

COACHING THE UNDER 8 PLAYER

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1. CHARACTERISTICS OF U - 8 PLAYERS

- Attention span is a bit longer than U-6 players but still not at a "competitive" stage
- Inclined towards small group activities.
- Always in motion: scratching; blinking; jerking; rocking....
- Easily bruised psychologically. They will remember negative comments for a long time. Shout praise. Give "hints".
- They want everybody to like them.
- Developing physical confidence. (Most are able to ride a two-wheeler.)
- Starting to imitate older players or sports heroes. Want the same "gear" as them.
- Lack sense of pace. They go flat out until they drop.
- Skeletal system growing rapidly. Often results in apparent lack of coordination.
- Cardiovascular and temperature regulation system is not developed. Their heart rate peaks quickly and they overheat quickly. Make sure that they get adequate water breaks.
- Limited understanding with personal evaluation. "If they try hard, they performed well" regardless of the actual performance. Thus, they need to be encouraged constantly, and asked "Now, can you do this?"
- Better at recognizing when the ball is out of play, and remembering what goal they are going for... but in the heat of battle, they will sometimes still forget. They still find it difficult to really be aware of more than one thing at a time.

2. INVOLVING THE PARENTS

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-8 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-8 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 expectations for them are 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

6, 7, and 8-year-old players are a bit more compliant than their U-6 counterparts. They will be able to follow 2 or 3 step instructions and are starting to have a good understanding about what it means to play a "game". They are also starting to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they now will recognize that they even have teammates by the fact that they occasionally, and I mean occasionally, will pass the ball to a teammate, on purpose. Often, they will repeat the phrase "I can't do that!", but, will quickly run to you to show you that they can, even when they only think that they can. Some other things that you can expect to happen during a season with this age group are:

- There will be at least 200-300 falls during the season, but now they will usually pick themselves back up.
- The puddle in front of the goal is still too tempting to resist.
- Keep a spare pump in your bag, as the players usually do not realize that their ball is flat until they try to kick it, or the coach tells them that it is flat.
- Some of the girls are a lot tougher than the boys.
- They will still want to wear a "pinnie", even when the color is identical to their shirt.
- It will be impossible to remember who is whose best friend as you try to make up teams.
- School conflicts will come up... please, let them go (they must face their teachers five days a week).
- They will wear their uniform to bed.

4. COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Some of the players that are playing as a 7 year old have had two years of soccer experience and thus have already touched the ball a few thousand times in their lives. This, however, does not mean that these players are ready for the mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have some idea of the game, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball with his/her body. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be brand new to the sport, it is imperative that activities are geared towards individual success and participation. Following are some more items that a coach of U-8 players should consider.

- Small-sided soccer is the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but also, it is an easier game to understand.
- Because of rapid growth spurts during this age, players will go through times when they seem to have lost control of their body. What they could easily do 2 weeks ago now seems unattainable. Be patient.
- Passing is not an important part of their game, no matter how much anybody yells at them to do otherwise, it is much more fun to dribble and shoot. Let them.
- Training once or twice a week is plenty, and should not last longer than one hour and fifteen minutes.
- Players should bring their own size #3 ball to training. Learning how to control it should be the main objective. They need to touch it, as many times as possible during fun activities that will engage them.
- Challenge them to get better by practicing on their own. There is no rule which states that they can't learn by themselves, no matter how important we think we are.
- Incidental things are important. They are forming the habits that will impact their future participation. Ask them to take care of their equipment (water bottle included), cooperate, listen, behave, and try hard. Realize, however, that they often forget and will need to be reminded often.
- Ask them to work with others to solve a particular challenge. Start them with just one partner and work from there.

5. SKILLS TO TEACH AT THIS AGE

Introduction of Dribbling and Ball Control Skills: At this age dribbling and ball control are the activities to be emphasized most. Fun Games such as "green light...red light", "alligator swamp", "Bingo", "The blob", "monster" listed in U-6 can easily be used at this age as well. These 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

- 1) Topping the ball
- 2) Roll
- 3) Toe Taps
- 4) Bell Dribbles

Secondary Foot Skills

- 5) Inside Cut
- 6) Outside Cut
- 7) Scissors
- 8) Push-n-pull

Receiving

- Inside foot
- Outside foot
- Sole Trap

Passing

- Inside foot
- Outside foot
- Instep

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.

BASIC FOOT SKILLS

Basic Foot Skills: The following are the basic foot skills that should be taught at all ages. These basic skills are the foundation for many of the more advanced ball skills and most of the 1v1 moves. Players need to master these skills prior to moving on to more advanced skills.

- 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) **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) **Toe Taps:** Toe Taps are tapping the ball with the toes of both feet going left foot, right foot.
- d) **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,

***Techniques:** The players will inevitably start with their heads down looking at the ball. After practicing a skill for a couple of practices challenge them to do the skill with their heads up and their eyes off the ball.*

SECONDARY FOOT SKILLS:

Secondary Foot Skills: These ball skills should be introduced in the U7 age group and above. These skills start to work on the player's ability to make quick cuts and moves.

- a) **Inside Cut: Dribble** the ball forward then quickly turn 180° using the inside of the foot to redirect the ball. The move should come quick and the player must bend their hip and knee of the pivot foot. Should be a sharp quick turn.
- b) **Outside Cut: Same** as Inside cut except use the outside of the foot to turn the ball. Should be a sharp quick turn.
- c) **Side to Side Step On: (scissors)** Starting with the outside of the foot, roll the ball outside and top the ball by tapping the top of the ball with the sole of the foot.
- d) **Push-n-Pull:** Push the ball forward with the top of your foot, tap the ball and pull back with sole of the same foot. Alternate feet one left, one right...
- e) **Double Cut: Tap** the side of the ball with the inside of the right foot, then tap the ball the same direction with the outside of the left foot, then tap the ball to the right with the inside of the left then again in the same direction with the outside of the right. Repeat.

***Techniques:** The players will inevitably start with their heads down looking at the ball. After practicing a skill for a couple of practices challenge them to do the skill with their heads up and their eyes off the ball.*

Introduction of Technical passing and Receiving Skills: Introduction of the basic passing and receiving skills.

RECEIVING AND PASSING

Receiving and Passing should be introduced to players at the U7 and above. At the U7 age only about 20% of practices should be devoted to receiving and passing and most of that should be devoted to receiving the ball (first touch). Coaches and players will get discouraged quickly if receiving and passing is introduced prior to mastering the basic foot skills. If a player does not feel comfortable with the ball then the player will not be able to properly receive the ball, and quickly becomes discouraged. First touch receiving should be the emphasis at the age of U7 through U9. As the child moves to higher level of play first touch will become very important. One and two touch passing is the most efficient way to keep a defense off balance, and possession of the ball. But this can only be done after mastering the first touch. Juggling and foot skills are foundation to mastering the first touch. When practicing emphasis should be on the one part of the body the player is working on. **Do not** teach the kids to stop the ball with their first touch. As the players get older they will need to be in continual movement. The first touch should always set up their next move or pass. This takes a lot of patience and practice for the players to master. Start with working on foot traps (inside and outside) and then move up to thigh and chest traps.

- a) **Inside foot:**

- **Pass** – The toe needs to be pointed outside, ankle locked, knee bent, leg motion should be parallel to path of ball. Striking the ball should be done in the middle or just above center of the ball with the area of the foot between the heel and the ball of the foot. Planted foot is next to the ball pointing towards the target. Head is down and body is coming forward over the ball. The player does not lean back.
- **Receiving** – Again the toe needs to be pointed outside, ankle locked, knee bent, contract between foot and ball needs to happen with the arch of the foot and center of the ball.

***Technique:** In passing the ball the body must be square to the intended target so the leg does not come across the body. In receiving the ball, the body needs to be open to the direction of the first touch. In trapping the ball with the inside and outside of the foot, we don't want to necessarily stop the ball. Touching the ball to the open space on the first touch is very essential.*

b) Outside foot:

- **Pass** – The toe must be pointed down, ankle locked, toe pointed slightly inwards, and the knee bent. Leg motion should be done perpendicular to the body, just as in an inside foot pass. Again strike the ball in the middle or just above center of the ball with the outside of the laces. Head is down and body is coming forward over the planted foot. The player does not lean back.
- **Receiving** - Again the toe needs to be pointed outside, ankle locked, knee bent, contact between foot and ball needs to happen with the arch of the foot and center of the ball.

***Technique:** The motion of the leg is **not** from side to side, as most kids will do. The motion is the same as a power kick. The only difference is the toe is pointed down and a little inward and the ball is struck with the outside of the foot.*

c) Using the Instep (top of foot): This part of the foot is used primarily for long passing and shooting as it provides for the most powerful strike on the ball. The non-shooting is foot placed next to the ball and pointed towards the target. The shooting foot then is pointed with toes down and the ball is struck in the center with the top of the foot or on the laces. To keep the ball from going too high it is important that the knee of the shooting leg and upper body stays over the ball. Power is really only generated by stepping into the ball at a slight angle and using the hips to swivel slightly thereby whipping the shooting leg through the ball with speed.

d) Sole Trap: In receiving the ball, the foot is angled up and the sole of the foot is used to stop the ball.

Technique: Do not receive the ball too close to the body. This move is done generally under pressure and the foot will be extended out to keep ball away from defender. This move is also done when Trap and Shielding.

- e) **Thigh Ball:** The meaty part of the thigh is used in receiving a ball with the thigh. **Do not use knees**, it is much harder to control the ball. Knee needs to be bent, toe off the ground. As ball contacts the thigh the thigh is simultaneously drawn down to absorb the impact force. The ball should be placed in front of the body.

Technique: The body should be open to receiving the ball and the thigh should be used to direct the ball to the open space. (first touch)

- f) **Chest Ball:** The player wants to have his arms out in front of him/her as if he/she was going to catch it with his/her elbow. Their chest should be out and on impact the arms and chest should collapse. This absorbs the impact of the ball. The body should then open to the open space and direct the ball there.

Technique: The body should be perpendicular to the path of the ball. The ball's direction after touch will be determined by quickly opening the chest up to that direction.

- g) **Foot Settle (elevator trap):** With the foot off the ground the ball is caught with the laces of the foot and is simultaneously brought to the ground. The ball should not bounce off the foot when settled.

Technique: The toe should be pointed up to cradle the ball between the laces and shin. The settle reaction must be done quickly and takes a lot of practice.

- h) **Header:** Properly heading the ball in soccer has not been linked to brain damage as many think. It is important to show a player the proper way to head the ball because it will surely happen during a game.

- **Offensive** – The forehead right above the nose should be the only place to contact the ball. The contact should be made at the center of the ball or above center in a downward motion. The motion should be through the ball.
- **Defensive** – Again the forehead right above the nose is used to contact the ball. The contact should be made below the center of the ball and in an upward direction. Again the contact should be made through the ball.

Technique: Arms should be used to protect the body, but not used to push or use their opponent in any way. The key to proper heading is the head going through the ball. It will only hurt if the ball hits the head.

- i) **Juggling:** Juggling the ball takes a lot of practice and dedication but will allow the player to receive volleyed balls with ease. As with many of the skills only practicing at home will truly allow a player to develop his/her own technique. Juggling the ball

includes the foot, thigh, chest, and head. Players practice months and years to be able to effectively use all parts of their bodies. Here are some of the basic ways to start juggling.

- **Thigh** – Start with bouncing the ball off the thigh and catching it. Challenge the kids to get two or more bounces before catching it. The thigh is the easiest to learn.
- **Foot** – Again start with dropping the ball and juggling it back up and catching it. Again increase the number of bounces prior to using their hands to catch it.
- **Chest** – The chest is used to cushion the ball. The ball should drop from the chest down to either the foot or thigh. Start with thigh to chest to thigh. Increase the repetitions.
- **Head** – This is the most difficult and should not be done until they have mastered the thigh and foot. Using the hard spot on the forehead bounce the ball up six to twelve inches above ones head. Slightly bend the neck and use your knees to bounce the ball not your neck.
- **Other parts of the body** such as the outside foot, inside foot, and heel are used to juggle as well. These can all be learned once the basics have been mastered.

Again this takes a to of time and dedication to do effectively. However, their touch and control over the ball will increase tremendously mastered.

SHOOTING

Shooting is nothing more than passing at the goal. At the younger ages U12 and under, it is more important that they shoot accurate than hard. At these ages player" cruciate ligaments have not fully developed around the knee, as a young player kicks the ball hard the knees has a tendency to over extend stretching these ligaments since they are not fully developed. Continual over extension of these ligaments could cause damage (some permanent) to the cruciate ligaments. Many of the injuries young players get are from over training at a young age. Their muscle, ligaments, and joints are still developing and over training may lead to permanent injury. When training concentrate more on accuracy then on power.

Shooting Technique: Teach the players to shoot the ball on the goal the same way they would pass to a teammate except the pace on the ball should be harder (but not too hard – see above). Players should use the inside of the foot (push pass) for most accuracy. For harder shots then they should use the instep pass (toes pointed down and strike the ball with the laces). Players should be taught to pick a spot on goal (preferably in the corners of the goal) and "pass" the ball into theses areas. Striking the ball with the big toe should be discouraged.

6. TYPICAL PRACTICE SESSION

Here are some items that should be included in a U-8 training 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: dribbling the ball with the bottom of their feet, with their elbows, backwards, with the back of their neck while holding on to it; keeping the ball up with their thighs; keeping it up with their feet while sitting.

Individual Or Small Group Activities: Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1v.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 a game where players are trying to work with a partner or small group to obtain a goal. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" (where everyone plays), instead of games where the "looser sits". Be creative. These players like "crazy" games with a lot of action.

Play The Game: Small sided soccer can be used to heighten intensity and create some good competition. Play 1v.1 up to 5v.5. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Perhaps play to emphasize a particular skill (can only dribble the ball over a goal line in order to get a point). Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. Switch teams often, give everyone a chance to win. Also, 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 head, then thigh and then catch it. Can one player kick a ball to a partner and then back without it hitting the ground? 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. EXAMPLE PRACTICE GAMES:

Sees Under 6 warm ups and practice fun games. Most of these will apply to under 8 as well. Some new ones:

- a) **Triangle passing** - Split team into 3's. Players form a triangle and pass ball around. Start with small triangle and then make bigger. Play one or two touch passing.
 - Variations: Have the 3 players in a line. Middle player receives ball, turns and passes.

- Middle player stands in the middle with legs apart. The other two try to pass ball through the player's legs.
 - encourage a quick pace
- b) **Juggling** - to start players juggling ask them to kick with the foot and then catch, then do the same with the thigh and head. Once successful, players should try for two contacts then catch. Try to mix up the contacts i.e. foot, thigh then catch, or head, thigh then catch.
- c) **"Get Em"** - Here is a game which involves both passing and dribbling that is fun and engages players quickly. Also, although primarily an individual exercise that allows for differences in ability level, if the players are ready, it can quickly become a cooperative game where players work together to solve a challenge.

THE GAME:

- Each player will need a ball. Player 'A' is "It" and is the only player to start with a ball. All the other players around the outside of the grided space.
- Player 'A' dribbles and tries to hit the other players below the waist with the ball. When hit, that player gets a ball and joins player 'A'.
- The game is over when all of the players have been caught.
- The last player caught starts with the ball for the next game.
- If you think the task will be too difficult for the one player to get another at the start of the game, start with 2 players being "It".
- Encourage quick movements and sudden changes of direction to catch players off guard.
- Encourage deceptive passing of the ball: look one-way and pass the other; use the outside of the foot.
- Players not caught should run, jump, and use zig-zag movements.

d) **"Running Bases"**

Here is another game that emphasizes dribbling that is fun and challenging for players. Again, primarily, it is an individual game that could lend itself to small group cooperation if the players are ready.

THE GAME:

- Each player will need a ball, except those that have been designated as "It".
- Players that are "It" need to carry a colored "pinnie" or flag in their hand.
- Players with a ball try to dribble without being tagged. If they are, they exchange places with the "tagger" (The "tagger" hands the "pinnie" to the dribbler and takes their ball).
- Dribblers are safe in one of the designated bases. Only one player is allowed in a base at a time. If a new player enters a base, the old player must leave the base.
- Add "taggers" when the players find the game to be easy.

- It seems about right to have one base for every 3 players, but, this number can be adjusted either way to make the game constantly interesting.
- This game can also be played by only allowing the "tagger" to "get" someone by kicking his or her ball away, not just "tagging" the person.

e) Monkey In The Middle

- 5 players in a grid.
- One player is a defender (monkey). The other players stand around the perimeter (inside) of the grid and pass the ball (banana) around without it being stolen by the monkey. Whichever player makes a mistake i.e. bad pass or losing the ball out of the grid, switches with the monkey.
- Encourage the players to get open for a pass and start moving without the ball to use all the space in the grid.

f) Four Goal Game

- Two teams 3 v 3 or 4 v 4 in a small rectangular field. Two goals are set up on each endline. Teams can score in two goals. Adjust field size and goal size as needed based on number of players.
- Encourage players to go to unmarked goal and to play across the field.

g) Pass And Score

- Players form a line 20-30 yards from the goal. Player at the front of line passes the ball to the coach. The player then runs around a cone to the side then receives the ball back from the coach and shoots on goal.
- Coach should vary the return the pass in various ways like on the ground and bouncing the ball. Should vary left and right foot shooting.

h) Bermuda Triangle

- Players work in pairs as teams 2 vs. 2. Three cones in a triangle 10 yards apart act as goals. Players score a point by hitting any of the three cones with the ball. Play continues non-stop for two minutes. Since there are more goals than team members, there is always an open goal to attack.
- Encourage players to go to open space and pass to teammates.

i) Knockout

- All players in a grid with a ball. Each player attempts to knock out another player's ball while keeping control of their own ball. Any ball that is dribbled outside, or kicked outside the grid is considered out. These players must do a skill drill outside the square i.e. "20 toe taps", "20 roll backs" and then they can return to the field. Encourages players to use their body to shield the ball.