

Space: The Tactical Frontier

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Taking a cursory look through the children's book section in any Borders or Barnes and Noble bookstore is a simple way to gain perspective on the intellectual capabilities of young players. For the very young, the paragraphs are short, the sentences are choppy, the writing is in large font, there are lots of illustrations, and the content deals with, well, kid's stuff! The writing in children's books is designed to capture and expand the imagination, to lay the foundation for abstract reasoning, to help develop reading speed, and to promote reading as an enjoyable life-long skill.

Ultimately, the expectation is for children to move from Aesop and Christian Andersen, to Orwell, Shakespeare, Bateson, Morrison, and Salinger et al. It should come as no surprise to any parent that 5th graders are not asked to read Solzhenitsyn; in fact there would probably be uproar if that were the case! However, there is a strong cognitive parallel between reading capabilities and soccer capacity and, sadly, our young soccer players are commonly asked to attempt the intellectual equivalent of Faulkner without having ever opened Dr. Seuss.

Just as children's books are geared to the level of the reader, there are many sound educational reasons why children under the age of thirteen should be playing smaller versions of 11-a-side soccer. Particularly for those under eleven, the following arguments are significant. Socially, children are still finding out who they are and are very much into their own small world. Physically, they are not very strong, and many are just beginning to discover how to coordinate the movements of their lower limbs in relation to objects, such as soccer balls.

Emotionally, they need to find success while being challenged; they need an enjoyable learning environment; they need to develop respect for the knowledge and teaching ability of their adult role models; and they need to feel they are improving if interest and motivation are to be maintained. **Intellectually**, they are not very abstract in their thinking, limiting their ability to scheme and plan ahead. **Technically**, they have a very limited range of skills and, **tactically**, they are only capable of understanding a few basic concepts. In short, matching playing numbers and the level of competition to age and ability is as sound an educational practice as matching reading material to intellectual readiness.

Coming on board full time with OYSAN in June, I spent a good deal of time this summer working with the younger kids in our OYSAN summer camps, finding out just what eight, nine, and ten year-olds were capable of understanding about soccer. And I was also able to watch over 500 of our top 1987 birth-year girls as they competed and trained at the USYSA regional camp. While there are always going to be a small number of advanced players who exceed the norms of a large group, the following observations have generally been supported throughout the summer and into the fall.

Technical range

- Dribbling the ball into space. All ten year olds can dribble the ball forward into open space

- Dribbling the ball away from pressure. Many ten year olds have developed a few basic moves to turn the ball. Some are learning to “wriggle” out of pressure by combining moves with multiple changes in direction.
- Dribbling the ball past an opponent. Only a limited number of ten year-old players have the ability to purposely fake or feint, change speed and direction, and dribble past an opponent.
- Controlling the ball on the ground. Most ten year olds can control a rolling ball, if given enough time and space
- Controlling the ball out of the air. Most ten year olds can control a low bouncing ball, if given enough time and space. Most ten year olds do not attempt to control balls directly out of the air.
- Kicking skills. Most ten year olds are limited in their ability to use both feet and a majority of the six different surfaces used for kicking. Due to their limited strength and power, most passes and shots remain on the ground.
- Slide tackling. As a “fear” skill, ten year-olds are generally reluctant to slide tackle, although many can effectively demonstrate this skill.

Tactical range

- Orientation. By age ten, all players have passed the hurdle of appreciating which goal to attack and which to defend.
- Recognizing the direction of pressure. Given enough time and space and encouragement, most ten year olds can recognize where a defender is coming from and dribble the ball into open space.
- Moving into open space. Virtually all ten year olds have learned, or can learn, to move into open space to receive a pass. However, when they arrive in a new space, their overwhelming tendency is to stand still and watch the player with the ball. What virtually all of our ten year-olds cannot do is understand when to move away from a defender at the right time and in the right way to receive a pass from a teammate. They have no concept of how to vacate or create space, and they do not appreciate how to correctly time and shape their supporting run as the ball is about to be passed in their direction. In effect, passes are exchanged between players because, with smaller numbers and larger playing areas, space is available. Ten year olds simply do not understand how to seek out passing lanes for themselves in tight spaces, making combination play and positional expectations unrealistic.
- Making connections. Soccer is essentially about dribbling the ball, or combining and connecting players together with passes to score goals. At age ten, most players will look to pass to other teammates, if given enough time and space, but will then stand still. There very little purposeful “off the ball” movement from the majority of ten year-old players, rendering any “combinations” as very slow and deliberate actions. Tactically, most players under the age of eleven dribble the ball until they shoot, run out of space, skill, or ideas, or until they see a teammate. At that point, they either shoot or pass and stand still, or try to recover possession.
- Recovering the ball. Ten year olds will defend individually, but not in coordinated groups. If an attacking player is double-teamed, it is usually because their limited

dribbling skills have given more defenders time to converge around the ball. When recovering behind the ball, most players will try to defend by running goal-side of the dribbler. This inevitably opens up space on either side of the defender and allows the skillful dribbler room to fake or cut the ball to either side of the often-unbalanced defender.

- Transition. Most ten year olds understand the concepts of transition from attack to defense and from defense to attack. With the prospect of scoring a goal as the reward, quickly moving forward or quickly recovering the ball are natural elements of small-sided play.
- Vision. The vast majority of ten year-olds are ball-watchers. Because they are very “technical” in their thinking, they look up only after they have secured possession. In this case, limited skill refinement forces players to focus on the mechanics of technical execution before contemplating the tactics of what to do next. Only after young players have gained some measure of comfort with the ball will they ever have the confidence to appreciate the advantage of seeing, beforehand, where they might go next. Another likely contributor to ten year-olds’ lack of vision is related to their level of intellectual development. Most ten year-olds are just on the fringe of being able to think in abstract, hypothetical, ways and, therefore, have not yet developed the mental skills to think ahead.
- Offside. Understanding the concept of offside is possible for some 10 year-olds, but is, by no means, universally understood. Small-sided games can be very helpful in introducing the various tactical implications to young players.

Fitness

- Most youth players have tremendous energy reserves in their young bodies and will play soccer for significant periods of time if they are motivated. Generally, fitness is the least important dimension in coaching players under the age of twelve, and all fitness can and should be derived naturally from playing soccer games.

Making sense of the Numbers Game

Without first understanding the concept of how to create and use space, young players not only should not, but also cannot play organized soccer in large numbers. The intellectual threshold for the emergence of the “space concept” appears to be between ten and twelve, rendering larger-number games for players younger than eleven as developmentally malignant.

To determine whether players understand how to create and use space and therefore play organized positions, matching-up opponents in any mid-sided game will help provide the answer. For example, 5v5 games are traditionally played on a 40x30 yard field with goals six yards wide. With the goalkeeper in possession, it is important to separate the players and create space for the team to play in an organized way. With four field players, two will become the right and left fullbacks, one will take on the role of the midfielder, and the fourth will become the striker. Match up each attacker with a

defender, essentially creating four 1v1 duals, and allow the goalkeeper to dribble the ball out to start play. Given that the two fullbacks have only to move to the side of the goalkeeper to open up space in the center, it is primarily the movement of the two remaining players that will determine whether the space concept has begun to emerge. If the two central players stand still, particularly if they stand still in wide positions; or if they don't move in opposition to each other (one left-one right, one short-one long); or if they move too early to the ball and attempt to shield off their opponent to create a passing lane; or if they cannot appreciate running diagonally, or north and south, as alternatives to east and west, they are demonstrating elementary tactical thinking and cannot play in larger numbers or with organized positions.

Given the level of play for the average youth in Ohio-North at this point in our soccer evolution, the following guidelines for the number of players would appear to be on firm ground. Players who demonstrate more advanced tactical awareness should play with older or better players.

Five and six year-olds:

No more than 3v3, with the best solution being the inclusion of an adult, when possible (2v2+1 and 3v3+1), to help the youngsters appreciate that direction and scoring goals are important concepts.

Seven and eight year-olds:

No more than 4v4, with the goalkeeper determined by who is closest to the goal at the time of a shot.

Nine and ten year-olds:

No more than 5v5.

Eleven and twelve year-olds:

No more than 9v9.

Thirteen and fourteen year-olds:

No more than 9v9 for most girls, and 11v11 for most boys.

Next time: The rules and logistics of small-sided games.