

Player Rotation Consideration	
Reasons to Rotate	Playing at the Back, Dealing with “Talented Players, Appreciation for Teammates and Roles within a Team
Potential Pitfalls of Player Rotation	Flow of the Game, Learning to Play While Fatigued, Reinforcing Coaches Feedback
Recommendations	Reduce Number of Substitutions, Rotate at Half, Rotate Game to Game

Over the years I’ve found that LUSC coaches have been very committed to adhering to the philosophy of rotating players in an effort to expose all players to the different positions of the field. This is fantastic since the benefits of player rotation are enormous; players learn the different tactical decisions one needs to make to play a certain position; they develop a greater understanding of the physical demands each position imposes on a player; and in turn enjoy the game more than if they were continuously asked to play the same position. The more the player enjoys playing, the better they develop over time.

I want to elaborate on a couple of the most important reasons to rotate players from a pure development standpoint.

Playing at the back- There are many kids that prefer to play “at the back”. It can be in a player’s personality that they prefer to protect their goal more than attack the opponents. This can be seen right from a player’s introduction to the game in the K-2nd grade program when they stand in front of their pugg goal no matter how often they are told that there are no goalies! As a coach, we need to make sure that we continue to expose and encourage these players to playing further up the pitch. Why? When you play at the back, you tend to choose (settle for) the safe option since the repercussions of turning the ball over are much greater than if it happens further up the field. When you play at the back there is little to no “cover” so safety is encouraged by the coaches and spectators and in turn playing it safe becomes the rule of thumb. Another, but more understated, habit that forms by playing at the back is limiting as players field of vision. It is much easier for a player to “read the game” from the back since the play is generally always in front of them. This becomes a real limitation to a player down the road.

On the surface these two reasons may appear to be not so troubling, but as the game becomes more complex and players compete for roster spots, the kids that have always played it safe or have been limited to viewing the game from “the back” get phased out. Why? Players that were exposed to playing up top (or attacking positions in general) and were encouraged to take chances in the final third will have a stronger skill set and variety to their game. This provides those attacking players more opportunities to adjust positions, if they are found lacking as strikers as they advance in age, the reason being if they can view the game with their back to goal or surrounded by defenders on all sides (like a central midfielder), they can generally speaking make the adjustment of dropping further back where they can see the entire field and learn to “play it safe”. Moving from back to front is a far rarer occurrence.

Dealing with the “talented player”- It’s been my experience that if we are not careful, the player that most often gets shortchanged in the development process at the younger ages is the

"talented player". I hesitate to use the word talented, because more often than not this is a player on the older end of the spectrum with regards to his/her teammates and/or slightly more physically developed. They generally are put in positions where their physical skills have the greatest impact on the result of the game (center forward, center back) whether it helps them develop the other skills needed to continue to be "talented" down the road or not. We often see the big & fast kid dominate youth games, but once the other players catch up from a physical standpoint or they have a better tactical sense of how to deal with this players skill set, they no longer have success, get frustrated and drop out. Another reason to rotate players is to prevent this from happening is if the "talented" young player can learn to impact the game from a variety of positions, even at the expense of the games result, they'll have a more well rounded skill set to continue to develop and enjoy the game as they get older and the competition becomes greater.

Appreciation for teammates and roles within a team- When you've been exposed to the different positions on the pitch, you gain a better understanding of the demands of the game for the players playing in the various positions on the field. This can translate into a better player off the ball (if I run here, I open up space for my teammate there) and a more encouraging and less finger pointing teammate since there is a greater awareness of the difficulties the game presents.

If you're still reading, you've probably come to the conclusion that I am a huge proponent of having a rotation system. I am, but I do have a few concerns when it's not done properly.

1. **Flow of the Game-** Watching the games on Saturday, I often see a team just beginning to settle into a rhythm and within a minute or two there is a mass substitution. Although soccer is a simple game, it isn't an easy game. It often can take several minutes, and a few mistakes, for a player to settle into the flow of the game. Constant substitution adds to this problem.
2. **Learning to Play while Fatigued-** One important skill for a player to learn is the ability to pace oneself over the course of a game. If we substitute too quickly this skill gets neglected. This problem surfaces when players reach the 11 vs. 11 game where the need to run for a longer period of time is vital in the performance of a player and team.
3. **Reinforcing Coaches Feedback-** After most substitutions, I observe coaches offering players feedback on their performance during their last shift (I do the same), but the next time the player enters the game he or she is often in a different position. By doing so, we don't allow for the player to put into practice what the coach just offered as feedback since the demands of each position require different tasks.

I believe these potential negatives can be addressed in a positive manner with a couple of simple solutions while keeping the integrity of the player rotation system intact. A couple of recommendations:

1. **Reduce the number of Substitutions-** For example, in a game with 30 minute halves, instead of having 5 rotations of 6 minutes per half, have 4 shifts of 7.5 minutes. This will

allow players to settle into the flow of the game while also providing the benefit of playing for a longer period of time where they'll learn to pace themselves.

2. **Rotate Positions at the Half-** Instead of having a player move to a new position on each shift allow the player to play in one area of the field during each half. By doing so, the coach can offer feedback and observe whether the player is applying the information on his or her next shift. This will also allow the player to better focus on the requirements of a certain position in relation to their teammates than if they are moving from spot to spot each rotation.

Or

3. **Rotate Positions on Week to Week basis-** I prefer doing it at the half since a player that is being asked to play in a non-preferred spot can get frustrated doing so for an entire game, but if you have a team that is open to this it will allow you to observe a player settle into the spot and gain a greater comfort level and positional sense over the course of a full match.

There is certainly a lot to consider when it comes to player development and I do understand that moving players out of their preferred position may compromise the result in the short term, but I hope I've made the case that the benefits to the players overall development and enjoyment of the game long-term must certainly outweigh the score of a U10 game on a Saturday afternoon.

Thanks for adhering to a rotation system. This will ensure that we develop more complete players who enjoy the game as they continue through the LUSC program and beyond.