



A Guide to Coaching U13 – U14 Players

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"The team that makes the most mistakes will probably win...The doer makes mistakes, and I wanted doers on my team-players who made things happen." John Wooden, Basketball Coach, UCLA, 10 NCAA National Championship Titles

CHARACTERISTICS OF and COACHING U13 and U14 PLAYERS

Experienced coaches say that by the age of 12 year players have "turned the corner" into looking more like real soccer players. Through ages 13 and 14, players have a tendency to be more self critical and independent, which may be interpreted as rebelliousness, in their early teen years; however, they also have the potential for developing a greater commitment and passion for the game. There is a huge dropout rate in many youth sports at the 12- and 13-year-old age bracket because players enjoyment of the game is reduced. To minimize the drop out rate, practice activities need to be well organized and constructed to meet the demands of the age group. The game needs to remain fun and enjoyable. As you coach players in this age group, the following should be considered.

- **Technical skill training is still very important** and needs to be done in the context of promoting improvement in mental toughness, concentration and diligence. Although the game has expanded to a larger field, practice sessions should consist predominantly of technical training and the use of small-sided tactical training activities. Small-sided exercises, activities with repetitions, varying conditions, targets and encouragement, as well as **specific, immediate, constructive feedback** are all essential for success at this level.
- When players reach this age, adult standards and formal rules become applicable. The game expands to 11v 11. The pace of development quickens at this time due to the acceleration of physical and mental maturation. Players are growing taller and filling out. Muscle and bone growth accelerates. As players adjust and adapt to these changes, their motor ability may appear to deteriorate some before recovering.
- Players are in varying stages of puberty and maturation. As a coach of this age level, you play a critical role and have the potential to have a profound affect that can either accelerate or hinder a player's development. They are in a time of self-discovery and want to have a sense of belonging, accomplishment and achievement. They become more aware of praise, status and recognition.
- Training should include stretching and mobility exercises, followed by strength training and dynamic speed-oriented exercises. Flexibility exercises, before and after training, are essential for preventing injuries, and they have also been proven to increase athletic performance. To ensure maximum stride length and range of motion, pay particular attention to the hamstrings, hip flexors and groin muscles. Physical preparation is critical for optimizing the execution of an entire range of techniques. Agility, speed, strength and endurance are also necessary components at this age. All physical training should be done with the ball. Strength training should be non-weight bearing and focus on core strength and stability.
- Players must have quality skills in order to implement any tactical or particular system of play. Technical skill training must still comprise a major portion of the practice session. Players must be able to control a ball efficiently and pass or shoot with the various surfaces of both feet. An individual's ability to dribble, shield, control and pass is paramount to the success of any tactic. Technical skills should be practiced at speed and under pressure, which are realities of soccer.
- Tactical training should involve the continued use of individual and small group tactics to help players increase their tactical speed and decision-making ability. As a coach, patience is an important characteristic and you must allow your players to learn by doing.
- Nutrition is important. Proper diet for pre-game, post-game, tournaments, etc. need to be continually emphasized and highlighted.

Sources:

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