

The Benefits of Pool Play vs. Traditional Leagues for U-10s

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*The Youth Soccer Insider asked **Sam Snow**, Technical Director of U.S. Youth Soccer, to explain the benefits of a U-10 "academy" format that differs from the traditional league and team setup.*

By Sam Snow

Numerous clubs across more than 20 state associations have been implementing a youth academy format for the U-10 age group. This format is in the best interest of both the short-term and long-term development of the children.

In most instances, the youth academy format does not have set teams. Instead, the players all register with the club, but not a specific team. They do register for the U-10 age group and then train in player pools. The pools could be as many as A, B and C depending on the size of the U-10 age group in the club. The pools can have training sessions mixed together and as separate pools.

The games are Pool A vs. Pool A and so on. The matches can be intraclub and interclub. Intraclub matches could also be A vs. B and B vs. C.

UPWARD MOBILITY. By grouping the kids into pools, ability-based grouping within an age group takes place. Now the developmental gap among players is narrowed. Since the children are registered to the club and not a team or pool then they may be moved from Pool to Pool, up or down, based in the evaluation of the coaching staff on developmental needs. The coaches may move players from Pool to Pool as often as needed.

That movement of players between pools may be done for matches, too. The interclub games should be Pool A vs. Pool A, Pool B vs. Pool B and Pool C vs. Pool C. The matches should be played by U.S. Youth Soccer Modified Rules for the U-10 age group.

Since it's possible to move players between pools, a youngster could be exposed to a more demanding match, moving from Pool C up to Pool B for example -- one game at a time. Then the player goes back to the original pool. The club pass and ability-based grouping into player pools eliminates the "all or nothing" situation with fixed teams.

The possible fluid movement of players between pools for training sessions and matches allows the coaching staff to individualize player development. The staff can weekly compare notes on the players to determine which ones may need to switch pools. That move could be for one day or the entire soccer year or anything in between.

Matches are played for fun, exhilaration and to test one's abilities. Having games that are more evenly contested lends to those objectives. When matches require the players to be constantly mentally alert and physically active, then high performance thresholds are achieved and new ones are

set. Games that are too hard or too easy don't challenge the players appropriately. A balanced game puts players into the flow that intensifies performance.

REF TRAINING OPPORTUNITY. Game day is also a great time to mature referees. Every community needs more refs and to reduce the attrition of game officials. The youth academy format provides an excellent environment for a young referee advancement program to flourish. In such a program teenage referees work matches alongside adult refs. Assessors and referee educators are also on hand to provide feedback and tips on performance.

Indeed, when the youth academy format is well planned, then the four adult pillars that support youth soccer can be influenced positively. Those pillars are the parents of the players, coaches, administrators and referees.

The parents can have sessions before and between matches with sport psychologists or nutritionists to learn how they can help their child's soccer growth. Sometimes a club director of coaching and/or the state technical director could speak to the technical, tactical and Fair Play components the players are being taught in the youth academy program.

Administrators working with the youth academies have the opportunity to support a dynamic and progressive program that tends to grow because of its positive impact on the players. A fulfilling experience means player retention in the club.

INSTILLING STYLE OF PLAY. Coaches in the program now have a real chance to coach quality soccer to large numbers of players and not be forced into a "peak by Friday" situation. They can now train the whole player, not just technique and athleticism. The coaches will be able to instill a style of play that goes far beyond the kick-n-run style born out of the fear of a loss. The measurement of success in the youth academy format is on player performance, not merely game outcome.

On game day players and coaches from both teams could, perhaps should, share the same bench. Remember that the other players are not adversaries and the other team is not the enemy. Indeed, they are fellow competitors who also enjoy playing the beautiful game.

Given the manner in which the youth academy is set up in a few states, if Club Z shows up to a game short a player or two then they can barrow players from Club Y. The bottom line is to maximize playing time for the kids. The goal of the youth academy format is to have a healthy competitive environment that is player-centered.

COST CONTAINMENT. In quite a few places a youth academy is conducted in a club with enough U-10 players to do so. That's the intraclub set up. In some states two or more clubs in the same area play jointly for an interclub set up.

This keeps the travel distances and the cost of time and money to reasonable levels. Several state associations run the youth academy in conjunction with member clubs. In this instance those clubs in the youth academy can meet once or twice a year in a central location.

On those occasions, clubs set geographically farther apart may now play one another. The matches in the expanded format allow for deeper player evaluations. Those evaluations could be of individual players, teams within a pool or even an entire pool.

FLEXIBILITY. For instance, Club Z might now play far away Club T and find that Club Z's Pool A is equivalent to Club T's Pool B. Subsequently, adjustments could be made to provide evenly competitive matches. By having centralized youth academy festival days a couple of times a year, a variety of competition is provided while containing costs to the players' families. A couple of examples of states where such a program is flourishing are [Iowa](#) and [North Carolina](#).

The youth academy plays 6-a-side on appropriate-sized youth soccer fields. The small-sided format creates situations that accelerates high-performance enhancement among the players. Coaches may now teach the principles of play, individual and group tactics as well as more than 20 ball skills with profound learning taking place.

The small-sided game provides repeated game situations on both sides of the ball thus impacting the players in all four components of the game. Those demands of both the match and training sessions help young players improve for today and tomorrow.

Furthermore, the small-sided game format has a positive influence on mental concentration and accordingly tactical transition. Physical fitness also improves as the game is always near the players, which demands direct player involvement frequently. Not only is fitness impacted by this fact, so is tactical mobility. Technique improves through repetition in the reality of game demands. Since the players are always engaged mental focus improves.

The hurdles to the youth academy format will all come from the adults. If the adults can move past wanting U-10 soccer to be a mini-pro league then the odds move in favor of the players not only becoming better soccer players, but also, one hopes, they become life-long participants in the game.

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