



# Active Practice

Sport offers valuable opportunities for physical activity. Coaches play an important role in promoting physical activity and fitness among their athletes, and can assist athletes in reaching recommended levels. However, it can be a challenge to give fitness the proper emphasis in practice as sport skill development, game strategies/tactics, and sport rules are also necessary to prepare athletes to compete. With minor adjustments to practice plans, coaches can prepare their athletes with tactical and technical skills while also maximizing physical activity, thus improving fitness. Below you will find some simple strategies for infusing fitness into your practice sessions through increasing athlete active engagement and reducing inactive time.

***Did you know?** The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends 150 minutes per week of moderate to vigorous physical activity for adults and 60 minutes per day for youth for optimal health.*

## **Before Practice Begins:**

- Create a written plan for every session that includes activities, order and duration to ensure smooth transitions and maximize activity time.
- Determine teams/groups/partners in advance so that you can assign athletes quickly during the session.
- Set up equipment (e.g., cones, stations, nets) before practice starts.
- When possible, provide enough equipment so that multiple athletes can actively participate at one time.
- Teach the team routines for practice components like warm-up, cool-down, transitions, and basic drills
- Plan practice sessions that are physically demanding – practice sessions should challenge athletes and include appropriate breaks for rest and water.
- Encourage athletes to put forth their best effort in every activity.

## **During Practice Sessions:**

- Include an active warm-up routine that involves aerobic activity and dynamic stretching.
- Infuse conditioning exercises that require minimal organization and equipment. Progressively increase repetitions as athletes improve. The [Fitness Cards](#) have great examples of exercises for all levels of ability.
- Use timed circuits and/or stations– this helps to focus attention on one skill/activity, keep athletes actively engaged in the task, and reduce equipment needs.
- If drills are done in lines, form multiple lines with fewer athletes in each to reduce time waiting for turns.
- Avoid elimination games/activities that involve an athlete being “out” and inactive.
- Encourage athletes to jog or walk briskly during transitions and water breaks to decrease down time.
- Play small-sided games/scrimmages that increase activity time and maximize ball touches.

***Tip:** Strenuous physical activity may feel uncomfortable or distressing to some athletes because of the increased heart rate, breathing rate, and perspiration that occurs. Help athletes to understand that those are normal responses to exercise and provide extra praise and encouragement when they train hard and exert themselves.*



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- Build in a 10 to 15-minute conditioning component at the beginning or end of each session.
- Check your sport federation website. Many sport federations are also focusing on keeping athletes active at practice. They might have sample practice plans available.
- Decrease instruction time by condensing initial points into simple and brief directions, and providing positive and constructive feedback during the activity.
- Provide athletes opportunities for choice to increase their motivation to engage actively. Avoid offering too many options so athletes can be more decisive.
- Use behavioral strategies to engage athletes and deter disruptive behavior – some athletes may display disruptive or noncompliant behavior during practice sessions that can detract from your efforts. The following may help:
  - Maintain a standard practice routine
  - Be clear and consistent with expectations and instructions
  - Praise/reinforce positive behaviors and active participation
  - Offer athlete a leadership role to increase self-esteem
  - Reduce distractions when possible (extra equipment, noise, people)
  - Track progress and praise improvements
  - Offer breaks to athletes who demonstrate disruptive behaviors
  - Use peer partners for support
  - Avoid using exercise as punishment
  - Keep practice session moving and reduce downtime (also see [Coach Reference Guide: Ideas to Improve Learning](#)).

## **Beyond Practice Sessions:**

- Increase the duration and/or frequency of your practice sessions – consider adding 15 extra minutes onto each practice, increasing the frequency from 1-2x/week, and/or extending the season by including a few more pre-season sessions to help promote fitness.
- Encourage athletes to be physically active on non-practice days. Check-in with athletes during practice to hear what they did outside of your organized sessions. Provide praise and reinforcement for any fitness efforts.

## **Go the Extra Mile: Assess Fitness Improvements**

Simple field tests can be used to measure fitness and demonstrate the impact of your efforts to engage athletes in physical activity. Coaches are encouraged to conduct fitness tests before and after the sport season to track improvements in fitness and help motivate your athletes to continue on their path to fitness. Resources for simple fitness assessments will be available soon (Fall 2019)!