

# U12 Benchmarks, Coaching and Player Development

U12 is the next progression for a player from U10. At this level, players will start to separate themselves from each other in terms of their skill, desire, competitiveness, and overall knowledge of the game. At this level, several concepts such as Goalkeeper are further enforced as well as the full introduction to tactics on the field.

Children in the U12 will have started to separate themselves skill wise and will be looking to showcase their skills and experience. Teamwork will play a bigger focus in U12 as tactics will be a large part of the game for them from here out.

At U12, most players have been playing soccer for several years and have a firm understanding of the game. Further refining these skills and enhancing them with on field tactics as well as keeping the players engaged will be the biggest challenge.

## **U12 Division Rules:**

- Goalkeepers
- Offsides
- Much larger field than U10 (about double the size. The most significant size increase from one division to another).
- 9 vs 9
- Size #4 ball
- throw-ins, goal kicks, or corner kicks continued with Goal kicks employing the build out line. There is no Buildout line in U12. Players cannot enter the Penalty area until the ball clears from a goal kick.
- Referee and Assistant Referee employed for game. Referee (the center referee on the field) along with the Assistant Referees (line judges) will be responsible for calling the game, offsides, out of bounds, goal kicks, corner kicks and any penalties that may occur during a game.
- 2 30 halves'
- All players are to play at least half of the game.

## **Components of the Game for the U-12 Age Group**

- Technical Development– These are the skills used to play the game, i.e., the “fundamentals”. This includes things like dribbling, passing, shooting, receiving, tackling, juggling, etc. Along with making sure players have fun, skills are probably the most important area for youth players to focus on.
- Tactical Development – Tactics for youth soccer focuses largely on decision making, i.e. how players can make the correct decision given a particular situation. We should try to understand the progression of tactics and develop the players in the proper sequence, so that players are comfortable solving easier problems (1v1, 2v1) before they move on to solve more complex ones (4v4)

- Psychological Development – For youth soccer, this relates to whether the player is having fun playing soccer, and other aspects such as how they deal with winning and losing, their level of motivation, and how they interact with teammates, coaches, and their parents.
- Physical Development – Fitness for youth soccer players can be largely achieved by just letting them play soccer, although some of the older age groups (U14 and maybe U12) may start incorporating speed and conditioning into practice games and activities.

### **General Characteristics & Expectations for a U12 Coach:**

- Allow the players to make mistakes and encourage them to make their own Decisions. As players progress to U12, they play on larger fields and dribbling may not always be the best option. Players will need to start understanding when to dribble, when to pass and to whom, and when to shoot for goal. At this stage, they will often choose the wrong option, but as coaches and parents, we need to be patient with them and encourage them to make these decisions independently, especially during games. Aimless kicking or “booting” of the ball should not be encouraged.
- Tactics now are starting to become of an importance.
- keep asking the players to be creative and to take risks -we never want them to stop doing these things.
- ask for feedback from them -they will tell you how things are going.
- try to hand over leadership and ownership of the team to them.
- keep it fun!!! At this age, the players are aware of the score and many parents and coaches are paying more attention to the results. You will start noticing many coaches and parents yelling directions from the sidelines. We should remind ourselves and the parents of our players that improving their play and having fun are the main objectives. As far as possible, we should refrain from yelling directions to the Players during games, as it will hamper their ability to make decisions independently.
- Reduce player dependence on adult guidance through “Guided Discovery”. In practice sessions, coaches should try to allow players to make mistakes and ask players how they could do things better and guide them to the correct answers, rather than telling the players what to do. This will help the players’ ability to solve problems and reduce their dependence on adults for guidance during games.
- Teambuilding. At the U12 age group, players recognize the fact that they are part of a team, and they begin to associate themselves with their team. This is a great opportunity to teach young players about the value of teamwork and what it means to be part of a team (i.e., trusting your teammates, not criticizing them, etc.). Certain fun teambuilding activities can be done during some practices, especially in the beginning of the season when players may not be familiar with each other.
- Set the example. Players will feed off your energy whether positive or negative. Set the example for Sportsmanship, fair play, and teamwork. Players will be more competitive in this age than previous ones so continue to emphasize teamwork and sportsmanship.
- Ensure that Practices are structured as safe as possible. With the expansion of skills at U12 and the increase in competitiveness, injuries tend to happen.

- And lastly, keep it fun!!! At this age, the players are aware of the score and many parents and coaches are paying more attention to the results. You will start noticing many coaches and parents yelling directions from the sidelines. We should remind ourselves and the parents of our players that improving their play and having fun are the main objectives. As far as possible, we should refrain from yelling directions to the Players during games, as it will hamper their ability to make decisions independently.

### **General Characteristics of a U12 Player**

- all children are maturing at different rates.
- players need to warm-up and stretch -muscle pulls and other nagging injuries are common otherwise.
- players will typically understand elemental abstract concepts and hypothetical situations.
- They like to solve problems.
- peer evaluation is a constant.
- egos are sensitive.
- coordination may depend on whether they are in a growth spurt.
- technique still needs to be reinforced constantly.
- playing too much can lead to overuse injuries.
- playing too much and not feeling like they have a choice in the matter can lead to burnout and drop-out.

### **Typical U12 Practice Structure**

- A typical U12 training session should not exceed 1hr.
- Every child should have a ball.
- Warm-up activities should include balance coordination and agility, all activities done with a ball.
- Continue with partner activities and Drills.
- A mixture of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games. Introduce target games with a variety of player combinations: 1v1, 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2.
- Finish with 4v4 game to small goals, Goalkeepers are introduced.

### **Practice Structure**

Warm-ups: Proper stretching of legs arms, and body. Have the players form a circle around you the coach and demonstrate each stretch. have the team count out the length of each stretch. After stretches, have each player have a ball placed in front of them. They will work on ball skills.

1. Have the players place their right foot on top of the ball. Then have the players roll the ball with their foot from heel to toe 10 times with their right foot, repeat with the left foot.
2. Have the players again place their right foot on top of the ball this time have the players roll the ball side to side of their foot, do this 10 times, and repeat with the left foot.
3. The next drill will start again with the ball in front of the player only they will start with both feet on the ground. They will then do touches on the top of the ball with their right and left feet.

The ball should not move only the player. This will take the player a while to get use to. Do this 20 times (10 for each foot).

4. In place dribble. Have the ball in between the players legs and have them dribble the ball from right foot to left foot in place. As with the previous drill, there will be a learning curve but by the end of the season, you should see a noticeable improvement in the players ball handling skills with these drills.
5. Players should spend equal time developing both feet – this is very important!!!

### **U12 Technical Skill Priorities**

- Technical focus at U11/12 level should be a progression of those skills learned at lower levels plus the following:
- Field Play -Technical Skills:
  - Dribble with all sides of both feet (inside, outside, sole)
  - Dribble out of trouble
  - Dribble past someone (feints, fakes, crossovers etc.)
  - Changes of direction and turns (pullback, inside/outside turns)
  - Speed dribbling in traffic
- Soft first touch
  - First touch away from pressure
  - Receiving the ball with all parts of the body
  - Shielding – Players should develop proper technique to shield the balls from opponents.
- Shooting with both feet (with inside of foot and laces)
- Shooting for power, for accuracy and volleying
- Introduce proper volleying technique
- Passing with inside and outside of both feet
- Passing to feet and passing to space
- Introduce chipping the ball
- Introduce long passes (using laces)
- Juggling with both feet and thighs (allowing one bounce between juggles if needed)
- Basic thrown-in technique
- Introduce proper defending technique
- Introduce block tackles
- Specific goalkeeping technique
  - Proper positioning (hands and body)
  - Body position around the goal
  - Ball distribution (throwing, rolling, punting)
  - Basic diving from the ready position.
  - Collecting balls from the attacking player's feet.
- Continue to focus a fair amount of practice time on dribbling. At this stage, players can be taught several dribbling moves that are used frequently in soccer, such as step-overs, scissors, cuts, turns and so on. We should continue to encourage them to be creative in their dribbling.
- Incorporate other basic skills into practice sessions.
- First Touch / Receiving: Players should be encouraged to focus on developing a soft first touch when receiving the ball. Players should be familiar with the proper technique to receive the ball

on the ground with both feet. They should also be able to receive balls in the air using both feet, thighs, and chest. Players should also be shown how to receive the ball away from pressure.

- Shielding: Players should be familiar with the proper technique to shield the ball from opponents.
- Shooting: Players should be familiar with proper shooting technique (using their laces) and have plenty of opportunities to practice with both feet.
- Volleying can be introduced to older or more experienced players. Drills where players stand in lines and wait for their turn to shoot on goal are discouraged as this is not a realistic game situation and players spend a lot of time waiting for the ball. Instead, use small side games with large goals to encourage and emphasize shooting (see sample games / activities for examples).
- Passing: Players should be able to pass the ball with the inside and outside of their feet. They should also be able to pass the ball accurately over 8-15 yards and learn how to chip the ball. They should also learn about the difference between passing to feet and passing to space.
- Juggling: Players should continue to work on their ball juggling skills using both feet, thighs, and even their head.
- Defending Technique: Players should be shown the proper defensive stance and how to make block tackles. Poke tackles can also be introduced at this stage. Players should also be encouraged not to rush into their tackles but to be patient and wait for the right time to win the ball.
- Perform basic skills under increasing pressure (i.e., less time and space)
- At this age group, players should continue to focus on improving their basic skills / technique (i.e., dribbling, passing, receiving, shooting, etc.) by trying to execute them under increasing pressure. The coach can increase pressure by reducing the playing area (i.e., restricting space), allowing fewer touches of the ball (i.e., restricting time), etc.

#### U11/12 Tactical Skill Priorities

- Tactical focus at U11/U12 level should still be at an introductory level. Problem solving and making decisions for themselves are critical tactical elements in young players. Below are some of the tactical skills to focus on at this age-level.
- Field Play - Tactical Skills:
  - Short and long wall passes (also known as give and go or 1-2)
  - Importance of the first touch
  - Immediate transition from defense to offense or vice versa
  - Attacking Concepts (possession and support)
  - Role of the second defender (pressure and cover)
  - Width and depth in attack
  - Player movement on throw-ins
  - Penalty kicks
- Players should be exposed to these simple tactical scenarios and understand how to both attack and defend these game contexts.
  - 1 v 1 (attacking and defending)
  - 2 v 1 (attacking and defending)
  - 2 v 2 (attacking and defending)

A lot of 1 v 1 duels should be incorporated into practice sessions to allow all the players to get plenty of opportunities to learn how to dribble past an opponent and how to stop one. The basic roles of first and second attackers and defenders should be introduced through 2 v 1 and 2 v 2 games and activities.

### **Game & Sideline behavior**

- It is strongly recommended to have an Assistant Coach or a Team Parent for your team. This way you have a coach on the sideline and on the field. This will help manage the players on the sideline.
- Players should be attentive to the game when on the sideline and be ready to go in. they can cheer their teammates.
- Players should not engage in horseplay, or any disruptive behavior while on the sideline.
- At the end of the game, all players are to line up and shake the opposing teams' players hands as a sign of sportsmanship.
- All items and trash should be picked up and the field clear before teams depart.
- Any issues with players should be brought up with the players parent in a private setting. Do not discuss player behaviors in front of the player and other players.

This is a guideline for structuring your practices. Please adjust this as needed to fit your teams needs. Some players will need further guidance and training as opposed to other players. Be flexible in your approach and keep the following things in mind when out there:

- Are the activities fun?
- Are the activities organized?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Is creativity and decision-making being used?
- Are the spaces used appropriate?
- Is your feedback appropriate?
- Are guiding or controlling the players in the activity?
- Are there implications for the game?