

A MODEL OF PLAYER DEVELOPMENT: THE BIG THEMES

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U-6

INDIVIDUAL PLAY

At this level, the primary concern of the adults is to facilitate activities that cater to frequent ball contacts and the development of basic motor skills. One player-one ball activities and various “fun games” are excellent complements to small-sided soccer games up to 3v3. The formation of teams is not recommended, with group activity “play days” replacing formal, structured play. All activities should include every player.

U-7/8

INDIVIDUAL PLAY AND A LITTLE PASSING

At this level, dribbling the ball is still the primary soccer focus, although passing can be expected and should be encouraged. The children will be much more aware of how to play soccer games and should be given more responsibility for making teams and rules and for keeping score. Games of up to 4v4 with no goalkeepers are excellent small-sided versions of soccer for these children and no formal teams should be created at this time. The players’ affinity for goalkeeping can be satisfied through “nearest the goal” or “no goalkeeper” rules, but should be decided by the participants. “Play Days” are recommended in lieu of league competitions, with activities designed to include every player. Small-sided soccer games should be the primary content of practice, with “fun games” designed to maximize ball contacts used in complement.

U-9/10

INDIVIDUAL PLAY, SUPPORT AND BALL CIRCULATION, SMALL-GROUP TACTICS

At this stage, young players start to identify themselves with a “team” and will be much more motivated to attend to formal instruction and repetitive practice activities. Improving and refining individual play through technical repetition is an important goal at this stage and small-group tactical awareness can be rapidly expanded. Games of up to 6v6 provide a natural balance between technical repetition and tactical complexity. Granting players the freedom to creatively produce individual solutions to tactical and technical problems is a critical element of coaching. Improved vision and support are the tactical markers of this age, and improved ball circulation is achieved as players understand more about controlling and changing the rhythm of play. Goalkeepers should be frequently rotated.

U-11/12
INDIVIDUAL PLAY, SUPPORT AND COMBINATION PLAY, LARGE GROUP TACTICS

At this stage, motivated and talented players are capable of demonstrating almost every technique and practices should still include significant periods of technical repetition and small-sided play to reinforce and refine this technical base. The competitive structure will involve playing numbers through 8v8 and, for the first time, players can appreciate the basic ideas of positioning and roles; meaning games involving possession in midfield will be possible. The early lessons of support and mobility can be expanded to evolve combinations in two's and three's, and defending can also become more coordinated as players learn to relate to each other in both attack and defense. Individual and group decision-making can be associated with purposeful changes in the rhythm of play, and movement away from the ball can become a critical element of problem solving. The careful introduction of activities designed to develop soccer-specific fitness find a foundation in this period.

U-13/14
LARGE GROUP TACTICS, TEAM BUILDING

Young teenagers are not polished soccer players, and the expansion and refinement of their technical base must still be the primary focus of these important years. Coaching 11v11 team play will begin at U-13, and patience will be required as the players' physical and tactical dimensions adapt to the larger field size and increased numbers. Practice activities should be geared towards improving decision-making under pressure, while challenging players to solve small and large group problems quickly and collectively. As defenders become stronger, faster and more aggressive, attacking players will require sharper instincts for creating and using space, particularly, when playing with their backs to goal. Soccer-specific fitness activities should become integrated into an overall training and development plan, with caution advised with regard to over-training and burnout.

U-15 through Adulthood
TEAM BUILDING, FUNCTIONAL TRAINING, LEARNING TO WIN

This is truly the beginning of the formal "team" building years. As players begin to reach physical and technical maturity, training should seek to develop the skills specific to positioning. Training becomes more focused on functional (positional) play, and fitness becomes important as a means of achieving victory. Players' strategic understanding of soccer must be expanded to help make them coach-independent. Appreciation of the various systems of play, the study of individual and team tendencies, and the tactical applications of the laws become important aspects of player development.