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The Modified Corner Kick Pilot Project Report

2024-2025

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We would like to express a special thank you to both Southwest Soccer & Peel Halton Soccer Association for their partnership and unwavering support throughout the project. Your leadership, coordination, and provision of resources played a vital role in the smooth execution of each stage of the pilot.



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Executive Summary

Purpose of the Pilot: The primary objective of the 2024 pilot project was to evaluate whether introducing corner kicks at the U8 level, in the 5v5 playing format, would encourage defending teams to retain possession of the ball, rather than clearing it over their own goal line to force a goal kick. The previous rule was presented as “A goal kick or dribble-in is awarded when the whole of the ball passes over the goal line either on the ground or in the air, having last touched a player of either team”, presenting a significant opportunity for manipulation by players and coaches alike. By introducing corner kicks taken 5 yards up the sideline, the project aimed to assess its impact on player behaviour, match flow, and overall development outcomes. This adjustment to the corner-kick location was made to address the biomechanical challenges younger players face when attempting to accurately deliver the ball from a traditional corner position, while also creating more developmentally appropriate opportunities for 1v1 attacking duels. By moving the corner restart 5 yards up the sideline, players are provided with improved angles and more manageable technical demands, encouraging players to engage in positive decision such as 1v1s, penetrative passing, or the retention of possession under pressure, key aspects of technical and tactical development. The 2025 pilot project set out to further evaluate these measures, as experience, familiarity, and a continued understanding of the rules of the game possess the potential to impact game speed, delivery, and engagement among members.

Incentive for Change: Previous U8 corner kick laws were reviewed due to potential manipulation of the law that was detrimental to player development at this age and stage. Example of feedback received in 2023 included the following information from Southwest Soccer to Ontario Soccer that indicated potential manipulation of the law due to the lack of corner kicks, as seen below:

When defending players are under pressure from an opponent, players will intentionally kick the ball out of bounds to get a goal kick. This allows them to maintain possession of the ball and forces the opponent to retreat to the defensive [retreat] line.

Results from the initial pilot demonstrated promise, and as a result, Ontario Soccer moved forward with implementing the corner-kick rule for future seasons, with ongoing monitorization to ensure continued efficiency, clarity, and developmental benefit.

Key Findings

The pilot yielded several important insights:



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- 1. Active Time:** This season demonstrated a meaningful increase in ball-in-play time compared to the previous year. In the 2024 season, the average active time was **15.58 minutes (46.5% of total match duration)**, reflecting the impact of longer restarts and reduced match fluidity. In contrast, the 2025 season saw ball-in-play time rise to **20.4 minutes**, representing **51%** of total match duration. This improvement indicates that players spent substantially more time engaged in active play, benefiting their technical development, decision-making, and overall match experience. The increased efficiency of restarts, particularly the reduction in corner-kick inbound times, contributed to a more continuous and dynamic game flow, allowing for richer developmental opportunities throughout each match.
- 2. Corner Kick Speed & Efficiency:** This season demonstrated a notable improvement in the efficiency of corner-kick execution compared to the previous year. In the 2024 pilot, corner kicks were identified as a major contributor to slowed match flow, taking an average of **37 seconds** to complete and creating extended periods of inactive play. In contrast, during the 2025 season, players executed corner kicks more quickly and with greater clarity, reducing the average inbound time to **18.5 seconds** per restart. This improvement reflects increased familiarity with the modified rules and a growing understanding among players regarding when and how to restart play. As a result, corner-kick stoppages were shorter, and overall match tempo improved relative to the previous year, contributing to smoother transitions and a more fluid playing experience.
- 3. Corner Kick Frequency:** The introduction and refinement of the corner-kick rule contributed to a noticeable increase in the number of corners taken per match from one season to the next. In the 2024 season, teams averaged **8.43** corner situations per match, reflecting both the match format and players' limited familiarity with the restart option. In the 2025 season, however, this number rose significantly to an average of **12.4** corners per match, indicating not only greater utilization of the modified restart but also a shift in player behaviour as they became more comfortable recognizing and executing corner-kick opportunities. This increase suggests that players were more actively engaging in attacking play near the goal line and that the revised corner-kick structure contributed to a more dynamic and tactically varied match environment.
- 4. Retreat Line Frequency:** The data shows a measurable decline in retreat line usage from the 2024 season to the 2025 season. In 2024, teams required the retreat line an average of **25.71** times per match, reflecting frequent resets and a higher reliance on structured restarts to regain possession or organize play. In the 2025 season, this number decreased to **22.9** usages per match, indicating that players became more effective at maintaining possession, playing forward under pressure, and managing transitions without triggering as many retreat-line scenarios. This reduction suggests improved confidence, better decision-making, and enhanced technical execution among players as



they adapted to the updated format and gained familiarity with the modified corner-kick rule.

Recommendations:

1. Adopt the Modified 5-Yard Corner-Kick Rule Province-Wide (With Continued Monitoring)

The data shows that the modified corner-kick rule:

- Increased developmental decision-making opportunities
- Reduced heading-risk (0 heading attempts)
- Quicker inbounds in year-over-year analysis
- Increased corner frequency (12.4 per match, up from 8.43)
- Supported improved ball-in-play time compared to 2024

Recommendation: Adopt the 5-yard corner-kick structure province-wide, but maintain ongoing evaluation, particularly around inbound speed and restarts to ensure continued improvement and consistency.

2. Prioritize Dribble-Ins as a Foundational Development Tool

Dribble-ins significantly surpassed pass-ins in possession retention rates for both corners and sideline restarts (up to **84% retention** on corner dribble-ins).

Recommendation: Continue promoting dribble-ins as the primary restart for learning ball control, confidence, and individual decision-making. Integrate dribble-in scenarios into training to encourage scanning, body orientation, and pressure recognition.

3. Introduce A-Frame Barriers Behind Goals at Festivals

Ball-retrieval delays were a major contributor to dead time (49% of total match time). A-Frames would:

- Prevent balls from entering adjacent fields
- Increase active time
- Create sponsorship visibility for hosting clubs

Recommendation: Pilot A-Frames at select districts in 2026 to quantify improvements to ball-in-play time.



Background and Objectives

Current U8 Format

In Ontario, the U8 (5v5 match format) follows a developmental, non-competitive structure as part of the [Long-Term Player Development \(LTPD\) model](#).

Match Format	Match Duration	Field Size	Ball Size	Sideline Restarts	Goal Line Restarts	Offside	Retreat Line	Substitutions	Match Day Format
5v5 (with GK)	Two (2) 15-20 minute halves	Width: 25-30m Length: 30-36m	3 (or 4 super light)	Pass In and Dribble In	Defending team goal kick	N/A	Halfway Line	Unlimited (any stoppage or during play)	Festival Format

Match Format: Teams consist of five players on the field, including a goalkeeper, on smaller fields (approximately 30-36x25-30 meters) to meet the needs of the players from a physical component but also support their soccer development by maximizing touches (for additional research providing evidence to smaller match formats see [Appendix A](#)).

Match Duration: The maximum match time per player per day is 80 minutes, ensuring players are not pushed beyond their physical limits. Matches typically consist of either two 15 or 20-minute halves with a 5-minute halftime in between. The 15-20 min halves allow players to play multiple matches per day (up to the maximum 60 minutes) in the festival format.

Offside: There is no offside rule at this age to simplify the match, promote creativity, encourage attacking play to boost player confidence, develop spatial awareness and decision-making over time.

Substitutions: Substitutions are unlimited, allowing players to rotate frequently, get the rest they need and play different positions on the field.

Competition: No scores or standings are kept, emphasizing fun and skill development over competition.

Retreat Line: The retreat line is in effect for goal kicks, requiring defenders to fall back to promote playing the ball out from the back. According to Ontario Soccer's Grassroots Standards (2021), "The retreat line was first implemented in Ontario grassroots soccer in 2014 to help develop young players' ability to play out from the goalkeeper and to keep possession of the ball



as they build an attack. This teaching tool has also been used to help build confidence in players as they retain ball possession”.

Corner Kicks: In the modified U8 format, corner kicks are taken from a designated spot located five yards up the sideline from the goal line. This placement provides young players with more space and clearer angles to execute the restart while reducing congestion around the goal area. From this location, players may choose either a dribble-in or a kick-in to re-enter the ball into play, allowing them to advance forward toward the attacking zone or play backward or sideways to maintain possession. This flexibility encourages decision-making, supports technical development, and aligns with the developmental intent of offering multiple options.

Match Day Format: Festivals emphasize learning, fun and inclusiveness by providing young players with multiple short matches in a supportive environment.

Current Corner Kick Rule:

1. The Goal Kick
 - A goal kick is awarded when the whole of the ball passes over the goal line either on the ground or in the air, having last touched a player of the attacking team.
2. The Corner Kick or Dribble-In
 - A corner kick or dribble-in is awarded when the whole of the ball passes over the goal line either on the ground or in the air, having last touched a player of the defending team.
 - These set-pieces are placed 5 yards up the sideline to provide players with a forward option.

Pilot Objective

Ontario Soccer reviewed the implementation of the corner kick rule at the Fundamentals age group, targeting the U8 level. This rule was implemented for three (3) seasons when the defending team last touches the ball, with this season being the second year of implementation.

The goal of the current pilot is to obtain a further understanding of where the match format can be modified or improved to support player development at the Fundamentals ages and stage.

Stakeholders

There are a number of stakeholders who have played essential roles in organizing, developing, supporting, and participating in the pilot. These stakeholders include:

1. **Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) – Ontario Soccer:** “A Member Association of Canada Soccer, Ontario Soccer provides leadership and support programs and services



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to the membership in Ontario. Ontario Soccer is the recognized Provincial Sport Organization (PSO) for soccer with the province of Ontario's Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries" (Ontario Soccer, n.d.).

Ontario Soccer's role in this pilot project included:

- Collaborating with the district to develop a plan of action for the pilot project
- Developing the corner kick rule that was implemented
- Record matches for analysis
- Complete analysis
- Educating clubs, coaches and match officials on the pilot project
- Providing support for onsite questions from parents/caregivers, coaches and match officials
- Developing a report reviewing the pilot project

2. District – Southwest Soccer & Peel Halton Soccer: Member Associations of Ontario Soccer.

These clubs' roles in this pilot project included:

- Collaborating with Ontario Soccer to develop a plan of action for the pilot project
- Scheduling the festival season
- Booking fields
- Scheduling match officials
- Communicating with clubs and teams regarding the pilot project
- Managing communication with match officials about the new corner kick rule
- Answering questions from clubs, coaches and parents/caregivers

3. Clubs – Numerous clubs participated in the festival season and the pilot project, contributing to multiple teams. Their involvement provided a diverse and representative sample of player groups, ensuring comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of the modified match format.

The clubs' roles in this pilot project included:

- Sharing information regarding the pilot project with their teams as received from the district on behalf of Ontario Soccer



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Teams (Player Pools) – Clubs with player pools created numerous match day teams. The teams participated in the festival season and were the test subjects for the pilot project.

Team Officials – A substantial number of team officials were registered to the teams listed above, each playing an important role in supporting player development, facilitating match-day operations, and ensuring adherence to the principles and expectations of the pilot project.

The team officials' role in the pilot project included:

- Coaching the players
 - Teaching the players the rules (including the corner kick rule)
 - Caregivers from the district and club regarding the festival schedule
4. **Players** – Players were registered on the teams that participated in the festival season, forming the primary player pool for the pilot project. Their involvement provided essential data on developmental outcomes, match-flow behaviours, and the effectiveness of the modified u8 match-format rules.
5. **Match Officials** – Match officials from varying ages participated in the pilot project. The match officials' role in the pilot project included:
- Ensuring that matches were conducted fairly and in accordance with the laws of the match
 - Helping players understand the modified corner kick rule implemented halfway through the festival season
 - Ensuring that the matches were played in a positive and safe environment



Pilot Design

Data Collection

Twenty-One (21) matches of forty (40) minutes of length were recorded throughout the festival season. All matches were fully coded; however, two (2) matches were cut short due to environmental circumstances. These matches were removed from the sample due to insufficient data. Matches were coded using Hudl Sportscode. Video from the Veo cameras was downloaded to a hard drive and labeled as follows: 'match number - home team vs. away team - date.' The video was then uploaded from the hard drive to Hudl Sportscode for review and coding. An example of the code window and coding timeline can be found in Appendix C.

Matches were recorded and tagged for several different events, such as Active Time, Inactive Time, Pass-In, Dribble-In, Corner Usage, and Retreat Line Usage, among others. A complete list of metric definitions can be found in Appendix D.

As a result, the Player Development Team took the opportunity to delve deeper into understanding where improvements could be made in the current format, the value of dribble-ins vs. pass-ins for player development at this age and stage, and to evaluate the corner kick rule and its benefits and drawbacks to the match in comparison to the previous study. A more comprehensive review of the U8 match format was completed overall.



Project Observations and Analysis

After reviewing the data and match footage, the focus looked to the pros and cons of the corner kick rule.

Impact of Corner Kicks

Match Flow: While overall corner-kick inbound time decreased from the 2024 to the 2025 season, improvements in match flow were not consistent across all games. Several matches still experienced delays as players took additional time to recognize whether a restart required a corner kick or a goal kick. This hesitation created unnecessary stoppages and, in certain cases, slowed the overall pace of play. These moments highlight the continued need for clear education and the reinforcement of restart rules to ensure that players can make quicker decisions and maintain a more fluid match rhythm.

Possession Outcomes: Analysis of the charts demonstrate meaningful differences in possession based on the type of inbound play selected. Dribble-ins, regardless of direction, proved to be the most effective method for maintaining possession, showing higher success rates than pass-ins or shot attempts. This trend suggests that players at the U8 level benefit from the control and simplicity of dribbling into space, allowing them to make more deliberate decisions once back in play. These findings reinforce the developmental value of offering multiple restart options and highlight the importance of teaching players how to assess pressure cues and select the option most likely to preserve the ball.

Heading Concerns: A positive outcome of the modified corner-kick format was the notable reduction in aerial balls played into the penalty area. The pilot recorded a notable decrease in cross attempts compared to the previous season, and importantly, no heading attempts occurred during the matches. This aligns well with age-appropriate safety guidelines and indicates that players are adapting their corner-kick strategies in ways that reduce unnecessary risk. The trend toward more grounded, controlled restarts supports safer play while still promoting skill development and decision-making.



Data Analysis

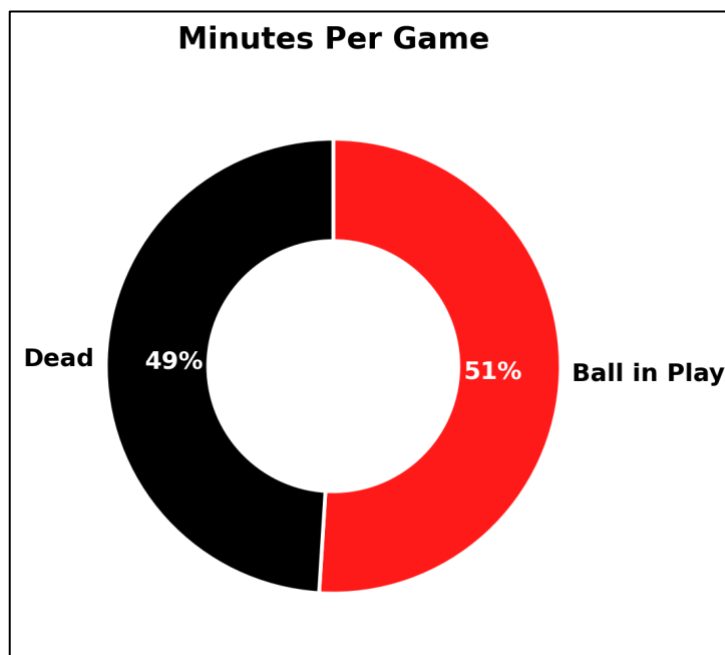
Key Metrics

The data collected from the matches provide insight into how corner kick implementation influenced the overall flow and dynamics of the match. All data can be found in the General Match Results Table (Table 1), the Corner-Kick Results Table (Table 2), the 2024/2025 Comparison Table (Table 3) and the Gender-Based Comparison table (Table 4). Several important trends emerged:

1. Impact on Active and Inactive Time:

- In the 40-minute matches without corner kicks, the average ball in play time (time when the ball is in play to all players) was **20.4 minutes** or **51%** of the match.
- Conversely, dead ball time (time when the ball is out of play or blown inactive by the match official) recorded at **19.6 minutes (49%)**.

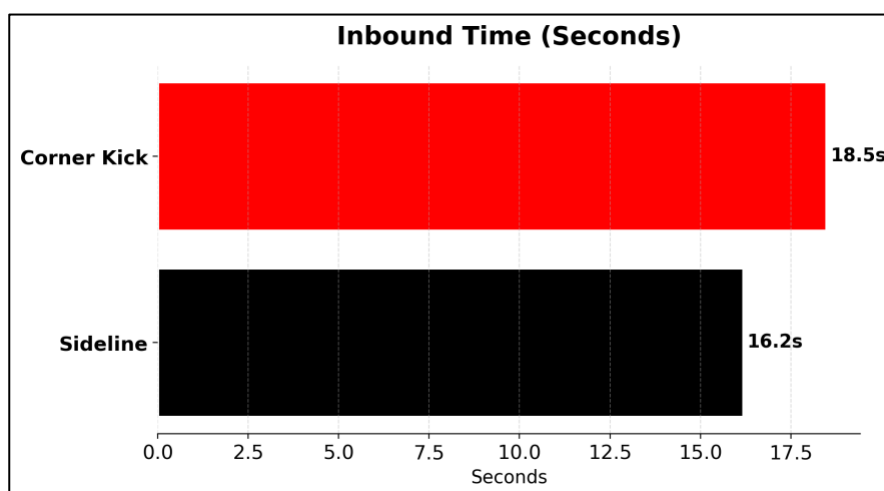
Figure 1. Ball In Play Comparison



2. Corner Kick Inbound Time vs. Sideline Inbound Time:

- One particularly notable finding is the difference in inbound times. The average sideline inbound time was **16.2 seconds**.
- However, the average corner kick inbound time was longer, taking **18.5 seconds** on average.

Figure 2. Inbound Time (Corner & Sideline)



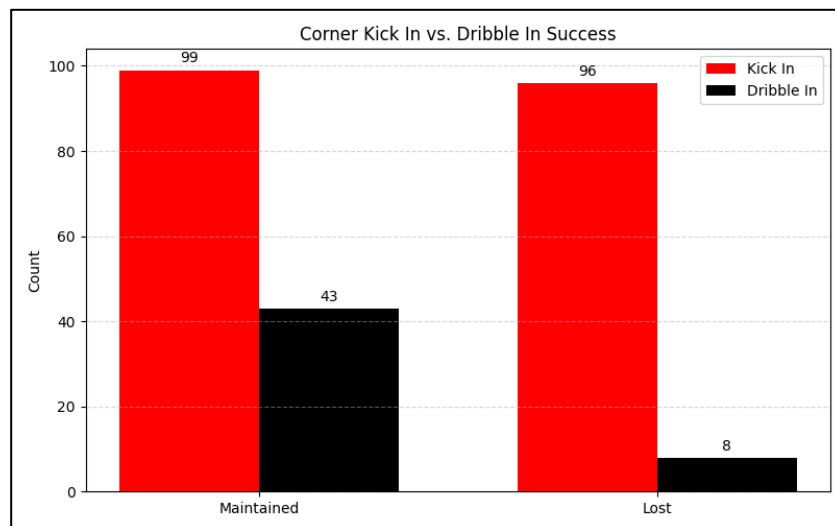
3. Corner Kick Inbound Results vs. Sideline Inbound Results

Corners

- 246 corners were taken among the games. Of these corners, **195 (79%)** resulted in a kick in, and another **51 (21%)** resulted in a dribble in.
- **99** kick-ins resulted in possession being maintained (**51%**), while **96** kick-ins resulted in a loss of possession (**49%**).
- **43** dribble ins resulted in possession being maintained (**84%**), while **8** dribble ins resulted in a loss of possession (**16%**).
- **133** corners were played forward towards the net (**54%**), while **113** saw players play the ball to the side/back (**46%**).
- Lastly, **64** corners were taken as a cross (above ground), and **131** corners were taken as a pass.



Figure 3. Corner Action Success Rate

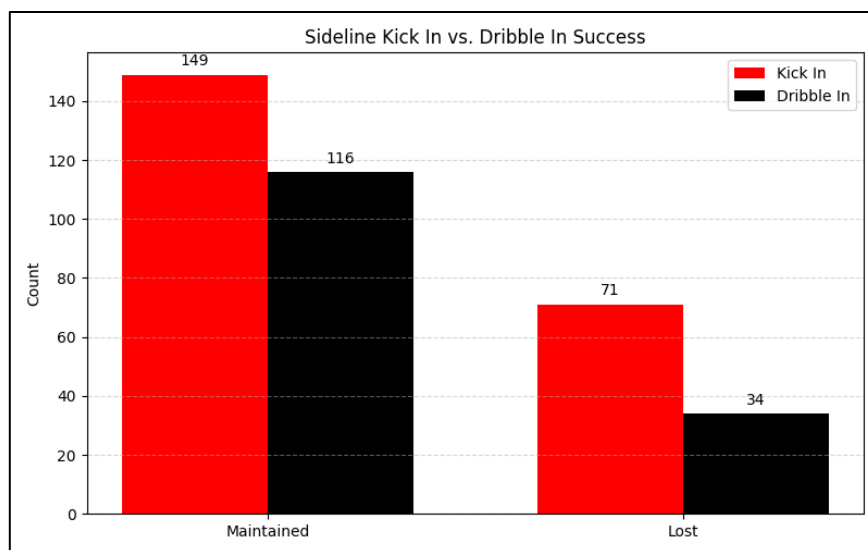


Sideline

- 370 sideline inbounds were attempted, with **220 (59%)** being kick-in's, and **150 (41%)** being dribble-ins.
- Kick-in attempts saw **149** inbounds resulting in possession being maintained (**67%**), whilst only **71** inbounds resulted in a loss of possession (**33%**).
- Dribble-ins saw a significantly higher success rate, with **116** dribble-ins retaining possession (**77%**), and only **34** resulting in a loss of possession (**23%**).

Figure 4. Sideline Action Success Rate





4. Average Corners Taken:

- During matches with corner kicks, an average of **12.4** corners were taken per match.
- Only 3 shots were taken from corners, with 1 resulting in a goal.

5. Retreat Line Usage and Goals:

- The data also indicated an average retreat line usage of **22.9** times per match.
- Furthermore, there was an average of **9.1** goals per match.

Table 1. General Match Results Table

Avg. Ball in Play Time	Avg. Dead Ball Time	Avg Ball out on Sideline Time	Avg. Sideline Inbound Time	Avg. Ball out on Goal Line Time	Avg. Corner Inbound Time	Retreat Line Usage	Avg. Goals
Average 20.4 Minutes or 51% of the match	Average 19.6 Minutes or 49% of the match	4.9 Minutes Per Match	0.27 Minutes (16.2 Seconds)	8.48 Minutes Per Match	0.31 Minutes (18.39 Seconds)	22.9 Times Per Match	9.1 Goals

Table 2. Corner-Kicks Results Table



Corners Taken	Possession Maintained	Possession Lost	Kick-Ins	Dribble-Ins	Forward	Back/Side	Cross	Pass
246 Corners Taken	142 Maintained Possession (57.6%)	104 Lost Possession (42.4%)	195 Kick-Ins (50.7% Poss. Maintained)	51 Dribble-Ins (84% Poss. Maintained)	133 Played Forward	113 Played Back or to the Side	64 Taken as a Cross	131 Taken as a Pass

Table 3. Comparison between 2024 and 2025

Season	Ball in Play Time	Dead Ball Time	Corners Per Game	Avg. Corner Inbound Time	Avg. Sideline Inbound Time	Retreat Line Usage	Avg. Goals
2024	15.58 Min	16.33 Min (53.5)	8.43 Per Game	37 Seconds	25 Seconds	25.71 Times Per Match	4.9 Goals Per Match
2025	20.4 Min (51.1%)	19.6 Min (48.9%)	12.9 Per Game	18.39 Seconds	16.2 Seconds	22.9 Times Per Match	9.1 Goals Per Match

Table 4. Comparison between Genders

Gender	Ball in Play Time	Dead Ball Time	Corners Per Game	Corner Kick In	Corner Dribble In	Avg. Corner Inbound Time	Avg. Sideline Inbound Time
Girls	20.8 min (52%)	19.2 Min (48%)	11.7 Per Game	80 Kick ins (Poss. Maintained 44 times, 55%)	26 Dribble ins (Poss. Maintained 22 times, 85%)	19.3 Seconds	17.2 seconds



Boys	20.1 Min (50.3 %)	19.9 Min (49.7%)	14 Per Game	115 Kick ins (Poss. Maintained 55 times, 47.8%)	25 Dribble ins (Poss. Maintained 21 times, 84%)	17.7 Seconds	15.1 Seconds
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Additional Project Learnings

Corner Kick Implementation SWOT Analysis

1. Strengths

a. Enhanced Possession Retention via Dribble-Ins:

Data show dribble-ins significantly increase the likelihood of maintaining possession compared to kick-ins across both sideline and corner restarts, supporting technical development and confidence on the ball.

b. Improved Ball-in-Play Time Year-Over-Year:

Average active time increased to **20.4 minutes (51%)**, indicating more engagement and meaningful play opportunities for young athletes compared to the previous season.

c. Developmentally Appropriate Restart Options:

Allowing dribble-ins and pass-ins over throw-ins aligns with LTPD and simplifies technical requirements, enabling more touches, controlled entries into play, and reduced frustration for U8 players.



- d. **Reduced Heading Exposure and Safer Play:**
Modified corner-kick placements promoted grounded restarts, with **0 heading attempts recorded**, supporting Ontario Soccer's safety guidelines.
- e. **Greater Variety of Problem-Solving Scenarios:**
The inclusion of corners, retreat lines, and multiple restart types creates diverse moments for decision-making and tactical learning in age-appropriate forms.

2. Weaknesses

- a. **Corner-Kick Restarts Still Slow Down Match Flow:**
Corner inbound times averaged **18.5 seconds**, slower than sideline restarts (**16.2 seconds**), and players often hesitated when determining the correct restart, disrupting tempo.
- b. **Cognitive Load May Be High for Some U8 Players:**
Multiple restart options (dribble-in, pass-in, different directions, modified corner locations) can create confusion and delay decision-making, particularly for children still developing spatial awareness.
- c. **Dependence on Coach and Match Official Education:**
The success of the format relies heavily on proper rule understanding. Inconsistent coach or official education leads to varied interpretations and delays during restarts.
- d. **Field Layout Challenges Affect Match Efficiency:**
With multiple small fields in close proximity, balls frequently roll into neighboring games, elongating stoppages, particularly on goal-line restarts.

3. Opportunities

- a. **Introduce A-Frame Barriers to Increase Active Time:**
Strategically placed barriers behind goals could reduce ball-retrieval delays and enhance ball-in-play percentages, while offering branding or sponsorship avenues.
- b. **Refine Restart Education for Coaches and Players:**
Structured training on when to use dribble-ins vs pass-ins, recognizing pressure cues, and executing quicker restarts can elevate developmental quality and improve match flow.
- c. **Further Standardize Corner-Kick Placement:**
Testing alternate distances (3–7 yards) may optimize space, improve safety, and enhance decision-making, supporting a more consistent province-wide rollout.



- d. **Leverage Parent/Caregiver Education to Improve Match Environments:**
Engaging parents in LTPD-focused learning can reinforce positive sideline behaviour, reduce pressure on players, and improve developmental outcomes.
- e. **Strengthen Data-Driven Development Pathways:**
Continued tracking of possession outcomes, active time, and restart efficiency can shape best practices for grassroots formats across Ontario.

4. Threats

- a. **Over-Complexity Risks Frustration or Disengagement:**
If restarts feel confusing or overly structured, young players may experience diminished enjoyment, contrary to LTPD priorities.
- b. **Variable District Resources and Education Levels:**
Uneven access to coach education, field setup quality, or official training could lead to inconsistent implementation across the province and distorted outcome comparisons.
- c. **Safety Risks if Rules Not Properly Adopted:**
If coaches revert to encouraging lofted or aerial crosses, especially in larger or more competitive environments, there may be unintentional reintroduction of heading risk.

Dribble-Ins/Pass-Ins vs Throw-Ins Comparison

The inclusion of dribble-ins and pass-ins over throw-ins at this U8 age and stage is done because it better aligns with their developmental stage, enhancing both their enjoyment of the match and their skill acquisition. Listed below are several examples of why dribble-ins and pass-ins are considered better for player development at this age:

1. **Allows for Heightened Ball Possession**
 - Allowing dribble-ins at the U8 level meaningfully enhances players' ability to maintain possession. When players are permitted to restart play by dribbling the ball rather than executing a traditional kick-in, they gain more control over both the speed and direction of the restart. This smoother, more developmentally appropriate action reduces the technical burden placed on young players, most of whom are still mastering basic ball-striking mechanics, and instead leverages skills they are more comfortable with, such as close control and simple dribbling movements.
2. **Easier for Young Players**



- A key developmental purpose at the U8 level is the development of physical literacy and motor skills. Many children struggle with the proper technique for throw-ins (keeping both feet on the ground, using the correct arm motion, etc.). Dribble-ins and pass-ins are much easier for them to execute consistently and accurately, reducing frustration and improving the flow of the match. Increasing the opportunities for dribbling and passing repetitions with variation supports the development of players' physical literacy and technique in key skills.
 - By using feet rather than hands, players can quickly get back into play, minimizing stoppages and keeping the match engaging.
- 3. Encourages Attacking Play**
- With dribble-ins, players have the option to advance the ball themselves, encouraging confidence and creativity. This is especially beneficial for young players as it gives them more opportunities to dribble into space and take on opponents in 1v1 situations with a feint, move, or fake.
 - Pass-ins can be used to quickly switch play or pass to a teammate if there is an overload or teammate in a superior position to advance to goal, which encourages more movement off the ball and supports tactical awareness.
- 4. Enhancing Decision-Making**
- At a young age, players are still developing their understanding of the match. Dribble-ins and pass-ins simplify their decisions by focusing on the skills they are already learning (dribbling, passing, partnerships, and overloads) without the added complexity of mastering throw-ins.
 - Attentional cues support the players decision-making through communication, such as, coach, teammate or opponent verbal or non-verbal prompts.
- 5. More Engagement**
- Because the ball is in play more often, all players are more involved in the action. This maximizes touches on the ball for everyone on the field, promoting more development opportunities and ensuring that no player is left waiting for long periods during throw-ins.

Conclusions



The 2024–2025 U8 Pilot Project provides clear, evidence-based insights into how modified match-format elements, most notably the implementation of the 5-yard corner-kick rule, shape the developmental environment for young players. Across the matches, measurable improvements were observed in ball-in-play time, restart efficiency, and player decision-making, indicating that the updated format supports a more dynamic and developmentally appropriate playing experience.

The increased frequency and improved execution of corner kicks demonstrate growing familiarity with the modified rule, while the data consistently highlights dribble-ins as the most effective method of maintaining possession. These findings reinforce the value of offering multiple grounded restart options that align with the physical, cognitive, and technical capabilities of U8 players. Importantly, the continued reduction of aerial balls and complete absence of heading attempts confirm that the modified corner-kick structure effectively supports player safety while still encouraging attacking variety.

At the same time, the pilot identified areas requiring further refinement. Corner-kick inbound times, while improved relative to the previous season, remain longer than sideline restarts and, in some matches, contributed to slower match flow due to hesitation or uncertainty. This underscores the need for continued coach, player, and match-official education to ensure consistent interpretation and efficient application of the rules. Environmental challenges, such as retrieving balls from adjacent fields, also highlight opportunities to improve festival-day field setups to further enhance match tempo.

Overall, the findings affirm that Ontario Soccer’s developmental approach at the U8 level is directionally sound and increasingly aligned with Long-Term Player Development principles. The modified corner-kick rule shows promise as a developmentally appropriate addition to the U8 match format, provided it is supported by ongoing education, improved environmental conditions, and continued evaluation.

Recommendations

Suggestions for Further Testing:

1. **Longitudinal Tracking of Dribble-In vs. Pass-In Development:** The pilot project clearly indicates that dribble-ins lead to significantly higher possession-retention rates than pass-ins across both sideline and corner restarts. To deepen understanding of this trend, future research should examine how these outcomes evolve as players progress through multiple seasons and experience physical, cognitive, and technical growth. A



key area of investigation is whether early reliance on dribble-ins enhances decision-making by allowing players to manipulate space more confidently, or whether it delays the development of passing under pressure, an essential skill in later stages. It is also important to explore whether players naturally transition toward more pass-ins as they mature or if this shift requires targeted coaching interventions. By tracking these patterns longitudinally, Ontario Soccer can determine whether dribble-ins serve primarily as a developmental bridge or represent a sustained advantage within small-sided formats.

2. **Exploration of Restart Decision-Making Models for U8s:** Given the distinct differences in possession outcomes observed between dribble-ins, pass-ins, and backward/sideways restarts, further research should investigate the decision-making processes U8 players use when selecting a restart option. This includes identifying the cues young players interpret, such as defensive pressure, available space, and teammate positioning, and understanding how these factors influence their choices. Additionally, examining the impact of coaching behaviours on restart decisions will be valuable, particularly the contrast between guided-discovery approaches that encourage players to read the game independently and direct instruction that prescribes specific solutions. Insights from such research could play a pivotal role in enhancing coach-education frameworks and informing training designs that develop more adaptable, game-aware players.
3. **Impact of Modified Corner-Kick Locations on Safety and Skill Development:** The 5-yard corner-kick placement used in the pilot contributed to reduced heading risk and increased opportunities for grounded, controlled re-entry into play. Future research should evaluate whether alternative distances, such as 3 yards or 7 yards, further optimize safety, spatial clarity, and technical execution. Shifting the corner location even slightly may influence the frequency of crosses, grounded passes, or dribble-ins, potentially altering both attacking tendencies and defensive responses. Additionally, it would be beneficial to assess how varying placements affect pressing triggers, player spacing, and small-group tactical interactions. Studying these variables will support the refinement of the rule and ensure that, if adopted province-wide, it aligns with both developmental best practices and safety guidelines.

Suggestion:

- Randomly assign festival fields to 3-, 5-, and 7-yard placements for two weekends.
- Track corner inbound time, dribble- vs pass-in mix, possession retention, and any aerial deliveries.



Ball Circulation System: The ball circulation system offers a simple but highly effective solution to one of the largest contributors to inactive match time: retrieving balls that exit the field of play, particularly along the goal line. Dead-ball time currently accounts for 49% of total match duration in U8 play, with goal-line restarts comprising a substantial portion of that delay as players hesitate to retrieve balls that roll behind the goal or toward adjacent fields. Implementing a circulation system, where an additional ball is stationed at each goal and immediately placed into play upon a goal-line exit, helps reduce these retrieval delays and maintain a more continuous flow of play. By minimizing long pauses and removing uncertainty around ball collection, the system supports higher active-play percentages, enhances player engagement, and contributes to a smoother, more developmentally appropriate match environment for young players.

Explore A-Frames: Field setups for festivals often include multiple small fields in very close proximity to each other to maximize the use of space. At the fields where Ontario Soccer Player Development staff were on site, there were four (4) to six (6) fields in one location. This proximity means that when the ball goes out of play, it sometimes rolls onto an adjacent field that may be active with a match. Players often hesitate to retrieve the ball, not wanting to disrupt play on the other field, which extends the time it takes to return the ball to play. This usually happens when the ball goes out on the goal line, as parents are seated on one sideline and coaches/team benches are on the other, preventing the ball from going too far. For these reasons, introducing A-Frames placed behind the goals to block the ball from rolling onto another field may allow for quicker re-entry (whether for corner kicks or goal kicks), thus increasing active play time and ball-in-play time for the players. Additionally, hosting clubs could brand these A-Frames, offering sponsorship or marketing opportunities.

Coach Education Opportunities: Not only are players learning the game at the U8 age and stage, but so are the coaches. Coaches play an essential role in player development at this stage, and for that reason, they need to be educated on how to best support their players' development. Based on observations from this pilot project, Ontario Soccer's Player Development Team identified four key education topics that would be beneficial for coaches.

1. **Dribble-In and Pass-In from varying starting points:** Coach education on dribble-ins and pass-ins, more specifically, teaching players how to identify when and where to use each option based on the game situation. Coaches can emphasize using dribble-ins to exploit space when there is room ahead, encouraging players to drive forward and practice ball control. Pass-ins can be introduced when opposition pressure limits dribbling, helping players recognize when to pass to teammates in open space.



The goal is to stop players from simply kicking the ball aimlessly and instead encourage them to make decisions based on what the opposition allows, reinforcing concepts like spatial awareness, dribbling, and passing technique.

2. **Focus on Skill Development over Winning:** Coaches should be educated to prioritize individual player development, especially decision making of skills such as dribbling, passing, shielding, and turning, rather than focusing on winning or results. This mindset encourages creativity and experimentation, fostering a positive learning environment.
3. **Positive Reinforcement and Patience:** Encouragement in using positive reinforcement to build confidence and enjoyment. Since U8 players are still learning, mistakes are part of the process, and a supportive environment helps them grow without fear of failure.
4. **Understanding Child Development:** Coaches need to be educated on the cognitive and physical development stages of U8 players. This will help them set realistic expectations, use age-appropriate activities, and communicate effectively with young players.

U8 Pilot Project – Future KPI Dashboard

Category	KPI	Baseline Value	Target Value	Rationale
Match Flow Efficiency	Ball-in-play %	51% (20.4 min)	≥53%	Increase meaningful playtime.
	Dead-ball %	49% (19.6 min)	≤47%	Reduce stoppages & retrieval delays.
Restart Speed	Avg. corner-kick inbound time	18.5 sec	≤16.5 sec	Improve restart efficiency.
	Avg. sideline inbound time	16.2 sec	≤15.5 sec	Maintain fast sideline restarts.
	Restarts ≤15 seconds	Not tracked	≥70%	Create consistent tempo.
Corner-Kick Quality	Dribble-in rate (corners)	21%	≥30%	Promote high-retention restarts.



	Dribble-in retention (corners)	84%	≥80%	Sustain successful decisions.
	Kick-in retention (corners)	51%	≥55%	Improve passing outcomes.
Sideline Decision-Making	Dribble-in retention	77%	≥80%	Encourage controlled re-entry.
	Kick-in retention	67%	≥70%	Reduce turnovers.
Retreat Line & Possession	Retreat-line usage per match	22.9	≤22	Reflect improved possession.
	% caused by turnovers	Not tracked	10% reduction	Identify developmental gaps.
Corner Frequency & Attacking Output	Corners per match	12.4	Track only	Understand attacking habits.
Safety	Heading attempts	0	Maintain 0	Safety compliance.
	Grounded/waist-height deliveries	Majority grounded (Not Tracked)	≥70% grounded	Reinforce safe restarts.
Environmental Efficiency	Goal-line ball-out time	8.48 min	20% reduction	Improve retrieval via A-frames/ball cycling.
	Ball-circulation usage	Not tracked	≥75%	Reduce wasted time.



Appendices

Appendix A

Additional research that was reviewed to support observations.

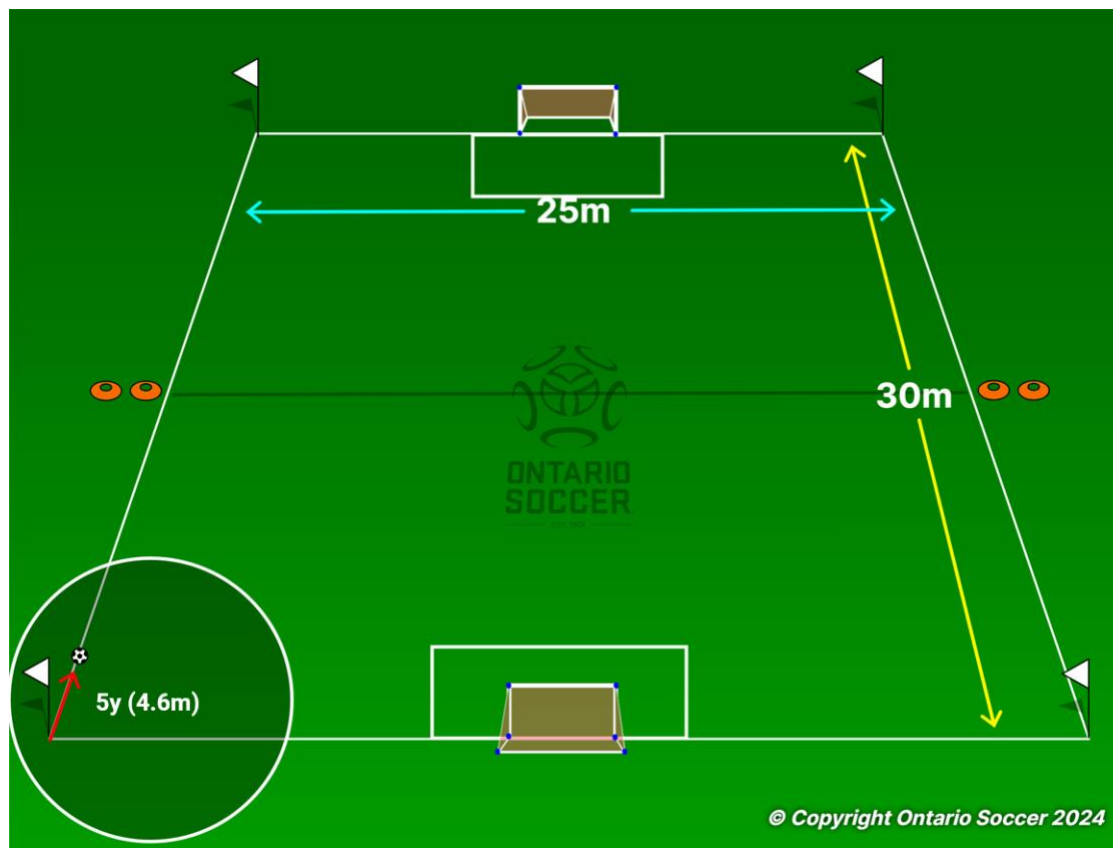
Additional Research:

- Ontario Soccer. (2024). *Heading Guidelines*.
https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/461b-3279643/Heading_Guidelines_-_Final.pdf#_ga=2.45678244.1257792505.1728658351-698818148.1650307459
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https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/0112/8095/2021_Ontario_Soccer_Grassroots_Standards_-_Approved.pdf#_ga=2.246610564.1257792505.1728658351-698818148.1650307459



Appendix B

A visual representation of the field layout for the modified corner kick rule. Rule: A dribble-in/kick-in is awarded to the attacking team when the whole of the ball passes over the goal line having last touched a player of the defending team, and a goal is not scored. The dribble-in/kick-in will be 5 yards (4.6 meters) from the corner flag, and on the same side where the ball crossed over the goal line for the attacking team.



Appendix C

An example of the code window and coding timeline from Hudl Sportscode used to collect data from the recorded matches. Larger version of the code window at the bottom.



Appendix D

A complete list of the metric definitions created for the project data collection and analysis.

Term	Definition
Active Time	Total duration of time the ball was in play to all players within the field of play.
Inactive Time	Total duration of time the ball was not in play to all players within the field of play (e.g., when the ball went out of play, halts in play made by the match official and the ball held by the goalkeeper during defensive team retreating to half).
Total Match Time	Total duration of the match (calculated by Active Time + Dead Time = Total Match Time).
Ball In Play Time	The duration of time the ball is live and able to be played by at least one player within the field of play (e.g., Goal keeper controls the ball after making a save while the opposing team retreats, sideline restarts do not count) .
Ball Out on Goal Line	Total number of times and total duration of time the ball left the field of play on the goal line.
Ball Out on Sideline	Total number of times and total duration of time the ball left the field of play on the sideline.
Pass In	When a player attempts to move the ball to a team mate from a sideline or goal line restart.
Dribble In	When a player takes a touch to themselves to re-enter the ball into the field of play during a sideline restart in an attempt to keep the ball, pass the ball to a teammate or shot on the opponents goal.
Shot	When a player attempts a shot on goal from a sideline restart.
Possession Maintained	When the ball is controlled by the team that either passed to a teammate who successfully receives the ball or dribbled the ball into the field of play for a minimum two seconds or an action is made following the pass or dribble (e.g., a shot, an attempted dribble and/or pass).
Possession Lost	When the ball is not controlled by a player of the team who directly shot, passed or dribbled the ball into the field of play.
Corner (5-Yard) Usage	Total number of times a corner at the designated 5-yard mark was attempted.
Retreat Line Usage	Total number of times the retreat line was required during active play and inactive ball play.
Average Ball Out On Sideline Time	Total duration of time across the entire game for the ball to leave the field of play on the sideline and return to play through a pass or dribble in from the sideline.
Average Sideline Inbound Time	Total duration of time it took for the ball to leave the field of play on the sideline and return to play through a pass or dribble in from the sideline per sideline restart per match.
Average Ball Out On Goal Line Time	Total duration of time across the entire game for the ball to leave the field of play on the goal line and return to play through a goal kick.



Average Goal Line Inbound Time	Total duration of time it took for the ball to leave the field of play on the goal line and return to play through a pass from the goal keeper.
Expected Corner	Total number of times the ball leaving the field of play on the goal line should have resulted in a corner kick per match (only used during the first half of the season when there were no corner kicks).
Corner Kick Total	Total number of corner kicks taken per match.
Average Corner Kick Inbound Time (Per Match)	Total duration of time it took for the ball to leave the field of play on the goal line and return to play through a pass, shot or dribble-in from the designated corner kick location; per corner kick, per match.
Deflection	Action of the ball deflecting off a defending player (not including the goal keeper) and directing it over the goal line without intention in the direction.
Save	Action of the ball being last touched by the goal keeper after a shot or dribble in direction of the goal and instead being deflected over the goal line.
Intentional Kick Out	Action by the defending team to kick the ball out on the goal line with intention.



References

Long-term development. Sport for Life. (2016, June 6). <https://sportforlife.ca/long-term-development/>


Who We Are. Ontario Soccer. (n.d.). <https://www.ontariosoccer.net/who-we-are>



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