CANADA SOCCER GRASSROOTS STANDARDS

The Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards have been designed to create the best possible learning and development environment for young players in Canada. First introduced in 2020, the Grassroots Standards are based on Sport for Life's Long-term Athlete Development (2005) and Canada Soccer's Long-term Player Development (2008) as well as global best practice while considering the realities of Canadian soccer and will become mandatory for all member organizations (clubs, academies, districts/regions, leagues) in Canada in advance of the 2026 playing season.

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 develop skillful players who are comfortable with the ball and have the technical proficiency and tactical understanding to solve soccer problems, it is essential that young players interact with the ball as often as possible by fostering an environment that maximizes one-on-one encounters, quick decision making, and final acts (goals, shots, crosses).

Given the uniqueness of our country, where geography, climate, and infrastructure can be vastly different from one region to the next, it may not always be possible to implement the Grassroots Standards in their entirety. Recognizing this reality, member organizations may apply for special dispensation through their Provincial/Territorial Member Association by providing supporting rationale and an action plan to achieve the standard (if applicable) if they are not able to meet all required standards. This approach allows for some flexibility to account for the different environments and contexts in which soccer is played, while setting a standardized national direction for grassroots soccer in Canada. As adults, it is our responsibility to ensure that all children can enjoy soccer in a safe, fun, accessible, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate environment. The Grassroots Standards are structured around a set of guiding principles for grassroots soccer in Canada.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

- Grassroots Programs should be appropriately structured for the age and stage of the participating players and allow for the opportunity for multi-sport participation, activity sampling, and life balance.
- Grassroots Matches should be played on fields, with goals and balls, and following a match day format that is developmentally appropriate for the participating players.
- Coaches have the greatest impact on the experience of players and every child deserves a properly qualified coach.
- Children register to play soccer, not to watch others play or spend time traveling. Teams should strive for fair playing time and limit travel time as much as possible.
- Talent Identification and selection should be delayed as long as possible to provide as many players as possible with the best training environment available.
- Match results should not be the focus of grassroots soccer as this restricts player development and negatively impacts the player experience.

CANADA SOCCER GRASSROOTS STANDARDS

	ACTIVE START	FUNDAMENTALS		LEARN TO TRAIN	
CRITERIA	**U4-U6**	**U6-U7**	**U8-U9**	**U10-U11**	**U12-U13**
Principle: Grassroots Programs should be appropriately structured for the age and stage of the participating players and allow for the opportunity for multi-sport participation, activity sampling, and life balance.					
Season or Block Length	6-16 weeks	6-16 weeks	6-22 weeks	10-22 weeks	10-22 weeks
Practice-to-Match Ratio	N/A	1:1 or 2:1	2:1 or 3:1	2:1 or 3:1	2:1 or 3:1
Structured Practice Duration	30-60 minutes	30-60 minutes	45-75 minutes	60-75 minutes	60-90 minutes
Number of Match Days per Week	N/A	1 (Respecting the practice-to-match ratio)			
Number of Memorable Events (tournaments)	N/A	N/A	2 per season	2 per season	3 per season
Principle: Grassroots Matches should be played on fields, with goals and balls, and following a match day format that is developmentally appropriate for the participating players.					
Match Format	Informal Games	3v3	4v4 (No GK) **or** 5v5 (With GK)	7v7	9v9
Maximum Goal Size	N/A	Pop-up Goals 4ft (1.22m) x 6ft (1.83m)	Ideal: 5ft (1.52m) x 8ft (2.43m) Maximum: 6ft (1.83m) x 12ft (3.65) Minimum: 4ft (1.21m) x 6ft (1.83m)	Ideal: 6.5ft (1.98m) x 16.5ft (5.03m) Maximum: 6.5ft (1.98m) x 18.5ft (5.64m) Minimum: 6ft (1.83m) x 12ft (3.66m)	Ideal: 6.5ft (1.98m) x 18.5ft (5.64m) Maximum: 7ft (2.13m) x 21.5ft (6.55m) Minimum: 6ft (1.83m) x 18ft (5.49m)
Field Size	N/A	Width: 18-22m Length: 25-30m	Width: 25-30m Length: 30-36m	Width: 30-36m Length: 40-55m	Width: 45-55m Length: 65-75m
Ball Size	3	3	3 or 4	4	U12: 4 U13: 5
Match Duration (maximum)	N/A	30 minutes (2x15 min, or 4x7.5 min)	40 minutes (2x20 min or 4x10 min)	50 minutes (2x25 min or 4x12.5 min)	70 minutes (U12) (2x35 min or 4x 17.5 min) 80 minutes (U13) (2x40 min or 4x 20 min)
Maximum Match Time Per Player Per Day	N/A	60 minutes	80 minutes	100 minutes	120 minutes
Minimum Rest Time Between Matches	N/A		Duration of one match		
Match Day Roster	N/A	Ideal: 6 players Maximum: 9 players	Ideal: 8-10 players (depending on game format) Maximum: 12 players	Ideal: 10-12 players Maximum: 14 players	Ideal: 14 players Maximum: 18 players
Match Day Format	N/A	Festival Format		Festival or League Format	
Referee or Game Leader	N/A	Game Leader	Game Leader or Referee		Referee
Restarts from Sidelines	N/A	Dribble-in and Pass-in			Throw-in
Offside	N/A	No			Yes
Substitutions	N/A	Unlimited (on the fly or at designated stoppages)		Unlimited (any stoppage)	
Retreat Line	N/A	Yes (halfway line)		Yes (one third)	No

	ACTIVE START	FUNDAMENTALS		LEARN TO TRAIN	
CRITERIA	**U4-U6**	**U6-U7**	**U8-U9**	**U10-U11**	**U12-U13**
Principle: Coaches have the greatest impact on the experience of players and every child deserves a properly qualified coach.					
Coaching Qualifications	As outlined in the Canada Soccer Coach Education Minimum Standards, Canada Soccer Safe Sport Roster and presented below				
	Grassroots Stream* 1. Criminal Record Check with Vulnerable Sector Screen 2. NCCP Make Ethical Decisions Module and/or Online Evaluation 3. Respect in Sport Activity Leader Program 4. NCCP Making Headway Module 5. NCCP Emergency Action Planning Module 6. NCCP Rule of Two Module				
	Active Start – Online Theory Module and Practical Workshop	Fundamentals – Online Theory Module and Practical Workshop		Learn to Train – Online Theory Module and Practical Workshop	
	Grassroots – Community Stream* 1. Criminal Record Check with Vulnerable Sector Screen 2. Canada Soccer Coaching Soccer in Canada Online Module 3. Respect in Sport Activity Leader Program				
	* these coach qualifications represent the minimum standard for the Grassroots Streams. Member Association may increase the requirements within their jurisdiction.				
Player-to-Coach Ratio	U4: One-with-One (child-with-adult informal play) U6: Ideal: 4:1; Maximum 8:1	Ideal: 6:1 Maximum 9:1	Ideal: 8:1 Maximum 10:1	Ideal: 8:1 Maximum 12:1	Ideal: 8:1 Maximum 14:1
Principle: Children register to play soccer, not to watch others play or spend time traveling. Teams should strive for fair playing time and limit travel time as much as possible.					
Playing Time and Positions	N/A	Fair Playing Time for All Players (Coaches should target a minimum of 50% playing time for each player) Players Try All Positions			
Team Travel Time	Within organization	Under 60 minutes each way			
Principle: Talent Identification and selection should be delayed as long as possible to provide as many players as possible with the best training environment available.					
Grouping Players for Match Play	Must support "Open Rosters" that allow the movement players between teams on a regular and ongoing basis				
	Teams cannot be formed using try-outs or other similar evaluation methods				
	Tiering of players is not permitted before U10				
Select Teams	No provincial/territorial or regional select teams before U14.				
Principle: Match results should not be the focus of grassroots soccer as this restricts player development and negatively impacts the player experience.					
Scores and Standings	N/A	No scores or standings			
Scores and Standings in Tournaments	N/A		No		Permitted but not preferred

SEASON OR BLOCK LENGTH

Development programs for young players are often broken up into seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter) or into multi-week "blocks". There should be a minimum of 2 weeks between seasons or blocks for players to get some rest or to play other sports and activities. In grassroots stages, where children sample different sports, it is also important to allow for new registrations for different seasons and blocks. The parameters around minimum/maximum time of the seasons/blocks are flexible to ensure that clubs can offer appropriate programming for players.

PRACTICE-TO-MATCH RATIO

This is the number of practice sessions (practices) that players participate in during a week compared to the number of match days (Festivals, Memorable Events) in that week.

Most learning occurs in training sessions where there is an opportunity for skill development through more repetitions and feedback from coaches.. While some children may only want to play matches, many also enjoy the learning environment created in training sessions, particularly when these involve age and stage appropriate games and activities.

STRUCTURED PRACTICE DURATION

This is the length of time that the structured practice session takes place. This is from the time the coach gathers all the players at the start of the practice (prior to the warm-up, if required) to the time the coach has a debrief with the players at the end of the practice session. This does not include the coach's set up and take down time before and after the practice session.

The length of structured practices is relative to the age of the children and their stage of development. The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines call for children aged 5-17 to accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity of physical activity daily; however, younger children have limited aerobic and anaerobic capacities and short attention spans, so structured practice durations are shortened accordingly.

NUMBER OF MATCH DAYS PER WEEK

Players spend far more time on the ball in practice learning the skills they need to enjoy soccer than they do in a match. (In a 90-minute match in professional soccer, the top players who are on the ball the most only have the ball for approximately 2 minutes.) Practice is where players learn the fundamental skills to enjoy soccer, and matches are where those skills are applied or tested. The limitations on the number of match days per week are to encourage more meaningful practice sessions.

MEMORABLE EVENTS

Playing in tournaments and memorable events is an important part of a positive soccer experience for young players. Some of their most memorable experiences will be participating in tournaments and festivals, often away from home, where lifelong friendships are formed. Playing in tournaments and memorable events is also demanding on children physically and can place a higher focus on winning when a champion is crowned. While tournaments can be a highlight of the season, their importance can sometimes be overstated, so the number of memorable events per season should be reasonable and extensive travel avoided until older ages.

Given the size of our country and the proximity of many Canadians to the United States, it is often more convenient for teams to travel to memorable events in the United States than in Canada. We want our players to have great experiences in a variety of competitions, and there are many options to do this in Canada and the U.S. Overseas travel (i.e. Europe, Asia, South America) should generally be restricted until players are older so that they can fully appreciate the experience. However, there may be exceptions, so please contact your Member Association to inquire about overseas travel.

MATCH FORMAT

The match format refers to the number of players on each team. As children are not miniature adults, it is important that they play in match formats that are appropriate for their age and stage of development. Smaller match formats for younger ages ensure players have more touches on the ball and greater development opportunities, which adds to their enjoyment of the game. This can range from very few players (1v1, 2v2 or 3v3) to the full FIFA regulation game format of 11v11.

FIELD SIZE

Like the match format, field size must also be adjusted for children. Young players lack the size, strength, and endurance to play on a full-size pitch, so sizes are reduced accordingly. Recognizing that field sizes are not always under the control of the soccer organization, a range is provided for each playing format.

More information on field layouts for grassroots games is available **here**.

BALL SIZE

As children have shorter legs and smaller feet than adults and generally lack the strength needed to play with a size 5 ball, an appropriate sized ball is important to their development prior to U13. "Light" and "Super Light" balls have begun to gain prominence in some areas of the world as they allow children to play with a consistent size ball while still being able to kick the ball in the air. Light and Super Light balls are not readily available in Canada; however, if available, a size 4 Light or size 5 Super Light would be appropriate for U8-U9 while a size 5 Light would be appropriate for U10-13.

MAXIMUM MATCH DURATION

This refers to the maximum length of the match. The match is normally played in two halves of equal duration (i.e. A 30-minute match would be comprised of two, 15-minute halves) however, the match may be divided as required. Dividing a game into quarters rather than halves provides the opportunity for increased coaching time while letting players explore and self-regulate in-game

MAXIMUM MATCH TIME PER PLAYER PER DAY

In order to ensure that our young players are safe, we do not want them to be pushed beyond their physical limits. The maximum match time per player is the total amount of match time each player experiences on match day. Be careful to track the total playing time of each player, as exceeding the recommended guidelines may lead to burnout or injury.

MINIMUM REST TIME BETWEEN MATCHES

Young players need rest as they expend a great deal of energy during matches. It is important for their wellbeing that they have a minimum rest period between matches during a Festival or Memorable Event. This ensures that they have the time needed to recover, refuel, and rehydrate. The rest time between matches is considered the time between the end of one match, including any additional time or kicks from the penalty mark, and the start of another.

MATCH DAY ROSTER

The match day roster is the list of players that a coach has available to play in a given match. It is important for coaches to remain within the standards provided; too few players and there is an increased risk of fatigue, burnout, and injury. Too many players and there is a risk of boredom as players will spend too much time on the sidelines and not enough time playing soccer. Canada Soccer requires "Fair Playing Time" for all players with a target of each player playing at least 50% of each match up to U13.

MATCH DAY FORMAT

Grassroots programs for players U6-U9 must utilize a Festival Format for match days. "Festival Format" involves a number of teams playing their matches at a single venue rather than single team home and away matches as occur in a League Format. A festival may include one or two matches in a day but does not include placement or elimination games. League Formats may be introduced beginning at U10; however, cannot include scores or standings or elimination or championship games.

GAME LEADER

In many parts of Canada, Game Leaders are used to facilitate matches between young players. The Game Leader will be trained to achieve a few objectives on the field:

- Enable children to have a fun and rewarding experience while competing in small-sided games.
- Ensure player safety.
- Implement simplified rules while keeping the game moving — limiting stoppages and assisting the young players with all restarts.

The Game Leader typically serves as an entry point for younger individuals to begin their coaching and/or refereeing journey; however, a Game Leader can also be a club representative, coach, parent, or beginning or senior referee.

RESTARTS FROM THE SIDELINES

One of the greatest challenges that young players face as they are learning to control the ball is keeping the ball in play. When the ball goes out of play along the sidelines, it is required to be played back into play by the team who did not touch the ball last. The traditional method of returning the ball into play is via a throw-in. However, for young players, this can be a challenging skill to learn and often results in the ball going back out of play. To facilitate more contact time with the ball at their feet and more time for the ball to be in play, players up to U11 will be permitted to pass or dribble the ball back into play when a restart from the sidelines is required. In addition to keeping the ball on the ground, providing the option for a player to dribble or pass in also creates a game-relevant decision making opportunity that includes consideration of space, teammates, and opponents.

OFFSIDE

Offside is Law 11 of the International Football Association Board (IFAB) Laws of the Game and is to be implemented for young players at the U12 level. For a deeper understanding of Law 11, please follow **this link**.

SUBSTITUTIONS

Substitutions are used to ensure that players have an opportunity to play different positions and to get some rest, when required. While ensuring that all players get exactly the same playing time is a challenge, it is important for players to have an opportunity to play as much soccer as possible. Substitutions on stoppages limit substitutions to when the ball is not in play and involve a process controlled by the Referee or Game Leader, whereas substitutions on the fly allow for substitutions while the ball is still in play.

RETREAT LINE

The retreat line has been introduced in grassroots soccer in recent years to help develop young players' ability to play out from the goalkeeper and to keep possession of the ball as they build an attack. This teaching tool has also been used to help build confidence in players as they retain possession of the ball.

COACHING QUALIFICATIONS

This refers to the training that a coach is required to complete prior to coaching a group of young players. Coaches have the greatest impact on the experience of players and serve a vital role that involves mentoring, leadership, and personal development in addition to teaching skills and tactics. To provide the best possible environment and experience of young children, it is essential that all coaches have the appropriate training and/or certification for the programs in which they coach. As part of Canada Soccer's Safe Sport Roster, all coaches in Canada are required to complete the training outlined in the Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards.

PLAYER-TO-COACH RATIO

For coaches to enjoy their experience and be able to build meaningful relationships with their players, Canada Soccer has provided a range of player-to-coach ratios, from "Ideal" to "Maximum". This ensures that all players will have the opportunity to interact with their coach(es) as much as possible.

An appropriate player-to-coach ratio better ensures adequate supervision and the safety of young players as well as supporting their learning through regular and ongoing coach interactions.

PLAYING TIME

One of the most challenging tasks for a grassroots coach is to ensure that players get equal playing time. While it may not be possible to achieve equal playing time, all grassroots players must be given "fair" playing time. This means that coaches will do their best to ensure that all players play the same amount and as much soccer as possible. Grassroots players should not play less than 50% of a match*. All children have the right to enjoy their soccer experience and they can't do that if they don't get to play.

* At U7 where the Match Day Roster allows for more players, players may not play 50% of the match; however, all players should play as close to equal time as possible.

TRAVEL TIME

For young players to fall in love with the game of soccer, they need to play. Time spent traveling to a match, festival, or tournament is time that cannot be spent on the field enjoying that experience. While Canada's geography may require travel and dispensation may be available to ensure all communities have access to competition, travel times should be limited to a maximum of 60 minutes each direction in grassroots soccer.

SCORES AND STANDINGS

Canada Soccer continues to endorse the removal of scores and standings from grassroots soccer. The goal of grassroots soccer is to create the best possible learning and development environment for all young players in Canada. While the removal of scores and standings does not dimmish children's desire to compete, it shifts the focus of grassroots matches from the adult concept of rewarding performance measured by result toward development and the participant experience, which are more appropriate emphases in children's sport.

For more information on Scores and Standings, please review **Redefining Winning in Grassroots Soccer**.

SCORES AND STANDINGS IN MEMORABLE EVENTS (TOURNAMENTS)

At U11 and younger, tournaments cannot include elimination games (i.e. semi-finals, finals, etc.) and should be played "festival-style" with all teams playing an equal number of games, regardless of result. While festival-style memorable events are preferred, some flexibility is afforded at U12/U13. Given the limitations on the number of memorable events in which players may participate each year, tournaments at these ages may include elimination games.

GROUPING PLAYERS FOR MATCH PLAY

The traditional model of grouping players for match play in Canadian youth soccer revolves around choosing a select number of players, typically from a try-out or similar evaluation event, at a specific moment in time based on their current performance level, then having them compete against other teams to determine who is better. Competition and team formation must support our knowledge of child development by:

1. Considering developmental features at different ages and stages.
2. Considering the development of social relationships, behaviours, skill sets, and game understanding.
3. Allowing all children to show their potential.

The identification and placement process can be extremely stressful for young players. This is particularly true if player identification is done through a traditional "tryout", which provides a relatively limited opportunity to demonstrate ability in an unfamiliar and high stress environment. In addition to being stressful on young players, tryouts are also not the most effective way to evaluate players. Evaluating players on an ongoing basis over an extended period of time, preferably in an environment in which they are comfortable, is a better approach in terms of the effectiveness of the evaluation and in limiting the amount of stress on young players. For these reasons, tryouts or other similar evaluation events are not permitted in grassroots soccer in Canada up to U13.

Players can be grouped for match play in many different ways. Tiering of players and teams is not permitted before U10 and players should be grouped using a random* or balanced** approach. Streaming*** of players can begin at U10; however, placement cannot be done through a tryout process.

By providing a balanced approach to the formation and grouping of teams within a league or festival will provide children with the feeling of:

1. Being a 'good player' and getting constant touches on the ball
2. Having potential
3. Success by developing comfort on the ball and building a library of techniques and skills through game formats relevant to their age and developmental stage.

*Random – Players are placed on teams by random selection with no evaluation process.

**Balanced – Players are placed on teams with other players of varying ability with a goal of creating teams of similar quality.

***Streamed – Players are evaluated and placed on teams with other players of similar ability.

OPEN ROSTERS

Research shows that children learn best when they are exposed to different learning environments. This is facilitated by using an "open roster" approach to team formation. Open rosters allow players to be moved between teams on an ongoing basis rather than the traditional approach of fixed rosters which place a group of players onto a team at the beginning of the season with limited or no opportunity for movement. 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, amongst others, open rosters also better facilitate meaningful competition between teams, which is instrumental to player development.