



## A Guide to Coaching U11 and U12 Players

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*"Consider the following as the cornerstone of your coaching philosophy...Athletes First, Winning Second. Every decision you make and every behavior you display is based first on what you judge is best for your athletes and second on what may improve the athlete's or team's chances of winning." Dr. Rainer Martens, Founder of American Sports Education Program*

### CHARACTERISTICS OF and COACHING PLAYERS U11 and U12 PLAYERS:

Some coaches say that between the ages of 10 and 12 year-old players begin to or have "turned the corner." They are looking more like real soccer players and their play is more predictable. However, games are still likely to be frantically paced and a bit unpredictable. Players are recognizing how much fun it is to play the game skillfully. The following should be considered when coaching players younger than age 12.

- Instruction needs to be enabling because players tend to become highly self-critical and increasingly more self-conscious. Explanations should still remain brief and concise (less than 30 seconds), and tell "why". Show them choices of what **CAN** be done and what the **POSSIBILITIES** are instead of telling them what not to do.
- Soccer skills are more predictable and recognizable. They begin to develop the ability to sustain complex, coordinated skill sequences.
- Differences in the physical maturity and skill levels between the players may be very pronounced. Some players might be as big as you are, some might be half your size. Players are learning how much fun it is to play the game skillfully. However, players begin to leave the game because they recognize the importance of skill and become discouraged with their lack of it. Those that are discouraged may not have the physical tools yet, but are comparing themselves to those that have turned the so called corner. Unfortunately, if they leave the game at this age, it is highly likely they will not return. **A positive encouraging environment is critical.**
- Some of the players have reached puberty. Girls, in general, experience the change in life earlier than boys. The average age for the beginning of pubescence in girls is 10 years with a range of 7-14. For boys age 12 is average with a range of 9-16. As a coach be sensitive to whether a child has entered puberty early or late because there are important psychological implications.
- Continued development of a solid foundation in individual technical skills is important. Individual skill development needs to be done under the pressure of time, space, and an opponent. An increase technical speed is critical. Demonstration is very important and the players learn best by "doing."
- Most players are becoming more capable of thinking abstractly. Thus they are able to understand the team concepts that are foundational to the game. Changes in thought process are the result of an increased ability to acquire and apply knowledge. They can problem solve creatively and while they are moving. The first signs of this ability are that they will pass the ball even when they know that they will not get it back. They will run to a spot, away from the play, even when they know that they might not get the ball. Players are experiencing the **"dawn of tactical awareness."** Training must provide players the opportunity to problem solve, think creatively and solve problems while moving. It is a very important time to introduce and teach the basic principles of play in terms of attack and defense, building from 1 v 1 to 4 v 4 situations. Attacking: Keep possession; Encourage risk taking; Take players on 1v1 in proper areas of the field; Support; Basic combination play (Wall pass, takeover); Promote attacking soccer. Defending: Proper pressure (in front and behind); Channel player; Immediate chase; Cover; and Marking. Let them use their imagination to problem in a variety of positions. This is a critical time for the development of the whole soccer player.
- Players are becoming more susceptible to peer pressure. They are spending more time with friends and less time with their parents. Popularity influences self-esteem. Players at this age seek peers that are most like them in age, race, sex and socio-economic status. Great opportunity exists to introduce the value of cultural diversity.
- They are developing a conscience, morality and scale of values. They will point out inconsistencies between what you say and what you do. They are "moral watchdogs". They are looking towards their role models and heroes in order to know how to act. As a coach, you are a critical role model.
- Players are openly competitive. A few may foul on purpose. They will yell at their teammates when they make a mistake. They will openly question the referee's decisions. Players will encourage each other. It is important to establish discipline from the beginning and to actively promote the concept of respect.
- Flexibility training is key to prevention of injury. Overuse injuries, burnout and high attrition rates associated with high-intensity children's programs that fail to stress development and learning enjoyment are common at this age.

- Although they are more serious with their play, they are still mainly involved because it is fun. At this age, is where the largest number of players are lost from the game. The primary reason for quitting is, "it is not fun anymore." Having fun does not mean that it is all fun and games, but the players need the opportunity to enjoy the game.
- Nutrition is important. Proper diet for pre-game, post-game, tournaments, etc. need to be emphasized.

**Sources:**

**Arnot, B.**, Introduction to Coaching the U8-U10 Player, Eastside Youth Soccer Association, [http://www.eysa.org/eysacoaching\\_manual.htm](http://www.eysa.org/eysacoaching_manual.htm). Last viewed January 2006. **Ford, D.** 1999, *Coaching Youth Soccer: An Essential Guide for Parents and Coaches*. The Lyons Press. 117p. **Henrichs, A. and others**, *U.S. Women's National Teams Program, U12-U19 Club, State, and Region Curriculum Guidelines*. <http://www.nebraskasoccer.org>. Last viewed February 2006 **Wein, H.** 2001. *Developing Youth Soccer Players*. Human Kinetics, 216 p. US Youth Soccer National Youth License. Characteristics of U-6 to U12 Players. <http://www.nebraskasoccer.org>. Last viewed February 2006.