

## ***The Street Soccer “Play Day” Model***

### **Theoretical Design.**

Appreciating the essence of street play requires no more imagination than a mental journey back to our sporting childhoods. Our fondest moments were often free of adult supervision. There was the thrill of the first invitation to play with the older kids. The first goal! Plotting teams for the lunch recess during class. Arguing over who would be Pele or Best or Baxter that day. Improvising fields. Using bricks or bottles or piles of coats for goals. Sending the youngest kid to recover balls inadvertently kicked into a neighboring garden, or onto a school roof. Smelling new-cut park grass. Ignoring mom’s calls to come home for meals because the game wasn’t finished – at least until she appeared in person! Deciding on the rules. Playing past dusk, or in the rain, or the frost. Ten half-time: twenty wins! Diving over the ball to get out of goal and back onto the field! Picking teams. Summer games that lasted all afternoon or evening. Games with 20 players on each team! The disappointment of bursting a plastic ball. Not having to defend. Becoming the organizer. Spontaneity!

### **Practice Construction**

The Dutch, under Rinus Michels, are generally credited with formally advancing “Play Days” as an outgrowth of their “Dutch Vision” project in 198X. While organizing free play might be considered akin to adlibbing old prose, it is the spirit of the free play environment that coaches should aspire to capture when using this model.

Play Days can work for all ages, but are arguably best suited for regular use with young players as an alternative to forming stable, season-long teams. Young children start to identify with the concept of “team” around the age of eight or nine, therefore forming stable groupings and having coaches and referees and formal rules for these players is an adult-imposed condition that eliminates most connections to the ideals of street soccer, including the creativity and ownership that are critical for perseverance and prolonged participation.

### **Divisions**

To organize Play Days, start by identifying the number of players in each age band. The five and six year-olds (U-6’s) should play together, as should the seven and eight year-olds (U-8’s). Boys and girls should play together, but accommodations can also be made for girls who want to play with other girls. For the purposes of this example, 60 players compete in the U-6 group and 100 players complete in the U/8 group.

### **Playing numbers**

The ideal playing numbers are 3v3 for U-6’s and 4v4 for U-8’s. The possibilities for the use of goalkeepers at the U-8 level are discussed below. In reality, the actual playing numbers should remain flexible to ensure that every child plays all the time.

### **Field dimensions, goals, and markings**

For U-6’s, there is no practical advantage to marking out “fields.” This is for two reasons. First, formal restarts slow the pace of the games; and second, the small numbers will always bring the game back towards the goal, as soon as their skills allow them to turn

the ball around. Cones or corner flags can be used for goals, and the goals should be three to four yards wide to encourage vision and goal scoring. Placing the goals 20-25 yards apart from each other will form the length of the field.

For the U-8's, the field size is 35-40 yards long by 25 yards wide, and with three to four yard wide goals. Corner flags or large cones can be used to form the goals.

Small cones should be used to mark out the perimeters of the playing areas. While large cones are easier to identify, they are more dangerous and obtrusive when used as part of field lines that are in-play.

**Field logistics**

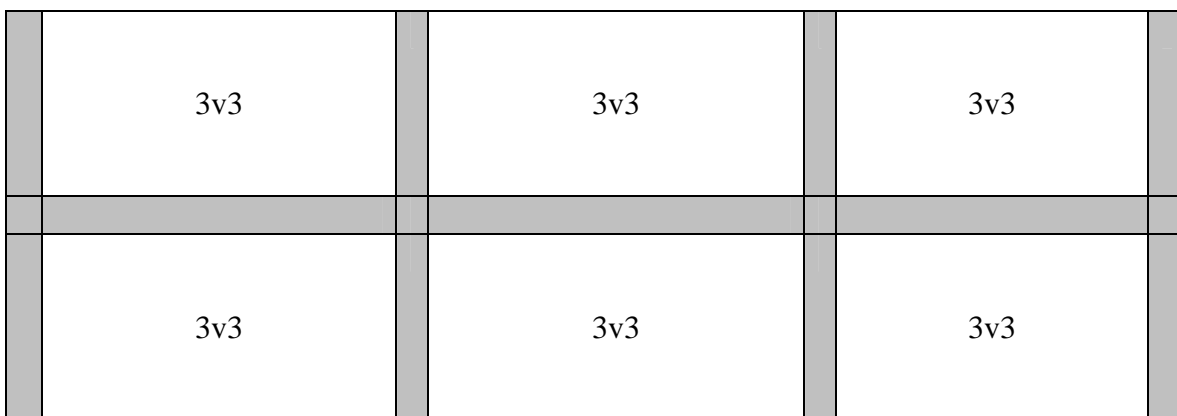
With 60 players in the U-6 division, a maximum of ten 25x20 yard fields would be required for all the players to compete at one time. In the U-8 division with 100 players, the maximum number of 40x25 yard fields required would also be ten.

**U-6's**

If the playing space is an open park area, creating fields is a simple matter of laying out cones and planting corner flags; making ten small fields takes only a few minutes for a small group of adults.

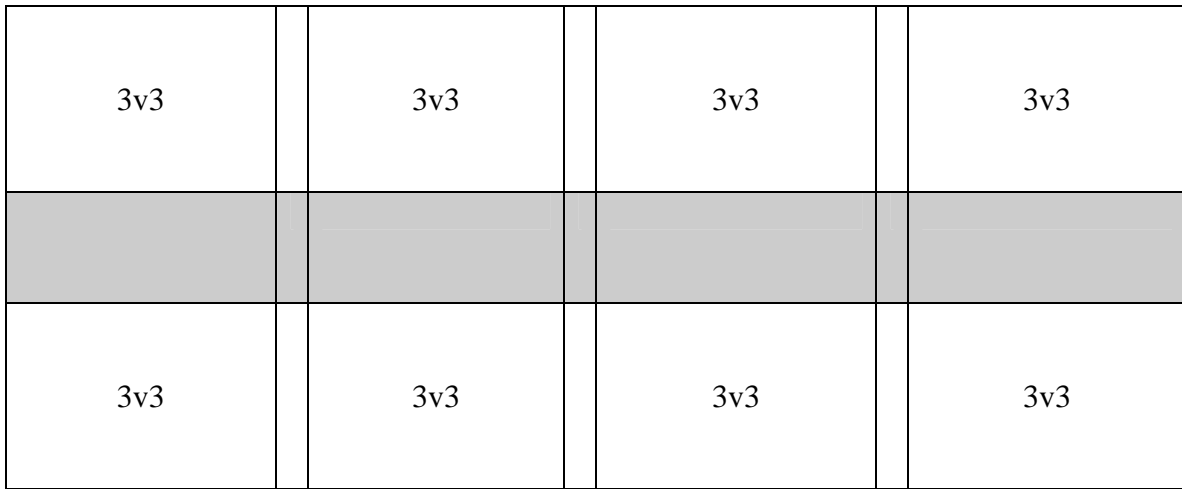
If the playing spaces must be created on existing soccer fields, the following guidelines would apply.

On an 80x55 yard field, which is now widely used for 8v8 games, six 25x20 yard fields can be created to accommodate up to 36 U-6 players. Figure 1 shows this organization. If the existing goals are fixed, each field can be shortened to create a buffer zone in front of the goalposts and space behind each goal. If space is available, starting to mark the fields outside of the fixed goals will eliminate any common boundary lines.



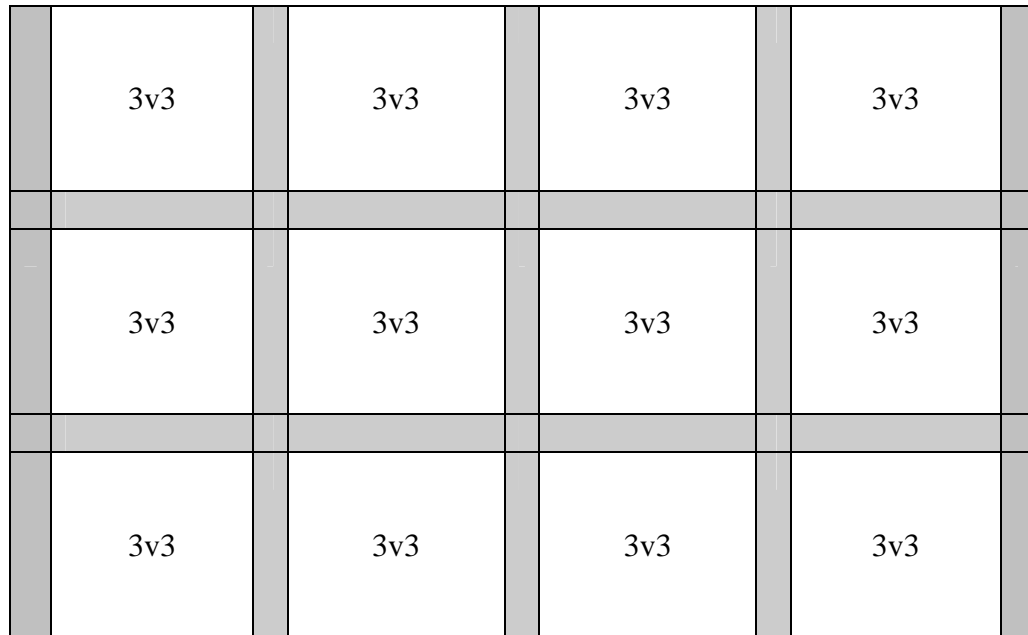
**Figure 1**

On a 100x50 yard field, which is a small regulation pitch, eight 23x20 yard fields can be created with a 10-yard walk-space in the center. Figure 2 shows this organization. Laying out the fields in this way avoids any potential for collisions with fixed goals. In this space, 48 children can play at one time. If the regulation goals are not fixed, additional space should be created between each goal.



**Figure 2**

If the existing space is a regulation soccer field of 120x75 yards, twelve 25x20 yard fields can be created to accommodate up to 72 U-6 players. Figure 3 shows this organization. A buffer area must be created in front of any fixed goals. Laying out the fields starting from the top of the respective goal areas will still provide for two to three yards of buffer space between each field.



**Figure 3**

**U-8's**

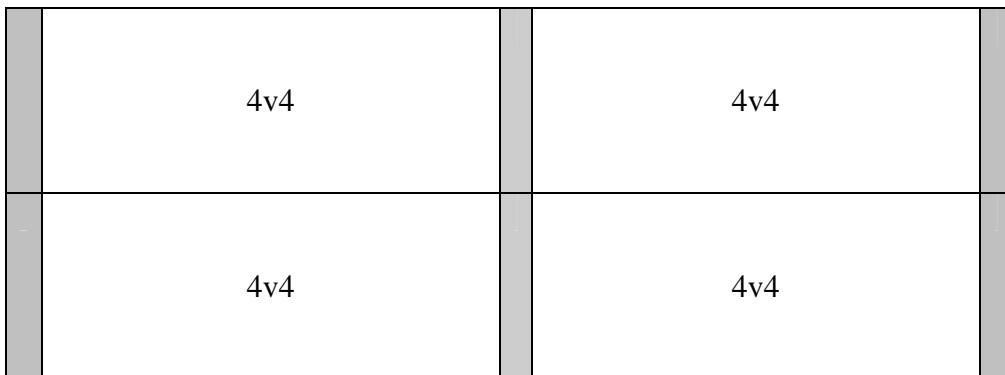
If the playing space is an open park area, creating ten 40x25 yard fields is again achieved by dropping cones and posting corner flags.

On an 80x40 yard field, two 40x25 yard fields can be created to accommodate up to 16 U-8 players. Figure 4 shows this organization. The fields should be organized across the width of the existing space to eliminate any possibility of a collision with fixed goals and to avoid the need for a common sideline.



**Figure 4**

On a 100x50 yard space with fixed goals, four 36x23 yard fields can be created to accommodate 32 U-8 players at one time.



**Figure 5**

If the existing space is a regulation soccer field of 120x75 yards, five 40x25 yard fields can be created to accommodate up to 40 U-8 players. Figure 6 shows this organization. Where additional large fields are available, the middle field is eliminated.

4v4		4v4
	4v4	
4v4		4v4

**Figure 6**

The number of fields required to accommodate 60 U-6 and 100 U-8 players at one time is shown in Table 1. If only a limited number of fields are available, playing groups can be staggered in relation to the space available.

	<b>80x40 yard fields</b>	<b>100x50 yard fields</b>	<b>120x75 yard fields</b>
<b>U-6's 60 total players</b>	Up to 36 players per field  2 fields required for 60 players	Up to 46 players per field  2 fields required for 60 players	Up to 72 players per field  1 field required for 60 players
<b>U-8's 100 total players</b>	Up to 16 players per field  6 fields required for 100 players	Up to 32 players per field  3 fields required for 100 players	Up to 40 players per field  3 fields required for 100 players

**Table 1**

**Number and duration of “games” per Play Day**

Young children play with great enthusiasm and energy for short periods and then they rest or move onto something else. With this in mind, Play Days for U-6’s and U-8’s should not exceed a total of 60 minutes of active play and feature multiple short duration games against a variety of opponents. The recommendation for U-6’s is that they play no more than six 8-minute games for a total playing time of 48 minutes, and the U-8’s play no more than six 10-minute games for a total playing time of 60 minutes. Weather conditions, field conditions, and enthusiasm should help determine the exact number of games in each division per day.

**Uniforms**

If possible, players should receive two T-shirts for use at games and practices. One shirt should be light and the other dark. In reality, small-sided games do not require clear identification. However, if funds are available, shirts provide practical keepsakes.

### **Adult Supervision U-6**

With 60 children in the U-6 division, up to six coaches will be required to organize the games.

During the Play Days, the primary responsibilities of the adults, once the games are under way, are to observe and rank the players to determine the various ability levels; to play on the field with the weaker players or weaker teams to help them make progress and experience success; to keep time and help the children rotate between games, to comfort any child in emotional or physical distress; to help settle any lingering rule disputes; and to deter parents from “coaching” their children from the sidelines.

### **Adult Supervision U-8**

At the U-8 level, 100 children will require between seven (~14 players) and ten (10 players) coaches to organize the practices and games. The responsibilities of these adults on Play Days are the same as the U-6 coaches.

### **Referees**

For U-6’s, there are no referees; however, an adult should always be within range to help keep the games moving.

U-8’s should be allowed to call their own fouls, goals, and out of bounds. In an ideal situation, U-8 teams should also be free to decide on their own rule modifications! Decisions such as whether corners are taken or not, and whether the goalkeeper can use their hands or not, are common decisions that can be arbitrary decided on a game-by-game basis in a free play environment.

### **Modified Rules**

Kick-ins replace throw-ins.

No goal kicks. Play restarts when any player dribbles the ball back into the field or passes to a teammate.

No corner kicks (U-6) Play is restarted in the same manner as a goal kick.

No offside

All fouls are indirect

### **Goalkeepers**

Three basic goalkeeping options evolved from street soccer. The most basic was that no one could use their hands around the goal. The second was that the defending player closest to the goal became the goalkeeper for that part of the action, and that player was then free to run the ball out of the goal and start the next attack. This was the best and most common solution when no player wanted to be the goalkeeper. The final option was to have a rotating goalkeeper. This option became customary when the number of players grew above four or five per side. The rotation was usually based on when goals were conceded, but spending too long in goal was grounds for grumbling and so time spent in goal was also a consideration. It is recommended that goalkeepers, in some form, be introduced at the U-8 level, but not with five and six year-olds.

### **Rotations of players**

There are a number of ways to rotate players on Play Days, and using a variety of these configurations provides opportunities for more players to experience success and failure, and winning and losing. Here are the most common options.

#### **Random rotation by day.**

As players arrive at the fields, they are randomly assigned to teams at the start of play each day. This can be achieved in two ways. The most common approach is to bring the entire group together and assigning each player a number corresponding to a field: six or eight players will be on field #1, six to eight on field #2, etc. Once in the correct space, the players are helped to form their teams for the day, if necessary, and play resumes. With this option, players should be encouraged to start playing “warm-up” soccer games on their own until the bulk of the players arrive.

The second random rotation option is to assign players to teams as they arrive at the field. The first six or eight are sent to start play on field #1, the next six or eight to field #2, etc. With this method, players arriving early automatically get more playing time while the bulk of the players arrive.

#### **Random rotation by game.**

Players can be rotated onto new teams after each game. This is recommended as a possible option for U-8's, but not U-6's. With this format, the players return to a central area after each game, and new teams are formed by lining the children up and re-numbering them into new teams. This takes a little more work from the coaches, but is a fun way to create individual competition within team play. As long as the players are not standing in the same positions they occupied for the previous “count-off,” each team will have new members. With 100 participants, walking down the line and numbering the players 1-25 will result in 25 teams of four. With this format, teams #1 and #2 always play on field A, teams #3 and #4 always play on field B, etc.

#### **Ability groupings.**

Players have more or less ability with the ball at every age level. After one or two days observing a group of young children, it becomes readily apparent who has a sense of the game; who is immature and avoids participation; who can play, given more time and space; who is physically advanced and can dominate the smaller kids; who thinks out solutions; who is agile and can run, etc. By labeling players as, for example, “Red,” “White” and “Blue” for the purpose of creating balanced teams, it is possible to match players of different abilities together and create more games that are closer in score. The weaker players learn by watching and participating with the stronger ones, and the stronger ones learn how to compensate for weaker teammates. With this approach, the teams are pre-determined and stay together for a day or two, before new configurations are announced.

This approach also provides opportunities to occasionally create play that is stratified by ability. As a one-off approach, this is a good way to change the dynamics of a Play Day; however, this method should not be used as the “regular” approach with young children.

For the motivated club or community, the ability-grouping scenario can provide an opportunity to be creative with the better players. Like golf, a handicapping system can be used to challenge dominant players to do more to score points.

### **Competition.**

If the “Random rotation by Play Day” approach is used, players can report their win-loss record to the coaches at the end of each day’s play. This approach can work at both the U-6 and U-8 level, although competition at the U-6 level is naturally generated from playing games against different opponents and these “records” should never be used to create standings or individual rankings. At the U-8 level, some players are already quite competitive, but many are still easily bruised when they are embarrassed or intimidated. For this reason, mixing and matching players provides the best environment to encourage the positive value of competition while minimizing the not-so-subtle pressures exerted by parents and coaches.

Competition at the U-8 level can be made fun by mixing teams, yet keeping individual scores. This can be achieved by awarding points (3) to every player on a winning team. Points can also be given for every goal scored by a team (win or lose), and for shutouts (1). For example, if a game ends 2-0, each member of the winning team would score 3 points for the win, 2 points for the goals, and 1 point for the shutout, for a total of 6 points. The losing team did not score a goal, so they would not earn any points during that round of play. Tied games are worth one point per team, in addition to goal points. At the end of each game, the teams agree on the score, the players add up their respective points, and their individual number is reported to the central area scorer. At the end of each Play Day, every player has accumulated a point total that can be used to help balance ability groups, if this approach is utilized.