



## US YOUTH SOCCER PLAYER'S GUIDE

**Becoming a Better Player and Teammate**

US Youth Soccer Coaching Department



Prepared by the US Youth Soccer Coaching Department

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In association with the US Youth Soccer Coaching Committee

With support from the US Youth Soccer Board of Directors, US Youth Soccer Recreation Committee, US Youth Soccer Referee Committee, 55 US Youth Soccer State Association Technical Directors and the U.S. Soccer Technical Advisors.

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# Introduction

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Hi Kids,

Welcome to the world's favorite game! You might have been playing soccer for a while now or you may be new to the sport. People like you are playing soccer all across the USA and the world. US Youth Soccer provides for you some tips on how to play the game.

It has been said that soccer is a simple game, but those of us who play the game know it can be quite challenging. What you do on and off the field will affect how well you play. Being a good player and good teammate are both equally important. Respecting your opponents, teammates, referees, coaches, club and the game are all crucial to your overall enjoyment. Demonstrating fair play will earn you the respect from your teammates and opponents.

In this player's guide, Coach John Thomas and Coach Sam Snow give you the "how to" on the points mentioned above and more. *The US Youth Soccer Player's Guide* is a quick, fun overview of the game, covering everything on and off the field, including training, adult expectations and good game day routines. Use this as a resource to help you become a better player and teammate.

It's time for kickoff...good luck!

**Sam Snow**

Director of Coaching  
US Youth Soccer

# Part I: It's a Player's Game

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Soccer, unlike some other team sports, is centered on the player. In some sports, the game stops often and the coach tells players what to do next. In soccer, the game rarely stops and the players must decide what to do on their own. You need to be aware in a soccer game and be able to make decisions for yourself. The player who can make a difference in a match is a savvy soccer player. This means you need to not only learn the skills of the game, but also the rules and strategies. To learn the rules for your specific age group you can go to the US Youth Soccer [website](#). From time to time ask the referee about the rules before your match or between your matches at a tournament.

Since you all are the ones playing the game, during a match it's the individual players' responsibility to talk to their teammates and make decisions. You must take responsibility for what you do on the field. Players should be doing most of the talking during a match, while coaches can offer their advice. The players play the game, so you need to take charge after the kickoff whistle blows.


To learn more about strategies of soccer, you need to become a student of the game. First of all listen to your coach and be willing to ask questions about the game. Go watch live and televised matches. Check out local professional and college teams. Tune into The US Youth Soccer Show on Fox Soccer. Read soccer books and magazines. Watch soccer videos and DVDs. Even video games like FIFA 12 can help you get a better picture of the game in your head. Learn all you can about the game.

## Part II: Teamwork

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Soccer is a game with room for individual expression and creativity within the team. You see those moments in a match now and then, a bit of individual brilliance. A big save, a dribble that beats an opponent and goes to goal, a crucial tackle, a clearance off the line or a breathtaking goal; those moments of great individual play stand out in soccer. They are all part of the bigger picture, which is team play.

Teamwork is part of what makes a team sport fun to play and watch. There is great satisfaction when you and a teammate pull off a certain play together. Do things in a match for your teammates that you would like them to do for you. Encourage your teammates, especially when they make a mistake. You can lift their confidence and help get them back in the game. It may take a lot of hard work and sweat, but it helps your team do its best. Being a team player is important and you can be an impact player too.



*“Do things in a match for  
your teammates that you  
would like them to do for  
you.”*

**US Youth Soccer Director of  
Coaching Sam Snow**

## Part III: The Grown-ups

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Most of the parents and coaches at the game know that the match is for you and they support you. However, some adults forget that it's just a game. While you don't want to be disrespectful, you should try and tune out what people off the field are saying. Your attention must be on your teammates and what's happening on the field.

You know from playing the game that win, lose or draw, it's the game and the competition you like. Yes, it is exciting to win a match and a bummer to lose one; yet no matter how the game goes you'd rather be playing soccer than not. Sometimes adults forget this and they only focus on getting trophies. Remind them from time to time that playing the game is what counts. Always give your best whenever you play. Remember that soccer is a player's game and play the game for you.

## Part IV: The Lineup

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Soccer teams have a basic formation to play the game. That formation is divided into four lines, the goalkeeper, fullbacks, midfielders and forwards. There is only one goalkeeper, but the number of fullbacks, midfielders and forwards can change. The difference may be due to the age group and the number of players on the field for each team, it can also vary because of different formations.

Soccer savvy players can play different positions in a variation of formations. That versatility will make you quite a valuable player to many teams. In fact, US Youth Soccer recommends that players get exposed to playing all of the positions on a team up to age 14. Whatever lineup your team uses the basic idea is for you to be able to help your teammates near you on offense and defense and for them to help you too.

If you are in the starting lineup for today's match then you have the responsibility to be ready physically and mentally. Arrive at the field ready to warm up and get focused. As you warm-up, in your mind picture yourself doing good things in the match. See yourself being skillful, confident and helping your teammates on offense and defense.

If you start off today's match as a substitute, then do your best to help the starters get ready. You too need to play the game in your mind so you can be ready when your playing time comes. Once the match begins, watch closely to see how the other team plays, then you can be ready to go in and help your teammates anywhere on the field. To do all of these things takes a positive attitude and self-confidence.



## Part V: Training Session and Practice

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Practice is what you should do on your own or with friends to improve your skills; see the section in this Player's Guide called *On Your Own*. The training session is where your teammates and you can improve your teamwork and gain a better understanding of the game. The training session is when you learn new things from your coach and can try those things on your own.

If you want it to all come together in a match, then what you do before the match is crucial. This means good training sessions and practice. You get out of practice and training what you put into them. If you give your best at those times then the payoff for that hard work will be your performance in matches.

You should come to training sessions with an alert mind to learn new things. The attitude to try new skills and tactics is very important to becoming your best. You can be challenged at training to push yourself by your coaches and your teammates. Take on that challenge and you'll find your game getting better and better.

Be a team leader. Before a team training session, challenge your teammates to a game like Warp Speed.

### **Warp Speed is a group juggling activity to help focus on problem-solving and teamwork.**

- It extends the common name game to a team building exercise by asking players how fast they can pass the ball to each teammate. This includes saying their teammate's names. Predict a time and try to deliver.
- Check yourselves; was your prediction too fast or too slow? Try to figure out what you can improve upon and then make a more accurate prediction.
- Push yourselves to go even faster. The more accurate your passes are, the closer you get to Warp Speed.

Practice on your own or with a friend or two and try out new skills. This is the time to experiment and become comfortable with the ball. Practice can also be a good time to improve your personal fitness.

Training Session	Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You, your coach and teammates working together and learning new skills</li><li>• Push your teammates and yourself</li><li>• Hard work will pay off during the match</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improving skills on your own or with a couple of friends</li><li>• Experiment with new tricks</li><li>• Work on physical fitness</li></ul>

## Part VI: Game Day

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To play your best on game day, what you do the day before counts, and it starts by eating right. It is important to eat a good dinner, and get a good night's sleep. The food that will be your fuel on game day is mostly what you ate in the two meals prior to the match. So, what you eat and drink really counts when you play.

If your match is in the morning eat a light breakfast, but if it's in the afternoon, have a regular breakfast. Get to the field at the time your coach tells you. During the warm-up with your team, you should play the game in your mind. Sports psychologists call playing the game in your head visualization. You see yourself on the field playing skillfully and doing good things during the match like; getting into the right places to help your teammates and giving them encouragement.

Whether you are in the starting lineup or not, it's important to get a good warm-up both mentally and physically. If you'll be going into the match from the bench keep visualizing how you will contribute when you go in. Pay attention and see if you can figure out the other team's strengths and weaknesses. Then when you go in you'll have your head in the game right away. Be sure to stretch and run a bit to get your heart rate up and be ready to run hard as soon as you step onto the pitch. You'll be the one with fresh legs, so work hard to support your teammates.

During the match keep visualizing yourself playing skillfully. The more you play that movie in your head the more likely it will happen on the field. Listen to your teammates on the field and tune out the distractions from around the field. Remember to respect the referees; they are just a part of the game environment. Don't complain about field conditions or the weather, just play your best. Focus on the parts of the match that you have control over.

Finally, don't be so concerned about the match outcome that you don't try the things you've been practicing. The match is when you need to try what you've learned in your training sessions and what you've practiced on your own.

## Part VII: What to Eat and Drink

Soccer is a high intensity, intermittent activity, which requires both strength and endurance for the length of the match. A proper diet is crucial to your health and to your performance as a soccer player. Proper foods and fluids are necessary to have the energy to play your best.

As soon as you start to become dehydrated you'll feel tired. Water, in and of itself, is a nutrient; however, it doesn't give you energy, but it will adequately hydrate you both before and during play. Most soccer players do not drink enough water, and drinking a sport drink helps with staying well-hydrated.

Preventing dehydration can be simple as long as you drink as frequently as possible during a match and go into the match well-hydrated. You might be thinking, "What's the big deal? Won't drinking when I'm thirsty guarantee that I'm hydrated?" The answer is surprisingly, no. During exercise, for reasons not totally understood, humans don't drink enough to prevent dehydration. You need to drink before you're thirsty and keep drinking after you no longer feel thirsty.

Your body needs water. But remember water comes in all sizes, shapes and colors. Milk is 90 percent water. Juice and most soft drinks are 89 percent water, sport drinks are 94 percent water and even pizza is 50 percent water. Nearly everything that passes your lips provides water for your body, and in fact, research shows that most hydration happens at meals from the combination of food and beverages.

Figure 1: Water Content of Common Foods and Drinks<sup>1</sup>

Water Content of Common Foods and Drinks	
Item	Water Content
Diet Soft Drink, Decaffeinated Tea and Coffee	99%
Sport Drink	94%
Milk	90%
Soup	90%
Juice	89%
Yogurt	80%
Corn	76%
Baked Potato	74%
Cooked Rice	73%
Cooked Pasta	66%
Taco	59%
Chicken	54%
Ground Beef	53%
Pizza	50%

<sup>1</sup>Prepared by the U.S. Olympic Sports Medicine Division and the International Center for Sports Nutrition. 1999 U.S. Olympic Committee

The training diet is the foundation for feeling on top of your game during a training session or practice or during a match. Eating right before a match does not provide as many performance benefits as eating well the rest of the week. How much energy you have at training or practice determines how much work can be done on the field.

In addition to water, your body needs adequate carbohydrates, fats, proteins and micronutrients. With micronutrients it is more important to make positive changes to the diet rather than to take supplements. Carbohydrates are likely to provide the majority of energy during a soccer match. Soccer players therefore need to make the effort to ensure they have enough carbohydrate in their diet.

**Good sources of carbohydrates:**

- Fruit, rice, bread, pasta, potatoes and breakfast cereals

**Good sources of fat:**

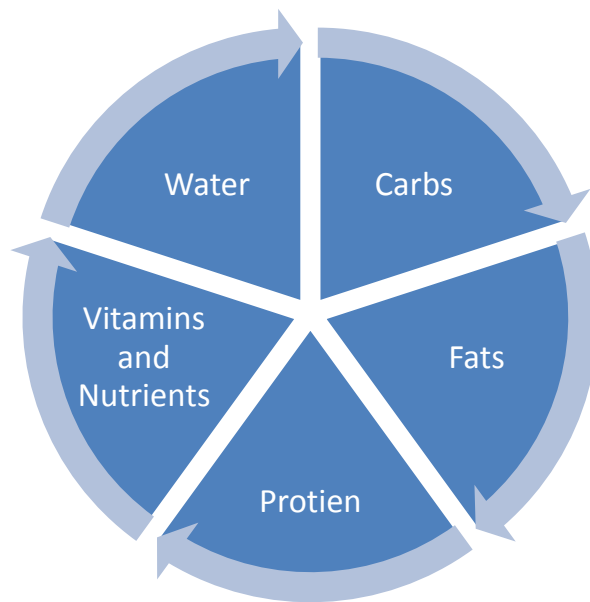
- Lean meat, fish, milk and nuts

**Good sources of protein:**

- Meat, milk, poultry, fish, dairy foods, nuts, eggs and legumes (peas, beans, etc.)

**Good sources of vitamins and minerals:**

- Fruit, vegetables, nuts, lean meat, eggs and dairy products



A general rule of thumb is to try to eat three hours before you go to the soccer field so that the food has a chance to digest and be useful in your system as energy.

For more information on nutrition for soccer players check out this FIFA document:

[http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/footballdevelopment/medical/51/55/15/nutritionbooklet\\_neue2010.pdf](http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/footballdevelopment/medical/51/55/15/nutritionbooklet_neue2010.pdf)

## Part VIII: Getting Match Fit

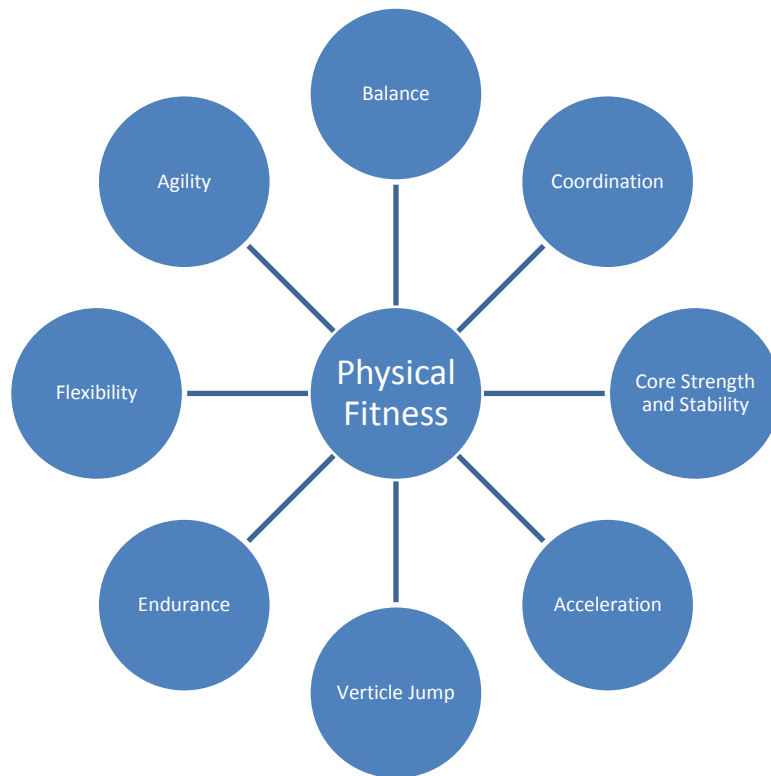
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The question for most players is, “Are you match fit?” Meaning, are you in shape enough to play at a high pace for a full match. The problem is not that coaches and players do not try to get soccer fit; it’s that the approach is a bit haphazard and inconsistent.

One of the parts of soccer that you personally control is your own physical fitness. This is something you can improve on your own time as well as when you are at training with your team.

### Physical Fitness Components

As a soccer player wanting to improve your game, you should work to improve upon these components:



In your training sessions, work on rhythm exercises and the proper running motion. You should also learn how to land correctly when jumping, as this will reduce the likelihood of knee injuries.

If the coach and players put sufficient demands into a training session much can be accomplished. Then, both fitness and technique, and possibly tactics too, can be trained. The problem is that most players train in second or third gear and the coach allows them to get away with it. Come match time, and they must play in fourth gear, and occasionally in overdrive, and they are not up to it. The lack of fitness is even more noticeable in extreme weather conditions, especially high heat and humidity.

So, the key is when the training session has reached match situations, the players must push themselves, and be pushed by the coach, to perform at match speed. This one factor alone is missing in most training sessions. With it the competitiveness, speed of thinking (tactical decision-making), technical speed and fitness improve. Players have a responsibility here to push themselves. Don't wait for the coach to have to yell at you to play at game pace. You get out of training what you put into it. Train in second gear and you'll play in second gear, even if you try to play faster you'll fail. Players need to push themselves first and foremost. Only then do they have a right to expect that their teammates should do the same. Your coach is there to push you along when you need the help, and has the responsibility to relay these expectations to the players and set the tone during training sessions.

By training at match pace often during a season, the team will be prepared for the specific demands during an actual match. Match pace training brings out the best in everyone. If the team trains this way then the need for calisthenics and running laps is eliminated. In general, the fitter you are the longer you can have a positive impact on the game. Just by giving your all at each training session your fitness will improve.

Finally, while training at match speed is indeed physically demanding, it's much more enjoyable because the ball is involved and you are actually playing the game. That's always more fun than wind sprints.

The key is to enjoy the game!

## Part IX: On Your Own

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Earlier we mentioned that there's a difference between a practice and a training session.

Training is something you do with your team and coach and practice you do on your own or with one or two friends. If you want to become really good at soccer then you need to practice. Training with your team, even a few times a week, may not be enough. So practice at home or in your neighborhood with other kids, or maybe even at school if you get the opportunity.

What you can do on your own are things you practice. That could be juggling, playing the ball against a wall (someplace without windows), dribbling (make your own slalom course) and maybe work on some physical fitness too.

### Wall Ball

*Knocking the ball against a wall gives you the chance to practice several skills.*

- **Passing**- Put an X on the wall and try to hit it with your pass. Vary your distance from the wall and your angle to the X.
- **Receiving**- As the ball comes off the wall, control it with different parts of your body: inside of the foot, thigh, top of the foot and so on.
- **Heading**- See how many times you can head the ball against the wall without it touching the ground. How about trying the same things as you did in passing, but now with headers.
- **Shooting**- Hit the X. Try some shots off the ground and some when the ball is in the air.
- **Throw-in**- Hit the X.
- **Goalkeeping**- Try different types of throws and hit the X. Also try out different catches as the ball rebounds from the wall. Vary the height of the ball.

### Tips on Passing

- Point the toes of the foot you are standing on towards your target
- Keep the knees of both legs slightly bent
- Keep the ankle of your kicking leg locked so that your kicking foot is steady
- Lean slightly forward to keep the path of the ball level
- Keep your eyes on the ball

### Tips on Receiving

- Get your body in line with the path of the ball
- Keep the knees of both legs slightly bent
- Relax the area of the body receiving the ball upon contact with the ball
- Exhale
- Keep your eyes on the ball

### Tips on Heading

- Get yourself in line with the flight of the ball
- Keep the knees of both legs slightly bent
- Strike the ball with the forehead at the hairline
- Keep your mouth shut with your tongue and cheeks out from between your teeth
- Keep your eyes on the ball

### **Tips on Shooting**

- Approach the ball at a slight diagonal angle
- Point the toes of the foot you are standing on towards your target
- Lean over the ball
- Point the toes of your kicking foot down and curl them back inside of your shoe to make a firmer striking surface of your foot (like making a fist)
- Keep your eyes on the ball

### **Tips on the Throw-in**

- Stand with your hips facing where you want the ball to go
- Firm grip on the ball with the tips of your thumbs just touching behind the ball
- Hold the ball with your fingertips
- Follow through on your throw for improved accuracy and distance

### **Tips on Keeper Throws**

- Hold the ball comfortably in your hand and release it off the fingertips
- Stand with your hips facing where you want the ball to go
- Keep knees of both legs slightly bent
- Keep your head steady and facing your target
- Follow through on your throw for improved accuracy and distance

### **Tips on Keeper Catches**

- Get your body in line with the path of the ball
- Watch the ball all the way to your hands
- Keep your knees and elbows slightly bent
- Spread your fingers as wide as you can as you catch the ball for a safer grip
- Relax and exhale as you catch the ball and absorb it



## Part X: Fair Play

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Without an opponent you do not have a match. The other team is crucial to having the chance to see how well you play and how you can improve. The opposing team is not the enemy. They are players like you who love the game. Show respect for your fellow players before, during and after the match; when the match is over shake hands in a sincere way. These gesture shows class on your part and your respect for the game. Don't hesitate to shake hands with the opposing coaches and the game officials too. They all give to the game just like you. Remember you are setting the right example for the fans too.

### **Tips on How to Set a Good Example:**

- Strive to maintain integrity within soccer.
- Know and follow the Laws of the Game.
- Play and practice in the spirit of cooperation with opponents, officials, administrators, coaches and spectators.
- Be a positive role model to younger players.
- Say no to drugs and alcohol.
- Beat opponents by skill and not by unfair methods.
- Keep your composure at all times and do not retaliate; this is a key component to becoming a top-level player.
- Do not overact when your team scores a goal.
- Learn to win and lose graciously.

Be sure to check out the FIFA Fair Play Code at

<http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/administration/50/02/75/discoinhalte.pdf>

## US Youth Soccer Programs

US Youth Soccer offers a number of programs to accommodate players of every age and ability from U-5 to U-19. Additional information about the programs can be found at [USYouthSoccer.org](http://USYouthSoccer.org)



### *US Youth Soccer American Cup*

The Kohl's US Youth Soccer American Cup provides recreational youth soccer players the opportunity to experience a consistent and high quality statewide tournament in a fun, family-like atmosphere. It fosters stimulation and excitement about soccer in an effort to increase the recreational players' interest and love for the game.



### *US Youth Soccer National Championship Series*

Each summer the United States Youth Soccer Association (US Youth Soccer) crowns a boys and girls national champion in each of its six age divisions (Under 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19). The finals are a culmination of a year-long series of competitions at the state and regional levels known as the US Youth Soccer National Championship Series which provides approximately 185,000 players on 10,000 teams from US Youth Soccer's 55 State Associations the opportunity to showcase their soccer skills against the best competition in the nation.



### *US Youth Soccer National League*

The US Youth Soccer National League is an extension of the highly successful US Youth Soccer Regional Leagues (US Youth Soccer Region I Premier League, Midwest Regional League, Region III Premier League and Far West Regional League) playing not only to claim the title of National League Champion but also to earn two slots in each gender age group at the US Youth Soccer National Championships. In addition to the four Regional Championship winners, the top finisher in each age group division from the National League will earn slots to the national finals. The National League's top two finishers in each age group division will also retain their positions in the league for the following season.



### *US Youth Soccer Presidents Cup*

The US Youth Soccer Presidents Cup provides a progressive, competitive experience to US Youth Soccer teams from the state to regional to national level. The Presidents Cup gives players an additional opportunity to compete against teams from across the country at a high level for the joy and the challenge of the game. It provides the chance to experience a unique US Youth Soccer event with camaraderie, community and competition through sport.



### *US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program*

The US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program (US Youth Soccer ODP) was formed in 1977 to identify a pool of players in each age group from which a National Team will be selected for international competition; to provide high-level training to benefit and enhance the development of players at all levels; and, through the use of carefully selected and licensed coaches, develop a mechanism for the exchange of ideas and curriculum to improve all levels of coaching.

### *Soccer Across America*

Soccer Across America is designed to introduce the sport of soccer to youngsters living in communities not yet served by existing clubs and leagues. Focused on making soccer available to lower-income children in underserved communities, Soccer Across America provides soccer training and administrative guidance to players and organizations that might otherwise not be exposed to the sport.



### *TOPSoccer*

US Youth Soccer TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer) is a community-based training and team placement program for young athletes with disabilities, organized by youth soccer association volunteers. The program is designed to bring the opportunity of learning and playing soccer to any boy or girl, who has a mental or physical disability.



### *Youth Soccer Month*

In September, the National Youth Soccer Month campaign is celebrated and educates the public about the joys, rewards and benefits of playing youth soccer, and offers a variety of resources to learn more about youth soccer and get involved.



**For more information and additional resources, visit [USYouthSoccer.org](http://USYouthSoccer.org) - the online home for everything youth soccer for administrators, coaches, parents and players.**

