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 **7v7 & 8v8** 

*"The most valuable elements of street soccer were molded into a training plan for youth soccer. The basic idea is that players learn by discovering the purpose, and aim of the game."<sup>1</sup>*

Bert van Lingen

An effective training plan for youth players will need to take two separate yet related phases into account. The learning phase concerns practices, camps, clinics, homework and so on. The time spent learning the game in a "noncompetitive" environment. The competitive phase concerns the time spent in an actual game set in league or tournament play. This is the "testing time" for the players and the coach. Each phase would have little meaning without the other. The quality of the competitive phase is dependent on the quality of the learning phase and the needs of the learning phase are dependent on the results of the competitive phase.

In order for a training plan to work it's vital that these two phases of a players education are linked. Unfortunately, there is far too often a disconnect at this point. Games are seen as a way to learn "how to win," where "good hustle," (work harder, not smarter) is valued more than effective problem solving. Value is determined by the teams record. Coaches even slip backwards on game day, reverting to the most expedient means to get a result, "kick the ball forward and let Jackie Star score." The pregame routine reverts to a couple of lines in front of the goal to practice shooting, warm-up the goalkeeper and a little hype. The result of this change is that children learn that practice really isn't important, when game day is here they're going to do something else.

**In order for youth soccer education to be truly effective and efficient it is vital that the two phases of learning are used as extensions of one another.**

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With this in mind the KNVB has adopted the game of 7v7, combined with the correct coaching, as their means of making the competitive phase more relevant to the learning phase. The consensus of the United States Youth Soccer Association is that 8v8 is the preferred form. The following will give a brief overview of the two games and some of their characteristics.

### 7v7 - The game for wingers.

The following examples are taken from [\*Coaching Soccer\*](#).<sup>1</sup>

The diagram at right shows the basic structure of a team in possession playing 7v7. The first key point is that the goalkeeper's task is to play as a sweeper behind the #2 & #4. This allows the #3 to press up into a midfield

7v7 own team in possession

role and support the three top players. It also establishes a link between 7v7 and 4v4 by creating the two diamond shapes on the field. This helps to connect the learning and competitive phases.

The key player is the #3. This player must have the insight when and how far to go forward. He needs to be able to play the top

position in 4v4, (diamond #1) as well as the sweeper position, (diamond #2.)

7v7 also illustrates exactly how to build a small sided game that addresses a specific problem. The problem is "What is the best competitive form to develop the attacking qualities of wingers, what are the minimum requirements?" 1) We want to have both wings involved and wingers, by definition, play on either side of a central player. This requires three top players. 2) The attacking qualities of wingers will include crossing the ball. A common result of crosses is the goalkeeper making a save, so a goalkeeper is necessary. 3) Since we are concerned with the attacking qualities the wingers will need someone behind them to defend. This will require three back players which also leaves the wingers with an immediate opponent that they will have to beat. (If you use two defenders against three forwards, 6v6, at least one of the top players will have to come back in order to establish a balance.) From this assessment the minimum number of players needed for a competitive game that encourages attacking wing play is seven, three top players, three back players and a goalkeeper. Since this concerns the competitive phase of the game the opponents will play with equal numbers, 7v7. Since there are goalkeepers there must be goals and the field must be small enough to allow allot of attacking opportunities but large enough for building up play.

7v7 opponents in possession

The second diagram shows the basic structure when the opponents are in possession. The two central players have the responsibility of dropping back into a defensive role and the goalkeeper takes a more cautious position. One problem in youth soccer is that the two central players often don't have enough time to get into these positions after a change in possession. For example, the opposing goalkeeper saves a shot and immediately starts a counter attack with a long kick. If the number 3 and 6 have pushed upfield the ball will sail over their heads and this pattern is repeated at the other end. Building up play isn't practiced or encouraged. The fast paced hustle game is.

This does not absolve the wingers of their responsibility of tracking back to their immediate opponent. If an outside defender has made a run forward its still the wingers job to track them. The distance between every player is a key concern for how the team will play.

### 7v7 - Counter attacking.

The examples above work well when the two teams are evenly balanced or you are



coaching the team that can dominate the opponent. However, when you are faced with an opponent that is clearly superior then a different approach

to the game might be necessary.



When you are sure that the opponents will have a lot of possession and can dictate play the counter attacking game can offer the best chance for success. In this game the probabilities are, 1) you cannot hold the opponents in their own half, 2) you will have little success building up the play from deep in your own half, 3) you will have very little time for any buildup, 4) much of the action will be in front of your own goal.

Instead of thinking in terms of a 3-3, using wingers and trying to spread the field, think how a 4-2, with the center forward withdrawn into a primarily defensive role, can help to answer some of the problems. In this example the number 7's primary task is defensive, he becomes a center midfielder. When in possession he will support the top players from behind the ball. He will avoid runs out to the wings and ahead of the top players because these will take him too far away from the center of the field and hinder his basic task. (Remember, you won't have much of the ball.) When not in possession he will take up a position very close to the back three to try to make up in numbers what you may lack in quality. While the number 2 and 4 can move up on the wings chances are they will be too far back to be of any real use.

The attacking strength will lay in the abilities of the two top

players to quickly combine and exploit any mistakes by the opponents. They will need to have a good understanding between each other and communicate effectively. The attacks will be characterized by being over very quickly and coming primarily through the center. Speed of thought and action is critical.

This picture shows how important it is for children to learn how to play in all of the small forms of soccer. 2v2 for the two top players, 3v3 when the center midfielder becomes involved, 4v4 for the back four and 5v5 when you include the goalkeeper. This also demonstrates how when one players task is changed, the number 7 in this case, it can effect the rest of the team. Go to KNVB's counter attacking game for a practice.

### 8v8 - The central midfielder.

With the addition of one player the 7v7 game changes dramatically. The problem in 7v7 is the shared responsibility of the center midfield between the numbers 3 and 6. This requires both to assume the role on a part time

8v8 basic shape

basis, the number 3 when in possession and the number 6 when not. The addition of the eighth player (#8 in this example) ends that. He can assume the role and take responsibility for the tasks in both of the main moments. He becomes the key player in 8v8.

The introduction of the center midfielder also effects the other players tasks. The center top doesn't need to come as far back for the ball and the center back will have fewer opportunities to press into midfield. They can concentrate more on their most basic tasks, attacking and defending respectively. This will allow the outside backs greater freedom to press forward on the flanks as they will find more space and the #3 is more likely to "stay home."

The connection between 4v4 and 8v8 can again be seen by the two diamonds. The difference is who is involved in them. In 8v8 the goalkeepers, center backs and center tops roles have been reduced. What is gained is an actual midfielder, someone that the back players can play through to get to the tops. This player will have to master turning and receiving in order to pass forward, learn how to hold behind the top players as support and go past them when needed. A careful balance between opportunities and responsibilities.

Both forms can be useful in player development. Both are considered small sided games and both offer different learning opportunities. 7v7 tends to be a more open game, dependent on individual moments and player talents. 8v8 tends to be more tactical, more of a coaches game.

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