Developing Season and Practice Plans
We hope you have learned a lot from this book: what your responsibilities are as an interscholastic coach, how to communicate well and provide for safety, how to teach and shape skills, and how to coach on competition days. But competitions make up only a portion of your season—you and your student athletes will spend more time in practice than in competition. How well you conduct practices and prepare your athletes for competition will greatly affect not only your athletes’ enjoyment and success throughout the season, but also your own.

**Do Your Research**

During the sport season, coaches must organize certain practices differently based on the following factors:

- Time of year
- Equipment available
- Weather and field conditions, if coaching outdoors
- Injuries to athletes

When planning practices, you will divide them into preseason practices and regular season practices, depending on the time of year. You will vary both your preseason practices and your practices in season depending on where they fall in relation to any scrimmages or competitions. Later in the chapter, we look closely at practice plans and provide forms you can use during the year.

While you are developing your season plans before the start of the season, be sure to inventory practice equipment and look over the areas you will use for your practice sessions. Remember that equipment may vary from practice facility to facility, so you must be prepared for various locations. Make sure to include in your individual practice plans whatever equipment you will need for each practice.

You should be aware of excessive heat conditions that might force you to adjust the length of your practice. In this case, shorten each segment of your practice schedule, include more water breaks, and make sure that your athletes are not overheating. If you are coaching an outdoor sport you should also be aware of the weather conditions that could force you to even eliminate a practice session and be aware of lightning during severe weather. If lightning is nearby when the athletes are outdoors, quickly get them to shelter.

Because injuries are unpredictable, you cannot plan for them. But they will occur, and you may need to make immediate changes to your practice plan when certain athletes are unavailable because of injury or sickness. At these times, be flexible and understanding. Have a plan for adjusting your practices under these varying conditions that will allow you to accomplish the most and prevent avoidable injuries.
**Season Plans**

Before the first practice with your athletes, sit down as a staff and write down each practice and competition date on a calendar. Then go back and number your practices. Those practice numbers will become the foundation of your season plan. Now you can work through the season plan, moving from practice to practice to create a quick overview of what you hope to cover in each practice.

To create a season plan, simply list the practice number, the purpose of the practice, the main skills you will cover, and the drills you will use during the practice. While developing this plan, keep in mind the research that you gathered earlier. Also keep in mind the various skills that your athletes must learn and be sure to cover those skills in your season plan. Your season plan provides a snapshot of the entire season. A blank Season Plan form is included in the appendix on page 76.

Use your season plan to begin developing individual practices. You may need to adjust your season plan throughout the season, and that is okay. It is meant to serve as a guide that can be revised and adjusted if you and the staff believe the team needs extra work in certain areas or if injuries or equipment issues force you to change your plans.

**Developing Practice Plans**

Coaches rarely believe they have enough time to practice everything they want to cover. Therefore, you must set and agree on priorities concerning how the practices will be conducted and the actual amount of time to allocate for each part of the practice. Although your practice structure will vary slightly depending on where you are in your season, each practice plan should include the following sections:

- **Purpose**
- **Equipment**
- **Plan**

The purpose of a practice focuses on what you want to teach your athletes; it outlines the main theme for the practice and should be drawn from your season plan. Equipment sections note what you need to have on hand for each practice. Plan sections are the core of what you will do during practice. Plan sections consist of the following basic elements:
Warm-Up (5 to 10 minutes)
Each practice should begin with a warm-up and stretching period. Brisk running can also be used to raise the athlete’s core temperature.

Cool-Down (5 to 10 minutes)
Practice should conclude with a cool-down and stretch period. Following this you’ll wrap up the practice with a few summarizing comments and remind the athletes of the next practice or competition.

The remaining elements of the plan section vary both in structure and in content depending on where you are in the season. However, elements that may be used in multiple practices are as follows:

Introduction (5 minutes)
This period can be used to introduce new information relevant to the focus of the day. It should be short and to the point.

Individual Period (15 minutes)
During this period, teach individual techniques to the various individuals or groups. The size of your coaching staff will determine the number of groups. Keep the drills short, teach one technique in each drill, and allow each athlete the maximum number of repetitions.

Group Period (20 minutes)
Use this time to have the athletes play a game or two to let them use the skills they have just learned and to understand them in the context of the game. During the game and skill practices emphasize the importance of every athlete being involved. No athlete should just be standing around watching the rest of the team.

Practice Types
As was discussed earlier in this chapter, you will vary your practices based on where you are in your season. The main parts of the season are the preseason and the regular season.

Tryouts
The IESA has guidelines for when tryouts and practices may begin for each activity. Make sure you review the IESA season calendar for your sport prior to the start of your season. Use these first practices to introduce individual techniques, work on conditioning, and establish practice organization. These practice sessions should be devoted to giving every athlete a chance to try out for any position and to find the athletes that have the best natural skills required for specific positions on the team.

Some schools in the IESA keep all their kids who try out for their school teams and form A and B squads for the regular season play. These schools determine the students who will represent their school in the IESA regional
tournaments versus those participating on their squads in regular season prior to the start of regional play. Other schools determine their team sizes to meet IESA regional tournament requirements in the beginning of the season. One of the hardest experiences for any adolescent is getting cut from an athletic team. Know your school’s policy prior to starting your season and share this information at the preseason meeting conducted with parents and students so everyone involved knows what to expect.

The practices that follow these early practice sessions can be used to condition your team; to introduce the athletes to your practice schedule; and to prepare athletes for practices later in the season.

**Regular Season Practices**

You will conduct your regular season practices according to your practice plan once the regular season is underway. Regular season practices before competition day prepare the team for the contest by reviewing the pre competition routine for stretching, where they will go, and what they will do for a warm-up. Do not run the athletes excessively during a practice right before a competition. Keep their legs rested and their minds fresh.

A blank Practice Plan form is included in the appendix on page 77. You can use this form and adapt it for any type of practice your are conducting.

**Fun Learning Environment**

Regardless of where you are in your season, it is important that you create an environment that welcomes learning and promotes teamwork. Following are seven tips that will help you get the most out of your practices:

1. Stick to the practice times agreed upon with school administration.
2. Start and end each practice as a team.
3. Keep the practice routine as consistent as possible so that the athletes can feel comfortable.
4. Be organized in your approach by moving quickly from one drill to another and from one practice session to another.
5. Tell your athletes what the practice will include before the practice starts.
6. Allow the athletes to take water breaks whenever possible.
7. Focus on providing positive feedback.

You may also want to consider using games to make practices more fun. During your season, it may be fun to use the games toward the end of the week to add variety to your practices.