

SUBSTITUTIONS IN YOUTH SOCCER GAMES

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Many youth, school and college games in North America allow unlimited substitutions during games. The main driving force behind the liberal substitution rules is to promote equal playing time for all participants and to provide ample development opportunities to all the players. Although these substitution rules are well intentioned, the end result is not always conducive to player development. When substitution is taken to excessive levels and players are rotated in and out like a revolving door, the rhythm of play breaks down, games become too helter-skelter and player development suffers.

There are generally two types of substitutions:

1. Tactical substitutions: where coaches are trying to fix issues and improve the performance by making changes or replacing a player(s) who is no longer effective.
2. Playing time management: where the coach is trying to give everyone ample playing time.

These are legitimate reasons for substituting, as long as they are not taken to extreme. Coaches should keep the following points in mind when making substitutions and strategizing:

The fundamental process of tactical development hinges on the cycle of playing-receiving feedback-playing. This cycle is already naturally inherent in the game's rules. Players play the first half, receive immediate feedback from the coach at half time, and return to the game in the second half to apply the coach's instructions. When unlimited substitutions are literally applied, the tactical learning cycle is interrupted. For instance, the half time talk loses its effectiveness if many players are replaced for the second half. The new players cannot relate to the coach's feedback since they didn't experience the problems of the first half and the non-returning players lose an important opportunity to put into use the coach's feedback. This issue is exacerbated if the half time talk precedes the second half substitutions announcement. It's better to first announce the substitutions and then give the feedback about what needs to be done in the second half. The players will pay more attention since they are getting specific instructions that is applicable to them.

One feature of unlimited substitution often seen in North American youth games is the constant re-entry of players to play in 10-15 minute shifts. This seemingly pre-determined player rotation does little to teach players the tactical intricacies and nuances of the game. It takes at least ten minutes to get into the rhythm of the game. Just as a player settles into a position, he gets pulled out. This strategy does not allow players to develop a feel for the pace of the game. Knowing that one has only 15 minutes to play before coming out, players tend to run 'hard' rather than run 'smart'. Knowing that the coach will make substitutions within 5-10 minutes of the start of the game makes some players nervous. They are worried that if they make a bad pass, they might be the ones pulled out.

To make matters worse, coaches often send players back to play a different position from the one they occupied in the previous shift. Tactical development is all about learning the right angles and support distances relative to teammates and to the ball. In other words, it is about learning to maintain a good team shape. Every position has its own specific angles and geometry to discover. Players, especially

inexperienced ones, need time to learn how to contribute to the overall team shape with their own positioning and how to adjust to the game's ebb and flow. Good coaches observe their players' positioning and provide brief but relevant tips while the game is going on and at half time. The purpose of the feedback is to help the players understand team shape. This is the essence of tactical development. Constant substitutions, with players thrown into different positions within the same game, hinder players' tactical growth.

A much better approach is to allow players to play entire halves and let each player remain in the same position for the entire game, or at least for most of the game. A player rotation system can still be used to ensure that every player gets to play at least half the game. Each player should have a 'main' position that he/she is responsible for learning during the season. The next season, the players can move and learn to play another position so that in a couple of years all players will have developed the versatility needed in the modern game.

Lastly, coaches should prepare the bench players physically and mentally for action before sending them into the field. The players on the bench should go through a warm up routine and stretch periodically, especially in frigid weather. Sending a player cold into a game straight from a sitting position increases the chance of injuries. When working with young players, the coach can point out to the bench players certain tactical aspects in order to help them read the game and understand their role when stepping in. If the substitution is a tactical one, it always helps to have a quick word with the player just before sending him/her into the game to make sure he understands what's expected of him.