

# FREESTYLE TRAINING DRILLS



*There's a key to every kid and a drill for every skill*

INTRODUCTION



Australian Soccer kids don't spend hours each day playing with a ball on the streets, beaches and parks like their counterparts in the leading Football nations of the world. We need to discover new ways, better ways, smarter ways, faster ways and different ways for these intuitive, intelligent, talented individuals to achieve their full potential.

The aim of Freestyle Soccer is to give talented kids the freedom to think for themselves, the knowledge to make their own decisions, the confidence to create their own moves, the encouragement to challenge themselves and the responsibility to run their own training drills.

There's a key to every kid and a drill for every skill. Freestyle Soccer drills are designed for individuals, pairs and small motivated groups so they can keep control of the ball while getting thousands of ball touches and measuring their own performance and improvement. Close repetition in pairs also helps to synchronise control and support.

## **WALL PRACTICE**





Little kids try too hard to kick the ball too hard. Boys, especially, boot the ball as hard as they can while Dad stands on the sideline shouting ‘Big Kick. Big Kick.’ **Wall Practice** is the quickest and most effective way for kids to learn how to control their power and weight the pass correctly. It helps kids to develop fast footwork.

Kids stand two metres from the wall and continuously kick the ball first time using either foot. If they kick the ball too hard, they soon learn that the wall can return the ball even harder and faster. Once they develop an intuitive feel for the ball, players can achieve up to 1000 touches in ten minutes. **Wall Practice** teaches kids to keep the ball on the ground and use whichever foot the ball comes to.

Beginners can use the wall to improve their weak foot. Advanced kids are able to keep the ball up heading or juggling against the wall and some players move further back to practice two touch power kicks.

## JUGGLING



**Juggling** is simply the quickest and most effective way for kids to develop their Soccer skills and keep a record of their improvement. It gets kids up on their toes and using both feet while trying to control difficult bouncing, spinning, unpredictable balls in the air.

When kids juggle a ball, they develop the three key elements of Freestyle Soccer: Footwork, Vision and Close Repetition. **Juggling** develops the natural skills that all kids have. They constantly move their bodies to keep pace with the ball and use their minds to make quick decisions while getting hundreds of repetitive ball touches.

The secret to **juggling** is as simple as walking and running. Players just need to alternate their feet so that they regain balance every time they put their foot down. **Juggling** teaches kids to keep their eyes on the ball and strike through it smoothly instead of stabbing at it.



## CARD AND PEN



Most kids have no idea how good they really are or how much they're improving because coaches never measure their ability. Juggling is ideal for kids to measure and keep a record of their own improvement.

Using a **Card and Pen**, kids only need about 10 minutes to juggle the ball about 20 times and write down their results while the coach can stand in the middle and monitor the practice. Later, the coach can take the cards home and record the juggling figures in his training folder.

The **Card and Pen** can be used to record individual juggling for both feet, left foot only, right foot only, thighs only and head only. It can also be used for juggling in pairs. Performance measurement is critical to the development of Soccer kids. When they achieve short term goals it inspires them to try harder. By keeping a record, each kid knows where they're up to and the next target to aim for.

## DRIBBLING



The key to skill is a kid and a ball. The key to talent is a moving kid and a moving ball. Too many Australian Soccer kids spend too much time standing in a line or stabbing at dead balls. They need to move if they want to improve. They need to believe if they want to achieve.

When kids run around an oval, they should always take a ball with them and try to keep it as close as they can. At first, they keep their eyes on the ball but gradually they learn to look around while they dribble. **Dribbling** is a great way to improve balance and coordination by constantly transferring weight from one foot to the other.

Kids can create their own **dribbling** drills by constantly switching the inside and outside of either feet combined with sudden stops and changes in pace and direction. Players need thousands of touches to achieve an autonomous level of skill. They need to become bored with a drill so that they stop thinking and start reacting intuitively.



## HEADING



**Heading** is one of the most neglected skills in Australian Soccer. There are thousands of kids who are scared of heading a ball because they were hurt when they were little for a very simple reason. They let the ball strike them instead of them striking the ball. They braced themselves and closed their eyes so naturally the ball made an impact.

There are teenagers who deliberately move slowly to a 50-50 high ball to avoid clashing heads with the ball or their opponent. **Heading** is one of the easiest skills to improve and can make any player more valuable in a game. The secret is to start by keeping the ball close.

Players just need to throw the ball into the air and head it back into their hands. The challenge for little kids is not to let the ball touch the ground. This keeps them on their toes and improves their agility. As they develop their skills, kids can gradually throw the ball higher. The aim of **heading** drills is to overcome fear and develop confidence.

## BALANCING



A lot of Australian Soccer kids lack an intuitive feel for the ball because they spend so much time standing in a line or a circle waiting for their turn to kick it away. Freestyle kids always have a Soccer ball with them so they become familiar with the different properties such as roll, bounce, spin and balance. Familiarity is the key to confidence.

**Balancing** a ball becomes an integral part of juggling. Anyone can kick a ball. Constant practice enables kids to develop combinations so they can place the ball exactly where they want it to go. By lobbing the ball into the air with their feet, players learn to catch the ball on their head, neck, thighs and instep improving their confidence in receiving a difficult high ball.

Too many talented kids tense up in a game because they try too hard and rush too much. **Balancing** a Soccer ball teaches kids to relax and helps them to develop concentration, control and confidence.



## STATIC TURNS



Soccer kids should always have a ball at their feet especially when they're standing on the sideline and watching the match. That way, they keep moving the ball between their feet without realising.

**Static turns** involve dragging the ball back with the sole of the feet and pushing it forward or moving away in a different direction. Kids can tap the ball between both feet or drag the ball across the standing foot while they turn. Any kid can kick the ball away. **Static turns** enable kids to keep the ball close while they develop a feel for it.

Outdoor players have a greater awareness of their options because they're used to looking further than 20 metres but indoor players have greater ball control because they're used to being pressured as soon as they gain possession. Freestyle is the style of no style. Freestyle kids practice every style until they can absorb them into their own game.

## SHOOTING PRACTICE



Freestyle strikers learn how to finish because they know where to start. Power shooting begins in the 6 yard box so that kids can develop timing and eye/foot coordination before they add power.

Close **Shooting Practice** starts with short, simple, slow, relaxed, two touch control on the ground using at least 50 balls. Most Soccer teams only practice shooting for 15 minutes a week and always run the drills down the centre of the pitch. Freestyle kids practice up to two hours each session and shoot from every angle and distance. They master their accuracy range until they're ready to measure their power range.

In a game determined by the number of goals scored, clubs need to get serious about teaching strikers how to shoot. Every club should have its own specialist shooting gallery with a dedicated goal scoring coach and every major region should have its own Top Gun academy.



## SHARPSHOOTING



**Sharpshooting** is an intensive one hour goal scoring session where one striker is put through a range of shooting drills so that the skill becomes second nature and establishes a sense of familiarity.

In Australia, thousands of talented strikers panic in front of an open goal simply because the situation is unfamiliar due to lack of regular practice. Shooting, like any other motor skill, needs hundreds of repetitions to progress from the cognitive to the autonomous level.

The greatest pressure during a game occurs in the 18 yard box for both strikers and defenders and accounts for the highest number of unforced errors. Defenders learn to score own goals and strikers fluff the sitters because they worry too much about what might go wrong.

Sharpshooters and experienced defenders are able to relax in the 18 yard box because they've done it all so many times before. The sharpshooter has practiced for hours from every angle and distance so nothing worries him in a match situation. Familiarity is the secret.

## FREESTYLE JUGGLING



Ordinary training produces ordinary players. Extra training produces extraordinary players. We look for those kids who train when we tell them to train and we overlook the thousands of Freestyle kids who have the self motivation to train when we don't tell them to train.

Sometimes we select these talented Freestyle kids because they look different and their game is unpredictable. Then we change them so they all look, think, stretch, move, kick and play the same way until they lose the unique style that made them so special in the first place.

Each generation is more talented and smarter than the previous generation and we need to give them the chance to show what they can do, instead of imposing our own limitations on them just because they're kids and we have this idea that adults always know better.

**Freestyle juggling** gives us an insight into the players of the future.



## TRIANGLE



A lot of Soccer kids pass straight forward or run straight forward while a defender waits for them. The **triangle** is one of the most effective shapes in Soccer because it provides at least one diagonal option that enables intelligent kids to think and play laterally.

A Triangular drill teaches kids to change the direction of the ball. Standing in a triangle, three kids can continuously practice 'throw, head, catch' in a clockwise direction and then switch anti-clockwise. As they become more proficient at rotating the ball, they can practice side volleys and progress to two-touch chest volley and thigh volley.

Advanced players can use triangles to run their own shooting drills. Feeding the ball and crossing the ball should be essential elements of shooting sessions but few teams can regularly put a ball into the box. The first kid feeds the ball to the winger who crosses the ball to the striker. They swap positions every ten balls to keep the drill sharp.

## LIGHTEN UP



There isn't one Soccer kid in Australia who can't improve within five minutes using **Lighten Up**. It's the ultimate close repetition drill that can assess and develop footwork and vision while a player gets 200 ball touches. The feeder throws the ball about 20 times to the head, shoulders, thighs and feet. He runs the drill through three full sets.

All kids are different and they all have different styles. **Lighten Up** quickly identifies flat foot, stiff legged, one footed players who stab at the ball awkwardly instead of striking through it smoothly. Some kids rush and tense up. Some kids lack confidence and move back to give themselves more room. Most kids lack rhythm in their movements.

**Lighten Up** is the ideal drill before the game starts. Initial touches will be too hard or too soft, too fast or too slow, too early or too late, too high or too low, too left or too right. It takes 200 touches for kids to eliminate the mistakes and develop consistent and relaxed control.



## CLOSE REPETITION DRILLS



Close ballwork in pairs is the most effective way for kids to warm up before each game. A lot of Soccer teams stand around in a circle and share one ball or stand in line waiting to pass to the coach. The average Australian Soccer kid only gets 10 touches of the ball before each game and coaches have no idea how many touches they need. These kids spend 20 minutes of the match making unforced errors.

The hour before each game is the most important time of the week and determines how well a team is going to perform. Too many kids distract each other by joking around or worrying about the temper of the ref or the size of the opposition. Close ballwork in pairs splits the kids up so they can concentrate on the ball and think about the game.

**Close repetition drills** allow kids to get more than 200 ball touches so that they eliminate all the basic mistakes and their control becomes more consistent. In pairs, kids can head the ball, pass, trap, juggle, dribble and tackle. They're ready to go flat out when the whistle goes.

## HIT THE CONES



Coaches and players have no idea how accurate Soccer kids really are because they've never been given small targets to aim for. Players boot the pass in the general direction of their mates or they aim for the whole goal when they shoot. If we give kids small targets to aim for, they soon develop the skill to strike them from 20 to 25 metres away.

Every kid has an accuracy range and a power range. If a 5 year old can hit a cone 10 metres away, and adds 2 metres every year, you will eventually have a 15 year old who can hit a small target at 30 metres.

Most young players stab **at** the ball awkwardly instead of striking **through** it smoothly so the ball jumps up into the air. Small target cones teach kids to keep the ball on the ground. Kids can compete against each other and keep score to see who can achieve 5 hits first. Start at 10 metres and slowly increase the distance as kids improve. Most young players should practice at the optimum support distance which is usually between 15 and 25 metres. If they reach a distance where they strain and lose control, they should drop back 5 metres.

Players should always practice with their strong foot first to give them more confidence. They can then start working with their weak foot at a closer distance. Other variations include chipping the ball, lobbing the ball and first time instep drives. The most important subject a kid can learn about is themselves. They need to know their passing limits.



## HEADING IN PAIRS



Possession is the most important element in Soccer. It consists of control and support. One is limited without the other. Australian Soccer kids become quite proficient with their control on the ball but struggle to develop support off the ball for the other 95% of the game.

**Heading in Pairs** is the first step in teaching kids to understand the synchronisation of control and support. Two players work together to keep the ball in the air. When one kid is heading the ball, the second kid is improving his support position so he can receive the ball. Kids always try too hard when they start heading but control kicks in when they learn to relax and develop a natural rhythm. Something clicks.

A lot of young kids are still scared of heading the ball in case it hurts and **Heading in Pairs** is the quickest way to develop their confidence and improve their heading ability because it's a close repetition drill.

## ONE BOUNCE



Juggling is the key to developing intuitive ball players. The most difficult part of juggling is getting started because kids try to control a ball on its way down. **One Bounce in Pairs** enables kids to practice controlling the ball on its way up so they become more confident.

A lot of kids are scared of juggling because it can't be faked and they worry that other kids will laugh at them so they just pretend that they hate juggling. Any kid can learn to juggle by using a bounce between kicks. As they improve, they progress to **One Bounce One Touch**.

The great advantage of **One Bounce** is not the control on the ball but the support off the ball. This drill quickly conditions kids to 'give and go' instead of passing the ball and just standing there spectating. By keeping a count of the passes, kids can measure their improvement. Coaches don't need to feed the ball. They can monitor kids in pairs.



## NO BOUNCE



The secret to improvement is to get kids to practice what they can't do not what they can do. When kids become bored with a conscious skill, it becomes an intuitive talent. That's when they look ahead to the next level. Modern kids always want to play any game at the highest level.

Freestyle kids learn very quickly to master **One Bounce** and most kids can achieve over 100 with practice. These kids are ready for the next challenge which is **No Bounce** and **No Bounce One Touch**. As they can't use a bounce, they need to move a lot closer to each other.

The secret to **No Bounce** is to relax on the ball but to stay sharp off the ball. The secret to **No Bounce One Touch** is to play the ball into the middle, not kick it at the training partner. Too many kids give up in the first five minutes of any drill. After five minutes, they learn to adapt to the pressure and become familiar with the added pressure.

## ONE TOUCH PASSING



A lot of kids like to play two-touch in a game because it gives them the time to decide on their next move. Freestyle kids can play the ball first time because they've already been thinking two steps ahead.

Too many defenders try to trap a difficult ball and it bounces off them to the opposing attacker. A good defender can transform a clearance into a penetrating pass because he has confidence in his first touch. A lot of wingers stop a fast pass and then struggle to cross a dead ball into the box when they could use the energy if they hit it first time.

**One Touch Passing** is a drill for pairs where they try to put 100 passes together without losing control. Each range presents its own challenge. They start at 1 metre, then 5 metres, 10 metres and 20 metres. 100 continuous 20 metre passes is a great warm up before a game because it challenges players to keep the ball on the ground.



## JUGGLING CIRCLE



**Juggling Circle** is the quickest and most effective way to assess how kids move and communicate in a group. 6 to 8 players (half a squad) keep a ball up in a circle and keep count of how many passes they can put together without losing control. They start with simple **One Bounce** and progress to **One Bounce One Touch**.

In the **Juggling Circle**, kids react the same way they do in a game. Some stand still, some don't talk at all, some stand back if they lack confidence and some lose control of the ball by trying to be too smart.

It's essential to observe the first five minutes of this drill without stopping to correct the many mistakes. Then you can gradually add key elements to improve performance. Kids stand flat footed so get them up on their toes. Get them to call their name to avoid two kids going for the same ball. You will notice an immediate improvement and the great advantage of this drill is that you can measure the performance. You can then challenge the group with **No Bounce**.

## RAPID FIRE



Normal shooting practice is too slow and conscious and kids spend too long standing in line waiting for their turn. When a whole squad is shooting, the average wait between kicks is more than two minutes.

**Rapid Fire** is an intensive team drill where balls are fed at a rate of one every second so that kids have to be on their toes mentally and physically and they need to synchronise their movement as a team.

Fear of failure is the greatest obstacle in sport. A lot of talented strikers psyche themselves out by thinking too much about what can go wrong so it does. **Rapid Fire** teaches kids to just do it and back their instincts. The players only have a split second to take a snapshot look at the target before they kick and they only have 10 seconds till their next shot. Freestyle kids are never scared to shoot and miss.



## RAINBOW



Repetition drills enable kids to get the maximum number of ball touches in the minimum amount of time so they can quickly learn from their mistakes and adjust their technique. Rapid Fire drills condition kids to think a lot faster so they can make quick decisions.

**Rainbow** is an intuitive shooting drill where 100 shots are fired at the goal at the rate of one every second from just outside the 18 yard box. Ideally, 6 to 8 players take turns to run onto the ball, focus on a small target and then keep their eyes on the ball as they strike it. The aim of **Rainbow** is to develop consistently good habits so that kids never pass or shoot in a game without checking their target first. A video camera placed behind the net indicates the accuracy of each player but, more importantly, identifies the kids who look at the ball as they kick and those kids who look up to see the net bulge. Most coaches have no idea what kids look at. Vision is the secret to scoring goals.

## FEEDING THE BALL



Freestyle Soccer kids develop their skills through three distinct levels.

**Level 1 – Think for Yourself** - kids learn to practice basic skills on their own and keep a written record of performance and improvement.

**Level 2 – Create your own Moves** - kids organise ballwork in pairs and mentor the new kids to develop footwork, vision and confidence.

**Level 3 – Run your own Training Drills** - kids take responsibility, learn how to feed the ball and understand what to look for in drills.

Coaches don't play in the games. They don't need to feed the ball in training drills. Kids need to practice **Feeding the Ball** so they know what to do, learn how to do it and can understand why they do it.

**Feeding the Ball** is an essential skill that starts in pairs with **Heading**, **Lighten Up**, **Hit the Cones** and **One Bounce** and evolves to group shooting drills like **Wall Pass**, **Rapid Fire** and **Crossing the Ball**.