



Many coaches always wonder what formation works best when coaching a small sided team. There are many formations that could work for your team and get you the results you are looking for. Which has too many coaches only worry about the short term, our game this upcoming Sunday or our record this season, and many forget about the actual goals we should be thinking about. It is our job to develop young soccer players that enjoy playing the beautiful game of soccer and that are able to be able to play this game for many more years to come. When coaches worry about formations the chances are that many players are pushed in a position the coach feels works best for the team. This can definitely help a team of young soccer players to be successful, but are all these players given the opportunity to fully develop?

The WSA has a clear vision on how we can successfully develop young players. We intend to develop soccer players that are technically capable of playing in tight spaces and comfortable on the ball under pressure. Players need to be confident on the ball and in the long term be able to make decisions on and off the ball without a coach having to tell them what to do. How do you achieve that kind of success when working with young soccer players? One very important thought is instead of focusing on 1 formation, or possibly 2, players should be taught the game of soccer based on the principles of play. To gain an understanding how the game of soccer should/can be played all players need to understand the principles of play. When the focus is on the actual formation players are taught how to play a position without gaining an understanding of several critical elements of the game of soccer.

The focus on a formation too often also exploits the physical abilities of some of the more physically gifted players at U9, U10 and U11 and will not develop soccer players. We as coaches need to understand that with this shift in our thinking that we might not win all our games. This is the start of a process in which players will learn valuable lessons. A team will probably lose some games while going through the process, but it definitely worth it as we focus on the long term. Don't forget that many opposing coaches might not think alike and focus on the outcome of the games. For us a program the long term goal is far more important than winning our game this upcoming weekend.

The first time players are introduced to the 8v8 game in Westfield is when they start playing travel at U9. They have been introduced to the game of soccer in many small sided settings (1v1 – 4v4), but have never played with as many as 16 players on the field. They are somewhat comfortable on the ball and are capable of taking players on or possibly shoot on goal. This is all in their role as the 1st attacker and they have yet to successfully master the ball to be completely comfortable on the ball to guide it in to the direction where they want it to go. The technical component will still receive most of the attention in training and little by little players will be introduced to the more advanced principles of attack.

In smaller settings (2v1; 2v2; 3v2 or 3v3) players should be made familiar with the concept of depth/support. Many players have had enough issues till that moment controlling the ball, and some still run alongside of their teammate on the ball, but to move the ball up the field players need the support of their team mates. Can they get open for the player with ball and find the area of the field where they can receive the ball. This way players move from me and the ball; to me, the ball and my team mate. When we start out travel soccer some players might be able to execute this already, but many we need to continue to focus on this in the first few years these players our part of our travel program.



Many small sided games are played from goal to goal without using much of the width. Which makes sense as young players, and some supporting parents, think that this is the fastest way to the goal. To fully exploit the weaknesses of your opponent we want and need to stretch out the opponent across the width and length of the field.

Players need to understand that if they are in the right shape the opponent will need to cover more ground to possibly win the ball back. This will give the team in possession of the ball more time. More space simply means more time on the ball, which will make it easier to possess the ball.

This can and should be practiced in smaller settings and players should be given the opportunity to explore that for themselves. There are many multi goal games that can teach the concept of space, shape and increase the spatial awareness of young players while under pressure of an opponent. When players are forced to explore the width they eventually will start to recognize these situations in a game as well.

The introduction of the first principle of attack will be done before players even enter travel (penetration – pass, shoot or dribble). Some players will then also pick up the basics of how they can support their team mate off the ball. At U9 and U10 coaches will spend a lot of time working on the concept of shape, using the length and width of the field, which can be done in different formations. As long the players and team are given the opportunity to explore the width, possibly switch the point of attack and still control the ball in the middle third of the field you are on the right track.

At U11, and U12, the players have grown physically and they should understand their roles as the supporting players and the movement off the ball in open areas further away from the ball should also be increased. When the players understand the basic principles we can also include different combination plays that we can use in possession of the ball to unbalance the defending team.

Although the focus so far has mostly been on the attacking principles of play, it is good to understand that every attacking principle can be countered by a principle of defense. If players are training in 1v1 situations, are encouraged to take players on, they will eventually be taught in these same 1v1 situations to defend one another. After explaining the role of the 1st defender, players will be introduced to the role of the 2nd defender. What do we need to do in defense when my teammate steps up to pressure the ball?

By teaching the players the basic principles of play before even focusing on a formation they will be able to play multiple formations when they get older. Players can then adjust to the given situation and being able to adapt can give them an edge over players that were forced to play a formation to win games at U9 and U10. We in turn will have players that are creative, as they are able to read different game situations really well, and that are able to make decisions on the ball without needing the constant guidance from the coaches.

We focus on a positive, ball orientated, style of soccer. In possession of the ball players need to be both comfortable and capable to make decisions, even under pressure of an opponent. The style of play that we implement is based on this philosophy. Through the years players will be brought up in this concept, get an understanding of shape and increase their spatial awareness. All players are given the opportunity to explore different parts of the field to develop a good understanding of the game and the demands placed on them in the different parts of the field.



Players will understand their role on the field, to support the ball orientated style of play, including the role of the goalkeeper. Once players have a good understanding we can slowly shift our focus on the formation or formations we feel fit the needs of our players.

In the end a system of play is designed to give a team the opportunity to express itself in possession of the ball and to organize in defense. The shape is very important which is why teaching that part first is so important. A very important question you should always ask yourself is: “Do players fit the system or does the system fit the players?”

On the next page you will find a summary of the principles of play and the different roles players have on the field, both in offense and defense. To further increase your knowledge on the different stages of development players go through it can be very beneficial to read US Soccer’s best practice sessions.

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WSA Take Aways

- 1) The WSA philosophy is to develop players that are technical very capable on the ball, have a good understanding of the game and are able to make their own decisions on the ball.
- 2) It is important to teach young players to play the game of soccer based on the principles of play, not based on 1 single formation.
- 3) The focus on a formation can quickly pigeon hole young players in a position, often based on the physical capabilities of this player, and have many coaches focus on the outcome of the game instead of focusing on the development of young players.
- 4) Players that have learned to play the game based on the principles of play will have a better understanding of how the game of soccer can be played. These players will be able to play different formations and more effectively, as they are able to adjust to different scenarios when they are out on the field.
- 5) Your style of play is based on your philosophy on soccer. To develop young soccer players the WSA focuses on a possession based style of play in which you want to control the play. This to develop players that are comfortable and confident on the ball and able to make the decisions on the ball.
- 6) Your system of play should be based on the needs of the players on your team (their strengths and weaknesses).
- 7) Always keep in mind the short and long term development goals when you pick a system of play for your team. Young players need to gain an understanding of how the game of soccer can be played. Many youngsters have no understanding of shape or space, so developing the players' spatial awareness is more important than the focus on a specific system of play.



Principles of play	
Principles of attack	Principles of defense
Penetration <i>Shoot, dribble, pass, run with ball</i>	Pressure <i>Deny, delay, and divide</i>
Support <i>Angles and distance</i>	Cover <i>Angles and distance</i>
Width/depth	Compactness <i>Horizontal and vertical</i>
Mobility <i>Create and exploit space</i>	Balance
Improvisation <i>Flair</i>	Control and restraint <i>Patience</i>

Applying the principles of play	
Player role	Principle
1 st attacker	Penetration
2 nd attacker	Support
3 rd attacker	Width and depth
1 st defender	Pressure – delay
2 nd defender	Cover
3 rd defender	Balance