

# YOUTH SOCCER COACHING GUIDE

U3 – U18



A complete framework for coaching soccer

Based on the 4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™

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## 1. Introduction

This guide can be used to structure soccer practices and drills for any team and competitive environment. It has been developed based on 30 years of coaching experience, observation, and researching best practices around the globe.

It naturally complements our own soccer practice books by providing a framework for coaching all age groups, competitive levels, and goalkeepers. It allows you, the coach, to select the appropriate soccer practice plans and activities from our, or any other, collection of soccer practice resources.

The guide is formatted around the **4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™** which are the underlying foundation of the activities and practice plans in our practice books. In the next chapter I will review the **4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™** in more detail, but in essence they are:

1. Technical Skills
2. Tactics
3. Physical Fitness
4. Mental Fitness

Here is an example of a **4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™** development profile:

<b>Soccer Drill Development Profile©</b>				
Youth Competitive (U13-U18): 7v7 Flank Attack				
Technical Skill	●	●	●	○
Tactical	●	●	●	●
Physical Fitness	●	●	●	○
Mental Fitness	●	●	●	●

The second principle underpinning our coaching philosophy and practice design are **The Seven Speeds of Soccer**, a German concept created to improve the cognitive and physical speeds of soccer players. The seven speeds are:

1. Perceptual speed
2. Anticipation speed

3. Decision Making speed
4. Reaction speed
5. Movement speed without ball
6. Action speed with ball
7. Game action speed

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive review of the seven speeds of soccer

For each age group, competitive level and for goalkeepers we will:

- recommend the appropriate **4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™** development profile, showing the emphasis on each pillar for the specific age group
- break down what each pillar means
- provide an example practice activity/drill and show how the 4 Pillars and Seven Speeds of Soccer are incorporated
- refer you to the appropriate soccer practice book from our library to consider for your team practices

At U11 and older we will split the profiles into recreational and competitive soccer due to different requirements and emphases for competitive training.

Youth soccer development has become more targeted to specific age groups. In the “old” days organized soccer started at U10, all games were 11v11 and played on a full field with regular size 5 balls. That was possible because the essential soccer skills were learned playing street (or beach) soccer for hours every day and children got the required touches on the ball before they ever showed up for organized practices or games. Today soccer is mostly played in organizations and touches on the ball mostly happen during practices and games. Our practices maximize touches on the ball. To allow a reasonable level of involvement and satisfaction, FIFA has recommended to make fields, goals, players/team, and balls smaller for the younger age groups. FIFA still regulates all dimensions and rules for full field soccer but has made recommendations for small field soccer. Associations and clubs have a lot of flexibility based on fields and equipment available as long as they follow the concept. I have seen many different models and thought it would be useful to give an example:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Field Size (m) Length x Width</b>	<b>Fields on full field</b>	<b>Goal Size</b>	<b>Ball Size</b>	<b>Game Length</b>
U3 – U6	3v3 (no GK)	20 x 15 m 22 x 17 yds.	6	2 x 1 m 6 x 3 ft.	3	30 min + 30 min training
U7 – U8	5v5 (incl. GK)	35 x 25 m 40 x 30 yds.	4	3 x 1.5 m 10 x 5 ft.	4	50 min
U9 – U10	7v7 (incl. GK)	50 x 35 m 55 x 40 yds.	2	3.5 x 2 m 12 x 6 ft.	4	70 min
U11 – U12	9v9 (incl. GK)	70 x 50 m 80 x 55 yds.	1	5.5 x 2 m 18 x 6 ft.	5	70 min
U13 – U14	11v11	FIFA	1	FIFA	5	80 min
U15 – U18	11v11	FIFA	1	FIFA	5	90 min

FIFA expresses all dimensions in metric units. For our imperial units I have converted as closely as possible.

If you choose one of our practice books you can be assured that the 4 Pillars and Seven Speeds of Soccer are present in every book and every activity. Once you start thinking about them you will recognize them as you practice.

## **2. The 4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™ Overview**

This provides a brief review of the four pillars which are used in each and every one of our soccer practice books:

### **1. Technical Skill Development**

There too many skills a soccer player can perform to mention here. Entire books have been written on soccer skills alone. But to list a few:

For Out Players:

- ball control – receiving, second touch, passing
- 1v1 moves
- shooting, heading
- shielding
- tackling
- dribbling
- running with ball

For Goalkeepers:

- Catching the ball
- Parrying the ball
- Foot saves
- Angles
- 1v1
- Collapsing dives
- High dives

### **2. Tactical Development**

Tactics apply to the team as a whole, to units (goalkeeper, defense, midfield, attack), and to individual players. Tactics can be expressed as a formation (e.g. 4-4-3), as a philosophy (e.g. high possession soccer), and/or as a strategy (high pressure, line of engagement, etc.)

I advocate choosing all of the above elements based on the player personnel available, i.e. their skills, maturity level, understanding of the game, age, etc. There is no point talking possession soccer to 5 year olds or high pressure to 15 year old recreational teams. My recommended tactical steps for any coach are:

1. Evaluate the context of your team – age, competitive level, league
2. Evaluate your players
3. Choose an overarching philosophy (possession, fast transition, fun, etc.)
4. Choose a formation
5. Select strategies

Then coach individuals the tactical elements required for their position, functional units on how to play together, and finally how the units function as a team. For example:

- systems of play suited to number of players on field
- learning positional roles
- essential game elements – overlaps, give and go, switching play, etc.
- recognizing other team's tactics
- etc.

### **3. Physical Fitness**

The elements of physical fitness can be very complex. At the professional level they are monitored during practices and games (e.g. top running speed, heart rate) and during idle times (oxygen levels, enzymes, resistance capacity, etc.). For youth soccer training I recommend to consider both the physical fitness attributes and their evaluations, but measure them somewhat more empirically. For example with young children, observe flexibility. With older and competitive youth players clock sprint speed and test endurance. With older and competitive goalkeepers evaluate vertical leap and horizontal diving reach.

Here then are some of the attributes of physical fitness to consider in your training:

- speed
- endurance
- strength (legs, upper body)
- agility
- flexibility

#### 4. Mental Fitness

Under the umbrella of mental fitness fall several areas which on their own are entire fields of study – psychological development, emotional development, social development, performance status. Again, depending on the age group and competitive level some of these areas are more relevant than others.

Examples of mental fitness attributes are:

- focus
- concentration
- confidence
- decision making, anticipation, perception
- team atmosphere and environment
- peak performance states
- communication
- social interaction

For each age group and respective competitive level I will offer a **4 PILLARS OF SOCCER™** development profile, explain what each pillar means, and give an example soccer drill from our relevant practice book showing how the pillars are applied.



### 3. The Seven Speeds of Soccer

The seven speeds of soccer is a German concept and credit must be given to the inventors – Gero Bisanz, Gunnar Gerrisch, Jurgen Weineck, and those who expanded it with relevant soccer drills and wrote a book on it. The book is called “How to Improve the 7 Speeds of Soccer” and is part of the Performance Soccer Conditioning series. It has been authored by experts from across the soccer and training spectra – V. Gambetta, J. Luxbacher, J. Osorio, R. Quinn, N. Sedwick, and M. Thyron.

Speed is more than the physical speed of a player, such as when sprinting. Yes, physical sprinting speed is an important aspect of a player’s or a team’s performance. But when considering the number of sprints during a game relative to the length of the game it becomes evident that there is more to speed than running fast.

You have likely observed players who are a little older yet they get to the ball before a younger, physically faster opponent. How is that? It’s because the experienced player likely perceived the situation faster, anticipated the game faster, made a quicker decision as to where to move to, reacted to the final ball motion faster, moved into position without the ball quicker, got the ball and then likely played a quick pass increasing the speed of the game. And there you have them – the 7 speeds of soccer:

1. **Perceptual Speed** – the ability to observe, process, and integrate the game as it unfolds around the player, using visual and auditory senses.
2. **Anticipation Speed** – the ability to predict future events based on previous experiences, observations, and intuition.
3. **Decision Making Speed** – The ability to develop options and quickly decide on the best one to execute.
4. **Reaction Speed** – The ability to react to events such as opponent, teammate, or ball movements.
5. **Movement Speed without Ball** – The ability to move at maximum physical speed
6. **Action Speed with Ball** – The ability to handle the ball at maximum physical speed, 1v1 moves, dribbles, passes, shots.
7. **Game Action Speed** – The ability to pull all other speeds together during a game, considering technical, tactical, and physical circumstances to

increase the pace of your team's game. That is what I described in a previous article as catching the opponent out of shape and out of balance – play the game faster than the opponent.

Just to level set, when we discuss speeds of soccer, we are talking about thought processes that take fractions of a second and action processes that don't take much longer. Improving these speeds then is an exercise in making small improvements as well as in training certain parts of the brain. But we do this in the context of soccer. These speeds apply to both out players and goalkeepers.

### **1. Soccer Perception Speed**

is about taking in many, many pieces of visual and auditory information. It is that basic building block that allows the processing of the information and ultimately making split second decisions and executing them. Soccer perception speed can be trained and practiced at any level of soccer. Regardless of a player's base level of perception speed, it will get better with continued playing experience. So the combination of practice and playing time will lead to improvements.

Let's look at some examples of what we mean by perception speed:

- Recognizing that the ball has been passed to you, whether directly at your feet or into space ahead of you. Do you need a shout, do you perceive the ball movement as soon as it is passed?
- If you are in control of the ball, do you perceive movement of your team mates? Do you perceive spaces available to play the ball into?
- Do you perceive opponents closing you down?

It is all about your field of vision and your speed of taking in a sensory stimulus and processing what that stimulus means.

From a practice point of view, we always advocate that players are constantly moving, with or without the ball, and are getting maximum opportunities of ball touches. Questions to ask yourself as a coach when you run soccer drills:

1. Are all players moving or are they standing?
2. Does the ball keep moving or is it a stop/start situation?

3. Are players making contact with the ball as early as possible? This includes attacking the ball as opposed to waiting for it to come to you.

## 2. Soccer Anticipation Speed

describes a player's ability to predict the probability and end result of a game action situation. Because they can predict what will happen they can execute their own response/move that much faster. For example, if an outside defender can predict that the opposing midfielder will switch the play from the opposite side of the field to their side with a long ball, they can scan other opposing players, decide where the ball will likely end up, who the likely recipient is, and get physically and mentally ready to get into the target space before the ball or opponent get there.

This speed is highly dependent on a player's experience. A professional will have seen more game situations and has developed a larger mental data base than a youth player in their second year of soccer. But it is not only experience, anticipation can be trained.

The best coaching method is small sided games in relatively small spaces, 2v1, 2v2, 3v2, 3v3, 4v4, etc.

## 3. Soccer Decision Making Speed

Let's review a real life example to illustrate this speed:

Seven year old boys play in a league game on Tuesday evening, 5 a-side including a goalie on a small sized field. One player is very aggressive and always wants to win the ball, and he does. Once he gets the ball, he holds on to it, runs/dribbles with it, and gets entangled with opposing players. The coach **may** shout at him to pass to an open team mate, but nothing happens. The immediate diagnosis is that the boy is a "ball hog", doesn't want to pass. The technical analysis might suggest that he keeps his head down and is not aware of his surroundings. Both may be reasonable causes of why he keeps holding on to the ball far too long.

The coach actually praised the player who "hogged" the ball for his great efforts in winning possession and then asked why he wouldn't pass and eventually lose it again by running out of space or being swarmed by the opposing team. The

answer was: “I don’t see the open players”. That may lead to the conclusion that his head is down and in practice we need to work on keeping the head up. But when asked if he would do anything different if he did see open team mates he hesitated, maybe trying to figure what we wanted to hear. It suddenly became clear that he actually didn’t know that he had to make a decision of what to do with the ball once he gets it, and that the decision should lead to a positive play. So at the next practice the coach asked him to think about what he could do after he gets the ball. It took a few minutes but together they came up with dribbling, passing, and shooting, depending on where on the field he was and what he saw. Now that he knew there were options he realized that he had to look up, not because the coaches told him, but because that would give him information to make a good decision.

Experience is a key factor in decision making. The more experience you have, the faster information is taken in and processed. That in turn allows the decision to act to be made faster.

#### **4. Soccer Reaction Speed**

is defined as the ability to react to a previous action as perceived by the player.

We typically think of reaction and its speed in the context of goalkeepers making saves. And that is true as goalkeepers are trained to react to the motion of the shooter and the flight of the ball immediately after it leaves the foot. But all other positions rely on reaction speed as well. Although a player has perceived and anticipated the next play, and made a decision on what to do, the actual play may be somewhat different. Therefore one must react to the actual outcome of the anticipated play. A good example is a forward getting sent into the penalty box with a through ball. Both forward and passer perceive the space behind the defense. The passer anticipates the run and the forward anticipates the pass. The decision is to pass and the forward decides to shoot on goal on the first touch. At the moment of the shot a defender slides in from behind to block the shot. The forward now reacts to the new situation, controls the ball to the side past the defender, and then shoots on the second touch.

Many factors impact the reaction speed of a soccer player, arguably the most important one is aerobic fitness. As individuals become tired, the reaction speed

slows. Other factors are the type of reaction, age, gender, motivation, emotional state, intensity of the situation, muscles involved, etc. So it is a very complex process and training has to be very specific to develop reaction speed.

## **5. Soccer Movement Speed without Ball**

Vern Gambetta of Gambetta Sports Training Systems said it best:

“Game analysis has shown that the average player will be in possession of the ball only 2% of total match time. What happens the other 98% of the time?”

The answer is that players move, or at times rest. The average professional soccer player runs between 10 km and 14 km during a 90 minute game. That is a lot. Using the math above 9.8 km to 13.7 km are run without the ball. The running is a mix of many physical movements, for example:

1. Short sprints to receive a pass
2. Long sprints to close down an attacker
3. Short jogs when the play is shifting
4. Long jogs to get up the field to take a corner kick
5. Jumps for headers
6. Side steps
7. Running backwards
8. Quick changes of directions to lose a defender
9. Quick moves getting into position to receive a throw in
10. Short steps or long strides
11. Sliding for tackles
12. Diving for goalies

## **6. Soccer Movement Speed with Ball**

The sixth soccer speed, action with ball, totally involves the mastery and control of the soccer ball. It is about executing all required soccer skills with a high degree of accuracy at maximum speed.

It is good that a player perceived the play, anticipated the exact end point of a pass, decided to meet the ball there, reacted to the actual pass, and out-sprinted the defense to get to the ball first. All this will be wasted if that player needs a





















many touches to control the ball, needs to adjust their body to get ready for a shot, and then hope to strike with pace and accuracy. It may work at very young ages but as players mature, competition increases, and the demands of the game grow, it will not be successful.

What is required is to execute ALL skills at maximum speed with accuracy. I always start with emphasizing accuracy first, then add speed. The ONLY way to improve skills is through repetition. Assuming reasonable natural aptitude for soccer, the kids who practice most and touch the ball most often will eventually turn into the best soccer players. Studies have shown that 4,000 ball touches a week, starting at age 5, will suffice. A typical 1.5 hour youth practice will have each player touch the ball at best 100 times. So even three practices a week isn't even close. Our practices average around 500-600 touches per player if coached correctly. Still not even half of what is required in three sessions per week. This then leads to individual extra ball work for those who aspire to higher level soccer.

## **7. Soccer Game Action Speed**

relies on all of the other components of soccer speed for its execution. It is the ability to make fast, effective decisions during the game in relation to technical, tactical, and conditioning possibilities. The capacity to process information quickly during a game is an individual player attribute. It can even vary within a player depending on the game situation or the emotional, physical, and psychological state of the individual.

#### 4. U3 – U6 Recreational

<b>Soccer Drill Development Profile©</b>					
U3 – U6 Recreational Soccer					
Technical Skill					
Tactical					
Physical Fitness					
Mental Fitness					

#### Overview

You may be surprised that skill development has a low emphasis and physical and mental fitness are very high. What is more typical when observing coaches of young children is spending time on technique development. But skill development involves a lot of instruction with kids standing idle, followed by repetition which is boring.

At this age group it is far more important to keep kids moving, to get them to interact with other children and to have fun. This is why I recommend a higher emphasis on physical and mental training in a fun and active environment.

I should note that grouping U3 – U6 is a very broad age band and differences between players in each age group are far larger than in any other age group. You can have three year olds that have been kicking a ball around at home quite skilled and then have four year olds who have never seen a soccer ball.

This can lead to the advanced child “hogging” the ball when the game happens and others just standing and watching. Typically clubs organize the “game event” such that there is 30 minutes of activities before the 30 minute game. It is important that the activities are fun – they can include parents and siblings for the very young ones.

In the typical 3v3 game with teams of up to 9 players there is a lot of idle time on the sidelines. This is not good. I would rather play a continuous 3v3 and divide the field into smaller areas. I suggest the “coach” bring some extra cones and consider that. That way all the kids are involved and the occasional “drama” of getting children back on the field is avoided.

**Technical Skill** means encouraging kids to play the ball with their feet. There is no need to get concerned with kicking technique (toe vs laces, etc.), 1v1 moves, passing accuracy or any other of the key soccer skills. Running with the ball and just kicking it is sufficient.

**Tactical** training is reduced to teaching the direction of play and the boundaries of the field. Coaching tactical elements like passing, positions, etc. would likely be beyond the cognitive skills of kids who just want to have fun and be busy.

**Physical Fitness** for young children is not what coaches typically associate with soccer: running speed, endurance, strength, etc. At this age group physical fitness means:

- Coordination – can the child actually run, coordinating arms and legs?
- Agility – can the child turn while running, run and jump?
- Flexibility – can the child bend down, touch feet?

Developing these attributes has a high priority as they set the stage for future physical development and soccer fitness.

**Mental Fitness** also isn't the typical soccer model of focus, concentration, game readiness, toughness, confidence, etc. At this age group mental fitness relates to:

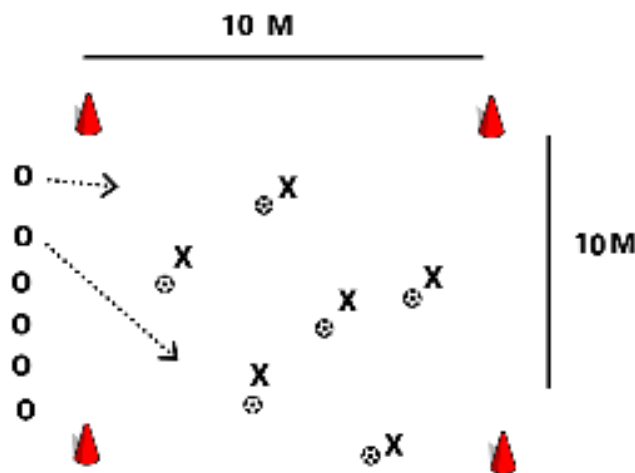
- Social Skills – getting children to interact with each other. Learning that it is ok to share the ball with others, wear the same uniform and belonging to a group, and having a good time within the context of a GAME.























- Emotional Development – it's ok to be excited to be there or initially to be unsure about the whole thing, especially for first timers. The goal in the first year is really to see if the child has an interest in sports, in playing with others, and in soccer. The success is for the child to come back the second year. Once you get to U5 and U6 they will be more interested in the sport and start to play soccer.

The recommended soccer practice book for this age group is our Kids (U4 – U8) book [Kids Soccer Practices](#)

**Sample Soccer Drill from our book:**



5. Xs inside the grid each have a ball in their hand, they are the “hunters”
6. Two Os enter the grid at a time and the Xs try to tag them by tossing the ball at them – ensure ball is thrown below the waste
7. Os who are tagged sit down and next two Os enter the grid
8. Make the grid smaller if needed to allow more success
9. Watch out for stronger kids and ensure they aim properly
10. Younger kids may not be able to throw hard enough – allow them to tag the players with their hands
11. If it takes too long to tag players – switch roles faster or have all six Os enter grid at the same time
12. Ensure that idle time is minimized

<b>Soccer Drill Development Profile©</b>					
Kids U4 – U8 Coordination Game #6					
Technical Skill					
Tactical					
Physical Fitness					
Mental Fitness					

**Technical Skills:**

It is important to vary the content of practices for young children and inject some non-technical exercises that provide some fun and laughter. This activity is not intended to develop any particular foot based skill. However, throwing the ball at a particular target can be viewed as introduction to throw-ins and goalkeeping.

**Tactics:**

This drill, as most drills in our Kids Soccer Basics book is not intended to develop tactical understanding. However, the concept of two players inside the grid running into space is an early introduction to movement without the ball. Also the concept of a target player is introduced.

**Physical Fitness:**

This drill is designed to develop coordination and agility. The players with the ball need to move close to their targets without dropping the ball. They need to work out the body mechanics to throw the ball at a moving player and learn to aim the throw below the waist. You will be surprised at the difficulty young kids may have initially and you may have to adjust the drill to foster success. The players entering the grid as targets need to be able to recognize their attackers and avoid being hit by the thrown ball. This requires changes of direction and if the ball is aimed at them, perhaps a last second jump or side step to avoid being hit.

## **Mental Fitness:**

The social aspect is to introduce cooperating with others. For the youngest players this may simply mean being on the field together and chase some other kids. The older ones (U5/U6) may start to develop team play by coordinating whom to go after.

The emotional component relates to having fun by playing a “hunting” game. Everyone is a hunter and can enjoy success or being the hunted enjoying “escaping”. As mentioned above, if the youngest players struggle with tossing the ball simply convert the game into a 6v6 tag game – without the ball.

By the very nature of this soccer drill the **seven speeds of soccer** come into play. Of course the younger children will need encouragement and help and the activity may need to be modified to keep them engaged.

## **Perception**

The players with the ball need to perceive the movement and position of the target players. The target players need to perceive the movement of 6 attackers. The players waiting outside the grid need to be aware of when their turn to enter the grid comes up. So they should stay focused on what is going on. The nature of this drill makes it fairly easy for them to be engaged.

## **Anticipation**

The players with the ball need to anticipate new players entering the grid and the space they are likely to occupy so that they will throw the ball to the spot the target will be in, not necessarily where the target is at the moment. The target players need to anticipate the opposite – which player will throw the ball and to which location so that they can avoid it.

## **Decision Making**

The players with the ball need to decide which target to go for. They can decide individually or communicate and work as a group of 6 going after one target or

split into two groups each going after a target. The target players need to decide where the space is that makes it most difficult for the attackers to hit them.

### **Reaction**

The target players need to react to the position of the attackers and more importantly to the ball thrown at them. If the ball is on target they need to react to avoid being hit. A quick side step or jump might do the trick. The attackers need to react to the movement of the targets.

### **Movement without Ball**

All players are moving without the ball at their feet.

### **Movement with Ball**

Does not apply since players are carrying the ball in their hands.

### **Game Action**

The application to game action is the recognition of space and movement and delivering the ball to a target player.