Introduction

The instep kick is the most powerful kick in the sport of soccer. Beginning players**, however, often have difficulty learning this skill for four reasons: (1) it requires a coordination of rapidly moving body parts; (2) it requires accurate foot placement and body positioning; (3) players perceive previously learned "toe" kicking as initially more successful and are, therefore, reluctant to utilize the instep kick; and (4) players are anxious about the possibility of an injury from kicking the ground instead of the ball.

Because of the difficulties encountered by many beginning players in performing the instep kick, it is important that coaches understand these problems and have a teaching scheme to facilitate the learning of this important soccer skill. The remainder of this article addresses a progression that has been previously successful in teaching the instep kick to many young athletes.

What is the Instep?

The first question that must be answered before attempting to teach the instep kick to young players is- What is the instep kick? Most children know where the sole, inside, and outside of the foot are, but many do not know what is meant by the instep. In fact, initial failure in learning this kick may be due to this simple lack of understanding. Basically, the instep is the region on top of the foot where the shoelaces are tied. The parts of the foot (figure 1), including the instep, should be defined to beginners because various kicks and traps are named by the part of the foot used in their execution (e.g., inside of the foot kick, sole of the foot trap). This will help to alleviate future misunderstandings.
Manual Guidance

A key factor in the success of any kick in soccer is the placement of the supporting foot (the non-kicking foot plant) (figure 2). If the support foot is improperly positioned relative to the ball, the resultant kick will likely be errant. Manual guidance (video 1) of the kicking leg helps to reduce this problem because the ball is placed by the coach directly to the side of the support foot after the foot has been positioned. (Note the outline of the position of the support foot in figure 2.) The player maintains balance on the support foot by holding the shoulders of the coach. This supported position (figure 3) properly aligns the head and trunk of the player over the ball. In this position, the athlete must flex the hip and knee of the kicking leg just enough for the extended foot to clear the ground during leg swing. The coach holds the ball with one hand from behind so as not be struck on the fingers and guides the player's kicking leg back and forth, flexing and extending the athlete's knee. The extended instep (plantar flexed ankle joint) should contour to the ball (figure 2) and be guided in making firm contact. This guided action provides the athlete with (1) a "feel" for proper instep contact, (2) proper body positioning over the ball, (3) proper support foot positioning, and (4) a reduction in anxiety toward subsequent attempts at the instep kick.

(Video: Download: QuickTime Windows Media ; Support foot position)

Figure 2. Support foot position

Supported Kick: The next phase in this progression is the supported kick (video 2). This can be attempted after only a few minutes of practice with manual guidance. It differs from the manual guidance technique in that the player controls the kicking motion of the leg and foot contact. Support is still maintained by placing the hands on the shoulders of the coach. The ball is now held by the coach with two hands from behind and positioned, as before, directly to the side of the support foot. The player must be instructed to control the force of the kick. The intent of this phase is not to teach forceful kicking, but to instruct in leg control, proper foot contact (contour with the ball) (figure 2), and proper body alignment (figure 3).

(Video: Download: QuickTime Windows Media ; Alignment of head and trunk over the ball)

Figure 3. Alignment of head and trunk over the ball

Leap-Kick: Once the player demonstrates control of the kicking leg in the supported kicking phase, the athlete should be instructed to add a step onto the support foot prior to kicking (leap-kick, video 3). This step should become exaggerated into a short leap. Again, the force of the kick must be controlled by the athlete. The coach holds the ball with both hands, as in the previous phase. Feedback should be continually given on support foot positioning, leg swing, body positioning, and instep contact with the
Independent Kicking - Straight Approach

After the player masters the leap-kick with the instep, the coach can move to the side and observe several independent instep kicks. As control of the leap and kicking action progresses, the player should be encouraged to precede the leap by a few approach steps from directly behind the ball (straight-approach, video 4).

(Video: Download: QuickTime Windows Media ; )

Independent Kicking - Angled Approach

The final phase in this progression is to teach an angled approach to the ball (video 5). When kicking with the right foot, the approach should be from behind and to the left of the ball; the approach is made from behind and to the right of the ball when kicking with the left foot. Two basic differences exist between the straight and angled approach. First, the support foot is planted farther from the ball in the angled approach (figure 4), but it is still positioned directly to the side of it. Second, the hips and knee of the kicking leg do not need to be flexed at impact with the ball in order for the extended foot to clear the ground (figure 4). This is because the body leans away from the ball, providing a sufficient distance for the kicking leg to fully extend into impact.

(Video: Download: QuickTime Windows Media ; Angled approach)

Figure 4. Angled approach - note support foot position and fully extended kicking leg

Greater ball velocity can be generated in the angled approach instep kick because there is increased hip rotation (figure 5a) and the extended leg provides a longer lever (figure 5b). The straight and angled approach instep kicks should be practiced initially on stationary balls and then on rolling balls.

(Image: Variations on the angled approach)

Figure 5. Angled approach. a) greater hip rotation b) greater lever length

Diagnosing Performance Problems

After young athletes are able to simulate the movements of the instep kick, a variety of control problems will be evident. The following is a list of frequent performance results and their probable causes. Insight into these relationships will be helpful in diagnosing and correcting performance problems.
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- **Ball kicked into the ground**
  This is caused by a placement of the support foot too far forward with respect to the ball. Contact is made with the instep, but on the downward swing of the leg resulting in the ball being compressed between the ground and foot.

- **Clockwise or counterclockwise ball spin ("curving or bending" the ball)**
  This may or may not be a desirable result. It depends upon the intent of the kick. One cause of the lateral ball spin is off-center instep contact with the ball. A second cause of lateral ball spin is a glancing kick.

- **Slow ball velocity**
  Final ball velocity depends upon several factors. There are, however, three primary determinants in ball velocity:
    - If the hip of the kicking leg is not fully extended prior to foot plant, subsequent leg swing velocity will be reduced. This extension ("cocking") of the hip (1) allows greater distance for the leg to increase its velocity on the forward swing, (2) stretches the muscles which cross the hip to facilitate their contraction and recoil of the leg, and (3) permits greater rotation of the hip.
    - If the supporting leg flexes excessively during foot plant, the velocity of the kicking leg will be reduced. On the other hand, a firm supporting leg "blocks" the forward motion of its hip and increases the velocity of the swing leg.
    - Improper coordination and sequencing of movements in the kick will reduce possible ball velocity. The order of events in the kicking leg, following hip extension, are: (1) hip rotation, (2) forward swing of the thigh, and (3) forward swing of the shank. Each of these movements should increase the velocity of the subsequent segment resulting in maximum velocity at the foot just prior to impact with the ball. The action of the leg should be like a whip "snapped" at the ball.

**Practice Strategy for Teaching the Instep Kick**

Instruction on the parts of the foot can be given to the entire team within a few minutes; however, the manual guidance, supported kick, and leap-kick phases of this progression require the coach to work with one individual at a time. Therefore, instruction on these phases should be given before or after practices and/or during practice breaks. Having youth athletes wait their turn for individual instruction during practice is not a good use of practice time. Some players will progress quickly through these phases whereas others may require several exposures. Instruction and practice should be directed at both feet. Once they are able to perform the leap-kick, a variety of independent instep kicking drills should be incorporated into practice sessions in order to help the athletes perfect the performance of this important skill.

** Note that the player seen in the figures and video clips was 7 years of age and introduced to the instep kick via the progression described in this paper.

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