

U-12

CHARACTERISTICS OF U - 12 PLAYERS:

- They begin to develop the abilities to sustain complex, coordinated skill sequences.
- Some of the players have reached puberty. Girls, in general, arrive earlier than boys.
- Most players are able to think abstractly and are thus able to understand some team concepts that are foundational to the game.
- They are beginning to be able to address hypothetical situations, and to solve problems systematically.
- They are spending more time with friends and less time with their parents. " They are susceptible to conformity to peer pressure.
- They are developing a conscience, morality and scale of values.
- Players tend to be highly self-critical. Instruction needs to be enabling. Show them what can be done instead of telling them what not to do.
- Although they are more serious with their play, they are still mainly involved because it is fun.
- They are openly competitive. A few may foul on purpose.
- They are looking towards their role models and heroes in order to know how to act.
- They have a more complex and developed sense of humor.

INVOLVING THE PARENTS

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-12 player still relies on their parents for support and encouragement. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed. Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- Training and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss training.
- What each player should bring to training: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guard's cleats or sneakers.
- Most importantly, your philosophy about coaching U-12 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as learn about soccer.
- What your expectations for them are during game time. How do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should not coach from the sidelines?
- Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do, they probably will too.

THINGS YOU CAN EXPECT

Some coaches say that the 10 and 12 year-old players have "turned the corner" and are looking like real soccer players. However, games are still frantically paced and a bit unpredictable for the most part. These players know how much fun it is to play the game skillfully. As a result, we begin to see some the players drop out who recognize the importance of skill and become discouraged with their lack of it. Some other things that we can expect when working with this aged player are:

- They will yell at their teammates when they make a mistake.
- They will openly question the referee's decisions.
- Players will encourage each other.
- They will pass the ball even when they know that they will not get it back.

- Team cooperation is emerging. They will run to a spot, away from the play, even when they know that they might not get the ball.
- They will point out inconsistencies between what you say and what you do. They are "moral watchdogs".
- The difference in skill levels between the players is very pronounced.
- Some players might be as big as you are; some might be half your size.
- Not only will some of the players come to training with expensive cleats, but some will also come with matching uniforms, sweatsuits, and bag.
- Parents, during games, can be brutal. Some will yell at the referee at almost every call.
- They will get together with their friends and be able to set up and play their own game.

COACHING RATIONAL

Coaching at this age level is a challenge because many of the players view themselves as real soccer players, while others are at the point where it is not as much fun as it used to be because they feel that their lack of skill development does not enable them to have an impact on the game. They see their skillful friends able to do magical things with the ball and since they can not do this themselves, they start to drop out. Our challenge then, if the players are willing, is to keep all of the players engaged, involved, and make them feel important. (As though they are improving.) Skills still need to be the primary focus of training and players need to be put into environments where they are under pressure so that they learn how to use their skills in a variety of contexts. Here are a few other considerations as we think about working with this aged youngster:

- Our goal is to develop players in a fun, engaging environment. Winning has its place but must be balanced with the other goals of teaching them to play properly. Some decisions will need to be made that might not necessarily lead to wins (i.e.: having players play different positions, or asking players to try to play the ball "out of the back".)
- Smaller, skilled players can not be ignored. Although it may be tempting to "win" by playing only the bigger players in key positions, the smaller, skilled players must be put into areas of responsibility.
- Small-sided games are still the preferred method of teaching the game. This makes learning fun and more efficient.
- Flexibility training is essential. Have them stretch after they have broken a sweat, and, perhaps most importantly, at the end of the workout at a "warm-down".
- Overuse injuries, burnout and high attrition rates are associated with programs that do not emphasize skill development and learning enjoyment.
- Playing 11-a-side games is now appropriate.
- Single sexed teams are appropriate.
- Train for one and one-half hours, two to three times a week. Training pace needs to replicate the demands of the game itself.
- They are ready to have a preferred position, but it is essential for their development for them to occasionally play out of their preferred spot, in training, as well as during games.
- Training is now best if it focuses on one, perhaps two topics a session. Activities should be geared to progressing from fundamental activities that have little or no pressure from an opponent to activities that are game like in their intensity and pressure.

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TYPICAL TRAINING SESSION

Here are some items that should be included in a U-12 training session:

WARM-UP: A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual or small group activities that involve the ball. Since there can be one theme to the session, hopefully, the warm-up will lead into the theme of the day. Static stretching is also appropriate at this time, after the players have broken a sweat, again, hopefully done with the ball. The warm-up should get the players ready to play. It should be lively, fun, and engaging as well as instructional. There is nothing like a good, fast-paced activity to grab the player's attention and make them glad that they came to practice.

INDIVIDUAL OR SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES: Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not necessarily a real 1v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals or cooperate in small groups in a game environment. An example would be a kind of keep-away game, or small-sided games that bring out or emphasize a specific skill or topic. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" instead of games where the "looser sits". Be creative. These players like "crazy" games with a lot of action.

PLAY THE GAME: Small sided soccer can be used to heighten intensity and create some good competition. Play 4v.4 up to 8v.8. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Perhaps play to emphasize a particular skill (can only dribble the ball over a goal line in order to get a point). Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. Switch teams often, give everyone a chance to win. Also, it is important that every player has a chance to shoot on goal as often as possible. Finish this stage with a real game with regular rules. Players need to apply their newly learned abilities to the real game.

WARM-DOWN & HOMEWORK: Finish the session with a warm down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Challenge them with some ball trick. Can they complete a juggling pattern? Can one player kick a ball to a partner and then back without it hitting the ground? Can they do that with their heads? How many times can they do it back and forth? It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.

U-12 TRAINING IDEA 'NUMBERS PASSING'

Here is a good warm-up that will get players prepared for a session on passing and receiving skills. It is an example of how players can be challenged in an environment that is dynamic and can demand specific, targeted technique that has direct implications to the demands placed upon players during the real game. Since there is no pressure from an opponent, it is appropriate to use this activity during the warm-up.

THE GAME:

- Assign each player a number.
- Players pass the ball to the player with the # one higher than their own # (e.g.: 5 passes to 6, 11 to 1.)
- All balls travel through the entire team.
- After they pass a ball, they must run to a different spot on the field.
- Players are first allowed unlimited touches, then only two touches, then one touch if they are able.
- Ask the players not to let the ball stop, or to let their pass hit other players or balls.

TRY THESE VARIATIONS:

- Left foot only.
- Outside of foot only.
- No talking allowed.

ASK THE PLAYERS TO:

- Make eye contact with the person they are passing to.
- Perform good passing technique.
- Keep their body and vision open to the field of play.
- Keep the person they are passing to in their line of sight.
- Be active. Look like a soccer player.