

## Simple Small-Sided Games

Simplified Games as the Pillars of Teaching & Learning of Youth Players  
by Horst Wein

Understanding the complex games of soccer, basketball, volleyball, hockey or handball can be best achieved through the practice of a logical progression of simplified games, with a gradual increase in the numbers of players on the teams. Just as young players are growing physically and mentally, the difficulty and complexity of the simplified games are growing as well.

The games are called "simplified" because they have these characteristics:

- Reduced number of participants
- Reduced dimensions of the playing field
- Simplified rules that are flexible and adaptable to the existing conditions
- Limited numbers of game situations
- Simplification of the problems
- Easier contexts for coaches to be able to observe, analyze, evaluate, and correct the performance of all players in the game.

These qualities that characterize the simplified games have a positive impact on both coaches and players for several reasons:

- Exposing children to simplified games with teams of only two, three, or four players leads to far fewer technical and tactical errors when competing later on in more complex games (e.g., 7-on-7 or 8-on-8 soccer).
- Frequent execution of the same techniques stimulates the acquisition and perfection of skills, as does having less distraction by many other teammates and opponents. Moreover, with fewer players, there is more time and space available, facilitating correct execution of techniques.
- To become a good soccer player, a child must learn to perceive with acuity and a wide field of vision the current game situation: the position of the ball, teammates and opponents on the move, location of the goals, and lines on the field. The simplified games not only aid the progressive development of perception but also enable young players to analyze game situations and make correct decisions thanks to the soccer knowledge they have gained through game practice.
- The frequent appearance of the same basic game situations allows players to experiment with different solutions until they are able to resolve on their own the problems presented in the simplified game. Later, when the same or similar game situation reappears in a more complex competition, the player is likely to recognize it and instantly recall a good solution.
- The reduced number of players allows less-skilled ones to become intensively involved in the game.
- Because each team consists of just two to four players, the simplified games progressively develop the capacities of communication and cooperation between players. These are essential aspects of top soccer performance that have often been underestimated in the past.
- No premature specialization for any playing position occurs; the simplified games make every player play defense as well as offense or attack, on the right and on the left as well as in the center of the field. Simplified games help develop complete and intelligent soccer players.

Simplified games contain a reduced number of players, which allows each child to play an intensive role in the game.

Children don't need a high level of ability or specific game knowledge to enjoy training and competing with simplified games. The simplicity of the game itself immediately attracts young players and encourages them to resolve the problems they find in it. After a certain amount of practice, if the coach observes a deficiency (technical or tactical) that is limiting the children's playing capacity, he or she interrupts the game, isolates the problem aspect, and presents the children with corrective activities or exercises. The goal is to overcome the deficiency discovered in the global game.

For the children, practice appears in a completely different light. Instead of simply working on a skill that the coach has predetermined, the child, having discovered that he or she still lacks something to win the simplified game, is motivated to learn a particular skill determined from the context of the game. The youngster wants to master it to a certain degree. So the mastering of a skill is perceived not so much a prerequisite for playing a game but as a complementary part of it; the training has the clear purpose of raising the level of performance in the game in order to win it. This way drill practice does not "kill" the enthusiasm of the young players whose main wish is always to play, and also win games, rather than mastering a determined skill. By using simplified games, a bridge is built between the learning of a new skill and its application in a complex game situation.

Horst Wein has worked for many top clubs such as Real Sociedad, Leeds Utd, Sunderland, Inter Milan and is currently at the Centre of Research and Development of the Royal Spanish Football Federation. He has also wrote numerous books on soccer, offers regular coaching courses and recently ran a course for the English Football Association