"It comes down to a very simple saying: There is a right way and a wrong way to do things. You can practice shooting eight hours a day, but if your technique is wrong, then all you become is very good at shooting the wrong way.... Get the fundamentals down and the level of everything you do will rise."

-- Michael Jordan

EXPLANATION OF SECTION HEADINGS:

CHARACTERISTICS:

These sections provide a brief description of the PERSON we're trying to coach. It is the coach's responsibility to teach the person first, and the player second. The better we understand the physical and psychological characteristics of the people we coach, the better we can teach them not only soccer, but also sportsmanship and values (respect, integrity, cooperation).

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

This section was added to include general advice on structuring practices (what to emphasize, preferred method of instruction, etc.).

TACTICS:

Tactics refer primarily to decision-making (i.e., making decisions on the field and understanding one's role within the team). Individual tactics are the decisions a player makes when he or she is in possession of the ball on offense, or decisions in a one versus one defensive situation. Team tactics refer to understanding systems, style of play, and decisions that are part of the team's overall plan of attack and defense. It should be noted that most tactical decisions are made when players are *not* in possession of the ball. Coaches of very young soccer players (U-8 and below) should spend very little time coaching tactics to their players. At the youngest ages, teaching individual ball mastery and proper technique are of much greater importance. Individual tactics play a role of increased importance at U-10, and both individual and team tactics should be emphasized more as players reach U-12 and higher age brackets.

CURRICULA:

The curricula are overviews of developmentally appropriate, technical teaching objectives for youth soccer players U-8 through U-12. Each curriculum was created primarily to serve as a guide to help coaches understand a) *What* types of skills and techniques they ought to teaching their young athletes, and b) an optimal progression through which a developmental foundation can be constructed and nurtured over time. It is hoped that these coaching curricula will assist coaches in identifying *specific, age-appropriate, technical training concepts and objectives* that may be targeted during the playing season. In addition, the curricula can serve as "yardsticks" by which coaches can measure the progress of their athlete's development over time as soccer players.

What the curricula are not:

The curricula are *not* guides on *HOW* to coach; rather, they are guides on *WHAT* to coach.
The curricula are *not* handbooks of drills and exercises (There are scores of excellent books, videos, and internet websites out there that outline drills and exercises to teach different technical and tactical concepts).
The curricula are neither fully comprehensive nor exhaustive. There are a multitude of technical components involved in playing the game of soccer. Moreover, each technical component can be dissected into smaller components. The aim of these curricula is to identify the basic foundation and progression of player development U-8 through U-12.

Also, the reader may notice that there is no mention of fitness in this curriculum. This omission is deliberate. In accordance with the recommendations of the US Soccer Federation, *younger players should get all the fitness training they need through soccer exercises and games*. It is the coach's responsibility to structure training sessions in a manner that ensures that players remain active, minimizing long lines and standing around. Exercises should include the ball and imitate the game as much as possible. From a purely economic standpoint, it makes sense to organize activities that will improve players' fitness while simultaneously improving their technique and tactics. This can be accomplished quite easily, with a little bit of planning and preparation *(remember, just playing the game in and of itself is excellent fitness training!)*.

A Note of Caution to Coaches:
During the season, coaches may be tempted to ignore teaching certain fundamentals in order to win games. Coaches who surrender to this temptation do so to the detriment of their players. For instance, a coach might "play to win" by playing his strongest player as a central defender and his fastest player as a forward. This coach's "winning" game plan might then involve having his strong defender boot the ball as far as he can every time he gets it, while his speedy forward then chases after the balls played behind the opposition's defense with the aim of scoring breakaway goals. Whatever might be gained by a couple of victories on the scoreboard pales in comparison to what is lost not only in the development of the rest of the players on the team (who are bypassed and ignored in this tactical system) but also the development of these two players (who learn only to kick and run). Within this "winning-oriented" approach, no one on the team develops the skills necessary to succeed at higher levels of play. If our goal is to build players who will love the game and play it well, not just today but also further down the line, then we must keep in mind that although there will always be shortcuts to success or to winning, there are no short cuts to excellence.

U-8 PLAYERS

CHARACTERISTICS:

- Limited attention span
- Non-competitive mentality
- Difficult to sit still, always moving
- Psychologically vulnerable to criticism (remember criticism for a long time)
- Developing physical confidence
- Unable to pace themselves (often go at 100% until they drop!)
- Skeletal system growing rapidly. Often results in apparent lack of coordination (they will fall down A LOT!)
- Cardiovascular and temperature regulation system is not developed well. Heart rate peaks quickly and they overheat quickly (need regular water breaks)
- Rarely distinguish between effort and ability (Try hard = perform well in their minds)
- Lifetime habits are being ingrained: cooperate, listen, respect each other, try hard, clean up after yourself, etc.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ball mastery exercises and games (every player with a ball)
- Lots of 1 v 1 games
- Small-sided games (1 v 1 up to 5 v 5)
- Encourage dribbling and shooting in training and games – encourage individual play and don't worry if players play somewhat selfishly

TACTICS:

I. Team/Player in possession of the ball (offense)

- Spread out, find space (Don't bunch up!)
- Emphasize individual rather than group tactics

II. Team/Player NOT in possession of ball (defense)

- Recover behind the ball
- Introduction to tackling

Introduction to marking (near the ball only)

U-8 CURRICULUM

I. Ball Mastery/Control

- Juggle with laces alternating feet
- Fast footwork
- Basic ball manipulation using all surfaces of foot (outside, inside, laces, sole)
- Use both feet

II. Dribbling

- Stop, start, run with the ball *in control*
- Basic turns (inside, outside, sole of foot)
- Introduce rolling the ball with sole

III. Passing

- Pass ball on ground, for short distances using inside of the foot
- Technique: ankle locked, forward swing, follow through, body over ball, bring foot back after making contact with ball, head should be still
- Accuracy
- Proper weighting

IV. Receiving (Trapping)

- Control ball with inside of foot; ball should not be trapped under body
- Introduce thigh trap and outside of the foot trap
- Repetitions should include mostly balls on the ground, and also balls served in the air for short distances
- Body in line of motion of the ball, head still, arms out for balance
- Move to the ball! (Don't wait for it)

V. Shooting

- Technique: use laces, ankle locked, toe down, plant foot pointed in direction of target
- Follow through: shooting leg aimed directly at target (NOT across the body), ankle remains locked and toe down
- NO TOE KICKS!
- Low, driven, aimed at corners

VI. Heading

- Practicing heading regularly is not advisable for this age group

- Proper technique should nevertheless be introduced with a very soft ball, since some players will be heading the ball anyway (eyes open, mouth shut, meet the ball)

U-10 PLAYERS

CHARACTERISTICS:

- Great variation between players in playing ability and physical maturity
- Love for skill acquisition, love to be challenged
- Some kids begin moving from concrete to abstract thinking
- Able to pace themselves and plan ahead
- Begin to understand very basic tactical concepts, but often unable to determine best choice
- Coach's explanations should be brief, concise, and mention "why"
- Players becoming increasingly competitive
- Increased self-responsibility and self-motivation; will work on skills on own
- Love identification with team

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ball-mastery and individual skill are still paramount. However, unlike U-8s, exercises should be more dynamic and replicate game situations (pressure, goal, etc.)
- Emphasis should be small-sided games (lots of 1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2, 3 v 3 etc.)
- Practice games should be competitive – teach them to handle winning and losing in practice.

TACTICS:

I. Team/Player in possession of the ball (offense)

- When to shoot, pass, dribble
- Moving into space to get open
- Support in front of and behind the ball
- Angle and distance of support (dictated by pressure on the ball)
- When to pass to feet or into space
- Basic positioning in 8 v. 8 game (defense, midfield, forward)
- Players should learn to play a range of positions (teach awareness of playing space and understanding of different roles)

II. Team/Player not in possession of ball (defense)

- Basic defending: position of feet and body, angle of approach, distance
- Tackling: block tackle (stay on feet); slide tackle
- Marking/tracking (goalside, inside)
- Clearing (high, wide, away from goal)
- Shepherding/jockeying/containing (body position; don't dive in!)
- Challenging opponent nearest the ball (closing down)
- Role of the first and second defender (pressure-cover)

- Recovering behind the ball

U-10 CURRICULUM

I. Ball Mastery/Control

- Juggling with feet, thighs, and head
- Fast footwork, slightly more advanced
- Basic ball manipulation using all surfaces of foot
- Use both feet

II. Dribbling

- Running with the ball to produce an end (e.g., turn, beat an opponent)
- Dribbling with a change of speed and direction.
- Use of dummies and feints (scissors, stepover, Cruyff, stop-starts, pullbacks)
- Pressure should be introduced at times when practicing dribbling
- Basic shielding (sideways on)

III. Passing/Crossing

- Technical perfection (ankle locked, forward swing, follow through, body over ball, bring foot back after making contact with ball, head should be still)
- Introduce driven passing
- Introduce simple forms of disguise when passing
- Look up and make eye contact before passing
- Accuracy, weighting, timing
- Pass and MOVE
- Introduce communication with teammates (e.g., "Man on", "Turn")

IV. Receiving (Trapping)

- Control ball on the ground with all parts of the foot
- Thigh trapping, chest trapping (short services)
- Add repetitions receiving balls in the air (body in line of flight of the ball)
- Introduce decision-making on first touch (depending on pressure and attacking options)

V. Shooting

- Emphasize flawless technique (ankle locked, forward swing, follow through, body over ball, bring foot back after making contact with ball, head should be still)
- Main concern should be with technique and accuracy, not power
- Emphasize low, driven shots aimed at corners across goalkeeper

VI. Heading

- Soft, underhand serves from short distances.

- Technique: eyes open, mouth shut, arms out for balance
- Timing, Snap
- Repetition should be primarily without opposition

U-12 PLAYERS

CHARACTERISTICS:

- Great variability in athleticism, due to differences in pubertal maturation. Some players may be as big as the coach, and some half that size
- Differences in skill levels can also be very pronounced
- Beginning to develop ability to sustain complex, coordinated skill sequences
- Most players capable of abstract thought, and are thus capable of understanding and visualizing tactical/team concepts – foundation of higher-level play. They will point out inconsistencies in what you say and do
- Beginning to address hypothetical situations and solve problems systematically
- Spend more time with friends and less with parents. Peer pressure and conformity assume an increased importance
- Developing a conscience, morality and system of values
- Players tend to be highly self-critical. Instruction should be enabling. Show them *what to do* and *how to do it* rather than focusing on *what not to do*
- Openly competitive. Players will cheat and foul to win at times
- They look towards role models to learn how to behave
- More complex and developed sense of humor
- Players may yell at teammates when they make a mistake
- They may openly question referee's decisions
- They will openly encourage each other
- Team cooperation emerging

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Small-sided games are still the preferred method of teaching
- Greater emphasis on flexibility (stretching)
- Playing 11 v. 11 is now appropriate
- Training should focus on one or two topics per session
- Progress from fundamental activities with little or no pressure to game-like activities with intensity and pressure

TACTICS:

I. Team/Player in possession of ball (offense)

- More communication ("Man on", "Turn"). Call for the ball.
- Step up as a unit when ball is cleared
- Create space to receive ball (feints, spins, checking)
- Depth – exploiting space behind opposition
- Width – opening up on attack, especially ball-side
- Create space for teammates/running off the ball
- Overlaps, takeovers, wall pass, blind-side runs
- Anticipation vs. Reaction

II. Team/Player NOT in possession of ball (defense)

- Team defending: when to intercept vs. delay (high vs. low pressure)
- Drop back as a unit (disciplined) when ball is lost
- 3-player defending roles: pressure-cover-balance (3 v 3 and greater)
- Marking players vs. marking space (how, when, where)
- Channeling and forcing play as a unit (2 or 3) or team (4 or 6)
- Compactness (lateral and vertical)
- Anticipation vs. Reaction
- Defending in different thirds of the field (back, middle, front) – Safety vs. Risk

U-12 CURRICULUM:

I. Ball Mastery/Control

- Advanced juggling (more touches, more body parts)
- Wall training
- Advanced ball manipulation exercises (moves, dribbling)

II. Dribbling

- Running with the ball through space with greater purpose (head up, vision)
- Successful execution of moves under full pressure from opponent (1 v 1, 1 v 2)
- Combine moves
- Advanced fakes and feints (drag scissors, double-touch, criss-cross)
- Greater emphasis on decision-making and game application (dribbling to beat an opponent, to create space, to pass, to change the point of attack, to shoot)

III. Passing/Crossing

- Technique: ankle locked, forward swing, follow through, body over ball, bring foot back after making contact with ball, head should be still
- Include more driven, bent, and chipped passing
- Accuracy, timing, and weighting under greater pressure
- Introduce simple forms of disguise when passing

IV. Receiving (Trapping)

- Control balls on the ground and in the air TO MAINTAIN POSSESSION
- Aggressive first touch (change the angle of reception)
- Shielding the ball (receiving and turning under pressure)
- Disguise when receiving a ball under pressure
- Body positioning (hips facing the field)
- See the field (eyes up) before and after receiving pass
- Thigh trapping, chest trapping (short services)
- Increased repetitions receiving balls in the air from greater distances (body in line of flight of the ball)
- Introduce decision-making on first touch (depending on pressure and attacking options)

V. Shooting

- Emphasize perfect technique
- Emphasize low, driven shots played to corners across goalkeeper
- Introduce bent and chipped shots

VI. Heading

- Different types: to score a goal, to clear defensively, to pass
- Angled, higher serves
- Pressure from opponent