

## Youth Training

### What formation to play and what style to consider

For the youth coach a lot of energy is often put in to deciding what formation to employ. Youth coaches can become very concerned with systems and formations and sometimes at the expense of individual player development. The challenge is to coach players in both the technical and tactical elements of the game relative to their developmental level and maintain competitiveness in their games.

There are certainly key considerations to be made in choosing the formation of a youth team and they are often similar to the considerations made in senior soccer.

- Personnel
- Coach's preference
- Game context
- The opponent
- Regional or national characteristics
- Player development

#### **Personnel:**

While at the youngest ages players need to have an exposure to different positions it is also necessary to consider how the collection of the talent pool can best be deployed on the field. Each player needs to be evaluated in terms of their technical and tactical understanding, their physical capabilities and their mentality/psychology. This evaluation by the coach has to be part of the decision of which formation to use. Players with genuine improvisational skills will likely play higher on the field for example and may mean a three forward set up is suitable over two. Similarly the technical ability of players to cross the ball and finish wide deliveries can impact the use of width in a formation.

A youth coach with a good grasp of the principles of both attack and defense coupled with the ability to understand the physical, cognitive and social skills of the players will be able to make informed decisions on what formation to start the game with and how to manipulate it during the game, especially through the implementation of substitutes.

#### **Coach's preference:**

The comfort level of every youth coach in how they deploy their players is very important. The coach must have an understanding and a confidence in the formation the players are asked to perform within. No one formation in of itself is too defensive or offensive it is more important to understand the freedom within the formation that the players are given by the coach to get forward or to hold back.

Coach's preference will depend largely on two key considerations, their depth of knowledge and their competitive personality. As such much of the fine work in the sport sciences dedicated to sport psychology and coaching mentality is something that coaches are increasingly availing themselves of.

#### **Game context:**

In United States Soccer Federation coaching education the SAID principle is discussed at length. This acronym stands for Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demands and essentially addresses game context. The youth coach often has less control of the context of the game than the senior coach. For example kick off times; game frequency, etc are not always a controllable for the youth coach. Weather conditions are a fairly obvious way to consider formations and style. Extreme conditions of wind can dictate the need to keep the ball on the ground and get more

midfielders around the ball. Equally defending facing into the wind could require getting more players capable of winning aerial duels in central positions and will certainly impact the depth on the field of the team.

One of the greatest challenges facing the youth coach is the prevalence of tournaments which can offer up a number of games in short order relative to the more relaxed frequency of league play. A formation and style that is more physically conservative and able to operate with a lot of personnel changes will be appropriate in a tournament setting.

Other game context concerns for the coach occur in the flow of the action. Injuries, score line, time on the clock, for example, require that the coach can manage the formation and the players understanding of that formation on an ongoing basis. Half time is an excellent opportunity for the coach to tweak things on the basis of the evaluation of the first half in large part through the shifting of positional roles based on what the game challenges are.

### **The opponent:**

It is not a common for the youth coach to have the opportunity to scout an opponent. When it is, however, the formation of the team can be chosen to either negate the strengths of an opponent or exploit their weaknesses. A coach may identify key individuals on the opposition that may need to be covered by a strict marking system or by several players working in tandem. In another example in order to prevent the opponents attacking through their wide backs and maybe to challenge these players in possession playing with three forwards could be a front line formation that makes sense.

A consideration for the coach in regard to the opponent would be if their team is going to react to what the opponent presents or rather to be proactive and plan to play to the strengths of their own players. The youth coach does have to make a choice between primarily adjusting to the opponent as opposed to "directing" their own formation if they have knowledge of their opponent.

### **Regional or national characteristics:**

Within soccer in America it is possible to track certain trends in formations employed by coaches. Ten to twelve years ago the base formation of 3-5-2 was very much a part of the Men's National Team philosophy, certainly through youth ranks up to the Olympic Team. As such at that time many college and youth coaches wanted to play 3-5-2 because it was popular and because a lot of our coach education programs were strong in addressing the formation or system. Currently in youth soccer in America a lot of coaches have abandoned employing a sweeper system because zonal systems of play are very much in fashion. Observation of international soccer and professional leagues clearly suggests trends and fashions in formations. Without doubt it can be suggested that styles and formations can be tracked with ethnic preferences and even the local climatic conditions the game is typically played in.

### **Player development:**

For the youth coach formations should be decided based on a variety of factors and getting a result and being competitive should undeniably be part of that. More importantly, however, the youth coach is charged with developing players and formations can be an essential part of that development both technically and in terms of game understanding.

All youth coaches are capable of offering three numbers; 4-4-2, 3-5-2, 4-3-3, etc in response to a question about the formation of their team. Such a response is hollow if the follow up question of why this formation is a choice and how the players have been trained within it cannot be answered. It is not adequate coaching to choose a formation, but to fail to account for its relevance to your team and teaching the team to play within it. For a start taking a leaf out of Dutch soccer coaching by including the goalkeeper into the thinking makes sense, so 4-4-2 now becomes 1-4-4-2.

Teaching zonal defending to individual and groups of players is critical and yet too often players are asked to play a zonal formation with no clear understanding of how to do so. It may be far easier to play with a sweeper yards deep of the play and ask the other defenders to mark a designated individual on the other team. It is easier because it does not necessarily require training for players to follow and understand the direction. The challenge, however, is that a sweeper who drops off continually often never experiences the challenge of tackling and tracking and very commonly is not encouraged to handle the ball. The youth player asked to mark a single opponent may become effective at destroying play, but may not have any sense of how to cover space and read the game and is also not encouraged to handle the ball. Attacking movement and combination between two or three forwards requires training and attention, but again too often youth coaches are content to identify their formation without having trained the players technically and tactically within it.

Simply put the better the teaching, the better the player ability and game understanding and consequently the more flexibility and adaptability the players will have within their team and in regards to moving on to advanced levels of play. Certainly the coach's choice and understanding of formations is a key in player development.

**Summary:**

Smaller sided versions of the game 6 vs.6 or 8 vs. 8 can equally be included in the discussion of what formation and style to play. In the smaller model it can be helpful to introduce the players to formations for the first time by considering at first just two lines of players and the goalkeeper. Then at a later stage players need to appreciate the three lines of the team, and with increased numbers, more options and decisions both in and out of possession.

The challenge for the youth coach is to make their choice of formation and playing style based on the myriad of factors, relevant to their team and situation, which can inform it. Winning is an essential ingredient of the game and the youth coach must manage that reality while all the time challenging and stretching each of their players and themselves.

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