
Understanding Your Players

Why a U12 child plays soccer?

Similar to the U10 player, these children are looking for more than just fun from their soccer experience. They do play because they want to enjoy the game but it is not the sole reason for playing. At these ages players want to be part of a team, they want to play with their friends, learn more about the skills involved to be success at the sport, form new friendships and build a relationship with the coach. Their soccer experience needs to be more encompassing. A coach needs to challenge the players, while still keeping all the fun elements involved!

What are the Physical Capabilities of players at these ages?

1. Their Skeletal System is still growing.
2. There are now significant differences between the genders.
3. Greater diversity between players in maturity & ability.
4. Significantly Improved co-ordination in fine motor skills. Players should be challenged with more difficult techniques and be expected to master / fine tune these techniques.
5. Prone to heat loss and related injuries. Players should be given longer breaks so they can fully recover. Breaks should be tailored to the climate.

What are the Cognitive Characteristics of an U12 player?

These ages are often described ad the 'fertile period for learning' because of the follow characteristics

1. They have a better understanding of the team concept.
2. Eager to learn. They are mini sponges and should be treated that way. The more we can teach the better at these ages.
3. They are internally motivated to play.
4. They now understand the concept of space and time.
5. They begin to think ahead. This allows for tactical instruction.
6. They have an ability to sequence thoughts and actions together; Run, Strike and Think.
7. They can perform more complex tasks.

What are the emotional characteristics of these players?

Players are becoming more intense and serious about playing soccer at these ages. It is no longer the push of the parents that is the biggest influence over their recreational activities. Emotionally players are becoming more complex and have the following characteristics:

1. Whether a child enters puberty early or late has important psychological implications.
2. Girls will tend to form cliques.
3. Boys take a more broad approach to team relationships.
4. Popularity influences self esteem.
5. Players should be included in the formation of rules for the team.
6. The manor in which players interact with their teammates is based upon how they feel about themselves.
7. Treat players with respect and don't force them into uncomfortable situations.

What do these characteristics mean to a soccer coach?

1. When coaching players of these ages it is still important to instill a love for the game. However, a coach should also try to implement more team building elements into the team's soccer diet.

2. What should practice look like at these ages:
 - Organized. Coaches should prepare for every practice. Try to attend practice at least 15 minutes early in order to set up your activities. It is essential that activities run from simple to complex with little change over time between them.
 - Coaches should still welcome all players to practice.
 - Duration: 1 hour and 30 minutes. Players should be allowed fewer breaks during practice but these should be longer duration as players need more time to recover.
 - Frequency: practice should take place at least twice a week.
 - Ratio of players to the ball. 1:1 to 1:4.
 - Activities should be educationally focused. Activities that are physically, technically and tactically challenging are fun for players at these age groups. Competition should also be a staple of each activity at these ages. This will drive players to challenge themselves and teammate to improve.
 - Small Sided Games. The range for the ratio of player to ball has increased and small side games should be a staple of practice. Again, time should be allotted for free play during each practice.
 - Competition. Teaching players to be competitive is also an important element of coaching at these ages. Try to make every activity, game or scrimmage competitive between teams or individuals. To make the environment competitive, the activity must mean something and have a consequence. Consequences should involve a physical element, such as push ups, sit ups, running, etc.

3. Coaching; the word teacher is still the best description for coaches of an U12 team. Players are like sponges to new information at these ages and coaches should be prepare to teach players with the following methods:
 - Letting the game be the teacher. Implementing activities with certain restrictions in order to bring out of your players the technical or tactical skill you are focusing on.
 - Giving clear demonstrations of the skill or idea you want to teach.
 - Talking with individuals during the flow of the activity or taking that player to the side to implement the information.
 - Asking thought provoking questions to players or the entire group in order to guide players to solve soccer problems. This is ideally done on a natural stoppage of play as well as the start or finish of an activity.
 - Using the 'FREEZE METHOD' to teach. The freeze method is when a coach stops an activity directly after a mistake OR perfect passage of play to reenact and teach the group. It is important the during this stoppage you show (demonstrate) the group exactly what you want the players to do in that specific situation. After showing the group, a coach must allow the players to practice the skill or passage of play that you want. Finally, restart the activity with the skill or passage of play perfectly performed by your players.

It is important to remember that players at these ages are still bruised very easily by negative and / or demeaning comments. However, players will start to blame other players for mistakes made during practice and we must be sure to identify who and what mistakes have been made in order to teach players in the correct manor. Coaching points should be made by not only identifying mistakes made but also asking players how to solve the problems. Remember a ratio of 4:1 is required when giving feedback; one negative point should equal four positives.

4. What should we be teaching a U12 player?

Although technical development should be a key element in a U12 player’s soccer diet, tactical ideas start to become as important. All technical areas outlined at U10 are still important for U12 players, however you should expect technical work to be done at full pace and executed well under pressure.

Age Appropriate Technical Aspects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dribbling Technique: Change Direction & Pace. • Running with the Ball Technique: How & When to exploit space on the dribble. • Master Turning with the Ball: Inside Hook, Outside Hook, Drag Back, Stop Turn, Step Over and Cryuff. • Master Moves to Beat Defenders: Step Fake, Scissor, Double Step Fake and Double Scissor. • Hesitation Moves: Wave and Stop / Go. • Shielding the Ball: Securing and Keeping Possession of the ball using the body. • Passing: Inside and Outside of the Foot. Master Passing Over Distance. • Receiving: Inside and Outside of the Foot. Master Receiving out of the Air. • Finishing: Shooting from Varying Distances. • Heading: Attacking and Defensive. • Surface Work: Volleying, Thigh & Volley and Chest & Volley.

Small group and team tactical concepts should become a major focus of practices at U12. In addition to the repetition of tactics from the U10 age groups, these tactical elements should also be include into your teams soccer diet:

Defending	Attacking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure: Delay and Restraint. • Cover: marking space around the ball. • Balance: Weak side defending. • Positional Defending: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defending as a forward. - Midfield defending. - Back line defending. • How does each line defend in each third of the field. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Attacker: How & When to Penetrate. • Second Attacker: Supporting the Player with the Ball. • Team Shape when in possession. • Third Attacker: Mobility & Penetrating Runs. • 2 Man Combinations: Master Give & Go, Overlap. • 3rd Man Running Combinations. • Possession vs. Penetration: Risk vs. Reward in each 3rd of the field.

6. Practice Topic Progression:

<i>Fall</i>	<i>Practice 1</i>	<i>Practice 2</i>
<i>Week 1</i>	We don't have the ball - Team Defending	We have the ball - Shape in Possession
<i>Week 2</i>	We don't have the ball - Team Defending	We have the ball - Shape in Possession
<i>Week 3</i>	Attacking Play - Dribbling	Possession vs. Penetration - Dribbling
<i>Week 4</i>	Attacking Play - Dribbling	Possession vs. Penetration - Dribbling
<i>Week 5</i>	Attacking - Combination Play	Possession vs. Penetration - Passing
<i>Week 6</i>	Attacking - Combination Play	Possession vs. Penetration - Passing
<i>Week 7</i>	Attacking / Creative Play	Turning and Switching Play
<i>Week 8</i>	Attacking Play - Finishing	Attacking Play - Finishing

<i>Spring</i>	<i>Practice 1</i>	<i>Practice 2</i>
<i>Week 1</i>	We don't have the ball - Team Defending	We have the ball - Shape in Possession
<i>Week 2</i>	We don't have the ball - Team Defending	We have the ball - Shape in Possession
<i>Week 3</i>	Attacking Play - Dribbling	Possession vs. Penetration - Dribbling
<i>Week 4</i>	Attacking Play - Dribbling	Possession vs. Penetration - Dribbling
<i>Week 5</i>	Attacking - Combination Play	Possession vs. Penetration - Passing
<i>Week 6</i>	Attacking - Combination Play	Possession vs. Penetration - Passing
<i>Week 7</i>	Attacking / Creative Play	Turning and Switching Play
<i>Week 8</i>	Attacking Play - Finishing	Attacking Play - Finishing