

Why 8 or 9 A-Side?

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The following notes are taken from many articles written by several leading technical authorities in the game. I am grateful to the following people for allowing me to reproduce them in part or in their entirety. They represent my own opinions as well as those of the entire State Director of Coaching fraternity across the nation. The national coaching staff of US Soccer and the NSCAA also endorse the playing of small sided games for the U12 age group.

Thanks to: Sam Snow, Tom Goodman, Jeff Pill, Dr Tom Turner, Horst Wein, Virgil Stringfield, Dr Ron Quinn, Dr Dave Carr, Charlie Cook and others too numerous to mention.

Here are five common arguments presented by those who currently do not favor small sided games at the U12 level and an attempt by yours truly to offer a solution or some rationale. Over the next 12 months I will work with you to try to help everyone better understand the rationale behind the small sided games.

ARGUMENTS.

1. **Roster sizes.** Roster sizes can best be solved by the introduction of the “CLUB PASS”. This will allow the free movement of players between teams. It will also allow clubs to offer more playing opportunities as a club pass allows the free movement of players within a club to play for any team within the same age group or above by one or two years.

2. **Field availability.** First, like all the other states, we will never have enough fields. The argument that goals are set and cannot be moved is a fact in far fewer places across the state, than the places where they can be moved. The re - thinking of the scheduling of games for any given age group enabling the same age groups that are playing on the same size field to play on the same night is a relatively easy fix. Extending the season by starting earlier and finishing later would also help
3. **The real game is played 11v11!** Soccer was designed by adults for adults. There is nothing sacred about the number 11. It is an arbitrary number decided upon by a bunch of men in a tavern [pub in London]. They could not agree and all wanted different numbers, and so compromised at 11. It has been taught in national and international coaching schools since 1971 that individual technique and small group tactics need to be taught before team tactics. This should be the focus up through U14. So team tactics [how to play with numbers of 9 through 11 on the field] are not a real concern until U15.
4. **Not enough referees or coaches.** This is a 35 to40 year old argument. Youth Soccer around the world has never had enough referees or coaches and most likely never will. Yet in the USA the game has grown and flourished despite these shortages. It is the job of adults privileged to be participants in youth soccer to work together to solve these logistical hurdles. In the Coaching education courses we emphasize that all decisions made by adults should be made with the best interest of the child as the primary reason for the decisions.
5. **Modified Soccer is playing 11v11.** Even though some consider it the responsibility of club soccer to develop players for scholastic soccer, the true responsibility is to develop players to the best of their ability in the proven environment of small sided games. And if school sports are an extension of the classroom then shouldn't the school coaches take a physical education approach and place the players in the small sided game environment where development is proven to take place? Also the mere title of the program "modified" lends itself to the FIFA regulations of allowance to "modify" the rules for Younger players. It is my intention to contact the High School athletic committee to try to enter into discussions regarding the possible change to their modified

program rules. A couple of coaches of modified soccer recently shared with me that they would prefer to play 8v8 or 9v9 as on many occasions they do not have enough players show up to play. Another also commented that it would be far better to play 3 - 4 games of 9v9 (at the same time) as it would help him get playing time to his 40 players!

Children in the U11 and U12 age groups should play 8v8 or 9v9 in their matches. This includes the goalkeeper, hence seven or eight field players and one goalkeeper. The playing field should be 70 to 80 yards long and 45 to 55 yards wide. The goal should be 6 feet high by 18 feet wide. The penalty area should be 14 yards out from each post and 14 yards forward. The goal area, penalty spot, penalty arc, corner arc, corner flags and center circle should be per FIFA rules. They should play two halves of 30 minutes each. Overtime should be two periods of 10 minutes each. The ball is a size 4, which gives a good indication that these are still children playing the game.

Players in this age group should play 8v8 or 9v9 to enhance their soccer abilities. This is true for all levels of play, recreational or premier. At this point in their physical and psychological development, most ten and eleven year old children love to play games, any game. But they do not necessarily play these games – including soccer - with understanding. Coaches must be careful at this juncture and not fall victim to the false assumption that these preadolescent children are now able to play mature soccer.

U12 players start having more competence in their individual technical performance. They now intentionally combine in groups of two to four around the ball. In fact, the word “team” now becomes more than an abstract concept.

There are also Technical, Physical, Psychological and Tactical elements to consider in this discussion.

TECHNICAL

With fewer players on the field each player will touch the ball frequently. Obviously this happens in match conditions, thus assisting their technical development in a realistic way.

Technical speed is enhanced due to the realistic size of the field. Improving technical speed puts a player on the road to tactical awareness. Since there are fewer players on the field they will have to perform both offensive and defensive ball skills frequently during match play. Improving ball skills is the main objective with this age group.

Two critical technical aspects of soccer are learned incorrectly in the current 11v11 format with this age group; **goal scoring and shot stopping**. In the current 11v11 format the U12 players are asked to use a regulation adult goal, which is 8 feet high by 24 feet wide. Ten and eleven year old goalkeepers generally are not very tall. Being pre-adolescents they do not have a vertical jump of any significant height. They generally have no chance of making a save on a high shot. Poor goalkeeping habits may be developed due to this environment. Furthermore the shooters are getting into a terrible habit of shooting high. In a few short years the goalkeepers will be tall and have significant jumping abilities. So now shots hit high are often to the delight of these older keepers who like to show off their acrobatics. With a smaller goal at U12 better goalkeepers and shooters will be developed.

Skills become an even more important factor at this point in their development because the players need to be introduced to general tactics as well. The technical/tactical possibility of switching the point of attack occurs for these players on a slightly smaller pitch. They could not execute this play on a full size pitch. The ability to switch the attack from one side of the pitch to the other with one or two touches of the ball is now a real option. This technical/tactical possibility keeps all of the players within the team connected. (For those of you who have taken the “B” or “A” License you know this as vertical and

horizontal compactness. Granted this is a tactical aspect, but without technique there is no execution of tactics.) When this age group plays 11v11 on a large pitch the players on the side of the field opposite to the ball become spectators to the game, not players in the game. Here are the techniques that a coach should teach to players in this age group.

For Field Players: feints with the ball; receiving ground, bouncing & air balls with the lower leg, thigh, abdomen, chest & head; chipping to score; outside of the foot pass; bending shots; crossing to the near post & penalty spot spaces; heel pass; kicking & receiving with the instep; introduce the half-volley & volley shooting and introduce the slide tackle.

For Goalkeepers: footwork; bowling; low dives & forward diving; angle play; near post play; saving penalty kicks and introduce parrying and boxing.

PHYSICAL

With fewer players on a smaller pitch a greater demand will be placed on the players' fitness level. In this environment the game will take on a quick pace from end to end of the pitch. No player will be able to "hang out" while someone else defends or attacks for that player. In the 8v8/9v9 match environment the biggest increase on the fitness demand upon the players will be anaerobic. Speed and strength in these pubescent players will also begin to improve. Players will be in constant motion from penalty area to penalty area. Because the pitch is somewhat smaller there will be less aerobic endurance required, since the players will do fewer long distance jogs. Instead more anaerobic endurance will be required since they'll do more short distance sprints. The cumulative effect will be a significant improvement of their soccer specific fitness. To this end the 8v8/9v9 match follows the S.A.I.D. principle. This of course is the **Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demands**. In the 8v8/9v9 match this physical demand will be soccer specific.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

With fewer players directly involved in the match a greater demand on mental focus will be placed upon the players. The game will always be near them and they will be almost continuously involved in the action. This will keep their attention; the 8v8 match is exciting and dynamic.

Since the number of players on the field of play is manageable for these children they may be willing to take more risks. In other words players now work with one another on offense in the shape of combination passing and defending in pairs. When playing in larger numbers the tactical picture is confusing to them. They do not yet have the cognitive development to handle so many variables at once. Consequently their confidence in making the “right decision” is eroded. This leads to a kick ball approach since they are not quite sure what to do.

Furthermore in the small sided game environment the coach and players can work together to improve teamwork; confidence; desire; mental rehearsal; intrinsic motivation; handling distress; how to learn from each match; sportsmanship; dealing with parental involvement and emotional management.

TACTICAL

The aspect of player development that will be most impacted by the 8v8 environment is tactics. With fewer players on a smaller pitch all players will be continuously involved on “both sides of the ball.” That is they all will be engaged in both offense and defense throughout the match. A much greater demand for tactical *transition* will occur in this small-sided game. When U12 teams play on a large pitch with 11 a-side there is a tendency for the players to watch their teammates play and to only play themselves when the ball is in their immediate area. Even a casual observation of most U12 matches will reveal that almost 100% of the players’ ball watch on both defense and offense. It’s only natural when there is very little chance of a

switch in the point of attack from one touchline to the other. The smaller sided match does not allow players to “hide in the weeds.”

I recommend that U12 teams play in a 2-3-2 formation [8v8] and 3-3-2-formation [9v9]. These formations allow the players to execute the principles of play, but will also place a great demand on mental and physical transition.

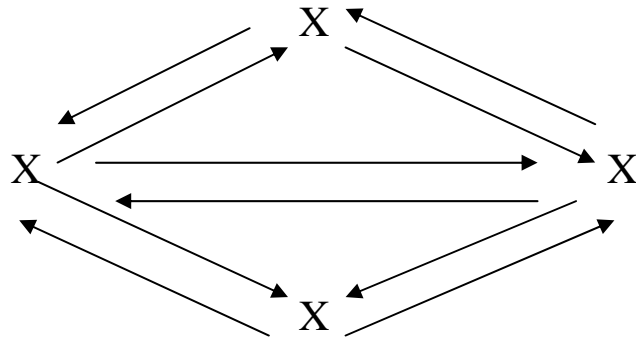
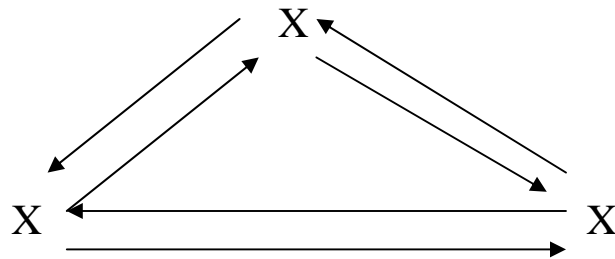
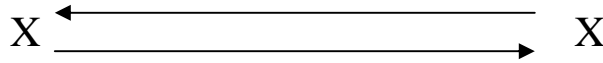
This aspect of the smaller environment is most appropriate since the U12 age group is considered the dawning of tactical awareness. Ten and eleven year old players can execute individual and group tactics. The tactical concept of compactness is enhanced in the small-sided game.

What they do not yet have is the experience or maturity to execute team tactics. As more players enter the field of play the tactical environment becomes more complex. This has a direct impact on the players’ decision making in both a technical and tactical sense. It also makes it harder for the inexperienced coach to pass on meaningful information, as it is harder to see the game with 22 players than it is with 16 or 18. More players on the pitch mean more possible **lines of interaction**. That is, the probable connections between the players. More lines of interaction make for a tactically more complex environment. For ten and eleven year old players in an 11v11 match there are two hundred and twenty-two more potential lines of interaction than in the 8 v 8 match. Each of those lines of interaction is a possible tactical decision.

This becomes a tactically overwhelming environment, which leads to frustration. Since the tactical problems are too complex to solve the players often resort to a kick and run approach. Within the 8 a-side match the group tactics are reduced to mostly two, three and four players around the ball. This is a tactical situation, which a ten or eleven year old can comprehend. Consequently the player is able to handle the tactical environment and make intelligent decisions. The graphics below clearly show how quickly the tactics of a soccer

match become quite complex each time that one more player is added to the field of play.

LINES OF INTERACTION¹



3 V 3: $5 \times 6 = 30$ lines of interaction

4 V 4: $7 \times 8 = 56$ lines of interaction

6 V 6: $11 \times 12 = 132$ lines of interaction

8 V 8: $15 \times 16 = 240$ lines of interaction

11 V 11: $21 \times 22 = 462$ lines of interaction

(Note: Slides showing the lines of interaction can be found at nyswsga.org as part of the SSG manual.)

In addition to individual tactics here's what the coach of U12 and U11 teams should teach regarding tactics. Combination passing; 2 v 1 defending; 2 v 2 attacking & defending; the roles of second attacker & defender; verbal & visual communication for all positions; commanding the goalmouth for the goalkeeper; half-time analysis; corner kick plays for both defending and attacking; a kick-off play; wall passing; introduce the principles of defense and begin to identify potential roles for players of goalkeeper, defender, midfielder and/or forward.

The 8 or 9 a-side small-sided game promotes player development. Whether you play for a U. S. Youth Soccer club or AYSO or SAY or the local recreation department the cornerstone of these organizations is player development. The curricula of the "Y" License, the Coerver Method and the Youth Diploma of the NSCAA have the common ground of player development as their foundation. The 8/9 a-side small-sided game promotes the objectives of player development as extolled by all of the above groups. These objectives for U12 players can be seen in the Coerver Method Pyramid of Player Development displayed below.



The U12 age group is a transitional age for soccer players. These are players in the throes of puberty. Moving from childhood into adolescence

they are going through a myriad of changes emotionally, physically, intellectually and socially. The 8 a-side game serves as their bridge into playing the adult soccer game of 11 a-side. This environment will produce young teenaged players who are a bit more tactically aware and more comfortable with the ball. With this approach we are moving closer toward intrinsic motivation, which is precisely where we want to be if we honestly believe that soccer is a player's game.

Let me quote some of the points Horst Wein lists as advantages of 8-on-8 Soccer:

1. *Each player touches the ball more often and is therefore more involved in the game. This more intensive participation not only enhances technical and tactical learning but also allows the youth coach to collect more precise information about the performance of each player as well as of his whole team as a unit.*
2. *With fewer players on the field, the basic game situations appear more frequently, but they confront the young player with less complex problems than in the full game. The players therefore can feel more capable, which results in self-confidence and, at the same time, greater motivation to learn even more.*
3. *All young goalkeepers prefer to play 8-on-8 soccer instead of the full game. Why? Like their teammates they too have the opportunity to play the ball more often because fewer players are involved in the game and because the ball approaches the vicinity of the goals more often. Therefore, they gain more experience in less time. And the size of the goal is perfectly tailored to their height.*
4. *With the ball more often played close to the goal, the forwards and defenders also gain valuable experiences in the most decisive parts of the field—where any mistake or successful action can modify the result of the game. In 8-on-8 soccer they learn to deal with stressful situations and to take offensive and defensive rebounds.*
5. *With only eight players on a team, the game has fewer interruptions with the ball being in play for more of the time.*
6. *The job of the youth coach, who generally is not very*

experienced, is much easier. He or she learns under simpler conditions (fewer players but more ball contacts, less complex game situations) to analyze a player's performance and the team as a whole, as well as how to facilitate programming the contents for the next training sessions.

7. *What is valid for the coach is valid also for the referee. Putting a logical progression of youth competitions into practice will also, without doubt, benefit the level of officiating in the long term. Like the coach and his or her young players, young referees also grow slowly—by facing increasingly difficult and complex problems—onto the full game, ensuring that they feel capable at each stage of their referee development.*
8. *Spectators, especially parents, really enjoy watching an 8-on-8 game more than the traditional one because it's easier to follow. Because there are more goal opportunities for both teams, it's more exciting. Last, but not least, the parents see their daughters and sons in possession of the ball more frequently; they see more successful interventions than in the full game—and more possibilities of scoring.*

The U12 age is a fertile learning period. Players at this age can be expected to be more thoughtful in meeting the demands of the game. Small-sided games generate more opportunities for problem solving for the players to work out together. Hence “teamwork” is promoted!

The benefits of 8/9 a-side soccer for these children far outweigh any logistics or administrative problems created for the adults. Our challenge is to find solutions!

*Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate,
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.*

A Psalm of Life

William Wadsworth Longfellow
