

Under 9 and Under 10

In the U9 and U10 age groups, the game can really start to take shape, even at the recreational level. Many players are internally competitive at these ages, understanding and keeping track of wins and losses. Although usually played as 6v6 or 8v8, these games really begin to mimic the full-sided, 11v11 game as well:

- In many leagues the coaches are now relegated to the sidelines.
- Referees are usually introduced at this age.
- The markings on the field are similar to those on a full field.

Key Concepts

Coaching U9 and U10 soccer can be really fun, but there are a few challenges of which you ought to be aware:

- **You can have huge discrepancies between players' ability levels.**
Some players are chomping at the bit to get into competitive soccer. They may have played soccer for years and practice regularly on their own time. Other players may be non-athletes trying the game for the first time.
- **The games become competitive between players and you must constantly focus on doing the right thing as a coach.**
Game situations may affect where you put players, but don't let them affect when you put players into the game. At this age self-esteem is both apparent and fragile for kids. As a coach you don't want to put players in positions where you know they will fail, but you want to give them ample opportunity to succeed and feel good about their contribution to the team.
- **As the players become more competitive, so do the parents.**
My experience has been that if you are successful in creating an environment that allows the players to develop, you will have few problems with parents. That said there will be the occasional parent who is a problem. Here are my recommendations for handling parents:
 - **Write a letter at the beginning of the season explaining your philosophy about coaching and your expectations for players and parents.**
Go over this letter with the parents. Invite anyone who does not agree with the letter to contact the league commissioner and ask to be switched to another team. Don't do this in a "my way or the highway" fashion. Just explain that this is what you intend to do and you understand your plan might not align with everyone's desire for his/her child. If that is the case, your feelings will not be hurt if someone requests a transfer. (*See Appendix D for a sample letter.*)

- **When a problem does arise, don't address it in front of the players, and don't address it when emotions are high.**
Let things settle for a day and then call the parent and have a reasonable discussion.

- **Always keep the best interest of the child in mind.**
Youth sports' benefits degrade when they become special interest vehicles for adults. A child can't control to whom they were born. Keep that in mind, and don't punish a child as a reaction to the parents. You might be the best adult influence in that child's life.

- **If referees are used in your league, establish the expectation with your players that referee calls are not to be questioned.**
Players must learn to focus on what they can control in a game. Referees can certainly affect games, but they are like the weather. You can't control them. If players get upset and feel victimized by referees, their play will degrade because they feel hopeless. Setting the expectation that players will honor the referee is easy. Holding yourself to the same standard is a lot harder. Bear in mind that you are the primary role model for your players.

- **At this age you can still use the same "Stars" program that I outlined for the younger players (see Appendix B).**
I didn't know how players in our U10 program would react when I introduced the program to them at the beginning of the season, but they loved it! The lessons you reinforce with the stars are even more valuable in these age groups because the players are more emotionally affected by games.

Player Development

Regarding player development, everything from previous age groups still applies. The players still need a lot of repetition on the basic skills already reviewed, and some will still require instruction on those skills. The players will also still enjoy the games we've discussed previously. Don't think those games only apply to younger players.

Because the players in this age group are more mature and more competitive, many coaches make the mistake of treating them like adults. While the players can handle more practice exercises that are "drill-like," the fact is they don't enjoy them. That won't seem important to some coaches, but most coaches will agree that players play games like they practice. Players will always practice harder when they are having fun and enthused about what they are doing. I like to mix instruction, repetition, and competition to keep the practice interesting and intense. That intensity will carry over into the games.

Competition

Competition is a key to having good practices. Here are just some of the benefits:

- **Kids will have fun and maintain enthusiasm.**
- **When players catch on to your routine of injecting competitions into practice, they will focus and put more into the regular repetitive activities because they think they might be preparing for a competition.**
- **Competition adds an element of stress that is similar to game situations.**
Kids will be more likely to take a practice element to the game if they are accustomed to performing it under stress and pressure.
- **Competition adds the need for speed.**
In practice situations most players will perform tasks well within their comfort zones. Those comfort zones rarely come close to the speed at which the game itself is played. Competition will push the players outside their comfort zones and increase the speed or pace of the activity to mimic game speed.

Combining instruction, repetition, and competition

An example of the instruction, repetition, and competition mixture is detailed below in a scenario where “heading” is the topic:

1. **Bring the players together and briefly demonstrate proper heading technique.**
(Instruction)
2. **Have the players pair up and practice heading.**
(Repetition)
One player throws the ball while the other heads it back. I tell the players to switch roles every ten headers.
3. **After 5 minutes or so of the routine heading repetition, introduce a competition.**
(Competition)
Each pair is now a team. One team member will throw and catch while the other will head the ball back. Teams must try to keep the ball from hitting the ground. Once a team’s ball hits the ground, the team is out, and the players must sit down. The last team standing wins.

4. **After a winner is crowned, have the teams stand up, switch the roles of each team member, and restart the competition.**
5. **I generally have a reward for the winners.**
The reward could be an extra water break, a shorter fitness run, or they could be captains to pick teams for the scrimmage. Whatever it is, I make sure they are recognized somehow for winning, which keeps inspiration high for future competitions.

Practice

Again, players this age require some level of technical and tactical training. The technical training is what scares most novice coaches because they don't feel like they can adequately teach or demonstrate the skills. In that case, separate the instruction and the repetition. Delegate the instruction, and manage the repetition.

Technical Instruction

In my "real job," I am a manager in an Information Technology department. I began my career as a software developer writing COBOL programs. I know next to nothing about today's coding languages. Yet I am effective when it comes to growing and developing the people who work for me. How? I can't train my people on coding, but I get them training. I then put them in situations that allow them to use their training, build their skills, gain confidence, and I push them to new levels of achievement.

Take that strategy out of the office environment, and apply it to the soccer field. Find somebody who can come in to teach and demonstrate skills. That person doesn't have to come to every practice. If he or she comes out 3 or 4 times throughout the season, he or she can be a very effective training aid.

You, as the coach, just have to worry about planning and organizing the repetition of practice. You create the environment to allow the players to practice the skills they learned from the expert. It is likely that you will also have a player or two who excel at the techniques that were taught. Use those players as examples. Use them to do further demos or to help correct poor techniques in other players. Players always respond and learn best from other players, as they feel challenged by other players.

In the U9 and U10 age groups, all the same techniques discussed for younger players still apply. However, the list expands considerably at this age. Use the following list to create a development plan for your season. How much or how little of this list you use will be largely dependent on your players, so be flexible. These techniques are explained in more detail in Appendix C.

- **Passing**
Players need to be able to use the inside of both feet to make accurate passes that are easy to receive. Your players should understand the value of playing a ball that is easy to receive (i.e. on the ground, with proper pace, in the direction the player is facing) and take responsibility for their passes. Many players feel like passing is only kicking the ball in the

general direction of a teammate. If it is too hard, too soft, or bouncing is of no consequence in their minds because as soon as the ball left their foot, it was the responsibility of their teammate. You need to change that mindset by making them accountable for the “receive-ability” of their pass.

- **Chest and thigh traps**

At this age more balls will be played in the air. Players need to develop the techniques, and thereby the confidence, to handle balls out of the air without fear.

- **Heading**

This skill can be a scary proposition for some players, but learning the proper technique is important so when they do try it, the experience is pain free. When players do head the ball in a game, praise them highly for their courage. Other players will take note and then try it for themselves. Still other players may never do it, and that’s okay at this age.

- **Serving balls in the air**

Players at this age should begin developing the skill of kicking longer, “flighted” balls.

- **Defending**

There is a proper technique to defending. Players should learn that technique and understand the priorities of defending, which are not intuitive to young players:

- a. The top priority is to keep the other team from scoring.
- b. The next priority is winning possession of the ball.

- **Shielding**

Shielding is the act of handling the ball in tight spaces, keeping one’s body between the ball and the opposition. The player’s body acts as the shield to the ball.

- **Goalkeeping**

All players should gain some level of training on the basic skills of goalkeeping. These skills include:

- Catching balls into and away from the body, including those overhead.
- Punching balls that can’t be caught.
- Approaching shooters to cut down angles.
- Punting.
- Throwing.

Tactical Instruction

Tactics become more important at this age as well. With 6 or 8 players on a team, being able to play in an orderly fashion is important in order to take shots and score goals. Some teams may have a dominant player who can do this on his or her own. However, even players on those teams need to develop a tactical awareness of the game. If you coach a team with a dominant player, don't allow your one star player to do everything.

Create a system that gets everyone involved. While some high-level coaches may view this as inhibiting your star player, you can further help that player by finding supplemental opportunities that are more challenging. Such opportunities might include:

- Guest playing or practicing with an older team.
- Practicing with a competitive team.
- Joining a competitive preparatory program, such as a "Challenge Program."
- Playing pick-up games with older players.

Ultimately if your star player is much further above everyone else in the league, put your team aside, and do what is best for the player. Find and recommend a situation that will be challenging and fun for the player, even if it means losing that player from your roster. Your team's record may suffer, but the star player will benefit, as will the other players who will no longer be able to depend on that player as their crutch.

Tactics at this age should be simple. Playing positions are a form of tactics, but positional play is covered in an upcoming chapter. I've broken tactics down into three categories: defensive, offensive, and set plays.

Defensive Tactics:

- **Marking players - basically man-to-man defense**
The concept that needs teaching with regard to marking players is to do it from a "goal side" position. This means your player should keep his or her body between the player they are marking and the goal they are defending (*See Figure 4 on the next page*). This is easy when a player is marking the opponent with the ball. It is not intuitive when they are marking players away from the ball.
- **The first defender is the one defending against the player with the ball.**
This player needs to keep his or her body between the ball and the goal, denying penetration of the ball and the player.

- **The second defender is the covering defender.**
He or she provides support to the first defender.
 - Support should be offered toward the center of the field, between the first defender and the goal.
 - The second defender should be positioned to be able to step in and defend against the player with the ball should the first defender get beat off the dribble.
 - The second defender's position should take away dangerous through-ball opportunities (i.e. penetrating passes).
 - The second defender can still have marking responsibilities.

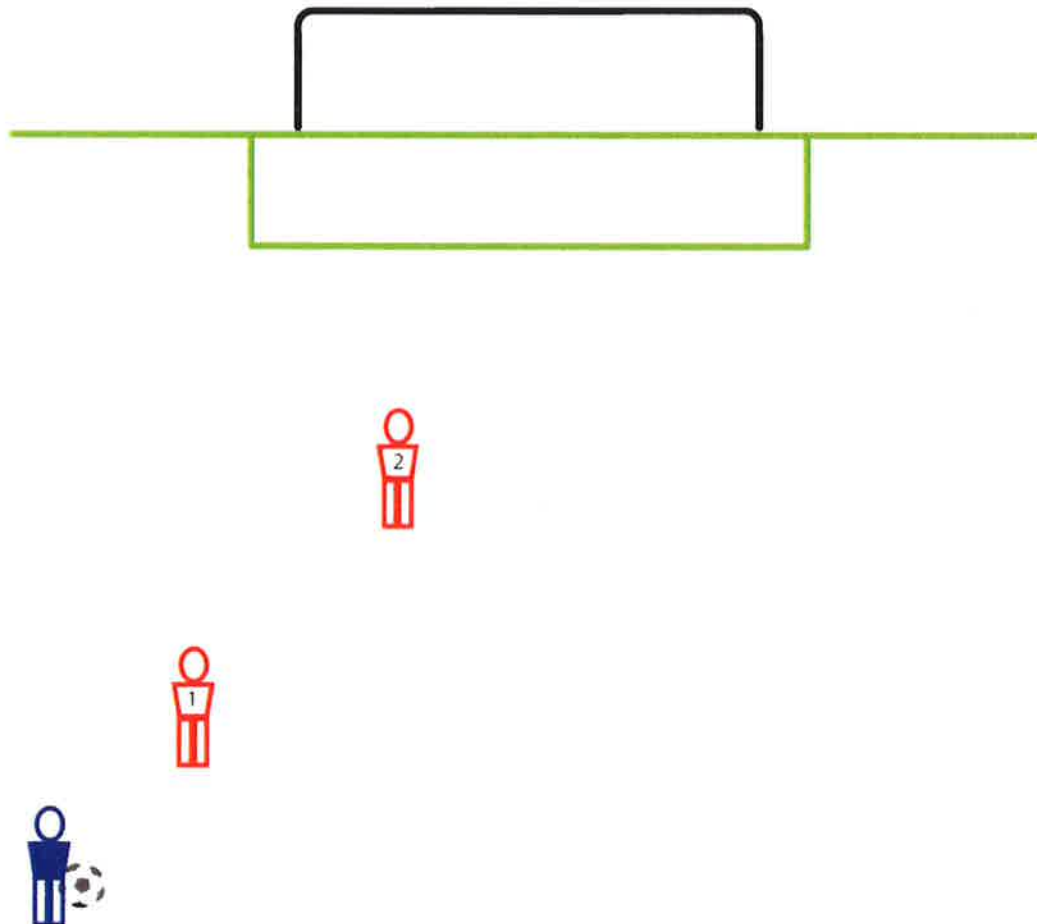


Figure 4: Defending the goal

- **If the first defender gets beat, and the second defender steps in to defend against the person with the ball, the second defender becomes the first defender.**

That will be an easy concept for your team. However, the former first defender should recover to become the new second defender (*See Figure 5 below*).

- Teach your players this concept of recovery. To most players this is easy to learn but not intuitive. Most players, left to their own judgment, will turn and chase the ball, or worse yet, just turn and watch.
- The recovery run should be made toward the near post and continue until he gets behind the ball (i.e. can defend with his back to his goal).

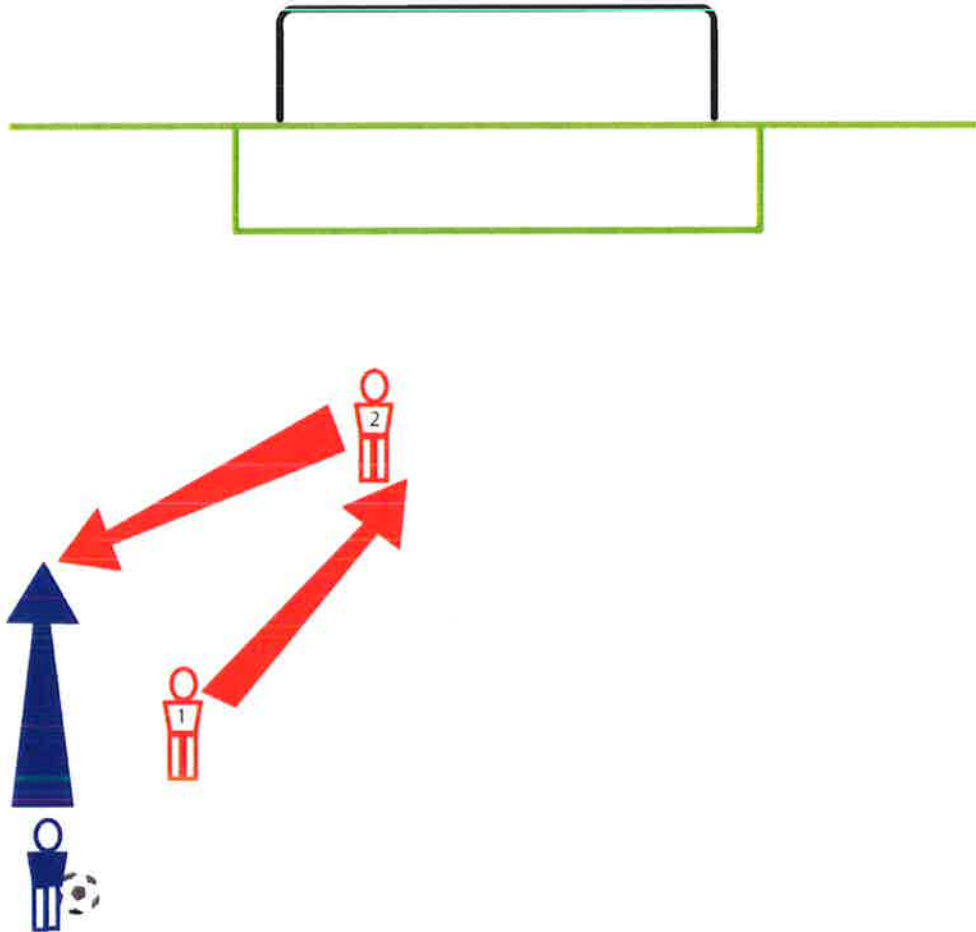


Figure 5: Defending the goal

- It should be noted that in higher levels of soccer there is also considered a third defender who provides balance. However, this is a concept better left for higher levels of play.

- **Channeling and delaying**

Defensive players need to be taught to channel opponents into wide positions on the field. They also need to be taught the value in delaying an attack to allow teammates to recover into defensive positions behind the ball. Players need to understand that the top priority in defending is to keep the other team from scoring. The second priority is to win the ball for your team.

- Channeling in and of itself can be a delaying tactic. The first defender should take a side-on approach to entice the player toward the wide area of the field.
- Delaying can be as simple as slowing down the player with the ball or kicking the ball out of bounds to allow your team to recover.

- **High, wide, and far**

This is the priority of where you want the ball to go when clearing it from your defensive third of the field.

- **High**
Get the ball up in the air where nobody can reach it. This will eliminate deflections.
- **Wide**
Get the ball out of the middle of the field to the flanks where it is less dangerous.
- **Far**
Get the ball as far up the field as possible.

This concept sounds easier than it is. The ideal situation is to be able to execute all three of these ball placements. However, that is not always possible. To most players, far is the natural highest priority. They want to get the ball up the field toward the other goal, and they recognize that the quickest way between two points is a straight line. Unfortunately, that way is also strewn with opposing players. You don't have to watch too much recreational soccer to see a well-meaning defender attempt to clear a ball, knocking it off an opponent's shin guards and giving up a breakaway. Teach your players this order of priority to clearing balls, and you will significantly reduce the number of silly goals your team allows.

Attacking Tactics:

- **Attack with numbers**

Although this sounds too simple, I have observed that many U10 players tend to stand and watch their teammate with the ball, only reacting to the ball when it is played. Teach your attacking players to move down the field as a unit. Proactive soccer is played when the person with the ball reacts to opportunities created by teammates running to spaces away from the ball. Reactive soccer is played when everyone just reacts to wherever the ball goes. You want your team to evolve into playing proactive soccer.

- **Framing the goal**

This is the same concept discussed in the U7 - U8 section of the book. However, with more players on the field, it is likely you will have more players in front of the goal. You still want players making the far post and slot runs. You also want a player making a near post run (*See Figure 6 on the next page*).

- **Far post**

Attack to the 6 yard box, just outside the far post. Any ball coming to that point, or any point closer to the goal, should result in a first touch shot.

- **Slot**

The penalty spot, facing the goal, ready to shoot any cross or rebound.

- **Near post**

The area just inside the nearest post to the ball, as close to the goal as possible without being offsides. The run to the near post should be across the face of the goal so as to drag as many defenders as possible along with the run, leaving less contention at the slot and far post. If the ball is played to the near post, this player has the two options listed below:

1. Deflect the ball into the corner of the goal, which is why the run is to the area just inside the post.

2. Redirect the ball to the front of the goal for teammates. Remember the defenders this player dragged along? Now the far post and slot players have a better chance of getting to this redirected ball and getting a shot.

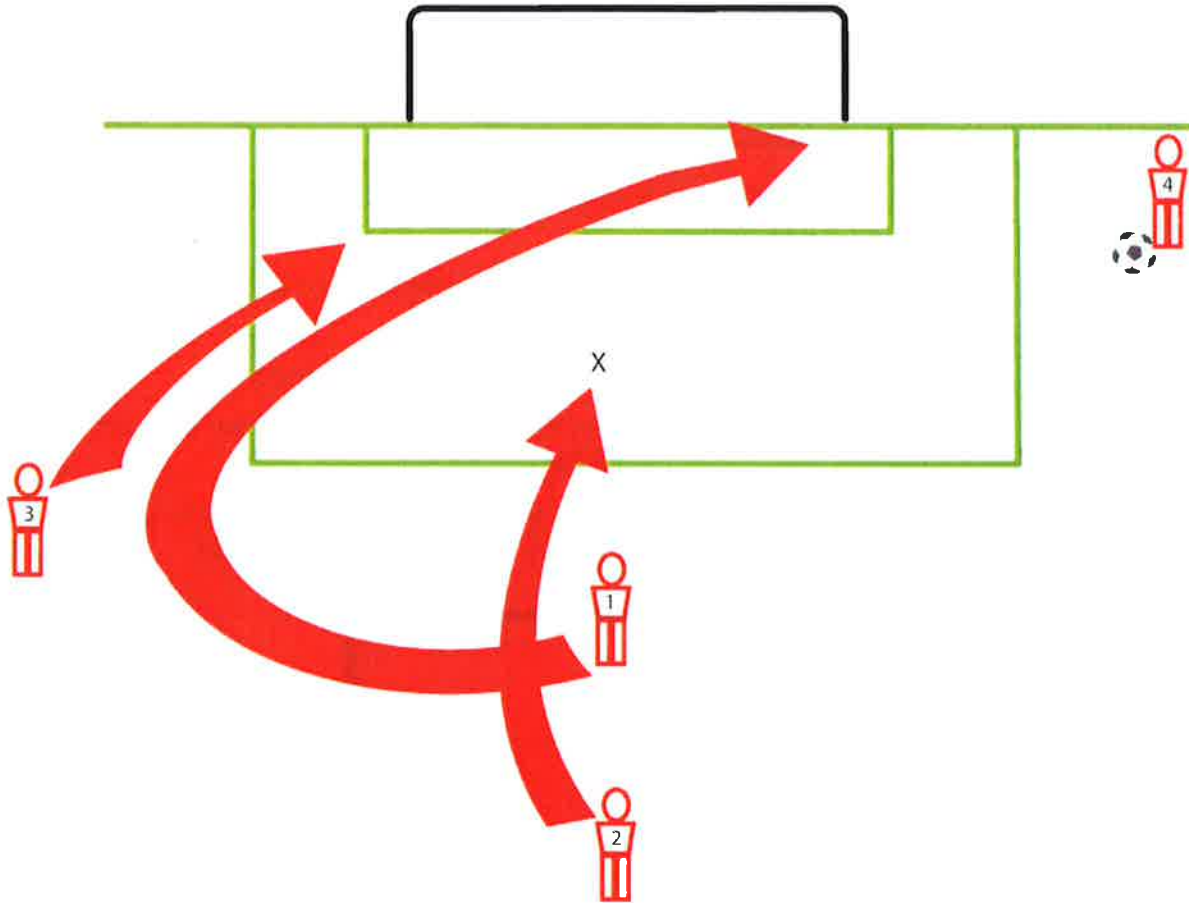


Figure 6: Framing the goal

- **Playing horizontally and diagonally**
Recreational defensive players always congregate directly up the field from the ball. This is a smart move on their part, as recreational attacking players usually only recognize the space straight in front of them. Teach your players to play balls horizontally and diagonally, not just vertically. Wide players should look for opportunities to play the ball into the center of the field. Central players should recognize opportunities to play the balls to the flanks.

- **Exploiting space behind the defense**

It always amazes me to see teams trying to pass the ball, but constantly doing so in front of the defenders, never creating dangerous goal scoring opportunities. Teach your players to get the ball into the space behind the defense, but to your team's advantage (See Figure 7 below).

- When attacking an opponent's back line (i.e. defenders), don't pass the ball to teammates. Pass the ball into space behind the defense where the teammate can get to the ball first.
- Well placed balls behind a defense have many advantages:
 - i. They can lead to breakaways or shooting opportunities.
 - ii. They can lead to crossing opportunities.
 - iii. Defenses become less organized when they are chasing balls toward their own goal.
 - iv. Defenders who get to balls first still have to turn in order to get the ball up the field.

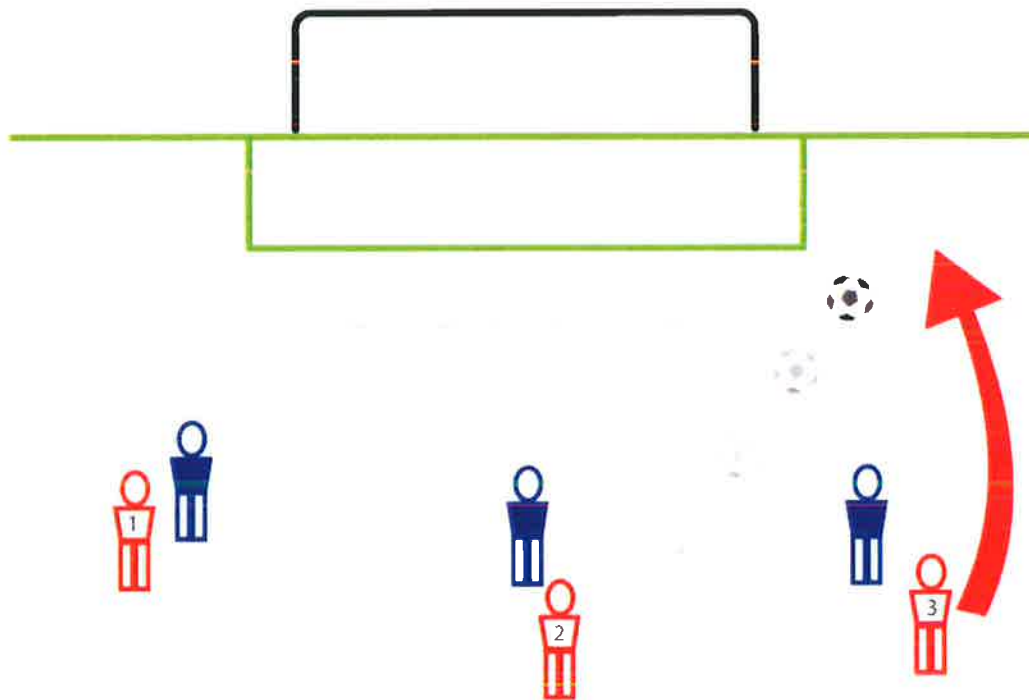


Figure 7: Exploiting space behind the defense

Set Plays

In soccer, set plays such as corner kicks and free kicks are very important aspects of the game. They take a lot of time and repetition to develop. Being a coach of a recreational soccer team, you probably have limited practice opportunities. On top of that, as a U10 coach you probably don't have a group of players that are willing to go through the painstaking repetition required to develop great set play execution. Your players want action! With that in mind, here are some simple tactics, easily taught, that will bring organization to your most important set plays.

- **Corner Kicks**

1. To take your corner kicks, choose a player who can get the ball to the face of the goal in the air. The position that player plays is not important, although you probably don't want to bring your goalie forward to perform this task. The player should aim for a spot directly in front of the middle of the goal, just outside the 6 yard box (i.e. out of the keeper's reach).
2. Leave just two defenders back, instructing them just to delay any counter attack against them, preferably kicking the ball out of bounds by a significant distance.
3. Have one player stand with the goalie. This player cannot deliberately impede the goalie, but his or her presence will limit the goalie's mobility and vision.
4. Have your other three players stand together at the top of the goal box, in line with the far post. As the player taking the kick approaches the ball, these players make runs to the near post, far post, and slot. They should already be familiar with those runs from your attacking work on framing the goal.

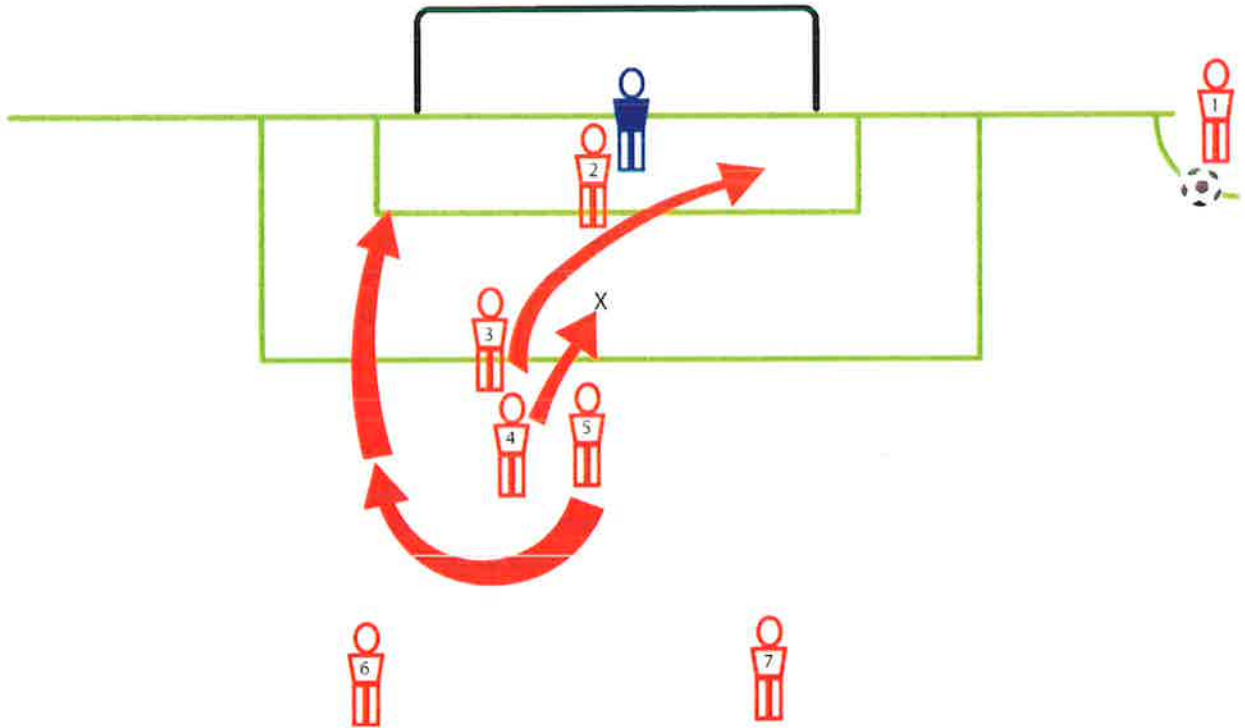


Figure 8: Setting up a corner kick

- **Defending Corner Kicks**

1. Bring everyone back except one forward.
2. One defender stands an arm's length away from the near post, facing the ball. This defender's job is to keep low balls from reaching the face of the goal, even if it means sacrificing another corner kick. If the ball is played beyond this defender, he or she then folds into the goal to help block any shots taken.
3. Your goalie should be situated in the middle of the goal, on the goal line. The goalie should be able to stand on the goal line and see the ball through the space provided by the teammate's arm's length distance from the near post.
4. Another defender stands at the back post, inside the goal itself. This person's line of sight to the ball will be through near post netting of the goal. As the ball is played, this person steps up to the goal line to help block any shots taken.

5. All other defenders should mark opposing players. They should go wherever the person they are marking goes, always maintaining a position between that person and the goal. They should challenge that person for any ball whether it is on the ground or in the air.

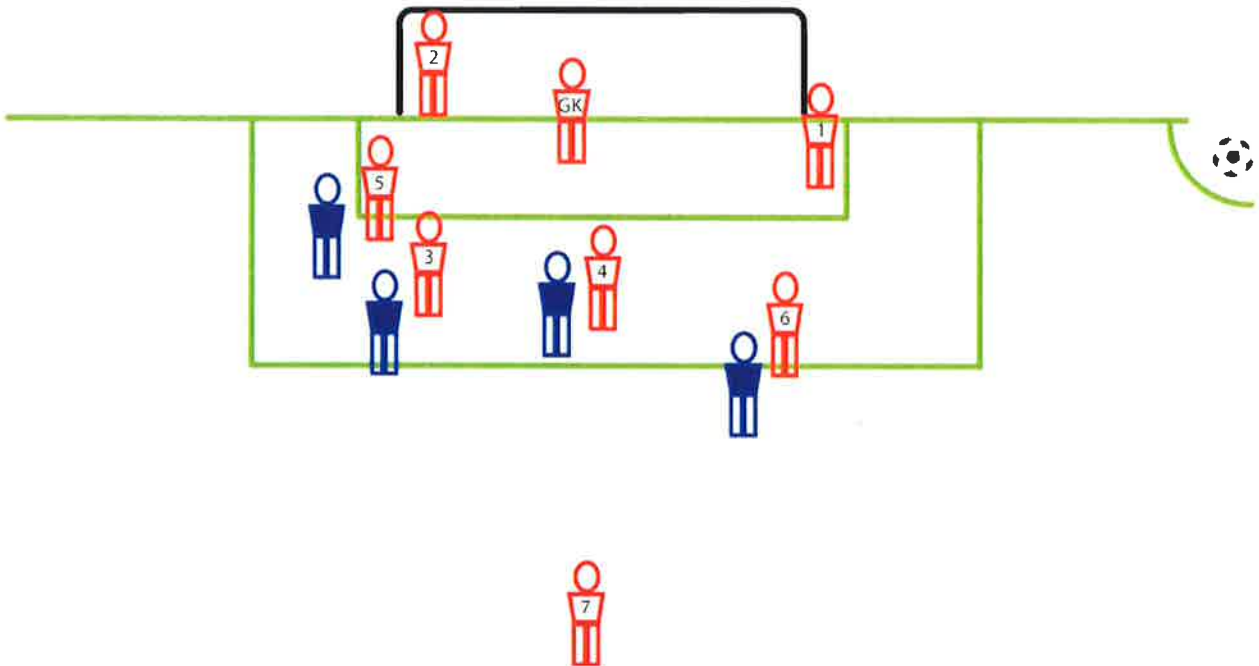


Figure 9: Defending against a corner kick

- **Direct Kicks**

These are free kicks from which a goal can be scored directly from the kick itself. A referee will signal a direct kick by pointing at the ground. Any direct kick awarded for a foul inside the goal box is a penalty kick. Otherwise, it is taken at the point of the foul. Have a strong footed player shoot high and to the corners, if in range to do so. If not, have them play a ball to the back post. Here are some other pointers:

- Offsides is a concern for your players. Make sure they know to start in an onsidess position until the ball is kicked.
- If playing to the far post, have them make runs into that area of the field. They should time their runs to match the kicking of the ball in order to remain onsidess.

- **Indirect Kicks**

These are free kicks where at least two people must touch the ball in order for it to count as a goal. A referee will signal an indirect kick by standing at the spot of the foul with his or her hand in the air. Here are two sequences of indirect kicks:

- **Kicks out of shooting range**

These are easy. Serve the ball toward the back post, just as you would a direct kick.

- **Kicks in shooting range**

Requires 2 people at the ball, a shooter and a “spotter.”

- **Shooter**

The shooter marks a spot just in front of the ball where he/she wants the ball spotted. The shooter then backs up and aligns himself or herself with that spot (i.e. not the stationary ball). A short approach to the ball is preferable, since the ball will be live as soon as the spotter rolls it.

- **Spotter**

When the shooter is ready, this person gently rolls the ball to the spot indicated by the shooter. The shooter meets the ball at that spot for the shot. Obviously timing is what needs practice in this situation. Any parent can oversee two people working on this set play, while you coach the rest of the team in other activities.

- **Defending free kicks**

The difference as to whether or not the kick is direct or indirect is really inconsequential when it comes to lining up to defend a free kick, but the players do need to know which kind of kick is being taken. Defending players should build a wall (stand shoulder to shoulder in front of the ball) 10 yards away from the ball (*See Figure 10 on the next page*). Here are some other points of interest:

- Given that offsides is a consideration, your players should allow the goalie a buffer to cleanly field balls. Don't put players on the posts or have players standing in the space behind the wall.
- On an indirect kick, the players in the wall should charge the ball as soon as it is touched the first time.
- Players should align themselves from the near post toward the center of the goal. The goalie then takes a position just past the last defender in the wall, covering the far side of the goal.

- You should have anywhere from 3 to 5 players in the wall, depending on the proximity to the goal and the angle at which the shot will be taken.
 - Kicks directly in front of the goal and in a dangerous range for a shot should be defended with 5 in the wall.
 - Kicks at more difficult angles or distances can be defended with fewer players in the wall.
 - Those players not in the wall should mark opposing players but take advantage of the offside rule to leave the desired buffer for the goalie. If an opposing player lines up in an offside position, you want your players to be smart enough to leave that player alone and let the referee make the call once the kick is taken.

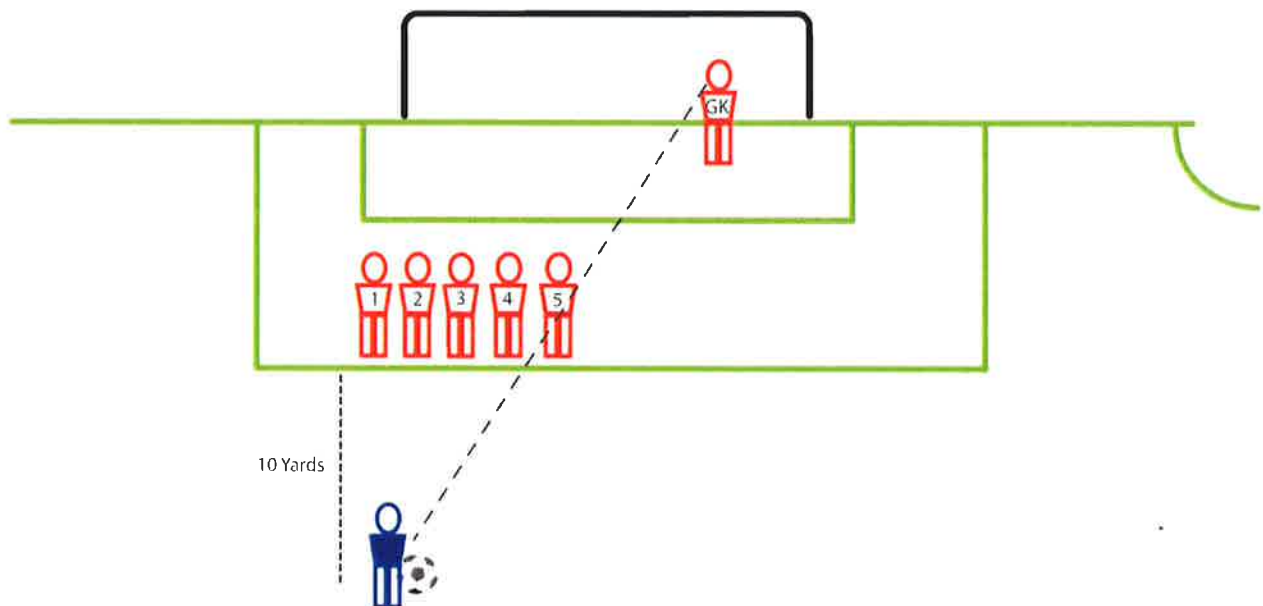


Figure 10: Defending against a free kick

Summary

The Under 9 and Under 10 age groups are very enjoyable. At these ages the game really begins to look like “soccer.” However, don’t mistake these players for young adults. They still have a lot of child in them. Keep the fun and instruction flowing.

