



Thoughts on Organizing Pre-Teen Youth Soccer Practices **Tom Turner, OYSAN Director of Coaching** **May 2009**

Coaching Goals

The basic goals for coaching youth soccer are....

1. To ensure the players enjoy participating and want to return.
2. To encourage a level of technical competence that inspires independent practice.
3. To provide opportunities for young players to naturally learn the principles of play without excessive instruction.
4. To encourage a generation of fitter children.

Ideas that Work!

Plan Your Practice!

It's good to plan out what to do at practice and it's good to plan out how the practice is going to flow from activity to activity. With that said, it's also important to be flexible enough to change direction in mid-stream if a teachable moment arrives.

With pre-teens, practice content should be based on individual and small-group development. With players closer to high school age, the practices should help develop ideas on team play and the individual skills required to perform in a specific position.

Over the course of a typical week for pre-teens, practice time should be dedicated to...

- Playing 1v1 and 2v2
- Developing individual technique
- Developing ideas about the principles of play
- Developing possession skills, including individual and small-group activities
- Playing the appropriate game form for the age: 3v3 / 4v4 / 6v6 / 8v8 / 11v11
 - Kids need to understand how the games feel
 - Kids need to understand typical restarts
 - Kids need to understand the spacing and movement associated with their game form
- Free Play

What should NOT be included in the pre-teen curriculum are fitness activities, such as laps and sprints, simply for the sake of fitness training; and practice time dedicated to restarts, such as throw-ins or free kicks. Neither are developmental priorities and both can be included in other activities.

Structure Games!

Playing soccer between two goals is a wonderful approach to practice and no kid will ever complain when they're scrimmaging. But what if there was something about the player's technique or tactical understanding that could be improved through training?

What if the game had two or three goals on each goal line? What if the game was played across the field instead of up and down? What if the goals were four yards wide instead of two? What if all the attackers had to be in the same half of the field for a goal to count? What if the players scored points for passing the ball into the opponent's goalkeeper's hands and they scored more points if the pass was from their own half? What if the game only had three players per team instead of six? What if the field was 50 yards long instead of 30?

Soccer games can be changed in a few basic ways to help players learn a little more quickly and experienced coaches are able to adjust the size or the shape of the field, or the playing numbers, or the scoring systems, or the playing time to encourage some element of the game to be a little more prevalent.

Make Games Work!

A wide range of abilities is more the norm than the exception in youth soccer and experienced coaches routinely adjust the game rules to challenge the better players and provide success to the less-skilled. Often, a common rule, such as two-touch, works well for the entire group. However, while two-touch may be a good idea in theory, inexperienced players may need more than two touches just to control the ball.

If the weaker players aren't engaged, they aren't learning, so to encourage their participation perhaps reward their team with a bonus point for every goal they score, or for every pass they complete. Conversely, if the stronger players aren't playing quickly, they aren't learning either, so perhaps limit the number of touches they can take per possession, or place a ceiling on the number of touches allowed for a goal to count.

Practice: How Long?

Kids will play soccer games for hours and get bored with drills in minutes. With a game-based practice, count on 60 minutes for U-6's; 90 minutes for U-8's; and up to 2 hours for U-10's and older. Ideally, schedule about 25% of the practice for individual technical training, but only if the activities are competitive and challenging. Otherwise, keep playing games!

There's Benefit to Bulk!

Working with a small group of players for an entire season is very difficult. When two or three or four teams combine for practice, the increased volume helps create many more

interesting possibilities for competition and ability grouping. This approach is perfect for pre-teens and the teams don't even have to be the same age.

Plan Free Play!

Every youth soccer practice should include some extended period of free play where the kids are left in control. Coaches can also use free play time to get some exercise and mental relief for themselves!

Bag the Run and Stretch!

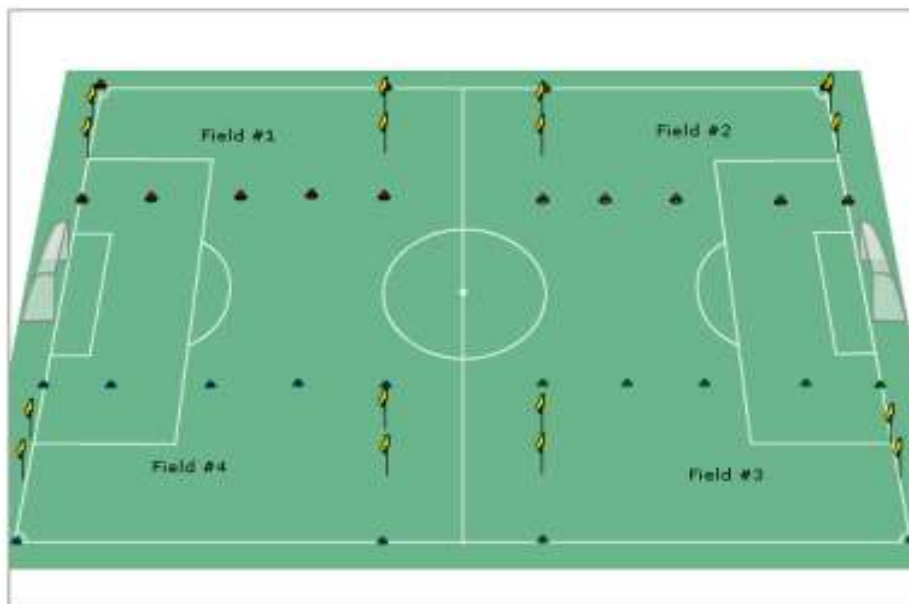
Soccer is a sport which requires rapid and frequent changes in pace, direction and elevation, and involves physical contact with other players. It is not played at a constant speed and movement in straight lines is most often over short distances. While running laps may work well for the cross country squad, the long, slow distances actually work against the physiology of training a soccer player.

It is also more helpful to prepare for a highly dynamic sport by warming up in a dynamic manner, so sitting down to stretch is also not as helpful as many coaches believe. Since it is very unusual for pre-pubescent kids to actually pull muscles, any formal warm-up time is much better spent with the ball.

In general, when kids start to hit puberty, it makes more sense to schedule a formal warm-up with dynamic, soccer-related exercises. Until then.....

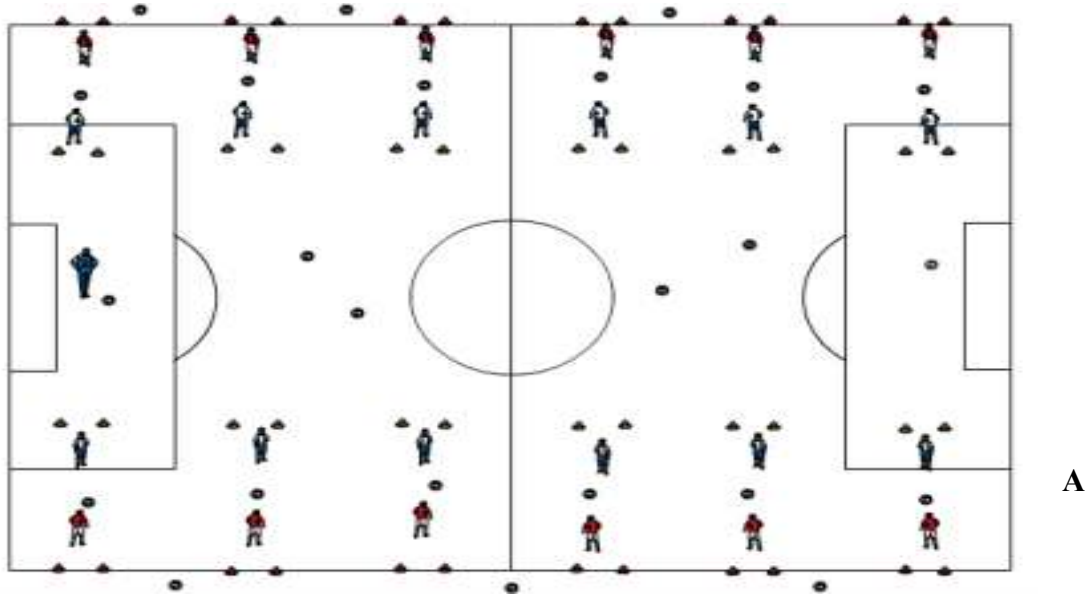
Start with a Bang!

Kids come to soccer to play soccer games and most discipline problems can be prevented by starting out with free play. Set up 4v4 fields (40 yds x 25 yds) at least 15 minutes prior to the official start time and assign players to teams as they arrive. Use scrimmage vests to randomly assign players to teams for the night. Don't worry if the fields are initially too big, or if a game has five or six players per side, or if there is an odd number of players. When the last players arrive, many of their teammates will have been active for 20-30 minutes.



Same Games: New Opponent!

Pre-teen soccer practices should include a steady diet of games between 1v1 and 4v4. By organizing multiple small games, players can be rotated to face different opponents after each round. This allows for repeated exposure to the same basic game, but with a fresh challenge! By rotating one team clockwise (white, in the figure below) and keeping track of which team wins each round (show of hands), competition can be used to increase effort and naturally develop soccer fitness.



Keep Everyone Active!

Players need to actively participate to learn and coaches do not need to monitor every player all the time to be effective; in fact, the very opposite is true. For example, in the activity below, only the shooter and the goalkeeper are active.



While in this organization, the players rotate between the three stations every 10-15 minutes and are active for the entire practice.



Whether the players rotate between opponents to play the same game, or rotate with the same opponents to play different games, the objective is the same: a MINIMUM of 70% active participation.

Good Competition is FUN!

Knowing what to do to win and how long a game will last are the keys to motivation and effort. Kids love to compete and even juggling can be made into a contest. The fun part comes from playing in close games, not blow-outs, so the teams have to be balanced or the games won't be challenging. One of the main jobs of the coach during practice is to balance the teams to ensure close games.

Odd Number Options!

One of the great advantages of combined-team practices is the ability to play larger-sided games. The downside is having to make fields for 20-30 players and what to do with odd numbers. The simple solution is to be flexible. If the idea was to play 4v4, make the best player neutral and play 4v4+1. Yes, the neutral can score! Another solution might be to assign a weaker player to a team and play 5v4. The coach or assistant coach or a parent can also step in to balance a game, if need be.

Active Rest: A Touch is a Touch - Even a Bad One!

Every now and again, players need a break for water and this can be a problem waiting to happen for the inexperienced coach. Whether break time is required to change the field set-up, or just to take in water, juggling is an excellent way to change the tempo of the practice, while keeping everyone on task. Players can juggle individually or in pairs. Pairs can cooperate (how many together) or compete (fewest drops). Ideally, it is best to let the players set their own challenges, but they should know as they come off the field that they are expected to juggle until the coach is ready to start the next activity.

Don't Forget The Soccer Homework!

Just as a musician or a gymnast or a writer will never develop their potential on the strength of limited practice, soccer players should be challenged to work on their skills at home. Set individual or team juggling goals. Set up a "Crossbar Challenge" to encourage kicking practice. Organize "Soccer Tennis" competitions or "Penalty Kick" shoot-outs. Anything that motivates kids to spend time in practice will help. The world record for juggling is now 208,333 touches (Dan Magness, May 2009). Can your team or club beat that number in a season? In a year?