

Small-Sided Games: A Key to More Technical Players?

“Liverpool practiced small-sided games every day and it was high-intensity stuff. We used to do a very light warm-up, jog around the field a couple of times to loosen the limbs, do a few stretches, put the cones down for goals and then go into five-a-side or eight-a-side.

It was the same every single day. There was no tactical work, none whatsoever. All the strategic stuff was done within the small sided games. Liverpool believed that everything we faced in five-a-sides would be encountered again on match day. That was why the five-a-sides were so competitive. Liverpool’s training characterized Liverpool’s play – uncomplicated but devastatingly effective.”

“Practicing on smaller pitches, Liverpool was always going to play a short-passing game. We only trained with small goals so there was little long-range shooting. We passed the ball until we got close enough to score. The philosophy centered on passing, making angles and one-touch football.”

- John Barnes, Former Liverpool and English national team player.

A colleague of mine recently surveyed U11 coaches that play 8 v. 8 in a travel league. The league is considering having those teams continue to play 8 v. 8 as U12’s.

Comments such as the following were noted:

“No one plays small sided soccer.” “Real” soccer teams play 11v11.”

“Small sided soccer favors slower out of shape players which goes against the spirit of play.”

“Players need to learn tactics at this age (U11), and they cannot do so playing 8v8.”

“It is easier to involve more players if you have more players on the field.”

“Young players need to learn how to play soccer on the full sided field because this reflects the reality of their future games.”

“The middle schools and high schools all play 11v11 and we are hurting our players by not preparing them for this transition.”

These and similar comments focusing on competition and winning demonstrate one example of the fundamental difference in the current U.S. approach to youth soccer and

those of the European clubs and nations. One needs only to view the websites of US Youth Soccer and the 55 state association sites to see that there are countless articles on the merits of small sided soccer. Not everyone is a fan for a variety of reasons. In the very near future, USSF may nonetheless force the youth soccer community to open its eyes and join the ranks of those using the small sided soccer game to train their youth.

The European Club Association (ECA) encompasses 214 clubs from 53 associations from across Europe. In February 2012, the ECA released a comprehensive overview of many of its member's youth academies. This 162 page report has very detailed and comprehensive information about those youth academies. The clubs in the report are from all regions of Europe and feature information about Real Madrid, Barcelona, Arsenal, Bayern Munich, Inter Milan, Sporting Club, Standard Liege, FC Basel, Panathinaikos FC, Shakhtar Donetsk and many others. One part of the ECA report that I would like to share are the findings about academy players and the type of small-sided games they play.

U5 to U9:	U10 to U11:	U12 to U13:	U14 to u23:
4 v. 4 – 45%	5 v. 5 – 4 %	6 v. 6 – 1%	9 v. 9 – 2%
5 v. 5 – 40%	6 v. 6 – 5%	7 v. 7 – 14%	11 v. 11 – 98%
6 v. 6 – 5%	7 v. 7 – 55%	8 v. 8 – 7%	
7 v. 7 – 10%	8 v. 8 – 23%	9 v. 9 – 25%	
	9 v. 9 – 12%	10 v. 10 – 1 %	
	11 v. 11 – 1 %	11 v. 11 - 52%	

The world's top clubs are already utilizing small-sided games to develop more technical players in their youth programs, an approach that we here in America are slow to adopt. Stan Baker sums it up nicely:

“It all starts with the proper numbers of players at training and games for the specific age group at practice. For example, 7-9 year olds should play in a 3v3 environment, 10-11 year olds in a 5v5 environment and U12 players should play in a 7v7 environment. The youth academies in Spain such as Barcelona, Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid play games with player numbers no larger than 7v7 up to 12 years old. The size of the field is smaller and the ball is smaller so that the players can function according to their physical abilities. They have understood that the players are not yet adults.”

- *Stan Baker, author and coach*

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