

USE PHYSICAL EDUCATION GAMES TO MAKE CONDITIONING FUN, PURPOSEFUL

9/15/2015

By Anthony Stone

From ankle biters to the pros, most football players have one thing in common:

A strong desire to get out of conditioning drills.

Let's face it. The No. 1 thing that athletes tend to dislike about practice is conditioning.

Long runs. Short rests. More long runs. Just thinking about it can be as mentally taxing as actually doing it.

I've found that players who are having fun tend to try harder without even noticing.

So tell me: Why make defensive linemen run 100-yard sprints or ladders in a set time? What does doing that say about those players?

Does it make them better at their roles and responsibilities?

Does it make them better gap defenders?

No to both.

I realized this years ago, so instead I started to play games and use high intensity drills in gamelike situations to take the place of conditioning.

Playing physical education games at the end of practice went much further than lining everyone up and running sprints. Players compete to win instead of running just fast enough so the coaches don't yell at them.

These games also improve footwork, hand-eye coordination and stamina while keeping the kids engaged.

But the bottom line is – it's fun. Instead of shouting their way through conditioning, coaches will find it hard to get the kids off the field, all while accomplishing the same goals.

Now, at the end of practices, kids ask to play the games. We turned routine into fun by changing the dynamic.

So, next time you start conditioning drills, introduce a PE game instead. The end result is the athletes have fun while improving their skills and abilities.

Here's two games your young players are probably familiar with from PE class that you can use to add some fun and conditioning into the end of practice:

Turtles, Dogs and Elephants

Equipment: Nothing other than a practice field.

Separate the players into groups. Use a minimum of two groups of four to an unlimited number of groups of six – but keep the groups small if you can – and have them line up like relay races. The first player is the turtle. He or she lies flat on the stomach about five yards from the start of the line.

The second player is the dog. This player steps or carefully leaps over the turtle. About five yards father on, this player lies face down with only hands and feet on the ground, arching the back upward so that another player can crawl under.

The third person is the elephant. This player steps or leaps over the turtle, crawls under the dog, then five yards later stand stills with an arm up in the air like an elephant's trunk.

Everyone else navigates the first two players, runs around the elephant and reforms a line five yards beyond.

Once everyone in the line has gone through the obstacles, the first person gets up from the turtle position and goes through all the obstacles. Then the dog does the same, then the elephant.

Variations: Mix up the order of the animals, or players can also choose their own animals as long as they fit the criteria.

Capture The Cone

Materials: Big outdoor area, 60 soccer cones, 8 tall cones

The total field yardage is usually 50 yards, and the width is that of a football field.

C = cones

This game is fast-paced and continuous play. The goal is to get all eight cones on your side, standing the cones up (no stacking), 20 yards back from the box finish line.

Prison: If any team crosses the box finish line and get tagged before it gets back to its side or crosses back over the box finish line, then it must go to the other team's prison. If the players that are getting chased run out of bounds, they also go to prison.

Note: Players can run back and forth over the box finish line. If they cross the line, the other team can tag them, and if they stay on their side then they are the taggers.

To rescue the people who have been captured, free players must run to the prison without getting tagged (they can't get tagged once in the prison area), then while in the prison, they must take one of their teammates and jog/sprint around the out of bounds, exit the prison and go out of bounds to go around the long way, then reenter their side once they pass the box finish line. After that, both players are back in.

Capturing cones: Players cannot guard the cones. Taggers must be at least five yards from the cones. After three warnings, a cone is given to the other side.

Players can only pick up one cone at a time. They cannot pass, throw or kick to try and give the cone to another player. You cannot take the cone into the prison area to avoid getting tagged.

Players cannot drop the cone to avoid getting tagged. Once they have the cone, they must keep running. If the player gets caught, he or she must put the cone back before going to prison.

Variations: Have students that are sent to prison do an exercise while they wait. Don't allow any jumping or allowing their feet to leave the ground.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program.

PRACTICE PLANNING IS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS SEASON CONTINUES

10/1/2015

By Anthony Stone

Ask yourself this question: Are successful teams organized?

Practice plans allow coaches to stay on track and have every minute of practice count. This is an important step at all levels of football.

USA Football's youth practice guidelines offer a clear, medically endorsed process to implement heat acclimatization procedures, clear definitions of contact and time limits on player-to-player contact to construct a proper practice plan. The guidelines were designed with input from USA Football's Medical Advisory Committee and Football Advisory Committee and are endorsed by the American College of Sports Medicine, the National Athletic Trainers' Association and the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine. They provide youth football organizations with recommendations to establish consistent methods designed to limit the chance for injury during structured practice sessions.

With this structure available to all USA Football members, there's no reason to not have a plan every time your team steps on the practice field.

Below is an overview on what my football practice plans include. Note that not all elements are part of every practice, but these are things I want to implement before I play an opponent.

And following USA Football's National Practice Guidelines for Youth Football, practice is limited to two hours with 30 minutes of full-contact drills.

It's OK to tweak sections if the team need more work in specific areas, but be sure to do your teaching against air, bags and in controlled situation. Live speed should be reserved for experience, not learning.

10 min

Pre-practice

10 min

Heads Up Tackling and Heads Up Blocking drills as warmups

Stretching and agility lines

5 min

Special team pods; if a position is not being used, add to individual time

Water break

15-20 min

Tackling circuits (all positions); drills against air, bags or control

15-20 min

Individual time (water in individual areas)

15 min

Group

15 min

7-on-7 or 9-on-7 skeleton

Water

15-20 min

Team offense scout scripted vs. defense scripted (two whistle)

15-20 min

Team offense scripted vs. defense scout scripted (cone drill)

Water

10 min

Special teams (hidden yardage)

10 min

Conditioning (PE games)

3 min

Closing

Pre-practice: motivate the players and take this time to talk to the team about what needs to be improved something before the next game. If there's no glaring needs, take this time to work on fundamentals.

Tackling circuit: Follow USA Football's Levels of Contact to build players' confidence.

Remember that teams that can tackle well are more competitive.

Individual time: Fundamentals, fundamentals, fundamentals. The more fundamentally sound players are, the better and more competitive the team will be.

Group: Bring one side of the ball together and review. This allows everyone to get on the same page.

Skeleton: Make it no contact or this is where coaches can introduce some thud-level competition. Remember to keep everyone on their feet.

Two whistle and cone drill: By being scripted, this part of practice makes it faster for the team to line up and run plays.

Special teams: Focus on one special team at each practice. This is where a team can gain some "hidden yardage" that makes a difference.

Conditioning: If the players are having fun then they won't even know they are working out. Plus this time will fly by.

Closing: Keep it short and sweet; Focus on the How, why and what is important to talk about to the players. Wrap up by talking about any housekeeping items.

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6 FOOTBALL ACRONYMS THAT BUILD BETTER QUARTERBACKS

By Anthony Stone

My first year as an assistant college coach is one I will never forget.

The head coach always wore a hat with "FBI" printed on it. During a staff meeting, he told us it stands for "FootBall Intelligence."

From there, I began developing football acronyms for players to use to better remember sometimes complex thoughts. Here are six for quarterbacks.

DEA (Depth, Eyes, Alignment)

This is used to identify keys in order to determine whether a defense appears to be in zone or man-to-man coverage.

In the graphic above, zone is depicted on the left. Man-to-man keys are on the right.

Depth. If the corners are seven or more yards deep in coverage, it is most likely zone coverage.

If the corners are within six yards of the receiver, it is most likely man.

Eyes. If the DBs' eyes are on the quarterback, it is most likely zone coverage. If the DBs have their eyes on the receiver, it is most likely man.

Alignment. An outside alignment by DBs on a receiver points to zone coverage. An inside or head-up alignment points to man.

IRS (Initial Receiver Space)

After taking the snap, the quarterback should think about three things:

Determine the deep shell. Is it one high or two high?

Based on that, what are my reads?

During the play, where is the open window, and is the receiver in that spot (if you look at receivers)?

Drill this every day at practice, and it will become second nature for quarterbacks.

FBI (FootBall Intelligence)

This one is all about preparation, designed specifically for high school players and older.

Here are the themes that quarterbacks should think about when a coach says, "FBI."

During practice:

Come early and stay late. No one should put more film time in than the QB.

Know the offense thoroughly. Study and know the game plan each week.

Know the skills and capabilities of your teammates. Don't ask a teammate to do something he is incapable of doing.

Learn about opponents. Don't be surprised during games. React, don't think. What are the fronts and coverages to expect of the team's tendencies, strengths and weaknesses of their defense?

During the game:

Always know the score, position of the ball, down and distance, time remaining and time outs remaining. A QB should also know how many timeouts the other team has left if trying to run the clock out.

Avoid negative yardage plays. It is better to throw the football away than take a sack. Know where the outlet is and when to run or get rid of the ball.

Don't waste scoring opportunities by being a greedy QB. Score points whenever possible. Don't force the ball in traffic on a third-and-goal. Just take the field goal.

Always encourage teammates on both sides of the football.

TMO (2-Minute Offense)

Here's what all quarterbacks should know:

The rules for clock stoppages: official time outs, incomplete passes, out of bounds, measuring for first down. Know that the clock stops only briefly after a first down.

What is the score?

How much time is left?

The number of timeouts remaining.

Quarterbacks must make teammates aware of a situation. Talk to receivers and backs about getting out of bounds or getting down instead of fighting for yards and wasting time.

Quarterbacks lead the team.

If the clock is not stopped, line up immediately and run the predetermined or called play. If the clock is stopped, use the huddle and again receive play(s) from the sideline.

When the clock is stopped for measurement or penalty, use a huddle near the line of scrimmage and be ready to play on the referee's signal.

When carrying the ball, get as much yardage as possible, and then get out of bounds.

RDC (Reading Defensive Coverages)

This one is best explained in the graphic below.

ABC (Cadence)

This one is great for youth football programs. Have code words for cadences to make it easy for kids to remember the snap count between the huddle and the line.

Practice it enough, and QBs can even change the snap count before getting under center.

Apple is on one.

Banana is on two.

Cucumber is on three.

TRICK OR TREAT: RULES OF THUMB ON GOING FOR 1 OR 2

10/29/2015

By Anthony Stone

Halloween is right around the corner, which means football season is coming to an end for most youth, high school and college teams.

I want to share a little trick that I've used since getting into coaching.

Did you know that the two-point conversion has been around since 1958, when it was first introduced in college football?

With the play clock ticking, though, the question always remains:

Trick: When should coaches go for the one- or two-point conversion?

Treat: Former NFL head coach Dick Vermeil developed a two-point conversion chart during the early 1970s while he was the offensive coordinator at UCLA. Variations of the chart he created is still used by coaches to help them determine what to do after a touchdown in various situations.

Here's the one I use. Feel free to copy it or tweak it to suit your own needs.

The key thing is to create your own chart so you don't waste a time out or screw up the math when deciding whether to line up for 1 or 2.

Lead by

10 TIPS THAT WILL HELP YOU GET INTO COLLEGE AND PLAY SPORTS

11/12/2015

By Anthony Stone

For college coaches, recruiting season starts now.

For high school football players, this means it's time to get everything in line and put your best foot forward. Here are 10 tips that can help a student-athlete before the recruiting process starts.

Grades, grades, grades. Don't wait until junior year to start studying. The NCAA has rules in place that requires a steady accumulation of core courses over an entire high school career. The earlier you show effort classroom, the more it will impress college recruiters and show on the field. Having great grades all four years says a lot about your work ethic. A great motto for all student-athletes: "Excel in the classroom and you will excel on the field."

Character. It is important how you interact with coaches, teammates, teachers, peers and people in your community. Are you disrespectful and know it all, or do you lead by example? College coaches aren't looking for people who need constant attention because of behavioral issues. Your character says a lot about you as a person and how likely you are to succeed in college.

Commitment. Be the first one to practice, weight room and team meetings. It shows you are dedicated team player. This also will help you when you ask your high school coach for help with networking.

SEE ALSO: Recruiting advice every high school football player needs to hear

SEE ALSO: NCAA launches new website to answer eligibility questions

Free money. When the letters start coming from college football programs, it is important to know if they are interested in you or are you just on the mailing list as a potential walk-on? Open lines of communication with coaches and financial aid offices to see what kind of assistance is out there. Until you ask for help you will never know.

Find a home. No matter how talented you are, make sure you go to a college that fits your personality and where you will enjoy for the next four years. Is playing time or playing for a championship more important to you? Where do you get along with coaches? Do you prefer a campus that is closer to home, in a city or in a certain conference? Are you going somewhere just because one of your friends is going there? It is important to feel connected so you complete all four years and receive your diploma.

The right major. Make sure the university offers what you want to study. Fewer than 6 percent of college players will make it in the NFL. That means 94 percent of NCAA football players enter the work force. For example, if you want to be a certified athletic trainer or engineer or pre-law, and your school doesn't offer it, why are you there? On campus visits, don't just go to the stadium on game day. Sit in on classes as well.

Networking. You are not the first player from your high school to go on to play in college. Ask your high school coach to help you with connections. It will really help you in the long run, especially with all the different methods there are to share film.

Be honest and upfront. When a college scout shakes your hand, he wants to see if you are the same height as listed in your stats and how firm your handshake is. Always look someone in the eye when shaking hands and talking.

Ask questions. When a coach calls, ask how they acquired your contact information. Also, ask questions such as: Do they have your major? What's the graduation rate? How many players do they bring in each year? How many seniors are on the team? What position are they wanting you to play? How many players are currently at that position?

Social media. This has had an impact on athletes and college recruiting during the last 10 years. It is important for every student-athlete to remember that you never know when someone is going to record or take a picture and post it. Think before you act. You don't want to turn off your top colleges and lose everything you worked hard for because of one wrong decision. Keep all of your social media accounts clean.

This is your future. Don't rush into it unprepared.

USE THIS OFFSEASON TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR USA FOOTBALL MEMBERSHIP

12/3/2015

By Anthony Stone

Now that the football season has come to an end for most youth and high school coaches, it is time to start planning for next season.

The first thing coaches should do is conduct staff meetings and get a head start on which football clinics to attend in early 2016. Clinics offer a wealth of knowledge and resources that coaches can bring back to share with other members of the program.

Another important offseason tool is your USA Football membership. The resources offered at USAFootball.com offers everything a coach needs to build successful youth and high school programs.

The online certification course is just the start. Here is just some of the material that offered for free as part of a USA Football membership, most of which can be found through your membership dashboard

Practice Planner

Tackle and flag football playbook Library

Drills Library

Game Day Print Center: rosters, depth chart, QB wristband, call sheets, sports physical form

NFL FLAG rule book

National Practice Guidelines for Youth Tackle Football

Levels of Contact

Tackle and flag football drills

Skills and Drills video series

Chalk Talk video series

Inside the Program video series

Coach Insurance

Football Marketplace

Document library

Fundraising ideas

I always say: "It is like Netflix for coaches!"

There are a few items I use regularly to make myself a better football coach.

Levels of Contact. When I played, I never had drills designed to build my confidence up by going against air. Most of the drills I did as a youth, high school, college or professional indoor player consisted of bags, thud, live speed – more live speed than anything else. By implementing Levels of Contact into practice, you can build an athlete's confidence to enhance fundamentals and perform better in practices and games.

Heads Up Tackling drills. Everyone knows the saying, "If you are a good tackling team, you will be a competitive team." There are 21 Heads up Tackling drills you can pick and choose from. A tackler's shoulder should go up and forward – never down. When the neck and shoulder are strained, it opens the opportunity for stingers. Heads Up Tackling is a front shoulder strike versus the old days of bite the ball or wrap up the ball-carrier. When you wrap up a ball-carrier, your head is going down. With every coaching membership, you can look at the Heads up Tackling videos to help make the game safer, not softer.

Film room. Coaches should start planning now to attend clinics or at least learn something new this upcoming offseason. The USA Football Film Room offers hours of drills broken down by both position and age. It is ideal for veteran coaches or first-year coaches on the youth level. In this section, you can also find stretches and drills for flag football. This is extremely important for parents who volunteer to coach their children's teams.

Practice Planning tool. In one of my earlier blogs, I discussed the importance of practice plans and how it is vital to keep them as a resource since they help explain a lot about your season. The following year, it will be easier to do insertion schedules or drills for your football team since you can go back and see what worked and what didn't work. By putting a daily practice plan on paper, you can keep it in a binder and use it as a resource for next season and beyond. Plus, having practice plans makes writing down notes/adjustments for the next practice easier. It also allows your talking points for the coaching staff meetings faster and more organized since everything is already written down.

SEE ALSO: Practice planning is just as important as the season continues

QB wristbands. Are you the type of coach who uses wristbands to call plays in during a game? If yes, then this part of the USA Football membership is perfect for you. I always had to make copy after copy to get the play bands to fit in the wrist coach. USA Football has a template that coaches can color coordinate and have 20, 40 or 60 plays listed. Tip for coaches of younger players: Limit the number of plays so you don't overwhelm them.

Call sheets. Coaches at all levels of football utilize call sheets for every game. When the game is in a pinch and if you go to the well with your favorite play way too many times, then you know you should utilize a call sheet. I recommend that you try the ones that are available with your USA Football membership. You can write down your notes during the game or notes from when you break down film prior to the game.

Depth charts. Have you ever had a game where a player got hurt and you had to use a timeout because you couldn't decide on – or find – a substitute? I call this the "What If" scenario. Being prepared with the help of a USA Football depth chart takes the worry out of the game. It allows coaches to go in and either update or print out and insert it on their call sheets.

This is just a small taste of what you get with your USA Football membership. Coaches, remember also to download the USA Football app on your phone so you can use your water break timer for practice.

Let parents and players in your organizations also know that the phone app is free for them to everyone.

USE BREAKAWAY TEAMS TO PUT THE FUN BACK IN YOUR OFFSEASON FOOTBALL PROGRAM

12/16/2015

By Anthony Stone

High school and middle school coaches looking to drive competition, motivation and leadership during offseason activities can use a system I call Breakaway Teams.

By breaking the team up into smaller groups, it emphasizes accountability, motivates players to work together, encourages socialization and builds player confidence – all while having fun.

Smaller teams improve overall team participation during the offseason.

For the youth level, coaches can modify the ideas below so they are less competitive and more fun. Breakaway Teams also can be adapted to use with any sport.

Here is how they work.

Appoint four or more players – captains – who are leaders and have bought into your football program.

Put all the players' names in a hat and have each captain draw his team. This is the best way to go so teams don't become extensions of pre-existing groups. (You can draw by position as well to make sure not to have all the linemen on one team, for example.)

Draft a coach for each team. This is important so coaches bond with players from both sides of the ball.

During breakaway games, let the players decide what order they go in. These are their teams.

The coach is just there to guide them. By taking ownership, players will buy into the system more.

All players work together to pick an appropriate name for their teams. Coaches need to sign off on these.

How do the Breakaway Teams earn points?

Attendance for offseason meetings

Attendance for lifting or offseason conditioning

Attendance for camp days and 7-on-7

Attendance for the start of the season

Spend five to 10 minutes on Breakaway Games each week. They should be fun and competitive. Do them just long enough so when they are done they are upset it is over (Goal: you always want them leaving practice excited for tomorrow!)

Here are a few games you can do:

Capture the cone

Turtles, dogs and elephants relay

Drop kick field goals

Dummy throws over goal post

Pyramid building

Lineman catch a punt or pick a coach to catch a punt

Tug-of-war

Sled drive

Fumble recovery, scoop and score

Team bear crawl

Emphasize the values found in the leadership ladder

L = Loyalty

E = Effort

A = Attitude

D = Dedication

E = Education

R = Respect

S = Sportsmanship

H = Humility

I = Integrity

P = Punctuality

Formula for a winning team

Getting the best out of each student-athlete

Stress the fundamentals

Team cohesion and a common belief in a unified and attainable objective

Try this or adapt a version of it to your football team for a great way to kick off the offseason

5 STEPS TO STOPPING THE MOST POPULAR RUNNING PLAY IN YOUTH FOOTBALL

12/30/2015

By Anthony Stone

Every clinic I have attended or spoken at always includes a recurring question: How do you stop the toss play?

Whether it is called a toss, pitch, sweep or jet sweep, this play is about getting to the outside. Speed dominates, and that is an understatement in sports, especially football. Once the ball-carrier gets around the corner, it is almost an automatic touchdown.

So here are five points to help with stopping the toss next year.

Defensive line must penetrate and disrupt the line of scrimmage

The defensive linemen must get through the line of scrimmage and disrupt the blockers. This is vital against all running plays, not just the sweep.

If your first line of defense can upset the blocking scheme and obscure the path of the running back, you are halfway home.

Linebackers must understand “clear and cloudy” method using fast flow

Once linebackers understand fast flow and can manage their gaps to pursue an outside run, they will create time to react to the toss play when first seeing the running back trying to get to the edge.

By practicing fast flow with your inside linebackers to the playside, they can keep a yard behind the back and wait for him to turn his shoulders upfield. For the backside linebacker against the toss, this will help him dip and rip while shuffling fast across the path while not moving upfield and getting blocked by the offensive linemen.

This will help them elude the offensive linemen until a gap becomes open, allowing them to make the tackle if the running back cuts back.

Then it's just remembering: Clear is good, cloudy is bad.

SEE ALSO: Check out all of USA Football's Skills and Drills videos

Secondary must stay in its assigned lanes or alley

Defensive backs need to play the angle correctly to funnel the ball-carrier back to the linemen and linebackers if they are unable to make a play.

Most often, it's the DBs are who break up the toss play, so keep working with them to become a vital piece to the puzzle as cornerbacks hold the edge and safeties run the alley.

All defensive players must stay in their gaps

When defensive players over or under pursue the toss, the outcome is usually bad. By implementing the three points above, the ball-carrier will be left with nowhere to go.

From there, you can either paint the player in the corner where the sideline is your friend or send him back inside where defenders can slow the ball-carrier down.

Play until the whistle

When the defense swarms to the football, it is hard for the offense to break off a big play. What I always say is, "A defensive player's commitment to his team is measured by the distance he is from the ball at the end of each play."

Defensive players have to understand that every play count, and they are to keep moving until the whistle no matter what.

Use the five points above to stop the toss play next season. Get a head start by reviewing game film to identify what you can change or implement to be more successful.

Keep me posted on Twitter on how your season is going.

Good luck and Happy New Year.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program.

BE AN EXPERT AT YOUR POSITION: DEFENSIVE LINE

1/14/2016

By Anthony Stone

As a player, my coaches always told me to give 110 percent. So when I first started coaching, I told my players the same thing.

Let me ask you: Can you eat a 110 percent of a pizza or only 100 percent of it?

As coaches, we need to stop asking players for more than they are physically able to produce and focus on fine-tuning the best of what they have to offer.

I now tell my players and students to “be an expert at your position.”

For defensive tackles and defensive ends, I use SAKR – stance, alignment, keys, responsibilities – to help them improve their skills.

SEE ALSO: Be an expert at your position: Linebackers

SEE ALSO: Be an expert at your position: Defensive Backs

It all starts up front, so get the most out of these big fellas to set the tone on defense.

Stance

A great stance is where it all begins on defense. If a player doesn't have a proper stance, then he has already lost one battle, and it is hard to come back from this.

There are different types of stances that defensive lineman can use. Here's a quick look at each.

2-point stance. The immediate benefit from a standing position is being able to see a wider range of the field, side-to-side, as well as into backfield in an upright position. For defensive ends especially, this allows them to maneuver around slower offensive tackles in order to get to the ball-carrier faster.

3-point stance. A good 3-point stance allows players to get their hands prepared for a contact situation right from the get go. The stories are true: Low man wins, and if you are not getting cut then having great hand placement, active feet and being low will get you a long way in the trenches.

4-point stance. The advantages of a 4-point stance are that both hands and feet are connected to the ground, spreading a player's body weight evenly. This stance allows players to move forward quickly.

Alignment

Where a defensive lineman beings a play has a big influence on where he ends it. For me, the one developed by former Houston Oilers head coach Bum Phillips is the easiest for younger players to grasp.

As with most things, simpler is often better.

Keys

Once the ball is snapped, defensive linemen look for keys from the offensive players lined up in front of. Defensive lineman must play to the run and react to the pass.

As St. Olaf College offensive line coach Eugene Crosby has said: “If something goes away, someone is coming to play.”

Here are five 1-on-1 blocks a defensive lineman must be able to recognize and defeat:

Down block. Defensive lineman goes down with blocker, stays in hip pocket and remains square to line of scrimmage. Stay flat and don't create a hole. If the defender identifies a pulling blocker

coming toward him, wrong arm the blocker, close the hole and make the running back bounce outside.

Base block. The defensive lineman should attack half the man, protect his gap and fight pressure with pressure. If you feel like you are losing, fall and make a pile.

Pull. Defensive lineman follows the pull and get in the hip pocket of the pulling lineman.

Kick slide/pass pro. If the interior offensive linemen backs up, the defensive lineman should once again attack half the man and protect their gap. Defensive ends should make sure they contain and close the play if they read kick side/pass pro.

Reach block. The defensive lineman needs to take half the man on while not letting the offensive lineman take over the gap. Stretch the play down the line of scrimmage. Don't let the blocker take you up or get hooked. Fight pressure with pressure.

Movement is key at the snap of the ball. Coaches should practice those first few seconds of every play – a lot.

Responsibility

Defensive linemen have a different responsibility than other players on that unit. They need to play to run and react to pass. Otherwise they will be pushed into the linebackers or the ball will pass them.

Defensive linemen need to become an expert at every day drills, including:

Be a hand fighter

Have active feet

Leverage all blocks

Beat and defeat blocker first

Keep separated from the blocker

Create a new line of scrimmage

Maintain pursuit speed

Play to the whistle and get in on every tackle

Keep me updated on twitter @Coach_Stone_MT on how your defensive linemen respond to using SAKR.

Part 2 of this series coming in a few weeks will look at linebackers.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program.

BE AN EXPERT AT YOUR POSITION: LINEBACKERS

1/28/2016

By Anthony Stone

Linebackers are sometimes referred to as the quarterbacks of the defense. They need to understand what formation the offense is showing and quickly give a strength call.

No matter which way a team designates how call strengths, using SAKR helps prepare linebackers for the challenges that lie ahead.

SEE ALSO: Be an expert at your position: Defensive linemen

SEE ALSO: Be an expert at your position: Defensive Backs

Are you a coach who makes players run as punishment for making mistakes during practice? Because we have all seen it.

A player makes a mistake. The coach makes him run laps. The player returns to the coach in time to run the play again, and he makes the same mistake – and so on, and so on.

Instead of negative reinforcement, if we as coaches stop and actually teach that player, we not only instill confidence and self-worth but also improve his ability as an athlete. After all, we are training him to be a football player not a marathon runner.

As I've written before, we cannot eat 110 percent of a pizza, so we need to stop asking players for more than they are physically able to produce and instead focus on fine-tuning the best of what they have to offer – to be an expert at your position.

For linebackers, I use SAKR – stance, alignment, keys, responsibilities – to help them improve their skills.

Stance

A great stance is where it all begins on defense. If a player doesn't have a proper stance, then he has fallen so far behind, he might have already lost the battle.

In my drill manual when I coached college linebackers, my linebacker stance alone was more than half a page. Too much.

Now, all you need is the four words of the USA Football breakdown position drill – feet, squeeze, sink, hands.

Once that is mastered, there are two stances that linebackers use:

2-point stance. The advantage of the 2-point stance is it offers the benefit of seeing a wider range of the field as well into the backfield from an upright position. Having a good 2-point stance gives the linebacker the ability to read and confidently move in any direction on the snap as they don't normally deal with consistent contact right at the snap.

3-point stance (for linebackers in an under front or short-yardage situations). The advantage of having a good 3-point stance is it allows players to get their hands prepared for a contact situation from the get go. The stories are true, low man wins, and if you are not getting cut, then having great hand placement, active feet and being low will get you a long way.

Alignment

By simply adding a zero to Bum Philips' Defensive Line techniques, coaches can easily map linebacker techniques.

Using this system simplifies situations when a player is changes from a defensive line to linebacker or other way around. Look out when both the linebackers and the defensive linemen are in the correct alignment before the snap and are in a great stance.

Keys

Linebackers read their keys to see if the play is a run or pass. The chart below is for guard keys. Once the linebackers know the guard key, they should know if it is a run or pass and possibly which direction the play is going.

Linebackers not on the line of scrimmage have about one second after the ball is snapped to read their keys and determine if the play is a run or pass. Then responsibility kicks in.

Responsibility

Linebackers have two different responsibilities: run and pass. Continuing with the over front, the picture below identifies what each linebacker run and pass responsibility is.

Keep me updated on twitter @Coach_Stone_MT on how your linebackers respond to using SAKR.

The next part of this series will be implementing SAKR in the secondary.

BE AN EXPERT AT YOUR POSITION: DEFENSIVE BACKS

2/11/2016

By Anthony Stone

They are the last line of defense. Cornerbacks and safeties.

Typically smaller, quicker and more agile than the players in front of them, one mistake by a defensive back and it's an open field to the end zone.

Let's break down those players and how to maximize their talents, using the SAKR method.

SEE ALSO: Be an expert at your position: Defensive line

SEE ALSO: Be an expert at your position: Linebackers

Let me ask you a question: Do you find yourself telling players, "Practice makes perfect?"

Why do coaches say this then put unrealistic goals on players? Coaches need to ask the players for their best but not more. As Pro Football Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi said, "Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect."

Be a better coach and allow your players to be successful by improving their skills with this approach to Cover 1 man below.

Stance

A great stance is where it all begins on defense. Failure to get the secondary in proper position is one of the leading causes for big plays.

Old Dominion defensive backs coach Sam Perryman teaches stance for corners and safeties this way:

Feet in the framework: narrow base and lean forward at the waist

"Z" in the knees

Weight slightly on the balls of the feet

Nose over toes

Arms hanging loosely, alert but relaxed

First step should be six inches

No false step, curl toes in the shoes

Don't rise up when coming out of your stance

Most of all, be comfortable

[CLICK HERE](#): To see a video teaching stance for defensive backs

And as Perryman said: "Be comfortable in your stance, and I will tweak it to get the most out of you as a player. Coaching isn't like painting by numbers because all players are different."

Alignment

Cover 1 is one of the most popular coverage alignments for youth defensive coordinators with either press man or off man for the corners and strong safety. In recent years, NFL defensive coordinators are using it more and more as well.

Pressed coverage means the corners are right up on the line of scrimmage - like Darrelle Revis and Josh Norman like to do. In off-man coverage, corners line up about seven yards deep and one yard inside the receiver.

For the strong safety, play an inside shade on a slot receiver or tight end.

If the corner to the strong safety's side is playing off, the safety should press in order to avoid pick routes by receivers. If a corner is pressed, then the strong safety should be five to seven yards off his man. This is called being at different levels.

The free safety, meanwhile, lines up 10 yards deep in the center of the field.

Keys

Keep it simple. Corners and safeties must remain focused on the player in front of them in press coverage. Like Perryman says, "Don't stare at the quarterback. He won't throw you the ball." Corners playing off need to protect against a three-step drop. When the ball is snapped, a corner should backpedal slowly by keying the QB for his first three steps, looking to jump on the ball if it is thrown quickly.

The faster a defensive back recognizes quick routes, the faster he will be able to break on the ball and make a play.

Strong safeties should never watch the QB at all unless facing a receiver with a wide split.

Free Safeties should drop back while looking at the quarterback's eyes, keeping their heads on a swivel to look at receivers while getting depth.

Responsibility

Corners and strong safety have the same responsibility for Cover 1: Don't let the player you are covering catch the football and don't look back at the quarterback. Often, a corner who turns his head to look for the football loses his man or ground, which could in turn result in a completed pass.

Move up to stop the run only once the ball-carrier passes the line of scrimmage.

Cover 1 responsibility for the free safety is short and sweet. The free safety is the Alamo: Don't let any player get behind you.

Use SAKR to improve your players' skills and fundamentals on defense for years to come. Keep me updated on twitter @Coach_Stone_MT on how your defense responds.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program.

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S TEAM SHOWS GLOBAL REACH OF FOOTBALL

2/25/2016

By Anthony Stone

Football has long been America's game, but love for the sport is expanding well beyond the U.S. borders.

I recently was named interim head coach for the 2017 Australian Outback National Women's Team and traveled there to meet with players.

As part of the training camp, I taught the women elements of USA Football's Heads Up Football program, including proper fundamental tackling techniques.

And as it turns out, English isn't the only language we have in common. We speak football as well.

Tackling is a great place to start whenever working with a new team. It's a skill that everyone can learn. After watching them on film for so long, I was excited to get going. The team included a mix of veterans and rookies, but it is important that they are all on the same page when it comes to this all-player fundamental.

And consistency is the key to success.

As a USA Football Master Trainer, I also have had the opportunity to work at U.S. National Team events.

The Australian Outback National Women's Team is managed by Bring it on Sports and supported by Gridiron Australia, the national governing body of the sport in that nation. Australia and the United States are two of 71 nations on six continents that have national governing bodies dedicated solely to American football.

The women are excited to work hard, improve their skills and represent their country at the 2017 Women's IFAF tournament, which will be held at a site still to be determined.

SEE ALSO: Women's U.S. National Team

SEE ALSO: Women's World Football Games

"Spending a week with a USA Football Master Trainer and having him install the Heads Up Football philosophy into each of us was a highlight of the camp for me," Australian women's player C.J. Sims said. "The passion, dedication, drive and competitiveness this coach had for us as female athletes and this sports success within Australia was inspiring."

"What an experience," fellow player Tracy Day said. "Here I was thinking I had already seen some of the toughest of football sessions in my short career, but nothing came close to what Coach Stone had in store. I left camp with not only a better football skill set but a better football mind set. As I checked off each session at camp, physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted, I couldn't help but walk back to my room, gear in hand, smiling from ear to ear at the realization that irrelevant of the outcome or my selection, I would be leaving camp as part of a bigger movement for Women's Football in Australia."

It's the offseason for most football players, but learning never takes a day off. With the Women's World Games 3 coming March 1-6 in New Orleans, 17 countries will be represented on the field – including Australia.

Football is constantly evolving. Heads Up Football is part of that, setting the sport's highest standards in concussion recognition and response; heat preparedness and hydration; sudden

cardiac arrest; equipment fitting; practice guidelines; Heads Up Tackling; and Heads Up Blocking.

Available to all U.S. youth organizations and high schools, more than 150,000 coaches were trained in Heads Up Football in 2015.

Football doesn't define us as just a player or coach. It continually brings out the best in us on the field and in life.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program.

TEACH YOUR QUARTERBACK HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY SECURE THE BALL FROM CENTER

3/10/2016

By Anthony Stone

Every football play starts with the snap. A good one allows the potential for success. A bad one bogs down everything immediately and can mean instant disaster or even a turnover. Whether in the shotgun or from under center, this is something a team needs to get down before moving on to anything else. For younger players, stick to being under center. Too many things can go wrong in the shotgun until athletes are old enough to consistently get it back there. Follow these four steps to help your quarterback secure a solid snap and get the play going. SEE ALSO: Solving center snap problems in youth football

Quarterback stance

Getting into a good athletic stance is just as important for quarterbacks as everyone else.

Feet shoulder-width apart and staggered with the leg on his or her throwing side back

Knees bent so there is no wasted motion

Toes either straight ahead or slightly in

Weight on the balls of the feet, gripping the big toe of the pivot foot

Head up, back straight, eyes scanning defense

Shoulders relaxed

Bent slightly at the waist

Arms relaxed with bend at the elbows

This checklist puts the quarterback in the correct position to receive the ball and push off the non-dominant leg with a half-yard head start so the center won't be able to step on the QB's feet while getting into the backfield.

Hand positions for taking the football under center

Start with being comfortable. Make sure the bottom hand is pushing up so the football doesn't go into the wrist.

The middle knuckle should be positioned in the middle of the center's butt pad.

Use both hands to boost the center up a little if the center is too low for your quarterback.

Taking a snap under center

Be in a correct athletic stance as described above

Connect with the center by placing the middle knuckle of the throwing hand underneath and push up

Keep the non-dominant palm connected to the throwing palm until the ball is secure

Practice, practice, practice: Every center is different, so if a quarterback finds one who he or she is most comfortable with, take that into account when choosing positions for your players.

Third hand method and secure the snap

After receiving every snap, regardless of the play, the ball should be brought straight into the "third hand" the quarterback's body. Practice this so many times that it becomes automatic.

The football is well-protected and hidden from the defense in this position. Often times, fumbles occur at this point when the quarterback does not use his third hand so pulling linemen, moving backs and others can knock the ball loose if the quarterback is careless while getting away from the center. Ball security is key for any successful offensive play.

If the play is a run, the ball should remain against the body until clear of any obstacles, including the fullback, then both hands should extend the ball. On plays that involve multiple fakes, the ball should remain against the body while giving hand fakes and only be extended once all obstacles have cleared.

If the play called is a pass, the ball should be against the body, which can then be used as a lever to swing back and forth to a comfortable chest-high position with both hands on the ball. Now go back and watch film of your quarterback to see where you can improve the exchange. Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program.

HERE'S HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE LEVELS OF CONTACT WITH A SMALL ROSTER

3/24/2016

By Anthony Stone

I was recently asked if a football team with a low number of participants could successfully implement USA Football's Levels of Contact.

Of course they can.

For the team in question, it holds three practices per week – Monday, Wednesday and Friday – with games on the weekends. The frustration the coach faces is that not all of his players show up at every practice.

For this situation, Levels of Contact is perfect because the system focuses on varying intensity levels through drills to build player confidence, ensure their safety and prevent physical and mental exhaustion.

Just be organized, have a backup plan and adjust accordingly.

SEE ALSO: Practice planning is just as important as season continues

To be a successful football coach, you need Plan A, Plan B and Plan Kobayashi Maru – for those who follow Star Trek – for when everything seems to go wrong.

Coaches without backup plans can become frustrated, and that is not good for your players or you.

Most coaches typically have their best players playing both ways. Probably 10 percent or more of the players are rookies or have weak fundamentals, depending on the level. But through proper drills and teaching, all of the players can be ready for the season.

Levels of Contact helps here by getting the most out of inexperienced players and developing skills to the point where everyone can contribute.

Here's a breakdown of what Levels of Contact is and how to overcome limited numbers on your roster.

Air

Players run a drill unopposed without any contact.

Problem. Players who start on the offensive and defensive lines often don't get to drill both during a single team session.

Solution. Having two groups alternating during team period so they can learn what to do by running the same play against air. Also, just because there is no opposition doesn't mean there's no hustle. Set a cone 15 yards past the line of scrimmage so the players run past the cone to simulate the play in being successful.

Bags

Drill is run against a bag or another soft-contact surface.

Problem. How to improve tackling skills for the defense.

Solution. Bags are perfect to simulate tackling and instill proper fundamentals. This, in turn, builds the confidence necessary for a young athlete to make contact against another player. If you have the resources available, use an Echo Tackling Ring or Shadowman. If not, any soft contact will work. Remember to use the 21 USA Football Heads Up Tackling drills to work

improve on skills. Tackling is the most important all-player skill in the sport, and teams that tackle well are usually more competitive.

Control

Drill is run at assigned speed until the moment of contact. One player is predetermined the “winner” by the coach. Contact remains above the waist, and players stay on their feet.

Problem. How to improve tackling skills for your defense.

Solution. Once players have mastered the fundamentals against bags, it’s time to move on to Control. This does not mean full-speed contact by any means. As the name suggests, players are staying under control when making contact. Stress to the offensive player that it’s his job to let the other player win so he can work on skills. In turn, it’s the defensive player’s job to keep both players on their feet and not overdo it with a teammate.

Thud

Drill is run at full-speed through the moment of contact. There is no predetermined “winner,” but contact remains above the waist and players stay on their feet with a quick whistle.

Problem. How can I practice full speed contact situations without 11-on-11 or limit injuries within full team drills?

Solution. Eventually, young athletes need to practice football at full speed. That doesn’t mean crashing headlong into each other. By scripting offensive and defensive plays for the upcoming game, Thud will allow players to go at live contact speeds but not be taken to the ground. This is a good speed to run mid-week so players are recovered from the game and need to start working toward the upcoming weekend.

Live

Full speed with players going to the ground.

Problem: How do I simulate game speed during practice?

Solution: Use Thud. There are too many variables when using live scrimmaging, especially at younger levels. It’s extremely rare at the NFL and college level for practices to be conducted at live speed with full tackling. Put your players in a position to learn and grow by sticking with Thud.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women’s National Team program.

Air Anthony Stone bags control Fundamentals and Performance levels of contact practice planning thud youth football

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TEACH YOUR QUARTERBACK HOW TO READ THE DEFENSE

4/8/2016

By Anthony Stone

Quarterback is the hardest position to learn and play in football because there are so many factors that go into it.

Football teams today want to pass more than run on offense, which has a higher chance of leading to a negative outcome: turnovers, incompletions, tip balls, sacks, etc. This puts even more pressure on quarterbacks to be field generals.

In order to lead their teams, quarterbacks needs to understand where their passing windows are located on the field and what defensive coverages they are facing on each down through both presnap and postsnap reads.

Here, we will discuss the how to read the middle of the field to determine coverage and potential openings.

SEE ALSO: 6 football acronyms that build better quarterbacks

Defining the middle

The middle is not hash to hash. It is typically behind the linebackers but can move depending on where the ball is located on the field and your formation. At presnap, the quarterback is looking to identify the number of defenders – typically safeties – in that zone. Whether there are zero, one or two makes a huge difference.

Defenses typically cannot have more than two safeties without having major problems stopping the run. So by identifying the number of safeties, it helps the quarterback narrow down the potential plays that the defense can run and helps the offense play fast.

If you can teach this to your quarterback then you are half way home to reading coverages.

The chart below help with identifying safeties in the middle.

Reading coverages

Some quarterbacks have a difficult time understanding how to read coverages. By focusing first on the middle of the field, they often can find out the coverage's weakness. Here are the five most common:

Cover 0 is when linebackers, cornerbacks and safeties are playing man-to-man on receivers while everyone else is blitzing. The goal is have multiple blitzers against your offense, and they won't be able to block them all.

Weaknesses of this defense are:

No underneath help

Crossing routes

Breaking routes

Pick routes

Find the weak link on man coverage

Nobody in the middle of the field – deep post route

Cover 1 is man-to-man, with both corners and the strong safety or linebackers while the free safety remains in deep zone coverage.

Weaknesses of this defense are:

- No underneath help
- Crossing routes
- Breaking routes
- Pick routes
- Play-action passes
- Out routes

Cover 2 is two deep zone coverage where the strong safety and free safety are both responsible for splitting the field in half. The cornerbacks have flats, and linebackers have hook and curl zone coverages.

Weaknesses of this defense are:

- Vertical routes
- Smash routes
- Deep middle
- Strongside curl
- Flood routes

Cover 3 is a three deep zone with both corners and the free safety splitting the field in thirds with zone coverage underneath by linebackers and strong safety.

Weaknesses of this defense are:

- Weakside curl/flat
- Strongside curl/flat
- Limited fronts
- Flood routes
- Dig routes
- Four vertical

Cover 4 has four deep zones. Each cornerback and safety one quarter of the field, and linebackers have underneath coverage.

Weaknesses of this defense are:

- Smash routes
- Flat routes
- Flood routes

Safeties are susceptible to play-action

Possible mismatch with No. 2 receiver and the outside linebacker on the wheel.

Playing quarterback is complicated enough for any young athlete. Teach them this simple checklist to identify a defense and its weakness to give quarterbacks a leg up on the competition.

6 STEPS TO IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE YOUTH FOOTBALL DRILLS

4/21/2016

By Anthony Stone

Parents and coaches see football through different sets of eyes.

And with the proliferation of news and information available at our fingertips, coaches not only must know what they are doing on the field, they need to be able to address any concerns and answer every question the parents have.

When parents watch your practices, they might be asking, "Is that drill safe for my child?" or "Are they going to get hurt?" This is what my mom would ask when I was kid.

If you, as a coach, can properly answer these six questions, then you know the drill is right for your players.

What is the purpose of the drill?

As a football coach, you must assess all of the drills within your practice plan to identify whether they build player confidence and athletes them more fundamentally sound.

Every drill should be able to be taught at a variety of speeds and intensities to establish a progression for the players. USA Football's Levels of Contact accomplishes this, taking drills through air, bags, control, thud and live.

What skills are you trying to teach?

How to block? How to tackle? How to catch a football? How to kick a football? How to carry a football? How to cause turnovers? The list goes on.

Every drill – especially at the youth level – should focus on teaching one skill at a time. Coaches can then build upon that foundation as the season goes on.

Every drill must have a purpose and a specific skill attached to it, helping players improve their abilities to be successful in a game situations. If the drill doesn't accomplish this goal, change it or eliminate it.

For example, there is a common turnover drill involving two players engaged against two players where the coach throws the ball on the ground and the players are supposed to find the ball and recover it.

What skill is being taught? Blocking? Tackling? Ball stripping? Recovery? No. What's being taught is wrestling and diving recklessly after a loose ball, exposing heads to contact.

A better option is a drill I call clean/dirty. The players are in groups of 10, standing in a line 10 yards away from a coach. On "go," the coach rolls the football toward the first player and says "clean" or "dirty." On "clean," the player scoops up the football, tucks it away and scores. On "dirty," the player falls on the ball and secures it.

Are you conducting a drill that teaches "toughness?"

This question ties into the previous one.

I too often hear youth football coaches say they do a drill because it makes their players "tougher."

How does this help them in a game situation? A drill should teach players to respond faster, play fundamentally sound and make good decisions.

Making a player "tougher" doesn't build player confidence because those drills always have a loser. What did that kid learn? More often than not that he doesn't like football, and it's our job as coaches to make all of our players better.

Being tougher doesn't make you a better tackler. If anything, it fuels a player to take chances and stray from the fundamentals of the sport.

Instead, use the USA Football tackling circuit to teach the skills that players need in the game. Start against air and bags and don't move to control, thud and live until the players are ready.

USA Football offers more than 20 tackling drills in its Film Room – which is included with all USA Football memberships.

Build confidence up so when it is time to tackle, the players are ready and fundamentally sound. You are asking for trouble when players are just being used as battling rams.

How does speed and distance come into play?

When setting up drill, it is important to know how far apart the players are and how fast they are running at each other.

If the drill looks like two rams bumping horns, any skill learning is lost in the distance.

The days of separating the weak from the strong are gone. It is about teaching the proper fundamentals and technique.

Watch the video below. Some of these drills are inherently dangerous. Others could be teaching tools by narrowing the speed and distance at which they are run

Does the drill design led to players being successful

Whether at the youth or the high school level, there will always be an experience gap between players. What might be second nature to some is an unknown to others.

For example, when teaching a player how to catch a ball, are you starting off right away 10 yards apart? Get closer and work your way to that distance.

Help players grasp concepts faster and build their in not dropping the football.

Does your drill maximize participation?

Do your drills have one or two players active and everyone else just watching? If so, then you have a circus line and are wasting precious practice time.

Players sitting on the sideline are not learning. They only get better by doing.

By involving the team as a whole, players get more reps in shorter times, building fundamentals and confidence.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT and ask him questions with the hashtag: #AskUSAHUFMT.

5 IMPORTANT STEPS TO BECOME FULLY INTEGRATED INTO HEADS UP FOOTBALL

5/5/2016

By Anthony Stone

Signing up for Heads Up Football is the easy part.

Then comes the fun part.

Whether within a youth football organization or a high school program, Heads Up Football sets the nation's highest standards in player health and safety, bringing coaches, players and parents together through education and on-field teaching.

For me, the most important segment is educating parents, but we'll get to that later. There are other important steps first.

Step 1: The school or club Player Safety Coach gets trained by a USA Football Master Trainer
All organizations and high schools can send one representative to be trained as a Player Safety Coach through a free, four-hour clinic. This individual receives hands-on, practical training to supplement the online course to take back home and share with others.

Step 2: Certify all coaches in the program or league

All of your coaches must take and pass the USA Football coaching course on NFHSLearn.org (high school) or the Level 1 Certification (youth) before their first practice.

This course sets the foundation for learning and all that is to come. Here is another way to think about becoming certified: Would you fly on an airplane if the pilot didn't have a license? Would you feel comfortable sending your child to a school where the teachers weren't trained and certified? No. So why let your child play football if the coaches aren't certified?

Step 3: Conduct a Coaches Clinic

The PSC meets with all coaches to review the seven Heads Up Football components and answer any questions. Coaches also learn a series of drills to teach the Heads Up Tackling and Heads Up Blocking fundamentals.

Step 4: Educate parents and players

This is the big one. All youth and high school football teams should conduct the parent and player meeting right before the season starts as a way to inform the parents about rules, policies, schedules and other important household items.

Start the meeting by giving parents an overview of why your school or organization chose to become part of Heads Up Football and that their children's health and safety is your No. 1 concern.

Display your coaches' USA Football certificates so parents can see they are trained. Walk the parents through some of the drills you will be teaching their children. Make them part of the process. Let them ask questions. Create advocates for your program.

Introduce all of the football coaches and the PSC. Explain equipment fitting by actually doing it. Let parents experience what it's like to be a player. Break into smaller groups so coaches can talk to their team parents.

Close by coming back together and thanking everyone for attending and you hope they enjoy the upcoming season.

Step 5: PSC guides and mentors coaches

The Player Safety Coach's job is not done with preseason events. He or she needs to be there at practices and games to help the coaches in any way possible. It is important for PSCs to

reinforce that coaches use Heads Up Football terminology and teach Heads Up Football techniques.

Thank you for making a better, safer game.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT and ask him questions with the hashtag: #AskUSAHUFMT.

BACK TO THE BASICS: CATCHING THE FOOTBALL WITH CONFIDENCE

5/19/2016

By Anthony Stone

Football is ever-evolving and has really changed during the last two decades, especially in respect to the passing game.

It's hard to believe the West Coast Offense has been around for 30 years. That system developed by Don Coryell and popularized by Bill Walsh's San Francisco 49ers is the original blueprint for a pass-drive attack.

Today, almost all football teams – including those on the youth level throw the football – contain at least some offensive package with a no-huddle spread.

But throwing the ball is just part of the equation. The receiver on the on the other end has to be able to catch it a well, and this is not an easy skill for many youth players.

SEE ALSO: 3 drills to reinforce wide receiver technique

SEE ALSO: Catching the ball with small hands

Through teaching techniques, coaches can take the necessary steps to build a player's confidence while making them better pass catchers. He are the five basic fundamentals to start with:

Keep your eye on the ball

Extend your arms toward the ball

When the ball hits your hand, bring the ball into your body

Tuck the football away

Run with the football

Hands in the right place

If the football is above the waist, use the diamond teaching cues:

Diamond. Thumbs and pointer fingers are together in the shape of a diamond. Use the word "diamond" to relate better to young players. Visualization is key, and they connect it to a famous WWE wrestler, Diamond Dallas Page. When a player is about to catch the football, he or she follow five steps listed above.

If the football is below the waist, use the pinky-to-pinky cue:

Pinky to pinky. Put the pinkies together to form an "M." The reason I call it "M&Ms" is because most kids love M&Ms. When players are about to catch the football, they follow the five steps above. Make sure each player's elbow come together so the ball doesn't fall through the arms.

The biggest thing you need to do is to make it fun for the players, especially if they are first starting out. Who wants to keep practicing if you aren't having fun?

Easy setup

Start by partnering the players, then give them the item – football, tennis ball, a squishy ball, etc. – you are using that day to have them practice catching.

Next, put them on a line with a tub or wagon filled with these items, situating the other players no more than 5 yards away. Closer is always better for younger players. You can see their confidence improving with every catch.

For example, in my gym class, I used toy chickens, toy pigs, beach balls, giant football fishes and other items that are easier to catch. With older players, I use tennis balls, bumpy balls or even an old-school dodgeball.

When first teaching a player to catch, make it fun and exciting. Don't make them feel like it's a job. Switch the item up that is being thrown until eventually they all have footballs. As the progress, add challenges such as having the players turn around once after the thrower throws the football.

Two things to avoid:

Don't start with the partners being too far away from each other.

Don't make it competitive.

Here are some drills I do for older students in middle school and high school:

Partner tennis ball catching

Highest point with a tennis ball

Bounce and catch bumpy ball or tennis ball

Clockwork catching with football

Raptor drill with football

Hand flips with football

Turn around with football

Goal post catches with football

Back claps with football

Back drops with football

Over shoulder with football

One hand catches with football

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT and ask him questions with the hashtag: #AskUSAHUFMT.

HEADS UP FOOTBALL IS SO EASY KIDS CAN TEACH IT

6/3/2016

By Anthony Stone

Heads Up Football is not just a tag line or a decal a team puts on its helmets. It is the future of football.

The USA Football program educates coaches on how to lay a foundation and teach the basics of the sport so important tackling and blocking skills can be taught at any level or individual skill level. It also encompasses all-sport player safety aspects of concussion recognition and response; equipment fitting; sudden cardiac arrest awareness; and heat and hydration.

Heads Up Football is taught by coaches at more than 6,300 youth organizations and 1,100 high schools across the nation. The program is designed to be simple enough for a first-year coach with no experience in the sport to pick it up and install it at practices but thorough enough for to benefit any veteran coach.

At St. Ann Catholic School in Chicago, John Krenkel serves as the Player Safety Coach. Each Heads Up Football organization or school appoints a PSC to serve as the conduit between USA Football and the community. Through an online course, an in-person clinic and continuing education at USAFootball.com, Krenkel and other PSCs make sure their coaches are teaching proper technique and are there to answer any questions they have.

I first met Coach Krenkel two years ago at a PSC Clinic. Last month, John tagged me in a Facebook post of his students performing USA Football's blocking techniques, and one of the players was teaching it to the rest of his teammates.

SEE ALSO: 5 important steps to become fully integrated into Heads Up Football

SEE ALSO: 6 reasons to make sure all of your coaches are certified

The players were really into it and having fun doing it. Watching the videos, is easy to tell that Coach Krenkel exemplifies what a Player Safety Coach should be. He understands that player safety comes first and is a firm believer that all youth programs should join Heads Up Football. USA Football doesn't run leagues, nor does it tell you how to coach. USA Football is a resource to help make the sport that we all love better.

All across the nation, players will soon return to the football field for practice. From that first day, more than 1 million young athletes will either learn about Heads Up Football or reinforce what they learned the year before.

It all starts with the breakdown position - feet, squeeze, sink and hands.

As a teacher, I know how important it is to have unity within a coaching staff and players. The verbiage in Heads Up Football's tackling and blocking allows coaches to use a universal language that carries with players throughout their experience with the sport.

For example, if a coach or teammate sees a player overstriding or standing still before tackling a ball-carrier, anyone on the sideline can call out "Buzz" so that player realizes what to do.

Buzzing the feet is a key to taking short, choppy steps in the leadup to a tackle so as to come under control and shut off cutback lanes.

Everyone on the team can communicate without frustration or confusion on what they need to do.

As a football coach, I understand that the idea of change, especially with terminology is difficult, but look at it this way: What if your high school players grow up with Heads Up Football and

bring that inherent knowledge with them from the first day at the varsity level? Your players are already familiar with the terminology, and the learning curve is nearly cut entirely. Players would be better learners, tacklers, blockers and their confidence in the system is already instilled.

Watch the video below, and think about it. A system so simple a child can teach it but sophisticated enough that 30-year veteran coaches are learning from it.

At the end of the day, I want my children and the people I coach to be part of a better, safer game of football.

HEADS UP FOOTBALL COMES TO ENGLAND

6/16/2016

By Anthony Stone

Football has no boundaries, and USA Football's Heads Up Football program is the universal language.

This was evident yet again earlier this month when I joined a group of Master Trainers in England to teach Heads Up Football components to coaches there, laying the groundwork for today's players and future generations of athletes.

Football is an important sport for youth and teenage athletes because players of any size, shape and skill level can play. There is no singular body type. Along with proper techniques and fundamentals, by providing players with valuable lessons in character building, perseverance, teamwork and dedication, we provide them with skills that will follow them throughout every aspect of their lives.

And through training, we build coaches into strong, qualified leaders who serve as sources of inspiration to players and advocates throughout their communities.

SEE ALSO: USA Football taking Heads Up Football to Russia

SEE ALSO: NFL players help spread love for football in Egypt

Most people associate American football and England with the NFL games that are played each year in that country. But the sport is not just an amusement for Brits, who carry the same passion for football that Americans do.

Organized American football has been available in England for more than 30 years. In fact, BritBowl XXX will be played in August to determine the nation's top team.

A lot has changed since those early days, said British American Football Association President Jon Wyse. In the beginning, proper equipment was scarce and the stories of players wearing motorbike helmets to practice has become part of the country's folklore.

The sport also has come a long way in that time. Recent efforts from USA Football to create a better, safer game have not gone unnoticed across the Atlantic Ocean.

England is now home to football equipment suppliers, and purchasing new helmets and shoulder pads is as easy as it is in the United States.

Of course, ensuring the proper fit is vital to player safety, and that's where Heads Up Football's online education can help.

Heads Up Football is the sport's most comprehensive player health and safety program, creating a singular terminology and setting the foundation for learning within the sport. The program encompasses USA Football's online Coach Certification Course; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concussion recognition and response; heat and hydration protocols; sudden cardiac arrest protocols; equipment fitting instruction; and tackling and blocking fundamentals.

This is important education for coaches in Great Britain, where the sport operates largely on a volunteer basis. Even at the 80 college level programs, coaches are volunteer.

As the national governing body for the sport, the British American Football Association has worked to support these coaches through its coach development program.

The result was myself and three other USA Football Master Trainers – George Teague, Jimmy Wallace and Chad Hester – speaking to 180 coaches. Feedback has been positive with coaches learning and enjoying the level of personal interaction, understanding the framework to coach players in safer fundamentals.

Football is being taught better today than ever before – both here in the U.S. and abroad.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He has been a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program and will coach the 2017 Australia Women's Outback National Team. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT and ask him questions with the hashtag: #AskUSAHUFMT.

Anthony StoneBAFAEnglandHeads Up Footballinternational football

BACK TO THE BASICS: SHOTGUN SNAPPING WITH CONFIDENCE

6/30/2016

By Anthony Stone

There is a common issue for many teams that snap the football in the shotgun: the ball goes over the quarterback's head, the ball is dropped, the ball flies to the side of the quarterback or the ball rolls back to the quarterback.

Every play starts with the center, so whether the team is playing flag football or tackle, it is vital to build the center's confidence and skills so the ball is properly delivered to the quarterback.

SEE ALSO: Read more of Anthony Stone's Back to the Basics blog series

Eugene Crosby is the offensive line coach at St. Olaf College and works all of his centers and long snappers through the same routine.

It all starts with the center being in the proper stance. This means being balanced with evenly distributed weight and not too forward of a lean.

When it comes to the snap itself, it is important to emphasize a consistent release point. That means making sure the center is not releasing the ball above the knees. The higher the release, the higher the snap gets to the quarterback. The same goes if you release the ball to low.

To get the best outcome, emphasize the release going through the calf muscle.

Another teaching point is to make sure the athlete is not breaking his wrist. This can lead to an unpredictable delivery. When the center moves and snaps at the same time, the ball tends to drift in that direction – i.e. if you step right, the ball drifts right.

Crosby can take any player on a football team and with a little work make them comfortable and consistent in delivering the ball.

Coaches who are part of Heads Up Football can use the USA Football system already are ahead of the game in teaching this skill.

Stance. Start with the stance position for Heads Up Blocking.

Grip. Just like throwing a football but put the hand up a little bit or put the index finger on the tip of the football, whichever is more comfortable for the center.

The rest of it comes through practice. When centers and QBs are together, take any moments of down time and turn them into reps, making sure the quarterbacks are at the same depth every time. If linemen are alone, try this: Take two garbage cans, and turn one upside down.

Place the other can on its side and Duck tape it on top of the upside down with the open end pointed at the center. The ball should go in the sideways can every time.

Reinforce positive thinking in your centers. If they are struggling, get them in the habit of saying, "I can do it," before getting into their routine. When they do it correctly, it puts a smile on their face and builds confidence.

Once the center has the shotgun motion down, the next step is to get into blocking position.

Now, it is time to go to the practice field. Tweak the system to find what works best for your players.

Good luck. Use the hashtag #BackToTheBasics on Twitter to let me know how it's going.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He has been a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program and will coach the 2017 Australia Women's Outback National Team.

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BACK TO THE BASICS: CATCHING THE FOOTBALL ON PUNTS OR KICKOFFS WITH CONFIDENCE

7/14/2016

By Anthony Stone

Everyone talks about offense and defense when preparing a game plan, but what about that other aspect of football?

Special teams too often get overlooked, including by some coaches, even though it makes up a third of all football games.

Coaches can find hidden yardage within kicks and punts – not to mention points. Don't get caught in the trap of ignoring this part of the game.

One of the hardest things for young athletes to do on special teams is catching and securing the ball after it is kicked.

Everyone watches on Saturdays and Sundays as highly skilled players easily corral a punt or kickoff and run effortlessly upfield. But for youngsters, it's not that easy. Even older athletes sometimes have a hard time with it.

And turning the ball over in special teams can really hurt. It not only wipes out an offensive opportunity but often flips field position.

So ask yourself the following questions to help teach this skill:

What is the age and skill of the players you are teaching?

Are you making fun to learn for appropriate age groups?

Starting out

For young players, have them begin simply by throwing the football up in the air and catching it.

This simple technique lays the foundation and builds confidence.

Explain to them that as the football comes down, they make a basket with their chests, hands and forearms. Their elbows need to be tight to the body with shoulders square and feet straight into the oncoming kick.

Once their confidence improves, have them punt the football straight up in the air and practice catching it. With this added dimension, the football is coming to them but they won't always be able to keep their feet straight and shoulders square. The players will have fun practicing at a park or when they can't play catch with someone.

Next, add one player throw the football straight up as another other player moves in to get square with the ball. After they master this, have the partners start stepping back and either throwing the football from a distance or punt the football to each other.

High schoolers use their noodles

Returns on special teams can change the momentum of the game – for good or for bad.

I got the following idea from watching the movie "Karate Kid." You remember: Wax on, wax off ... paint the fence.

One way to lessen the chance for muffed returns is by using pool noodles. The key is to cut each noodle to the specific size and fit for the player.

Have the player wrap the noodle around his or her back and over the elbows with elbows in tight, then cut it so it doesn't interfere with catching a ball – about three to five inches from their arms.

Use the noodles to keep the elbows tight to the body when making a basket with the arms, elbows and chest to catch the football. Be sure to also keep their shoulders square and feet straight, then just let it fall right in that space.

When starting out, have quarterbacks throw the football long and high so returners get used to the football coming straight at them.

Once the players get the feel for that, they can proceed to a kicker or punter kicking them the football.

Once a player has mastered that level, use extra noodles as distraction pieces or use loud music or sounds and make it a competition for the players.

The kids will love it.

Now it is time to go to the practice field or at home and learn to be more confident in catching the football on a kick.

Tell me how is it going on Twitter with #BackToTheBasics.

SEE ALSO: Read more of Anthony Stone's Back to the Basics blog

SEE ALSO: 3 punt blocks to bring pressure on special teams

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He has been a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program and will coach the 2017 Australia Women's Outback National Team.

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INSERTION SCHEDULES ARE IMPORTANT TOOLS TO COACHING FOOTBALL

7/28/2016

By Anthony Stone

Preseason practice for high school football is under way, and the start of the new season for youth football teams is just around the corner.

Is your insertion schedule ready?

What is an insertion schedule, you might ask? It's an important piece of your practice planning that no coach should go without. And it will make your life so much easier.

Let's discuss what one looks like for offense, defense and special teams.

SEE ALSO: Insertion schedules work for skill building, too

SEE ALSO: Read Anthony Stone's Be An Expert At Your Position blog series

An insertion schedule is a list that must be completed within a certain amount of time to allow a football team to be successful.

If you have been around football for a while, I'm sure you remember the days when coaches just stretched players, made them run a couple of laps, then go straight to scrimmaging for the rest of the practice.

Those days are over.

What do youth players actually learn during those practices? Nothing.

By implementing an insertion schedule, you lay a foundation to make your program successful and your athletes safer. Also, your athletes have a better opportunity to absorb the material that is given to them so they can learn skills and develop them for the next level of play.

Remember, every level of football is different, so the earlier you lay the foundation the better chance the athlete has to improve.

What is in an insertion schedule

How many days until you play your first game?

How big are your playbooks for offense, defense and special teams? (We will discuss this in an upcoming blog.)

Do you have your old practice plans from the season before that include your notes on what worked and what didn't? (Make the pledge to use the USA Football practice guidelines.)

A list of drills and skills from each coach that need to be addressed before the first game.

A breakdown of what your offensive coordinator, defensive coordinator and special teams coach want by the first game.

SEE ALSO: Download an example of an offensive insertion schedule

SEE ALSO: Download an example of a defensive insertion schedule

SEE ALSO: Download an example of a special teams insertion schedule

An offensive insertion schedule examples:

What do you want every position group to learn before the first game?

Offensive line. Heads Up Blocking to allow you to run the ball and get first downs

Running backs. Know the holes and how to secure the football

Quarterbacks. Know how to throw properly and the proper steps to execute a play

Receivers. How to catch the football, block and run routes

This is just a small taste of what your insertion schedule for all-player skills should look like.

The rest of the insertion schedule should include – but is not limited to:

Making sure they understand gaps and defensive alignments, cadence, huddle formations, offensive formations and offensive plays broken down by position.

What defensive fronts and coverage you will go over (for older players).

A key point to remember: Every player is at a different level of knowledge, and none has the same knowledge base as you do. That is why it is important when teaching your material this preseason to make sure you have an insertion schedule so you can teach them in a more effective and efficient way by making the game fun, safe, and enjoyable for your players.

When you ask a player what he or she learned at practice, you never want to hear: "That I don't like running laps!"

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He is the quarterbacks coach for Boylan High School in Rockford, Ill., and has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He has been a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program and will coach the 2017 Australia Women's Outback National Team. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT and ask him questions with the hashtag: #AskUSAHUFMT.

INSERTION SCHEDULES WORK FOR SKILL WORK, TOO

7/29/2016

By Anthony Stone

Insertion schedules are critical pieces to every coach's practice plan. They help a head coach set goals for the team while coordinators and position coaches also get what they need done by the next game.

This is especially important on the youth level, where coaches typically don't spend the day together talking, oftentimes meeting up at the field minutes before practice starts.

SEE ALSO: Insertion schedules are important tools to coaching football

But insertion schedules go way beyond just offense, defense and special teams. They are useful tools when it comes to teaching the game's most important all-player skills, including tackling and turnovers.

Teams that tackle well will be successful. By limiting opportunities for big plays, it keeps the ball out of the end zone and makes the offense line up to snap the ball again.

Add to that the ability to create turnovers, and any youth team is well on its way to good things. Let's take a look at how to organize and plan how to accomplish the steps toward these important player skills.

Tackling

First step: Become a part of USA Football's Heads Up Football program and use the tackling resources that are part of membership.

Either at the website or by downloading the free USA Football app, watch and incorporate the Heads Up Tackling videos – Breakdown, Buzz, Hit, Shoot and Rip – into your practice plans.

Don't just watch them and assume you will remember everything. Write the key points down like a teacher would a lesson plan.

It is vital that these are taught to your players first because in order to allow everyone to be on the same page. It also will build player confidence up, which is vital to a successful team.

During the first week of practice, make sure everyone on your team is using the USA Football verbiage and start implementing a tackling circuit if don't already.

Then start teaching like John Cacciatore and Bryant Salamone do here at Boylan High School in Rockford, Ill.

Tackling fundamentals can be taught outside of a tackling circuit as well.

After players stretch, have them stay in their stretch lines to learn or review the Breakdown position or Hit position before breaking into position groups.

This gets the momentum going and players on the same page so they are excited for the start of practice.

And even though it's not a formal tackle circuit, you are halfway there already.

Then nailing down these basic fundamentals, the circuit can move on to more complex drills that put the basics together into other skills. All of these drills are available with your USA Football membership.

Most important, remember to follow USA Football's National Practice Guidelines for Youth Tackle Football and limit full contact – Thud or Live – to no more than 30 minutes each day.

SEE ALSO: [Click here for an example of a tackling insertion plan](#)

Early season

Make sure players understand Breakdown, Buzz, Hit, Shoot and Rip.

Establish same-skill all-tackling stations so coaches can focus on that one skill to make sure players are successful before they move on

Use a tackling circuit at every practice to create good habits

Start implementing Levels of Contact

In-season

Use a variety of drills at each station, identifying which skills your players need to work on

Focus on different skills at each station

Plan for an in-week progression

Continue with Levels of Contact and break players into different groups so some may work against Air or Bags and others Control

Troubleshooting

Tackle circuit drills should directly address mistakes that were made in a game

Track why players miss tackles and use USA Football verbiage to note it

Turnovers

Everything related above to tackling is the same for turnovers when it comes to creating circuits.

Feel free to switch things up by using a turnover drill as part of a tackling circuit as well. Here are a few turnover drills that I use and the Level of Contact I typically run them at:

3-line strip drill – hammer, punch and claw (Control)

Tomahawk (Control)

Punch out (Control)

Scoop and score (Air)

Ball drills (Air)

Batted ball (Air)

Clean and dirty (Air)

Fumble recovery, scoop and score (Bags)

2 on 1 tackle (Control)

Club and rip (Control)

Tip and pick A)

QB takeaway (Control)

SEE ALSO: [Click here for an example of a turnovers insertion plan](#)

As a defensive coach, setting goals and executing them each week will make your players more confident in getting the ball back to your offense. Instill the skills, then reinforce them every practice.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary in Rockford, Ill. He is the quarterbacks coach for Boylan High School in Rockford, Ill., and has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He has been a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program and will coach the 2017 Australia Women's Outback National Team. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT and ask him questions with the hashtag: #AskUSAHUFMT.

HOW TO KEEP CHILDREN ACTIVE THE ENTIRE YEAR

8/10/2016

By Anthony Stone

Who remembers the days when school was out and as soon as the sun would come up, your parents would throw a ball out the door and wouldn't expect you back home until lunch and then not again until dinner?

Nowadays, we have children who don't leave the house without some sort of electronic device and have no idea what physical activity is outside gym class.

So, unless we do something about it, the future generations could look like the people represented in the movie Wall-E: a generation that becomes so dependent on technology from an early age that they don't even know how to socialize with others face-to-face or even walk on their own.

Technology is great but too much technology can make people less active.

Gone are the days of physical education class every day. As a PE teacher, I am lucky to have the same class twice a week.

This is challenging when child obesity is on the rise and state testing expects PE teachers to conquer this issue with limited class time.

Hopefully the days of PE teachers rolling out the ball during class has also become extinct.

It is our job as educators to continually raise the bar and challenge students to reach their potential both in the classroom and in the gym.

A friend gave me a book on the topic last year that I highly recommend: Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain.

Here is what I believe will help keep children active in your city, town, community, or school. Have a Plan

It is vital to have the activities set up like a lesson plan, or like an insertion schedule for football. Motivating today's students can be challenging because some are not as easily motivated as others. Having a plan helps you stay on track with what you are trying to accomplish despite behavioral issues. Here are some examples of what I have done within my school and community that parents, teachers, and coaches can implement.

In your School District

Do something extra at your school. Try having a running club after school where parents and students come twice a week and stretch and run outside (weather permitting) or inside if space allows. Plus, you would be surprised at how many teachers and principals participate! Also, have the students and parents sign a contract that states the pick up times for parents so you don't get stuck waiting.

Enroll in Play 60. A huge advantage to this program is that it's free. I signed my school up for the first time last year and it was a huge success. We only had third-to-fifth graders participate for the plays, but it was very rewarding and the students learned a lot and even gave back to the community in addition to staying fit. Fuel Up to Play 60 is an in-school nutrition and physical activity program launched by National Dairy Council and NFL, in collaboration with the USDA, to help encourage today's youth to lead healthier lives

DOWNLOAD: The Fuel Up to Play 60 Pledge

In your Community

Contact your local Recreation Department or Park District When school is not in session or does not offer one of the above programs, then look to what the community has to offer.

In my community, we have a fantastic park district that gives back to the community everyday. It offers activities, events, shows, camps, and leagues for all ages and skill level.

The Rockford Park District believes in supporting the youth of the community by laying a foundation for tomorrow's leaders.

They believe in Heads Up Football and implement the safety components for all sports and camps that they offer.

Every city needs to have a person like a Lamont Jones, Rockford Park District Manager of Youth Sports. He is a visionary and leader when it comes to getting kids off the streets and couches in order to motivate them to be more active.

He is wonderful at making sure students and parents are successful by equipping them with all the necessary resources.

Jones's vision is to provide world-class sports and activities for our citizens.

"It is important that at our level, [we create a] 'foundation' to provide proper fundamentals, develop skills, introduce youth and parents to the 'player-coach relationship'," Jones said.

SEE ALSO: NFL Play 60 initiative makes history

Jones recognizes that it's a team effort. It truly takes a village.

"We can't provide all these great sports without a group of dedicated volunteer coaches, team moms, a great partnership with our school district and use of their facilities," he said.

So my challenge to all parents, coaches, teachers and students is to have a plan and go out and execute it. Don't wait and put it off until tomorrow because our youth need you to invest in them today. Their health is important and we definitely want them all to live an active and long life.

With your help we can lay the foundation that teaches our youth to not only be leaders but to live an active and healthy life.

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HOW TO EXECUTE A TWO-MINUTE OFFENSE

8/25/2016

By Anthony Stone

Operating an offense with less than two minutes remaining in the half or the game is often a critical factor in a team's success.

How will your offense respond to the challenge when this opportunity presents itself?

As a coach, you need to make sure you prepare for the two-minute drill in practice before you even get to that situation in a game. Accordingly, it is essential that your team works on it twice a week in pads and once more during walk-throughs.

Unexpectedly sprinkling the drill in at practice can also help players react quickly, similar to a real game scenario.

In order to run an effective two-minute drill, it is imperative that you review and understand your state and/or league's rules for clock stoppages.

Here are some things to keep in mind with the two-minute offense:

What are you trying to accomplish in the two-minute offense?

What is the score?

Do you need a touchdown or a field goal to take the lead or win?

How much time is left (in the half or in the game)?

How many timeouts do you have left?

Use your timeouts in the first half because you can't carry them over to the second half.

Make sure your team is aware of when you are running the two-minute offense.

Must make sure all teammates are aware of their responsibilities (for example, getting out of bounds rather than fighting for extra yards and taking up more time.)

Keep your quarterback calm and remind him that he's in charge. Make him feel like he has done this before and can do it again.

Understand clock management

Typically, the game clock stops when the following occurs:

A time out is called by the official.

An incomplete pass is thrown.

The ball carrier goes out of bounds.

Officials measure for a first down.

On first down, officials move the chains before restarting the clock.

Here are some additional tips:

If the clock is not stopped, then have the offense line up immediately by yelling, "ball, ball, ball," and run the predetermined play.

If the clock is stopped, then have the offense huddle and receive the play from sideline.

If it is first down or you need to stop the clock for a winning field goal, then have the quarterback call, "spike, spike, and spike," which indicates that the quarterback will spike the ball to stop the clock.

When the clock is stopped for a measurement or penalty, then use a huddle near the line of scrimmage. Make sure the offense is ready to go when the referee signals that the ball is ready for play

When carrying the ball, get as much yardage as possible and then get out of bounds.

Keep the sticks moving!

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary and quarterbacks coach at Boylan High School in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He also is a coach for the U.S. Women's National Team program. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT.

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If the clock is stopped, then have the offense huddle and receive the play from sideline.

If it is first down or you need to stop the clock for a winning field goal, then have the quarterback call, "spike, spike, and spike," which indicates that the quarterback will spike the ball to stop the clock.

When the clock is stopped for a measurement or penalty, then use a huddle near the line of scrimmage. Make sure the offense is ready to go when the referee signals that the ball is ready for play

When carrying the ball, get as much yardage as possible and then get out of bounds.

Keep the sticks moving!

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WHEN TO USE TIMEOUTS

9/8/2016

By Anthony Stone

Every football coach knows how to take a timeout, but the key is knowing when to use them, especially if you are running a two-minute offense before the half or at the end of the game.

SEE ALSO: How to run a two-minute offense

A lot of coaches might have tunnel vision during the game. However, using timeouts at the correct time can allow you to control the tempo of the game.

Timeouts are one part of the football game that are easily overlooked. No matter if you coach at the youth, high school, college or professional level, timeouts are a tool that requires strategic use.

For example, all teams have three timeouts in the first half and three timeouts in the second half. We are not given a timeout bank where you can use them later in a game. Don't use timeouts right away in the beginning of a game, but in the first half, you need to utilize them to your advantage.

Here are some occasions when you ought to consider calling a timeout.

The offense often calls timeout when:

It is lined up wrong.

It only has 10 players on the field.

It doesn't want to get penalized.

The wrong play is called from a player to the huddle (with players running in plays.)

You are trying to hard count the opponent instead of running a play on third- or fourth-and-short.

You rethink the play you are about to run against the defense.

You need "to preserve the clock at the end of the half or end of the game." (hat tip to Donald Davis, USA Football Master Trainer)

You want to run a two-minute offense (before the half or end of game.)

You want to let the clock run all the way down.

Defense normally uses timeouts to when:

It wants to stop the offense's momentum on a long drive.

It has 10 players on the field.

It tries to get the ball back before the half or end of the game.

It wants to make the offense run an actual play, not just use victory formation.

It needs to get different defensive personnel in the game.

It's not able to get the correct defensive call in from the sideline.

It wants to get an extra water break.

When it wants "to see what the offense's alignment is before a crucial down." (Hat tip to Scott Taylor, USA Football Master Trainer)

It has 12 players on the field.

Special teams usually uses timeouts when:

There are not enough players on the field.

You don't like the formation you are seeing from the other team.

You want to ice the kicker.

You want to ice the punter.

You don't want to be penalized for delay of game.

You are letting the clock run all the way down.

You want to draw up how to attack the opposing team.

Share these points with your coaching staff whether they are on the field or up in the box. You can even add them to your call sheet. When the game is close this is a tool coaches can use to squeeze out every extra advantage in the football game this season.

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ODE TO THE FOOTBALL COACH'S WIFE

9/13/2016

(Original)

By Anthony Stone

USA Football knows that there are plenty of female coaches in the coaching industry, and we aim to help even more achieve a spot in these ranks. Male or female, every coach and team needs a great support system to succeed. Here is one longtime coach's take on how his spouse is an integral piece for his team's success and his own sanity.

Coaching is a 24/7, 365-day job. Even in the offseason, we are preparing for the next season, handling recruiting, going to clinics to become better coaches and staying on top of the athletes to make sure they are handling their grades and staying in shape.

While the requirements to coach a football team are many, there's a clear unsung hero of many football teams: the coach's wife.

The support of spouses is vital to the team's success because they keep all the moving pieces running smoothly, from the family to day-to-day life to being the glue of the football team.

A coach and his wife are like a tag team. The coach's wife is usually in the background making sure the family is taken care of while the coach puts in long hours.

And she usually makes it look easy.

Every team is different, just like every relationship is different. Keep in mind not all marriages are created equal, but they all require the following to be successful: love, open communication, trust and commitment to name a few.

As with any job, the spouse doesn't have to understand the job in order to be supportive. Both the husband and the wife just need to understand and listen to the other half.

A coach's wife is as important to the team as a practice plan or scouting report. We lean on them for big-picture things such as support, wisdom and guidance as well as smaller things like meals and making sure we're keeping hydrated.

What makes a coach's wife the unsung hero of the team?

Coaches' wives are the rock of the family. The coach's wife often takes on sole responsibility for managing and organizing the home life when the coach is away with football duties, often assuming more than her fair share. My wife helps the children with their homework, packs school lunches, makes sure they are on time to doctor's appointments, prepares family meals and takes the kids to their sports practices. Most days when I get done with coaching high school football, I go straight to my son's NFL FLAG practice to help. By the time I arrive, my wife has already been there for 30 minutes.

Coaches' wives are a support system. Not only does the coach's wife commit to spending three hours in the stands on Friday nights, rain or shine, she's usually involved in some aspect of preparation for game day. While I spend Fridays preparing for the game on the field, my wife is taking care of everything off the field, including getting my gameday attire ready, making sure our kids are prepared to sit in the bleachers and taking care of everything that I forget. A coach's wife isn't a passive bystander offering support from the bleachers. She usually has an active hand.

Coaches' wives are event coordinators. Where would any football team be without the wives of coaches who step up and donate their time to make sure players have the best experience possible? Coaches' wives are usually the first in line to schedule a team meal, organize an

awards assembly and coordinate the team's laundry schedule. These are seemingly small tasks that can get overshadowed by the excitement of games but are crucial to a successful season. In the past, my wife has made the flyer for our year-end awards banquet, sent out the final invitations and made sure the food was being delivered. At an awards banquet, players often thank coaches. They should also be thanking the coaches' wives.

Coaches' wives are an important soundboard. Coaches' wives listen to their spouse's problems, whether they are related to football Xs and Os or not. My wife gives me advice even though I might not want to hear it. It is amazing that my wife can understand the problems I face on a daily basis and pretty much tell me at the end of the day, "Suck it up, Buttercup," or "Do what you were going to do the first time," or "Go with your gut and stop second guessing yourself. You are here for a reason so go out and accomplish the task at hand." Some coaches' wives have a tremendous grasp on the sport of football. Others might be less familiar with the game. Still, they all seem able to dispense wisdom that can get their husband through challenging times, whether on or off the field.

Coaches' wives are deeply understanding of the time commitments that coaches face. Wives of coaches know that the coach's job isn't over when the game ends. Often, it might not even be over when the season ends. My wife understands that after the game, win or lose, I still work for a few hours to break down film while the game is fresh on my mind. When that game is behind us, it's on to the next game, and more Hudl-watching, scouting trips and film breakdown. She will usually send me a motivational text after the game while I break down film, whether we win or lose.

Coaches' wives sacrifice their own time to make sure they get time with their husband. Quality time together matters whenever you can squeeze it in. Even after a long day, a coach's wife is often willing to stay up late just to make time with her husband. When I get time with my wife late at night, we will talk about everything important that happened that day or just watch TV shows together. This wouldn't be possible if she didn't sacrifice an extra hour of sleep just to stay up late with me.

Coaches' wives automatically inherit a larger family: a football family. We are a family of six, but my wife and I both say that our family is so much bigger since we are a football family. The time and energy that she and I both pour into every player and every team leaves a lasting bond. We get to know the players, their parents and their siblings away from the field. It takes time and effort to build those relationships, and a coach's wife is willing to invest in her new football family.

Coaches' wives are there to celebrate the good times – but are also there to endure the hard times. When a team wins, a coach's wife is right by her husband's side to celebrate. Victories are fun and usually easy to handle. But when a team struggles, and other parents or fans might begin to question or criticize the coach, the coach's wife has to endure the comments, handling them with grace and dignity, even when it's difficult to do so.

Pro Football Hall of Fame head coach Bud Grant said it best: "A good football coach needs a patient wife, a loyal dog and a great quarterback – but not necessarily in that order."

Thanks to all the football coaches' wives out there, especially my wife, Kara.

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BACK TO THE BASICS: BEING RESOURCEFUL, THE MANY WAYS TO USE GARBAGE CANS EFFECTIVELY IN PRACTICE

9/22/2016

By Anthony Stone

My previous 'back to the basics' blogs discussed how to improve a particular skillsets. This blog will show you how to use ordinary garbage cans to build confidence for both the individual and the team as a whole.

See Also: Back to the Basics: Catching the football on punts or kickoffs with confidence

See Also: Back to the Basics: Shotgun snapping with confidence

See Also: Back to the Basics: Catching the football with confidence

Football programs usually don't have a money tree in the backyard so they are not able to purchase any item they want or need during the season. Coaches adapt and learn to become creative. That's why coaches tend to joke about things like the 1001 ways to use duct tape! As a coach, I have learned over the years to become very resourceful. For example, when there aren't enough players on the team or at practice, a coach can use regular plastic garbage cans to improve a team's confidence. The garbage cans work to substitute certain positions when running the following drills:

- 1) The offense can view different defensive fronts they expect to face.
- 2) The defense can view the different offense formations so they can better understand what the strength should be for every play.

Offensive Linemen can use garbage cans during inside run so players can get more reps and make sure they have proper hand placement.

Coaching point: Make sure you have the correct defensive fronts (Ex. 3-4, 3-3, 4-1, 4-2, 4-3, 4-4, 5-1, 5-2, and 6-2 just to name a few) that you expect to encounter that week. Also, I put a cone 15 yards from the line of scrimmage so all players, except the Quarterback, must run to the garbage can that represent the ball carrier.

This will help to ensure no one misses their assigned blocks on running plays.

Running Backs can use garbage cans similar to the purpose described above. However, I recommend that you split the defensive in half so you are only focusing on one section of the front, instead of showing a whole defensive front. This will help the running back identify which player to block on that side of that play.

Coaching Point: To avoid wasting time and moving the cans around just move players to the other side of the play. This avoids dedicating time to moving the cans around.

Wide Receivers can use garbage cans as a re-route tool. Receivers can work on regaining their route path as fast as possible, then getting down field and catching the football from a coach or quarterback.

Coaching Point: Put cans approximately 1-5 yards off the line of scrimmage. This drill will help receivers execute their reroute run effectively and efficiently so the timing of the quarterback and receiver are in sync.

Quarterbacks can use garbage cans in a half-line or outer shell. This will assist the quarterback to better understand what coverage's an opposing team is expected to run and what to look for when a certain pass play is called.

Coaching point: In a half-line alignment, the cans will show where the defensive players will line up in coverage during pre-snap formation. For example, if you are facing a Cover 2 Defense,

then the quarterback knows what to look for when a play is called like smash – that is hitch by #1 and Corner by #2.

See Also: Back to the Basics: Teach your quarterback how to read the defense

Defensive Linemen can use garbage cans by putting them in a line a couple yards behind each other. This allows the defensive line to learn how to use the rip technique to get through small places.

Coaching Point: Don't place the garbage cans too close. Make sure players go left and right using both hands.

Linebackers can use garbage cans to represent a full offensive line. Remember to have two other linebackers play the offensive guards. Coaches will give those players which way to go on the play and the linebackers that are watching them will read which way they go. This will help them to track the ball carrier and stay in their gap.

Coaching Points: Make sure the guards are a yard ahead of the center and tackles as cans and the players holding the cans make the path very obvious.

Defensive backs can use garbage cans instead of using cones when doing the "W Drill". Often this is more effective than using cones because it forces defensive backs to get deeper in their drops. Simply put, if a player cheats during this drill while garbage cans are used, they will run into the can and fall over.

Coaching Point: The reason garbage cans are more effective for this particular drill is because players will often cut corners on cones. By using garbage cans they won't be able to cut a corner and their drops will improve or they will be falling all over the garbage cans.

These are just a few drills you can implement with your team at the next practice. My dad, who was a Marine, always told me to "work smarter, not harder!" Growing up in a Marine household taught me a lot of things that I now apply in both life and football: discipline, dedication, determination, and also to be very resourceful.

Please feel free to share with me how your team uses garbage cans during football practice. If you're interested in something more active than trash cans, check out what Shadowman Sports offers.

Anthony Stone is a USA Football Regional Master Trainer and a physical education teacher at Gregory Elementary and quarterbacks coach at Boylan High School in Rockford, Ill. He has coached football at the youth, middle school, high school, college and indoor professional levels. He coached for the U.S. Women's National Team program in 2010 winning a gold Medal as the Defensive Coordinator with an overall score of 201-0 in 3 games, as well as the defensive coordinator for the 2017 Australian Women's National Outback Team. Follow him on Twitter @Coach_Stone_MT.

BACK TO THE BASICS: THE CONE DRILL

10/6/2016

By Anthony Stone

Do you ever wonder why some offenses are hungrier than others?

Why some offensive players don't go down after initial contact?

Could it be because they want it more? The answer is yes.

You can tell when a coach has taken time to instill player confidence by the way an athlete carries/catches the ball in practice. It is important that coaches make players understand the focus of the game, which is to move the chains and keep the drive going. One way to cultivate this individual and team confidence is through fundamentals drills.

The drill I am sharing is basic, but vital to moving the ball. A single cone can assist your offense in executing plays more effectively and helping offensive players learn to run plays at higher speeds.

So what is the cone drill?

The purpose of this drill is teach the offense to consistently run plays at high speed and keep the chains moving. To implement the drill, place a cone 15 to 20 yards downfield. Once a play has developed and the intended offensive player has possession of the football, they sprint past the downfield cone and immediately back to the huddle to run the next play. This practice encourages players to explode past the line of scrimmage and quickly get up field on every play to get the first down. You can implement this drill in every aspect of practice.

See Also: Practice planning is just as important as the season continues

Here are a few different ways you can incorporate the drill:

Individual

Group

Team

The individual time applies to running backs. Make sure that the cone is positioned 15 to 20 yards down-the-field. While practicing designed run plays, the running back who has possession of the ball must sprint to the cone and back to the huddle.

The group time involves the quarterback and running backs working together. If you read the section of my last blog focusing on running backs identifying their blocks, then you can integrate both drills by having the running backs sprint to the downfield cone and back after completing their block.

The team time involves the entire offense. Typically, offensive coordinators have a script of plays they install during practice. Integrating the cone drill into this aspect of practice includes the entire offense doing one of two things at the conclusion of the play:

Sprinting 15 to 20 yards downfield to the cone and back to the huddle in order to get ready to run the next play.

Sprinting 15 to 20 yards downfield to the cone and remaining at this depth. The offense then immediately lines up to run the next play. This teaches players to get used to having longer drives, which eventually breaks down defenses even if the offense isn't scoring at will during the game.

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TRICK OR TREAT: USING THE SWINGING GATE ON 2-POINT CONVERSIONS

10/20/2016

By Anthony Stone

Halloween is right around the corner, which means some football seasons are coming to an end while others are about to start the playoff season.

It is nice to have a trick up your sleeve when you need that extra point to take the lead. That is why going for a 2-point conversion in a game is sometimes better than just tying up a game or sending it into overtime.

The reason going for two is important is to keep the momentum going for your football team and to make the other team rush to try and score. Ideally, that leads to your opponent making a mistake.

A great example came during Week 1 of the NFL season, where we saw Raiders head coach Jack Del Rio go for two against the New Orleans Saints. If they would have kicked the PAT, it would have sent the game into overtime and again put the ball in the hands of the New Orleans Saints and Drew Brees.

As a coach, you need to have those one or two plays that you practice all the time but you never show unless you really need to. Once you use it, the opposing team will start preparing for it.

Here is a little trick for coaches that don't currently have a 2-point play.

Trick

Understand what your opponent does inside the 5-yard line while on defense and throw a monkey wrench in their plans by practicing a play that will get you the yardage you need to score.

Questions to ask yourself:

Do they load the box in passing formations?

Do they play man or zone?

Do they like to blitz?

Do they sub in players?

After answering the above questions, you can make your play and run it with confidence. Keep it in your back pocket like a magician so when the time is right you can pull the rabbit out of the hat and get that 2-point conversion.

This Halloween blog wouldn't be complete without a treat so I want to share a 2-point conversion play that I like to run and practice a lot: the swinging gate. I am going to show you the basic gate formation I have used with my numbering system.

Treat

Position Back Down / Play Call

1 is either a tall wide receiver or tight end

2 is the bruising running back

3 is all-around athlete that can do anything

4 is the quarterback

5 is the speed on the team

6 is the tall wide receiver or that player that can get open no matter what

The rest of the players are offensive linemen arranged in their usual order.

I will let the quarterback/box coach call the number out loud after he counts the defenders left to right. Then I will give a thumbs up or down on the sideline. Next, the quarterback will either change it or go with the call by saying, "Ready, set, go."

Play calling will always be the last number in a three-digit call so that is the last number the offense will hear.

Examples: Number, number, and call number

__ 1 = Throwing the fade to 1 because no one is covering him.

__ 2 = When we outnumber the defenders over to the offensive line side and they will wedge block.

__ 3 = Will snap the ball, then delay, and go out and turn around under the field goal post. (No one is accounting for this player.)

__ 4 = Speed option right – we outnumber them on that right side.

__ 5 = Flood Routes: 3 runs to back of end zone and out, 5 runs an arrow to front pylon, 6 runs route to back of pylon. They are in a Cover 0 look.

__ 6 = 3 runs the route above but ends up under the right part of the goal post, the 5 blocks for the QB on a sprint out, and 6 gets a route from the QB, either slant-corner, out, fade, or comeback. They are in a Cover 1 look.

So when the time is right and you think the defense is sleeping go for two and have confidence that you will be successful just like you are in practice.

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2 point conversions
Anthony Stone
Fundamentals and Performance

HOW YOUTH FOOTBALL COACHES CAN KEEP PLAYERS ENGAGED

11/3/2016

By Anthony Stone

Many youth football seasons have come to an end, but this is an ideal time for a coach to work on learning new techniques.

Since most youth teams only have one volunteer coach, the challenge becomes keeping the players on the sideline focused on the field and engaged while trying to teach the basics of football.

Coaches often have to remind players to pay attention during practice, to prevent players from picking grass or goofing around instead of watching their position on the field and being ready to jump in.

Here are five teaching techniques I use as a physical education teacher to keep a large group of students focused. These can also be applied to coaching:

Make sure you go over rules. It is important to make sure the players understand your rules and regulations before you start football practice and that you have a routine. For example, teach the players stretches and easy drills you can run while setting up the football field, especially if you are the only coach.

Get excited. Before you start, make sure you are as excited—if not more excited—than the players when you introduce a drill. It is important for this age group to know you are interested in being with them.

Keep all drills and games fun and interesting. Young players actually learn more when they are engaged and not just standing on the sideline. Make sure you have games for them to play that incorporate the skill you are trying to teach, because players like to have fun at this age. It isn't a job for them.

KISS: Keep It Short and Simple. It is important to keep the instructions short and concise when teaching. I learned a long time ago when teaching elementary school to start out each school year with instructions that only last as long as the grade the students are in: kindergarten is 30 seconds, first grade is one minute, second grade is two minutes, etc. To go along with the first tip teach drills and positions with just a couple rules. Do a drill with different color cones. Tell the players the first cone they should run to is green (for "Go") and the last cone is red (for "Stop"). Give players at different positions simple, specific instructions. Be sure to model what you teach, using players to provide the example.

Help players keep things in perspective. Remember, at this age, it is easy for players to get upset very fast about nothing or something they had little control over. You need to help teach them that they don't need to get upset and the world is not ending. Remind them that they are there to have fun and get to play the greatest game on the planet. It also helps to break up a bad mood with a joke.

Before any more time passes, you should review the obstacles you faced this season. Write them down and use the above tips to come up with a game plan to keep your players more engaged and help make your life less stressful. You will have more fun as a coach and your players will notice.

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