



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

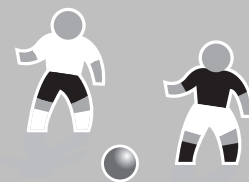
Game Duration: 2 X 25 minutes

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.