

Part 3

Coaching U5/U6

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# Part 3-

## Age Group Guide: Coaching U5/U6

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### Coaching the Preteen Age Groups – U5 to U12<sup>1</sup>

Coaching the preteen age groups may be the most important coaching position in youth soccer. These are formative years for children, and this stage is the best opportunity to instill a love for the game within them. A true passion for soccer keeps people in the game for a lifetime and develops champions. Soccer clubs must build a positive player-first culture. The soccer environment for these children needs to follow the creed of foremost building the player and then the team.

The philosophy of coaching youth soccer places great importance on age appropriate activities and creating a child-centered learning environment. Many great players have traced personal success to the coaching received at an early age. It is hoped that the youth soccer coach will one day look back with pride at the opportunities created for learning and enjoyment. A supportive, child-centered, positive experience in youth soccer is vital to the growth of the game.

Soccer is all about enjoyment for children. The experience can be summed up in the four messages of Youth Soccer Month – Fun, Family, Fitness and Friendship.

- **Fun** – Whether recreational or competitive in nature, involvement in soccer is easy, affordable and rewarding.
- **Family** – Playing soccer ties families together as schedules, vacations and family time are coordinated.
- **Friendship** – The relationships generated through playing soccer extend beyond the field.
- **Fitness** – The health and fitness (physical, psychological and social) benefits of playing soccer.

The single most important goal a coach of young players can have is to instill a passion for the game. It is passion that keeps a player in the game for a lifetime. It is passion that motivates many players to do that extra bit of practice to become a top notch player. It is our shared passion for the game that impels us to become coaches, referees, team managers or all of those.

The coach's efforts put into motion a relationship with soccer for children, which, through the help of countless others, will provide the foundation for players to experience the joy of participation throughout their life.

The most effective player development experience for our pre-teen players applies a player-centered approach to coaching that uses the tools of age appropriate, game-like activities. Learning the game is accelerated for the children when the coach uses guided discovery at proper times in a

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<sup>1</sup> Snow, Sam. US Youth Soccer Player Development Model, February 2012, pg. 52-53.

training session and occasionally in a match. Coaches who use the following Principles of Coaching will be the most effective teachers of the game. The principles of youth coaching are guidelines developed as a foundation or a sounding board to assess the appropriateness of an activity or training session. The following six principles are presented so that youth players receive a healthy and positive youth soccer experience.

- **Developmentally appropriate** – This challenges the coach to examine the appropriateness of the activity, which should fall within the range of a player’s abilities.
- **Clear, concise and correct information** – How instructions are given is crucial when dealing with children.
- **Simple to complex** – Are the activities presented in a way that allows for ongoing modifications and new challenges to meet the players’ interests and abilities?
- **Safe and appropriate training area** – The area should be free of hazardous materials and be safe from traffic or other environmental dangers. The training experience should be psychologically safe.
- **Decision making** – Are there opportunities for the players to make decisions? These opportunities need to be present in all activities for learning to occur.
- **Implications for the game** – The activities presented in a training session must, in some way, reflect the demands a player faces in the game. The coach at this level is providing the foundational movement and thinking skills to enable players to solve more complex soccer problems later on.

## **The U5/U6 Age Group – General Overview of the Age Group & Major Factors That Should be Noted**

Just like you can’t expect to succeed in building a treehouse in a sapling, you cannot expect a U5/U6 player to have the skills and coordination seen in a traditional “soccer” game. Soccer at the U5/U6 level is all about fun – developing a love for the game that will lead to the internal motivation that will drive the player to want to develop his or her skills at the older ages. The primary focus of the coach must be creating an environment where this can occur. The foundational skills laid out in this guide are essential to forming the strong foundation required for more advanced athletic development.

Players at the U5/U6 age will vary considerably in their physical coordination, however coaches should ensure that all players are included in all activities to ensure all players maximize their learning and form a solid foundation. As players develop, many players who appeared to be outstanding athletes at the U5/U6 age will see their abilities fade, while other players who may have had less developed physical abilities will later come into their own. Coaches should keep this in mind when instructing players, and ensure that all players regularly receive positive praise and encouragement to keep them engaged in the sport.

## U5/U6 The Fundamental Stage<sup>2</sup>

### *Individual – Me and My Ball*

The fundamental stage covers ages 6 to 9. The objective is to learn all elementary movement skills by building overall motor skills. In terms of motor development, cognitive development and social development, generally there are few differences in the capabilities of the players in this age group. Individual and small group play is essential for both touches on the ball and learning at their own pace. The emphasis should be on letting the children play. Over coaching unfortunately occurs at this age group.

Prior to a player being expected to learn ball skills the child must first be in control of the body. This growth in athleticism is a long-term evolution. It is imperative for children to acquire a base of general balance, coordination and agility before soccer skills. How can the coach expect them to control the ball before they can control their bodies? That is why it is essential for youngsters be exposed to movement education.<sup>3</sup> The foundation of movement education must be laid during childhood. This requirement is of primary importance to the youngest players, making ball skills secondary in importance. Do not use a calisthenics approach; instead, keep it fun and enjoyable to foster a desire to play. This intrinsic motivation will grow a passion for the game that could last a lifetime.

The fascination for the ball, the desire to master it and the thrill of scoring goals provides the launching pad into a lifetime of soccer participation. The joy and skills of the game are best nurtured by encouraging freedom of expression and organizing children's play in small groups. This is the fun phase where a passion for the game must be sown.

***“...children in the 21st (century) have been transformed from net producers of their own toy and play culture to net consumers of play culture imposed by adults.” - David Elkind, American child psychologist and author***

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What many adults have forgotten from their own youth is that children of this age can only focus on a limited number of tasks at one time. It takes the full attention capacity of a U5/U6 player to control the ball because they are still developing basic balance, coordination and agility. Also, in a 3v3 match for U5/U6 players, the opposition for the player with the ball is generally 1v5. So during a match the player needs to focus on the task at hand, trying to control the ball. Unfortunately, they are distracted by adults yelling from the touchline. Now they have to make a choice, either play the ball or listen to the coach and parents. If the adults want to help the children play their best, they need to be quiet while watching the game.

Players in this age group are egocentric – a me, my, mine mentality. Young children do not play together; they play next to one another, meaning they do not necessarily interact as they play. This psychosocial reality is called parallel play. Each child is engaged in his or her own game and is not

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<sup>2</sup> Snow, Sam. US Youth Soccer Player Development Model, February 2012, pg. 54-57.

<sup>3</sup> Developing and applying coordinated and rhythmical body movements in learning situations.

sharing or cooperating in a game. In soccer, this is most evident in the U5/U6 age group and still occurs to a lesser degree in the U7/U8 age group. Players in these age groups swarm around and go after the ball because it is the only toy on the field. They have not yet learned the social skill of sharing, hence why passing (sharing) the ball occurs by chance. All adults around the field when these age groups are playing must realize the children are not small adults. Why should the children suddenly display the social skill of sharing when they do not yet truly display that talent in any other setting? The child's enjoyment at this age is derived from playing in a group. Preschoolers enjoy playing in the presence of others, parallel play, even though they may not always watch or interact with them. However, at this age there is no real interest in competition or outcome. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together but still involved in individual play.

Through the use of game-like activities, trial and error exposes children to the components of the game and the principles of play. The primary training activities are body awareness and maze games. Remember that the game is for all kids, and everyone should be encouraged to participate.

The training session must be player-centered with the coach as a facilitator of the soccer experience. It is necessary to go with the flow and be adaptable with this age group. Use guided discovery and the coach's toolkit, as discussed in Part I, which gets children thinking and playing with little coaching interruption. Throughout the season, allow the players to experiment and discover the ball skills being taught on their own. The coach should demonstrate the skills a few times during the session. Also during the session, call out some of the key coaching points on how to execute the ball skills. Praise loudly and positively when a player does a skill correctly—positive reinforcement. Encourage them to try to do new things with the ball throughout the soccer season. It is very important that each player has a ball for every training session.

### **General Characteristics of the U5/U6 Age Group**

- Catching skills not yet developed
- Constantly in motion – love to run, jump, roll and climb
- Eye-hand and/or eye-foot coordination is primitive at best – not ready for bouncing or flighted balls
- No sense of pace – go flat out
- Physical coordination is immature – can balance on dominant foot
- Controlling the ball is a complex task
- Prefer large soft balls and foam balls
- Only understand simple rules
- Individually oriented (me, my, mine) – little or no concern for team activities
- Believes in Santa Claus, but will not discuss with peers – lofty imagination
- Physical and psychological development of boys and girls are quite similar
- Psychologically, easily bruised – need generous praise
- Short attention span – tends to one task at a time
- Limited understanding of time and space

U5/U6 players should play at least 50 percent of each match they attend.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is to create a well-rounded player.

**U5/U6 Coach Qualities for Success:** Uses the games approach to learning, not drill oriented. Act as a facilitator rather than a coach. Other characteristics are: good humor, friendly helper, organizer, stimulator, ability to see soccer from a child's perspective, patient, able to demonstrate movements and simple skills, enthusiastic and imaginative.

### **Best Practices For Coaching U5/U6<sup>4</sup>**

Soccer at these ages should be discouraged in any form other than as a fun activity for kids, that happens to include a soccer ball. Creating a joyful environment is mandatory.

#### **Some Thoughts About this Age:**

Five- and six-year olds are too young to be involved in any structured, organized soccer program. At most, they should be involved in fun activities that encourage the children to explore their physical abilities, while also including a ball with which to play. Make sure these are activity based games that emphasize exploration and experimentation with the rolling, spinning, and bouncing qualities of the ball. The soccer ball should be considered a toy. There should be no activities where players wait in lines to perform a pre-determined movement or required action.

Five- and six- year olds, although still young, are beginning to gain more control over their bodies. At the same time, it is still new to them and they will require a lot of time and energy figuring out what their bodies can do, and how to use this developing coordination. Children at this age also love to use their imagination when they play. Keep this in mind when designing games. They enjoy playing on their terms, and as a by-product of their play, they will gain some limited comfort with the ball. Although they love to play, their ability to stay focused on any one thing is very limited. Keep your activities short and simple. Finally, even as they are steadily developing physical and mental abilities, they are still very young. Always treat children with care, patience and give plenty of encouragement. It can be helpful to include parents in the practice/play time so they can take ideas home with them to their backyards or parks. If children must be involved in these organized practice times, they should be having so much fun that when they go home, the soccer ball becomes one of their favorite toys.

#### **General Description of What Should be Happening During "Practice"**

The children should be having fun with the ball. There should be periods of active playing where everyone is involved, and there should be ample opportunities for short breaks for water and for catching their breath. If there is more than one adult/coach, the children should be divided into smaller groups, with at least one adult per group. At these young ages, children work hard and tire quickly. Allow them to have "active rests," where they are not running but are trying to do something specific with the ball, often sitting or standing. Everyone should be occupied with something, even when resting.

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<sup>4</sup> United States Soccer Federation. Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States. pg. 11-12.

## **General Description of Information that is Communication to the Players by the Coach**

At these ages, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often. There should not be any discussions about positions or any other team concepts.

## **U5/U6 Skill Development**

### **Components of the Game in Priority Order**

1 <sup>st</sup> Priority	Fitness
2 <sup>nd</sup> Priority	Technique
3 <sup>rd</sup> Priority	Psychology
4 <sup>th</sup> Priority	Tactics

When coaching the U5/U6 age group it is important to focus on physical development (“fitness”). The emphasis of coaching at his age is to give children versatile experiences of basic motor skills and combinations, developing key skills such as balance, coordination and movement. Basic techniques should be introduced and enforced to prepare the children for the next level of soccer. The aim at this age is to improve a child’s basic motor skills, whilst also developing the child’s physical, psychological and social development.

## **Coaching U5/U6 Fitness, Ability & Health Skills**

### **Introduction**

At this age group a significant emphasis must be placed on developing key motor skills and building a fitness foundation to allow players to establish core skills that are essential to later athletic performance. Soccer themed activities increase general fitness levels in children and promote healthy lifestyles. The health benefits of active sports such as soccer include stronger bones and muscles, increased flexibility and endurance.

### **Discussion of Fitness, Ability & Health Skills in the U5/U6 Age Group**

Developing the athletic abilities of soccer players is an ongoing process, yet the crucial foundations must be laid during childhood. Improved athleticism aids the refinement of ball skills. Athleticism is founded in specific key motions and actions. By performing these motions, players build their proprioceptive<sup>5</sup> awareness, which allows them to become more dexterous and agile. Additionally, physical health is critical to performance. While young children are unlikely to fully see the connection between healthy routines and performance, establishing good health habits is key to long term player health. Together, these foundational fitness skills and health skills, prepare our players for the physical demands of sport participation at the U5/U6 level and throughout their athletic career.

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<sup>5</sup> Proprioception is the unconscious awareness of one’s own body in space. It helps us to understand how to move our foot to the exact right place to come into contact with a ball, and how to execute smooth motions. Perhaps more than any other sensory factor, proprioception is at the core of athleticism.

<b>U5/U6 Fitness, Ability &amp; Health Skills List</b>
How to Warm Up
Nutrition
Hydration
<b>Foundational Skills</b>
Balance
Bending, Twisting & Reaching
Running
Hopping
Jumping
Skipping
Starting & Stopping
Changing Direction
Rolling

## **U5/U6 Age Group Target Fitness, Ability & Skills**

### **Health Skills**

#### ***Overview***

At all ages in soccer it is important to address the health issues that coincide with youth sports. Educating the players and parents is important to initiating good practice and to instill positive attitudes to healthy lifestyles. At the U5/U6 age group, players are very open to new ideas – and coaches are encouraged to explain the importance of health and fitness concepts in terms that young players will understand. Fitness should be focused on getting to understand how our bodies move, identifying body parts, and developing the proprioceptive awareness that is at the center of athletic ability. Health concepts, like eating healthy foods at snack and making sure you stay hydrated can be explained as “fuel” for their body – just like a car needs fuel to run, our bodies need fuel to be powerful. Encourage hydration by ensuring that players take regular water breaks.

#### ***How to Warm Up***

At this age it is important to introduce the idea of a ‘warm up’ however this would be delivered in a very different way than a warm up for U14 players. At the U5/U6 age group a practice would usually begin with a fun game involving all players being active and moving around a controlled area. The main focus should be on increasing heart rate and preparing the children both physically and mentally for the session ahead.

#### **U5/U6 Warm up Example – Body Parts**

1. Each player places a ball inside set area.
2. On coaches command players move around grid as directed by the coach (walking, jumping, hopping, skipping etc).

3. When coach shouts out a part of the body (e.g foot, knee, head etc) the children find the closest ball and put that body part on the ball.
4. Progress to children dribbling ball then stopping ball to put body part on it following coach's command.

### ***Nutrition & Hydration***

At this young age group a large responsibility is placed on parents to ensure their child is receiving enough nutrition and hydration to safely perform the demands of soccer activities. Children of this age lack the knowledge and understanding of the energy required to perform such tasks and can easily get caught up in the activity. It is vital that the coach encourages regular water breaks, ensuring every child is staying hydrated, along with snack breaks during extended periods of play. Additionally, if the team decides to do a snack, the coach should ensure that the snack is a healthy one such as fresh fruit. Popsicles, Munchkins, or other similar food should be avoided (at least until after the session completes).

### **Foundational Skills**

#### ***Overview<sup>6</sup>***

Acquaintance with locomotor and non-locomotor activities lays the foundation for all of the movements and skills in soccer. This requires an underpinning of physical education during the first ten years of a youngster's soccer life. That foundation is non-locomotor (not moving from one space to another), locomotor (moving from one space to another) and manipulative (controlling a ball with the hands or feet) actions.

#### **Categories of Movement Patterns**

*Locomotor* – body moving through space, such as walking, jumping and running, hopping, turning, rolling, skipping, diving, twirling, shuffling, kneeling, loping or leaping and stopping

*Nonlocomotor* – specific parts of the body are moved, such as pushing, pulling, dipping, stretching, bending, tucking and twisting

*Manipulative* – patterns in which the ball is “moved”, such as throwing, catching, passing, dribbling, shooting and other actions involving propelling or receiving the ball.

A youth soccer coach should be able to observe a player's movements and assess the quality of those movements, which in turn affect the caliber of ball skills. It stands to reason that as athleticism grows within a player then too the odds for good performance of ball skills increase. This means for the soccer coach ball skills and physical education go hand in hand. One must be able to observe and assess motor movement when children play soccer.

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<sup>6</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 9-11.

### Assessing Motor Patterns and Skills – Process and Product

When assessing the quality of performance the process of movement deals with the technique of completing a specific movement in terms of its components (hip rotation, arm action, etc.) and the specific elements of the performance (angle of takeoff in a jump, length of lever arms, etc.). The product of movement concerns the result of the action, the height the child jumps, the time elapsed in a dash, as examples. In general, but not always, the process and product of a motor performance are related. Good performers in terms of the product usually demonstrate proficiency in the movement process. In other words the player in good control of his or her body motion is more likely to be skillful. This is why movement education is important during the soccer player's childhood years.

A knowledgeable coach realizes that every player goes through a sequence of learning and performing the movement patterns mentioned above while on the pathway to achieving adult patterns. The achievement of developmental milestones cannot be predicted based on age, size, weight or strength. The rate of mastery of skills varies widely. From infancy, development progresses from the head to arms to torso and then to the legs. So proficient ball skills can only come after full control of the lower limbs is reached. For example if a kick is divided into its various separate yet combined movements, certain distinct phases can be differentiated. Separation of this kind is very difficult since a kick is a continuous series of movements. However it is important to deal with the components of the basic action of kicking, since if a coach is familiar with them it is easier to observe and correct faults or to reinforce correct patterns. Here then are the stages in growth from kicking a soccer ball to passing or shooting one.

### Developmental Sequence of Kicking in Early Childhood

*Stage 1:* Initial position – with two legs together, ball in front of a foot. With no leg windup or arm movement the child pushes the ball from a stationary position. After the kick he or she steps backward to regain balance. By age two most boys and girls reach this stage.

*Stage 2:* Initial position – with two legs together, ball in front of a foot. The child begins the kick from a stationary position, but in preparing to kick, there is both a leg windup to the rear and some opposition movement of the arms and legs. Balance is recovered by stepping backward or to the side. Most boys achieve this stage by age three and a half and most girls by age four.

*Stage 3:* Initial position – several steps behind the ball. The child takes one or more steps to approach the ball. The kicking foot stays close to the ground until the moment of contact. After the kick the child steps forward or to the side to regain balance. The forward momentum used during the run up propels the body forward after the kick. Most boys achieve this stage by age four and a half and most girls by age six.

*Stage 4:* Initial position – several steps behind the ball. The child approaches the ball with several rapid steps, leaps before the kick and usually hops during the plant onto the support leg after the kick. The body generally reclines during the windup. Most boys achieve this stage by age seven and most girls by age eight.

*By contrast here are the mature kicking features of the older player.*

- run up to the ball
- balance on the plant leg (forces are on the support foot)
- location of the plant foot immediately adjacent to the ball (not behind ball)
- swing leg movement during the back swing and forward swing (hip extension to hip flexion, knee flexion to knee extension)
- hip rotation while striking the ball (swing begins in the legs, continues through hip rotation and ends with torso and arm involvement)

Regardless of the type of kick the basic action is identical:

- a) the position taken to the ball (preparation)
- b) the back-swing of the kicking foot (preparation)
- c) the kick proper (contact)
- d) the follow-through

### ***Balance***

Balance is the physical steadiness that keeps you on your feet. Having good balance is key to master as a soccer player. It is important to develop good balance whilst stationary, but more importantly whilst on the move. Balance is at the core of nearly every action performed in a soccer game. When kicking the ball, controlling your center of gravity is essential to solid execution of the kick. When dribbling, balance is at the core of executing nearly all dribbling moves, and developing solid balance at a young age will allow players to be adept with the ball throughout their soccer careers. Likewise, as soccer is a fast paced sport a player needs to develop the ability to maintain balance at speed by adjusting the body to meet the demands of the game. For example if an opponent bumps into a player who is dribbling, the player needs to be able to shift their body weight accordingly to maintain balance and control the ball. Balance is key for all aspects of soccer.

#### **Balance – Stationary**

1. Stand on one leg – stand on one leg and lift the other foot off the ground. Then stand back on two feet. Then repeat while balancing on the opposite leg.
2. Cross leg over – stand on one leg, and then bring the other leg across the midline of the body. Repeat while balancing on the opposite leg.
3. Star – stand on one leg, extending the legs and arms outward, then lean the body towards the standing leg keeping limbs extended outwards. Repeat on the other leg.
4. A Little Dance - Stand on one leg and extend other leg forward, then extend that same leg backward and then out to the side, repeat on opposite side.

#### **Balance/Agility – In Motion**

1. Hop in place on one leg, then stop and repeat on the opposite leg, then switch while hopping.
2. Twirl in place – spin about in a 180°/360° circle with one leg on the ground.
3. Happy star – arms and legs diagonally to the side; keep one leg back and one arm forward (both sides after a reset)
4. Jump and kick heels towards buttocks

### ***Bending, Twisting and Reaching***

Bending, twisting, and reaching all contribute to developing flexibility in children. Flexibility is the range of motion around the joints. Soccer can be demanding on the body so it is important for players to build strength and flexibility around the joints to prevent injury and to aid recovery. Helping children to establish flexibility and certain range of motion movements from a young age will help them to better understand the ways in which their bodies can move. Encouraging exercises that require a full range of motion helps players to remain flexible and ultimately can help to protect them from injuries. These skills go hand in hand with other foundational skills like balance, running and jumping.

- Example exercises:
  - Alphabet Shapes: creating shapes with the body
  - Trunk Twist: keeping feet still, twist upper body side to side
  - Reach to Stars: stretch your body as long as you can - up on your toes extending your arms as high as possible towards the sky
  - Roly Poly: a forward roll (somersault), start by kneeling or standing on the ground, place your head down near the ground with the palms of each hand flat on the ground next to each ear. Push off your feet so that your body rolls onto your back, feet over your head and then back onto the ground. See diagram below.



### ***Running***

Running is a rapid movement that involves transferring weight from one foot to the other with a brief loss of contact with the ground by both feet. Speed and maturation of running style increases with age as the child's muscle strength, balance and coordination improve. By teaching young players how to run correctly will help to benefit many other factors relating to soccer now and in years to come. With the right running technique, a child can run faster, further and can master change of direction, agility and balance with greater ease.

Basic running mechanics must be taught and reinforced as part of movement education in the U5/U6 and U7/U8 age groups and the motions can be reinforced during warm-up or cool-down activities with the U9/U10 and older age groups. The following basic mechanics of running serve as a good foundation to this skill for the soccer player. Coaches must note that a player's running style will change in the match when in contact with the ball or opposing players or when reacting to the movement of teammates or opponents. Here then are the basics upon which to build proper running:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 7-8.

- Maintain a balanced and upright posture
- Control speed by how much force is applied with each foot strike
- The quicker the foot strike, the faster the player runs
- Strive to get the feet on and off the ground as quickly as possible
- Leg locomotion and stride length determine the speed at which a player runs
- Position with the torso and head aligned with the hips
- Strike the ground with the ball of foot while bringing the foot back under the body
- Lean forward slightly, bending the ankles until body weight is centered on the balls of the feet
- Head in a neutral position, looking forward with the facial muscles relaxed (glance sideways or turn the head only when needed to tactically scan the field)
- Lift the heel and push off with the ball of the foot
- Bend the leg at the knee and drive it forward
- Bend the arms; swing the arms forward and back (the movement will be diagonally across the front of the body in order to be able to change direction) to maintain poise
- Attempt to keep the center of gravity near the ground (this aids in stopping or sudden change of direction)<sup>8</sup>

### ***Jumping***

Jumping is the action of pushing off with both feet and landing with both feet. Initially players should learn to jump with both feet. Teaching the correct way to jump will help with performance and reduce the possibility of knee injuries. This is helpful as there are many situations during a game where you may perform a stationary jump or a moving jump. Jumping can be broken down into 2 segments; the take off and the landing.<sup>9</sup>

#### **APPROACH RUN BEFORE TAKE-OFF:**

The approach run should be made in the direction in which the player intends to receive the ball from or propel the ball towards. Lengthen the final stride and the center of gravity should be lowered somewhat. Press against the ground with the heel of the foot of the take off (drive) leg. By straightening the trail leg the body weight is transferred onto the lead leg which is slightly bent at the knee. By straightening the take off (lead) leg and by pulling up the knee of the trail leg vigorously the body will leave the ground. The arms can help in the upward momentum by swinging upwards close to the torso. If the take off space is tight because of the presence of other players then the final two strides should be stutter steps to be able to change the momentum from horizontal along the ground to vertical into the air.

#### **LANDING FROM THE JUMP:**

The legs should be held in a lunge position. To ensure a soft landing the knees should bend a little as the balls of the feet touch the ground; followed by the arch of the foot and then the heel.

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<sup>8</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 8-9.

Players jump in a soccer match to hurdle over another player on the ground, to avoid a tackle, to receive or strike the ball; to head the ball or for a goalkeeper to catch, punch, or deflect the ball. The ability to judge the speed and the arc of the ball, while making a split-second decision on the timing and takeoff point of the jump, will mark the above average player. Undoubtedly the basis of good play in the air is jumping mechanics.

Example Exercise: jump forward and plant (then jump backward/ sideways/ diagonal)

### ***Hopping***

Hopping is a more complex extension of the jumping action. Hopping requires the ability to balance on one leg and then generate enough force in the stance leg to hop, clear the ground and land without putting the other leg down or falling over. Hopping successfully requires that a player's balance skills are developed. For some players, hopping will initially look like standing on one leg but after pushing off, the player will have to use both feet to regain balance. This is ok and an important developmental step. Hopping is a particularly important skill in soccer as soccer players spend a good deal of time balancing on one foot while manipulating the soccer ball with the other foot. By focusing on moving with just one foot contacting the ground at the U5/U6 age, you will be developing players with an internal sense of balance and an ability to move on one leg with greater fluidity by the time they are ready to execute more complex footwork around U9/U10.

- Example Exercise: hop and move (forwards/backwards/sideways) double leg (like a jump); then single leg; alternatively, have players jump from one leg while stationary or on the move.

### ***Skipping***

Skipping is the forward action of hopping on one leg, transferring weight onto other leg and repeating process, raising knee to opposite arm each time. When a player skips, he is developing explosive power and coordination that will be key for timing jumps and runs at the older ages. Timing contact with the ground with the body's forward momentum is essential to a player's ability to ultimately win headers, and explode quickly into space to beat an opponent to the ball. By focusing on this skill at the U5/U6 age group, players will begin to understand the natural timing required to create explosive movement, and as muscle mass begins to develop in the older age groups, the player will have already developed the muscle memory and timing to execute explosive actions on the field.

### ***Starting & Stopping***

Starting and stopping involve controlling the body's speed and balance to start and stop on command. Players in a soccer game must constantly adjust their speed and motion in response to changes in the pace of the game. To start and stop quickly requires a great deal of control over ones body. By encouraging players at U5/U6 to practice these skills, through games that require repeated starting and stopping, players will develop the control over their body that is essential in order for them to progress to the next level. As players progress, the ability to quickly and effectively start and stop will be essential to their ability to effectively dribble the ball, execute feints and fakes, and respond to key moments in the game where timing is essential to success.

### ***Changing Direction***

Changing direction involves controlling the body to adjust accordingly and stay on balance whilst changing direction. In soccer, the ball regularly changes direction around the field so it is important that the players are able to adjust their bodies to respond to these changes. Throughout a soccer game players change directions countless times, while running, dribbling, shooting, and performing countless other actions. The ability of the body to respond to external stimuli in a controlled manner is complex. Players must be aware of their current state while also anticipating a change in momentum and establishing an awareness of the direction in which they must next move. For players at the U5/U6 age groups, this is a novel concept and one that will likely take time to develop. Maintaining an awareness where one is and where one wants to go, coupled with making the effort to change from moving in one direction to moving in an alternative direction are challenging. Exposing players repeatedly to situations where they are forced to change directions and move about is key to ensuring that they begin to develop fluidity in their directional motion. This fluidity will be essential to their performance on the field, and their ability to quickly adjust to the changing dynamics of the game, at the higher levels.

### ***Rolling***

Rolling involves the motion of the body on the ground. To practice rolling, have players lay on the ground and roll from side to side like logs. The awareness of how the body moves and the core and leg muscles used to roll the body are all important to the development of a soccer player. Helping U5/U6 players understand the momentum of the body on the ground will help them to develop resiliency and responsiveness in the game environment – where players frequently take tumbles to the ground and rolling is key to avoiding injury. Players should be taught to roll and then get back to their feet quickly, as they should in a game if they find themselves knocked to the ground.

### ***Conclusion***

The skills discussed above are the foundation for athletic performance. Mastering these skills is essential to a player's long term success. Virtually every action, every motion, and every technical skill that players learn from U5 through the end of their playing career, will have its foundation in one of these fitness skills. While it may be tempting to disregard developing these skills in lieu of more soccer specific skills, doing so will ultimately harm a player's long term development. Thus, it is essential that coaches embrace coaching these skills and understand the importance of these skills in a player's long term development.

## **Coaching U5/U6 Technical Skills**

### ***Introduction***

US Youth Soccer's Long Term Player Development Plan suggests that this age group falls in the 'Passion – Fun – Play' category. While instilling these ideas in players is the top priority, incorporating basic sport specific technical skills gives players a feeling of empowerment as they see their skills develop. The U5/U6 players are the future of all soccer programs and it is important to introduce simple soccer techniques that will lay the foundation that will assist them in progressing to the next level.

## Discussion of Technical Skills & the U5/U6 Age Group

When coaching technical skills at the U5/U6 level, it is important to focus on the use of both feet in order to develop the core technical competencies in both feet. The use of both feet will help to make them an all-around accomplished player in the future. When attempting a technical skill, the use of repetition will help the players develop muscle memory for the technique. With that said, the technical skills of a U5/U6 player will not have the fluidity, coordination, or efficacy of the skills of an older player. This is to be expected. These are players who are in the infancy of their soccer “career” and whose biomechanical abilities and proprioceptive awareness are just beginning to develop. As such, the players must be praised regularly for the attempt, and small successes should be recognized. At each age, players are physically and cognitively suited to develop certain skills. By teaching skills at the appropriate developmental phase, we can maximize efficiency and ensure that we develop the foundation that will allow for high level athletic performance during the teenage and adult years. At the U5/U6 age group, players are most suited to learn the following fundamental technical skills:

<b>U5/U6 Technical Skills List</b>
Shooting
Ground – Inside of Foot
Dribbling
Start & Stop
Running with the Ball
Shielding
Tackling
Possession - Block & Hold
Dispossession – Toe Poke

## U5/U6 Target Technical Skills<sup>10</sup>

### Shooting Skills

#### *Overview of Shooting*

Shooting is the primary method of getting the ball into the back of the net. At U5/U6, shooting will often be the result of opportunity and will likely appear to be more the result of dribbling into the net rather than an discrete and separate action. It is rare that players will have the control in a game to control a moving ball to the point where they can get an actual shot off. With that said, players should be encouraged to learn the technique of shooting during training sessions so that they increase their comfort with the technical aspects of the motion. As the players grow and develop their foundational skills and proprioceptive awareness, they will slowly begin to integrate shooting with other motions until it ultimately becomes a fluid action at older age groups. While

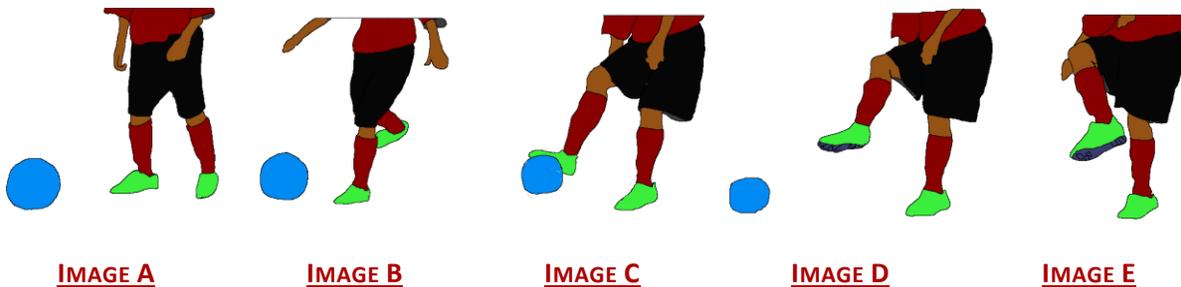
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<sup>10</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 16-53.

velocity does improve accuracy it is technique that makes the ball fly more so than raw power. The technique of shooting with accuracy must be established before power is added to the player's repertoire. For the U5/U6 age group, the focus should be on beginning to introduce this technique. This is the starting point and must be a point of emphasis so that as players continue to develop the correct technique becomes part of their natural form. Shooting of some nature should occur at every training session for the preadolescent age groups.

### ***Ground - Inside of Foot***

Shooting on the ground with the inside of the foot (near the arch) is one of the most common types of shot. You use the inside of your foot to strike the ball and the ball stays low to the ground. The inside of the foot is the largest surface of the foot and therefore is the best option for players to learn how to use their foot to direct the path of the ball towards a target. For much of the U5/U6 year, this shot will look a bit awkward as the players learn about how to adjust their bodies in relation to the ball, however it is important that use of this skill and the correct technique is reinforced at regular intervals. As players develop, the inside of the foot will become key in their ability to execute accurate close range shots on the ground and in the air; however for U5/U6, working with players to develop comfort using the inside of the foot to propel the ball towards the goal is a key developmental milestone.



### Key Coaching Points<sup>11</sup>

1. **Preparation:** non-kicking (plant) foot is alongside the ball about 6" away; toes of the plant foot pointed toward the target; knee of the plant foot leg is slightly bent; shoulder on the kicking leg side is in-line with the ball; the backswing of the kicking foot is approximately 45°; the ankle of the kicking foot is now with the toes pointing away from the kicker; the head is steady and looking down at the ball; the hips must now be facing the target; on the downswing of the kicking foot the sole of the foot is parallel to the ground (See Images A & B)
2. **Contact:** strike the center of the ball at the horizontal line A (equator) with the inside (arch) of the foot; the toes of the kicking foot turned slightly upward (See Image C)
3. **Follow Through:** the knee of the kicking leg should come upwards on the follow through; the inside of the kicking foot should be flat to the target on the follow through; the kicking foot should go towards the target on the follow through; keep the head down until after the kicking foot has landed on the ground (See Images D & E)

<sup>11</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg.40-41.

## Dribbling Skills

### Overview of Dribbling

Dribbling is the effort for one player to control the ball and move it about on the field. U5/U6 players must spend as much time as possible with the ball at their feet in order to develop a natural comfort with controlling the ball. Players should be encouraged to use all parts of their feet to move the ball about and creativity should also be encouraged. For U5/U6 players, who are just learning to control their bodies, the idea that they must also control the ball - an external object - is a complex concept for them to master. As players develop, this will become more natural and players will become more adept at controlling the ball and their bodies. Ultimately, the ability to change direction and change speed are crucial to successful dribbling. Change of direction is the ability while dribbling to alter course to the left or the right or a 180° turn. Change of speed while dribbling could include changing from slow to fast or fast to slow, coming to a complete stop or moving from a standing start.

### Start & Stop

Starting and stopping the ball is the first mechanism for controlling the ball. Players must learn to judge the motion of the ball and learn to time their own physical reactions to the moving object. They must time their reaction with the speed of the moving object. This is a highly complex concept that must be taught with that in mind. Players should be encouraged to work on this skill during training sessions. Start with your foot on the ball and then accelerate while using any part of either foot to keep the ball under close control until you are ready to stop as you begun. When working on this skill, encourage players to take equal strides and keep the ball close to their bodies.



**IMAGE A**



**IMAGE B**



**IMAGE C**

Key

Points<sup>12</sup>

1. **Preparation:** stay on the balls of the feet; knees slightly bent; lean a little forward at the waist; arms out somewhat for balance; head steady; eyes glance up to see the dribbling path (See Image)

Coaching

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<sup>12</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 18.

2. **Contact:** eyes glance down to ensure proper contact with the ball; touch the ball at the horizontal midline (line A) with the instep or the inside or outside of the instep (front of the foot near the toes); the ball can be touched at the vertical midline (line B) or slightly left or right of that line to change direction with the ball (See Image).
3. **Follow Through:** the sole of the foot can be used to stop the ball or to change direction (See Image C)

### ***Running with the Ball***

Running with the ball requires a great deal of focus for the U5/U6 player. They will often struggle to control both their own speed and movement and the speed and movement of the ball - which is normal. Continuing to expose players to situations where they can work to control the ball while in motion will help them to develop this skill. For U5/U6 players, running motion and balance are core foundational skills that most players have largely mastered without a ball, however when the ball is added into the picture, these become skills that they are still just beginning to develop.

Coordinating running, timing of the run, timing of the ball, stride so that you come in contact with the ball at the right moment, and continuous evaluation of one's body's proximity to the ball takes considerable focus for players at this age. Just as when they learned to walk and subsequently run as young toddlers, it will take much repetition for players to truly begin to become adept at running with the ball. The key is to encourage the effort and provide regular positive feedback. The distinction between running with the ball and starting and stopping (above), is that players will push the ball a bit further out in front of them and then catch up with the ball when they are working on running with the ball, while they will be aiming to keep the ball closer to their body (within a leg's reach) when working on starting and stopping.



**IMAGE A**



**IMAGE B**



**IMAGE C**

### **Key Coaching Points<sup>13</sup>**

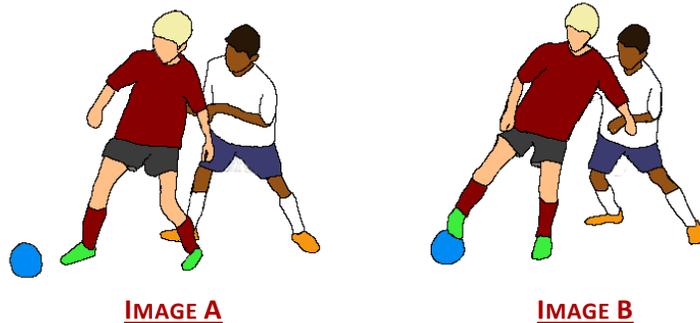
1. **Preparation:** balance and good running motion (See Image A)
2. **Contact:** push the ball forward with the instep; each push of the ball should go several yards and then run to catch up with the ball; touch the ball forward in the natural running stride; when touching the ball with the instep look at the ball (See Image B)

<sup>13</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 18.

3. **Follow Through:** look up and search for any passes or shots that might be on while the ball is rolling forward; when the ball is a few strides away the head is up and the eyes scan the field (See Image C)

### **Shielding**

Shielding the ball is the process of getting your body between the ball and a member of the opposing team to prevent that other player from being able to get to the ball. Players at U5/U6 can be introduced to the concept of shielding through fun activities; however it likely will take some time before players will use this skill in games. Shielding the ball can only be done when you have possession of the ball.



### **Key Coaching Points<sup>14</sup>**

1. **Preparation:** take up a side position to keep the ball away from the opponent at the furthest point; stand on the leg closest to the opponent with the knee slightly bent for balance; the arm closest to the opponent should be to some extent up and locked for balance and to hold off the opponent (do not push); lean with the shoulder closest to the opponent; head steady; use the foot away from the opponent to turn away thus screening the ball (See Image A)
2. **Contact:** eyes on the ball; center of gravity lowered to help balance; the leg furthest from the opponent should be extended to hold the ball as far away from the opponent as possible; place the sole of the foot of that leg on top of the ball (See Image B). Alternately form a wedge using the inside of the foot and the ground.
3. **Follow Through:** firm base provided by supporting foot; if the opponent commits to one side then roll in the opposite direction

### **Tackling Skills**

#### **Overview of Tackling**

Tackling is how one player gets the ball from another player in soccer. Unlike in American football, tackling in soccer is all about contact with the ball, not the other player. The player who is tackling will use his or her feet to attempt to take the ball from another player. At U5/U6 players will likely be motivated to get the ball, often tackling their own teammates. This is normal and will fade as the players begin to expand their understanding of the game. When tackling, balance is very important

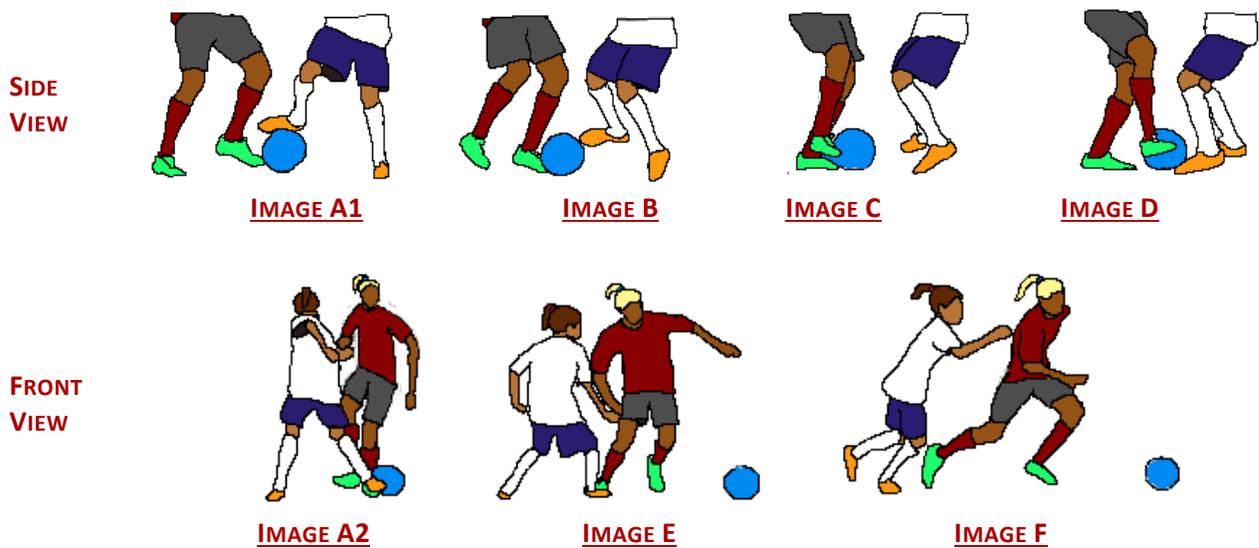
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<sup>14</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 18.

as the player must remain stable while lifting one foot to the ball. Strength, courage and skill as well as technique all play a part in the successful tackle. Tackling is the core skill of defending to regain the ball for one's team.

**Possession – Block & Hold**

The block & hold tackle is a way for the tackling player to gain possession of the ball by removing it from the opposing player. The block and hold is essentially first stopping the ball, and subsequently removing possession. This is the foundation of how one team gains possession from another at all levels of the game. Instead of simply kicking the ball away from the player in possession, the block and hold requires players to first stop the ball and then bring the ball under their control. When going in for a tackle, always go in 100% like you want to win the ball. Be strong and use your body.



**Key Coaching Points<sup>15</sup>**

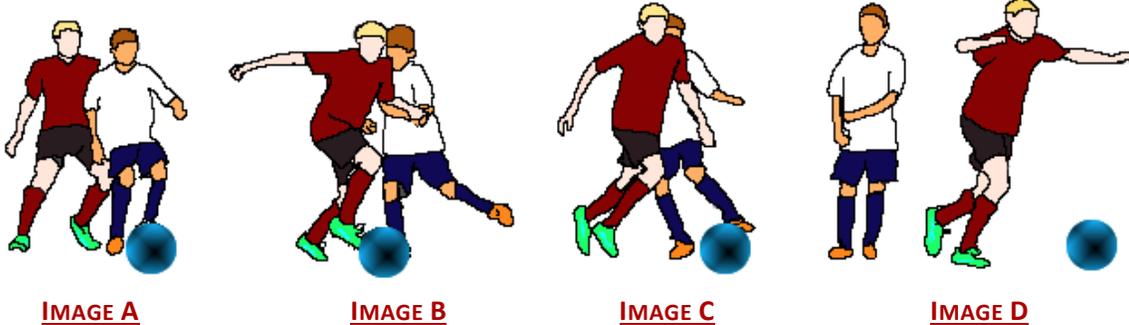
1. **Preparation:** get as close to the ball as possible to get a firm pull onto the ball; eye on the ball; step in close to the ball; support foot square to the ball; weight rests on the standing leg which is slightly bent at the knee; toes of the standing foot are pointed forward; the tackling foot should be turned outward; the tackling leg is bent somewhat; the tackling foot is swung backwards as in the push pass technique although somewhat less (See Images A1 & A2)
2. **Contact:** contact the ball with the inside of the foot (arch of the foot) as opponent touches it; step into the tackle; with muscles and joints well tightened place the tackling foot in front of the ball; weight carried through the center of the ball and supported by the standing leg behind and to the side of the ball with the knee bent; push the tackling foot slightly forward at the moment of contact the upper torso is inclined slightly forward; balance is maintained by the arms (See Images B & C & D)

<sup>15</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 47.

3. **Follow Through:** follow through by rolling the ball over the opponent's foot; tackler's shoulder to opponent's shoulder contact will help to press forward and maintain balance (See Images E & F)

### **Dispossession – Toe Poke**

The toe poke tackle is a way for the tackling player to remove the ball from another player's possession without necessarily obtaining possession. This is the most common type of tackle that is seen in the U5/U6 age group. It requires fewer steps than the block and hold, however is still a highly valuable skill and one that will be relevant for players at all ages. When executing a toe poke tackle, players will frequently appear to be simply kicking at the ball. The coach can assist the players by providing frequent, but not constant, reminders and encouraging any efforts by the player to use the correct preparation, contact, and/or follow through as listed below. When trying to dispossess with a toe poke, stand your ground and when the time is right, try tap the ball away.



### Key Coaching Points<sup>16</sup>

2. **Preparation:** approach from the side of the dribbler; keep the near arm down at the side; eyes on the ball; look for the moment when the dribbler has just touched the ball to time the tackle (See Image A)
3. **Contact:** when the ball is just in front of the dribbler stretch forward the near leg; poke the ball away with the toe (See Image B)
4. **Follow Through:** regain a normal running stride (See Images C & D)

### **Conclusion**

These technical skills provide players will critical core skills that they will use throughout their careers. Introducing correct technique at U5/U6 helps to ensure that players develop effective technical movement patterns and build muscle memory. As players get older, having technically sound movement patterns ingrained into their muscle memory will allow them to perform at a high level and develop additional skills swiftly and with greater ease.

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<sup>16</sup> Snow, Sam. Skills School. US Youth Soccer. 2010. pg. 48.

## Coaching U5/U6 Psychological & Mental Strength Skills

### Introduction

For many U5/U6 players, soccer is the first athletic “team” experience. The rules, concepts, and social dynamics are quite complex for many of these players. Additionally, the U5/U6 coach has a tremendous amount of influence over how this experience goes for each player. It is essential that the coach create a welcoming, encouraging, and positive atmosphere where players feel safe to learn and have fun.

### Discussion of Psychological & Mental Strength Skills & the U5/U6 Age Group

At the U5/U6 age group the priority is for the players to gain a successful soccer experience whilst developing basic fundamental skills. In order for children to develop an enjoyment and passion for soccer they must be presented with regular opportunities to succeed, contributing to increased confidence and social acceptance. Social skills are also developed through team activities, following instruction and interacting with others.

U5/U6 Psychological/Mental Strength Skills List
Fair Play
How to Play
Sharing
Parental Involvement
Emotional Management

### Target U5/U6 Psychological & Mental Strength Skills

#### Overview

A key piece of the learning process at any age is trial and error, and coaches should expect many “errors” at this age group. This is both developmentally appropriate and a great opportunity for coaches to demonstrate positive encouragement and instill an appreciation for creativity in the young athletes on the field. Encouraging players to take it upon themselves to try new things, and rewarding creative thinking is a great way to make the experience a positive one and to motivate our

youngest players. The demeanor of the U5/U6 athlete will vary considerably as personality differences are quite evident by this age, particularly in social situations. The coach will need to ensure that he or she takes steps to welcome all personality types into the group – including those that may run opposite to the coach’s own style. Psychological skills, and all skills for that matter at the U5/U6 age group, should be injected within the regular activities, not focused on specifically via



a lecture or discussion. Players should be praised for high fiving a teammate (or an opponent) after a good effort on the field – and coaches should regularly model this type of behavior.

### **Fair Play**

The key principles of fair play in youth soccer are:

1. Respect the rules
2. Respect the officials (in this case coaches) and their decisions
3. Respect your opponent
4. Give everyone an equal chance to participate
5. Maintain your self-control at all times

From a young age both the coaches and parents must place little emphasis on winning and more emphasis on having fun, improving skills, making friends and trying their best. With this mental approach children will develop the ability to accept a loss and focus more on the enjoyment of the sport. With less emphasis placed on winning, children are more likely to abide by the rules and respect decision made by the official. These are traits that successful players must possess throughout their entire soccer career. Coaches can help to instill these principles in their players by example and by ensuring that the team takes part in post-game rituals like the high-five line.

### **How to Play**

Children develop a number of social and psychological skills through active sports participation, contributing to an enhanced ability to follow instruction and learn new things. A coach should act as a role model and lead the children in their development but also encourage **guided discovery** (the use of asking questions to guide players towards the answer the coach is looking for) so the children are exploring and learning for themselves. Competition is not of value at this age, and play should be exclusively focused on enjoyment and trying new skills. Focus on competition at this age creates an environment where creativity is discouraged, rule breaking is encouraged, and most importantly creates an environment that will not instill in players the love for the game that will inspire them to develop the internal motivation and positive play characteristics. Instead of competition, cooperation should be the name of the game for the U5/U6 athlete and coach. Working together with others to achieve a goal is the core of cooperation at this age, and promotes the development of creativity, problem solving, and communication skills that are essential components of a complete player.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sharing**

A child does not truly understand the concept of sharing until about the age of 5. With this in mind it is important to provide plenty of high participation activities involving each child playing with their own ball. Practice activities that require pairs at this age can prove difficult; however an introduction to team based activities would benefit the children and teach them social skills such as team work, communication and an ability to share. With that said, for the majority of activities that involve a ball, there should be a ratio of one ball per child. Players can actively engage with one another and learn concepts such as taking turns through activities that involve a ball (for example, having all players dribbling around and high fiving one another, or having them dribble about and

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<sup>17</sup> Snow, Sam. US Youth Soccer Player Development Model, February 2012, pg. 37-38.

then each takes a turn calling out a body part that everyone must touch to a ball). Coaches should be aware that players at this age may have some challenges sharing. There are likely to be some frustrating moments for children in the soccer environment, particularly during scrimmages when there is just one ball for many players. Coaches should encourage players to cheer for their teammates and find similar alternative methods to ensure that all players are engaged in the activity.

### **Parental Involvement**

At this age parental involvement may be encouraged to support a child's learning. Some children with extrovert characteristics may run onto the field by themselves and happily participate in every activity thrown at them, whereas more introvert children are likely to hesitate and watch from the sidelines. Parental involvement may aid greater participation from the less confident children which in turn contributes to their learning. As a child experiences success and enjoyment on the field, the parent should look to appropriately withdraw themselves from the activity in an attempt for their child to perform independently. The parent's role should then become one of cheerleader and supporter – praising the child for his or her efforts – regardless of how small they may seem to the parent. Coaches can help to create an environment of support and appropriate involvement by encouraging parents to allow the players to experiment on their own and always ensuring that their own conduct is focused on providing players with positive praise.

### **Emotional Management**

During sports participation children experience a number of different emotions such as anger, excitement, sadness, anxiety and joy. Emotional management is the ability to control and manage these emotions. At this young age it can be overwhelming for children to feel and express such a variety of emotions during a period of time. Success both socially and on the soccer field depends on having the ability to control exuberance when appropriate. Children can go from being happy to sad in a split second and the smallest things can trigger this. As a coach it is important to have a method to manage these outbursts to encourage more positive emotions.

Example: Player loses ball to opponent and expresses anger. Coach takes player to the side, talks to him and asks for a high five. Player gives high five but is still angry. Coach asks for a low five (“down below”) but moves hand as player goes to hit it (“too slow”). Repeat low five a couple of times the allow player to hit your hand (“too fast”). At this point the player is feeling a positive emotion from accomplishing the most recent task.

***“Playing sports can teach kids things like discipline, respect, and responsibility- but kids need your guidance to learn these life lessons.” Dr Michael Simon, 2005.***

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### **Conclusion**

These psychological skills are essential to instilling a love for the game in our young players. Coaches must work to ensure that their actions reflect and encourage these skills in the players they coach. Helping players to develop these skills will enhance their social and emotional skills and their understanding of the concept of a team. Again, the coach at this age and the attitude and

approach the coach brings to each team activity play a significant role in whether players successfully develop these skills and lay the foundation for future success.

## Coaching U5/U6 Tactics

### Introduction

Tactics at the U5/U6 age group primarily focus on the absolute basics of soccer. Still, the concepts will be challenging for players and it will take significant positive encouragement for players to begin to grasp them. Coaches should primarily focus on educating players about tactical skills through simple verbal praise and instruction using the tactical terms in their praise. This provides players with exposure to the concepts. By consistently praising, players will make the connections between their actions and the tactical concepts. Attempting to explain the concepts to players verbally is not effective at this age, so active coaching, focus on physical landmarks such as sidelines, and the frequent use of positive reinforcement are the best methods for relaying this tactical information.

### Discussion of Tactical Skills & the U5/U6 Age Group

Realistically very young age groups are not ready for the concept of complicated tactics. At this age they will be learning the meaning of boundary lines and the other markings on a soccer field. Learning about the marks on a soccer field will be quite enough for the youngest players. Coaches should not concern themselves with trying to teach the abstracts areas (open space, thirds, etc.) on the field that do not have actual lines on the ground. For the horizontal use of the field teach the younger age groups which half of the field is ours and which is theirs (attacking/ defending).

U5/U6 Tactical Skills & Concepts List
Principles of Attack
Penetration
Principles of Defense
Pressure
Which Goal to Shoot At
Playing the Ball, Wherever it May Go
Comprehending Boundary Lines

## Target U5/U6 Tactical Skills

### Overview

Tactical skills for the U5/U6 age group are fairly straightforward for coaches, but quite complex for the young athlete. Tactics can be divided into two categories, the Principles of Play – which include both the Principles of Attack and Principles of Defense, and the general tactics. The first two Principles of Play (tactical concepts) should be introduced at a very simple level at this age group. Players will likely not have the ability to fully grasp the concepts, but it is important that they hear the terms in appropriate situations. The general tactics that are relevant to this age group are largely related to how players and the ball move about the field. They focus on the most basic applications of tactical understanding, such as boundaries. It is important to remember that this is

likely to be the first team experience the majority of the players have experienced therefore more emphasis should be placed on participation and enjoyment, with an introduction to basic soccer tactics.

## **Principles of Attack**

### ***Penetration***

Penetration is, by definition, the ability to move the ball past one or more of the opponent's players towards the goal you are trying to shoot on. No U5/U6 player will understand that sentence. The plan of attack for U5/U6 players is dribble as far as you can and then shoot. This familiarizes the players with the basic concept of penetration and is a good introduction to attacking play. The use of the term penetration as part of regular praise (ex. "great job Sam, way to penetrate the defense with your dribbling"), is as far as coaches need to go at this age to introduce this tactical concept.

## **Principles of Defense**

### ***Pressure***

Pressure is the effort of the defending team to stop the opponent from moving the ball towards the defending team's goal. Defending for very young players means go get the ball, dribble away from the other players and then shoot. As mentioned earlier regarding sharing and emotional management, this process can be daunting for some young children. It is important we give them the opportunity to play with similar size/ ability children to ensure each child is experiencing this sense of accomplishment and excitement of stealing the ball from the opponent. As with the term penetration, the use of the term pressure as part of your regular praise (ex. "great job putting pressure on the blue team Audrey!") is sufficient for coaching this term at the U5/U6 age group.

Playing games such as the 'Numbers Game' would be ideal for this.

E.g. Numbers Game – Each child is matched up to player of similar ability and given a number. On coaches call both players with that number run onto field, challenge for the ball and look to score in opposition's goal.

## **Which Goal to Shoot At**

Learning which way to go on the field is a significant achievement for these young players. For U5/U6 players, simply understanding and remembering which team they are on and which goal they are shooting at takes considerable concentration. Constant reminders and positive reinforcement from the coach can assist in this learning process. Using different colored cones/ goals can also make this easier for the children to understand and become familiar with moving in a specific direction.

## **Playing the Ball, Wherever it May Go**

In small sided games at U5/U6, positions are irrelevant. The players are familiarizing themselves with a number of new concepts and it is important not to throw too much instruction at them, instead allow them to explore the field and learn through experiences. Players should be encouraged to move with the ball – which typically means they move together in what is often described as a "clump" or a "swarm" as they attempt to steal and dribble the ball. This is normal and

should be encouraged. The fact that the players are engaging with the ball and aware of the movement of the ball are two key concepts that are reinforced by encouraging the players to follow the ball about on the field.

### **Comprehending Boundary Lines**

The players should begin to understand the basic boundaries on the field and learn to stop play should the ball cross these boundaries. This can often take a while for the children to fully understand, however constant reinforcement by the coach and parents can speed up the learning process. At this age the ball will often run out of play which can break down the game. During training activities, it is recommended that the coach has a collection of soccer balls on the sideline and rolls a new ball in every time the active ball leaves the field. This ensures that playing time is maximized and players maintain focus on the game.

### **Conclusion**

These tactical concepts should be reinforced each game and training session in a friendly way by coaches. It's important that coaches focus on positive behaviors and always relay information to these young players in a way that leaves a positive impression. Coaches should not attempt to verbally explain these concepts as the U5/U6 player does not have the abstract cognitive awareness to understand such an explanation. Instead, the coach's objective should simply be to familiarize the players with the concepts by example (ex. as soon as the ball goes out of bounds, the coach can say loudly "ball's out of bounds! Here comes a new one!" and then immediately roll the new ball into the game.).

## **U5/U6: The Game**

At this age training sessions are very much an introduction to the game with the main emphasis being on enjoyment. Children gain technical skills and game insight by playing in simplified soccer situations. There are no officials, no positions and no score is kept. Coaches should focus on providing players with positive praise and encouraging the skills discussed earlier in this guide. The professional coaches will provide coaches with a session plan each week that outlines all activities that the players will perform, followed by a simple scrimmage. The scrimmage will loosely follow the guidelines below:

### **Basic Overview of the U5/U6 Field**

Field of about 20x30 is outlined with cones and two pugg nets are set up centered on the short ends of the field.

### **Basic Rules of the U5/U6 Game**

Play with approximately 3 players per team aka 3v3 (sometimes may be 4 players depending on team size)

Goalkeeper Status – No goalkeepers

Ball size - 3

Restarts – Informal restarts (kick-in's or the coach will just roll a new ball in). No throw-ins. No free kicks.

Referee – none, coaches are responsible for managing the games.

Scoring – No scores or team records.

Time – 35 mins

### **Recommended Licenses for this Age Group**

- F License, or
- U5/U6 Youth Module Certificate, or
- National Youth License

### **Conclusion to Coaching the U5/U6 Age Group**

The principle of coaching this age group is to improve a child's basic motor skills, whilst also encouraging the child's physical, psychological and social development and of course, instilling a love for the game. An introduction to the basic rules and understanding of the game will be explored and children should be given the opportunity to develop key characteristics through guided discovery and coaching. The aim is to give children of this age a good physical and social foundation to start soccer skill training at the next level. While potentially tempting, coaches should refrain from introducing more complex concepts beyond those outlined in this guide during the U5/U6 age group. If a coach neglects to give the skills discussed in this guide sufficient attention, his or her players will likely find that they have significant skill deficits further down the line. While it can be hard at times to see the value of certain skills, they are essential and a coach's willingness to adhere to coaching these age appropriate skills and concepts will have a significant impact on a player's long term development. The final page of this document contains a list of all of the skills and concepts we have discussed. Coaches should work to ensure they incorporate reinforcement of each of these skills in their coaching on a regular basis.

## U5/U6 Milestones Checklist

<b>Foundational Skills</b>	
Balance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bending	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changing Direction	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jumping & Hopping	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reaching	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rolling	<input type="checkbox"/>
Skipping	<input type="checkbox"/>
Starting & Stopping	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twisting	<input type="checkbox"/>
Walking & Running	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Fitness, Ability &amp; Health</b>	
How to Warm Up	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nutrition	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hydration	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Technical Skills</b>	
Tackling	
Possession - Block & Hold	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dispossession - Toe Poke	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dribbling	
Start & Stop	<input type="checkbox"/>
Running with the Ball	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shielding	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shooting	
Ground - Inside of Foot	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Tactical Skills &amp; Concepts</b>	
Principles of Attack	
Penetration	<input type="checkbox"/>
Principles of Defense	
Pressure	<input type="checkbox"/>
Which Goal to Shoot At	<input type="checkbox"/>
Playing With the Ball, Wherever It May Go	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehending Boundary Lines	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Psychological/Mental Strength Skills</b>	
Fair Play	<input type="checkbox"/>
How to Play	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sharing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parental Involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotional Management	<input type="checkbox"/>