

The purpose of juggling

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By Adrian Parrish

Coaches will often request that their players practice and perform juggling skills/exercises during downtime at practice sessions or even ask for them to develop this skill at home. But why is it required of a player to execute such a skill considering it is very rarely, if at all, used in games? Obviously it serves a purpose, and that is not just to help players become more comfortable with the ball by developing their first touch. It also helps develop a player's balance and agility – two characteristics that we look for players to possess.

It is required of a top level player to have a good first touch and be comfortable on the ball, especially when under pressure from opponents, with limited time and space. Therefore, coaches must encourage juggling in order to develop touch, because touch translates into being composed in games. With a good touch players will be at ease when bringing the ball under control and holding it against pressure.

Juggling can also help players develop a better weight on their passing as well as being able to pass it with more accuracy. This technical skill is developed through juggling activities because players should be able to feel the ball through the shoe, giving them control of their first touch or pass and not the ball dictating what the player does. Practicing juggling can also help players settle with the ball when it is dropping to them from out of the air. As they improve at juggling they will become more relaxed in bringing the ball down and continuing with it in a natural flow of the game or even shielding it from a defender.

Within today's US school system it is not a rare occurrence to see physical education classes and activities being removed from the curriculum. Not only is this resulting in children becoming unfit but can result in children struggling with simple tasks such as tumbling, hopping and balancing skills. When you juggle, touching the ball is half of the battle. The other is being in control of your body.

We may underestimate the importance of balance in soccer, but with all of the rapid lateral movement that takes place in the game, it is something that we can not afford to neglect. If we encourage juggling skills, balance will be improved. When players practice juggling they need to have a relaxed posture, with slightly bent knees, using their arms for balance. During the task a player is likely to lose control of the ball and will stretch out to get that extra touch which could result in the player losing his or her balance.

Therefore encourage players to become familiarized with the ball and if they feel they are about to lose control simply let it touch the ground and have them start again. This will allow the player to maintain their balance. It is amazing that players do not really understand the meaning and purpose of agility and why it is required in soccer. During this past summer I questioned a group of regional level players as to why they needed to be agile as a soccer player. Not one could give me the meaning of agility or why it is important to be agile so they can play soccer.

Agility is a natural partner to balance, but it is being able to keep your balance while performing the skill in motion. Juggling can help players improve their agility especially if they work in pairs or challenge their individual skills by knocking the ball out of their proximity and keeping it under control. If working in pairs, players must move after playing the ball off to their partner and prepare to receive the ball back after a set number of touches.

All of these skills may seem like a coach can develop and improve these during the practice time with players but with juggling, players are in control of their own development and can also improve their fitness level while doing something soccer-specific. Juggling is mainly an aerobic activity which helps with the development of those muscles such as hip flexors and lower back muscles that, if not conditioned properly, will tire in games and leave players lacking speed in the later stages of matches.

As coaches you need to keep a variation of juggling activities that will help keep the players motivated. Whether they practice at home in the back yard or at the soccer field, players have to want to improve and must show this desire. Players can work on juggling skills to improve their touch, balance, agility and general fitness and do so at their own rate. It is important for players to have patience while practicing their juggling skills. They can't expect to become good at juggling in few weeks. This is something that takes time but players who do it on a more consistent basis will obviously reach their goals sooner than those who practice once a week.

When players first start, they may only be able to juggle the ball one or two times; the majority will start in a comfort zone by only doing the skill using their thighs. Instead of requesting that players count how many times they can juggle the ball before it drops to the ground, allow them to see how many touches they can accomplish in a set time no matter if it touches the floor or not.

As the players become in harmony with the ball and start to master the skill of juggling, you can then challenge them by assigning tasks to accomplish. Set goals, such as a set number of touches before the ball hits the ground. Juggle while moving from one place to another or knock the ball high and away slightly so the player has to adjust their position to keep the ball under control as it drops.

Many of you may have seen high level professional players partake in juggling exercise in pairs or small groups. This is a skill you can introduce to your players and teams as they start to become more comfortable so you can continuously focus and develop the skills behind the purpose of juggling. Keep encouraging this skill amongst your players and realize it does have a bigger purpose that will help them in the game.

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