

PRACTICE PLANNING BASICS: Setting the Tone for Game Play and Growth

Practice is every coach's time to shine. Games belong to the players and to the implementation of the practice purpose that has been worked on. Practice is where you will either prepare your team for competition or create a lack of opportunity to grow your players to compete within their expected levels.

Below is a simple way to make sure that a coach is prepared to maximize the little time we get to move the needle and set the tone for skill growth and competitive application.

1. Start with Your Objective

Before planning drills, define the purpose for the practice. Proverbs 29:18 says, "*Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained...*" This is especially true in setting the foundation of practice planning for each practice. This is the big picture focus of the team practice and without it, there is no logical progression to building a successful team.

Questions to determine your practice purpose around:

- Is it skill-focused (e.g., passing technique)?
- Is it tactical (e.g., running offensive plays)?
- Is it mental (e.g., teamwork, communication, resilience)?
- Is it conditioning (e.g., building endurance or speed)?

A single practice should have one primary focus with supporting elements.

Too many objectives lead to shallow development. This doesn't mean that you won't engage the development of area key skills, it just means the primary focus of the practice is based around the purpose.

2. Include Mental & Character Development Moment

This is where a good coach will paint the big picture for the practice.

Take 3-5 minutes to:

- Share a short motivational thought or verse.
- Encourage athletes to practice teamwork, effort, and sportsmanship.

This is especially powerful with a faith or leadership focus.

As a part of this, players should break out with a full understanding of what the focus of practice will be and will have been introduced to key words/language that will be emphasized throughout the practice. Team expectations are given in this moment.

3. Progress from Simple to Complex

- Start with isolated skill work (reps without pressure).
- Move to game-like drills (adding decision-making, defenders, or time pressure).
- Finish with live play where athletes apply what they've learned.

This mirrors how athletes learn — they build confidence with repetition, then learn to execute under game-like stress.

4. Plan for Constant and Consistent Engagement

An effective plan keeps athletes moving, not standing in lines. Lines create lack – lack of focus, lack of touches, lack of discipline. Players should remain engaged in some element of the practice. Build a consistent reason for them to stay focused on the goals of practice.

- Incorporate competitive elements (scorekeeping, time limits).
- Include variety to maintain focus and fun.

5. Prepare & Be Flexible

Write your plan out with times, drills, and needed equipment.

But stay ready to adjust - if a drill isn't working, pivot. If you must change drills, focus on the same concept, but move to a familiar drill to rekindle confidence. If players are fatigued, shift to something engaging but lower intensity.

Structure the Practice

Break your session into intentional segments. A common structure looks like this:

Drill

Purpose (In line with your big picture)

Example Activities

Sample format

Warm-Up (5–10 min.)

Prepare body & mind - Inspire and Instruct the practice purpose.

Team meeting, dynamic stretches/ movement prep, quick game

Skill Development (15–25 min.)

Teach/refine a skill

Station work, technical drills, progressions

Team Concept (20–30 min.)

Apply skill in context from training

Small-sided games, controlled scrimmages

Competition (10–15 min.)

Build intensity

Situational game play

Cool Down & Debrief (5–10 min.)

Recover & reflection

Stretching, mental focus, reflection on purpose

Keep segments short, focused, and high-energy — especially for younger athletes.

Failure to plan a good practice will create growth opportunities and often leads to disruptive and unfruitful practices. The role and responsibility of a coach is to create a vision and purpose that leads to better players and teams.