

Introducing the Skill of Heading in the U11 Age Group

Players begin in this age group to play the ball off the bounce and out of the air. For some players this will include heading the ball. Some of those players have an older sibling whom they have watched head the ball and the younger player wants to imitate the older one. Some have seen professional or college players head the ball and again want to learn the skill to be more like the big kids. Some who begin to head the ball in the U11 age group are fearless and are willing to give heading the ball a try. However some children at this age will still shy away from heading the ball and that's all right. Let each child learn the skill as the individual's confidence leads him or her to it. No matter when a player begins to learn the skill it is vitally important that the coach takes the time to teach the skill well. Heading for field players as with diving for goalkeepers are techniques that when done incorrectly could cause injury. Coaches must know these techniques well as they begin to teach them to players.

When techniques are taught correctly and THOROUGHLY by coaches then the likelihood of injury from performing the skill is dramatically reduced. Today we will break down the skill of heading the ball into its separate parts. Then the technique will be taught to the players and pieced together into the final skill to use in a game.

When a coach watches a player head a ball look at the feet first and work up to the head. Proper heading of a soccer ball begins with the feet. Here are the key coaching points for the basic header:

Head: chin tucked in, neck stiff, never close the eyes. It is important to watch the flight of the ball until the moment of impact.

Upper body: brought back early into the curved position – and then snapped forward. Contact is made with the ball when the body is perpendicular to the ground.

Legs: bent at the knees to support the forward thrust.

Feet: approximately shoulder width apart; get up on the balls of the feet to improve movement to get into the path of the ball.

Area of contact: middle of the forehead, sometimes the side of the forehead, never the temples or the top of the head.

Among young players there is a mental barrier to overcome when talking about heading and that is simply fear. The earliest and most elementary lesson about heading is never let the ball hit you. Go out and meet it, and make contact with the front part of the forehead where the bone is the thickest. You must attack the ball! You hit it, not the other way around. The main surface of contact is of course the forehead. The ball must be struck, not cushioned. The neck and back muscles should be rigid to generate power. The part played by the eyes is important! Although it is likely that the reflex blinking action causes the eyes to be closed at the moment when the ball is struck by the forehead, players should be encouraged to watch the ball right onto the forehead; only by doing so can a player time the actual heading movement accurately. There need be no fear of danger to the eyes since they are well protected by the heavy bone structure immediately above them.

Here are steps to follow to break down the skill into segments to be taught and then build the segments into the final skill.

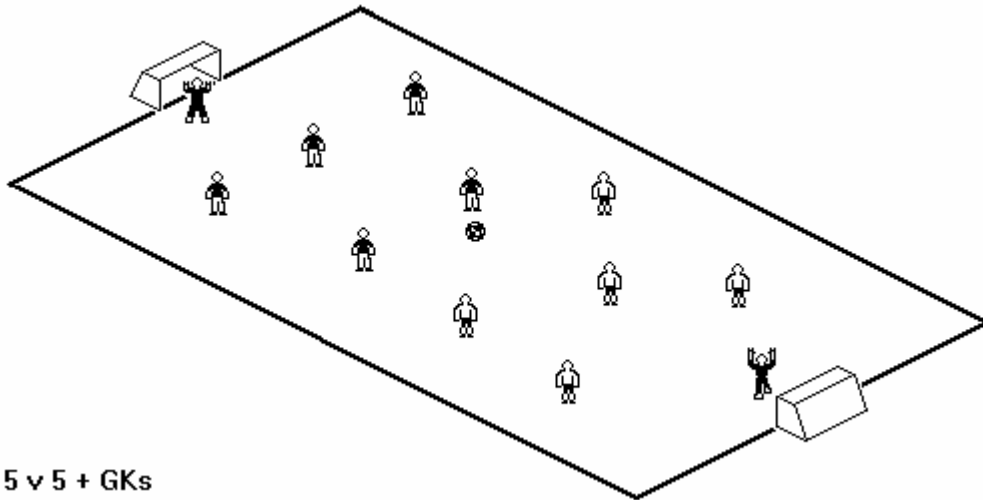
- Have the players place the ball onto his/her own forehead and try to balance the ball there as long as possible. **Objectives:** body balance, eyes open and on the ball, proper placement onto the forehead, confidence
- Juggle the ball on the forehead. **Objectives:** visual tracking of the moving ball, keeping the eyes open and on the ball, proper contact on the forehead, footwork to get under the ball, varied force onto the ball to keep it aloft
- Bounce the ball hard and then head it up and then catch it, repeat. **Objectives:** increased time of visual tracking of the ball, experience with understanding the

properties of a bouncing ball, there will be an increased need to move to adjust to the movement of the ball, confidence

- A pair ... one partner holds the ball at head height and stationary. The other player heads the stationary ball, reverse rolls and repeat. **Objectives:** work on the body mechanics of heading the ball with the feet on the ground and a stationary ball, focus on the head, neck and torso
- Pairs ... toss the ball in the air to yourself and then head it to your partner who catches the ball and then repeat. **Objectives:** self service allows each individual player to determine the height and pace of the ball to be headed, visual tracking of a ball in flight, footwork to get under the ball to head it
- Pairs ... bounce the ball to your partner for him/her to head back to the server. The bounce should be high enough for the player heading the ball to get under it. After four repetitions reverse rolls. **Objectives:** more complex visual tracking of the ball, but with the bounce there is more time to track the ball with the eyes
- Pairs ... underhand toss to your partner to head the ball back to the server. After four repetitions switch rolls. **Objectives:** tracking the flight of the ball, timing, move into the flight path of the ball, confidence
- Pairs ... while on the move serve the ball with an underhand toss and head the ball back to the server. Movement should be forward, backward and sideways. After one minute switch roles. **Objectives:** combining all aspects learned earlier to now move and head the ball

Activity: Toss-Head-Catch. This activity allows for many services of good enough quality to head the ball and is fun.

Activity: 5 vs. 5 + GKs. Play a regular soccer game and give bonus points for any goal scored from a header.



5 v 5 + GKs

Cool-Down

Optional Equipment: Nerf soccer ball, volleyball, under inflated soccer ball

Sam Snow
Director of Coaching Education