

# Characteristics of U12 Soccer Players

(Sixth & Seventh Grade)

**Repetitive Technique Continues to be Very Important. But it MUST BE DYNAMIC, NOT STATIC!**

- Physical Development
- Mental Development
- Social Development

## Physical Development

- The average age for the beginning of pubescence in girls is (10) years, with a range from (7-14)
- The average age for the beginning of pubescence in boys is (12), ranging from (9 to 16).
- Dynamic and rhythmic warm-up and cool-down exercises are the key to preventing injury.

## Physical Development

- Overuse injuries, burnout, and high attrition rates are associated with high-intensity children's programs that fail to stress skill development and learning enjoyment.
- Begin to develop abilities to sustain complex coordinated skill sequences.

## Mental Development

- Begins to think in abstract terms and can address tactical situations.
- A systematic approach to problem-solving appears at this stage; the game of soccer must present the ability to think creatively and solve problems while moving.

## Social Development

- More TV, less unstructured play.
- I am beginning to spend more time with friends and less with my parents.
- Popularity influences self-esteem.
- Whether a child enters puberty early or late has important social and emotional implications.
- Learning appropriate sex roles.
- Most children seek peers like them in age, race, sex, and socioeconomic status.
- Opportunity to introduce the value of cultural diversity.
- Developing a conscience, morality, and a scale of values.

## Coaching Methods

- Coach = Facilitator
- Makes the training player/athlete-centered
- Asks guiding questions
- Creates problem-solving opportunities
- Positively reinforces players
- Simple to complex activities: Time, Space, Players

## How to Coach...

- Coaching at a stoppage
- Coaching during the flow of play

## Guided Questioning...

- "How could you..."
- "Is there another way to...?"
- "What happens if you..."

## Typical U12 Training Session

- It should not exceed 1 hour and 30 min.
- Warm-up, small group activities, stretching. (15 min.)

- Introduce larger group/team activities (6-8 players).
- Continue with directional games. Play to targets and/or zones.
- Conclude with a small-sided game 8v8 with GK's.
- Finish with cool-down activity.

### **U12 Tactical Sign**

- The dawning of Tactical Awareness

### **Coaching Activities Checklist**

- Are the activities fun?
- Are the activities organized?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Is creativity and decision-making being used?
- Are the spaces used appropriately?
- Is the coach's feedback appropriate?
- Is the coach guiding or controlling the players in the activity?
- Are there implications for the game?

### **Characteristics of U12 Soccer Players (Sixth & Seventh Grade)**

#### **Characteristics of U12 Soccer Players**

- They begin to develop the ability to sustain complex, coordinated skill sequences.
- Some of the players have reached puberty. Girls, in general, arrive earlier than boys.
- Most players can think abstractly and are thus able to understand some team concepts that are foundational to the game.
- They are beginning to be able to address these hypothetical situations/abstract concepts and to solve the problems systematically.
- They spend more time with friends and less time with their parents.
- They are susceptible to conformity & peer pressure.
- They are developing a conscience, morality, and scale of values.
- Players tend to be highly self-critical.
- Instruction needs to be enabled.
- Show them what can be done instead of telling them what not to do.
- Although they are more serious with their play, they are still mainly involved because it is fun.
- They are openly competitive.
- A few may foul on purpose.
- They are looking towards their role models and heroes to know how to act.
- They have a more complex and developed sense of humor.
- They tend to form cliques on teams if allowed.
- Girls are especially more conscious of their bodies and more protective.
- More aggressive play by the boys starts to separate them from the girls.

#### **Things You Can Expect**

Some coaches say that the (10-12) 12-year-old players have "turned the corner" and look like real soccer players. However, games are still frantically paced and a bit unpredictable for the most part. These players know how much fun it is to play the game skillfully. As a result, we begin to see some of the players drop out who recognize the importance of skill and become discouraged by their lack of it. Some other things that we can expect when working with this aged player are:

- They will yell at their teammates when they make a mistake.
- They will openly question the referee's decisions.
- Players will encourage each other.
- They will pass the ball even when they know that they will not get it back.

- Team cooperation is emerging. They will run to a spot away from the play, even when they know they might not get the ball.
- They will point out inconsistencies between what you say and what you do. They are "moral watchdogs".
- The difference in skill levels between the players may be very pronounced.
- The physical difference in size, weight, and muscular development may vary dramatically.
- Not only will some of the players come to training with expensive cleats, but some will also come with
  - Matching uniforms, sweat suits, and bags.
  - They will get together with their friends and be able to set up and play their own game.
  - Parents can be brutal or abusive during games. Some will yell at the referee at almost every call. COACHES: Address this inappropriate behavior in the pre-season and throughout the season. Educate the parents on the importance of sportsmanship and make it clear that it benefits the team. The game belongs to the players, not the parents.

### **Coaching Rationale**

Coaching at this age level is a challenge because many of the players view themselves as real soccer players, while others are at the point where it is not as much fun as it used to be because they feel that their lack of skill development does not enable them to have an impact on the game. They see their skillful friends able to do magical things with the ball, and since they cannot do this themselves, they start to drop out. Our challenge then, if the players are willing, is to keep all the players engaged and involved and make them feel important, as though they are improving. Skills still need to be the primary focus of training, and players need to be put into environments under pressure to learn how to use their skills in various contexts. Here are a few other considerations as we think about working with this aged youngster:

- Our goal is to develop players in a fun, engaging environment. Winning has its place but must be balanced with the other goals of teaching them to play properly. Some decisions will need to be made that might not necessarily lead to wins (i.e., having players play different positions or asking players to try to play the ball "out of the back.")
- Smaller, skilled players cannot be ignored. Although it may be tempting to "win" by playing only the bigger players in key positions, the smaller, skilled players must be put into areas of responsibility.
- Encourage creativity and taking risks.
- Small-sided games are still the preferred method of teaching the game. This makes learning fun and more efficient.

**Overuse Injuries, Burnout and High Attrition Rates** are associated with programs that do not emphasize skill development and learning enjoyment. Overuse injuries are also common with players whose parents push them into multiple teams and training sessions such as school ball, club ball, and select. There is only so much a (11) year-old body can handle.

- Train for one and one-half hours two to three times a week. The training pace needs to replicate the demands of the game itself.
- They are ready to have a preferred position, but it is essential for their development to occasionally play out of their preferred spot in training and during games.
- As with previous age groups, training remains best if it focuses on one or perhaps two topics per session. Activities should be geared to progressing from fundamental activities that have little or no pressure from an opponent to activities that are game-like in their intensity and pressure.
- Flexibility training is essential. Have them stretch after they have broken a sweat and, perhaps most importantly, at the end of the workout in a "warm-down."

### **Typical Training Session**

Here are some activities that should be included in a U-12 training session:

#### **Warm- Up**

- A brief warm-up is appropriate to get the players thinking about soccer and physically prepare them for the upcoming session. This should involve individual or small group activities that

include the ball. It is recommended that coaches emphasize technical skills for the warm-up in every practice session. The warm-up should lead to the theme of the day. There is no absolute right or wrong way to warm up as long as it is done.

- Static stretching is also appropriate once the players have broken a sweat, but dynamic rhythmic stretching is preferable, hopefully done with the ball. The warm-up should get the players ready to play. It should be lively, fun, and engaging as well as instructional. There is nothing like a good, fast-paced activity to grab the player's attention and make them glad they came to practice.

#### **Individual or Small Group Activities**

- 1 v 1 is very appropriate at this age to build the confidence in the players to take on an opponent. In addition, it helps them develop the confidence they need to defend against an oncoming player.
- Games of keep away, stressing the proper shape on a soccer field, a triangle, or a diamond, are recommended. Technical excellence in passing and receiving must also be stressed.

#### **Play The Game** (*TGFU: Teaching Games for Understanding*)

- Small-sided soccer can be used to heighten intensity and create some good competition. Practices should have both match-related and match-condition components.
- The fundamental skill should progress from little or no pressure to the skill or activity at 50 %, 75%, then full pressure. Build success, then gradually increase game-like conditions and game pace.

#### **Warm Down and Homework**

- Finish the session with a warm-down.
- Give them some more stretches to do with the ball.
- You may want to review what you started the session with.
- Give them some homework so that they practice on their own.
- Challenge them with a ball trick. A set number of juggles, a new juggling trick, or a new feinting movement.
- It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point, and you will get an enthusiastic return.