



## Youth Soccer and the Numbers Game

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Recently USYS initiated a "small sided games" initiative for players from U-6 to U-12. The purpose of this initiative is to provide a more realistic soccer environment where size of field, goals, and number of players is appropriate to the physical and psychological parameters of respective age groups. Children are not "little adults" and cannot play soccer physically, tactically, or emotionally like adults.

The imposition of the adult game in adult dimensions according to an adult value system with adult levels of expectation suppresses and inhibits the personal and soccer development of children.

The USYS initiative has generated much discussion in the youth soccer community. I believe the moniker "small sided games" is central in creating confusion regarding the purpose and implementation of age appropriate numbers. A small sided game is one with fewer players than the "real game". There is no progression through thirds of the field and the players are not grouped by blocks (backs, midfield, and forwards). An adult "small sided game" usually involves up to a 6 vs. 6 activities.

By contrast, 8 V 8 for U-12's is not a "small sided game", but a "correct numbered" game or, in fact, the "real game". The team of eight will have a framework (system), a style of play, progression through the thirds in attack and defense, and has four blocks (GK, backs, midfield, and forwards). Played on an appropriate sized field this is not a "small sided game", it is the "real game".

In your discussions with administrators, coaches, parents, and players explore this rationale for "correct numbered" or "age appropriate" games.

Physically, a ten year old child playing on a full sized soccer field is the same as an adult playing on a field 250 yards long by 150 yards wide. The goal would be 48 feet long by 16 feet high (FIFA).

Technically, when there are fewer numbers in a game each child will have more ball contacts. More ball contacts translates to greater technical development because each player will have more opportunities to execute the skills of the game (dribble, pass, shoot; etc.) in a game environment. Constant repetition of skills under pressure of an opponent in a game environment over time promotes skill acquisition, the critical component in that elusive term, player development.

Players have more fun, as they do not have to stand and wait for the ball to come to them. They are close to the ball and can easily involve themselves in the action.

A correct sized field with appropriate numbers will allow more scoring opportunities and therefore more goals. What does the NHL do to resolve tied games in the regular season? They play overtime with only four skaters. The NHL reduces the number of players to increase the possibility of scoring a goal to get a winner.

Tactically, a soccer game may be described as a series of small group tactics (2V2, 3V3; etc.) in the immediate area around the ball, tied together by changes in the point of attack. A change in the point of attack may be lateral to relieve pressure or vertical to gain territory. Youth players playing 11 V 11 cannot strike balls over distances involved on an adult field, so the game remains in a small area with more and more players crushing into the same space. An appropriate numbered game on an appropriate sized field allows most players to be in technical range of teammates anywhere on that field.

Further, systems of play are easily replicated by the U-12 8 V 8. The 4-4-2 system is mimicked by playing 3-3-1. The 3-5-2 mimicked by playing 2-3-2. The 4-3-3 by 3-2-2.

Perceptually, children learn soccer type sports (basketball, field hockey, lacrosse, football, ice hockey) through the theory of selective attention. The theory of selective attention posits that we attend to the most important cues in an environment, discard extraneous and/or ancillary cues, and make a decision based on the most important cue(s). Children are not capable of perceiving and processing the amount of information involved in an 11 V 11 game on a full sized field. They require a simpler, less complex environment.

Player development occurs in three stages. Children begin as ball watchers. The only cue they attend to is the ball. They chase the ball to exhaustion regardless of teammates, opponents, or where they are on the field. The classic and often hilarious “bunching” of kids is the classic, defining characteristic of players in this stage.

In the second stage a child becomes a player watcher. The child’s main focus is still the ball, but he or she can now also attend to the closest teammates and/or opponents. Through the entry level of this stage the player gradually perceives, processes, and makes soccer decisions in a more complex environment. A larger area and more players comprise a now expanding soccer scene where the ball and more players become the basis for decision making.

In the third stage a player becomes a space watcher. Here the player usually scans a large area of the field where he or she assesses and interprets the impact and importance (perception and processing) of player movement, both teammates and opponents, through the visual field. Decisions to dribble (hold the ball or beat on opponent), pass (penetrative or possession, long or short); etc. are based on the cues processed in the observed space.

Pressure on the ball, third of the field, whether in a flank or central corridor are further cues assessed. What is occurring in the player’s entire visual field is now the determinant of decision making, not simply the ball and one or two adjacent players. Add collateral problems such as score, time remaining, fatigue; etc. and a compendium of information emerges that a player must perceive and process to make a soccer decision. Making these decisions in milliseconds in the pace of a complex soccer game is a summation of number of years played and the quality of the total soccer experience.

The youth soccer experience must be the vehicle to transport the child on his or her journey through the stages of the game. The journey is the process we call player development. To make that journey successful for each child the vehicle, the youth soccer experience, must provide a safe, positive, and fun learning experience where the personal and soccer needs of each child is the alpha principle.

Age appropriate numbers on an appropriately sized field is the safest, most direct, and most efficient paving for the child to travel on the journey of player development in the vehicle of the youth soccer experience.