



Cross, header, goal!

The offensive header: Characteristics, techniques and exercises by Peter Hyballa, German “pro” license holder

A superb combination on the right wing; the outside forward skillfully penetrates and plays a perfect cross to the center forward, who goes up for the ball and. . . . And the crowd goes silent. Although the forward got free of his opponent, he headed the ball past the goal. Missed opportunities like these are often due to the technical difficulty of executing the offensive header. In this article, we present criteria for evaluating players’ headers, along with technique exercises that can later be incorporated into practice games.

Attacking style

High balls in the penalty box can be a good way to get past compact defenses, whereas it’s often difficult to get close enough to the goal by dribbling alone. Therefore, many coaches develop an attacking style that involves playing balls from the wings and crosses from the inside positions into the center of the opposition. The trouble with this approach is that, although crossing technique and wing tactics feature prominently in practice, the scoring play itself—the header—tends to be neglected. Even so, many coaches are still confused when forwards fail to head supposedly “easy” balls into the goal.

Situations

Lower-level teams, in particular, tend to play high balls toward or near the goal, in the hope that attackers will get to them and score. Good technique is especially important on stationary balls, since they don’t give the attacker a head start over the defender. Therefore, when you practice set plays, you should focus not only on different variations

Header to the left: Take off with the left leg and turn the upper body in the direction of the header.

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on free kicks, corner kicks and throw-ins, but also on accurately executing offensive headers under opposition pressure.

It’s easier to correct technical errors in heading situations without opposition pressure. Your job is to explain heading technique in such a way that the player can do better on the next header. For youth players, in particular, it’s important to provide clear and comprehensive explanations and demonstrations of technique. Technical explanations are also good for dispelling young players’ fears of heading, which helps them execute headers with proper technique.

Techniques

Below, we present the various techniques and types of headers. You should be familiar with every type of finishing header, because every heading situation has its own technique.

● The offensive header from a standing position usually occurs in game situations where

Types of headers

Standing/straight

- Draw the upper body back.
- Swing quickly forward.
- Hit the ball with the forehead.
- Keep knees slightly bent, feet parallel or one in front of the other.

Standing/turning

- Turn the upper body toward the ball.
- Swing powerfully forward.
- Watch the ball before and after the header.

Straight/two-legged jump

- Observe the ball’s flight path.



an outside forward dribbles to the sideline and then lobs a low ball in front of the goal and away from it. This allows the center forward to head the ball at the goal from a standing position. The upper body draws back (wind-up), building up momentum and then quickly swinging forward to hit the ball with the forehead. The knees are slightly bent; feet are placed parallel or one in front of the other.

- The offensive header while turning (standing or running start) can be observed in situations where the crosser stands directly across from the heading player, or when the ball is played into the center from an inside position. The upper body draws back to build up momentum and turns in the desired direction (toward the ball). The turning motion starts from the balls of the feet; placing one foot in front of the other makes this easier.

- The header with two-legged takeoff is often used on corner and free kicks, because of the way it allows the heading player to get free of man-markers. It features powerfully swinging arms, a strong wind-up, and contact with the ball at the top of the jump.

- On the offensive header with one-legged takeoff, the ball is usually in the air for a long time, and the player heads it after a short running start. On this type of header, it's important not only to execute the technique correctly, but also to observe the ball's flight path accurately, in order to meet the ball and hit it with the forehead.

- Low crosses usually result in diving headers. This situation is common when an outside player crosses into the middle with the "weak" foot. The diving header usually involves a turn and opposition pressure. The dive begins with a powerful one-legged takeoff, with the upper body leaning forward.

- Swing the arms powerfully forward.
- Draw the upper body back.
- Hit the ball at the top of the jump.
- Flex the neck and torso muscles before contact.

Turning/two-legged jump

- Take off powerfully toward the ball.
- Twist from the hips, turning the upper body in the direction of the header.
- Draw the upper body back.
- Hit the ball at the top of the jump.

Straight/one-legged jump

- Jump up, not forward
- As a general rule: You have to time your jump correctly to get to the ball!
- Move your entire body toward the ball.

While in the air, the head should be oriented so that the player can see the ball and hit it with the forehead. Both arms reach forward, to direct the header more accurately and to break the player's fall.

- The turning header with two-legged takeoff is common when a forward gets free of an opponent. To time the jump, the attacker must watch the ball continuously while moving to meet it. The upper body should not start turning until after the powerful two-legged takeoff. The upper body also draws back, then swings forward with the help of the arms.

- The turning header with one-legged jump can be seen in match situations where the heading player moves toward the near post to meet the ball. The player should watch the ball continuously, take off powerfully and then start turning the upper body.

Tactical considerations

Many coaches complain that bad timing is the cause of unsuccessful headers. They mean that the player is jumping too soon or too late and failing to hit the ball at the top of the jump. They may also complain that the forward misjudged the ball's trajectory and started moving toward it too late as a result. However, a successful header requires not just timing (when do I go up for the header?) and optimal technique (how do I execute the header?) but also preparation. In terms of individual tactics, the attacker should always keep an eye on the crosser with the ball and create the necessary "space and time" before the ball is played.

In other words, timing is important not only for the header itself, but also for getting open and moving toward the ball. A player with

- Don't be afraid of the ball or of colliding with an opponent.

Turning/one-legged jump

- Keep your eyes on the ball.
- Take off with the left leg for headers to the left.
- Take off with the right leg for headers to the right.

Diving

- Lean forward from the waist.
- Keep your eyes on the ball.
- Reach both arms forward to break your fall.

Technique: Headers with a running start

- Pay close attention to the ball's flight path.
- Start running toward the ball.
- Without stopping, take off from the balls of your feet.
- Take off powerfully, swinging your arms.
- Keep your eyes on the ball!
- Draw back your upper body while in the air.
- Glance at the goal just before executing the header.
- Flex all your muscles (especially the neck muscles).
- Hit the ball with your forehead at the top of the jump.
- "Follow through" with your eyes.
- Land with knees bent to absorb your body's momentum.





space and time for the header will be better able to aim it precisely and score. Therefore, tactics should include not only the player executing the header, but also all the other players nearby. Simply blocking an opponent or crossing paths with a teammate can be enough to throw the opposition's defense into confusion. Attacking players should coordinate their running paths so that the player with the best heading skills has a chance to shine. These concepts lead to the following "position-specific" training objectives:

● For defenders: After moving the ball quickly forward, one defender should join the at-

tack, take a quick running start and try to head the ball into the goal, taking full advantage of his movement speed.

● For midfielders: After building the attack—using the full width of the field—the midfielders should support the forwards, moving up together from the back and generally staying behind the attacking players. This allows them to create space for the attackers or set up their own long-distance header.

● For forwards: These players create space for teammates moving up from behind, but more importantly, they should move to meet the ball and head it powerfully into the goal. This requires them to get free of their oppo-

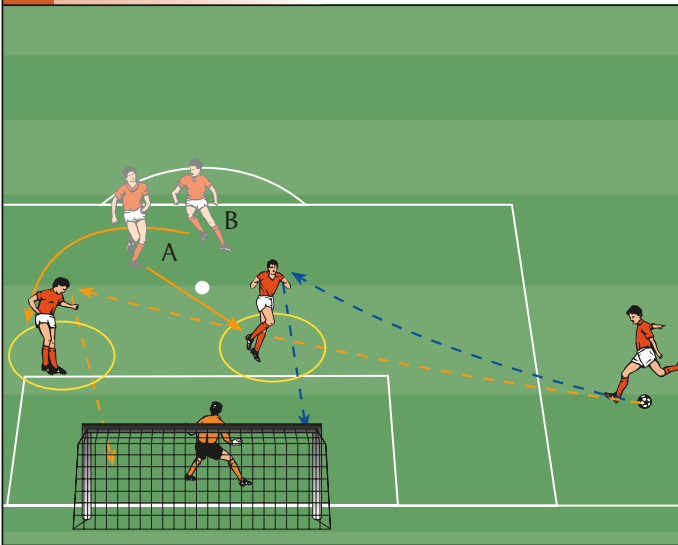
nents, gaining the space and time they need to drive the ball home.

Sample exercises

This section contains technique exercises for offensive headers with and without opponents, so that players can develop and refine their own individual movement styles. The practice games that follow give them an immediate opportunity to try out these techniques by applying them to "real" game situations.

EXERCISES WITHOUT OPPONENTS

1 Two-zone game 1



Setup and sequence

- Mark out two zones in front of the goal
- A wing player tries to cross the ball into either zone for a header.
- Players A and B try to score with a header (possibly crossing paths).

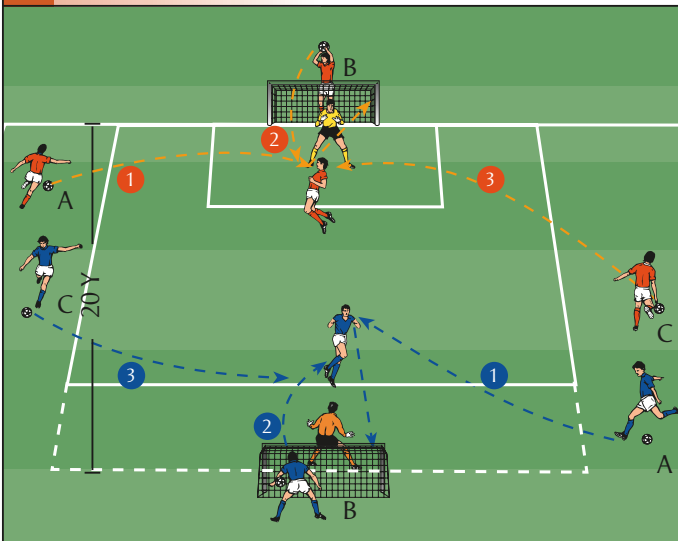
Variation

- Instead of having two zones side by side, mark out one behind the other (longer distance).

Notes

- Near post: Show for a turning header with one-legged takeoff.
- Far post: Show for the ball with a running start (one- or two-legged takeoff).

2 Multiple directions



Setup and sequence

- Set up two goals with goalkeepers 20 yards apart.
- Position one player in front of each goal.
- Each crosser (A, B and C) has a ball. A plays the ball into the middle from the endline. B stands behind the goal and plays a low ball so that the forward can score with a diving header. C crosses from the inside position into the field.

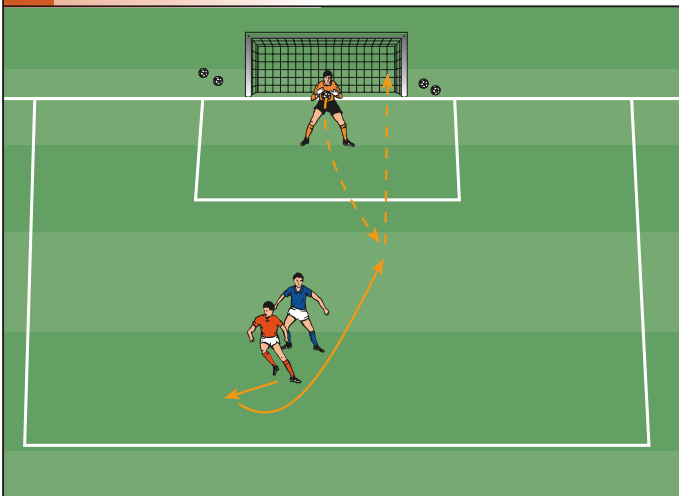
Note

- A, B and C should take turns, making sure to give the heading players plenty of time to execute their headers.



EXERCISES WITH OPPONENTS

1 Getting away from your opponent



Setup and sequence

- The goalkeeper passes to the attacker, who gets free of the opponent to finish with an offensive header.

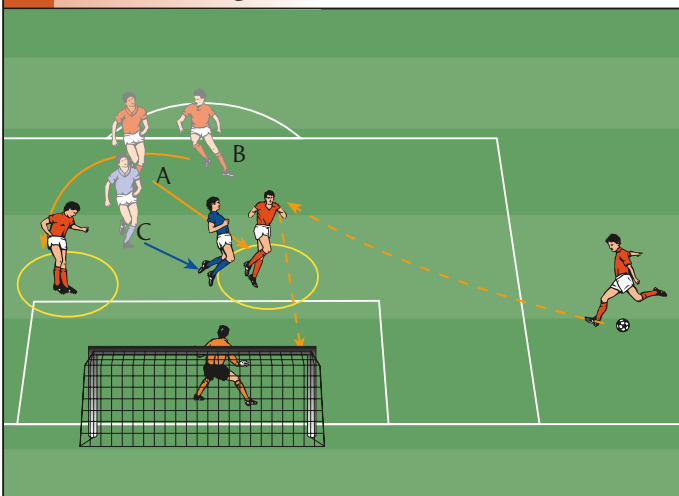
Variations

- Position a crosser on each wing.
- Position two keepers in the goal, to train the forward more effectively.

Notes

- The attacker should use lots of different body fakes and fake steps.
- Keep players focused on proper timing and correct technique.

2 Two-zone game 2



Setup and sequence

- Setup is the same as “Two-zone game 1,” with an added defender.
- Forwards try to get free of their opponent to finish with an offensive header.

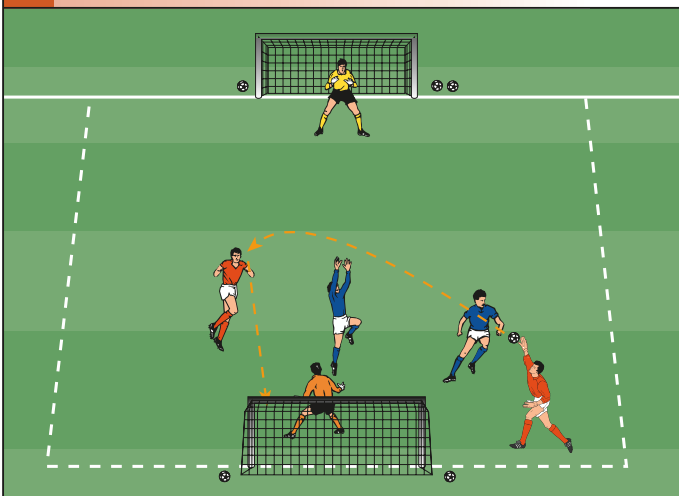
Variation

- Mark out one zone behind the other.

Notes

- Use anticipation and running fakes to get a head start.
- Attackers should move at top speed.
- Act decisively!

3 Handball with headers



Setup and sequence

- Mark out a 20 x 10-yard field. Teams play 2 v. 2 handball with headers on two goals with goalkeepers.
- Players may not hold the ball longer than three seconds and can only score on headers set up by throw-ins.

Notes

- Players without the ball must constantly get free of their opponents and show for the ball.
- Players should set up heading situations quickly and often.
- Goalkeepers should also set up heading situations.



PRACTICE GAMES

1 8 v. 8 with header zone



Setup and sequence

- Field is a half with a 10 x 10-yard zone marked in front of each goal with goalkeeper.
- Teams play 8 v. 8; headers from the marked zones score three points. Goalkeepers may not leave their goals.

Notes

- Before entering the zone, the attacker (transparent) should use running and body fakes to get to the ball before an opponent does.
- Remember to draw the upper body back.

2 8 v. 8 with wing zones



Setup and sequence

- Field is a half; teams play 8 v. 8 on two goals with goalkeepers.
- Mark out two 10-yard-wide wing zones.
- Shots set up by crosses from the wing zones score three points.

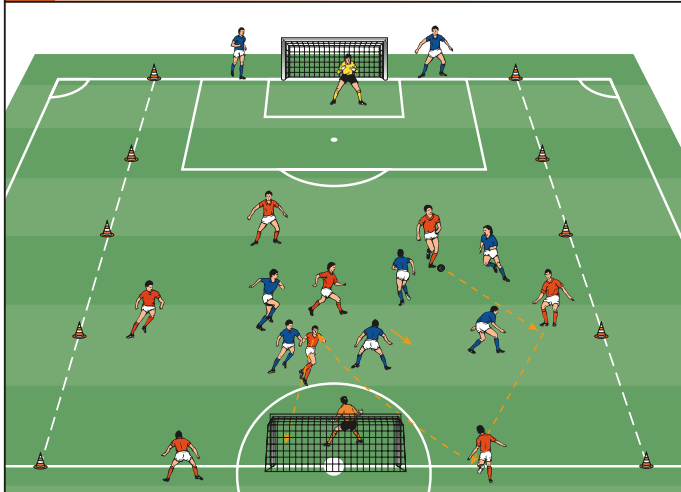
Variation

- Play begins with a throw-in, in order to create a heading situation immediately.

Notes

- Before entering the zone, the attacker (transparent) should use running and body fakes to get to the ball before an opponent does.
- Near post: Use a turning header with one-legged takeoff.
- Far post: Show for the ball with a running start (one- or two-legged takeoff).

3 6 v. 6 with 4 passers



Setup and sequence

- Teams play 6 v. 6 + 4 passers on two goals with goalkeepers (45 x 45-yard field).
- Attackers have two touches in their own half and unlimited touches in the opposition's.
- Two passers stand next to each goal.
- Passers must use two touches and try to create heading situations by playing high balls in front of the goal (attackers can also score on shots set up by teammates).

Notes

- Attackers should pass to passers on the ground, to make it easier for the passers to play high balls.
- Attackers should get free at the right moment and call for the ball.
- Passers should pay attention to attackers' fakes.