



By Erik Imler

When watching countless youth soccer games as a Youth Academy Director (ages 8-10), I find it relatively easy to spot the “difference makers” on any team. Their dominance presents itself in various ways: It might be the crafty player who oozes self-confidence and proficiency with the ball at their feet...It might be the physically dominant athlete who muscles over their smaller counterparts....It might be the player who has figured out that finding space away from the crowded pack will afford them time and space to dribble or shoot....Or, it might be the ‘scrappy’ youngster who fights for every loose ball with unbridled enthusiasm.

If your child is one of those players you know it and, as a parent, you’re confident in their ability to play at a competitive level.

But what if your child is NOT the overly dominant one on the field however they love the game and aspire to continue playing at a more competitive level?

What should you be looking for in your child to understand if they have the potential to play at a more competitive level in the future?

A youth player will be evaluated on these four areas – what is referred to as the “coaching pillars”:

- Technical – ball mastery
- Tactical – understanding of the game
- Physical – speed, agility, power
- Mentality – self confidence

How do you, as a parent, determine if your young and aspiring player has the potential to be an impact player in the future?

What should you be expecting of your child at the U9 to U11 age group as building blocks to enable them to become an impact player in the future?

Based on 20+ years of experience as a player and over 15 as a coach at various levels of development, I have a pretty good idea of what an 8-10 year old player looks like.

THE TOP SIX SKILLS EVERY PLAYER MUST HAVE AT THE 8-10 YEAR OLD STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

Skill #1: Dribbling

One of the first things most players learn to do when being introduced to the game is dribble the soccer ball. At the 8-10 year old stage of development, dribbling needs to be able to serve multiple purposes for a player:

- Dribble to Beat an Opponent – when in possession of the ball and facing a defender, the attacking player must be able to maneuver past the defender

using a change of speed or body feint to accelerate into open space.

- Dribble to Accelerate into Space – when receiving the ball in space and moving it forward at speed.
- Dribble to Avoid Pressure – ‘turning’ with the ball away from pressure to maintain possession.

Young players at this stage of development may have not yet developed a confidence on the ball. Therefore, when pressured by an opponent, panic sets in and a poor decision is made, oftentimes resulting in a turnover. Whether the correct decision is to attempt to beat a player or turn away from pressure with the ball, confident dribbling technique is a skill every aspiring player must have.

Does your child possess confidence when dribbling?

Skill #2: Passing

While recreational soccer is often characterized by the term “bunch ball” (when every field player swarms the dribbler trying to get a touch on the ball), the idea of sharing the ball amongst teammates plays a big role at the next stage of development. Therefore, the ability to properly pass the ball with the insides of both feet is a critical skill.

I often ask parents to tell me if the game they are watching is an attractive one. If they say: “Yes,” I ask: “Why?” The typical responses I receive include phrases like *“spreading out”* and *“passing the ball around the field”*.

The mantra I use with my players, and the title of my soccer blog is: [“If You Can’t Pass, You Can’t Play.”](#) Simply put, if no real quality possession is maintained by either team, the game probably looks like something you were used to seeing years prior: “bunch ball.”

I demand that my players spend hours improving their passing technique with



the insides of each foot. At my youth club, I have built a dozen of these benches (pictured left) that are scattered around our training field. These benches have multiple uses including:

- Seating
- Soccer tennis nets
- Small sided goals
- Rebound surface

[Watch a Video About How to Build a Bench](#)

[Watch a Video of a Game to Play Using the Bench](#)

A rebound surface allows a player to increase the number of touches on the ball in a shorter, more concentrated period of time. Repetition of proper passing technique has to take priority over everything else with my players at this stage. Tipped on their sides, these 6-foot long benches provide the perfect training tool for young and aspiring players to develop essential passing skills.

Does your child possess the ability to accurately pass the ball with both feet?

Skill #3: Receiving

Naturally, the ability to control the ball with comfort and ease using multiple surfaces (foot, thigh, chest) is a necessity if passing the ball is a priority. Poor control when receiving the ball allows a defender to close space quickly and put them under pressure in a hurry.

My players are used to hearing me say, “Your first touch can NEVER be your worst touch.” When a player’s first touch pops the ball up in the air or bounces away from them, attention immediately shifts to finding the ball. When that happens, the player no longer sees the game in front of them. And when an extra touch or two is needed to get the ball back under control, pressure from a defender can spell the beginning of the end...a turnover is looming.

Improvement comes from repetition. Aspiring players must go back to the rebound surface. Players can work on two things at once – passing technique and receiving skill.

Does your child possess the ability to get the ball under control quickly with multiple surfaces (foot, thigh, chest)?

Skill #4: Shooting

A large number of players struggle to shoot the ball with confidence and with good technique. An even larger number of players are only one foot dominant – having yet to put in the time to develop the weaker foot.

I see a countless number of goal scoring moments lost in games when a young player has a great opportunity to shoot but disregards the perfect chance simply because they are afraid to use their weaker foot. Ultimately, the player chooses to run around the ball or continue a dribble – opportunity lost!

A big part of youth development is creating a training environment that affords youngsters the opportunity to score lots of goals. If you ask a child what they love

about playing soccer, scoring goals will be one of the top three answers for sure. At least one of my practices each week is designed with a shooting on goal aspect to it. In these shooting exercises, players are encouraged to use both feet. While a drastic difference may exist when comparing a child's dominate shooting foot to their weaker foot, experimenting in practice and therefore developing the ability to shoot using both feet is an essential skill for an aspiring player

Does your child possess the ability to strike the ball with power using both their right and left foot?

Skill # 5: Spacing and Transition

Dribbling, passing, receiving and shooting are all technical components of development, while a player's understanding of spacing – when to make the game big and when to make the game small – is a tactical component (the way the player visualizes and comprehends how to play the game).

When bringing a player from our club's recreational or developmental program into the Youth Academy (U8-U11), a big part of their learning curve is gaining a more tactical understanding of a soccer game. Tactics can easily become overwhelming for an 8-10 year old, and understanding basic principles of play is the first step in helping them feel in control of the game. By definition, the principles of play are – providing pressure on the ball, cover, balance in attack and defense, creating height, width and depth, etc.

At this stage of development, players must begin to understand the ball is the fastest thing on the field and that chasing the ball all over the field is not how the game is supposed to be played. Aspiring players must allow the ball to "run" and the opponents to "chase." In other words, good teams make their opponents defend by passing the ball to areas of the field where there is no pressure.

Obviously, in order to find success, a teammate must occupy open spaces (away from pressure) and a pass must be delivered with accuracy and proper pace.

I spend considerable amounts of time trying to get players to 'trust' their teammates: trust they will win the ball from the opponent. When they win the ball, they need another teammate to pass it to in order to relieve pressure. Players must resist the urge to chase after the ball and, instead, "pull away" from the pack/crowd in anticipation of the next play. This is the moment of transition – when the game shifts from offense to defense.

Players who can understand and execute well in moments of transition offer options and flexibility within a team. The sharper the player's soccer IQ combined with an elevated technical proficiency, the more complex the tactical ideas and concepts a player is capable of digesting.

Does your child put themselves in good positions on the field and transition from offense to defense?

Skill #6: Attitude

My job as director of a youth academy program is multi-faceted. I must hire quality coaches, design a training curriculum, schedule practices and games, coordinate events, communicate with Board members and parents, coach my teams and even line fields. My goal as a coach is to inspire young players to develop a training habit. My hope is that each player has fun and wants to come to practices and games.

But the true measure of my job as a coach is igniting a youngster's 'fire' with the desire to improve as a soccer player. Over the course of a season, I may spend 50-60 hours with my players. Two practices per week and a game or two on the weekends is the structure of most youth soccer clubs in the United States. We

have to assume that if a player consistently attends the practices and games, development will occur.

But, like anything, 'real' development occurs when any player commits additional time to their craft. A majority of U9-U11 soccer players in the United States rarely kick a soccer ball outside of the days it's officially marked on the calendar (two times per week and once on the weekend).

It's those players who play pick-up soccer games with their friends in the street or at the park...those players that mess around with a soccer ball trying new things with their older brother or sister...those players that ask the coach to be included in next training session after their practice just ended...those players who can carry on an intelligent conversation with you about last week's Champions League games, etc.,...it is those players whose fires are ignited to learn and improve.

Players who genuinely love the game have the best chance to make it to the next level of the game.

Does your child possess the desire to improve?

This deeper understanding of THE TOP SIX SKILLS FOR PLAYERS AT THE 8-10 YEAR OLD STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT will enable you, as a parent, to identify the building blocks of skill that your child must develop if they aspire to play at a more competitive level in the future. Keep in mind that all children's developmental path is unique and some children develop at a much slower pace and later age than others.

The most important thing that must be nurtured and developed is their love for the game, their love for being a teammate, their love for being active.