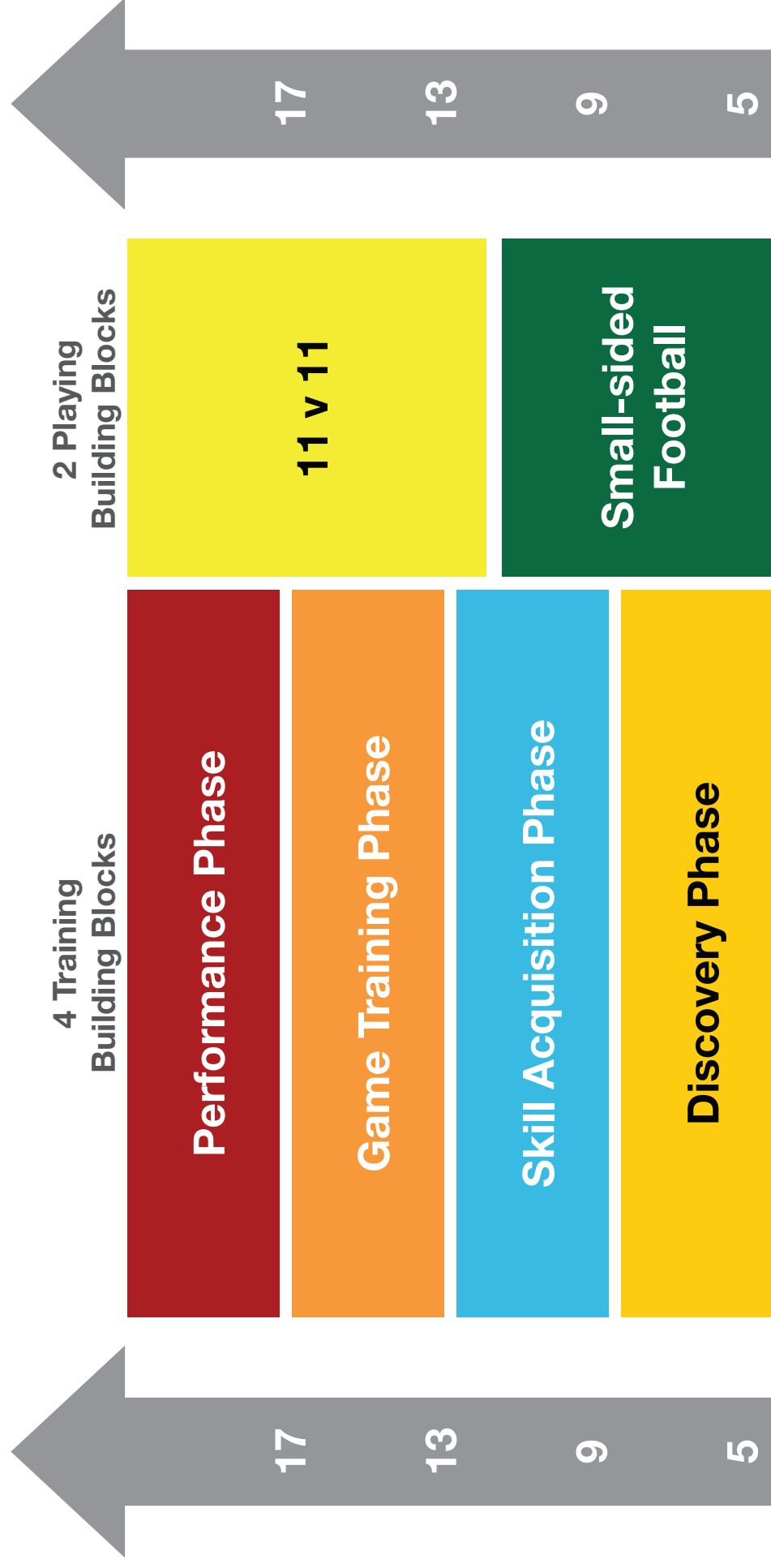


3.

## The Building Blocks



The National Football Curriculum distinguishes 6 Building Blocks: 4 training Building Blocks and 2 playing Building Blocks.

The FFA Building Blocks Methodology is the framework that provides practical guidelines for coaches working at all levels of youth development in order to help them in answering questions such as:

- What are the mental and physical characteristics of players in the various development stages?
- What type of practices are best suited for specific age groups and why?
- How long should a session go for and how often should I train?
- How do I plan and design my sessions?
- What are points of interest when I coach my team during games?

With the aim to:

- Develop technically proficient players
- Develop tactically aware, proactive players
- Transform the physical and direct style of youth football in Australia to a successful style based upon technique and creativity

- To instill a lifelong passion and love for football in young players

- To create a real 'football culture' in Australia

The result of this approach must be future generations of players with the skills and habits to make Australia a successful contender on the World stage, both in men's and women's football. Does the Building Blocks methodology guarantee we will develop the next Lionel Messi in Australia? Unfortunately the answer is no, but this structured approach will certainly increase the chance.

There is no magic formula for developing special players but recent scientific research (Coyle; Ericsson, Gladwell; Syed et al) does provide some very interesting insights:

1. **Talent is not 'innate'**. Messi (or any other outstanding performer in sports, science or art) didn't receive or inherit special 'genes' from birth

2. Every world class performer has a history of **many years of deep practice** that started at a young age

3. A condition for many years of deep practice is **intrinsic and sustained motivation**, a characteristic all top performers share.

No top performer has ever circumvented these rules! This doesn't mean however that geniuses do not exist. The top teachers and coaches Daniel Coyle interviewed for his book "The Talent Code" pegged the genius rate (Messi!) at about one per decade. Let us take a closer look at these insights.

If talent is not innate and excellence is the result of many years of sustained deep practice does that mean that anyone can become a top level player? Theoretically yes, although it's not that simple.

Many people may have heard of the so-called "Rule of 10,000 hours". This rule, introduced by the Swedish scientist Anders Ericsson, basically states that it takes 10,000 hours (or 10 years) of practice to reach a level of excellence in sports, science, art or any other field.

It is apparent that the **quality** of that practice is vital although, interestingly, research conducted by UK professor Mark Williams shows that time invested in **non-organised** practice, such as playing with mates in the park or juggling a ball in the back yard, is at least as important.

# The Building Blocks

## Coaching

Quality of practice is clearly contingent on the importance of **good coaching**. Good coaching means **purposeful** practice and quality **feedback**.

Purposeful practice is always aimed at progress: after all, only by working at what you can't do will you turn into the expert you want to become. And quality feedback is the rocket fuel that propels learning. Without it, no amount of practice is going to get you there because "if you don't know what you are doing wrong you can never know what you are doing right". Good coaches are therefore able to design practice so that feedback is embedded in the exercise, leading to automatic adjustment.

**A good way of visualising what 'purposeful practice' means is to picture something 'just beyond the player's reach' or 'just outside someone's comfort zone', so there is a challenge but not one that is too difficult.**

## Motivation

Intrinsic motivation means that the player has developed a true passion for football and the motivation to become the best they can be comes from deep inside. The chance of developing a passion for football is of course greater when you grow up in an environment with a real football culture, where you have role models and more and better opportunities. That is why developing a real football culture is so crucial for Australia.

It's also important to realise that it is impossible to 'impose' motivation. Pushy parents or coaches will achieve nothing (or the opposite of what they are looking for) if it isn't the player's own choice.

However if the motivation is intrinsic, the effect is very powerful. One of the differences between good performers and the very best is that top performers are able to "push themselves harder for longer" because their motivation level is higher.

Intrinsic motivation by itself however is still not enough, for only **sustained** motivation leads to excellence.

A prerequisite for sustained motivation is what Professor Carol Dweck calls a 'growth mindset', which basically means that mistakes are embraced and deficiencies confronted ("I can master this, I just have to practice harder") This mindset sees a setback as a motivational factor.

The opposite is called a 'fixed mindset'; for those people, failure is a de-motivator ("I will never be able to do this, I just don't have the talent")

**Here, it is also worthwhile highlighting the fact that coaches also have fixed or growth mindsets, which can affect their own development as well as that of their players.**

## A growth mindset is a characteristic shared by most top performers

How can a coach or parent stimulate the development of a growth mindset in players?

- Praise effort, not 'talent'
- Emphasise that abilities can be transformed through application
- Emphasise that challenges are learning opportunities instead of threats

**“Failure is a great opportunity for improvement”**

To bring all of the above to life, FFA has developed the Building Blocks Methodology, outlining the logical and progressive steps necessary to achieve our long term goals.

Key points:

- Football is a very complex game and takes at least ten years to master
- A step-by-step, phased approach is required, taking into account the age of the player
- The logical approach we have adopted in the Building Blocks can be summarised like this:
  - simplified situations before complex ones
  - individual skills before team tactics
  - football development before physical preparation
- The age groups stated are guidelines not absolute rules; girls and boys develop at different rates, and players of the same age may be at different developmental stages
- Each Building Block has a clear, distinguishable focus, but the player's development should be viewed as a gradual, ongoing process towards game mastery
- It is an holistic approach, rather than a series of four isolated stages/concepts.

For example, although the focus in the Skill Acquisition Phase is on individual skill development, the player's tactical insight is being developed at the same time, but using the 'hidden learning' approach.

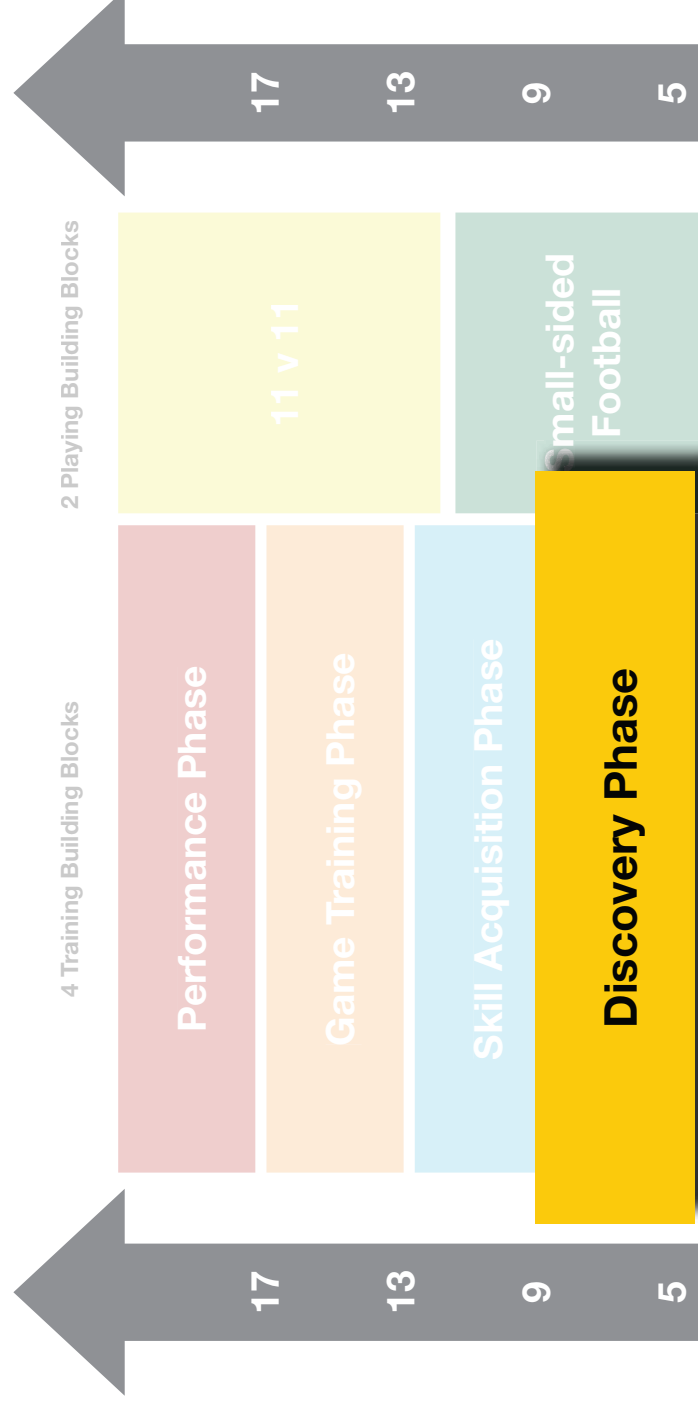
The coach uses training exercises which involve as many of the game-specific resistances (team-mates, opponents, direction, goals, etc) as possible, so that game awareness is automatically developed, rather than trying to 'coach tactics'. Equally, technical development doesn't stop at the end of the Skill Acquisition Phase; it continues throughout the Game Training and Performance Phases, although it is now not the main focus.

**Development of tactical insight doesn't suddenly begin in the Game Training phase; it is developed during the Skill Acquisition phase in smaller, simpler situations. Here, the players are introduced to the fundamental individual and team tasks that form the foundation of decision-making in the 11 v 11 game.**

Let's now have a closer look at each individual Building Block.

### 3.

## The Discovery Phase



- Discovering one's (im)possibilities through trial & error
- Natural development: 'learn FOOTBALL by playing football'
- No 'coaching' but organising fun football exercises
- Replicating the 'street/park football' environment of the past
- Emphasis on building a love of the game

## The Discovery Phase (U/6-U/9)

Regarding the first Building Block, the points made earlier concerning the development of excellence don't really apply yet and fortunately things are still quite simple.

What are the characteristics of children in this age bracket?

- They are still 'clumsy' (lack fine motor skills), because they are still developing their coordination
- They have a short span of attention and are quickly and easily distracted
- They are 'self-centred' and not yet able to really work together (so do not ask them to perform team play, it is impossible for them!)
- They play or participate for fun with short bursts of energy and enthusiasm
- They are unable to handle a lot of information (instructions; feedback)

What does this mean for training sessions with children this age?

### Just let them play a lot of varied fun football related games!

In the 'good old days' as a kid you learned to play football in the street or the park. There were no coaches involved who made you run laps or do stretches and push-ups. When you were with just one mate you played a 1 v 1 game, when there were 8 of you, you played 4 v 4. There were no referees either, you made your own rules and every problem got solved. You just played, every free minute of the day. Funny as it may seem, this was (and still is) the best possible way to develop a basic skill level, understanding and passion for football.

In third World countries the old saying "the game is the teacher" still applies and is one of the reasons why we find so many creative and technically good players from Africa and South America in the European top leagues. But in our developed society children do not play sports in the streets

and parks that much anymore. They watch television, surf the internet, play computer games, chat on Twitter and Facebook as well as having to study.

As parents we now send our children to a club or academy to learn to play football and, despite all good intentions, here we make the mistake of 'coaching' children this age.

The first and most important step when 'coaching' the youngest kids is to take the word 'coach' out of your mind. Your most important job is to recreate that street football environment, be an organiser of fun football-related practices and..... let them play! This approach, where they can 'discover' how the game works in a natural way, is the right one for the Discovery Phase.

**You'll find the  
Discovery Phase  
Model Sessions on  
page 85.**



### 3.

## Skill Acquisition Phase



- In the Skill Acquisition Phase the coach must focus exclusively on providing a solid foundation of **technical skill**
- If the player does not gain this **skill foundation** during this phase it will be very difficult to make it up later
- No amount of fitness or competitive spirit will ever compensate for deficiencies in **functional game skills**



## The Skill Acquisition Phase (U/10-U/13)

The characteristics of children this age are:

- They are highly motivated and enthusiastic
- They are competitive, like challenges and want to show they're the best
- They are well balanced and coordinated
- They are very adaptive to learning motor skills
- Although still self-centred, they start to learn how to work together
- They are sensitive to criticism and failure (praise is important)
- They are physically and mentally ready for a more structured approach to training

As mentioned above, in the period before entering the growth spurt that goes hand in hand with puberty, children are well balanced and coordinated. This makes them very adaptive to developing motor skills (techniques) especially since this is one of the brain's key development periods.

The Japanese call this phase of 'turbo charged' technical development the 'Golden Age of motor learning'. In no other development phase in life will motor learning happen faster than here. As a logical consequence of the above, it makes sense that we make optimal use of this period to lay a sustainable technical foundation.

**TECHNICAL SKILLS MUST BE DEVELOPED NOW**  
(if we miss out here it will hamper us for the rest of our playing career).

Hopefully it now makes perfect sense why we call this phase the 'Skill Acquisition Phase'. The focus during this period is on the development of the 'functional game skills'.

These are the technical skills you need to perform effectively during a game.

The word 'functional' emphasises the difference to 'un-functional' tricks, which may be fun to see and do but useless during the game.

## The 4 Core Skills:

The FFA Skill Acquisition training program focuses upon developing four core skills when in possession of the ball.

### 1. Striking the ball

This includes all forms of striking the ball such as short/long passing; shooting and crossing

### 2. First touch

Controlling the ball with all allowed body parts

### 3. 1 v 1

All moves, feints and accelerations to get past and away from an opponent

### 4. Running with the ball

At speed (with a lot of space) or 'dribbling' (in tight areas), this includes techniques for protecting the ball and changing direction.

These four core skills cover 95% of the actions of any outfield player when in possession of the ball during a game of football. The other 5% consists of actions such as heading and throw-ins.



# Skill Acquisition Phase

Of course we can also distinguish defensive skills such as various tackling techniques and it goes without saying that the defensive 1 v 1 skills are equally important and must be properly developed too.

We made the practical choice to develop the defensive skills as part of the 1 v 1 practices. Although the emphasis is on the attacking skills, we are not ignoring the defensive ones. So, in the 1 v 1 Model Sessions, coaches will find the box below with coaching tips for the defender as well the attacker.

1 v 1 Coaching Tips	
ATTACKER	DEFENDER
"Go at the defender with speed"	"Show the attacker one way/force them away from goal"
"Use a feint to put the defender off balance"	"Bend your knees and stand on your toes so you're able to change direction quickly"
"Threaten to go to one side then suddenly attack the other"	"The best moment to commit is when the attacker takes a heavy touch or slows down"

As far as heading is concerned, the advice is to start developing this specific skill at the start of the Game Training Phase. At younger ages heading is a 'scary' activity and not much heading takes place anyway since most players lack the power to play aerial balls.

If heading is practised during the Skill Acquisition Phase we advise the use of so-called super light balls (specially devised for youth football).

As we've explained earlier it takes many hours of practicing and lots of repetition to properly develop the four core skills with both feet and 'automate' the techniques. Automate means that we've practised the techniques so often that we can execute them without having to consciously concentrate on the execution.

We can compare this process with learning to drive a car: in the beginning we have to consciously think of every act in the process, we even tend to look where the pedals are. But after some time we drive from A to B while having a conversation, thinking deeply about something or making a (hands free) phone call. We arrive at our destination totally unaware of the driving acts we have executed on the way: driving a car has become an automatism.

The same principle applies for mastering the core skills: many hours of purposeful practice will eventually lead to automatism and we execute the skill 'unconsciously'. When this happens we will, as a consequence, have more time for scanning our options and making decisions. With top level players the ball is 'glued' to their feet while they look around and check the options.

The principle of thousands of hours of practice leading to automatism applies to everything, from playing a violin to playing golf or football. Football however differs from golf because the technical skills must be executed under constant pressure of football-specific resistances (opponents; space; time; direction), in ever-changing situations.

Scientific research (Daniel Coyle, 'The Talent Code'; et al.) shows that in football the most educationally effective way is to develop technical skills (execution) and perception skills (decision-making) **simultaneously**.

This 'holistic approach' is one of the essences of the FFA Coaching Philosophy which is explained in depth in chapter 4.

So, herein lies the huge challenge for anyone working with players in this important age bracket: your primary role is that of a 'skills teacher' focused on individual technical development as opposed to being a 'team coach'.

Your mission is to 'automate' the core skills through lots of repetition, but at the same time avoid 'drill' practices, where there may be repetition but no decision-making.

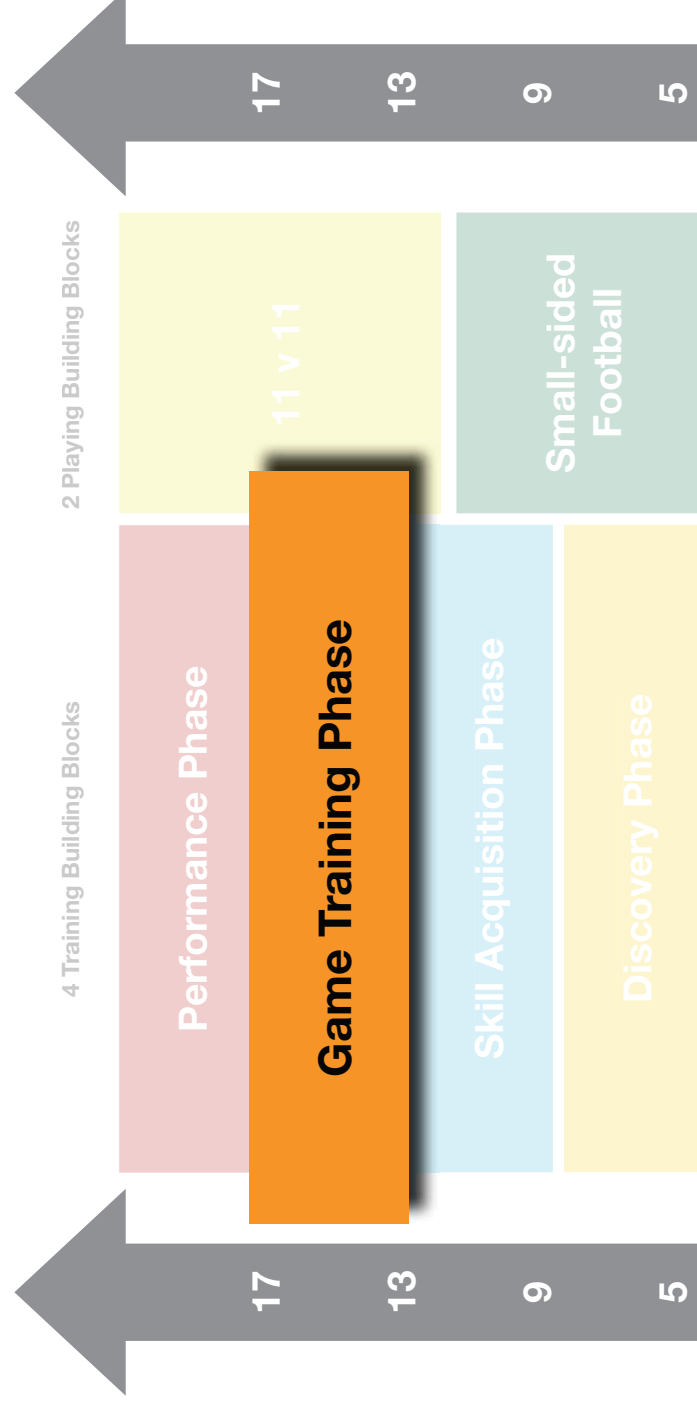
**It's not easy to get this right!**

**You'll find the Skill Acquisition Phase Model  
Sessions on page 127.**



3.

## Game Training Phase



- Preparing players for senior football by teaching them to apply the functional game skills in a team setting using 1-4-3-3 as the preferred formation
- Developing tactical awareness, perception and decision-making through a game-related approach to training

## The Game Training Phase (U/14-U/17)

The most important aspect of this age bracket is the fact that these players are in (or entering into) the **puberty** phase which is a phase of radical mental and physical changes.

Huge changes in the hormonal system cause confusion while the physical changes can also unsettle the youngsters. Physically they may sometimes suddenly look like adults but mentally they often are still children, something that may also confuse coaches. Another aspect for coaches to consider is that in general, girls enter the puberty phase slightly earlier than boys.

The main **mental** characteristics of the puberty phase are:

- Sudden mood changes
- Resistance against authority
- Impulsiveness (first acting then thinking)
- Accelerated intellectual development
- Identity search which leads to a desire to be part of a group

The main physical characteristic of the puberty phase is a sudden acceleration in growth. One of the consequences of this **growth spurt** may be a temporary decrease of coordination and strength.

Because suddenly the bones start growing fast and the muscles and ligaments as well as the nervous system need time to adjust to the new proportions, players may look 'clumsy'. Players are also prone to overuse **injuries** like Osgood-Schlatter disease during this phase.

It goes without saying that it's of the ultimate importance that coaches working with players this age have knowledge and understanding of all these aspects to be able to guide youngsters through this critical development phase in a well-considered way.

While during the puberty phase players' physical and technical development temporarily stagnates or loses ground, their intellectual development accelerates as does their understanding of and appreciation for teamwork.

This makes the Game Training Phase exceptionally suited for developing tactical awareness and insight.

Whereas the purpose of the Skill Acquisition Phase is to **acquire** the core skills, the Game Training Phase is about learning how to **apply** them in a functional way. In the Game Training Phase the focus shifts towards learning to play as a team and developing an understanding of the team tasks during the main moments (attacking; defending; transitioning), as well as the specific tasks that go with the individual team positions.

To be able to properly develop the team tasks and the individual player tasks we need the context of a playing formation. After all, team tasks and player tasks may differ depending on the playing formation.

### The 1-4-3-3 formation

It is important to realise that we did not just take 1-4-3-3 as a starting point! Unfortunately this has been and continues to be widely misunderstood and far too much attention has been devoted to discussions about playing formations.

Of course there are many successful styles and formations in football but FFA considers 1-4-3-3 the most appropriate formation to develop an understanding of **team play** in young players.

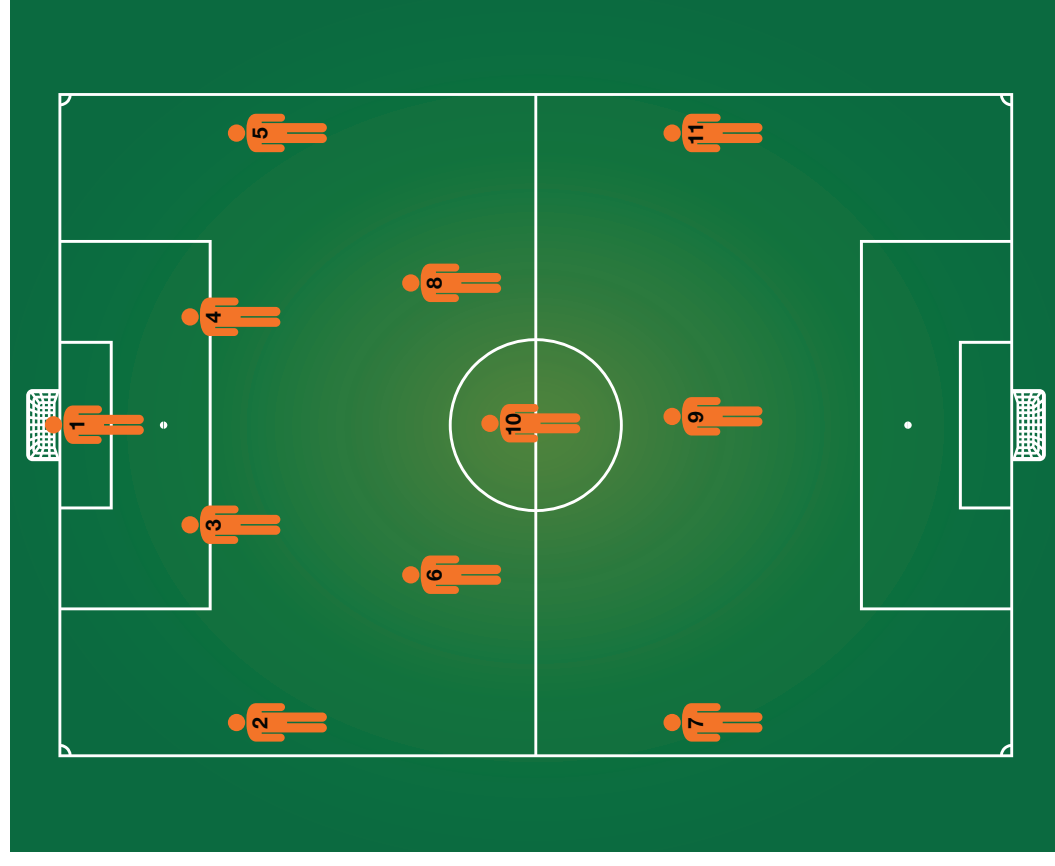
Our opinion is supported by another very interesting quote from the Chris Sulley research on Europe's most successful academies:

**“There was a clear emphasis on a possession based philosophy and most employed a 4-3-3 model with an explicit attempt to pass the ball through the units. There was a tangible difference in the type of work delivered to the players from what is typically delivered at EPL academies. Early age players typically participated in random and variable practices that involved decision-making tactically. The consistent Talent ID criteria was centred around the player's ability to handle the ball, make good decisions and speed, as opposed to the notions of power, size and strength that still dominate the English youth system”.**

# Game Training Phase

## Why?

- In the 1-4-3-3 formation there are 3 lines with a balanced spread of players over the pitch ('triangles' of players). As explained earlier, this is one of the basic conditions for successful positioning play or to put it more simply: this creates a range of other, more 'logical', options for youth players. Instead of just kicking the ball forward, players almost 'automatically' start making combinations;
- The 1-4-3-3 formation stimulates the development of creative attacking players; more specifically the 3 attackers and the attacking midfielder(s)
- Defensively 1-4-3-3 also has an advantage since pressuring an opponent's defence line (proactive defending!) is easier to do with 3 attackers as it requires less running and is tactically less complicated
- For youth players, the positions and the attached player tasks are logical, recognizable and easy to comprehend. Moreover, every position has a specific number which makes learning to play as a team easier.



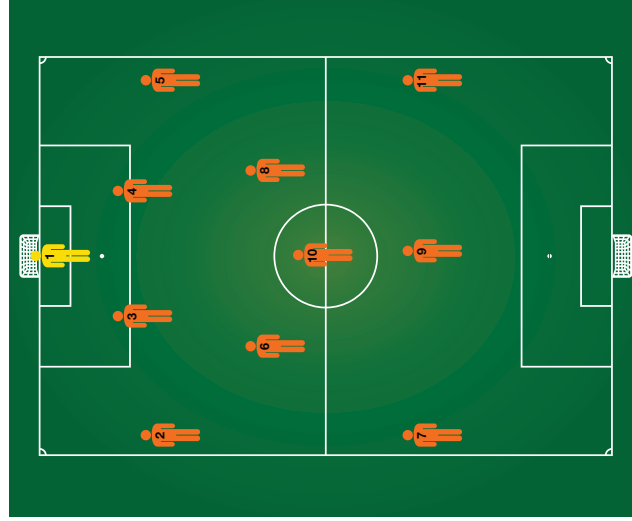


## Competence profile - Goalkeeper #1

The goalkeeper is of course a special position in any playing system or formation. First and foremost it's the goalkeeper's task to keep the opponent from scoring in any possible way within the rules of the game. Some goalkeepers do that by making spectacular saves, others are great at organizing their defence and anticipating situations. Top keepers possess all these qualities as well as the physical and mental characteristics required.

A condition for our preferred playing style is that goalkeepers must be able to play with their feet as a prerequisite for possession-based football and the goalkeeper is an indispensable link for that.

As a consequence of defending high up the park, there will regularly be a big space behind our defence. This requires a goalkeeper to be able to play as a 'sweeper' which is another characteristic specific to the playing style.



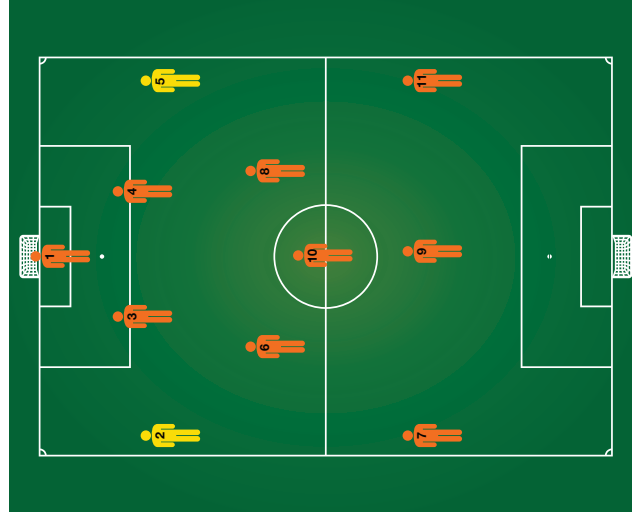
## Competence profile - Full-backs #2 & #5

Full-backs in modern high-level football must be very versatile.

Defensively sometimes they have a direct opponent (winger) which requires strong defensive 1 v 1 skills. Sometimes they have no direct opponent so they have to defend 'positionally' which requires awareness and tactical insight. The role of modern full-backs in playing out and especially in attacking wing play has become vitally important.

When playing out, it's often the full-backs that can receive the ball from the goalkeeper because they do not have a direct opponent and are therefore unmarked.

In attack, more often than not it's the overlapping full-backs that provide the decisive crosses and assists. Especially in possession of the ball it's favourable if #2 is right footed and #5 is left footed.



# Game Training Phase

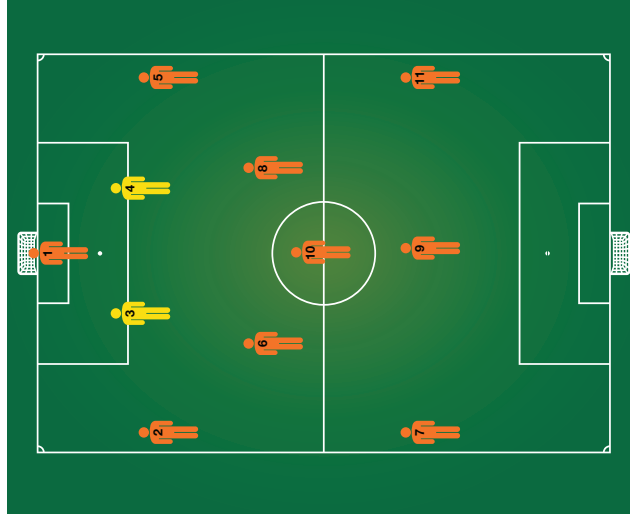
## Competence profile - Centre-backs #3 & #4

Just like the full-backs, modern centre-backs also need to be more versatile than before.

Of course a centre-back still needs to be defensively strong and good in the air. But today's centre-backs also need to be tactically aware and know what to do when the opponent plays with one striker or with two, when to close down and mark an opponent and when to drop off and give cover.

In ball possession, a good cross-field pass to the wingers is still an important asset for any centre-back. But modern centre-backs should also be able to move into the midfield with the ball at their feet and create a numerical advantage. It's also important for a centre-back to have leadership skills and to coach and organise the team. Centre-backs usually have all the other outfield players in front of them which gives them an ideal view of the game.

Playing out is much easier if #3 is right-footed and #4 left-footed.



## Competence profile - Midfielders #6 & #8

The right (#6) and left (#8) midfielders are the 'engine room' of the team.

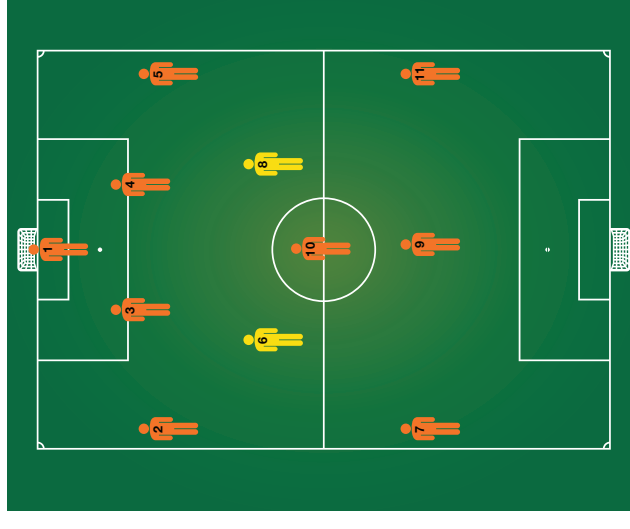
Their task is to stay centrally and support the back four during BPO as well as feed and support the attack in BP.

It's important they can 'read' the game (meaning they are tactically aware) and have a good passing range.

Defensively they must assist the defence by creating a block with the centre-backs and screen the passing lines to the opponent's central striker(s).

In BP they must be the link players that receive the ball from the defenders and deliver it to the attackers without turning it over unnecessarily.

One of the two should always join in to support the attack while the other one stays behind the ball to keep the defensive balance. If #6 is right footed and #8 left footed it's easier to quickly change the point of attack which increases the chance of successful attacking play.





## Competence profile - Attacking Midfielder #10

In the 1-4-3-3 formation the role of the #10 is of vital importance for successful attacking play.

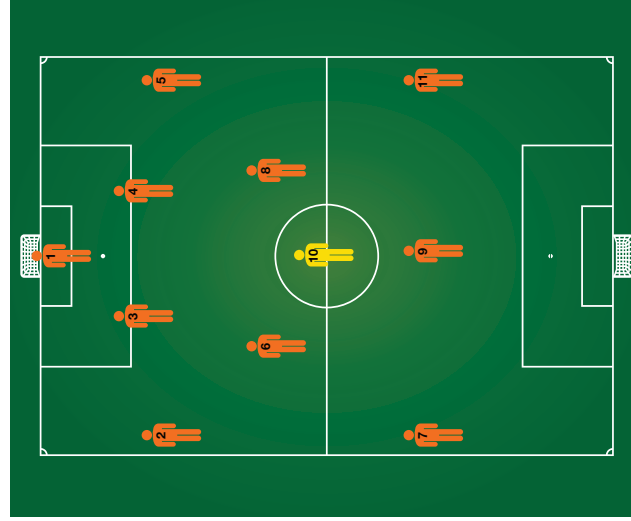
The #10 must be a versatile, creative player that can combine, dribble and take on opponents.

A good #10 recognises the right moments to play a killer pass and has the ability to score goals.

The #10 tries to get on the ball in the space between the opponent's back four and midfield ('playing between the lines').

Although the attacking contribution of #10 is vitally important, it's a **midfield** position (not a 2nd striker).

Defensively the attacking midfielder should therefore connect with #6 and #8 to form a compact unit that presses the opponent in the central midfield area.



## Competence profile - Wingers #7 & #11

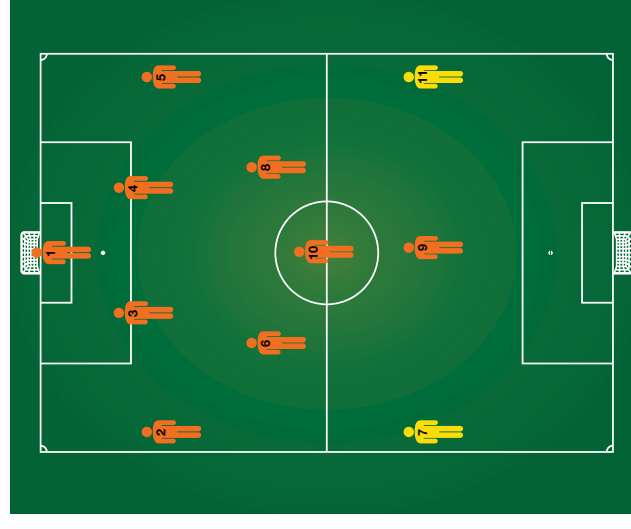
The task of the right winger (#7) and left winger (#11) is to stretch the opponent's defence and, together with the full-backs, create openings in the wide areas. Although wingers can (should) also cut inside, it's important to do this at the right moment which means not too early and not all the time.

Their starting position should always be **high** and **wide**.

A moment when they should **always** come inside is when a cross is delivered into the penalty area from the opposite wing.

Wingers must have good attacking 1 v 1 skills, be able to run with the ball at speed and to deliver good crosses. Creative combination skills as well as goalscoring abilities are also important attributes.

Defensively the wingers play an important role in pressuring the opponent's back four and, together with the full-back, protect and defend their designated wing.



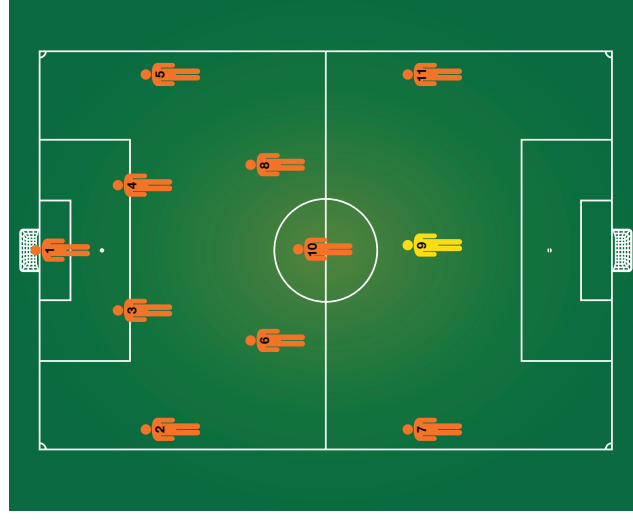
### Competence profile - Central Striker #9

Traditionally the central striker or centre forward is the 'target man' that plays as high as possible. This is still the most common interpretation although there are also variations.

Of course the primary task of the central striker is to score goals. That means #9 must have a good shot with both feet and be a good header of the ball.

The #9 must also have a keen spatial awareness and excellent timing. Other important skills are creative combination play, the ability to keep the ball under pressure from an opponent and the ability to take on defenders.

Defending in modern football starts with the attackers. The central striker in particular has an important role in determining when and where to start pressuring the opponent's back four.

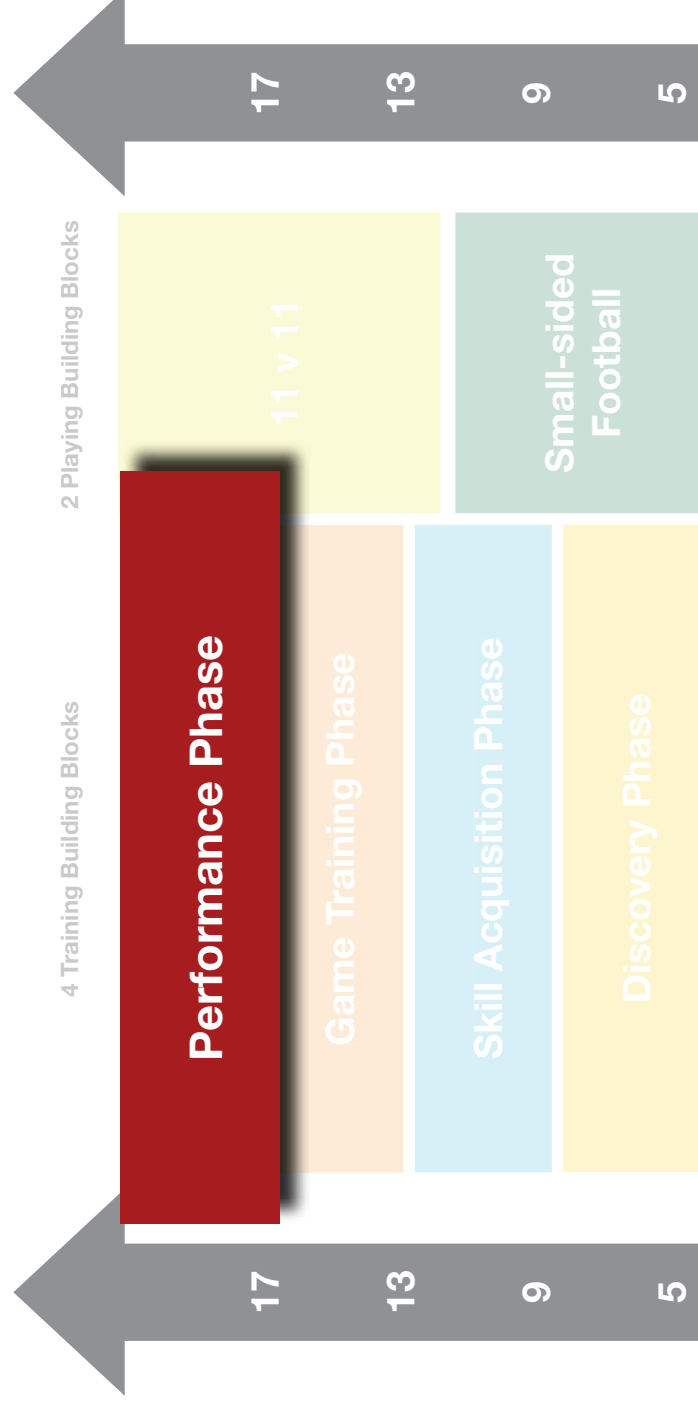


You'll find the Game Training Phase Model Sessions on page 189.



### 3.

## Performance Phase



- Preparing teams for a competition environment where winning becomes the main aim
- Training to focus on solving football problems, based on match analysis
- FOOTBALL CONDITIONING becomes a key part of the program

## The Performance Phase (17 years and older)

The Performance Phase starts when the puberty phase has ended and the growth spurt has come to a standstill. Generally this happens around the age of 16, but differs from individual to individual and, as stated before, girls generally reach this point earlier than boys.

Girls and boys diverge in their physical abilities as they enter puberty and move through adolescence. Higher levels of the hormone **Testosterone** allow boys to add muscle and even without much effort on their part, get stronger. In turn, they become less flexible.

Girls, as their levels of the hormone **Estrogen** increase, tend to add fat rather than muscle. They must train rigorously to get significantly stronger. Estrogen also makes girls' ligaments lax which makes them more flexible than boys but also more prone to certain injuries such as ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament) rupture.

**Core Stability** strength training is therefore an important training element in the Performance phase, especially for girls. However, it's unnecessary to do that in a gym since Core Stability programs can perfectly be done on the pitch as part of the warm-up. This way we avoid losing valuable **football** training time.

At this stage of development, the young adults are ready for high performance training. Coordination is back, the mental balance has been restored and the energy systems of the body are now effectively 'trainable'.

This is the moment that **football-specific conditioning** can start. At an earlier age so-called 'conditioning' is mostly pointless and generally a waste of time (or even dangerous if conducted inexpertly).

This is also the moment that winning really starts to matter. That's why the purpose of the Performance Phase is:

### Learning how to perform/win as a team

So in the Performance Phase, the coach is very much focused on getting results. Training, therefore, is centred on fixing specific problems with the team's tactical performance.

**You'll find the Performance Phase Model Sessions on page 267.**



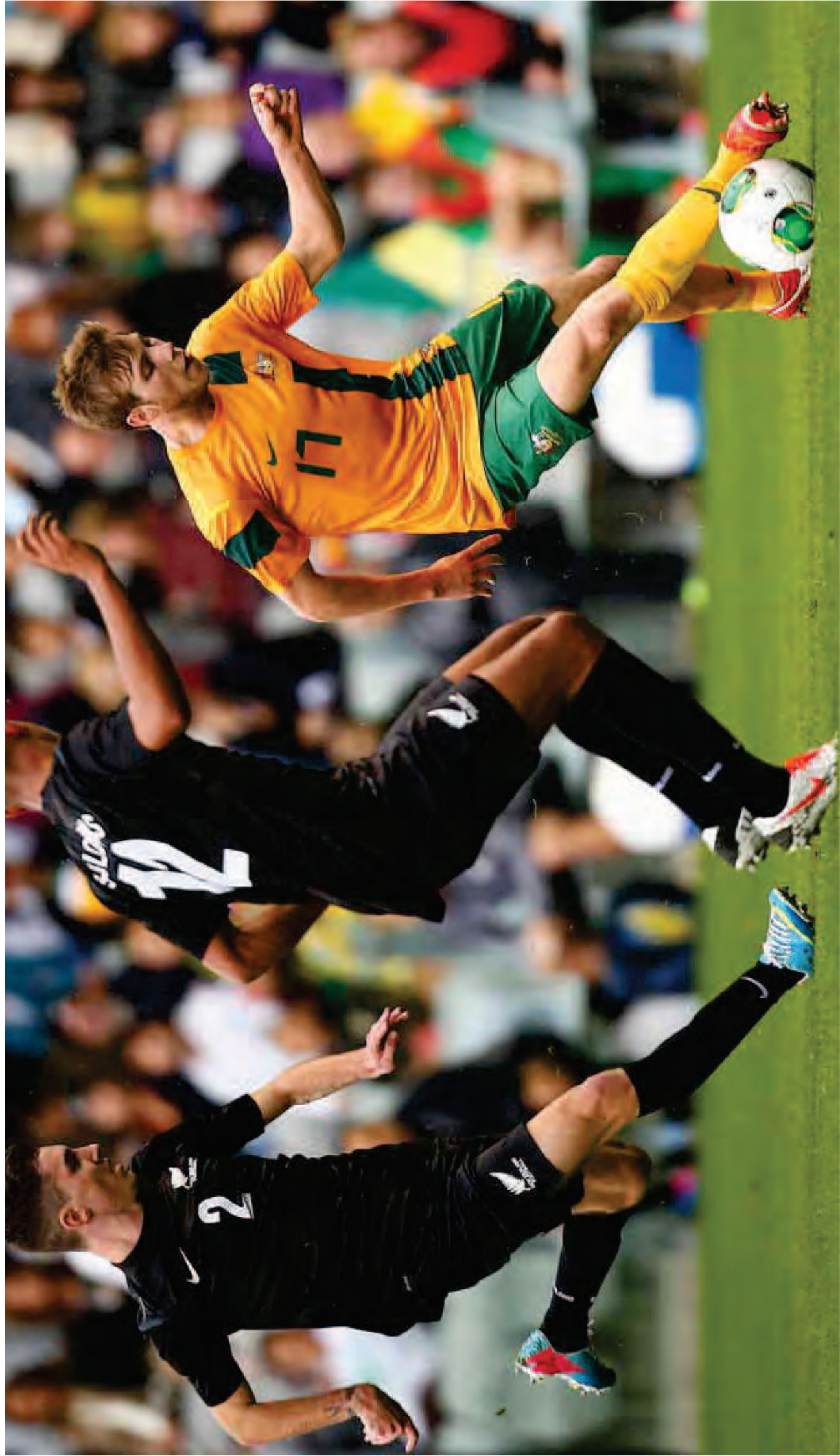
3.

## Performance Phase





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CURRICULUM CONTENTS PAGE





### 3.

## Small Sided Football

The last two Building Blocks are the Playing Building Blocks, **Small Sided Football** and **11 v 11**.



- U/6-U/7 : 4 v 4 (no goalkeepers)
  - U/8-U/9 : 7 v 7 (6 outfield players and a goalkeeper)
  - U/10-U/11 : 9 v 9 (8 outfield players and a goalkeeper)
  - From U/12 : 11 v 11
- Emphasis on fun, freedom of expression and 'learning by playing' instead of 'winning at all costs'
  - The game is for the players, the role of coaches and parents is to help, teach, stimulate and praise them so they enjoy playing.

## Small Sided Football

A former colleague of mine once came up with this perfect analogy while discussing the rationale of Small Sided Football with someone who disagreed with the concept:

**“So then, would you also throw your 3 year old daughter into the deep end of an Olympic Pool to teach her how to swim?”**

The motives behind the concept of Small Sided Football (SSF) are numerous and make perfect sense for any right-thinking person:

- For kids aged 5-12 the distances they have to cover on a full pitch are way too big. They are unable to run or pass over big distances and they will be exhausted in no time
- An 11 v 11 game is far too complex for young kids: there are too many rules, options and choices to be made and as a result the success rate will be very low
- The number of ball contacts in a game involving 22 kids and one ball on a big pitch will be very limited so they do not develop and it's not much fun

As a result of the above mentioned points the motivation to play our beautiful game will soon be gone and the kids will turn their interests to other activities! The biggest mistake you can make as a coach is to consider children to be little adults. We have hopefully made this clear by describing the mental and physical development stages throughout the various Building Blocks.

By gradually increasing the number of players as well as the pitch sizes the children learn to play the game in a progressive, logical and stimulating way.

In his book “The Talent Code”, researcher Daniel Coyle describes why **futsal** (which is **Small Sided Football**!) is the secret behind the success of Brazilian football. In futsal players touch the ball on average 6 times per minute more often than in 11 v 11. In addition to this, because of the limited space, quickness of decision-making as well as accuracy improves dramatically. Coyle calls futsal ‘turbo charged football learning’.

This is once again an example of what we call the holistic approach. Brazilian kids do not separately learn how to pass the ball first; then to dribble and then to receive the ball, etc. They develop those technical skills as well as the decision-making skills while playing futsal.

Currently the rationale of Small Sided Football is understood and adopted all over the football world as the best way to make the youngest players familiar with our game.

On the next pages you will find the Small Sided Football formats used by FFA with an explanation of how 7 v 7 and 9 v 9 lead up to the 1-4-3-3 formation in a logical and methodical manner as well as a number of coaching tips.

# Small Sided Football



Small Sided Football Formats

Playing Format	Under 6 & 7	Under 8 & 9	Under 10 & 11
NUMBERS	4 v 4	7 v 7	9 v 9
FIELD SIZE	Length: 30m Width: 20m	1/4 Full Size Pitch Length: 40m - 50m Width: 30m - 40m	1/2 Full Size Pitch Length: 60m - 70m Width: 40m - 50m
FIELD MARKINGS	Markers or line markings	Markers or line markings	Markers or line markings
PENALTY AREA	Nil	5m depth x 12m width	5m depth x 12m width
GOAL SIZE	Width: 1.5m - 2.0m Height: 0.9m - 1.0m	Width: 2.5m - 3.0m Height: 1.8m - 2.0m	Width: 4.5m - 5.0m Height: 1.8m - 2.0m
GOAL TYPE	Markers, Poles, Goals	Markers, Poles, Goals	Markers, Poles, Goals
BALL SIZE	Size 3	Size 3	Size 4
GOALKEEPER	No	Yes	Yes
PLAYING TIME	2 x 15 minutes	2 x 20 minutes	2 x 25 minutes
HALF TIME BREAK	5 minutes	5 minutes	7.5 minutes
REFEREE	Game Leader	Instructing Referee	Instructing Referee

## U/6-7

Teams of 4 players (no goalkeepers).

### Coaching tips:

No 'coaching' only stimulating and praising

'Natural' development through just playing and discovering one's (im)possibilities through trial & error.

Emphasis on fun and building a love of the game.

The best coach is not the one who shouts instructions the whole game, however unfortunately many parents seem to feel that's what good coaches are supposed to do.

- In 4 v 4 football, the 'coach' should not worry about 'tactics' other than encouraging the kids to try and score when they have the ball and win it back when the other team has the ball in order to prevent them from scoring

- Aim for equal playing time.

### How NOT to coach Small Sided Football



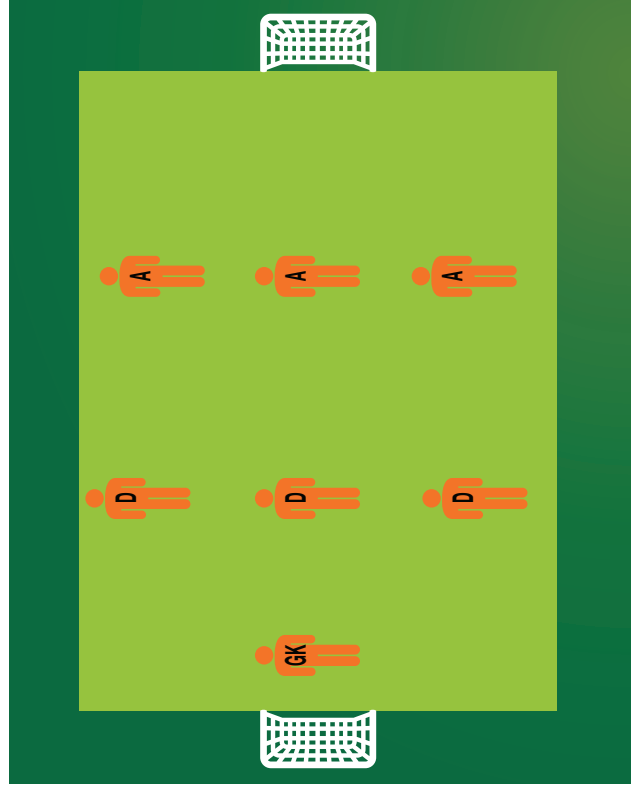
# Small Sided Football

## U/8-9

Teams of 7 players (one goalkeeper and 6 outfield players)

### Coaching tips:

- The players now begin to understand what the game's purpose is (winning by scoring more goals than the opponent)
- There will still be a lot of individual play but the players start to understand that they have to work together in order to be successful
- A basic 'feeling' for team play, direction and dealing with an opponent starts to develop
- Preference and talent for a specific position starts to show: you can start working on a basic organisation (1 in goal; 3 at the back; 3 up front) and a basic understanding of some team tasks (how to defend and attack as a team)
- The coach should still let every player play in every position regularly. One week they want to be goalie, next time the centre forward. Let them!
- Bigger goals with goalkeepers automatically appeal to aiming and shooting: give them all plenty of opportunities to shoot (or be the goalkeeper).
- In 7 v 7 football, the coach should still not be too concerned with 'tactics'. The focus in training is on the individual player, so in the weekend game the players should have the opportunity to apply their skills in a game setting. The coach organises the players into two lines of three with a Goalkeeper behind. The players just need simple tasks so they do not become confused or overwhelmed with information (Examples: 'You three try to defend more than you attack' 'you three try to attack more than you defend' 'let's see if we can always have one of our players pushed right up in the middle of the pitch' 'when the opponent has the ball, can we get one of our team near every one of their players on the goal side', etc)



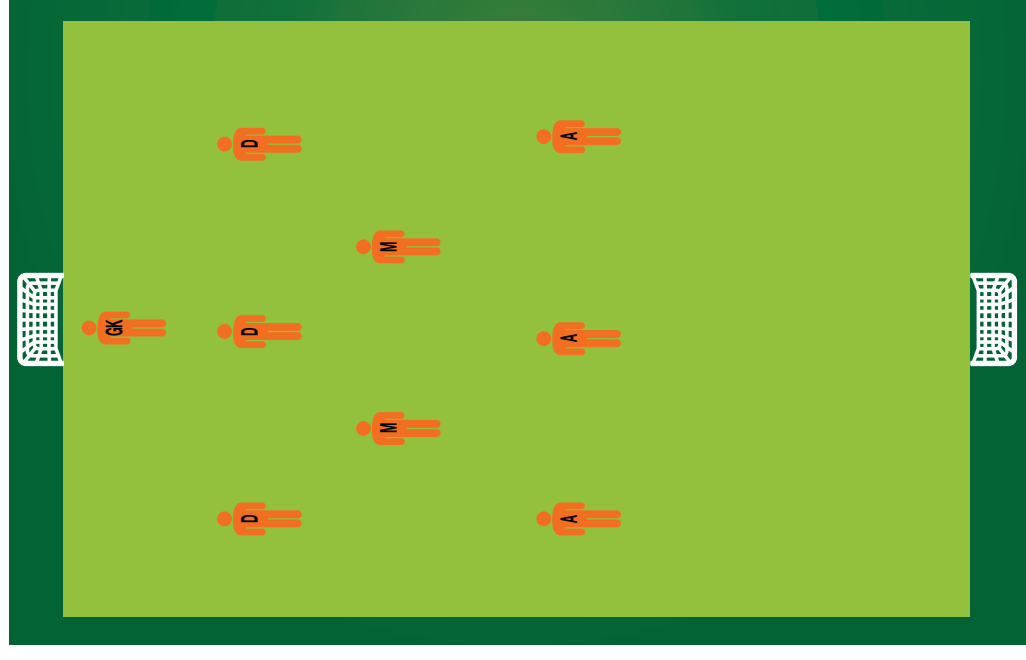
- At half-time, the coach should rotate players around to experience different aspects of the game (e.g. the three defenders become the three attackers)
- Aim for equal playing time



## U/10-11

### Coaching tips:

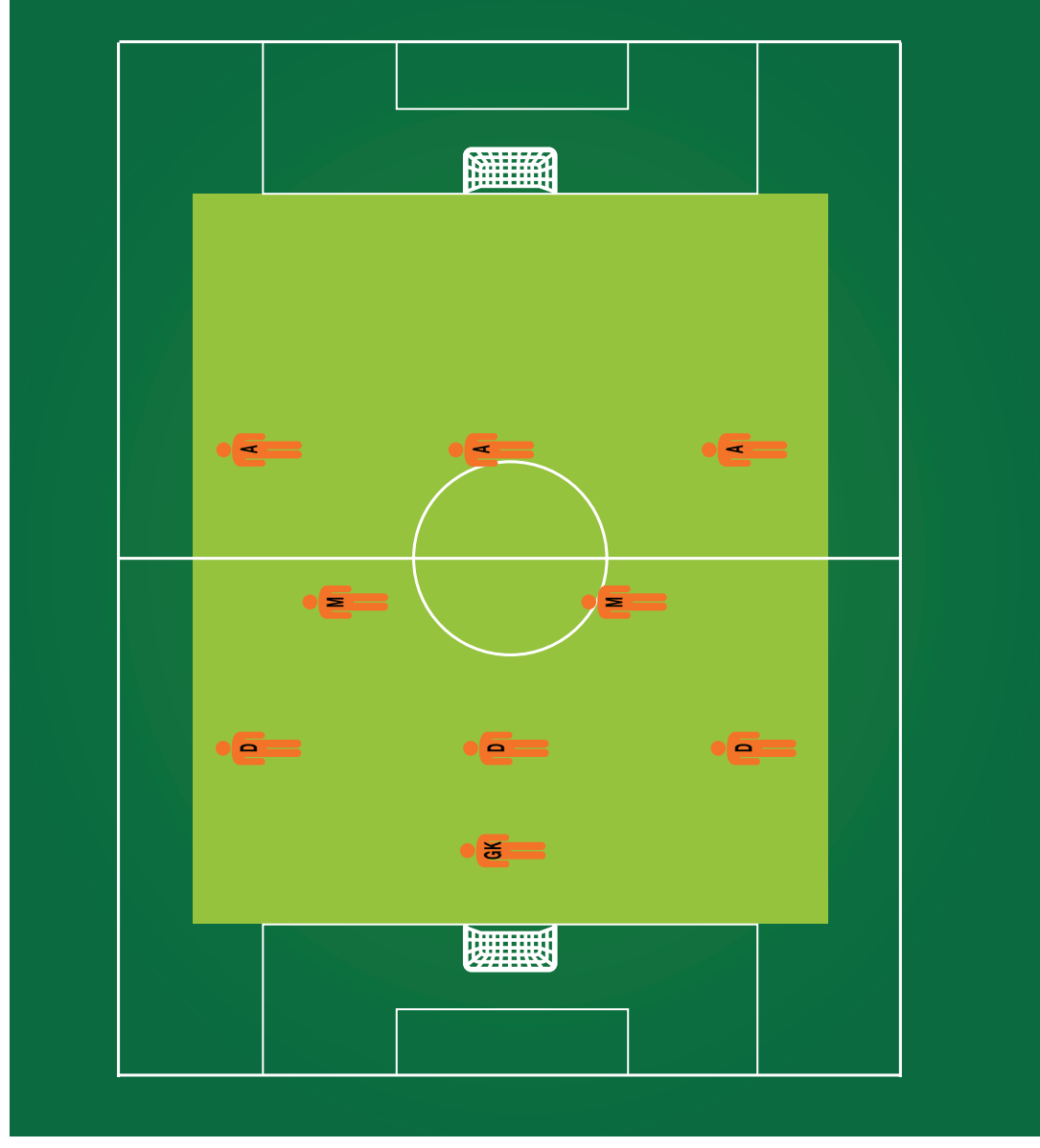
- The understanding of working together as a team develops more and more
- The awareness of the individual roles in relation to teamwork is also developing as well as the understanding for acting without the ball both in defence and attack
- With 8 outfield players a tighter and more strict task allocation and use of space is required
- Preference/ability for specific positions becomes more and more clear
- At this age the kids are very competitive and clever and very quickly develop their motor skills
- All the above means that the coach can raise the bar on all these aspects but:
  - Avoid an information 'overkill'
  - Keep it simple (speak their language)
  - It's their game, it's not about the coach
- In 9 v 9, the coach organises the players into three lines with a goalkeeper behind, preferably in a 1-3-2-3 formation as a guide for team shape
- The coach is still not too concerned with tactics or obsessed with results
- The players still just need simple tasks on match day
- The players should still be regularly rotated, either at half-time or from game to game
- Avoid playing the best players in central positions, and 'hiding' the weaker players out wide
- Aim for equal playing time



# Small Sided Football

## U/11

- With the U/11's it is FFA's preference to play box to box and narrow the field approximately 5m each side. Playing in the length of the pitch is a totally new experience with a different perception and more complexity. As a last step towards the real, full pitch game this format offers the ideal link.



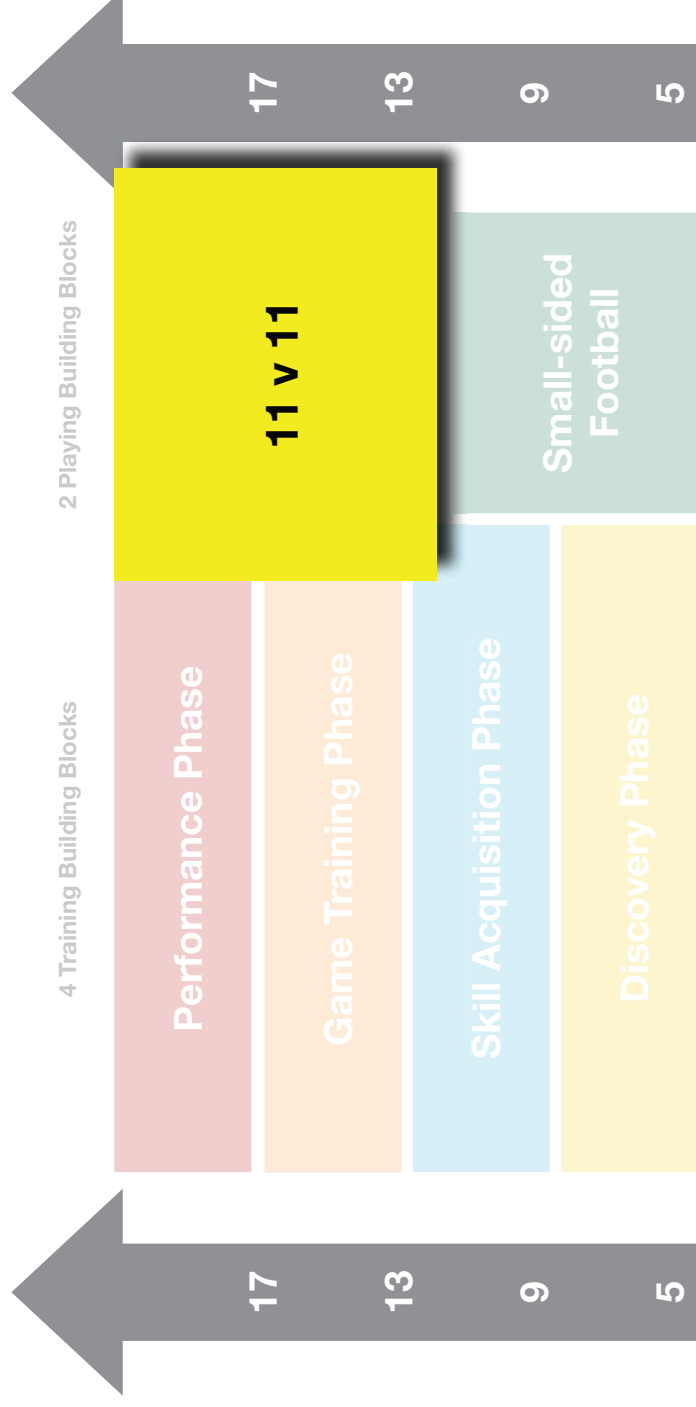


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3.

11 v 11



- From U/12 at the earliest
- The weekly game is a vital developmental element for young players
- The game is the frame of reference that tells us if we are improving
- Only in a regular, year-round competition environment can game cleverness, game hardness and game experience be developed
- The game is for players (not for the coach)



## 11 v 11

In the opinion of FFA, the full 11 v 11 game should be played from U/12 at the earliest. Worldwide, many experts are of the opinion that even this is too early and it's better to wait till after the growth spurt.

There is general consensus though on the fact that a weekly game is a vital element for the development of young players because the game is the frame of reference that tells us if we are improving. Only in a regular, year-round competition environment can players develop game cleverness, game hardness and game experience.

In youth football the development of the INDIVIDUAL should come first NOT the team result, something many coaches (and parents) often seem to forget.

In order to develop players to the maximum of their potential, they need to continuously be challenged to raise their individual bar.

Therefore each player should train and play at a level that is most appropriate for his/her actual development stage. If the level of resistance is too low and it's too easy, players do not develop. If the level of resistance is too high and it's too difficult, they do not develop either.

**This is why the best must train with the best and play against the best.**

This also explains why quality competitions are such a vital element of the development pathway.

In order to improve the competition structures as well as the structure and quality of club youth academies in Australia, FFA has introduced the Talented Player Pathway **Three Pillar Structure**.

The Three Pillar Structure is aimed at drastically raising the quality, accessibility and clarity of the Talented Player Pathway in Australia. The Three Pillar Structure is a work in progress though and still contains gaps.

Therefore FFA together with the Member Federations have taken ownership of parts of the National Talented Player Pathway whereas in most countries in the world youth development is undertaken by the (professional) clubs.

On the next pages you will find an explanation of the Three Pillar Structure of the male Elite Player Pathway.

**The Female Elite Player Pathway Re-Structure together with the National Competitions Review for Women's Football is still in progress and accordingly is not available for inclusion in this publication. Although the starting points are identical, there will be certain differences in the pathway structure for girls and women.**



# The Three Pillar Structure

## PILLAR 1

“The Elite”

FFA

Socceroos  
Olyroos

Young Socceroos

Joeys

AIS

U22

U20

U19

U18

U17

U16

U15

U14

U13

U12

Scouting / Talent ID

## PILLAR 2

“Best of the Best”

A-League / FFA /  
Member Federations

A-League

NYL

NTC

Skilleroos

Skill Acquisition  
Programs

NTC Challenge  
(U/15-16)

U/13-14  
National Youth  
Championships

Scouting /  
Talent ID

## PILLAR 3

“The Best”

National Premier  
League

First Team

U20 Team

U19 Team (optional)

U18 Team

U17 Team (optional)

U16 Team

U15 Team (optional)

U14 Team

U13 Team (optional)

U12 Team

Pillar 1: The Elite

The first pillar consists of the men's National Team programs which are the specific responsibility of FFA (AIS/Joeys, Young Socceroos, Olyroos and Socceroos).

The male national team pathway starts with the AIS program.

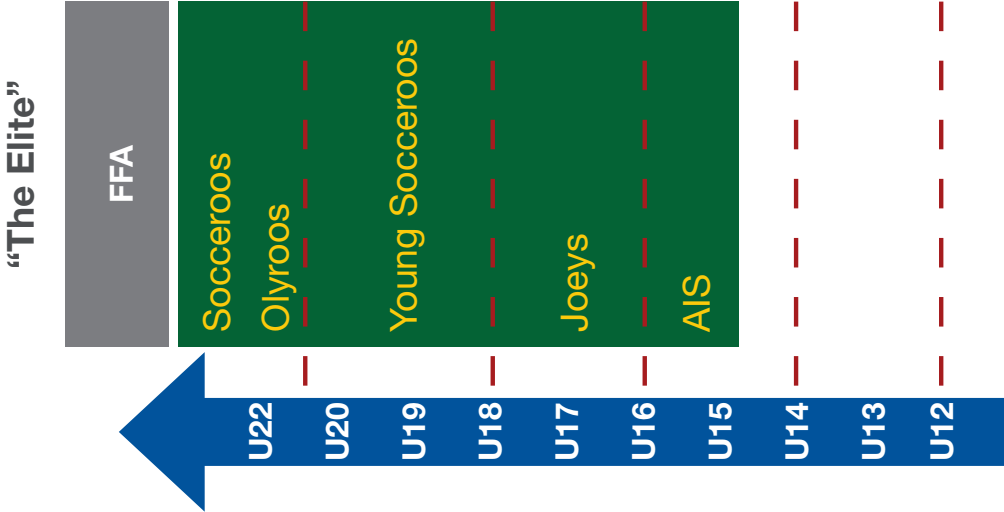
This is a 2 year full time program at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra for the best Australian U/16-17 boys.

The players for this top level program of international standards are primarily recruited from the underpinning State and Territory National Training Centre (NTC) programs.

The AIS team participates in the National Youth League (NYL) and ideally the AIS squad is the same group of players that form the Australian U/17 team (the 'Joeys').

This program prepares the players for the AFC U/16 Championships and the U/17 World Cup (subject to qualification) that are held every 2 years.

Graduates from the AIS program generally continue their playing career with National Youth League (NYL) or A-League clubs or are being contracted by overseas clubs.



The next national representative team are the Young Socceroos for U/19-20 year old players. The Young Socceroos program is a 'camp based' program, since the majority of players are contracted NYL or A-League players or playing for overseas clubs. It is a 2 year program comprising of the U/19 AFC Qualifiers and Championships, the latter being the qualification tournament for the U/20 World Cup held every 2 years.

The Olyroos program is for U/22-23 year old players. Every two years they participate in the U/22 AFC Qualifiers and Championships, and every 4 years these Championships are the qualification tournament for the Olympic Games.

The last and most important step in the pathway is of course the Socceroos. The majority of Australia's top senior players are playing for overseas clubs, several of them in European top leagues. But recently more players from the A-League are being selected for the Socceroos which underlines the increasing quality of our domestic competition.

Every 4 years the Socceroos must qualify for the FIFA World Cup. Every 4 years the AFC also organises the Asian Championships (usually the year after the World Cup).

For both events there is a staged qualification process for countries that are members of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

# The Three Pillar Structure

## Pillar 2: The Best of the Best

The second pillar consists of the combined FFA/ Member Federations programs, the National Youth League (NYL) teams and the A-League clubs.

The Skill Acquisition Programs (SAP) are programs aiming for talented boys aged U/14 and under, with the emphasis on developing the functional game skills as explained earlier in this chapter (the Skill Acquisition Phase).

There is at least one SAP program in every State and Territory and the so-called 'Skilleroos' squads (U/13-14) form the pinnacle of these programs.

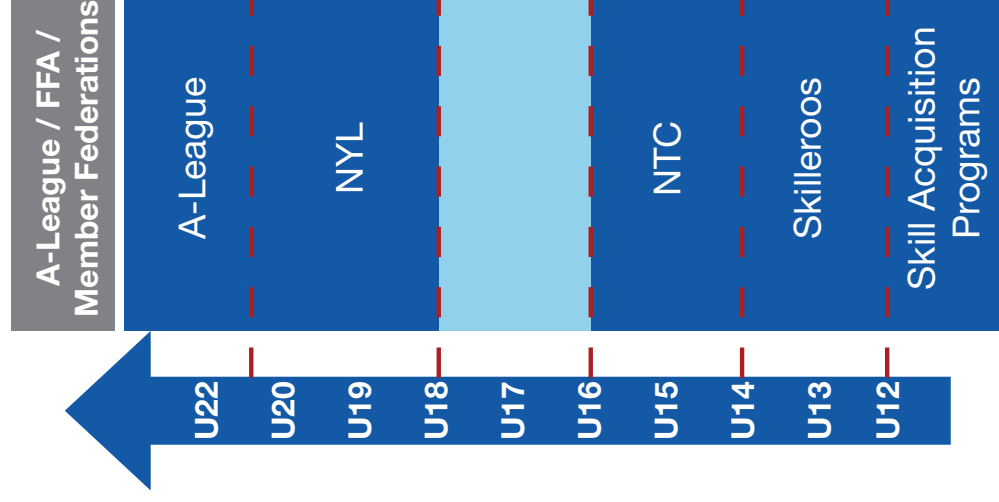
There are yearly U/13 and 14 National Youth Championships to identify the most talented players in these age brackets.

The SAP is the first level of the National Talented Player Pathway for every boy that dreams of one day wearing the 'Green and Gold'.

Graduates from the SAP programs enter the National Training Centre (NTC) programs aimed at talented U/15-16 boys in every State and Territory.

The focus of these programs is on developing an understanding of the team tasks and individual player tasks as explained earlier in this chapter (the Game Training Phase).

## "Best of the Best"



There is a yearly 'NTC challenge' to identify the most talented U/15-16 year old players for the AIS program that leads into the National U/17 team, the 'Joeys'.

The National Youth League (NYL) teams of the A-League clubs should form the next step for NTC graduates to continue their playing career at elite level.

Reality, however, shows that this step is often too big since many NYL teams are made up of 18-21 year olds and senior first team players.

Ideally we should bridge the current U16-U18 gap in Pillar 2 (light blue box in the diagram). FFA, together with the Member Federations and the A-League clubs are currently discussing possible solutions.

FFA's preferred solution is the so-called 'integrated pathway'. This means fusing together the FFA/ Member Federation programs with the local A-League clubs. Pillar 2 will then consist of the A-League and NYL teams underpinned by U/12-18 'academies' thus creating another important building block in Australia's Talented Player Pathway.

The current SAP and NTC program structure would then need revising and restructuring and appropriate solutions need to be in place for States and Territories that do not have an A-League club. It's worth mentioning that some A-League clubs, such as Newcastle Jets, in conjunction with FFA and their Member Federation, have already established academies in line with this philosophy.

### Pillar 3: The Best

The third pillar is being created as a result of the National Competitions Review (NCR) and will create a competition for Elite Clubs at the highest level below the A-League in every State and Territory across Australia.

The name of these competitions is 'The National Premier League' (NPL). These 'Elite' clubs are selected and identified through an Elite Club Licensing Program that is being phased in from 2013 onwards. The purpose is to drastically raise the quality and quantity of youth development by improving and standardising the structure of these clubs. To obtain a license for the National Premier League, clubs must (amongst many others) meet criteria regarding:

- **Teams:** NPL clubs must have teams in all age groups from first grade to U/12's;
- **Youth development:** NPL clubs must have a long-term youth development mindset. Through

the introduction of a points system an NPL club can only raise a competitive first team by filling it predominantly with young, self developed players;

- **Coaching:** To guarantee the quality of coaching all NPL clubs must appoint a Technical Director and appropriately accredited coaches for all age group teams. The Technical Director must ensure that the National Football Curriculum is implemented;
- **Finance:** It will be mandatory for NPL clubs to publicise their registration fee structure in order to put a halt to the culture of using youth players and their parents as the source of income to fund the first grade.

Other criteria will focus on governance, facilities, organisational structure, membership protection, medical provisions, reporting structure and so on.

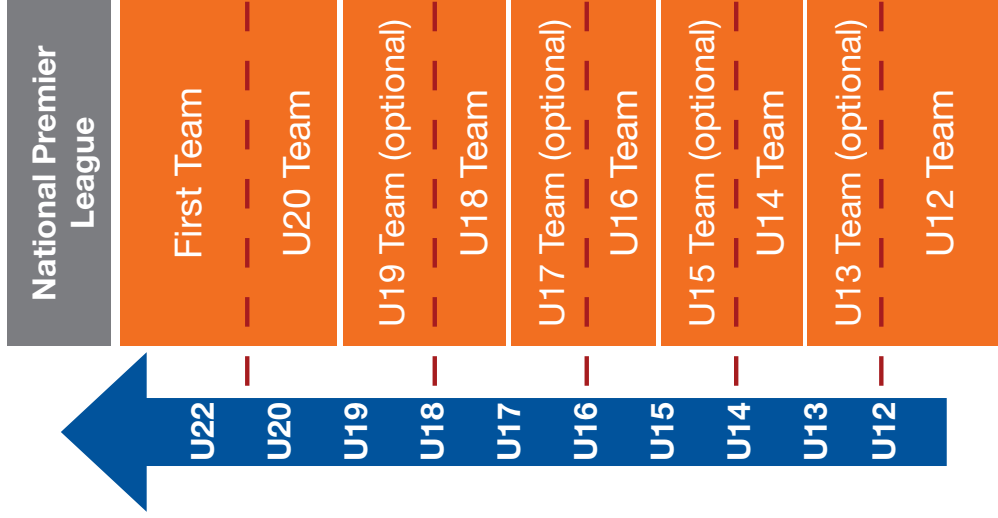
A final important objective of the National Competitions Review will be a gradual extension of the youth season to 10 months (including

competitions and training), which will bring Australia more into line with world's best practice. Whilst access to facilities outside of the winter period will be an obstacle, FFA will work with Member Federations to establish strategies which will provide greater access to football facilities.

The three pillar structure will not only drastically increase the quality of youth development but at the same time create far more opportunities for talented players. The expectation is justifiable that the majority of Australia's talented players will be gathered in these three pillars with the opportunity to switch from one pillar to another at any stage of their development. A late developer can be identified in the third pillar at any stage of his development and be transferred to Pillar Two (or even One).

If on the other hand the pathway for a player in Pillar Two stops, the player has the opportunity to continue his playing career on a quality level in Pillar Three. Through this three pillar structure the pathways will be much clearer for both players and their parents.

### "The Best"





## The Three Pillar Structure



FFA recognises that State and Territory based clubs have long played an important role in developing talented young players, and that they will play an increasingly important role in youth development in the future.

Assessing current Socceroos and A-League club squads, the vast majority of players are known to have risen through these clubs. With the implementation of the Elite Club Licensing program it is expected that many more young players of an even higher technical quality will be produced by the NPL club system. For this reason, FFA will officially recognise these accredited elite clubs as part of the Elite Player Pathway.

In the new three pillars pathway structure, the “best of the best” will continue to be selected for State/Territory or National programs (e.g. Skilleroos; NTC; AIS), where players will be exposed to year-round football in an elite or professional environment, ideally at no cost.

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