

The Logistics of Small-Sided Games
Part I: Community “Play Days”
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January 2001

The small-sided games movement has evolved worldwide in response to the steady demise of street soccer. As a phenomenon, street soccer remains strong in only Latin America, Africa, and in some parts of the Middle and Far East. In street soccer cultures, children as young as five can be found playing with their peers and older “friends” in ever-varying configurations of games. Two or three players are enough to start the days’ play and, on occasion, the numbers may swell to resemble small mob scenes. Goals are made from whatever is available and play is always between two goals, the ball may be nothing more than a bundle of rags, there are no scrimmage vests, no referees, and no coaches. Rule disputes are settled by the players, and the outcome of games is often decided by family meal times, evening curfews, the availability of light, or some agreed upon number, such as “ten halftime-twenty winner.” The severity of the bug bites in the summer was, as I remember, reason to keep moving, not reason to quit! During school days, arriving early meant more opportunities to play in smaller-sided games before the sleepyheads arrived, and the lunch hour game was interrupted only long enough to gobble down food before resuming play.

In the 1980’s, with their street soccer cultures disappearing or already extinct, progressive Western soccer federations turned to small-sided games in an attempt to compensate for the loss of skillful, imaginative players. Given the sheer volume of touches experienced over time in street soccer play, the number of players on the field was never an issue. But when “soccer time” became organized and reduced to only two or three hours each week, it became necessary to maximize ball contacts by reducing the number of players competing for possession. In soccer, dribbling skills are essential, and the creative dribbler was, and remains, the most prized talent.

Young children come into organized soccer at the suggestion or urging of their parents, and “play” to a five or six year-old is not complicated by the adult concept of “competition.” Sadly, while all parents want their child to have a positive experience in sport, for many, the specter of “win now” has become more important than the process of learning and having fun. For many very good reasons beyond the scope of this piece, children below the age of eight should not be placed in competitive situations in which the outcome influences their enjoyment and participation, and their right to learn and dream. For these reasons, this article suggests ways to restructure community youth soccer programs.

Play Days

At the U-6 and U-8 levels, “Play Days” are recommended as the alternative to forming stable, season-long teams. Young children start to identify with the concept of “team” around the age of eight or nine, so forming stable teams and having coaches and referees

and rules for these players is an adult-imposed condition that eliminates most connections to the ideals of street soccer and free play.

Divisions

To organize Play Days, start by identifying the number of players in each age band. The five and six year-olds should play together, as should the seven and eight year-olds. Any “obviously” dominant sixes should be moved up. Boys and girls should play together, but accommodations should also be made for girls who want to play with other girls. For the purposes of this article, we will assume there are 60 players in the 5-6 group and 100 players in the 7-8 group.

Playing numbers

The recommendations for playing numbers are 3v3 for U-6’s and 4v4 for U-8’s. The possibilities for the use of goalkeepers at the U-8 level are discussed below.

Field dimensions, goals, and markings

In reality for five and six year-olds, there is no real practical advantage to marking out “fields” as the small numbers will always bring the game back towards the goal as soon as their skills allow them to turn the ball round. Cones or corner flags can be used for goals, and the goals should be eight yards wide to encourage vision and scoring. Placing the goals 25 yards apart from each other will form the field; however, if sidelines must be used, the rectangle should be 25 yards by 20 yards to reduce the number of sideline restarts.

For the seven and eight year-olds, the recommended field size is 40 yards by 25 yards, with goals six yards in width. While cones can again be used to form the goals, flags are better. Currently, four and six yard wide goals are the most common sizes used for youth play. It should not be thought of as unusual to have a mixture of regular and “corner flag” goals.

At both the U-6 and U-8 level, small cones should be used to mark out the perimeters of the playing areas. While large cones are easier to identify, they are more dangerous and obtrusive when used as part of field lines that are “in-play.”

Field logistics

With 60 players in the U-6 division, a maximum of ten 25x20 yard fields would be required for all the players to compete at one time. In the U-8 division with 100 players, the maximum number of 40x25 yard fields required would also be ten.

U-6’s

If the playing space is an open park area, creating fields is a simple matter of laying out cones and planting corner flags; making ten small fields takes only a few minutes for a small group of adults.

If the playing spaces must be created on existing soccer fields, the following guidelines would apply. On an 80x40 yard field, which is currently used for some 8v8 games, six

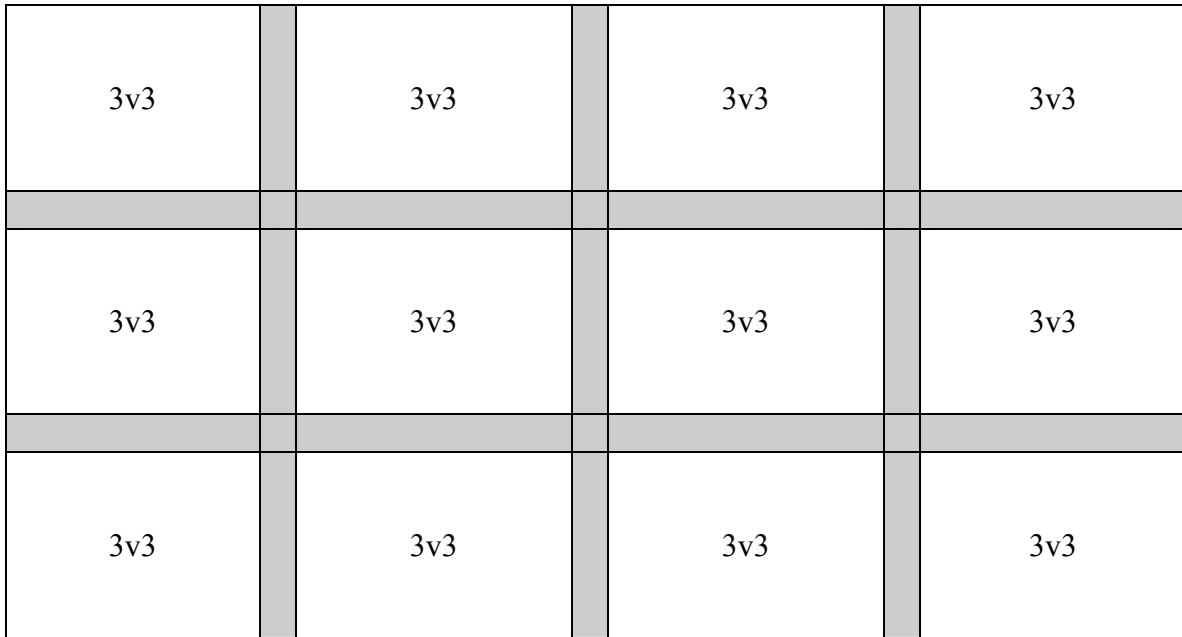
25x20 yard fields (three long by two across) can be created to accommodate up to 36 U-6 players (six games x 6 players). If the existing goals are fixed, the games will all share a common sideline and the central games will also share common goal lines. In the case of fixed goals, each field should be shortened by 2 yards to create a buffer zone in front of the goalposts and eliminate any possibility of collisions. However, if space is available, starting to mark the fields to the outside of the fixed goals, will require that only the central games share a common boundary. If space is available and there are no fixed goals, all the shared lines can be eliminated by creating a five-yard buffer between each field.

3v3	3v3	3v3
3v3	3v3	3v3

On a 100x50 yard space, which is a small regulation soccer field, eight 25x20 yard fields (four long by two across) can be created with shared goal lines and a 10-yard walk-space in the center. Lining out the fields in this way also avoids any potential collisions with fixed goals. In this space, 48 children (8 games x 6 players) can play at one time with three fields on each half sharing goal lines. If the regulation goals are not fixed, a buffer zone can be created between each field.

3v3	3v3	3v3	3v3
3v3	3v3	3v3	3v3

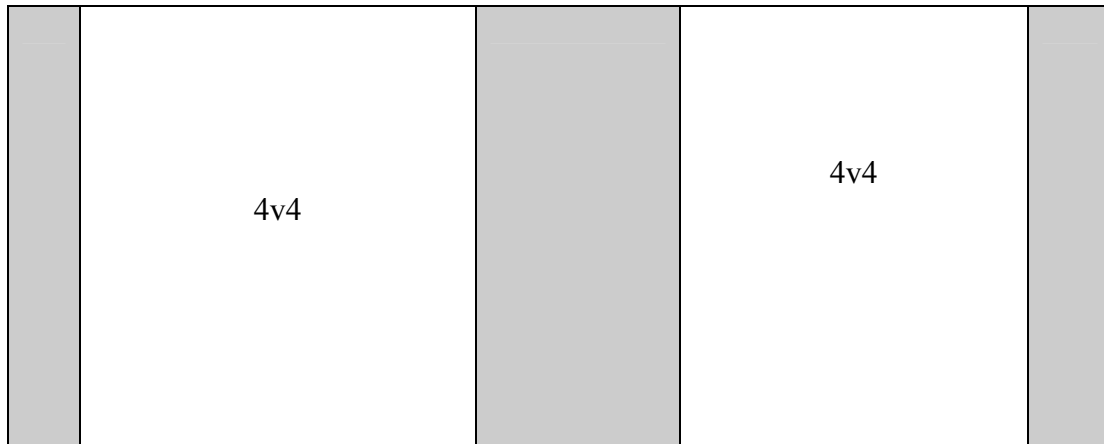
If the existing space is a regulation soccer field of 120x75 yards, twelve 25x20 yard fields (four long by three across) can be created to accommodate up to 72 U-6 players (twelve fields x six players). No shared sidelines would be necessary and a buffer area must be created in front of any fixed goals. Starting the fields on the top of the respective goal areas will still provide for two to three yards of buffer space between each field.



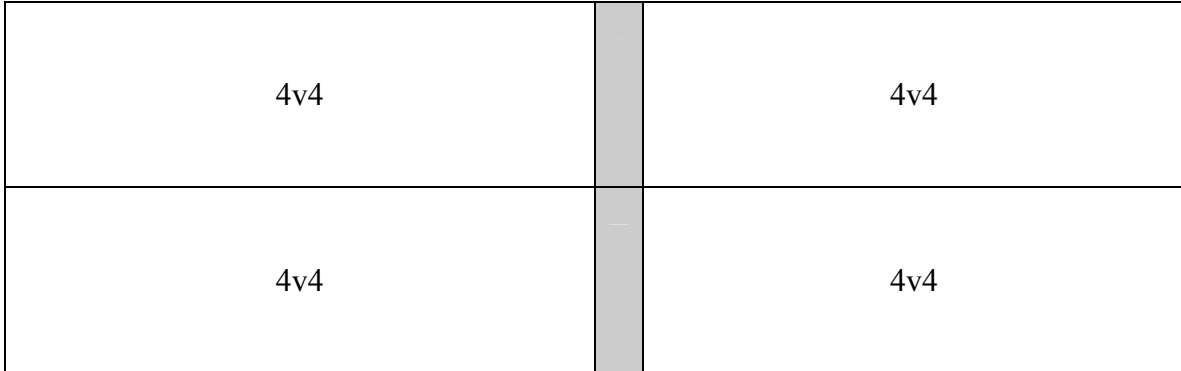
U-8's

If the playing space is an open park area, creating ten 40x25 yard fields is again achieved by dropping cones and planting corner flags.

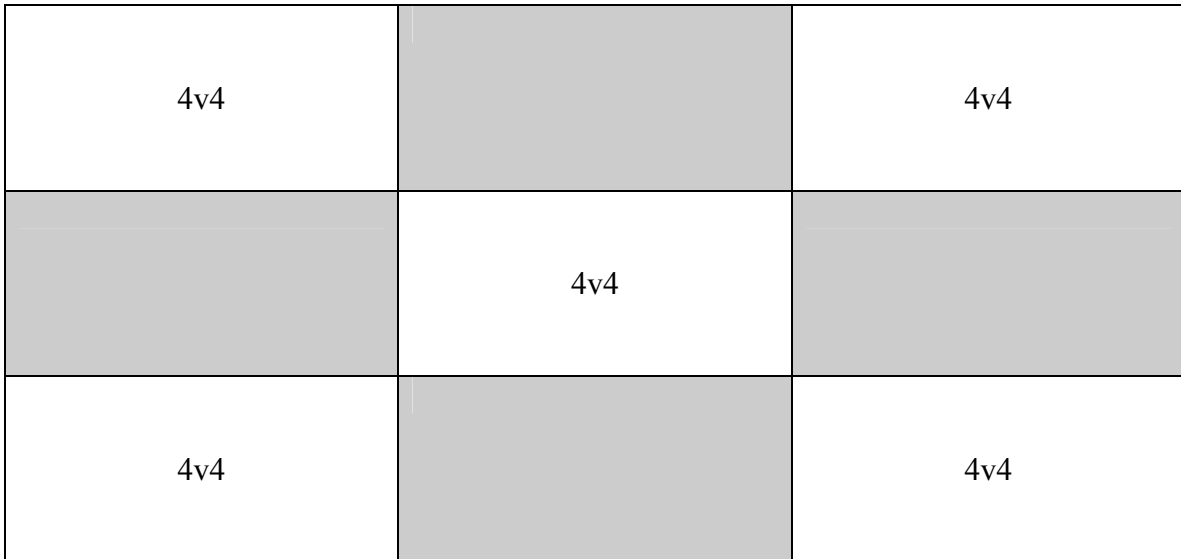
On an 80x40 yard field, two 40x25 yard fields can be created to accommodate up to 16 U-8 players. The fields should be organized across the width of the existing space to eliminate any possibility of a collision with fixed goals and to avoid the need for a common sideline.



On a 100x50 yard space, four 40x25 yard fields (two long by two across) can be created with shared sidelines and a walk-space across the existing center of the field. In this way, 32 U-8 players can compete at one time. If the regulation goals are fixed, the field marking should begin at the top of the goal area.



If the existing space is a regulation soccer field of 120x75 yards, five 40x25 yard fields (one in each corner and one vertically in the center) can be created to accommodate up to 40 U-8 players (five games x eight players). No shared sidelines would be necessary.



To summarize: In our scenario, with 60 and 100 U-6 and U-8 players respectively, the number of fields required to accommodate the players at one time, without any major substitutions or absences, would be as follows. If only a limited number of fields are available, playing groups can be staggered in relation to the space available.

	80x40 yard fields	100x50 yard fields	120x75 yard fields
U-6's 60 total players	Up to 36 players per field 2 fields required for 60 players	Up to 46 players per field 2 fields required for 60 players	Up to 72 players per field 1 field required for 60 players
U-8's 100 total players	Up to 16 players per field 6 fields required for 100 players	Up to 32 players per field 3 fields required for 100 players	Up to 40 players 3 fields required for 100 players

Number and duration of “games” per Play Day

Young children play with great enthusiasm and energy for short periods and then they rest or move onto something else. With this in mind, Play Days for U-6’s and U-8’s should not exceed a total of 60 minutes of active play and feature multiple short duration games against a variety of opponents. The recommendation for U-6’s is that they play no more than six 8-minute games for a total playing time of 48 minutes, and the U-8’s play no more than six 10-minute games for a total playing time of 60 minutes. Weather conditions, field conditions, and enthusiasm should help determine the exact number of games in each division per day.

Uniforms

If possible, players should receive two T-shirts for use at games and practices. One shirt should be light and the other dark. In reality, small-sided games do not require clear identification. However, if funds are available, shirts provide practical keepsakes.

Staffing and Coaching at Games and Practices

With 60 children in the U-6 division, up to six coaches will be required to organize the games and practices. The role of these adults is to organize the fields and teams at Play Days and conduct practice sessions.

On Play Days, the primary responsibilities of the coaches, once the games are under way, are to observe and rank the players to determine the various ability levels; to play on the field with the weaker players or weaker teams to help them make progress and experience success; to keep time and help the children rotate between games, to comfort any child in emotional or physical distress; to help settle any lingering rule disputes; and to deter parents from “coaching” their children from the sidelines.

At practices, all the coaches and players should practice together in the same large area, if possible. If this is not possible, one third or one half of the group should practice in the same general area together with an appropriate number of coaches. The coaches are responsible for organizing a steady diet of small-sided games, ranging from 1v1 to 3v3, and providing fun games that are soccer-related. These games should be heavily focused on individual dribbling activities where players have multiple opportunities to manipulate the ball. The coaches should work with 20-30 kids as a “team” and assist each other’s

efforts, rather than struggling alone as isolated individuals. The 2-hour “G” level coaching clinic provides specific information on these activities and is free to OYSAN member groups.

At the U-8 level, 100 children will require between seven (~14 players) and ten (10 players) coaches to organize the practices and games. The responsibilities of these adults on Play Days are the same as the U-6 coaches.

At practices, the range of possible games is influenced by the players’ increased awareness of teammates. Games ranging from 1v1 to 5v5 provide many opportunities to dribble, pass and shoot, and different field shapes and scoring methods should be used to provide different challenges to players. While passing is becoming a more frequent feature of play for seven and eight year-olds, dribbling the ball should remain the major focus of games and other soccer related activities. The 14-hour OYSAN “E” level coaching course provides specific information on these activities.

Referees

For U-6’s, there are no referees; however, a coach should always be within range to help settle any “major” disputes. For U-8’s, the players should be allowed to call their own fouls, goals, and out of bounds. In an ideal situation, U-8 teams should also be free to decide on their own rule modifications! Decisions such as whether corners are taken or not, and whether the goalkeeper can use their hands or not, are common decisions that can be arbitrary decided on a game-by-game basis in a free play environment.

Modified Rules

Kick-ins replace throw-ins. (U-6 and U-8)

No goal kicks. (U-6 and U-8) Play restarts when any player dribbles the ball back into the field or passes to a teammate.

No corner kicks (U-6) Play is restarted in the same manner as a goal kick.

No offside (U-6 and U-8)

All fouls are indirect (U-6 and U-8)

Goalkeepers

Three basic goalkeeping options evolved from street soccer. The most basic was that no one could use their hands around the goal. The second was that the defending player closest to the goal became the goalkeeper for that part of the action, and that players was then free to run the ball out of the goal and start the next attack. This was the best and most common solution when no player wanted to be the goalkeeper. The final option was to have a rotating goalkeeper. This option became customary when the number of players grew above four or five per side. The rotation was usually based on when goals were conceded, but spending too long in goal was grounds for grumbling and so time spent in goal was also a consideration. It is recommended that goalkeepers, in some form, be introduced at the U-8 level, but not with five and six year-olds.

Rotations of players

There are a number of ways to rotate players on Play Days, and using a variety of these configurations provides opportunities for more players to experience success and failure, and winning and losing. Here are the most common options.

Random rotation by Play Day. As players arrive at the fields, they are randomly assigned to teams at the start of play each day. This can be achieved in two ways. The most common approach is to bring the entire group together and assigning each player a number corresponding to a field: six or eight players will be on field #1, six to eight on field #2, etc. Once in the correct space, the players are helped to form their teams for the day, if necessary, and play resumes. With this option, players should be encouraged to start playing “warm-up” soccer games on their own until the bulk of the players arrive.

The second random rotation option is to assign players to teams as they arrive at the field. The first six or eight are sent to start play on field #1, the next six or eight to field #2, etc. With this method, players arriving early automatically get more playing time while the bulk of the players arrive.

Random rotation by game. Players can be rotated onto new teams after each game. This is recommended as a possible option for U-8’s, but not U-6’s. With this format, the players return to a central area after each game, and new teams are formed by lining the children up and re-numbering them into new teams. This takes a little more work from the coaches, but is a fun way to create individual competition within team play. As long as the players are not standing in the same positions they occupied for the previous “count-off,” each team will have new members. With 100 participants, walking down the line and numbering the players 1-25 will result in 25 teams of four. With this format, teams #1 and #2 always play on field A, teams #3 and #4 always play on field B, etc.

Ability groupings. Players have more or less ability with the ball at every age level. After one or two days observing a group of young children, it becomes readily apparent who has a sense of the game; who is immature and avoids participation; who can play, given more time and space; who is physically advanced and can dominate the smaller kids; who thinks out solutions; who is agile and can run, etc. By labeling players as, for example, “Red,” “White” and “Blue” for the purpose of creating balanced teams, it is possible to match players of different abilities together and create more games that are closer in score. The weaker players learn by watching and participating with the stronger ones, and the stronger ones learn how to compensate for weaker teammates. With this approach, the teams are pre-determined and stay together for a day or two, before new configurations are announced.

This approach also provides opportunities to occasionally create play that is stratified by ability. As a one-off approach, this is a good way to change the dynamics of a Play Day, however, this method should not be used as the “regular” approach with young children.

For the motivated club or community, the ability-grouping scenario can provide an opportunity to be creative with the better players. Like golf, a handicapping system can be used to challenge dominant players to do more to score points.

Competition.

If the “Random rotation by Play Day” approach is used, players can report their win-loss record to the coaches at the end of each day’s play. This approach can work at both the U-6 and U-8 level, although competition at the U-6 level is naturally generated from playing games against different opponents and these “records” should never be used to create standings or individual rankings. At the U-8 level, some players are already quite competitive, but many are still easily bruised when they are embarrassed or intimidated. For this reason, mixing and matching players provides the best environment to encourage the positive value of competition while minimizing the not-so-subtle pressures exerted by parents and coaches.

Competition at the U-8 level can be made fun by mixing teams, yet keeping individual scores. This can be achieved by awarding points (3) to every player on a winning team. Points can also be given for every goal scored by a team (win or lose), and for shutouts (1). For example, if a game ends 2-0, each member of the winning team would score 3 points for the win, 2 points for the goals, and 1 point for the shutout, for a total of 6 points. The losing team did not score a goal, so they would not earn any points during that round of play. Tied games are worth one point per team, in addition to goal points. At the end of each game, the teams agree on the score, the players add up their respective points, and their individual number is reported to the central area scorer. At the end of each Play Day, every player has accumulated a point total that can be used to help balance ability groups, if this approach is utilized.

Parent issues

The issue of parents in sport is a fascinating study, and I highly recommend The Cheers and the Tears, by Dr. Shane Murphy, for anyone concerned about the current state of the youth sport experience. In short, it has becoming increasingly more apparent that parents are driving decisions about the direction of youth sport. The impact of this shift is that the needs and interests of the parents often supercede the needs and interests of the players. Social power, ego, future financial gain, and the child’s perceived athletic prowess and possibilities are just some of the reasons why some parents have turned the fun and wonderment of children’s play into a competitive cauldron. Despite the arguments, protests and pleas of those educated in the field of child development, the “parent knows best” mentality is imposing adult models on youth sport, with alarming consequences. It is strongly suggested that communities examine their reasons for organizing youth soccer and question the degree to which their program is driven by parents’ interests at the expense of the children.

In closing.

I hope these suggestions help alleviate some of the logistical fears expressed by many coaches and administrators when faced with the prospect of changing to the small-sided games concept. As a professional teacher and coach, I can say unequivocally that this approach is more enjoyable and beneficial for young children, and much less stressful for those parent-coaches who labor to teach impossible concepts, such as skills, positions and team strategy. Children just want to run with the ball, kick the ball, and score goals. At the community level, learning through participating, and having fun in a stress-free

environment are worthy guiding principles. I am available to help any community implement or “sell” this concept to parents, administrators and coaches, and can be reached by phone at the OYSAN office (330) 659-0989, or by e-mail at gers1873@aol.com.

Next: Scaling back the Travel Soccer numbers.