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# ***U.S. Soccer Federation***

Washington, DC

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## ***Player Development: Zone 1***

- Over the past two years, there has been a lot of discussion centered around the concept of mandating small-sided games as a core principle of Zone 1
- When looking at mandating small-sided games (or other items) we realized that we should be *thinking and looking much broader to truly improve the dynamics within Zone 1*
- So, let's start from the beginning



## ***Review of Zone Models***

- Over the past three years, U.S. Soccer has implemented a common framework for discussing the player development process
  - Zone 1 – Ages 6-12
  - Zone 2 – Ages 13-18
  - Zone 3 – Above the age of 18
- This framework has allowed us to narrow our focus within these areas and have meaningful discussion on how to improve within each zone



## ***Zone 1 – Original Synopsis (Feb 2007)***

- We have defined Zone 1 as the following:
  - Base Level
  - Ages 6-12
  - “The ball is your best friend”
- Dynamics
  - Introduction to the game/huge numbers from age 6 to 10
  - Limited knowledge base from most coaches
  - Players who develop physically at an early age are typically the “stars”
  - Current environment places too much emphasis on winning vs. developing a passion for the game/fundamentals of the game
- Assessment Summary
  - Need more free play, less structure – futsal, playground, etc.
  - Encourage passion and experimentation
  - Encourage technical training and the most basic building blocks of the game (1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2, etc.)

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# *Developmental Theory*



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## ***Developing Expertise***

- There has been a substantial amount of research performed in the field of developing expertise (including soccer)
  - U.S. Soccer works with Anders Ericsson and Paul Ward in this area, but have spoken to many others including: Peter Vint, Mark Williams, Istvan Balyi
- Core Principle of Development
  - 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to reach elite level performance
    - 10 years of practice = 1,000 hours per year
    - 1,000 hours/year = 20 hours per week



# Sample Zone 1 Academies

- Professional youth academies all train at least 3 hours per week in Zone 1

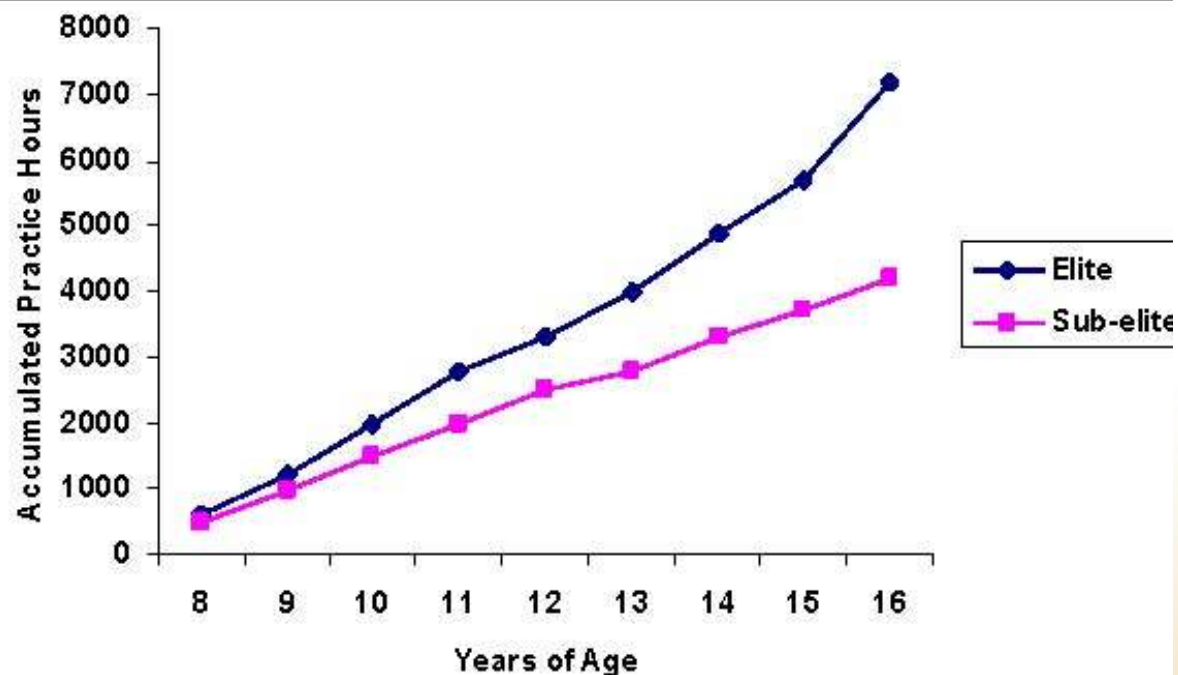
Club	Active Zone 1 Ages	Avg. Training (Hrs/Week)
Ajax	6-12	3.5 hours
AC Milan	10-12	4 hours
FC Twente	6-12	4.5 hours
Fulham	9-12	5.33 hours
Chelsea	9-12	5.5 hours
Galatasaray	10-12	6 hours
Dinamo Zagreb	6-12	6 hours
Real Madrid	8-12	6 hours
Bayern Munich	8-12	8 hours

- Source: Richard Russell, England FA



## *Value of Deliberate Practice*

- Sample of European Academy players demonstrated that total practice hours was a key difference in the backgrounds of professional ('elite') and amateur ('sub-elite') players

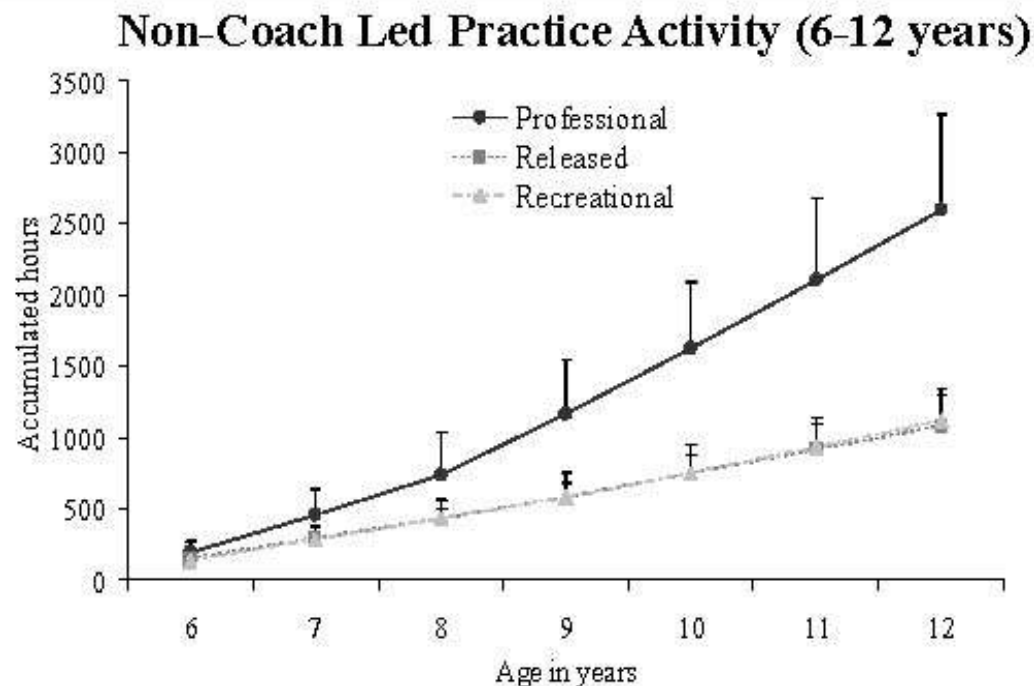


Ward et al. (2004, 2007) High Ability Studies



## Value of Free Play

- Different sample of European Academy players demonstrated that additional hours accumulated in free play environments was the major difference in the backgrounds of future professional vs. amateur players



Ford et al. (2008) JSEP



## ***Principles of Development***

- Total hours accumulated in quality structured environments (i.e. professional youth Academies) drives elite player development
  - 10,000 hours of deliberate practice required to reach elite level performance
- Of the players exposed to quality structured environments, the players who accumulated more hours of free play were the ones to develop into professionals

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# ***Assessment of Zone 1 Landscape in U.S.***



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## ***Zone 1 Demographics***

- Introduction to the game for players
- Great base of players in Zone 1
  - Total male population ages 6-12 = 13,914,988
    - Source: U.S. Census
  - Total registered players = 1,364,493 (9.8%)
    - Source: U.S. Soccer Registration Department
  - 1 of every 10 boys in Zone 1 is playing organized soccer
  - Participation #'s peak at age 10
- Unfortunately, participation is extremely limited
  - Most players only play once every 2.5 weeks
    - Source: Taylor Report



# Participation

- Zone 1 players are not playing very often in structured or unstructured environments
  - Over 75% of U.S. players are playing less than 1x/ week
  - Only 13% of 'Avid' U.S. players play more than 2x/ week; almost all of the additional play is unstructured
    - Source: Taylor Report

#/Times Played Soccer in Past Year

	USYS	AYSO
1-3 times	8%	8%
4-10 times	17%	14%
11-20 times	20%	22%
21-50 times	30%	35%
51-100 times	13%	12%
101+ times	13%	10%

#/Times Played Organized Soccer in Past Year

	USYS	AYSO
1-3 times	9%	9%
4-10 times	22%	18%
11-20 times	28%	34%
21-50 times	28%	28%
51-100 times	10%	11%
101+ times	2%	0%



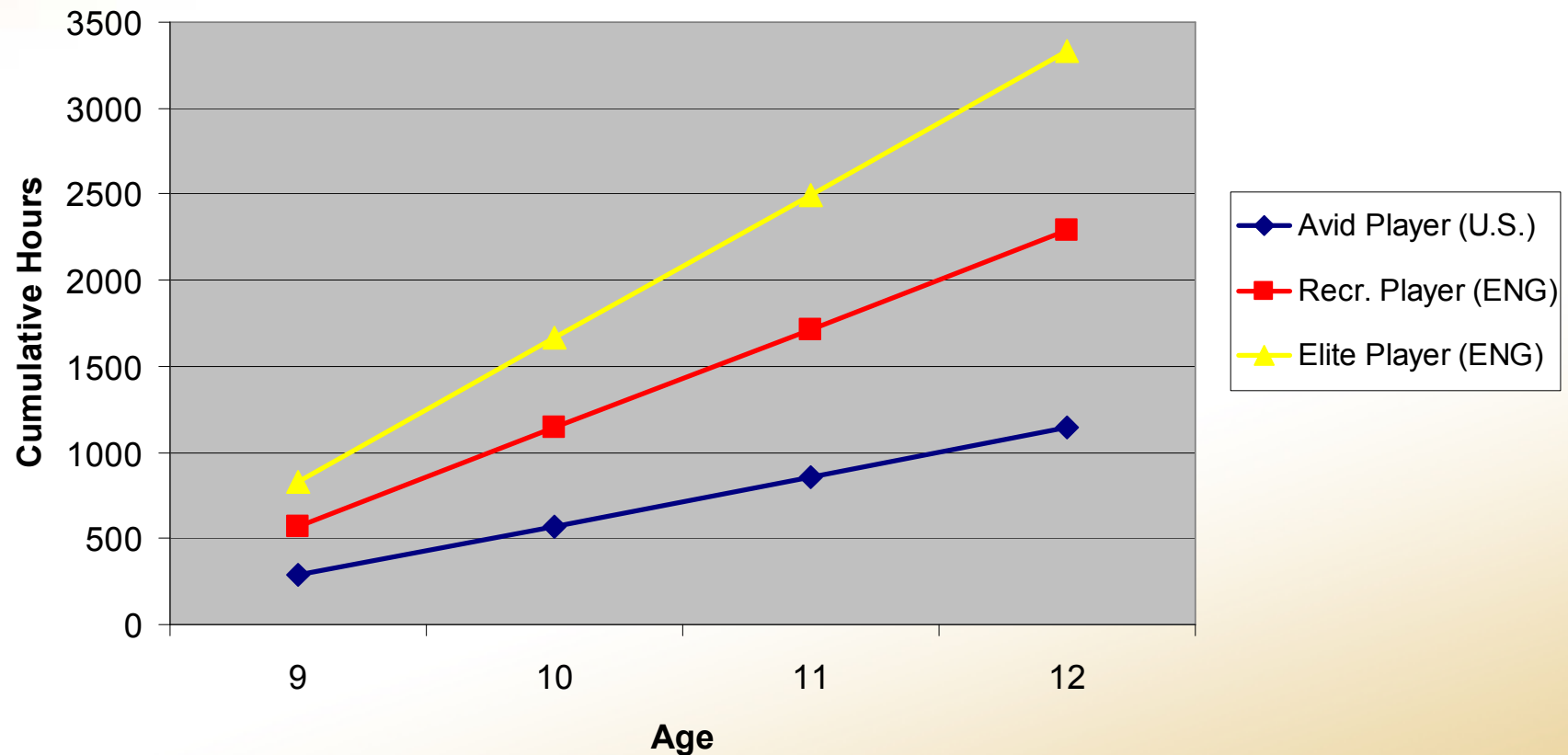
## ***Time Spent Playing***

- Comparing the level of activity between U.S. and European players in Zone 1 demonstrates a major area of opportunity to improve U.S. player development
  - ~3-8 hours per week for the more Avid U.S. player
  - 8-14 hours for the Recreational European player
  - 12-20 hours for the “Elite” European player
- The Avid U.S. player plays less often than the Recreational European player – **clearly**, we need more time playing the game



## Activity Over Time

- Year over year, the gap between total hours played by European and American youth players only increases





## *Comparing Types of Activity*

- Europeans spend significantly more time in training, individual practice and free play than U.S. players

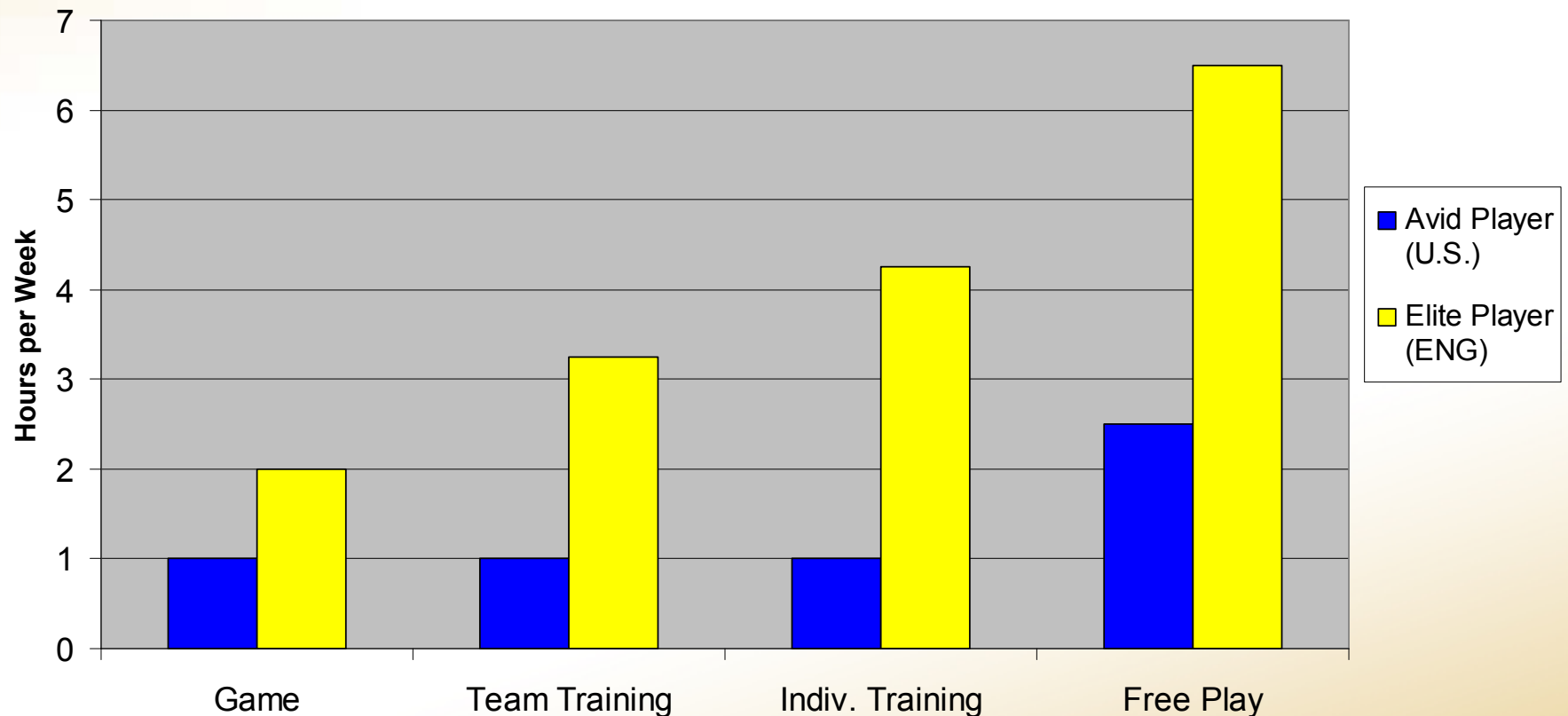
Activity	U.S. Player	Euro. Player
Game	1 hours/wk	2 hours/wk
Training	1 hours/wk	3+ hours/wk
Individual Practice	1 hours/wk	4+ hours/wk
Free Play	2.5 hours/wk	6.5 hours/wk

- Zone 1 players in Europe do not spend a great deal of time playing games (only 2 of 16 hours per week)



## Comparing Types of Activity

- Weekly Schedule Comparison between Avid U.S. Player and Elite European Player in Zone 1 (ages 9-12)



Sources: Ward (2004, 2007) and Taylor Report



## *Quality of Activity*

- The quality of activity in structured environments (training and games) is equally important for Zone 1 player development
- Quality of training and games is driven by the quality of the coaches



## ***Training Environment***

- Coaching emphasis in training does not encourage player development
  - The quality of a training environment at all levels is dictated by the quality of the coach
  - Limited knowledge base from most coaches
  - Poor instruction at the earliest levels
    - Use of the adult game as model
  - Players rarely get the chance to play *real soccer*
  - Little/No implementation of training cycles or periodization
  - All about the team's results!
    - Not enough players are encouraged to play up to ability level



## ***Game Environment***

- Coaching emphasis in games does not support player development
  - Games are “*managed*” / coached like other American sports
  - Frantic pace of play (substitution patterns)
  - Constant stoppages (coaches, referees, rules, etc.)
  - Constant verbal instruction from both sidelines (parents & coaches)
  - Tactics used to get the desired result (both situational & game)
  - Too much emphasis on winning vs. developing a passion for the game/fundamentals of the game

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# ***U.S. Soccer Best Practices***



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# ***U.S. Soccer Best Practices***

- U.S. Soccer Best Practices provides coaches with an ideological framework for solutions in Zone 1
  - Value of Free Play
    - Limit amount of structured competition in early ages
    - Encourage free play outside of training (i.e. futsal, street soccer, soccer tennis, etc.)
  - Team Practice Environment
    - More free play incorporated into younger practices
    - Focus on building blocks (1v1, 2v1, 2v2, 3v2)
    - Encourage experimentation
  - Game Environment
    - Small-sided games
    - Limited travel and competition at younger ages
    - Focus on 'what the game looks like' not results
    - International rules



# U.S. Soccer Best Practices

- Appropriate types of organized play in Zone 1

Zone	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Age Grp.	U-6	U-8	U-10	U-12	U-14	U-16	U-17
No. of Games per Year	No Organ. Games	No Organ. Games w/ Score	Ltd. # of Org. Gms. (2:1 training-game ratio)	30 Max. (3:1 training-game ratio)	30 Max. (3:1 training-game ratio)	30 Max. (3:1 training-game ratio)	30 Max. (5:1 training-game ratio)
Periods of Rest	Voluntary	Voluntary	Multi-sport partic.	Time Off & Cont. Multi-sport	Some Time Off	Limited Breaks	Limited Breaks
Amount of Travel	None	None	In State (1 Hr. Max.)	Day Trips, plus 2 Over-nights	Regional	National	National
Partic. in Tourn.	None	None	Jamboree or Festival	Round Robin Only	Max. 3 Games in 4 Days	Max. 3 Games in 4 Days	Max. 3 Games in 4 Days
Champion ships	None	None	None	State (small-sided)	State and Regional	State and Regional	State, Reg. and National



# U.S. Soccer Best Practices

- Appropriate age-specific training environments

Zone	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Age Grp.	U-6	U-8	U-10	U-12	U-14	U-16	U-17
% Struct. Practice	None	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Very High
%Unstruct. Practice	Very High	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low	Very Low
Technical	Very High	Very High	Very High	High	High	High	Moderate
Tactical	Very Limited (1v1, 1v2, 2v2); No Positions	Very Limited (1v1, 1v2, 2v2); No Positions	Limited (1v1, 1v2, 3v3, 5v5 w/ GK); No Positions	Moderate (1v1, 1v2, 6v6, 7v7); Begin Assigning Positions	Moderate (Variety); Start Teaching Positions	Moderate (Variety)	High (Wide Variety)
Physical	Mvmt. Edu.	Mvmt. Edu.	Coord. & Balance	Speed & Agility	Introduce Strength	Seasonal Program	Seasonal Program
Mental	Enjoymt. & Skill Dev.	Enjoymt. & Skill Dev.	Learn to Train	Learn to Train	Train to Train	Train to Train	Train to Compete



# U.S. Soccer Best Practices

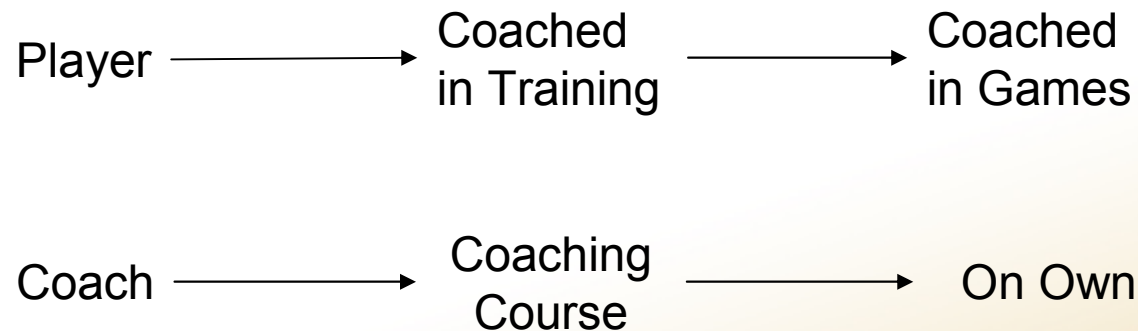
- Age-specific structure of game environments

Zone	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Age Grp.	U-6	U-8	U-10	U-12	U-14	U-16	U-17
No. of Games per Year	No Organ. Games	No Organ. Games w/ Score	Ltd. no. of org. gms. (2:1 T-G ratio)	30 Max. (3:1 T-G ratio)	30 Max. (3:1 T-G ratio)	30 Max. (3:1 T-G ratio)	30 Max. (5:1 T-G ratio)
Players/Tm.	3v3	3v3	6v6 Max	9v9	11v11	11v11	11v11
Game Length	n/a	n/a	2x25 mins.	2x30 mins.	2x35 mins.	2x40 or 45 mins.	2x40 or 45 mins.
Subs.	n/a	n/a	Free	Free	No re-entry/ half	No re-entry	No re-entry
GK Status	None	Optional	Rotate	GK share time	GK based on ability	GK based on ability	GK based on ability
Field Size	30 yd. x 20 yd.	30 yd. x 20 yd.	60 yd. x 40 yd.	55-60 yd. x 80-85 yd.	100 yd. x 60 yd.	115-120 yd. x 70 yd.	115-120 yd. x 70 yd.
Size of Ball	3	3	4	4	5	5	5



# Coaching Development

- We need to develop better coaches to work in Zone 1
  - Courses/Materials
    - Teach theory of U.S. Soccer Best Practices
    - Teach application of U.S. Soccer Best Practices
  - Coach Mentoring
    - Coaches get NO feedback on their performances – OTHER THAN WINS AND LOSSES (explains the focus on winning)



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# *Next Steps*



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# Overview

- Based on broad review, the biggest challenges in the U.S. to elite player development in Zone 1 are:
  - Limited amount of player activity in unstructured environments
  - Better coaches are required to improve training and game environments
- U.S. Soccer Best Practices provides an ideological framework to address these challenges
- What is the best way to encourage the widespread adoption of this framework at the local level in Zone 1?