

U9 Academy/Travel Format
Fall 2007

“Giving Back The Game”

Starting next fall 2007, all U9 Travel Soccer will be playing in an “Academy” format for league play in Indiana Youth Soccer. This is different from the regular travel format that has been offered in the past for this age group. The impetus for this change is mainly to provide a fun and more positive playing environment as these children transition into their first years of the travel soccer experience.

Introduction

Recently the United States Soccer Federation released a document entitled “Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States.” In the 10-14 year old section of this document they have a section that is called the “Academy Level.” The age groups in that Academy Level are the U10 and U12 age groups.

There is a discussion about winning and losing within this section of the “Best Practices” document about the environment that U.S. Soccer feels is appropriate for the youth (6-12) player. The emphasis in this section is on development over results with these age groups. To create a better environment for our players, coaches, adult spectators, and referees, the transition from having U9 “Travel” teams to U9 “Academies” must be achieved.

What are Academies?

An Academy is when a club/association keeps a collection of players within an age group as opposed to placing them on individual teams. Some Academies do not “cut” or “tryout” younger players, and all children that want to play are accepted. In our model, clubs will retain the option to select players, but the no-cut policy is recommended. The Academy is an idea that is being used in many areas of the country and around the world. There are no “A, B, and C” teams in these Academies, as players stay in pools and can be moved back and forth according to their progress and development throughout the seasonal year. The emphasis is on developing players and **FUN!**

The Academy approach embraces the idea that young players still have a lot of learning and growing to do in the game and recognizes that putting them in an environment where they would receive more training than matches is more developmentally appropriate. This approach would allow clubs to keep players in a pool, foster development over winning and let these young players play freely. Each club’s Developmental Academy would play non-results-oriented competition against other club Academies organized by the various Indiana Youth Soccer travel leagues.

Objectives

The four major objectives of the Academy format are to create a better environment (**FUN**) for player development, coaching education, parent education and referee development.

Player Development

- Success is a by-product of player development. There is a saying that without technique, there’s no tactics. With the Academy approach, the focus is on improving the individual player’s technique. Since players are in an environment where they don’t have to constantly worry about the decision-making process during the match, the players begin to develop a “feel” for the game, to play instinctively. Young players are allowed to show their abilities in an environment of competition without the “fear” of losing a match. At the same time, players learn to make decisions in a match-like setting while getting more touches on the ball, thereby improving technical development. If clubs are going to produce better

teams in the future, then clubs must first produce players that are better technically.

- In Indiana, travel clubs presently have players between the ages of 7-9 years of age “tryout” to make a club team. We put these youngest of players through the psychological rigors of making a club travel team when they are so young. There is absolutely no way that anyone can predict how good a nine/ten year old player is going to be. How many players get missed when we have them “tryout”? How many young players get discouraged when they don’t make the “A” team? How many parents get upset? How many times have we seen late bloomers? The Developmental Academy will foster an entire first travel experience where players will look to be more creative, take risks, become better with the ball and have more **fun**.
- Young players are dropping out of the sport of soccer by the time they are 13 or 14 years of age. Research has shown that 70% of all kids drop out of sports. Why do players drop out? The pressure to win at the youngest ages has become problematic. The current model in Indiana is results-based. The novelty of playing matches also wears off when they become a teenager when they have played so many games at such young ages. **The main reason soccer is no longer fun is due to pressure to win and/or an unhealthy emphasis on results over development and FUN.** The Academy format reduces the stress and pressures of the system.

Adult (Coaches and Parents) Development

- Sideline behaviors on both sides of the field are a contributing factor to player, coach and referee drop-out. The pressure to win takes over when the challenge of taking risks, trying new things on the field should prevail. The Academy format reduces this pressure on coaches, parents and referees, as well.
- Success is a byproduct of player development. Does it really matter who wins at 8 or 9 years of age? Yet we put adult coaches in a situation where winning is the focus as they are under pressure from parents who may become disgruntled and take their child to another club. As a result, coaches resort to “winning strategies” such as: planting players (cherry picking) in order to increase scoring or sitting players for longer than a half of a match because they don’t want to risk losing. Instead of winning and losing, coaches should be focusing on player development, enthusiasm and love of the game. The Academy format would allow coaches to coach for development rather than winning.
- Often coaches and parents begin to feel that their whole sense of self-worth is manifested through the younger players on the field. All too often adults (coaches and parents) berate the officials (young teenagers) and lose their composure. In the Academy format, the change in focus helps everyone remember that the kids are the reason for the game.
- The perception to some adults is that we now want to make U9 “Recreational,” but that isn’t the case. The Academy is a bridge between Recreation/Rec-Plus and Travel. It is geared for players that aspire someday to play at a high level. Players would still represent a club but instead of being put onto teams, the players would be put into each club’s Academy. The players can benefit from the club’s entire coaching staff, experience competition by playing against other club’s Academies and develop a club pride and sense of belonging. This is a healthy benefit for the players, parents and coaches.
- The Academy format will also lead to continue coaching development; now, club directors of coaching can “mentor” a new/young coach in this low-pressure environment. Take away the emphasis of “results” and now these young coaches will be able to teach these young players what they know. We are seeing more young people that are familiar with the game and have an interest in coaching, but they simply don’t want to coach in a travel environment due to time and commitment. In an Academy model, we can get young coaches that have played the game at a higher level to teach without the fear of losing.
- This Academy approach is “Player-Centered” and not “Coach Controlled.” Soccer is a player-centered game isn’t it? With the Academy approach, young players will be in an environment where they are challenged at their own pace. More players can be included as opposed to excluded in the younger age groups which helps clubs in building a larger base for future players.

Referee Development

- According to our State Youth Referee Administrator, Indiana currently has a 38% turnover rate with young referees. One of the big reasons referees drop out is due to verbal abuse by adults that simply isn't worth the payment or free soda from the concession stand.
- In the Academy approach young referees will gain invaluable experience in calling a match and not worry about the outcome. Younger referees who are often called upon to call U9 matches can now be "mentored" in an environment that is developmentally-appropriate for them, as well.
- Referees are necessary and in order to develop these younger referees we need to provide an environment for them to learn while managing a quality match. The need to retain future referees is vital. No referees=no game!

Academy Competition Format 2007

- **Four** Academy Play Dates will be set up by the Indiana Youth Soccer per season. Academy dates will be on Saturdays, no Sundays. An Academy Date will consist of two matches.
- **Academy Play Dates will be set up by the travel leagues.**
- Two or more Academies may be assigned to a venue depending on the number of players in each club's Academy.
- No teams. Club Academy Directors split up their players into groups of 7-9 players. All players show up, and then the coaches split up the players and have them play 6v6 (5 plus goalkeeper). *Academies can share players if necessary to make playing groups.*
- Indiana Youth Soccer Playing Rules for U9s will be used. (No offside, Punt Rule, etc.)
- Clubs would have **copies** of player passes and are responsible to ensure that all players are registered with Indiana Youth Soccer and have current state issued player-pass cards.
- Academy Directors should bring bibs/vests to the match dates (just in case)
- Matches will be two-25 minute halves in length.
- Each player must play at least half of every match.
- For the first match, players will be **randomly** assigned into playing groups by each club's Academy Director.
- Academy Directors may opt to "train" players together in between matches. These trainings should consist of technical work and no more than 45 minutes.
- For the second match, players can be balanced by abilities (homogenously) **if** Academy Directors desire this format. Academy Directors need to collaborate and communicate to make sure that the groups are formed appropriately. Academy directors are encouraged to contact each prior to an Academy day to discuss how they will be forming their groups for both matches.
- For the second match, Academies are encouraged to change the groups, but not required.

- No championship tournaments for these age groups
- Each club's Academies may enter "playing groups" for tournaments. A recommendation of no more than two tournaments per season.

Academy Management

1. Each club will appoint an Academy Director. It is recommended that each Academy Director holds at least a US Youth Soccer National Youth License and/or USSF C License.
2. Each club will be required to submit the name(s) of their Academy Director to Indiana Youth Soccer.
3. Clubs can determine their own method for admitting players into the Academy. The "No-Cut Policy" is recommended. Every player who wishes to join should be accepted unless the numbers exceed the playing space available and/or coaching staff is limited. (To be successful, each club needs to strive for a maximum of a 1:12 player ratio.)
4. Clubs should be clear that the young players within their own Academy are those who desire to play at a high level. Each club should promote/advertise that these Academies are a step above recreation soccer.
5. Every coach in each club's Academy will sign a Code of Conduct which will be supplied by Indiana Youth Soccer
6. Every parent in each club's Academy will sign a Code of Conduct which will be supplied by Indiana Youth Soccer.
7. Every player in each club's Academy will sign a Code of Conduct which will be supplied by Indiana Youth Soccer.
8. U9 Academy players must be 8 years old by July 31st per Indiana Youth Soccer Registration Rules.

A Final Thought

"When we place children in travel soccer too soon the emphasis is subtly being placed on the team result and winning the game, rather than on the individual player's performance. If the team doesn't win, then it doesn't get to play in this league or that division or in this particular tournament. Thus, coaches feel the pressure and start recruiting bigger, stronger kids that can help secure the victory-now. They start playing more of a long ball game and placing the emphasis on direct play. They want the ball out of their end as quickly as possible. What the coaches should be doing is, building out of the back, keeping possession of the ball, encouraging risk takers and flair and placing the emphasis on the individual's technical abilities. Are the coaches allowing an environment to flourish that allows the players to make mistakes because they know long term development is what they are really after? The answer is no, because there is too much pressure to succeed at every step along the way. If this coach loses too many games then he risks losing his players to a more "successful" team. The parents will want to move their child to a "winner," or get rid of him and bring in (in some cases hire) another coach. Thus, the environment becomes individually stifling and the player's creativity takes a back seat to the winning mentality". - Gordon Miller, *Too Much Too Soon* <http://www.vysa.com>