

Characteristics Of U - 6 Players

Boys and girls under 6 years of age play in our Pee Wee leagues. They play co-ed, three a side soccer with no goal keepers. Coaches are allowed on the field to help, guide and encourage the youngsters. A number 3 size ball is used at this age level.

Children at this age are characterized by the following traits:

- Short attention span.
- Can attend to only one problem at a time.
- May understand simple rules that are explained briefly and demonstrated.
- May or may not understand or remember:
 - ◆ what lines mean on the field;
 - ◆ what team they are on;
 - ◆ what goal they are going for.

We need to be patient and laugh with them as they get 'lost' on the field.

- Easily bruised psychologically. Shout praise often. Give "hints", don't criticize. Need generous praise and to play without pressure. No extrinsic rewards (trophies, medals, etc.) should be given for winning.
- Prefer "parallel play" (Will play on a team, but will not really engage with their teammate). Thus, a 3 against 3 game is, in reality, a 1 against 5 game because they all want the ball at the same time.
- Very individually oriented (me, mine, my).
- Constantly in motion, but, with no sense of pace. They will chase something until they drop. They are easily fatigued but recover rapidly.
- Development for boys and girls are quite similar.
- Physical coordination limited. Eye - hand and eye - foot coordination is not developed. Need to explore qualities of a rolling ball.
- Love to run, jump, roll, hop, etc..

- Catching or throwing skills not developed.
- Can balance on their "good" foot.

Involving The Parents

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-6 player still views their parents as the most significant people in their lives. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed.

A pre-season parents letter is a good way to communicate so that there is no doubt that your message has been delivered.

The guidelines here are really appropriate to any age group. Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- A means of contacting everyone without one person doing all of the calling. (Phone chains.)
- Choosing a team administrator-someone to handle all of the details.
- Complete all paperwork required by your league or club.
- Discuss the laws of the game, which are quite simple at this level.
- Carpool needs.
- Practice and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss practice
- What each player should bring to practice: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guards (Cleats are not mandatory.)

Probably the most important aspect to discuss with your parents is your philosophy about coaching U-6 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as learn about soccer.

The second most important aspect is your expectations from them during game time. For example, how do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should never coach from the sidelines?

Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do they probably will too.

Things You Can Expect

As coaches of these younger players there are things that we know that we can expect during training and games. If we know what to expect, we will be more effective in dealing with the hundreds of situations that come up. This will help us relax, and, in turn, allow us to enjoy the unpredictable nature of working with these children even more. Here are some of the things that we can expect.

- Most players cry immediately when something is hurt. Some cry even when something is not hurt.
- No matter how loud we shout, or how much we "practice" it, they can not or will not pass the ball.
- Somebody will come off the field in need of a toilet. Somebody will stay on the field in need of a toilet. (You should be aware that the field house is now equipped with both men's and women's toilets)
- The only player to hold a position would be the goalkeeper (and we don't play with one). Don't even consider teaching positional play.
- Twenty seconds after the start of a game, every player will be within 5 yards of the ball. There are a lot of cute names for this such as the "Swarm" and "Bumble Bee Soccer" and the "Bunch". Bunching is a favorite topic on a lot of coaching forums on the Internet. No one we've seen has come up with a way to prevent it at this level, so if you do, ***patent it.***
- Several players will slap at the ball with their hands, or pick it up. Several parents will yell at them not to do that. This will continue for many years
- During a season, you will end up tying at least 40 - 50 shoe laces. And you'll continue to tie shoe laces right up to the time they go to a travel team and even beyond that.
- They will do something that is absolutely hysterical. Make sure that you laugh!

Coaching Rationale

It is important to understand at the outset that players coming to any sport prior to the age of 6 years old, in general, do not do so by their own choice. As a result, their coaches need to give them something about which to get excited.

Further, at this age, learning to play soccer is secondary to most other things in their lives.

With the above assumptions, let's look at some things that we can do to energize the U-6 players, and, hopefully, get them to the point where they will enthusiastically initiate the sign up for next year!

- Each session should be geared around touching the ball as many times as possible. Involve the ball in as many activities as possible. Basic movements such as running, skipping, hopping, etc. need to be emphasized. If these can be done while kicking, catching, rolling, or dribbling a ball... all the better!
- Training should not last for more than one hour. This is primarily due to physical fatigue and attention span considerations. Train once a week. Any more than this may lead to their and your burnout.
- Have as many different kinds of activities ready as you can get into one hour. Emphasis needs to be placed on what is FUN!
- Every player should bring his or her own size #3 ball.
- Remember, although the children may have very similar birth dates, their physical and / or mental maturity may vary as much as 36 months. Activities need to accommodate these individual differences whenever possible.
- Team play and passing is an alien concept to these players. They know that if they pass the ball, they may never get it back. In fact, they often will steal it from their own teammates. Do not get uptight if they do not pass, let them dribble to their heart's content.
- Plan for at least 4, 90 second drink breaks, especially in warmer weather. Their "cooling system" is not as efficient as in older players.

Typical Training Session

Here are some items that should be included in a U-6 training session:

Warm Up

A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that may or may not involve the ball. They can chase their ball as it is thrown by the coach, bringing it back with different parts of their body. Or, they can chase someone with their ball at their feet.

Individual Activities

Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1 v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals in a game environment.

An example would be a kind of tag game, or "*Red Light - Green Light*", *Shark, Bulldog* or a game where players are trying to knock their ball through gates. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" instead of games where the "loser sits".

Play The Game

Move on to the real game, but, make sure it is a 2 v. 2, 3 v. 3, or 4 v. 4 game. Switch the game every 5 minutes or so. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary.

Warm-Down & Homework

Finish the session with a warm down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like, bounce it off their thigh and then catch it. It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.