

*PLAYER/CLUB  
DEVELOPMENT MANUAL*

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# « INTRODUCTION »

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## A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this manual is to provide guidelines to all the clubs in Georgia for designing a club structure and programs for player development. The aim is to offer ideas for a systematic, progressive club-wide structure that will create the best possible environment for optimum development. Although this manual was written by coaches and is designed from a coaching perspective, it's more of an 'operations manual' than a 'coaching manual'. The manual deals with the wider scope of running a club and addresses a variety of philosophical and practical issues. The issues selected for inclusion in this manual were the ones that have arguably the most impact on player development. The manual does not attempt to deal with some important topics, such as referee development, facility development, fundraising, risk management and volunteerism, simply because it was felt that these topics are outside the scope of this manual.

## B. PLAYER DEVELOPMENT TRENDS IN THE USA

Youth soccer in America has progressed beyond recognition from its humble beginning in the sixties and seventies. Our local, state, and national programs are highly organized and are driven by the combined efforts of soccer leaders and paid professionals working side by side with the masses of dedicated volunteers. Our youth soccer organizations cater to a myriad of playing levels and league sizes, which require a sophisticated and complex infrastructure. And at the top of the pyramid, we now have professional men's and women's leagues for players to aspire as the next step after college soccer, or instead of college soccer.

Our youth clubs have become much more professional, with full-time coaches and administrators providing a top to bottom 'single entity' operation. Most clubs have transitioned from a loose collection of teams sharing the same name and nothing else, into an integrated organization with a central control and a club culture. Many clubs have a multi-million dollar annual budget and operate much like a corporate business entity, with income coming from many sources, such as player registrations, coaching fees, camps, tournaments, sponsorships, branding and selling logoed merchandize, and even franchising. Good old American marketing and entrepreneurial verve has infiltrated youth soccer in a big way.

But the picture is not all rosy. Our youth programs are over-structured by the adults running the show and not enough free play is experienced by the players. Too much emphasis on winning puts a premium on tactical straight-jackets and percentage play. The over-bearing, adult-oriented approach prevalent in youth soccer stifles creativity and takes the fun out of the game for many players who are instructed to play the adult version of the game before they are ready. Youth soccer has become too expensive for many, as parents reel under the financial demands of elite play. The whole 'Elite' concept is overused, with any slightly-above-average player whose parents are willing to pay the 'elite' fees happily welcomed into the program. Such an approach

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creates unrealistic expectations from parents who want a return on their investment but lack the knowledge to evaluate performance or understand the long term process of player development.

This manual tackles the key areas of player development that need the most attention, based on extensive observations of games and practices at all the playing levels, as well as discussions with coaches, parents and administrators from clubs across the country. Due to the large scope, the manual is split into sections, each dealing with a separate topic. One section addresses the general club coaching structure, while other sections deal with the recreational program and the competitive program. There is also a section on dealing with and educating the parents.

The biggest areas for improvement are urgently required at the two ends of our playing spectrum, namely, our youngest recreational age groups and our top, elite youth players. Our clubs have to bring more technical expertise into the U-6, U-8 and U-10 programs because what we do with these age groups will have a direct impact on the elite programs. At present, the youngest age groups are supervised by enthusiastic volunteers who, for the most part, have very little relevant technical experience. This requires that our club Directors of Coaching get more involved with running the programs for the youngest ages and mentoring the volunteer coaches.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the elite level, the daily environment of our best young players is not challenging enough. Some of our youth clubs legislate themselves into mediocrity in the name of fairness and democracy. Many clubs are caught between the needs of the elite athlete and the demands of the paying customers, the parents. We have created a rigid, team-oriented system that promotes the upward movement of teams over the upward movement of players. There is a misplaced emphasis on playing too many games at the expense of practice time and a general emphasis on quantity at the expense of quality. As a result, our top elite players are not developing to their fullest potential.

## C. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This document includes some basic principles of development in order to educate club leaders and shows them how to turn principles into practical implementation tools. The educational part of the manual is necessary in order to provide club leaders with the rationale and philosophy behind the practical recommendations. It's much easier for a club to implement ideas if there is a consensus within.

The guidelines in this manual are only recommendations. This manual is not part of the Georgia Soccer bylaws, policies or rules and regulations and, as such, clubs are free to implement as many of the recommendations as deemed appropriate for their specific needs. However, the author of this manual believes very strongly in the recommendations and would hope that all the clubs adopt them in the spirit of player development, for the good of the game. Implementation of this manual will lead to the development of better players at all the levels of play, from Recreational to Select. And better play means more enjoyment for the players and the spectators.

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All of the recommendations and ideas in this manual are a product of extensive traveling throughout the state, country and abroad. They represent a body of opinions accumulated through interaction with coaches and administrators from the grassroots to National Staff level. They were derived from studying how American and foreign clubs are structured and how players are developed. **These are real life recommendations that have been applied successfully and have proven themselves over time.**

There are over one hundred clubs in Georgia, whose size varies from a couple of hundred players to a few thousands. Clubs have reached a varying level of structural maturity, in terms of growth and organization, and some have already implemented many of the structural components suggested in this manual. Some club leaders reading this manual might feel overwhelmed by the sheer breadth and scope presented. For those who are not quite sure where to start, our suggestion is to start at the beginning, that is, at the U-6/U-8 age groups. After dealing with the U-6/U-8, clubs can review and upgrade their U-10/U-12 program. Once clubs get it right at the youngest ages, they can move up the ladder and improve the rest, with the knowledge that the youngest generation of players is already reaping the benefits. The State Director of Coaching is available to assist clubs in implementing these recommendations. Clubs are encouraged to contact the State DOC at the state office to discuss the best plan of approach.

Implementing these solutions will require a strong leadership with courage, conviction and vision. The people entrusted with implementing these ideas must have a clear understanding of the principles of attaining excellence. We can improve our chances significantly if we know the way ahead, and are willing to do what it takes to achieve excellence. The future is bright, but it's not guaranteed. As we all know, player development is a long journey. We must be patient in our approach, but we must also ensure that we start navigating the long journey in the right direction. Failing to do this could shortchange a whole generation of players until we manage to correct our course, and that would be a shame.

We also need to remind ourselves that player development is not just about finding the next Mia Hamm, or the next Landon Donovan. It's about creating the right soccer culture that ignites a passion for the game in everyone and grows the game. It's about providing each young player a chance for personal growth and fulfillment, regardless of playing ability or financial means. It's about utilizing soccer's potential for teaching life skills to the fullest. It's about using soccer as a vehicle for teaching our children important life lessons, and developing values, character and social skills

This is certainly an exciting time to be involved with soccer, as a player, a coach or as an administrator. The momentum is with our sport, the beautiful game.

## A. MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS

The first thing that every club needs to do is compose an overall mission statement. This mission statement should form part of the club's bylaws and be agreed upon by the club board. The mission statement should be carefully thought out and reflect accurately the philosophy and intentions of the club. Some clubs are mainly interested in providing an 'introductory-foundation' type of a soccer program which is geared towards the recreational level players. Other clubs are more committed to providing high level training and competition for their best players. It is up to the individual clubs to decide their area of emphasis.

When creating the mission and vision statements, club leaders should assess realistically their current position and future potential as a club. The history of the club, past accomplishments, community demographics and population base all need to be considered when envisioning the future. There is no point in aiming unrealistically high if the community is not similarly motivated. Many parents will happily claim they want the best, but not all of them will be willing to invest the time and money necessary to be the best. On the flip side, a club that doesn't provide quality programs for aspiring players is likely to lose their best players to neighboring clubs who do. Some clubs are happy to be a 'feeder club' while others aspire to be a 'destination club'.

A club that sees itself as a provider of elite player development should have the resources and qualified staff to create a true club concept top to bottom, with technical leadership and hierarchy, quality facilities, quality coaches AND committed players and parents. Such a club must have a genuine commitment to excellence. A likely mission and vision statement for an ambitious club could run along the following lines:

***The mission of XYZ club is to help foster young players' physical, mental and social growth so they can reach their potential in life through their participation in soccer. The club will provide the highest quality staff, facilities, environment and curriculum to give players the tools to succeed.***

***The club's vision is to develop a reputation for producing well trained athletes and gain the respect of the national soccer community as a true soccer academy. College coaches, national coaches and professional coaches will recognize the standards of excellence embodied by the club and expect those who graduate from the club to be quality players with a solid soccer foundation and good citizens.***

On the other hand, a club that sees itself as an 'academy of life' where life skills acquired through sports is valued above all, should invest heavily in training their leaders, coaches and parents to become positive role models. Such a club should focus on developing the players' self-image, values and character. This means that the coaches will be expected to teach much more than the X's and O's as game results are secondary in importance.

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A club that considers itself a ‘Life Academy’ more than merely a ‘Sport Academy’ will expect its staff to use every opportunity to teach life lessons and coping skills. Imagine, for example, a situation late in a game where the team trailing by a goal is awarded a penalty kick. The player taking the kick misses the goal and the team loses the game. The coach of a ‘Life Academy’ club will look at this situation as a valuable life lesson and will teach the players to console the penalty kick taker and commend him for having the courage to take the crucial penalty kick. The coach of a ‘Sport Academy’ will likely focus on the technical flaws of the penalty kick taker and want to teach him to take more accurate kicks.

Parents look for youth sports organizations to provide their child an environment for growth. The expectation level of parents could range from as little as ‘a place to leave their child for a couple of hours’ to as much as ‘a center for advanced sport training’. It is important to convey the club’s philosophy to all the parents before they register their children, and to keep their program structure and operational decisions consistent with that philosophy. Clubs can also post their mission statement on the club web page and promotional material.

It is important to note that, regardless of their specific philosophy, youth clubs have a universally expected duty to do what is in the best interest of the individual player and to do its best to allow all the players to enjoy their experience with soccer. Too often, club officers and coaches adopt ‘team building concepts’ that are borrowed from the professional game even though they are not appropriate for youth. The main difference between youth play and professional play is the concept of “who comes first – the player or the team?”. At the professional level, the team obviously comes first. The professional team has a clear hierarchy of starters and ‘bench warmers’ and squad players, etc. The subs are paid handsomely to sit on the bench and be called upon if and when needed. Everyone on the professional team is expected to put the team first and to sacrifice himself for the sake of the team. The result is all that matters at the pro level.

But at the youth level, **the player must come first!!** Every decision made by the club and the coach should be in the best interest of the individual players. Examples: 1) A youth player should not be kept in goal against her wishes just because she is the best keeper and ‘the team needs her’ to win the game. 2) Coaches should not hold on to good players at a lower playing level just to help the team to win games. The better player should be allowed to move up to the next level in order to help him reach his potential, even if it means that the team he leaves behind will be weakened. 3) Every player must play in every game, not left to sit on the bench for the entire game because the team must win. 4) When players are invited to play for the Regional or National Team, their club coaches should allow them to go even if there is a conflict with a club activity. It’s not fair to the players to ask them to give up such opportunities in the name of team loyalty. The team is there to serve the player’s ambition, not the other way around.

Some adults will argue that soccer is a team game and, therefore, team building concepts such as sacrifice and ‘do what’s best for the team’ should be taught to our kids. Indeed, some team building concepts are appropriate to youth play. The concepts of cooperation between teammates, team leadership, helping teammates, learning to trust others, and being respectful of teammates are certainly team building concepts that should be introduced to young players. But the concept of ‘sacrifice for the team’ is not appropriate for youth sport. We cannot in all good

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conscience ask young players to sacrifice their future potential just to bolster the team's 'win' column. We cannot deny young players the enjoyment of playing, since soccer is their leisure activity, and every player deserves to play.

### B. SAMPLE EXCERPTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The following pages contain a few possible excerpts that could form part of mission statements and their inherent implications:

#### **Sample 1: Recreational Philosophy**

*“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning, through equal participation, regardless of ability.”*

##### **Implication**

This mission statement would be most appropriate for a club that only has a recreational program. This means that every player who registers gets to play equal time. It means that every season, teams should be balanced in terms of ability, that recruiting is not allowed, that all-star teams will not be formed, and that game results are not important. It also means that each player is treated the same. For example, if the club provides supplemental training or clinics, all the players should have the opportunity to attend. It is recommended that a club that adopts this philosophy should not even keep scores or standings.

It also means that players, whose ability or commitment level outgrows the level provided by the club, should not be discouraged from joining another club that offers higher level competition. A club that espouses a pure recreational philosophy should not take offense to players leaving for higher levels, or leaving for a club that provides more training. It should take pride in the fact that one of its own has progressed to the next level and regard it as a club accomplishment.

#### **Sample 2: Developmental Philosophy**

*“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning, at a level that fits his/her interest and ability”*

##### **Implication**

This mission statement would be most appropriate for clubs that have a mixture of recreational and intermediate level programs. The club will participate in multi level play in order to provide its players an opportunity to play at a level commensurate with their ability and commitment. The recreational side of the club would operate with exactly the same philosophy and guidelines

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as explained above in Sample 1. The club can also form recreational all-star teams to participate in appropriate level competitions or to receive supplemental training. In addition, the club can form competitive level teams for which the more committed players will have an opportunity to try out.

It must be noted that the recreational all-star and the competitive teams should continue to provide equal, or close to equal, playing time for all the players. No player should be put through the agony of sitting on the bench for all or most of the game. Even at the competitive youth level, the game result should never be more important than the enjoyment of all the players. The intermediate level players are still playing the game mainly for fun and social interaction and, with a few rare exceptions, do not have aspirations to become professional players. Most intermediate level players are really at a level not much higher than recreational in terms of mentality and ability. All they want is to play and have fun. We should not deny them their right to play just because they are now classified as ‘competitive’ players.

As with the recreational level, players whose talent and/or commitment outgrows that which is offered by the club should not be discouraged from moving to another club that offers higher level play, if they so desire.

### **Sample 3: The ‘Quest for Excellence’ Philosophy**

*“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning at a level that fits his/her interest and ability, and to create a challenging environment for talented players who aspire to reach their full potential”.*

#### **Implication**

This mission statement is most appropriate for clubs that have a mature program, with a large recreational base supporting a well developed select team program comprising intermediate and top level teams.

Such a club will create programs that cater to all the playing levels. The recreational and intermediate level program should follow the same philosophy as in samples 1 and 2. The top select teams (Athena ‘A’ and Classic I) will be geared toward the best players, those who have the potential to play at a high level (College, ODP, professional) and the commitment and desire to reach their full potential.

However, we must never lose sight of the fact that players want to play, and that they have the right to play. And in order for players to reach their potential, they have to play. This means that even at the top select level, every player should play in each game. This doesn’t mean that players should be guaranteed equal playing time, but rather that players will have to compete for more playing time, with the best and most committed getting more time than the rest. This approach satisfies both the basic youth sport convention that everyone must play and the need to

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create a competitive environment where players are constantly monitored, evaluated and challenged to do better to earn more playing time.

A club that makes a commitment to excellence must follow that commitment with deed. This means that it must aggressively search for top level coaches, preferably ones who possess a USSF national coaching license or equivalent, and provide the resources and facilities required for players of this level. Some clubs proclaim a commitment to excellence but do not have the resources or wherewithal to deliver. It's important for clubs to honestly assess where they are and either do what it takes to provide excellence or allow their best players to go to a club that does provide it.

There are many complex issues associated with top level youth play, such as players playing up, the tryout process, coaching selection criteria, paid coaches, relationship between the club's first tier and the lower tiers teams in the same age group, etc. These issues must be handled by experienced coaches, under the leadership of a club Director of Coaching, with integrity and an unwavering regard for the welfare of the individual players.

### **Sample 4: The Result Oriented Approach**

*“To create a challenging environment that enhances team development and to make our teams competitive at the state, regional and national level in order to win state, regional, and national championships.”*

#### **Implication**

The team building approach is NOT appropriate for youth sport! This is actually an example of a badly chosen mission statement. When players are engaged in a game at any level, recreational or competitive, naturally they play to win and are expected to give their total effort to that end. But to declare a result-oriented objective in a mission statement implies that winning is the most important thing. It also implies that success can only be measured by the amount of trophies won. There are many other ways to measure success in youth sport that are more meaningful and relevant, such as membership growth and retention, players graduating to the next level, development of community spirit, character building, lifelong friendships, contributing to crime free, drug free or smoke free environment, etc. Counting trophies is the least appropriate way.

### **Other Objectives for the Mission Statement**

The mission statement samples listed above were specific to sport. As mentioned before, there are some general objectives that are common to all youth organizations, such as character building, moral development, instilling the values of honesty, sportsmanship and responsibility, etc. Clubs can combine the sport-specific objectives with the general ones as they see fit. But here again, it's important for members' behavior to be consistent with the mission statement. For example, if the club promotes sportsmanship in its mission statement, it must see to it that the coaches and parents behave accordingly and stamp out gamesmanship.

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For your information, the mission statement of the United States Youth Soccer Association is to *“foster the physical, mental, and emotional growth and development of youth through the sport of soccer for all ages and levels of competition. US Youth Soccer’s job is to make soccer fun and instill in young players a lifelong passion for the sport”*.

### C. ETHICS IN YOUTH SOCCER

The unprecedented growth of our game has made youth soccer very competitive. Although competitiveness is a natural and desirable mindset in the quest for sport excellence, it can also spawn negative consequences if not harnessed properly. And many people are noticing the warning signs and are trying to raise the awareness of the decision makers in youth soccer, the club coaches, administrators and parents. For example, the Citizenship through Sports Alliance has a panel of youth sports experts from across the country. This panel publishes an annual Youth Sports National Report Card. The CTSA’s 2005 report was highly critical of the lack of a child-centered philosophy in youth sports, giving youth club leaders a grade of ‘D’ (Poor) while the coaches didn’t fare much better, receiving a grade of ‘C- minus’ (between Fair and Poor). More alarmingly, the panel gave a grade of ‘D’ for parental behavior.

Like all youth sports, soccer cannot escape the negative effects of over-competitiveness. The main areas of concern are:

#### **Flawed Player Development**

The competitive element in youth soccer can be counterproductive by hindering player development. When the emphasis is on playing to win, acquisition of basic skills takes second place to team organization. Over-coaching stifles individual creativity and problem solving skills, size and stamina of the early developers is valued over skill, and the whole practice-to-game ratio is out of whack in favor of games. The formative years of 6-14 should be spent honing technique and encouraging self expression, best accomplished in practices where ball contacts can be maximized. But coaches prefer to put their players through an interminable procession of games and tournaments where actual touches of the ball are minimal and secondary to the requisite hard running. This is also a time when a lifelong love of soccer should be fostered. But the excessive travel and grind of too many games, coupled with the direct or indirect pressure to perform, result in player burn out and loss of interest. The high attrition rate of teenagers quitting sports sends a clear and unmistakable message.

Another adverse effect of our burgeoning soccer culture is the notion that more is better and that to reach ones potential and be discovered, one has to spend loads of money traveling all over the country in search of the next ‘showcase’ tournament. This notion blinds coaches and parents into a spending spree that is needless and misguided, not to mention that it squeezes financially needy families out of the system. One of the original attractions of playing soccer, it being an inexpensive sport, is no longer true. It’s a universally acknowledged fact that low income communities in any country are a breeding ground for many elite athletes. A player development process that prices out low income children will pay a price of lost talent, in the long term.

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Every country has its own soccer culture, evolved over decades. The US soccer culture is in its embryonic stage but if we are not careful, a flawed American soccer culture and player development philosophy could ingrain itself, with a misplaced emphasis on games and tournaments at the expense of practices and technical development, with an accent on quantity over quality. And once that happens, it's very hard to change.

### **Turf Wars over Players and Coaches**

When winning is the main goal, youth clubs resort to poaching the best players from each other. The quick fix strategy of recruiting the best players is more enticing, compared to the long term and labor intensive approach of developing one's own. Coaches are training their eyes on the outside instead of focusing on excellence and best practices on the inside. Furthermore, the recruiting wars create a caustic environment of mistrust and animosity among coaches, parents and administrators from competing clubs.

### **Deterioration of Core Values**

When games become too competitive, the teaching of sportsmanship, maintaining dignity in dealing with winning and losing, respect for opponents, and developing character all take a back seat. When coaches indulge star players for the sake of winning, these young prima donnas know they can behave inappropriately and get away with it. In the heat of battle, the reason for playing is lost under the large shadow cast by the end result.

Some of the important life lessons that youth sports is supposed to teach our children, from building character, to humility, to taking responsibility for one's own actions and performance, are neglected. When the better kids are courted by coaches who fall over themselves to sell their programs, what kind of message does that send to these impressionable players? It nurtures the instant solution culture where problems can be solved simply by moving to another club rather than deal squarely with character deficiencies. And when results don't go one's way, the blame game becomes the escape route from accountability and responsibility.

The competitive trends are not only adversely affecting the essence of player development, but also cause the line between ethical and unethical behavior to become blurry. Youth club leaders need a timely reminder of the purpose of youth sports. The mission of any youth organization is to develop character, instill values, teach respect for authority and society, develop confidence and a positive self image and help youth reach their potential in life. We just happen to use soccer as the vehicle to achieve this mission.

The mission of a youth club should not revolve around winning championships. Winning is a byproduct of a quality program. But it should not be the driving force. Many well meaning club leaders verbalize and articulate the need to de-emphasize results, but fail to notice that their actions, or the actions of their staff, contradict their stated philosophy. Some simply don't see the difference between 'teaching life lessons through sport' and 'collecting trophies in sport'. The ambivalence in what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' dims the moral clarity and leads to a collision between mission and ambition. Some examples:

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### **We want our club to be The Best in the State/Region/Nation**

When club leaders make such claims, on the face of it, it sounds reasonable and a plausible sporting goal. But the question begs: Is it really about the players, or is it about adult personal ambitions? Just how far are they willing to go to achieve this ambition? Will judgment be clouded by ambition and push the ethical envelope too far? Who benefits exactly? Will these leaders look after the best interest of the individual players?

### **It's a business! It's survival of the fittest!**

As youth clubs grow in size and budgets, comparisons with business are inevitable. Although a business model can and should be used to structure and professionalize youth soccer, it should not be used to condone the more distasteful 'cut throat' aspects of business as acceptable practice in youth soccer.

Corporate business mantra allows market forces to determine winners and losers. The goal of each entrepreneur company is to maximize profits, annihilate the competition and monopolize the market share. If soccer followed the same mantra, the end result will be only one club left standing in, say, Atlanta. Youth soccer should not allow itself to be governed by market forces alone.

Youth soccer has more in common with organizations such as Boys Scouts of America, or a School District Board. Such organizations strive to operate in a businesslike manner, with fiscal responsibility, and a child welfare oriented philosophy. They have board of directors who set the vision and mission and who hire experts to run the day to day operation. A Club Director of Coaching's role is more akin to a School Principle's than that of a corporate CEO. And school principles don't waste their time and energy trying to lure children from other schools.

### **We are an 'Elite Club'**

Club leaders who position their organization as an elite club aimed at the elite player must remember that they are still dealing with fragile, impressionable children who are psychologically easily bruised. The term 'elite' is overused and often misused in sport. Unfortunately, the school of thought among some coaches is that "if the player wants to be part of our elite club, he/she must be able to handle the pressure". An 'elite' tag is not a license to abuse players and it doesn't absolve us of responsibility for the unpleasant consequences our players might suffer in the name of competition.

A club that claims elite status has a responsibility to provide the players elite level facilities, expert coaching, administrative support and, above all, a high standard of behavior and role modeling. Elite status should reflect a measurement of what the club can do for the player in terms of character and skill development, not what the player can do for the club.

As was noted earlier, the undeniably disturbing trend on youth soccer is that the line between 'right' and 'wrong' is no longer clear. Most club leaders are well meaning and passionate about

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the game, but some inadvertently take the wrong turn somewhere along the way, while others turn a blind eye to questionable behavior within their club, in their quest for success.

Is it ethical for a coach to try and convince a player to join his team after the player has already given his word to another team? In the strict terms of the local governing rules, this scenario might be legal, but it's not ethical. Is it ethical for a coach to make false promises to a young player, or to disparage a fellow coach in order to convince a player to sign? When a coach tells a player that his current coach cannot help him reach the next level, ethical boundaries have definitely been exceeded.

When the main reason for traveling to an expensive prestige tournament is to give the team a recruiting advantage, is it fair to impose such expenses and time away from home on all the players just to attract better players, some of whom will replace existing ones upon their return?

What would you do as a parent, if you found out that your child's teacher shouted at and criticized him/her in front of the whole class because your child gave the wrong answer. You would undoubtedly be very upset at the teacher and probably have a word with him. Yet, many parents allow the coach to shout and berate their child when he/she makes a mistake on the soccer field. How is this different from the classroom example? Any way one looks at it, it is child abuse. Parents should not tolerate this type of behavior by coaches. But many do, because they think this coach will help their child reach the 'next level'.

Some club leaders tolerate coaches who are poor role models because of their winning track record. Coaches, who are constantly shouting at players, or criticizing referees with sarcastic remarks, or are often confrontational with opposing coaches and parents. Coaches who punish their players for losing a game by making them do laps. Coaches who flaunt the rules and teach their players that 'acceptable deceit' overrules sportsmanship and fair play, and that nice guys finish last. Such poor role models should not be tolerated. It flies in the face of the main goal of youth sports.

Another widely accepted reality is the perpetual bench warmer. If club leaders and coaches were to personally experience the indignity of sitting on the bench for a whole game, or for most of the game, they might view this humiliating practice in a different light. The argument that the bench warmer still gets to play in games of lesser importance or against easier opponents misses the whole point. If the purpose of youth sport is to help children develop self esteem, how is the implied lack of confidence in a player going to accomplish that? Is it ethical for a coach to ask a family to fork out hundreds of dollars for an out of town tournament but keep the player on the bench because it's a 'must win' tournament? Has anyone bothered to look at the faces of the players sitting on the bench, those who know they won't get to play? Or the painful expression on their parents faces as they share in their embarrassment?

Americans love to cheer for the underdogs. Sport folklore is awash with stories of a team of underdogs overcoming adversity, rising to the challenge under the inspiration of a caring coach and beating a team of cocky favorites. In youth soccer, the real life, but sadly ignored, underdog is the bench warmer. It's time Hollywood made a movie about a bench warmer who overcame

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the ignominy of his tag, under the tutelage of a caring adult, and scored the winning goal in a 'must win' tournament.

### Who invented Standings and Trophies?

It's a myth that elite players need to play for championships and trophies to be properly challenged. Elite players are challenged by playing with and against other good players. Players in general don't need the extrinsic stimulation of a trophy to give their all and engage in intense play. The competitive juices inherent in elite players take care of that. That's what makes them elite. Anyone who has observed any of the top youth teams play each other in meaningless friendly games or festivals would have noticed the intensity and effort to be no less than when a trophy is at stake.

It's the adults, the parents and coaches, who need the extra stimulation of a trophy. It's the only way for them to remain emotionally engaged in the game. As their children embark on their journey through the youth sport experience, the adults' attention span evolves from "look how cute he is in that uniform" to "this is getting boring! Let's start keeping scores and standings". In today's world of expanding highways and shrinking street games, the adults are the driving force behind youth sports. Championships and State Cups were manufactured to help adults maintain an emotional stake in their children's sport, to enable adults to share in their child's experience. But let's not allow adult needs to get in the way of the mission of youth sports.

### The Role of Club Leaders

Club leaders are in the position to positively influence the sport experience of our young players. They must not shirk their responsibilities as decision makers and administrators of the game at grass roots. Their actions must be governed by high ethical standards, for the good of the game, and for the benefit of the next generation. Club leaders should keep in mind the following principles and guiding points:

- ◆ A Club's philosophy should be compatible with an appropriate mission statement and the actions of the board and staff should stay true to this mission.
- ◆ Club leaders should take responsibility for the actions of all its members, from coaches to parents to players.
- ◆ Club boards should let the technicians make the technical decisions. The board should not interfere with the soccer decisions made by the experts they hire. But, at the same time, the board should monitor the staff to ensure that the club's philosophy and reputation is not undermined.
- ◆ Club leaders should make every effort to reverse the spiraling costs of youth soccer and make it accessible for everyone who wants to participate, regardless of financial means.

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- ◆ A universally accepted wisdom from every sport and educational expert and every Olympic gold winner is that any meaningful and successful ‘Quest for Sporting Excellence’ should focus on the process, not the result.
- ◆ Club leaders should handle the coaching staff consistent with the above philosophy. This means that staff performance review is based on quality of experience and role modeling and not be winning oriented. It means a zero tolerance of unethical behavior or player abuse. It means coaches are held accountable and pay the consequences for breaches of ethics.
- ◆ Club leaders need to implement parent education programs. Parents can often be the lightning rod of discontent and are often the least informed, yet, most influential in conflict resolution. Clubs should not be held hostage by parents for the sake of winning a trophy.
- ◆ Clubs should focus on developing their own players rather than cast envious eyes at those from the club next door.
- ◆ Clubs have a responsibility to teach players more than just about X’s and O’s. Club leaders must set their goals to the higher moral grounds of developing citizens.
- ◆ Club leaders should put aside own personal agendas when in leadership positions. This means refraining from exerting influence to benefit themselves or their children. It means making the tough decisions even at the expense of political expediency or personal desires.
- ◆ Club leaders should focus on safeguarding their club’s reputation. In the long term, this is the best philosophy for success and growth.
- ◆ Club leaders should strive to maintain a cordial and collaborative relationship with their neighbors. Every club needs quality competition to reach its potential. Your neighbors are not your enemy but your quality competition. Without a healthy dose of local rivalry, clubs would have to travel further to find it.
- ◆ Most of the conflicts in youth soccer stem from adult-induced petty disputes, collision of personal agendas and power struggles. The victims are invariably the players and the game itself.

We must not let the growth of youth soccer to blind us to the problems that exist. As the stakes get higher and the game gets more competitive, we need to remind ourselves of our responsibility to our children and to the sport and not get carried away by unhealthy zealotry and a win at all cost attitude.

# « THE PHASES OF SOCCER DEVELOPMENT »»

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Every child that is introduced to the game of soccer embarks on a journey of discovery, starting from the moment he/she first kicks a ball. Some children fall in love with the game and are drawn to it for life while others lose interest at some point and move to something else. There has been plenty of research on the reasons why kids play organized sports and why so many of them quit by the time they are teenagers. It is imperative for club leaders, coaches and parents to understand these reasons so that they can design programs that motivate and inspire kids to stay in the game. The ones that eventually develop into high level players go through the following phases of growth, generally in the sequence shown:

## **Phase 1 – Introduction to Soccer**

This is their first experience of organized play, usually between 4 to 12 years old. It's their first exposure to teams, coaches, practices and games. It's also their first attempt at mastering the skills of the game. Soccer might not be the only sport played, as players dabble in many sports and leisure activities. If the introductory experience was fun, the player might move on to phase two. If the experience was not enjoyable, the player will likely drop out of soccer.

## **Phase 2 – Commitment to Soccer**

If the introductory phase proves an enjoyable experience, the player will decide that he/she likes soccer and is keen to continue playing the game. The most common motivators for continuing to play soccer are: (a) discovering the freedom inherent in soccer, the players' game - the freedom to run and do with the ball whatever the instinct dictates, (b) a noticeable or rapid gain in skill, (c) having a 'fun' coach, and (d) enjoying the social aspects of a team sport. It's not necessary for all of the above four motivators to exist together for a commitment to be made. All it takes is one reason. And it's not necessarily just the best players who make a commitment to soccer. Players of all abilities can fall in love with soccer and make it their sport of choice.

On the flip side, players who quit soccer cite one or more of the following reasons: (a) it's not fun, (b) too much pressure, (c) coach didn't like me, (d) I wasn't good at it, (e) my parents took it too seriously. Research shows that more than 70% of players quit organized sports by the time they are 14 or 15.

For those who choose soccer as their main sport and commit to playing it on a regular basis, soccer becomes an integral part of the weekly routine and is ingrained into the family life. This marks the birth of the 'Soccer Family', the 'Soccer Mom' and all that it entails.

## **Phase 3 – Commitment to Excellence**

Once soccer is chosen as the main sport, players begin to acquire soccer idols as they spend more and more time watching high level games. And with exposure to high level soccer, come the dreams about emulating their idols. At this stage, many players start to compare themselves to their peers and begin to wonder whether they are good enough to play the game at a high level. Unfortunately, some players quit soccer at this stage, when the realization that they are not as good as they thought they were hits home. But some develop an aspiration to become top players and make a commitment to work on their game. They are hooked!

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However, American players as a rule don't spend enough time with the ball. To start with, they don't even have an idea how much training is required to become a top level player. Their coaches need to do a better job of inspiring them to work on their game and explain to them how to achieve excellence. Players who are committed to excellence need to train on their own in addition to the normal team practices. They need to watch games intently and learn from the best. They need to become self-analytical and strive to improve all aspects of their game.

Sport experts cite the 10,000 hour rule which basically says that for athletes to reach elite level performance, they need to invest at least 10,000 hours into training. That works out to around 20 hours per week for 10 years. Players like Ronaldo, Messi and Zidane have probably accumulated the 10,000 hours by the time they were 18 or 19 year old since they spent countless hours juggling and hitting the ball against the wall and playing pick-up games from a very young age. Most American players don't spend enough time with the ball beyond the normal team practices and games. Research by the US Soccer Technical Committee reveals that the so called 'elite' or avid American youth player spends between 3-8 hours per week training and playing soccer. By contrast, the average European recreational player spends between 8-12 hours per week and the average 'elite' European young player spends between 12-20 hours per week training and playing soccer. For this reason, very few American players reach the standards of ball control of the Europeans and South Americans.

### **Phase 4 – Commitment to Winning**

This is the stage when a player reaches a high level of technical, tactical and mental maturity and, with it, a competitive streak. This player is seriously looking at a college or professional career in soccer and therefore, sets high standards, both for himself and for his team. The player who is committed to winning has no patience for slackers, wants to play with other players of similar ability and drive, and is looking to constantly challenge herself in practice and in games.

### **Implication**

The phases described above are intrinsically developed within each player. The adults should provide opportunities for players who aspire but realize that they cannot and should not push or 'fast track' players through these phases. Players need to be allowed to progress at their own pace. Some players show early promise while others are so-called late developers. Two players of the exact same age could be strikingly different in physical or mental maturity. Players who are physically advanced for their age need to be kept humble and not allowed the early success to get to their heads lest they might neglect their training and find themselves falling behind in the skill department. On the flip side, players who are lagging physically should be encouraged and supported in order to keep them from quitting. It typically takes 6 to 10 years for players to go from Phase 1 to Phase 4. Adults cannot decide for the players in which phase they need to be. Let the players decide! Most players never progress beyond the first phase, let alone reach the fourth one. Your task, as adults in charge of running a youth sport association, is to provide all your players the programs, the resources and the opportunity to advance through the phases of development without putting any pressure on them. Let the players decide for themselves how much they want to commit.

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### A. CLUB BOARD AND THE COACHING COMMITTEE

Most youth clubs have a board of directors that directs and organizes all aspects of the club's operation. The size of the board varies, often depending on the size of the club, and could number as little as 3 or 4, or as many as 20 members. Large clubs have a tendency to beget large boards since every facet of the club operation, from field maintenance to concession stand operation to scheduling, has representatives on the board.

The most effective boards have leaders with a clear vision who do not allow personal agendas to cloud their judgment. There is no ideal size, but a board with more than a dozen people can become cumbersome and inefficient. One way to get more people involved with the running of the club without creating a huge board is to form many working committees who will be assigned projects and be expected to report to the board. Such committees can accomplish a lot of objectives without the need to vote at the board level and will prevent burnout of board members.

The ideal board should comprise a good balance of corporate skills, political clout and community contacts. Every effort should be made by the board to identify and enlist prominent people within the community with expertise in legal, financial, corporate, administrative, medical and educational areas. When a club's board consists of people whose only qualification was that they were available, there is a stronger risk of weak leadership and lack of direction. A combination of well meaning volunteers, corporate types and politically connected influential people is likely to produce the right balance between 'grafters' and 'leaders', between 'planners' and 'doers'.

Each board should think long term and be continually identifying, mentoring and grooming the next generation of board members. The succession process should not be left to chance but be carefully planned, with potential leaders vetted as to their competence, commitment, integrity, leadership skills, philosophical compatibility, etc.

Another key consideration and a potential sticking point is the term limit for serving on the board. On the one hand, you don't want to lose quality people who dedicate their free time for the benefit of the club. On the other hand, when the same people are in charge for a long time, there is a tendency for them to become possessive of their turf and reluctant to share power or allow new blood into leadership roles. The club can stagnate without an injection of new ideas and new people. Some of the possible solutions for avoiding staleness are: implementing term limits of different lengths for different board positions; having a Past President position on the board to allow the previous president to still be involved and maintain continuity; appointing departing board members into working committees where their experience and dedication could be valuable.

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The potential negative of frequent changes to the board is that each new president might be tempted to impose his/her priorities, resulting in lack of long term stability. For example, the current president might have a strong connection to the select program and might neglect the recreational program while the next president, whose children played recreational soccer, might come in and swing the pendulum too much the other way and allow the select program to deteriorate. This is why long term goals, based on the solid foundation of a mission and vision statement, are necessary.

Another vital consideration for club boards is the issue of establishing a demarcation line between big picture club decisions and technical decisions that require coaching expertise. Sometimes the big picture decisions would still require technical coaching input and an overlap between administrative and technical issues is quite common. However, the nature of your typical youth club board is such that administrative positions far outnumber technical positions. A club board is lucky if it includes one or two persons who possess a strong playing or coaching background. In fact, most club boards comprise mainly parents and administrator-type volunteers, which mean that very often these boards do not have any voting members with a strong coaching background. Clubs that have a paid Director of Coaching (DOC) usually require him/her to attend board meetings and report to the board, but rarely does the paid DOC have any voting rights.

Club boards usually use democratic voting procedures to arrive at most decisions on club operations. This means that people with very little coaching experience, who possess minimal expertise in player development, are routinely asked to make vital decisions on issues such as play format, formations of teams, selection of coaches, tryout format, and players playing up. Board members are invariably hard working well-meaning volunteers who want to do what is best for their beloved club. But a system that allows the board member in charge of, say, the concession stand, who has no coaching qualifications whatsoever, to decide on key player development issues, is not going to produce the best results.

**One way to eliminate a ‘disconnect’ between the administrative and technical groups is to create a Coaching Committee that will oversee the coaching program.** This committee should number no more than three or four members, and should include the club Director of Coaching (DOC) plus two or three board members. Typically, the Coaching Committee could include the board member in charge of the select program and the one in charge of the recreational program. It's important however, that the board members chosen to sit on the coaching committee have significant coaching background and qualifications. Ideally, every committee member should have a USSF national level license and past coaching experience. At the very least, every committee member should possess the National ‘D’ License. The license requirement is meant to ensure that the coaching committee comprises people who received at least some exposure to the USSF's player development philosophy and methodology, and that these members have an inherent affinity to coaching education.

If a club does not have a Director of Coaching, the Coaching Committee would essentially carry out all the duties normally associated with a Director of Coaching. In the absence of a DOC, the

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formation of a Coaching Committee is even more vital, to ensure that there is a small group of club officers who are qualified to oversee the coaching aspects.

### **The duties of the Coaching Committee can include:**

- 1) Monitoring the DOC's work and conducting his/her evaluation and performance review. In the case of a paid DOC, recommending to the board renewal or termination of contract and commensurate salary increase.
- 2) In the case of a club looking to hire a DOC, creating the job description and conducting the search for a club DOC, interviewing candidates, and recommending the best candidate(s) for the board to approve.
- 3) Reviewing and approving the short and long-term seasonal objectives for the club, as presented by the club DOC.
- 4) Reviewing and approving all the coaching selections made by the DOC. Although the coaching committee should have the power to veto a coaching selection, this would normally be a 'rubber stamp' task. A coaching committee that routinely rejects the DOC's selection betrays a serious case of philosophical differences between the committee members, which will need to be addressed, probably by the club's full board.
- 5) Creating a process for conflict resolution between parents and team coaches.
- 6) Conducting hearings and adjudicating grievances by team coaches or parents against the DOC.
- 7) In the case of a club without a DOC, performing the duties listed in the section on the Club Director of Coaching.

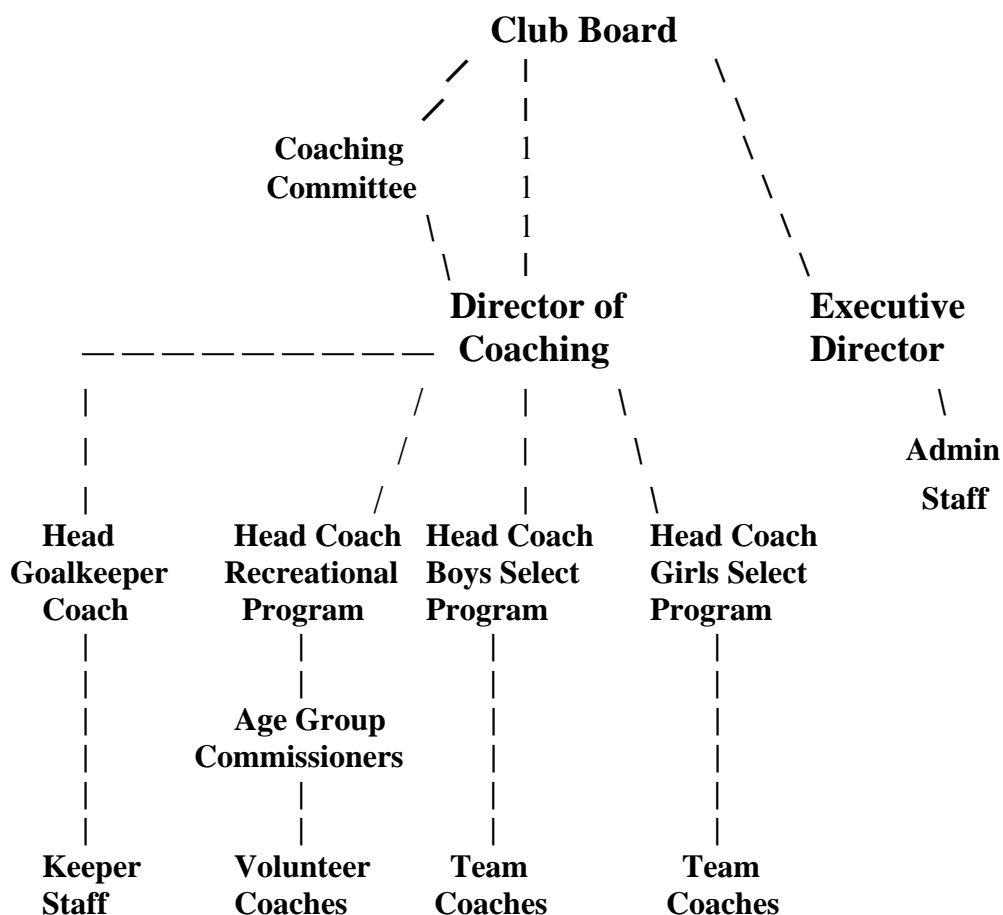
The Club President should select the two or three board members into the coaching committee, with one of them appointed to chair it. **It's important to keep this committee small for the sake of efficiency and to ensure that only the most qualified people are included.** Under this structure, the club board can continue to run the administrative aspects of the operation, while giving the power to the Coaching Committee to run the coaching and player development side of things. This will streamline the operation and allow people to be productive within their area of expertise. The DOC and his/her assistants will run the day to day tasks of the coaching program, under the direction and supervision of the Coaching Committee, and the committee will, in turn, report regularly to the club board.

It must be noted that the creation of a Coaching Committee is only recommended where clubs have board members who are qualified to deal with coaching matters. There is no point in having a Coaching Committee with little technical expertise. Some clubs have a Coaching Committee that rarely meets and does very little valuable work due to lack of time or commitment. In the absence of technical expertise or commitment to coaching issues at the board level, the best and most effective solution is to have the club DOC report directly to the board and work closely with the club President.

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## B. COACHING ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Just as with any organization, a youth club should have an organizational chart that clearly defines the chain of command and is designed to create the most effective and efficient structure. The components of the chart below do not depend on whether the people holding these positions are paid or volunteers. Even if the positions are filled with volunteers, the structure can still assist clubs in clarifying the areas of responsibilities.



As mentioned before, the DOC can report either to the Coaching Committee, or directly to the Club Board. Either way, the DOC should have the authority to run the coaching aspects of the club as outlined in a later section on the duties of the DOC. As can be seen in the chart, the DOC should oversee all the playing levels, from the recreational to the select. This is to prevent each team from doing its own thing and deviating from the overall club philosophy and master plan. For example, clubs that hire paid coaches should give the DOC the authority to oversee the hiring of the coaches and determine a consistent, club-wide, coaching fee structure. The DOC will probably not have the time to recruit and evaluate every recreational volunteer coach, but

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he/she can delegate this task to the Age Group Commissioners while still retaining the authority to veto or replace a volunteer coach found unsuitable.

Some clubs have also added the position of a full-time Executive Director. This begs the question of whether the DOC should report to the Executive Director or directly to the Board. As long as the Executive Director allows the DOC to run the coaching side of things and there is a mutual respect and cooperation between them, it doesn't really matter which way it's done. There are cases where the DOC requires assistance with organizational tasks and is not a strong administrator type person. In this case, it is probably better to have the DOC report to the Executive Director who can make sure that the organizational tasks within the coaching program are not neglected and are executed with professionalism. But if the DOC has sufficient organizational and administrative skills, it is suggested here that the DOC report directly to the Board as opposed to the Executive Director in order to create a clear division of responsibilities between the administrative and the coaching bodies.

There are some clubs that do not have a traditional Board of volunteers who oversee the club. Some clubs are run either by a DOC who is also the President/CEO of the club, or by a Board that is made up of the full-time staff, such as the DOC, Program Directors and/or the Executive Director of the club. The advantage of such a structure is that professionals are making all the decisions and these decisions can be made quickly and decisively, making the club more efficient and proactive. Some of the most successful youth clubs in the country are run by the full-time staff and are thriving as a result of this unique structure. The disadvantage of such an arrangement is that the people making all the decisions are also the ones getting paid by the club and this could become a conflict of interest without some form of checks and balances.

Some of the smaller clubs might find this chart too elaborate for their size and situation. But just about every club in Georgia has a recreational and a select program and, hence, must find people willing to perform the duties associated with those programs. The smaller clubs will simply have individuals assigned to fill multiple positions, but the chart could remain the same.

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### C. LINKING RECREATIONAL & SELECT PROGRAMS

Most clubs run both a recreational and a select program and, typically, these clubs have representatives from both programs in their boards. Since the needs and the philosophy of the recreational program are quite different from those of the select, it is very tempting for clubs to separate the two programs, at least to some degree. Some clubs accomplish this by creating a 'club' entity that oversees the select program, independently from the recreational body. Other clubs go as far as creating two separate boards, one for the select and one for the recreational division. **Whatever structural model used, clubs have to be careful not to put too much distance between the two programs but, rather, insist on maintaining a strong link between them.** Failing to link the two is likely to hold back player development.

In some clubs, the two programs are at odds with each other since the select teams are often perceived as getting a preferential treatment in terms of prime practice time, facilities and resources. Sometimes, the select coaches raid the recreational teams for players, with little regard for the consequences, such as leaving a recreational team with not enough players. When this happens, the recreational body might resist taking directions from the select body, preferring to 'run its own show' and vice versa. If, for all intents and purposes, the two programs are independent of each other, it becomes very difficult to design a progressive and comprehensive player development structure for the club as a whole. It becomes virtually impossible to implement a club wide curriculum. **The DOC or, in the absence of a club DOC, the Coaching Committee should be in charge of coaching matters for both programs.** As explained later on in the section on the Recreational Program, what clubs do with their U-6, U-8 and U-10 age groups has a long-term impact on the quality of the select program. Many clubs are beginning to understand this relationship and are demanding from their DOC to get more involved with the recreational program. Some even go as far as hiring a full-time Recreational Director who works under and reports to the club DOC. Either way, the most experienced and qualified coaches in the club must have input in how the recreational program conducts its coaching selection and education and its player training. A club that has a paid DOC should insist on his/her overseeing the coaching aspects of the recreational as well as the select division. Please refer to the section on the 'Club Director of Coaching' for more detailed recommendations on his/her duties relative to the recreational program.

#### **Encourage the Best Players to Play Select Soccer**

Recreational coaches should encourage their best players to play at the select level and not hold on to them in order to win recreational level tournaments. When clubs have winning teams at the Recreational level but are struggling at the Select level, it's a sure sign that the better players are still playing with their recreational teams. As mentioned before, youth soccer is all about the betterment of the individual, not the team. The player must always come first.

For their part, clubs should educate the recreational parents about the benefits of competitive soccer, as well as the required commitment. There is a lot of misconception regarding select

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soccer and parents are sometimes reluctant to put their child through the perceived pressure and excessive demands and expenses associated with the select travel program. Handouts, newsletters and parent meetings should be used to provide valuable information about the select program.

Another way for the club to link the recreational and select program is to insist that the club DOC have a greater ongoing presence within the recreational environment. The DOC should get to know as many of the coaches and parents as possible by participating in the parent and coaches meetings, and by spending some time observing recreational practices and games and interacting with everyone. A great way to promote the select level is for the DOC to scout and select the Recreational All-Star teams and to train them periodically. When good players get exposed to good coaching, they are more likely to see the benefits of stepping up into the select program. The DOC and his select coaches should pay particular attention to the best U-8/U-9 Recreational players since they will form the base for future select teams.

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### D. CLUB DIRECTOR OF COACHING

The concept of a club Director of Coaching (DOC) is now entrenched in the landscape of youth soccer. In the 1980's, some of the bigger youth clubs around the country started hiring full-time coaches and the position of a club DOC was born. With every passing year, more and more clubs decided to hire a paid Director of Coaching. By the year 2010, the number of paid DOC's in Georgia alone had swelled to around 50, not to mention the additional 40-50 coaches employed by clubs on a full-time basis to assist the DOC. **The trend to employ qualified professional coaches to run the coaching programs in youth soccer is certainly encouraging. The influx of professional coaches has had a profound impact on the level of play and the quality of players graduating into senior soccer. Every club should seriously consider hiring a DOC.** The obvious main hurdle to overcome for most clubs is how to raise the money for a full-time DOC. But before dealing with the financial issues, let's look at the benefits of having a club DOC as well as the possible duties of such a position.

**Why hire professional coaches?** It is a given that most of the player development occurs at the club level since that is where the majority of players play most of their soccer. The vast majority of youth coaches are volunteers with bundles of enthusiasm and the best of intentions. These volunteer coaches form the backbone of our youth clubs and are absolutely necessary for youth soccer to exist and flourish. However, most of these volunteer coaches lack a strong soccer background and need professional guidance from experts in the area of player development. This is where the club DOC can play a vital role. Also, once the best players reach the top select levels, most of the volunteer coaches can no longer challenge them. These players need to be exposed to a higher level of coaching in order to reach their potential. Put simply, the task of the club DOC would be to educate the volunteer coaches at the recreational and intermediate levels, to bring in and train professional coaches for the top select levels, and thus, increase the skill level of all the players in the club. Without a qualified coach in charge of a youth club, the players will simply not reach their full potential.

Youth coaches need continuing education that a club DOC can provide. The mandatory state coaching license courses are an important first step in the coaching education chain. But these courses are a one-time deal. Just as players need role models to observe and emulate, the same is true for coaches. The DOC can stimulate and inspire the volunteer coaches to seek more knowledge. The advantages of having the volunteer coaches simply observe practical coaching excellence is hard to measure but is invaluable. A club DOC will raise the bar and set new, higher standards for both coaches and players. Clubs will also be able to retain their best players who, in the absence of a qualified coach, are likely to migrate to other clubs that do have paid coaches.

As youth soccer participation grows and soccer becomes more established, multi-tiered and, therefore, more sophisticated, club boards spend an inordinate amount of time discussing and arguing over myriad technical issues. Issues such as how to organize tryouts; how to draft players; how to set coaching selection criteria; should players be allowed to play up an age

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group; should there be a club-wide common playing system; what should the role of the second tier teams be; how many games and which tournaments should the teams play; what should be the training priorities for each age group; the list goes on and on. These thorny issues have caused numerous rifts in clubs throughout the country and have divided many boards, sometimes leading to splinter groups leaving to form their own clubs and setting unhealthy rivalries within the same community. A club DOC can not only provide the missing technical expertise to deal with these issues but, just as importantly, act as the objective professional who is assigned to deal with the issues with an absence of any personal agendas.

To summarize, hiring a professional DOC will raise the standards of instruction given to the players and coaches. It will ensure that the coaching will be taken seriously and that there will be someone held accountable for the services. Hiring a DOC will signal the first step towards achieving excellence.

### **Some of the duties the club DOC could fulfill are:**

- 1) Design a set of coaches' selection criteria and hire all the team coaches.
- 2) Design the team coaches' job descriptions.
- 3) Train and monitor the team coaches and help them plan and implement practice sessions.
- 4) Design and administer a continuing education program for the team coaches.
- 5) Conduct coaches clinics.
- 6) Design and implement a club-wide curriculum.
- 7) Design manuals for the team coaches.
- 8) Create long and short-term seasonal plans for the club and provide guidance to team coaches in designing their own team's seasonal plans.
- 9) Design the playing format for the in-house recreational programs, specifying the number of players on the field, the duration of games, the number of games, the size of fields, etc.
- 10) Design the training priorities for each age group and level.
- 11) Design a Player Development Manual for the club.
- 12) Maintain the coaching content on the club's web site.
- 13) Assist the Coaching Committee in designing a Coaches Code of Conduct.
- 14) Administer and instruct the state level coaching courses at his/her club.
- 15) Bring experts such as state, regional, and national staff coaches, to present clinics.
- 16) Bring Referee Instructors to educate the coaches and the parents on the rules of the game.
- 17) Bring in experts in the sports sciences, such as a soccer fitness expert, a medical expert for first aid, a sport psychologist, and a nutritionist, to make presentations and to assist in the overall program design.
- 18) Initiate partnerships with other soccer entities, such as exchange programs with professional clubs from abroad, coaches associations, soccer specific retailers, sister clubs in other parts of the country, etc.
- 19) Implement keeper training and speed training supplemental programs.
- 20) Keep abreast with online technology and innovations related to coaching education and player development.
- 21) Act as the technical liaison between the club and the State DOC.
- 22) Create a suitable library of books, videos and articles for all the team coaches to access.
- 23) Design and administer the team tryouts.

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- 24) Select and coach the Recreational All-Star.
- 25) Organize supplementary skill clinics and summer camps for the players.
- 26) Help with the organization of club hosted tournaments.
- 27) Identify the most talented players in the club and alert the State and Regional Coaches for possible inclusion in State and Regional Teams.
- 28) Assist in the design of a Code of Conduct for the players and for the parents.
- 29) Help the club create a policy for team travel that will address logistical, supervision and behavior issues while traveling to tournaments away from home.
- 30) Assist the club with the technical coaching aspects of a Risk Management Policy.
- 31) Educate the players and the parents about the playing opportunities beyond the club level, such as the ODP, and encourage the best players to try out for the ODP.
- 32) Design a player evaluation/feedback process that guides the team coaches in how and when to provide feedback to the players.
- 33) Create a college recruiting information program and educate the players and parents on college playing opportunities.
- 34) Assist in the design and implementation a parent education program that would include parent meetings, parent handbooks, handouts, and occasional seminars.
- 35) Report to the Coaching Committee and assist the committee in all its duties.
- 36) Report to the Club Board and attend the board meetings.
- 37) Promote the club within the community and help with public relations.
- 38) Represent the club at State, Regional, and National coaching seminars and workshops.

It's important to note the duties that are NOT included above. Duties such as maintaining the facilities, cutting the grass, lining the fields, scheduling referees, administering fund-raising events, directing tournaments and other similar duties were not included for a reason. In many clubs, the DOC is the first and only full-time employee hired. It is therefore very tempting to dump a lot of the administrative load on the full-time person. After all, he/she is paid to work for the club and is always available while everyone else is a volunteer with a busy life. Many aspiring DOC's agree to take on the added administrative duties when negotiating their contract with the club, keen to demonstrate their enthusiasm and secure the position. Dumping too many administrative duties on the DOC is not an efficient way of using his/her expertise. Any task that can be carried out by a volunteer, that does not require technical expertise, should continue to be assigned to the volunteers. This is not to suggest that such tasks are beneath the DOC to perform. It's simply that clubs must remember why they hired the DOC in the first place and allow him/her the time and authority to carry out his mandate without any unnecessary distractions. The DOC should focus her energy on coaching and player development if a club truly wishes to extract quality work from her and achieve excellence. The DOC should be judged by his performance as a head coach and it doesn't make sense to impede his ability by saddling him with unrelated duties. The intention here is not to make the DOC's life easy and allow him to coast through with minimal effort. As can be seen from the list above, the scope of work within the realm of coaching that a club DOC can undertake is immense. A quality DOC would be a creative self-starter with abundant initiative who is always looking to implement new training methods to raise the level of the club. A good DOC will get to know all the team coaches from top to bottom and take a personal interest in every coaching aspect of the program. If clubs will do their homework and hire the right person, they will be amply rewarded.

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In today's competitive youth soccer market, clubs compete for the best coaches and players. The club DOC needs to have a visible presence and interact and communicate with coaches, players and parents on a regular basis. This is a hands-on, labor intensive position that cannot be properly fulfilled from an office. The club DOC needs to listen to the membership and have his finger on the pulse of the club so he can anticipate potential crisis, learns who the potential trouble makers are and deal with issues before they turn into serious crisis.

As mentioned before, it's important for the club DOC to be in charge of the coaching and training aspects of ALL the levels in his/her club. The DOC cannot afford to neglect the recreational level. This doesn't mean that he/she needs to actually coach recreational teams. **It means that the DOC should design the technical details of the recreational program such as the playing formats, coaching education, parent education, and training priorities. The DOC can delegate the task of recruiting volunteer coaches to his/her age group Commissioners, but he must monitor the volunteer coaches and have the authority to remove those who are found unsuitable.**

Another issue that usually surfaces is whether the DOC should be allowed to coach ANY teams. Clubs should avoid hiring DOC's who are only interested in coaching the top teams and neglect to look after the welfare of the club as a whole. **It's impossible for someone to coach 3 or 4 teams and still have enough time and energy to carry out the normal duties of a club DOC. However, it would be a good idea for the DOC to coach one team, for a number of reasons:** Even experienced coaches never stop learning. For a coach to keep abreast of new coaching methods and continue his/her professional growth, he needs to constantly solve problems within the coaching cycle of training, observation, and match analysis. Coaching a team will stimulate the DOC to continue to challenge herself as a coach. It will also help him relate better to the daily problems his team coaches face by being 'in the trenches' and, therefore, allow him to offer his coaching staff sound and practical advise. Good coaches have a passion for teaching and will be more inclined to apply for the position of a DOC if they know that they would have the opportunity to coach a team.

Younger DOCs need to coach so they can continue their growth and accumulate more practical experience. The more experienced DOCs might elect to give up coaching a team for a year or two to give themselves more time to implement their ideas and train their coaches. This might make more sense for a newly hired experienced professional who prefers to focus on the overall club's structure and delays taking on a team to coach until such time he is satisfied with the club's progress and organization.

It should be up to the DOC to decide which team to coach. But the DOC should coach a different team each year. This is based on the belief that youth coaches in general should not coach the same team for more than one or two years (the rationale behind this belief is explained in a later section on the select program). Therefore, the DOC cannot impose a term limit on her team coaches if she doesn't apply the same rule for herself. Also, the DOC should be careful not to create the perception that he picks the best team for himself and keeps it, in order to seek

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personal glory, because this could lead to resentment and a loss of respect on the part of his staff. The DOC should be a role model and lead by example by projecting herself as a 'team player' so that she can demand the same from her staff.

### **The following qualifications should be considered when searching for a DOC:**

- 1) Possess a USSF 'A' or 'B' License, or equivalent. Candidates with a strong playing background who have no coaching license could be considered, but one would have to question their commitment to coaching education, considering that 70% of the duties of a DOC are related to coaching education. Candidates possessing an NSCAA coaching license or a foreign license should be considered as well. Regardless of license level, clubs should verify the authenticity of the license and, in the case of a foreign license, contact the US Soccer Federation to determine the American equivalency of the foreign license.
- 2) Possess the USSF National Youth License. This is the newest license offered by US Soccer and is geared toward coaches who work with the U-6 through U-12 age groups. This license is extremely beneficial for a club DOC since it is more effective than the traditional USSF courses in preparing him/her to design age-appropriate programs for the youngest age groups. If a candidate is hired without this license, the club should insist on enrolling him/her in the National Youth License course as soon as possible.
- 3) Possess strong practical coaching experience at the youth level.
- 4) Demonstrate ability to relate to and communicate with young players of all levels, from recreational to top select.
- 5) Possess strong practical playing ability at the professional, semi-professional and/or college varsity level.
- 6) Possess strong interpersonal skills with solid written and oral communication skills.
- 7) Possess proven ability to influence adults and articulate concepts to large audiences.
- 8) Demonstrate leadership qualities.
- 9) Possess experience in instructing coaching courses to adults.
- 10) Possess integrity and follow morally and ethically sound standards.
- 11) Possess organizational and administrative skills with good time management.
- 12) Have a dynamic personality with innovative ideas and strong motivational skills.
- 13) Possess a player development philosophy that is in line with the club's mission.
- 14) Possess computer skills and is current on technology advances in coaching education.
- 15) Be responsible and have a mature personality.
- 16) Committed to working a non-traditional schedule of afternoons, evenings, and weekends.

This leaves one more item to cover: How to raise the money for a club DOC. It's easier to find ways to raise the money if the club is fully behind the concept of hiring a DOC. Some club boards are not fully convinced there is value in hiring a paid coach when there are plenty of volunteer coaches willing to coach for free. Undoubtedly, there are some board members who believe that volunteering one's time to coach kids is a noble and worthy community service and, therefore, regard paid coaches with suspicion. Hence, the first step for a club is to 'convince itself' and its membership of the need to hire a DOC.

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Over the last twenty years, soccer coaching has evolved from a mainly volunteer, hobby-based activity to a bon a fide profession. Before a field of endeavor can rightfully gain the status of a PROFESSION, certain basic elements must exist within that field. Elements such as a formal, nationally recognized certification program with a standardized testing procedure, a professional association, a governing body that monitors good standings, a Code of Ethics, an ethics and grievances hearing process, and a demand for advanced knowledge in the field. All of these elements exist now for soccer coaching and, therefore, legitimize it as a profession. Coaching youth soccer is now established as a legitimate professional endeavor. Aspiring professional coaches spend a lifetime immersed in the game, obtaining coaching licenses and becoming keen students of the game. Qualified coaches have gone to great lengths and efforts to educate themselves and are now in a position to offer their knowledge for appropriate remuneration. One would not expect lawyers or teachers to offer their specialized knowledge and services for free and the same can be said for qualified coaches.

This is NOT to say that a volunteer cannot do the job of a DOC. If a club is lucky enough to have among its ranks a person with the right qualification for a DOC, who is willing to do it for free and has the time to do it properly, it should grab and enlist this person to the position. But the reality is that such people are rare.

### **What is the going salary for a club DOC?**

As of 2010, base salaries for full-time DOCs in Georgia typically range from \$35,000 to \$80,000, depending on the coach's experience, the size of the club, and the local cost of living. Salaries for a part-time DOC vary from \$15,000 to \$30,000. In the case of full-time coaches, clubs must also remember to budget for the additional cost of employee benefits, such as medical insurance, dental insurance, as well as unemployment insurance and taxes. Other expenses associated with a paid DOC could include travel expenses, cell phone and long distance roaming charges, laptop and software and computer maintenance, and an allocation for attending regional/national coaching symposiums and conventions.

Large clubs with over 1,000 players should be able to afford a full-time DOC by levying an additional fee from each player on top of the usual registration fee. For example, a club with 1,000 recreational and 300 select players could raise \$30,000 by charging each recreational player an additional \$15 per year and each select player an additional \$50 per year. Charging more from the select players reflects the difference between the recreational and select programs' level of commitment. Medium-size clubs, with 500 to 1,000 players, could also levy an additional fee from the players, plus, in order to enable the DOC to bring his/her salary to a full-time level, allow him/her to earn additional income from running camps for the club. Small clubs with less than 500 players might not need a full-time person and could start with a part-time DOC and progress from there. Small and medium-size clubs that cannot afford to pay for just a coach could combine the duties of a DOC with an administrative position. Small clubs that are located in close proximity to each other should consider joining forces and creating one unified club that would be stronger and better able to afford a paid DOC.

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Small clubs can help their DOC earn additional income by allowing him/her to be a paid coach for one of their select teams. Paying the DOC to coach one of the teams is only recommended for small clubs where the overall job of running the club is not too overwhelming. At bigger clubs, the DOC should be provided with a sufficient base salary so that he/she doesn't get paid extra for coaching a team. This will protect him/her from complaints that he/she spends too much time with the team that pays him/her and neglecting the rest of the club. The DOC can also organize a '3v3/4v4 Bash' or similar one-day fun festivals during teacher work days and holidays and earn extra money from participation fees. Many clubs run mandatory pre-season camps for all their select teams as a way to supplement their DOC's income. Another way for the DOC to earn extra money is by working for the state association as a Course Instructor or an ODP Coach. The club could also allow the DOC four to six weeks off in the summer to earn extra income at other summer camps. It is not advisable to allow the club DOC to earn extra money by 'moonlighting' as a private trainer for individuals or groups. This could take up too much time, especially if it proves lucrative, and could also lead to a conflict of interest situation.

Some clubs hire a person to double up as a DOC and an Executive Director. It's basically two positions rolled into one. The person holding such a position will split his time between technical coaching issues and administrative and marketing tasks. His salary could have a coaching director component plus an administrative component plus bonuses for membership growth, sponsorship income, tournament income, etc.

Many clubs obtain additional revenue from sponsors, from running tournaments and from doing fund-raising events, such as casino nights, raffles and cookie sales. However, this type of revenue should not be relied on for paying a DOC since it's unpredictable and fluctuates from year to year, depending on uncontrollable factors such as the economy, sponsors' bank balance, the weather and the motivation and commitment of the participants. Revenues from these types of fund-raising events are best channeled towards other club needs, such as facility improvements and equipment. The funds for paying the salary of a DOC must be secured and guaranteed on a regular basis. That's why player fees and income from camps, as well as mandatory team camps, are the best way to pay for a DOC.

Clubs who decide to hire a DOC can advertise the position in national soccer publications such as Soccer America as well as in the local state association's newsletter. In Georgia, the State Director of Coaching can help clubs get the word out to qualified coaches by mailing to all the State Coaching Staff a flyer prepared by the club that includes the job description and other pertinent details. Clubs that need assistance in creating an employment contract can seek advice from other clubs that have already gone through the process of hiring a DOC.

### **How much authority should the DOC have?**

Many clubs wrestle with this thorny issue, caught between the need to leave technical matters to the technician and the reluctance to relinquish power. Clubs must remember why they hired the DOC in the first place, which is to benefit from his/her technical expertise. If they second guess

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him/her and restrict his/her power to do the job properly, what is the point of hiring a professional? The DOC should be given the authority to:

- 1) Hire and fire coaches, with the approval of the Coaching Committee.
- 2) Organize the tryout process and have the final say on player selection and placement.
- 3) Have the final say on player development issues such as players playing up, playing format, training priorities, implementing club-wide coaching standards and policies.
- 4) Have a final say on how many competitive teams to register in each age group, based on the talent level available.

Directors of Coaching who feel restricted in their capacity to perform their duties will lose the motivation to impact the program and just go through the motions, and will eventually quit and go where they feel more appreciated.

It goes without saying that clubs should do their homework and check the background and experience of the person they intend to hire. If they hire the wrong candidate, it can cause long lasting damage to the club and add fuel to the arguments made by those who were initially opposed to hiring a paid coach. Just as in any other profession, there are good DOCs and there are bad ones as well.

## E. SETTING GOALS & EVALUATING PERFORMANCE

It is important for club leaders to invest the time on setting long term goals for the club and follow up with periodic evaluations. Many clubs are run on a season by season basis, with little thought towards long term goals. Most of the efforts throughout the week are focused simply on winning the next weekends' games or the next tournament. Such Boards are always in a reactive mode, spending heaps of energy dealing with miscellaneous issues and stumbling from one crisis to the next. With such clubs, it seems that so much energy is required to deal with the day to day issues, such as travel arrangements, equipment and field maintenance, scheduling conflicts, players' issues, disgruntled parents, discipline issues, fund raising, etc, that there is no time left for taking a step back, projecting into the future, setting goals and evaluating progress.

As explained in an earlier section, club leaders should spend most of their time looking at the big picture in terms of setting long term goals and evaluating and adjusting goals as needed, instead of micro-managing the petty minute details of the organization. They can let the staff get on with the business of achieving the goals and leave the day to day running of the club to the DOC and his/her staff or the administrative staff or the various committees.

Examples of goals that can be set at the club Board's level:

**Membership Growth:** Projects geared towards increasing the profile of the club such as community outreach initiatives to increase membership or financial assistance programs to attract lower income players. Membership growth goals are easy to measure and evaluate.

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**Player Achievements:** Increase the number of players who receive special recognition such as advancing in State/Region ODP or getting into the National Teams? Can measure how many players have got soccer scholarships at college programs or are playing professional soccer?

**Facility improvement projects:** Increasing the number of fields, adding floodlights, or building a club house are examples of important goals that might draw most of the resources and energy for a certain period of time.

**Staff Development:** Initiatives such as getting all coaches at the club licensed, implementing a continuing education program, hosting national level courses to increase the number of nationally licensed coaches, allocating scholarship funds for coaching education.

**Fundraising Goals:** Fundraising projects to raise the necessary money to accomplish some of the other goals mentioned above.

While the Club's Board is focusing on the overall direction of the club, The DOC and his staff should be evaluating the technical aspects, such as team performances and individual players' progress. But in some clubs, it's hard to tell the difference between Board meetings and Coaches meetings. Quite often, Board meetings sound more like a coaches meeting, where board members discuss tryouts and coaching performance and tournament results while coaches meeting seem to focus on organizational administrative details only and player development issues are skimmed through as an afterthought.

The perpetual question on a DOC's mind should be whether the curriculum is being followed, whether it is effective, and whether any parts of it need revamping. Although game results can offer to some extent an indication of how successful the program is being implemented, it's much more important to appraise performance: Are the teams improving? Are the players getting better?

When game results are used to measure progress, many uncontrollable variables enter and distort the assessment process. Club coaches cannot control how good the opponents are, or the referee's mistakes, or the weather conditions, or the mental and physical state of the players showing up for the game. The only thing the coaches can control is the quality of the practice sessions and the implementation of a well thought out curriculum.

One club Board, in their infinite wisdom, decided that they would pay the coaching staff bonuses based on how many games they won. It became clear very quickly that this approach is counterproductive since the coaches' incentives were to keep their team at a lower level and enter weak tournaments so they could win a lot of games and earn hefty bonuses.

A more thorough discussion on implementing a club curriculum and evaluating team performances can be found in a later section.

## A. PLAYER DEVELOPMENT IN ZONE 1

The age range of players in most American youth clubs goes from as young as 4 year olds all the way to 18 year olds. Once players become 18 or 19, they go off to college and either play college soccer, amateur adult soccer, professional soccer, or quit playing soccer all together. US Soccer divides the player development process into 3 distinct zones and, as you can see from the divisions below, the youth clubs are obviously responsible for player development within the first two zones:

Zone 1: Ages 6-12, (the fundamental stage)

Zone 2: Ages 13-18, (the training stage)

Zone 3: Ages 19-adults (the professional stage)

In Zone 1, players are introduced to the game while learning how to control their own body and the ball at the same time. In Zone 2, the players learn to train, learn to control the ball quicker and how to apply their ball skills in game situations. And finally, in Zone 3, they learn how to compete and function within specific systems and strategies to help their team win.

Soccer experts agree that the fundamental stage of Zone 1 up to the age of 12 is the most important. It's because the first zone is the spring board to reaching one's full potential and without a strong foundation of individual skill attained at the first stage, player development is irreversibly stunted.

Most youth coaches also acknowledge that the playing ages between U-6 to U-12 represent a crucial period in players' development. Most agree that during this period, the focus should be on technical training and that a result-oriented competitive approach is not appropriate. But even though many share this popular philosophy, there are still countless variations and opinions on what exactly technical development means, how to structure practice sessions, and what is the optimum game play format. Before we offer recommendations, let's look at the technical and tactical realities of players within Zone 1:

### ***U-6/U-8: The Dawn of Technique (Player and His Ball)***

This stage of development is mostly a technical stage, where the players learn how to control and manipulate the ball. Most players at this stage can 'kick' a ball, but cannot 'pass' or receive the ball and are just learning how to 'feel' the ball and stroke it without losing control of it. Since all their energies are focused on controlling the ball, they cannot solve any tactical problems nor are they capable of posing tactical problems for their opponents. There is very little tactical development here. There is no distinction yet between recreational and select play. Although some players are already athletically more advanced or possess better coordination, all the players are 'starting from scratch' technically speaking.

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### ***U-9/U-10: The Dawn of Tactics (Player, His Ball, and His Partner)***

The variation in speed, strength and coordination start to play a part in separating players into recreational and select level. The observations made here apply to both recreational and select players, only to differing degrees.

Technically and in terms of leg power, most players at this stage can only execute short ground passes 10-20 yards long with the correct pace and accuracy. Most are not able to chip or deliver long air passes or crosses, unless they run towards the ball and are hitting a ball that is rolling towards them. They cannot bend passes and are limited to simple push passes or outside-of-foot passes with a short passing range

Tactically, the more advanced players in this age group can control, dribble and pass short passes consistently, and are therefore ready to start solving tactical problems. For example, the player on the ball is beginning to make decisions on when to pass, when to dribble, and when to shoot. The player without the ball begins to think about his position and movement in relation to the ball and opponent. But the limited range of passing and the tactical naiveté of the players mean that only the players in the immediate vicinity of the ball are engaged in play at any one point. Put it simply, *technically*, the players are within the passing range of the 4v4 game and *tactically*, the players are learning to cope with the 2v2 game.

It might sound logical to presume that, since the players have been playing 3v3 & 4v4 at the U-6 and U-8 levels, they must know how to play 4v4 and are ready for the 8v8 game. It's important to make a distinction here that at U-8, the players were not really playing 4v4 but were playing *at* 4v4. Each team might have had 4 players on the field, but their poor technique did not allow them to learn the tactical lessons that a 4v4 game can offer.

By the same token, if we ask U-10 teams to play 8-a-side, the players will not be playing 8v8. They will basically behave as if they are playing 3v3/4v4 within the 8v8 environment we have created for them. This is observed at the select level and, even more so, at the recreational level.

### ***U-11/U-12: The Dawn of Team Tactics (Player, the ball & his Support Group)***

As players improve their technique and increase their passing range, their tactical vision expands accordingly. Players at this age can make 10-30 yard passes comfortably, are beginning to chip the ball and can lift and cross the ball over short distances. They are still unable to handle the passing and crossing demands of the 11-a-side game and are still struggling to deal with the bounce, speed and height of trajectory of long passes.

Tactically, some of these players understand the concept of ball circulation and switching play, but their limited technique causes frequent turnovers when they attempt to play beyond their range of accuracy. This obviously happens often when they play 11-a-side. They still have problems bypassing, or 'skipping' a player when switching across the field. They also find it difficult to skip a line and pass from the backline to the front line or from the midfield into the

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spaces behind the opposing defense. Very little build up from the back is attempted, again, due to the limited passing range and the poor support options around the ball.

Teams are not yet able to keep possession for long periods. The ball changes possession often and goes out-of-bounds frequently due to poor technique. When the game is played on a big field (11-a-side) and teams cannot keep the ball for long, defenders don't have many opportunities to join the attack and midfielders and forwards are not able to interchange. This can lead to the development of one-dimensional players.

### ***THE ROLE OF COACHES – CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT***

Players will improve even without coaching, by virtue of playing. The more they play and the more they watch soccer, the better they will get. Also, players' performance is enhanced when they play instinctively. But this is only true if their instincts are correct. This is where good coaching comes into play. Although players will get better without coaches, good coaches can speed up the rate of improvement. They do that by helping the players develop good instincts and acquire good habits.

Successful development occurs when good instincts are *ingrained*. There is a world of difference between 'learned' and 'ingrained'. Players learn tactical concepts from coaches. But for the concepts to become ingrained, it takes *time, repetition* and *success*. This begs the questions: Which environment is more conducive to ingraining correct instincts with 8 to 11 year-olds? 6v6, 8v8 or 11v11? Would 2v2/3v3/4v4 practice activities be sufficient on their own to ingrain good instincts, or do we need to reduce the numbers in games? In the heat of battle, learned instincts often go out the window and bad instincts take over if the environment is too complex. Every field size places its own demands on the players. If our players are asked prematurely to solve the 11-a-side field problems, they might be forced into the wrong instincts. The result is a sometime helter-skelter sometimes 'track meet' game with lots of kicking and chasing and very little soccer.

The level of our players has improved tremendously over the past 10 years. However, we must ask ourselves whether we are transitioning too fast from 4v4 at U-8 to 11v11 at U-12. Are our players conditioned to play a game that is often beyond their technical range? Is it tactically too advanced for many of them? Is it physically too demanding for them to make the long sprints needed to keep up with the play in 11v11? Most 12 year olds cannot handle the technical, tactical and physical demands of the 11v11 game.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS***

The preceding section provided a technical and tactical assessment of our 5 to 12 year-old players. This section contains recommendations on structuring the appropriate environment in each age category of Zone 1 for optimum development.

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### ***U-6/U-8: The Dawn of Technique (3v3 and 4v4 Game Format)***

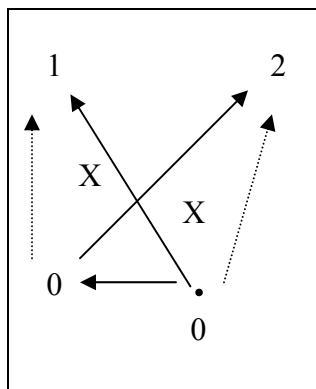
Programs should emphasize the skill of dribbling. Practices should include a lot of free dribbling activities where players are required to dribble in different directions to satisfy a variety of commands or fun challenges, but not against an opponent since they are not ready for that. Aimless booting of the ball should be discouraged. Constant coaching from the sidelines by the parents and coaches should be discouraged. The time wasting set plays such as throw-ins, goal kicks and corner kicks are not even necessary and can be dispensed with, in order to maintain a focus on maximum ball touches. The KINS Manual for coaching U-6/U-8 on our web site can be used as a guide for play structure and practice priorities.

The aim is to produce U-9 players who are comfortable with the ball, are not afraid to hold on to it, even under pressure, and whose instincts are to ‘absorb’ the ball rather than kick it forward as far as possible every time it comes towards them.

Although soccer is a passing game, players who are good dribblers are more likely to develop their ball control to its full potential and expand their passing repertoire. As they become confident on the ball, they can make better decisions whenever they face an opponent.

### ***U-9/U-10: The Dawn of Tactics (6v6 Game Format)***

The technical priorities should be to continue to fine-tune dribbling and the ability to take players on, as well as introduce passing and finishing. Whereas in the U-6/U-8 stage practice activities do not involve as much live opponents, now it is time to increasingly introduce opponents at practice in order to learn technique-on-demand. But the majority of these opposed activities should be in the 1v1, 2v2 and 3v3 environment. The 2v2 grid should be the primary practice environment for this age group.



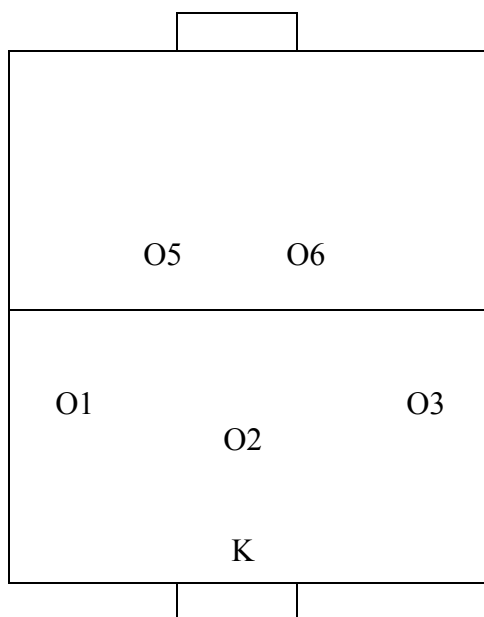
Observations of 8 and 9 year-olds play reveal that most would struggle to solve a simple problem such as the one shown in the diagram: When to play a split pass (option 1), when to play a wall pass (option 2) or when to dribble past opponent. These tactical shortcomings are disguised in

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large group play since players have more options and they can always kick the ball forward for a chase if they are pressured. It all goes back to the key question: Which instincts are we trying to ingrain here? A smaller game field size with fewer players will likely induce the more creative options out of players. The increased touches of 6v6 over 8v8 will provide players with more opportunities to cement these creative combinations into their repertoire.

Tactically, the 6-a-side game provides a great learning tool and an ideal springboard for 11-a-side play. Although teams can play 2-2-1 or 2-1-2, the recommended formation is 3-2, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, remember that U-8 play does not have positions or lines and does not provide any meaningful tactical lessons (for reasons previously mentioned). Hence, it is better for players entering the U-9/U-10 level to start their tactical education within a two-line system rather than the traditional three lines. Before our players are thrust into the complicated three line formation (defenders, midfielders and forwards), they should learn how to link two lines, how to pass from one line to the next, how to maintain a good shape, and how to step up and support or overlap into the next line. With 8v8, coaches are forced to use three lines, but with 6v6, it is possible to use only two lines, such as in a 3-2 formation.



Secondly, the 3-2 formation replicates the functional demands and situations of all the 11-a-side positions. Positions O1 and O3 will train all the future wide defenders and wide midfielders. Position O2 will be relevant to all the future central defenders and defensive midfielders. And positions O5 and O6 will be the training ground for all the future forwards and attacking midfielders. Furthermore, all the passing patterns and movement of the 11-a-side game can be learned and duplicated within the 3-2 formation. The 2-2-1 or 2-1-2 formations are not as effective in replicating the 11-a-side patterns. For example, team width is difficult to attain and

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players scrambling wide tend to receive balls facing the wrong way (outwards instead of inwards).

The 3-2 formation allows the introduction of twin forwards and all its related tactical nuances. It also can be used to introduce players to zonal defending in a ‘numbers-up’ environment. Attacking wise, the 3-2 is ideal for teaching ‘playing out of the back’. The players in positions O1 and O3 have the freedom and the opportunities to overlap constantly and enter into the ‘attacking third’ scenarios a lot more often than within the 8v8 environment. In fact, observations of 8v8 play reveal a penchant for playing 3-3-1, which inhibits the overlapping of defenders into attack. With 3 midfielders in front of them, there is no room for wide defenders to overlap. In 3-3-1 play observed, the defenders did not cross the half line once and were always stuck behind the midfielders. Coaches recognize this limitation and solve it by rotating players. Players who played in the back line the first half were put in midfield the second half. But modern soccer demands the development of attacking defenders. We can only accomplish this by forcing defenders to overlap. The 3-2 formation is more conducive to attacking defenders than 3-3-1.

In short, the 3-2 is ideal for replicating just about all the 11v11 scenarios. The 3-2 prepares players to play 11-a-side, using the 6v6 environment that fits perfectly within the technical range of U-10’s and does it via a simpler, two line formation. Once the players graduate to U-11/U-12, they will be more ready for the introduction of a three line formation such as 3-2-2. This play format is recommended for both select and recreational players.

### ***U-11/U-12: The Dawn of Team Tactics (8v8 Game Format)***

After spending 2 years learning the nuances of team play within the 6v6 format, the players will be ready for 8v8. As presented previously, the 11-a-side game is still too advanced for most of them.

The technical focus is still in place, with emphasis on increasing passing range and type of passes, using a variety of passing surfaces, dribbling, crossing, and finishing. Heading can receive more attention now. The speed of play should also increase.

Tactically, the emphasis should be on building out of the back within the three line system. The 3-2-2 formation is ideal for teaching ‘playing out of the back’. It creates the 3-defenders-plus-keeper vs 2 forwards situation, which recreates the 11-a-side game. In the 3-3-1 formation, it’s too easy to play out of the back against only one forward. Also, in 3-2-2, the defenders can play the ball to midfielders or into the forwards showing for the ball. In the 3-3-1, there is only one forward, making it harder to find the front player with a pass.

This assessment includes many generalizations about players’ capabilities that some coaches might disagree with. It is difficult to provide anything but a general assessment. One must remember that not only is there a wide range within an age group, but that players improve from month to month. Observations of U-10 play in the spring season can reveal improvement in

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team play compared to the fall season. Players adapt and improve. But we are still moving too fast for them and not giving them a chance to solidify the technical and tactical foundation before embarking on 11-a-side play.

The notion that the better players will be more challenged by playing 11-a-side is flawed. Players will be challenged by playing against better players, regardless of field size. The level of competition in practice and games determine the challenge, not the playing format. Having said that, the average and weaker players are usually less gifted athletically than the best players and would benefit from 6v6 over 8v8 and 8v8 over 11v11 because it is physically less demanding. The best players will improve by playing small-sided games if they are matched against other good players.

There is a school of thought that if we are going to play 11v11 in the fall, we need to play 11v11 in the preceding spring to prepare the players for the upcoming 11v11 fall season. Most of what we do in the spring is irrelevant for the fall. Players will have been away on summer vacation and will start from scratch in the fall pre-season. The only relevant preparation for the fall is done in the pre-season August period. There might be some residual effect transferred from spring to fall but, for the most part, what we do in April prepares our players for April, not for September.

Logistically, the 6v6 game allows for better usage of space. In all the sites visited, the area used for an 8v8 field could easily be split into two 6v6 fields. This means that 24 players can play in the 6v6 format in the same area that currently holds 16 players playing 8v8. However, there will be a need to use more coaches with 6v6. For every 50 players, a club will have to add one more coach to the staff in a switch from 8v8 to 6v6.

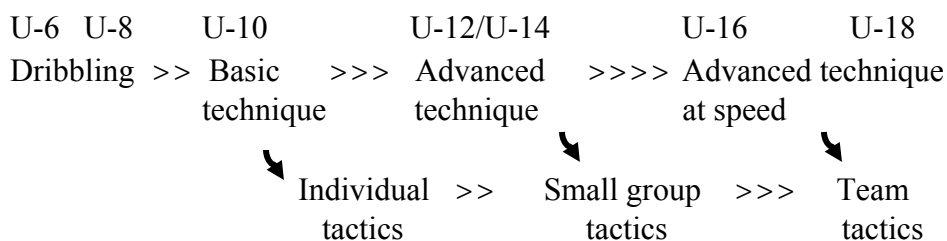
One argument often put forward against small-sided soccer is that players like to play the 11-a-side game. Youngsters like to emulate adults. They see the professionals play on TV. No doubt kids of any age would get excited if allowed to play the 'adult version' on a big field, where they can pretend to be Mia Hamm or Eddy Adu. But after a short while, the novelty of 11-a-side would wear off and replaced by boredom when the ball is far away and frustration when the game's complexities overwhelm. Clubs can certainly organize 11-a-side games, just for fun, once in a while if they wish. But the bread and butter soccer environment in Zone 1 should be small-sided soccer.

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## B. TRAINING PRIORITIES FOR ZONES 1 AND 2

It should be clear by now that, in terms of the sequence of development, players need to learn technique before tactics. The Player Developmental Model shown below illustrates the sequence and the general relationship between technique and tactics.

### PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL



First, let us explain the terms used in the model. **Basic technique** refers to the ability to dribble, receive and pass short and medium range ground passes. **Advanced technique** refers to the ability to dribble past opponents, receive and pass long range passes, bend balls with the inside and outside of the foot, chip the ball, shoot and volley, and head. **Advanced technique at speed** simply means the ability to execute all of the above with only one or two touches. **Individual tactics** refers to attacking and defending in one-against-one situations. **Small group tactics** refers to player decisions in attack and defense, within small groups of up to 4v4, where players learn about wall passes, crossovers, overlaps, support angles, basic depth and width within the triangle and diamond shapes. **Team tactics** refers to attack and defense within the 11v11 game, where players learn about team shape and decisions in the thirds of the field.

One distinction worth noting here is the difference between **Passing** and **Kicking**. Passing denotes precision and purpose, with the pass properly weighted and accurate. A quality pass ‘talks’ to the receiver in the way it is delivered, with the bend and speed of the pass telling the receiver what he can do with the ball. On the other hand, a Kick is basically transferring the ball from one area of the field to another. Many coaches either don’t understand the difference between a Pass and a Kick, or choose to ignore it. They allow their players to kick the ball and are satisfied with playing the ‘percentage game’ of kicking since, at the youth level, such an approach can get results. But in the long term, such an approach produces limited players.

In the section on the Recreational Program, the importance of stressing dribbling skills at the U-6 through U-10 ages will be discussed, and this is reflected in the model. The curved arrows illustrate the dependence of tactical development on technique. For example, the model shows that players must have the **basic technique** before they can successfully learn **individual tactics**, and that **advanced technique** is a pre-requisite for **group tactics**. The model suggests that if talented players receive the proper dose of training and competition under the guidance of qualified coaches, they should be able to execute technique at speed at age 16 and be tactically

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sound by the time they reach the age of 18. It must be stressed that only the very best will actually be able to replicate the rate of development shown in the model. However, the basic sequence illustrated in the model applies to all players, albeit at slower rates of progress.

As mentioned before, the age range between 9 to 12 is considered by experts as the Golden Age, from a developmental viewpoint, since players of these ages exhibit great enthusiasm towards sport activities, absorb concepts like sponges, and can learn new skills easily before puberty gets in the way. It was already established that players must be technically sound before they can be successful at executing tactical concepts. **For this reason, 9 to 12-year-olds should focus primarily on developing their technique. In these age groups, ball contacts are the most crucial consideration. Players need to spend a lot more time practicing and not play too many games.** One game per week is sufficient for their development, allowing the rest of the time to be devoted to technical training, either with their team or on their own. What we currently see in America is teams as young as U-12 and U-13 traveling all over the country and playing more than 70 games a year. Games of 11v11 are not effective vehicles for developing technique. These games are more effective for developing fitness and team tactics, which are not appropriate at these young ages.

Why do coaches play their teams in so many games? One reason is that many coaches run out of practice drills after a few months and have difficulties motivating their players in a practice setting. Since players will always prefer to play than to practice, coaches find it easier to play games than to create challenging practices week in week out. After all, the players don't seem to mind. Another reason is that coaches are continually tempted to test their team against opponents. Some coaches actually believe that games are the best way to develop their players. The phrase 'the game is the best teacher' is taken too literally here. This term was coined to teach coaches that the best practices comprise game-like activities as opposed to line drills that have little relation to the game, but coaches misapply the intent of the phrase. Good teams tend to play more games because they win most of them and this has a 'feel good' factor. The players and the parents are happy because they win most of the time, the coach looks good, and the feeling of a 'high' after a win is hard to resist. But the long-term impact of too many games early on must be considered. Games are important. But more is not always better.

The other important point about these ages is that young players need to have the freedom to explore the limits of their ability, to express themselves, and gain the confidence to try the unpredictable. The problem is that too much pressure is placed on them to win starting as early as U-10. This pressure hinders their development and affects their performance since fear of failure is the greatest obstacle to successful performance. Coaches and parents should take the long-range outlook and not be overly concerned with results at this early stage.

Less games, more practices, and the freedom for players to express themselves and be creative are the key ingredients of a successful program at the crucial zones 1 and 2.

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## C. PRACTICE VS GAME, WHICH DEVELOPS BETTER?

In any sport, players develop skills via a combination of practices and competitions. This begs the questions: what should the practices-to-games ratio be; how often should we schedule games; and what is the total number of games and practices for optimum development. Given that many experts attribute player burnout to excessive number of games and unrelenting pressure to perform, answers to these questions will have a huge impact on the quality of experience and performance levels attained.

When it comes to youth soccer, the volume of practices and games is dictated, directly or indirectly, by the coaches and the parents. This is an area of considerable debate and misperceptions, where economic factors, status chasing, bragging rights, player recruitment and other factors are thrown into the equation and cloud the issue for well meaning but confused coaches and parents. This section attempts to deal with this issue and help club leaders make more informed decisions that will benefit player development.

One very important measurement in player development is how much skill a player learns that is ‘transferable’ to the next team he/she will join. In other words, as players grow and move from team to team, from level to level, how much of what they learned in the past is useful in the future. For example, a choreographed movement rehearsed and learned to execute in a corner kick has no residual value once the player leaves the team and joins another. But the ability to strike a ball is a skill that will always prove useful, in any team and any level.

In soccer, coaches tend to divide the trainable components of the game into four categories: Technique, Tactics, Fitness, and Psychology. We start by outlining the effects practices and games have on each of these components, in order to arrive at some conclusions and recommendations and clear up the confusion.

### ***TECHNIQUE***

By player’s technique, we mean the ability to control and master the ball and execute the complete repertoire of receiving, passing, dribbling, shielding, shooting, heading, etc.

**Benefits from Games:** The best way to improve technique is through constant repetition and high volume of contact with the ball. Games provide very limited technical benefits since players don’t get many touches of the ball. When you have 22 players sharing one ball, each player only gets on average 20-40 ball touches per game. In fact, depending on position and amount of minutes played, some players only touch the ball 10-20 times per game.

**Benefits from Practices:** In a well structured practice that is geared towards technical development, players would typically touch the ball hundreds of times in one single practice. By keeping the player-to-ball ratio small (1:1 through 4:1) and using small-sided games, each player would easily accomplish 200-400 touches, and often even more, in a 90 minute practice session.

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**Conclusion:** Without question, practices provide much better technical development than games. Players will learn technical skills mainly in practices.

### ***TACTICS***

Tactical development refers to the decisions players make, with and without the ball, in both attack and defense. Examples of decisions with the ball are: which technique to use, which kicking surface to use and where to play the ball. Examples of decisions without the ball are: positioning, when and where to make runs and how to support teammates. Good decisions are based on the sound principles of play, such as Support, Width, Depth, and Mobility. These principles are always applicable and constant, regardless of team formation.

When players are well coached and versed in the sound principles, they are more likely to make good decisions.

Many people associate tactics with Team Formation, Strategy and System of Play. Team formation, strategy and system of play are decided and conveyed to the team by the coach. But it's the players' ability to make good decisions on the field, based on the universal principles, that determines the success of the strategy/system of play.

**Benefits from Games:** Games help the players develop an understanding of how to play together and result in better team cohesion. There is no question that playing games will improve the overall performance of the team as players get to know each other. Games also provide players with a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the tactical framework laid out by the coach.

When coaches and parents see their team improving from game to game, it's only natural for them to conclude that the players are developing and that the games are responsible for the development. But are the players *really* developing or is it simply the *team cohesion* that is developing.

Parents must remember that once a player leaves a team, the cohesion and understanding that was previously attained is no longer useful with the next team and the player is basically starting from scratch in developing cohesion with new teammates.

Hence, the salient question is, did the players learn the sound principles of soccer and are they better at solving tactical problems, regardless of which team they will join and which formation will be used. Players who learn to solve soccer problems are more adaptable and more valuable to a coach employing any system. It's hard to assess exactly the contribution of games towards the residual tactical skills that players take with them from team to team. But, just as with technical development, the frequency of 'learning moments', those moments when a player is around the ball and making decisions, is much lower in a game than in a practice.

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**Benefits from Practices:** In a well constructed practice, under the guidance of a knowledgeable coach, the potential for learning how to solve soccer tactical problems is enhanced by more repetition and more scope for the coach to provide feedback. The use of small-sided activities further increases the learning opportunities.

**Conclusion:** A quality practice will be more effective at teaching the tactical principles than a game. Games improve team cohesion and teach players functional roles. But since cohesion and functional roles are to a large extent team-specific, the long term benefits from games are limited. Also, when players are tactically intelligent, cohesion and roles are easy to teach and it doesn't take many games to accomplish.

### ***FITNESS***

Soccer fitness has many components, such as speed, stamina, agility, power, and flexibility. Experts agree that until players complete their growth spurt and their cardiovascular and neuromuscular systems reach maturity, emphasis on fitness training has limited benefits. Hence, fitness training of young players should not assume a high priority and should be done mainly with the ball.

Another fact about fitness is that it is reversible, meaning that when a player stops playing or training he will lose some of the fitness level gained. For example, loss of stamina, which is the foundation fitness for soccer, can occur within just two weeks of inactivity. The good news is that the human body adapts quickly and fitness levels can be regained easily when players resume training.

**Benefits from Games:** Players and coaches often talk about 'match fitness'. They are referring to the fact that the best way to become fit for games *is* to play games. This fact is correct and is based on the principle of sport specificity. As players play in games, their bodies adapt to the rigors of playing and they become not just fit, but 'game-fit'.

But since fitness is reversible, as soon as they stop playing games, as in the off-season, they lose the peak match fitness. Fortunately, the pre-season and the early part of the next season will take care of this and allow them to regain the peak game fitness.

However, the danger of physical burn out of players due to playing too many games is real. Especially when players play multiple games per weekend, as is the norm in youth tournaments in the U.S. Care must be taken to allow for complete recovery after an exhausting weekend of play. This means that whenever players play in a weekend tournament, they are too tired to train in the first half of the week and training volume is reduced, which means that player development suffers

**Benefits from Practices:** The one advantage practice has over games is that the coach can manipulate the activities to create specific fitness demands and overload the players in order to

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improve a specific fitness component. But, just as in games, when players stop training, they lose a certain amount of fitness.

**Conclusion:** Since fitness at the youth level is not a high priority and its levels fluctuate based on the stage of the season, the ratio of practices to games is not a major issue in the context of long term player fitness development. The biggest issues are fatigue from over playing, burn out, and the time needed for recovery from exhausting tournaments that could otherwise be used to train and develop the players.

### ***PSYCHOLOGY***

Players' performance depends heavily on their mental state and psycho-social maturity level. Sport Psychology encompasses many aspects, some of which are goal setting, mental preparation, coping with performance anxiety, dealing with winning and losing, confidence and self image, social interaction, team bonding, and enjoyment and fulfillment.

At the youth level, *enjoyment*, *social interaction*, and development of a *positive self image* should be of paramount concern and the main objectives of sport.

Many studies and surveys of young players conducted by sport psychologists confirm that the most common and important reasons young players participate in sport are: enjoyment, be with friends, and learn new skills.

**Benefits from Games:** Players love to play games. Games provide the motivation to improve and the incentive to train. Players of all levels love to compete, but elite players are especially aroused by the challenges of competing against quality opponents.

In order for games to provide optimum benefits, it's vitally important for coaches and parents to make sure that the players' enjoyment and motivation is not overly depended on the game results. Obviously, winning enhances enjoyment and adds a sense of fulfillment to the game experience. But, when dealt with appropriately, losses can be viewed as valuable learning experiences and kept in perspective.

Games can easily become a dreaded event for players who lack self-confidence or players who spend long periods sitting on the bench. Since a prime objective of youth sport is to develop a positive self image, players who are confined to bit roles or spend most of the time on the bench are not likely to develop self confidence. Players who are verbally or mentally abused by coaches or parents are also likely to dread the game day experience and quit sport altogether.

**Benefits from Practices:** Obviously, practices don't have the 'buzz factor' of games, but a well constructed practice that comprises the correct level of difficulty and keeps players engaged and challenged can have similar psychological benefits as games.

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A sign of a good practice is when players are so engrossed in the activities that they lose track of time and beg to continue when the practice ends. If practices sometimes get a bad rap and are associated with boredom, it's mainly because of poor coaching.

**Conclusion:** Both games and practices can and should contribute towards a healthy psychological growth of players. Games are inherently more enjoyable and motivating than practices and are an integral part of the psychological imprint on young players. Games also serve the purpose of gauging progress, monitoring the effectiveness of training, and planning the training sessions.

But on the flip side is the growing concern that the excessive number of games in youth soccer's elite level, coupled with the long distance and frequent travel, are contributing to burnout and loss of enjoyment. The undesirable side effects of too much too soon are well documented and include the 'been there, done that' syndrome, the pressure to win and qualify for the prestige tournament, the high expenses of travel, and the loss of quality family time.

Since enjoyment, social skills and self image are the key aims, the most important factor affecting long term psychological benefits is the manner in which the adults deal with game results and pressures to win. To this end, the ability of the coach to make games and practices a fun and fulfilling experience is more crucial than the ratio of practices to games.

### ***CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OPTIMUM PLAYER DEVELOPMENT***

To recap, this section attempts to answer the key questions regarding the optimum number of practices and games at the youth level. From the comparison of benefits broken down above for each trainable component, it is clear that practices have a much bigger impact on the technical and tactical development of players than games. Players experience many more touches on the ball and more learning moments in practices compared to games. In fact, the number of ball touches in games for each player is practically negligible. Hence, practices should outnumber games by a large ratio.

Practices are more conducive to long term technical and tactical development since they provide the skill foundation that is transferable from team to team and from level to level, whereas games tend to develop 'perishable' benefits, such as team cohesion and match fitness.

Furthermore, the excessive number of tournaments and associated travel and fatigue contribute to physical and mental burnout. The problem is that the symptoms of burnout are not always immediately apparent and can stay undetected for months or years before they manifest themselves. A torn ACL sustained in an innocuous, moderate activity could easily be the cumulative result of endless multi-game tournaments and lack of downtime over the previous few months or years.

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Another way to look at the issue of practice-to-game ratio is to compare games to school tests. If practice is for learning and games are for gauging progress, it follows that much more time should be spent learning than testing. Teachers don't prescribe tests every second day in school because it takes valuable time away from learning. If the ratio of practice to games is 1 to 1 or even 2 to 1, it's like spending every second day in school doing tests instead of learning new things.

Imagine a gymnast attending an inordinate amount of competition events frequently, at the expense of practice. It's clear that a gymnast should spend hundreds of hours training and perfecting technique before attempting to enter a competition. It's also clear that in a gymnastics competition, each competitor is only active for a couple of minutes and that such an event has no impact on skill development. Well, a soccer competition is also devoid of any meaningful skill development for the same reason, namely that each player only comes into contact with the ball for a total of a few seconds over the course of a ninety minute game. The only difference is that soccer is a team sport which requires developing team cohesion in addition to the individual skill. But we don't need so many games to achieve team cohesion. Individual skill acquisition should be the priority.

As mentioned before, experts cite the '10,000 hours' rule of thumb for skill development. The expert consensus for any sport is that it takes around 10,000 hours of technical training to reach an elite, 'Olympic gold' level of performance. To achieve this volume of practice, an athlete would have to train 10 times per week for 10 years, and that's exactly what Olympic gold aspirants do. If we tried to calculate the number of hours players such as Ronaldinho or Zidane spent working on technique by adding up all the hours they spent on their own from a very young age to the hours spent in team practices, it will probably add up to 10,000 hours by the time they reached the age of 20.

In all the major soccer playing nations, young players spend a lot more time practicing than playing. However, In the U.S. there is a mistaken belief that players develop by playing games and the player development culture is evolving in the wrong direction, with emphasis on games at the expense of valuable practice time. The end result is that competitive level players are asked to play 70-100 games per year, many of which are lumped into multi-game weekend tournaments.

The common rationale that drives coaches and parents towards all these travel and games is the search for quality competition, and that players develop by playing against good players. But this ends up promoting quantity rather than quality. Players get into the habit of pacing themselves through games to survive the marathon and, by the time they face quality opponents in the later stages of the tournaments, they are too exhausted to derive any meaningful benefit.

While it is definitely beneficial for good players to play with and against other top players, the benefits really kick in when players attain a good technical base. Players in the early stages of skill acquisition (ages 6 to 12) need to experience success and develop the confidence to execute the skills. Many players who are thrown pre-maturely into a highly competitive environment against better opponents are not likely to try new tricks and are more likely to play

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conservatively and hold back. It might be better in the long term to be the big fish in a small pond for a while, before jumping into the big pond.

We need to monitor the amount of games our players are playing and make sure a rest and recovery period is implemented after each season. As a rough guideline, the recommended number of games per year and the practice-to-game ratio are shown in the table below:

Age Group	Number of games Per year	Number of team practices per week	
		Recreational	Elite
U-8	20-30	2	2
U-10	20-30	2	3
U-12	30-40	2	3
U-14	30-40	2	3-4
U-16	40-50	2	4
U-18	40-50	2	4-5

Ideally, the games should be spread out in a frequency of one game per week. Also, young players, especially between the ages of 8-16, who aspire to play at the professional level, should supplement the team practices with additional ball practice on their own.

Elite level players should set aside 4-8 weeks of off-season rest each year, for regeneration and recharging. It's hard for the top youth players to find time to rest since they are more likely to be involved with many programs simultaneously, such as club soccer, high school soccer and ODP. This is where the parents need to be educated and avoid getting carried away by all the tournaments and invitations and insist on rest periods.

Another undesirable feature of youth soccer that needs to be minimized is the time spent traveling. Many elite players spend an inordinate time traveling out of state and across the country to play games and tournaments. Some players are also traveling excessive distances to team practices every week because they would rather play for a top team located in another community than play for their local team. This is an issue with no easy answers. But parents should consider the pro's and con's carefully and keep in mind that the hours wasted traveling each week could be spent practicing to improve technique. In the long term, practicing instead of traveling might prove a better investment of time and a whole lot cheaper.

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## D. IMPLEMENTING A CLUB-WIDE CURRICULUM

The future of youth soccer can be captured in two words: ‘Soccer Academies’. Academy is the catch word. Everyone is looking to position their club as a soccer ‘academy’. But what does it mean? Most people would agree that the word academy implies a school. A soccer school then. But schools have a curriculum that is utilized to teach and measure the effectiveness of teaching. Therefore, it doesn’t make any sense to have an academy but not have a curriculum.

Most clubs already have a ‘Club Plan’ in place that might include a curriculum and job descriptions and club policies and guidelines. But the questions are: how effective is it? Do the coaches follow it? How is it monitored and evaluated? Does it reflect the club’s mission and identity? Many clubs are so wrapped up in the day to day running of their club that they rarely have time to stop, take a step back and try to get a global sense of the direction the club is going.

This section attempts to provide clubs with the framework for implementing a curriculum. Each club can create a curriculum that takes into account its own unique parameters. But regardless of the club’s situation, the key player development principles should still form the basis for everything a club does.

The benefits of having a well planned and progressive curriculum are many fold:

- Gives the club identity
- Thorough educational experience for the players that graduates a ‘complete’ athlete/person
- Gets everyone on the same page
- Coaching staff works as a team rather than a bunch of individual coaches
- Blueprint for staff training
- Easier to monitor and assess effectiveness of programs
- Selling point for the club, Branding
- Keeps administrators and parents from interfering with technical issues

The club’s curriculum should be connected to the club’s mission and vision statement. An earlier section already addressed the establishment of a mission and vision for the club. The mission/vision statement is followed by a club philosophy that everyone must buy into. And only then, one can start to design the curriculum. Lastly, the organization chart, the club policies, and the staff job descriptions are created to implement the curriculum.

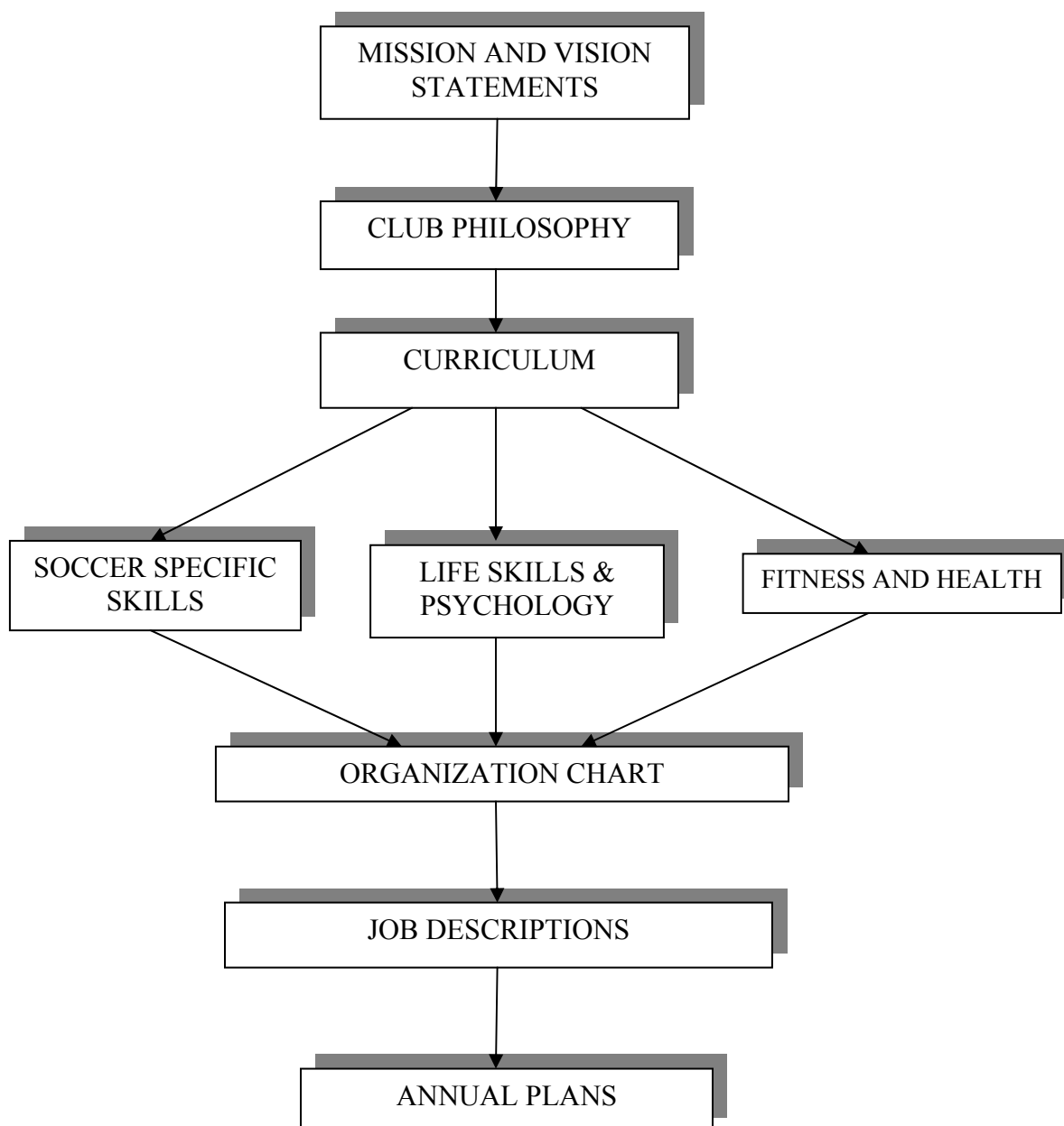
The following pages provide examples of what a club’s mission and philosophy could be, followed by a sample curriculum. This gives the reader an idea of how everything flows.

Once the curriculum is laid out, comes the more detailed summary for each age group that would assign priorities to all the topics, the training volume and key coaching points and objectives for each age group. Measurable expectations should also form a part of the age-specific summary. Playing style and formations could also be part of the curriculum for certain age groups and levels. And lastly, a set of activities that would represent the bread and butter of the training sessions prop up everything else. All this information that comes under the curriculum would

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vary from club to club and is not included here. This is where the club DOC would fill in the blanks and complete the whole document to suit his/her club.

## THE CLUB CURRICULUM FLOW CHART



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## **SAMPLE: ELITE YOUTH CLUB MISSION AND VISION**

The mission of XYZ youth club is to help foster young players' physical, mental and social growth so they can reach their potential in life through their participation in soccer. The club will provide the highest quality staff, facilities, environment and curriculum to give players the tools to succeed.

The club's vision is to develop a reputation for producing well trained athletes and gain the respect of the national soccer community as a true soccer academy. College coaches, national coaches and professional coaches will recognize the standards of excellence embodied by the club and expect those who graduate from the club to be quality players with a solid soccer foundation and good citizens.

## **SAMPLE: YOUTH CLUB PHILOSOPHY**

The club's philosophy is founded on a set of *core principles* that govern the policies, direction, actions and structure of the club. These core principles are:

### ***Develop the Person, Not Just the Athlete***

A youth soccer club has a responsibility for the overall growth of its young athletes. Our club's philosophy embraces the holistic approach of developing the complete person. Our aim is to complement the home and school environments in the pursuit of developing character, values, self-confidence, independence, analytical skills, social skills, coping skills, and sports skills to prepare young athletes for life. Soccer is just the vehicle for achieving these aims and helping each athlete reach his/her potential in their chosen path in life.

### ***Develop respect for sports and sportsmanship***

We strive to teach our players and coaches to compete fairly, to respect the opposition and to show humility when winning and integrity at all time. Our philosophy is that winning at all cost is not an acceptable mindset and gamesmanship is not tolerated.

### ***Individual Development***

Our philosophy is based on what is in the best interest of the individual athlete. This is done through maintaining a healthy balance between individual development and team building. The team is there to serve the needs of the players and no athlete should be expected to sacrifice his/her potential for the sake of the team. This does not preclude the fostering of team ethos and team spirit but the team dynamics should provide the platform for developing interpersonal relationships and social skills rather than surrender individual creativity and ambition. A youth team is just one temporary step in life's ladder, not the top of the ladder. Tomorrow, the athlete will be part of another team.

### ***Intrinsic Motivation, Enjoyment and Natural Ability***

Our club's philosophy is centered on the belief that athletes can only attain excellence when they are intrinsically motivated and are enjoying their experience. With children, enjoyment and

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commitment are inter-dependent and one cannot exist without the other. There are no guarantees for success and, ultimately, it depends to a large extent on the player himself/herself. We recognize that it takes a combination of hard work, strong personal traits and natural athletic ability to reach excellence. But inspiring players to become intrinsically motivated and measure themselves against high standards will be a core objective of our club.

### ***Value of Hard Work***

We believe in instilling a strong work ethics in our players. There are no shortcuts in life and talent alone is not enough to reach one's potential. It must be coupled with hard work and perseverance.

### ***Playing Philosophy***

Our club believes in playing open, creative, attacking soccer, where players are encouraged to express themselves. Ball possession is emphasized, with attacks built up from the back and players interchanging their positions, as dictated by the game. Aimless kicking, kick-and-chase, and over reliance on physical play are discouraged. Our teams will exhibit good support play around the ball and patience and composure on the ball.

### ***Staff in Harmony with the Club's Philosophy***

The youth club should foster a positive learning environment in which the technical and administrative staff creates a supportive, player-centered program. Each member of the staff strives to work in harmony with the overall club philosophy. The staff should be highly qualified and include all the diverse disciplines necessary for a sport academy. The staff should work as a team with the single-minded purpose of looking after the welfare of the players.

## **SAMPLE: YOUTH CLUB CURRICULUM**

Our club recognizes that an integrated, club-wide curriculum is the key for optimum player development. There must be a line that connects U-6 to U-19, a line that everyone in the club understands and follows. Without a curriculum, the player development process becomes disjointed, is difficult to monitor and evaluate, and players graduate with skill gaps. A deficit in one stage of the development process will tend to inhibit acquisition of more complex skills at a later stage.

Our club will focus on developing skills that go beyond the mere concepts of attack and defense. It's just as important to develop problem solving skills, communication skills, leadership skills, and foster a positive self image, a natural curiosity and an independent, inquisitive mind. This is accomplished by creating an integrated club wide, age specific curriculum that addresses progressively the following areas:

### **Character Development**

1. Develop self confidence.
2. Demonstrate the value of sportsmanship and humility.

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3. Teach the value of hard work and perseverance.
4. Promote leadership and taking responsibility for one's actions.
5. Teach respect for mentors and elders as well as opponents.
6. Promote academic education and school study.

### **Soccer Specific Skills**

1. Teach individual technique and develop a comfort level with the ball.
2. Develop 1v1 skills that allow players to dominate opponents and win individual duels.
3. Develop tactical problem solving skills.
4. Develop creativity, versatility and adaptability.
5. Develop the ability to play in various playing systems.
6. Develop a self-reliant player who can make his/her own decisions on the field.

### **Fitness and Health**

1. Develop a progressive program for long term fitness.
2. Develop the core soccer fitness needs of speed, agility, strength and stamina.
3. Teach and promote a healthy lifestyle with proper balance.
4. Develop a lifetime commitment to healthy living.
5. Teach nutrition and self-care.

## **SAMPLE: CURRICULUM FOR SOCCER SPECIFIC SKILLS**

### **OBJECTIVES OF SOCCER SKILLS CURRICULUM**

Our curriculum is based on the Building Block concept, where players are taught age and level specific skills in a progressive sequence. One of the key objectives of the curriculum is to provide a strong foundation with a step by step, progressive plan that enables players to achieve mastery of the ball and develop the tools and skills needed to play at a high level. Skills from one age group are utilized to build more advanced skills later in the continuum.

Although soccer is a team game, its flow is characterized as a succession of individual duels. Team success hinges on the ability of players to win these individual duels. Hence, the ultimate aim is to develop players who can dominate their opponents and win the majority of their individual duels. Players who can dominate opponents are able to play at a high level, in any system and any formation, and are the type of players sought by top level coaches.

### **PRINCIPLES OF PROGRESSION**

Players need technical, physical, tactical and psychological tools to win their duels. The technical tools are the foundation of soccer skills. *Technique* is the body's mechanical execution of ball manipulation, such as receiving, dribbling, passing or shooting the ball.

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Technique leads to skill. *Skill* is the ability to select and execute the right technique under pressure of the game. So, technique has to do with ‘how to’ while skill has to do with ‘when and why’.

However, before a player can learn soccer techniques and skills, he/she must learn to control his body’s movement. Players must first develop the full range of *locomotor* (running, jumping, hopping, turning, etc) and *nonlocomotor* (pushing, pulling, bending, twisting, etc) movement skills before they can become adept at *manipulative* skills (such as propelling or receiving the ball).

Therefore, the club’s curriculum starts at U-6 with teaching locomotor and nonlocomotor movement along with simple ball manipulative skills. Additionally, motor skills acquisition typically progresses from gross motor skills to fine motor skills. *Gross motor skills* refer to movements of the entire body or large segments of the body, while *fine motor skills* refer to movement requiring precision and dexterity, such as manipulative skills. Manipulative skills are basically the eye-to-hand and eye-to-foot coordination.

The SKILL curriculum therefore should progress from *gross motor skills* (locomotor and nonlocomotor) to *fine motor skills* to *soccer technique* to *soccer skills* within the U-6 through U-18 continuum.

### THE SKILLS PROGRESSION TABLE

In the Building Block approach, there are 4 main phases of **individual** player’s development:

1. **Body & Ball Mastery Phase:** Player and his/her ball (ages 4-16)
2. **Individual Duel Phase:** Player versus opponent (ages 6-18)
3. **Partner Phase:** Player and partner versus opponent (ages 8-18)
4. **Team Phase:** Player uses ball mastery to help team (ages 12-18)

The starting age for each phase depend on the natural ability and learning skills of the player and can vary from those recommended above. But failure to properly address each phase or skipping a phase or ‘fast tracking’ players will result in under-developed individuals.

Although each progressive phase starts at a different age, it’s important to note that the four phases eventually overlap. Once they start to overlap, one should not focus on a single phase at the expense of the other phases. The curriculum should allow for work on phases one, two and three to continue well into the teens and constantly be reinforced, refined and not be neglected once the Team Oriented Phase kicks in.

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## SKILLS PROGRESSION TABLE

Age	Body & Ball Mastery Phase	Individual Duel Phase	Partner Phase	Team Phase
U-6	<p><b>Movement Education</b> (Running, Stopping, Balance, Jumping, Hopping, Turning, Skipping, Rolling, etc) Develop ball sense through <b>Dribbling</b></p>	-----	----	----
U-8	<p><b>Movement Education</b> (Same as U-6 plus Pulling, Pushing, Stretching, Bending, Twisting, etc) <b>Manipulative Skills</b> (Throwing &amp; Catching rolling balls, Bouncing balls) <b>Dribbling, Juggling, Passing</b> ground balls, <b>Shooting</b></p>	<b>Dribble 1v1</b>	<b>2v0, 2v1</b> Cooperative and Competitive activities where two players work together to manipulate the ball	-----
U-10	<p><b>Movement Education</b> (Same as U-6/8 plus Running backwards, Running laterally, Agility, Flexibility, Diving, Twirling, Shuffling, Leaping) <b>Manipulative Skills</b> (Throwing &amp; Catching ground, bouncing and air balls <b>Feints and Dribbling, Receiving</b> with <i>deception</i>, <b>Juggling, Passing</b> (ground and air balls 10-25 yards, inside and outside of foot), <b>Shooting</b> (instep drive), <b>Heading</b></p>	<p><b>Dribble 1v1</b> Attacking skills: <b>Feints, Shielding</b>, Defending skills: <b>Marking, Jockeying, Block tackling</b></p>	<p><b>2v1 and 2v2</b> Attacking skills: <b>Support</b> (angle, position, open body to field) <b>Wall Pass, Overlap</b> Defending skills: <b>Marking</b> (pressure), <b>Positioning</b> (cover), <b>Intercepting</b> (reading cues &amp; anticipation)</p>	<b>Two line Interaction</b> , Playing through The lines

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Age	Body & Ball Mastery Phase	Individual Duel Phase	Partner Phase	Team Phase
U-12	<p><b>Movement Education</b> (Same as before, but increase complexity and utilize more agility equipment) <b>Feints and Dribbling, Shielding, Receiving</b> with <i>deception</i>, <b>Juggling, Passing</b> within 10-40 yards range (inside &amp; outside of foot, bending passes), <b>Chipping, Shooting</b> (driving, bending), <b>Volleying, Crossing, Heading</b></p>	<p><b>Dribble 1v1</b> Attacking skills: <b>Feints, Shielding</b>, Defending skills: <b>Marking, Jockeying, Block tackling, Slide tackling</b></p>	<p><b>2v1 and 2v2</b> Attacking skills: <b>Support</b> (angle, position, open body to field) <b>Wall Pass, Overlap, Crossovers, Off-the-Ball Running</b> to Destroy Cover and create 1v1. Defending skills: <b>Marking</b> (pressure), <b>Positioning</b> (cover), <b>Intercepting</b> (reading cues &amp; anticipation)</p>	<p><b>3v3 and 4v4</b> Attacking skills: <b>Team shape</b> (depth &amp; width), <b>Support angles, Triangles, Off-the-ball Runs, Switching Point Of Attack</b> Defending skills: <b>Marking, Positioning, Intercepting</b></p> <p><b>8v8</b> <b>Three line Interaction</b> Playing through The lines <b>Zonal Defending</b></p>
U-14	<p><b>Movement Education</b> (Same as before, but increase complexity and utilize more agility equipment) <b>Feints and Dribbling, Shielding, Receiving</b> with <i>deception</i>, <b>Juggling, Passing</b> Within 10-50 yards range (inside &amp; outside of foot, bending passes), <b>Chipping, Shooting</b> (driving, bending), <b>Volleying, Crossing, Heading</b></p>	<p><b>Dribble 1v1</b> Attacking skills: <b>Feints, Shielding</b>, Defending skills: <b>Marking, Jockeying, Block tackling, Slide tackling</b></p>	<p><b>2v1 and 2v2</b> Attacking skills: <b>Support</b> (angle, position, open body to field) <b>Wall Pass, Overlap, Crossovers, Off-the-Ball Running</b> to Destroy Cover and create 1v1. Defending skills: <b>Marking</b> (pressure), <b>Positioning</b> (cover), <b>Intercepting</b> (reading cues &amp; anticipation)</p>	<p><b>4v4 &amp; 5v5</b> Attacking skills: <b>Team Shape</b> (depth &amp; width), <b>Support angles, Triangles, Transition, Off-the-ball Runs, Flank Play, Possession Rhythm, Switching Point Of Attack</b> Defending skills: <b>Marking, Positioning, Intercepting, Compactness, Balance, Transition</b></p> <p><b>11v11</b> <b>Three line Interaction</b> Playing through The lines <b>Zonal Defending</b></p>

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Age	Body & Ball Mastery Phase	Individual Duel Phase	Partner Phase	Team Phase
U-16	<p><b>Movement Education</b>  <b>Speed &amp; Agility</b>                      (Same as before, but increase complexity and utilize more agility equipment)  <b>Feints and Dribbling, Shielding, Receiving</b> with <i>deception</i>,  <b>Juggling, Passing</b>                      Within 10-60 yards range (inside &amp; outside of foot, bending passes), <b>Chipping, Shooting</b> (driving, bending), <b>Volleying, Crossing, Heading</b></p>	<p><b>Dribble 1v1, 1v2</b>                      Attacking skills:  <b>Feints, Shielding,</b>                      Defending skills:  <b>Marking, Jockeying, Double Marking, Block tackling, Slide tackling</b></p>	<p><b>2v2 and 2v3</b>                      Attacking skills:  <b>Support</b> (angle, position, open body to field)  <b>Wall Pass, Overlap, Crossovers, Off-the-Ball Running</b> to Destroy Cover and create 1v1.                      Defending skills:  <b>Marking</b> (pressure),  <b>Positioning</b> (cover),  <b>Intercepting</b> (reading cues &amp; anticipation)</p>	<p><b>5v5 and 6v6</b>                      Attacking skills:  <b>Team shape Support angles, Triangles, Transition, Off-the-ball Runs, Flank Play, Possession Rhythm, Switching Point Of Attack</b>                      Defending skills:  <b>Marking, Positioning, Intercepting, Compactness, Balance, Pressing, Transition</b>  <b>11v11</b>  <b>Three line Interaction</b>                      Playing through The lines  <b>Zonal Defending</b></p>
U-18	<p><b>Power, Speed &amp; Agility</b>                      (Same as before, but increase complexity and utilize more agility equipment)    <b>Technical Maintenance</b></p>	<p><b>Dribble 1v1, 1v2</b>                      Attacking skills:  <b>Feints, Shielding,</b>                      Defending skills:  <b>Marking, Jockeying, Double Marking, Block tackling, Slide tackling</b></p>	<p><b>2v3, 3v3 and 3v4</b>                      Attacking skills:  <b>Support</b> (angle, position, open body to field)  <b>Wall Pass, Overlap, Crossovers, Off-the-Ball Running</b> to destroy Cover and create 1v1.                      Defending skills:  <b>Marking</b> (pressure),  <b>Positioning</b> (cover),  <b>Intercepting</b> (reading cues &amp; anticipation)</p>	<p><b>8v8 and 11v11</b>                      Attacking skills:  <b>Team shape, Support, Triangles, Transition, Off-the-ball Runs, Wide Play, Possession Rhythm, Switching Play</b>                      Defending skills:  <b>Marking, Positioning, Intercepting, Compactness, Balance, Pressing, Transition</b>  <b>Functional Roles, Three line Interactn</b>                      Playing through The lines  <b>Zonal Defending, High Pressing</b></p>

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## FINAL THOUGHTS ON IMPLEMENTING A CLUB CURRICULUM

The role of the Club DOC is crucial in the implementation process. He has to get all the coaching staff to buy into the philosophy and curriculum. Some team coaches might resist change if they are set in their ways regarding their coaching style or practice routine, especially if they have been successful in the past. Some coaches will resent being monitored by the DOC or might just feel uncomfortable being evaluated.

The key for the DOC is to convince the staff that the curriculum and the associated staff training will not only improve the team performances but will benefit the coaches as well. The implementation process will expand their teaching and analytical skills. The DOC needs to create a club atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation among the staff. At the same time, it must be made clear that the coaching staff is a **team** with a common goal of taking the club to the next level and anyone who is not willing to work in tandem with the overall club's goals will not remain on staff for long.

With the advent of technology, the Club DOC can use many tools to train his/her staff effectively. There are internet based sites and software programs that can be used to film and analyze practice sessions and games. Some of these technologies are relatively inexpensive so cost would not be an issue.

The Club DOC can organize weekly or monthly staff meetings where power point slides and video clips of practices and games showing both desirable and undesirable performances can provide visual clarity. Most coaches dread staff meetings since such meetings are often spent dealing with administrative, logistical and parental issues and rarely venture into meaningful discussions on player development. Coaches regard such meetings as a waste of time and a bore. A Club DOC who can turn staff meetings into insightful and educational sessions that give coaches practical and clearly defined coaching tools will not have any problems convincing his staff to attend meetings and implement his concepts. They will quickly see the value.

The DOC should monitor the team practices and observe games and maintain written reports on the progress of each team and performance of all coaches. Each coach should be required to design a seasonal plan and individual practice plans and submit a report after each game. The game report should explain what the team was trying to accomplish in the game and evaluate results. Every game should have a main theme or objective other than just to work hard, play well and try to win. The theme should be related to the overall curriculum and specific goals for the team. For example, a team might use a game, or a series of games, for learning how to switch the point of attack. The roles of the back line and midfielders in switching the ball from flank to flank would be rehearsed in practice and the games will be used to gauge progress and evaluate transfer of learning from practice to game. Without a curriculum and a seasonal plan with specific goals, coaches tend to go from game to game in a reactive mode, trying to address everything but, in the end, fixing nothing.

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## E. EVALUATING PLAYER/TEAM PERFORMANCES

References were made in an earlier section on the importance of setting long term goals for the club. The long term goals set by the club's Board should be related to the club's mission and vision and long term strategic planning and will likely concentrate on financial long term stability, marketing and fundraising projects, community based projects, or facility development projects. At the same time, the DOC and the Coaching Committee should develop their own set of long term goals, which will focus specifically on player development. As discussed earlier, game results should not be the main measuring stick since results on their own can distort real progress and disguise shortcomings until it is too late.

Attempting to evaluate the progress of players individually, as well as collective team performances, is not an easy task. It is a task complicated by the facts that player development is a long term process and that players' performances do not improve in a steady linear incline. The other problem with evaluation of performance is the subjective nature of interpretation and variability in coaches' opinions. The challenge for the Club DOC is to devise a system for evaluation that is consistent and compatible with the curriculum and fully understood by the staff. This section provides one example of how the DOC can approach this challenge to achieve technical performance goals.

Most coaches observing youth soccer played at different ages and levels would notice the manner in which players and teams mature gradually from a primitive playing style of 'kick and chase' to a more controlled style with more thought and precision as they get older and technically more polished. Players typically start their soccer journey at a young age with limited skills and the goal is to produce a quality player by the time they turn eighteen and leave for college. A Club DOC must have an idea in mind of what the 'complete' soccer player should look like at eighteen and should be able to define it in concrete terms. The DOC should also have a clear vision of how he wants the teams at his club to play. This approach establishes a starting point of reference (at the youngest age) and an end point of reference (at eighteen) for both the players individually and the teams. All that remains is to add a few intermediate milestones or steps in the ladder on the way to the 'finished product' at the age of eighteen and we now have a 'progress chart' that can be used to evaluate players and teams. Below is an example of defined steps or milestones along the developmental path in terms of the team's performance:

### **STAGE I: KICK AND CHASE**

This is the most basic, primitive playing style where players simply run up to the ball and kick it hard towards the other teams' goal and chase it. Whoever gets to the ball first kicks it again towards the other teams' goal. There is no possession or rhythm to the game, just helter-skelter kicking and running and charging about. There is a high level of randomness to the play since all the misplaced kicks make it hard to predict where the ball will end up next. This is the type of play most commonly seen in 'Recreational' soccer at young ages U-6 through U-10.

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## **STAGE II: DROP, KICK AND CHASE**

As players get more experience playing 'kick and chase', they start to figure out that sometimes it's better to pass the ball to someone else who is better positioned to kick the ball forward. Examples of that are players who are facing their own goal, or players who are under aggressive pressure from opponents. This playing style is slightly more thoughtful than just kick and chase, but the overall flow of play is still the same frantic kicking and running, with the occasional 'drop' pass, followed immediately by a long kick up the field.

## **STAGE III: PASS FORWARD AND MOVE FORWARD**

As players improve technically and watch more professional soccer, they start to try and play a more controlled soccer and begin to learn passing the ball. Whenever a player has the ball, he/she looks for teammates to pass to. But at this stage, the choice of passing is still mostly forward, and the quality of passing and control is still poor. This results in frequent losses of possession as players play inaccurate passes or pass to the wrong player. Also, players have not learned yet how to support each other and the player with the ball is often without any easy close support since teammates still tend to run away from the ball calling for and expecting a long pass. Still no rhythm to the play, still frantic soccer, with loss of possession every second or third pass.

## **STAGE IV: DROP, SWITCH AND GO FORWARD**

As players become smarter and technically stronger, they start to realize that sometimes it's better to switch the point of attack to an area of the field less congested. At this stage, players have the awareness of space and the ability to pass the ball accurately over medium and long distance and start to play more back passes and lateral passes in order to switch to the other side. Players now develop the habit of playing it back when under pressure and the player receiving the drop pass will often look to switch with a lateral pass to the other side. But after a switch, the tendency to go forward is still strong and players will play the ball forward even if it's not the best option. This stage starts to look like sophisticated soccer but the youthful eagerness to go forward is still the prevailing instinct and the rhythm of possession is still not mature. Play is still executed at a constantly high speed and few players are able to slow down and put their foot on the ball and vary the tempo. Deception and creativity is still missing for the most part.

## **STAGE V: BALL CIRCULATION**

This is the most advanced stage of play. At this stage, the players have the composure on the ball, the vision, and the ability to slow the play down, to pass the ball around with one and two touch tempo and maintain a rhythm of possession. Many possessions involve a sequence of probing passes, back passes and lateral passes, as the ball is switched from flank to flank in search of space and patient build up. Ball possession is valued and the players' technique is of a high enough level that teams can keep the ball for long periods with a sequence of 5-20 passes on a regular basis and multiple switches in the same possession. This is the style of play of the top teams in the world, not just at full level, but also at the youth level.

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Stage V should theoretically be the goal of a club DOC, to have the top teams at his/her club play with possession and build up from the back by the time the teams are at the U-18 age, if not earlier. The DOC can use the stages described above to evaluate each team in his club and determine at which stage each team is playing. The goal is to train each team and help it progress through the stages until they get to stage V.

The process will require staff meetings to get everyone on the same page regarding the definition, standards and criteria for each stage. This is where visual aids and showing clips that define the characteristics of each stage can be used to great effect.

It's important to impress upon the staff the limitations of playing at the lower stages (Stage I through IV). With the lower stages, success depends to a large extent on the other teams making mistakes. Playing kick and chase or playing with long balls will only work if the opponents cannot handle it. If opponents have inferior athleticism, or lose concentration often or are disorganized, then playing kick and chase might bring a result. But if the opponents are equal to the task and can handle such attacks, results will not come and there is no Plan B. However, success when playing at Stage V, the possession game, depends mainly on your own team's performance. If the team keeps possession well and varies the attacks, it doesn't matter how good the opponents are, results will be positive more often than not.

Once everyone buys into the concept and is properly trained to assess the team performance in the context of the Stages, the whole staff will speak the same language and focus on the same training priorities. This will realign the whole club's technical focus on the player development *process* rather than game results.

The DOC will ensure that each coach and his assigned team is the right fit by making sure the coach has the ability to take the team to the next stage. The DOC can also use this approach to evaluate his coaching staff. Coaches who aspire to take charge of a top team in the club must demonstrate the ability to help the team into the next stage. Winning tournaments is no longer the main criteria since teams can win trophies playing 'kick and chase' if their opponents are weaker.

Each team can be evaluated in terms of their current playing Stage, how many of the players in the team are able to play at a higher Stage, what areas need improvements, individual player assessments, etc. This creates a road map for each team and identifies the skills each player and each team are lacking that require work. This tool helps in designing the seasonal plan for each team.

In summary, a sound strategy is to start with defining performance benchmarks, setting long term goals, designing a club wide curriculum and from that creating seasonal plans for each team. This method allows even the rookie coaches to be productive. Without a systematic approach, each coach blazes his own trail and pulls his team in a different direction. The result is a haphazard development in bits and pieces with glaring skill gaps that are never addressed.

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

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## A. GENERAL OVERVIEW AND CHALLENGES

The Recreational Program is essentially the first soccer experience for most players. It is also the program where most of the players will remain for their whole playing career. The absolutely most important objective of the Recreational Program is to instill a love of the game within each player, so that every player returns the following season. To succeed in wooing every player back, the experience must be a positive one.

By far the largest number of active youth players in this country is recreational. In fact, the local and state run recreational programs in America are arguably the most organized youth soccer programs in the world. Our recreational administrators and coaches are dedicated, intelligent volunteers, many of whom are college-educated. Our infrastructure is excellent and our resources are limitless. But the ‘most organized’ doesn’t necessarily mean the ‘best program’. If there is one glaring weakness in our recreational programs, it is the lack of people with life-long soccer experience, especially a technical experience. Most of the technical expertise is concentrated at the competitive level. The recreational programs are thus left in the hands of willing, enthusiastic volunteers, but ultimately with little or no soccer background.

The generic problems seen in recreational programs across the state, and the country, are repeatedly the same, and are predictably related to the fact that a strong technical supervision is missing. The most common problems observed are:

- 1) Too much emphasis on ‘booting’ the ball aimlessly forward at the U-6 through U-10 age groups, which is not conducive to skill development.
- 2) Too much emphasis on results, especially at the U-10 and U-12 level.
- 3) Players, good enough for the competitive level, kept at the recreational level by coaches who want to win.
- 4) Parental behavior on the sidelines. Too loud, too overbearing, too much. Young players are not given the opportunity to grow out of their dependency on the adults.
- 5) The 11v11 game is too difficult for U-12 recreational players who, for the most part, do not have the technical skills or the athleticism to deal with the demands of 11-a-side. They need to play small-sided soccer.
- 6) Clubs having difficulties recruiting volunteer coaches.
- 7) Coaches don’t have enough variety of activities to make the practices fun and effective.
- 8) Pre-game warm-ups are very poor, and do not prepare the players for the demands of the game.
- 9) Too many substitutions during games kill the flow and make games helter-skelter.
- 10) Drafting of teams at the recreational level is a problem at some clubs, with some coaches manipulating the system to stack teams.

This chapter addresses these and other issues and provides appropriate recommendations. If there is one message that should be heard loud and clear, it is that club Directors of Coaching

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must get more involved by overseeing and monitoring the technical aspects of the recreational programs. What we do with the 4 to 9 year old players has a direct and profound impact on our competitive programs.

### **Playing Format**

The vast majority of clubs have adopted Georgia Soccer's mandated small-sided playing rules for the U-6, U-8, and U-10 ages. The premise that players develop faster and experience more enjoyment in small-sided games is universally accepted and proven. Clubs should also consider playing reduced numbers at the older recreational age groups whenever possible. Please refer to the age specific page for further recommendations and information on playing format.

### **Drafting Teams**

The basic guidelines for forming recreational teams are that there are no tryouts and no one is cut, and that teams will be evenly balanced. **It is strongly recommended that the teams should be mixed after every season up to the U-10 age, and mixed every year at the U-12 and older ages, and that the teams' draft process be overseen by an impartial, club-appointed person.** Forming new teams every season serves a number of useful purposes. First of all, it discourages coaches from recruiting the stronger players and manipulating the system as they seek to build a 'super' team. Secondly, it prevents coaches from becoming overly possessive of their players. This will make it easier for the better players to try out for the competitive teams without feeling guilty or pressured otherwise by their recreational coach. Thirdly, it avoids the staleness and boredom associated with doing the same drills under the same coach for too long. After about a year, most parent coaches lose their impact, as players start to tune them out. And lastly, it eliminates the build up of rivalries between teams and the 'us versus them' mentality, which can sometimes breed animosity between players and parents of opposite teams. When players acquire new teammates every season, everyone becomes a friend and the atmosphere at games is much more relaxed.

There will undoubtedly be resistance to this recommendation. Some parent coaches will argue that their child is happier playing with players he/she is familiar with. But kids make friends easily so this shouldn't really be an issue. Another objection might point to the need to buy new uniforms every season. There is an easy solution for this problem. Clubs can buy the same uniform for all the teams and make them reversible, so that players can wear the appropriate side for their team and never have to buy another jersey. Or clubs can distribute bibs (pennies) at games. In fact, buying the same jersey for all the players helps the club create a club identity and move away from the 'team' concept and eliminate all the baggage associated with the team-oriented culture. Experience has shown that clubs that relent to coaches' demands and allow recreational teams to stay together, end up with bigger problems down the road. The following example is typical of such problems: A recreational U-8 team is allowed to stay together into their U-9 year. The team is winning within the recreational program. When the team moves into the U-10 age group, they are still together. Meanwhile, at the U-10 Select Tryouts, only 7 players show up and the club is forced to cancel its U-10 select program. It turns out that none

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of the players from the recreational team that was allowed to stay together came to the tryouts even though many of them were good enough for select soccer. The recreational team's coach convinced all the players to stay together at the recreational level. But the problem is that, since most of the good players have left the U-10 recreational program, this team has no competition and is beating everyone handily. So they petition the club to allow them to move as a team to the select level. The end result of all this is that a coach and a few parents have managed to destroy the club's U-10 select program and undermine the whole select tryout process, all in order to satisfy their own personal agendas. If clubs stand firm and hold their grounds on these issues, the natural resistance to change will only be encountered in the first year of implementation. After that, everyone will see the benefits and changing teams every season will become an accepted club policy that no one questions.

### **Recruiting and Educating Coaches**

Convincing parents to volunteer to coach is always a challenge. There is no quick and easy way to find willing coaches. But the following recommendations should help the recruiting process.

***Improve organization and communication*** – Parents will be more inclined to volunteer if they see that the club is well organized. When all the logistical details are taken care of efficiently, such as team assignments, game scheduling, practice field allocation, uniforms distribution, productive and informative coaches meetings, parent meetings, a regularly mailed and informative newsletter, and decent facilities, parents can be persuaded to coach. If the prospective parent coach sees that the club has an established support system that will provide the necessary resources and not abandon him to deal with the team problems on his own, he/she is more likely to volunteer.

***Offer Clinics and Coaching Courses*** – Many parents are reluctant to volunteer because they know very little about coaching soccer. By offering clinics and coaching courses, the club can alleviate their anxiety. The club can show the parents that the course manuals form an excellent source of material, specifically designed for rookie coaches and include enough practice activities for an entire season. The club DOC can inspire and motivate volunteer coaches by working with them and setting an example for quality sessions. Many clubs find a way to put their coaches through a clinic by holding mandatory coaches meeting to distribute team uniforms or game schedule and piggyback a clinic onto the meeting.

***Utilize the resources of the State Association*** – The state association offers free clinics throughout the year. Contact the State Director of Coaching (State DOC) to set up a series of clinics. The State DOC is also available to visit clubs, meet with the club officers, meet with the parents, evaluate club needs and offer advice on all player development/coaching issues. Take advantage of their expertise.

***Assign age group Commissioners*** – The club should appoint a Commissioner for each age group. Ideally, these Commissioners will stay permanent at the same level and not move up with the teams. For example, the U-6 Commissioner will not become next year's U-8 Commissioner but will always work with the U-6's. This will improve the administration of

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each program as these Commissioners become experts at dealing with age-specific problems and their accumulated experience will not be lost. The prospective parent coaches will be happy to know that there is an ‘old head’ available to guide them through the start up operation.

The duties of the age group Commissioner could include recruiting coaches and helping the DOC with training them, organizing clinics, organizing parent meetings for his/her age group, monitoring the practices and games, and acting as a field marshal during games and tournaments. The Commissioner can also help coaches deal with parental complaints. Any time a parent and the coach cannot resolve an issue, the coach can refer the parent to the Commissioner. This again alleviates coaches’ anxiety about having to deal with difficult parents on their own.

Smaller clubs can assign Commissioners for multiple age groups. For example, clubs with less than 5 teams per age group could assign a combined U-6/U-8 Commissioner. Bigger clubs should be able to appoint one person for each age group. All the Commissioners could report to the Club Officer in charge of the Recreational Program and/or to the Club Director of Coaching (Club DOC).

The Georgia Soccer rules mandate that every recreational coach must have a coaching license, and that the required minimum license depends on the age group as follows:

<u>Age group</u>	<u>Minimum License</u>
U-6 & U-8	‘G’ Certificate
U-10 & U-12	‘F’ Certificate
U-14 and older	‘Rec E’ or ‘E’ Certificate

Coaches have a 6-month grace period to attain the minimum license. The state association also has a waiver policy that allows coaches to start at the course level that is most appropriate for their players. For example, the coach of a U-14 recreational team can skip the ‘G’ and ‘F’ courses and enroll directly into a ‘Rec E’ or an ‘E’ course.

**Many small clubs have difficulties filling the classes and meeting the minimum required attendance to hold a class. Subsequently their courses repeatedly get cancelled and their coaches cannot get certified. The state association’s Coaching Department will generally co-operate with the small clubs to find solutions to this problem.** One solution is to combine the ‘G’ and the ‘F’ courses into one class. Another solution is for the club to bring players for the field sessions when there are not enough coaches in attendance. Also, the ‘G’ and the ‘F’ courses can be spread out into a series of short sessions scheduled over a period of time, say 2 hours per session. Please contact the State DOC to discuss the best solution for your club. The State DOC is committed to helping your coaches get the required education and certification.

Clubs who do not attach a high priority to coaching education are doing their members a disservice and are hurting their own long-term growth potential. One cannot over emphasize the

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important contribution that coaching education brings in creating an enjoyable and fulfilling experience for the players. Clubs have a responsibility to make sure that the coaches, in whose hands the players are entrusted, are as knowledgeable and well prepared as can be. If a coach never gets an opportunity to observe a quality practice session, the chances are he/she will never learn how to conduct one. Informed coaches are better able to understand, develop and challenge players. Uninformed coaches could de-motivate players and contribute towards player attrition. Many coaches themselves drop out of coaching due to frustration born out of lack of knowledge. **Clubs should remind their coaches that if they are not certified, they are contravening Georgia Soccer rules and are subject to suspension.** Even more important is the club's liability in the context of risk management issues. Clubs, whose coaches are unlicensed, stand the risk of a major lawsuit filed by parents of an injured player. The coaching course curricula include sections on teaching proper and safe techniques, care and prevention of injuries, and supervision of children. **If a coach is found negligent and the club is shown to be lax on coaching education, it could be held liable.**

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## B. AGE GROUPS U-6 AND U-8

### **Playing Format**

U-6: Play 3 v 3 on a field approximately 15 x 25 yards. Game duration 30-40 minutes.

U-8: Play 4 v 4 on a field approximately 20 x 40 yards. Game duration 40-50 minutes.

Refer to the Georgia Soccer Rules and Regulations for the complete playing rules.

**Absolutely no scores should be kept and no standings posted.**

### **Use of Goalkeepers**

Using goalkeepers is not recommended for these age groups. The rationale is simple - **no need to have keepers if players are not technically able to shoot.** Players of this age cannot maintain concentration for long and will become bored and fidgety if made to stand alone in front of goal while their teammates are free to chase the ball. Also, the modern keeper needs to be able to receive and pass the ball just like a field player. However, clubs can introduce goalkeepers at the U-8 spring season in order to help in the transition to U-10, where keepers will be required.

Another reason for not using a keeper is that the player chosen to be the keeper is usually instructed to remain inside the goal and is not given the chance to be part of the action. This restriction is counterproductive in the long run, as it denies the budding keeper a chance to learn how and when to come out and collect loose balls in his own half – the essence of goalkeeping. If coaches won't allow the keepers the freedom to roam in front of the goal area, what is the point in having one? Making the keeper stand in goal is like adding a third post to the goal, a situation that is devoid of any redeeming long-term benefits. If coaches feel that your typical U-8 player is not ready to be a roaming keeper than they shouldn't use any keeper at all.

If coaches insist on using keepers at the U-8 level, they must allow them and even encourage them, to come out of the goal area and learn to be 'connected' to the rest of the team. One way to do this is to use the following rule for incorporating keepers: Mark a line across the field parallel to the goal line, about 6 yards away from the goal line, to designate a goal area. The player on the defending team who is closest to the goal is allowed to use his/her hands inside the goal area. This way, there is no one specific player assigned to be a keeper and all of them get a taste of playing keeper.

Some clubs not only refrain from using keepers at U-8, but also have a rule that, for a goal to count, all the players on the attacking team must be in the other team's half. This rule helps teach everyone to move up and down the field as a unit and ingrains good habits in future defenders. This rule, it is hoped, might eradicate the pathetic sight we often encounter in U-10 play, where the defenders are standing rooted close to their goal, while the ball and the action are far away, deep in the other team's half.

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### Squad Size

When forming teams, **the rule of thumb is: avoid having more players on the bench than are playing on the field at any time.** For example, if a U-8 team playing 4v4 has 9 or 10 players, the player rotation becomes awkward and they don't get enough playing time. This means that U-6 teams should not have more than 6 players while U-8 teams not have more than 8 players.

**If squad sizes are uneven (some teams show up with fewer players while other teams come with too many), clubs can create a process (organized by the age group commissioners or field marshals) by which the larger teams lend one or two players to the smaller teams for the game.** We realize that parents are conditioned to the 'team' concept and the thought of lending one of their own players to the other team will meet with resistance by some. As mentioned before, some of the unwanted features of the 'team' mentality prevalent in youth sport should be downplayed in favor of a 'club' mentality and 'player development comes first' approach.

### Volume of Activities

It's always a tricky problem to recommend how often young players should train and play, especially when dealing with beginners. Every child is different. One six-year-old might want to play soccer every day, while another will be satisfied with just once a week. While at the select level players are often made to play too many games, at the recreational level that is usually not an issue. If anything, many recreational players do not get enough soccer activity. **Clubs should create their recreational programs with some flexibility in order to meet every player's appetite for the game. This can be accomplished by combining the regularly scheduled team training with supplemental, club-organized player clinics.** Players can choose to attend just the team training or, if they are really keen, they can also profit from the extra clinics.

Supplemental clinics at the U-6 and U-8 age groups are highly recommended, but they must be properly organized by experienced coaches who understand the developmental needs of these age groups. Exposing young players to experienced coaches once a week in addition to the regular team practice presents a number of desirable advantages. The variety factor inherent with working under different coaches is one advantage. The volunteer team coaches are not saddled with the burden of running more than one practice per week. The volunteer coaches can learn from the more experienced coaches by attending these clinics. In fact, the volunteer coaches should be required to attend the supplemental clinics for their own team. And lastly, the experienced coaches can ensure that the players get the age-appropriate training they need.

The supplemental clinics should be conducted by the Club DOC, or by the age group Commissioner. These clinics could take a variety of formats. Many clubs use the 'follow-the-lead' format, where all the teams show up with their coaches at one location and the clinician in charge demonstrates each activity to the volunteer coaches and then watches them do it with

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their team. The table below summarizes the recommended weekly volume of activities. The practices should be no more than 60 minutes long. The supplemental clinics should be optional to the players.

Age	Team Practice Per Week	Supplemental Clinics Per Week (optional)	Games Per Week	Total Games Per Year
U-6	1	1	1	20-25
U-8	1 or 2	1	1	20-25

### **Role of the Club DOC or the Coaching Committee**

The Traditional approach toward training the U-6 and U-8 age groups is to recruit parent coaches, put them through a couple of pre-season coaching clinics, hand them some form of a coaching manual, and send them loose to fend for themselves. The rationale behind this approach is that all the players really need is a ‘facilitator’ rather than a ‘coach’, and the more experienced coaches should be left to focus on the older age groups where players need more tactical training. In the writer’s opinion, this approach is extremely misguided and is actually contributing in no small measure to a stifling effect on players’ achieving full soccer potential all across the spectrum, from recreational to select. The developmental phase that U-6/U-8’s undergo is absolutely the most crucial phase! The rate of motor skill development of 4 to 8 year olds (the starting point) has a strong correlation with the end result. The quality of the motor skills acquired at the starting point has a big influence on the final level of soccer potential attained by each player. Some components of soccer skills, if not practiced and honed properly at the starting point, can never be fully mastered at the later ages.

The vast majority of parent coaches are well meaning. They generally do a good job of creating a fun experience for the players. The problem is that these parent coaches are simply not qualified to design the right training program for the 4 to 8 year-olds. They are focusing on the wrong skills and are not aware that what they are doing is inadvertently stifling the development of their players. By the time the more experienced coaches take over at the U-10 and older ages, some of the growth potential has already been lost forever.

The skill priorities for these age groups are thoroughly explained in the next section. This section merely serves to emphasize how important it is for the club DOC to be intimately involved with all aspects of the program for these key age groups. If a club does not have a DOC, then the job of running the program should fall under the watch of the Coaching Committee. The club DOC or the senior coaches don’t necessarily have to coach teams in these age groups. **But the DOC (or the Coaching Committee) does need to play a key role in designing the training and game format, to periodically monitor the parent coaches during practices and games, to work closely with the age group Commissioners, to help organize the supplemental clinics, and to provide on-going guidance to the volunteer coaches.** We must get it right at the starting point. It’s as simple as that!

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### Skill Priorities

By far the most important skill for beginners is the skill of dribbling. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and using dribbling to get away from pressure. **The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation and preparation for the other fundamental skills of soccer, such as controlling, passing and shooting.** When players are receiving the ball and making the preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. The ability to dribble also helps maintain possession of the ball. It's not unusual for players to find themselves in a game situation where dribbling is the only viable option to get out of tight pressure and maintain possession.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start the better.

Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players don't get easily discouraged if they fail. Players of this age do not possess the analytical thought process to look back or think ahead. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that the last time they tried to dribble it didn't work will not even enter their minds. But if we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble.

Thirdly, in 3v3 and 4v4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is always just a few yards away from shooting range. Once the game moves to the larger-sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on its own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B.

And lastly, it's better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the U-10 and older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

Most parent coaches reading this section will probably agree that dribbling should be a priority. The challenge is to find a way to implement this priority into the real life dynamics of your typical U-6/U-8 program. How can the clubs do it?

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As mentioned in the previous section, most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to ‘boot’ the ball up the field. Shouts of “get rid of it!” and “kick it!” are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, they louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to ‘kick it forward’ that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. The reality is that players are controlled like puppets by the adults to such an extent that they are not thinking for themselves, and are afraid to do anything but kick the ball. Even throw-ins are routinely thrown straight to the other team by confused players who are conditioned to play the ball forward, no matter what. The kick-offs are no better, with players kicking the ball straight to the other team, American football style. Players, who clearly have plenty of time on the ball with no pressure anywhere near, are still kicking it forward without any thought or skill. And this type of mindless play is usually not corrected by the parent coaches and is allowed to occur time and again.

**What the coaches must do is encourage the players to dribble, dribble and dribble. Their first touch must be a soft one. There should be very little coaching done by the coaches, just the occasional reminder to “dribble” and, when close enough to goal, to “shoot”. The shout to “kick it” should never be hollered by the adults.** Dribbling out of pressure should be the emphasis for these age groups. Results don’t count and ‘booting it’ should not be an option. The players must be allowed to be creative and to solve the problems of pressure and space by themselves, using dribbling techniques. Passing is an impossible technique to master for players who cannot dribble. The better players, once they learn to dribble out of tight areas, will be able to create space for themselves with the dribble and will then start to look up and pass the ball. But that will come naturally. Success at the U-6/U-8 ages is measured by how many times a player can dribble past opponents since game results are not important.

The coaches’ approach to the pre-game warm-up should also change. No more the traditional line drills where the coach serves one ball at a time to a line of players who shoot on goal. Instead, the players should all have a ball each and dribble inside their half, using fun types of dribbling activities, to prepare them for the game. The club DOC can prepare a sheet of pre-game warm-up activities that every team must do prior to kick-off.

To summarize, if we want our players to fully master the art of dribbling, the following conditions must exist: a) they must start learning to dribble early; b) we must provide ample opportunities for dribbling in practices and games, and c) we must create the right game environment where players are not afraid to dribble. The following guidelines are recommended for the skill priorities at the U-6/U-8 ages:

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-6	<b>Dribble out of trouble Soft first touch No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal</b>

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<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-8	<b>Dribble out of trouble</b> <b>Soft first touch</b> <b>No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal</b> <b>Introduce passing only to the players who can dribble out of trouble (this can be done during the supplemental clinics where the best players can be grouped separately for some of the activities).</b>

**Coaches need to reduce the number of unnecessary stoppages in play.** For example, there is no need to stop and correct every time a throw-in is not done properly. For some reason, parent coaches have a fixation on teaching players how to take a throw-in. There is absolutely no reason on earth for U-6/U-8's to rehearse throw-ins in practices or games. Why is it so important for the players to do proper throw-ins at U-6/U-8? All the players will eventually learn the throw-in technique over time by themselves. It's like walking. We don't teach toddlers to walk - they learn it instinctively by trying and falling. The players in time will learn to take a throw-in without the need for us to stop games and teach it. Every minute of the game should be spent playing, with as little interruption as possible.

### **Parents' Role**

The parents must understand the skill priorities and embrace the program structure, if it is to succeed. Clubs should prepare a handout that deals specifically with the U-6/U-8 priorities. The handout should include the rationale behind the priorities and explain to the parents how they are expected to behave on the sidelines. As mentioned before, we feel that the clubs need to be firm and clear about their expectations of the parent's behavior. The handout should clearly state what is and isn't allowed on the sideline, and use the field marshals to monitor and enforce these rules.

One of the main problems with parents at games is that they sit too close to the field. Their proximity to the players gives them too much of a presence which, in turn, impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. It's very hard for parents to resist shouting instructions to the players because beginner players are visibly unsure of themselves and naturally make a lot of mistakes. Children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. This dependency spills over into youth sports, manifesting as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. **Therefore, another important objective of the U-6/U-8 programs should be to wean the players out of their dependency on their parents' help during games.** This is so very crucial for the development of soccer players. We all know that soccer is a players' game, meaning that it's the players who must make the decisions on the field. In soccer, coaches have a lot less influence and power during games than in some of the other traditional American sports.

Soccer players must learn to think for themselves and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly

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concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do. The following guidelines are recommended for U-6/U-8 game set-up:

- 1) **The fields to be laid out in such a way that keep the parents about 20-30 yards from the sidelines.** This can be easily done using special lines or ropes beyond which parents cannot encroach. We all agree that most players want their parents to be at the games, watching them play, and we realize that having the parents sit by the sidelines seems so nice and cozy. But keeping the parents some distance away from the action will enhance the players' sense of freedom and ease most of the intimidation any players might feel when the parents are right on top of them. And the parents can still enjoy watching the game. What we lose in coziness we gain in giving the players more independence.
- 2) **Parents should not coach the players.** All they should be allowed to do is cheer good plays by their team but they should also be encouraged to politely applaud good play by the other team.
- 3) **Parents must never tell the players to “kick” or “boot” the ball.** As discussed in the section on the skill priority, kicking the ball needs to be discouraged. The parents will need to be prepared to accept that a lot of the dribbling attempts will be unsuccessful and that, nevertheless, they will have to bite their tongues and let the players try again and again.
- 4) **Coaches should also keep their instruction to a minimum** and let the players understand that they must make their own decisions on the field and that it's OK to make mistakes. The coaches should stand on the sideline and only enter the field if absolutely necessary. It must be remembered that we are trying to help the players grow out of their dependency on the adults. The coaches should encourage dribbling out of trouble and discourage kicking.
- 5) **All this information should be conveyed to the parents in a meeting and using a handout.** A sample handout for this purpose is included in the section on dealing and educating the parents.

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## C. AGE GROUPS U-10 AND U-12

### **Playing Format**

The move to small-sided soccer went into high gear in the nineties after prolonged lobbying by soccer educators and National Staff Coaches. Georgia was one of the first states to mandate 3v3 at U-6 and 4v4 at U-8 in the mid-nineties, and now this format is widely used across the country. US Youth Soccer continued the campaign by declaring that U-10 play should have a maximum of 6v6 and everyone, including Georgia, followed suit. However, embracing small-sided soccer shouldn't stop there. In fact, the feeling among many experts is that the U-12 format should be no more than 8v8, in a 40 by 60 yard field. Discussions about the appropriate playing format for players under the age of 13 have picked up steam again recently among National Staff Coaches, State DOC's, and Club DOC's. All the National Coaches and the State DOC's agree that most players are technically, physically and tactically not ready for the 11v11 game until the U-13 or U-14 level. This opinion corresponds with those of the professional youth coaches from the traditional soccer countries such as France, Holland, and Italy. These countries have an excellent reputation in the area of player development and mandate small-sided play until U-12 and only recommend starting 11v11 at U-14. No doubt, some 11 to 13 year-olds can cope with the demands of 11-a-side play on a big field. But the majority of the players in these ages cannot. The writer's observations of club play in Georgia reinforce the conclusion that we are rushing our players into the 11v11 environment too soon. Your typical 12-year-old doesn't even have the strength and technique to cross the ball, or deliver a cross-field pass, in the big field.

Putting aside momentarily the debate on whether 12 year olds can or cannot play 11v11, the most compelling reason to reduce the playing format to 6v6 or 8v8 is the fact that it is undeniably better from a player development context. Smaller fields with fewer players mean more touches on the ball which, in turn, speeds up the mastery of the ball and provides more enjoyment to the players. Smaller fields also encourage better, more skillful soccer since the long kick up the field is not required as much as on a large field. Passing, dribbling and combination play are more effective means of moving the ball forward in smaller fields and that's exactly what we want our players learning to do. If 11-a-side is too much for 12-year-old select players, it certainly is even more so for recreational players who are, for the most part, less athletic and technical. **At the recreational level, clubs should reduce the playing format to 6v6 at U-10 and 8v8 at U-12.** The benefits are clear:

- 1) It's more appropriate for the players,
- 2) Promotes better soccer,
- 3) Improves the player development process and speeds the acquisition of skills,
- 4) More enjoyable for the players,
- 5) Requires less field space, and
- 6) Allows the smaller clubs to keep their recreational program in-house.

The membership of Georgia Soccer has voted and implemented small-sided soccer for U-10 and U-12. But sometimes, new parent coaches might raise objections to playing small-sided soccer and they need to be educated. The most likely objections will cite the need to recruit more

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volunteer coaches, and that the players want to play 11v11 soccer. The need for more volunteer coaches shouldn't be an issue since the 4v4 format at U-8 will automatically create a large reservoir of willing and experienced coaches. The arguments that kids like to play the adult version are valid, but who says we cannot offer our kids both? There is nothing wrong with providing our players with a regular diet of 6v6 play, mixed with the occasional 11v11 friendly game. Teams could have a roster of 7 to 8 players for the regular club play of 6v6, and combine with another team to create a roster of 14 to 16 players for 11v11 scrimmage. This approach will enhance player development and enjoyment and will allow them to look forward to the occasional 'big' game. It will also promote goodwill and cooperation between teams within the same association and emphasize the 'club' mentality over the sometimes less healthy 'team' mentality. Another solution that will also reduce the need for more coaches would be to maintain team rosters of 14-16 and split the team by half to play two simultaneous games of 6v6 in the house league.

As far as equipment and field space requirements are concerned, 6v6 play lends itself ideally to the typical level of resources available. Clubs can use the same goals that are currently being used for U-10 play. They can easily squeeze two 6v6 games into the present U-12 fields by playing one game across each half, or run four 6v6 games simultaneously on one regular 11v11 field.

### **Volume of Activities**

Two practices plus one game per week are the norm at the U-10 and U-12 recreational levels. By this time, the more committed players generally migrate to the Academy programs and the need to train more than twice a week is usually not an issue. Recreational players who wish to train more than twice a week should be allowed to join in the practices of the Academy teams. If there are no Academy teams in the age group, the players can practice with one of the older teams. The practice length should be between 60 to 90 minutes, but definitely not to exceed 90 minutes.

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Team Practices Per Week</b>	<b>Game Per Week</b>	<b>Total Games Per Year</b>
<b>U-10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20-25</b>
<b>U-12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25-30</b>

### **Skill Priorities**

**The emphasis on dribbling should continue at these age groups, but now passing needs to be introduced and practiced as well.** As we move from U-8 to U-10, the fields are getting bigger and dribbling is not always the best solution. At this stage, players need to learn when to dribble out of trouble and when to pass. However, aimless kicking should be discouraged. Game results at the recreational level should never assume much importance. Players at the U-10/U-12 levels should be learning to combine with teammates around them, using short ground passes and wall passes to move the ball forward.

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The best training environment for these age groups is the 2v2 to 4v4 activities and practice games. Georgia soccer's web site has a U-10/U-12 Academy Coaching Manual that can be used for recreational teams as well, as the key principles and rationale are the same.

The best way for the players to learn is by deciding themselves when to dribble and when to pass and learn from their mistakes. The coaches and parents should refrain from shouting instructions every step of the way. As mentioned before, the ideal approach is to give the players the freedom to express themselves, let them make their own mistakes and learn by trial and error. The need to reduce players' dependence on the adults for guidance during the game is a constant objective.

### **Parents' Role**

The U-10/U-12 age groups seem to represent a turning point with respect to coaches' and parents' expectations and preoccupation with game results. At the U-6/U-8 age groups, adults are less prone to worry about the results. They are willing to accept that it's too early to put pressure on the players. But all that changes as soon as the players reach the U-10 level. Many coaches and parents regard this age group with more seriousness and adopt a competitive approach that is ill-advised and which can lead to irresponsible behavior. It could be due to the fact that 10 year olds seem much more mature than 8 year olds as they acquire adult-like reasoning and coordination. It could be because U-10 is when teams can first enter the State Recreational Tournament, or maybe because this age sees the advent of inter-club play, or the fact that 6v6 and 8v8 are just a small step away from the adult, 11v11 version of the game. Whatever the reason, U-10/U-12 parent coaches have gained the unenviable reputation as overly competitive, and ironically, this reputation is prevalent at the recreational level.

The club DOC, and/or the U-10/U-12 Age Group Commissioner assigned by the club, must keep the parents and coaches of this age group under close scrutiny and spend considerable time educating and monitoring them. This is a key age group. In another year or so, the players will be old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to continue to play organized soccer. If the experience at U-10 turns sour for them, they will quit. It must be fun and rewarding for them. For this reason, a comprehensive parent education program should be implemented at the U-10 age group, which will be the logical extension of the programs suggested in this manual for the U-8 parents.

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## D. AGE GROUPS U-14 AND OLDER

The recreational program at the U-14 and older levels is probably the least problematic and least controversial of all the age groups. By the time players reach this age, they will have found their proper playing levels. By now, their parents will have mellowed down, realizing that life doesn't revolve around the result of a soccer game, and that their child is not going to become the next Mia Hamm. Anyone who is still involved in recreational soccer at this age is obviously a true fan of the game, playing it simply for the enjoyment factor and doesn't take it too seriously. In fact, the biggest challenge clubs face with this age group is to retain enough players in order to field a team. Many clubs struggle to fill rosters. Here again, clubs need to look into the possibility of combining age groups or combining with a neighboring club to have enough players for a team. If clubs don't have enough players available for the traditional 11v11 game, they can play small-sided soccer.

### **Training Priorities and Volume of Practices**

As players grow older into the high teens, having pre-set training priorities becomes a less effective approach. A more sensible approach would be to analyze the team's performance in games. Coaches working with these age groups should base their decision regarding the practice topics on their team's performance in matches. In other words, the games will tell the coaches what they need to work on. For example, if the team is struggling with possession and the breakdowns are mostly technical, then the practices on the following week should be devoted to improving passing.

Keep in mind though that very few recreational players would be willing to engage in a technique enhancing activity if it's not fun. Coaches must make it fun otherwise they will lose the players' attention or desire. Therefore, the best approach is to use game-like activities that create repetition of the topic and are enjoyable. Line drills are boring, they bear very little resemblance to the game and do not prepare the players for the dynamic demands of the game and therefore should be avoided. The 'Recreational E' or the State 'E' coaching course are the best source of activities for this level and every coach should attend one of these courses.

The standard two practices and one game per week represent the right dose of soccer activity these players need. Coaches should make it clear that they expect the players to attend practices, but flexibility should prevail. Teenagers have many interests and need to keep a balanced life. Soccer is just one of many activities that fill their weekly schedule and missing the occasional practice should not become a source of conflict as long as they attend the majority of the practices.

Participation is the key at the recreational level. Winning should always take a second seat to enjoyment. All the players on the team should get equal, or close to equal, playing time. Recreational players are not likely to become professional players, so the objectives of playing soccer revolve around building self-esteem, staying fit, making friends, and having fun. Sitting on the bench will not contribute to building self-esteem, improving fitness or having fun.

# « SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

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## A. GENERAL OVERVIEW AND CHALLENGES

The Select Program is geared toward players who have outgrown the Recreational Program and are looking for a more challenging soccer environment. Players who play at the select level usually have a personal goal, such as to play for the high school varsity team, or to play college soccer, or to become a professional player and play for the National Team. Hence, the main objective of the Select Program should be to help each player reach his/her potential and achieve his/her goal. This should be done in a fulfilling and supportive way that continues to foster the love of the game.

The Select level in Georgia is divided into two programs: The U-10/U-12 Academy program and the U-13 to U-19 Select Program (called Athena Program for girls and Classic Program for boys). The Academy Program is the introductory stage for 9-12 year olds who aspire to play at the select level and provides a stepping stone into competitive soccer. The Academy Program allows clubs the flexibility to register pools of players rather than teams and allows them to do their own scheduling so they play as many games as they wish against whoever they wish. Academy players can be moved from team to team for developmental purposes, game results are not kept and individual technical development is the highest priority. This has also eliminated the incentive or need to have State Cup and State Championships until the U-13 age group, which is definitely one of the most desirable consequences of the Academy program implementation.

Beyond the State level Select Programs is the Regional League for the top 3-4 teams in each state, starting at U-14. This program is called the Region Premier League and is an inter-state league.

The good news is that the Academy and Select levels are getting better, more sophisticated, and more professionally-run with every passing year. The best youth clubs across the country have taken on the mantle of developing players and have essentially become the production line for players for the High Schools, Colleges, National Youth Teams and MLS. Compared to even ten years ago, our youth clubs have made impressive advances in organization, coaching education, professionalism, facilities, and high level competition. The players coming off of the youth conveyor belts are continuously getting better, technically, tactically and physically.

But we are still lagging behind the major soccer countries. If there is one failing in our system, it is that the daily environment of our best young players is not challenging enough. A combination of factors, such as the American educationally-oriented sport culture, the reliance on and belief in democratically designed programs, and a lack of a long-lasting, rich, professional soccer tradition, have created a youth soccer culture that tends to legislate itself into mediocrity. The competitive programs that are geared to the intermediate level players are, for the most part, adequate. But our developmental model falls short in providing the top echelon 1% of our young players the appropriate training and competition.

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In an effort to attract more players and increase revenues so that full-time staff can be maintained, youth clubs have diluted their own so-called 'elite' programs. The term 'Elite' is now over-used to apply to very average teams and players. Any player who is a notch above average and can afford to pay the coaching fees is enthusiastically invited to join the 'Elite' level program. This trend has diluted the elite level since every club is racing to create an elite program. It has also created unrealistic expectations on the part of the parents, not to mention that players who are courted by a bunch of competing clubs have little incentive to work hard and improve. Managing all these expectations has become quite a challenge for club DOC's who are trying to tread the fine line between providing a service for the paying customers and implementing a true player development structure.

Below is a summary of the problems which are common in many clubs across the state:

- 1) Too much emphasis on playing games and not enough on practicing. Simply not enough contacts with the ball.
- 2) Youth game over-structured with not enough free play.
- 3) Too many multi-game-per-day tournaments, which promote a test of stamina rather than skill, and cause injuries.
- 4) Select soccer has become too expensive for many families. It has become a middle class suburban based game to the exclusion of inner city and low income neighborhoods.
- 5) An inherent emphasis on **quantity** at the expense of **quality**.
- 6) Too much focus on tactics and fitness at the U-10 through U-14 and not enough emphasis on technical development.
- 7) Too competitive at the younger ages. Unnecessary pressure on young players, coupled with 'pigeon-holing' them into positions too early. Players are not given the chance to express themselves and be creative. Many 11 to 14 year-olds are already labeled as 'bench players' with little playing time given.
- 8) Too much coaching from the sidelines. The result is generations of robotic players who cannot solve soccer problems on their own.
- 9) Players burned-out from too much competition and a tug-of-war between club, high school and ODP.
- 10) Some clubs lack a central focus and leadership, and are essentially comprised of a collection of teams loosely connected, with each team left to blaze its own trail, fight for the same club players, and dilute the top level.
- 11) A rigid, team-oriented system that promotes the upward movement of teams over the upward movement of players. Players register for teams as opposed to clubs, with movement of players within the club restricted either by regulation or by policy. Good players are kept in mediocre teams to help the team get promoted instead of promoting the player.
- 12) Lack of coordinated effort and cooperation between neighboring youth clubs to combine resources. Unhealthy and petty rivalries fester instead.
- 13) Too often, pre-game warm-ups do not properly prepare players for the game.
- 14) Too many substitutions during the game disrupt the flow and hinder tactical development of players.
- 15) In some clubs, youth coaches lose their effectiveness by staying with the same team for too long.

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This section on the Select Program Structure attempts to deal with some of these issues and offers some solutions.

### **DEFINING THE LEVELS IN THE SELECT PROGRAM**

Writing and organizing the section on the select program proved the most challenging, because the so-called Select level encompasses such a wide variety of participants. The select program in Georgia includes the Academy, Region Premier League, Classic, and Athena Divisions, which are, in turn, further split into sub-divisions, such as the Athena A and B, etc. Let's face it. Most of the players that make up the select program are best described as the 'in-between' category. These quasi-competitive players have outgrown the recreational level, are looking for a bigger challenge, but do not quite have the talent or commitment to become fully-pledged elite level competitive players.

This wide range of players makes it difficult for clubs to design simple, cookie-cutter programs for their select teams. How can one propose a recommendation that would make sense and be practical for all the select teams in a particular club? How can we lump together solutions that meet the needs of an Athena 'C' player with those of an Athena 'A' ODP caliber player? The answer is we cannot!

So, before we begin the discussion of the select program, we need to establish some definitions that will serve as points of reference for our recommendations. For the sake of simplicity, we would like to define three player levels:

- 1) Elite Level
- 2) Top Level, and
- 3) Intermediate Level.

The Elite Level players are the ones that can best be described as the ODP-caliber players. The ODP-caliber players are those who are good enough to make the state, regional, or national ODP pools. The ODP-caliber players are the ones who show the most potential to play top division I college soccer, get college soccer scholarships, or even play professionally and make the national team. The Top Level refers to the players who play at the top tier, such as the Region Premier and top Classic I and Athena A teams. The Intermediate Level refers to all the other select levels below the top tier, such as Athena B, C, D, Classic II, etc.

Throughout the chapter on the Select Program, a differentiation between the player levels will be made, offering level-specific recommendations. The bigger clubs will find it easier to implement the level-specific recommendations, since they have sufficient numbers and quality to field homogeneous teams at the Top Level and second tier teams at the Intermediate Level. However, the medium and small size clubs will have to be more flexible and creative when implementing the recommendations.

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### THE THREE PILLARS OF THE SELECT PROGRAM

Any select program that aspires to help players reach their full potential must pay particular attention to the three ‘Pillars’ of Player Development:

- 1) High Practice Volume,**
- 2) Quality Competition (at games and at practice), and**
- 3) Quality Coaching.**

All three pillars must be in place within a player development program in order for it to function properly. A program that lacks even one of these pillars will fall short of its goals and never reach true excellence. This is especially true for the Elite and Top Level select program. Let’s examine each pillar.

#### **High Practice Volume**

Young players must hone the basic techniques of the game, such as dribbling, passing, receiving, shooting and heading. Without a mastery of these techniques, players cannot possibly reach their potential. To become technically sound, players must spend hours practicing their technique in an environment that creates repetition and maximum touches on the ball. Simply put, a practice where each player has 400 contacts with the ball is more effective than a practice where each player has only 50 ball contacts.

Maximizing contacts with the ball is crucial at the youth level. This has obvious implications on the organization of the team practice, which explains why all the coaching manuals preach against line drills and fitness activities without the ball. But the concept of maximum ball contacts has implications on a wider context of program design. It requires that the ratio of practices to games needs to be heavily slanted toward practices, because players don’t get many ball touches during the game. On average, a player will have about 20-40 ball contacts in a game, and that’s only if he/she plays the whole game! In an earlier section, the benefits of practice over games have been amply demonstrated.

Clubs that wish to increase the practice opportunities for their players will probably run into some logistical problems. Typically, some of these problems are: 1) lack of field space; 2) qualified coaches who can earn more money coaching 3 teams twice a week than coaching 2 teams three times per week; and 3) parents who don’t have the time to drive the kids to more practices.

But all these logistical problems can be solved with adequate planning and organization. Some of the most common solutions clubs use to increase practice opportunities are:

- 1) Supplemental player clinics organized by the club DOC.
- 2) Open door policy, which means that all players are allowed to join in other teams’ practice in the same club.

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- 3) Supplementing the regular team practice with combined team practices (two teams training together).
- 4) Creating a ‘free practice area’ with bouncing walls, where players are free to come and train on their own any time. In fact, players who are committed to excellence should be encouraged to train on their own and must do so if they seriously want to become Elite players.
- 5) Organizing 3v3 or 4v4 festivals, where players participate as individuals and are mixed and shuffled into teams and play for fun, without any coaching or referees.
- 6) Car pooling to practices.

The club DOC should have an input in the scheduling of team practices. The logistics of integrating the teams’ practice schedule with games should not be left to chance. Centralizing this task and using the technical expertise of the DOC or the coaching committee to oversee the total scheduling job will be necessary in order to accomplish the optimum usage of field space. Such considerations as optimum number and spacing of practices for each age group, combining practices, scheduling teams of equal ability at the same time are best handled by a qualified coach with a master plan in mind.

### **Quality Competition**

The second pillar of development has to do with the quality of the opposition in games and in practices. Simply stated, good players develop faster if they play with and against other good players. The better players must be constantly challenged, otherwise they develop ‘bad habits’ and stagnate. By bad habits, we mean that players become mentally lazy if they don’t have to think two steps ahead and don’t have to solve problems associated with high level play, such as tight aggressive marking and athletic and skillful opponents. If players are playing against inferior opposition too often, they also become technically lazy by taking too many touches on the ball since no one is good enough to take the ball away from them.

The problem most clubs are facing is how to provide their best players with quality opponents on a regular basis. This problem manifests itself in different ways. It comes up as a team problem, where the best teams in each age group cannot find enough quality games. It is also prevalent on an individual player basis, where the best player on a mediocre team doesn’t get challenged enough in practices or games. The following recommendations can be used by clubs to create more quality competition and are divided into Team-centered and Player-centered solutions.

**Team-centered recommendations:** The traditional solution for the best teams is to seek high-level competition by traveling to out-of-state tournaments. This is obviously a good idea but the concept of tournament play has been taken to such an extreme that many teams play more tournament games than club games and their original purpose is now lost. The proliferation of tournament play in youth soccer has become a huge problem with players asked to play 80 to 100 games per year under less than ideal conditions, with little rest between games. There are a few major problems with tournaments. The first one is that teams are asked to play 3-5 games in one weekend and that is way too much. The human body is not designed to play more than one game per day and, by the third game, it becomes a contest of stamina rather than skill. Secondly, the optimum developmental cycle of one game, followed by a few practices to work on the

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weaknesses observed in the game, followed by the next game, cannot be applied in tournament play and hurts player development. Thirdly, tournaments have become money making events where every half-decent team is accepted, thus diluting the competition. Good teams who seek tough games are forced to play two or three weak opponents and, by the time they face a good team, everyone is too tired to benefit from the original intent of the contest. Fourthly, the heavy physical toll extracted by tournaments, coupled with all the travel, causes more injuries drains the players and can cause burnout. And lastly, all this traveling is a serious drain on the parent's pockets.

**Teams have to become more selective in choosing tournaments and only participate in 2-4 tournaments per year. Clubs hosting tournaments should schedule one game per day or reduce the playing time for each game so that the total duration of play per day does not exceed 100 minutes.** For example, when teams play two games per day, each game should have 25-minute halves, and if teams play three games per day, each game should have 15-minute halves.

Aside from tournaments, teams seeking challenging games can schedule exhibition games against older teams within their own club or in adjacent clubs. These exhibition games can be played in the off-season and pre-season, or during the season on specific weeks when the regularly scheduled club game is against a weak team.

**Player-centered recommendations:** Every club, big or small, has players who have advanced ahead of their teammates to a point where they need more challenge to continue to develop. This is especially a concern with medium and small clubs where each team has a wide mix of players. It's quite possible that a lower level Select team has one or two players who could play at the Top level, or an Athena B player who can play Athena A, or a Classic I player who should be playing up an age group.

Clubs must address this problem if they are truly committed to helping each player reach his/her potential. This can be done in a number of ways: One solution is to pool the best players from two or three age groups together to form one team. The concept of single-age-group-play is so ingrained in this country that many adults in youth clubs are against allowing players to play up. Having players play up is a routine occurrence in all parts of the world. Professional youth coaches from all over the world have long understood the value and benefits of this practice. In fact, it's rare to find a youth team abroad that doesn't have a couple of younger players. A typical U-19 team from anywhere in South America, for example, would have players ranging in age from 14 to 18. US Youth Soccer has actually made a policy statement on July 17, 1999 that encouraged relieving strict age requirements for younger players for the sake of their development, citing US Soccer bylaw 702, "Opportunity to Participate".

Some coaches will resist losing their best player to an older team because they don't want to weaken their own team. One would have to question their motives and not allow coaches' personal agendas to stand in the way of the individual player's long-term benefits. As is continually stressed throughout this manual, club soccer at the youth level is all about what's best for the individual, not the team. Clubs cannot sacrifice the individual's potential just to

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improve a team's 'W' column. For this reason, decisions on these matters must be made by a qualified person such as the club DOC, and not left to the individual team coaches to fight over players. Please refer to a later chapter that deals with the issue of players playing up.

Another solution is to organize supplemental training for the best players. This can be done via regularly scheduled advanced player clinics that are by invitation only, or by sending the best players to train with older teams within the same club. The best players can accompany older teams to tournaments as guest players. Additional competition can be created via a club select All-Star team. The selection of the club All-Star can be done by the DOC or the Coaching Committee, through scouting of games. The best players identified can be invited to join the All-Star Team, which could play a series of exhibition games against quality competition.

Neighboring clubs can pool their best players in an age group together to form one strong team. The notion of two clubs cooperating for the good of the game or even joining together is not new or original. It's been done before by clubs in Georgia and elsewhere.

All of the above suggestions are workable, provided that whoever is overseeing the implementation is qualified and objective. This is where the club DOC, or the Coaching Committee, can bring leadership and guidance. For instance, a typical 1,000 player-strong club might have around 800 Recreational players, 150 Intermediate Level players, 40 Top Level players, and 10 Elite caliber players. Since all these players are spread over a number of age groups, an objective and experienced coach will be required to assess the level of all the players and design a player-centered plan to help the Elite and Top Level players get more challenge, within the framework and constraints of the playing rules and existing team structure.

The most important thing to remember is that all these suggestions will require that someone at the club level take the initiative to identify the best players, organize and monitor the solutions so that the players get maximum benefit. These solutions will not happen by themselves because most parents and team coaches are too preoccupied with their team's day-to-day issues to take stock and look at the overall picture.

Clubs should also promote the ODP and encourage their best players to try out for the State Select Team. Players who make the ODP do not leave their club team but receive additional, high level training and competition and are exposed to the best coaches in the Region. The vast majority of club coaches supports the ODP and understands its value to the players. No matter how good a club team is, it will have one or two individuals who have outgrown the team's level and need to be exposed to a higher level. Competition at the ODP level pits the best 18 players from one state against the best from another state. No club competition can replicate this. The state ODP is the first step for players who aspire to play for the regional and national teams. Coaches who advise their players against trying out for ODP are doing them a disservice. A club coach who tells his/her players that they are getting all the challenge they need from the club team activities is either misinformed about the ODP or has got a personal agenda. Clubs who have any concerns or questions about the ODP should contact the State Director of Coaching.

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### Quality Coaching

This is the third pillar of player development. We discussed earlier, under the practice volume, how players must have repetition and ball contacts to achieve technical proficiency. It will take good coaches to make this happen. In order for players to achieve excellence, they must be guided, inspired and challenged by quality coaches. Even the most committed players are not going to engage in an activity if it's boring or doesn't make sense to them. Good coaches will have a large repertoire of activities that will challenge the players and achieve the required volume of repetition without boredom setting in. Good coaches will know how to progress from one activity to the next to achieve an optimum flow and maximize learning. Players can tell whether their coach knows what he/she is doing. The better players will lose respect for the coach and tune him out if they sense that he cannot teach them anything new. Clubs must invest in coaching education. In Georgia, select coaches must have a minimum license as follows:

<b>Level</b>	<b>Minimum License</b>
Academy	State 'E' License (National Youth License recommended)
Athena A & B	State 'D' License
Classic I & II	State 'D' License
Athena C & lower	State 'E' Certificate
Classic III & lower	State 'E' Certificate

But making sure that all the coaches obtain the minimum license required should only be the first step. **Clubs should create their own minimum coaching standards, which should exceed the state's criteria. The coaches of the Top select teams should be required to possess at least a USSF 'C' License. The coach in charge of the Recreational Program and the Academy Program should possess the National Youth License. The DOC should possess at least the USSF 'B' License and the National Youth License. Clubs should pay the course fees for their coaches to get a USSF national level license.** Georgia hosts a USSF 'C' License course once a year, usually in April or May. Every club should be sending their best coaches to this course, not least because it would be cheaper than to send them out-of-state.

At the same time, clubs should authorize their DOC or, in the absence of a DOC, the Coaching Committee, to design a Coach Selection Criteria for all the levels, that will include clear guidelines, qualifications and experience requirement, minimum license requirement, and code of conduct. This will help in ensuring that each team is assigned the appropriate level coach in an objective and fair way. The authors of the criteria should monitor all the coaches in the club and remove those who exhibit inappropriate behavior or whose conduct is contrary to the club's criteria or philosophy.

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### B. PLAYERS PLAYING UP

One issue that generates heated debate in clubs across the country is whether players should be allowed to play in an older age group. Many clubs forbid players from playing up, and even some of the state youth associations have restrictive rules pertaining to this. There are a number of reasons cited by those against playing up. They claim that players belong with peers of similar social and mental maturity, and that playing up is a temporary solution and eventually the player might have to deal with the stigma of demotion back to his proper age group. These arguments are valid and should be factored into the final decision. But one suspects that the underlying issue has to do with a natural reluctance to deal with gray areas. It's a lot easier for a club to impose a total ban on playing up than to have to decide who should play up and at what age. Club boards that feel uncomfortable dealing with delicate decisions avoid the issue by banning it outright.

Players playing with and against older players are so common in the rest of the world that youth coaches from other countries would probably be amused to discover that playing up is such a complicated issue in this country. The Brazilian U-19 team from Vitoria, that won the Dallas Cup a couple of years ago, had players ranging in age from 14 to 18. The French U-16 team from Marseille, competing in the Sun bowl in Tampa against our regional ODP U-16 teams, had a few U-14 and U-15 players. In fact, one of the problems with European tournaments is the tendency of professional teams to send under-age youth teams to compete in a higher age division. They do it to provide their younger players a challenging experience. But if everyone does it, it defeats the purpose.

Here in the USA, the US Youth Soccer Association has made a policy statement on July 17, 1999 that encouraged relieving strict age requirements for younger players, for the sake of their development. This was triggered by the realization that our youth clubs are legislating mediocrity by banning 'playing up' and that we need to be more flexible in our approach if we want our best players to reach their full potential.

That playing up can be beneficial is an easy concept to sell. Almost every club has a number of players who clearly are ready to play up and who will undoubtedly gain from it. The problem is that there are too many parents who petition for their child to play up when the child is not ready or talented enough. On the flip side, there are players who SHOULD play up but whose coaches don't let go because they don't want to lose their star player. Some players hit their puberty early and, at the ripe age of 12, tower above their contemporaries. Other players develop their skills and tactical awareness ahead of their teammates but are not physically ready to compete against older players. There are no easy answers here.

**Clubs should allow players to play up, but only on a limited scale and under carefully constructed guidelines, and that the decision must rest with a qualified coach such as the Club Director of Coaching or, in the absence of a DOC, the Coaching Committee.** Decisions like this must be made by a knowledgeable and experienced coach who can look at the situation objectively and neutrally. In fact, we

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believe that a pro-active plan should exist within the club for scouting and identifying players who need to play up. Instead of the process being initiated by the parents and being parent-driven, the pro-active plan will take care of identifying the players, and will avoid unnecessary conflicts with pushy parents. When extremely gifted players are spotted as being too advanced for their age, the qualified coach, or coaches, should weigh the pros and cons for each case and make a decision. Of course, the players concerned and their parents would have to agree to play up. After all, it's possible that a player might prefer to stay at the proper age group for personal or social reasons. But the concept of 'team loyalty' and the reluctance to abandon the proper-age team and weaken it should not factor into the equation. The argument that it's not fair to the other players should not be a deterrent. A player who is ready to play up and has soccer ambitions should not allow team loyalty to override what is in his/her best interest. This is no different from the case of a gifted student in a regular class who is invited to join a gifted class. The choice is obvious. And, just as one would expect the teacher to not mind losing her star student, the same is expected from the coach.

**Clubs can use the following guidelines to determine who plays up:**

- 1) Player should be dominant in his own age group.**
- 2) Player should be athletically and physically mature enough for the higher age. Some players' technical and tactical ability help them dominate their own age group, but they might not be physically able to cope with the stronger, faster, older players.**
- 3) Player should be mentally mature and able to relate to the older teammates.**
- 4) Player should be a regular starter in the older team. If the player is going to be just a role player or a bench warmer, there is no point in her playing up and risk destroying her confidence.**
- 5) The player should be the one who wants to play up, not just the parents.**

There are a number of other factors to consider. One scenario that can complicate the decision is when the proper-age team is very strong and has a good chance at winning the State Cup and beyond, while the older team is weak and is not likely to win anything. If the older team is playing at a lower tier division, it might be better for the player to stay with his own age group where the playing level is higher. Again, the DOC who considers the overall long-term plans for the club and sees the whole picture is the best person to make the decision. Such cases might merit a compromise solution that has the player playing up occasionally as a guest-player and training with the older team, but retaining his/her eligibility for the proper-age team's involvement at the State Cup. The Club Pass rule can be used to play up without the need for a transfer. The Club Pass now makes it easy to move players from a younger team to an older team or from a lower level team to a higher level team and should be used as needed for the intended purpose – to help players develop at their own pace.

Another factor to consider is the age of the player and his/her current phase of development. Before we make recommendations here, it's important to explain the process of learning and

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acquiring skills that players undergo, because the player's stage within the learning process has a significant impact on the decision to let him play up.

The process of acquiring any skill, whether it's dribbling, passing or receiving, is most effective if learned in the following sequence:

**Stage 1:** Skill practiced via high repetition, with no pressure from opponents.

**Stage 2:** Skill performed against pressure from teammates in team practices.

**Stage 3:** Skill performed in games against weak opponents, the 'confidence building' stage.

**Stage 4:** skill performed in games against strong opponents.

This sequence implies that players initially need to spend time perfecting the technique without opponents. Then they should try it out for a period of time against opponents in a non-game environment where the result is not important, such as in a practice scrimmage. Following that, they should have plenty of opportunities to try it in games against weaker opponents. This allows them to succeed and develop confidence and, thus, solidify the technique and ingrain it into their game repertoire. And finally, they need to practice it against tough opponents.

For most skills, this is not a short-term process lasting one or two weeks. It is usually a long-term process that can take years just to reach the fourth stage. It must be noted that the third stage is extremely important because it's the confidence building stage that enables the player to cement the technique into his game. If not enough time is spent in the third stage, the ability to perform the skill successfully in games against tough opponents might be undermined. For example, someone who starts the process at U-6 might just be entering the third stage when he becomes U-10. If, when he reaches U-10, he is sent to play up at U-11 before he has had the opportunity to develop the confidence to perform the skill, it could destroy his confidence and retard his development. This is because he might not succeed in performing the skill at the older age group and will be reluctant to try again. What has essentially happened to this player is that he was made to skip stage 3 by playing up too soon and, as a result, couldn't cope with stage 4. This is why it's important for such decisions to be made by qualified coaches, who understand the learning process and can watch a player and correctly assess her current stage of skill acquisition.

We recommend that the guidelines listed above be considered within the context of the player's developmental stage as follows:

### **U-6 to U-8**

Playing up is NOT recommended since the players are all in the first and second stages of skill acquisition and it's too early. Even the ones who are physically dominating should stay in their own age group. It's too early to build them up as future stars. Let them benefit from a longer stay in stage 3, the confidence building stage.

### **U-9 to U-14**

Playing up is only recommended in special cases, using the guidelines above, together with an assessment of the player's skill acquisition stage. One has to be careful here, since most players have not reached puberty yet. The player playing up might struggle once his teammates reach

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puberty, and might have to go back to his own age group. For this reason, playing up should be allowed in increments of one year, with a review at the end of each year, and the player and parents should be advised of this policy in advance.

### **U-15 and older**

Playing up is recommended for players who meet the guidelines stated above. Regional and National ODP caliber players should be playing with older players otherwise they will not get challenged.

## C. TEAM-ORIENTED VS CLUB-ORIENTED APPROACH

Adults tend to view youth games as CONTESTS between two teams to determine which one is the best. Sport psychologists will tell you that this is the root cause of most of the problems in youth sport. Clubs have to educate the adults to look at each game as simply just another developmental opportunity for a bunch of young players. The more effort a club puts into educating the parents and coaches to reduce the pressure on young players, the happier the players and the more productive the program will be.

The ‘Team’ culture manifests itself in various ways, some positive and some negative. One of the issues with many of our youth clubs is that these clubs are merely a collection of teams, which happen to have the same name and sometimes wear the same uniform. What is missing at many clubs is a progressive developmental master plan that links the individual teams and connects the flow of training from one age group to the next. Clubs that have had a bona fide DOC for a while are slowly moving in the right direction, towards establishing a club-oriented system for player development. But many clubs that either do not have a DOC, or have just recently created the position, are still operating off a team-oriented philosophy, where each team blazes its own trail, unaware of what the other teams are doing, and without a central club focus. The problems associated with such a lack of club focus are numerous:

### **Infighting over Players**

Team coaches in such clubs invariably engage in a tug-of-war over the same players. As a result, the best players are not all playing at the highest possible level. For example, some clubs have two teams competing in the same tier, i.e. two Classic II teams. The best solution, from a developmental point of view, would be to field an ‘A’ and a ‘B’ team. This approach will put all the best players in one team, will challenge the players more, and will improve the chances of the ‘A’ team to get promoted to the higher level. This suggestion is based on the assumption that the best players are indeed ambitious to play at the higher level. Granted, there are players who would rather stay on the same team with their friends than play at a higher level. The ultimate goal should be to make it possible for every player to find his/her proper level. Unfortunately, in a team-oriented club, the two coaches might accomplish the opposite, to suit their own ambitions, and fight over the same players and end up fielding two weak teams.

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### **Training Priorities Lose Focus**

A lot has already been written on this in other sections of this manual. When a club-based development plan is missing, continuity of training is lost. There needs to be a relationship between what is taught at, say, the U-10 age to that which is being taught at the U-11 age, and so on. Age-specific training priorities should be established, with a building block approach, which provide the players with the technical foundation before exposing them to advanced tactics. Without a master plan, coaches become mainly concerned with preparing their team for tomorrow's game, without taking the long-term developmental needs into consideration.

### **Coaching Selection Criteria Undermined**

Without a central focus, the process for evaluating and assigning coaches based on consistent criteria is hard to implement. As a result, unqualified coaches end up with teams of which they are poorly equipped to handle.

### **Coaches Lose Their Effectiveness**

In a loosely connected club structure, each coach tends to stay with the same team for many years. There is obviously a lot to be said about the long-lasting friendships and bonding that develop when a group stays together for a long time. But, on the flip side, coaches lose their effectiveness to impact and influence players sooner or later, usually after one or two years. After a while, players start to tune the coaches out, as they get tired of doing the same drills, hearing the same voice, and receiving the same coaching tips. Players who want to advance in the game need to be exposed to different coaches and to different coaching styles, otherwise the soccer side of things becomes stale. A new coach every year or two will re-ignite the engine, re-kindle the motivation and create new challenges for the players.

Obviously clubs that comprise mainly parent coaches and have a limited number of coaches will have to make some concessions and allow the coach to continue coaching their own child. But whenever possible, coaches should be moved around every one or two years, especially at the Elite Level of select soccer, where players are highly skilled and need fresh ideas and constant challenge.

Most professional clubs run youth academies where the coaching staff remains in the same age category and the players move on to the next coach. For example, the U-12 coach is always coaching U-12's and doesn't follow the same team into U-13. There is another U-13 coach waiting to take them over. This way, the players benefit from working with coaches who have become experts at a specific age group.

### **Who Owns The Player?**

Clubs should invest the time and effort at developing an identity. This will help foster an affinity toward the club by the players and parents. When players feel only loyal to their team and to their coach, the club's overall health and future is on fragile grounds. Team coaches can decide one day to move to another club and take along their team, lock, stock and barrel. When team loyalty is taken to an extreme, it can create an 'us versus them' mentality and lead to bad feelings between teams in the same club.

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Clubs must remember that, within the context of player registration and playing regulations, the players belong to the club, not the team. Hence, clubs have the authority to place players into teams as they see fit, as long as it is done in accordance with the rules of the state association. Coaches do not 'own' players, and must abide by the rules and policies of the club.

### A. HOW TO EDUCATE AND DEAL WITH PARENTS

One area that is often neglected by clubs is the creation of a well organized parent education program. Most club officers and coaches will attest to the fact that dealing with parental complaints is the most difficult, time consuming and unpleasant part of youth soccer. The inescapable reality is that we live in a ‘customer-service-oriented’ culture, where parents demand and expect quality programs for their children. We cannot blame parents for wanting to make sure that the program in which their child is participating is providing the best possible environment for success. Youth clubs are caught in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, they have a duty to inform and educate the parents and listen to their concerns while, on the other hand, they cannot allow parents to dictate how the program should be organized if their demands run counter to accepted player development philosophy. Clubs should take the time to listen to parents but, all the while, keeping in mind that the average parent is not qualified to run a player development program. Clubs also have to watch out for parents who might try to manipulate the program to benefit their own personal agenda.

Educating and informing parents in a proactive way will go a long way towards reducing potential problems. A well-planned process of disseminating information to parents should include:

- 1) A pre-season club wide parent meeting conducted by the club
- 2) A Parent Handbook that covers all the policies and philosophy of the club plus the most common scenarios that parents typically encounter. Each parent should be given this handbook.
- 3) A Parent Contract or Agreement that each parent signs at the beginning of the season. By signing the agreement, each parent is acknowledging that they read the Contract/Parent Handbook and understand the content and agree to abide by the rules and policies of the club.
- 4) A pre-season team parent meeting conducted by the coach
- 5) A biweekly parent newsletter that explains programs, objectives and updates
- 6) A regular schedule of team parent meetings throughout the season organized and moderated by the coach. These meetings can include some information on the seasonal plan and the rationale behind the training structure and playing philosophy. The more informed the parents, the better.
- 7) At least once per season, a player evaluation meeting conducted by the team coach with each player and his/her parents. Parents need to know how their child is progressing and what steps the coach is planning to take in order to help their child improve. Also, what the player and his parents need to do to help the player progress. Player development is a collective effort and parents have a role to play.

The newsletter, the handouts and the meetings should describe the mission statement, enlighten the parents on player development issues, clarify the program structure, advise club policies, and explain the rationale for every club policy.

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Clubs can also utilize the resources of the state association in this area. Georgia Soccer has a Parent Excellence Program that entails seminars conducted by the State DOC with the help of power point presentations, videos and Q & A sessions. These seminars can be presented to the whole parent block of the club or can be done in a more age and level specific approach, i.e. the Academy Program parents, or the Recreational Program parents, etc. Clubs that want to schedule Parent Excellence Seminars can contact the State DOC any time of the year. The seminars are free for member affiliates of Georgia Soccer.

**The club should also put in place a clear and fair process for dealing with parent's grievances and conflict resolution.** For example, unhappy parents must first try to resolve the issue with their coach. If that doesn't bring a resolution, parents' next step is to appeal to the age group Commissioner, if one exists, or to the Club DOC. If the commissioner/Club DOC cannot mediate a resolution, parents can go to the club officer in charge of the specific program. From there, they can go to the Club Board.

Club-issued, standardized Complaint Forms and/or Appeal Forms can be created for parents to submit, in order to keep a record of these concerns. These records can be used by the club to review and revise their policies as needed, to help in making decisions on coaches' selection, and to make sure that the concerns have been dealt with in a timely manner and closure has been reached.

**A process must also be in place to deal with unruly parents.** We feel that the clubs must be firm and clear about what they expect from parents in terms of behavior at practices and on the sidelines. As mentioned before, youth clubs are essentially service-oriented organizations that view the parents as customers. But this should not prevent clubs from insisting on ethical and sportsmanlike behavior on the part of the coaches, parents, and players. Our clubs should not be afraid to enforce a code of behavior for fear of losing players. Experience has taught us that clubs that show a weakness and a reluctance to deal with problem parents usually end up with the most problems.

Field Marshals can be assigned to monitor and police the fields during games. These marshals should be given the authority to take parents who break any club rules to the side and give them a warning. If the parents persist in breaking the rules following the warning, the marshals should have the authority to ban them from the complex for the duration of the game and report them to the club's Discipline Committee. The Discipline Committee can deal with repeat offenders according to the policy set by the club. Ninety-nine percent of the parents are reasonable people. Unfortunately, the one percent who repeatedly causes problems is usually incorrigible and, sadly, sometimes the only solution is to ban them completely from the club complex even if it means that their kids will be lost to the program. Of course, it's imperative to make sure that all the parents are aware of the rules and the policy for dealing with breaches of club rules before the season starts.

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## B. PARENT EDUCATION TOPICS

Parents play a crucial role in the soccer growth process of their child, yet, are the least informed participants. The whole skill of parenting is clouded by common misconceptions and poor role modeling by parents who are a product of their own upbringing. Parents want what's best for their child, but could actually do more harm than good through lack of knowledge or education. Most parents would gladly accept advice from people they perceive as experts if they believe that knowledge gained will help their child. Youth clubs can enlist experts and/or develop the expertise to provide guidance to parents. The efforts in this area are certainly going to be worthwhile if the parents become more supportive of the coach, the club and most importantly, their child. Some of the parenting topics that require the most guidance fall under the following categories:

### **Overbearing Parents**

Today's society has become more materialistic and competitive. Parents want to start preparing their child for the world earlier than previous generations. The result is often overbearing parents who constantly monitor their children and suffocate their freedom to be kids.

### **Whose needs and expectations are met?**

Some parents live vicariously through their children and some coaches are in it for their own personal glory. Youth sport is often shaped to satisfy the needs of the adults rather than the needs of the kids. Kids play sports to have fun, be with their friends and learn new skills. Many children quit organized sports by the time they are teenagers because their needs are not being met.

### **How players become committed to a sport**

Players go through stages of commitment and 'fall in love' with a sport if they enjoy it and are improving their skill. Motivation and enjoyment go hand in hand with youth sports. Parents often force the sport on the child and try to 'fast track' the commitment level. They need to let the child decide how much time they want to spend playing and training.

### **What the coaches are trying to teach the players**

Parents need to have some understanding on how players develop their soccer skills, the benefits of practices over games, the age specific priorities of technique over fitness and tactics and what a good practice looks like in order to maximize ball contacts and hone technique.

### **Role of practices versus games**

We have a disease in North America called 'tournamentitis'. Our youth teams play in too many tournaments and don't train enough. Parents and coaches think that players develop in games but players actually develop mostly through the practices.

### **Tournaments benefits and pitfalls**

Tournaments have become big business in North America. They are good for fund raising and for team bonding and family outings, but they are not conducive to player development. By the

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second game of the tournament, players are too tired to derive any developmental benefits. Teams should not do more than 2-3 tournaments per year, but many teams do 8-10 tournaments. Tournaments have the potential to cause burnout and are a financial hardship for many families who think they have to spend all this money to play on a good team.

### **How College Showcases work**

Many tournaments are billed as ‘College Showcase’ yet attract teams as young as U-12. College coaches are not interested in looking at U-12 players and only start to scout players at U-16 and U-17. Also, college coaches don’t go to tournaments to ‘see what’s out there’. They come to a tournament prepared with a list of players they want to observe. Players do not get ‘discovered’ at tournaments. Unless they have done the leg work first and contacted the college coaches and sent them their resume, college coaches won’t know they exist and there are way too many players in a tournament for college coaches to notice someone out of the blue.

### **Player evaluations**

Parents should sit with the coach and get an evaluation of their child’s progress. But at the youngest ages of U-6 through U-12 there is no need to fret over strengths and weaknesses and goal setting. It should all be about fun and social skills and self image and confidence building. Starting at U-13, the soccer potential can be evaluated and discussed.

### **Playing up**

Some parents think that their child should play up to be challenged. It’s again the ‘fast track syndrome’ of parenting. Playing up is only recommended if the player would still be an impact player with the older team and has already gone through most of the puberty so physical attributes potential is already known. Many players show early promise but fizzle out once other players reach their puberty.

### **Understanding the role of youth sports**

Parents should be reminded that 99.9% of players will not become professional players. The most important benefits from youth sport are the social skills, life skills, coping skills and values and character building that a sport team setting can offer.

### **Understanding the odds of success**

Many parents look at soccer as an opportunity to get a college soccer scholarship. Only a small percentage of players get soccer scholarships and the average soccer scholarship is around \$8,000 per year while the average college expenses are \$40,000 to \$60,000 per year. Parents spend thousands of dollars a year on youth sport looking for a return on their investment and the numbers don’t add up except for a few very talented players.

### **Role modeling**

Parents need to keep in mind their responsibility to model good behavior to their child. Staying positive on the sideline, no coaching from the sidelines, treating everyone with respect, are just a few examples of positive role modeling. Being a good listener and not manipulating the

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conversation towards their agendas but rather using conversations to learn about their child's needs and wants are desirable parenting skills.

### **Evaluating the club and the coach**

Parents need to be educated on what a good club should be like. Are the club coaches and officers behaving in a way that is consistent with the club's mission? Are the coaches licensed and knowledgeable? Are the players treated properly or are they abused?

### **Understanding the pursuit of excellence**

For players to reach their potential, they have to invest time and effort in addition to what they do with the team. Top players have all spent hours practicing and watching soccer on TV when they were young. It's what players do away from their team that will determine how far they advance in the game. Just because a number of youth coaches are trying to recruit their child doesn't mean that their child 'has arrived'. Achieving success at U-12 means nothing. It's where they will be at 19-20 that is most important and there are no short cuts. Talent is not enough. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication to reach the top and not everyone will achieve it.

All the topics listed above plus any other deemed important by the club should be addressed thoroughly through handbooks, meetings, newsletter, etc. Below is a sample letter to parents, pertaining to a specific program group, that attempts to explain the rationale behind a program's approach and philosophy.

## C. SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS

**TO:** Parents of U-6/U-8 players

**FROM:** Club Director of Coaching

**RE:** **KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL** - Program Design and Parents' Role

The purpose of this letter is to outline our special program, specifically designed for the U-6 & U-8 players. The program is called: "KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL". We would like to explain to you the skill priorities and program objectives for your child, the program's format, and your role within the program.

### **Skill Priorities**

The technical objective of the U-6/U-8 program is to teach players to dribble. Dribbling is the foundation skill for all the other skills and must be taught first. Aimless kicking will be discouraged by the coaches, as it develops bad habits and has no long-term benefits.

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### **Field Layout**

You will be asked to sit about 20 yards away from the sidelines during games in an area designated as the Parent's Area. The objective here is to give the players a sense of freedom, encourage the players to think for themselves and wean them out of their dependency on the adults.

### **We ask that you:**

- 1) Refrain from coaching. Leave the coaching to the coach.
- 2) Do not tell the players to 'kick it' during the games or the practices.
- 3) Avoid encroaching beyond the parent's designated area until the game is terminated.
- 4) Feel free to cheer and applaud. This is NOT Silent Weekend! But no negative comments and absolutely no coaching. And, please, applaud good plays by the other team too.
- 5) Exhibit good sportsmanship and make the other team feel welcome.

Please refer to the attached handout (shown below) for a more detailed rationale of our program. Feel free to speak to me if you have any questions or concerns. I hope your child and you have a nice season.

## **KICKING IS NOT A SOCCER SKILL – PROGRAM RATIONALE**

### **Skill Priorities**

Everyone knows that the game of soccer has a number of basic skills, or *techniques*, that players have to learn, such as dribbling, receiving passes, making passes, shooting and heading. Players also have to learn to make good decisions during the game, such as when to dribble, when to pass, and to whom to pass. These players' decisions are referred to as *tactical* decisions.

The first principle of soccer development is that players should master the basic techniques before they can learn the tactical side of the game. **Technique before tactics!** Think of techniques as vocabulary, and tactics as the grammar rules for forming sentences and paragraphs. Now, imagine a young immigrant who arrives in America without a word of English. It's pretty obvious that before we can teach this immigrant about the rules for joining nouns, verbs, and adverbs to form a sentence, we have to give him a chance to accumulate enough vocabulary. The bigger his vocabulary, the better will he be able to use grammar to articulate his thoughts.

In terms of soccer development, your child is just beginning his/her 'schooling'. We use the word 'schooling' here because there are many similarities between a regular school and a youth club, which can be considered as essentially a soccer school. In fact, as you might have already noticed, throughout this letter we will be using many analogies from real life schooling and the principles of growing up to explain the rationale behind the program.

As far as techniques are concerned, some techniques should be taught before others. The first technique that children should learn is **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation skill and preparation for all the other fundamental techniques of soccer, such as receiving, passing and shooting. When players are receiving the ball and making

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preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction with the ball, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and dribbling to get away from pressure. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. There are also times in the game, when the player with the ball has no passing options and the only way out of tight pressure is to dribble.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start the better. Just like any complex bio-mechanical skill such as skating or gymnastics, the later you start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form.

Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players don't get discouraged easily if they don't succeed. Players of this age do not possess the analytical thought process to look back or think ahead. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that the last time they tried to dribble it didn't work will not even enter their minds. But if we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble.

Thirdly, In 3v3 and 4v4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is always just a few yards away from shooting range. Once the game moves to the larger sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on its own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. And lastly, it's better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the U-10 and older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

### **Kicking is NOT a Soccer Skill!!!**

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, they louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. The fact is that the players are asked to execute a skill (kicking) that they would automatically learn anyway as they grow up, even if they didn't play soccer. If you don't believe it, just go outside to your back yard, place a ball on the ground, take a few steps back, run up to the ball and kick it forward. I am willing to bet you that, even if you never played soccer in your life,

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you would still succeed in kicking the ball forward. Your kick might look awkward and your movement lack grace, but you still would manage to kick it forward.

The reality is that players are controlled like puppets by the adults to such an extent that they are not thinking for themselves and are afraid to do anything but kick the ball. Even throw-ins are routinely thrown straight to the other team by confused players who are conditioned to play the ball forward, no matter what. The kick-offs are no better, with players kicking the ball straight to the other team, American football style. Players who clearly have plenty of time on the ball with no pressure anywhere near, are still kicking it forward without any thought or skill. And this type of mindless play is usually not corrected by the coaches and is allowed to occur time and again. The end result is that we are ‘coaching’ the skill of dribbling OUT of the players. We take away the natural ‘comfort’ with the ball - forever!

Let’s be frank here. The underlying issue has to do with how you, the adults, look at the game and analyze it. It’s fair to say that you all accept that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and that there is no need to keep standings. But you also instinctively know that the easiest way to get the ball from point A to point B is to kick it in that direction. It’s hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. So, the next time your child has the ball in his/her half, you can’t help it and shout “kick it!” But every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble. The buzz word of our program is: ‘Soft first Touch’. Every time your player goes to the ball, his/her first touch on the ball should be a soft one, meaning NO KICKING!

Some of you might ask “but what about passing?” Isn’t soccer a team game and passing a fundamental team skill? **Passing** implies an intention by a player to direct the ball accurately towards a teammate. It implies decision making. Do not confuse passing with kicking. The term ‘Kicking’ means using the feet to propel the ball in a certain direction. You will not see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. In terms of the level of difficulty, **kicking** is the easiest to learn, **dribbling** is next, and **passing** is the hardest to master for young players. Think of dribbling as ‘passing to myself’. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? What young players do is actually kick, not pass, and the cheers they hear from you when they kick only serve to reinforce this bad habit.

For this reason, we ask you to **stop shouting to your players to kick the ball**. If game results truly don’t matter, no one should be overly concerned if a player tries to dribble and loses the ball. First touch must be a **SOFT TOUCH**.

### Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency

Now that we explained the program’s skill objective for your child’s technical development, we would like to make you aware of another important objective, in the area of decision making. Children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. This dependency transfers into youth sports and manifests itself as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8

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program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is so very crucial for the development of soccer players.

We all know that soccer is a player's game, meaning that it's the player who must make the decisions on the field. In soccer, coaches have a lot less influence and power during games than in some of the other traditional American sports. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do.

One of the main features of youth soccer is having the parents sit very close to the field. We realize that it all seems so nice and cozy to sit by the sidelines. But sitting so close to the players gives the parents too much presence, which impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.

### **Individual Concept vs Team Concept**

As parents, naturally you are mainly concerned with the welfare and development of your child. When your child goes to school, you are really only interested in how he/she is progressing in school. Do you really care how the class is doing as a whole? As long as your child is doing well and the teacher is keeping pace with the required academic standards for his/her age, you are happy. You don't go around boasting that your child's class average was higher than the class next door. The class concept in school is seen as a logistical convenience where children of like-age are grouped together to learn academics and social skills within the dynamics of a group, nothing more, nothing less.

**The same concept should be applied to youth sport. Just like a classroom, a youth team should be seen as a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social skills, nothing more, nothing less.**

But parents and coaches seem to have a hard time accepting this notion. They let the team concept take over and become the focus of the soccer activity. It's no longer "my son is going to play today". It's become "OUR TEAM is playing against THEIR TEAM today".

People want to be part of a team. They feel safe and comfortable. There are many positives in a team environment, such as building lifelong friendships, sharing common goals, learning to trust and depend on others. But when the team assumes too much importance or consumes your life, it can lead to tension and conflicts. Games become more stressful. The mood of the family unit for the rest of the day hinges on the game result. 'What's best for the team' overrides what's best for the individual players. The negative aspects of the team concept manifest themselves in many ways: The amount of playing time players get, rivalry between teams spilling over into arguments and even hostility, coaches fighting over players, referee abuse, etc.

## « EDUCATING & DEALING WITH PARENTS »

As parents, you should only be concerned with one thing: Is your child having fun? And is he/she being given the opportunity to play and learn the game? How the team is doing has absolutely no impact on the future well being of your child. Mia Hamm is not playing for the National Team because her U-10 team won the state championship. She is in the national team because she has developed into a skillful and athletic player. Your child might develop into a high level player or he/she might not. A lot of this depends on the genes and is pre-determined before your child was even born. As long as he/she is having fun and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, that's all you can ask for. Remember: The team is there to serve your CHILD'S needs. Your child is not there to serve the team's needs. If the team's performance produces strong emotions in you, you need to step back and take a deep breath and suppress these emotions. **The team is just a logistical expediency to engage a bunch of kids in play, nothing more, nothing less. Tomorrow, your child will be part of another team.**

Parents must beware of coaches who seem intent in building a 'dynasty' at these young ages. If a coach approaches you with the intent to recruit your child into his/her team because "He wants to build a strong team", you should question his agenda. The chances are he/she will emphasize the wrong type of development and training. The chances are that he/she will replace your child down the road when a better player crops up.

**TOPSoccer** (The Outreach Program for Soccer) is a community-based training and team placement program for young athletes with disabilities. The emphasis of this program is on development and physical participation rather than on competition; and to provide meaningful learning, development and physical participation opportunities to young disabled athletes through the game of soccer. The goal of this program is to enable young people with disabilities to develop their physical fitness, technical skills, courage and self-esteem, through the joy and excitement of playing soccer.

**A TOPSoccer athlete is defined as** any youth player between the ages of 4 and 19 who has a disability that limits his/her ability to perform at the level of play in which he/she has chosen to participate. Players are placed on teams by ability, not age. The emphasis is on ability not disability and player involvement.

## **Modification of the Playing Environment**

The objective is to create a meaningful experience in soccer for youth players with disabilities. Modification of the playing rules and equipment is oftentimes necessary.

- ◆ Play small-sided games on smaller fields
- ◆ Use “Unified Games” as a means to facilitate play. In unified soccer, a ratio of players with disabilities to able-bodied players is kept on the field. Example: 5 versus 5 with a ratio of 3 disabled to 2 able-bodied players. Disabled athletes take all kick-offs and re-starts.

### **For Children with Orthopedic Impairments:**

- ◆ Reduce field size
- ◆ Increase number of players on team (to include “buddies/helpers”)
- ◆ Use regulation balls with less air, “nerf” balls or “gymnic” balls.

### **For Children with Visual Impairments**

- ◆ Increase size of ball used
- ◆ Use brightly colored balls
- ◆ Wrap goals with brightly colored tape
- ◆ Use beeper/bell balls
- ◆ Use soccer “buddies/helpers”
- ◆ Use some kind of sounding device near or in the goal

# « TOPSOCCER »

## **Registration**

TOPSoccer athletes are registered just as any youth soccer players are, and are afforded the same protection as any other player.

**For further information or assistance in starting a TOPSoccer program, contact the Georgia Soccer - Youth Special Programs Representative.**

