

Basic Coaching Concepts for Players Under the Age of Eleven The "Golden Age" for Soccer Skill Learning

Tom Turner, Director of Coaching and Player Development
Ohio Youth Soccer Association-North

When young soccer players reach the age of eight, nine or 10, they have generally accumulated four or five years experience with the sport and have developed some basic skills and ideas about the game. Before age eight, the main goal of coaching is to provide an enjoyable entry into soccer and ensure enjoyment and fun. In short, the role of the coach is to facilitate games for the enjoyment of the participants. For many players, reaching eight, or nine, or 10 (every child is a little different) means new priorities and a new appreciation for their personal responsibility to the game. For the first time, these players begin to realize that winning and losing are tied to ability, not effort, and that skills must be refined for improvement to be noted. The role of the U-9/10 coach is therefore critical in shaping the technical range and tactical insights of the players; the role of the coach is that of a teacher.

The period around eight or nine is considered the beginning of the "Golden Age" for skill learning for a number of reasons. Players will listen to and comprehend more complicated directions. Players will carry out repetitive "drill" activities and appreciate their purpose. Players will spend time working on their skills alone, if they are motivated. Players will appreciate the importance and thrill of learning new skills and refining existing techniques. Players will begin to identify with national or international heroes and begin to emulate their skills and personalities. Players love to compete and strive to win. Players begin to equate fun with improvement. Players begin to equate their personal identity and self-esteem with their perceived ability and feedback from significant others, including peers, parents and coaches.

Coaching nine- and 10-year-olds is a formidable task that requires a number of skills on the part of the adult. These skills include practical soccer knowledge, the ability to demonstrate and inspire by example, some basic understanding of child psychology, an appreciation of purpose relative to the age and ability of the players, and the ability to teach for long-term growth. With that said, the elements outlined below are all within the technical and tactical range of nine- and 10-year-olds players in Ohio, although it should be acknowledged that in some parts of the world, and some parts of the United States, players of the same age might be more or less advanced. Our goal, as coaches in Ohio, is to develop basic skills and ideas about the game at an age when players are highly receptive to instruction and highly motivated to learn.

The following elements represent a checklist for assessing the performance of individual players. Some players will be quite advanced in some areas and not others. Some players will be capable of executing some skills against one level of opponent, but not another. Some players will be able to execute techniques in a drill, but fail to apply them as skill when under pressure from live opponents. Some players will be competent, but not outstanding. Some players will be technical, but not skillful, while others will be skillful, but not technical. When viewed as a developmental continuum, all players will score high in some areas and low in others. Coaching "well" means assessing players' abilities and insights and slowly moving them towards the "ideal" of the top level in the time available to us.

Individual Technical and Tactical Issues for Under-9 and Under-10

Contacting the Ball

How many ways can the player kick, dribble or control the ball? There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The Under-9/10 player should be challenged to expand their range of surfaces and textures (weights and spins) in an ongoing process of technical refinement.

Is the player two footed? Juggling and dribbling practice should always involve the use of both feet and young players must be encouraged to experiment with all six contact surfaces. For the more motivated players, juggling, kicking and Coerver's* are essential "homework" activities for developing a comfort level with the ball.

*Coerver's are individual dribbling moves named after the Dutchman, Wiel Coerver, who created the training program.

Passing

Does the player purposely pass the ball towards teammates? Players should be asked to control the ball and look for teammates rather than simply kicking the ball forward or to safety; it is often necessary to remind young players that the goalkeeper is always the most open player on the team when they are under pressure or no obvious forward passing options are available. At this age, the "thinking" behind a passing decision is often more telling than the outcome, and young players must be encouraged to attempt to maintain possession by passing (or dribbling) even as their limited range of techniques fail them.

How far can the player kick the ball accurately? Players should be encouraged to pass within their technical range. Technique, physical strength and the size and weight of the ball all impact kicking distance and accuracy. In the small-sided games environment, shorter passes should be expected and encouraged, with aimless "boots" to safety, or to the opposition regarded as wasted possessions.

Does the player use disguise and deception when passing? Encouraging more frequent passing (and dribbling) with the outside of the foot will help improve the level of subtlety in young players. The use of the hips to deceive opponents can also become a feature of play for nine- and 10-year-olds.

Shooting

Does the player shoot, when possible? A player's first thought in possession should always be "Can I score a goal from here?" Goals in practice should be wide and high enough to encourage shots from various distances and angles and young players should be reminded that the objective of the game is to score more goals than the opponent in the time provided. Shots can be placed, driven, chipped, curled, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, or improvised using any other legal body part.

Ball Control

How many touches does the player take to control the ball? The earlier a player decides what to do with the ball, the faster they will play; however, many Under-9 and Under-10 players will not look up before they have secured possession because their skill level will not allow them to concentrate on two things (the ball and

the next action) at once. Time, space, vision of the field and a comfort level with the ball are the most important elements in reducing the number of touches necessary to control the ball.

Does the player understand their tactical options before the ball is controlled? Vision for "What next?" is a key element in the positive use of the "first touch," and coaches should challenge players to appreciate their immediate tactical situation as early as possible during play. Coaching should attempt to develop "pre-control" vision whenever possible by asking players to assess the availability of space around them before receiving a pass.

Does the player open their body when possible when controlling the ball? Players who open their body towards the opponent's goal before receiving the ball take fewer touches and play faster. Players should only open their bodies when they have space to do so. This skill begins to emerge at the Under-10 level, although some younger players can grasp the concept.

Dribbling

Does the player have the skill to dribble out of pressure, or past an opponent? Dribbling practice should include basic moves to turn away from pressure and also ideas on how to use changes in pace and direction to maintain possession or beat an opponent. As the most artistic aspect of soccer, young players must not be discouraged from learning to dribble the ball through early and repeated failures. At this age, repetition in practicing dribbling moves in isolation and in live tactical contexts is critical for developing touch and creativity.

Does the player run into open space with the ball? Running forward with the ball is important for making defenders commit to the ball, for shortening passing distances, for changing the rhythm of play and for creating shooting possibilities. Players must be encouraged to quickly dribble the ball into open space and also encouraged to use the outside surface of the foot when "speed dribbling."

Does the player dribble with their head down and rarely look to pass or shoot? While it is important to encourage young players to quickly dribble the ball into open space, players must also be aware of their passing and shooting options. Given that the ball can travel faster when kicked, it is important to encourage dribbling players to look up during those moments when they are in open space and not touching the ball, and when they are momentarily clear of opponents.

Does the player use disguise and deception when dribbling? The most difficult opponents are "wrigglers" who are unpredictable in their dribbling. Players should be encouraged to combine dribbling moves and become comfortable making multiple, abrupt changes in direction.

Heading

Does the player head the ball? Heading becomes more common by ages nine and 10 and practicing and playing with lighter balls will help overcome any initial fears of performing this difficult skill. It should also be stressed that there is NO medical evidence supporting the claim that heading a soccer ball is dangerous to the participants.

Support

Does the player move with the game or do they pass and stand still? Young players should not be restricted in their movements on the field and moving "with the game" should become a natural extension of passing. Passing sequences involving two and three players should be encouraged and can be expected at this age. These beginning attempts at combination play will become essential elements of mature play. At the Under-9 and Under-10 levels, an increase in the speed of ball circulation, coupled with a more controlled rhythm of play can be expected from competent players.

Does the player move into open spaces when not in possession? Players should be encouraged to "find" new supporting positions away from teammates rather than be told where and when to move. By age 10, some children have started to think more abstractly about the use of space away from the ball; however many others do not yet demonstrate this spatial awareness, making large-group positional instruction irrelevant for the vast majority of nine and 10 year-olds. More advanced nine- and 10-year-olds will often appreciate supporting positions to the side of the field (width) while failing to demonstrate the importance of creating space downfield and ahead of the ball (depth).

Is the player more comfortable when facing the opponent's goal than when playing with their back to the opponent's goal? Some players are uncomfortable checking and receiving the ball with their back to goal. While older players will ultimately be selected to positions based on this skill, all young players should regularly experience this challenge as a natural part of their soccer education. Before the ability to play effectively with "back to goal" develops, young children must first learn to find passing lanes, judge when and how to run for the ball, learn how to control and turn with the ball, and learn how to disguise their movements. Because of the reduced technical and tactical demands, small-sided games create the only natural environments that provide repeated experiences in learning this difficult aspect of soccer.

Defending

Does the player try to recover the ball when possession is lost? "Defending" at this age should be no more complicated than encouraging young players to try and win the ball back when lost. The better players can grasp the concept of "marking" an opponent and "picking up" opponents when not in possession, and they will recover behind the ball as a group. However, in deference to the technical difficulties associated with attacking play for most nine- and 10-year-olds, any concentrated emphasis on "team" defending should be delayed until at least Under-11.

Does the player simply kick at the ball when an opponent is in possession?

Tackling for the ball can and should include efforts to regain possession. The player who routinely kicks the ball away should be encouraged to use their body and the open space away from the opponent to attempt to win the ball back.

Transition

Does the player mentally transition after a change in possession? When the ball turns over from the attacker to the defender or from the defender to the attacker, the game offers chances to demonstrate awareness of two very important concepts: immediate recovery of the ball and immediate counter-attack to goal. Players should be assessed on how well they understand these concepts and

encouraged to react as quickly as possible to any change in possession. By extension, the players immediately in support of the ball can also be assessed on how well they react to help their teammates.

Creativity

Does the player improvise when solving tactical problems? Those players who use non-standard techniques to solve tactical problems are demonstrating signs of creativity. A "good" pass gets to its target at a pace that can be controlled, regardless of the technique used in the delivered; similarly, a goal is a goal, regardless of how it was propelled into the net. Young players who improvise should be encouraged, not scolded, and it must be remembered that for young players, the "thought" behind an action is generally more telling than the outcome, which is often limited by experience and technical range. Three elements impact creativity. The first is technique, the second is tactical awareness, and the third is confidence. Players who have the audacity to think and act out of the ordinary may be future stars of the game, and, while their techniques will be refined over time, their willingness to take risks must be nurtured at every level. Creative players are not always the easiest individuals to coach.