

Spirit of the Game Development

Keller Soccer Association 3-11-2024

During a season, teams may face opponents where they could run up the score by 8+ goals. Not only is repeatedly running up the score against the "spirit of the game" of recreational soccer (as stipulated in NMCSL 2023 Bylaw 8.4.3.2), but there are also better ways to develop players in those matches.

For example, a critique of U.S. recreational soccer has been that players don't spend enough time learning how to build the ball out of the back (hence the motivation of the buildout line in U9-10). So, a team winning by 8+ goals simply because they have lopsided match-ups on the attack and can win long balls, or one player keeps scoring from break-aways, likely needs to spend more time developing other aspects of *each players'* game.

Here are some ideas to help coaches come up with more meaningful ways to develop players in games against a notably weaker opponent:

1. Switch the players around. According to the [US Youth Soccer Player Development Model](#), ages 11-13 is when players *could start* specializing in *one or two* positions, and should not fully specialize in a position until age 14. "*Many players who show promise as children find they can no longer compete at the adult level because they became too specialized too soon (pg 72)*". This holds especially true at the recreational level.
2. See if you can get each player on the team to score an equal number of goals throughout the season.
3. If you're at risk of reaching 8 goals, have the players pass to work the ball out of the back up one side, then bring it back to the keeper and repeat on the other side.
4. If you're at risk of reaching 8, challenge the players to see how many times they can string consecutive passes together so every player on the field touches the ball.
 - a. For example, it may take 12 passes to get all 7 players to touch the ball, and that'd be "one." Then, it may take 15 passes to get all 7 players to touch the ball, and that'd be "two." Etc.
5. A goal must be scored off of a cross after one of the above happens. If the cross is missed, work the ball to the back and up the other side of the field.
6. If you're at risk of reaching 8, have the team play keep away. Emphasize that players off the ball must give passing options to the players with the ball. Creating passing options like this can be called "empathetic playing" (e.g. if you had the ball, where would you want your teammates to be for a pass?)
 - a. Interestingly, focusing on "easy-pass keep-away" can also be an effective strategy if a team is far behind or short players. Too often, when teams are down, they will make low-probability passes, further wearing out their own team members and making it more likely the other team could score again.
7. If you're at risk of reaching 8, play 4-touches and emphasize using the first touch to optimally position (or kill) the ball.
8. Consider just playing "keep away"
9. If any of the above are too easy, have the players do any of the above faster, use only 3-touches or less, only pass with their non-dominant foot, have two of the passes be chips, etc....

- a. A significant difference between higher-level players and recreational players is the ability to consistently do the basics faster than their opponents.