

## **JUNIOR LEVEL: Teenage Years**

### **U-14: 7th and 8th graders**

#### **Some Thoughts About This Age**

This becomes the transitional age into the adult game. The match form should be 11 v 11 and there begins to be a greater focus on how ball skill and decisions influence success on the field. At this point, there is a clear difference between the emotional and physical maturity of a 13 year old and an 18-year-old. While there is not a big difference between the way a 13-year-old or an 18-year-old processes information (thinking and problem solving), keep in mind that the 13-year old is just beginning to think at this level.

In contrast, an 18-year old will have more experience and confidence in his or her ability to think and problem solve in this manner. 13-year-old children are now less certain about themselves, less communicative, and somewhat more vulnerable. They are now more focused on their friends and begin to view themselves as being somewhat separate from their parents. They are also stronger physically and are more aware of what their bodies can do (speed, strength, appearance).

The 14-year-old is typically becoming more outgoing and confident and loves competition. He or she is also increasingly more able to plan, think ahead, and to imagine options. Coaches can have more discussion about the “what if…”

From now on the matches are full-sided 11 v 11 games. It is at the U-14 age group that coaches should begin to focus somewhat on team issues, such as how the backs work together in different parts of the field, or the relationship between the different lines of the team (defenders and midfielders, mid-fielders and forwards, etc.). As the players graduate to the junior level, they should possess a comfort with the ball and an insight into the game that will allow them to deal with the increased pace of the game, both in athletic speed and speed of decisions. The goal at this point in a player’s development is to begin expanding his or her understanding of the game as their technical and game maturity allows. Again, this is accomplished through the small-sided game model for practice (up through 9 v 9 games) and the full-sided game for matches. The graduation to the full-sided game model should be a logical and subtle step. The ideas and principles that apply to the smaller game models continue to apply to the bigger game. The outcome of the game at this age is still largely determined by ball skill and game insight.

#### **■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON**

At these ages, ball skills, enjoyment and insight into the game, with a gradual introduction to fitness, mental toughness, and results are the keys. Success in winning matches should begin to be the product of a consistent and systematic approach to the game that focuses more on player development than on team building. The players should be developing an understanding and familiarity with each other on the field, but the desire to get a result on Saturday should not hamper their instincts for the game, or their desire to experiment and explore the game. These players are a long way from being “complete.” Encourage them to play in different positions. Don’t pigeonhole players based only on what is best for getting the result. Balance your players match experiences so that some games will allow you to experiment without necessarily sacrificing the result.

#### **■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE**

At this point, most of the exercises and games that the players play in practice should be competitive, with a winning and losing team(s). Their focus should be on how their decisions and their ball skill help or hinder their team’s ability to win at whatever game or exercise that they play. Two critical and interrelated themes in every practice should be recognizing when and how to get the ball out of pressure with the goal of getting forward and recognizing when and how to win the ball back, both as an individual and as a group. Games and exercises should be set up that encourage players to make decisions based on the cues

and clues that exist in the game. Players should experience a variety of games, from 4 v 4 to 8 v 8: some with and some without

**CONSIDER THIS:** Too many matches and too much soccer desensitize players to the special quality of the match and the concept of “match day.” goalkeepers, some to small goals, some to large goals, some with 2 goals and some with 4 to 6 small goals. Each set up will encourage different challenges for the players to address – all within the basic framework of keeping the ball and winning the ball back – and going to goal, and winning the game. The coach needs to consider the players’ technical development because without sound technique, good ideas on the field are useless. Putting players in small-sided games where they have to solve a problem by application of their technique is a critical part of training this age. At times, success or failure in these games and this environment are the direct result of the players’ ability with the ball.

An important theme for this age, therefore, is to address the player’s accountability for his or her decisions and ball skill as he or she and their team look to find ways to win their game. Figuring out how and when to keep the ball or when to go forward, as well as how and when to win the ball back are basic themes where this accountability can be addressed. Within each game that the coach sets up for the players, this can be accomplished by focusing on speed of play and the ability to solve problems in competitive situations. In general, most players this age who are playing at a competitive club level are technically good and can solve problems well in slower games or isolated situations. When the demands of the game and the speed of play increase, many have a hard time mastering the ball, staying tuned in, seeing enough, and making sense of their plays. By placing players in competitive situations i.e., faster games, these aspects improve dramatically over time. If the players are not held accountable for their decisions or if the environment is not challenging or competitive enough to punish players for their mistakes, then the players run the risk of developing bad habits that may hinder their long term development.

In training sessions play small-sided games with different demands and challenges. The games should be fast. To keep up with the speed of play, good technical ability and habits on and off the ball are necessary. The players need to stay tuned in mentally, to read the game, deal with the demands of the game, and to make decisions that help their team win. The goal is to help their personalities to grow and for them to begin to solve problems as a group. Therefore, give the players some freedom to make decisions, to solve problems, and to experiment with the game. Be more concerned with them developing into better players who can figure out how to win than with telling them exactly what to do.

#### ■ SOCCER AGE AND CHRONOLOGICAL AGE OF YOUR PLAYERS

A child’s biological age is an important factor determining age-appropriate tasks. However, the reality of Youth and Junior soccer is that, with its emphasis on team play, match results and competition, the American player is often graduating to the next level of soccer without having the proper tools. They are moving to this next phase of the game based on their biological age (their age in years), without regard for their “soccer age” (their level of soccer development).

Coaches at the U-12 level for example, may voice frustration at their players’ inability to “figure out” tasks and concepts such as team possession and team defending. Consider a student in Trigonometry class who is being introduced to concepts like sine and cosine. Imagine how difficult this will be for the student to “figure out” if he/she had not been properly taught the fundamentals of math – addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The student might even understand some trigonometric concepts, but lack the basic tools to work out a correct solution. This student should not have been promoted to this next level of math. It is the same in soccer. The success of each new skill and concept is based upon skills and concepts already learned. The more comfortable a player is with the ball, the more options he/she will have to solve each soccer challenge he/she faces.

The age-appropriate phases outlined in this are not set in stone. Each individual player develops at his or her own pace, often irrespective of their age in years. The soccer ability of some of your players will match the age-appropriate phases that are outlined in this document. Some will lag behind and some will be ahead. When evaluating your players, it is important that you don't confuse your players' biological age, with their "soccer age." Each player's "soccer age" is unique to the individual. Your player's "soccer age" depends on several factors: 1) The rate of each individual's emotional and physical growth. 2) The frequency that they are playing soccer. 3) The soccer environment they are in (encouraging or discouraging individual creativity and comfort with the ball). As a coach, therefore, it is critical that you are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating your players' soccer ability. If your players' skills do not match the demands of the corresponding age appropriate phase outlined in this document, it is your responsibility to adjust their soccer "diet," based on their "soccer age." In some cases, for example, this may mean that a 16 year old player spends time addressing skills, or playing in numbers that seem more appropriate for a 12 year old. One thing is certain; the more comfortable your players become with the ball, the quicker and easier that they and you can expand their game to include new skills and tactical concepts.

#### ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES:

Although the 13 and 14 year old begin to resemble adults, they are still far from a complete player. Players must continue to focus on individual and small group ideas. This can be accomplished by focusing on "the game within the game." Find themes on which to focus that – when taken together and accomplished with skill – add up to successful soccer.

There should be some attention to organization, but the focus should be more on the smaller group relationships on the field, i.e., how the backs work together or how the backs work with the mid fielders, or how players can pressure the ball in 3's and 4's. The match continues to be the place for these players to develop their instincts for the game. Mistakes on the field should be errors of commission rather than errors of omission. It should not be the place for them to "play scared" or "safe."

Coaches should encourage big picture themes such as staying connected with the rest of the team, as well as more focused idea like encouraging players to find ways to get past opponents – either individually or in groups. For example, on a given match day, the coach can encourage counting passes, or counting how often a dangerous ball is served into the box. The coach can even reward the team after the game based on how many of these plays they pulled off. At some point, as the players get better at these smaller pieces of the game, winning becomes the more consistent by-product.

#### **A Discussion About the Team Meeting**

The team meeting, especially at the U-14 level and older, can be a very effective tool for helping players take more responsibility and ownership for the process and their own development. Often, the team meeting at the youth level takes the form of a lecture.

Coaches should be careful not to turn these learning opportunities into one-way discussions. Players will only remain engaged and focused as long as they are interested in the topic. A great way to keep them listening and learning is to get them involved in the conversation. With this approach, the meetings become open discussions where the coaches throw out questions about the day, the game or the training session, and see what ideas or thoughts the players have. Sometimes the coach's questions address principles of defending, principles of attacking, how goals are scored, or what competing means.

Some questions to start the discussion could include: What makes a good player? What we would do differently if we had the game all over again? The coach could ask the players to talk about who played well, for both teams. Why or how well did we execute our game plan? How well were we able to play “our game”? What influenced our ability to get our game going? And so on. The point of these meetings is to encourage players to think and reflect, not to just show up and be told what to do or how to play. Rather it is an opportunity to start to see the game in a different light by talking about it, expressing how you feel on the field at different times and so on.

The goal for the coaches, in all aspects of our interactions with our players, is to prepare them to be competent soccer players. One important aspect of this objective is to help the players become independent thinkers on the field. Allowing them and helping them to think critically about the game is a vital step in the process. The team meeting, when it actually involves the team, can help to move this process along.

**CONSIDER THIS:** Matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, and fitness), not as the aim. In this respect, the usefulness of the game can occur in many different forms, from the 4 v 4 to the full-sided match model. Even at the senior level, the game still offers opportunities for growth, however the weight of balance between factors such as enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness and results shift more toward the latter.

#### ■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

The U-14 coach should have a firm grasp of both the youth game and the junior game. He or she should have an appreciation for creativity and independent thinking. At the same time, he or she should be able to communicate group and team themes to the players in a clear and simple manner.

## **U-16: 9th & 10th graders**

### **General Thoughts about this age**

By 15 and 16 years old, the players should be comfortable dealing with the ball in a variety of situations. With this in mind, the coach should look to address several issues over the course of the two year cycle that address how basic tactical issues can influence the game:

(1) Small group ideas on both sides of the ball (Moving forward together on the attack, realistic pressure, and how to help your team win the ball back).

(2) How the small group ideas tie into larger team concepts. Such as the similarities and differences between high and low pressure, keeping your back line connected with your attacking players during possession in your attacking half of the field, or rhythm of play issues (when to speed up and when to slow down).

(3) Some basic positional responsibilities and how, as a team, these responsibilities are interconnected. For example, how the backs share defensive responsibilities, how decisions that the defending line makes are related to the decisions of the players in front of them, or the role of the holding midfielder in your team's possession.

(4) Accountability for their execution and decisions with the ball. Players at this age must aspire to have technical precision. Players need to be made aware of how their ability to collect and pass the ball has a direct impact on all aspects of the game.

*Note: These concepts and goals are all based on the assumption that the players are good enough with the ball to be able to begin dealing this next level of soccer. If they do not possess the requisite skills to begin taking on these new challenges, it is the responsibility of the coach to make sure they continue to work on the tools that they lack.*

#### ■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

At the U-16 age coaches should continue to address principles and themes of the game in generic situations i.e., not position-based, as well as in functional (positional) scenarios. Coaches can set up small-sided games to multiple goals where players and teams (of 6's or 7's) are dealing with pretty tight spaces, but with several goals. Defensively the players and teams are focusing on getting pressure to the ball so that they limit the number of goals that they need to actively defend.

As these principles are being addressed, it should begin to make some sense to the players how to translate these concepts into team issues, such as how the backs work together in different parts of the field or the relationship between the different lines of the team (defenders and midfielders, midfielders and forwards, etc.). Creating games where these larger team issues are introduced, experienced and discussed is also important at this age.

***“Ball control is the most important skill a young player could learn. Controlling the ball will simply make the game easier to play and open up more options instantly. The great thing about practicing ball control is that there are many different body parts and ways to control the ball that could prove beneficial in a game. It's the single skill I find myself doing to this day on the practice field. I look for two things when I am controlling the ball: I find the easiest way to control the ball and I control the ball in the direction that will make my next pass as simple as possible.”***

*Claudio Reyna -- Manchester City and Captain of the US Men's National Team*

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

Players at these ages still need to learn by experiencing the game. The majority of the game should still be taught by putting the players in realistic soccer environments and allowing them to feel their way through the challenges that the game presents to them. As much as possible, these concepts and themes should be taught in competitions where the games or exercises end with a winning and a losing team.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

The matches should be an extension of the themes that are being addressed on a daily and weekly basis. There should be an awareness by the players and a discussion prompted by the coach about performance based on the players' ability to recognize themes during the game, and the players' technical ability to act on what they see.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

Charismatic. Knowledgeable. Articulate. Disciplinarian. Managerial know how. Thoughtful persuader. An understanding of the 3 lines of the team and how each works as a separate unit as well as part of the team as a whole