



Zia Youth Soccer League's Condensed Playing Rules
for NON-COMPETITIVE COACH-LED SCRIMMAGE GAMES
in the Dribblers and Runners Age Divisions:

Updated March 2026

Soccer's rules and regulations are maintained and updated annually by the International Football Association Board (IFAB). The board consists of eight members, four of which come from FIFA, and the other four coming from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales - all countries that contributed to the development of the sport. FIFA's most recently published rule book is 140 pages long, which is a bit ambitious for the young player or parent who is just becoming familiarized with the sport. For this reason, Zia Youth Soccer has prepared a simplified version below that should allow you to learn the basic rules of soccer. Please also be aware that although FIFA publishes an established set of rules, these rules are subject to modification by national, regional, and local organizations, such as Zia Youth Soccer, as needed to best serve our players.

IFAB currently acknowledges 17 standard rules of soccer as follows:

Rule 1: The Field of Play

Soccer is played on a rectangular grassy field, distinctly marked by two short goal lines and two long-touch lines. The field is divided into halves, separated by the halfway line, which runs from the midpoints of each touchline. At the midpoint of the halfway line is a marked center point surrounded by a lined center circle.

Zia Youth Soccer League's Dribblers and Runners field is approximately 30 yards long and 20 yards wide, with the following markings:

Halfway Line - width of field, marked equidistant between goal lines;

Center Circle Radius - 4 yards;

Penalty Area - approx. 2 yards from goal post and 2 yards into field;

Corner Arcs - on all four corners, 1-yard radius;

The goals used are 3 feet high and 4 feet wide, securely anchored for play.

Rule 2: The Ball

The size of soccer ball used will vary from division to division according to the players' ages. Zia Youth Soccer League's Dribblers and Runners use a **size 3 ball**.

Rule 3: The Number of Players

Youth leagues such as Zia generally play small-sided scrimmages, with fewer players on the field than in a professional match, in order to best serve player development.

Number of players in a scrimmage: 5 per team on field (no goalkeeper);
Substitutions - Substitutions may be made at any stoppage and are unlimited;
Playing Time - Playing time that is as close to equal as possible shall be offered to all team members present at a scrimmage. **Note: although every effort shall be made to provide absolutely equal playing time to all team members present, various factors may affect a coach's ability to provide 100% equal playing time, including but not limited to logistical challenges that may arise due to the number of players present, an individual player's unique readiness or ability to participate, etc.;*
Team Sizes - Standard roster size up to 10 players (11 may be permitted per administrative discretion; further roster size variation/exception may be considered per coach and administrative discretion); teams may be co-ed.

Rule 4: The Players' Equipment

All players should wear a league-issued jersey, shin guards (fully covered by the socks), and soccer cleats. No jewelry or other sharp, hard, or dangerous objects.* If the coach deems a player's equipment unsatisfactory, the player can be sent off until the issue is remedied.

**Newly-pierced ears, in which the earrings cannot be removed, may be covered with padded medical tape for player safety.*

Rules 5 and 6: The Coach-Led Scrimmage

In Zia Youth Soccer League's truly non-competitive environment, which is focused on positive player development and FUN, not strict competition, scrimmage games are led by the coaches. Certified referees are not needed, as this is not a competitive game. **The scrimmage should instead be viewed as an opportunity for players to expand upon what they learn during practice in a game-like environment, with the continued direct support of their coaches on the field.** Coaches work together, both on the sidelines and on the field with the players as needed, to guide the scrimmage in a safe and enjoyable manner for all involved.

At the Dribblers and Runners levels, the scrimmage should be managed using the Boss of the Ball process, which is described at the bottom of this document. Any infringements of the rules shall be explained to the players in order to assist in the learning process.

Rule 7: The Duration of the Scrimmage

- Zia's Dribblers and Runners play four 8-minute quarters or two 16-minute halves at the coaches' discretion;
- Quarters are highly encouraged during hot weather in order to allow plenty of time for water breaks in the shade;
- There will be 1-minute breaks between quarters, and a 5-minute halftime break.

Rule 8: The Start and Restart of Play

The initial **kick-off** is generally determined by a coin toss or rock-paper-scissors, whereby the team who wins the toss can either choose to start with the ball or choose which goal they would like to attack. The other team is then afforded whatever choice the winner does not elect to take. Kick-off occurs at the start of each half, and after each goal scored, and is taken at the center of the halfway line. If a team scores a goal, the opposing team is given the kick-off to restart the match. At kick-off, all players must be on their own half of the field. The kicker will be within the center circle; the kicker's offensive teammates may accompany him/her within the circle. Opponents must be outside of the center circle. The ball is in play when it is kicked and clearly moves in any direction. All restarts are made by the Boss of the Ball.

Rule 9: The Ball In and Out of Play

The ball is out of play when it completely leaves the field of play over the touchline or goal line, on the ground or in the air. The ball is also considered out of play whenever there is a stoppage. If, for any reason, the ball strikes the frame of the goal or a coach and remains within the goal and touch lines, it is still in play.

Rule 10: Method of "Scoring"

A "score" has been made when the whole of the ball completely crosses the goal line between the posts and under the cross-bar. But remember, this is a RECREATIONAL NON-COMPETITIVE scrimmage. As such, no scores or standings will be recorded or posted, in accordance with Zia Youth Soccer League's philosophies of non-competitive recreational play. Coaches should maintain a focus on fun, encourage players in all areas of scrimmage activity, and help them understand that "scoring" is not the only goal. Players should be praised for every effort and achievement on the field, not just when goals are made.

Rule 11: Offside

The offside rule is not observed in Zia Youth Soccer League's scrimmages.

Rule 12: Fouls & Misconduct

This rule covers offenses involving contact committed on the field-of-play while the ball is in play and against any opponent, teammate, or coach, in addition to non-contact fouls and technical offenses, including but not limited to:

- Kicking or attempting to kick an opponent.
- Tripping or attempting to trip an opponent.
- Jumping at, charging, pushing, tackling, holding, spitting at, striking or attempting to strike an opponent.
- Playing in a dangerous manner.
- Serious foul play or violent conduct.

- Unsportsmanlike behavior.
- Dissent by word or action.
- Using offensive or abusive language and/or gestures.
- Persistent infringement of the rules.
- Intentionally delaying the restart of play.
- Denying the opposing team a goal or an obvious goal-scoring opportunity by deliberately handling the ball.
- Handling the ball deliberately (Accidental contact, i.e. ball striking hand or arm with no intent by player, is not an offense and should not be penalized, as these are instinctive, self-protective reactions).
- **Heading the ball deliberately is prohibited for player safety and in accordance with US Youth Soccer regulations.**

In this age group, the rules are very liberal. When a child makes a mistake or an offense occurs, the coaches will take the time to explain it to the child and allow him or her to try again. There will be no cautions or ejections in these divisions, except in the case of repeated dangerous or violent play, which may result in the offending player being removed from the scrimmage for a period of one quarter or half by his or her coach. All fouls/offenses shall result in a Boss of the Ball restart.

Rules 13 - 17: Free Kicks, Penalty Kicks, Throw-Ins, Goal Kicks, and Corner Kicks

There are no free kicks, penalty kicks, throw-ins, goal kicks, or corner kicks in the Dribblers and Runners divisions, as all restarts are made by the Boss of the Ball.

MERCY RULE: Keeping the scrimmage experience positive and balanced.

Although Zia Youth Soccer League tries to form teams that are as balanced as possible, there are times when one team will simply be at a more advanced place in their skill development than another. If this happens, and one team is "scoring" goal after goal while the other team clearly struggles and begins losing confidence (and their smiles), the coaches must take action together. Remember, Zia's scrimmage games are designed to be fun opportunities for players to expand upon what they learn in practice in a game-like environment. These are NOT competitive games, and not a single child should walk away feeling like they've "lost." That is not what Zia is about. So should a scrimmage begin to have an unbalanced feel as previously described, coaches should take steps to balance the environment accordingly. Sometimes this may mean loaning a more skilled player to the other team, or allowing the team in need of a boost to have an extra player on the field. Or perhaps adding a new rule for the team that keeps "scoring," requiring that each player they have on the field must touch the ball before it goes in the goal. Another great tactic - one which is particularly useful to not only help the team that is struggling but to also challenge the team that is ahead - is to move players out of their "usual" positions in which they excel, in order to try new positions. This could mean moving that one player who scores goal after goal into a defensive spot, or vice versa. The options are endless. Coaches are encouraged to get

creative and work together to make the experience a positive one for every player on every team, supporting Zia Youth Soccer League's mission of providing a truly recreational, non-competitive, FUN and pressure-free soccer experience.



Boss of the Ball for the Dribblers and Runners Age Divisions

Three- to five -year-olds tend to see the world through their own eyes. They are generally very concrete thinkers, seeing the world and the way it works in black and white instead of shades of gray. Because they are in this stage of cognitive and emotional development, many of them have a hard time seeing the bigger picture and thinking situationally.

You may be thinking, "Yeah, so? Why is this relevant to soccer?"

Players in the Dribblers and Runners age divisions, as a whole, find the rules of throw-ins, goal kicks, corner kicks, and even goalkeeping very confusing, as these are very situationally-based rules. Even passing is a concept that is largely foreign to them, since they mainly think of themselves in relation to the ball and the action, not really being able to see where they fit in the larger picture of a team. Additionally, much valuable scrimmage game time can be spent explaining these rules to young children, and because they are often not yet developed enough to make or receive a long pass or kick, the ball will usually end up coming right back at whoever took it, creating a situation where we may repeat the same inbounds play for five minutes or more.

Our goals in these age groups are 1) getting every child as many touches on the ball as possible, focusing on developing dribbling, shooting, and ball control skills, and 2) teaching the players directional play, where all players on the team are defending one goal and attacking the other, while the other team does the opposite. As contrary as it may seem to many adults, the rest, like passing, rules of inbounds play, and goalkeeping, will come as they grow and mature.

The more comfortable the kids are on the ball, the more they will love the game, and will want to stay with it throughout childhood and into adulthood. Often times, observing the more complex rules of soccer like throw-ins and corner kicks at this age results in the most advanced two kids on each team controlling the ball for 95% of the game, leaving all the other kids with just a few touches on the ball each game, at best. Some of the less aggressive players may not even touch the ball at all during a game, which is not helping them grow or develop as players.

These are the reasons behind Zia Youth Soccer League's "Boss of the Ball" approach to inbounds play during games. When the ball goes out of bounds, instead of having the kids take a throw-in, corner kick, or goal kick, we will have a "boss of the ball" (the coaches on the field) inbound the ball by distributing it either (1) to the member of the opposite team that last touched it or (2) to a member of the opposite team who has so far struggled to get any touches on the ball, at the coaches' discretion.

This method is a concrete way of teaching that if you want to keep the ball, it's best to keep it in bounds, and that the other team will receive the ball if you cause the ball to go out. It eliminates the situational rules of throw-ins, corner kicks, and goal kicks. The boss of the ball approach puts the ball back on the field quickly, allowing much more of the game to be spent on action and with players developing dribbling, shooting, ball control, and defending skills. Another advantage of this method is that the coach can better control the flow of the game and distribute the ball to the less aggressive players who might otherwise not touch the ball much. These players still may get the ball taken away from them by the more aggressive players, but they will get experience in game situations touching and controlling the ball, which is really the only way they will improve, develop, and grow as players. Far from punishing the stronger players, this system challenges them more, as they must learn to adapt, and will improve at defending and tackling, then going to goal themselves.

We are always very excited to coach and welcome our youngest players, and believe simplifying the game for them using the boss of the ball approach for inbounds play is the best way to encourage player development.