

# USYSA National Champions - U14G

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*Contributed by Mike Saif, editor and publisher of WORLD CLASS COACHING magazine. Mike participated in his first coaching course in his home country, England, 20 years ago when he was just 19 years old. After arriving in the U.S. in 1991 Mike attended and passed the USSF "B" Licence in 1993 and the USSF "A" Licence in 1994.*

*Mike formed the 87 Dynamos Girls Team at the U10 age group although he had coached a number of the players in various other teams and clinics since they were 7 and 8 years old. In 2001 the 87G Dynamos won the USYSA/Snickers U14G National Championship. In this article, Mike explains what kind of schedule the team followed during their National Championship season and shares a typical training session.*

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After losing in the final of the Region Two tournament last year, I evaluated our strengths and weaknesses. I talked to a number of coaches of teams that had won their Regional or National tournaments to find out what kind of practice and game schedule they did with their teams.

Our practice schedule for the previous year was twice a week in the fall and spring and once a week indoors during the winter months (Nov - Feb). We did some conditioning but not much. For this year, we increased our practice schedule to three times a week for the fall and spring and still once a week during the indoor season. However, we did conditioning at most practices and the girls attended a voluntary strength, speed and agility (plyometric) workout twice a week at a health club during the indoor season.

Our conditioning workouts consisted of 800 - 1,500 yards of sprints with a maximum distance of 300 yards down to 10 yard shuttles. These lasted about 20 minutes and were done during most training sessions.

Our game schedule didn't really change that much. We played 25 games in the fall including three tournaments. The spring season consisted of 24 games prior to playing in the Region Two tournament in late June. During the winter months we played about 10 - 12 indoor games.

After winning the Kansas State Cup, we practiced Monday through Thursday in the mornings for two weeks prior to Regionals. We also scheduled 7 or 8 scrimmage games during the evenings and at the weekend. After the Regional tournament we took 10 days off and repeated the same two week practice schedule prior to the National tournament.

As the editor and publisher of WORLD CLASS COACHING magazine I have been fortunate to visit and observe some of the best youth coaches in the world. Much of my training sessions are based on what I have observed and learned from these coaches. Much of what we do is based around a possession game, therefore we work constantly on passing and receiving. This year I introduced more tactical awareness such as how to break down other teams, playing against the offside trap, switching the point of attack, etc.

We play a very attacking 4-4-2 or 2-4-4 formation (this year we scored 198 goals and conceded only 18 from 58 games). Our two wide midfielders play as attacking wingers when we have possession and our two fullbacks push up as midfielders. There is an element of risk involved but we feel we are capable of scoring more goals than we concede playing this way. Our two center defenders are also extremely quick, strong and good 1 v 1 defenders which enables us to take those risks. Plus it is much more fun for the players to play an attacking style.

On reflection, the factors that were important in us winning the National Championship were less to do with technique and tactics and more to do with the mental side of the game:

**Conditioning** - We felt that we were at least as fit if not fitter than every team we faced. The plyometric workouts also made a difference and helped reduce injuries.

**Practice Schedule** - What amounted to practice in the morning and a scrimmage in the afternoon for two weeks prior to Regionals and Nationals was critical. We improved so much during that time, probably as much as we had improved during the entire spring season.

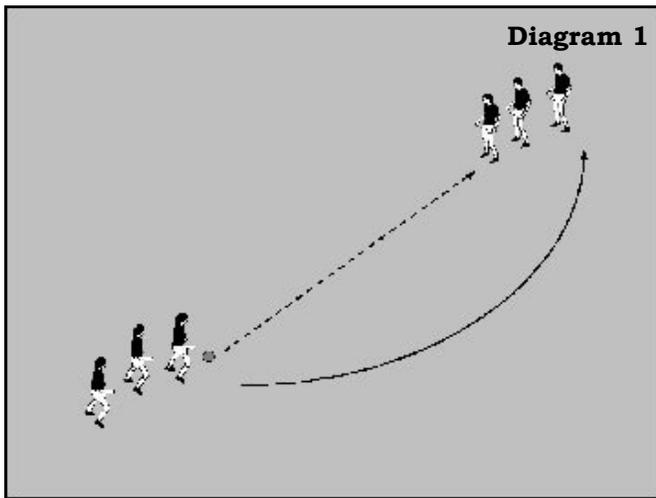
**Commitment and Dedication** - For the entire year, no player missed a game other than for an injury. We also had an excellent attendance for practices with 12 of 15 girls missing only one or no practices for the entire spring/summer season.

**Team Goal** - After losing in the final last year, the players set their goal to win Regionals this year and constantly talked about it during the season. This is what they used to push themselves during conditioning workouts.

**Team Chemistry** - Without doubt, team chemistry was critical. Without it we would have struggled to overcome the hurdles and setbacks we faced during the season. The girls love soccer, love playing with each other and have a great time at practice, games and out-of-town tournaments.

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*A typical training session of the U14 Girls Dynamos contributed by head coach, Mike Saif.*



## Warm-Up

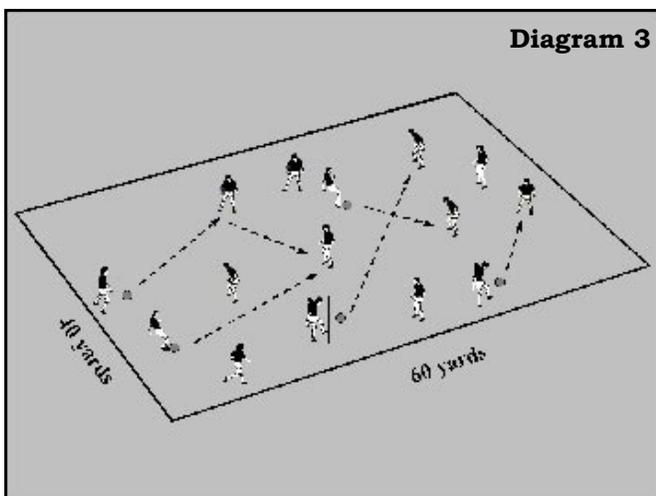
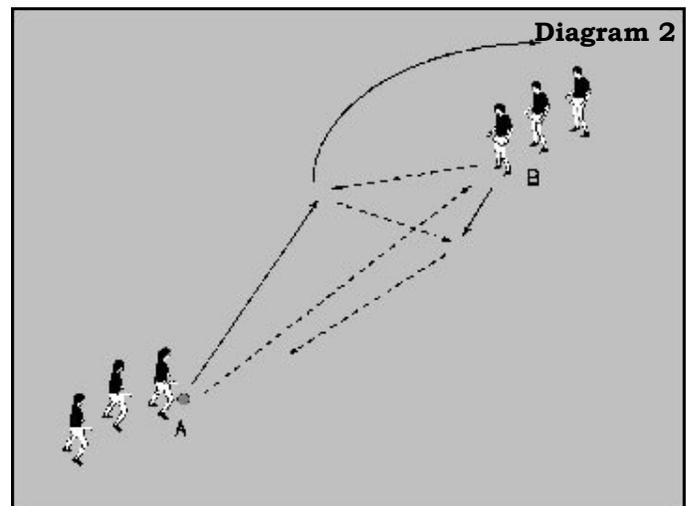
The players arrive about 15 minutes before the scheduled practice time and go through a jog and stretch routine. The warm-up with the ball starts with players in groups of five or six. Each group forms two lines 15 yards apart as shown in diagram 1. The front player in line passes the ball to the opposite line and follows her pass to join the back of that line. The drill continues with the ball being passed between the two lines of players. Play for 5 - 10 minutes with breaks for stretches.

## Variations

Throughout the season we do many variations of this drill such as shortening or lengthening the distance between the two lines, limiting the number of touches or playing a give-and-go as shown in diagram 2.

## Coaching Points

- A good first touch to keep the ball on the ground and in front to allow for a quick pass to the opposite line
- Firm accurate passes
- Play as quickly as possible
- Pass and receive using different surfaces of the foot



## Passing and Receiving

Using 5 or 6 balls, all 16 players pass and move around inside a 60 x 40-yard area. The objective of the game is to keep moving and have the players constantly showing and asking for players to pass to them. Occasionally, we might add 2 or 3 defenders to ensure the players are also focusing on what is happening around them as they receive the ball.

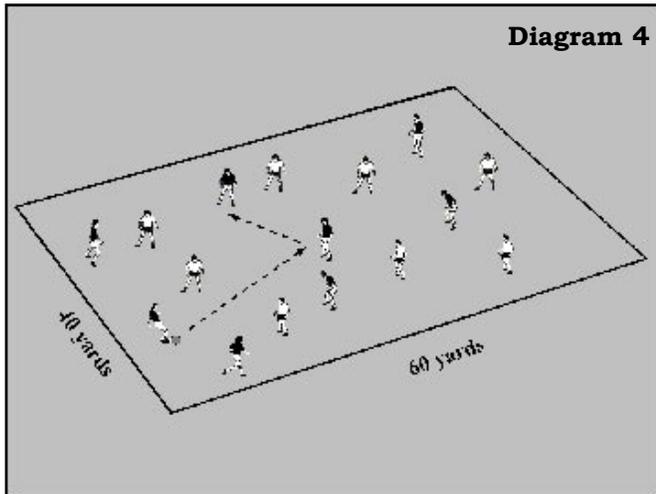
## Coaching Points

- Show and ask for passes
- Move into the spaces with and without the ball
- When in possession, keep your head up to see your options
- Play at game speed

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## One-Touch Passing

I got this game from observing Ray Hudson coaching the Miami Fusion at pre-season training earlier this year. Split the players into two teams. With 16 players I use a 60 x 40-yard area. If there is an odd number, use a “neutral” player who plays for the team in possession. The teams play keep-away but only the one-touch passes are counted. The first team to 20 passes is the winning team. Play two or three games. This game can be used for working on passing and receiving or on closing down defensively.



## Coaching Points

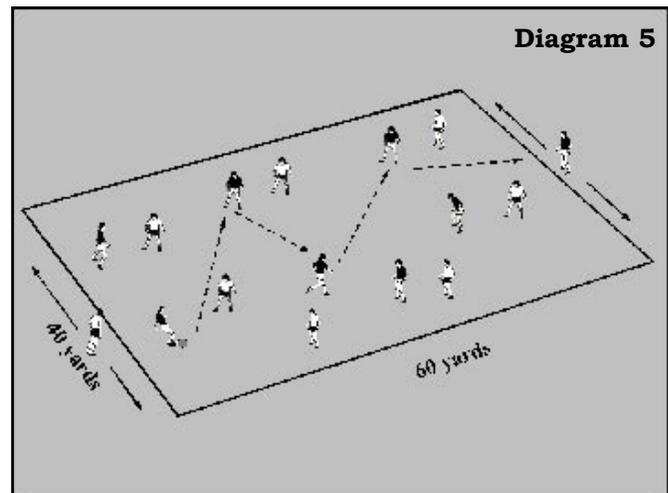
- Awareness - know where you are going to pass the ball before you receive it
- Only use a one-touch pass if it's on - if not use two or more touches to ensure you keep possession
- Quality passes and receiving touches
- Work hard to get open to receive a pass - it makes it easier for the person in possession
- Once you lose possession try to get it back as soon as possible
- Play at game speed

## Progression

Place one player from each team on the end-line as shown in diagram 5. Now the teams must keep possession with a directional objective of passing the ball to their target player on the end-line.

## Coaching Points

- Possession with a purpose - play forward if possible
- Use all previous coaching points
- Play at game speed



## Conditioning

The conditioning part of practice is a series of sprints with adequate rest in between each set of sprints to allow the heart rate to get back to about 75% normal rate. The maximum sprint we do is about 300 yards and the shortest sprint we do is 10 yards. At the early part of the season we tend to do more of the longer sprints and toward the end of the season we will do more of the shorter sprints. I split the team into three groups with each group containing players with similar speed and endurance. This adds an element of competition as the players are all expected to finish each sprint in close proximity of each other. Having three groups allows for one sprint followed by three parts rest with a break after each set of sprints to allow 75% recovery. A typical session is as follows:

2 x 300-yard sprints

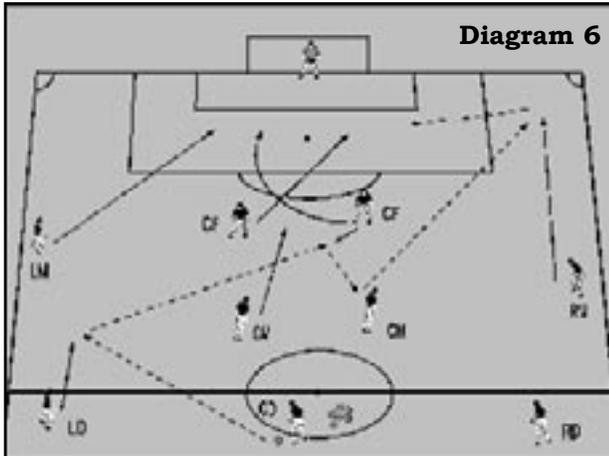
3 x 150-yard sprints

5 x 50-yard sprints

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## Shadow Play

I often spend 10 - 15 minutes on shadow play going through various combinations. Toward the end of the spring season we worked on playing the ball into the forwards' feet and playing from there. I learned many of these combinations watching a session by Dick Bate, the coach of the England U16 National Team. After demonstrating a few combinations of what I was looking for at walking speed, the players would then perform them at game speed. I would then add a few defenders to make the game more realistic and ask the players to use any of the combinations or others that might seem appropriate.



## Shadow Play

In this combination the ball is passed from the center defender to the left defender.

The left defender passes to the center forward.

The center forward passes to the center midfielder.

The center midfielder switches the ball wide to the running right midfielder who crosses into the penalty area.

The left midfielder, both forwards and both center midfielders make timed runs toward the penalty area.

## Shadow Play

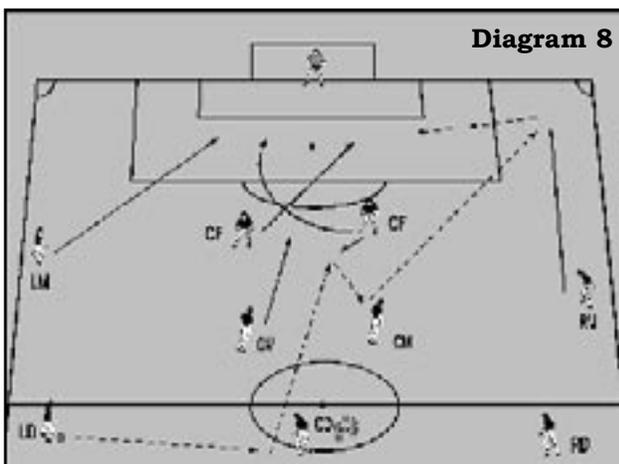
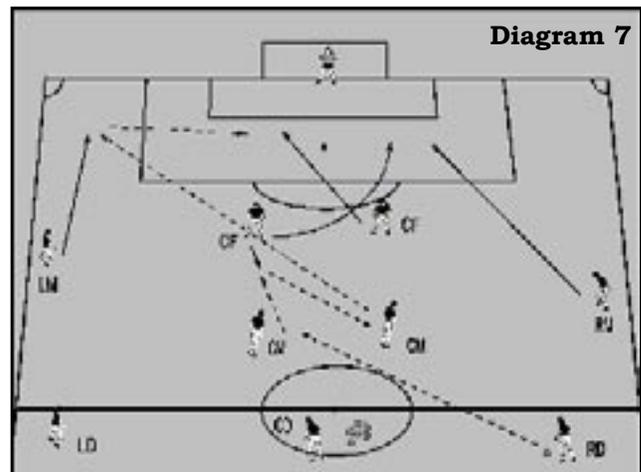
In this combination the ball is passed from the right defender to the center midfielder.

The center midfielder passes to the center forward.

The center forward passes to the center midfielder.

The center midfielder switches the ball wide to the running left midfielder who crosses into the penalty area.

The right midfielder, both forwards and both center midfielders make timed runs toward the penalty area.



## Shadow Play

In this combination the ball is passed from the left defender to the center defender.

The center defender passes to the center forward.

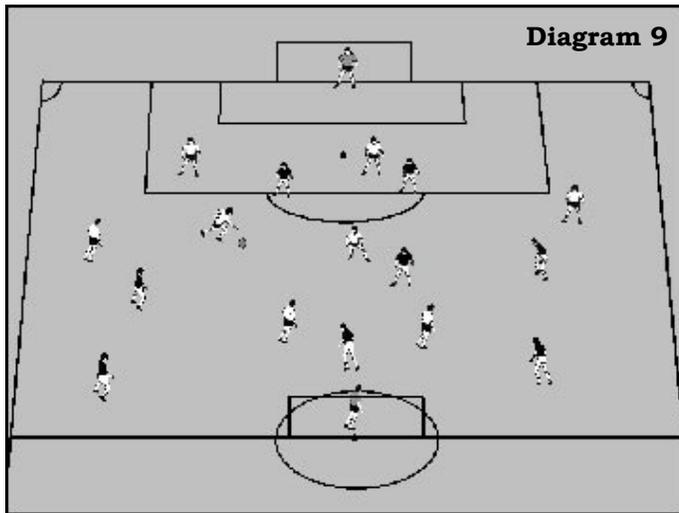
The center forward passes to the center midfielder.

The center midfielder passes the ball wide to the running right midfielder who crosses into the penalty area.

The left midfielder, both forwards and both center midfielders make timed runs toward the penalty area.

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## Half-Field Game

Practice usually ends with a game played on a half-field. I will start the game with some conditions. For instance, in this game the players are only allowed to score a goal once the ball has been played into the forwards' feet (as we practiced with the shadow play). I rarely stop the game to get across any coaching points. However, I am constantly looking for, and encouraging the players to focus on what we have worked on earlier in the practice. In particular, I am always focusing on quality passing and receiving.

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