



# Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States

## INTRODUCTION

The scope of coaching education in the United States is as large as the country itself. As our society is woven with the threads of many cultures, so is our soccer the product of the styles and experiences of the many diverse communities across the country. While this presents us with a set of challenges that are unique to the United States, this diversity also helps to continually breathe life into our soccer community. It is against this backdrop that U.S. Soccer approaches its responsibility for helping to prepare coaches to bring the game of soccer to our young players.

There is not just “one way” to teach soccer to players, nor is there just one style of coaching. There is a broad spectrum of styles and methods for how each of us experiences the game. Some of this comes from our backgrounds, while some of this also is the product of our own personalities. At the youth and junior levels, however, there is a set of fundamental principles that must be considered by anyone involved with soccer. In general, *young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that, succeed and fail.*

The coach’s long term goal is to prepare the player to successfully recognize and solve the challenges of the game on his or her own. It is vital that the coach approaches soccer with this in mind.

This document is designed to give youth and junior level coaches a basic set of ideas that can help open up the game of soccer to children in ways that celebrate the spontaneous qualities of soccer. It is not designed to give the coach the “secrets” of the game. There are no secrets. This is part of soccer’s beauty.

This document represents a series of recommendations that have been compiled and reviewed by U.S. Soccer’s Coaching Education staff and the Men’s and Women’s National Team staffs. It presents a compilation of what U.S. Soccer considers to be an appropriate, comprehensive and responsible approach to developing sound soccer players.



## **BASIC IDEAS TO CONSIDER WHEN COACHING YOUTH SOCCER**

The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the game becomes easier - both to teach and to learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well. As these individual skills and the creativity to make them come alive in the game are developed to a level of competence, the finer points, first of passing skill and later of team organization can be taught.

The town and club coaches who work with our youth and junior players on a daily basis play a fundamental role in the development of soccer players in this country. Towns and clubs should strive to place experienced coaches who have a clear understanding of the value of teaching technique at the youth and early junior levels. Equally important is the coach's personality and character. Working with 6- to 14-year-old children requires patience, kindness and respect.

Coaching soccer can be confusing at times because the game changes dramatically as the players improve in both skill and physical ability. When coaching young, developing players, as well as the adolescent players, U.S. Soccer feels it is helpful to keep the following ideas at the forefront of your mind:

- 1) Set up situations where the players can learn by playing the game. The game is the best teacher for young players.
- 2) Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player's development by organizing less, saying less and allowing the players to do more. Set up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer.
- 3) Teaching and learning the game of soccer is a process: make your goals seasonal, as well as daily and weekly. Often, at the younger ages, the developmental efforts of one season are not noticeable in children until sometime in the next season.
- 4) Set age-appropriate goals i.e., know what the child is able to do at that age.
- 5) From a developmental standpoint, the young ages are the best ones for learning skills. Spend the time now encouraging this growth. By the age of 17 the capacity to pick up new motor skills begins to wane, while the ability to conceptualize team organization, tactics and strategy increases. As a coach, work with these strengths, not against them.



- 6) Do not expect games and practices to look like professional soccer. If you want to use high level soccer as a teaching tool, focus on the individual skill level of professional players, not their organization. Give your players opportunities to see what older, more skilled players, i.e., a high school, college player or an older brother or sister, can do with the ball. On occasion, invite some of these players to participate in your practice. Use them to model good soccer qualities. Let your players learn by experiencing the game alongside or against these better players. Older players can also be used as “neutral players.” In this case, the neutral player helps whichever team has the ball i.e., he or she never defends. Maybe that neutral player has limited touches and/or can’t score, but he or she gives the team with the ball a better chance of keeping the ball. By helping to maintain possession, the neutral player(s) helps the game maintain some rhythm, and gives the kids a clearer picture of the game’s possibilities.
- 7) Recognize and understand how the skills learned at each age are connected to preparing the player to move into the next phase of his or her development. Know what the next level of play is, and the general tools that your players should carry with them as they move on. Help them to be prepared.
- 8) Allow your players to develop these requisite skills in an environment where the main goal is to have fun with the ball.
- 9) The value of matches is that they provide youngsters with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skill and creativity. It is always nice to win, however that should not be your focus at the younger age groups (through 14 years).
- 10) Have a clear idea of what it is you want to accomplish at practice. Create exercises/games that replicate and repeat the movements and situations that are found in soccer and that allow the player to grow comfortable and confident with the ball at his or her feet. Encourage players to move with the ball at his or her feet and deal with boundaries, opponents, teammates and goals. Keep in mind that soccer is a pretty simple game. If you are involved in soccer for long enough, you begin to realize that all the many little games that work are really just variations on the same basic concepts. As long as the parameters that you have established in your exercises/small-sided games are true to soccer (goals for scoring and defending), creates the problems that you want the kids to solve (protecting the ball while dribbling, etc.), and allows your players to be challenged and find some success, you’re on the right track.
- 11) Don’t be afraid to experiment to find what works best.
- 12) Remember that the game is the best teacher for the players. Coaches and parents should think of themselves more as facilitators, monitors, guides or even participants, to provide a rich environment for the kids to learn from and enjoy.



## AGE APPROPRIATE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U-6 TO U-18 AGE GROUPS

The following pages represent U.S. Soccer's recommendations on best practices in soccer according to the player's chronological age, from Under-6 through Under-18. It is just as important, however, to consider the players' "soccer age" (i.e., his or her level of soccer competence), when determining themes to address in practice and matches. Remember that these recommendations are based on the assumption that the players have the ball skill necessary to move onto the next level of challenges. It is the responsibility of the coaches to continually evaluate and assess the needs of their players so that they can play soccer at the appropriate level. Parents and coaches alike should also take care to give their players a variety of playing experiences so that they are able to find some games where they are more challenged and some games where it is a little bit easier. In this case, it is the responsibility of the adults to evaluate this on a team and individual basis.

### ENCOURAGE CREATIVITY AND BALL SKILLS BEFORE TACTICS!

The youth coach has an important role in encouraging the development of these fundamental tools. One of the goals of this coaching guide is to introduce parents/youth coaches to an approach to coaching youth players that 1) embraces the lessons that are found in the game itself, and 2) is player-centered rather than coach-centered.

What does this mean? Consider the following comments by Hans Bongers on the growth of soccer around the world in the last 30 years, and how adults/coaches have approached player-development:

*Organized soccer "boomed" in the seventies. Not only did the number of people around the world who play in leagues drastically increase, also the age at which the youngest kids could start to play official games went down to 5 years and even younger. Parallel to this, many well organized coaching clinics and soccer schools, based on different educational theories were created, all hoping that a new Pele or (Johan) Cruyff would emerge from them and the brilliant collective play of the Brazilian team in the sixties and the Dutch ("total soccer") team of the early seventies could be reproduced. In the last decade many soccer associations from different countries have asked themselves how (even if!) soccer can be taught. (Hans Bongers: Somagic Street Soccer/ [www.streetsoccer.hypermart.net](http://www.streetsoccer.hypermart.net)).*

By default, the well-intentioned and seemingly reasonable approach of many youth coaches is to look to adult soccer as their guide to teaching the game. What most youth coaches find helpful in



the adult game is the organization and positional responsibilities (tactics) that the adult players exhibit so well. They are concepts that adults can understand well and so, as coaches, many tend to bring an organizational or tactical approach to coaching youth. Coaches often focus on keeping the players under control and teaching what appears to be the basics of the game: organization, positions, tactics, how to prepare to win games. We choose order over apparent chaos. It is tempting to strive to have the youth games look like adult games, with kids holding their own in set positions, organized and disciplined. The magic of the Dutch players of the early seventies, or Brazil's great players of the sixties, however, was not created from an organized practice routine. It began when they were children, in pickup games where the player and the game were the dominant factors. There were neither adults nor a set schedule of mandatory practices and games. That said, we live in a different world today. Adult supervision is often necessary to ensure proper safety. The presence of adults, however, does not have to inhibit the opportunity for children to be creative and experimental in their approach to learning soccer.

Manfred Schellscheidt, Boys U-14 National Team Head Coach, describes the scene that many of our beginner level players face in the following quote:

*Let us take a look at what typically happens to our youngsters as they are introduced to the sport of soccer. Day one for most of our players is probably the day mom and dad registers them with the local or the town recreation league. Based on the number of applicants, teams are formed, coaches assigned, and playing fields coordinated. The available fields serve all ages and are quite often adult dimensions. And so the games begin. Children that may have never previously kicked a ball are faced with the ultimate challenge - playing eleven v eleven on a field too big for them. Are we really surprised that they cannot do this? But do not worry; this is where the coach comes in. He or she is the one who is called on to fix and remedy the situation. With the help of positioning, the players are spread all over the field and told, 'This is how the big guys do it. The ones who just won the World Cup.' Since this proved to be the winning formula, we must all learn from them and imitate them. (Manfred Schellscheidt: *Experimenting With The Game*).*

In reality, what is needed from the youth coach is quite different. Again, we need to keep in mind that most of the great soccer players today played their early soccer in unsupervised games.

*"International conferences about this topic often conclude that well-intended coaches and parents should try to withdraw from influencing young players too much, if not completely. It is suggested that if you do want to train young players the emphasis should be on 'play and fun' and various smaller versions of the 11-against-11 game have seen the light. One concept that pops up more and more in all these discussions is 'Street Soccer.' 'The streets' (alleys, parks, beaches ... ) being the mysterious setting where brilliant players like Pele and Cruyff – and their fellow magicians in other sports – developed in a natural way." (Hans Bongers: *Somagic Street Soccer*).*



A primary focus for the coach at the youth level, through the U-12 age group, is to provide an environment that comes close to simulating the “pickup” games of our youth. In this setting much of the creativity and personality of kids developed naturally, without the involvement of adults. Kids need to be allowed to play freely, develop their skills and use them in a creative manner. Coaches should organize only so far as it helps to create this environment. Again, Manfred Schellscheidt comments on this idea of “street soccer” and how the coach can help to create this environment.

*Beside the games, what do our training sessions look like? Are they mobile or static? Are the players free to experiment and learn from the game or are they constantly instructed? Is there room for trial and error, or are they simply told what to do and where to go? (Breathing life into soccer) ... is more about converting our training sessions into some form of street soccer in which players, with the help of the coach, experiment with the basic elements of the game in a competitive way... Learning (in this case, soccer) is about experimenting with new things and relating to them. Mastery means coming to grips with things we have experimented with, often with repetition. It is all about developing an understanding and feel for the game. The lessons for all of us will come from the game and so will the answers. In the beginning the person and the game are separate, maybe even far apart. When things get good, the game and the person become one. (Manfred Schellscheidt: Experimenting With The Game)*

With this in mind, try to encourage comfort with the ball and the confidence to use this skill creatively. Encourage the dribbler at the younger ages; your team of 8 to 10 year olds should be full of them. Dribbling, at the younger ages, is the child’s attempt to gain control over the ball. Controlling the ball is the primary skill that every other skill in soccer depends upon. Although controlling the ball may seem to be a simple task, it actually takes an enormous amount of the child’s energy. Do not expect him or her to look to pass or to pass with any level of competence or awareness, until he or she has first mastered this skill. Consider these two points. Children from about age 6 to 12 have an almost limitless capacity to learn body movement and coordination (i.e., motor skills). At the same time, their intellectual capacity to understand spatial concepts like

**CONSIDER THIS:** At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for children to develop their individual relationship with the ball. The fact that younger children are placed into team environments is not their fault. Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal. Do the same with the rest of your players. Work to bring all your players up to that level of confidence and comfort with the ball. Coaches should avoid the impulse to “coach” their players from “play to play” in order to help them win the match. Coaches should not be telling their young players to “pass rather than dribble,” to “hold their positions” or to “never” do something (like pass or dribble in front of the goal).

positions and group play is limited. Work to their strengths.



Many kids who have been involved in organized soccer will often look to pass the ball or kick the ball down field as their first option. They have been taught to “share” the ball or they have learned that the best way to keep from making a “mistake” with the ball at their feet is to kick it away as fast as possible. For this reason, it helps if the coach continually encourages the players to make dribbling their first option. It may also help to make the players take at least two touches on the ball before they can look to pass. Remember that making mistakes at these early ages is a very important part of the player’s learning and development. Encourage risk-taking and applaud effort.