

# Play with a Purpose

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## I. What to expect at practice

“You play the way you practice.” This is a favorite saying of my assistant’s at Loudoun Valley. Practice is where you improve, whether it is with the team or in your own backyard. Whenever you enter a practice session, you must give the same effort you would if it were a real game. Always think about the purpose of a drill and how it contributes to the game. I invite you to make mistakes; they make you better if you are willing to learn from them.

Here’s what you need to bring to practice. Of course, you will need weather-appropriate clothing, shin guards, and soccer shoes. In addition, I want you to wear a white shirt (United t-shirts on Thursdays) for all practices. We will also have a conditioning run occasionally at the end of practice so bring running shoes also. And don’t forget water and your ball!

Here is our practice policy: All players are expected to attend *both* practices. I do understand that some of you may be on high school teams and may miss practices. There is no penalty for that because I know the commitment involved. However, you must attend at least *one* practice a week in order to start or see significant time in that week’s game. If you have three unexcused/unexplained absences, then you will need to meet with me about your commitment to this team.

I will attempt to keep the following schedule. The Tuesday practice each week will focus mainly on technique/ball skills. The Thursday practice of the week will focus on game tactics. This game tactics day will only be effective if we have 95% or better attendance.

Just imagine if I plan on working on an important defensive game plan and one or two regular defenders are not there to learn it. It affects the entire team when that happens.

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Challenge: Be at every practice this season.

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## II. How United will prepare for a game

After a focused week of practice, we will be physically and mentally ready to take the field. Arrive at the field no later than 45 minutes before the kick-off. Players will be dressed and ready to warm up 30 minutes before the game. If you are late to our pre-game warm-up or do not take it seriously, then you will not start. You are expected to have the full uniform. You should always bring both jerseys and our long-sleeved red United T-shirt. Tournament requirements may vary.

During warm-ups, game face and focus ensues. There is no goofing around. Make sure jewelry is removed and "nature has called." Be sure to have water and Gatorade for halftime and other breaks.

If you are on the bench during the game, then you stay with me and your team on the bench until you re-enter the game. Players on the sidelines will watch the game intently and support their teammates. When you take or leave the field, you will always jog. We will be on our toes during all kickoffs. When the game is over, we will have a quick cool-down run as a team.

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Challenge: Make an effort during every game or pre-game to focus to the best of your ability.

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## III. What you can do outside practice to improve

You have to touch the ball every day. You should juggle, dribble, and pass at least 60 minutes a week outside practice and games. Practice with your weaker foot. I expect each player to spend the off days juggling and stretching. Also, play basketball, swim, or jump rope. Add on some light weight lifting, ab crunches, and push-ups. The agility exercises we will do at practice along with this "homework" will increase your physical and technical speed.

If you are very serious about your development (and consequently the team's), ask your parents about purchasing the following items: a rebounder, an agility ladder, and a good ball or two. The rebounder is the most important item here because it will quicken and sharpen your touch. When high school tryouts take place, coaches immediately evaluate a player's touch. It is arguably the most important factor in identifying a player.

Oh, yeah. Your school homework better be done too.

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Challenge: On a calendar, write a brief description of a soccer-related activity. Include any progress like increased juggles. Do this 4 days a week outside of games and practice.

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It is also very helpful to watch soccer on TV or in person. Watch players that play your position. Notice their runs, habits, and field personalities. Young soccer players will sometimes not learn how to see the field until late in their playing career. Watching a lot

of high-level soccer will speed up that process. Also, playing and watching other sports helps you learn angles and timing.

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Challenge: Select a game to watch. Take notes on it. Focus on one thing (such as passing, forwards, or goalkeeping). Apply what you learn to your game.

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## IV. What must I do on the field to be a member of United?

Not only will a good portion of you be seeing a variety of positions, but in many ways all positions are the same. The game is pretty much the same all over the field. Along with the basics, all players are expected to do things like defend, shoot, etc.

We can work together to help you find and develop your strengths at whatever position you play. Once you determine your strengths, it only makes sense to take advantage of them.

**Playing Time.** This is certainly on every player's mind going into a new season. You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to play a lot. We have a large roster this season. This is good because it gives us more competition at practice. Competition is a good thing. You must compete with your own teammates (and friends) for playing time. It will be like that on any high level team you go to. I plan to use our roster top to bottom in every game. But of course, it would be unreasonable to think that everyone is going to play the exact same amount of minutes. You compete **with** each other at practice, but compete **together** in the game.

Your time is directly related to your performance in practice and recent games. Also, don't live or die by whether or not you start. That is an easy way to fall off your mental edge. Some coaches start the best 11 no matter what. I don't necessarily feel that way. I am a big believer in combinations, in other words, who plays well together.

If you are not a 60-70 minute player, then I expect you to accept your role as a 20-30 minute player. You are important to us. I try to give you feedback and advice as truthfully and promptly as possible so you have the opportunity to play more. Don't underestimate what happens at practice. I put a lot of stock into your attitude and commitment to practice. In addition to practice, pre-game is just as important. A lousy, unfocused warm-up can earn a lot of bench time.

Finally, whether you are a role player or heavy contributor, you are committed to the goals of this team. We lose sight of those goals when players, coaches, and fans talk behind backs, start cliques, and complain about things that they think they can't control. Even though complaining to a teammate makes you feel good today, it only makes your frustration worse in the long run. Then what do you have but a lot of bench splinters and a losing record. Not only that, but your teammates may lose respect for you if they don't agree. Even your closest friend on the team may think you are saying the same things about them. Don't let yourself fall into that trap.

The season will be what YOU make of it.

## V. The proper diet

It is important for young high school athletes to start good eating habits. Discipline yourself just like you do with brushing your teeth, doing your homework, and keeping your room clean. Here are your eating and sleeping guidelines.

1. Protein every day, including meat, eggs, or peanut butter.
2. Carbohydrates the night before a game, including bread and pasta.
3. You must eat breakfast. No discussion. An apple or a Pop Tart is not enough.
4. Drink lots of water all the time. Drink Gatorade after a workout.
5. Don't eat more than one fast food meal a week (and that's only if we win).
6. No soda. No coffee.
7. No zany sleepovers before a game. Sleep will never be overrated.

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Challenge: Meet these guidelines all season.

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## VI. Other ideas for improving your game

I previously mentioned having your homework done. Remember, you are a student-athlete. A happy school life goes hand-in-hand with a happy soccer life. School gets tougher as you get older unless you keep a healthy balance of mental and physical exercise.

Keep your room clean. You may argue that it "just ain't my personality to be clean." I understand. However, it's a good habit to appear prepared, organized, and in control as much as possible. I believe in preparation.

Why is this important? Discipline. Discipline yourself to always have your homework done, room clean, and ball touches every day. We always say that it is important to depend on each other. Well, it's just as important to depend on yourself.

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Challenge: Make the Honor Roll.

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## VII. My thoughts on team personality, expectations, and goals

We can take on several different team personalities, but we should strive for a single team identity. We can be timid, physical, bullying, or finesse. A winning team is skilled and physical as well as smart, disciplined, and sportsmanlike. This is the team we will strive to be. We want people to see us and think, "Hey, that's a classy team."

I have expectations for this team in several ways. I have expectations for every practice, every game, and all season long. A team should have many expectations. Consider these:

1. What do I expect from you?
2. What do you expect from yourself?
3. What do you expect from your teammates?
4. What do you expect from me?

The best way to fulfill your expectations positively is to work hard and communicate. Spend time with each other off the field. I also encourage you to keep a soccer journal or diary. It always helps to reflect on where you've been in order to get you where you want to go. And always...always expect to win.

The game of soccer is about goals. When you enter a career or join a team, you set goals for yourself. Good goal setters pick achievable goals that they know will challenge them. The tougher your goals are, the better you will feel when you achieve them. But don't put the bar too high.

If you have goals and dreams, you have to envision them before they happen. If you step up to take a penalty kick, see yourself placing it in the lower corner and then do it. Opportunities are missed when the player does not look into the future positively and see her success before it happens.

Make your goals specific, whether they are short-term or long-term goals. Here's an example of a long-term goal: "I will make the high school soccer team in each of my four years." This way, you know if it's been achieved. Pick two long-term goals and two short-term goals and *write them down here*. Then you can't cheat yourself on them.

You don't have to share your goals with others, but don't write down more than a few. It's better to concentrate your efforts on the more important ones. Here are mine.

#### Short-term

1. Lead a team with no cliques and obvious enjoyment and satisfaction on everyone's face.
2. Finish first in our division.
3. Win one tournament this year.

#### Long-term

1. Help each United player make her high school team.
2. Improve our standing or division each season.

Play with a purpose. Every time you take the field for a game or practice, every time you go in the backyard to kick around, and even every time you make a single pass, do it with a purpose. It will make you (and us) more successful and you'll have a heck of a lot more fun.