

## U9/U10 Soccer:

### STAR: Specific, Terrific, Active, and (soccer) Real

by Marsha Lycan

Coaching the younger age groups in Soccer certainly poses many unique challenges. Coaches are faced with the daunting task of facing a group of youngsters who have been pent up in class all day and forced to pay attention, now cut loose to freedom and often times wanting to do nothing more than act silly and run around like crazy people. Trying to reign in this energy and impose an extremely structured and boring practice with lots of instruction and “drilling” is a plan doomed for failure. This is certainly not to say that the inmates should be running the asylum! It’s usually effective to gather the children together at the beginning of every practice and remind them that you are all there to learn and grown as soccer players and even though you recognize they have been sitting in class all day, it is important to pay attention and do their very best to listen, and work hard. I always make a deal with them that if they hold up their end of the bargain, we will have a very fun practice and be rewarded with one of many silly, fun games I like to use at the end of practice as a reward for their efforts. If the efforts and attentiveness are less than desirable, then we don’t get to have our fun game at the end. It’s a very effective positive reinforcement system that works like a charm most of the time.

I devised a simple acronym to keep in mind when planning out your U9/U10 session: STAR—Specific, Terrific, Active, and (soccer) Real. I feel the STAR plan is a very effective methodology for running a session at any age group, but in particular the younger ages, who will have lesser attention spans, and ability levels.

**SPECIFIC:** Many youth coaches make the mistake of trying to do too much in a very short time. Keeping in mind that many of these players will have very limited, if any, experience with the game, it is essential to focus on a very specific skill or theme during the training session. It’s a natural tendency to recognize that the players need work on 5 or 6 different things because you have your “first big game” or “first big tournament” coming up very quickly. Please put this mindset aside and recognize your job as a youth coach is to develop these players over the course of the season, and the game results should be very irrelevant. Many of the teams only have the chance to train once or twice before the games begin, and it is very tempting to try and cover lots of material in a short amount of time, but the most effective method for player development will be to focus on ONE very specific topic per session so that the children get lots of instruction and repetition to help them understand and improve upon the theme. They will be much more focused and your training session will be far more productive in the long run. And, by long run, I mean over the course of the season, as I can’t stress enough not to lose sight of the overall development in lieu of the game results. If your first session is on dribbling and you lose your first game 10-0 because no one knew how to defend—but the dribbling was GREAT 😊--then you had a very successful first game! It won’t hurt to remind the parents of this every now and then too, and perhaps communicate with them what the focus is each week so they can start to measure the success in ways other than game results.

**TERRIFIC:** When you are planning and executing your weekly training session, try to imagine “little Johnny” arriving home afterwards to his eager Mother asking how practice was....do you think he will

frown and say it was boring and dumb, or break into a big grin exclaiming how terrific and fun it was???

It is essential with the young players to make Terrifically fun sessions in order for them to stay dialed in and ultimately work harder and improve. There are easy ways to implement fun in every session even when they are learning and new skill or tactic. Kids love games and competition and there are ways to make the individual exercises fun by adding competitions—make them count their repetitions to see who got the most (and set a benchmark for improving upon the individual scores), or add silly consequences into exercises for losing teams, or when the skill isn't performed properly (such as making them jump up and down waving their arms exclaiming "I'm a big pink fluffy star"—that's a favorite and sure to get them smiling and laughing). As coaches, be creative and always try to add your own personal touch to all of the exercises and sessions to make it terrific!

**ACTIVE:** One of my biggest pet peeves is seeing LINES in soccer training. The only time anyone will ever see lines at one of my sessions is perhaps at the end of training if we are doing a fun or silly game (power/finesse, Death Star or Super Shootout). There is really no other time where a coach should have his players in a long, single file line, working on shooting or something of the like. This is a sure fire way to lose all your players---especially the younger ones, who have now just completely checked out of practice and completely stopped paying attention. It is not realistic to ask them to stand in line and have a work/rest ratio of 10 or 20 to 1. Coaches must devise sessions that keep all of the players involved and active. Of course there are times where perhaps not every player will have a ball at his/her feet for every second of the session, but as the coach, you need to figure out how to involve as many players as possible. If the theme is shooting or finishing, instead of having one long line shooting at a single goal, bring in a second goal and now have 2 lines by each for a total of 4 lines and run mirror image exercises simultaneously so the lines are only 2 or 3 kids short and moving very quickly. That minor adjustment achieves the same end result but involves many more players and results in many more repetitions.

**(Soccer) Real:** One of my favorite expressions in training sessions is Soccer Real or Game-Like. The more Real you can make your training sessions, the more easily it will ultimately translate to the big game on Sunday. For example, you will see many coaches working on dribbling by lining up all players on the touch line with a ball and executing various dribbling skills back and forth. This activity probably meets the S-T-A requirements of STAR...It's certainly SPECIFIC, it's hopefully TERRIFIC as the coach should be implementing fun/silly things into the dribbling to keep the kids interested and laughing, and everyone has a ball and is moving at once so it's definitely ACTIVE. But, you need to ask yourself is this REAL? It's not often during a game that we are lined up on a line and get to just dribble back and forth in a straight line across the soccer field, is it? Perhaps we can place the kids into a large grid and carry out the same variety of dribbling exercises? By making this minor adjustment we've now made this so much more soccer REAL as the children will now be not dribbling in a straight line, but be forced to change direction when they get to the edge of the grid. Additionally, they are now dribbling through and around the rest of the players and are forced to keep their heads up, and keep the ball between their feet and under control just as in a game where there are defenders.