

Part 6

A Parent's Guide to U14

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Part 6: A Parent’s Guide to U14

Introduction

Young players are frequently introduced to skills and concepts that are often too advanced for their skill level and ability which results in an overload of information too early in their development as soccer players. As a result, players fail to develop the foundational skills that are required for future success. While players may be physically capable of executing more advanced, or “impressive” skills at a young age, they rarely develop the understanding and decision making that will allow them to use those skills effectively in later years. Additionally, by failing to focus on key developmentally appropriate skills at the time where a child is most receptive to learning those skills, we are creating holes in the child’s soccer foundation that are likely to create significant challenges down the road when the player is playing at a faster, more intense, and more complex level. Just like a house may look fine on a sunny day, cracks in the foundation will become extremely apparent when the house is exposed to a more intense environment.

By focusing on skills and concepts at the time when a child is naturally best prepared to learn them, we can maximize the efficiency of the learning process, ensure there are no gaps in the child’s soccer development, and ensure that each player experiences soccer as a fun and positive activity. Although it is fun to watch players demonstrate “advanced” skills, it’s essential that we all remember that successful player development is a long-term process, and players will learn the more advanced skills in due time. It is important that as parents you are well informed as to what your child should be learning and at what stage of their development they should be introduced to the various concepts and skills.

Priorities During Development

At each age, children are particularly well equipped to learn certain skills. By teaching players these skills during the optimum window for their development, players are able to learn them in an efficient and effective manner. Additionally, teaching players the skills and concepts that they are best suited to learn allows them to naturally ingrain the cognitive, movement, and behavioral patterns into their play. The table below displays and what the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th priorities are for the U14 age level. While the first priority is likely to be the focus of much attention, all of the elements will come into play in most practices.

1 st Priority	Technique
2 nd Priority	Psychology
3 rd Priority	Tactics
4 th Priority	Fitness

What Your Child Should Be Introduced To & When

Below is a table of the skills and concepts that should be a main focal point in your child’s training session at the U14 age. The tables focus upon Technical Skills, Tactical Skills, Physical Fitness, Ability & Health Skills, and Psychological Skill/Mental Strength Development.

Technical skills relate to a player’s technique when they are contacting (or about to contact) a ball. The focus is on how a player controls (and propels) the ball with different parts of his or her body. Tactical skills are the decision making skills. They focus on cognitive knowledge and understanding of the game, and most importantly making decisions. Players must take in a lot of

knowledge and make quick decisions to be effective soccer players. At the youngest ages, simply being aware of the lines on the field is a complex tactical task. As players age, tactical skills will become much more advanced, including anticipating runs by fellow teammates, identifying space in which to run, and decisions about whether to dribble, pass, or shoot.

Fitness is all about efficiency of movement. It does not merely include endurance and strengthening, but also the critical skills of balance, agility, quickness, and explosive power. Additionally, fitness includes injury prevention strategies, healthy responses to injury, hydration, and nutrition. Finally, psychological/mental strength skills focus on a player’s work ethic, source of motivation, sense of team, handling frustration, understanding of individual and group problem solving, and many other skills that play into a player’s character development. Players who are psychologically mentally strong are

able to play against even the grittiest opponents without allowing the opponent’s play to get into their heads. Mentally strong players are also able to remain calm in difficult situations, such as penalty kicks in the final moments of a match. At each age group, players will be primed to learn different skills. During the U14 age group, players are at the optimal stage of development to learn the following skills:

Tactical Skills & Concepts List	Technical Skills List
Principles of Attack	Receiving
Penetration	Receiving a Ball Off the Bounce - Cushion
Support	Thigh
Width	Chest
Depth	Head
Principles of Defense	Receiving a Ball Out of the Air - Cushion
Pressure	Head
Support (Cover)	Instep
Balance	Receiving – First Touch
Compactness	Receiving – With Either Foot
Attacking Runs	Shooting
Penetrating Runs	Shooting on the Ground
Unbalancing Runs	Bent with the Inside of the Foot
Clearing Runs	Bent with the Outside of the Foot
Defending Runs	Outside of Foot
Sliding Over/Pinching In Runs	Half Volley Shooting
Stepping Up Runs	Inside of Foot
Dropping Off Runs	Forward Instep Drive
Attacking Tactics	Volley Shooting
Off the Ball Runs	Forward Instep Drive
Advanced Attacking	Inside of Foot

Attacking Space	Side Volley
How to Play in the Attacking Half	Scissors Forward
Playing In Space	Scissors Side
General Tactics Concepts	Scissors Overhead (Bicycle)
Verbal & Visual Communication	Dribbling
Individual & Group Tactics	Feints
Post-Match Analysis	Heading
Responding to Restarts	Standing or on the Run
Playing On/Around, & Away from the Ball with Purpose	Forward to Pass / Redirect a Pass
	Flick Header aka Flick Backwards
	Airborne from a Stationary Jump or on the Run
	Diving
	Twisting to Flick
	Other
	Dummy the Ball
	Shoulder Charge
	Tackling
	Slide Tackle – Far Leg
	Slide Tackle – Near Leg
	Passing
	Passing – On the Ground
	Chip Pass
	Driving Crosses to the Far Post & PK Mark
	Driving Crosses to the Far Post & Top of PK Area
	Inside of Foot Bent Pass
Outside of Foot Bent Pass	
Psychological/Mental Strength Skill List	Fitness, Ability & Health Skill List
Emotional Management (Self-Discipline)	Health Skills
Fair Play	Proper Warm Up
How to Play	Proper Cool Down
Parental Involvement	Nutrition
Sportsmanship	Hydration
Emotional Regulation	Injury Prevention – Sr. Program

Handling Distress	Fitness & Ability Skills
Assertiveness	Acceleration
Focus for Full Match	Agility at Speed (Sharp Turns)
Mental Focusing Techniques	Anaerobic Exercise
Post-Match Analysis	Cardio Respiratory Training
Self & Team Discipline	Cardio Vascular Training
Tension Control	Flexibility
	Lateral Movement
	Rest for Recovery
	Speed

Player Characteristics at This Stage

At the U13/U14 stage players are now grasping more complex strategic concepts and understand how to apply both individual and group tactics to execute team strategy. The pace of cognitive development quickens at this age because of the acceleration of physical and mental maturity. This development, along with the move to the 11v11 field, mean that players are now able to handle far more complex tactical decisions. With this physical development there is a continued improvement of their coordination on and off ball. Players at this phase should have a basic level of mastery of nearly all technical skills. From the U14 age group onward, technical development is primarily focused on refinement of the skills already learned with just a few of the most advanced technical skills being introduced – primarily those requiring advanced reading of aerial balls. It is around this age that players start to notice the significant differences in physical maturation rates between individuals. As their bodies are going through physical changes that affect personal appearance and self-esteem, they tend to be quite self-critical and may need regular positive reinforcement. As a result, the psychological components of development become increasingly important and healthy development of players in this regard provides them with a critical basis for the mental strength required to compete successfully in the coming years.

What Will Players Learn During U14?

As your son or daughter moves higher up the age group brackets the demands of training will increase. Physically, players at this age group need to work on rhythmic movement, dynamic range of motion exercises and a measured amount of static stretching during the warm-up and cool-down. There is a need for some exercise without the ball to improve their fitness- however the majority of fitness should be done using a ball. At U13/U14 players will be challenged to develop individual skills under the pressure of time, space and an opponent. Players will learn that they are not to let the ball bounce, instead practice bring the ball from the air to encourage fluidity in team play. By winning the ball in the air, players will be able to gain control sooner than if they had waited for the ball to hit the ground, thereby allowing them to control the pace and play of the game. You should start to notice that your son or daughters team can maintain possession of the ball and that they can use it to perhaps create space or time. Regular training should focus on shooting on the run or turn, from various angles, from crosses and on volleys and half volleys. Set plays for this age group must be simple and direct with the

emphasis being on good technique and proper timing of each player’s role in the set play. In terms of defending players should now be taught how to apply pressure to an opponent and that it is not always vital that they win the ball but they can shepherd and opponent into an area of less risk. Players must also learn about the timing of runs, knowing when to start and stop and their use of speed- when to accelerate and when to decelerate in order to attack or track or defend.

Why Now?

At this age, players are entering the second phase of development as a soccer player. Belonging on a team is a significant psychologically as peer relationships and inclusion are highly important to players at this age. Players have the ability to understand strategy and tactics both at the individual and a team level required to execute such strategy. Physically players are no longer as resilient as they were at younger phases of development and as such it is important that range of motion, strengthening and injury prevention protocols. Agility training and core strength are essential as players continue to experience upward growth at this period. Creativity is still an essential component of player development and players benefit considerably from being in an environment where they are encouraging to make decisions and try out new skills on the field.

How Do the Skills and Concepts Focused on at the U14 Age Group Fit into Long Term Development?

What they will learn and how they will learn it is going to play a really important role in their long term development. U13/U14 is a pivotal age group to really find themselves as players. Things such as what position they feel they play best and how to develop the skills for that chosen position. What role within the team they may have and they will start to take ownership on their performance? What they done well and why? How they could have done better and what can they do in time for the next game to correct those mistakes.

There will be a lot more focus on the technique of the skill and how to execute it. Development is key at this age and some players will start to excel quickly and others not so quickly, which is all part of the learning process. Which again plays a huge part in the long term development aspect.

What Types of Activities Should Be Done at This Stage?

At this age group you will witness a variety of activities. For example, because of growth spurts typically occurring at this time in their biological growth, you will see players regularly completing agility and core body balance training. You will continue to see small-sided games in training sessions and this will have a positive impact on the technical speed of players as the play will be quick and allow a lot of touches on the ball whilst moving. Players will also be introduced to the use of games-based training, having them put under pressure in drill that puts a player in an overloaded situation for example 2v1, 1v2, 2v2, 3v2, 2v3 and 4v2, meaning defenders or attackers will have to work harder to win or maintain possession of the ball. Where body awareness type activities now tend to just be part of a warm up or cool down, the use of target games is still a strong facet of session structure.

What are the Rules of the Game?

Adult standards and formal rules become the focal point during this period, using a full size adult field with full size goals. Players should now be familiar with all rules of soccer. Team sizes at this stage correspond to that of normal regulation rules which is 11v11.

What is the Parent’s Role in Player Development at This Age?

This is a pivotal age group for your child’s development. This is where we see the highest drop-out rate for the sport. One of the main reasons for this is because the player stops enjoying the sport. Continue to support your child in a none-pressure environment. Show interest by asking what they think went well and what they would like to work on in the next game. Encourage them to watch the game at home, be mindful of the difference between encouragement and pressure. This is a good age to discuss many of the life skills soccer can help develop; respect, responsibility, teamwork, sportsmanship. These discussions can start before the U14 age group but you will recognize your child needing these skills more often as the game has become more competitive and presenting more intense challenges. So if you think of your overall role as a parent who has to have a balance of being a parent and possibly a soccer buddy. Show support and interest but not to the point where your child may feel like you’re a judging their performance.

What’s Next?

For 7th graders, the next year will look very similar as players remain in the U14 age group for two years. As they move into the role of the more senior players on the team, they will likely be looked to by the incoming 7th graders as role models as the younger players begin to adjust to playing on the larger 11v11 field. Many 7th graders who struggle initially to adjust to the larger field and increased dynamics of a mixed age group team, will begin to see the value as they take on the leadership role as 8th graders.

For 8th graders, what’s next is a continuation of soccer through one of many pathways. As players move to high school, they will have the option to try out for one of the three high school teams for their gender (Freshman, JV, and Varsity) if they attend AHS. Most private schools also have between one and three school based teams that players try out for. Tryouts are typically the weeks preceding the start of the school year and players are strongly encouraged to begin conditioning prior to attending those tryouts. The information on dates for high school tryouts will come to players through their respective high schools. School based soccer programs play only during the fall season. Players who are interested in continuing to play at a high level in the spring, are encouraged to try out for the ASC Premier team (for girls) or the ASC BAYS Select Team (for boys). The girls’ tryouts take place in May or June for the following spring, while the boys’ take place in March or April. Information on these will be available on the ASC website and via email blasts to players.

For players who prefer not to try out, or do not make a fall high school or spring select team, ASC offers a number of recreational teams at the high school level. Teams for both boys and girls are offered in the fall, playing 7v7 on a smaller field, and in the spring, playing full field 11v11. Information on registering for these teams is typically sent out about a month prior to the season.

Conclusion

As mentioned, the dropout rate at the U14 age groups is the highest in the sport. There are

numerous factors which contribute to this but you, the parent, can be instrumental in enabling your child to continue enjoyment in participation in the aforementioned ways. As development is progressing more rapidly than in prior years a wider concept of the game in its entirety is understood. Your children will not only develop better knowledge of the game they will also mature with it, taking on more responsibilities and handling a much larger amount of pressure will not only make them grow as a player but also as a person. The coming years will be a critical time for physical and psychological development as players begin to develop the muscle mass and physical structure of an adult. Psychologically players will be confronted with decisions regarding their commitment and desire to play at advanced levels. Many players will choose to pressure soccer at a competitive level where others will choose to participate recreationally.