

PRACTICE DRILLS

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DROP BACK

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 receiver. 1 ball.

How it works: A quarterback and a receiver face each other, standing 5 yards apart. The quarterback takes a three-step drop and delivers a pass. A three-step drop is when the quarterback receives the snap, takes three steps backward by backpedaling, plants his feet and throws. If the receiver doesn't have to take a step in any direction to catch the ball, the quarterback moves back 3 yards and repeats the steps. Every time the quarterback delivers an accurate pass, he moves farther away.

Coaching pointers: As the target gets farther away, your quarterback may no longer follow proper technique in an effort to throw the ball greater distances; make sure his feet are pointed toward the target and that he's following through toward the receiver. Turn this drill into a fun competition between your quarterbacks to see who can end up the farthest away before his pass is off target.

HEAD UP

What you need: 1 running back, 1 quarterback. 5 adults. 1 ball.

How it works: Position five assistant coaches or parents in a line with roughly 10 yards between each of them. On your command, a running back takes a handoff from the quarterback and runs full speed toward the first adult. As the player approaches, each coach or parent points left or right, and the player must react quickly, weave around that adult, and head toward the next adult.

Coaching pointers: Youngsters running at full speed have a tendency to get sloppy with their technique, so besides making sure their heads are up and their eyes are looking straight ahead, monitor that they're holding the ball properly as they're shifting to the left and right.

THE GAUNTLET

What you need: 1 quarterback, 1 wide receiver, 1 defensive back. 1 ball.

How it works: Position a wide receiver about 10 yards away from a quarterback, facing him, and put a defensive back right behind the receiver. The quarterback delivers a pass to the receiver, and as soon as the ball is in the receiver's hands, the defensive back tries knocking it loose.

Coaching pointers: The receiver must first focus on making the catch and then immediately tuck the ball away safely. The more proficient he becomes at this, the less likely turnovers or dropped passes will plague him during the season.

STAYING ALIVE

What you need: 1 offensive lineman, 1 defensive lineman. 1 coach. 2 cones or other markers.

How it works: Use the following steps for this drill:

1. Set up two cones about 8 feet apart to mark the playing area.
2. An offensive and defensive player line up across from each other and take their normal stances. You stand behind the defensive player and point in the direction you want the offensive player to take the defensive player.
3. When the offensive player is ready he tries to drive block the defender in the direction you indicated and knock him outside the area marked by the cones.

Coaching pointers: The defensive player is trying to drive through the block, so the offensive player can be effective only if his feet are properly positioned and he maintains proper leverage.

ANGLE TACKLE

What you need: 1 linebacker, 1 running back. 1 coach. 1 ball.

How it works: Position a linebacker facing a running back, about 5 yards away and get behind the linebacker so only the running back can see you. On your whistle:

1. The running back begins running toward the linebacker. When he gets a couple yards away, you motion for him to cut either left or right.
2. The linebacker is forced to react to the quick change in direction and take the proper angle to make the tackle on the running back.

Coaching pointers: Make sure the linebacker's head is up and that he drives through the running back and securely wraps him up with both arms.

PRACTICE TIPS

Set a positive tone – Since you're the team leader it's important to remember that everything you do – from how you phrase instructions to your body language – affects the tone of your practices. Good attitudes are contagious so be sure to spread yours around for all the kids to soak up. It'll pay big dividends in both their performance and effort, as well as lead to a fun-filled day of football.

Involve parents – If you're doing a drill with quarterbacks and receivers, have the parents take the role of defensive back. The kids can have great fun running patterns against their parents or a teammate's parent. Just be sure to give the parents plenty of advance notice so that they make sure they come to the practice with the right shoes and clothing to participate.

Don't dwell on the problem – Anytime a youngster is struggling to pick up a specific skill, there is a natural tendency to dwell on what he is doing wrong. Often, that can simply make everything worse. Instead, shift your focus around and demonstrate the right way to do it instead of talking about what he's doing wrong. Demonstrations are a great visual blueprint that a youngster may relate to better. Taking the time to show the child exactly what you mean, and acknowledging even the slightest improvement the next time he performs the skill, can help keep him headed on the right track.

Be specific with the praise – Hand out specific feedback to your players rather than general comments that tend to go unnoticed. Comments such as "way to go" usually don't mean a whole lot to kids, so zero in on exactly what you're applauding the player for. Saying something along the lines of "Great job on that tackle; that's the way to wrap your arms around him" packs more of a punch and is more likely to stick in the child's head every time he pursues a tackle.

Halt practice to recognize the positives – A good habit to get into is to occasionally stop your practices when the team does something really well. For example, a quick 20-second break to applaud the punt coverage team's effort to get downfield can really boost the confidence of your players.

GAME DAY TIPS

Boost players' confidence – During the pre-game activities be sure to sprinkle some positive words around to players. This little bit of extra encouragement – regardless if it's a pat on the back or a comment about how you're looking forward to watching them perform – gives them a little shot of confidence that can wind up making a big difference in their level of play and how much they enjoy the game.

Reserve energy for the game – During the pre-game warm-ups make sure the kids aren't going at full speed and expending all of their energy. Have them start at half speed and gradually work their way up, this way they'll be loosened up and ready to go at kickoff instead of gasping for breath.

Put defensive players on the move – Shifting defensive players around at the line of scrimmage prior to the snap can present all sorts of challenges for the offense. It can disrupt blocking schemes and have the unit second guessing if the play that has been called is going to be effective.

Use trickery – Trick plays are good for a variety of reasons. One, they can catch the opposition off balance and produce a big play for your team and secondly, they are great fun to practice during the week and run on game day. You'll see the excitement in the kids' eyes when you call a trick play. Plus, when it works it will really boost the team's confidence.

Mix things up – Don't be afraid to mix your plays up. Players, especially at the older and more advanced levels of play, will embrace the challenge of running a variety of different plays. Even if a team is struggling in a particular area of the game, don't shy away from calling those plays. The only way kids will get better at running them is through both repetitions in practice and actually going through against an opponent on game day, too.