

U-18+ | Fulfillment in the Final Phase

Us – Realization of the team game leading to an adult style team

The training to compete stage covers ages 15 to 18, with variances by gender [Table 8]. The objectives are to optimize fitness preparation along with individual and position specific skills, as well as performance in soccer.

The training to win stage covers ages 17 and older [Table 8]. The objectives are to maximize fitness preparation and individual soccer and position-specific skills, as well as performance (maximize engine, skills and performance).

Much of the training with the U-18+ age group will continue the refinement of skills and tactics previously learned with an emphasis on developing positional and team play. The objective of this training is improved consistency and speed of play. Here are the primary objectives:

- Individual and group skill should be covered in the warm-up.
- Even players in their 20s must continuously refine the techniques and tactics learned earlier in their careers.
- Players have a personal responsibility to maintain and improve their physical fitness.
- Social and emotional growth is a lifelong process.
- The continued importance of developing players who have composure and technical speed under pressure cannot be overstated. To develop confidence and competence, players must be exposed to environments where ball manipulation and ball protection are practiced. Players should be placed in training activities where they have to look around and take visual cues of the options before receiving the ball.

In training at this age, several aspects of play must be addressed:

- Group games will include match-related training pitting attack versus defense.
- Vital to the game is the skill of crossing with the aim to develop a complete understanding of crossing angles, overlaps and near and far post runs.
- With set plays, players must develop a complete understanding of attacking and defending responsibilities.
- Emphasize the importance of possession from throw-ins in the defensive and midfield thirds of the field versus possession and creativity in the attacking third.
- Players need to understand how to play against a compact defense. They must learn to be patient as they maintain possession and look for the spaces to penetrate.

Because they are coming to a time of real athletic prowess many players, especially males, solve soccer problems with their legs (fitness) before their brains (tactics). Players must be coached to think first, and then run. Fundamentally, follow the US Youth Soccer ODP mantra of *Work hard – Play smart*. To play smart requires players to read the game. The use of guided discovery is still appropriate with older age groups. If their training environment is rich with soccer problem solving situations then their skills to read the game will be developed by this age.



Fitness is a major factor in performance given the pace of the game and the need for compactness with all players contributing to attack and defense. The players must understand that their fitness level will affect their playing time. Specialized fitness training sessions with qualified personnel will produce results improving individual and team performance. Some of that specialized training may include core stability, agility challenges, plyometrics, interval training, circuit training and soccer specific weight training. There should be properly devised fitness sessions in the seasonal plan. Note too that fitness improvement will occur in training sessions when most of the session is in game-like and match-condition activities. Coaches must note that U-18+ players are not always at the same fitness level. Note that players recovering from injury should be placed on an individual specialized training plan to enhance their recovery as prescribed by an athletic trainer.

Mobility (off-the-ball running) is vitally important to maintain a good team shape on the attack and defense. Creating opportunities on the attack relies greatly on mobility by off-the-ball attackers, movement with a purpose. When to run and when not to run are tactical decisions based on reading the game. When a player does make an off-the-ball run, they should consider the timing of the run, at what pace to run and the angle of the run, with these runs being in any direction on the attack or defense.

“All coaches talk too much about running a lot. I say it’s not necessary to run so much. Soccer is a game that’s played with the brain. I want players to learn how to think fast. I want them to learn how to run little, but run smart. You need to be in the right place at the right time, not too early, not too late.”

- Johan Cruyff, Barcelona and The Netherlands, former coach

Incorporate mental skills training into training sessions. Those skills – visualization, bouncing back from mistakes or positive self-talk – will be the margin between average and excellent match performances. As players learn the mental side of the game, there may be positive translation into the choices they make in their lifestyle. A proper lifestyle will contribute to the athlete’s success.

Players in the U-18+ age group are making their own lifestyle choices. Continue to educate the players about their off the field habits including nutrition, hydration, sleep patterns, alcohol, tobacco, drugs and fitness training. There are experts and professionals whose work falls into these categories who can assist in educating players or giving the coach correct information and facts to share.

One in three training sessions must be devoted to defensive aspects of the game. The ability to defend as a group in each third of the field is a consistent training theme. Teams must realize that defending begins with the team's forwards who need to pressure back players of the opposing team and try to shepherd the opponent's attack into predictable spaces for their team's midfielders to be able to win the ball. Midfielders must do the same for the fullbacks. Tactically, this requires good group defending through the thirds of the field. Team defending now means that the entire team must be able to shift vertically on the field to defend as the opposing team switches the point of attack.

Specific roles in defending, according to position in the team formation, are important aspects to learn. How to play in a flat back system of three or four should be refined. The defensive (holding) midfielder is a truly important tactical role for quality team performance. Team defending requires skillful and intelligent play. All 11 players must contribute to the team's defending just as all 11 will contribute to the attack. Quality defending is the springboard to attack.

Having a group of attacking players who can operate at high speed, under intense pressure and in increasingly smaller spaces will be a key to success. Counterattacking is the attack which counters the attack. Players must be exposed to high transitional environments where the ball is moved forward quickly when the opposing team is disorganized and spread out with limited numbers at the back. The coach must devise training activities that go in two directions and emphasize transition mentality with forward looking and clinical finishing. Defending the counterattack must also be part of training and of high consideration. This is an age where block defending will become more common so the need to develop players with the ability to play in small spaces is critical.

Upwards of 46 percent of goals could come from the counterattack³⁷. A team should be trained about the importance of transition when the opposing team is disorganized and defenders are spread out and pushing up the field. Conversely, as counterattacks become more important, the ability to defend the counterattack needs consideration. Defenses could be set up so that players entice opposing attackers into areas of the field where counterattacking can be most effective. If the counterattack is not an option, then the ball should be played in a controlled manner, progressively up the field using short angled passes, combination play and occasionally long diagonal passes to break down the opponents.

During a match, every player must constantly anticipate endless shifting situations and make split-second decisions. Options from which to choose are created by the actions of teammates and opponents. Top notch players possess the ability to continuously and quickly oversee all of the possible options. They also have the technical qualities to determine the correct solution and the ability to carry out that solution swiftly in most situations. The complexity and unpredictability of the ever changing conditions prevent the perfect match from ever being played. The unpredictable factor of the game is a

³⁷ 2008 report from the Alliance of European Football Coaching Associations

reason why soccer, worldwide, is the most popular sport. Of course, every coach strives for perfection to get the most out of the team. The qualities of the players decide what the limits of the achievements of the team are. The coach's goal is to build a team of self-reliant and soccer savvy players who work hard and play smart together.

"No coach has ever won a game by what he knows; it's what the players know that counts."

- Paul "Bear" Bryant, University of Alabama, former football coach

With team formations the importance of shape is crucial. The system of play used by successful teams will have a good balanced structure that displays disciplined defending and is flexible when attacking. Players should have a complete understanding of the principles of play. Those principles are the questions the players ask themselves in match situations, such as, "Should I move forward or wide to support now?" or "Am I in the right place to give balance to our defense?". By having a clear understanding of the principles of play, the players can begin making sound tactical decisions. To aid the players' perception of match situations, there should be several functional training sessions each month.

Functional play is a feature of training and matches for the U-18+ team. Functional play by position within two or more formations should be learned. Match-related training can be attack versus defense, individual or small groups, for a set amount of time or repetitions in the specific area of the field and then switch roles. Players need to learn both their attacking and defending roles and responsibilities. Match conditions must involve transition and provide the players with realistic problem-solving opportunities. One in three training sessions must be devoted to defensive aspects of the game. Remember that all training session activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition.

Teams in the U-18+ age group must be capable in at least two systems of play. Teams that can adapt to changing field/weather conditions, opposing styles of play or simply the score and time left in the match with appropriate tactics and team formation are likely to handle any situation they come across. However, the ability for the team to adapt requires individual confidence, talent and versatility.

The rehearsal and execution of set plays is vital to successful play; set plays account for 21 percent of goals scored³⁸. Given then the statistical significance of scoring chances from set plays, there must be regular training of them. Players should be expected to apply set plays practiced in training to the matches.

The technical demands on defenders are increasing as is the need for goalkeepers to be able to become attacking players. Goalkeepers should be included with some of the outfield player training activities. Since pressure from opponents will occur more consistently and over larger portions of the field, the goalkeeper's ability to play, using his or her feet is important. Receiving back passes, making clearances and passing the ball up field are requirements of the modern goalkeeper.

³⁸ UEFA study of Euro 2008

Remember that the goalkeeper is the last line of defense and the first line of attack. The attacking role for the goalkeeper takes on greater significance. Distribution of the ball by the goalkeeper with a real tactical sense greatly influences the team's attacking success, and must be merely punting the ball downfield. When distributing the ball by rolling, throwing or kicking there must be a good tactical decision for it. Typical decisions for the goalkeeper to make on the attack are when to play short for build-up play, when to distribute toward the flanks or when to start a quick counterattack.

Goalkeepers no longer stand in the goalmouth waiting to stop a shot. They act as sweepers and remain connected to their backline. They frequently move outside their penalty area and must be able to use their feet either to receive back passes or to launch counterattacks. Goalkeepers must be used more often in passing and receiving activities. At a minimum, devote four training sessions per month to goalkeeper training when the rest of the team assists their goalkeepers in training on tactics.

Train in competitive situations to improve the will to win, making the sacrifices often necessary for a strong individual and team performance. Perhaps more important than the will to win is the willingness to *prepare* to win, meaning to work diligently at training sessions to improve in each aspect of the game, but especially in areas of personal deficiencies. Remember everyone wants to win, but few are willing to make the on- and off-the-field commitment to the lifestyle of a true competitor. This means good habits away from the field in the player's life, including a balanced and healthy diet with proper hydration every day. A good sleep routine contributes to consistent athletic performance. Players must learn about taking care of their bodies beyond nutrition and consider the pitfalls of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Winning and losing always occur in soccer and having a balanced perspective will help a team achieve its best.

"Win as a team – Lose alone."

- Gerard Houllier, Paris Saint Germain, RC Lens, Liverpool, Olympique Lyonnais and France, former manager

General Characteristics of the U-18+ Age Group

- Emotions can still overcome tactical logic
- They are likely to solve soccer problems with their legs first and their brains second
- May have bad diet and sleep habits, and, as a result, low energy levels
- The skeleton is close to full maturation, but peak athleticism is still a few years off
- Very concerned with what others say and think about them
- Developing a team consciousness – want and need a strong voice in planning their activities/game plans

- May try to manipulate others to get what they want
- Loud behavior may hide their lack of self-confidence
- Look at the world more objectively – look at adults more subjectively and are critical of them, yet they still want adult leadership
- Go to extremes – often appear to be unstable emotionally while having a know-it-all attitude
- Vulnerable – emotionally insecure, fear of rejection and mood swings
- Social needs and desires are high
- Many will leave the game for employment and many who go to college will not return to the game after graduation
- There is still a strong desire to be part of a team

Expose players to a variety of match situations such as how to play when up by a goal or down by a goal. Use games based training where players work skillfully to keep possession of the ball. In training, use more functional play activities and target/directional games. Continue to refine their 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. The core goal is 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-18+ Age Group*

Tactics: Should be able to adapt tactics and change team formation during the flow of play. Team tactics, tactical functional training, specialized tactics for a particular opponent, midfield play, attacking out of the back third, possession with a purpose, combination play with tactical implications, penetration with creativity, intentional flank play, pressing to win possession as an attacking concept, consistency on set plays, playing a role, combination zone and man-to-man marking defense, creativity on the attack, total soccer concept and playing on, around and away from the ball with purpose. For goalkeepers: support the attack from the defensive third, command beyond the penalty area, last line of defense—first line of attack and most of all, presence.

Fitness: Use the 11+ routine as a part of the warm-up. Be consistent with cool-downs, plyometrics, depth jumping, implementing the overload principal and fitness tests with and without the ball – both with the guidance of a strength/conditioning coach or a certified athletic trainer. Follow fitness training concepts similar to the U.S. Youth National Teams and US Youth Soccer ODP teams. Continue player education about nutrition and rest.

Psychology: Factors include increased concentration, reduced mental mistakes, playing with self-confidence and self-motivation, emotional management during a match, dedication, commitment,

leadership, personal responsibility for actions on and off the field, sportsmanship, how to play, selfless – team comes first, discipline, composure, concentration, confidence, consistency, courage, personal goal setting, imagery, patience and respect for the game. With increased player responsibilities comes a decrease of parental involvement and that is suitable to the age and needs of the players.

Technique: technical/tactical functional training, all techniques rehearsed at match speed and at match related and match condition levels.

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

Typical U-18+ Training Session

- Should range from one hour (i.e., day before a match) to two hours
- Warm-up, small group activities, dynamic range of motion stretching, use the 11+ program -approximately 20 minutes-
- Use individual to large group activities (six to eight players)
- Use team activities (eight to 11 players)
- Directional games playing to targets and/or zones. Intersperse positional functional training -approximately 25 minutes-
- Conclude with small-sided games or 11v11 -approximately 30 minutes-
- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching -approximately 15 minutes-
- All activities should be challenging, motivating and involve transition

A great deal of coaching within 8v8 to 11v11 games

Fulfillment of a player's potential depends on individual efforts, the support of teammates and the unselfish guidance of the coach. Players must be exposed to a playing and training environment that stretches their mental, physical and technical capabilities to the limit. Players must have a sound understanding of the game's principles and concepts. Players should show emotional stability when confronted with pressure situations. Demanding and challenging training sessions and matches are a must.

Encourage players to watch high level soccer regularly. Players should be able to mentally insert themselves into the position they play and think what they would do in the situations seen. As they watch these matches, they should focus on the group play around their position. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youths 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 US Youth Soccer Show podcast.

Video analysis of team and individual performance should be consistently used with this age group. The analysis should be developed around problem-solving discussions. An exchange of questions and answers between the coach and the players and between the players themselves will be productive. In general, video analysis should be used immediately following the activity when the player has a feel for the action. Video feedback can have its best impact during training sessions where review followed by immediate repetition of the action can take place in a coach-controlled situation.

Short viewing periods plus the coach's analysis should be followed by an attempt to correct as well as improve upon performance. Correction should be positive, not negative. The coach should stop talking and listen. The players' minds do not need to be filled with details. They should be able to think and analyze for themselves, with the coach only guiding them to reach a conclusion when they reach an impasse.

A final word of advice: video analysis demands that the coach understand the mechanics of soccer. No longer will guesswork be allowed, the instant replay of video leaves each analysis open to question. Knowledge of key movement cues that contribute positively to the players' performance is essential. Watch the US Youth Soccer DVD, *Skills School | Developing Essential Soccer Techniques*, for assistance in this area. Also use as a reference the *Skills School Manual* from US Youth Soccer.

Coach qualities: charismatic, well-informed, up-to-date, experienced, knowledgeable, articulate, disciplinarian, no doubts about personal authority and managerial know-how

License recommendation: Volunteer coach – USSF “B” License or higher and Level 3 Goalkeeper certificate. Paid coach – USSF “A” License, National Goalkeeper License and National Fitness License. U.S. Soccer recommends that coaches of U-18+ teams have a minimum of a USSF “A” License.

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 US Youth Soccer ODP is a standing feature in the soccer calendar for players and the coach's seasonal planning.

The game: 11v11 – With an emphasis on team tactics and being able to play in two or more systems of play. Teams should be able to change formation during a match when game demands require it, but also play with the highest level of technical play under pressure.

“My great gift was my ability to read the game.”

- Michel Platini, UEFA, president

Please read thoroughly the Competition and Outcome section in the Best Practices guide.