

Training the U8 Player

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Principles of Youth Coaching

- Developmentally appropriate activities
- Clear, concise and correct information
- Simple to complex progression
- Safe and appropriate training area
- Opportunities for players to make decisions
- Implications for the game

Game/Activity Checklist

- Are the activities FUN?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Is creativity and decision making being used?
- Is the space appropriate for the age group and number of players?
- Is the coach's feedback appropriate?
- What are the implications for the game?

Understanding the U8 Player

Seven and eight year olds are still very fragile and self-centered, but their coordination, balance and agility are developing rapidly. Some players exhibit very good technical range and sophistication, while others are just beginning to develop. Seven and eight year olds are beginning to think in terms of small group play and can link more than one tactical option together. They can typically only kick the ball accurately over a short range and still do not deal with the ball coming out of the air very well. They can dribble away from pressure and their range of technique can include a number of different kicking surfaces. Vision is improving, but is still focused on their own team's possession. There is an improved awareness of space and time and they are willing to move into open areas to receive passes when time allows. Seven and eight year olds are capable of playing and practicing with more complicated rules and restrictions.

U8 Coaching Philosophy

Keep it simple and FUN! At the U8 level, dribbling is still the primary focus, although passing can be expected and encouraged. Games of 4 v 4 with no goalkeepers are excellent small sided versions of soccer for these players. Small sided games should be the primary focus of each practice, with "fun games" designed to maximize contact with the ball by every player.

Game Classifications

- **Body Awareness** – activities that emphasize the use of body parts, motion, coordination and balance with and without the ball.
- **Target Games** – activities that involve solving the objective by going from point A to point B. These activities are more directional and defined and can be done with and without the ball.
- **Maze Games** – activities in which the player has the opportunity to move 360 degrees or in a circle environment with and without the ball. Even though the area may be defined, it does not necessarily have a specific target of boundary to go to. These activities allow players to make decisions while moving all directions.

Typical Training Session Format

- Should not exceed more than 1 hour.
- Warm-up, each player with a ball and stretching (10 minutes).
- A mixture of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games and introduce target games (30 minutes).

- Conclude with small sided games of 4 v 4 with no goalkeepers (15 minutes).
- Cool down with dynamic movements (i.e., high knees, heels, skipping, etc.) and stretching (5 minutes).

Games and Activities

Math Dribble

Every player has a ball and works within a confined area. Players dribble to keep control while avoiding others. While they dribble, the coach calls out a math problem. The players immediately solve the problem by forming the appropriately sized group. This activity organizes groups without asking players to choose a partner or counting off. For example, if your next activity requires partners, call out $1 + 1$ or $3 - 1$. The activity encourages dribbling in a confined area, changing direction and changing speed. Quick reaction to cues, awareness of other players, problem solving and listening skills are stressed.

Ball Retrieve in Pairs

Work with one ball between two players. Using general field space, start from the middle of the field. One pair of players hands the coach the ball who then tosses it away and calls out a number from 2 – 10. Whatever number the coach calls, each pair of players must return the ball to the coach by passing the ball with their feet in exactly the asked for number of touches. The players decide how to solve the problem. The coach should rapidly toss balls away to keep the exercise flowing. The activity encourages working in pairs, pacing of passes and playing to a target.

Gates in Pairs

Using pairs of cones, the coach constructs 8 to 12 randomly spaced goals that are placed approximately three yards apart. Each pair of players should have one ball. After a signal from the coach, pairs of players attempt to play as many passes to each other as possible through the gates in 60 seconds. Players cannot pass through the same gate on consecutive passes. The activity encourages problem solving, speed of passing, changing direction, receiving and passing to feet, communication and cooperation.

Pac Man

Each player has a ball in a confined area approximately 20 x 25. Adjust the space to accommodate the number of players. All but two players must place their ball outside the area. The two players with the ball are the Pac Men. Pac Men dribble their balls and attempt to hit other players below the knee with a pass. Once a player is hit, they get their ball and become a Pac Man. The game continues until all players are hit and have their ball. The activity encourages dribbling and passing to a moving target, decision making, changing direction, fitness training and allows ability levels to play equally.

Boss of the Balls

This is a small sided game of 4 v 4 to two small goals and is played in an area approximately 20 x 30. The coach is standing at the midline with all of the balls. Ball one is put into play and the game begins. As soon as a goal is scored or a ball goes out of the area, the coach tosses or kicks in another ball. Coach can increase the demand of the exercise by adding goals at each corner of the field creating the opportunity for each team to have two goals to score in. This encourages passing, changing the point of attack and encourages successful finishing opportunities. As “Boss of the Balls,” the coach can often change the dimension of the game by using more than one ball at a time.

Keep it simple and FUN!