

OFFSIDE ANYONE?

.....the next step for match play at practice.

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It is common to hear goalkeepers and goalkeeper trainers lament the lack of attention given to the goalkeeping position during soccer practice. The average keeper is either sent away to work on his/her own, or with a peer, or is isolated from teammates with a "goalkeeper trainer" to develop individual techniques, usually in the form of fitness exercises disguised as skill practice. The irony is that when the keeper is finally involved in "match play," they often find themselves facing unrealistic situations and invariably having to deal with a steady diet of play in and around their six yard box. The transfer from practice to the real game is, unfortunately, minimal, at best, and any notion that this training environment is productive in player development terms must be considered a stretch.

There is a very simple solution to this problem, with some significant benefits accrued by the rest of the players: **USE THE GOALKEEPERS AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE AND ADD AN OFFSIDE LINE TO ALL SMALL-SIDED OR LARGE- SIDED GAMES.**

There are three major benefits to this approach, all dealing directly with the objective of making practice as realistic to the demands of match play as possible. **A very large assumption on my part is that coaches are training their teams through either small-sided or large-sided games, such as 1v1, 2v2, 4v4, 5v4, 7v7, and the games are to one or two goals.** From an educational perspective, there is little or no benefit to practice situations that do not include the possibility of immediate transition towards a target point or, preferably towards the opponents goal. In my world, if it's a "line drill," it's not soccer.

The three benefits are:

#1: The **goalkeeper** should have at least 12-18 yards of open space to get into line and move towards a shot. If the offside line is the 18-yard line, as it would be in most games, defenders should not back up into the box or chase attackers into that space. The goalkeeper will have realistic match situations to deal with every day at practice. They will develop a better positional sense. They will learn how to play as the sweeper-keeper. They will have many opportunities to organize their defense. They will have realistic opportunities to play with their feet. They will deal with break-a-ways. And they will have realistic time and space to deal with shots and crosses.

#2: The **defenders** will become more comfortable dealing with an offside line and learn not to chase opponents into offside space. They can also practice stepping up to the restraining line every time the ball is played backwards by the attackers, and without worrying about attackers poaching goals. With an offside line, defenders can learn to play in a zonal defensive arrangement and learn to pass players along; too often our players are limited to strict man-man, which does not force the kind of decision making required at the higher levels. The security of an offside line allows teams to play in a more compact shape, assisting the opportunity to provide

both support in attack and cover in defense.

#3: The **attackers**, who, for the most part, have probably been allowed to play a vertical game in which the fastest player wins in practice but not necessarily in games, must change their approach to creating scoring chances. Diagonal runs, cross-over runs, combination play in two's and three's, counter attacks, and individual improvisation are all required to score goals against a flattened defense (zonal or otherwise) and a restraining line. When players must devise creative ways to penetrate a well-organized defense and an active offside line, every day, the level of play is quickly raised.

For each line (goalkeeper, defenders, and attackers), the addition of an offside line significantly changes the demands of practice to more closely replicate the realities of the game. Transfer to the game is more likely, and the players will become more sophisticated in dealing with the offside law. We may even have less moaning at the referees as more players, coaches, and parents understand nuances in the application of law eleven!

A general guideline for implementing this approach is that playing areas will become longer to accommodate the keepers "box". For example, a 3 v 3 game might be played on a field approximately 30 x 20 yards, with the half-way line (15 yards) as the offside line. As an alternative, two goalkeeper boxes 12 yards from each goal line can be created on the same size field. Four versus four might be played in an area of approximately 40 x 25 yards, with an 18-yard box marked at each end; a 6 v 6 game might be played in half-field with the penalty box extended to the half-way line to form the side lines. Marking a penalty box at each end creates a midfield space of approximately 24 yards on a regulation field. While the playing spaces are generally longer, the additional area causes very few adjustment problems for the players.

An additional consideration is the impact of an offside line on the tactics of the game. The offside line can be moved to different heights on the field, leaving space behind the defenders or space in front of the defenders. If the offside line is at the half-way line, the defense should move closer to the forwards to compact the lines and space will be created behind the defense. This provides frequent opportunities for the defense to "trap," while allowing the forwards opportunities to make diagonal runs into open spaces. In contrast, if the offside line is close to the goal, the goalkeeper will cover the space behind the defenders and the space available to the attackers will be in front of the defenders. This provides more opportunities for attacking players to combine with passes to feet.

In closing, using the offside line in small-sided games is a novel idea that has produced many unexpected bonuses for this coach and his players. I hope it will help you better prepare your team to meet the demands of an ever-more sophisticated game. Good luck.