

FOOTBALL



HELP DESK

'Helping Coaches Helping Kids'

SPEED CAMP

Several years ago as a youth coach I was coaching a team of 9-10 year old kids in a park that was known to have bad football teams. We were considerably less athletic than some of the teams we were playing against and were losing on a regular basis. During the off-season I decided to start looking for ways to improve my team's talent level. Short of running off the bad players and recruiting good ones, I was going to have to find a way to turn my players into better athletes. I felt I could accomplish this because they were young and it was a personal feeling that kids this age were adaptable and a lot of the times products of their environment anyway.

Asking this question around the youth football community drew a number of responses but one of those responses came from a fellow named Clark Wilkins. He is known around Internet coaching circles as 'Dum-coach'. He is not dumb. Clark was the first to talk speed with me; he was running a defense that was dependent on his defensive players getting to the sidelines faster than the offensive players could get there. I started to question him and he told me he was simply using some running drills to make his kids faster. The drills he gave me are the following.

Frog Hops

In this drill, the player squats down like a frog on all fours and on the whistle he springs out of his stance as far as he can landing back in the same frog position coiled up and ready to spring again. We want their hands to be flat on the ground with elbows bent so they can use their arms a little to help push off the ground. Once the players get good at this we will hold races to get these kids to coil, uncoil, recoil, and uncoil over and over in rapid succession. NOTE (Kids who are really over weight may have trouble doing this drill and if they do and complain of their knees hurting it is best to stop the drill with those kids. Have them do standing squats instead.)

Bounders

This is simply running with as long a stride as possible, literally springing from one foot to another for a distance.

High Knees

In this drill the runner is instructed to run with knee lift as high as possible. This is not a race. We strive to get as many steps in as possible. This forces kids to use their arms when running and we stress the elbow fire as well as knee fire. We also talk to them about knee up/toe up relationship.

Back Pedals

We want them to run backwards with their hips low, reaching for grass, pumping their arms in the process.

Sprint

Run as fast as you can with good form! Simple enough. Right? It's not as easy as you might think. Tell the players to keep their hands loose and pound them up and down like hammers while keeping their elbows in close to the body.

Clark claimed these drills were making his kids faster. With that in mind I set out to try them with my own 9 yr old son. We went outside and I marked off an area for the drills. I used 30 yards for simplicity so we marked off that distance with a tape measure and timed my son in the 30-yard dash. Then we started him doing the drills for a period of 3 weeks. Sometimes he would even go in the yard and do them during the day while I was at work and then do them again with me when I got home. In just 3 weeks, his 30-yard dash time improved by 5 tenths of a second. His time dropped from a 4.1 to like a 3.6! This amazed me. Why did this happen?

The answer is simple. Most kids under age 12 have not developed any muscle structure yet. If you take the average 10 year old and stick your finger in his hip it will sink like you stuck it in a jar of peanut butter. Everything in football starts with the hips. Developing that muscle will give an average kid an immediate burst of explosion. The second reason this gain was realized was running form. Most kids don't know how to run yet. The other drills all serve to improve running form. Seeing this gain in my own son, I was determined to implement this with my own team. We were going to run these drills before practice but something seemed to be missing. My search continued.

I started reading as much as I could on speed training and how to improve speed, looking for techniques that I could use with kids to make them better, obviously things like weight lifting are not going to be an option for 10 year olds. In the process I learned a lot about speed.

Speed is broken down into 5 basic parts. They are form, agility, flexibility, explosion, and core strength. I took those components and built them into the following speed circuit that spawned our speed camp. Here is how it works. Five weeks prior to the start of football practice we start our camp. Everyone is invited, from kids on our team, to the kids on the other teams in our park, to the kids that don't play football at all. We got a fair amount of fall baseball, soccer, and track kids who wanted to do this, even a few kids who played for other parks in our league. We would meet on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, giving us 15 workouts between the start of camp and our first practice.

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OPENING

Each workout would begin with one large group. For form we started out doing Clark's drills. We did them at 1/2 & 3/4 speeds. This served as our Dynamic Warm Up and worked on our form at the same time. From there we did a few minutes of static stretching exercises to loosen up and work on flexibility. We would complete the entire Opening segment in around 10 minutes. After we finish this segment of the workout, we would split into 3 groups. Those groups rotated between the **ACES**. That stands for our **A**gility, **C**ore, & **E**xplosion **S**tations. Each of these three segments should last about 15-minutes. The entire circuit takes about 45 minutes to finish. We get started and someone blows a whistle every 15 minutes to switch.

AGILITY

At the Agility station we start off doing a routine of tire drills, we use 8 BMX style bike tires; they are light, small, and promote rapid foot fire. A couple times through using high knees and then quick stepping twice all around the same formation of tires firing each foot in to and out of each tire like a rope ladder drill. From there we go to the cones where we set up four cones in a 10-yard by 10-yard box. The kids start out back pedaling, then when they reach the first cone they shuffle, when they reach the second cone they sprint forward, when they reach the 3rd cone, they shuffle the opposite way thru the finish line. We do this drill twice, first clockwise and then counter-clockwise. From there we all move to the jump rope area, grab a rope and form a circle. We do 3 sets of 60 seconds jumping the ropes. NOTE (The tires we use at the agility station make great landmarks for the running backs in fall practices. Just set the tires up as our offensive line when repping plays, they are low to the ground so they don't trip up the backs and they are a great representation of the size of your average 10 year old linemen. They work really well for us while timing our plays.)

CORE

At the Core station, the kids spread out so they have space to move and we do the following exercises:

Supermans – In this drill, kids lay on their stomachs with their hands, feet, arms, legs and head raised up off the ground as high as possible in order to work their lower back muscles. 3 repetitions for 60 seconds.

Push-ups – Good form is the most important part of this push-up. Flat backs with hands shoulder width apart and legs straight. Kids should focus on keeping their abs really tight during these push-ups. 3 sets of 10.

Sit-ups – Bigger kids can do crunches just as long as they are working on their abs. 3 sets of 10.

Jump Squats – Basically the kids will squat down as low as possible and load their arms for a super high jump. Land and repeat. 3 sets of 10.

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EXPLOSION

At the explosion station the group divides in half. One half goes to the plyo-boxes. We do jumps on these boxes for 3 sets of 8. We do those sets both forward and side to side. The other group is in the harnesses. They pair up to run 30-yard sprints while their partner is on the other end of the line giving them resistance. We want to make them work to reach the finish, make them have to really dig to get there, but not so much so that momentum is ever broken. This is a fine line and takes some teaching. We do 4 sets of 30-yard sprints like this. Each set of sprints starts with the front kid in the harness as he runs/pulls for 30 yards, then they turn around and his partner runs/pulls the 30 yards going back. We do 4 sets down and back like this. After 7.5 minutes they switch to the plyo-boxes while the kids who were at the boxes move over and work in the harnesses.

*~ ~ ~ During the **ACES**, as groups finish each of the stations, they are waiting for the whistle to blow. During this time they can drink from the water we set out at each of the 3 stations. ~ ~ ~*

When we finish the **ACES**, we come together as one group again and take our place on the line, right back where we started. We repeat the opening exercises that we did as our Dynamic Warm Up (minus the frog hops) but this time we are running full speed and still stressing form. This also takes 5 or 10 minutes depending on how worn out the players are. We feel we can't ever work on form enough and we want our kids to concentrate on form even when they are tired. The entire workout adds up to about 65 minutes. It is designed to be a very high tempo, very physical work out, but it won't start that way. The first week this workout usually takes about 90 minutes. But around the end of week 2, the kids start to understand the routine and start to get in better shape. This is when we start to push the pace and work on dropping the time to somewhere around 65 or 70 minutes.

So that is our Speed Camp and I feel it is a huge part of our success in the last few years at a park where we have gone from a league doormat (zero titles in any age group for the last 10 years) to a league powerhouse (3 of the last 4 championships at the 11-12 year old age group and at least one title in each of the other age groups over the last 4 years).

We feel that Speed Camp gives us several things. **Speed** is the most obvious. Size can intimidate but plain and simple; speed kills. At higher levels, teams have both size and speed, but in youth football we don't have the same kind of control over the type of players we get. We can't make our kids grow any bigger, but we can certainly make them run and move faster. Not just straight-line sprinter speed but overall quickness and agility.

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Speed Camp also gives us:

Work Ethic – It takes a great work ethic to give up those summer nights and brave the heat and mosquitoes to make yourself a better player.

Mental Toughness – This comes from performing the workout routine even when you are tired and physically spent.

Physical Toughness - Our kids start the season already in great shape and ready for the physical nature of this sport. They are ready to give and receive a physical pounding. But mostly we give the pounding to our opponents who aren't physically hard like we are.

Heart - That's right, heart. It is one side effect of this camp that I did not expect but has made me such a huge believer in now, that it may be more important than the speed.

Kids, who don't have heart, don't survive this camp. They stop coming. Why is that important to you? It is important because kids who quit this camp don't show up for football sign-ups. In their mind they already quit. That might sound hard but this camp gives them the opportunity to try the sport of football without the commitment. Hey, it isn't for everyone, and if a kid quits from the pain of Speed Camp, what's he going to do when he gets his bell rung? Even though it was never the intent of the camp, in the end, it has served to dissuade the meek at heart from playing because it's just too hard.

While some may think that it's a sad day for youth sports when this is the case, I say to you ha! The reason I say this is because all the kids we have left on the team have big heart, and they are totally invested in our team, i.e., they are 'all in'. This to me is one of the most important factors to team success and I am so sure of its power that I will never deviate from this philosophy. Being 'all in' means that team is never going to quit on you. Through this camp, we have given them the bodies, the speed, and the heart to work through the tough times. It is not easy to give up on the field of play when so much has been invested. It's not so easy to say, hey, we'll get them next time.

I have seen this and if you're a youth coach you have seen it also. All you have to do is think back to the game when you got popped quick by a team and your team hung their heads. They were defeated at that moment, even if it was only 2 minutes into the first quarter. How many of those games end up being blowouts? We blow teams out every year because we score first and they say, man we're going to get beat again and they hang their heads. Rarely have I seen a team that has gone through the rigors and hard work of speed camp hang their heads when bad things happen on game day (only once in 4 years). And when you have a team that will fight, you have a chance in every game.

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IMPORTANCE

In the end, this camp we started running 4 years ago has become the cornerstone of our program. It has paid us in spades for the work we have put into developing and executing it. And I have watched my kids learn about pride, heart, discipline, determination, desire, and toughness, all while getting in great shape and getting faster. We are always one of the fastest teams in the league now. Our fastest player isn't as fast as their fastest player. Neither is #2 or #3, but as a team we are faster. By the time you compare players 4 through 11, we are smoking them.

We are also some of the hardest hitters around. And while heart and physical toughness play big parts in that, speed plays a big part as well. Faster players have higher velocity. *High Velocity = High Impact.*

If I could go back and point to one thing that turned our program around, it was not our offense, nor our defense nor our practice schedule. Nothing has helped our program as much as this camp. Again, I feel this camp is the single most important thing you can do for your team. I hope you adopt some if not all of the ideas here and go on to have a great season.

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