

More fun and games

Variations for youth soccer training that are effective, entertaining and easy to implement

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It isn't always easy to fulfill the need for youth soccer training that's fun, interesting and playful. Unfortunately, when it comes to putting training programs into practice, all kinds of problems can arise. Practical tips and suggestions that take these problems into account and offer workable solutions are always in demand.

In this article you'll find:

- practical variations on attractive exercises
- specific tips on using these exercises in your training program
- how these exercises can fit into a long-term youth training concept
- how to adapt each exercise to your players' ability level
- interesting methods for teaching dribbling, faking, 1 v. 1 play, passing and combination play

Introduction

Problems in the practice of youth soccer training

It should be age-appropriate, fun, playful, always interesting and, of course, instructive. How to fit it all into a single package is a tall order for a soccer training program. After all, there are always certain practical problems that go along with training, and if you're a youth coach, you're probably familiar with them already. For children, one of the biggest problems is finding appropriate

games. Setting up attractive exercises takes time and can lead to too much downtime during practice sessions. Long, complicated explanations tend to make young children feel impatient and overwhelmed. But appropriate games—games that not only are fun, but also train specific skills and abilities—often require significant amounts of preparation and explanation.

For some youth coaches, it may seem simpler and more efficient just to have the kids receive passes and shoot, assembly-line style, than to have to explain the rules of some game first. And of course there's the question of keeping them under control, etc., etc., etc. . . .

Potential Solutions

In this article, we'll use a sample game and a number of variations to show you how you can overcome all of these obstacles.

- What's unique about the "bridge defender" game and its variations is that you can use them to train a variety of different skills without ever having to change the basic rules or setup. The games are interesting and attractive, and they can focus on technique, individual tactics or 1 v. 1 play, depending on the variation.
- The game builds on other small-sided games and leads naturally to more complex ones. Another plus is that you can use the same setup for supplementary exercises from time to time.
- The fact that the game is connected with an imaginative, fantasy-based story has also proved to be

an advantage, especially for very young children.

● The original "bridge defender" game is a form of tag, which leads first to a simple variation involving the soccer ball, and then to "one-way bridges." The simple dribbling variation known as "switching sides" is an excellent place to begin with this set of games. Then, as you teach new variations, you can gradually make the games more and more challenging.

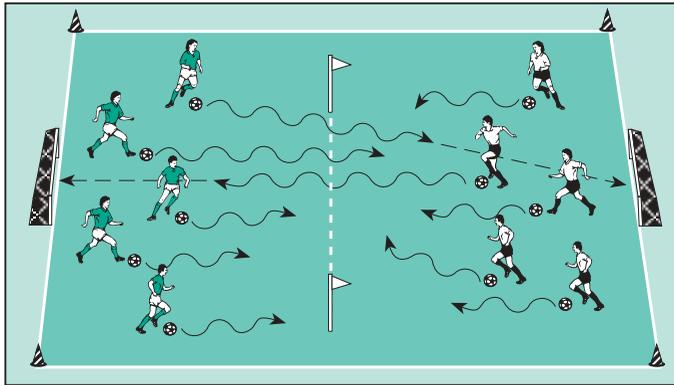


▶▶▶ INTRODUCING "BRIDGE DEFENDERS"

1 SETUP

Divide players into two groups, one on each end-line of a field of an appropriate size. The two teams face each other, and each player has a ball. Mark the centerline with a flag on each sideline. You can also call the line between the flags "the bridge."

SWITCHING SIDES



SEQUENCE

Both teams switch sides by dribbling across the field at the same time. Players may not cross the sidelines, so they all have to go between the flags ("across the bridge"). Which team can reach the opposite endline ("cross the bridge") first? Coach: Remind players to avoid collisions!

VARIATION

▶ In addition to dribbling their own balls across the field, players should also try to shoot their opponents' balls away (i.e. keep their opponents from "crossing the bridge").

2 SETUP

• Switching sides and shooting: Add a goal on each endline.

SEQUENCE

The objective is to cross the "bridge" and then score on the goal. You can also put goalkeepers in the goals.

3 SETUP

• Now gradually move the flags closer together, making the bridge narrower and narrower. This makes things more difficult for players.

SEQUENCE

The objectives remain the same: Which team can switch sides first? Or which team can score five goals first?

4 SETUP

• Lay out cones to divide the field lengthwise. Now place three flags on the centerline, evenly spaced, to create two "bridges."

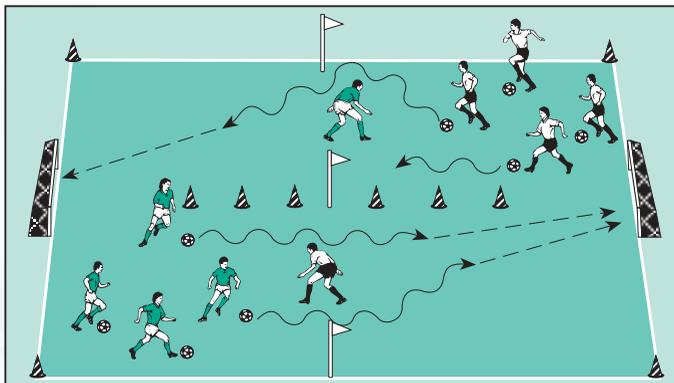
SEQUENCE

Assign one team to each line or "bridge." Players are only allowed to run across their team's bridge.

5 SETUP

• Now assign two "bridge defenders." One player from Group A guards the bridge assigned to Group B, and one from Group B guards A's bridge.

BRIDGE DEFENDERS



SEQUENCE

As above, all players (except for the two bridge defenders) try to switch sides by crossing their assigned bridges. The bridge defenders try to stop their opponents by shooting their balls away. Bridge defenders must stay on their bridges!

NOTES

- ▶ By now we've reached the basic form of "bridge defenders" by means of a simple progression. Long explanations are unnecessary, since the original concept of "switching sides" is easy to understand.
- ▶ Games 3 through 5 can be played with or without goals.
- ▶ Players can try to cross the bridges either one at a time or simultaneously.



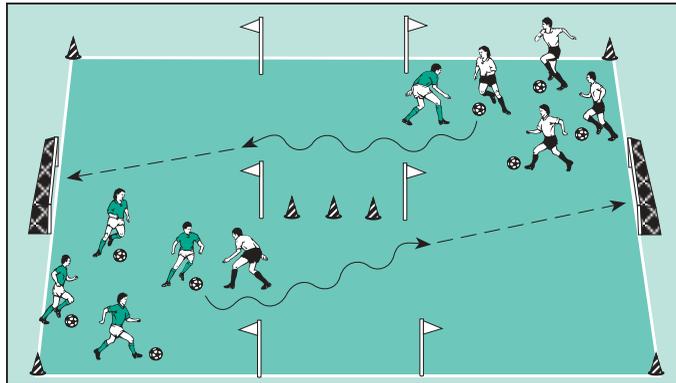
VARIATIONS FOR DRIBBLING & 1 V. 1 PLAY

6

SETUP

- Now each bridge consists of two lines (marked by flags) set several yards apart. This creates an "entrance" and an "exit" for each bridge. The bridge defender stands at the entrance and may not leave that position.

ENTRANCES AND EXITS



SEQUENCE

Not only do the players have to get past the bridge defenders, they also have to stay "on the bridge" the whole way across. That means they have to dribble across the second line (the exit) as well, without losing control of the ball. If they make a mistake, they have to start over from the beginning.

OBJECTIVE

► The objective is for players to keep the ball close to the foot. Players who simply kick the ball past their opponent (the "bridge defender") and then run after it run the risk of missing the second line ("falling off the bridge").

7

SETUP

- Now place two defenders on each bridge: one at the entrance and one at the exit.

SEQUENCE

Essentially the same as Game 6, except that now players have to dribble past a second bridge defender.

OBJECTIVE

► This version places an even greater emphasis on close dribbling.

8

SETUP

- Now there's only one defender on the bridge (two lines marked by flags).

SEQUENCE

The bridge defender is free to move anywhere on the bridge (i.e. between the two lines).

OBJECTIVE

► This version puts more emphasis on 1 v. 1 play. If an attacker gets past the defender, the defender can pursue and try to win the ball again.

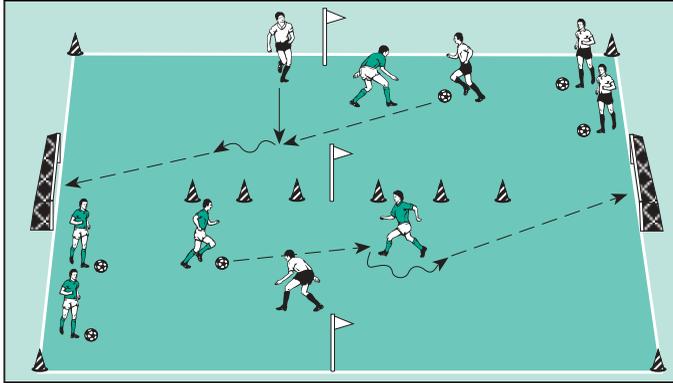


VARIATIONS FOR PASSING: "THE AGENT"

9 SETUP

• This version has "short" bridges with one defender each, as in the basic version (Game 5). Each group places one or more "agents" on the other side of its assigned bridge.

PASSING TO THE AGENT



SEQUENCE

Now each player tries to kick the ball past the bridge defender and pass it accurately to the agent, who can either kick it across the opposite endline or shoot at a goal, depending on the variation. If you use more than one agent, then you can allow multiple players to "cross the bridge" simultaneously.

NOTE

▶ Adding agents does not change in the basic game significantly. Now the point is simply to get the ball to the other side, and the players themselves are not allowed to cross the bridge. Instead, they have to try to pass past the defender and to the agent.

OBJECTIVE

▶ showing for passes, opening and using passing lanes

10 SETUP

• Each group has a "long" bridge between two lines marked by flags. A bridge defender stands at each bridge's "entrance" (see Game 6).

SEQUENCE

Now the agent stands on the bridge, i.e. between the two lines, and is not allowed to leave it. The agent must receive the ball on the bridge and then shoot across the "exit" line and/or into the goal.

NOTE

▶ Like the other games, this one should be made into a small competition to improve motivation: Which group can "cross the bridge" more often within a given time period? Which team can score more goals during the same period?

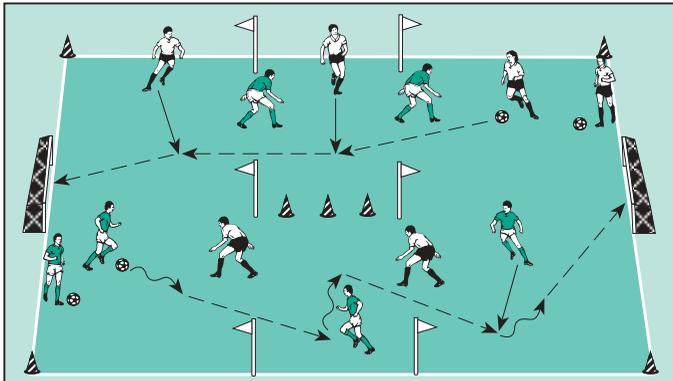
OBJECTIVES

- ▶ better coordination of showing and passing
- ▶ more accurate passes
- ▶ better ball control (by the agent)

11 SETUP

• Each group has a long bridge and two bridge defenders, one at the entrance and one at the exit. Each team has one agent on its bridge and one on the other side.

PASSING FROM AGENT TO AGENT



SEQUENCE

First, each player passes past the first bridge defender to the agent on the bridge, who passes past the second defender to the agent on the other side. High passes that go over the entire bridge are not allowed: each player has to kick a precise pass to the agent on the bridge.

VARIATIONS

- ▶ Players can also pass directly to the agent on the far side.
- ▶ Ideally, this version should also include shooting (at a goal with goalkeeper).



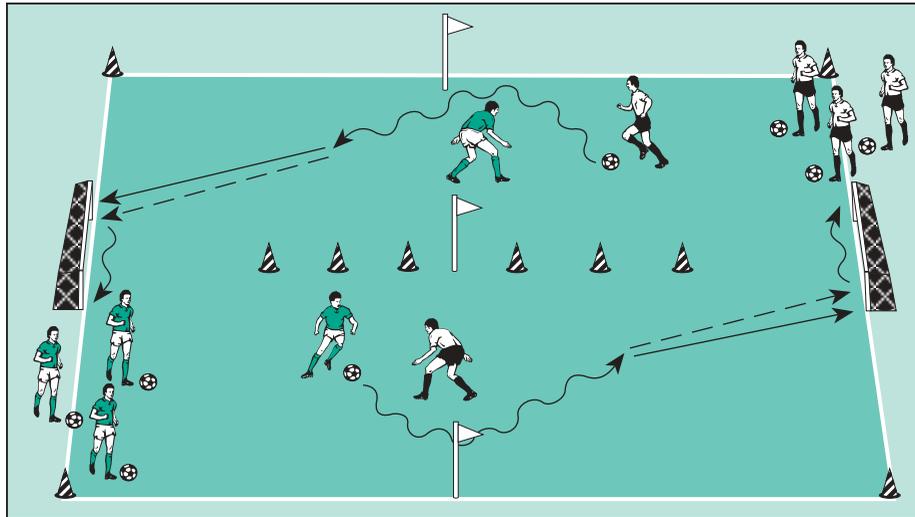
EXERCISES

1

SETUP

- Exercises should always be done on an individual basis, meaning that teammates cross the bridge one at a time. Of course, the other team can do the exercise on its bridge at the same time. However, it makes more sense to forget about teams during an exercise. After players cross one bridge, they should go directly to the end of the line waiting to cross the other bridge. This creates a circular flow.

SET UP FOR DRIBBLING AND 1 V. 1



SEQUENCE

Initially, you can replace the bridge defenders with flags, which players have to get past (for example, with a fake). Later you can introduce passive or half-active players. Players can shoot after crossing the bridge. As in the other games, you can increase players' motivation with simple, clearly defined competitions:

Who can score the most goals in five minutes? When the time is up, the coach tallies the individual scores and announces the winner and runners-up. This type of feedback is extremely important after a competition and should never be neglected because of time constraints or reasons of "convenience."

NOTE

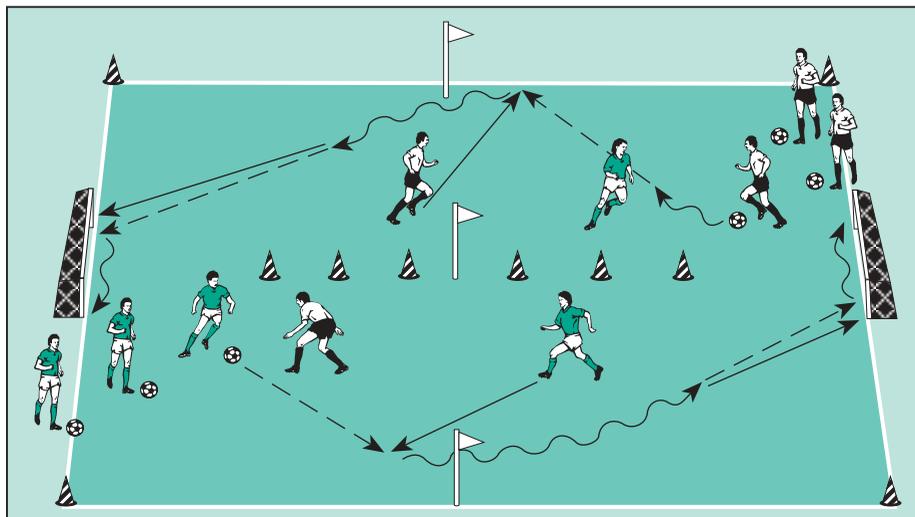
► One of the many advantages of the "bridge defender" games is that the basic format makes it easy to pause periodically for exercises focusing on specific themes. Then, when play resumes, players can apply what they've learned immediately. (This may require temporarily taking the element of competition out of the game.)

2

SETUP

- Passing exercises with "agents" also lend themselves to a circular setup.

SET UP FOR PASSING AND COMBINATION PLAY



SEQUENCE

One group stands on each side of the centerline, facing the right-hand bridge. Behind each bridge defender (initially passive) stands an agent, who receives the ball from the first player in the group (the passer) and then passes across a line or shoots at a goal. Afterwards, the passer becomes the (passive) defender, the defender becomes the agent, the next player in the group becomes the new pas-

ser, and the old agent moves to the end of the other group's line and waits to cross the other bridge.

Advantages of this setup: There are hardly any interruptions, and players are constantly in motion. Each one has to play different roles, with different requirements. This helps them learn about many aspects of the game in a relatively short time.

NOTES

► You can do the "bridge defender" exercise before the game: First practice, then play.

► You can also interrupt a game to do the exercise, if you (or your players) notice that players are having problems with the game that could be solved by practice. After the exercise, you may even notice immediate improvements in performance, which helps players understand the value of practicing.

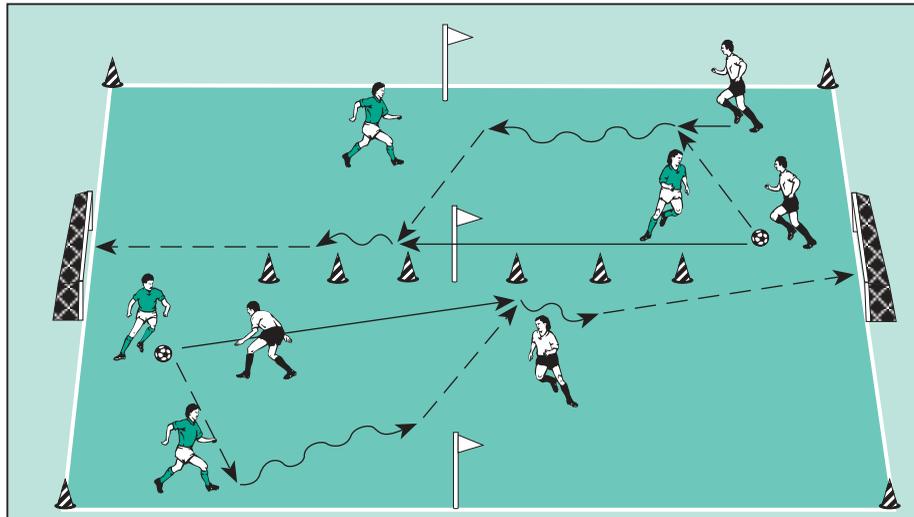


FURTHER DEVELOPMENT TO 4 V. 4 PLAY

1 SETUP

- Each group has a long bridge and two bridge defenders.

4 X 2 V. 2



SEQUENCE

Two players from each group cooperate to get a ball across the bridge. One defender stays at the entrance, the other at the exit. Both attackers can cross the bridge forward (and backward, if necessary). One attacker starts out as an “agent” on the bridge. The other one, who has the ball, can dribble, pass to the agent, or kick a long pass all the

way across the bridge and past both defenders. Afterwards, attackers shoot at a goal (with goalkeeper).

NOTE

► Once players have mastered the basic version of “bridge defenders,” you can make the game more complex.

VARIATION

► Defenders are not required to stay at the entrance and exit, which creates a 2 v. 2 situation on each bridge. Since this is happening on both bridges at once, this is a “2 x 2 v. 2” game, and by taking away the line between the two bridges, you can make it a 4 v. 4 game.

Conclusion

In soccer training, it makes sense to use simple themes that show up again and again, from one session to the next.

The advantages:

- There’s no need for extensive explanations and preparations.
- You can always build on something familiar.
- The familiarity of previous games helps kids understand each new game sequence. Before long, the game is flowing, and players are having positive experiences.

The “bridge defender” variations are a method that takes advantage of these benefits. There are variations for every aspect of the game: dribbling, faking, 1 v. 1 play, passing and combination play.

This provides you, the coach, with a familiar game format that you can adapt and apply to any practice situation. It also gives you an opportunity to lead players from a simple game to a very complex one in small, easily understandable steps. And the wide variety of variations keeps practice interesting and attractive, no matter how often you use the game.

“Bridge defenders” is not a series of games that have to be taught in an uninterrupted sequence. With all of its variations and applica-

tions, it makes more sense to think of it as a theme you can return to from time to time. Interrupting the game for other games or exercises is no problem. A long break to work on basic passing (if this hasn’t already happened) is an especially good idea. In general, the games are arranged as they naturally develop, from simple to complex.

Like many other games, “bridge defenders” can be considered a “motivation game” (see the Success in Soccer books by Gero Bisanz and Norbert Vieth), and it’s a great motivator: Start telling stories of bridges, moats and treasures, and in no time you’ll have even the youngest kids paying attention and playing along.