Ohio Youth Soccer Association North
U-10/12 Coaching Module

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Imagine....
Dear Coach,

Welcome to the OYSAN U-10/12 Module. The players you are coaching are the most impressionable and enthusiastic of all youth soccer populations, making this the most important coaching challenge you will ever undertake. U-10/12 players are ripe for technical growth and development and it is crucial that tactical constraints do not stifle creativity, enthusiasm and enjoyment during this period.

This course will give you the knowledge and tools to be successful. It will not, however, provide you with the wisdom to use the information in the most effective way, or the passion to inspire young players to stay involved in the game. Ultimately, your success as a coach will be measured by the number of your players who continue to play soccer from year to year, and by the breadth and depth of their skills. It is easy to win youth soccer games; it is not easy to be a successful youth soccer coach.

The following information is intended to provide a context for the methodology suggested in this course, which is **learning soccer by playing soccer**.

**The Demise of Street Soccer and the Rise of Small-Sided Games**

The small-sided games movement has evolved worldwide in response to the steady demise of street soccer (free play). As a part of youth culture, street soccer remains strong in only Latin America, Africa, and in some parts of the Middle and Far East. In street soccer cultures, children as young as five can be found playing with their peers and older “friends” in ever-varying configurations of games. Two or three players are enough to start the days’ play and, on occasion, the numbers may swell to resemble small mob scenes. Goals are made from whatever is available and play is always between two goals. The ball may be nothing more than a bundle of rags; there are no scrimmage vests, no referees and no coaches. Rule disputes are settled by the players and the outcome of games is often decided by family meal times, evening curfews, the availability of light, or some agreed upon number, such as “ten halftime-twenty wins.” The severity of the bug bites in the summer was reason to keep moving, not reason to quit! During school days, arriving early meant more opportunities to play in smaller-sided games before the sleepyheads wandered in, and the lunch hour game was interrupted only long enough to gobble down food before resuming play.

In the 1980’s, with their street soccer cultures disappearing or essentially extinct, progressive Western soccer federations turned to small-sided games in an attempt to help compensate for the loss of skillful, imaginative players. Given the sheer volume of touches experienced over time in street soccer games, the number of players on the field was never an issue. But when “soccer time” became organized and reduced to only two
or three hours each week, it became necessary to maximize ball contacts by reducing the number of players competing for possession. In soccer, dribbling skills are essential, and the creative dribbler was, and remains, the most prized talent.

Young children now come into organized soccer at the suggestion or urging of their parents; ironically, children repeatedly cite adult pressure as one of their main reasons for quitting organized sport. While all parents want their child to have a positive sport experience, for many, the specter of “win now” has become more important than the process of learning slowly and having fun. For many good reasons, children below the age of thirteen should not be placed in competitive situations in which the outcome influences their enjoyment and participation or threatens their right to learn and dream.

**When Adult Sport is Imposed on Children’s Play**

With free play conspicuously absent from the American soccer landscape, the picture created by soccer in OYSAN and across the United States is quite alarming. It has been reported that in all youth sports approximately 70% of participants quit before age 14. The reasons cited for this exodus are predictable: Other interests take preference; the children are not having fun; the children are not being understood; the children are being placed under too much competitive stress; the children are not participating; the children are not excited or motivated to persevere; the children perceive the pressure to win as taking away from their enjoyment; the children perceive the adults as too domineering and too directing; and ironically, the children also quit because they feel they are not being taught.

Not so long ago, organized select soccer began around age 12. Young players would spend time in their local communities and gravitate to the select programs as they approached 11 or 12. As the game became more popular, it was perceived as a good idea to give children a head start by creating U-11 and then U-10 divisions at the select level; we now also have U-9’s and U-8’s playing for results. Premier soccer in Ohio-North has followed a similar pattern since its inception in the early 1980’s, and those clubs now draw children as young as seven. Even more alarming are the local communities with organized programs – often managed by non-soccer people - for three and four year-olds. In 1999, an attorney in Mississippi threatened legal action against the state soccer association on the grounds that the MYSA was depriving his son of opportunities to fully develop his future potential by denying permission to play in a league. The son was 24 months old!

Equally devastating for many children are the decisions being made about future potential at an age when they can barely control the ball; many select programs now hold try-outs
for players as young as seven. By age eight, players are routinely compared to their peers, resulting in a child either being chosen for the team (a positive boost to self-confidence) or being told they are not good enough (a crushing blow to delicate egos). Kudos to those communities who form multiple level teams and train all interested and motivated players together with the best coaching available. Arsenal’s French manager Arsene Wenger, writing in *Four-Four-Two* (April 2001), labeled those who make decisions about the future professional potential of young players as either “Liars or cheats.” It is simply impossible to predict where a precocious ten year-old will be in five or ten years, and all that can be said about a talented ten year-old is that (s)he is a talented ten year-old.

Without a free play environment, the general technical base that almost universally characterizes players from soccer cultures is absent in most American players. Without a firm appreciation for the long-term nature of player development, the instructions offered to players by coaches are almost always driven by the pressure to reduce the risk of losing goals. Simply, as soccer has become more organized, coaches feel more pressure to win. This is seen when dribbling is discouraged in favor of passing and when players are told to avoid dwelling on the ball. This is seen when defenders are strategically positioned in front of the goalkeeper to ensure some opposition is in place when an attacker bursts out of the ubiquitous mob. This is seen when direct play is considered safer and therefore preferred. This is seen when the free movement of players in support of teammates is restricted by many and expressly forbidden by others. In short, the technical, tactical and emotional needs of the individuals are often supplanted by the emotional needs of the coach, whose self-worth and perceived value are generally equated with winning percentage. This scenario repeats itself at the grassroots level and at the select level and at the elite level. As soccer has become more organized, soccer players have become less “free” to enjoy the game in a manner that satisfies their principle of fun through play, and then they quit, in droves.

Our ability to maximize precious player resources and improve the overall quality of the youth soccer experience is dependent on informed and committed adults having the courage to give youth soccer back to the children.

**Player Development**

The U-10/12 course encourages the shaping of a “National Style” as the universal goal of long-term player development. This goal requires an approach to teaching that is less directive and more player-centered and much of what you will see and hear defines good coaching as the ability to facilitate activities that provide players with opportunities to learn through personal discovery.
As context, the “Model for Player Development” is presented as a working foundation for understanding the technical, tactical, physical and emotional needs of young players as they mature between U-9 and U-12. These ideas are demonstrated and expanded with players in the various field sessions.

OYSAN has over 10,000 registered coaches, the vast majority of whom have never played soccer at any competitive level. Adopting a common national vision for player development and educating both novice and experienced coaches on how to affect technical development and tactical insight at the expense of overzealous competition will be a daunting challenge that must be pursued.

The players deserve no less from all of us!

This is our challenge as coaches.

Good luck!

Tom Turner

Thomas W. Turner, Ph.D., Ohio Youth Soccer Association North Director of Coaching and Player Development

Organizational Note:

Throughout this manual, reference will be made to U-6, U-8, U-10 and U-12 age groups. Although not specifically stated, the U-6 age group includes U-5 players; the U-8 age group includes U-7 players; the U-10 age group includes U-9 players; and the U-12 age group includes U-11 players.
The Philosophical Context of the U-10/12 Module

“The first duty to children is to make them happy. If you have not made them so, you have wronged them. No other good they may get can make up for that.” Charles Buxton, Author.

“The motivation to learn basic skills is never greater that at this age level (8-12). Children gradually begin to change from being self-centered to being self-critical and develop the need for group or team games. The game itself should be central to all skills training. Note that 11-a-side football (soccer) 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.” Andy Roxburgh, UEFA Technical Director, in Guiding Talent

“As a kid you need to touch the ball as much as you can. You should always be with the ball. You should have a feeling that wherever the ball is, you can do anything with it. No matter where it is, where it is on your body, how it’s spinning, how it’s coming at you, the speed it’s coming at you, anything. You can learn the tactical side of the game later. It’s amazing to me that people put so much emphasis on trying to be tactical and worry about winning when it doesn’t matter when you’re 12 years old. We’re going to have big, strong, fast players. We’re Americans, we’re athletes. But if we never learn at an early age to be good on the ball, then it’s just useless.” Landon Donovan, USA World Cup Star, in Soccer America

“The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the game becomes easier - both to teach and to learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well. As these individual skills and the creativity to make them come alive in the game are developed to a level of competence, the finer points, first of passing skill and later of team organization can be taught.” US Soccer, Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States
“The amount of space in 11-a-side is not good for young kids. You spend too much time running around without the ball. I think the best way to improve your skills is to play football on a smaller pitch. I didn’t play 11-a-side football until I was 13. In Brazil, most kids play futebol de salao, which is similar to five-a-side. In futebol de salao, you are always involved.” **Juninho, Brazilian World Cup Winner**

“With most players under age 12, an 11-on-11 game on a full-sized field defeats much of the purpose of learning basic skills and having fun. It’s also much harder to coach.” **Bobby Clark, in The Baffled Parent’s Guide to Coaching Youth Soccer**

“Proper training should begin at ten years of age. If young tennis players, gymnasts, and swimmers can train happily for a few hours each day to improve, so can young soccer players. Coaches must also stress the importance of practicing outside of team sessions. The result should be direct contact with the ball for a total of at least eight hours a week.” **Wiel Coerver, in Soccer Fundamentals for Players and Coaches**

“In simplified, modified games, players learn to be aware and to improvise. They develop the awareness to be alert, to concentrate, to recognize the situation. Skills are important, but the value of skills is to be able to use them efficiently in a fraction of a second. Our practices should be one quarter skill training and three quarters applying those skills in endless situations. The combination of skills and timing is critical.” **Rinus Michels, Dutch Master Coach.**
U-10/12 Course Content and
Traditional Two-Day Course Outline

The actual course schedule may vary by location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Times</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Session Title</th>
<th>Time / Site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td></td>
<td>5:30 pm - 6:00 pm</td>
<td>Course Registration</td>
<td>Course Registration</td>
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<td>6:00 pm - 6:15 pm</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6:15 pm - 7:00 pm</td>
<td>Soccer Warm-up (Play Based Games / Activities)</td>
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<td>Friday</td>
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<td>7:00 pm - 7:45 pm</td>
<td>Naked Eye Analysis / Kicking Techniques / Applications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
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<td>7:30 pm - 8:00 pm</td>
<td>Naked Eye Analysis / Kicking Techniques / Applications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8:00 pm - 8:30 pm</td>
<td>Methods of Coaching: The Art of Teaching</td>
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<td>60: Class/Field</td>
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<td>Developing a National Style / Principles of Play</td>
<td>60: Class</td>
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<td>Developing a National Style / Principles of Play</td>
<td>60: Class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9:30 am - 10:00 am</td>
<td>Dribbling Skills Analysis / Application</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4v4 games (Manipulating Practice Variables)</td>
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<td>60: Field</td>
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<td>Ball Control Skills / Application</td>
<td>Ball Control Skills / Application</td>
<td>60: Field</td>
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<td>2:30 pm - 3:00 pm</td>
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<td>60: Field</td>
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<td>Heading Skills</td>
<td>30: Field</td>
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<td>Training the Goalkeeper / Finishing Activities</td>
<td>90: Field</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Training the Goalkeeper / Finishing Activities</td>
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</table>
A Model of Player Development: The Big Themes

The following model is of player development intended as a descriptive continuum. It is presented to provide perspective on the skills, abilities and emotional needs of young children as they mature. While the information is generally accurate for each age group, all children mature at different rates and it is entirely possible that some precocious youngsters will understand the game and perform skills at levels well beyond their cohorts. Is also quite normal for older children with less experience to perform skills and demonstrate tactical understanding at the levels of much younger children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Recurring Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U-6</td>
<td>Me And My Ball</td>
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<tr>
<td>U-8</td>
<td>Sharing The Ball</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>U-10</td>
<td>Playing Around The Ball</td>
<td>U-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>U-12</td>
<td>Playing Away From The Ball</td>
<td>U-6 and U-8</td>
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<tr>
<td>U-14+</td>
<td>Team Development</td>
<td>U-6 and U-8 and U-10 and U-12</td>
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**U-6 Coaching Theme: Individual Play**

U-6’s have very limited coordination and body awareness and are just learning to appreciate the difficulties associated with manipulating an object as troublesome as a round soccer ball without using their hands. They can dribble in straight lines. They can turn the ball in wide arcs. They can kick with their laces and toes and they can stop the ball if it is not traveling too fast or coming out of the air. They will "sometimes" pass the ball if they have time to assess their location and how to coordinate the kick, and they will gladly try to recover the ball when out of possession. They have no practical concept of space or teamwork and they have very little tolerance for complicated rules. U-6's are very egocentric and do not like to share their toys. They are more likely to play beside their friends than with them (parallel play). While these youngsters have quite limited attention spans and absent pacing skills, players as young as five and six will play small-sided soccer games and other soccer-related activities for up to an hour, if they are motivated and excited.
At the U-6 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 of up to 3v3. While U-6’s can play 4v4, 3v3 provides for a less cluttered environment. The formation of teams is not recommended, with group activity “Play Days” recommended as the alternative approach to formal, structured play. All activities should include every player and adults should appreciate that there are no "incorrect" responses from U-6’s.

**U-8 Coaching Themes: Individual Play And A Little Passing**

U-8’s are still very fragile young people and still very egocentric, but their coordination, balance and agility are developing rapidly and a growing technical range allows some players to be quite sophisticated in their individual play. U-8’s are beginning to think in terms of small groups, making "some" purposeful passing more of a realistic tactical option. They can only kick the ball accurately over a short distance and they still do not like to deal with balls coming out of the air. They can dribble away from pressure and are beginning to understand that the game can have a rhythm other than “frenetic”. Their range of techniques can include a number of different kicking surfaces, but their vision for the game is almost exclusively post-control (after possession is secured). Their limited appreciation for space does not marry well with numbers above 4v4. They will move to open areas to receive passes when given time to assess how to help their teammates, and they are capable of playing and practicing with scoring conditions and more complicated rules. They understand the field has boundaries, but not more complicated rules such as offside. Kick-ins should replace throw-ins for U-8 soccer.

At the U-8 level, dribbling the ball is still the primary soccer focus, although passing can be expected and should be encouraged. Encouraging the players to take a “soft” controlling touch to set up a dribble, pass or shot is a critical element for the developing soccer player. 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. While U-8’s can play 5v5, the fifth field player creates a more cluttered environment that minimizes touches. The players’ occasional curiosity for goalkeeping can be satisfied through the “nearest the goal” rule, but this should be decided by the participants. “Play Days” are recommended in lieu of formal league competitions and activities should be 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-10 Coaching Themes: Playing Around The Ball
Nine and ten year-olds can be unabashedly creative in their play. The best young players at this age move well with the game, circulate the ball quickly between teammates, defend with power and aggression, and generally play soccer in a way that can be exciting to watch. For the best ten year-olds, the vision to determine “what next” starts before the ball arrives (pre-control) and their ability to apply sound technique in subtle ways, such as chipping and 1v1 dribbling is becoming evident. U-10’s are developing a working understanding of width and depth, making some measure of positional play much more realistic to their level of understanding. U-10’s can understand the value of technical repetition and are much more willing to practice independently. They will begin to head the ball and are more likely to try to control balls coming out of the air. Their passing range can be as much as 30-40 yards. U-10’s can pass and control the ball with any surface and are capable of disguising their passing and dribbling movements. Feinting and faking are common features of play for the more gifted technicians.

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 of this period and small-group tactical awareness can be rapidly expanded. Granting children the freedom to creatively produce individual solutions to tactical and technical problems is a critical element of coaching. Particularly at this age, it is vital to encourage players to take purposeful controlling touches rather than prompting them to simply kick the ball away. Players will begin to move away from each other, but creating space and playing with back to goal is a difficult combination of skills that can be fostered in the more advanced players. Improved vision and support are the tactical markers of this age and better ball circulation is achieved as players begin to understand more about controlling and changing the rhythm of play. The better U-10’s will begin to combine with each other and the goalkeepers should be an integral part of switching play from side to side. Games of up to 6v6 provide a natural balance between technical repetition and tactical complexity without the added complexity of a formal midfield line. Goalkeepers should be frequently rotated.

U-12 Coaching Themes: Playing Away From The Ball
The competent U-12 player is comfortable in possession and can demonstrate a number of skillful solutions to evading pressure. The better players will juggle and perform “tricks” with the ball for fun to impress their peers and their maturing body control and coordination provides the agility to quickly change speed and direction with the ball. The competent U-12 can kick the ball with a wide range of techniques, with bending the ball seemingly the last kicking skill to emerge. Shots and passes can be struck with power and
accuracy and passing range is expanding beyond 40 yards. Crossing and heading are a much more common feature of play. Given appropriate playing spaces, U-12’s can control and change the rhythm of play in large groups, and attack and defend with a high level of sophistication. U-12’s are generally prepubescent, but some size and weight differences related to growth are evident. The level of competitiveness and the drive to win can be impressive, with a maturing physical dimension providing for longer periods of continuous play.

At this stage, motivated and talented players are capable of demonstrating almost every technique, but practices should still include significant periods of technical repetition and small-sided play to reinforce and refine this technical base. The competitive structure should involve playing numbers through 8v8 and, for the first time, most players can intellectually appreciate the basic ideas of positioning and roles. Building up through, and possessing the ball in the midfield third should be expected. 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 recovering the ball. 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 (speed agility, balance, coordination and quickness) find a foundation in this period. The very best players in this age group are capable of playing 11v11; the vast majority are not.

**U-14 Coaching Themes: Large Group Tactics and Team Building.**
The most talented and dedicated soccer players will have developed a full range of technical skills by the dawning of the teen years. Unfortunately, adolescence can often play havoc with agility, coordination, and balance, and these skills may regress for a period of time until nature’s time for rapid maturation has passed. These physical changes can also take an emotional toll as young, and often, insecure teenagers struggle to overcome the frustration of diminished performance and perhaps social status. Throughout the teen years, a primary function of the coach is to stabilize the range of
techniques and develop permanent mind-muscle habits. Both isolated technical repetition and technical repetition under pressure are critical for technical consolidation and refinement. Improved technical speed is a significant factor in tactical speed of play.

For those players targeted for the elite levels, technical and tactical functional (positional) training take on a more prominent role during the mid to late teen years. The physical changes that mark adults from adolescents will create wide ranges in the size and weight of players during the teen years. Girls will generally compete their growth spurts between 13 and 15, while the boys typically range between 14 and 17. Many boys can also experience periods of delayed growth as late as the early 20’s.

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 typically 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 format and volume.

U-16 through Adulthood: Team Building, Functional Training and Learning to Win.
This is truly the beginning of the formal “teambuilding” years. As players begin to reach physical and technical maturity, training should seek to develop the skills specific to positional (functional) 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. Physical and psychological training, incorporating a wide range of performance factors, are essential components of a well-balanced training environment.
A Model of Goalkeeper Development

All children will develop at different rates, based on their genetic timetable and the influence of adults, siblings and friends. It is also true that two children of the same chronological age can be almost a full year apart in terms of biological and social development. The following developmental outline should therefore be taken as a continuum, rather than an absolute.

Five and Six Year-olds
Goalkeepers should not be a feature of play at this age. However, using the hands to manipulate the ball during individual and partner activities designed to improve body-to-ball awareness should be encouraged.

Seven and Eight Year-olds
By U-8, some young children will start to gravitate to the role of goalkeeper and will enjoy playing the position in practices and games. Not all young children are drawn to the goal, however, so care must be taken to accommodate any natural apprehensions. The “skills” of goalkeeping at this age essentially reduce to picking up the ball and basic shot stopping, with most diving associated with falling on balls rolling very close to the body. All the goalkeeping techniques demonstrated will be quite unrefined and distribution skills will be limited to throwing and punting, with both actions unlikely to have any tactical purpose beyond clearing the ball away from the goal. Seven and eight year-olds can be quite brave, but they can also be under-cautious, resulting in a few bumps and bruises. There is no “aerial” game for U-8’s, and any communication with teammates will be more supportive than tactically substantive. All seven and eight year-olds should be trained as field players, not goalkeepers.

Nine and Ten Year-olds
By the time a young player approaches U-10, their physical qualities will have changed significantly and they will have clearly started to identify with the trappings and mindset of the goalkeeper position. While these players should remain as active field players for at least two-thirds of all team-oriented training sessions and half of games, they should certainly be helped to refine their goalkeeping techniques before or after the regular practice, or during goalkeeper-specific sessions. U-10 goalkeepers can perform all the basic catching techniques and can collapse in control and dive with some power. The basic tactical concepts of getting into
the line of shots and closing down shooting angles are also within the capabilities of the very top U-10 players; however, the vast majority will stay rooted to their goal lines. The major coaching emphases during this period should be refining basic techniques, improving footwork and balance, and building hand-eye coordination as a response to the speed, height, and trajectory of the ball. While dealing with high balls should be part of training, crossing situations, per se, rank low in terms of relevance to game situations and short-term player development.

Eleven and Twelve Year-olds
U-12’s are capable of looking, acting and performing in mature ways, with only physical limitations and game experience constraining their rate of progress. The coaching emphases should continue to refine basic techniques for catching, collecting, smothering and diving, with crossing situations becoming much more relevant. Tactically, U-12’s have much greater range in performing their supporting functions behind the defense and in dealing with crosses, and their willingness to communicate with defenders should be encouraged. The U-12 goalkeeper will likely have difficulty with crosses and high balls played into the area, particularly in traffic, and their appreciation of how to organize a defense in crossing situations will prove to be a challenge. The need to circulate the ball across the back of the team to change the point of attack brings the goalkeeper’s foot skills into prominence, as does the enforcement of the pass back rule.

As with field players, the skills and abilities of U-12 goalkeepers will be highly varied. Specialist trainers are recommended for this group to ensure that a sound balance is maintained between skill refinement and fitness. A major concern with the layman goalkeeper coach is that anaerobic fitness activities are often coated as goalkeeper “development,” and that high intensity training activities are often lauded as meeting the long-term needs of this population. While some fitness enhancement is expected from regular goalkeeper training, skill refinement is more likely to be achieved from lower intensity activities.

While technical and physical development will remain staples of the young goalkeeper’s practice diet, a key emphasis in training goalkeepers at the U-12 level is the expansion of tactical awareness, particularly with the offside rule becoming a challenging new feature of play. The goalkeeping basics of getting into line and cutting down the shooting angle also require constant repetition and refinement, especially as field players become more adept at disguising their shots and striking the ball with increased pace and spin. Facing live practice situations in small-sided and large-sided games is important for young goalkeepers as they learn to relate their choice of technique to the tactical demands of the game.
The Art of Teaching

“It is impossible to formulate exact written instructions on how to help players to improve their game. A coach must be competent at reading (i.e. analyzing) the range of different situations which crop up in the game. Good soccer coaching demands an enormous amount of insight on the part of the coach, as well as the ability to interpret correctly the shortcomings and/or talents of his (or her) players and to involve the players in the search for solutions to the problems encountered.”  


Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player’s development by organizing less, saying less and allowing the players to do more. Set up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer. US Soccer, Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in The United States

“What it means to be a “teacher” rests, amongst other considerations, on how we construe children-as-learners.”  

David Wood, in How Children Learn and Think

The Observation-Teaching-Observation Cycle

The art of teaching is displayed in the coach’s ability to:

- Develop and implement a long-term vision.
- Assess players for relevant individual, group or team problems.
- Organize relevant training activities to improve performance.
- Develop ownership within the team.
- Re-assess players for relevant individual, group or team problems.
The Soccer Environment

Fundamental to good coaching is the creation of a positive learning environment. When players feel their motivations for participating are being understood and they are learning new skills, they have more fun and are more likely to stay involved with the sport. Noted below are several ideas that all coaches should strive to incorporate into their soccer environment.

Participation
A major goal of coaching is 100% participation. Young players learn more from doing than by listening or observing. Providing multiple practice organizations is now the accepted norm and players should never stand in lines for their turn to practice a drill. When necessary, "extra" players can be used as neutrals and play for both teams.

Relevance
If transfer is to be achieved between training and games, soccer practice should seek to look and feel like a real soccer game. In its most basic form, soccer has two teams, a playing space, a method of scoring, a ball, and some basic arbitrary rules.

Time on Task
The more coaches talk, the less time players have to enjoy themselves and learn. At a very minimum, players should be actively involved for 70% of any practice session.

Failure First
The most successful teaching approach for motivating players to listen to suggestion is often found in allowing them to first fail. Having failed to meet a challenge (possess the ball, score a goal, win the ball back, execute a skill, or simply juggle the ball), players will be more inclined to listen and watch for details on how to succeed next time. If the subsequent information is relevant to them, the motivation to try and improve is assured.
As a coaching technique, the age-old practice of starting a training activity by listing the expected outcomes, and detailing the steps necessary to get there, is a surefire recipe for inattentive and unmotivated players.

Observation and Modeling
When older or more experienced players compete with younger players in training or games, the socialization process often establishes a pecking order. Invariably, the younger players learn from the older or more experienced players through observation and modeling. Where possible, having experienced adults or teenagers practicing and playing soccer with younger children creates the most natural learning environment.

**Asking Questions**
One goal of coaching is to develop tactically independent thinkers. Coaches can help players become insightful by including them in the discussion and decision-making process. When the coach identifies a problem, the traditional teaching approach is to give the players the solution. This strategy perpetuates the coach as the source of all knowledge. In contrast, when the coach asks the players to identify problems and discuss possible solutions, (s)he is inviting the players to think about the game as active participants and the player’s answers can help the coach appreciate what the players understand. The questioning approach can empower players of all ages to take responsibility on the field and to become more insightful participants. While a little more time consuming, the questioning approach provides for a deeper level of player involvement and enjoyment.

**Cueing**
When we think ahead for someone and verbally lead them, we are hoping to “cue” their thinking and perhaps their performance. Cueing has more relevance for players when the game situation and the cue have been previously discussed. This teaching tool has the advantage of maintaining flow during activity while allowing information to be offered without formal interruption. The drawback to cueing is that coaches often think for their players all the time in an effort to make everything perfect. This is unrealistic and potentially damaging because players never get the opportunity to think for themselves. When the coach does most of the talking, players do not take initiative. When left alone, communication amongst the players emerges naturally.
Planning the U-10/12 Practice Session

It is neither possible nor realistic to train every aspect of play at every training session, but it is possible to regularly train the core concepts for each age group through an “economical” approach to practice planning.

Economical training seeks to combine the technical, tactical, physical and psychological elements of skill learning.

The following information presents a menu of practice planning options, with some “staples” noted for inclusion at every session. The start (free play) and the end (play in match form) constitute the recommended “bookends” of each practice.

Free Play
Practice should always begin with free play, ideally with the players picking their own sides, making their own goals, and determining their own rules. When four players have arrived at practice, a game is possible. When all the players have arrived, or practice is 15 minutes old, it is “possibly” time to think about moving on, but not always! This opening serves as both motivation and reward for the “early birds” and provides a more beneficial and economical warm-up than aimless shooting at goal or running laps. If this warm-up game is competitive and flowing, there is good reason to prolong the activity as it is probably considered exciting, adult-free fun by the players!
Small-Sided Soccer Ladders
A soccer ladder provides opportunities for players to compete in small-sided games with and against teammates of equal and lesser ability. Cones or flags are used for goals and the playing time is related to the number of players. For 1v1 games, 60-90 seconds is adequate; for 2v2 games, 2-3 minutes is about right; and for 3v3 games, 3-4 minutes is enough time to maintain enthusiasm while recognizing the fitness demands.

The time available and the desired game form determines the actual number of rounds played, with 2v2 and 3v3 games more accommodating of a complete round-robin format than 1v1.

In developing a soccer ladder, the number of players at practice and the game form (1v1, 2v2, etc.,) determines the number of fields required. By way of example, we will use a group of 16 players.

- If we choose 1v1 as the game form, we will need eight fields: $16 / 2 = 7$. The field size would be 20 yards long, with no sidelines required.
- If we choose 2v2 as the game form, we will need four fields: $16 / 4 = 4$. The fields would be 25 yards long, with no sidelines required.
- If we choose 3v3 as the game form, we will need three fields: $16 / 6 = 2$, with four extra players (2v2). The 3v3 fields would be 25-30 yards long, with sidelines optional at 20 yards; and the 2v2 field would be 25 yards long, with no sidelines required.

A number of basic solutions are available to accommodate extra players.

- First, the coach or a parent can fill in.
- Second, the team(s) containing the weakest player(s) can be increased in number.
- Third, the team(s) opposing the strongest player(s) can be increased in number. If this option is selected, one (or more) player(s) would always rotate fields to play against the strongest player(s).
- Finally, as in the example above, two teams of two would play their remaining rounds against teams of three.

Individual Technical Development
Players like to be challenged to learn new skills and helped to refine existing ones. Working individually, in pairs, or in groups of three or four can be enjoyable, but made more all the more so if there is an element of competition involved. Pass back and forth in pairs, for example, is
usually quite monotonous, until there is a way to win! “First pair to fifty wins!” “How many passes exchanged or “step-overs” performed in 30 seconds?” “Last one to 20 loses!” “How many successful attempts out of 10?” “Beat your partner’s score to win.” All the basic skills should be reinforced in one form or another at practice and assigning these skills as homework activities is an absolute must for motivated and aspiring players.

Under the label of individual technical development are juggling activities and Coerver work. Wiel Coerver is a Dutch coach who formulated a training program based on the moves made famous by the game’s greatest players. Juggling and Coerver’s provide a foundation for creative thinking, if presented as open-ended challenges rather than simple imitation. These activities are important for developing touch, balance and coordination.

Soccer Tennis
Once players have developed the ability to juggle the ball a few times using different body parts, playing soccer tennis is the ideal format to apply ball control, heading, and volleying skills in a fun and competitive game.

Technical Games
Many skills can be practiced through modified games. Head-handball and volley-handball are two examples of games that train skills not frequently performed in matches or practices. Any small-sided activity that provides a high volume of technical repetition within a competitive game form would fall under the label of a technical game.

Possession Games
Possession games should be a staple of all U-10/12 practices and a number of these games will be demonstrated throughout this course. Variety, transition and an element of competition are the keys to presenting these important games in a fun way.

4v4 Games
Games of 4v4 provide an excellent balance of technical repetition and tactical complexity and can be utilized for players of all ages and all abilities. These games can be structured to emphasis technique over tactics by, for example, playing to goals across the width of the field (40x25) to emphasize finishing; or tactics over technique, by, for example, limiting touches (to three) and playing across the endline or sideline. The range of scoring options for 4v4 games can be found later in this chapter and will be demonstrated on the field.
Play in Match Form
The practice should include some significant period of play in the official game form of 6v6 or 8v8. This activity offers a natural opportunity to reinforce playing rules and game tactics, and also develop some simple ideas on restarts.

Fun Games
As much as some would like to think of U-10/12 players as mature and grown up, they are still quite young and often immature. Adding a tag game, a knockout game, a strategy game, such as Capture the Flag, or any other light-hearted five minutes of fun will help end the session on a positive note.

Practice Variables and Success vs. Challenge

“Good” Coaching
Good coaching is about creating an environment where players can improve and enjoy playing soccer. The first challenge is to create practice activities that naturally transfer learning from training to games. At the younger ages, this is THE most important element of coaching as the majority of young players (~U10 and below) are not developmentally “ready” for deliberate instruction.

Once the coach is able to create good training activities, they can turn their attention to providing information that helps players apply technique and better read the tactical cues of the game. Players must be developmentally ready to listen to the coach and the coach must appreciate what information is most relevant to any particular player at any particular time.

In general, our soccer environment is characterized by an overload of coaching information and a dearth of natural learning through play. As a result, we have very few
players who are comfortable in possession, and ever fewer who can be described as creative. Soccer needs coaches who think differently, who are less intrusive, and who understand that the game is full of mistakes and that’s OK!

**Assessing the Training Session**

When assessing the quality of their training sessions, coaches should challenge themselves by answering the following four questions…

First, were the activities *relevant*? Simply did my practice activities look like soccer?

Second, did the activities have *flow*? Were there natural transitions between attack and defense? Was I able to leave the players in control?

Third, were the players *engaged* in the activities? Were the games enjoyable? Did I give them ways to win? Did I tell them how long they were playing for?

Fourth, was I able to “tweak” the activities to find balance between challenge and success? Were the teams balanced? Was the ball out of bounds a lot? How many passes connected before turn-overs? Were the spaces OK for the number of players? Did the conditions (i.e., 2-touch) help or hurt the search for better soccer? Did my activities target the soccer problems I was trying to train?

**Controlling the Practice Variables**

The five variables outlined below constitute the “bag of tricks” available to coaches who endeavor to create realistic and challenging training activities for their players without over-coaching. Coaches who look to experiment with the mix of these variables will learn from their successes and failures and, in time, become better at their craft.

**1. Number of Players**

- The higher the number of players in a game or activity, the fewer opportunities each player has to actively participate.
- The higher the number of players in a game or activity, the more difficult it becomes to create space and maintain possession.
- With smaller numbers, the onus is on the players to apply the basic principles of play.
- With larger numbers, the onus is on the players to demonstrate positional understanding and how to play away from the ball.
- Smaller playing numbers increase anaerobic fitness demands.
- Larger playing numbers provide for more natural rest periods within any game or activity.
- Neutral players encourage possession and attacking
success.
- Neutral players pose additional problems for defenders.

2. Method of Scoring
- Providing a way to win improves motivation and purpose.
- Providing a means of transitioning from defense to attack and vice versa improves motivation.
- Games played through 180 degrees (directional) are more challenging for attackers.
- Games played through 360 degrees (non-directional) are more challenging for defenders.
- Games with more than one goal to attack provide for more scoring and creativity.
- Games with more than one goal to attack increase the challenge for defenders.
- Games with goalkeepers or targets provide for better flow in transition.
- Games with goalkeepers are more realistic.
- The larger the goal, the more likely it is that players will shoot.
- The larger the goal, the more likely it is that players will shoot from distance.
- The larger the goal, the earlier players will start to defend.
- The method of scoring influences the technical, tactical, physical and psychological demands of any game.

Scoring Options for Small-Sided Games
Goals can be scored in a number of different ways, with the size, number and location of the goals impacting the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological demands of the game.

The following diagrams show examples of the most common scoring methods and many other configurations are possible. Coaches should strive to become familiar with the working dynamic between the size and shape of the playing area, the number of players on the field, the conditions (restrictions) imposed on the game, and the method of scoring.

a. Dribble the ball across the short line (line soccer)
b. Dribble the ball across the long line (line soccer)

c. Kick the ball through either of two small goals on the short line

d. Kick the ball through any of three small goals on each long line
e. Kick the ball through either of two goals on each long line

f. Shoot or pass the ball through one goal (big or small) on the short line
g. Shoot or pass the ball through one goal on the long line, with counter-attack goals on the opposite long line.

h. Shoot the ball through offset goals on the long line

i. Shoot the ball through two goals on each long line
j. Pass the ball to a target player(s) on the short line

k. Pass the ball to a target player(s) on the long line

l. Dribble or pass the ball though multiple small goals inside the game
3. Space
- The smaller the space, the higher the demands on technique and spatial awareness.
- Younger players need larger spaces.
- Better players should play in smaller spaces.
- The playing space should provide for adequate flow.
- The playing space should provide for adequate challenge.
- The playing space must be proportional to the number of players on the field.
- The playing space can be square or rectangular, but most games should be played in a rectangle.
- The configuration of the playing space will influence the technical, tactical, physical and psychological demands of any game.
- Goals do not always have to be opposite each other.

4. Time
- The players should know how long they are playing for before they start.
- Playing time should be related to the fitness demands of the game or activity.
- The fewer the players, the shorter the playing time.
- With no rest, players will go into oxygen debt in 60-90 seconds.
- Playing time should be related to a way to win (time or score).

5. Conditions and Playing Rules
- Conditions and playing rules must be realistic to the game of soccer.
- Positive conditions (points rewarding successful application of a concept) are usually more motivating.
- Negative conditions (penalizing players for non-compliance) should be used sparingly.
- Absolute conditions (players must perform “X” before going to goal) usually produce unrealistic soccer games.
- Conditions should never become more important than scoring goals.
• Playing rules can and should be modified to provide maximum flow to activities. In particular…
  o Enforcing offside challenges attacking players to be more sophisticated in creating chances.
  o Enforcing offside gives defenders the option to stop tracking runners or step up.
  o Enforcing offside provides goalkeepers with space to assess starting positions and cut down angles.
  o Moving the offside line back from the half-way line favors attackers and attacking concepts, such as stretching the field from front to back.
  o Not having an offside line hinders defenders and the development of defensive concepts, such as squeezing the field from front to back.
Providing Feedback and Information: Using the Coach’s “Toolkit”

In 2005, US Soccer released “Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States”. One of the key messages from that player development blueprint was that the youth soccer environment needed to become much more player-centered and far less coach-driven. Central to that notion was the desire to move coaching away from the traditional Anglo-German approach of stopping and starting training games whenever breakdowns occurred.

As an alternative, coaches were encouraged to find less intrusive opportunities to provide information to players. Those methods, the Coach’s Tool Kit, are outlined below.

1. Coach the Individual within the Flow of the game.
   - Individual players can be given information while the game is moving.
   - Information should not be given when the player is in possession of the ball.
   - Information should not be given to a player who is about to come into possession or who is about to be involved in the game.
   - The volume of information should not escalate into a running prescription.
   - The best information will help players understand how to recognize and perhaps deal with standard game situations.

2. Coach the Group within the Flow of the game.
   - Group coaching should seek to address strategic objectives, such as how to attack and defend as a team.
   - Group coaching may also address the overall rhythm of attacking play and the success or failure to defend relative to the cues coming from the game.
     - Essentially, group coaching should seek to address the positioning and organization (balance) of one or more lines.
     - Group coaching can be achieved by working through designated players who are responsible for standard game situations. For example, the goalkeeper can help organize his/her defenders when there is a goal kick at the other end of the field.

3. Coach during Natural Stoppages.
   - Information can be exchanged between coach and player(s) when the ball is not active.
• Natural stoppages include balls out of bounds, injuries, goals, fouls, and the end of time periods.
• The length of any coach-player exchanges during a natural stoppage should be proportional to the duration of the time-out.

4. Use **Conditions to promote learning**.
• Conditions are rules of play that can shape learning and performance.
• The use of conditions offers one of the most effective modern teaching tools.
• Once the conditions are explained and understood by the players, there is no need to actually “coach” during the allotted playing time.
• Conditions can reward good play by assigning bonus points when, for example, there is a successful pass to a teammate.
• Conditions can penalize non-compliance, for example, by awarding indirect free kicks, when players fail to take more than one touch.
• There is a danger that using unrealistic conditions, such as “Do X (5 passes) before Y (score a goal)” hinder tactical development. The use of conditions must be balanced by periods of free play.
• Scoring schemes should always value goals more highly than extra points. The objective of the game is to score goals, not, for example, to keep possession.

5. Use the **Freeze Method**.
• Freezing play should be the last option in the coaches’ arsenal.
• The use of the freeze method is most relevant when the players are positionally organized and likely to face the same game situation again.
  • The freeze method is least relevant for technical mistakes.
  • In the communication during a freeze, it is more important that the players to begin to understand the tactical cues (player-centered approach of a situation that the absolute solutions (coach-centered approach).
  • Contrary to common practice, it is not necessary for the game to be restarted with a successful performance. It is more important for the coach to relay the necessary information and restart the game as fast as possible.
• Freezes should include information on the “cues” (words) the coach might use to help the players read similar game situations later on.
The following observation tool is designed to help coaches assess their teaching skills. The important elements of a practice observation are outlined below, with relevant questions provided to help the reflective coach assess their performance. This observation tool can also be used for the formal or informal assessment of coaches working in a club or community.

1. The Organization of Players and Playing Spaces
   - Are the playing numbers in each activity appropriate for the practice focus?
   - Are the playing spaces for each activity appropriate for the ability level?
   - Is the playing shape and field orientation for each activity appropriate for the practice focus?
   - Are all the players included or frequently rotated in the games or activities?
   - How many players are not active in any activity?
   - Are the goalkeepers included in the activities?
   - Are the goalkeepers involved as goalkeepers or field players?

2. The Introduction of Activities
   - How long does the coach take to organize players and introduce activities?
   - Is overly detailed coaching information given during the introduction of activities?
   - Is the coach demonstrating or walking through any new activities to help facilitate player understanding?
   - Are the players aware of the game duration and how to win?

3. The Development of Activities
   - Are the activities allowed to develop a flow?
   - Do the activities allow for natural transitions between attacking and defending?
   - Is there a reasonable balance between challenge and success?
   - Are any imposed conditions appropriate for the practice focus?
   - Are the conditions changed, where necessary, to improve quality?
   - Are adjustments made to the playing spaces, where necessary, to improve quality?
• Does the sequence of selected activities flow together?

4. Stoppages
• How frequently are the activities being stopped?
• Is the timing of stoppages appropriate to the practice focus and activity flow?
• Are the stoppages generally addressing the most relevant problems?
• Are the stoppages addressing "structural/tactical" (macro) or "technical" (micro) issues?
• Are the activities being stopped more or less often as the practice session develops?

• What is the ratio of coaching time to playing time?
• How are the activities started and stopped?
• How are the activities restarted after a coaching stoppage?
• To what degree is the "freeze" method predominant in the coaching style?

• To what degree is cueing utilized as a coaching tool?

5. Coaching Information
• Does the coach use the “Toolkit” to inform and instruct?
• Is the coach providing relevant information?
• Does the coach ask for player input?
• Is the coach consistent in his/her comments, relative to the practice focus?
• To what degree are the players being allowed to make their own tactical decisions?
• Is the coach continuing to provide information during the large group phase of practice?
• Are age-appropriate coaching themes being recognized and reinforced within each activity?
• Are the group activities addressing relevant tactical problems?
• To what degree, if at all, is the coach "cheerleading?"
• To what degree, if at all, is the coach providing an overload of information?
6. Coaching Mannerisms and Demeanor

- Is the coach's appearance professional?
- Is the coach relating to the players in a professional manner?
- Is the coach's position enhancing his/her ability to observe as many players as possible?
- Is the coach's body language suggesting confidence or uncertainty?
- To what degree is the coach's voice impacting intensity?
- Is the coaches' level of enthusiasm impacting intensity?
- Is the coach using any overly repetitive phrases, such as "OK?"
- Is the coach occasionally or frequently participating in play?

7. Equipment

- When possible, are the playing spaces marked out in advance?
- Are goals positioned on the field, if applicable?
- Are scrimmage vests available and utilized?
- Are marking cones available and utilized?
- Are extra balls readily available during activities?
- Is the coach easily distinguishable from the players?
- Is extra equipment removed from the playing areas?
- Are the players involved in the clean up of activities?
The Ideal of the Good Coach

An “ideal” is an unattainable standard that serves as the measurement of perfection. Listed below are many of the elements of the “perfect” youth coach. They are presented as talking points, as observation tools, as philosophical guides, and as expectations for the qualities of future generations.

- The good coach views players from an holistic (well-rounded, multi-faceted) perspective.
- The good coach appreciates the value of humor and fun in the learning process.
- The good coach understands that learning takes time and that learning is very individual in nature.
- The good coach understands that habits come from the shaping of thought and behavior of players over months and years.
- The good coach understands that player-involvement in the learning process is critical for motivation.
- The good coach helps his or her players answer the questions.
- The good coach understands that the extent of learning and understanding is revealed through performance.
- The good coach inspires by example.
- The good coach respects the game.
- The good coach is knowledgeable, but frugal in sharing it with players.
- The good coach is patient.
- The good coach understands the developmental level of his or her players.
- The good coach constantly watches his or her players to determine what skills and insight will help each player continue to develop.
- The good coach works forward towards an always illusive vision of the ideal soccer player.
- The good coach selects practice activities that are relevant and motivating.
- The good coach used a variety of coaching methods and teaching progressions to achieve their objectives.
- The good coach develops a breadth and depth of individual techniques.
• The good coach develops a breadth and depth of age-appropriate tactical understanding.
• The good coach offers suggestions and plants seeds.
• The good coach understands that a consistent message is the key to short and long-term development.
• The good coach understands that mistakes are an important aspect of learning.
• The good coach understands that hard-working young players perceive themselves as learning, even when they appear to be floundering.
• The good coach always seeks to raise the performance bar.
• The good coach develops soccer-fit players.
• The good coach appreciates the value of balanced competition and the futility of one-sided contests.
• The good coach appreciates the value of rest and recovery.
• The good coach is flexible and adaptable.
• The good coach is forgiving.
Coaching Ethics and the Developmental Process

Ethics are the standards of conduct and moral behavior specific to an organization. Coaches affiliated with the Ohio Youth Soccer Association North (OYSAN) also fall under the umbrella of US Youth Soccer and the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). The following statements refer to the ethical standards expected from OYSAN coaches involved in educating young children in soccer and seeking to understand the reasons for children’s participation in and growth through youth sport.

1. Ethics with regard to coaching for “Process” versus “Product”: Coaches who place the outcome of games ahead of the ongoing needs of the participants are being unethical.

The primary reasons children play sports are to participate and learn new skills, to be with friends, to compete with and against others, and to have fun. They enjoy learning from new experiences and, as time goes on, from direct instruction. They do not like being scolded or abused for making mistakes and they would rather play in a losing effort than sit on the bench during a victory. They would also rather play in a close game than in a blowout. Very young children rationalize winning and losing to working hard; older children equate winning and losing with their skills and abilities, directly influencing their self-confidence. Care must be taken to allow players between the ages of five and twelve the opportunity to become skillful and game savvy by focusing on their long-term development rather than their win-loss record.

2. Ethics with regard to Soccer Rules: Coaches who bait, antagonize, or otherwise challenge the decisions of the officials are being unethical.

It is the responsibility of the coach to understand the basic rules of play and to strive to educate his or her players to perform within the letter and spirit of the rules to the best of their abilities. Both novice and expert coaches, and especially those coaches who are also registered officials, should appreciate that the application of the rules to the game is based on
the interpretation of the officials. It is the coach’s responsibility to model good sportsmanship and to demonstrate respect for the game. It is also the responsibility of the coaches to monitor and control any form of referee abuse by players, parents and other spectators.

3. Ethics with regard to Playing Time: Coaches who play only their better players in an attempt to win games, and those who do not provide young players with equal playing time, or adequate rest, are being unethical.

Youth sport is not a miniature version of adult sport and all young players have a right to equal playing time, regardless of the status or level of a contest. Players who do not regularly participate are at higher risk of dropping out, and no youth coach can predict which talented or round or awkward young player will become the star of tomorrow once maturation, talent and desire are coupled with a good training environment.

It is also regarded as unethical to over-play children in an attempt to bolster the chances of a club winning multiple games played on the same day, or over a number of days, as is often the case at tournaments. Players who are fatigued face a higher risk of injury, and players who play an excessive number of games over a prolonged period or months or years are at higher risk for burning out and developing overuse injuries. It is also true that players who face excessive playing demands are often hurried back from injury, with serious potential for chronic joint instability as a result.

4. Ethics with regard to Positioning: Coaches who restrict the movement of players in small-sided games in order to win games are being unethical. Coaches who rigidly organize players into formal positions to artificially separate them are guilty of over-coaching.

The ability of players to understand positions starts to emerge around age ten and develops rapidly over the next few years. Small-sided games that do not require a formal midfield organization are designed to provide age-appropriate and ability appropriate competition for players under the age of eleven. The intent is for players to enjoy freedom of movement within the game, thereby learning how to create and use space
within small-group environments. Small-sided games can also help coaches better appreciate their “curriculum” in working with young children.

In addition, two key elements of team play at U-11 and above are support for the midfield and forward lines from the defenders, and the natural movement of defenders into midfield and forward positions to create numerical superiority around the ball. The practice of positioning “Goalie Guards” close to the penalty area and restricting these players from moving with the team is clearly intended to limit the loss of goals. Finally, the practice of positioning attacking players in front of the opponent’s goal to “Cherry Pick” does not help the team quickly transition to attack, nor does it help develop the important skills of playing with back to goal. Neither of these practices is in the best interests of the players.

5. Ethics with regard to Blowouts: Coaches who deliberately run up scores are being unethical.

Lopsided games in youth sports are inevitable and care must be taken to appreciate the sensitivity of young children to such events. Playing short-handed, adding players to the opponent’s team, playing key players out of position, sitting key players for longer periods, playing with limited touches, restricting scoring from close range, and only scoring from crosses are some possible options for dealing with blow-out situations. At the youngest ages, adult coaches should consider playing in goal to help the losing team gain some measure of stability or consolation.

6. Ethics with regard to Player Advancement: The coach who seeks to retain a player(s) who has outgrown the knowledge and abilities of the coach for the implicit or explicit purpose of winning games is being unethical.

Players improve by playing with and against other good players, through personal motivation and independent practice, through study, through observation, and through good coaching. By far, the most important factors in player development are coaching and environment. At the top level, the successful coach is one who develops players to their fullest potential and reaps the rewards through the play of the team. The successful youth coach, in contrast, helps individual players develop to their fullest potential, or to the limits of the coach’s knowledge, before moving them along to a higher level of play and a new learning environment. The unethical youth coach often seeks to covet his or her top performers for reasons of self-worth and personal gain, regardless of the short and long-term impact on the individual player.
7. Ethics with regard to Game Tactics: Coaches who use negative tactics and minimize the enjoyment of the players in order to win games are being unethical.

Winning youth soccer games is relatively easy. The coach who tells his or her players to take no risks with back passes; kick every ball forward; dribble the ball forward; stay behind the ball, or behind the half when playing as a defender; press the opposition into their half at every opportunity; and be very aggressive when defending, will win a higher percentage of their games. Youth coaches who play to win at all costs in this manner are guilty of practicing an insidious form of child abuse. The younger the players are when a coach displays this attitude, the less likely it is that they will ever experience the joy of actually playing soccer as it can be: An exercise in creative self-expression. It is quite easy to be “winning” youth soccer coach; it is much more difficult to be a “successful” youth soccer coach.

8. Ethics with regard to Respecting the Game

Soccer has been played worldwide in one form or another for over 4500 years, and in the United States since 1869. Over four million American children now regularly play youth soccer. The first official soccer rules were codified in London, England in 1863 and the World Cup is the world’s largest single sport event. It is the responsibility of each coach to demonstrate respect for the game by honoring players, spectators and officials, and by promoting positive character development to all young players in words and deeds. Coaches who fail to meet these standards by displaying poor sportsmanship and overreacting to the natural ups and downs of the game are being unethical.
“In human affairs of danger and delicacy successful conclusion is sharpened by hurry. So often men trip by being in a rush. If one were properly to perform a difficult and subtle act, he should first inspect the end to be achieved and then, once he had accepted the end as desirable, he should forget it completely and concentrate solely on the means. By this method he would not be moved to false action by anxiety or hurry or fear. Very few people learn this.” John Steinbeck, *East of Eden.*

**Aspiring...**
Young players adopt soccer heroes and begin to aspire to greatness around ages eight or nine. To help more of these youngsters come closer to their dreams, youth coaches must learn to view soccer as more than just kicking and running.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain soccer's phases of play. The intent is to help coaches appreciate how soccer can be systematically dissected; and, through training,
how players can be helped to better-value possession and participate in a more constructive and sophisticated game.

Inherent to the discussion is the assumption that players have achieved a level of technical competence that allows the coach a range of strategic (big picture) choices in his/her selection of tactics.

**The Better Team Lost: Exploring Soccer’s Phases of Play**

Anyone who has been around soccer for any length of time will appreciate that the better team doesn’t always win. In no other sport can a team dominate possession, dominate the number of scoring chances, dominate the number of attacking restarts, and yet fail to secure a worthy result. In soccer, goals count, meaning inferior or tactically disciplined teams can often find ways to succeed against steep odds.

When the soccer match is over, knowledgeable fans and participants will offer their judgments on the quality of play and how lucky, unlucky, or deserving their team was that day. But how subjective are those opinions? While the unschooled observer will barely see beyond the final result in qualifying the value of a contest, the more sophisticated pundits will take the ebb and flow of the game and the quality of the tactical choices into account.

Soccer, like all invasion sports, can be objectively broken down into “phases” of play, with the team that demonstrates competence in most of these phases, by and large, having the better opportunity to emerge victorious.

In the reality of soccer, the transition between phases can often occur very quickly and many times untidily, particularly when the technical level of the participants is not conducive to keeping possession. Soccer is a game of mistakes and result-oriented coaches often employ tactics designed to reduce the risk of conceding goal scoring chances. In the extreme, this mentality results in a form of “soccer-tennis” with both teams playing the ball as far forward as early as possible in the hope of cashing in on defensive errors. This style of play is both basic and frenetic and invariably hard on the eyes of the soccer purists who savor a more cohesive tactical landscape.

It is also true that a team’s strategic choices may minimize or eliminate the utilization of one or more phases. For example, a team that “presses” is unlikely to also “bunker;” and a team that routinely punts the ball from the goalkeeper is unlikely to risk building out of their own end.
When the savvy soccer-watcher offers their opinion on whether the “better” team won, or not, they are consciously or unconsciously evaluating play as a reflection of their appreciation for the phases of play. Naturally, not everyone sees the same game in quite the same way so, even for neutrals, deciding upon the “better” team can be very much a relative decision based on personal bias and an appreciation for the success of any chosen match strategy. For example, while Greece’s victory in the 2004 European Championships was begrudgingly applauded as a triumph for defensive organization and counter-attacking soccer, Red Star (Crvena Zvezda) Belgrade’s castigated 1991 European Cup penalty shootout win over Marseille following 120 minutes of bunkering defense could only be appreciated by their own supporters.

For the purposes of this article, a “good” team is defined as one that demonstrates a high degree of tactical organization, one that plays with controlled changes of rhythm in both attack and defense, and one that displays tactical versatility. While there is no such thing as a “perfect” game, good teams have the ability to efficiently and effectively change their tactical stripes to meet the demands confronting them.

**The Phases of Play**

In figure 1 (below), “Game Strategy” is divided into attacking and defending options, with a breakdown of the associated phases of play attached to the appropriate side.

In the interest of clarity and flow and to help the reader clearly distinguish between the different phases of play, the information in figure 1 will be discussed in three parts.

![Diagram of Soccer's Phases of Play](image)

**Figure 1**
Part I: The Attacking Phases

- Attacking and Building-up
- Transitioning From Build-up to Attack
- Building-up in the Defensive Half
- Building-up in the Opponent’s Half
- The Moment Of Transition
- Counter-Attacking

Part II: The Defending Phases

- Defending Against the Counter-Attack
- The Pressing Dilemma
- Defending From Behind a Line of Confrontation
- Bunkering

Part III: Restarts

- Attacking
- Defending

**Part I. The Attacking Phases**

Attacking and Building-up

Soccer is a game of passing and dribbling, with the objective of scoring more goals than the opponent. In terms of individual decision-making, the first thought any player should consider when in possession is whether they can score a goal. How often, for example, do we see young players creatively attempting to beat the goalkeeper from distance? If scoring is not possible, the player should assess whether an assist is possible. If an assist is not possible, they should look to move the ball forward towards the opponent’s goal.

In most circumstances, looking to advance the ball forward is preferred to moving the ball square or backwards. However, when a forward option is not available, the objective is to keep the ball in possession until a forward dribbling or passing option, or a shooting opportunity, becomes available.

As the options to attack the goal become more limited, either because the ball is too far away, or the opponent is too well organized, the better teams will look to circulate the ball and maintain possession. This is called building-up, or the build-up, and it is the phase of play most lacking and perhaps least understood in American youth soccer.

Transitioning From Build-up to Attack

At any moment during the build-up, a pass, dribble, or shot may signal that a goal scoring opportunity is available and the tactical phase has changed from build-up to attack. When an attack on goal is possible, the speed of play will often increase significantly as individuals take initiative, or a small group of players attempt to gain a numerical advantage around or behind a defender(s).
Given these definitions of building-up and attacking, the distinction between the two can often be quite blurry. For example, the build-up may be as simple as a long throw from the goalkeeper to a forward when the opponents are caught in a poor defensive posture; or a long pass over the top of a flat back line by a quick-thinking full back; or a quick transitional pass by a midfielder to a forward following an interception close to the opponent’s goal.

More likely, the formal building-up phase will involve forward and backward and side-to-side passing and dribbling. It is also true that the build-up will take two very distinct forms depending on the position of the ball.

Building-up in the Defensive Half
In cases where the goalkeeper or a defender has secured possession and the opponent is not pressing, the better teams will take the opportunity to slow the game down, move players forward, and circulate the ball into attacking positions. This tactic of building from the back helps save energy and, as the ball is advanced, provides the attacking team with better support, and therefore shorter distances to run with the ball or play penetrating or combination passes.

The tactical advantage is simply a function of numbers, with the vast majority of system match-ups providing for the defenders and the goalkeeper to outnumber the attackers. For example, when both teams are playing 4-4-2, the four defenders and the goalkeeper often play against only two forwards, ensuring a high probability of maintaining possession and successfully advancing the ball.

When building out of the back against a retreating defense, the flank players will create space by moving as wide as possible; the forwards will create space by getting as far down field as possible; and the central midfielder(s) will provide the defenders with time and space by initially moving forward. If this space is not created, the team that attempts to build out will find themselves under pressure and in danger of turning the ball over in a very dangerous part of the field.

Playing out from the defensive half does not always include a formal choreographed build-up. Many times, the goalkeeper can initiate open play with a quick release to a teammate in space; the same is true of any player who gains possession in the defensive half. Sometimes these passes result in a counter-attack; most often they simply force the defense to retreat into their own half and allow the build-up to take place further forward.

Building-up in the Opponent’s Half
When a defending team deliberately bunkers in, or is otherwise pegged back in their own end, the attacking team is faced with a very difficult problem as there will be very little space behind the defense and very little space between the defenders. Even on a regulation field with 72-75 yards of width, the challenge of creating goal-scoring chances demands skill, mental patience, and a high degree of tactical discipline. The team that possesses good dribblers may succeed; the team that possesses the ability to pass the ball with pace and accuracy and length may succeed; the team that can quickly combine in tight spaces may succeed; the team that can score with shots from outside the box may succeed; the team that can score from wing play may succeed; the team that can score goals from restarts may succeed; the team that can change their formation and style may succeed; the team that can add a “dimension” player, such as a tall striker, may succeed. But nothing is assured, and history is replete with examples of courageous defensive performances resulting in famous results being secured against very long odds.

To build-up effectively when an attack has stalled or when patience is required, individual players must have the dribbling skills to keep the ball and the passing skills to warrant teammates spreading out from back to front and from side to side. With the offside law restricting how far forward a team can expand, the onus is often on the defensive line to drop off from the midfield to create time and space at the back of the team. This is often achieved in the defenders own half and is one of the primary reasons why the lingering practice of positioning “goalie guards” – those who are required to stand on top of the penalty box -- is so abhorred by youth soccer observers. By restricting the forward movement of defenders to support the team during the build-up, coaches are destroying these players’ natural and necessary connection to their teammates and to the most enjoyable phases of soccer.

The Moment Of Transition
In any soccer game, teams will find themselves in and out of possession, and the most dangerous moments during open play are found when the ball transitions from defense to attack and from attack to defense. When a team is building up, the players are usually spread out from back to front and from side to side. The opposite is true of the defense, whose organized shape will be very compact as players move towards the ball from the sides and from the front and back. While a good attacking team will have wide players as much as 75 yards apart, and will have committed defensive and midfield players forward for attacking support, a good defending team will try to move as a tight block in order to help create layers of help around the ball.
Counter-Attacking
In the seconds immediately following a change of possession, two opposing dynamics come into play: The counter-attack and defense against the counter-attack.

The team that has just regained possession will look to exploit the spaces between and behind their opponents before the defensive block can be organized. At the higher levels, the team that can effectively counter-attack is often the more successful and therefore a premium is placed on speed of recognition and speed of play. The counter-attack can be carried out with any combination of dribbling and passing movements, with the point of origin and the availability of space generally impacting the likely tactical solutions.

Because attacking spaces are more available when counter-attacking, under-pressure defenders are often forced to take greater risks with offside tactics. This, in turn, pressures attacking players to better appreciate how, where, and when to run into shooting or crossing positions. Players who understand the value of lateral and diagonal running in these situations often become the game breakers; conversely, players who run in straight lines often become offside.

Sometimes, what starts as a promising counter-attack opportunity quickly peters out as defenders recover goalside, or technical/tactical lapses kill the impetus of the moment. While the initiative for an attack may still be regained, it is more likely that teams must abandon the counter-attacking phase and revert to formally building-up.

Part II: The Defending Phases

Defending Against the Counter-Attack
Knowing that the counter-attack is a pivotal tactic, good teams will look to develop transition skills that slow or stop an opponent’s immediate forward progress. This is achieved by immediately pressuring the ball to force sideways or backwards passes; and by keeping the midfield and defensive lines well balanced positionally and numerically. Importantly, this continual defensive organization takes place during the building-up or attack. Teams that wait to organize their defending until after the turnover are much more likely to be punished for their ball watching by good counter-attacking teams.

At the moment of transition, players in attacking positions are often on the wrong side of their immediate opponent and out of position to help their own teammates. This is why immediate pressure on the ball can be so critical. However, where the turnover occurs on
the field and whether the risk of counter-attack is high or low, will, in part, dictate how a team should react to a loss of possession.

The Pressing Dilemma
In addition to factors such as weather, fitness, field conditions and technical range, the time remaining, the score, and the importance of the match situation to any competition impact where teams start to defend. Counter-attacking situations aside, if, for example, a team is losing, or needs an additional goal, the onus is on that side to increase their defensive tempo and chase the ball. This results in pressuring the ball closer to the opponent’s goal.

When a defending team chooses the right tactical cues, pressuring can be a very effective tactic; however, it does bring risks. Pressing can be perilous because the defensive block must move forward and towards the ball. If this movement does not happen at the right moment and with the players reacting together, there will be attacking spaces left open within the block, or behind the block, or on the flanks. With defensive players committed forward without being organized, a quick build-up may produce dangerous attacking opportunities and break-a-way situations for the opponent. The defensive application of offside tactics also becomes important as pressing teams can’t also effectively protect the space behind their back line. This is one reason why goalkeepers must play out of their goal in pressing situations.

Defending From Behind a Line of Confrontation
Pressing makes sense when the ball can’t easily be played over or through the defensive block. When pressing doesn’t make sense, teams can either force the issue by pushing players forward and taking greater risks, or they can drop back a little and start to defend closer to their own goal. When this strategy is employed, the team may still press when the right moment presents itself, but will otherwise drop back behind a pre-determined “height” - such as 25-30 yards from the opponent’s goal, or to the top of the circle on the opponent’s side, or behind the half-way line -- before attempting to regain possession.

When a line of confrontation is established during the match preparation, the basic strategic approach is for the team to drop back in transition and begin defending when the ball reaches the confrontation line. However, the moment of transition creates a few more tactical dilemmas for players to assess. What if the closest defender doesn’t pressure the ball and a counter-attack results? Or, if the closest defender correctly pressures the ball, should his/her teammates still drop back to the line of confrontation? Or, what if two defenders are in the vicinity of the ball and both are needed to eliminate a counter-attack or a quick forward pass. And, how do these decisions affect the reorganization of the defensive block?
Bunkering
While all teams must defend deep in their own end from time to time during a match, at the extreme, a team may simply defend “en masse” behind the ball and attempt to score goals with as few passes and as few players committed to attack as possible. This strategy of “bunkering and counter-attacking” is often chosen when one team is significantly overmatched by their opponent; are playing numbers down because of a red card, fitness, or injury; are playing to protect a lead; or attempting to keep a clean sheet. Ironically, this strategy can also work well for a good team playing against a tactically naive opponent, or a counter-attacking team that must secure a result.

Part III: Restarts
Given the paucity of goals in soccer, restart situations often present some of the best scoring opportunities in close games. Accordingly, it is almost standard for the top teams to utilize live and still image technology in their scouting to prepare for upcoming opponents. Nothing is left to chance, particularly at the club level, where time will be appropriated to restarts prior to each game.

There are five formal restart situations and three special situations that must take into account. The five formal restarts are goal kicks; corner kicks; indirect free kicks in the defensive, middle and attacking thirds; direct free kicks in the defensive, middle and attacking thirds; and throw-ins. The three special situations are drop balls; “ceremonial” restarts, following an injury or other non-foul stoppage; and the goalkeeper’s punt or kick from open play when a quick release is not desired or possible. Obviously, each situation requires more or less training time, with restarts inside and around the penalty area requiring considerably more preparation than, for example, drop balls, which may never feature in a formal training session.

In Closing…
The purpose of this article was to explain soccer in terms of its tactical phases, or parts. It is hoped that the descriptions can impact both spectators and coaches.

For the casual parent-spectator, the intent is to help cultivate a more mature youth soccer crowd that can better-appreciate the developmental value of “good” soccer. In striving to replace “kickball” with an appreciation for Pele’s “Beautiful Game,” the “better” teams may still lose a few contests to tactically limited opposition, but the overall quality of the soccer spectacle and the passion of the participants will surely be elevated above today’s average fare.
For coaches, the natural extension of this article relates to team preparation and the degree to which their players are capable of understanding and executing a sophisticated tactical approach to soccer. By helping each player understand their positional role and responsibilities within a system during each phase of play, the obligation to think and act under pressure can be transferred from the coach to the players… Ultimately, if coaches work towards developing independent thinkers who understand the game, we will all enjoy some relieve from the prescription coaching that is a demotivating plague on our youth.

One final thought. As Rinus Michels pointed out in *Teambuilding*, the process of molding a competent team starts with the preparation of young players many years earlier. Good technical players who can solve small-group tactical problems will always be capable of playing different styles of soccer, as we can observe from the global nature of the top professional leagues. It remains a truism that the goal of youth soccer is to produce generations of passionate, insightful players with a comfort level for the ball in the hope that a few special players with exceptional individual qualities will emerge. As long-time US Soccer National Staff Coach Jay Hoffman would take pains to remind us, talking tactics is important, but the three most important cornerstones of any tactical discussion will always be technique, technique, and technique!
Modeling the National Style of Play at the State Level

In virtually all successful soccer countries, the national teams’ style of play is a reflection of the quality of play in the top professional league and sets the standard for all other levels to emulate. Whether the evolution of the national team’s style is a reflection, or the result, of the top league’s play is always an interesting debate, particularly in this era of global transfer markets and freedom of movement. In either case, the outcome is a collective national uniformity in the way members of an educated soccer society, both players and spectators, view “good” soccer.

Playing style can be separated into two distinctly opposite approaches. On one side are those who play the ball forward as early and as often as possible and who rely on combative players to harry opponents and cause turnovers: The DIRECT STYLE. Norway is still the most visible and rigid proponent of this style today, and Ireland successfully played direct soccer in the 1980's and early 1990's. It is a style closely associated with the northern European countries and British coaches in particular. No country has ever won a men’s World Cup using this style, and on the entire American continent only Canada, as a result of its’ British and Norwegian coaching influences, has periodically played this way. Norway is the only women’s team to win a World Cup (1991) or an Olympics (2000) playing this style.

The alternative approach is to build the ball forward through the midfield third whenever possible: The INDIRECT STYLE. The United States men’s and women’s national teams play an indirect style, as do all U.S. youth national teams. Countries as diverse as Argentina, Brazil, France, Holland, Iran, Italy, Japan, Korea, Nigeria, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Zaire all play a ball possession style. The indirect style certainly does not
preclude players from passing the ball directly past the midfield, or directly into space behind the opponents’ defense, but there is a distinctly slower, more purposeful rhythm to the passing movements when an obvious route forward is not available. Players are challenged to make intelligent decisions, utilize space effectively, and solve tactical problems with skill and insight, and those players who can keep possession in a purposeful way, often under pressure, are prized for their skill. Men’s World Cup winners Uruguay (1934 and 1950), Italy (1938, 1982 and 2006), Brazil (1958, 1962, 1970 and 1994, 2002), Germany (1954, 1974, 1990), Argentina (1978, 1986), England (1966), and France (1998) all triumphed playing an indirect style.

Application and Characteristics of the National Style
Since the United States national teams have, for years, adopted indirect soccer as the national style of play, there is an opportunity, a cultural obligation perhaps, for those of us involved in youth soccer to emulate the national team heroes and train players in the national style. There are two significant obstacles that must be overcome if Ohio is ever to succeed in evolving an educated soccer population and a more cultured average player: the knowledge base of coaches and the education and support of parents.

Coaching
Indirect play is risky. There is no question that young players will lose goals trying to pass or dribble the ball out of the back and play through the midfield, and that fewer chances will be created in attempting to intelligently possess the ball in the attacking half. Soccer is a game of mistakes, and young players must be allowed to learn slowly by taking technical and tactical risks and by expanding their ability to recognize and solve basic tactical problems. Possession of the ball is the most important aspect of indirect play and young players must be challenged to find ways to break pressure by dribbling and passing rather than simply whacking the ball as far downfield as possible. Before age twelve, the major emphasis of player development programs must be to improve individual skills, with particular emphasis on dribbling skills. Only during the teen years should coaching begin to seriously emphasize the development of team play and winning as a key element of participation. Sadly, however, as long as our youth coaches at all levels continue to place winning above player development and resort to direct play under even minimal pressure, learning through risk-taking and experience will never allow us to develop future generations of players who are comfortable with the ball and capable of playing constructive soccer.

Coaches who work to develop intelligent soccer players in the indirect style understand that:
- The players must be given the initiative to make decisions in games, not the
coaches or the parents.

- Technical skills must be primarily developed in tactical contexts.
- There are risks inherent in trying to keep possession that will result in the loss of goals.
- Mistakes are a positive aspect of learning to play soccer and the best learning environment is one that balances success and challenge.
- Winning is more important to vicarious-living adults than to their young children. Young players quit soccer because they don’t get to play, they don’t have fun, they don’t get any better, and they feel they are under too much pressure to perform. While young players do enjoy competition and winning, winning, per se, is not very important to young players.

Coaches working to develop players in the indirect style appreciate that:

- Players should be competent in dribbling the ball away from pressure and into space, controlling the ball on the ground, and kicking and dribbling the ball with a number of different surfaces. Many competent teenager players will also be proficient in dribbling past opponents.
- Players should also be competent at heading the ball, slide tackling, and controlling the ball with a number of different surfaces out of the air.
- Players should turn their bodies sideways-on whenever possible when receiving passes, and should always look backwards and forwards before receiving the ball in order to “read” the game and make faster decisions to pass, dribble or shoot.
- Players should be encouraged to either penetrate forward with the ball, or possess the ball, based on the movement and position of defenders and the likelihood of gaining territory or creating scoring chances.
- Players should view the goalkeeper as a crucial link in the build-up out of the back.
- Players should understand when and how to change the rhythm of the game by passing the ball to penetrate or possess.
- Players should understand when and how to change the rhythm of the game by running with the ball to penetrate or possess.
- Players should understand how and when to move into new supporting positions in order to help the team penetrate forward or circulate the ball and keep possession.
- Players should understand how to create space away from well-positioned defenders when playing with their back to goal.
- Defenders should be comfortable playing even-numbers in the back in order to add numbers to the attack.
- Players should understand how to function in organized positions, and how to play in relation to small groups of players linked by long or short passes.
• Players should understand when and how to interchange positions in order to unbalance defenses.
• Players should understand when and how to arrive in attacking spaces.
• Players should understand when and how to combine with other players in a variety of ways.
• Players should understand how to defend individually.
• Players should understand how to defend in a zone.
• Players should understand how to attack and defend offside space.

Coaching Comments and their Messages

One of the more bizarre arguments offered by hardened opponents of the small-sided games movement was, “We are not interested in developing players for the national team; we are only interested in developing players for our high school team!” Why would anyone not want players to improve? Imagine a math teacher proclaiming that he or she was only interested in preparing students to count change! While it may have been a Luddite (or Pleasantville) response, it did reflect an understandable mindset for people with only local community and high school soccer to relate to. Since the majority of high school teams play kickball (direct soccer) with poor players (some even play kickball with good players), those with no alternative frame of reference and a high school coach with little or no soccer background will naturally hold closely to their own vision of what soccer is. The more isolated these groups are from Premier soccer, the Olympic Development Program, college and the professional game, the more skeptical they seem to be that something much better is possible or desirable. The evolution of adults, and then players, in these areas may be a longer-term challenge, but it is one that deserves our perseverance!

Much of what players hear from the sidelines and in practice reinforces the “fear soccer” characteristic of the direct style and perpetuates their alienation from the skills and playing habits that will help them grow as intelligent and passionate soccer players. This insidious form of brainwashing also helps to explain why our average player in OYSAN has never developed the competence to fully enjoy the game and compete into adulthood.

What follows is a sample of more typical comments heard at soccer games and practices, and the underlying messages that are being bluntly relayed to the players about their parents’ and coaches’ respect for and understanding of the game.
1. **Comments**: Get it out of here! / Great kick! / Get rid of it! / Boot it long! / Don’t pass it backwards, you might lose it! / Don’t ever pass the ball across the field!

**Message**: Don’t take any chances in trying to keep possession. You are going to be under pressure, so get the ball as far downfield as early as possible so that the ball is away from our goal. Don’t take the time to look for a teammate and don’t worry where the ball ends up. Just make sure you don’t lose possession and risk conceding a goal.

**Style conflict**: If we never ask young players to take risks and try to play constructive soccer at an age when results don’t matter, when will they ever develop the skills, insights and confidence to play in control, at speed, and under pressure?

2. **Comments**: Don’t play with it! / Too many touches! / Don’t hold onto the ball!

**Message**: You don’t have the skill to dribble the ball to create space or buy time for a pass, and we might lose a goal if you are dispossessed. Better to play safe and clear the ball forward out of our end.

**Style conflict**: Dribbling is the most important skill a young player can learn because they will never have another chance to become a creative player.

3. **Comment**: Never kick the ball like that! / Where did you learn that? / Always kick the ball the way I have shown you!

**Message**: There is only one correct way to kick the ball and that is not the right way. I have all the answers and you must follow my direction because I am the coach and I am in charge. If you don’t do as I say, you will sit on the bench.

**Style conflict**: Creative players solve problems in novel ways. They do the unexpected and use whatever insights they possess to arrive at solutions. A good pass, for example, is one that arrives at its target and can be used to the teams’ advantage, regardless of how it was delivered. When we tell players they “cannot” use technique in a unique way, we are chipping away at their ability to think for themselves and perpetuating a culture where players have limited skills and no creativity.

4. **Comments**: Stay back! / I told you not to cross the half-way line! / Everyone stay in your positions! / What are you doing up there?

**Message**: Soccer is about rigid positioning. Defenders have to stay in the back to protect the goalkeeper and never cross the midfield line. Only players in attacking positions get to attack the opponent’s goal. As there is no build-up, there is no need for players to move into the next line.

**Style Conflict**: Encouraging players from the defending and midfield lines to join the attack is a critical element of mature team play. At the youngest ages (U-8 and below),
the movement of players is in relation to movement of the ball. As players get older, intelligent spacing (U-10) and then formal positioning (U-11 and above) will determine who plays with who, and when. Teams that restrict the movement of players between lines do not create numerical advantage around the ball and are generally hamstrung in their ability to possess the ball during the building up and in attacking.

5. Comments: You should have passed that ball to “Smurf” instead of shooting! / You should have shot at goal instead of passing to “Smurf!” / I told you to do drop back and never play offside! / I don’t care how far offside the player was going to be! / Always kick the ball the way you are facing! / I told you to kick the ball out of bounds when you are under pressure on the sideline!

Message: There is only one interpretation of how to play the game and it is mine! Learn the way I want you to play and be robotic in your play. This team is a machine, I am in control and you need to play your part.

Style Conflict: Players have to make choices in soccer and these choices have to become independent of coaches or other adults. Many times, players make poor decisions because of technical limitations, sometimes it is because of good play by the opponents, and at other times it is due to limited tactical awareness. Players who are asked to think about their decisions and analyze their choices will become more coach-independent over time. Coaches who practice realistic soccer situations will also help to develop independent thinkers. Players who are constantly told what to think will come to resent the coach’s domineering style when (s)he is discovered to not have all the answers.

6. Comments: That’s a card, Ref! / Offside! / Hey Ref, call it both ways! / Unintentional Ref; that’s not a foul! / That’s a handball, Ref! / Didn’t you see that, Ref? / Ref, you suck! / What game are you watching, Ref? / Where did you get your badge, Ref, the Mickey Mouse club? / How many times, Ref?

Message: “I know everything about the interpretation of the rules and the referee, players and parents need to know it.” By attacking the credibility of the official, we send the message to the players and the parents that referee abuse is acceptable. When we serve as a negative example, or condone a vocal parent or player’s negative outbursts by not rebuking them, we are demonstrating disrespect for the game. We also send a strong
message to the players that appealing decisions and questioning the authority of the official is an acceptable part of a soccer education.

**Style conflict:** Refereeing is a matter of opinion and many new referees are just learning to understand the nuances of officiating what can be a very fluid game. There are good and bad referees, good and bad players, and good and bad coaches. Everyone makes mistakes and everyone should be allowed to learn their craft without undue abuse. Coaching players to react to any call by taking a quick restart or by organizing the defense is a much more proactive and productive approach to dealing with refereeing decisions. Without a playing background, a refereeing license, and years of experience in soccer, questioning calls is usually the last action an inexperienced coach should undertake. Coaches who truly work from a developmental bias, view positive and negative refereeing decisions as an integral part of the game that present valuable learning opportunities for their players. Life is not always fair and the most important words a coach can teach are, “In the opinion of the referee!”

In summary, the safety-first, fear-driven, direct, approach to youth soccer develops players who are uncomfortable and, probably, incapable of playing constructive soccer. Only through more focused, less pressured coaching, and more appropriate small-sided games, can we provide an environment where our young players have the opportunity to play soccer as adults in our national style.
The First “Golden Age” for Soccer Skill Learning: Ages 8-12

For some reason, adults – some who can’t even kick a ball – think it’s perfectly okay to scream at children while they’re playing soccer. How normal would it seem if a mother gave a six-year-old some crayons and a coloring book and started screaming? “Use the red crayon! Stay in the lines! Don’t use yellow!” You think that child would develop a passion for drawing? Most important, parents must realize that playing sports is a way for children to express themselves. Claudia Reyna, in More than Goals.
The First Golden Age for Skill Development

When young soccer players reach the age of eight, nine or ten, they have generally accumulated four or five years experience with the sport and have developed some basic skills and ideas about playing the game. Before U-9, the main goal of coaching is to provide an enjoyable entrée into soccer and ensure enjoyment and fun. In short, the role of the coach is to facilitate games and activities for the enjoyment of the participants.

For many players, reaching eight, or nine, or ten (every child is a little different) means new priorities and a new appreciation for their personal responsibility to the game. For the first time, these players begin to realize that winning and losing are tied to ability, not just effort; and that skills must be refined for improvement to be noted. The role of the U-10/12 coach is therefore critical in shaping the technical range and tactical insights of the players; the role of the coach evolves from facilitator to teacher.

The period beginning around eight or nine is considered the beginning of the “Golden Age” for skill learning for a number of reasons. Intellectually, U-10’s are transitioning from concrete to abstract reasoning, which allows them to think ahead and start to use space away from the ball. Because they are “older,” U-10’s will listen to and comprehend more complicated directions. They will carry out repetitive “drill” activities and better appreciate their purpose. They will spend time working on their skills alone, if they are motivated. They will appreciate the importance and thrill of learning new skills and refining existing techniques. They will begin to identify with national or international heroes and begin to emulate their skills and personalities. They love to compete and will strive to win. They begin to equate fun with improvement. They begin to equate their personal identity and self-esteem with their perceived ability and feedback from significant others, including peers, parents and coaches.

Coaching pre-teens is a formidable task that requires a growing number of skills on the part of the adult. These skills include practical soccer knowledge, the ability to demonstrate and inspire by example, an understanding of child psychology, an appreciation of purpose relative to the age and ability of the players, and the ability to teach for long-term growth. With that said, the elements outlined in this chapter are all within the technical and tactical range of U-10/12 players in Ohio, although it should be acknowledged that in some parts of the world, and some parts of the United States, players of the same age might be more or less advanced. Our goal is to develop basic skills and ideas about the game at an age when players are highly receptive to instruction and highly motivated to learn.
**Player Assessment**

The technical sections of this course represent a checklist for assessing the performance of individual players against the capabilities of the “ideal” (perfect) performer. It is important to appreciate that some players will be quite advanced in some areas and not others. Some players will be capable of executing some skills against one level of opponent, but not another. Some players will be able to execute techniques in a drill, but fail to apply them as skill when under pressure from live opponents. Some players will be competent, but not outstanding. Some players will be technical, but not skillful, while others will be skillful, but not technical. When viewed as a developmental continuum, all players will score high in some areas and low in others. Coaching “well” means assessing players’ abilities and insights and slowly moving them towards the “ideal” of the top level in the time available.

**Assessment of Individual Technical Issues**

Possessing the insight to observe players for individual and collective abilities is the first step on the path to planning a relevant age-appropriate training program. The following pages present questions and comments on the range of skills and abilities present in the vast majority of U-10/12 players. The information should be used to situate the U-10/12 player on the developmental continuum.

**Contacting the Ball**

*Question: How many ways can the player kick or dribble or control the ball?*

*Comment:* There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The U-10 player should be challenged to expand their range of surfaces and “textures” (lofts and spins) in an ongoing process of technical refinement. The U-12 player should become proficient in using a majority of surfaces - ideally, but not necessarily with both feet - and be challenged to expand their ability to use different textures. The coach of the motivated U-12 player should intensify the refinement of these basic contacting skills through warm-up activities and tactically challenging practice games.

*Question: Is the player two-footed?*

*Comment:* The bottom line is that most top players only use one foot; however, it is not a detriment to be able to play on both sides of the body. To develop players who are at least comfortable with two feet, juggling and dribbling practice should involve both feet and
young players should be encouraged to experiment with all six contact surfaces. For the more motivated players, juggling, kicking and Coerver’s* are essential “homework” activities for developing a comfort level with the ball.

*Coerver’s are individual dribbling moves named after the Dutchman, Wiel Coerver, who created the training program.

**Passing**

*Question: Does the player purposely pass the ball towards teammates?*

*Comment: Players should be asked to control the ball and look for teammates rather than simply kicking the ball forward or to safety. It is often necessary to remind young players that the goalkeeper is always the most open player on the team when they are under pressure or no obvious forward passing options are available. At this age, the “thinking” behind a passing decision is often more telling than the outcome and young players must be encouraged to attempt to maintain possession by passing (or dribbling) even as their limited range of techniques fail them.*

*Question: How far can the player kick the ball accurately?*

*Comment: Players should be encouraged to pass within their technical range. Technique, physical strength and the size and weight of the ball all impact kicking distance and accuracy. In the small-sided games environment, shorter passes should be expected and encouraged, with aimless “boots” to safety, or to the opposition regarded as wasted possessions.*

*Question: Does the player use disguise and deception when passing?*

*Comment: Encouraging more frequent passing (and dribbling) with the outside of the instep will help improve the level of subtlety in young players. The use of the hips and shoulders to deceive opponents can also become a feature of play for these players.*

**Shooting**

*Question: Does the player shoot, when possible?*
Comment: A player’s first thought in possession should always be “Can I score a goal from here?” Goals in practice should be wide and high enough to encourage shots from various distances and angles and young players should be reminded that the objective of the game is to score more goals than the opponent in the time provided. Shots can be placed, driven, chipped, curled, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, or improvised using any other legal body part.

**Ball Control**

**Question:** How many touches does the player take to control the ball?

Comment: The earlier a player decides what to do with the ball, the faster they will play; however, many U-10/12 players will not look up before they have secured possession because their skill level will not allow them to concentrate on two things (the ball and the next action) at once. Time, space, vision of the field, and a comfort level with the ball are the most important elements in reducing the number of touches necessary to control the ball.

**Question:** Does the player understand their tactical options before the ball is controlled?

Comment: Vision for “What next?” is a key element in the positive use of the “first touch,” and coaches should challenge players to appreciate their immediate tactical situation as early as possible during play. Coaching should attempt to develop “pre-control” vision whenever possible by asking players to assess the availability of space around them before receiving a pass.

**Question:** Does the player open their body when controlling the ball?

Comment: Players who open their body towards the opponent’s goal before receiving the ball take fewer touches and play faster. Players should only open their bodies when they have space to do so. This skill begins to emerge at the U-10 level, although some younger players can grasp the concept.

**Dribbling**

**Question:** Does the player have the skill to dribble out of pressure, or past an opponent?

Comment: Dribbling practice should include basic moves to turn away from pressure and also ideas on how to use changes in pace and direction to maintain possession or beat an opponent. As the most artistic aspect of soccer, young players must not be discouraged from learning to dribble the ball through early and repeated failures. At this age, repetition in isolation and in live tactical contexts is critical for developing confidence, touch and creativity.
At the U-12 level, evading pressure and beating opponents are critical skills for complementing the passing game as team play emerges. Rapid and abrupt changes in speed and direction and the use of the shoulders and hips to disguise intentions become critical subtleties as dribbling sophistication responds to the improved skills of defenders. The most difficult opponents are “wrigglers” who are unpredictable in their dribbling, and players should be encouraged to combine dribbling moves and become comfortable making multiple, unexpected changes in direction.

**Question: Does the player run into open space with the ball?**

Comment: “Speed dribbling” is important for making defenders commit to the ball, for shortening passing distances, for changing the rhythm of play and for creating shooting possibilities. Players must be encouraged to quickly dribble the ball into open space and also encouraged to use the outside of the instep when speed dribbling.

**Question: Does the player maintain vision of his/her options, or dribble with their head down and rarely look to pass or shoot?**

Comment: While it is important to encourage young players to quickly dribble the ball into open space, players must also be aware of their passing and shooting options. Given that the ball can travel faster when kicked, it is important to encourage dribbling players to look up during those moments when they are in open space and not touching the ball, and when they are momentarily clear of opponents.

Particularly at the U-12 level, improving speed of play through cleaner technique and developing tactical insight is the primary role of the coach. Dribbling should now be considered very much a means to an end, with the balance between shooting, passing and dribbling (decision-making) related to time and space and position on the field.

**Heading**

**Question: Does the player purposefully head the ball?**

Comment: Heading becomes more common by U-10 and practicing and playing with lighter balls will help overcome any initial fears of performing this difficult skill. It should also be stressed that there is NO medical evidence supporting the claim that heading a soccer ball is dangerous to the participants.
Question: How diverse are the player’s heading skills?

Comment: Heading to goal and heading away from goal are basic applications of heading technique. In addition, the use of heading as a passing technique and as a response to crossing situations should also be stressed as viable applications of this difficult skill. The timing of heading techniques, relative to the ball’s pace, trajectory and time of flight, is the critical “next level” for most U-12 players, and beyond. In practice, soccer balls should be kicked in the air over varying distances, whenever possible, to approximate realistic match situations, with hand-serves utilized as seldom as possible.

Tackling

Question: Does the player simply kick at the ball when an opponent is in possession?

Comment: Defending the ball can and should include efforts to regain possession. The U-10/12 player who routinely kicks the ball away should be encouraged to use their body and the open space away from the opponent to attempt to win the ball back.

Question: How comfortable and capable is the player in using sliding techniques?

Comment: In addition to tackling for the ball, sliding skills can be used to score goals, keep balls in play, to reach wayward passes, to cross balls from the goal line, and to extend reach. Players should be instructed in tackling techniques with both the inside and outside legs (relative to a defender), and in sliding to maintain possession, pass, or clear.

Creativity

Question: Does the player improvise when solving tactical problems?

Comment: Those players who use non-standard techniques to solve tactical problems are demonstrating signs of creativity. A “good” pass gets to its target at a pace that can be controlled, regardless of the technique used in the delivery; similarly, a goal is a goal, regardless of how it was propelled into the net. Young players who improvise should be encouraged, not scolded, and it must be remembered that for young players, the “thought” behind an action is generally more telling than the outcome, which is often limited by experience and technical range. Three elements impact creativity. The first is technique, the second is tactical awareness, and the third is confidence. Players who have the audacity to think and act out of the ordinary may be future stars of the game, and, while their techniques will be refined over time, their willingness to take risks must be nurtured at every level. Creative players are not always the easiest individuals to coach.
Assessment of Individual and Small Group Tactical Issues

Support

Question: Does the player move with the game or do they pass and stand still?

Comment: Young players should not be restricted in their movements on the field and moving “with the game” should become a natural extension of passing. Passing sequences involving two and three players should be encouraged and can be expected from some advanced U-10’s. These elementary forays into combination play will become essential elements of mature play. At the U-10 level, an increase in the speed of ball circulation, coupled with a more controlled rhythm of play can be expected from the players.

Question: Does the player move into open spaces when not in possession?

Comment: Players should be encouraged to “find” new supporting positions away from teammates rather than be told where and when to move. By U-10, many children have started to think more abstractly about the use of space away from the ball; however many others do not yet demonstrate this spatial awareness, making large-group positional instruction irrelevant for the vast majority of U-10’s. The more advanced U-10’s will appreciate supporting positions to the side of the field (width) and also downfield and ahead of the ball (depth).

Playing with “Back to Goal”

Question: Is the player more comfortable when facing the opponent’s goal than when playing with their back to the opponent’s goal?

Comment: Many players are uncomfortable checking and receiving the ball with their back to goal. While older players will ultimately be selected to attacking positions based on this skill, all U-10/12 players should regularly experience this challenge as part of their soccer education. Before the ability to play effectively with “back to goal” develops, players must be aware of the tactical possibilities for receiving the ball to feet or into open space; they must learn to identify passing lanes or open spaces; they must learn to judge when and how to run for the ball; they must learn how to lay the ball off to a supporting player or turn with the ball; and they must learn how to disguise their movements and intentions. Because of the reduced technical and tactical demands, small-sided games create the only natural environments that provide repeated experiences in learning these difficult aspects of soccer.

At the U-10/12 ages, games of 6v6 and 8v8 provide many opportunities to expose young players to this important and difficult skill within positional structures for the first time.
Playing with back to goal is an important concept for both midfielders and forwards and it is a grave disservice to encourage young players to play kickball, or exclusively direct soccer at this age.

**Combination Play**

*Question: Does the player look to combine with teammates?*

Comment: At the U-10 level, an increase in the speed of ball circulation (passing) and a more controlled rhythm of play can be expected features of play. By U-12, those qualities can be taken a step further with the expectation of more purposeful combination play. Combination play includes any pass or sequence of passes involving two or more players; and also dribbling movements created by the runs of teammates. Combination play can be used as a means of penetrating or possessing.

**Use of Space**

*Question: Does the player move with the game when not in possession?*

Comment: In general, attacking players try to open up the field in order to create possibilities for small-group play, while defenders try to limit the amount of time and space available for the attackers to penetrate by passing or dribbling, or change the point of attack to a more open area. On both sides of the ball, individual players have responsibilities to move with the game relative to their positions. At the U-12 level, attacking players should be instructed how to play with their immediate small group or stay away from the ball and defenders should be instructed how to move as a defensive block. The attacking concepts of support, width and depth are critical applications of spatial awareness, as are the defensive concepts of support, balance and compactness.

**Individual Defending**

*Question: Does the player try to recover the ball when possession is lost?*

Comment: When the ball is lost, a defender’s first instinct should be to try to win it back. If this is not possible, they should either look to recover goal-side behind the ball, or take up a new position for counter-attacking possibilities.

The better U-12 players will grasp the concept of “marking” and “picking up” opponents when not in possession and they will recover behind the ball as a group. However, in deference to the technical difficulties associated with attacking play for most U-10’s, any concentrated emphasis on “team” defending should be delayed until at least U-12.
Transition

Question: Does the player mentally transition after a change in possession?

Comment: When the ball turns over from the attack to the defense or from the defense to the attack, the game offers chances to demonstrate awareness of two very important concepts: immediate recovery of the ball and immediate counter-attack to goal. U-10/12 players should be encouraged to react as quickly as possible to any change in possession.

At all levels, speed of transition is often a critical element in the scoring and preventing of goals.

With that said, it is beneficial to use live practice activities that incorporate transition to and from goal. The issue of vision is closely related to transition in that a player’s first attacking thought should be to score a goal. If scoring is not possible, passing to the player furthest forward within range is the next best option.

By extension, the players immediately in support of the ball can also be assessed on how well they react to help their teammates create scoring chances in transition. In defense, does the player immediately try to recover the ball, or do they stop playing when the attack is over and the opponent has the ball?
The Principles of Play

“At the latter stages of the youth level (U-10 through U-12), the goal is to provide training and game environments that promote the continued growth of ball skill, an increased game awareness, and an appreciation for taking calculated risks in the attack through the 3 v 3 to 9 v 9 game model, all in an environment that the players enjoy. The small-sided game model is an effective method for developing ball skill and game awareness because it increases opportunities for players to have contact with the ball and to both attack and defend without the tactical regimentation that can occur in 11 v 11 soccer.” US Soccer, Best Practices For Coaching Soccer in The United States
The Principles of Play

The Principles of Play

The Principles of Play

The game of soccer is a continuous series of small-sided games that connect different groups of players together as the ball circulates around the field. Individual players will connect with different small groups by passing the ball, by dribbling the ball, or by moving without the ball into other areas.

All invasion sports, such as soccer, break down into basic tactical principles that players learn to “read” as they gain experience with the game. Understanding the basic principles of play also help coaches guide and appreciate the movement and decision-making of their players.

Soccer’s principles of play are divided into attacking and defending concepts and young players should learn to apply these principles as a natural response to repeatedly experiencing typical game situations.

Transition to Attack
In general, defenders try to position goal-side and inside of their opponents to protect the middle of the field. At the moment of transition, when possession is regained, the opponents are often spread out and in exposed defending positions. Therefore, the first priority when coming into possession and transitioning from defense to attack is to look for counter-attack opportunities.

Transition to Defense
In contrast, when attacking teams lose possession, they may be caught open to a counter-attack and initially unable to defend effectively as a team. Therefore, the first priority when losing possession and transitioning to defense is to minimize any immediate threat of losing a goal.
Because drills typically STOP at the moment of transition, the most critical tactical situations are often eliminated from the natural learning process.

Principles of Attack

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Penetrate</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Try To Score</td>
<td>Move To Help The Player With The Ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try To Move The Ball Forward</td>
<td>Combine With Teammates Around The Ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Move To Pull Defenders Out Of Supporting Positions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Depth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create Space From Side–to-Side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Draw Defenders Out Of The Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create Space From Front-to-Back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide Options For Forward Passes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide Options For Safe Backward Passes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessing Individual Decision-Making

- Whenever possible, players should look to shoot at goal.
- Players who can’t score, should look to pass to someone who can.
- When scoring is not an immediate possibility, players should look to pass or dribble the ball forward and keep possession.
- When there are no immediate forward options, players should look to pass or dribble the ball sideways or backwards to maintain possession.
- Only when there are no immediate constructive options and the threat of losing a goal is high, should the players look to simply kick the ball away.

Assessing Group Decision-Making

- Upon regaining possession, teams should look to counter-attack.
- If the counter-attack stalls, or there is no opportunity to counterattack, teams should look to spread out, possess the ball, and wait for opportunities to go forward.
- To effectively keep possession, teams should create space between the front and back of the team and from side to side.
The goalkeeper is typically the most open supporting player on the field and should be the safety pass for anyone under pressure and facing their own goal. Otherwise, the players at the back of the team serve the same role.

**Principles of Defense**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Balance</th>
<th>Compact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Try To Win The Ball Back</td>
<td>Move To Help Defend Around The Ball</td>
<td>Squeeze Towards The Ball From The Sides</td>
<td>Squeeze Towards The Ball From Back and Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try To Stop Forward Progress</td>
<td>Follow Attackers Running Into Dangerous Spaces</td>
<td>Defend Space And Opponents On The Weak Side</td>
<td>Manage The Depth Of The Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manage Offside Tactics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessing Individual Decision-Making**
- When dispossessed, players should first look to win the ball back.
- If winning possession is not possible, players should try to stop forward progress:
  - When close to goal, opponents will look to shoot.
  - When further from goal, opponents will look to pass or dribble the ball forward.
- When it is not possible to stop forward progress, defenders should try to “steer” the ball into teammates or into a more constricted space.

**Assessing Group Decision-Making**
- Upon losing possession, teams should look to eliminate or minimize the threat of a counter-attack.
- If there are positive numbers in the immediate area around the ball, “pressing” forward provides the first opportunity to recover possession.
- If pressing is not possible - or desirable, players should recover behind the ball and squeeze in from the sides to form a defensive “block.”
Once organized into the block, individual defenders can start to look for their opportunities to intercept passes, pressure opponents into mistakes, or win the 1v1 duels.

Training the Principles of Play

The table below shows the value of naturally developing the principles of play through small-sided games between 1v1 and 4v4. The optimal game for teaching each principle is noted in bold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attack</th>
<th>Defense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1v1 / 2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
<td>Penetrate</td>
<td>Pressure 1v1 / 2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Support 2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
<td>Width</td>
<td>Balance 2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
<td>Depth</td>
<td>Compact 2v2 / 3v3 / 4v4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast, there is no educational value to 23 players standing stationary in a line waiting to run unopposed through a series of stationary cones to shoot at an open goal once in 15 minutes.

Let The Games Teach!
Teaching Technique I

If we were to pay more attention to the questions of balance and body adjustment we would help almost every player to improve. So perhaps the most important thing is to impress on both coaches and players that movement of the feet, balance, and adjustment of the body are the basic ingredients of the game. Watch an average player and there will be no adjustment of the feet before he (she) plays it. In this situation, the ball is dictating to the player.” Ron Greenwood, in Soccer Coaching the European Way

“No two situations are the same in a game of soccer, and this is why players have to develop their technique by actually playing. There is no “ideal” technique; how a player kicks the ball with his (her) instep will always depend on the options available to him (her), his (her) position on the field, and the positions of his (her) teammates and opponents.” Bert van Lingen, in Coaching Soccer: The official coaching book of the Dutch soccer association

“If people knew how hard I have to work to gain my mastery, it wouldn’t seem wonderful at all.” Michelangelo, in Howard Ferguson’s, The Edge

Naked Eye Analysis

All techniques can be broken down into three phases for analysis:

- The Preparation phase: what happens before contact?
- The Contact phase: what happens at the point of contact?
- The Follow-Through phase: what happens after contact?

Since any live application of technique is mostly improvised from a picture-perfect ideal, and some techniques are a combination of two or more standard techniques, the breakdown of basic skills is viewed in terms of mechanical principles, rather than a skill-
by-skill dissection. In this first skill training session, the general mechanics of kicking techniques are also analyzed phase-by-phase as an example of the “Naked Eye” process.

**Teaching Technique: Kicking Skills**

A “good” pass gets to its target in a manner that can be easily controlled or used by the receiver. There are six surfaces of the foot used for kicking: the inside, the outside of the instep, the sole, the instep (laces), the heel, and the toe.

There are (give or take) nine standard kicking techniques: short passes (including passes with the inside and outside of the foot, and passes with the sole, heel and toe), driven balls at goal, driven balls for passing, lofted balls, chipped balls, bent balls, full-volleys, half-volleys, and side-volleys.

**Mechanics**

**Preparation Phase**
- Does the player adjust their balance and orientation during the approach to the ball?
- Is the plant position (angle and distance) of the non-kicking foot reasonable for the technique being performed?
- Does the player adjust their body shape prior to contact and relative to the desired technique and trajectory?
- Does the player have good toe position (angle and alignment) relative to the desired technique and trajectory?
- Does the player have good hip alignment and rotation relative to the desired technique and trajectory?

**Contact Phase**
- Does the player have a good contact point, relative to desired technique, trajectory and spin?
- How is the player balanced during the contact phase?
- Does the player generate power through knee extension or leg extension?
- Does the player use the opposite arm to help balance?
- Does the player watch the ball on contact?
Follow-Though Phase

- Does the player follow through in relation to the desired technique, spin and trajectory?
- Is there positive weight transfer?
- How is the player balanced during the follow-through phase?

Teaching Techniques: Dribbling Skills

There are three types of dribbling

- Dribbling into open space.
- Dribbling away from an opponent to maintain possession.
- Dribbling past an opponent to advance the ball.

The key technical questions for assessing dribbling techniques are:

- Does the player demonstrate a comfort level with the ball while dribbling?
- Does the player use the front foot (little toe) when dribbling forward?
- Does the player use changes in pace while dribbling?
- Does the player use changes in direction while dribbling?
- Can the player execute the standard 180-degree turns: inside of the foot, outside of the instep, sole, step on and over, drag back, Cryuff?
- Can the player execute the basic step-over options (outside foot over the ball, inside foot over the ball) with both feet?
- Does the player use feinting movements with their body to unbalance and beat defenders?
- Does the player use faking movements with the ball to unbalance and beat defenders?
- How fast can the player execute dribbling techniques?
- Does the player combine two or more dribbling techniques to create space or beat opponents?
Mechanics

- How flexible are the player’s ankles?
- How agile is the player in quickly turning and changing direction?
- How close is the ball dribbled to the body?
- What is the position of the ball (inside foot / front foot) relative to the dribbling foot?
- Which way(s) does the player turn when under pressure?
- How far is the ball from both feet when turning?
- Where is the player’s body weight before, during and after changing directions?
- Does the player adjust their center of gravity when turning or changing direction?
- Does the player adjust their shoulders and hips to help in turning?
- Does the player move their shoulders and hips to help beat an opponent?
- How does the alignment of the player’s plant foot affect their balance and agility?
“Rather than adhering to current soccer programs that concentrate on the execution of different skills, the modern coach should teach pupils to understand all aspects of the game. Too much drill will kill the young players’ innate potential! Over time, coaches should carefully and progressively develop important capacities, including perception, analysis of game situations, and correct decision making under stressful conditions.

Yet a coach cannot foster these qualities through verbal instruction alone. When coaches continually use verbal instruction, they become the main actors in the coaching theater, thereby curtailing or even killing the active participation of the players. Usurping the active role is detrimental to the players’ effective learning. By involving the players, on the other hand, a coach obliges them to think, to collect information, to organize the collected information and come to conclusions, to evaluate and judge, to imagine, invent, and create new moves and combinations.”

Horst Wein, in Developing Youth Soccer Players

“Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. I never did anything worth doing by accident, nor did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work.”

Thomas Edison, in Howard Ferguson’s, The Edge

Technique II focuses on the mechanics of controlling the ball on the ground and out of the air; the mechanics of heading the ball from weight-bearing and non-weight bearing positions; and, weather permitting, the mechanics of sliding to play the ball.
Teaching Technique: Ball Control Skills

There are three basic ball control applications:

- Balls rolling towards the body, requiring use of the inside of the foot, the outside of the instep or the sole of the foot.
- Balls bouncing towards the body, requiring use of the inside of the foot, the outside of the instep, or the thigh, stomach, chest or head.
- Balls coming out of the air, requiring use of the inside of the foot, outside of the instep, the top of the instep, or the thigh, chest, or head.

There are two basic techniques for controlling a soccer ball

- Wedging techniques, where the ball is wedged between a body part and the ground as it lands.
- Cushion Techniques, where the ball is “caught” by a body part as it falls.

Generally, players should be assessed on:

- Their demonstrated range of techniques.
- Their vision to control the ball into an undefended space.
- The number of touches required for the next action to take place.
- Their balance and body control throughout the controlling movement.
- Whether “control and pass” can become one action.

Mechanics

- Does the player move into the ball’s line of flight, or close enough to make solid contact with the ball?
- Is the player balanced and “light” on their feet prior to ball contact?
- Does the player select an appropriate controlling surface and technique for the trajectory and speed of the ball?
- Does the player select the controlling surface early enough for the trajectory and speed of the ball?
- Is the player balanced in one leg on contact, where appropriate?
- Does the player maintain eye contact with the ball at the moment of control?
- Does the player angle the controlling body part to form a sideways on-vee (>) with the ground when using wedge techniques?
- Does the player begin to move their body into the target receiving space prior to contact when using wedge techniques?
- Does the player present the controlling body part towards the ball when using cushion techniques?
- Does the player start to withdraw the controlling body part prior to contact when using cushion techniques?
Teaching Technique: Heading Skills

There are (give or take) four basic heading situations in soccer:
- Heading with the feet on the ground.
- Heading with the feet off the ground.
- Diving to head.
- Glancing headers.

In all cases, heading can be used:
- To clear the ball away from danger.
- To score a goal.
- To pass to a teammate to maintain possession.

Mechanics
- Does the player keep their eyes open and on the ball through contact?
- Does the player make solid contact with the forehead?
- Does the player use their arms to generate power and to maintain balance?
- Does the player adjust their body to achieve skillful solutions to non-standard situations?
- When heading with the feet on the ground, does the player step forward towards the ball to produce a backswing?
- When heading with the feet on the ground, does the player coil backwards away from the ball to produce a backswing?
- When jumping to head, does the player take off from one leg?
- When jumping to head, does the player take off from two legs?
- Does the player use their arms to help generate force and balance?
- When jumping to head, does the player turn their upper body sideways to the opponent?
- When jumping to head, does the player contact the ball at the highest point of the jump?
- When jumping to head, does the player achieve a follow-through?
- When diving to head, does the player’s shoulder alignment help them find the target?
- When diving to head, does the player land in a safe manner?
- Do the player’s mechanics remain consistent as the ball travels over greater distances?
- Do the player’s mechanics remain consistent as the ball travels along different trajectories?
Teaching Technique: Sliding Skills
(This session is optional based on field and weather conditions)

There are (give or take) seven basic applications of sliding techniques:

- To dispossess an opponent with the leg closest to the opponent.
- To dispossess an opponent with the leg farthest from the opponent.
- To maintain possession by hook sliding.
- To extend kicking range and score a goal.
- To extend passing range and connect with a teammate.
- To clear a ball running across the body.
- To cross a ball running across the body.

In most cases the ball can be kicked with either the inside leg or the outside leg, relative to the path of the ball.

The five contact surfaces used in conjunction with a slide are:

- The top of the foot (instep).
- The inside of the foot.
- The outside of the instep.
- The sole.
- The heel.

Mechanics

- Is the player too close to the ball when attempting to slide?
- Is the player too far from the ball when attempting to slide?
- Does the player recline their torso when initiating a slide?
- Does the player extend the kicking leg towards the ball from the knee when connecting with the ball during a slide?
- Does the player tuck the inside leg under their body when performing any slide where the outside leg is used to contact the ball?
- Is the kicking surface making solid contact with the ball during the slide?
- When performing a hook slide to maintain possession, does the player quickly regain their feet?
- Is the player able to perform sliding skills with both legs?
- When sliding to cross or clear the ball, does the player open their hips towards the intended target before contact?
- When sliding to cross or clear a ball with a 90-degree pullback, does the player fall over to help produce a solid contact?
Analysis of Dribbling Techniques: A Practical Workshop

Dribbling and ball control are the technical foundations of soccer. While the best attacking players are capable of beating opponents, every soccer player should be able to run with the ball and maintain possession by dribbling out of pressure.

There are three basic applications of dribbling techniques:
1. Dribbling into open space (Speed Dribbling)
   a. Attacker running into open space
   b. Attacker between the defender and the goal
2. Dribbling with a defender between the attacker and the goal
   a. Attacker faced forward (1v1 Dribbling)
   b. Attacker facing away from goal (Dribbling for Possession)
3. Dribbling with a defender to the side of the attacker (A combination of Speed Dribbling and Dribbling for Possession)

There are six potential surfaces of each foot available for dribbling a soccer ball:
- Inside of the foot
- Outside of the foot
- Instep (laces)
- Sole
- Heel
- Toe

Technically, there is no one “correct” way to dribble a soccer ball; however, some ideas can help improve individual play.

Basics…
- In general, players should learn to dribble the ball with the little toe.
- In general, players who change the angle of the ball while in possession are less predictable when they decide what to do next (Pass, dribble, shoot).
- In general, all players should be able to stop the ball using the inside, outside, and sole of both feet.
- In general, all players should be able to turn the ball with the inside, outside, and sole of both feet.
In general, all players should be able to roll the ball sideways, backwards, and forward with the sole of both feet.

In general, all players should be able to “step over” the ball from “inside to outside” and from “outside to inside” with both feet.

In general, it helps to dribble the ball in a way that allows the attacker’s body to act as a shield between the ball and the defender.

In general, players who frequently change direction while dribbling for possession (“wrigglers”) are more difficult to dispossess than those who run in straight lines.

In general, players who can change speed (fast to slow / slow to fast) while dribbling are more successful at maintaining possession or beating an opponent.

More Details…

Mechanically, it is the head and shoulders that initiate turns and twists.

Mechanically, the distance from the feet to the ball and the distance from the head to the feet dictate the speed and efficiency of any turn.

Tactically, players who can disguise their intentions by faking with their shoulders, hips, head, or footwork, are more likely to successfully keep possession, beat an opponent, or simply create space.

At the younger ages, encouraging players to develop an aggressive attacking attitude towards dribbling is more important than tactical correctness.

Creative attacking attitudes towards dribbling will never be rekindled once the critical period for development (5-12) has passed.

While we can and should help young players develop a wide range of dribbling “tools,” the application of these tools under pressure will always be a reflection of personal expression and confidence.

Task #1

Choose any basic turn (i.e., inside / outside / sole / step-over) and select one person to demonstrate the technique to the group.
Break the technique down into its basic teaching steps by using the following technical and mechanical elements to help guide your analysis.

The key issues are 1) Footwork, 2) Balance, 3) Agility and 2) Weight Transfer.

- Foot placement relative to ball?
  - Kicking foot?
  - Standing Leg?
- Ball movement from foot surface to foot surface (one foot)?
- Ball movement across feet (two feet)?
- Use of head and shoulders to initiate a turn?
  - Distance between feet and ball?
  - Relation to running speed?
- Lowering of the base (center of gravity) to change direction?
- Efficiency of turn, relative to running speed?
  - Diagonal cuts vs.
  - 90 degree turns vs.
  - 180 degree turns vs.
  - Multiple changes in direction? (see below)

**Task #2**
Choose any combination of two dribbling moves and repeat the analysis process.
Analysis of Kicking Techniques: A Practical Workshop

Some thoughts…..

A) Amongst the many ways to kick a soccer ball are the following….

- Short straight passes
- Short flicks
- Bending balls (high and low)
- Driven balls (straight)
- Cut backs
- Chipped balls
- Flighted balls
- Lifted balls
- Full volleys (front, side, overhead, over-shoulder)
- Half volleys (front and side)

B) Everyone -- in regular soccer -- has two feet.

C) There are six surfaces used for kicking a soccer ball:

- Inside in the foot
- Outside of the foot
- Instep (laces)
- Heel
- Toe
- Sole

D) The ball can be contacted when it is:

- Stationary
- Rolling, bouncing or flying away from the kicker
- Rolling, bouncing or flying towards the kicker
- Running, bouncing or flying across the kicker
- Flying above or behind the kicker
E) Finally, the ball can be contacted in different ways to make it move with a desired spin and in a desired direction. In general, the ball can be contacted:

- Through the center
- Through the bottom half
- On the top half
- High or low on the side

With so many variables affecting performance, it is often helpful to consider the Mechanical Principles underlying the range of kicking techniques in order to determine the underlying cause(s) of a breakdown.

**Here is your first challenge...**

1. Form small groups of between two and four coaches.
2. Introduce yourselves to each other.
3. Select one of the skills noted in section (A) above.
4. Analyze the technique using the following mechanical categories
   - Power: How is power created?
   - Balance: What must the player do to maintain balance at the point of contact?
   - Direction: How does the player control the direction of the kick?
   - Spin: How does the player control the spin of the ball?
   - Leverage: What joints are actively involved and how are they utilized to help create power and spin?
   - Body Rotation: How is body rotation controlled, or used to aid the execution of the technique?

**And the second challenge...**

The analysis of technique can be broken down into three phases for “Naked Eye Analysis.”

- The Preparation Phase: What happens before contact
- The Contact Phase: What happens at the point of contact
- The Follow-Through Phase: What happens after contact
Choose another technique and break the skill down using the Naked Eye Analysis criteria.
Soccer Fitness

It’s possible at any time during a player’s career to get into top physical shape, but you can’t teach skills to an old player. Youth coaches should keep in mind that individual skills need to be nurtured from an early age. Players who haven’t mastered the fundamental skills become frustrated because the game gets too difficult for them as they move into higher levels. **Claudio Reyna, in More than Goals**

"We don't demand that the youth teams win, we demand that they play good soccer. We don't use the word, 'winning.'" Not until after the players reach age 16 is there fitness training. That's when we start to concentrate on the technical, tactical and physical requirements they need for the first team. Before that age we mainly play soccer. Everything is with the ball. We work on skills and some tactics." **Jose Ramon Alexanco, Director, Barcelona FC youth program,**

"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. You need to be in the right place at the right time, not too early, not too late." **Johann Cruyff, Dutch Master.**
**Economical Training**
The basic elements of soccer fitness encompass speed, acceleration, agility, balance, power, strength, coordination and flexibility. In particular, the expansion of anaerobic capacity and recovery from anaerobic activity are critical to the demands of modern soccer. However, in situations where a team practices only once or twice each week and, particularly, in situations where the players are pre-pubescent, training to enhance performance in specific fitness areas is impractical.

At the U-10/12 level, competitive small-sided games and individual technical activities with the ball are viable and efficient alternatives for developing the fitness and motor patterns specific to soccer. With “economical” training, technique, tactics, psychology and fitness are trained together as often as possible. In other words, forget the lap running! In all non-professional environments with limited training opportunities, soccer fitness can and should be derived from active play.

**Fitness Development and Puberty**
The training emphases for U-10/12 players are skill development and tactical insight. Significant gains in aerobic capacity are not possible until after puberty. As children turn into adolescents, their hearts, lungs, muscles and the supporting circulatory system grows in relation to their new size. Only after this change, is it recommended to systematically train the cardiovascular and muscular systems for the specific intent of developing soccer fitness and conditioning.

**Soccer Fitness Explained**
The purpose of the cardiovascular system is to provide oxygen to the body. During exercise, the heart, lungs, blood, and blood vessels work together to supply oxygen to the skeletal muscles. Within the skeletal muscles, small energy processors called mitochondria use the oxygen to break down the chemical ATP and release energy. In the process of producing energy, the skeletal muscles produce carbon monoxide (CO2) and water (H2O) as by-products of metabolism. When we are sitting or walking at a comfortable pace, the body can supply all the energy we need and
we can sustain the activity indefinitely. When we start to move at higher intensity levels, such as from jogging to running to sprinting, the ability of the cardiovascular system to supply oxygen, and the ability of the skeletal muscles to process ATP is determined by genetics and training.

The simplest way to think about exercise intensity is along a heart rate continuum, with aerobic activity at the low end and anaerobic activity at the other. At the aerobic end of the intensity continuum, our cardiovascular system can supply all the oxygen we need to meet the demands of our activities. The least aerobic activity we participate in is sleeping and measuring our pulse first thing in the morning is the best indication of our resting heart rate. Resting heart rates can range from the high 30’s to 80 beats per minute (bpm) for adults and can be as high as 60 to 100 bpm for adolescents.

As we move from a state of rest to a state of maximum exertion, we release more adrenaline, our heart rate increases, our respiration rate increases, our blood pressure rises, we sweat more heavily, we breathe off more CO2, and we move from the comfort of aerobic metabolism to the physical stress of anaerobic metabolism.

At the anaerobic end of the intensity continuum, our cardiovascular system cannot meet our body’s demands for oxygen for very long without periodic recovery at a lower intensity level. Sprinting is the most anaerobic activity a soccer player has to undertake, and full speed can only be maintained for about 60 seconds without rest.

Maximum heart rate (MHR) is estimated by subtracting the person’s age from 220, although every individual is somewhat unique. Heart rates can be used to determine training intensity and recovery speed. As a general rule, the higher the level of competition, the faster the game is played and the more time is spent towards the high end of the aerobic-anaerobic continuum. This should be reflected in the intensity of training, particularly at the higher levels. For example, a 25-year-old international level player (MHR: 220-25 = 195) may spend the balance of a match with an average heart rate of around 170 bpm. This means he/she was working at 87% (170/195) of their MHR for the entire 90 minutes. In soccer, it is the player’s ability to quickly and repeatedly recover from high intensity exercise that determines soccer fitness.

When we work at high intensity for an extended period, the skeletal muscles begin to burn because of another by-product of anaerobic metabolism: pyruvic acid. When there is insufficient oxygen to bind with pyruvic acid, it becomes lactic acid. The accumulation of lactic acid will eventually cause us to slow down or stop, depending on the type and duration of the activity. When we slow down to a more manageable intensity, the body uses oxygen to remove lactic acid. This explains why we pant and take deep breaths for a few minutes while we recover from high intensity exercise; are out of breath from not warming up; or are out of shape. The act of breathing heavily after high intensity exercise is the visible sign that the body is in a state of recovery from lactic acid build-up. This is called oxygen debt. As we become fitter, the skeletal muscles do not produce lactic acid as quickly and our muscles become more tolerant of its presence. Also, as we become fitter, the body’s ability to remove lactic acid becomes more efficient, making the
recovery process from oxygen debt much less of a barrier to prolonged high intensity performance.

**Soccer Fitness**

Recovery is the most important aspect of soccer fitness. Soccer is a dynamic activity that involves moving at speeds that vary between walking and sprinting. Playing soccer also involves falling, jumping, sliding, colliding, twisting and turning, and running forwards, sideways, and backwards. Each movement takes energy; further taxing the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems. It is the ability of players to repeatedly work and recover that determines soccer fitness. While advanced players and professionals train to develop specific aspects of fitness in conditioning sessions, the focus of youth soccer is the development of skill, and the recommended way to train soccer players under the age of thirteen is through the vehicle of small-sided soccer games.

**Fitness and the Practice Variables**

The coach can control the intensity of these small-sided games by manipulating the playing variables: The number of players in the game has an influence on the intensity; the amount of space available to the players has an influence on the intensity; the quality of the players has an influence on the intensity; the conditions imposed on the players has an influence on the intensity; the personality of the coach has an influence on the intensity; the objective of the game has an influence on the intensity; and the amount of time allotted to play has an impact on the intensity.

**Interval Training**

Interval training is the preferred method of preparing soccer players at all levels. Intervals of play and intervals of rest are used to tax the cardiovascular system and allow for recovery. High intensity work intervals raise the heart rate into the high end of the anaerobic zone and promote oxygen debt. This periodic stress on cardiac muscle causes the heart to become stronger and pump blood more efficiently. As the heart muscle becomes more efficient, it pumps out more blood per beat. This is why fitter people generally have lower heart rates.

As a rule, the fewer players in a game, the longer the relative recovery period should be. For example, early in the season while stamina is being developed, a playing interval of 60 seconds might be followed by a rest interval of 180 seconds, which is a work to rest ratio of 1:3. Playing 1v1, with four support players would be an example of a game using this work to rest ratio. Similarly, if we were to play 2v2, with 4 supporting players for 90-second intervals, the work to rest interval would be 1:1. Larger-sided games, such as 5v5, have longer work intervals (5-10 minutes) because there are more opportunities for
players to rest within the game. A recovery interval matching the playing interval would be acceptable with four teams, although having three teams playing in rotation would be a much better option. In this case, each team would play for ten minutes and rest for five, for a work to rest ratio of 2:1.

One final thought on interval training. When players are in a rest phase, they can be asked to participate in light activity as their recover. Active rest can involve the players in small keep a-way games, such as 4v1, or they can perform ball work, such as juggling or practicing Coerver moves.

In summary, improving the fitness levels of youth soccer players is most effectively achieved by playing soccer in competitive and challenging soccer games. When playing the game is the practice focus, all the natural elements of soccer fitness are allowed to emerge naturally. And by competing to a winning score, or for a known period of time, the essential motivation for competitive play is created.
Basic Elements of Goalkeeping

The goalkeeper is part of the team. He (or she) is neither more nor less important than the other members of the team. Sometimes (s)he will win a game for his (her) team and sometimes (s)he will lose one; on other occasions his (her) performance will not affect the result one way or the other. As part of the team, the goalkeeper must receive the attention (s)he needs to be able to function at his (her) best. The goalkeeper’s task is highly complex, and cannot be viewed in isolation from the task of the team as a whole. Frans Hoek, in Soccer coaching: The official coaching book of the Dutch soccer federation

The Young Goalkeeper as a Soccer Generalist

One of the tenets of youth training is to develop soccer generalists first and positional players second. Young players who have an affinity for playing in goal should be trained primarily as field players for roughly two-thirds of each practice, and play on the field for no more than one-half of each competitive match.

Scheduling additional practice time for goalkeeper-specific training is encouraged, provided the training is predominantly skill-based.

Incorporating the Goalkeeper into Team Training

Goalkeeping development, as with any other position, entails the learning of basic techniques and the recognition of typical tactical situations. Whereas technical development can and should be achieved outside of team training sessions, tactical understanding is enhanced by repeated exposure to realistic soccer situations. For this
reason, young goalkeepers should not be ignored during game-play and the team can and should be used to train the goalkeeper. The following elements constitute the foundation of goalkeeper training.

**Starting Positions and Angles**

The goalkeeper who stands on his or her line when a shot is taken will not be well placed to cover the spaces close to the posts. Conversely, the goalkeeper who stands further out of the goal will be susceptible to losing a goal over their head. Such is the dilemma of the goalkeeper’s starting position for all match situations; in short, the goalkeeper’s starting position is always a compromise between narrowing the angle for shots towards the posts and being able to defend high shots or crosses.

Starting positions are related to:

- The overall qualities (physical, technical, tactical, psychological) of the goalkeeper.
- The overall qualities (physical, technical, tactical, psychological) of the defenders.
- The overall qualities (physical, technical, tactical, psychological) of the attackers.
- Which team has possession.
- The position of the ball on the field.
- The offside tactics employed for that match (U-12).

**Mobility and Footwork**

An old soccer adage is that when the ball moves, so too should the players. This is particularly true of goalkeepers, who must move their feet to get their hands to the ball. Goalkeepers should be light and agile on their feet and constantly adjusting their position in order to react quickly to predictable and unpredictable situations. In general, goalkeepers should move their feet in the fastest way possible to get to the ball, but should be balanced and in a ready position when a save is required. This explicitly implies that crossing the feet in order to run to a ball is perfectly acceptable and desirable. It is the balance at the end of the movement that counts!

**Handling**

Shots and crosses can arrive at the goal area in many guises. If no collapse or dive is necessary to make the save, the possible range of techniques falls into two categories:

- Shots or crosses below waist height (where the fingers are pointed down)
- Shots or crosses above waist
height (where the fingers are pointed up)

For shots and crosses below waist height, the following situations should be trained:

- Balls rolling on the ground
- Balls bouncing into the lower body
- Balls driven into the lower body

For shots and crosses above waist height, the following situations should be trained:

- Balls driven at the chest
- Balls driven at the head
- Balls driven above the head
- Balls driven or floating across the shoulder
- Chipped balls
- Balls arriving in the air from the center of the field
- Balls arriving in the air from the side of the field

Collapsing and Diving

When the ball cannot be easily caught, or the pace or angle of the ball demands added caution, the goalkeeper should “go to ground” to make the save. The following saves should be trained.

- Forward dive
- Kick-out
- Standard collapse
- Power dive and catch
- Power dive and deflection
- Smother

Wide Situations

Essentially, soccer balls can arrive into the goal area from the flank in the air or on the ground and a general rule of thumb for wide situations is that the goalkeeper’s main area of responsibility is the near post. The following considerations impact the goalkeeper’s starting position and movement.

- The age and experience of the goalkeeper.
- The qualities (technical, tactical, physical, psychological) of the goalkeeper.
- The technical qualities of the attacker(s).
- The distance from the ball to the goal.
- The angle of the ball to the goal.
- The position and movement of teammates.
• The position and movement of attackers.

**Break-a-way Situations**
A general rule of thumb is for the goalkeeper to “stand up and be controlled” as long as possible and react to the attacker’s movements. When an attacking player is 1v1 with the goalkeeper, the following considerations come into play. The age and experience of the goalkeeper.
• The qualities (technical, tactical, physical, psychological) of the goalkeeper.
• The likelihood of help from a teammate(s).
• The angle of the attacker.
• The speed of the attacker.

**Distribution**
The goalkeeper’s distribution choices should be judged on the same basis as a field player’s passing choices. The following are standard techniques for goalkeeper distribution.
• Bowling
• Sidearm/Overarm
• Basic Passing Skills (feet)
• Full-volley (punt)
• Half-volley
• Side-volley
Meet OYSAN Director of Coaching Tom Turner

Tom Turner came to the United States from Scotland in 1978 to play soccer and pursue a college education at Cleveland State University. While in Scotland he played for Scotland’s schoolboys and for Glasgow Rangers Youth Team. He was offered professional “terms” by Rangers FC, Celtic FC and Clydebank FC. In 1984, after playing in three NCAA tournaments, completing bachelor’s degrees in education and psychology and a master’s degree in education (exercise physiology emphasis), he began teaching at North Olmsted, OH where he helped coach the high school to two state finals and a 25-0 Division I State Championship in 1985.

OYSAN State Coach Steve Parker recruited Turner to the ODP Staff in the spring of 1985. Turner was hired to coach at his college alma mater in 1987. He stayed for six years and posted the highest wins total in school history (14) in 1990. During that time Turner also earned his USSF "A" license and NSCAA Advanced Diploma, joined the Region II Boys ODP Staff under Fred Schmalz, and began conducting state level coaching education courses in Ohio-North under Dr. Tom Nash.

In 1993, Turner was asked to serve on the USSF National Instructional Staff and, in 1994, was appointed by then USSF Director of Coaching Bob Gansler to the technical report staff for the World Cup with specific responsibility for observing Sweden and Switzerland at the Detroit venue. The departure of Timo Liekoski for the U.S. Olympic and World Cup Teams in 1993 signaled Turner's appointment as part-time State Director of Coaching for Ohio North.

Citing "An inability to recruit," Turner left Cleveland State University in 1993 to teach and coach at Hawken School in Gates Mills, OH. The school became a state contender under Turner, with four final four and three state final appearances in seven years. After five years with the Region II Boy’s ODP staff, Turner was asked to take over from the departing Dean Duerst (University of Wisconsin-Madison) as head coach of the girl’s ODP program in 1994. Building the quality of the staff, improving professionalism, becoming more sophisticated in playing indirect soccer, reaching out to the regional
coaching network, and working to bring national respect to the region were seen as Turner's primary concerns in 1994. Those goals had been achieved when Turner stepped down in the fall of 2004. Turner's seven-year pursuit of a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction (Sports Pedagogy) became a reality in May of 2001 when he graduated from Kent State University. His dissertation, entitled A Constructivist Approach to Coaching Education: A study of learning experiences, described the challenges facing inexperienced recreation level soccer coaches and their K-3 players.

Turner has served as assistant coach to April Heinrichs with the U-16 Women’s National Team (WNT) at the 1997 Sports Festival in Blaine, Minnesota; assistant coach to Jay Hoffman with U-20 WNT at the 1999 Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada; and Head Coach of the US Youth Soccer Adidas All-American team during their 2001 and 2005 European Tours.

Turner earned the National Youth License in 2000 and was appointed to the US Youth Soccer National Instructional Staff following the appointment of Tom Goodman as US Youth Soccer Director of Coaching in 2002.

Turner has served as Chair of the Region II Coaches Committee, as a member of the Region II Coaches Symposium Committee, and as a member of the Midwest Regional League Committee. He currently serves as a member of the US Youth Soccer National League Committee and as Chairman of the US Youth Soccer National Coaching Committee. At the local level, Turner was the first Commissioner of the OYSAN State League.

In the fall of 2008, Turner achieved a unique honor when he was appointed as head coach of the Region II Boy’s ODP program, becoming the first person to have led both regional ODP programs.

An avid writer of soccer articles, Turner has presented at the US Youth Soccer Workshop, the Region II Coaches Symposium, the NSCAA Convention, the USSF Staff Workshop, and at numerous state association workshops and lecture series in the US and Canada. He has been appointed to teach USSF “A,” “B,” and “C” courses since 1993 and continues to implement local curricular innovations and advocate for modern approaches to teaching soccer.

Tom Turner was born in Greenock, Scotland in 1960 and lives in Richmond Heights, OH with his wife Barb. In his spare time he plays golf, soccer, reads books, gardens, and plays the guitar.