



# Heading the ball to score

by **John Madding**, Director of Coaching and Education,  
New Mexico Youth Soccer Association

This article is part of the US Youth Soccer youth coaching education series.

Heading the ball is a hot topic throughout the country. With headgear being mandated by some state associations, leagues and clubs, it is important to remember that correct technique is the key to safety. Once players have mastered basic heading technique, they will be less afraid of heading and also less likely to hurt themselves. Therefore it's important for every coach to teach players the correct way of heading.

## Heading

There are a number of ways to play headers, depending on game situation and position:

- header straight ahead while standing still
- header to the side while turning
- header straight ahead with two-legged takeoff
- header to the side while turning with two-legged takeoff
- header straight ahead with one-legged takeoff
- header to the side while turning with one-legged takeoff
- diving header

Heading techniques should be taught in the order listed above. Heading to the side while turning should not be taught until players have mastered heading straight ahead while standing still, and so forth. Jumping headers are extremely challenging in terms of timing your movement to meet the incoming ball. Therefore, these techniques should not be taught until the basic execution of the header has been mastered completely.

## Heading techniques

While there are some general heading techniques that apply in both attack and defense, heading the ball towards the goal involves specific techniques that only apply in attack. Important general techniques are:

- The correct surface to use in heading the ball is the hairline, not the forehead.
- Players should keep their eyes open as they make contact with the ball. If their eyes are closed, it increases the chances of the ball making contact somewhere other than the hairline.
- Players should keep their mouths closed at the time of contact. This makes an injury to the jaw or tongue less likely.
- Shoulders and back should be firm, with muscles tense to create a solid upper body. This will help absorb the impact of the ball.
- Players can create a "frame" with their arms. This allows them to create a safe zone around them, and also makes it easier for them to judge the flight of the ball.

Special techniques for attacking headers are:

- As players make contact with the ball they should attempt to head the ball down towards the goal (as opposed to up and away). Balls headed down and to the corners of the goal are much harder for the goalkeeper to save.
- To give the ball more momentum, players should execute the header with the body turned. This also makes it harder for the goalkeeper to judge where the header is being aimed.
- Players can also head the ball harder when heading it back in the same direction the cross came from.
- To head the ball down, players may need to jump in order to get over the ball. This skill takes time and effort to master. Judging a



**Players with proper heading technique and the right size can be a powerful force.**

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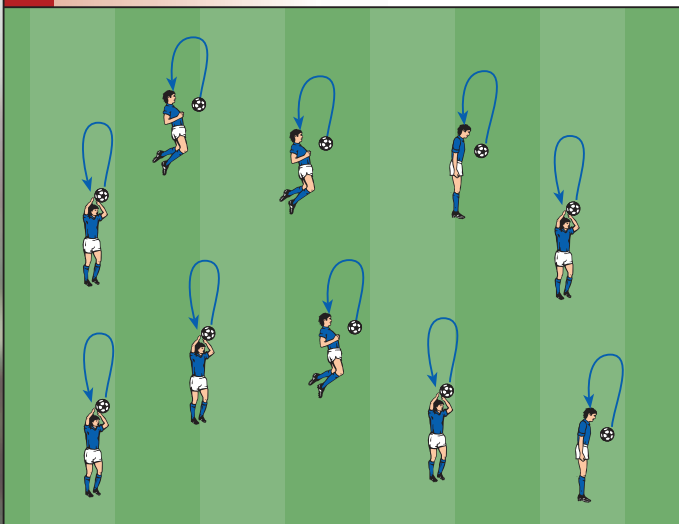
ball in flight is difficult for anyone, let alone a player who is 10 or 11 years old.

- A simple rule for timing the approach to the ball is to try to hit the ball just as it begins to come back down. Players should also try to hit the ball at the top of the jump.



## WARM-UP

### 1 Heading exercises



#### Setup

- Each player has a ball.

#### Sequence 1

- Each player tosses the ball up, heads it correctly and catches it.

#### Sequence 2

- Each player tosses the ball up, heads it twice and catches it.

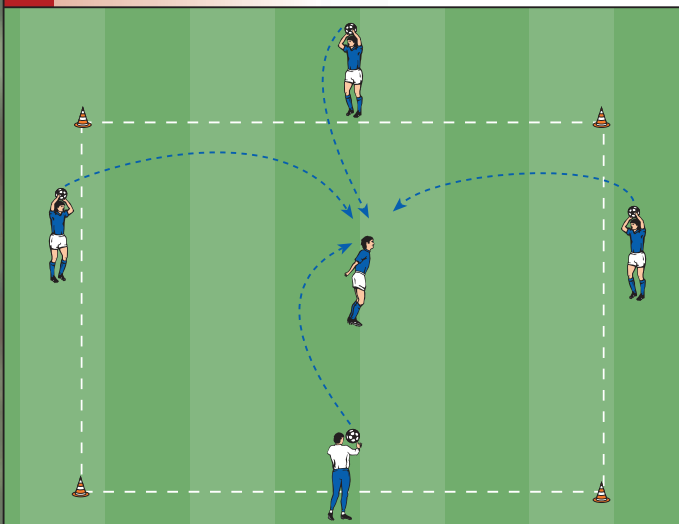
#### Sequence 3

- Competition: How many headers can a player execute in a row without catching the ball or letting it hit the ground?

#### Coaching points

- Make sure players space themselves out for safety.
- Use the hairline as the contact surface.
- Keep eyes open to ensure correct contact.
- Keep mouth shut for safety.

### 2 Header tag



#### Setup

- Mark out two 3 x 3-yard fields.
- On each sideline of each field stands a player with a ball.
- In the middle of each field stands a player without a ball.

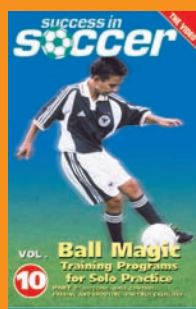
#### Sequence

- Outside players toss the balls to themselves and try to hit the player in the middle with headers.
- The player in the middle moves around inside the field to avoid the balls.
- Players switch roles once a minute.
- Which player can score the most hits?

#### Coaching points

- Focus on correct technique.
- Head the ball down to the body of the target player, not to his face.
- Target player has to stay oriented.

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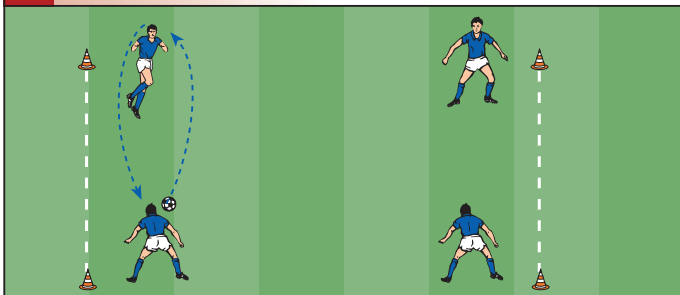
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## MAIN SESSION

### 1 2 v. 2 heading



#### Setup

- Mark out several 10 x 12-yard fields.
- Position two teams of two (A and B) in each field.

#### Sequence

- Each team defends one endline of its field.

- Team A starts with the ball: A1 tosses the ball to A2, who heads it back.
- Team A repeats this step while moving towards the opposite endline.
- When A2 feels they are close enough, they attempt to head the ball across the endline below the defenders' shoulders.
- B1 and B2 must stay on their own endline and act as goalkeepers, but they are not allowed to use their hands.
- Once the ball has hit the ground, Team B begins at its endline and tries to score against Team A.

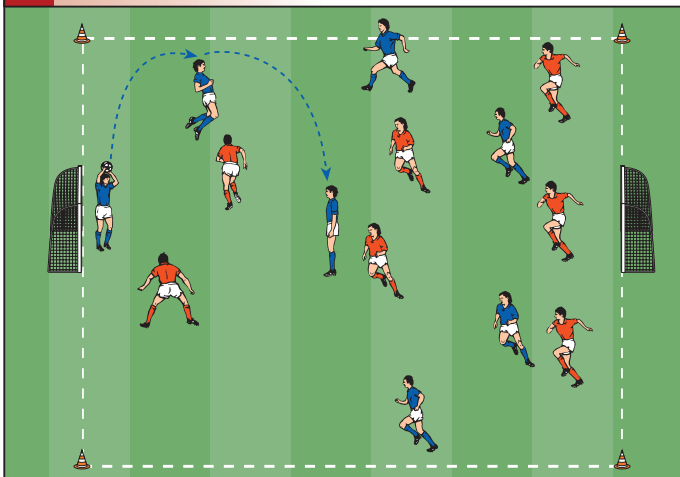
#### Variation

- Players move the ball forward by heading it back and forth.

#### Coaching points

- Continue to focus on correct technique.
- Encourage players to head the ball down for the best chances to score.

### 2 Team headball



#### Setup

- Teams play 8 v. 8 on a 60 x 45-yard field with a goal on each endline.

#### Sequence

- Attackers move the ball down the field by heading it back and forth and score by heading it into the goal.
- Defenders win the ball if it touches the ground.
- The defender closest to the goal acts as the goalkeeper.

#### Variation

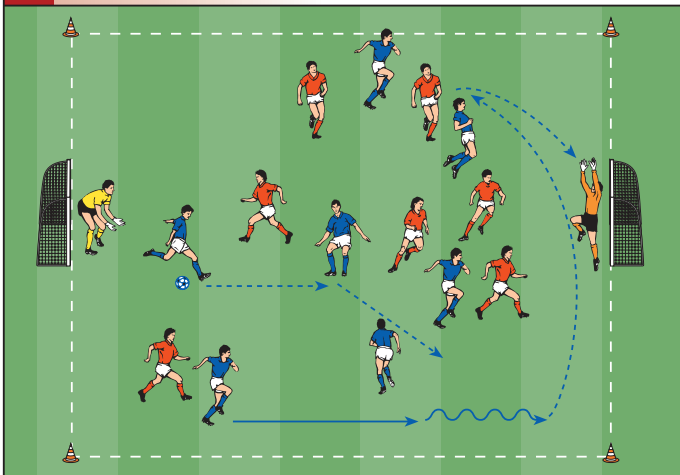
- You can allow for more success by requiring the defending team to walk.

#### Coaching points

- Continue to focus on the correct technique. Large goals help players understand the concept of heading the ball down toward the goal.

## CONCLUSION

### 1 Final game



#### Setup

- Field and teams are the same as in Exercise 2 above.
- One player from each team becomes a goalkeeper.
- Rotate goalkeepers throughout the game.

#### Sequence

- Teams play 8 v. 8.
- Any goal set up by a header scores three points.
- Every other type of goal scores one point.

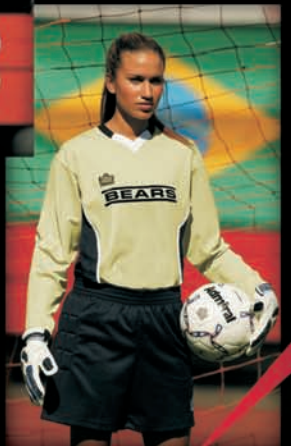
#### Coaching point

- Let the players play!





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