

## YOUTH SOCCER LETTER – Small-Sided Games

At its Annual General Meeting in August, US Soccer reaffirmed its commitment to small-sided soccer as a key component of player development. Beginning September 1, 2003, U-6 programs should involve no more than four players on a team (three is strongly recommended); U-6 should use no more than five (four strongly recommended), and goalkeepers should not be utilized. U-10 soccer teams should be no more than 7-a-side (six is strongly recommended). U-12 can be 11-v.-11, though 8-a-side is strongly recommended.

Most soccer coaches are delighted with the move. Many soccer parents, however, are not.

Even before the motion passed at the San Francisco AGM, Kentucky Youth Soccer Association director of coach and player development [NOTE TO MIKE: THAT IS THE CORRECT TITLE] Fran Kulas distributed the guidelines. A woman calling herself “Anonymous Soccer Mom” responded by e-mail.

Calling the proposed changes “a huge mistake,” she said: “3-v-3 play makes sense in the U-6 division, but beyond that we are setting ourselves up for destroying a sport that has been growing in popularity over the last decade! Healthy competition is a big part of life. Are we attempting to make soccer an uncompetitive, social sport where everyone is ‘a winner’ at the end of the game? My U-8 daughter’s skills and excitement are growing rapidly. I cannot imagine her playing with a reduced amount of players and no goalie! It is the competition that develops character...learning to win and lose and to play as a team.

“Why hold our children back and cause them to lose interest in this sport? Players work in smaller groups at practices to sharpen their skills. Using these small groups in games will destroy the game and result in many players losing interest in the sport altogether. I have talked to many, many parents, all who feel that this would be a big mistake. I ask that you conduct a survey amongst each league in Kentucky before making a decision.”

Kulas’s response serves as a ringing endorsement for small-sided soccer. It is also an eloquent defense of youth soccer on various levels, including skill attainment, character development and enjoyment.

Kulas noted that all 55 state youth association directors of coaching, and US Soccer staff coaches – many holding advanced degrees in childhood development, elementary education or curriculum development -- have been concerned for several years with player retention. One reason players quit is because of negative experiences, often because they rarely touch the ball in game situations. “Our goal as state directors of coaching is to implement changes to retain players, not turn them off,” he wrote.

He compared soccer to baseball, another sport with retention problems. Young players may get only two or three at-bats a game, and – depending on their position – few chances to field the ball. “What is great about soccer is that there are no limits on how many chances a player has to touch the ball,” Kulas said. “Taking it a step further, the chances a player has to touch the ball in a game are exponentially increased when we make the size of the teams smaller. The position statement does not suggest eliminating competition. We haven’t

suggested taking away the goals, or for that matter an objective. Webster's Dictionary defines a 'game' as follows: 'any competitive activity that two parties recreationally engage in according to a set of rules.' By nature and definition, soccer is competitive no matter what the shape of the game or size of teams."

Noting the soccer mother's approval of 3-v.-3 soccer at U-6, Kulas added that there are many similarities and common needs between 5- and 7-year-olds. He continued, "You acknowledge that 'players work in smaller groups at practices to sharpen their skills.' The same concept naturally translates into game situations. Can you imagine the feeling a child has when he or she experiences the same positive feelings in a game as in practice?"

He said the no-goalkeepers guideline "decreases situations where some kids just stand in goal, and increases the opportunity for all players to score more frequently." That leads to increased interest in soccer, along with higher self-esteem.

Kulas continued: "No offense, but it is quite typical that parents disagree with some of these changes. Parents are the ones who care about the score. Kids just want to play and have fun. To adults, fun means winning. To children fun can be scoring a goal, or any positive experience. Sports psychologists have discovered that two main sources of motivation keep coming out at the top of why children play sport: achievement and affiliation. Children don't feel a sense of achievement or affiliation when they stand on a field without touching the ball, while being screamed at to stay in position."

He highlighted what he considers the most powerful and convincing portion of US Soccer's position statement: "Soccer games smaller than 11-v.-11 provide many critical advantages to players, including the ability to repeatedly contact the ball, and the ability to repeatedly experience basic tactical problems. In terms of playing development, this ability to actively participate is directly related to fun and enjoyment, and to the issues surrounding quality of play and retention."

Kulas concluded by quoting Lynn Kidman, a lecturer in sports coaching at the University of Otago in New Zealand: "Winning is a major factor in sports participation, but success is more important. An athlete can win without performing well, or can lose even though the performance has been outstanding. Success is a measure of how well the athletes are participating, how well they are achieving both personal and team goals. Winning is where you compare yourself to others. Success is self-measured, based on individual performance and contribution."

Like coaching directors across the country, Kulas will have to work hard to get his position across. Just three days after receiving the e-mail from the anonymous soccer mom, Kulas got this from a U-8 coach:

"If you go to a non-competitive 3-v.-3 'game' with no goalie, you might as well just have open practices. The purpose of competition is to compete, have fun, and learn the real rules of the game. There is more to soccer than the fundamentals, and quite honestly, you will lose the vast majority of players because of such a change. Young players want and need competition in the form of playing competitive sports. A 3-on-3 opportunity is just not going to achieve

this goal. I am appalled by the provision and will end up quitting if such a result occurs. I pray that this state has the common sense to avoid such a ridiculous proposal. Also, please do not have this e-mail designated as anonymous. I stand proudly by the comments made herein.”

Rather than throwing up his hands, Kulas told *Soccer America's Youth Soccer Letter*: “Implementing small-sided games will be a fun challenge for all in the soccer community, in terms of educating players and coaches. It will be an added challenge to educate parents. Coaches and parents must work together as the player’s support network. Everyone involved in the game must recognize the importance of these relationships.

“While it may at times be frustrating to entertain questions and address issues with parents who are new to the game, it is well worth the time of coaching directors and administrators to do so. Many times people reject new ideas because they are unfamiliar. It is the responsibility of all of us to educate everyone involved in the player development cycle. The first step was adopting the small-sided changes. The successful implementation of these changes will happen only if everyone works to help everyone else understand the methodology behind the changes.”

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