



U-10 & U-12 ACADEMY/SELECT
COACHING MANUAL

November 2005

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This manual is the third component of a comprehensive set of guidelines for player development prepared by the Georgia Soccer Coaching Program. The guidelines deal with players in the U-5 to U-19 ages, but the main emphasis is to cover the player development continuum from U-5 to U-12, the important formative years and the stage related to small-sided soccer. The three components are:

- 1. Club Player Development Manual.** This is an operational manual for clubs. It provides guidelines on clubs' coaching infrastructure and addresses the club's Mission Statement, coaching organizational structure, roles of the Club DOC, and recommendations for the clubs' recreational and select programs (can be found in www.gasoccer.org click on COACHES and then click on DOCUMENTS and scroll to find it).
- 2. KINS Implementation Manual.** The coaching manual for U-5 through U-8 players that emphasizes the skill of dribbling and lays the foundation for individual creativity (can be found in www.gasoccer.org same place as above).
- 3. U-10/U-12 Academy/Select Coaching Manual.** The coaching manual for U-9 through U-12 players. This is the 'Golden Age' of player development, the stage of technical foundation and the dawn of tactics.

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A. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

This manual is for coaches who work with players in the U-9 through U-12 age groups. These age groups are often coined as the ‘Golden Age’ of player development, where players’ increased capacity for learning and endless enthusiasm makes for an extremely fulfilling experience for students and teacher alike.

It is also a crucial stage in player development, the cementing of a technical foundation and the dawn of tactics. Youth clubs must pay careful attention in programming for these age groups. Their long term impact cannot be overstated.

Youth coaches must look at player development through ‘bi-focal vision’. They must understand the present needs of their age group while, at the same time, retain the long term vision of the ideal end product. Without this bi-focal vision, it would be hard to design a road map for a developmentally appropriate program that allows players to reach their full potential.

Nowhere is it more so than with U-10/U-12’s. Coaches in charge of U-10/U-12’s must have well developed observational skills for assessing the current needs of players while keeping a patient perspective on long term goals. It’s the overriding message behind this manual, a coaching manual specifically targeting a stage that is both the golden age and the beginning of the journey of player development.

This manual is player-centered, as opposed to being coach-centered. A coach-centered approach would focus on teaching coaches generic coaching methods and training principles with the aim of creating a better coach. A player-centered approach focuses more on the needs of the player and guides the coach towards a better understanding of what is appropriate for a specific age group and level. It is hoped that the reader of this manual will become not just a better coach, **but better at coaching U-10/U-12’s.**

Soccer in this country is still searching for a culture, a soul. What type of a soccer culture will eventually take roots here? What kind of a player development philosophy will we grow to embrace? Will our youth soccer experience be dominated by endless travel across the country to play countless games? Will our game at the youth level succumb to the instant gratification of wins at the expense of practicing and teaching the fundamentals? Are we going towards national championships at U-10 and a win-at-all-cost mindset? Will we label ten-year-olds as ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, celebrate the former and allow the latter to drift away from the game? Can we afford to do that? Are we burning out our players and contributing to the ever increasing attrition of children dropping out of organized sports at the ripe old age of thirteen? Or can we evolve into a culture that appreciates what it takes to develop well rounded, skillful players. Can we become an embodiment of a teaching to ‘play’ philosophy rather than teaching to ‘compete’? Do we recognize the difference between teaching players how to play instead of how to run plays? Do we understand how the latter can hinder players from reaching their true potential? These are very critical questions. For, once a culture is embedded,

it's nearly impossible to change. It becomes the *modus operandi*, the “that's how we do it here” standard response of resistance to change.

Youth coaches might not realize it, but they have a huge impact on the eventual shape of the American soccer culture. And coaches of U-10/U-12's are in a position to impact a generation of players for life and, one dare say, have an obligation to the game. Coaches of U-10/U-12's can fire up the imagination of players, can motivate them to watch high level soccer and get them hooked, can inspire them to work on individual technique on their own. U-10/U-12 coaches can *create* the American soccer culture. It is hoped that this manual will inspire coaches to do just that.

There is no one way to teach, nor one definitive method that guarantees success. There is no magic formula in player development, nor are there any short cuts. There are, however, certain principles backed by research or experience that should help guide youth coaches. Some of those principles form the backbone of this manual. But just as we preach on instilling individual creativity in players, the same applies to coaches. The best coaches are those who understand the basic principles of teaching soccer, but are also not afraid to question norms and to tweak and add their own personal touch. It's also important for coaches to travel and study the game and be open to new ideas. It's not enough to compare one's players and one's methods to the club next door. The soccer universe is much bigger than that.

It is worth repeating here that the most important skill for a coach is the ability to observe and analyze. In practical terms, it means that coaches need to assess their own players and apply whichever recommendations that make sense for their specific needs. And this assessment process must be continuous. As the years pass and player levels improve, what was true once may no longer apply.

Although this manual is aimed at the competitive level players, most of the principles are applicable to all the levels of the youth game. It's not about finding the next Freddy Adu or Mia Hamm. It is about helping coaches become ‘teachers’ of soccer who can inspire players embarking on a road of self-discovery. Most players will not reach the lofty heights of professional soccer, but all of them can benefit from a child-centered approach to development. If we can raise the level of the average player, we will bring more enjoyment to their experience, will likely keep more of them in the game, and will probably produce more Freddy Adu's in the process.

Lastly, before we dive with both feet into the world of 10-year-olds, it behooves us to reflect on the type of players currently produced by the American soccer system. Although the senior and youth national teams have made significant and impressive progress in the world stage, knowledgeable coaches agree that the American player still lags behind the leading nations in terms of technique and tactical awareness. These deficiencies, coupled with the propensity for quantity over quality in youth soccer is a concern of many experts. And the roots of the problem are planted as early as the U-10 stage. Below is what some of our top level coaches are saying:

The following are excerpts from the Region III ODP Staff report from the U-15's trip to Mexico:

“Technique: We were sorely lacking as a group in this area compared to the opposition”...“ I can honestly say in all three games I could not identify a Mexican player who did not have a comfort level on the ball anywhere he received it, anywhere on the field, with or without pressure. This series of games showed us the players we brought, who were big, strong, fast, and athletic, could not contribute to the team because of their limitations with the ball....”

“Tactics: We had difficulty maintaining possession when we did win it, due to the fact we had so many players technically weak on the ball”.

“Game Management: This was a part of the game that hopefully every player learned a great deal from by playing against the kind of teams and individual players we were up against. The Mexican players are already masters at dictating a game based on the score and timing of the game. They slowed it down, sped things up, and wasted time, all at appropriate moments during a game. No matter how much the coaches talked about this part of the game during the weekend, our players still wanted to get the ball in play, and get forward at all times irregardless of the score, or time left in a game (not that we got forward very often). Our boy's soccer intelligence, compared to the Mexican players' insight, in the same age-group, was exposed a lot during the games on this trip”.

Some more excerpts, this time from a trip by the U-17 Region team to Argentina:

“Technical Attributes: Overall our opponents were technically better and more comfortable on the ball by a small margin. The Argentines were very fluid, agile and addressed the ball under pressure generally very well. We still need more work in tight spaces playing under pressure. “

Here is what Tony Dicicco, the former Women's National Team Coach has to say regarding the American player:

“We are not good enough as a soccer culture at striking the ball. In fact, we are weak.”...“We need to be better at the basic tactics of the game and the most important tactic is support.”...“The biggest obstacle to player development in the US at the youth level is we have travel teams and select teams and super teams with the emphasis on winning and your team advancing and not the players developing.”

Foreign coaches watching our U-20 National Team compete in the FIFA U-20 world Cup 2005 in Holland described our players as “Robotic”.

The message is clear. We don't have to worry about our players' ability to compete physically. That's not the problem. We do need to help our players improve technically, to become more deceptive and unpredictable, and to become tactically more astute. Tactically, support play is crucial and is a definite weakness. **U-10/U-12 coaches can play an important role, by beginning to address these weaknesses.**

B. U-10/U-12 PLAYER CHARACTERISTICS

Before coaches can start designing a player development program, they must understand the skill level, characteristics, and maturity level of the players. This is done through observation of the target age group in practices and games followed by a thorough, objective analysis. Too often, coaches design a practice program based on what they want the players to learn, as opposed to what the players can handle. Coaches who are not skilled observers can easily misdiagnose the needs of the players.

The USSF National Youth License course takes the same player-centered approach with its stated philosophy that THE GAME WITHIN EACH CHILD is at the center of all beliefs, decisions and actions taken by the child, the coach and the organization and that a training program needs to be DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE. The National Youth License course sets the tone with excellent analysis of the motor skills, cognitive (problem solving) skills, and social characteristics of each age group, with supporting expert information from renowned psychologists, philosophers, and educators.

This manual takes it a step further and adds the **technical** and **tactical** considerations to the **motor skills**, **cognitive** and **social** aspects of this age group. Since we are focusing here on the ‘golden age’ of technical and tactical foundation, it is important to thoroughly analyze the **technical** and **tactical** realities of 8-11 year-olds. To that end, we start with a detailed profile of this exciting age group in order to prepare the reader for the task of prescribing the correct game and training environment.

Characteristics of U-10 Players

U-10 Motor Skill Development

Boys and girls begin to develop differently and it makes sense now to separate the genders. Stamina and ability to stay physically active increased as compared to U-8, but players still lack adult-level stamina and tire quickly. The good news is that they recover quickly as well. Young players are more prone than adults to heat injury. They are also affected by accelerated heat loss, increasing risk of hypothermia.

Gross and small motor skills become more refined. There is a great diversity in playing ability and physically mature individuals demonstrate stronger motor skills. Children can make rapid gains in learning and function at increasingly sophisticated levels in the performance movement skills. Kids of this age are often described by coaches as ‘sponges’ for their ability and enthusiasm to learn new skills.

Implications:

Sessions of 75-90 minutes, with frequent water breaks, that don’t require excessive running which can tire the players needlessly. We want the players physically fresh for the technical work and emphasize maximum ball touches throughout the session.

U-10 Cognitive Development

Play at this age becomes less egocentric. The “*Me! My toy! I don’t want to share it!*” stage is disappearing and players begin to appreciate the benefits of cooperation with others. This is the dawn of ‘team’ play and the understanding of what ‘being part of a team’ means. Introduction of ‘competitive’ and ‘cooperative’ activities is appropriate and effective. Whereas some younger players (U-6/U-8) would not deal well with an activity where the ball is ‘stolen’ from them by teammates, U-10 players normally accept that competition in practice is necessary and is even fun. They can get excited when a competitive activity gets ‘down to the wire’ and celebrate victory with loud enthusiasm. The ‘cooperative’ types of activities teach them the value of team work and that some tasks are easier accomplished when players work together.

Players begin to understand and appreciate the need for rules and limits and a code of conduct. When an individual breaks a practice rule set by the coach, teammates get upset and will not be slow in reminding him. Abstract thinking begins. The ability to sequence thoughts and action is evident, with some players beginning to think in advance of the ball. Hence, tactical concepts of time and space can be introduced. Starting to understand fundamental tactical concepts such as changing direction of the ball, passing back in order to go forward, etc.

They exhibit lengthened attention span compared to U-8, but still short compared to adults. Players are still fidgety and hyper, and require short explanations and getting activity going quickly. Repetitive technique very important, but it MUST BE DYNAMIC, NOT STATIC.

Players are intrinsically motivated to play. They are more inclined towards wanting to play rather than being told to play. They also demonstrate increased responsibility:

- Bring ball and water to practice
- Tuck in jersey and pull socks up
- Carry own stuff.

Implications

Although technical development is the highest priority, we can start to teach tactical concepts to them, but we must stay within their technical range and use clear and brief explanations. Competition in practice is fun for them and they love activities that pit one group against the other with a winner declared. We should give the players more responsibilities by asking them to carry out on their own as many tasks as possible, i.e. bring own equipment, split into groups, set the grids, put on the bibs, gather the balls to start an activity, and make decisions on the field.

It is especially important to allow them to make their own decisions and solve their own problems in activities and game, and experience the consequences of their own decisions. We provide guidance in appropriate doses and at the right moments, but now that they are able to connect cause to effect, learning by ‘trial and error’ is very effective.

U-10 Social Skills Development

Adults outside the family (coach!) may take on added significance and the importance of the coach as a role model cannot be overstated. Continued positive reinforcement is still the most effective communication tool as players are psychologically fragile.

Players may initiate play on their own at this stage. They become more serious about their play and start comparing themselves to teammates. Peer pressure is significant as well as team identification. Players enjoy the uniforms and find it 'cool' to be part of a team.

Players begin to understand and see that repetitive practice of a technique results in improvement. This can be a great motivational tool, since they can now connect the two concepts of 'practice' and 'improve'. But explanations must still be brief, concise and purposeful.

Implications

This is a great period of discovery and learning for the players and coaches should take full advantage of their enthusiasm, but bear in mind that players who develop more slowly need plenty of encouragement or else the natural enthusiasm might dissipate. Activities must be organized to ensure every player achieves success, i.e. pairing opponents of similar ability in practice activities, using 'inclusive' games that don't eliminate the weakest player early, and focusing on improving their own previous performance instead of focusing on comparing themselves to the best players.

U-10 Technical and Tactical Development

As explained before, it is critical to develop an intimate understanding of where the players are, in terms of technical ability, technical range, and tactical maturity. Of vital importance is the technical RANGE of players, or how far they can pass the ball with any power and accuracy, and what type of passes can they receive and control. These aspects have a strong bearing on decisions of field size, number of players and practice design. Observations of U-10 players at Academy level have yielded the following:

U-10 Technical Considerations

The ability to strike a ball properly and the feel for the proper weight of passes is a clear deficiency. First touch is also a problem, with players not able to prepare the control surface effectively, and not having mastered yet the art of cushioning the ball. Bending balls around opponents or into players' runs is beyond them at this stage as all passes are straight line passes. Crossing is also beyond their ability, but then it depends on how one defines a cross. Some players might be able to generate enough power to get the ball into the penalty area, especially if ball and crosser converge at speed and at a favorable angle, but dribbling up the flank and wrapping their feet around the ball to 'guide' it into near post or far post runs is too difficult for them. Crossing from a stationary position is downright impossible.

Of all the techniques, dribbling at this age group is usually the most advanced, but mostly straight line dribbling. U-10 players tend to dribble a lot, partly because they like to dribble and be in control and partly because they are so focused on looking at the ball that they lose vision and are oblivious to their passing options. However, shielding is rarely used with players not knowing yet how to use their bodies and shield the ball or turn away from pressure.

The range of passing and accuracy varies, but for the most part, is very limited. For a typical U-10 player to get any distance on a pass, ball and player must be moving towards each other on contact. Players have to have a running start in order to get power behind their pass. When required to pass from a stationary position, they can only muster enough power to hit a 10-15 yards pass. Since they have to mobilize so much of their body energy just to get the power, accuracy often suffers.

U-10 Tactical Considerations

Understanding of team shape is totally lacking. Players at the U-10 level do not know how to stretch the field and provide depth and width.

Lack of support is a big problem. Players struggle with providing proper support for the ball carrier. Players often get caught in opponent's 'shadow' and do not adjust their positions, hence support angles are poor. Front players' instinct is to run away from the ball, straight to goal, denying good support ahead of the ball.

Still on the topic of support, players do not know how to transition from supporting the passer to supporting the receiver when the ball is played forward. Players have difficulties with the concept of support behind the ball.

Players do not open their bodies to the field and have a limited vision of the field and their options. Lack of vision causes players to make poor decisions pertaining to choice of passes and wall passes. It also leads to poor first touch decisions, with no thoughts given to the best option and resulting in many give-a-ways.

Players cannot 'read the pressure' on teammates. This means they pass the ball to teammates who are closely marked. It means they do not have a handle on the relation between distance of pass and distance of marking.

There is practically no deception in the play of U-10's. Most attacks are played along vertical lines with players' instincts to play 'Kick and Chase' soccer. The bigger the field and the bigger the numbers on the field, the more frantic play becomes, with the element of randomness associated with kick and chase.

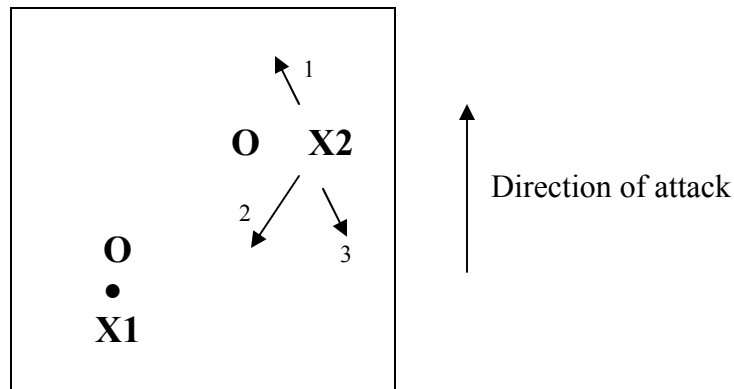
Conclusions and Implications

Players coming into the U-9/U-10 level are tactically naïve. It's quite understandable, given that their U-6 and U-8 experiences were purely technical, where they spent most of their time learning to control the ball. **For tactical development to occur, the players must have a certain 'threshold' technical ability that will allow them to focus less on**

the ball and more on learning tactical lessons. Most of them do not possess this threshold technical ability before the U-10 age group and many are not technically ready even then.

When players graduate to the U-10 level, it is the first time they have some fundamental ball control, sufficient body motor development, and enough cognitive ability to think ahead. Armed with basic technique, motor development and cognitive reasoning skills, they can finally start solving tactical problems. This stage is essentially the first time they are able to stop and think about their next move, or their next run, and the when's, the where's and the why's.

Since U-10 players have a limited passing range and are tactically starting 'from scratch', we must therefore break it down for the players and start with the most basic level of problem solving: **The player, the ball, and his/her nearest partner:**



In the scenario shown in the diagram above, we have two X's (attackers) against two O's, with the X's about 10-15 yards apart. The box represents a portion of the field, not a specific grid size (There would obviously be other players on the field, but we are focusing on these four players). Player X2 needs to decide whether to make a run, or stay where he is. His options are to run forward (1), or run towards the ball (2) or move away from his marker (3) or just stay put. The player with the ball (X1) needs to decide whether to pass to X2's feet, pass into space behind the second defender, do a wall pass with X2, or dribble.

This scenario seems simplistic enough and easy to solve for experienced, adult coaches and most of us would quickly agree that, given the position of the two defenders, option 3 is the best one for X2. However, this scenario represents quite a tactical challenge for the two U-10 attackers. Each of them has at least the four options that we listed above, not to mention all the possible permutations with other teammates further away and they would struggle to do the right thing. Most U-10 players would probably choose option 1 or just stay and ball watch. Furthermore, if X1 passed the ball to X2, he would probably neglect to adjust and take up the correct support position to help X2 maintain possession. Given that this simple scenario would pose quite a challenge to U-10 players and is the bedrock

of support play, we need to create practice activities that focus on the *player, the ball, and his/her nearest partner* and generate many repetitions of this scenario. We essentially need to put U-9/U-10 players in the 2v2 environment for large portions of their practice times. This is where they belong, technically and tactically. Although the game format is 6v6, these young players need to start with learning to solve 2v2 tactical problems. The other decisive advantage of the 2v2 activity is that technical repetitions are automatically built in, due to the small number of players sharing the ball.

In conclusion, the bread and butter practice environment for U-9/U-10 should revolve around technical activities, mixed with tactical 2v2 activities, with variations of grid size, restrictions, and rules for scoring, to elicit problem solving skills.

This is not to suggest that 3v3, 4v4, 5v5 and 6v6 activities are to be avoided completely. The players will enjoy playing 5v5 or 6v6 and such numbers can be used occasionally in practice. What *is* clear is that the most effective environment for teaching U-9/U-10's basic support play which is sadly lacking is in the 2v2 activities that eliminate all the other distractions. If we don't spend sufficient time with 2v2 or skip the 2v2 step and go directly to bigger numbers in practice, such as 4v4 and 6v6, the players will not get sufficient repetitions to ingrain the concepts. Some will also experience information overload playing bigger numbers and will revert to kick and chase soccer.

In the final analysis, the players will dictate where they need to be. By observing the players and assessing whether they are correctly solving the support problems, coaches will be able to prescribe the appropriate training environment.

It boils down to the observation skills of the coaches. Can the coach tell when players have demonstrated a readiness for larger numbers?

Characteristics of U-12 Players

U-12 Motor Skills Development

Many players are beginning their pubescence at this stage. The average age for the beginning of pubescence is 10 years for girls and 12 years for boys. But until they go through most of the growth process, fitness exercises and weight training exercises do not necessarily improve their fitness levels, since the body's neuromuscular system has not been fully developed yet. Players should be at least 16 before weight training produces significant strength benefits.

Overuse injuries, burnout, and high attrition rates are associated with high-intensity children's programs that fail to stress skill development and learning enjoyment. Since their bodies are undergoing quick changes and soft tissue (muscle) expansion doesn't always keep up with bone growth, flexibility training is the key to preventing injury.

Coordination level of many U-12 players is beginning to reach maturity and many are capable of performing complex skill sequences.

Implications

This is a great developmental phase, where skill acquisition potential is at its optimum. Coaches need to resist the temptation to focus on fitness and maintain their priorities on individual technical development.

U-12 Cognitive Development

Players at this stage begin to acquire ‘adult’ logic. They begin to think in abstract terms and can address hypothetical situations and apply a systematic approach to problem solving (if I do this....and then I do that... this might happen...). This means they can solve more complex problems.

Although players look up to the coach and want to please him/her, they also start to question in their minds the validity of instructions and activities. It has to make sense to them for optimum motivation and participation. They no longer follow adults blindly like they did when younger.

Implications

This is an ideal time to allow players to solve their own problems and learn to think about the game. They have to understand ‘why’ they do things and they need coaches who have the communicative and analytical ability to clearly explain and guide players through the nuances of the game. At the same time, coaches need to resist the temptation to throw the kids into the ‘adult’ version of the game just because they seem like little adults. They are still young and the game needs to be broken down for them to digest information. Small-sided soccer is still the main teaching tool.

U-12 Social Skills Development

Players at this age begin to spend more time with friends and less time with parents. Peer pressure plays a factor in type of activities they choose. Popularity and being with the ‘in’ crowd at school affects self-esteem. Early or late onset of puberty also affects self-esteem and could have psychological implications. They begin to compare themselves to peers in terms of soccer ability and, unfortunately, some drop out of the game when realizing they are not as good as they thought they were.

They watch more TV and engage less in unstructured play. Many players touch a ball only in the structured team environment.

Most kids migrate towards friends that are alike in terms of age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, and sports interests. They are well on their way in developing a conscience, morality and a scale of values.

Implications

Players at the U-12 age group exhibit adult-like characteristics in their ability to perform complex skills, communicate and socialize, and apply logic. Hence the tendency by coaches and parents to treat them as ‘little adults’, with a concurrent unrealistic set of expectations. Over-emphasis on results and the extrinsic motivation (trophies) embedded

in youth soccer often reaches fever pitch at the U-12 age group because the adults perceive these players as ‘ready’ for the vagaries of competitive play.

Coaches should look for ways to keep players motivated to play. It still is ‘cool’ to be part of a team. It’s not ‘cool’ to sit on the bench. A positive and encouraging approach with the physically late developers is crucial. History has shown time and again that the late developers often have the advantage later in their sports careers, as long as they don’t drop out due to early disappointments.

U-12 Technical and Tactical Development

As players grow, their technical range increases, their stamina improves and their tactical awareness gets sharper. Players who spend many hours honing their skill outside of team practices are beginning to reap the benefits by now. Their superior skill enables them to spend more time thinking about their next move and their speed of play and problem solving is enhanced.

Technically, the power and accuracy of U-12’s passing and crossing increases compared to U-10’s, with the better players’ passing ranging up to 20-30 yards. However, their receiving skills lag behind their passing, and their ability to control air balls, bouncing balls, and long passes/clearances is still poor. They still need a running start to get power and height behind their passes.

Tactically, there is still very little deception to their play. First touch has no deception, is very stiff and predictable. They understand the concept of switching play and try to do it, but their lack of power/accuracy does not allow them to do it well, resulting in turnovers. Hence, play is still dominated by the kick and run mode, since that is the safest way to get the ball from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’.

Since teams cannot keep possession for long periods, defenders, and especially wide fullbacks, don’t have many opportunities to overlap and attack. Players don’t interchange positions and don’t develop the full range of skills necessary for the development of the modern player.

Implications

Now that the players have close to mature coordination level, more work should be focused on deception and flexibility in every touch and pass. Individual technical creativity, coupled with disguise, should be emphasized, i.e. twist one way and explode the other way, fake one way and sprint with the ball another way, fast footwork with the ball, look in one direction and pass in another, bending and chipping balls, and everything performed at game speed.

Small-sided play is still the best environment for technical and tactical development. The trial and error opportunities associated with small numbers is still the key to ingraining the right instincts and habits. 3v3, 4v4 and 5v5 should be the main tactical diet but small-sided games should often be functional, i.e. 5v5 played with 3 defenders and 2 attackers

playing 3-2 formation. Focus should be on improving possession play, to give the lines (defense - midfield or midfield – forwards) enough time to interchange.

Tactically, the American player lags behind in the areas of support play and flank play. We already discussed how important it is to focus on support play, starting with the 2v2 environment at the U-10's, where the player learns to work with his/her nearest partner. This theme should be maintained and expanded at the U-12's, using 3v3 to 5v5, to add the elements of depth and width to the picture, but still keeping it small.

Secondly, we do not develop quality wide players. Part of the reason is the direct play at the youth level and the inability to keep possession long enough for fullbacks to overlap into wingers. Playing 3-2 at U-10 and 3-2-2 at U-12 is conducive to developing wide players, but more on that in a later section.

C. PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL

This section deals with the features that define an optimum player development program for U-10/U-12's. It discusses the best way to ingrain good playing habits, recommends training priorities and highlights which techniques should be emphasized at each age, and delves into ways to progress through the age groups and develop a curriculum that builds upon itself in a logical, progressive manner. This section also talks about field size considerations, covers the methods for forming teams, and provides insight into the type of coaches best suited to work with these age groups.

Ingraining Good Habits

The previous chapter summarized the characteristics of U-10 and U-12 players. Based on this information, coaches can now tailor the training to address their players' specific needs. It is worth noting here that a healthy dose of patience is required. When players are introduced to new concepts or skills, they go through two stages of skill acquisition:

1. Learning the skill.
2. Embedding it into their set of instinctive responses.

In the first stage, they learn how to execute the new concept or new skill. The second stage, namely ingraining it into their instincts, usually takes much more time than the first stage, but is fundamental for long term success. The objective here is for the skill to be executed at the right time in the game and to be used instinctively.

The optimum mode of play is through instinctive responses. Players should trust their own instincts and play without 'looking over their shoulders'. Otherwise, they become tentative and get bogged down by thinking too much, or by being conditioned to wait for their coaches' instructions. The problem with most young players new to a sport is they don't yet have good instincts, or habits. When put under the stresses of competition, players will automatically revert to their natural instincts. But if the right habits have not been ingrained yet, undesirable responses will be elicited. For example, the 'kick and chase' mode of play is essentially the players' natural response to competitive stress in games they are not equipped to handle.

The perennial challenge for youth coaches is to get rid of the bad instincts and replace them with good habits, habits that in time become ingrained into their instinctive responses. But this process takes time and requires patience by the coaches. As soon as coaches notice that their players have learned to execute a skill, or seem to understand a new concept, they assume that they can move on to a more complex topic and do not allow the new skill sufficient time to get ingrained. How often have we heard coaches grumble in frustration "Yesterday, we worked on possession in practice, but today they can't string two consecutive passes to save their lives".

This ‘fast tracking’ through the developmental stages of players in the haste to get to the ‘big game’ 11v11 tactics is not advisable, not even for the better players. The longer we keep players in the second stage of the skill acquisition process (ingraining stage), the better long term results. And this is true for all young players, even the best ones. The patient approach of skill acquisition is especially crucial for the U-5 through U-12 age groups, the formative years. In practical terms, as an example, it means that the 2v2 training environment recommended for tactical development of U-9/U-10’s needs to be repeated until the desirable habits are ingrained.

Technical and Tactical Progression U-5 to U-12

The current small-sided game format for youth soccer in Georgia is:

U-6:	3v3
U-8:	4v4
U-10:	6v6
U-12:	8v8
U-13:	11v11

For most players, U-6 and U-8 play is purely a technical experience and U-10 is the first time basic tactical concepts can be taught. The play format at U-10 is 6v6, but, as mentioned before, tactically the players are at the 2v2 stage, since they still can’t solve support and movement problems near the ball.

Games of 2v2, 3v3, and 4v4 do not require organization of players into positions. But once we get into 6v6 and higher, it becomes necessary to organize the players into some form of team formation, with specific units (lines) of defenders, midfielders or forwards and specific roles. Given that U-6 and U-8 play did not involve positions and that U-10 is the first time players are organized into formation, it is highly recommended to start with only two lines, i.e. playing 6v6 with a keeper and a 3-2 formation (3 defenders and 2 attackers). The level of sophistication and movement off the ball in a three line formation is too complex for U-10’s. Let them spend some time learning how two lines interact, before we throw them into a three line formation.

The term ‘small-sided soccer’ is commonly used when referring to games with less than 11 players per side. But when you think of it, in the eyes of the U-10 player, 6v6 is not a small-sided game, but rather the full-blown game. From the perspective of a typical 9 year-old, the 6v6 game has the same feel that the 11v11 game has for adults. For a 9 year-old, it’s the 2v2 or 3v3 games that give them the ‘small-sided’ feel. Hence, in terms of a *tactical* progression *through the eyes of the players*, we can re-define small-sided games as follows:

2v2 to 4v4	Small-Sided Games (SSG)
5v5 to 6v6	2 Line Games (2LG)
7v7 to 11v11	3 Line Games (3LG)

Taking this player-centered view of the progression of small-sided play is just another tool we can use to design a more effective, age-specific development program. Based on this approach, the player development model shown in the table below gives an outline of what we should focus on at each age group.

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL

PROGRAM	AGE	TECHNICAL EMPHASIS	TACTICAL EMPHASIS	TRAINING ENVIRONMENT	GAME FORMAT
K I N S	U-5/U-6	Dribbling (100%)	-	Fundamental. Player with ball. Unopposed (1v0).	3v3 (SSG) KINS 'New Ball' method
	U-7/U-8	Dribbling (70%) Passing (30%)	-	Fundamental. Player with ball. Unopposed (1v0). Opposed (1v1).	4v4 (SSG) KINS 'New Ball' method
A C A D E M Y & S E L E C T	U-9/U-10	Dribbling Juggling Short Passing Receiving Shooting & Finishing Shielding	Support near the ball (ahead and behind the ball). First touch. Combination play. 2-line shape. 2-line interaction.	Technique: (70%) Unopposed (35%) Opposed (35%) Tactics: (30%) 2v2 to 4v4 (SSG). U-9: 2v2 mainly U-10: 3v3 mainly	6v6 (2LG) 3-2 formation
	U-11 & U-12	Dribbling Juggling Medium Passing Receiving Finishing Heading Shielding	Support. Combination play. Deception. 3-line shape. 3-line interaction.	Technique: (70%) Unopposed (35%) Opposed (35%) Tactics: (30%) 2v2 to 5v5. (mainly 4v4)	8v8 (3LG) 3-2-2 formation

The table summarizes the main recommendations for designing the training and game format for U-5's through U-12's. The U-5's through U-8's are included here for the sake of completeness (for more detailed recommendations and rationale on these age groups, refer to the KINS Manual). Suffice to say that players in the U-5/U-6 ages need to spend most of their practice time in individual activities learning to dribble and manipulate the ball without pressure of opponents. They cannot handle both controlling the ball and

keeping it away from opponents at this age (this is referred to as ‘unopposed’ 1v0 training under the ‘Training Environment’ column in the table). As players move to the U-7/U-8 ages, we can gradually add pressure of opponents in practice sessions and use a mix of fun activities, some of which are unopposed (individual or cooperative activities) and some of which incorporate opponents (competitive activities).

Once players graduate to the U-9/U-10 stage, the better ones migrate to the ‘Select’ or ‘Academy’ programs, while the rest go into the ‘Recreational’ program. This manual focuses on the select players, but most of the recommendations apply to all levels of play.

Technical Emphasis

The column titled ‘Technical Emphasis’ highlights the technical priorities for each age. **Dribbling** and **juggling** are very high on the agenda of U-10/U-12’s. These players love to dribble and are sufficiently coordinated to work on feints and fast footwork and try it out against live defenders. **A lot of 1v1 activities should be used with U-10/U-12’s** and it should be planned such that there is minimal idle time between turns, to maximize repetition and learning. Some coaches might regard juggling as an expendable luxury that players can indulge in on their own free time. But it’s not a mere coincidence that every star player is also an accomplished juggler. Juggling helps players develop a feel for the ball, improve their first touch, and advance their balance and coordination, not to mention their confidence on the ball. All the top players spent hours of their childhood juggling the ball and continue to do so in their professional career. As youth coaches, we need to inspire our players to do the same. Setting aside some time for juggling in the practice session can only help.

Another aspect of the game that can never be overplayed is **finishing**. The more creative ways we can find to incorporate finishing into our activities, the better. Even when we work on dribbling or passing, it’s possible and advisable to add finishing as the end product of every passing drill or make scoring on goal the objective of every dribbling move.

A question often asked by coaches is when should they introduce training to teach **heading**? The simple answer is that heading should be taught when players are technically able to cross the ball in the air. Before that, there is no point spending too much time on heading when there are so many other, more applicable and fundamental skills to improve. However, there is nothing wrong with occasionally working on heading at U-10/U-12 just to introduce the technique and eliminate any early fear of ball-to-head contact. A soft introduction to heading, using small balls (size 1 or 2) is recommended. How often and how much heading practice? It is up to the coach, and should be based on priorities and players’ abilities.

Tactical Emphasis

The column titled ‘Tactical Emphasis’ highlights that tactical training is not really applicable or realistic at U-6 and U-8, and that the main priority at U-10 and U-12 should be the teaching of **‘support play near the ball’, ‘deception with the ball, and combination play in small groups.**

Training Environment

It's important to pay close attention to the column in the table, titled 'Training Environment'. This column contains the recommendations for the content and emphasis in practice sessions. As we mentioned before, technical training is the number one priority for U-10's and U-12's and the table suggests that technical work should involve 70% of the practice time. However, working on technique in isolation without opponents, such as repetitions of unopposed dribbling or passing moves, should not constitute the only part of the technical content. Players at the U-10 and U-12 stage need to practice technique against opponents. This will improve the transfer of skill to the game and will be more realistic, not to mention more fun for the players.

To that end, a mixture of individual, cooperative and competitive activities should be used to hone technique. Rather than spend a whole hour doing 'Coerver' moves or passing combinations without any opponents, better to add the realism of opponents for at least half the time. The low ratio of players to ball inherent in small groups will still produce the requisite volume of technical repetitions.

As a rough guideline, a typical practice session should be split into 3 parts: A third of the practice devoted to unopposed technique; a third of the time for practicing the technique against pressure; and the last third in small-sided games devoted to tactical teaching. This approach has the recommended allocation of 'two thirds technique/one third tactics', not to mention the fact that even the tactical third provides for plenty of technical repetitions due to the small player-to-ball ratio.

The 'Training Environment' column also recommends **2v2** as the main vehicle for tactical training for U-9's, **3v3** for U-10's, and **4v4** for U-12's. Each stage builds on to the next:

- 2v2:** It's ideal for U-9's since it is the smallest possible unit for teaching tactics and combination play. It's advantageous for teaching to *open body*, *support angle*, *support distance* and *reading the pressure on the ball*, without any distractions of additional player permutations.
- 3v3:** This is the smallest possible unit for addressing *width* and *depth*, the key elements of team shape, as well as *support behind the ball*, while still reinforcing the previous points of open body, support, and reading pressure. Players can start to learn how to stretch the field and create passing lanes for penetration.
- 4v4:** This format adds more options and complexity to the 3v3 and is a great segue to team tactics and formation. Some coaches see 4v4 as *the* starting point for teaching tactics and laud the diamond shape as the basic tactical unit. This writer feels that 4v4 is too complex for U-9/U-10's as a preliminary tactical tool and needs to be preceded by a healthy doze of 2v2 and 3v3 play. A diamond shape in itself is not the objective, but rather a byproduct of good support play.

This approach gives coaches a consistent, progressive plan that allows players to advance tactically from simple situations to more complex ones at a steady and manageable rate. It doesn't exclude other activities or numbers, but is recommended as the predominant staple of training at each stage.

Fitness on its own has no place in the training program of U-10/U-12's. Players at this age have not completed their growth spurt and many have not even started their puberty. This means that fitness work with players who have not yet matured physically has limited value since the neuromuscular system cannot yet handle full adaptation to fitness training. **The fun games and activities will take care of the fitness needs of these players. Every moment in practice needs to be devoted to ball work.**

Game Format

And finally, the column titled 'Game Format' addresses the game environment for each age group. Following the plan allows players the easy transition from Small-Sided Games of 3v3 and 4v4 at U-6/U-8, where there are no positions/formations, to the 6v6 game with only two lines, hence, a soft introduction to formations, and then to the 8v8 games with three lines.

Field Size Considerations

One of the main objectives for going small-sided is to discourage the 'kick and chase' mode of play that players are forced into when playing on large fields. Playing in smaller fields encourages using skill and keeping the ball on the ground to get into scoring positions since the long kick up field would put the ball out of bounds. Another advantage of smaller fields is that less physical effort and less stamina is required to cover the field, saving more energy for skillful play. This is especially important for 8-11 year-olds who still lack the stamina necessary for long sustained runs.

The GYSA playing rules allow for a range of field size. For example, the range for 6v6 play at U-10 is from 35X45 to 45x60. The maximum size of 45X60 is probably too big and the recommended field size for U-10's is 40x50. In games involving mostly U-9's, recommended field size should be even closer to the minimum allowed, 35x45. Ideally, field size should present the players technical and tactical challenges and eliminate the fitness challenges. If the field is too big, the amount of running required leaves players exhausted and defeats the purpose of small-sided soccer.

There is a tendency to put the better/bigger players into bigger fields because "they are ready for it". In actual fact, this rationale contradicts the coaching principles we teach at coaching schools. As players get better, they should be subjected to more pressure. One method we often use to increase pressure in practice is by decreasing field size. Smaller grids (or fields) punish a poor first touch or a bad pass. Bigger fields forgive bad technique and give the physically bigger players an advantage. In reality, putting the bigger players on bigger fields makes it easier for them to use their physical assets and conceal their technical and tactical weaknesses. It doesn't make sense to adopt two

diametrically opposite strategies to develop players, where we decrease playing area in practice but give them acres of space in games. Smaller spaces, for practices *and* games, are more consistent with our main objective at U-10/U-12 of encouraging and teaching skillful play and good technique.

Hence, the recommendation here is to use fields that are small enough to force players to find soccer solutions but not too small that play is bogged down in a congested traffic. This is another consideration that calls for insightful observations by the coaches and a continuous re-assessment of players' progress. In trying to strike the right balance between too big and too small, erring on the 'too small' is preferable as it is more conducive to skill development.

The same considerations apply to the U-12's. Here the recommended field size ranges from 40x60 to 60x100. The upper limit of the range (60x100) is too big for 8v8 and is probably more appropriate for 11v11. The recommended size should be around 50x70, depending on the players.

Finally, most activities incorporating pressure (opponents) should involve **usage of cones to restrict space**. Allowing unlimited space is unrealistic and gives the activity a fitness slant instead of a technical/tactical one, even if the intent is not there. Some coaches don't have the necessary equipment to lay enough small grids or don't have the patience to do it. This lack of organization should be addressed. Clubs could mark permanent grids in specially dedicated areas, which saves the need for laying many cones and facilitates the planning of practices. More on this in a later section.

Forming Teams: Balanced Versus Ability-Based

One of the hottest debates in the U-10/U-12 circles is whether clubs should split their Competitive/Academy program players into balanced teams or form Gold, Silver and Bronze teams based on ability.

This is an issue that can be fraught with special interest and personal agendas, making it difficult to please all parties. Parents of strong players often prefer ability based teams while parents of weaker players campaign for balanced teams. Coaches who emphasize the need to win prefer ability based teams while coaches who prefer to downplay results opt for balanced teams.

Both methods have some merits, but the general feeling among youth development experts is that the later we segregate the players by ability, the better. Some of the arguments for balanced teams are:

- No one knows for sure who will develop into a good player since players mature at different rates. We must do everything we can to encourage ALL players and make it a positive experience for all of them. In many cases, the only difference between an 'A'

team player and a 'B' team player is the physical attributes rather than skill differential, and we know that post-puberty, early physical advantages can disappear. Players who get placed on the lower teams might get discouraged and quit.

- It is another strong message to parents and coaches that results are not important at this stage. Players' self-image is more important.
- Weaker players learn from the stronger players
- Stronger players still improve, even when mixed with weaker players. They develop leadership skills, self confidence and self-reliance by having success and are not afraid to experiment with new tricks and expand their technical repertoire. This is the stage for exploration, not for playing it safe.
- It is still possible to find ample occasions to separate players by ability within the balanced team approach. This can be accomplished in practice, using the 2v2/3v3 activities where the best players are grouped together in the same grid.

Balanced teams could also have disadvantages:

- If the weaker players are VERY weak, they will hold other players back. They will not have any success, they might lose confidence, and their enthusiasm could dissipate.
- More difficult to match up against other clubs if everyone does something different. This is not an issue except when scores are very lopsided.

Weighing the pros and cons, it is recommended to balance teams at least at U-9/U-10. If possible, balancing the teams at U-11/U-12 should also be considered, but it's a bit tricky since we now enter the stage where puberty kicks in and some players are just so physically advanced while others have not hit the puberty curve yet and variations are more pronounced than at U-10.

Ultimately, each club must assess its own talent level and player depth and decide accordingly. There is no one single answer for all. Coaches should analyze the players at each age group and decide on the arrangement that suits their players' specific needs. In some instances where numbers dictate, it might be better to have 2 balanced teams and a third team containing players who are too weak compared to the rest.

It also depends to a large degree on how the players are treated and trained and how skillfully the rationale for splitting the teams is articulated. Perception and poor communication can ruin the best laid plans.

Coaching Characteristics of U-10/U-12 Coaches

Let us now discuss the type of coaches most suited for coaching these age groups. It is encouraging to see that in most clubs in Georgia, some of the best available coaches are involved with U-10/U-12's. There is certainly a greater appreciation of the impact that quality programming at U-10/U-12 can have on the long-term health of the club.

What are the ideal qualifications for coaching these ages?

The U-10/U-12 coach should, first and foremost, be one who loves to work with young children and who possess charisma. Infectious enthusiasm is a strong asset here, since inspiring a passion and a love for the game is the number one priority for this age group. It must be fun for both the players and the coach. This is not a job for anyone who regards it as a chore.

There are countless ways to inspire youngsters. If the coach is an ex-player, he/she can impress the players with some clever tricks and win them over. Other coaches use fun games and a natural affinity with young kids to build bridges of trust and inspiration. Kids of this age are still easily influenced by adults of authority and are willing to be led. They haven't yet reached the stage where they think they know more than the adults. Thankfully, that doesn't come until later.

Coaching this age is about teaching without glory. It's teaching with a patient approach to player development. It's about the recognition that all the work done will bear fruit at a future time and will probably allow the next coach in line, the one who inherits your players, to enjoy the extrinsic rewards.

Coaches of professional teams tend to focus on their players' strengths and demand that they stick to their specific strength and do only what they are good at doing. On the other hand, coaches of young players should focus on their players' weaknesses and encourage them to improve all aspects of the game. It's about developing well rounded players as opposed to specialization of players.

Coaching U-10/U-12's requires a compassionate individual who can tell the difference between 'demanding that players do' and 'challenging them to do'. Between measuring success by keeping records of wins versus keeping records of consecutive juggles.

The best U-10/U-12 coaches are careful not to scare their players from expressing themselves on the field. Players should not be frightened of making mistakes. This is the time to learn from trial and error. Coaches should not 'kick every ball' and be overbearing and over-structured with their players.

Coaches should understand how players learn and how the body works, mentally and physically. They should be able to read their players and tell from their behavior and their body language how they are feeling. An example comes to mind, of a U-12 team playing in an important tournament. This team was playing their second game of the day, in very hot and humid summer conditions, and the players were struggling. The parents on the sidelines were chastising the players for their apparent lack of effort, which prompted their coach to firmly ask the parents to stop and remember the conditions. To his credit, the coach understood what the players were going through and rightly defended them. But some coaches, from the comfort of their bench, might fail to appreciate this and join the parents in vocal criticism. Such lack of empathizing by a misguided coach can lead to loss of respect and loyalty from the players. It can also lead

to defensive behavior and shifting of blame by players, which is a sure way of eroding team moral and chemistry.

Coaches should regard themselves not just as teachers of players, but also as educators of parents. Most parents of U-10/U-12's are either new to the game or new to the competitive environment of select soccer. Either way, the parents need guidance and look to the coach for leadership and answers. Some will question his methods or allow personal agendas to interfere. The best coaches can articulate philosophies and concepts to parents and know how to influence parents in a diplomatic and non-confrontational manner.

Lastly, coaches should be well organized and understand the principles of play. They need to be open to new ideas and willing to learn and be self-critical and adaptable. As they interact with their players, they should be constantly observing and assessing, by posing the following questions:

IS THERE ENJOYMENT?
IS THERE LEARNING?
IS IT APPLICABLE TO THE GAME?
IS IT TECHNICALLY CORRECT?
AM I STOPPING TOO MUCH?
SHOULD I MOVE ON?

D. TECHNICAL TRAINING FOR U-9 TO U-12

As mentioned before, the majority of practice time spent at these age groups should be devoted to improving the technical abilities of players. The Player Development Model Table in the previous section recommends around 70% of practice time devoted to technique. However, observation of practice sessions reveals that excessive time is wasted moving from one activity to another and getting started. Also, too much time is spent in unopposed technical repetitions, and most of it is done at a speed and in a space that has little relevance to the game. The end result in many cases is insufficient levels of repetitions and a loose connection to the game.

Maximizing Touches

Ratio of Practices to Games: League games do not contribute much towards technical development since players touch the ball very few times in the course of a game. In fact, most players touch the ball 20-40 times in a typical U-12 game, depending on the position, substitutions and match-ups. In instances when one team dominates, the stronger teams' defenders are likely to experience even less than 20 touches. Compare this to the hundreds of ball touches in a single, well structured practice. *Since U-10/U-12 is the prime time for developing technique, the ratio of practices to games should be heavily weighted towards practice.* A program for U-10's and U-12's will be better served with 3 or even 4 practices per week and only one game per week, as opposed to 2 practices and 2-3 games per week. Some coaches get carried away with games and tournaments and lose track of the priorities for these age groups. *This is the single most worrying trend of youth soccer and the sooner we redress the balance in favor of practices, the better.* Not every practice needs to be a team practice. Skill nights, clinics and 2v2/3v3 festivals can also feature in the weekly diet.

Repetitions in Practices: For technical development to occur optimally, the design of the practice sessions and the frequency of sessions are crucial. Coaches must carefully design sessions to extract maximal touches and progress to live opponents as quickly as possible. For example, if the technical topic is dribbling, players should be learning to execute the dribbling moves at match speed, with the explosive change of pace and direction that would replicate the requirements of the game. Furthermore, players should move as quickly as possible into 1v1 activities. This approach is recommended for all levels of players. Of course, lower level players will need more time in unopposed play, but all players need to progress to competitive, game-like situations at some point in practice and get ample repetitions of 1v1 duels.

The same applies to any technique, be it passing or shooting, etc. The sequence of practice should be:

1. Unopposed individual or small group activities to promote high repetition level, making sure they are executed at game speed. Work on both feet.

2. Add opponents, but keep groups small to continue to affect high repetition levels and work on technique in game-related conditions. It's not enough to just keep the groups small if the activity has only one group active at a time. Sessions should be designed to engage all the groups at the same time, to maximize touches. Give careful thought to the match-ups in the small groups and keep players of similar ability together. Encourage creativity and demonstrate how to incorporate deception to their moves.
3. Progress to a scrimmage, starting with two small-sided games side by side to keep ratio of players to ball small, and finishing with a squad scrimmage.

Replicating the Technical Demands of the Game

Every activity should replicate as much of the game as possible, from the warm up to the final activity. In selecting an activity, the following criteria should be considered and assessed, in conjunction with the level of the players:

Distance: Is the distance between players realistic to the game?

Movement: Is the movement of the players similar to what is desirable in the game, especially movement off the ball?

Space: Is the space allocated realistic to the demands of the game?

Area: Can we do the activity in the appropriate area of the field?

Functional: Is the technique chosen compatible with the functional demands in that particular area of the field?

Repetitions: Does the organization lend itself to many repetitions for each player?

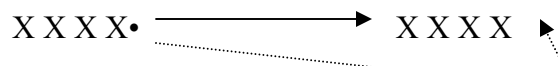
Finishing: Can we add a goal and incorporate shooting/finishing to the activity?

Ability: Finally, and most importantly, are the players able to handle the complexity of the activity?

As an example of how these considerations can affect practice planning, let's look at variations of warm up passing drills for U-10's and evaluate them against the above criteria.

Activity 1: Line Drill

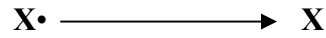
Groups of eight in a line drill, where players pass and run to the opposite side.



Verdict: Poor choice for a U-10 warm up, since eight players are sharing just one ball. There are not enough ball touches, movement or relevance to the game.

Activity 2: Stationary Passing Activity

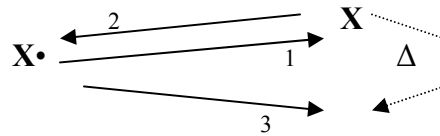
Players in pairs, 10 yards apart, stationary, passing the ball back and forth.



Verdict: Poor choice. Satisfies the repetition criteria, but lack of movement makes it too easy and boring for U-10's. No relevance to the game. Might be more appropriate for recreational level players, but even with them need to add movement as soon as possible.

Activity 3: Stationary Server Passing Activity

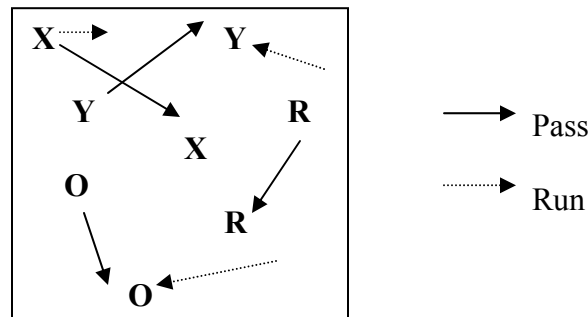
Players in pairs. One player stationary serving passes to partner. The partner checks away, around a cone and back, and passes the ball back to server.



Verdict: Satisfies the repetition criteria and adds some realistic movement. Better than the first two activities but still a bit too static. One advantage is that it is easy and quick to organize.

Activity 4: Passing and Moving

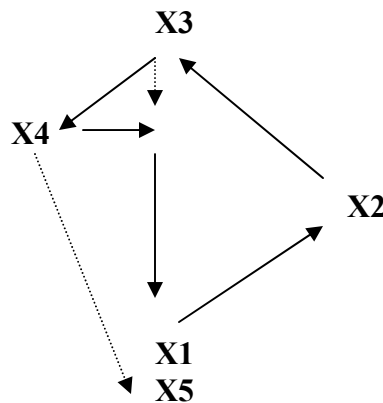
Players in pairs, one ball per pair. Pairs moving around randomly in a grid, passing and moving.



Verdict: Satisfies the repetition criteria and adds movement in a crowded area, which is a plus. Specific passing and receiving technique can be taught, as well as combination plays.

Activity 5: Passing in Sequence

Players in groups of five. Each group executes a passing sequence where players pass and follow the pass in this sequence: X1 passes to X2 and follows the pass and takes X2's place. X2 passes to X3 and follows. X3 does a wall pass with X4 and passes the ball to X5 (who is ready to start the sequence again). X3 takes the place of X4 and X4 runs behind X5.



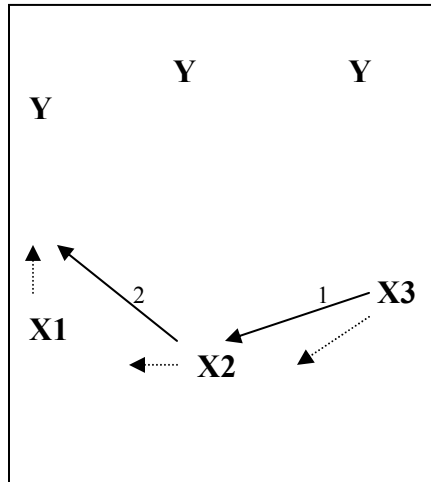
Verdict: A good mix of passing, receiving and combination plays, which are all relevant to the game. Overall, a good warm up activity. **Could be even better if we add a goal and make the last link of the sequence a shot on goal.**

Activity 6: Passing Patterns

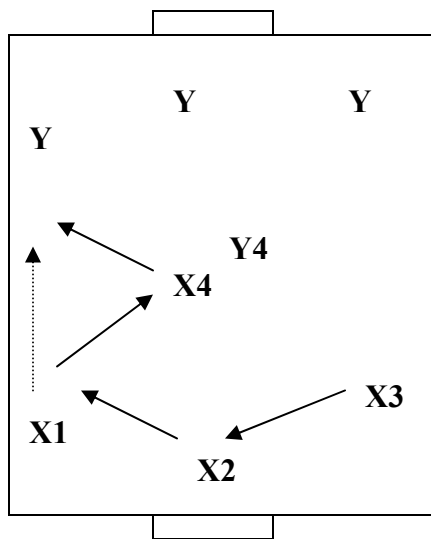
Players in groups of three. Each group positioned across the 6v6 size field to simulate the back line or the midfield line and passes the ball from side to side, with the appropriate adjustment of positions to provide support behind the ball. In the diagram below, the passing and movement patterns are illustrated. X3 passes to X2 (who is supporting him from behind the ball). X2 passes it to X1 on the other flank. X1 takes a couple of dribbling touches up the flank, pulls the ball back and passes back to X2 who passes to X3. X3 takes a couple of dribbling touches up the flank, pulls back and restarts the sequence back to X2. As they pass the ball from side to side, the players slide back-and-in to support the ball from behind. The three 'Y's do the same thing in the other half.

In this activity, a specific passing and receiving technique can be demanded to fit the positions. For example, X3's pass to X2 should be played in front of him. X2 should receive the ball with his far foot (in this case, the left foot) and use his first touch to prepare for pass to X1. X1's first touch should be with the front foot (left foot) to propel the ball wide

and up the flank. All the players should be quick on their feet to adjust their position such that they are always taking their first touch facing up field (for example, if the ball was played slightly behind them, they quickly shuffle backward so they can still face up the field when receiving the ball).



The activity can be varied by adding a forward (X4) as shown in the diagram below. This time the pattern involves a switch to the other side and a wall pass with the forward and can finish with a cross that is met by X4 and X3 to finish on goal. The group can restart by going the other way, with a new back three of X1, X4, X3 while X2 is the new forward. Meanwhile, the 'Y's are doing the same thing, going back and forth in opposite direction to the 'X's.



Variations of passing patterns can be added in subsequent practices. For example, X1 to forward X4 who lays it back to X2 who plays it through to X3 on the other flank. Coaches can use such activities to ingrain good habits, such as the forward stretching the field by moving away first and timing his checking run to receive the pass from X1, the support distance and support angle of the players without the ball, the quality and purpose of first touch, etc.

Verdict: These passing-pattern types of activities are ideal for warm up play. They satisfy all the criteria, with sufficient technical repetition, game-like movement, realistic space, appropriate area of the field, and functional application. These activities help ingrain good habits and good instincts for the most frequently occurring situations in the game. By adding a goal and finishing, it becomes even more realistic and fun for the players.

The six examples illustrated above are typical of warm up activities used by coaches. Note how the 'verdict' on each activity rates it in terms of the criteria mentioned before. *Specifically, how closely does it replicate the demands of the game?*

It should be noted that, although some activities are better than others, all the activities can be used at some point, depending on the objective of the practice, the time of the season, the fatigue level of the players and their mood. With some imaginative tweaks and creativity, every activity can be a fun and productive experience. For example, Activity 2 (Stationary Passing) is too static and boring, but can be converted to an exciting game by putting two cones mid-way between the players to create a gate and the players compete by executing one-touch passing back and forth through the gate. Whoever misses the gate loses a point. By the same token, in the wrong hands a good activity can be ruined or can become too static if not enough attention is paid to the details that make the activity game-like.

And finally, the warm up activities shown above are all executed without pressure and, therefore, should not be kept for too long. The passing and movement should be executed at game speed to extract maximum benefit and after about 15-20 minutes, it's time to progress by adding pressure of opponents.

E. TACTICAL TRAINING FOR U-9 THROUGH U-12

Team Formations for U-10 and U-12 Play

The recommended formation for 6v6 play at U-10 is a 2-line formation of 3 defenders and 2 forwards. The reasons are numerous:

- Players entering the U-10 Academy need to spend time learning how 2 lines interact before they learn how to play in a 3 line system.
- Five field players are not enough to make 3 lines viable. If 3 lines are used, play becomes too narrow. Players are constantly scrambling to get wide and tend to receive the ball while still running towards the sidelines, thus facing the wrong way. Impossible to have both width and balance at the same time.
- The 3-2 formation closely replicates all the passing patterns and movement of the 11v11 game. Hence a better transfer of learning to the big game.
- The 3-2 formation replicates the modern style of play that starts with numbers up in the back and requires timely and intelligent runs from the back to create numbers upfront.
- The 3-2 system has width and depth. The team will attack with at least 3 players with one of the defenders joining the attack. Either a wide defender overlaps or the central defender steps up. If a wide defender overlaps, the other defenders shift laterally to cover. If the central defender steps up, the remaining defenders pinch in to close the gap. These are exactly the type of movements that players need to learn in the modern game. And everyone is receiving the ball while facing the right way.
- In the back, we have a numbers up situation of 3 defenders versus 2 forwards. This makes it easier to play out of the back. It also makes it possible to introduce zonal defending concepts.
- There is a dearth of players in the U.S. who are comfortable playing wide, especially wide defenders with the ability to overlap. Playing with 3 defenders who are encouraged to overlap and attack will produce more flank play and result with more players equipped with the skill and tactical awareness for flank play.

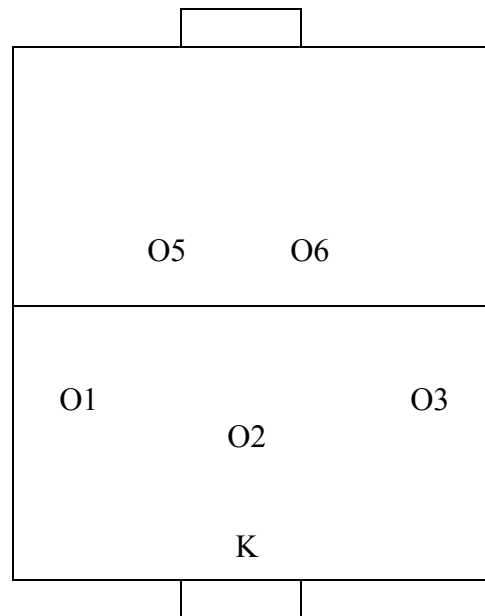
Coaches who insist on playing the 6v6 game with 3 lines (i.e. 2-1-2 or 2-2-1) should make the field as narrow as possible. If the field is too wide for 2 defenders, it is virtually impossible to build up from the back or switch sides around the back unless the keeper is used extensively as a sweeper-keeper, which is a bit unrealistic if the keeper needs to venture a long way from goal. Another disadvantage to only 2 players in the back is that they can't join the attack if they are playing against 2 forwards.

The 3-2 concept is carried over to the 8v8 game played at U-12 with a 3-2-2 formation that requires defenders to join the attack and replicates the technical and tactical demands of the 11v11 game. Some coaches like to use a 3-3-1 formation at U-12. On the face of it, a 3-3-1 formation encourages flank play and involves 4 players in wide positions. But observations of 3-3-1 play reveal that the wide defenders are stuck behind the wide midfielders, with no room to overlap and hardly ever cross the half way line.

Developing Versatile Players

We all agree that versatility is very important. However, young players who are exposed to tactical formations for the first time need to learn one system at a time and must be given the time to learn their roles before throwing them into new situations. Switching players around from one position to another in a single game is not recommended. Each position has its own passing and movement options, its own 'geometry' of angles and distances and each player needs to learn how to contribute towards his/her team's shape from that position. It takes a while to learn this and constant changes are counterproductive and retard their tactical development. They need to spend at least one season and preferably one year learning one formation before switching to another formation. Versatility is the ultimate goal for the modern player. But versatility is easier to develop by allowing players to grow into a role, one role at a time.

Secondly, the 3-2 formation (and 3-2-2) presents the functional demands and situations of all the 11-a-side positions and there is no need to change formation in order to develop versatility. Positions O1 and O3 will train all the future wide defenders and wide midfielders. Position O2 will be relevant to all the future central defenders and defensive midfielders. And positions O5 and O6 will be the training ground for all the future forwards and attacking midfielders. Furthermore, all the passing patterns and movement of the 11-a-side game can be learned and duplicated within the 3-2 formation



The 3-2 and 3-2-2 formations allow the introduction of twin forwards and all its related tactical nuances. It also can be used to introduce players to zonal defending in a 'numbers-up' environment. Attacking wise, the 3-2 is ideal for teaching 'playing out of the back'. The players in positions O1 and O3 have the freedom and the opportunities to overlap constantly and enter into the 'attacking third' scenarios a lot more often than within the limited 2-2-1 or 2-1-2 environment.

Key Tactical Coaching Points

Earlier in the manual, the need to focus on support play around the ball at the U-10 and U-12 stage was emphasized. Coaches need to break the game down for the players and address each of the key coaching points in a clear and methodical fashion and allow learning by repetition. The coaching points listed below are presented in a logical sequence and can be used as a ‘road map’. It means that the points are taught in progression and that learning coaching point 1 will better prepare the player to learn point 2, and so on. Conversely, if a player doesn’t understand how to apply a coaching point, he would struggle with the ones that follow it and build on it.

The following key coaching points form the foundation for support play and can be addressed in 2v2 to 4v4 games:

1. **Open Body.** Players must learn to position themselves so they can see the whole field and assess all their options.
2. **Support Angle.** Players need to make it easy for the player on the ball to find them with a pass. Players need to ‘read the pressure’ on the ball and adjust their position accordingly.
3. **Find Space.** Players also need to ‘read the pressure’ on themselves and make quick adjustments to get away from pressure so they have time and space when *they* receive the ball. It’s about learning the relationship between distance from the ball and distance from immediate opponent.
4. **Support behind the Ball.** Players have to provide support behind the ball in case a forward pass is not possible or in case player with the ball is under pressure and forced to face own goal.
5. **Team Shape.** Players need to understand how to create **width** and **depth** and which of those they should provide in each scenario.

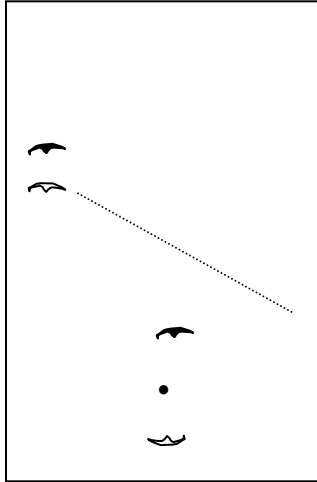
The following key coaching points apply to decisions on the ball:

6. **Hold it or Pass it.** Players need to read pressure to decide when to control and hold on to the ball and when to pass it first time.
7. **Combination Play.** Players need to learn which combination play is best for each situation. Should it be a wall pass, a double pass, an overlap, or a split pass?
8. **Deception.** Players need to learn how to keep defenders guessing, using body movement, fakes and fast footwork.

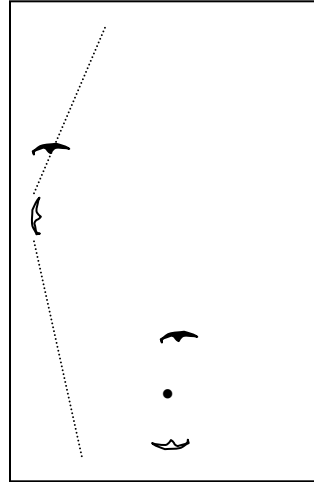
These coaching points can be taught progressively in a curriculum approach, with seasonal objectives, and spread over the U-10/U-12 period at a rate of absorption commensurate with these young minds. The tactical portion of practice should target support play around the ball by using appropriate activities that bring out these key points. The program’s goal should be for players to instinctively adopt good support positions and make good decisions by the time they graduate into the 11v11 world of U-13 soccer. To aid coaches in visualizing the key points, an illustration of all the points is made via diagrams in the next few pages.

Coaching Point 1: Open Body

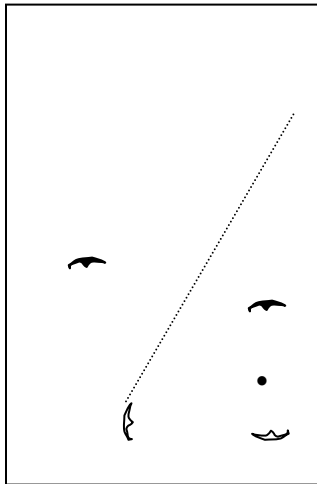
Objective is to see the whole field.



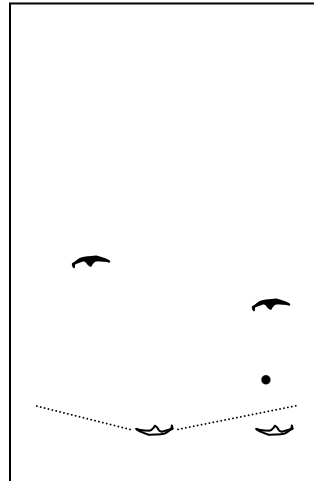
wrong



right

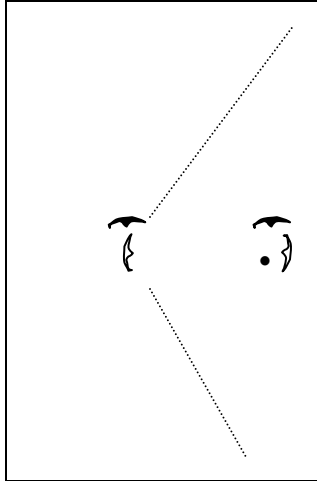


wrong



right

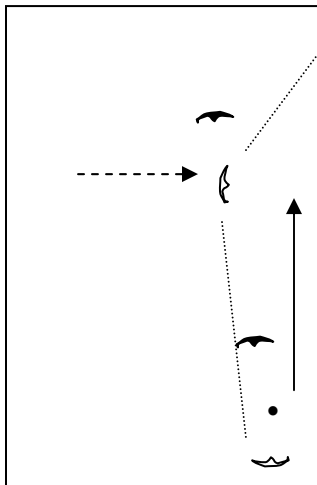
Coaching Point 1: Open Body (cont'd)



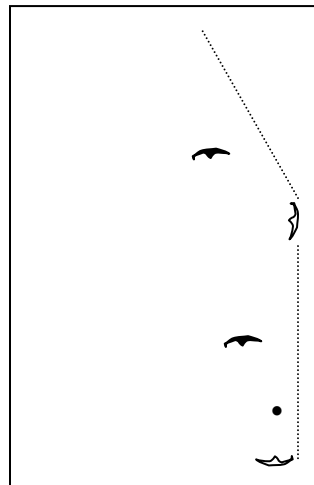
wrong



right



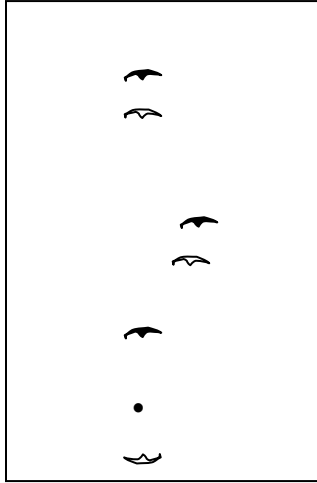
wrong



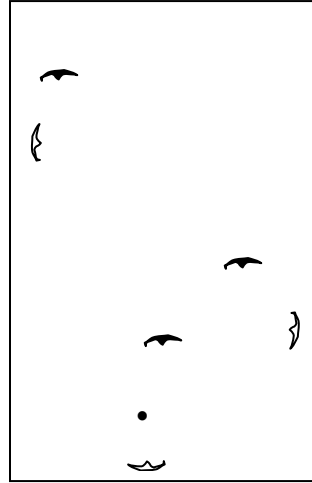
right

Coaching Point 2: Support Angle

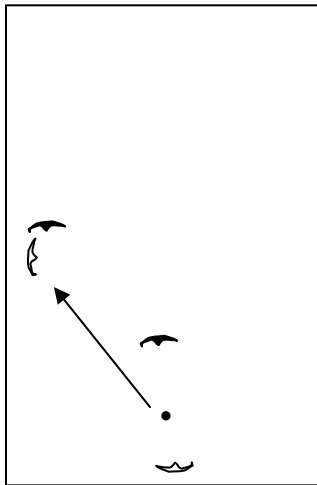
Objective to give player with the ball safe passing options



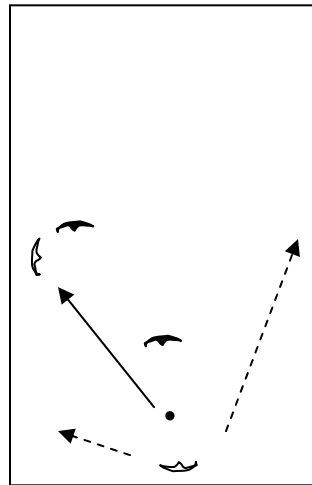
wrong



right

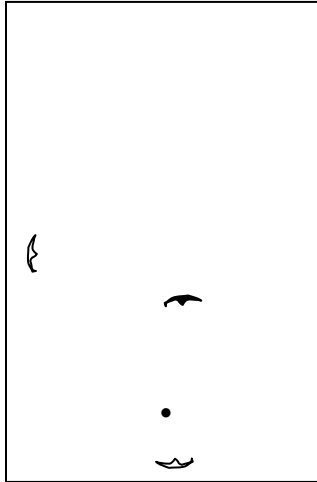


wrong to stay in same spot after passing

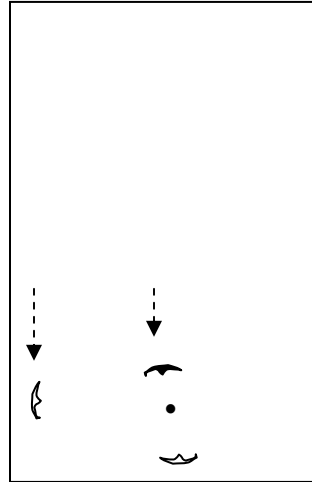


right to pass and move to give good support angle

Coaching Point 2: Support Angle (cont'd)



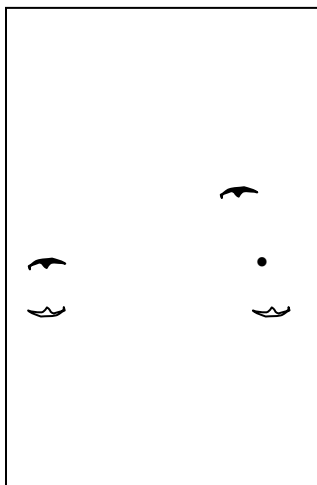
good angle since
pressure is low



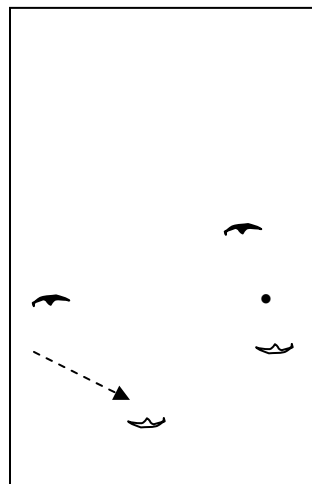
must adjust position when
pressure is tighter

Coaching Point 3: Find Space

Objective is to get away from tight marking

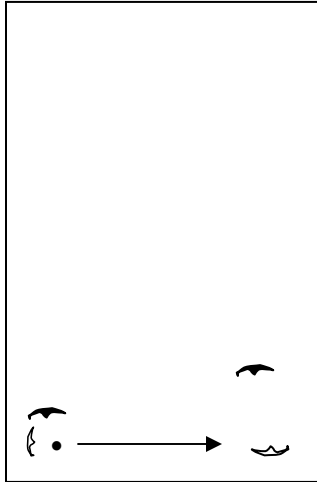


wrong – too close to
the marker

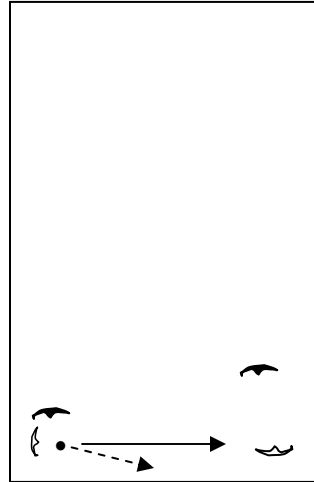


right – more space and
time on the ball

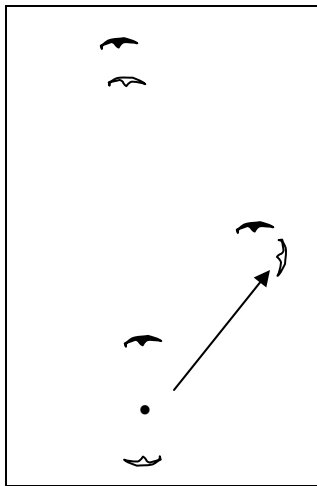
Coaching Point 3: Find Space (cont'd)



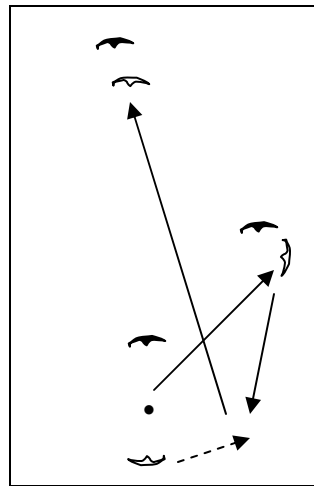
wrong to pass and remain in the corner



right to pass and quickly move away from pressure



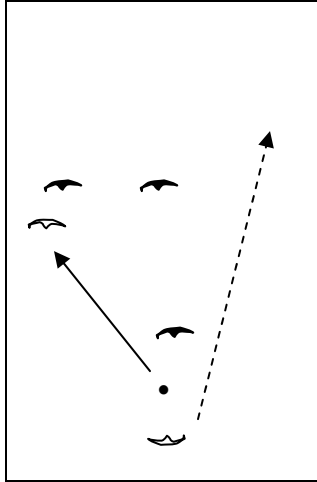
wrong to pass and stay in the same place



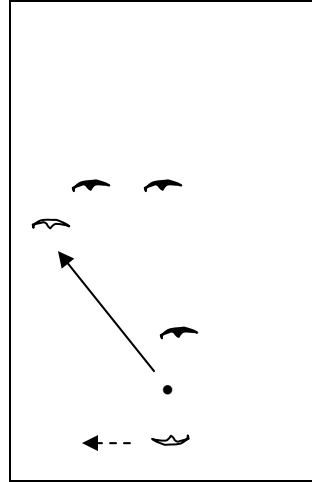
right to pass and quickly move away from pressure can then pass forward

Coaching Point 4: Support Behind the Ball

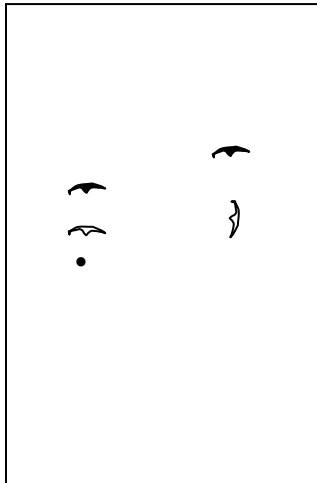
Objective to help teammates in trouble who cannot go forward



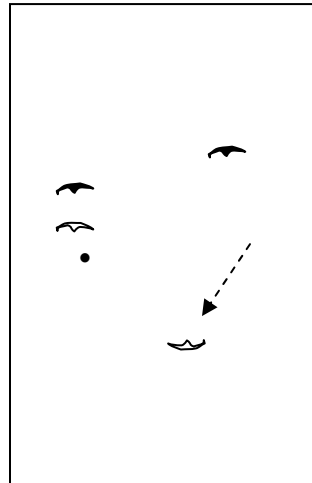
wrong to leave player
alone under pressure



right to stay behind the
ball and provide support

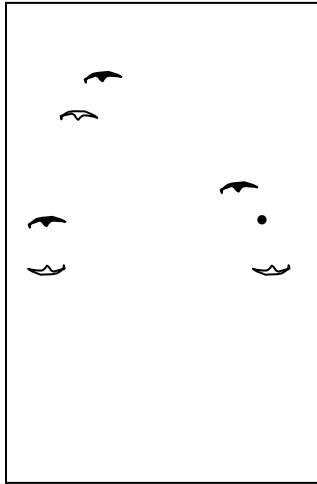


wrong

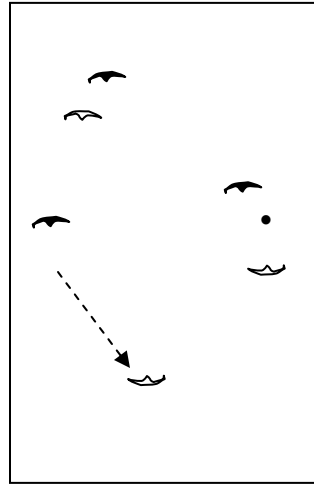


right

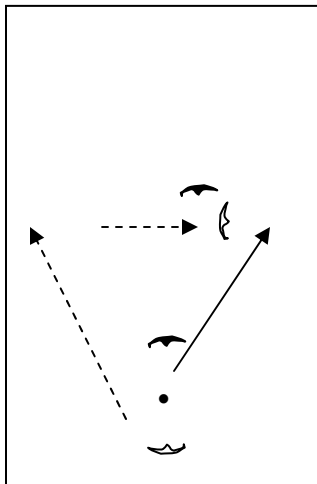
Coaching Point 4: Support Behind the Ball (cont'd)



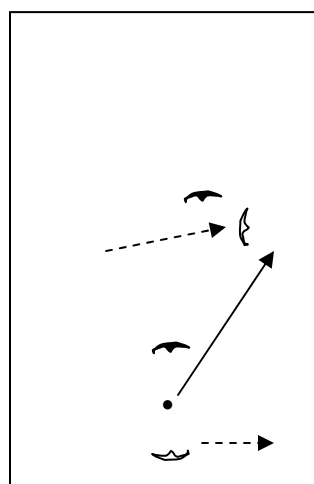
wrong – too flat



right



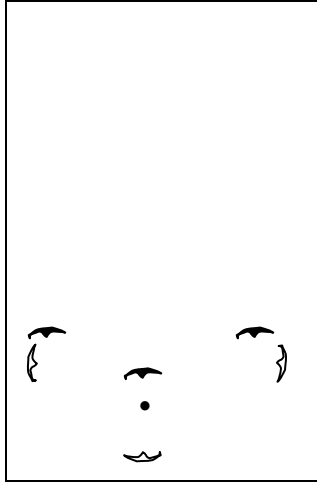
wrong – teammate left stranded



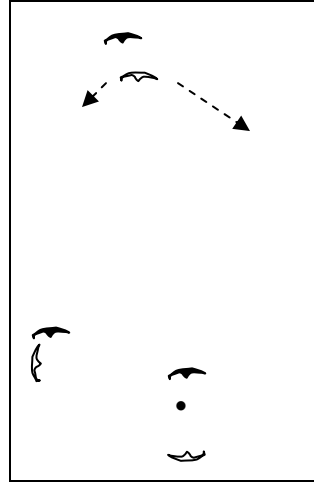
right – teammate has easy safe option to pass back

Coaching Point 5: Team Shape in 3v3

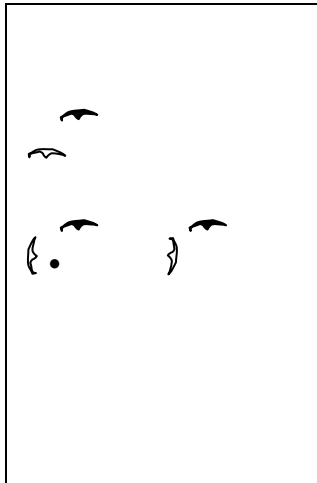
Objective to create width and depth



wrong



right

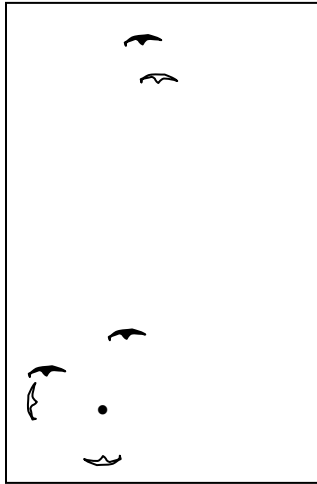


wrong

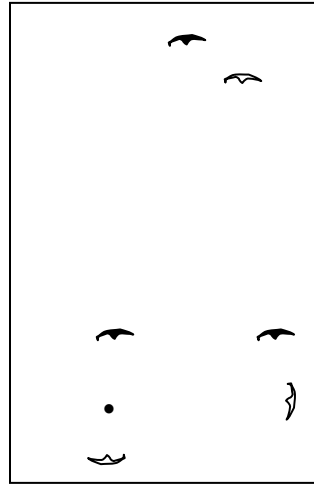


right

Coaching Point 5: Team Shape in 3v3 (cont'd)

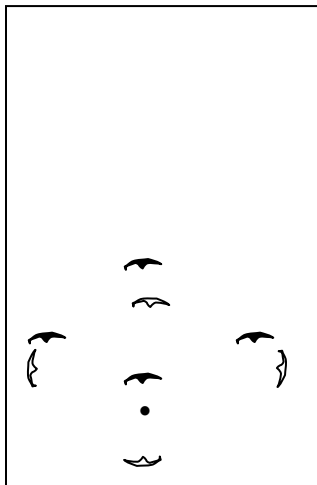


wrong

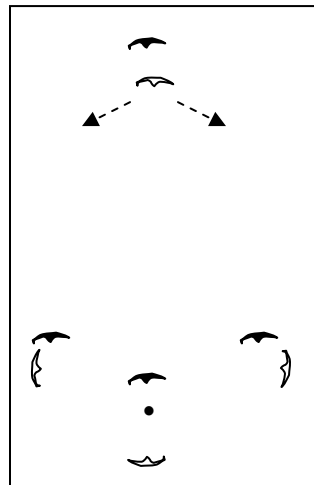


right

Coaching Point 5: Team Shape in 4v4

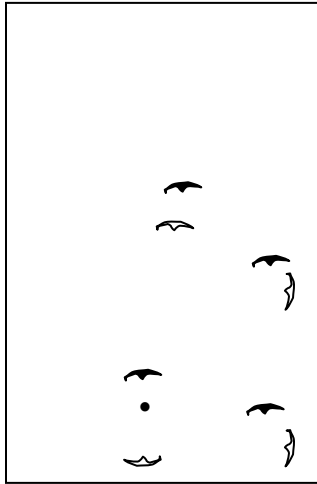


wrong

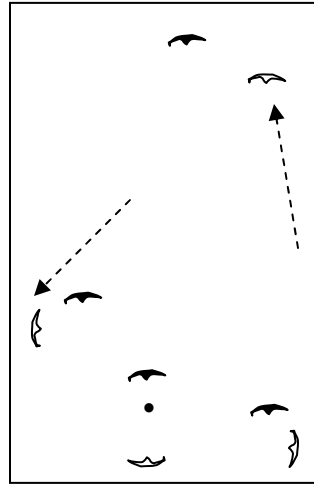


right

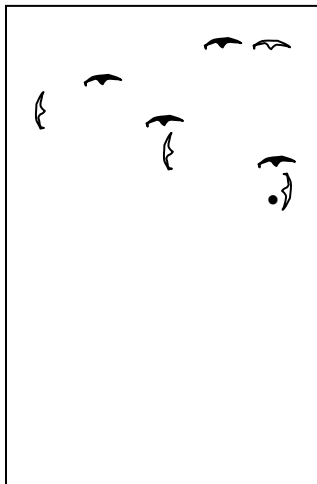
Coaching Point 5: Team Shape in 4v4 (cont'd)



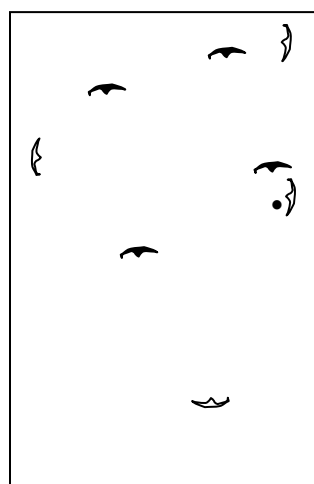
wrong



right



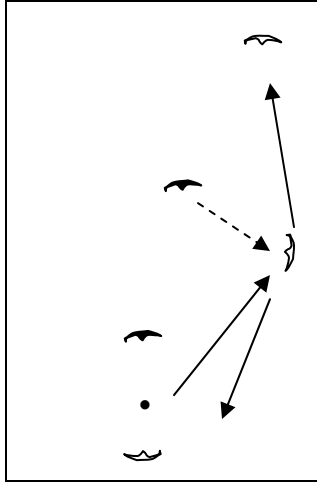
wrong



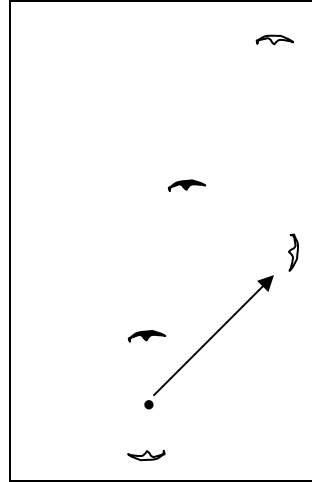
right

Coaching Point 6: Hold it or Pass it

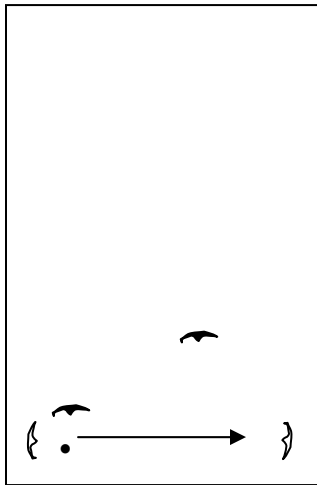
Objective to teach players to read pressure and make good decisions on the ball



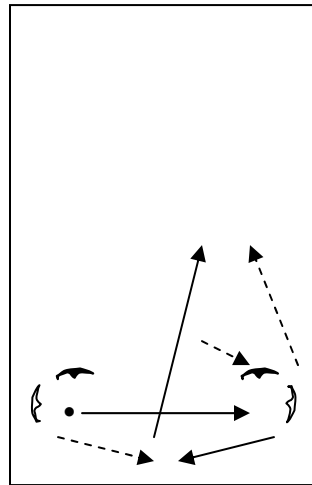
pass first time since pressure is coming



hold it since there is no immediate pressure



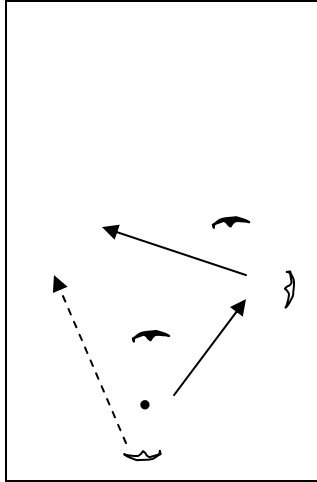
hold it if there is no immediate pressure



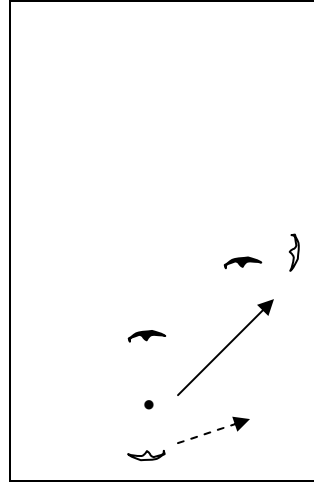
first time passes to escape pressure

Coaching Point 7: Combination Plays

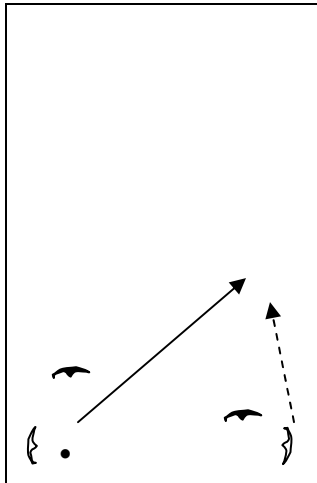
Objective to learn when and how to combine



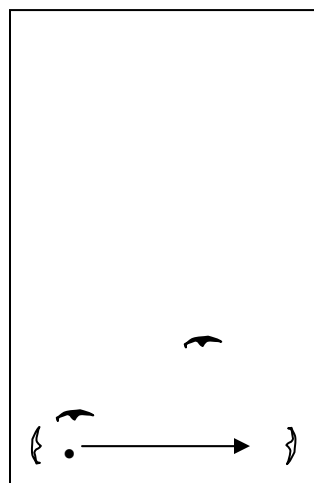
wall pass is on



wall pass is **not** on

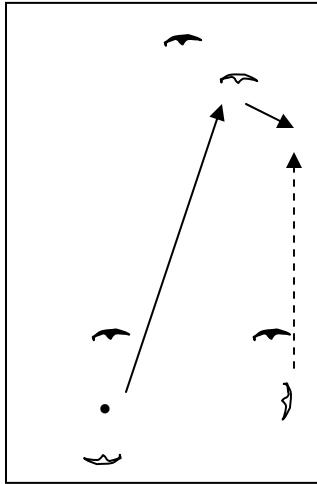


split pass is on

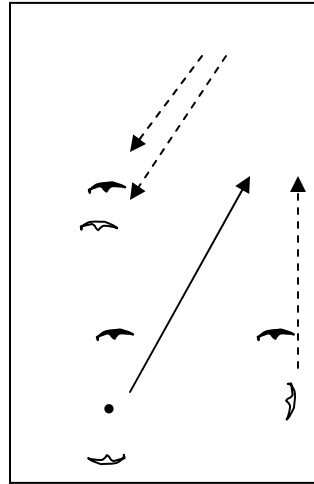


split pass is **not** on

Coaching Point 7: Combination Plays (cont'd)

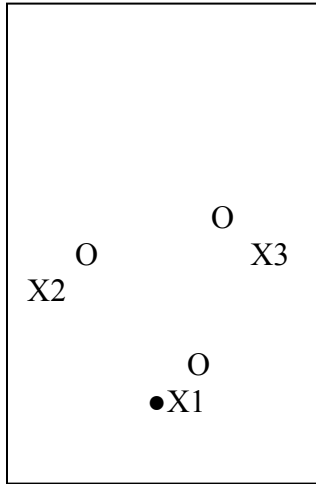


through ball is on

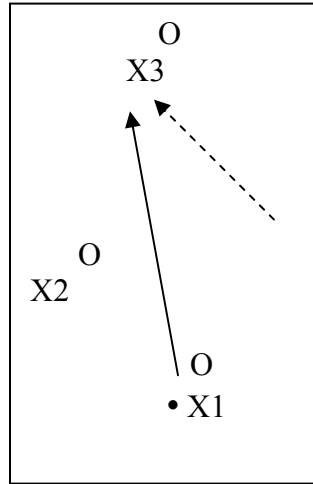


through ball is on into
space created

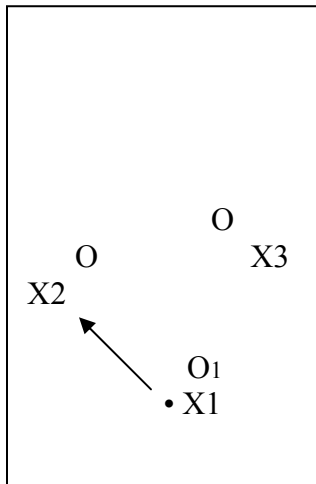
The following scenarios reinforce the coaching points in a 3v3 game environment. Coaches observe the players' responses to the stimuli and see if they read the cues and understand how, where, and when to move to provide good support and good team shape.



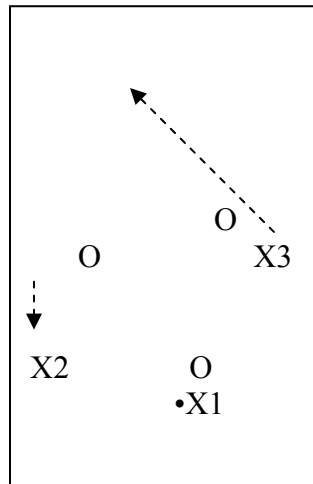
No depth



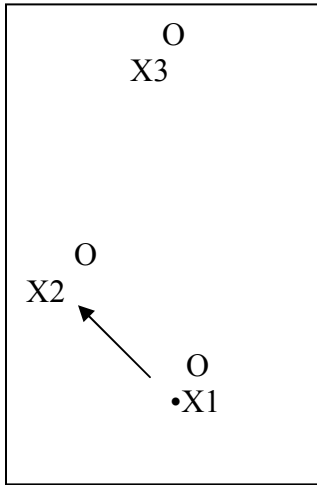
good depth
passing lane



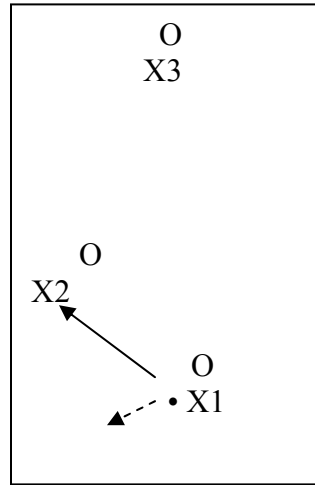
X3 caught behind defender O1.
X2 gives good support angle
but will be under immediate
pressure if he gets the ball.



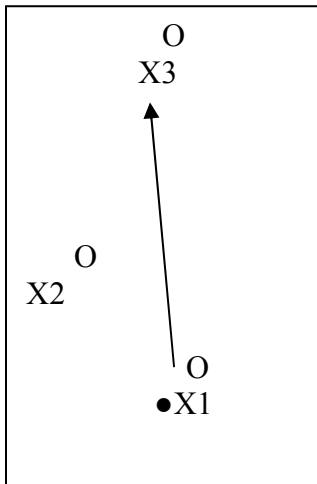
X2 finds more space
split might be on.
wall pass might be on.



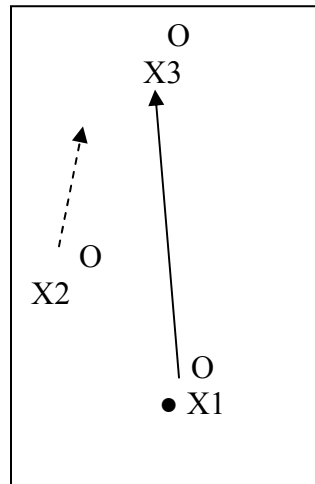
X1 passes and doesn't move, putting X2 under pressure.



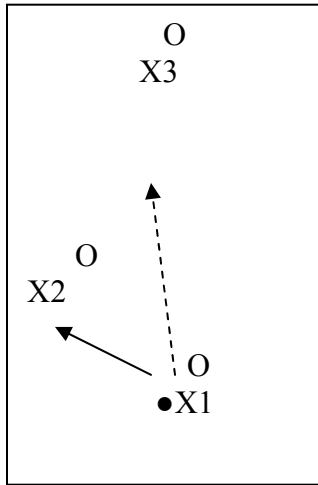
X1 passes and moves to find more space and support X2.



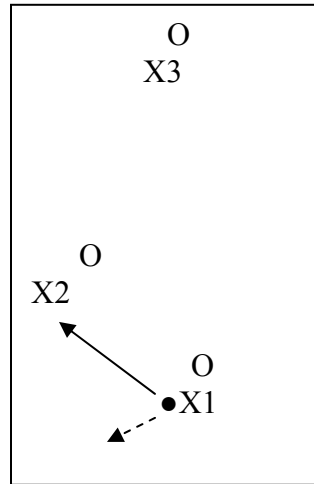
X1 passes to X3 and X2 doesn't move to support receiver.



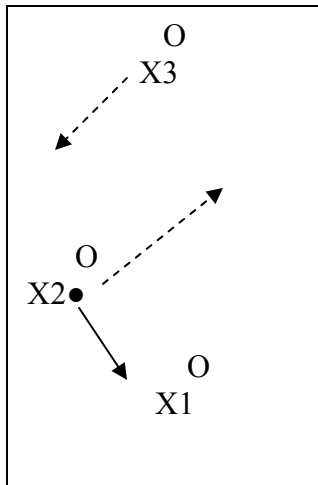
X2 moves quickly to support X3.



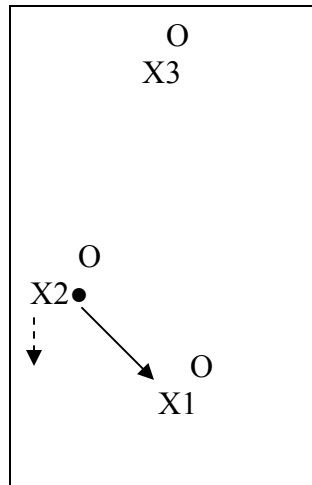
X1 passes to X2 and runs up
X2 is under pressure and
left alone.



X1 passes and adjusts
to provide support
behind the ball.



X2 passes to X1 and runs
upfront. X1 is in trouble
unless X3 helps by getting
wide



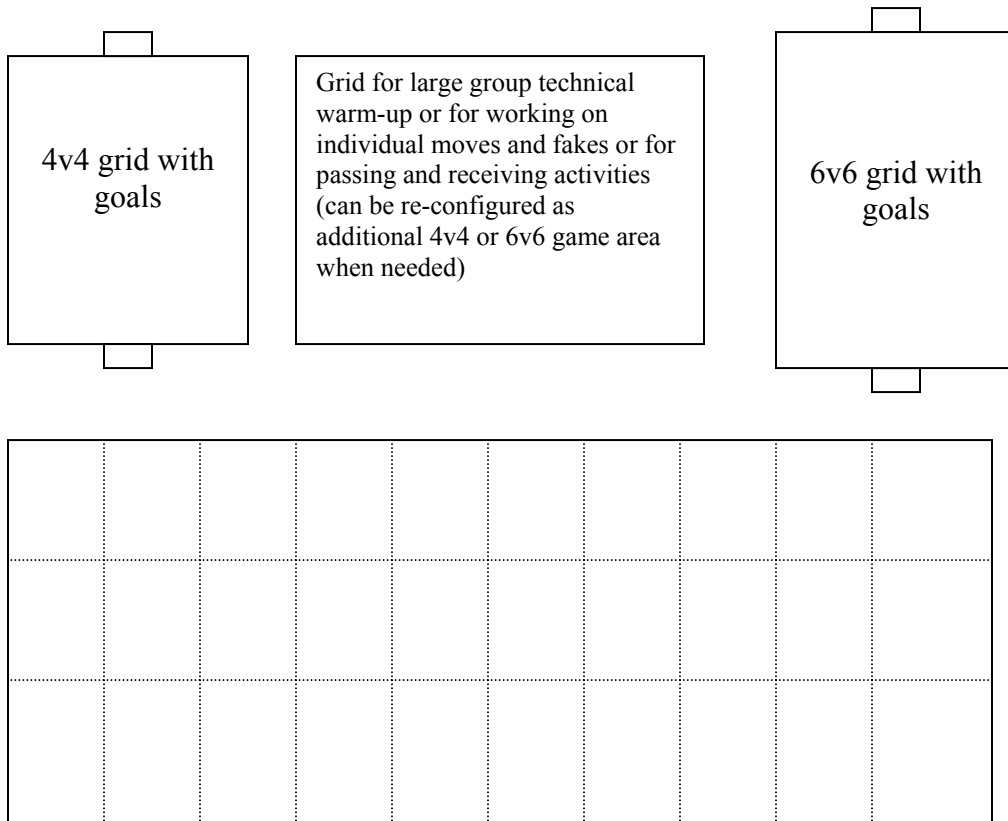
X2 passes to X1 and adjusts
to provide support angle
for X1.

F. PRACTICE PLANS FOR U-9 TO U-12

Organization of Practice Areas

As mentioned before, one of the key problems observed with U-10/U-12 programs is the lack of emphasis of 2v2/3v3 play in practice. Most sessions tend to comprise a fundamental technical activity (or technical stations), followed by a big game of 6v6 or 8v8. **WHAT IS GLARINGLY MISSING IN PRACTICES IS A SUFFICIENT DIET OF 2V2/3V3 GAMES TO BRIDGE THE TECHNIQUE WORK WITH THE 6V6/8V8 GAMES.** Clubs that train their players in large pools are especially guilty of relying on large scrimmages to avoid the extra planning and work necessary to organize large groups into 2v2 grids. But the extra planning is worth the effort.

Wherever possible, clubs should look into setting an area of their training complex specifically for 2v2/3v3 activities with permanent markings of multiple small grids enough to accommodate their player pools. Such configuration can take either one of the following approaches: (i) set an area exclusively for the U-10/U-12's, or (ii) set an area specifically for 2v2 to 4v4 grids that can be used by all the age groups on a rotation basis. Such a dedicated area could conceivably look like the example below:



The large grid area can be divided into small grids by placing cones where lines intersect. The grids with permanent goals can be used by groups that include keeper activities or finishing activities.

The technical warm-up grid can be used to ingrain certain good habits. For example, if every dribbling warm up activity is done there with a constant reminder to use feints/creativity and every passing warm up activity done there is executed with emphasis on deception, players associate that grid with creativity and it becomes habitual in that area. In time, deception will become ingrained and used by the players in all the grids, as well as in the games.

Activities with Numbers Up versus Numbers Even

As stated previously, Academy Players must spend a lot more time solving tactical problems in 2v2 and 3v3 activities. MOST OF THE TIMES, THESE ACTIVITIES SHOULD INVOLVE EVEN NUMBERS. Playing 5v2 or 4v2 will guarantee success, but the built-in multiple passing options allow players to be tactically lazy with no urgent need to adjust support angles and distances. When the numbers are even, players have to work harder at supporting each other and the major weakness of support play can be improved. Playing 5v2 is more suited for recreational players who are still struggling with the simple techniques of passing and receiving.

Designing Practices

As an example, let's look at a few variations of a 90 minutes practice plan that focuses on possession involving a pool of 20 players:

PRACTICE PLAN #1

Fundamental Stage (40 minutes):

Activity 1: Players in pairs working on unopposed short passing.

Activity 2: Players in 5 groups of 4 working on unopposed short and long passing.

Match Condition Stage (50 minutes):

Activity 3: Scrimmage 8v8, with 4 players sitting on the bench.

Verdict: A very weak plan. Although this practice has some technical value, there is very limited tactical benefit. The fundamental stage has no realism since it is unopposed, and the 8v8 has too few learning moments for each player, hence limited tactical impact. Furthermore, it is not recommended to have players sitting on the bench at a practice scrimmage. They already have to share playing time at games. Scrimmages should be organized to avoid bench players.

PRACTICE PLAN #2

Fundamental Stage (30 minutes):

- Activity 1: Players in pairs working on unopposed short passes.
- Activity 2: Players in 5 groups of 4 working on medium passing.

Match Related Stage (30 minutes):

- Activity 3: Three groups, each playing 5v2 or 4v2 possession.

Match Condition Stage (30 minutes):

- Activity 4: 8v8 scrimmage with 4 bench players.

Verdict: Slightly better than Plan #1, but still far short of what they need tactically. The numbers-up Match Related stage is still too easy and doesn't force the players to quickly adjust position and work hard and early to offer good support angles. It also doesn't challenge their first touch and quick decisions on the ball.

PRACTICE PLAN #3

Fundamental Stage (30 minutes):

- Activity 1: Players in pairs working on unopposed short passing
- Activity 2: Players in 5 groups of 4 working on medium passing.

Match Condition Stage (60 minutes):

- Activity 3: Four groups. Each group playing 3v3 or 2v2 to two goals.
- Activity 4: Two 5v5 games side by side.

Verdict: Good practice plan. It provides ample technical training at the start. It doesn't waste time in numbers up activities that have built-in success. It challenges the players to adopt quick support angles and break pressure in tight situations. Everyone is always engaged.

PRACTICE PLAN #4

Fundamental Stage (20 minutes):

- Activity 1: Players in pairs working on unopposed short and medium passes.

Match Related Stage (20 minutes):

- Activity 2: Four groups, each playing 3v2 (2v2+1) possession.

Match Condition Stage (50 minutes):

- Activity 3: Four Groups, each playing 3v3 or 2v2 to two goals.
- Activity 4: Two teams playing 6v6 and two team playing 4v4 to small goals.

Verdict: Another good plan that has everything: technical work, numbers up possession, and numbers even small-sided games.

PRACTICE PLAN #5

Match Related Stage (20 minutes):

Activity 1: Three groups play 5v2 or 4v2 possession in small grids.

Match Condition Stage (40 minutes):

Activity 2: Five games of 2v2 to two goals at the same time in small grids.

Shadow Training (30 minutes):

Activity 3: Four groups of 5, each group doing a shadow training session of passing/movement patterns to one goal (2 groups working, 2 groups resting/reloading).

Verdict: Another good session, where the 2v2 games ‘kill two birds with one stone’, by providing both the technical repetitions and the tactical challenges. The numbers-up warm up allows a soft introduction to the rigors of the 2v2. The shadow play is used to teach team shape in a 3-2 formation and build good habits of passing and movement and interaction between two lines.

Tournament/Festival Format in Practices

Young players love competition. Any time you can make an activity into a competition, you will generate an extra buzz with the players. Every effort should be made to dress up every activity with a competitive objective. For example, a coach’s dare to see “which group can do the most successful repetition in a set time?” or “who will get to the finish line first?” is guaranteed to increase motivation. When given a choice between practicing a technique and playing a game, we all know what they would rather do.

To that end, every so often, we can ‘reward’ the players by doing a little tournament instead of a regular practice. This will excite and motivate them. If properly organized, a mini-tournament can combine all the benefits of a practice *and* a game. There are endless permutations and ideas for doing just this. Below is one example:

Lay out game grids side by side, as shown below:



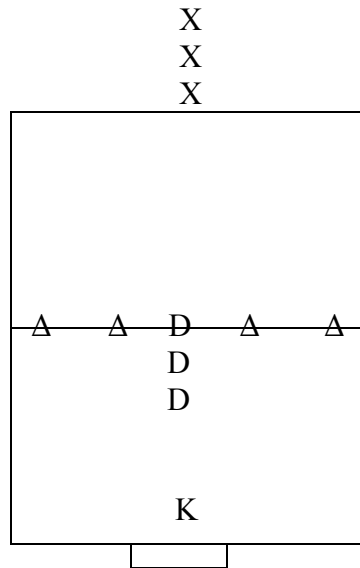
The Champions League grid will be the only one with a set of goals and keepers. All the other grids will have small goals and no keepers. Split the group into teams of 2 or 3 players and play mini-games of 10 minutes each. After each game, the winning team moves up a grid and the losing team moves down a grid. Teams that win in the Champions League grid remain there. At the end of the tournament, see which teams are playing in the Champions League. Obviously, all the players will want to win and move towards the Champions League. If the teams are split by ability, start with the weakest team in the Champions League and the strongest team in the House League.

Samples of Recommended Activities

The following pages contain examples of activities for training U-10/U-12 players. As explained before, coaches should mix and match activities to produce a session high on repetition, high on technical emphasis, and with a dose of tactical lessons focusing on the player, the ball, and his/her immediate surrounding.

The activities illustrated in the next few pages incorporate opponents and are not meant for the warm-up stage. There are countless other books and manuals containing warm up activities and match related activities. The purpose of the activities in this manual is to show a few examples of how to teach some of the points discussed and how to keep the ratio of players to ball as small as possible, to maximize touches and learning moments.

ACTIVITY 1: 1V1 TO GOAL

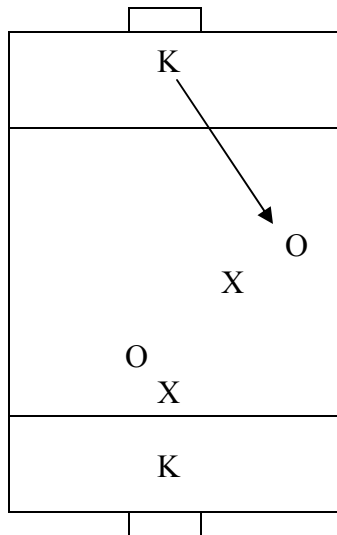


Organization: Area 20 yds wide by 30 yds long, split by a half line and two gates on the half line. Players arranged with three defenders and three attackers. Defender passes the ball to attacker and comes out to challenge. Attacker must dribble through one of the two gates and then he can score on the big goal against the keeper. If defender is beaten through the gate, he cannot chase attacker into the attacking half. Players return to their original line and the next defender serves the ball. After 10 turnovers, the teams switch roles. The team with the most goals wins.

Objectives: Players learn to dribble using feints and deception. Finishing on goal is always a great motivator and adds the finishing practice to the activity.

This activity can be preceded by a dribbling warm up without opponents, where players rehearse a couple of feints and tricks. Coach can challenge players to try the tricks they practiced against live opponents in this activity.

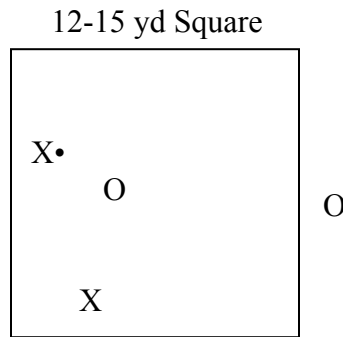
ACTIVITY 2: 3v3 DRIBBLE TO END ZONE



Organization: A game of 3v3 to large goals with keepers. The field is 25 by 40 yds, with two end zones 10 yards deep. Players cannot enter their own end zone and can only dribble into the opposite end zone and can only score from inside the end zone. Defenders cannot chase players into their own end zone, making it 1v1 against the keeper. The keeper cannot score but can help with the build up play. If ball goes out of bounds, it is restarted with a dribble at the point of exit. If ball goes out of bounds in the end zone, the keeper restarts.

Objectives: Players learn to dribble and execute combination plays. They learn to read the cues for when to dribble and when to combine with teammates and learn deception. It's also a finishing activity 1v1 on goal.

ACTIVITY 3: 2V1 POSSESSION



Organization: Two teams of 2 in each grid. One team keeps the ball against one defender while his partner stands outside the grid. When the defender gets tired, he can switch with his partner on the fly. After 10 turnovers, teams switch roles. Ball going out of bounds counts as 1 turnover. If defender wins the ball and can pass it to his outside partner, it counts as 2 turnovers (this feature highlights the element of transition which is crucial for soccer). This could be a physically tiring activity for some players. Provide active rest (working on juggling, etc) after every 5-10 minutes if needed.

Objective: To teach support, support angle, most economical movement, read pressure on the ball.

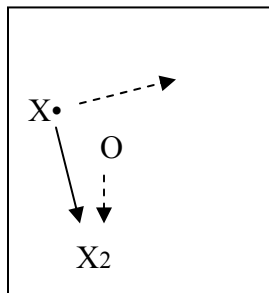


Diagram 1

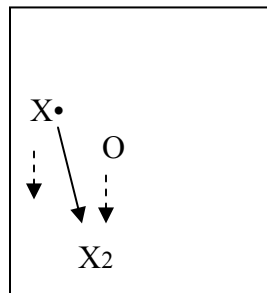


Diagram 2

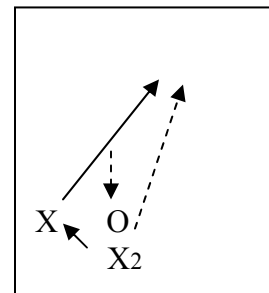
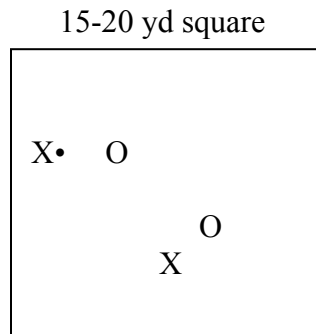


Diagram 3

One of the lessons that young players find hard to learn is *when and how to pass and move*. Our players have been repeatedly told to 'pass and move' that they are conditioned to doing it without thinking of the consequences. Often it is better to 'run smart' rather than 'run hard'. The three diagrams above illustrate this point. In diagram 1, X passes and runs to the other side of the grid. But his run might get him behind O and not easily available for X2. Depending on how O closes down on the ball, X2 might be in trouble and under pressure. Diagram 2 shows an alternative move by X, based on the pressing angle of O. Now X2 can play the ball back to X and run across the grid, using O's momentum against him and getting the ball with plenty of time and space (Diagram 3). Players need to learn when to run across the grid and when to stay close to receiver.

ACTIVITY 4: 2V2 POSSESSION

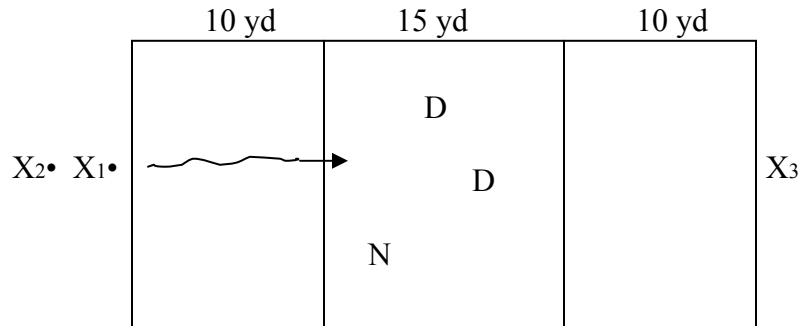


Organization: Two teams of two, playing possession in a grid. If the O's win the ball, they keep playing and the X's become the defenders. Count how many one-touch passes each team makes in a 5 minutes game. One-touch passes don't have to be consecutive. The team with the most one-touch passes is the winner, or the team that gets to 20 one-touch passes first is the winner. Variations: The team with the most split passes is the winner.

Objective: Teach to open body to see pressure and space relationship. Quick support, support angle, when to drop square and when to run behind defenders for a split pass. When to fake a pass and dribble instead.

Players learn how to stay close to each other and constantly adjust their support angle as they pass back and forth or dribble. Once they get pressed too tight against a grid line, they must find a way to spring the ball into the open space and regroup without losing it. Again, as in Activity 3, running 'smart' instead of running 'hard' is the key. Also, there is plenty of scope for deception here, both for the player off-the-ball and the player on-the-ball.

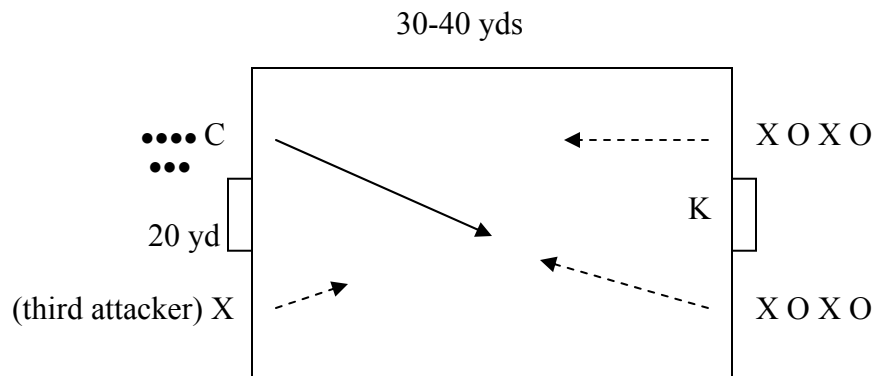
ACTIVITY 5: 2V2 TO END ZONE



Organization: Groups of 6. Grid is 15 yds wide by 35 yds long, split into three areas as shown. X1 dribbles the ball into the middle area, where he can combine with Neutral player N against the two defenders D to get the ball into the end zone. If he succeeds, he passes the ball to the waiting X3 and takes his place. X3 dribbles the opposite way to get the ball into the opposite end zone. If defenders win the ball, they pass the ball to one of the X's waiting outside. After 5 turnovers, the two defenders and the neutral player switch roles with the X's. The Neutral player and the Defenders must stay in the middle zone. Only the X players can enter the end zones. One variation that makes it a bit harder is to allow X to enter into the opposite end zone only with a dribble. This means that N must combine with X within the confines of the middle zone and cannot just pass it into the end zone.

Objectives: This activity is ideal for working on support, combination plays, and deception. The X's can use N to combine and get a return pass into the end zone or fake a pass and dribble through instead. The Neutral player learns to open body and provide correct support angle. The X's can dribble towards the middle zone without pressure, which helps prepare for the combination play and gives N more time to get into good positions. If X is under pressure, he can always dribble back into the safety of the first zone to regroup.

ACTIVITY 6: 2V2 TURN TO GOAL

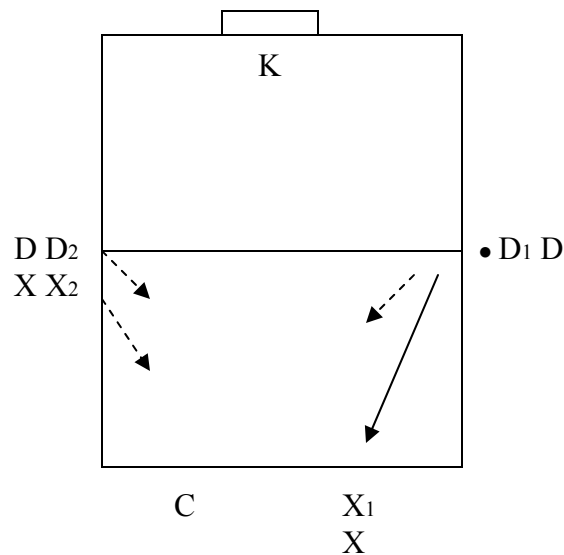


Organization: Sequence starts with four players running into the field, two attackers (X) closely marked by two defenders (O), and Coach serves a ball to the attackers as they run towards him. The two attackers try to control and turn and attack the goal with the Keeper. The two defenders try to win the ball and pass it to the Coach. When play ends, players return to the back of the line and the next four players run in. Rotate roles after the X's had a few turns.

Objectives: Players learn to show for the ball, receive under pressure and combine to turn and beat defenders. Player without the ball needs to read pressure on the ball. If partner has back to goal and under pressure, supporting player needs to drop. If partner has turned and is facing goal, supporting player needs to decide which combination play is on (wall pass, crossover, or over lap). Players learn deception in receiving pass from Coach with back to goal, to facilitate turning. Players learn how to escape pressure. Players learn not to turn into pressure, when to shield the ball and find partner and when pressure is loose enough that turning is possible.

Variation: A third attacker is added. The third attacker cannot cross the half-way line or score and is used as a safe drop pass option by the two attackers, allowing them to turn and get into better positions. This variation could be used to prepare for a progression to 3v3, with a third defender joining in.

ACTIVITY 7: 2V2 TO GOAL

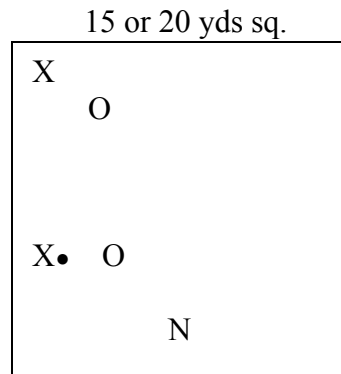


Organization: Use a grid of approx 20 yds by 30 or 35 yds, split into two halves. Defender D1 serves the ball to attacker X1 and closes him down. As soon as the ball is served, defender D2 and attacker X2 join in to make it 2v2. The attackers try to score on goal. The half line is the off-side line for this game. When the ball goes out of bounds, everyone returns to their original lines and the next group goes. Attacking team gets 1 point for each shot on goal and 5 points if they score. Defending team gets 1 point each time they clear the ball outside the grid and 3 points if they can win the ball and pass it to the Coach (C). No one gets any points if the attacking team shoots wide. The first team to reach 20 points is the winner. Switch roles for the next round.

Objectives: Activity ideal for learning combination play. Players learn to read the cues for a wall pass, a dribble, an over lap, etc. Support angle and distance is crucial for success. If the two attackers are too close to each other or too narrow, cannot do wall pass. If too far apart, defenders can easily intercept the wall pass.

One of the most common errors X2 will make is run diagonally to the other side of the grid and leave X1 stranded. This run will also result with X1 getting a pass right against the side line, facing the side line with nowhere to go but shield. Players can learn deception in making decoy runs to shake off pressure and create space for combination plays.

ACTIVITY 8: 2V2+1 POSSESSION



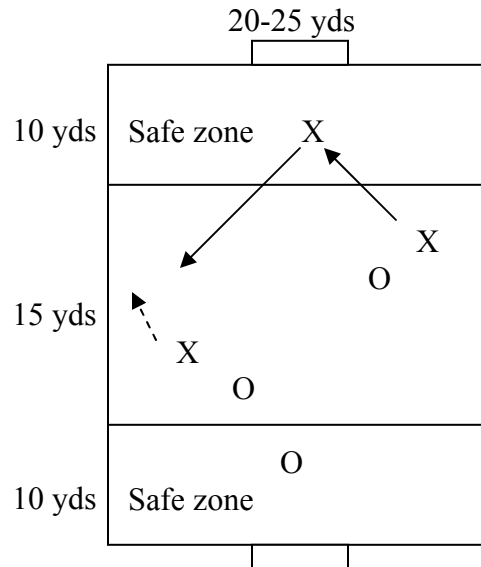
Organization: Groups of 5 play 2v2 possession with a neutral player who always plays with the team in possession. Teams score a point every time they make 5 consecutive passes.

Objectives: Players learn support, support angle, and when to hold on to the ball and when to pass first time.

Variations:

1. *Neutral player only has one touch.* This teaches the players to quickly support the neutral player.
2. *Neutral player has unlimited touches, but all other players have only two touch max.* This teaches the neutral player to provide quick support and be constantly involved and dictate the rhythm of play by holding the ball when appropriate and playing and supporting when appropriate.
3. Play 3v3 plus neutral and neutral player cannot pass the ball back to the player who passed it to him.

ACTIVITY 9: 3v3 WITH SAFE ZONE



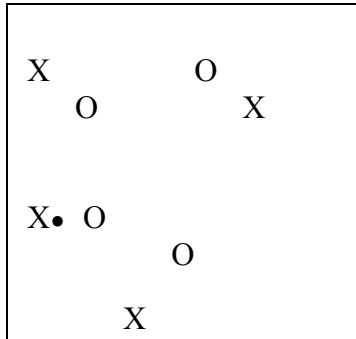
Organization: Game of 3v3 with small goals and no keepers. One player from each team is in the safe zone near his goal and 2v2 in middle zone. Players can play it back to the safe zone if they wish, to help with switching of play. If player in safe zone gets a pass, he can dribble into the middle zone to make it 3v2. Once a goal is scored, the ball starts with the safe zone player. Players in the middle zone cannot enter the opposite team's safe zone. If possession is lost, the extra player must retreat back to his team's safe zone.

Variation: If the player in the safe zone gets a back pass, he cannot dribble into the middle zone and can only join the attack if he passes the ball.

Objectives: Keeping possession by using support behind the ball. Players learn when to drop the ball and go wide. How to maintain a good team shape, with depth and width.

ACTIVITY 10: 4v4 ELIMINATION

30 by 30 square



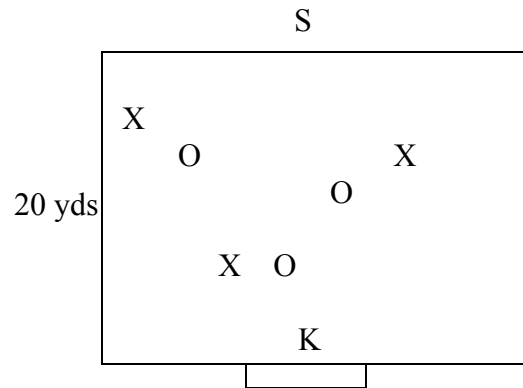
Organization: Two teams of 4 playing possession. If a team makes 5 consecutive passes, the defending team must take one player out of the grid to make it 4v3. If the attacking team makes another 5 consecutive passes, the defending team loses another player to become 4v2. The team that eliminates all the opponents wins the game. The defending team can bring outside players back into the grid by winning the ball and passing it to the outside player. If an outside player gets the ball, he can dribble inside and continue play. Teams can only eliminate opponents when they are at full strength.

Note to coach: each time a team makes 5 consecutive passes, the coach should stop play and let the defending team take a player out before serving a new ball to the attacking team. As numbers of defenders reduce, coach can demand a higher number of consecutive passes or demand one-touch passes from the numbers-up team.

Objectives: Players learn support angles, distances, when to hold the ball, when to play first time, team shape and transition from attack to defense and vice versa.

This is a fast pace game that requires the coach to be more of a referee than a teacher. The coaching points can be reviewed at natural breaks and at water breaks since players will get irritated if stopped while trying to make successive passes.

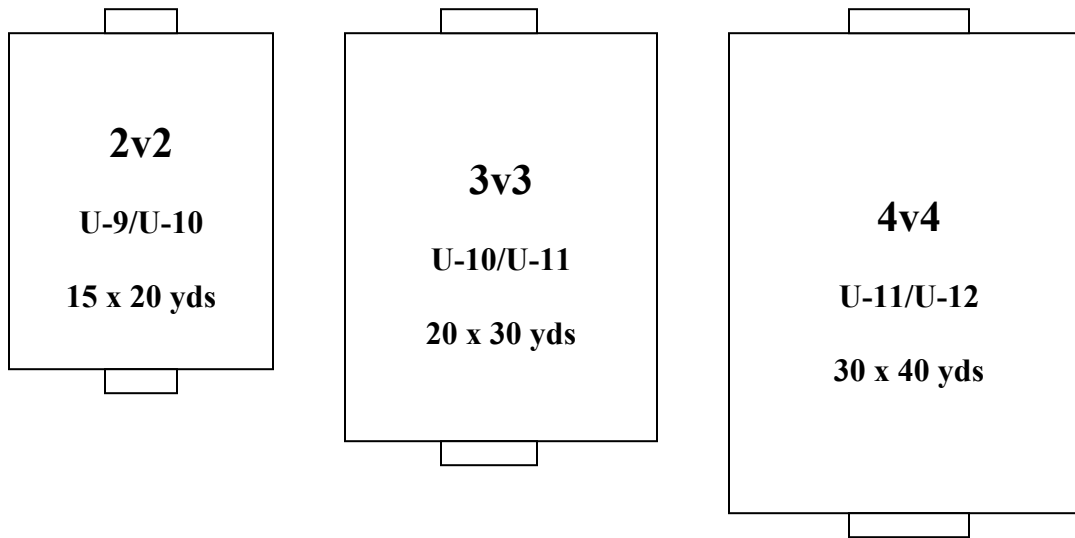
ACTIVITY 11: 3v3 TO ONE GOAL



Organization: A game of 3v3 in an area 30 by 20 yards, with one goal and a keeper. Both teams attack the same goal. Server (S) serves ball randomly and team that wins the ball attacks goal. If defending team wins the ball, they must first pass back to the Server who will serve the ball back to them. If ball goes out of bounds, the Server serves a new ball to the team based on which team touched it last before it went out.

Objectives: Receiving, turning and shooting. Players learn to open their body and when to shoot first time and when to set teammate for a shot. Team shape for combination plays. Transition from attack to defense and vice versa.

ACTIVITY 12: PRACTICE SCRIMMAGE



Organization: Recommended field size and numbers for practice scrimmages for each age group. This doesn't mean that we can't play 2v2 at U-12 occasionally, or that we can't play 4v4 at U-9. This is simply a recommendation for the most common training environment at each age. There are many possible variations to these games:

Variations:

1. Play to small goals with no keepers.
2. Play to big goals with keepers.
3. Play to big goals with no keepers, but ball must be chipped into the goal for it to count (works best with U-11/U-12's).
4. Play to wide but low goals where can only score with ground shots.
5. Play to targets standing on the end lines.
6. Play without goals and score by dribbling across end lines.
7. Play with 4 goals. Each team defends two goals (3v3 and 4v4).
8. Play with 4 goals placed on each of the four perimeter lines of the grid.
9. Play with 4 goals and each team has a keeper that defends two goals simultaneously.
10. Play with multiple goals placed randomly inside grid and teams score by passing to teammate through any goal.
11. Play with only one goal located in the center of the grid and can score from any side.
12. Without goals, and players score by hitting tall cones located on end lines.
13. Cannot pass forward (except if a keeper is used, he is allowed to pass forward). This encourages dribbling and/or longer throws from keeper.
14. Cannot pass back. This also encourages dribbling and penetration.
15. Can only score with left foot.
16. Cannot dribble across the half line (ball must be passed into the other half). This works best with 4v4.