

A Developmental Approach

To The Soccer Learning Process

Soccer – by definition

- Soccer is a game played between 2 teams and each team is trying to score more goals than the other team.
- Soccer games are decided by goals. Practice centers on creating and finishing opportunities, or, on denying them. The entire soccer world revolves around one team trying to put the ball in the net while the other tries to stop them.
- Small-sided games provide the most natural, efficient and effective way for children to learn the game. Here is where small-sided games, along with clear functions, can help.
- They learn techniques and tactics, find solutions to problems and determine their own level of involvement.

The Elements of Soccer – define what soccer is

- **Goals** - give the game meaning and direction
- **Field** – sets the physical boundaries
- **Ball** – ball possession determines player's roles
- **Rules** – sets limits and controls behavior
- **Players** – teammates (cooperation) and opponents (competition)

The Progression to 11 vs 11 soccer

- **If we start with the premise that it takes 10-12 years to develop a soccer player,** then what is the rush to 11 vs 11 when there is plenty of time to get there.
- If a player starts playing at age 6, by the age of 16 to 18, he should be developed into a well-rounded soccer player. Unfortunately, due to our current system, children are dropping out in large numbers around the age of 12 to 14. It seems that we are running them off. Why? Maybe it's no longer fun and they have not gotten any better,
- There are various **phases** that a player passes through on the journey to becoming a player: **introductory, developmental, creative, competitive, and maturation.**
- Development occurs incrementally in the following areas – mostly governed by age and developmental norms: technical, physical, tactical, emotional .
- Children's legs are smaller and cover much less ground than an adult. A smaller field is more size/work-rate appropriate. The young children are not exhausted trying to cover too much ground and they are not strong enough to kick the ball over the distance either. Forcing children to play on big fields really becomes an exercise in futility.
- Each time you add players and/or increase the size of the playing area, you automatically increase the variables involved – and in many cases exponentially!!! Thus, the mental capacity of the player is brought more into play and the cognitive ability is not even in place to handle most of what is needed.

- **The lines of interaction (possible passing interactions or 1vs1 confrontations) for 4 players is 12, for 6 players it is 30, for 8 players it is 56 and for 11 players it is 110.** This scale shows the progression clearly and implies time and experience be involved, not hurrying up!
- With major clubs like Manchester United and Ajax Amsterdam leading the way for 4 vs 4 as the best learning tool for their young players, who are we to disagree. With clubs like that, they have so much invested in their youth, their future, that they certainly cannot afford to get it wrong, where it matters the most.
- The value they see in 4 vs 4 is the realization that the young children are learning how to play the game, developing skills, competing and having fun !! Manchester United has mandated playing 4 vs 4 through age 11...(' United want to revolutionize coaching of the Under-9 to Under-11 age-group, focusing more on developing skills in four-v-four games')
- When you want to increase the quality of the foundation (young children), you must provide the ideal conditions so the young players can best learn the game. The goal is for the young players (age 6-12) to learn the game, play the game and have fun playing. This involves quality coaching and playing the real game in a modified form (4 vs 4).

1 vs 1 through 8 vs 8

- 1 vs 1 – it's all on you
- 2 vs 2 – now with a teammate
- 3 vs 3 – first sign of shape (triangle)
- 4 vs 4 – new shape – diamond – width and depth
- 5 vs 5 – field players only, no keeper – add a player to the center of the diamond
- 6 vs 6 – now include the keeper
- 7 vs 7 – introduce wingers
- 8 vs 8 – beginning of line play (backs-midfield-forwards)
- Each addition creates changes and challenges that must be dealt with – the building blocks are necessary for the total development of the player. Fast forward does not solve the problem, but rather creates the problem.

- **This model listed below is now practiced in over 80% of the 55 state associations which constitute US Youth Soccer.**
- **4 vs 4 (through U8)** provides best model for learning to play soccer. All the players are involved in the game and have an effect on the outcome. Played on field 40 yds(L) x 25 yds(W) with a goal 3ft (H) x 10 ft (W), without a keeper, with no set positions, allows the players to become very involved in all aspects of the game --- building up, scoring and defending.
- Players will touch the ball more and have more chances to score goals and this should make playing more fun, and also allow the creativity to flow.
- **4v4 is the smallest manifestation of a real match.** In it are all of the elements necessary for children to experience real soccer without any confusing duplication. In a real soccer match children have the option of passing the ball forwards, square or backwards.
- 4v4 also provides the minimum numbers needed for all of the principles of play. One player is up top for penetration. Two are needed for width and one holds back to supply depth. 4 vs 4 is the optimum number for teaching in small-sided games. .
- The biggest change in moving to games larger then 4v4 is in how to use all those other players.
- Progression to **5 vs 5** without a keeper played on a field 50 yd (L) x 30 yd (W). What to do with the extra player? Place the player in the middle of the diamond and adjust accordingly. This player could be the stabilizer to the group – the hub of the wheel, so to speak.
- **6 vs 6 (through U10)** is an extension of 4 vs 4, **but now with a fixed goalkeeper.** It is 5 a side with a keeper, on a slightly larger field with a slightly larger goal as well. The field should be at least 60 yd (L) and 40 yd (W). This is a progression of the 5 vs 5 without a keeper, so the playing shape should remain the same, just add a keeper. The goal should be 6 ft (H) and 18 ft (W).
- Progression is to 6 a side with a keeper (7vs7)
- **8 vs 8 (through U12) is the beginning of line play – backs, midfield, forwards.** This is 7 a side with a keeper. The field is now at least 70 yd (L) x 55 yd (W) and the goals should be less than the full size goals. At this point, the understanding of roles, positions and the interaction between the different groups of player becomes very important. This the beginning of the team building phase and the cognitive understanding of the players is greatly increased. The demands of how to play in the attacking, defending and in the transition phases all become much more important. It is about properly covering all of the space and knowing how to make space in attack and close space in defense. It is also the beginning of systems and alignments and with that comes a lot of responsibility. Team strategies become more prevalent and the game becomes more physical as the players grow in size and physical capacities (speed and strength).
- Progression to 8 a side plus keeper (9vs9) – play across the width of the full size field, with the sidelines being end-lines and the end-line and half-line being sidelines.

The Learning Process

- The Learning Process does not have a Fast Forward button. It is a patient process over time that yields the best results. Children need to learn the game in stages and carry each stage of learning over into the next stage. Age-appropriate learning experiences set the tone for player development.
- Think of children in the school setting – would you ask them to do more than they are reasonably capable of doing? Why do we insist on doing this in soccer? Because we do not value or understand the Learning Process of soccer.
- First children must learn the basics of the game – skills, rules, sportsmanship, how the game is played and then they must continue to build on those and other concepts as the level of competition increases
- The lack of time devoted to learning to play soccer has to be compensated for by accelerated learning in a shorter period. Thus the benefit of small-sided games. The game must be simplified and put into a format that is easier for the children to learn.
- In order to accelerate the learning process, the 11 vs 11 game needs to be simplified, but must also retain as many typical features and characteristics of the game as possible. Thus it is necessary to maintain the elements, in a modified form, appropriate to the age and developmental stage of the players involved.
- The Learning process depends largely on practice. Soccer is best learned by playing, and the time children spend playing the game is important for their soccer development.
- Children need to learn the game and understand it on their terms. It must be meaningful to them. They must have involvement and recognize what is going on and participate accordingly
- Learning up to around age 11 or 12 is mostly concrete learning, the abstract learning starts to kick in around 11 or 12 for most children. The golden age of learning is considered between the ages of 9 and 11.
- If we were to simplify the developmental process to the most basic elements, this would be the platform: (always with a goal of some sort to attack and defend)
 - 1) **master the ball** (creating a base to play and to play against others)....
 - 2) **playing together** (with teammates and against opponents - combining skills with insight)
 - 3) **playing within a system** (team tactics and roles)
- **Some areas of concern:**
 - 1) Young athletes under-train and over-compete.
 - 2) Training in the early years is heavily focused on outcomes (winning) rather than processes (overall child development).
 - 3) It is estimated that approximately 70% of children quit sports by age 13.
 - 4) In general, young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first-hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that succeed and fail. We are very guilty of over-coaching.

The Developmental Process

6 to 8 years old: Discovery

Easily distracted, cannot concentrate for long periods of time. Egocentric, they all want the ball – 3v3 becomes 1 v 5. The players' abilities are largely limited to kicking ball forward, receiving passes, dribbling and shooting at goal. Every player need constant contact with the ball. Create fun games with the ball that they can do. The ball is their biggest obstacle. Size 3 ball and play 4v4 in a modified area. Allow for a lot of space.

8 to 10 years old: Development

More small-group oriented, longer attention span. Ideal age to develop fundamental soccer skills. More awareness and purpose – more aggressive. Teach skills in modified soccer games. Size 3 or 4 ball and play 4 to 5 a side. Able to combine with one or two other players more comfortably. Better able to deal with light soccer pressure.

10 to 12 years old: Creativity

They have control over their own movements and work consciously to improve their game. Continue with skill development, but now is the time to start teaching insight into the game. Small sided games provide many opportunities for problem-solving and confidence in trying new moves and techniques. Now is the time to start adding different conditions to the small-sided games. Individual soccer personality begins to unfold. They are motivated to try new things. Size 4 ball and up to 7 a side games.

12 to 14 years old: Discipline

Development of individual opinions, more assertive. Growth spurts for some but not all. Increased capacity to read the game (insight). Tasks are assigned, movement off the ball, combination play. Awkward stage for some, coordination is a problem. Speed of play increases. Talent gaps become noticeable. Team concepts begin to be introduced. Team play (attack, defense and transition) becomes the focal point. Players at this stage will ask many questions and need to know why they are doing things. They are curious as to what is the purpose. Size 4 or 5 ball with 8 or 11 a side.

14 to 16 years old: Competitive

Winning is more important than ever, capable of playing very competitive soccer. Playing pressures increase dramatically (time and space). Physique and fitness are developing, coordination is improving. Plays the game with more insight and intensity. Tactics and team play are main themes. Positional play (role and tactics) become very important. Some players struggle to keep pace with the rest. Size 5 ball and 11 a side.

16 to 18 years old: Fulfillment

More mentally and physically stable. All of the soccer ingredients are in place, now it's a matter of putting everything together. The speed of play demands a faster level of mental and technical play. Tactics and roles become more important and complex. Team organization, systems of play, defensive schemes all become more sophisticated.

*** Up until they are 16, the French work only on technique. The relationship is just the ball and the player to improve control touch and passing. Players need complete control of the ball before moving on to tactics and strategies.

