

How we do soccer at GSA and why

At Greenbelt Soccer Alliance (GSA), our guidelines for providing soccer to local youth are those of the US Soccer Federation (USSF) and US Youth Soccer Association (USYSA). Realize that these are the organization that develop players for the most competitive environments with the ultimate goal of providing players for the US National Teams that can compete successfully internationally. But these same guidelines are ones that encourage the largest soccer participation in a very fun environment at the youth levels. Let's look at the USSF and USYSA guidelines and consider the rationale behind them.

USSF and USYSA recommend that small-sided soccer should be used and that no standings should be maintained up through U12. Participation in tournaments with winners and losers should not be encouraged and awards or trophies should not be given.

What is the rationale behind these recommendations?

1. Small-Sided Soccer

- 1.1. Small-sided soccer is the dominant soccer model internationally based on the concept that the size of teams and the size of the field should gradually increase as players age and develop. It emphasizes maximum interaction with the ball and the idea that all players should be involved in offense and defense. This concept translates to all players being more involved in the game and thus more fun for the kids.
- 1.2. At the youngest level (up to U8) no goalies should be used
 - a) we want to encourage our young players to aggressively go for the ball wherever it is on the field. Positioning young players teaches them to not try to win the ball but rather to stay in one spot on the field. These are the wrong instincts to build. So in the same way that goalies should not be used, players should be free to run anywhere on the field to try and win the ball. Small fields encourage this type of free-for-all aggressive play.
- 1.3. Advantages of playing small-sided games
 - a) More time with the coach/facilitator since team sizes are smaller
 - b) Energetic workouts due to playing both offense and defense
 - c) More efficient use of field space
 - d) Matches can be played simultaneously across a full size field
 - e) Children are physically more efficient in smaller space
 - f) Children are actively involved for a longer period of time
 - g) It takes less time to score a goal or advance to goal
 - h) Greater success rate for the players
 - i) All of the above translates to more fun for the kids

2. No scores, no standings, no tournaments

- 2.1. USSF believes that the dominant reason that the US is not able to compete at the highest levels internationally is the lack of a "soccer culture" in the US. A "soccer culture" is one where, when children have free time to play, they choose to be outside kicking a soccer ball either by themselves or with a few friends. The great soccer players have developed their skills because they love to play the game and are motivated by the pure joy of playing with the ball. USSF recommendations are guided by the desire to create a play-oriented environment for children that encourages this sort of relationship with the game, a type of play that they refer to as "street soccer". Toward that end USSF recommends that:
 - a) **No standings be maintained in leagues at the youth levels.** At the youth levels, the emphasis should be on play; developing skills in a fun environment and not winning games. Kids are naturally competitive and like to win but at the youth levels the focus

- should be on fun, player development and participation. Recording scores and maintaining standings serves parents' and coaches' desires to feel that their kids are advancing but does not accelerate player development and, in fact, can deter it.
- b) **No tournaments participated in or awards given.** USSF recommends that at the U10 and U12 youth levels soccer “festivals”, where all teams participate and there are no winners and losers, take the place of competitive tournaments. Also, no awards or trophies should be given. Instead the motivation should be the joy of playing soccer.
 - c) **The soccer environment be about fun and giving kids a chance to make decisions.** Playing soccer in a fun environment with a lack of adult-induced pressure to win attempts to replicate the “street soccer” experience that has permitted many of the great international players to develop their skills. In today's society we do not permit our children to play unattended as in the past, but that does not mean that the adults have to dictate how the kids play. We should let them, at least at times, experience a soccer environment with a minimum of adult structure that lets the kids make the rules and determine how play will proceed.
 - d) **Activities should emphasize ball control over organization.** The single most important skill for a soccer player to develop is that of ball control. Activities should be created that emphasize developing ball control skills over learning positional structures. Coaches that require their players to stay in fixed positions at young ages will win more games. But those coaches that encourage their players instead to always be going for the ball are encouraging the development of soccer instincts and skills that will serve the player more in their future.
 - e) **All players are guaranteed at least 50% playing time.** 70% or more is desired. Skill development for all players is the goal and there is no substitute for playing time during the games. No child should sit out more than half of a game at the youth levels.

At GSA, we attempt to follow the above recommendations as closely as possible. These guidelines are the ones that USSF believes will build the strongest soccer players. At GSA, we believe that these guidelines are also excellent for encouraging the largest possible participation in soccer at the recreational level and therefore serve the goals of encouraging community recreation the most effectively.

Following these guidelines, we at GSA encourage participation in the PGSI league in Hyattsville in the spring and fall up through the U12 level. PGSI provides small-sided soccer with no scores recorded and no standings maintained. The last day of each season is for a soccer festival where all teams play 3 short games and all players receive a small award (typically a ribbon) at the end of the festival.

GSA team sizes are maintained at a maximum of twice the number of players on the field. This enables us to guarantee minimum playing time of 50%. This format requires more coach volunteers when compared with organizations that permit more children on a team and do not guarantee minimum playing time. If we have enough coaches, we will make the teams even smaller to give 70% playing time per player. Beyond U12 we recommend pure recreational play to continue in the Takoma league where minimum playing time is guaranteed, standings are not maintained but play occurs on full-sized fields.

During the summer, GSA sponsors an intramural 4v4 summer soccer program that attempts to replicate the “street soccer” environment advocated by USSF and USYSA. No fixed teams are maintained, no scores are recorded and no standings are kept. The focus is on a minimum of adult intervention where the players can experience the free-flow of soccer for the pure fun of playing.

Beginning in 2013, Greenbelt Soccer Alliance will lay the groundwork to sponsor teams to play “travel soccer” for some of our older players (U11 and up). Travel leagues are affiliated with Maryland State Youth Soccer Association and provide a selected, higher pressure environment with more of an emphasis on winning games. The Baltimore Beltway Soccer League is one such travel soccer league that GSA will explore joining. Travel soccer is the path upward for the more committed players who want the most competitive environment although GSA will still guarantee 50% minimum playing time for players on these selected teams.

First some motivation:

In a painstakingly researched piece, USC master's candidate Ryan McCormack authors this treatise on the current moment in time for US Youth Soccer. Ryan grew up playing soccer in California's Coast Premier League and served as a youth coach for three seasons and is presently with the Arizona Hammers in a leadership capacity.

The #1 Issues that Jurgen Klinsman needs to address in Youth Soccer in the US:

1. The United States Lacks a Soccer Culture

This is the biggest obstacle facing the growth of American soccer. In other countries, soccer is as important as family and religion. It is the sport that every kid growing up plays first, and a major part of this is how relatively inexpensive the game is to play. In poorer countries, kids need nothing but a ball and some space. They're not playing twice a week at practice. They're playing seven days a week just for fun. And this is where many of the great soccer nations stand out from the United States. As Beall puts it, "Many diversions exist here in the US that are not available to people in other countries." Here, because there is greater wealth than in other countries, some of our gifted athletes that could succeed in soccer play sports like football, basketball, or hockey in organized settings where the cost is greater because there is not that cultural tie. Those costs are often reduced by high schools and college funds to aid in allowing more kids to play the game as costs grow. On top of that, these are the sports that are most widely televised in the US. Kids are able to see the game played at the highest level, pick up new techniques or tactical observations, and then go out and practice these skills. They are driven to play more because the sport is easy to access. Soccer, on the other hand, is much more difficult to find on TV on a consistent basis. As a result, this education and push for technical mastery of skills is lost, and true development falls to youth clubs, where the kids may only be for 3-4 hours a week. Development is stunted because the sport is not engrained into American culture yet.

Klinsmann acknowledged this same issue being the biggest difference between American players and players from global soccer powers:

"One thing is certain: The American kids need hundreds and even thousands more hours to play. That is a really crucial thing. If it's through their club team, if it's through themselves, whatever it is. The difference between the top 10 in the world and where we are right now is the technical capabilities and the higher pace. In a high-pace, high-speed environment, to keep calm on the ball, to sharpen your minds so you know what to do with the ball before you get the ball. That's the difference right now. You might have technically gifted players here, but once you set the pace two levels higher, they lose that technical ability because they're getting out of breath or their mental thought process isn't fast enough." – Jurgen Klinsmann (courtesy of Grant Wahl and SI)

To encourage the development of a soccer culture among US youth, the focus of youth soccer organizations should be on providing a fun, creative environment that permits the players maximum of time interacting with the ball. This is fostered by small-sided format in leagues that do not maintain scores or standings. Tournaments with winners and losers are discouraged for players under the age of 10. Trophies and awards are also discouraged at the youngest level. Let the motivation be on the pure enjoyment of playing soccer. Provide an environment that helps to develop a "street soccer" mentality.. Soccer festivals where there are no ultimate winners are encouraged instead.

From the small-sided manual:

It is a pity that youth soccer is often compared with soccer played by adults. Often there are instructions given by coaches that the children don't understand (also parents shouldn't get involved with the coaching). Small-sided games begin to give the game back to the players and allow a more player-centered soccer environment. When players are motivated to practice their sport, they'll learn more from it and therefore become a better soccer player. So our aim is to get as much pleasure from soccer as possible.

From small-sided manual

Festivals

κ Soccer festivals feature multiple small-sided mini-games per event (e.g., 10 games X 10 minutes) with no elimination and no ultimate winner. Soccer festivals create an atmosphere of enjoyment, stemming from the fun of participation in the game and allowing play to be the center of the experience. Coaching consists of positive comments about the player's efforts and cheering. Fans cheer for the players on both teams.

κ We believe that soccer festivals should replace soccer tournaments for all players under the age of ten.

We also endorse and support the movement to prohibit U10 teams from traveling to events that promote winning and losing and the awarding of trophies.

κ Teams are participating in a vast number of tournaments each season. The participation in these tournaments by youth teams often creates a "win-at-all-cost" attitude and has a negative influence on player development.

κ This high level of participation in tournaments affects the development of the player in the following ways:

- a) Time is reduced for development (i.e. training)
- b) Excessive play at competitive tournaments is detrimental to individual growth and development
- c) Winning becomes the main issue for the coach rather than the long term development of the player

U6 : 3v3, no goalie, no scores, no standings, ball size 3

Length: minimum 20 yards maximum 30 yards
Width: minimum 15 yards maximum 25 yards

U8: 4v4, no goalie, no scores, no standings, ball size 3

Length: minimum 25 yards maximum 35 yards
Width: minimum 20 yards maximum 30 yards

U10: 6v6, no scores, no standings, ball size 4

Length: minimum 45 yards maximum 60 yards
Width: minimum 35 yards maximum 45 yards

U12: 8v8, scores, standings, tournaments may begin, ball size 4

Length: minimum 70 yards maximum 80 yards
Width: minimum 45 yards maximum 55 yards

References:

1. Player Development Guidelines: Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States, US Youth Soccer Association, D License Training Materialg
2. Small Sided Games Manual, US Youth Soccer