

Basic Coaching Concepts for Players Under the Age of Thirteen Individual Technical and Tactical Issues for U-11's and U-12's

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Contacting the Ball

How many ways can the player kick or dribble or control the ball? There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The U-11/12 player should be proficient in using a majority of surfaces with both feet, and be challenged to expand their ability to use different textures (weights and spins). The coach of the motivated U-11/12 player should intensify the refinement of these basic contacting skills through warm-up activities and tactically challenging practice games.

Finishing

How proficient is the player in front of goal? Shots can be placed, driven, chipped, curled, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, or improvised using any other legal body part. Practice activities should refine these skills through individual, small group and small-sided activities.

Vision and Ball Control

How quickly does the player assess tactical options and execute ball control skills? Vision for "What next?" is a key element in the positive use of the "first touch," and for improving speed of play. Coaches should challenge players to appreciate their immediate tactical situation as early, and as often, as possible by looking around and turning their bodies sideways-on to the game, whenever possible. The earlier a player decides what to do with the ball, the fewer touches they will take and the faster they will play. Practice activities should involve possession games and other live, competitive games in order to improve decision-making and speed of play.

Dribbling

Does the player have the skill and creativity to dribble out of pressure, or past an opponent? At the U-11/12 level, evading pressure and beating opponents are critical skills for complementing the passing game as team play emerges. Rapid and abrupt changes in speed and direction, and the use of the shoulders and hips to disguise intentions, become critical subtleties as dribbling sophistication responds to the improved skills of defenders.

Does the player maintain vision while dribbling? Improving speed of play, through cleaner technique and faster reading of the game, is the primary role of the coach at this stage. Dribbling should now be considered very much a means to an end, with the

balance between shooting, passing and dribbling (decision-making) related to time and space and position on the field.

Heading

How diverse are the player's heading skills? Heading to goal and heading away from goal are basic applications of this technique. In addition, the use of heading as a passing technique and as a response to crossing situations should also be stressed as viable applications of this difficult skill. The timing of heading techniques, relative to the balls' pace, trajectory and time of flight, is the critical "next level" for most players of age eleven and beyond. Soccer balls should be kicked in the air over varying distances, whenever possible, to approximate realistic match situations, with hand-serves utilized as seldom as possible.

It should also be stressed that there is NO medical evidence supporting the claim that heading a soccer ball is dangerous to the participants.

Tackling

How competent is the player in applying sliding techniques? In addition to tackling for the ball, sliding skills can be used to keep balls in play, to reach wayward passes, to cross balls from the goal line, and to extend reach. Players should be instructed in tackling techniques with both the inside and outside legs (relative to a defender), and in sliding to maintain possession, pass, or clear.

Combination Play: Support and Movement with the Game

Does the player move with the game and combine with others? At the U-10 level, an increase in the speed of ball circulation, coupled with a more controlled rhythm of play are common features of play. At the U-11/12 level, those qualities can be taken a step further with the expectation of more formal combination play. At eleven, take-overs, wall passes and double passes are much more universal, and up-back-through combinations can be developed over time. Because of their still growing appreciation for midfield width and rhythm of play in large numbers, overlaps are still much less probable. All other combinations (passes to feet, passes to space, dribbling, and one-three's) are already established at this age, meaning that eleven and twelve becomes the period when most of the combining elements in the game can be performed for the first time.

Use of Space

Does the player move with the game when not in possession? In general, attacking players try to open up the field in order to create possibilities for small-group play, while defenders try to limit the amount of time and space available for the attackers to either penetrate by passing or dribbling, or change the point of attack to a more open area. In both cases, individual players have responsibilities to move with the game relative to their position. Attacking players should be instructed how to play with their immediate small group or stay away from the ball, and defenders should be instructed how to move as a defensive block. The attacking concepts of width, depth, support and mobility are critical applications of spatial awareness, as are the defensive concepts of cover, balance and compactness.

Playing with “Back to Goal”

Is the player more comfortable when facing the opponent’s goal than when playing with their back to the opponent’s goal? Many young players are uncomfortable checking and receiving the ball with their back to goal; however, 8v8 games provide many opportunities to expose young players to this important and difficult skill within a positional structure. To play effectively with back to goal, players must be aware of the tactical possibilities for receiving the ball to feet or into open space; they must learn to identify passing lanes or open spaces; they must learn to judge when and how to run for the ball; they must learn how to lay the ball off to a supporting player or turn with the ball; and they must learn how to disguise their movements and intentions. Playing with back to goal is an important concept for both midfielders and forwards and it is a disservice to encourage kickball, or exclusively direct soccer at this age.

Defending

Does the player understand basic defensive concepts? When the ball is lost, a defender’s first instinct should be to try to win it back. If this is not possible, they should either look to recover goal-side behind the ball, or take up a new position for any counter-attacking possibilities. Individual decision-making in defense follows a basic hierarchy of thinking. First, try to win the ball and keep possession when it is passed to an immediate opponent. Second, try to knock the ball away from the immediate opponent. Third, try to deny the immediate opponent space to turn with the ball. Fourth, try to keep the immediate attacker running towards a sideline or into other defenders. Finally, when not in position to achieve any of the above, recover behind the ball and help the team defend.

Transition

Does the player mentally transition after a change in possession? At all levels, speed of transition is often a critical element in the scoring and preventing of goals. With that said, it is beneficial to use live practice activities that incorporate transition to and from goal. The issue of vision is closely related to transition in that a player’s first attacking thought should be to score a goal; if that is not possible, passing to the furthest player possible is the next best option.

Decision-Making

By U-11, many players can read the game with some degree of sophistication and can be helped to identify the “best” option for play, based on the following hierarchy. First, can the player shoot at goal? Second, can the player dribble into position to shoot at goal? Third, can the player pass to someone who can score a goal? Fourth, can the player pass the ball forward to a teammate to maintain possession? Fifth, can the player pass the ball sideways or backwards to a teammate to maintain possession? Fifth, is the player under enough pressure to warrant a clearance?

Creativity

What is a creative team player? Three elements impact creativity. The first is technique, the second is tactical awareness, and the third is self-confidence. Players who have the audacity to think and act out of the ordinary may be future stars of the game and

their willingness to take risks must be nurtured at every level. As players move towards the teen years, a critical paradox enters the coaching challenge. Creative players are necessary for making teams unpredictable and creative players are often frustrating to coach and play with because they rarely conform to standard team concepts. Creative players are not always the easiest individuals to coach, but creative players are worth their weight in gold and America has yet to produce a creative genius.