10 Ways to Improve Your Training Sessions

Without Adding More Drills
Practical advice for young football coaches. Coach Vin Blaine | Game Changer Coaching Library | Free access

When a training session does not go well, it is tempting to search for a new exercise.

Perhaps the players looked distracted. Perhaps the passing practice felt flat. Perhaps the game produced little of the behaviour you wanted to develop. Another drill might help—but first, examine how you delivered the session already in front of you.

Was the purpose clear? Did players spend enough time playing? Was the challenge appropriate? Could they understand your instructions? Did the activity give them a reason to make the decisions you were coaching?

A familiar practice can provide a different learning experience when its organisation, conditions or coaching improves. Reusing it also gives you a chance to observe changes across sessions.

The following ten adjustments are starting points. Choose those that address an actual difficulty in your group, then watch what changes. You do not need to apply all ten at once.

1. Give the session one clear learning purpose

Trying to coach passing, scanning, movement, finishing, pressing and transitions with equal attention can make a session difficult to follow.

Choose one main football problem. Other actions will still occur, but your planning and observation need a manageable focus.

For example, “improve passing” is broad. “Help players offer an accessible passing angle when a teammate is under pressure” tells you what situation to create and what behaviour to observe.

Explain the purpose simply: “Today we are helping the player on the ball find another option.” Return to it in your interventions and review.

Try this: Write the main purpose in one sentence before arranging the cones. Identify one observable sign that players are addressing it.

Reflect: Could a player explain what we were working on and why it mattered?

2. Protect time spent playing

Players cannot explore football solutions while repeatedly waiting for the organisation to restart.

Look for avoidable queues, lengthy explanations, equipment changes and unclear rotations. Have spare balls ready, explain restarts and prepare the next arrangement before you need it.

If one player acts while seven wait, consider whether the same practice can operate in two smaller groups. Keep necessary recovery and hydration; more active time should not mean removing appropriate breaks or increasing intensity indiscriminately.

Ask whether time in the session serves learning, recovery or organisation. Reduce delays that serve none of those purposes.

Try this: Ask a colleague to note where players spend time waiting and change the biggest avoidable delay.

Reflect: How much waiting came from my organisation rather than the players' needs?

3. Make instructions shorter and easier to understand

A detailed explanation can be accurate and still leave players unsure where to start.

Begin with the essential information: what they are trying to do, how they score or succeed, and the key rule needed to begin. Demonstrate a restart or scoring action when that is clearer than another explanation.

Check understanding by asking players to show the starting action. "Does everyone understand?" may produce agreement without revealing confusion.

Introduce additional detail when it becomes relevant. Safety instructions remain clear and explicit from the beginning.

Try this: Prepare a brief explanation and one demonstration for a familiar game. Observe whether players start correctly with fewer repeated instructions.

Reflect: Did I explain what players needed now, or everything I knew about the activity?

4. Adjust the space to fit the learning problem

The area influences the time and options available to players.

If the pitch is too tight for the group, every reception may become a rushed attempt to escape pressure. If it is too large, players may complete passes without needing to recognise defenders or adjust support.

Change space because of something you observed. Adding width might create another passing angle. Reducing length might bring supporting players closer. The same change can have different effects with different groups.

After adapting, examine whether the intended football problem still exists. Making the game easier may improve immediate performance without demonstrating lasting learning.

Try this: Change one dimension, compare a few relevant situations and return to the original area when appropriate.

Reflect: Did the new space create better learning opportunities or simply remove the challenge?

5. Use player numbers to improve opportunities

Player numbers affect involvement, pressure and the availability of support.

A large game may leave some players with few relevant decisions. A smaller game can provide more opportunities, but it can also increase physical demands and reduce the tactical relationships you intended to coach.

Consider splitting a group into parallel games or adding a neutral player to support possession. Explain the neutral's role and rotate it so the same player is not always protected from defending.

Preserve the important features of the problem. If the objective involves goalkeepers and building out, removing them changes what players need to perceive.

Try this: Review who is involved and who is peripheral. Adjust numbers or roles while retaining the session's purpose.

Reflect: Who gained useful opportunities, and who still needs a better challenge?

6. Observe before intervening

A mistake can invite an immediate correction. But a single event may not tell you enough about the cause.

Watch several relevant opportunities. Look at the receiver, nearby defenders and supporting players—not only the ball. Notice whether players recognise the difficulty and adjust independently.

A midfielder who loses possession may have taken a poor touch, received a difficult pass or lacked support. Those explanations lead to different coaching actions.

Waiting briefly does not mean ignoring safety or allowing confusion to continue. It means collecting enough information to make your intervention useful.

Try this: Observe one short game block with a single focus. Record three events before deciding what needs attention.

Reflect: Was my correction based on a recurring problem or an emotional reaction to one outcome?

7. Coach one useful adjustment at a time

Stopping play and listing every problem can overload players and interrupt the rhythm you want to develop.

Select the relationship that is limiting the action. If the passer has no accessible teammate, coach the supporting angle before discussing pass technique, scanning frequency and the entire team structure together.

Use the intervention that fits: a live cue, a private conversation, a demonstration or a brief group pause. Explain enough to help, then restart.

Observe whether the next opportunity changes. If it does not, reconsider your explanation or the task rather than simply making the instruction louder.

Try this: Before intervening, decide which one action you want players to test next.

Reflect: Did my intervention leave players with a clear next action?

8. Ask for the player's view

The coach sees the game from outside. The player acts with a different view, under pressure and with information that may change quickly.

Ask a focused question: “What did you notice when the defender moved?” or “What made that pass difficult?” Listen to the answer and check your understanding before offering advice.

Do not turn the conversation into a test of whether the player can guess your preferred answer. Offer a demonstration or pair discussion when speaking to the whole group is difficult.

Player input can reveal a task-design problem as well as an individual learning need.

Try this: Hear from one player you would not normally ask, then use their account alongside your observations.

Reflect: Did I learn something that changed my coaching decision?

9. Keep the game’s choices meaningful

Rules and bonuses can direct attention, but they can also encourage players to perform an action merely to collect points.

A compulsory forward pass may produce rushed turnovers when the lane is closed. A touch limit may prevent a player from protecting the ball when that would be sensible. A mandatory switch may move possession away from an available advantage.

Examine whether your condition supports the football intention. Keep alternative solutions available where possible and explain that players must read the situation.

Remove a temporary rule later and observe what remains. Players reproducing an action under a reward condition is not the same as selecting it appropriately in a match.

Try this: Review one rule in your favourite activity. Keep, amend or remove it based on the decisions it produces.

Reflect: Are players solving the football problem or just satisfying the rule?

10. Let the review shape the next session

The final improvement happens after the players leave.

Record what you intended, a few relevant observations, the players’ perspective and one next step. Avoid describing the session only as good or poor.

Identify something to keep, something to change and something that remains uncertain. If a practice produced useful opportunities, it may deserve another session with a small adaptation. Repetition gives players time to revisit the problem and gives you evidence to compare.

Check later whether the behaviour appears in an unrestricted game or match when the relevant opportunity occurs. A missing opportunity is different from a failed response.

Try this: Finish your review with: “Next session, I will change ___ because I observed ___. I will look for ___.”

Reflect: Can I explain how today’s evidence influenced tomorrow’s plan?

Start with one change you can explain

At your next session, choose one difficulty and one adjustment. Perhaps you will shorten the introduction, organise two smaller games or observe before stopping play.

State what you expect the change to help. Then look for evidence and ask players about their experience.

Some changes will work; others will need revision. What matters is the connection between the problem you noticed, the decision you made and what happened next.

Your existing practice library can become more useful as your organisation, observation and judgment improve. A better session may begin with a better use of the activity you already know.

Continue your learning with Designing Reflective Practices, the free Game Changer Coaching Library course on observation, player conversations and adapting the next session.

Further reading

England Football Learning, How coaches can plan for football training — https://learn.englandfootball.com/articles-and-resources/coaching/resources/2024/How-coaches-can-plan-for-football-training.

England Football Learning, How to use observation as a coach — https://learn.englandfootball.com/articles-and-resources/coaching/resources/2024/How-to-use-observation-as-a-coach.

FIFA Training Centre, When to tell and when to ask — https://www.fifatrainingcentre.com/en/environment/coaching-competencies/when-to-tell-and-when-to-ask.php.

The adjustments above are practical suggestions to test with your own players, not fixed prescriptions for every session.