

The Evolution of Small Sided Play

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Over the past two years I have had the opportunity to experience first hand the benefits of small-sided play for players under the age of nine. During this time, I have coached my son, Sean and his team - as U-8's and this year as a U-9 team. I am doing double duty this year, coaching my six-year-old son Christopher and his U-7 team. Both teams are part of the Micro-Mod program in the Lake Washington Youth Soccer Association.

As some of you may remember, from 1989 to 1995 I served as the Coaching Director for Lake Washington Youth Soccer Association. One major change that we made during that time, with the help of many volunteers (Dr. Dan Broughton, John Graham), was to redesign the soccer program for young players under the age of 12. The LWSYA Micro-Mod Program was created: U-7's would play 3 v 3 (without goalkeepers), U-8's would play 4 v 4 (first year with goalkeepers), U-9's would play 4 v 4, U-10's would play 6 v 6 and U-11's would play 9 v 9. Players would experience 11-a-side when they reached the age of eleven. This system was implemented over a five-year period. This way no existing team was impacted by the new system. Only new teams starting in 1990 would experience the new system. This program has remained intact for ten years; the only modification came just this season with U-9 teams playing 5 v 5.

The proposal to move to small-sided games did not come without its critics and skeptics. At one meeting one gentleman was most irate; he claimed that by using small-sided games we weren't allowing the kids to play the "real game." This change was a threat to most adults' comfort zones because it violated their concepts of how soccer should be played. Despite their concerns, small-sided play has endured and proven to be a tremendous program for young children.

Even after ten years of success, some Clubs and Associations in Washington State have not adopted small-sided play for U-7 to U-11 soccer players. These groups hold onto excuses, such as there is not enough field space or coaches to make the change. Unfortunately, these are only excuses. Every club and Association that I have met with indicate that neither field nor coach availability have been issues during implementation. Believe me, making the change is well worth the small risk.

After a decade of small-sided play for children, we need to look at its next evolution of growth. I believe we need to look at how we schedule practices and games for these same ages. Anyone that has coached players six, seven and eight years of age knows that the most challenging days of the week are practice days. I found that by the beginning of season, my U-7 team was working best with one practice before their weekly game. For my U-9 team, we practiced twice a week for our weekly game through October, then we cut back to one practice a week.

There is no doubt in my mind that as our season progressed, the players benefited as much from the games as they did from practice. Other coaches I have spoken with concur with this assessment. If this is the case, why not allow the players at this age to play more games? This can be done several ways. First, just schedule two games a week, one mid-week and the other on Saturday. The second way would be to schedule a day, at a central location, that would bring together all teams of the same age. During this time, teams could combine to play 2 v 2, 3 v 3, 4 v 4 or 5 v 5, whatever is age appropriate. For example, there are six players on my U-7 team. I would join with another team or two and we could play several 2 v 2 or 3 v 3 games at one time. That way no player is sitting out. All players will have a chance to benefit from playing against other players and learn from the game. It would also provide coaches with an opportunity to network and learn from each other's experiences. The real benefit is for the player to get a chance to play. I had an opportunity to do this once during the season with my U-9 team (when I set it up with another team) and it was great. The players enjoyed playing with and against new players and I didn't have to plan out another practice session. Everyone benefited.

Once players reach the age of nine, they are able to (and should) practice twice a week. They are just beginning the "Golden Age of Learning" and will develop and improve from increased training. However, below this age we need to expand the benefits of our small-sided format and provide our youngest players with the opportunity to play more. The kids will love it and I know most coaches would be much more comfortable organizing and managing another game during the week rather than a practice.

Ten years ago when I helped design and create the Micro-Mod Program in LWYSA it never occurred to me that I would be getting married and having two little boys that now benefit from playing in that program. I can only imagine what the next decade of change might bring.