

**Q&A on Small-Sided Games
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Why is it said that it is good for development of players?

GARY ALLEN, Assistant DOC, Virginia YSA; US Soccer National Instructional Staff

The first point that always comes to mind concerns the fact that each player will touch the ball more. The obviousness of this point means that its importance is often over-looked. By touching the ball more, the player not only has more opportunities to improve his or her skill under the pressure of the game; he or she also has many more opportunities to make decisions as the game demands. One of the major roadblocks to our development as a soccer nation is our inability to cope with the speed at which the world game is played. This is not pure physical speed; rather it is speed of thought and execution, the very elements small-sided games emphasize.

Of equal importance is the fact that each player is required to play a bigger role in each game. No player can be assigned a purely offensive or defensive role. All of the players must be involved in quickly transitioning from defense to offense when the ball is won, and from offense to defense, when the ball is lost. When a player's team has the ball, he or she must become much more involved as part of the group that is attacking than is required in the 11 v 11 game. Similarly, when his or her team loses the ball, the player cannot expect others to carry the full responsibility of defending and winning the ball back. The game played on the world level often is won or lost by quick transition from offense to defense, or vice versa.

Another important product of the increased roles for each player in smaller-sided games is the development of concentration. The smaller numbers of players on each side requires each player to pay attention to where the ball is and what is going on around him or her. The ability to play the game on the world level demands incredible ability to concentrate for the full length of the game. Playing smaller sides increases the opportunities for players to develop such concentration.

Why is it said that it is good for development of players?

ANDY BIGGS, DOC, Maine YSA; Region I Girls ODP Staff

When players compete in age-appropriate small-sided games, they have greater involvement in the action. For players, this means doing more of what they love most about soccer – shooting, dribbling, passing, scoring goals, blocking shots, and simply running after the ball. And in terms of their development, this increased involvement results in improved technique, clearer decision making,

active participation in both the attack and defense, and a greater appreciation for game.

In order to develop their skills, players need opportunities to try them in games. Players who compete in small-sided games have significantly more contacts with the ball. In a pilot study, the California Youth Soccer Association -- South, compared the number of passes attempted by a U8 player in an 8v8 game to the number attempted by the same player in a 4v4 game. In the 8v8 game, the player attempted 12 passes, completing 3. And in the 4v4 game, that same player attempted 46 passes, and completed 18. While the increased contact with the ball is clearly a benefit to skill development, it also translates to more opportunities to hone decision-making.

Soccer is often referred to as a player's game, and the best players stand out for their ability to solve the problems the game presents. In small-sided games, players are exposed to many of the same problems presented by the 11 a-side game. There are decisions about when to pass rather than dribble and decisions about where to run to support the ball. However, in small-sided games, players confront these problems more often, and, with fewer players, the choices are more clear. With only 4 players on a team rather than 8, it's easier to see where there isn't a player to support the ball and then to run there to help out.

Having fewer players on the field also allows each player to take an active role in both the attack and in the defense. With fewer players and a smaller field, the game often demands that players move quickly from an attacking position to a defensive one, as a single pass and short run can often result in a chance at goal. The result is that players begin to feel free to move into different areas of the field, and in the long run that can only result in better and more complete players.

At first glance, it may appear that by competing in games of 3v3, 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8, it will take players longer to adjust to 11v11. However, given that small-side games provide increased contacts with the ball and more opportunities to hone decision-making while moving quickly from attack to defense, by organizing these games, our players will be better prepared to play 11 a-side.

How did you arrive at the numbers, it sounds arbitrary to me?
Dr. TOM TURNER, DOC, Ohio-North YSA; Region II Girls Head Regional Coach; US Soccer National Instructional Staff

In 1985, the Dutch Soccer Association (KNVB) became the first soccer country to formally implement small-sided games at the youth level as a means of combating the demise of street soccer. Rinus Michels, in his excellent book, Teambuilding: The road to success outlines the guidelines for coaching every age group between five and professional, including the justification and purpose

of their small-sided playing structure in relation to total player development. While the Dutch use no games (5), 4v4 (6-8), 7v7 (9-10), 11v11(11 and older) as their progression, Michels clearly states that their choice of game forms was somewhat arbitrary and that other playing numbers could have been selected. Ultimately, the selection of game forms was made on the basis of Dutch players working with Dutch coaches in a Dutch soccer environment. It should also be remembered that the FIFA birth date of January 1 means that Dutch players (and most soccer countries outside of the USA) are generally older, by as much as eight months, than their American “peers.”

In the United States, a different soccer and sports culture, and a different coaching dynamic impacted the decision on playing numbers, with the players’ ability to create and use space as a key element in the decision to choose 6v6 as the maximum playing number for U-10’s. At the entry levels, games of 3v3 (U-6) and 4v4 (U-7/8) are designed to allow players freedom to play with the ball and express themselves more fully, while at the U-11/12 level, it was felt that one more year of small-sided play (fewer than 11v11) was more appropriate for the physical and tactical development of the American player. It was also noted that players who are exceptional young talents can and should be moved up to the level that matches their soccer abilities.

Are the coaching schools going to be shorter now that the game is smaller? JANET RAYFIELD, US Soccer National Staff Coach

In a simple response: NO. The smaller numbers will now parallel the technical and tactical abilities of the players. The smaller numbers will allow coaches to focus on the appropriate ideas in practice AND in games. However, this in no way diminishes the responsibility of the coach to learn. A coach, even of the youngest ages, must understand the physical and psychological attributes of the players he/she is coaching. They must know and be able to teach the proper technical elements of executing soccer skills and know and be able to communicate tactical aspects of the game. If you look closely at the current curriculum of the courses as they progress through the ages and levels the playing numbers are kept small up through the C license. The coaching courses are aimed at improving both the soccer knowledge and the teaching ability of those in the course. The number of technical and tactical ideas that can be demonstrated and taught in a 3v3 game are endless. The ability to teach is a skill that must be learned and practiced. It takes time to become a good coach whether you’re coaching 3v3 or 11v11.

**Our kids are happy playing 8v8 at U8 now. Why upset the cart?
GARY ALLEN, Assistant DOC, Virginia YSA; US Soccer National
Instructional Staff**

Kids are happy playing in the mud, but that does not mean that they would not be much happier playing in the sand at the beach if they knew it existed and were given the chance to do so. The issue really has nothing to do with upsetting the kids' apple cart, and that really is the problem. It is the adults' apple cart that is threatened. No, it is more like the adults' orange cart, because the argument mixes apples and oranges.

Adults have developed an organized system of leagues and tournaments, and created all kinds of periphery, based primarily on convenience and profit. It has nothing to do with development. In essence, the organization of leagues and tournaments have procedural ramifications, but have nothing to do with the substantive issue of development, other than that maintaining the status quo and hindering development.

There are virtually no substantive arguments against smaller sided play for these ages. There is no expert in the game from any country that does not extol the value of smaller sided play for development. The "kids being happy" point is a red herring. Kids from all over the globe play pick-up games in their neighborhoods in much smaller numbers and in much smaller spaces. It is the game itself, not the numbers that make kids happy.

**Will I need to coach more, or less from the sideline during a game?
SUE RYAN, SUNY Stonybrook Head Women's Coach; Region I Girls Head
Regional Coach**

In terms of coaching from the sidelines, I have always felt that the more coaches talk from the sidelines the less players will listen because they simply tune the coach out. Changing the number of players on the field will not affect the amount of talking from the sideline. If it does, the talking will probably be decreased since the players will have a clearer picture of the game and be less confused. At higher levels of play coaches who have not done their job well in training must make up for it during the game.

**If I am playing 5v5, have no subs and a player gets hurt, doesn't playing
5v4 really put my team at a disadvantage? KARL DEWAZIEN, DOC,
California-North YSA**

Probably the most obvious response is that, in this situation, the league should require all games be played with even numbers; however, there are other beneficial considerations when playing numbers down.

If anything your team may be at an advantage, at least mentally. Having one less player on the field 'forces' the players to play more as a team. They will have a tendency to realize that they need to rely on each other even more. They

will usually make up for the deficiency by making the ball work for them in attack by giving better support. They will also work harder to help each other by better covering in defense. Let me explain:

In attack - the players will realize that they do not have the same number of options to pass as with a full team. Therefore, they will (hopefully) make the job of the opponent more difficult by keeping the ball moving. The player with the ball will, in this situation, be faced with a numbers down situation. That is, the opponent will try to double-team the player with the ball whenever possible. In order to avoid this pressure situation, the players need to realize the ball moves much quicker and make the opponent work to get the intended numbers-up.

A good coach will have practiced 'playing short.' Possibly working on one-touch and two-touch play with emphasize on quick release of the ball. A coach will have practiced and convinced the players that being one player down does not change the environment that drastically. A coach will have shown that, with only four players, the essence of attacking (support) play is still applied and the player with the ball still needs options 1) through the long axis (a through or forward pass); 2) left and right (a square or diagonal pass) and 3) behind (a back pass). The organization is still there and all the players need to do is carry out their duties.

In defense, the same attitude should apply since there is only one ball on the field and the defensive objective is to stop the opponents from putting it in the goal. We must be a little more aggressive at covering for each other, with the closest defender still looking to pressure as fast as possible and the next defender responsible for giving good cover. All other defenders should look to move into supporting (balancing) positions that help teammates and limit the space available to the attackers. Since this is the basis of our defense with any numbers, not much will have changed by playing one man short. As mentioned before, the players may end up playing better defense when they are at a numerical disadvantage. This may give cause for them to work a little bit harder than usual.

Again, it is important for the coach to practice playing 'one man' short during practice. It should not come as a surprise for the players to have to adjust to the playing environment during a game. Practices should prepare the players for any situation and the loss of a player through injury or ejection is a reality that needs to be covered.

With proper preparation, the coach can bring success to his players no matter what the situation. It may be hard to believe, but many a game has been won by teams who were short-handed because the team with numbers-up eased up enough to make the teams seem even. From the youth to the professional level, players who think they have an advantage will let that affect their play. And the effort they give is not the same as when the teams are at equal numbers. As has

been stated many times, the game is both mental and physical, and when we don't give 100% in both areas we will be at a disadvantage.

Who says that small-sided play is better and how do they know?

TIM SCHULZ, DOC, Colorado Rush; Region IV Boys Head Regional Coach

We have been playing the following progression in the Colorado Rush organization for approximately 10 years: U-5 and U-6, 3v3; U-7 and U-8, 4v4; U-9 and U-10, 8v8. The results speak for themselves. Our club's enrollment grew from 1,800 to 5,800. We have Olympic Players, National Players and Professional Players that developed in our system. We have won 10 national Championships in the last four years. We have people who grew up through the club system who are now coaches volunteering to give back to the game.

WE HAVE HAD A BOARD OF DIRECTORS THAT IS VERY PROGRESSIVE IN THEIR THINKING AND NOT WORRIED ABOUT THE LOGISTICAL OBSTACLES TO GETTING IT DONE.

The parents on my team say they don't want to do this. What do I say to them? Dr. RON QUINN, Xavier University, Head Women's Coach; US Soccer National Instructional Staff

Small-sided games are designed to provide maximum opportunity to learn all aspects of the game. Technically they will have more opportunities to be involved with the ball in a variety of game situations. Tactically, the opportunities to make decisions are dramatically increased through small-sided games, which translate into a more aware and tactically astute player later. Physically, small-sided games are more demanding because, with fewer players, everyone must pull their own weight. Socially, players are able to feel more a part of the team because they are more involved in the game. Everyone will get chances to contribute and score goals!

The youth game is different than the adult version, just watch them play. Therefore, young players should be allowed to play as children in an environment that is appropriate for their developmental level. Finally, small-sided games, as a learning tool, are used by amateur and professional teams all over the world. Shouldn't our youth players, who require the most learning, use the most effective tool? If we take care in the beginning, the end will take care of itself.

It seems that the keeper is not needed in a small-sided game. How will the keeper learn the position? TONY WAITERS, Former player, Liverpool FC; US Soccer National Instructional Staff

First of all I must question the question. I do not agree that "the keeper is not needed in a small-sided game." I have been embroiled in this argument for a long time now and no one has yet convinced me of the merits of not including a goalkeeper. Having had the good fortune of traveling 72 countries of the world, almost always on soccer business, and watching kids playing soccer (often without coaches), I have never seen a pick-up game of soccer with young children where they did not elect to have goalkeepers. It's an integral part of their fun and the thrill of the game.

Certainly, we don't want permanently positioned goalkeepers. Young children should have the opportunity of learning all the skills of the game -- providing they are ready for them. Goalkeeping -- stopping or catching a ball with the hands -- can be introduced to children as young as three years of age -- so long as it is in a fun, child-friendly, non-intimidating environment.

Once children are into opposed play -- whether that is 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs.4 (and maybe we should wait until 6- of 7-years of age before starting any type of opposed play anyway), if the program prior to the introduction of opposition is correct, the children will be able to cope with the goalkeeping situation.

The concern for safety and self-esteem is understandable, but if the situation is presented right, it's great fun for the kids. Let's face it, it is perfectly natural for children to catch and tumble.

In a small-sided program with a rotation that puts every child in goal for a short period on an equal-time basis, I cannot see why we would not have keepers. Young children, as field players, don't go in aggressively or dangerously at the goalkeeper. And the factor of self-esteem applies equally to attacker, defender or goalkeeper. The attacker beats the defender. The defender dispossesses the attacker. The goalkeeper denies the shooter.

Some say I'm biased towards goalkeeping because I was a keeper myself. I wasn't until I was 14-years of age. Prior to becoming a keeper, I was a field player, but I'd played in goal from the get-go. We all did.

As children, one of our favorite games was "Three Goals In." There could be as many as five or six of us all playing into one goal. The keeper would kick the ball out and we'd all compete for the ball. The first person to score three goals got the privilege of going "in" (the goal).

If your program decides a no-goalkeeping rule in games -- for whatever reason --

do not deny the children the opportunity of learning one part of the great skills and thrills of the game -- goalkeeping -- in fun activities. Just remember, it's child's play

We don't exactly agree with your numbers. Can we modify them for our own needs? MIKE SMITH, Director of Recreation, Oregon YSA; Region IV Girls Head Regional Coach

Firstly, all the professional State Directors of Coaching across the country agree that this is the most developmentally appropriate playing system to develop young players, adding playing numbers in small increments (see below).

Please note that the recommendations promote the maximum number of players on the field at one time. It is okay for coaches to use smaller numbers for even more touches on the ball in practice and in-house recreation games.

With previous lack of direction from their states, however, many clubs have independently developed different playing formats. Today, with the increasing popularity and cosmopolitan nature of soccer, more and more recreational soccer clubs are offered the opportunity to play other communities, whether it be in friendly games, district leagues or Oregon Youth Soccer sponsored jamboree events. By offering developmentally appropriate guidelines, OYSA will hopefully get more coaches on the same page and tend to alleviate difficulties in inter-club play.

Happy Coaching!

PLAYING NUMBERS

Small-sided games should be used for match play for players under the age of twelve because they provide for the appropriate development of skill and the understanding of simple tactics. Small-sided games in match play for younger players create more involvement, more touches on the ball, exposure to simple, realistic decisions and ultimately, more enjoyment. The number of players on the field of play at each age group should promote development, enjoyment of the game and provide a logical progression from year to year. All the State Directors of Coaching in Regions II, III and IV have agreed that the following would provide the most appropriate development:

★ Under 6:	3 v 3	(no goalkeeper)	Field 20x25 yards
★ Under 7:	3 v 3	(no goalkeeper)	Field 20x25 yards
★ Under 8:	4 v 4	(no goalkeeper)	Field 23x40 yards
★ Under 9:	6 v 6	(including goalkeeper)	Field 40x60 yards
★ Under 10:	6 v 6	(including goalkeeper)	Field 40x60 yards
★ Under 11:	8 v 8	(including goalkeeper)	Field 50x90 yards
★ Under 12:	8 v 8	(including goalkeeper)	Field 50x90 yards

★ Under 13:	11 v 11	(including goalkeeper)	Field 60x100 yards
★ Under 14:	11 v 11	(including goalkeeper)	Field 60x100 yards
★ HS Rec:	11 v 11	(including goalkeeper)	Field 70x110 yards

The reasons for this progression in playing numbers is relatively straightforward (*please also refer to the player development section at the end of this document*).

It is not developmentally appropriate for players below the age of five years old (U5) to play organized soccer. Four year olds do not need any formal game play. Parents should encourage their child to enjoy kicking a lightweight ball back and forward or into a goal for some quality 1-on-1 time. Excite your child about the game.

For the U6 and U7 group, children do not typically possess in their makeup the desire to 'share' or pass the ball. Players, therefore, need to be provided a small field with few numbers for them to succeed in dribbling the ball in the right direction and turning before going out of bounds (even this will take time!) Three players on a side make a basic unit of a team triangle, where all the principles of the game can be learned (by playing experience only - no structured coaching!) No goalkeeper allows for increased success in dribbling and scoring and all players learn to interact with the ball and their feet.

The U8 group has a player added to their format to make 4v4. This introduces the concept of team diamond, providing three potential players to pass to. Don't be surprised when this still does not happen!

The U9 and U10 age groups have the logical progression of adding another field player and then this is where we believe that is appropriate to introduce the position of goalkeeper, which makes 6v6. This will present the extra challenge our 8 and 9 year olds need in front of goal at this stage in their playing development. This provides a new and challenging learning environment for a consistent 4 seasons (based on spring and fall play). We continue with a small field and team numbers to maximize each player's involvement and contact with the ball and still progress in their understanding of the principles of the game.

U11 and U12 follow another logical step by adding another two players for a consistent period of 4 seasons. These ages are known as coaching education circles as 'the dawn of tactical awareness'. By continuing with a smaller sided format, players are more likely to see and understand the attacking and defensive principles of the game as applied to small group settings. The fewer players on the field make it less confusing to see and therefore understand. Players also get more touches on the ball, again promoting skill development and enjoyment of the game.

At U13 and above, players are generally ready to move to the 11-a-side game.

With this consistent state-wide approach, OYSA Coaching courses can also be further tailored to be more specific to the playing numbers and field formats.