

Practicing Solo: The 720 Challenge

By Brandi Chastain

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It's amazing how much more technical and organized soccer training is now. When I was growing up, we practiced twice a week (three times when I got older) and played one game on the weekend, unless there was a tournament, and I didn't start playing in tournaments until I was 11.

Today, with year-round soccer (which I didn't play until I was nearly in college), there are an incredible number of games being played. Too many in my opinion (but that's another story).

Children in sports are often overly organized. Informal play gives them the opportunity to be independent, creative, and self-motivated. They dictate the place, the time, the rules, and the structure - or lack of it. When I was young, aside from formal practice, I was out on my front lawn everyday, juggling or kicking a ball. I'd play with the neighborhood kids or my brother.

He and I often took it into the house, playing 1 v 1 in our hallway, which couldn't have been more than three feet wide. (Of course, that would drive our mother crazy.)

That said, these casual skill sessions don't have to last for hours - even 15 minutes a day of juggling or footwork can be a significant addition when compounded over time. Mix it up with friends, or play a little by yourself.

What's important is that you develop the habit, and put the fun into it, the way we did with the National Team. We played informal games and created challenges against one another all the time. The rewards are simple, but satisfying, like the losers serving the winners lunch and busing their trays in the cafeteria of the Home Depot Center, buying coffee or smoothies, or hitting the ground for push-ups and sit-ups while the winners gloat.

Going for '720'

Try this ultimate challenge. It's called 720, and here's why. Using these 12 ball-juggling surfaces (laces/instep of both feet, outside of the feet, inside of the feet, thighs, chest, shoulders, head) and keeping the ball up in the air, use as many of those surfaces as you can in 60 seconds. Multiply the number of surfaces you successfully use (at least once), by the number of

seconds you keep the ball up.

Your maximum scored would be $12 \times 60 = 720$.

Excerpted from "It's Not About the Bra; How to Play Hard, Play Fair, and Put the Fun Back into Competitive Sports" By Brandi Chastain with Gloria Averbuch courtesy of HarperCollins.

Brandi Chastain made 192 appearances and scored 30 goals for the U.S. women's national team in 1988-2004. She won two Women's World Cups (1991 & 1999) and two Olympic gold medals (1996 & 2004).