

HOW TO HELP 5-11S DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS ON THE BALL



For 5-11 year olds, developing confidence on the ball is essential. Here's how to get them staying on the ball and mastering it.

MASTERING THE BALL

Ball mastery is the starting point for everything that follows. That's why it must be a priority when coaching young children.

It's about being able to manipulate and maneuver the ball in any direction, at varying speeds, with any part of the foot or body.

These skills can be used when dribbling, traveling with the ball, turning, receiving, shielding, or screening the ball.

So how do we get there? Practice is the key.

Here are some ways to work on mastering the ball:

- Encourage your players' natural urge to explore and experiment by providing lots of ball contact.
- Use isolated ball-familiarity exercises that promote touch, feel, and manipulation (but don't require much decision-making).
- Try small-number activities, games, and formats that bring returns in all four corners (technical, physical, psychological, and social).



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STAYING ON THE BALL

What comes first? Mastering or staying on the ball? It's hard to say because each feeds into the other.

As players' mastery of the ball improves, try encouraging them to stay on it for longer.

Now, that doesn't mean hogging or dribbling until possession is lost.

Staying on the ball is about the player knowing they can keep the ball for longer. It doesn't matter if there's a lack of space or pressure from the opposition.

With more time on the ball, players can start thinking about how to attack and score for themselves. Or help others to do the same. They can look for more attacking, threatening, and creative options. Not just the easy or predictable ones.

And staying on the ball means more chances for the game to change. Supporting positions might turn into attacking ones. Or the whole pitch could open up before them. All while the player is still in possession.

These situations don't happen if the player is told to always pass the ball early to the easiest option.

It seems simple. But it can be hard for adults to encourage staying on the ball. Why? Because mistakes happen often. It's frustrating.

As a coach, it's your job to be patient and consistent. That way, players will always feel supported.

It's worth the wait. By staying on the ball, players develop their dribbling skills. They improve their turns, twists and spins away from pressure. Players become good at hiding the ball from opponents and know who to release the ball to, and when.

- These capabilities will stay with them for the rest of their lives. As a coach of young players, that's your legacy.



WHEN TO STAY ON THE BALL

Is your player in any of these situations? Try encouraging them to stay on the ball.

- They have no positive or threatening passing options. They're prepared to stay on the ball and see if one appears.
- There's a space in front, to the side or behind them. Traveling to that space with the ball will change the situation in the game to a more positive, attacking one.
- They've recognized that the situation is 1v1 and they're going to dribble with the ball.
- They're under pressure and passing options are compromised. They're willing to relieve the pressure and change the situation by screening, shielding or turning with the ball.
- All their options are sideways and backward. Staying on the ball may allow the situation to change and present a forward, positive, more attacking option.

TREAT PLAYERS AS INDIVIDUALS

It can take years of practice for players to be able to successfully handle these situations.

For younger players, managing the ball might be all they can cope with. And that's okay.

Think about the needs of your players, both as a group and as individuals. Give them enjoyable ways to practise and the time to do it.

