

## selecting player positions and team formations in youth soccer

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When children start playing soccer at younger ages (U-6 and U-8), the emphasis should be on small-sided soccer. At these ages, teams should use a 3 v 3 or 4 v 4 without goalkeepers. They will eventually move to a 5 v 5 with a goalkeeper when they get to U-7 or U-8. The small-sided game maximizes the number of touches each player gets, and also gives them an opportunity to understand the basic concepts of the game. For a discussion of how to use small-sided soccer in your coaching sessions, visit this [link](#).

At these beginning levels, the players are just beginning to learn how and when to pass the ball, and you may have begun to introduce the concept of [positions](#) (for example, in 5 v 5 you may designate one or two players at a time to be "defenders," or, to be certain that they get back on [defense](#) every time).

At some point, the number of players on the field expands, and the size of the field expands. Now, there is a need to assign positions to the players and to be certain that there are players who defend and players who advance in an effort to score. You may play 7 v 7 or 8 v 8 (including a goalkeeper) and it is often difficult to decide on a proper formation. For example, in 7 v 7 you may play a 3-3 or a 2-2-2 or a 1-2-1-2 or a 1-2-2-1. A 3-3 means 3 defenders and 3 forwards. A 2-2-2 involves two defenders, two midfielders, and two forwards. A 1-2-1-2 generally means a sweeper back defender, two wing defenders in front of the sweeper, a centre midfielder, and two forwards. A 1-2-2-1 generally means a sweeper back defender, two wing defenders in front of the sweeper, two midfielders in front of the defenders, and a centre forward.

There are advantages and disadvantages to all of these formations. For example, a 3-3 may give you a solid defence and a solid offence, but there is the risk of large gaps between the forwards and the defenders. This makes it difficult for the defenders to get the ball to the forwards, and leads to a situation in which three of your players are playing and the other three are watching and waiting. For example, either the forwards are working together in your offensive end to try and score while the defenders are standing and watching at midfield; or, the defenders are fighting an attack while the three forwards stand near midfield, waiting for the defenders to get the ball out to them. With a 2-2 the midfielders have to run a great deal. They will either stay close to each other and cover the entire width of the field, or stay just in front of the defenders, or stay just behind the forwards, often getting involved in the

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offensive third of the field.

Triangles tend to be an important shape in soccer. The players can form triangles in the 2-2-2 by staggering the lines as play occurs, but the formation can still lead to the players remaining in two straight lines. The 1-2-2-1 and 1-2-1-2 create the triangle relationships from the get-go, but can leave gaps in the field or can result in a single player covering the entire width of the field at his or her position. The 2-2-2, 1-2-2-1, and 1-2-1-2 formations will all present challenges for the coach seeking to have his or her players use the full width of the field.

Whatever formation you decide upon, as a coach you will then need to communicate the concepts behind the positions to your players. Some players learn on the field. Others learn by looking at a diagram. Others learn well from reading and re-reading a textual description of their responsibilities.

To help you, we have prepared a basic summary of the general responsibilities of defenders, midfielders, and forwards. These descriptions track the concept of a 2-2-2 formation in a 7 v 7 game. Before you use them, you need to tailor them to your particular coaching approach, philosophy, and formation. For example, if you decide on three midfielders instead of two, the responsibilities of the centre midfielder may differ from the responsibilities for the outside midfielders. You may want your centre midfielder to be aggressive on offence or you may prefer him or her to drop back on defence or to mark the other team's best forward or midfielder on defence. You probably want the wing midfielders, not the centre midfielder, to take throw-ins. You may want your wing defenders to take all throw-ins. You may want your centre midfielder or a wing midfielder closest to the corner to take corner kicks. There are many variations.

Still, we thought it might be helpful to set out the position responsibilities in writing, to allow the players to read and reread their responsibilities, to allow their parents to read something that explains what their child should be doing on the field, and to focus your thinking about what you want your players to be doing.

Feel free to use these pages as you see fit, and to edit them and change them to make them consistent with your approach. You may want to prepare a separate description for the left midfielder and the right midfielder. The same may be true for the right and left forward or right and left defender. Your goalkeeper may take all goal kicks, and so on. These pages are just a start to help you communicate your ideas and the position responsibilities to your players. We hope you find the following materials helpful.

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