U11/12 - Transitioning from 7v7 to 9v9

Lots of things remain the same between 7v7 and 9v9 soccer. As players start soccer, coaches' focus should still be on individual skills (though now with the added constraints of time, space, and pressure) and fostering a sense of fun and genuine love for the game in every player. After all, U11 players are still children (and they will be for a while!), and at 10 years old they are still smack-dab in the middle the "golden age of learning."

The field stays relatively small, to the point that individual players can dominate (though to a lesser extent). That means you should continue to expect end-to-end action and lots of goals. At this age, coaches should continue to emphasize the "how" of technique, but also guide players towards finding answers to the questions of "when, where and with/against whom."

Lastly, players at this age should be building an understanding of basic attacking combinations and defensive cooperation, with everyone on the field involved on both sides of the ball. They should also continue to play in a variety of positions, including goalkeeper

— specializing at this age can have devastating long-term effects in tactical and technical development.

There are also some significant differences to keep in mind as your player makes the step up to 9v9 soccer. Some are developmental, while others are more tactical.

Developmentally, the most important thing to consider is that 10-year-olds are beginning to gain agency and the ability to make their own decisions on *and* off the field. With greater commitment comes greater responsibility, and players should feel free to make that choice for themselves. That means encouraging (not forcing) them to consider how major of a part they want soccer to play in their lives.

Tactically, more space on a 9v9 field introduces some new ideas for players to consider. One is keeping possession as a means of creating chances. Another is the notion of creating overloads, often by overlapping the ball to provide extra width. That last word is a particularly important introduction in 9v9 soccer — generally, 7v7 fields are too narrow to really introduce width as a powerful concept for dragging defenses out of position.

Individually, players should be learning their role in the team, in specific positions and more generally in the context of the team. On the attacking side, that means knowing how to create triangles and diamonds to support the attack and create passing options, width, and depth. Defensively, it means understanding the role of the 1st defender (delay the attacker by pressuring the ball), 2nd defender (provide cover behind the ball) and 3rd defenders (provide balance

and depth). This should include some discussion of interchanging roles and fluidity all over the field. I always tell my players to do the job that needs to be done, even if it isn't "yours" to do.

There is of course no right answer to the single "best" formation for playing 9v9 soccer. There are too many variables: the strengths of your players, the opposing team's setup, and the 7v7 formation your team has played in the past. What's most important is that players are comfortable on the field and begin thinking about how to use the new, bigger (but more crowded) field to their advantage.

As players begin to learn more about their roles and responsibilities in 9v9 soccer, there are some classic 9v9 formations to help get them started. Here are three of our favorites:

The 4-3-1

Strengths:

- Back four builds a strong understanding of the partnership between center-backs.
- Encourages defenders to join the attack, since they have numbers behind them to cover.
- Maintain possession by keeping a triangle in the middle of the field — or a diamond if you include the striker!
- Teaches possession soccer, with lots of players in the defensive and middle thirds to keep the ball.

Weaknesses:

- Can be difficult to play without fast and fit right/left backs. If they're not overlapping and providing width to the attack, the field is very narrow.
- Playing with only one striker can lead to them being isolated.
- Sacrifice attacking numbers *if* your defenders don't join the attack, or your midfielders aren't quick to transition forward.
- Requires two strong center-backs with and without the ball.

The 3-2-3

This classic setup can help prepare players for future formations that feature a back three.

Strengths:

- Triangles all over the field makes it very possession-oriented
- Great balance and symmetry
- Teaches wingers how to stay wide and help defend
- Solid defensive base, with midfielders there to cover for defenders who join the attack

Weaknesses:

- Easy to lose the midfield “battle” against teams with more midfielders, especially if the two midfielders aren’t positionally disciplined
- Can leave huge spaces for the other team to attack in wide areas
- Can create too much “specialization” in roles, where attackers attack and defenders defend.

The 2-4-2

This formation translates directly into the famous 4-4-2 formation — later, you just add outside defenders and you're good to go.

Strengths:

- Builds partnerships between cornerbacks, center midfielders and strikers
- Good for possession, as it creates an overload in the middle of the field
- Tons of freedom for midfield players

Weaknesses:

- Teams often struggle to attack through wide areas
- Can be difficult for midfielders to understand their role
- Leaves teams exposed at the back, with only one player around to cover for mistakes.
- Defenders must be very, very strong and disciplined.