



Okemos Soccer Club

U11 Boys

Western Suburban Soccer League (WSSL)

WSSL Division 3

Record: 1 W – 6 L – 1 D (4 points)

Overview:

Despite our record, we were a competitive team in a difficult league. Of our six losses, four were by two goals or less with three losses by one-goal, including a pair of one-goal losses to the division champion, Rush Lansing. In three of our six losses, we actually held leads and controlled the run of play for much of the game.

In developing young players, process is more important than outcomes. From start to finish, the boys embraced our approach to practice and applied those lessons in the games. Throughout the season, we improved steadily, especially on defense.

In the first half of the season, we allowed 17 goals (4.25/game), but allowed only nine goals (2.25/game) in the final four games of the season. Our attack managed only 14 goals in eight games or 1.75/game, which is an area that requires improvement.

WSSL rules promote the top two teams in each division and relegate the bottom two teams in each division. Technically, WSSL could relegate our team to division four, but I will argue that our team belongs in division three for the eight-game spring season. Based on our play in the fall, we were never “out of our depth” in division three. We were sufficiently challenged and met that challenge with hard work and determination, which started to pay off in the second half of the season.

Attacking

Strengths:

(a) Building up in Wide Areas

In possession of the ball, it is safest to build up the attack from the wide areas. This way, if you do give up the ball in your defensive-half of the field, it is more difficult for the opponent to create a scoring opportunity. When in possession of the ball, our team did a good job of building up using our wingers and wing backs. In particular, at times, we did a good job of pushing the ball into space and allowing our speedy wingers to move the ball forward into the final third. At times, we controlled the run of play with this strategy. We can improve on recognizing when to play the ball into space and when to play the ball into a player's feet. Our wingers also need to recognize when the run into space and timing our runs into the area.

(b) Counterattacking

Most of our scoring opportunities were created on the counterattack whether it was winning the ball on defense or through a quick distribution from the goalkeeper. Our boys did a good job of transitioning from defending to attacking play, helping to create many of our scoring opportunities.

Weakness:

(a) Ball Possession & Penetration

Throughout the season, we were unable to sustain possession of the ball for any length of time. My preferred style of play is keeping possession of the ball, building up from the back, finding pockets of space, and exploiting that space to break down opponents. Unfortunately, as a team, we lacked the skill necessary for this style of play. Too often, we gave the ball away unnecessarily and were unable to sustain possession. To improve in this area, we need to become stronger on the ball, especially with our first touch.

(b) Finishing

Throughout the season, we struggled to finish our scoring opportunities in the final third. We did a good job of moving the ball through the wide areas and into the penalty box, but we struggled to set up our strikers once we reached the penalty area. At times, when we found our strikers, they were unable to find the back of the net. In the spring, we will work on finishing, including: one-touch shooting; two-touch shooting; turning to shoot; running onto the ball to score; shooting from distance; volleying the ball; and heading to score.

(c) Creating scoring opportunities from wide areas

While we did a terrific job of moving the ball with numbers into the final third, we need to improve our ability to cross the ball into the penalty box, keeping in mind to (a) deliver the ball earlier and in the air from the outside edges of the box and (b) to deliver the ball on the ground to the six-yard box when our wingers reach the end line. The second part of creating scoring opportunities from wide areas is teaching strikers to move off of the ball into pockets of space to score, finishing with one touch, and using your first touch to set up scoring opportunities.

(d) Controlling the ball in the middle of the field

In our attack, we need to be stronger in the middle of the field. We need to develop a few players who can control play from the middle of the field, distributing the ball to our strikers and changing the point of attack by switching the ball. To create scoring opportunities in the middle of the field, we need a stronger presence in the middle of the field, a player who can effectively direct the attack with strong dribbling and accurate passing. These strong midfielders need to be strong enough on the ball to effectively handle pressure and distribute the ball to set up scoring changes.

(e) Switching the point of attack

With a strong presence in the middle of the field, we will be able to quickly switch the point of attack, creating additional scoring chances for our strikers. Without a strong presence in the middle of the field, we were unable to attack in the middle of the field and switch the attack. As such, at times, we were solely reliant on attacking from the wide areas.

Defending

Strengths

(a) Keeping the ball wide

Our first defending principle is to keep the ball wide. Keeping the ball wide limits the attacking team's options. This involves the correct closing-down technique and angling the run to push the attacker to the outside. The boys did a very good job of forcing the defender wide and keeping them wide.

(b) Defending in Pairs

Young players have a habit of rushing at the attacker or diving in to win the ball. This aggressive play typically ends with the attacker speeding past the defender. Being aggressive is fine, but in the right situations. When the second defender is in position to provide cover for the first defender, the first defender can aggressively attack the ball in an effort to win it from the attacker. The boys improved throughout the season communicating with each other on the right timing for these defensive challenges.

(c) Goalkeeping

We were fortunate to develop as many as four reliable goalkeepers during the season. It is no surprise that as our back four improved in their defensive technique, our goalkeepers improved as well. Our goalkeepers made a number of great saves this season, using proper technique to keep the ball out of the goal.

(d) Pressing in the final third

When we lost the ball on the attack, our forwards did a wonderful job of pressing and winning balls back in the attacking end of the field. We created a number of scoring opportunities by winning balls deep in our opponents' end of the field. When appropriate, our boys also did a good job of pressing on goal kicks to put pressure on the kicking team

Weaknesses

(a) 1 v 1 Defending

At times, we struggled with our 1 v 1 defending. Our problems in this area most often stemmed from a lack of patience for the right opportunity to attempt to win the ball. First, we must contain, keeping the ball in front of us. Then, we stay with the attacker, waiting for a poor touch for the opportunity to step in and win the ball. Too often, we overran the defender in our aggressiveness. Other times, we would be in a great position to win the ball, but we lacked the proper technique to make a clean, hard tackle. In the final four games of the season, we improved dramatically with our 1 v 1 defending, but we still have more work to do.

(b) Defending the Counterattack

In the beginning of the season, we had difficulty in slowing the counterattack, giving up many goals in transition. Our key issue was not being situationally aware of our surroundings when faced with a counterattack. With a numerical advantage, our goal is to win possession of the ball and build up our attack. When facing a numerical disadvantage, the safest play is often playing the ball out and resetting our defense. In the second half of the season, we improved at playing it safe when the other team had the advantage on the counterattack.

(c) Midfielders winning balls wide

In certain areas of the field, when the wing backs have slowed the attack, our midfielders must recognize the opportunities to combine with the wingbacks defensively and win the ball from the attacker. This is also an intangible skill that requires the midfielder to properly "read" the game and recognize opportunities to combine and win the ball.

(d) Defending Corner Kicks, Free Kicks

Starting with the Powerade Tournament, we struggled to defend restarts, especially corner kicks. We allowed too many clean opportunities on goal due to a lack of aggressiveness in clearing the ball from the penalty box. We cannot allow attackers to run unimpeded toward the goal without being challenged in the box. Touch-tight defending is critical in the box. Most importantly, it is critical for our defenders to mark the man and not play the ball.

(e) Communication

Our defenders need to work on communicating with each other and listening to instructions from the goalkeeper. The defenders need to be demonstrative in calling for the ball, informing teammates that they have supports, directing teammates to push the ball in certain directions. In addition, we need our goalkeeper to be more demonstrative in determining the placement of defenders.