

**CANADA SOCCER  
GRASSROOTS PROGRAM GUIDE**

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## INTRODUCTION

In Canada, our goal is to cultivate an atmosphere conducive to as many Canadians as possible developing a passion for the ball, being skillful, with the ability to adapt and find solutions to soccer problems. To support that goal, Canada Soccer is revising the approach to grassroots soccer programming to guide clubs towards good practices in player development. To develop to their potential, children must have access to safe, fun, and developmentally appropriate environments supported by well-trained coaches. Quality training environments and coaching should not be restricted to players showing early competence but, rather, be available to any player who has the desire to train and improve.

By reimagining the approach to grassroots soccer, Canada Soccer strives to have as many players as possible, for as long as possible, in the best environments possible.

## GRASSROOTS PROGRAM GOALS

### GOAL 1

- Keep more young players involved in soccer for longer by providing them with an enjoyable experience through access to high quality training and meaningful competition based on interest rather than ability.

### GOAL 2

- Produce clear training and competition guidelines for clubs so that they can deliver the best possible environment for young players.

## WHY DO WE NEED TO REIMAGINE GRASSROOTS SOCCER IN CANADA?

According to the FIFA Big Count 2006, Canada is in the top 10 in the world in registered youth players<sup>1</sup>. In 2023, approximately two thirds of the registered players in Canada were grassroots players Under 13 and younger<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, youth attrition rates in sport are rising<sup>3</sup>. While the reasons youth dropout of sport are complex, designing programs to meet the needs and wants of children and ensuring a positive environment and experience can lead to improved retention<sup>4</sup>.

The traditional model of talent identification and team selection in Canadian youth soccer uses a tryout or similar identification event to place players on to teams based on their perceived performance level. These teams are then tiered based on ability with higher level teams typically receiving more training opportunities and better coaching. Unfortunately, this method of talent identification and development is flawed in several ways as:

- It does not accurately predict potential or future performance as the characteristics that define "talented"

athletes in early age are not the characteristics that define elite athletes later in their career<sup>5</sup>;

- It can often deselect players who might have high potential<sup>6</sup> but who have less soccer experience or are lacking in physical literacy or maturation relative to their peers; and,
- Early selection prior to physical maturation places an disproportional emphasis on physical size, speed, and strength and may not consider mental, social, emotional, and cognitive-motor abilities<sup>7</sup>.

By revising the approach to grassroots programs in Canada, these challenges can be addressed. Rather than basing selection on performance, participation in grassroots programs will be based on interest. Access to high-quality training environments and coaching should not be restricted to those showing early competence but, rather, be available to any player who has the desire to train and improve.

<sup>1</sup>[FIFA Big Count 2006](#)

<sup>2</sup>[Canada Soccer Annual Report 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Decline in Youth Sport Participation](#). Sport Information Resource Centre. December 2023.

<sup>4</sup>[Battaglia, A, Kerr, G, and Tamminen, K. \*The Dropout From Youth Sport Crisis: Not as Simple as it Appears\*. Human Kinetics Journals, Volume 13, Issue 3, January 2024.](#)

<sup>5</sup> Howell, S., Lee, Y., & Yi, K. J. (2024). Nurturing holistic talent, addressing systemic inequity: Canadian coaches' insights on optimizing youth soccer talent identification and development. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 20(2), 443-454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541241296454> (Original work published 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Howell, S., Lee, Y., & Yi, K. J. (2024). Nurturing holistic talent, addressing systemic inequity: Canadian coaches' insights on optimizing youth soccer talent identification and development. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 20(2), 443-454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541241296454> (Original work published 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Jurbala, Paul (27 Oct 2023): [Reimagining the athlete development pathway: constraints-led, learning-based, life-long](#), Sports Coaching Review, DOI: 10.1080/21640629.2023.2275402

## What is Grassroots Soccer in Canada?

Within the Canada Soccer Ecosystem, *Grassroots* is defined as all programming up to Under 13. This includes the first three stages of Long-term Player Development; *Active Start, Fundamentals, and Learn to Train*. At these ages, participants compete in small-sided games, with fewer than 11 players per team using modified rules as outlined in the [Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards](#). The focus of these programs is on building a love of soccer, sport, and physical activity, skill development, and fostering a sense of belonging within a positive learning environment.

For more information on the Canada Soccer Ecosystem, [click here](#).

## HOW WILL REIMAGINED GRASSROOTS PROGRAMS WORK?

Grassroots programs provide both training and competition environments. These programs are integrated and replace existing programs, rather than providing supplemental training for interested or talented players. The registration and movement of players for both training and competition within grassroots programs is one of their differentiating factors from a traditional soccer program. Traditionally, players are assigned to a team with a coach and teammates who remain the same for a playing season. While teams may share field space, each team is typically self-contained. Access to quality training environments has been restricted to players demonstrating early competency through an evaluation or tryout process with players of lesser ability having fewer training contacts and lower quality coaching, which limits their opportunities for development. By connecting the number of contacts and quality of coaching to the desire to participate and train, more young players will have the opportunity to access higher quality training environments.

Within grassroots soccer, the training program should be considered separately from the level of competition in which a player participates. As an example, a player training three days a week may not necessarily be able to compete regularly at the highest level of competition and, alternatively, involvement in a one day a week training environment does not restrict a talented player from playing at the highest level of competition as has occurred traditionally with the separation of development and recreational programming. Within the new approach to grassroots soccer, players are placed into player pools or training groups rather than onto static teams. Player Pools are led by a group of coaches and overseen by a qualified Grassroots Lead, who must be present at all training sessions. While player pools may be further divided for activities and small-sided games within a training environment, these groups are fluid and should be changed frequently to allow for a variety of learning experiences for young players.

From the Player Pools, players are then grouped onto teams for competition. Research shows that children learn best when they are exposed to different learning environments<sup>8</sup>. This is facilitated by using an "Open Roster" approach to team formation, meaning that any player from the Player Pool can be assigned to any team for competition and rosters can be changed from week to week. In addition to exposing children to a variety of experiences, including being a leader and follower, playing with friends and having the opportunity to make new ones, open rosters also better facilitate meaningful competition between teams, which is instrumental to player development. The goal of roster formation is to ensure meaningful and competitive games rather than to create the strongest team possible to beat your opponent. Grassroots competition environments (leagues and festivals) must allow for open rosters to align to the requirements of Canada Soccer Grassroots Programs.

Moving away from a team-based approach and toward player pools with open rosters for competition, facilitates more meaningful competition (fewer one-sided results), a variety of

experiences for players (sometimes a stronger player in a team, other times playing alongside others who are more advanced at that moment in time), and de-coupling team formation from the training program in which a player participates.

For more information on how to set up a Canada soccer Grassroots Program, please [click here](#).

### How to Register Players into a Grassroots Program

Registration for a grassroots program should be open, with players choosing training frequency based on interest. Players may register for their desired number of activities per week, regardless of ability level by selecting a Grassroots 1, 2, or 3 program.

|              | WEEKLY TRAINING & GAME FREQUENCY |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Grassroots 1 | 1 session and/or Game / Festival |
| Grassroots 2 | 2 sessions + Game / Festival     |
| Grassroots 3 | 3 sessions + Game / Festival     |

While Grassroots Program registration should be open and based on interest, in many grassroots environments, there are limitations to the number of players who can be accommodated in a program based on capacity. Typical limiting factors are the number of coaches and the amount of field space available. Ideally, every player should be able to train as often as they like; however, recognizing this may not always be possible, registration may be done by:

- ▶ First-come, First-served
- ▶ Invitation based on in-program observation for up to 50% of registrations (at least 50% of registrations must be open to first-come, first-served)
- ▶ Previous registration with the club or within the program (club or program loyalty)

### Training Methodology

While Canada Soccer is not prescriptive in dictating training methodology, based on program structure, it is our belief that in many cases, a station-rotation approach is most effective for grassroots program delivery. That said, there is no evidence of a "best" methodology for player development. Regardless of approach, clubs must have a formally documented training methodology that supports their playing philosophy and coaches should be trained and supported to deliver this methodology consistently throughout club programming. Additionally, clubs

<sup>8</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment for all Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. 2013.

should support players across all four corners of development, Technical-Tactical, Physical, Mental, and Social-Emotional as these abilities are integrated and co-dependent<sup>9</sup>.

More information on stage-based focuses on four corners development is outlined in the Long-term Development Athlete Development Matrices.

- ▶ Active Start
- ▶ Fundamentals
- ▶ Learn to Train

More information on training methodologies and their benefits and drawbacks based on the type of players we are trying to develop in Canada is [available here](#).

## Competition

***"We need competition that supports everyone."***

**Dr. Joe Baker**

Competition in grassroots soccer must be meaningful and developmentally appropriate. Meaningful competition leads to results that are relatively close and not predictable. Teams are matched with others of a similar ability leading to the belief that they have a chance for success and remaining fully engaged throughout the competition<sup>10</sup>. Clubs and coaches in grassroots soccer should be focused on the facilitation of meaningful competition rather than organizing their teams to win as many games as possible.

For children to develop best, at times, it is appropriate to extend a group by playing against an opponent that is stronger. At other times, consolidation of learning through games against a weaker opponent can build confidence. However, playing against opponents of similar quality most of the time provides the best opportunity for learning, as matches that provide too great a challenge can lead to frustration, while those that are not challenging enough can result in boredom. As a club leader, it is important to select an appropriate level of competition to ensure it is meaningful for the players involved<sup>11</sup>.

For developmentally appropriate competition to occur, competition formats (rules, field size, duration) must be modified to align with the athletes' stage of development<sup>12</sup>. Canada Soccer has defined developmentally appropriate game structures through the [Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards](#), which will become mandatory for all member organizations (clubs, academies, districts/regions, leagues) in Canada in advance of the 2026 playing season.

More information on the benefits of small-sided games and developmentally appropriate game formats is [available here](#).

Recommendations on how to set-up fields for small-sided games are available [here](#).

## Grouping Players for Competition

For players 12 years of age and younger (Under 13), teams should be created from the larger training group or player pool on an ongoing basis using open rosters. Tiering of players is not permitted before U10 in alignment to the start of league play. Prior to U10, teams should be formed by taking a balanced approach that places players on teams with others of varying ability to create teams of similar quality. Beginning at U10, players can be streamed through ongoing observation and placed on teams with other players of similar ability. Open rosters allow the frequent re-grouping of players to better facilitate meaningful competition.

All clubs operating grassroots programs must align to the following minimum standards for grouping players:

- ▶ No tryouts or similar player identification or placement events are permitted
- ▶ Players should be observed within a program on an ongoing basis or integrated into a training environment for evaluation
- ▶ Competition must allow for Open Rosters

## GRASSROOTS PROGRAM TARGETS AND LONG-TERM PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

The role of the amateur youth soccer club is to get children playing, keep them playing, and make them better. In addition, in Canada, amateur youth clubs also have a role in the development of players to progress into professional academies and regional and national EXCEL pathways. If a player participates in a grassroots program three days per week from 9 to 13

years of age, they will have accumulated over 450 hours of intentional training in a high-quality environment. Regardless of starting point, these players should improve and be more capable of playing at higher levels as they progress through the program<sup>13 14</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Jurbala, Paul (27 Oct 2023): [Reimagining the athlete development pathway: constraints-led, learning-based, life-long](#), Sports Coaching Review, DOI: 10.1080/21640629.2023.2275402

<sup>10</sup> [Sport for Life: The challenges around meaningful competition](#).

<sup>11</sup> ThemPra Social Pedagogy. [The Learning Zone Model](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Sport for Life: The challenges around meaningful competition](#).

<sup>13</sup> Cote, J, Baker, J, and Abernethy, B. *Practice and Play in the Development of Sport Expertise*. Handbook of Sport Psychology Chapter 8. 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, J, and Young, B. [20 years later: deliberate practice and the development of expertise in Sport](#). International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology. Volume 7. Number 1. 2014.

As a comparison, if a child with no musical experience registers to learn to play an instrument, taking lessons for an hour, three times per week for 5 years, it is reasonable to expect that with a quality teacher and in a quality environment, that child should be a significantly better musician by the end of that experience<sup>15</sup>. Traditionally, we have not held the same expectation for young soccer players, particularly those who have not demonstrated early ability and been selected into higher-level programming. This limits the player pool as it ages out of the grassroots stages and takes away one of Canada's largest competitive advantages; a registered player pool that is amongst the top 10 in the world.

Grassroots competition should include A, B, and C pools (or similar) beginning at U10 if the overall player pool allows it. A

"pool" is connected to the level of competition in which the player regularly participates. Pool A is the highest level of competition available, Pool B the intermediate level or levels if the size of player pool requires further division, and Pool C is community/house league/recreational programming. Players should not be tiered for competition prior to U10.

Targets have been set for clubs to register players into A and B/C pools. Player development targets and retention of children will be reviewed as part of the Club Licensing application and/or renewal.

| AGE                  | POOL A         | POOL B | POOL C         |
|----------------------|----------------|--------|----------------|
| <b>U10/U11 (7v7)</b> | <b>&gt;35%</b> |        | <b>&lt;65%</b> |
| <b>U12 (9v9)</b>     | <b>&gt;40%</b> |        | <b>&lt;60%</b> |
| <b>U13 (9v9)</b>     | <b>&gt;45%</b> |        | <b>&lt;55%</b> |

<sup>15</sup> Ericsson KA, Krampe RT, and Tesch-Romer C. *The Role of Deliberate Practice in Acquisition of Expert Performance*. Psychological Review. Volume 100, Number 3. 1993.

## APPENDIX A: CANADA SOCCER GRASSROOTS PROGRAM STANDARDS

| CANADA SOCCER GRASSROOTS PROGRAM STANDARDS              |  |
|---|--|
| <b>All Grassroots Programs:</b>                         |  |
| <b>Grassroots Standards</b>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Align to the <a href="#">Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards</a> in their entirety, unless special dispensation has been granted by the Provincial/Territorial Member Association.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Age Groups</b>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ U9-U13</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Player Registration</b>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ No tryouts or similar player identification or placement events are permitted           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Players currently registered with the club should be observed within their current program on an ongoing basis</li> <li>▶ New players to the club should be integrated into a training environment for evaluation over a period of at least two weeks or four training sessions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ No more than 50% of registration is permitted to be by invitation</li> <li>▶ At least 50% of registrations must be open to first-come, first-served</li> <li>▶ Ideally, all players can be accommodated within their desired training program with sub-grouping as necessary.</li> </ul> |
| <b>U9-U13 Competitions</b>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Competitions allow for Open Rosters</li> <li>▶ Clubs are strongly discouraged from selecting "set" teams (i.e. the same players grouped together permanently)</li> </ul>  |
| <b>National Youth Club Licence:</b>                     |  |
| <b>Program Duration</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Training Block Duration = 10-22 weeks</li> <li>▶ Annual Program Duration = 30-44 weeks</li> <li>▶ Minimum Time Between Training Blocks = 2 weeks</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Training</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Offers Grassroots 3 with at least 3 sessions per week open to any player and meeting the grassroots program requirements</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Coaching</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Has two Grassroots Lead Coaches (boys and girls) who hold a valid Children's Diploma Licence and one of whom is present at every grassroots field session</li> <li>▶ Assistant Coaches meet the requirements of the full <a href="#">Canada Soccer Safe Sport Roster</a> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Stage-appropriate Canada Soccer Grassroots Coach Education entails completing the Learn to Train online and on-field practical components.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |
| <b>Review</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Completes Grassroots Program Desk Audit</li> <li>▶ Completes Grassroots Program Site Visits – announced and unannounced</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Member Association Youth Club Licence – Level 2:</b> |  |
| <b>Program Duration</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Training Block Duration = 10-22 weeks</li> <li>▶ Annual Program Duration = 30-44 weeks</li> <li>▶ Minimum Time Between Training Blocks = 2 weeks</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Training</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Offers Grassroots 3 with at least 3 sessions per week open to any player and meeting the grassroots program requirements</li> </ul>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Coaching</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Has two Grassroots Lead Coaches (boys and girls) who hold a valid Children's Diploma Licence and one of whom is present at every grassroots field session</li> <li>▶ Assistant Coaches meet the requirements of the full <a href="#">Canada Soccer Safe Sport Roster</a></li> <li>▶ Stage-appropriate Canada Soccer Grassroots Coach Education entails completing the Learn to Train online and on-field practical components.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Review</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Completes Grassroots Program Desk Audit</li> <li>▶ Completes Grassroots Program Site Visits – announced and unannounced</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Member Association Youth Club Licence – Level 1:</b> |  |
| <b>Program Duration</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Training Block Duration = &lt;22 weeks (recommended 10-22 weeks)</li> <li>▶ Annual Program Duration = &lt;44 weeks (recommended 30-44 weeks)</li> <li>▶ Minimum Time Between Training Blocks = 2 weeks</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Training</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Offers Grassroots 2 with at least 2 sessions per week open to any player and meeting the grassroots program requirements</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Coaching</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Has a Grassroots Lead Coach who holds a valid C Diploma Licence Certified and is present at every grassroots field session.</li> <li>▶ Assistant Coaches meet the requirements of the full <a href="#">Canada Soccer Safe Sport Roster</a></li> <li>▶ Stage-appropriate Canada Soccer Grassroots Coach Education entails completing the Learn to Train online and on-field practical components.</li> </ul>                               |
| <b>Review</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Completes Grassroots Program Desk Audit</li> <li>▶ Completes Grassroots Program Site Visits – announced and unannounced</li> </ul>  |

## APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND SUPPORTING INFORMATION

### Grassroots Program Principles

To ensure that a holistic development environment exists for players and coaches, Canada Soccer grassroots programs will be guided by a set of principles outlined [here](#).

### Grassroots Program Terminology

There is no such thing as an "elite" or "high performance" ten-year old soccer player. These terms, amongst others, have been used to market and promote programming, selling the dream of a professional playing career and pathway to young players and their families. As grassroots programs are designed to support safe, fun, developmentally appropriate, accessible, inclusive, and welcoming environments, terms such as "elite", "high performance", and "prospect/pre-prospect" cannot be used to describe them. Terminology associated with grassroots programming will be considered as a part of the review process.

### Game and Training Methodology in Grassroots Sessions

As well as having the chance to represent their clubs in matches as a part of festival or league play, children should have opportunity to participate in a variety of small-sided games within training sessions to challenge their technique, problem solving skills, resilience, decision making, and skill development. Grassroots programs should provide players with games in all sessions and a more formal weekly competition festival or league. For examples of games within training sessions, please [click here](#).

### Player Identification and Placement

Within grassroots programs, player pools and teams cannot be formed using try-outs or other similar evaluation methods. These approaches to talent identification are ineffective as they are based on a very small sample size and consider almost exclusively physical development and technical and tactical performance on the field<sup>16</sup>. Tryouts also cause significant anxiety in children. Constraints on field space or coaching may prevent all players from being accommodated in a grassroots program. In this case, invitation to the program should be done through an ongoing observation process for players within the club. Players who are new to the club or trying soccer for the first time should be evaluated through participation in the training environment over multiple sessions.

### Canada Soccer Player Movement and Management Framework

The Canada Soccer Player Movement and Management framework presents a rights-based approach to guide player movement between amateur youth clubs. More information on the Canada Soccer Player Movement and Management Framework is [available here](#).

### Competition and "Winning" in Grassroots Soccer

Competition is defined as an interdependent activity that requires two or more parties to cooperate for the contest to occur<sup>17</sup>. Grassroots competition should present the two basic concepts of a game, cooperation and opposition. Within grassroots soccer in Canada, we must support and provide competition to benefit all through a structure that brings out the best in all teams and children. For more information on the winning in grassroots soccer, please review [Redefining Winning in Grassroots Soccer](#) and [The Cost of Winning](#).

### Rights of the Child, Team Culture, and Social Connection

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) is a human rights treaty that outlines the rights of children, defines them as individuals under 18, and sets out the responsibilities to protect and promote those rights. Players are children first and have rights within soccer programs. Consideration of these rights is essential to creating a positive culture. For more information on considering the rights of the child within grassroots programs, please [click here](#).

One of the core elements of sport participation is the sense of belonging to a team. With the shift to player pools, it can be challenging to maintain social connections amongst the larger group of players. For more information on fostering a sense of club culture and team identity without formal teams, please [click here](#).

<sup>16</sup> Jurbala, Paul (27 Oct 2023): [Reimagining the athlete development pathway: constraints-led, learning-based, life-long](#), Sports Coaching Review, DOI: 10.1080/21640629.2023.2275402

<sup>17</sup> Shields, D and Bredemeier, B. *Contest, Competition, and Metaphor*. Journal of the Philosophy of Sport. 2011.