

**Deconstructing Youth Soccer:  
Creating the ideals of street play in an organized soccer world**

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### **Preview**

**In February 2002 at the US Youth Soccer workshop in Atlanta, GA, the Director's of Coaching from all 55 State Soccer Associations formally endorsed a program of small-sided games for all players under the age of thirteen. This program calls for games of no more than 3v3 at U-6, games of no more than 4v4 at U-7/8, games of no more than 6v6 at U-9/10, and games of no more than 8v8 at U-11/12.**

**This program of small-sided games was adopted by the US Youth Soccer National Coaching Committee and forwarded to the National Board of Directors for formal nationwide adoption.**

**This article seeks to offer practical models for the restructuring of the American youth soccer environment for players between the ages of five/six (U-6) and eleven/twelve (U-12). The suggestions that follow draw on personal lessons from street soccer, utilize functioning physical education and coaching models, and borrow from the study of child, adolescent and sport psychology. The suggestions also reflect the experiences of existing, vibrant recreational and competitive soccer programs in Ohio-North and other states. By offering models that have proven to be successful, the intent is to further inform the national debate during this fertile period of coordinated evolution.**

## **Part I: Introduction**

Juergen Klinsman: “Ozzie, how is it that in Argentina you keep producing such wonderful, creative young players year after year?”

Ozzie Ardilles: “I think it is because we are too unorganized to be organized!”

While the wording may not be entirely accurate, the sentiment was heard loud and clear at the 2002 NCSAA Convention in Philadelphia when former German striker, Juergen Klinsman retold this conversation in part response to the question, “Will the USA (men) ever become a top six nation?” We live in a country where adults dominate youth sport. We live in a country where free play in soccer has never existed, except with the immigrant populations and those lucky enough to grow up with them. We live in a country where precious player resources are often cast aside or wasted with wanton disregard for present enjoyment or future potential. While some with an old school mentality would claim that America is all about toughness and social Darwinism and that formative and formal competitive experiences are natural and desirable, I would strongly argue that this mentality should not be inclusive of the youngest members of our soccer populations. I would also argue that, in their current forms, much of the structure and many of the principles underlying organized youth soccer in the United States are damaging to our long-term growth and development. At the very least, the current structures do very little to address the children’s love for “play” on their own terms; one example being the requirement that recreation level programs provide for only a minimum of 50% playing time, when 100% is not only more desirable, but eminently doable.

### **Children and Play**

Fascinating rules emerge in the streets and parks and sandlots and alleyways when children are left to their own devices in sport. In Shane Murphy’s excellent and insightful book, The Cheers and the Tears: A healthy alternative to the dark side of youth sport today, four basic principles were reported in describing the ways children govern their own organizations during free play. These four principles, Action, Involvement, Excitement and Friendships, are briefly described below.

**Action.** Games must be motivating, and children always seem to find ways to structure play into “competition” when they are left alone. Competition is fun, so long as the rules make sense! Mostly a set score determines the winner, sometimes a mealtime. Children never line up to practice a drill when play is an option; hence, “scrimmage” time is taken for granted. Older children will eagerly wait on the sidelines until a game ends for the right to play the winner and attempt to hold the field against the next challengers. Children often know intuitively what game numbers create the best balance for competition, and they will create multiple teams when space limits the option to play multiple or larger-sided games.

**Personal involvement.** The following question has probably been offered to thousands of children over the years: “Would you rather play on a team that may not win very often, or sit on the bench for a team that wins all the time?” The response is always the same. Children would rather play and lose than sit and win. One of the compelling features of youth sport, from the youth’s perspective, is participation. For athletes of every age, there is very little enjoyment in watching someone else play, and very little learning takes place without the opportunity to participate directly; most commonly, everyone plays! Children will often modify their rules to allow the weaker players second chances at success; more importantly, this practice also served to reduce the risk of embarrassing their weaker peers.

**Excitement.** Blowouts are no fun for children and characteristic of youth orchestrated play is the need for excitement and challenge. Ironically, while being the last player picked from a group can often be embarrassing, the practical outcome of this age-old tradition is relatively balanced competition. No youth sport contest begins with the two best players starting out on the same team. If the sides turn out to be uneven, either the game is concluded and new sides picked, or players trade places and new hope is given to the trailing side. Young players often modify their rules to accommodate imbalance or inequity and, particularly in lopsided contests, “next goal wins” serves to produce the required adrenaline rush in pursuit of last-minute glory.

**Friendships.** Young children enjoy being with their friends. They enjoy competing against them and competing with them. They also enjoy meeting new friends through sport. Social order is often created through sport, with the bigger or older kids appointing themselves as captains, picking the teams, settling the arguments and setting the rules. The first real sports heroes many of us remember were often the older, bigger or most advanced players involved in our daily games.

## **The Demise of the Street Soccer Culture and the Rise of Small-Sided Games**

The small-sided games movement evolved worldwide in response to the steady demise of street soccer. As a part of youth culture, street soccer remains strong in only Latin America, Africa, and in some parts of the Middle and Far East. In street soccer cultures, children as young as five can be found playing with their peers and older “friends” in ever-varying configurations of games. Two or three players are enough to start the days’ play and, on occasion, the numbers may swell to resemble small mob scenes. Goals are made from whatever is available and play is always between two goals. The ball may be nothing more than a bundle of rags, there are no scrimmage vests, no referees and no coaches. Rule disputes are settled by the players and the outcome of games is often decided by family meal times, evening curfews, the availability of light, or some agreed upon number, such as “ten halftime-twenty wins.” The severity of the bug bites in the summer was, as I remember, reason to keep moving, not reason to quit! During school days, arriving early meant more opportunities to play in smaller-sided games before the sleepyheads wandered in, and the lunch hour game was interrupted only long enough to gobble down food before resuming play.

In the 1980’s, with their street soccer cultures disappearing or essentially extinct, progressive Western soccer federations turned to small-sided games in an attempt to help compensate for the loss of skillful, imaginative players. Given the sheer volume of touches experienced over time in street soccer games, the number of players on the field was never an issue. But when “soccer time” became organized and reduced to only two or three hours each week, it became necessary to maximize ball contacts by reducing the number of players competing for possession. In soccer, dribbling skills are essential, and the creative dribbler was, and remains, the most prized talent.

Young children now come into organized soccer at the suggestion or urging of their parents; ironically, children repeatedly cite adult pressure as one of their main reasons for quitting organized sport. While all parents want their child to have a positive sport experience, for many, the specter of “win now” has become more important than the process of learning slowly and having fun. For many good reasons, children below the age of thirteen should not be placed in competitive situations in which the outcome influences their enjoyment and participation or threatens their right to learn and dream.

This article suggests ways to restructure entry-level and early experience youth soccer programs based on the needs of the children. It does not seek to reinvent street soccer, but it does seek to offer a balance between the ideals of street play and the realities of the over-organized youth sports world in which our children find themselves. At its core, is the belief that adults should not be partner to the “JonBenet Ramsey Phenomenon” of dressing children up to participate in miniature versions of professional sport.

## **A Model of Player Development: The Big Themes.**

The following model is intended as a descriptive continuum. It is presented to provide perspective on the skills, abilities and emotional needs of young children as they mature. It is also intended to provide evidence supporting smaller-sided games for the vast majority of players below U-13. While the information is generally accurate for each age group, all children mature at different rates and it is entirely possible that some precocious youngsters will understand the game and perform at levels beyond their cohorts. Significant overlap between stages is also quite normal and it is also true that some older children's skill level and understanding will more closely resemble that of younger players.

### **U-6's**

Five and six year-olds have very limited coordination and body awareness and are just learning to appreciate the difficulties associated with manipulating an object as troublesome as a round soccer ball without using their hands. They can dribble in straight lines. They can turn the ball in wide arcs. They can kick with the laces and the toes and they can stop the ball if it is not traveling too fast or coming out of the air. They will pass to teammates if they have time to assess their location and how to coordinate the kick, and they will gladly try to recover the ball when out of possession. They have no practical concept of space or teamwork and they have very little tolerance for complicated rules. While they are very egocentric, they will share the ball with teammates and, in spite of their limited attention spans and absent pacing skills, players as young as five and six will play small-sided soccer games for up to an hour, if they are provided with, or allowed to take, periodic breaks.

### **U-6 Coaching Theme: Individual Play**

At the U-6 level, the primary concern of the adults is to facilitate activities that cater to frequent ball contacts and the development of basic motor skills. One player-one ball activities and various "fun games" are excellent complements to small-sided soccer games of up to 3v3. While U-6's can play 4v4, 3v3 provides for a less cluttered environment. The formation of teams is not recommended, with group activity "Play Days" (see page 9) replacing formal, structured play. All activities should include every player.

### **U-7/8's**

Seven and eight year-olds are still very fragile young people and still very egocentric, but their coordination, balance and agility are developing rapidly and a growing technical range allows some players to be quite sophisticated in their individual play. Seven and eight year-olds are beginning to think in terms of small groups, making planned passing more of a realistic tactical option. They can only kick the ball accurately over a short distance and they still do not like to deal with balls coming out of the air. They can dribble away from pressure and they are beginning to understand that the game can have a rhythm other than "frenetic." Their range of techniques can include a number of different kicking surfaces and textures, but their vision for the game is almost exclusively post-control (after possession is secured). Their limited appreciation for space does not

marry well with numbers above four or five. They will move to open areas to receive passes when given time to assess how to help their teammates and they are capable of playing and practicing with restrictions and more complicated rules. They do not understand offside.

### **U-7/8 Coaching Themes: Individual Play and a little Passing**

At the U-7/8 level, dribbling the ball is still the primary soccer focus, although passing can be expected and should be encouraged. The children will be much more aware of how to play soccer games and should be given more responsibility for making teams and rules and for keeping score. Games of up to 4v4 with no goalkeepers are excellent small-sided versions of soccer for these children and no formal teams should be created at this time. While U-7/8's can play 5v5, the 5<sup>th</sup> field player creates a more cluttered environment that minimizes touches. The players' affinity for goalkeeping can be satisfied through the "nearest the goal" rule, but this should be decided by the participants. "Play Days" (see page 9) are recommended in lieu of formal league competitions and activities should be designed to include every player. Small-sided soccer games should be the primary content of practice, with "fun games" designed to maximize ball contacts used in complement.

### **U-9/10's**

Nine and ten year-olds can be unabashedly creative in their play. The best young players at this age move well with the game, circulate the ball quickly between teammates, defend with power and aggression, and generally play soccer in a way that can be exciting to watch. For the best ten year-olds, the vision to determine "what next" starts before the ball arrives (pre-control) and their ability to apply sound technique in subtle ways, such as chipping and 1v1 dribbling, are becoming evident. Ten year-olds are developing a working understanding of width, making some measure of positional play much more realistic to their level of understanding; however, they generally do not create depth very readily and the inclusion of a "midfield" in any playing organization creates insurmountable crowding problems for all but the most advanced players. Nine and ten year olds can understand the value of technical repetition and are much more willing to practice independently. They will head the ball and are more likely to try to control balls coming out of the air. Their passing range can be upwards of 30-40-yards. Nine and ten year olds can pass and control the ball with any surface and are capable of disguising their passing and dribbling movements. Feinting and faking are common features of play for the more gifted technicians.

### **U-9/10 Coaching Themes:**

#### **Individual Play, Support and Ball Circulation, and Small-Group Tactics.**

At this stage, young players start to identify themselves with a "team" and will be much more motivated to attend to formal instruction and repetitive practice activities. Improving and refining individual play through technical repetition is an important goal of this period and small-group tactical awareness can be rapidly expanded. Granting children the freedom to creatively produce individual solutions to tactical and technical problems is a critical element of coaching. Players will begin to move away from each other, but creating space and playing with back to goal is a difficult combination of skills

that can be fostered in more advanced players. Improved vision and support are the tactical markers of this age, and improved ball circulation is achieved as players understand about controlling and changing the rhythm of play. The better players in this age group will begin to combine with each other and goalkeepers should be frequently rotated. Games of up to 6v6 provide a natural balance between technical repetition and tactical complexity.

### **U-11/12's**

The competent U-11/12 player is comfortable in possession and can demonstrate a number of skillful solutions to evading pressure. The better players will juggle and perform “tricks” with the ball for fun, and to impress their peers, and in games, and their maturing body control and coordination provides the agility to quickly change speed and direction with the ball. The competent U-11/12 can kick the ball with a wide range of techniques, with bending the ball seemingly the last skill to emerge. Shots and passes can be struck with power and accuracy and passing range is expanding beyond 40 yards. Crossing and heading are a much more common feature of play. Given appropriate playing spaces, U-11/12's can control and change the rhythm of play in large groups and attack and defend with a high level of sophistication. U-11/12's are generally prepubescent, but some size and weight differences related to growth are evident. The level of competitiveness and the drive to win can be impressive, with a maturing physical dimension providing for longer periods of play.

#### **U-11/12 Coaching Themes:**

##### **Individual Play, Support and Combination Play and Large Group Tactics.**

At this stage, motivated and talented players are capable of demonstrating almost every technique, and practices should still include significant periods of technical repetition and small-sided play to reinforce and refine this technical base. The competitive structure should involve playing numbers through 8v8 (or 9v9) and, for the first time, players can intellectually appreciate the basic ideas of positioning and roles; meaning games involving possession in midfield will be possible. The early lessons of support and mobility can be expanded to evolve combinations in two's and three's, and defending can also become more coordinated as players learn to relate to each other in both attack and defense. Individual and group decision-making can be associated with purposeful changes in the rhythm of play and movement away from the ball can become a critical element of problem solving. The careful introduction of activities designed to develop soccer-specific fitness find a foundation in this period. The very best players in this age group are capable of playing 11v11; the vast majority is not.

### **U-13/14's**

#### **U-13/14 Coaching Themes:**

##### **Large Group Tactics and Team Building.**

Young teenagers are not polished soccer players, and the expansion and refinement of their technical base must still be the primary focus of these important years. Coaching 11v11 team play will begin at U-13, and patience will be required as the players' physical and tactical dimensions adapt to the larger field size and increased numbers. Practice activities should be geared towards improving decision-making under pressure, while

challenging players to solve small and large group problems quickly and collectively. As defenders become stronger, faster and more aggressive, attacking players will require sharper instincts for creating and using space, particularly, when playing with their backs to goal. Soccer-specific fitness activities should become integrated into an overall training and development plan, with caution advised with regard to over-training and burnout.

## **U-15 through Adulthood**

### **U-15 through Adulthood: Team Building, Functional Training and Learning to Win.**

This is truly the beginning of the formal “teambuilding” years. As players begin to reach physical and technical maturity, training should seek to develop the skills specific to positional (functional) play and fitness becomes important as a means of achieving victory. Players’ strategic understanding of soccer must be expanded to help make them coach-independent. Appreciation of the various systems of play, the study of individual and team tendencies, and the tactical applications of the laws become important aspects of player development.

### **When Adult Sport is Imposed on Children’s Play**

With the children’s perspective in mind, the picture created by select soccer in Ohio-North and across the USA is quite alarming. It has been reported that in all youth sports almost 60% of participants quit before age 14. The reasons cited for this exodus are predictable: Other interests take preference; the children are not having fun; the children are not being understood; the children are being placed under too much competitive stress; the children are not participating; the children are not excited or motivated to persevere; the children perceive the pressure to win as taking away from their enjoyment; the children perceive the adults as too domineering and too directing; and ironically, the children also quit because they feel they are not being taught.

Not so long ago, organized select soccer began around age 12. Young players would spend time in their local communities and gravitate to the select programs as they approached 11 or 12. As the game became more popular, it was perceived as a good idea to give children a head start by creating U-11 and then U-10 divisions at the select level; we now also have U-9’s and U-8’s playing for results. Premier soccer in Ohio-North has followed a similar pattern since its inception in the early 1980’s, and those clubs now draw children as young as eight. Even more alarming are the local communities with organized programs for three and four year-olds. In 1999, an attorney in Louisiana threatened legal action against the state soccer association on the grounds that the LYSA was depriving his son of opportunities to fully develop his future potential by denying permission to play in a league. The son was 24 months old!

Equally devastating for many children are the decisions being made about future potential at an age when they can barely control the ball; many select programs now hold try-outs for players as young as seven. By age nine, players are routinely compared to their peers, resulting in a child either being chosen for the team (a positive boost to self-confidence)

or being told they are not good enough (a crushing blow to delicate egos). Kudos to those communities who form multiple level teams and train all interested and motivated players together with the best coaching available. Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger, writing in the April (2001) issue of Four-Four-Two, labeled those who make decisions about the future professional potential of young players as either "Liars or cheats." It is simply impossible to predict where a precocious ten year-old will be in five or ten years, and all that can be said about a talented ten year-old is that (s)he is a talented ten year-old.

As sport becomes more organized, coaches feel more pressure to win. Without a firm appreciation for the long-term nature of player development, it follows that the instructions offered to players are driven by the pressure to reduce the risk of losing goals. Dribbling is discouraged in favor of passing and players are told to avoid dwelling on the ball. Defenders are strategically positioned in front of the goalkeeper to ensure at least two bodies are in place when an attacker bursts out of the ubiquitous mob. Direct play is safer and therefore preferred. Free movement of players in support of teammates is restricted by many and expressly forbidden by others. In short, the technical, tactical and emotional needs of the individuals are often supplanted by the emotional needs of the coach, whose self-worth and perceived value are generally equated with winning percentage. This scenario repeats itself at the grassroots level and at the select level and at the elite level. As soccer has become more organized, soccer players have become less "free" to enjoy the game in a manner that satisfies their principle of fun through play, and then they quit, in droves.

Our ability to maximize precious player resources and improve the overall quality of the youth soccer experience is dependent on informed and committed adults having the courage to give youth soccer back to the children. The "Model for Player Development" on page six is offered as a working foundation for understanding the technical, tactical and emotional needs of players as they mature, and the "Play Day" and "Split Game" models outlined in the remainder of this article are proposed as realistic alternatives to the culture of forming organized "single" teams at the very earliest ages. "Play Days" are targeted towards U-6, U-7 and U-8 players completing in 3v3, 4v4 and 5v5 games, while "Split Games" are proposed for U-9 and U-10 players competing in 5v5 or 6v6 games. With this model, eleven-a-side soccer is delayed until U-13 for the vast majority of our young players and the single game model of "team versus team" is delayed until U-11 and U-12.

## **Part II: The U-6/7/8 “Play Day” Model**

At the U-6, U-7 and U-8 levels, “Play Days” are recommended as the alternative to forming stable, season-long teams. Young children start to identify with the concept of “team” around the age of eight or nine, so forming stable teams and having coaches and referees and formal rules for these players is an adult-imposed condition that eliminates most connections to the ideals of Murphy’s “children and play” (page 2) and to street soccer.

### **Basic Organization**

To organize Play Days, start by identifying the number of players in each age band and the number of fields or open spaces available. This information will determine the number of hours and the number of volunteers required to organize the Play Day. The five and six year-olds (U-6’s) should play separately, as should the seven and eight year-olds (U-7’s and U-8’s), although, in smaller communities, any two-year age groups can certainly be combined. Any “obviously” dominant players should be moved up to the next age band, but only if they are comfortable leaving their friends. Boys and girls should play together, but accommodations should also be made for girls who want to play with other girls.

For the purpose of example, in this article I will assume there are 60 players in a U-6 group and 100 players in a U-8 group.

### **Playing numbers**

The national recommendations for playing numbers are 3v3 for U-6’s and 4v4 for U-7/8’s. The possibilities for the use of goalkeepers at the U-7/8 level are discussed below.

### **Flexibility in playing numbers**

The recommended playing numbers of 3v3 for U-6’s and 4v4 for U-7/8’s are ideal, but not always practical, and communities implementing the Play Day model should appreciate that flexibility is the key to success. Games of 4v4 are not “bad” for five year-olds, but 3v3 is better; similarly, games of 5v5 are not “bad” for U-7/8’s, but games of 4v4 are better. These young children will NOT spread out until they are tired, and the more players there are competing for possession, the fewer the touches enjoyed by everyone. With little mob scenes inevitable, it is the size of the mob that is critical to providing for frequent dribbling opportunities. With this said, if the numbers present provide for some games of 3v3 and some games of 4v4 at the U-6 level, the players should be arranged as such. The same is true with games of 4v4 and 5v5 at the U-8 level. It is even possible that some games will be played with uneven teams, such as 4v3 or 5v4; again, flexibility is the key to successful implementation.

When the number of players in attendance produces uneven teams, care should be taken to ensure that the weakest players are not left short-handed and unlikely to experience some success. Possible solutions include having the stronger players compete with fewer teammates and having an adult play with a shorthanded team.

### **Field dimensions, goals, and markings**

The reality of working with five and six year-olds is that there is no practical advantage to marking out “fields,” as the small numbers will always bring the game back towards the goal as soon as the youngster’s skills allow them to turn the ball around. Real goals, big cones or corner flags can be used for the goals, which should be at least four yards wide to encourage vision and scoring. Placing the goals 25-30 yards apart from each other will form the field. If sidelines must be used, the rectangle should be 25-30 yards in length by 20 yards in width to reduce the number of sideline restarts, which are essentially an imposition on players at this age.

For the U-7’s and U-8’s, the recommended field size is 40 yards by 30 yards, with goals, again, a minimum of four yards in width. Regular goals or corner flags can be used to form the goals and it should not be thought of as unusual to have a mixture of regular and corner flag goals on these fields.

These recommended field dimensions can and should be adapted to fit the logistics of existing field spaces.

At the U-7/8 level, painted lines or disc cones should be used to mark out the perimeters of the playing areas. While upright cones are easier to identify, they are more dangerous and obtrusive when used as part of field lines that are technically “in-play.”

### **Calculating the Number of Fields**

With 60 players in the U-6 division and six players per field, a maximum of ten 25-30x20 yard fields would be required for all the players to compete at one time.

In the U-7/8 division with 100 players and eight players per field, the maximum number of 40x30 yard fields required would also be ten.

### **Field logistics: U-6’s**

If the playing space is an open park area, creating fields is a simple matter of planting corner flags and laying out cones (if used); making ten small fields with no sidelines takes only a few minutes for a small group of adults.

If the playing spaces are being created on existing soccer fields, the following guidelines would apply.

On an 80x40 yard field, which is currently used for most 8v8 games, six 24x20 yard fields (three long by two across) can be created to accommodate up to 36 U-6 players (six games x 6 players). If the field has fixed goals, each field should be shortened, if necessary, to create a buffer zone in front of the goalposts to eliminate any possibility of collisions (Diagram 1a). Each field will share a center line.

Diagram 1a

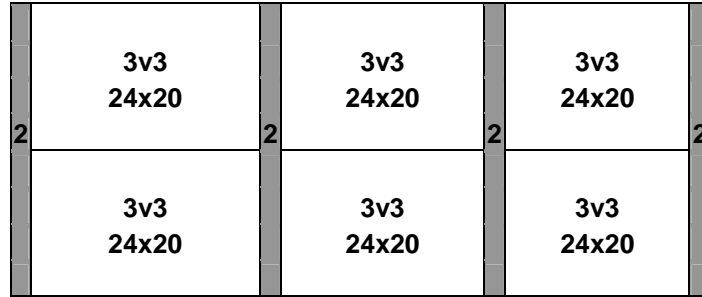


Diagram 1a shows an 80 yard x 40 yard field divided to accommodate 36 players competing in 3v3 games.

Because the large field width is 40 yards and the two smaller fields (20 yards wide) also need 40 yards, where space permits, the outside lines of the 3v3 fields should be marked with paint or cones outside of the existing sidelines to create a 5-yard central walkway (Diagram 1b)

Diagram 1b

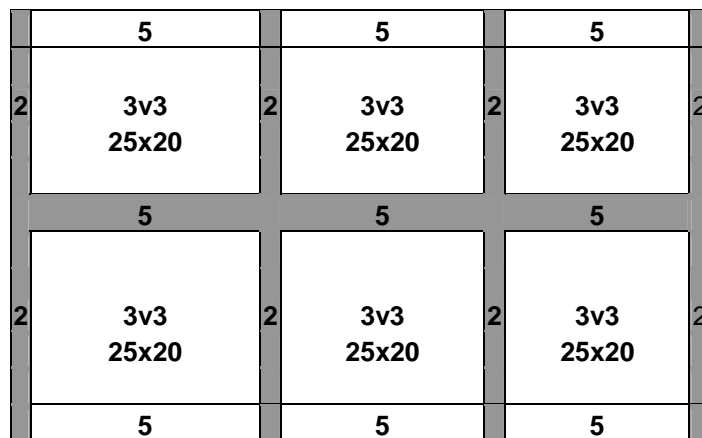


Diagram 1b shows an 80 yard x 40 yard field divided to accommodate 36 players competing in 3v3 games. This field also has buffer space between each field and around each goals.

On a 100x50 yard space, which is a small regulation soccer field, six 28x20 yard fields (three long by two across) can be created to accommodate 36 players with a 10-yard walk-space in the center (Diagram 2). On this field, buffer zones (3-5 yards) can be created in front of any fixed goals and between each field.

If the existing space is a regulation soccer field of 120x75 yards (Diagram 3), twelve 25x18 yard fields (four long by three across) can be created to accommodate up to 72 U-6 players (twelve fields x six players). No shared sidelines would be necessary and a 3-yard buffer area should be created in front of any fixed goals. Starting the fields on the top of the respective goal areas will still provide for two to three yards of buffer space between each field.

Diagram 2

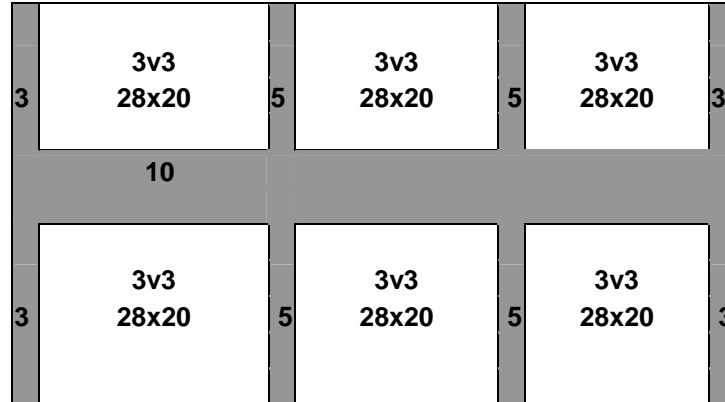


Diagram 3 shows a 100 yard x 50 yard field divided to accommodate 36 players competing in 3v3 games.

Diagram 3

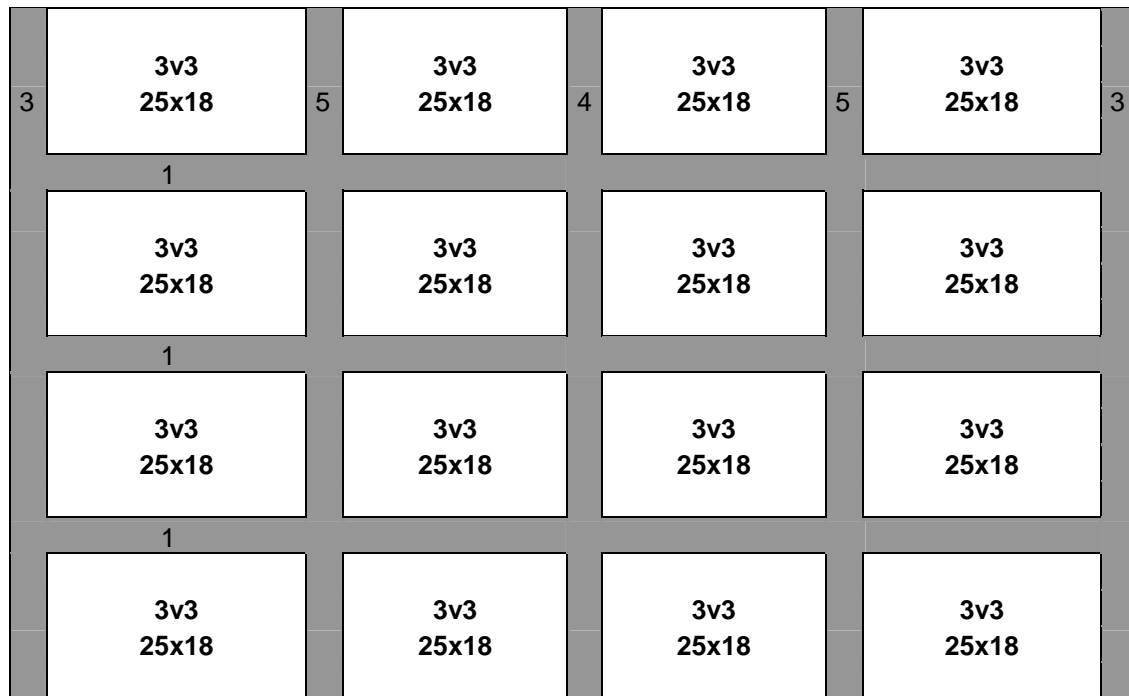


Diagram 4 shows a 120 yard x 75 yard field divided to accommodate 72 players competing in 3v3 games.

**Field logistics: U-7/8's**

If the playing space is an open park area, creating ten 40x25 yard fields is again achieved by dropping cones and planting corner flags.

On an 80x40 yard field, two 40x30 yard fields can be created to accommodate up to 16 U-7/8 players (Diagram 4). The fields should be organized across the width of the

existing space to eliminate any possibility of a collision with fixed goals and to avoid the need for a common sideline.

Diagram 4

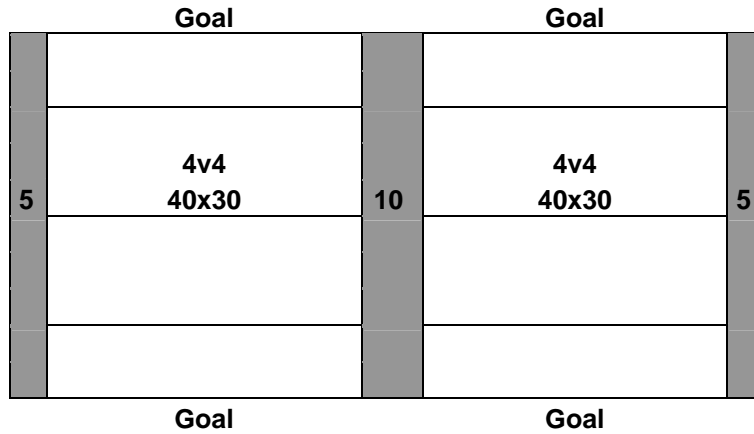


Diagram 4 shows an 80 yard x 40 yard field divided to accommodate 16 players competing in 4v4 games

On a 100x50 yard space, four 40x25 yard fields (two long by two across) can be created with shared sidelines and a walk-space along the existing center of the field (Diagram 5a). In this way, 32 U-8 players can compete at one time. If space is available, the fields should be marked outside of the existing sidelines and widened to the full 30 yards (Diagram 5b). This would also provide for a central walkway.

If the existing space is a regulation soccer field of 120x75 yards (Diagram 6), a maximum of five 40x25 yard fields (one in each corner and one vertically in the center) can be created to accommodate up to 40 U-8 players (five games x eight players). No shared sidelines would be necessary.

Diagram 5a

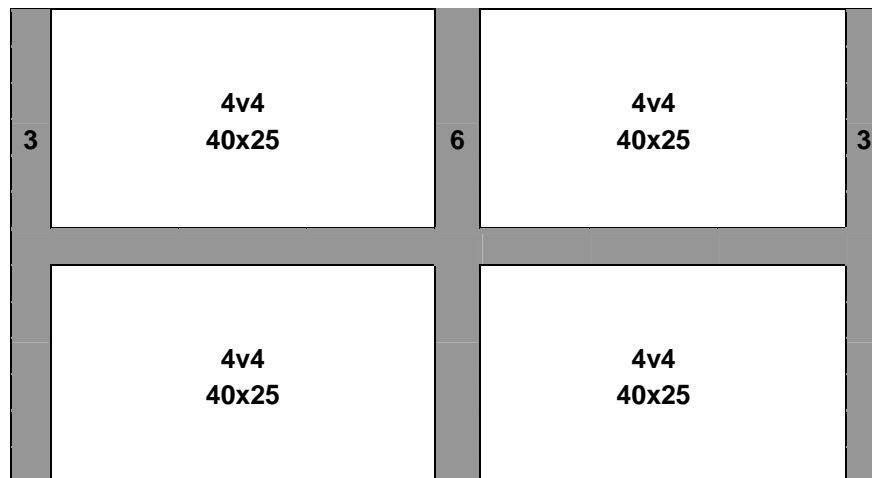


Diagram 5a shows a 100 yard x 50 yard field divided to accommodate 32 players competing in 4v4 games.

Diagram 5b

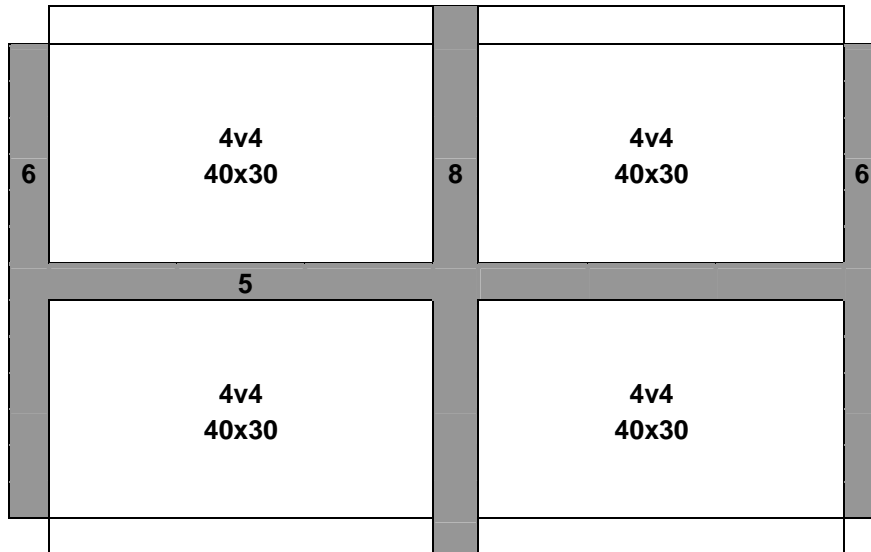


Diagram 5b shows a 100 yard x 50 yard field divided to accommodate 32 players competing in 4v4 games

Diagram 6

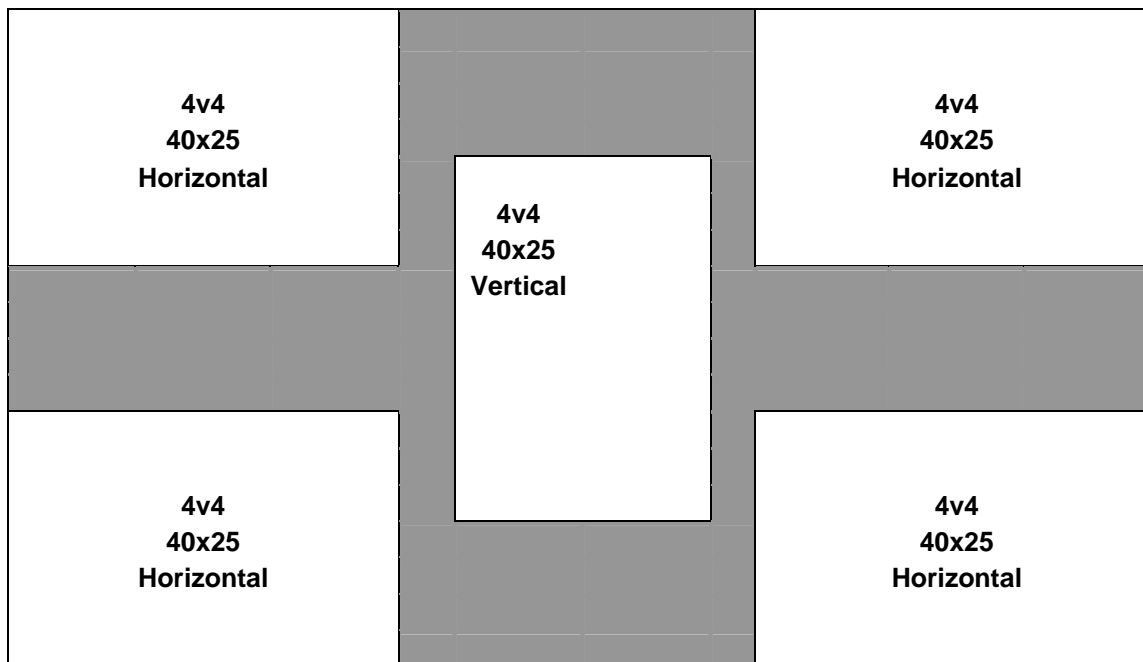


Diagram 6 shows a 120 yard x 75 yard field divided to accommodate 40 players competing in 4v4 games.

To summarize: In our scenario, with 60 and 100 U-6 and U-8 players respectively, the number of fields required to accommodate the players at one time would be as follows. If

only a limited number of fields are available, playing groups can be staggered in relation to the space available.

	<b>80x40 yard fields</b>	<b>100x50 yard fields</b>	<b>120x75 yard fields</b>
<b>U-6's 60 total players</b>	Up to 36 players per field 2 fields required for 60 players	Up to 36 players per field 2 fields required for 60 players	Up to 72 players per field 1 field required for 60 players
<b>U-8's 100 total players</b>	Up to 16 players per field 6 fields required for 100 players	Up to 32 players per field 4 fields required for 100 players	Up to 40 players per field 3 fields required for 100 players

### **Number and duration of “games” per Play Day**

Young children play with great enthusiasm and energy for short periods and then they rest or move onto something else. With this in mind, Play Days for U-6’s and U-8’s should generally not exceed 60 minutes of active play and should, ideally, feature multiple short duration games against a variety of opponents. The recommendation for U-6’s is for three to four 15-minute games for a total playing time of between 45 and 60 minutes. With the U-8’s, four 15-minute games for a total playing time of 60 minutes will satisfy their typical needs, with weather conditions, field conditions, and enthusiasm helping to determine the exact number of games each day.

### **Playing Rules**

The modified playing rules for the U-6’s and U-7/8’s are slightly different; these rules can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively. At the U-6 level, the modified rules are designed with the players’ limited appreciation for order and formality in mind, and to minimize stoppages. At the U-7/8 level, the modified playing rules introduce basic restart situations, but still cater to the players desire for limited formality.

### **Uniforms**

The best solution for uniforms is for each player to receive one T-shirt of the same color and for the host organization to furnish scrimmage vests of a contrasting color. A reversible shirt for each player is also a uniform possibility, but changing sides (taking off the shirt in public) may be uncomfortable for some children.

### **Staffing the Play Day**

One group leader is required for each age group and the primary responsibilities of the adults are determined by the age of the players, with U-7/8’s requiring much less assistance than the U-6’s.

With ten fields in the U-6 division, ten additional adults will be required to help facilitate games. This assumes all 60 players are participating at one time. The number of adults would be halved if the 60 players were scheduled to attend in two groups of 30.

In the U-8 division, one adult can oversee two fields, meaning only six additional adults would be necessary to supervise all 100 players at one time. While one adult per field

may be “better” from the adult mentality, U-8 players, in particular, enjoy less direct supervision.

### **Facilitating the Play Day**

At the U-6 level, the players will initially be quite limited in their ability to understand the game, but they will appreciate not to use their hands and which direction to attack and defend within a couple of weeks. With the U-6's, the adult's first responsibility is to help the group leader move the players to their assigned field and start the games as soon as possible. There is no formal “start” signal and when the children are situated they should start to play. The limited playing rules can be explained as they become necessary.

Once the games are underway, the next challenge facing the adult is to observe the players to determine the “balance” between the teams. If the ball is generally moving back and forth, the teams are probably balanced. If one team (or player) is dominating and scoring at will, the adult will have two basic options. First, to play with the weaker players and help them make progress and experience success. Second, to change the players around to achieve more balanced teams.

The adults' other responsibilities include praising the players for their efforts, comforting any child in emotional or physical distress, helping settle any lingering rule disputes (usually U-7/8's), and deterring parents from “coaching” their children from the sidelines. The final challenge will be to help the children rotate between games.

The most difficult aspect of playing soccer as a five or six year old is restarting the game after it has crossed the goal line, and it is often the case that the adult's most practical contribution to U-6 soccer is physically participating in this phase of play. This is because the kicking range of the players is only a few yards, at best. In the adult version of soccer, a ball crossing the goal line results in a goal, a goal kick, or a corner kick and these rules should come into play at the U-7/8 level. In the U-6 game, any ball crossing the goal line should be restarted with a modified goal kick where any attacking player is allowed to dribble or kick the ball back into play from any point on the goal line. When all the players are massed in front of the ball with no obvious route back into play, the adult can actively participate by kicking or throwing the ball into an open space where, hopefully, an attacker can run onto the ball and advance it downfield.

### **Referees**

There are no formal referees required, but an adult will always be on the field, or close by. The golden rule for U-6's is to keep the action as fluid as possible unless one of the players complains! For U-8's, the players should be allowed to call their own fouls, goals, and out of bounds as much as possible, with the adult available to help only when needed. In an ideal situation, U-8 teams should also be free to decide on their own rule modifications! Decisions such as whether corners are taken or count “half” a goal, and whether players at the back of the team can use their hands or not, are common decisions that can be arbitrary decided on a game-by-game basis by the players in the Play Day format.

## **Goalkeepers**

In general, there should be no formal goalkeepers at U-6 and U-7/8; however, even U-6's will prevent goals by using their hands and this should not be discouraged provided the "offending" player is not routinely camped in the goal.

At the U-8 level, there are three basic goalkeeping options that have evolved from street soccer. The most restrictive is that no one can use their hands around the goal. The second is that the defending player closest to the goal becomes the goalkeeper for that part of the action, and that player is then free to run the ball out of the goal and start a counter-attack. Traditionally, this option was the best and most common solution when there were small teams or no player wanted to be the goalkeeper. The final option is to have a rotating goalkeeper. Traditionally, this option became customary when the number of players grew above five or six per side. The rotation was usually based on when goals were conceded, but spending too long in goal was grounds for grumbling and so time spent in goal was also a consideration. It is recommended that goalkeeping, in some form, be introduced at the U-8 level, ideally with the players deciding the format.

## **Rotations of players**

There are a number of ways to rotate players on Play Days, and using a variety of these configurations provides opportunities for more players to experience success and failure, and winning and losing. Here are the most common options.

### Random Rotation by Play Day.

As players arrive at the fields, they are randomly assigned to teams at the start of play each day. This can be achieved in two ways.

- 1) The most common approach is to bring the entire group together and assign each player to a field: six or eight players will be on field #1, six or eight on field #2, etc. Once in the correct space, the players are helped to form their teams for the entire day and play begins.
- 2) The second random rotation option is to assign players to teams as they arrive at the field. The first six or eight are sent to start play on field #1, the next six or eight to field #2, etc. With this method, players arriving early automatically get more playing time while waiting for the bulk of the players to arrive. The U-6/7's will need adult assistance, while the U-8s will be more independent.

### Random Rotation by Game.

Players can be rotated onto new teams after each game. This is recommended as a viable option for U-8's, but not U-6's or U-7's. With this format, the players return to a central area after each game, and new teams are formed by lining the children up and re-numbering them into new teams. This takes a little more work on the part of the coaches, but is a fun way to create individual competition within team play. As long as the players are not standing in the same positions they occupied for the previous "count-off," each team will have new members. With 100 participants in our U-8 example, walking down the line and numbering the players 1-25 will result in 25 teams of four. With this format, teams #1 and #2 always play on field "A," teams #3 and #4 always play on field "B,"

teams #5 and #6 always play on field “C,” etc. As it is only possible for 24 teams to play at once, the four players on team #25 would be dispersed into two fields (“A” and “B,” for example) to make games of 5v5.

### Ability Groupings.

Players have more or less ability with the ball at every age level. After one or two weeks of observing a group of young children, it becomes readily apparent who has a sense of the game; who is immature and avoids participation; who can play, given more time and space; who is physically advanced and can dominate the smaller or weaker kids; who thinks out tactical solutions; who is agile and can run, etc. By labeling players as, for example, “Red,” “White” and “Blue” for the purpose of creating ability groups, it is possible to match players of similar abilities together, or stratify teams with balanced, but mixed ability levels; both practices serve to create games that are likely to be more balanced in terms of score.

In theory, when grouped by mixed abilities, the weaker players learn by watching and participating with the stronger ones, while the stronger players learn how to compensate for weaker teammates. With this approach, teams are pre-determined before play begins and stay together for a day, or two, before new configurations are announced. This method provides the group leader with opportunities to balance each team by separating the better players. The drawback is that any timid or hesitant players will still tend to be dominated by the stronger ones.

Dividing the players into “aggressive” and “non-aggressive” groups ensures that the more timid or hesitant players have the opportunity to experience success and emerge over time. This method has proved to be highly beneficial to both groups of players, with the adults having license to move players from group to group as deemed necessary.

### **Competition.**

If the “Random rotation by Play Day” approach is used, players can report their win-loss record to the coaches at the end of each day’s play. This approach works best at the U-8 level where players are quite competitive – and can count! Because many players are still easily embarrassed and intimidated, mixing and matching players over a period of time provides the best environment to encourage the positive value of competition while minimizing the not-so-subtle pressures often exerted by parents and coaches.

When using the “Random Rotation by Game” approach, competition at the U-8 level can also be made fun by mixing teams, but keeping individual scores. This can be achieved by awarding points (3) to every player on a winning team. Points can also be given for every goal scored by a team (win or lose), and for shutouts (1). For example, if a game ends 2-0, each member of the winning team would score 3 points for the win, 2 points for the goals, and 1 point for the shutout, for a total of 6 points. The losing team did not score a goal, so they would not earn any points during that round of play. Tied games are worth one point per team, in addition to goal points. At the end of each game, the teams agree on the score, the players add up their respective points, and their individual number is reported to the central area scorer. Teams are then reconfigured. At the end of each Play

Day, every player has accumulated a point total that can be used to identify the talent levels and help balance ability groups.

### **Parent issues**

The issue of parents in sport is a fascinating study, and The Cheers and the Tears, by Shane Murphy, is highly recommended reading for anyone concerned about the current state of the youth sport experience. In short, it has becoming increasingly more apparent that parents are driving decisions about the direction of youth sport. The impact of this shift is that the needs and interests of the parents often supercede the needs and interests of the players. Social power, ego, future financial gain, and the child's perceived athletic prowess and possibilities are just some of the reasons why some parents have turned the fun and wonderment of children's play into a competitive cauldron. Despite the arguments, protests and pleas of those educated in the field of child development, the "parent knows best" mentality is imposing adult models on youth sport, with alarming consequences. It is strongly suggested that communities examine their reasons for organizing youth soccer and question the degree to which their program is driven by parents' interests at the expense of the children.

### **Practices: the next level**

For most parent volunteers, the prospect of actually having to "coach" soccer is challenging, if not threatening. In communities where the adult soccer organizers have little or no soccer expertise, the Play Day format is the best possible learning experience for children as it provides a means for active learning through trial and error. No knowledge beyond basic organizing skills is necessary on the part of the adults, and one to two Play Days each week will provide a wonderful entry-level soccer program.

If a number of adults with soccer or physical education experience are involved in the local community, the Play Day approach can be expanded to include a practice night. This additional activity period can be used to increase the number of individual ball contacts through fun, soccer-related activities.

At these practices, all the coaches and players should practice together in the same large area, if possible, with the U-6's practicing separately from the U-7's, who, in turn, would practice separately from the U-8's. If this is not logistically possible, one third or one half of the group can practice in the same general area together with an appropriate number of adults. Generally, the U-6's will require an adult for every 6-10 children and the U-7/8's will require an adult for every 14-18 players. One "Head" coach is responsible for designing and leading the activities and for mentoring his or her assistants. The coaches should work together as a group. The Head Coach is responsible for organizing a steady diet of small-sided games, ranging from 1v1 to 5v5 - depending on the ages involved - and providing fun, soccer-related games. He or she can also model good coaching behaviors and closely assist any novice coaches. At all Play Day practices, all games and activities should focus heavily on individual dribbling activities where players have multiple opportunities to manipulate the ball.

The different abilities of the U-6 and U-7/8 players should influence the content and design of the practices. At the U-6 level, the format might look something like the following:

Warm-up: Free Play  
Fun Game: Freeze Tag  
Soccer Games: 2v2  
Fun Game: Red Light / Green Light  
Soccer Game: 1v1  
End: Free Play (3v3 / 4v4)

At the U-7/8 level, there is more soccer and less “filler” in the following example.

Warm-up: Free Play  
Soccer Game: Round Robin 1v1 or 2v2  
Fun Game: Sharks and minnows  
Soccer Game: 3v3  
Skill Development: Basic Juggling Skills  
End: Free Play (4v4 / 5v5)

### **Training Stations**

The multiple training station approach has proved to be successful at Play Day training sessions. In this format, the Head Coach plans the activities each assistant coach will lead at their respective station and the players are rotated between the coaches after a few minutes at each station. The activities will be similar to those suggested in the traditional practice session noted above.

For more information on these formats, please contact OYSAN State Director of Coaching Tom Turner ([Gers1873@aol.com](mailto:Gers1873@aol.com)) about the U-6 and U-8 coaching education programs.

## **Part III: The U-9/10 “Split Game” Model**

### **Adult Model**

The standard model currently utilized for U-9/10's is to play 8v8 on a field up to 90 yards long and up to 50 yards wide, with goals either 12 or 18 feet wide and six feet high. A referee and two assistant referees (AR's), or club AR's, control the game. The most contentious rules, from the perspective of the referees, parents and coaches are generally those that deal with offside, handball, tripping and the throw-in. The average player often has difficulty clearing the ball out of the box from a goal kick and there are many who rarely touch the ball in open play. With a full roster of 14, six players from each team are always on the sidelines. The duration of the games is set at 50 minutes, resulting in the average player participating for just under 29 minutes per game ( $8/14 \times 50 = 28.57$ ) or less than 60% of the total time. Each team generally has a coach and an assistant coach who are often overly consumed with direct play and the organization of players into positions. Positioning, in the adult sense, has been observed to be very difficult, if not conceptually impossible for most U-9/10 players. A previous article from Ohio Soccer, entitled “Space: The tactical frontier” <http://www.oysan.org/Spacethetacticalfrontier.doc>) will acquaint unfamiliar coaches and parents with the technical and tactical rationale for less congested, less structured games at the U-9/10 level.

### **The Alternative**

In the Split Game model, two teams compete at a home site in the traditional way, but with the following modifications. Each team divides their roster of 14 into two “mini-teams” of seven players. These seven-player teams are divided evenly with four field players and a goalkeeper at U-9, or five field players and a goalkeeper at U-10. It is also possible, but not recommended to play 6v6 at U-9. Both 5v5 and 6v6 games can be played on the same field space. With a 14-player roster, each mini-team will have a maximum of two substitutes. The 80 x 50 yard field is divided in half, with two 45-50 yard x 35-40 yard fields laid out between the existing sidelines (Diagram 7). The goalkeeper's boxes are marked across the width of the field ten yards from each goal. One referee is assigned to each field. Each team of seven plays a game of 2 x 15-minute halves before taking a break and then rotating to play a similar game against the other half of the opponent's team. The players should be rotated evenly, but not at every stoppage in play. With the total playing time set at 60 minutes, the average player now competes for just less than 43 minutes per game ( $5/7 \times 60 = 42.66$ ), which is over 71% of the total time.

### **Logistics**

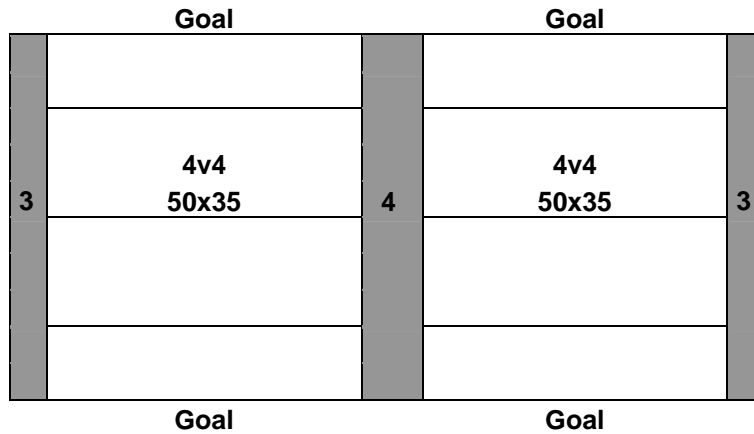
#### **Referees.**

One referee will be required for each game. With the most contentious rules modified to satisfy the needs of the children, the U-9/10 game becomes the perfect environment to introduce young referees into soccer. Any increase in the number of U-9/10 referees will eventually be offset by the anticipated elimination of referees at the U-8 level and below.

**Goals.**

Adding one additional set of goals to each 80-90 x 45-50 field will involve a capital expenditure. However, the goals on each smaller field do not have to be the same size, proving leeway for existing goals of any size to be used on the second field until a matching set can be purchased or manufactured.

Diagram 7.



In Diagram 7, an 80 yard by 50 yard field has been divided in half to form two 50 yard by 35 yard fields.

**Lines.**

Painting additional lines on existing fields is cosmetically pleasing and certainly preferred, but not absolutely necessary from a practical standpoint. Dropping cones at 10-yard intervals on each sideline will form the perimeter of the field, and the goalkeeper's boxes (35-40 x 10) can be marked with two additional cones placed 10 yards from each goal line and 12-13 yards from each sideline.

**Coaches.**

There is no need for additional coaching with this model for at least two reasons. First, coaching should take place at practice, not during play. Games are the time when children should be able to enjoy themselves in an environment free from adult direction. Second, each coach (there are generally two with each team) can see each player for up to half an hour while watching one of the two games. The job of the coach during play is to observe players for technical and tactical tendencies and, given the tender age of these players, very few surprises will emerge over the course of a season. Other than watching the clock for substitutions (a change every five minutes is suggested) the role of the coach at this level should be to observe each player with an eye towards their gradual improvement over time. As a rule of thumb, practice time is for coaching and game time is for playing.

**Determining winners**

In the split-game model, the first option is to add the total number of goals scored in each game. The team with the best aggregate score would be pronounced the winner. A second, and strongly recommended option would be to view the total number of points available for each mini game as two, with each tie worth one point. With four mini games

(two games per 30 minutes) being played over the course of an hour, the total number of points available would be eight. To win the match outright a team would be required to secure at least two wins and a draw from the four 30-minute games. This method is recommended because it eliminates the pressure to run up the score when the eventual outcome of a game becomes obvious.

### **Playing Rules for U-9/10's**

The modified playing rules for U-9/10's can be found in Appendix C. These modifications are designed with the players' emotional level, and their need for activity and involvement in mind. The rules borrow from street soccer and from basic coaching theory, and continue to omit the most contentious adult rules, such as offside, until U-11 and older.

## **Part IV: The U-11/12 Single Game Model**

### **Adult Model**

Currently, children under the age of 13 play competitive games of 11-a-side, generally with rosters of 18 players. The games are played on an adult size field (between 100 and 130 yards long and between 50-80 yards wide), and follow standard FIFA rules with the exception of substitution. Due to the limited size and strength of these young players, the ball tends to remain in areas of the field for prolonged periods, as it is quite difficult for children with limited technical range to consciously circulate the ball from end to end or from side to side. The standard game length is 50 minutes. The average player sees action for 30.5 minutes ( $11/18 \times 50$ ), or 61% of the time, assuming an equal rotation of team members.

Coaching, and the limited vision and passing range of U-11/12's have a profound impact on group and team tactics at this age. The ball often takes an inordinate amount of time to travel from goal line to goal line and players who can kick the ball out of danger and towards the opponent's goal are often regarded as "better" than those who may show promise in dribbling the ball. With total disregard for the many learning opportunities surrounding the FIFA offside rule at the half way line, defenders are often told to stay at the top of their penalty box to safeguard against break-a-way opportunities, essentially leaving vast tracts of land between the defensive and midfield lines.

Compounding this problem is the distance from the defensive line to the forward line, which may be as much as 80 yards, if the other team also employs "goalie guards!" Given this expanse, the midfield players have an impossible challenge in supporting the lines on either side of the half, and the "linking" process that is crucial to basic support and combination play between the three lines is effectively eliminated as a tactical option. Tactically, the coaches' fear of losing goals produces the most conservative and basic strategic approach: kick the ball long, and preferably early; keep numbers behind the ball at all times; and stay in positions. A previous Ohio Soccer article entitled "Developing the National Style at the State Level" (<http://www.oysan.org/nationalstyle.doc>) outlines the detrimental long-term impact of this style of play.

### **The Alternative**

The existing model for U-9/10's (season 2000-2001), with some minor rule modifications, is the recommended model for youth players under the age of 12. Seven field players and a goalkeeper, and a roster of 14, provides a playing environment that is infinitely more suited to the technical and tactical realities of this age group. Maintaining rosters of 14 should also allow for fewer administrative problems in adding or subtracting players to create rosters of 18 at an age when "cutting" can be devastating to motivated, but less talented players.

### **Major Modified Rules for U-11/12's**

- Increase the game time to 70 minutes. Rationale: Statistically, during a 50-minute game, equally rotating 11 players from a roster of 18 provides for more time on the field ( $11/18 \times 50 = 30.5$  minutes, 61%) than playing 8 from a roster of 14

(8\14 x 50 = 28.57 minutes, 57%). However, the average number of touches per minute will increase with teams of eight, and, by increasing the game time by twenty minutes, the average playing time for each child will remain at 57%, but the actual time on the field will jump to just under 40 minutes (8\14 x 60 = 39.9).

- Field size decreased to 80-90 yards in length and 40-50 yards in width. Rationale: The smaller space allows players to create and deny scoring chances on a more regular basis. In addition, the defensive, midfield and forward lines are more naturally connected, providing realistic supporting distances and the possibilities of combination play.
- At a minimum, substitutions should be made around the 15-17 minute mark, except in the case of injury. Rationale: Soccer is a game with a distinctive rhythm. Players must learn how to play with one another based on individual strengths and weaknesses. Normally, about 15 to 20 minutes is required for a player to become comfortable with the pace of play; therefore, it is recommended that substitutions be made in a manner that provides “blocks” of playing time to each individual. In addition, since each change in personnel interrupts the rhythm of play and, to a greater or lesser degree, the tactical approach of the team, it is recommended that players would be better served by playing an entire half than by playing for two 15-17 minute blocks in each half.

### **In closing...**

In 1960, President Kennedy challenged NASA to land a man on the moon within 10 years. Many people thought he was out of his mind, but the scientists appreciated the possibilities and NASA achieved the objective in only nine years. Soccer is facing a much less formidable challenge, but can we achieve another American miracle?

## **Appendix A**

## **U-6 Playing Rules**

### **1.0 Number of Players**

The recommended number of players for U-6 games is 3v3. Games of 4v4 can be used to accommodate additional players. Goalkeepers are not recommended for this age.

### **2.0 Roster Size**

With the Play Day format, there are no rosters. The Play Day format is an inclusion based model that provides for 100% participation.

### **3.0 Field Dimensions**

The field of play shall be rectangular, with the recommended size for 3v3 being 25-30 yards by 20-25 yards.

### **4.0 Markings**

In reality, field markings for U-6 games are unnecessary; however, chalk lines or disc cones can be used to mark out the fields.

### **5.0 Goals**

Corner flags, placed 12 feet apart, provide the most efficient means of creating multiple goals. If finances allow, the recommended goal size for U-6 is 6 feet by 12 feet. Small hockey goals are not recommended because they are too narrow to encourage the vision to shoot from distance. When the suggested goal size is not available, other common sizes, such as 6 feet by 6 yards and 7 feet by 7 yards will suffice.

### **6.0 The Ball**

The recommended ball for all players younger than seven is a “lightweight” size four. These balls feel like volleyballs and are easier for young players to kick and control. In the absence of lightweight size four balls, size three balls should be used.

### **7.0 Duration of Play**

With the “Play Day” format, players can compete in between two and six games per day for a total of 45-60 minutes of active participation, depending on player interest. Rest breaks should follow each play period.

### **8.0 The Referee**

A coach or parent should monitor play. The primary concerns of the adult are the safety and enjoyment of the players. Only one adult should be on the field to help the players and “coaching” from the sidelines should be minimized.

### **9.0 Offside**

Offside does not apply to U-6 play.

### **10.0 Restarts**

All restarts are indirect and opponents must be at least 4 yards from the ball. At the U-6 level, any illegal restarts should be retaken, with an explanation of the rule provided to the players.

### **11.0 Start of Play**

The kick-off can be played backwards from the center spot to ensure possession. All players should begin the game in their own half of the field.

### **12.0 Corner Kicks**

Many communities wisely elect to eliminate corner kicks at the U-6 level, and this practice is recommended. In this event, any field player on the attacking team can restart the game by passing or dribbling the ball into play from the goal line.

### **13.0 Goal Kicks**

When the ball crosses the goal line and is last played by an attacker, any field player from the opposite team can restart the game by dribbling or passing the ball into play from the goal line.

### **14.0 Goals**

Following a goal, any field player from the attacking team can restart the game by dribbling or passing the ball into play from the goal line.

### **15.0 Throw-ins**

With no sidelines, there are no restarts. When formal lines are painted, the game should be restarted with a kick-in from the spot where it left the field of play.

### **16.0 Misconduct**

A player who blatantly tries to injure an opponent or who continually breaks the rules should be removed from the game. The player may be allowed to reenter the game after a cooling off period at the discretion of the coach and game manager.

### **17.0 Penalty Kicks**

None

### **18.0 Sliding and Slide Tackling**

No “dangerous” slide “tackling” is allowed at the U-6 levels, but players can legally slide to play the ball if there is no danger of injury to an opponent.

## **Appendix B**

## **U-7/8 Playing Rules**

### **1.0 Number of Players**

The recommended number of players for U-7/8 games is 4v4. Games of 5v5 can be used to accommodate additional players. Formal goalkeepers are not recommended for this age, but players at the back of the team can take the role of goalkeeper and some players will “rest” in goal.

### **2.0 Roster Size**

With the Play Day format, there are no rosters. The Play Day format is an inclusion based model that provides for 100% participation.

### **3.0 Field Dimensions**

The field of play shall be rectangular, with the recommended size for 4v4 being 35-40 yards by 25-30 yards. Games of 5v5 can also be played on this space.

### **4.0 Markings**

All field markings should be clearly visible using either chalk or cones. When playing 5v5, the goalkeeper’s area should be marked 10 yards out from each goal. This area should extend from sideline to sideline.

### **5.0 Goals**

Corner flags, placed 12 feet apart, provide the most efficient means of creating multiple goals. If finances allow, the recommended goal size for U-7/8 is 6 feet by 12 feet. Small hockey goals are not recommended because they are too narrow to encourage the vision to shoot from distance. When the suggested goal size is not available, other common sizes, such as 6 feet by 6 yards and 7 feet by 7 yards will suffice.

### **6.0 The Ball**

The recommended ball for all players younger than age nine is a lightweight size four.

### **7.0 Duration of Play**

The game should consist of 10-minute periods. With the Split Game format, each “mini game” will consist of two 10-minute halves. Players would compete in four 10-minute periods (two min-games) per day. If the traditional single-game format is used, teams should play four 10-minute periods. In all cases, a 5-minute break should follow each 10-minute period.

### **8.0 The Referee**

At the community level, registered referees are not necessary and a coach or parent should monitor play from the sidelines. The primary concerns of the adult are the safety and enjoyment of the players.

### **9.0 Offside**

Offside does not apply to U-7/8 play.

### **10.0 Restarts**

All restarts are indirect and opponents must be at least 4 yards from the ball. At the community level, any illegal restarts should be retaken, with an explanation of the rule provided to the player.

### **11.0 Start of Play**

The kick-off can be played backwards from the center spot to ensure possession. All players should begin the game in their own half.

### **12.0 Corner Kicks**

Corner kicks should be taken in the usual manner.

### **13.0 Goal Kicks**

When the ball crosses the goal line outside of the goal and was last touched by an attacker, the game is restarted when any player from the defending team (the new attackers) passes or dribbles the ball back into play.

### **14.0 Goals**

When a goal is scored, any attacking player can restart the game by passing or dribbling the ball back into play. No formal kick-offs are taken, except at the start of play.

### **15.0 Throw-ins**

The game should be restarted with a kick-in from the spot where it left the field of play.

### **16.0 Misconduct**

A player who blatantly tries to injure an opponent or who continually breaks the rules should be removed from the game. The player may be allowed to reenter the game after a cooling off period at the discretion of the coaches and game manager.

### **17.0 Penalty Kicks**

None

### **18.0 Sliding and Slide Tackling**

No dangerous slide “tackling” is allowed at the U-7/8 level, but players can legally slide to play the ball if there is no danger of injury to an opponent.

## **Appendix C**

## U-9/10 Playing Rules, with Comments and Interpretations

### 1.0 Number of Players

The maximum number of players for U-9 and U-10 is 6v6, with 5v5 recommended for U-9's. One player shall be designated as the goalkeeper. In order to maximize playing time, learning and enjoyment, it is recommended that teams be divided in half to play "Split Games."

**Comment:** Under the new OYSAN playing rules, member leagues have discretion over the number of U-9 and U-10 players on the field, up to a maximum of 6v6. The U-9 changes come into effect this fall (2002), and the U-10 changes come into effect in the fall of 2003. Given that both 5v5 and 6v6 can be played on the same field space (45-50 x 35-40), it is strongly encouraged that U-9's play 5v5 to provide a more positive learning environment for both players and coaches.

### 2.0 Duration of Play

The game shall consist of 15-minute periods. With the "Split Game" format, each "mini game" will consist of two 15-minute halves. Players would compete in four 15-minute periods (two min-games) per day.

If the traditional single-game format is used, teams should play four 15-minute periods. In all cases, a 5-minute break should follow each 15-minute period.

**Comment:** The sixty minutes playing time is ten minutes more than previously allotted for U-9/10's, which was 2x25 minute halves. At all ages, players need to be on the field for longer "blocks" of time with fewer substitutions.

### 3.0 Roster Size

Each member league has discretion over roster sizes. The recommendation for leagues using the 5v5 and 6v6 Split Game format is 14 players. For leagues using the traditional single game format, rosters of 7 players are recommended for 5v5 and roster of between 7 and 8 are recommended for 6v6.

**Comment:** The goal of youth sport is, or should be "active" participation for all, and it is true that both players and their parents want as much participation time as possible. While, in general, fatigue is not a major issue for young players, the potential for illness, injury and absences do impact the choice of roster size. Our existing structure for U-9/10's (8v8) is centered on rosters of 14 players, which provides for an average of 57% playing time, or 29 minutes of active participation, per 50 minutes, per player. This roster size provides for a critical mass of players at practice, with fourteen players creating opportunities for practicing the competitive game forms of 5v5 and 6v6. A single team roster of 7 or 8 or 9 would not provide coaches or players with this important option. Using the Split Game format and a roster of 14, those participating in 5v5 games enjoy a minimum average playing time of 71%, or 43 minutes per hour, while those playing 6v6 enjoy an average minimum playing time of 86%, or 51 minutes per hour.

#### **4.0 Field Dimensions**

The field of play shall be rectangular, with the recommended size for 5v5 being 45 yards by 35 yards and the recommended size for 6v6 being 45-50 yards in length by 35-40 yards in width.

**Comment:** The “actual” size of the playing field may be affected by the space available at local sites; however, the field spaces should not exceed the recommended maximums. It is a stated goal of the small-sided games movement to develop players who are more comfortable in possession. As field space increases, “kickball” replaces passing and dribbling as the preferred tactical option for advancing the ball.

#### **5.0 Markings**

All field markings should be clearly visible using chalk or paint. The goalkeeper’s area should be marked 10 yards out from each goal. This area should extend from sideline to sideline. A half way line should also be marked from sideline to sideline.

**Comment:** The 10-yard goal area is designed to make the field marking process as simple as possible. Tactically, the large goalkeeper area and the suspension of the pass back rule (see 20.0) provide for a safe supporting option at the back of the team. It is anticipated that the goalkeeper will be used more as a sweeper to provide a safe choice for players under pressure or without forward passing options.

**Comment:** If the field cannot be painted because of, for example, inclement weather, the marking of boundaries and lines with flat disc cones is a viable temporary alternative. Raised cones create an increased risk of injury and should not be used for competitive games.

#### **6.0 Goals**

The minimum goal size is 6 feet by 12 feet. Six feet by 18 feet and 7 feet by 21 feet goals are also commonly used. In addition, corner flags or regulation size goals (8 yards by 8 feet) can be used if smaller goals are not available.

**Comment:** The 6 feet x 12 feet goals are most commonly used for U-9/10 play and clubs and communities should endeavor to provide these goals for all U-9/10 fields as soon as budgets allow. In reality, the goal is to play soccer on a field with two goals of the same size. This does not preclude communities from having different size goals on side-by-side fields until similar goals can be purchased.

**Comment:** In the interests of safety and Risk Management, a reminder that any portable goals should be weighted down or securely anchored.

#### **7.0 The Ball**

The recommended ball for all players under ten is a size four, with lightweight balls preferred.

**Comment:** The weight of the soccer ball has a significant impact on the psychology of young players and their tactical and technical range. Lighter balls can be driven and flighted with greater ease, lighter balls can be headed without fear of pain or injury, and lighter balls are not as painful to block.

### **8.0 Determining a Winner**

In the Split Game format, each 30-minute “mini game” win is worth two points and each tie is worth one point. When two teams play a Split Game format, the total number of points available is eight (4 games x 2 points). Regardless of the number of goals scored in each game, the team accumulating the most points out of eight over the two games is the winner.

**Comment:** The purpose of the 8-point format is to eliminate the need to track the aggregate score between games. The outcome of each game is a win (2 points), a tie (1 point), or a loss (0 points) with the actual score from one mini-game unaffected by the score of the other.

**Comment:** The “spirit” of the Split Game format provides for coaches to ensure teams and games are as even as possible. Players may be changed from mini-game to mini-game, although this movement should normally take place only between periods.

### **9.0 The Referee**

Each game should have a registered referee. In the absence of a registered referee, a coach or parent shall monitor play; the primary concerns of the referee or the supervising adult are the safety and enjoyment of the players.

**Comment:** The U-9/10 age group is generally the first competitive level for Ohio North leagues. As the small-sided games format becomes fully implemented at the community level, the need for referees at all levels below U-9 will be significantly reduced or eliminated. The U-9/10 level will then serve as the typical entry point for young, and new referees.

**Comment:** The modified U-9/10 playing rules have eliminated the most contentious FIFA Laws; they are both player and parent friendly.

**Comment:** It is each coach’s responsibility to educate their soccer parents on the “letter and spirit” of the playing rules and ensure that the match officials are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

### **10.0 Offside**

Offside does not apply to U-9/10’s.

**Comment:** Players begin to understand offside around ages 11 or 12. In order to create more scoring chances and to cater to the intellectual realities of the players, offside has been eliminated for this age group.

**Comment:** When in possession, soccer requires players to create space on either side of the field and between the back of the team to the front of the team. In general, U-9/10 players have greater difficulty creating and maintaining space between the front and back of the team (depth) than to the sides (width). The elimination of offside allows players who create space downfield to be rewarded with passes from the back of the team.

### **11.0 Restarts**

All restarts are indirect and opponents must be at least 4 yards from the ball.

**Comment:** For ease of use and understanding, and to increase the flow of play, direct free kicks (DFK's) have been eliminated until U-11.

**Comment:** The 4-yard radius was chosen arbitrarily.

### **12.0 Start of Play**

Following the coin toss and following each goal, the kick-off can be played backwards from the center spot to ensure possession. Players should remain in their own half of the field until the ball is kicked.

**Comment:** In youth games, play is very often started or restarted from a place kick (kick-off) with a long kick to the opposition. Allowing young players to pass the ball backwards is one simple means of encouraging possession-oriented soccer.

### **13.0 Corner Kicks**

When the ball crosses the goal line and was last played by a defender, the game is restarted with a corner kick.

**Comment:** As the field markings do not provide for corner kick arcs, restarts from the corner should be taken as close to the intersection of side and end lines as possible. All corner kicks are indirect.

### **14.0 Goal Kicks**

When the ball crosses the goal line and was last played by an attacker, the goalkeeper shall restart play in possession. Possession is defined as holding the ball in the hands. The ball can be kicked, dribbled or thrown into play, but cannot be punted, volleyed, half-volleyed or thrown directly over the half way line in the air (restart: IFK from half way line). Once the ball is placed on the ground, it becomes live.

**Comment:** When the ball crosses the goal line and was last touched by an attacker, the goalkeeper may collect the ball in his or her hands and restart play from any point within the goalkeeper's area. The intent of this modification is to improve the flow of the game by eliminating the tactical difficulties associated with formal goal kicks; this method of restarting play also rewards the fast-transitioning team.

**Comment:** The goalkeeper may not punt, volley, drop kick, or throw the ball directly over the halfway line on the fly. This is the only rule modification that is directly targeted

toward coaches who would otherwise demand their goalkeeper play the ball downfield at every opportunity.

**Comment:** The goalkeeper may place the ball on the ground, or roll the ball out of the 10-yard area and dribble forward. In either case, the goalkeeper has the same rights as his or her teammates and the ball can be kicked over the half way line on the fly.

### **15.0 Goals**

Following a goal, the game shall be restarted with a kick-off from the center of the field.

**Comment:** Self-explanatory.

### **16.0 Kick-ins**

When the ball crosses a sideline, the game shall be restarted with a kick-in from the spot where it left the field of play.

**Comment:** The substitution of kick-ins for throw-ins allows attacking players greater passing range and improves the possibilities of maintaining possession from this restart. Teammates can move farther away from the ball and the goalkeeper will often be within range as a safe supporting option.

### **17.0 Misconduct**

A player who blatantly tries to injure an opponent or who continually breaks the rules should be removed from the game. The player may be allowed to reenter the game after a cooling off period at the discretion of the referee.

**Comment:** The purpose of youth soccer is to participate and have fun through learning, but not at the expense of the enjoyment of teammates or opponents. With U-9/10 players, the need for red and yellow cards should be unnecessary; however, in some cases, the referee may feel that a player should not return to play. In this event, the offending player should be replaced by a teammate.

### **18.0 Penalty Kicks**

None

**Comment:** All fouls are indirect, except in the case of Obvious Goal Scoring Opportunities (see 19.0)

### **19.0 Obvious Goal Scoring Opportunities (OSGO)**

When an attacking player is fouled during an obvious goal scoring opportunity (OSGO), or a defender illegally stops the ball from entering the goal, the game is restarted with a direct free kick at an open goal taken from the half way line. All players, except the defending goalkeeper, should stand behind the ball, while the defending goalkeeper should stand beside the goal. If the goal is made, the game is restarted with a kick off. If the attempt is missed, the ball becomes dead and the defending goalkeeper starts the game in possession from inside the goal area.

**Comment:** Any attacking player may take the goal attempt from the half way line.

**Comment:** There is no immediate continuation of play following a miss. Following a missed attempt, play resumes as soon as the goalkeeper has possession of the ball inside his or her goalkeeper's area.

### **20.0 Pass Back Rule**

The pass back rule is not in effect for U9/10 players. The goalkeeper is allowed to pick the ball up when it has been deliberately kicked to him or her by a teammate, provided the goalkeeper is inside the 10-yard area.

**Comment:** This rule modification effectively allows the goalkeeper to handle any balls that come inside their area, regardless of the intent of the passer and regardless of who last kicked the ball.

**Comment:** It is expected that this rule modification will encourage coaches to instruct their players to turn away from pressure and be less direct when no forward passing lanes are available.

**Comment:** When the ball is played to the goalkeeper and not picked up, the goalkeeper can legally kick the ball directly over the half way line on the fly.

**Comment:** When the goalkeeper rolls or bounces or throws the ball to a teammate and the ball is immediately passed back to the goalkeeper, the goalkeeper can legally pick the ball up. There is no limit to the number of times this can occur.

### **21.0 Sliding and Slide Tackling**

No "dangerous" slide tackling is allowed at the U-9/10 level, but players can legally slide to play the ball if, in the opinion of the referee, there is no danger of injury to an opponent.

**Comment:** This is the most controversial interpretation remaining for referees in U-9/10 play! Choosing to eliminate sliding would take away the opportunity to learn a very important skill and a most enjoyable aspect of play. However, sliding can be dangerous to both defender and attacker. Sliding for the ball is an integral part of soccer and the desire to restrain aggression whilst encouraging players to sensibly "go to ground" is a delicate balancing act that may never be adequately achieved.

**Comment:** Players sliding for the ball with no opponent(s) in playing distance are not guilty of any offense.

**Comment:** When two players are running side by side and one or both slide to play the ball forward in the direction of the run, there is no foul.

**Comment:** When two players are running side by side and one player tackles the ball across the body of the opponent without “going through” the opponent, there is no foul.

**Comment:** When two players are running side by side and one player “goes through” the opponent to tackle the ball across the body of the opponent, a foul has been committed.

**Comment:** When a player slides from the side of an opponent and clearly plays the ball without “going through” the opponent, there is no foul. One player falling over another as the result of a sliding challenge is not illegal.

**Comment:** When a player slides from the side and contacts the opponent and the ball at the same time, or if the player contacts the ball and then “goes through” the opponent, a foul has been committed.

**Comment:** When a player slides from behind an opponent and “goes through” the opponent to contact the ball, a foul has been committed.

## **22.0 Advantage**

The FIFA interpretation of the advantage rule is applicable to small-sided games.

**Comment:** Where possible, the referee will attempt to maintain flow in the play. This often involves the application of the “advantage rule.” When the defending team has committed an infraction, but the attacking team has a goal scoring opportunity, play may be allowed to continue to its natural conclusion. However, if the referee signals that a foul has been committed and applies the advantage rule, the game may still be stopped and brought back to the original spot of infraction, if the potential advantage to the attacking team was not realized. The referee also has discretion over when to apply the advantage rule. For example, play may be stopped immediately if a player has been seriously injured; or the referee may be less lenient in applying the advantage rule if (s)he deems the match “temperature” has started to rise beyond acceptable limits.