

**Observations from U-10 OYSAN State Cup**  
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**Assessment from Preliminary Rounds**

Good coaches have always appreciated the immense benefits of long-term thinking with regard to the technical development with young players. In this competition, those teams whose players were comfortable in possession performed with more frequent and recognizable changes in rhythm and circulated the ball in a more sophisticated manner. Above all else, the players who could turn away from pressure were most effective in opening up passing, shooting and further dribbling opportunities. Secondly, players who were willing and able to control the ball and look to bring teammates into the game with passes were equally effective. In contrast, the smaller playing space (45x36 yards) quickly exposed those players with weak technique and highlighted the limitations in their future potential.

Tactically, the better teams routinely involved their defenders in attack while maintaining team balance. The width of the field was not utilized to the degree possible and this often made building up more difficult than necessary. Teams which spaced well or moved well, and which used the goalkeeper in a playmaker role, were better able to connect the passes necessary to attack to goal. Counter-attack opportunities were quite frequent, with individual technique and vision often determining the conversion rate. The transition to defense was excellent; perhaps, due to the players enthusiasm for the game and, perhaps, due to the short field.

The better goalkeepers were agile and had quick feet and good instincts for angles. Getting into the line of shots was a common prerequisite for goal prevention, but “trapping” the ball against the waiting body (thighs and chest) was a common bad habit that will require reversal in the near future. One or two goalkeepers displayed technical abilities that foretold of regular exposure to goalkeeper training, while most were simply athletic and instinctive. The goalkeepers had numerous opportunities to initiate counter-attacks and quick build-ups, but missed more than they recognized, often in favor of clearing the ball long and either out of bounds or to the opposition.

Coaches who discouraged their goalkeepers from aimlessly punting the ball into the other team’s penalty area created the tactical conditions necessary for constructive play. These teams found ample time and space to build the game from the back or play directly to the forwards. Sadly, some coaches became more concerned with the here and now, particularly in close games, and these particular contests quickly deteriorated into rhythmless kick-fests that were unattractive to watch and very negative in the messages provided to both players and observers.

**Logistics**

With US Youth Soccer National Rules currently permitting goalkeepers to kick the ball the length of the field in the air, there are problems with the field size. However, enlarging the field to accommodate punting and long goal kicks would only serve to

create conditions favoring athleticism over skill development. While the following dimensions are a reasonable compromise in promoting skill development with a punting condition, some future restrictions on goalkeeper distribution may be necessary.

- Field Length: 55 yards (165 ft)
- Field Width: 40 yards (120 ft)
- Center Circle Radius: 5-yard (15ft)
- Corner Kick Arc Radius: 1-yard (3 ft)
- Penalty Box: 10 yards (30 ft)
- Goal area: 5 yards (15 ft)

In general, the new national playing rules served the game well, with the following exceptions.

- With boys in particular, any free kick was an opportunity to blast away at the goal. This produced a virtual firing line from just about anywhere on the field and eliminated the need to create scoring chances in more constructive ways. Awarding Indirect Free Kicks for most fouls may be necessary.
- Goalkicks were routinely belted the length of the field by teams lacking the interest or skills for building the game. Restricting the “airborn” length of goalkicks may be necessary.

### **Assessment from Final Rounds**

The increased field size (55 x 40 yards) and re-proportioned markings (10-yard penalty area) eliminated the kicking (punting and goal kick) problems seen in the preliminary rounds. Heading and controlling balls out of the air became more common features of play, as did flank play and the associated goalmouth incidents. For those teams that utilized the space to advantage, a more rhythmic game resulted from fewer throw-ins and goal line out of bounds. There were more goal chances created from combination play and more opportunities to possess the ball in the attacking half.

The use of the goalkeeper as a playmaker was underutilized, except in the girls finals (Cobras vs GTFC), and teams did not take advantage of their opportunities to build the game from the back when the opponents dropped into their own half.

When assessed through the lens of the phases of play, the following observations can be noted from this competition.

**1) Building up:** Goalkeepers were generally not encouraged to build the game from the back, in spite of the abundance of time and space. Simply, from a tactical perspective, there was too much punting to the opposition. Those teams that used the goalkeeper to change the point of attack were the most successful in maintaining possession and connecting passes. Teams that did attempt to build the game through their defenders or goalkeeper conceded very few goals as a result of turnovers.

**2) Attacking:** The 6v6 game provided for numerous 1v1 situations and other small-number confrontations that mimicked the demands of the adult game. This observation, coupled with the developing spatial awareness of this population, provided for contests that were tactically relevant and psychologically inclusive. Teams that used their defenders to support their attacks and those that utilized the width and length of the field to advantage were able to create scoring chances in a variety of ways. Some coaches adopted a rigid 3-2 formation, which did not allow for numbers in attack and, when coupled with a punting approach, rendered these teams ineffective in building the game to create scoring chances. Encouragingly, only one team relied on an individualistic approach to goalscoring. Thoughtful combination play between two or more players was frequently witnessed, and good ball circulation was often rewarded with goal chances.

**3) Attacking restarts:** Direct shots on goal were the most common use of attacking free kicks. Short and long corners were observed, as were passes to defenders to change the angle of shots and crosses. With no offside rule to limit attackers, it was very common to see attacking players standing on the goal line or in front of the goalkeeper on free kicks. On the throw-ins, teams that looked to do so, found ample space at the back of their teams to possess the ball; however, most simply played the ball down the line or square into the field. In the 6v6 game, this tactic was not necessarily ineffective, as players were often faced with 1v1 duels where they could retain possession and find support, as their skills allowed.

**4) Transition to defense and defending against the counter-attack:** Because U-10's do not channel very well defensively, and because their technique often results in loss of possession, there were many opportunities to counter-attack in the 6v6 game. The better players were able to pressure the ball to advantage, but individual defending is an emerging skill for the majority of these players. Encouragingly, there were very few unopposed break-a-ways as most teams were able to maintain some defensive balance as they attacked.

**5) Pressing:** Because the defenders were often connected to the front players, coordinated pressing was quite evident with the better teams. Zonal pressing was also observed during deep corner throw-ins.

**6) Defending from behind a line of confrontation:** With one or two forwards remaining "high," it was rare to see teams completely dropped off. Ironically, late in the girls final and with their team winning 3-2, some parents were heard shouting at their defense to "push up" while the coaches tried to encourage the opposite!

**7) Defending restarts:** Teams formed appropriate sized walls and effectively filled the danger spaces, as necessary, on restarts. Very few goals were actually scored from free kicks, in spite of the goal size (7x21 feet) and the skill and willingness of players to shoot with pace. Even fewer goals were conceded from corner kicks. Players matched up on throw-ins and often took up appropriate starting positions to the goal side and inside of their immediate opponents.

**8) Transition to attack and counter-attacking:** This was the most common style of attack and teams with a player in an advanced position were best suited to taking advantage of their opportunities. Improving the chances of conversion was related to the number and speed of arrival of supporting players. In general, teams managed to retain good balance in defense while countering.

### **Player Personalities**

Relatively speaking, the Ohio soccer landscape is not particularly conducive to the emergence of unique playing personalities. Underlining the cultural challenge was the fact that, in this tournament, the vast majority of coaches were white males of European extraction. Of the 14 teams, only one was coached by a woman, and only one non-white face was observed on the team benches.

As should be expected, the player's vision of the game tended to reflect their coaches' influences. There were serious game faces on show and very few moments of real elation outside of goalscoring moments. There were no "nutmeggers;" there were no "baiters," who would set up an opponent and trick them out of the game, or out of possession; there were very few examples of defenders making slashing runs out of the back and into attack; and there were no major risk-takers in attacking multiple opponents. The tactics of winning impacted the dribbling and passing decisions to the point where questions have to be asked with regard to the balance between playing the game in an adult manner and developing crafty players who are willing to try the unusual and willing to take a risk, just because they think they can! It is certainly THE major dilemma for youth soccer coaches operating in a competitive environment, and the long-term impact on our youth development have to be asked! "Teaching creativity" may be an oxymoron, and, while the better players in this tournament were excellent in their efficiency, these U-10's certainly did not reflect Latino or African influences in their playing mannerisms, exuberance, and ideas about the game. We are all reflective of our culture, but being aware of our shortcomings is the first step towards evolution.

### **Coaching**

The quality of the coaching comments ranged from periodic encouragement to ongoing choreography. While most coaches were extremely positive and forgiving, there was an instance of constant verbal abuse offered in lieu of constructive coaching information. While there were some excellent examples of highly positive coaching, the general trend, particularly in the boys competition, was towards over-directing and over-analysis.

The specter of winning was most evident in the degree to which teams encouraged punting into inferior numbers. With time and space to build the ball, coaches who ignored, or were oblivious to the tactical possibilities of constructive play, underscored the lingering dilemma of the value of intense competition for young players. As has always been known, the game itself and competition per se, are not the problems; rather the knowledge and attitude of the adults often undermines the quality of the environment and the enjoyment of the participants.

## **Referees**

The overall standard of refereeing in the tournament was exceptional. Those officials without small-sided games experience responded quickly to the U-10 format, and each referee in turn was able to provide quality match control with a humanity befitting young players. The Modified FIFA Laws of the Game used in this event were as follows:

### **Law 1 – The Field of Play**

**Dimensions:** The field of play must be rectangular. The length of the touchline must be greater than the length of the goal line.

Length: 55 yards  
Width: 40 yards

**Field Markings:** Distinctive lines not more than five (5) inches wide. The field of play is divided into two halves by a halfway line. The center mark is indicated at the midpoint of the halfway line. A circle with a radius of eight (5) yards is marked around it.

**The Goal Area:** Five (5) yards

**The Penalty Area:** A penalty area is defined at each end of the field as follows: Two lines are drawn at right angles to the goal line, ten (10) yards from the inside of each goalpost. These lines extend into the field of play for a distance of ten (10) yards and are joined by a line drawn parallel with the goal line. The area bounded by these lines and the goal line is the penalty area. At the top of each penalty area a penalty mark is drawn ten (10) yards out from the midpoint of the goalposts. An arc of a circle with a radius of eight (5) yards from each penalty mark is drawn outside the penalty area.

**Flag posts:** Conform to FIFA.

**The Corner Arc:** 1-yard radius, which conforms to FIFA.

**Goals:** Goals must be placed on the center of each goal line. They consist of two upright posts equidistant from the corner flag posts and joined at the top by a horizontal crossbar. The maximum distance between the posts is twenty-one (21) feet and the maximum distance from the lower edge of the crossbar to the ground is seven (7) feet.

**Safety:** Goals must be anchored securely to the ground. Portable goals may only be used if they satisfy this requirement.

**Law 2 – The Ball:** Size four (4).

**Law 3 – The Number of Players:** A match is played by two teams, each consisting of not more than six players, one of whom is the goalkeeper.

Substitutions: Conform to FIFA with the exception of unlimited substitution.

**Law 4** – The Players’ Equipment: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 5** – The Referee: Registered referee/new referee program. Parent/Coach or assistant.

**Law 6** –The Assistant Referees: None

**Law 7** – The Duration of the Match: Conform to FIFA with the exception of the match being divided into two (2) equal halves of twenty-five (25) minutes each. There shall be a half-time break of five (5) minutes.

**Law 8** – The Start and Restart of Play: Conform to FIFA with the exception that the team not taking the kick-off are at least five (5) yards from the ball until it is in play.

**Law 9** – The Ball In and Out of Play: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 10** – The Method of Scoring: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 11** – Offside: No offside.

**Law 12** – Fouls and Misconduct: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 13** – Free Kicks: Conform to FIFA with the exception that all opponents are at least five (5) yards from the ball.

**Law 14** – The Penalty Kick: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 15** – The Throw-In: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 16** – The Goal Kick: Conform to FIFA.

**Law 17** – The Corner Kick: Conform to FIFA with the exception that opponents remain at least five (5) yards from the ball until it is in play.

### **U-9/10 Curriculum**

The following soccer components were observed in U-10 players (boys and girls) during the 2004 OYSAN State Cup. Given that “some” U-10 players and teams can perform these skills, it is reasonable to assume that all U-10 players should be exposed to these elements during training sessions. The expectation is that capable coaches will focus on developing these “fundamentals” during this first “Golden Age” of skill learning.

## **Technical Issues**

### **Receiving Techniques**

- Soft 1<sup>st</sup> Touch (wedging surfaces)
- Receiving into space
- Getting behind bouncing/flighted balls (cushioning surfaces)
- Using a selected body part (e.g., foot, thigh, or head) to control balls out of the air

### **Kicking Techniques**

- Driving the ball with the laces
- First-time finishing
- Creating weight transfer during shooting/clearing
- Passing using the inside/outside/toe
- Volleying techniques with the laces and inside of the foot
- Occasional side volleys

### **Dribbling Techniques**

- Turning out of pressure
- Beating opponents 1v1
- Running at space
- Rolling the ball with the sole of the foot
- Feinting
- Faking
- Stopping and starting
- Changing speed and direction

### **Heading Techniques**

- To clear
- To possess
- To goal
- Jumping to head
- Generating power through a backswing
- From crosses

### **Tackling/Sliding Techniques**

- Block tackling
- Sliding to maintain possession
- Sliding to dispossess an opponent
- Sliding to pass, clear and score

## **Tactical Issues**

### **Field Tactics**

- Pre-control vision and body preparation
- Support and moving to open passing lanes/spaces
- Mobility (movement) with the game

- Third-man running
- Very limited overlapping
- Playing with back to goal
- Changing the point of attack
- Changing the rhythm of play
- Passing backwards to relieve pressure
- Transition to attack by creating width and depth during the build-up
- Transition to attack through counter attacking
- Transition to defense by early pressuring
- Transition to defense by recovering goalside
- Pressuring (very limited channeling)
- Covering
- Balancing

### **Goalkeeping Issues**

#### Goalkeeper Skills and Tactics

- GK as a playmaker
- Footwork to the ball
- Getting into line of shots
- Catching/blocking high balls
- Deflecting high balls
- Positioning for crosses
- Catching/deflecting crosses
- Collapsing
- Diving
- Clearing lines
- Punting
- Rolling the ball
- Overarm throwing/passing

### **Psychological Issues**

- Noted enthusiasm for the game
- Noted urgency in the speed of play
- Every player routinely connected with teammates
- Large rosters reduced participation time

Roster Size		6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Game: 6v6	Duration: 2 x 25 mins	100%	86%	75%	67%	60%	55%	50%	46%	43%
		50	43	38	34	30	28	25	23	21

- Small field increased the likelihood to recovering the ball: defensive transition excellent
- Increased goalscoring rate and goal chance creation impacted motivation
- Involving defenders in attack was highly motivating

## **Physical Issues**

- Ability to quickly stop and start
- Ability to accelerate
- Ability to quickly change direction while remaining balanced
- Ability to jump with the body under control
- Ability to propel the body into saves and tackles
- Controlled backwards and sideways running
- Use of the upper body to challenge, shield, and defend
- Anaerobic capacity to compete for 50-minutes with as few as three substitutes

## **Participating Teams (14)**

- Cleveland Cobras Girls
- Excalibur Boys
- Greater Akron Premier Boys
- Greater Akron Premier Girls
- Greater Toledo FC Boys
- Greater Toledo FC Girls
- Internationals Boys Blue
- Internationals Boys White
- Internationals Girls
- Ohio Select FC Boys
- Pacesetter Boys
- West Central United Boys
- West Central United Girls
- Westlake Girls

**In short:** This was a wonderful first 6v6 competition that players, coaches, referees and parents seemed to appreciate more as the tournament evolved. Given the quality of play and the speed and intensity of the games, the evolution of the U-11 and U-12 games to 8v8 cannot come soon enough.