

An intentionally designed practice that meets athlete needs can help the team stay engaged, listen, feel they belong, and perform. **It's important for coaches to plan practice ahead of time to:**

- ✓ Focus on athletes and their emotions during practice instead of trying to think about what the next activity will be
- ✓ Create moments of connection to strengthen relationships with athletes and between athletes
- ✓ Build opportunities for athletes to learn life skills
- ✓ Ensure team rituals and routines are consistent each practice
- ✓ Plan grouping strategies so athletes do not feel left out when groups are created
- ✓ Instill a progression of skill so players can work towards mastery
- ✓ Anticipate where athletes may struggle and come up with ways to adjust their strategy and encourage them

When planning practices, coaches can consider the following components of a dynamic practice:

Routines

So much of athletes' lives are out of their control. Routine and structure provides them the comfort of knowing what to expect.

Instruction

Use clear and concise instructions to help athletes understand what is being asked of them. Always check for understanding.

Skills and Drills

Plan activities that minimize long lines and keep all players actively engaged. Progress the difficulty of drills by adding new challenges, consequences, or variations as athletes master the skills.

Transition, Attention-Getters, Grouping Strategies

Use engaging strategies to keep athletes focused between activities and while grouping up. Learn **T-A-G** strategies in [PCA's Tricks of the Trade: Strategies for Athlete Engagement](#).

Conditioning

Make conditioning fun by letting the athletes choose an activity, cross-training (i.e. use different sports in conditioning), or having them pull 'double duty' - running while dribbling the ball, running through the bases, etc.

Positive Encouragement

Build opportunities for positive encouragement and connection into practices. Athletes will want to keep coming back when they experience supportive relationships with their peers and coaches.

Designing a Dynamic Practice

PCA's Practice Model takes the components of a dynamic practice and applies them within a structure. The practice model consists of:



Preparation

- Plan practice before you arrive at the field using the same structure throughout the season.
- Design a practice which focuses on one skill/theme/technique.



Set-Up

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early to set up equipment.
- Be available to talk to players as they arrive



Opening Routine

Establish a consistent way to welcome athletes to practice and reinforce team culture. This could include movement, cheers, fun, and a check-in.

- As athletes arrive to the field, ask them to pair up and discuss their favorite movie with their partner while throwing the softball back and forth. "Create a routine so kids know what to expect - structure, not necessarily activities."
- Start practice with an opening circle
 - Thank athletes for showing up
 - Check-in with thumbs (thumbs up for a good day, sideways for an ok day, down for a bad day. Pay attention to athletes whose thumbs are down).
 - Introduce the skill/theme/technique you will work on.



Warm-Up

- Get athletes moving so they are a little out of breath and starting to sweat. Do so with an engaging game instead of running laps.
- Incorporate stretching and ask a couple of athletes to lead them.



Activity #1

- Break the sports skill down into smaller, teachable components. (i.e. I want to see you 1.Keeping your head up, 2.Using both feet, 3.Keeping the soccerball close to you.).
- Use a visual demonstration to show athletes what you are looking for.
- This activity should be simple enough for athletes to focus on learning the new skill/technique/strategy.

Designing a Dynamic Practice



Activity #2

- Progress the difficulty of activity #1 so athletes are challenging themselves.
- Apply slight pressure, obstacles, or competition to allow athletes to practice the skill/technique/strategy in a tougher environment.



Scrimmage

- Give athletes an opportunity to practice the skills they worked on during practice within a game situation. Keep coaching points to a minimum and allow athletes to take risks in testing out their new skills.



Closing Routine

- Include a consistent game or activity (i.e. a shoot out, relay race, etc.) and a closing circle. In the closing circle:
 - Check back in with athletes to see how they are doing after practice.
 - Ask for athlete feedback and suggestions - ex: is there anything they want to focus on next practice? Is there an activity they didn't think worked today?
 - [Winner's circle](#) - At the end of practice, circle the team up and encourage peer to peer support. Ask them, "Who saw someone improve upon the skill today?", "Who saw someone encouraging a teammate today?"



Coach Reflection

- Reflect on practice and think about ways to improve the experience for athletes. [Reflect on interactions](#) with athletes, the objectives and outcomes, and adjust the plan for the next practice or competition based on your thoughts.

