

A CURRICULUM FOR PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

*Gulf Coast Soccer
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With respect to youth soccer, the club's primary mission should be **educational** (as opposed to competitive) in nature. This is especially true at the youngest levels (Zone 1, ages 6-12), and should remain the dominant perspective at the intermediate levels (Zone 2, ages 13-18).

The implications of this distinction are profound, as an educational institution must be structured and managed quite differently than an organization that is designed primarily to compete. At the macro level, an educational organization measures itself in terms of the quality of its processes, whereas the competitive organization focuses on the quantity of its outcomes. At the micro level, educational programs look at the outcomes for individuals, whereas competitive programs focus on the outcomes of teams and groups.

Another key implication of the educational focus is that the club must have a published and progressive **curriculum**. This curriculum should have multiple layers of complexity, starting with an overview of the learning outcomes expected for each age group each year, then drilling down to a set of specific lesson plans, standard training schedules, and standard competitions that will be employed to implement this curriculum.

In addition to defining those things that will be part of each year's instruction, the club's player development curriculum should also provide guidance regarding those topics that will not be taught, and competitive formats or venues that will not be permitted, at each stage of the curriculum. For instance, the curriculum should provide clear answers to questions such as the following:

- How will we form teams?
- How will we organize our practice sessions?
- When it is appropriate to group players by ability?
- In which leagues will we participate?
- How many tournaments will our players be expected (or permitted) to play in each season?
- What minimum and maximum limits will we set for each player annually in terms of expected numbers of formal practices and games?
- When should players begin to specialize in terms of positions played?

The following top-level player development curriculum was adapted from several sources, including a progressive topics timeline originally prepared by Sam Snow (US Youth Soccer Director of Coaching Education) and US Soccer's "Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States". As players grow and mature, the curriculum adjusts the main developmental priorities (in terms of the four components of the game) to match the typical physical, cognitive, and social attributes of the players.

Note that because this is a progressive plan, every aspect of play that is taught at one age must be reinforced at the next age. Thus, topics taught at U6 must be trained again at U8, U10, and so on. Abilities acquired by players in a younger age group must be refined at the next age so that players can be successful when challenged by more skillful, more athletic, or more aware opponents and teammates. If an older player is lacking in some element introduced at a younger stage, this must be addressed before that player can advance to the next stage of the curriculum.

Even adult players must continuously refine the techniques and tactics learned earlier in their careers. Older players must assume personal responsibility for maintaining and improving their physical fitness as well as addressing any specific technical deficiencies.

Finally, note that all topics must be trained to achieve symmetry of ability. A player must be able to succeed with a given topic on both the right and left sides of the body. Thus, fitness topics like “balance” would require players to stand on their right foot only, and then on their left foot only, for a similar length of time. Technical topics like “goalkeeper distribution” would be trained using both the right and left arms, and tactical topics like the “wall pass” would require players to make passes to players on both their right and left.

Age	U6
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance • Running • Jumping • Tumbling • Turning/Spinning
Technique	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stopping rolling balls with the feet (receiving on the ground) • Running with the ball (dribbling) • Ball striking (shooting)
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientation (which goal to attack, and which goal to defend) • “How to play” (understand basic rules of play) • Ball-winning (go get the ball if you don't have it)
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair play • Emotional control • Imagination • Courage
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30-35 practices per year (Academy-style, 40 minutes/practice) • Majority of training activities include a ball for each player • Very few activities with more than 4 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3v3 to small goals (no goalkeepers) • 25-30 scrimmages per year (“street-soccer” style, with “New Ball!” rule used instead of throw-ins or kick-ins) • No formal games, jamborees, or tournaments

Age	U8
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agility • Eye/foot and eye/hand coordination • Continued refinement of gross motor development • Introduce concepts of warm-up and cool-down
Technique	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bounce juggling and ball-lifting (with the feet) • Change of direction (using pullbacks and basic cuts) • Receiving ground balls with inside, outside, and sole of the feet • Push pass • Block tackle • Shooting (ground balls, with inside of the foot and with the instep, up to 8 yds) • Introduce basic throw-in (two-footed) • Introduce full volley (from hands)
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always control the ball on the first touch (“Kicking is not soccer!”) • 1v1 attacking (courage to dribble toward the goal and at defenders) • 1v1 defending (seek to win the ball) • 2v1 (passing to an open teammate) • Recognition of open space • Two tactical lines (1-3 on attack, 3-1 on defense) • Moving up and back as a team (no “goal guards”!)
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working in pairs • Sharing • Sportsmanship • Creativity
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60-70 practices per year (Academy-style, 60 minutes/practice) • Majority of training activities have 1-2 players per ball • Very few activities with more than 6 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4v4 to small goals (no goalkeepers) • 10-15 scrimmages per year (“street-soccer” style, with “New Ball!” rule used instead of throw-ins or kick-ins) • 10-15 games per year, which may be part of an organized jamboree/festival (using approved U8 rules, no reported scores/standings) • No tournaments

Note: “Introduce” in the curriculum descriptions implies that we want to give players exposure to certain topics at this stage of development, but success is not expected at this stage.

Age	U10
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endurance • Flexibility (range-of-motion) • Consistent warm-up and cool-down routines
Technique (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running with the ball (speed dribbling into open space) • Dribbling moves to beat a defender 1v1 and escape from pressure • Push passes to feet across short and intermediate distances (0-20 yds) • Shielding • Juggling (feet, thighs, and head) • Receiving bouncing balls with the instep, sole, inside, and outside of the feet • Receiving air balls with the chest and thigh • Full volleys, half volleys, and push volleys (bouncing balls) • Finishing (with the instep and the inside of the feet, up to 15 yds) • Throw-ins (split stance) • Shoulder charge • Poke tackle • Introduce chipping and crossing
Technique (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ready stance • Basic catching (“W” grip above the chest, basket catch below the waist) • Introduce high balls (no pressure) • Basic footwork (lateral movement, stepping to the ball) • Developmental diving (from sitting and squatting positions) • Distribution (throwing, bowling, punting) • Goal kicks
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1v1 attacking (change of pace, change of direction, acceleration to penetrate with the ball) • 1v1 defending (angle and distance of pressure, channeling, restraint) • 2v1 attacking (wall pass, overlapping runs, takeovers, fakeovers, short support) • 2v2 defending (pressure, cover) • Man-to-man defending • Principles of width and depth on attack and defense • Introduce role of the goalkeeper • Introduce basic systems of play (learn names of positions, experience playing in all roles) • Introduce set plays (basic attacking and defending roles, short restarts, direct vs. indirect free kicks)
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working in groups of 3 or 4 • Sensitivity (winning and losing gracefully) • Cooperative competition • Sustained focus on task (ability to focus for one entire half of play)
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65-80 practices per year (Academy-style, 75 minutes/practice) • Majority of training activities have 2-4 players per ball • Very few activities with more than 8 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7v7, with goalkeepers • 10-15 scrimmages per year (using approved U10 rules) • 15-20 games per year, up to half of which may be part of an organized jamboree/festival (using approved U10 rules, no reported scores/standings) • No tournaments, but at least one jamboree/festival per season (fall, spring)

Age	U12
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength • Speed • Aerobic exercise
Technique (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First-touch turning with the ball (feet, thighs, and chest) away from pressure • Advanced feints, cuts and turns with the ball (performing moves in series) • Passing with the heel, sole, and the outside of the foot • Passing across long distances (20+ yds) • Crossing to near post, far post, and slot targets • Chipping to pass or score • Volleys and headers (to score, to clear) • Far post finishing (all angles, with inside foot, up to 20 yds) • Finishing breakaways • Introduce heading (held balls, bouncing balls, low/diving headers) • Introduce the slide tackle
Technique (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced footwork (footwork patterns, dropback steps, distinct movements in series, field awareness/vision while in motion) • Reaction training • Low diving (from feet) • Angle play • High balls (played forward into the penalty area, limited pressure) • Dealing with crossed balls (on the ground, in the air) • Introduce 1v1 breakaway saves • Introduce deflecting (punching, boxing, tipping, parrying) • Saving penalty kicks
Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1v1 defending (defensive feints) • 2v1 and 2v2(-1) defending (delay/deny penetration, immediate chase) • 2v2 attacking (combination play, reading defensive shape—flat versus deep) • 3v2 and 3v3(-1) attacking (man-up) and defending (man-down) roles • Vision (body shape and eye contact with teammates) • Passing along the touchlines (body shape and choice of passing surface) • Field player communication (“Man on!”, “Turn!”, “Time!”, “Switch!”, etc.) • Basic goalkeeper communication (“Away!”, “Keeper!”, “Step!”, “Drop!”) • Attacking and defending set plays (long/direct and short/indirect options) • Half-time analysis and implementing half-time adjustments
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork • Confidence • Desire and intrinsic motivation • Competitiveness • Self-analysis of performances and abilities
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80-100 practices per year for select-level players (mix of team and Academy-style training, 90 minutes/practice) • 65-80 practices per year for recreational players (Academy-style, 90 minutes/practice) • Separate functional training for goalkeepers (25-35 hours/year) • Majority of training activities have 2-6 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9v9, with goalkeepers • 5-10 scrimmages per year (using approved U12 rules) • 25-30 games per year, up to half of which may be part of organized tournaments or jamborees/festivals (using approved U12 rules) • 2-5 tournaments (including jamborees/festivals), including an appropriate State Cup competition

Age	U14
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power • Acceleration • Anaerobic exercise • Cardio respiratory and cardiovascular training
Technique (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headers and chest traps to win the ball in the air (off punts, goal kicks, etc.) • Heading to pass (including flick-on headers) • Bending balls (inside/outside of the feet, on the ground and in the air) • “Dummying” the ball • Introduce the slide tackle
Technique (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diving saves for medium and high shots • Advanced deflecting (in motion, in traffic, second saves) • Saving the 1v1 breakaway • Dealing with back passes • Throwing to distribute over long distances (30+ yards)
Tactics (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce 11v11 systems of play (4-4-2, 3-4-3, 4-3-3) with some functional specialization (playing 2-3 positions instead of all positions) • Switching the point of attack • Playing out of the back • Transition, counterattacking and speed-of-play • Finishing 1v1 breakaways to goal • Attacking runs (third-man runs, checking runs) • Switching positions (roles) during the run of play • Role of the 3rd defender (tracking runs off the ball) • Concentration/compactness in defense (especially in the middle third)
Tactics (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Command of the penalty area (communication with field player teammates) • 2v1+GK breakaway (stay-or-go decision with a defender in the play) • Supporting the attack within the penalty area
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming adversity • Positive self-talk • Assertiveness • Emotional management and self-control • Individual and team discipline • Focus on task (full match)
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80-100 practices per year for select-level players (mix of team and functional/specialized training, 90 minutes/practice) • 65-80 practices per year for recreational players (mix of team and Academy-style training, 90 minutes/practice) • Separate functional training for goalkeepers (25-40 hours/year) • Majority of training activities have 4-10 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11v11, with goalkeepers (smaller numbers may be used for recreational players) • No more than 5 scrimmages per year (using approved U14 rules) • 30-35 games per year, up to half of which may be part of organized tournaments or jamborees/festivals (using approved U14 rules) • Practices and games played outside the club (school teams, guest appearances, etc.) count toward the annual limits for each player • 2-5 tournaments (including jamborees/festivals), including an appropriate State Cup competition

Age	U16
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plyometrics • Weight training • Core/back/abdominal strength • Interval & sprint-recovery training • SAQ (speed, agility, and quickness) training
Technique (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diving headers to score and clear • Airborne kicking (scissors volley, overhead volley) • Finishing (power vs. finesse) • Skill mastery (technical execution under pressure)
Technique (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backward (recovery) diving • Drop kicks (half-volley distribution)
Tactics (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attacking runs (withdrawing, penetrating, crossover) • Collective attacking in the final third • Attacking down the wings and from wide positions • Passing on diagonals • Playing through the thirds of the field • Introduce zonal defending • Collective defending in the defensive third • Recognition of numbers-up/numbers-down situations • Speed of play and controlling the match tempo (build-up vs. counterattack) • Tactical adjustments during the run of play • Post-match analysis (collective and individual)
Tactics (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiating the counterattack • Organizing teammates on defensive set plays • Supporting the attack beyond the penalty area (including attacking free kicks)
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courage • Independence and self-reliance • Personal and collective accountability • Goal orientation (process and outcome goals) • Willingness to sacrifice to achieve one's best • Mental rehearsal and imagery • Functional specialization (gaining a deep understanding of 1-2 positions and heightened confidence in one's ability to play those positions)
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90-120 practices per year for select-level players (mix of team and functional/specialized training, 90-105 minutes/practice) • 70-90 practices per year for recreational players (team training, 90 minutes/practice) • Separate functional training for goalkeepers (30-50 hours/year) • Majority of training activities have 4-10 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11v11, with goalkeepers (smaller numbers may be used for recreational players) • No more than 5 scrimmages per year (using approved U16 rules) • 30-40 games per year, up to half of which may be part of organized tournaments or jamborees/festivals (using approved U16 rules) • Practices and games played outside the club (school teams, guest appearances, etc.) count toward the annual limits for each player • 3-6 tournaments (including jamborees/festivals), including an appropriate State Cup competition, with no more than 3 tournaments in any three-month period

Age	U19
Fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fitness testing (standards-based) • Overload training • Periodization of training
Technique (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical speed of play (all skills rehearsed at match speed and under game conditions) • Technical-functional training
Technique (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power diving • Skill mastery (technical execution under pressure)
Tactics (Field Players)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational tactics (winning/losing by a goal with 10 minutes to play, tactical adjustments for specific opponents, etc.) • Ability to shift system of play during the run of play • Zonal and man-marking combinations in defense • Phase play and patterns of play • Creativity in attack • “Total soccer” concept • Tactical-functional training
Tactics (Goalkeepers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of team shape during run of play • Command beyond the penalty area
Psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership skills • Playing a role (starter vs. substitute, “piano player vs. piano carrier”) • Emotional control during matches • Reducing mental mistakes • Dedication and commitment to excellence and achievement • Responsibility for off-field factors that influence on-field performances • Selflessness (team comes first) • Results orientation (wins, championships, etc.)
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90-120 practices per year for select-level players (mix of team and functional/specialized training, 105-120 minutes/practice) • 70-90 practices per year for recreational players (team training, 90 minutes/practice) • Separate functional training for goalkeepers (30-60 hours/year) • Majority of training activities have 4-12 players per ball
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11v11, with goalkeepers (smaller numbers may be used for recreational players) • No more than 5 scrimmages per year (using approved U19 rules) • 30-40 games per year, up to half of which may be part of organized tournaments or jamborees/festivals (using approved U19 rules) • Practices and games played outside the club (school teams, guest appearances, etc.) count toward the annual limits for each player • 3-6 tournaments (including jamborees/festivals), including an appropriate State Cup competition, with no more than 3 tournaments in any three-month period