

# **SOCCER IS A PLAYER'S GAME**

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At this time in the United States soccer is played by many thousands of children whose parents have very little knowledge or understanding of the game. It is important for those parents to understand that soccer is unique in that all the decisions in a game are made by the players. This is a difficult concept for many parents to comprehend because in the more traditional sports, baseball, football and basketball, the coaching staff can and do play a vital role in determining the result while the game is being played.

Soccer is a game with skills that can only be improved by exposure to repetition of the game. Soccer presents a series of motor and sensory motor challenges; having control of the body while being in control of the ball is essential to a player's success. While coaches must provide the environment in practice to expose players to the demands of skill and decision making, they must also provide games with realistic challenges for the age and ability levels of the players.

11-a-side soccer is the adult version of a kid's game that requires adult problem solving and decision making. Young boys and girls are children, not mini-adults. Therefore, they should not be exposed to adult soccer challenges. As in all areas of education, children should be taught step-by-step.

## **The Ages of Soccer**

Children who play soccer from an early age will usually pass through four distinct phases before they become mature (adult) soccer players.

### **The Beginner**

In the Western world, children generally enter into some form of organized soccer, either at school or within the community, at around age 6. These early years, 6 to 8, should be considered the "Beginning Phase." During this time children learn to kick the ball in a comfortable, coordinated way, to run purposefully with the ball and to begin playing as a team against other children. They are just starting to understand the need to share the ball (passing), to help one another to go forward (offense) and to try to stop the opposition (defense).

However, players of this age are just emerging from a colossal development period, i.e. from being born to going to school...a relatively short time in which they have learned to crawl, walk, run and talk. In soccer terms, when they play the game for the first time they are still "babies"... relatively uncoordinated, understandably egocentric and view their world of soccer from that perspective.

### **The Preteen Phase (9, 10 and 11)**

The second soccer stage sees the young soccer player emerging from the beginner phase at around 8 or 9 years of age. Coaches of these players find themselves faced by eager, coordinated, energetic youngsters who are like sponges in their ability and willingness to learn but who want to learn by “doing” and not being lectured; whose relationship with their parents, teachers and coaches is at an optimum. It is, without doubt, the “Golden Age of Learning.” This stage in the lives of the young soccer players is the most important in terms of skills development

Players should not be wingers, strikers or fullbacks at this time in their soccer development and experience. Nor should there be a permanently positioned goalkeeper. These youngsters are soccer players. They are not even attackers, midfielders or defenders.

The duty of the coach is to give each player the opportunity to develop all the skills of the game...including goalkeeping. Positional play should be gradually introduced with the move into and the experience of 11-a-side soccer.

### **The Early Teens (12 –15)**

Through necessity we have generalized in terms of the age classifications. We all know that children do not mature at the same rate. However, for most, the early adolescence years are between 12 and 15. In many ways, this time in the life of young people can be described as the “turbulent years.”

It is usually a period of great change both physically and psychologically with an accompanying increasing resistance to authority...parent, coach and teacher. Normally, there is a rapid skeletal growth with accompanying increased danger of injuries. Youngsters relate to one another (peer pressure) better than with adults and they are becoming accustomed to working and socializing in larger groups (gangs). Coaching this age group requires a very different approach to the first two phases with the “team” aspect becoming much more important. The coach must be skillful so as not to alienate his/her somewhat already erratic and unpredictable young charges. The trauma and distractions of the “early teens” only further emphasizes how important the “preteen phase” is in building a base of all-round soccer skills.

### **The Later Teens (16 – 19)**

As teenagers grow through the early adolescent stages, in most cases the growth spurt upwards slows down and the rest of the body has the chance to catch up with the skeletal growth. We can expect a change in attitude as the more mature teenager sees adulthood and a career not too far away. This is a great stage of development for the more committed soccer player. Skill development is almost complete. Therefore, much can be accomplished by the coach with regard to team development and the tactical role of the individual within the team.

## **Practice Makes Permanent**

In the years that I have worked in the United States I have often been asked my opinion on the differences between the top player and the average player.

In general terms my answer has been that a player must know how to solve the problems that are presented by the game. On offense a player must know how to **maintain possession of the ball** and on defense he/she **must have the desire to win the ball back immediately**.

The top player is able to keep possession under the pressures created by: the moving ball, the movement of the body with the ball, opposition and stress. The average player may struggle when subjected to those conditions. For example, an average player will “show” the ball to the opponent when trying to take an opponent on or turn the ball towards the opponent when trying to change direction. This may be the result of incorrect playing conditions and playing habits developed at a young age.

The old saying “practice makes perfect” only holds true if players practice correctly. They can practice “correctly” only under the pressures they may expect in a game.

The ages 9,10 and 11 are the most impressionable. Playing habits can be changed. Therefore, it is important that players learn to play correctly during this period. Bad habits can be changed in young players but are almost impossible to remove as they grow older.

## **Match Day**

It is important for everybody at a youth game ... coach, official and parent ... to understand the age and level of the players so that expectations are realistic. It is also important to note that the match is viewed from entirely different perspectives; the player, the coach, the officials and the parents all have different roles to play. Players and officials have to run, sweat and have to make split-second decisions based upon the “pictures” they see in a game. As a result, mistakes will be made. Coaches have to make fewer decisions and while they are sometimes affected by emotions created by the game, they should be under no real pressure during the game. Parents cannot possibly be impartial during a game. Naturally they will be biased towards their own team. However, despite the excitement and emotion that may be created, parents must understand that the game is for their children. Soccer is a player’s game.