

Chapter 12

Street Soccer Moves into the 21st Century

Small-sided games trace their origins to the street soccer games of the past. They represent a return to the old-school style of learning, free form recess rather than a structured physical education class.

Street soccer has always been player-centered. They had the responsibility of organizing the games based on their needs and interests. If it wasn't a good game, i.e. fun for everyone, players would leave to find some other way to spend their time. This meant the top players had to consider the well being of the lesser ones, who were pleased to be included, or there wouldn't be a game at all.

Without adult supervision, the kids set their own standards. League tables and standings were unnecessary in street soccer — winning was important for its own sake. It allowed children to experiment and develop their own signature moves and skills. Players would come to be identified by their talents, and some would even pass into local legend. Wins had to be achieved with a certain amount of style, at least by the top players.

When it came time to pick teams, decisions were based on ability, not age. Talented 10-year-olds could easily fit into games with 12- and 13-year-olds. This allowed older players to assume leadership roles, mentoring the younger children about the ins and outs of the game, teaching them the lessons they themselves had only recently learned.

And of course, the players would have to mediate any disputes by themselves, they were their own referees. In doing so, they learned valuable lessons about compromise and negotiations. Today's children are never very far from an adult whose only too willing step in and do all of this for them. The opportunities to learn and/or practice these skills have rapidly diminished.

Street soccer was played in an endless variety of forms, with different numbers, on different surfaces, with different goals, rules and even different balls. Players learned quickly how to adapt to the changing situations and conditions. They thought pragmatically about the way the changes would affect the game and how they would handle them. Used properly, today's small-sided games provide just this type of environment. They allow children the greatest opportunity to develop all of the basic skills within the context of a match, while they also encourage children to develop their own identities in the game.

Tournaments & Festivals

In a tournament, each player is assigned to a team, and stays with that team for the duration; the teams switch opponents from game to game. This provides each team a constant flow of new external problems

and it allows team identities to develop. The results reflect the group as a whole, and the players bond over the course of the competition as they learn how to utilize their talents and assign tasks for the good of the team. Each game is preparation for the next, and they refine the plan as they go.

But during festivals, every team changes with every game. Each player will face different opponents and work with different teammates each time out, which means they face new problems inside as well as outside the team. Success requires assessing — rapidly — their own teammates' and as well as the opponents talents. Players only have a few minutes to develop a plan and distribute the tasks. (The same thing happens in a match when teams make substitutions.)

While it's still in everyone's self interest to play for the win, the result doesn't carry over to the next game as a team effort. Each player feels the effects of the match individually, but team bonding lasts only as long as each individual game. With the next match, the process starts all over.

Introducing the Difference

Getting children to appreciate the difference between a Festival and a Tournament can be accomplished during warm ups at practice. Small 2v2 games, like the Heading or Passing Games from Chapter 11 can serve as the vehicle for their orientation. As players arrive at practice they play a series of short competitive matches. They can stay together as a team or switch partners with each new game. This is a useful method for getting players mentally from wherever they were coming from to the practice.

The following formats represent valuable tools for teams, clubs or Associations. They allow players the freedom to practice their leadership skills in a small-scale competitive environment that is also a lot of fun. They also free you up to observe the player's interactions in different situations and environments.

Setting up the Festival

You'll want to stay with a single form, and one the players are familiar with, throughout the festival. Begin by choosing what the game you'll use, i.e. the basic game, with recessed goals, line soccer and so on. Settle on the numbers per side — 3v3, 4v4. Once you've made these decisions and you have a rough idea how many kids you're expecting, set up enough fields to accommodate everyone.