

# Use of Small-Sided Games to Develop Players

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After analyzing the needs of your team in the latest match or tournament, selecting a topic and series activities that will aid in the players' development by specifically addressing their needs through repetition could make the difference in the upcoming game. In addition, very few, if any, of us live in the ideal world of having 18 players attend every practice, show up on time and stay for the duration. So, having alternative activities for the players will help you "appear" more prepared for your session.

Below are several small-sided activities you can use in putting together your session. "As coaches, plagiarism is not only accepted, but encouraged" (unknown). Within the context of your team, you can modify any or all of these activities to meet the demands of the game.

By changing the orientation or size of the field, number of players, use of neutrals, playing with a man up or down, using targets or lines or small goals instead of regulation goals, you can necessarily bring out different outcomes within your sessions. Changing the size of the field can also incorporate fitness.

One thing all these activities share is the often overlooked, but vital component of transition. In youth soccer, we don't see our players often enough to omit this important factor from your training session. By including it a lack of communication or a player who gets frustrated after a mistake will be exposed. In all these activities keep plenty of balls available before beginning.

## Activity – 1v1

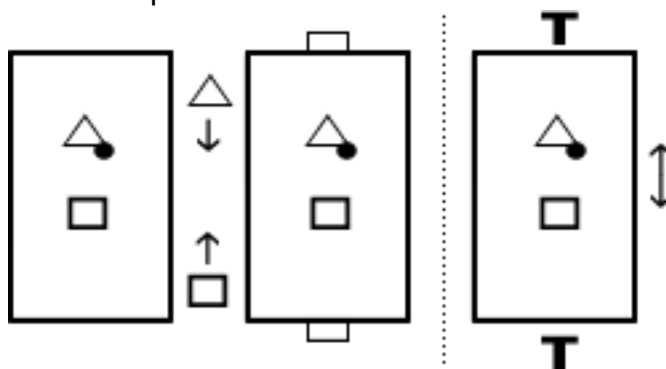
One versus one is the most basic of all activities and the essence of team sports. If your team can win the 1v1 duel more often than your opponent you will have success.

Here the activity is shown with three different "goals" – line, small goals, and target players – each of which will have a different impact.

**To a line** – This can be played two ways: (1) stop the ball on the line; (2) dribble through the line under control. The emphasis of the activity is on the attacker to engage the defender. The defender may choose to play off the ball as to not create space in behind him/herself the attacker to dribble into.

**To small goals** – The emphasis of this activity is on the defender applying immediate pressure with direction away from the goal so the attacker can't score. It will also force the attacker to consider the risk of losing possession. The quality of the shot/pass is not important so long as the ball travels through the goal.

**To Targets** – Again, two options: (1) Target is stationary; (2) Target is a teammate who can move the width of the field. The quality of the pass to the Target is important, as it must be completed to score. Generally, this game is played bi-directional/make it, take it. If a player completes a pass to one target he/she gets it back and the play switches direction all within the flow. There is no stoppage to allow players to sort out the direction. You might put a touch restriction on the Target player's reception/pass



back to put more emphasis on the quality of the pass from the attacker and first touch of the Target.

**Additional thoughts** – How you start the activity will also lend itself to your aim for the activity. After the ball goes out of bounds, you can start with: (1) a pass across the length of the field from the defender to the attacker which will put space between the two that must be closed; (2) a free-flowing game where the player who by rule should be in possession dribbles the ball in; (3) several balls scattered around the field so the player who should be in possession of the ball can choose whichever ball they want. The last two options keeps the players' minds engaged for the duration and the activity/intensity high.

### Activity – 2v2-1

**Explanation** – Two teams of two play against one another to regulation goals. One player from the defending team must drop back and become the goalkeeper. For example, two reds have the ball, one blue defends and one blue is the goalkeeper. If/when one of the blue players gains possession, the blue goalkeeper joins the attack while one red drops back to be the goalkeeper. This takes place in the flow of the game with no interruption. The players do not pre-determine who the goalkeeper will be and must communicate based upon what the game presents upon losing possession. When the ball goes out of play, the team in possession gets a ball from a resting player behind their goal. Teams play for a certain duration (e.g. 2 minutes). The centerline serves as it does in the game with regards to offside.

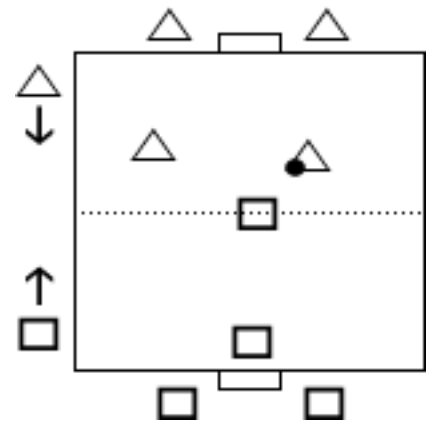
**Variations** – (1) The team who scores a goal stays on while the other team switches. The team who scores gets a new ball from a resting player behind their goal. (2) Both teams switch on ball out of bounds with the team in possession dribbling a new ball onto the field.

**Techniques** – Dribbling to beat a defender, speed dribbling, short passing, receiving ground balls, shooting, tackling, and goalkeeping.

**Attacking** – Combination play, supporting positions/runs, creating space for self and/or player with the ball, and finishing.

**Defending** – Isolating/eliminating an attacker, pressure with direction, body position, and communication.

**Additional thoughts** – Depending on your topic, you may want to include some restrictions. For instance, if you are working on dribbling to beat an attacker, you may say the players can only score in the attacking half of the field. Generally, I am against such restrictions because I want players to look to score as a first option, especially in transition, so be cognizant that you don't restrict the players unnecessarily. One added benefit of this activity is you may find a hidden gem of a goalkeeper.



### Activity – 3v3+3

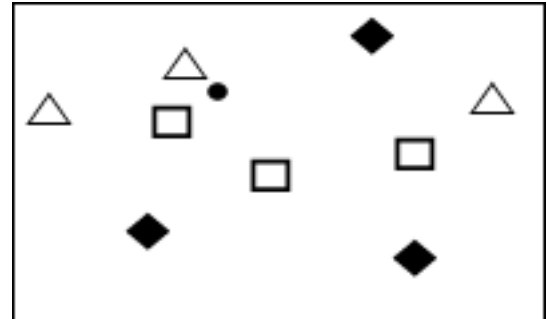
**Explanation** – Three groups of three players are put in different colors (e.g. red, yellow, blue). One group (e.g. blue) defends while the other two groups (e.g. red and yellow) becomes one team of six and maintain possession. The defending team accumulates points by allowing either a certain number of passes and/or getting split with a pass between two teammates. The group with the most points loses.

**Variations** – The defending team may change one of two ways: (1) the team of three within the group of six committing the turn-over becomes the defending team while the group who gained possession joins with the third to create the new group of six (i.e. if blue is defending and intercepts a pass made by a player on the red team, red defends against blue and yellow; (2) on coaches command. In the second scenario, when the three win the ball they have to play 3v6 and keep possession as long as possible.

**Technique** – Shielding, short passing, receiving ground balls, long passing, receiving air balls, and tackling.

**Attacking** – Team shape, body position, switching the point of attack, penetrative passes, and first touch (limit the number of touches).

**Defending** – Communication, pressure with direction, depth/cover, delay, and double team.



**Additional thoughts** – In this activity it is important to keep a rectangular shape to the field and vary its size according to the skill level of the team and intended outcomes of the coach. The field shape is important because the defending team must understand the difference between pressing the field front-to-back versus squeezing it side-to-side. Having length will on occasion allow the attacking team to play “back” away from pressure and the defending team must decide whether or not they are organized enough to pressure or lay off and “choose to fight another day”. You may choose to add touch restrictions to emphasize the quality of the pass and first touch. Another option is to vary touch restrictions with the flow of the game. For example every other pass is one touch, while the odd is two, three, etc... or the group attacking longest has limited touches while the group just becoming attackers has unlimited.

### Activity – 3v3 to 3 goals

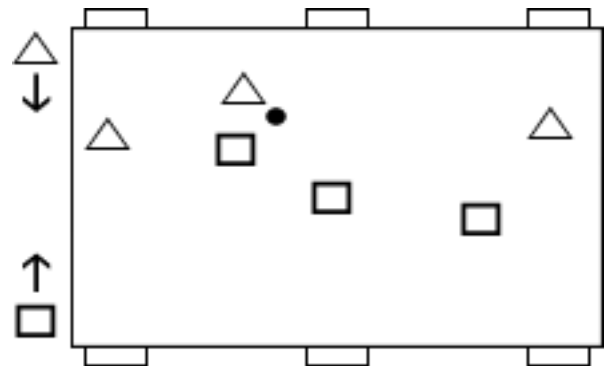
**Explanation** – Two teams of three, each defends three goals on a short (15-20 yards), wide (35-44 yards) field. It is important to include the offside rule within this activity.

**Variations** – Each team defends two wide goals, omitting the goal in the middle.

**Technique** – Dribbling to beat a defender, shielding, short passing, receiving ground balls, and tackling.

**Attacking** – Score/penetrate as a first option, support, isolate defenders, risk versus reward and timing of runs.

**Defending** – Pressure with direction, depth/cover, delay, and zonal principles (include offside).



**Additional thoughts** – You should pre-define the roles of each player (center, left, right), especially if working on zonal defending. If you have an extra player, use them as a linesman to call offside.

### Activity – 3v3 to End Zones

**Explanation** – Two teams of three, each defends an end zone (5 yards) on a short (20-25 yards), wide (35-44 yards) field. The “goal line” (dashed) serves as an offside line such that no attacking player can enter the end zone until the ball has been passed by a teammate. Think

of the goal line as being in line with the second to last defender. A player may run into the end zone at the point the ball is kicked and does not have to wait for it to enter the end zone first.

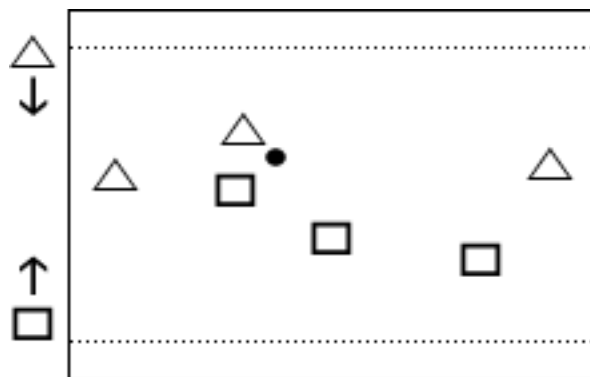
**Variations** – Score by (1) completing a pass to a teammate in the end zone; (2) dribbling the ball into the end zone; (3) Either. You can also play bi-directional.

**Techniques** – Dribbling to beat a defender, speed dribbling, shielding, short passing, receiving ground balls, shooting, and tackling.

**Attacking** – Support, combination play, beating an offside trap, timing and shape of runs, and creating space for self or teammate.

**Defending** – Pressure with direction, depth/cover, delay, zonal principles, high/low pressure, double team, and defending against combinations.

**Additional thoughts** – You should pre-define the roles of each player (center, left, right), especially if working on zonal defending. If you have an extra player, use them as a linesman to call offside. Extending the edges of the penalty area will give you 44 yards of width which is generally the amount of space three should be able to defend. You can play this activity zonally or man-to-man marking depending on your system and the desired outcomes.



### Activity – 4v4+1 to Targets

**Explanation** – Two teams of four, each defends a line/direction on a short (20-25 yards), wide (35-44 yards) field. A Neutral player (all-time offense) plays with whichever team is in possession of the ball to create a 5v4 situation. This game is usually played bi-directional.

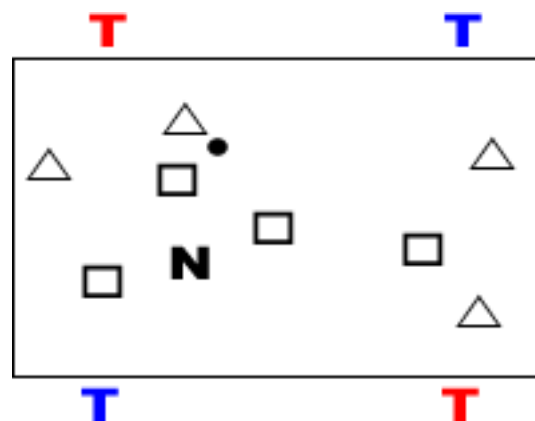
**Variations** – Put Targets in different colors (e.g. one red, one blue on each side) and (1) dictate per coach's order which they can play to; (2) dictate that they must go to a different color on the other side after a goal. To keep all players involved, if a player completes a pass to a Target of the same color, the Target dribbles the ball onto the field and the player making the pass takes his/her place. You can play that the Neutral may or may not score.

**Technique** – Dribbling to beat a defender, shielding (can't pass back to Targets as supporting players), short passing, receiving ground balls, and tackling.

**Attacking** – Support, team shape, early penetration, combination play, goalkeeper dealing with pass back (use a Target), and playmaker.

**Defending** – Pressure with direction, depth/cover, delay, zonal principles, and defending against combinations.

**Additional thoughts** – When introducing bi-directional games or activities with several rules such as colored Targets, get the activity going with none of those additional rules/restrictions in place and add them incrementally as the players begin to understand the activity. For instance, you may start the game by saying yellow scores by getting the ball to one set of Targets and green scores the other direction. After a goal, the other team would get the ball and direction would not change. Once they get the idea, add the bi-directional part. You can add a Neutral



either to even out the numbers or make the exercise easier. If short numbers and you want success for the attackers, play numbers down (i.e. 4v4-1) meaning one player on the team without the ball takes a knee to create a 4v3 situation.

### Activity – 4v4+2 to Targets

**Explanation** – Two teams of four, each defends a line/direction on a long (35-44 yards), narrow (15-20 yards) field. This game is usually played bi-directional. The two Neutral players are “walls” on the outside of the sidelines and are used as supporting players. They cannot score directly, but should move the length of the field.

**Variations** – Put the Neutrals on the interior of the grid or add one inside. Put Targets in different colors (e.g. one red, one blue on each end). If a player completes a pass to a Target of the same color, the Target dribbles the ball onto the field and the player making the pass takes his/her place. Make the Targets goalkeepers and play to regulation goals.

**Technique** – Dribbling to beat a defender, shielding, short passing, receiving ground balls, driven balls/long passing, receiving air balls, shooting, and tackling.

**Attacking** – Support, team shape, depth, early penetration, and combination play.

**Defending** – Pressure with direction, depth/cover, delay, double team, zonal principles, and defending against combinations.

**Additional thoughts** – Keep lots of ball available, especially if adding a goal. To make the activity more functional, you can predetermine a shape and the players’ positions/roles. Limiting the number of touches by the field players, Neutrals and/or Targets will bring out a different quality to the game.

