

## 'The swarm': a legitimate team shape?

what to consider if you're thinking of putting young soccer players in fixed positions

a youth soccer coaching article from [Palo Alto AYSO](#)

How many times have you heard a coach or parent call out "John, remember your position!" or "John, you're supposed to be playing fullback!" during a game? How many times have you done it yourself? I'll plead guilty right away. Sometimes it seems like coaches (and some parents) are obsessed with getting the kids to play position. Is this ok or are we making unreasonable demands on the kids and as a result spoiling their enjoyment of the game? Remember, in AYSO, the game is for the players, not the coaches or parents. The short answer is that there is no short answer, but in this note I will try to cast some light on the matter, and perhaps help you see the issue of playing position from a different perspective, that of "team shape".

First, the answer depends a great deal on the age of the kids. I would expect that by 12-14, most players understand why positional play is important and what the field positions are, but I would not expect everybody to succeed in translating that into actual game play until 14-16. In contrast, at age 5, I would expect no understanding and no interest at all in playing position. Obviously sometime between ages 5 and 14, coaches are expected to teach positional play and (we hope) that the players will catch on. The key question is when and why? My belief, based on many years of coaching this age group, is that we generally try to do this too early, and that this is the root cause of a lot of the sideline shouting on the subject. Sadly it sometimes also leads coaches to teach bad habits that become a liability in later years.

Anyone who has watched 11-a-side (or even 7-a-side) at the 6-8 age is familiar with the "swarm" - everybody chasing the ball and nobody playing position. In contrast, you may also have seen players standing in fixed positions on the field, especially defenders standing on the edge of the penalty area. Which mode of play is more fun? Since the kids will chase the ball if given the chance I think the answer is the swarm. It is obvious which is better exercise. You might be surprised that I also believe that the swarm is better at developing soccer ability. But isn't it important that the kids learn to play position? Certainly, but not until it is necessary, and definitely not at the expense of developing the basic instincts that a soccer player needs. If I had to pick the most important characteristic of a good soccer player, it would be "hustle" - the desire to win the ball, get open for passes and deny opponents space to play or receive the ball. These abilities can go a long way to make up for pure soccer skills. Every coach loves a player with hustle! Yet it's hard to teach, especially if the formative years are spent standing around playing position!

Playing position only matters once the skill level and mental development of the kids has risen to the point where it makes sense to them and is also actually useful in the game. This happens rather later than most people think, not usually before the age of nine in average kids. Defensively, the need to play position arises once the opposition can kick the ball a long distance or can dribble or pass out of the swarm and break away. In either

case it becomes more important for the defensive team to cover the strategic areas of the field. As defensive abilities improve, the offensive team has to pass the ball to find open space and try to isolate defenders one-on-one. This requires that the players spread out and stretch the defence. Once players mature enough to loft the ball thirty yards or more, as happens between age eleven and fourteen on average, good positional organization becomes very important, both offensively and defensively. But playing position away from the ball requires mental maturity, putting team before self, something that also only develops in the early teen years. Fortunately the game moves much faster at this level and frequent changes of direction and location of play occur, so that participation is ensured for everyone, even when playing position. This is simply not the case in the younger age groups and playing position often literally means no touches of the ball for long periods. This can't be right for young players.

If you watch a top-level game, you will see that the players position themselves so that the team as a whole has a definite "shape", with the players generally spaced evenly in that shape, so as to cover the whole territory. As the game develops, players are constantly adjusting their positions relative to one another and to the actual play. On defence the shape contracts in an attempt to deny space and put more players near the ball (a kind of swarm!). On offence the team shape expands to try to create space and break the shape of the defence. What you will hardly ever see is a player standing still. Players are constantly in motion, fine-tuning their position, covering for their teammates and compensating for changes in the opponents' strategy. The offside law plays a key role in encouraging a compact shape on defence. By making it illegal to for an opponent to receive the ball in an offside position behind the defence, the law encourages defences to push towards their opponents' goal and limit the space for their opponents to play in. This is another reason why teaching defending players to stand on their penalty area is wrong - it allows the opposition to freely use the space between the half-way line and the penalty area without the risk of being offside and develops a bad defensive habit that is hard to break later.

Team shape is what I concentrate on when introducing positional play. More than anything else, I want the players to "stay connected" as a unit and not break into separate groups. I want the whole team involved all of the time, so I am always encouraging my defence to move up the field to at least the half-way line when we are attacking. Sometimes my team will give up goals on breakaways that might have been prevented by having the defence on the penalty area. That's a small price to pay for teaching the right long-term strategy and having all my team involved in the game.

Many of the difficulties of teaching positional play are made worse by playing too many players on a team, because this increases the "need" to assign them positions in an attempt to avert the swarm. The right answer is to adjust the number of players on the team to the development level of the players! AYSO National is committed to reducing team sizes in the younger age groups and we are in the forefront of this process in the Palo Alto region. In 1998 we introduced the 4-a-side program for the boys Under-7 age group and it has been very successful. It has many benefits, not least that teaching positional play is a non-problem by design. In the 2000 season, 4-a-side was extended to

both the Under-8 and Under-7 divisions, and 7-a-side was introduced for the Under-10 and Under-9 divisions. In 2002, the Under-9 divisions switched to 5-a-side, as the jump to 7-a-side was too much for many players. The gradual increase from 4 to 5 to 7 players allows coaches to teach the beginnings of positional play, without becoming overwhelmed by the complexities of 11-a-side.