



Academy System

Arizona Youth Soccer Association realizes the Academy approach is vital if our players and clubs want to keep producing and competing against high caliber organizations from other states.

What are Academies?

An Academy is when a club/association keeps a collection of players within an age group as opposed to placing them on individual teams. Some Academies do not “cut” or “tryout” younger players and all children that want to play can participate. Arizona Youth Soccer Association highly recommend that clubs keep all 7U, 8U, 9U, 10U players who try-out to stay within the program.

The Academy is a concept that is based on the club systems from around the world. There are no “A, B and C” teams with these Academies as players in pools and can be moved back and forth according to their progress and development throughout the seasonal year. The emphasis is on development and FUN!

Currently clubs throughout the majority of the United States have players attend a one or two day “tryout”. Players are then placed on teams according to their abilities or cut from having the opportunity to be coached and play/train within a competitive environment.

Player Development

The Academy approach accommodates and accepts that younger players still have a lot of learning and growing to do within the game and recognize that putting them in an environment where they would receive more training than matches is more developmentally appropriate. This approach would allow clubs to keep players in larger pools, foster development over winning, and let these young players play freely. Each clubs Academy would then play non-results oriented competition against other clubs that would be organized in Academy Play Dates.

Success is a byproduct of player development. There is a saying that without technique there’s no tactics. With the Academy approach, the focus on improving the individual player’s technique will be emphasized because players will be in an environment where they will not have to worry about making a poor decisions or fear of failure during the game.

Young players need to get a “feel” for the game; to learn to play instinctively. Young players will be allowed to show their abilities in an environment in which they will still be playing against competition without the “fear” of losing a game. At the same time young players will learn to make decisions in a game like setting while getting more touches on the ball, thereby improving their technical development. If clubs are going to produce better teams in the future, then clubs must first produce players that are better technically.

Arizona Youth Soccer Association clubs presently have players aged 6,7 “tryout” to make a club team. Clubs put these young players through the psychological rigors of making a club team when they are so young. There is absolutely no way that anyone can predict how good a 6/7 year old is going to be. So many players get missed when we have “tryouts”, which can cause these young players to get discouraged if they don’t make the level. This can cause a snowball effect, as parents become disgruntled and look to move to another organization so that their child can play on the so called “A” team.

Coaches have roles and responsibilities as well as taking care of our actions without letting egos undermine our real purpose. With young players it is the coaches’ job to develop every player without discretion of ability. How many times have we seen late bloomers? An Academy will provide an environment that will allow these young players to experiment and play without the fear of losing a game. The Academy will foster an environment where players will look to be more creative, take risks, become better with the ball and have more fun.

Young players are dropping out of the sport of soccer by the time they are 13 or 14 years of age. Research has shown that 70% of all kids drop out of sports. The main reason soccer is no longer fun (according to players who drop out) is due to pressure to win or failure due to an emphasis on results over development and fun. The excitement of playing games also wears off when they become teenagers due to the pure fact of having so many games so early in their young soccer careers.

Adult: Coach & Parent Development

Are adults involved with the youth soccer game more concerned about the outcome of a single game or season and failing to see the bigger picture? Or is the message received by soccer authorities confusing because nobody really knows how to measure success?

Currently in Arizona Youth Soccer, the model used for U10 is measured on a results based format. With each passing season the amount of problems reported within these age groups. It is usually due to sideline behavior by the coach or parents and the pressure to win. When observing teams that play under pressure to win games, the quality of soccer and the player’s confidence in taking risks does not prevail.

The majority of adults in today’s society played sports growing up in a non structured environment. They could play without any pressure, without adults dictating their every move and would solve problems for themselves. Society has changed in many different ways resulting in fewer opportunities for children

to engage in “free play”. In order for us to keep developing technically efficient soccer players and creating teams that play without fear of taking risks, we have to create a happy medium where everyone can experiment with the game.

Youth soccer clubs are now businesses with the common theme among clubs being “if we don’t create winning teams at 7 and 8 years old, parents become disgruntled and take their child to another organization”. Realistically does it matter who wins at these young age groups? Do 16 year olds remember their season record from when they were 7 years old? The measuring tool that should be used for youth team/club success at the youngest age groups is overall player development and retention rather than wins and losses. Coaches go through a season in fear of not just losing games but whether they are going to please the parents. Instead the focus should be about developing player’s enthusiasm and love of the game.

“Academy Soccer” may cause adults to perceive that this is simply going to U7/8/9/U10 recreational soccer, which is not the case. Actually, the Academy format is a bridge between Recreational and competitive geared for players that aspire someday to play at a higher level.

The academy approach would allow for a “true” club environment to be created. Players would not necessarily be placed onto a team but would play with various different players and allow them to experience different competition during training and play dates.

This will also lead to coaching development as now club Directors of Coaching can “mentor” a new/young coach in this environment. Take away the emphasis of “results” and these young coaches will be able to teach these young players. We are now getting more young people that are familiar with the game but they don’t want to coach in clubs due to the pressure to win games. If each club has an Academy then we can get young coaches that have played the game at a higher level to teach without the fear of some parent looking at their watch and/or the result at the end of the game.

This Academy approach is “Player Centered” and not “Coach Controlled”. Soccer is a player centered game. With the Academy approach young players will be in an environment where they are challenged at their own pace. More players need to be included as opposed to excluded in these younger age groups and this format will do just that.

Below is an excerpt from the US Soccer Federation “Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States”:

“When we place children in travel soccer too soon the emphasis is subtly being placed on the team result and winning the game, rather than on the individual player’s performance. If the team doesn’t win, then it doesn’t get to play in this league or that division or in this particular tournament. Thus, coaches feel pressure and start recruiting bigger, stronger kids that can help secure the victory now. They start playing more of a long ball game and placing the emphasis on direct play. They want the ball out of their end as quickly as possible. What the coaches should be doing is building out of the back, keeping possession of the ball, encouraging risk takers and flair and placing the emphasis on the individual’s

technical abilities. Are the coaches allowing an environment to flourish that allows the players to make mistakes because they know long term development is what they are really after? The answer is no, because there is too much pressure to succeed at every step along the way. If this coach loses too many games then he risks losing his players to a more “successful” team. The parents will want to move their child to a ‘winner” or get rid of the coach and bring in (in some cases hire) another coach. Thus the environment becomes individually stifling and the player’s creativity takes a back seat to the winning mentality”.

Referee Development

During the first 2 years of a young referee’s career 7 out of 10 quit officiating games. One of the big reasons they drop out is due to verbal abuse or grief dealt by adults. Referees feel it is not worth the money, time or hassle to help in developing the game.

In the Academy approach, young referees will gain invaluable experience in calling a game and not worry about the outcome.

We need to provide an environment for our young referees to learn while managing a quality match. The need to retain future referees is vital. No Referees=No Games!

How to Establish an Academy

Following club tryouts for 7U/8U/9U/10U rather than having A,B,C teams selected a club will select a pool of players. This pool will train each week and then play other clubs. It is preferred that the Academies keep all the players and continue to develop them instead of cutting players and discouraging them from playing the game.

The “No Cut Policy” is highly recommended and every player who wishes to join should be accepted unless the numbers exceed the playing space available and/or coaching staff is limited.

Clubs can determine their own method for admitting players into the Academy. Clubs should be clear that the players within their own Academy are those that desire to play at a higher level.