

# U-12 | For the Love of the Game

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## *Us – The Critical Transition Period*

**Still within the learning to train stage [Table 8] of ages 8 to 12, the U-12 age group is a transitional time. The objective is to learn all of the fundamental soccer skills (build overall sports skills).**

Many players at this age are deciding if they want to commit deeply to soccer, stay in the game with a part-time commitment or drop the sport altogether. The coach must also be sensitive to the many biological and psychological changes that are occurring for these children now and through the U-14 age group.

The effect of the role model is very important at this stage of development. Hero worship, identification with successful teams and players and a hunger for imaginative skills typify the mentality of this age. This is a time of transition from self-centered to self-critical. Players of this age have a high arousal level in relation to the training of basic skills. The *golden age of learning* begins with the U-10's and continuing with the U-12's is the most important age for skill development. Demonstration is very important and the players learn best by doing. Continue to ingrain the principles of play. It is important to establish discipline from the beginning.

*"It's amazing how much more technical and organized soccer training is now. When I was growing up, we practiced twice a week (three times when I got older) and played one game on the weekend, unless there was a tournament, and I didn't start playing in tournaments until I was 11. Today, with year-round soccer (which I didn't play until I was nearly in college), there are an incredible number of games being played. Too many in my opinion ..."*

- Brandi Chastain, U.S. Women's National Team, retired player

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Continue establishing a solid base of technique. Develop individual skills under the pressure of time, space and opponent(s) and increase technical speed. While passing has become a more natural part of the game, the dribbling personality must still be encouraged to express that skill. When working with this age group, concentrate on the application of age appropriate activities, placing an emphasis on individual possession and defending. This means more work on combining players in pairs and small groups to defend and attack.

The coach's responsibility remains coaching the players, not merely ball skills. The key motivator in soccer is the ball; it should be used as much as possible in training sessions. It is very important that warm-up sessions are well handled because this is the time when the coach takes control and sets the tone for the training session. 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 game-like activities. The repetition of technique is undertaken through fun games and dynamic

activities. Impulses of the nervous system are improved with a slower controlled movement, and sequenced muscle action is improved with faster movement. Both have implications in movement education and technique for this age group.

Continue teaching the principles of attack and defense, and provide opportunities for players to experience a variety of positions. When attacking, players should work on keeping possession of the ball but should also be taught that possession play is a means to penetrating to the opponents' goal and not an end in itself. Training the players on combination play, such as wall passes, take-overs and overlaps will aid them in keeping the ball long enough to set up a good attack. Work on improving their small group play in 2v1, 1v2 (emphasis on improvisation), 2v2, 3v1 and 3v3. The objective by the end of this age group is to play well in 5v5 situations.

A continued emphasis should be placed on the principles of play and the roles of players when attacking and defending. Players will need to understand their particular role when attacking and when trying to regain possession of the ball. The players will need guidance in understanding these roles because of a greater number of players and the increased size of the field. The players should have a basic understanding of how to interchange roles during the flow of play. At a minimum, devote two training sessions per month to goalkeeper training where the rest of the team assists their goalkeepers in training on tactics. Specialized goalkeeper training may begin with the U-12 age group; though, it is still important that all of the players are exposed to this position.

When attacking, all players are involved but with an awareness of cover/support by the goalkeeper and at least one covering field player. Develop an understanding of the roles that players have in supporting the attack; i.e.: the player with the ball (1<sup>st</sup> attacker), players providing immediate support (2<sup>nd</sup> attacker(s)) of the ball and other players (3<sup>rd</sup> attacker(s)) who create length (depth) and unbalance (width) the defense. All this needs to be shown in an environment with greater numbers of teammates and opponents on a larger playing field.

When defending, all players participate, even the players furthest up the field, getting goal-side of the opposing players. Continue to develop and show the principles of defending so that all players gain an understanding of defensive roles. Demonstrate the roles of players that delay (put pressure on the ball – 1<sup>st</sup> defender), the players that provide support (cover – 2<sup>nd</sup> defender(s)) and the players that provide balance (depth – 3<sup>rd</sup> defender(s)).

The concept of triangular supporting play and diamonds are still the dominating group shapes, but become more complex because of the larger team numbers. The triangle shape is of particular importance in building upon the idea of support (pairs) from the U-8 and U-10 age groups. The large triangle (width and depth) and the diamond are support on the attack and the smaller triangle (concentration) is support when defending. Continue an emphasis on combining with teammates (3<sup>rd</sup> attacker running).

Teetering on the fence, between childhood and adolescence, the pubescent U-12 player presents problems and potential. They can follow complex instructions and even create their own versions of games. They will demonstrate a greater degree of analytical thought, which enhances tactical

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understanding; yet, their match performance will be inconsistent. Much of their training should consist of small-sided games with various conditions placed upon the players.

### General Characteristics of the U-12 Age Group

- Better able to deal with flighted balls
- Can sequence thoughts and actions to perform more complex tasks
- Can use abstract thought to meet the demands of the game
- Should be able to simultaneously run, strike the ball and think
- Fertile period to learn – full of eagerness
- Important psychosocial implications for a child entering puberty
- Popularity influences self-esteem
- Improved coordination
- Significant physical differences exist between the genders now
- Strength and power becoming factors in their performance

Through the use of game-like activities which allow for trial and error, expose players to the four components of the game. The training activities are maze games and target games, using body awareness games for warm-up and cool-down. 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 is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul."*

*- Friedrich Froebel, German pedagogue, developed concept of "kindergarten"*

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Many players who show promise as children find they can no longer compete at the adult level because they became too specialized too soon. Some players in the professional ranks who make headlines are the ones who played other sports in their younger years and came to competitive soccer relatively late. The quality of technical movement sequences depends on coordination, which is why it is critical to the execution and success of technical/tactical actions. Beware during this critical transition period of the *too much too soon* syndrome. Players must be exposed to playing all positions on the team through the U-14 age group. Versatility is a crucially important piece of player development. When players are pigeon holed into set positions too soon in playing soccer, the opportunity for well-rounded development is lost.

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The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. The 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-12 Age Group\*

**Technique:** moving throw-in, master the qualities of a bouncing spinning ball. Experiment with the qualities of a flighted ball, feints<sup>29</sup> with the ball, receiving bouncing and air balls with the thigh and chest, first touch receiving, heading to score goals and for clearances while standing or jumping, outside of foot passing, receiving with either foot, short passing with both feet, bending shots, crossing to near post space and penalty spot space and heel and flick passing. Introduce half volley and volley shooting, chipping to pass and slide tackle. For goalkeepers: W grip, footwork, underarm bowling, side-arm throwing to targets, taking own goal kicks, side-winder kick, low and forward diving and angle and near post play. Introduce deflecting and boxing.

**Tactics:** 2v1 defending, 2v2 attacking and defending, roles of 2<sup>nd</sup> attacker and defender, man-to-man defense, combination passing, playing on and around the ball as a group with purpose, verbal and visual communication for all positions, halftime analysis, general work on all restarts, wall pass at a variety of angles, passing combinations on the move and rotation of all players through the team – everyone plays in each position. Reinforce the principles of defense. For goalkeepers: positional play, basic angle play (ebb and flow) – into and down the line of the flight of the ball, commanding the goalmouth for the goalkeeper and positioning during a penalty kick and communication.

**Psychology:** Keep it fun and enjoyable to foster a desire to play, self-motivation. Focus on teamwork, confidence, desire, mental skills, handling distress, how to learn from each match, fair play, parental involvement and emotional management (discipline).

**Fitness:** Fitness work continues to be done with the ball. Strength can be improved with body resistance and aerobic exercises. Also focus on agility at speed (sharp turns), acceleration, deceleration, reaction speed, range of motion exercises, proper warm-up and cool-down (include static stretching in the cool-down) are highly recommended now.

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

### Typical U-12 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour and 30 minutes.
- Warm-up, small group activities, range of motion stretching.  
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Introduce large group/team activities (six to eight players).

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<sup>29</sup> A feint (body swerve) is done only with the body, no contact with the ball until the player in possession finally plays the ball. A feint could be done with almost any part of the body.

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- Continue with directional games. Play to targets and/or zones.  
-approximately 30 minutes-
- Conclude with Small-Sided Games, 8v8 with goalkeepers.  
-approximately 35 minutes-
- Finish with cool-down activity, including static stretching.  
-approximately 10 minutes-

### **A great deal of coaching within 4v4 games**

The implementation of developmentally appropriate activities to encourage decision making and increase training demands is evolving in the club environment for this age group. Since sports heroes are a factor in the lives of these children, encourage them to watch high level soccer. The club culture must stress the need for development of the individual player over team building. Avoid overloading players of this age with too many tournaments; no more than two per season is suggested. It is recommended that the club introduce players to sport psychology, nutrition and fitness specialists at this age. If the club needs help with specialists your US Youth Soccer State Association technical director can provide guidance.

U-12 teams should play in two competitive tournaments per year in addition to the US Youth Soccer State Championships or league cup. Look to book the team only into tournaments that play a maximum of one match per day. Still allow for proper development with a minimum of 50 percent playing time for players at all levels of competition at this age. Finally, it is recommended that the team play a maximum of 10 months of each soccer year with two months off. The time off could be two consecutive months or one month off at midseason and another at the end of the soccer year.

Encourage players to watch high level soccer in person and on television. The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer Channel is a good opportunity to see other youth players in the game. The Show highlights soccer of all levels from across the country. USYouthSoccer.org also features the individual stories from The Show and it can also be viewed online by downloading the podcast.

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

**Coach's qualities:** sensitive teacher, enthusiastic, possess soccer awareness, ability to demonstrate, knowledge of the key factors of basic skill, loves to have fun while teaching, able to deal with youngsters who question/challenge the coach, gives encouragement and preferably energetic.

**License recommendation:** Volunteer Coach – U-10 to U-12 Youth Certificate or National Youth License and/or USSF "D" License. Paid Coach – National Youth License, USSF "D" License and Level 1 Goalkeeper certificate.

**The game:** Several new phases of development appear in the U-12 match such as developing a basic understanding of the offside rule. Now that the game is 8v8, the final line in midfield is added to the

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team. New tactical decisions are in place for the U-12s in regard to using short passes involving midfielders to penetrate into the attacking third or making long passes forward, bypassing the midfielders. Place more emphasis on team shape and a balance between the lines in the team on attack and defense. Work with the players on their decision to join in the attack or defense, noting that not all players can attack or defend simultaneously. The formations of 3-2-2; 3-3-1; 2-3-2 are the most common in the 8v8 game. All of these formations allow the players to execute the principles of play. All players must attack and defend in these systems of play. These formations, when played on an appropriate U-12 size field, allow the players to:

- Switch the point of attack
- Attack the far post on corner kicks and from the run of play
- Stay compact

The 3-3-1 formation may require the center forward to play off-center to one side. This then makes it possible to combine with the center midfielder and an outside midfielder. The opposite flank is now open for overlap attack by the outside fullback or midfielder. The challenges with this formation may be the lone striker simply being a runner and the rest of team being too stagnant.

The 3-2-2 formation is the easiest to form triangles around the ball and provide support on attack and defense. This formation encourages more freedom of movement while teaching shape in the defenders' line. It is the easiest formation to coach; therefore, it may be best suited to the novice coach.

The 2-3-2 formation is the most demanding on the players and coach. This formation emphasizes transition and the tactical awareness that makes transition possible. A considerable demand of tactical vision and communication is placed upon the players. Zone defense, requiring tactical growth, is mandatory in this system of play.

With an appropriately sized field players can play through a large range of tactical situations regardless of the team formation.

*"A winner in life, not just in football, learns from a defeat or a mistake and comes back stronger."*

*- Carlos Parreira, Brazil National Team, former coach*

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