

A Team of Technical Tips
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It is the range of techniques that generally separates players into ability groups. Those who are most comfortable in possession; those who can individually and collectively create solutions to small-group tactical problems; those who can impose their unique personality on a game; and those who can meet the athletic challenges of the higher levels are going to be the top performers. Everything about team and player assessment begins with individual technique.

At the local level, we have tens of thousands of youngsters playing soccer who have tremendous physical potential, but lack even a limited diversity of skills. Listed below is a checklist of key technical skills -- a starting line-up and a sub-- that every player should have some proficiency in, if not mastery of, by age 12.

From a coaching perspective, many of these tips can be readily implemented into competitive 4v4 and 5v5 games by simply creating scoring systems that reward creativity; in all cases, some regular individual technical repetition is necessary.

1. **Ball Control on the Ground.** When controlling the ball on the ground, players should use the foot to create a closed wedge, rather than an uphill slope. Typically, poor first touches are caused by the controlling foot being moved out in front of the body and angled upwards, creating a slope for the ball to jump up, and often over. Not cushioning (giving with) the ball by moving the foot backwards on contact compounds the problem. **Technical Tip...** A better approach is to let the ball run a little under the body, which creates a closed angle between the foot and the ground, and provides for better balance because the feet are closer together. With the pace taken off the ball on the first touch, it is much easier to keep the ball close to the body for the next action.
2. **Basic Ball Striking.** Mechanically, it is much easier to kick the ball with pace when the supporting (standing) leg is close to the ball on contact. Kicking a soccer ball has much in common with lifting a heavy object; the more balanced we are, the easier it is to generate force. While virtually every soccer technique is an exercise in improvisation, those who constantly place their standing leg behind the ball are incapable of generating power and driving the ball with the instep (laces). These players often kick with the toes or inside of the foot and have an ungainly long stride on contact. **Technical Tip...** Encourage players to place their standing leg even with, but a little removed from the ball; point their kicking toe towards the bottom of the ball (6 o'clock on the clock face); and follow through by landing on their kicking leg. With some practice, the standing leg will come off the ground as the body moves forward and players learn that power is generated from the knee joint, rather than the hip.

3. **Soft First Touch.** Developing a soft first (controlling) touch helps players maintain possession and gives them more time to decide whether to pass, dribble or shoot. Sadly, it is not uncommon to observe players whose second touch is a tackle! Coaches can make a difference by not allowing 1-touch play for those who struggle to keep the ball close. Coaches can also help improve decision-making by requiring players to look around them before controlling the ball. In both cases, an indirect free kick would be awarded against the miscreant! **Technical tip...** When players are aware of the closed and open spaces around them prior to receiving the ball, the direction of the controlling or second touch is related to the tactics of the moment, making the players more skilful! When coaches help players become aware of space, teammates and opponents they are helping to improve individual decision-making and collective speed of play.
4. **Expanding Basic Technical Range.** There are six sides of the foot (front and back, top and bottom, left and right) used to kick and control a soccer ball, and the more surfaces a player can use the more versatile they become. Too often, weaker players use only the inside of their dominant leg to receive, pass and dribble; perhaps the inevitable outcome of an endless stream of coaching materials that have perpetuated the notion that short passing and the inside of the foot are inexorably synonymous. **Teaching Tip...** Coaches can encourage more versatility by giving bonus points for using the sole or the outside of the foot, for example, in practice games; by worrying less about the “correct” choice of surface (technical decision) and more about the outcome (tactical result); and -- for those with a playing background -- by serving as a natural role model during practice games.
5. **Dribble with the Little Toe.** In general, players should dribble the ball with the outside of the foot; this is particularly true when running with the ball at speed. The outside of the foot provides more disguise when passing; is more effective for creating spin and lift; and is more efficient during the typical running motion where most people are pigeon-toed. **Technical Tip...** Encouraging players to feel the ball contact the little toe through their shoe when they dribble is a useful teaching aid. The little toe places the foot at a good contact angle and provides for immediate and on-going feedback.
6. **Dribbling for Possession.** Despite participating in soccer programs for a number of years, many players become teenagers without the ability to dribble out of pressure. Sadly, the constant demand on young players to simply kick the ball forward has rendered a majority as technically inept. At the very least, everyone should have some minimal range of tricks available for cutting and turning the ball to evade pressure. The most common surfaces used to turn and cut the ball are the inside, outside and sole of the foot; in reality, any surface can be used. **Technical Tip...** Coaches can help develop these skills by organizing practice games between two goals that encourage competitive dribbling. When the field is shorter in length, a premium is placed on possessing the ball and beating the opponent(s) in tight spaces; when the two goals become further apart, the

emphasis shifts more towards speed dribbling into open space. Pre-teens should experience some form of competitive 1v1 and 2v2 games at every practice.

7. **Ball Control out of the Air - I.** When controlling balls coming out of the air, it is important to cushion the ball and get the ball onto the ground as quickly as possible. Many players are afraid to use their head or chest as a controlling surface when the ball is arriving with any pace; and many others are not comfortable contacting the ball when it drops from a height. **Technical Tip...** The basic principles of controlling balls out of the air are similar to catching any ball. First, get in line with the ball; second, determine the body part to be used, based on the pace and trajectory; third, move the selected body part into line with the flight of the ball; and fourth, “give” with the body part as the ball makes contact.
8. **Ball Control out of the Air - II.** A more effective technique for controlling balls out of the air is to contact the ball as it lands and “wedge” it between the foot and ground. This skill eliminates at least one controlling touch prior to dribbling, passing or shooting. The inside, outside and bottom of the foot are the typical controlling surfaces and players need to lean their body in the direction of the controlling touch to be most effective. This technique can be effectively used for bouncing balls and for balls coming directly out of the air. **Technical Tip...** The keys to good execution start with the player positioning his/her shoulders square (90 degrees) to the bouncing or incoming ball. With a good lean towards the intended open space and the controlling foot creating a closed angle with the ground, even a relatively poor contact will result in possession.
9. **Heading for Possession.** Where possible, players should use heading as a passing tool and not simply as a means to clear the ball. A quick look around for available teammates, just before making contact, can make the difference between a possible counter-attack or regaining possession, and more defending! **Technical Tip...** When using the head as a passing tool, the body must absorb the pace of the ball by using the same principles as catching with the hands. (See #7)
10. **Use of Disguise and Changes of Pace.** Players can become more creative in passing and dribbling, and therefore much more effective in keeping possession and creating scoring chances, if they can disguise their intentions. The use of different surfaces of the foot is part of the solution; the ability to change the direction of the ball -- from a straight line towards goal -- is part of the solution; the ability to use feigns and fakes is a significant part of the solution; and the ability, while dribbling, to change pace from fast to slow and slow to fast is also part of the solution. **Teaching Tip...** Coaches can help move these skills forward by playing competitive 1v1 and 2v2 games as part of every practice; by adding periodic conditions to 4v4 games, such as a minimum number of touches per possession, or awarding bonus points for attempts at creativity and control; and by generally discouraging aimless clearances and other negative decisions that are grounded on fear of losing possession or goals.

11. **Playing with Back to Goal.** The ability of teams to play soccer in a constructive, and worldlier fashion is based, in no small measure, on having players who can receive the ball while facing their own goal and often under pressure from a defender. Players who are skillful with back to pressure are typically more aware of defender's positions; typically more able to create space and keep receiving spaces alive; typically more aware of when the ball can be passed to them; and typically more aware of when to turn and when to control the ball backwards. **Teaching Tip...** These critical skills can be specifically developed by playing games that include end line players who concurrently function as targets (for the opponents) and support players (for teammates). In reality, any soccer game that requires players to create space and check back to receive passes will help; however, smaller practice organizations that provide for realistic positional play will help more. When there is width and depth to a team, and when the coaching challenges players to change the rhythm of play by attacking when possible and otherwise circulating the ball, the natural passing connections between players at the front and back of the team will be present.

And the substitute...

12. **Adjusting the Body for Ball Striking.** Many players could perform a wider range of kicking techniques if they learned to adjust the alignment of their hips prior to contact. The typical under-performed skills involve a wide range of techniques used for striking the ball across the line of the body. Examples include passing or clearing the ball down the sideline, when running towards the sideline; crossing the ball, when running towards the goal-line; and hooking the ball backward -- or forward -- while running vertically in the opposite direction. More advanced skills include striking volleys and half-volleys at heights ranging from ground level to overhead. **Technical Tip...** The key to better performance is the alignment of the hips on contact. If the foot of the supporting leg is planted towards the intended target, or close to that direction, the hips will naturally follow suit and this opens space for the kicking leg to swing across the body. It should be noted that this adjustment often results in players falling over as they make contact through the middle of the ball.