

Developing Mental and Physical
Toughness.

Nebraska Coaches Association Clinic
2017

Jim Gardner

- Developing mental and physical toughness is a process, a way of thinking and playing, that does not happen in a short period of time. It is a process that takes time, consistency, tradition and planning to develop, and becomes ingrained in the way that your players think and play. Part of my coaching background is as a wrestler and wrestling coach for 22 years. With that background as a young coach, one thing I thought I could always bring to the game was physical toughness. Wrestling is all about body control and adjusting to how your opponent moves, how they react and how you react to them. It is that way on the soccer field as well, and to be able to play physical you must be able to lower your center of gravity and know how to react when you are in contact with another player. It is also a thought process as well... a way of being, a wrestling match is a constant mental battle. As a wrestler you are always dishing it out or taking it, and I want that mentality to transfer to the players I coach in soccer. As a coach of girls and women on the pitch, it is possible to make large gains in this area simply because they are not normally in a physical way of thinking or playing as they grow up. Boys and men are a bit different as culturally, they tend to grow up with a more physical contact, but everything is still relevant to them as well. In no way do I want to infer that it is OK to play dirty or break the rules to try to win. Far from it, playing from behind is looked down on, and it is a source of pride to win a battle in a clean physical way.

One of the first ways that we started to develop physical toughness was working on developing the process, that if you are going to play physical then you had better be ready for your opponent to play that way too. No matter how tough you are there is always someone who will meet or exceed what you can do. If you know this from the start, and play with the idea that you are going to be the one to initiate the physical play, and know how to deal with your opponents physical reaction to your play, you will come out on top more times than not. We call it T-Bird Tough and the first thing we talk about at the beginning of each year and as stated above...if you are going to dish it out you had better be able to take it. Every year I put a highlight video together and one of the sections is on tough physical play where sometimes we get knocked done and sometimes we put others on the ground, but one way or the other we always get up. Seeing themselves and their teammates on video, builds a team way of thinking and a sense of pride in how they play.

We do a practice early in the season every year, which is specifically designed to bring out the concept of physical play. I believe it is unique to our team and one of the reasons we are able to build a physical style of play year to year.

Drill 1. Shielding;

Each player has a partner. Partners change after each session which lasts thirty seconds. Play against 10-15 different partners. At the end of each session the losing player pays a penalty. Five to ten push-ups, burpees, sit ups, etc.

Object is to maintain control of the ball. Person who has ball at end of thirty seconds is the winner.

One person starts with the ball and the other player stands behind them ready to take the ball away.

Player with the ball may not dribble, but has to maintain touch with the ball, by having one foot on ball at all time. If ball gets kicked away both players chase to get control.

Player without the ball try's to take the ball away so they have it at the end of the thirty seconds. Players may use their hands, hips, shoulder, etc. to try and take the ball away from their partner.

Player with the ball focuses on keeping their body in front of the defender, lowering their center of gravity, and using their hands and arms to keep from losing the ball.

Player without the ball try's to move their partner off the ball by lowering their center of gravity, trying to get their hip in front of their partner hips, going from one side to the other, pulling a shoulder or pulling a hip to get in front and steal the ball.

Drill 2. Anything goes shielding;

All the same rules apply, but now defender can do anything they want to win the ball, other than picking up their opponent and throwing them down.



Drill 1 and 2. Shielding;

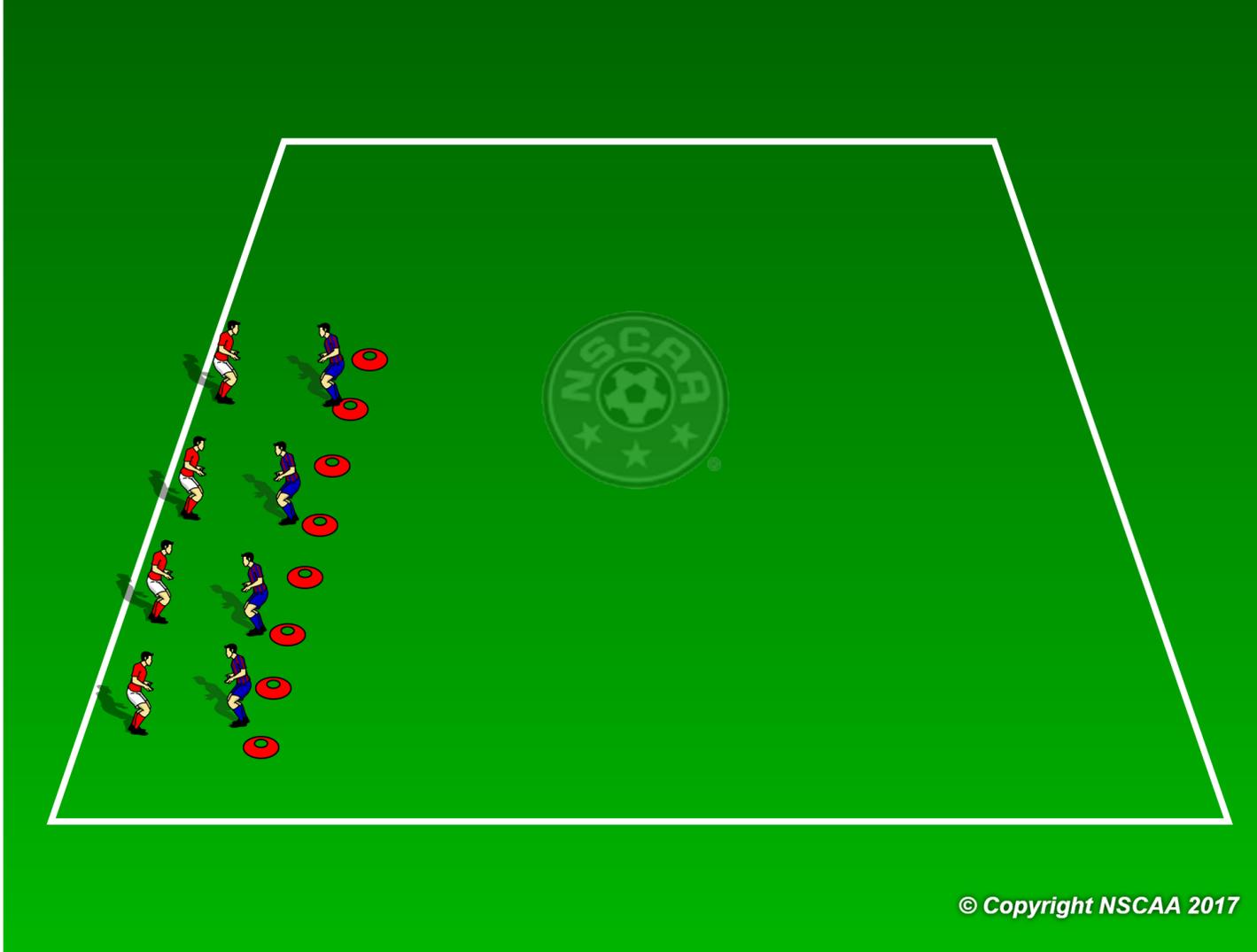
- Each player has a partner. Partners change after each session which lasts thirty seconds. Play against 10-15 different partners. At the end of each session the losing player pays a penalty. Five to ten push-ups, burpees, sit ups, etc.
- Object is to maintain control of the ball. Person who has ball at end of thirty seconds is the winner.
- One person starts with the ball and the other player stands behind them ready to take the ball away.
- Player with the ball may not dribble, but has to maintain touch with the ball, by having one foot on ball at all time. If ball gets kicked away both players chase to get control.
- Player without the ball try's to take the ball away so they have it at the end of the thirty seconds. Players may use their hands, hips, shoulder, etc. to try and take the ball away from their partner.
- Player with the ball focuses on keeping their body in front of the defender, lowering their center of gravity, and using their hands and arms to keep from losing the ball.
- Player without the ball try's to move their partner off the ball by lowering their center of gravity, trying to get their hip in front of their partner hips, going from one side to the other, pulling a shoulder or pulling a hip to get in front and steal the ball.

Drill 2. Anything goes shielding;

- All the same rules apply, but now defender can do anything they want to win the ball, other than picking up their opponent and throwing them down.

Drill 3. King of the hill;

- Use one of the sidelines or end lines and put cones four yards away from the end line or side line for a length of 20- 30 yds.
- Each player has a partner and the object is to on signal from the coach to push-pull the other person over the side line or the cone line, using body awareness and body position.
- Must start with hands on the ground.
- After each round have them switch partners.

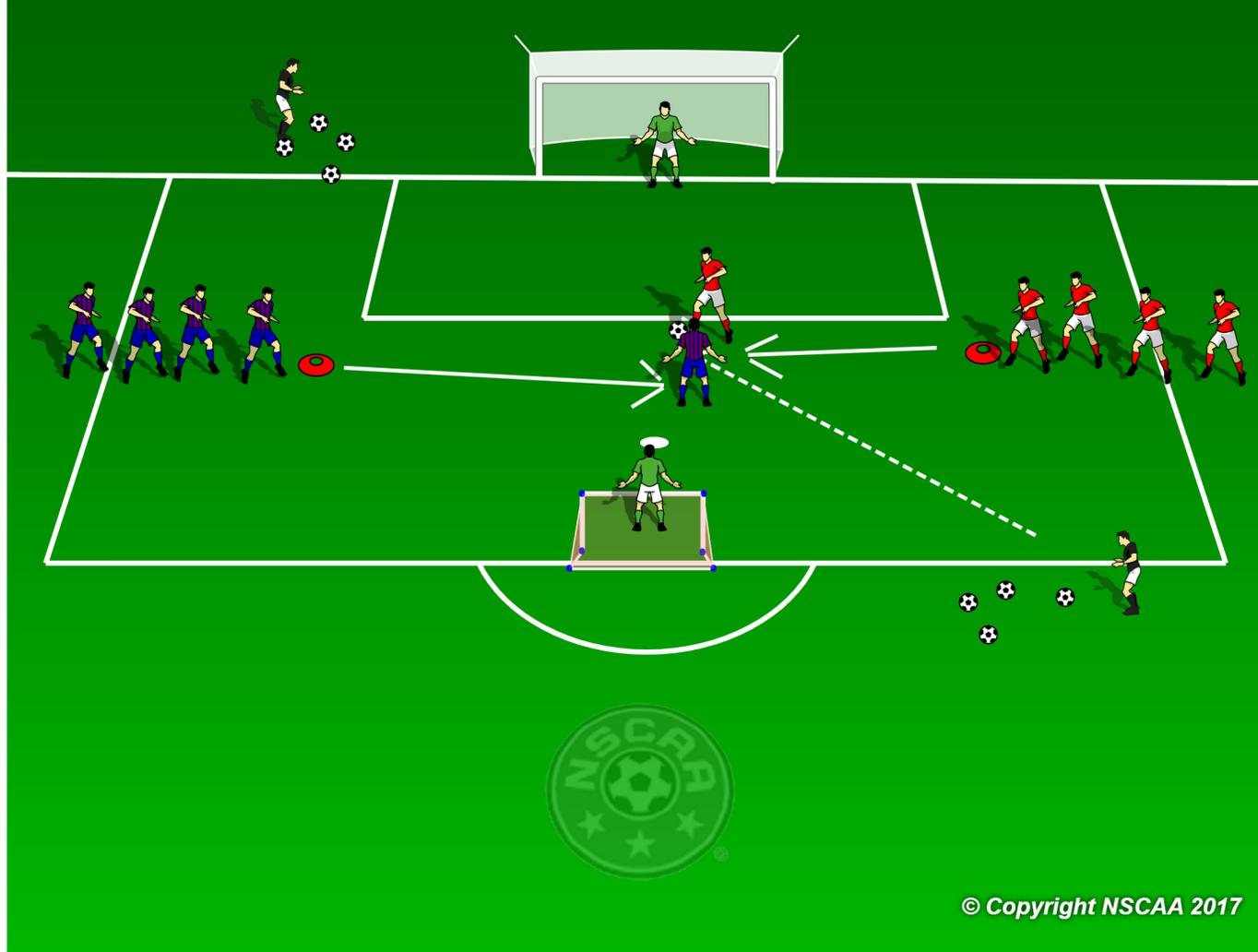


Drill 3. King of the hill;

- Use one of the sidelines or end lines and put cones four yards away from the end line or side line for a length of 20- 30 yds.
- Each player has a partner and the object is to on signal from the coach to push-pull the other person over the side line or the cone line, using body awareness and body position.
- Must start with hands on the ground.
- After each round have them switch partners.

Drill 4. 1v1 with full goals, keepers 18yds apart;

- Two teams half way between the goals about five yards outside the goal posts.
- Coach feeds ball diagonally between two lines.
- As soon as ball is touched both players try to win the ball.
- Player that win's the ball goes directly to goal trying to score.
- Player that does not win the ball takes defensive posture and immediately puts hands on and shuts down scoring opportunities.
- If defensive player wins' ball roles are reversed
- If keeper catches ball then they quickly distribute.
- Once goal is scored, ball is out of bounds or shot over or past net, new ball is sent in.

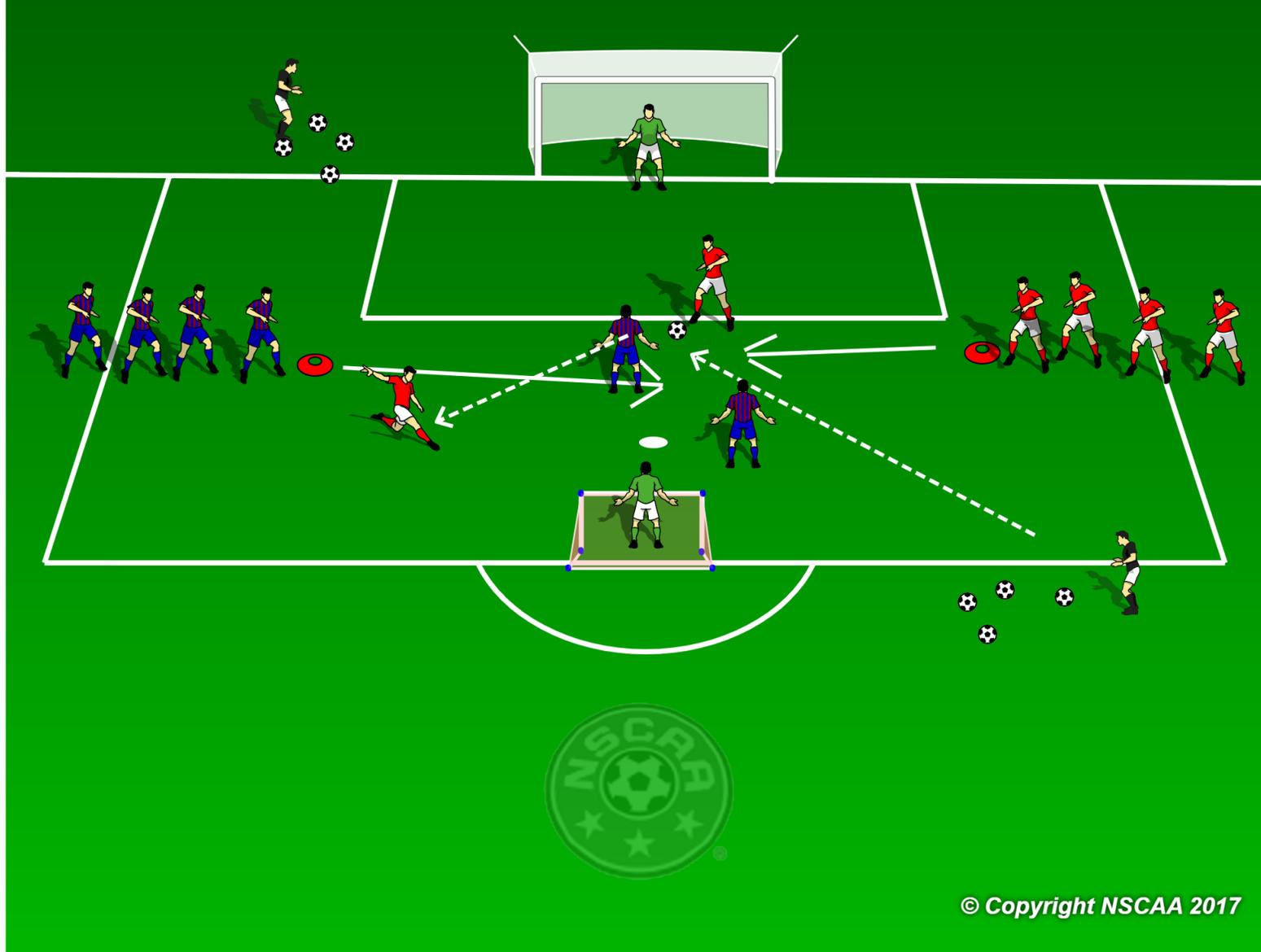


Drill 4. 1v1 with full goals, keepers 18yds apart;

- Two teams half way between the goals about five yards outside the goal posts.
- Coach feeds ball diagonally between two lines.
- As soon as ball is touched both players try to win the ball.
- Player that win's the ball goes directly to goal trying to score.
- Player that does not win the ball takes defensive posture and immediately puts hands on and shuts down scoring opportunities.
- If defensive player wins' ball roles are reversed
- If keeper catches ball then they quickly distribute.
- Once goal is scored, ball is out of bounds or shot over or past net, new ball is sent in.

Drill 5; 2V2 with full goals, Keepers 18yds apart

- Same drill as above.
- Focus on pressure cover and denying goal.



Drill 5. 2V2 with full goals, Keepers 18yds apart;

- Same drill as above.
- Focus on pressure cover and denying goal.

Being mentally tough is just as important as being able to play physical. Being able to overcome adversity, handle a tough loss, play from behind, playing with the lead, dealing with injuries and other key mental factors are built into our yearly plan as well. The following are some of the ways we build that toughness over the course of the year.

Each week our players get a written evaluation. They are given a score of 1-5 on Physical, Mental, Tactical and Technical areas of the game. Which include many of the attributes of physical and mental play. Attached.

We read and study John Wooden's A life time of observations and reflections on an off the court. His reflections on character, adversity, recognizing a champion, the worthy opponent, failure, persistence, consistency and many others work hand in hand with our philosophy.

We have a Team performance evaluation handout and poster that we discuss each week. This evaluation more than any other sets the tone of play each week.

Another area that is stressed is being able to head a ball with passion and power. Being able to head a ball under pressure in a crowd is one of the more difficult things to do in soccer and certainly takes a tough Physical and mental attitude to be able to accomplish. Players that can head a ball effectively on frame or away from goal are celebrated and often times find themselves in the highlight video. Needless to say we spend a considerable amount of time practicing and developing this skill from the moment they enter our program.

We have a tradition once a year of going into the wrestling room and having a day off the pitch, working on skills and games that reflect how we want to play. We always start with diving headers, volleys, slide tackling, and with the men adding bicycle kicks. Since we video everything and some of it goes in the highlight video, they work hard to accomplish the more difficult tasks...having a softer landing helps too. Fun to see when these drills are actually transferred to the pitch.

We play other games that to me work on both mental and physical toughness.

- Sharks and minnows; This is the same game you would play in the pool or in the gym, but with a twist...we play on our knees. This means that they have to work on tackling and how to avoid being tackled, working as individuals and as a team.
- King of the mat; This is an old wrestling game where the squad is divided into two teams and they must each defend their own territory. There is a dividing line down the middle of the wrestling room and there are two jails, one on each side. If you go into enemy territory or are pulled into enemy territory and a knee or hip touches the mat you must go to jail. You can get out of jail if someone can run into the jail area and tag you, to get out. We usually play five minute games and the one with the most in jail at the end of the game is declared the winner. Again, they must push and pull and dodge and tackle and run through others, which helps ingrain that physical contact is ok and how to adjust to it.
- War Ball; This is a dodge ball game using soft 5-6 foam balls where everybody versus everybody else. Dodge ball rules apply and when you have been hit three times you are out. It is fun to see who can through and who can not, and who plays more aggressive or timid.

- Tank; This is my favorite all time game, and although it does not involve physical contact it does involve lots of throwing of balls and plenty of laughter. Each person has a partner, one is the tank and one is the driver. The tank is blindfolded and the driver can only talk to them and not touch them or guide them in anyway but with their voice. The object is for the tank driver to guide their tank and pick up a ball so the tank can fire it at another tank and driver. We use about 20 soft foam balls. The driver and tank switch places when the tank has been hit twice and they are out with both tanks have been hit twice. This game is as much fun to play as it is to watch.
- Sumo wrestling; This is the highlight of the day and we have our annual sumo wrestling tournament. Since there are many circles in the room each person gets a partner and on the signal they try to push or throw the other person out of the circle. Sumo wrestling rules apply. You must start with both hands on the ground. If a Knee, hand or any other body part touches the mat in the circle you are out. If a hand foot or body part touches outside the circle you are out. This is a double elimination tournament and we go winners against winners until there is only one left standing. You will learn a lot about mental toughness in this game.

The drills, games, and activities are by no means inclusive, but are some of the driving forces behind our style of play. We want our players to be able to love the game, have fun and come out on top. Having mental toughness and to be able to play physical, is just a part of our total team philosophy.