

Steal These Drills: I Did Tips for Youth Coaches

by Kevin Sheehan

Think of the best coach that you have ever had in lacrosse. Chances are, if you are coaching today, you have structured your instruction in exactly the same way that you were coached. In all probability, this instruction involves waiting in lines for your time with ball, half field scrimmage time in which you walked through a team offense or were talked through a team defense and full field scrimmage. If you are coaching seven year olds, this may not be the most effective plan for instruction. In fact, it can be a formula for disaster.

We can do better as coaches of youth today by examining and stealing instructional strategies from other sports. After all, a good coach is a good thief. I am not sure who said these words, but I know that truer words were never spoken. The first sport that offers us insight and innovation in youth coaching is soccer. Yes, I know that some of us may have been driven crazy by the obsession of youth soccer coaches who view soccer as a year round activity. However, with its certification courses for youth coaching, no other sport more effectively involves its participants in sound instructional games that teach as well as entertain. I have chosen to steal (adapt) two of these games or drills.

I stole this first game because I became frustrated at the basic inability of young players to move with the ball (cradle) and protect their stick. Basically, after a full practice, without these most basic skills, the games that are played become a nightmare in which the ball is constantly stripped and on the ground. The game I borrowed is known as soccerland. This game, will be henceforth known as lacrosseland.

Lacrosseland

In order to play the game, you need four cones and a ball for each player. The game is played in the confines of the four cones, which you set up. The cones are set up in a rectangle, roughly one quarter of the offensive zone or an area adjustable to the number of players in your lacrosse land. It

begins by asking your players if they know how a big dump truck moves. After they answer, sometimes complete with sounds, you ask each player to run and cradle in a circle in the way that a big dump truck moves. As they begin to move in a circle, they are practicing the skill that is most vital to their playing, but probably the skill to which we devote the least attention. If you compare young soccer players' ability to dribble a soccer ball and young lacrosse players' ability to effectively cradle, we will most often come up short in the comparison. As the dump trucks move, we ask them to become four door sedans. They now pick up speed, and if we are brave enough, we may wish to ask them to shift

I said touch and not whack. No wrap checks are allowed. Players must avoid the thieves moving their feet and protecting their sticks. They will learn cradling and stick protection as survival skills in the game. Once a player is frozen, he (or she, I have played it with both) must place the lacrosse ball between his legs. He is not allowed to move, but may be freed by a fearless teammate who successfully makes a pass to his stick. If he catches the ball, he is free to run again. The game ends when the car thieves have frozen all the cars.

What happens is magic. Players learn to move their bodies and sticks in a way that naturally teaches offensive stick protection. They will demonstrate moves that you have

never taught. More than all of this, they will have fun and get a sense of how the game is played. A warning for you is that you can never play the game once. More than likely, you will not get out alive if you don't give everyone a chance to be a car thief. The good news is that they are playing, moving, conditioning and developing game skills. The bad news is

that they all need a ball. This is a radical concept for many of us used to conducting a practice with only a dozen balls.

Monkey in the Middle

Move without the ball. What coach has not yelled this to his or her players with a sense of frustration? However, if you think about it from a player's perspective, especially a young player, move when, move where? Have we really taught them when or where to move? This soccer version of monkey in the middle accomplishes this task while players are having fun. The game is again played within four cones. Notice that the cones make these drills ideal for indoor as well as outdoor practice. The cones are formed into a rectangle ten feet apart. Similar to the first drill, the understanding must be worked up to in a progression.

Begin by lining the three players up on three of the cones. The players are lined up



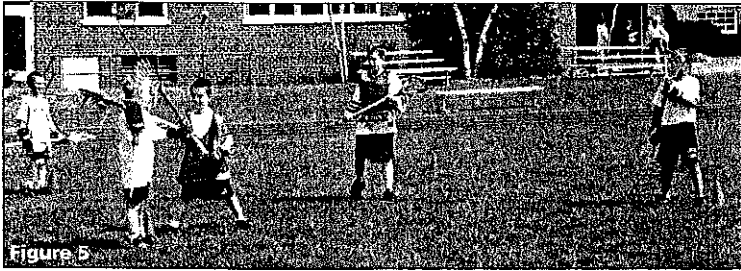
Figure 1



Figure 2

the cradle to the left hand. As they progress through the season, we may wish to ask them to roll, use magic hands (*Lacrosse Magazine*, May 2000) or even employ a single hand or bottom hand cradle. Finally, we ask them to become racecars. They now zoom around lacrosseland. As they move in a circle, you change speeds by calling out commands or car types. They are practicing cradling and movement with a time on task that a line drill could never accomplish. More than that, they are becoming attuned to obeying your voice commands. This part of the drill takes less than five minutes, but equals twenty minutes of a line drill.

Now the drill becomes fun. Take two of your more fun loving and hyperactive players out of lacrosseland. Take away their ball and proclaim them as car thieves to the group. They are now to enter lacrosseland and they can freeze or steal cars by touching the head of their sticks to the head of the stick of the cars (Players with ball). Notice



in an L (Figure 1) and must keep the L. They must always be adjacent. As player 1 passes to player 2, player 3 must run to keep the L and be adjacent to the ball. (Figure 2) The game begins without defense and players learning to move adjacent and keep the L. If players are unable to catch a lacrosse ball effectively enough to run the drill, use a small, light dodge ball.

Now you add one defender and players instinctively understand that by moving adjacent to the player with ball, you become another outlet for the passer. (Figure 3) As you add a second defender, your players can now learn to find the open man. In addition, by having the defensive players call ball or back, you are teaching fundamental defensive sliding. (Figures 4 & 5) Begin the drill by having the players on defense call ball and back, depending on their role. Go slow until players understand that they will either be on the ball in lacrosse or backing up the player on the ball. You may need to play with a dodge ball and then progress to a lacrosse ball as skills progress. Remember that you need to develop concepts as you develop skills. As seven year olds, when you have taught this progression, you have taught them to play a smart game of monkey in the middle. Who doesn't love monkey in the middle? As your players develop these understandings, you can eliminate the cones and your players have learned to move intelligently on offense and defense.

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Bug in a Box

When playing with younger players, you can call the above drill, bug in a box. The bugs are locked in the box as long as passes are successfully made. Once the ball is stopped, the bugs can leave the box to get to the groundball. After three successful passes, the bugs must drop to their backs and kick their arms and legs in a bug-like fashion. These understandings are offensive and defensive reactions and movements to open spaces that will provide a solid foundation for a player's entire lacrosse career.

Basketball Three Man D-E-F-E-N-S-I-V-E Drill

Probably the biggest mistake we, as lacrosse coaches, make is to not break down and teach defense as a concept. We sometimes instruct our team as a whole,

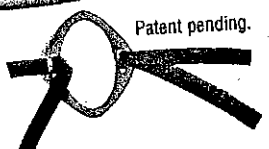
but never break down the defensive scheme as a concept. Young players rarely make the transfer from this coach talk on team defense to their individual role. Once we begin our games, we often find everyone face guarding their opponent, despite our talk. The disaster of this is that we almost cannot play a game with this type of defending. Players can't get open, one on one works without any backup and worst of all, players are rewarded for not passing. All too often, to combat our lack of effective back up, we are forced to demand that players make a certain number of passes before scoring. This drill is borrowed from basketball and in particular, the words of Red Holtzman, former Knick coach, still ring in my ears. Those words, see the ball, see your man, provide the inspiration for this drill. This drill is basically a game of three on three to teach defense. It has the

power to restructure how your players play, not only defense, but how they play offense.

The drill starts out as a three on three drill with players in front of the cage. (As you progress, you can set it up in back of the cage) The player in the middle starts with the ball with his defender saying the word, ball. The other two defenders form a V with their man and the ball and say the word, back. (Figure 6 & 7) For the rest of their careers in lacrosse, they must understand that on defense they must always see two things—the ball and their man. They must be either on the ball or in a back position. They must understand only the man with the ball can score and adjust their position to stop this player. It may be a good idea not to use sticks as you teach position and reaction. Young players tend to then play with their sticks and not



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their feet. Come to think of it, so do many older players that I know.

Use the immortal words of Red Holtzman: SEE the ball. Begin the drill by only allowing the players to pass to the adjacent player as the defensive players slide between ball and back roles. Make sure that they talk. This will allow you to know that they understand their roles. Next, allow one player to dodge as they slide to the ball proving that they are truly back. I like to ask players when they say back, do they really mean it? I tell them that they must never lie to a teammate or their lacrosse brother (or sister). If they say back, they must always sell out to give back up help to their teammate. They must get there! As they master the concept, allow the players to now cut and move as they wish on offense. Warning: you now will constantly find players who now look at the ball as their man cuts behind them to the goal. Of course, they can never let their man get between them and the goal. Hey, I didn't say it would be easy. They must now learn to talk and keep the V (between ball and man) alive as their man cuts.

Once the concept is mastered, have players play 3 on 3, sideline to sideline with two cones as the goals. You will be amazed at the talk. More amazing will be the transfer to games.

Maryland Women

The last drill that I share with you I borrowed from University of Maryland's women's lacrosse Team. At the University of Maryland, women warm up in a progression beginning with two players working on stick protection, moving to passing, quick sticking, passing into space. However, the final two on two passing drill is one that I believe can teach players a multitude of concepts in a brief period of time. These concepts, changing the level of their stick angle and faking as well as moving to space to get open, are vital to young players being able

to effectively play.

The drill begins with two players who are offensive and two who are defensive. The drill is simple. One offensive player must pass to the other offensive player. Sounds simple, right? However, the player passing must first pass through a defensive player. (Figure 8) He must learn to adjust his stick level, angle and to fake in order to make the pass. The defensive player is not to strip the player or violate the space of the offensive player. The offensive player must not dodge, but must move his (or her) stick to make the pass. The defensive player on the other end starts by playing dummy defense and staring at the passer. The offensive

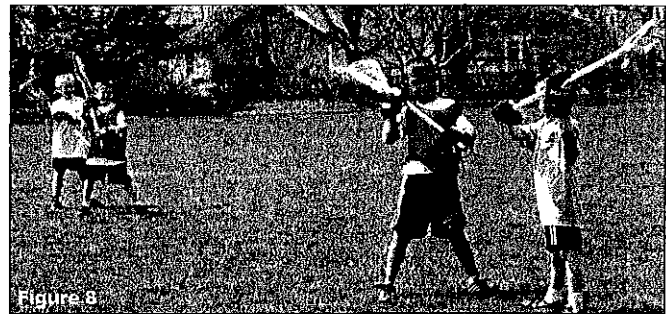


Figure 8

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player breaks to the left or right catching the ball on the run (Figure 9). Once this player receives the ball, he turns and becomes the passer. The roles are reversed. As players master the drill, the defensive player becomes less of a dummy defenseman and more of an active defenseman. The offensive player now learns to get open in an authentic manner.



Figure 9

An interesting sidelight to the concept of passing is the idea that the passer should keep his fist on the bottom hand at eye level. This action hides the ball from the defender and the goalie. In addition, it insures that the stick will be moved by a pull down motion rather than a push by the top hand. The physics are beyond me. What I do know is that is how most Canadians power the ball and I don't think any of us would question the ability of the Canadians to shoot with power and accuracy. This idea was stolen directly from Gary Gait and he should receive full credit.

In Conclusion

What I am suggesting is that these games and drills, and other drills that you steal on your own, should restructure your entire

practice. Think of each of these drills as a ten-minute station and divide your team in three. (Lacrosse Land, Bug in a Box, Three on Three Basketball Drill, Maryland Passing) Have players rotate through the stations. Remember, the first time players do a drill, game or station, they are thinking their way through the drill. If you repeat the drill, they begin to be able to move through the drill without thinking. This is the way they must play; with patterns and movements that are instinctual. A second thing that happens is that assistant coaches now become vital to your practice. If you do not have enough assistant coaches, recruit a parent or two. They will be hooked as they gain skills at their station. Too often, our assistant coaches are more like cones than vital parts

of our practice.

These drills are ideal for indoor winter clinics or outdoor practices in which you are dramatically outnumbered. The drills are not reserved for seven year olds. Since they are sound concept builders of the most basic understandings necessary to play the game at its highest level, they may be lifted by coaches of any age. I hope that some

of these ideas and drills can be stolen by you as I have stolen them from others. Hopefully, you will steal other drills and we can learn to steal them from each other. The game and your players will be better for it. ○

— Kevin Sheehan coached in various capacities for seventeen years at Adelphi University. In the 1998 World Games, he served as a consultant and assistant coach to the Australian National Lacrosse Team. Currently Kevin runs clinics for the Checkmate Lacrosse Corporation in the U.S. and Australia. Check for a video coming out next Fall which will feature youth players demonstrating these techniques as well as the techniques from last May's Lacrosse Magazine article.

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