U13/14 Transitioning from 9v9 to 11v11

11v11 is the most dramatic, and the most exciting: at long last, kids are playing the game they love the way it was meant to be played, the way they see their heroes playing it on TV.

This is a big jump — the goals are bigger. The field is bigger. The team is bigger. That physical shift transforms the game, away from the slapstick action typical of smaller-sided youth games and toward a more balanced, patient pattern of play.

Keeping possession and building out of the back become crucial in giving the team time to spread out and maximize the newfound space. The game builds rhythm and momentum to replace all-out action and barely controlled chaos. Players learn to run less and let the ball do the work.

Those are some major changes, and they deserve careful consideration. Here are some important adjustments to keep in mind as your player or team begins to transition into 11v11 games.

Me Becomes We

Whether playing 4v4 or 9v9, individualism tends to run the show in smaller-sided formats. Gifted players can easily dominate games and an average team can excel if they have one player with the skills or physical attributes to take charge and make things happen.

That isn't the case in 11v11 games. Pure speed and size don't take you as far, and selfish players tend to either get found out, or find out themselves that one player simply can't do it all against a good team. As the number of players on the field increases, each player must learn how to help the team, rather than fixate on the self.

That doesn't just mean passing the ball more. It means having a holistic view of the team's objective and keeping a constant focus on your role in accomplishing it. With more specialized, less fluid roles, players become more responsible for understanding their part in the bigger picture unfolding on the field.

Staying Involved (in the Right Ways)

Playing 11v11 also emphasizes the importance of positioning and team shape. That's true defensively, where poor positioning leaves space for the opposition to attack (and the player with a lot of work to do), but it's also true offensively, with players responsible for maximizing and exploiting all this newfound space. The winger who chases the ball around the field isn't helping the team, for example — they're doing someone else's job, and leaving their team without an outlet.

That's a hard line to walk for players who want to stay involved in the game. As the clock races toward the final whistle, it can be frustrating to feel like the game is passing you by. That happens less in small-sided games, which are designed to empower players by giving them touches on the ball and constant repetition.

The best way to combat that feeling is by getting the ball and making something happen. Every touch keeps you invested and involved in the game. With four extra bodies on the field, though, touches on the ball are at a premium, and players need to be proactive and assertive in finding the ball. Regular, even constant involvement should be the goal for every player. Whether you're a center-forward or a goalkeeper, the onus is on you to find the ball — but at the right times and in the right places.

But in full-sided games, each player finds themselves less involved: fewer touches on the ball, fewer 1v1 situations, fewer decisions to make. That frustration can push players to do one of two things: lose discipline and revert back to a very selfish game or lose focus and phase out of the game entirely. Both are unproductive (but understandable) reactions for young players who feel left out of the action.

Physicality and Positioning in 11v11

With a larger field in 11v11, players will have to adjust. Certain positions will be running much more than when playing 9v9. A 20-yard breakaway becomes a 50-yard run in 11v11. Players who dominated a smaller field because of their speed will be forced to adapt and learn the benefits of positioning.

Bigger fields mean that tactical decisions become much more important, such as when to drop, when to make runs behind the defense, and when to sit back in the midfield.

In 11v11, kids are forced to analyze decisions much more. When moving the ball up the field, they often tend to go to one side or up the middle, constantly leaving out one winger and making their attacks more predictable.

Whether 9v9 or 11v11, The Game Doesn't Change

The most important thing to remember during this transition is that it's all still soccer, and soccer is a simple game. It's all about decisions: when to go and when to stay, when to pass and when to shoot, when to tackle and when to hold your ground. If players can keep their cool and consistently make the right decisions, they will thrive playing 11v11.

Parents and coaches can help by keeping players focused on the fundamentals. Those fundamentals always stay the same, no matter what the format: make the field big, move the ball, and find the open player. Don't over-complicate things with in-depth explanations of formations and inverted wingers and trick set pieces. Help players understand the shape and the flow of the game, and then let them learn and explore for themselves.