

A beginner's guide to small-sided games

Nowadays, coaches appreciate that children learn best by playing the game, not by enduring boring drills. And the best game to play is a small sided game – such as 4v4.

This is because SSGs:

- Are easy to set up.
- Allow more touches of the ball.
- Reduce the number of choices a player has to make when in possession.
- Encourage goal scoring.
- Can be easily modified by conditions which allow specific topics to be practised in a match-like situation.
- Do not require any input from the coach once the conditions are understood and the game has begun; the game is the teacher.

Small-sided games are not new, however. The Dutch have used them extensively since the 1970s and in the UK they were used as early as the 1960s by the West Ham coach, Ron Greenwood.

Pitch size

The size of the pitch is determined by the age and skill level of your players. For an average group of U10s, 30 yards long by 20 yards wide is a good size but whatever size of playing area you choose, bear in mind that you can usually make the game easier by making the playing area – or the goals – bigger if your players are having difficulty.

The reverse is also true: if your players are finding the game too easy, make the pitch and/or the goals smaller.

Goalkeepers

Goalkeepers are required in most SSGs. You can either add a fifth player as the goalkeeper or use an outfield player so it becomes 3v3 plus a goalkeeper.

Restarts

All SSGs can be restarted in a number of ways:

- With a throw-in.
- With a roll in from the touchline.
- By the goalkeeper rolling the ball out.
- The coach can pass a new ball on.

These variations allow your players to focus on building up moves in a specific way or, if the coach serves a new ball on, from a specific area of the pitch.

Four classic SSGs

1. The wide game

Objective: to encourage shooting. This game also encourages players to pass the ball wide and cross it into the penalty area.

Set-up: goals are placed on the sidelines of a normal-sized pitch, making the playing area wider than it is long.

2. Possession v pressure

Objective: to improve keeping possession, making a quick transition.

How to play: team A starts on the pitch and passes the ball around. Team B stand on the sidelines.

On your command, team B runs on to the pitch, tries to win the ball and then score a goal.

Team A tries to keep possession.

Team B has 30 seconds to win the ball and score a goal – if it fails, the passing team is awarded a point.

Rotate the teams for the next game.

3. Play out, go out

Objective: to encourage using the full width of the pitch.

Set-up: As normal except there are no goals. Both teams have two outfield players on the pitch and two on the sidelines.

How to play: On-field players earn a point for their team by making a successful – i.e. controlled – pass to a team mate who is waiting on the sidelines.

If they succeed, the player on the sideline dribbles the ball in and the player who passed to them takes their place as a sideline player.

Award one point for every successful pass. The first team to earn five points wins.

4. Doubled-sided goals

Objective: to encourage players to play with their heads up and look for goal-scoring opportunities. It's also a good workout for your goalkeepers.

Set-up: the goals are made with cones or poles and are set in about 10 yards from the end lines.

Coaching notes: before the game begins, tell your players that if they can't score into the front of the goal they should try to play the ball around the back of the goal and score in that side.

