
Chapter 7

Coaching Eleven and Twelve Year Olds: The Dawning of Tactical Awareness

William James, An American Educator/Psychologist (1842-1919), promoted the idea that play was the result of instinct. He furthered the idea that children learn best when they are motivated by their own interests.

One Ball Four to Eight Players

Teetering on the edge of childhood and adolescence, the U-12 player presents a myriad of problems, but a gold mine of potential. Not only can they follow complex instruction, they now have the ability to create their own variations of the games. When compared to younger players, the U-12 player demonstrates a greater degree of analytical thought, which enhances tactical understanding. Still, their performance during match play will be inconsistent. Much of their training should consist of small-sided games with various playing or field conditions placed upon the players.

Psychomotor

As muscles mature, strength and power become a factor in their performance. Prior to age 11, running up and down the field presented a physical challenge in itself. With a size #4 ball in play and natural muscle development taking place, the U-12 player can strike the ball with ample distance and with a degree of directional confidence. A coach can ask and should expect players to execute a pass successfully much of the time.

Coordination improves in the 11 and 12 year old. In order to strike a soccer ball with one's foot and send it in a predetermined direction, it requires proper technique and coordination of the entire body. Players will begin to gain more confidence with the ball above their waist and upper body traps and heading takes on a bigger role in their play. Skills of the goalkeeper are also being developed and require flexibility, agility and overall body coordination. Players are growing and many players may be well over 5 feet in height and 100 pounds in weight. There are now significant, observable differences between genders.

Cognitive

Educators refer to the U-12 age as a fertile period for learning. They contend that enough basic knowledge is present to allow a nonrestrictive element of inquiry on the part of the learner. This means they can sequence thoughts and actions and perform more complex tasks. Players at this age are entering Piaget's fourth stage of cognitive development called formal operations. Players can be expected to use more abstract thought in meeting the demands of the game.

A coach can expect his players to understand the game and use teammates to help solve problems. If training sessions present appropriate problems for players to solve, reasonable game results can be expected.

At this point in the development, U-12 players should be able to simultaneously run, strike the ball and think. The idea that field space can be successfully covered by several small passes or one properly played pass begins making sense to players. The U-12 player is usually eager to learn. They are very much internally motivated to play but the nature of training sessions is crucial. It may stimulate or stifle the learning process.

Psychosocial

Whether a child enters puberty early or late has important psychological implications. These implications have direct impact on how a child develops relationships with teammates. Girls have a tendency to form cliques, boys take a more broad approach to team relationships. Popularity influences self-esteem. The manner in which they feel about themselves can determine how they relate to their teammates. Rules can be modified and created based on acceptance and/or agreement from the group.

The Game as Teacher

The U-12 player should be exposed to as many game-like situations as possible during training. For this to happen, all of the elements of the game that create realistic situations should be in place. These elements include: ball, field, laws, teammates, opponents, and objectives.

- **Ball** - The use of a ball by each player throughout practice is essential for building confidence and maintaining realistic qualities that relate to playing soccer. Young players need to practice individually with a ball, a partner, in small groups and with their team as a whole. Having plenty of balls available increases opportunities for decision-making and less time is spent retrieving stray balls.
- **Field** - Select the size of the playing area to correspond to the age, skill and demands of the practice. The size of the space puts some limitations on players. Too small a space may frustrate players as they don't have enough time or space in which to play. Too large an area will not challenge the players to "make" their own space, may lull them into feeling too comfortable and won't prepare them for the rigors of game space.
- **Laws** - The use of the laws of the game and fair play (sportsmanship) should be emphasized in practice. This will lead to compliance in games. Laws such as off-side should be included in sessions that relate to how the law is enforced in the game.

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- **Teammates and Opponents** - All decisions in the game are made based on the position of the ball, the objective of the game, the positions of teammates and the positions of the opponents. This requires keen observation of all players.

The decision to pass, shoot, dribble, cross, and receive in one direction or another are all made based on this observation.

- **Objectives** - Players should be challenged to play to an objective. Whether they score a goal or create points, the players should set and achieve results of their play.

Correcting Technique

Technical correction (i.e., foot placement, follow through, etc.) are effective with this age group since they can now visualize what it is you want them to do and how you want them to do it. Using the “freeze” method during play to describe, explain and correct is useful, but it should not be over-used. Trial and error, which includes free play, is a process of eliminating those skills that fail and experimenting with those that lead to success. Players need to be encouraged to self-correct mistakes they make during their play. This comes from instruction, feedback, and experience.

When introducing new skills, one must manage the tightrope between challenge and frustration. If practice is too simple, the player might lose interest; if the practice is too difficult, frustration creeps in rapidly and the player may give up, thinking that they “won’t get it.”

Tactical Awareness — Team Concepts

It is easy to fall into a detrimental method of coaching known as “over coaching.” The coach should first wait and observe, so players can search for solutions. Try hinting at something rather than offering an all out solution. Ask opinions (make sure you know the right answer). When time comes to coach, communicate clearly, concisely and correctly. An U-12 player can discuss and understand basic tactical concepts such as depth, width, balance and individual player responsibilities. But, remember that not everyone on your team will be at the same level of tactical understanding.

At younger ages, distribution of the ball by the coach has many advantages, but as players get older they must experience realistic restarts. Goalkeepers must be encouraged to distribute the ball from their end and field players should play the ball from the touchlines. Allow players to keep score during games, encourage good sportsmanship and allow for a competitive atmosphere to exist in practice.

Bear in mind many players are afraid to experiment in practice and games for fear of failure. This fear is related to many cues given consciously or unconsciously by adults. Young children care a great deal what adults think of them. They strive to perform for adults, to the point of substituting safe, mediocre play for more daring and dangerous play. We must allow players the freedom to play without fear to encourage their more creative responses.

Why Small-sided?

When we see a professional soccer game we watch as 22 players attempt to score goals or to try and prevent goals from being scored. This is a simple and true outlook on the game. All players must at one time or another be both an attacking player and defensive player. Youth players need to practice this condition until the reaction becomes permanent. Small-sided games provide this opportunity in abundance. The ebb and flow of 4 v 4 and other small-sided combinations offers innumerable situations in which transition takes place.

Characteristics of Small-sided Games

- More opportunities to play the ball. The fewer players on the field, the more possible times a player will come in contact with the ball. In fact, players will find they have no choice; the ball will quickly find them!
- More opportunities to score. Many players in an 11v11 game are not inclined to seek the goal, because they are so far away or because of defensive restraints.
- More opportunities to scheme. As we play we must constantly change and adapt to our surroundings. This challenge is the basis for tactics. How do we solve the puzzle?
- More opportunities to coach. The small-sided game allows coaches a perfect opportunity to observe and analyze the individual and collective responses of players under quick game-like conditions. Are players comfortable with the ball? Are they confident in defense? How well do they adapt to the unexpected? Do they recognize goal-scoring opportunities?

Sample Small-sided Game/Activities

Game 1: Grab the Tail (Warm-up)

On a field 25 x 20 yards (based on 12 players), players tuck a scrimmage vest into the back of their shorts. On the coaches signal all players try and grab each other's tail and throw it to the ground. All players continue to play even if they have lost their tail and play until there is one player remaining with a tail.

A variation is to allow the player to keep any tail he/she has captured. See who can collect the most tails. This activity encourages quickness, speed, and scheming.

A quick warm-up activity should be followed by several minutes of stretching especially emphasizing range of motion in the major muscle groups.

Game 2: Soccer to One Target (Target Game)

On a 40 x 30 yard field (12 players), each team has five field and one target player (he/she can be the goalkeeper). The target player may run the length of the goal line opposite the field players of his own color. The object is to score by playing the ball to the hands or feet of the target player. The target then distributes the ball to the opposite color, before it crosses midfield, who then attempts to play the ball to their own target.

Keep the game continuous. A variation to this is the team that scores keeps possession and attempts to score on the opposite target. The team who gave up the score must change ends of the field quickly in order to defend the distribution of the ball to a member of the team who just scored.

This small-sided game encourages accuracy and pace of pass, an early forward pass, following the pass and distribution. Coaches should observe and praise players when they recognize the forward pass, keep possession long enough to get a clear chance to play forward and are in good position to receive the ball.

Game 3: Barrel Ball (Target Game)

This is commonly called a street-game. Use up to half the field with a barrel in the middle. The rules are quite simple: two teams play against each other and score a goal when they hit the barrel. The last player who touches

the ball before it hits the barrel receives the goal, regardless of which team shot the ball.

Players are not permitted to touch the barrel. It would be good to have at least a one yard dead space around the barrel where players are not allowed to stand. Award bonus points for a ball that is played in the barrel (this is difficult but a great challenge)! This is a great small-sided game that can be used to start or end a practice. Players have to possess the ball under pressure, find the open player and make accurate passes, and shoot the ball quickly and accurately when presented the opportunity.

Game 4: Triangle Goal (Maze Game)

Using cones or flags create a triangle goal in the middle of your training space. The sides of the triangle should be approximately 8-10 yards in length. Two teams of approximately 6-8 players each play against each other. The defending team places three goalkeepers on each line of the triangle goal while the remaining 3-5 players defend against the attacking players. A goal may be scored on any side.

The team in possession is the attacking team and attempts to shoot or pass the ball across any one of the three triangle sides. The height of a “good” shot (goal) is determined by the coach. When possession is lost, goalkeepers must vacate the goal and the team that has lost possession must employ a quick defensive transition to avoid being scored upon. Play is to a set number of goals or to a time limit.

If a goal is scored the team who scored can become the defending team or can be allowed to retain possession and try to score again. If the defending team gains possession, the three goalkeepers sprint out and three new players from the other team must run in and take up goalkeeper positions. The roles are now reversed and play continues. This activity encourages transition play and changing the point of attack.

Game 5: Four Goal Game

Two teams play on a 40 x 30 yard area with goals in each of the four corners. Each team will defend two goals and attack two goals. Goalkeepers are optional. One goalkeeper could be utilized to defend both goals. This game encourages changing the point of attack and establishing field width. Players are able to identify which goal is the most vulnerable to attack.

What About Goalkeeping?

Last line of defense - first line of attack.

Many of the law changes in soccer have been centered on goalkeeping; how quickly the ball is released, what is allowed in the passback, etc. All of these new laws have forced us to reconsider the overall dynamics of goalkeeping. More than ever before, modern goalkeepers cannot detach themselves from the game. They have become vital elements of the attack as well as their more traditional role as the last defensive stand. They must be accurate passers of the ball during distribution, reliable receivers of the ball under pressure and even show deftness at heading when clearing errant back passes.

This means that the youth goalkeeper must be competent in field skills. Most goalkeeping skills are specific to the position (catching low, medium and high balls, diving, throwing). Older players are more likely to embrace goalkeeping as a more or less permanent role. How well these players incorporate the physical and mental skills of both field player and goalkeeper will determine the true effectiveness of their jobs as the first line of attack and the last line of defense.

Some Key Considerations

- Players at the U-10 level and older should be encouraged, not forced, to be exposed to goalkeeping roles in practice. Many players develop goalkeeping skills at older ages. Exposing many players at U-10 and U-12 to the position could help identify a hidden talent. Further, exposure to the rigors of goalkeeping may help field players understand the difficulty of the position.

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- Goalkeeping should become an active part of every practice. Unfortunately, many coaches incorrectly set up practices where goalkeepers work mostly by themselves and call on them only for shooting exercises. Goalkeepers should be used early in practice in technical development with the ball at their feet, and either as targets or in their primary role in front of the net to solidify their importance. They should not only play as shot blockers and distributors of the ball, but as active communication links with the rest of the team.
 - The role of the goalkeeper needs to move beyond that of a shot blocker during shooting practice. Coaches should permit goalkeepers to distribute the ball, which increases their decision-making and communication abilities. The goalkeeper's offensive role should develop in concert with their defensive role.
 - Be Active. Concentration by the goalkeeper is vitally important to their effectiveness. Goalkeepers who stay on their line or who are not attached to the rest of the team will soon be reacting to a desperate situation instead of a relatively safe one. Encouraging goalkeepers to be involved and ready goes a long way in reducing dangerous situations.
 - Goalkeeping is a tough job. Much is expected of goalkeepers, but they receive very little praise. In many ways, goalkeepers are subject to open and unforgiving exposure. Mistakes are clearly showcased and become very personalized, and psychologically deflating. Mistakes will be made. Encouragement and understanding mixed with sound coaching advice will go a long way in creating a stimulating playing environment.
 - When to begin as a goalkeeper is a question asked by many coaches. The authors believe that initiating goalkeeping in games prior to age nine is inappropriate. Children should be exposed to body movements that simulate what goalkeepers do, but to put them under the pressure of being a goalkeeper before they have developed some basic psychomotor and cognitive skills is inappropriate.

