

Ball Mastery

Probably the single most important thing a child can learn in soccer is to be comfortable with the ball at their feet. And the most effective way to establish and enhance that comfort is to give them multiple touches on the ball, i.e. increase their foot skills.

Foot skills should be the foundation of every practice session no matter how young or how old the child is. Why? Because:

- Working on foot skills at the beginning of a practice session is a good way to warm up.
- You can easily adjust the complexity of the skill depending upon the age and skill level you are coaching.
- There is always a way to progress to harder and harder skills
- You get multiple touches on the ball right away.
- Done at speed it can be a good aerobic training tool and is much more effective, overall, than running laps
- As time passes, and mastery is achieved, the skill becomes instinctive and you'll see it be used in a game unconsciously.

Let me provide an example that we may all be more familiar with, hitting a baseball. Hitting a baseball may be one of the hardest overall skills in sports. There are a lot of different muscular movements, which require coordination, involved in hitting a baseball. Some of them are bat position, stance, head (and therefore eye) position, bat movement, feet movement, hip movement, etc. etc. If a player had to think about all of them before he actually did something the child wouldn't be able to hit a beach ball. But after sufficient practice, hitting a ball becomes so instinctive that a large percentage of the population under the age of 15 can actually do it.

The same can become true for our soccer players. Multiple touches on the ball builds confidence and most of all, builds the kinesiology, the brain/muscle coordination, that makes a first touch on the ball instinctive.

Below we have listed several ideas for multiple touches on the ball that can be part of your warm-up. Remember any skill can be broken down to an age appropriate level. However this list attempts to go from basic foot skills to more advanced.

This first list does not include any complex moves such as scissors, Matthews, Cruyffs or Rivolinis to name a few more advanced examples. They will be dealt with later in this section.

- 1) **Foundation** – Fast movement of ball inside right to inside left and back again. Player is in a semi-sitting position and has to develop a rhythm with the ball. Make sure that the knees are slightly bent. This cannot be done correctly, stiff-legged
- 2) **Inside-Out Roll** – Place the outside of the right foot just off the top of the ball. Roll the foot over the ball keeping it in contact. The movement is left to right. The foot rotates so at the end of the stroke the inside of the foot is on the outside of the ball. Reverse the movement so that the outside of foot rolls over the ball right to left. The inside of the foot ends the stroke.

Use the left foot to do the same exercise. Move inside to outside first, then reverse outside to inside. The foot should stay in contact with the ball if possible.

In general, we tend to see our children develop a dominant foot very early. In order to advance in the game of soccer we must get them working the non-dominant foot very early in the game. Therefore all exercises should stress the non-dominant foot over the dominant one. It is difficult, but you must stay on them to try and work this important area.

- 3) **Pull Back to Instep** – With sole of the right foot on top of ball roll ball back and trap with the instep of the right foot. After 10 consecutive rolls, switch to left foot.
- 4) **Pull Back to Inside of Foot** – With sole of right foot on top of the ball, pull back to the LEFT instep. Alternate left sole to right instep. It is important that the non-receiving foot is not planted. Set up a rhythm.
- 5) **Triangle** - Pick a spot about 2 to 3 feet in front of your body. This is the point of a triangle. Your left and right feet are the other two corners.

Start with the right foot. Put the sole of the right foot on top of the ball. Pull the ball back to the right inside foot and then immediately play the ball to the left inside. Serve the ball back with the left inside to the sole of the right foot at the point of the triangle. The idea is to keep the ball moving throughout this exercise

- 6) **Block Ball Inside-Inside and Change Direction** – Push ball out in front of player. Player covers the ball with the inside of the right foot. Swiveling hips he plays the ball to the inside left and changes direction. Tap the ball

out in front again and repeat. After 5 successful changes of direction do the same skill with the left foot covering.

- 7) **Block Ball Outside-Inside Same Foot** – This is slightly more advanced than number 6 (above). Push the ball out in front of the player. Player blocks ball with the outside of the right foot and plays it AWAY from pressure to the inside of the SAME foot. When dominant foot is working well switch to the non-dominant foot.
- 8) **Brushes** - Starting with the right foot player brushes the top of the ball across his body (i.e. right to left). The right foot ends up crossed over the left. The left foot moves behind the right to the opening position and the next brush takes place. Once a player gets the rhythm right he/she should be able to put 5 consecutive brushes together without the ball running away. Switch dominant and non-dominant feet.
- 9) **Brush Tap** – The same basic movement as the brush but instead of making a second brush the player taps the ball to a halt with the inside of the other foot. i.e. if you are Brush-Tapping right, the right foot brushes and the left foot taps.
- 10) **Tap- Tap – Brush** – Start with the ball on the inside of either foot. Tap the ball to the inside of the opposite foot and then back again to the starting foot. The starting foot then brushes the ball to the opposite foot. The sequence is then re-started with the next tap. It is important to develop a rhythm and be on your toes for this skill.
- 11) **Tap-Tap-Tap- Step Over Push Outside** – Three (3) taps in this drill. After the third tap the opposite foot steps over the ball and pushes it to the outside with the outside portion of the foot. The skill is then repeated.
- 12) **Step Across – Play Outside Away from Pressure** – Push the ball out ahead. You can either stop it with the sole of the right foot, or step immediately step past the ball with the same foot. Ball is now near the back (in this case, the left) foot and the right foot/leg is shielding the ball. Then lift the left leg past the right and play the ball back to the right right with the outside of the right foot.

What is important here is that the fake with the right stepover sells the move to the attacking player's left and then the explosion back to the right gains that one extra second that the attacker needs to get the advantage

- 13) **Brush - Step Across – Play Outside Away from Pressure**

This is a double-fake move. It is basically the same move as the Step Across except that it is preceded by a brush. For this example the brush

is done with the left foot across the body (i.e moving to the attacker's right. Then the attacker performs the step over with the right foot as described above. The explosion is again back to the attacker's right with the outside of the right foot.

14) **Step Over Right -Turn Right**

Make the basic step over move with the right foot. Then pivot on the right turning to the right and play the ball back, away from pressure with the inside of the left.

Make sure that this move is also done in conjunction with a step over left, turn left routine so the non-dominant foot is also worked

15) **Pull Back – Play Behind – Change Direction** – Push the ball out front. Stop it with the sole of the right foot. Pull it back past the left ankle. Play it behind the left ankle with the inside of the right foot. Left outside receives the ball and moves off in a different direction. Tap the ball with the instep twice and then repeat using the left sole to stop the ball, pull it back, etc.

16) **Inside-Outside** – Dribble the ball with one foot alternating the inside of the foot with the outside. Use dominant foot first and then the less dominant foot. When single foot mastery is achieved use both feet going inside-outside-outside-inside.

17) **Pull Across – Outside** – Start with the right foot on top of the ball. Pull it across your body and then push it outside with the left. Stop the ball with the sole of the left foot and pull it back across your body then push it outside with your right foot.

18) **Figure 8's** – The outside of the foot is extremely important in guiding the ball away from pressure. Have your players do 360° turns with four sharp touches on the ball with the outside of the right foot and then again with the outside of the left, making a figure 8 on the field.

19) **1-2-3-4 Double Touch**

This is the same as the Inside Outside exercise above except at the end of the inside outside move (both feet) there is a double touch (inside to inside) made before repeating the pattern

Conventional wisdom indicates that a child has to perform a skill a minimum of 75 times before they actually begin to learn it. Mastery comes much later. That is why it is so important for the children to get multiple touches on the ball.

The above skills can be the **Warm Up** and **FUNDAMENTALS** portion of your dribbling/ foot skills practice session.