

The Game Protocol

**Helping your Team Compete and
Improve Every Game**

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The Keys Helping your Team Compete and Improve Every Game

This Game Protocol is for use by coaches in the Tosa Kickers program as a guide to improve player development and help your team be competitive in every game. It will also:

- Aid the coaches in what to look for, what to watch
- Simplify the game for the players
- Create a synergy between training and games

Good Shape + Simple Instructions + Problem Solving = IMPROVED PLAY and MORE SUCCESS

By following these guidelines, coaches – independent of a playing or coaching background – will become better teachers and understand the game better.

The design of this protocol is specifically for Tosa Soccer, our coaches' needs and player needs. It includes seven parts:

- Part 1 Multiple Coaches
- Part 2 Pre-Game
- Part 3 First Half
- Part 4 Halftime
- Part 5 Second Half
- Part 6 Postgame
- Part 7 How to Win and Often Asked Questions

The Game Protocol provides a logical progression for organizing themes for and coaching the game. Games are the proving ground for the effectiveness of your training sessions. In each of the seven parts, we lay out the progression for preparing for and performing at game time.

Part 1 – Multiple Coaches

Most Tosa teams have 1-3 coaches. We want to make sure this is to our advantage.

Three Rules for Multiple Coach Teams

1. Never disagree publicly
2. Delineate Responsibilities
3. Communicate prior to giving messages to players

Pre Game Assignments for Multiple Coach Teams

- One coach warms up team
- One coach warms up goalie separately
- One coach delivers pregame talk
- One coach gives individual instruction

1st Half Assignments for Multiple Coach Teams

- One coach watches and instructs team
- One coach watches takes notes on other team or
- Coaches are assigned to watch different aspects ie defenders, midfielders, fwds etc...

Halftime Assignments for Multiple Coach Teams

- One coach gives halftime talk (coaches should talk before the talk) – switch off you like.
- One coach gives individual player instruction

2nd Half Assignments for Multiple Coach Teams

- One coach watches and instructs team
- One coach watches takes notes on other team or
- Coaches are assigned to watch different aspects ie defenders, midfielders fwds etc...

Post Game Assignments for Multiple Coach Teams

- One coach gives post game talk (coaches should talk before the talk) – switch off you like.

Part 2 – Pre-Game

The pre-game includes the warm-up and pre-game instruction.

Warm up

- Bring the same equipment you bring for practice (cones/discs, jersey vests, soccer balls, stopwatch)
- Bring a notebook or dry erase board
- Begin warming up, at least 30 minutes prior to the game (tell players to arrive 35 minutes prior to the game)
- The warm-up should look like practice but shorter – same drills and same games (this makes things easier for the players and helps relay themes)

Here is a logical warm up progression that simulates practice and prepares the players for the game.

Warm up exercise number 1 (5-7 minutes) – Technical and physical warm up with the ball - between 1 and 4 players per ball.

Warm up exercise number 2 (5-10 minutes) – Competitive game with direction and boundaries (4 vs 4 maximum) – play to the big goal with one of the games.

Warm up exercise number 3 (5 Minutes) – Play big to the big goal and either small goals, gates or end-zones in the other direction.

Pre – Game Information

Before I talk about the information this is crucial. Do not accept anything but full attention from players. They are not allowed to:

- Change
- Fidget
- Play with a ball
- Talk to someone else
- Look in another direction

when the coach is talking. At worst, they can fake they are listening.

When speaking the players should be:

- In front of you
- Facing away from the sun
- Sitting preferably

The Coach should be:

- Engaged
- Making eye contact
- Close to player level – especially with little kids

Pre –Game Information should be thematic and progress from game to game, month to month and season to season. It also, often deals with shape or positional responsibilities. Good soccer cannot occur without skill and skill is not adequately displayed unless players are in the correct spots.

For example:

Drill a **U11 Academy Team** (U10 team playing up) during their fall season on basic team shape prior to games. This would be done by telling and showing **on a dry erase board, notebook or with cones** – This is imperative. Players learn faster when they are shown and told. If you just tell, studies conclude that it needs repeating and explaining between 20-28 times for it to be absorbed adequately into action.

“The center back stays back. The wide back goes forward when the ball is on their side and pinches in or comes to the middle when the ball is on the other side. The central midfielder needs to get forward and back but mostly needs to be able to balance the field and get into the attack late. The center fwd needs to stay up top. The wide midfielders need to get in scoring positions and get up and down the sidelines and pinch in on defense when the ball is on the other side of the field.”

After saying that follow it with questions, *“Susie where does the outside back go when we are on defense and the ball is on the other side of the field?”*

The players need to be absorbing the information and the best way to do it is to ask them questions and make sure they know the answers.

A U12 team, whose general shape is good, will be working on a different theme like 'changing the point of attack'. Now your pregame speech might sound like this (as you show on a dry erase board):

When our outside back gets the ball our center back needs to be where Steven? Correct back and giving a support angle. Where is the central midfielder Danny? No, back more so you can get the ball facing fwd. Where is the center forward Tobias? Yes showing for the ball to feet unless what? Right if our back has no one on them and can play the ball long you may run diagonally toward the corner. Where is the wide midfielder on the same side of the ball George? Yes, on the sideline giving a good passing angle to the back. Where is the weakside defender Michael? There you go pinched in a little, to be safe, and a little further forward then the center back. How about the weakside midfielder Buster? Yes you can get forward a little and get ready to get wide or just show in the middle. Now we can switch the attack around the back because we have a good support angle from our center back. We can go through our center midfielder who is giving a good angle. We can go to our center fwd who plays a drop ball to our center mid and we can go out the other side. Where what player can get into the attack now Michael? Correct Michael you can get fwd.

The examples show how the pre-game talks had a theme, were interactive (to get players attention and see if they know the material) and they are simple. Lastly, it is not 100 points it is the same point with the details to make it work. There are thousands of things to talk about and you just need to pick 1-3 of the most important and cover them thoughtfully and thoroughly. Start with simple shape and progress game to game, month to month season to season.

Individual Coaching Points

Prior to games pull players aside and give them individual coaching. "Louise how are you going to defend today?" I'm not going to let players turn and I'm going to stay in front of the ball when they are facing me. "Perfect. Move those feet and remember the ball can't fake."

Part 3 – 1st Half

1. Start your stopwatch

What to Look For Part 1:

- Is your shape correct?
- Are your players in the right positions?
- Are they performing the details of your themes?

In other words, coach your theme and the shape/positioning of players off the ball so the player on the ball has options. Defensively proper shape is the difference between winning and losing. **Instruct those things as the game goes on until they know where to be on the field.**

What not to do:

- Commentate – Follow the ball and tell the player what to do in every situation. This is a major problem. Everyone wants to watch the ball and tell players what to do. This is short term.
Players need to learn how to think and solve problems, not what to think. Problem solving is an everyday training exercise.
- Motivate – You can tell players to work harder, to care, etc... but make sure there is information. Many people try to motivate without details and it falls flat.

What to Look For Part 2:

- Good match ups – Where can you exploit the other team?
- Bad Match ups – Where will you be exploited?
- The opponent's tendencies – How do they play? Do they hit big serves? Do they get the ball wide and go 1 vs 1? Do they leave space somewhere on the field that can be taken advantage of?
- How will you lose – If you were to predict how you will lose the game what would it be and can you prevent it by manipulating match-ups, changing tactics
- How will you win – If you were to predict how you will win the game can you make certain you create that situation by manipulating match-ups, changing or reinforcing tactics

Substituting

Time:

- Create a system where everyone plays 50%. In 30 minute halves you can put players in at 15 minutes. You can sort the games into sixths and make sure players, play 3 of those. Some players will play more than 50% and that will help you be successful.

How:

- Don't start your best team. Maybe you always start a sub so when you do sub the lineup does not fall off too much or
- Take a look at the other team and sub according to match ups (maybe you make sure a weak player is not matched up against their strong player) or
- Start to organize your subs based on the other team to create the match ups (holding off a talented attacker until they put in their weak defender)

Part 4 - Halftime

Talk to your coaching staff and prepare between 1-3 team points. One coach delivers the halftime talk by telling and showing. If it is a refresher of themes you can ask questions, if not tell and show 1-3 coaching points maximum on a board and then ask questions. Keep your comments to between 5-7 minutes. These comments must:

- Change the game
 - Stopping another player on the other team
 - Exploit a match up
 - Exploit a tendency
 - Shore up a weakness
- Stay the course but even better

- *“We’re switching the attack but we don’t play a dangerous pass, or take people on 1 vs 1 quick enough.” Michael when you get the ball off the switch you and Buster have a 2 vs 1 if you go at them quickly.”*
- Adjust to circumstances
 - Down 1-2 goals how do you adjust
 - Up 1-2 goals how do you adjust
 - Losing or winning by a lot how do you adjust
 - Referee is calling a lot or hardly any fouls how do you adjust

This is your time to be a great coach. You need to pick and deliver 1-3 points out of the myriad of options and make them stick.

Individual Coaching Points

Pull players aside and tell them things that are helpful. *“Lindsey, the number 6 is not nearly as fast as you. When you get her 1 vs 1 run at her and push the ball by her before she is close to you.”*

Part 5 – The 2nd Half

1. Start your stopwatch

What to Look for?

- Are halftime adjustments comments making a difference being followed? **Instruct those things until players get it.**
- Has anything changed? Did they make personnel changes that will exploit your team? **You may need to make quick instructions or personnel moves to adjust to the opposing coach.**

What not to do:

- Commentate – Follow the ball and tell the player what to do in every situation. This is a major problem. Everyone wants to watch the ball and tell players what to do. This is short term. **Players need to learn how to think and solve problems, not what to think.** Problem solving is an everyday training exercise.
- Motivate – You can tell players to work harder, to care, etc... but make sure there is information. Many people try to motivate without details and it falls flat.

Substituting

Same as first half but you may need to have a prepared way to play and personnel when you are winning and losing by a close margin late in the game.

Part 6 – Post Game

Post game talk – A 3-5 minute talk reviewing the themes of the game with questions and answers. **Again, tell and show.** This is a great time to make sure the players are engaged in what the team is trying to accomplish.

Part 7 – How to Win and Often Asked Questions

How to Win Games – Winning games and developing players are not always conducive. By playing weak players less than 50% of games, discouraging passing out of the back, or joysticking every choice players make you can create short-term success leading to long-term failure. This piece will not encourage winning at the cost of player development. At the same time, it is important to be pragmatic. Here are the pragmatic ways to win youth soccer games:

Defend well

- Get players behind the ball
- Be great 1 vs 1 defenders

Win aerial balls

- Win head balls
- Win volleys and clearances
- Win balls in the box

Create Advantageous Match ups

- Make sure you are stopping their best players
- Make sure your best players get the ball where they are effective

Don't get beat on goal kicks, punts, throw ins

- These are set plays and they can be prepared for – but not with a lot of time devoted in practice.

Put players where they will have success and do not ask them to do more than they can do

- Positions are constant but roles in positions are pliable based on the talent of the player and opponent
 - Players should be instructed to do what they are capable of doing at game time
 - Players should be encouraged to do what they are capable of doing and doing it great

Teach teams to play in accordance with the score

- There is nothing wrong with learning to solve the problem of how to win a game
 - Less players should be attacking when you are winning late in the game
 - More players should be attacking when you are losing late in the game

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I be rotating players in positions?

Positions have roles and responsibilities. Players need to understand how to play a position and how to perform a role. Switch positions only when players understand how to perform the role. Your best players might be able to play multiple positions well because they have more skill, more energy, and more athleticism; they are the exception. Some players struggle reading the game and need to stay in one spot so they can have success. Lastly, practice formats should not confine a 13 and under player to a particular position. A quality practice always has small sided where players defend and attack equally. This combination of learning a role in big sided games and playing small sided in practice is perfect for player development.

Where do I play players who are really struggling?

Less talented players should usually play fwd, wide midfielder and on occasion wide defender. If you want to win games defense has to be a priority. Your spine (center back, center midfield) needs to be strong and if you are going to play a weak player at wide defender make sure the match up is right.

What is the best formation to play?

In order - The best formation to play is the formation that you understand and can coach. The best formation to play is the one that suits the personalities of the players.

For U11 and U12 a 3-3-1 is simple and provides natural defensive shape. For U13 and above there are more formations and you should pick one that you are comfortable teaching. The current wisdom is that all teams should play a zonal back four because that is how nearly every professional and college team plays. However, you need to be comfortable knowing you can teach a zonal four. Pick a formation that suits your players. Maybe you have 3 really athletic talented central midfield type players. You play a 4-4-2 and rotate the three players in the central midfield. This thought process is endless.

How much should I coach shape in practice?

When you play any small-sided game, you are always coaching shape. Providing cover in 2 vs 2 defending or giving a proper support angle is shape. When you play 5 vs 5 or above players must have positions and you need to coach the shape. Again, skill wins the day but -- skill is hard to perform without players in the right spots.

Should I have 1 goalkeeper?

If you have a player that wants to play Goalie and has an affinity for Goalie, by all means, play them in goal, just make sure they have foot skills and get some field time. If you do not have anyone who wants to play goalie rotate them and try to play your best keeper(s) against the better teams.

All week in practice we emphasize technique and small-sided situations, and then on game day we are supposed to teach and emphasize tactics and shape. How does that work?

Players need repetition with the ball and repetition making decisions under pressure. This is what needs to happen every practice. Then at game time, it should show. You can certainly make a game point composure on the ball and taking two touches (as opposed to smacking the ball) or ball striking etc... but large sided tactics need repetition on game day, the same way technique and small sided decision making need repetition in practice. You can also pull players aside to remind them of technical things.

What do I do when we are winning by a lot? Losing by a lot?

How to win is no longer an emphasis in both cases, improvement is. When you are winning by a lot, only allow weak-footed goals, 3 touch maximum, shots inside the box, goals off crosses etc... Make the game a chance to learn.

When losing you do the same thing. How can we keep the other team from scoring or how can we win the ball? Can we get a shot off? You need to change the emphasis from how to win the game to how to win some moments in the game.

Prologue

By following the Game Protocol, you will train yourself and the players to understand how to compete. Follow this structure consistently and make it part of your process.

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