

Characteristics Of U - 8 Players

Commack Soccer League plays Under 8 (first and second graders) on an *approximately* 35 x 55 field with six (6) per side including a keeper. Players move up to a #4 ball at this age. Real goals are used, corner kicks are made as well as throw-ins. Girls and boys separate into different leagues at this age however don't kid yourselves, some of the girls can still run, kick and play with the boys and you'll see girls teams training with the boys all of the time. As a coach at this level you will find:

- Attention span is a bit longer than U-6 players but still not at a "competitive" stage
- Inclined towards small group activities.
- Always in motion: scratching; blinking; jerking; rocking....
- Easily bruised psychologically. They will remember negative comments for a long time. Shout praise. Give "hints".
- They want everybody to like them.
- Developing physical confidence. (Most are able to ride a two-wheeler.)
- Starting to imitate older players or sports heroes. Want the same "gear" as them.
- Lack sense of pace. They go flat out until they drop.
- Skeletal system growing rapidly. Often results in apparent lack of coordination.
- Cardiovascular and temperature regulation system is not developed. Their heart rate peaks quickly and they overheat quickly. Make sure that they get adequate water breaks.
- Limited understanding of personal evaluation. "If they try hard, they performed well" regardless of the actual performance. Thus, they need to be encouraged constantly, and asked "Now, can you do this?"
- Better at recognizing when the ball is out of play, and remembering what goal they are going for.. but, in the heat of battle, they will sometimes still forget.
- They still find it difficult to really be aware of more than one thing at a time.

Things You Can Expect

6, 7, and 8 year old players are a bit more compliant than their U-6 counterparts. They will be able to follow 2 or 3 step instructions and are starting to have a good understanding about what it means to play a "game".

They are also starting to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they now will recognize that they even have teammates by the fact that they occasionally, and I mean occasionally, will pass the ball to a teammate, on purpose.

Often, they will repeat the phrase "I can't do that!", but, will quickly run to you to show you that they can, even when they only think that they can. Some other things that you can expect to happen during a season with this age group are:

- There will be at least 200-300 falls during the season, but, now they will usually pick themselves back up.
- The puddle in front of the goal is still too tempting to resist.
- Keep a spare pump in your bag as the players usually do not realize that their ball is flat until they try to kick it, or the coach tells them that it is flat.

However also begin instructing the kids that it is THEIR responsibility to make sure that their equipment is with them, and in proper working order, at all times. It is not too early for them to take on the responsibility of having, for example, their water bottle with them (and having it filled with water in it might be good also)

- Some of the girls are a lot tougher than the boys.
- They will still want to wear a "pennie", even when the color is identical to their shirt. They don't complain if the pennies smell because you didn't wash them. This will change as they get older particularly with girls teams..
- They will come to believe, as will you, that "the ground is their friend."
- Will look up at birds and planes as they fly by even when an attacker is bearing down on them
- Will stop and pick the dandelions on the field
- It will be impossible to remember who is who's best friend as you try to make up teams.

- School conflicts will come up... please, let them go (they must face their teachers five days a week).
- They will wear their uniform to bed.
- If you put them "on defense" they will stand like statues in the box until an attacker approaches. That is they take you very literally. Get them into the game. Allow them to take risks. Never criticize when a player takes a risk and fails. If you do, it becomes harder and harder to get them to take risks again.
- The physically mature player will dominate.

One of the cutest stories I have ever heard about soccer involves this age group and was supplied by Jim Turpin, a National Level coach.

Seems there was a young girl was playing on a U8 rec They had played several games and were doing quite well.

After the 6th. Game, which they won, one of the girls came off the field crying.

She came up to her parents and the tears were flowing freely. Her dad, of course, had no clue; they had just won the game, hadn't they? Her mom, getting down on one knee, asked what was wrong.

The little one says, through the tears, "I want to be on the other team."

"Why?" Asks her mom, "Don't you like your teammates?"

"Yes, they're great."

"Then why do you want to be on the other team?" Asks Mom.

"It's their uniforms," sobs the girl.

"Don't you like yours?"

"There OK but," the tears came stronger, "the other team gets a different one each game."

Coaching Rationale

Some of the players that are playing as a 7 year old have had two years of soccer experience and thus have already touched the ball a few thousand times in their lives. This, however, does not mean that these players are ready for the

mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have some idea of the game, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball with his/her body.

They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be brand new to the sport, it is imperative that activities are geared towards individual success and participation. Following are some more items that a coach of U-8 players should consider.

- Small sided soccer is the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but, it is an easier game to understand.

We play small sided in the league (6 on 6) but practices should be small sided as well with 3 on 3 being a very manageable level on the practice field

- Because of rapid growth spurts during this age, players will go through times when they seem to have lost control of their body. What they could easily do 2 weeks ago now seems unattainable. Be patient.
- Passing is not an important part of their game, but with the proper training and PATIENCE you can introduce it. The earlier the kids understand that their teammates are there to help them, and that it is indeed a team game, the more fun the game will become for everyone

Passing relays, like a give and go ladder, are fun ways to teach passing and give a much needed competitive aspect to practice

- Training once or twice a week is plenty, and should not last longer than one and one-half hours .
- Each player should bring their own size #4 ball to training. Learning how to control it should be the main objective. They need to touch it as many times as possible during fun activities that will engage them.
- Challenge them to get better by practicing on their own. There is no rule which states that they can't learn by themselves, no matter how important we think we are.
- Incidental things are important. They are forming the habits that will impact their future participation. Ask them to take care of their equipment (water bottle included), cooperate, listen, behave, and try hard. Realize, however, that they often forget and will need to be reminded often.
- Ask them to work with others to solve a particular challenge. Start them with just one partner and work from there.

- Every player should play every position (except perhaps keeper although I did that also). There are no forwards and no defenders. There are just soccer players

Typical Training Session

Here are some items that should be included in a U-8 training session:

Warm- Up

A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that may or may not involve the ball, although in general, a ball at their feet is better than no ball at their feet. They can chase their ball as it is thrown by the coach, bringing it back with different parts of their body.

Individual Or Small Group Activities

Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals in a game environment. An example would be a kind of tag game, or a game where players are trying to work with a partner or small group to obtain a goal. Keep players in motion at all times. **Avoid having them wait on lines.** Play games of "inclusion" (where everyone plays), instead of games where the "loser sits". Be creative. These players like "crazy" games with a lot of action.

Play The Game

Small sided soccer can be used to heighten intensity and create some good competition. Play 1v.1 up to 5v.5. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Perhaps play to emphasize a particular skill (can only dribble the ball over a goal line in order to get a point). Use cones if you don't have real goals. **Keep players involved.** Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. Switch teams often, give everyone a chance to win.

Games, drills, exercises, what ever you want to call them, must be success oriented to start. Build on success by progressing to more and more difficult drills, say by starting out with a single defender playing half speed, then $\frac{3}{4}$ speed and then full speed.

Success breeds success

Warm-Down & 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. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like, bounce it off their head, then thigh and then catch it. Can one player kick a ball to a partner and then back without it hitting the ground? 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.