

**A Model Training Program  
for  
U16 – U19 Elite Youth Soccer Players in the United States**

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The resources available for training elite youth soccer players have increased exponentially over the past 10 years. Athletes in the top clubs throughout the country are now regularly provided with, among other things, both strength and power training as well as speed and agility training—benefits previously reserved solely for collegiate and professional soccer athletes. In many regards, the training and coaching methodologies used with these youth soccer players are far more advanced than those used with athletes in other American sports.

The large increase in training tools and disciplines, and the resulting necessity for top players to become not only better soccer players, but also faster and stronger athletes, has added an element of complexity to planning soccer training. The challenge for trainers and clubs is to provide their athletes with the proper amount of training in each discipline, at the proper time, and without overtraining the athlete. Adding to this challenge is the fact that, if not provided with this training by their clubs, many athletes will go find it on their own. When athletes begin training with several different independent programs, the lack of coordination between the training plans often results in over-training. Similarly, conflicting training methodologies can often diminish the returns the athlete receives from their hard work. Because of these problems, providing athletes with one integrated and coordinated training plan becomes even more important.

This article aims to provide a structural framework for developing a year-long training program for elite soccer athletes. This model program will incorporate the proper amount of training in all the disciplines essential for soccer and athletic development. Adherence to this program or one like it will develop soccer players that are not only technically and tactically improved, but are also stronger and faster athletes.

Because of the large difference in training priorities and needs for both the very young athlete, and the mature collegiate or pro soccer player, the scope of this article is confined to 16 – 19 year old athletes. Presuming that, for elite players, basic technical and tactical concepts are mastered before age 16, it is near age 16 when strength, speed, and other training disciplines can first be most efficiently incorporated into soccer training.

Identifying Training Components:

The USSF, and most of the governing soccer bodies in countries throughout the world, including the DFB and KNVB<sup>1</sup>, have identified four basic components to the game of soccer: technical, tactical, physical, and psychological. A model training plan for elite athletes must address each of these components. Analyzing training structure through a

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<sup>1</sup> The DFB (Deutscher Fussball Bund) is the governing body of German soccer, and the KNVB (Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbalbond) is the governing body of Dutch soccer.

component-based viewpoint also helps to provide a framework for developing efficient and successful training plans:

- **The Technical Component:**

Elite U17 – U19 players should already have mastered soccer’s basic technical skills. For these players, training technique involves learning and perfecting advanced skills, (bending a ball, volley finishes, etc.), while increasing the speed and consistency of execution in all technical actions. This technical training should provide for high amounts of repetition at increasing speeds. As such, high quality technical training will often include a fitness element to it. Finally, technical training for elite players should involve increasing “resistance” within the training activity. Though younger players may need to train primarily with no pressure or resistance, for example with passive defenders, elite players must spend much of their time training technique under defensive pressure within a game-realistic environment.

- **The Tactical Component:**

For elite U17 – U19 players, tactical training can still involve reminders of the basic decision-making principles of the game—individual tactics. However, most tactical training at this age should focus on learning broader and more complex tactical cues, and the majority of tactical training time should be spent in one of two areas:

- 1) **Group/Team Tactics:**

Group or team tactics involve learning tactical cues within lines on the field and in various systems of play. Group or team tactical training also helps individual athletes to understand their role and function in various situations on the field.

- 2) **Functional Training:**

Since by this age most players have “settled in” to a specific position or line on the field, functional training should also be a regular feature of training—involving training players in both the specific techniques and tactics of their primary position.

- **The Physical Component:**

The physical component of the game involves athleticism: strength, quickness, agility, balance, power, etc. Because the methods for training these qualities are very different, the physical component can be broken down into three training modules:

- 1) **Strength and Power Development:**

Strength and power training for soccer players should heavily emphasize the athlete’s “core”—the abdominals and lower back. Most importantly, the training must be soccer-specific—that is, the training exercises should strengthen muscle movements that are actually performed in the game.

- 2) **Lateral Speed and Agility (LSA):**

LSA training involves increasing foot-speed, improving control of the body’s center of gravity, and increasing the efficiency and speed of changes of direction. Both LSA

and SAS (see below) training modules emphasize quality of movement mechanics, not fitness or quantity of movement. Therefore these modules are most effectively done first in training.

### **3) Straight-Ahead-Speed and Acceleration (SAS):**

SAS training involves improving acceleration mechanics so that the body is efficiently and effectively using all body movement and positioning to increase speed. The goals of SAS training are to both eliminate counter-productive movement habits and to increase muscle explosiveness.

- **The Psychological Component:**

Many coaches speak of the need for a proper mentality and the importance of psychological strength without spending time doing psychological training. At its most basic level, psychological training involves teaching the athlete how to train consistently and effectively, and then how to compete effectively. More advanced psychological training involves activities designed to help the athlete perform in game situations. Psychological training can be broadly separated into two basic focuses:

#### **1) Motivation-focused training:**

Motivation-focused psychological training is designed to help the athlete learn to train and compete sharply and with high intensity on a consistent basis. Examples include: goal-setting sessions, developing habits of a “competitor”, etc.

#### **2) Performance-focused training:**

Performance-focused psychological training is designed to help the athlete perform successfully in pressure situations. Examples include: visualization techniques, stress-reduction techniques, etc.

Each of the 4 training components obviously includes a broad range of training activities. Within this spectrum of activities, basic coaching principles dictate that, whatever the training goal, developmentally appropriate training activities always be selected. Also, the activities used in any session must depend on the specific individual developmental needs of the athlete or team involved.

It is useful to think of the components not as independent divisions, but as overlapping areas along a soccer training continuum. For example, tactical training always has some degree of technical benefit, and psychological training can be built into conditioned games. Well-thought out and efficient training activities can and should involve multiple components.

#### Season Segmentation:

Over the course of a calendar year, each training component will receive greater or lesser emphasis according to established training priorities. These priorities should be carefully identified based on the time of the year, specifically the time and focus of the particular season.

For soccer players, the calendar year can be roughly divided into four different seasons, each of varying length, and each requiring very different training priorities:

Season	Percentage of the Year	Months
Pre-Season	15 %	1.5
Competitive Season	45 %	5
Recovery and Regeneration	15 %	2.5
Off Season Training	25 %	3

The training planning process begins each year with a 3-6 week pre-season, and moves directly into the longest season of the year—the competitive season. At the conclusion of the competitive season, a period of rest and regeneration, or a recovery season, is essential. Following this recuperative “break” comes off-season training—which should be a time of significant individual technical and athletic improvement. Properly conducted, off-season training lays the groundwork for much of the results of the competitive season. At the end of off-season training, the players should be provided with a short recovery break before the yearly cycle begins again with pre-season training.

Using Season Segmentations to Develop Training Priorities:

The different realities and demands of each season will dictate training priorities and goals during that season. For example, in the competitive season, the pressure for results in competition requires that team tactical training be a high priority. Similarly, the need to help athletes deal with the stresses of game performance requires psychological development to be a high priority. Each season of the year will require similar adjustments to training priorities. The following table illustrates the appropriate priority level for each training component in each season:

Season	Technical Training	Tactical Training	Physical Training: Strength/Power	Physical Training: LSA	Physical Training: SAS	Psychological Training
Pre-Season	HIGH	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Competitive Season	LOW/MEDIUM	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	HIGH
Off-season	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LOW

*(Because by definition the recovery season is a recuperative break from soccer training, it is not included in this table.)*

The priority level of each training area should determine the amount of weekly training time devoted to that area within the season. Although the exact weekly training frequency may vary both within and across seasons, establishing training priorities helps to provide a guidepost to the content of each training week:

- **HIGH:** Should be addressed in nearly every training during the week.
- **MEDIUM:** Should be addressed in approximately one-half of the trainings.
- **LOW:** Should be addressed in approximately one training per week.

Only after the priority level of each training area in each season is determined can a successful yearly training plan be developed. Logically, this plan will begin with the pre-season.

### The Pre-Season:

Ideally, pre-season training should begin 4 weeks before the first official competition. This will provide sufficient time to address all team needs, and to physically and mentally prepare the players for the rigors of the competitive season. (At a bare minimum, pre-season training should begin 2 weeks before competition.) Pre-season training has several goals:

- 1) Sharpen technical execution
- 2) Develop a team system and style of play
- 3) Refine fitness levels
- 4) Establish set piece organization

Though players may not be expected to enter pre-season in top physical form, pre-season is not a time to “get fit.” Elite athletes must understand that fitness is a 12 month priority, and must take responsibility for maintaining high levels of fitness throughout the year. If an athlete enters pre-season expecting to “get fit”, chances of injury increase significantly, and performance in all pre-season trainings will suffer. The costs of getting fit during the pre-season will then carry-over to produce unsatisfactory results early in the competitive season.

During the course of a 4-week pre-season, 2-3 friendly competitions are ideal. Spreading these competitions out over the course of the pre-season will allow for adequate training time to address tactical problems that are identified during the competitions. These competitions also provide opportunities to train set plays in a realistic environment.

Pre-season trainings should also place a heavy emphasis on refining technique, particularly the speed of technical execution. During the off-season, technical “sharpness” tends to fade without competition. Since demanding technical training also has a fitness component to it, it is also a very efficient way to provide more enjoyable fitness training.

Considering these goals, a model pre-season training week places heavy emphasis on refining technical execution, and mastering team tactics:

Sessions	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
AM	Recovery Training, Psychological Training (45 min.)	Technical Training (60 min.)	OFF	Technical Training (60 min.)	OFF	Light Technical Training, Psychological Training (45 min.)	OFF
PM	OFF	LSA, Tactical Training (75 min.)	SAS, Tactical Training (90 min.)	LSA Tactical Training (75 min.)	OFF	OFF	<i>Friendly Competition</i>

During a 4 week pre-season, two-a-day trainings should only be planned during the middle 2 weeks. The lower intensity of the weeks without two-a-days will allow the athletes to “ramp-up” at the beginning of the pre-season, which will help reduce injuries, and to “taper-down” into the competitive season.

Similarly, two-a-day training days should be planned so that the trainings on these days are short and high-intensity. The high energy demand placed on the athletes during these days requires that total training time is carefully managed. If these trainings are too long, fatigue will cause both the concentration and performance level of the athletes to drop precipitously. (Always remember that the over-arching goal of the pre-season is to begin the competitive season with players that are healthy, fit, and fully tactically prepared for success. Both over-training and under-training will compromise these goals.)

Recovery trainings should be very light low-impact work-outs, and are primarily scheduled to help the athlete reduce stiffness and soreness from previous trainings and competitions. As such, pool work-outs, light jogs, or stationary biking are excellent activities. Yoga is another activity with excellent recuperative benefits.

The Competitive Season:

The primary focus of the competitive season is on game results. As such, during the competitive season, tactical training and psychological training will provide the greatest immediate rewards:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
OFF	SAS, Tactical Training (75 min.)	LSA, Tactical Training (90 min.)	SAS, Tactical Training (90 min.)	OFF	Technical Training, Psychological Training (30 min.)	<i>Competition</i>

Because technical improvement requires high amounts of repetition, and thus has a longer time horizon, general technical training is a lower priority during the competitive season. However, specific technical functional training may be a regular feature of

training in order to improve an athlete's performances in executing the techniques they use most often in competition. For example, technical functional finishing activities for forwards may greatly improve goal-scoring success over the course of the season if done consistently.

The intensity level of trainings must be carefully monitored during the competitive season. Because players must have opportunities to recover after competition, trainings the day or two after competitions should be lighter than on other days.

Most importantly, scheduling during the competitive season must remain flexible. For example, the day after particularly physically demanding competitions, it may be advisable to add a short recovery and psychological training. Also, one strength and power training per week may be added to maintain strength gains that were made over the off-season. Finally, psychological training may play an increased role during weeks of highly emotional or important competitions.

Trainings the day before competitions can be very effective if planned correctly. These trainings should be high-intensity in order to simulate the coming competition, but must also be very short to prevent tiring the players for the next day. Psychological training on this day should consist primarily of visualizing individual performance during the competition. This primes the athlete for performance while also lowering stress.

#### The Recovery and Regeneration Season:

The recovery and regeneration season is both the most over-looked season of the year and the most abused. This season has only one focus: to allow the athlete to mentally, physically, and emotionally recover from the stresses of a competitive season. In order to accomplish this, the recovery season must provide the athlete with an extended break from the sport.

The recovery and regeneration period is over-looked because many trainers, players, and particularly parents, do not appreciate the importance of a "break". Whether it be concerns of falling behind other players and teams, boredom, or whatever else, the recuperative benefits of this period are often ignored. More than anything else, this period of rest is important in preventing burn-out and over-training of young soccer players. After a recovery season, players will return healthy and re-invigorated to their training. In this instance, less really can mean more.

The length of the recovery season is negotiable. The length of the recovery season can range from 25 – 40 % of the length of the pre-season and competitive season combined. Generally, the longer the competitive season, the longer the recovery season should be.

No team activities should be planned during this season. Every athlete should be encouraged to avoid any soccer training for several weeks during this period, even if the athlete feels that this is unnecessary. If after a few weeks an athlete desires to begin

individual soccer training again, and he/she is completely healthy, encourage the athlete to do so.

The Off-Season:

The off-season is the time of the year farthest removed from the competitive season, and is sandwiched between the recovery season and the pre-season. Off-season training should not begin until the athletes have had time to recover physically, mentally, and emotionally from the tolls of the competitive season.

Because it is far removed from the competitive season and the stresses of winning and losing that competition provides, individual training needs take priority during this period: technical development, power and strength development, LSA, and SAS can all be very effectively trained during this period.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
LSA, Technical Training (75 min.)	Strength and Power, Technical Training (90 min.)	OFF	LSA, Strength and Power, Technical Training (90 min.)	OFF	SAS, Strength and Power (60 min.)	OFF

Off-season training should be specifically tailored to the needs of individual players. Technical training programs can be different for each player, or for each functional line. Strength and power development needs also may be different among players on the team. However, while different individual training programs may be developed, conducting these trainings together as a team will help build camaraderie and sustain motivation.

Conclusion:

Elite soccer players require training programs that address all of their needs technically, tactically, athletically, and psychologically. A program that focuses too much on one area while neglecting another will hinder the athlete’s overall development. On the other hand, a program that forces the athlete to over-train, or that emphasizes the wrong training areas at the wrong times, will risk injury and diminish team success. Finding the correct mix of training components and developing a single integrated training plan is therefore mandatory for long-term individual and team success.

A well-developed yearly training program accelerates overall player development, reduces the chances of injury, and increases player motivation. When players know that all their developmental needs are being addressed they also grow in confidence—both in themselves and in their teammates.

This article describes a model training program for elite youth soccer players age U17 – U19 in the broadest sense. It provides a structural framework with significant flexibility. The selection of safe and developmentally appropriate activities, and the final scheduling

of weekly trainings remain the domain of the team trainer—who must combine his/her technical expertise with knowledge of specific team needs.

The best trainers also realize when additional coaching expertise is required. Often, strength or speed specialists should be brought in to develop appropriate programs and to provide expert feedback. However, even when these experts are employed, it is the team trainer who must insure that each training module addresses individual needs and is scheduled appropriately within the training program. It is in these choices where the best trainers distinguish themselves.