

GEAR & GADGETS

Give Virtual Training A Shot

With youth leagues sidelined by Covid, these smart devices can help kids improve skills, sans teammates



FRANCESCO CICCONE/ILLUSTRATION

BY ASHLEY MATEO

ON MARCH 12, one day after NBA commissioner Adam Silver suspended the season due to Covid-19 concerns, Matt Toder received a similar notice from the director of his second-grade son's soccer league: All games and practices for the spring season were on hold until further notice.

Mr. Toder, a video producer in Brooklyn, had hoped Nathan might see the field come summer, but weeks have turned into months. Now, with a return to schools this fall looking dubious for millions of American kids, many youth sports leagues are likely done for 2020. Parents are looking for ways to keep their young athletes' skill levels up so they can return to turfs and courts next year without having squandered their competitive edge—or even better than ever.

In the absence of face-to-face coaching, Mr. Toder bought his son a DribbleUp smart soccer ball (from \$100, dribbleup.com), which syncs to a phone to track his son's moves and stats in real time. Alternatively, via a connected tablet, his son can take aim at virtual targets or join live and on-demand classes with pro trainers and compete in online drills against fellow athletes.

"Like any other skill, you learn through repetition," Mr. Toder said. "Touches on the ball at home aren't the same as touches in a game, but you're not going to get better at the latter without intense practice at the former."

Nothing can replace in-person contact or a real-life competitive environment, said Adam Rosante, a certified trainer and youth-exercise specialist who runs "Gym Class With Adam," a series of free YouTube workouts aimed at grade schoolers currently stuck at home. "But virtual practice sessions and at-home tools and technology have the potential to give kids similar benefits."

In addition to joining DribbleUp workouts, Mr. Toder's son also attended Zoom training sessions with his league's coaches.

Kids want ways to keep skill levels up so they can return to fields and courts without having squandered their edge.

The virtual workouts, focusing on fundamentals like dribbling and control, were specifically designed to be performed within three square feet in a living room.

"We also worked with his coach in individual sessions using WhatsApp video twice a week," Mr. Toder added. "We would call from a turf they kept open in Brooklyn, and the coach would have him run drills" while offering real-time feedback. "My son's passion for the game hasn't waned. He's invested as ever, if not more," he said. "And a focus on discrete footwork drills has kept him improving."

Emmanuel Nevills, 16, from

Westwood, Mass., also joined Zoom baseball "practices" while his club team was prohibited from playing games. "They had everyone on these big calls where the coaches would show an All-Star's performance and break down the mechanics to help us learn what to do or not to do," he said. The coaches also improvised by providing the players with solo training schedules and created a YouTube channel showing relevant drills, which helped him prepare for a shortened season, he said.

Players practicing in an environment where a coach can't eyeball them can still get invaluable instantaneous feedback from an array of smart tools.

FitLight Junior, a shrunken version of a training system many pro teams and athletes use, consists of wireless LED light pads that can be velcroed, suctioned, clipped or otherwise mounted on different surfaces around the home. The lights flash in patterns that you specify for sports ranging from basketball and boxing to volleyball and hockey via a tablet preloaded with training programs. Each program gives kids a set amount of time to deactivate the lights by touching them using limbs or a piece of equipment, depending on the game (\$899 for the 6-light package, fitlighttraining.com). FitLight logs your kid's reaction time and accuracy of movement in an app, helping develop speed, agility and hand-eye coordination when human opponents can't just drop by.

"FitLight and products like it force a child to react to an unpredictable stimulus, which is key to

any sport," said Mr. Rosante. "Picture a lacrosse midfielder taking on an attacker running toward him: Will they cut left? Right? An athlete's ability to react to the unpredictable can be the determining factor between a successful defense and watching the offense blow by." You can also help teach kids those skills, he added, via notably un-digital activities like playing tag or dodgeball.

For tennis players who normally rely on coaches, partners and expensive ball launchers to run drills, the portable Slinger Bag costs a fraction of the price of clunkier launchers spotted at tennis clubs (from \$550, slingerbag.com). This kind of technology, combined with the smartphone you may already carry in your pocket, can make solo practices more effective, said Christo Schultz, a United States Professional Tennis Association-certified coach and Head Tennis Professional at Charles River Country Club in Newton, Mass.

Mr. Schultz has also had athletes use the iPhone's Slo-Mo feature to record their strokes so he can send them immediate feedback and help them recognize where they can improve. "Parents are using technology like this a lot more and sending the videos for coaches to analyze," he said. "The utilization of this kind of technology makes coaching from afar a lot more fun and effective."

"In a time when kids are feeling less control in their lives than ever before," said Mr. Rosante, "practice gives them a way to experience control and see growth through their direct efforts."

HEY THERE, SPORT / FOUR DEVICES DESIGNED TO KEEP KIDS IN THE STARTING LINEUP



For Little Lionel Messis

Pair the smart DribbleUp sports ball with its partner app to access live and on-demand practice sessions and workouts that use virtual targets to challenge speed and agility during drills. From \$100, dribbleup.com



For Tiny Diana Taurasis

Kids can improve reaction time and hand-eye coordination by deactivating the wireless lights in a FitLight Trainer Junior set according to training programs you select. \$899 for the 6-light package, fitlighttraining.com



For Mini Mike Trouts

You might already have a pro-level sports tool in your pocket: Use the Slo-Mo feature on your iPhone 11 to record video of swing practice so coaches can critique your kid's form from afar. iPhone 11 from \$699, apple.com



For Raw Rafael Nadals

Kids can hit the local tennis court (or a mere driveway) with Slinger Bag, a rolling tennis ball launcher that looks like a suitcase and can fire up to 72 balls for nonstop stroke practice. From \$550, slingerbag.com



July, \$349



Kapsul W5, \$599



Windmill, \$395

5 QUESTIONS

Conditional Reasoning

That clunky old AC unit is wasting energy and ruining your décor. We ponder smarter ways to stay cool

1 What makes smart air conditioners so clever? Like any intelligent appliance, these AC units are synced and best controlled from a phone, letting you power them on and set temperature, fan speeds and sleep schedules while miles from home. And if, like me, you've grown accustomed to shouting at home appliances, the latest units also offer control via Alexa: Simply ask her to crank the air a bit if you're warm in bed but can't be bothered to move.

2 Do I really need to pay a premium for a stylish AC? Handsomely designed appliances are already filling living rooms. And now that people are spending so much time at home, "You don't want an eyesore staring back at you," said Windmill co-founder Mike Mayer. His brand's minimalist design has clean, curvy lines and a mesh face (\$395, windmillair.com). July brand units come with one of three optional faces—buy more to match your style to the seasons (from \$349, july.ac). Meanwhile Kapsul's W5 features a colorful readout and honeycomb grille on its oval face (\$599, kapsulair.com).

3 Are these sleek designs merely decorative? No. Beyond looking nice, the Windmill and July each aim their cooling vents up at a 45 degree angle, allowing air to flow down over a room rather than blasting you in the face. The quietly cooling Kapsul's squat 7-inch frame wastes less power and occupies only a sliver of your window, giving back much of your summertime view.

4 Any drawbacks? Extra tech can cause extra headaches: One night when the top vent of my Windmill test unit got covered by a curtain, it immediately fritzed, bleeping and blooping like R2-D2 throwing a tantrum for 10 minutes before getting stuck in Celsius mode. An analog version wouldn't face similar issues, but unlike big brands, notorious for hard-to-navigate customer service, these startups let you access live chat with real humans right from their homepages.

5 So are these new AC units worth the upgrade? Many Frigidaires offer more cooling power for less cash and can be made smart with aftermarket products. But rather than having your AC to storage so you don't have to watch it yellow in the winter sun, consider something you don't mind staring at year round. —Matthew Kitchen

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