

Getting the Most From Your Minimum Play Players

X's and O's and scheme are huge in developing a dominating team in youth football, but the nuances of the game require most of us to be good at doing many things most football coaches at the upper levels don't have to deal with. Unless you are coaching a "select" team or have 50-60 kids on your squad, the typical youth football coach is going to have to develop some unathletic kids into competent starters and competent backups.

The typical youth football team consists of 22-27 kids. If for the sake of discussion you have 24, the typical team will have 4-5 kids from that group that are real "football players", athletic enough or tough enough kids that can start both ways. Now you have 19 kids remaining, of which you have 12 starting spots left on offense and defense. Of the remaining 19, you will typically have 3-4 kids that are smart enough that through technique and alignment/assignment mastery they will start at a position but may lack some of the physical attributes that are required to play the position well. Of the remaining 15, most teams will have 5-6 kids that are "average" meaning they possess average athleticism and enough mental ability that they will start on one side of the ball. So now you are left with 9 "minimum play" kids, which are usually well below average size and athleticism, often first year kids that are very lost. Often the remaining nine, 4 are often kids that are totally out of their element. Many times these are the kids that are first year kids giving football "a try" that often play just one year and are either very weak physically, mentally or both. Sometimes these kids are playing just to please a parent.

Minimum Play Players

You are going to have to develop a starter or two out of that group of "minimum play" kids as well as some competent back ups. Many youth football leagues including Pop Warner have minimum play rules, where you have to play everyone a pre-set number of plays. Even for those of us that have no minimum play rules, many of us self impose a minimum play standard to insure all the kids get at least some playing time if they attend practices regularly. When faced with this challenge the youth coach has to be willing, able and interested in developing weaker players. I for one look forward to it and embrace it as a challenge and opportunity to help someone develop an appreciation and love for the game and helping someone that in many cases wouldn't get much attention elsewhere. On a selfish note if you have minimum play requirements, the development of these players may be the difference in your teams winning or losing. Often in leagues like Pop Warner where minimum play rules are strictly enforced, how well your least talented players perform versus the other teams least talented players is a strategy unto itself.

Minimum Play Strategies

When developing kids like this, the starting point is to have a scheme on offense and defense that can accommodate them. What we mean here is the scheme is minimum, player “friendly” at certain positions. These positions do not require a tremendous amount of skill, size or athleticism but still add value to each snap. An old way to do this was to split your worst player out 20 yards, force the defense to cover him and play in essence 10 versus 10 football. The problem with that is any descent defensive coordinator is going to write down and track your minimum play kids and when they split the weaker player out like that, the defense is either going to ignore him or at least split the difference and cover him with “1/2” a man. So in that example the defense starts in a scheme outnumbering the offense 10 ½ to 10. That poor kid split out knows he’s out there for no real reason at all other than to get in his required plays, providing no real value to the snap and a parent problem in waiting. I doubt he’s developing any skills or a love for the game either. If you have 4-5 real weak kids and you try and get them all in at this “leper” position, it may be tough to them all their plays.

My system and others allow for the playing of a few weaker kids both on offense and defense. The difference is the alignment, base skills and techniques for those positions can accommodate even the weakest player, but unlike the above example they provide legitimate aggregated value to your team on each snap. Unlike the above example these kids are being developing football skills and feel like they are part of the team. My system and others allow via scheme and through very easy to teach technique a chance for those kids to contribute.

Developing Minimum Play Players in Youth Football

One of the key factors in my opinion is to try and stay as positive as you can with these kids, realizing ahead of time that they will probably give you plenty to be frustrated about. While we certainly hold these kids responsible to the same standard of perfection as everyone else on Alignment, Stance, First Step, Effort and being a great Teammate, we look to the slightest of positives to encourage these kids with. Something as minor as complimenting him on being the first back from a water break or even that his feet are straight in his stance may be something that slowly but surely gives this player the confidence to play more aggressively or pay attention closer. We are firm believers that any youth football player, no matter his skill set can be an ASSET to our team by having him perfect the ASSET, Alignment, Stance, First Step, Effort and being a great Teammate. There is no great athletic ability required to be an ASSET to your team in youth football.

Words of Encouragement

Some words you may want to use when one of these players makes a mistake: I know you can do better than that, I expect better than that out of a player like you or We both know you can do this. Of course you want to point out the specific thing the player did wrong first, point out something positive he did and then how to correctly perform the task that he made the mistake in. Finish up again with something positive. We like to use the “sandwich method”, sandwich the negative around 2 positives. See if you don’t get better results with this method rather than focusing solely on pointing out and correcting the mistake. When we see them doing something positive we like to go with: That’s what we need to see from you, This team needs you to do it this way every time, or We know you can do it like this every time.

Coaching youth football is X’s and O’s, but it may be more about getting that player to believe in your scheme, techniques and himself than at any other level of football.

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