

U-10 | The Learning to Train Stage

The Start of Us

The learning to train stage covers ages 8 to 12 [Table 8]. The objective is to learn all of the fundamental soccer skills, building overall sports skills.

In this stage, children gradually begin to change from being self-centered to self-critical and develop the need for group games. This is a flux phase in a youngster's soccer career. The motivation to learn basic skills is very high at this age. The game itself should be central to all technical training. 11v11 is too sophisticated and complicated for young players. Small-sided games, which provide the right amount of pressure for the child's level of development, are more appropriate.

Physiologically the U-10 players are children not adolescents. In fact peak athletic performance takes place in early adulthood. So for 10 year olds, there is still a low ceiling to athletic performance. The adult concept of work rate is driven by the desire to win. Children like to win, but playing is more important. They are engrossed in the process of play, not the outcome. Still coaches and parents should encourage children to try their best. Ten year olds can understand the broad idea of effort, but the details are foggy. They continue to equate effort with performance regardless of the outcome. The ability of players to understand and execute consistent play with a good work rate will grow over many years. These traits should be gradually nurtured by coaches and parents.

An emphasis needs to be placed on skill development at this age while using a games-based approach²⁶. Practice individual skills within individual and small group tactics. Training sessions should include fun skill building activities with some teaching of technique. When coaching players in this age group, the coach's role expands from one of facilitating to being a teacher of technique and game application. However, playing at this age is still very important, so emphasis should shift toward enjoyable skill development. These players start to move from the *how* (technique) to *when, where, with whom and against whom* (skill – tactics). Training sessions should still focus on small-sided games so players have the opportunity to recognize the pictures presented by the game. These objectives are best achieved through a games-based approach to learning soccer.

U-10 is the time to introduce basic combination play, wall passes and take-overs while concentrating on basic skills in cooperative play; i.e., passing, receiving, shooting and heading. Remember players are being coached, not skills. The key motivator in soccer is the ball; use it as much as possible in training sessions. It is very important that warm-up sessions are well handled, as this is the time when the coach takes control and sets the tone. Get into action as soon as possible by having the team work at the outset without an involved and complicated explanation. The teaching of ball skills needs to be accomplished through games. The repetition of technique is undertaken through fun games and dynamic activities. Around age 10, visual acuity takes on an adult pattern and the ability to visually track

²⁶ A game centered focus with an emphasis on player decisions and individual readiness. The coach is the facilitator and creator of soccer problem situations posing questions on time, space and tactical risk/safety.

a moving object in the air is developing more. This is one reason that the goalkeeper position is not introduced into youth soccer until now. Receiving a bouncing ball and a ball in the air that is head height or lower is happening on purpose now as well. Heading the ball may be a skill some youth are ready for and others will come to it later. Only a small amount of training for heading the ball should be done with U-10 players, but they do need to be introduced to the skill. The skill needs to be taught incrementally to build confidence and help the players know that heading does not hurt if the ball is struck correctly; beginning with a spongy ball may be necessary.

"If we concentrated less on results at an early age, and more on technical development, and this idea of kids falling in love with the game, they would be much better off ..."

- John Hackworth, Philadelphia Union, coach and youth development coordinator

For U-10's, continue to build the player before the team. Stress individual development over team building. Remember, for the players, fun and enjoyment through play are still critically important. The philosophy of a club tends to drive how U-10 soccer is conducted. A club can positively impact the soccer culture if it chooses to follow US Youth Soccer and U.S. Soccer recommendations. Because children at this age intentionally play in small groups, there can be too much emphasis on results as opposed to performance. Some tactical ideas are emerging in their game, but their thoughts tend to be vague. This growing capability is one aspect of the flux phase. Often the adults involved with this age group see these abilities appear in matches and leap to expecting adult team-like performance when in fact the children are still learning how to play.

Continue to lace the principles of play into activities with the U-10 age group. In particular, they will begin to comprehend width and depth, but their execution of it will be inconsistent. Time and space relationships are just now budding. This emerging awareness of space is aided by showing the players the triangle and diamond shapes in the game. The triangle shape is of particular importance in building on the idea of support (pairs) from the U-8 age group. The large triangle (width and depth) is support on the attack and the smaller triangle (concentration) is support when defending. With depth, stretching out the opposition may occur. Players should be encouraged and praised for playing on both sides of the ball, which is attacking and defending. Keep in mind that the shape of the triangle changes with passing lanes adjusting in length and angle to support the ball. This constant adjustment is crucial in group play.

All players should recover to help defend after losing possession of the ball. Similarly, all players should look to contribute to every attacking play, even when their role is as the supporting last defender.

The position of goalkeeper is new to their soccer experience at U-10. The policy of US Youth Soccer and U.S. Soccer is that through the U-14 age group all players get exposed to playing all positions on the team. This is true also for playing in goal, so take time at training now and then to teach basic goalkeeper skills to all of the players. In training sessions, have the players take turns playing in goal. Two training sessions per month should be devoted to goalkeeping. Over the course of the soccer year,

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every player must have the opportunity to play in goal. The players won't know what their best position may be once they are teenagers unless they are given the chance to try them all.

There are now two lines in the team at U-10: goalkeeper plus defenders and forwards. While the field player positions could be manipulated in a lineup, it is wise to put the players in positions where it is easy for them to execute the principles of play [Table 2]. Most crucial in the team formation is the ability of the players to form triangles. US Youth Soccer recommends two simple formations at this age: 3-2 or 2-3. These formations are easy to conceptualize for children 8 to 10 years old. Getting into a group shape at dead ball situations is also possible at this age with an emphasis at goal kicks and throw-ins.

General Characteristics of the U-10 Age Group

- Lengthened attention span - they are still in motion, but not as busy, only holding still long enough for a short explanation
- More inclined toward wanting to play rather than being told to play
- Psychologically becoming slightly more firm and confident
- Some are becoming serious about their play
- Team oriented – prefer team type balls and equipment. Enjoy the uniforms and team association.
- Boys and girls beginning to develop separately
- Developing the pace factor – thinking ahead
- Gross and small motor skills becoming much more refined

While using game-like activities, which allow for trial and error, expose the children to the components of the game. The key training activities are body awareness, maze games and target games. Age appropriate activities can be found in US Youth Soccer's *The Novice Coach Vol. 2 Under-10 to 12 years*, *US Youth Soccer Skills School*, *US Youth Soccer Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games*, *US Youth Soccer Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer DVD*, *The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual* and the *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*.

"Play builds imagination. Play with other children teaches skills of problem solving and cooperation. A child who learns to play alone will never be lonely. Play teaches the ability to tolerate frustration and it teaches the all-important ability to fail. Play generates joy and allows the experience of flow²⁷."

- Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, child and adult psychiatrist, ADD/ADHD

²⁷ Flow is that period of time in which the activity matches your ability. Players can experience flow in almost any activity if these two factors are present and evenly balanced. The flow concept is critical for effective soccer training.

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Remember the game is for all players and everyone should be encouraged to participate. The U-10 age group is when children are often asked to compete before they have learned how to play. This *too much too soon* syndrome is another symptom of the flux phase. Therefore, US Youth Soccer recommends U-10 players should not:

- Be involved in results oriented tournaments, only play days, jamborees or festivals with a participation award.
- Be exposed to tryouts.
- Be labeled recreational or competitive.

"The players must feel that they have a sure and strong guide."

- Marcello Lippi, Italian National Team, head coach

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is a well-rounded player. Here are the building blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-10 Age Group*

Technique: Experiment with the qualities of a bouncing ball and running with the ball, passing with the inside and outside of the foot (emphasis on quality push pass), instep drive, receiving ground balls with the instep and outside of foot (body behind the ball), receiving bouncing balls with the instep (cushion) and the sole, inside and outside of foot (wedge), fakes²⁸ in dribbling and turning with the ball. Introduce heading and crossing. Practice throw-ins. For goalkeepers: ready stance, getting the feet set, how to hold a ball after a save, diamond grip, catching shots at the keeper, punting, recovery from down to the ground and up to set position and footwork exercises. Also introduce goal kicks and throwing.

Psychology: Keep soccer enjoyable to foster a desire to play using self-motivation. Working in groups of three, four or five, stay focused for one entire half. There is an increase in responsibility, sensitivity, awareness of how to win or lose gracefully, fair play, parental involvement, how to play, communication and emotional management.

Fitness: Factors are endurance, range of motion flexibility, rhythm exercises and running mechanics. Any fitness activities must be done with the ball. Introduce body resistance exercises and the idea of cool down.

Tactics: 1v1 defending, roles of 1st attacker and defender, 2v1 attacking, what it means to get goal-side, small group shape in pairs and threes (emphasize support on both attack and defense), playing on and

²⁸ A fake is done with the feet. The goal of a fake is to get the opponent off balance (wrong footed) or going in the direction opposite of where the player in possession of the ball really plans to go.

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around the ball as a group with purpose, playing a variety of positions to develop the complete player, introduce the principles of attack and set plays.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

These players will demonstrate increased self-responsibility, so they should be given, to a reasonable extent, partial responsibility for their preparation at training sessions and matches. They are very capable of assuming this responsibility when adults step aside and let it happen. Now they can initiate play on their own, which leads to learning through self-discovery and self-expression. They do enjoy and benefit from competition, so all training activities should have objectives and/or a method of scoring. They will intentionally play in groups, although individualism is still the core of their game. Use cooperative games and activities in training sessions to further instill a team mentality.

Typical U-10 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour and 15 minutes.
- Free play or a warm-up (ball juggling), partner and small group activities, dynamic stretching.
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Introduce small group activities (four to six players).
- Add more directional games. Play to targets and/or zones.
-approximately 25 minutes-
- Conclude with a Small-Sided Game, 6v6, with goalkeepers.
-approximately 25 minutes-
- Finish with cool down activities.
-approximately 10 minutes-

Devote the end of each training session to playing 4v4, 5v5 and 6v6 practice games. Fun games involving smaller numbers can be played, especially 1v1, 2v1 and 3v2 or 5v3 leading up to a final training activity. Always coach for success. It is still important to ensure that each child has a ball and to focus on fun games, but as the players develop psychosocially, they will be ready to participate and cooperate in small groups.

U-10 players must play at least 50 percent of each match they attend. Better yet would be to have a roster size that allows each youngster to play more than half of each match. They should not play a season longer than four months, and must have at least one full month off between seasons of play.

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate clinic by calling your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Coach's qualities: Sensitive teacher, patient, facilitator, enthusiastic, imaginative, ability to demonstrate, understands technique and preferably a youthful outlook.

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License recommendation: Volunteer Coach – U-10 to U-12 Youth Module Certificate or National Youth License. Paid coach – National Youth License and USSF “E” License.

The game: Regardless of the level of competition, these players should always play at least 50 percent of the match; they won’t grow as players sitting on the bench. Through the course of the season expose the players to each position on the team during match play. Versatility is highly prized at the upper levels of the game.

Once the match begins, the coach should sit down and watch, and let the players do most of the talking during the match. The coach should speak up to praise them for doing something well and for trying what they have been taught in training sessions.

It is natural for children this young to be inconsistent in their match performance. For that matter, so are adult professional players. The difference between a professional soccer team and a U-10 team is simply that the pros make fewer mistakes, but they do make mistakes. Don’t fret about inconsistent play with this age group. It’s normal for a team to have highs and lows in match performance.

Please read thoroughly the Ball Control and Creativity section in the *Best Practices* guide.