

***21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MANUAL***

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# « INTRODUCTION »

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## **A. PURPOSE**

We at the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association are committed to continually improving our offerings to the youth soccer players throughout our state. However, as an umbrella organization, it is often difficult for us to assist by providing a personal hand with each player. The purpose of this manual is to serve as that hand and to reach out to all member organizations and help provide guidelines for creating a system of player development that will aid in enhancing the soccer experience for all youth players. Whether we are helping a young recreational player, or a teenage elite player, this manual should help us all to serve those players better and allow them to have fun and reach their goals. The aim is to offer ideas for a systematic, progressive organization-wide approach that will create the best possible environment for optimum player development. At the same time, this manual is meant to help those in administration and those serving on the board of directors for an organization. This manual should help make all of our lives easier, while improving services to the players. Although the manual does not cover all the possible questions people may have, it does discuss a wide scope of issues that we currently face and need to consider. The issues that were selected for inclusion in this manual were the ones that have the most impact on the way that players and coaches are trained and developed. The information is drawn from a variety of sources in this country and others. In other words, we are not speculating, we are simply compiling proven techniques and hoping we, in Massachusetts, can use them to better our youth players' experiences.

## **B. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

Youth soccer in this country has progressed to a level likely unimaginable to those who began their efforts 70 or 80 years ago. In this time, the rules of the game have changed, cleats have changed, the ball, uniforms, and overall soccer organization has changed. In the face of all these changes, we have to keep open minds and readjust our methods and understanding. Thankfully, psychological, nutritional, kinesiological, physical, developmental, and organizational research have provided us mountains of knowledge on how to best develop players at all levels amidst these changes. However, this information is often not reaching those people who would benefit from it most. We at the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association can help you by being the provider of this information.

Our youth soccer organizations cater to a myriad of ages, playing levels, personal goals, and community dynamics, which requires a sophisticated infrastructure that can address questions and issues without having to call in board members every time a new question develops. We have all participated in heated board meetings lasting hour after hour and ending with no resolution. This manual should help make those meetings extinct. Although this manual will not address every issue and/or question you have, it will address many of them and we are happy to discuss and serve as a reference for all those questions that are not detailed in these pages. You will find suggestions on various areas of player development, guidance with parent education, ideas on how to improve your coach education, ideas on how you might focus your decision-making process in all areas, suggestions for an organizational chart, and even a plan as to how you could actually hire a Director of Coaching for your own club without increasing your current

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registration fees. Hopefully it will help you further serve the players we all hope to see having fun and developing.

In our state, as in many states, the groups of players that need the most attention are the U-6, U-8, and U-10 age groups. What we do with these groups will impact all other age groups eventually. Once positive habits are set, they are easy to upkeep. If poor habits are picked up first, it is much more difficult to re-teach players and correct those habits. We cannot say, in this state, that any age group is most deficient as all groups have needs that need to be attended to that are currently being ignored. As the players age and become more serious, competitive players, we need to do a much better job of preparing them to reach their goals. At the same time we must realize that all players do not want or have the capabilities to become “elite” players. Therefore, we must always keep focus on the individual players we are working with and make sure we set up a structure and program that allows each player to reach his/her individual goal. We cannot sacrifice the goals of the recreational player for those of the competitive player. At the same time the reverse sacrifice is also not fair. A fundamental posit of this manual is to remember that treating all players the same is not treating all players fairly. As any sample population, players are a diverse group of people with varied talents and goals. Treating all varied parties with respect to their individual differences is fair treatment and will help keep everyone happiest in their own respect.

This manual will help guide boards of directors as they try to determine just how to accomplish that tricky and, at times, seemingly impossible task of serving a group with such varied needs and goals. Luckily, the information we are providing is information gathered from organizations that have succeeded and failed in this endeavor and have found creative and logical ways to improve service to the players. This information comes from people in youth soccer in this state, in other states, and in other countries. It has been learned through experience from groups dealing entirely with recreational players, to those dealing with a mixture of competitive and recreational players, and those dealing only with elite players. Whether you are hoping to help serve a recreational player or a hopeful national team player, this manual includes proven methods of serving both optimally and easily.

Although the recommendations in this manual come from people who have spent their lives studying child development and athletic development and have been involved in soccer for many years, this manual does not go so far as to set rules and regulations for your organization as part of the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association. It is hoped that you will seriously consider adopting much of what is in the manual as it is written solely for the purpose of improving the experience of youth soccer for players in our state. The information in this manual can help the recreational player and the future national team player have fun and develop to the best of their abilities. At the same time, the guidelines can help coaches and administrators enjoy their work in youth soccer with greater ease and efficiency. These are proven methods from around the state, country and world.

There are currently over 186,000 youth soccer players in our state. This makes us the second largest state in the 55 member United States Youth Soccer Association. Within our 186,000, there are organizations trying to serve 100 players and others trying to serve 10,000. Whatever

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the size of your organization, many of the fundamental structures are the same. This manual may prove to be overwhelming for someone in a group of either size. We realize we are covering a lot of information and recognize that it is extremely difficult to enact change, but are not asking you to do this alone. We at the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association will be there to help in the process in any way we can help. Whether it be working with your board of directors, conducting a presentation to your membership, communicating via email or phone, or providing help in any other way, just let us know what we can do. If you are considering hiring a Director of Coaching upon finishing this manual and need guidance as to how to find someone or would like the State Director of Coaching to serve on your hiring committee, that is entirely possible and we will help you find someone for your association. Any change will make some people uneasy and continued education is the best way to comfort those most uneasy. We will help with that education. The only way we can achieve excellence as a state and within our own communities is with continued evaluation of our services, education, and the courage to move forward.

Enacting many of these suggestions will take the efforts of strong leaders who are comfortable thinking proactively and are patient. You will see benefits to your players immediately, but adopting these suggestions is not a quick fix to all difficulties. This manual is meant to help create a long-term road to drive organizational decisions and enable players to travel down as far as they wish to travel. Trying to drive down that road at 200 miles per hour will likely cause a crash, just as it would if you were in a car. However traveling a steady 65 miles per hour will get you to your destination safely and at an appropriate pace. At the same time, imagine following that road if it continually forks, but never has a sign. Eventually you may find yourself right back where you started after years of travel, no better off than when you began. Unfortunately, that is exactly what is happening to many young players in our state today because we have not posted the signs to make their drive easy and goal-directed. You will likely see benefits to your players within a few years. A few years after that you will likely see even greater improvements. Player development is a long process and those of us leading the charge of youth development need to keep focused and remember that it is a long process. Continued education and evaluation is necessary to help these players long-term. However, change needs to start now so we do not continue to provide a sub-optimal experience for another generation of young players.

## « MISSION STATEMENT »

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The guiding force behind every association and club should be its' mission statement. This statement should be adopted into the bylaws after the board agrees upon it. Once agreed upon, this statement should guide all decisions in the club. Whenever there is controversy over a question, board members should ask themselves how that question is best answered in the spirit of their mission statement. It is likely and recommended that the mission statement be unique to each association as each association has different foci and differing goals in mind. Some associations may be directed to providing opportunities for recreational level players. Others may be solely targeting the development of premier players, where as others may have a dual focus. Regardless of the type of mission statement, the mission statement should be relayed to every parent and player in the association. It should be up on the association's webpage, in mailings and on registration forms. Anyone joining the association should know what the primary motives of the association are before joining. This will help them choose an organization that best fits their goals and will help prevent misunderstandings in the long run.

Regardless of the specific population they are serving, youth associations have a universally expected duty to do what is in the best interest of the individual player and to do its best to allow all the players to enjoy their experience with soccer. This idea differs greatly from what is considered priority at the professional or collegiate level. At those levels, it is considered appropriate to place team priorities over individual development. At the professional level, winning is the priority and people's jobs depend on results. Everyone on the professional team is expected to put the team first and to sacrifice himself for the sake of the team. Those players sitting on the bench are being paid well to do just that. Youth players are not being paid to sit on the bench. In actuality, they are paying to sit on the bench.

At the youth level, **the player must come first!!** Every decision made by the club and the coach should be in the best interest of the individual players. Examples: 1) A youth player should not be kept in goal against her wishes just because she is the best keeper and 'the team needs her' to win the game. 2) Coaches should not hold on to good players at a lower playing level just to help the team to win games. The better player should be allowed to move up to the next level in order to help him reach his potential, even if it means that the team he leaves behind will be weakened. 3) Every player must play in every game, not left to sit on the bench for the entire game because the team must win. 4) Young players should not be pigeon-holed into one position when young. Players should be given the chance to play multiple positions and develop various skills to make each player a better overall player. 5) When players are invited to play for the Regional or National Team, their club coaches should allow them to go even if there is a conflict with a club activity. It is not fair to the players to ask them to give up such opportunities in the name of team loyalty. The coach should help the player choose what is best for the player. The team is there to serve the player's ambition, not the other way around.

The previous points do not intend to go so far as to say that there should be no team building in youth soccer. In fact, team building is a vital part of the full experience of youth soccer. The concepts of cooperation, helping teammates, trust, dedication, and being respectful are certainly team building concepts that should be introduced to young players. These concepts are an immeasurably important part of learning that occurs in youth sports in general. However, these

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concepts do not involve sacrificing one's own development and goals in order to win. The following pages contain a few samples of mission statements with these thoughts in mind and discuss their inherent implications.

### **Sample 1: Recreational Philosophy**

“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning, through equal participation, regardless of ability.”

#### **Implication**

This mission statement would be most appropriate for a club that only has a recreational program. This means that every player who registers gets equal playing time. In addition, teams should be balanced in terms of ability every season, recruiting should not allowed, all-star teams should not be formed, and game results are not important. It also means that each player is treated the same. For example, if the club provides supplemental training or clinics, all the players should have the opportunity to attend. It is recommended that a club that adopts this philosophy should not even keep scores or standings.

Within this philosophy, players' whose ability or commitment level outgrows the level provided by the club, should not be discouraged from joining another club that offers higher level competition. A club that espouses a pure recreational philosophy should not take offense to players leaving for higher levels, or leaving for a club that provides more training. It should take pride in the fact that one of its own has progressed to the next level and regard it as a club accomplishment.

### **Sample 2: Developmental Philosophy**

“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning, at a level that fits his/her interest and ability.”

#### **Implication**

This mission statement would be most appropriate for associations that have a mixture of recreational and intermediate level (travel) programs. The club will therefore provide opportunities for players to play at a level that is commensurate with their abilities and provide more challenging environments for players as they improve and wish to play in a more challenging environment. The recreational side of the club would operate with exactly the same philosophy and guidelines as explained above in Sample 1. Supplemental training should still be provided to all though it may be sub-divided based on abilities of players. More committed players will have an opportunity to try out for more competitive (travel) teams as well. Some associations may also wish to have recreational all-star teams as a middle ground between these two levels. It is strongly recommended that this be given much thought and consideration before doing so as it may inherently change the focus of some of your players and coaches at the recreational level. Some associations have balanced this concern by only having recreational all-star teams for the year that tryouts first become available for the competitive teams. The goal is to prepare players better for that level of play. Whatever your decision might be, please note that

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the recreational all-star and the competitive teams should continue to provide equal, or close to equal, playing time for all the players. No player should be put through the agony of sitting on the bench for all or most of the game. Even at the competitive youth level, players are still playing the game mainly for fun and social interaction and we should be focused on the enjoyment of all of the players.

As with the recreational level, players whose talent and/or commitment outgrows that which is offered by the club should not be discouraged from moving to another club that offers higher level play, if they so desire. In some instances associations allow players to move to a more competitive level, but also require those players to stay with a recreational team. This is not recommended as it detracts from the experience of the rest of the players on the recreational team and is not helpful to the development of the more competitive player either.

### **Sample 3: The ‘Quest for Excellence’ Philosophy**

“To provide each player the opportunity to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment that emphasizes fun, enjoyment and skill learning at a level that fits his/her interest and ability, and to create a challenging environment for the best players who aspire to reach their full potential.”

#### **Implication**

This mission statement is most appropriate for clubs that have a mature program, with a large recreational base supporting a well developed select team program comprising intermediate and top level teams. This differs from the previous mission sample in that these associations offer comprehensive offerings for all players ranging from the recreational player to the national team hopeful.

The recreational and intermediate level program should follow the same philosophy as in samples 1 and 2. The top select teams will be geared towards players who have the potential to play at a high level (ODP, college, professional) and the commitment and desire to reach their full potential. Of course, if claiming to provide the environment necessary to help top players reach their potential, a club must provide the appropriate resources for these players. This environment will include well qualified, nationally licensed coaches who continually seek out education. This environment will include offerings that discuss nutritional guidance, sport psychology advice, and speed and agility work-out suggestions, as well as specified goalkeeper training. In addition, this club must have the resources and facilities to support the needs of these players.

However lofty our goals, we must never lose sight of the fact that players will not improve at any level without playing. Players at the top level should still play in every game. This does not mean that players should be guaranteed equal playing time, but rather that they will have to compete for more playing time, with the best and most committed getting more time than the rest. If a player is not getting much playing time with the top level team, the club should find alternative avenues to insure that the player is getting playing time, as there is no developmental replacement for having to play at game speed. This approach satisfies both the basic youth sport convention that everyone must play and the need to create a competitive environment where

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players are constantly monitored, evaluated and challenged to do better to earn more playing time.

As one might suspect, there are a variety of dicey issues involved with top level youth play, such as players playing up, the tryout process, coaching selection criteria, paid coaches, relationship between the club's first tier and the lower tiers teams in the same age group, etc. These issues must be handled by experienced coaches, under the leadership of a club Director of Coaching, with integrity and an unwavering regard for the welfare of the individual players. These issues need to be dealt with consistently by the leadership of the club.

### **Sample 4: The Result Oriented Approach**

“To create a challenging environment that enhances team development and to make our teams competitive at the state, regional and national level in order to win state, regional, and national championships.”

### **Implication**

Although clubs may have hopes to win championships, focusing their efforts on said championships and having winning as a primary motivation is not appropriate in youth sport! This is an example of a mission statement that is harmful to players both on and off the field. A result-oriented objective in a mission statement implies that winning is the most important thing. Development of players is not a concern, nor is the method of winning. This statement implies that success can only be measured by the amount of trophies won. Such a result-oriented philosophy leads to a high player attrition rate and often turns players away from sports for life. Fun becomes dependent on winning and improvement is not appreciated in the event of a loss. There are many other ways to measure success in youth sport that are more meaningful and relevant, and most importantly, not harmful. Winning should always be seen as a by-product, not as the measure of success.

### **Other Objectives for the Mission Statement**

Whether a mission statement is for a youth sport organization or another organization involving youth there are some general objectives that are common to all youth organizations. We should all be concerned with character building, moral development, instilling the values of honesty, sportsmanship and responsibility, etc. Often times we can use the sport experience or structure to help teach our players greater life lessons and the meaning of community responsibility as well. Whatever our goals, it is important for members' behavior to be consistent with the mission statement. From the board of directors, to the executive director, to the director of coaching, to the coaches, parents, and players, everyone in the club should be aware of the mission statement and act in accordance with its' tenets.

For your information, the mission statement of the United States Youth Soccer Association is to “foster the physical, mental, and emotional growth and development of youth through the sport of soccer for all ages and levels of competition. US Youth Soccer's job is to make soccer fun and instill in young players a lifelong passion for the sport”.

## « CLUB COACHING STRUCTURE »

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Youth soccer clubs typically have a board of directors that control all factors of the club's operation. This board organizes and directs all club matters and is usually made up of anywhere from 3 to 25 members. The size of the board often varies with the size of the club and the titles each club chooses to bestow on board members varies. You will find most boards in Massachusetts to be working boards. That is, each member of the board has a specific function (i.e. concessions, field manager, age group coordinator, treasurer).

The optimum size of the board largely depends on the people involved and the number of other volunteers an organization utilizes. It is wise to recognize that overly large boards make decision-making a slow and tedious process. Given that most boards arrive at decisions using the diplomatic process, large boards can lead to long meetings. It is not rare to hear of board meetings lasting up to and over 3 hours long. Meetings such as this often lead to frequent turnover in boards, which is not good for the continuity of the club.

Soccer club boards can help themselves organize by staying focused on their mission statement and relating issues they face back to that mission statement. Furthermore, it is good practice for a board to individually list the primary foci and goals for the club. Having someone qualitatively organize that data and before having the full board review the summary, is an informative process through which board members can educate themselves and one another as to the varied considerations that are constantly represented around the table. Focusing the long list of goals to a workable set of goals that are listed in priority order and associated with timetables and measureables is the first step in focusing your board and, hence, your club in one unified direction.

If you find that board meetings are still continuing for hours, you may wish to develop an agenda for each board meeting that is consistent and time-delineated. That means each committee or department will have 5 to 10 minutes to report on matters and once that time is up, discussion is squelched by the president, any votes are made, and a new topic is discussed. Furthermore, if each committee provides a written monthly report before each meeting, then discussion can be limited to points of contention and the meeting can move along more efficiently.

Depending on the association, boards often run into term difficulties in one of two ways. First, there may be frequent turnover. If this is the problem, a board needs to identify the reasons for this turnover and make attempts to rectify the problem. Frequent reasons known to create this difficulty are there being too much work, board members feeling like their voice is not wanted (especially by opinionated others), not feeling as if the board is a democracy, or just not agreeing with the direction in which the board is heading. Another frequent reason is that new members are not told what their role encompasses and are not "taught the ropes" when they join the board. In contrast, some boards suffer from no change. Often times, smaller clubs cannot find people to serve on the board. Every effort needs to be made to bring new ideas and perspectives to the board on a regular basis. Board members should not be serving 10+ years in the same position, especially if it is a leadership position. Making sure of a natural progression from one position to another, actively recruiting board members, or associating positions or volunteer work (partial responsibilities) to parents being given financial assistance may help with this issue.

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Since boards oversee all aspects of youth soccer clubs, it follows that the board should have a Coaching Committee to oversee all aspects of coaching within the club. This committee should number no more than three or four members, and should include the club Director of Coaching (DOC) plus two or three board members. If your club has a DOC, the DOC should be given the lead position on this committee with board members serving a consultative role. Typically, the Coaching Committee could include the board member in charge of the travel program and the one in charge of the recreational program. Otherwise, you may have one board member in charge of girls and one in charge of boys. Alternatively, some clubs break up roles according to the age of players. However roles are determined, it is extremely important that board members on the Coaching Committee have significant coaching experience and qualifications. In a perfect world these members will have a national level license and years of coaching experience. At least, these committee members should hold a “D” license. This education will provide these members with an understanding of basic coaching methodology and challenges as well as provide some exposure to the USSF’s player development philosophy. It should go without saying that these members need to have an inherent interest and affinity for coaching education.

If a club does not have a Director of Coaching, the Coaching Committee would essentially carry out all the duties normally associated with a Director of Coaching. In the absence of a DOC, the formation of a Coaching Committee is even more vital, to ensure that there is a small group of club officers who are qualified to oversee the coaching aspects.

### **The duties of the Coaching Committee can include:**

- 1) Monitoring the DOC’s work and conducting his/her evaluation and performance review. In the case of a paid DOC, recommending to the board renewal or termination of contract and commensurate salary increase.
- 2) In the case of a club looking to hire a DOC, creating the job description and conducting the search for a club DOC, interviewing candidates, and recommending the best candidate(s) for the board to approve.
- 3) Reviewing and approving the short and long-term seasonal objectives for the club, as presented by the club DOC.
- 4) Reviewing and approving all the coaching selections made by the DOC. Although the coaching committee should have the power to veto a coaching selection, this would normally be a ‘rubber stamp’ task. A coaching committee that routinely rejects the DOC’s selection portrays a serious case of philosophical differences between the committee members, which will need to be addressed, probably by the club’s full board.
- 5) Creating a process for conflict resolution between parents and team coaches.
- 6) Conducting hearings and adjudicating grievances by team coaches or parents against the DOC.
- 7) In the case of a club without a DOC, performing the duties listed in the section on the Club Director of Coaching.
- 8) Consult with the DOC as necessary on sensitive decisions that set a standard of club operation.

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- 9) Assist in the decision-making process and at times handling of sensitive issues so members recognize decisions are club decisions, not DOC conflicts.
- 10) Serve as lead voices on coaching matters/policies/changes that need board approval.
- 11) Serve as a sounding board for the DOC when DOC suggests new initiatives.

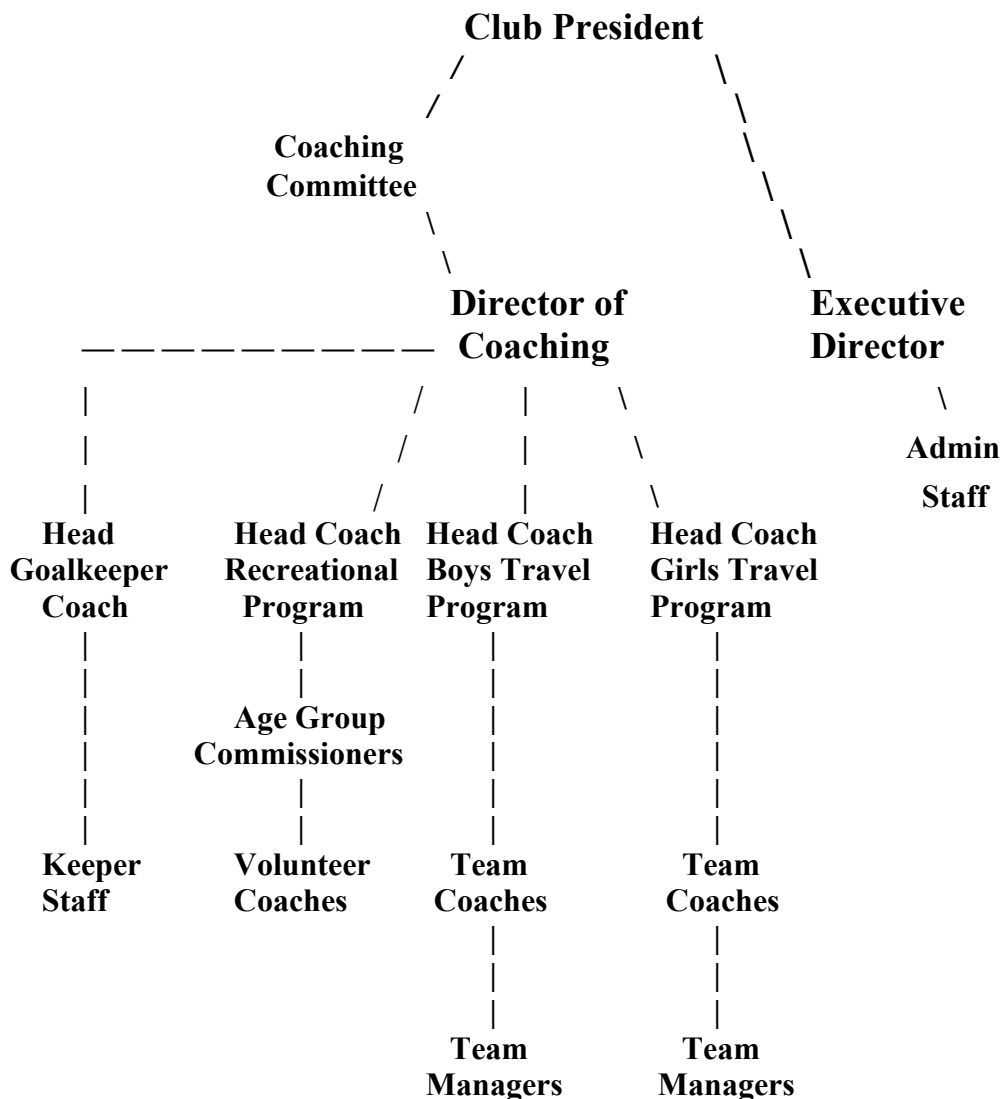
Under this structure, the club board can continue to run the administrative aspects of the operation, while giving the power to the Coaching Committee to run the coaching and player development side of things. This will streamline the operation and allow people to be productive within their area of expertise. The DOC and his/her assistants will run the day to day tasks of the coaching program, under the direction and supervision of the Coaching Committee, and the committee will, in turn, report regularly to the club board. If these matters are continually brought up to the larger board, it often lengthens the time needed to come to resolution on matters and frustrates members. Furthermore, as these matters effect the day to day operations of the club, waiting to convene the full board before making such decisions insures that progress within the club moves slowly at best. Lastly, since these matters typically surround player development and coaching, it is best to allow those who have sought out education and gathered experience in these matters to make these decisions. Allowing the full board, many of whom have no coaching education or experience, to make all of these determinations will not lead to the most efficient and professional resolutions.

It must be noted that the creation of a Coaching Committee is only recommended where clubs have board members who are qualified to deal with coaching matters. There is no point in having a Coaching Committee with little technical expertise. Some clubs have a Coaching Committee that rarely meets and does very little valuable work due to lack of time or commitment. In the absence of technical expertise or commitment to coaching issues at the board level, the best and most effective solution is to have the club DOC report directly to the club President.

# « CLUB COACHING STRUCTURE »

## A. COACHING ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Just as with any organization, a youth club should have an organizational chart that clearly defines the chain of command and is designed to create the most effective and efficient structure. The components of the chart below do not depend on whether the people holding these positions are paid or volunteers. Even if the positions are filled with volunteers, the structure can still assist clubs in clarifying the areas of responsibilities. Your club may not have these exact titles or as many positions as we list. This is meant to be a general guideline that you can relate to your club's roles.



As mentioned before, the DOC can report either to the Coaching Committee, or directly to the Club President. Either way, the DOC should have the authority to run the coaching aspects of

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the club as outlined in a later section on the duties of the DOC. As can be seen in the chart, the DOC should oversee all the playing levels, from the recreational to the select. Doing this insures that one unified philosophy permeates throughout the entire club. In addition, this helps prevent teams from doing their own thing and deviating from the club philosophy. If members see a disparity in operation or treatment from one team to the next, the board can expect to have problems.

For travel coaches, the DOC should evaluate their performance and make sure a consistent club philosophy and standard is being taught. Members should know what to expect of all club coaches. For clubs that hire paid coaches, the board should give the DOC the authority to oversee the hiring of the coaches and determine a consistent, club-wide, coaching fee structure. This will help insure that members are getting quality coaches and that independent paid coaches will not charge members exorbitant amounts of money. This also insures that wealthier teams are not given priority treatment because of their wealth. The DOC will probably not have the time to recruit and evaluate every recreational volunteer coach, but he/she can delegate this task to the Age Group Commissioners while still retaining the authority to veto or replace a volunteer coach found unsuitable. The DOC and Commissioners should be clear on standards and philosophies for all coaches for the club.

Some clubs have also added the position of a full-time Executive Director. This begs the question of whether the DOC should report to the Executive Director or directly to the President. As long as the Executive Director allows the DOC to run the coaching side of things and there is a mutual respect and cooperation between them, it does not really matter. In cases where the DOC requires assistance with organizational tasks and is not a strong administrator type person, it is probably better to have the DOC report to the Executive Director who can make sure that the organizational tasks within the coaching program are not neglected and are executed with professionalism. If the Executive Director micro-manages a DOC who can stand on her own, then conflicts will develop. To protect against this, it is suggested that a well-organized and professional DOC report directly to the President in order to create a clear division of responsibilities between the administrative and the coaching bodies.

Smaller clubs might find this chart too elaborate for their size and situation. If that is the case, it is recommended that you look at the descriptor categories of the positions listed in the chart and just streamline the chart maintaining the categorical integrity. If while reading over this manual you feel your organization would like to become more professional or organized but simply do not have adequate size, consider communicating with a nearby town or club and seeing if pooled resources might allow for clearer organization with more support and an overall better environment for players and coaches and board members (likely with less duties).

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### **B. LINKING RECREATIONAL AND TRAVEL PROGRAMS**

Most associations in Massachusetts have both a recreational and a travel program. For the most part, both of these arms are run by the same board, though different boards have different ways of overseeing the programs. Some clubs have one person or committee in charge of overseeing the recreational program and one in charge of the travel program. Others have one person overseeing both programs. Still yet, some associations actually have two separate mini-boards that are only concerned with their own program. Whatever structural model you maintain, please keep in mind that it is best to have these two programs linked and supportive of one another. Not only does this help build membership affiliation and long-term allegiance, but failing to link the two is likely to hold back player development.

Many associations have likely experienced some strain between their two programs. Often times members point out a discrepancy in the way teams from the two programs are treated. Travel teams are often seen as getting preferential treatment in regards to field space and practice time. Uniforms are an obvious difference that can cause strife at times, as is the general appearance of administrative and/or board support. In some clubs, travel coaches have raided recreational teams for players and left recreational teams not only short of talent, but also short of the needed number of players to compete. As these differences become constant thorns, members associated with the recreational program are less likely to desire any connection with the travel program. For this reason and others it is strongly recommended that the DOC or coaching committee be in charge of coaching and player development decisions for both programs. This organization can insure that decisions are being made with consideration of the entire program and for player development overall, not just one team.

Throughout the nation, clubs are recognizing that a developmental recreational program is key to developing a strong club. If an association runs a quality and properly focused U6, U8, and U10 program, it has a drastic effect on the long-term success of the club and the overall development of players and happiness of players and parents alike. For this reason, many clubs are asking their DOC's to spend more time with the recreational program. Otherwise, clubs are hiring an assistant DOC or a part-time person who is specifically in charge of overseeing the recreational program. Whatever the case, associations needs to recognize that the most qualified coaches in the club should be helping to educate the volunteer coaches and organizing the program so that it fosters player development. You will actually see that some clubs are using their paid coaching staff to run practices for their recreational teams at times as part of their basic recreational program. This not only provides support to volunteer coaches, but also helps educate them and benefits players. Your coaching leadership should be directly in charge of overseeing coaching education and player training in the recreational program. For more detailed recommendations on the DOC's duties relative to the recreational program please refer to the section on Club Director of Coaching.

#### **Encourage the Best Players to Travel Select Soccer**

It is extremely difficult for a coach to give up his/her best player on any team. Sometimes, players are kept on recreational teams because of this. If we remember the general philosophy of youth soccer however, we will remember that the player should always come first. Is keeping a

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talented player on a team of players all less talented than her an action taken with concern to that player's development or the team success? If the latter, we need to question our actions. Winning the recreational title is not a goal that supercedes long-term player development. Often times these players get bored playing at a non-competitive level and end up developing bad field habits and/or behavioral habits. All coaches, whether they are recreational coaches or the DOC need to recognize that players enjoy being challenged and seeing themselves improve. Players need to be put in an environment in which this can happen.

Some reasons that players do not play travel soccer are that they do not want to make the commitment or that they play another sport and do not have time for two travel sports. These are completely justified reasons and if a player does not want to make the commitment for travel soccer, than a player should not be coerced to do so. Players who are enthusiastic, talented, and committed to soccer, should be encouraged to tryout. Frequently, there are misconceptions amongst parents as to what is involved in travel soccer. There are also questions surrounding expenses and militaristic coaching. Associations in general need to do a better job of educating parents as to what playing travel soccer entails. Clarifying the basic questions and answers on web pages, in a brochure or handout, and in parent meetings is the best way to educate parents and help them determine if travel soccer is appropriate for their family. It will not be for everyone.

As mentioned earlier, associations can link the recreational and travel programs with unified oversight. Also, having the DOC or travel coaches provide occasional training for recreational teams and/or coaches is a good way to link the programs. Having the DOC present at some game days and interacting with coaches, players and parents is a good idea. Possibly having some pre-tryout training for interested players could help link the two programs. However it is accomplished, the more the DOC or coaching leadership gets involved with the recreational side and interacts with members, the better it is for overall player and club development.

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## DIRECTOR OF COACHING

### C. CLUB DIRECTOR OF COACHING

If you look around Massachusetts, you would believe the concept of a club having a DOC to be a new concept. However, the idea of a club Director of Coaching (DOC) is not original or new in this country. In the 1980's, some of the bigger youth clubs around the country started hiring full-time coaches and DOC's. With every passing year, more and more clubs decided to hire a paid Director of Coaching. In fact, most successful clubs and associations throughout the country now have DOC's. In Illinois, there are typically 3-5 full-time employees for each club, including a DOC. These clubs include a mixture of town-based associations and premier clubs. The majority of clubs in Illinois have paid coaches for all their travel teams. In Delaware, which has 175,000 less players than in Massachusetts, there are more paid youth soccer professionals in clubs than we have here. In Virginia, Georgia, Texas, California, Florida, Alabama, Wisconsin, Arizona, Kentucky, Nebraska, and even in Hawaii, you will find DOCs leading clubs around the state. It is time that we here in Massachusetts begin seriously considering the same. Otherwise our players will soon see a recognizable gap between their abilities and the abilities of their peers in other states. The obvious main hurdle to overcome for most clubs is how to raise the money for a DOC, whether it be full or part time. Later, I will provide a breakdown of how to fund this position. Right now, we will look at the benefits of having a club DOC as well as the possible duties of such a position.

**Why hire a Director of Coaching?** It is a given that most of the player development occurs at the club level since that is where the majority of players play most of their soccer. The vast majority of youth coaches are volunteers with bundles of enthusiasm and the best of intentions. These volunteer coaches form the backbone of our youth clubs and are absolutely necessary for youth soccer to exist and flourish. However, most of these volunteer coaches lack a strong soccer background and need professional guidance from experts in the area of player development. This is where the club DOC can play a vital role. The DOC can help these volunteers on a consistent basis and serve as an open resource for the coaches as they encounter new questions and challenges. Once the best players reach the top select levels, they need coaches who have years of experience and have years of education behind them. These players need to be exposed to a higher level of coaching in order to reach their potential. If the DOC has educated the volunteers throughout the years and the volunteers have sought their coaching licensure, these volunteers may still be able to help these players. However it is more likely that trained professional coaches can help the top players, and thus, increase the skill level of all the players in the club. The DOC should be in charge of seeking, hiring, setting pay scale, and giving training guidance to these coaches. By doing this, the club will have one unified progression of coaching recreational to intermediate to top level players. This will help all coaches and players reach their full potential in this club and could not be done without the supervision and guidance of a DOC who is qualified and knowledgeable enough to oversee these aspects of coach and player development.

Youth coaches need the continuing education that a club DOC can provide. The state coaching license courses are an important step in the coaching education chain and the state has other offerings for coaches, however a club DOC can serve as a constant resource and give incremental guidance throughout the season and year. Just as players need role models to

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observe and emulate, the same is true for coaches. The DOC can provide regular clinics or one on one help and stimulate and inspire the volunteer coaches to seek more knowledge. If coaches run into problems they have not experienced before or feel overwhelmed by, the DOC can be there to help solve the problems and ease the burden on the volunteer coach. The advantages of having the volunteer coaches simply observe practical coaching excellence is hard to measure but is invaluable. We have all heard the adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. In many cases, this adage rings true. A club DOC will raise the bar and set new, higher standards for both coaches and players. Of course, before we set higher standards, we need to make sure we have set fundamental standards. Does your club currently have standards of performance for each age or level? This is something a DOC can set to get all members of the club on the same page and focused on a progressive track of development. With this, it is likely that clubs will be able to retain their best players who, in the absence of a qualified coach, are likely to migrate to other clubs that do have paid coaches.

As youth soccer participation grows and soccer becomes more established, multi-tiered and, therefore, more sophisticated, clubs boards spend an inordinate amount of time discussing and arguing over myriad technical issues. Issues such as how to organize tryouts; how to draft players; how to set coaching selection criteria; should players be allowed to play up an age group; should there be a club-wide common playing system; what should the role of the second tier teams be; how many games and which tournaments should the teams play; what should be the training priorities for each age group; the list goes on and on. These thorny issues have caused numerous rifts in clubs throughout the country and have divided many boards, sometimes leading to splinter groups leaving to form their own clubs and setting unhealthy rivalries within the same community. A club DOC can not only provide the missing technical expertise to deal with these issues but, just as importantly, act as the objective professional who is assigned to deal with the issues with an absence of any personal agendas. Lastly, the DOC can spend time working on parent education, so parents have realistic expectations and understand what the club is about. Undoubtedly, this will reduce strain on the board.

To summarize, hiring a professional DOC will raise the standards of instruction given to the players and coaches. It will ensure that the coaching will be taken seriously and that there will be someone held accountable for the services. Hiring a DOC will signal the first step towards achieving excellence at all levels of play.

#### **Some of the duties the club DOC could fulfill are:**

- 1) Design a set of coaches selection criteria and hire all the team coaches.
- 2) Assist the Coaching Committee in designing a Coaches Code of Conduct.
- 3) Train and monitor the team coaches and help them plan and implement practice sessions.
- 4) Design and administer a continuing education program for the team coaches.
- 5) Conduct coaches clinics.
- 6) Design coaching manuals for the team coaches.
- 7) Bring in experts such as state, regional, and national staff coaches, to present clinics.
- 8) Bring in Referee Instructors to educate the coaches and the parents on the rules of the game.

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- 9) Bring in experts in the sports sciences, such as a soccer fitness expert, a medical expert for first aid, a sport psychologist, and a nutritionist, to make presentations and to assist in the overall program design.
- 10) Act as the technical liaison between the club and the State DOC.
- 11) Create a suitable library of books, videos and articles for all the team coaches to access.
- 12) Create long and short-term seasonal plans for the club and provide guidance to team coaches in designing their own team's seasonal plans.
- 13) Design and administer the team tryouts.
- 14) Select and coach the Recreational All-Star team if you have one.
- 15) Design the playing format for the in-house recreational programs, specifying the number of players on the field, the duration of games, the number of games, the size of fields, etc.
- 16) Design the training priorities for each age group and level.
- 17) Organize supplementary age and level appropriate skill clinics for the players.
- 18) Design a Player Development Manual for the club.
- 19) Identify the most talented players in the club and alert the State and Regional Coaches for possible inclusion in State and Regional Teams.
- 20) Assist in the design of a Code of Conduct for the players and for the parents.
- 21) Help the club create a policy for team travel that will address supervision requirements and logistical and behavioral issues while traveling to tournaments away from home.
- 22) Assist the club with the technical coaching aspects of a Risk Management Policy.
- 23) Educate the players and the parents about the playing opportunities beyond the club level, such as the ODP, and encourage the best players to try out for the ODP.
- 24) Design a player evaluation/feedback process/form that instructs the team coaches as to how and when to provide feedback to the players.
- 25) Create a college recruiting information program and educate the players and parents on college playing opportunities.
- 26) Assist in the design and implementation a parent education program that would include parent meetings, parent handbooks, handouts, and occasional seminars.
- 27) Report to the Coaching Committee and assist the committee in all its duties.
- 28) Report to the Club Board and attend the board meetings.
- 29) Promote the club within the community and help with public relations.
- 30) Represent the club at State, Regional, and National coaching seminars and workshops.
- 31) Create, evaluate and summarize game reports to track team development over seasons and years.
- 32) Make all final decisions on player placement, players playing up, and movement within teams from the club.
- 33) Oversee all travel tournament selections.
- 34) Organize and run summer and/or school vacation camps for the club that remain consistent with the club developmental philosophy.

As you can see by the sheer number of possible duties, this job could be quite overwhelming and is definitely needed. It is extremely important to note that duties not included above are maintaining the facilities, cutting the grass, lining the fields, scheduling referees, administering fund-raising events, directing tournaments, administrating registration and other similar duties. In many clubs, the DOC is the first and only employee hired. It is therefore very tempting to

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dump a lot of the administrative load on the full-time person. After all, he/she is paid to work for the club and is always available while everyone else is a volunteer with a busy life. Many aspiring DOC's agree to take on the added administrative duties when negotiating their contract with the club, keen to demonstrate their enthusiasm and secure the position. Dumping too many administrative duties on the DOC is not an efficient way of using his/her expertise and will often end up in the club moving backwards as opposed to forwards. Any task that can be carried out by a volunteer, that does not require technical expertise, should continue to be assigned to the volunteers. This is not to suggest that such tasks are beneath the DOC to perform. Rather, people should perform the tasks they are best qualified to perform in order to help the club maximally. With this in mind, clubs must remember why they hired the DOC in the first place and allow him/her the time and authority to carry out his mandate without any unnecessary distractions. The DOC should focus her energy on coaching and player development and, by doing so, will most efficiently and effectively help the association improve and help both players and coaches reach their potential. A quality DOC will be a creative self-starter with abundant initiative who is always looking to implement new training methods to raise the level of the club. This DOC will get to know all the team coaches and take a personal interest in every coaching aspect of the program. Above all, this person will be looking out for the players and making sure that their concerns are priority.

As mentioned before, it is important for the club DOC to be in charge of the coaching and training aspects of all the levels in his/her club. The DOC cannot afford to neglect the recreational level and the board should not allow the DOC to do that. That is not to say that the DOC should actually coach recreational teams, but it does mean that the DOC should design the technical details of the recreational program including the playing formats, coaching education, parent education, and training priorities. The task of recruiting volunteer coaches can remain with age group Commissioners, but the DOC must help monitor the volunteer coaches and have the authority to remove those who are found unsuitable.

**Should the DOC coach a club team?** A major issue that often comes up with clubs and a DOC is whether or not a DOC should coach any teams. This becomes a particularly difficult issue if the club pays it coaches and allows the DOC to be a paid coach in addition to his duties. This arrangement is a recipe for disaster and is not recommended. Clubs should avoid hiring DOC's who are only interested in coaching a few teams and neglect to look after the welfare of the club as a whole. It is impossible for someone to coach 3 or 4 teams and still have enough time and energy to carry out the normal duties of a club DOC. However it is a good idea for the DOC to coach one team. Coaching is a craft and it is important that the DOC maintain her skills in this craft. Managing a team and working with a group of players regularly is quite different from overseeing coaching and watching a different team every day. In addition, the X's and O's of coaching are only part of the coaching equation as managing players and their personalities and skills are an equally important part. Even experienced coaches never stop learning and honing their skills to manage these varied demands. In order for the DOC to keep abreast of new coaching methods and continue his/her professional growth, he needs to constantly solve problems within the coaching cycle of training, observation, player management, and match analysis. Allowing a DOC to coach one team will help him relate better to the daily problems his team coaches face by being 'in the trenches' and, therefore, allow him to offer his coaching staff

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sound and practical advise. It will also allow other coaches to watch the DOC train and coach his team. Lastly, quality coaches have a passion for teaching and will be more inclined to apply for the position of a DOC if they know that they would have the opportunity to coach a team.

Of course, this now raises the question of which team the DOC will coach, as this could become a sticky point amongst the board and/or members. It should be up to the DOC and the coaching committee to decide which team the DOC will coach. This decision should be based on the overall needs of the teams within the club and how the whole coaching staff fits within the whole coaching structure. This decision should not be based on which team in the club is best and how the DOC can gain personal glory by coaching the best team and winning championships for the club. The DOC should be a role model and lead by example by projecting herself as a ‘team player’ so that she can demand the same from her staff. In addition, the DOC should coach a different team every one or two years. This is based on the belief that youth coaches in general should not coach the same team for more than one or two years (the rationale behind this belief is explained in a later section on the select program). Therefore, the DOC cannot impose a year limit on her team coaches if the rule does not apply to her as well.

#### **The following qualifications should be considered when searching for a DOC:**

- 1) Possess a USSF ‘A’ or ‘B’ License, or equivalent (NSCAA Premier or National Advanced license). Candidates with a strong playing background who have no coaching license should not be considered, as one would have to question their commitment to coaching education, considering that 70% of the duties of a DOC are related to coaching education. Candidates possessing a foreign license should be considered as well. Regardless of license level, clubs should verify the authenticity of the license and, in the case of a foreign license, contact the US Soccer Federation to determine the American equivalency of the foreign license.
- 2) Possess the USSF National Youth License. This is geared toward coaches who work with the U-6 through U-12 age groups and goes over specific soccer and developmental issues for each age group. This license is extremely beneficial for a club DOC since it is more effective than the traditional USSF courses in preparing him/her to design age-appropriate programs for the youngest age groups. If a candidate is hired without this license, the club should insist on enrolling him/her in the National Youth License course as soon as possible.
- 3) Have earned a minimum of a bachelor degree, preferably in the education or child development field.
- 4) Possess strong practical coaching experience at the youth level.
- 5) Demonstrate ability to relate to and communicate with young players of all levels, from recreational to top select.
- 6) Possess strong practical playing ability at the professional, semi-professional and/or college varsity level.
- 7) Possess strong interpersonal skills, solid written and oral communication skills, listening skills, and computer skills.
- 8) Possess proven ability to influence adults and articulate concepts to large audiences.
- 9) Demonstrate leadership qualities.
- 10) Possess experience in instructing coaching courses to adults.
- 11) Possess integrity and follow morally and ethically sound standards.
- 12) Possess organizational and administrative skills with good time management.

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- 13) Have a dynamic personality with innovative ideas and strong motivational skills.
- 14) Possess a player development philosophy that is in line with the club's mission.
- 15) Be responsible and have a mature personality.
- 16) Committed to working a non-traditional schedule of afternoons, evenings, and weekends.

**What is the going salary for a club DOC?** Before thinking about hiring and paying a DOC it is imperative that the board is fully behind the decision. Taking this step is a commitment to a more organized and professional development process for players and coaches alike but does come with some understanding and responsibility that, if lacked, could be a guarantee of conflict. Once the board has agreed that hiring a DOC is the best course of action for a club, the board should decide whether to hire a full-time or a part-time DOC.

Looking around the country, one sees that most well-organized clubs/associations do have a full-time DOC. However, that is not to say that those clubs jumped right in with a full-time DOC when they first hired for the position. Here in Massachusetts it would be fantastic if clubs had the financial means and board support to hire a full-time DOC. Given this is a new idea to many though, that may not be the case and it may be smart for clubs to look to hire a part-time DOC to start. This person and the board can then build the job as everyone settles into the new arrangement and agrees on the needs of the club heading into the future.

Currently, full-time DOC's around the country are earning between \$35,000 and \$80,000. This is an extremely wide range and much of it has to do with the socio-economics of the geographic region in which clubs are situated. Of course, the education and background of the candidates have much to do with salary as well. A fair guideline for this state also varies greatly depending on where in the state, however between a salary \$35,000 and \$50,000 is a realistic range to consider. If looking to hire a DOC for 20 hours/week, then it is recommended you pay the DOC between \$18,000 and \$25,000 depending on qualifications. Something to remember is that a full-time person should also be given health insurance, disability coverage, and some form of retirement fund. (Nonprofits can set up a 503b retirement fund for employees).

Smaller clubs may have difficulty financially supporting a DOC and should not risk the financial integrity of the organization to do so. Smaller organizations would be better served by communicating with each other and possibly cooperatively hiring a DOC. We all have very similar issues and needs and having a person split his/her time between the two or three organizations makes a lot of sense and may help support collaboration as the players get older and pools of players available makes fielding teams for players (of all levels) difficult.

A frequent question will be whether a part-time DOC should be hired all year long or just during the fall and spring seasons. It is strongly recommended that the DOC be hired for the full-year. It is likely that a club will want to have the DOC on the field working with players and coaches during the week and observing games or running a U6 program on the weekends. If a DOC is an avid worker and does effectively manage to work with all teams and provide supplemental offerings for players, there will be no time for the DOC to develop a curriculum or research tournament placements and set up coaching clinics during the season. Of course, the summer offers some flexibility and you may help drive down the salary cost by giving the DOC 4-6

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weeks off in the summer. In contrast, this time may also be used to have the DOC run camps for your club that are consistent with the club curriculum and developmental philosophy. This also offers the club the opportunity to enter into a profit-sharing arrangement with the DOC to help pay for his/her salary and to bring in money to the club for other needs (fields, goals, financial need players). Other sources of revenue for the DOC's salary could be age specific clinics that run throughout the year, a day-time U6 program for part-time kindergarteners, school break camps, and if an association is comfortable with it, a player fee. Many clubs obtain other additional revenue from sponsors and from doing fund-raising events, such as casino nights, raffles and cookie sales. Revenues from these types of fund-raising events are best channeled towards other club needs, such as facility improvements and equipment. If your club hosts tournaments, that is a great way to raise revenue for the club. Please, if hoping to use this revenue to pay the DOC make sure you have back-up funds that support the DOC if weather should force a tournament cancellation. The funds for paying the salary of a DOC must be secured and guaranteed on a regular basis. Here is a quick guide as to how revenues can be generated:

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<u><i>Program</i></u>	<u><i>Cost per player</i></u>	<u><i># of players</i></u>	<u><i>Revenue for DOC salary</i></u>
U6 day---(Wed. 10am, 6 weeks)	\$70	10	\$700 per season
U6 day---(Wed. 1pm, 6 weeks)	\$70	10	\$700 per season
(if popular, you will likely need 4 of these sessions/week and could have 20-30 players/session)			
U7 technical clinic (7 weeks)	\$85	12	\$1,020 per season
U8 technical clinic (7 weeks)	\$85	12	\$1,020 per season
U10 technical clinic (7 weeks)	\$85	25	\$2,040 per season (minus \$250 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> coach)
Feb. vacation camp (10 hours)	\$125	30	\$3,750 per year (minus \$800 gym and 2 <sup>nd</sup> coach)
April vacation camp (10 hours)	\$100	30	\$3,000 per year (minus \$300 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> coach)
Summer Camps (15 hrs/wk, 2 wks)	\$125	80 total	\$10,000 per year (minus \$2200 in costs)

Total revenue created for DOC yearly salary = \$23,910

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- these numbers are conservative numbers
  - these programs are programs that have been successfully run at clubs
  - all associated fees with these programs are extremely reasonable
  - if there are more interested players, the DOC can hire additional coaches and the overall club profit will increase dramatically

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- U6 classes have successfully been run with an average of 25 players per session for 6 sessions/week at other clubs
- The Summer Camps number here is especially conservative and the club might consider making a profit-sharing agreement with the DOC. The more players come to camp, the more the DOC and the club benefit.
- Notice that none of this revenue has come from fundraising or tournaments
- **NONE OF THIS REVENUE IS FROM INCREASED PLAYER FEES! ☺**

As you can see by looking over these extremely conservative numbers, hiring a DOC is entirely possible and will have wide ranging benefits. The fact that this person would be running coaching clinics, helping coaches throughout the year, and running team practices at times is not listed anywhere is this revenue stream. Having this person construct a progressive curriculum of development is now a no-cost reality. Having a professional to answer parent questions and set parent expectations is a free benefit. Decreasing the strain on board members is an additional benefit. Therefore, you are increasing your service to your members in highly visible ways without increasing membership fees! In all honesty, people would likely be happy to pay for such services and if you wished to grow into a full-time DOC down the line, you can easily see how this could be accomplished.

**How does a club go about finding a DOC and creating a job?** Mass Youth Soccer will help you through every step of this process. Our DOC and staff will sit down with your board and discuss this process and help answer all questions. Making sure that everyone is on the same page before hiring is imperative. Having a job description for the incoming DOC is also important and if you do not feel comfortable creating your own, Mass Youth Soccer will offer samples descriptions that other clubs have used successfully. If you have questions as to whether the job description you finalize is feasible, we will be happy to go over it with you and make sure of its' feasibility.

A huge challenge in the process of hiring a DOC is finding one. This area is one in which Mass Youth Soccer will not only help, but will be happy to take the lead for you. It is well known that a large percentage of athletic resumes include lies. How does the average board member know if an applicant really did play for his country's national team or coach at the levels he says he did? How does the board know if an applicant actually has the coaching licenses she says she possesses? How does a board know if a person's references are well-respected people in the field? These are tough questions and this is where Mass Youth Soccer can help most clearly. We will be happy to publish the openings of these positions and be the resume clearinghouse for clubs/associations. We will be happy to interpret the resumes for you and guide you as to the top candidates. The soccer world does not operate by six degrees of separation, but rather by three degrees of separation and it is highly likely that our staff will personally know the references a respected candidate lists on her resume. If a club wishes, we will even have one of our staff sit on your hiring committee and help through the interview process or serve as a sounding board for members. Finally, we will even be willing to serve as an ad hoc member on your board for a few months to help smooth out the wrinkles and insure that all is running well. Often times, clear communication and shared expectations at the outset of a relationship help immeasurably and having an unbiased and educated observer helping facilitate this can help make everyone happy.

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Overall, Mass Youth Soccer is willing to help in any way we can. We see the development of DOC positions throughout the state as integral to the continued development of soccer players and coaches and as a monumental step in insuring a positive soccer experience for everyone involved.

Therefore, we will publicize openings on our webpage, through our email notifications, and throughout our current instructional and ODP staff. We will place openings listings in the BayStater as well. You should do the same in your community and on your webpage and in your mailings. If you want to look outside of Massachusetts to hire for this position, just let us know and we will guide you as to how to do that.

**How much authority should the DOC have?** Many clubs wrestle with this thorny issue, caught between the need to leave technical matters to the technician and the reluctance to relinquish power. Clubs must remember why they hired the DOC in the first place, which is to benefit from his/her technical expertise. If they second guess him/her and restrict his/her power to do the job properly, what is the point of hiring a professional? The DOC should be given the authority to:

- 1) Hire and fire coaches, with the approval of the Coaching Committee.
- 2) Organize the tryout process and have the final say on player selection and placement.
- 3) Have the final say on player development issues such as players playing up, playing format, training priorities, implementing club-wide coaching standards and policies.
- 4) Have a final say on how many competitive teams to register in each age group, based on the talent level available.
- 5) Give final approval to tournament selection of teams to make sure teams are playing at the appropriate level.

Directors of Coaching who feel restricted in their capacity to perform their duties will lose the motivation to impact the program and just go through the motions. At the same time, boards must make sure that DOC's do not feel they can act and make decisions without any oversight. This is an intricate balance as every decision cannot be placed in limbo until the monthly board meeting, but some decisions are important enough that they should. Constant power struggles between board members and a DOC will end up in stagnation and rifts throughout the entire club and will not be good for anyone.

It goes without saying that clubs should do their homework and check the background and experience of the person they intend to hire. Mass Youth Soccer is happy to help with this. Hiring the wrong candidate can cause long lasting damage to the club and add fuel to the arguments made by those who were initially opposed to hiring a DOC. Just as in any other profession, there are good DOC's and there are bad ones as well. One consideration of ultimate importance is that of why the candidate wants to become a DOC. There are many people out there who see an opportunity and have qualifications, though have underhanded motives. A quality DOC will have the players' best interests in mind constantly and will not be driven by fame or money as primary or even secondary motives. That is not to say they do not deserve

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these things. Through the hiring process however, a board needs to be attentive to the person they hire and realize they are hiring a person, not a resume.

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

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### A. GENERAL PROBLEMS OBSERVED

Playing in the Recreational Program is the first soccer experience for most players. It is also the program where most of the players will remain for their whole playing career. The primary objective of the Recreational Program is to instill a love of the game within each player, so that every player enjoys himself and, hopefully, returns the following season. This positive experience can have far reaching effects on young children and has immeasurable value for players.

Although we often hear about competitive players more often, recreational players represent the largest number of active youth players in this country. Fittingly, the local and state run recreational programs in America are arguably the most organized youth soccer programs in the world. Our recreational administrators and coaches are dedicated, intelligent volunteers, many of whom are college-educated. These people often put in countless hours and are infrequently thanked for their efforts, other than the thanks they absorb by seeing those smiling faces running around on game day. Many recreational programs infrastructure is excellent and their resources are limitless. If there is one glaring weakness in our recreational programs, it is the lack of people with life-long soccer experience, especially a technical experience. Most of the technical expertise is concentrated at the competitive level. The recreational programs are thus left in the hands of willing, enthusiastic volunteers, who have little or no soccer background. Thus, sometimes even the most organized programs are not as developed as they could be for the players.

The problems seen in recreational programs across the state and the country are amazingly similar. They are often related to the fact that strong technical supervision is missing. The most common problems observed are:

- 1) Too much emphasis on kicking the ball aimlessly forward, with no specific purpose in mind. This is not conducive to skill development.
- 2) Too much emphasis on results, especially at the U-10 and U-12 level.
- 3) Players who are good enough for the competitive level are kept at the recreational level by coaches who want to win.
- 4) Parental behavior on the sidelines. Often parents are yelling directions loudly, bombarding players with too much information and, thus, resulting in young players not having the opportunity to grow out of their dependency on the adults.
- 5) Parental behavior on the sidelines. Often parents yell at young referees or coaches, demonstrating poor sportsmanship and decreasing the enjoyment of the game for everyone.
- 6) The 11v11 game is too difficult for U-10 or U-12 recreational players. They need to play small-sided soccer.
- 7) Clubs have difficulty recruiting and maintaining volunteer coaches.
- 8) Due to lack of coach education, coaches do not have enough variety of activities to make the practices fun and effective.

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- 9) Pre-game warm-ups are very poor, and do not prepare the players for the demands of the game.
- 10) Too many substitutions during games kill the flow and make games chaotic.
- 11) Drafting of teams at the recreational level is a problem at some clubs, with some coaches manipulating the system to stack teams.

The following pages address these concerns and provide some hints to help with these difficulties. Each community will find problems that are unique to their environment and some of these solutions may not work due to the environment in your town. However, the hints can likely be adjusted a bit one way or another in order to help in any environment.

### **Drafting Teams**

Recreational teams should have no tryouts, no cuts, and actually no selection at all. The teams should be equally balanced and made without any influence from those who may have motives otherwise. One way to insure this is to randomly place children on teams using a computer. Use age and school or neighborhood as your selection variables if that is how you organize your teams. If you have a ranking system at the end of the year, use that ranking as a determining value to make sure teams have equal strength. Many programs have a coaches meeting in which selections are made. This meeting can end up in major battles and create hard feelings. Typically, those coaches who have been around the longest and know most of the players are the ones who end up with the best teams. Outside of coaches, parents may also try to exert influence over team placement. Many programs have seen the development of social and economical cliques amongst parent groups who then use the team as a social group and sometimes intentionally disclude others. This seems unlikely, but it has and does happen. Keeping the drafting process free from personal bias is tricky, but necessary. If you cannot draft via computer it is recommend that a person or persons without children be involved in determining placement.

It is strongly recommended that the teams should be mixed after every year. This serves a number of useful purposes. First of all, it discourages coaches from recruiting the stronger players and manipulating the system as they seek to build a ‘super’ team. Secondly, it prevents coaches from becoming overly possessive of their players/teams. This can result in an environment where the coach feels it is “his” team as opposed to one team in a larger organization. Thirdly, it avoids the staleness and boredom associated with doing the same drills under the same coach for too long. Fourth, it allows players to be exposed to a number of teammates/friends as they progress through the program and thus promotes socialization. Fifth, different coaches see different abilities and potential in players and will help develop players in unique ways. Lastly, it eliminates the build up of rivalries between teams and the ‘Us versus Them’ mentality, which can sometimes breed animosity between players and parents of opposite teams. Overall, this can help create a very positive and friendly atmosphere.

There will undoubtedly be resistance to this recommendation. Some parent coaches will argue that their child is happier playing with familiar teammates. This may be true, but should not be a concern as players will become familiar with their new teammates quite quickly. Some parents need to balance carpool demands and this should be considered, but only within reason as

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## GENERAL GUIDELINES

programs have had people try to manipulate drafting of teams by all claiming interrelated carpool needs. Another objection might point to the need to buy new uniforms every year. Clubs can buy the same uniform for all the teams and make them reversible, so that players can wear the appropriate side for their team and never have to buy another jersey until they outgrow it. This actually saves families money over the years as they buy less jerseys overall and often pass the jerseys down to younger children in the family. Buying the same jersey for all the players also helps the club create a club identity and facilitates moving away from the 'team' concept that often creates player affiliation tensions within the club.

Experience has shown that clubs that relent to coaches' demands and allow recreational teams to stay together, end up with bigger problems down the road. The following example is typical of such problems: A recreational U-8 team is allowed to stay together into their U-9 year. The team is winning within the recreational program. When the team moves into the U-10 age group, they are still together. Meanwhile, at the U-10 Select Tryouts, only 7 players show up and the club is forced to cancel its U-10 select program. It turns out that none of the players from the recreational team that was allowed to stay together came to the tryouts, even though many of them would be challenged more appropriately at the select soccer. The recreational team's coach convinced all the players to stay together at the recreational level. Now the problem is that, since most of the good players have left the U-10 recreational program to play somewhere they could play travel, this team has no competition and is beating everyone handily. They petition the club to allow them to move as a team to the select level. The end result of all this is that a coach and a few parents have managed to destroy the club's U-10 select program and undermine the whole select tryout process, all in order to satisfy their own personal agendas. In addition, the players are losing out by not playing with other strong players, which would result in bettering their development. Having been with that coach a few years, it is likely in those players best interest to learn from another coach at that point as well. Lastly, how did the players feel who are on those recreational teams that this super team beat handily? If clubs stand firm and hold their grounds on these issues, the natural resistance to change will only be encountered in the first year of implementation. After that, everyone will see the benefits and changing teams every year will become an accepted club policy that no one questions.

### **Recruiting and Educating Coaches**

Convincing parents to volunteer to coach is always a challenge. There is no quick and easy way to find willing coaches. But the following recommendations should help the recruiting process.

***Improve organization and communication*** – Parents will be more inclined to volunteer if they see that the club is well organized. When all the logistical details are taken care of efficiently, such as team assignments, game scheduling, practice field allocation, uniforms distribution, productive and informative coaches meetings, parent meetings, a regularly mailed and informative newsletter, and decent facilities, parents can be persuaded to coach. If the prospective parent coach sees that the club has an established support system that will provide the necessary resources and not abandon him to deal with the team problems on his own, he/she is more likely to volunteer. Providing support on game day to help manage parents or referees or any outstanding situations is also important. Also, help coaches with

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parent communication and guide them how to organize the team most efficiently and how to communicate expectations to parents.

***Offer Clinics and Coaching Courses*** – Many parents are reluctant to volunteer because they know very little about coaching soccer. By offering clinics and coaching courses, the club can alleviate their anxiety. The club can show the parents that the course manuals are an excellent source of material, specifically designed for rookie coaches and include enough practice activities for an entire season. The club DOC can inspire and motivate volunteer coaches by working with them and providing a quick age specific coaching clinic at the start of every season. Some associations have actually created programs in which the DOC or travel coaches will run two or more practices per season for any interested recreational coaches. Others actually have the teams practice together under the lead of the DOC who guides each coach and team through the activities for the practice. By doing this, new coaches never have to run a practice alone and will get continued education and the confidence to coach in the future.

***Utilize the resources of the State Association*** – The state association offers clinics throughout the year and some are even free. Contact the State Director of Coaching (State DOC) to set up a series of clinics. The state association has Development Coaches designated to handle coaching education and player development in all areas of Massachusetts. The State DOC and Development Coaches are also available to visit clubs, meet with the club officers, meet with the parents, evaluate club needs and offer advice on all player development/coaching issues. Take advantage of their expertise.

***Assign Age Group Commissioners*** – The club should appoint a Commissioner for each age group. These Commissioners will stay permanent at the same level and not move up with the teams. For example, the U-6 Commissioner will not become next year's U-8 Commissioner but will always work with the U-6's. This will improve the administration of each program as these Commissioners become experts at dealing with age-specific problems and their accumulated experience will not be lost. The prospective parent coaches will be happy to know that there is an 'old head' available to guide them through the start up operation.

The duties of the age group Commissioner could include recruiting coaches and helping the DOC with training them, organizing clinics, organizing parent meetings for his/her age group, monitoring the practices and games, and acting as a field marshal during games and tournaments. The Commissioner can also help coaches deal with parental complaints. Any time a parent and the coach cannot resolve an issue, the coach can refer the parent to the Commissioner. This again alleviates coaches' anxiety about having to deal with difficult parents on their own.

Smaller clubs can assign Commissioners for multiple age groups. For example, clubs with less than 5 teams per age group could assign a combined U-6/U-8 Commissioner. Bigger clubs should be able to appoint one person for each age group. All the Commissioners could report to the Club Officer in charge of the Recreational Program and/or to the Club Director of Coaching (Club DOC).

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***Be nice*** – This seems like a simple and obvious point, however it is often one that is forgotten as deadlines are seen and stressful situations occur. Volunteers worldwide often quit because

they are treated poorly or talked to in a negative manner. An association should always remember that volunteers are their lifeline and should always be treated respectfully, even when making mistakes.

Many states mandate that every coach, recreational or travel, must have a coaching license. Although Massachusetts Youth Soccer does not mandate licensure at this time it is recommended that all coaches seek licensure and all associations encourage and support coaches seeking licensure. Once coaches gain knowledge and confidence, they are much more likely to continue to volunteer. A fair guideline for recreational coach licensure follows:

<u>Age group</u>	<u>Minimum License</u>
U-6 & U-8	'G' Certificate
U-10 & U-12	'F' Certificate
U-14 and older	'E' Certificate

Many small clubs have difficulties filling the classes and meeting the minimum required attendance to hold a class. Subsequently their courses repeatedly get cancelled and their coaches cannot get certified. The state association's Coaching Department will generally co-operate with the small clubs to find solutions to this problem. One solution is to combine with a nearby association and collaboratively hold a course. Also, the courses can be spread out into a series of short sessions scheduled over a period of time to help those with demanding schedules. Please contact the State DOC to discuss the best solution for your club. The State DOC is committed to helping your coaches get the needed education and certification.

It is in everyone's best interest to place a priority on coach education. Coaches will feel more relaxed and have more fun when coaching. Players will develop more and have more fun with educated coaches who are aware of age specific concerns and proven teaching methodology. Parents will be happier with the quality of the program the association is providing. Age group Commissioners and Board Members will have less fires to put out. Clubs can stop focusing on day to day emergencies and begin realizing their long-term growth and/or success potential. One cannot over emphasize the important contribution that coaching education brings in creating an enjoyable and fulfilling experience for the players and the coaches. Clubs have a responsibility to make sure that the coaches, in whose hands the players are entrusted, are as knowledgeable and well prepared as possible. If a coach never gets an opportunity to observe a quality practice session, the chances are he/she will never learn how to conduct one. Informed coaches are better able to understand, develop and challenge players. Uninformed coaches could de-motivate players and contribute towards player attrition. Many coaches themselves drop out of coaching due to frustration born out of lack of knowledge. No one wants to see players or coaches dropping out for any reasons, especially due to lack of enjoyment. Another issue of importance is the club's liability in the context of risk management issues. Clubs, whose coaches are unlicensed, stand the risk of a lawsuit filed by parents of an injured player. The coaching course

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curricula include sections on teaching proper and safe techniques, care and prevention of injuries, and supervision of children. If a coach is found negligent and the club is shown to be lax on coaching education, it could be held liable.

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## U-6 AND U-8

### Overall Playing Format

Many countries and states have begun mandating small-sided play throughout their organizations. Massachusetts Youth Soccer has not done this but does agree that small-sided soccer is the best play to develop players and keep players having fun and involved in soccer. In the past years all the State DOC's and the US Soccer National Staff has agreed to move to small-sided soccer to make sure players are actively involved in the game and are given the chance to touch the ball more often and develop their skills. It is also important to note that small-sided games provide players with problems that are reasonable to solve and allows them more success to help build confidence. The following recommendations are those that come from US Youth Soccer as created and agreed upon by all the State DOC's in the entire country.

### **B. AGE GROUPS U-6 AND U-8**

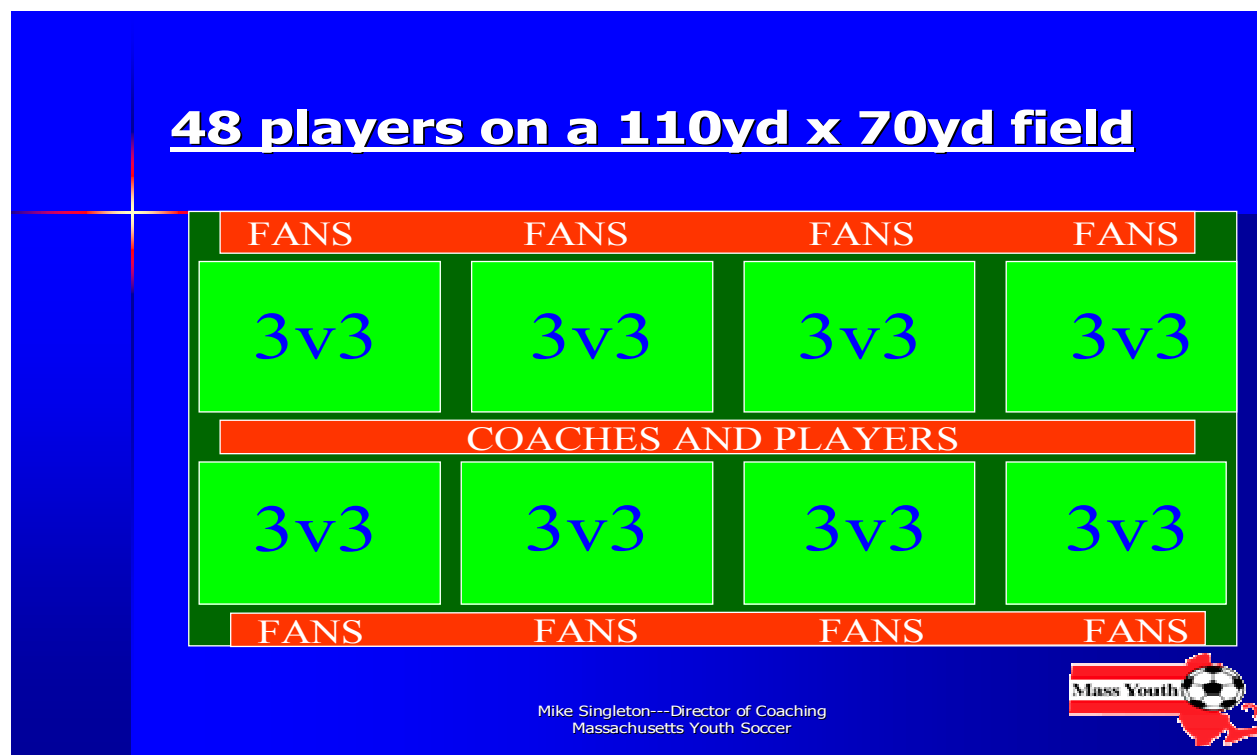
#### Age Specific Playing Format

U-6: Play 3 v 3 on a field approximately 20 x 25 yards. Game duration = four 8 minute quarters

U-8: Play 4 v 4 on a field approximately 25 x 35 yards. Game duration = four 12 minute quarters

**Absolutely no scores should be kept and no standings posted.**

Below is an organizational example of how to set up fields:



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## U-6 AND U-8

### **Roster Size**

U-6: A minimum of 4 and maximum of 6 players per team if the one team-one field format is used. If the one team-two field policy is used, then a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 10 players per team. (see picture on page 33)

U-8: A minimum of 6 and maximum of 8 players per team if the one team-one field format is used. If the one team-two field format is used, then a minimum of 10 and maximum of 12 players per team.

When forming teams, the rule of thumb is: avoid having more players on the bench than are playing on the field at any time. If a U-8 team playing 4v4 has 9 or 10 players, the player rotation becomes awkward and players do not get enough playing time. Many recreational programs enact a 50% playing time rule. If being true to this rule, the program cannot then place more than double the required number of players to play the game on a team. This means that U-6 teams should not have more than 6 players while U-8 teams not have more than 8 players. (if playing one team-one field)

If squad sizes are uneven (some teams show up with fewer players while other teams come with too many), clubs can create a process (organized by the Age Group Commissioners or Field Marshals) by which the larger teams lend one or two players to the smaller teams for the game. We realize that parents are conditioned to the 'team' concept and the thought of lending one of their own players to the other team will meet with resistance by some. However, people should be reminded of the mission statement and the desire to have children play as opposed to watch. This also helps prevent the 'team' mentality in favor of a 'club' mentality. As always, player development comes first.

### **Use of Goalkeepers**

Using goalkeepers is not recommended for these age groups. One reason for this is that modern day goalkeepers must be able to control the ball with their feet and pass as well as field players. U6 and U8 are critical ages in developing those skills which is best done when children play as a field player. Another reason is that most children's hand-eye coordination is developed by everyday activities and other sports quite well, however foot-eye coordination is not. We need to make sure we spend every second we have developing foot-eye coordination. In addition, one bad catch that ends up with a ball hitting a player in the face may lead a player to be fearful of the ball for a long time. Currently, even the best goalkeepers in the world did not begin playing goalkeeper until after the age of 10.

As discussed earlier, children enjoy participating in the game. Having a player back in goal, stuck in a penalty box, often prevents them from participating and having fun. Some clubs not only refrain from using keepers at U-8, but also have a rule that, for a goal to count, all the players on the attacking team must be in the other team's half. This rule helps get everyone involved and paying attention. It also helps teach everyone to move up and down the field as a unit and ingrains good habits in future defenders. This rule, it is hoped, might eradicate the discouraging sight we often encounter in U-10 play, where the defenders are standing rooted close to their goal, uninvolved, while the ball and the action are deep in the other team's half.

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## U-6 AND U-8

### Volume of Activities

It is difficult to say how often children should be playing at these ages. Every child is different. One six-year-old might want to play soccer every day, while another will be satisfied with just once a week. The key here is that children want to play and the frequency with which they play should be something they help determine. In order to service the various desires of players, clubs should create their recreational programs with some flexibility. This can be accomplished by combining the regularly scheduled team training with supplemental, club-organized player clinics. Players can choose to attend just the team training or, if they are really keen, they can also enjoy the club clinics.

Supplemental clinics at the U-6 and U-8 age groups are highly recommended, but they must be properly organized by experienced coaches who understand the developmental needs of these age groups. Exposing young players to the most experienced coaches once a week, in addition to the regular team practice, presents a number of desirable advantages. Working under different coaches is one advantage, as the players may have different learning styles or just learn different information from a different coach. In addition, this insures that the volunteer team coaches are not saddled with the burden of running more than one practice per week, which may be too much of a commitment for many people. If they have time, the volunteer coaches can learn from the more experienced coaches by attending these clinics. Most importantly, the experienced coaches can ensure that the players get the age-appropriate training they need. As mentioned earlier, it is easier to learn good habits first than learning bad habits that have to be extinguished later before then learning proper habits. At this age, the players are in a unique stage of development in which they will learn skills quickly as their brains and bodies are best suited to do so. Just like learning language, there are times people are able to pick up certain skills best. At this age, players can learn to master the ball best.

The supplemental clinics should be conducted by the Club DOC, or by the age group Commissioner. These clinics could take a variety of formats. Many clubs use the ‘follow-the-lead’ format, where all the teams show up with their coaches at one location and the clinician in charge demonstrates each activity to the volunteer coaches and then watches them do it with their team. Others just have the DOC work with 2 or 3 teams at a time in a larger group. The table below summarizes the recommended weekly volume of activities. The practices should be no more than 60 minutes long (45 minutes long for U6). The supplemental clinics should be optional to the players.

Age	Team Practice Per Week	Supplemental Clinics Per Week (optional)	Games Per Week	Total Games Per Year
U-6	1	1	1	20-25
U-8	1 or 2	1	1	20-25

### Role of the Club DOC or the Coaching Committee

The most common method of training the U-6 and U-8 age groups is to recruit parent coaches, provide them with a couple pre-season coaching clinics, hand them a coaching manual, and wish

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## U-6 AND U-8

them the best of luck. Given the large demands on organizations, it is very difficult for a program to provide more than this. However, efforts need to be made to brainstorm how players and coaches might be helped at these ages. A common rationale is that U6 and U8 players really just need a ‘facilitator’ and the more experienced coaches should be left to focus on the older age groups where players need more tactical training. To some degree this is quite true. Facilitating a fun learning environment is exactly what needs to be done at these ages. However, what the players are actually learning is the question that we need to ask ourselves. The developmental phase that U-6/U-8’s undergo is absolutely the most crucial phase of skills development. The rate of motor skill development of 4 to 8 year olds (the starting point) has a strong correlation with the end result. The quality of the motor skills acquired at the starting point has a big influence on the final level of soccer potential attained by each player. That is not to say that 6 year-olds need professional coaches to run them through drills by any stretch of the imagination. However, exposing the players to the movements that will help them gain coordination and control the ball are keys to their future development as a player. Some components of soccer skills, if not practiced properly at the starting point will never be fully mastered at the later ages. For this reason, many clubs have begun using some of their most intelligent and proficient coaches to help with these ages to make sure the players are focusing on the proper ball skills and coordination. Whether they work directly with players or regularly with the volunteer coaches, special attention is being given to these fun and important age groups.

The skill priorities for these age groups are thoroughly explained in the next section. This section merely serves to emphasize how important it is for the club DOC to be intimately involved with all aspects of the program for these key age groups. If a club does not have a DOC, then the job of running the program should fall under the watch of the Coaching Committee. The club DOC or the senior coaches do not necessarily have to coach teams in these age groups, but the DOC (or the Coaching Committee) does need to play a key role in designing the training and game format, to periodically monitor the parent coaches during practices and games, to work closely with the age group Commissioners, to help organize the supplemental clinics, and to provide on-going guidance to the volunteer coaches. If we get it right at the starting point, everyone enjoys the experience more and player development has been placed as the priority.

### **Skill Priorities**

Without a doubt, the most important skill for beginners is the skill of dribbling. One might even argue that the only important skill for beginners is dribbling. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations. They need to learn how to dribble forward unopposed, how to change speed and direction, how to shielding the ball from opponents, how to dribble past an opponent, how to dribble to get away from pressure, and how to dribble with all surfaces of the foot. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation and preparation for the other fundamental skills of soccer, such as receiving, 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 creative dribbler will be able to give herself more time or room to pass or shoot. The ability to dribble also helps maintain

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## U-6 AND U-8

possession of the ball. Whatever the situation, if a player is comfortable with a ball at his feet then the game becomes much easier and more fun. It is also much more enjoyable to watch!

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 and 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. Luckily, playing small-sided will allow them many opportunities to show what they can do and if they do not succeed at first, they will have a second chance very quickly. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. We need to encourage them to take risks and be creative at this stage as well. Encourage them to see what works and does not work. Encourage them to be creative and to show what they can do. If we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed because they are much more aware of self evaluation and are also more aware of peer evaluation. This may result in their becoming reluctant to dribble. Therefore, it is imperative to encourage and facilitate ball mastery and confidence at the younger ages. For everyone's sake, it is 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 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 coaches and parents would likely agree that teaching dribbling at these younger ages is extremely important. Regardless, if one attends a typical U6 or U8 game, one can hear the players being encouraged to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" resonate the entire game. The further forward a player kicks, the louder the cheers. Players become hesitant to try to dribble as the cheers get louder for them to kick the ball with every second they possess it. Some children report they do not want to be yelled at anymore so they kick the ball even though no one is around them. Whatever the situation, we need to curb this tendency and need to encourage creative dribbling, not big kicking.

What we must do as an organization is make sure that our coaches are all on the same page. If all the teams are focusing on dribbling skills, then all children will be learning what is appropriate. The next task is to make sure this goal is communicated to parents so they know what is expected of the players and can support the players appropriately during games. Imagine how the players will react if they are encouraged to be creative and are cheered for when trying a daring new move. Imagine how much more comfortable even the most timid players will feel when encouraged to possess the ball and told they should keep the ball. This will only help development and help build confidence and increase enjoyment in these youngsters.

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## U-6 AND U-8

Of course, with a focus on dribbling and being creative, the traditional warm-up of line drills where the coach serves one ball at a time to a line of players who shoot on goal must be extinguished. Instead, the players should all have a ball each and dribble inside their half, using fun types of dribbling activities, to prepare them for the game. Play tag games or chase games and get the children excited to play. The club DOC can prepare a sheet of pre-game warm-up activities that every team should do prior to kick-off.

To summarize, if we want our players to fully master the art of dribbling, the following conditions must exist: a) they must start learning to dribble early; b) we must provide ample opportunities for dribbling in practices and games, and c) we must create the right game environment where players are not afraid to dribble. The following guidelines are recommended for the skill priorities at the U-6/U-8 ages:

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-6	<b>Dribble with all sides of both feet</b> <b>Dribble out of trouble</b> <b>Dribble past someone</b> <b>Soft first touch</b> <b>No kicking allowed except when shooting on goal</b>
U-8	<b>Dribble with all sides of both feet</b> <b>Dribble out of trouble</b> <b>Dribble past someone</b> <b>Soft first touch</b> <b>Introduce proper shooting technique</b> <b>Introduce passing only to the players who can dribble out of trouble (this can be done during the supplemental clinics where the best players can be grouped separately for some of the activities).</b>

We all need to make sure we set up practice conditions and games in which we reduce the number of stoppages in play. At this age it is not important to stop play with every poor throw-in and hold play until it is done correctly. Eventually players will learn to throw the ball in correctly and it does not need to detract from the game at this age. Every minute of the game should be spent playing, with as little interruption as possible.

### Parents' Role

The parents must understand the skill priorities and embrace the program structure if it is to succeed. Clubs should prepare a handout that deals specifically with the U-6/U-8 priorities. The handout should include the rationale behind the priorities and make sure everyone is aware of what is being coached and stressed to the players. It should also explain to the parents how they are expected to behave on the sidelines. It is important for the clubs to be firm and clear about their expectations of the parent's behavior. The handout should clearly state what is and is not expected on the sideline. Associations may find that having the DOC run a parent education

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

## U-6 AND U-8

session in which the parents must actually perform in a practice that mirrors what the children must do is a great way to build understanding and for the parents to learn just how difficult it is to do the things we are asking the players to do. A session like this also tends to be a lot of fun and may even result in a few more people being willing to coach or help the association down the line.

Here are a few things to clarify with parents at the start of each season:

- 1) **The fields are laid out in such a way that have parents on the opposite sideline from players.** This can be easily done using signage and you will see an example of organization in the picture on page 33. We all agree that most players want their parents to be at the games, watching them play, and it creates a fun atmosphere. However keeping the parents on the opposite side of the field from the bench and at least 3 yards away from the action will enhance the players' sense of freedom and ease most of the intimidation any players might feel when the parents are right on top of them.
- 2) **The parents should not coach the players.** Parents should be encouraged to cheer good plays by their team and should also be encouraged to politely applaud good play by the other team.
- 3) **Parents must never tell the players to “kick” or “boot” the ball.** As discussed in the section on the skill priority, kicking the ball needs to be discouraged. The parents will need to be prepared to accept that a lot of the dribbling attempts will be unsuccessful and that, nevertheless, it is great for the players. Letting the players try again and again is the best thing for the players.
- 4) **The coaches should also keep their instruction to a minimum** and let the players understand that they must make their own decisions on the field. Coaches should be supportive and remember that making mistakes is part of the game. It must be remembered that we are trying to help the players grow out of their dependency on the adults. The coaches should encourage dribbling out of trouble and discourage kicking.
- 5) **All parent concerns should be discussed with the coach when the children are not present.** If parents do have concerns with how players are being treated or coaching methods, it is very important that the association clarify where concerns should be brought first and proper procedure for voicing concerns. Players should not be exposed to harsh comments or questions of any sort at any time.
- 6) **All this information should be conveyed to parents in a meeting that includes a handout.** A sample handout for this purpose is included in the section on dealing with and educating parents.

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## U-10 AND U-12

### C. AGE GROUPS U-10 AND U-12

#### Overall Playing Format

The move to small-sided soccer went into high gear in the nineties after prolonged lobbying by soccer educators and National Staff Coaches. Many states began mandating small-sided in the mid-nineties and now this format is widely used across the country. In fact, Massachusetts is one of the few remaining states that is not mandating small-sided, just strongly recommending it. Discussions about the appropriate playing format for players under the age of 13 have picked up steam again recently among National Staff Coaches, US Youth Soccer Directors Tom Goodman and Sam Snow, and State DOC's. This group recognizes the importance of moving soccer development forward together, as an entire country. All the National Coaches and the State DOC's agree that most players are technically, physically and tactically not ready for the 11v11 game until the U-14 level. This opinion corresponds with those of the professional youth coaches from the traditional soccer countries such as France, Holland, England, and Italy. These countries, which have an excellent reputation for successful player development, mandate small-sided play until U-12 and only recommend starting 11v11 at U-14. No doubt, there are some 11 to 13 year-olds who can cope with the demands of 11-a-side play on a big field, but the majority of the players in these ages cannot. Having seen youth soccer in a number of states throughout this country, this writer strongly agrees with the small-sided rationale as he has seen many 11 and 12 year-olds struggle to cross a ball, switch the field, play a corner into the box, or even make a necessary run down the flank on a full-sized field. It is extremely important we ask children to perform tasks that they have a reasonable chance of accomplishing. Asking an 11 year-old to play a 45 yard ball accurately is not a reasonable request.

Putting aside momentarily the debate on whether 12 year olds can or cannot play 11v11, the most compelling reason to reduce the playing format to 6v6 (U-10) or 8v8 (U-12) is the fact that it is undeniably better within a player development context. Smaller fields with fewer players means more touches on the ball which, in turn, speeds up the mastery of the ball and provides more enjoyment to the players. In a smaller environment, players must sharpen their first touch and learn to make choices more quickly. Smaller fields also encourage better, more skillful soccer since the long kick up the field is not required as much as on a large field. In addition, you will not see the estranged player standing 60 yards away from the ball knowing that she will never get it because no one can kick it there accurately. Just as 11-a-side is too much for 12-year-old select players, it is also for recreational players who are, for the most part, less athletic and technical. At the recreational level and select level, clubs should reduce the playing format to 6v6 at U-10 and 8v8 at U-12.

As with any change, it is likely that this change will come with resistance. Questions surrounding how to get enough coaches, how to get more fields, and how to organize so many teams are very good questions. If a club has supported it's coaches and educated it's coaches at the U6 and U8 level, it is likely they will have the needed supply of coaches for the U10 and U12 teams and actually have extra coaches available to use as assistants. Field space needs to be managed

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

## U-10 AND U-12

differently as clubs can easily squeeze two 6v6 games into the present U-10 fields by playing one game across each half. If you think about it, doing this would result in 24 players playing on the field that use to service 22. Therefore, you are using your space more efficiently and may need less space overall. The goals currently being used for these levels can still be used. These and many other questions need to be asked and addressed before switching structures and your state DOC is more than happy to help speak to clubs and boards of directors to walk them through the process and discuss how this is possible and beneficial for players. The state development coaches can help with both the set up of the program and with the education of your program's coaches.

### Age Specific Playing Format

U-10: Play 6 v 6 on a field approximately 40 x 60 yards. Game duration = two 25 minute halves

U-12: Play 8 v 8 on a field approximately 50 x 80 yards. Game duration = two 30 minute halves

Below is an example of how to organize field space:



### Roster Size

U-10: A minimum of 9 players and a maximum of 12 with 10 players/team as optimal

U-12: A minimum of 12 players and a maximum of 16 with 14 players/team as optimal

**Please note that goalkeepers are used in these age groups**

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

## U-10 AND U-12

### Volume of Activities

Two practices plus one game per week are the norm at the U-10 and U-12 recreational levels. Those players who do wish to train more than twice a week should be allowed to join in the practices of a select team or participate in a special clinic that the club offers similar to that which the club offers for the younger players. The practice length should be between 60 to 75 minutes for U10 and 75 to 90 minutes for U12. The practice should never exceed 90 minutes.

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Team Practices Per Week</b>	<b>Game Per Week</b>	<b>Total Games Per Year</b>
<b>U-10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20-25</b>
<b>U-12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25-30</b>

Clubs that adopt the 6v6 game format can schedule two teams to practice together in each time block.

### Skill Priorities

Dribbling should continue to be a stress for these age groups, however passing, receiving, and shooting should be stressed in practices as well. As we move from U-8 to U-10, the fields are getting bigger and dribbling is not always the best solution. At this stage, players need to learn when to dribble out of trouble and when to pass. As always, aimless kicking should be discouraged. Players at the U-10/U-12 levels should be learning to combine with teammates around them, using short ground passes and wall passes to move the ball forward. Players should understand how to support teammates with the ball and be learning to recognize where defenders are not (and hence where to attack).

I know this may seem like a lot, but it is reasonable for players to learn these things if allowed to make mistakes and asked how to fix those mistakes at times. In practices, the coaches should ask the players how they could do things better and guide them to the correct answers without simply telling the players what is best. This will help the players learn how to solve problems on the field during games as well and reduce players' dependence on adults for guidance during the game.

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
<b>U-10</b>	<b>Continue with dribbling foci</b> <b>Passing with inside and outside of both feet</b> <b>Shooting with both feet</b> <b>Receiving the ball with all parts of body</b> <b>Proper 1 vs 1 defending</b>
<b>U-12</b>	<b>Continue with all U-10 foci</b> <b>Basic combination play</b> <b>Proper 2 vs. 2 defending</b>

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

## U-10 AND U-12

### Parents' Role

The U-10 age group seems to represent a turning point with respect to coaches' and parents' expectations and preoccupation with game results. At the U-6/U-8 age groups, adults are less prone to worry about the results. They are readily willing to accept that it is too early to put pressure on the players. That does seem to change drastically as children enter the U10 age group. In truth, players at this point keep score in their head and do become competitive within themselves. Some children, you might notice, end up making everything in life a competition at this point. This is specifically the reason that coaches and parents need to remind players that improving their play and having fun are more important than winning. If this singular focus on results is supported, the environment can become too serious and, at times, devastating to young players. If it is not the overly competitive players and parents who are devastated, it is often the well-intentioned, properly focused players and parents who are. Often time they cease finding the game environment enjoyable. This is a major reason why over 70% of children drop out of all youth sports by the time they turn 13 or 14.

The club DOC, and/or the U-10 Age Group Commissioner, must keep the parents and coaches of this age group under close scrutiny and spend considerable time educating and monitoring them. In another year or so, the players will be old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to continue to play organized soccer. If the experience at U-10 turns sour for them, they will quit. We must do everything we can to maintain a fun environment in which players and parents alike are enjoying themselves. For this reason, a comprehensive parent education program should be continued at the U-10 and U-12 age groups. Parent communication is key for programs whether it be with U-6 or U-12 parents.

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

## U-14 AND OLDER

### D. AGE GROUPS U-14 AND OLDER

By the time players have advanced to the U-14 group, they are old veterans of the recreational program. Typically, the coaches at this age are also old veterans, as are the parents. This means that most everyone is now well versed in the club philosophy and usually means that this group poses very few problems for the club. Players are truly playing because they enjoy it at this age and parents and coaches have realized that the World Cup is not on the line. Although this is all true most of the time, an association still needs to make sure they convey club philosophy and monitor activities. Of course, monitoring can be much less than at other age groups and often just includes making sure that these teenagers do not lose their tempers. The biggest challenge clubs face with this age group is to retain enough players in order to field a team. Many clubs struggle to fill rosters. In order to solve this dilemma and make sure that those who truly are playing for the love of the game get to play, clubs need to look into the possibility of combining age groups or combining with a neighboring club to have enough players for a team. If clubs do not have enough players available for the traditional 11v11 game, they should play small-sided soccer.

#### **Training Priorities and Volume of Practices**

As players grow older into the high teens, having pre-set training priorities becomes a less effective approach. There are basic organizational and tactical topics the coach will want to cover so everyone knows how the team is trying to play. Once these are covered, coaches working with these age groups should base their decision regarding the practice topics on their team's performance in matches. In other words, the games will tell the coaches what they need to work on. For example, if the team is struggling with possession and the breakdowns are mostly technical, then the practices on the following week should be devoted to improving passing and/or receiving. If a team is allowing a large number of goals, then the team needs to focus on individual and team defense.

A special consideration at this age is that coaches must make practices fun, otherwise they will lose the players' attention or desire. Therefore, the best approach is to use game-like activities that create repetition of the topic and are enjoyable. Making things competitive, so that each person is trying to better their own performance is one way coaches can engage players. Using line drills or the same drills over and over again will bore these players very fast and they may lose interest in the game. Given this group now knows a bit about the game and have mouths that often voice that knowledge, it is very important that coaches at this level be educated. This will help make sure the players continue to have fun and benefit from the experience. It will also help make the experience fun for the coach. This age can be a challenging one if players need to create alternative entertainment for themselves during practice.

The standard two practices and one game per week represent the right dose of soccer activity these players need. Coaches should make it clear that they expect the players to attend practices, but flexibility should prevail. Teenagers have many interests and need to keep a balanced life. Soccer is just one of many activities that fill their weekly schedule and missing the occasional

# « RECREATIONAL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

## U-14 AND OLDER

practice should not become a source of conflict as long as they attend the majority of the practices.

Participation is the key at the recreational level. Winning should always take a second seat to enjoyment. All the players on the team should get equal, or close to equal, playing time. Recreational players are not likely to become professional players, so the objectives of playing soccer center around building self-esteem, staying fit, making friends, and having fun. Sitting on the bench will not contribute to building self-esteem, improving fitness or having fun.

<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Skill Priorities</u>
U-14 & up	Continue with foci of U-12 Team defense Team offense Coaching from the game

# « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

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## A. GENERAL PROBLEMS OBSERVED

The Select/Travel Program is geared toward players who have outgrown the Recreational Program and are looking for a more challenging soccer environment. Players who play at the select level usually have a personal goal, such as to play for the high school varsity team, or to play college soccer, or to become a professional player and play for the National Team. Hence, the main objective of the Select Program should be to help each player reach his/her potential and achieve his/her goal. This should be done in a fulfilling and supportive way that continues to foster the love of the game while helping players achieve their goals.

If one looks across the country, it is easy to see the great steps forward that many clubs have taken in the past ten years to help players develop and reach these lofty goals. The best youth clubs have taken on the mantle of developing players and have essentially become the production line for players for High Schools, Colleges, National Youth Teams, MLS and WUSA (it still lives). Compared to even ten years ago, our youth clubs have made impressive advances in organization, coaching education, professionalism, facilities, and high level competition. The players coming up are continuously getting better technically, tactically and physically. Although this is fantastic information, disappointing facts indicate that we in Massachusetts are not advancing at this same pace. In fact, our select players' level of performance, when compared to others throughout the Region and nation in past years, has shown a steady decline. Our clubs have not been developing at pace with those around the country and it is hurting the development of the players.

A clear failing in our system is that the daily environment of our best young players is not challenging enough. A combination of factors, such as the American educationally-oriented sport culture, the reliance on and belief in democratically designed programs, and a lack of a long-lasting, rich, professional soccer tradition, have created a youth soccer culture that tends to legislate itself into mediocrity. Even if you currently look at the "premier" league in the state you will see that many of the teams in this league are not in fact premier teams, but rather glorified recreational teams. It seems people's concern with calling themselves premier has actually overtaken the goal of becoming premier. Unfortunately, the players, who are unable to progress to the level they are capable of progressing to, and the parents, who are spending thousands of dollars for a sub-par soccer education, are the ones suffering because of this problem.

The competitive programs that are geared to the intermediate level players are, for the most part, adequate. There are a large number of players who will compete well at the high school level, but will not be able to go on and play collegially or thereafter. In general, most of our "premier teams" are composed of these players. There is a wide range of abilities seen in the coaching and organization of clubs/associations trying to service these players. Some programs are helping these players quite well and others are doing more harm than good. Overall, however, we are developing players who can play at this level. The question is then, "At what level would these players be able to play at if they all received better training?" Furthermore, the top players who are clearly capable of going on to play at higher levels are not being developed to their potential.

## « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

In looking at the big picture, it is fair for most clubs to not spend a lot of money or time on this top 1% as it is a minute portion of the playing population. In fact, if all clubs did try to service these players it would prove more harmful to all players (lack of attention to the bulk of players and improper training environment for the top players). However, there are a handful of clubs who do have the capability of developing these players. If your club is not one of these clubs, then your club should encourage the high level player to go play for the other club and take pride in the fact that you have developed a player who has been able to reach her goals and has the chance to see them all become a reality. These players will only benefit from playing in a training environment that is constantly challenging. This environment is composed not only of a well-educated and well intentioned coach, but also of other competitive players that challenge each other to play at their highest ability everyday. Players should not be able to take breaks and develop bad habits because they are in a sub-par training environment. Again, there are only a handful (less than 5) of clubs in the state equipped to handle these players and some of them need to improve their organization to service these players better. Here is a list of problems commonly seen in clubs that are trying to help select/travel players of any level:

- 1) Too much focus on tactics and fitness at the U-10 through U-14 and not enough emphasis on technical development.
- 2) Too competitive at the younger ages. Unnecessary pressure on young players, coupled with 'pigeon-holing' them into positions too early. Many 11 to 14 year-olds already labeled as 'bench players' with little playing time given.
- 3) Too much emphasis on playing games and not enough on practicing. Simply not enough contacts with the ball.
- 4) Too many multi-game-per-day tournaments, which promote a test of stamina rather than skill, and cause injuries.
- 5) An inherent emphasis on quantity at the expense of quality.
- 6) Players burned-out from too much competition and a tug-of-war between club, high school and ODP. Dual-rostering ending up in struggles and too many games.
- 7) Some clubs lack a central focus and leadership, and are essentially comprised of a collection of teams loosely connected, with each team left to blaze its own trail, fight for the same club players, and dilute the top level.
- 8) A rigid, team-oriented system that promotes the upward movement of teams over the upward movement of players. Players register for teams as opposed to clubs, with movement of players within the club restricted either by regulation or by policy. Good players are kept in mediocre teams to help the team get promoted instead of promoting the player.
- 9) Lack of coordinated effort and cooperation between neighboring youth clubs to combine resources. Unhealthy rivalries fester instead.
- 10) Too often, pre-game warm-ups do not properly prepare players for the game.
- 11) In some clubs, youth coaches lose their effectiveness by staying with the same team for too long.
- 12) No overall club curriculum of development so players lack a well-planned progressive learning track that is consistent as they grow and consistent across team and coaching changes.
- 13) Renegade clubs. A club is a program that has a full menu of teams across all age groups and allows players options to challenge themselves at the level they want to challenge

## « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

themselves. A true club is like a family in which there is cooperation between team and movement in the best interest of players. A club is not comprised of a couple teams that exist because a coach had a problem with his old club and, in bitterness, decided to go off and start his own renegade club. This is only hurting play in our state.

- 14) The best coaches are, too often, working only with top level and older teams. These coaches need to work with younger players to stamp in good habits.
- 15) Clubs hanging on to their best players, rather than helping them play for a higher level team so they can continue to develop.

The following section on the Select Program Structure attempts to deal with these issues and offers some solutions.

### **B. DEFINING THE LEVELS IN THE SELECT PROGRAM**

The travel/select program in Massachusetts is absolutely enormous and due to this enormity has multiple levels of play. It is impossible to suggest guidelines for the group as a whole because the players playing 'A' division soccer are drastically different than those playing 'C' division. Those playing for the state cup are different than those playing in MTOC. Given the large continuum of competitive levels we see amongst the players in Massachusetts, we must be very careful with recommendations.

In order to provide clarification and simplicity throughout this section, we will divide the levels of the travel program into two groups. Of course, there is good argument for breaking the program into 4 groups, however it is not feasible for this manual. The first level will heretofore be referred to as Top level, with the second level being referred to as the Intermediate level. Recommendations for these two groups will be differentiated throughout the remainder of this manual. When referring to the Top level we are talking about the most competitive players who play at the A or B level and have goals to play soccer in college and in the ODP program. The Intermediate level describes those players who are a step below the top players. Whether it is because of less ambitious goals or more limited athleticism, this group will look to compete in high school and are currently C level premier players or top level non-premier league players. It is this author's opinion that the D level of the premier league and the lower levels of the non-premier leagues are more like recreational leagues than select leagues. Thus, for players in these low divisions, we should follow the recommendations suggested in the recreational program section of this manual.

### **C. THE THREE PILLARS OF THE SELECT PROGRAM**

Any select program that aspires to help players reach their full potential must pay particular attention to the three 'Pillars' of Player Development:

- 1) Quality Competition (at games and at practice)**
- 2) Quality Coaching**
- 3) High Practice Volume (when compared to recreational)**

## « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

### **Quality Competition**

Players can practice every day and receive quality coaching yet still not develop. Without having players face quality competition, our best and most imaginative efforts will prove insufficient in developing top level players. We can discuss having to perform skills at a faster pace and provide countless repetitions to that ends, but unless a player is faced with the reality that unless they perform at that speed they will be unsuccessful, development will not occur at its maximum level.

Players need to be constantly challenged in order to raise their level of play. Once they prove themselves dominant or even competent at a certain standard they need to be challenged more. A player who can outrun all the other players on a field needs to be placed in an environment in which she cannot do this and must develop technical skills in order to beat players. A player that is technically sound and is so good that he can take 3 or 4 extra touches every time he gets the ball needs to be challenged in an environment against stronger players who will punish those extra touches by taking the ball. Strong players need to be in a practice environment in which mistakes are punished by the players around them. Being lazy on defense should result in giving up a chance and, hopefully, a goal. If the player can recover for laziness because others players are not good enough to capitalize, the player never learns that he has to be on task all the time and cannot take any breaks at any time. Being slow to recognize a pass or a chance to dribble into space should result in that chance disappearing and a resultant loss of possession. If a player is playing against players that are not as good her, then she is never forced to play her best all the time. She may not have to dribble at full speed or increase her speed of play. Bad habits can develop and prevent the player from reaching her potential. When this player is then placed against stronger players in an all-star game or within the ODP program, this player will suffer. She will find that she cannot compete at the level required. Unless she is used to playing at that level constantly, her development will be stunted. Similarly, if your team is extremely competitive within practices, but cannot find a team to play that is competitive with you, development will be stunted as well.

### **Team Challenges**

Of course, there are real-life challenges to providing this atmosphere within clubs. If there is not a team nearby that can challenge your team, then finding competitive competitions takes a bit of work. One obvious route of finding competition is going outside of the immediate area or the state to find the competition. If your team dominates your region within Massachusetts, find competition in other parts of Massachusetts. If your team is one of the best teams in the entire state, then look outside the state borders in the Region I Director's leagues. Another option is to go to tournaments that provide quality competition. Tournaments can provide quality competition, however they are NOT the best environment for development. Playing 3 to 5 games on a weekend is not healthy for young players, much less helpful. Players are running their bodies into the ground and are not being given opportunity in training to fix the mistakes they made in games until they have played up to five games. Tournaments can serve a purpose as they are fun and do provide quality competition, however we must be careful not to enter our teams into too many tournaments. Going to more than 4 tournaments/year is not recommended and 2 or 3 is suggested as the optimal choice. Playing too many games, especially in a short amount of

## « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

time, will hurt players physically and is not helpful to development. This will be discussed further in the High Practice Volume section.

If you are now wondering what other choice you may have to find quality team competition, look to older teams. Do not feel so restricted as to stay only with your one age group. Teams one year older may provide the best competition. If you are working with older teenagers, see if you can play a college during the spring or ask a competitive men's team for a scrimmage. If you coach a dominant girls team, consider playing a strong boy's team to secure quality competition. Sometimes we can serve our players needs without traveling all over the state and region if we think a bit creatively.

### **Player challenges**

Often times we see situations in which we do not have entire teams that are elite, but rather a player or two that are performing at a level far above the other players on a team. This is often a challenging situation because the team learns to rely on these players and the loss of them may devastate the team. On the other hand, the loss of these players may help the other players on that team develop more as they are forced to play a bigger part in the team's success. Whichever the case, we must remember that decisions in youth soccer need to be based on the individual players and what is best for them. If we remain guided by this principle we will do what is best for these talented players. What is best might be allowing those players to play up an age group (if they welcome the challenge and are committed to playing at the highest level possible). Having players play in older age groups is a routine occurrence in all parts of the world. Professional youth coaches from all over the world have long understood the value and benefits of this practice. A typical U-19 team from anywhere in South America, for example, would have players ranging in age from 14 to 18. US Youth Soccer actually made a policy statement on July 17, 1999 that encouraged relieving strict age requirements for younger players for the sake of their development, citing US Soccer bylaw 702, "Opportunity to Participate". If the decision of moving a player up becomes a challenging one because a team coach does not want to lose his player, this coach must be reminded of our general guiding principle and the ultimate decision for this move should be made by the club DOC.

In the case in which you have a handful of players from a couple age groups that are more competitive than others, you may look to form a team that spans a few years. Ultimately, players will play against players up to 3 years older than them in high school, so it is not an infrequent occurrence anyway. This way, more competitive players can play with others who are equally competitive and like-minded. Also, your less competitive players can play with others who will challenge them to the level at which they will have equal successes and failures, as opposed to constant failures.

Another solution is to organize supplemental training for the best players. This can be done via regularly scheduled advanced player clinics that are by invitation only, or by sending the best players to train with older teams within the same club. The best players could also accompany older teams to tournaments as guest players. If two or three clubs find themselves all in the same predicament of having a handful of top players and a handful of intermediate players, these clubs can pool their best players in an age group together to form teams most appropriate for all the

## « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

players. This would be a shining example of doing what is best for the players, above club and coach personal goals. If a club only has one or two top players and no within club or shared-club solution, a club should encourage these players to play with a team from another club that can challenge them and help them get onto that team. Although this is often very hard for a coach or club to do, it is best for the players and we should take pride in the fact that we developed the player to the highest level we could. Those players will also be thankful not only for the development, but also the support and encouragement to reach their ultimate goals.

The most important thing to remember is that all these suggestions will require that someone at the club level take the initiative to identify the best players, organize and monitor the solutions so that the players get maximum benefit. These solutions will not happen unless the DOC or leaders of the club are proactive in finding the best placement for players. A qualified person needs to constantly be considering the best environment for players and helping to educate coaches and parents. Often times we are blinded by team success and forget individual development. Someone in the club needs to be in charge of thinking otherwise as it is a simple thing to overlook at times.

Lastly, clubs should also promote the ODP and encourage their best players to try out for the State Select Team. This program exists to help the best players improve their play and get the best competition and coaching available. Competition at the ODP level pits the best 18 players from one state against the best from another state. The state ODP is the first step for players who aspire to play for the regional and national teams. It truly helps players see how they match up against players from the whole state and in the whole country. Having a player see this level of play and play at this level is more educational than anything that any of us coaches might say. Seeing what they must do to be the best is often the best motivation for a player and will help all of us when coaching these players later. Coaches who advise their players against trying out for ODP are doing them a disservice. The ODP and clubs should be working together to help the players and the ODP is not trying to compete with clubs at any level. Clubs who have any concerns or questions about the ODP should contact the State Director of Coaching.

### **Quality Coaching**

Regardless of how committed or how athletically gifted a young soccer player is, a player needs quality coaching in order to reach their potential. A quality coach will keep the game fun for players at all levels. A quality coach will be able to identify the specific areas of a player's game that need improvement. Not only will a quality coach be able to identify these areas, but she will also be able to teach the player how to improve these weaknesses. Under the guidance of a quality coach, players will become creative problem-solvers on the field and will likely find their enthusiasm for the sport growing each year. Practices will seem short to players as skilled coaches make the practice fun and organize the practice smoothly, so activities flow from one to another and have a logical progression. A skillful coach will build a personal relationship with each player and show them that he has their best interest in mind. He will also be able to create harmony on the team and teach players to "own" their own careers. Of utmost importance, a well-intentioned, quality coach will look to develop players in the long-term and not focus on winning games in the immediate. The reasons for needing quality coaching are endless. Not only do they help players' development, they help the whole club run smoothly and gain respect. For

## « SELECT/TRAVEL PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

these reasons and many more, clubs must invest in coaching education. Clubs should mandate licensure for their coaches to insure they are providing every advantage to their players. Currently, many states mandate licensure for all coaches, though Massachusetts is not one of them. However, it is recommended that clubs make sure their coaches have the following licenses at these varied levels:

<b>Level</b>	<b>Minimum License</b>
U10	State 'E' Certificate (National Youth License also recommended)
U11/U12	National 'D' License (National Youth License also recommended)
U13-15 (intermediate level)	National 'D' License
U13-U15 (top level)	National 'C' License or NSCAA National Diploma
U16 & above (intermediate)	National 'C' License or NSCAA National Diploma
U16 & above (top level)	National 'B' License or NSCAA National Advanced Diploma

If a club mandates that coaches attain these licenses it is only fair that the club pay for the licensure as well. This money should come from player fees as it makes sense since quality coaching is a direct benefit to the players. Outside of the coaches, it is strongly recommend that directors of the recreational program have a National Youth License and directors of the travel program have a 'D' license. The DOC should have a minimum of a 'B' license and a National Youth License as well. Along with these licensure mandates it would benefit a club to make clear guidelines for the hiring/placement of coaches, including qualifications and experience requirement, minimum license requirement, and code of conduct. This will help in ensuring that each team is assigned the appropriate level coach in an objective and fair way. The authors of the criteria should monitor all the coaches in the club and remove those who exhibit inappropriate behavior or whose conduct is contrary to the club's criteria or philosophy.

### **High Practice Volume**

Players can have great coaching and competition, but if they never practice they will never improve. In addition, if they infrequently practice, they will see little improvement. Young players must regularly work on perfecting the basic techniques of the game, such as dribbling, passing, receiving, shooting and heading. If a player is not ept at performing all these techniques, discussing tactics becomes a waste of time. Why talk about switching fields if players cannot pass the ball accurately to get it there? Why talk about taking players on in the final third if players cannot control the ball well enough to do so? To become technically sound, players must spend hours practicing their technique in an environment that creates repetition and maximum touches on the ball. Simply put, a practice where each player has 600 contacts with the ball is more effective than a practice where each player has only 200 ball contacts and coaches must create atmospheres in which this is possible. Maximizing contacts with the ball is crucial at the youth level. The concept of maximum ball contacts not only affects the organization of practice, but also has implications on a wider context of program design. It requires that the ratio of practices to games needs to be heavily slanted toward practices, because players do not get nearly as many ball touches during the game. On average, a player will have about 30-50 ball contacts in a game, and that's only if he/she plays the whole game. This is a far cry from the hundreds of touches players should get in practice.

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With the proliferation of tournaments and leagues, players are now playing almost as many games as they are practices. Dual-rostered players are being set up to fail by playing more games than they should be throughout the entire year. With competitive players, whether they be top or intermediate level, it is recommended that players practice more than the twice a week recommended for the recreational program. The recommended number of practices per week and the maximum number of games per year are tabulated below. The volume of practice recommended in the table reflects that seen at the youth training centers of the top professional clubs across the world. A typical 12-year-old French Top level player has on average 1500 ball contacts per week within the team environment only, not to mention the additional contacts he might achieve training on his own. A typical Massachusetts Top level player training twice a week has, at best, 400 touches per week. By the time a young European player reaches the apprentice professional stage in his late teens, his technique under pressure and technical speed of play is far superior to that of a teenage player from Massachusetts. Unfortunately, it is not only our foreign counterparts that are running away from us in this domain. If we merely look to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas, California and many other states, we will see that competitive teams are training more than we are here in Massachusetts. The only way we can keep up is if our clubs recognize this problem and make a serious effort to change the ratio of practices to games.

### RECOMMENDED VOLUME OF PRACTICES AND GAMES AT THE SELECT LEVEL

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Practices per week</b>		<b>Games per week</b>	<b>Total games per year</b>
	<b><u>Top Level</u></b>	<b><u>Intermediate</u></b>		
U-10	2	2	1	25-30
U-11	2	2	1	25-30
U-12	3	2	1	30-35
U-13	3	2	1	30-35
U-14	4	2	1	30-35
U-15	4	2 or 3	1	35-40
U-16	5	2 or 3	1	35-40
U-17	5	2 or 3	1	40-45
U-18	5	2 or 3	1	40-45

You will find the recommendations world-wide for the younger players is actually higher than what is listed here. If players at the younger ages would like to train more, it is recommended that optional additional training be offered by clubs. However, it is not felt that we should be preventing players from participating in other activities or that children should be forced to specialize at this young age. Clubs that wish to increase the practice opportunities for all of their players will probably run into some logistical problems. Typically, some of these problems are: 1) lack of field space; 2) finding qualified coaches who have the time and 3) parents do not have the time to drive the kids to more practices. All these logistical problems can be solved with adequate planning and organization. Some of the most common solutions clubs use to increase practice opportunities are:

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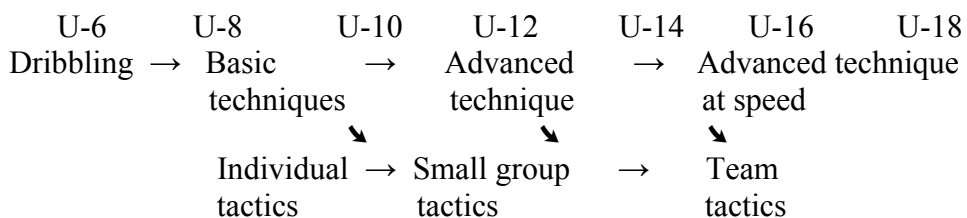
- 1) Supplemental player clinics organized by the club DOC.
- 2) Open door policy, which means that all players are allowed to join in other teams' practice in the same club.
- 3) Supplementing the regular team practice with combined team practices (two teams training together).
- 4) Creating a 'free practice area' with bouncing walls, where players are free to come and train on their own any time. In fact, players who are committed to excellence should be encouraged to train on their own and must do so if they seriously want to become ODP-caliber players.
- 5) Organizing 3v3 or 4v4 festivals, where players participate as individuals and are mixed and shuffled into teams and play for fun, without any coaching or referees.
- 6) Car pooling to practices.

The club DOC should have an input in the scheduling of team practices and preferably should be organizing the overall schedule. Centralizing this task and using the technical expertise of the DOC or the coaching committee to oversee the total scheduling job will be necessary in order to accomplish the optimum usage of field space. Such considerations as optimum number and spacing of practices for each age group, combining practices, scheduling teams of equal ability at the same time, and making additional opportunities available for players are best handled by a qualified person who has all these considerations in mind and can therefore make up a master plan.

### D. TRAINING PRIORITIES

In terms of the sequence of development, players need to learn technique before tactics and then small group tactics before team tactics. The Player Developmental Model shown below illustrates the sequence and the general relationship between technique and tactics.

#### PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL



The model above is meant to be simple and the terms used are further clarified in the following sentences. **Basic technique** refers to the ability to dribble, shoot, receive balls from the ground or the air, and pass short and medium range ground passes. **Advanced technique** refers to the ability to receive and pass long range passes, bend balls with the inside and outside of the foot, chip the ball, volley, and head. **Advanced technique at speed** simply means the ability to execute all of the above at full game speed. This may mean being able to use one or two touches or may

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mean using more touches and bursting into spaces when appropriate. Whatever the technique is, it is important that players are able to perform the technique well and efficiently. *Individual tactics* refers to attacking and defending in one-against-one situations. *Small group tactics* refers to player decisions in attack and defense, within small groups of up to 4v4, where players learn about wall passes, crossovers, overlaps, support angles, basic depth and width within the triangle and diamond shapes. Players will also learn about timing and overall group movement. *Team tactics* refers to attack and defense within the 11v11 game, where players learn about team shape, situational (time of game, score, game importance) decisions, and decisions in the thirds of the field.

As mentioned previously in the recreational program section, players cannot perform tactics if they are unable to demonstrate technical proficiency. Players need to develop a full repertoire of technical skills so they are able to perform the tasks required to play successfully. If a player cannot accurately and powerfully shoot, then teaching that player and the team ways to get that player in the position to shoot are not going to be rewarding. If players cannot pass accurately, your team will likely be unable to get anyone into the position to shoot anyway. If your player's first touch is not soft, he will likely lose the ball when trying to set up his shot in a crowded penalty box. As players get older the game becomes much faster and more physical. For players to continue to experience success, they need to perform these skills and make decisions quicker in every year that passes. If they cannot perform the skills or make the decisions quick enough they will likely lose the ball or get hurt. It is true, self-preservation will teach them to release the ball more quickly at times. I would hope this is something us coaches can teach the players before it gets to the point of self-preservation.

The age range between 8 and 12 is largely considered as the developmental Golden Age for soccer. At these ages, players tend to have open minds and overwhelming enthusiasm. Children learn information at a torrid pace during these years. It is actually fair to compare their learning soccer at these ages with their learning language. Their minds are forming thought patterns and modes of thinking and they will be able to learn a language much faster than their parents would be able to if taught in the same environment. In addition, muscle memory is forming and players of these ages are teaching their bodies to move in certain ways and efficiently. It is well known that players move differently when playing soccer as opposed to tennis or football. The action of using your feet to dribble or pass while moving in multiple directions is a unique demand in soccer and one that takes learning. This learning is much harder to do at older ages. For these reasons, coaches of 8 to 12-year-olds should focus primarily on developing their technique and maximizing the amount of ball touches every player receives. This can be done best in a practice environment in which players get much more touches than they would in a game. One game per week is sufficient for their development, allowing the rest of the time to be devoted to technical training, either with their team or on their own. The lore of playing in multiple leagues and tournaments is great, however players need more training time. Playing in 70 or more games per year is not the best thing for these players.

There are a number of reasons that players at these younger ages are playing so many games. One is the pressure to prove success through winning. Playing in games is a great thing and winning is fun, however it should not become the primary motivation of a coach over

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development. Often times we feel, as coaches, that winning validates our coaching and to a degree that is true. However, is an accurate measure of success the number of U12 games a coach wins or is it the number of players who have fun and develop in order to be able to play at the highest level they wish to play? Often times when focused on winning, we forget the majority of the team's development and only focus on getting the ball to the best players who will insure a win. In fairness, coaches often feel pressure from parents who are counting wins, losses, goals for, goals against, time of possession and are putting pressure on coaches to win. If coaches do not win, parents will sometimes take their players off of the team. Whether it be a stress from coaches or parents we all need to remember it stresses out players and that is not fun for them. This is not great for development and we all need to remember that it is impossible to judge how good a 10 or 11 year-old will be in the long run. The big, strong, fast 10 year-old may stop growing and previously less developed players may prove to be better athletes in the long run. They will not be better players if we do not develop their skills however. Another possible reason for too many games is that coaches run out of practice drills after a few months and have difficulties motivating their players in a practice setting. Since players will always prefer to play than to practice, coaches find it easier to play games than to create challenging practices week in and week out. Coaching education could help these coaches be able to constantly provide fun and competition in practice. Of course, we have all heard the phrase 'the game is the best teacher' and it truly can be...in moderation. This term was coined to teach coaches that the best practices comprise game-like activities as opposed to line drills that have little relation to the game. It is not meant to suggest that just having players play games with no instruction was ideal. Games are important, but more is not always best.

Another important point about these ages is that young players need to have the freedom to explore the limits of their ability, to express themselves, and gain the confidence to try the unpredictable. They have fantastic imaginations and, if encouraged, will try things we have never seen. Sure, some of these things will not work, but some will as well. Those successes will fuel confidence and enjoyment. If we stress winning too much, this pressure will hinder their development and affect their performance since fear of failure is the greatest obstacle to successful performance. We all need to think in terms of long term development and not be overly concerned with results at this early stage. Less games, more practices, and the freedom to express themselves and have fun are the key ingredients of a successful program at the crucial ages up to U-14.

## « SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

### MISC ISSUES: PLAYERS PLAYING UP

A common debate at the board level is whether or not players should play up an age group. There is no easy answer to the question as each individual case is different. There are, however, some clear considerations that should be taken into account when reviewing each situation. There are warranted worries of players being physically overmatched or emotionally outcasted. In addition, there is the fear that the player will eventually move back down and see that as a demotion. Regardless, there are some scenarios in which it is clearly the best choice for a developing player. In fact, players playing with and against older players are so common in the rest of the world that youth coaches from other countries would probably be amused to discover that playing up is such a complicated issue in this country. The Brazilian U-19 team from Vitoria, that won the Dallas Cup a few years ago, had players ranging in age from 14 to 18. The French U-16 team from Marseille, competing in the Sun bowl in Tampa against our regional ODP U-16 teams, had a few U-14 and U-15 players. However, before making any such decisions it is important to consider many factors.

Here in the USA, not only did the US Youth Soccer Association make a policy statement that encouraged relieving strict age requirements for younger players for the sake of their development, but the US Soccer National Staff did as well. This was triggered by the realization that our youth clubs are legislating mediocrity by banning ‘playing up’ and that we need to be more flexible in our approach if we want our best players to reach their full potential. Here is the US Soccer National Staff position statement on the topic:

“When it is appropriate for soccer development the opportunity for the exceptional player to play with older players must be available. If there is a concern regarding the individual situation, the decision must be carefully evaluated by coaches and administrators familiar with the particular player. When faced with making the decision whether the player ought to play up, the adult leadership must be prepared with sound rationale to support their decision. Under no circumstances should coaches exploit or hold players backing the misplaced quest for team building and winning championships, nor should parents push their child in an attempt to accelerate their ascension to the top of the soccer pyramid. In addition, playing up under the appropriate circumstances should not preclude a player playing back in his or her own age group. When the situation dictates that it is in the best interests of the player to do so, it should not be interpreted as a demotion but as an opportunity to gain or regain confidence.”

Playing up can have some clear benefits for some players, however there are problems that need to be avoided. One problem is that many parents petition for their child to play up when the child is not ready or talented enough. On the flip side, there are players who should play up but are not allowed to by coaches who do not want to lose their star. Other difficulties include players reaching puberty early and being physically dominant, but technically inferior. Other players develop their skills and tactical awareness ahead of their teammates but are not physically ready to compete against older players. There are no easy answers here.

Whatever the situation, the decision becomes easier if the club takes a proactive stance in defining situations in which playing up will be considered and how that decision will be made. Doing this can help prevent many battles down the line. In addition, the ultimate authority as to

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### MISC ISSUES: PLAYERS PLAYING UP

whether a player moves up or not should be the DOC. The DOC will take into consideration the long term development of the player over parent's wishes, team coach wishes, and any other intervening variables. The players emotional, physical, athletic, and soccer maturity are all factors that need to be considered. This cannot be a decision made without considering social ramifications in addition to soccer ramifications. Of course, the concept of 'team loyalty' and the reluctance to abandon the proper-age team and weaken it should not factor into this decision. The argument that it is not fair to the "of age" players should not be a deterrent. A player who is ready to play up and has soccer ambitions should not allow team loyalty to override what is in her best interest. This is no different from the case of a gifted student in a regular class who is invited to join a gifted class. This is definitely an issue that can stir up emotions. However, on top of all else, of course, the ultimate choice lies with the player and her parents once the DOC proposes the possibility.

#### **Clubs can use the following guidelines to determine who plays up:**

- 1) Player should be dominant in his own age group.**
- 2) Player should be mentally mature and able to relate to the older teammates.**
- 3) Player should be athletically and physically mature enough for the higher age.**
- 4) Player should be a regular starter and impact player on the older team. If the player is going to be a role player or spend a lot of time on the bench, there is no point in her playing up and risk destroying her confidence.**
- 5) The player should be the one who wants to play up, not just the parents.**

There are a number of other factors to consider. One scenario that can complicate the decision is when the proper-age team is very strong and has a good chance at winning the State Cup and beyond, while the older team is weak and is not likely to win anything. If the older team is playing at a lower tier division, it might be better for the player to stay with his own age group where the playing level is higher. Again, the DOC who considers the overall long-term plans for the club and sees the whole picture is the best person to make the decision. Such cases might merit a compromise solution that has the player playing up occasionally as a guest-player and training with the older team, but retaining his/her eligibility for the proper-age team's involvement at the State Cup.

Another factor to consider is the age of the player and his/her current phase of development. Before we make recommendations here, it is important to understand the skill development is a long-term process and confidence building is as well. Players first develop skills without any pressure from opponents. Next, they learn to perform those skills when pressured by teammates in practice (a controlled environment), and then games (uncontrolled environment). In a practice, a coach can choose who a player competes against in order to make sure of a sufficient number of successes to help build a players confidence. As that player becomes more skilled, a coach can challenge the player more in that practice environment. It is hoped that teams are playing against fair competition, so players will have a taste of success in games as well. Having this success

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### MISC ISSUES: PLAYERS PLAYING UP

ultimately plays a monumental role in confidence building. However, if players are thrust into competitions that are overwhelming, this confidence will be stunted. If a player who is just mastering skills has not had a chance to succeed and build her confidence, then it could be devastating to move her up. Not only would it be devastating to her confidence, but also to her skill development as she will not try to perform difficult skills in the overwhelming atmosphere. If her skills are not sufficient to do what she hopes to do with the ball, she will likely get rid of the ball more quickly and not have the number of touches on the ball and number of experiences of success necessary to help her grow as a player. This understanding of a player's place in the overall developmental scheme can only be judged appropriately by a highly qualified coach. To help in deciding when to play a player up, it is recommended that all these variables be taken into consideration. Here is a simplistic guide as to age concerns:

#### **U-6 to U-8**

Playing up is not recommended since the players are all in the early stages of skill acquisition and socialization. Even the ones who are physically dominating should stay in their own age group. It is too early to build them up as future stars as no one can accurately prognosticate this far ahead. Let them benefit from having many chances to build their confidence.

#### **U-9 to U-14**

Playing up is only recommended when using the previously mentioned guidelines. Both an assessment of the player's skill and the player's maturity need to be taken into account. One has to be careful here, since most players have not reached puberty yet. The player playing up might struggle once his teammates reach puberty, and might have to go back to his own age group. For this reason, playing up should be allowed in increments of one year, with a review at the end of each year, and the player and parents should be advised of this policy in advance.

#### **U-15 and older**

Playing up is recommended for players who meet the previously mentioned guidelines. Most players at this age play with older players on high schools teams regardless. Without a doubt, regional and national ODP caliber players should be playing up, otherwise they will not get challenged.

## « SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

### MISC ISSUES: COMPETITIVE SOCCER, WHEN IS IT TOO SOON?

When is it too soon to start competitive soccer? If you ask 20 people this question you will likely get 20 different answers. At the root of this question is the question of what is defined as competitive soccer. For our purposes, let us consider competitive soccer as being travel soccer comprised of teams that have been selected through a tryout process and are stratified by ability.

In truth, whenever we put teams on a field and keep score, we are creating competitive soccer. When we track those scores and keep standings, we are further adding competition to the mix. The curious reality of this is that children keep score in a game regardless of what we do as adults. Whether they remember that score 10 minutes after the game or with 10 minutes left in the game largely varies from player to player. The chance of a young player actually thinking on his own to track his team's win/loss record is quite laughable. However, there are 9 year-olds who have done that. When finding such a child, it is highly likely you will also find an extremely competitive parent who put the idea in the child's mind. In fact, it is highly likely that this obsession with standings and wins and goals scored is all a figment of adult pressure. That is not to say there are not competitive children out there naturally, as the author was such a child himself. However psychological research supports the idea that such children are competing more for attention and love through competition than the actual victory itself. Is that what we want to promote in youth soccer?

As has been promoted throughout this book, players need to be challenged in order to develop and athletically gifted children who develop skills at a young age may not find competition in a format in which team placement is blind to ability. However that does not mean these children should be forced to play on a U-10 travel team. This player's family should not have to commit to weekly travel if the family is not ready for it. Clubs, alternatively, can think outside the box and come up with differing ways of providing challenges without stressing results. Ultimately, what is being posited is that clubs can allow children to be children. A number of clubs throughout the country have tried various strategies with these things in mind. Some clubs have organized special programs for their more developed 10 year-olds. They select the best players in the age group (usually 20-40) and invite them to join training twice a week with an inter-squad game on the weekend. These players are registered as recreational players, as they are only playing in-house against each other. Teams are changed regularly and no records are kept. The goal of these clubs is to bring the best players together and provide them with quality training under the best coaches in the club. Therefore they are providing a challenging environment, but, at the same time, eliminating the pressure of playing games for results. They are, quite rightly, emphasizing training and development over games.

Other clubs offer training by qualified coaches to any players who would like to show up and then make sure players are challenged appropriately by player management within the training. Some have gone so far as to then sort these players into equally strong teams for play on weekends. Yet other clubs do stratify team placement, but it can change weekend to weekend. Since all the players train together, they make a decision every week as to which team the player will play for on the weekend. Since the club is setting up games for all of its' teams and because this is an in-house program, it is not a problem. Lastly, clubs that do not have the numbers to organize themselves this way have all-star training and may find a few other like-minded clubs

## « SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

### MISC ISSUES: COMPETITIVE SOCCER, WHEN IS IT TOO SOON?

who are interested in player development over results in order to schedule some friendly games. Whatever the course of action, clubs need to try to think of ways to stress development over results. Competition is natural, but we, as adults, determine how much importance winning is given and how much children see the true competition as improving on their own past performance.

There is no one right way to do this but when thinking of U-10 and possibly U-11 players, the following elements should be incorporated:

- 1) The best players should be identified and trained, (preferably 2/week) in order to provide them with a challenging training environment under qualified coaches. This can be done within the existing select or recreational programs in the form of supplemental clinics. We simply cannot ignore the fact that the best players do need something extra over and above the Recreational program, if they are to achieve their potential.
- 2) The best method for identifying the top players is through scouting the games within the club, during the season. The scouting and selection should be done by the club DOC or the Coaching Committee. Scouting is preferred over tryouts since it will eliminate the stress and conflicts associated with tryouts.
- 3) Most U-10/11 players, even the top ones, are still developing skills and confidence and playing every game against tough opponents is not nearly as important as training. As long as the best players are in a challenging training environment on a regular basis, they can even still play recreational soccer. What is important is for the players to be allowed to express themselves in games and play with imagination and adventure, without fear of second-guessing by parents and coaches. This is the stage for perfecting their skill and gaining confidence, not testing the players' limit or collecting trophies.
- 4) Traveling long distances for games should be avoided. The club format should be structured on a regional basis and travel to tournaments should be limited. Out-of-state travel is not appropriate yet for this age group.
- 5) The number of games should be monitored and not exceed 30 per year. As explained in prior sections, the number of ball contacts per week each player achieves is the most important statistic for this age group. Games offer a limited number of ball contacts and are, therefore, not conducive to technical development. Team practices and individual practices provide the ball contacts needed and should take priority.
- 6) Regardless of the category of play, whether it is Recreational, Select, or just a series of friendly games, game results should not be posted or kept.
- 7) Whatever program format is used, it must not contravene the existing State Youth Association's rules and regulations. If you have questions about this, please call the state office.
- 8) Clubs need to recognize that, regardless of format, the club will need to educate parents and coaches. Adults tend to view youth games as contests between two teams to determine which one is the best. Sport psychologists will tell you that this is the root cause of most of the problems in youth sports. Clubs need to educate and set expectations and guidelines to insure a quality environment for the players. Games should be seen as developmental opportunities, not as contests.

# « SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »

## MISC ISSUES: TEAM-ORIENTED VS CLUB-ORIENTED APPROACH

With the variety of challenging situations and decisions that come up in youth soccer it is easy to see why situations explode at times. When clubs are merely a collection of teams, as opposed to a unified family, the chances for these explosions are exponentially higher. Being a club does not simply mean wearing the same uniform and playing on the same fields. There is much more to being a part of a club. Having the support of other families and club leadership to help your child achieve his goals is being part of the club. Knowing that coaches are looking out for your child's best interest in the long term and will provide you with honest feedback as to his development is part of being in a club. Seeing the club set up programs to help the various desires of all children is part of being in a club. When part of a club, you see loyalty returned to you, you are helped when needed and you help others when needed. Clubs host social events and set up fun events that parents and children can participate in together. A true club is a community. Just as schools have a progressive developmental master plan for students, clubs have one for players that links the individual teams and connects the flow of training from one age group to the next. Clubs that have had a bona fide DOC who sets the direction and culture of the club are moving in the right direction towards establishing a club-oriented system for player development. The more clubs move in this direction, the better off the children will be. The team-oriented philosophy in which each team blazes its own trail, unaware of what the other teams are doing, and without a central club focus, will slowly disappear. With it, the following problems commonly associated with this philosophy should diminish as well:

### **Infighting Over Players**

Team coaches in team-oriented clubs invariably engage in a tug-of-war over the same players. As a result, players are not playing in the most challenging and appropriate situations. The ultimate goal should be to make it possible for every player to find his/her proper level. Unfortunately, in a team-oriented club, the two coaches might accomplish the opposite, to suit their own ambitions, and fight over the same players and end up fielding two teams on which few players, if any develop.

### **Training Priorities Lose Focus**

When a club-based development plan is missing, continuity of training is lost. There needs to be a clear progression from what is taught at each age level to the next. Age-specific training priorities should be established, with a building block approach, which provides the players with the technical foundation before exposing them to advanced tactics. Without a master plan, coaches become mainly concerned with preparing their team for tomorrow's game, without taking the long-term developmental needs into consideration.

### **Coaching Selection Criteria Undermined**

Without a central focus, the process for evaluating and assigning coaches based on consistent criteria is hard to implement. As a result, unqualified coaches end up with teams of which they are poorly equipped to handle. Often times, cliques or popularity contests become part of the club coaching realm. These things should play no part in any youth organization, ever.

## « SELECT PROGRAM STRUCTURE »»

### MISC ISSUES: TEAM-ORIENTED VS CLUB-ORIENTED APPROACH

#### **Coaches Lose Their Effectiveness**

In a loosely connected club structure, each coach tends to stay with the same team for many years. There is obviously a lot to be said about the long-lasting friendships and bonding that develop when a group stays together for a long time. But, on the flip side, coaches lose their effectiveness to impact and influence players sooner or later, usually after one or two years. After a while, players start to tune the coaches out, as they get tired of doing the same drills, hearing the same voice, and receiving the same coaching tips. Players who want to advance in the game need to be exposed to different coaches and different coaching styles, otherwise the soccer side of things becomes stale. Often times, just the way one coach says something differently sparks different players. In addition, with different coaches, less players become pigeon-holed. A new coach every two years will re-ignite the engine, re-kindle the motivation and create new challenges for the players.

Obviously clubs that comprise mainly parent coaches and have a limited number of coaches will have to make some concessions and allow the coach to continue coaching their own child. But whenever possible, coaches should be moved around every two years, especially at the Top level of select soccer, where players are highly skilled and need fresh ideas and constant challenge.

#### **Who Owns The Player?**

Team-oriented clubs find the players have no affiliation with the club, only with their team or coach. This is not best for the club, the players, or the coaches. Clubs should invest the time and effort at developing an identity. This will help foster an affinity toward the club by the players and parents. When players feel only loyal to their team and to their coach, the club's overall health and future is on fragile grounds. Team coaches can decide one day to move to another club and take along their team. When team loyalty is taken to an extreme, it can create a 'Us vs. Them' mentality and lead to bad feelings between teams in the same club.

Clubs must remember that, within the context of player registration and playing regulations, the players belong to the club, not the team. Hence, clubs have the authority to place players into teams as they see fit, as long as it is done in accordance with the rules of the state association. Coaches do not 'own' players, and must abide by the rules and policies of the club.

## « EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

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Most club directors and board members would agree that the least enjoyable part of their work is dealing with parent complaints and disciplinary measures. Unfortunately, this becomes part of the job of every youth soccer organization as problems and concerns develop that need attention. Solving these problems is not normally the unsavory part of the process, rather it is dealing with heated emotions. For this reason and others, it is extremely important that clubs take proactive measures to help educate parents and minimize points of conflict.

Though sometimes our frustration boils, we must always remember that the large majority of parents are helpful, well-intentioned people who formulate the true backbone of the club. As in most groups however, it is the 1% of people screaming and shouting the loudest that sometimes ruin it for the rest. Therefore, it becomes our job to respond to the concerns of this 1% while trying to minimize their effect on the remaining 99%. Whatever the case, it is helpful to remember that parents are upset because they care about their children. Whether we feel their motivations are positive or negative, we must recognize that they care about their children and that, in itself, is a positive thing. It is much better for a child to have an over-concerned parent than one who pays no attention to him and shows no interest in his life. Occasionally, we might find we need to guide the over-concerned parent or watch out for parents who might try to manipulate the program to benefit their own personal agenda. Whatever the scenario, club officials should always try to remain calm and try to be nice. As tough as it can be at times, emotions should remain calm to help resolve issues.

It is better to be proactive in educating and informing parents to help reduce potential problems and making everyone's involvement in the club more enjoyable. By doing this we can actually stunt the development of heated issues and problems. A well-planned process of disseminating information to parents should include:

- 1) A pre-season club wide parent meeting conducted by the club
- 2) A pre-season team parent meeting conducted by the coach
- 3) A monthly parent email that explains programs, objectives and updates
- 4) A quarterly club newsletter with major news and goings-on
- 5) A regular schedule of team parent meetings throughout the season organized and moderated by the coach
- 6) At least one meeting per year between team/age group parents and the DOC or coaching committee
- 7) The provision of an annual evaluation form to allow the parents to provide feedback to the club

The newsletter, the handouts, and the meetings should describe the mission statement, enlighten the parents on player development issues, clarify the program structure, advise club policies, and explain the rationale for every club policy. The club should have in place a clear and fair process for dealing with parent grievances and conflicts that is clearly detailed to parents as well. For example, unhappy parents must first try to resolve the issue with their coach. If that proves fruitless, parents' next step is to appeal to the Age Group Commissioner (recreational) or DOC

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(travel). If the commissioner cannot mediate a resolution, parents can go to the club officer in charge of the specific program. From there, they can go to the DOC or to the Club Board. It is recommended that issues go to the DOC before the board as the board need not be bothered with every problem. However, they should be aware of problem trends and extreme situations. Club-issued, standardized Complaint Forms and/or Appeal Forms can be created for parents to submit and in order to keep a record of these concerns. These records can be used by the club to review and revise their policies as needed, to help in making decisions on coach selection, and to make sure that the concerns have been dealt with in a timely manner and closure has been reached. In addition, this provides a paper trail in case there are varying accounts of how issues are resolved. In the extreme cases in which parents consider lawsuits, having a paper trail is key protection for a club. Although it seems extreme, better to be safe than sorry. Lawsuits against youth sport organizations are rare, but they do exist.

Sometimes situations develop that cannot be handled with paper or over time. Sometimes, unruly behavior demands an immediate response from the club. To help with these situations, clubs must be firm and clear about what they expect from parents in terms of behavior at practices and on the sidelines. For the benefit of players and everyone involved, clubs should not be afraid to enforce a code of behavior for fear of losing players. Experience has taught us that clubs that show a weakness and a reluctance to deal with problem parents usually end up with the most problems. Field Marshals can be assigned to monitor and police the fields during games. These Marshals should be given the authority to take parents who break any club rules to the side and give them a warning. If the parents persist in breaking the rules following the warning, the Marshals should have the authority to ban them from the complex for the duration of the game and report them to the club's Discipline Committee. The Discipline Committee can deal with repeat offenders according to the policy set by the club. Again, it is rare that these situations happen and most parents would never put themselves in this situation, but for those who do, a club needs to act quickly and insure the safety of players, coaches, referees and parents alike. This means that everyone should be safe from physical or verbal abuse. It is imperative to make sure that all the parents are aware of the rules and the policy for dealing with breaches of club rules before the season starts.

Some clubs have moved to create a Parent Code of Conduct that all parents must sign at the start of each season or year before their children are allowed to play. This helps remind parents of proper behavior and club expectations and most parents seem to appreciate knowing that the club is taking measures to insure that their children are in a positive environment. An example of a code of conduct is below:

### **Sample Parental Code of Conduct**

#### **I will:**

- (1) be encouraging, supportive, & affirmative in regard to my child's play on the field
- (2) respect officials & accept their decisions
- (3) support the coach, manager, the team, & the club
- (4) volunteer my services & talents to the club when possible
- (5) familiarize myself with the Laws of the Game

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(6) comply with rules, policies, & procedures of the team & Club as they apply to me

(7) discuss my child

- only with the coach
- not with the manager or any other person
- only at a time mutually agreed upon with the coach
- never prior to, during, or directly after a game

**Further, I will never :**

(1) engage in dissent directed toward an official

(2) engage in any kind or type of unsportsmanlike conduct with any official, coach, player, or parent

(3) interfere at any time with the duties and responsibilities of the coach or manager

(4) act in any manner which is detrimental to the team or the Sample Soccer Club

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

You may wish to add comments to this Code of Conduct indicating what measures the club will take if parents do demonstrate unsportsmanlike behavior continually. For instance, it serves the best interest of the club to have stated on this signed Code of Conduct that parents can and will be removed from the field if they continually berate a referee. If a parent's continued meddling into team matters might lead a club to remove a player from a team, it is helpful to indicate such ramifications in advance to avoid further difficulties.

Now that we have set guidelines for parent conduct, here is an example of writings you can use to help with overall parent education:

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## SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS AT THE U6 & U-8 LEVELS

**TO:** Parents of U-6/U-8 players

**FROM:** Club Director of Coaching

**RE:** Welcome to our Club!

The purpose of this letter is to outline the club philosophy for the U-6 & U-8 players. By explaining to you the skill priorities and program objectives for your child, the program's format, and your role within the program, we hope we can clarify many of your questions and work together to make sure we provide a wonderful experience for everyone involved. Above all else, please remember that, as a Club, our primary objective is to make sure that every player has fun.

### **Skill Priorities**

The primary objective of the U-6/U-8 program is to teach players to dribble. We want players to be comfortable with the ball at their feet and want to help build their confidence. By encouraging them to dribble, we hope to encourage creativity as well and will promote their adding their own personality to the game. Only a few players at the U-8 level will begin to develop passing skills. This will not be a stress in our program, though we will begin to introduce basic passing technique for the oldest and most mature players. Please recognize we do not list kicking as an objective. We do not want the children to aimlessly kick the ball as it is not helpful to their development as a player. They need to touch the ball as often as possible and to develop skills. We much prefer they learn how to dribble as opposed to just kicking the ball. Typically, young players find dribbling much more fun.

### **Field Layout**

You will be asked to sit a few yards away from the sidelines during games in an area designated as the Parent's Area. The objective here is to give the players a sense of freedom, encourage the players to think for themselves and minimize the effect that we adults have on the children's play. We hope to encourage them to think for themselves when on the field and wean them out of their dependency on the adults.

### **We ask that you:**

- 1) Refrain from coaching. Leave the coaching to the coach.
- 2) Do not tell the players to 'kick it' during the games or the practices.
- 3) Avoid encroaching beyond the parent's designated area until the game is terminated.
- 4) Feel free to cheer and applaud. This is not "silent" soccer, but it should be "positive" soccer. Please refrain from offering negative comments and please applaud good plays by both teams.
- 5) Exhibit good sportsmanship and make the other team feel welcome.

Please refer to the attached handout for a more detailed rationale of our program. Feel free to speak to me if you have any questions or concerns. I hope your child and you have a nice season and have fun!

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## A. PROGRAM RATIONALE FOR U-6 AND U-8

### Skill Priorities

The game of soccer has a number of basic skills, or *techniques*, that players have to learn, such as dribbling, receiving passes, making passes, shooting and heading. These skills make up the foundation of the game. However players always need to learn how to use these skills. This includes making decisions during the game, such as when to dribble, when to pass, and to whom to pass. These players' decisions are referred to as *tactical* decisions.

The first principle of soccer development is that players should master the basic techniques before they can learn the tactical side of the game. **Technique before tactics!** Think of techniques as vocabulary, and tactics as the grammar rules for forming sentences and paragraphs. Now, imagine a young immigrant who arrives in America without speaking a word of English. Before we can teach this immigrant about the rules for joining nouns, verbs, and adverbs to form a sentence, we have to give him a chance to learn a number of nouns and verbs in order to construct a sentence. If a child knows no words, than knowing the rules by which to organize the words is useless. If this child knows words we can typically understand the gist of what he is trying to say, despite his lack of grammatical knowledge. Of course, the more grammar this child learns, the more we will consider him fluent in the language. The same is true with soccer. Teaching players' tactics when they do not have the skills to complete them will prove fruitless. Teaching them technical skills will allow them to play and the games we watch will seem somewhat like soccer, but not like the soccer we see on television. Once they master the skills (grasp the words), then we can teach them how to use the tactics (construct sentences and paragraphs). Then their game will look like the game we see on television (or be fluent). This will not happen at the U-6 and U-8 ages.

In terms of soccer development, your child is just beginning his/her 'schooling'. We use the word 'schooling' here because there are many similarities between a regular school and a youth club, which can be considered as essentially a soccer school. Some techniques should be taught before others. The first technique that children should learn is **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation skill and preparation for all the other fundamental techniques of soccer, such as receiving, passing and shooting. When players are receiving the ball and making preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction with the ball, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and dribbling to get away from pressure. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. There are also times in the game, when the player with the ball has no passing options and the only way out of tight pressure is to dribble.

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. Just like any complex bio-mechanical skill such as skating or gymnastics, the later you

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start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form. 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 do not get discouraged easily if they do not succeed. They are not thinking in terms of peer assessment. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that they did not succeed the last time they dribbled will not even enter their minds. Of course, since we play 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs. 4, we guarantee that players will get another chance to show their skills very soon so they would not even have time to think about it if they were capable of doing so. 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. Once they become aware of others' perception and peer review, they will not be so daring and creative. Thirdly, in 3 vs.3 and 4 vs. 4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is almost always within reach and the goals and other players are also close. Once the game moves to the larger sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. Lastly, it is better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents, other players, and coaches to show 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.

### **To Cheer or Not To Cheer—That is the Question**

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a 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. Even when no one is around to pressure them, we see players just kicking the ball without any thought. Part of this might be because of the cheering they get from the sideline when they do this. However, kicking is not a skill. All of us, with no learning, can kick a ball. What we really want to emphasize is learning and skill development. So, please, do not cheer for kicking...cheer for dribbling and creativity. We do not want to 'coach' the players out of developing ball skills and showing creativity—do we?

On the surface it is easy to say that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and that there is no need to keep standings. In actuality, players at this age often do not know the score when the game ends. I am willing to bet they know the directions to the nearest ice cream store however. Even with this understanding it is hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. It is difficult to not place importance on the score as we are tallying it in our head. Despite this, we need to remember what is best for the players. Partner with your spouse or a friend and help stop each other from saying "kick it". It is especially hard when the ball is front of their goal and you want them to clear it, but please remember, every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble.

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Many of you may be wondering about teaching passing as that is certainly part of soccer. However, just as in school, we are taking one step at a time. Before we do multiplication and division, we are doing addition and subtraction. There is a progression to learning and the players are most capable of learning dribbling at this age. You will not typically see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. Most players realize there is only one toy on the field and they want to play with the toy. They do not understand the logic in giving their toy to someone else. If they do that, they no longer get to play with the toy. Think of dribbling as ‘passing to oneself’. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? Despite our grandest hopes, let us be honest with ourselves as well. Some of those kicks that end up going to teammates are still just kicks. The fact that they randomly ended up with a teammate does not make the kick a pass. ☺

### **Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency**

In addition to technical development, we want to help players with mental development. Just as they practice technical skills to improve their play, they also need to practice decision making. This can very easily be done by placing them into situations repeatedly and allowing them to make decisions on their own. If natural consequences do not teach them what the best decision is, then the coach can help clarify that with the player. If we constantly tell these young players what to do and prevent them from making these decisions, they will never improve their decision making skills, a very important part of the game. Typically, children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. In youth sports, this dependency is manifested as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Although it can be very hard, we need to allow these players to make their own decisions. The hardest part will be that some of the decisions will be faulty. However, we must allow them to learn from their successes and failures as both provide vital information and help in development. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8 program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is crucial for the development of soccer players. Since coaches do not have time outs and the game runs continuously, coaches have very little control over games once they start. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do for the good of the players. Not surprisingly children tell us that they actually have more fun when they are not being told what to do constantly....imagine.

Commonly, we see parents sitting and standing very close to the sidelines and even encroaching onto the field. We realize that we get excited and are enthusiastic and that is great! However, parents sitting so close to and on the field impacts the players’ behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.

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### **Individual Concept vs Team Concept**

As parents, you are mainly and thankfully concerned with the welfare and development of your child. When your child goes to school, you become very interested in how he/she is progressing in school. Do you care how the class is doing as a whole? You are likely happy as long as your child is doing well, the teacher creates a supportive learning atmosphere, and the teacher is keeping pace with the required academic standards for his/her age. It seems laughable to imagine parents boasting that their child's class average was higher than the class next door. It does not seem to be a concern. The class concept in school is seen as a logistical convenience where children of like-age are grouped together to learn academics and social skills within the dynamics of a group. The same concept should be applied to youth sports. Just like a classroom, a youth team should be seen as a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social skills. Just as we do not brag about how strong our child's entire class is in academics, we should not brag about the strength of our child's team in soccer.

People want to be part of a team. They feel safe and comfortable. There are many positives in a team environment, such as building lifelong friendships, sharing common goals, learning to trust and depend on others. But when the team assumes too much importance or consumes your life, it can lead to tension and conflicts. Games become more stressful. The mood of the family unit for the rest of the day hinges on the game result. 'What's best for the team' overrides what's best for the individual players. The negative aspects of the team concept manifest themselves in many ways: The amount of playing time players get, rivalry between teams spilling over into arguments and even hostility, coaches fighting over players, referee abuse, etc.

Though we are ingrained in the American culture to place a high value on winning, we urge you not to place importance on winning, but rather on making sure your child is having fun and is being given the opportunity to play and learn the game. Your child's U-6 or U-8 team's record will have absolutely no impact on the future well being of your child. Mia Hamm is not playing for the National Team because her U-10 team won the state championship. She is on the national team because she has developed into a skillful and athletic player. Your child might develop into a high level player or he/she might not. Some of this depends on our genes and is pre-determined before your child was even born. As long as he/she is having fun and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, we should all be happy. Remember that the team is there to serve your CHILD'S needs. Your child is not there to serve the team's needs. If the team's performance produces strong emotions in you, you need to step back and take a deep breath and suppress these emotions. If your child is having fun, that is the most important thing. The team is just a logistical way to engage a bunch of children in play. Tomorrow, your child will be part of another team.

Parents must beware of coaches who seem intent in building a 'dynasty' at these young ages. If a coach approaches you with the intent to recruit your child into his/her team because "He wants to build a strong team", you should question his agenda. The chances are he/she will emphasize the wrong type of development and training. The chances are that he/she will replace your child down the road when a better player pops up.

# « EDUCATING AND DEALING WITH PARENTS »

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## **B. SETTING A PARENT MEETING AGENDA**

As players get older, the need for communication does not dissipate. It is still extremely important to clarify goals and expectations. Doing this in the form of a parent meeting at the start of the season will help prevent confusion and stunt potential problems. It is recommended that you have something in writing to hand to parents at this meeting. By doing this, you are insuring that your words are not being misconstrued. If there is a concern down the line, you can reference the document to provide clarification.

In this document, it is important that you list your coaching philosophy and your goals for the team and players. It is also important you discuss attendance expectations and disciplinary measures as these areas are often the genesis of most problems. You may wish to inform parents how and when they can contact you if they have questions. Questions about players should not be asked in front of other players or other parents. Parents should not be asking questions during a game or practice or at any time you are with the team. Coaches have been known to have parents call at midnight or at 6 am to talk about their children. If you do not want this to happen, clarify that in your meeting and on your handout. Lastly, make sure to address sideline behavior as well. Parents need to remember that they are role models for their children and uncontrolled behavior on the sideline is not acceptable. Each meeting will differ based on the age and level of the players you are coaching. However, here is a sample handout for a parent meeting:

### **Sample Parent Meeting Agenda**

**Team Goals:** Our primary goals as a team are to have fun and to develop as young soccer players. I hope to be able to teach the players needed skills that will help them improve in the game. We will have fun practices that focus primarily on technical skills. I do hope that we win games as well, however this will be a by-product of our players developing skills and enjoying the game. If you watch practice you may at times see us engaging in activities that do not look like “real soccer”. Please be assured that all activities we do will help with skill building or team bonding.

**Style of Play:** I will be encouraging the players to take risks and be creative. We will focus on developing dribbling, passing, receiving, and shooting skills so players are proficient at all. It is my hope that players have the confidence to show their skills in the game and show comfortability on the ball. We will move up and down the field as a team, use combination plays, and I will be moving players into multiple positions to help them learn all parts of the game. I tend to encourage an attacking style of play that players typically find quite fun.

**Attendance:** I will be at every practice and game, foregoing any unforeseen emergencies. Please make every attempt to have your child at every practice and game as well as it is part of learning the responsibility of being on a team. Given our hectic lives, I do understand that players may have conflicts here and there. Please let me know before the first game of any conflicts you

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might have for the season so I can prepare my practices accordingly and we can make sure our team has enough players at every game.

**Discipline:** I have been told that I run a tight ship and will continue to do so. If players are acting out I will ask them two times to fix their behavior. If they fail to do so after these warnings, I will sit them down at practice or during a game. If the behavior continues we will need to talk about it to find a way to help resolve the behavior best without it detracting from the rest of the players' experiences on the team.

**Communication:** I am typically a difficult person to reach by phone. The best way to get a hold of me is via email at [soccercoach@sampleclub.com](mailto:soccercoach@sampleclub.com). Should you wish to talk by phone my office number is 1-800-852-6666 and the best time to reach me is between 12pm and 3pm. If these times do not work, let's schedule a time that works for both of us. Please do not ask to talk to me during a practice or game or immediately before or after the game or in front of your child. I do encourage open communication and questions as we all hope to make this a great experience for the children.

**Sideline Behavior:** Please be supportive and enthusiastic on the sideline during games. The players and I will truly appreciate your applause and encouragement. However, if everyone is coaching, this will only confuse the players. Please do not coach from the sideline. The players need to make their own decisions and we need to support them and educate them at practice. Remember you are a role model on the sideline for the players. Please set a good example.

**Overall:** I am excited for a great year and I hope you and your child are as well. Let's all have fun and enjoy the game. If you have any questions, please, let's keep open communication. 😊

# « TOPSoccer Programs for Disabled Athletes »»

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**TOPSoccer** (The Outreach Program for Soccer) is a community-based training and team placement program for young athletes with disabilities. The emphasis of this program is on development and physical participation rather than on competition; and to provide meaningful learning, development and physical participation opportunities to young disabled athletes through the game of soccer. The goal of this program is to enable young people with disabilities to develop their physical fitness, technical skills, courage and self-esteem, through the joy and excitement of playing soccer.

A TOPSoccer athlete is defined as any youth player between the ages of 4 and 19 who has a disability that limits his/her ability to perform at the level of play in which he/she has chosen to participate. Players are placed on teams by ability, not age. The emphasis is on **ability** not disability and **player involvement**.

## **Modification of the Playing Environment**

The objective is to create a meaningful experience in soccer for youth players with disabilities. Modification of the playing rules and equipment is often necessary.

- ◆ Play small-sided games on smaller fields
- ◆ Use “Unified Games” as a means to facilitate play. In unified soccer, a ratio of players with disabilities to able-bodied players is kept on the field. Example: 5 v 5 with a ratio of 3 disabled to 2 able-bodied players. Disabled athletes take all kick-offs and re-starts.

### **For Children with Orthopedic Impairments:**

- ◆ Reduce field size
- ◆ Increase number of players on team (to include “buddies/helpers”)
- ◆ Use regulation balls with less air, “nerf” balls or “gymnic” balls.

### **For Children with Visual Impairments**

- ◆ Increase size of ball used
- ◆ Use brightly colored balls
- ◆ Wrap goals with brightly colored tape
- ◆ Use beeper/bell balls
- ◆ Use soccer “buddies/helpers”
- ◆ Use some kind of sounding device near or in the goal

# « TOPSoccer Programs for Disabled Athletes »»

## **Registration**

TOPSoccer athletes are registered just as any youth soccer players are, and are afforded the same protection as any other player.

**For further information or assistance in starting a TOPSoccer program, contact the Massachusetts Youth Soccer office as we are enthusiastically dedicated to helping all players who want to play enjoy the opportunity to do so.**

## « Conclusion and Future Considerations »»

Hopefully you have found something in this manual that will help you in your continued soccer endeavors. Again, this is not meant to be a bible of youth soccer, but many of the ideas listed in the previous pages have helped soccer clubs around the country serve their members better. We sincerely hope they help your club as well.

Topics not included in this manual are by no means unimportant. If you have any questions about topics that were not included, please call the state office and we will be happy to help answer any questions you have. If you have further questions about topics listed in this manual, please contact us as well. You can expect to see continued publications coming from the state office and if you have any particular requests, please let us know. One publication that will be coming out soon will detail what consumers should expect from a model soccer club. It is our hope that we can help the members choose optimal soccer development situations with a little education. We are all in this together and hope to help the thousands of youth players in our state as best we can.

If nothing else after reading this manual, please remember that this game is for the children and all of our decisions should be based on what is best for those children. If you ever find yourself drifting off the path, please remind yourself that the best interest of the player is primary. If you see a friend drifting of the path, lend a hand and pull him back on. If you need a hand, just let us know at the state office and we will gladly help.

Lastly, thank you for taking the time to read this manual and thank you for caring about the children. Your time is a great benefit to the children and although they do not always say thank you, we hope you can see the amount of thanks in their smiles and glowing eyes out on those fields every day. The fact that you are taking the time to give thought to ways to make the experience better for them is a wonderful testament to you. Best of luck!

*This manual is very much an updated and acculturated version of a manual that Jacob Daniel created a few years ago. Without his pioneering work, this manual would still be in the works. Unending thanks is definitely due him.*