

Player Development Initiatives

Small Sided Standards & Birth Year Registration

Frequently Asked Questions

General

Please review the Player Development Initiatives and see below for more information.

Why are these changes being made?

The current landscape is inconsistent and not as successful as it could be when it comes to player development. Through these initiatives, U.S. Soccer aims to develop players with more game understanding, individual skill, intelligence, creativity and confidence. These changes also provide a consistent approach across the country while challenging the status quo of our soccer landscape by focusing on the development of the individual versus the success of a team. Parents can also have a better understanding of exactly what they should expect from a soccer program for their children.

Are these changes aligned with the U.S. Soccer Development Academy?

Yes. These initiatives align the entire youth player development environment with the proven approach and success of the Development Academy program. Clubs, coaches and parents who are in programs external to the Development Academy are encouraged to incorporate these philosophies of player development. These initiatives fully support the existing technical framework of the Development Academy, which serves as the model for development across the country.

How do these changes affect the current soccer landscape?

Member organizations were allotted two full years from the announcement in August 2015 to plan on how to best implement the initiatives. As of August 2017, U.S. Soccer member organizations are required to adopt the small sided game standards and birth year registration policy. It is recommended that additional best practices are considered based on the U.S. Soccer Player Development Philosophy. Please contact your local soccer leaders for more information on how they plan on implementing these changes.

Who is required to follow these initiatives?

As of August 2017, all of U.S. Soccer's member organizations are required to follow the PDIs. This includes, but is not limited to, all youth members and their respective competitions: State Associations, US Youth Soccer, US Club Soccer, AYSO, SAY, etc.

Small Sided Standards

Are the goal and field sizes the exact sizes required?

The goal sizes listed are the maximum sizes for each age group. Field sizes are listed with required ranges for length and width for each age group. U.S. Soccer understands that facility limitations may delay the pace at which membership is able to meet the goal and field size standards. Members should be working toward full compliance as soon as possible.

Is the goalkeeper included in the number of players for 4v4, 7v7 and 9v9?

The 4v4 game model does not include goalkeepers. The 7v7 model is 6 field players and 1 goalkeeper per team, and the 9v9 model is 8 field players and 1 goalkeeper per team.

What is the purpose of using quarters at for 4v4 play instead of halves? The four quarters provide increased opportunities for a coach to manage substitutions and to guide players in a more controlled environment during the breaks in play. This should also reduce over-coaching during the periods of play. The transition from 4 quarters to 2 halves also allows players to gradually adapt to the full game environment, while considering the physical and cognitive development stages of the player.

When does offside come into effect?

Playing with offside begins at the U-9 age group, along with the 7v7 game model.

Are there mandates or standards at age groups U-14 and older?

Not yet. U.S. Soccer is examining the Zone 2 environment and many of these potential changes would reflect the standards already established by the Development Academy. Additional Zone 1 player development initiatives are also being considered. For specific details regarding how U14-U19 is going to be managed with the birth year registration initiative, please contact your local member organization.

4v4 Small Sided Standards:

Can a player dribble in from a corner kick or goal kick in 4v4 play?

No. Corner kicks, goal kicks, and free kicks must be kicked or passed in. Dribble-ins are only acceptable as restarts when the ball has gone out over the sidelines.

7v7 Small Sided Standards:

Are the build out lines mandatory for 7v7 play?

Yes. The build out lines are required for 7v7 play at the U-9 and U-10 age groups. The build out line is used to promote playing the ball out of the back in an unpressured setting.

Where should the build out line be located on the field?

The build out line should be located halfway between the midfield line and the penalty area line on both sides of the field.

Can small discs be used to denote the build out line?

Yes. In the event that build out lines are not painted on the field, small discs or flat markers may be used. U.S. Soccer advises that no more than three discs or flat markers be used to denote the build out line. Above all, player safety should never be comprised as a result of the creation of the build out lines.

Can the defending team cross the build out line as soon as the goal kick has been taken?

No. The defending team may only cross the built-out line once the ball has LEFT the penalty area after the taking of a goal kick.

If a goalkeeper has the ball in his or her hands, how is the “six second rule” applied given the presence of the build out line?

A goalkeeper may choose to play the ball from his or her hands before the opponent has retreated behind the build out line. In this case, the six second rule is not applied, as the goalkeeper has willingly decided to quickly restart play. If a goalkeeper has the ball in his or her hands, and is clearly waiting for the defending team to retreat behind the build out line, the six second period should be started only once the defending team has retreated behind the build out line. This allows for the attacking team to have more time and space to play out of the back in a skillful and tactical way.

Are there required formations for 7v7 play?

These formations are recommended, but not mandated. For the 7v7 game model, the recommended formations are 1-2-3-1 or 1-3-2-1.

What happens if a defender crosses the build out line prematurely?

The goal kick is taken again once defenders have retreated behind the build out line.

9v9 Small Sided Standards:

Are build out lines required for 9v9 play?

No. While U.S. Soccer encourages playing out of the back in 9v9 play, the build out line is not required at this level.

Are punting and drop kicks allowed in 9v9 play?

Yes. Goalkeepers may punt or drop kick the ball in 9v9 play. The introduction of punting and drop kicks at this age is necessary, as both are commonplace in traditional 11v11 play. With that said, U.S. Soccer encourages goalkeepers to actively try to pass with their feet or roll the ball into play whenever possible.

Are there required formations for 9v9 play?

These formations are recommended, but not mandated. For the 9v9 game model, the recommended formations are 1-3-2-3 or 1-3-3-2.

Heading:

Until what age is heading not allowed?

Heading is not allowed through and including U-11 games.

What happens if a player accidentally heads the ball at U11 or younger? Should play be stopped or play allowed to continue?

Play should be stopped. Since there are no referees in 4v4, the requirement to stop play when a player heads the ball is left to the coaches. For 7v7 and 9v9 play, play should be stopped by the referee and an indirect free-kick awarded.

What happens if an eleven year old is playing up in U12 and he or she deliberately heads the ball?

It is the responsibility of the eleven year old player's coach and parent/legal guardian to ensure that he or she is educated and informed not to deliberately head the ball when playing in a U12 game. That said, if he or she does deliberately head the ball during a U12 game, play will continue so the normal flow of the game is not disrupted.

Can my U12 team participate in heading activities in practice with a regulation size soccer ball?

Yes, however, U.S. Soccer mandates that heading activity with a regulation size soccer ball be limited to 30 minutes per week with a maximum of 15-20 headers per player, per week. The use of lightweight balls (foam, balloon, etc.) at this age group is encouraged when teaching heading technique.

Birth Year Registration:

Why is birth year registration going into effect for all levels of play and all age groups?

Having players train and play according to their age and developmental stage supports the objectives of the small sided standards by focusing on the physiological and developmental needs of the player. This change is meant to better safeguard the development of youth players at all ages and levels.

Why can't there be different standards for recreational and competitive teams?

There is no universal definition of what separates recreational from competitive soccer. In addition to supporting the overall objectives of player development, U.S. Soccer believes that having separate registration systems based on undefined levels of play would create unnecessary confusion, and this would not provide a consistent approach across the soccer landscape. Players should also be provided the opportunity to develop to best of their abilities regardless of the level of play in which they are participating.

Is my son or daughter still going to be able to play with his or her friends and classmates?

The answer to this depends on a variety of factors, and one major consideration is how your club is making teams. Playing on a team with all of your friends isn't always a reality in the current environment. This is similar to not having all of your friends in the same class or classes at school. Another factor is that the age cutoff used for school registration varies across the country. This means that there are already a variety of unique player age and grade combinations. Participation in scholastic sports can also impact the composition of some teams, so clubs should plan accordingly for players leaving club soccer for school sports. The placement of individual players on specific teams will remain a function of the local club and league to help find the players the best possible environment for their development.

Don't you realize that you're breaking up my existing team?

U.S. Soccer recognizes that making these changes can impact existing teams in the short term. However, players joining and leaving teams is something that already happens regularly throughout country. There are a variety of factors that require teams to evolve and adapt including player maturity rates, moving away, focusing on new interests or their soccer abilities differentiating from their peers. Again, both small sided standards and birth year registration support the development of the individual player as a priority over team success.

How can teams continue to be registered together?

Players still have the ability to “play up” with older teammates. In addition to being on a team with their peers, “playing up” can also allow players to compete in a more challenging environment, which can aid in their future development.

Will a player miss any time playing soccer due to the change to birth year registration?

No. Players will have the ability to play with their birth year team, or “play up” with teams in older birth years.

What is “playing up” and are players able to “play down”?

Players have the ability to “play up” with teammates at older age groups, based on birth year. Players are not permitted to “play down” with teammates at younger age groups, based on birth year.

What is “relative age effect”?

Relative age effect (RAE) refers to the selection bias towards players born earlier in the calendar year. Registering players according to birth year will help everyone understand and better identify the potential for bias. Birth year registration is not intended or expected to eliminate relative age effect.

How does this change fix “relative age effect”?

The player development initiatives do not claim to fix this issue. However, having players grouped by birth year does make it easier to understand for parents and coaches.

How do I determine the birth year used for a competition?

Birth year registration should be based on the year in which the season ends. For example, if a season begins in the fall of 2017 and ends in the summer of 2018 (ex: 2017-18 season), the players would be registered based on their age in the year 2018. Competitions that take place in a single year (ex: fall of 2018 only) should use that year to determine birth year. To simplify determining the age group, just subtract the birth year from the year the season ends.

Year Season Ends – Birth Year = Age Group:

- 2017-18 – **2003** = **U15**
- 2022-23 – **2016** = **U7**
- 2018 – **2012** = **U6**

Please refer to the Birth Year and Season Matrix for more detailed information.

What are some practical approaches to help manage the team environment?

Embrace the diminished role of the team concept at younger ages and have players participate as a pool of players. One method is to try using mixed age groups for teams based on the small sided standards. An example of this would be a U11/12 team instead of separate U11 and U12 teams. For younger ages, you could create teams based on the first and last six months of the year so that players are organized Jan. to June and July to Dec. Offering multiple teams per birth year can help diminish the effects of RAE and assist with managing scholastic sport participation.

Closing

What can I do to support the initiatives?

Supporting, engaging and the educating of parents is key. Unless we do this together, we won't be successful. U.S. Soccer acknowledges that these changes are significant and appreciates the continued efforts of all youth soccer stakeholders across the country. Change of this magnitude takes time and can be uncomfortable. Because of this, U.S. Soccer asks that the entire soccer community please have patience as these changes are implemented, and trust that these and future initiatives will lead to long-term success in the area of player development.

Who can I talk to if I have more questions?

It's important to communicate with your local soccer leaders to avoid misinformation about these initiatives and their objectives. This includes speaking with your coach, club or league administrators, State Association or other U.S. Soccer youth member. If you have additional questions, please contact the portion of membership that is overseeing your competition.