

Youth Lacrosse Offense – Some Basics  
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Successful coaching of team offense depends on how one defines success. A team may be fortunate to have a few players who are bigger and faster than their opponents, thus they are able to dominate play and score goals. It is very tempting as a youth coach to try to generate goals by simply trying to get the ball to the big fast kid. While this may work in a short term way, ultimately it fails because the team doesn't feel as invested in their overall success as they would if more of them played a part. You are a successful coach if you are invested in maximizing the experience for your players. Make it fun, make it appropriately challenging, be patient, communicate clearly with parents, model good sportsmanship, and you'll be a good coach no matter how many games you win or lose.

Some things that you should understand as a coach:

Developing successful settled (half field) offense is much more difficult than implementing a sound defensive system. (Hint to coaches – make sure you focus a lot on defense in the early part of the season!)

The younger and less skilled your players are, the more you should plan your offense around opportunities that exist in transition from D to O and that are generated from riding and good ground ball work. If most of your players are inexperienced, they will have trouble executing an offensive that expects all players to be able to handle the ball. Good high school and college teams sometimes struggle to implement effective offensive systems.

It is quite difficult for a young and unskilled group to generate good shots against an organized defense with a decent goalie.

So, what to do?

At its simplest: Make sure you focus on the proper fundamentals of catching, throwing and cradling. These are the basic skills that enable players to score goals. Players of all ages absolutely must work on the fundamentals, and they must work on those skills at times when they are not at practice. Parents need to play catch in the back yard with their kids. At practice number 1, meet with the parents afterward and tell them they need to play catch with their boys in the back yard or help them find a wall or throwback so they can practice. (Hint – parents can use a baseball glove).

With the younger age groups – U-9, U-11 – focus on an organized clear – passing the ball up the field (think fast break in basketball). Your team can generate good scoring chances by moving the ball into the offensive end and scoring before the defense can get organized. They can also do this by having a good ride. When you get into a half field 6 v 6 situation (settled offense), try to get the boys to spread out, utilizing a “1-3-2” (one behind) type of a formation. Try to get them to pass to each other and to maintain spacing – if they all run to the ball and call for it, offense doesn't work. You need to train your team to get into an offensive formation, and to move the ball (this is where fundamentals comes in). Try to set up a “midfield sweep” or work the ball to “X” and see if an attackman can beat a defenseman around the cage.

One of the rewards of working with the youngest kids is watching how fast they progress (think about training a puppy). You have to be patient though and have reasonable expectations. You have to praise them for trying to do the right thing even if they don't execute it right.

They need to practice shooting – overhand, fundamentally sound and on cage – preferably low. (Away from goalie’s stick)

They need to practice passing to an open man who shoots. These are easy drills to set up.

Repetition reinforces the young players ability to perform these skills

Always make practice fun – kids love relay races and “contests” as long as they don’t get out of hand or overly physical. You can have a shooting contest or a relay race contest.

So, with the youngest players, focus on clearing the ball and pushing to the goal in transition. In settled situations, try to get them to be in a set using spacing, passing the ball and looking for an open man in front of the goal or a dodge.

For the U-13 and U-15 kids, you ought to be able to expect more out of them though this again is determined by skill level. Boys this age should be able to learn to move without the ball, and to pass the ball around the perimeter and to an open man near the goal. You should be able to implement an organized system for clearing the ball from the defensive end to the offensive end, for riding and for settled offense and defense.

Just because the players are older though, doesn’t mean an offense needs to be complex. Indeed, the best offenses are usually quite simple. Some key concepts on offense are:

- Creating space for a dodging teammate (getting out of his way, and taking your defender – the defensive help – out of the way.)
- Keeping proper spacing i.e. someone always behind the cage – usually an attackman, players on the wings, and a player or 2 up top to protect against a fast break and to initiate dodges.
- Shooting accurately and selecting “good” shots.
- Utilizing several types of dodges to get past defenders and create pressure on the D.
- Maintaining offensive possession until a good shot comes.

A simple “Triangle” offense is a good way to start. In this offense, run out of a 1-3-2 set (one behind, 3 across the top of the crease, and 2 up top), the 3 midfielders work together in a triangular rotation. At the same time, the 3 attackmen also are working together. This is a good example of a simple offense that if executed properly works well at any level – youth, high school and college. It draws on all the basic concepts.

Once again, the fundamentals are critical. Players who have been developing bad habits – i.e. throwing sidearm - will no doubt throw inaccurate passes which will make running an offense difficult.

As a coach, it is really important to be patient, maintain a sense of humor, be firm but not overly harsh. It is no different from being a good parent. Boys want and need structure and boundaries. They want to be led. They need to learn how to be good team mates, how to support each other, not pick on each other. Every practice should emphasize having fun and making progress as individuals and as a team for goals. At the end of the season, hopefully your players will say they had fun, they learned a lot about lacrosse, they became better competitors and good sportsmen and respect and like their “coach.”