US YOUTH SOCCER PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL

A Player-Centered Curriculum for US Youth Soccer Clubs

US Youth Soccer Coaching Education Department

Prepared by the US Youth Soccer Coaching Education Department

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With support from the US Youth Soccer Board of Directors, US Youth Soccer Recreation Committee, US Youth Soccer Referee Committee, 55 US Youth Soccer State Association Technical Directors and the U.S. Soccer Technical Advisors.

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Introduction

Soccer – The grace of ballet, the fire of a mountain folk dance, the rhythm of boogie, all rolled into one and hidden beneath knee-socks and cleated shoes.

Welcome to the *US Youth Soccer Player Development Model*. The purpose of this publication is to help youth soccer coaches and soccer clubs raise the level of play across the country. This can be achieved by becoming aware of the capabilities and aspirations of their players at each stage of their development and by creating more positive, player-centered learning environments. The key to modern youth player development can be found in the lessons of the free play era, where children took charge of games, learning and fun. By participating in endless hours of player-centered soccer, the children of the street soccer generation developed a life-long passion and a practical feel for the game that has been all but lost in the transfer to over-organized sport. By returning to the ideals of the free play era, youth coaches and soccer clubs can use meaningful soccer games and soccer-related activities to unlock the potential of their young charges to produce savvy, sophisticated American players.

The *Player Development Model* is divided into three main parts. Part I is the Primer, which provides general information on coaching methods, training tools and the elements of a healthy soccer environment. Part II, Zone 1: Preteen Age Groups provides information on coaching U-6, U-8, U-10 and U-12 age groups and is organized into separate chapters for each of those age groups. Part III, Zones 2 and 3, Teenagers, discusses the challenges and solutions of working with the U-14, U-16 and U-18+ age groups, with separate chapters for each of those age groups. The *US Youth Soccer Player Development Model* is written as a complementary publication to the U.S. Soccer *Player Development Guidelines – Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States*.[1] Reference will be made to *Best Practices* throughout this publication, so please keep a copy nearby. The coach inspires the soccer experience for the players, and this *Model* provides the knowledge needed to pass on the beautiful game to the next generation.

"Soccer is an art not a science and the game should be played attractively as well as effectively. Soccer is a game of skill, imagination, creativity and decision-making. Coaching should not stifle, but enhance those elements."

- Bobby Howe, U.S. Soccer, former director of coaching, professional and National Team coach

[1] A free pdf version of the *Best Practices* can be downloaded under the coaches section on USYouthSoccer.org.

What is soccer?

The beauty of the game is in its simplicity.

Within a given set of rules there are two teams who compete to score goals against each other. Each team consists of 11 (or fewer) individuals who must use their abilities to play together while trying to win the game. It's hard to play simple. Simplicity is GENIUS!

Part I: Primer

The Primer provides information on the basic principles of play, Small-Sided Games (SSG) and the stair step approach they provide to development, systems of play, soccer as a long-term development sport, fair play and how to organize player-centered training.

It also touches on the importance of continuing education for staff, age appropriate training methods, the development of a coaching philosophy, seasonal planning, the value of good soccer facilities, the importance of a progressive, developmentally-based club-wide curriculum and above all else, the art and science of coaching.

Coaching development is a life-long process that is fundamentally tied to player development. Simply, the better the coaching, the faster players will improve. To become a good coach requires study. Coaches must understand players, teaching methods, learning styles, psychology and even parental involvement in youth sport. This *Player Development Model* offers information and advice, but not magic formulas for player or coach development. Ultimately, each coach is responsible for their own skills and insights and for the environment created.

The coach is on the front line of development in a youth player's career, and the coach's continuing education is vitally important to that development.

Chapter 1: Player Development

There are over 5,000 US Youth Soccer clubs across the nation. Each club has the obligation to provide its members the opportunity to play the game while learning and growing as individuals. The opportunity to participate follows the major player development pathways of both recreational and select soccer. The US Youth Soccer recreational pathway includes the US Youth Soccer American Cup, Soccer Across America and TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer). The select pathway includes the US Youth Soccer National Presidents Cup, US Youth Soccer Regional and National Leagues, the US Youth Soccer National Championship Series and the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program (US Youth Soccer ODP). For more information about the programs available to US Youth Soccer members, reference Appendix E.

A club must have a model for the development of all players. The core for planned development is a sound curriculum. True player development occurs when each player's daily training and playing environment is of the highest quality. If this environment is consistent, with a clear vision of what lies ahead for the players, development is maximized. To this end, a club must have a business plan for staff growth, facility management and implementation of programming within the club. The club must also

provide for the ongoing education of the administrators, coaches, parents and referees who make up the four adult pillars supporting youth soccer. A club must also build, maintain and expand its facilities as one of the elements in the formula of successful player development. All of these elements will be discussed in detail throughout the Primer.

> ***"You must love the game and want to share with the players a certain way of life, a way of seeing football."***
>
> **- Arsène Wenger, Arsenal Football Club, manager**

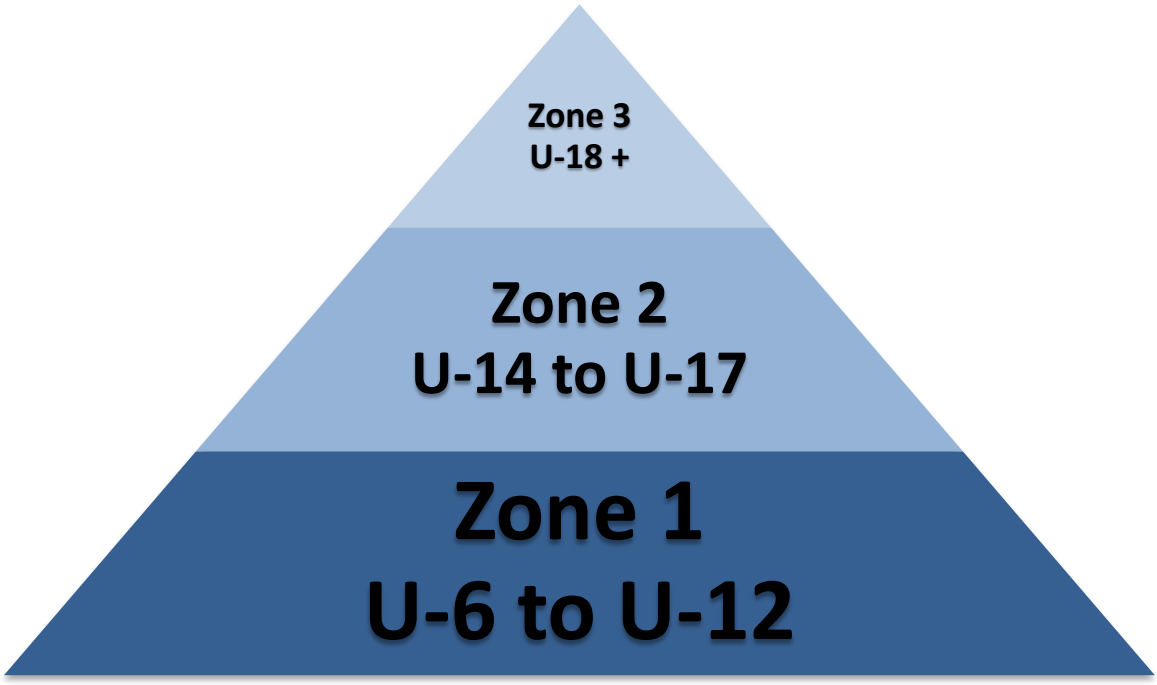


Figure 1: Player Development Pyramid

U.S. Soccer uses this Player Development Pyramid [Figure 1], giving broad direction to soccer environments while impacting the development of youth players. Zone 1 has a technical emphasis that is accomplished by focusing on player development versus match outcome. The intent is for coaches, administrators and parents of the players to spotlight the process of playing the game, rather than the score. The measurement of success in Zone 1 is the players' improvement of ball skills, understanding of the rules of the game, playing fairly and learning general game principles.

In Zone 2 the emphasis is on the club culture and daily training atmosphere. There must be more training sessions and fewer matches so the players can learn the details of tactics, team formations and game strategies. As is noted in the Seasonal Planning section and Table 5 (ratio of training sessions to matches), the focus in Zone 2 needs to be on training sessions. Matches should be fewer in number and of an appropriate level of competition.

Zone 3 takes the player toward professional player development. This development will occur in college, semi-pro and professional and youth national teams. This is the age to focus on the outcome of the match as well as the quality of performance. The long-term objective of Zone 3 of the U.S. Soccer Player Development Pyramid is to develop future U.S. National Team players. Change in the soccer landscape is necessary to create success at the international level. It is recognized that American players still have room for improvement on all elements of the game at this level and specifically ball skills, but the issue is being addressed through large scale change with support from all corners. Greatly affecting this change is the full implementation of U.S. Soccer's *Best Practices.*

The application of the three zones with relation to game management (pre-game, game, halftime and post-game) is reviewed in detail in Appendix B.

Chapter 2: Facilities for Development

If you build it, they will come.

Throughout the United States a great deal of time and effort is being put into the education and development of coaches. The goal of any good coach is to develop players to their full potential thus helping them rise in the game as far as their talents will allow. Raising the professional standards of coaching is laudable. However, the coach may acquire knowledge and learn of proper training techniques, but is then frustrated by the lack of facilities to use these new skills. Too many teams must train on the outfield of a baseball diamond or on half of a soccer field, and some use any open patch of ground they can find. Sometimes there are no goals, corner flags or any proper training equipment. Usually if there are goals they are fixed permanently in the ground, so the turf in front of the goal is worn away. Consequently, the players reach a certain level of play and then stagnate there. The best coaches in the world cannot fully develop players without the right training environment.

Quality coaching and facilities will contribute positively to player development. Since player development is the backbone of the game, the construction of training grounds is a necessity. US Youth Soccer State Associations, along with local clubs, must work together toward this goal.

Across the nation outstanding soccer complexes are being built for matches; in most cases though, the fields are used only on match day. So where do the players train? A simple observation of most club teams will show that the coaches and players spend one to three days per week training and one day per week in a match, on the average. If the time spent training is triple that of playing, why isn't more emphasis put on the development of training grounds? Building fields solely for matches will not meet the needs of the youth soccer community. Thus, land at the complex must be set aside to construct a training ground as well. Devote and develop field space just for training sessions. The space needed will depend upon the number of teams in the club. Certainly the larger the better, but any space set aside specifically for training is a step in the right direction.

Administrators and coaches can all work together to help develop the best facilities. The role of soccer administrators here is to acquire the means to provide the tools for coaches. Through this teamwork, administrators and coaches can jointly produce quality players.

Consider too the need for covered or indoor facilities during inclement weather. In areas where extreme high and low temperatures persist for long periods, the training phase in the seasonal plan is interrupted. A club should construct a facility or make leasing or rental arrangements with a suitable facility to be productive during these periods of the year. With access to an appropriate facility, games and training can continue in the form of Futsal, indoor soccer or inside a field house where there is the option to play 3v3 up to 11v11.

The dimensions of the playing field have a real impact on the players' ability to perform in a skillful and tactical way. Playing on an age-appropriate sized field allows for soccer to be played as opposed to kick ball, which occurs on inappropriately sized fields. If clubs build full-sized plots, 130 x 100 yards, then any size field or fields from Table 1 can be marked off.

US Youth Soccer Recommended Field Dimensions	
Age Group	**Length x Width (yards)**
U-6	25 x 20
U-8	35 x 25
U-10	55 x 40
U-12	80 x 50
U-14	100 x 65
U-16	110 x 70
U-18+	120 x 75

Table 1: Field Dimensions

Here are some of the tools needed at a first-rate soccer training ground:

- Sand field and/or pit
- Kicking board or rebound goal
- Portable free kick wall
- Flat faced goals and portable goals of various sizes (be sure they are properly anchored)
- Cones of various sizes
- Training bibs of various sizes and colors
- Corner flags, coaching poles, yellow rope, pendulum pole and hurdles
- Balls of various sizes and colors and medicine balls
- Soccer tennis and soccer volleyball playing areas
- Video camera scaffolding
- Grids (10 x 15 yards) marked off on part of the training ground
- Storage

Chapter 3: Player Development Curriculum

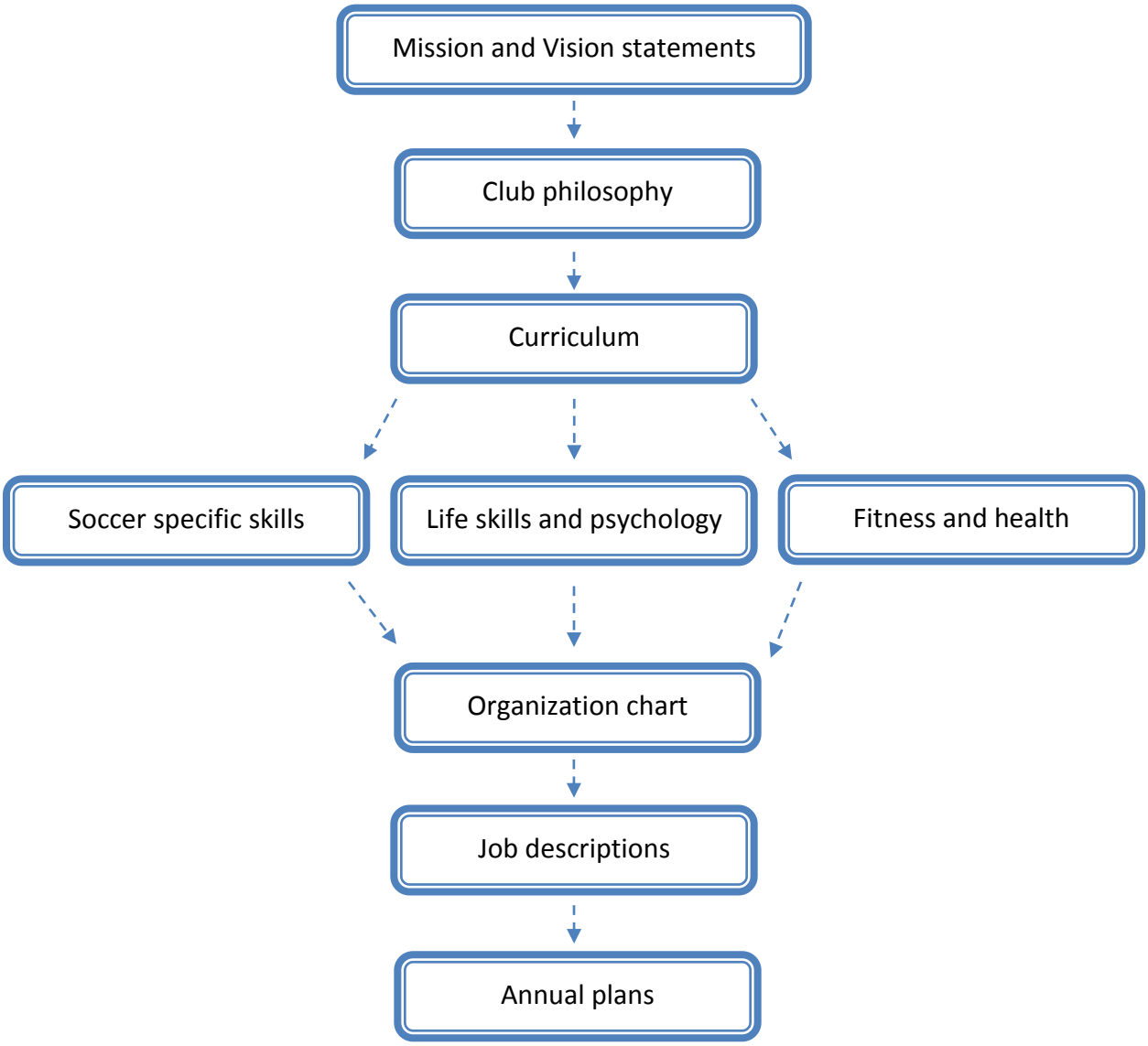
A curriculum is a plan for teaching the subject. It is an attempt to account for all the learning guided by the coach. The process of learning is made easier if both the coach and the player know what the coach is trying to achieve. This should be an explicit statement, the more specific and precise the better. These statements are the coaching objectives within the curriculum. The player is aided knowing not only what to do, but also whether he or she has done it. The coach's task is easier when knowing what to look for in the player's performance.

There should be continuity throughout the year in the way training sessions are conducted. Plan all training sessions in advance and in detail. The radial below [Figure 2 (Worthington, 1974)] gives an overview of the factors influencing player development within all four components of soccer [Figure 3], described here as soccer skill. Like any teacher, a soccer coach must decide what skills will be introduced during the year and in what sequence. This necessity requires seasonal planning on the coach's part and will be covered later.

Figure 2: Coach and player impact upon skill development. Collectively, these factors influence the soccer culture of the club.

While the curriculum is the baseline for what to do in training, coaches should observe matches to understand developmental needs of each player. The coach must be flexible with the curriculum and be ready to adjust it based on specific needs. Evaluating the players in a game may show an immediate need of a player or of the team that may call for a deviation from the current point in the curriculum. While consulting the director of coaching, the coach will have to use personal knowledge and judgment as the season progresses as to whether the curriculum set is best for the players on that specific team. How players perform may dictate progressing ahead or lapsing behind the schedule of the curriculum. The coach should not feel confined by a curriculum.

The Club Curriculum Flow Chart[2]



An integrated club-wide curriculum is the key for optimum player development. There must be a line that connects U-6 to U-19, a line that everyone in the club understands and follows. Without a curriculum, the player development process becomes disjointed, difficult to monitor and evaluate, causing players to graduate with skill gaps. A deficit in one stage of the development process will tend to inhibit acquisition of more complex skills at a later stage.

"Play is the highest form of research."

- Albert Einstein

[2] *Implementing a Club Wide Curriculum* (May 2008), Jacob Daniel, director of coaching, Georgia Soccer

There is a difference between a training session and practice. Practice is time with the ball that a player spends alone or with a friend or two. Players should be encouraged to practice on their own, knowing that self-motivation provides the best results from practice. A training session is with the team and the coach and should replicate the game. It is necessary to be realistic with the activities in a session plan according to the age group being instructed.

The curriculum should consist of the four components of soccer [Figure 3] used to develop player performance. To tie the four components together for both the player and the team as a whole, the principles of play must be evaluated. In each age group chapter of the Model, the four components of soccer will be discussed related to each of the three zones identified in the player development pyramid [Figure 1], incorporating the applicable principles of play to the appropriate age group.

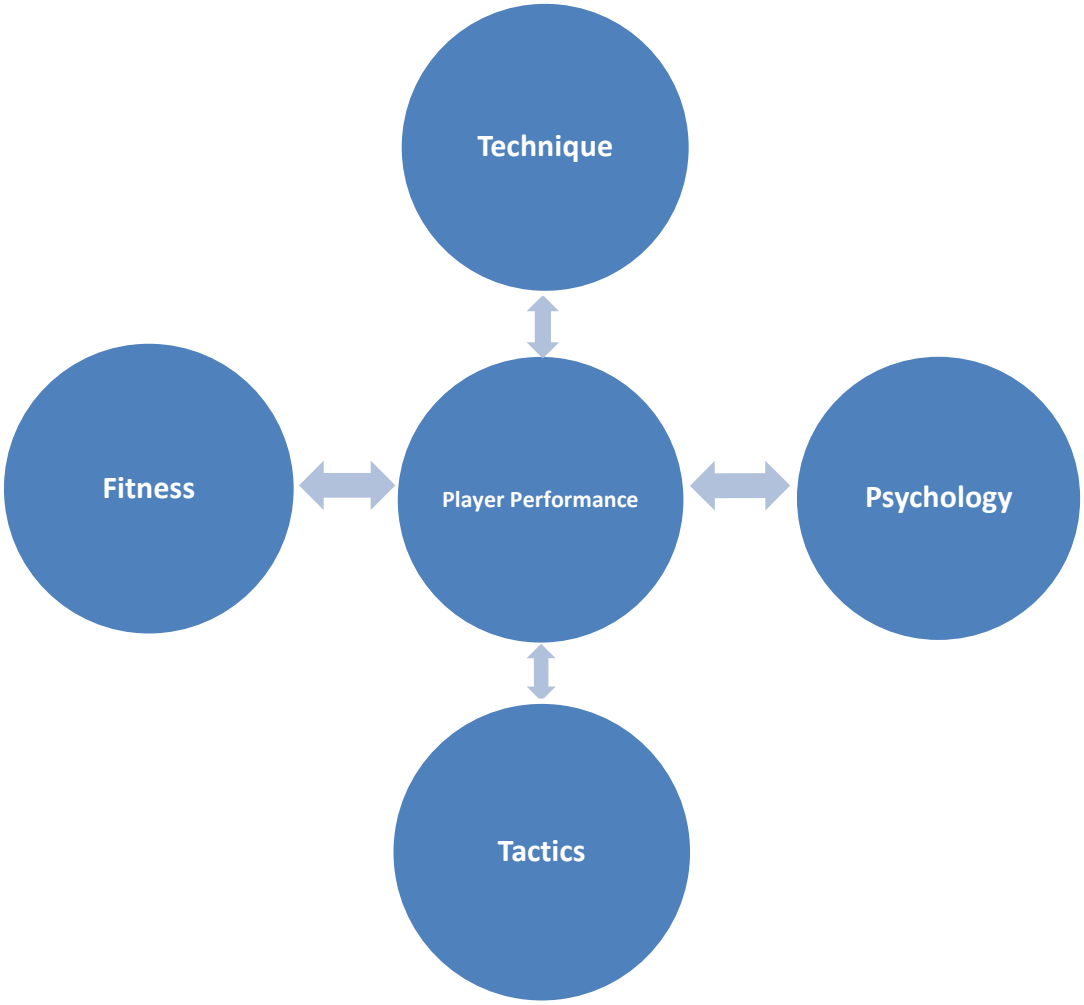


Figure 3: The Four Components of Soccer

The principles of play are essentially the checklist a player goes through mentally for each tactical situation that occurs in a match. Over many years of appropriate training and matches, these principles will become second nature for the players, and improved decision making quickens. The foundation to

building a team during the teenage years is to inculcate, within the players, the principles of play through those four components of soccer.

> ***"Teambuilding is a theoretical, well-structured process in which the coach has to understand the logical cohesion between the different parts – like a mechanic with a car."***
>
> **- Rinus Michels, former Ajax Amsterdam and Netherlands National Team, coach**

Principles of Play	
Principles of Attack	**Principles of Defense**
Penetration	Pressure – immediate chase
Depth – support (angle and distance)	Delay – get goal-side
Mobility – unbalancing (off-the-ball runs)	Depth – cover
Width – switch the point of attack	Balance – get ball-side
Improvisation	Compactness – concentration
Finishing	Control and restraint

Table 2: Principles of Play
Learn more at a USSF "D" License coaching course with your US Youth Soccer State Association.

Applying the Principles of Play	
Player Role	**Principle**
1st Attacker	Penetration
2nd Attacker	Support
3rd Attacker	Width and Depth
1st Defender	Pressure and Delay
2nd Defender	Depth
3rd Defender	Balance

Table 3: Principles of play for each of the six roles on the team.

Section 1 - Transition

Transition is the most important moment in soccer -- the moment in the match when individual players switch their player role in the game from defense to attack or attack to defense. Transition is understood first by an individual player, followed by a group of players. Then the team learns to see the same tactical cues. That ability leads them to reading the game.

This moment of transition occurs first as mental recognition of the situation and then as a decision that initiates physical action. *The faster the recognition-decision-action connection is made, the more impact a player's performance will have.* Only once individual players are quickly making the transition from one phase of play to the next will it be possible for a team to execute quick and skillful transition from defense to attack or vice versa.

If transition does not happen fast enough for a player or team, they will always be a step or two behind the action. The speed of a player's transition is based on his or her tactical awareness. Tactical awareness is being mindful of where one is on the field, as well as the location of the ball, teammates and opponents. It is the ability to read the game, to anticipate what will happen next and not merely react to what just happened. In some soccer circles, this tactical awareness is called insight. In American soccer, this level of mental focus and tactical awareness is referenced as being soccer savvy.

Players have no chance of becoming soccer savvy players if they are simply cogs in the team wheel. Transition in training session activities must become an ever increasing aspect as they mature. Players who are over-coached in matches become robotic in their performance and cannot make tactical decisions fast enough. Slow decision making leads to reaction players instead of anticipation players. The over-coaching comes not only from coaches, but spectators who constantly yell out to the players what to do and when to do it. This environment of coaches and parents making soccer decisions for the players during a match has led to a weakness in transition. The goal is to develop anticipation players – players who can read the game and are mentally one step ahead in the game. This sort of player evolves in a healthy soccer environment. That environment requires less coaching during matches and better coaching during training sessions. The training environment should lead to self-reliant players who think and communicate for themselves during a match.

The foundation to a good soccer environment in a club is a well-planned and consistently executed player development curriculum. From this foundation, a positive soccer culture can be built.

Section 2 - Systems of Play

Too often coaches concentrate on a team formation to the exclusion of essential developmental needs. A common question is, "What is the best formation to win?" Some coaches are quick to permanently place a player in a specific position. That is an erroneous decision. In fact, many coaches teach the game by position. This approach has an over emphasis on a particular system of play and the team formation to execute that system. Systems are not the focus, but rather the framework. The decisive factor is the player and his or her individual qualities, specifically technical expertise. Players must be given the chance to play every position in soccer to deepen their understanding of the game. While it takes more coaching talent to do so, teaching positioning prior to the roles of positions in a formation develops anticipation players. Do not lock players in a position!

Top teams play offensively, fast and flexible. To achieve the form of top teams, players must be soccer savvy and versatile. These are players who can adapt to several different systems of play and can take on diverse roles in various team formations. Remember that the formation is merely a platform, a reference point, for the players from which to play soccer.

Section 3 - Division of the Field - Thirds and Channels

Soccer, like all team sports, involves both elementary and sophisticated tactics. The general principles of play [Table 2] and the division of the field into the following three specific areas [Figure 4] help clarify tactics for the beginning player and coach. The three divisions of the field cover the defending, midfield and attacking thirds. The midfield third is the same for both teams, while the defending third for one

team is the attacking third for the other. The basic strategies performed in each third help make for an attractive and well-played game. Furthermore, the field is divided into three channels running the length of the field – two flank channels and one central channel.

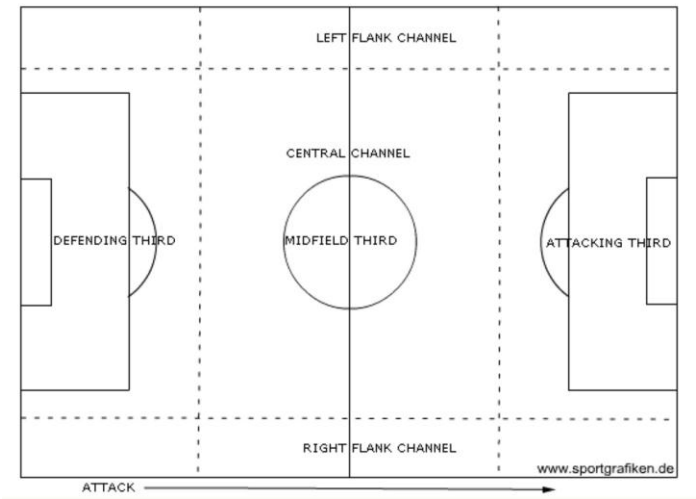


Figure 4: Thirds and Channels of the Field

Section 4 - Seasonal Planning

Good games can be planned. Great games just happen.

The three main phases of seasonal planning are preseason, season and postseason. The youth soccer coach must also take into account other activities in which the player is engaged. These include school and extracurricular activities, other sports, US Youth Soccer ODP, family and social functions, religious events, etc. These activities will influence the player's soccer experience.

The game is the best teacher – maybe. It does indeed teach players by showing them their strengths and weaknesses. However, too many matches in the player's schedule become a hindrance to development. There must be a proper balance between the number of matches played, training sessions per season and time off each season.

Coaches need to have a schedule for the season. A seasonal plan should begin by devising the schedule from the last possible event the team could attend in that soccer season. For the U-8 team most likely this is an end of the year soccer jamboree or festival or perhaps just the last play day on the schedule. For the U-18 team, the last event could be the finals of the US Youth Soccer National Championships. Whatever the last event is, plan from that point back to the beginning of the season. This will allow the coach to see the scope of the steps needed to develop players whose skills will culminate at the final season event. Take into account match days, training days, regeneration training days, specialty training, holidays, major school events (i.e., final exams), planned days off and tournaments. The schedule must

also reflect the rhythm of training. Following are one month schedule samples that could apply to childhood, pubescent and adolescent teams. [3]

Sample planning for U-6 to U-10						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
						1 Parents' meeting and children's play day
2 Day off	3 Training	4 Day off	5 Training	6 Day off	7 Match	8 Day off
9 Pick-up game	10 Day off	11 Training	12 Day off	13 Match	14 Day Off	15 Day off
16 Training	17 Day off	18 Pick-up game	19 Day off	20 Day off	21 Festival	22 Day off
23 Day off	24 Training	25 Day off	26 Training	27 Day off	28 Match	29 Day off
30 Day off	31 Pick-up game					

Table 4: Sample monthly planning calendar for U-6 to U-10

[3] A training session should go from low to medium to high to medium to high to low in the physical exertion demanded from the players – once exhausted little learning occurs.

Sample training U-12 to U-14						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
						1 Day off
2 Training	3 Day off	4 Training	5 Day off	6 Training	7 Day off	8 Match
9 Training	10 Day off	11 Training	12 Day off	13 Day off	14 Match	15 Day off
16 Training	17 Day off	18 Training	19 Day off	20 Training	21 Day off	22 Match
23 Day off	24 Training	25 Day off	26 Training	27 Travel	28 Tournament	29 Tournament
30 Day off	31 Regeneration training					

Table 5: Sample monthly planning calendar for U-12 to U-14

Sample U-16 to U-18+						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
						1 Day off
2 Regeneration training	3 Training	4 Specialty Training	5 Training	6 Training	7 Match	8 Day off
9 Regeneration training	10 Training	11 Match	12 Regeneration training	13 Online session	14 Match	15 Day off
16 Regeneration training	17 Training	18 Specialty training	19 Training	20 Training	21 Match	22 Day off
23 Day off	24 Training	25 Online session	26 Training	27 Travel	28 Tournament	29 Tournament
30 Day off	31 Regeneration training					

Table 6: Sample monthly calendar for U-16 to U-18+ select players

Planned time off is vitally important to avoid over-scheduling, overuse injuries and mental burnout. Both the players and the coaches need time off to recharge their batteries and come back to soccer reinvigorated. It is possible to have too much of a good thing.

Club and high school coaches need to work together for the sake of the players on dovetailing their seasons. A week or two off between seasons for the year-round players will reduce burnout. After a little rest and relaxation, the player will come back fully charged and ready to give 100 percent. If this formula is not followed, then players giving a fraction of their ability will become the norm.

Clubs and coaches must plan a reasonable soccer year calendar for each age group. Certainly the U-6 schedule should not have the same intensity, duration and frequency of activity as the U-16 schedule. Beware of the *too much too soon* syndrome[4]. A symptom of the syndrome is the *more is better* mentality[5]. For positive player development that will last for decades, a balanced approach must be taken in planning the soccer calendar. The following list covers the areas within the planning concept that the coach is responsible for when preparing a team to compete. All four components of soccer (fitness, psychology, tactics and technique) [Figure 3] are incorporated into these areas and some will overlap from one area to the next.

Planning concepts:

- Periodization
    - Peak at championship time
- Short-term and long-term development goals
- Rhythm of training[6]
- Tournaments must be few and far between. Discretion is necessary when deciding when and why the team participates in a tournament.
- Avoid over training or under training
- Avoid burnout, both mental and physical
- Avoid overuse and chronic injuries

There are two principles of learning in physical education that the coach should consider in the seasonal plan for skill improvement. The plan for training sessions each month should reflect these principles:

[4] The misguided notion that if beginning soccer at age 5 is good then 3 or 4 is a head start. The same flawed logic is often used in beginning tryouts too soon.
[5] The misapplied idea to increase training from one hour to two or double the number of matches from 50 to 100.
[6] The rhythm of a season should have a balance with the level of competition – peaking with the most challenging matches at season's end.

- **Principle of distributed practice -** Short periods of intense practice will result in more learning than longer, massed practice sessions.
- **Principle of variable practice -** Block practice[7] aids performance while variable practice[8] aids in learning. Variable practice causes an increase in attention.

Remember, plan the practice and practice the plan.

Recommended Training Sessions to Match Ratio			
Age Group	**Frequency**	**Duration**	**Ratio**
U-6	1 day per week	45 minutes	1:1*
U-8	1 day per week	45 to 60 minutes	1:1
U-10	2 days per week	60 to 75 minutes	2:1
U-12	2 to 3 days per week	75 minutes	2 or 3:1
U-14	3 days per week	75 to 90 minutes	3:1
U-16	3 days per week	90 minutes	3 or 4:1
U-18+	4 to 5 days per week	90 to 120 minutes	4 or 5:1
**Or 0:1 – The idea here is for the U-6 players to show up on game day for their hour, which includes 20 to 30 minutes of appropriate activities and then a 3v3 match. This is the approach in which the players are not assigned to teams, but all children in the age group meet at the same time and place to be trained and have a game.*			

Table 7: Training recommendations

Beware of Tournamentitis

Tournamentitis – true it's not a real word, but it does convey the condition of too many tournaments on the American soccer scene. On almost every weekend of the year there are hundreds of tournaments of every type taking place. They are for all ages and every level of play.

Tournaments started as a means to supply games for teams when there were far fewer teams than today. The distance between the teams often meant that the investment in time and money to get to another soccer club caused everyone to maximize the effort by playing many games. These tournaments began in earnest in the 1970s. Clearly, the number of soccer clubs has grown dramatically since then. The distance between clubs has become closer simply because of the proliferation of teams in towns. Yes, geography still plays a major role in the way soccer is managed in the U.S. The impact of distance on time and cost for travel will not change. What has changed, and will continue to change, is the distance between the home grounds of clubs.

In the 1980s, tournaments took on another focus. They became the main revenue stream for many clubs. Proceeds helped build facilities, turning the wheels of local governments and businesses to support soccer because of their financial impact on a community. The profits made even helped create jobs within the clubs for administrators and coaches. Tournaments have certainly aided with positive

[7] Block practice concentrates on one physical skill at a time before moving on to another.
[8] Variable practice does not present skills consecutively, but in a random order. Variable practice is more demanding since players must switch skills continuously. It would seem that the block method would be more effective. This is not the case. The variable practice is more difficult for players and hence demands a higher degree of mental focus. This demand develops better motor patterns for skills.

outcomes for the growth of soccer in our nation; yet, the dominant place of tournaments in youth soccer is a double-edged sword.

When a team plans to play in a tournament, it must ask: who, when, where and why. Teams should indeed play in tournaments to get exposed to a different style of play or a different level of competition. With young teenage teams, it can be part of learning how to play on the road. For older teams, the chance at regional and national level competition can also provide for scouting opportunities by college and professional coaches. In any case, the number of tournaments must be balanced with the rest of the team's schedule for training sessions and matches.

The most talented players tend to play the most matches (100 plus a year) and are generally the least rested. By virtue of the number of matches played (and the minutes played therein) the most talented players tend to be under-trained [ideal 5:1 ratio; 10,000 hour rule (Balyi & Hamilton, Spring 2004)]. Most select players never learn how to *train* appropriately. With so many tournament matches in two or three days, players go into survival mode and play in low gear. Seldom, except perhaps in the semifinal match, do they give 100 percent on the field. This means élite players never learn how to *play* appropriately for the level of competition. Mental and physical exhaustion leads to poor play, typified by kick-n-run soccer. These factors may also contribute to injuries as players who make slow decisions get into tight situations leading to bad tackles, unnecessary fouls, poor tactical positioning, and etcetera. To avoid the malady of tournamentitis, the coach must carefully plan the season with a good balance of league matches, training sessions and tournaments. In closing, here is the Position Statement from the 55 US Youth Soccer State Association technical directors on the topic of tournament play:

We believe that excessive play at competitive tournaments is detrimental to individual growth and development and can reduce long-term motivation. Multiple matches being played on one day and one weekend have a negative effect on the quality experience and development of the individual player. Further, far too many playing schedules include so many tournaments and matches that there is never an offseason. We believe that players under the age of 12 should not play more than 100 minutes per day, and those players older than 13 should not play more than 120 minutes per day. We also recommend to tournament managers and schedulers:

- *The players should be allowed ample rest between matches.*
- *That all tournament matches be of the same length and that no full-length match be introduced during playoff rounds.*
- *Kickoff times allow players a reasonable opportunity to prepare for competition. This encompasses rest and recovery, nutrition and adequate time to warm-up after traveling a long distance in addition to taking into consideration extreme environmental conditions.*

> ***"The problem in the U.S.A. is they start travel soccer at too early an age. That's totally detrimental. It becomes more about winning and about collecting hardware than about having the kids play and learning from playing."***
>
> **- Alfonso Mondelo, Major League Soccer, director of player development**

Section 5 - Long-Term Player Development

Development of soccer players is a continuum that overlaps age groups. The following are the top 10 objectives in the development of a soccer player:

1) Develop the child's appreciation of the game.
2) Keep winning and losing in proper perspective.
3) Be sensitive to each player's development needs.
4) Educate the players to the technical, tactical, physical and psychological (four components of soccer) demands of the game for their level of play.
5) Implement rules and equipment modifications according to the players' age group.
6) Allow players to experience all positions.
7) Players need to have fun and receive positive feedback.
8) Training should be conducted in the spirit of enjoyment and learning.
9) Provide the appropriate number of training sessions and matches according to the player's stage of development.
10) Strive to help each player reach their full potential and be prepared to move to the next stage of development.

As a team sport, soccer is a late specialization sport. A multi-sport experience provides a solid base to long-term development as a soccer player. From 6 to 12 years of age, children should have opportunities to be in different sports. Concentrating on one sport is inappropriate in terms of physical and game-sense development. The goals of any coach working with a young player who is pre-pubescent should include increasing proficiency of physical ability, developing functional versatility from a strength, movement and biomechanical standpoint and lastly, diminishing the potentially negative effects of specialized training. Subsequently when working with pre-pubescent aged players, the mandate should be one of global, all-encompassing development rather than specialization in one sport.

> ***"Readiness for sports is the match between a child's level of growth, maturity and development, and the task demands presented in competitive sports."***
>
> **- Dr. Robert M. Malina, world renowned expert on athletic development**

With pre-pubescent children, muscle innervations are completed roughly by the age of 6, although individual variances occur. Muscle innervations refer to the final expansion of nerve endings within a muscle fiber's interior. At the conclusion of the muscle innervation process, children are able to learn and begin the process of establishing functional ability in gross motor skills and movement patterns. At approximately age 6, it is realistic to begin teaching ball skills. Innervations are linked to coordination and motor control, so it stands to reason that children gain proficiency in gross motor skills more quickly than finer skills. This is another argument as to why early specialization is counterproductive – every sport requires various degrees of fine motor skills, which simply cannot become functional abilities in younger players.

Within a child's brain, specifically the cortex, stimulation and excitability govern over inhibition. This means young children are prone to poor concentration, especially over prolonged periods, and display indiscriminate reactions when responding to a specific situations, particularly those involving sudden

changes of direction. Reflexes become conditioned and more permanent around 10-12 years of age. Reflexes are extremely difficult to develop during puberty. This supports the fact that variety and well-rounded skill acquisition is crucial to training a young player. The inability to develop appropriate and specific reflexes in the teenage years supports the need to introduce young players to as many athletic experiences as possible in the early years.

One of the interesting features in support of varied development is the concept of plasticity. Plasticity refers to the ability of the young brain to adapt to new stimuli. The plasticity of the brain and nervous system declines rapidly in time, and actually may reach a functional limit, athletically speaking, by the late teenage years. Brain development is a long process and based largely on exposure. In fact, the brain development period, which extends through childhood and into adolescence, is characterized by an increased ability to adapt to new stimuli or high plasticity. However, this process does not continue equally forever. There are critical periods for different types of learning. If a skill is not acquired during its critical period, then the acquisition of that skill later in life will be harder, if not impossible (Erikson, 1950).

Conventional wisdom often supports an *as soon as possible* perspective, which many youth sport experts see as flawed. Evidence (Grasso, 2004) suggests that the earlier children begin playing organized youth sports, the sooner they drop out. This is especially true if the youth soccer program does not focus on psychomotor, cognitive and psychosocial development domains.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Swiss Psychologist and Developmental Theorist. Piaget's theories center on his discovery that children perceive the world differently than adults and that their development proceeds in determined stages which always follow the same sequence. He viewed imitation as an important part of learning via the play process.

Please note that there is a plus or minus three-year range from the player's chronological age in his or her development in each of these domains.

Psychomotor (physical) Domain

This domain is the physical fitness development of players from childhood through late adolescence. Emerging athleticism in players will happen at individual rates. Some will blossom early and some late. In the best interest of the players a well-rounded approach to fitness improvement includes the ball most of the time.

Cognitive (learning) Domain

It has been said that soccer is a thinking game. But few youth coaches today intentionally provide training environments for players that cause them to problem solve. Yet when it comes to game day, the players must make all of the game decisions, many of them in the blink of an eye, given the pace of the game. Teach players not just to play hard but to play smart. Encourage them to think for themselves on the field.

The general consensus among youth sports experts is that some children reach the social and cognitive maturity required for successful participation in organized sports at the age of 8. The ability to understand the complexities of game strategies however is usually developed in children who are 12 or older. Thus, most children are not ready for competitive sports before they complete the first or second year of middle school (Coackley, 1994). Subsequently, it is the recommendation of US Youth Soccer that tryouts where cuts occur not take place until 13 years of age.

Psychosocial (emotional) Domain

Play has long been understood to provide children with the experiences they need in order to learn social skills and values. Through play, children become sensitive to other children's needs and values, learn to handle exclusion and dominance, manage their emotions and learn self-control, as well as share power, space and ideas with others. At all levels of development, play provides opportunities for children to feel comfortable and in control of their feelings by allowing the expression of emotions in acceptable ways. Soccer provides children with the opportunity to negotiate and resolve conflict (Erikson, 1977; McArdle, 2001; Piaget, 1959; Winnicott, 1968). Thus the concept behind the psychosocial aspect of soccer is assisting children and adolescents to address a myriad of social and psychological challenges simultaneously in gentle and non-intrusive ways through their natural predilection to play (Bell & Suggs, 1998; Henley, 2007).

Section 6 - Time Is On Your Side

The development of a soccer player is a long process in which the players progress gradually from a simple to a more complex involvement in the game. This progression requires proper guidance and direction from coaches who are ethical, knowledgeable and licensed. This process cannot be rushed, but players should participate at a level that is both challenging and demanding. There is no guarantee that a player will reach his or her potential, but the opportunity must be provided!

> ***"…we must develop a culture and a way of thinking whereby highly skilled and qualified coaches are assigned to coach the younger players."***
>
> **- Jeff Tipping, former NSCAA, director of coaching**

Trainability in Childhood and Adolescence		
Late Specialization Model	**Age**	**Objective**
FUNdamental Stage	Females 6-8 Males 6-9	Learn fundamental movement skills
Learning to Train Stage	Females 8-11 Males 9-12	Learn fundamental soccer skills
Training to Train Stage	Females 11-15 Males 12-16	Build the aerobic base and build strength toward the end of the phase and further develop soccer-specific skills
Training to Compete Stage	Females 15-17 Males 16-18	Optimize fitness preparation and sport, individual and position specific skills as well as performance
Training to Win Stage	Females 17+ Males 18+	Maximize fitness preparation and sport, individual and position specific skills as well as performance
Retention Stage	Competitive Retirement	Retain players for coaching, officials, administration, etc.

Table 8: Trainability in childhood and adolescence (Hamilton)

The coach turns technical, tactical, psychological and physiological (four components of soccer) know-how into reality. The ultimate goal is to prepare the players to participate at the next level. The next level could be the next age group or a different level of competition. Both of these levels are encompassed in the Stages for the Ages progression illustrated in Figure 5.

Many of the adults organizing youth soccer do not fully grasp the timeline for the development of a soccer player. Since the majority of soccer players in most communities are children and teenagers they think that soccer is a child's game when in fact it is an adult game. Because of this basic misunderstanding they think soccer players are supposed to peak somewhere in the range of 13 to 16 years old. In fact soccer players peak in their mid-to-late twenties for field players and perhaps the early thirties for goalkeepers. Indeed, biologically, adolescence ranges from 15 to 23 years of age. Soccer players do not peak athletically until they are in their twenties, as well as fully developing their tactical awareness and emotional control.

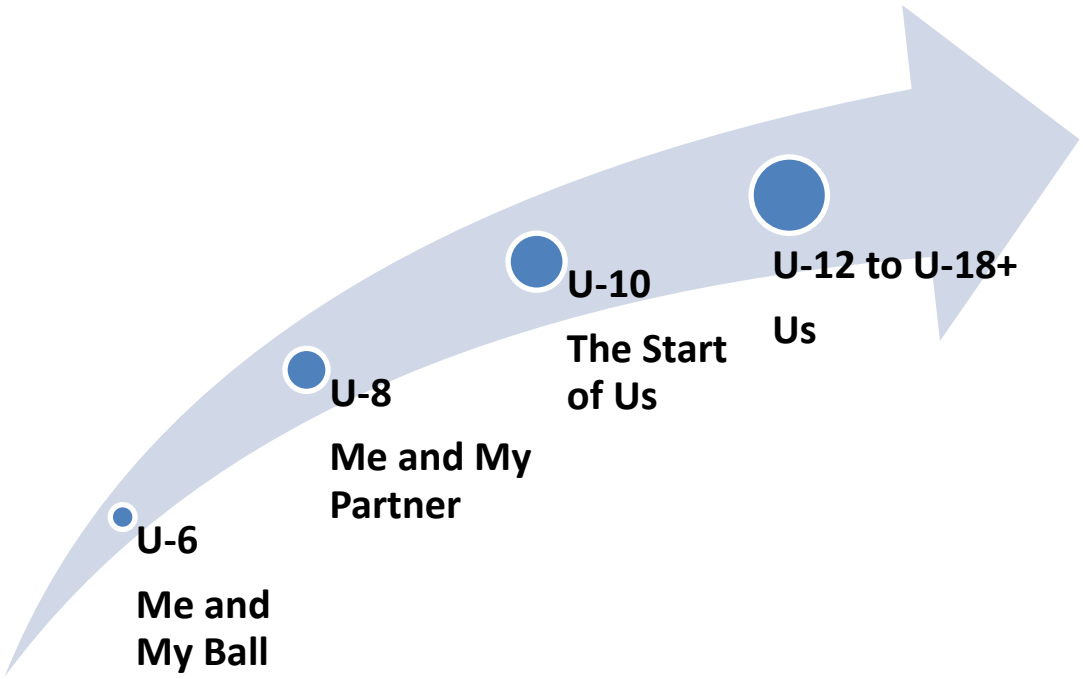


Figure 5: Stages for the Ages[9]

Once adults comprehend this realistic age for a fully developed player, they understand the sound logic behind a proper player development scheme. It begins to make sense that *too much too soon* will in fact harm the players more than help. Adults then become aware that the appropriate approach for development is not an out-come based approach but a process-based approach: why children should play small-sided games, why tryouts should be held off until the teenage years, why U-10 and younger teams should not make long distance trips or play in tournaments, why there should not be records kept of results until the players are in the U-12 age group, why overuse injuries occur in younger children when they play the same game too often, why youth are jaded toward the game by age 13, why players and soccer families experience burn-out from all the trips, tournaments, etc.

> ***"There is no magic formula or short cut to successful development. Coaching at youth levels is all about working with players to improve performance, not about recruiting players to build teams to win championships. Soccer is a player's game and players should be considered first when political, administrative and coaching decisions are made."***
>
> **- Bobby Howe, U.S. Soccer, former director of coaching, professional and National Team**

Since a youth soccer club could potentially have a player from age 4 to 19, then it is clear that a patient approach to proper development is realistic. A great sense of accomplishment could come from winning

[9] *Stages for the Ages* (2007), Vince Ganzberg, former director of coaching, Indiana Soccer Association

the US Youth Soccer National Championship Series. Ultimately though, success is in seeing lifelong players give back to the game!

For the U-6 to U-10 player environment, many clubs and some State Associations have replaced the outcome-based approach with a process-based approach via an academy-based setup. The *academy approach* is the same as saying scrambled. This is the terminology sometimes used in the national coaching schools. The main idea is no organized league play. Players are not assigned to a specific team, but are *scrambled* on each game day, allowing them to play with and against different players, using a non-results oriented philosophy. This best practice is prefaced with research from sports and child psychologists and pediatricians. They assert that sport should be organized, if it is to be organized at all for children under the age of 10, to allow the children to play because they love to win, not have to win. The goal is to compete to do their best rather than compete to be the best.

The academy format, or pool play, is recommended with multiple game options, movement within a group of players and all players having an equal opportunity to play. It is possible in an academy setup to have co-ed play where talented and motivated girls are allowed to play with boys, perhaps even allowing talented girls' teams to play in the boys division. An academy is a part of a progressive club curriculum. The focus of soccer programs at a young age should be on unhurried and diverse play in an environment that promotes positive developmental settings. The coach's responsibility here is to provide soccer activities that challenge youth players to advance to the next level of learning while keeping them motivated in an environment that promotes important citizenship qualities.[10]

The club curriculum should follow the three biological stages of pre-adult growth: childhood, puberty and adolescence [Table 9]. The majority of soccer clubs across the nation have evolved into single-year age groupings. This is done predominately for organizational and administrative reasons, even though single-year age groupings have nothing to do with player development. Indeed two-year age groupings, within one of those three stages of growth noted in Table 9 create a better environment for player development. The coach needs to be knowledgeable of the broad characteristics noted for the ages in each stage in Table 9. In this way, the coaches and the administrators can prepare a positive, player-centered environment that will enhance the growth of the players.

The biological stages of growth can be further broken down as follows:[11]

- Sampling years – ages 6 to 12
- Specializing years – ages 13 to 15 or Recreational years – age 13 +
- Investment years – age 16 +

The coach's role during the sampling years includes an approach centered on children's needs instead of performance outcomes. The coach should act as a resource person who can restructure the play and practice environment (avoid imposing a rigid structure). The coach should also focus on self-motivating behaviors versus externally controlled activities, encourage and support multi-sport involvement, avoid

[10] Excerpt from Academy Approach: Options for U6, U8, U10 Soccer Play (2005), Rick Meana, director of coaching, New Jersey State Youth Soccer

[11] Jean Côté, Ph.D., in his developmental model of sport participation

year-round training in soccer and advocate the use of game sense teaching[12] (Thorpe, Bunker, & Almond, 1986).

In the specializing years, adolescents should choose the sport they prefer. Coaches should create an environment that is enjoyable and challenging, address the different goals and needs of individuals with different skills and objectives, and finally, provide a deliberate balance of both training and play. During the same period, some players will choose recreation play over select play and the coach has goals here, too. They are to address the different goals and needs of individuals, focus on self-motivating behaviors and support and encourage recreational participation in soccer.

It is during puberty that players generally make the choice to specialize in soccer or to participate in recreational soccer. Either decision is fine since the goal of coaches is to keep youngsters in the game. They must be given free choice of the path they wish to follow.

During the investment years the coach's deliberate practice becomes the focus of players' training and will provide physical and social resources to overcome the effort and motivational constraints associated with deliberate training.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) believed that experience (doing) was necessary for perceptual change to occur. This included play experiences. He believed that curiosity and play should be used to inspire learning.

"Sports, when approached in the right way, can be as valuable as academics in the development of a happy child."

- Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, child and adult psychiatrist specializing in ADD/ADHD

Some players will choose the select player pathway for their soccer experience. This pathway involves a greater commitment of time, energy and emotion by the player and their family. Support along the select player pathway is a critical need for the player to handle the inevitable highs and lows along the way. That support must come from the player's family and friends. Here are vital factors in the player development pathway:

- Small-sided games from U-6 to U-12, allowing for accelerated skill development and understanding of individual and group tactics.*
- A soccer setting with an emphasis on developing the player before team building.*
- Focus on performance before outcome for the U-6 to the U-14 age groups.*
- Sensible competition and travel for gradual development to keep players in the game for the long term (see Jean Côté).*

[12] The idea of progressing from tactics to skills, or from why? to how? rather than vice versa. In training present problems of "what to do?" and "when to do it?" and not just "how is it done?"

- Structure the select player environment in a prioritized order –*
    - Teammates
    - Coaches
    - Opponents
- Pathways for select development include –
    - US Youth Soccer State League (U-12 to U-19)
    - US Youth Soccer Region League (U-14 to U-19)
    - US Youth Soccer National League (U-15 to U-17)
    - US Youth Soccer National Championships Series
        - US Youth Soccer State Championships (U-12 to U-19)
        - US Youth Soccer Regional Championships (U-14 to U-19)
        - US Youth Soccer Nationals Championships (U-14 to U-19)
    - US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program (U-13 to U-18)

*These factors apply equally well to the recreation/community player development pathway.

The long-term goal of select player development is to have players who can move up to the next level of play, which could include the club team, US Youth Soccer ODP, the youth national team or the collegiate level. Some may even have the multifaceted talents to become a professional player. Unfortunately very few clubs measure their success based on the number of players who are capable of moving up in the game after years of well-planned and properly executed training. Remember that fulfilling player potential takes time. The coach must train players to understand and master the progressively difficult game of soccer. The success in the growth of select players is not only measured in the victories gained but the number of players moving up to a higher level of play. The game within the child progresses through continuous development of creativity and mastery of the ball.

That pathway for development demands the players be allowed to learn by trial and error, experiment with new skills, experience a variety of game demands, demand high standards from themselves, make their own decisions during a match and play with exuberance. The American player should have a 'feel' for the game, be comfortable on the ball, athletic and enjoy the game.

> ***"We should measure success in coaching by how long it takes the player to no longer need his coach."***
>
> **- Greg Ryan, University of Michigan, coach**

Biological Stages of Growth		
Ages 4 to 9 Childhood	**Ages 10 to 14 Puberty**	**Ages 15 to 23 Adolescence**
Mostly random technical repetitions, psychologically friendly and positive, simple combinations and decision-making activities. Individual basic skills with an emphasis on keeping ball possession. A lot of balance and coordination exercises. Free play – movement education – trial and error – discovery – experimentation!	More combinations on attack and defense. Many decision-making environments. Psychologically positive with correction. Advanced competitive skills against match opponents. Tactically work on the roles of attack and defense and the basic principles of play. Exercises should focus on endurance, rhythmic movement, flexibility and running mechanics. Application of where it all fits into the game.	Positional application of ball skills. Intense fitness training now becomes a part of the training routine. Much of the focus of training is now on group and team tactics. Fitness training with an emphasis on speed, range of motion, strength and stamina. Emphasize now the mastery of ball skills and the match application of them.
Matches	**Matches**	**Matches**
Matches of 3v3 to 6v6. No leagues or standings! No tournaments, festivals instead. Many fun and competitive games. Gain technical skills and game insight by playing in simplified soccer situations.	Matches of 8v8 to 11v11. Tryouts should not begin until the U-13 age group. Less emphasis on the match results and more emphasis on players' performances.	11v11 matches with a strong emphasis on combination play. Matches should be used as a learning opportunity to execute new tactical concepts and team formations. There must be a balance between competitive matches and training games.

Table 9: Biological Stages of Growth
FIFA Coca-Cola World Football Academy Manual - modified youth development methodology

Childhood Key Factors (ages 4-9)

- Children of the same age may differ a good deal in motor skill development. A child's motor skills develop in a particular sequence: first they learn to crawl, then walk, and then run, jump and hop, in that order. There is a developmental sequence in learning a single technique, too. As players practice a particular technique, such as dribbling, they use their bodies more effectively each time and reach a higher level of development in that technique.
- Children progress through motor development sequences at their own rate. Players of the same age may be at different development levels because of differences in motor ability and in the amount of time they have practiced the technique. The important thing is that each player shows continued progress.

- Children of the same age will differ in physiological development (bone growth and muscular strength). Those who for their age excel in soccer are often more advanced physiologically than others their own age.
- Children, although loaded with energy, must be given rest periods.
- Compared to other periods in a child's life, these ages are the slow years in physical growth, making it the best time to learn new techniques.
- Children have not learned to accept mistakes – their own or others.
- Children lack the ability to make quick decisions.
- Children are in need of understanding and encouragement.
- Children like to play with others but side-by-side rather than together – "Me first…" rather than "Let's both do this…" It's a difficult time to teach tactics. Indeed the focus should be on teaching ball skills within game-like activities.
- Children have not yet learned the skills of compromise and team play. Expect frequent argument. Do not interfere with their arguments, as it is a part of their learning process.
- Children should not be expected to play a team game the way adults would.
- The rules should be bent to fit their physical and mental maturity. Fewer players result in more touches of the ball. Equipment suitable to their age and size results in better play.
- Team games call for social and mental skills that they are just starting to develop.
- Adult reactions to their efforts are often mistaken and become a blow to their self-confidence.
- Provide equal opportunity and playing time for all participants.

"When I'm on the field I feel free."

- David Beckham, English National Team and LA Galaxy, player

Puberty Key Factors (ages 10-14)

- All children are individuals and should be treated as such.
- Our society fosters cooperation and competition. Soccer activities can promote these behaviors.
- Provide the opportunity for each child to participate in challenging, meaningful and varied activities planned to enhance each one's perceptual motor development and total psychomotor development to his or her fullest capability.
- Children should be able to choose their own activities as much as possible for responsible decision making.
- Developmental goals will be met by any of the activities the children may choose.
- Learning often involves work.
- The coach and the parents must structure the child's environment to enhance the development of fitness.
- The home environment plays an important role in the learning process (cultural patterns).
- Promote cooperation and fair play; enhance self-worth.
- Discuss the difference between winning and success, losing and failure (one does not necessarily equate to the other).
- Conduct training sessions and plan activities that are fun and challenging but also emphasize the importance of skill acquisition within that framework.
- Apply reinforcement and corrective feedback as necessary.

- Facilitate a positive learning environment both at training sessions and matches.
- Educate/develop the whole child/player.
- Demonstrate technical and tactical skills and how they can be adapted to further the enjoyment of other sports.
- Encourage participation in general recreation activities and complementary sports.

"The drive, the hunger, the passion must be inside you, because players need to recognize that you care."

- Alex Ferguson, Manchester United Football Club, manager

Adolescence Key Factors (ages 15-23)

- Establish and refine training that increases the players' understanding of the correct use of space, width, depth, mobility and other principles of team play.
- Each player should be given the opportunity to develop to his/her fullest potential (physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and intellectually) while working at his/her own rate and present challenges at every level of ability.
- The player development scheme should include a program of psychomotor development that is varied enough to meet the needs and interests of the individual, which introduces skills that allow for carry-over activities in later life.
- The player development scheme should incorporate a variety of teaching and learning styles to allow for maximum participation of each individual.
- The player development scheme should be sensitive to the ethnic flavor and socio-economic status of the player population that allows players as members of a free society to express themselves openly in an enriched environment.

"In the game each player must be the coach of his team-mates in front and beside!"

- Johann Cruyff, former Barcelona and The Netherlands, coach

Section 7 - Small-Sided Games

US Youth Soccer has long advocated small-sided games for preteen players to enhance their soccer experience. Soccer, as played by the FIFA Laws of the Game, is an adult sport. The world's governing body for soccer recognizes this fact and allows modifications to the Laws of the Game:

Subject to the agreement of the member association concerned and provided the principles of these Laws are maintained, the Laws may be modified in their application for matches for players of under 16 years of age…

Any or all of the following modifications are permissible:

- *Size of the field of play*
- *Size, weight and material of the ball*
- *Width between the goalposts and height of the crossbar from the ground*

- *Duration of the periods of play*
- *Substitutions*[13]

All ages can play small-sided games, but it has a greater developmental impact on younger soccer players. This has to do with the stages of development that all children go through. As children progress through these stages they mature physically, emotionally and mentally. The reasoning behind small-sided games for children is to provide them a stair step approach to learning and playing the adult game of soccer. The small-sided game environment allows them to gradually learn the rules of play, game strategies, tactical concepts, teamwork and fair play as well as quality ball skills through increased time with the ball.

American players need to spend more time with the ball. From ages 4 to 14, ball skills must take precedence over the score and the win/loss record. Without ball skills, soccer that is dynamic, intelligent, tactical and exciting will not be possible. Refinement of ability to an expert level takes 10,000 hours of correct repetition according to research supported by the United States Olympic Committee. See Table 10 below for additional guidelines regarding the relationship between age and number of ball touches.

For more information on small-sided games refer to the Small-Sided Games Resource Center on USYouthSoccer.org.

Plato (427-347 B.C.) From 3-6 years of age children should be absorbed with play, in games of their own devising.

Table 10 shows a possible plan for increasing players contact time with the ball.[14]

Touches from 5 to 18 years old				
Age	**Number of days per year**	**Number of touches per session**	**Number of years**	**Total touches**
5-6	120	800	2	192,000
7-9	180	800	3	432,000
10-12	240	800	3	576,000
13-15	240	800	3	576,000
16-18	240	800	3	576,000
Total touches by age 18				2,352,000

Table 10: Number of ball contacts for player development

[13] FIFA Laws of the Game 2011-2012, page 3
[14] Kwik Goal, Soccer Coaching Literature Packet

Why no keeper until U-10?

Here is the Position Statement of the 55 State Association technical directors on the position of goalkeeper:

"We believe goalkeepers should not be a feature of play at the U-6 and U-8 age groups. All players in these age groups should be allowed to run around the field and chase the toy – the ball. For teams in the U-10 and older age groups, goalkeepers should become a regular feature of play. However, young players in the U-10, U-12 and U-14 age groups should not begin to specialize in any position at this time in their development."

The analysis of most soccer experts is that small-sided games for young children are most beneficial for learning basic motor skills, basic rules and the fundamental concepts of the game. They also learn how to interact with their peers within a game involving a ball. What is not supported is the use of goalkeepers in this format. Children want to run, kick the ball and score goals. Every child should experience the triumph and success of scoring a goal. They don't do well when told to stand in one place. If the action is at the other end of the field, a young goalkeeper will find some other activity to hold his or her attention.

Young children have great difficulty visually tracking moving objects, especially if they are in the air. Most children younger than 10 are very reactionary in their movement behavior and will duck or throw hands in front of the face if the ball comes toward the head. Anticipating where the ball might be played is a skill that has not yet developed and that does not really develop until age 9 or 10. Prior to age 9, visual tracking acuity is not fully developed. Players have difficulty accurately tracking long kicks or the ball above the ground. Beginning at approximately age 10, one's visual tracking acuity achieves an adult pattern.

Striking the ball at a small target accurately is a challenge for all children. Goalkeepers restrict the opportunities to score goals to a select few players. Young children stuck in goal will not develop goalkeeping skills and are more likely to get hit with the ball than actually save it.

It is important to wait until children are better able--physically, mentally and emotionally--to handle the demands of being a goalkeeper. There are no goalkeepers in the 3v3 and 4v4 format through age 8; goalkeeping is then introduced in the 6v6 format beginning at age 9. This still allows plenty of time for children to grow up and be the best goalkeepers they can be; most likely keeping them engaged in playing soccer for many years to come. Once players take on the goalkeeper role, they tend to grow in the position through three general stages. Those stages are shot blocker, shot stopper and finally goalkeeper.

The shot blocker stage is one where the goalkeeper simply reacts to shots after they have been taken. He or she tries to get into position to make saves and this is sometimes merely blocking a shot and not making a clean catch. The attacking role of the shot blocker is usually just a punt of the ball downfield.

At the shot stopper stage, a player has progressed to not only making saves after a shot is taken but also being able to anticipate shots. With this improved ability to read the game, the shot stopper gets into

better positions to make saves and begins to stop shots from being taken in the first place. The shot stopper now comes out on through balls and collects them before a shot is taken. The shot stopper also cuts out crosses before opponents can get to the ball. The shot stopper comes out in one-on-one situations and takes the ball off the attacker's feet. The shot stopper can deal with the ball both before and after a shot is made. Distribution with some tactical thought on the attack is also developing for the shot stopper.

The goalkeeper stage is the complete package. The goalkeeper is highly athletic and physically fit. The goalkeeper is mentally tough, composed and confident. The goalkeeper has the full set of skills for the role to both win the ball (defending techniques) and to distribute the ball (attacking techniques). A full-fledged goalkeeper is indeed the last line of defense and the first line of attack. A goalkeeper not only makes saves but contributes to the attack with tactical and skillful distribution of the ball. The goalkeeper is physically and verbally connected to the rest of the team no matter where the ball is on the field. A first-rate goalkeeper is mentally involved in the entire match and is therefore physically ready when the time comes to perform.[15]

Cardinal Rules of Goalkeeping[16]

From U-10 to U-18+ teach players to follow these rules when they are in goal.

1. **Go for everything!**

You may not be able to stop every shot that comes your way, but if you make the attempt, you will find that you are stopping shots you never before thought possible. You will also have the personal satisfaction that at least you made the attempt and your teammates will be more forgiving even if you miss.

2. **After a save – get up quickly!**

If you have gone to the ground to make a save, get back on your feet as fast as possible. Look for a fast break distribution or direct your teammates into position to receive a build-up distribution. This aspect is particularly important if you are hurting. You cannot show weakness, start the counterattack. This will particularly intimidate your opponents and raise the confidence in your teammates.

3. **Do not be half-hearted – 100 percent effort!**

Every time you make a play, it must be with all of your ability. If you go halfway, you will miss saves and possibly injure yourself.

4. **Communicate loudly!**

You must constantly give brief instructions when on defense. When your team is on the attack, come to the top of your penalty area or beyond and talk to your teammates and offer support to the defenders. Be mentally involved in the entire match, no matter where the ball is.

[15] *Wait Until They're Ready* (2000), Dr. David Carr
[16] *Cardinal Rules of Goalkeeping* (1979), Winston Dubose and Sam Snow

5. **No excuses! No whining! Just get on with the match.**

If a goal is scored against you, a corner kick is given up or the shot is a near miss, do not yell at your teammates even if it's their fault. Do not hang your head or kick the ground or the post if it was your fault. During the match is no time to point fingers or make excuses. The play is over, it's ancient history; get on with playing the remainder of the match. Focus on what lies ahead!

The small-sided game environment is *developmentally appropriate* for our young soccer players. It's a fun environment that focuses on the *player* (Goodman, 2004). And it is about *the player;* isn't it?

Section 8 - Appropriate Competition

The goals of youth soccer should be to promote physical activity, fun, life skills (i.e., self-reliance, conflict management and purposeful interaction with others), fair play and good health. Many soccer programs start out like this, but change over time because adults and children misunderstand the difference between competition and cooperation.

Youngsters used to play with friends after school and on weekends. For a variety of reasons, they now are enrolled in organized, competitive soccer programs. Is this fact a concern? Can a child be too young for soccer competition? This seemingly easy question is actually quite complex to answer. The coach must first think of organized competitions where the players compete against each other in matches according to specific rules. This is a so-called *adult model* of competition. Now a child's readiness for competition must be assessed, accounting for biology, sociology, psychology and physiology. A young player may be physiologically ready for the demands of competition but not psychologically ready.

At age 5, children start to compare themselves to other children. Even so they still don't understand competition. They tend to play when they are having fun or winning, but lose interest when the opposite occurs. Even at 8 years old, children may not be physically or emotionally ready or have the cognitive skills to understand and meet the expectations that parents and coaches have of them. They may not have the social skills to understand turn-taking or be emotionally ready to handle criticism. The benefits soccer offers can be lost if results-oriented competition is emphasized too soon.

Overt competition involves more ego-oriented goals and tends to promote the attitude that winning is everything. It often discourages children from trying new tasks, but can encourage them to break the rules in order to win. Cooperation in soccer is the willingness to work together to achieve a common purpose, which empowers players with creative problem solving skills, better communication skills, more sharing of emotions and a better sense of team. Parents, administrators and coaches have a large influence on the process of balancing cooperation and competition. The needs and goals of the players must be considered in order to build a successful youth soccer program.

Now as to the original question, "Can a child be too young for competition?" Yes, when referring strictly to the adult model of competition. Youngsters do not have the psychological, social and physical skills necessary for the results oriented environment. However, if the adult leaders structure competition to

make it developmentally appropriate for these young players, they can benefit from the experience and develop the skills to prepare themselves for competition.[17]

> ***"We are asking our players to compete before they have learned how to play."***
>
> **- Jay Miller, U.S. U-20 Men's National Team, former coach**

Section 9 - Street Soccer

The importance of giving the game back to the players cannot be overemphasized. Whether it is called street soccer, a sandlot game, a kick-about or a pickup game, this is the way millions upon millions, for over 100 years, have learned to play soccer.

While the pickup game has not disappeared in the U.S.A., it is not used in youth soccer as it could be. There are millions of youngsters playing soccer in this country, so why are pickup games not seen in every park?

There can be many reasons why so few pickup games happen in youth soccer. They include a sedentary lifestyle, vacant lots for playing no longer exist, and the design of neighborhoods now-a-days creates little or no yard on which to play, parents are reluctant to let their children play away from home without adult supervision, soccer facilities are closed except for scheduled events or young people simply don't know how to organize a game.

There can be more reasons and some of the ones noted are beyond the direct control of most soccer coaches. The one that is the most disturbing is that children do not know how to organize their own games. How has it come to pass that children cannot throw down objects to mark goals, pick teams and play? Part of the answer is that coaches have taken the game away from the youngsters. There is over coaching and over organization. Coaches, parents and administrators need to give the game back to the players.

In the 1970s and 1980s, coaches had to be a focal point of most soccer experiences since so many of the children were just then being introduced to the game. Unlike today, there were very few televised soccer matches and in many communities none at all. Professional and college teams

[17] *Understanding Competition versus Cooperation in Youth Sports,* Angela Reinhart, Unit Educator, Family Life Champaign County Unit.

were not nearly as prevalent as today, so the opportunity for a child to go watch adults play the game was rare. Even to watch a World Cup match one had to go to a theater for closed-circuit TV. Consequently, the coach had to demonstrate all of the ball skills, show players how to position themselves on the field and teach the rules.

While that is still true to an extent today, there are many models for a child to see how to play the game. The coach no longer needs to be at the center of a new player's soccer experience. Now keep in mind that coaches are not alone in the need to give the game back to the players.

The need for organization has been a double-edged sword for American soccer. The ability to organize has created teams, clubs and leagues and quality soccer complexes that dot the land.

This organization has provided quality coaching and referee education, and the game has grown tremendously for the most part by the labor of volunteers. But organization has a downside, too. Adults meddle too much in the children's soccer world. Everything is planned out! From uniforms for U-6 players to select teams at U-10, adults are too involved. The children do not know how to organize a pickup game because they are seldom allowed the opportunity.

Good organization is an American trait, but what might be driving the compulsion to infiltrate adult organization into child's play? As a sports nation, we suffer from the *too much too soon* syndrome. Many adults involved in youth soccer want so badly to achieve success, superficially measured by the win/loss record and the number of trophies collected, that they treat children as miniature adults. Unfortunately, it is the adults who lack the patience to let the game grow within the child naturally.

In the National Youth License coaching course, the idea of street soccer is presented. This is a way for the club to begin giving the game back to its rightful owners, the players. The club provides the fields and supervision for safety, but no coaching, allowing players to show up and play pickup games. Granted, it's not as spontaneous as a neighborhood game, but it does provide a chance to play without referees, coaches and spectators. This means the children are free to learn how to organize themselves, solve disputes, become leaders, rule their own game, experiment with new skills, make new friends and play without the burden of results. If the club wants to provide an even more productive fun-filled environment, then it can put out different types of balls to use in some of the games, encourage them to set up fields of different sizes, allow mixed age groups to play together and even have coed games.

The players have a lot they can learn from each other. After all, players learning from players has produced Michele Akers, Landon Donovan, Mia Hamm, Kasey Keller and many other world class players. That same unencumbered environment has produced the multitudes that support the game. When adults give the game back to the players, in some small measure, they are likely to keep more players in the game for a lifetime, and then the odds improve for the U.S. to produce its share of world class players. Youth soccer now lives in the culture created over the last 30 years. Will we evolve?

"I must admit that football in the streets gave us a great sense of freedom."

- Eric Cantona, French National Team, former player

The key benefits of street soccer should be reflected in coaching. Those benefits are:

- Lack of psychological distress for game results except from the players themselves.
- Opportunity to play with and against a variety of players, each of whom present different strengths and weaknesses which help individual and group improvement.
- Opportunity to take chances with new skills and ideas.
- Opportunity to play with variations of the number of players and size of the field which enhances tactical growth.
- The 'street soccer' environment requires players to think for themselves which allows the chance for anticipation players to evolve.

Beach Soccer – Indoor Soccer – Futsal

One of the beauties of soccer is that the game can be played anywhere the ball can roll, and playing in a variety of conditions helps to develop more well-rounded players. A mix of outdoor and indoor soccer along with some variety in the type of playing surface, size of field and type of ball used will have a positive impact on ball skills and clever play. One possibility is soccer on the beach, which is not only great fun, but certainly impacts the players' skills and physical fitness. Players are more likely to experiment with more acrobatic skills on the beach, too.

At times the weather conditions dictate that soccer go indoors. Coaches must take this fact into consideration in the player development curriculum for the club. Indoor soccer could be played inside a hockey rink type playing area using the boards or Futsal. Some indoor facilities are large enough to allow up to 11v11 matches. All of these options keep players active in the game. The same basic skills, tactics and knowledge of the game as the 11v11 outdoor game occur indoors. Yet Futsal may offer the best compliment to player development. One of the benefits of this version of soccer is that it can be played inside or outside, on a dedicated Futsal court, tennis court or basketball court, so the options of where to play are wider. Young players exposed to playing Futsal show a greater comfort on the ball along with more intelligent movement off-the-ball. The more pleasure they derive from their participation, the more they wish to play and practice on their own. While their instinct to play is natural, their affection and appreciation for soccer must be cultivated in a soccer rich environment. Futsal is a foundation to such goals because it:

- Allows players to frequently touch the one *toy* on the field, namely, the ball. In a statistical study comparing Futsal to indoor soccer with walls, players touch the ball 210 percent more often.
- Presents many opportunities to score goals. With limited space, an out of bounds and constant opponent pressure, improved ball skills are required.
- Encourages regaining possession of the ball as a productive, fun and rewarding part of the game (defending).
- Maximizes active participation and minimizes inactivity and boredom. Action is continuous so players are forced to keep on playing instead of stopping and watching.
- Provides a well-organized playing environment with improvised fields. Without a wall as a crutch, players must make supporting runs when their teammates have the ball.
- Reflects the appropriate role of the coach as a facilitator. With all the basic options of the outdoor game in non-stop action mode, players' understanding of the game is enhanced.

- Players enjoy the challenge of playing a fast-paced, fun and skill-oriented game that tests their abilities; allowing the game to be the teacher![18]

Section 10 - Player-Centered Training

Guided Discovery

The traditional way sports have been taught is with the coach as the center of attention. The coach tells the players what to do, command style, and then expects them to produce. With the command style, the coach explains a skill, demonstrates the skill and allows the players to practice the skill. In contrast to reproduction of knowledge in the coach-centered approach, the guided discovery approach emphasizes the production of new talents. The approach invites the player to think, go beyond the given information and then discover the correct skills. The essence of this style is a coach-player connection in which the sequence of information and questions leads to responses from the player. The combination of information and question by the coach elicits a correct response which is discovered by the player. Guided discovery simply means that the coach raises questions and provides options or choices for the players, guiding the players to answer the questions because they become curious about the answers. The player in a command style setting thinks too much about what they are trying to do, a form of paralysis by analysis. If the coach instead guides the players in a player-centered training environment, then they gradually become capable of holistic thinking in their soccer performance.

Holistic thought is opposed to the analytical type of thinking. Analysis means to divide the whole into parts to be studied more closely. Holistic thinking considers the parts as a whole. Soccer performances, training sessions and especially matches are better suited to holistic than analytical treatment because they involve an integrated set of movements that must all happen at the same time. Holistic thinking has been linked anatomically to functions carried out in the right hemisphere of the brain. The right hemisphere coordinates movements and sensations associated with the left side of the body and the left hemisphere does the same for the right side of the body. In addition, the left hemisphere is known to control analytical thinking, which includes verbal expression, reading, writing and mathematical computation. The functions associated with the right side of the brain are those having to do with sensory interpretation, coordination of movement, intuitive or creative thinking and holistic perception of complex patterns. This hemisphere can grasp a number of patterns simultaneously.[19]

Sports tradition has emphasized left side brain functions to the exclusion of the other. We acquire pieces of knowledge one at a time. In soccer, the traditional coach teaches separate points of technique, ignoring the flow needed in actual performance. In soccer, we draw upon right hemisphere capabilities of holistic perception, rhythm, spatial relationships and simultaneous processing of many inputs. Left hemisphere functions are largely uninvolved. New players often go wrong in trying to control their movements with a constant, specific internal awareness. They engage the left-brain functions of analysis and sequence to interfere with holistic coordination of physical movement. Obscuring a player's

[18] United States Futsal Federation (2008)

[19] *How Psychosocial Sport & Play Programs Help Youth Manage Adversity: A Review of What We Know & What We Should Research* by Robert Henley, Ph.D.; Ivo Schweizer, M.A.; Francesco de Gara, M.A.; Stefan Vetter, M.D. at the Centre for Disaster and Military Medicine, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

awareness with too many instructions (over coaching) will make the player so pre-occupied that he or she 'can't walk and chew gum at the same time', so to speak.

It is often argued that effective coaching is as much an art as it is a science. Guided discovery in coaching soccer is a balance of the two. In a broad sense, our coaching style of the American soccer player must move away from the *sage on the stage* and more toward the *guide on the side*.

> ***"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand."***
>
> **- Confucius, Chinese philosopher**

Section 11 - Over Coaching

Successful coaches are effective communicators

For players to become self-reliant, the coach must not micromanage the game for them. As a player-centered sport, some coaches become disillusioned as they learn that they are the *guide on the side* and not the *sage on the stage*. In many sports the coach makes crucial decisions during the competition. This coach-centered perspective has been handed down to us from other sports and coaching styles of past generations.

> ***"Talking too much is a big danger for a coach. The words get lost in the wind."***
>
> **- Sir Alex Ferguson, Manchester United Football Club, manager**

In soccer, players make tactical decisions during the match; the coach's decisions are strategic. The ego-centric personality will find coaching soccer troublesome. During the match the coach can call out some general reminders, "mark up" for example, but for the most part should remain quiet, only yelling out loud praises while sitting and quietly observing the match. It is the players who should be heard the most during a match. Some team supporters might think the coach is not coaching if there is not constant talking, so parents will need to be educated on why this chatter diverts players' attention. Team supporters too often have their view of the match colored by the professional model and by the way coaching is portrayed in other sports and in the sports media. In a coach-centered sport with frequent stoppages in play and timeouts, the coach takes on a direct role during the game. Soccer does not stop except for a serious injury and halftime, giving the coach an indirect role during the match.

The coach should attempt to have players play for an extended period of time. The players must solve their own problems on the field instead of having the coach make substitutions in order to solve the problem for them. Coaches should not platoon players in and out of games in order to wear an opponent down. Unlike most team sports, soccer is a player's game, not a coach's one. Substitutions allow for all players to play and will speed development for a greater number of players. The coach should decide before the match or tournament what the policy regarding substitutions will be and stick to it.

Players have more room to grow when the coach makes sensible substitutions and talks less during matches. In this fertile game environment, some players will grow as team leaders. This will begin with a player directing one or two players, and in time, the entire team. Leaders will guide and inspire the team from within.

"Over-coaching is the worst thing you can do to a player."

- Dean Smith, University of North Carolina, former basketball coach

Section 12 - Types of Game-like Activities

The ability to modify training depends on the skill of coaches in knowing what the objectives are. There must be a clear direction to the coach's work and this includes knowledge of game-like activities (Fleck, Quinn, Carr, Buren and Stringfield, 2002). Without these essentials, there cannot be a commitment to coaching children about soccer and what it has to offer. Game-like activities that can be used in training fall into three main categories. Select activities from each category that is age appropriate (as is explained further in Parts II and III of this Model).

Three main categories of game-like activities:

- **Body awareness**: Activities that emphasize the use of body parts, motion, coordination and balance, with and without the ball.
- **Maze games**: Activities in which the player has the opportunity to move in a 360° environment, with and without the ball. Even though the area is defined, there is not necessarily a specific target or boundary to go toward. These activities allow the players to make decisions while moving in all directions.
- **Target games**: Activities that involve solving the objective by going from point A to B. In contrast to maze games, these activities are more directionally defined and can be done with and without the ball.

There will be times in training activities when the concepts of each of the three main types of game-like activities may be utilized in a single activity. Additionally, for the U-12 and older age groups, further modifications of an activity can be useful to player development.

Additional modifications of game-like activities:

- **Conditioned games:** Game-like activities with a condition placed on the activity, such as goals scored from crosses count double. At most, only one or two conditions should be placed on any activity.
- **Restricted games:** Game-like activities with a restriction placed on the players, such as a maximum of two touches on the ball. At most, only one or two restrictions should be placed on any activity.

Friedreich Froebel, German Educational Reformist (1782-1852 A.D.) fostered the idea that learning can occur through play and games.

Training Variables

To affect all four of the components of the game, the ball to player ratios should be followed as outlined in the following Table 11. When the ratio is correct for the majority of the time spent in a training session, player development is accelerated.

Ball to Player Ratios	
Age	**Ratio**
U-6	1:1
U-8	1:1 to 1:2
U-10	1:1 to 1:4
U-12	1:1 to 1:6
U-14	1:1 to 1: 7
U-16	1:1 to 1: 8
U-18+	1:1 to 1: 10

Table 11: Progression of ball to player ratio maximizing development

When conducting training, the coach should be mindful of the variables that can be manipulated. The proper balance and control of these variables can make for a good training session that is enjoyed by all. Three overriding factors impact all training sessions and matches: frequency, duration and intensity.

Frequency comes back to seasonal planning and the soccer calendar and is the number of matches and training sessions planned and when they occur.

Duration is the length of time spent in each training session and match. The length of matches is set with possible variables being in a tournament where the length of the matches might be shortened or, if a winner of a match must be determined, then there may be overtime and possibly penalty kicks. The coach has direct control over the duration of training sessions. The time of a training session may be shortened but do not lengthen it. More is not better. The optimal length of a training session for each age group is provided in Table 7. Once mental and physical fatigue has set in, little more can be learned by the players. The principle of distributed practice discussed in Section 5, Seasonal Planning applies here.

The factor of intensity is largely out of control for the coach during a match as each game takes on a life of its own. To a degree, the intensity of a training session can be controlled. Control of training intensity begins with a well written session plan, so each activity put into a session plan should be thoughtfully considered. How exerting is each activity? Do not have more than two vigorous activities in a row. A training session should have a rhythm of low to medium to high and then low in the physical demands. When too many highly strenuous activities take place in a row or one vigorous activity continues for too long (duration), then fatigue takes over. This is when play gets sloppy, poor decisions are made and injuries may occur. Again, more is not better; remember the principle of distributed practice referred to at the end of the prior paragraph.

When using a games-based approach during training much can be accomplished, through the use of guided discovery and the coach's toolkit. The toolkit is a vehicle that allows coaches to teach, correct and influence the learning process of a player without taking away their creativity and killing the

flow of the game or activity. Following are tools that can be used to progress from individual to group to team interaction:

- **Coaching in the flow** – Coach from the sidelines as the training session goes on, without stopping the activity.
- **Individual coaching –** One-on-one, pull a player to the side while the activity goes on.
- **Make corrections at a natural stoppage –** free kicks, ball going out of bounds, injury, etc.
- **Manipulation of the activity –** For example, a four goal game to teach the players how to look both ways, switch the point of attack or shift defensively.
- **Freeze** – The least desired way to teach; stopping the session to paint a picture kills the flow of the activity.

Determining which of these tools is best suited at a certain time of the training session is the key to making the session enjoyable while still being able to teach and learn.

If using equipment, try to make sure the layout has visual impact. During a training session a coach controls the equipment. Take into account the use of balls (various types), cones (a variety of shapes and colors), goals (portable or fixed and various sizes) and auxiliary equipment such as speed ladders, coaching sticks, pendulum poles, etc. The scope of the equipment available impacts the possibilities within training activities. If training is conducted on different surfaces from time-to-time, there is a bearing on the skills of the players as they must adjust to different ways that the ball rolls and bounces. (No matter where a training session is conducted, appropriate safety precautions need to be taken.)

Finally, coaches can manage pressure in training. There are three aspects of pressure that occur in every game and for every age group. They are time, space and opponent.

Training Session Variables	
Opponents	Even or uneven number of players
Space	Size and shape of the playing area
Time	Can be manipulated directly by the watch or indirectly by the size of the grid and the number of opponents
Conditions and restrictions	Method of scoring, touch restrictions, etc.

Table 12: Coach manipulated training variables

A coach should manage the training variables in the flow of training to achieve the desired outcome. Train with an attention to detail.

Age Appropriate Ball Sizes			
Age group	**Ball size**	**Circumference**	**Weight**
U-6 and U-8	3	23-24 inches	11-12 ounces
U-10 and U-12	4	25-26 inches	12-13 ounces
U-14 to U-18+	5	27-28 inches	14-16 ounces

Table 13: Age appropriate ball sizes

Section 13 - Fair Play

Soccer is a competitive sport. Competitiveness is a natural and desirable mindset, but it can spawn negative consequences if not properly harnessed. Notice the warning signs, such as tryouts prior to U-13 or punishing players for a loss. US Youth Soccer is committed to raising the awareness of the negative consequences of an over-emphasis on outcome-based expectations. The Citizenship Through Sports Alliance 2005 Youth Sports National Report Card (Sportsmanship, 2005) is highly critical of the lack of a child-centered philosophy in youth sports, giving youth club leaders a grade of 'D' (poor) while the coaches did not fare much better, receiving a grade of 'C- minus' (between fair and poor). More alarmingly, the report gave a grade of 'D' for parental behavior. Referees received a favorable grade of 'B-minus' for their behavior, although the need for improved training in technique, rules and safety was cited.

It is essential to note that overly competitive trends are not only adversely affecting the essence of player development, but also blur the line between ethical and unethical behavior. The mission of any youth organization revolves around these fundamental goals: develop character, instill values, teach respect for authority and society, develop confidence and a positive self-image and help youth reach their potential in life. The goal is to use soccer as the vehicle to achieve this mission.

What role should administrators, referees, coaches and parents play? Together, they have an enormous impact on the lives of millions of youth soccer players in the United States. While each parent must be accountable for individual actions and teach the child to do the same, administrators, referees, coaches and parents form a quadrangle of role models from whom many children learn behaviors that they will carry into adulthood. Cooperation, respect and maturity among the adults in soccer will encourage those qualities in our players.

The mission of a soccer club should not revolve around winning championships. Winning is a byproduct of a quality program, but it should not be the driving force. Many club leaders articulate the need to de-emphasize results, but fail to notice that club procedures, or the actions of the staff, contradict the club's stated philosophy. Some simply do not see the difference between teaching life lessons through sport and collecting trophies in sport. This ambivalence to right and wrong dims the moral clarity and leads to a collision between mission and ambition.

Coaches: What can you do to make the game of soccer more enjoyable for the players?

1. Attend coaching classes to learn the most effective ways to conduct training.

2. Teach skills and fair tactics – discourage unfair gamesmanship.[20]
3. During matches, leave the tactical decisions to the players.
4. Concentrate on coaching, rather than on the accuracy of a referee's decisions.
5. Take a course on the *Laws of the Game* and officiate some matches.
6. Remain calm – do not make loud, offensive remarks.
7. Be positive, avoid confrontation with any official and be a role model of fair play.
8. Set high standards for yourself, the players and team supporters.
9. Provide good behavior guidelines to parents.
10. Be firm with parents at matches.
11. Communicate with parents frequently through newsletters, in meetings and at social gatherings.
12. Play the game yourself and encourage parents to play and referee soccer.[21]

Some clubs tolerate coaches with winning records but who are poor role models – coaches who constantly shout at players, criticize referees with sarcastic remarks or are often confrontational with opposing coaches and parents--must be challenged and corrected. Coaches who punish their players for losing a game by making them do physical exercise must be removed. Coaches who twist the rules and teach their players that *acceptable deceit* overrules sportsmanship and fair play and that nice guys finish last are poor role models who cannot be tolerated. It flies in the face of the main goal of youth sports.

Club leaders are in the position to positively influence the soccer experience of young players. Policy makers must not shirk responsibilities of the game at the grassroots level. All actions must be governed by high ethical standards--for the good of the game and for the benefit of the next generation.[22]

Section 14 - The Modern Coach

The modern coach should emulate the following characteristics and actions:

- Create learning situations.
- Create age appropriate conditions and intensity of competition.
- Cause transfer of learning from training to match.
- Encourage players to develop physically, technically and tactically.
- Develop a team framework and teach players their roles so the team has a good soccer environment.
- Explore a variety of strategic situations and have mental and tactical rehearsal for all eventualities.
- Develop infrastructural support; the club has a good soccer culture.
- Develop psychological strength and maturity of the players and team.
- Enjoy the work. Enjoy the game. Strive to win.

[20] Gamesmanship is when a player tries to fool the referee into making a call on an infraction that did not really happen, such as “diving” in order to get a free kick.
[21] *Role Models for Life* (July 2002), US Youth Soccer
[22] *Ethics in Youth Soccer* (January 2008), Jacob Daniel, director of coaching, Georgia Soccer

- Ceaselessly study the game and work to improve the craft of coaching.

> ***"The modern coach needs a philosophy, an expert eye and intuition."***
>
> **- Roy Hodgson, UEFA and FIFA, technical study group and Fulham Football Club, manager**

Player-Centered Coaching

With a player-centered coaching approach, players are given more ownership of their learning, thus increasing their opportunities and strengthening their abilities to retain important skills and principles. This learning also develops the players' ability to make good decisions during matches, an important element in successful performance at any level of play. It helps players to take a leadership role and ownership in enhancing the team culture.

Player-centered coaching places a high priority on the total development of the player. The game within the child is a concept central to the American approach to youth soccer coaching: that the game of soccer is already within each player and the talent of a coach is used to bring out the game from within each player. The approach of the game within the child, pioneered by Dr. Ron Quinn and colleagues, requires coaches to have a solid knowledge of the game. Coaches must understand who is being coached and allow the player to make decisions by using guided discovery in coaching and by setting appropriate soccer challenges for players to improve their problem-solving skills.

> ***"I use a global method. Yes, I use direct methods when preparing our organization, but I also use guided discovery where I create the practice, dictate the aim, and the players come up with different solutions."***
>
> **- José Mourinho, Real Madrid, head coach**

Philosophy of Coaching

They won't care what you know until they know that you care.

It is important to develop a coaching philosophy when getting started in coaching. For that matter, even experienced coaches may want to re-evaluate their philosophy.

> ***"Once they cross that line, it's their game. It's not about us as coaches; it's about them being able to make decisions."***
>
> **- Jay Hoffman, US Youth Soccer Region I ODP Boys, former head coach**

A coach's philosophy has an impact on daily coaching procedures and strategies. A coach's philosophy is actually a very practical guide. The beginning coaching philosophy usually comes from our former coaches. This is a natural start because it is the approach with which we are most familiar and comfortable. It is also reasonable to assume that the philosophy of a person's everyday life, thoughts

and actions would be applied when it comes to coaching. How many coaches would stick to principles of Fair Play rather than win the match? There may be a gap between what is thought to be the right thing to do in daily life and the action taken on the field.

To form or analyze a personal philosophy of coaching, first know what a coach is. A coach can be many things to many different people. A coach is a mentor, teacher, role model and sometimes a friend. Most of all, a coach must be a positive personality. A positive coach has the following traits:

- Puts players first
- Demonstrates consistent actions
- Develops character and skills
- Sets realistic goals
- Treasures the game
- Creates an enjoyable partnership with the players
- An ethical coaching philosophy
- A coaching philosophy compatible with the individual's personality
- Fair play is a top priority in the coaching philosophy
- Approach to coaching is educationally sound and appropriate for players

Coaching is much more than just following a set of principles or having a well-established club. Coaching is interaction in young people's lives. The players who come onto the field are students, family members and friends to someone. They are the same person in all areas of life with the same personality, ideals, flaws and struggles throughout all aspects. It is the coach's responsibility to help players make right and more mature decisions in all areas of their lives. Coaches must help them develop character, discipline, self-motivation, self-worth and an excitement for life. To achieve these objectives, the coach must set these standards for the players and others around them, and then help them reach those standards by developing appropriate relationships with them based on respect, caring and character. When character development is the foundation for a program, players will get the most out of their soccer experience. When that happens, the coach will also get the most out of players, for this approach makes champions.

The most successful coaches are not necessarily the ones who win the most games. Coaches who have successful experiences focus on team cohesion. The desire to see the players learn and improve their skills is the key to effective coaching. Coaches should commit to using all of their knowledge, abilities and resources to make each player on the team successful. The focus is to promote an atmosphere of teamwork, mutual respect and commitment. By achieving this, the coach will be successful and also win.[23]

> ***"You need to have a clear philosophy – to know what you want and how to get it."***
>
> **- José Mourinho, Real Madrid, head coach**

[23] *Developing a Coaching Philosophy* (2007), Steve Mergelsberg

"If you want to raise the level of the élite player, then you must raise the level of the average player."

Rinus Michels
Ajax and The Netherlands, former manager

A checklist for coaches can be found in Appendix C.

Part II: Preteen Age Groups

Zone 1: U-6 to U-12

Childhood to Puberty Stages

The Fundamental Stage

The Learning to Train Stage

"I don't care if players at that age win a game. I want them to learn to love soccer and learn to deal with the round thing…"

- John Hackworth, Philadelphia Union, coach and youth development coordinator

Coaching the preteen age groups may be the most important coaching position in youth soccer. These are formative years for children, and this stage is the best opportunity to instill a love for the game within them. A true passion for soccer keeps people in the game for a lifetime and develops champions. Soccer clubs must build a positive player-first culture. The soccer environment for these children needs to follow the creed of foremost building the player and then the team.

The philosophy of coaching youth soccer places great importance on age appropriate activities and creating a child-centered learning environment. Many great players have traced personal success to the coaching received at an early age. It is hoped that the youth soccer coach will one day look back with pride at the opportunities created for learning and enjoyment. A supportive, child-centered, positive experience in youth soccer is vital to the growth of the game.

Soccer is all about enjoyment for children. The experience can be summed up in the four messages of Youth Soccer Month – Fun, Family, Fitness and Friendship.

- **Fun** – Whether recreational or competitive in nature, involvement in soccer is easy, affordable and rewarding.
- **Family** – Playing soccer ties families together as schedules, vacations and family time are coordinated.
- **Friendship** – The relationships generated through playing soccer extend beyond the field.
- **Fitness** – The health and fitness (physical, psychological and social) benefits of playing soccer.

The single most important goal a coach of young players can have is to instill a passion for the game. It is passion that keeps a player in the game for a lifetime. It is passion that motivates many players to do that extra bit of practice to become a top notch player. It is our shared passion for the game that impels us to become coaches, referees, team managers or all of those.

The coach's efforts put into motion a relationship with soccer for children, which, through the help of countless others, will provide the foundation for players to experience the joy of participation throughout their life.

The most effective player development experience for our pre-teen players applies a player-centered approach to coaching that uses the tools of age appropriate, game-like activities. Learning the game is accelerated for the children when the coach uses guided discovery at proper times in a training session and occasionally in a match. Coaches who use the following Principles of Coaching will be the most effective teachers of the game. The principles of youth coaching are guidelines developed as a foundation or a sounding board to assess the appropriateness of an activity or training session. The following six principles are presented so that youth players receive a healthy and positive youth soccer experience.

Principles of Coaching

- **Developmentally appropriate** – This challenges the coach to examine the appropriateness of the activity, which should fall within the range of a player's abilities.

- **Clear, concise and correct information** – How instructions are given is crucial when dealing with children.
- **Simple to complex** – Are the activities presented in a way that allows for ongoing modifications and new challenges to meet the players' interests and abilities?
- **Safe and appropriate training area** – The area should be free of hazardous materials and be safe from traffic or other environmental dangers. The training experience should be psychologically safe.
- **Decision making** – Are there opportunities for the players to make decisions? These opportunities need to be present in all activities for learning to occur.
- **Implications for the game** – The activities presented in a training session must, in some way, reflect the demands a player faces in the game. The coach at this level is providing the foundational movement and thinking skills to enable players to solve more complex soccer problems later on.

For Game Management (pre-game, game, halftime and post-game) recommendations for each zone within the Player Development Pyramid, see Appendix B.

Chapter 4: U-6 | The Fundamental Stage

Individual – Me and My Ball

The fundamental stage covers ages 6 to 9 [Table 8]. The objective is to learn all elementary movement skills by building overall motor skills.

In terms of motor development, cognitive development and social development, generally there are few differences in the capabilities of the players in this age group. Individual and small group play is essential for both touches on the ball and learning at their own pace. The emphasis should be on letting the children play. Over coaching unfortunately occurs at this age group.

Prior to a player being expected to learn ball skills the child must first be in control of the body. This growth in athleticism is a long-term evolution. It is imperative for children to acquire a base of general balance, coordination and agility before soccer skills. How can the coach expect them to control the ball before they can control their bodies? That is why it is essential for youngsters be exposed to movement education[24]. The foundation of movement education must be laid during childhood. This requirement is of primary importance to the youngest players, making ball skills secondary in importance. Do not use a calisthenics approach; instead, keep it fun and enjoyable to foster a desire to play. This intrinsic motivation will grow a passion for the game that could last a lifetime.

The fascination for the ball, the desire to master it and the thrill of scoring goals provides the launching pad into a lifetime of soccer participation. The joy and skills of the game are best nurtured by encouraging freedom of expression and organizing children's play in small groups. This is the fun phase where a passion for the game must be sown.

> ***"…children in the 21st (century) have been transformed from net producers of their own toy and play culture to net consumers of play culture imposed by adults."***
>
> ***- David Elkind, American child psychologist and author***

What many adults have forgotten from their own youth is that children of this age can only focus on a limited number of tasks at one time. It takes the full attention capacity of a U-6 player to control the ball because they are still developing basic balance, coordination and agility. Also, in a 3v3 match for U-6 players, the opposition for the player with the ball is generally 1v5. So during a match the player needs to focus on the task at hand, trying to control the ball. Unfortunately, they are distracted by adults yelling from the touchline. Now they have to make a choice, either play the ball or listen to the coach

[24] Developing and applying coordinated and rhythmical body movements in learning situations.

and parents. If the adults want to help the children play their best, they need to be quiet while watching the game.

Players in this age group are egocentric – a me, my, mine mentality. Young children do not play together; they play next to one another, meaning they do not necessarily interact as they play. This psychosocial reality is called parallel play. Each child is engaged in his or her own game and is not sharing or cooperating in a game. In soccer, this is most evident in the U-6 age group and still occurs to a lesser degree in the U-8 age group. Players in these age groups swarm around and go after the ball because it is the only toy on the field. They have not yet learned the social skill of sharing, hence why passing (sharing) the ball occurs by chance. All adults around the field when these age groups are playing must realize the children are not small adults. Why should the children suddenly display the social skill of sharing when they do not yet truly display that talent in any other setting? The child's enjoyment at this age is derived from playing in a group. Preschoolers enjoy playing in the presence of others, parallel play, even though they may not always watch or interact with them. However, at this age there is no real interest in competition or outcome. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together but still involved in individual play.

Through the use of game-like activities, trial and error exposes children to the components of the game and the principles of play. The primary training activities are body awareness and maze games. Age appropriate activities can be found in US Youth Soccer's *The Novice Coach Vol. 1 Under-6 to 8 years*, *US Youth Soccer Skills School*, *US Youth Soccer Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games*, *US Youth Soccer Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer* DVD, *The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual* and the *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*. The club should follow the recommendations in the US Youth Soccer Vision document. All resources are available on USYouthSoccer.org. Remember that the game is for all kids, and everyone should be encouraged to participate.

The training session must be player-centered with the coach as a facilitator of the soccer experience. It is necessary to go with the flow and be adaptable with this age group. Use guided discovery and the coach's toolkit, as discussed in Part 1: Primer of this *Model*, which gets children thinking and playing with little coaching interruption. Throughout the season, allow the players to experiment and discover the ball skills being taught on their own. The coach should demonstrate the skills a few times during the session. Also during the session, call out some of the key coaching points on how to execute the ball skills. Praise loudly and positively when a player does a skill correctly—positive reinforcement. Encourage them to try to do new things with the ball throughout the soccer season. It is very important that each player has a ball for every training session.

Section 1 - General Characteristics of the U-6 Age Group

- Catching skills not yet developed

- Constantly in motion – love to run, jump, roll and climb
- Eye-hand and/or eye-foot coordination is primitive at best – not ready for bouncing or flighted balls
- No sense of pace – go flat out
- Physical coordination is immature – can balance on dominate foot
- Controlling the ball is a complex task
- Prefer large soft balls and foam balls
- Only understand simple rules
- Individually oriented (me, my, mine) – little or no concern for team activities
- Believes in Santa Claus, but will not discuss with peers – lofty imagination
- Physical and psychological development of boys and girls are quite similar
- Psychologically, easily bruised – need generous praise
- Short attention span – tends to one task at a time
- Limited understanding of time and space

U-6 players must play at least 50 percent of each match they attend. They should not play a season longer than two months. They must have at least one full month off between seasons of play.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is to create a well-rounded player.

Section 2 - Components of the Game for the U-6 Age Group*

Fitness: Introduce the idea of how to warm-up and movement education. Begin education about nutrition with players and parents. Balance, walking, running, how to start and stop, jumping, hopping, rolling, skipping, changing direction, bending, twisting and reaching.

Technique: Dribbling (stop and start) and shooting. Experiment with the qualities of a rolling ball.

Psychology: Sharing, fair play, parental involvement, "how to play" and emotional management.

Tactics: Where is the field? The concept of boundary lines, at which goal to shoot and playing with the ball wherever it may go.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

Section 3 - Typical U-6 Training Session

- Should not exceed 45 minutes.
- Every child should have a ball.
- Free play or a warm-up, including movement education challenges and soccernastics.[25]
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Game-like activities, mostly body awareness and maze games.
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Finish with a 3v3 game with two goals, no goalkeepers
  -approximately 15 minutes-

Coaches should devote the end of each training session to playing 3v3 practice games. During these practice games is the best time for the coach to teach rules of the game to the players. Fun games involving small numbers can be played, especially 1v1, 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2 leading up to a final activity of 3v3. It is important to ensure each child has a ball and to focus on fun games. The benefit of the increased number of touches on the ball in those games is irreplaceable. Coaches should be well prepared and have a selection of game-like activities planned, while keeping in mind these young children have short attention spans.

> ***"Who can play 3 on 3 successfully can play soccer!"***
>
> **- Cesar Luis Menotti, won 1978 FIFA World Cup for Argentina, coach**

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling the US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Coach's qualities: Uses the games approach to learning, not drill oriented. Act as a facilitator rather than a coach. Other characteristics are: good humor, friendly helper, organizer, stimulator, ability to see soccer from a child's perspective, patient, able to demonstrate movements and simple skills, enthusiastic and imaginative.

License Recommendation: Volunteer coach – U-6/U-8 Youth Module Certificate or National Youth License. Paid coach – National Youth License.

The Game: Preferably these should be unstructured pick-up game style matches. If scheduled matches must occur then every effort must be made to reduce the *us versus them* mentality and outcome-based expectations that surround too many youth games.

[25] Fun activities with or without the ball which challenge a player's coordination, balance, flexibility, ball skill and creativity.

"The coach should be able to be child-like, but not childish."

Dr. Tom Fleck, coach and leader of youth soccer development in the United States

Please read thoroughly the Ball Control and Creativity section in the *Best Practices* guide.

Chapter 5: U-8 | Igniting the Passion

Me, the ball and my friend

The objective of the fundamental stage is to learn all basic movement skills by building overall motor skills. During the fundamental stage [Table 8] an opportunity occurs for a lifelong turn-on to the game.

Igniting a passion for the game must be the number one objective for coaches of this age group. The aim of the coach is to keep their soccer experience fun, enjoyable and to foster a desire to play. This love of the game keeps people in the game for a lifetime.

There can be differences now in the motor, cognitive and social development capabilities of the players in this age group. Individual and small group play, especially pairs, is essential for both touches on the ball and learning at their own pace.

The emphasis on movement education and body awareness continues with this age group and is expanded to involve even more activities with the ball. These activities should include eye-hand and eye-foot coordination games. This is essential to overall coordination and a well-rounded physical fitness approach.

Now is the opportune time for encouraging skills with either foot as the muscle movement patterns are a clean slate. Ambidextrous skill is certainly a goal for a coach committed to player development. Show players that passing is another option to dribbling. This is not just a technical objective but a psychosocial one since the basis of all teamwork is cooperation between partners. Many U-8 activities will be done in pairs to promote communication, cooperation and the conceptualization of soccer principles. Furthermore, encourage them to get better by practicing on their own with the ball.

Children in the U-8 age group still play predominately as individuals and occasionally with a partner. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together but are still involved in individual play. This age group prefers individual activities, but it is possible to successfully get them into activities where they can work in pairs.

The attention capacity for this age group is still limited to one task at a time. They are quite rightly focused on the ball. In a 4v4 match the opposition for the player with the ball is generally 1v7 even though partner play is now emerging. So during a match, the players need to focus on the task at hand, trying to control the ball. Unfortunately, they are often distracted by adults giving advice from around the field. Now they have to make a choice: either play the ball or listen to the adults. If the adults want to help the children play their best, they need to be quiet while watching the children's game.

From parallel play, as described in the U-6 age group, to learning to share with others, these milestones are passed by the end of this age. Thus, players need encouragement to share and approval for trying. Ask them to work with others to solve a challenge. Start them with just one partner and work to a

variety of partners from there. It is important for early childhood coaches and administrators to teach this reality to the player's parents and to let everyone know it is OK to play swarm ball at the U-6 and U-8 age groups. Swarm ball may actually help players improve their dribbling skills and decision-making ability.

Six, 7 and 8 year olds are starting to understand what it means to play a game. They are beginning to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they will now recognize that they even have teammates because they will occasionally pass the ball to a teammate purposefully. Some U-8 players will have played for more than a season; however, this does not mean these players are ready for the mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have an idea of the game with regard to scoring or preventing goals, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be new to soccer, it is imperative that activities are geared toward individual success and participation. Parallel play may occur in training sessions for U-8 players, too. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together, but still involved in both individual and partner play.

General Characteristics of the U-8 Age Group

- Like to show skills – need approval
- Beginning to develop some physical confidence (most can ride a bicycle)
- Lack sense of pace – go flat out, chasing the ball until they drop
- Still in motion – twitching, jerking, scratching and blinking are all second nature physical movements
- Still into running, jumping, climbing and rolling
- Boys and girls are still quite similar in physical and psychological development
- Attention span is a bit longer than the U-6 age group
- Developing playmates
- More into imitation of the big guys (sports heroes becoming important)
- Still very sensitive – Dislikes personal failure in front of peers, making ridicule from the coach in front of the group very destructive
- Still do not believe in the intensity of the team at all costs
- Inclined more toward small group activities

> ***"Practice – learning anything – hurts somewhat. You see how bad you are at it and with encouragement there is improvement. With practice comes discipline. The best road to getting there runs not through the land of fear and punishment but through the land of connection, play, practice, mastery and recognition. He/she learns how to be coached."***
>
> **- Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, child and adult psychiatrist specializing in ADD/ADHD**

Using game-like activities, which allow for trial and error, exposes children to the components of the game. The key training activities are body awareness and maze games. Introduce a few target games too. They need to touch the ball frequently during fun activities that engage them. Small-sided games are still undoubtedly the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but it is also an easier game to understand. Age appropriate activities can be found in US Youth Soccer's *The Novice Coach Vol. 1 Under-6 to 8 years*, *US Youth Soccer Skills School*, *US Youth Soccer Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games*, *US Youth Soccer Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer* DVD, *The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual* and *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*. All of the adults associated with the club should be familiar with the philosophy promoted in the US Youth Soccer Vision document. All resources can be found on USYouthSoccer.org. Remember that the game is for all players and everyone should be encouraged to participate.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-8 Age Group*

Technique: Experiment with the qualities of a rolling or spinning ball. Introduce ball lifting, juggling, block tackle, receiving ground balls with the inside and sole of the foot, shooting with the inside of the foot, toe passing and shooting and dribbling while changing direction. Introduce the push pass.

Fitness: Agility, eye-foot and eye-hand coordination, balance, leaping, bounding, tumbling, catching, throwing, pulling, pushing, warm-up activities and movement education. Continue education on sports nutrition with players and parents.

Psychology: Encourage working in pairs, sportsmanship, parental involvement, how to play, emotional management, creativity, dynamic activities, participation of all players and a safe and fun environment. There is still a short attention span unless the player has peaked (keep interest high). Like to show what they can do – encourage trying new things. Developing self-esteem – activities should foster positive feedback and attainable positive success.

Tactics: Back line and forward line, 1v1 attack and choosing to dribble or pass. Introduce the names of positions (fullbacks and forwards). Institute games of 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2, playing with the ball with a purpose and promote problem solving.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

The training session must be player-centered with the coach as a facilitator of the soccer experience. With this age group it is necessary to be adaptable. Use guided discovery and the coach's toolkit, as discussed in The Primer section, which allows youngsters to play with little coaching interruption and gets them thinking. Throughout the season, allow the players to experiment and discover the ball skill being taught on their own. The coach should occasionally demonstrate skills, or have someone demonstrate a few times during the session. Also during the session, call out one or two of the key coaching points on how to execute a ball skill. Praise loudly and positively when a player does a skill correctly – positive reinforcement. Encourage them to try to do new things with the ball throughout the soccer season. While it is still important for the training session that each player has a ball, paired activities will now be done as well as individual ones. Encourage the players to cooperate through passing or helping on defense by running back toward goal. Cooperation in pairs is the foundation to teamwork. Now that children are at an age where they can play together purposefully and toward a common objective, work on cooperative partner activities.

Typical U-8 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour.
- Free play or a warm-up, each player with a ball, dynamic stretching and soccernastics.
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Some individual body awareness activities.
- Introduce partner activities.
- A mixture of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games. Introduce target games with a variety of player combinations: 1v1, 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2.
  -approximately 25 minutes-
- Conclude with a Small-Sided Game of 4v4, two goals and no goalkeepers.
  -approximately 20 minutes-

Coaches should devote the end of each training session to playing 4v4 practice games. Fun games can also be played involving small numbers, especially 1v1, 2v1, 1v2, 2v2, 1v3, 2v3 and 3v3 leading up to the final activity of 4v4. Through these games, expose the U-8 age group to the principles of play. It is important to ensure each child has a ball and to focus on fun games. The benefit of the increased number of touches on the ball is irreplaceable. Be well prepared and have a selection of game-like activities planned while keeping in mind these young children have short attention spans.

Developing a general understanding of the basic rules of the game is an objective in working with the players. U-8 players must play at least 50 percent of each match they attend. They should not play a season longer than three months and must have at least one full month off between seasons of play.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Coach's qualities: Sensitive teacher, facilitator, patient, enthusiastic, imaginative, able to demonstrate, understand technique and preferably young at heart**.**

License recommendation: Volunteer Coach – U-6 /U-8 Youth Module Certificate or National Youth License. Paid Coach – National Youth License.

The game: Preferably these should be unstructured pick-up game style matches. No organized matches where the score is recorded. If scheduled matches must occur then they should be seen as another fun activity that includes a soccer ball. There should be no emphasis on team concepts or positions. Outcome based matches are in their future. Playing for results must not be part of the U-8 match.

Please read thoroughly the Ball Control and Creativity section in the *Best Practices* guide.

U-10 | The Learning to Train Stage

The Start of Us

The learning to train stage covers ages 8 to 12 [Table 8]. The objective is to learn all of the fundamental soccer skills, building overall sports skills.

In this stage, children gradually begin to change from being self-centered to self-critical and develop the need for group games. This is a flux phase in a youngster's soccer career. The motivation to learn basic skills is very high at this age. The game itself should be central to all technical training. 11v11 is too sophisticated and complicated for young players. Small-sided games, which provide the right amount of pressure for the child's level of development, are more appropriate.

Physiologically the U-10 players are children not adolescents. In fact peak athletic performance takes place in early adulthood. So for 10 year olds, there is still a low ceiling to athletic performance. The adult concept of work rate is driven by the desire to win. Children like to win, but playing is more important. They are engrossed in the process of play, not the outcome. Still coaches and parents should encourage children to try their best. Ten year olds can understand the broad idea of effort, but the details are foggy. They continue to equate effort with performance regardless of the outcome. The ability of players to understand and execute consistent play with a good work rate will grow over many years. These traits should be gradually nurtured by coaches and parents.

An emphasis needs to be placed on skill development at this age while using a games-based approach[26]. Practice individual skills within individual and small group tactics. Training sessions should include fun skill building activities with some teaching of technique. When coaching players in this age group, the coach's role expands from one of facilitating to being a teacher of technique and game application. However, playing at this age is still very important, so emphasis should shift toward enjoyable skill development. These players start to move from the *how* (technique) to *when, where, with whom* and *against whom* (skill – tactics). Training sessions should still focus on small-sided games so players have the opportunity to recognize the pictures presented by the game. These objectives are best achieved through a games-based approach to learning soccer.

U-10 is the time to introduce basic combination play, wall passes and take-overs while concentrating on basic skills in cooperative play; i.e., passing, receiving, shooting and heading. Remember players are being coached, not skills. The key motivator in soccer is the ball; use it as much as possible in training sessions. It is very important that warm-up sessions are well handled, as this is the time when the coach takes control and sets the tone. Get into action as soon as possible by having the team work at the outset without an involved and complicated explanation. The teaching of ball skills needs to be accomplished through games. The repetition of technique is undertaken through fun games and dynamic activities. Around age 10, visual acuity takes on an adult pattern and the ability to visually track

[26] A game centered focus with an emphasis on player decisions and individual readiness. The coach is the facilitator and creator of soccer problem situations posing questions on time, space and tactical risk/safety.

a moving object in the air is developing more. This is one reason that the goalkeeper position is not introduced into youth soccer until now. Receiving a bouncing ball and a ball in the air that is head height or lower is happening on purpose now as well. Heading the ball may be a skill some youth are ready for and others will come to it later. Only a small amount of training for heading the ball should be done with U-10 players, but they do need to be introduced to the skill. The skill needs to be taught incrementally to build confidence and help the players know that heading does not hurt if the ball is struck correctly; beginning with a spongy ball may be necessary.

> ***"If we concentrated less on results at an early age, and more on technical development, and this idea of kids falling in love with the game, they would be much better off …"***
>
> **- John Hackworth, Philadelphia Union, coach and youth development coordinator**

For U-10's, continue to build the player before the team. Stress individual development over team building. Remember, for the players, fun and enjoyment through play are still critically important. The philosophy of a club tends to drive how U-10 soccer is conducted. A club can positively impact the soccer culture if it chooses to follow US Youth Soccer and U.S. Soccer recommendations. Because children at this age intentionally play in small groups, there can be too much emphasis on results as opposed to performance. Some tactical ideas are emerging in their game, but their thoughts tend to be vague. This growing capability is one aspect of the flux phase. Often the adults involved with this age group see these abilities appear in matches and leap to expecting adult team-like performance when in fact the children are still learning how to play.

Continue to lace the principles of play into activities with the U-10 age group. In particular, they will begin to comprehend width and depth, but their execution of it will be inconsistent. Time and space relationships are just now budding. This emerging awareness of space is aided by showing the players the triangle and diamond shapes in the game. The triangle shape is of particular importance in building on the idea of support (pairs) from the U-8 age group. The large triangle (width and depth) is support on the attack and the smaller triangle (concentration) is support when defending. With depth, stretching out the opposition may occur. Players should be encouraged and praised for playing on both sides of the ball, which is attacking and defending. Keep in mind that the shape of the triangle changes with passing lanes adjusting in length and angle to support the ball. This constant adjustment is crucial in group play.

All players should recover to help defend after losing possession of the ball. Similarly, all players should look to contribute to every attacking play, even when their role is as the supporting last defender.

The position of goalkeeper is new to their soccer experience at U-10. The policy of US Youth Soccer and U.S. Soccer is that through the U-14 age group all players get exposed to playing all positions on the team. This is true also for playing in goal, so take time at training now and then to teach basic goalkeeper skills to all of the players. In training sessions, have the players take turns playing in goal. Two training sessions per month should be devoted to goalkeeping. Over the course of the soccer year,

every player must have the opportunity to play in goal. The players won't know what their best position may be once they are teenagers unless they are given the chance to try them all.

There are now two lines in the team at U-10: goalkeeper plus defenders and forwards. While the field player positions could be manipulated in a lineup, it is wise to put the players in positions where it is easy for them to execute the principles of play [Table 2]. Most crucial in the team formation is the ability of the players to form triangles. US Youth Soccer recommends two simple formations at this age: 3-2 or 2-3. These formations are easy to conceptualize for children 8 to 10 years old. Getting into a group shape at dead ball situations is also possible at this age with an emphasis at goal kicks and throw-ins.

General Characteristics of the U-10 Age Group

- Lengthened attention span - they are still in motion, but not as busy, only holding still long enough for a short explanation
- More inclined toward wanting to play rather than being told to play
- Psychologically becoming slightly more firm and confident
- Some are becoming serious about their play
- Team oriented – prefer team type balls and equipment. Enjoy the uniforms and team association.
- Boys and girls beginning to develop separately
- Developing the pace factor – thinking ahead
- Gross and small motor skills becoming much more refined

While using game-like activities, which allow for trial and error, expose the children to the components of the game. The key training activities are body awareness, maze games and target games. Age appropriate activities can be found in US Youth Soccer's *The Novice Coach Vol. 2 Under-10 to 12 years*, *US Youth Soccer Skills School*, *US Youth Soccer Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games*, *US Youth Soccer Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer* DVD, *The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual* and the *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*.

> ***"Play builds imagination. Play with other children teaches skills of problem solving and cooperation. A child who learns to play alone will never be lonely. Play teaches the ability to tolerate frustration and it teaches the all-important ability to fail. Play generates joy and allows the experience of flow[27]."***
>
> **- Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, child and adult psychiatrist, ADD/ADHD**

[27] Flow is that period of time in which the activity matches your ability. Players can experience flow in almost any activity if these two factors are present and evenly balanced. The flow concept is critical for effective soccer training.

Remember the game is for all players and everyone should be encouraged to participate. The U-10 age group is when children are often asked to compete before they have learned how to play. This *too much too soon* syndrome is another symptom of the flux phase. Therefore, US Youth Soccer recommends U-10 players should not:

- Be involved in results oriented tournaments, only play days, jamborees or festivals with a participation award.
- Be exposed to tryouts.
- Be labeled recreational or competitive.

> ***"The players must feel that they have a sure and strong guide."***
>
> **- Marcello Lippi, Italian National Team, head coach**

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-10 Age Group*

Technique: Experiment with the qualities of a bouncing ball and running with the ball, passing with the inside and outside of the foot (emphasis on quality push pass), instep drive, receiving ground balls with the instep and outside of foot (body behind the ball), receiving bouncing balls with the instep (cushion) and the sole, inside and outside of foot (wedge), fakes[28] in dribbling and turning with the ball. Introduce heading and crossing. Practice throw-ins. For goalkeepers: ready stance, getting the feet set, how to hold a ball after a save, diamond grip, catching shots at the keeper, punting, recovery from down to the ground and up to set position and footwork exercises. Also introduce goal kicks and throwing.

Psychology: Keep soccer enjoyable to foster a desire to play using self-motivation. Working in groups of three, four or five, stay focused for one entire half. There is an increase in responsibility, sensitivity, awareness of how to win or lose gracefully, fair play, parental involvement, how to play, communication and emotional management.

Fitness: Factors are endurance, range of motion flexibility, rhythm exercises and running mechanics. Any fitness activities must be done with the ball. Introduce body resistance exercises and the idea of cool down.

Tactics: 1v1 defending, roles of 1st attacker and defender, 2v1 attacking, what it means to get goal-side, small group shape in pairs and threes (emphasize support on both attack and defense), playing on and

[28] A fake is done with the feet. The goal of a fake is to get the opponent off balance (wrong footed) or going in the direction opposite of where the player in possession of the ball really plans to go.

around the ball as a group with purpose, playing a variety of positions to develop the complete player, introduce the principles of attack and set plays.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

These players will demonstrate increased self-responsibility, so they should be given, to a reasonable extent, partial responsibility for their preparation at training sessions and matches. They are very capable of assuming this responsibility when adults step aside and let it happen. Now they can initiate play on their own, which leads to learning through self-discovery and self-expression. They do enjoy and benefit from competition, so all training activities should have objectives and/or a method of scoring. They will intentionally play in groups, although individualism is still the core of their game. Use cooperative games and activities in training sessions to further instill a team mentality.

Typical U-10 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour and 15 minutes.
- Free play or a warm-up (ball juggling), partner and small group activities, dynamic stretching.
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Introduce small group activities (four to six players).
- Add more directional games. Play to targets and/or zones.
  -approximately 25 minutes-
- Conclude with a Small-Sided Game, 6v6, with goalkeepers.
  -approximately 25 minutes-
- Finish with cool down activities.
  -approximately 10 minutes-

Devote the end of each training session to playing 4v4, 5v5 and 6v6 practice games. Fun games involving smaller numbers can be played, especially 1v1, 2v1 and 3v2 or 5v3 leading up to a final training activity. Always coach for success. It is still important to ensure that each child has a ball and to focus on fun games, but as the players develop psychosocially, they will be ready to participate and cooperate in small groups.

U-10 players must play at least 50 percent of each match they attend. Better yet would be to have a roster size that allows each youngster to play more than half of each match. They should not play a season longer than four months, and must have at least one full month off between seasons of play.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Coach's qualities: Sensitive teacher, patient, facilitator, enthusiastic, imaginative, ability to demonstrate, understands technique and preferably a youthful outlook**.**

License recommendation: Volunteer Coach – U-10 to U-12 Youth Module Certificate or National Youth License. Paid coach – National Youth License and USSF "E" License.

The game: Regardless of the level of competition, these players should always play at least 50 percent of the match; they won't grow as players sitting on the bench. Through the course of the season expose the players to each position on the team during match play. Versatility is highly prized at the upper levels of the game.

Once the match begins, the coach should sit down and watch, and let the players do most of the talking during the match. The coach should speak up to praise them for doing something well and for trying what they have been taught in training sessions.

It is natural for children this young to be inconsistent in their match performance. For that matter, so are adult professional players. The difference between a professional soccer team and a U-10 team is simply that the pros make fewer mistakes, but they do make mistakes. Don't fret about inconsistent play with this age group. It's normal for a team to have highs and lows in match performance.

Please read thoroughly the Ball Control and Creativity section in the *Best Practices* guide.

U-12 | For the Love of the Game

Us – The Critical Transition Period

Still within the learning to train stage [Table 8] of ages 8 to 12, the U-12 age group is a transitional time. The objective is to learn all of the fundamental soccer skills (build overall sports skills).

Many players at this age are deciding if they want to commit deeply to soccer, stay in the game with a part-time commitment or drop the sport altogether. The coach must also be sensitive to the many biological and psychological changes that are occurring for these children now and through the U-14 age group.

The effect of the role model is very important at this stage of development. Hero worship, identification with successful teams and players and a hunger for imaginative skills typify the mentality of this age. This is a time of transition from self-centered to self-critical. Players of this age have a high arousal level in relation to the training of basic skills. The *golden age of learning* begins with the U-10's and continuing with the U-12's is the most important age for skill development. Demonstration is very important and the players learn best by doing. Continue to ingrain the principles of play. It is important to establish discipline from the beginning.

> ***"It's amazing how much more technical and organized soccer training is now. When I was growing up, we practiced twice a week (three times when I got older) and played one game on the weekend, unless there was a tournament, and I didn't start playing in tournaments until I was 11. Today, with year-round soccer (which I didn't play until I was nearly in college), there are an incredible number of games being played. Too many in my opinion …"***
>
> **- Brandi Chastain, U.S. Women's National Team, retired player**

Continue establishing a solid base of technique. Develop individual skills under the pressure of time, space and opponent(s) and increase technical speed. While passing has become a more natural part of the game, the dribbling personality must still be encouraged to express that skill. When working with this age group, concentrate on the application of age appropriate activities, placing an emphasis on individual possession and defending. This means more work on combining players in pairs and small groups to defend and attack.

The coach's responsibility remains coaching the players, not merely ball skills. The key motivator in soccer is the ball; it should be used as much as possible in training sessions. It is very important that warm-up sessions are well handled because this is the time when the coach takes control and sets the tone for the training session. Get into action as soon as possible by having the team work at the outset without an involved and complicated explanation. The teaching of ball skills needs to be accomplished through game-like activities. The repetition of technique is undertaken through fun games and dynamic

activities. Impulses of the nervous system are improved with a slower controlled movement, and sequenced muscle action is improved with faster movement. Both have implications in movement education and technique for this age group.

Continue teaching the principles of attack and defense, and provide opportunities for players to experience a variety of positions. When attacking, players should work on keeping possession of the ball but should also be taught that possession play is a means to penetrating to the opponents' goal and not an end in itself. Training the players on combination play, such as wall passes, take-overs and overlaps will aid them in keeping the ball long enough to set up a good attack. Work on improving their small group play in 2v1, 1v2 (emphasis on improvisation), 2v2, 3v1 and 3v3. The objective by the end of this age group is to play well in 5v5 situations.

A continued emphasis should be placed on the principles of play and the roles of players when attacking and defending. Players will need to understand their particular role when attacking and when trying to regain possession of the ball. The players will need guidance in understanding these roles because of a greater number of players and the increased size of the field. The players should have a basic understanding of how to interchange roles during the flow of play. At a minimum, devote two training sessions per month to goalkeeper training where the rest of the team assists their goalkeepers in training on tactics. Specialized goalkeeper training may begin with the U-12 age group; though, it is still important that all of the players are exposed to this position.

When attacking, all players are involved but with an awareness of cover/support by the goalkeeper and at least one covering field player. Develop an understanding of the roles that players have in supporting the attack; i.e.: the player with the ball (1st attacker), players providing immediate support (2nd attacker(s)) of the ball and other players (3rd attacker(s)) who create length (depth) and unbalance (width) the defense. All this needs to be shown in an environment with greater numbers of teammates and opponents on a larger playing field.

When defending, all players participate, even the players furthest up the field, getting goal-side of the opposing players. Continue to develop and show the principles of defending so that all players gain an understanding of defensive roles. Demonstrate the roles of players that delay (put pressure on the ball – (1st defender), the players that provide support (cover – 2nd defender(s)) and the players that provide balance (depth – 3rd defender(s)).

The concept of triangular supporting play and diamonds are still the dominating group shapes, but become more complex because of the larger team numbers. The triangle shape is of particular importance in building upon the idea of support (pairs) from the U-8 and U-10 age groups. The large triangle (width and depth) and the diamond are support on the attack and the smaller triangle (concentration) is support when defending. Continue an emphasis on combining with teammates (3rd attacker running).

Teetering on the fence, between childhood and adolescence, the pubescent U-12 player presents problems and potential. They can follow complex instructions and even create their own versions of games. They will demonstrate a greater degree of analytical thought, which enhances tactical

understanding; yet, their match performance will be inconsistent. Much of their training should consist of small-sided games with various conditions placed upon the players.

General Characteristics of the U-12 Age Group

- Better able to deal with flighted balls
- Can sequence thoughts and actions to perform more complex tasks
- Can use abstract thought to meet the demands of the game
- Should be able to simultaneously run, strike the ball and think
- Fertile period to learn – full of eagerness
- Important psychosocial implications for a child entering puberty
- Popularity influences self-esteem
- Improved coordination
- Significant physical differences exist between the genders now
- Strength and power becoming factors in their performance

Through the use of game-like activities which allow for trial and error, expose players to the four components of the game. The training activities are maze games and target games, using body awareness games for warm-up and cool-down. Age appropriate activities can be found in US Youth Soccer's *The Novice Coach Vol. 2 Under-10 to 12 years*, *US Youth Soccer Skills School*, US Youth Soccer *Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games*, *US Youth Soccer Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer* DVD, *The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual* and the *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*.

> ***"Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul."***
>
> **- Friedrich Froebel, German pedagogue, developed concept of "kindergarten"**

Many players who show promise as children find they can no longer compete at the adult level because they became too specialized too soon. Some players in the professional ranks who make headlines are the ones who played other sports in their younger years and came to competitive soccer relatively late. The quality of technical movement sequences depends on coordination, which is why it is critical to the execution and success of technical/tactical actions. Beware during this critical transition period of the *too much too soon* syndrome. Players must be exposed to playing all positions on the team through the U-14 age group. Versatility is a crucially important piece of player development. When players are pigeon holed into set positions too soon in playing soccer, the opportunity for well-rounded development is lost.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. The coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-12 Age Group*

Technique: moving throw-in, master the qualities of a bouncing spinning ball. Experiment with the qualities of a flighted ball, feints[29] with the ball, receiving bouncing and air balls with the thigh and chest, first touch receiving, heading to score goals and for clearances while standing or jumping, outside of foot passing, receiving with either foot, short passing with both feet, bending shots, crossing to near post space and penalty spot space and heel and flick passing. Introduce half volley and volley shooting, chipping to pass and slide tackle. For goalkeepers: W grip, footwork, underarm bowling, side-arm throwing to targets, taking own goal kicks, side-winder kick, low and forward diving and angle and near post play. Introduce deflecting and boxing.

Tactics: 2v1 defending, 2v2 attacking and defending, roles of 2nd attacker and defender, man-to-man defense, combination passing, playing on and around the ball as a group with purpose, verbal and visual communication for all positions, halftime analysis, general work on all restarts, wall pass at a variety of angles, passing combinations on the move and rotation of all players through the team – everyone plays in each position. Reinforce the principles of defense. For goalkeepers: positional play, basic angle play (ebb and flow) – into and down the line of the flight of the ball, commanding the goalmouth for the goalkeeper and positioning during a penalty kick and communication.

Psychology: Keep it fun and enjoyable to foster a desire to play, self-motivation. Focus on teamwork, confidence, desire, mental skills, handling distress, how to learn from each match, fair play, parental involvement and emotional management (discipline).

Fitness: Fitness work continues to be done with the ball. Strength can be improved with body resistance and aerobic exercises. Also focus on agility at speed (sharp turns), acceleration, deceleration, reaction speed, range of motion exercises, proper warm-up and cool-down (include static stretching in the cool-down) are highly recommended now.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

Typical U-12 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour and 30 minutes.
- Warm-up, small group activities, range of motion stretching.
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Introduce large group/team activities (six to eight players).

[29] A feint (body swerve) is done only with the body, no contact with the ball until the player in possession finally plays the ball. A feint could be done with almost any part of the body.

- Continue with directional games. Play to targets and/or zones.
  -approximately 30 minutes-
- Conclude with Small-Sided Games, 8v8 with goalkeepers.
  -approximately 35 minutes-
- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching.
  -approximately 10 minutes-

A great deal of coaching within 4v4 games

The implementation of developmentally appropriate activities to encourage decision making and increase training demands is evolving in the club environment for this age group. Since sports heroes are a factor in the lives of these children, encourage them to watch high level soccer. The club culture must stress the need for development of the individual player over team building. Avoid overloading players of this age with too many tournaments; no more than two per season is suggested. It is recommended that the club introduce players to sport psychology, nutrition and fitness specialists at this age. If the club needs help with specialists your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director can provide guidance.

U-12 teams should play in two competitive tournaments per year in addition to the US Youth Soccer State Championships or league cup. Look to book the team only into tournaments that play a maximum of one match per day. Still allow for proper development with a minimum of 50 percent playing time for players at all levels of competition at this age. Finally, it is recommended that the team play a maximum of 10 months of each soccer year with two months off. The time off could be two consecutive months or one month off at midseason and another at the end of the soccer year.

Encourage players to watch high level soccer in person and on television. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youth players in the game. The Show highlights soccer of all levels from across the country. USYouthSoccer.org also features the individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading the podcast.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Coach's qualities: sensitive teacher, enthusiastic, possess soccer awareness, ability to demonstrate, knowledge of the key factors of basic skill, loves to have fun while teaching, able to deal with youngsters who question/challenge the coach, gives encouragement and preferably energetic.

License recommendation: Volunteer Coach – U-10 to U-12 Youth Certificate or National Youth License and/or USSF "D" License. Paid Coach – National Youth License, USSF "D" License and Level 1 Goalkeeper certificate.

The game: Several new phases of development appear in the U-12 match such as developing a basic understanding of the offside rule. Now that the game is 8v8, the final line in midfield is added to the

team. New tactical decisions are in place for the U-12s in regard to using short passes involving midfielders to penetrate into the attacking third or making long passes forward, bypassing the midfielders. Place more emphasis on team shape and a balance between the lines in the team on attack and defense. Work with the players on their decision to join in the attack or defense, noting that not all players can attack or defend simultaneously. The formations of 3-2-2; 3-3-1; 2-3-2 are the most common in the 8v8 game. All of these formations allow the players to execute the principles of play. All players must attack and defend in these systems of play. These formations, when played on an appropriate U-12 size field, allow the players to:

- Switch the point of attack
- Attack the far post on corner kicks and from the run of play
- Stay compact

The 3-3-1 formation may require the center forward to play off-center to one side. This then makes it possible to combine with the center midfielder and an outside midfielder. The opposite flank is now open for overlap attack by the outside fullback or midfielder. The challenges with this formation may be the lone striker simply being a runner and the rest of team being too stagnant.

The 3-2-2 formation is the easiest to form triangles around the ball and provide support on attack and defense. This formation encourages more freedom of movement while teaching shape in the defenders' line. It is the easiest formation to coach; therefore, it may be best suited to the novice coach.

The 2-3-2 formation is the most demanding on the players and coach. This formation emphasizes transition and the tactical awareness that makes transition possible. A considerable demand of tactical vision and communication is placed upon the players. Zone defense, requiring tactical growth, is mandatory in this system of play.

With an appropriately sized field players can play through a large range of tactical situations regardless of the team formation.

> ***"A winner in life, not just in football, learns from a defeat or a mistake and comes back stronger."***
>
> ***- Carlos Parreira, Brazil National Team, former coach***

Part III: Teenage Groups

Zone 2: U-14 to U-17

Zone 3: U-18+

Puberty to Adolescence Stages

The Training to Train Stage

The Training to Compete Stage

The Training to Win Stage

"We need our younger players to be comfortable with the ball. We need our older players to be able to do it in a phone booth, with two or three defenders around them. They should be able to receive that ball and put it anywhere they want."

- John Hackworth, U.S. Men's National Team, assistant coach

Playing Soccer

A Fork in the Road

Typically, between the ages of 12 and 15 is when athletes decide to play a sport recreationally or with deeper commitment. Some will drop out of sports altogether, an estimated 70 percent (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990), some will play soccer recreationally and another sport competitively; and some will embrace soccer as their number one sport. The number of sports a person usually plays narrows to two or three. As described by Dr. Jean Côté in The Primer, some young people begin specializing in their early teens. US Youth Soccer clubs should provide opportunities for these teenagers no matter which pathway of participation they choose. This will minimize the physical, psychosocial and drop out costs that go along with investing in soccer over long periods of time.

It is during the late teens, 16 and older, that players will likely narrow down their sports participation to one or two sports. Some will commit full time to their chosen sport with other sports being played for recreation or rehabilitation purposes. These are the investment years from Dr. Côté's model noted in The Primer.

Teenage players should be asked to begin giving back to the game. They could be a soccer buddy in TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer), a soccer camp counselor or a demonstrator of ball skills to younger players in their club. However they choose to contribute, giving back to the game is its own reward.

The information that follows will guide a coach no matter which pathway a player chooses. With the backing of coaches more US Youth Soccer clubs can address and perhaps reduce the dropout rate. We must work collectively to keep young people in healthy activities such as soccer. We have a duty to provide a soccer environment that helps them to grow as athletes and as good citizens.

Training for Teenage Teams

Teenagers have grown cognitively to the point of being able to project into the future. Some functional drill-like rote repetition training has a place. They need a mix of dynamic and rote repetition in skill development.

Three Major Training Points

1. **Keep it economical.**[30]

The four components of soccer are:

- Technical – Best done during warm-up and the fundamental stage of the training session.
- Tactical – Emphasize decisions on and around the ball.
- Physical – Are you training intensely enough?
- Psychological – Keep score, become competitive and find a way to win.

[30] Economical training is a training session that combines two or more of the four components of soccer.

Match related activities must include as many of these components as possible and must be competitive. We must learn how to win. Everything must relate to the game and the players figuring out how to win. All activities must include transition.

2. **Keep it simple.**

Use simple game-like activities. Apply simple and consistent problem solving based upon the principles of play. Remember that simplicity allows for creativity.

3. **Keep it focused.**

Training should be theme based. Each 90 minute training session should have four to six activities. The key coaching method in all training sessions is guided discovery. Guided questions should be the majority of comments made by the coach. The command style of coaching should comprise a smaller portion of the coach's interaction with the players.

Set plays are now a regular feature of the game for teenage teams. With set plays simple and direct work the best; remember the KISS acronym, Keep It Simple Stupid.

For the select teams in age groups U-16 to U-19 there should be limited substitutions so that players learn to play tactically and coaches learn how to manage the match.

Throughout Zones 2 and 3 of the Player Development Pyramid, teams are aspiring to encompass what it takes to be considered a modern soccer team with the full potential reached by the U-19 age group. Appendix D covers the essentials for being a modern soccer team.

For Game Management (pre-game, game, halftime and post-game) recommendations for each zone within the Player Development Pyramid, see Appendix B.

U-14 | Committing

Us – The Formal Phase

The training to train stage covers ages 11 to 16. The objectives are to build the aerobic base, strength toward the end of the phase and further develop soccer specific skills (build the engine and consolidate sport specific skills).

A commitment to the game can be a consideration for children in this age group. Some are ready to make a full-time allegiance to the sport. Most are not ready to make this decision yet, one way or the other. Adults must be careful not to make this decision for the player. The commitment must come from a personal choice by the player.

Adult standards and formal rules become the focal point during this period. The pace of development quickens at this age because of the acceleration of physical and mental maturity. The demands of training should increase, thus provoking improvement in mental toughness, concentration and diligence. Awareness of tactical moments within the game becomes an important facet of the learning process. Players in this age group can grasp a strategic concept and the individual or group tactics to execute the strategy. They also tend to be self-critical and rebellious but have a strong bond to the team.

> ***"Football is about emotions – especially the emotions you give."***
>
> **- Michel Platini, UEFA, president**

Physically, these players need to work on rhythmic movement, dynamic range of motion exercises and a measured amount of static stretching during the warm-up and cool-down. Beware of overstretching, particularly for the knee joint, as too great a range of motion may lead to hyperextension and thus injury to the soft tissues. These players are beginning to need some exercise without the ball to improve their fitness, the appropriate use of the overload principle[31]. However, the majority of the fitness needed for this age group is still accomplished with the ball. The added benefit here, physically, is the continued improvement of their coordination with the ball. Because of growth spurts typically occurring at this time in their biological growth, one cannot go wrong with agility training and core body balance training. Regular use of The 11+ routine from FIFA provides a proven standard that will properly prepare players for the demands of the game. The 11+ can be found on FIFA's website.

Invest time in the development of individual skills under the pressure of time, space and opponent. The importance of a good first touch in receiving, passing, heading and shooting for field players and deflecting and boxing and kick saves for goalkeepers cannot be over emphasized. Passing must be done consistently while on the run. Teach players that they are not to let the ball bounce. Have players take

[31] Simply stated, the overload principle means the body will adapt to the stresses placed upon it. The more you do, within reason for the age group, the more you are able to do.

the ball out of the air as this provides solid team play. An increase in technical speed is affected by using small-sided games in training sessions. Encourage players to shield the ball from defenders as well as take on opponents 1v1 using feints, spin turns and moves to beat an opponent. Train the players to highly value maintaining possession of the ball. Shooting on the run or turn, from various angles, from crosses and on volleys and half volleys must be a regular feature of training.

The psychological component of the game should remain fun and enjoyable. Encourage imagination and creativity in training sessions to produce players with enthusiasm come match day. While players of this age want and need increased demands at training, be realistic for the age. Establishing concrete training targets for players at this age is a self-motivator for them. When training targets are set, they must be evaluated from time to time and give the players clear feedback.

The development of individual skills as well as individual and small group tactics is important at this stage of development. Possession of the ball is very important both individually and as a team. The most important factors are the quality of the first touch and early movement of the 2nd attacker(s). If the players learn to keep the ball using proper team shape and movement to do so, it will help them understand defending issues better, too. They should also have a better idea of when and where to defend high or low pressure once the ball is lost. That assessment is influenced by the number of teammates and opponents around the ball, where the ball is on the field and the distance and angle of the ball to goal. Reading the game should help them recognize numbers up and numbers down situations, such as when to delay, step up and try to win the ball or take ground or when to withdraw and wait for teammates to get goal-side.

Individually, when on the attack, emphasize keeping possession by not always rushing forward, especially when the opponents have good defensive shape. Use possession play to create a chance for penetration toward the opponents' goal. In the attacking third, encourage risk taking to persuade players to take on opponents, especially in a 1v1 situation and when in the opponents' penalty area.

When in groups, players should play hard to keep possession of the ball. The quality of the first touch is crucially important here, as is early and smart movement of attacking team players around the ball. Players need to learn that the movement to support could be a run of many yards or just a few steps and an adjustment of angle to the 1st attacker. Sometimes the 2nd attacker will make a good run and be available to receive a pass, but the ball is not delivered. The effort of the 2nd attacker must be recognized and praised. Emotionally, players this age will stop making those runs if they do not get the ball. The coach must help them to see the value of the run. Tell them if they make 10 runs and get the ball once it may be at a crucial moment. Group play will now be from pairs to fours. In these groups players need to be coached to perform combinations such as wall passes, takeovers, double passes and overlaps. To pull off these combinations, they will need to be coached to see and understand the principles of attack for width, depth and penetration. Finally, intelligent runs into the penalty area to meet crosses must become more consistent at this age. To accomplish these goals of group play, players should be put into 2v1, 1v2, 2v2, 3v2, 2v3, 4v2 and 4v4 situations in training sessions.

When defending as an individual, players need to be taught how to apply proper pressure in front of or from behind the 1st attacker. They also need to begin to understand that as the 1st defender they do not always have to win the ball, but sometimes shepherd the opponent into a tight space and/or to the 2nd defender. Players need to be in the habit of immediate pressure if they have lost the ball.

Players should begin to understand and be held accountable for decisions they make on the field and how it affects their game and team. Consequently, make training sessions competitive to get players out of their comfort zone. Expect the players to truly read the game in a tactical sense. That expectation must be realistic in relation to their maturity and decision making ability as well as the tactics of soccer they have learned. A variety of tactical situations in training sessions will aid the players in deepening their tactical awareness.

Singularly important in the game is mobility. When defending, mobility takes the form of recovery runs[32], tracking runs [33] and supporting runs. On the attack, mobility means supporting runs and off-the-ball runs to create space for oneself or a teammate. Reading the game and knowing when, where and why to run is important for the player who can anticipate play.

The word hustle is so often misused that it has come to mean mindless running, merely for the sake of running. Do soccer players need to have a high work rate? Yes, but it means tactical running, on and off the ball movement, with a purpose. Soccer players need to learn when to run and when to not run. There are times when it is tactically correct to not run. They also need to learn at what angle to run. Players must be taught when to make straight runs and when to make diagonal, square and bent runs. Of course these runs could be forward or backward on attack or defense. Tactical off-the-ball runs are part of reading the game.

Players must also learn about the timing of runs, when to start and stop. Most off-the-ball runs start too early so the player is marked up once arriving in the space to meet the ball. Directly incorporated to the timing of runs is the pace of the run. Recovery runs on defense are probably going to be all out. Tracking runs on defense will have to match the pace of the opponent being marked. Many, but not all, attacking runs without the ball will start off slow or at a moderate pace and then accelerate at the last moment darting past an opponent to meet the pass. There is something more to running in soccer than mere locomotion. Brains as well as brawn need to be put into players' running.

> ***"Once the whistle blows it's all about tactical movement."***
>
> **- Shep Messing, 1972 U.S.A. Olympic Team, goalkeeper**

Set plays for this age group must be simple and direct. The emphasis will be on good technique and proper timing of each player's role in the set play. On set plays, the opposition needs to be shown more than one option and in more than one direction from the ball. By having options to the left and right of the ball – short or long, and perhaps also in front of and behind the ball, the defending team is forced to

[32] When defending a run back into space in the defending half and into good defensive shape.
[33] When defending a run matching an opponent's run.

spread out to mark attackers, and thus, space is created for the attack. An emphasis needs to be placed on possession at throw-ins rather than just hurling the ball back onto the field.

Goalkeeping becomes a much more specialized position and demands more quality training at this age. The players should continue to train as field players to keep foot skills at a high level, but specific goalkeeper training should occur with a qualified goalkeeper trainer. At a minimum, devote three training sessions per month to goalkeeper training with the team.

Through the use of games-based training, expose the players to various game situations including functional training[34]. Many more target games are used now in training sessions. Continue to refine technique and emphasize the tactical use of those techniques. Refer to the US Youth Soccer DVD *Skills School – Developing Essential Soccer Techniques* and *Soccer: How To Play The Game | The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of U.S. Soccer*.

General Characteristics of the U-14 Age Group

- The more advanced U-14 players are able to execute the range of skills, but most others are still developing previously taught skills and are now being exposed to these additional skills
- Important psychosocial implications for a child entering puberty – early or late
- Popularity influences self-esteem
- Tests limits - a know-it-all attitude
- Fertile period to learn – full of eagerness
- Tend to be quite self-critical and may need regular positive reinforcement
- Bodies are going through physical changes that affect personal appearance
- There will be significant differences in physical maturation rates between individuals
- Rapid growth spurts of the skeleton leave ligaments, tendons and muscles catching up, so coordination and balance are astray. Temporary gangly movement may result in a loss of touch on the ball. Players do not always make the connection between their growth spurt and the temporary loss of form; they need help realizing that everything will come back into synch in six to 18 months.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

[34] (1) specialized training in the particular skills necessary for playing a specific position; (2) training, under match conditions, that stresses a player's technical or tactical weakness.

Components of the Game for the U-14 Age Group*

Technique: Experiment with the qualities of a flighted ball, i.e.: spin, swerve, chipping to pass, bending passes and driving crosses to the far post and top of the penalty area. Also, practice half volley and volley shooting, slide tackles, heading to pass, flick headers, diving headers, receiving with the outside of the instep, outside of foot shot, receiving bouncing and air balls with the head, dummy the ball and shoulder charge. Introduce chipping to shoot. For goalkeepers: far post play, collapse save, step and save, step power and save, save/reaction save/recovery save, medium and high diving, deflecting over the crossbar and around the posts, boxing and catching crosses, reading crosses (when to come and when to stay), half volley (drop kick), kick saves, long over-arm throws, saving penalty kicks and angle play.

Psychology: assertiveness, tension control, self and team discipline, able to stay focused for an entire match, sportsmanship, parental involvement, how to play, mental focusing techniques, emotional management and self-regulation.

Tactics: Individual and group tactics including delay, depth and balance in defense. Compactness[35], role of 3rd defender, how to make recovery and tracking runs. Playing on, around and away from the ball with purpose. Responding to restart situations. How to defend in each part of the field [Figure 4]. How to play in the attacking half. Checking runs, take-overs, switching positions during the flow of play, zone defense and post-match analysis. For goalkeepers: taking command of the goal area, provide support on the attack out to the back line, distance of support to the defense, organization during a corner kick, setting the wall at free kicks and 1v1 with the defense and communication.

Fitness: acceleration, speed, anaerobic exercise, cardio respiratory and cardiovascular training, flexibility – static stretching (particularly in the cool-down), lateral movement and all fitness work with the ball. Continue player education about nutrition and introduce the concept of rest for recovery.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

Typical U-14 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour and 30 minutes
- Warm up, small group activities, range of motion stretching
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Introduce large group/team activities (six to eight players)
- Continue with directional games. Play to targets and/or zones
  -approximately 30 minutes-
- Conclude with small-sided games or 11v11
  -approximately 35 minutes-

[35] The whole team moves together both horizontally and vertically to support each other on the attack or when defending.

- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching
  -approximately 10 minutes-
- All activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition

Coach's qualities: strong personality, soccer knowledgeable, managerial know how and enthusiasm.

License Recommendation: Volunteer coach - USSF "D" License or higher and Level 1 Goalkeeper certificate. Paid coach - USSF "C" License or higher and Level 2 Goalkeeper certificate. U.S. Soccer recommends that coaches of U-14 have a minimum of a USSF "C" License.

A great deal of coaching within 5v5 games

At times, allow the players to sort themselves into 4v4, 5v5, 6v6, etc., games. Also, make these games functional in organizing the teams together with defenders, midfielders and attackers. Organize the lines within the framework to give the players more functional possibilities by creating numbers, roles and functions in lines of play – 5v5, might be 2-2-1 v 1-3-1 – numbers and players' specific positions. Finally, also adjust the field in terms of length and width to affect play, number of goals, restrictions on play, thirds of the field, etc.

Continue to encourage players to watch high level soccer in person and on television. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youth players in the game. The Show highlights soccer of all levels from across the country. USYouthSoccer.org also features the individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading The US Youth Soccer Show podcast.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Overriding consideration: Participation in the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program must now be incorporated into the soccer calendar for players and the coach's seasonal planning.

The game: 11v11 – While always playing to win, focus on performance, not merely outcome.

The U-14 age group is playing 11v11 for the first time and any number of team formations is possible. Whatever formation is chosen, it must be one that allows the players to execute the principles of play. Continue to expose the players to all of the team positions. Keep in mind that players this age still do not play well over long distances, so choose a formation that allows the formation of triangles to support one another. The 4-3-3 formation is the easiest for this age group to execute. To promote attacking soccer, play a 3-4-3 formation.

Along with full team formations, the U-14s now play on large fields. Do not put these players onto an adult field as it quickly becomes just a running exercise. Keep the field small enough so that they can play to the far post on corner kicks and switch the point of attack from one flank to the other.

U-16 | The Fervid Phase

Us – The Dedication

The development of skill and group tactics - The training to train stage covers ages 11 to 16 [Table 8]. The objectives are to build the aerobic base, strength toward the end of the phase and further develop soccer specific skills (build the engine and consolidate sport specific skills).

This is a critical time in a player's development. Many children stop playing because of other interests, a lack of success, a shortage of playing opportunities, poor leadership or other reasons. Players tend to be mentally tough and self-confident, but need attention and security. There is a need for team spirit, leadership and discipline within a team.

For fitness, work with the ball (economical training) is always more engaging, and the adolescent player will now respond physiologically to additional physical fitness training. The overload principle is applicable in order to stress the player's body enough for real gains in strength, power and acceleration. Supplemental fitness training should be a part of the coach's monthly training plan with U-16 and older teams. Speed training is now realistic with the onset of adolescence and will now produce gainful results. The S.A.I.D. principle[36] is most appropriate in the training environment. As a routine part of the monthly plan, some speed training and soccer-specific weight training should be added. If there is not a strength and conditioning coach employed or working with the club, your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director can be contacted to suggest resources. Speed and strength training must be properly done for best results and to avoid injury. This supplemental and demanding training must fit into the soccer calendar at appropriate periods in order to peak at the right times.

Proper guidance on athletic nutrition has always been important and now the coach will need to reinforce, and to a degree, monitor player eating habits. Players in this age group travel on their own since many are able to drive themselves to training sessions and matches. This means they will make their own choices on when and what to eat and the coach should regularly provide them with information about good hydration and nutrition habits to help them perform their best on the field. This need for a good diet is especially important during the physical stress of a tournament. The coach must promote healthy lifestyles by being an example of what the players are being taught.

With players having greater power and velocity, the possibility of injury increases. Be sure that you have a plan of action in the event of an injury. The coach and assistants must rehearse the action plan at least once per season. There is also a need to be knowledgeable on regeneration training, not just for players coming back from injury, but for the whole team after a match. Furthermore, the coach must be aware of proper rehabilitation times and practices. If the injury has been serious enough to need a physician's

[36] S.A.I.D. = **S**pecific **A**daptation to **I**mposed **D**emands, meaning the body will adapt to the physical demands placed upon it.

care, then consult that medical professional on appropriate rehab practices and the time table for full recovery back into active soccer.

Technique training should be leading to artistry with the ball. The perfection of technique is not an end in itself but rather a means to achieving tactical superiority over an opposing team. However, this superiority depends on each player's ability to execute the fundamentals of the game. The ultimate goal of technique training is the improvement of the team as a whole and not the perfection of isolated skills. Coaching ball skills is based on a progressive pattern, beginning with the fundamentals and leading to the more complex methods of dealing with the ball under match conditions.

Fundamental skills can be rehearsed during the warm-up. A season long objective for this age group is to increase their technical speed. With the growing muscular power of the U-16 player, striking balls accurately over distance while under pressure should emerge in their game. This new ability will add a new tactical dimension to their game.

> ***"You have to make each player feel useful, but not indispensable."***
>
> **- Marcello Lippi, Italian National Team, head coach**

Group (team) identity is quite important, as it improves the chance for quality performance. Individual and group discipline needs to be a top priority. A coach needs to be consistent in the expectations of the players' responsibilities to the team. Leadership must be taught and emphasized. A strong leader or two within the team makes a difference if the coach guides them in a positive direction. Note that this is an age when team leaders could have either a positive or negative influence. If a negative slant occurs, then it is quite likely that cliques will form within the team. Yet, with the right guidance by the coaches and given opportunities to lead, many positive qualities of leadership and team spirit can be instilled with players this age.

To help in developing leadership within the team, players should be involved in discussions and decisions at team meetings. The player-coach meetings are as important as parent-coach meetings. The coach should be sure to ask the players for their thoughts at halftime, too. When the players are asked for their input from the first half of the match, they are often able to identify tactical challenges on the field and what corrections are needed. It has been observed that when coaches alone direct the needed corrections, the players don't seem to pay much attention because they are not engaged in the communication process. How can players learn to think tactically and for themselves if the coach takes center stage too often? Part of confident coaching is knowing how and when to give ownership/leadership to the players.

The coach should try to sit back, listen and be there when needed.

> ***"We also spend a lot of time on trying to develop leaders in the team because leaders are the ones at the end that can hold the whole team chemistry issue together and make everybody work towards that goal."***
>
> **- Jay Hoffman, U-20 U.S. Men's National Team, former head coach**

Players in this age group are beginning adolescence and they are more capable of abstract thought and foresight. It is important for the individual and the team to work on goal setting. Goals should be achievable through short-term objectives the players can attempt in a single season. Along with the growing psychological capabilities comes improved concentration so the coach can stay on a task longer in a training session. The coach should also expect longer periods of mental focus during matches. Still, with both the training and matches, the program should vary to satisfy their urge for competition.

The game is becoming an increasingly tactical contest for this age group. Their training should present them with challenging game situations with the objective of increasing their tactical speed (decision making). Group games with numbers up, numbers down and even numbers of players can provide the players with a variety of soccer problems to be solved. Training session activities should be competitive where there are outcomes. In these group games the attackers should keep possession with a purpose by using width, depth and quick support using combination play, such as wall passes, takeovers, overlaps, double passes and 3rd attacker runs. A particularly important combination to master is the checking run to create space, lose a marker and receive and turn with the ball or lay it off. The objective of possession play with a purpose is to set up the chance for penetration into the attacking third through mobility, creativity and crossing along with proper runs into the penalty area.

Block defending as a group, in any part of the field, becomes a part of the U-16 team game. As the ball moves on the field, the defending team needs to shift players to defend as a group of three to five players in the ball area. Within that group, they must execute their roles as defenders. Defending in this manner requires fitness and a mental alertness which comes from reading the game. Patience is a key psychological factor to read the right moment to win back the ball. That moment may not come until teammates have recovered or tracked back into good defensive shape, so patience will be required from the players. Organization is key to intelligent and skillful defending with communication (who, what, when, where) being central to that aspect of teamwork. The players need to be able to adjust to the demands of the game during the match.

One training session out of every three must be devoted to 3v3, 4v4 and 5v5. These group games bring out the enjoyment of winning possession of the ball with skill while responding to tactical cues.

Reading the game is always important to quality performance. However, for a physiological reason, many teenage players will make impulsive tactical decisions because their brain has not finished developing. The underdeveloped area is called the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, which plays a critical role in decision making, problem solving and understanding future consequences of the moment's

actions. However, full maturity will not occur until players are into their twenties. Consequently, while their tactical awareness is much improved at U-16, it still has a long way to go. Team tactics fully understood and executed is in the future of their soccer playing. Tactically, this age group should be exposed to team tactics, but more importantly is the reinforcement of individual tactics and an emphasis on group tactics. To help launch the players into team play, one of these formations should be considered 4-4-2, 3-4-3 or 4-3-3.

It is clear that systems of play are designed to enhance strengths and minimize weaknesses of a team. Teams may employ two or more systems. This is an age when strong consideration should be given to developing the ability to play with zonal defense in a flat back three or four. Please note that individual defending needs to be addressed prior to this age to prepare for collective defending.

This is an age where players will start to identify their strengths in specific positions on the field. It is important not to lock players into a single position. Field players still need to have more than one role on the field and should not be confined to playing just a flank role or a central role for the team, i.e., forever a winger or center fullback. They need to play multiple roles for the team. For the development of select players they must continue to play more than one role for the team for tactical growth. For example, an outside fullback needs to know how to play as a wing forward when overlaps occur. There needs to be a balance in their training between a specific role in the team and continued general development. This means that functional play and training is a part of the team building environment.

Set plays are an integral part of the game now. However, training on set plays should be addressed within the flow of training on a regular basis. Players need to learn several roles in set plays, both on attack and defense. Do not confine them to just one role during a set play because there is always a possibility that the lineup on the field could change. Having players know several roles during set plays adds to the adaptability of the team.

Set plays and the players' responsibilities on attack and defense during free kicks should be a consistent theme in training throughout the soccer year. Some clear tactical thought and rehearsal must go into throw-in set plays.

The U-16 age group players will likely be either a goalkeeper or a field player. As a field player they are expected to be able to play a number of different positions. As a goalkeeper, specialized training should be a regular feature of their development. Their training should consist of a combination of specialized training with the goalkeeper coach and training with the team. The coach should, at a minimum, devote

three to four training sessions per month to goalkeeper training when the rest of the team assists their goalkeepers in training on tactics.

Also, be aware that not being able to completely understand future consequences shows up in the emotional side of their game, for better or worse. A team can win or lose a match on emotions, but a team cannot play just on emotions for the entire year. The U-16 player needs the example from older players on how to play well within all four components of the game, so look for chances to train with and against older teams. Select players should consider playing on an adult team as well as the youth team.

General Characteristics of the U-16 Age Group

- May have a lengthened attention span
- Able to better understand moral principles
- Strong identification with admired adults
- Very sensitive to praise and recognition; feelings are easily hurt
- Fear of ridicule and being unpopular
- Friends set the general rules of behavior
    - Strong need to conform exists
    - Dress and behave like their peers in order to belong
- Experiences physical changes - very concerned with their appearance and very self-conscience about their physical changes
- Often a rapid weight gain at the beginning of adolescence poses an enormous appetite
- Caught between being a child and being an adult

Expose the players to various game situations through the use of games-based training. Many more target games and functional activities are now used in training sessions. Continue to refine the tactical application of technique. Refer to the book *Soccer: How to Play the Game | The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of U.S. Soccer*.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. As a coach, the core goal is to create a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-16 Age Group*

Tactics: Should be developing the ability to adapt tactics during the flow of play and key players should be able to dictate the rhythm of the game. Practice playing on, around and away from the ball with

purpose, group tactics, the role of the 3rd attacker, principles of attack and defense, diagonal passing, dribbling and off-the-ball runs, wing play, overlapping runs, defending in the midfield and attacking thirds, all possible set plays, match analysis and switching the point of attack. For goalkeepers: command out to the penalty spot, initiate the attack, provide support on the attack to the fullbacks, recognize pressure on and off the ball and team organization when defending against free kicks

Psychology: personal accountability, drive, courage, sacrifice in order to achieve one's best, sportsmanship, parental involvement, how to play, emotional management and communication

Fitness: power, vertical jump, body composition, plyometric exercise, soccer-specific weight training, interval training, S.A.I.D. principle, recovery exercise and time off for rest, agility training with and without the ball, range of motion exercises especially during the warm-up and cool-down must include static stretching as well as light movement and proper nutrition and hydration

Technique: Chipping to score and airborne kicking: forward volley, scissors volley and bicycle kick. For the goalkeeper: backwards diving, saving the breakaway, all forms of distribution, narrowing the angle and improve reaction saves.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

Typical U-16 Training Session

- Approximately 90 minutes
- Warm-up, small group activities, range of motion stretching
  -approximately 15 minutes-
- Use large group activities (six to eight players)
- Introduce team activities (eight to 11 players)
- Continue with directional games - Play to targets and/or zones - Intersperse functional training
  -approximately 30 minutes-
- Conclude with small-sided games or 11v11
  -approximately 35 minutes-
- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching
  -approximately 10 minutes-
- All activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition

A Great Deal of Coaching within 7v7 Games

Coach qualities: charismatic, experienced, knowledgeable, articulate, managerial know how and thoughtful persuader

License recommendation: Volunteer coach – USSF "D" License or higher and Level 2 Goalkeeper certificate. Paid coach – National Youth License, USSF "C" License or higher and Level 3 Goalkeeper certificate. U.S. Soccer recommends that coaches of U-16 teams hold at a minimum the "B" License.

Encourage players to watch high level soccer in person and on television. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youth players in the game. The Show highlights soccer of all levels from across the country. USYouthSoccer.org also features individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading the podcast.

When players watch matches, they should focus on the players in the positions they play. The use of video analysis should also be part of developing players for this age group. The analysis should be led by the coach and the focus should be on technique done correctly and to clearly paint the picture on good tactical movement. Conceptualization of formation and positioning within systems of play can be enhanced with the use of game software such as FIFA 2011 which can be configured to replicate your team and opponents.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Overriding consideration: Participation for select players in the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program must now be incorporated into the soccer calendar for players and the coach's seasonal planning.

The game: 11v11 – With an emphasis on group tactics and being able to play more than one team formation. Teams should also be able to know when to play man-to-man marking in a zone defense. The focus of matches should be on the tactical application of ball skills, learning new tactics, executing set plays and trying new team formations. The match is for learning more about soccer, not entertaining the fans.

In order for players to develop a rhythm of play during a match, substitutions should be limited. The act of platooning, where players are rotated in and out, stifles rhythm. Limits on substitutions need to be addressed based on the level of competition.

Please read thoroughly the section about How to Function in a Group in the Best Practices guide.

U-18+ | Fulfillment in the Final Phase

Us – Realization of the team game leading to an adult style team

The training to compete stage covers ages 15 to 18, with variances by gender [Table 8]. The objectives are to optimize fitness preparation along with individual and position specific skills, as well as performance in soccer.

The training to win stage covers ages 17 and older [Table 8]. The objectives are to maximize fitness preparation and individual soccer and position-specific skills, as well as performance (maximize engine, skills and performance).

Much of the training with the U-18+ age group will continue the refinement of skills and tactics previously learned with an emphasis on developing positional and team play. The objective of this training is improved consistency and speed of play. Here are the primary objectives:

- Individual and group skill should be covered in the warm-up.
- Even players in their 20s must continuously refine the techniques and tactics learned earlier in their careers.
- Players have a personal responsibility to maintain and improve their physical fitness.
- Social and emotional growth is a lifelong process.
- The continued importance of developing players who have composure and technical speed under pressure cannot be overstated. To develop confidence and competence, players must be exposed to environments where ball manipulation and ball protection are practiced. Players should be placed in training activities where they have to look around and take visual cues of the options before receiving the ball.

In training at this age, several aspects of play must be addressed:

- Group games will include match-related training pitting attack versus defense.
- Vital to the game is the skill of crossing with the aim to develop a complete understanding of crossing angles, overlaps and near and far post runs.
- With set plays, players must develop a complete understanding of attacking and defending responsibilities.
- Emphasize the importance of possession from throw-ins in the defensive and midfield thirds of the field versus possession and creativity in the attacking third.
- Players need to understand how to play against a compact defense. They must learn to be patient as they maintain possession and look for the spaces to penetrate.

Because they are coming to a time of real athletic prowess many players, especially males, solve soccer problems with their legs (fitness) before their brains (tactics). Players must be coached to think first, and then run. Fundamentally, follow the US Youth Soccer ODP mantra of *Work hard – Play smart*. To play smart requires players to read the game. The use of guided discovery is still appropriate with older age groups. If their training environment is rich with soccer problem solving situations then their skills to read the game will be developed by this age.

Fitness is a major factor in performance given the pace of the game and the need for compactness with all players contributing to attack and defense. The players must understand that their fitness level will affect their playing time. Specialized fitness training sessions with qualified personnel will produce results improving individual and team performance. Some of that specialized training may include core stability, agility challenges, plyometrics, interval training, circuit training and soccer specific weight training. There should be properly devised fitness sessions in the seasonal plan. Note too that fitness improvement will occur in training sessions when most of the session is in game-like and match-condition activities. Coaches must note that U-18+ players are not always at the same fitness level. Note that players recovering from injury should be placed on an individual specialized training plan to enhance their recovery as prescribed by an athletic trainer.

Mobility (off-the-ball running) is vitally important to maintain a good team shape on the attack and defense. Creating opportunities on the attack relies greatly on mobility by off-the-ball attackers, movement with a purpose. When to run and when not to run are tactical decisions based on reading the game. When a player does make an off-the-ball run, they should consider the timing of the run, at what pace to run and the angle of the run, with these runs being in any direction on the attack or defense.

> ***"All coaches talk too much about running a lot. I say it's not necessary to run so much. Soccer is a game that's played with the brain. I want players to learn how to think fast. I want them to learn how to run little, but run smart. You need to be in the right place at the right time, not too early, not too late."***
>
> **- Johan Cruyff, Barcelona and The Netherlands, former coach**

Incorporate mental skills training into training sessions. Those skills – visualization, bouncing back from mistakes or positive self-talk – will be the margin between average and excellent match performances. As players learn the mental side of the game, there may be positive translation into the choices they make in their lifestyle. A proper lifestyle will contribute to the athlete's success.

Players in the U-18+ age group are making their own lifestyle choices. Continue to educate the players about their off the field habits including nutrition, hydration, sleep patterns, alcohol, tobacco, drugs and fitness training. There are experts and professionals whose work falls into these categories who can assist in educating players or giving the coach correct information and facts to share.

One in three training sessions must be devoted to defensive aspects of the game. The ability to defend as a group in each third of the field is a consistent training theme. Teams must realize that defending begins with the team's forwards who need to pressure back players of the opposing team and try to shepherd the opponent's attack into predictable spaces for their team's midfielders to be able to win the ball. Midfielders must do the same for the fullbacks. Tactically, this requires good group defending through the thirds of the field. Team defending now means that the entire team must be able to shift vertically on the field to defend as the opposing team switches the point of attack.

Specific roles in defending, according to position in the team formation, are important aspects to learn. How to play in a flat back system of three or four should be refined. The defensive (holding) midfielder is a truly important tactical role for quality team performance. Team defending requires skillful and intelligent play. All 11 players must contribute to the team's defending just as all 11 will contribute to the attack. Quality defending is the springboard to attack.

Having a group of attacking players who can operate at high speed, under intense pressure and in increasingly smaller spaces will be a key to success. Counterattacking is the attack which counters the attack. Players must be exposed to high transitional environments where the ball is moved forward quickly when the opposing team is disorganized and spread out with limited numbers at the back. The coach must devise training activities that go in two directions and emphasize transition mentality with forward looking and clinical finishing. Defending the counterattack must also be part of training and of high consideration. This is an age where block defending will become more common so the need to develop players with the ability to play in small spaces is critical.

Upwards of 46 percent of goals could come from the counterattack[37]. A team should be trained about the importance of transition when the opposing team is disorganized and defenders are spread out and pushing up the field. Conversely, as counterattacks become more important, the ability to defend the counterattack needs consideration. Defenses could be set up so that players entice opposing attackers into areas of the field where counterattacking can be most effective. If the counterattack is not an option, then the ball should be played in a controlled manner, progressively up the field using short angled passes, combination play and occasionally long diagonal passes to break down the opponents.

During a match, every player must constantly anticipate endless shifting situations and make split-second decisions. Options from which to choose are created by the actions of teammates and opponents. Top notch players possess the ability to continuously and quickly oversee all of the possible options. They also have the technical qualities to determine the correct solution and the ability to carry out that solution swiftly in most situations. The complexity and unpredictability of the ever changing conditions prevent the perfect match from ever being played. The unpredictable factor of the game is a

[37] 2008 report from the Alliance of European Football Coaching Associations

reason why soccer, worldwide, is the most popular sport. Of course, every coach strives for perfection to get the most out of the team. The qualities of the players decide what the limits of the achievements of the team are. The coach's goal is to build a team of self-reliant and soccer savvy players who work hard and play smart together.

> ***"No coach has ever won a game by what he knows; it's what the players know that counts."***
>
> **- Paul "Bear" Bryant, University of Alabama, former football coach**

With team formations the importance of shape is crucial. The system of play used by successful teams will have a good balanced structure that displays disciplined defending and is flexible when attacking. Players should have a complete understanding of the principles of play. Those principles are the questions the players ask themselves in match situations, such as, "Should I move forward or wide to support now?" or "Am I in the right place to give balance to our defense?". By having a clear understanding of the principles of play, the players can begin making sound tactical decisions. To aid the players' perception of match situations, there should be several functional training sessions each month.

Functional play is a feature of training and matches for the U-18+ team. Functional play by position within two or more formations should be learned. Match-related training can be attack versus defense, individual or small groups, for a set amount of time or repetitions in the specific area of the field and then switch roles. Players need to learn both their attacking and defending roles and responsibilities. Match conditions must involve transition and provide the players with realistic problem-solving opportunities. One in three training sessions must be devoted to defensive aspects of the game. Remember that all training session activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition.

Teams in the U-18+ age group must be capable in at least two systems of play. Teams that can adapt to changing field/weather conditions, opposing styles of play or simply the score and time left in the match with appropriate tactics and team formation are likely to handle any situation they come across. However, the ability for the team to adapt requires individual confidence, talent and versatility.

The rehearsal and execution of set plays is vital to successful play; set plays account for 21 percent of goals scored[38]. Given then the statistical significance of scoring chances from set plays, there must be regular training of them. Players should be expected to apply set plays practiced in training to the matches.

The technical demands on defenders are increasing as is the need for goalkeepers to be able to become attacking players. Goalkeepers should be included with some of the outfield player training activities. Since pressure from opponents will occur more consistently and over larger portions of the field, the goalkeeper's ability to play, using his or her feet is important. Receiving back passes, making clearances and passing the ball up field are requirements of the modern goalkeeper.

[38] UEFA study of Euro 2008

Remember that the goalkeeper is the last line of defense and the first line of attack. The attacking role for the goalkeeper takes on greater significance. Distribution of the ball by the goalkeeper with a real tactical sense greatly influences the team's attacking success, and must be merely punting the ball downfield. When distributing the ball by rolling, throwing or kicking there must be a good tactical decision for it. Typical decisions for the goalkeeper to make on the attack are when to play short for build-up play, when to distribute toward the flanks or when to start a quick counterattack.

Goalkeepers no longer stand in the goalmouth waiting to stop a shot. They act as sweepers and remain connected to their backline. They frequently move outside their penalty area and must be able to use their feet either to receive back passes or to launch counterattacks. Goalkeepers must be used more often in passing and receiving activities. At a minimum, devote four training sessions per month to goalkeeper training when the rest of the team assists their goalkeepers in training on tactics.

Train in competitive situations to improve the will to win, making the sacrifices often necessary for a strong individual and team performance. Perhaps more important than the will to win is the willingness to *prepare* to win, meaning to work diligently at training sessions to improve in each aspect of the game, but especially in areas of personal deficiencies. Remember everyone wants to win, but few are willing to make the on- and off-the-field commitment to the lifestyle of a true competitor. This means good habits away from the field in the player's life, including a balanced and healthy diet with proper hydration every day. A good sleep routine contributes to consistent athletic performance. Players must learn about taking care of their bodies beyond nutrition and consider the pitfalls of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Winning and losing always occur in soccer and having a balanced perspective will help a team achieve its best.

> ***"Win as a team – Lose alone."***
>
> **- Gerard Houllier, Paris Saint Germian, RC Lens, Liverpool, Olympique Lyonnais and France, former manager**

General Characteristics of the U-18+ Age Group

- Emotions can still overcome tactical logic
- They are likely to solve soccer problems with their legs first and their brains second
- May have bad diet and sleep habits, and, as a result, low energy levels
- The skeleton is close to full maturation, but peak athleticism is still a few years off
- Very concerned with what others say and think about them
- Developing a team consciousness – want and need a strong voice in planning their activities/game plans

- May try to manipulate others to get what they want
- Loud behavior may hide their lack of self-confidence
- Look at the world more objectively – look at adults more subjectively and are critical of them, yet they still want adult leadership
- Go to extremes – often appear to be unstable emotionally while having a know-it-all attitude
- Vulnerable – emotionally insecure, fear of rejection and mood swings
- Social needs and desires are high
- Many will leave the game for employment and many who go to college will not return to the game after graduation
- There is still a strong desire to be part of a team

Expose players to a variety of match situations such as how to play when up by a goal or down by a goal. Use games based training where players work skillfully to keep possession of the ball. In training, use more functional play activities and target/directional games. Continue to refine their tactical application of technique. Refer to the book *Soccer: How to Play the Game | The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of U.S. Soccer.*

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-18+ Age Group*

Tactics: Should be able to adapt tactics and change team formation during the flow of play. Team tactics, tactical functional training, specialized tactics for a particular opponent, midfield play, attacking out of the back third, possession with a purpose, combination play with tactical implications, penetration with creativity, intentional flank play, pressing to win possession as an attacking concept, consistency on set plays, playing a role, combination zone and man-to-man marking defense, creativity on the attack, total soccer concept and playing on, around and away from the ball with purpose. For goalkeepers: support the attack from the defensive third, command beyond the penalty area, last line of defense—first line of attack and most of all, presence.

Fitness: Use the 11+ routine as a part of the warm-up. Be consistent with cool-downs, plyometrics, depth jumping, implementing the overload principal and fitness tests with and without the ball – both with the guidance of a strength/conditioning coach or a certified athletic trainer. Follow fitness training concepts similar to the U.S. Youth National Teams and US Youth Soccer ODP teams. Continue player education about nutrition and rest.

Psychology: Factors include increased concentration, reduced mental mistakes, playing with self-confidence and self-motivation, emotional management during a match, dedication, commitment,

leadership, personal responsibility for actions on and off the field, sportsmanship, how to play, selfless – team comes first, discipline, composure, concentration, confidence, consistency, courage, personal goal setting, imagery, patience and respect for the game. With increased player responsibilities comes a decrease of parental involvement and that is suitable to the age and needs of the players.

Technique: technical/tactical functional training, all techniques rehearsed at match speed and at match related and match condition levels.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group*

Typical U-18+ Training Session

- Should range from one hour (i.e., day before a match) to two hours
- Warm-up, small group activities, dynamic range of motion stretching, use the 11+ program -approximately 20 minutes-
- Use individual to large group activities (six to eight players)
- Use team activities (eight to 11 players)
- Directional games playing to targets and/or zones. Intersperse positional functional training -approximately 25 minutes-
- Conclude with small-sided games or 11v11 -approximately 30 minutes-
- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching -approximately 15 minutes-
- All activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition

A great deal of coaching within 8v8 to 11v11 games

Fulfillment of a player's potential depends on individual efforts, the support of teammates and the unselfish guidance of the coach. Players must be exposed to a playing and training environment that stretches their mental, physical and technical capabilities to the limit. Players must have a sound understanding of the game's principles and concepts. Players should show emotional stability when confronted with pressure situations. Demanding and challenging training sessions and matches are a must.

Encourage players to watch high level soccer regularly. Players should be able to mentally insert themselves into the position they play and think what they would do in the situations seen. As they watch these matches, they should focus on the group play around their position. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youths in the game. The Show highlights soccer of all levels from across the country. USYouthSoccer.org also features individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading The US Youth Soccer Show podcast.

Video analysis of team and individual performance should be consistently used with this age group. The analysis should be developed around problem-solving discussions. An exchange of questions and answers between the coach and the players and between the players themselves will be productive. In general, video analysis should be used immediately following the activity when the player has a feel for the action. Video feedback can have its best impact during training sessions where review followed by immediate repetition of the action can take place in a coach-controlled situation.

Short viewing periods plus the coach's analysis should be followed by an attempt to correct as well as improve upon performance. Correction should be positive, not negative. The coach should stop talking and listen. The players' minds do not need to be filled with details. They should be able to think and analyze for themselves, with the coach only guiding them to reach a conclusion when they reach an impasse.

A final word of advice: video analysis demands that the coach understand the mechanics of soccer. No longer will guesswork be allowed, the instant replay of video leaves each analysis open to question. Knowledge of key movement cues that contribute positively to the players' performance is essential. Watch the US Youth Soccer DVD, *Skills School | Developing Essential Soccer Techniques,* for assistance in this area. Also use as a reference the *Skills School Manual* from US Youth Soccer.

Coach qualities: charismatic, well-informed, up-to-date, experienced, knowledgeable, articulate, disciplinarian, no doubts about personal authority and managerial know-how

License recommendation: Volunteer coach – USSF "B" License or higher and Level 3 Goalkeeper certificate. Paid coach – USSF "A" License, National Goalkeeper License and National Fitness License. U.S. Soccer recommends that coaches of U-18+ teams have a minimum of a USSF "A" License.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Overriding consideration: Participation for select players in US Youth Soccer ODP is a standing feature in the soccer calendar for players and the coach's seasonal planning.

The game: 11v11 – With an emphasis on team tactics and being able to play in two or more systems of play. Teams should be able to change formation during a match when game demands require it, but also play with the highest level of technical play under pressure.

> ***"My great gift was my ability to read the game."***
>
> **- Michel Platini, UEFA, president**

Please read thoroughly the Competition and Outcome section in the Best Practices guide.

Conclusion

Is coach doing a good job?

Proper player development leads to good match performance, which often leads to victory. But there are shortcuts to winning, particularly with players younger than high school age. Just get the biggest, fastest child around, then outrun and outmuscle the opposition. Play run-n-gun attack and high pressure defense against young players who are still learning the game and those tactics can win matches. However, it doesn't help those children to learn how to play soccer in a sophisticated manner, which is required for future success.

> ***"Parents, coaches, teachers, and mentors should be proudest of their charges not when they win, but when they never give up doing their best to try to win."***
>
> **- Karl Ahrendt, Stars' Founder**

US Youth Soccer focuses more on match performance than outcome; yet, this is not to say players should not strive to win. There's nothing wrong with winning. But remember, the outcome of the game is not necessarily a measure of whether the coach is doing a good job developing players. Players and coaches should diligently work to improve their performance. This is the drive for excellence as opposed to momentary success. So how do we measure success? How do parents know if the coach is doing a good job of coaching the players? How does the novice coach know if the players are growing within the game?

Questions to answer when measuring success for youth soccer:

Short term and Continual

Fun: Do the players smile and laugh? Do the players look forward to playing? The first question from the player's family should be, "Did you have fun today?"

Fair play: Does a player demonstrate by words and actions a sense of sportsmanship?

Rules of the game: Do the players know and follow the rules of soccer?

Health and fitness: Are the players fit enough to meet the physical demands of the game? Are they developing good nutrition and hydration habits befitting an athlete?

Friendships: Are the players creating new friends within the team and with players from other teams?

Skills: Are the players demonstrating a growing number of ball skills and are they becoming more proficient in those skills?

Long term and Continual

Commitment: How do the players answer when asked at the end of a game, "Did you try your best?"

Roles in the team: More important than learning a position, are the players learning about positioning? Knowing where the center forward plays in the team formation is important; yet, learning how to move tactically within the game is far more important. Do all of the players get exposed to playing all of the positions?

Leadership: Are players being given the opportunity to take on leadership roles and responsibilities? Are the coaches and team managers teaching leadership?

Tactics: Are the players experimenting with new tactics in matches? The coaches must teach new tactics to the players in training sessions, and then allow them to try out the tactics in a match, regardless of how that might affect the outcome.

Retention: Do the players come back year after year? Retention is recognized also as a short-term measure of success in youth soccer and developing well-adjusted citizens is another long-term measure of success in youth sports.

It takes many years to develop into a quality soccer player. Indeed, that continued development can be seen even in young professional players. Soccer is a long-term development and late specialization sport. Striving to improve individual, group and team performance is more important at the youth level than the score line. Simultaneously, players should play to win. Coaches should teach and develop the players as they learn how to win. Parents should support the players and coaches. Intrinsic success is, by its nature, more difficult to measure than extrinsic success. A trophy is more tangible to an adult than the exhilaration a child feels while playing soccer. The final measure of success for parents and coaches of the player's soccer experience will require a good deal of patience from the adults. That measurement is the free choice of the child to stay in the game.

> ***"We don't demand that youth teams win. We demand that they play good soccer."***
>
> **- Jose Ramon Alexanco, FC Barcelona, youth director**

Nowhere in this Model is there mention of the measurement of ball skills; i.e., the number of juggles a 14 year old should be able to do or the elapsed time for a 9 year old to dribble through a series of cones. Using these measurements in a fun contest format for players can be a positive motivator for youngsters to practice with the ball. However, coaches should not use these measurements to assess player talent or to make player selections.

> ***"Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts."***
>
> **- Dr. Albert Einstein, Austrian-American physicist and 1921 Nobel Prize winner for physics**

What is a game?

A game is a recreational activity involving one or more players. This can be defined by a goal that the players try to reach, or some set of rules which determine what the players can or cannot do. Children love playing games. They play them primarily for entertainment or enjoyment, but games may also serve an educational role or for stimulation; children learn through play. This fact seems to have been lost on many. It appears to have been replaced with other descriptions such as enemy, battle, war and fight. This sense of combat is not the game of soccer which is a competition. To compete is to seek or strive for the same thing as another. Competition is a trial of skills. The definition of competition is when players strive to attain a common end and may have the friendliest feelings toward each other. The opposing team is made up of fellow competitors. The opposing team, staff and supporters are members of the soccer family. During the match, players must compete to the best of their ability. After the match, they should come together to grow the game in our country. Treat the game and its participants with respect.

> ***"One man practicing sportsmanship is far better than a hundred teaching it."***
>
> **- Knute Rockne, Notre Dame, former football coach**

In some parts of the world, learning to play soccer was ingrained in children through their culture. That culture was permeated by soccer. Young players had many chances to make mistakes, try new tricks and learn the game while playing in neighborhood games. These same children regularly watched professional and international matches in person or on TV. They evolved into the game at a natural pace and moved into their first formal team around age 11 or 12.

For generations, those imbued with a love for the beautiful game learned the game from the game. Long before getting a spot on a team with a coach, countless players had their passion for soccer deeply planted in the pick-up games of their childhood. While the pick-up game still exists around the world, a child's soccer experience is increasingly centered on the formal training session and not the neighborhood game.

In the U.S., historically that soccer culture existed in only a small measure and almost exclusively in ethnic enclaves. For the majority of our players, the soccer experience has been a formal one from the start. In that soccer background, too much emphasis in the training of players has been placed on a robotic drill routine that has the coach at the center of training. Instead, the game must be the centerpiece with players at the forefront of the action. Indeed, both US Youth Soccer and U.S. Soccer have advocated a game-like approach to training session activities for over thirty years.

> ***"…the game is played with passion, love for football and instinct, but in football you also have to think…"***
>
> **- Jose Mourinho, FC Internazionale Milano, manager**

The essence of the game is based in the relationships built and the feelings of accomplishment sensed by all who participate in the world's game. As the world's game, soccer can take one around the world to experience the sport and other cultures, learn languages and better relate to others. The game in many aspects is a school of life. Soccer evokes emotions affiliated with beginnings, lifelong relatedness, dreams and hopes. Participation in the game can help form one's life and personality. As caretakers of the game, coaches must have fun and health as the first concern within the competitive and social dimensions of the game.

Soccer is the game the world plays; one with a long and colorful history on our shores. A game so easy to understand and easy to play, and yet so hard to perfect, "The Game for All Kids!®". It is a game to play anywhere, anytime, by anyone. For a simple child-like ballgame, soccer has come a long way in the U.S.A., and it shows no signs of retreating. The world's game is also an American game. Soccer is a game which repays the amount of work an individual puts into it. When coaches put more into their craft of coaching, the players benefit. Any seasoned coach will say that theory is only valuable when it can be put into practice on the field. Therefore, this is a practical manual that will enable a coach to get the best, at any level.

Soccer, especially at the grassroots level, is more than a sports activity, more than the promotion of physical skills and the report of scores. Soccer carries a responsibility for society as a whole.

"To enable another is to share the greatest love of all."

- Tim Russert, former commentator, journalist and columnist

Appendix A
Additional readings and references

US Youth Soccer has a number of coaching materials available to its members and of those, the *Skills School – Fundamental Ball Skills Technical Manual, Small-Sided Games Manual* and *Vision* are useful references to supplement this Model. Along with print and multimedia resources, US Youth Soccer's website, http://www.USYouthSoccer.org, has a complete section for coaches which includes free downloads and a Small-Sided Games Resource Center.

Additional resources are on USYouthSoccer.org including the *US Youth Soccer Official Coaching Manual* and the DVDs titled *The Novice Coach | Vol. 1 Under-6 to 8 years* and *Vol. 2 Under-10 to 12 years*, *Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer*, *Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games* and *Skills School | Developing Essential Soccer Techniques*.

The *Player Development Model* is meant to be used in conjunction with U.S. Soccer's *Player Development Guidelines – Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States*. The booklet is available to download for free from the http://www.ussoccer.com.

www.USYouthSoccer.org

Appendix B
Game Management: Pre-game, Game, Halftime, Game and Post-game

Zone 1 | U-6 to U-12

Pre-game

- Coaches arrive 30 minutes prior to kickoff
- Set responsibilities with staff
- Consider the environmental conditions
- 10-20 minutes of actual warm-up [10 minutes for U-6, 15 minutes for U-8, 20 minutes for U-10]
    - individual warm-up [U-6, U-8, U-10]
    - pairs [U-8, U-10]
    - small group [U-10] (possession activities, directional games)
- U-10/U-12
    - Introduce goalkeeper into game/warm-up
    - introduce dynamic stretching to promote good habits
- Starting line-up
    - Do not over-emphasize position and tactics – avoid specific positions
- Team huddle
    - Final instruction/reminders – cheer!

Game

- Start game, sit down and enjoy the game
- Finding a balance between the puppet master, cheerleader and silent "non-existent" coach
    - Limit coaching!
- Be sure all players get equal playing time
- Be sure players get to play in different positions
- In the event of an unbalanced game/blow-out, look for different ideas to even out the game:
    - Communicate with league officials prior to start of season – comply with league rules
    - Subtract a player from the team that is up
    - Make adjustments to teams (borrow a player, re-align two teams)
    - Sit key players
    - Play key players in different positions
    - Subtract a player from the team that is winning

Halftime

- Relax and hydrate
- Get on their level; be sure all players are looking at the coach (no distractions behind the coach – including the sun). Get away from the parents/sidelines!
- Be sure that information is positive, emotions are under control and voice is at a controlled level.
- Sandwich approach of information (+ - +)
    - U-6/U-8 – simple information, if anything at all
    - U-10/U-12 – simple to complex (general to specific) with information, address basic principles rather than specific mistakes
- Communicate with staff prior to speaking with players

- Limit the amount of time speaking to your team (think about age of players and how long they can listen to the information)
- Substitutions
- Quick warm-up prior to starting second half

Post-game

- Shake hands (Coach must be a good role model by shaking the hands of referees, opposing coach and players)
- Check for injuries
- Brief cool-down stretch
- Stay positive regardless of the match outcome
- Snacks/drinks
- Reminder about next training session
- Be very brief after game and save discussions for the next training session
- Occasionally address the parents in a post-game discussion

Zone 2 | U-14 to U-17

Pre-game

- Coaches arrive 40 minutes prior to kickoff
- Set responsibilities with staff
- Consider the environmental conditions
- 20-30 minutes of warm-up
    - Individual warm-up
        - Field players
        - Goalkeepers
    - Pairs
    - Small group (possession activities, directional games)
- Dynamic warm-up
    - More structured warm-up
    - Allow time for individuals to warm-up, including functional warm-up
- Give line-up to the players
- Roles and responsibilities
    - Discuss individual and small group roles
    - Discuss attacking and defensive roles
- Team huddle
    - Final instruction/reminders

Game

- Start game, sit down and enjoy the game
- Find a balance between the puppet master, cheerleader and silent “non-existent” coach
    - Stay within the technical area
    - Limit coaching!
- Be sure all players get playing time
- Take notes
    - Attacking and defensive strengths and weaknesses

    - Individual, small group and team strengths/weaknesses
- Tactical adjustments
    - Which principles of play can be addressed at halftime?
- Allow players to play extended times (getting into the flow of the game and make mistakes, play through it and figure it out)

Halftime

- Relax and hydrate
- Care for any injuries
- Communicate with staff prior to speaking with players
- Be specific on information at halftime
- Allow substitutions time to warm-up while players coming off the field are getting a drink and then bring all players in for quick halftime talk
- Get on their level; be sure all players are looking at the coach (no distractions behind the coach – including the sun). Get away from the parents/sidelines!
- Be sure that information is positive, emotions are under control and voice is at a controlled level
- Limit the amount of time speaking to team (think about age of players and how long they can listen to directions)
    - Limit the discussion to 2-3 points (make this time a dialogue not a monologue)
- Announce substitutions
- Quick warm-up prior to starting second half

Post-game

- Shake hands (Coach must be a good role model by shaking the hands of referees, opposing coaches and players)
- Check for injuries
- Snacks/drinks
- Cool down for 10 to 15 minutes which includes easy movement and static stretching
- Stay positive in your comments to the team and individuals
- Reminder about next training session or match
- Be brief after the match and save discussions for the next training session
- Highlight a player for strong performance or efforts during the match
- Occasionally address the parents in a post-game discussion

Zone 3 | U-18 +

Pre-game

- Coaches arrive 45 minutes prior to kickoff
- Set responsibilities with staff
- Consider the environmental conditions
- 30 minutes of warm-up
    - Individual warm-up
        - Field players
        - Goalkeepers
    - Pairs

    - Small group (possession activities, directional games)
- Dynamic warm-up
    - More structured warm-up
    - Allow time for individuals to warm-up, including functional warm-up
- Give line-up to the players
- Roles and responsibilities – be specific
    - Discuss individual and small group roles
    - Discuss attacking and defensive roles
    - Specifics in set pieces
- Team huddle
    - Final instruction/remarks

Game

- Start game, sit down and enjoy the game
- Finding a balance between the puppet master, cheerleader and silent "non-existent" coach
    - Stay within the technical area
    - Limit coaching!
- Be sure all players get playing time
- Take notes
    - Attacking and defensive strengths and weaknesses
    - Individual, small group and team strengths/weaknesses
- Tactical adjustments
- Allow players to play extended times (getting into the flow of the game and make mistakes, play through it and figure it out)

Halftime

- Relax and hydrate
- Care for any injuries
- Communicate with staff prior to speaking with players
- Evaluate player's psychology and motivation – what do they need?
- Possible adjustment's opponents are making – think about what the other team's adjustments will be and anticipate what will happen
- Allow substitutions time to warm-up while players coming off the field are getting a drink and then bring all players in for quick halftime talk
- Get on their level; be sure all players are looking at the coach (no distractions behind the coach – including the sun). Have the players who just came off sitting on the team bench – other players and staff can stand.
- Situational discussion
    - Winning goal up
    - Losing goal down
    - Match situation
- Be more specific on information at halftime
    - Tactical adjustments
    - Ask for player input
    - Arrive at solutions
- Be sure that information is positive, emotions are under control and voice is at a controlled level

- Limit the amount of time speaking to team (think about the age of players and how long they can listen to directions)
    - Limit the discussion to 3-4 points (make this time a dialogue not a monologue)
- Announce substitutions
- Quick warm-up prior to starting second half

Post-game

- Shake hands (Coach must be a good role model by shaking the hands of referees, opposing coaches and players)
- Check for injuries
- Proper hydration
- Cool down for 15 to 20 minutes which includes easy movement and static stretching
- Stay positive in your comments to the team and individuals
- Reminder about the next training session or match
- Be brief after the match and save discussions for the next training session
- Highlight a player for strong effort during the match
- Occasionally address the parents in a post-game discussion

Appendix C
A Checklist for Coaches

Personal Attributes

Appearance

- ✓ Dress suitably and groom properly

Disposition

- ✓ Pleasantness
- ✓ A sense of humor
- ✓ Even temper
- ✓ Courtesy
- ✓ Sympathy
- ✓ Enthusiasm

Poise

- ✓ Self-control and behave in an adult manner

Character

- ✓ Sincere and truthful
- ✓ Role model of positive ideals

Leadership

- ✓ Accept responsibility
- ✓ Plan and organize
- ✓ Understand the emotional and psychological characteristics of players
- ✓ Good rapport with each player
- ✓ Understand the personal needs and problems of players and adjust accordingly
- ✓ Discipline suited to the age of the players
- ✓ Discipline fairly and impartially - temper discipline with good judgment and humor

Relations with Others

With Parents

- ✓ Seek cooperation and understanding in achieving goals of the player development model
- ✓ Show consideration for their opinions and feelings
- ✓ Display friendliness and courtesy

With Colleagues

- ✓ Friendly
- ✓ Cooperative
- ✓ Courteous
- ✓ Considerate

With Game Officials

- ✓ Be courteous, respect decisions and accept them gracefully
- ✓ Avoid bickering and "ref baiting"

Appendix D
Modern Soccer Teams

Circulate the ball quickly

Play with speed and with intensity

Play smart

Work hard

Maintain discipline at all times

Pursue common goals - well organized on and off the field

Have several playmakers and goal scorers

Goalkeepers participate in the attack

Psychological strength and maturity

Have sound leadership (coaching and administration)

Have infrastructural support (programming, facilities, staffing)

"No matter the coaching role, winning comes from a commitment to excellence and an ability to deliver."

- Marcello Lippi, Italian National Team, head coach

Appendix E
US Youth Soccer Programs

US Youth Soccer offers a number of programs to accommodate players of every age and ability from U-5 to U-19. Additional information about the programs can be found at USYouthSoccer.org.

US Youth Soccer American Cup

The Kohl's US Youth Soccer American Cup provides recreational youth soccer players an opportunity to experience a consistent and high quality statewide tournament in a fun, family-like atmosphere. It fosters stimulation and excitement about soccer in an effort to increase the recreational players' interest and love for the game.

US Youth Soccer National Championship Series

Each summer the United States Youth Soccer Association (US Youth Soccer) crowns a boys and girls national champion in each of its six age divisions (Under 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19). The finals are a culmination of a year-long series of competitions at the state and regional levels known as the US Youth Soccer National Championship Series which provides approximately 185,000 players on 10,000 teams from US Youth Soccer's 55 State Associations the opportunity to showcase their soccer skills against the best competition in the nation.

US Youth Soccer National League

The US Youth Soccer National League is an extension of the highly successful US Youth Soccer Regional Leagues (US Youth Soccer Region I Premier League, Midwest Regional League, Region III Premier League and Far West Regional League) playing not only to claim the title of National League Champion but also to earn two slots in each gender age group at the US Youth Soccer National Championships. In addition to the four Regional Championship winners, the top finisher in each age group division from the National League will earn slots to the national finals. The National League's top two finishers in each age group division will also retain their positions in the league for the following season.

US Youth Soccer Presidents Cup

The US Youth Soccer Presidents Cup provides a progressive, competitive experience to US Youth Soccer teams from the state to regional to national level. The Presidents Cup gives players an additional opportunity to compete against teams from across the country at a high level for the joy and the challenge of the game. It provides the chance to experience a unique US Youth Soccer event with camaraderie, community and competition through sport.

US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program

The US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program (US Youth Soccer ODP) was formed in 1977 to identify a pool of players in each age group from which a National Team will be selected for international competition; to provide high-level training to benefit and enhance the development of players at all levels; and, through the use of carefully selected and licensed coaches, develop a mechanism for the exchange of ideas and curriculum to improve all levels of coaching.

Soccer Across America

Soccer Across America is designed to introduce the sport of soccer to youngsters living in communities not yet served by existing clubs and leagues. Focused on making soccer available to lower-income children in underserved communities, Soccer Across America provides soccer training and administrative guidance to players and organizations that might otherwise not be exposed to the sport.

TOPSoccer

US Youth Soccer TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer) is a community-based training and team placement program for young athletes with disabilities, organized by youth soccer association volunteers. The program is designed to bring the opportunity of learning and playing soccer to any boy or girl, who has a mental or physical disability.

Youth Soccer Month

In September, the National Youth Soccer Month campaign is celebrated and educates the public about the joys, rewards and benefits of playing youth soccer, and offers a variety of resources to learn more about youth soccer and get involved.

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Karl Ahrendt – Stars' Founder
Jose Ramon Alexanco - FC Barcelona Youth Director
Paul "Bear" Bryant – legendary University of Alabama football coach
David Beckham – Los Angeles Galaxy and English National Team
Eric Cantona – former professional and French National Team player
Brandi Chastain – legendary professional and U.S. Women's National Team player
Confucius – Chinese philosopher
Johann Cruyff – world renowned player for Holland, coach for Barcelona and The Netherlands
Albert Einstein – Austrian-American physicist
David Elkind – American child psychologist and author
Alex Ferguson – manager for Manchester United Football Club
Tom Fleck – legendary coach and father of youth soccer development in the U.S.A.
Friedrich Froebel – German pedagogue who laid the foundation for modern education based on the

recognition that children have unique needs and capabilities. He created the concept of the "kindergarten."
John Hackworth – assistant coach U.S. Men's National Team, former U. S. Soccer Development Academy Director and former head and assistant coach with the U.S. U-17 Men's National Team, Coach Philadelphia Union
Edward Hallowell – a child and adult psychiatrist who specializes in ADD/ADHD
Roy Hodgson – manager for the Fulham Football Club and a member of the UEFA and FIFA Technical Study Group
Jay Hoffman – Virginia Rush SC Director of Coaching, US Paralympic National Soccer Team head coach, US Youth Soccer ODP Boys Region I head coach, and former U-20 U.S. Men's National Team head coach, former assistant coach with the U.S. Women's National Team, former professional and college coach
Gerard Houllier – former manager for Paris Saint-Germain, RC Lens, Liverpool, Olympique Lyonnais and France
Bobby Howe – former U.S. Soccer Director of Coaching, professional and National Team coach
Marcello Lippi – head coach for Italy
Robert Malina – world renowned expert on athletic development
Cesar Luis Menotti – former coach of Argentina, Huracán, FC Barcelona, Mexico, Independiente, Sampdoria, Rosario Central, CF Puebla and Tecos.
Shep Messing – American goalkeeper with 7 seasons in the NASL, 6 seasons in the MISL and the 1972 U.S.A. Olympic Team. He is currently a broadcaster.
Rinus Michels – legendary coach for Ajax and The Netherlands
Jay Miller – Former Executive Director of Coaching for the Atlanta Fire United S. A., former U-20 U.S. Men's National Team head coach, former college coach
Alfonso Mondelo – MLS Director of Player Development
Jose Mourinho – manager for F.C. Internazionale Milano
Carlos Parreira – former National Team coach for Brazil, South Africa, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates
Michel Platini – president of UEFA
Knute Rockne – legendary Notre Dame football coach
Tim Russert – commentator, journalist and columnist
Greg Ryan – head coach for women's soccer at the University of Michigan, former coach of the U.S.A. women's National Team
Dean Smith – legendary University of North Carolina basketball coach
Jeff Tipping – former NSCAA Director of Coaching
Arsène Wenger – Manager for Arsenal Football Club

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For more information and additional resources, visit USYouthSoccer.org - the online home for everything youth soccer for administrators, coaches, parents and players.