

Basic Coaching Concepts for Under-9 and Under-10's in Small Sided Games

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Coaching small-sided games with an eye towards the long-term growth and enjoyment of each individual player is a complicated undertaking, but arguably the most important challenge in soccer. Reducing the number of players on the field and effectively eliminating the need to coach positions dramatically reduces the degree of difficulty facing the youth soccer coach. Consequentially, the "curriculum" for coaching youth soccer from ages five to ten should focus on fun, decision-making and skill development with the long-term goal of producing "competent individuals" by the teen years rather than "winning teams" by age ten. The following questions form the basis for observing young players' strengths and weaknesses and the information gathered can be used to create individual player profiles.

The subsequent goal of coaching is to help each player make progress over the course of the season, with the area of technical development valued above all other concerns.

It is critical for coaches to appreciate that young players value fun, balanced competition and improvement over winning and that mistakes are a necessary and vital aspect of learning. Young players should NEVER be chastised for taking a tactical risk and failing; nor should they be required to play in a manner that minimizes their participation and enjoyment.

Coaches should be sensitive to the slow pace of learning and appreciate that many of the basic technical and tactical concepts outlined below will require ongoing repetition and patient molding over many years before becoming established habits.

Coaches should also appreciate that technical development is stifled when the tactical environment is too complicated for the participants. Without adequate time and space to control the ball and assess their tactical options, young players cannot develop tactical understanding or a range of techniques through game play. Only once the basic techniques and tactical insights outlined below have become tenuously established should the training and playing environment challenge young players to perform with more speed and under increased pressure from opponents.

Individual Technical and Tactical Issues

Contacting the Ball

How many ways can the player kick or dribble or control the ball? There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half- volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The U-9 and U-10 player should be challenged to expand their range of surfaces and textures (weights and spins) in an ongoing process of technical refinement.

Is the player two footed? Juggling and dribbling practice should always involve the use of both feet and young players must be encouraged to experiment with all six contact surfaces. For the more motivated players, juggling, kicking and Coerver's (individual dribbling moves) are essential "homework" activities for developing a comfort level with the ball.

Passing

Does the player purposely pass the ball towards teammates? Players should be asked to control the ball and look for teammates rather than simply kicking the ball forward or to safety; it is often necessary to remind young players that the goalkeeper is always the most open player on the team when they are under pressure or no obvious forward passing options are available. At this age, the "thinking" behind a passing decision is often

more telling than the outcome and young players must be encouraged to attempt to maintain possession by passing (or dribbling) even as their limited range of techniques fail them.

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

Does the player use disguise and deception when passing? Encouraging more frequent passing (and dribbling) with the outside of the foot will help improve the level of subtlety in young players. The use of the hips to deceive opponents can also become a feature of play for nine and ten year olds.

Shooting

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

Ball Control

How many touches does the player take to control the ball? The earlier a player decides what to do with the ball, the faster they will play; however, most U-9 and U-10 players will not look up before they have secured possession because their skill level will not allow them to concentrate on two things (the ball and the next action) at once.

Time, space, vision of the field and a comfort level with the ball are the most important elements in reducing the number of touches necessary to control the ball.

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

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

Dribbling

Does the player have the skill to dribble out of pressure, or past an opponent? Dribbling practice should include basic moves to turn away from pressure and also ideas on how to use changes in pace and direction to maintain possession or beat an opponent. While presenting a variety of moves to young players certainly has long-term benefits, creating a positive attitude towards dribbling is a more important element of coaching. As the most artistic aspect of soccer, young players must not be discouraged from learning to dribble the ball through early and repeated failures.

Does the player run into open space with the ball? Running forward with the ball is important for making defenders commit to the ball, for shortening passing distances, for changing the rhythm of play and for creating shooting possibilities. Players must be encouraged to quickly dribble the ball into open space and also encouraged to use the outside surface of the foot when “speed dribbling.”

Does the player dribble with their head down and rarely look to pass or shoot? While it is important to encourage young players to quickly dribble the ball into open space, players must also be aware of their passing and shooting options. Given that the ball can travel faster when kicked, it is important to encourage dribbling

players to look up during those moments when they are in open space and not touching the ball and when they are momentarily clear of opponents.

Does the player use disguise and deception when dribbling? The most difficult opponents are “wrigglers” who are unpredictable in their dribbling. Players should be encouraged to combine dribbling moves and become comfortable making multiple, abrupt changes in direction.

Heading

Does the player head the ball? Heading becomes more likely by ages nine and ten and practicing and playing with lighter balls will help overcome any initial fears of performing this difficult skill. It should also be stressed that there is NO medical evidence supporting the claim that heading a soccer ball is dangerous to the participants.

Support

Does the player move with the game or do they pass and stand still? Young players should not be restricted in their movements on the field and moving should become a natural extension of passing. Passing sequences involving two and three players should be encouraged and can be expected at this age; these beginning attempts at combination play will become essential elements of mature play.

Does the player move into open spaces when not in possession? Players should be encouraged to “find” new supporting positions away from teammates rather than be told where and when to move. By age ten, some children have started to think more abstractly about the use of space away from the ball; however many others do not yet demonstrate this spatial awareness, making positional instruction irrelevant for the vast majority of nine and ten year olds.

Is the player more comfortable when facing the opponent’s goal than when playing with their back to the opponent’s goal? Some players are uncomfortable checking and receiving the ball with their back to goal. While older players will ultimately be selected to positions based on this skill, all young players should regularly experience this challenge as a natural part of their soccer education.

Defending

Does the player try to recover the ball when possession is lost? “Defending” at this age should be no more complicated than encouraging young players to try and win the ball back. In deference to the technical difficulties associated with attacking play for nine and ten year-olds, any emphasis on “team” defending should be delayed until at least U-11.

Does the player simply kick at the ball when an opponent is in possession? Tackling for the ball can and should include efforts to regain possession. The player who routinely kicks the ball away should be encouraged to use their body and the open space away from the opponent to attempt to win the ball back.

Transition

Does the player mentally transition after a change in possession? When the ball turns over from the attacker to the defender or from the defender to the attacker, the game offers chances to demonstrate awareness of two very important concepts: immediate recovery of the ball and immediate counter-attack to goal. Players should be assessed on how well they understand these concepts and encouraged to react as quickly as possible to any change in possession. By extension, the players immediately in support of the ball can also be assessed on how well they react to help their teammates.

Creativity

Does the player improvise when solving tactical problems? Those players who use non-standard techniques to solve tactical problems are demonstrating signs of creativity. A “good” pass gets to its target at a pace that can be controlled, regardless of how it was delivered; similarly, a goal is a goal, regardless of how it was propelled

into the net. Young players who improvise should be encouraged, not scolded, and it must be remembered that for young players, the “thought” behind an action is generally more telling than the outcome, which is often limited by experience and technical range.

The essence of coaching young players, therefore, is in fostering creativity through technical development and tactical understanding. To that end, asking the player who makes a rash decision (i.e., a needless give-a-way or hurried clearance) why they chose that particular action, and then challenging them to consider more positive alternatives is always a better coaching approach than dictating thoughts or choreographing patterns of play. Players make mistakes because they lack experience and composure; our job is to help inch them towards more consistent performance based on improved skill and faster “reading” of the game.