

The Missing Link:

Motor Skill Development



Much has been said in many quarters about player's development and in particular about the technical ability of Canadian players. Many debates have discussed what technique "should" be taught first: passing, receiving, dribbling, or shooting. Opinions vary, and in a multicultural society like ours, the influence of our original soccer roots is ever present in any discussion. You can bet that Italians, Scottish, English and Brazilians will all have different opinions on how, what and when.

However, they all agree that technique training takes priority in youth development, and even though their approach to teaching it might differ from one to another, youth coaches make it as priority in their training session.

The question still remains: why can't we develop good technical players then? I am sure that any soccer coach reading this article can come up with at least one good explanation and solution to the problem. However, after talking to various coaches, only few have ever mentioned one aspect of training that might have the greatest impact on the player's technical development: Motor Skills Development.

What is Motor Skills? As the word "motor" signifies movement, motor skill is the ability of a person to learn how to move with their body. Crawling, walking, running, jumping, turning, climbing, and also balance and coordination are part of motor skills development. From the day we are born, our body with the help of our brain learns how to move and is continually readjusting to the various stages of growth that we go through till maturity. Like when we teach a particular soccer technique, in motor skill development, mechanical repetition of a movement is key. The more we make a particular movement; the more it becomes natural and second nature.

How all this has anything to do with technique development? The answer is movement or the lack of it. We all know about the youth situation of today, children in great majority are not as active as previous generations. We, as a society have created an environment that encourages stationary life versus a mobile lifestyle; computers have taken over outside play, inertia over movement. How does this affect technique development you might say? In this case the answer to this question has to be provided by a series of questions:

- How can players dribble correctly if they are uncoordinated?
- How can a player strike a ball correctly if they have poor balance?
- How can players head a ball when they do not know how to jump?
- How can players receive the ball when they have poor lateral movement and poor flexibility?

As coaches we have to be aware of this problem and re-adjust our thinking. When planning our seasons and defining objectives, we need to incorporate motor skills development exercises in our training sessions. At the pro level these steps have already been taken. I have seen it first hand, when visiting Inter Milan a few years ago. (Article on this visit will be presented in the near future). At their youth team's level, each

team has a coach on staff, whose main responsibility is to address motor skill training development of players. In our local

club reality, we do not have the resources that a pro club provides, however we can still make some adjustment in our approach to training to address motor skills development.

One of most important things that a coach can do is to encourage players to participate in other sports. It might seem sacrilegious coming from a soccer coach, but especially at the younger ages, it is important that players have a broad experience of sport and motor skills activities. Schools at any level can play a great role in motor skills development, and soccer coaches must support any player's involvement in school sports.

What kind of activities can we do to help motor skills development?

It is not complicated and with a little bit of creativity, coaches can incorporate in their training sessions exercises that promote motor development.

Here are some examples of activities that can be used in each different age group

Age 8-12

In this age bracket fun and play is the foundation of development, and this formula can be used in motor skill training.

- Tag games
- Obstacle courses
- Relay races
- Juggling
- Skipping rope
- Games of balance, and coordination

Age 12-14

This is a crucial period of growth for players. Because of this rapid growth, their body loses coordination, and affects the execution of technique and their overall play.

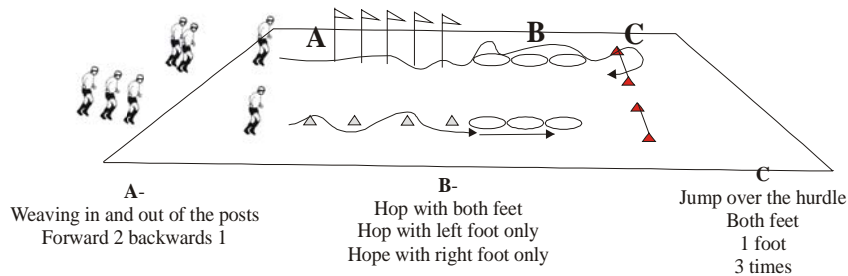
We can help out players by providing specific motor skill training programs

Running coordination is very important, and should be done regularly. If feasible, hiring professional running coaches at this stage would be a wise investment.

What it follows are some examples of small little changes of drills that coaches might use in practice sessions that can help motor skills development

Relay Races

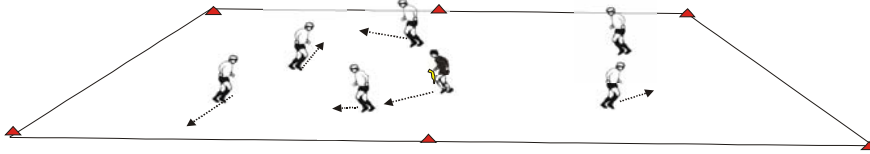
Field Set up 20x30



Relay races is an activity that can be programmed in any part of the training session. It is fun and addresses some aspects (coordination, balance,) of motor skills training

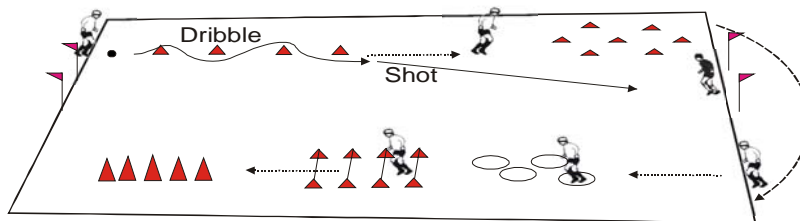
Tag Game

Field Set up
30x30



Another fun activity that can be used in the warm-up phase of a training session. Quick change of direction, and running coordination are highlighted.

Combination



Sometimes we can incorporate to technical drills coordination exercises. Like the example above, technical exercises are followed by coordination exercises.