

“What? We Didn’t Grow Up Playing That Way?”

The title above is just one of the quotes I have been hearing as your Director of Coaching with the recent approval of implementing small sided games. “We want our kids to be playing the “REAL GAME”! “How are we going to prepare our kids for High School soccer?” These are questions that I hear from time to time concerning the change of going from 11 aside soccer in the U-11/12 age groups to playing 8v8 (7 field players and a goalkeeper). The U9/10 age groups will be playing 6v6 (five field players and a goalkeeper). Again, this is a change from the normal pattern that we have been using for the U9/10 age groups. There is a quote that I have on used with this small-sided games approval and that is “When patterns are broken, new worlds emerge”.

A book that I would highly recommend any parent who has a child playing a sport, an administrator, and those who coach is “Just Let The Kids Play” by Bob Bigelow. In that book it sites a research that was done with youth sports. “In a survey done by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State, children were asked why they quit a sport or a team. The top two reasons for both boys and girls were 1) they were no longer interested and 2) it was no longer fun.”

This just isn’t true for soccer, but for all youth sports. If we look at the first reason and their interest level and relate that to small sided games hopefully we can see one of the many reasons why reducing the numbers on a soccer field for the ages of 5-12 years old makes sense.

What this is about, however, is how this will improve our players from a developmental standpoint not only in getting more touches on the ball, but to prepare them tactically as well without really even teaching them tactics. The playing shapes of 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8 will teach by themselves how “playing lines” relate to the 11v11 match. So, in short, this article is not about teaching tactics to these younger players, but how the 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8 versions relate to the 11v11 game that we are all accustomed to.

4v4-Teaching Shape and Style

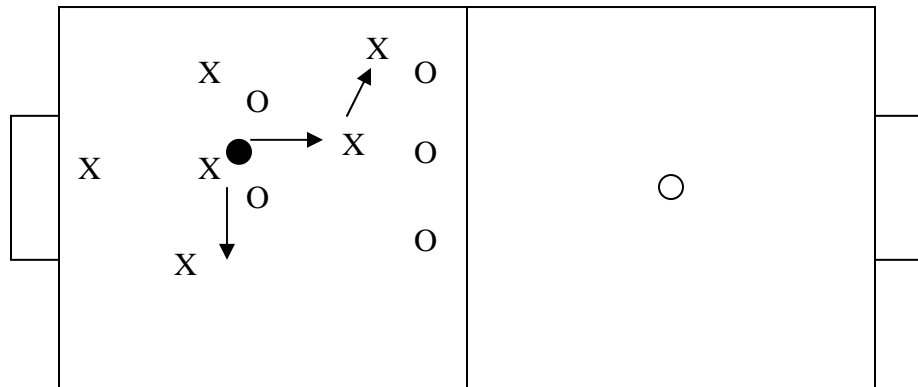
As a progression, from the U6 and U8 age groups, players learn the shape of a triangle in both 3v3 and 4v4 play. In the 4v4 model, the diamond shape is the desired starting shape but as the game progresses, triangles are still present. Players in the 4v4 model learn the basic diamond shape and the importance of length, width, and depth. Because they are actively more involved, they stay interested and have fun because the possibility of scoring and preventing goals is present. I am now seeing basketball leagues play 3v3 with younger ages, shorter baskets, and courts. I saw a quote by Bobby Howe, our previous USSF coaching director, say that “Realistic experience + Fun=Improvement in Play”. Playing 4v4 with these two youngest age groups is more realistic experience for them. After all, 4v4 in the youngest age groups really become 1v7 doesn’t it?

6v6 in Two Playing Lines

Now, let's look at the U9/10 age groups. So, how is 6v6 instead of 8v8 going to improve them? When they get to 9/10 or the "Golden Ages" now coaches feel like they can coach! Players can actually do things like "Drills!" I hope for their sake, we teach them by playing games and in particular 6v6 so that they can meet the demands of the game and not the coach. Playing 6v6 instead of 8v8 is a better progression due to the fact that now players can start understanding how two playing lines relate to the 11v11 match. For example, let's say your formation is a 3-2. Three players who start behind the line of two players. In the 11v11 match, games are usually won or lost when linking or not linking with the midfielders happens on a consistent basis. As the players get older, the backs in particular, should always look to the forwards to see if they can connect. This, however, usually is offers the lowest percentage of keeping possession. So, the next logical choice to get the ball up the field is to pass to a midfielder. Then the midfielders now look to play the ball forward (length), if that is not on, then play the ball either back (depth) or across (width) in order to get around defenses. With a 3-2 formation, this connection of teaches players how to play through two thirds of the field. The backs playing into the midfield (building out of the back) or the midfield playing into the forwards (attacking in the final third).

The diagram below shows how the x's in two playing lines of 3 backs and 2 forward build out of the back. The central back, has at least two options to get out of the back and to get the ball into midfield. These 5 players must work together and do so in a way that is something more than the "Hail Mary" approach of knocking the ball up to the biggest, fastest, strongest player. Then after getting the ball through the midfield, now the 3 backs become midfielders and the 2 midfielders become forwards. Think about how many repetitions they will get with 6 aside, which will pay dividends down the road as far as their overall development to the "real" game. With the 8v8 model, some players are going straight from 4v4 to 8v8 and miss the development of how to "link" up with the playing line that is in front of them.

Example of building out of the back.



It teaches also how to defend in different thirds of the field. When teaching defending at the 11v11 stage, individual defending is a must before group defending can even be considered an idea. When group defending is taught, usually two playing lines work

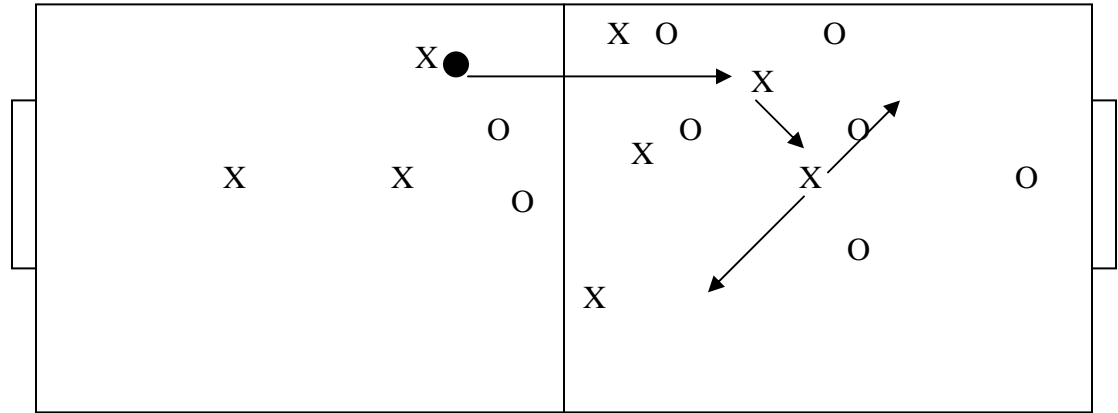
together. (i.e. 2 forwards-4 mids, 4 mids-4 backs). Teaching the importance of two playing lines is important to the “real” game. Once playing in lines of two (by the way is only suggested by yours truly) has been exposed to them they can now “realistically” progress to having 3 playing lines, which the 8v8 model presents. By once again, reducing the playing numbers, field sizes, their technical and tactical opportunities increase. If we keep their minds in the game, then they remain more interested. When I was a teacher, anytime I could teach them something without them really even knowing it, then the motivation was easy. The fun element of being more actively involved is present because as a playing group, the all attack and all defend. “Realistic experience + Fun=Improvement in Play”.

8v8 in Three Playing Lines

Now our players move from the 8v8 game at U9/10’s to 11v11 on the “real field”. Having coached this transitions a time or two and after observing numerous U11/12 matches, it only makes sense to not only reduce the fields, but the playing numbers. The ball takes an unusual amount of time getting from one half to the other unless you utilize the “Hail Mary” approach and just knock it to the biggest, strongest, fastest player, have them run onto it and then score. You may win games, but are you really developing them? Most players in these age groups can strike a ball “accurately” around 30-40 yards with their strong foot. Yet, we have them play on a field that is in some cases 120 yards long and the distance between the front line and the back line sometimes can get up to 60-70 yards, players naturally will still bunch up because they simply can’t connect with each other. With 8v8, and a smaller playing field, not only will they be able to connect with more realism, but the possibilities of combinations, the importance of midfield play, flank play, and the movement between all of the players becomes more in sync. By reducing the field size and the numbers, “real” linking between back players and the forward line can happen. So, now when a ball is played up to the forwards, because at U9/10 they learned that when the front line has the ball, they need support, more players will move into supporting positions earlier in order to get in behind defenses. If the possibility of playing up to the front is not on, now they can then link with the midfielders and develop play in the midfield. By doing this, we put our players under more decisions that they have to make for themselves increasing their own interest level because they are now an active participant in the game and simple have to play. The goalkeeper instead of staying back on his/her line now is forced to also take a more active role and playing as a sweeper in addition to his/her goalkeeping responsibilities.

The diagram below has the x’s playing in a 2-3-2 formation (3 playing lines). The o’s are in a 3-2-2 formation. The left back, if you will for the x’s has an opportunity to play the ball forward to the one of the two forwards. Because in the 6v6 model, when the forward players received a ball, they learned how to link up with other forward player. As you can see as well, when the x forward player that is the closest to their goal receives the ball, they have two good options. One would be to play the ball back to the opposite midfielder and the second would be to combine with the other forward player who originally gave them the ball. There are more options as the armchair “central midfielder” might be able to explore, but the point is that because they learned how to

play in two playing lines in the 6v6 model, now when you only add two more players to the mix, not only is the possibility of them seeing their options clearly, but they will probably have more success in doing so.



More importantly we put them on the field that is more “realistic” for the physical abilities that will encourage creating soccer players with their own minds to create how to score goals which we know is one of the biggest critiques of soccer to the uneducated fan. In the same diagram, sure it may be a longer pass, but it is a pass to someone’s feet and they learn how to play in front of defenses instead of relying on playing the ball behind the defenders having someone run onto it in an attempt to score.

Now, when the players go into the 11v11 match they may have, can say will in all cases, the ability to see where the little games of 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8 play into the “real” game. The point is, give these players time to develop into playing the “real” game. This is one way where, as a country, we will truly start developing “soccer players” and not just “kids that play soccer” because there is a difference. Now they are making up the script, figuring out how to make decisions on the field with their own minds.

So, what is the goal? Is it to create “soccer players”? I think that it is a little bit of creating “soccer players”, players who now will appreciate the game on a little different level, which will in the long run create an even larger base of soccer fans in this country. Don’t we want our kids to be life long fans of the game instead of dropping out at the age of 14 only because when they were younger they didn’t get the opportunity to truly play? So, let’s not rush them into making too many decisions when on the field. Their minds are already full enough off of the field. “Just Simply Let The Kids Play” on a scale that will be not only developmentally, but fun as well.