



CAL NORTH

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Grassroots Soccer
Ages U8-U18

**Adapted from USSF PDIs
Edited June 2026*



Current Landscape

The coaching and playing environment needs to be improved for 6-12 year olds

- Too much emphasis on the result of the game
- The priority should be to develop skills and abilities
- There is a need to educate and empower parents and coaches
 - Cal North offers USSF grassroots courses specifically designed for introductory coaches working with players 12 and younger
 - Contact Joyce Bordley to set up your grassroots coaching course today!

jbordley@calnorth.org



Structural Change

We can't keep doing the same thing and expect to get different results

- Long-term development of players is the top priority
 - Kids under the age of 12 don't win World Cups so we should not treat them like adults or professional players
- Players need to be put in the best possible environment to succeed
- There are no shortcuts
 - Success requires a long-term approach and commitment
- Individual development and fun soccer experience is a priority



Starting Point

First set of changes designed to grow and improve the game

- School Year Registration
 - Registering players according to a Aug 1 to July 31 timeframe
- Small Sided Games
 - Development philosophy and playing standards for players 12 and younger



School Year Registration

Objectives

- The focus moves away from the team and onto the individual player
 - Development and winning do not have to happen independently from one another
 - Our misguided desire to win at all costs at the youth level often comes at the expense of individual player development
 - This change will casue many parents and coaches to rethink how teams will be formed moving forward and this should take place with each individual player in mind based on their developmental needs



School Year Registration

Objectives

- The focus moves away from bigger, faster, stronger
 - Changing to school year registration doesn't eliminate relative age effect (RAE) because whenever there is a defined age range, someone will be the oldest and someone will be the youngest
 - However, this change does help better understand and account for RAE
 - Parents and coaches should have an increased awareness of a player's birth month relative to his or her peer group and level of performance
 - This should help combat focusing on kids that appear to be better simply because they are up to 364 days older than a teammate or opponent



School Year Registration

Objectives

- Uniformity across the state and across membership
 - The current landscape is highly variable
 - Having uniformity doesn't mean that all soccer will look the same in all places at all times
 - It does mean that the soccer community can be better aligned with Cal North's player development objectives and we can collectively harness the advantage our state's diversity and populations have to offer
 - A uniform framework also allows Cal North, and the programs of our members, to provide consistent messaging and education for parents, players, coaches and referees



School Year Registration

Objectives

- Aligns with international standards for youth development
 - This means aligning with the international standards used by the world's leading soccer nations so that kids in Northern California are developing in an environment similar to those playing in Germany, France, Spain, etc.



School Year Registration Chart

Note the change in age grouping method from birth year (2025/2026) to school year (2026/2027) in this chart.

AGE GROUP CHART		US YOUTH SOCCER	CAL NORTH
2025-26 SEASON			
BIRTHDAY			AGE GROUP
Jan. 1, 2020 - Dec. 31, 2020	→		U-6
Jan. 1, 2019 - Dec. 31, 2019	→		U-7
Jan. 1, 2018 - Dec. 31, 2018	→		U-8
Jan. 1, 2017 - Dec. 31, 2017	→		U-9
Jan. 1, 2016 - Dec. 31, 2016	→		U-10
Jan. 1, 2015 - Dec. 31, 2015	→		U-11
Jan. 1, 2014 - Dec. 31, 2014	→		U-12
Jan. 1, 2013 - Dec. 31, 2013	→		U-13
Jan. 1, 2012 - Dec. 31, 2012	→		U-14
Jan. 1, 2011 - Dec. 31, 2011	→		U-15
Jan. 1, 2010 - Dec. 31, 2010	→		U-16
Jan. 1, 2009 - Dec. 31, 2009	→		U-17
Jan. 1, 2008 - Dec. 31, 2008	→		U-18
Jan. 1, 2007 - Dec. 31, 2007	→		U-19
Jan. 1, 2006 - Dec. 31, 2006	→		U-20
2026-27 SEASON			
BIRTHDAY			AGE GROUP
Aug. 1, 2020 - July 31, 2021	→		U-6
Aug. 1, 2019 - July 31, 2020	→		U-7
Aug. 1, 2018 - July 31, 2019	→		U-8
Aug. 1, 2017 - July 31, 2018	→		U-9
Aug. 1, 2016 - July 31, 2017	→		U-10
Aug. 1, 2015 - July 31, 2016	→		U-11
Aug. 1, 2014 - July 31, 2015	→		U-12
Aug. 1, 2013 - July 31, 2014	→		U-13
Aug. 1, 2012 - July 31, 2013	→		U-14
Aug. 1, 2011 - July 31, 2012	→		U-15
Aug. 1, 2010 - July 31, 2011	→		U-16
Aug. 1, 2009 - July 31, 2010	→		U-17
Aug. 1, 2008 - July 31, 2009	→		U-18
Aug. 1, 2007 - July 31, 2008	→		U-19
Aug. 1, 2006 - July 31, 2007	→		U-20



Small-Sided Games

Objectives

- Develop improved skills with the ball
 - Improve confidence and comfort
- Develop intelligence with and without the ball
 - Promote faster decisions and better awareness
- Develop partnerships within the team



Small-Sided Games

Objectives

- Provide an age appropriate environment
 - Standards align with physiological needs of players based on year of birth
- Uniformity across the state and across membership
 - Similar to the outcomes listed for birth year registration, having consistent standards allows Cal North, and the programs of our members, to provide more meaningful messaging and education for parents, players, coaches and referees



Small-Sided Games Chart

	U6 6 years old and younger	U7 7 years old and younger	U8 8 years old and younger	U9 9 years old and younger	U10 10 years old and younger	U11 11 years old and younger	U12 12 years old and younger
Field Size Ranges (yards)	Length 25-35 Width 15-25	Length 25-35 Width 15-25	Length 25-35 Width 15-25	Length 55-65 Width 35-45	Length 55-65 Width 35-45	Length 70-80 Width 45-55	Length 70-80 Width 45-55
Maximum Goal Size (feet)	Height 4 Width 6	Height 4 Width 6	Height 4 Width 6	Height 6.5 Width 18.5	Height 6.5 Width 18.5	Height 7 Width 21	Height 7 Width 21
Ball Size	3	3	3	4	4	4	4
Players	4v4 No GK	4v4 No GK	4v4 No GK	7v7 GK	7v7 GK	9v9 GK	9v9 GK
Game Time (minutes)	4x10	4x10	4x10	2x25	2x25	2x30	2x30
Offside	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



11v11 Games Chart

	U13 13 year old & younger	U14 14 years old & youner	U15 15 years old & younger	U16 16 years old & younger	U17 17 years old & younger	U18 18 years old & younger
Field Size Ranges (yards)	W50- 100 x L100- 130	W50- 100 x L100- 130	W50- 100 x L100- 130	W50- 100 x L100- 130	W50- 100 x L100- 130	W50- 100 x L100- 130
Maximum Goal Size (feet)	8 x 24	8 x 24	8 x 24	8 x 24	8 x 24	8 x 24
Ball Size	5	5	5	5	5	5
Game Time (minutes)	2 x 35	2 x 35	2 x 40	2 x 40	2 x 45	2 x 45



4v4 Standards



4v4 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Coaches should have the age appropriate license issued by U.S. Soccer
- Formal games are not needed so playing with and against teammates at the end of each training session (1-2 per week) is sufficient
- Formal rosters and teams are not needed so having a flexible and fluid approach to playing and training is recommended
 - While playing, everyone should participate a minimum of 50% of the time
 - With 4 players on the field, having 6 players on each “team” when the “game” is played helps maximize participation and engagement



4v4 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Here are some examples of having a flexible and fluid approach to training and playing
 - Utilize “in-house” programs that have everyone train and play as a pool of players rather than as distinct teams
 - This approach allows players to train and play with a variety of other kids based on numbers, ability, age, height, weight, etc.
 - If using teams with a set roster of players, players can be mixed up during the game at the end of the training session to provide variety



4v4 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Results and standings should not be recorded
- Travel should be limited as much as possible
- Players should not be participating in events (tournaments, showcases, festivals, etc.)
- Remember that safety and fun are the top priorities so make adjustments as needed to ensure both are being promoted



Concussion Initiative

Concussion Initiative

- Per U.S. Soccer's Concussion Initiative, if a player is suspected to have a head injury the referee* is instructed to stop play to allow for treatment/evaluation as needed
- If the player leaves the field of play for additional evaluation, a substitution can be made in that moment
- The player with the suspected head injury may not return to the game unless a Health Care Professional (HCP) or Certified Athletic Trainer (ATC) has cleared the player
- Any coach or parent insisting on returning the player to the game without approved clearance will result in the referee* ending the game



Concussion Initiative

Concussion Initiative

- Heading is not allowed in 4v4 games
- If a player heads the ball in a game, whether deliberately or accidentally, an indirect free kick should be awarded to the opposing team from the spot of the offense
- In a controlled and individual environment (where heading is an isolated skill being taught away from any form of opposition or other aspects of the game), the use of lightweight balls (foam, balloon, etc.) would be acceptable for teaching heading technique



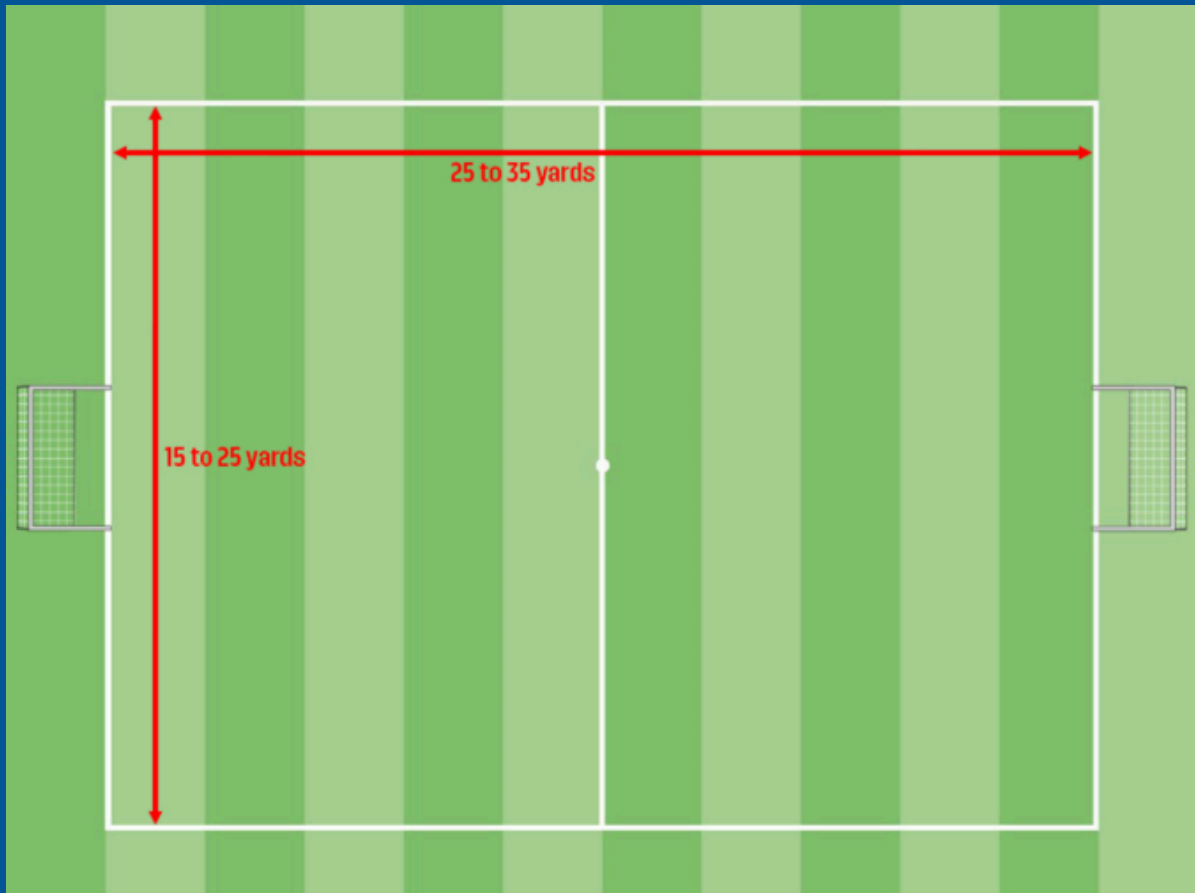
4v4 Standards of Play

Standards of Play

- Fields
 - 25-35 yards (length)
 - 15-25 yards (width)
 - Goals should be no larger than 4 feet (height) x 6 feet (width)
 - Corner flags are not needed

4v4 Standards of Play

Standards of Play





4v4 Standards of Play

Standards of Play

- Games
 - Size 3 ball
 - 4v4 (no goalkeepers)
 - Shin guards are required
 - Substitutions are unlimited and can occur at any time
 - 4 quarters - 10 minutes each
 - 5 minute breaks between quarters
 - Playing times can be less than 10 minutes when managed by the coaches and parents



4v4 Standards of Play

Standards of Play

- Games
 - Kick offs, free kicks, throw-ins, goal kicks and corner kicks are used to start or restart play
 - Kick-ins and/or dribble-ins are also acceptable as restarts when the ball has gone out over the sidelines
 - Goal kicks and corner kicks should be taken in the general vicinity of the respective goal or corner
 - If used, all free kicks are indirect
 - Opponents should be 10 feet away from the ball on all restarts
 - No penalty kicks
 - No offside



4v4 Standards of Play

Standards of Play

- Games
 - Registered and certified referees are not needed at this level
 - Since there is no referee, coaches are expected to manage the game environment from the touchline using these standards of play and their best judgement
 - Together, coaches and parents are expected to create and promote a fun and safe environment for the players



7v7 Standards



7v7 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Coaches should have the age appropriate license issued by US Soccer
- The training-to-game ratio should be 2-3 training sessions per game played
- Rosters should include no more than 12 players
- Players should participate in no more than 20 games per calendar year and in no more than one game per day
- Every player should play a minimum of 50% of the time in each game

7v7 Player Development Philosophy



Player Development Philosophy

- Results and standings should not be recorded
- Players should have a minimum of 2 rest days per week during the season along with planned breaks from organized soccer during the calendar year
- Any travel should be limited to no more than an hour away
- Events (tournaments, showcases, festivals, etc.) should provide a predetermined number of games with no advancement, placement games or champions



Concussion Initiative

Concussion Initiative

- Per U.S. Soccer's Concussion Initiative, if a player is suspected to have a head injury the referee* is instructed to stop play to allow for treatment/evaluation as needed
- If the player leaves the field of play for additional evaluation, a substitution can be made in that moment
- The player with the suspected head injury may not return to the game unless a Health Care Professional (HCP) or Certified Athletic Trainer (ATC) has cleared the player
- Any coach or parent insisting on returning the player to the game without approved clearance will result in the referee* ending the game



Concussion Initiative

Concussion Initiative

- Heading is not allowed in 7v7 games
- If a player heads the ball in a game, whether deliberately or accidentally, an indirect free kick should be awarded to the opposing team from the spot of the offense
- In a controlled and individual environment (where heading is an isolated skill being taught away from any form of opposition or other aspects of the game), the use of lightweight balls (foam, balloon, etc.) would be acceptable for teaching heading technique

7v7 Standards of Play



Build Out Line

- The build out line promotes playing the ball out of the back in a less pressured setting
- When the goalkeeper has the ball in his or her hands during play from the opponent, the opposing team must move behind the build out line until the ball is put into play
- Once the opposing team is behind the build out line, the goalkeeper can pass, throw or roll the ball into play (punts and drop kicks are not allowed)
- After the ball is put into play by the goalkeeper, the opposing team can cross the build out line and play resumes as normal
- The opposing team must also move behind the build out line prior to a goal kick and may only cross the build out line once the ball has left the penalty area

7v7 Standards of Play



Build Out Line

- If a goalkeeper punts or drop kicks the ball, an indirect free kick should be awarded to the opposing team from the spot of the offense
- If the punt or drop kick occurs within the goal area, the indirect free kick should be taken on the goal area line parallel to the goal line at the nearest point to where the infringement occurred

7v7 Standards of Play



Build Out Line

- The build out line will also be used to denote where offside offenses can be called
- Players cannot be penalized for an offside offense between the halfway line and the build out line
- Players can be penalized for an offside offense between the build out line and goal line



7v7 Standards of Play

Build Out Line Practical Applications

- Ideally, the goalkeeper will wait to put the ball into play once all opponents are past the build out line
- However, the goalkeeper can put the ball into play sooner but he or she does so accepting the positioning of the opponents and the consequences of how play resumes



7v7 Standards of Play

Build Out Line Practical Applications

- To support the intent of the development rule, coaches and referees should be mindful of any intentional delays being caused by opponents not retreating in a timely manner or encroaching over the build out line prior to the ball being put into play
- Coaches are responsible for addressing these types of issues with their players
- Referees can manage the situation with misconduct if deemed appropriate
- Referees should be flexible when enforcing the 6 second rule and counting the time of possession should only begin when all opponents have moved behind the build out line

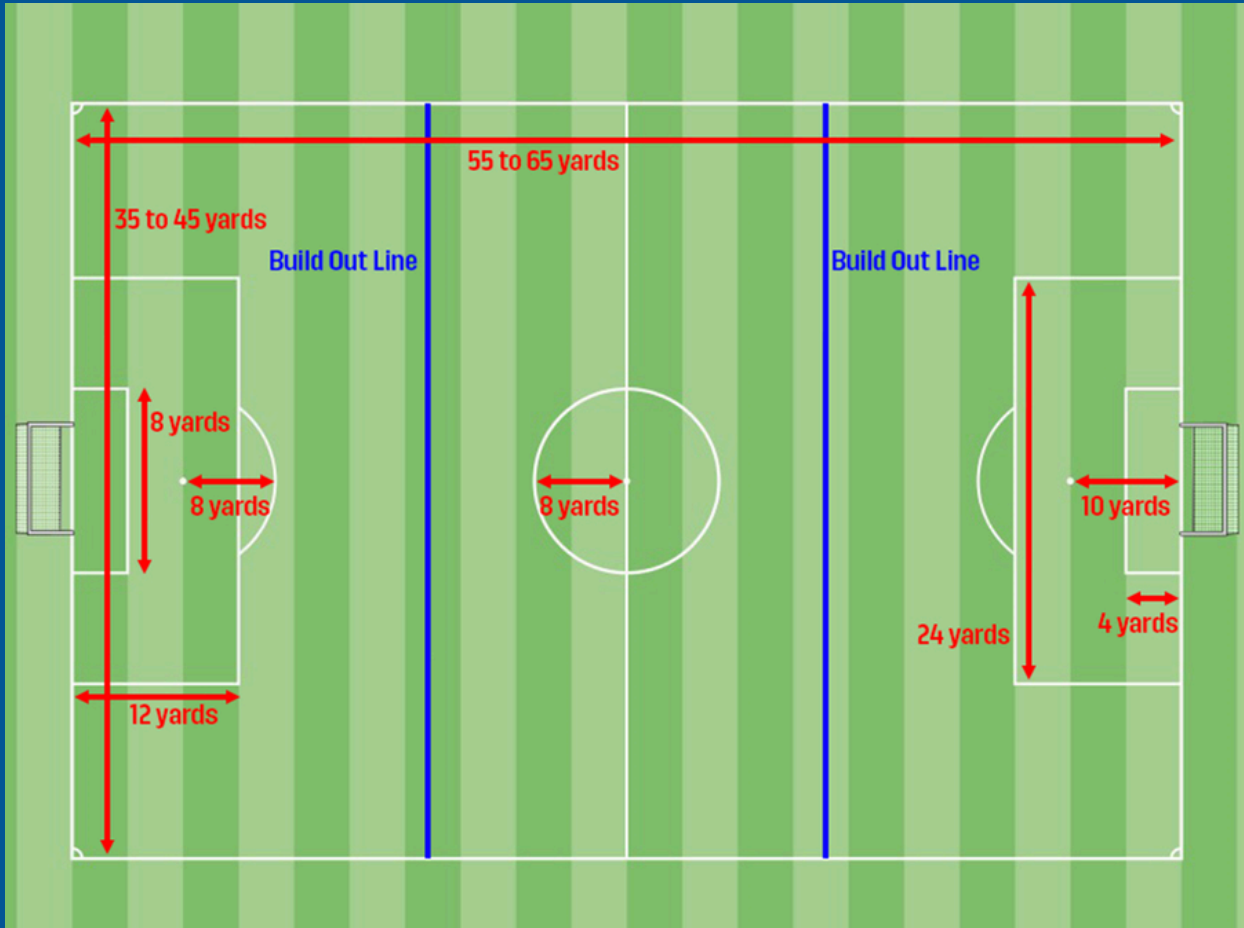


7v7 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 1 – Field of Play
 - 55-65 yards (length)
 - 35-45 yards (width)
 - Goals should be no larger than 6.5 feet (height) x 18.5 feet (width)
 - A 6.5 feet (height) x 12 feet (width) goal is recommended based on the age and ability of the players
 - Diagram contains recommended field markings and dimensions
 - Build out lines should be equidistant between the penalty area line and halfway line

7v7 Standards of Play





7v7 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 2 – Ball
 - Size 4
- Law 3 – Players
 - 7v7 (6 field players and 1 goalkeeper)
 - Game may not start or continue if there are less than 5 players on a team
 - Substitutions are unlimited and can occur at any stoppage



7v7 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 5 – Referee
 - Minimum certification as a U.S. Soccer Grade 9 Referee
- Law 6 – Other Match Officials
 - Used at the discretion of the competition

7v7 Standards of Play



Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 7 – Duration of the Match
 - 2 halves
 - 25 minutes halves
 - 10 minute halftime
 - No added time



7v7 Standards of Play

Standard Laws of the Game

- Law 4 – Players' Equipment
- Law 8 – Start and Restart of Play
- Law 9 – Ball In and Out of Play
- Law 10 – Method of Scoring
- Law 11 – Offside
- Law 12 – Fouls and Misconduct*
- Law 13 – Free Kicks
- Law 14 – Penalty Kick
- Law 15 – Throw-in
- Law 16 – Goal Kick
- Law 17 – Corner kick

*With the exception of deliberate heading and punting



7v7 Standards of Play

Standard Laws of the Game

- Law 4 – Players' Equipment
- Law 8 – Start and Restart of Play
- Law 9 – Ball In and Out of Play
- Law 10 – Method of Scoring
- Law 11 – Offside
- Law 12 – Fouls and Misconduct*
- Law 13 – Free Kicks
- Law 14 – Penalty Kick
- Law 15 – Throw-in
- Law 16 – Goal Kick
- Law 17 – Corner kick

*With the exception of deliberate heading and punting



9v9 Standards



9v9 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Coaches should have the age appropriate license issued by U.S. Soccer
- The training-to-game ratio should be 2-3 training sessions per game played
- Rosters should include no more than 16 players
- Players should participate in no more than 30 games per calendar year and in no more than one game per day
- Every player should play a minimum of 50% of the time in each gam



9v9 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Results and standings should not be recorded
- Players should have a minimum of 2 rest days per week during the season along with planned breaks from organized soccer during the calendar year
- Any travel should be limited to day trips with limited allowances for overnight stays
- Events (ex: tournaments, showcases, festivals, etc.) should provide a predetermined number of games with no advancement, placement games or champions



9v9 Player Development Philosophy

Player Development Philosophy

- Results and standings should not be recorded
- Players should have a minimum of 2 rest days per week during the season along with planned breaks from organized soccer during the calendar year
- Any travel should be limited to day trips with limited allowances for overnight stays
- Events (ex: tournaments, showcases, festivals, etc.) should provide a predetermined number of games with no advancement, placement games or champions



Concussion Initiative

Concussion Initiative

- Per U.S. Soccer's Concussion Initiative, if a player is suspected to have a head injury the referee* is instructed to stop play to allow for treatment/evaluation as needed
- If the player leaves the field of play for additional evaluation, a substitution can be made in that moment
- The player with the suspected head injury may not return to the game unless a Health Care Professional (HCP) or Certified Athletic Trainer (ATC) has cleared the player
- Any coach or parent insisting on returning the player to the game without approved clearance will result in the referee* ending the game



Concussion Initiative

Concussion Initiative

- Heading is not allowed in 9v9 games in U11 play
- If a player heads the ball in U11 play, whether deliberately or accidentally, an indirect free kick should be awarded to the opposing team from the spot of the offense
- If a header occurs within the goal area, the indirect free kick should be taken on the goal area line parallel to the goal line at the nearest point to where the infringement occurred
- In a controlled and individual environment (where heading is an isolated skill being taught away from any form of opposition or other aspects of the game), the use of lightweight balls (foam, balloon, etc.) would be acceptable for teaching heading technique

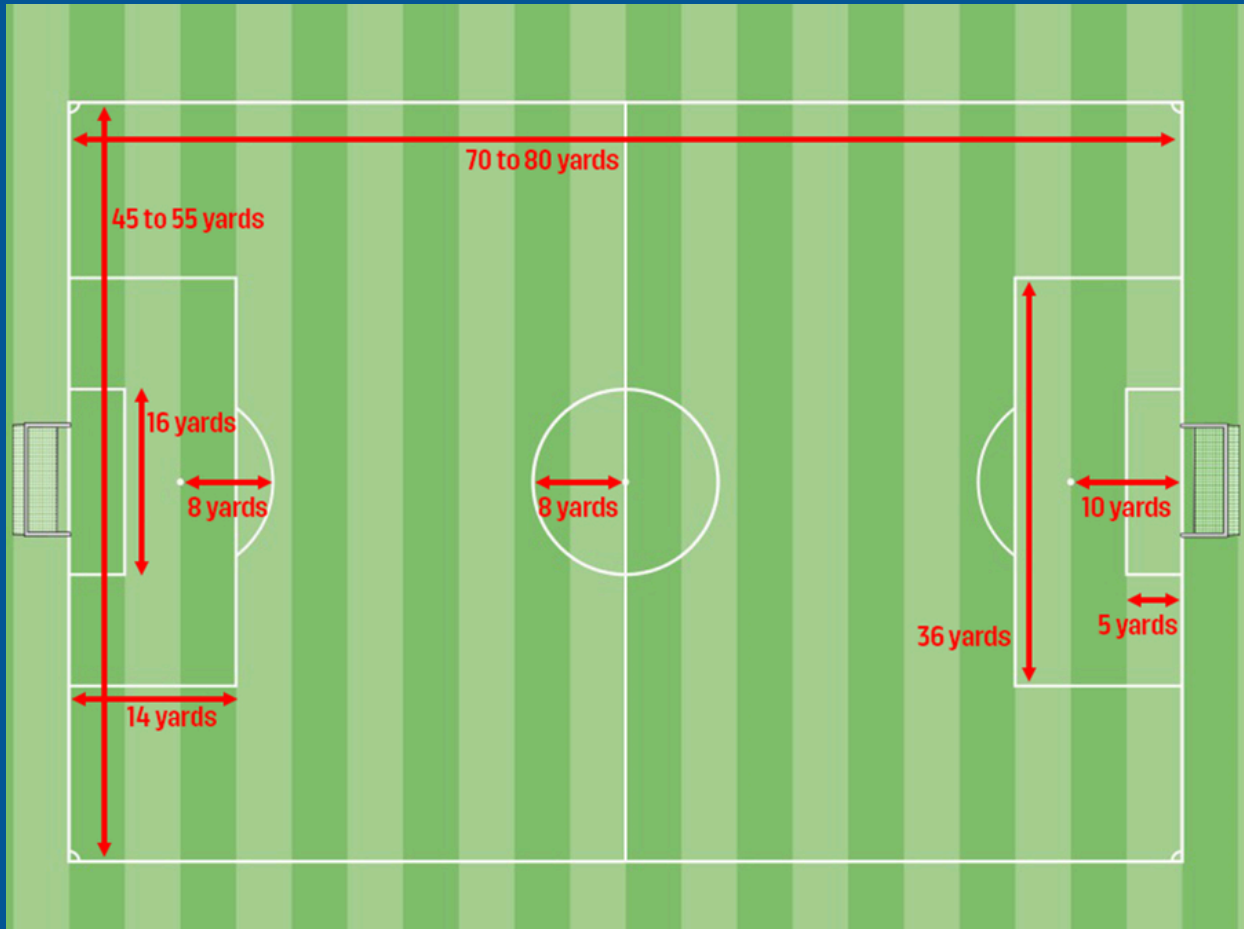


9v9 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 1 – Field of Play
 - 70-80 yards (length)
 - 45-55 yards (width)
 - Goals should be no larger than 7 feet (height) x 21 feet (width)
 - A 6.5 feet (height) x 18.5 feet (width) goal is recommended based on the age and ability of the players
 - Diagram contains recommended field markings and dimensions

9v9 Standards of Play





9v9 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 2 – Ball
 - Size 4
- Law 3 – Number of Players
 - 9v9 (8 field players and 1 goalkeeper)
 - Game may not start or continue if there are less than 6 players on a team
 - Substitutions are unlimited and can occur at any stoppage



9v9 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 5 – Referee
 - Minimum certification as a U.S. Soccer Grade 9 Referee
- Law 6 – Other Match Officials
 - Used at the discretion of the competition authority



9v9 Standards of Play

Modified Laws of the Game

- Law 7 – Duration of the Match
 - 2 halves
 - 30 minutes halves
 - 10 minute halftime
 - No added time



9v9 Standards of Play

Standard Laws of the Game

- Law 7 – Duration of the Match
 - Law 4 – Players' Equipment
 - Law 5 – The Referee
 - Law 8 – Start and Restart of Play
 - Law 9 – Ball In and Out of Play
 - Law 10 – Method of Scoring
 - Law 11 – Offside
 - Law 12 – Fouls and Misconduct*
 - Law 13 – Free kicks
 - Law 14 – Penalty Kick
 - Law 15 – Throw-in
 - Law 16 – Goal kick
 - Law 17 – Corner kick

*With the exception of deliberate heading in U11 games



Implementation

Timeline

- All information about the Concussion Initiative is implemented with immediate effect
- Birth year registration and the small sided standards is mandated as of August 2017
 - Members were provided 24-months to prepare the implementation
 - Please contact your local member for more information on implementation
- The Player Development Philosophy information is provided as best practice standards
 - Although not currently mandated, Cal North believes members should adopt these principles to align with our values and objectives for player development



What You Can Do

How to Best Support the Changes

- Have patience
- Stick to the facts
- Read the FAQ
- Communicate with and get answers from your local member and leaders