

Learning to Juggle

Several weeks I wrote an article directed to parents and coaches about encouraging their children to practice on their own. I would like to expand on that idea with some suggestions on how to make learning about ball control fun.

Let's start with the basic ball control exercise -- juggling.

All you need is a ball and some space and away you go. For beginners, the best way to learn to juggle is through a simple method of just one juggle and a catch. Bounce the ball off your thigh and catch it. Continue to do so until it becomes too easy. Then progress to two juggles off a thigh and catch it. Once two juggles become easy, stay with two juggles but this time juggle once off each thigh. Do this until it becomes too easy. Now try to juggle several times off the thighs, alternating the thighs -- right-left-right-left.

The thigh is the easiest of the 14 surfaces to juggle. Which is why I always train players to begin juggling with that body part. It is not until they master the thighs that we move on.

For the record, here are the 14 areas: Head, Chest, Shoulders (2), Thighs (2), Inside of Foot (2), Outside of Foot (2), Laces or Top of Foot (2), Heel of Foot (2).

From the thighs, we would move to the feet, preferably the laces or top of the feet. And again, for first-timers, I would have them toss the ball up and touch it back up with the laces and catch it.

Once the players master the toss and catch with the feet, I would begin teaching them combination juggling and we would go "thigh-foot-catch". This is a basic combo, but one that really begins to teach ball control. Once this is mastered, we would move on to the inside and/or outside of the feet, again beginning with a toss and catch, progressing to combination juggling.

Note: I do not begin teaching heel juggling until after all other surfaces are practiced.

From the inside and/or outside of the feet, we move upwards to the head. Head juggling is safe if taught properly. Make sure players head the ball with their forehead. But most importantly, they need to toss the ball only a foot or so above their heads. As all other surfaces, use the toss-head-catch method until mastered.

The head juggle is one of the best surfaces for combo juggling. I've had Under-8 players able to perform this combo -- head-thigh-foot.

From the head, we would go to the shoulders and the chest. The shoulders are a difficult surface to learn only because it is often performed incorrectly. The way I teach shoulder juggles is by having players, without a ball, just shrug their shoulders as when answering a question with an "I don't know!" Now add a ball to that. Toss it up, shrug a shoulder and the ball should pop straight up, allowing the player to add another body-surface juggle.

The chest juggle is easy to learn but it, too, is often performed incorrectly. Players need to lean back so that when the ball hits their chest, it pops up. Most times, players remain upright and when the ball hits the chest it falls to the ground.

Now that we have explored all the surfaces we can begin to really have fun.

Players, who train with me either indoors during the winter or outdoors during the seasons, enjoy combination juggling. I will often put them through "tests", asking them to perform such combinations as:

- (1) head-thigh-foot

- (2) thigh-foot-head
- (3) head-shoulder-thigh-foot

Even better, I make them come up with combinations on their own. You'll be amazed at the creativity some players have.

When I am training a team or a small group of players we play a game similar to the basketball shooting game of "HORSE" only we call it "MIA" or "HAMM" for girls and "PELE" for boys.

One player starts the game by announcing a combination. He or she has to perform the combo and then everyone else has to follow. If the first person fails to perform his or her own combo, or if anyone else who follows fails to perform the combo, those players get a letter. Players are eliminated when they use up all the letters -- M-I-A, H-A-M-M, P-E-L-E. (Note: any player eliminated has to continue performing all called combinations. This keeps everyone busy and keeps everyone learning!)

This is a great way to begin or end a practice session. Players love it not only for its "fun" value, but also for its competitive value. But mostly because it is fun.

And isn't that what soccer learning should be all about!