

Small-Sided Games Revealed As Best Soccer Teacher... And More Fun!

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Parents fight hard for small classrooms. They know that fewer students means a better learning environment.

Parents also know their children can't tackle calculus unless they've taken years of "real math": addition, subtraction, fractions.

Yet some of those same parents resist small-sided soccer. "It's not 'real soccer,'" they say of 3-v-3, 5-v-5 or 7-v-7 games, with small goals.

Of course it is. The best players all over the planet -- as well as many who play simply for fun -- grew up playing small-sided. They understand that full-sided (11-v-11) soccer is really just a series of small contests -- small-sided soccer on a bigger field.

In soccer, the game is the best teacher. And the best learning environment -- on the field, as in the classroom -- involves low numbers. Just as adding and subtracting is "real math," small-sided is definitely "real soccer." And "real soccer" is always fun.

"You don't always have to evaluate your child's play," Ouellette advises. "Just go enjoy their joy. If you watch them play small-sided, you will see their joy."

AYSO's National Coaching program advocates small-sided soccer at ages U-12 and below (but it's also fun for players of all ages). It is appropriate for many reasons, yet AYSO National Coach John Ouellette uses a simple story to illustrate his passion for it.

He describes a woman he has known for years. In high school, she was the leading scorer in the state. She starred in college, and was inducted into her school's Hall of Fame.

Her daughter, now 11, is "extremely average," Ouellette says. "She will never reach her mother's level of accomplishments. But because she's playing small-sided soccer, in terms of touch and reading the game she is way ahead of where her mom was at 11." What gives Ouellette and the girl's mother the greatest pleasure, though, is that she loves to play.

Ouellette knows that small-sided soccer is not always an easy sell.

Some people say there are not enough fields. Of course, small-sided fields can be laid out anywhere, including unused or underutilized areas of parks, in the front lawns of homes and behind businesses. And a full-size field can usually accommodate two side-by-side small-sided fields.

Others contend there are not enough coaches to handle the increased numbers of teams. Interestingly, many AYSO Regions have discovered it's easier to recruit U-6 and U-8 coaches when rosters are smaller. The reason, Lower levels of stress and intimidation.

Ultimately though, small-sided soccer is not about fields or coaches. "It's about the kids and the game," says Ouellette. "It's about enriching children, while developing a love for the sport."

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With help from Ouellette, the AYSO National Coaching Commission has promoted small-sided soccer for more than 20 years. All top coaches, in AYSO and around the world, agree on its benefits. Those benefits begin with the understanding that youngsters are children, not mini-adults; they have a child's cognitive, spatial, physical and social limitations.

Playing small-sided soccer on small fields improves and speeds a player's development, both tactically and technically. Having more touches on the ball offers each youngster more opportunity to impact and control a fast-flowing, fluid game. It also encourages creativity, risk-taking and decision-making. Players run more, improving their fitness.

Most importantly, fewer players share one ball, making small-sided soccer more fun.

AYSO Hall of Famer Julie Foudy won two FIFA Women's World Cups while captaining the U.S. Women's National Team from 1991 through 2004. However, she says, "When I was younger, I got lost on a big field. Looking back, I'm amazed to think of the size of the fields I played on. I was like every other kid. None of us had the size or ability to cover all that ground."

On a large field, Foudy says, "you can get away with sheer athleticism. But if you're pressured - which happens when you play small-sided in tight spaces - you have to learn to deal."

As a professional she played more small-sided games than full. In fact, the smaller contests were often more competitive than the big ones. "Our 3-on-3 and 4-on-4 tournaments were brutal, but they made us better players and teammates," says Foudy, now a television analyst for ABC and ESPN. "We had to rely on each other. We couldn't point fingers, and we couldn't slack off." She believes that playing small-sided soccer helped her Women's National Team earn a competitive edge.

John Harkes agrees. The first American to play in the English Premier League and U.S. Men's National Team "Captain for Life" played "constantly, every day" as a youngster in New Jersey. He and his friends used T-shirts as goals; the winners-stay-on rule made each game hyper-competitive, but only because it was the kids themselves that wanted it that way.

Harkes attributes his tight play, tricky moves and quick thinking to small-sided soccer. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I was taking more risks, becoming more imaginative," the ESPN commentator says. "When I moved to larger fields, I was ready to pick up the nuances."

Just a few hours earlier, his son's U-14 team had played a spirited series of small-sided games. "Everyone had fun," says Harkes, who coaches the squad. "They competed hard and they laughed hard, just like I did as a kid."

Harkes' daughter is eight. "I wouldn't have her play anything other than small-sided," he says. "When you think of the size of the kids, their strength and stamina, it's a no-brainer."

Foudy's daughter Isabel Ann was born on New Year's Day 2007. She's still too young for soccer, but when she does Foudy will advocate small-sided games.

"She'll play full-field when she's ready," Foudy says. "When she gets older, she'll have the foundation to move into full field. It will be appropriate for her then, just like small-sided is appropriate when she's young."

And just like calculus is appropriate after a youngster has already learned how to add, subtract and do fractions. Hopefully, in as small a classroom as possible.