

TRAINING PRIORITIES FOR 14U-19U

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Many players in the 14U-19U age groups experience a key transition phase in their soccer development. They are going through major physiological and psycho-social changes as they embark on the road to manhood. By this stage most, if not all, have developed their body strength to a point where they can handle the physical demands of the 11-a-side game. In fact, their raging hormones and newly discovered physical powers are often channeled into displays of increased aggression, leading to fast paced encounters with plenty of physical challenges. It's their way of knocking on the doors of adulthood and independence and announcing their arrival.

The increased speed and physical play places new technical demands on the players. They must be able to control the ball quicker and execute a range of techniques with less time and space. Those who have assiduously worked on honing their technique during the formative years between the ages of 8 to 13 are able to adapt to the faster speed of play. But those who have neglected their technical development tend to struggle at this stage. Games at this age range can easily degenerate into a chaotic helter-skelter if the players' newly acquired strength and aggression is not matched by sound technique.

Hence, one of the essential training priorities at this stage is to improve the technique of players at match speed and help them deal with the technical demands of the more aggressive, physical game. That can be accomplished through activities that are technically challenging. Activities such as possession games in small grids, where players have little time and space and where a poor first touch would get punished. They also need to learn to receive balls coming from any distance, at pace and varying heights, and distribute it with all surfaces of their feet. They need to increase their passing range and develop a repertoire of passing techniques, such as driving, bending, chipping, etc.

The other significant feature of this age range is the onset of specialization. By the time players reach the 16U level, most of them have gravitated to their permanent position. By then, they have figured out their best position and begin to specialize. A functional element needs to be introduced to the training. The sessions devoted to tactics should oscillate between generic tactical topics such as possession, penetration, and functional activities that deal with specific positions and phases of play. Also, on the tactical level, group tactics and team tactics become a prominent part of the training as focus is shifted from individual tactics to group dynamics. And lastly, transition from attack to defense and vice versa should be incorporated as much as possible to improve this important aspect of high-level soccer.

To summarize, the training priorities for 14U-19U play are:

1. Technical Speed of Play – execute advanced technique at high tempo.
2. A good balance of general tactical sessions and functional tactical sessions to help players specialize and develop team tactics. Include transition whenever possible.
3. All the while, maintaining a solid foundation of basic technique via technical warm-ups and technical-functional repetitions.

4. Fitness – high intensity low volume speed work to convert the newly acquired strength into explosiveness.

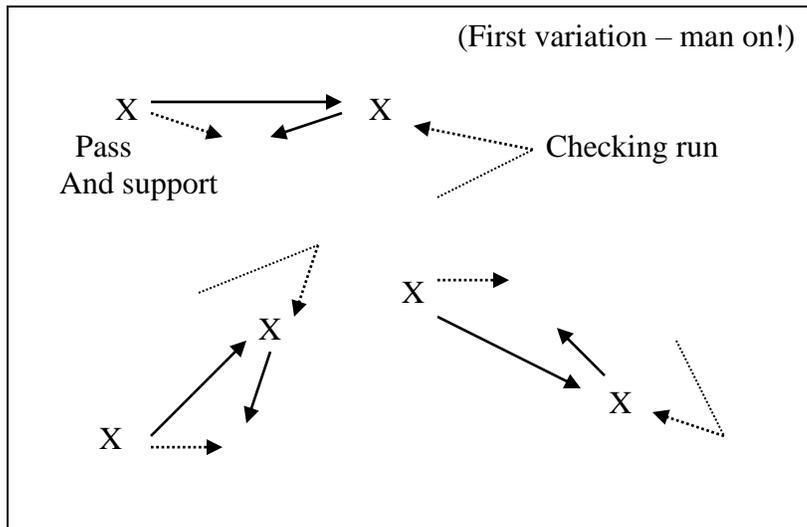
Below are two examples of a practice plan that illustrate the training priorities. The first practice deals with POSSESSION in a generic approach, meaning not position-specific. It includes a progression of activities that emphasize possession through verbal communication, quality first touch and passing, and good positioning, and teaches players how to quickly adopt good support angles to give the player with the ball many passing options. The second practice's focus is on PLAYING OUT OF THE BACK WITHIN A 3-5-2 FORMATION. The second practice is obviously more functional and teaches the players to make possession/penetration decisions in the back third within a specific team formation.

Practice Plan 1 for 14U-19U

Topic: Possession

Team: 16 players

I. Warm up



Players in pairs spread over half a field. Each pair has a ball. As the player with the ball dribbles around, his partner checks away at a slow jog and then quickly checks to the ball, asking for it.

First variation: The passer shouts “man-on!” as he passes and comes quickly to support and receives a first time pass back. Receiver moves away again, opens up a distance between the two players and readies himself for another checking run. Process is repeated 10 times and then players switch roles.

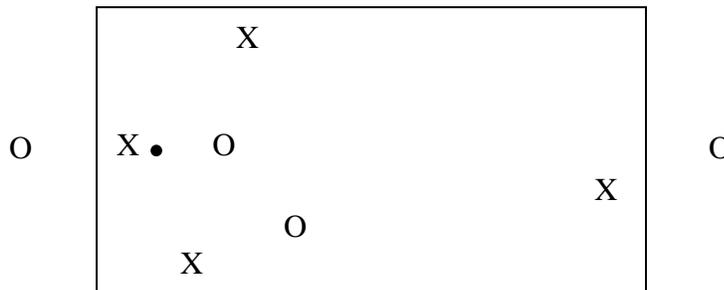
Second variation: Player checks to the ball. The passer shouts “turn!”. The receiver turns with the ball and dribbles away, now becoming the passer. Pair looks for each other again and repeats.

Third variation: The players vary their communication, with the passer deciding to shout “man on!” or “turn!” and the receiver reacting accordingly.

Coaching points:

- Eye contact between the two players at all time. Dribbler keeps head up. Receiver watches the ball as he checks away.
- Change of pace on checking run.
- Passer needs to communicate early and clearly.
- Quality pass towards the checking player, on the ground, with pace.
- Passer supports the pass by immediately following at a new angle and taking up a new position closer to the receiver.
- Quality first time pass back.
- If turning, do it economically, with few touches.

II. 4v2 Possession



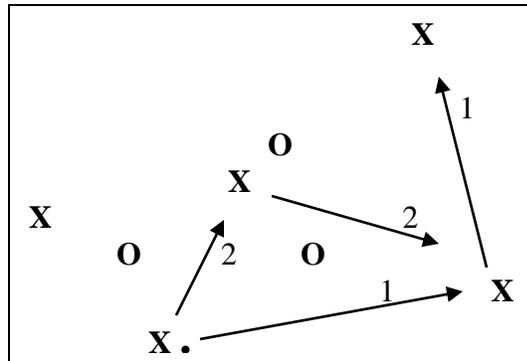
Group split into 4 teams of 4 players and use two grids 15yds by 20yds. Teams play 4v2 possession in each grid. Defending team has 2 players outside grid at each end. Teams change roles after 5 turnovers. A turnover is when the ball goes out of bounds last touched by an attacker, or the defenders intercept and pass to one of the outside players. Attacking team can try to win the ball back if they lose it to the two defenders (transition).

Coaching points:

- Support angles and shape that give easy passing options left, right, and long.
- Draw defenders to one end and then quickly switch ball to the other end and move to support.
- Body position open to field to see all options before ball arrives.

- If defenders intercept, pressure them quickly to regain possession before they pass ball to the outside players. Use numerical advantage to double mark and block outlet pass.

III. 5v3 Possession



Each group of 8 plays 5v3 possession in a grid 20yds by 30yds. If the 3 defenders win it, they keep it against the 5 players, hence play is continuous. The 5 players have maximum 2 touch restriction, the 3 players have unlimited touches.

This activity is physically tiring. Work in 10-minute intervals separated by 10 minutes active rest. The active rest periods can be spent working on long range passing.

Coaching Points:

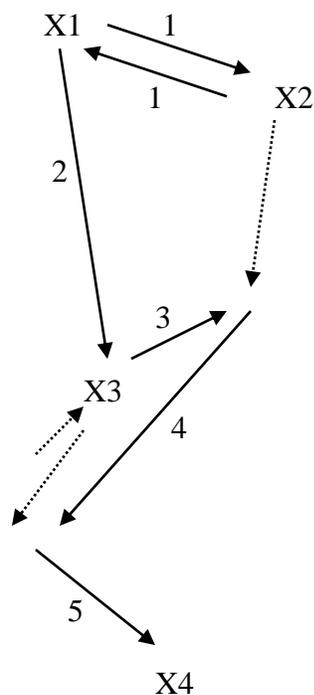
- This activity teaches the 5 players to develop a possession rhythm with one and two touch play and teaches them to transition to pressing the ball immediately upon turnover (transition).
- The 3 players learn to keep the ball by trickery, dribbling and shielding.
- Support angles and shape are again paramount.
- Body position open to the field.
- The players on the periphery stretch the field by pushing against the lines, provide pressure outlet, see the whole field and can communicate to the inside player (man on, turn, etc). They are better positioned to send long balls to the other sides (pass sequence 1).
- The central players help switch the point by checking to receive and redirecting with one touch to a new player (pass sequence 2). The central player is like a rebounding wall who avoids turning into pressure.

IV. 8v8 Possession

Play possession in a grid 40yds by 50yds. Start with unlimited touches and progress to maximum two touch. First team to reach 20 one-touch passes (not necessarily consecutive) is the winner. Players learn good habits that form the basis for possession play: Stretch the field, keep moving the ball and work it into less crowded areas, communicate, play one and two touch soccer, play the way you are facing rather than turn needlessly into pressure, and offer good support angles. Practice can finish with an 8v8 scrimmage with keepers and goals to evaluate transfer of learning from the activities to the game.

Practice Plan 2 for 14U-19U **Topic: Playing out of the Back in 3-5-2**

I. Warm Up



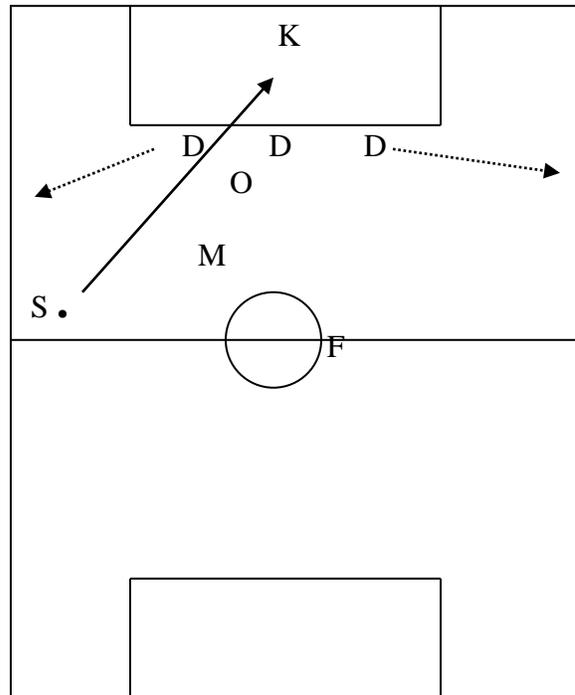
Players in groups of 4. The distance between X1 and X4 is about 50yds. X1 and X4 are typically defenders or defensive midfielders. X2 and X3 are forwards and attacking midfielders. The players work on passing patterns such as the one shown: X1 and X2 (link player) interchange (passes 1) until X1 prepares ball for long pass, at which point X3 (target player) checks to the ball and receives (pass 2). X2 immediately sprints to

support X3. X3 plays first time (pass 3) to X2 and turns and sprints for a through ball (pass 4) from X2 and passes it to X4. Process is repeated the other direction, with X3 becoming the link player and X2 the target player.

Coaching Points:

- While X1 and X2 interchange passes, X3 should check away from the ball to stretch the distance.
- The cue for X3's checking run is when X1 uses his first touch to prepare for a long pass.
- X2 should support X3 at an angle to allow an angled pass, making it easier to play the through ball (passes 3 and 4).
- Quality passes. Long pass should be low, hard and to feet. Shorter passes should be softer paced to allow first time passes. Can also vary the long passes to target, using driven balls, air balls to head down or to chest for a back pass off the chest. Another variation is for X2 to pass directly to X4 (replace passes 4 and 5 with one long pass).
- Everything done at match speed.

II. 3-5-2 Playing out of the Back – Work on Defending Unit

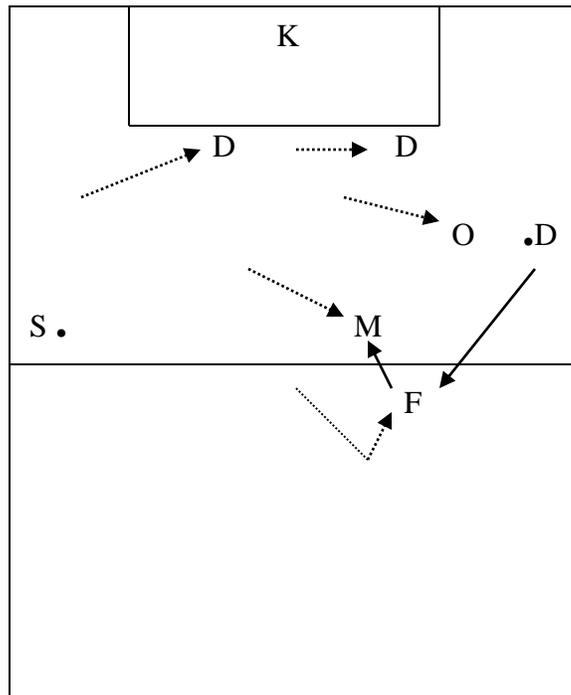


The warm-up has prepared the players technically for the main session. Now we move to the area of the field appropriate for the topic and start developing the session.

The first step is to work with the back line on adopting the right shape to possess and build up from the back. This step includes a server (S), the keeper, the 3 defenders, an attacking midfielder and a forward, playing against one opposing forward (O). The objective is to get the ball to the forward. The sequence starts with a server (S) who passes the ball to the keeper to simulate a through ball gathered by the keeper. The back line starts compact as they would when defending. As soon as the keeper gathers the ball, the back line gets wide and spreads across the field to receive a throw from the keeper. The defender who gets the ball, plays it to the checking forward who lays it back to the attacking midfielder, preferably with first touch. Opponent O should chase the back line and try to close the ball. If O wins it, he can go to goal and play continues until it goes out of bounds. Play stops when F plays it back to M and the sequence repeated, starting from server.

Coaching points: (see diagram below)

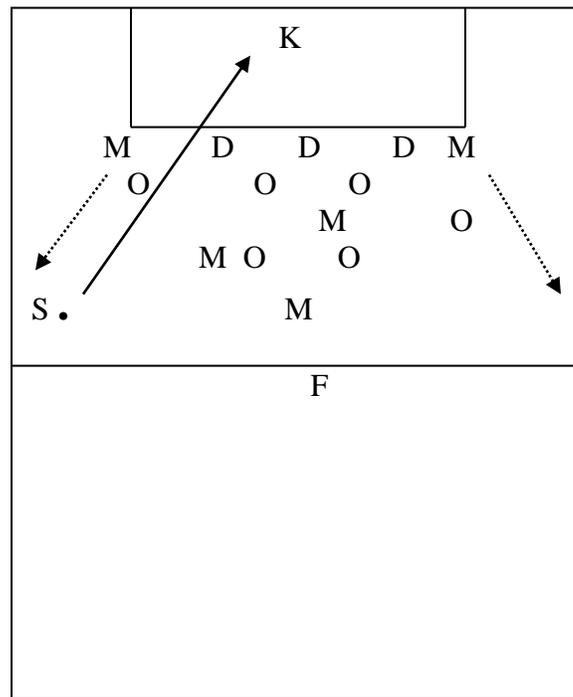
- Keeper's throw in front of defender, so he can play it forward easily. If the throw can beat the pressing forward (O), even better.
- Other two defenders shift across and support from behind the ball.
- Forward times his checking run.
- Quality delivery to forward's feet.
- Midfielder M quickly supports F for a drop pass to end sequence.



III. 3-5-2 Playing out of the Back – Add Midfield Unit

Once the back line gets it right, the midfield line is added. Coach adds the two wide midfielders, one or two defensive midfielders, and puts all the opponents in midfield as well as a second opposing forward to replicate the game's demands. This becomes a

10v6 game. Objective is to play the ball into the other half under control. If the opponents win the ball, they attack and try to score.



Coaching points:

- Wide midfielders get wide and high quickly to make room for the back line.
- Defenders get wide.
- Quick decision from keeper to throw to wide midfield or defender or central midfield.
- Central midfielders stagger position and avoid being flat.
- Immediate support behind the ball. If wide M has it, wide D supports from behind. If wide D has it, central D supports from behind. Similarly, the D's support the defending M, defending M supports attacking M and attacking M supports F. This way, players can play the way they are facing and not turn into pressure and ball is circulated quickly.
- Wide M should push up as high as possible unless they need to drop and support.
- The in-back-through passing patterns to spring a midfielder through should feature prominently in this exercise. Examples: IN to attacking M's feet, BACK to a defending M, THROUGH to the forward or OUT to the wide M. IN to forward's feet, BACK to midfield, THROUGH to a wide midfielder's run.
- If forward pass is not on or midfield under pressure, the wide D can step up and receive a square ball in the flank to relieve pressure and keep the ball.