

Virginia Youth Soccer Association U9-U12 Developmental Travel



Twenty One Steps To Increased Learning, Fun and Retention

It has been fairly well established that at least seventy percent of all youth quit organized sports by U13. When seeking a solution it must be noted that it is not what we are doing at U13 that poses the problem but what players have experienced prior to that (at U9 through U12). Clearly something is broken and many feel that, with improvements, we should be able to get that figure under fifty percent.

Sports specialists and child development professionals repeatedly indicate that the problem revolves around too much pressure to achieve “winning” results too soon instead of focusing primarily on individual development. Such pressure on young children reduces intrinsic motivation, leads to perceptions of failure, diminishes enjoyment and promotes a determination to get out as soon as they get more control over their lives. This exodus accelerates by U13.

In an effort to increase individual player development, satisfaction and retention, Virginia Youth Soccer, under the guidance of its technical director, has examined best practices as espoused by national staff and technical experts throughout US Youth Soccer and compiled the following model which aims at rectifying the many problems commonly found in our processes today. This model is envisioned as a replacement for, and not an addition to, current results oriented models based on tryout selection processes. We offer it for your consideration.

- 1. Little or No Selecting Out-** Every player that attends an evaluation has a place to play unless the player clearly exhibits extremely poor skills or desire that does not meet the minimum standard set by the technical director. The mere fact that the player has chosen to be evaluated expresses motivation, character and the player’s desire to participate at a level that is more challenging. It would be expected that ninety to one hundred percent would be accepted. As a result young players do not see themselves as failures and the development base is broadened. It has been shown time and again that except in rare cases, the player pool picked as “the best” at U9 is very different than that picked at U13. Delaying a tryout/selecting out process until U13 benefits both premier and recreational players and greatly improves retention at all levels. Players may easily move in and out of travel soccer without the stigma of failure. Negative experiences will be reduced. Late bloomers will be retained or have easy late entry or reentry.
- 2. Club Pass-**For league play, a club can move a player, for the benefit of that player (not for team competitive advantage), for one or more games during the season onto another team in the same age group or up onto an older team of usually not more than 2 years their senior. The club technical expert and the age group head coach (if one exists) should be utilized to insure focus on individual player development and oversee potential abuse.

For example:

- a. It might be concluded that a player would benefit by playing some games on an older team or simply a different team in an age group at either a more or less advanced level.
- b. Another team, because of injury or vacations, might have an opening for a particular game and the player might benefit from playing in different circumstance.

In either case, the player could be moved within their own club without any paperwork or transfers taking place. A game day roster would reflect the addition. A player could not play more games in a season than it's original team was scheduled to play and no player could participate in more than one game in a day unless it was with the same team. It would be expected that this process would increase club identification and reduce team identification.

- 3. Carded as travel players-**Players should be registered as travel players and as such the teams formed can attend travel tournaments. It is particularly important, however, at these young ages to limit both frequency and distance of travel so as to reduce results oriented pressure. For example it might be appropriate to play a limited number of in-state tournaments and to avoid traveling to out of state tournaments. Being carded as travel players gives the team further opportunities that might otherwise not be available to them if they remained strictly as a recreation player. We want the players to have the ability and option to play in a travel tournament, if they so desire, while keeping the amount of travel to a minimum.
- 4. Large age group divisions formed by area and not ability-** Divisions within an age group should not be formed based on team strength but on proximity of players. Teams from nearby clubs should be grouped together in divisions with approximately twice as many teams as games in a season. This reduces the amount of travel and limits the creation of unofficial standings since teams do not play enough common opponents.
- 5. Club must choose to participate 100%-**A club must commit to enter all of their travel players and teams in such a program and:
 - a. Not hold selecting out tryouts to form a team and
 - b. Not put some players in a different results oriented or premier program.To do so would undermine the entire program by supporting the perception that selecting out "the best" is somehow beneficial and realistic. A club is in or they are out.
- 6. Increase in travel teams will be substantial-**Fortunately, a large increase in travel teams will not require more fields or referees since teams need a field and referee whether they are travel or recreational. This will also not place an undue burden on a league's referee assignors as each club can be responsible for assigning referees for home games. If travel teams practice more than recreational teams, then a club will need more practice slots on their fields.

- 7. Evaluation System for Placement of Players-**During evaluations the players are internally assigned the rating of a 1, 2 or 3. Number 1 signifies the best players associated with the top talent. Number 2 signifies a middle of the road player. And number 3 signifies players at the end of the spectrum. Three categories are simpler and easier to keep track off than five. It allows the evaluators to concentrate on the player's total performance without taking valuable time away from the process.
- 8. Equal Placement-**Each team should have equal representation of 1's, 2's and 3's and the talent should be evenly distributed throughout the league. The child of the coach or an assistant coach could be placed on their team but would be evaluated just as other players and would count as any other child in distribution of players. Coaches are encouraged to cooperate with each other in letting players stay on teams they were on before. If the league determines that a club has inadvertently or intentionally created an unusually strong or weak team the club could be required to use the club pass process to rebalance one or more teams during or between seasons.
- 9. Evaluation Format-**Small Sided Games should be used to identify the talent and subsequently categorize the talent. No drills should be utilized or employed. The evaluators should look at the player's speed, decisions and executions under realistic game-like conditions and not sterile exercises. There are many circumstances where evaluators have set up drills for points or time in an attempt to quantify performance. There are far too many circumstances where players tested out well in the drills but made poor decisions in the game. Therefore, a player should always be evaluated on the decisions, executions and speed under match conditions.
- 10. Evaluation Criteria-**The players should be evaluated on:
 - a. Speed-technical, speed of execution and/or speed of thought. A player must have some sort of speed to their game.
 - i. Technical speed is the ability to settle a ball and get the pass or shot away quickly.
 - ii. Pure speed is the natural running speed of an athlete.
 - iii. Speed of thought is the ability to read the game and be able to be in the right place at the right time
 - b. Technique-What is their first touch and passing skills like under the pressure of a match.
 - i. With regard to evaluating technique, if a player has a poor first touch then they will always be fighting the ball to make subsequent decisions.
 - c. Character-Work-rate, coachability, desire.
 - i. In regard to character, evaluate the player's fighting spirit and their ability to compete.
 - ii. Do they work off the ball?
 - iii. Do they enjoy the game and have a love for the sport?

It is important that these evaluation criteria be set and understood so that evaluators have a base line measurement and know what they are looking for in a player.

- 11. Player Identification-**The club technical director or technical expert (and/or age group head coach if one exists) must observe the recreation teams to the extent possible for talented children and encourage them to attend the evaluation session. No matter how much the message gets out, there will still be coaches that won't encourage the youngsters to attend the evaluations and enter the travel development program. The organization has to be pro-active in this regard.
- 12. Evaluators-**The Club Technical Director and/or age group head coach (if one exists) picks the best available evaluators for the evaluation session.
- 13. No Public Scores or Standings Kept-** In order to keep additional pressure off of the players, the model will take on a non-results oriented format. Referees may report game results to the league in order to provide the league managers with the information necessary to promote balanced teams and to detect any club that has created, inadvertently or intentionally, unbalanced teams.
- 14. Coaching License-**All coaches and active assistants should have taken the F module for the age they are coaching. . In addition, coaches should have at least an E Certificate to coach U9 and U10 and at least a D license to coach U11 and U12. If the league is already operating in some capacity, a grandfathering of one year should be imposed. Mandatory coaching education is a must if we are to ensure quality.
- 15. U9 and U10 use 6V6 Format including GK's-** Roster size should be a maximum of 9. It is suggested that teams should play an attacking system of 2 defenders and 3 strikers. We owe it to the development of the players, and the game, to encourage teams to attack. Given the fact that this is the most difficult aspect of the game to develop, the philosophy that is instilled must lend itself toward supporting that concept. Many coaches are comfortable in teaching defense since it is an easier concept to understand, in that it is about destroying something. Therefore, it is imperative, to the growth of the individual as well as the game, that players be placed in a system that gives them more opportunities to attack and encourages them to take risks and play with flair in the part of the game that is about creativity.
- 16. U11 and U12 use 8V8 Format including GK's-** Roster size should be a maximum of 12. It is recommended that teams play an attack-oriented system of 2 defenders, 3 midfielders and 2 forwards (2-3-2). By having 3 in the midfield we are placing the majority in high traffic areas where they will be around the play and come into contact with the ball more often. In addition, they are in positions where they can join in the attack when the opportunity presents itself. Also, wide midfield players will aid in the development of flank play and the associated technique of crossing of the ball.

- 17. Possession Philosophy-**The long ball, getting boomed out of the back, should be de-emphasized and the short passing game clearly emphasized as the style of choice. We are trying to develop individual players for the long term and not compromise for victories in the short term. A great many coaches (as well as parents) encourage the youngsters to “boom” it out of the back and play the long ball game because they are uncomfortable with their players under pressure in their own end. This long ball philosophy is counterproductive to long term individual, as well as collective, development. Allow the players to play it around the back and attempt to keep possession. They will definitely give up the ball and more goals will be scored on them in the short term but they will be comfortable with the ball and technically more competent in the long term.
- 18. Age group practices together-**If a club has multiple teams (likely for all but the small clubs) at least one practice per week (or possibly all) should be a joint practice for the entire age group that should be supervised by a recognized technical expert that serves as the age group head coach. Team coaches would receive the session lesson plan before practice and arrive early for practice to allow briefing from the age group head coach. This approach is club and age group centric instead of team centric, reduces results oriented pressure and facilitates focus on individual player development.
- 19. Age group head coach-**If a club has multiple teams many benefits can accrue from having a single recognized technical expert (which could be a paid professional) in charge of the entire age group. If there are enough teams (more than three or four) there might be one or more assistant age group head coaches that are also recognized technical experts. The age group coaches would be selected, dismissed and paid by the club. This ensures quality and protects competent coaches from over wrought parents. Each team could also have an unpaid but licensed parent coach chosen by and under the supervision of the age group coach(s). The team parent coach would direct players at practice under the supervision of the age group coaches and could coach games when age group coaches are not available.
- 20. Decrease in costs for families-** Today it is commonplace for even the youngest travel teams at U9 to employ a professional coach to conduct practices and coach all games. The use of recognized technical experts to manage an age group with each individual team having a volunteer coach could substantially reduce family costs, which seem to be an ever-increasing burden.
- 21. Improved conditions for technically competent coaches-**The above structure provides an improved environment for technically competent licensed coaches and makes a club more attractive as a place of work so that a club can more successfully attract such coaches.

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