

# How to Run Youth Soccer Tryouts That Actually Work

Fundamentals

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Last spring I took over a club U12 roster mid-season and had to run an emergency tryout with 38 kids, one field, and two assistant coaches who had never evaluated players together before. We got through it — but I made every mistake you can make: no pre-set rubric, inconsistent scoring across coaches, and five awkward post-tryout phone calls I hadn't scripted. This guide is the system I rebuilt from that experience.

A good youth soccer tryout comes down to three things: technical skill, raw athleticism, and coachability. Run two structured days, use a shared scoring sheet every coach fills out independently, and decide how you will communicate cuts before the first player steps on the field. Everything else — drill selection, station rotation, parent emails — is scaffolding around those three pillars.

## Build Your Evaluation Rubric Before You Book the Field

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Most coaches plan the drills and forget the rubric. Then they're standing on the sideline watching 30 kids with nothing but gut instinct to go on, and by Day 2 the scores are in their heads, not on paper.

Set your rubric first. For a youth soccer tryout, I use three buckets:

**Technical skill (40%):** first touch, passing accuracy, dribbling in tight space, 1v1 defending. These are the visible skills parents and coaches think of first, and they're important — but they're only part of the picture.

**Athleticism (40%):** speed, lateral quickness, body control, and recovery speed after a sprint. For players under 12, this bucket matters at least as much as technique. A coachable, athletic 9-year-old with a rough first touch will outpace a technically polished kid who can't change direction — every time. We always include at least one pure athleticism station that involves no ball at all.

**Coachability (20%):** Does the player adjust when given a correction mid-drill? Do they listen before a rep starts, or just begin moving? Do they reset mentally after a mistake? This is the most invisible trait to parents and the most predictive to experienced coaches. It is what separates athletes who improve from athletes who plateau.

Have every coach score independently on a 1–5 scale for each bucket after each station. Average the sheets after Day 2. The numbers surface borderline cases and remove the "I liked him more" problem from the conversation.

## Timeline: Start Four Weeks Out

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The preparation window is shorter than most coaches expect.

- **4 weeks out:** Reserve the field, set tryout dates, draft your parent announcement.
- **3 weeks out:** Email parents with the date, time, location, and what to bring. Assign numbered pinnies so every player has an evaluation ID from the first minute — this is essential when coaches are scoring independently.
- **2 weeks out:** Brief your coaching staff on the rubric and assign each coach a station. Make sure every coach scores using the same sheet.
- **1 week out:** Send a reminder email. Attach any required registration or waiver paperwork.
- **Day of:** Arrive 30–40 minutes early to set up stations. Post the rotation order on a board at the field entrance so players and parents know the plan.

A note on parent behavior: set ground rules in the announcement email. Parents watch from the sideline only — no coaching from the fence — and results will be communicated individually, not posted publicly. Addressing this up front prevents most sideline

# Structure: Two Days, Three Stations Each

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## Day 1 – Technical and Athletic Evaluation

Divide players into groups of 6–8 and rotate through three stations every 15–18 minutes. Small groups are not optional — you need enough reps per player that coaches can actually form an opinion, and you need groups small enough that a player can't hide. A group of 14 is too big. A group of 6 is ideal.

Run your three stations simultaneously with a coach at each. Keep a score sheet at every station. Note standout observations — "weak left foot but recovers well" is more useful than a 3 circled on paper.

## Day 2 – Decision-Making and Small-Sided Games

Move to 4v4 and 5v5 games on a reduced field. This is where coachability becomes visible. Stop play mid-game, give one specific correction ("when you have space, look before you receive it — not after"), restart, and watch who applies it and who reverts. A player who cleans up their positioning after one cue in a live-game context is a better long-term investment than a technically polished player who tunes out coaching.

Day 2 should run 75–90 minutes — not longer. You are watching how players perform under mental and physical fatigue, which is real game information. Over-extending the session degrades the signal.

## The Drill Sequence (Day 1 Stations)

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**Station 1 – First Touch Gate Passing (15 min)** Set up two small gates (two cones each, 5 yards wide) 15 yards apart. Players pass through the gate and move to receive a return pass, controlling it with one touch before passing back. Rotate so every player gets 8–10 reps. Evaluate: quality of first touch on a moving ball, body shape at reception, whether the player checks their shoulder before the ball arrives. Coaching cue: "Receive across your body — open your hips before the ball gets to you, not after."

**Station 2 – 1v1 Defending Corridor (15 min)** Mark a 10x20-yard corridor with cones. The attacker starts with the ball at one end; the defender starts 2 yards away. The attacker tries to dribble to the far line; the defender tries to stop them. Rotate roles after each rep and track reps so every player defends and attacks equally. Evaluate: attacker's decision-making under direct pressure, defender's positioning, patience, and recovery speed when beaten. Coaching cue to defenders: "Stay between the ball and the goal — force them wide, don't dive in."

**Station 3 – Agility and Sprint Circuit (15 min)** This is the no-ball athleticism station. Set a 5-cone flat ladder, a 5-yard lateral shuffle line, and a 10-yard sprint finish. Players go one at a time through all three segments without stopping. You are not evaluating soccer here — you are watching foot speed, body control in the lateral shuffle, and acceleration out of the final cone. This is the station where raw athletic potential that has not been developed yet becomes visible. Coaching cue: "Quick feet through every rung, stay low in the shuffle, then explode to the finish."

## The Gap Most Coaches Miss: Age-Specific Evaluation Weights

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This is the single biggest mistake I see at youth tryouts — running a U8 tryout exactly like a U14 tryout. The rubric I described above needs to flex by age group, and getting this wrong means you'll cut wrong.

**U8–U10 players:** Your primary evaluation is athleticism, attitude, and willingness to work. Technical polish at 7–9 years old is almost entirely a function of how many structured sessions a player has had, not their ceiling. A technically rough U9 with elite coordination, a fearless 1v1 instinct, and genuine competitive drive will outpace a technically tidy U9 who's had more training reps. At this age I shift my weights to 50% athleticism / 30% technique / 20% coachability. The athleticism ceiling is the thing worth betting on.

**U12–U14 players:** Technique becomes a baseline requirement, but now you can also see developmental acceleration. A U13 who

apply it. I make a note: "Coaching cue applied on weak foot — verify Day 2." That kind of responsive adjustment at 13 is worth a roster spot.

**U14+ and competitive/travel levels:** Weight technique and positional decision-making more heavily. Watch specifically for awareness of space and off-ball movement in the Day 2 small-sided games. Players at this level are often on a recruiting track, and what you evaluate now mirrors what college programs will assess. Our college soccer recruiting guide for parents covers the technical markers college coaches look for — worth reading to sharpen your own evaluation lens at the high school age range.

## Evaluating Coachability: The In-Tryout Feedback Test

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Partway through Station 1 on Day 1, I pause each group for 60 seconds and give one specific, coachable correction for the whole group: "On your next rep, I want you to check over your shoulder before the ball arrives — not after." Then I restart and watch closely.

In a group of 8 kids, the breakdown is almost always the same: - 2–3 will apply the cue on the very next rep. - 3–4 will try but revert by the third rep. - 1–2 will nod and immediately do exactly what they were doing before.

The first group is who you're targeting — they are the players who will improve fastest in a team environment because they hear coaching as useful information, not criticism. The middle group is developmentally normal. The last group is a flag worth noting before you commit a roster spot.

I write a small C+ or C- next to a player's name on the score sheet. It is not a veto — just a data point that is worth surfacing when two players are statistically tied at the end of Day 2 and you have to decide between them.

## Cutting Players With Honesty and Care

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No one teaches you this part, and it is the part that families remember longest.

**Communicate cuts individually, never in a list.** A public roster posted on a website or a group email is efficient for coaches and genuinely hard for kids. A personal call or individual email — even a short one — tells a player they were seen as a person, not a number. That matters. When I was cut from a high school team at 16, I still remember whether the coach called or posted a sheet.

**Be specific.** "You showed real composure under pressure on the defending station" is better than "it was a really competitive group this year." Vague positive feedback after a cut lands as hollow because it is. Specific feedback, even brief, gives a kid something true to carry.

**Separate the cut from the player.** "You are not on this roster this season" is not the same as "you are not a soccer player." We have had players come back a full cycle later — after working on a weak foot or improving their first touch — and make the team. Say that directly. "I'd encourage you to keep working on X and try again next season." A door you leave open is not the same as a door you shut.

**Give parents a sentence.** A short follow-up note to the parent — not an apology, just a specific acknowledgment that their player competed well and one honest encouragement — closes the loop and prevents the parent from filling the silence with their own story about what happened.

## Post-Tryout: Results and Roster Setup

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Post results within **48–72 hours** of the final session. After 72 hours, the silence starts to feel like disrespect, even when the delay is logistical. Set a deadline for yourself in advance and hold it.

Your communication to selected players should include the roster confirmation, the first practice date, time and location, any fees or commitments due before the first session, and a brief description of the season schedule. Players who just earned a spot are motivated — don't make them wait for logistical details.

Once the roster is final, run your first practice with a real session plan, not an unstructured introductory hour. Players who just competed to earn a spot want to see a coach who showed up prepared. Our U12 soccer practice plan is built as a full first-

session template for that age group — use it as a starting point and adapt it to your roster. For U10 and under, the U10 soccer practice plan covers the pacing and drill complexity that fits that developmental window.

More resources for running your soccer program are at our soccer coaching hub.

Running tryouts well is one of the most consequential things a club or travel coach does. The players who make your roster, and the ones who do not, will remember how it felt for years. Build the system so both groups walk away feeling like they were evaluated honestly.