

The “Academy” Format

Guidelines and Suggested Procedures for

Teams & Clubs Participating in the U9 Age Group

USA League Play – 2007-2008



United Soccer Association

Forward

To all USA League Member Clubs:

In May 2007 the membership of the United Soccer Association (USA League) passed new rules for the U9 Age group. Known commonly as the “Academy” rules, these rule changes were proposed by members of the League and were unanimously supported by the Club’s Director’s of Coaching present at the DOC Meeting held by the League. In addition, this type of format for younger age teams has been endorsed and recommended by US Youth Soccer (USYS) and the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), etc. As such, USA League has taken a step forward to advance this “new” approach to developing our youngest players.

Since the adoption of this new set of rules, many member clubs have raised questions as to how the new rules will be implemented by the League, and have requested guidance on how clubs should be forming and administering these teams. Also, although these rules were passed almost without opposition at the AGM, some concerns have been raised – i.e. Why were these rules passed, and how will they be enforced?

We have prepared this Guide for your use in an effort to answer these questions, and to provide all clubs with a common set of guidelines and suggestions. As USA League has a diverse membership with clubs of many differing sizes and philosophies, no one set of Rules or Procedures will address exactly how each club will administer, train and coach their teams – and it is not our place to impose restrictions on the freedom of our members to follow their own philosophy of the game. There are volumes of information available on the Academy concept available and some suggested reading is offered in the appendix; the intent here is not to cover everything, but to provide some basic information that clubs can use as a beginning point for answering these questions for themselves and their parents. With that in mind, remember that (other than the specific rules contained in the USA League Bylaws), the information presented herein is only a guide. Each member club will use this information as they see fit.

Yours in Soccer

The Board of Directors

United Soccer Association

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Forward	2
Table of Contents	3
1. Philosophy of the Academy Format	4
1.1. Why the need for change?	4
1.2. Specific problems with the current format	4
1.3. The “Academy” format defined	5
1.4. How the Academy format can address the current problems	5
1.5. Competition and Winning	6
2. Academy Team Administration	8
2.1. Team sizes and roster limits	8
2.2. Team staff recommendations	8
2.3. Team coding and registration	9
2.4. Passes and rosters	9
2.5. Game day procedures	9
2.6. Schedules	9
2.7. Additional information and recommended reading	10
3. Questions & Answers	11

1. Philosophy of the Academy Format

1.1 Why the need for Change?

Over the past few years, soccer professionals worldwide have expressed the need for a new emphasis in training philosophy with younger players. This is also a major area of needed improvement identified by US Soccer, as they have evaluated US players and the training programs providing players to the US National Team system. Simply put, the structured competitive soccer system in place today has resulted in a priority of winning over development. Competitiveness and a desire to win ARE important, fundamental aspects of the game, but 6 to 11 year olds need to learn how to play the game correctly before win/loss records become the only criteria for success. A foundation in training the basic skills of the game early on is needed.

1.2 Specific problems with the current format.

The current competitive soccer system provides many excellent opportunities for players, but also leads to certain potential problems – especially in younger players. Some of the areas of concern which have led to the implementation of the Academy approach around the county, and worldwide, are listed below.

1. Player retention – players leave the game at early ages due to lack of success, lack of enjoyment, and stress induced by coaches and parents.
2. Tactics over Technique – Many young teams spend too much time learning tactical aspects of the game, which can lead to quick wins without players learning needed skills for the future.
3. Positions & Team play – Players are “pigeon holed” into specific positions early on, and are not challenged or allowed to try a variety of positions.
4. Results based soccer – Teams, players, clubs, and coaches are judged by wins vs. losses, and are rewarded accordingly. Parents want their players to play on “elite” teams, encouraging coaches and clubs to emphasize a winning record to recruit players. Coaches and trainers are judged based on record, division, tournament success etc. – not on improvement of individual players.
5. Fear of failure – Players at young ages are often afraid to attempt new things for fear of failure, giving up goals, losing the game, etc. Coaches are afraid to allow players to try

new positions, or to play the “weaker” players especially in close games for fear of losing. Players are not encouraged to experiment, try new things, and be creative.

1.3 The “Academy” format defined.

Simply put, an “Academy” is a group of players placed within one group within an age group at a club, instead of being placed on individual teams. There are no “A” or “B” or 1st and 2nd teams, etc. and players are kept in the larger player pool and are moved back and forth according to progress and development throughout the year.

Clubs within our league will have Academies of varying sizes. Some clubs may only field enough players to make up one team (i.e. 8-10 players), while others may have 40 or 50 players grouped together based only on age and gender. Individual trainers and clubs will have differing styles and philosophies with regard to how they will train their Academy players, but all should share a common approach – with an emphasis on player development.

An integral component to the Academy format is a removal of Standings and Records of teams. This should remove the incentive for clubs or coaches from playing games just to win, and encourage allowing players to learn the game without the fear of failure.

1.4 How the Academy format can address the current problems.

By grouping all players together by age and gender in one Academy program, coaches and trainers will have freedom to focus on training and development. The importance is placed on training, and not the success of individual ‘teams’.

The goal is for players to train as a group, with allowances for smaller group training within the larger Academy group. For games, players can be grouped based on a variety of criteria on a weekly basis; the lack of strict team rosters offers the clubs flexibility to change the team’s components without hindrance. For example, players may be grouped one week by ability level (more advanced together, and least advanced together), the next week by making more equal teams, or by having players play different positions on different weeks, etc.

Hopefully, with positive guidance from coaches and parents, players will be challenged to excel without being overly pushed to win. Coaches should set goals beyond the final score: improvement in passing, communication, beating players 1v1, etc. While these goals are harder to measure than a final score, they are the type of things that coaches should teach players and parents to look for.

1. Player retention – Without the reward/punishment of win loss records, clubs have more incentive to include a wider range of players in their programs. Players who are not currently as physically advanced can receive opportunities to train and improve. Enjoyment of the game should be stressed over final results. The club’s philosophy towards this program should be explained to parents and players, and coaches should ask for support in achieving their goals.
2. Technical over Tactical – Small sided games at younger age groups were implemented in order to simplify the Tactics of the game. Combined with no net gain for winning every game, coaches should have freedom to stress fundamental skills, even if shape or formation suffers.
3. Positions and Team Play – Players should have opportunities to attempt to learn a variety of positions. Today’s forward may be tomorrow’s defender or Goal Keeper. Players should not be labeled by position – at U9 there should be no forwards or midfielders – only soccer players.
4. Goals based soccer – Developmental goals, not results should be prioritized. The individual improvement of each player should be the guide for success – not the final team record.
5. Fear of Failure – Players are allowed to experiment and be creative. Players should not be discouraged from taking on defenders or trying new “moves”. If creativity is stifled now, they will most likely have a fear of ever trying anything new. If a player tries to take on a defender and causes a counter attack conceding a goal – they should be encouraged and applauded for trying, not reprimanded for the end result. With time, players will gain confidence along with their new skills and will learn decision making through success and failure.

1.5 Competition and Winning

As stated before, competitiveness is an important component of the game of soccer. A desire to win is natural in all players, and should not be discouraged. Players of all ages want to win and are naturally competitive. They will know who won at the end of the game.

It is understood that coaches, players and teams will play to win. The hope is that this is not the ONLY focus. Teams should take pride in their own successes, not in the failure of their opponents. Coaches are encouraged to communicate with their opponents prior to matches to discuss their goals for the game, and how they can cooperate to help each other accomplish

each team's goals while maintaining a competitive environment – this will be further discussed later in this guide.

Coaches and clubs should at no time attempt to “stack” teams to win every game. Game rosters should be composed as best as possible to allow maximum playing time for all players, and to allow player movement in positions and amongst teams.

Coaches should set clearly defined goals for each player, each game and for the season – and should place as much emphasis on the achievement of those goals as on the net result of the games.

2. Academy Team Administration

2.1 Academy sizes and roster limits

By rule, each Academy program will request team slots based on total player registrations in each gender. Each club wishing to form an Academy team must have a minimum of 6 registered players – there is no maximum.

Team “slots” – define the number of games each club’s Academy will have on a given league game day. If a club has 6 to 10 players and requests one team slot, they will be scheduled for 1 game each game day. If a club has 50 players and requests 5 game slots, they will be scheduled for 5 games – 5 groups of 10 players, each playing in 1 game.

Clubs will request team slots based on the guidelines set within the USA League rules: Minimum 6/Maximum 12 players per Team Slot requested.

Each club should make a decision on how many team slots they desire, in the best interest of all players. Obviously, clubs with fewer players have fewer options (i.e. 10 players – only 1 slot), while larger Academies have more to consider. For example an Academy with 48 players could request as many as 8 Team Slots, but this would mean very small game rosters, or could request as few as 4 Team Slots, which would mean 6 players on the bench at all times for 4 each of the 4 games; a compromise of 5 Team Slots would give game rosters of 9 or 10 players and allow for missing players, injuries etc. and still provide ample playing time for all. This decision should be made by each club based on their own needs and the best interest of the players and parents.

Each team slot will be individually identified on the schedule.

2.2 Academy Staff Recommendations

Clubs should strive to provide ample coaching and training staff for each Academy program. Training staff and coaching staff should be large enough to provide all players with adequate time and attention. Larger Academy programs should consider multiple coaches, with an Academy “Director” or Administrator to oversee the full staff. Training staff should also be Licensed and/or Experienced and able to provide correct age appropriate training. Directors of Coaching and/or Academy Directors should work with trainers and coaches to provide a cohesive and equal approach to training all players. As before, each club will have to determine how they will staff their own Academy programs to cover the needs of the players.

2.3 Team coding and registration

All players and coaches are required to be registered with FYSA. All players in a club's Academy program should be registered to one team code with FYSA. Separate teams by gender are allowed. Otherwise, all players in the same age group and gender (i.e. U9 Boys – 1 Academy, U9 Girls – 1 Academy) should be placed under 1 team code. Academy specific team codes will be provided to the club registrars by FYSA.

2.4 Passes and rosters

Player and coaches passes are required at every game. Game day rosters for each game must be prepared indentifying the players participating in that game. This can either be in the form of an FYSA Event Roster, or an FYSA Downloaded Roster. If a FYSA downloaded official roster is used, the players which are participating should be identified and those not playing in that game should be crossed out. Passes and rosters shall be reviewed by the game official prior to the game.

2.5 Game day procedures

For each league game, the coaches will provide the referee with the player passes and rosters for those players participating in that specific game. The referee will compare the player passes and roster and ensure that the correct players, and the correct number of players (maximum 12) are participating.

2.6 Schedules

The league will attempt to form a schedule for Academy age groups which balance convenience of the clubs with an equitable schedule for all. As each club will have differing numbers of teams, compromises will have to be made.

An attempt will be made to provide a balanced home and away schedule, within the possibilities of the schedule.

Club's with multiple teams: The League will attempt to schedule home games for all Academy teams from an individual club on the same days (all teams from an individual club play at home on the same days and away on the same days). The away game schedule may result in a club's Academy teams playing at different locations on the same day. As a result, clubs are encouraged to plan early and communicate schedules to players and parents. Clubs can decide

in advance which players will play in which games, or may decide on a week to week basis as they see fit. Either way, keep in mind that parents will have to know in advance their schedule for planning and transportation.

Club Academies will be grouped based on Geographic regions, which should limit travel requirements for participants.

2.7 Additional information and recommended reading.

Many excellent sources of information exist on training philosophy and the Academy approach. A recommended resource is:

“Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States” – US Soccer –

Available via PDF Download at USSOCCER.com, this is a 70 page guide with discussion of each age group and much discussion and rationale for the Academy approach as implemented here.

3. Questions and Answers

Some responses to questions which have been asked about the Academy Format

- 1. With no Win/Loss Record, isn't this just "glorified Rec soccer"?** – No, the emphasis is on training and making each player better. Scores will be kept, but there is no need to post standings. This program differs from "rec" soccer in that players will be receiving intensive individual training from professional, experienced and licensed coaches and trainers.
- 2. Why do we have to play based on geography only? We want to play the "better" teams.** – Geographically based groupings limits travel for the younger players. With proper communication between coaches adequate competition between clubs can be achieved. Further, clubs are allowed and encouraged to schedule friendly games or scrimmages with other clubs, as they see fit, in addition to the league schedule. Also, teams may participate in tournaments for additional competition if they desire.
- 3. How is the league going to "police" the teams to keep them from winning all their games?** – In short, we aren't. Teams are allowed to win games. And teams are allowed to be "better" than others. Clubs are encouraged to divide teams in order to provide competitive and challenging games for both teams playing. Communication between coaches prior to matches will assist in this – coaches should discuss their teams, and what they are trying to accomplish with their opponents coaches and work together to help each other have competitive AND enjoyable games. The AGC's will monitor the age group and will bring to the attention of the Executive Board any coach or club who is blatantly ignoring the principals of sportsmanship and fair play.

4. **Will this approach be expanded to other age groups?** – As this is the 1st year of these new rules, the League will monitor the progress of the Academy age groups and will attempt to find ways to make improvements for the future. If the membership of USA decides, the Academy rules may be phased in to older age groups over time.

5. **Why did the USA Board do this? Why are they *making us play in Academies*?** – The USA Board of Directors do not decide these matters. This approach was suggested by the membership, endorsed by the Directors of Coaching of the various clubs, and overwhelmingly voted in to effect by the affiliates. As with all aspects of our League, the member clubs have the deciding votes. Furthermore, this approach is recommended by US Soccer, US Youth Soccer – and is being adopted around the country and around the world (Manchester United’s Youth Academy is only one example where skill development is being stressed over game wins). We are not the first to adopt this program, but do not want to be the last!