

## U-16 | The Fervid Phase

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### *Us – The Dedication*

***The development of skill and group tactics - The training to train stage covers ages 11 to 16 [Table 8]. 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).***

This is a critical time in a player's development. Many children stop playing because of other interests, a lack of success, a shortage of playing opportunities, poor leadership or other reasons. Players tend to be mentally tough and self-confident, but need attention and security. There is a need for team spirit, leadership and discipline within a team.

For fitness, work with the ball (economical training) is always more engaging, and the adolescent player will now respond physiologically to additional physical fitness training. The overload principle is applicable in order to stress the player's body enough for real gains in strength, power and acceleration. Supplemental fitness training should be a part of the coach's monthly training plan with U-16 and older teams. Speed training is now realistic with the onset of adolescence and will now produce gainful results. The S.A.I.D. principle<sup>36</sup> is most appropriate in the training environment. As a routine part of the monthly plan, some speed training and soccer-specific weight training should be added. If there is not a strength and conditioning coach employed or working with the club, your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director can be contacted to suggest resources. Speed and strength training must be properly done for best results and to avoid injury. This supplemental and demanding training must fit into the soccer calendar at appropriate periods in order to peak at the right times.

Proper guidance on athletic nutrition has always been important and now the coach will need to reinforce, and to a degree, monitor player eating habits. Players in this age group travel on their own since many are able to drive themselves to training sessions and matches. This means they will make their own choices on when and what to eat and the coach should regularly provide them with information about good hydration and nutrition habits to help them perform their best on the field. This need for a good diet is especially important during the physical stress of a tournament. The coach must promote healthy lifestyles by being an example of what the players are being taught.

With players having greater power and velocity, the possibility of injury increases. Be sure that you have a plan of action in the event of an injury. The coach and assistants must rehearse the action plan at least once per season. There is also a need to be knowledgeable on regeneration training, not just for players coming back from injury, but for the whole team after a match. Furthermore, the coach must be aware of proper rehabilitation times and practices. If the injury has been serious enough to need a physician's

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<sup>36</sup> S.A.I.D. = **S**pecific **A**daptation to **I**mposed **D**emands, meaning the body will adapt to the physical demands placed upon it.

care, then consult that medical professional on appropriate rehab practices and the time table for full recovery back into active soccer.

Technique training should be leading to artistry with the ball. The perfection of technique is not an end in itself but rather a means to achieving tactical superiority over an opposing team. However, this superiority depends on each player's ability to execute the fundamentals of the game. The ultimate goal of technique training is the improvement of the team as a whole and not the perfection of isolated skills. Coaching ball skills is based on a progressive pattern, beginning with the fundamentals and leading to the more complex methods of dealing with the ball under match conditions.

Fundamental skills can be rehearsed during the warm-up. A season long objective for this age group is to increase their technical speed. With the growing muscular power of the U-16 player, striking balls accurately over distance while under pressure should emerge in their game. This new ability will add a new tactical dimension to their game.

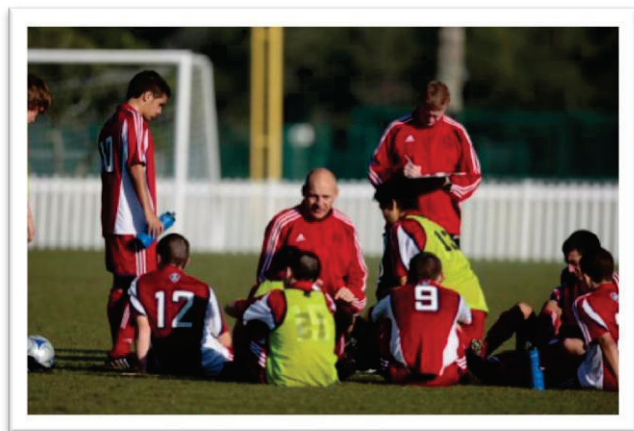
*"You have to make each player feel useful, but not indispensable."*

**- Marcello Lippi, Italian National Team, head coach**

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Group (team) identity is quite important, as it improves the chance for quality performance. Individual and group discipline needs to be a top priority. A coach needs to be consistent in the expectations of the players' responsibilities to the team. Leadership must be taught and emphasized. A strong leader or two within the team makes a difference if the coach guides them in a positive direction. Note that this is an age when team leaders could have either a positive or negative influence. If a negative slant occurs, then it is quite likely that cliques will form within the team. Yet, with the right guidance by the coaches and given opportunities to lead, many positive qualities of leadership and team spirit can be instilled with players this age.

To help in developing leadership within the team, players should be involved in discussions and decisions at team meetings. The player-coach meetings are as important as parent-coach meetings. The coach should be sure to ask the players for their thoughts at halftime, too. When the players are asked for their input from the first half of the match, they are often able to identify tactical challenges on the field and what corrections are needed. It has been observed that when coaches alone direct the needed corrections, the players don't seem to pay much attention because they are not engaged in the communication process. How can players learn to think tactically and for themselves if the coach takes center stage too often? Part of confident coaching is knowing how and when to give ownership/leadership to the players.



The coach should try to sit back, listen and be there when needed.

*“We also spend a lot of time on trying to develop leaders in the team because leaders are the ones at the end that can hold the whole team chemistry issue together and make everybody work towards that goal.”*

**- Jay Hoffman, U-20 U.S. Men’s National Team, former head coach**

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Players in this age group are beginning adolescence and they are more capable of abstract thought and foresight. It is important for the individual and the team to work on goal setting. Goals should be achievable through short-term objectives the players can attempt in a single season. Along with the growing psychological capabilities comes improved concentration so the coach can stay on a task longer in a training session. The coach should also expect longer periods of mental focus during matches. Still, with both the training and matches, the program should vary to satisfy their urge for competition.

The game is becoming an increasingly tactical contest for this age group. Their training should present them with challenging game situations with the objective of increasing their tactical speed (decision making). Group games with numbers up, numbers down and even numbers of players can provide the players with a variety of soccer problems to be solved. Training session activities should be competitive where there are outcomes. In these group games the attackers should keep possession with a purpose by using width, depth and quick support using combination play, such as wall passes, takeovers, overlaps, double passes and 3<sup>rd</sup> attacker runs. A particularly important combination to master is the checking run to create space, lose a marker and receive and turn with the ball or lay it off. The objective of possession play with a purpose is to set up the chance for penetration into the attacking third through mobility, creativity and crossing along with proper runs into the penalty area.

Block defending as a group, in any part of the field, becomes a part of the U-16 team game. As the ball moves on the field, the defending team needs to shift players to defend as a group of three to five players in the ball area. Within that group, they must execute their roles as defenders. Defending in this manner requires fitness and a mental alertness which comes from reading the game. Patience is a key psychological factor to read the right moment to win back the ball. That moment may not come until teammates have recovered or tracked back into good defensive shape, so patience will be required from the players. Organization is key to intelligent and skillful defending with communication (who, what, when, where) being central to that aspect of teamwork. The players need to be able to adjust to the demands of the game during the match.

One training session out of every three must be devoted to 3v3, 4v4 and 5v5. These group games bring out the enjoyment of winning possession of the ball with skill while responding to tactical cues.

Reading the game is always important to quality performance. However, for a physiological reason, many teenage players will make impulsive tactical decisions because their brain has not finished developing. The underdeveloped area is called the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, which plays a critical role in decision making, problem solving and understanding future consequences of the moment’s

actions. However, full maturity will not occur until players are into their twenties. Consequently, while their tactical awareness is much improved at U-16, it still has a long way to go. Team tactics fully understood and executed is in the future of their soccer playing. Tactically, this age group should be exposed to team tactics, but more importantly is the reinforcement of individual tactics and an emphasis on group tactics. To help launch the players into team play, one of these formations should be considered 4-4-2, 3-4-3 or 4-3-3.



It is clear that systems of play are designed to enhance strengths and minimize weaknesses of a team. Teams may employ two or more systems. This is an age when strong consideration should be given to developing the ability to play with zonal defense in a flat back three or four. Please note that individual defending needs to be addressed prior to this age to prepare for collective defending.

This is an age where players will start to identify their strengths in specific positions on the field. It is important not to lock players into a single position. Field players still need to have more than one role on the field and should not be confined to playing just a flank role or a central role for the team, i.e., forever a winger or center fullback. They need to play multiple roles for the team. For the development of select players they must continue to play more than one role for the team for tactical growth. For example, an outside fullback needs to know how to play as a wing forward when overlaps occur. There needs to be a balance in their training between a specific role in the team and continued general development. This means that functional play and training is a part of the team building environment.

Set plays are an integral part of the game now. However, training on set plays should be addressed within the flow of training on a regular basis. Players need to learn several roles in set plays, both on attack and defense. Do not confine them to just one role during a set play because there is always a possibility that the lineup on the field could change. Having players know several roles during set plays adds to the adaptability of the team.

Set plays and the players' responsibilities on attack and defense during free kicks should be a consistent theme in training throughout the soccer year. Some clear tactical thought and rehearsal must go into throw-in set plays.

The U-16 age group players will likely be either a goalkeeper or a field player. As a field player they are expected to be able to play a number of different positions. As a goalkeeper, specialized training should be a regular feature of their development. Their training should consist of a combination of specialized training with the goalkeeper coach and training with the team. The coach should, at a minimum, devote

three to four training sessions per month to goalkeeper training when the rest of the team assists their goalkeepers in training on tactics.

Also, be aware that not being able to completely understand future consequences shows up in the emotional side of their game, for better or worse. A team can win or lose a match on emotions, but a team cannot play just on emotions for the entire year. The U-16 player needs the example from older players on how to play well within all four components of the game, so look for chances to train with and against older teams. Select players should consider playing on an adult team as well as the youth team.

### General Characteristics of the U-16 Age Group

- May have a lengthened attention span
- Able to better understand moral principles
- Strong identification with admired adults
- Very sensitive to praise and recognition; feelings are easily hurt
- Fear of ridicule and being unpopular
- Friends set the general rules of behavior
  - Strong need to conform exists
  - Dress and behave like their peers in order to belong
- Experiences physical changes - very concerned with their appearance and very self-consciousness about their physical changes
- Often a rapid weight gain at the beginning of adolescence poses an enormous appetite
- Caught between being a child and being an adult

Expose the players to various game situations through the use of games-based training. Many more target games and functional activities are now used in training sessions. Continue to refine the tactical application of technique. Refer to the book *Soccer: How to Play the Game | The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of U.S. Soccer*.

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. As a coach, the core goal is to create a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

### Components of the Game for the U-16 Age Group\*

**Tactics:** Should be developing the ability to adapt tactics during the flow of play and key players should be able to dictate the rhythm of the game. Practice playing on, around and away from the ball with

purpose, group tactics, the role of the 3<sup>rd</sup> attacker, principles of attack and defense, diagonal passing, dribbling and off-the-ball runs, wing play, overlapping runs, defending in the midfield and attacking thirds, all possible set plays, match analysis and switching the point of attack. For goalkeepers: command out to the penalty spot, initiate the attack, provide support on the attack to the fullbacks, recognize pressure on and off the ball and team organization when defending against free kicks

**Psychology:** personal accountability, drive, courage, sacrifice in order to achieve one's best, sportsmanship, parental involvement, how to play, emotional management and communication

**Fitness:** power, vertical jump, body composition, plyometric exercise, soccer-specific weight training, interval training, S.A.I.D. principle, recovery exercise and time off for rest, agility training with and without the ball, range of motion exercises especially during the warm-up and cool-down must include static stretching as well as light movement and proper nutrition and hydration

**Technique:** Chipping to score and airborne kicking: forward volley, scissors volley and bicycle kick. For the goalkeeper: backwards diving, saving the breakaway, all forms of distribution, narrowing the angle and improve reaction saves.

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

### Typical U-16 Training Session

- Approximately 90 minutes
- Warm-up, small group activities, range of motion stretching  
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Use large group activities (six to eight players)
- Introduce team activities (eight to 11 players)
- Continue with directional games - Play to targets and/or zones - Intersperse functional training  
-approximately 30 minutes-
- Conclude with small-sided games or 11v11  
-approximately 35 minutes-
- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching  
-approximately 10 minutes-
- All activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition

### A Great Deal of Coaching within 7v7 Games

**Coach qualities:** charismatic, experienced, knowledgeable, articulate, managerial know how and thoughtful persuader



**License recommendation:** Volunteer coach – USSF “D” License or higher and Level 2 Goalkeeper certificate. Paid coach – National Youth License, USSF “C” License or higher and Level 3 Goalkeeper certificate. U.S. Soccer recommends that coaches of U-16 teams hold at a minimum the “B” License.

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 individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading the podcast.

When players watch matches, they should focus on the players in the positions they play. The use of video analysis should also be part of developing players for this age group. The analysis should be led by the coach and the focus should be on technique done correctly and to clearly paint the picture on good tactical movement. Conceptualization of formation and positioning within systems of play can be enhanced with the use of game software such as FIFA 2011 which can be configured to replicate your team and opponents.

**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 for select players 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 – With an emphasis on group tactics and being able to play more than one team formation. Teams should also be able to know when to play man-to-man marking in a zone defense. The focus of matches should be on the tactical application of ball skills, learning new tactics, executing set plays and trying new team formations. The match is for learning more about soccer, not entertaining the fans.

In order for players to develop a rhythm of play during a match, substitutions should be limited. The act of platooning, where players are rotated in and out, stifles rhythm. Limits on substitutions need to be addressed based on the level of competition.

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**Please read thoroughly the section about How to Function in a Group in the Best Practices guide.**