



Coaching Youth League Ultimate

By Carey Goldenberg

With a little preparation, coaching an Ultimate team can be a great challenge rather than an overwhelming and daunting task. Prepare yourself to be patient—it can take between three and five years to develop a successful program. Your personal growth as a coach may take less time but your team will need some extra time to learn your drills and philosophies. When coaching freshmen, start with the basics. By the time your players are seniors, you will have built a strong foundation and players can continue to fine tune their skills for each game and tournament.

Basics

Discs

Encourage new players to acquire their own discs to use at their leisure. Whether your players buy them on their own or borrow from a “team supply,” each kid needs to develop his own collection of prized wall hangers and playing stock. Who knows when and where they will want to practice throwing and catching? If they want to throw at 8pm in the park, they can take their disc out to work on their inside-out forehands on their schedule.

Discs can be purchased in bulk from Discraft, and they will sell you misprints for \$2 apiece. If you buy a large quantity at once, you can sell them at the school for a profit (\$10 each is a reasonable amount), which can cover your team’s own supply of discs, as well as help fund shirts or travel. Contact Discraft directly for quotes on bulk orders and misprints.

Throwing and Catching

Teaching the fundamental skills of throwing and catching the disc requires a bit of time. Each player

will need individual cues and direct feedback, whether this means telling them to, “Keep the disc parallel to the ground,” “Put more spin on the disc,” or “Change the angle of your release.” If you can recruit a particularly skilled, experienced thrower to help teach these fundamentals, it can help speed the learning process and solve a lot of the team’s issues. The better each player can throw, the greater the chance they will help the team when they step on the field.

At the beginning of a player’s throwing career, it helps to stress the outlet, or “reset.” This is a necessary tool for beginners—if players can grasp the concept of “not throwing the disc away,” or possession-oriented offense, their decision-making will help the team much more than a lower-percentage risk-taking philosophy. New players don’t want to be blamed for turnovers, so for a while they may be intimidated to throw tougher down field passes. Having newer players concentrate on a “dump-reset” strategy can keep them from irritating more experienced players. Encourage each player to throw 50 backhands and 50 forehands during every warm up. When catching throws above the head, players should try to get both hands on the disc with their thumbs pointing down. For throws below the waist, thumbs should face up. At waist height, catching with a pancake or clap catch works best.

Simple Drills

Three Person Throwing and Marking Weave

Have players get into groups of three and set up a simple weave. Thrower plays defense as soon as they release the disc. Player A throws to player B with player C covering the throw. Then player B throws to C with A playing defense. Finally, player C throws to A with B playing defense. If they have learned about the stall count, have the count be five (5). This drill will build up their faking skills, their pivoting, marking, and their ability to make good decisions quickly.

Straight on Throwing Drill

Split the team into squads of five or so, standing in 2 lines facing each other about 30 to 40 feet (when more skilled, 40-50 yards) apart. Once the drill starts, player A from the front of one line runs at the thrower in the front of the other line. This thrower must throw directly at the person running at them. Once the disc is caught, the player at the front of the other line makes a cut straight toward the player who just caught the disc. They must wait until the disc is caught though, or the drill doesn't work as well. These timed cuts will help out once they start playing the game and they realize that they aren't getting thrown to. They should learn to time their cuts to get open better.

Four Corner Drill

This drill takes time to learn but is great for cutting, anticipating cuts, setting up fakes that lead to good throws, and throwing a lead pass to space. This drill should be used in both directions (clockwise & counter-clockwise), so as to practice both forehands and backhands. Cones are set in a square pattern, about 25 yards apart. Players line up several yards behind each cone. Again, as in the "Straight-on Throwing" drill, the cutter waits for the thrower to actually catch the disc before they start their cuts and run to the next cone. As players improve over the course of the season, they should start setting up their cuts before the disc is caught. Imagine a square, with another square inside, with its corners at the midpoints. The player starts at the cone (first square) and runs toward the next cone, but catches the disc at the

midpoint. After catching the disc, they stop, pivot and throw to the next player.

Remember to only introduce one or two new skills per practice. Beginning players need to integrate basic concepts into play, which helps out the real reason they come out—to have fun!

Defensive Philosophies

I start with teaching defense. If a player can learn to be a great defender, the rest of the game will seem easy. No matter what a player has learned, played before, or generally prefers, everyone should be somewhat versed in several different styles of defense. In theory, all a team has to do to score is play catch and team keep-away down the field. It seems easy, but a strong defense can take easy passes away. But how? Is it best to force towards one side of the field? Do you try to make your opponent throw forehands all day? Do you try to use the direction and strength of the wind to your advantage? There are virtually limitless options, but your team has to choose those that work best for them in any given situation. Explain the concept and positions of Zone Defense—a good zone can help your team conserve energy and frustrate the other team into a few quick turnovers that give you the lead. Perhaps your philosophy targets the strongest players on the opposing team, neutralizing them with your best defenders. Sacrificing your players' energy on defense can really help a team's confidence.

Offensive Philosophies

Again, if you use your experience as a club player, the concepts that work for you and your club team may be too advanced for the less experienced athletes on the team. Let them experiment with different play styles until they find one they have the most success with and are most comfortable playing. Breaking down various offensive positions (handler, middle and longs) can be a familiar concept to former football and soccer type players. They can apply those cross-sport concepts to the mind set of Ultimate relatively easily. Whatever offensive strategies are employed—vertical stack, horizontal stack, dominator, chaos, etc.—your players have to want to buy into that thought process. Make sure you spend enough time introducing each new concept and style, so they your team gains a firm understanding of these techniques. Try not to force any particular style on the team. Let them choose

what works best for them. What works well for one team may be difficult to grasp for another.

As newer players are introduced you can help them integrate into the offense as their skills develop. Create the concept of “team first,” and then players will achieve individual accolades later.

Instill patience and confidence into every aspect of your team and you will help your individual players in a myriad of different ways. Alternate your critical coaching comments with praise and encouragement. Remember the formula: praise, comment, praise!