

U-14 | Committing

Us – The Formal Phase

The training to train stage covers ages 11 to 16. The objectives are to build the aerobic base, strength toward the end of the phase and further develop soccer specific skills (build the engine and consolidate sport specific skills).

A commitment to the game can be a consideration for children in this age group. Some are ready to make a full-time allegiance to the sport. Most are not ready to make this decision yet, one way or the other. Adults must be careful not to make this decision for the player. The commitment must come from a personal choice by the player.

Adult standards and formal rules become the focal point during this period. The pace of development quickens at this age because of the acceleration of physical and mental maturity. The demands of training should increase, thus provoking improvement in mental toughness, concentration and diligence. Awareness of tactical moments within the game becomes an important facet of the learning process. Players in this age group can grasp a strategic concept and the individual or group tactics to execute the strategy. They also tend to be self-critical and rebellious but have a strong bond to the team.

"Football is about emotions – especially the emotions you give."

- Michel Platini, UEFA, president

Physically, these players need to work on rhythmic movement, dynamic range of motion exercises and a measured amount of static stretching during the warm-up and cool-down. Beware of overstretching, particularly for the knee joint, as too great a range of motion may lead to hyperextension and thus injury to the soft tissues. These players are beginning to need some exercise without the ball to improve their fitness, the appropriate use of the overload principle³¹. However, the majority of the fitness needed for this age group is still accomplished with the ball. The added benefit here, physically, is the continued improvement of their coordination with the ball. Because of growth spurts typically occurring at this time in their biological growth, one cannot go wrong with agility training and core body balance training. Regular use of The 11+ routine from FIFA provides a proven standard that will properly prepare players for the demands of the game. The 11+ can be found on FIFA's website.

Invest time in the development of individual skills under the pressure of time, space and opponent. The importance of a good first touch in receiving, passing, heading and shooting for field players and deflecting and boxing and kick saves for goalkeepers cannot be over emphasized. Passing must be done consistently while on the run. Teach players that they are not to let the ball bounce. Have players take

³¹ Simply stated, the overload principle means the body will adapt to the stresses placed upon it. The more you do, within reason for the age group, the more you are able to do.

the ball out of the air as this provides solid team play. An increase in technical speed is affected by using small-sided games in training sessions. Encourage players to shield the ball from defenders as well as take on opponents 1v1 using feints, spin turns and moves to beat an opponent. Train the players to highly value maintaining possession of the ball. Shooting on the run or turn, from various angles, from crosses and on volleys and half volleys must be a regular feature of training.

The psychological component of the game should remain fun and enjoyable. Encourage imagination and creativity in training sessions to produce players with enthusiasm come match day. While players of this age want and need increased demands at training, be realistic for the age. Establishing concrete training targets for players at this age is a self-motivator for them. When training targets are set, they must be evaluated from time to time and give the players clear feedback.

The development of individual skills as well as individual and small group tactics is important at this stage of development. Possession of the ball is very important both individually and as a team. The most important factors are the quality of the first touch and early movement of the 2nd attacker(s). If the players learn to keep the ball using proper team shape and movement to do so, it will help them understand defending issues better, too. They should also have a better idea of when and where to defend high or low pressure once the ball is lost. That assessment is influenced by the number of teammates and opponents around the ball, where the ball is on the field and the distance and angle of the ball to goal. Reading the game should help them recognize numbers up and numbers down situations, such as when to delay, step up and try to win the ball or take ground or when to withdraw and wait for teammates to get goal-side.

Individually, when on the attack, emphasize keeping possession by not always rushing forward, especially when the opponents have good defensive shape. Use possession play to create a chance for penetration toward the opponents' goal. In the attacking third, encourage risk taking to persuade players to take on opponents, especially in a 1v1 situation and when in the opponents' penalty area.

When in groups, players should play hard to keep possession of the ball. The quality of the first touch is crucially important here, as is early and smart movement of attacking team players around the ball. Players need to learn that the movement to support could be a run of many yards or just a few steps and an adjustment of angle to the 1st attacker. Sometimes the 2nd attacker will make a good run and be available to receive a pass, but the ball is not delivered. The effort of the 2nd attacker must be recognized and praised. Emotionally, players this age will stop making those runs if they do not get the ball. The coach must help them to see the value of the run. Tell them if they make 10 runs and get the ball once it may be at a crucial moment. Group play will now be from pairs to fours. In these groups players need to be coached to perform combinations such as wall passes, takeovers, double passes and overlaps. To pull off these combinations, they will need to be coached to see and understand the principles of attack for width, depth and penetration. Finally, intelligent runs into the penalty area to meet crosses must become more consistent at this age. To accomplish these goals of group play, players should be put into 2v1, 1v2, 2v2, 3v2, 2v3, 4v2 and 4v4 situations in training sessions.

When defending as an individual, players need to be taught how to apply proper pressure in front of or from behind the 1st attacker. They also need to begin to understand that as the 1st defender they do not always have to win the ball, but sometimes shepherd the opponent into a tight space and/or to the 2nd defender. Players need to be in the habit of immediate pressure if they have lost the ball.

Players should begin to understand and be held accountable for decisions they make on the field and how it affects their game and team. Consequently, make training sessions competitive to get players out of their comfort zone. Expect the players to truly read the game in a tactical sense. That expectation must be realistic in relation to their maturity and decision making ability as well as the tactics of soccer they have learned. A variety of tactical situations in training sessions will aid the players in deepening their tactical awareness.

Singularly important in the game is mobility. When defending, mobility takes the form of recovery runs³², tracking runs³³ and supporting runs. On the attack, mobility means supporting runs and off-the-ball runs to create space for oneself or a teammate. Reading the game and knowing when, where and why to run is important for the player who can anticipate play.

The word hustle is so often misused that it has come to mean mindless running, merely for the sake of running. Do soccer players need to have a high work rate? Yes, but it means tactical running, on and off the ball movement, with a purpose. Soccer players need to learn when to run and when to not run. There are times when it is tactically correct to not run. They also need to learn at what angle to run. Players must be taught when to make straight runs and when to make diagonal, square and bent runs. Of course these runs could be forward or backward on attack or defense. Tactical off-the-ball runs are part of reading the game.

Players must also learn about the timing of runs, when to start and stop. Most off-the-ball runs start too early so the player is marked up once arriving in the space to meet the ball. Directly incorporated to the timing of runs is the pace of the run. Recovery runs on defense are probably going to be all out. Tracking runs on defense will have to match the pace of the opponent being marked. Many, but not all, attacking runs without the ball will start off slow or at a moderate pace and then accelerate at the last moment darting past an opponent to meet the pass. There is something more to running in soccer than mere locomotion. Brains as well as brawn need to be put into players' running.

"Once the whistle blows it's all about tactical movement."

- Shep Messing, 1972 U.S.A. Olympic Team, goalkeeper

Set plays for this age group must be simple and direct. The emphasis will be on good technique and proper timing of each player's role in the set play. On set plays, the opposition needs to be shown more than one option and in more than one direction from the ball. By having options to the left and right of the ball – short or long, and perhaps also in front of and behind the ball, the defending team is forced to

³² When defending a run back into space in the defending half and into good defensive shape.

³³ When defending a run matching an opponent's run.

spread out to mark attackers, and thus, space is created for the attack. An emphasis needs to be placed on possession at throw-ins rather than just hurling the ball back onto the field.

Goalkeeping becomes a much more specialized position and demands more quality training at this age. The players should continue to train as field players to keep foot skills at a high level, but specific goalkeeper training should occur with a qualified goalkeeper trainer. At a minimum, devote three training sessions per month to goalkeeper training with the team.

Through the use of games-based training, expose the players to various game situations including functional training³⁴. Many more target games are used now in training sessions. Continue to refine technique and emphasize the tactical use of those techniques. Refer to the US Youth Soccer DVD *Skills School – Developing Essential Soccer Techniques* and *Soccer: How To Play The Game | The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of U.S. Soccer*.

General Characteristics of the U-14 Age Group

- The more advanced U-14 players are able to execute the range of skills, but most others are still developing previously taught skills and are now being exposed to these additional skills
- Important psychosocial implications for a child entering puberty – early or late
- Popularity influences self-esteem
- Tests limits - a know-it-all attitude
- Fertile period to learn – full of eagerness
- Tend to be quite self-critical and may need regular positive reinforcement
- Bodies are going through physical changes that affect personal appearance
- There will be significant differences in physical maturation rates between individuals
- Rapid growth spurts of the skeleton leave ligaments, tendons and muscles catching up, so coordination and balance are astray. Temporary gangly movement may result in a loss of touch on the ball. Players do not always make the connection between their growth spurt and the temporary loss of form; they need help realizing that everything will come back into synch in six to 18 months.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

³⁴ (1) specialized training in the particular skills necessary for playing a specific position; (2) training, under match conditions, that stresses a player's technical or tactical weakness.

Components of the Game for the U-14 Age Group*

Technique: Experiment with the qualities of a flighted ball, i.e.: spin, swerve, chipping to pass, bending passes and driving crosses to the far post and top of the penalty area. Also, practice half volley and volley shooting, slide tackles, heading to pass, flick headers, diving headers, receiving with the outside of the instep, outside of foot shot, receiving bouncing and air balls with the head, dummy the ball and shoulder charge. Introduce chipping to shoot. For goalkeepers: far post play, collapse save, step and save, step power and save, save/reaction save/recovery save, medium and high diving, deflecting over the crossbar and around the posts, boxing and catching crosses, reading crosses (when to come and when to stay), half volley (drop kick), kick saves, long over-arm throws, saving penalty kicks and angle play.

Psychology: assertiveness, tension control, self and team discipline, able to stay focused for an entire match, sportsmanship, parental involvement, how to play, mental focusing techniques, emotional management and self-regulation.

Tactics: Individual and group tactics including delay, depth and balance in defense. Compactness³⁵, role of 3rd defender, how to make recovery and tracking runs. Playing on, around and away from the ball with purpose. Responding to restart situations. How to defend in each part of the field [Figure 4]. How to play in the attacking half. Checking runs, take-overs, switching positions during the flow of play, zone defense and post-match analysis. For goalkeepers: taking command of the goal area, provide support on the attack out to the back line, distance of support to the defense, organization during a corner kick, setting the wall at free kicks and 1v1 with the defense and communication.

Fitness: acceleration, speed, anaerobic exercise, cardio respiratory and cardiovascular training, flexibility – static stretching (particularly in the cool-down), lateral movement and all fitness work with the ball. Continue player education about nutrition and introduce the concept of rest for recovery.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

Typical U-14 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour and 30 minutes
- Warm up, small group activities, range of motion stretching
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Introduce large group/team activities (six to eight players)
- Continue with directional games. Play to targets and/or zones
-approximately 30 minutes-
- Conclude with small-sided games or 11v11
-approximately 35 minutes-

³⁵ The whole team moves together both horizontally and vertically to support each other on the attack or when defending.

- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching
-approximately 10 minutes-
- All activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition

Coach's qualities: strong personality, soccer knowledgeable, managerial know how and enthusiasm.

License Recommendation: Volunteer coach - USSF "D" License or higher and Level 1 Goalkeeper certificate. Paid coach - USSF "C" License or higher and Level 2 Goalkeeper certificate. U.S. Soccer recommends that coaches of U-14 have a minimum of a USSF "C" License.

A great deal of coaching within 5v5 games

At times, allow the players to sort themselves into 4v4, 5v5, 6v6, etc., games. Also, make these games functional in organizing the teams together with defenders, midfielders and attackers. Organize the lines within the framework to give the players more functional possibilities by creating numbers, roles and functions in lines of play – 5v5, might be 2-2-1 v 1-3-1 – numbers and players' specific positions. Finally, also adjust the field in terms of length and width to affect play, number of goals, restrictions on play, thirds of the field, etc.

Continue to encourage players to watch high level soccer in person and on television. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youth players in the game. The Show highlights soccer of all levels from across the country. USYouthSoccer.org also features the individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading The US Youth Soccer Show podcast.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Overriding consideration: Participation in the US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program must now be incorporated into the soccer calendar for players and the coach's seasonal planning.

The game: 11v11 – While always playing to win, focus on performance, not merely outcome.

The U-14 age group is playing 11v11 for the first time and any number of team formations is possible. Whatever formation is chosen, it must be one that allows the players to execute the principles of play. Continue to expose the players to all of the team positions. Keep in mind that players this age still do not play well over long distances, so choose a formation that allows the formation of triangles to support one another. The 4-3-3 formation is the easiest for this age group to execute. To promote attacking soccer, play a 3-4-3 formation.

Along with full team formations, the U-14s now play on large fields. Do not put these players onto an adult field as it quickly becomes just a running exercise. Keep the field small enough so that they can play to the far post on corner kicks and switch the point of attack from one flank to the other.