

WHY FIELD SIZE AND PLAYING NUMBERS MATTER!

TOM TURNER // MEMBER SINCE 1985



All experienced coaches understand that field size and playing numbers directly impact technical repetitions, tactical outcomes, physical demands and emotional enjoyment. Experienced youth coaches, in particular, also appreciate that, above all else, the youth soccer experience must be fun—today, or there may not be a tomorrow.

For this coach, the essence of the youth soccer practice is small-sided games. If street soccer spawned generations of players, known and unknown, then learning to love soccer by playing soccer is the bedrock principle.

THE ENVIRONMENT MATTERS!

The fact that smaller playing numbers (e.g., 8v8 vs 4v4 vs 2v2) produce an increase in technical repetition and a corresponding decrease in tactical complexity is intuitive. But what about field size?

How do we strike the correct balance between field size and playing numbers?

Finding the sweet spot between a playing space that is too small—in which players have no time or space to make purposeful, informed actions—or too large—in which players can't attack or defend collectively—is less intuitive, but can be informed with some simple math.

DETERMINING FIELD SIZES

The minimum dimensions for a FIFA regulation field are 112 yards by 72 yards and the field must be a rectangle. This equates to a width which is 64% of the length ($112/72 = 0.643$). There are 11 players on a full-sided team, providing coaches with a constant of 10 yards (10.18) per player ($112/11$) to estimate the length of all smaller-sided fields.

The table on the right shows how this simple math can be used to organize field spaces that accurately correspond to the number of players.

Playing Numbers	Scale	Proportional Field Sizes (Yards)	Rounded Field Sizes (Yards)
11v11	100%	112x72	110x70
10v10	91%	102x65	100x65
9v9	82%	92x59	90x60
8v8	73%	82x53	80x50
7v7	64%	72x47	70x45
6v6	55%	62x40	60x40
5v5	45%	50x33	50x30
4v4	36%	40x26	40x25
3v3	27%	30x20	30x20
2v2	18%	20x13	20x15

While these numbers provide typical starting points, experienced coaches will always adjust their field sizes to suit their training objectives and the ability and motivation of their players. There are many reasons to make a playing area larger or smaller, or oriented east to west instead of north to south. As a simple guide, if the ball is constantly out of bounds or turning over, the field size is too small or the playing numbers are too large, or both; conversely, if players become isolated or not engaged in the game or fail to react positively to changes of possession, the field is probably too big.

FIELD LENGTH AND DEEP OFFSIDE LINES

The formal introduction of a "Build-out" (or Drop Back) line for the 7v7 game in the 2017 U.S. Soccer Player Development Initiatives is an important and useful coaching tool, with application to many game forms above 2v2. Because the build-out line also serves as an offside line, the effective attacking space is increased, so the field length can be shorter. The use of a build-out/drop back line does not impact field width.





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For example, on a 7v7 field (noted above as 70x45 yards) with offside at the half-way line, the effective playing space for any constructive build-up (if the opponents decide to press) is 35 yards. By adding the build-out/drop back line, and essentially moving the half-way line (the offside line) backwards, the effective attacking space extends to approximately 40 yards on a 60-yard field, and to as much as 50 yards on a 70-yard field.

There is a related caution. Because the offside line effectively dictates the compactness of a team from back to front, extending the offside line much beyond the back of the center circle on larger-sided fields can create unrealistic spacing on both sides of the ball.



DETERMINING PLAYING NUMBERS

Determining which range of game forms (2v2, 2v2+1, 3v3, 3v3+1 through 11v11) and their associated field dimensions create the most positive learning environment for children is a challenging process more informed by the art of coaching than the science of mathematics.

Starting with the observation that we have evolved into a kick-ball culture that drives the pre-teen masses out of the game, while leaving a majority of survivors bordering on technical and tactical illiteracy, one of the critical solutions is to create an environment where both experienced and inexperienced coaches feel less compelled to over-organize and over-manage young players.

As a general tactical progression based on expanding soccer maturity, children begin their careers by focusing solely on the ball (U6); progress to playing around the ball (U8); develop the spatial awareness to play away from the ball (U10); and can understand the concepts of mobility versus balance in three lines by U12. As a developmental continuum, however, it is a given that there will always be players who lead or trail the curve, making chronological age less important than soccer age in selecting appropriate training games.

TO CONSIDER...

As a general observation, we have tended to over-estimate the capabilities of young players and so have organized

competition and practice formats that are far too complicated and confusing for their developmental needs.

The technical basis of soccer—at all levels—is individual possession, encompassing the ability to receive the ball, with the touch and vision to manipulate the ball for a pass, dribble or shot. Players who can keep the ball for their team—individually and collectively—will likely have more fun and satisfaction than those whose skill set provides for less relevant involvement. Developing “skill”—the application of technique to a tactical situation—requires extensive exposure to basic tactical situations, and providing that repetition requires playing numbers that provide time and space commensurate with ability.

In concert, soccer’s basic tactical situation centers around open or closed space. The tactical cue to dribble forward, pass forward or shoot is the same—an opening. Conversely, when defenders have closed the path forward, maintaining possession by passing or dribbling into any available space is the complementary choice.

This simple concept—when to go forward and when to go somewhere else—is the foundation of ball circulation and rhythm in team play.

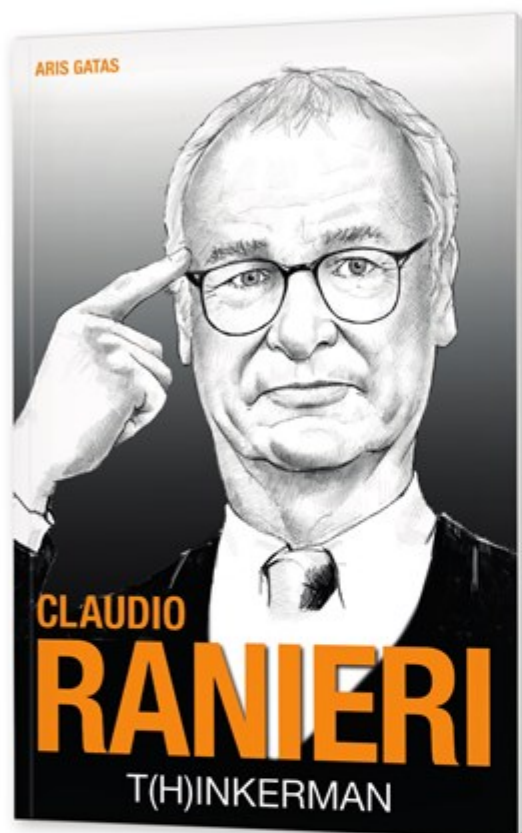
A well-proportioned field space should present defenders with the simple tactical dilemma shown here. Do they get close to their immediate opponent to stop them receiving a pass, or do they defend the path to the goal? When they can do both at the same time—and assuming the attackers have a reasonable sense of how to move to support around the ball—the field space is too narrow.

Weaker and less experienced players need more time and space, not less. This is a given. Learning develops slowly, over time, through intuition (self-awareness), through shaping (guided discovery and direct instruction), and following successful repetitions.

In order to build muscle memory and a mental representation of solutions, there simply need to be fewer variables (teammates and opponents) for inexperienced learners to process. When the game form is too complicated, young players never develop the insights to make informed decisions and learn from their experiences. If one of the key factors in player retention is understanding that, well before the teen



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ARIS GATAS

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years, players begin to equate “fun” with personal progress. engineering the opportunities for personal progress should be paramount to the coaching process.

For the youngest players, the number of teammates and opponents is critical because the games often resemble “one versus the rest” rather than X versus X.

Even directing to clumping older players to spread out fails to produce better tactical situations because their speed of play is often too slow to overcome the pressure of limited time and space. Compounding the problem is an effective passing range that rarely exceeds 5-10 yards. When playing numbers outstrip the capabilities of the players, coaches over-structure and over-coach as they search for alternative solutions that rarely support the long-term mission.

THE RISE, DEMISE, AND SECOND COMING (?) OF THE GOALIE GUARD

The evolution of the “Goalie Guard” position provides observational evidence for advocating smaller numbers for younger and inexperienced players. In the early 2000s, the State Association Technical Directors began an advocacy campaign to reduce playing numbers from 11v11 to 8v8 for U11s and U12s, and from 8v8 to 6v6 for U9s and U10s. The adoption reached a majority of state associations but “Small-sided Games” only became a nationwide model after U.S. Soccer mandated playing standards in 2017.



During the 16-year interim, the most significant unintended consequence of downsizing was the elimination of the goalie guards—those players permanently stationed at the top of their own penalty area to either guard the goalkeeper or create artificial spacing between the lines.

Smaller playing numbers forced coaches to consider why scoring goals was more difficult with half their team standing 30-40 yards from the opponent's goal. Within two years of downsizing, goalie guards essentially disappeared from the “Travel/Competitive” landscape.

Time will tell if the goalie guard position rises from the ashes.

REVISITING HISTORY: THE VYGOTSKY FACTOR

Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist whose work on the “Zone of Proximal Development” described the natural socialization process inherent to all cultures. Indirectly, he also explained the value of street soccer to player retention and development.

In brief, he observed that there are skills and insights that children can demonstrate on their own; skills and insights that children can demonstrate with the help of someone with more experience; and skills and insights that children can't yet demonstrate because they are developmentally not ready to operate at that level.

It should not come as a surprise that many musicians come from musical homes and many athletes from athletic homes and many academics from academic homes, etc. And, as is still the case, the better soccer players are invariably socialized to the game with the help of their soccer-playing parent(s) or older siblings. Dribble-minded parents tend to socialize dribble-minded personalities, while pass-minded parents tend to socialize pass-minded personalities.

In street soccer, it was the older brothers, sisters and friends who organized and managed the environment and who served as role models, mentors, and heroes to the younger generation. This structure created a cultural glue, and a seamless orientation for younger friends and siblings, who, in turn, assumed leadership roles as they aged up in the social order.

As soccer has become more structured, perhaps the biggest failings have been to organize playing groups by chronological age and without natural role models. As a consequence, the youth soccer environment is fundamentally hamstrung by the volume of parent-coaches who do not, or cannot, actively participate, and by parent-coaches who have soccer backgrounds, but who are socialized to stand on the sidelines and bark directions.

While the ideal would be to have role models on the field actively participating with young players until they are ready to become independent, “facilitating” from the goalkeeper position can also change the learning dynamic, because children discover very quickly that they can pass the ball backwards when in trouble or out of ideas, and then move away from the ball and still expect to be re-involved. Adult role models accelerate the spatial awareness curve and expand the range of relevant game forms available for use at practice.

IN CONCLUSION

Based in the lessons of street soccer, this article offers some thoughts on elements of the physical environment which can help improve player retention and development. Developing passion starts with positive first experiences, fueling the desire to return for more. For some, the motivation to improve will eventually drive a willingness to engage in deliberate practice; for others, the majority, playing just for the love of playing is enough. The youth soccer environment is critical for improving the retention rate for both mindsets and there is, admittedly, no one clear answer.

The United States is a vast continent with soccer influences spanning the globe. It is probably safe to predict that any future American “stars” will emerge from soccer families or non-traditional soccer environments. It is also probably safe to predict that continuing to over-structure entry-level soccer programs will continue to produce predictably poor results. ■