

# U7/ U8: Keeping the Game Moving

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In observing games at this age level, it is troubling to see how much time is lost whenever a ball goes out of play and formal restarts are employed to get the game going again. Valuable playing time is lost due to retrieving the ball and organizing, instructing, and positioning players.

Players at these ages want to be involved in playing the game at all times and are often unable to understand the mechanics of how the games should be restarted and are unable to execute a throw in. How often have you seen a throw in require constant explanation and instruction from anxious coaches and parents leading to greater confusion for the player concerned? Then, invariably, the ball will go straight to an opponent or a retake will be required. The same applies to goal kicks, free kicks, corner kicks, and even kick offs.

Developmentally, children at these ages are not ready for this kind of structured game. That kind of structure has more to do with an adult perception and experience of how the game should be played. Different soccer associations have experimented with changes in how the game is organized at U7/U8. These changes have proven to be beneficial in improving the amount of actual playing time, game understanding, and soccer development and fun for children in this age group. Consequently, it is not necessary to follow the formalized structure of older youth and adult soccer for small sided games at U7/U8.

Discussions with Gordon Miller, Director of Coaching for VYSA (Virginia Youth Soccer Association) led to suggestions for the changes listed below. These changes have been used by other associations in the state and have been effective and age appropriate in keeping play moving and maintaining the involvement of players. The following guidelines will be used for the U7/U8 age group. We would recommend that coaches employ these guidelines during practices and scrimmage games in order to familiarize their players.

- The referee will carry a ball at all times during games. When the game ball goes out of play, the referee will place the ball he is carrying for the team restarting the game in the spot where the restart is to take place. Coaches will supply the referee with another ball to carry. Coaches should keep a ready supply of balls.
- There will be no throw ins. Instead, restarts from the sideline will be from a kick in.
- Goal kicks – referees will place the ball at the corner of the box around the goal. Opposing players will be asked to move back.
- Corner kicks – the referee will place the ball in the corner. As most corner kicks typically result in a long kick to the opposition or a failed kick that doesn't reach the goal area, we would ask that coaches encourage their players to take a "short corner." This would consist of a corner kick taker with a teammate close by at the corner. The taker would make a short pass to the teammate who could dribble to the goal area and shoot or pass.
- Free kicks – the referee would place the ball at the point of infraction and instruct the player to take the kick as quickly as possible.
- The Three Second Quick Start – Get the ball into play as quickly as possible by giving the players a three second count down to play the ball at all restarts including kick off, kick in, goal kick, corner kick, free kick. It would be essential to encourage players to do this during practice sessions so that they would be ready for games.

It is our hope that these changes will lead to more playing time during games, greater speed of play, and a higher level of player development and fun. We would ask that coaches cooperate as much as possible with our referees to make these changes effective.

We would also request that coaches refrain from placing players in specific attacking or defensive positions to take advantage of the small field. We understand that it is possible to organize a group of players to follow specific coaching instructions that can lead to winning results. However, all current coaching research shows that such an approach is not age appropriate and is not effective in developing players and creative play.

Players should be free to try their own moves and play the game as they see it rather than following rigid instructions. At this age level, the game should be about learning by playing, trying new things that might fail, and even chasing the ball if that is how the player sees the game. The game should not be about coaches and tactics. Instead, coaches should strive to create an environment for players to learn.

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