THE PROGRESSION PLAYBOOK
A GUIDE TO COACHING LACROSSE SKILLS IN AN AGE APPROPRIATE CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Think back to when you first got involved with lacrosse. Were you a parent, held hostage with the threat to either be the coach or not have a place for your child to play. Maybe you grew up playing, went on to a college career and never dreamed of not being a coach?

In either scenario, what was missing from your development as a coach? What do you wish you had that would have helped you? Did you know everything that you needed to put that group of young athletes out on the field and have it resemble lacrosse?

What this book is all about is giving you the tools to put your athletes first. It’s about providing the ultimate lacrosse experience for the kids. It’s about creating an environment where every kid can reach their full potential.

There is nothing else like this for the lacrosse coach. We have had conversations with many lacrosse coaches, ranging from NCAA Division 1 Champions to the coaches in youth programs that consistently advance players to high level programs to develop this resource. All of the experts agree that a systematic and intentional development pathway is what made the difference in their athletes.

It is our sincere hope that by providing this curriculum to lacrosse coaches, players across the country will have an opportunity to learn lacrosse in a way that is physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially appropriate. We believe that this increases both the learning and fun for young athletes. When kids are having fun, they’re learning and when they learn they improve.

Age appropriate coaching will help young athletes LEARN THE SPORT BETTER, LOVE THE SPORT MORE, STAY WITH THE SPORT LONGER and ultimately reach their full athletic potential.

LACROSSE ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Creating a model of participation that provides opportunity for all, for life.
THE MATRIX (APPENDIX C)

It is universally agreed upon that not all skills are appropriate for every age player to learn, as well as that players must learn the foundational skills of lacrosse technique before moving on to more complex ones. We call this The Matrix. The Matrix is a process that illustrates what should be taught to athletes, when it should be taught to them, and to what extent they should be learning it.

You will find six stages of development for each skill in The Matrix. These different stages tell you just how far you can and should push your athletes to perform, based upon their age, physical development, cognitive development and experience level. Let’s take a look at the stages:

**INTRODUCTION**
Players have seen the skill.

**EXPLORATION**
Players have the opportunity to try the skill on their own in a lacrosse or non-lacrosse context.

**DEVELOPING**
Players have been coached in the fundamentals of the skill.

**PROFICIENCY**
Players can perform the skill well consistently with little to no resistance from an opponent.

**MASTERY**
Players can perform the skill well consistently with moderate resistance from an opponent or with another teammate.

**EXTENSION**
Players can use the skill well consistently within multiple contexts.

**USING THE MATRIX**
As you work through this guide, you will see that each skill has established performance benchmarks. Think of them as a checkpoint in determining just how far you should go with teaching a skill. When you think your player has reached the end of a developmental stage:

STOP

Can the athlete______________ (fill in the noted skill(s) outlined)?

**YES**
Move on to the next stage

**NO**
Keep working on the current stage or Back up one stage
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GRIPPING THE STICK

DESCRIPTION: Holding the stick properly is the foundation on which skills such as passing, catching, and shooting are based. By learning to grip the stick properly, players will be set up for future successes.

Ideal Age of Introduction: U9 and Below | Age to Reach Extension: U11

INTRODUCTION (PLAYERS HAVE SEEN IT) – U9 AND BELOW
In the Introduction stage, players have seen coaches performing the skill correctly. You can show your athletes how to do it by saying things such as “Look at how I’m holding my stick with my fingers and not my palm.” You are just trying to plant the seeds for success in this early stage.

EXPLORATION (PLAYERS TRY IT) – U9
During the Exploration phase, players are not given intentional instruction for how to hold their sticks, but rather simple cues to get them thinking about the correct way to hold a lacrosse stick. Examples of the cues you might use with players include:

- “Hold it, but don’t squeeze it.”
- “Be gentle.”
- “Let your stick breathe.”

DEVELOPMENT (PLAYERS ARE WORKING ON IT) – U9
In the Development stage, players are given specific instruction for holding their sticks properly.

- Have the player’s place their sticks on the ground in front of them, with the open face of the head towards the ground.
- Players reach down and pick their sticks up in their fingertips, not allowing their palms to touch the shaft.
- Emphasize that they should imagine a small ball like a ping-pong ball between their palm and the stick. If they are having trouble with this, physically place a ping-pong ball between their palm and the shaft to create the desired space.

PROFICIENCY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT CONSISTENTLY) – U9
Players are ready to work on Proficiency stage when the player can consistently hold their stick properly. Once this occurs, coaches can begin working on incorporating the correct grip into drills involving stick work. Work on using a correct grip while doing the following:

- Scooping a ground ball
- Catching a ball tossed by the coach or partner
- Throwing a ball into an open goal or target
- Throwing a ball to a partner
MASTERY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT WITH OTHERS) – U11
Upon entering the Mastery stage, players are now introduced to a competitive element for using the correct grip. They should begin learning how to alter their grip based on the situation presented.

- Shooting – Fingertip grip (added in this stage)
- Passing – Fingertip grip
- Catching – Fingertips grip

EXTENSION (PLAYERS CAN DO IT IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS) – U11
Extension being the final stage grip development is where the player will use the previously learned skills in multiple contexts. The players should be working on the following skills to complete the Extension stage:

- Maintaining the correct grip during dodging
- Maintaining the correct grip when shooting
SCOOPING

DESCRIPTION: Scooping is the act of picking a ball up off of the ground using a lacrosse stick and maintaining possession of it for three steps after the scoop.

Ideal Age of Introduction: U9 and Below | Age to Reach Extension: U11

INTRODUCTION (PLAYERS HAVE SEEN IT) - U9 AND BELOW
In the Introduction stage, players have seen coaches performing the skill correctly. This may be by intentional modeling (The coach says “Watch how I scoop.”) or through observing the coach doing it on and around the field. Players are not formally taught the technique of scooping during the Introduction stage. But rather are allowed to work through the skill individually and figure out what works for them.

EXPLORATION (PLAYERS TRY IT) - U9
During the Exploration phase, players are not given intentional instruction for scooping. Rather they are taught the principles of scooping through the suggested teaching progression as follows:

1. Players use their hands to walk up to a ball on the ground, pick it up, and continue to move forward. Both hands should be used when doing this.

2. Players hold a stick head (no shaft) in their hand and use it to scoop the ground ball and continue to move forward. Both hands should be used when doing this.

3. Players are given a complete stick and use the techniques they have self-identified through the previous two stages to scoop a ground ball. Both hands should be used when doing this.

DEVELOPMENT (PLAYERS ARE WORKING ON IT) - U9
In the Development stage, players are given specific instruction for scooping a ground ball. In a one player to one ball setting, players should be taught to:

- Bend their body to be low to the ground
- Keep the top hand about one-third of the way down from the throat of the stick
- Aim their stick 1-2 inches in front of the ball
- Hold their stick parallel to the ground
- Keep their back hand low to the ground
- Move through the ball
- Bring the stick and ball quickly up to a vertical position, immediately beginning cradling to keep the ball in the stick
- Continue moving throughout the scooping process
- Use their body and leg to protect their stick and ball from an opponent
- Take 3 steps and fish-hook to protect their stick
- Pick their head up and look to pass the ball to a teammate (passing not required, only the act of looking to move the ball should be expected)
- Scoop moving balls (rolling towards and away from the scooper)

No defensive pressure should be used in this stage, as developing confidence in their abilities is of the utmost importance. Only once the player is consistent and confident in their scooping ability, should the coach begin adding pressure.
PROFICIENCY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT CONSISTENTLY) - U9
Players are ready to work on Proficiency stage when the player can consistently scoop a ground ball using the proper technique as outlined in the Development phase of skill progression. When a player reaches this stage, the coach can begin adding light defensive pressure such as the following:

- Coach covers the ball with a stick

The player should be expected to build their scooping skills in this stage to incorporate the following:

- Fish-hook away from light defensive pressure
- Make a pass to coach or shoot the ball into a goal after taking three steps and fish-hooking away from light defensive pressure.

MASTERY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT WITH OTHERS) - U11
Upon entering the Mastery stage, players are now introduced to a competitive element for scooping ground balls. They should begin learning how to use their speed and body to be in position to “win” a ground ball versus a single opponent. The suggested skill progression for the Mastery stage is as follows:

- Redirecting a loose ball to a favorable location for scooping
- Passing the ball to a teammate
- Boxing out an opponent

EXTENSION (PLAYERS CAN DO IT IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS) - U11
Extension being the final stage of scooping skill development is where the player will use the previously learned skills in multiple contexts and versus multiple opponents. The players should be working on the following skills to complete the Extension stage:

- Redirecting the ball to a teammate to scoop
- Scooping against multiple opponents
- Boxing out an opponent so a teammate can safely scoop

SUGGESTED DRILLS AND ACTIVITIES
(AVAILABLE IN THE PROGRESSION PLAYBOOK DRILL CARDS AND MOBILE COACH)

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CRADLING AND STICK PROTECTION

DESCRIPTION: Cradling is using the movement of the stick to maintain possession of the ball in the stick. There are two handed and one handed methods of cradling. Stick protection is part of the requirement to maintain possession of the ball.

Ideal Age of Introduction: U9 or Below | Age to Reach Extension: U11

INTRODUCTION (PLAYERS HAVE SEEN IT) – U9 AND BELOW
In the Introduction stage, players have seen coaches performing the skill correctly. This may be by intentional modeling (The coach says “Watch how I cradle to keep the ball in my stick.”) or through observing the coach doing it on and around the field. Players are not formally taught the technique of catching during the Introduction stage. But rather are allowed to work through the skill individually and figure out what works for them.

EXPLORATION (PLAYERS TRY IT) – U9
During the Exploration phase, players are not given intentional instruction for cradling or stick protection.

Cradling:

• Players are asked to hold a ball vertically in the palm of their hand up near their ear/shoulder area and to move their hand from their nose to their ear. This introduces the cradling motion and force needed to keep the ball in their sticks later.
• Players try to walk, jog, or run while “cradling the ball in their hand.
• Players are given their sticks and asked to try and mimic the techniques they found successful in the previous two activities.

Stick Protection:

• Players are each given a pinnie or other flag like item to tuck into their waist band. They then play a game with a partner, trying to take their partners flag.
• Give players the instruction to keep their body between their opponent and the flag.
• Players are given their sticks back and now try to keep an opponent from tapping their stick with their hand, much like in the flag drill.

DEVELOPMENT (PLAYERS ARE WORKING ON IT) – U9
In the Development stage, players are given specific instruction for cradling and stick protection. In a one player to one ball setting, players should be taught to:

Cradling:

Two Handed Cradle

• The top hand 2-3 inches below bottom of the head of the crosse. The top hand is responsible for controlling the motion of the stick.
• Bottom hand is positioned near the belly-button and is relaxed on the butt end of the stick. It is responsible for protecting the stick and maintaining its’ stability.
• Stick should be held in the fingertips with top digit of each finger and thumb for better control & wrist action.
• Palm in palm out movement of the top hand is the cradling motion (This motion creates the centrifugal force on the stick head which keeps the ball in pocket)
• Keep his elbow up so stick is parallel to the body creating excellent stick protection and limited stick exposure to the defender.
• Arms should move similar to the natural movement of one’s arms when running, which is forward and backward.
• The difference is when cradling both arms move together.
• A player should use the 2 handed cradle when there is no pressure or less pressure from a defender. This allows for easier running ability in open field.

**Stick Protection:**

• The player’s body should be between the stick and his defender (think Shoulder, Shoulder, Stick)
• The stick should be at shoulder height and vertical
• Top hand holding stick in position about chest high near the arm pit (this is called the “box position”)
• Player’s head is kept up as part of the protective system with the stick head in the “box position”
• The elbow of the top hand holding the stick must be up so the forearm is horizontal to ground.
• Keeping the elbow up forces stick to be vertical & perpendicular to ground, maximizing protection of the stick.

All practice sessions should incorporate using both hands at the top of the stick for cradling and stick protection.

**PROFICIENCY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT CONSISTENTLY) – U11**

Players are ready to work on Proficiency stage when the player can consistently keep the ball in his stick by cradling and protect the stick with his body from a “shadow” defender trying to touch the stick. You can work on developing proficiency by adding minimal pressure and incorporating a single defender. The ball carrier should be working on the following skills:

• Run in a straight line while maintaining possession of the ball in their stick
• Run through a course of cones while maintaining possession of the ball in the stick
• Pivot his entire body to maintain Shoulder, Shoulder, Stick protection while cradling to avoid a check
• Immediately begin cradling and protecting his stick after scooping a ground ball or receiving a pass.

**MASTERY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT WITH OTHERS) – U11**

Upon entering the Mastery stage, players are now introduced to a competitive element for cradling and stick protection. They are working on the skill primarily with another player(s) for a partner. The suggested skill progression for the Mastery stage is as follows:

• Cradling in multiple positions (“box”, waist)
• Switching hands when cradling for optimal stick protection
• Cradling and protecting his stick while evading a defender
Extension (Players can do it in multiple contexts) – U11

Extension is the final stage of skill development and is where the player will use the previously learned skills in multiple contexts and versus multiple opponents. The players should be working on the following skills to complete the Extension stage of cradling and stick protection:

- Cradling in multiple positions (at the shoelaces, with bottom hand only on an extended stick).
- Appropriately use one handed or two handed technique based on the situation presented to them.
- Appropriately switch hands multiple times to evade defender(s).

### Suggested Drills and Activities

**Available in the Progression Playbook Drill Cards and Mobile Coach**

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CATCHING

DESCRIPTION: Catching is the skill of receiving a ball into the pocket of the lacrosse stick and maintaining control of it once it enters the pocket of the stick.

Ideal Age of Introduction: U9 and Below | Age to Reach Extension: U11

INTRODUCTION (PLAYERS HAVE SEEN IT) – U9 AND BELOW

In the Introduction stage, players have seen coaches performing the skill correctly. This may be by intentional modeling (The coach says “Watch how I catch.”) or through observing the coach doing it on and around the field. Players are not formally taught the technique of catching during the Introduction stage. But rather are allowed to work through the skill individually and figure out what works for them.

EXPLORATION (PLAYERS TRY IT) – U9

During the Exploration phase, players are not given intentional instruction for catching. Rather, they are taught the principles of catching through the suggested teaching progression as follows:

1. Without using sticks, an adult tosses a ball underhand to the player. The player should work on allowing the ball to come to them and receiving the ball softly with both hands.

2. Give the players just the head of a stick. An adult tosses a ball underhand to the player and he catches it with the head of the stick, similar to using a baseball glove. This teaches “choking up” on the stick to provide better control during the catch.

3. Give the players a complete lacrosse stick. An adult will underhand toss balls to the player and the player will receive the ball into their stick, using the skills they acquired in the previous two progressions.

DEVELOPMENT (PLAYERS ARE WORKING ON IT) – U9

In the Development stage, players are given specific instruction for catching a ball. In a one player to one ball setting, players should be taught to:

- Keep their stick up in the box position to provide a target for the passer.
- Keep the face of their pocket “open” to the passer to provide the greatest surface area to catch with.
- Give with the ball as it enters the pocket by slightly moving the entire stick in the direction the ball is traveling.
- See the ball into the pocket by following it with his eyes.
- Immediately cradle once he feels the ball in his stick’s pocket.

All practice sessions should incorporate using both hands at the top of the stick for catching passes.

PROFICIENCY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT CONSISTENTLY) – U11

Players are ready to work on Proficiency stage when the player can consistently catch a ball using the proper technique as outlined in the Development phase of skill progression. When a player reaches this stage, the coach can begin adding layers of difficulty, such as:

- Stationary partner passing (player to player).
- Catching while walking, jogging, or running towards a passer (coach to player).
- Over the Shoulder Catching while walking, jogging, or running away from a passer (coach to player).
MASTERY (PLAYERS CAN DO IT WITH OTHERS) - U11
Upon entering the Mastery stage, players are now introduced to a competitive element for catching passes. They are working on the skill primarily with another player(s) for a partner. The suggested skill progression for the Mastery stage is as follows:

- Catching while walking, jogging, or running towards a passer (player to player).
- Over the Shoulder Catching while walking, jogging, or running away from a passer (player to player).
- Catching with light defensive pressure (1 defender shadow covering)

EXTENSION (PLAYERS CAN DO IT IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS) - U11
Extension is the final stage of catching skill development and is where the player will use the previously learned skills in multiple contexts and versus multiple opponents. The players should be working on the following skills to complete the Extension stage of catching:

- Quick Sticking
- Catching on the opposite side (cross-handed)
- Catching passes “off-target”
- Catching with moderate defensive pressure

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OVERHAND PASSING

**DESCRIPTION:** Passing is the skill of propelling a ball using a lacrosse stick in the direction of a designated target, with the intent of the ball being caught by another player.

**Ideal Age of Introduction: U9 and Below | Age to Reach Extension: U11**

**INTRODUCTION (PLAYERS HAVE SEEN IT) – U9 AND BELOW**

In the Introduction stage, players have seen coaches performing the skill correctly. This may be by intentional modeling (The coach says “Watch how I throw.”) or through observing the coach doing it on and around the field. Players are not formally taught the technique of throwing during the Introduction stage. But rather are allowed to work through the skill individually and figure out what works for them.

**EXPLORATION (PLAYERS TRY IT) – U9**

During the Exploration phase, players are not given intentional instruction for passing. The methodology below provides the player with an opportunity to self-correct some of the more common problems with throwing, such as the ball dropping out of the stick because the back shoulder or head of the stick is dipped too low. The players can learn the principles of passing through the suggested teaching progression as follows:

1. Without using sticks, a player uses overhand throwing technique to propel the ball into a target.
2. Without using sticks, a player uses overhand throwing technique to propel the ball to a partner, aiming for the “box” area.
3. Player is given a stick and uses the self-taught mechanics from the previous two progressions to propel the ball into a fence or other surface that will stop even the most errant of passes.

During this phase, any and all movement of the ball in a forward direction should be celebrated.

**DEVELOPMENT (PLAYERS ARE WORKING ON IT) – U9**

In the Development stage, players are given specific instruction for throwing a ball with a lacrosse stick. In a one player to one ball setting, players should be taught to:

- Keep the stick up in the box position.
- Point non-throwing shoulder at the target. Arms are out and away from the body.
- Push off with the back foot and step with the front foot.
- Rotate the upper body so it ends up squared to the target.
- Pull with the bottom hand while simultaneously pushing with the top hand.
- Snap the top-hand wrist over so the head of the stick ends up pointing at the target.
- The follow-through of the stick is across the body to the opposite hip, not under the armpit.

Proper mechanics take precedence over accuracy during development. Accuracy of passes is still developing at this point in the player’s skill development.
**Proficiency (Players can do it consistently) - U11**

Players are ready to work on Proficiency stage when the player can consistently throw a ball using the proper technique as outlined in the Development phase of skill progression. When a player reaches this stage, the coach can begin adding layers of difficulty, such as:

- Players are given a specific target to throw to.
- Players are working with a stationary teammate.
- Players may pass to more than one teammate.

All practice sessions should incorporate using both hands at the top of the stick for throwing overhand passes. Accuracy begins to be developed during the Proficiency stage.

**Mastery (Players can do it with others) - U11**

Upon entering the Mastery stage, players are now introduced to a competitive element for passing. They are working on the skill primarily with another player(s) for a partner. The suggested skill progression for the Mastery stage is as follows:

- Pull-passing across the body
- Throwing while moving
- Throwing around a defender(s)

**Extension (Players can do it in multiple contexts) - U11**

Extension is the final stage of throwing skill development and is where the player will use the previously learned skills in multiple contexts and versus multiple opponents. The players should be working on the following skills to complete the Extension stage of catching:

- Quick Sticking
- Throwing on the opposite side (cross-handed)
- Throwing passes “off-target” to a spot where teammate can catch it.
- Throwing with moderate defensive pressure

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**Suggested Drills and Activities**

*(Available in the Progression Playbook Drill Cards and Mobile Coach)*

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# APPENDIX C

## INDIVIDUAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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## APPENDIX C
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