

Player Development through Small-sided Games

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Disclaimer- The rules explained below are for clubs/leagues who have adopted small-sided games at all age groups. In Nebraska, not all age leagues will adopt these playing rules at U8 and U10 until Fall 2005. Check with the league directly.

Forty-three of the fifty-five US Youth Soccer State Associations, including Nebraska and Iowa have adopted small-sided games. The goal is to aid in the players' enjoyment and learning of the games. As such, several rule changes have been enacted and are being abused by coaches who are placing more importance on winning the game than on player development.

Issue #1: Player positions at U6 & U8

At the under 6 and under 8 age groups, smaller numbers are intended to bring about more involvement by the players. The concept of space is foreign to players at this age and the game will usually result in a mass of players surrounding the ball. As coaches, it is our responsibility to these players not to over-coach, thus limiting the players' freedom to roam the field and therefore lessen or limit the opportunities to become involved in the game. As human beings, some of us are naturally exploratory and creative, while others are protectors; however, it is not appropriate to "station" a player in front of the goal as a defender and restrict their mobility.

Issue #2: Goalkeeper punting at U9/U10

Because of the small field size, many players are physically capable of punting the ball from one penalty area to the other. And, because there is no offside, it is possible to put the goalkeeper's five teammates in that attacking penalty area and hope for a goal as a result of a long punt. (It would be inappropriate to eliminate the punt all together, as it is sometimes appropriate to relieve pressure, especially if the goalkeeper is physically less developed and cannot throw the ball over any great distance.)

With fewer players on the field, coaches should encourage the goalkeeper to get the ball back into to play as quickly as possible, but with a controlled distribution, specifically with a throw or by placing the ball at his/her own feet and passing to a teammate, which allows his/her team to maintain possession and attempt to penetrate through dribbling and passing, not a hopeful punt.

Aimlessly punting the ball from one end of the field to the other does not allow for players to be involved in the game and develop their skills. Watching a tennis match is no FUN for the players on the field.

Issue #3: No offside at U9/U10

For a variety of reasons, the rules state that there is no offside at U9/U10. Unfortunately, coaches are abusing this policy by constantly placing a forward next to the opposition's goalkeeper, either to "cherry-pick" or to interfere with his/her vision and mobility. This practice is not only opposed to player development and FUN, it is unethical.

While it is true that players will naturally migrate forward and will get into advanced positions within the flow of the game, coaches should discourage a player from simply "posting up" the goalkeeper. The intent of the rule is to allow for more space for the players to dribble and pass, not for a coach to pad his/her record.