



# Developmental Skills

(Michael M. Hensley • Technical Skills Trainer • TYSL)



*Some are born with talent... but talent isn't enough.  
Practice makes perfect, long painful runs, endless hours with a ball, these are what ultimately set you apart,  
you may be good but it takes training to be great!*

The more technical skills a player has, the more the individual will be able to contribute to the whole of the team. A highly skilled player should have the confidence to handle any difficult situation that may arise. As with all elite players, every young athlete should always strive in various situations to use techniques that will achieve the best possible results, so that tactical insight develops to the fullest possible extent.

Beginning with the first training session, positive habits, such as a sporting attitude, self-discipline, independence, and initiative should be encouraged. The promotion of these ideals can have a profound influence on young players. Even those who are not especially gifted will practice with a ball on their own or with a friend for long periods as long as they are encouraged and stimulated. The more successful they are with the ball, the more involved they become with soccer. You will soon see their general self-confidence improve as well.

Individual athletes will progress at different rates, some, will master techniques faster than others. However, those who are not so gifted, and who have to practice more, will develop the discipline to practice on a regular basis. Anyone who fosters this ideal of individual self improvement can go along way in soccer and gain a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction in playing the most popular sport in the world.

The future of soccer depends on imaginative and effective play. In order to produce exciting, skillful players, who are attack-minded, skills and attitudes must be learned at a young age through constant repetition. There are essentially four stages to developing outstanding soccer performance, (1) learning all aspects of ball control, (2) becoming as effective and as skillful as possible in the many different one-on-one situations, (3) beating opponents either individually or with the help of other players in order to create and score more goals, and last but not least, (4) finishing on goal.

**Ball Feeling:** Most of the world's greatest players developed their skills as children, by constantly playing soccer and by being in contact with the ball for hours at a time. They have acquired the same feeling in their feet as successful basketball players have, in their hands, for a basketball. The foundation of these skills, "ball feeling," can only be acquired through repeatedly touching the ball. A few touches each practice session or in games is not enough to produce ball feeling and confidence with a ball.

Good coordination in soccer, as in other sports, is very important. Here, the many different practices with a ball are divided into two categories. The first is developing a "feeling" for the ball at the earliest possible age. The second consists of those "movements" with the ball used by top professional athletes in real match situations against opposition. Exercises can be developed for very young players and should be introduced as early as possible.

Tactics-based methods and a primary focus on "getting off the ball" for ages ten and under will greatly stunt the individual development in these young athletes at an age where experimentation & creativity should be the standard. Young athletes should be encouraged to be "on the ball" in the interest of development. When these skills are fully developed and combination play is introduced the ability to hang on to the ball in pressure situations, will greatly contribute to the overall development of the team unit. Most of the "ball feeling" exercises are suitable for young players to practice on their own, a fun kind of homework. The first steps will, of course be difficult but, with encouragement and practice, young players will improve and acquire a natural feel for the ball. Then, the more skillful they become, the more fun they will derive from the game.



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Again, constant repetition is the key to ball control. Using both feet is essential. Young players have tremendous energy and a thirst for knowledge. As long as the coach is imaginative and encouraging, these repetitive exercises will be the key to improvement. The designated skills are to be done slowly at the start and then each exercise or movement is gradually brought up to speed.

**One-On-One Development:** The “moves” of the great players of soccer form the basis of all the initial exercises. All the moves have one thing in common; they are used to beat players one-on-one. In one-on-one situations, good dribbling skills, and ball control are essential if effective attacking players are to be produced. These moves are not only useful in game situations, they also improve general body coordination and flexibility; this can also help prevent injuries. All the moves should be learned with limited opposition, so repetition is uninterrupted. Then opposition is gradually introduced until there is full pressure on the player with the ball.

There are many moves; young players will soon select their favorites. It is essential, however, that young players practice all of the skills that they have learned and that they are encouraged to do it in small match situations. Ultimately, skills must be used under one hundred percent pressure to be successful.

Technical skills are easier to teach to player’s age ten and under. After this age, it becomes progressively more difficult to teach what should be done spontaneously in games. Young players throw caution to the wind, while older players are largely influenced by what is safe or not.

One-on-one play is possibly the least practiced skill in soccer, strange, when it is the skill most possessed by all of the world’s best players. Not only is it wonderful to watch a player outwit an opponent with skillful play, but it is also a way of creating more space and time for the player and the team.

**Team Possession:** Getting possession of the ball and keeping it is an important part of soccer. Players with good ball-control and dribbling skills have the ability to keep possession of the ball and to play attractive, exciting, attacking soccer. The emphasis on technique is for all players; defenders also will improve by practicing the very skills that they will find themselves defending against. They will appreciate what needs to be done to defend against skillful players. They will also learn that if they become more skillful with the ball, they too, will contribute to keeping possession and playing attacking soccer.

➤ **Combination Play:** Once individual players have learned the individual moves, they are encouraged to combine with teammates to beat opponents. One two’s and overlaps are taught. Above all, young players appreciate that individual moves give them an option, either beating opponents individually or in combination with teammates. With these options they will become more valuable to the team. It is recommended that exercises for practicing combination & or possession oriented games be played with a distinct numerical advantage, so young players have a clear picture of the value of combining with each other. Once ball feeling is acquired, by practicing the moves and ball exercises, you will see that players kicking, passing, and receiving abilities will improve dramatically. Receiving the ball well is crucial to creating more time and space.



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- **Creating Chances and Finishing:** Once players become more skillful, especially in one-on-one situations, more goal scoring chances will be created. Certainly, the higher the level a player reaches, the less time and space will be available. The better the control, the more goal scoring chances there will be.
- **Heading:** Heading of the ball is not recommended age 10 and younger. Once players are over ten years of age, heading exercises can be introduced. Again, repetition is important. In most of the heading exercises, jumping and bounding are key. Not only do they improve the power and accuracy of heading, but also they have the added benefit of improving the acceleration & strength in young players.
- **Shooting:** Repetition training is essential to improve shooting. At first, accuracy is all-important. Being able to shoot with both the right and left foot will be made easier by the earlier ball feeling exercises. Volleys, half volleys, ground shots...one thing is certain young players love nothing more than shooting on goal. Can you imagine playing basketball without a goal to shoot in? Just as in basketball shooting needs to be worked on in every session during your soccer training.
- **Games:** To maximize the number of touches, small sided games are crucial, three on three or four on four are essential for player development. The games can be conditional, for example; before a shot on goal there must be a move or an overlap, or a certain number of passes. Restrictions should have age and skill considerations.
- **Young players should be encouraged to be creative; playing with flair and initiative is essential for the developmental growth in these young athletes. These qualities are not only important in soccer but in society as a whole.**