



U14: The beginning phase of 11 v. 11

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This article is part of the US Youth Soccer youth coaching education series.

By the time they reach the U14 level, players should possess a good grounding in technical training as well as individual and small group tactics. With the advent of the 11 v. 11 game, adult standards and formalized rules start to shape players' soccer development. Skill acquisition is reinforced as training demands increase, provoking improvement in mental toughness, concentration and diligence.

The U14s are at a critical stage. There is a huge dropout rate in a great many youth sports at the 12- and 13-year-old age bracket. Therefore, practice activities have to be thought out well and constructed in an age-appropriate manner. Take the care as well as the time to understand your craft, so that more quality players are produced by design and more players end up staying in this wonderful game over a longer period of time.

In this article, we present useful coaching information, techniques and specific training exercises designed for improving the qualities and characteristics of players in the U14 age group.

Characteristics and training of the U14 player

At the U14 age level, players are growing taller and filling out. As muscle and bone growth accelerates, players must adjust and adapt to the changes. As a result, their motor ability deteriorates at first. Players tend to overcompensate, they temporarily lose preci-

sion and economy of movement, and they become more susceptible to injury. Training must be well-rounded, and practice sessions should be scheduled at least three times a week as players' endurance increases. Strength training can be integrated into the program, but the overall emphasis should still be on fun.

The youngsters have not yet matured into adults, yet they are playing the adult version of the game. Coaches often make the mistake of thinking that since the game has gotten larger, practice should reflect that fact with increased numbers and larger practice fields. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Even though the players are entering the unknown and somewhat unfamiliar world of 11 v. 11, practice sessions should consist largely of technical training (at this age the French train more than 75% of the time on technique) and small-sided tactical training activities. The aim is for players to continue to develop their mastery of the ball and learn to make effective decisions about individual and small group tactics. By focusing on these aspects, team-tactical situations will become much easier. Small-sided exercises, activities with repetitions, varying conditions, targets and encouragement, as well as specific, immediate feedback, are all essential for success at this level.

In order to understand what the players should be doing in practice, we should first understand what they are capable of from a psychological standpoint. We must comprehend who we are coaching, how they view themselves and what is going on inside their heads. If we don't consider who our audience is and what their capabilities are, then we will never be able to effectively coach them and relay quality information.

Mentality: Cognition, motivation and emotion

U14 players are in varying stages of puberty and maturation. At this stage of their mental development, they begin to display independence and are becoming self-critical. They become more aware of praise, status and recognition. They are in a time of self-discovery and have a sense of belonging, accomplishment and achievement.

The coach at the U14 level plays a critical role and has a profound ability to either accelerate or hinder a child's development. The important decision of coach selection should not be left up to a parental committee that has little or no soccer knowledge. Most of the time, parents will select a coach on the basis of his or her past record of wins and losses. Instead, the club's technical director should select the person with the skill set that is best suited for the gender and age group in question. Let the professional set the training priorities and establish the team's direction. It's the long-term development of the players that should set the focus, not the short-term results.

A coach should possess the following characteristics:

- integrity and honesty
- a strong personality
- a great wealth of soccer knowledge through education
- enthusiasm and terrific passion for the game
- the ability to demonstrate proficiently
- quality communication skills
- a genuine liking for and understanding of children.

These qualities enable a coach to have a positive influence on young players' mentality.



Condition: Flexibility is essential

Flexibility exercises before and after training are essential for preventing injuries, and they have also been proven to increase athletic performance. Training should include stretching and mobility exercises, followed by strength training and dynamic speed-oriented exercises.

Pay particular attention (especially with boys) to the hamstrings, hip flexors and groin muscles, to ensure maximum stride length and range of motion. Physical preparation is critical for optimizing the execution of an entire range of techniques. Agility, speed, strength and endurance are also necessary components at this age. All physical training should be done with the ball.

Technique: Encourage creativity

Technique training must still comprise a major portion of the practice session. Players must be able to control a ball efficiently and pass or shoot with the various surfaces of both feet. In the end, there is no tactic or system of play that will effectively cover up that deficiency. Most technique training should be done at speed and under pressure. Isolating techniques without pressure is important for understanding and acquisition, but technique training as it is commonly practiced, without opponents or decision-making, is unrealistic.

Players must be encouraged to actively engage their opponents, with an emphasis on speed, a variety of moves, shielding and spin turns. Fostering creative risk-takers is also critical for long-term success. In order to break into soccer's upper echelons and stay there, we must produce players capable of individual brilliance and flair, who can turn the balance of a game, or at least influence its outcome. The creative player must be sought out, nurtured and allowed to blossom: an easy statement to make, but a difficult one to put into practice.

Tactics: Decision-making

The continued use of individual and small group tactics is warranted at U14. Increase the tactical speed and the decision-making process, but remain patient with the applications. Exercises must allow players to make decisions and teach them that there are consequences for making the wrong ones.

The quality of team tactics depends to a large extent on how well players understand and execute individual and small group tactics. For example, we can keep possession of the ball for the purpose of eventually going forward in an attempt to score. Or we can keep possession of the ball for the purpose of killing off a game and running out the clock. The skills are similar, but the applications are different.

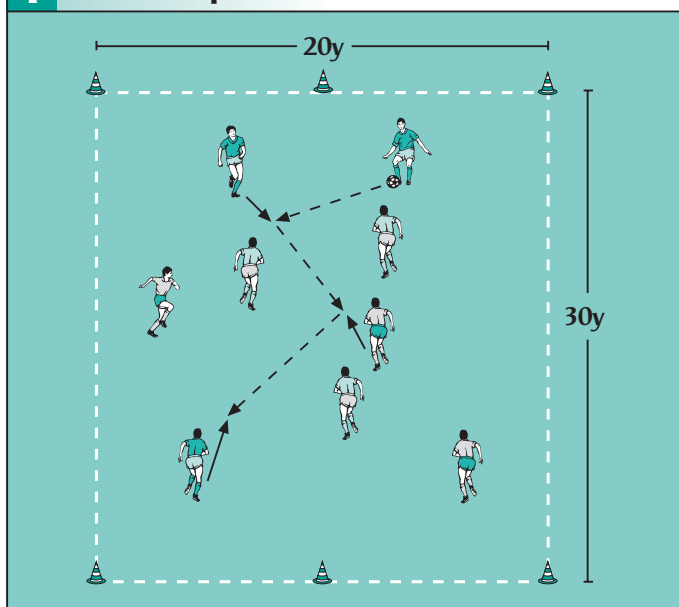
An individual's ability to dribble, shield, control and pass is paramount to the success of any tactic. However, the group's ability to support each other in combination plays, movement into space, and penetration of balls and timing of runs must also be understood and executed well.

Sample exercises

On the next few pages, we present a series of exercises designed to systematically prepare players for playing 11 v. 11 matches in a 3-4-3 formation with a strong, attack-oriented playing style.

PRACTICE SESSION

1 3 v. 3 + 3 possession



Setup

- Mark out a 20 x 30-yard grid.
- Players form three teams of three and play 6 v. 3.

Sequence

- Attackers keep possession of the ball for one minute, then switch.
- Defenders score by winning the ball, attackers by completing six passes.

Coaching points

- Attackers must create short support around the ball, middle support in the heart of the three defenders and long support on the opposite side of the grid.
- Also focus on passing angles, first touch, ball movement and communication.

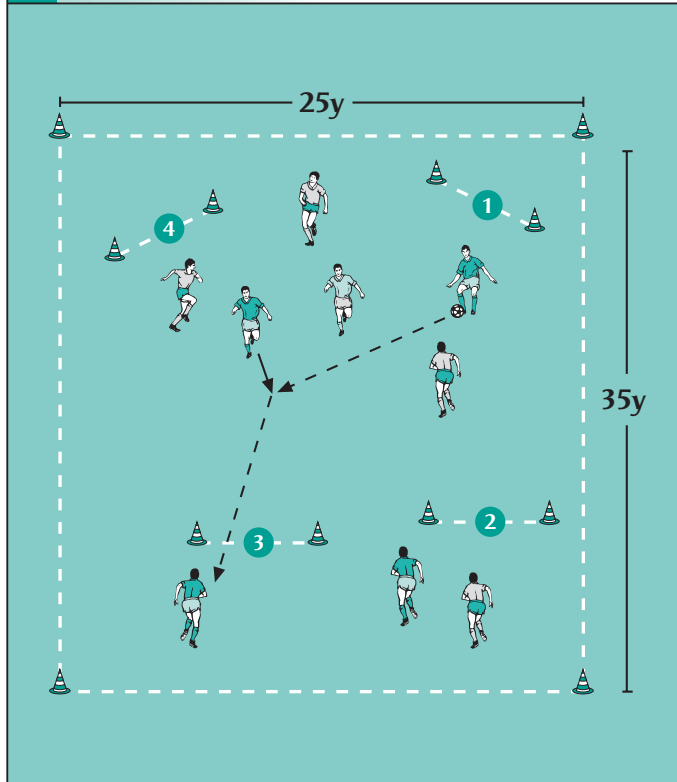
Variations

- Attackers immediately switch to defense whenever they lose the ball.
- The player who lost the ball runs around a far cone before rejoining the game.
- Limit touches to four, two or one (emphasize shielding).



PRACTICE SESSION

2 4 v. 4 + 1 on four goals



Setup

- Mark out a 25 x 35-yard grid with four goals, each three yards wide.
- Players form two teams of four plus one neutral player.

Sequence

- Attackers score one point each time the ball is passed through a goal and received and controlled on the other side.

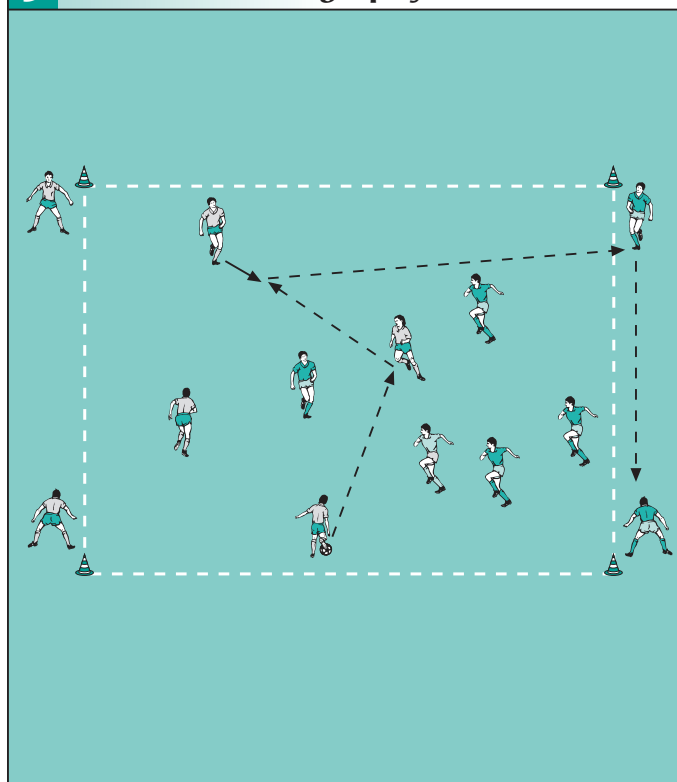
Coaching points

- Spread out to cover the grid, and switch play quickly to attack an open goal.
- Focus on communication, quick ball movement, seizing opportunities, quality and weight of passes, first touch, timing of runs, and reading the game.

Variations

- Attackers score one point for six passes and two for passing through a goal.
- Attackers score by dribbling through goals.
- Attackers can only score once on each goal.

3 4 v. 4 + 1 with target players



Setup

- Mark out a 20 x 40-yard grid.
- form two teams of four, plus one neutral player in the grid and two target players at each end.

Sequence

- Attackers score by passing to target players; ball then goes to the other team.
- Target players pass back and forth until new team is ready for the ball.
- Attackers may pass back to their own target players if necessary.
- Teams switch roles and positions periodically.

Coaching points

- Create support behind, beside and ahead of the ball.
- Think ahead and make eye contact before passing and receiving.

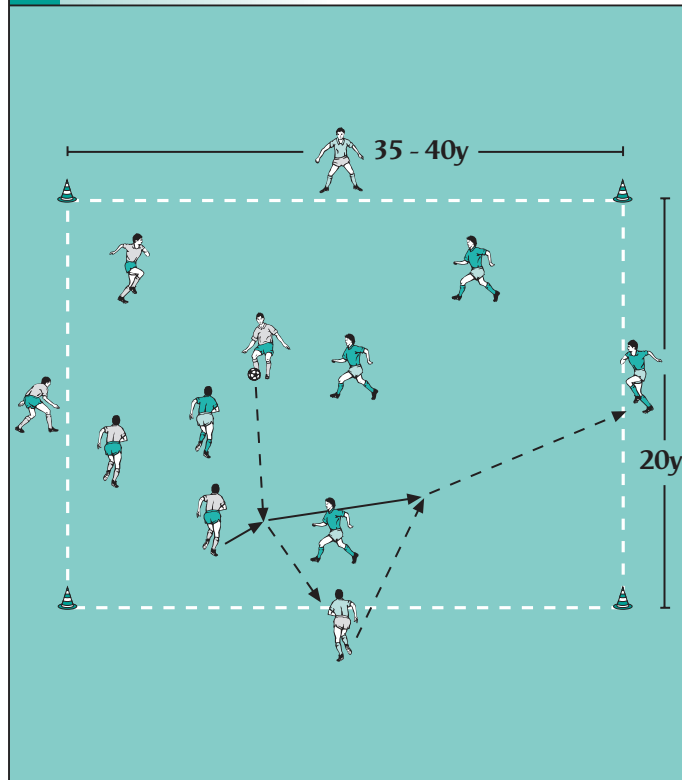
Variation

- Attackers keep the ball after scoring and attack the other end.



PRACTICE SESSION

4 4 v. 4 with wall players



Setup

- Mark out a 20 x 40-yard grid.
- Players form two teams of four with two neutral players outside the grid and one target player at each end.

Sequence

- Attackers score by passing to target players; ball then goes to the other team.
- Neutral players support attackers and play wall passes (limited to one touch).

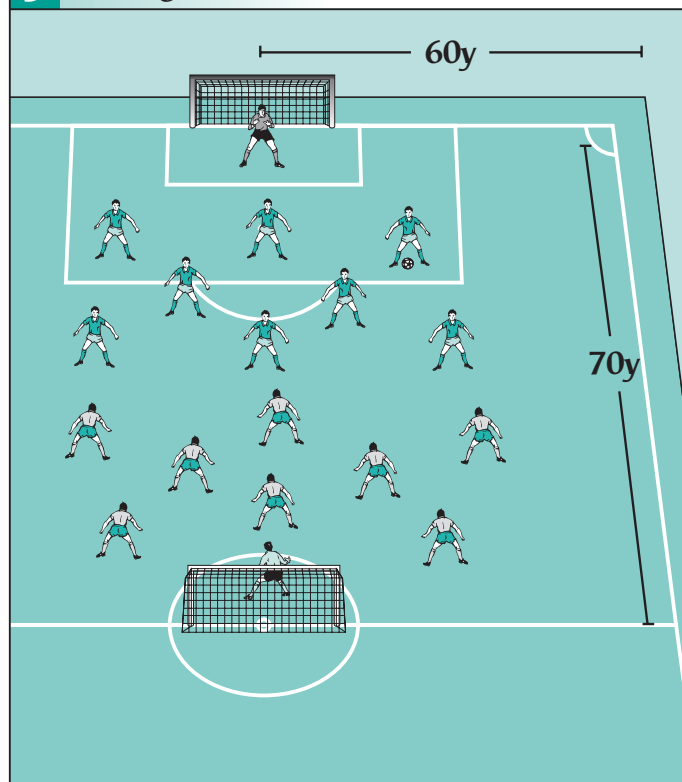
Coaching points

- Focus on passing angles, deception, quality and speed of wall passes, eye contact and passing technique.

Variations

- Attackers keep ball after scoring and immediately attack the other end.
- Limit number of touches and/or playing time.
- Players who pass to target players switch positions with them.
- All players must be their own half before a target player can pass to them.

5 Final game



Setup

- Mark out a 70 x 60-yard grid with two standard goals.
- Players form two teams of eight plus goalkeepers.

Sequence

- Teams play 9 v. 9 to score on the goals.
- Play begins with the attackers up 1:0. They must keep possession and defend their lead for five minutes. They should try to kill the game in the opposition's half. They cannot score until their opponents have tied the game; after that, either team can score.
- After five minutes, play starts over with the other team in possession.
- At the very end, play a ten-minute game with no restrictions.

Coaching points

- Because players are making the transition to the 11 v. 11 game, they should work on using the entire width of the field (crossing etc.).