Why 8 A-Side?

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Children in the U11 and U12 age groups should play eight versus eight (8 v 8) in their matches. This includes the goalkeeper, hence seven field players and one goalkeeper. The playing field should be 70 to 80 yards long and 45 to 55 yards wide. The goal should be 6 feet high by 18 feet wide. The penalty area should be 14 yards out from each post and 14 yards forward. The goal area, penalty spot, penalty arc, corner arc, corner flags and center circle should be per FIFA rules. They should play two halves of 30 minutes each. Overtime should be two periods of 10 minutes each. The ball is a size 4, which gives a good indication that these are still children playing the game.

Players in this age group should play 8 v 8 to enhance their soccer abilities. This is true for all levels of play, recreational or premier. At this point in their physical and psychological development, most ten and eleven year old children can **play** rather than *play at* the game of soccer. Coaches must be careful at this juncture and not fall victim to the false assumption that these preadolescent children are now able to play mature soccer.

Yet there is more competence in their individual technical performance. They now intentionally combine in groups of two to four around the ball. In fact, the word "team" now becomes more than an abstract concept.

TECHNICAL

With fewer players on the field each player will touch the ball frequently. Obviously this happens in match conditions, thus assisting their technical development in a realistic way. Technical speed is enhanced due to the realistic size of the field. Improving technical speed puts a player on the road to tactical awareness. Since there are fewer players on the field they will have to perform both offensive and defensive ball skills frequently during match play. Improving ball skills is the main objective with this age group.

Two critical technical aspects of soccer are learned incorrectly in the current 11 v 11 format with this age group; goal scoring and shot stopping. In the current 11 v 11

format the U12 players are asked to use a regulation adult goal, which is 8 feet high by 24 feet wide. Ten and eleven year old goalkeepers are not very tall. Being pre-adolescents they have no vertical jump of any significant height. They generally have no chance of making a save on a high shot. Poor goalkeeping habits may be developed due to this environment. Furthermore the shooters are getting into a terrible habit of shooting high. In a few short years the goalkeepers will be tall and have significant jumping abilities. So now shots hit high are often to the delight of these older keepers who like to show off their acrobatics. With a smaller goal at U12 better goalkeepers and shooters will be developed.

Skills become an even more important factor at this point in their development because the players need to be introduced to general tactics as well. The technical/tactical possibility of switching the point of attack occurs for these players on a slightly smaller pitch. They could not execute this play on a full size pitch. The ability to switch the attack from one side of the pitch to the other with one or two touches of the ball is now a real option. This technical/tactical possibility keeps all of the players within the team connected. (For those of you who have taken the "B" or "A" License you know this as vertical and horizontal compactness. Granted this is a tactical aspect, but without technique there is no execution of tactics.) When this age group plays 11 v 11 on a large pitch the players on the side of the field opposite to the ball become spectators to the game, not players in the game. Here are the techniques that a coach should teach to players in this age group.

For Field Players: feints with the ball; receiving ground, bouncing & air balls with the lower leg, thigh, abdomen, chest & head; chipping to score; outside of the foot pass; bending shots; crossing to the near post & penalty spot spaces; heel pass; kicking & receiving with the inside of the instep; introduce the half-volley & volley shooting and introduce the slide tackle.

For Goalkeepers: footwork; bowling; low dives & forward diving; angle play; near post play; saving penalty kicks and introduce parrying and boxing.

PHYSICAL

With fewer players on a smaller pitch a greater demand will be placed on the players' fitness level. In this environment the game will take on a quick pace from end to end of the pitch. No player will be able to "hang out" while someone else defends or attacks for that player. In the 8 v 8 match environment the biggest increase on the fitness demand upon the players will be anaerobic. Speed and strength in these pubescent players will also begin to improve. Players will be in constant motion from penalty area to penalty area. Because the pitch is somewhat smaller there will be less aerobic endurance required, since the players will do fewer long distance jogs. Instead more anaerobic endurance will be required since they'll do more short distance sprints.

The cumulative effect will be a significant improvement of their soccer specific fitness. To this end the 8 v 8 match follows the S.A.I.D. principle. This of course is the **S**pecific **A**daptation to **I**mposed **D**emands. In the 8 v 8 match this physical demand will be soccer specific.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

With fewer players directly involved in the match a greater demand on mental focus will be placed upon the players. The game will always be near them and they will be almost continuously involved in the action. This will keep their attention; the 8 v 8 match is exciting and dynamic.

Since the number of players on the field of play is manageable for these children they may be willing to take more risks. In other words players now work with one another on offense in the shape of combination passing and defending in pairs. When playing in larger numbers the tactical picture is confusing to them. They do not yet have the cognitive development to handle so many variables at once. Consequently their confidence in making the "right decision" is eroded. This leads to a kick ball approach since they are not quite sure what to do.

Furthermore in the small sided game environment the coach and players can work together to improve teamwork; confidence; desire; mental rehearsal; intrinsic motivation; handling distress; how to learn from each match; sportsmanship; dealing with parental involvement and emotional management.

TACTICAL

The aspect of player development that will be most impacted by the 8 v 8 environment is tactics. With fewer players on a smaller pitch all players will be continuously involved on "both sides of the ball." That is they all will be engaged in both offense and defense throughout the match. A much greater demand for tactical ***transition*** will occur in this small-sided game. When U12 teams play on a large pitch with 11 a-side there is a tendency for the players to watch their teammates play and to only play themselves when the ball is in their immediate area. Even a casual observation of most U12 matches will reveal that almost 100% of the players' ball watch on both defense and offense. It's only natural when there is very little chance of a switch in the point of attack from one touchline to the other. The 8 a-side match does not allow players to "hide in the weeds."

I recommend that U12 teams play in a 2-3-2 formation. This formation allows the players to execute the principles of play, but will also place a great demand on mental and physical transition.

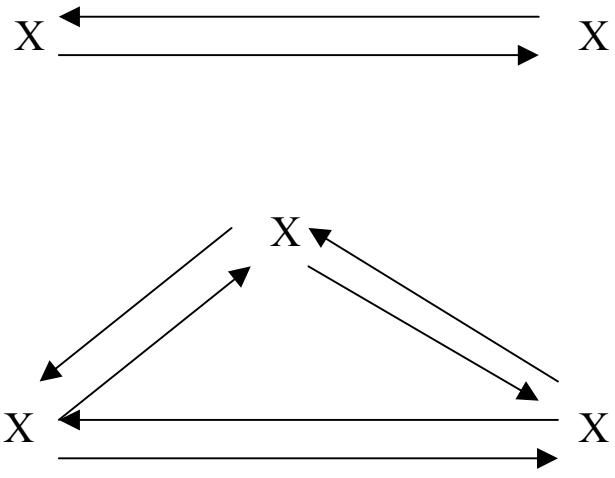
This aspect of the 8 v 8 environment is most appropriate since the U12 age group is considered the dawning of tactical awareness. Ten and eleven year old players

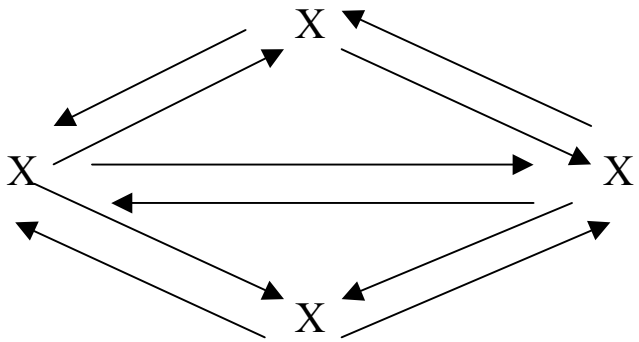
can execute individual and group tactics. The tactical concept of compactness is enhanced in the small-sided game.

What they do not yet have the experience or maturity to execute are team tactics. As more players enter the field of play the tactical environment becomes more complex. This has a direct impact on the players' decision making in both a technical and tactical sense. More players on the pitch mean more possible **lines of interaction**. That is, the probable connections between the players. More lines of interaction make for a tactically more complex environment. For ten and eleven year old players in an 11 v 11 match there are two hundred and twenty-two more potential lines of interaction than in the 8 v 8 match. Each of those lines of interaction is a possible tactical decision.

This becomes a tactically overwhelming environment, which leads to frustration. Since the tactical problems are too complex to solve the players often resort to a kick and run approach. Within the 8 a-side match the group tactics are reduced to mostly two, three and four players around the ball. This is a tactical situation, which a ten year old can comprehend. Consequently the player is able to handle the tactical environment and make intelligent decisions. The graphics below clearly show how quickly the tactics of a soccer match become quite complex each time that one more player is added to the field of play.

LINES OF INTERACTION [1]





3 V 3: 5 x 6 = 30 lines of interaction
4 V 4: 7 x 8 = 56 lines of interaction
6 V 6: 11 x 12 = 132 lines of interaction
8 V 8: 15 x 16 = 240 lines of interaction
11 V 11: 21 x 22 = 462 lines of interaction

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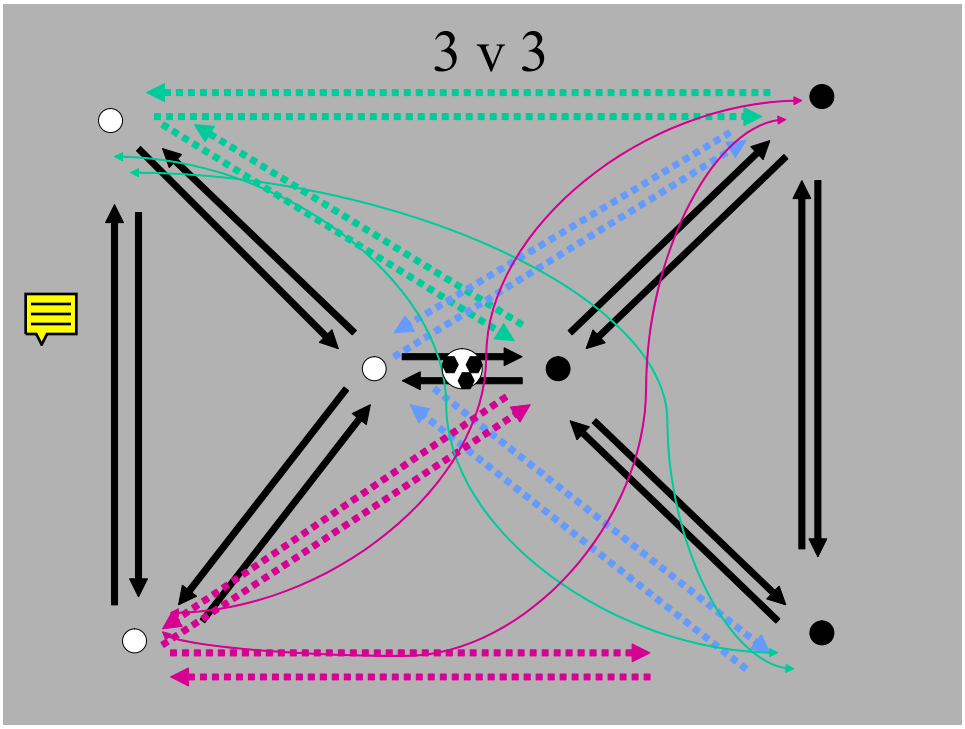

In addition to individual tactics here's what the coach of U12 and U11 teams should teach regarding tactics. Combination passing; 2 v 1 defending; 2 v 2 attacking & defending; the roles of second attacker & defender; verbal & visual communication for all positions; commanding the goalmouth for the goalkeeper; half-time analysis; corner kick plays for both defending and attacking; a kick-off play; wall passing;

introduce the principles of defense and begin to identify potential roles for players of goalkeeper, defender, midfielder and/or forward.

The 8 a-side small-sided game promotes player development. Whether you play for a U. S. Youth Soccer club or AYSO or SAY or the local recreation department the cornerstone of these organizations is player development. The curricula of the "Y" License, the Coerver Method and the Youth Diploma of the NSCAA have the common ground of player development as their foundation. The 8 a-side small-sided game promotes the objectives of player development as extolled by all of the above groups. These objectives for U12 players can be seen in the Coerver Method Pyramid of Player Development displayed below. [2]

The U12 age group is a transitional age for soccer players. These are players in the throes of puberty. Moving from childhood into adolescence they are going through a myriad of changes emotionally, physically, intellectually and socially. The 8 a-side game serves as their bridge into playing the adult soccer game of 11 a-side. This environment will produce young teenaged players who are a bit more tactically aware and more comfortable with the ball. With this approach we are moving closer toward intrinsic motivation, which is precisely where we want to be if we honestly believe that soccer is a player's game.

Here I quote Horst Wein,

"Advantages of 8-on-8 Soccer

The 8-on-8 soccer game better matches 12-and 13-year-old players than the official 11-on-11 competition in several areas:

1. *Each player touches the ball more often and is therefore more involved in the game. This more intensive participation not only enhances technical and tactical learning but also allows the youth coach to collect more precise information about the performance of each player as well as of his whole team as a unit.*
2. *Although the parameters of space and time are almost exactly the same (290 square meters per player or 300 square meters per play) as in the 11-on-11 game, the 8-on-8 game assures better learning (and facilitates a smooth transition to regular play) because there are only 16 players in the field. With fewer players on the field, the basic game situations appear more frequently, but they confront the young player with less complex problems than in the full game. The players therefore can feel more capable, which results in self-confidence and, at the same time, greater motivation to learn even more.*
3. *Playing with the No. 4 ball size allows youngsters to reach any player on the field with a pass (something that is impossible to find with their playing on the full field with the official ball). This aspect stimulates their perception skills. Besides, the size and weight of the ball are in perfect harmony with the level of speed and power of these players (especially true for the girls). With the ball tailored to their physical and mental capacities, better results occur in the acquiring and consolidating the most important techniques. This can't happen when youth compete in the traditional game with the official ball, therefore having fewer chances at the ball because of the excessive numbers of players on each team. The 8-on-8 competition therefore helps young players to develop correct habits for latter use in the 11-on-11 game. There is no question that it's much easier to integrate a player successfully into the full game after she or he has been exposed to two years of simpler problems in the 8-on-8 game.*
4. *All young goalkeepers between 12 and 14 years prefer to play 8-on-8 soccer instead of the full game. Why? Like their teammates they, too, have the opportunity to play the ball more often because fewer players are involved in the game and because the ball approaches the vicinity of the goals more often. Therefore, they gain more experience in less time. And the size of the goal is perfectly tailored to their height.*

5. *With the ball more often played close to the goal, the forwards and defenders also gain valuable experiences in the most decisive parts of the field—where any mistake or successful action can modify the result of the game. In 8-on-8 soccer they learn to deal with stressful situations and to take offensive and defensive rebounds.*
6. *With only eight players on a team, the game has fewer interruptions with the ball in play more time.*
7. *There is no physical overloading of any player because the coach may change a player as frequently and as often as he considers wise. "Rolling substitution" improves the team spirit and at the same time develops more versatile players who are capable of playing well in different positions. Due to the shorter distances in 8-on-8, there are less stimuli for anaerobic resistance, which at this stage of the development of the player has to be considered positive. Despite the poor level of explosive power, the No. 4 ball can be passed to any player in any part of the field, thus stimulating development of the perceptive capacities.*
8. *The job of the youth coach, who generally is not very experienced, is much easier. He or she learns under simpler conditions (fewer players but more ball contacts, less complex game situations) to analyze the player's performance and the team as a whole, as well as how to facilitate programming the contents for the next training sessions. The greater facility in analysis makes it easier to find appropriate solutions to problems.*
9. *What is valid for the coach is valid also for the referee. Putting a logical progression of youth competitions into practice will also, without doubt, benefit the level of umpiring in the long term. Like the coach and his or her young players, young referees also grow slowly—by facing increasingly difficult and complex problems—onto the full game, ensuring that they feel capable at each stage of their referee development.*
10. *Spectators, especially parents, really enjoy watching an 8-on-8 game more than the traditional one because it's easier to follow. Because there are more goal opportunities for both teams, it's more exciting. Moreover, because of the larger penalty areas between the centerlines and the 16.5-meter line of the full field (almost 40 meters deep and 55 meters wide), fair play must be practiced to not give away penalties to the opponents. That is why far fewer injuries occur when rules of 8-on-8 soccer are applied. Last but not least, the parents see their daughters and sons in possession of the ball more frequently; they see more*

successful interventions than in the full game—and more possibilities of scoring."[4]

The U12 age is a fertile learning period. Players at this age can be expected to be more thoughtful in meeting the demands of the game. Small-sided games generate more opportunities for problem solving for the players to work out together. Hence "teamwork" is promoted!

The benefits of 8 a-side soccer for these children far outweigh any logistics or administrative problems created for the adults. Our challenge is to find solutions!

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.

A Psalm of Life
William Wadsworth Longfellow

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[1] Lines of Interaction graphic designed by Virgil Stringfield, assistant Director of Coaching for the Florida 2 Youth Soccer Association and an instructor for U. S. Soccer.
[3] Charlie Cooke, Coerver Schools; Cincinnati, OH.
4 "Developing Youth Soccer Players" by Horst Wein, pp. 206-208