

HOW TO SETTLE THE SMALL-SIDED DEBATE

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The debate regarding the playing format for U-12's and younger is raging in youth soccer. Coaches and administrators are all weighing in with their recommendations. In the U-10 age group, as an example, we hear suggestions ranging from 6v6 to 9v9.

But the problem is the debates lack any concrete, factual or scientific reasoning. Nor do they produce any research that backs up one solution over another. The recommendations are based more on personal preferences, personal biases, or gut feelings.

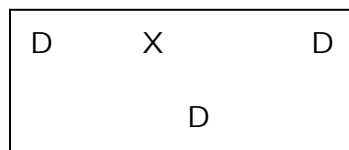
Even if we looked to the rest of the world for guidance or rationale, we would find that over there, the most common numbers are 7v7 and 9v9 and that these numbers are more a result of a simple, easy to implement conversion of an 11v11 field into smaller fields for younger players. The 7v7 format was born out of the decision to play across half a traditional 11v11 field and 9v9 was born out of the decision to bring the goals to the edge of the penalty areas and play 9v9. In other words, no serious research or scientific basis exists for 7v7 and 9v9 other than the convenience of using an existing 11v11 field.

It is possible to settle this argument once and for all by using a more analytical approach. We need to **establish criteria** for deciding the proper play format for each age group. And we need to base the criteria on much more than just hunches or intuition. Below are some suggestions for creating a set of criteria. The arguments presented below focus on U-10 but can be similarly applied to any age.

TECHNICAL RANGE OF PASSING

If we conducted a simple test to determine the passing range of U-10 players, we would find that 9-10 year olds can pass the ball over 10-20 yards maximum. By a 'pass', we mean an accurate, firm pass made by a stationary player hitting a stationary ball. Here is a simple test: put 3 defenders in a grid 30 by 15 yards and a forward 30-35 yards away from the grid as shown below. These dimensions replicate the distance between the back line and the forward line in a U-10 game involving three lines (defenders, midfielders and forwards). Stick an opponent in the defenders' grid. Serve the ball to any of the three defenders and ask them to keep possession against the lone opponent (3v1) for at least two passes and then to pass it to the forward 30 yards away.

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You will find that the three defenders will not be able to reach the forward with a firm, accurate ball. This is because they will not be able to control a 'lateral' pass and quickly make a 30-35 yards vertical pass to the forward. They might be able to reach the forward with a running start (like in a goal kick) or if ball and player are moving towards each other as in a back pass from the midfield. But the test here replicates building the attack from the back and they will fail to reach the forward. You will find that if you bring the forward closer to the defenders, say around 15-20 yards, they will finally be successful.

Now, let's imagine U-10's playing 8v8 or 9v9. Consider the scenario where the left defender receives a pass from the keeper or the central defender. He controls the ball and looks up. With him being stationary and the ball resting in front of him, his passing range will be maximum 20 yards. This means that he could reach the outside left midfielder, the central defender, or the central midfielder. He would not be able to reach the two forwards, the outside right midfielder, or the right defender. In this scenario, half the team is redundant since they cannot be reached. There will also be large areas of the field that are unreachable which means that balls into space cannot be played by the defender with the ball at his feet.

The consequence of playing 8v8 or 9v9 at U-10 is that they will not be able to play a patient build up from the back and defenders will 'boot' the ball forward rather than control it to avoid being caught in possession. This will encourage direct play of the 'kick and chase' variety. Not a desirable outcome.

TACTICAL RANGE OF PROBLEM SOLVING

We know from the research presented in the National Youth License that at the U-6 and U-8 stages, the players are busy learning to control their own body (locomotor and nonlocomotor skills) and to control the ball. At U-10, they are starting to learn to solve soccer problems. Although they played 4v4 at U-8, they didn't really learn to play 4v4 (diamond shape, width and depth, support angles, etc) since they were too busy learning to control their body and the ball. They have not yet learned the tactical lessons of 4v4.

But now that they are U-10, can we really ask them to solve tactical problems of 8v8 or 9v9? Again, a simple test of playing 2v2 or 2v2+1 will show that they do not understand yet how to adjust their position and angle to support the ball and cannot make good decisions as to when to pass to feet and when to pass to space. At U-10, the players are tactically at the 2v2 stage.

RANGE OF PHYSICAL DEMANDS

What would be a desirable or acceptable distance that the average U-10 player should cover in a typical game? Top level professionals run an average of 10Km per game. How much should a ten year old run in one game? 1Km? 3Km? 5Km?

We obviously don't want a U-10 game to be a test of stamina. We want the players to run less and play more. Sport Psychologists can tell us the level of stamina of 10 year olds compared to adult and we can use that as a measure of optimum field size and numbers for each age.

Maybe a better measurement would be to divide the number of touches on the ball by the distance run. A distance-per-touch ratio then. A player running an average of 50 yards for each ball touch is more desirable than running 200 yards for each ball touch. The bigger the field and the bigger the number of players, the more each player will have to run between touches.

We can easily do some research here and quantify this ratio by analyzing each play format (6v6, 7v7, 8v8, 9v9) and coming up with a ratio of distance per touch for each format.

CONCLUSION

We can take the three criteria mentioned here, namely the technical range, the tactical range and the physical range and use them to determine the best play format for each age group.

No prize for guessing that I believe that U-10's should play 6v6. The 6v6 game is within their technical range. This is because almost all the players are within passing reach of each other. My observations of U-10 players playing 8v8 is that they crowd into a portion of the field and cannot spread and use the whole field. They essentially play 8v8 the same way they play 6v6 since their passes cannot skip lines or be played into spaces behind the opposing back line unless the forwards have the ball.

The only way for them to play 8v8 at U-10 is to avoid building up from the back and use keeper punts and for every free kick in their own half kicked far. This is the prevalent style of 8v8 at U-10 that I have observed.

If we want our players to play more possession and teach our defenders to play their way out of their half, we need 6v6 at U-10. No use playing with three lines if the players cannot skip a line with their passes? A similar rationale can be applied to U-12's playing 8v8 as opposed to 11v11.