Portland Timbers & Portland Thorns
Player Development Model
Player Development

I don’t believe skill was, or ever will be, the result of coaches. It is a result of a love affair between the child and the ball.
Manfred Schellscheidt, US Youth National Team Coach.

There is nothing the coach can do in practice to offset what the player will not do alone.
Anonymous

No two situations are the same in a game of soccer, and this is why players have to develop their technique by actually playing. There is no “ideal” technique; how a player kicks the ball with his instep will always depend on the options available to him, his position on the field, and the positions of his teammates and opponents.
Bert van Lingen, KNVB Coach.

It helps if the coach continually encourages the players to make dribbling their first option. It may also help to make the players take at least two touches on the ball before they can look to pass. Remember that making mistakes at these early ages is an important part of the player’s learning and development. Encourage risk-taking and applaud effort.

The Scope of Player Development

It takes 10 years of extensive training to excel in anything. Herbert Simon, Nobel laureate.

Player development encompasses technical, tactical, physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of growth. By far, the most important aspect of the youth sport environment is emotional development. Participants must have fun and learn new skills and tactical insights in order to feel ownership in, and attachment to the game; and to develop the passion that will drive them to persevere and aspire to greater things.
The Coaching Challenge

It is estimated that approximately 70% of children quit sports by age 13. The Youth Sports Institute cited the following reasons for kids playing and quitting sports in a 1987 study. Subsequent follow-up studies have continued to validate these findings.

The 10 most important reasons I play my favorite sport.

In order of importance….

1. To have fun (Related to coaching)
2. To improve my skills (Related to coaching)
3. To stay in shape (Related to coaching)
4. To do something I’m good at (Related to Coaching)
5. For the excitement of competition (Related to coaching)
6. To get exercise (Related to coaching)
7. To play as part of a team (Related to coaching)
8. For the challenge of competition (Related to coaching)
9. To learn new skills (Related to coaching)
10. To win (Related to coaching)

The 11 most important reasons I stopped playing a sport.

In order of importance….

1. I lost interest. (Players don’t develop ownership in the sport)
2. I was not having fun. (Adults are too critical of mistakes and self-expression)
3. It took too much time. (It takes approximately 10 years, or 10,000-hours to be proficient at anything)
4. Coach was a poor teacher. (Not being taught basic skills)
5. Too much pressure (Not understood by their coaches or parents / Pressure to perform)
6. Wanted a non-sport activity. (Some drop-out is inevitable)
7. I was tired of it. (Too much, too soon, perhaps?)
8. Needed more time for study.
9. Coach played favorites.
10. The sport was boring.
11. There was an overemphasis on winning.

Core Problems with Youth Sport Development

Dr. Istvan Balyi is a leading expert in the field of long-term athletic development (LTAD). Here are some of his key observations of youth sport.

• The chronological age, rather than the biological age, of players dominates competition and training decisions.
• Young athletes under-train and over-compete.
• Adult competition is likely to be superimposed on young athletes.
• Male programs are likely to be superimposed on females.
• Training in the early years is heavily focused on outcomes (winning) rather than processes (overall child development).
• The best coaches are frequently encouraged to work at the elite levels.
• Under-development between 6 and 16 cannot be fully overcome; athletes will never reach their genetic potential.
• Coach/teacher education tends to skim the growth, development and maturation of young people in favor of technical information.

In general, young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first-hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that succeed and fail.

Why Small-Sided Games?

The Portland Timbers and Thorns have thought long and hard about the answer to the question, "Why Small-Sided Games?"

What does "Small-Sided Games" mean? These are soccer games with fewer players competing on a smaller sized field. These are fun games that involve the players more because fewer players are sharing one ball.

All ages can play "Small Sided Games", but it has a definite developmental impact on our younger soccer players. US Youth Soccer recommendations for "number of players" at the various age groups are as follows:

- **U6** | 3 against 3 no goal keepers
- **U7 & U8** | 5 against 5 no goal keepers
- **U9 & U10** | 7 against 7 including goal keepers
- **U11 & U12** | 9 against 9 including goal keepers
- **U13+** | 11 against 11 including goal keepers

Here are some of the reasons why we believe, as soccer coaches, administrators and parents must guarantee that our young soccer players play small-sided games:

1. Because we want our young soccer players to touch the soccer ball more often and become more skillful with it! (Individual technical development)
2. Because we want our young soccer players to make more, less-complicated decisions during the game! (Tactical development)
3. Because we want our young soccer players to be more physically efficient in the field space they are playing in! (Reduced field size)
4. Because we want our young soccer players to have more individual teaching time with the coach! Fewer players on the field and fewer players on the team will guarantee this! (Need to feel worthy and need to feel important)
5. Because we want our young soccer players to have more, involved playing time in the game! (More opportunity to solve problems that only the game presents)
6. Because we want our young soccer players to have more opportunity to play on both sides of the ball! (More exposure to attacking and defending situations)
7. Because we want our young soccer players to have more opportunities to score goals! (Pure excitement)
8. Because we want to include children of all temperaments, assertive to shy, to have more opportunities to interact with others and the game! (Socialization)

These are the reasons why we adults must foster "Small-Sided Games" in our youth soccer programs. The "Small-Sided" environment is a developmentally appropriate environment for our young soccer players. It’s a FUN environment that focuses on the young soccer player.

It just makes sense doesn’t it?
Let Them Play!

For many reasons our players and their families lead very busy lives. Often times being busy leads to players leading lives that are over-structured. When this structure carries over to the soccer field we start to develop players that don't make decisions for themselves. The struggle we face as coaches is to find a way to develop a training session that follows a plan, while still giving players the opportunity to play and make decisions while experiencing success and failure.

The key to having success designing your training sessions is to make sure that your activities follow these four simple rules:

1. Are your activities age appropriate?
2. Do your activities allow for decision making?
3. Do your activities have implications for the game?
4. Are your activities fun?

While these questions seem easy to follow, many coaches tend to use activities that are more drill like. The Timbers/Thorns prefer “game activities” for activities related to the game.
The 3 L’s of Coaching

Coaching soccer is different from coaching many of the most popular sports in the United States. Most of the sports Americans grow up playing are coach centered. In football the coach calls the plays. In basketball the coach has designed a set offense and defense. In baseball there are situational rules that are absolute. Soccer is very different. During the games our players are in fluid situations that they may or may not have ever seen before. It is important that our training sessions put players into these game-like situations often. In order to do this we avoid the following:

- Lines
- Laps
- Lectures
- Language (Inappropriate)

The 3 L’s listed above disrupt the development of players. As you can see, the 3 L’s are defaults from other sports.

Sometimes it is difficult to think outside of the box to design games that don’t have lines in them. Here is an example. The old standby of teaching players to dribble by having them navigate a line of cones. While this does make players familiar with the properties of the ball, it does not allow them to decide for themselves which way they want to go. To make it more fluid we place the same cones in various places in an undefined space. The players then have to pick their heads up to find the various cones. This accomplishes the same technical development while allowing the players to have the freedom to make decisions.

Laps. Need I say more. Most players growing up look at laps as a negative thing. Coaches often use laps to punish players for not paying attention or for showing up late. This is counter productive for few reasons. First, fitness should not be a punishment at the younger ages. If running has a negative stigma to it then players will not want to do it as they get older. Second, most often teams have limited time for training. If we use up the time we have making players run, how will they become better soccer players. Third, most players don't like to run for no reason. If the running isn't fun then soccer isn't fun.

Since most coaches grew up playing sports that are coach centered, they feel that the more they say the better coach they are. It is actually quite the opposite. In soccer we try to design activities that facilitate the players development so that we don't have to coach as much. By having players participate in games that force them to make decisions, we allow the players to solve the problems for themselves.

As adults we develop some bad habits in our communication. It is important for us to use appropriate language when speaking to players and parents. The use of profane or vulgar language sets a poor example for our players.
**Guided Discovery**

As coaches we tend to want to solve problems for players. It is not uncommon to hear coaches yelling from the sidelines telling their players what to do. If players start to rely on the coaches and stop making decisions for themselves we are really developing robots and not players. To avoid this problem we use guided discovery to help players make their own decisions.

Guided discovery is the art of asking meaningful questions. By asking guided questions we help the players solve the problem on their own. This will give athletes the opportunity to practice problem solving and will help them to become more capable of solving problems that arise in games.

The goals of effective questioning are:

- Actively involving athletes in the learning process
- Enhancing their task mastery
- Enhancing their conceptual understanding
- Promoting both simple (low-order) and complex (high-order) thinking

An example of a low-order question is: What part of your body do you use to dribble the ball? When the player answers this question they can use a one word answer. Along with questions like this, we also like to ask questions that require players to have more in depth answers. An example of a high end question is: How can we get the ball down the field quickly? When the player answers this question they will use their own thoughts and opinions. The use of Low-order and High-order questions is necessary during training sessions. It is important for coaches to understand both types of questions and to apply them appropriately. Use of high order questions will provide athletes more opportunities for self-evaluation.

To use guided discovery effectively, the coach guides (facilitates) the players through effective age appropriate questioning to discovery. Here are some examples of guided questioning:

- Why didn’t that pass work? So, how should we do it this time?
- How can we get the ball to the other side of the field?
- Why is it important for you to lift your head up when you have the ball?

Along with asking guided questions, coaches need to provide positive responses. Here are some examples:

- Great….so how could we do it faster?
- I like that answer….what other skill can we use to get the ball to our teammates?
- Now you’re getting the idea! Where could you position yourself so that you could see both the player you are defending as well as the ball?
Question: What is your No. 1 qualification as a coach?

For 15 years, as a drill sergeant, I turned raw recruits into fighting machines.

Inspiration.

Experience, I played soccer on my prep school team.

Leadership, as V.P. of a major corporation, I have thirty-six people working under me.

I was available.
Age Group Characteristics

The U6 Player

Physical Development

At the ages between 4 and 6 you will see that players tend to be very similar. Differences between boys and girls are minimal. With this being said, there are always players that develop at rates that are faster and slower than the norm. We base the information in this manual on the typical player.

It is key at this age to use our time with the players to help them become more comfortable with their bodies. We call this a “movement education” approach. We use many different games and activities that don’t look a lot like to soccer to have players enhance their coordination and comfort with the ball.

Players at this age have an under-developed level of coordination. A child’s coordination starts with their head and moves down towards their feet and out to their hands. This is key for coaches to understand. If we take this in to account when designing our sessions, our expectations will be at an appropriate level. We have the players perform a variety of activities that have them exploring the properties of the ball with their hands and feet. The goal is to have players start with movements that are more comfortable for them and progress on to movements with their feet that maybe more complex and soccer related.

When asking players to be active in the sessions we should be aware of a couple of major differences between adults and children. Players at this age have a resting heart rate at about 90 beats per minute. The average adult has a resting heart rate of about 70 beats per minute. This means that players tire and recover quicker than the typical adult. Knowing this, we should design activities that are short and have less rest between them. We should also take into account that players at this age are more likely to feel the effects of hot and cold temperatures. Just because we as coaches are comfortable doesn’t mean the players are. Look for nonverbal communication from the players to recognize when they may be too cold or too hot.
Mental Development

Players at this age have incredible imaginations. They love to pretend and escape to far off lands. As coaches we can use our imaginations to inspire and keep our games fun for the players. Instead of using cones to mark a line, we can use them to show where the ocean is. Instead of having players dribble across a space with defenders, we can have the players become their favorite fish and have them try to avoid the sharks or fishermen. By using our imaginations we can challenge the players.

While designing games for the players we must remember that at this age they cannot deal with multiple problems or process large amounts of information. We need to make sure that the instructions we give the players are simple and deal with only one problem at a time. Using words like “but” and “if” only make it more complicated for the players. Start off with simple activities and over time make them more challenging.

The other piece that is important for us to remember is that these players have little or no understanding of time and space. Having a grid marked with cones does not in any way mean that the players will stay inside the space. We can also use the immature understanding of time to our advantage. If we want to give the players a feeling of success we can give them more time to achieve the stated goal.

Social Development

Players at this age are very predictable. The key to understanding these players is realizing that everything in their life is me, my, or mine. The players are egocentric and see the world only from their eyes. To get the most out of the activities, make sure that you have as many balls as players. Each player will want to have a ball and most are not likely to share.

All players prefer positive comments to negative but for players of this age it is a necessity. It is important that the players have the ability to play without pressure. In order for the players to develop a joy for the game of soccer, they must enjoy going to practice and playing in games. The more we can encourage them, the more they will love the game.

Typical U5/U6 Training Session

When designing a training sessions for this age it is important that they do not exceed approximately 60 minutes. Keeping the training sessions shorter will keep the players engaged. Here is the basic progression for a typical session:

- **Warm-Up (Approx. 20 Minutes)** - The warm-up should include a lot of movement education and fun activities. You should plan on having 2 - 3 exercises to keep the players focused. The players will have a short attention span so it is key to have different games to keep them interested.

- **Main Activities (Approx. 20 Minutes)** - These games will incorporate body awareness and maze games. Maze games are activities that do not involve specific direction. These games allow players to move in whichever direction they would like. The players wont necessarily understand which direction they should move towards.
• Final Game (Approx. 20 Minutes) - The final game should be 3v3 to small goals or cone goals with no goalkeepers. Make sure to mix up the players at least once during the game. (2x9 minute game)

Every session should end with the players having the opportunity to play the game. This is why they are there! If needed, you can play bigger numbers or play with multiple fields so that all the players can participate. Here are a few things to consider when you are designing a training session:

• Are the activities fun?
• Are the activities organized?
• Are the players involved in the activities?
• Are creativity and decision making being used?
• Are the spaces used appropriate?
• Is the coach’s feedback appropriate?
• Is the coach guiding or controlling the players?
• Are there implications for the game?

The U7/U8 Player

Physical Development

At the ages between 6 and 8 you will see that players tend to be very similar. Differences between boys and girls are are still small. With this being said, there are always players that develop at rates that are faster and slower than the norm. We base the information in this manual on the typical player.
It is key at this age to use our time with the players to help them become more comfortable with their bodies. We call this a movement education approach. We use many different games and activities that don’t look a lot like to soccer to have players enhance their coordination and comfort with the ball.

Players at this age have a slightly better but still under-developed level of coordination. A child’s coordination starts with their head and moves down towards their feet and out to their hands. This is key for coaches to understand. If we take this in to account when designing our sessions, our expectations will be at an appropriate level. We have the players perform a variety of activities that have them exploring the properties of the ball with their hands and feet.

The goal is to have players start with movements that are more comfortable for them and progress on to movements with their feet that maybe more complex and soccer related.

When asking players to be active in the sessions we should be aware of a couple of differences between adults and children. Players at this age have a resting heart rate at about 90 beats per minute. The average adult has a resting heart rate of about 70 beats per minute. This means that players tend to become tire and recover quicker than the typical adult. Knowing this, we should design activities that are shorts and have less rest between them. We should also take into account that players at this age are more likely to feel the effects of hot and cold temperatures. Just because we as coaches are comfortable doesn’t mean the players are. Look for nonverbal communication from the players to recognize when they may be too cold or too hot. There is an Improvement in pace and coordination from U6, however the immaturity of a U8’s physical abilities are obvious. It is important that we design activities and training sessions that take this into account.

**Mental Development**

Players at this age have incredible imaginations. They love to pretend and escape to fa off lands. As coaches we can use these imaginations to keep our games fun for the players. Instead of using cones to mark a line, we can use them to show where the ocean is. Instead of having players dribble across a space with defenders, we can have the players become their favorite fish and have them try to avoid the sharks or fishermen. It also helps us as coaches use our imaginations to make sure we can challenge the players.

While designing games for the players we must remember that their limited ability to tend to more than one task at a time leaves little or no capacity for “tactical” decision making. All of the activities that we use within the session should be geared towards the technical side of the game. We need to make sure that the instructions we give the players are simple and deal with only one problem at a time. Using works like but and if only make it more complicated for the players. Start off with simple activities and over time make them more difficult.

Their concept of time and space relationship is just beginning to develop and will be limited by the capacity to attend to multiple tasks. It is key for coaches to make activities simple and easy to understand.

The players have little or no experience with personal evaluation. For them effort is synonymous with performance. If they are working hard they must be doing well.
Players self-concept and body image are just starting to develop, but are very fragile. Players at this age have a great need for approval from adults such as parents, teachers, and coaches. They love to show individual skills that they have been practicing on their own or have seen on television. It is important to allow them time to show these skills. If you deny them this opportunity you run the risk of hurting their feelings.

All players prefer positive comments to negative but for players of this age it is a necessity. It is important that the players have the ability to play without pressure. The ability to play for fun is very important. They players are beginning to become intrinsically motivated. They will begin to ask about when they get to play as opposed to their parents telling them it’s time to go to practice.

Now that their universe is expanding, they will start to develop true playmates. They will now have “friends” that they trust and will share with those players regularly.
**Typical U7/U8 Training Session**

When designing a training session for this age it is important that they do not exceed approximately 60 minutes. Keeping the training sessions shorter will keep the players engaged. Here is the basic progression for a typical session:

- **Warm-Up (Approx. 15 Minutes)** - The warm-up should include a lot of movement education and fun activities. You should plan on having 1 - 1 exercises to keep the players focused. The players will have a short attention span so it is key to have different games to keep them interested. Start to introduce partner activities.

- **Main Activities (Approx. 25 Minutes)** - A mix of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games to encourage decision making.

- **Final Game (Approx. 20 Minutes)** - The final game should be 5v5 to small goals, flags, or cone goals with no goalkeepers. Every session should end with the players having the opportunity to play the game. This is why they are there! If needed, you can play bigger numbers or play with multiple fields so that all the players can participate.

Here are a few things to consider when you are designing a training session:

- Are the activities fun?
- Are the activities organized?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Are creativity and decision making being used?
- Are the spaces used appropriate?
- Is the coach’s feedback appropriate?
- Is the coach guiding or controlling the players?
- Are there implications for the game?
Physical Development

At the ages between 8 and 10 you will see that players start to have different stages of development. Differences between boys and girls start to become apparent. With this being said, there are always players that develop at rates that are faster and slower than the norm. We base the information in this manual on the typical player.

Now that the players are starting to develop at a quicker rate we are able to see that the individuals that are more physically mature are showing more developed motor skills. This allows for the bigger, stronger, faster, players to separate themselves from the rest of the team. These players will be able to rely on the physical attributes to have success throughout the season. It is important for coaches to focus even harder on developing the technical skill for these players. As they get older, and more players develop, their athleticism will not make up for a lack of technical ability.

The other issue that coaches run into in these ages is the difference in playing ability. When players are younger they are all very similar players. Now you will see players that practice on their own or just “get it” more than other players. When designing a training session it is key to make sure that you have activities that will challenge all of the players.
When asking players to be active in the sessions we should be aware of a couple of differences between adults and children. Players at this age have a resting heart rate at about 90 beats per minute. The average adult has a resting heart rate of about 70 beats per minute. This means that players tend to become tire and recover quicker than the typical adult. Knowing this, we should design activities that are shorts and have less rest between them. We should also take into account that players at this age are more likely to feel the effects of hot and cold temperatures. Just because we as coaches are comfortable doesn't mean the players are. Look for nonverbal communication from the players to recognize when they may be too cold or too hot.

**Mental Development**

We are now entering the phase of youth development that allows for more soccer decisions to be taught. Their attention spans start to increase, they understand how to deal with multiple problems at once, and they can manage their pace more effectively.

One of the most exciting aspects of this age is that they are staring to be more intrinsically motivated to play. They know when soccer practice is and they remind their parents about it. Players play because it is fun for them. They enjoy the challenges and rewards that the game brings. We must ensure that we continue to make the game enjoyable.

Along with the motivation to play, the players will also start to show signs of increased responsibility. They will bring their own ball and water to training, tuck their shirts in and pull their socks up to look the part, and will also want to carry their own stuff. Soccer has become more than just a social/physical activity to some players.

The players are also starting to understand basic tactical concepts. They can grasp the idea that changing the direction of the ball can help them and their team. Maze and target games are equally important for their development. Just because the players are starting to understand tactics doesn't mean we should neglect the technical development. Using repetition to develop the players ability with the ball is important, but it must be dynamic and not static.

**Social Development**

The personalities of players really begin to blossom at these ages. Some players will begin to initiate play on their own. They will seek out ways to play and will attempt to get others involved as well. You will start to see that peer pressure will increase in their lives. This pressure will sometimes work in your favor. If the team is working hard towards their goals it is more likely that the individuals will buy into the activities that the coach selects. You will also see that adults outside of the family will take on an added significance. This is often both coaches or teachers.

All players prefer positive comments to negative but for players of this age it is a necessity. It is important that the players have the ability to play without pressure. In order for the players to develop a joy for the game of soccer, they must enjoy going to practice and playing in games. The more we can encourage them, the more they will love the game.
Typical U9/U10 Training Session

When designing a training session for this age it is important that they do not exceed approximately 75 minutes. Keeping the training sessions shorter will keep the players engaged. Here is the basic progression for a typical session:

• Warm-Up (Approx. 15 Minutes) - The warm-up should include partner and small group activities. This is also the time to introduce some dynamic stretching.
• Main Activities (Approx. 25 Minutes) - Work in small group activities. Add more directional games to targets or zones.

• Final Game (Approx. 25 Minutes) - The final game should be 7v7 including goalkeepers. Every session should end with the players having the opportunity to play the game. This is why they are there! If needed, you can play bigger numbers or play with multiple fields so that all the players can participate.

• Cool Down (Approx. 10 Minutes) - Have the players involved in a low impact game to help the muscles recover. Incorporate a little static stretching.

Here are a few things to consider when you are designing a training session:

• Are the activities fun?
• Are the activities organized?
• Are the players involved in the activities?
• Are creativity and decision making being used?

• Are the spaces used appropriate?
• Is the coach’s feedback appropriate?
• Is the coach guiding or controlling the players?
• Are there implications for the game?
The U11/U12 Player

Physical Development

At the ages of 10 and older you will see that players will start entering pubescence. The average age for the beginning of pubescence in girls is 10 years with a range of 7 - 14. The average age for boys is 12 with a range from 9 - 16. During these ages it is important to remember that increases in the amount of exercise at the intensity does not necessarily increase the aerobic fitness levels in children.

One of the most important factors to consider is that overuse injuries, burnout, and high attrition rates are associated with high-intensity children’s programs that fail to stress skill development and learning enjoyment. Approximately 90 percent of all youth players in the United States are under the age of 14. If the game continues to be fun, and the players continue to learn, they will continue to play.

The other issue that coaches run into in these ages is the difference in playing ability. When players are younger they are all very similar players. Now you will see players that practice on their own or just “get it” more than other players. When designing a training session it is key to make sure that you have activities that will still challenge all of the players.

Mental Development

We are now entering the phase of youth development that allows us to teach in more abstract terms. This allows us to address more hypothetical situations. This growth makes the idea of tactics much more likely to be understood. At this point in their development they are also developing a systematic approach to problem solving. During the training sessions it is important for them to have opportunities to think creatively and solve problems while playing.
Social Development

Socially, with peer pressure and gaining independence, the players are becoming more and more interested in TV, computer games, and less structured play. This makes it even more important for the training sessions to be structured. The progression of simple to complex is mandatory. The players are also dealing with significant change in their lives. Whether or not a child enters puberty early or late has important psychological implications. Players are also learning their appropriate gender role. How boys and girls act in social situations impacts how they train and play.

Typical U11/U12 Training Session

• When designing a training sessions for this age it is important that they do not exceed approximately 90 minutes. Keeping the training sessions shorter will keep the players engaged. Here is the basic progression for a typical session:
  • Warm-Up (Approx. 15 Minutes) - The warm-up should include partner and small group activities. This is also the time to introduce some dynamic stretching.
  • Main Activities (Approx. 30 Minutes) - Work in small group activities. Start to work in groups of 6 to 8 players. Teaching the game in functional groups will allow players to see how the different lines (Defenders, Midfielders, Forwards) work together. Continue playing directional games to lines, targets, or zones.
  • Final Game (Approx. 35 Minutes) - The final game should be 9v9 with goalkeepers. Every session should end with the players having the opportunity to play the game. This is why they are there! If needed, you can play bigger numbers or play with multiple fields so that all the players can participate.
  • Cool Down (Approx. 10 Minutes) - Have the players involved in a low impact game to help the muscles recover. Incorporate static stretching.

Here are a few things to consider when you are designing a training session:

• Are the activities fun?
• Are the activities organized?
• Are the players involved in the activities?
• Are creativity and decision making being used?
• Are the spaces used appropriate?
• Is the coach’s feedback appropriate?
• Is the coach guiding or controlling the players?
• Are there implications for the game?