

The Four Phases of Player Development

The curriculum for developing player skills must be appropriate for each age level.

The success of the U.S. Women's National Team program is largely dependent on the quality of the programs that feed into it. True player development occurs when each player's daily training and playing environment is of the highest quality. If this environment is consistent, with a clear vision of what lies ahead for each player, development is then maximized.

Toward that end, the National Team staff has put together a list of curriculum guidelines for the U-12 through U-19 age groups at the club, state and regional team levels. The purpose is to:

- Educate coaches as to the standard of play and expectations for each age.
- Provide coaches with a framework with which to organize curriculum decisions.
- Provide for consistency, with guidance through all levels of play.
- Improve "vertical integration: for player development.
- Improve the quality of play on a national basis.

It is important to note that each player and each team is different. The following document thus serves as a guideline or standard by which players and coaches can plan development. Individual and team needs can therefore be identified and addressed. Individual strengths can be stabilized while deficiencies can be improved. Of course, an accurate assessment of each player's and team's needs are essential.

It is imperative that each coach take the time to observe and study the level for which the team is preparing to compete. For example, each club coach should be attuned to the state level, state coaches should make an effort to observe the regional team play. Regional coaches should be familiar with the age-group specific national team level, and every coach should spend time studying the full National Team. In this way, a more accurate assessment of player expectations is possible.

The ultimate goal of each coach should be to prepare the players to compete at the next level. This document can help coaches towards their goals of developing more sophisticated players and teams.

FOUNDATION PHASE: THE ROMANCE (U-11 and U-12)

Development of individual skills – individual and small group tactics:

The effect of the role model is very important at this stage of development. Hero worship, identification with successful teams and players and a hunger for imaginative skills typify the mentality of this age. This is a time of transition from self-centered to self-critical. Players of this age have a high arousal level in relation to the training of basic skills. This is the "golden age of learning" and the most important age for skill development. Demonstration is very important time to introduce and teach the basic principles of play. It is important to establish discipline from beginning.

Coach must be:

A sensitive teacher, enthusiastic, possess soccer awareness, ability to demonstrate or utilize someone who can paint a good picture (older player, assistant coach), knowledge of the key factors of basic skills, give encouragement.

Technique:

It is important to establish a good strong solid base. The coach must develop individual skills under the pressure of time, space and an opponent and increase technical speed:

- Dribbling: Encourage risk taking. Teach moves to beat an opponent and to keep possession.
- Shielding: Spin turns, change of speed, change of direction.
- Receiving: Ground and air balls – all surfaces from a partner and on the move.
- Shooting: Proper striking technique, partner serve from all angles, turns, cut backs, volleys.
- Passing: Emphasize the proper technique by using the laces; inside and outside of the foot and short and long crossing.
- Heading: Start with self serve, then add a partner to serve. Teach jumping to head, turning the ball and

partner juggling.

- Tackling: Teach the proper technique with emphasis on balance and having no fear.

Tactics:

The dawn of tactical awareness

- Individual: Start with 1 v. 1 situations in attack and defense. Play 1 v. 1 frequently.
- Small Group: Continue with 2 v. 1, 2 v. 2, 3 v. 1, 3 v. 2, 3 v. 3, 4 v. 2, 4 v. 3, 4 v. 4.
- Positions: Players must play a variety of positions. They must develop an awareness of the game.

Emphasize the complete player and the basic principles of play.

- Attacking: Encourage keeping possession and risk taking. Have players take opponents on 1 v 1 in proper areas of the field. Teach the concept of support, basic combination play (wall pass, takeover). Promote attacking soccer.
- Defending: Emphasize the proper pressure both in front and behind. Teach the concepts of channeling the player, immediate chase, cover and marking.
- Team: Team tactics do not take priority at this age. Focus is placed on maintaining balance and playing skillful soccer. Players play a variety of positions and emphasis is placed on player development instead of getting results as a team.
- System: Put players out on the field for the love of the game, without spending much time coaching a system. Focus on teaching principles of play as opposed to systems. If playing 8 v.8, then play a 2-3-2. If playing 9 v. 9, play 3-3-2. Most importantly, players should enjoy the great game.

Note: a great deal of coaching/teaching within 4 v. 4 games

Physical:

All fitness work should be done with the ball, with partners, and using fun and engaging activities.

Physical activities should include the following components:

- Flexibility
- Agility with and without the ball
- Speed
- Strength
- Endurance
- Balance

Psychological:

- Keep it fun and enjoyable to foster a desire to play (intrinsic motivation)
- Encourage decision-making
- Imagination/creativity
- Increase demands in training
- Emphasize discipline
- Encourage players/teams to watch professional and National Team games on television

The Game:

- 8 v. 8 or 9 v. 9 (includes keepers)

FORMAL PHASE: THE COMMITMENT (U-13 and U-14)

Development of individual skills – individual and small group tactics:

Adult standards and formal rules become applicable. The pace of development quickens at this time due to the acceleration of physical and mental maturation. The demands of skill training as well as training loads should increase, thus provoking improvement with mental toughness, concentration and diligence.

Awareness of tactics within the game becomes an important facet of the learning process. Players tend to be self-critical and rebellious, but have a strong commitment to the team.

Coach must be:

A strong personality with some soccer knowledge. The coach should be enthusiastic and patient but demanding.

Technique:

- Build on the base.
- Emphasize the development of individual skills under the pressure of time, space, and an opponent.
- Continue to increase technical speed.
- Dribbling: Encourage the players to take opponents on 1 v. 1. Teach feints/moves, how to keep possession, how to shield and spin turns.
- Receiving: Emphasize a quality first touch. Have players take balls out of the air and work on turning. Players should use all surfaces and learn to receive the ball on the run.
- Shooting: Work on shooting on the run, on the turn, from all angles, from crosses and from volleys.
- Passing: Work on short, long, bent, crossed, driven and chipped using all surfaces. All should be learned on the run.
- Heading: Work on going to goal (shoot/glance), to pass and to clear.
- Tackling: Emphasize the proper techniques.

Tactics:

- Increase tactical speed (decision making under pressure).
 - Individual: Work on 1 v. 1, in attack and defense.
 - In attack: Teach players to keep possession but encourage risk taking and taking players on in the proper areas of the field.
 - In defense: Teach how to apply proper pressure (in front and behind), how to channel players, when to use immediate chase and how to use angles of pressure.
 - Small Group: Continue with 2 v. 1, 2 v. 2, 3 v. 2, 3 v. 3, 4 v. 2, and 4 v. 4.
 - In attack: Teach to keep possession, support, combination play (including the wall pass, takeover, overlap, the double pass). Introduce the concepts of width, depth and penetration. Begin work on crossing with proper runs in the box. Start to demonstrate simple set plays.
 - In defense: Players should be introduced to angle and distance of cover, defensive balance, delay and pressing as a group.
 - Team:
 - In the attack: Teach players how to keep possession and how to play the ball away from pressure. They should know how to maintain balance in the chosen system. Introduce interchange of positions during the run of play. Encourage attackers to take defenders on in the final third. The keeper becomes an integral part of the attack (play balls back to the keeper). Players should still play a variety of positions.
 - In defense: Players should learn to maintain good “shape.” Zonal concepts should be introduced and should include knowing when to “delay” or “step.” Clear decision on where the “line of confrontation” should be is important at this level. Coaches should teach how to maintain good pressure and cover in all three thirds of the field.
 - System: The recommended system for player and team development is a 3-4-3.
- Note: There should be a great deal of coaching/teaching in 4 v. 4 and 7 v. 7 games.

Physical:

- All fitness work should be done with the ball
- Flexibility – static stretching and dynamic flexibility
- Agility – coordination with and without the ball
- Speed
- Strength – non-weight bearing, core strength and stability
- Endurance
- Balance

Psychological:

- The game should remain fun and enjoyable. Players should have a passion for the game
- Imagination/creativity
- Increase demands
- Establish training targets
- Maintain discipline
- Encourage players/teams to watch professional and National Team games on television

The Game:

- 11 v. 11

FERVID PHASE: THE DEDICATION (U-15 and U-16)

Development of individual skills – individual, group and team tactics:

This is a critical time in the player's development. Many stop playing due to other interests, lack of success, shortage of playing opportunities, poor leadership or other reasons. Players tend to lack mental toughness and self-confidence. They tend to be self-critical and struggle with their desire to be competitive or need to be more competitive. There is a need for attention and security. A great focus on team spirit, leadership and discipline within the team.

Coach must be:

Charismatic, experienced, knowledgeable, articulate, a disciplinarian, have managerial know-how, a thoughtful persuader.

Technique:

- Skills should be mastered leading to artistry and improvisation, all under match conditions.
- Individual skill covered during the warm-up and/or in competitive situations.
- Increase technical speed. It is important that technique is still highly emphasized at this age.
- Strike balls cleanly over distance with accuracy under pressure.

Tactics:

- Increase tactical speed (decision making)
- Individual: Decisions based on thirds of the field.

In attack: There must be an application of varied technical abilities in order to increase tactical options. There must be an aggressive attacking mentality in final third. Emphasis should be placed on predicting what the game will need next. Knowing what each player's specific roles and responsibilities are lends to greater understanding of the big picture.

In defense: There should be a clear understanding of how the quality of pressure affects team defending success. There must be an ability to take options away from the attacker.

- Small group: 4 v. 4, 7 v. 7, 9 v. 9

In attack: Players must understand the balance of needing possession and penetration. Continued work on combination play (wall pass, takeover, overlap, double pass, third player running etc.). Playing for penetration and creativity in solving problems becomes important.

- Mobility – movement without the ball
- Crossing – picking out a runner rather than putting it in the box
- Box organization – penetration, width and support for every ball played in the box
- Attacking as a group of three (forwards, midfielders and defenders)
- Set plays (80 percent success rate: where we get:
 - goal; 2) shot on goal, or 3) corner kick

In defense:

- Compactness
- Cover, delay, dictate and recover
- Communication (who, what, when, where)
- Defending as a group of three (forwards, midfielders and defenders)
- Enjoy winning possession of the ball and dictating the play
- Set plays

- Team: Clearly defined team tactics, how the team decides to play as a group.

In attack:

Comfort with direct and indirect styles

Sustained possession as a means to break down the opponent's defense

Understanding how to counterattack

Decisions based on thirds of the field

In defense:

- Comfort with "high pressure" and "delayed high pressure" styles
- Understanding of zonal and man-to-man marking play
- Goalkeeper as the last defender

- Keeping good team compactness
- Stopping the counterattack
- Decisions based on thirds of the field and different systems of play

System: The recommended system to expose players to various systems using 3-4-3 and 4-3-3.

Note: A great deal of coaching/teaching within 7 v. 7 and 9 v. 9 games.

Physical:

- Fitness should take place with and without the ball.
 - Flexibility – static stretching after training/matches.
 - Dynamic flexibility – partner stretching
 - Importance of discipline for warm-up and cool-down
 - Agility – with and without the ball
 - Footwork – keeping the feet active when moving/playing
 - Endurance – aerobic and anaerobic
 - Strength – Upper and lower body. Core strength and stability
 - Balance
 - Nutrition – proper diet pre-game, post-game, at tournaments
 - Prevention and care of injuries
 - Importance of rest/recovery – schedule issues relative to the physical demands

Psychological:

- Leadership/player responsibilities
- Discipline
- Respect for the game
- Goal setting
- Vary program – satisfy players' urge for competition
- Establish pre-practice and pre-game routine (as individuals and team).
- Encourage players/teams to watch professional and National Team soccer

The Game:

- 11 v. 11

ELITE PHASE: THE FULL BLOOM (U-17, U-18 and U-19)

Development of functional and team play:

Fulfillment of a player's potential depends on his or her own efforts, the support of teammates and the unselfish guidance of her coach. He or she must be exposed to a playing and training environment, which extends her mental, physical, tactical and technical capabilities to the limit. He or she must have a sound understanding of the game's principles and concepts. Players should show emotional stability when confronted with pressure situations. Demanding and challenging training sessions and matches are a must.

Coach must be:

Charismatic, well informed, up to date, experienced, knowledgeable, articulate, a disciplinarian. No doubts about his/her authority, managerial know-how.

Technique:

- Mastered skills leading to artistry. All at speed under match conditions, demanding excellence.
- Individual skill covered during warm-up and competitive situations.

Tactics:

- Increase tactical speed (decision-making) with increased pressure and competition. Having the ability to change and adapt to game dynamics, up or down a goal, management of the clock and flow of the game.

• Individual:

In attack: A good deal of time spent in functional training environments.

- Decisions based on thirds of the field.
- Comfort in playing in the different areas of the field/team (back, middle, front, center, wide).
- Confidence to hold possession as an individual.

- Solve problems at the individual level.
- In defense: Clear understanding of how the quality of pressure affects the ability of the team to defend.
- Decisions based on thirds of the field.
 - Comfort at playing two different positions.

- Small group:

In attack:

- Improvisation/deception encouraged
- Advanced understanding of combination play and how to combine to break down a defense.
- Balance of possession and penetration with a purpose to score goals.
- Recognize opportunities to penetrate by a variety of means.
- Attacking in groups of three (forwards, midfielders and defenders)

In defense:

- Pressure, cover, balance
- Control of the game's speed and direction due to defending decisions.
- Recognition of double team opportunities.
- Defending in groups of three (forwards, midfielders and defenders)
- Team: Understanding of lines and linkage between lines. Understand positional and team needs.

In attack:

- Comfort with direct and indirect styles of play.
- Combination play with tactical implications.
- Sustained possession as a means to break down the opponent's defense.
- Speed of play; the game is faster and more physical.
- Creativity, quality of final ball to beat backs.
- Understanding how and when to counterattack.
- Serving runners in the box.

In defense:

- Comfort with "high pressure" and "delayed high pressure" styles.
- Understanding of zonal and man-to-man marking play.
- Goalkeeper as the last defender.
- Keeping good team compactness.
- Stopping the counterattack.
- Decisions based on thirds of the field and different systems of play.
- Pressing (when and where to pressure, channel and dictate defensively).
- Systems: The recommended system – all. Based on a variety of factors (individual/team abilities, opponent, field conditions, game management etc.). The Women's National Team, U-21, U-19 and U-16 National Teams predominantly employ three forwards using a 3-4-3 and 4-3-3 system.

Note: A great deal of coaching/teaching within 9 v. 9 and 11 v. 11 games.

Physical:

- Fitness work with and without the ball.
- Flexibility – static stretching after training/matches.
- Dynamic flexibility – partner stretching.
- Importance of discipline for warm-up and cool-down.
- Agility – with and without the ball.
- Endurance – aerobic and anaerobic.
- Strength – upper and lower body. Core strength/stability.
- Balance.
- Nutrition – proper diet pre-game, post-game, tournaments.
- Prevention and care of injuries.
- Importance of rest/recovery – schedule issues relative to the physical demands.

Psychological:

- Increased concentration.
- Leadership and increased player responsibility.
- Discipline.
- Accountability.
- Goal setting.
- Respect for the game.

- Self-confidence, self-motivation, goal setting.
- Vary program – satisfy players' urge for competition. Will to win.
- Mental toughness/competitive mentality.
- Establish pre-practice and pre-game routine (as individuals and teams).
- Encourage players/teams to watch professional and National Team games on television.

The Game:

- 11 v. 11.