

# Teach Roles, Not Positions

**At U-10 level,  
coaches should give  
players a wide range  
of experience**

By Lang Wedemeyer

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Before coming to South Dakota to begin the inaugural season of women's soccer at South Dakota State University, I was the Director of Coaching for a medium-sized youth club in Virginia. During my time there, I noticed a disturbing trend among area coaches at the U-9 and U-10 levels of play.

They were teaching their players (boys and girls) how to play specific positions. This not only occurred with the "select teams," but also with recreational sides.

There has been much controversy and a number of articles lately dealing with the competitive nature of this age group. Northern California has announced that there will be no more competitive tournaments for this age

sibilities of roles. Instead of teaching a player how to play right back, we should be teaching the player the basics of how to play defense. The teaching of roles refers to players learning the proper tactics for some basic defense, midfield and attacking play.

Once we have made the decision to not worry about how to make Susie the best right midfielder she can be, we must think about the best way to teach these roles to our players. And finally, how can we have these players implement the responsibilities of the roles in a competitive environment while keeping in mind that the numerical results don't matter?

How often have you seen or been associated with a coach who sticks the

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group (see Karl Dewazien's article in the May-June 2001 *Soccer Journal*). Many youth organizations are getting away from the competition side of U-10 to work on player development. However, most of the country's youth programs still are sponsoring tournaments and competitions in which scores are recorded and winning is rewarded.

I am not going to get directly into the argument of whether all tournaments and competitions should be banned for this age group. And note that when I mention "competitions," it refers to league play where winning and losing records are kept and champions are singled out.

However, one outcome of these competitions is the emphasis on playing specific positions. At this age level, coaches should not be teaching players how to play specific positions. Instead, we should be teaching them the respon-

team's best goalkeeper in goal for an entire game? The player asks, "Coach, do I have to stay in goal this half? Can't I come out on the field?" The coach responds with, "Jimmy, you're the very best we have and this is what your team needs you to do." Jimmy stays in goal because that's the role his coach has asked of him. If the team wins, the coach is even more likely to keep Jimmy back there for many games to come. This begs the question: Is this fair to Jimmy's development as a player?

When I was the Director of Coaching, I had a U-10 girls team that was consistently beaten by the other local girls team from the competing club. The parents of our team complained to me over and over about how our coach "wasn't teaching them the right things," that "our girls didn't want to play any more if they couldn't win."

I went to watch their next game. The

competing club's coach had one big, strong, fast girl whom he had sit up top (right at the half line) and wait for the ball. Their team would kick it long, she would run after it and score. Not once during the game did she play any defense, pass to her teammates or ever play a different position or role.

The next game of the tournament, that team played a much better opponent from out of the area. This new opponent had a defender with as much speed as the lone forward the team had built its strategy around. She had no idea what to do when faced with someone who could match her speed. This became more and more common as the year went on.

Two seasons later that girl quit soccer altogether. I can't say with certainty the reasons why she quit, but I imagine much of it had to do with the fact that she never was able to develop any other part of her game. Her development was stifled, taking the challenge and enjoyment out of the game for her.

I know we have all had players who, for one reason or another, were successful at the younger age groups but failed to develop as they matured. Perhaps their roles changed and they

were not able to adapt because of the coach's inability to teach or the player's inability to learn.

## Teaching roles

Now that we have determined that it is important to train players in roles rather than position play, coaches must examine effective ways of teaching these roles to U-10s.

There has been more and more of a push to let the game be the teacher for younger players. I fully support this idea. So how can we teach roles in this environment? I think that you first must look at the instincts and personalities of the players on your team.

If you place them in a small-sided scrimmage on the first day the team is together, you should be able to learn a lot about each player and where he or she feels most comfortable. Some players will gravitate up front, some will hold in the back, many want to play goalie and a few will wander off chasing butterflies. Take some notes on where the players seem to like to play, who steps up to take control in the game, which ones fall back toward the goal and who runs from the ball every time it comes near.

Do all the players run forward and try to score, leaving no one on defense? Do all but one or two stay back as the ball goes forward, leaving that responsibility for others? These are just a few questions to ask yourself as you watch the group play for the first time.

Most of any actual teaching by the coach should be focused on various techniques (passing, ball control, tackling, dribbling, shooting, etc.). This is a given. Tactics, however, still will be part of the training and they will become more complicated for the players as more players and plays are added to an exercise.

I think the best way to teach the roles of defense, midfield and attack are through small-sided games. Get the players to take some responsibility in their learning. For example, if you are playing 4 v. 4 and one team consistently pushes all four players forward, leaving themselves open for a counterattack, what could you do? One idea is to stop the game after a while and ask that team, "Why do you think you are giving

up so many goals?" Nine times out of 10 someone will figure it out and say, "Because we don't have anyone back there." Your next question for them: "How do we fix that?" They have just learned their first lesson in responsibility of roles.

Within the training games, you don't necessarily have to assign roles to players. But as they gravitate to an area on the field, begin to briefly stop the exercises and ask players why they are doing something ("Why did you run over there?" or "Why did you run up near the goal?"). In this way, by highlighting different bits and pieces of the game and asking them questions, they are not only learning the roles, but also participating in the learning process, which makes it that much more effective. It's also far better than the coach constantly problem-solving for them.

Remember to leave out any "coaching terms." The players will not remember any of them, or they may remember the term but not its meaning or purpose. Another challenge to you as a coach is to teach the basis of the roles in small increments so the players gradually can assimilate them into their play. Also remember to review those roles from time to time as they reappear in future training games.

## Managing the competitive aspect

This is the ultimate test for a coach: Can the players take what they've practiced and implement the concepts in a competitive environment? Can you see improvement in the players' play as they progress through the season? The next question is: How can we as coaches put them into a competitive environment without allowing the score to dictate their play?

Although we don't want to keep score or records, competitive games are what most every child really looks forward to. It is easy (unless you are in a league or tournament) to create a competitive environment without keeping score. The players initially and automatically will keep score on their own. But by constantly mixing teams, changing players around, they will lose track soon enough.

If you have to play in a league game

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Here two youth players compete to win the ball. This 1 v. 1 confrontation emphasizes technique (ball control, defending) as well as an understanding of the basic tactics once the roles of the players have been established.

or tournament, how can you enforce the implementation of roles as opposed to winning and losing? For one, make sure each player plays more than one role during that game. Another is to set goals for the players before the game that de-emphasize winning. Whether they win or lose, be sure to stress these goals when reviewing the game with the group. For instance, you can set a goal of having everyone on the team get a shot off on goal. By playing each person in an attacking role, your team works to accomplish this goal. Or you can set a goal of having each player defensively clearing a ball out of the penalty box. You will have to be creative, but you can have your players focus on the goal of accomplishing some aspect of a particular role.

U-10 players will vary greatly in their level of play and comprehension. Whether you are coaching first-time recreation players or the best youth players from a large city, concentrating on teaching roles instead of positions is

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Effective youth coaching involves coaches keeping their team discussions simple, short and at a level U-10s can understand.

an important part of player development. When you teach roles, the players naturally will create a more free-flowing game that they enjoy much more.

If you adopt this philosophy, the challenge for you as a coach is to find a method of teaching that matches your players' comprehension level. Also be sure not to detract from the technical teaching or the flow of the training or game. Finally, can you creatively get your players to implement these ideas in a competitive environment without worrying about wins and losses?

The last piece of advice I offer is before you even have your first practice with your U-10 team, have a meeting with the parents to explain your philosophy of emphasizing player development over winning. This may not stop all the complaints down the line, but it should hinder them somewhat. Here again, selling your philosophy to parents will demand even more creativity on your part.

Good luck! ❁