



Sarnia Football Club

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METHODOLOGY

The game of soccer can be easily broken down into four components: technical, tactical, physical, and psychological. Whenever running a practice we should do our best to insure that our activities include all of these components. Although we should try to incorporate the four components into all of our activities, we also need to recognize it is important to teach and coach in a manner that is appropriate to both age and ability. Here is a description of each of the four components:

Four Components of the Game

Technical

Technique is the mastery of the ball using various body parts. Skill is the application of that mastery during the course of a game. At the U10 and U12 age levels, players need to continue to work on their technical proficiency and should be placed into situations in which we hope will increase their ability to manipulate the ball when under pressure. Technical proficiency needs to be shown at full speed and with defensive pressure.

Tactical

Tactics are the parts of the game in which players have to make on and off the ball decisions based upon the position of teammates, opponents, where the ball is, where they are on the field and where the goals are in relation to the ball or themselves. U10 players are capable of learning angles of support, how and when to spread the field and the roles of the 1st and 2nd attacker and defender. The U12 age group is often referred to as “the dawn of tactics.” Players in this group should recognize width, depth, support, combination play, and the roles of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd attacker and defender.

Physical

Each player has physical attributes such as strength, speed, agility, size, quickness and endurance. These areas can be maximized but are limited by the genetics of the athlete. At different ages, the development of different parts of the physique should be emphasized. Players do not need strength training but do need to know how to stretch properly and we should focus upon aiding their balance, coordination, and agility.

Psychological

The psychological aspect of the game refers to the mental portion of the game. This includes competitive mentality, optimism, leadership and overall attitude among many things. The mental make-up of athletes can have a vast effect upon their performance and their enjoyment of the sport. Coaches and parents can have a large affect upon young people’s attitude towards sport and their opportunity to enjoy the game. Teambuilding becomes important at these ages, as does teaching our players to be resilient. Between U12 and U14, roughly 75% of players will

quit playing soccer. This dropout rate is seen across all sports and is a startling number that we need to be aware of at all times. These players need to be allowed to have fun and soccer should be enjoyable above all else. If we fail to create this environment, we need not talk about any of the components of the game, as we simply will not have children who are willing to play.

Economy of Training

Training economically means the inclusion of more than one of the four components of the game into the same activities within a training session. An example of an uneconomical practice would be running for a whole practice. Fitness might be improved (though injuries increase); however, players would not improve tactically or technically. An example of an economical activity is ball tag which includes manipulation of the ball (technical work), turning, stopping, and running (physical), decision making (tactical), and if the coach sets the environment for success, confidence can be built by the coach (psychological). With the little time we spend with players, economical training is a must.

Age Specific Coaching

These two age groups often prove to be the most gratifying for coaches. The children are typically enthusiastic, thirsty for information, and have yet to enter into some of the rebellion often seen in teenagers. What encourages us even more is the fact that we see hints of the “the real game” at these ages and we see ourselves having a direct effect on the game as we make tactical decisions that drastically effect the game. As exciting as this can be, we must not sacrifice each of our player’s long-term development for an immediate goal. These players still need **constant technical repetition** and we must halt our urge to overly stress tactics in our practices. If we are spending more than 20% of our practice time stressing tactics, we are overdoing it.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Although sometimes we may mistake 5-8 year-olds for little adults, they are clearly not little adults. They have many years of childhood and development to enjoy before they are able to look at life in a similar fashion to adults. The reason for this is that they need time to intellectually, emotionally and physically develop. In order to fully understand the children and to make practices run as smoothly and happily as possible, it is extremely important for us to understand the following characteristics about U6 and U8 children.

Typical Characteristics of U6 Players

- Focused on themselves* – reality to them is solely based on what they see and feel.
- Unable to see the world from another’s perspective* – it is “the world according to me” time. Asking them to understand how someone else is seeing something is unrealistic.

- *Everything is in the here and now* – forget about the past and future, they live in the moment.
- *Heating and cooling systems are less efficient than adults* – we need to give frequent water breaks (every 8-10 minutes) or they may just run until they cannot run anymore.
- *Enjoying playing, not watching* – they feel no enjoyment from watching others play when they could be playing too. Every player should have a ball in practice.
- *Limited attention span* (on average 15 seconds for listening, 10-15 minutes when engaged in a task) – keep your directions concise and to the point. When in an open environment, such as a park, their attention span will dwindle towards 10 seconds.
- *Effort is synonymous with performance* – if they have tried hard, they believe they have done well. This is a wonderful quality and we should be supportive of their enthusiasm.
- *Active imaginations* – if we utilize their imaginations in activities, they will love practice!
- *Look for adult approval* – watch how often players look to you for approval or to see if you are looking. Also be encouraging when they say “Coach, look what I can do!”
- *Unable to think abstractly* – asking them to think about spatial relations or runs off the ball is unrealistic.
- *Typically have 2 speeds* -- extremely fast and stopped.
- *Usually unaware of game scores* – we should keep it that way.
- *Often like to fall down just because it is fun* – they are just children having fun
- *Often cannot identify left foot vs. right foot* – they know which foot they use most and if they point to their feet you can help teach them left and right.

Typical Characteristics of U8 Players

- *Tend to play well in pairs* – unlike 6 year-olds; these children enjoy playing in pairs. Try to set up the pairs yourself to control the games and manage the personalities.
- *Are now able to take another’s perspective* – they now have a sense of how other people are feeling.
- *Still unable to think abstractly* – still do not have this capability, be patient.
- *Heating and cooling system still less efficient than adults* – still make sure to give frequent water breaks.
- *Still much prefer playing to watching* – keep everyone active during practice and remember no lines.
- *Limited attention span (on average 15-20 seconds for listening, up to 20 minutes when engaged in a task)* – this may vary greatly on any given day depending on school, diet, etc. Try to get a gauge each day and do not fight crankiness.
- *Have an understanding of time and sequence* – they now understand “if I do this, then that happens”.

- *Many have incorporated a third or fourth speed into play* – not all players, but many players now have incorporated a speed or two between stopped and as fast as possible.
- *Extremely aware of adult reactions* – be very aware of your verbal and nonverbal reactions, as they look for your reaction frequently.
- *Seek out adult approval* – be supportive when they ask about their performance or try to show you skills. They very much need reassurance and you need to help build their confidence to try new things at this age.
- *Begin to become aware of peer perception* – a social order is beginning to develop. Be sensitive to this.
- *Wide range of abilities between children at this age* – children all develop at varying paces. You may have an 8 year-old who seems more like a 10 year-old and one that seems more like a 6 year-old on the same team. Your challenge is to manage this range in a way that challenges each player at a level that is reasonable for that player.
- *Beginning to develop motor memories* – by attempting beginning technical skills, they are training their bodies to remember certain movements.
- *Some will keep score* – the competitive motors churn faster in some than others. Surely some parents are fueling the motors with their own. Regardless, we do not need to stress winning and losing at this age. Results should not be important at this age.
- *Less active imaginations than U6 players* – still have active imaginations by adult standards, but some of the silliness that 6 year-olds allowed will not be appreciated by this group. However, children at this age are still quite silly, just in a different way. Still use their imaginations, but watch their reactions to games to read how far you can go with things. Always keep things fun!

Psychological/Fun Aspects of Coaching U6 and U8

The most important aspect of working with these age groups is FUN. If not having fun, children will no longer want to play. Children remind us adults of this fact over and over again when asked in research studies and anecdotally. Psychosocial development is also a very important focus for this age group. Children are still learning how to enter and interplay within a social group and we can help with this through soccer. It is important that we praise children of these ages regularly and help build self-esteem and a willingness to be creative. In this manner, we can support them as individuals and help facilitate their entry into the world of group play.

Five and six year-olds have a short attention span and loads of energy. As a result, quick instructions and simple activities work best. Activities that utilize their active imaginations are preferred and will help keep their attention. These players all want to play with the “toy” on the field, which is the ball. In practice, make sure to have a “toy” for each player.

The U8's, like the U6's, need activities that have fun as a central theme. From a psychosocial standpoint, the U8 player has a high need for approval from adults and can be easily bruised psychologically by negative comments from adults. They are very aware of not only what you say to them but how you say it. U8 players are more involved socially, and do enjoy working with a partner; however, they will struggle with larger group sizes. It is important to note there is a wide degree of variation in the social and physical development at this age.

Technical Development of 6-8 Year Olds

Fun, dribbling, and motor development (running, skipping, galloping, turning, jumping) should be the central soccer themes in U6 practices. In order to become comfortable on the ball, U6 and U8 players need to touch the ball as often as possible. The U8 player is now ready to continue the development of dribbling skills, and begin passing and shooting; however, maximizing touches on the ball while having fun is still the focus from a technical standpoint. As we have said repeatedly in this manual, players tell us they play soccer in order to have fun! What we must remember is that one of the main components of fun, according to young players, is seeing themselves improve at something. For this reason, helping them see their technical improvement when they make improvements and praising them for it is vital. It is important that each player be shown their own improvement and that we do not compare all players to the "best" player. We cannot stress enough that tactical instruction should be kept to a minimum at these ages. Below are recommended guidelines for you to follow in your work with these young players.

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-6	Dribble with all sides of both feet Dribble out of trouble Dribble past someone Soft first touch
U-8	Dribble with all sides of both feet Dribble out of trouble Dribble past someone Shielding Soft first touch Introduce proper shooting technique Introduce passing

GUIDED DISCOVERY

If you ever attended a youth soccer game, you are likely to hear many specific directions from coaches and spectators alike. We then expect this young player to sort through the information and then make a quality decision. All the contradicting information interferes with the player's ability to solve the problem. As a result, the player now tries to kick the ball as far as possible or lower their head and run with it. It's simple and sometimes gets results however, that doesn't make for better soccer players.

If we asked these players to explain their decisions to us at the end of the game, or even immediately after their actions, it is unlikely they would be able to provide us with a rational explanation. If these players are placed in the same situation at a later time, they will not have experience from which to draw upon when faced with a similar situation. Many times the player will continue make the same mistake or randomly try something else in order to please the adults. This creates frustration for the player and can cause the player to stop playing all together.

So what can we do as coaches to prevent players from making the same mistakes and sense of frustration? We could continue to yell louder and hope they are listening to us. Of course, that will continue to make the game less enjoyable for the player. A better choice is to provide the players with the tools to make these decisions for themselves. If our players understand when it is best to kick the ball forward or to run forward with the ball and why they are making all the decisions they are making during a game, then they will be able to improve their own play and be rewarded with success. Further, if they become thoughtful, strategic players they will have more fun, gain confidence, and your team's performance is more likely to improve continually.

By asking our players questions to which they must come up with answers, we can insure that our players are thinking, as opposed to mindlessly following our directions. By asking guided questions, we can help maintain focus and direction for our team and help provide learning experiences for our players.

When referring to guided questions, we mean that our questions should place our players on the right track (guide) in order be able to solve the questions we pose. Some such questions may be quite direct and simplistic such as:

- What part of the foot do you use to make a short pass?
- Where should you aim when shooting on goal?

Questions such as these are called "low order" questions as they demand factual, memorized answers. In contrast, we could ask "high order" questions that challenge our players a bit differently by asking them to weigh options within the framework of a larger process. High order questions beg interpretation and

comprehension over memorization or recall. Examples of “high order” questions include:

- How can we get the ball down the field quickly?
- Why should we play high-pressure defense?

Utilizing questions such as these will help our players learn and retain information that will aid them in making optimal choices as they play. It is not better to ask “high order” or “low order” questions, as they both serve helpful roles in learning. Our task as coaches is to find the proper balance of “high order” vs. “low order” questions for each of our players. In consequence, rather than waiting for us coaches to fix errors of play at half-time, our players will likely look to solve errors immediately during the game.

Through the use of guided questions, players develop confidence and learn to trust their own decisions. Of course, we must temper the difficulty of our questions to insure they achieve the success necessary to help build their confidence. Players may be a bit uneasy when asked these types of questions (especially high order) at first. For this reason it is a good idea to provide a few positive words before asking a question. For example:

- Great...so how could we do it faster?
- I like that answer...what other skill can we use to get the ball to our teammates?
- Now you're getting the idea! Where could you position yourself so that you could see both the player you are defending as well as the ball?

Now armed with the confidence and skill to evaluate situations and make decisions on their own, these players will look within themselves (not toward the sideline) in order to determine what choice to make on the field. As they become skilled at answering these questions, they will be able to increase their quality and speed of play. This will allow us to sit back in our chairs during games and appreciate the fruits of our practice efforts.

Using this method of coaching, we can help develop more competent players and more confident people. Although coaches and parents alike may find their sideline shouting ignored as players gain competence, I think both groups would be happy with that result.

Here are a few more examples of guided questions to incorporate into your coaching:

- In a 3v3 situation, what's the best way to get the ball to your teammate? Try it!
- What happens when you pass the ball behind your teammate? Let's try it!
- Why didn't that pass work? So, how should we do it this time?
- How can we get the ball to the other side of the field?
- Why is it important for you to lift your head up when you have the ball?

MOSSTON'S SLANTY LINE THEORY

Because children are maturing at various rates, our most challenging task may be to find a way to run a practice in which we challenge each player at a level that befits their abilities. Do you set goals for all your players that are based on the performance of your best player? If so, do your lesser players have any chance of actually attaining these goals or are they constantly faced with failure? In contrast, do you set your goals according to the abilities of your lesser players in order that everyone on your team can reach the goals? If you do this it is likely your better players will find practice extremely boring and they will not develop or have fun. We are stuck with a problem if we do either of these things, so what do we do?

STRAIGHT LINE

SLANTY LINE

Think of practice as a jumping contest. If we hold a stick parallel to the ground and eight feet in the air (see picture above) and then ask all players to jump as high as they can and touch the stick with their hand, we will find most players have no chance of success. However, if we hold this stick at a slant and challenge players to touch the highest part of the stick they can reach, then each player can experience some success. Each time they jump, we can challenge them to try to improve the height they reach on that slanted stick. Therefore, they experience success and have reachable goals to strive for going forward.

This is Mosston's Slanty Line Theory in practice. By challenging each player in a manner that befits their abilities we will keep every player engaged and cognizant of challenging, yet reachable goals. By doing this, we are much more likely to aid in every player's development rather than challenging all players at a standard that only befit a few. Allowing each player to reach new goals will clearly enhance their enjoyment!

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ⁱ USSF G manual