

JUGGLING

Learning Juggling Skills

Keys:

- *Initially practice juggling on pavement so that you can play the bounce and keep the ball moving. Learning to softly touch a bouncing ball is almost as important as a juggle touch and teaches the same movements.*
- *Use the shoelace or instep part of the foot for most foot touches. Use the soft, fleshy part of the thigh for thigh juggles. Stay away from the knee.*

Benefits:

Development of juggling skill in training provides four important benefits that money can't buy, these being:

- touch
- balance
- agility
- soccer specific fitness

Touch

Top level players feel the ball through the shoe, and know at every moment what part of the ball and what parts of the foot are in contact. The player learns to project, mentally, down to the surface touching the ball, foot, thigh, chest, or head, and learns to feel where the ball will go next based on the last touch. For example, it's easy for you to toss a basketball back and forth between your right and left hands, even with your eyes closed. Your mind is in your fingertips. Why shouldn't practice make it easy for a player to "toss" a soccer ball between feet?

You must encourage juggling in order to develop touch, because touch translates into better results in matches. With good touch, players will weight their passes more accurately, have an easier time beating opponents with attacking moves, and be more successful at holding the ball against pressure, all because of improved touch gained by juggling.

Balance

When you juggle, touch on the ball is half the battle, the other is in controlling your body. Being able to make rapid, quick, micro adjustments with all the large and small muscles is a requirement for successful juggling, and players with better balance are the ones who can move to their right but keep their balance to shoot the ball to the left, just inside the post. (There's no kidding about the value of balance. I have a player this year who trains 4-5 hours a day as a competitive figure skater, and she's finished in the top ten nationally the last two years. She has incredible balance and agility, and in this year's state cup final, she took on two defenders and beat each with a quick lateral move to the right, then finished with a goal to the left post. The keeper had no chance to go back the other way.)

Agility

Balance's natural partner, like balance in motion. The ability to change directions quickly. As juggling increases balance, it does improve agility somewhat, especially for those players who work in group juggling exercises where movement and control mix together. Like this one:

Groups of two, juggle four touches, loft a pass half height (chest high) to partner and move to new location 6 feet away and prepare to get ball back. Partner does likewise.

Soccer Specific Fitness

Sure your players can run a long way in the Cooper test, but do they have the leg development, balance, abdominal and lower back development to check back to the ball, kill a hard pass, turn and make an attacking move to goal, and repeat this 50 times a match ? After they do this 20 times, do they still have both the fitness and the touch to be successful ? Juggling is fairly aerobic, especially if you do it in a group with movement, and helps accomplish development of those little muscles that wear out quickly in matches if not conditioned, like hip flexors and lower back muscles. Kids with underdeveloped hip flexors have absolutely no speed at all late in a game.

Learning to juggle is not easy! There are not many "shortcuts". It can be very frustrating to new players and they just want to quit trying. Take it slow with lots of encouragement for everything. Many times they will begin to show significant gains but seem to lose all of those gains the following practice. Go slow. The time and effort it takes a player to progress from 2 touches to 4 touches may well be the same as from 20 to 40 juggles later on. Work in games (see below) to keep it interesting.

- Start with a decent but expendable ball that you can use on pavement and not mind the scuffs. You may find that if you under-inflate it just a tiny bit, it will allow for more control. Repeat all the skills with both feet.
- Hold the ball out in front of you with both hands and drop it onto the pavement for a bounce. After the bounce, tap the ball back up to your hands with the shoelace or instep part your foot. Catch the ball and repeat several times with each foot. We need to learn how to describe these movements so the teacher can lead some beginning jugglers through these skills. (I would call this a "bounce-foot-catch".)
- Now, drop the ball for a bounce, tap it softly up towards your hands but let it fall back to the pavement for another bounce. Then tap it up to your hands for a catch. (I would call this a "bounce-foot-bounce-foot-catch".) Repeat this several times, again with both feet.
- Next we will drop the ball directly to the foot for a tap back to the hands for a catch. (This is a "foot-catch")
- Now drop the ball to the foot for a tap but let it bounce, then use the foot to tap it up to the hands for a catch. (This is a "foot-bounce-foot-catch".)
- Keep adding on touches and bounces alternating a foot touch with a bounce and ending with a catch. It's important to end with a catch to maintain control.
- Finally drop the ball for a bounce and tap it up with the foot but before it bounces try to tap it up again for a catch. (This is a "bounce-foot-foot-catch".) This is the beginning of "real" juggling! This is a big step. If it seems too difficult for the player, do not hesitate to back up and work on the 1 touch exercises again with bounces inbetween.
- Continue to try different variations of bouncing and 2 foot touches. Don't try to go to 3 consecutive foot juggles too soon. Getting from 2 juggles to 3 is a very big step as well.

Instead try to link lots of 2 juggles together with bounces. Try a **bounce-foot-foot-bounce-foot-foot-catch**. Later on link together a several of these 2 touch juggles with a bounce between each one. In fact, see how long you can keep it going with 2 touches and then a bounce. Have a contest.

- It may not be the first day, but eventually you are ready to go for 3 juggles. Warm-up with single touches and work up to 2 touches linked together with bounces, just as I have described above. Then try a bounce followed by 3 foot juggles and a catch. (This is a **bounce-foot-foot-foot-catch**.) Encourage alternating feet during the 3 touch juggle. Once they get the hang of this, start using bounces to link together more 3 and 2 touch.
- You can drop the ball directly to the foot without a bounce, to start the juggle, once they begin to develop some control.
- Approach thigh touches and head touches the same way, but wait until they have some control with their feet so they can "dig" it up for a catch at the end. Also they will often find the thigh touches easier and tend to overwork them thus neglecting the feet. Start with a **thigh-bounce-foot-catch** combo and then keep adding on. Try a **thigh-thigh-bounce-foot-catch** and then a **thigh-thigh-foot-foot-catch** and now they are up to 4 legitimate juggles!
- Once you have made it this far you should encourage less bounces between touches, but I still like to see players use the bounce to keep the ball moving. I think it is better that they keep touching it back up even with bounces, as opposed to getting frustrated and stopping.
- Now it will take time and practice to learn how to keep the ball airborne. Once again, introduce games and contests to keep it interesting. ([click here for Juggling Games](#)) A great game for juggling skills and improvement of all first touches is "[soccer tennis](#)"! I highly recommend it.
- There will be breakthrough days when the player finally juggles 3 in a row or much later, gets to 10 for the first time. These are often followed by frustrating days where nothing seems to work. Then much later, when they finally get to about 20 juggles, the "lights" seem to come on. Juggling actually becomes a fun thing to do and they begin to attract attention and compliments from other players, coaches, and parents. Now if they keep at it, they can break 50 in "no time".

Juggling practice and games

Use the driveway when first learning to juggle and allow bounces between touches until they get proficient.

Juggle "Horse" - just like the old basketball version of "horse" where one player calls a shot or skill and the other player must do it or get a letter. So, player 1 calls "foot-knee-foot-catch" and then demonstrate it. Player 2 then must also do it or get a letter. I play that you must catch the ball at the end which prevents the wild last uncontrolled kicks. Start simple and even use bounces on the driveway, i.e. "foot-bounce-foot-knee-catch".

"Toe-knee-chest-nut or Tony Chestnut" - this is for younger kids or absolute beginners. Have them drop the ball to the toe (i.e. foot) and kick it back to the hands for a catch. Repeat for knees, chest and head. Begin to link them together, i.e. "toe-knee-catch". Then "turn Tony on his head" and go the other way. Do "head-catch" followed by "chest-catch" then knees and toes etc. Then link them all together and watch out.....all of a sudden they will whip off a "head-knee-foot-catch" and will have done 3 juggles and their first "waterfall" - yeah baby!

Waterfall Shots - The "waterfall" is successfully doing a head touch - down to a knee touch - and then a foot touch - and then directly back up to the head again without the ball touching the ground. The trick is to do many in a row.