U9 Academies
The Future of US Soccer

The only country in the world that has more children playing soccer other than the United States of America is Brazil. This South American nation has a rich history of producing world class players, yet their system has less structure than the current system used here in the U.S.

In 2007, the United States Soccer Federation introduced the U.S. Soccer Development Academy to encourage clubs to develop U16 & U18 Male soccer players. The developmental approach was introduced for clubs to start creating elite soccer players and reduce the focus on winning games. Although this approach taken by US Soccer is good for the game, many US Youth Soccer State Associations realize that player development needs to become a priority and take place with the younger age groups.

Kentucky Youth Soccer realizes the Academy approach is vital if our players and clubs want to keep producing and competing against high caliber organizations from other states.

Throughout this manual, this approach will help clubs realize the importance as well as guide them on how to create an academy while educating coaches, players, referees and parents involved with the process.

What are Academies?

An Academy is when a club/association keeps a collection of players within an age group as opposed to placing them on individual teams. Some Academies do not “cut” or “tryout” younger players and all children that want to play can participate. Kentucky Youth Soccer highly recommend that clubs keep all U9 players who try-out to stay within the program.

The Academy is a concept that is based on the professional soccer club systems from around the world. There are no “A, B, and C” teams with these Academies as players stay in pools and can be moved back and forth according to their progress and development throughout the seasonal year. The emphasis is on developing players and FUN!

Currently travel/select clubs throughout the majority of the United States have players attend a one or two day "tryout." Players are then placed on teams according to their abilities, or cut from having the opportunity to be coached and play/train within a competitive environment.
PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

The Academy approach accommodates and accepts that younger players still have a lot of learning and growing to do within the game and recognize that putting them in an environment where they would receive more training than matches is more developmentally appropriate. This approach would allow clubs to keep players in larger pools, foster development over winning, and let these young players play freely. Each club's Developmental Academy would then play non-result oriented competition against other clubs that would be organized in "Developmental Academy Play Dates."

Success is a byproduct of player development. There is a saying that without technique there's no tactics. With the Academy approach, the focus on improving the individual player's technique will be emphasized because players will be in an environment where they will not have to worry about making poor decisions or fear of failure during the match.

Young players need to get a "feel" for the game; to learn to play instinctively. Young players will be allowed to show their abilities in an environment in which they will still be playing against competition without the "fear" of losing a match. At the same time young players will learn to make decisions in a match-like setting while getting more touches on the ball, thereby improving their technical development. If clubs are going to produce better teams in the future, then clubs must first produce players that are better technically.

Kentucky Youth Soccer Select clubs presently have players aged 7 and 8 "tryout" to make a club team. Clubs put these young players through the psychological rigors of making a club select team when they are so young. There is absolutely no way that anyone can predict how good a nine/ten year old player is going to be. So many players get missed when we have them "tryout", which can cause these young players to get discouraged if they don't make the level. This can cause a snowball affect, as parents become disgruntled and look to move to another organization so that their child can play on the so called "A" team.

Coaches have roles and responsibilities as well as taking care of our actions without letting egos undermine our real purpose. With young players it is the coaches' job to develop every player without discretion of ability. How many times have we seen late bloomers? An Academy will provide an environment that will allow these young players to experiment and play without the fear of losing a match. The Developmental Academy will foster an environment where players will look to be more creative, take risks, become better with the ball and have more fun.

Young players are dropping out of the sport of soccer by the time they are 13 or 14 years of age. Research has shown that 70% of all kids drop out of sports. The main reason soccer is no longer fun (according to players who drop out) is due to pressure to win or failure due to an emphasis on results over development and FUN. The excitement of playing matches also wears off when they become a teenager due to the pure fact of having so many games so early in their young soccer careers.
ADULT: COACH & PARENT DEVELOPMENT

Are adults involved with the youth soccer game more concerned about the outcome of the single match or season and failing to see the bigger picture? Or is the message received by soccer authorities confusing because nobody really knows how to measure success?

Currently in Kentucky Youth Soccer, the model used for U9 soccer is measured on a result based format. With each passing season the amount of problems reported are increasing within these age groups. It is usually due to sideline behavior by the coach or parents and pressure to win. When observing teams that play under the pressure to win games, the quality of soccer and the player’s confidence in taking risks does not prevail.

The majority of adults in today’s society played sports growing up in a non structured environment. They could play without any pressure, without adults dictating their every move and would solve problems for themselves. Society has changed in many different ways resulting in fewer opportunities for children to engage in “free play.” In order for us to keep developing technically efficient soccer players and creating teams that play without fear of taking risks, we have to create a happy medium where everyone can experiment with the game.

Youth Soccer Clubs are now businesses with the common theme among clubs being “if we don’t create winning teams at 8 and 9 years old, parents become disgruntled and take their child to another organization.” Realistically does it matter who wins at these young age groups? Do 16 year olds remember their season record from when they were 8 years old? The measuring tool that should be used for youth team/club success at the youngest age groups is overall player development rather than wins and losses. Coaches go through a season in fear of not just losing games but whether they are going to please the parents. Instead the focus should be about developing players enthusiasm and love for the game.

In a study conducted by Dr. Brent Walker, (Sports Psychologist for the United States Soccer Federation and Founder of “Play in the Zone”) players and parents were asked simple questions on what aspects of the game they value higher than others. As you will see from the results below, even though the parents were 100% behind a developmental approach, the underlying message is that they still value winning higher than what players do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Players Values</th>
<th>Parents Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Successful team</strong></td>
<td><strong>Playing Time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% Effort</td>
<td>Winning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Success</strong></td>
<td><strong>Team Success</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good At</strong></td>
<td><strong>Challenging</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fun</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Winning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fun</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improvement</strong></td>
<td><strong>Winning Team</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At first glance you may believe that majority of the coaches and parents have a player development mentality, but with player’s success and competition and playing time rated as high as it is, the underlying focus switches to winning without the parent or coach realizing.

“Academy Soccer” may cause adults to perceive that this is just simply going to U9recreational soccer, which is not the case. Actually, the Academy Format is a bridge between Recreational and Select geared for players that aspire someday to play at a higher level.

The academy approach would allow for a “true” club environment to be created. Players would not necessarily be placed onto a team but would play with various different players and allow them to experience different competition during training sessions and Play Days.

This will also lead to coaching development as now club directors of coaching can “mentor” a new/young coach in this environment. Take away the emphasis of “results” and now these young coaches will be able to teach these young players. We are now getting more young people that are familiar with the game but they don’t want to coach in club’s or a travel environment due to time and commitment. If each club has an Academy then we can get young coaches that have played the game at a higher level to teach without the fear of some parent looking at their watch and/or the result at the end of the match.
This Developmental Academy approach is “Player-Centered” and not “Coach Controlled.” Soccer is a player-centered game isn’t it? With the Developmental Academy approach young players will be in an environment where they are challenged at their own pace. More players need to be included as opposed to excluded in these younger age groups and this format will do just that. Below is an excerpt from the US Soccer Federations “Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States”:

“When we place children in travel soccer too soon the emphasis is subtly being placed on the team result and winning the game, rather than on the individual player’s performance. If the team doesn’t win, then it doesn’t get to play in this league or that division or in this particular tournament. Thus, coaches feel the pressure and start recruiting bigger, stronger kids that can help secure the victory-now. They start playing more of a long ball game and placing the emphasis on direct play. They want the ball out of their end as quickly as possible. What the coaches should be doing is, building out of the back, keeping possession of the ball, encouraging risk takers and flair and placing the emphasis on the individual’s technical abilities. Are the coaches allowing an environment to flourish that allows the players to make mistakes because they know long term development is what they are really after? The answer is no, because there is too much pressure to succeed at every step along the way. If this coach loses too many games then he risks losing his players to a more “successful” team. The parents will want to move their child to a “winner;” or get rid of him and bring in (in some cases hire) another coach. Thus, the environment becomes individually stifling and the player’s creativity takes a back seat to the winning mentality”.

**REFEREE DEVELOPMENT**

During the first 2 years of a young referee’s career 7 out of 10 quit officiating games. One of the big reasons they drop out is due to verbal abuse or grief dealt by adults. Referees feel it is not worth the money, time or hassle to help in developing the game.

In the Developmental Academy approach, young referees will gain invaluable experience in calling a match and not worry about the outcome. Younger referees who are often called upon to call U9 matches can now be “mentored” in an environment that is developmentally appropriate for them as well.

Clubs can use players from some of the older age group teams as referees. This in return will allow these older players to give back to the game and gain a better understanding of what it takes to officiate a game. Clubs can then use referee assignors or even club/academy directors to guide these young referees throughout the games.

We need to provide an environment for our young referees to learn while managing a quality match. The need to retain future referees is vital. No Referees = No games!!
HOW TO ESTABLISH AN ACADEMY

Following club try-outs for U9 teams, rather than having A, B, C teams selected, a club will select a pool of players. This pool will train each week and then play within their own club or with another club. Then, once a month clubs travel together for an "Academy Play Date" that is set up between local clubs for competition.

The Academy approach has worked all around the world. Currently most of the top clubs in the world have their young players in academies. Players would still represent a club but instead of being put onto teams, the players would be put into each club’s Academy. The players will then benefit from the club’s coaching staff and still be able to experience competition by playing against other club’s Academies. This type of environment will allow the players to experiment and play without the fear of losing a match. This environment will also allow the coaches to move players around within their own Academy, not worrying about coaching to win, and ultimately contribute even greater towards a player’s overall development. Again, this Academy approach is "Player-Centered" and not "Coach Controlled".

Players either with select or recreational experience can attend the clubs open try-out for the U9 academy. It is preferred that the academies keep all the players and continue to develop them instead of cutting players and discouraging them from playing the game.

KENTUCKY YOUTH SOCCER ASSOCIATION ACADEMY GUIDELINES

Each club will appoint an Academy Director. It is recommended that each Academy Director holds at least a US Youth Soccer National Youth License and/or a minimum USSF “C” License or equivalent. Each club will be encouraged to submit the name(s) of their Academy Director to Kentucky Youth Soccer.

Clubs can determine their own method for admitting players into the Academy. The "No-Cut Policy" is highly recommended and every player who wishes to join should be accepted unless the numbers exceed the playing space available and/or coaching staff is limited. (To be successful each club should strive for a maximum of a 1:12 player/coach ratio.)

Clubs should be clear that the players within their own Academy are those who desire to play at a higher level. Each club should promote/advertise that these Academies are a step above recreation soccer. However, recreational players are permitted to participate should they wish to make the step up.
WORKING WITH OTHER CLUBS

Clubs are permitted to hold at least 2 extra play dates a season. They can invite clubs of similar size and ability, larger or smaller clubs.

The games played can follow the same format as provided by Kentucky Youth Soccer or alternate playing formats may be agreed upon by the clubs involved.

Club Academy Directors must inform the State Director of Coach & Player Development that they will be hosting an inter-club play day. Academy clubs can even play in house play dates, or organize pick up games and street soccer festivals on weekends when no games have been officially arranged.

COMMON SENSE GAME MANAGEMENT

Even though scores are not kept during each game it is still possible to tell if a game becomes lopsided. This is then no longer enjoyable or beneficial to any of the players.

Unlike regular league structure the Academy format will allow you to solve the problem by.......

* Adding a player to the weaker team.
* Moving impact players to another game.
* Changing an impact player with a keeper.
* Removing a player from the stronger team.
* All of the above.

ACADEMY PLAY DATES GUIDELINES

ACADEMY TRAINING GUIDELINES

Trainings should not exceed 45 minutes of adult directed soccer with additional 30 minutes allotted form of free play/self expression.

Each club’s Academy does reserve the right to group the players for training; however, it is recommended that it not be done more than 1 training per week. For example, during one of the two training sessions groups should/could be mixed. The second training session of the week the academy coaches and/or director can group the players by ability if they so choose.

FORMAT

In conjunction with the hosting clubs in each district, Kentucky Youth Soccer will set up five academy play dates per season. Academy dates will be on Saturdays with Sundays used as rain dates.

Academy Play dates will be assigned to a venue. Academies will be invited in to participate against different clubs each play date. Each academy play date, all players will participate if they choose.

No teams shall be formed permanently. Every player shows up and then the coaches split up the players and have them play 6v6 (5 plus Goalkeeper). Academies can share players if necessary to make playing groups even. Alternative playing formats may be used if agreed upon by Academy Directors. Kentucky Youth Soccer U9/U10 Playing Rules will be used to govern the play dates. An academy play date will consist of three matches, each being played for 20-25 minutes in duration with a ten minute break between games to reshuffle teams.

See Game Day Example Below:

Group Warm-up = 9:00 AM
Game 1, Kick-Off = 9:20 AM
Game 2, Kick-Off = 9:55 AM
Game 3, Kick-Off = 10:30 AM

Game Day Logistics
* Reshuffle Teams after every game
* Maintain the teams for all three games
* Pre-Assigned Teams (Balanced Teams by ability)
* Tired Competition (Better/ Weaker players pre-assigned)

Although Kentucky Youth Soccer will be setting up the play dates and assigning which academies can/will play against each other, it will be the responsibility of the academy directors to establish which player/team selection format they will be using for each of the games. Each player must from the list above play at least half of every match, but it is encouraged they play more. No results or standings will be kept for the games. The purpose is to have very few players sitting on the substitute bench, so if the Academy Directors agree smaller sided games can be played to accommodate every player.
TECHNICAL EMPHASIS

• Dribbling
  • Finding space (head up)
  • Beating an opponent (taking players on)
  • To keep possession (shielding)

• Passing
  • Short passing
  • Disguise in passing
  • Introduction to striking longer balls

• Receiving
  • Mechanics of receiving balls on ground
  • Importance of first touch (sets up second touch)
  • “Take it somewhere new”

• Shooting/Finishing
  • Mechanics of shooting
  • Mentality to finish
  • Finishing off the dribble

• Juggling
  • Individual
  • With a partner

• Goalkeeping
  • Footwork (Getting behind the ball)
  • Collecting balls off ground
  • Catching techniques
  • Stance

FITNESS

• Should not be done as a means of getting them “FIT”. No sprint tests, long distance runs, etc.
• Should be done as a means of getting better with the ball and should include the ball. Should be FUN!
• Teach controlled falling
• Running mechanics
• Range of Motion activities
• Proper training activities should provide enough fitness

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

Dribbling
- Fun Dribbling Activities
- Positive and Creative Dribbling
- Beating an opponent on the dribble
- Creating 1 v1 opportunities in a game
- Dribbling for possession

Passing & Receiving
- Fun Passing Activities
- Dynamic First Touch
- Receiving and Turning with the Ball
- Passing/possession
- Passing, Receiving and movement
- Dealing With Bouncing Balls

Shooting & Finishing
- Shooting
- Attitude to shot & Finish

Goalkeeping
- Footwork
- Dealing with 1 v1 situations
- Basic Handling
- Dealing with crosses

TACTICAL EMPHASIS

• Penetration via dribble or pass
• Role of support
• Introduction of simple 2 player combinations
• Mentality of winning the ball back (getting pressure)
• Understanding of transition from attack to defense
• Understanding of transition from defense to attack
• Understanding of how 2 playing lines interact

TACTICAL EMPHASIS

• When to dribble and when to pass
• Developing support play to improve possession
• Switching the play
• Defending in small groups
• Pressure, Cover, Balance
• Winning and keeping possession

PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPHASIS

• Positive
• Encouraging players to “take risks” (encourage dribbling and creative play over passing)
• Fun!