

COACHING THE UNDER 6 PLAYER

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1. CHARACTERISTICS OF U - 6 PLAYERS

- Short attention span.
- Can attend to only one problem at a time.
- May understand simple rules that are explained briefly and demonstrated.
- May or may not understand or remember: what lines mean on the field; what team they are on; what goal they are going for. We need to be patient and laugh with them as they get 'lost' on the field.
- Easily bruised psychologically. Shout praise often. Give "hints", don't criticize.
- Need generous praise and to play without pressure. No extrinsic rewards (trophies, medals, etc.) should be given for winning.
- Prefer "parallel play" (Will play on a team, but will not really engage with their teammates. Thus, a 3 against 3 game is, in reality, a 1 against 5 game because they all want the ball at the same time.
- Very individually oriented (me, mine, my).
- Constantly in motion, but, with no sense of pace. They will chase something until they drop. They are easily fatigued but recover rapidly.
- Development for boys and girls are quite similar.
- Physical coordination limited. Eye - hand and eye - foot coordination is not developed. Need to explore qualities of a rolling ball.
- Love to run, jump, roll, hop, etc.
- Prefer large, softballs.
- Catching or throwing skills not developed.
- Can balance on their "good" foot.

2. INVOLVE THE PARENTS

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-6 player still views their parents as the most significant people in their lives. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed. Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- A means of contacting everyone without one person doing the entire calling. (Phone chains.)
- Choosing a team administrator-someone to handle all of the details.
- Complete all paperwork required by your league or club.
- Discuss the laws of the game.
- Carpool needs.
- Training and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss training.
- What each player should bring to training: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guards (Cleats are not mandatory.)
- Most importantly, your philosophy about coaching U-6 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as learn about soccer.
- What your expectation for them is during game time. How do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should not coach from the sidelines?
- Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do they probably will too.

3. THINGS YOU CAN EXPECT

As coaches of these younger players there are things that we know that we can expect during training and games. If we know what to expect, we will be more effective in dealing with the hundreds of situations that come up. This will help us relax, and, in turn, allow us to enjoy the unpredictable nature of working with these children even more. Here are some of the things that we can expect.

- Most players cry immediately when something is hurt. Some cry even when something is not hurt.
- No matter how loud we shout, or how much we "practice" it, they can not or will not pass the ball.
- Somebody will come off the field in need of a toilet. Somebody will stay on the field in need of a toilet.
- The only player to hold a position is the goalkeeper (if you play with one). Don't even consider teaching positional play.
- Twenty seconds after the start of a game, every player will be within 5 yards of the ball.
- Several players will slap at the ball with their hands, or pick it up. Several parents will yell at them not to do that.
- A model rocket that is launched from a nearby field will get 99% of the player's attention. By all means, stop whatever you are doing and go watch for a couple of minutes!
- During a season, you will end up tying at least 40 - 50 shoelaces. During a season, you will end up tying at least 40 - 50 shoelaces.
- They will do something that is absolutely hysterical. Make sure that you laugh!

4. COACHING PHILOSOPHY

It is important to understand at the outset that players coming to any sport prior to the age of 6 years old, in general, do not do so by their own choice. As a result, their coaches need to give them something about which to get excited. Further, at this age, learning to play soccer is secondary to most other things in their lives.

With the above assumptions, let's look at some things that we can do to energize the U-6 players, and, hopefully, get them to the point where they will enthusiastically initiate the sign up for next year!

- Each session should be geared around touching the ball as many times as possible. Involve the ball in as many activities as possible. Basic movements such as running, skipping, hopping, etc. need to be emphasized. If these can be done while kicking, catching, rolling, or dribbling a ball... all the better!
- Training should not last for more than one hour. This is primarily due to physical fatigue and attention span considerations. Train once or twice a week. Any more than this may lead to their and your burnout.
- Have as many different kinds of activities ready as you can get into one hour. Emphasis needs to be placed on what is FUN!
- Every player should bring his or her own size # 3 ball.
- Remember that although they may have very similar birthdates, their physical and / or mental maturity may vary as much as 36 months. Activities need to accommodate these individual differences whenever possible.
- Team play and passing is an alien concept to these players. They know that if they pass the ball, they may never get it back. In fact, they often will steal it from their own teammates. Do not get uptight if they do not pass, let them dribble to their heart's content.
- Plan for at least 4, 90 second drink breaks, especially in warmer weather. Their "cooling system" is not as efficient as in older players.

5. BASIC SKILLS TO BE TAUGHT AT THIS AGE

Introduction of Dribbling and Ball Control Skills: At this age, dribbling and ball control are the activities to be emphasized most. Games such as "green light...red light", "sharks and minnows", and "Simon says" (See U-6 Practice "FUN" games) are fun games kids enjoy playing yet still learn how to dribble and control the ball. All these drills are one player with one ball. Players are having fun yet still getting a lot of touches on the ball.

Basic Foot Skills: At this age, it is important to just allow the players to continuously touch the ball as much as possible while teaching them the basic foot skills. These foot skills are the basic components of more advanced moves the players will be taught when they get older. Mastery of these basic skills is essential in developing young

soccer players. The more touches they receive with the ball, the more comfortable the ball will become to the player, and improve his 1v1 skills.

Basic Foot Skills to Teach:

- a) **Topping the ball:** Topping the ball is basically using the ball and sole of your foot to move the ball around. Just have the players move around using the ball and sole of their foot to move the ball.
- b) **2) Roll Back:** The Roll Back is using the sole of your foot to roll the ball back and turn 180°. Make sure the player turns the same way as the side of the body the ball is being rolled back from. You don't want the players rolling the ball behind their backs.
- c) **3) Toe Taps:** Tapping the ball with the toes of both feet going left foot, right foot.
- d) **4) Bell Dribbles:** Bell dribbles are using the insides of the foot to tap the ball left to right, and should look like you are ringing a bell with your feet as the bell and the ball as the pendulum,

Remember Patience: It takes a lot of patience to teach these skills to players. It takes repetitive practices to learn to do these effectively. Do not get discouraged if the players don't pick up the skills immediately or during their first year playing soccer.

6. TYPICAL PRACTICE SESSION

Warm-Up: A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that may or may not involve the ball. They can chase their ball as it is thrown by the coach, bringing it back with different parts of their body. Or, they can chase someone with their ball at their feet. Static stretching is also appropriate at this time, again, hopefully done with the ball. "Soccernastics" activities are very appropriate, like: rolling the ball with the bottom of their feet, with their elbows, backwards, with the back of their neck while holding on to it; throwing it up and catching it; keeping it up with their feet while sitting.

Individual Activities: Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1 v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals in a game environment. An example would be a kind of tag game, or "Red Light - Green Light", or a game where players are trying to knock their ball through gates. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" instead of games where the "looser sits".

Play The Game: Move on to the real game, but make sure it is a 2 v. 2, or 3 v. 3 game. Switch the game every 5 minutes or so. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players

involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. It is important that every player has a chance to shoot on goal as often as possible.

Warm-Down & Homework: Finish the session with a warm down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like, bounce it off their thigh and then catch it. It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.

7. UNDER-6 PRACTICE "FUN" GAMES.

WARM UP GAMES

TAG GAMES:

Players dribble ball in defined area. "It" player tries to tackle ball away. Suggest coach be "it" first then select a player and switch around

Variations:

- a) **Hop-a-long tag:** "it" player hops on one foot to touch another player
- b) **Hospital Tag:** "It" player has to tag other players. When a player is tagged he has to put hand on area tagged. Once players have been tagged three times they are out.
- c) **Tunnel Tag:** Once a player is tagged, they must freeze. They can be unfrozen only when another player crawls between their legs.
- d) **Slide Tag:** Players start out in pairs (arms locked) except one. "It" player tries to tag the unpaired player. To avoid being tagged the solo player can lock on to one of the pairs and then the player at the opposite side gets "bounced off" and must avoid being tagged. This can be done with and without the ball.
- e) **Bad-apple:** all players with ball at their feet. "It" player carries ball and tries to throw it at the other players balls. Players switch roles after successful hit

PLAYERS WORKING IN PAIRS

- a) **Practice throw ins** - throw with proper technique to partner who catches ball and throws back
- b) **Punt and Catch:** players punt the ball back and forth

- c) **Passing ball back and forth.** Have players perform an exercise after each pass such as 2 jumping jacks, summersaults, log roll, sit down etc.

INDIVIDUAL PLAYER WORKING WITH BALL

- a) **Ball touches** - touch top of ball with ball of feet. Do 25 times switching feet.
- b) **Ball Drags/pushes** - using sole of foot, ball is moved backward, forward.
- c) **Ball lifts** - try to lift stationary ball off ground - scoop ball with top of foot or try rolling ball onto toe.
- d) **Circles/figure-eights** - player tries to guide ball in a small circle of figure-eight.
- e) **Cuts** - dribble forward several steps, cut the ball 180 degrees back using inside and outside of foot.
- f) **Inside/outside** - using one foot dribble ball alternating with inside and outside of foot

PRACTICE GAMES

1) ALLIGATOR SWAMP

Select 2-3 players to be alligators. They start in the middle of the field. Alligators have to be in a crab position i.e. hands and feet on the ground, belly button facing the sky. All other players on the endline with a ball and they try to dribble across the swamp as the alligators try to kick their balls away. If a player's ball gets kicked out of the swamp then that player becomes an alligator for the next round. Dribbling players stop when they reach the end of the grid. Repeat going the other direction for the next round however the number of alligators will increase each time. The last player dribbling is the winner.

- Tell players to keep the ball close to their feet. Players can try to lift ball over legs of alligators.
- Can vary the width and length of swamp.

2) THE BLOB

All players in a grid with a ball except 2 players. The two players with a ball form a blob by holding hands (Coach should be part of the blob). The blob moves freely and tries to kick any player's ball out of the grid. If a player's ball leaves the grid then they join the blob. The last player dribbling is the winner.

- Tell the players to stay away from the blob, don't get trapped in a corner and move to the open space, keep the ball close to your feet.
- Can vary the size of grid depending on skill level of players.

3) MISSILE ATTACK

Make two teams opposite each other on endlines. One team has a ball and they are the bombers. When coach yells "bombs away" the players with the ball have to kick, punt or throw-in the ball towards the other team. The other team then must collect the balls and dribble across the opposite endline within 10 seconds or the bombs will explode.

- Make end lines longer depending on the skill level of the teams.

4) THE MONSTER

Make a circular grid. Every player has a ball except one who is the monster. The monster tries to steal the balls. If a player loses their ball then that player switches places with the monster. If a player dribbles outside the circle then make the player do an exercise such as push-ups before reentering. Have the monster hold a cone so other players know who to watch out for.

- Tell your players to keep their bodies between the monster and the ball - use your body to protect the ball.
- try having multiple monsters
- make the players use specific dribbling technique i.e. only use left foot, sole of foot etc

5) GATE GAMES

Set up random set of gates using cones 2 yards apart.

Game 1: every player with a ball - how many gates can they dribble through in 30 seconds. Have the players use different dribbling techniques i.e. dribbling backwards, sideways, instep, outside of foot.

Game 2: players in pairs with one ball. Pairs get points for every time they pass the ball through a gate although they can not pass the ball through the same gate twice in a row. Again have them pass with different techniques i.e. instep, push pass and outside of foot. After each successful pass have them do an exercise i.e. jumping jack, log roll etc

6) PIN THE TAIL

All players in a grid with a ball. The coach is the donkey. The players try to "pin the tail" by kicking the ball at the donkey. Play until you can't run anymore. This will be your player's favorite game and a good one to end each practice on. Have fun with this and be dramatic - roll around on the grass when hit and taunt the players to hit you. Find nearby parents to be donkeys.

7) SHOOTING GALLERY

Split team into two. Each player on one team has a ball. Each player on the other team has a cone. Have the players with cones spread out in a grid and stay close to their cone (planet) to defend it. The other team tries to dribble and shoot down the planets. If a cone is knocked down then the defender kneels next to it -the planet has been destroyed. Play continues until all cones are toppled. The teams switch roles.

8) "Keep your yard clean"

The Game: Create a 'neutral area' between the two teams where no player is allowed into. This area can be as small as one yard and as big as 10 yards wide. The width is determined by how far the players can kick the ball.

Each player starts with a ball at his / her feet. On command, each team tries to keep their side of the game free of balls by kicking their ball over to the other teams side.

After an appropriate amount of time (when the balls become too scattered, or, the players are loosing focus), call the game and count which side has the most balls on their side.

Distribute the balls evenly for another try if the players are still interested.

After players have found some success with this basic game, try these variations:

- Players can only use their left foot.
- Throw the ball back.
- Punt the ball back.
- Dribble the ball around a cone that has been set up in the middle of their "yard", then, kick the ball back.

9) "Red Light...Green Light"

The Game: Each player has a ball, except the one player that is designated as the "light".

Lines from start to finish should be approximately 20 - 30 yards.

Players start from the line opposite the "light". The "light" then turns away from the group shouting out "GREEN LIGHT". At this signal, the players start to dribble towards the "light".

When the "light" turns back around, calling out "RED LIGHT", players must freeze their bodies and their ball.

If the "light" catches players or a ball still moving, that player must take 5 steps back.

The first player to cross the line where the "light" is standing is the winner and becomes the new "light".

You can start the game without using balls for younger players, then have them roll the ball with their hands, then use their feet.

10) PEEP Behind the Curtain

Players at the end of a grid while the coach stands at the opposite end. The coach turns their back to the kids. When they do, the kids dribble toward the coach. When the

coach turns to look at the players, the players stop and freeze with the ball. Anyone caught moving must go back to the start line and start over. The first to reach the coach wins. Players are rewarded for close ball control while dribbling.

11)BINGO

Cones are spread out around the grid and one or two players are designated as cone replacers. All other players have a ball. Each child with a ball tries to knock down the cones, each time a cone is knocked down the player shouts "BINGO". It is the cone replacers job to restore the cones to the upright positions. When all the cones are knocked down the players win. If after a minute or so some of the cones are still standing then the replacer team wins.