

CLUB PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MANUAL

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« TABLE OF CONTENTS »

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
MISSION STATEMENT	3
THE PHASES OF SOCCER DEVELOPMENT	7
CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE	
A. CLUB BOARD AND THE COACHING COMMITTEE	8
B. COACHING ORGANIZATIONAL CHART	10
C. LINKING THE RECREATIONAL AND SELECT PROGRAMS	12
D. CLUB DIRECTOR OF COACHING	14
RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE	
A. GENERAL GUIDELINES	
General Problems Observed	21
Playing Format	22
Drafting Teams	22
Recruiting and Educating Coaches	23
B. AGE GROUP U-6 AND U-8	
Playing Format	26
Use of goalkeepers	26
Squad size	27
Volume of Activities	27
Role of the Club DOC or the Coaching Committee	28
Skill Priorities	29
Parents' Role	31
C. AGE GROUP U-10 AND U-12	
Playing Format	33
Volume of Activities	34
Skill Priorities	35
Parents' Role	35
D. AGE GROUP U-14 AND OLDER	
Training Priorities and Volume of Practices	37
SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE	
A. GENERAL PROBLEMS OBSERVED	38
B. DEFINING THE LEVELS IN THE SELECT PROGRAM	39
C. THE PILLARS OF THE SELECT PROGRAM	40
High Practice Volume	40
Quality Competition	42
Quality Coaching	45
D. TRAINING PRIORITIES	46

« TABLE OF CONTENTS »

SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE – MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

PLAYERS PLAYING UP	48
COMPETITIVE SOCCER AT U-10, IS IT TOO SOON?	51
TEAM-ORIENTED VS CLUB-ORIENTED APPROACH	53

EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS 55

SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS	57
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TOPSoccer 62

« INTRODUCTION »

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this manual is to provide guidelines to all the clubs in Georgia for designing a club structure and programs for player development. The aim is to offer ideas for a systematic, progressive club-wide approach that will create the best possible environment for optimum player development. Although this manual was written by coaches and is designed from a coaching perspective, it's more of an 'operations manual' than a pure coaching manual, dealing with the wider scope of running a club and addressing a variety of issues. The issues that were selected for inclusion in this manual were the ones that have the most impact on the way that players are trained and developed. The manual does not attempt to deal with some important topics, such as referees, facility development, fundraising and volunteerism, simply because it was felt that these topics are outside the scope of this manual.

B. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth soccer in America has progressed beyond recognition from its humble beginning in the fifties and sixties. Our local, state, and national programs are highly organized and are driven by the combined efforts of soccer leaders and paid professionals working side by side with the masses of dedicated volunteers. Our youth soccer organizations cater to a myriad of playing levels and league sizes, which require a sophisticated and complex infrastructure. This manual tackles the various areas of player development that need attention at the club level, based on extensive observations of practices and games at all the levels of play, as well as discussions with coaches parents and administrators from clubs across the state. Due to the large scope, the manual is split into sections, each dealing with a separate topic. One section addresses the general club coaching structure, while other sections deal with the recreational program and the competitive program. There is also a section on dealing with and educating the parents.

The biggest areas for improvement are urgently required at the two ends of our playing spectrum, namely, our youngest recreational age groups and our top, elite youth players. Our clubs have to bring more technical expertise into the U-6, U-8 and U-10 programs because what we do with these age groups will have a direct impact on the competitive programs. At present, these age groups are ran by enthusiastic volunteers who, for the most part, have very little relevant technical experience. This requires that our club Directors of Coaching get more involved with running the programs for the youngest ages.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the elite level, the daily environment of our best young players is not challenging enough. Our youth clubs tend to legislate themselves into mediocrity in the name of fairness and democracy. We have created a rigid, team-oriented system that promotes the upward movement of teams over the upward movement of players. There is a misplaced emphasis on playing too many games at the expense of practice time and a general emphasis on quantity at the expense of quality. As a result, our top one percent players are not developing to their fullest potential.

« INTRODUCTION »

This document is part a practical implementation manual, and part an informational and educational tool. The educational part of the manual is necessary in order to provide club leaders with the rationale and philosophy behind the practical recommendations. It's much easier for a club to implement ideas if there is a consensus within a club. For this reason, this manual not only suggests changes, but also attempts to educate and explain why and, thus, hopefully build the consensus that will drive change.

The guidelines in this manual are only recommendations. This manual is not part of the GYSA Rules and Regulations and, as such, clubs are free to implement as many of the recommendations as deemed appropriate for their specific needs. However, the author of this manual believes very strongly in the recommendations and would hope that all the clubs adopt them in the spirit of player development, for the good of the game. Implementation of this manual will lead to the development of better players at all the levels of play, from Recreational to Select. And better play means more enjoyment for the players and the spectators.

All of the recommendations and ideas in this manual are a product of extensive traveling throughout the state, country and abroad. They represent a body of opinions accumulated through interaction with coaches and administrators from the grassroots to National Staff level. They were derived from studying how American and foreign clubs are structured and how players are developed. **These are real life recommendations that have been applied successfully and have proven themselves over time.**

There are over one hundred clubs in Georgia, whose size varies from a couple of hundred players to a few thousands. Clubs have reached a varying level of structural maturity, in terms of growth and organization, and some have already implemented many of the structural components suggested in this manual. Some club leaders reading this manual might feel overwhelmed by the sheer breadth and scope presented. For those who are not quite sure where to start, our suggestion is to start at the beginning, that is, at the U-6/U-8 age groups. After dealing with the U-6/U-8, clubs can review and upgrade their U-10 program. Once clubs get it right at the youngest ages, they can move up the ladder and improve the rest, with the knowledge that the youngest generation of new players are already reaping the benefits. The State Director of Coaching and the District Coach are available to assist clubs in implementing these recommendations. Clubs are encouraged to contact the State DOC at the state office to discuss the best plan of approach.

Implementing these solutions, or other similar ones, will require a strong leadership with courage and a clear vision. The people entrusted with implementing these ideas must have a clear understanding of the principles of attaining excellence. We can improve our chances significantly if we know the way ahead, and are willing to do what it takes to achieve excellence. The future is bright, but it's not guaranteed. As we all know, player development is a long journey. We must be patient in our approach, but we must also ensure that we start navigating the long journey in the right direction. Failing to do this could shortchange a whole generation of players until we manage to correct our course, and that would be a shame.

« MISSION STATEMENT »

The first thing that every club needs to do is compose an overall mission statement. This mission statement should form part of the club's bylaws and be agreed upon by the club board. The mission statement should be carefully thought out and reflect accurately the philosophy and intentions of the club. Some clubs are mainly interested in providing an 'introductory-foundation' type of a soccer program which is geared towards the recreational level players. Other clubs are, in addition, committed to providing high level training and competition for their best players. It is up to the individual clubs to decide their area of emphasis. But it is important to convey the philosophy to all the parents before they register their children, and to keep their program structure and operational decisions consistent with that philosophy. Clubs can also post their mission statement on the club web page and promotional material.

It is important to note that, regardless of their specific philosophy, youth clubs have a universally expected duty to do what is in the best interest of the individual player and to do its best to allow all the players to enjoy their experience with soccer. Too often, club officers and coaches adopt 'team building concepts' that are borrowed from the professional game even though they are not appropriate for youth. The main difference between youth play and professional play is the concept of "who comes first – the player or the team?". At the professional level, the team obviously comes first. The professional team has a clear hierarchy of starters and 'bench warmers' and squad players, etc. The subs are paid handsomely to sit on the bench and be called upon if and when needed. Everyone on the professional team is expected to put the team first and to sacrifice himself for the sake of the team. The result is all that matters at the pro level.

But at the youth level, **the player must come first!!** Every decision made by the club and the coach should be in the best interest of the individual players. Examples: 1) A youth player should not be kept in goal against her wishes just because she is the best keeper and 'the team needs her' to win the game. 2) Coaches should not hold on to good players at a lower playing level just to help the team to win games. The better player should be allowed to move up to the next level in order to help him reach his potential, even if it means that the team he leaves behind will be weakened. 3) Every player must play in every game, not left to sit on the bench for the entire game because the team must win. 4) When players are invited to play for the Regional or National Team, their club coaches should allow them to go even if there is a conflict with a club activity. It's not fair to the players to ask them to give up such opportunities in the name of team loyalty. The team is there to serve the player's ambition, not the other way around.

Some adults will argue that soccer is a team game and, therefore, team building concepts such as sacrifice and 'do what's best for the team' should be taught to our kids. Indeed, some team building concepts are appropriate to youth play. The concepts of cooperation between teammates, helping teammates, learning to trust others, and being respectful of teammates are certainly team building concepts that should be introduced to young players. But the concept of 'sacrifice for the team' is not appropriate for youth sport. We cannot in all good conscience ask young players to sacrifice their future potential just to bolster the team's 'win' column. We cannot deny young players the enjoyment of playing, since soccer is their leisure activity, and every player deserves to play. The following pages contain a few samples of mission statements and their inherent implications.

« MISSION STATEMENT »

Sample 1: Recreational Philosophy

“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning, through equal participation, regardless of ability.”

Implication

This mission statement would be most appropriate for a club that only has a recreational program. This means that every player who registers gets to play equal time. It means that every season, teams should be balanced in terms of ability, that recruiting is not allowed, that all-star teams will not be formed, and that game results are not important. It also means that each player is treated the same. For example, if the club provides supplemental training or clinics, all the players should have the opportunity to attend. It is recommended that a club that adopts this philosophy should not even keep scores or standings.

It also means that players, whose ability or commitment level outgrows the level provided by the club, should not be discouraged from joining another club that offers higher level competition. A club that espouses a pure recreational philosophy should not take offense to players leaving for higher levels, or leaving for a club that provides more training. It should take pride in the fact that one of its own has progressed to the next level and regard it as a club accomplishment.

Sample 2: Developmental Philosophy

“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning, at a level that fits his/her interest and ability”

Implication

This mission statement would be most appropriate for clubs that have a mixture of recreational and intermediate level programs. The club will participate in multi level play in order to provide its players an opportunity to play at a level commensurate with their ability and commitment. The recreational side of the club would operate with exactly the same philosophy and guidelines as explained above in Sample 1. The club can also form recreational all-star teams to participate in appropriate level competitions or to receive supplemental training. In addition, the club can form competitive level teams for which the more committed players will have an opportunity to try out.

It must be noted that the recreational all-star and the competitive teams should continue to provide equal, or close to equal, playing time for all the players. No player should be put through the agony of sitting on the bench for all or most of the game. Even at the competitive youth level, the game result should never be more important than the enjoyment of all the players. The intermediate level players are still playing the game mainly for fun and social interaction and, with a few rare exceptions, do not have aspirations to become professional players. Most intermediate level players are really at a level not much higher than recreational in terms of mentality and ability. All they want is to play and have fun. We should not deny them their right to play just because they are now classified as ‘competitive’ players.

« MISSION STATEMENT »

As with the recreational level, players whose talent and/or commitment outgrows that which is offered by the club should not be discouraged from moving to another club that offers higher level play, if they so desire.

Sample 3: The ‘Quest for Excellence’ Philosophy

“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning at a level that fits his/her interest and ability, and to create a challenging environment for the best players who aspire to reach their full potential”.

Implication

This mission statement is most appropriate for clubs that have a mature program, with a large recreational base supporting a well developed select team program comprising intermediate and top level teams.

Such a club will create programs that cater to all the playing levels. The recreational and intermediate level program should follow the same philosophy as in samples 1 and 2. The top select teams (Athena ‘A’ and Classic I) will be geared toward the best players, those who have the potential to play at a high level (College, ODP, professional) and the commitment and desire to reach their full potential.

However, we must never lose sight of the fact that players want to play, and that they have the right to play. And in order for players to reach their potential, they have to play. This means that even at the top select level, every player should play in each game. This doesn’t mean that players should be guaranteed equal playing time, but rather that players will have to compete for more playing time, with the best and most committed getting more time than the rest. This approach satisfies both the basic youth sport convention that everyone must play and the need to create a competitive environment where players are constantly monitored, evaluated and challenged to do better to earn more playing time.

A club that makes a commitment to excellence must follow that commitment with deed. This means that it must aggressively search for top level coaches, preferably ones who possess a USSF national coaching license or equivalent, and provide the resources and facilities required for players of this level. Some clubs proclaim a commitment to excellence but do not have the resources or wherewithal to deliver. It’s important for clubs to honestly assess where they are and either do what it takes to provide excellence or allow their best players to go to a club that does provide it.

There are many complex issues associated with top level youth play, such as players playing up, the tryout process, coaching selection criteria, paid coaches, relationship between the club’s first tier and the lower tiers teams in the same age group, etc. These issues must be handled by experienced coaches, under the leadership of a club Director of Coaching, with integrity and an unwavering regard for the welfare of the individual players.

« MISSION STATEMENT »

Sample 4: The Result Oriented Approach

“To create a challenging environment that enhances team development and to make our teams competitive at the state, regional and national level in order to win state, regional, and national championships.”

Implication

The team building approach is NOT appropriate for youth sport! This is actually an example of a badly chosen mission statement. When players are engaged in a game at any level, recreational or competitive, naturally they play to win and are expected to give their total effort to that end. But to declare a result-oriented objective in a mission statement implies that winning is the most important thing. It also implies that success can only be measured by the amount of trophies won. There are many other ways to measure success in youth sport that are more meaningful and relevant, such as membership growth and retention, players graduating to the next level, development of community spirit, character building, lifelong friendships, contributing to crime free, drug free or smoke free environment, etc. Counting trophies is the least appropriate way.

Other Objectives for the Mission Statement

The mission statement samples listed above were specific to sport. In addition, there are some general objectives that are common to all youth organizations, such as character building, moral development, instilling the values of honesty, sportsmanship and responsibility, etc. Clubs can combine the sport-specific objectives with the general ones as they see fit. But here again, it's important for members' behavior to be consistent with the mission statement. For example, if the club promotes sportsmanship in its mission statement, it must see to it that the coaches and parents behave accordingly and stamp out gamesmanship.

For your information, the mission statement of the United States Youth Soccer Association is to “foster the physical, mental, and emotional growth and development of youth through the sport of soccer for all ages and levels of competition. US Youth Soccer's job is to make soccer fun and instill in young players a lifelong passion for the sport”.

« THE PHASES OF SOCCER DEVELOPMENT »»

Every child that is introduced to the game of soccer, embarks on a journey of discovery, starting from the moment he/she first kicks a ball. The ones that eventually develop into high level players, go through the following phases of growth, generally in the sequence shown:

Phase 1 – Introduction to Soccer

First experience of organized play, usually anywhere between 4 to 12 years old. First exposure to teams, coaches, practices and games. First attempt at mastering the skills of the game. Soccer might not be the only sport played, as the player dabbles in many sports and activities. If the introductory experience was fun, the player might move on to phase 2. If the experience was not enjoyable, the player will likely drop out of soccer.

Phase 2 – Commitment to Soccer

If the introductory phase proves an enjoyable experience, the player will decide that he/she likes soccer and is keen to continue playing the game. The most common motivators for continuing to play soccer are: (a) discovering the freedom inherent in soccer, the players' game - the freedom to run and do with the ball whatever the instinct dictates, (b) a noticeable or rapid gain in skill, (c) having a 'fun' coach, and (d) enjoying the social aspects of a team sport. It's not necessary for all of the above four motivators to exist together for a commitment to be made. All it takes is one reason. And it's not necessarily just the best players who make a commitment to soccer. Players of all abilities can fall in love with soccer and make it their sport of choice.

Once a player chooses soccer as his/her main sport and commits to playing it on a regular basis, soccer becomes an integral part of the weekly routine and is ingrained into the family life. This marks the birth of the 'Soccer Family', the 'Soccer Mom' and all that it entails.

Phase 3 – Commitment to Excellence

Once soccer is chosen as the main sport, players begin to acquire soccer idols as they spend more and more time watching high level games. And with exposure to high level soccer, come the dreams about emulating their idols. At this stage, many players start to compare themselves to their peers and begin to wonder whether they are good enough to play the game at a high level. Unfortunately, some players quit soccer at this stage, when the realization that they are not as good as their peers hits home. But some develop an aspiration to become top players and make a commitment to work on their game. They are hooked! A player who is committed to excellence trains on his/her own in addition to the normal team practices. He/she watches games intently, trying to learn from the best. He/she becomes self-analytical, constantly looking to improve, and basically eats, drinks, and sleeps soccer.

Phase 4 – Commitment to Winning

This is the stage when a player reaches a high level of technical and tactical maturity and, with it, a competitive streak. This player is seriously looking at a college or professional career in soccer and therefore, sets high standards, both for himself and for his team. The player who is committed to winning has no patience for slackers, wants to play with other players of similar ability and drive, and is looking to constantly challenge herself in practice and in games.

Implication

The phases described above are intrinsically developed within each player. Adults cannot and should not push or 'fast track' players through these phases but rather allow the players to progress at their own pace. Some players show promise early while others are so-called late maturers. It typically takes 6 to 10 years for players to go from phase 1 to phase 4. Adults cannot decide for the players in which phase they need to be. Let the players decide! Most players never progress beyond the first phase, let alone reach the fourth one. Your task, as adults in charge of running a youth sport association, is to provide all your players the programs, the resources and the opportunity to advance through the phases of development without putting any pressure on them. Let the players decide for themselves how much they want to commit.

A. CLUB BOARD AND THE COACHING COMMITTEE

Most youth clubs have a board of directors that directs and organizes all aspects of the club's operation. The size of the board varies, often depending on the size of the club, and could number as little as 3 or 4, or as many as 20 members. Large clubs have a tendency to beget large boards since every facet of the club operation, from field maintenance to concession stand operation to scheduling, has representatives on the board.

A discussion on the optimum size and structure of a club board is outside the scope of this manual. But, regardless of the size, the nature of your typical youth club board is such that administrative positions far outnumber technical positions. A typical board is likely to include just one or two members who are in charge of coaching matters. The fact that club boards comprise mainly parents and administrator-type volunteers means that very often these boards do not have any voting members with a strong coaching background. Clubs that have a paid Director of Coaching (DOC) usually require him/her to attend board meetings and report to the board, but rarely does the paid DOC have any voting rights.

Club boards usually use democratic voting procedures to arrive at most decisions on club operations. This means that people with very little coaching experience, who possess minimal expertise in player development, are routinely asked to make vital decisions on issues such as play format, formations of teams, selection of coaches, tryout format, and players playing up. Board members are invariably hard working well-meaning volunteers who want to do what is best for their beloved club. But a system that allows the board member in charge of, say, the concession stand, who has no coaching qualifications whatsoever, to decide on key player development issues, is not going to produce the best results.

Clubs should create a Coaching Committee that will oversee the coaching program. This committee should number no more than three or four members, and should include the club Director of Coaching (DOC) plus two or three board members. Typically, the Coaching Committee could include the board member in charge of the select program and the one in charge of the recreational program. It's important however, that the board members chosen to sit on the coaching committee have significant coaching background and qualifications. Ideally, every committee member should have a USSF national level license and past coaching experience. At the very least, every committee member should possess the State 'D' License. The license requirement is meant to ensure that the coaching committee comprises people who received at least some exposure to the USSF's player development philosophy and methodology, and that these members have an inherent affinity to coaching education.

If a club does not have a Director of Coaching, the Coaching Committee would essentially carry out all the duties normally associated with a Director of Coaching. In the absence of a DOC, the formation of a Coaching Committee is even more vital, to ensure that there is a small group of club officers who are qualified to oversee the coaching aspects.

« CLUB ' S COACHING STRUCTURE »»

The duties of the Coaching Committee can include:

- 1) Monitoring the DOC's work and conducting his/her evaluation and performance review. In the case of a paid DOC, recommending to the board renewal or termination of contract and commensurate salary increase.
- 2) In the case of a club looking to hire a DOC, creating the job description and conducting the search for a club DOC, interviewing candidates, and recommending the best candidate(s) for the board to approve.
- 3) Reviewing and approving the short and long-term seasonal objectives for the club, as presented by the club DOC.
- 4) Reviewing and approving all the coaching selections made by the DOC. Although the coaching committee should have the power to veto a coaching selection, this would normally be a 'rubber stamp' task. A coaching committee that routinely rejects the DOC's selection betrays a serious case of philosophical differences between the committee members, which will need to be addressed, probably by the club's full board.
- 5) Creating a process for conflict resolution between parents and team coaches.
- 6) Conducting hearings and adjudicating grievances by team coaches or parents against the DOC.
- 7) In the case of a club without a DOC, performing the duties listed in the section on the Club Director of Coaching.

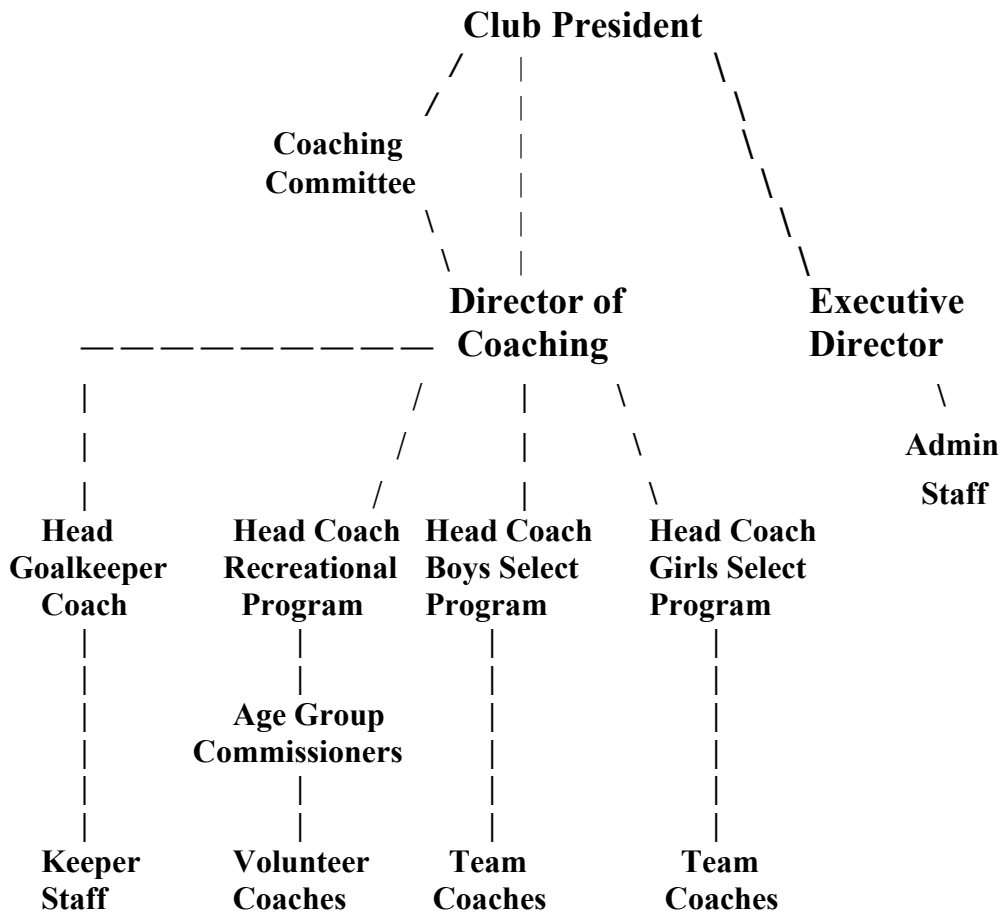
The Club President should select the two or three board members into the coaching committee, with one of them appointed to chair it. **It's important to keep this committee small for the sake of efficiency and to ensure that only the most qualified people are included.** Under this structure, the club board can continue to run the administrative aspects of the operation, while giving the power to the Coaching Committee to run the coaching and player development side of things. This will streamline the operation and allow people to be productive within their area of expertise. The DOC and his/her assistants will run the day to day tasks of the coaching program, under the direction and supervision of the Coaching Committee, and the committee will, in turn, report regularly to the club board.

It must be noted that the creation of a Coaching Committee is only recommended where clubs have board members who are qualified to deal with coaching matters. There is no point in having a Coaching Committee with little technical expertise. Some clubs have a Coaching Committee that rarely meets and does very little valuable work due to lack of time or commitment. In the absence of technical expertise or commitment to coaching issues at the board level, the best and most effective solution is to have the club DOC report directly to the club President.

« CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE »

B. COACHING ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Just as with any organization, a youth club should have an organizational chart that clearly defines the chain of command and is designed to create the most effective and efficient structure. The components of the chart below do not depend on whether the people holding these positions are paid or volunteers. Even if the positions are filled with volunteers, the structure can still assist clubs in clarifying the areas of responsibilities.



As mentioned before, the DOC can report either to the Coaching Committee, or directly to the Club President. Either way, the DOC should have the authority to run the coaching aspects of the club as outlined in a later section on the duties of the DOC. As can be seen in the chart, the DOC should oversee all the playing levels, from the recreational to the select. This is to prevent each team from doing its own thing and deviating from the overall club philosophy and master plan. For example, clubs that hire paid coaches should give the DOC the authority to oversee the hiring of the coaches and determine a consistent, club-wide, coaching fee structure. The DOC will probably not have the time to recruit and evaluate every recreational volunteer coach, but

« CLUB ' S COACHING STRUCTURE »»

he/she can delegate this task to the Age Group Commissioners while still retaining the authority to veto or replace a volunteer coach found unsuitable.

Some clubs, such as United Quest, AFC Light'ning, and Metro North have also added the position of a full-time Executive Director. This begs the question of whether the DOC should report to the Executive Director or directly to the President. As long as the Executive Director allows the DOC to run the coaching side of things and there is a mutual respect and cooperation between them, it doesn't really matter which way it's done. There are cases where the DOC requires assistance with organizational tasks and is not a strong administrator type person. In this case, it is probably better to have the DOC report to the Executive Director who can make sure that the organizational tasks within the coaching program are not neglected and are executed with professionalism. But if the DOC has sufficient organizational skills, it is suggested here that the DOC report directly to the President as opposed to the Executive Director in order to create a clear division of responsibilities between the administrative and the coaching bodies.

Some of the smaller clubs might find this chart too elaborate for their size and situation. But just about every club in Georgia has a recreational and a select program and, hence, must find people willing to perform the duties associated with those programs. The smaller clubs will simply have individuals assigned to fill multiple positions, but the chart could remain the same.

« CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE »»

C. LINKING THE RECREATIONAL AND SELECT PROGRAMS

Most clubs in Georgia run both a recreational and a select program and, typically, these clubs have representatives from both programs in their boards. Since the needs and the philosophy of the recreational program are quite different from those of the select, it is very tempting for clubs to separate the two programs, at least to some degree. Some clubs accomplish this by creating a 'club' entity that oversees the select program, independently from the recreational body. Other clubs go as far as creating two separate boards, one for the select and one for the recreational division. **Whatever structural model used, clubs have to be careful not to put too much distance between the two programs but, rather, insist on maintaining a strong link between them.** Failing to link the two is likely to hold back player development.

In some clubs, the two programs are at odds with each other since the select teams are often perceived as getting a preferential treatment in terms of prime practice time, facilities and resources. Sometimes, the select coaches raid the recreational teams for players, with little regard for the consequences, such as leaving a recreational team with not enough players. When this happens, the recreational body might resist taking directions from the select body, preferring to 'run its own show' and vice versa. If, for all intents and purposes, the two programs are independent of each other, it becomes very difficult to design a progressive and comprehensive player development structure for the club as a whole. **The DOC or, in the absence of a club DOC, the Coaching Committee should be in charge of coaching matters for both programs.** As explained later on in the section on the Recreational Program, what clubs do with their U-6, U-8 and U-10 age groups has a long-term impact on the quality of the select program. Many clubs are beginning to understand this relationship and are demanding from their DOC to get more involved with the recreational program. Some even go as far as hiring a full-time Recreational Coach who works under and reports to the club DOC. Either way, the most experienced and qualified coaches in the club must have input in how the recreational program conducts its coaching selection and education and its player training. A club that has a paid DOC should insist on his/her overseeing the coaching aspects of the recreational as well as the select division. Please refer to the section on the Club Director of Coaching for more detailed recommendations on his/her duties relative to the recreational program.

Encourage the Best Players to Play Select Soccer

Lastly, recreational coaches should encourage their best players to play at the select level and not hold on to them in order to win the recreational club trophy. When clubs have winning teams at the Recreational level but are struggling at the Select level, it's a sure sign that the better players are still playing with their recreational teams. As mentioned before, youth soccer is all about the betterment of the individual, not the team. The player must always come first.

For their part, clubs should educate the recreational parents about the benefits of competitive soccer, as well as the required commitment. There is a lot of misconception regarding select soccer and parents are sometimes reluctant to put their child through the perceived pressure and

« CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE »

excessive demands and expenses associated with the select travel program. Handouts, newsletters and parent meetings should be used to provide valuable information about the select program.

Another way for the club to link the recreational and select program is to insist that the club DOC have a greater ongoing presence within the recreational environment. The DOC should get to know as many of the coaches and parents as possible by participating in the parent and coaches meetings, and by spending some time observing practices and games and interacting with everyone. A great way to promote the select level is for the DOC to scout and select the Recreational All-Star teams and to train them periodically. When good players get exposed to good coaching, they are more likely to see the benefits of stepping up into the select program. The DOC and the U-10 select coaches should pay particular attention to the best U-8 and U-10 Recreational players since they will form the base for future select teams.

D. CLUB DIRECTOR OF COACHING

The concept of a club Director of Coaching (DOC) is not original or new. In the 1980's, some of the bigger youth clubs around the country started hiring full-time coaches and the position of a club DOC was born. With every passing year, more and more clubs decided to hire a paid Director of Coaching. For example, in 1993, there were just 3 or 4 full-time club DOC's in Georgia. By the year 2000, the number of paid DOC's had swelled to around 25, not to mention an additional 15-20 coaches who became employed by clubs on a full-time basis to assist the DOC. **The trend to employ qualified professional coaches to run the coaching programs in youth soccer is certainly encouraging. Every club should seriously consider hiring a DOC.** The obvious main hurdle to overcome for most clubs is how to raise the money for a full-time DOC. But before dealing with the financial issues, let's look at the benefits of having a club DOC as well as the possible duties of such a position.

Why hire professional coaches? It is a given that most of the player development occurs at the club level since that is where the majority of players play most of their soccer. The vast majority of youth coaches are volunteers with bundles of enthusiasm and the best of intentions. These volunteer coaches form the backbone of our youth clubs and are absolutely necessary for youth soccer to exist and flourish. However, most of these volunteer coaches lack a strong soccer background and need professional guidance from experts in the area of player development. This is where the club DOC can play a vital role. Also, once the best players reach the top select levels, most of the volunteer coaches can no longer challenge them. These players need to be exposed to a higher level of coaching in order to reach their potential. Put simply, the task of the club DOC would be to educate the volunteer coaches at the recreational and intermediate levels, to bring in and train professional coaches for the top select levels, and thus, increase the skill level of all the players in the club. Without a qualified coach in charge of a youth club, the players will simply not reach their full potential.

Youth coaches need continuing education that a club DOC can provide. The mandatory state coaching license courses are an important first step in the coaching education chain. But these courses are a one-time deal. Just as players need role models to observe and emulate, the same is true for coaches. The DOC can stimulate and inspire the volunteer coaches to seek more knowledge. The advantages of having the volunteer coaches simply observe practical coaching excellence is hard to measure but is invaluable. A club DOC will raise the bar and set new, higher standards for both coaches and players. Clubs will also be able to retain their best players who, in the absence of a qualified coach, are likely to migrate to other clubs that do have paid coaches.

As youth soccer participation grows and soccer becomes more established, multi-tiered and, therefore, more sophisticated, clubs boards spend an inordinate amount of time discussing and arguing over myriad technical issues. Issues such as how to organize tryouts; how to draft players; how to set coaching selection criteria; should players be allowed to play up an age group; should there be a club-wide common playing system; what should the role of the second tier teams be; how many games and which tournaments should the teams play; what should be

◀ CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE ▶ Director of Coaching

the training priorities for each age group; the list goes on and on. These thorny issues have caused numerous rifts in clubs throughout the country and have divided many boards, sometimes leading to splinter groups leaving to form their own clubs and setting unhealthy rivalries within the same community. A club DOC can not only provide the missing technical expertise to deal with these issues but, just as importantly, act as the objective professional who is assigned to deal with the issues with an absence of any personal agendas.

To summarize, hiring a professional DOC will raise the standards of instruction given to the players and coaches. It will ensure that the coaching will be taken seriously and that there will be someone held accountable for the services. Hiring a DOC will signal the first step towards achieving excellence.

Some of the duties the club DOC could fulfill are:

- 1) Design a set of coaches selection criteria and hire all the team coaches.
- 2) Assist the Coaching Committee in designing a Coaches Code of Conduct.
- 3) Train and monitor the team coaches and help them plan and implement practice sessions.
- 4) Design and administer a continuing education program for the team coaches.
- 5) Administer and instruct the state level coaching courses at his/her club.
- 6) Conduct coaches clinics.
- 7) Design manuals for the team coaches.
- 8) Bring experts such as state, regional, and national staff coaches, to present clinics.
- 9) Bring Referee Instructors to educate the coaches and the parents on the rules of the game.
- 10) Bring in experts in the sports sciences, such as a soccer fitness expert, a medical expert for first aid, a sport psychologist, and a nutritionist, to make presentations and to assist in the overall program design.
- 11) Act as the technical liaison between the club and the State DOC.
- 12) Create a suitable library of books, videos and articles for all the team coaches to access.
- 13) Create long and short-term seasonal plans for the club and provide guidance to team coaches in designing their own team's seasonal plans.
- 14) Design and administer the team tryouts.
- 15) Select and coach the Recreational All-Star.
- 16) Design the playing format for the in-house recreational programs, specifying the number of players on the field, the duration of games, the number of games, the size of fields, etc.
- 17) Design the training priorities for each age group and level.
- 18) Organize supplementary skill clinics and camps for the players.
- 19) Design a Player Development Manual for the club.
- 20) Identify the most talented players in the club and alert the State and Regional Coaches for possible inclusion in State and Regional Teams.
- 21) Assist in the design of a Code of Conduct for the players and for the parents.
- 22) Help the club create a policy for team travel that will address logistical, supervision and behavior issues while traveling to tournaments away from home.
- 23) Assist the club with the technical coaching aspects of a Risk Management Policy.
- 24) Educate the players and the parents about the playing opportunities beyond the club level, such as the ODP, and encourage the best players to try out for the ODP.

◀ CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE ▶ Director of Coaching

- 25) Design a player evaluation/feedback process that guides the team coaches in how and when to provide feedback to the players.
- 26) Create a college recruiting information program and educate the players and parents on college playing opportunities.
- 27) Assist in the design and implementation a parent education program that would include parent meetings, parent handbooks, handouts, and occasional seminars.
- 28) Report to the Coaching Committee and assist the committee in all its duties.
- 29) Report to the Club Board and attend the board meetings.
- 30) Promote the club within the community and help with public relations.
- 31) Represent the club at State, Regional, and National coaching seminars and workshops.

It's important to note the duties that are NOT included above. Duties such as maintaining the facilities, cutting the grass, lining the fields, scheduling referees, administering fund-raising events, directing tournaments and other similar duties were not included for a reason. In many clubs, the DOC is the first and only full-time employee hired. It is therefore very tempting to dump a lot of the administrative load on the full-time person. After all, he/she is paid to work for the club and is always available while everyone else is a volunteer with a busy life. Many aspiring DOC's agree to take on the added administrative duties when negotiating their contract with the club, keen to demonstrate their enthusiasm and secure the position. Dumping too many administrative duties on the DOC is not an efficient way of using his/her expertise. Any task that can be carried out by a volunteer, that does not require technical expertise, should continue to be assigned to the volunteers. This is not to suggest that such tasks are beneath the DOC to perform. It's simply that clubs must remember why they hired the DOC in the first place and allow him/her the time and authority to carry out his mandate without any unnecessary distractions. The DOC should focus her energy on coaching and player development if a club truly wishes to extract quality work from her and achieve excellence. The DOC should be judged by his performance as a head coach and it doesn't make sense to impede his ability by saddling him with unrelated duties. The intention here is not to make the DOC's life easy and allow him to coast through with minimal effort. As can be seen from the list above, the scope of work within the realm of coaching that a club DOC can undertake is immense. A quality DOC would be a creative self-starter with abundant initiative who is always looking to implement new training methods to raise the level of the club. A good DOC will get to know all the team coaches from top to bottom and take a personal interest in every coaching aspect of the program. If clubs will do their homework and hire the right person, they will be amply rewarded.

As mentioned before, it's important for the club DOC to be in charge of the coaching and training aspects of ALL the levels in his/her club. The DOC cannot afford to neglect the recreational level. This doesn't mean that he/she needs to actually coach recreational teams. **It means that the DOC should design the technical details of the recreational program such as the playing formats, coaching education, parent education, and training priorities. The DOC can delegate the task of recruiting volunteer coaches to his/her age group Commissioners, but he must monitor the volunteer coaches and have the authority to remove those who are found unsuitable.**

◀ CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE ▶ Director of Coaching

Another issue that usually surfaces is whether the DOC should be allowed to coach ANY teams. Clubs should avoid hiring DOC's who are only interested in coaching a few teams and neglect to look after the welfare of the club as a whole. **It's impossible for someone to coach 3 or 4 teams and still have enough time and energy to carry out the normal duties of a club DOC. However, it would be a good idea for the DOC to coach one team, for a number of reasons.** Even experienced coaches never stop learning. For a coach to keep abreast of new coaching methods and continue his/her professional growth, he needs to constantly solve problems within the coaching cycle of training, observation, and match analysis. Coaching a team will stimulate the DOC to continue to challenge herself as a coach. It will also help him relate better to the daily problems his team coaches face by being 'in the trenches' and, therefore, allow him to offer his coaching staff sound and practical advice. Good coaches have a passion for teaching and will be more inclined to apply for the position of a DOC if they know that they would have the opportunity to coach a team.

It should be up to the DOC to decide which team to coach. But the DOC should coach a different team each year. This is based on the belief that youth coaches in general should not coach the same team for more than one year (the rationale behind this belief is explained in a later section on the select program). Therefore, the DOC cannot impose a one-year limit on her team coaches if she doesn't apply the same rule for herself. Also, the DOC should be careful not to create the perception that he picks the best team for himself and keeps it, in order to seek personal glory, because this could lead to resentment and a loss of respect on the part of his staff. The DOC should be a role model and lead by example by projecting herself as a 'team player' so that she can demand the same from her staff.

The following qualifications should be considered when searching for a DOC:

- 1) Possess a USSF 'A' or 'B' License, or equivalent. Candidates with a strong playing background who have no coaching license could be considered, but one would have to question their commitment to coaching education, considering that 70% of the duties of a DOC are related to coaching education. Candidates possessing an NSCAA coaching license or a foreign license should be considered as well. Regardless of license level, clubs should verify the authenticity of the license and, in the case of a foreign license, contact the US Soccer Federation to determine the American equivalency of the foreign license.
- 2) Possess the USSF National Youth License. This is the newest license offered by US Soccer and is geared toward coaches who work with the U-6 through U-10 age groups. This license is extremely beneficial for a club DOC since it is more effective than the traditional USSF courses in preparing him/her to design age-appropriate programs for the youngest age groups. If a candidate is hired without this license, the club should insist on enrolling him/her in the National Youth License course as soon as possible.
- 3) Possess strong practical coaching experience at the youth level.
- 4) Demonstrate ability to relate to and communicate with young players of all levels, from recreational to top select.
- 5) Possess strong practical playing ability at the professional, semi-professional and/or college varsity level.
- 6) Possess strong interpersonal skills with solid written and oral communication skills.
- 7) Possess proven ability to influence adults and articulate concepts to large audiences.

◀ CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE ▶ Director of Coaching

- 8) Demonstrate leadership qualities.
- 9) Possess experience in instructing coaching courses to adults.
- 10) Possess integrity and follow morally and ethically sound standards.
- 11) Possess organizational and administrative skills with good time management.
- 12) Have a dynamic personality with innovative ideas and strong motivational skills.
- 13) Possess a player development philosophy that is in line with the club's mission.
- 14) Be responsible and have a mature personality.
- 15) Committed to working a non-traditional schedule of afternoons, evenings, and weekends.

This leaves one more item to cover: How to raise the money for a club DOC. It's easier to find ways to raise the money if the club is fully behind the concept of hiring a DOC. Some club boards are not fully convinced there is value in hiring a paid coach when there are plenty of volunteer coaches willing to coach for free. Undoubtedly, there are some board members who believe that volunteering one's time to coach kids is a noble and worthy community service and, therefore, regard paid coaches with suspicion. Hence, the first step for a club is to 'convince itself' and its membership of the need to hire a paid coach.

Over the last twenty years, soccer coaching has evolved from a mainly volunteer, hobby-based activity to a bon a fide profession. Before a field of endeavor can rightfully gain the status of a PROFESSION, certain basic elements must exist within that field. Elements such as a formal, nationally recognized certification program with a standardized testing procedure, a professional association, a governing body that monitors good standings, a Code of Ethics, an ethics and grievances hearing process, and a demand for advanced knowledge in the field. All of these elements exist now for soccer coaching and, therefore, legitimize it as a profession. Coaching youth soccer is now established as a legitimate professional endeavor. Aspiring professional coaches spend a lifetime immersed in the game, obtaining coaching licenses and becoming keen students of the game. Qualified coaches have gone to great lengths and efforts to educate themselves and are now in a position to offer their knowledge for appropriate remuneration. One would not expect lawyers or teachers to offer their specialized knowledge and services for free and the same can be said for qualified coaches.

This is NOT to say that a volunteer cannot do the job of a DOC. If a club is lucky enough to have among its ranks a person with the right qualification for a DOC, who is willing to do it for free and has the time to do it properly, it should grab and enlist this person to the position. But the reality is that such people are rare.

What is the going salary for a club DOC? As of the year 2000, base salaries for full-time youth coaches in Georgia typically range from \$25,000 to \$45,000, depending on the coach's experience, the size of the club, and the local cost of living. Salaries for part-time coaches vary from \$5,000 to \$20,000. In the case of full-time coaches, clubs must also remember to budget for the additional cost of employee benefits, such as medical insurance, dental insurance, as well as unemployment insurance and taxes. Other expenses associated with a paid DOC could include travel expenses, and an allocation for attending regional/national coaching symposiums and conventions.

◀ CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE ▶ Director of Coaching

Large clubs with over 1,000 players should be able to afford a full-time DOC by levying an additional fee from each player on top of the usual registration fee. For example, a club with 1,000 recreational and 300 select players could raise \$30,000 by charging each recreational player an additional \$15 per year and each select player an additional \$50 per year. Charging more from the select players reflects the difference between the recreational and select programs' level of commitment. Medium-size clubs, with 500 to 1,000 players, could also levy an additional fee from the players, plus, in order to enable the DOC to bring his/her salary to a full-time level, allow him/her to earn additional income from running camps for the club. Small clubs with less than 500 players might not need a full-time person and could start with a part-time DOC and progress from there. Small and medium-size clubs that cannot afford to pay for just a coach could combine the duties of a DOC with an administrative position. Small clubs that are located in close proximity to each other should consider joining forces and creating one unified club that would be stronger and better able to afford a paid DOC.

Small clubs can help their DOC earn additional income by allowing him/her to be a paid coach for one of their select teams. Paying the DOC to coach one of the teams is only recommended for small clubs where the overall job of running the club is not too overwhelming. At bigger clubs, the DOC should be provided with a sufficient base salary so that he/she doesn't get paid extra for coaching a team. This will protect him/her from complaints that he/she spends too much time with the team that pays him/her and neglecting the rest of the club. The DOC can also organize a '3v3/4v4 Bash' or similar one-day fun festivals during teacher work days and holidays and earn extra money from participation fees. Another way for the DOC to earn extra money is by working for the state association as a Course Instructor or an ODP Coach. The club could also allow the DOC four to six weeks off in the summer to earn extra income at other summer camps. It is not advisable to allow the club DOC to earn extra money by 'moonlighting' as a private trainer for individuals or groups. This could take up too much time, especially if it proves lucrative, and could also lead to a conflict of interest situation.

Many clubs obtain additional revenue from sponsors, from running tournaments and from doing fund-raising events, such as casino nights, raffles and cookie sales. However, this type of revenue should not be relied on for paying a DOC since it's unpredictable and fluctuates from year to year, depending on uncontrollable factors such as sponsors' bank balance, the weather and the motivation and commitment of the participants. Revenues from these types of fund-raising events are best channeled towards other club needs, such as facility improvements and equipment. The funds for paying the salary of a DOC must be secured and guaranteed on a regular basis. That's why player fees and income from camps, as well as mandatory team camps, are the best way to pay for a DOC.

Clubs who decide to hire a DOC can advertise the position in national soccer publications such as Soccer America as well as in the local state association's newsletter. In Georgia, the State Director of Coaching can help clubs get the word out to qualified coaches by mailing to all the State Coaching Staff a flyer, prepared by the club, that includes the job description and other pertinent details. Clubs who need assistance in creating an employment contract, can seek advice from other clubs that have already gone through the process of hiring a DOC.

◀ CLUB'S COACHING STRUCTURE ▶ Director of Coaching

How much authority should the DOC have? Many clubs wrestle with this thorny issue, caught between the need to leave technical matters to the technician and the reluctance to relinquish power. Clubs must remember why they hired the DOC in the first place, which is to benefit from his/her technical expertise. If they second guess him/her and restrict his/her power to do the job properly, what is the point of hiring a professional? The DOC should be given the authority to:

- 1) Hire and fire coaches, with the approval of the Coaching Committee.
- 2) Organize the tryout process and have the final say on player selection and placement.
- 3) Have the final say on player development issues such as players playing up, playing format, training priorities, implementing club-wide coaching standards and policies.
- 4) Have a final say on how many competitive teams to register in each age group, based on the talent level available.

Directors of Coaching who feel restricted in their capacity to perform their duties will lose the motivation to impact the program and just go through the motions, and will eventually quit and go where they feel more appreciated.

It goes without saying that clubs should do their homework and check the background and experience of the person they intend to hire. If they hire the wrong candidate, it can cause long lasting damage to the club and add fuel to the arguments made by those who were initially opposed to hiring a paid coach. Just as in any other profession, there are good DOC's and there are bad ones as well.

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

GENERAL GUIDELINES

General Problems Observed

The Recreational Program is essentially the first soccer experience for most players. It is also the program where most of the players will remain for their whole playing career. The absolutely most important objective of the Recreational Program is to instill a love of the game within each player, so that every player returns the following season. To succeed in wooing every player back, the experience must be a positive one.

By far the largest number of active youth players in this country are recreational. In fact, the local and state run recreational programs in America are arguably the most organized youth soccer programs in the world. Our recreational administrators and coaches are dedicated, intelligent volunteers, many of whom are college-educated. Our infrastructure is excellent and our resources are limitless. But the ‘most organized’ doesn’t necessarily mean the ‘best program’. If there is one glaring weakness in our recreational programs, it is the lack of people with life-long soccer experience, especially a technical experience. Most of the technical expertise is concentrated at the competitive level. The recreational programs are thus left in the hands of willing, enthusiastic volunteers, but ultimately with little or no soccer background.

The generic problems seen in recreational programs across the state, and the country, are repeatedly the same, and are predictably related to the fact that a strong technical supervision is missing. The most common problems observed are:

- 1) Too much emphasis on ‘booting’ the ball aimlessly forward at the U-6 through U-10 age groups, which is not conducive to skill development.
- 2) Too much emphasis on results, especially at the U-10 and U-12 level.
- 3) Players, good enough for the competitive level, kept at the recreational level by coaches who want to win.
- 4) Parental behavior on the sidelines. Too loud, too overbearing, too much. Young players not given the opportunity to grow out of their dependency on the adults.
- 5) The 11v11 game is too difficult for U-12 recreational players who, for the most part, do not have the technical skills or the athleticism to deal with the demands of 11-a-side. They need to play small-sided soccer.
- 6) Clubs having difficulties recruiting volunteer coaches.
- 7) Coaches don’t have enough variety of activities to make the practices fun and effective.
- 8) Pre-game warm-ups are very poor, and do not prepare the players for the demands of the game.
- 9) Too many substitutions during games kill the flow and make games helter-skelter.
- 10) Drafting of teams at the recreational level is a problem at some clubs, with some coaches manipulating the system to stack teams.

This chapter addresses these and other issues and provides appropriate recommendations. If there is one message that should be heard loud and clear, it is that club Directors of Coaching must get more involved by overseeing and monitoring the technical aspects of the recreational

◀ RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

GENERAL GUIDELINES

programs. What we do with the 4 to 9 year old players has a direct and profound impact on our competitive programs.

Playing Format

The vast majority of clubs have adopted GYSA's mandated small-sided playing rules for the U-6, U-8, and U-10 ages. The premise that players develop faster and experience more enjoyment in small-sided games is universally accepted and proven. Clubs should also consider playing reduced numbers at the older recreational age groups whenever possible. Please refer to the age specific page for further recommendations and information on playing format.

Drafting Teams

The basic guidelines for forming recreational teams are that there are no tryouts and no one is cut, and that teams will be evenly balanced. **It is strongly recommended that the teams should be mixed after every season up to the U-10 age, and mixed every year at the U-12 and older ages, and that the teams' draft process be overseen by an impartial, club-appointed person.** Forming new teams every season serves a number of useful purposes. First of all, it discourages coaches from recruiting the stronger players and manipulating the system as they seek to build a 'super' team. Secondly, it prevents coaches from becoming overly possessive of their players. This will make it easier for the better players to try out for the competitive teams without feeling guilty or pressured otherwise by their recreational coach. Thirdly, it avoids the staleness and boredom associated with doing the same drills under the same coach for too long. After about a year, most parent coaches lose their impact, as players start to tune them out. And lastly, it eliminates the build up of rivalries between teams and the 'Us versus Them' mentality, which can sometimes breed animosity between players and parents of opposite teams. When players acquire new teammates every season, everyone becomes a friend and the atmosphere at games is much more relaxed.

There will undoubtedly be resistance to this recommendation. Some parent coaches will argue that their child is happier playing with players he/she is familiar with. But kids make friends easily so this shouldn't really be an issue. Another objection might point to the need to buy new uniforms every season. There is an easy solution for this problem. Clubs can buy the same uniform for all the teams and make them reversible, so that players can wear the appropriate side for their team and never have to buy another jersey. Or clubs can distribute bibs (pennies) at games. In fact, buying the same jersey for all the players helps the club create a club identity and move away from the 'team' concept and eliminate all the baggage associated with the team-oriented culture. Experience has shown that clubs who relent to coaches' demands and allow recreational teams to stay together, end up with bigger problems down the road. The following example is typical of such problems: A recreational U-8 team is allowed to stay together into their U-9 year. The team is winning within the recreational program. When the team moves into the U-10 age group, they are still together. Meanwhile, at the U-10 Select Tryouts, only 7 players show up and the club is forced to cancel its U-10 select program. It turns out that none of the players from the recreational team that was allowed to stay together came to the tryouts

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

GENERAL GUIDELINES

even though many of them were good enough for select soccer. The recreational team's coach convinced all the players to stay together at the recreational level. But the problem is that, since most of the good players have left the U-10 recreational program, this team has no competition and is beating everyone handily. So they petition the club to allow them to move as a team to the select level. The end result of all this is that a coach and a few parents have managed to destroy the club's U-10 select program and undermine the whole select tryout process, all in order to satisfy their own personal agendas. If clubs stand firm and hold their grounds on these issues, the natural resistance to change will only be encountered in the first year of implementation. After that, everyone will see the benefits and changing teams every season will become an accepted club policy that no one questions.

Recruiting and Educating Coaches

Convincing parents to volunteer to coach is always a challenge. There is no quick and easy way to find willing coaches. But the following recommendations should help the recruiting process.

Improve organization and communication – Parents will be more inclined to volunteer if they see that the club is well organized. When all the logistical details are taken care of efficiently, such as team assignments, game scheduling, practice field allocation, uniforms distribution, productive and informative coaches meetings, parent meetings, a regularly mailed and informative newsletter, and decent facilities, parents can be persuaded to coach. If the prospective parent coach sees that the club has an established support system that will provide the necessary resources and not abandon him to deal with the team problems on his own, he/she is more likely to volunteer.

Offer Clinics and Coaching Courses – Many parents are reluctant to volunteer because they know very little about coaching soccer. By offering clinics and coaching courses, the club can alleviate their anxiety. The club can show the parents that the course manuals are an excellent source of material, specifically designed for rookie coaches and include enough practice activities for an entire season. The club DOC can inspire and motivate volunteer coaches by working with them and setting an example for quality sessions.

Utilize the resources of the State Association – The state association offers free clinics throughout the year. Contact the State Director of Coaching (State DOC) to set up a series of clinics. The state association has also hired a District Coach to handle coaching education and player development in South Georgia. The State DOC and District Coach are also available to visit clubs, meet with the club officers, meet with the parents, evaluate club needs and offer advice on all player development/coaching issues. Take advantage of their expertise.

Assign age group Commissioners – The club should appoint a Commissioner for each age group. These Commissioners will stay permanent at the same level and not move up with the teams. For example, the U-6 Commissioner will not become next year's U-8 Commissioner but will always work with the U-6's. This will improve the administration of each program as these Commissioners become experts at dealing with age-specific problems and their

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

GENERAL GUIDELINES

accumulated experience will not be lost. The prospective parent coaches will be happy to know that there is an ‘old head’ available to guide them through the start up operation.

The duties of the age group Commissioner could include recruiting coaches and helping the DOC with training them, organizing clinics, organizing parent meetings for his/her age group, monitoring the practices and games, and acting as a field marshal during games and tournaments. The Commissioner can also help coaches deal with parental complaints. Any time a parent and the coach cannot resolve an issue, the coach can refer the parent to the Commissioner. This again alleviates coaches’ anxiety about having to deal with difficult parents on their own.

Smaller clubs can assign Commissioners for multiple age groups. For example, clubs with less than 5 teams per age group could assign a combined U-6/U-8 Commissioner. Bigger clubs should be able to appoint one person for each age group. All the Commissioners could report to the Club Officer in charge of the Recreational Program and/or to the Club Director of Coaching (Club DOC).

The GYSA rules mandate that every recreational coach must have a coaching license, and that the required minimum license depends on the age group as follows:

<u>Age group</u>	<u>Minimum License</u>
U-6 & U-8	‘G’ Certificate
U-10 & U-12	‘F’ Certificate
U-14 and older	‘Rec E’ or ‘E’ Certificate

Coaches have a 6-month grace period to attain the minimum license. The state association also has a waiver policy that allows coaches to start at the course level that is most appropriate for their players. For example, the coach of a U-14 recreational team can skip the ‘G’ and ‘F’ courses and enroll directly into a ‘Rec E’ or an ‘E’ course.

Many small clubs have difficulties filling the classes and meeting the minimum required attendance to hold a class. Subsequently their courses repeatedly get cancelled and their coaches cannot get certified. The state association’s Coaching Department will generally co-operate with the small clubs to find solutions to this problem. One solution is to combine the ‘G’ and the ‘F’ courses into one class. Another solution is for the club to bring players for the field sessions when there are not enough coaches in attendance. Also, the ‘G’ and the ‘F’ courses can be spread out into a series of short sessions scheduled over a period of time, say 2 hours per session. Please contact the State DOC to discuss the best solution for your club. The State DOC is committed to helping your coaches get the required education and certification.

Clubs who do not attach a high priority to coaching education are doing their members a disservice and are hurting their own long-term growth potential. One cannot over emphasize the important contribution that coaching education brings in creating an enjoyable and fulfilling experience for the players. Clubs have a responsibility to make sure that the coaches, in whose

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

GENERAL GUIDELINES

hands the players are entrusted, are as knowledgeable and well prepared as can be. If a coach never gets an opportunity to observe a quality practice session, the chances are he/she will never learn how to conduct one. Informed coaches are better able to understand, develop and challenge players. Uninformed coaches could de-motivate players and contribute towards player attrition. Many coaches themselves drop out of coaching due to frustration born out of lack of knowledge. **Clubs should remind their coaches that if they are not certified, they are contravening GYSA rules and are subject to suspension.** Even more important is the club's liability in the context of risk management issues. Clubs, whose coaches are unlicensed, stand the risk of a major lawsuit filed by parents of an injured player. The coaching course curricula include sections on teaching proper and safe techniques, care and prevention of injuries, and supervision of children. **If a coach is found negligent and the club is shown to be lax on coaching education, it could be held liable.**

◀ RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

U-6 and U-8

AGE GROUPS U-6 AND U-8

Playing Format

U-6: Play 3 v 3 on a field approximately 15 x 25 yards. Game duration 30-40 minutes.

U-8: Play 4 v 4 on a field approximately 20 x 40 yards. Game duration 40-50 minutes.

Refer to the GYSA Rules and Regulations for the complete playing rules.

Absolutely no scores should be kept and no standings posted.

Use of Goalkeepers

Using goalkeepers is not recommended for these age groups. The rationale is simple - **no need to have keepers if players are not technically able to shoot.** Also, the modern keeper needs to be able to receive and pass the ball just like a field player. However, clubs can introduce goalkeepers at the U-8 spring season in order to help in the transition to U-10, where keepers will be required.

Another reason for not using a keeper is that the player chosen to be the keeper is usually instructed to remain inside the goal and is not given the chance to be part of the action. This restriction is counterproductive in the long run, as it denies the budding keeper a chance to learn how and when to come out and collect loose balls in his own half – the essence of goalkeeping. If coaches won't allow the keepers the freedom to roam in front of the goal area, what is the point in having one? Making the keeper stand in goal is like adding a third post to the goal, a situation that is devoid of any redeeming long-term benefits. If coaches feel that your typical U-8 player is not ready to be a roaming keeper than they shouldn't use any keeper at all.

If coaches insist on using keepers at the U-8 level, they must allow them and even encourage them, to come out of the goal area and learn to be 'connected' to the rest of the team. One way to do this is to use the following rule for incorporating keepers: Mark a line across the field parallel to the goal line, about 6 yards away from the goal line, to designate a goal area. The player on the defending team who is closest to the goal is allowed to use his/her hands inside the goal area. This way, there is no one specific player assigned to be a keeper and all of them get a taste of playing keeper.

Some clubs not only refrain from using keepers at U-8, but also have a rule that, for a goal to count, all the players on the attacking team must be in the other team's half. This rule helps teach everyone to move up and down the field as a unit and ingrains good habits in future defenders. This rule, it is hoped, might eradicate the pathetic sight we often encounter in U-10 play, where the defenders are standing rooted close to their goal, while the ball and the action are far away, deep in the other team's half.

◀ RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

U-6 and U-8

Squad Size

When forming teams, **the rule of thumb is: avoid having more players on the bench than are playing on the field at any time.** For example, if a U-8 team playing 4v4 has 9 or 10 players, the player rotation becomes awkward and they don't get enough playing time. This means that U-6 teams should not have more than 6 players while U-8 teams not have more than 8 players.

If squad sizes are uneven (some teams show up with fewer players while other teams come with too many), clubs can create a process (organized by the age group commissioners or field marshals) by which the larger teams lend one or two players to the smaller teams for the game. We realize that parents are conditioned to the 'team' concept and the thought of lending one of their own players to the other team will meet with resistance by some. As mentioned before, some of the unwanted features of the 'team' mentality prevalent in youth sport should be downplayed in favor of a 'club' mentality and 'player development comes first' approach.

Volume of Activities

It's always a tricky problem to recommend how often young players should train and play, especially when dealing with beginners. Every child is different. One six-year-old might want to play soccer every day, while another will be satisfied with just once a week. While at the select level players are often made to play too many games, at the recreational level that is usually not an issue. If anything, many recreational players do not get enough soccer activity. **Clubs should create their recreational programs with some flexibility in order to meet every player's appetite for the game. This can be accomplished by combining the regularly scheduled team training with supplemental, club-organized player clinics.** Players can choose to attend just the team training or, if they are really keen, they can also profit from the club clinics.

Supplemental clinics at the U-6 and U-8 age groups are highly recommended, but they must be properly organized by experienced coaches who understand the developmental needs of these age groups. Exposing young players to the most experienced coaches once a week, in addition to the regular team practice, presents a number of desirable advantages. The variety factor inherent with working under different coaches is one advantage. The volunteer team coaches are not saddled with the burden of running more than one practice per week. The volunteer coaches can learn from the more experienced coaches by attending these clinics. In fact, the volunteer coaches should be required to attend the supplemental clinics for their own team. And lastly, the experienced coaches can ensure that the players get the age-appropriate training they need.

The supplemental clinics should be conducted by the Club DOC, or by the age group Commissioner. These clinics could take a variety of formats. Many clubs use the 'follow-the-lead' format, where all the teams show up with their coaches at one location and the clinician in charge demonstrates each activity to the volunteer coaches and then watches them do it with

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

U-6 and U-8

their team. The table below summarizes the recommended weekly volume of activities. The practices should be no more than 60 minutes long. The supplemental clinics should be optional to the players.

Age	Team Practice Per Week	Supplemental Clinics Per Week (optional)	Games Per Week	Total Games Per Year
U-6	1	1	1	20-25
U-8	1 or 2	1	1	20-25

Role of the Club DOC or the Coaching Committee

The Traditional approach toward training the U-6 and U-8 age groups is to recruit parent coaches, put them through a couple of pre-season coaching clinics, hand them some form of a coaching manual, and send them loose to fend for themselves. The rationale behind this approach is that all the players really need is a ‘facilitator’ rather than a ‘coach’, and the more experienced coaches should be left to focus on the older age groups where players need more tactical training. In the writer’s opinion, this approach is extremely misguided and is actually contributing in no small measure to a stifling effect on players’ achieving full soccer potential all across the spectrum, from recreational to select. The developmental phase that U-6/U-8’s undergo is absolutely the most crucial phase! The rate of motor skill development of 4 to 8 year olds (the starting point) has a strong correlation with the end result. The quality of the motor skills acquired at the starting point has a big influence on the final level of soccer potential attained by each player. Some components of soccer skills, if not practiced and honed properly at the starting point, can never be fully mastered at the later ages.

The vast majority of parent coaches are well meaning. They generally do a good job of creating a fun experience for the players. The problem is that these parent coaches are simply not qualified to design the right training program for the 4 to 8 year-olds. They are focusing on the wrong skills and are not aware that what they are doing is inadvertently stifling the development of their players. By the time the more experienced coaches take over at the U-10 and older ages, some of the growth potential has already been lost forever.

The skill priorities for these age groups are thoroughly explained in the next section. This section merely serves to emphasize how important it is for the club DOC to be intimately involved with all aspects of the program for these key age groups. If a club does not have a DOC, then the job of running the program should fall under the watch of the Coaching Committee. The club DOC or the senior coaches don’t necessarily have to coach teams in these age groups. **But the DOC (or the Coaching Committee) does need to play a key role in designing the training and game format, to periodically monitor the parent coaches during practices and games, to work closely with the age group Commissioners, to help organize the supplemental clinics, and to provide on-going guidance to the volunteer coaches.** We must get it right at the starting point. It’s as simple as that!

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

U-6 and U-8

Skill Priorities

By far the most important skill for beginners is the skill of dribbling. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and using dribbling to get away from pressure. **The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation and preparation for the other fundamental skills of soccer, such as controlling, passing and shooting.** When players are receiving the ball and making the preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. The ability to dribble also helps maintain possession of the ball. It's not unusual for players to find themselves in a game situation where dribbling is the only viable option to get out of tight pressure and maintain possession.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start, the better. Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players don't get easily discouraged if they fail. Players of this age do not possess the analytical thought process to look back or think ahead. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that the last time they tried to dribble it didn't work will not even enter their minds. But if we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble. Thirdly, In 3v3 and 4v4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is always just a few yards away from shooting range. Once the game moves to the larger-sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. And lastly, it's better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the U-10 and older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

Most parent coaches reading this section will probably agree that dribbling should be a priority. The challenge is to find a way to implement this priority into the real life dynamics of your typical U-6/U-8 program. How can the clubs do it?

As mentioned in the previous section, most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, they louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. The reality is that players are controlled like puppets by

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

U-6 and U-8

the adults to such an extent that they are not thinking for themselves, and are afraid to do anything but kick the ball. Even throw-ins are routinely thrown straight to the other team by confused players who are conditioned to play the ball forward, no matter what. The kick-offs are no better, with players kicking the ball straight to the other team, American football style. Players, who clearly have plenty of time on the ball with no pressure anywhere near, are still kicking it forward without any thought or skill. And this type of mindless play is usually not corrected by the parent coaches and is allowed to occur time and again.

What the coaches must do is encourage the players to dribble, dribble and dribble. Their first touch must be a soft one. There should be very little coaching done by the coaches, just the occasional reminder to “dribble” and, when close enough to goal, to “shoot”. The shout to “kick it” should never be hollered by the adults. Dribbling out of pressure should be the emphasis for these age groups. Results don't count and 'booting it' should not be an option. The players must be allowed to be creative, and to solve the problems of pressure and space by themselves, using dribbling techniques. Passing is an impossible technique to master for players who cannot dribble. The better players, once they learn to dribble out of tight areas, will be able to create space for themselves with the dribble and will then start to look up and pass the ball. But that will come by itself. Success at the U-6/U-8 ages is measured by how many times a player can dribble past opponents since game results are not important.

The coaches' approach to the pre-game warm-up should also change. No more the traditional line drills where the coach serves one ball at a time to a line of players who shoot on goal. Instead, the players should all have a ball each and dribble inside their half, using fun types of dribbling activities, to prepare them for the game. The club DOC can prepare a sheet of pre-game warm-up activities that every team must do prior to kick-off.

To summarize, if we want our players to fully master the art of dribbling, the following conditions must exist: a) they must start learning to dribble early; b) we must provide ample opportunities for dribbling in practices and games, and c) we must create the right game environment where players are not afraid to dribble. The following guidelines are recommended for the skill priorities at the U-6/U-8 ages:

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-6	Dribble out of trouble Soft first touch No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal
U-8	Dribble out of trouble Soft first touch No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal Introduce passing only to the players who can dribble out of trouble (this can be done during the supplemental clinics where the best players can be grouped separately for some of the activities).

◀ RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

U-6 and U-8

Coaches need to reduce the number of unnecessary stoppages in play. For example, there is no need to stop and correct every time a throw-in is not done properly. For some reason, parent coaches have a fixation on teaching players how to take a throw-in. There is absolutely no reason on earth for U-6/U-8's to rehearse throw-ins in practices or games. Why is it so important for the players to do proper throw-ins at U-6/U-8? All the players will eventually learn the throw-in technique over time by themselves. It's like walking. We don't teach toddlers to walk - they learn it instinctively by trying and falling. The players will learn to take a throw-in in time without the need for us to stop games and teach it. Every minute of the game should be spent playing, with as little interruption as possible.

Parents' Role

The parents must understand the skill priorities and embrace the program structure, if it is to succeed. Clubs should prepare a handout that deals specifically with the U-6/U-8 priorities. The handout should include the rationale behind the priorities and explain to the parents how they are expected to behave on the sidelines. As mentioned before, we feel that the clubs need to be firm and clear about their expectations of the parent's behavior. The handout should clearly state what is and isn't allowed on the sideline, and use the field marshals to monitor and enforce these rules.

One of the main problems with parents at games is that they sit too close to the field. Their proximity to the players gives them too much of a presence which, in turn, impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. It's very hard for parents to resist shouting instructions to the players because beginner players are visibly unsure of themselves and naturally make a lot of mistakes. Children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. This dependency spills over into youth sports, manifesting as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. **Therefore, another important objective of the U-6/U-8 programs should be to wean the players out of their dependency on their parents' help during games.** This is so very crucial for the development of soccer players. We all know that soccer is a players' game, meaning that it's the players who must make the decisions on the field. In soccer, coaches have a lot less influence and power during games than in some of the other traditional American sports. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do. The following guidelines are recommended for U-6/U-8 game set-up:

- 1) **The fields to be laid out in such a way that keep the parents about 20-30 yards from the sidelines.** This can be easily done using special lines or ropes beyond which parents cannot encroach. We all agree that most players want their parents to be at the games, watching them play, and we realize that having the parents sit by the sidelines seems so nice and cozy. But keeping the parents some distance away from the action will enhance the players' sense of freedom and ease most of the intimidation any players might feel when

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

U-6 and U-8

the parents are right on top of them. And the parents can still enjoy watching the game. What we lose in coziness we gain in giving the players more independence.

- 2) **The parents should not coach the players.** All they should be allowed to do is cheer good plays by their team but they should also be encouraged to politely applaud good play by the other team.
- 3) **Parents must never tell the players to “kick” or “boot” the ball.** As discussed in the section on the skill priority, kicking the ball needs to be discouraged. The parents will need to be prepared to accept that a lot of the dribbling attempts will be unsuccessful and that, nevertheless, they will have to bite their tongues and let the players try again and again.
- 4) **The coaches should also keep their instruction to a minimum** and let the players understand that they must make their own decisions on the field and that it's OK to make mistakes. The coaches should stand on the sideline and only enter the field if absolutely necessary. It must be remembered that we are trying to help the players grow out of their dependency on the adults. The coaches should encourage dribbling out of trouble and discourage kicking.
- 5) **All this information should be conveyed to the parents in a meeting and using a handout.** A sample handout for this purpose is included in the section on dealing and educating the parents.

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

U-10 and U-12

AGE GROUP U-10 AND U-12

Playing Format

The move to small-sided soccer went into high gear in the nineties after prolonged lobbying by soccer educators and National Staff Coaches. Georgia was one of the first states to mandate 3v3 at U-6 and 4v4 at U-8 in the mid-nineties, and now this format is widely used across the country. US Youth Soccer continued the campaign by declaring that U-10 play should have a maximum of 8v8 and everyone, including Georgia, followed suit. However, embracing small-sided soccer shouldn't stop there. In fact, the feeling among many experts is that the U-10 format should be further reduced to 6v6 in a field size of around 30 by 40 yards, and that the U-12 format should be no more than 7v7, in a 40 by 60 yard field. Discussions about the appropriate playing format for players under the age of 13 have picked up steam again recently among National Staff Coaches, State DOC's, and Club DOC's. All the National Coaches and the State DOC's agree that most players are technically, physically and tactically not ready for the 11v11 game until the U-14 level. This opinion corresponds with those of the professional youth coaches from the traditional soccer countries such as France, Holland, and Italy. These countries, which have an excellent reputation in the area of player development, mandate small-sided play until U-12 and only recommend starting 11v11 at U-14. No doubt, there are some 11 to 13 year-olds who can cope with the demands of 11-a-side play on a big field, but the majority of the players in these ages cannot. The writer's observations of club play in Georgia reinforce the conclusion that we are rushing our players into the 11v11 environment too soon. Your typical 12-year-old doesn't even have the strength and technique to cross the ball, or deliver a cross-field pass, in the big field.

Putting aside momentarily the debate on whether 12 year olds can or cannot play 11v11, the most compelling reason to reduce the playing format to 6v6 or 7v7 is the fact that it is undeniably better within a player development context. Smaller fields with fewer players means more touches on the ball which, in turn, speeds up the mastery of the ball and provides more enjoyment to the players. Smaller fields also encourage better, more skillful soccer since the long kick up the field is not required as much as on a large field. Passing, dribbling and combination play are more effective means of moving the ball forward in smaller fields and that's exactly what we want our players learning to do. If 11-a-side is too much for 12-year-old select players, it certainly is even more so for recreational players who are, for the most part, less athletic and technical. **At the recreational level, clubs should reduce the playing format to 6v6 at U-10 and U-12.** The benefits are clear:

- 1) It's more appropriate for the players,
- 2) Promotes better soccer,
- 3) Improves the player development process and speeds the acquisition of skills,
- 4) More enjoyable for the players,
- 5) Requires less field space, and
- 6) Allows the smaller clubs to keep their recreational program in-house.

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

U-10 and U-12

There are a number of clubs in Georgia who play 6v6 or 7v7 at U-10 and U-12. The clubs that play small-sided soccer at U-12 are the smaller ones, outside of Atlanta. Ironically, they do it mostly because they do not have enough players registered to form 11-a-side teams. There is one club though, the Ogeechee Soccer Association in Statesboro, that plays 6v6 at the U-10 and U-12 Recreational level by choice, not necessity, because they are convinced it is more appropriate. The rest of the clubs in Georgia should visit Statesboro and observe their 6v6 games. They will notice how these recreational players are clearly more comfortable in the 6v6 environment, how very little aimless booting of the ball there is, and how impressive the level of play is, considering that it is recreational level soccer.

For the large clubs, where there is a sufficient number of players to keep the recreational program in-house, it is an easy matter of switching to 6v6. Clubs that like to inter-play against each other can sit together and come up with a mutually agreed format, which GYSA would gladly approve in most instances (GYSA is in charge of sanctioning inter-league play).

Undoubtedly, there will be resistance to these recommendations. The most likely objections will cite the need to recruit more volunteer coaches, the fact that the State Recreational Tournament and the other tournaments use 11v11 play, and that the players want to play 11v11 soccer. The need for more volunteer coaches shouldn't be an issue since the 4v4 format at U-8 will automatically create a large reservoir of willing and experienced coaches. The arguments that most tournament play is 11v11 and that kids like to play the adult version are valid, but who says we cannot offer our kids both? There is nothing wrong with providing our players with a regular diet of 6v6 play, mixed with the occasional 11v11 tournament. Teams could have a roster of 7 to 8 players for the regular club play of 6v6, and combine with another team to create a roster of 14 to 16 players for 11v11 tournaments. This approach will enhance player development and enjoyment and will allow them to look forward to the occasional 'big' tournament. It will also promote goodwill and cooperation between teams within the same association and emphasize the 'club' mentality over the sometimes less healthy 'team' mentality. Another solution that will also reduce the need for more coaches would be to maintain team rosters of 14-16 and split the team by half to play two simultaneous games of 6v6 in the house league, and keep the team intact for the 11v11 tournaments.

As far as equipment and field space requirements are concerned, 6v6 play lends itself ideally to the typical level of resources available. Clubs can use the same goals that are currently being used for U-10 play. They can easily squeeze two 6v6 games into the present U-10 fields by playing one game across each half, or run four 6v6 games simultaneously on one regular 11v11 field.

Volume of Activities

Two practices plus one game per week are the norm at the U-10 and U-12 recreational levels. By this time, the more committed players generally migrate to the select programs and the need to train more than twice a week is usually not an issue. The recreational players who do wish to train more than twice a week should be allowed to join in the practices of the select teams. If

◀ RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

U-10 and U-12

there are no select teams in the age group, the players can practice with one of the older teams. The practice length should be between 60 to 90 minutes, but definitely not to exceed 90 minutes.

Age Group	Team Practices Per Week	Game Per Week	Total Games Per Year
U-10	2	1	20-25
U-12	2	1	25-30

Clubs that adopt the 6v6 game format can schedule two teams to practice together in each time block.

Skill Priorities

The emphasis on dribbling should continue at these age groups, but now passing needs to be introduced and practiced as well. As we move from U-8 to U-10, the fields are getting bigger and dribbling is not always the best solution. At this stage, players need to learn when to dribble out of trouble and when to pass. However, aimless kicking should be discouraged. Game results at the recreational level should never assume much importance. Players at the U-10/U-12 levels should be learning to combine with teammates around them, using short ground passes and wall passes to move the ball forward.

The best way for the players to learn is by deciding themselves when to dribble and when to pass and learn from their mistakes. The coaches and parents should refrain from shouting instructions every step of the way. As mentioned before, the ideal approach is to give the players the freedom to express themselves, let them make their own mistakes and learn by trial and error. The need to reduce players' dependence on the adults for guidance during the game is a constant objective.

Parents' Role

The U-10 age group seems to represent a turning point with respect to coaches' and parents' expectations and preoccupation with game results. At the U-6/U-8 age groups, adults are less prone to worry about the results. They are willing to accept that it's too early to put pressure on the players. But all that changes as soon as the players reach the U-10 level. Many coaches and parents regard this age group with more seriousness and adopt a competitive approach that is ill-advised and which can lead to irresponsible behavior. It could be because U-10 is when teams can first enter the State Recreational Tournament, or maybe because this age sees the advent of inter-club play, or the fact that 8v8 is just a small step away from the adult, 11v11 version of the game. Whatever the reason, U-10 parent coaches have gained the unenviable reputation as overly competitive, and ironically, this reputation is prevalent at the recreational level.

The club DOC, and/or the U-10 Age Group Commissioner assigned by the club, must keep the parents and coaches of this age group under close scrutiny and spend considerable time educating and monitoring them. This is a key age group. In another year or so, the players will

« RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

U-10 and U-12

be old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to continue to play organized soccer. If the experience at U-10 turns sour for them, they will quit. It must be fun and rewarding for them. For this reason, a comprehensive parent education program should be implemented at the U-10 age group, which will be the logical extension of the programs suggested in this manual for the U-8 parents. A sample program for U-10 parents is included in the section on dealing and educating the parents.

◀ RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

U-14 and Older

AGE GROUP U-14 AND OLDER

The recreational program at the U-14 and older levels is probably the least problematic and least controversial of all the age groups. By the time players reach this age, they will have found their proper playing levels. By now, their parents will have mellowed down, realizing that life doesn't revolve around the result of a soccer game, and that their child is not going to become the next Mia Hamm. Anyone who is still involved in recreational soccer at this age is obviously a true fan of the game, playing it simply for the enjoyment factor and doesn't take it too seriously. In fact, the biggest challenge clubs face with this age group is to retain enough players in order to field a team. Many clubs struggle to fill rosters. Here again, clubs need to look into the possibility of combining age groups or combining with a neighboring club to have enough players for a team. If clubs don't have enough players available for the traditional 11v11 game, they can play small-sided soccer.

Training Priorities and Volume of Practices

As players grow older into the high teens, having pre-set training priorities becomes a less effective approach. A more sensible approach would be to analyze the team's performance in games. Coaches working with these age groups should base their decision regarding the practice topics on their team's performance in matches. In other words, the games will tell the coaches what they need to work on. For example, if the team is struggling with possession and the breakdowns are mostly technical, then the practices on the following week should be devoted to improving passing.

Keep in mind though that very few recreational players would be willing to engage in a technique enhancing activity if it's not fun. Coaches must make it fun, otherwise they will lose the players' attention or desire. Therefore, the best approach is to use game-like activities that create repetition of the topic and are enjoyable. Line drills are boring, they bear very little resemblance to the game and do not prepare the players for the dynamic demands of the game and therefore should be avoided. The 'Recreational E' or the State 'E' coaching course are the best source of activities for this level and every coach should attend one of these courses.

The standard two practices and one game per week represent the right dose of soccer activity these players need. Coaches should make it clear that they expect the players to attend practices, but flexibility should prevail. Teenagers have many interests and need to keep a balanced life. Soccer is just one of many activities that fill their weekly schedule and missing the occasional practice should not become a source of conflict as long as they attend the majority of the practices.

Participation is the key at the recreational level. Winning should always take a second seat to enjoyment. All the players on the team should get equal, or close to equal, playing time. Recreational players are not likely to become professional players, so the objectives of playing soccer center around building self-esteem, staying fit, making friends, and having fun. Sitting on the bench will not contribute to building self-esteem, improving fitness or having fun.

A. GENERAL PROBLEMS OBSERVED

The Select Program is geared toward players who have outgrown the Recreational Program and are looking for a more challenging soccer environment. Players who play at the select level usually have a personal goal, such as to play for the high school varsity team, or to play college soccer, or to become a professional player and play for the National Team. Hence, the main objective of the Select Program should be to help each player reach his/her potential and achieve his/her goal. This should be done in a fulfilling and supportive way that continues to foster the love of the game.

The good news is that the competitive level, known in Georgia as the Select level, is getting better, more sophisticated, and more professionally-run with every passing year. The best youth clubs across the country have taken on the mantle of developing players and have essentially become the production line for players for the High Schools, Colleges, National Youth Teams and MLS. Compared to even ten years ago, our youth clubs have made impressive advances in organization, coaching education, professionalism, facilities, and high level competition. The players coming off of the youth conveyor belts are continuously getting better, technically, tactically and physically.

But we are still lagging behind the major soccer countries. If there is one failing in our system, it is that the daily environment of our best young players is not challenging enough. A combination of factors, such as the American educationally-oriented sport culture, the reliance on and belief in democratically designed programs, and a lack of a long-lasting, rich, professional soccer tradition, have created a youth soccer culture that tends to legislate itself into mediocrity.

The competitive programs that are geared to the intermediate level players are, for the most part, adequate. But our developmental model falls short in providing the top echelon of 1% of our young players the appropriate training and competition. Here again, the problems are common in many clubs across the state:

- 1) Too much emphasis on playing games and not enough on practicing. Simply not enough contacts with the ball.
- 2) Too many multi-game-per-day tournaments, which promote a test of stamina rather than skill, and cause injuries.
- 3) An inherent emphasis on **quantity** at the expense of **quality**.
- 4) Too much focus on tactics and fitness at the U-10 through U-14 and not enough emphasis on technical development.
- 5) Too competitive at the younger ages. Unnecessary pressure on young players, coupled with ‘pigeon-holing’ them into positions too early. Many 11 to 14 year-olds already labeled as ‘bench players’ with little playing time given.
- 6) Players burned-out from too much competition and a tug-of-war between club, high school and ODP.

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

- 7) Some clubs lack a central focus and leadership, and are essentially comprised of a collection of teams loosely connected, with each team left to blaze its own trail, fight for the same club players, and dilute the top level.
- 8) A rigid, team-oriented system that promotes the upward movement of teams over the upward movement of players. Players register for teams as opposed to clubs, with movement of players within the club restricted either by regulation or by policy. Good players are kept in mediocre teams to help the team get promoted instead of promoting the player.
- 9) Lack of coordinated effort and cooperation between neighboring youth clubs to combine resources. Unhealthy and petty rivalries fester instead.
- 10) Too often, pre-game warm-ups do not properly prepare players for the game.
- 11) Too many substitutions during the game disrupt the flow and hinder tactical development of players.
- 12) In some clubs, youth coaches lose their effectiveness by staying with the same team for too long.

The following section on the Select Program Structure attempts to deal with these issues and offers some solutions.

B. DEFINING THE LEVELS IN THE SELECT PROGRAM

Writing and organizing the section on the select program proved the most challenging, because the so-called Select level encompasses such a wide variety of participants. The select program in Georgia includes the Premier, Classic, Junior, and Athena Divisions, which are, in turn, further split into sub-divisions, such as the Premier A and B, etc. Let's face it. Most of the players that make up the select program are best described as the 'in-between' category. These quasi-competitive players have outgrown the recreational level, are looking for a bigger challenge, but do not quite have the talent or commitment to become fully-pledged elite level competitive players.

This wide range of players makes it difficult for clubs to design simple, cookie-cutter programs for their select teams. How can one propose a recommendation that would make sense and be practical for all the select teams in a particular club. How can we lump together solutions that meet the needs of an Athena 'C' player with those of an Athena 'A' ODP caliber player? The answer is, we cannot!

So, before we begin the discussion of the select program, we need to establish some definitions that will serve as points of reference for our recommendations. For the sake of simplicity, we would like to divide the select program into two sub-programs:

- 1) Top Level, and
- 2) Intermediate Level.

The Top Level refers to the top tier only, such as the Classic I and the Athena A divisions. The Intermediate Level refers to all the other select levels below the top tier, such as Athena B, C, D,

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

Classic II, etc. When we refer to players as Top Level players, we obviously mean those who play at the Athena A and Classic I level. Likewise, Intermediate Level players are those who play at the lower tier levels of the select program. Furthermore, we would like to define another category of players, the ODP-caliber players. The ODP-caliber players are those who are good enough to make the state, regional, or national ODP pools. The ODP-caliber players are the ones who show the most potential to play top division I college soccer, get college soccer scholarships, or even play professionally and make the national team.

Throughout the chapter on the Select Program, a differentiation between the Intermediate and the Top Levels will be made, offering level-specific recommendations. The bigger clubs will find it easier to implement the level-specific recommendations, since they have sufficient numbers and quality to field homogeneous teams at the Top Level and second tier teams at the Intermediate Level. However, the medium and small size clubs will have to be more flexible and creative when implementing the recommendations.

C. THE THREE PILLARS OF THE SELECT PROGRAM

Any select program that aspires to help players reach their full potential must pay particular attention to the three ‘Pillars’ of Player Development:

- 1) **High Practice Volume,**
- 2) **Quality Competition (at games and at practice), and**
- 3) **Quality Coaching.**

All three pillars must be in place within a player development program in order for it to function properly. A program that lacks even one of these pillars will fall short of its goals and never reach true excellence. This is especially true for the Top Level select program. Let’s examine each pillar.

High Practice Volume

Young players must hone the basic techniques of the game, such as dribbling, passing, receiving, shooting and heading. Without a mastery of these techniques, players cannot possibly reach their potential. To become technically sound, players must spend hours practicing their technique in an environment that creates repetition and maximum touches on the ball. Simply put, a practice where each player has 400 contacts with the ball is more effective than a practice where each player has only 200 ball contacts.

Maximizing contacts with the ball is crucial at the youth level. This has obvious implications on the organization of the team practice, which explains why all the coaching manuals preach against line drills and fitness activities without the ball. But the concept of maximum ball contacts has implications on a wider context of program design. It requires that the ratio of practices to games needs to be heavily slanted toward practices, because players don’t get many

◀ SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

ball touches during the game. On average, a player will have about 30-50 ball contacts in a game, and that's only if he/she plays the whole game!

The ratio of practices to games is a major problem in this country. To start with, the traditional formula of two practices per week might be all right for Recreational and Intermediate Level players, but do not satisfy the developmental needs of Top Level select players. Additionally, when one factors in the multitude of club games, tournament games, and play-off games, the result is that our Top Level players play too many games at the expense of practice time. The recommended number of practices per week and the maximum number of games per year are tabulated below. These numbers are not arbitrarily plucked from the air. The volume of practice recommended in the table reflects that seen at the youth training centers of the top professional clubs across the world. A typical 12-year-old French Top Level player has on average 1500 ball contacts per week within the team environment only, not to mention the additional contacts he might achieve training on his own. A typical Georgia Top Level player training twice a week has, at best, 400 touches per week. By the time a young European player reaches the apprentice professional stage in his late teens, his technique under pressure and technical speed of play is far superior to that of a teenage Classic I player from Georgia. The only way we can keep up is if our clubs recognize this problem and make a serious effort to change the ratio of practices to games.

RECOMMENDED VOLUME OF PRACTICES AND GAMES AT THE SELECT LEVEL

Age group	Practices per week		Games per week	Total games per year
	<u>Top Level</u>	<u>Intermediate</u>		
U-10	3	2	1	25-30
U-11	3	2	1	25-30
U-12	4	2	1	30-35
U-13	4	2	1	30-35
U-14	4	2	1	30-35
U-15	4	2	1	35-40
U-16	5	2	1	35-40
U-17	5	2	1	40-45
U-18	5	2	1	40-45

Clubs that wish to increase the practice opportunities for their players will probably run into some logistical problems. Typically, some of these problems are: 1) lack of field space; 2) qualified coaches who can earn more money coaching 3 teams twice a week than coaching 2 teams three times per week; and 3) parents who don't have the time to drive the kids to more practices.

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

But all these logistical problems can be solved with adequate planning and organization. Some of the most common solutions clubs use to increase practice opportunities are:

- 1) Supplemental player clinics organized by the club DOC.
- 2) Open door policy, which means that all players are allowed to join in other teams' practice in the same club.
- 3) Supplementing the regular team practice with combined team practices (two teams training together).
- 4) Creating a 'free practice area' with bouncing walls, where players are free to come and train on their own any time. In fact, players who are committed to excellence should be encouraged to train on their own and must do so if they seriously want to become ODP-caliber players.
- 5) Organizing 3v3 or 4v4 festivals, where players participate as individuals and are mixed and shuffled into teams and play for fun, without any coaching or referees.
- 6) Car pooling to practices.

The club DOC should have an input in the scheduling of team practices. The logistics of integrating the teams' practice schedule with games should not be left to chance. Centralizing this task and using the technical expertise of the DOC or the coaching committee to oversee the total scheduling job will be necessary in order to accomplish the optimum usage of field space. Such considerations as optimum number and spacing of practices for each age group, combining practices, scheduling teams of equal ability at the same time are best handled by a qualified coach with a master plan in mind.

Quality Competition

The second pillar of development has to do with the quality of the opposition in games and in practices. Simply stated, good players develop faster if they play with and against other good players. The better players must be constantly challenged, otherwise they develop 'bad habits' and stagnate. By bad habits, we mean that players become mentally lazy if they don't have to think two steps ahead and don't have to solve problems associated with high level play, such as tight aggressive marking and athletic and skillful opponents. If players are playing against inferior opposition too often, they also become technically lazy by taking too many touches on the ball since no one is good enough to take the ball away from them.

The problem most clubs are facing is how to provide their best players with quality opponents on a regular basis. This problem manifests itself in different ways. It comes up as a team problem, where the best teams in each age group cannot find enough quality games. It is also prevalent on an individual player basis, where the best player on a mediocre team doesn't get challenged enough in practices or games. The following recommendations can be used by clubs to create more quality competition and are divided into Team-centered and Player-centered solutions.

Team-centered recommendations: The traditional solution for the best teams is to seek high-level competition by traveling to out-of-state tournaments. This is obviously a good idea but the concept of tournament play has been taken to such an extreme that many teams play more tournament games than club games and their original purpose is now lost. The proliferation of

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

tournament play in youth soccer has become a huge problem with players asked to play 80 to 100 games per year under less than ideal conditions, with little rest between games. A quick reference to the table above, showing the optimum number of games per year, reveals the true extent of the problem. There are a few major problems with tournaments. The first one is that teams are asked to play 3-5 games in one weekend and that is way too much. The human body is not designed to play more than one game per day and, by the third game, it becomes a contest of stamina rather than skill. Secondly, the optimum developmental cycle of one game, followed by a few practices to work on the weaknesses observed in the game, followed by the next game, cannot be applied in tournament play and hurts player development. Thirdly, tournaments have become money making events where every half-decent team is accepted, thus diluting the competition. Good teams who seek tough games are forced to play two or three weak opponents and, by the time they face a good team, everyone is too tired to benefit from the original intent of the contest. Fourthly, the heavy physical toll extracted by tournaments, coupled with all the travel, causes more injuries, drains the players and can cause burnout. And lastly, all this traveling is a serious drain on the parent's pockets.

Teams have to become more selective in choosing tournaments and only participate in 2-4 tournaments per year. Clubs hosting tournaments should schedule one game per day or reduce the playing time for each game so that the total duration of play per day does not exceed 100 minutes. For example, when teams play two games per day, each game should have 25-minute halves, and if teams play three games per day, each game should have 15-minute halves.

Aside from tournaments, teams seeking challenging games can schedule exhibition games against older teams within their own club or in adjacent clubs. These exhibition games can be played in the off-season and pre-season, or during the season on specific weeks when the regularly scheduled club game is against a weak team.

Player-centered recommendations: Every club, big or small, has players who have advanced ahead of their teammates to a point where they need more challenge to continue to develop. This is especially a concern with medium and small clubs where each team has a wide mix of players. It's quite possible that a Premier team has one or two players who could play at the Classic level, or an Athena B player who can play Athena A, or a Classic I player who should be playing up an age group.

Clubs must address this problem if they are truly committed to helping each player reach his/her potential. This can be done in a number of ways: One solution is to pool the best players from two or three age groups together to form one team. The concept of single-age-group-play is so ingrained in this country that many adults in youth clubs are against allowing players to play up. Having players play up is a routine occurrence in all parts of the world. Professional youth coaches from all over the world have long understood the value and benefits of this practice. In fact, it's rare to find a youth team abroad that doesn't have a couple of younger players. A typical U-19 team from anywhere in South America, for example, would have players ranging in age from 14 to 18. US Youth Soccer has actually made a policy statement on July 17, 1999 that encouraged relieving strict age requirements for younger players for the sake of their

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

development, citing US Soccer bylaw 702, “Opportunity to Participate”. Some coaches will resist losing their best player to an older team because they don’t want to weaken their own team. One would have to question their motives and not allow coaches’ personal agendas to stand in the way of the individual player’s long-term benefits. As is continually stressed throughout this manual, club soccer at the youth level is all about what’s best for the individual, not the team. Clubs cannot sacrifice the individual’s potential just to improve a team’s ‘W’ column. For this reason, decisions on these matters must be made by a qualified person such as the club DOC, and not left to the individual team coaches to fight over players. Please refer to a later chapter that deals with the issue of players playing up.

Another solution is to organize supplemental training for the best players. This can be done via regularly scheduled advanced player clinics that are by invitation only, or by sending the best players to train with older teams within the same club. The best players can accompany older teams to tournaments as guest players. Additional competition can be created via a club select All-Star team. The selection of the club All-Star can be done by the DOC or the Coaching Committee, through scouting of games. The best players identified can be invited to join the All-Star Team, which could play a series of exhibition games against quality competition.

Neighboring clubs can pool their best players in an age group together to form one strong team. The notion of two clubs cooperating for the good of the game or even joining together is not new or original. It’s been done before by clubs in Georgia and elsewhere.

All of the above suggestions are workable, provided that whoever is overseeing the implementation is qualified and objective. This is where the club DOC, or the Coaching Committee, can bring leadership and guidance. For instance, a typical 1,000 player-strong club might have around 800 Recreational players, 150 Intermediate Level players, 40 Top Level players, and 10 ODP-caliber players. Since all these players are spread over a number of age groups, an objective and experienced coach will be required to assess the level of all the players and design a player-centered plan to help the Top Level and ODP-caliber players get more challenge, within the framework and constraints of the playing rules and existing team structure.

The most important thing to remember is that all these suggestions will require that someone at the club level take the initiative to identify the best players, organize and monitor the solutions so that the players get maximum benefit. These solutions will not happen by themselves because most parents and team coaches are too preoccupied with their team’s day-to-day issues to take stock and look at the overall picture.

Clubs should also promote the ODP and encourage their best players to try out for the State Select Team. Players who make the ODP do not leave their club team but receive additional, high level training and competition and are exposed to the best coaches in the Region. The vast majority of club coaches support the ODP and understand its value for the players. No matter how good a club team is, it will have one or two individuals who have outgrown the team’s level and need to be exposed to a higher level. Competition at the ODP level pits the best 18 players from one state against the best from another state. No club competition can replicate this. The state ODP is the first step for players who aspire to play for the regional and national teams.

◀ SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

Coaches who advise their players against trying out for ODP are doing them a disservice. A club coach who tells his/her players that they are getting all the challenge they need from the club team activities is either misinformed about the ODP or has got a personal agenda. Clubs who have any concerns or questions about the ODP should contact the State Director of Coaching.

Quality Coaching

This is the third pillar of player development. We discussed earlier, under the practice volume, how players must have repetition and ball contacts to achieve technical proficiency. It will take good coaches to make this happen. In order for players to achieve excellence, they must be guided, inspired and challenged by quality coaches. Even the most committed players are not going to engage in an activity if it's boring or doesn't make sense to them. Good coaches will have a large repertoire of activities that will challenge the players and achieve the required volume of repetition without boredom setting in. Good coaches will know how to progress from one activity to the next to achieve an optimum flow and maximize learning. Players can tell whether their coach knows what he/she is doing. The better players will lose respect for the coach and tune him out if they sense that he cannot teach them anything new. Clubs must invest in coaching education. In Georgia, select coaches must have a minimum license as follows:

Level	Minimum License
Athena A & B	State 'D' License
Classic I & II	State 'D' License
Junior (top level)	State 'D' License
Athena C & lower	State 'E' Certificate
Premier	State 'E' Certificate
Junior (lower levels)	State 'E' Certificate

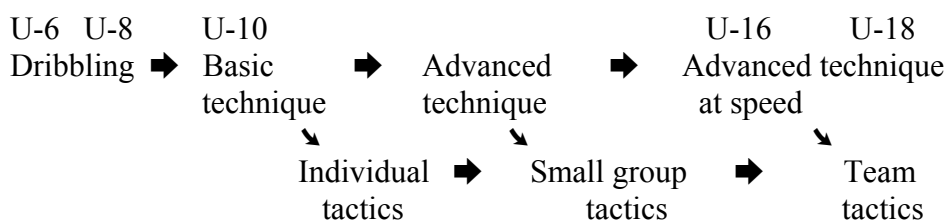
But making sure that all the coaches obtain the minimum license required should only be the first step. **Clubs should create their own minimum coaching standards, which should exceed the state's criteria. The coaches of the Top Level select teams should be required to possess at least a USSF 'C' License. The coach in charge of the Recreational Program should possess the National Youth License. The DOC should possess at least the USSF 'B' License. Clubs should pay the course fees for their coaches to get a USSF national level license.** Georgia hosts a USSF 'C' License course once a year, usually in May. Every club should be sending their best coaches to this course, not least because it would be cheaper than to send them out-of-state.

At the same time, clubs should authorize their DOC or, in the absence of a DOC, the Coaching Committee, to design a Coach Selection Criteria for all the levels, that will include clear guidelines, qualifications and experience requirement, minimum license requirement, and code of conduct. This will help in ensuring that each team is assigned the appropriate level coach in an objective and fair way. The authors of the criteria should monitor all the coaches in the club and remove those who exhibit inappropriate behavior or whose conduct is contrary to the club's criteria or philosophy.

D. TRAINING PRIORITIES

In terms of the sequence of development, players need to learn technique before tactics. The Player Developmental Model shown below illustrates the sequence and the general relationship between technique and tactics.

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL



First, let us explain the terms used in the model. *Basic technique* refers to the ability to dribble, receive and pass short and medium range ground passes. *Advanced technique* refers to the ability to dribble past opponents, receive and pass long range passes, bend balls with the inside and outside of the foot, chip the ball, shoot and volley, and head. *Advanced technique at speed* simply means the ability to execute all of the above with only one or two touches. *Individual tactics* refers to attacking and defending in one-against-one situations. *Small group tactics* refers to player decisions in attack and defense, within small groups of up to 4v4, where players learn about wall passes, crossovers, overlaps, support angles, basic depth and width within the triangle and diamond shapes. *Team tactics* refers to attack and defense within the 11v11 game, where players learn about team shape and decisions in the thirds of the field.

In the section on the Recreational Program, the importance of stressing dribbling skills at the U-6 through U-10 ages was discussed, and this is reflected in the model. The curved arrows illustrate the dependence of tactical development on technique. For example, the model shows that players must have the *basic technique* before they can successfully learn *individual tactics*, and that *advanced technique* is a pre-requisite for *group tactics*. The model suggests that if talented players receive the proper dose of training and competition under the guidance of qualified coaches, they should be able to execute technique at speed at age 16 and be tactically sound by the time they reach the age of 18. It must be stressed that only the very best will actually be able to replicate the rate of development shown in the model. However, the basic sequence illustrated in the model applies to all players, albeit at slower rates of progress.

The age range between 9 to 12 is considered by experts as the Golden Age, from a developmental viewpoint, since players of these ages exhibit great enthusiasm towards sport activities, absorb concepts like sponges, and can learn new skills easily before puberty gets in the way. It was already established that players must be technically sound before they can be successful at executing tactical concepts. **For this reason, 9 to 12-year-olds should focus primarily on developing their technique. In these age groups, ball**

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

contacts are the most crucial consideration. Players need to spend a lot more time practicing and not play too many games. One game per week is sufficient for their development, allowing the rest of the time to be devoted to technical training, either with their team or on their own. What we currently see in Georgia is U-12 and U-13 teams traveling all over the region and playing up to 70 games a year. Games of 11v11 are not effective vehicles for developing technique. These games are more effective for developing fitness and team tactics, which are not appropriate at these young ages.

Why do coaches play their teams in so many games? One reason is that many coaches run out of practice drills after a few months and have difficulties motivating their players in a practice setting. Since players will always prefer to play than to practice, coaches find it easier to play games than to create challenging practices week in week out. After all, the players don't seem to mind. Another reason is that coaches are continually tempted to test their team against opponents. Some coaches actually believe that games are the best way to develop their players. The phrase 'the game is the best teacher' is taken too literally here. This term was coined to teach coaches that the best practices comprise game-like activities as opposed to line drills that have little relation to the game, but coaches misapply the intent of the phrase. Good teams tend to play more games because they win most of them and this has a 'feel good' factor. The players and the parents are happy because they win most of the time, the coach looks good, and the feeling of a 'high' after a win is hard to resist. But the long-term impact of too many games early on must be considered. Games are important. But more is not always better.

The other important point about these ages is that young players need to have the freedom to explore the limits of their ability, to express themselves, and gain the confidence to try the unpredictable. The problem is that too much pressure is placed on them to win at the U-10 through U-14 age groups. This pressure hinders their development and affects their performance since fear of failure is the greatest obstacle to successful performance. Coaches and parents should take the long-range outlook and not be overly concerned with results at this early stage. Less games, more practices, and the freedom to express themselves are the key ingredients of a successful program at the crucial ages up to U-14.

◀ SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

MISC ISSUES: PLAYERS PLAYING UP

One issue that generates heated debate in clubs across the country is whether players should be allowed to play in an older age group. Many clubs forbid players from playing up, and even some of the state youth associations have restrictive rules pertaining to this. There are a number of reasons cited by those against playing up. They claim that players belong with peers of similar social and mental maturity, and that playing up is a temporary solution and eventually the player might have to deal with the stigma of demotion back to his proper age group. These arguments are valid and should be factored into the final decision, but one suspects that the underlying issue has to do with a natural reluctance to deal with gray areas. It's a lot easier for a club to impose a total ban on playing up than to have to decide who should play up and at what age. Club boards that feel uncomfortable dealing with delicate decisions on who deserves to play up and who does not, avoid the issue by banning it outright.

Players playing with and against older players are so common in the rest of the world that youth coaches from other countries would probably be amused to discover that playing up is such a complicated issue in this country. The Brazilian U-19 team from Vitoria, that won the Dallas Cup a couple of years ago, had players ranging in age from 14 to 18. The French U-16 team from Marseille, competing in the Sun bowl in Tampa against our regional ODP U-16 teams, had a few U-14 and U-15 players. In fact, one of the problems with European tournaments is the tendency of professional teams to send under-age youth teams to compete in a higher age division. They do it to provide their younger players a challenging experience. But if everyone does it, it defeats the purpose.

Here in the USA, the US Youth Soccer Association has made a policy statement on July 17, 1999 that encouraged relieving strict age requirements for younger players, for the sake of their development. This was triggered by the realization that our youth clubs are legislating mediocrity by banning 'playing up' and that we need to be more flexible in our approach if we want our best players to reach their full potential.

That playing up can be beneficial is an easy concept to sell. Almost every club has one or more players who clearly are ready to play up and who will undoubtedly gain from it. The problem is that there are too many parents who petition for their child to play up when the child is not ready or talented enough. On the flip side, there are players who SHOULD play up but whose coaches don't let go because they don't want to lose their star player. Some players hit their puberty early and, at the ripe age of 12, tower above their contemporaries. Other players develop their skills and tactical awareness ahead of their teammates but are not physically ready to compete against older players. There are no easy answers here.

Clubs should allow players to play up, but only on a limited scale and under carefully constructed guidelines, and that the decision must rest with a qualified coach such as the Club Director of Coaching or, in the absence of a DOC, the Coaching Committee. Decisions like this must be made by a knowledgeable and experienced coach who can look at the situation objectively and neutrally. In fact, we believe that a pro-active plan should exist within the club for scouting and identifying players who need to play up. Instead of the process being initiated by the parents and being parent-

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

MISC ISSUES: PLAYERS PLAYING UP

driven, the pro-active plan will take care of identifying the players, and will avoid unnecessary conflicts with pushy parents. When extremely gifted players are spotted as being too advanced for their age, the qualified coach, or coaches, should weigh the pros and cons for each case and make a decision. Of course, the players concerned and their parents would have to agree to playing up. After all, it's possible that a player might prefer to stay at the proper age group for personal or social reasons. But the concept of 'team loyalty' and the reluctance to abandon the proper-age team and weaken it should not factor into the equation. The argument that it's not fair to the other players should not be a deterrent. A player who is ready to play up and has soccer ambitions should not allow team loyalty to override what is in his/her best interest. This is no different from the case of a gifted student in a regular class who is invited to join a gifted class. The choice is obvious. And, just as one would expect the teacher to not mind losing her star student, the same is expected from the coach.

Clubs can use the following guidelines to determine who plays up:

- 1) Player should be dominant in his own age group.**
- 2) Player should be athletically and physically mature enough for the higher age. Some players' technical and tactical ability help them dominate their own age group, but they might not be physically able to cope with the stronger, faster, older players.**
- 3) Player should be mentally mature and able to relate to the older teammates.**
- 4) Player should be a regular starter in the older team. If the player is going to be just a role player or a bench warmer, there is no point in her playing up and risk destroying her confidence.**
- 5) The player should be the one who wants to play up, not just the parents.**

There are a number of other factors to consider. One scenario that can complicate the decision is when the proper-age team is very strong and has a good chance at winning the State Cup and beyond, while the older team is weak and is not likely to win anything. If the older team is playing at a lower tier division, it might be better for the player to stay with his own age group where the playing level is higher. Again, the DOC who considers the overall long-term plans for the club and sees the whole picture is the best person to make the decision. Such cases might merit a compromise solution that has the player playing up occasionally as a guest-player and training with the older team, but retaining his/her eligibility for the proper-age team's involvement at the State Cup.

Another factor to consider is the age of the player and his/her current phase of development. Before we make recommendations here, it's important to explain the process of learning and acquiring skills that players undergo, because the player's stage within the learning process has a significant impact on the decision to let him play up.

The process of acquiring any skill, whether it's dribbling, passing or receiving, is most effective if learned in the following sequence:

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

MISC ISSUES: PLAYERS PLAYING UP

Stage 1: Skill practiced via high repetition, with no pressure from opponents.

Stage 2: Skill performed against pressure from teammates in team practices.

Stage 3: Skill performed in games against weak opponents. The confidence building stage.

Stage 4: skill performed in games against strong opponents.

This sequence implies that players first need to spend time perfecting the technique without opponents. Then they should try it out for a period of time against opponents in a non-game environment where the result is not important, such as in a practice scrimmage. Following that, they should have plenty of opportunities to try it in games against weaker opponents. This allows them to succeed and develop confidence and, thus, solidify the technique and ingrain it into their game repertoire. And finally, they need to practice it against tough opponents.

For most skills, this is not a short-term process lasting one or two weeks. It is usually a long-term process that can take years just to reach the fourth stage. It must be noted that the third stage is extremely important because it's the confidence building stage that enables the player to cement the technique into his game. If not enough time is spent in the third stage, the ability to perform the skill successfully in games against tough opponents might be undermined. For example, someone who starts the process at U-6 might just be entering the third stage when he becomes U-10. If, when he reaches U-10, he is sent to play up at U-11 before he has had the opportunity to develop the confidence to perform the skill, it could destroy his confidence and retard his development. This is because he might not succeed in performing the skill at the older age group and will be reluctant to try again. What has essentially happened to this player is that he was made to skip stage 3 by playing up too soon and, as a result, couldn't cope with stage 4. This is why it's important for such decisions to be made by qualified coaches, who understand the learning process and can watch a player and correctly assess her current stage of skill acquisition. We recommend that the guidelines listed above be considered within the context of the player's developmental stage as follows:

U-6 to U-8

Playing up is NOT recommended since the players are all in the first and second stages of skill acquisition and it's too early. Even the ones who are physically dominating should stay in their own age group. It's too early to build them up as future stars. Let them benefit from a longer stay in stage 3, the confidence building stage.

U-9 to U-14

Playing up is only recommended in special cases using the guidelines above, together with an assessment of the player's skill acquisition stage. One has to be careful here, since most players have not reached puberty yet. The player playing up might struggle once his teammates reach puberty, and might have to go back to his own age group. For this reason, playing up should be allowed in increments of one year, with a review at the end of each year, and the player and parents should be advised of this policy in advance.

U-15 and older

Playing up is recommended for players who meet the guidelines stated above. Regional and National ODP caliber players should be playing up, otherwise they will not get challenged.

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

MISC ISSUES: COMPETITIVE SOCCER AT U-10, IS IT TOO SOON

Currently in Georgia, select (competitive) soccer starts at U-10. The U-10 age group is when clubs in Georgia are allowed to start holding tryouts and to separate the players into two level streams, the recreational and the select. There are a few issues associated with U-10 play that are forcing club coaches and administrators to revisit this age group.

One issue is that many U-10 teams end up traveling long distances across the state to fulfill their club game obligations. To make matters worse, some of these games are played between mismatched opponents, with one team much superior to the other. Obviously, since U-10 is the first year for select inter-scheduling, there is no history of performance to use for seeding purposes.

Many coaches feel that U-10 is too early to put players under the pressure of tryouts. They feel that such young players are too fragile psychologically and might lose their self-esteem or quit soccer altogether if rejected at the tryouts. There is also a debate on whether or not U-10 is too early to keep standings and put the players under the pressure of playing for points, promotion and relegation. Another issue is whether to include in the select program the U-9's who are good enough to play at the U-10 select level.

One other issue has to do with the transition from recreational to select. Many parents are either not willing to make the financial/time commitment, or do not realize the extent of the commitment until they start the season. Some parents are reluctant to put their child into a select program that is perceived as stressful for everyone.

Over the past couple of years, a few of the clubs in Georgia have started experimenting with new formats for their U-10s in an effort to solve some of the above mentioned issues. One Atlanta club, Tophat, organizes a special in-house program for their best U-10's. They select the best 25-30 players and provide them with training twice a week and inter-squad games on the weekend, during the fall season. These 25-30 players are registered as recreational players, do not play in the Athena program and only play in-house among each other. Tophat's objective is to bring the best U-10 players together, provide them with quality training under the best coaches in the club in order to challenge them, but, at the same time, eliminate the pressure of playing games for results. They are, quite rightly, emphasizing training and development over games.

Another club, Atlanta Lightning from Fayetteville, designed their own special program of training and games. They invited any U-10 or U-9 player who wished to participate and didn't turn any one away. They evaluated the 60 players who signed up, and drafted them in an attempt to field balance teams. These teams did not play in any formal club. They trained twice a week and arranged a series of weekend friendly games against other club's U-10 select teams. They also received permission from the State Youth Board to classify these players as 'Developmental' and enter into a couple of U-10 select tournaments. Lightning's objective was similar to Tophat's, namely to emphasize development and take away the drain of traveling far just to play a game, and to eliminate the pressures of playing in a select division. This was a one-time permission granted to Lightning by GYSA as a pilot project and was not necessarily going to become a standard, long-term policy until it was reviewed and discussed.

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

MISC ISSUES: COMPETITIVE SOCCER AT U-10, IS IT TOO SOON

So what is the best approach? Is the Tophat model the best one? Is the Lightning system the way to go? Or is there another way? As they say, there are many ways to skin a cat. Whatever format is adopted, for a program to be appropriate at the U-10 age group, the following elements should be incorporated:

- 1) The best U-10 and U-9 players should be identified and segregated, at least once a week and preferably twice, in order to provide them with a challenging training environment under qualified coaches. This can be done within the existing select or recreational programs in the form of supplemental clinics. We simply cannot ignore the fact that the best U-10 players do need something extra over and above the Recreational program, if they are to achieve their potential.
- 2) The best method for identifying the top players is through scouting the U-8 and U-10 games within the club, during the season before. The scouting and selection should be done by the club DOC or the Coaching Committee. Scouting is preferred over tryouts since it will eliminate the stress and conflicts associated with tryouts.
- 3) Most U-10 players, even the top ones, are in the third stage of skill acquisition (refer to the chapter on Players Playing Up for an explanation of the stages of skill acquisition). This means that playing every game against tough opponents is not really that important. As long as the best players are segregated for special training on a regular basis, they can even still play recreational soccer. What is important is for the players to be allowed to express themselves in games and play with imagination and adventure, without fear of second-guessing by parents and coaches. This is the stage for perfecting their skill and gaining confidence, not testing the players' limit or collecting trophies.
- 4) Traveling long distances for games should be avoided. The club format should be structured on a regional basis and travel to tournaments should be limited. Out-of-state travel is not appropriate yet for this age group.
- 5) The number of games should be monitored and not exceed 30 per year. As explained in prior sections, the number of ball contacts per week each player achieves is the most important statistic for this age group. Games offer a limited number of ball contacts and are, therefore, not conducive to technical development. Team Practices and individual practices provide the ball contacts needed and should take priority.
- 6) Regardless of the category of play, whether it is U-10 Recreational, Select, or just a series of friendly games, game results should not be posted or kept.
- 7) Whatever program format is used, it must not contravene the existing State Youth Association's rules and regulations.
- 8) The biggest obstacle clubs will have to overcome is the parents' and coaches' mindsets. Adults tend to view youth games as CONTESTS between two teams to determine which one is the best. Sport psychologists will tell you that this is the root cause of most of the problems in youth sport. Clubs have to educate the adults to look at each game as simply just another developmental opportunity for a bunch of young players. Clubs should create a Parent Education Program, specifically geared toward the U-10 age group. The chapter on Dealing and Educating the Parents has a sample education program for the U-10 parents.

◀ SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE ▶

MISC ISSUES: TEAM-ORIENTED VS CLUB-ORIENTED APPROACH

Many of our youth clubs are merely a collection of teams, which happen to have the same name and sometimes wear the same uniform. What is missing at many clubs is a progressive developmental master plan that links the individual teams and connects the flow of training from one age group to the next. Clubs that have had a bona fide DOC for a while are slowly moving in the right direction, towards establishing a club-oriented system for player development. But many clubs that either do not have a DOC, or have just recently created the position, are still operating off a team-oriented philosophy, where each team blazes its own trail, unaware of what the other teams are doing, and without a central club focus. The problems associated with such a lack of club focus are numerous:

Infighting Over Players

Team coaches in such clubs invariably engage in a tug-of-war over the same players. As a result, the best players are not all playing at the highest possible level. For example, some clubs have two teams competing in the same tier, i.e. two Classic II teams. The best solution, from a developmental point of view, would be to field an 'A' and a 'B' team. This approach will put all the best players in one team, will challenge the players more, and will improve the chances of the 'A' team to get promoted to the higher level. This suggestion is based on the assumption that the best players are indeed ambitious to play at the higher level. Granted, there are players who would rather stay on the same team with their friends than play at a higher level. The ultimate goal should be to make it possible for every player to find his/her proper level. Unfortunately, in a team-oriented club, the two coaches might accomplish the opposite, to suit their own ambitions, and fight over the same players and end up fielding two weak teams.

Training Priorities Lose Focus

When a club-based development plan is missing, continuity of training is lost. There needs to be a relationship between what is taught at, say, the U-10 age to that which is being taught at the U-11 age, and so on. Age-specific training priorities should be established, with a building block approach, which provide the players with the technical foundation before exposing them to advanced tactics. Without a master plan, coaches become mainly concerned with preparing their team for tomorrow's game, without taking the long-term developmental needs into consideration.

Coaching Selection Criteria Undermined

Without a central focus, the process for evaluating and assigning coaches based on consistent criteria is hard to implement. As a result, unqualified coaches end up with teams of which they are poorly equipped to handle.

Coaches Lose Their Effectiveness

In a loosely connected club structure, each coach tends to stay with the same team for many years. There is obviously a lot to be said about the long-lasting friendships and bonding that develop when a group stays together for a long time. But, on the flip side, coaches lose their effectiveness to impact and influence players sooner or later, usually after one or two years. After a while, players start to tune the coaches out, as they get tired of doing the same drills, hearing the same voice, and receiving the same coaching tips. Players who want to advance in

« SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

MISC ISSUES: TEAM-ORIENTED VS CLUB-ORIENTED APPROACH

the game need to be exposed to different coaches and different coaching styles, otherwise the soccer side of things becomes stale. A new coach every year or two will re-ignite the engine, re-kindle the motivation and create new challenges for the players.

Obviously clubs that comprise mainly parent coaches and have a limited number of coaches will have to make some concessions and allow the coach to continue coaching their own child. But whenever possible, coaches should be moved around every one or two years, especially at the Top Level of select soccer, where players are highly skilled and need fresh ideas and constant challenge.

Who Owns The Player?

Clubs should invest the time and effort at developing an identity. This will help foster an affinity toward the club by the players and parents. When players feel only loyal to their team and to their coach, the club's overall health and future is on fragile grounds. Team coaches can decide one day to move to another club and take along their team, lock, stock and barrel. When team loyalty is taken to an extreme, it can create a 'Us vs Them' mentality and lead to bad feelings between teams in the same club.

Clubs must remember that, within the context of player registration and playing regulations, the players belong to the club, not the team. Hence, clubs have the authority to place players into teams as they see fit, as long as it is done in accordance with the rules of the state association. Coaches do not 'own' players, and must abide by the rules and policies of the club.

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

One area that is often neglected by clubs is the creation of a well-organized parent education program. Most club officers and coaches will attest to the fact that dealing with parental complaints is the most difficult, time consuming and unpleasant part of youth soccer. The inescapable reality is that we live in a ‘customer-service-oriented’ culture, where parents demand and expect quality programs for their children. We cannot blame parents for wanting to make sure that the program in which their child is participating is providing the best possible environment for success. Youth clubs are caught in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, they have a duty to inform and educate the parents and listen to their concerns while, on the other hand, they cannot allow parents to dictate how the program should be organized if their demands run counter to accepted player development philosophy. Clubs should take the time to listen to parents but, all the while, keeping in mind that the average parent is not qualified to run a player development program. Clubs also have to watch out for parents who might try to manipulate the program to benefit their own personal agenda.

Educating and informing parents in a proactive way will go a long way towards reducing potential problems. A well-planned process of disseminating information to parents should include:

- 1) A pre-season club wide parent meeting conducted by the club
- 2) A pre-season team parent meeting conducted by the coach
- 3) A biweekly parent newsletter that explains programs, objectives and updates
- 4) A regular schedule of team parent meetings throughout the season organized and moderated by the coach

The newsletter, the handouts and the meetings should describe the mission statement, enlighten the parents on player development issues, clarify the program structure, advise club policies, and explain the rationale for every club policy. **The club should also put in place a clear and fair process for dealing with parent’s grievances and conflict resolution.** For example, unhappy parents must first try to resolve the issue with their coach. If that doesn’t bring a resolution, parents’ next step is to appeal to the age group Commissioner. If the commissioner cannot mediate a resolution, parents can go to the club officer in charge of the specific program. From there, they can go to the Club Board. Club-issued, standardized Complaint Forms and/or Appeal Forms can be created for parents to submit, in order to keep a record of these concerns. These records can be used by the club to review and revise their policies as needed, to help in making decisions on coaches selection, and to make sure that the concerns have been dealt with in a timely manner and closure has been reached.

A process must also be in place to deal with unruly parents. We feel that the clubs must be firm and clear about what they expect from parents in terms of behavior at practices and on the sidelines. As mentioned before, youth clubs are essentially service- oriented organizations that view the parents as customers. But this should not prevent clubs from insisting on ethical and sportsmanlike behavior on the part of the coaches, parents, and players. Our clubs should not be afraid to enforce a code of behavior for fear of losing players.

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

Experience has taught us that clubs that show a weakness and a reluctance to deal with problem parents usually end up with the most problems.

Field Marshals can be assigned to monitor and police the fields during games. These marshals should be given the authority to take parents who break any club rules to the side and give them a warning. If the parents persist in breaking the rules following the warning, the marshals should have the authority to ban them from the complex for the duration of the game and report them to the club's Discipline Committee. The Discipline Committee can deal with repeat offenders according to the policy set by the club. Ninety-nine percent of the parents are reasonable people. Unfortunately, the one percent who repeatedly cause problems are usually incorrigible and, sadly, sometimes the only solution is to ban them completely from the club complex even if it means that their kids will be lost to the program. Of course, it's imperative to make sure that all the parents are aware of the rules and the policy for dealing with breaches of club rules before the season starts. This manual has additional sections that address parent education pertaining to specific issues.

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS AT THE U6 & U-8 LEVELS

TO: Parents of U-6/U-8 players
FROM: Club Director of Coaching
RE: **KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL** - Program Design and Parents' Role

The purpose of this letter is to outline our special program, specifically designed for the U-6 & U-8 players. The program is called: "KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL". We would like to explain to you the skill priorities and program objectives for your child, the program's format, and your role within the program.

Skill Priorities

The technical objective of the U-6/U-8 program is to teach players to dribble. Dribbling is the foundation skill for all the other skills and must be taught first. Aimless kicking will be discouraged by the coaches, as it develops bad habits and has no long-term benefits.

Field Layout

You will be asked to sit about 20 yards away from the sidelines during games in an area designated as the Parent's Area. The objective here is to give the players a sense of freedom, encourage the players to think for themselves and wean them out of their dependency on the adults.

We ask that you:

- 1) Refrain from coaching. Leave the coaching to the coach.
- 2) Do not tell the players to 'kick it' during the games or the practices.
- 3) Avoid encroaching beyond the parent's designated area until the game is terminated.
- 4) Feel free to cheer and applaud. This is NOT Silent Weekend! But no negative comments and absolutely no coaching. And, please, applaud good plays by the other team too.
- 5) Exhibit good sportsmanship and make the other team feel welcome.

Please refer to the attached handout for a more detailed rationale of our program. Feel free to speak to me if you have any questions or concerns. I hope your child and you have a nice season.

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL – PROGRAM RATIONALE

Skill Priorities

Everyone knows that the game of soccer has a number of basic skills, or *techniques*, that players have to learn, such as dribbling, receiving passes, making passes, shooting and heading. Players also have to learn to make good decisions during the game, such as when to dribble, when to pass, and to whom to pass. These players' decisions are referred to as *tactical* decisions.

The first principle of soccer development is that players should master the basic techniques before they can learn the tactical side of the game. **Technique before tactics!** Think of techniques as vocabulary, and tactics as the grammar rules for forming sentences and paragraphs. Now, imagine a young immigrant who arrives in America without a word of English. It's pretty obvious that before we can teach this immigrant about the rules for joining nouns, verbs, and adverbs to form a sentence, we have to give him a chance to accumulate enough vocabulary. The bigger his vocabulary, the better will he be able to use grammar to articulate his thoughts.

In terms of soccer development, your child is just beginning his/her 'schooling'. We use the word 'schooling' here because there are many similarities between a regular school and a youth club, which can be considered as essentially a soccer school. In fact, as you might have already noticed, throughout this letter we will be using many analogies from real life schooling and the principles of growing up to explain the rationale behind the program.

As far as techniques are concerned, some techniques should be taught before others. The first technique that children should learn is **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation skill and preparation for all the other fundamental techniques of soccer, such as receiving, passing and shooting. When players are receiving the ball and making preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction with the ball, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and dribbling to get away from pressure. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. There are also times in the game, when the player with the ball has no passing options and the only way out of tight pressure is to dribble.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start, the better. Just like any complex bio-mechanical skill such as skating or gymnastics, the later you start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form. Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players don't get discouraged easily if they don't succeed. Players of this age do not possess the analytical thought process to look back or think ahead. They live for the moment, in

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

the here and now, and the fact that the last time they tried to dribble it didn't work will not even enter their minds. But if we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble. Thirdly, In 3v3 and 4v4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is always just a few yards away from shooting range. Once the game moves to the larger sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. And lastly, it's better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the U-10 and older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

Kicking is NOT a Soccer Skill!!!

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, they louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. The fact is that the players are asked to execute a skill (kicking) that they would automatically learn anyway as they grow up, even if they didn't play soccer. If you don't believe it, just go outside to your back yard, place a ball on the ground, take a few steps back, run up to the ball and kick it forward. I am willing to bet you that, even if you never played soccer in your life, you would still succeed in kicking the ball forward. Your kick might look awkward and your movement lack grace, but you still would manage to kick it forward.

The reality is that players are controlled like puppets by the adults to such an extent that they are not thinking for themselves and are afraid to do anything but kick the ball. Even throw-ins are routinely thrown straight to the other team by confused players who are conditioned to play the ball forward, no matter what. The kick-offs are no better, with players kicking the ball straight to the other team, American football style. Players who clearly have plenty of time on the ball with no pressure anywhere near, are still kicking it forward without any thought or skill. And this type of mindless play is usually not corrected by the coaches and is allowed to occur time and again. The end result is that we are 'coaching' the skill of dribbling OUT of the players. We take away the natural 'comfort' with the ball - forever!

Let's be frank here. The underlying issue has to do with how you, the adults, look at the game and analyze it. It's fair to say that you all accept that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and that there is no need to keep standings. But you also instinctively know that the easiest way to get the ball from point A to point B is to kick it in that direction. It's hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. So, the next time your child has the ball in his/her half, you can't help it and shout "kick it!". But every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble. The buzz word of our program is: 'Soft first Touch'. Every time your player goes to the ball, his/her first touch on the ball should be a soft one, meaning, NO KICKING!

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

Some of you might ask “but what about passing?” Isn’t soccer a team game and passing a fundamental team skill? **Passing** implies an intention by a player to direct the ball accurately towards a teammate. It implies decision making. Do not confuse passing with kicking. Kicking means using the feet to propel the ball in a certain direction. You will not see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. In terms of the level of difficulty, **kicking** is the easiest to learn, **dribbling** is next, and **passing** is the hardest to master for young players. Think of dribbling as ‘passing to oneself’. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? What young players do is actually kick, not pass, and the cheers they hear from you when they kick only serve to reinforce this bad habit.

For this reason, we ask you to **stop shouting to your players to Kick the ball**. If game results truly don’t matter, no one should be overly concerned if a player tries to dribble and loses the ball. First touch must be a **SOFT TOUCH**.

Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency

Now that we explained the program’s skill objective for your child’s technical development, we would like to make you aware of another important objective, in the area of decision making. Children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. This dependency transfers into youth sports, manifesting as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8 program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is so very crucial for the development of soccer players. We all know that soccer is a player’s game, meaning that it’s the player who must make the decisions on the field. In soccer, coaches have a lot less influence and power during games than in some of the other traditional American sports. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do.

One of the main features of youth soccer is having the parents sit very close to the field. We realize that it all seems so nice and cozy to sit by the sidelines. But sitting so close to the players gives the parents too much presence, which impacts the players’ behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.

Individual Concept vs Team Concept

As parents, naturally you are mainly concerned with the welfare and development of your child. When your child goes to school, you are really only interested in how he/she is progressing in school. Do you really care how the class is doing as a whole? As long as your child is doing well and the teacher is keeping pace with the required academic standards for his/her age, you are happy. You don’t go around boasting that your child’s class average was higher than the

« EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

class next door. The class concept in school is seen as a logistical convenience where children of like-age are grouped together to learn academics and social skills within the dynamics of a group. Nothing more, nothing less.

The same concept should be applied to youth sport. Just like a classroom, a youth team should be seen as a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social skills. Nothing more, nothing less.

But parents and coaches seem to have a hard time accepting this notion. They let the team concept take over and become the focus of the soccer activity. It's no longer "my son is going to play today". It's become "OUR TEAM is playing against THEIR TEAM today".

People want to be part of a team. They feel safe and comfortable. There are many positives in a team environment, such as building lifelong friendships, sharing common goals, learning to trust and depend on others. But when the team assumes too much importance or consumes your life, it can lead to tension and conflicts. Games become more stressful. The mood of the family unit for the rest of the day hinges on the game result. 'What's best for the team' overrides what's best for the individual players. The negative aspects of the team concept manifest themselves in many ways: The amount of playing time players get, rivalry between teams spilling over into arguments and even hostility, coaches fighting over players, referee abuse, etc.

As parents, you should only be concerned with one thing: Is your child having fun? And is he/she being given the opportunity to play and learn the game? How the team is doing has absolutely no impact on the future well being of your child. Mia Hamm is not playing for the National Team because her U-10 team won the state championship. She is in the national team because she has developed into a skillful and athletic player. Your child might develop into a high level player or he/she might not. A lot of this depends on the genes and is pre-determined before your child was even born. As long as he/she is having fun and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, that's all you can ask for. Remember: The team is there to serve your CHILD'S needs. Your child is not there to serve the team's needs. If the team's performance produces strong emotions in you, you need to step back and take a deep breath and suppress these emotions. **The team is just a logistical expediency to engage a bunch of kids in play. Nothing more, nothing less. Tomorrow, your child will be part of another team.**

Parents must beware of coaches who seem intent in building a 'dynasty' at these young ages. If a coach approaches you with the intent to recruit your child into his/her team because "He wants to build a strong team", you should question his agenda. The chances are he/she will emphasize the wrong type of development and training. The chances are that he/she will replace your child down the road when a better player crops up.

TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer) is a community-based training and team placement program for young athletes with disabilities. The emphasis of this program is on development and physical participation rather than on competition; and to provide meaningful learning, development and physical participation opportunities to young disabled athletes through the game of soccer. The goal of this program is to enable young people with disabilities to develop their physical fitness, technical skills, courage and self-esteem, through the joy and excitement of playing soccer.

A TOPSoccer athlete is defined as any youth player between the ages of 4 and 19 who has a disability that limits his/her ability to perform at the level of play in which he/she has chosen to participate. Players are placed on teams by ability, not age. The emphasis is on ability not disability and player involvement.

Modification of the Playing Environment

The objective is to create a meaningful experience in soccer for youth players with disabilities. Modification of the playing rules and equipment is oftentimes necessary.

- ◆ Play small-sided games on smaller fields
- ◆ Use “Unified Games” as a means to facilitate play. In unified soccer, a ratio of players with disabilities to able-bodied players is kept on the field. Example: 5 v 5 with a ratio of 3 disabled to 2 able-bodied players. Disabled athletes take all kick-offs and re-starts.

For Children with Orthopedic Impairments:

- ◆ Reduce field size
- ◆ Increase number of players on team (to include “buddies/helpers”)
- ◆ Use regulation balls with less air, “nerf” balls or “gymnic” balls.

For Children with Visual Impairments

- ◆ Increase size of ball used
- ◆ Use brightly colored balls
- ◆ Wrap goals with brightly colored tape
- ◆ Use beeper/bell balls
- ◆ Use soccer “buddies/helpers”
- ◆ Use some kind of sounding device near or in the goal

« TOPSOCCER »

Registration

TOPSoccer athletes are registered just as any youth soccer players are, and are afforded the same protection as any other player.

For further information or assistance in starting a TOPSoccer program, contact the GYSA Special Programs Representative.