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COACHES' HANDOUT

Skill Priorities for U-6 to 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 its 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



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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?

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, the 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. 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.

To summarize, if we want our players to fully master the art of dribbling, the following conditions must exist:

1. they must start learning to dribble early;
2. we must provide ample opportunities for dribbling in practices and games, and
3. we must create the right game environment where players are not afraid to dribble.



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The following guidelines are recommended for the skill priorities at the U-6/U-8 ages:

Age Group

Skill Priorities

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**

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