

Basic Coaching Concepts for Children Under 11

When young soccer players reach the age of eight, nine or ten, they have generally accumulated four or five years experience with the sport and have developed some basic skills and ideas about the game. Before age eight, the main goal of coaching is to provide an enjoyable entree into soccer and ensure enjoyment and fun. In short, the role of the coach is to facilitate games for the enjoyment of the participants. For many players, reaching eight, or nine, or ten (every child is a little different) means new priorities and a new appreciation for their personal responsibility to the game. For the first time, these players begin to realize that winning and losing are tied to ability, not effort, and that skills must be refined for improvement to be noted. The role of the U-9/10 coach is therefore critical in shaping the technical range and tactical insights of the players; the role of the coach is that of a teacher.

The period around eight or nine is considered the beginning of the "Golden Age" for skill learning for a number of reasons. Players will listen to and comprehend more complicated directions. Players will carry out repetitive "drill" activities and appreciate their purpose. Players will spend time working on their skills alone, if they are motivated. Players will appreciate the importance and thrill of learning new skills and refining existing techniques. Players will begin to identify with national or international heroes and begin to emulate their skills and personalities. Players love to compete and strive to win. Players begin to equate fun with improvement. Players begin to equate their personal identity and self-esteem with their perceived ability and feedback from significant others, including peers, parents and coaches.

Coaching nine and ten year-olds is a formidable task that requires a number of skills on the part of the adult. These skills include practical soccer knowledge, the ability to demonstrate and inspire by example, some basic understanding of child psychology, an appreciation of purpose relative to the age and ability of the players, and the ability to teach for long-term growth. With that said, the elements outlined below are all within the technical and tactical range of nine and ten year olds players in Ohio, although it should be acknowledged that in some parts of the world, and some parts of the United States, players of the same age might be more or less advanced. Our goal, as coaches in Ohio, is to develop basic skills and ideas about the game at an age when players are highly receptive to instruction and highly motivated to learn.

The following elements represent a checklist for assessing the performance of individual players. Some players will be quite advanced in some areas and not others. Some players will be capable of executing some skills against one level of opponent, but not another.

Some players will be able to execute techniques in a drill, but fail to apply them as skill when under pressure from live opponents. Some players will be competent, but not outstanding. Some players will be technical, but not skillful, while others will be skillful, but not technical. When viewed as a developmental continuum, all players will score high in some areas and low in others. Coaching "well" means assessing players abilities and insights and slowly moving them towards the "ideal" of the top level in the time available to us.

Individual Technical and Tactical Issues for U-9's and U-10's

Contacting the Ball

How many ways can the player kick or dribble or control the ball? There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The U-9/10 player should be challenged to expand their range of surfaces and textures (weights and spins) in an ongoing process of technical refinement.

Is the player two footed? Juggling and dribbling practice should always involve the use of both feet and young players must be encouraged to experiment with all six contact surfaces. For the more motivated players, juggling, kicking and Coerver's* are essential "homework" activities for developing a comfort level with the ball.

*Coerver's are individual dribbling moves named after the Dutchman, Wiel Coerver, who created the training program.

Passing

Does the player purposely pass the ball towards teammates? Players should be asked to control the ball and look for teammates rather than simply kicking the ball forward or to safety; it is often necessary to remind young players that the goalkeeper is always the most open player on the team when they are under pressure or no obvious forward passing options are available. At this age, the "thinking" behind a passing decision is often more telling than the outcome, and young players must be encouraged to attempt to maintain possession by passing (or dribbling) even as their limited range of techniques fail them.

How far can the player kick the ball accurately? Players should be encouraged to pass within their technical range. Technique, physical strength and the size and weight of the ball all impact kicking distance and accuracy. In the small-sided games environment, shorter passes should be expected and encouraged, with aimless "boots" to safety, or to the opposition regarded as wasted possessions.

Does the player use disguise and deception when passing? Encouraging more frequent passing (and dribbling) with the outside of the foot will help improve the level of subtlety in young players. The use of the hips to deceive opponents can also become a feature of play for nine and ten year olds.

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