Soccer

HOW TO PLAY SOCCER: Skils, Rules, Positions And More

Soccer (known as "football" outside of North America) is an action-packed team sport with simple rules and minimal equipment—no wonder it's the most popular sport in the world![1] Ready to get out there and start playing? Read on to learn the basic skills you'll need to get started and get a grip on the basic rules of the game, then you'll be ready to find a team or rally some friends for a pickup game of your own. Before you know it, you might be the cause of someone shouting, "Goooooooooaaaaaal!"

Things You Should Know

Win the game by scoring more goals than the other team. Use different parts of your foot to change the angle, arc, and direction of the ball as you move across the field. Defend by closing off space around the ball to deny the opposing team opportunities to advance the ball or score. Start playing in casual pickup games, then transition to a recreational league for a more competitive experience.

Instructions

1 Suit up with shin guards and cleats.

Shin guards are the only protective gear all soccer players wear, typically covered by long soccer socks. Cleats (also known as "boots") give you better traction and stability on the grass pitch. Goalkeepers also wear goalie gloves to protect their hands and give them better grip on the ball. In a competitive match, you'd also wear the team jersey and shorts (also called your "kit").[11] In a really casual pickup game, you don't necessarily need shin guards or cleats (although you're likely to end up with some bruises on your shins). This minimalism is part of why soccer is so popular around the world.

2 Start the game with 11 players on the field for each team.

In a casual pickup game, you might have fewer players on each side, but 11 players (including the goalie) is the standard. The rules define the minimum number of players a team can have on the field as 7 (including the goalie).[12] In a competitive match, you can have up to 7 substitute players on the bench (usually including 1 goalkeeper), but each team is only allowed to make 3 substitutions per match, regardless of injuries. This is where the minimum number might come into play.

3 Kick off from the center of the field to start each half.

The 2 teams face off around the center circle, with the ball placed on the center spot. A coin toss determines which team gets the first kick, with the other team kicking off the second half. The player chosen kicks the ball toward the opposing team's side of the field, aiming to connect with another player who can put the ball into play to start the match.[13] During the match, you'll return to the center circle for a kickoff every time a goal is scored. The team that got scored on is the one that kicks.

4 Use your feet, legs, and torso to control and advance the ball.

Unless you're the goalkeeper, you're never allowed to use your hands or arms to move or control the soccer ball—but you're allowed to use any other part of your body. You'll use your feet most often for passing or shooting, but touches with other parts of your body can help you get the ball under control.[14] If you're the goalkeeper, you're allowed to use your hands—but only when you're in the penalty box in front of the goal. That's the part of the field where goalkeepers typically stay anyway, but watch the lines if you're diving for a ball. This rule doesn't apply to incidental touching. If another player kicks the ball and it bounces off of your arm, you're all good—as long as you didn't move your arm in an attempt to control the direction of the ball.

5 Go after the ball, not the other player, to avoid fouls.

Even though players don't wear pads and protective gear, soccer can still be a pretty physical game. There's nothing wrong with incidental contact, but attacking an opposing player (rather than the ball) is definitely a rule violation that could result in the other team getting a penalty kick.[15] For example, if you're defending, you might slide to kick the ball away from an opposing player. If they happened to trip, that wouldn't be your fault. But if you tried to trip them by kicking their leg, that would be a foul. In a competitive match, it's up to the referee to determine if contact was incidental or intentional and issue penalties accordingly. Competitive soccer referees issue yellow cards or red cards depending on the number of fouls the player has or the severity of the violation. A red card means the player must leave the field, so their team will be at least one player short for the rest of the match.[16]

6 Play for a total of 90 minutes.

A standard soccer match is 90 minutes, divided into two 45-minute halves with a 15-minute break in between. The match clock is never stopped in soccer—there are no "timeouts," as in other sports. Instead, the referee keeps track of the time actually played and adds minutes (known as "stoppage time") to the end of each half.[17] In a casual pickup game, you can set your time however you want, but it's usually a good idea to plan it out ahead of time with a break at the half. Even in competitive matches, the total play time may vary depending on the age of the players. For example, younger kids tend to play shorter matches.

7 Throw the ball in if the other team kicks it out of bounds on the sidelines.

Retrieve the ball and stand on the sidelines at roughly the spot where the ball went out. Holding the ball with both hands, raise it up over and behind your head. Lean back and use your core muscles to heave the ball in the direction of a teammate and put it back in. Make sure you stay behind the line and don't lift your feet as that would result in the other team getting the ball.[18] Time doesn't stop when the ball goes out of bounds, so players quickly decide who should throw it in. Usually, it gets thrown in by whoever happens to be closest.

8 Set up a corner kick or a goal kick if the ball goes over the goal line.

If the attacking team kicks the ball over the goal line (but not in the goal), a member of the defending team kicks the ball from anywhere in the goal box. If the defending team kicks the ball out of bounds over the goal line, the attacking team gets a kick in from the corner on the side where the ball went out.[19] Corner kicks are infamous "set pieces." Teams have plays already set up that are designed to score a goal. If you're making a corner kick in a competitive match, you'll put one of these plays into motion. While any player can make a goal kick, it's usually the goalkeeper who does it—and they're usually going to kick the ball way over to the other side of the field.

9 Score more goals than your opponent to win the match.

The object of the game of soccer is deceptively simple. In reality, there are usually very few goals scored per match. It's not uncommon to see matches with evenly matched, highly skilled teams end in only 1 or 2 goals scored.[20] If the match ends in a tie, that's often how it ends. In tournament play where there has to be a winner to move on to the next round, a tied match is resolved with penalty kicks, an overtime period, or both. The specific rules depend on the tournament.