

# At what age should a soccer player peak?

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It's obvious by the ever-younger ages of select teams that many coaches, team managers and parents do not know when a soccer player should peak. Pre-teen teams are too young to have youngsters put into open try-out situations where they may be cut and put onto a team where they have to earn their playing time. In many places in the U.S.A. adults want to encroach into even younger age groups with too much- too soon. Even to the extent of such silly things as under 8 travel teams. Anyone who condones such an environment for children is motivated by greed, trying to take money off of well-meaning, but unsuspecting parents. Or they are stating to the world that they have no clue as to when a soccer player is supposed to peak. They must want these kids to sign a professional contract at age 9 and then play in the under 12 World Cup. They knowingly or unknowingly subscribe to the earlier and more is better mentality. This of course is educationally unsound.

It is no wonder then that so many youth soccer players are "burned out" by the time they are 15. For many players the "burnout" occurs even earlier. They are the victims of adults who are keen on winning the next under 8 jamboree or {heaven forbid} an under 12 regional cup championship.



Even when the adults organizing children's soccer understand the above pitfalls and make the effort to avoid them many still do not fully grasp the timeline for the development of a soccer player. Since the majority of soccer players in most communities are children and teenagers they think that soccer is a kid's game when in fact it is an adult game. Because of this basic misunderstanding of the game they think that soccer players are supposed to peak somewhere in the age range of 13 to 16. In fact soccer players peak in their mid to late twenties for field players and perhaps the early thirties for goalkeepers. Indeed adolescence ranges from age 15 to 23 in a person's biological growth. Soccer players do not peak athletically until they are in their twenties, not to mention their tactical awareness and emotional control. Once the adults

comprehend this realistic age of reaching the fruition of a fully developed player they soon understand the sound logic behind a proper player development scheme. It begins to make sense that too much too soon will in fact harm the players more than help. The adults (coaches, team managers, club, state, regional and national administrators and parents) become realistic about why children should play small sided games, why select try-outs should be held off until the teenage years, why U10

and younger teams should not make out of state trips or play in tournaments, why there should not be records kept of results until the players are in the U15 age group, why overuse injuries occur in younger and younger children when they play the same game too often, why kids are jaded towards the game by age 13, why players and soccer families experience burn-out from all the trips, tournaments, etc.

As a team sport soccer is a late specialization sport. The time frame for the development of soccer players is considered long-term athlete development. Please read the full article on athlete development in the USA Olympic Coach magazine, Spring 2004, volume 16, number 1 at

[http://www.usolympicteam.com/education/coach\\_spring04.pdf](http://www.usolympicteam.com/education/coach_spring04.pdf).

# Ages of Soccer Growth

<b>Ages 4 to 9 Childhood</b>	<b>Ages 10-14 Puberty</b>	<b>Ages 15 to 23 Adolescence</b>	<b>Ages 24 to ? Adulthood</b>
<p>Mostly technical repetitions, psychologically friendly and positive, simple combinations, decision making activities. Individual basic skills with an emphasis on keeping ball possession. Lots of balance and coordination exercises. Free play – Trial &amp; Error – Discovery – Experimentation!</p>	<p>More combinations on offense and defense. Many decision making environments. Psychologically positive with correction. Advanced competitive skills against match opponents. Tactically work on the roles of attack and defense and the basic principles of play. Exercises should focus on endurance, rhythmic movement, flexibility and running mechanics. Application of where it all fits into the game – the part of the field.</p>	<p>Tactical application of ball skills. Intense fitness training now becomes a part of the training routine. Much of the focus of training is now on group and team tactics. Fitness training with an emphasis on speed, range of motion, strength and stamina. Emphasize now the mastery of ball skills and the match application of them.</p>	<p>Soccer is now either a recreational activity or a job. Consequently training will reflect this reality. Specialization in preparation!</p>
<b>MATCHES</b>	<b>MATCHES</b>	<b>MATCHES</b>	<b>MATCHES</b>
<p>Matches of 3- to 6-a-side. No leagues or standings! No tournaments – festivals instead. Many fun and competitive games. Gain technical skills and game insight by playing in simplified soccer situations.</p>	<p>Matches of 8- to 11-a-side. Selection (try-outs) should not begin until the U13 age group. Less emphasis on the match results and more emphasis on players' performances.</p>	<p>11-a-side matches with a strong emphasis on combination play. Matches should be used as a learning opportunity to execute new tactical concepts and team formations. There must be a balance between competitive matches and training games.</p>	<p><b>Play to win!</b> Ability is measured by the result of the game and overall performance.</p>

**Table 1** Biological age groupings for player development.