

COACHES' HANDOUT

Skill Priorities for U-6/U-8 players

By far the most important skill for beginners is the skill of dribbling. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and using dribbling to get away from pressure. **The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation and preparation for the other fundamental skills of soccer, such as controlling, passing and shooting.** When players are receiving the ball and making the preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. The ability to dribble also helps maintain possession of the ball. It's not unusual for players to find themselves in a game situation where dribbling is the only viable option to get out of tight pressure and maintain possession.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start, the better. Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players don't get easily discouraged if they fail. Players of this age do not possess the analytical thought process to look back or think ahead. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that the last time they tried to dribble it didn't work will not even enter their minds. But if we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble. Thirdly, In 3v3 and 4v4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is always just a few yards away from shooting range. Once the game moves to the larger-sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. And lastly, it's better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the U-10 and older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

Most parent coaches reading this section will probably agree that dribbling should be a priority. The challenge is to find a way to implement this priority into the real life dynamics of your typical U-6/U-8 program. How can the clubs do it?

As mentioned in the previous section, most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks,

they louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. The reality is that players are controlled like puppets by the adults to such an extent that they are not thinking for themselves, and are afraid to do anything but kick the ball. Even throw-ins are routinely thrown straight to the other team by confused players who are conditioned to play the ball forward, no matter what. The kick-offs are no better, with players kicking the ball straight to the other team, American football style. Players, who clearly have plenty of time on the ball with no pressure anywhere near, are still kicking it forward without any thought or skill. And this type of mindless play is usually not corrected by the parent coaches and is allowed to occur time and again.

What the coaches must do is encourage the players to dribble, dribble and dribble. Their first touch must be a soft one. There should be very little coaching done by the coaches, just the occasional reminder to "dribble" and, when close enough to goal, to "shoot". The shout to "kick it" should never be hollered by the adults. Dribbling out of pressure should be the emphasis for these age groups. Results don't count and 'booting it' should not be an option. The players must be allowed to be creative, and to solve the problems of pressure and space by themselves, using dribbling techniques. Passing is an impossible technique to master for players who cannot dribble. The better players, once they learn to dribble out of tight areas, will be able to create space for themselves with the dribble and will then start to look up and pass the ball. But that will come by itself. Success at the U-6/U-8 ages is measured by how many times a player can dribble past opponents since game results are not important.

The coaches' approach to the pre-game warm-up should also change. No more the traditional line drills where the coach serves one ball at a time to a line of players who shoot on goal. Instead, the players should all have a ball each and dribble inside their half, using fun types of dribbling activities, to prepare them for the game. The club DOC can prepare a sheet of pre-game warm-up activities that every team must do prior to kick-off.

To summarize, if we want our players to fully master the art of dribbling, the following conditions must exist: a) they must start learning to dribble early; b) we must provide ample opportunities for dribbling in practices and games, and c) we must create the right game environment where players are not afraid to dribble. The following guidelines are recommended for the skill priorities at the U-6/U-8 ages:

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-6	Dribble out of trouble Soft first touch No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal
U-8	Dribble out of trouble Soft first touch No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal Introduce passing only to the players who can dribble out of trouble

Coaches need to reduce the number of unnecessary stoppages in play. For example, there is no need to stop and correct every time a throw-in is not done properly. For some reason, parent coaches have a fixation on teaching players how to take a throw-in. There is absolutely no reason on earth for U-6/U-8's to rehearse throw-ins in practices or games. Why is it so important for the players to do proper throw-ins at U-6/U-8? All the players will eventually learn the throw-in technique over time by themselves. It's like walking. We don't teach toddlers to walk - they learn it instinctively by trying and falling. The players will learn to take a throw-in in time without the need for us to stop games and teach it. Every minute of the game should be spent playing, with as little interruption as possible.

Parents' Role

The parents must understand the skill priorities and embrace the program structure, if it is to succeed. Clubs should prepare a handout that deals specifically with the U-6/U-8 priorities. The handout should include the rationale behind the priorities and explain to the parents how they are expected to behave on the sidelines. As mentioned before, we feel that the clubs need to be firm and clear about their expectations of the parent's behavior. The handout should clearly state what is and isn't allowed on the sideline, and use the field marshals to monitor and enforce these rules.

One of the main problems with parents at games is that they sit too close to the field. Their proximity to the players gives them too much of a presence which, in turn, impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. It's very hard for parents to resist shouting instructions to the players because beginner players are visibly unsure of themselves and naturally make a lot of mistakes. Children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. This dependency spills over into youth sports, manifesting as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. **Therefore, another important objective of the U-6/U-8 programs should be to wean the players out of their dependency on their parents' help during games.** This is so very crucial for the development of soccer players. We all know that soccer is a players' game, meaning that it's the players who must make the decisions on the field. In soccer, coaches have a lot less influence and power during games than in some of the other traditional American sports. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do. The following guidelines are recommended for U-6/U-8 game set-up:

- 1) **The fields to be laid out in such a way that keep the parents about 20-30 yards from the sidelines.** This can be easily done using special lines or ropes beyond which parents cannot encroach. We all agree that most players want their parents to be at the games, watching them play, and we realize that having the parents sit by the sidelines seems so nice and cozy. But keeping the parents some distance away from the action will enhance the players' sense of freedom and ease most of the intimidation any players might feel when

the parents are right on top of them. And the parents can still enjoy watching the game. What we lose in coziness we gain in giving the players more independence.

- 2) **The parents should not coach the players.** All they should be allowed to do is cheer good plays by their team but they should also be encouraged to politely applaud good play by the other team.
- 3) **Parents must never tell the players to “kick” or “boot” the ball.** As discussed in the section on the skill priority, kicking the ball needs to be discouraged. The parents will need to be prepared to accept that a lot of the dribbling attempts will be unsuccessful and that, nevertheless, they will have to bite their tongues and let the players try again and again.
- 4) **The coaches should also keep their instruction to a minimum** and let the players understand that they must make their own decisions on the field and that it's OK to make mistakes. The coaches should stand on the sideline and only enter the field if absolutely necessary. It must be remembered that we are trying to help the players grow out of their dependency on the adults. The coaches should encourage dribbling out of trouble and discourage kicking.
- 5) **All this information should be conveyed to the parents in a meeting and using a handout.** A sample handout for this purpose is included in the section on dealing and educating the parents.

