Successful Soccer Coaching
By
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A Guide for Recreational Soccer Coaches of Players Ages 4 to 10
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Introduction

Thank you for reading this book. I hope you find the book both informative and useful. Like most of you, I am a parent coaching recreational soccer. I am not a professional soccer coach. However, my hobby for the last 15 years has been coaching soccer. I got started coaching in my early twenties after playing throughout my life. For some reason coaching young players really clicked with me. It gave me the opportunity to stay involved with a sport I loved, while giving me the satisfaction of helping young people in our community.

Before coaching recreational soccer, I coached competitive teams for a number of years, primarily focusing on the U11 through U14 age groups. I experienced some success, including four state championships. During that time I was building my understanding of developing good soccer players at the young age groups. I also developed many opinions on what was lacking in our local recreational programs. I watched our club’s young competitive players struggle year after year with teams from other states, typically taking a year or two to catch them in terms of the quality of their play. I also watched our local recreational numbers hover at a mediocre level, with players ages U8 and older dropping out at a high rate.

In the fall of 2000, the first of my own children was ready to play. I started a program called “First Touch Soccer” to give 4-year-olds a fun, developmental program in which they could learn the game at an age appropriate level. Since then I have coached teams in U5, U6, U7, U8 and U10 age groups. I have run summer camps for children ages 4 to 11. I have also started a program we call “Challenge Soccer”, which is a supplemental, intermediate program for recreational players who might want to make the jump to classic soccer at some point in the future. My emphasis through all of this has been to teach players the game of soccer while instilling in them a great enthusiasm for the game. That enthusiasm, in my opinion, is my greatest gift to them. It is what will drive them to play for years to come.

While I came into recreational soccer coaching with a good background in the sport, I have continued to learn over those years as well. I’ve been amazed by all the lessons I’ve learned from these young players. I’ve been able to merge my experience, knowledge, and an open mind to become a successful recreational soccer coach. I appreciate the recreational program and enjoy it immensely. I teach coaches in our local program yearly, but I also learn more and more each year from the teams that I coach. While I don’t have the soccer pedigree of many authors on the sport, I do have a wealth of practical knowledge that a parent-coach can use to be a successful recreational soccer coach.

This book breaks down some lessons by age groupings. These age groups are referred to as “Under #” or “U#”, where the “#” represents a specific age. The “Under” means that the players are younger than the specified age until a certain date. US Youth Soccer defines that cut-off date as July 31. Therefore, in any given year, 9-year-olds that turn 10 between August 1 of that year and July 31 of the next year qualify as U10 players, even though most will turn 10 sometime
during the soccer year. That can be a confusing concept to parents who are unfamiliar with the way the age groupings work.

As a coach, you are probably only coaching in one of those age groups. Even so, I’d recommend reading all of the chapters in this book. If you are coaching an older team, many of the lessons from younger ages carry forward. If you are coaching a younger team, reading about the older ages will give you insight about how your players should progress through the years. It is important to coach with a vision.

Enjoy this book, but more importantly enjoy soccer and the opportunity it gives you to spend quality time with your children and their peers!
The Big Picture

Before we delve into how to coach a recreational soccer team, let’s first agree on what it means to be a successful recreational soccer coach. Let’s agree on the big picture.

You are probably coaching your son’s or daughter’s team. Sure, you have the opportunity to win games or even a championship if your league has such thing. More importantly, however, you have the opportunity to exert a positive influence on a subset of your child’s peer group. Studies have shown that teens involved in sports are less likely to be involved in sex, drugs, alcohol, and violence. Studies also show that 75% of children drop out of organized sports by the time they are 13. Positive experiences at younger ages can obviously have a significant impact on players staying involved in sports.

A few years back, I was struck by a television show about teen heroin addiction. The show focused on an affluent suburb of Baltimore where the teen heroin addiction rate was extraordinarily high. These were middle to upper class kids, addicted to a lethal drug that they might never be able to kick! It was a very sad show. Teen after teen interviewed on that show claimed “boredom” as the reason for using drugs. Now imagine the impact you and all the other coaches in your program can have if every child has a positive experience with soccer and keeps right on playing into their high school years. Sure, that idea may seem unrealistic, but that should be the goal of every coach in a recreational soccer program.

So what defines a successful recreational soccer coach if it is not wins and losses? Ultimately, I would argue it is the number of kids that come back to play soccer the next year. In our recreational program, players do not stay with the same team each year. Every year I end up with a new group of players. However, I take great pride in seeing my players from previous years are still out there playing! They come up and say, “Hi,” shake my hand, or give me high-fives. They are excited about soccer, and I helped influence that mindset. That excitement has more lasting value than the win/loss records they accumulated when playing for me.

Reality Check

One of my greatest experiences in coaching came from my younger son’s U7 team. After the first practice, I was painfully aware that the team did not have a great deal of talent. The good players were small. The big players struggled to pay attention. Others were very meek and mild. My own son was more interested in socializing than playing soccer. It looked like a long season.

I had a model in my head of how to coach a U7 team. My older son had gone through it the prior year. About halfway through the fall season, however, I realized that my model was not what this team needed. They were getting pashed in games. Although we didn't keep score, it was very obvious that the other teams were scoring many goals and, in some cases, we weren’t scoring any!
I took a step back and decided that I really needed to focus my efforts on making the season fun for the team. I played fun games with them at practice. I gave them awards for the little things they did well. I praised them and laughed with them. At the end of the fall season, I was worried about what the parents thought. I predicted that many of the kids would not come back for the spring season. Much to my surprise, all of them came back! Not only that, one boy asked to be transferred onto our team. The group went on to have a fantastic spring season. They were eager, confident, and they scored goals like crazy! I taught those boys a lot, but not nearly as much as they taught me! I entered that year thinking I knew a lot about coaching soccer. I came out of the year with a library of lessons learned about the value of being a positive coach.

**Two Pillars of Success**

There are two pillars of a successful recreational soccer program or team: fun and instruction. Young players want to have fun, and their parents want them to have good instruction. If you think the players are hung up on game results, you’re wrong. Just leave them alone after a poor game, and watch how fast they recover. If they show any remorse at all about the game, it will be gone at the first sight of snacks, a wrestling match, or a nearby game of tag. They unknowingly have a better perspective about sports than most parents. As parents, we want our children to learn about soccer and about playing sports. Fun is important but let’s face it, we could all take our kids to the playground for less money, and at times that better meets our schedules. No, we put our children in organized sports so they learn skills and lessons that will help them progress as players. Ironically, sports can also be a forum for kids to learn important life lessons. As a coach, you can increase your value to your players (even though they won’t realize it) by recognizing those opportunities and teaching those life lessons, either directly or indirectly. Soccer is just your vehicle by which to teach.

Let’s look at all the benefits players get if they have a positive coach. Kids have fun and socialize. They get exercise. They learn about teamwork, discipline, and develop a work ethic. They learn about sportsmanship and begin to accept competition, rather than threatened by it. They build confidence, self-esteem, and learn to cope with adversity. Last but not least, they earn a sense of accomplishment and pride. It’s not very hard to see that the benefits extend beyond the playing field to life itself. Those benefits flow through you! You influence how much or how little of those benefits your players realize over the course of a season!

As a recreational soccer coach, you must understand the purpose of the program in which you coach. Recreational soccer is for ALL kids. It is for kids who are very athletic. It is for kids who are uncoordinated. It is for kids of all heights, weights, and interests. It is for kids who are dedicated, and also for those who can only make Saturday morning games before 10:30. Why do they let all these kids into the program? Quite simply, it’s good for society and your community.
A friend recently asked me if I feel pressure to win games because of my experience in coaching. My answer was an emphatic, “No!” Game results are largely dependent on the players that happen to be assigned to my team. Some years the talent level is high. Some years the talent level is low. Some years I have a good mix of players. Some years I end up with a group of talented players who unfortunately all share the same weakness, such as playing defense. The pressure I do feel is for my players to show significant improvement over the course of the year. The level of the team that I have at any given time may influence what I teach, but not how much I teach. My players must learn and enjoy the season in order for me to feel like I’ve succeeded.

**Positive Coaching**

There is one more pressure that I feel due to my experience with coaching. I feel the pressure to provide a positive example for the players, parents, and other coaches. As a self-proclaimed “positive coach”, I don’t run up and down the field screaming instructions at the players. It’s their game, and I try to respect that by acting like an adult who is there to help them, not whose livelihood depends on the outcome. When my team makes a mistake, I let them know about it, but I try to do it in a constructive manner. I try not to point out just what they did wrong, but what would’ve been better. Last but certainly not least, I try to display good sportsmanship. When my team scores, I clap, cheer, and congratulate the players. I don’t, however, jump around like I’ve just done something spectacular myself. I try to be mindful of the opposing players.

**Reality Check**

A few years ago I learned a valuable lesson about how adult reactions are interpreted by children. I had a U5 team at the time. On this particular day they were playing a very competitive game.

Both teams were scoring goals at an even pace. On one play an opposing player dribbled toward our goal. My son came toward him to play defense. The player dribbled by him and scored. Normally this would not have bothered my son one bit. However, this time was different. The opposing boy’s mom came running out on the field cheering wildly. She picked up her son and jumped around hugging him. After moments of watching this reaction in disbelief, I turned around, and my son was in tears. I’m sure the mom’s reaction was genuine and intended only to praise her own son, but it magnified the defensive mistake and was very demeaning to our player.

I keep that memory in the back of my mind when I coach. I try to praise my players in a way that makes them feel good, but that is respectful of the feelings of opposing players.

Hopefully this chapter has influenced your outlook on recreational soccer and what defines a successful coach. If you disagree with my outlook, the rest of the book may be of little value. The book is not intended to help you win games. It is intended to help you provide a fun and instructional experience for your players. I hope you inspire all of your players to continue playing soccer for years to come.
Fun and Instruction

In the last chapter I explained that the two pillars of a great recreational soccer team and/or program are fun and instruction. Fortunately, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they coexist very nicely. Fun and instruction should be intertwined in everything you do as a recreational soccer coach.

A very good friend of mine sent me an e-mail one day. I had coached classic soccer with this friend for years. He took a similar path into recreational soccer, except that I preceded him by a few years. His e-mail said, “My first U6 practice is tonight. What words of wisdom do you have for me?” My response was the following: “Take everything you know about soccer and throw it out the window. Remember all the games you liked to play as a kid, and figure out how to incorporate a soccer ball into those games.”

The success of your practice times is largely dependent on the environment you create for the kids. In a 60 minute practice, do your players get 45 minutes of good activity, or do they spend two-thirds of that time standing in lines or listening to you talk? Every player learns best by doing, so keeping them active is critical. Every player should have a ball (they can bring their own). You should also understand that as the coach, you are only part of their instructional puzzle. Players will learn certain things on their own. They will also learn from the players around them.

Since young players can learn much about soccer on their own or from their teammates, it is a powerful tool for you as a coach. You don’t need to teach every single aspect of the game. You just have to create an environment for them to learn.

For example, let’s look at dribbling. You need to teach them how to manipulate the ball using the insides of their feet. You can then put them in a game or activity that is fun for them, and they will quickly figure out what makes them successful.

Players of different ages have different needs. You cannot have the same expectations for a 4-year-old as you would for a 10-year-old. With that in mind, let’s break down the age categories and look at their basic needs.
Under 5 and Under 6

I run a soccer camp each summer for players ages 4 – 11. I have evolved to the point that I really treat it as two camps: one for 4-and 5-year-olds and one for everyone else. Players of this age are very unique. I am very picky about the counselors I put with these players at the camp. I use a lot of high school and college players as counselors throughout the camp, but for this age group, I prefer people who are older and have parental experience, so I usually use some of my coaching peers who are also parents.

At this age, the players don’t need a lot of direct instruction. Many 4-year-olds are not yet in school, and 5-year-olds are just starting Kindergarten if your soccer season begins in the fall. Instruction from anyone other than Mom or Dad is often a foreign concept. Players of this age also have an attention span shorter than most puppies. The great thing about these ages is that you don’t have to be a soccer expert to be an excellent coach. If you are smarter than a typical 5-year-old, enthusiastic, and can muster a little patience, you can run a team that has a blast and improves significantly over the course of a season!
Key Concepts
Let’s look at some key concepts for coaching this age group:

- **Forget about coaching these players.**
  You need to play with them. Don’t stand around shouting instructions. Put on your athletic shoes, and relive your childhood. I tell my counselors, “If you’re having fun, the kids are having fun.”

- **Change is good.**
  In fact, change is mandatory. Players of this age can go from having a great time to being bored in a split second. Be prepared with a lot of different activities. While the older kids in my camp do stations for 15 – 20 minutes, the 4-and 5-year-olds will need to change activities 2 or 3 times during the same duration.

- **Be flexible.**
  As an adult trying to relate to a group this age, everything will not go according to your plan. Watch the players, and react to their needs. Often you will just have to tweak your game a little bit to get the results you want. It is also good to have an “old standby” activity, one that they love. Throw that activity into the mix when your players lose interest or get bored. Use that activity to reel them back in and raise their enthusiasm.

- **Players this age do not like to share.**
  Have them bring their own ball to practice. Provide activities in which each player can use his or her own ball.

- **Chaos is good.**
  Think about the game that these kids play. Your league may play 3v3 at this age. Despite what the jersey colors indicate, the game is usually played as 1v5. One person has the ball, and the other five are trying to take it. Forget the structured “drills” where everyone stands in line and dribbles through cones, one at a time. Create activities where everyone goes at once, and it is complete mayhem! The kids will have more fun, and you will create a more realistic, game-related environment.

- **Passing is too advanced.**
  I see coaches all the time trying to teach really young kids to pass. While passing is a fundamental part of soccer, there is really more to it than meets the eye. Players have to be able to play the ball accurately and with the appropriate pace. They have to be able to play with their head up so they can find their teammates. Receiving players need to be able to handle a pass. There are positional considerations as well. All that is too much! Focus your efforts on dribbling and kicking. You will prepare them well for passing in the future.
• **Don’t worry about proper technique.**
  Soccer books and videos will show you that the most common kicking technique uses the inside of the foot. Try getting a 4-year-old to do that! They may do it, but it will be at a robotic pace. I promote showing kids this age the technique but allowing them to play however they are most comfortable. If they see the proper technique enough, they will apply it when their coordination and confidence allows them.

• **Use practice time to develop skills.**
  Use game time to teach the game. Most programs for kids this age allow the coaches on the field during the game. There is no better teacher of the game than the game itself. However, during the game there is only one ball, and kids have to take turns playing. Therefore games are not ideal for skill development. Use your practice time wisely.

• **Don’t worry about positions.**
  Teach your players to spread out and not steal the ball from one another. While you’re not emphasizing passing, spreading the players out will, at the very least, allow more space for the person with the ball to dribble. As time goes on, players will start to figure out some passing for themselves. You likely won’t see terrific displays of combination play, but you’ll begin to see a pass here and there.

• **Learn your players’ names very early and use them often.**
  I am normally terrible with names, but when it comes to my players, I listen intently, and I know their names within minutes of starting the first practice. Learning names quickly shows your players they are important, and it quickly breaks the ice and creates a familiar environment for them.

• **Coach with Common Sense and Sportsmanship.**
  One thing drives me crazy when I watch young teams play. That is when the ball goes out of bounds, and the coach of the defending team crowds the team with the ball. The next few minutes are spent with the ball going back out of bounds, and play is constantly restarted. Be a sporting coach, and back up your players to allow the opposing team to get the ball back in play. It demonstrates good sportsmanship and increases the quality of the game for both teams. Nobody has fun chasing the ball out of bounds.
Practice
Those concepts are fundamental elements of understanding how to coach in this age group. Now let's examine what to do.

Skill Drills
Below is a list of practice activities that will help you create an environment that is fun and promotes the development of your players’ dribbling and kicking skills.

• **Kick the Coach**
  This is an all-time favorite of the players and really has great value. The coach runs around the field. The players dribble their balls and try to hit the coach with them. When you get hit, yell “OUCH!”, and watch them crack up laughing. This activity sounds silly, but it makes the players dribble their balls and shoot them at you while it is moving. Usually kids like to stop the ball and kick it when it is stationary. The nature of this game makes them kick it when it is moving. They also have to keep their heads up and react to your changes of direction. This game is a great “old standby” because it is fun and requires no setup time.

• **Cone Pickup**
  In this game you will lay out cones in random fashion on opposite sides of the field. I prefer doing this across the width of the field. When you say “Go,” the players have to dribble their balls and pick up as many cones as possible. The rule, however, is that they can only get one cone from a side at a time. Therefore, they have to dribble back and forth across the field to get their cones. All the while they will have to be watching out for other players and looking for available cones.

• **Red Rover**
  You may have played this game when you were younger. The players line up on a sideline, each one with his own ball. You stand in the middle and call, “Red Rover, Red Rover, come on over.” The players then try to dribble to the other side while you try to tag them. You can add to this game by having those caught players join you in the middle, and repeat the process until everyone is caught.

• **Freeze Tag**
  The players dribble around while you try to tag them. If you do tag a player, he or she must sit on the ball until a teammate tags him/her and frees him/her.

• **Animal Calls**
  Players dribble around in a defined area. When you call out an animal, they must stop their balls by placing a foot on top of the ball and then make the noise of the animal you named. When you say, “Go,” they begin dribbling again and the process repeats.
• **Body Parts**
  This game is very similar to “Animal Calls,” except that while the players are dribbling, you call out a body part and each player must stop his ball with that body part. You can start out by calling “foot,” and they stop the ball with their foot. You can then call, “left foot” or “right foot.” Progress to “knee,” “elbow,” “head,” “belly,” and everyone’s favorite, “bottom.” This is a great icebreaker at the beginning of a practice and is terrific for your first practice with a new team. It will get kids and parents alike laughing.

• **Gates**
  This is a much better version of the old “dribble through the cones drill.” Scatter pairs of cones around the field, each set representing a gate. When you say “Go,” the players try to dribble through as many gates as they can before you say, “Stop.” I really like this activity because all players can go at once. I also like the fact that players aren’t following a prescribed pattern. After each gate there is a decision to be made, “Where do I go next?” They must look for other gates and also look out for other players.

• **Parent Keepers**
  Use a similar layout as the “Gates” activity, except that the sets of cones should be wider. The cones now represent goals and you can recruit parents to stand in each one. The players then dribble around and try to score on the different parents. They can score from either side of the goal, so they can sneak up behind the parent goalies. This activity is one that you will have to observe and be flexible. If you see players only going to their own parent, make a rule that once they score on a goal, they have to go to another goal.

• **Relay races**
  These can be as simple as dribbling around a cone and coming back. You can get more creative as well. Make sure the relay teams are small. I like to keep them to two or three players. Here are some other ideas:

  1. Lay out cones for them to weave through.
  2. Have them crawl to a point, pushing the ball with their head before getting up and dribbling the rest of the way.
  3. Place a big target in the middle of the field, such as a trash barrel. Have the players dribble to it and hit the target with their ball before returning to give the ball to the next teammate.
  4. When exchanging the ball with their teammate, have them dribble behind the person and play the ball through their legs.
• **Rapid Shooting**
  Stand in the center circle with all the players. Each player hands you his or her ball. You then throw it toward the goal, and they chase it and kick it in the goal. They then retrieve their ball and return to the circle for another shot. The restriction you apply to this activity is that they must shoot with their first touch. Aside from getting a lot of kicking repetition, this will also help get them out of the habit of always dribbling the ball into the goal. You can also add to this activity by calling out which foot they must use to shoot.

**Competitive Drills**
Those are just some of the games you can play with your players. Use your own creativity to expand this list for yourself. As your players get more comfortable, you may want to introduce a little competition into your practice activities. Here are some ideas to add a little competition.

• **1v1**
  Stand on the end line of the field with the players, beside the goal. Call out two players’ names and throw out a ball. They must go after the ball and bring it back to shoot on the goal. Whoever scores wins, so the players are playing against one another.

• **Keep Away**
  Players are paired up with one ball between them. When you say “Go” they must compete with their partner for the ball. After about 30 seconds say “Stop”. Whichever player has the ball wins.

• **Team Keep Away**
  Split the group into two teams, and have them line up on opposite sides of the field. Put an odd number of balls in the middle of the field. When you say “Go,” the teams compete for possession of the balls. When you say “Stop,” whichever team has the most balls wins.
Summary
Have a great time with this age group! Once you acclimate yourself to the players, you will enjoy the experience as much as they do. Keep in mind that your success is largely defined by the excitement you instill in your players.
Under 7 and Under 8

When I refer to this age group, I am referring to First and Second graders. In some ways, coaching becomes easier at these ages. The kids are a little older. Having been in school, they (generally) listen a bit better. They also have a bit more coordination than the younger players. On the other hand, the discrepancy between players’ abilities becomes more pronounced. You will have some players that have played soccer for two or three years, while others are playing for the first time. You really have to evaluate the level and needs of your team in these age groups.

As you read this chapter, keep in mind that this is not a one-size-fits-all model. Remember my story about my U7 team? I started them off with a more structured approach, reverted to my U6 activities, and then reintroduced the more structured approach in the spring season. You too will have to evaluate your team and assess what they need. Don’t be too bull-headed to change. Adapt to your team as you learn more about the players.

Before we dive any deeper into this age group, let’s first understand the word “training” as it pertains to soccer. “Training,” at any level, consists of two main elements: instruction and repetition. “Instruction” obviously refers to teaching. You as a coach are a teacher. “Repetition,” on the other hand, refers to what people typically refer to as “practice.” It is the repeated application of skills or techniques to make them better.
**Key Concepts**

Now let’s look at some of the key concepts that apply to players of these ages:

- **Players can accept more instruction, and they can be held accountable to what they’ve learned, in a positive manner.** Always start and end your critique with positive comments. For example, “Mikey, I like the way you kicked that ball, but you kicked it into the middle of the field in front of our own goal. Remember we worked on keeping the ball away from our goal? Play that ball wide next time. Don’t worry about that mistake. Give me five, and let’s get back after it. You’re doing great!”

- **Players can and should begin to learn positions.** Positions will be covered in a later chapter dedicated solely to positional play. At this point you should simply realize that players this age can grasp simple positional concepts. Teaching positions may be painful at the beginning of the season, but you will see big rewards later in the season as you watch the quality of their play develop. Remember, your players’ development helps define your success as a coach.

- **Develop a routine warm-up for the players that they do at the beginning of every practice or game.** It can be a short, 5-minute warm-up, but it should include every player using his or her ball. The warm-up will provide consistent repetition of basic ball skills. If organized properly it can develop their fundamental ball handling skills and coordination, thereby promoting further development.

- **Organize your sessions into the following format: warm-up, instruction, game.** That model will work well for either a practice or a game night.

  - On a practice night the instruction will be longer and provide more time for repetition. The game would be a scrimmage of some sort.

  - On a game night you may only have 15 minutes or so prior to the start of the match. In that case, go through the warm-up quickly. The instruction can be as short as 10 minutes. The game then takes care of itself.

- **Promote teamwork, sportsmanship, and being coachable.** These characteristics will help your players progress on and off the field, across any sport they choose to play, in school and in life.
• **Players in these age groups will evolve to the point of passing if you create a positional environment that allows them to do it successfully.**
  The best way to teach passing is to point out those opportunities during games. Don’t yell instructions to them as they play, but use breaks in the play to point out opportunities they had. When they do make a good pass, heap praise upon them!

• **Use rewards to reinforce your lessons.**
  I like to give out stars after the games. I’ve detailed my “Stars Program” in Appendix B for you to reference.

• **A player’s decision-making ability is very important to his/her future development.**
  To promote the development of decision-making skills, let your players play. Coaches who constantly shout instructions to their players only really teach them to listen and obey. Players don’t learn to think for themselves. Let your players play and make decisions, even mistakes, for themselves, constructively coaching them at appropriate times (i.e. breaks in the action).

I’m sure all these concepts make sense conceptually. Now let’s look at how to apply these concepts, beginning with the warm-up.

**Warm-up**

The following is an example of the warm-up I do with my teams. There are a lot of steps to the warm-up, but it usually only takes about 5 minutes to complete. Players work back and forth across the width of the field. On each side they perform a specific exercise with the ball for anywhere from 30 seconds to a couple of minutes.

1. **Players begin by dribbling across the field with only their right feet.**
   I emphasize to them using both the inside and outside of the foot with small touches (i.e. keeping the ball close to them).

2. **Players do toe touches on top of their ball.**
   They start with one foot on top of the ball, switch feet, and then repeat. Players have to learn to lightly tap the ball and not step on it. They should progress to be able to perform this rapidly.

3. **Players dribble back across the field in the same manner they did in step 2, but this time they use their left foot.**
   Getting comfortable using both feet is very important. Many coaches emphasize kicking with both feet but neglect developing a player’s ability to dribble with both feet.
4. **Players tap the ball back and forth between their feet.**
   They don’t need to move around when doing this. They need to get their feet apart and develop the coordination and rhythm to keep the ball moving beneath them. As they get good at this skill, you can instruct them to move around while doing it. They can move forward and backward, or even in circles.

5. **Players then zigzag back across the field.**
   They dribble with both feet, cutting the ball sharply back and forth. Emphasize “a lot of zigs and a lot of zags.” This exercise will create the ability for them to turn a defender as they dribble at them.

6. **At this point I have the players perform one or two basic moves.**
   They spread out and perform ten repetitions of each move. Again, we are laying the foundation for them to use these moves in a game as they progress in their ability and confidence. For some players they may apply those moves during your season. Other players may not gain that confidence for years, but you will have started their foundation. (See Appendix C for some sample moves and how to teach them.)

7. **Players return across the field with one directive: “FAST!”**
   They must dribble across the field as fast as they can, keeping the ball as straight as possible. Emphasize using the top of the foot (i.e. the laces) to push the ball in a straight line.

8. **I then have the players spread out and juggle.**
   Juggling is the exercise of keeping the ball in the air using any soccer-legal surface of the body. This is an advanced skill, but they can start very simply. Players can begin by just bouncing the ball off their thigh and catching it. They can then progress to two bounces before catching it. Finally they can do as many as they can before the ball hits the ground. The most juggles I’ve seen from a player this age has been 8, but this is great repetition to help further their comfort with the ball.

9. **Last of all they get a partner and do two-touch, short passing.**
   Every time they receive a pass, they must trap it with one foot and play it back with the other foot. Players use the insides of their feet to trap the ball, moving it to a location where they can easily play the ball back with their second touch. The ball should always stay in motion, never coming to a complete stop. This exercise helps them develop a smooth flow with the ball. (Appendix C details proper techniques for performing skills.)
Practice

When it comes to “instruction,” there are a few key concepts that will allow them to be successful on the field and also add to their skill foundation. There are technical aspects of instruction, which refer to the skills of the game. There are also tactical aspects to be taught. Obviously at this age you don’t need too much focus on tactics, but there are some simple tactics that should be taught. Let’s start with Technical instruction.

Technical Drills

Technical instruction should include the skills that follow. Proper technique for performing these skills is detailed in Appendix C.

- **Passing technique with the inside of the foot**
  The easiest way to start teaching this technique is to line up the players side by side and have them pass the ball back and forth as they run. The orientation of the body will make using the inside of the foot very natural. Emphasize striking the middle of the ball, so the pass stays down.

- **Shooting technique with the laces**
  Proper shooting technique is to lock the ankle, pointing the toe straight down and striking the ball with the top of the foot, right through the middle of the ball. The non-kicking foot is called the “plant foot.” If players look awkward while shooting, it is usually because the plant foot is too far behind the ball. This foot should be right next to the ball.

- **Receiving technique using the inside of the foot**
  Many players want to step on top of the ball to stop it. They also want to bring the ball to a complete stop to evaluate what they are going to do next. Teach your players to use the inside of their feet to receive the ball and move it into open space, constantly keeping the ball in motion.

That is really it! If your players can master those skills in their U7 and U8 years, they will have visible success on the field and will have a solid foundation of skills.

“What about dribbling?” you may ask. Do you remember our warm-up? Dribbling is extremely important, but that is what the warm-up is designed to do. It will give them dribbling and coordination repetition every time you meet. There are also some great dribbling games you can play with them that they will love:

- **Knock Out**
  Players dribble around in a defined area and try to knock other players’ balls out of the area. To add intensity to this game, have the players that are knocked out come back into the game without their soccer balls to knock out other players.
• **Kick the Player**
  Remember “Kick the Coach” from the younger age groups? Well this is a progression of that game that saves the coach’s shins. Designate one player as “It.” Give that player a scrimmage vest, cone, or something to hold. That player runs around while others dribble and try to hit that person with their ball. Whoever hits the person becomes the person who is “It.” Aside from the dribbling practice, you may also notice the agility the person who is “It” displays trying to avoid being hit by the ball.

• **Relay Races**
  This game is the identical to that described in Under 5 and Under 6. These can be as simple as dribbling around a cone and coming back. You can get more creative as well. Make sure the relay teams are small. I like to keep them to two or three players. Here are some other ideas:
  - Lay out cones for them to weave through.
  - Have them crawl to a point, pushing the ball with their head before getting up and dribbling the rest of the way.
  - Place a big target in the middle of the field, such as a trash barrel. Have the players dribble to it and hit the target with their ball before returning to give the ball to the next teammate.
  - When exchanging the ball with their teammate, have them dribble behind the person and play the ball through their legs.

• **Obstacle course**
  Set up a little obstacle course, and let the players compete for the best time going through the course. In order to get repetition, let them do it a few times without being timed. That will allow you to get the players going quicker and keep them from standing in line. The very last thing you do is to time everyone going through the course and honor the winner.

**Tactical Drills**

The beauty of soccer for young children is that it is a game that simplifies very well. As a parent-coach you don’t need to be a tactical genius to teach some simple tactics to kids this age. In fact, keeping the game very simple is best for these players.

Ultimately the best played soccer is where players make good decisions instinctively. Giving too much tactical instruction to kids this age will make them think about the game too much. The game will be slower and less fun. However no tactical awareness will result in what is commonly called “Blob” or “Ameba Ball.”
Here is what I recommend teaching:

1. **Playing the ball wide on defense**
   Naturally players want to get the ball up field toward the opposing goal, and they understand the quickest way to do that is in a straight line. Players need to be taught to take the ball wide, away from their own goal, and then up the field. This will take the ball out of a dangerous area and reduce the silly goals against your team. Players also need to be taught that it is okay to kick the ball out of bounds on the defensive side of the field, preferably over the sideline as opposed to the end line.

   A. A simple way to teach this tactical concept is to serve balls to players facing you. Have them receive the ball, making good use of their first touch, take it wide around a cone, and kick it hard up the field *(See Figure 1 below).*

![Figure 1: Receiving the ball](image-url)
B. Continue the same exercise, but have the players stand with you facing the goal they are defending to simulate chasing down a ball headed toward their goal. Serve the ball into the defensive half of the field. Have each player chase the ball toward their goal, turn it wide, and then kick it hard up the field (See Figure 2 below).

2. **Crossing the ball**
   This is the first step to really learning to pass the ball. Teach the players to play the ball across the face of the goal from the sides of the field. Your players need to be taught that they don’t always have to shoot. If they are on the flanks of the field, simply playing the ball across the field puts the ball in a good position for the team to score.

3. **Framing the goal**
   This concept is simply the organization of players in front of the goal to receive crosses. Obviously if you are trying to teach your players to cross balls from the flanks, then having players in position to score just makes sense. Once your team scores a few goals from crosses, they will catch on and do it like crazy! The actual organization in front of the goal
depends on the number of players you use in your league. However, the most important areas to cover are the “far post” and the “slot” (See Figure 3 below). Even if your team plays 4v4 or 5v5, you should be able to cover these areas in front of the goal.

1. The “far post” is the area in front of the furthest goal post from the ball. Make sure your players don’t stand right at the post. They should leave enough room for the ball to be crossed between them and the goal.

2. The “slot” is the area directly in front of the goal. In a full sided game, this is the area between the penalty spot and the 6 yard box. On a smaller field you should adjust the spacing accordingly. The thing to remember is that this person is the most likely to be in competition for the ball with the goalie. This person also has the whole goal on which to shoot. Therefore this person should, and can afford to, leave more space between himself/herself and the goal.

   i. Allowing the space between the players and the goal is logical to an adult. It is much easier to score facing the goal which is the reason for the buffer. However, the natural tendency for players is to get as close to the goal as possible to wait for the ball. This concept will take consistent reminding.
Obviously you can practice crossing and framing the goal together, but start by having just one runner going to the goal at the far post. Work up to having two or more players running to the goal. As the players get better, add a goalkeeper to the equation and then a defender. The defender will force two things:

ii. Make the person crossing the ball evaluate the situation and choose a good spot for the ball.

iii. Make the players framing the goal spread out to ensure that one player cannot cover both or all of them.

**Scrimmage**

The last part of your session format is a game. When practicing before a game, the game obviously takes care of itself. However, in true practice sessions the game takes the form of a scrimmage. To make your scrimmages more effective, begin the game with some restrictions to force them to use the concepts you’ve taught during the instruction portion of the session.

For example, if your instruction was crossing the ball, you might start out the scrimmage with a restriction that shots must come with a player’s first touch, meaning the players cannot dribble or trap before shooting. This restriction would force them to pass the ball for someone to shoot with his first touch, thereby manufacturing some crossing opportunities. Another way to handle this situation would be to award 1 point for a regular goal, but 2 points (or more) for a goal scored from a cross, thereby inspiring them to look for crossing opportunities.

After your players have played and have had some success with the restriction on the scrimmage, lift the restriction and see how they do. Let them play, but continue to coach to the points you made during the instruction part of your session. Help guide them to apply the techniques or tactics that you taught.

**Summary**

The U7 and U8 age groups are a lot of fun to coach. The players are capable of learning a lot about the skills and concepts of the game. Their game can begin to take the shape of recognizable soccer, which is very rewarding. Keep in mind that players vary greatly. Don’t be afraid to revert back to U5 and U6 activities to begin the season and introduce more structured activities over time.
Under 9 and Under 10

In the U9 and U10 age groups, the game can really start to take shape, even at the recreational level. Many players are internally competitive at these ages, understanding and keeping track of wins and losses. Although usually played as 6v6 or 8v8, these games really begin to mimic the full-sided, 11v11 game as well:

- In many leagues the coaches are now relegated to the sidelines.
- Referees are usually introduced at this age.
- The markings on the field are similar to those on a full field.

Key Concepts

Coaching U9 and U10 soccer can be really fun, but there are a few challenges of which you ought to be aware:

- **You can have huge discrepancies between players’ ability levels.** Some players are chomping at the bit to get into competitive soccer. They may have played soccer for years and practice regularly on their own time. Other players may be non-athletes trying the game for the first time.

- **The games become competitive between players and you must constantly focus on doing the right thing as a coach.** Game situations may affect where you put players, but don’t let them affect when you put players into the game. At this age self-esteem is both apparent and fragile for kids. As a coach you don’t want to put players in positions where you know they will fail, but you want to give them ample opportunity to succeed and feel good about their contribution to the team.

- **As the players become more competitive, so do the parents.** My experience has been that if you are successful in creating an environment that allows the players to develop, you will have few problems with parents. That said there will be the occasional parent who is a problem. Here are my recommendations for handling parents:

  - **Write a letter at the beginning of the season explaining your philosophy about coaching and your expectations for players and parents.**
    Go over this letter with the parents. Invite anyone who does not agree with the letter to contact the league commissioner and ask to be switched to another team. Don’t do this in a “my way or the highway” fashion. Just explain that this is what you intend to do and you understand your plan might not align with everyone’s desire for his/her child. If that is the case, your feelings will not be hurt if someone requests a transfer. *(See Appendix D for a sample letter.)*
- **When a problem does arise, don’t address it in front of the players, and don’t address it when emotions are high.**
  Let things settle for a day and then call the parent and have a reasonable discussion.

- **Always keep the best interest of the child in mind.**
  Youth sports’ benefits degrade when they become special interest vehicles for adults. A child can’t control to whom they were born. Keep that in mind, and don’t punish a child as a reaction to the parents. You might be the best adult influence in that child’s life.

- **If referees are used in your league, establish the expectation with your players that referee calls are not to be questioned.**
  Players must learn to focus on what they can control in a game. Referees can certainly affect games, but they are like the weather. You can’t control them. If players get upset and feel victimized by referees, their play will degrade because they feel hopeless. Setting the expectation that players will honor the referee is easy. Holding yourself to the same standard is a lot harder. Bear in mind that you are the primary role model for your players.

- **At this age you can still use the same “Stars” program that I outlined for the younger players (see Appendix B).**
  I didn’t know how players in our U10 program would react when I introduced the program to them at the beginning of the season, but they loved it! The lessons you reinforce with the stars are even more valuable in these age groups because the players are more emotionally affected by games.

**Player Development**

Regarding player development, everything from previous age groups still applies. The players still need a lot of repetition on the basic skills already reviewed, and some will still require instruction on those skills. The players will also still enjoy the games we’ve discussed previously. Don’t think those games only apply to younger players.

Because the players in this age group are more mature and more competitive, many coaches make the mistake of treating them like adults. While the players can handle more practice exercises that are “drill-like,” the fact is they don’t enjoy them. That won’t seem important to some coaches, but most coaches will agree that players play games like they practice. Players will always practice harder when they are having fun and enthused about what they are doing. I like to mix instruction, repetition, and competition to keep the practice interesting and intense. That intensity will carry over into the games.
Competition

Competition is a key to having good practices. Here are just some of the benefits:

- **Kids will have fun and maintain enthusiasm.**
- **When players catch on to your routine of injecting competitions into practice, they will focus and put more into the regular repetitive activities because they think they might be preparing for a competition.**
- **Competition adds an element of stress that is similar to game situations.**
  Kids will be more likely to take a practice element to the game if they are accustomed to performing it under stress and pressure.
- **Competition adds the need for speed.**
  In practice situations most players will perform tasks well within their comfort zones. Those comfort zones rarely come close to the speed at which the game itself is played. Competition will push the players outside their comfort zones and increase the speed or pace of the activity to mimic game speed.

Combining instruction, repetition, and competition

An example of the instruction, repetition, and competition mixture is detailed below in a scenario where “heading” is the topic:

1. **Bring the players together and briefly demonstrate proper heading technique.**
   (Instruction)

2. **Have the players pair up and practice heading.**
   (Repetition)
   One player throws the ball while the other heads it back. I tell the players to switch roles every ten headers.

3. **After 5 minutes or so of the routine heading repetition, introduce a competition.**
   (Competition)
   Each pair is now a team. One team member will throw and catch while the other will head the ball back. Teams must try to keep the ball from hitting the ground. Once a team’s ball hits the ground, the team is out, and the players must sit down. The last team standing wins.
4. **After a winner is crowned, have the teams stand up, switch the roles of each team member, and restart the competition.**

5. **I generally have a reward for the winners.**
   The reward could be an extra water break, a shorter fitness run, or they could be captains to pick teams for the scrimmage. Whatever it is, I make sure they are recognized somehow for winning, which keeps inspiration high for future competitions.

**Practice**

Again, players this age require some level of technical and tactical training. The technical training is what scares most novice coaches because they don't feel like they can adequately teach or demonstrate the skills. In that case, separate the instruction and the repetition. Delegate the instruction, and manage the repetition.

**Technical Instruction**

In my “real job,” I am a manager in an Information Technology department. I began my career as a software developer writing COBOL programs. I know next to nothing about today’s coding languages. Yet I am effective when it comes to growing and developing the people who work for me. How? I can’t train my people on coding, but I get them training. I then put them in situations that allow them to use their training, build their skills, gain confidence, and I push them to new levels of achievement.

Take that strategy out of the office environment, and apply it to the soccer field. Find somebody who can come in to teach and demonstrate skills. That person doesn’t have to come to every practice. If he or she comes out 3 or 4 times throughout the season, he or she can be a very effective training aid.

You, as the coach, just have to worry about planning and organizing the repetition of practice. You create the environment to allow the players to practice the skills they learned from the expert. It is likely that you will also have a player or two who excel at the techniques that were taught. Use those players as examples. Use them to do further demos or to help correct poor techniques in other players. Players always respond and learn best from other players, as they feel challenged by other players.

In the U9 and U10 age groups, all the same techniques discussed for younger players still apply. However, the list expands considerably at this age. Use the following list to create a development plan for your season. How much or how little of this list you use will be largely dependent on your players, so be flexible. These techniques are explained in more detail in Appendix C.

- **Passing**
  Players need to be able to use the inside of both feet to make accurate passes that are easy to receive. Your players should understand the value of playing a ball that is easy to receive (i.e. on the ground, with proper pace, in the direction the player is facing) and take responsibility for their passes. Many players feel like passing is only kicking the ball in the
general direction of a teammate. If it is too hard, too soft, or bouncing is of no consequence in their minds because as soon as the ball left their foot, it was the responsibility of their teammate. You need to change that mindset by making them accountable for the “receive-ability” of their pass.

- **Chest and thigh traps**
  At this age more balls will be played in the air. Players need to develop the techniques, and thereby the confidence, to handle balls out of the air without fear.

- **Heading**
  This skill can be a scary proposition for some players, but learning the proper technique is important so when they do try it, the experience is pain free. When players do head the ball in a game, praise them highly for their courage. Other players will take note and then try it for themselves. Still other players may never do it, and that’s okay at this age.

- **Serving balls in the air**
  Players at this age should begin developing the skill of kicking longer, “flighted” balls.

- **Defending**
  There is a proper technique to defending. Players should learn that technique and understand the priorities of defending, which are not intuitive to young players:
    
    a. The top priority is to keep the other team from scoring.
    b. The next priority is winning possession of the ball.

- **Shielding**
  Shielding is the act of handling the ball in tight spaces, keeping one’s body between the ball and the opposition. The player’s body acts as the shield to the ball.

- **Goalkeeping**
  All players should gain some level of training on the basic skills of goalkeeping. These skills include:
    
    - Catching balls into and away from the body, including those overhead.
    - Punching balls that can’t be caught.
    - Approaching shooters to cut down angles.
    - Punting.
    - Throwing.
Tactical Instruction

Tactics become more important at this age as well. With 6 or 8 players on a team, being able to play in an orderly fashion is important in order to take shots and score goals. Some teams may have a dominant player who can do this on his or her own. However, even players on those teams need to develop a tactical awareness of the game. If you coach a team with a dominant player, don’t allow your one star player to do everything.

Create a system that gets everyone involved. While some high-level coaches may view this as inhibiting your star player, you can further help that player by finding supplemental opportunities that are more challenging. Such opportunities might include:

- Guest playing or practicing with an older team.
- Practicing with a competitive team.
- Joining a competitive preparatory program, such as a “Challenge Program.”
- Playing pick-up games with older players.

Ultimately if your star player is much further above everyone else in the league, put your team aside, and do what is best for the player. Find and recommend a situation that will be challenging and fun for the player, even if it means losing that player from your roster. Your team’s record may suffer, but the star player will benefit, as will the other players who will no longer be able to depend on that player as their crutch.

Tactics at this age should be simple. Playing positions are a form of tactics, but positional play is covered in an upcoming chapter. I’ve broken tactics down into three categories: defensive, offensive, and set plays.

Defensive Tactics:

- **Marking players - basically man-to-man defense**
  The concept that needs teaching with regard to marking players is to do it from a “goal side” position. This means your player should keep his or her body between the player they are marking and the goal they are defending (See Figure 4 on the next page). This is easy when a player is marking the opponent with the ball. It is not intuitive when they are marking players away from the ball.

- **The first defender is the one defending against the player with the ball.**
  This player needs to keep his or her body between the ball and the goal, denying penetration of the ball and the player.
• **The second defender is the covering defender.**
  He or she provides support to the first defender.
  
  - Support should be offered toward the center of the field, between the first defender and the goal.
  
  - The second defender should be positioned to be able to step in and defend against the player with the ball should the first defender get beat off the dribble.
  
  - The second defender’s position should take away dangerous through-ball opportunities (i.e. penetrating passes).
  
  - The second defender can still have marking responsibilities.

*Figure 4: Defending the goal*
• If the first defender gets beat, and the second defender steps in to defend against the person with the ball, the second defender becomes the first defender.
That will be an easy concept for your team. However, the former first defender should recover to become the new second defender *(See Figure 5 below)*.

- Teach your players this concept of recovery. To most players this is easy to learn but not intuitive. Most players, left to their own judgment, will turn and chase the ball, or worse yet, just turn and watch.

- The recovery run should be made toward the near post and continue until he gets behind the ball (i.e. can defend with his back to his goal).

*Figure 5: Defending the goal*

- It should be noted that in higher levels of soccer there is also considered a third defender who provides balance. However, this is a concept better left for higher levels of play.
• **Channeling and delaying**
  Defensive players need to be taught to channel opponents into wide positions on the field. They also need to be taught the value in delaying an attack to allow teammates to recover into defensive positions behind the ball. Players need to understand that the top priority in defending is to keep the other team from scoring. The second priority is to win the ball for your team.

  - Channeling in and of itself can be a delaying tactic. The first defender should take a side-on approach to entice the player toward the wide area of the field.
  
  - Delaying can be as simple as slowing down the player with the ball or kicking the ball out of bounds to allow your team to recover.

• **High, wide, and far**
  This is the priority of where you want the ball to go when clearing it from your defensive third of the field.

  - **High**
    Get the ball up in the air where nobody can reach it. This will eliminate deflections.

  - **Wide**
    Get the ball out of the middle of the field to the flanks where it is less dangerous.

  - **Far**
    Get the ball as far up the field as possible.

This concept sounds easier than it is. The ideal situation is to be able to execute all three of these ball placements. However, that is not always possible. To most players, far is the natural highest priority. They want to get the ball up the field toward the other goal, and they recognize that the quickest way between two points is a straight line. Unfortunately, that way is also strewn with opposing players. You don’t have to watch too much recreational soccer to see a well-meaning defender attempt to clear a ball, knocking it off an opponent’s shin guards and giving up a breakaway. Teach your players this order of priority to clearing balls, and you will significantly reduce the number of silly goals your team allows.
Attacking Tactics:

- **Attack with numbers**
  Although this sounds too simple, I have observed that many U10 players tend to stand and watch their teammate with the ball, only reacting to the ball when it is played. Teach your attacking players to move down the field as a unit. Proactive soccer is played when the person with the ball reacts to opportunities created by teammates running to spaces away from the ball. Reactive soccer is played when everyone just reacts to wherever the ball goes. You want your team to evolve into playing proactive soccer.

- **Framing the goal**
  This is the same concept discussed in the U7 - U8 section of the book. However, with more players on the field, it is likely you will have more players in front of the goal. You still want players making the far post and slot runs. You also want a player making a near post run *(See Figure 6 on the next page).*

  - **Far post**
    Attack to the 6 yard box, just outside the far post. Any ball coming to that point, or any point closer to the goal, should result in a first touch shot.

  - **Slot**
    The penalty spot, facing the goal, ready to shoot any cross or rebound.

  - **Near post**
    The area just inside the nearest post to the ball, as close to the goal as possible without being offsides. The run to the near post should be across the face of the goal so as to drag as many defenders as possible along with the run, leaving less contention at the slot and far post. If the ball is played to the near post, this player has the two options listed below:

    1. Deflect the ball into the corner of the goal, which is why the run is to the area just inside the post.
2. Redirect the ball to the front of the goal for teammates. Remember the defenders this player dragged along? Now the far post and slot players have a better chance of getting to this redirected ball and getting a shot.

![Figure 6: Framing the goal](image)

- **Playing horizontally and diagonally**
  Recreational defensive players always congregate directly up the field from the ball. This is a smart move on their part, as recreational attacking players usually only recognize the space straight in front of them. Teach your players to play balls horizontally and diagonally, not just vertically. Wide players should look for opportunities to play the ball into the center of the field. Central players should recognize opportunities to play the balls to the flanks.
- **Exploiting space behind the defense**

It always amazes me to see teams trying to pass the ball, but constantly doing so in front of the defenders, never creating dangerous goal scoring opportunities. Teach your players to get the ball into the space behind the defense, but to your team’s advantage (*See Figure 7 below*).

- When attacking an opponent’s back line (i.e. defenders), don’t pass the ball to teammates. Pass the ball into space behind the defense where the teammate can get to the ball first.

- Well placed balls behind a defense have many advantages:
  
  i. They can lead to breakaways or shooting opportunities.
  
  ii. They can lead to crossing opportunities.
  
  iii. Defenses become less organized when they are chasing balls toward their own goal.
  
  iv. Defenders who get to balls first still have to turn in order to get the ball up the field.

*Figure 7: Exploiting space behind the defense*
Set Plays

In soccer, set plays such as corner kicks and free kicks are very important aspects of the game. They take a lot of time and repetition to develop. Being a coach of a recreational soccer team, you probably have limited practice opportunities. On top of that, as a U10 coach you probably don’t have a group of players that are willing to go through the painstaking repetition required to develop great set play execution. Your players want action! With that in mind, here are some simple tactics, easily taught, that will bring organization to your most important set plays.

- **Corner Kicks**

  1. To take your corner kicks, choose a player who can get the ball to the face of the goal in the air. The position that player plays is not important, although you probably don’t want to bring your goalie forward to perform this task. The player should aim for a spot directly in front of the middle of the goal, just outside the 6 yard box (i.e. out of the keeper’s reach).

  2. Leave just two defenders back, instructing them just to delay any counter attack against them, preferably kicking the ball out of bounds by a significant distance.

  3. Have one player stand with the goalie. This player cannot deliberately impede the goalie, but his or her presence will limit the goalie’s mobility and vision.

  4. Have your other three players stand together at the top of the goal box, in line with the far post. As the player taking the kick approaches the ball, these players make runs to the near post, far post, and slot. They should already be familiar with those runs from your attacking work on framing the goal.
Defending Corner Kicks

1. Bring everyone back except one forward.

2. One defender stands an arm’s length away from the near post, facing the ball. This defender's job is to keep low balls from reaching the face of the goal, even if it means sacrificing another corner kick. If the ball is played beyond this defender, he or she then folds into the goal to help block any shots taken.

3. Your goalie should be situated in the middle of the goal, on the goal line. The goalie should be able to stand on the goal line and see the ball through the space provided by the teammate’s arm’s length distance from the near post.

4. Another defender stands at the back post, inside the goal itself. This person’s line of sight to the ball will be through near post netting of the goal. As the ball is played, this person steps up to the goal line to help block any shots taken.

Figure 8: Setting up a corner kick
5. All other defenders should mark opposing players. They should go wherever the person they are marking goes, always maintaining a position between that person and the goal. They should challenge that person for any ball whether it is on the ground or in the air.

Figure 9: Defending against a corner kick

- **Direct Kicks**
  These are free kicks from which a goal can be scored directly from the kick itself. A referee will signal a direct kick by pointing at the ground. Any direct kick awarded for a foul inside the goal box is a penalty kick. Otherwise, it is taken at the point of the foul. Have a strong footed player shoot high and to the corners, if in range to do so. If not, have them play a ball to the back post. Here are some other pointers:

  - Offsides is a concern for your players. Make sure they know to start in an onside position until the ball is kicked.

  - If playing to the far post, have them make runs into that area of the field. They should time their runs to match the kicking of the ball in order to remain onside.
• **Indirect Kicks**
  These are free kicks where at least two people must touch the ball in order for it to count as a goal. A referee will signal an indirect kick by standing at the spot of the foul with his or her hand in the air. Here are two sequences of indirect kicks:

  - **Kicks out of shooting range**
    These are easy. Serve the ball toward the back post, just as you would a direct kick.

  - **Kicks in shooting range**
    Requires 2 people at the ball, a shooter and a “spotter.”
    
    - **Shooter**
      The shooter marks a spot just in front of the ball where he/she wants the ball spotted. The shooter then backs up and aligns himself or herself with that spot (i.e. not the stationary ball). A short approach to the ball is preferable, since the ball will be live as soon as the spotter rolls it.

    - **Spotter**
      When the shooter is ready, this person gently rolls the ball to the spot indicated by the shooter. The shooter meets the ball at that spot for the shot. Obviously timing is what needs practice in this situation. Any parent can oversee two people working on this set play, while you coach the rest of the team in other activities.

• **Defending free kicks**
  The difference as to whether or not the kick is direct or indirect is really inconsequential when it comes to lining up to defend a free kick, but the players do need to know which kind of kick is being taken. Defending players should build a wall (stand shoulder to shoulder in front of the ball) 10 yards away from the ball (*See Figure 10 on the next page*). Here are some other points of interest:

  - Given that offsides is a consideration, your players should allow the goalie a buffer to cleanly field balls. Don’t put players on the posts or have players standing in the space behind the wall.

  - On an indirect kick, the players in the wall should charge the ball as soon as it is touched the first time.

  - Players should align themselves from the near post toward the center of the goal. The goalie then takes a position just past the last defender in the wall, covering the far side of the goal.
- You should have anywhere from 3 to 5 players in the wall, depending on the proximity to the goal and the angle at which the shot will be taken.
  - Kicks directly in front of the goal and in a dangerous range for a shot should be defended with 5 in the wall.
  - Kicks at more difficult angles or distances can be defended with fewer players in the wall.
  - Those players not in the wall should mark opposing players but take advantage of the offsides rule to leave the desired buffer for the goalie. If an opposing player lines up in an offsides position, you want your players to be smart enough to leave that player alone and let the referee make the call once the kick is taken.

**Summary**

The Under 9 and Under 10 age groups are very enjoyable. At these ages the game really begins to look like “soccer.” However, don’t mistake these players for young adults. They still have a lot of child in them. Keep the fun and instruction flowing.
Positions

“Positions” really refers to the system of play that you implement for your players. It will behoove you to implement a simple system of play that will allow your players to play in an organized fashion, so they can play successfully as a team. Although formations for 5v5 soccer are quite different than those for 11v11 soccer, I encourage coaches to use real names for their positions. Using real names will allow players to learn the terminology of the game, better preparing them for future systems of play.

Positional Names

Let's look at positional names:

- **Goalkeeper**
  Also referred to as “Goalie” or “Keeper.” I think this position is obvious and needs no further explanation. True goalies have good hand-eye coordination, are brave, and are vocal leaders. That said, in recreational soccer I like to let everyone have a chance to play goalie.

- **Backs – these are defenders**
  They are usually further qualified by right, left, or central. There are also more specialized names such as sweeper and stopper, which pertain to specific systems of play. A sweeper will play behind backs that are marking opposing players. The sweeper consistently plays the role of a second defender. A stopper will play in front of a defense. This person is usually a very aggressive, ball winning person who always tries to apply the first pressure to the ball.

- **Midfielders**
  These are transitional players, playing both offense and defense to varying degrees. Midfielders are the link from the defense to the attack. There are often varying roles in the midfield such as attacking midfielder, defensive midfielder, holding midfielder, and/or outside midfielder. Players who play on the flanks, either midfielders or forwards, are sometimes referred to as wings (i.e. right wing and left wing).

- **Forwards**
  These are attacking players. Forwards come in all shapes and sizes, but they all have some gift that allows them to score goals. They might be strong, fast, tall, shoot well, or be creative with the ball. That said, effective forwards do share a common trait: they have perseverance. Forwards fail more than they succeed. Perseverance allows them to brush off failure and keep pressing to score goals.
System of Play

At the highest levels of play, you will hear systems of play referred to by numbers: 4-4-2, 3-4-3, 3-5-2. The numbers build from the back forward. The goalie is always left out of these numbers, as that one is always assumed. In the examples used, the first number refers to the number of backs, followed by the number of midfielders, and finally the number of forwards.

The system of play a team employs is usually a function of the coach’s preference as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the players on the team. Even within similar systems of play, there can be differences in the execution of the system. One team may play a 4-4-2 with their backs in a flat formation across the back. Another team playing the same numerical formation may play with their backs in a diamond formation, utilizing the functions of a stopper and sweeper.

The intention of this book is not to delve into the different systems of play used throughout the world. The intention is to suggest some simple systems of play that can be employed to provide the best playing environment for your recreational soccer players. Not all recreational programs use the same number of players per team in each age group. I’ve taken many of the common numbers used by recreational programs and described systems of play that can apply to each. You will need to factor the age group you are coaching into the equation.

3v3:

3v3 soccer is referred to as micro-soccer. It is usually played at the youngest age groups, although 3v3 tournaments have become increasingly popular up through the adult ranks. For the purposes of this book, I am assuming that the players playing 3v3 soccer are those in the U5 and U6 age groups. Players playing 3v3 soccer in these age groups do not need positions, nor can they really handle them. The intention of 3v3 soccer is to provide a simple, fun environment in which kids can get a lot of participation and touches on the ball. That said, some simple rules for your players will allow them to learn the basics of playing as a team and prepare them to play positions in future age groups.

Player Rules:

- **Don’t steal the ball from your teammates.**
  This sounds too obvious, but it isn’t for players this age. They all want the ball, and the concept of “teammates” is foreign. Left to their own devices, a 3v3 game will always be played as 1v5 (one person with the ball and 5 trying to take it).

- **Spread out.**
  Getting your players to spread out will pay big dividends for your team. First of all, the person with the ball has at least two fewer people hovering around him/her. Their space to dribble is increased and their confidence with the ball will increase. Also, when the ball is kicked, the players away from the ball will have more time and space to control it and start to do something with it.
Player Management
In some cases, you may have a player who is dominant. In 3v3 soccer such a player can destroy the participation for all the other players on the field, even his or her own teammates. While you don’t want to rob that player of his or her own participation, you can define a temporary role for that player that allows the others more involvement. In those cases, after such a player has some success, you may want to move them into a role of a “back.”

The role can be simply defined by the line across the middle of the field. Have the player play in the defensive half of the field and ask them to pass the ball forward to their teammates. They still get to play hard. They learn the role and name of a “back,” and they learn about passing to teammates. While passing is a more advanced skill, so is this player so it’s a good fit. Meanwhile the game opens up to all the other players on the field.

4v4 and 5v5:
The difference between 4v4 and 5v5 soccer is the addition of a goalie. Therefore, from a positional standpoint, the systems of play are really the same. If your league plays 4v4 or 5v5 in the U5 and U6 age groups, then you may want to follow the advice described in the 3v3 section, following the general rules of play without forcing positional play.

In older age groups (U7 and U8), players are quite capable of learning some simple positional play, and they should begin learning positions. From a coaching perspective, it takes patience to get this started at the beginning of the season. You may have a very talented team that really struggles against other opponents as they learn to play positions. However, remember you are not coaching for game results. You are coaching for player development so they can enjoy the game for years.

The other thing I would point out about U7 and U8 players is that they are quite literal in the interpretation of your rules. Everything is black and white to them. They do not interpret grey areas by themselves. As long as you expect that at the beginning of the season, you can eventually help them overcome their black and white interpretations to a more realistic execution of the play.

1-2-1/Diamond Formation
In 4v4 or 5v5 soccer, I like to promote a diamond formation: 1-2-1. I use the following names for my positions: “goalie” (if used), “sweeper” (could be “back”), “right and left midfielders,” and “forward.” I use the markings on the field to help define the positions. Here is how each field position works:
• **Sweeper**  
  Plays only on the defensive half of the field. They can go anywhere on that half of the field, but the center stripe is their boundary. This is where the black and white interpretation comes into play. As they get more comfortable with the positions, you can help them understand to stop at the center line, but when a ball is rolling toward them, they can cross the line to kick it.

• **Forward**  
  Just the opposite of the sweeper. Once the ball is put in play, this player plays only on the attacking half of the field. It is hard for players not to chase the ball onto the defensive half of the field, but again you can use the center stripe as their point of reference. Again, as their comfort increases, you can help them understand that they can cross the line to get a ball rolling toward them.

• **Midfielder**  
  With the roles of the forward and sweeper clearly defined by the lines on the field, you as coach can concentrate on your midfielders. Midfielders go up and down the field. On the defensive side they can go anywhere they need to go to stop the opponent's attack. On the attacking half they should stay on the side of the field assigned to them (remember right midfielder and left midfielder). This concept of staying on a side of the field is difficult for them, as there are no such lines painted on the field. You will need to issue consistent verbal reminders to your midfielders early in the season.

There are several reasons I like the 1-2-1 formation over a 2-2 (2 backs and 2 forwards) formation. Although the 2-2 formation would be easier to teach, it is less realistic. Here are some advantages of the 1-2-1:

• There is transition to the game. Players are moving up and down the field.

• It introduces the concept of midfielders that play both offense and defense.

• It allows more numbers in the attack so crossing the ball and framing the goal are easier to teach and execute successfully.

**Rotating Players**

Another recommendation that I would make for playing positions in 4v4 or 5v5 systems of play is to rotate your players through all the positions, including goalie. In our league, we play 12-minute quarters. I sub players each quarter, assigning positions as they enter the field. This may seem extreme, but players respond well to it and they get to learn every position on the field.
I will prepare you, however, that your players will have positions that suit them well and others that don’t. The team’s quality of play will fluctuate accordingly. For example, in the first quarter you may play a group of players in certain positions and they look dynamite! Their game flows beautifully. They move instinctively, defend properly, and attack with numbers.

In the third quarter the same group returns to the field, but you change their positions. Suddenly the same group of players looks mediocre at best. They play hesitantly and need constant reminding of what to do and where to go. As a coach you may find that frustrating and be tempted to put them all back in their stronger positions. I find the best way to overcome my own competitiveness (allowing them to learn) is to show up at the field with a written rotation plan by quarter and force myself to stick to that plan. (See Appendix D – Tools and Templates).

There is one exception that I have for rotating players. Sometimes you will get a player that is very shy, timid, or maybe has a health problem or learning disability that limits his or her ability to perform. In those cases you may need to reconsider moving that player around the positions. It may be better for the player to get comfortable with a single position. Moving the player around may actually cause the player stress and impede his or her enjoyment of the game.

**Reality Check**

A few years ago I had a player on my U7 team that had a health impairment. This was the first time he had played a sport. He was very unsure of himself on the field and I really couldn’t tell if he was enjoying playing or not. I began the fall season rotating that player through the positions just as I did every other player. About halfway through the season I recognized something. When playing right-midfield the player really seemed to be more confident and played with a lot more enthusiasm. I left him in that position for the remainder of the fall season and he really blossomed. In the spring, after a couple of games, I experimented with moving him around again. This time he was comfortable enough that he played every position with the same enthusiasm and vigor. Today that player is still playing soccer, now at the U10 level. I am very proud of him and thankful for the lessons he has taught me as a coach.
**6v6:**
A league that plays 6-a-side soccer plays with a goalie and 5 field players. Formerly more common in U7 and U8 age groups, 6v6 soccer is now recommended for U9 and U10 programs, although many programs still play 8v8. With 6v6 soccer I like a 2-1-2 formation, although a 2-2-1 would also be reasonable. In either case the backs and forwards would play on the defensive and offensive sides of the field respectively. The midfielder(s) would provide transition and means to get 3 people into the attack.

In the U9 and U10 ages, players don’t need the black and white rules about crossing the midfield stripe. They need to learn to evaluate the game. Defenders can enter the attacking side of the field (slightly) if the opposing team has all its players crowded into the defensive end. Forwards too can cross the midfield stripe, coming back a bit to either provide a good passing outlet or to get a ball that has been cleared. The forward and defenders still play functionally the same way, but you are now teaching them to evaluate game situations and not be tied to markings on the field.

**8v8:**
In 8v8 soccer positions are necessary and can really mimic the form and function of the full-sided, 11v11 game. The names of the positions remain the same as those indicated in the previous sections. However, there are more options to choose from with regard to a system of play. I’ve chosen two such systems of play to highlight:

**2-3-2:**
Remember, this means 2 backs, 3 midfielders, and 2 forwards (See Figure 11 on the next page). In order to play this formation you have to have fast, dependable backs that consistently make good decisions. You also have to have energetic, fit midfielders who can recover consistently to help play defense. Here are some other points of interest for this system of play:

- With 2 forwards, your team does not have to be really precise in the attack. The forwards can chase down more balls played to the front.
- The midfield should provide width for your team, with the outside midfielders maintaining positions on the flanks when your team has the ball. Conceptually speaking, this will make the field big, which is what you want when your team has the ball. You want your team to compress the field when they defend and expand the field when they attack. The outside midfielders are the key to expanding the field.
- Your center midfielder should be a high-energy, well skilled player who has confidence handling the ball.
Figure 11: 2-3-2 Formation
3-1-2-1:
This formation sounds more complicated than it is. It is basically 3 backs with a diamond formation in front of them. I use this formation with my current U10 team. It is a flexible formation that can be adapted to different players as I make substitutions. It can also be adapted to different opponents.

Let’s break it down:

- **3 Backs**
  I play this with a left and right back and a sweeper. The left and right backs mark players and challenge the ball. The sweeper provides support.

- **1 Center Midfielder**
  This player moves up and down the field. I keep very good, high energy players rotating through this position. The team revolves around the center midfielder so everyone’s participation depends on this player being effective. That is why I limit who plays this position to the higher level players.

- **2 Wings**
  These players provide the flexibility in this formation. They can play as midfielders, coming back to help on defense against stronger opponents. They can also play as forwards in games where we can safely defend with the previously mentioned 4 players. In specific instances I may also have one player come back and leave the other one forward. I may do that in one of the following circumstances:
    - The opponent has a very dangerous player playing on one side of the field.
    - We have a slow or weak back playing on one side of the field.

- **1 Forward**
  This player must stay pushed up as far as he can without being offsides. The forward must be active in moving side to side across the field, especially when the wings are recovering to help with the defense. This player must also come back to meet the ball when it is cleared out of our defensive third of the field. Along with a knack for scoring goals, good candidates for forwards in this formation are ones that can stay focused on the game when the ball is away from them. Staying focused will allow the forward to anticipate play instead of just reacting to it.
While I believe rotating players through different positions is still important, I do it with more care. In 8v8 soccer, the system of play is more complicated. Therefore I usually start the season with players playing only one position (with the exception of goalie) until they grasp the concept as to how the team should play. Once they become comfortable in the system of play, I start rotating the players. Still, it is almost impossible for every player to play every position. My players usually each take a turn playing goalie. They have a primary position and then develop one or two other positions they play as well.
With regard to goalie, I don’t recommend having a single goalie in this age group. No longer can goalies pick up every ball that comes to them. Today’s goalkeepers have to be skilled with their feet. Therefore even if a player has a strong desire to be a goalkeeper, playing that person in the field will ultimately help his/her development in the goal. I recommend playing goalies at least part of every game in the field.
Conclusion

I hope this book has been helpful to you as a recreational soccer coach. As a coach you serve an important role in your community. You are a source of recreation, fitness, education and inspiration for your players. The time you spend with your players is very special and can have a lasting impact on their young lives.

Keep the game of soccer in the appropriate perspective. In the end, it is just a game. The best things you can do for your players is to let them have fun, teach them about the game, and be a positive role model for them. Everybody wins if children stay involved in sports. Make sure your players have an experience that builds their confidence and inspires them to keep playing.

The last thing I’d like to point out about the information presented is that it spans beyond the sport of soccer. As a youth myself, I was interested in all sports. Aside from soccer, I also played baseball, basketball and football. Most of my coaching experience has been in soccer because I love the challenge of teaching this game.

However, as my own children have played other sports, I have been called upon on occasion to help as an assistant coach. I have been able to utilize many of the same concepts that I learned coaching soccer to help facilitate positive, learning environments for T-ball and basketball teams. Those are the same concepts detailed in this book. If you find lessons in this book that serve you well as a soccer coach, use your creativity and figure out how to use them on the football field, baseball diamond, basketball court, or on whatever other sideline you may find yourself. The sport may change, but one thing stays the same -- children are children.
Appendix A: Top Ten Tips for Coaches

1. Be enthusiastic and have fun.
2. Make corrections in a constructive manner.
3. Praise your players much more then you criticize them.
4. Focus half-time talks on 3 points. Don’t give them too much to think about.
5. Always prepare ahead of time, either with a practice plan or a game lineup.
6. Be observant, flexible and willing to adjust your plan.
7. Teach life lessons to your players, and set a positive example for them to emulate.
8. Understand that other teams’ players are also in your child’s peer group, and there is great value in those players having a positive experience as well.
9. Understand that the Win/Loss record of the team has no lasting value to the players. Players benefit from continuing to participate in soccer.
10. Learn to incorporate fun and instruction in everything you do.
Appendix B: Stars Reward Program

For my recreational teams, I give out stars after each game. I use these stars to reinforce and further my teaching of concepts that I want the players to grasp. I borrowed the concept of using stars as rewards from the Upwards Basketball program in which my sons both play. After each basketball game the coach gets the players together and gives each player a colored star for the game. Different colors have different meanings, but each player gets one.

I liked the concept behind the stars given out by Upwards Basketball, but I modified the program slightly to better meet my needs. There are certain concepts of athletics and team play that I want to teach the players, but some of these concepts can be difficult to teach without lecturing to the players. Obviously young players don’t get a lot out of lectures. That is where the Stars Program comes into play.

Stars Process

Here is what I do:

1. **I buy packets of iron-on stars at a local hobby shop.**
   I get 4 colors: red, blue, white, and gold.

2. **Each color stands for something specific about which I want to teach the players.**
   You can have your stars stand for whatever you want to teach. Typically I do the following:
   - Red = Sportsmanship
   - Blue = Teamwork
   - White = Coachability
   - Gold = Wildcard

3. **I give the gold star out for whatever I see fit on a particular night.**
   If a player has a particularly great game in a certain area, I can recognize that achievement, setting an example to the other players on the team. A player might head the ball, play great defense, make a diving save, or use his weak foot to score a goal. Whatever the case may be, I have the gold star at my disposal to recognize the player and highlight the event for other players to emulate in future games.

4. **The goal of every player is to earn all their stars over the course of the season.**
   Once earned, parents can then iron the stars onto the player’s jersey.

5. **After each game I sit the players down and give out one star of each color.**
   Obviously not every player gets a star at each game, which makes the receipt of a star a big deal.
6. **As I hand out the stars, I give a brief introduction about what the player did to earn the star.**
   These introductions help teach and reinforce the lessons I want the players to learn. For example, “This player displayed very good sportsmanship tonight. One time he and another player ran into each other, and they both fell down. I heard him then ask the other player if he was all right. That’s good sportsmanship, so tonight the Red star goes to Johnny.”

7. **I keep a log of the players and the stars they earn, so I can keep the distribution relatively even across the players. (See Appendix D)**

**Star Examples**

The stars actually have another advantage as well. If a player has a certain weakness, I can use a star to “inspire” the player to overcome that weakness. Here are some examples:

- A player will not kick with his left foot. He will contort his body in all different directions in order to use his right foot. I might tell that player that in order to earn his gold star he has to be able to hit a target, from a specified distance, by kicking with his left foot. Hopefully this will inspire him to practice with his left foot.

- A player does not play positions very well. He’s a good player, but he wanders all over the field, chasing the ball. I might use the blue, teamwork star to inspire him to learn to play a position. I will do this by telling him ahead of time what he needs to do to earn that star. I will make him demonstrate the ability to play a position over multiple games, basically withholding the star until I’m sure he’s learned the lesson.

There are numerous ways you as a coach can use stars, or other rewards, as teaching aids for your players. The rewards will enhance the players’ enjoyment of their soccer experience. It might cost you a little bit of money, but you can ask players’ parents to contribute if you need to offset your personal expense. Use your own creativity and adapt this concept to something that is comfortable to you and meets the needs of your players.
Appendix C: Player Techniques

Moves

Here are a couple of good moves to teach. In both cases you should start by teaching the footwork without including the ball. The footwork is very easy to teach when the ball isn’t there to create a distraction.

Slide-Slide

This is a very easy but effective move.

1. Without the ball, the players slide sideways to one side and then back.
2. With the ball, they slide sideways in the first direction without the ball (See Image 1 below).
3. When they slide back, they take the ball with the outside of their foot (See Image 2 below).

Image 1: Sliding away from the ball

Image 2: Sliding toward the ball
**Step-over**

This move looks fancy when done with the ball, but it is actually a simple and effective move to get away from a defender. It will likely take your players a long time to try this move in a game, but once one person does it, others will quickly follow.

Starting without a ball, the sequence is very simple: right foot over left, left foot around to normal standing position, and slide back to where you started (See Image 3 below).

Repeat the sequence in the opposite direction (i.e. left over right to start).

Including the ball, the first step goes over or around the front of the ball (See Image 4 below). The last slide takes the ball away with the outside of the foot (See Image 5 below).

**Image 3: Step-over sequence without the ball**

**Image 4: Step over the ball**

**Image 5: Take the ball away**
Passing and Receiving

A proper pass in soccer is done with the inside of the foot.

1. The plant foot, which is the non-kicking foot, should be pointed at the target of the pass.

2. The kicking foot then makes contact in the middle, or slightly above the middle of the ball (See Image 6 below).

Receiving or trapping uses the same technique. In fact, if you were to watch a video of proper passing technique, playing the video backwards would give a good example of receiving technique. The difference is instead of striking the ball, the foot provides a cushion or is used to push the ball into open space. Again, getting the foot off the ground to the middle or upper half of the ball is very important. Otherwise the ball will pop up, requiring extra touches to bring it under control.

Image 6: Passing foot placement
Chest traps

Chest traps are a good way to control a ball in the air, above the waist. The chest offers a large surface on which to receive the ball. Chest traps also allow the player to keep both feet on the ground for quick reaction to the ball after it is received.

- Chest traps are used to receive balls in the air.
- For balls coming down to the body, the back should be slightly arched so the ball pops up and not away from the player. The torso can be rotated to further direct and protect the ball.
- For balls bouncing up from the ground, the torso can be leaned forward to create a wedge to force the ball back down to the ground.
- The arms are away from the receiving area, and again a cushion is created for the ball (See Image 7 below).
Thigh traps

Thigh traps are also used to control balls received in the air. Thigh traps are used over chest traps when the ball is below the waist, but not low enough for the feet. They are also used on balls coming down from directly overhead, where arching the back to receive the ball with the chest would be too awkward.

A common mistake with young players is to bring the thigh up to meet the ball, thereby driving the ball away from the player. As with other trapping techniques, a cushion should be created for the ball.

- The player’s leg should already be off the ground when the ball makes contact.
- The leg is then drawn away from the ball to create the cushion and drop the ball to the feet (See Image 8 below).

*Image 8: Cushioning the ball on the thigh*
Heading

Heading the ball is not a trapping technique. It is a way to drive airborne balls toward a target or away from an area being defended. Teaching proper heading technique is important, but heading a ball in a game takes a lot of courage for a young player. Teach your players this technique so when they are comfortable enough to try it in a game situation, they don’t have a painful experience.

- Heading is done with the forehead, right at the hair line.
- The eyes should be on the ball as it comes toward the head (See Image 9 below).
- Power in heading comes either from the midsection, thrusting the torso toward the ball, or the lower body, launching the entire body toward the ball.
- Power is not generated from the neck.
- The player should attack the ball as opposed to letting the ball hit the head.

Image 9: Keeping eyes on the ball
**Shooting**

Proper shooting technique is important, but it should be noted that “shooting” and “scoring” are different. Other than cheating, there are no bad ways to score a goal. They all count for one point. The message here is that while teaching this technique is important, young players should not be made to think that this is the only acceptable way to score goals. In the 2002 World Cup final, Ronaldo scored Brazil’s first goal with a “toe ball,” and nobody criticized him for not using proper technique.

- Proper shooting technique is done with the toe pointed down, striking the ball with the laces and driving through the middle of the ball.
- The plant foot is positioned next to, or even a little ahead of the ball.
- The knee should be over the ball to keep it from sailing high *(See Image 10 below)*.

*Image 10: Shooting foot placement*
**Serving balls in the air**

This technique is very similar to shooting, but instead of keeping the ball low, the kicking player wants the ball to go high. To do that, the plant foot should be slightly behind the ball (See Image 11 below). The kicking foot should make contact on the lower half of the ball, and the upper body should be leaning backwards (See Image 12 below).

*Image 11: Serving foot placement*

*Image 12: Serving position*
**Shielding**

Shielding is the act of protecting the ball from a defender. The player with the ball uses his or her body to keep a defender away from the ball.

- Shielding is done in tight spaces.
- The player with the ball “shields” the ball from the defender.
- A player shields the ball by keeping his or her body between the ball and the defender.
- The player should maximize the space between the defender and the ball by turning the body sideways and keeping the ball on the furthest foot from the defender.
- Arms cannot be used to push, but they can be out and rigid to increase body width *(See Image 13 below).*

*Image 13: Shielding the ball*
Defending and Channeling

A defensive player should be under control when defending against the ball.

- Knees should be bent and the player should be leaning forward slightly to be able to react quickly to whatever the attacking player does.
- The eyes should be focused on the ball so as not to be faked out by body feints.
- The player should take a “side-on” approach to the attacker, channeling the attacker to either a less dangerous area of the field, or toward the player’s weaker foot (usually the foot they are not using to dribble). (See Image 14 below)

Image 14: Channeling an attacker
Goalkeeping Skills
Since I don’t advocate specializing children as goalies in these ages of recreational soccer, it isn’t possible to do a lot of specialized goalie training. That said, you should teach your players basic goalkeeping techniques.

Fielding Low Balls
- The goalie should get his or her body behind the ball so that mishandled balls don’t go into the net.
- The goalie’s hands should be close together and should scoop the ball up into the torso of the body.
- Any time a goalie approaches a ball, he or she should yell “KEEPER,” to keep their own players from interfering. Include that yelling in all your practice drills (See Image 15 below).

Image 15: Fielding a low ball
Appendix C: Player Techniques

Catching Balls At or Above Chest Level

- The goalie should make a triangle between his or her hands. This allows the hands to wrap around the sides of the ball without allowing the ball room to slip through the hands (See Image 16 below).
- Mishandled balls should at least stay in front of the goalie.
- It is important for the goalie to move his or her body laterally behind the ball when possible.

Image 16: Making a triangle with hands
Catching Balls Above the Head

- The same hand technique is used when the ball is above the head. However, the goalkeeper’s eyes will be up, away from encroaching players.

- It is important to teach the goalkeeper to get a knee up to protect himself or herself (See Image 17 below).

![Image 17: Catching a high ball](image-url)

Punching a Ball

At times a goalie may need to punch a ball away from the goal. In traffic of many players, young goalies may not be able or confident enough to catch a ball. The normal reaction is to slap a ball, but punching is much more effective because it clears the ball further.

To punch a ball properly, a goalie should put both fists together to create a large, flat surface with which to strike the ball (See Image 18 below).

![Image 18: Fist placement for a flat surface](image-url)
I have some tools and templates that I have developed to help keep my coaching organized. These tools and templates include the items listed below. Each item can be found in the following pages.

- Sample parent letter
- Line up planner
- Goal keeper log
- Star program log
Sample Parent Letter

Parents,

Welcome to the U10 Freedom soccer team. Here is some pertinent information for you:

Coaches

Dave O’Brien (father of …) – I grew up playing soccer in Pennsylvania and have coached for the last 14 years. I began by coaching competitive teams and picked up recreational coaching when my own boys began playing. I have worked with kids ages 3 to 18. For the past four summers I have run a week-long soccer camp for players ages 4 – 11. My phone number is 555-1212. My e-mail is dave@soccercoach.com.

Tony Lastname (father of …) – Tony played soccer growing up as well. He has been active coaching recreational teams in Michigan and NWA. Tony is also active with Cub Scouts. Tony’s phone number is 555-1234... His e-mail is tony@soccercoach.com.

Philosophy

The Fayetteville Parks and Recreation Soccer is a “Fun First” soccer program. It is designed to accommodate players of all skill, experience, and dedication levels. This is not a competitive soccer program. Tony and I will strive to provide a very positive program for all the kids, teaching skills, positions and tactics, as well as sportsmanship, teamwork, and the ability to be “coached.” While we hope the players will play hard and play to win, we will not keep score, nor will we “coach to win.” We will try very hard to make game-time coaching decisions that are fair and equitable to all players and in the spirit of the program.

Practices

We will have four practices (weather permitting) to prepare for the season. Here is the practice plan:

1. Skill development and player observation.
2. Skill development and positional system of play
3. Skill development and positional system of play
4. Skill development and set plays (i.e. corner kicks, goal kicks, etc.)

Once games start, we will practice at 8:30 on Saturday mornings prior to our 9:00 games. I would like players at the field by 5:30 on Monday nights for a good warm-up. Additional practices may be scheduled as needed, but the norm will be to stick only to the game schedule.

Positions

In U10 soccer the boys will play 8v8. Positions will be important to keep organization to the game. While the ultimate goal is to teach each boy all positions, rotating players from day one will create chaos. My intention is to let players concentrate on a position or two while learning how to play as a team. As the comfort level develops we will begin moving players to expose them to other positions.

Before the season begins, I will provide a handout on some of the rules of U10 soccer and also an explanation of the positions. Please feel free to ask Tony or myself any questions you may have.

Welcome to the team,

Dave O’Brien
**Sample Line-up Planner**

I use this type of planner to plan my players positions for the game. This sample represents a team that plays 5v5. In our league the games are divided into quarters to allow for organized substitutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalkeeper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweeper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Mid.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Mid.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample Goalkeeper Log**

I use this type of spreadsheet to keep track of which players I played in goal in which games. This log helps me make sure I let everyone play in goal, and that I don’t play any single player in goal too much.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Sample Star Program Log**

I use this log to keep track of which players get which stars. I usually don’t give a player the same star twice during the season. Their goal is to earn all their stars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Red (Sportsmanship)</th>
<th>Blue (Teamwork)</th>
<th>White (Coachable)</th>
<th>Gold (Wildcard)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Player 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix E: Common Terms and Rules

- **Corner Kick**
  The act of putting the ball back in play when it goes over an endline, out of bounds on the defending team. The ball is kicked from the corner of the field. The ball must be on or inside the arc painted at the corner of the field. Although difficult, goals may be scored directly from corner kicks. Usually the player taking the kick attempts to put the ball in front of the goal for his or her teammates to try to score.

- **Direct Free Kick**
  A free kick awarded for handballs or fouls against a player. Goals may be scored directly from the kick of the ball. The referee signals a direct kick by pointing to the ground at the point of the foul.

- **Goal Kick**
  The act of putting the ball back in play by the defending team, when the ball goes over their endline, out of bounds on the attacking team. The kick is taken inside the goal box. On a full field, the kick is taken inside the 6-yard box. A goal kick cannot be touched by any other player until it leaves the goal box. On a micro-soccer field, neither box may exist, in which case the kick is usually taken within a yard of the endline.

- **Indirect Free Kick**
  A free kick that is awarded for a rules infraction that is not a handball or a foul against another player. On an indirect kick two people must touch the ball before it can be scored. A referee will signal an indirect kick by standing at the point of the foul with his or her arm pointing up in the air. Indirect kicks are awarded for infractions such as:

  - **Dangerous Play**
    Typically called when a player gets his or her foot up around head level, or when a player on the ground continues to play the ball thereby putting his or her own body at risk.

  - **Obstruction**
    An infraction when a player not in control of the ball keeps an opposing player away from the ball or the play in general. Blocking and picks are not allowed in soccer.

  - An indirect kick is also awarded when a goalie handles a ball intentionally played to the goalie by a teammate, either by a kick or throw-in. Players may play a ball back to their goalie with their head, chest, or thigh. On balls kicked or thrown, the goalie must play the ball like any other player on the field.

- **Kick-off**
  The act of restarting play at the start of a half or after a goal. The ball is started on the midfield stripe, in the center circle of the field. The defending team must stand outside the circle until the ball is touched.
• **Offsides**
This is the most misunderstood rule in soccer. A player is offsides on the attacking half of the field when he is closer to the opponent’s end line than both the ball and fewer than two opposing players. The goalie is usually one of those players, so this infraction is usually seen when an attacking player is in the space behind the backs before the ball is served. Players are only offsides at the time the ball is served or passed. They are allowed to run into those spaces to receive the ball after it is played. Many times players will appear offsides because they receive the ball behind the defense, but in fact they were onsides when the ball was served so it was a legal play. Players cannot be offsides on their defending half of the field. There are no offsides on corner kicks or throw-ins.

• **Penalty Kick**
A direct kick awarded for a foul or handball by the defending team inside the goal box. The ball is placed on the penalty spot directly in front of the goal. Only the shooter and goalie are allowed in the box until the shot is taken. The goalie may move from side to side but must remain on the goal line until the shot is taken (i.e. the goalie can’t move toward the ball prior to the shot). If the shot is missed, the shooter may not touch the ball a second time until another player touches the ball. Therefore, the shooter may not score on a rebound off the post or crossbar but can score on a rebound off the keeper.

• **Substitution**
When referees are present, substitutions are usually allowed only at certain times: when it is your team’s throw-in, when either team has a goal kick, after a goal, or when an injured player needs to be replaced.

• **Throw-in**
The act of putting the ball back in play when it goes out of bounds along a sideline. The team with the ball throws it back into play. Regulation throw-ins are done with a 2-handed throw from directly behind the head. Both feet must be on the ground when the ball is thrown.
Appendix F: Field Markings

The field shown below is a full sized field. Fields for small sided games may not have all the same markings.

- **Corner Arc**: Where the kickoffs occur.
- **6-Yard Box**: Goal kicks are taken here.
- **Penalty Spot**: Arc used to keep players 10 yards away from the ball during a penalty kick.
- **Goal Box**: Where goalies can use their hands.
- **Center Circle**: Where kickoffs occur.
- **Endline**: Where the game ends.
Appendix G: Resources

While I hope this book has been helpful and continues to be helpful as a point of reference, it is certainly not the only (nor can I claim it the best) resource available. Here are other resources that I have found very valuable in my own ongoing coaching education.

Books:

Positive Coaching
by Jim Thompson, Warde Publishers

The Double-Goal Coach
by Jim Thompson, HarperCollins Publishers

Why Johnny Hates Sports
by Fred Engh, Avery Publishing Group

Catch Them Being Good
by Tony DiCicco and Colleen Hacker, Penguin Publishing

The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual
available through US Youth Soccer

Websites:

www.usyouthsoccer.org
the official website of US Youth Soccer. A wealth of information is available.

www.joesoccer.com
check out the “Animated Drills”

www.ussoccer.com
the official website of the United States Soccer Federation

www.positivecoach.org
the website of the Positive Coaching Alliance

www.coachyourkids.com
follow the “Soccer” link

www.soccervideos.com
a great resource for books, videos and DVD’s