

Why Small-Sided Games?

by Tom Goodman, US Youth Soccer Director of Coaching Education

As the newly appointed US Youth Soccer Director of Coaching Education, veteran youth coach and father of three adult children, who used to be little soccer players, I have thought long and hard about the answer to the question, "Why Small-Sided Games?" Let me make sure that everyone understands the meaning of "Small-Sided Games". These are soccer games with fewer players competing on a smaller sized field. These are fun games that involve the players more because one ball is being shared by fewer players. All ages can play "Small Sided Games", but it has a definite developmental impact on our younger soccer players.

Here are some of the reasons why I believe we, as soccer coaches, administrators and parents must guarantee that our young soccer players play small-sided games:

- Because we want our young soccer players to touch the soccer ball more often and become more skillful with it! (Individual technical development)
- Because we want our young soccer players to make more, less-complicated decisions during the game! (Tactical development)
- Because we want our young soccer players to be more physically efficient in the field space they are playing in! (Reduced field size)
- Because we want our young soccer players to have more individual teaching time with the coach! Less players on the field and less players on the team will guarantee this! (Need to feel worthy...need to feel important)
- Because we want our young soccer players to have more, involved playing time in the game! (More opportunity to solve problems that only the game presents)
- Because we want our young soccer players to have more opportunity to play on both sides of the ball! (More exposure to attacking and defending situations)
- Because we want our young soccer players to have more opportunities to score goals! (Pure excitement)

These are the reasons why we adults must foster "Small-Sided Games" in our youth soccer programs. The "Small-Sided" environment is a developmentally appropriate environment for our young soccer players.

It's a FUN environment that focuses on the young soccer player.

It just makes sense...doesn't it?

ADVANTAGES OF PLAYING SMALL SIDED GAMES

- More time with the coach/facilitator
- Energetic workouts due to playing both offense and defense
- More efficient use of field space
- Matches can be played simultaneously across a full size field
- Children are physically more efficient in smaller space
- Children are actively involved for a longer period of time
- It takes less time to score a goal or advance to goal
- Greater success rate for the players

Frequently Asked Questions

Why make the change? It makes the game of soccer a better experience for children. More touches on the ball, more opportunities to make decisions, more actual play. Energetic workouts due to playing both attacking and defensive roles. While learning both offense and defense, a player will become more complete and will understand more readily the roles and importance of teammates.

Whose idea was this? US Youth Soccer has been a proponent of small sided games since the 1980's. Small sided games are endorsed by our national coaching committee, the State Directors of Coaching, US National Team Coaches for Men & Women, including many foreign soccer organizations: England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, France, Korea to name a few!

Why can't they play 11v11 like "real" soccer? The 11v11 format is the adult version of the game. Using an adult size field and goals makes little sense for children under the age of twelve.

Other sports don't alter their game- why does soccer? It's not a good comparison with football or baseball- neither has the element of transition that soccer does. Look at basketball- how many kids play basketball 5 on 5? Most basketball is played 1v1, 2v1 or 2v2 in a driveway! Kids don't wait until they have nine friends to have a game! Playing on a small field is a more efficient use of space, it takes less time to advance for a shot on goal, and children are more actively involved for a longer period of time.

I didn't grow up playing this way! True! Whether you grew up in the USA or another country, soccer was traditionally played 11v11 for all age groups. This isn't true any longer- small sided game formats are in use all over the world- not just in the US.

How will they learn to play 11v11? Progressing from 3v3, 4v4, 6v6, to 8v8 BEFORE 11v11 is a sound educational method. The problem is that young players were forced into 11v11 before their bodies were physically developed to play the adult version of the game. Any notion that players will be less prepared to play 11v11 is not justified.

Does competitive or travel have to play by this new rule? Yes. The decision to play small sided games is based on "age appropriate" philosophy- the level of play is not a factor. All players of that age group should play the same format.

This will never work! Sure it will! A number of State Associations have been playing 3v3 at under 6 & 4v4 at Under-8 successfully for more than a dozen years! Adopting 8v8 for under 11's and under 12's is the fastest growing trend in youth soccer.

Insights from the Professionals

All of the below insight, quotes, and examples are from US Soccer Staff and USYSA staff. These are descriptions of programming and observations from different areas of the country from the year 2000 – over 3 years ago! These areas have continued to progress in age appropriate soccer curriculum since the time of these quotes as well!

- Alex Hernandez (USSF, 11-16-00) – North Carolina

We are currently doing 7v7, including the goalkeepers, to a size-appropriate goal. Our U-6's play 3v3, and the U-8's are 4v4. In the U-11's we are doing a split season; that is, playing one game 7v7 then the next weekend 11v11 I am certainly of the mind that the longer the kids can play smaller sided games, the better off they will be. If we could just put off 11v11 until U-12 or U-13, I think our kids would be much more technical players. Then, when they are cognitively ready to handle tactics at ages 11, 12 or 13, they can make tremendous strides. But no tactics can be employed if you don't have the stinking ball! So, that's my 2 cents! Do I need to expand any more on this response? Are you trying to drum up a body of support for your proposals? Our club, now Triangle Futbol Club, is a typical TPD (Total Player Development) program, advocating Tony Waiters' Micro Soccer System. Should I send this on to Tony, who is now on our National Staff?

- Rick Garey (Staff Coach, LA, 11-19-00) – Louisiana

I applaud your efforts at trying to get coaches, parents and players to realize the benefits of young players playing in small-sided games. I have had a very difficult time convincing other coaches and parents as to the benefits of the small sided game. As a former middle school teacher and coach I try and explain to parents and players that "soccer school" is very similar to "academic school" in that the foundation skills, love for learning, creativity, confidence, etc., have to be all built in layers a little at a time. This is why we have different grade levels so that the children have time to develop layer by layer step by step. I have been on the Louisiana State Staff for six years now and I always work with the youngest age group of girls each year. My main focus is individual ball skills, first touch and technique with the vast majority of this taught with in the small-sided game format.

- Ian Barker (DOC, MN, 11-29-00) - Minnesota

Our charge has been lead at the club level wherever we have paid DOC's. In fact several major clubs pulled out of the state run fall leagues and ran small-sided games programs both inter and intra club. This initiative really put the wind up our board who came to realize the program they offered was no longer wanted. Coupled with this the promotion of small-sided games out of my office, Dave Linenberger, etc., has helped a lot of our clubs introduce their own programs. The major sell has been to demonstrate how fields, equipment and general resources can be reformed to pull off a small-sided games program without a lot of grief. Merely stating and demonstrating the value of the program was not enough and so we added the "This is how you do it" component and I believe this

is what pushed us over the edge in many areas. It looks like for the Fall 2001 we will have small-sided games for U9_U12 in state sponsored leagues, if not the membership will do it themselves under basic affiliation. If we do this, and do it well, it sets the stage for the full introduction of a program for Summer 2002 and then we are really off to the races.

- Mike Smith (Recreation DOC, OR, 12-1-00)- Oregon

In our National Youth License modules, I make a point of taking 15 minutes to do an experiment with the coaches present. All the kids that we bring in in the afternoons want to scrimmage, so, after the age appropriate training; I set them up for 5 minutes playing 8v8 on a large field. I have the coaches (candidates) all take a player and record how many times that player touches the ball. I tell them I can pretty much guarantee that there will be at least 1 player who doesn't touch the ball once (they never believe you). Anyway, after that rings true, I set up 2 small fields and play 2 games of 4v4 for 5 minutes. Each coach again records the number of touches for their assigned player. The difference is incredible. Through this method we try to educate the coaches that small-sided games are better for the development of players through number of touches, simplicity etc. This approach is working slowly but surely. Our biggest problem (of course) are the coaches who know it all and do not come to clinics. We are slowly trying to implement the USSF recommendations regarding coaching license requirements to ensure continuing education.

- Jacob Daniel (DOC - GA, 12-1-00)- Georgia

Here in Georgia, we have been very lucky to have a State Board that is committed to doing the right thing for player development. We have mandated 3v3 for U-6, 4v4 for U-8 and 8v8 for U-10 since 1994, and have completed the process of transition by 1995, so basically 99% of our clubs play small-sided games per USYSA's recommendations. We started the 'educating' process in 1993 by incorporating the small-sided games rationale and answers to commonly asked questions/objections in our 'F' courses and, since we also mandated that every recreational and select coach must have a minimum license, they are all exposed to the small-sided games philosophy through our coaching courses. It is now pretty much an accepted play format here. We also used the State's newsletter to promote small-sided games via articles and prepared a small-sided games package which was sent to all the leagues and sent our instructional staff to do free clinics on small-sided games. After doing all of the above promotion in 1993 and 1994, the State Board formed a small-sided games Committee which put together a transition plan and got the clubs to approve its implementation in our 1994 AGM. I agree that there is no need to play 11-a-side until U-14 and that 5v5 or 6v6 is best for U-10's.

Effective Playing Time VS Game Format and Roster Size

Effective Playing Time Relative to Game Format and Roster Size

Roster Size >		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Game Format	Game Duration													

3v3 (U-6) Single Game	4 x 8 min. quarters	100% 32	75% 24	60% 19	50% 16									
3v3 (U-6) Split Game	4 x 8 min. quarters				100% 32	86% 28	75% 24	67% 21	60% 19	55% 18	50% 16			
4v4 (U-7/8) Single Game	4 x 10 min. quarters		100% 40	80% 32	67% 27	57% 23	50% 20							
4v4 (U-7/8) Split Game	4 x 10 min. periods						100% 40	89% 36	80% 32	73% 29	67% 27	62% 25	57% 23	53% 21
5v5 (U-7/8) Single Game	4 x 10 min. quarters			100% 40	83% 33	71% 28	63% 25	56% 22	50% 20					
5v5 (U-7/8) Split Game	4 x 10 min. quarters								100% 40	90% 36	83% 33	77% 31	71% 28	67% 27
5v5 (U-9) Single Game	4 x 15 min. quarters			100% 60	83% 43	71% 37	63% 33	56% 29	50% 26					
5v5 (U-9) Split Game	4 x 15 min. quarters								100% 60	90% 47	83% 43	77% 40	71% 37	67% 35
6v6 (U-10) Single Game	4 x 15 min. quarters				100% 60	86% 52	75% 45	67% 40	60% 36	55% 35	50% 30			
6v6 (U-10) Split Game	4 x 15 min. quarters										100% 60	93% 56	86% 52	80% 48
8v8 (U-11) Single Game	2 x 35 min. halves						100% 70	89% 62	80% 56	73% 51	67% 47	62% 43	57% 40	53% 37
11v11 (U-12) Single Game	2 x 35 min. halves									100% 70	92% 64	85% 60	79% 55	73% 51

This table shows effective playing time relative to game format and roster size. The figures are presented as a) percentages of total playing time and b) as actual minutes played. Both figures assume equal rotation of players. At the youth level, a minimum goal of 70% playing time is recommended. Table provided by Dr. Thomas Turner.

Developing Skills with Small Sided Games!

It is recognized that to develop skills, repetitions are needed. The more we touch the ball the better our touch will be! Soccer coaches of all ages use small sided game environments to develop the technical aspects of their teams. We can also safely state that the more a child has the ball (touches), the more engaged he/she is in the activity- the more fun he/she has!

Touches On The Ball - A Comparison Between 11 v 11 And 4 v 4

by Glen Buckley

While I was Director of Coaching of the Eden Prairie Soccer Club in Minneapolis I did a survey of the difference in the amount of touches a player can have in a small sided [4v4] game as opposed to an 11 v 11 game. Three different games were assessed, the players were average ability. They were 10 and 11 years of age. The following quite remarkable results were recorded. If these figures do not help change the opinions of the anti small sided game coaches and parents then I fear nothing will.

11 v 11 friendly game, 22 touches in 60 minutes, (0.37 touches on the ball per minute).

4 v 4 games (205 touches in 48 minutes, (projected 60 minutes = 256) (4.3 touches on the ball per minute).

4 v 4 games (217 touches in 48 minutes, (projected 60 minutes = 271) (4.5 touches on the ball per minute).

The player in the 4v4 game touched the ball 12.31 more times in the same time period against the same opposition as the 11v 11 game. The assessments were done on four different occasions against different opposition, and assessing different players each time to reinforce the above figures.

The reason to implement small- sided games into the program was to increase the time and amount of touches a player had on the ball and these results clearly back this up.

I have heard it said by someone who falls into the above category that yes they get more touches on the ball but they aren't all quality touches? Of course they aren't all quality touches because if every touch was a quality touch then our players would all be great players with nothing to learn and we know it doesn't work like that. Even the best players in the world have non quality touches on the ball. Lets say for arguments sake 50% of touches were quality touches, then in the 11 a side game that player got 11 quality touches and in the 4 a side games the same player got 135 quality touches. Players learn from doing it right but also from doing it wrong. I believe players must make mistakes to help them learn how to do things correctly as well as learning from doing it correctly in the first place. From the 135 non - quality touches they will have gained valuable experience of what not to do e.g. a first touch was bad and the ball went to the opposition so next time that player concentrates on making a good first touch and so on. In comparison in the 11 a side game the same player hardly touched the ball making only 11 quality touches but also only 11 non quality touches meaning very little opportunity to learn from quality work and non quality work.

My experience in the game has taught me this is an important way to help players develop their technique and improve their game and these results act as confirmation of

this. I am sure this presentation goes some way to show how important it is to continue to use this type of developmental work as a part of our overall coaching programs.

Small Sided Games Tactics:

Teaching Tactics in preparation for 11 a side soccer

“What? We Didn’t Grow Up Playing That Way?”

A Natural Progression for teaching the tactical aspects of the game in an age appropriate environment.

by Vince Ganzburg (Indiana Director of Coaching)

The title above is just one of the quotes I have been hearing as your Director of Coaching with the recent approval of implementing small sided games. “We want our kids to be playing the “REAL GAME”! “How are we going to prepare our kids for High School soccer?” These are questions that I hear from time to time concerning the change of going from 11 aside soccer in the U-11/12 age groups to playing 8v8 (7 field players and a goalkeeper). The U9/10 age groups will be playing 6v6 (five field players and a goalkeeper). Again, this is a change from the normal pattern that we have been using for the U9/10 age groups.

What this is about, is how this will improve our players from a developmental standpoint not only in getting more touches on the ball, but to prepare them tactically as well without really even teaching them tactics. The playing shapes of 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8 will teach by themselves how “playing lines” relate to the 11v11 match. So, in short, this article is not about teaching tactics to these younger players, but how the 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8 versions relate to the 11v11 game that we are all accustomed to.

4v4 -Teaching Shape and Style

As a progression, from the U6 and U8 age groups, players learn the shape of a triangle in both 3v3 and 4v4 play. In the 4v4 model, the diamond shape is the desired starting shape but as the game progresses, triangles are still present. Players in the 4v4 model learn the basic diamond shape and the importance of length, width, and depth. Because they are actively more involved, they stay interested and have fun because the possibility of scoring and preventing goals is present. I am now seeing basketball leagues play 3v3 with younger ages, shorter baskets, and courts. I saw a quote by Bobby Howe, our previous USSF coaching director, say that “Realistic experience + Fun=Improvement in Play”. Playing 4v4 with these two youngest age groups is more realistic experience for them. After all, 4v4 in the youngest age groups really become 1v7 doesn’t it?

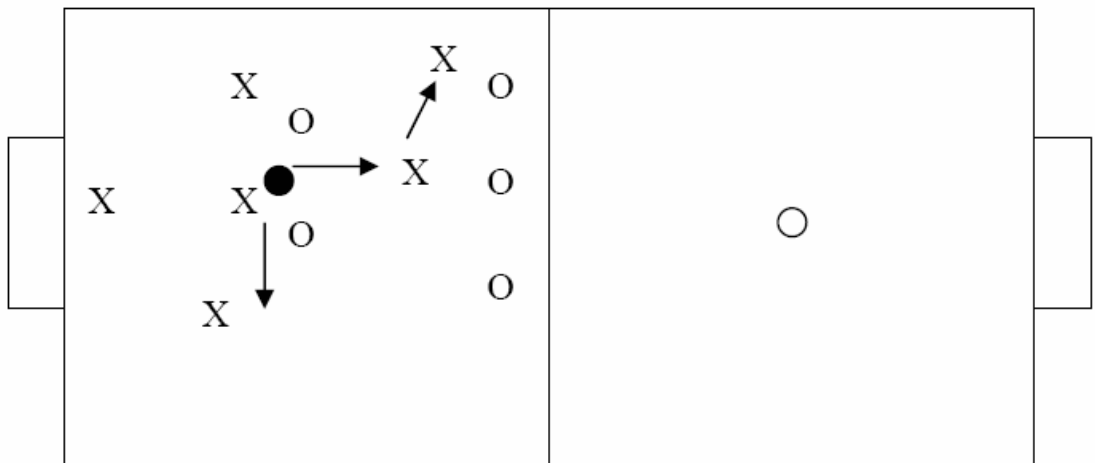
6v6 in Two Playing Lines

Now, let’s look at the U9/10 age groups. So, how is 6v6 instead of 8v8 going to improve them? When they get to 9/10 or the “Golden Ages” now coaches feel like they can coach! Players can actually do things like “Drills!” I hope for their sake, we teach them by playing games and in particular 6v6 so that they can meet the demands of the game and

not the coach. Playing 6v6 instead of 8v8 is a better progression due to the fact that now players can start understanding how two playing lines relate to the 11v11 match. For example, let's say your formation is a 3-2. Three players who start behind the line of two players. In the 11v11 match, games are usually won or lost when linking or not linking with the midfielders happens on a consistent basis. As the players get older, the backs in particular, should always look to the forwards to see if they can connect. This, however, usually offers the lowest percentage of keeping possession. So, the next logical choice to get the ball up the field is to pass to a midfielder. Then the midfielders now look to play the ball forward (length), if that is not on, then play the ball either back (depth) or across (width) in order to get around defenses. With a 3-2 formation, this connection of teaches players how to play through two thirds of the field. The backs playing into the midfield (building out of the back) or the midfield playing into the forwards (attacking in the final third).

The diagram below shows how the x's in two playing lines of 3 backs and 2 forward build out of the back. The central back, has at least two options to get out of the back and to get the ball into midfield. These 5 players must work together and do so in a way that is something more than the "Hail Mary" approach of knocking the ball up to the biggest, fastest, strongest player. Then after getting the ball through the midfield, now the 3 backs become midfielders and the 2 midfielders become forwards. Think about how many repetitions they will get with 6 aside, which will pay dividends down the road as far as their overall development to the "real" game. With the 8v8 model, some players are going straight from 4v4 to 8v8 and miss the development of how to "link" up with the playing line that is in front of them.

Example of building out of the back.



It teaches also how to defend in different thirds of the field. When teaching defending at the 11v11 stage, individual defending is a must before group defending can even be

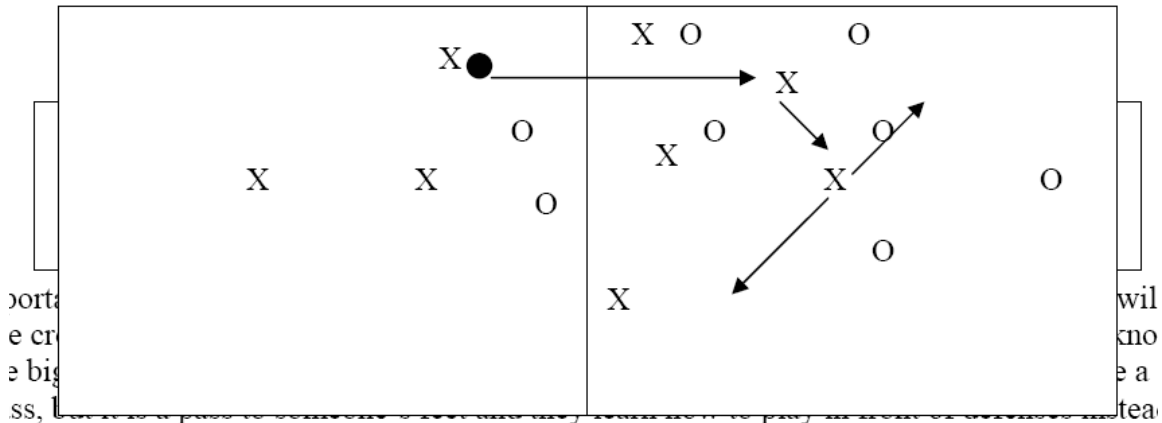
considered an idea. When group defending is taught, usually two playing lines work together. (i.e. 2 forwards-4 mids, 4 mids-4 backs). Teaching the importance of two playing lines is important to the “real” game. Once playing in lines of two (by the way is only suggested by yours truly) has been exposed to them they can now “realistically” progress to having 3 playing lines, which the 8v8 model presents. By once again, reducing the playing numbers, field sizes, their technical and tactical opportunities increase. If we keep their minds in the game, then they remain more interested. When I was a teacher, anytime I could teach them something without them really even knowing it, then the motivation was easy. The fun element of being more actively involved is present because as a playing group, the all attack and all defend. “Realistic experience + Fun=Improvement in Play”.

8v8 in Three Playing Lines

Now our players move from the 8v8 game at U9/10's to 11v11 on the “real field”. Having coached this transitions a time or two and after observing numerous U11/12 matches, it only makes sense to not only reduce the fields, but the playing numbers. The ball takes an unusual amount of time getting from one half to the other unless you utilize the “Hail Mary” approach and just knock it to the biggest, strongest, fastest player, have them run onto it and then score. You may win games, but are you really developing them? Most players in these age groups can strike a ball “accurately” around 30-40 yards with their strong foot. Yet, we have them play on a field that is in some cases 120 yards long and the distance between the front line and the back line sometimes can get up to 60-70 yards, players naturally will still bunch up because they simply can't connect with each other. With 8v8, and a smaller playing field, not only will they be able to connect with more realism, but the possibilities of combinations, the importance of midfield play, flank play, and the movement between all of the players becomes more in sync. By reducing the field size and the numbers, “real” linking between back players and the forward line can happen. So, now when a ball is played up to the forwards, because at U9/10 they learned that when the front line has the ball, they need support, more players will move into supporting positions earlier in order to get in behind defenses. If the possibility of playing up to the front is not on, now they can then link with the midfielders and develop play in the midfield. By doing this, we put our players under more decisions that they have to make for themselves increasing their own interest level because they are now an active participant in the game and simple have to play. The goalkeeper instead of staying back on his/her line now is forced to also take a more active role and playing as a sweeper in addition to his/her goalkeeping responsibilities.

The diagram below has the x's playing in a 2-3-2 formation (3 playing lines). The o's are in a 3-2-2 formation. The left back, if you will for the x's has an opportunity to play the ball forward to the one of the two forwards. Because in the 6v6 model, when the forward players received a ball, they learned how to link up with other forward players. As you can see as well, when the x forward player that is the closest to their goal receives the ball, they have two good options. One would be to play the ball back to the opposite midfielder and the second would be to combine with the other forward player who

originally gave them the ball. There are more options as the armchair “central midfielder” might be able to explore, but the point is that because they learned how to play in two playing lines in the 6v6 model, now when you only add two more players to the mix, not only is the possibility of them seeing their options clearly, but they will probably have more success in doing so.



More importantly we put them on the field that is more “realistic” for the physical abilities that will encourage creating soccer players with their own minds to create how to score goals which we know is one of the biggest critiques of soccer to the uneducated fan. In the same diagram, sure it may be a longer pass, but it is a pass to someone’s feet and they learn how to play in front of defenses instead of relying on playing the ball behind the defenders having someone run onto it in an attempt to score.

Now, when the players go into the 11v11 match they may have, can say will in all cases, the ability to see where the little games of 4v4, 6v6, and 8v8 play into the “real” game. The point is, give these players time to develop into playing the “real” game. This is one way where, as a country, we will truly start developing “soccer players” and not just “kids that play soccer” because there is a difference. Now they are making up the script, figuring out how to make decisions on the field with their own minds.

So, what is the goal? Is it to create “soccer players”? I think that it is a little bit of creating “soccer players”, players who now will appreciate the game on a little different level, which will in the long run create an even larger base of soccer fans in this country. Don’t we want our kids to be life long fans of the game instead of dropping out at the age of 14 only because when they were younger they didn’t get the opportunity to truly play? So, let’s not rush them into making too many decisions when on the field. Their minds are already full enough off of the field. “Just Simply Let The Kids Play” on a scale that will be not only developmentally, but fun as well.