



CASTLEWELLAN TOWN FOOTBALL CLUB

Match Day

The sixty minutes that undo the forty-four hours

Everything in this folder is Tuesday work. None of it survives a Saturday spent shouting instructions. A player who has been trained to scan, decide and try things will stop doing all three the moment a familiar adult voice starts making the decisions for them — and the voice does not have to be angry, it only has to be constant. This page is about the other half of the job.

! HEAD INJURIES — THE ONE THING YOU DO NOT GET TO JUDGE

If a player takes a blow to the head and you are in any doubt, they are finished for the day. Not "see how they go", not "they say they're fine", not "it's a cup game". You are not qualified to clear a concussion at the side of a pitch and neither is the parent standing beside you.

- If in doubt, sit them out. Remove them immediately and do not let them back on that day.
- Nobody returns to sport within 24 hours of a suspected concussion.
- Contact 111 within 24 hours of a suspected concussion.
- Minimum 21 days before returning to competition where there is a risk of contact — and only if symptom-free for the preceding 14 days.
- Symptoms lasting more than four weeks need assessment by an appropriate healthcare professional.
- Tell the parent what you saw, in plain words, and write it down the same evening while you still remember it.

BEFORE THE PLAYERS ARRIVE

- Walk the pitch before the players arrive. Glass, dog mess, holes.
- Check the goals are anchored. Every year, somewhere, a goal falls on a child.
- Know where your first aid kit is and who on the touchline is first-aid trained. If the answer is nobody, that is a club conversation for Monday.

THE NUMBERS, FOR YOUR FORMAT

Follows the team you picked at the top of the page. The full card for every format, and the rules for scaling a session between them, are under Formats.

U6 - U7 • 3v3	Round robin / festival — minimum 4 games × 10 min, maximum 7 on festival days. Pitch c. 20 × 16 m, goals 5 × 3 ft · four nets, ball 3 (soft touch). Referee: no — environment coordinators call fouls. Offside: no. Restart: dribble in or pass in (self-start). Powerplay applies. No league results. Maximum 2 substitutes.
U8 - U9 • 5v5	Round robin / festival — minimum 4 games × 12 min, maximum 7 on festival days. Pitch c. 40 × 25 m (max 42 × 33), goals 12 × 4 ft · two nets, ball U8 = 3 · U9 = 4. Referee: no — environment coordinators call fouls. Offside: no. Restart: dribble in or pass in (self-start). Powerplay applies. No league results. Maximum 3 substitutes.
U10 - U11 • 7v7	One game, three periods of 15 minutes. Pitch c. 55 × 35 m (max 60 × 42), goals 12 × 6 ft · two nets, ball 4. Referee: allowed from U10, recommended from U12. Offside: no. Restart: dribble in or pass in (self-start). Powerplay applies. No league results. Maximum 4 substitutes.
U12 - U13 • 9v9	One game — U12 2 × 25 min, U13 2 × 30, U14 2 × 35. Pitch c. 65 × 45 m (max 78 × 50), goals 16 × 7 ft · two nets, ball U12 & U13 = 4 · U14 = 5. Referee: yes — all laws of the game. Offside: yes. Restart: throw-in. League results from here. Maximum 5 substitutes.
U14 - U18 • 11v11	One game — U15 & U16 2 × 40 min, U17 & U18 2 × 45. Pitch c. 100 × 65 m (max 106 × 70), goals 24 × 8 ft · two nets, ball 5. Referee: yes — all laws of the game. Offside: yes. Restart: throw-in. League results from here. Maximum 6 substitutes.

- Every player plays at least half of the overall game time. Not a guideline — it is in the framework, and it applies at every age from U6 to U18.
- No substitute waits longer than half the game before getting on.
- No results-based football below U12. Scores, cups and tables begin at U12. Below that, do not report a score and do not keep one on the touchline.

THE DAY, IN ORDER

Before you leave the house

THE NIGHT BEFORE

Almost everything that goes wrong on a Saturday was decided on a Friday, by not deciding.

- Write the rotation down before you arrive. If you are picking substitutions in real time while losing, you will bench the same three children every week and you will believe you are being fair. Use the planner on this page.
- Every player knows they are playing, and roughly when. A text to the group the night before removes the worst hour of a child's week — the hour spent wondering.
- Check who you have quietly stopped picking. It is almost always the smallest, and it is almost always temporary — they are the players clubs lose before the advantage evens out.
- Decide your one thing. Pick a single idea from a session you have actually run and let that be the only thing you look for. Not five things.
- Check what you are asking of them is something you have trained. If you have not run Session 17, do not ask them to play out from the back on Saturday and then be disappointed.

The warm-up

20 MINUTES BEFORE

The same principles as any Tuesday: a ball each, no queues, warm within a minute. A match warm-up is not the day to introduce anything.

- A ball each for the first five minutes. Touches, not laps. Laps are a tradition, not a warm-up.
- Include what they will actually do — turns, short passes, a few shots. The keeper gets served properly rather than blasted at.
- Finish with something they enjoy. They should walk to the halfway line wanting to play, not already tired.

• Watch the ones who came out of the car stiff. A player who was fine on Tuesday and is guarding a knee today does not start.

The team talk

TWO MINUTES BEFORE KICK-OFF

Ninety seconds. Anything longer and they have stopped listening, they are just being polite.

- Three things maximum, and all three already trained. Kick-off is not the moment to install an idea.
- Name two players for something specific they did in training this week. Public, brief, accurate.
- Say out loud what they are allowed to get wrong. "I want you to try to turn. If you lose it trying to turn, that's fine, that's on me." This one sentence changes how a team plays more than any instruction.
- Do not talk about the opposition's best player. You will have created him.

Try to turn. If you lose it, that's on me.	Don't lose it at the back. —
Head up before it comes to you — like the Y-gate.	Concentrate!
Sam, your first touch on Tuesday was excellent. Do that.	Come on lads, big game.

The touchline

ALL GAME

This is the part that matters, and it is almost entirely about restraint. Instructions shouted from the side do not add information — they replace the decision the player was in the middle of making. Do it often enough and you train a child to look at you instead of at the pitch.

- The test, before every shout: is it an instruction or is it encouragement? If it is an instruction, swallow it. If it is encouragement, say it.
- "Man on" is you scanning for them. It feels helpful and it is the single most direct way to undo Session 1. If they cannot see the defender, that is the information you need — not something to paper over.
- Try a silent half. Not a gimmick. Say nothing but names and encouragement for a whole half and watch how much more they talk to each other. Session A7 is the training-night version of the same idea.
- Stand still, and stand beside the opposition coach. The framework asks that both coaches share one sideline, away from the spectators — deliberately, so the match does not look like a contest between two adults. It also makes it much harder to shout something you would not say in front of the other coach.
- Spectators stay two metres back from the pitch. That is in the framework too, and it is easier to establish in August than in November.
- Never coach from behind the goal. It puts you in the keeper's head and it looks exactly like what it is.
- Do not speak to the referee. At this level the referee is often a teenager doing you a favour. Whatever the decision was, your reaction is the thing the children will copy.
- Two named pieces of specific praise per player, per match. Written down afterwards if you have to. "Well done" to the group counts for nobody.

Good look, Erin.	MAN ON!
Well tried — again next time.	Just get rid of it! —
Nice and calm.	SHOOOOT!
(nothing)	Why did you do that?

Substitutions

PLANNED, NOT IMPROVISED

You are legally and morally obliged to get everyone at least half the match. Beyond that, the timing of a substitution says more to a child than anything you will say to them all season.

- Never substitute a player straight after their mistake. Wait two minutes at the absolute minimum. Otherwise it is a punishment and every child on that pitch will read it as one, including the ones on your own bench.
- Tell them why they are coming off and when they are going back on. "Ten minutes, then you're back on the left." That is the whole conversation and it costs you nothing.
- Rotate positions, not just minutes. A child who only ever plays right back is a child who has been quietly told what you think of them.
- The biggest player is not the best player, they are the earliest. In one age group the spread of maturity can be four or five years wide, so a rotation built on who looks strongest is a rotation built on birthdays and growth spurts. See Welfare → Growing players before you write next week's.
- Do not freeze the rotation to protect a lead. It is a youth football match. The plan you wrote on Friday was written by a calmer person than the one standing on the touchline at 2-1.
- The keeper is a player. Nominate two and give them outfield time, or you have chosen a specialist on the basis of who happened to be tallest a couple of years ago.

Half time

THE MIDDLE TEN MINUTES

The most commonly wasted ten minutes in youth football. A group of children who have just played half a match cannot absorb a tactical lecture, and they know whether it went well without being told.

- First sixty seconds: say nothing. Water, breathing, let them talk to each other. You will hear more in that minute than you will learn all half.
- Ask before you tell. "What's happening out there?" Their answer tells you what they can actually see, which is the only useful starting point.
- Two points maximum. One adjustment maximum. Anything more and none of it lands.
- Name someone for something specific. Every half, without fail.
- Last thirty seconds: the first five minutes. Give them one clear thing to do at the restart, and nothing else.

Full time

THE TWO MINUTES THAT GET REMEMBERED

Whatever the result, the children will remember your face before they remember the score. That is not sentiment, it is just how memory works.

- Handshakes first. Always, and including the referee. No exceptions, no matter what happened.
- Say nothing about the result for two minutes. Let it settle. Nothing said in the first two minutes after a defeat has ever helped anybody.
- One thing that went well, named and specific. Then let them go to their parents.
- The analysis is Tuesday, not the car park. A debrief in the car park is for you, not for them.
- Have one sentence ready for the parents. "Good performance, we'll work on the corners Tuesday." It ends the conversation kindly and it stops the touchline post-mortem.
- Never single a child out for the defeat. Not by name, not by look, not by who you do not speak to on the way to the car.

I loved watching you play.

You were unlucky — that keeper was miles offside.

What did you enjoy?

What went wrong out there?

I loved watching you play is worth passing on to the parents too. It is the line most often cited in youth sport as the one children actually want to hear in the car, and it is the opposite of what most of them get.

GAME-TIME PLANNER

Enter your squad and it builds a rotation that satisfies the framework: everyone at least half the match, nobody waiting more than half to get on, rolling substitutions. Shirt numbers or initials only — no names, and it stays on this device.

The planner is in the phone index: open it, tap Match Day, scroll to the planner. It works with no signal.

THE NINE RIGHTS, ON A SATURDAY

The Irish FA Youth Football Charter sets out nine rights every young player has. Most of them are decided on match day rather than in a policy document. This is what each one looks like at 10am on a wet pitch.

Play and recreation	They play because it is fun. The result is your problem, not theirs.
Protection	You know who your club welfare officer is, and you report concerns rather than weighing them up yourself.
To be heard	You ask them what they saw before you tell them what you saw.
Non-discrimination	Same minutes, same positions, same tone of voice — regardless of ability.
Health	Nobody plays hurt. Head injuries end the day, every time.
Education	How you speak to the referee is the lesson. Not the thing you said about respect on Tuesday.
Family environment	You talk to parents as partners, and you give them something useful to say in the car.
Rest and leisure	One match is a match. Three games in a weekend is an adult's decision serving an adult's purpose.
Privacy	You ask before you post a photograph, and you do not put a child's name beside their mistake anywhere.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

- Irish FA Youth Football Framework — game formats — <https://youthfootball.irishfa.com/game>
- Irish FA Youth Football Charter — <https://youthfootball.irishfa.com/education/youth-football-charter>
- Irish FA safeguarding — <https://www.irishfa.com/irish-fa-foundation/grassroots-and-youth-football/safeguarding>
- UK Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport — <https://sportandrecreation.org.uk/campaigns-and-policy/concussion/concussion-guidelines-for-grassroots-sport>

Checked August 2026. The framework is being phased in and the concussion guidance is periodically updated — re-check both at the start of each season, and always defer to your own league's competition rules.