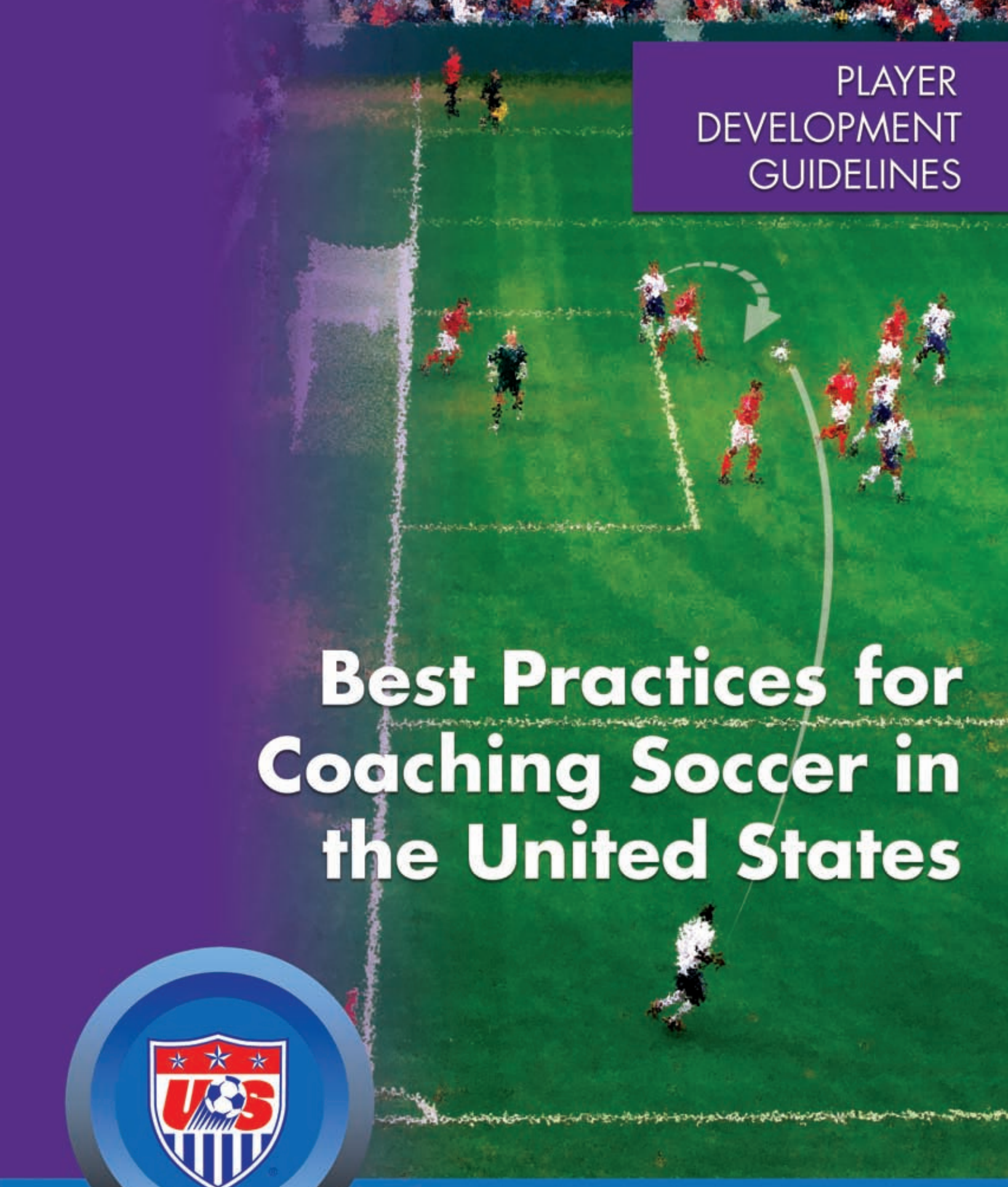
PLAYER DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES



Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States

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Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States

Introduction

The scope of coaching education in the United States is as large as the country itself. As our society is woven with the threads of many cultures, so is our soccer the product of the styles and experiences of the many diverse communities across the country.While this presents us with a set of challenges that are unique to the United States, this diversity also helps to continually breathe life into our soccer community. It is against this backdrop that U.S. Soccer approaches its responsibility for helping to prepare coaches to bring the game of soccer to our young players.

There is not just "one way" to teach soccer to players, nor is there just one style of coaching. There is a broad spectrum of styles and methods for how each of us experiences the game. Some of this comes from our backgrounds, while some of this also is the product of our own personalities. At the youth and junior levels, however, there is a set of fundamental principles that must be considered by anyone involved with soccer. In general, *young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that, succeed and fail.*

The coach's long term goal is to prepare the player to successfully recognize and solve the challenges of the game on his or her own. It is vital that the coach approaches soccer with this in mind.

This document is designed to give youth and junior level coaches a basic set of ideas that can help open up the game of soccer to children in ways that celebrate the spontaneous qualities of soccer. It is not designed to give the coach the "secrets" of the game. There are no secrets. This is part of soccer's beauty.

This document represents a series of recommendations that have been compiled and reviewed by U.S. Soccer's Coaching Education staff and the Men's and Women's National Team staffs. It presents a compilation of what U.S. Soccer considers to be an appropriate, comprehensive and responsible approach to developing sound soccer players.

Basic Ideas to Consider When Coaching Youth Soccer

The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the game becomes easier - both to teach and to learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well. As these individual skills and the creativity to make them come alive in the game are developed to a level of competence, the finer points, first of passing skill and later of team organization can be taught.

The town and club coaches who work with our youth and junior players on a daily basis play a fundamental role in the development of soccer players in this country. Towns and clubs should strive to place experienced coaches who have a clear understanding of the value of teaching technique at the youth and early junior levels. Equally important is the coach's personality and character. Working with 6- to 14-year-old children requires patience, kindness and respect.

Coaching soccer can be confusing at times because the game changes dramatically as the players improve in both skill and physical ability. When coaching young, developing players, as well as the adolescent players, U.S. Soccer feels it is helpful to keep the following ideas at the forefront of your mind:

1) Set up situations where the players can learn by playing the game. The game is the best teacher for young players.

2) Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player's development by organizing less, saying less and allowing the players to do more. Set up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer.

3) Teaching and learning the game of soccer is a process: make your goals seasonal, as well as daily and weekly. Often, at the younger ages, the developmental efforts of one season are not noticeable in children until sometime in the next season.

4) Set age-appropriate goals i.e., know what the child is able to do at that age.

5) From a developmental standpoint, the young ages are the best ones for learning skills. Spend the time now encouraging this growth. By the age of 17 the capacity to pick up new motor skills begins to wane, while the ability to conceptualize team organization, tactics and strategy increases. As a coach, work with these strengths, not against them.

6) Do not expect games and practices to look like professional soccer. If you want to use high level soccer as a teaching tool, focus on the individual skill level of professional players, not their organization. Give your players opportunities to see what older, more skilled players, i.e., a high school, college player or an older brother or sister, can do with the ball. On occasion, invite some of these players to participate in your practice. Use them to model good soccer qualities. Let your players learn by experiencing the game alongside or against these better players. Older players can also be used as "neutral players." In this case, the neutral player helps whichever team has the ball i.e., he or she never defends. Maybe that neutral player has limited touches and/or can't score, but he or she gives the team with the ball a better chance of keeping the ball. By helping to maintain possession, the neutral player(s) helps the game maintain some rhythm, and gives the kids a clearer picture of the game's possibilities.

7) Recognize and understand how the skills learned at each age are connected to preparing the player to move into the next phase of his or her development. Know what the next level of play is, and the general tools that your players should carry with them as they move on. Help them to be prepared.

8) Allow your players to develop these requisite skills in an environment where the main goal is to have fun with the ball.

9) The value of matches is that they provide youngsters with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skill and creativity. It is always nice to win, however that should not be your focus at the younger age groups (through 14 years).

10) Have a clear idea of what it is you want to accomplish at practice. Create exercises/games that replicate and repeat the movements and situations that are found in soccer and that allow the player to grow comfortable and confident with the ball at his or her feet. Encourage players to move with the ball at his or her feet and deal with boundaries, opponents, teammates and goals. Keep in mind that soccer is a pretty simple game. If you are involved in soccer for long enough, you begin to realize that all the many little games that work are really just variations on the same basic concepts. As long as the parameters that you have established in your exercises/small-sided games are true to soccer (goals for scoring and defending), creates the problems that you want the kids to solve (protecting the ball while dribbling, etc.), and allows your players to be challenged and find some success, you're on the right track.

11) Don't be afraid to experiment to find what works best.

12) Remember that the game is the best teacher for the players. Coaches and parents should think of themselves more as facilitators, monitors, guides or even participants, to provide a rich environment for the kids to learn from and enjoy.

Age Appropriate Recommendations for the U-6 to U-18 Age Groups

The following pages represent U.S. Soccer's recommendations on best practices in soccer according to the player's chronological age, from Under-6 through Under-18. It is just as important, however, to consider the players' "soccer age" (i.e., his or her level of soccer competence), when determining themes to address in practice and matches. Remember that these recommendations are based on the assumption that the players have the ball skill necessary to move onto the next level of challenges. It is the responsibility of the coaches to continually evaluate and assess the needs of their players so that they can play soccer at the appropriate level. Parents and coaches alike should also take care to give their players a variety of playing experiences so that they are able to find some games where they are more challenged and some games where it is a little bit easier. In this case, it is the responsibility of the adults to evaluate this on a team and individual basis.

Encourage Creativity and Ball Skills Before Tactics!

The youth coach has an important role in encouraging the development of these fundamental tools. One of the goals of this coaching guide is to introduce parents/youth coaches to an approach to coaching youth players that 1) embraces the lessons that are found in the game itself, and 2) is player-centered rather than coach-centered.

What does this mean? Consider the following comments by Hans Bongers on the growth of soccer around the world in the last 30 years, and how adults/coaches have approached player-development:

> *Organized soccer "boomed" in the seventies. Not only did the number of people around the world who play in leagues drastically increase, also the age at which the youngest kids could start to play official games went down to 5 years and even younger. Parallel to this, many well organized coaching clinics and soccer schools, based on different educational theories were created, all hoping that a new Pele or (Johan) Cruyff would emerge from them and the brilliant collective play of the Brazilian team in the sixties and the Dutch ("total soccer") team of the early seventies could be reproduced. In the last decade many soccer associations from different countries have asked themselves how (even if!) soccer can be taught. (Hans Bongers: Somagic Street Soccer/ www.streetsoccer.hypermart.net).*

By default, the well-intentioned and seemingly reasonable approach of many youth coaches is to look to adult soccer as their guide to teaching the game. What most youth coaches find helpful in

the adult game is the organization and positional responsibilities (tactics) that the adult players exhibit so well. They are concepts that adults can understand well and so, as coaches, many tend to bring an organizational or tactical approach to coaching youth. Coaches often focus on keeping the players under control and teaching what appears to be the basics of the game: organization, positions, tactics, how to prepare to win games. We choose order over apparent chaos. It is tempting to strive to have the youth games look like adult games, with kids holding their own in set positions, organized and disciplined. The magic of the Dutch players of the early seventies, or Brazil's great players of the sixties, however, was not created from an organized practice routine. It began when they were children, in pickup games where the player and the game were the dominant factors. There were neither adults nor a set schedule of mandatory practices and games. That said, we live in a different world today. Adult supervision is often necessary to ensure proper safety. The presence of adults, however, does not have to inhibit the opportunity for children to be creative and experimental in their approach to learning soccer.

Manfred Schellscheidt, Boys U-14 National Team Head Coach, describes the scene that many of our beginner level players face in the following quote:

> *Let us take a look at what typically happens to our youngsters as they are introduced to the sport of soccer. Day one for most of our players is probably the day mom and dad registers them with the local or the town recreation league. Based on the number of applicants, teams are formed, coaches assigned, and playing fields coordinated. The available fields serve all ages and are quite often adult dimensions. And so the games begin. Children that may have never previously kicked a ball are faced with the ultimate challenge - playing eleven v eleven on a field too big for them. Are we really surprised that they cannot do this? But do not worry; this is where the coach comes in. He or she is the one who is called on to fix and remedy the situation. With the help of positioning, the players are spread all over the field and told, 'This is how the big guys do it. The ones who just won the World Cup.' Since this proved to be the winning formula, we must all learn from them and imitate them. (Manfred Schellscheidt: Experimenting With The Game).*

In reality, what is needed from the youth coach is quite different. Again, we need to keep in mind that most of the great soccer players today played their early soccer in unsupervised games.

> *"International conferences about this topic often conclude that well-intended coaches and parents should try to withdraw from influencing young players too much, if not completely. It is suggested that if you do want to train young players the emphasis should be on 'play and fun' and various smaller versions of the 11-against-11 game have seen the light. One concept that pops up more and more in all these discussions is 'Street Soccer.' 'The streets' (alleys, parks, beaches ...) being the mysterious setting where brilliant players like Pele and Cruyff – and their fellow magicians in other sports – developed in a natural way." (Hans Bongers: Somagic Street Soccer).*

A primary focus for the coach at the youth level, through the U-12 age group, is to provide an environment that comes close to simulating the "pickup" games of our youth. In this setting much of the creativity and personality of kids developed naturally, without the involvement of adults. Kids need to be allowed to play freely, develop their skills and use them in a creative manner. Coaches should organize only so far as it helps to create this environment. Again, Manfred Schellscheidt comments on this idea of "street soccer" and how the coach can help to create this environment.

> *Beside the games, what do our training sessions look like? Are they mobile or static? Are the players free to experiment and learn from the game or are they constantly instructed? Is there room for trial and error, or are they simply told what to do and where to go? (Breathing life into soccer) ... is more about converting our training sessions into some form of street soccer in which players, with the help of the coach, experiment with the basic elements of the game in a competitive way... Learning (in this case, soccer) is about experimenting with new things and relating to them. Mastery means coming to grips with things we have experimented with, often with repetition. It is all about developing an understanding and feel for the game. The lessons for all of us will come from the game and so will the answers. In the beginning the person and the game are separate, maybe even far apart. When things get good, the game and the person become one. (Manfred Schellscheidt: Experimenting With The Game)*

With this in mind, try to encourage comfort with the ball and the confidence to use this skill creatively. Encourage the dribbler at the younger ages; your team of 8 to 10 year olds should be full of them. Dribbling, at the younger ages, is the child's attempt to gain control over the ball. Controlling the ball is the primary skill that every other skill in soccer depends upon. Although controlling the ball may seem to be a simple task, it actually takes an enormous amount of the child's energy. Do not expect him or her to look to pass or to pass with any level of competence or awareness, until he or she has first mastered this skill. Consider these two points. Children from about age 6 to 12 have an almost limitless capacity to learn body movement and coordination (i.e., motor skills). At the same time, their intellectual capacity to understand spatial concepts like positions and group play is limited. Work to their strengths.

CONSIDER THIS: At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for children to develop their individual relationship with the ball. The fact that younger children are placed into team environments is not their fault. Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal. Do the same with the rest of your players. Work to bring all your players up to that level of confidence and comfort with the ball. Coaches should avoid the impulse to "coach" their players from "play to play" in order to help them win the match. Coaches should not be telling their young players to "pass rather than dribble," to "hold their positions" or to "never" do something (like pass or dribble in front of the goal).

Many kids who have been involved in organized soccer will often look to pass the ball or kick the ball down field as their first option. They have been taught to "share" the ball or they have learned that the best way to keep from making a "mistake" with the ball at their feet is to kick it away as fast as possible. For this reason, it helps if the coach continually encourages the players to make dribbling their first option. It may also help to make the players take at least two touches on the ball before they can look to pass. Remember that making mistakes at these early ages is a very important part of the player's learning and development. Encourage risk-taking and applaud effort.

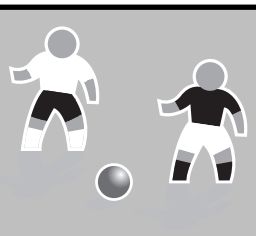
Ball Control and Creativity: 6 - 12 years old

PRE ACADEMY LEVEL: U-6 through U-12 Age Groups

U-6: K and 1st graders

Soccer at these ages should be discouraged in any form other than as a fun activity for kids, that happens to includes a soccer ball. There should be groups of players rather than teams. Fees should be nominal. Attendance should be optional. Creating a joyful environment is mandatory.

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: 3 v 3 is best option for these ages
GK Status: Goalkeepers should not be used
Field Size: 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)
Ball Size: 3
When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.

■ SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE:

Five- and six-year olds are too young to be involved in any structured, organized soccer program. At most, they should be involved in fun activities that encourage the children to explore their physical abilities, while also including a ball with which to play. Make sure these are activity-based games that emphasize exploration and experimentation with the rolling, spinning, and bouncing qualities of the ball. The soccer ball should be considered a toy. There should be no activities where players wait in lines to perform a pre-determined movement or required action.

Five- and six- year olds, although still young, are beginning to gain more control over their bodies. At the same time, it is still new to them and they will require a lot of time and energy figuring out what their bodies can do, and how to use this developing coordination. Children at this age also love to use their imagination when they play. Keep this in mind when designing games. They

enjoy playing on their terms, and as a by-product of their play, they will gain some limited comfort with the ball. Although they love to play, their ability to stay focused on any one thing is very limited. Keep your activities short and simple. Finally, even as they are steadily developing physical and mental abilities, they are still very young. Always treat children with care, patience and give plenty of encouragement. It can be helpful to include parents in the practice/play time so they can take ideas home with them to their backyards or parks. If children must be involved in these organized practice times, they should be having so much fun that when they go home, the soccer ball becomes one of their favorite toys.

■ DURATION OF PRACTICE; RATIO OF BALL TO CHILD AT PRACTICE

30 to 45 minutes is the best option for these ages. Most of the practice should be spent in ratios of one ball per child or one ball per two children.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

The children should be having fun with the ball. There should be periods of active playing where everyone is involved, and there should be ample opportunities for short breaks for water and for catching their breath. If there is more than one adult/coach, the children should be divided into smaller groups, with at least one adult per group. At these young ages, children work hard and tire quickly. Allow them to have "active rests," where they are not running but are trying to do something specific with the ball, often sitting or standing. Everyone should be occupied with something, even when resting. Keep the numbers from 1 v 1 to 3 v 3 and keep as many children actively involved with a ball as possible. Let them go to small goals with no goalkeepers. When possible, a size 3 soccer ball should be used.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

U.S. Soccer recommends that there be no organized matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age.

CONSIDER THIS: At these young ages, the primary goal is to make the player's experience with soccer so enjoyable that when he or she has a choice of activities, he or she choose to play soccer on his or her own.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

At these ages, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer-related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often. There should not be any discussions about positions or any other team concepts.

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

Patience, good humor, and a willingness to see the world through a child's eyes. Also, the ability to speak their language and accept that the children's play will not look at all like soccer.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

Children at these ages should not be playing any organized games. Playing with and against their teammates during practice times is sufficient and is to be encouraged.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Children at this age should be able to play when they want to play, and walk away when they are through.

■ TRAVEL

None.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.

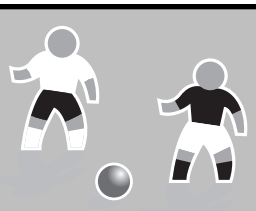
■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC.

None.

U-8: 1st and 2nd Graders

Soccer is still all about having fun with the ball and encouraging the children to want to have the ball at their feet. The numbers should still be one and two players to a ball.

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: 3 v 3 is best option for these ages
GK Status: Optional. Players should not be limited to playing one "position"
Field Size: 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)
Ball Size: 3
When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.

■ SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE

These children are still young. By the end of this phase, (around eight- years-old) children are beginning to be able to apply past experience to the present situation. For example, at a simple level, they can remember what they were shown or what they tried with the ball from last practice. At the same time, this ability is not present on a consistent basis. They are still not able to imagine consequences (i.e., if you do this, what will happen?). Let them learn through experience.

Do not attempt to replicate organizational schemes that you have seen older teams doing. Seven and eight year olds are not capable of playing anything that resembles organized soccer. For example, team concepts such as combination play or positions should not be introduced at this age.

Do use older players as mentors and role models. Often the younger players will learn simply by watching how the older players move or by what they can do with the ball.

GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

■ PRACTICE:

There should be a lot of playing with the ball in small numbers for relatively short periods of time. A key focus for this age is to encourage players not to fear the ball. Give each player plenty of opportunities to experience the ball at his or her own pace. For example, organizing games where there are multiple goals and balls for the players to work with. Also, games where they are changing direction and changing how fast they run, and dealing with balls on the ground and with bouncing balls.

"I don't believe skill was, or ever will be, the result of coaches. It is a result of a love affair between the child and the ball" – Manfred Schellscheidt

■ DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practices should last 45 to 60 minutes. For most of the practice, each player should be actively involved with a ball. Games of 1 v 1 or games up to 3 v 3 with multiple balls involved (2:1 ratio of player to ball) and games to goals are also enjoyable and effective for this age.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

No Lines. No laps. No Lectures. Attendance is still optional. Provided there is adequate supervision, children at this age should be allowed to come in and out of practice as they please. At this point, if you have not already done so, you may want to introduce some boundaries. However, don't allow the boundaries of the environment to hinder the training time by producing frequent stoppages of play because the ball goes 'out of bounds.' Try to keep the flow of the game going. Encourage informal play without pressure to "perform." Encourage the basic skills and give the players a lot of time with the ball. This will ultimately build their confidence. Make sure to always include games to goals.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

Similar to the U-6 age group, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer-related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often, as well as some simple ideas for maneuvering in tight spaces and past opponents. Coaches should exclude discussions about positions or other team concepts. When addressing technique, consider that kids learn much by watching and copying. A good picture of proper technique can be a very powerful learning tool. Coaches should say things such as, "See if you can make it look like this." Limit time spent breaking down the mechanics. Instead, try to do most of your teaching of technique by offering a picture and then set up fun games where the objective of the game is for players to practice certain ways to control the ball. This approach allows the player a certain amount of freedom to develop their ball control and accept that there is more than one way of doing it. This is applicable at least through U-12.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

U.S. Soccer recommends that there be no organized matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age. There will be no need to keep score or even be very involved, except to enjoy the players and their effort and joy. Every player should look forward to opportunities to have the ball at his or her feet

and to score. It is the coach's responsibility to encourage this fear-free culture. For the 7- and 8-year-old groups, these games should only be seen as another fun activity that happens to include a soccer ball. They are not ready for specific soccer type information and there should be no emphasis on team concepts or positions. They will have plenty of opportunities to play in "real soccer games," as they get older. Most of the information from coaches during these times will pertain to each player's individual relationship with the soccer ball — to want it, how to find it, deal with it, feel more comfortable with it, keep it close, etc.

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

This coach must clearly understand the capabilities and limitations of this age and appreciate the power of learning by watching. He or she must have the ability to demonstrate or to use older players to demonstrate.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

No organized matches where the score is recorded.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Children at this age should not be participating in a mandatory soccer program and should be free to participate at their own pace. There should not be a penalty or consequence for missing practice and no discussion about "commitment." An effort should be made to include any child that wishes to play soccer. It is healthy and appropriate to group players according to ability level, but movement between groups should be open and fluid in order to reflect changes in ability and individual development from year to year or every six months.

■ TRAVEL

None.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

None.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.

CONSIDER THIS: How can the coach help all his or her players to develop to their potential? First, help your weaker players to develop their confidence with the ball. At the same time, continue to challenge your stronger players to expand their creativity and confidence. Confidence is the key. The more time they spend during practice and games with the ball at their feet, the more comfortable they will become, the more confident they will become, the more they will look to get involved, and the more fun they will have with soccer.

Remember that the level of skill and competence that a 9-year-old exhibits is no indication of the skill and competence that he or she will exhibit at 16 or 18 years of age. You cannot predict which 9-year-old will develop into a real player. Therefore, work to encourage all your players to be competent and comfortable with the ball. This will give all your players the same opportunity to reach their potential.

Work during practice to move all your players forward at their own pace. Do not be concerned with match results. Be concerned that all your players want the ball at their feet and they want to score. If you can accomplish this, you have successfully allowed your group to grow as soccer players. Unlike practice, you cannot add more balls/goals during games to give kids more chances with the ball. But you can emphasize certain themes for the players to focus on, such as getting involved, attacking the goal, taking chances, and then spend the length of the game reinforcing these points. This approach will give your players the green light to experiment and be creative - qualities that, unfortunately at the younger ages, are often discouraged on game day, in the name of being safe and winning.

Ball Skill, Creativity and a Gradual Insight into the Game: 10 - 14 years old

ACADEMY LEVEL: U-10 through U-12 Age Groups

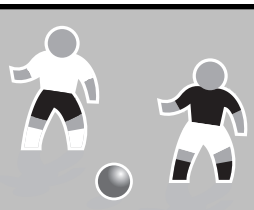
CONSIDER THIS: At the youth level, games are a forum for players to test their ball skills and game awareness, and should be considered an additional means of development, rather than the objective. Results are important as it gives the players a competitive focus in the match. Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that:

- is free flowing,
- is coach-guided, not coach-directed,
- demands that all players on the field, regardless of their specified position, participate in defending and attacking.

U-10: 3rd and 4th graders

Soccer for this age is a fun activity for the kids that encourages a lot of games to goals and encourages experimentation with the ball. The ratio of balls to players should be small enough that all your players are involved all the time. The focus is on developing a relationship with the ball in a joyful environment. There should be no standings and no awards.

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: A maximum of 6 v 6 including a goalkeeper
Game Duration: 2 X 25 minutes
Substitution: Free
GK Status: Players rotate as goalkeeper in game. All players should experience playing all the different spots on the field during the season.
Field Size: 60 yards x 40 yards
Ball Size: 4

■ SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE

At this age, there are some children that are becoming more physically mature. Among your group, there are now some bigger and faster players whose eye-hand and eye-foot coordination is a little ahead of the majority of your players. Some of your players may also demonstrate a greater capacity to stay focused for longer periods of time. At the same time, they are still people of action rather than thought. Explanations must still be brief, concise and purposeful. What seemed to make sense to them last practice may have to be almost relearned at the next practice. Care should be taken with players, regardless of athletic ability, to address ball skill, especially in tight spaces. The faster, stronger players should not be encouraged to use their athleticism to solve all their problems. Building comfort with the ball at ages nine and ten will provide them with a variety of crucial tools they will need as they get older, and the level of ball skill and athleticism rises. Begin to introduce the players to the idea of thinking about their decisions and movement as being related to themselves and one or at most two of their teammates and one or two of their opponents.

A Discussion on Winning and Losing at these Younger Ages

Competition is a central element in a player's development. At the youth level (ages 6-12), however, a competitive environment should not be a result-oriented environment. The differences must be clear. A competitive environment at the youth level encourages decisions from player and coach alike that focus on performance rather than outcome (favoring ball skill and inventiveness as the means to find success within the rules and spirit of the game). The result is just one indicator of performance and at this age, not the most important one.

Competition among kids playing games will always exist, whether adults are present or not. Making soccer "fun" at the younger ages does not mean that competition is removed. Competition can be positive and healthy. Scoring goals and winning the game are fundamental parts of soccer. Allow the children to enjoy this aspect without making it the focus. Set up other skill based objectives as the focal point. At the same time, recognize that children will find competition in anything you set up. Let them compete. In youth and junior level soccer, the emphasis and manner of the coach will often determine if the competitive environment is healthy or not.

At the youth level, matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, and fitness), not as the aim. These competitive situations are a series of tests for kids. In this respect, the usefulness of the game can occur in many different forms. Focus on the process and performance rather than the outcome, but be prepared for the possibility that your team may lose some games in the short term with this approach. Keep in mind that it is actually easier to win games at this age group with teams that are "organized" but lack skill. Placing the more physically mature players down the middle of the field and just asking players to 'kick it down the middle'

or only allowing players to specialize at one position may lead to more victories. This approach, however, does not effectively teach the players the game and prepare them to continue on in the sport. Instead, a skillful approach to playing soccer should be emphasized, even though this may result in conceding goals or losing games in the short term. During the learning process, ball control and passing can lead to more costly mistakes. At the same time, the coach can manipulate the level and variety of the competition to ensure that players and teams are being given the opportunity to win and to lose games. Valuable lessons can be learned in both scenarios. In the end, it is still the responsibility of the coach and the parents, to manage how competition is addressed and managed among his or her players.

CONSIDER THIS: U.S. Soccer recommends that teams play in double age group brackets. This allows players to play with other players of similar ability. Instead of one team of 10 year olds and one team of 11 year olds, there are two teams of mixed ages, with each player participating according to his ability. Additionally, up through the U-14 age group, teams should play in their own age bracket. After the U-14 age bracket, teams should be allowed to choose their age bracket based upon the level of competition.

■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Building the player's skill base continues to be the most important goal of the season. At this age, this can be done through the introduction of a few more players in the games the coach sets up. Depending on the skill level of the group, anywhere from 3 v 3 to 5 v 5 plus goalkeepers should be the range during practice. Keep in mind that even the more competent players will not be working effectively as a group once the numbers get beyond 5 v 5. In the smaller numbers, emphasis must still be on creating 1 v 1 or 2 v 1 duels on the field. These are key situations that will continue to confront players throughout their career. Gaining competence and mastery over these numbers is the key to preparing players for the future.

What I hear I forget,
What I hear and see I remember a little;
What I hear, see and ask questions about
or discuss with someone else, I begin
to understand;
What I hear, see, discuss and do, I acquire
knowledge and skill;
What I teach to another, I master.

(Adapted from the Chinese Philosopher Confucius)

■ PRACTICE

Keep the sessions simple and player centered. Give the players simple problem solving opportunities and plenty of opportunities to score goals. It is also important to be positive and to continue to create repeated opportunities for the players to express themselves through their ability with the ball, regardless of the outcome of their effort. Play, as both fun and as competition, is paramount. The more opportunities for each player to have experience with the ball, in fun games that allow them to go to goal, the better it will be for that player.

CONSIDER THIS FOR AGES 8 TO 14: How do you set up a practice that allows players to "do"? How can a coach pull together the various games into an organized practice?

First, keep things simple. Include no more than three or four exercises. For example, begin with a warm up that incorporates players moving with the ball. Then move to a game, but introduce a particular challenge or set of challenges for the players to solve (4 v 4 game with four goals; 4 v 4 game with no goalkeepers, where the players must hit the net on the fly to score a goal; 4 v 4 dribbling game; 4 v 4 with neutral players; etc.). Each of these games differs slightly in the challenges that are highlighted. However, the games still retain the essential qualities of soccer: attacking, defending, dribbling, passing, dealing with teammates and opponents, and scoring goals. Finally, let them play a game, 3 v 3, 4 v 4, 5 v 5, or 6 v 6 etc., (depending on their age and ability to deal with these numbers), where there are no particular twists to the game, but where you can verbally emphasize and encourage players to experiment and take risks confronting some of these challenges your practice has been addressing. To help ensure that your practice will add to your players' development, consider the following principles, questions and examples.

- *Do your players have repeated opportunities to have the ball at their feet?*
- *Do they have repeated chances to score goals?*
- *Are they asked to dribble and score in soccer situations?* A soccer situation is one that includes the ball, opponents, teammates, space, pressure, rules, time and goals (KNVB: The Dutch Vision On Youth Football).
- *Are your players having fun?* Generally speaking, if players have a lot of opportunities to play with the ball at their feet, and to score goals in games that replicate soccer, they will have fun.
- *How many players are involved?* 4 v 4 is the smallest way of playing soccer without losing any of the ingredients that make up soccer. There are always opportunities to play

deep, wide or backwards because of the numbers. Players are always confronted with match situations. Also, due to the limited numbers, it is easier for children (and coaches) to recognize the different moments in soccer that are constantly repeated (KNVB: The Dutch Vision On Youth Football). Some of the variations of the 4 v 4 game have already been introduced. The basic 4 v 4 game is set up on a field that is small enough to keep everyone involved, and big enough to give players room to be successful with the ball. There is one ball and two small goals, one on each end line. The elements of soccer the coach chooses to encourage will color the game somewhat. The power of 4 v 4, however, is that even with little or no involvement by the coach, these small games offer the players countless valuable soccer lessons. Adding players and increasing the field space accordingly will both increase options for the players as well as present new challenges.

- *How big is the field?* Are the players able to stay connected in your game/exercise? Does the size of the field lend itself to what you are working on? Again, the field should be small enough to keep everyone involved yet big enough to give players room to be successful with the ball. You may find that your first try at setting up the field dimensions does not work. It may be either too small and the kids can't get anything going, or it may be so big that the game seems to be played in pockets of two or three players while everyone else watches from a distance. Go ahead and experiment with the field size until you are comfortable. With coaches, as it is with players, learning occurs through trial and error.

- *Are there enough balls/goals so that many players are able to get touches on the ball and chances at goal?* Go ahead and experiment: add/remove ball/goals, increase/decrease the field size to help replicate the soccer environment you want. For example, an exercise designed to give your players lots of opportunities to run with the ball at their feet may result in the same few players dominating ball touches because of uneven talent levels. Instead of telling them they should pass to a less talented teammate, add some more balls and maybe some more goals to your game. This allows more players to experience the soccer situation you want replicated. Do not worry that it may look somewhat chaotic, or that it is difficult to keep score. Just focus on whether or not your players are getting repeated chances to run with the ball, deal with opponents and score goals. If this is happening, then you have successfully added to your players' soccer experience.

- *How long is your exercise?* Can the players maintain their focus and discipline throughout? If not, make adjustments. Something that can help the coach anytime an exercise is not working is to give the kids a quick water break. It will give you an opportunity to make the needed adjustments, or to move on to the next exercise. Perhaps the exercise is not the problem. Maybe it is a short attention span day for your team of 10-year-olds. Don't fight it. Use your breaks wisely. Keep things moving and stay alert for waning concentration.

- *How long is your practice?* Do your players finish practice wishing to play longer, or does your practice seem to unravel in the last 20 minutes or so? Make the practice as fun as possible. This means a lot of playing soccer, some water breaks when necessary, and little or no talking. Many times players are less than interested in a lecture about the finer points of the game. Keep in mind that young players have shorter attention spans than adults; do not treat them like adults. Forty-five minutes is a good length of time for six and seven year olds to be playing soccer in an organized practice. One hour to seventy-five minutes is best for players up to twelve years old. Anything longer and you are setting yourself up for aggravation that neither you nor your players deserve.

■ DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practices should consist of no more than 60 minutes of structured, adult-directed soccer with an additional 30 minutes allotted for free play/self expression and self-improvement.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

As much as possible let players experience soccer through 3 v 3 to 5 v 5 games that last for no more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time. The small numbers allow the players to gain critical practice at 1 v 1 and 2 v 1 situations, while still allowing for the fun and feel of a soccer game. The time limit gives the players a predetermined amount of uninterrupted play, while also allowing an opportunity after 10 minutes for the players to refocus. At this age, players are typically ready for games or activities that help them learn when to play the ball sideways and backward. They also can begin to appreciate and enjoy playing the game skillfully.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

Players at this age should be limited to a few organized matches per season, and they should require little or no travel. Remember, these are young children who have several more years to go before they will have all the tools needed to attempt soccer in the adult form. The best path to truly preparing them for the adult game is not have them practice at playing the adult game; rather it is by giving them repeated opportunities to experience soccer in a more manageable form for their age.

A team of 9 year olds who hold their positions and maintain a steady group of defenders who rarely, if ever venture into the attack, looks like a well disciplined and well organized team. However, U.S. Soccer does not recommend this as a proper approach to developing players at this age. It does not develop good soccer players. This approach hinders the player's ability to experience and enjoy the natural spontaneity of the game. It does not allow the players to have an equal opportunity to go and "find" the game based on what they see from the game or to handle

the ball and develop instincts for the game. These are skills that they will need at the older ages and that are often lacking in the older players. This approach, while "successful" in the short term fails the players in the long run because the environment does not allow the players to develop the tools they will need to be truly "competitive" i.e., prepared to deal with the game, at the older ages

A Discussion on Substitution Patterns at this Age:

Players should be given the opportunity to play soccer for extended, uninterrupted periods of time. This allows them to get a better feel for the flow of a soccer game. For example, it is more beneficial for a player to play for 12 straight minutes, than for him or her to play in two 6 minute periods. Substitution should be used to address injury, fatigue and lack of effort. It should not be used to punish a player for a soccer-related decision. At a minimum, players at this age should be playing 50% of the game. Ideally, the rosters are small enough to allow for close to 100% playing time for everyone.

CONSIDER THIS: Do You Notice an Uneven Skill Level within Your Team?

Often times on younger teams (8-10 years) you will notice a small number of relatively competent players per team who always seem to be around the ball. They have some quality(s), speed, strength, tenaciousness, and ball skill, that separate them from their teammates. The rest of the kids are more like on-field spectators, never actively seeking to participate. If the ball does land at their feet, they look to get it as far away from themselves as possible, as quickly as possible. A consistent problem for the youth coach and players is that the ability level on a team is very uneven. This is a normal situation for most younger teams across the country, especially, but not limited to the recreation level. There are several reasons for this imbalance: 1) Children start playing at different ages. There could be first-timers playing alongside kids who have been playing for several seasons. 2) Children in this age bracket develop at different rates, both physically and emotionally. 3) For many kids who lack the basic soccer tools, a full-out match can be intimidating. To address this challenge, try playing games with 3 balls going at one time. Another option is to be creative when choosing your groups for 'mini-games,' putting the more confident players together playing against each other and the more developing players playing in a different area. Occasionally using these methods will allow for all of the players to be challenged at a level that is appropriate to their own developmental level.

- GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

The coach should make comments that help players to stay involved and keep track of things without giving them all of the answers: "Join the game," "Find the ball," "Go get the ball," "Don't hide." The coach for this age group does not focus on positions, yet encourages everyone to take

part in attacking and defending. Try to manage the amount of information or feedback your players are receiving immediately after practices or matches. In today's youth soccer landscape, kids at these ages are being overloaded with adult feedback and evaluation. Too much or inaccurate information can be counterproductive to your goals.

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

Energetic. Plays while facilitating practice. Stimulates ideas.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 20 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match. Players should be given two days rest per week. In league play, there should be no more than the equivalent of 1 game per weekend. There should be no standings or post season playoffs and a limited number of small-sided round robins. Tournament play should not be encouraged.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

At these ages, it is recommended that parents discourage their children from specializing in or playing only soccer and encourage participation in a number of different sports and activities.

■ TRAVEL

In state travel only with a 1 hour maximum travel time.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC.

May attend a few jamborees or festivals per year where no results are compiled.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.

CONSIDER THIS: At the latter stages of the youth level (U-10 through U-12), the goal is to provide training and game environments that promote the continued growth of ball skill, an increased game awareness, and an appreciation for taking calculated risks in the attack through the 3 v 3 to 9 v 9 (U-12) game model, all in an environment that the players enjoy.

The small-sided game model is an effective method for developing ball skill and game awareness because it increases opportunities for players to have contact with the ball and to both attack and defend without the tactical regimentation that can occur in 11 v 11 soccer.

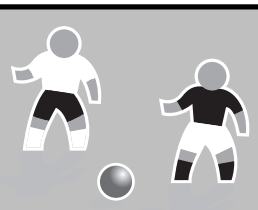
U-12: 5th - 6th graders

Some Thoughts about This Age

The U-12 age group seems to be the moment in youth soccer that causes the most discussion concerning player development. Are these players young adults or are they still children? As soccer players, they are still young. Although there are some areas of the game where the players are beginning to make progress, this is an age where ball skill and soccer instincts must be encouraged above the results.

Physically, eleven and twelve year olds' bodies are beginning to change. Often, this results in awkward growth spurts. Rapid bone growth often results in painful joint conditions such as Osgood-Schlotters syndrome in the knees. Players that, in the past, showed precise control over their bodies and the ball will sometimes now temporarily lose this coordination. As their bodies grow, especially the 11-year-olds, they will also need more rest. The coach may also find the 11-year-old to be somewhat contrary and oppositional. Typically by 12 years old, children are regaining some of the coordination and compliance that was temporary lost at 11. Generally at this age, there is more enthusiasm and ability to focus their energy toward both individual and team challenges. Coaches can use this enthusiasm and focus to their advantage by giving the players specific problems to solve within the games they play.

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: 9 v 9
Game Duration: 2 X 30
Substitution: Free
GK Status: GK share time in order of priority
Field Size: 50-55x70 yards for 8v8 (U-11) and 55-60x80-85 yards for 9v9 (U-12)
Ball Size: 4

CONSIDER THIS:

The Football Association (FA), the governing body of English football, has made the following recommendations regarding the Football Academy program, which targets the top young players in England and is run as a mandatory developmental arm of the top professional league in England (the English Premier League –EPL):

* Players aged 12 to 18 should play a maximum of 30 games per year with their club.
* No 11-a-side soccer until age 12.

* The level of competition should be compatible with the player's colleagues and opposition. (e.g., Not so difficult that success is not an option, and not so easy that the players become unmotivated.)

* Clubs and coaches should take care that players: Play alongside, and against, boys of a comparable standard, enabling them to put into practice skills learned during the week in an environment where they will be stretched.

* Play in a competitive environment where quality of performance is more important than results.

* The facilities (field size, ball, etc.) and match officials should also be compatible with the player's ability.

* The atmosphere surrounding this program should emphasize the role of matches as part of a development program in which the result is not of primary importance. The coaching staff should use the match program to reinforce the key aspects of the player's individual technical development.

* The number of games per season must be limited to a maximum of 30 and as the number of games will be limited to 30, it is important that none of them are wasted.

(www.theFA.com)

The Onset of Puberty

Between the ages of 12 to 14, children often experience a physical growth spurt that affects their balance and coordination. Oftentimes, they gain physical strength and power, but temporarily lose agility and suppleness. As soccer players, this means potentially losing some control over the ball. If the technical foundation is not strong, soccer is no longer fluid and fun for the players. It is at

this point that these players may move toward sports where it is easier for them to achieve some level of success – more traditionally American sports that demand "hand-eye" coordination such as baseball, basketball and lacrosse. It is critical, therefore, that we ensure that the players are getting the necessary technical foundation at the younger ages. This may prevent the loss of players during their middle school years who are capable and athletic, yet lack the foundation to pull them through their temporary physical awkwardness.

■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Practices should consist of up to 75 minutes of structured, adult-guided soccer with an additional 15 to 30 minutes allotted for free play/self expression and self-improvement.

CONSIDER THIS: Great skill begins with the desire to master the ball and the key elements of the game.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

The themes addressed in practice should be developed and expanded on from those that they dealt with at the U-10 level. Each practice should address individual ball skill as well as individual and small group decisions, in the attack and when defending. As they mature and are capable of keeping track of more things that are occurring on the field, we can increase the number of players that compete against each other.

The most dramatic change from the U-10 age group is the players increased ability to stay focused and to begin taking responsibility for their decisions on the field. At the same time, this is still an eleven- or twelve- year old. While his or her concentration is better than a ten-year-old, it is still in no way that of an adult. Make sure that the game problems that are created for him or her to solve are still relatively simple (up to 6 v 6 or 7 v 7). Continue to encourage risk taking and experimenting with the ball, but begin to get them thinking about themes such as working together with his or her teammates to solve problems, as well as getting him or her used to keeping track of the other players on the field.

As far as positions are concerned, players should learn the game based on principles of the game rather than positions on the field. Players' decisions on the field should be based on what makes sense to them in the game. Let the players experience different positions and the different challenges that these positions create. If children are placed into the straightjacket of positional play too early it will only destroy their instincts to be involved in the game.

As they move to the full-sided game at the U-14 age and beyond, the eventual and ideal goal, at the senior level, is for all the players to be able to keep track of all the other players on the field and then to deal effectively with the situations that evolve out of these relationships. The coach can create or eliminate the conditions of time and space based on how effectively players are able to cope with the conditions of the game.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

The game continues to be about individual ball control. At the same time, players should begin thinking of their decisions and movement as being related to their teammates and opponents in numbers up to 8 v 8 (not including GK). Matches should be played in numbers no larger than 9 v 9 (including GK).

Matches are a forum for players to test their ball skills and game awareness and should be considered an additional means of development, rather than the objective. Results play a role in development as it gives the players a competitive focus in the match. In this environment, there needs to be room for trial and error.

Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that is free flowing, is coach-guided but not coach-directed, and demands that all players on the field, regardless of their specified position, participate in defending and attacking.

"As coaches, we need to constantly reassess the technical demands that the game places on our players and continue to teach them as the level of the game increases. Often times the essence of coaching is in identifying those technical areas that a player needs to improve, regardless of the age or level the player is playing at."

John Hackworth
U-17 Youth National Team Head Coach

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

The coach of 11 and 12 year olds is responsible for encouraging and directing the enthusiasm of these ages towards attacking, technical and thoughtful soccer. All players should be encouraged to see their own role in the attack and the defense. Specifically, getting players to understand and recognize numbers up, even numbers and numbers down situations and the appropriate decisions based on each scenario. Keep in mind, where one player will view a 1 v 1 attacking situation as no advantage or a disadvantage, another may see this same scenario as a big advantage. Encourage each player based on his or her abilities, while at the same time, encourage all your players to work toward seeing 1 v 1, as both attacker and defender, as an advantage.

CONSIDER THIS: ***"If your team is winning most or all of its games at this age, you as a coach are probably doing something wrong." – Gerry McKeown, Technical Director of Player Development Academy (PDA) New Jersey***

Care must be taken at the younger levels to select players based on their soccer abilities and not on their ability to achieve an immediate result. At the U-12 level, it is easy to win games by just using physically big players who have matured earlier than their peers. As a result, the smaller, skillful players are at times not chosen, as they are not able to "win" the game. Special care and attention must be given to these "smaller" players. At the same time, special care must also be given to the physically more mature players in developing their technical skill, and their ability to maneuver with the ball in tight spaces. As coaches, we always need to keep an idea on the long-term development of all the players.

"What is good for a football manager is when a child who grows up in Japan likes to kick a ball as much as a child who grows up in France. And to find that pleasure as you travel all over the world is something that is still, for me, magical, that , how could it be that all over the world – you can go to China, you can go to Japan or France and give a kid the ball, and he is happy? And that explains the success of our game… (you must try in your) training sessions to give that joy to the people who practice, and you know you don't necessarily need to speak the language. You give the players the possibility to express themselves – like when they were kids, and they become happy and they play."

Arsene Wenger
Arsenal FC Manager

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER:

Sensitive teacher, enthusiastic, possess soccer awareness, ability to demonstrate or utilize someone whom can paint a good picture (older player, assistant coach). Possess knowledge of the key factors of basic skills. Give encouragement. Have an appreciation for the relationship or connection between individual skill and small group insight, and the players' eventual success at the older ages and the larger game model of 11 v 11.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 30 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match and players should be given two days rest per week.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Players should be given time off from organized soccer each year.

■ TRAVEL

Travel should be limited to day trips with two overnight events per calendar year. No standings or awards.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

Tournament–like events should be limited to competitions that are organized into a round robin format.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

A statewide 9 v 9 competition where each team plays a predetermined number of matches should be encouraged. Matches should be played on appropriately sized fields and with a size 4 ball.

No regional or national competitions.

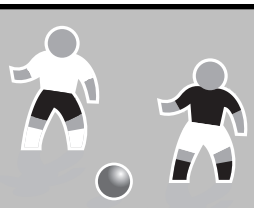
CONSIDER THIS: Manchester United's Academy U-18 team, along with the rest of the English Premier League Academy teams, play a 27-30 game league schedule that begins in mid August and finishes in mid April. That's 27-30 games over the course of 9 months or 36 weeks, or less than one game per week, with 3 months of no matches.

How to Function in a Group: 14 - 16 years old

JUNIOR LEVEL: Teenage Years

U-14: 7th and 8th graders

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: 11 v 11
Game Duration: 2 X 35
Substitution: No re-entry in half
GK Status: GK chosen based on ability
Field Size: 100 yards x 60 yards
Ball Size: 5

"Skill is executing great ideas. The rest is just technique."

Some Thoughts About This Age

This becomes the transitional age into the adult game. The match form should be 11 v 11 and there begins to be a greater focus on how ball skill and decisions influence success on the field.

At this point, there is a clear difference between the emotional and physical maturity of a 13-year-old and an 18-year-old. While there is not a big difference between the way a 13-year-old or an 18-year-old processes information (thinking and problem solving), keep in mind that the 13-year old is just beginning to think at this level. In contrast, an 18-year old will have more experience and confidence in his or her ability to think and problem solve in this manner.

13-year-old children are now less certain about themselves, less communicative, and somewhat more vulnerable. They are now more focused on their friends and begin to view themselves as being somewhat separate from their parents. They are also stronger physically and are more aware of what their bodies can do (speed, strength, appearance).

The 14-year-old is typically becoming more outgoing and confident and loves competition. He or she is also increasingly more able to plan, think ahead, and to imagine options. Coaches can have more discussion about the "what if…"

From now on the matches are full-sided 11 v 11 games. It is at the U-14 age group that coaches should begin to focus somewhat on team issues, such as how the backs work together in different parts of the field, or the relationship between the different lines of the team (defenders and mid-fielders, mid-fielders and forwards, etc.). As the players graduate to the junior level, they should possess a comfort with the ball and an insight into the game that will allow them to deal with the increased pace of the game, both in athletic speed and speed of decisions. The goal at this point in a player's development is to begin expanding his or her understanding of the game as their technical and game maturity allows. Again, this is accomplished through the small-sided game model for practice (up through 9 v 9 games) and the full-sided game for matches. The graduation to the full-sided game model should be a logical and subtle step. The ideas and principles that apply to the smaller game models continue to apply to the bigger game. The outcome of the game at this age is still largely determined by ball skill and game insight.

CONSIDER THIS: Too many matches and too much soccer desensitize players to the special quality of the match and the concept of "match day."

■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

At these ages, ball skills, enjoyment and insight into the game, with a gradual introduction to fitness, mental toughness, and results are the keys. Success in winning matches should begin to be the product of a consistent and systematic approach to the game that focuses more on player development than on team building. The players should be developing an understanding and familiarity with each other on the field, but the desire to get a result on Saturday should not hamper their instincts for the game, or their desire to experiment and explore the game. These players are a long way from being "complete." Encourage them to play in different positions. Don't pigeonhole players based only on what is best for getting the result. Balance your players match experiences so that some games will allow you to experiment without necessarily sacrificing the result.

■ DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practice should be 75 to 90 minutes long

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

At this point, most of the exercises and games that the players play in practice should be competitive, with a winning and losing team(s). Their focus should be on how their decisions and their ball skill help or hinder their team's ability to win at whatever game or exercise that they play.

Two critical and interrelated themes in every practice should be recognizing when and how to get the ball out of pressure with the goal of getting forward and recognizing when and how to win the ball back, both as an individual and as a group. Games and exercises should be set up that encourage players to make decisions based on the cues and clues that exist in the game. Players should experience a variety of games, from 4 v 4 to 8 v 8: some with and some without

goalkeepers, some to small goals, some to large goals, some with 2 goals and some with 4 to 6 small goals. Each set up will encourage different challenges for the players to address – all within the basic framework of keeping the ball and winning the ball back – and going to goal, and winning the game.

The coach needs to consider the players' technical development because without sound technique, good ideas on the field are useless. Putting players in small-sided games where they have to solve a problem by application of their technique is a critical part of training this age. At times, success or failure in these games and this environment are the direct result of the players' ability with the ball.

An important theme for this age, therefore, is to address the player's accountability for his or her decisions and ball skill as he or she and their team look to find ways to win their game. Figuring out how and when to keep the ball or when to go forward, as well as how and when to win the ball back are basic themes where this accountability can be addressed. Within each game that the coach sets up for the players, this can be accomplished by focusing on speed of play and the ability to solve problems in competitive situations. In general, most players this age who are playing at a competitive club level are technically good and can solve problems well in slower games or isolated situations. When the demands of the game and the speed of play increase, many have a hard time mastering the ball, staying tuned in, seeing enough, and making sense of their plays. By placing players in competitive situations i.e., faster games, these aspects improve dramatically over time. If the players are not held accountable for their decisions or if the environment is not challenging or competitive enough to punish players for their mistakes, then the players run the risk of developing bad habits that may hinder their long term development.

In training sessions play small-sided games with different demands and challenges. The games should be fast. To keep up with the speed of play, good technical ability and habits on and off the ball are necessary. The players need to stay tuned in mentally, to read the game, deal with the demands of the game, and to make decisions that help their team win. The goal is to help their personalities to grow and for them to begin to solve problems as a group. Therefore, give the players some freedom to make decisions, to solve problems, and to experiment with the game. Be more concerned with them developing into better players who can figure out how to win than with telling them exactly what to do.

■ SOCCER AGE AND CHRONOLOGICAL AGE OF YOUR PLAYERS

A child's biological age is an important factor determining age-appropriate tasks. However, the reality of Youth and Junior soccer is that, with its emphasis on team play, match results and competition, the American player is often graduating to the next level of soccer without having the proper tools. They are moving to this next phase of the game based on their biological age (their age in years), without regard for their "soccer age" (their level of soccer development). Coaches at the U-12 level for example, may voice frustration at their players' inability to "figure out" tasks and concepts such as team possession and team defending. Consider a student in Trigonometry class who is being introduced to concepts like sine and cosine. Imagine how difficult this will be for the student to "figure out" if he/she had not been properly taught the fundamentals of math – addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The student might even understand some

trigonometric concepts, but lack the basic tools to work out a correct solution. This student should not have been promoted to this next level of math. It is the same in soccer. The success of each new skill and concept is based upon skills and concepts already learned. The more comfortable a player is with the ball, the more options he/she will have to solve each soccer challenge he/she faces.

The age-appropriate phases outlined in this are not set in stone. Each individual player develops at his or own pace, often irrespective of their age in years. The soccer ability of some of your players will match the age-appropriate phases that are outlined in this document. Some will lag behind and some will be ahead.

When evaluating your players, it is important that you don't confuse your players' biological age, with their "soccer age." Each player's "soccer age" is unique to the individual. Your player's "soccer age" depends on several factors: 1) The rate of each individual's emotional and physical growth. 2) The frequency that they are playing soccer. 3) The soccer environment they are in (encouraging or discouraging individual creativity and comfort with the ball).

As a coach, therefore, it is critical that you are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating your players' soccer ability. If your players' skills do not match the demands of the corresponding age-appropriate phase outlined in this document, it is your responsibility to adjust their soccer "diet," based on their "soccer age." In some cases, for example, this may mean that a 16 year old player spends time addressing skills, or playing in numbers that seem more appropriate for a 12 year old.

One thing is certain; the more comfortable your players become with the ball, the quicker and easier that they and you can expand their game to include new skills and tactical concepts.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES:

Although the 13 and 14 year old begin to resemble adults, they are still far from a complete player. Players must continue to focus on individual and small group ideas. This can be accomplished by focusing on "the game within the game." Find themes on which to focus that – when taken together and accomplished with skill – add up to successful soccer. There should be some attention to organization, but the focus should be more on the smaller group relationships on the field, i.e., how the backs work together or how the backs work with the mid fielders, or how players can pressure the ball in 3's and 4's. The match continues to be the place for these players to develop their instincts for the game. Mistakes on the field should be errors of commission rather than errors of omission. It should not be the place for them to "play scared" or "safe." Coaches should encourage big picture themes such as staying connected with the rest of the team, as well as more focused idea like encouraging players to find ways to get past opponents – either individually or in groups. For example, on a given match day, the coach can encourage counting passes, or counting how often a dangerous ball is served into the box. The coach can even reward the team after the game based on how many of these plays they pulled off. At some point, as the players get better at these smaller pieces of the game, winning becomes the more consistent by-product.

CONSIDER THIS: Matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, and fitness), not as the aim. In this respect, the usefulness of the game can occur in many different forms, from the 4 v 4 to the full-sided match model. Even at the senior level, the game still offers opportunities for growth, however the weight of balance between factors such as enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness and results shift more toward the latter.

A Discussion About the Team Meeting

The team meeting, especially at the U-14 level and older, can be a very effective tool for helping players take more responsibility and ownership for the process and their own development

Often, the team meeting at the youth level takes the form of a lecture. Coaches should be careful not to turn these learning opportunities into one-way discussions. Players will only remain engaged and focused as long as they are interested in the topic. A great way to keep them listening and learning is to get them involved in the conversation.

With this approach, the meetings become open discussions where the coaches throw out questions about the day, the game or the training session, and see what ideas or thoughts the players have. Sometimes the coach's questions address principles of defending, principles of attacking, how goals are scored, or what competing means.

Some questions to start the discussion could include: What makes a good player? What we would do differently if we had the game all over again? The coach could ask the players to talk about who played well, for both teams. Why or how well did we execute our game plan? How well were we able to play "our game"? What influenced our ability to get our game going? And so on.

The point of these meetings is to encourage players to think and reflect, not to just show up and be told what to do or how to play. Rather it is an opportunity to start to see the game in a different light by talking about it, expressing how you feel on the field at different times and so on. The goal for the coaches, in all aspects of our interactions with our players, is to prepare them to be competent soccer players. One important aspect of this objective is to help the players become independent thinkers on the field. Allowing them and helping them to think critically about the game is a vital step in the process. The team meeting, when it actually involves the team, can help to move this process along.

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

The U-14 coach should have a firm grasp of both the youth game and the junior game. He or she should have an appreciation for creativity and independent thinking. At the same time, he or she should be able to communicate group and team themes to the players in a clear and simple manner.

RECOMMENDED LICENSE: 'B' LICENSE OR HIGHER.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 30 matches for their clubs per calendar year. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match.
Players should be given two days rest per week.

State Cup and Regional Cup.

No national championship.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Players should be given breaks from organized soccer that includes at least one extended break each year.

■ TRAVEL

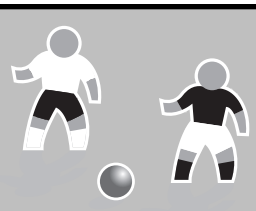
Players should be allowed to travel to competitions within their region.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

Players should be allowed to compete in state and regional competitions. Ideally, a three game event should be played over a five day period to allow for a day of rest and recovery between each game. At a minimum, a three game event should be played over a four day period to allow for a day of rest and recovery between the second and third games.

U-16: 9th & 10th graders

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: 11 v 11
Game Duration: 2 X 40 / 2 X 45
Substitution: No re-entry
GK Status: GK chosen based on ability
Field Size: 115 yards x 70 yards / 120 yards x 70 yards (minimum)
Ball Size: 5

General Thoughts about this age

By 15 and 16 years old, players should be comfortable dealing with the ball in a variety of situations. With this in mind, the coach should look to address several issues over the course of the two year cycle that address how basic tactical issues can influence the game:



(1) Small group ideas on both sides of the ball (Moving forward together on the attack, realistic pressure, and how to help your team win the ball back).

(2) How the small group ideas tie into larger team concepts. Such as the similarities and differences between high and low pressure, keeping your back line connected with your attacking players during possession in your attacking half of the field, or rhythm of play issues (when to speed up and when to slow down).

(3) Some basic positional responsibilities and how, as a team, these responsibilities are interconnected. For example, how the backs share defensive responsibilities, how decisions that the defending line makes are related to the decisions of the players in front of them, or the role of the holding midfielder in your team's possession.

(4) Accountability for their execution and decisions with the ball. Players at this age must aspire to have technical precision. Players need to be made aware of how their ability to collect and pass the ball has a direct impact on all aspects of the game.

Note: These concepts and goals are all based on the assumption that the players are good enough with the ball to be able to begin dealing this next level of soccer. If they do not posses the requisite skills to begin taking on these new challenges, it is the responsibility of the coach to make sure they continue to work on the tools that they lack.

■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

At the U-16 age coaches should continue to address principles and themes of the game in generic situations i.e., not position-based, as well as in functional (positional) scenarios. Coaches can set up small-sided games to multiple goals where players and teams (of 6's or 7's) are dealing with pretty tight spaces, but with several goals. Defensively the players and teams are focusing on getting pressure to the ball so that they limit the number of goals that they need to actively defend. As these principles are being addressed, it should begin to make some sense to the players how to translate these concepts into team issues, such as how the backs work together in different parts of the field or the relationship between the different lines of the team (defenders and midfielders, midfielders and forwards, etc.). Creating games where these larger team issues are introduced, experienced and discussed is also important at this age.

"Ball control is the most important skill a young player could learn. Controlling the ball will simply make the game easier to play and open up more options instantly. The great thing about practicing ball control is that there are many different body parts and ways to control the ball that could prove beneficial in a game. It's the single skill I find myself doing to this day on the practice field. I look for two things when I am controlling the ball: I find the easiest way to control the ball and I control the ball in the direction that will make my next pass as simple as possible."

Claudio Reyna
Manchester City and Captain of the US Men's National Team

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

Players at these ages still need to learn by experiencing the game. The majority of the game should still be taught by putting the players in realistic soccer environments and allowing them to feel their way through the challenges that the game presents to them. As much as possible, these concepts and themes should be taught in competitions where the games or exercises end with a winning and a losing team.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

The matches should be an extension of the themes that are being addressed on a daily and weekly basis. There should be an awareness by the players and a discussion prompted by the coach about performance based on the players' ability to recognize themes during the game, and the players' technical ability to act on what they see.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

Charismatic. Experienced. Knowledgeable. Articulate. Disciplinarian. Managerial know how. Thoughtful persuader. An understanding of the 3 lines of the team and how each works as a separate unit as well as part of the team as a whole

RECOMMENDED LICENSE: 'B' LICENSE OR HIGHER.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 30 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match. Players should be given two days rest per week.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Breaks from organized soccer should be encouraged throughout year to avoid burnout.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

Players should not be asked to play more than 160 minutes of soccer in any 72-hour period. Ideally, a three game event should be played over a five day period to allow for a day of rest and recovery between each game. At a minimum, a three game event should be played over a four day period to allow for a day of rest and recovery between the second and third games.

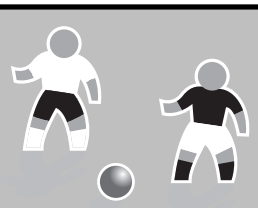
■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

Players should be allowed to compete in state and regional competitions.

Competition and Outcome: 17 years and older

SENIOR LEVEL: U-18 AND ABOVE

GAME APPLICATION



Game Form: 11 v 11
Game Duration: 2 X 40 / 2 X 45
Substitution: No re-entry
GK Status: GK chosen based on ability
Field Size: 115 yards x 70 yards / 120 yards x 70 yards (minimum)
Ball Size: 5

U-18: 11th and 12th graders
GENERAL THOUGHTS FOR THIS AGE:

At this age, the technical blueprint of who the player will be as an adult soccer player is almost complete. From here on, any growth is largely determined by how well the player has developed up to this point. Most of the growth is fine-tuning the qualities that already exist. Areas that can still be influenced greatly are game insight, physical conditioning and attitude.

In the rest of the world, this is the age where players are signing their first professional contracts with their clubs. Their technical abilities and their "soccer sense" have placed them in a position to begin making a living as a player. In this environment, however, they need to work everyday to improve their game in order to keep their place on the team and to continue to advance up the line to the senior team. Unfortunately, in the United States players are not consistently exposed to this type of environment. As a result, American players, even at the regional and national level, generally do not have the technical proficiency, game insight or disciplined approach that is expected at this age, and/or for players who have been involved in playing soccer for the past ten to twelve years of their lives.

With that said, coaches should continue to place consistent focus on these three areas of the player's game: technical proficiency and precision, game insight and the individual's responsibility for improving his or her game. There are also several match related tactical issues on which the coach can now begin to place more focus. For example, playing different systems, preparing for matches and employing tactics based on the strength of your opponent. Within each of these match related tactical issues, comes a focus on general positional responsibilities as well as specific positional roles, and how and when to pressure as a team, all of which are determined by your system of play or the tactics used for your matches. Additionally, game management issues, such as how to keep a lead in the final 15 minutes of a match or how to push for a draw or a win in the 2nd half or in the final 15 minutes of a match become important themes to address.

Game Management

At these ages, players should be able to recognize the needs of a particular game and how to make the appropriate adjustments. There are several recurring themes during the course of a game that the coach can use to help the players focus their energies. For example, within each 45 minute half, there are three often distinct 15 minute segments. The first 15 minutes is often a "feeling out" period for both teams that is played at a fast pace, with neither team looking to take any chances with the ball in their own end. In the second 15 minutes, the pace often lessens and the "style" of the teams begins to take shape. In the final 15 minutes, fatigue is often a factor. With this in mind, it is helpful for the players to have some specific themes to look for during the game. These themes include, but are not limited to 1) the level of pressure by both teams, 2) the effect that pressure is having on both teams, 3) our style and how well we are able to play "our" game, 4) the style of the opponent, 5) which team is able to dominate the game, and in what manner is either team finding success, 6) adjustments our team might need to make based on events in the game, and 7) the effect that fatigue has on both teams in the final 15 minutes of both halves.

Regardless of the issues that the coach chooses to emphasize, it is important that they are consistently addressed during practices and then reinforced during the games. In the end, it is all about getting the players to think critically on the field so that they will be able to recognize for themselves when they are at an advantage and when they are at a disadvantage, and then make decisions based on what's happening in the game."

■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Practices should always contain the following elements: competition, critical thinking and technical repetition.

At this age, the physical (fitness) side of the game begins to play a larger role than before. Practices and matches should continue to focus on improving the players' understanding of the tactical issues, such as how to control the rhythm of the game, as well as getting the group working not only functionally within the group but also as 11 players moving together on both sides of the

ball. Some time should also be spent addressing how players and the team manage the game. Not only in terms of executing the game plan, but how to address different scenarios such as playing in the final 15 or 20 minutes of a game with a lead, when the game is tied, or when your team is losing.

Players must be challenged everyday to solve soccer problems. They must be held accountable for their decisions and their performance. These players are ready for an increased level of problem solving that focuses on using their soccer mind and not just their physical attributes. 17- and 18-year-old players playing against more skillful teams or older teams on a regular basis will help their development. Keep in mind that these older players should be better soccer players and not just better athletes. There should be a continued emphasis on professional attitude including game preparation, on and off field behavior, work ethic, individual fitness, dealing with health and preventative issues of health, and spending time on technical issues to keep sharp.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

All aspects of practice should involve player accountability. As mentioned earlier, U-18 players will benefit from: 1) generic, non-functional exercises that emphasize principles of the game. 2) More specific, functional exercises that address working together within a "line" of the team or between "lines" of the team toward some soccer objective.

Non-functional, principle-based games address themes of the game through a variety of small-sided games that challenge the players to recognize these themes in less "structured" environments. An example of a generic, "principle-based" exercise is the 6 v 6 game with bumper players on the side and end lines of the field which can be used to address group defending, possession, speed of play, etc. The emphasis of the exercise can be manipulated by the conditions and the rules. This one game can be played with no goals as a keep away game, with end line targets to address rhythm of play as well as group and team defending and with big goals to focus on attacking and defending issues that are created with big goals and goal keepers. All the while, the bumper players offer outlet options while allowing the field space to remain relatively tight. In this example, most of the coach's teaching can be done as the ball is rolling or when the ball has gone out of bounds. Another way for the coach to influence these exercises is to play several games with a certain time limit for each game and discuss and make adjustments between games or play a longer game with a 5-minute half time. This model is beneficial because it is closer to how we coach in matches and it allows the players an uninterrupted amount of time to sort out the game for themselves.

The most common example of a functional exercise at this level is some type of half field or three-quarter sized field game that has one full sized goal and two "counter" goals. These exercises are beneficial because the coach can address specific scenarios as they would occur in specific parts of the field during a match. They also provide the coach and players with repeated opportunities

to practice a particular issue. Finally, these exercises are a good way to address team issues when the size of your roster doesn't allow you to play 11 v 11. For example, attacking and defending themes can be addressed beginning with 6 v 5 (4 defenders and a goalkeeper) and continuing to the full game.

There are several points to consider that may impact the effectiveness of these exercises. 1) Even though there are typically uneven numbers and a partial field with one full goal, try to make the soccer as realistic and competitive as possible. Make sure that the amount of information that you give is balanced by uninterrupted opportunities for the players to play. This means that, occasionally, you need to allow the game to play for a certain amount of time, allowing for some change of possession as well as restarts, etc. 2) Try to work with both groups somewhat equally. If you are designing this exercise to work with your attacking group going to a big goal, have your assistant coach address issues with the defending group such as establishing a point in their defending half to "recover" to when they are able to get the ball out of their end. Likewise, they can work on when to step and pressure and when to drop off and how to keep their back line active, and within the back line – what is the position of their bodies and how can this influence their ability to defend? These can all be addressed while the attacking team is also focusing on their own issues.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

The matches are the time for the players to apply the lessons from their week of practices, from their most recent match and as well as from the season thus far. Most of the coach's role in the match occurred during the prior week. By game time, the coach's role is to give the players some organizational focus during the pre game period and then make the appropriate adjustments during the match through substitutions and during the halftime break.

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

Charismatic; well informed; up to date; experienced; knowledgeable; articulate; disciplinarian; no doubts about his/her authority and managerial know-how.
Recommended license: 'A' License

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 30 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match. Players should be given two days rest per week.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Breaks from organized soccer should be encouraged throughout the year to avoid burnout.

■ TRAVEL

The decision to travel i.e., how far, for how long, and how often, should always be made with the quality of the competition, as well as the over all well-being of the players in mind.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

Players should not be asked to play more than 180 minutes of soccer in any 72-hour period. Ideally, a three game event should be played over a five day period to allow for a day of rest and recovery between each game. At a minimum, a three game event should be played over a four day period to allow for a day of rest and recovery between the second and third games.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

Players at this age should compete in state, regional and national championships.

"The quality of youth player development is directly related to the future success of our Women's National Team. For the US to stay at the top of the international game, we must develop players who are not only athletic, but exceptional technically. We must develop players who are creative and instinctive. We need players who not only think the game, but feel the game."

Greg Ryan
U.S. Soccer Women's National Team Head Coach

A FINAL THOUGHT:

We should measure success in coaching by how long
it takes the player to no longer need his coach.

Appendix A

DEVELOPMENT OF GOALKEEPERS

- The implementation of goalkeepers within youth soccer is an issue that creates considerable discussion among coaches. Restricting a player to the position of goalkeeper at too early of an age may have a negative effect and eliminate them from future participation in soccer
- Children grow at different rates and times. It is impossible to predict who will develop into the best goalkeeper when they are ten. Early selection as a goalkeeper may not be in the player's best long-term interest.
- Development of a goalkeeper must be carefully monitored and conducted. The progressive teaching of technical skills is important given the concerns for safety within the position.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- U-6: No GK required for 3 v 3 games. No GK required for 4 v 4 games.
- U-8: No GK required for 4 v 4 games.
- U-10: GK is included within team - rotate players as GK.
- U-12: GKs identified within team - GKs share time but in order of priority, which is determined by the coach.
- U-14: GK chosen on ability and contribution to the team.

MAXIMUM COMPETITION PER DAY

- Multiple games being played on one day or one weekend and its effect on the quality of the experience and development of the individual player.
- Playing schedules that include so many tournaments and games that there is never an "off season" for players.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- For tournament managers and schedulers:

1. Players should not be asked to play more than the equivalent of one full-length game plus overtime per day.
2. Where multiple games are a necessity:
   a. Schedule full-length games with a day of rest between games
   b. Play shortened halves for games played on back-to-back days

c. U-14 players should not be asked to play more than 140 minutes of soccer in any 72-hour period.
d. U-16 and older players should not be asked to play more than 160 minutes of soccer in any 72-hour period.

NOTE: Kick-off times for games should allow players a reasonable opportunity to prepare properly for competition. This encompasses rest and recovery, nutrition and adequate time to warm-up.

- Coaches prioritizing events:

1. Objectives are identified and a seasonal plan is developed that balances practice, competition, rest and recovery.
2. The best interests of the player must be considered when scheduling competition. The quality and the choice of the events must be carefully considered when developing a seasonal plan.

ABILITY TO PLAY UP

- The majority of clubs, leagues and district, state or regional Olympic Development Programs in the United States allow talented, younger players to compete on teams with and against older players. This occurs as a natural part of the development process and is consistent throughout the world. Currently, there are isolated instances where rules or policies have been imposed that restrict the exceptional player from "playing up." These rules regarding this issue vary. Some absolutely will not allow it. Others establish team or age-group quotas while the most lenient review the issue on a case-by-case basis.

- Associations that create rules restricting an individual player's option to play at the appropriate competitive level are in effect impeding that player's opportunity for growth. For development to occur, all players must be exposed to levels of competition commensurate with their skills and must be challenged constantly in training and games in order to aspire to higher levels of play and thus maintain their interest and passion for the game.

RECOMMENDATION:

- When it is appropriate for soccer development, the opportunity for the exceptional player to play with older players must be available. If there is a concern regarding the individual situation, the decision must be carefully evaluated by coaches and administrators familiar with the particular player. When faced with making the decision whether the player ought to play up, adult leadership must be prepared with sound rationale to support their decision. Under no circumstance should coaches exploit the

situation by holding players back in their quest for winning team championships, nor should parents push their child in an attempt to accelerate their ascension to the top of the soccer pyramid. In addition, playing up under the appropriate circumstances should not preclude a player from playing in his or her own age group when it is evaluated to be in the best interest of the player's development.

CLUB REGISTRATION vs. TEAM REGISTRATION

- Registering players to a club rather than team provides for fluid movement between teams and levels based upon the needs and abilities of the player.
- Registering players to a club rather than a team increases the opportunities for players to gain experience and playing time as determined by the Club's Director of Coaching.
- Club registration embraces the concept of "playing up" and positively influences the player by providing easy access to an increased level of competition.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Players should be allowed to register directly to a club. Club player passes rather than team player passes would be issued. Players would be restricted from playing down in competitions that are below their own age.
- Tournaments or cup competitions may freeze rosters prior to the start of the competition in order to prevent changes in the roster during the actual competition period.
- Players would be limited to playing only one game per day regardless of the age grouping.
- Club Director's of Coaching would oversee technical decisions relative to player development to ensure they are being made in the best long-term interest of the player's growth and development. Team coaches would not be able to hold players back when it is in their best interest to play up.

FESTIVALS vs. TOURNAMENTS

- Teams are participating in a vast number of tournaments each season. The participation in these tournaments by youth teams often creates a "win-at-all cost" attitude and has a negative influence on player development.
- This high level of participation in tournaments effects the development of the player in the following way:

  a. time is reduced for development, i.e., practice
  b. excessive play at competitive tournaments can be detrimental to individual growth and development
  c. winning becomes the main issue for the coach rather than the long term development of the player

RECOMMENDATION:

- For players below the age of 12, a festival format should replace a tournament structure whenever possible. Festivals feature a set number of games with no elimination or ultimate winner.

Appendix B

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED STATES: MAINTAINING A PERSPECTIVE

U.S. Soccer believes that first and foremost youth soccer is a sport that players should experience and enjoy as a game with a focus on individual experimentation and development. U.S. Soccer encourages creating soccer environments that will help promote the players' lifelong love of the sport. These environments should allow for the creativity, spontaneity and experimentation that the game of soccer naturally encourages. Too often, children are put into situations where development is secondary to winning, which leads to burnout and stifles individual skill development.

We believe that a player's development is enhanced when the short-term goals of a coach are pursued within the perspective of the player's long-term needs. The following is a two-part commentary on the importance of: (1) Having continuity and perspective in player development; and (2) Allowing children to experience soccer in ways appropriate for their age and level of soccer maturity. Part one addresses the theoretical stages of player development and how each successive step is built upon the foundations established in the previous stage. In the second part, the current Men's National Team coaching staff comment on the charge of their specific age group, and how it fits into the overall United States Men's National Team program of development and success.

The development of a player spans three general stages:

(1) Youth level (ages 6-12)
(2) Junior level (ages 13-17)
(3) Senior level (ages 18 and older)

A player's chances of success at the Senior level are greatly enhanced by mastering the building blocks of soccer that are best addressed at the Youth and Junior levels.

At the Youth level, ball skills, enjoyment of and experimentation within the game are key for a player's development.

At the Junior level those keys can be seen in ball skills, enjoyment and insight into the game, with a gradual introduction to fitness, mental toughness and results. At this point, any success in winning matches should begin to be the product of a consistent and systematic approach to the game that focuses more on player development than on team-building. (The theory being that individually competent soccer players that are placed together on a team are more prepared to

win than well-organized players who are unable to stand alone on their soccer abilities).

At the Senior level, players need to use all these qualities together, along with a commitment to excellence, in order to figure out how to ***win***. If a player skips a step at the Youth or Junior levels, he will find success and enjoyment more difficult as he moves toward the senior level.

At the Youth and Junior levels, there are several points to address when discussing how to achieve these goals:

(1) The game is the best teacher - let the kids learn from it by setting up opportunities for them to play

(2) Allow kids to learn in environments that are sensitive to age and abilities (emotional and athletic) and that offer a variety of experiences.

(3) Age and ability competition is a central element in a player's development.

(4) At the youth level, a competitive environment is not a result-oriented environment. The differences must be clear. A competitive environment at the youth level encourages decisions from player and coach alike that focus on performance rather than results. (Favoring ball skill and inventiveness as the means to find success within the rules and spirit of the game)

(5) At the junior level, technical skill and attacking soccer continue to be important themes, but now there is a greater focus on developing players' insight into the game by emphasizing the role of the game itself as a forum for learning. (Still focusing on the performance, rather than the result)

(6) At the youth and junior levels, matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness), not as the aim. The usefulness of the game, in this respect, can occur in many different forms, from the 4 v 4 to the full-sided match model. Even at the Senior level, the game still offers opportunities for growth – only the weight of balance between factors such as enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness and results shift more toward the latter.

A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF A YOUTH SOCCER PLAYER IN THE UNITED STATES

YOUTH LEVEL

At the early levels of youth soccer …

Kids are just getting to know the game; they're exploring, checking things out, feeling their way into the game. They may wave to you in the middle of the game or spin around, with their arms out, at midfield because of some sudden, mysterious inspiration. They want to run, to chase, to kick, to be with their friends – and to follow the ball wherever it goes (and who can blame

them!) During these years the kids should touch the ball as much as possible, learn physical balance, learn to guide the ball with both feet, and start kicking with some accuracy. When they play games, they should absolutely be left alone: the field should be their world, on the child's terms. These years should be about FREE PLAY with the world's favorite toy (the ball) and about falling in love with the game.

– Mass. Youth Soccer Association

At the later stages of the Youth level (ages 8 to 12) the goal is to provide training and game environments that promote the continued growth of ball skill, an increasing game awareness and an appreciation for taking calculated risks in the attack through the 3 v 3 to 8 v 8 game model. The small-sided game model is an effective method for developing ball skill and game awareness because it increases opportunities for players to have contact with the ball and to both attack and defend without the tactical regimentation that can occur in 11 v 11 soccer.

Games are a forum for players to test their ball skills and game awareness, and should be considered an additional means of development, rather than the objective. Results become important as they give the players a competitive focus in the match. Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that:

(1) Is free flowing,
(2) Is coach-guided, not coach-directed,
(3) Demands that all players on the field – regardless of their specified position – participate in defending and attacking.

JUNIOR LEVEL

As the players graduate to the junior level, they should be comfortable with the ball and have an insight into the game that will allow them to deal with the increasing pace of the game (both in athletic speed and speed of decisions). The goal at this point in a player's development is to begin expanding his understanding of the game as much as his technical and game maturity will allow. Again, this is accomplished through the small-sided game model for practice (up through 9 v 9 games) and the full-sided game for matches. The graduation to the full-sided game model should be a logical and subtle step. The ideas and principles that apply to the smaller game models continue to apply to the bigger game. The outcome of the game is still largely determined by ball skill and game insight.

SENIOR LEVEL

If a player has been exposed to a program that is able to address his or her needs and abilities over the long-term, this player should be prepared for this next stage of the game. At this point, winning is the purpose of the game. The emphasis is therefore to have players pull together all the components of their game in order to be as competitive as possible (both as an individual player and as part of a team) and get a positive result in individual matches. If their ball skills are insufficient, or they lack basic concepts of team play, they will struggle to have a positive

impact on the game. Ill-prepared players will have difficulty continuing their soccer careers at the higher levels. At the Senior Level, the performance should determine the result. While there is still a measurable focus on development, the emphasis is now more on insight and team concepts, rather than individual development of ball skills.

The following is a commentary by the current age-group National Team coaches on:

(1) The balance between developing soccer players and winning matches at their particular level within the National Teams programs, and
(2) How the age-group fits into the larger National Teams schematic.

Under-14 Boy's National Development Program

The current U-14 National Program is the first contact a player will have with US Soccer. These players then graduate into the U-15 Boy's Program. The goal and emphasis with players of this age is placed on development of skills and a deeper understanding of the game in a competitive, fun environment in the company of the most talented players that we can find.

We like to strike a good balance between training and matches, in which the players learn to take their cues and clues from the game. As attack and defense are in constant battle, the game has the power to teach and reveal itself to each player. There is plenty of action in the basic units of the game (1:1, 1:2, 2:2 and other small sided games in even and odd numbers) building up to the full-sided game.

The hope is to create originals, not clones. We simply follow this simple principle: The game/competition sets the demands and the player responds (Here is the problem. Find the solution and try to execute that solution). Players are encouraged/allowed to experiment and explore the game with the help of the coaches that understand the game and work well with kids. In this environment, there is plenty of room for trial and error.

Putting children into the straitjackets of positional play too early only destroys their instincts to be involved in the game. As they mature and are capable of keeping track of more things that are occurring on the field, we can increase the number of players that compete against each other. As they move to the full-sided game, the goal is for all the players to be able to keep track of all the other players on the field, and then to deal effectively with the situations that evolve out of these relationships. Under these conditions, time and space can be created or eliminated based on how effectively players are able to cope with the conditions of the game. It is all about ideas and developing the right attitude. Great skill begins with a desire to be master of the ball, and/or the key elements of the game and we try to encourage each player to be a master of the ball.

Looking back at the past U-14 camps, there is reason to believe that this approach works. There have been some highly attractive, very competitive soccer played by these 13 year-olds that was refreshing to watch. With constant care in the years to come, these young players have the potential for a bright future. The Under-14 National Camp occurs in August of each year. The past three years the camp has been held in Massachusetts.

Under-15 Boy's National Team

Each year we welcome a new age group mostly of players who come from the U-14 National Camp. We work with this group for a one-year cycle with an emphasis on speed of play and the ability to solve problems in competitive situations. In general, most of our players have a good starting point athletically and many are technically sound in slower games or isolated situations. When we increase the demands of the game and the speed of play, many have a hard time mastering the ball, staying tuned in, seeing the game and making sense of their plays. By being in the company of better players and faster games, these aspects improve dramatically.

In our training sessions we play small-sided games with different demands and challenges that we ask players to confront. The games are fast and to keep up with the speed of play, good technical ability and good habits on and off the ball are necessary. We ask the players to stay tuned in mentally, to read the game and the demands of the game and to make decisions that help their team win. We want their individual personalities to grow and for them to begin to solve problems as a group. Therefore, we give the players some freedom to make decisions, to solve problems, and to experiment with the game. We are more concerned with them developing into better players who can figure out how to win than with telling them exactly what to do. In this sense, we do not put a big emphasis on the results, but rather on how they are progressing as players. At the same time, we do provide them with our tactical insights and feedback, and we give them starting points for dealing with certain situations.

Our events have varied in numbers from 4-6 per year consisting mostly of training camps and competitive domestic and international events. Over the past three player cycles, the U-15 group has traveled to compete in tournaments in Mexico, Bolivia, France and Germany. Domestically, the teams have competed against U-15 regional teams, older regional teams, the U-17 US National Team, and MLS teams.

Under-17 Men's National Team

The Under-17 program is a result-oriented developmental program. Result-oriented in the sense of qualifying for the FIFA Under-17 World Championship, and developmental in the sense that players are prepared to be successful at the next levels of MNT programs and are prepared to enter college or professional soccer.

To this end, the U-17 National Team Program has entered into a new stage of player development with the increase in numbers in the residency program from 20 to 30 players. This allows us to bring in more players from the age below our main birth year (the main birth years for the U-17s are the even birth years). These players can now stay beyond the U-17 WC and work towards early high school graduation, work to prepare for development with the U-18 MNT, work to prepare to enter the pro soccer environment or work to enter the college soccer environment one year early.

Our soccer curriculum combines a variety of experiences that (1) prepare the players for the specific objective of the World Championship qualification and success at the World Championship, and (2) provide them with an environment that allows them to hone the skills needed to be successful at the next levels of elite soccer. The players must compete daily for their spots, and they are given challenging levels of match competition.

The Under-17 MNT plays matches to build toward two events: the CONCACAF Qualifying Tournament and the FIFA Under-17 World Championship. In the first year of residency (even-numbered years), the team travels to three of four international tournaments, as well as a foreign trip to the country that will host the next world championship. The team is in the full-time residency program so they train together year round, usually practicing during the week and playing games on the weekend. Domestically, the team plays a mix of matches versus international teams, pro teams, college teams, older club teams and older MNTs.

Under-18 Men's National Team

The primary function of the Under-18 Men's National Team is to identify potential Under-20 caliber players from this age group and to provide soccer opportunities for our players to develop and prepare for the U-20 National Team. The U-18 age group will eventually provide more than 50% of the player pool for the next U-20 group. As a result, U.S. Soccer has recently expanded its full-time residency program to include eight 1987 birth year players. We expect this group to form the core of the next U-18 player pool.

Because this age group does not have a World Championship, the challenge is to set up environments that come close to replicating that type of environment for the players. The limited time that the team is together places constraints on what the players can realistically accomplish. Therefore, we try to put the players in as many challenging matches as possible. We consider the time in the Under-18 MNT to be a transitional phase of development between the Junior and Senior levels of development.

In the U-18 program, the players come together for four to five events per year over a two-year cycle that ends with the players moving on to the U-20 age group. Each nine-day domestic camp will have 3 or 4 matches against competition ranging from a top youth club or ODP



teams, to other US National Teams and MLS teams. Both the practices and the matches are used to evaluate the players and provide information to the coaching staff regarding personnel, as well as player development issues. Each year ends with a top-level club or international tournament in either Europe or South America. We approach these tournaments as our own qualifiers and world championships. Our hope is to provide enough quality events to prepare these players for their next step in international competition.

Under-20 Men's National Team

The Under-20 team is similar to the Under-17 team in that it is a result-oriented developmental program. We are preparing players to be successful at a World Championship and to be successful at the next National Team level.

Much of the development at the U-20 level is about competition and "intensified preparation for the next level" (i.e., the Olympic team, National Team and/or a professional career). It is important that we find players who show the characteristics that will help them advance to play at the next level. We want to help these players mature as adults so they can handle any environment. We need to instill the belief that these players can win at an international level against the competition that they will see in the future. In this way, they learn to win in a manner that will be successful at higher levels. The more we can expose them to quality competition, training and coaching, the more we improve player development.

The challenge at this age group is blending collegiate players with young professionals. Our players are competing against international teams whose entire rosters are made up of full-time professionals in some of the world's best leagues. We must create opportunities that replicate a professional training and match environment. Currently almost 50% of this team's player pool is comprised of professional players. This is a contrast with the situation ten years ago when there were no U-20 professional players. As time goes by, we would expect more young players to be professional at this age.

Similar to the Under-17's, the Under-20's use each two-year cycle to prepare for two events: the CONCACAF Qualifying Tournament and the FIFA World Youth Championship. The Under-20's typically take two to three foreign trips a year, participating in at least one high-level European tournament. Several domestic training camps are held throughout the year, where the competition ranges from A-League teams to foreign clubs to MLS Teams to regional teams and other U.S. National Teams. Due to the make-up of this team, it is often difficult to hold training camps where the entire compliment of players are available, as the college season begins as the MLS season ends.

Under-23 Men's National Team

The focus of the Under-23 MNT program is to develop the professional player in preparation for representing the U.S. at the Olympics and potentially playing for the full National Team. In our current system, many of the players enter this age bracket as college players and become professionals while still in this age group. As our system evolves, we would expect that more players entering this age group would be professionals – similar to the U-20 age group.

Providing a variety of international competitions and contributing to their growth as pros is a vital component of this program. For those players who have been members of our youth teams leading up to the U-23's, continuing and building on their international experience is important. For those just arriving on the National Team scene becoming comfortable and familiar with the various styles and tempos of international play is a must. The components of the game are the guidelines at every stage of development. From the U-14 program to the MNT, the incrementally increasing focus is results. Game management and adjusting tactically to achieve results becomes more important than substituting to provide experience for younger players.

The Men's Olympic Soccer Tournament has evolved into a professional competition for players under the age of 23 with the addition of three "overage" players. The focus of the Senior Team is results. Therefore the U-23 program is a significant link in the development of our players and teams.

The Under-23 MNT puts it focus on preparing the team for the Olympics and the players for the pro ranks and the Men's National Team. As the Olympics approach, the intensity of the camps and the number of the camps increase, building up to the Pan-Am Games, the Olympic Qualifying Tournament and the Olympic Tournament. As this pool of players is made up almost entirely of professionals, this team holds fewer camps than any of the other YNTs. This team typically participates in European tournaments against other similar age National Teams, as well as holding domestic training camps that usually include games against MLS teams and other National Teams.

Men's National Team

Player development occurs at every level. The objective of the Men's National Team is to achieve results in international competition, and to develop players for the international arena. For this reason, there is a close relationship between the Men's National Team and the U-23 team, and at times, the U-20 team. Players at the Men's National Team possess the technical, tactical, physical and mental tools to be successful, but some players simply lack the international game experience. Development at the level of the MNT is achieved through competition – players playing in games and gaining experience at the various levels from

international friendlies and competitions to World Cup Qualifiers to the World Cup itself.

The four-year World Cup cycle builds toward World Cup qualifying and the World Cup, and the team's schedule follows that pattern. The first 18 months after the World Cup are used to identify players. As qualifying nears, the player pool is pared down and focus moves from player identification to qualification. A large training camp is held in January of each year, and once the MLS season begins, the MNT activity slows down in non-World Cup, non-Gold Cup years. In addition to friendlies, the MNT also participate in the CONCACAF Gold Cup, World Cup Qualifying, and the FIFA Confederations Cup. The U.S. usually plays 10-20 friendlies a year; typically the majority come against teams from CONCACAF, CONMEBOL and UEFA.

Appendix C

2005 WOMEN'S NATIONAL TEAM PROGRAMS COMPLETING THE AMERICAN SOCCER PLAYER THE MODERN INTERNATIONAL GAME

USA STRENGTHS
The U.S. National Team has distinguished itself and achieved victory on the international stage in recent years. Since 1991, the team has become known for having a unique blend of soccer savvy individuals who were also superior athletes, and dominated in the area of mental toughness. These traits have been consistent since winning the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991.

Recently, however, the rest of the world has caught up, and some have surpassed the U.S. in these categories. In particular, Brazil's 2004 Olympic Team was characterized by superior athleticism and skill. In 2003, Germany set a new standard for skillful execution of attacking tactics on their way to winning their first Women's World Cup.

USA FUTURE SUCCESS
In order to achieve continued success in the international arena, the United States needs to focus on developing skillful, "soccer savvy" players. These two areas are falling behind in comparison with the other top soccer nations. This must be accomplished while maintaining the athleticism and mental toughness of the players.

AMERICAN PLAYER PROFILE
The following chart represents where we stand in our development as a soccer nation. As can be seen, there is a huge variance among the current and developing players in the tactical and technical areas.

Strengths	**Potential**	**World Ranking**
Physical	80 –> 95 %	Top 3
Mental	60 –> 80%	Top 3
Technical	20% –> 75%	5th –> 10th
Tactical	20% –> 75%	5th –> 10th

Our challenge is to develop players that are:
- Technically Gifted
- Tactically Sound
- Composed
- Creative
- Risk Takers
- "Own the Game" and are focused on solving the problems that the game presents, instead of primarily thinking about coach imposed solutions to the game

EVOLVING COACHES –> EVOLVING PLAYERS

In order to affect change on the players a shift in coaching methodology may need to take place. The development of creative, intuitive players is greatly impacted by coaching style and demands.

When conducting training sessions, there needs to be a greater reliance on game oriented training that is player centered and enables players to explore and arrive at solutions while they play. This is in contrast to the "coach centered" training that has been the mainstay of coaching methodology over the years.

GAME CENTERED TRAINING DEFINED

"Game centered training" implies that the primary training environment is the game as opposed to training players in "drill" type environments. This is not to say that there is not a time for a more "direct" approach to coaching. At times, players need more guidance and direction as they are developing. However, if the goal is to develop creative players who have the abilities to solve problems, and interpret game situations by themselves, a "guided discovery" approach needs to be employed.

This approach taps in to certain essentials that are always present within the team. Players want to play and enjoy playing the game first and foremost. Since the "game" is used in training, this allows for players to be comfortable with the pace, duration, and physical and mental demands that the game provides. The reason why the players play is because they enjoy the game. They have a passion for the game. This is where they find and express their joy and creativity.

Games vs. Drills: a comparison

GAME
- This is what the players actually face during competition. It is 100% realistic.
- Therefore, the players are more competent at transferring what they have learned in training to the game itself.
- Game Experience = 100% of Training Time

DRILLS
- Many “drills” are not realistic. Therefore, players find it difficult to transfer the things learned in “drill” environments to the game itself.
- Game Experience = ?% of Training Time
- This is not to say that “drills” that closely replicate one aspect of the game should not be used in training. Dynamic, demanding, “drill” environments, used at the beginning of the training times, often prepares the players to play the game as it breaks down the more complicated “picture” that the game provides in to manageable pieces. However, care must be given to making sure that the “drill” is active, and mirrors the demands found in the game.

CONTINUOUS PLAY IN TRAINING
- Reflects the real game.
- Demands rhythm. The players can not go “all out” for an entire 90-minute stretch. They need to know how to control the rhythm of the game so that they can last the entire time.
- Demands focus. Players must stay focused for lengths of time, just like they need to do during the game.
- In order to have continuous play during training, the coach must coach “in the flow” of the game, and not interrupt play with stoppages to make coaching points.

FEEDBACK ON THE FIELD
- Coaching “in the flow” provides immediate feedback for the players.
- Feedback applies to the real game and is therefore directly beneficial to the players.
- Allows continuous play.

Brazilians

The Brazilians have always been noted for their touch, creativity, dynamic and instinctive play. Their individual brilliance with the ball sets them apart from the rest of the world. Allowing for uninterrupted play during training times helps to develop these characteristics in players. These characteristics are learned on the “streets” without the guidance or even presence of a coach. This opportunity must be provided for the players as the prevailing culture in our society does not find players seeking out these opportunities on their own.

FITNESS IN THE GAME

Having said that we need to develop the creative side to the players, we must be careful not to ignore the physical dimension as well. Can we do both at the same time? Yes, if we choose the correct coaching methodology. Use of the “games approach” to training can also be beneficial towards impacting the player’s aerobic fitness.

Using small sided games (4v4 –> 6v6) can greatly improve fitness with adherence to the following parameters:

- High Intensity 90 – 100% Capacity
- Work Intervals 4m
- Active Rest Intervals 5/m
- Repetitions: 4 –> 10 (Start Low)
- Measured: Heart Rate Monitors
- Benefits: Playing Soccer
- Vary the "rules" of the game in order to impact the fitness demands (e.g.: all players must be in the attacking half of the field in order for the goal to count. If a goal is scored before all defenders are in their defensive half, then the goal counts double)

PLAYER CENTERED TRAINING

Which type of player do we produce?

- Structured or Instinctive
- Coach Dependent or Independent
- Carries out Instruction or Solves Problems
- Thinks about the Coach or Thinks about the Game

Roles Defined:

Coach's Role

In the player centered approach:

- Focus is the Player
- Creates a challenging game environment
- Provides options
- Asks players what they think
- Develops Players

In the "command style:"

- Focus is the Coach
- Creates exercises and directs session
- Provides solutions
- Tells players what to think
- Develops Clones

Player's Role

In the player centered approach:

- Primarily learn from playing the game
- Focus = Playing
- Solve Soccer Problems

In the "command style:"
• Primarily learn from the coach
• Focus = Coach's Expectations
• Execute coach's direction

THE GOAL
The goal of all of this preparation is to produce players that:
• Are instinctive
• Are creative
• Take initiative
• Express individuality
• Think independently
• Understand options
• Solve problems
• "Own the game"

TECHNICAL NEEDS

What follows is a list of technical needs that have been derived from observations of National Team players playing at the Senior and Youth National Team levels:

• Receiving and Solving Pressure Individually
• Passing (Full "Bag of Clubs")
• 1v1, Dynamic Attacking Players
• Flank Service
• Finishing

Solving Pressure Individually: (Brazil)

• Receiving
• 1st Touch
• Next Several Touches to Free Player from Pressure
• Training: Small Sided Games Requiring Multiple Touches in Tight Spaces

Passing –> Penetration: (Germany)

• Types of Passes:
  • Chipped
  • Bent
  • Driven
• Training: Small Sided Games with Restraining Lines (5 v 5 + 2)
• Training: 11 v 11 with Restraining Lines 30 Yards from each Goal
• Must Penetrate Restraining Line with a Pass

1v1 ? Penetration: (Brazil)

- Developing Instinctive 1v1 Players – Brazilian Street Soccer
- Small Sided – Small Goals
- Even Numbers
- Tight Spaces
- Unlimited Touches

Flank Service: (Norway)

- Types of Flank Service
  - Driven Low –> Near Post
  - Driven High –> Center or Back Post
  - Chipped to Back Post
  - Curled behind back four and bending away from the goalkeeper
  - Pulled Back –> 12 and Near Post
- Training: Repetitions to each specific spot
- Flank Play Games

Finishing: (Germany, Sweden, Norway)

- Placement Finishing: Bending, Chipping, Volleys
- Types of Finishing
  - Breakaways
  - 1 Touch from Flank Service
  - 1 Touch in a Crowded Penalty Box
  - Shots > 18
- Finishing a Higher Percentage of Shots

TACTICAL NEEDS

Attacking Play

- Possession vs. Penetration
- Counter Attack
- When to Play Direct vs. Indirect
- Reading the Opponent's Numbers
- Making Decisions regarding Direction and Speed of Play

Penetration in the Final Third

- Attacking Diversity
  - 1v1
  - Combination Play
  - Penetration Passing
  - Flank Play
  - Endline Service
  - Early Service
  - Shots > 18
- Training: Games with Restraining Lines:18-35 yards from Goals

Team Defending

- Individual defending w/in team concept
- Zonal defending
- "Pressing"
- Variety of lines of confrontation

FITNESS PHILOSOPHY

- The physical dimension remains a strength of this country and can not be ignored. The rest of the world is catching up with us, or in some cases, have even surpassed us.
- Critical component of the game.
- Will continue to have an impact on payer selection but no more than technique, tactics or mentality.

FITNESS TESTS

The following fitness tests will be used by the senior national team:

- Beep Endurance Test
  Correlated to Aerobic Capacity
- 20-40 Sprint
- Vertical Jump
- T Test (Agility)
- Flying 200

Tests will help us provide feedback to players regarding their development.

PLAYER SELECTION

Breaking the characteristics of players in to the following four components remains a helpful way of evaluating players as it helps organize our thoughts and approach.

- Athletic
- Technical
- Tactical
- Mentality

Players that embody a “special quality” in one or more of the four areas listed above are able to have an impact on the international stage. This is not to say that there can be glaring deficiencies in the other areas. Rather, the player must be competent in all areas, but able to provide a “special” quality in at least one other area in order to be able to compete at the international level.

Examples of the special qualities of players can be found below:
• 1v1 defending: Markgraf
• Heading, ball winning, possession: Boxx
• Goal scoring: Wambach
• Final passing: Wagner

Summary

As we strive to maintain our highest standing in the international game, we must keep developing as a soccer playing nation. The stakes are getting higher, and the competitive level more intense. More countries are now providing the resources necessary to advancing the women’s game. In order to continue to be able to compete, we must constantly be looking for ways to improve and advance. The thoughts listed above are provided to help us to continue to achieve our goal of staying at the top of the international game.

Are You In The Net?

The U.S. Soccer Coaches Organization is taking on a new name, a new look and offering new benefits. Geared toward giving coaches more learning opportunities, CoachesNet offers greater insight into how the U.S. National Teams train and operate.

In addition to a behind-the-scenes look into the U.S. National Teams via exclusive interviews, videos and coachcasts, a CoachesNet membership also offers:

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