



How can you manage a lopsided game?



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Have you ever coached a game where the score got out of hand; either for the good or the bad? Don't worry; it happens to all coaches eventually. The bigger question is how to manage it?

Game scores can get out of hand for many different reasons. Often the blame is placed on the winning coach, but many times it goes much deeper than that. All participants in the game need to learn to manage these moments. League administrators, coaches, players and even parents can all work together to create a better environment.

So...where do we start? (League Administrators)

First, league administrators must ensure teams are placed against appropriate competition. Divisions and age groups shouldn't be determined solely by a coach's request. Many times coaches request their teams play against older or stronger competition with the good intention of challenging their players to reach higher goals. By creating standards to play up (either an age group or division) based on previous experience or based on a nationally recognized standard, may limit the number of requests to play up. For example, all players on a team must meet the standards set forth by the US Youth Soccer Player Development Model (*see link below.*) Teams playing against stronger or weaker competition don't benefit it unless the margin of strength is minimal and creates a bigger chance of games ending up lopsided. Even though wins and losses are not a measure of a team's development, tracking scores can help give a simple measure of parity throughout the division/age group. If most team's results at the end of the season are some wins, a loss or 2 and some ties and the winning margin is usually between 1-3 goals, then the league/division/age group is appropriate for most of its participants. Teams which achieve multiple wins or loses by 5 goals or more may not be placed in the most appropriate league.

<http://www.mayouthsoccer.org/UserFiles/file/USYS%20Player%20Dev%20Model2.pdf>.

The coaches do need to take the bulk of the responsibility... (Coaches)

Understand that the administrators will do their best to make your soccer experience an enjoyable one but your assistance is needed. Much like the administrators, make sure you are placing your team in the best league to help them get the appropriate challenge. The process will take time and, as the coach, you may have to do your homework. Before you register your team to play up an age group or in a lower division, watch the different leagues and age groups; several games will be needed to make an accurate assessment for your team. A general measure, as mentioned above, can be to find the league where your team can win some games, will probably lose a few and some games may end up in a tie. If most results are within a few goals either way, you can be sure your team is placed well and will enjoy their soccer experience. If your team ends up at one extreme or the other, you may want to reconsider their placement for the following season. Not knowing the result keeps the game exciting. No one enjoys losing but part of your soccer development is accepting that you are not always the best team on the field on the day and sometimes, even when you do everything right, your efforts still may not be good enough. The knots the players get in their

stomach because they do not know if they will be good enough on that day, keeps the game exciting and may lead to longer player retention. Tic-Tac-Toe is an example of what happens to a game when the result is foreseen; it's not much fun to play when the result is almost predictable and players lose interest soon after.

[From time to time though some games can end up lopsided. What can you do? \(Coaches\)](#)

Coaches, be proactive! Challenge your players to try new positions or give them specific game challenges **before** the game has been decided. Come to each game with a plan. The plan can include players in different roles each week, number of passes in the midfield, getting players forward from defensive roles or any other challenge you may have tried once you had a comfortable lead; only now, do it ahead of time. Managing the game before the first goal is scored is easier than after 4 goals have been scored. Once players have had a taste of success on a given day, it is difficult to reel them back in. For your players to grow, they need to experience new challenges before the result has been determined. The emotions and decisions which they encounter with a 0-0, 1-0 or 0-1 are much different than after 4-0 match. Remember, it is usually easier to remove a challenge than it is to add it. The harder it is to score the first goal, the less likely the game will get out of hand too early.

Coaches can challenge both the team and the individual player. Some examples of challenges could be:

Team Challenges to Start the Game:

- Everyone starts in a different position every week
- Modify your formation each week so some games you are strong in the defense (3-2-2), sometimes strong in the midfield (2-3-2), sometimes strong in attack (2-2-3) and sometimes balanced throughout.
- Everyone must touch the ball before the first goal is scored (can be consecutively but doesn't have to be)
- Start the game a player down

Suggestions for Player challenges:

- After you score a goal, how many players can you help score before you score again?
- Identify a key player who must touch the ball before the attack can begin (maybe a wide player, a central player or a player who hasn't had much involvement yet)
- All passes need to be on the ground
- Place a player who could benefit from lots of touches in the central midfield role
- I am sure you can come up with so many more

[What can you do if the game starts off competitively equal but starts to get lopsided? \(Coaches\)](#)

Once again, coaches, be proactive! The score is not always the best indicator that a game is about to get lopsided. Through active observation, you may be able to defer a potential blowout. Active observation is the art of silently watching your entire team. Are they more comfortable on the ball than their opponent? Are your players faster or more athletic than your opponents? Is most of the game being played on your attacking half of the field? These are some good indicators that the flood gates may soon open. These situations rarely show themselves in the first 5-10 minutes because there is so much energy and adrenaline on the field but once the players settle into the game, they tend to appear. At this time, start to take the same steps as noted above.

What if your team is going to be on the losing side? (Coaches)

Determine WHY? Give your players specific challenges as well. Try to keep the first goal from being scored for as long as possible. Give your players challenges which are not score related. For example, how many times can we complete 3 consecutive passes? Can we mark "man to man" on all corner kicks to avoid giving up goals? Goals are a bonus but not the only means of success. At half-time and at the end of the game ask your players how they did with the challenges you gave them. These can and should be controllable measures. How many goals were allowed is not always in their or your control. Sometimes our frustration as coaches in these situations stem from our inability to recognize the positives. By giving your team specific and measurable goals during these times will create a better environment during half time and at the end of the game.

Now, think back to your training. During training, are you giving your players Problems to Solve or Things to Remember? If the bulk of your training is focused around free kicks, goal kicks, corner kicks or throw-ins, you are giving your players Things to Remember. This is a recipe for disaster because rarely will they happen in the same manner which you created in training. Instead, try a different approach. What do we do when we have the ball? What do we do when we do not have the ball? Who can I get the ball to next? Why is it a good time to dribble? When would a pass be better than a dribble? These are examples of Problems to Solve. If your training is not creating Problems to Solve, consider adjusting your practices to allow your players to make better game time decisions. Be patient! If you try it on Tuesday, you will not see the results on Saturday but if your club can start the process at U6 the result may be visible by U9/U10.

How can you help as a parent of a child involved in a lopsided game? (Coaches, Parents & Players)

No one looks forward to being involved in a lopsided game. It really isn't fun to be on the winning side or the losing side. But, it is more humbling to be on the losing side. Now is not the best time to direct blame or vent frustrations. All athletes have experienced this at some point in their playing careers. Even if you are on the winning side, try to identify the moments your child tries something new. This is more important than the number of goals he/she scored. If the game didn't go in your favor, support your child; help them to recognize the good moments that they had and how proud you are of them for trying their best the entire game. In addition, explain to them that games do not always go the way you would hope but you will always have another game to do better in. As we mentioned above, once a game starts to become lopsided, it is often difficult to control. Even the best coaches in the country do not train for these moments because they hope it won't happen. However, if the league administrators, coaches and parents all work together, we can reduce these moments. Even though most coaches do their best to manage these moments it is difficult. There is not a perfect recipe to keep games from ending up lopsided and, even when we work together, from time to time; a game will end up uneven. Sometimes with all the precautions and good game management, games can still get out of hand. As much as we hate to admit it, some teams will be better than others. Getting all the teams in the proper league and seeking appropriate competition takes time.

When competing against a team or a coach who doesn't understand how to manage these moments, refer to all the steps above. Remember, it is not always easy to add conditions or restrictions to your team without the appearance of acting condescending to your opponent. Therefore, both coaches need to work together. The opposing coach, much like their team, is not the enemy. Talk to each other to take control of the game. What can you two do together to change the challenges for both teams? For example, both teams can back up to midfield on goal kicks until the ball has crossed the midfield line or a second player has had a touch on the ball before the defending team can run in on it. Same tactic can be used on throw-ins; allow the ball to be put back into play. By allowing the ball back into play gives the losing team a little more hope

and teaches the winning team to manage their pace in the game; slow down to dictate a slower pace of the game. Since not all games are played at 100 m.p.h., teaching the players to recognize when to play hard and fast and when to slow the tempo down is quite functional in their soccer development.

Both coaches can address their parents after these games to discuss the outcome. Whether you were outplayed or the better team, help the parents and players understand your goals. For example, “we were outplayed today for sure, but I asked the team to work on defending as a team closer to our goal. Did you notice that they worked hard at preventing the opponents from getting the ball into the penalty box?” “You know...we win as a team and lose as a team and we will improve as a team.” Similar statements can be made as the winning coach. “Just because we won the game doesn’t mean we do not have to continue to improve. Yes I am very proud of them but our goals are to improve our ability to dribble, or pass better, or etc. We will continue to work in practice to get better.” Many coaches, after a bad defeat, try to avoid conflict and many coaches seek approval after a big win. Either way address it soon after the game or at the next training to stress the importance of growth and development over results.

As soccer leaders, we encourage coaches to pursue education. Through a better understanding of the game and age group appropriate training, we strive to help coaches keep the game in perspective. We can’t fix every moment on the field but we can teach both the children and the adults how to accept, learn and grow from these moments in sports.