



JDL GAME LEADER HANDBOOK

2026



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FOOTBALL NSW JDL HUB



JDL GAME LEADER VIDEO

PART A

WHAT IS SMALL SIDED FOOTBALL?

What are the Junior Development Leagues?

From 2024, the Club Standards & Benchmarking Framework is implemented alongside the existing junior development competition structure. From 2025 onwards, these programs will be collectively known as the Junior Development Leagues (JDL).

The age groups within JDL remain consistent and compete in modified formats of traditional football, including adjusted field sizes, player numbers, rules, and ball sizes.

JDL players sit within Football Australia's Skill Acquisition Phase of the player development pathway. This phase prioritises individual player development, with performance assessed through player involvement, technical progression, mental engagement, and enjoyment of the game.

Clubs and JDL programs should be viewed in a similar way to the Australian education system, where long-term development and learning are the primary focus.

Football philosophy

Football NSW encourages small-sided football to be utilised as the preferred playing formats for Under 13 and below in various formats.

Small-sided football is focused on the individual player development unlike traditional 11 aside football which focusses primarily on the result and team objectives. Small sided football is an opportunity for the players to demonstrate the core skills in a match day setting guided by age appropriate coaching and interactions.

Small-sided football is designed to be inclusive, individual development focussed and to provide a great experience for all involved. Players within these age groups are in their formative years on building a love for the game and developing core physical literacy and football related skills.

Match Results

Within these age groups, results are not published on public platforms, and individual match results are not shared publicly or displayed on websites or scoreboards. Commonly known as 'non-competitive', results are not recommended to be shared to ensure coaches, players and parents focus on the game experience and the individual development of players.

Spectators

This non-competitive environment is conducive to encouraging players to express themselves and showcase what they have been taught in their club's development processes, thus, recognition of skilful play and players trying new aspects of the game are fundamental to this age group and the role of the spectator plays an integral role in creating the appropriate environment for players to thrive.

Spectators should be aware of the club's code of conduct and match day expectations. We actively encourage spectators to reward good play from both teams with messages of encouragement and praise. Whilst berating mistakes and coaching players from the sidelines should not occur and should be managed by the club's match day officials.

PART A

ROLE OF A GAME LEADER

Role of a Game Leader

Each game is to be controlled by one Game Leader. The main role of the Game Leader is to keep the game moving fluently, limit stoppages and assist players with all match restarts. Most importantly, they must make every effort to create an environment that ensures that all players have fun, are learning the game and have maximum involvement.

The Game Leader can be a club official, parent, young adult/older teenager or beginner referee and should always be enthusiastic and approachable. Most importantly, remember the children are learning the game – be flexible and patient.

The Game Leader should:

- Check all players are wearing shin guards.
- Ensure team officials and parents create a safe, enjoyable and positive playing environment for the children and do not emphasis winning or losing.
- Be enthusiastic, consistent and approachable.
- Let the game flow and give instruction to all players on the run where you can.
- Praise and encourage both teams.
- Encourage all children to have fun and different children to take re-starts.
- The closest player to the restart should be encouraged to take the restart especially with throw ins. This speeds up play and will stop teams trying to work out who's turn it is to take a throw in. The goalkeeper to take all goal kicks.
- Use a "Ready, Set, Go" prompt to encourage quick decisions when restarting play.
- Ensure the correct number of players are on the field.

- Discourage players from permanently standing in blatant offside positions and instruct them to move into onside positions. In the U9 – U13 age groups players should be made aware of the offside rule during training and be encouraged to always adopt this philosophy during the game.
- Encourage children to dribble or pass ball to team mates rather than kick the ball long.
- Ensure the opposing team are 15 metres (retreat line/exclusion zone) from the goal line and outside the penalty area.
- Encourage children to be involved in all aspects of the game, attacking and defending.
- Award free kicks as appropriate to help children learn the rules and consequences of committing fouls.
- Explain the rules to players and why a free kick has been awarded.
- When blowing the whistle make it loud so everyone can hear as this provides a perception that you are in control of the game.

A GAME LEADER SHOULD:



LET THE GAME FLOW



ENCOURAGE



USE READY SET, GO!



EXPLAIN TO EDUCATE

PART A

OFFSIDES

As players are learning the game we cannot expect the timing of their movement, runs and decision making to be like the senior game. As such, we encourage Game Leaders to apply leniency as shown in the graphics to the traditional Laws of the Game offside rule. We want to encourage forward runs in support of the attack and reduce players 'goal hanging' or waiting at the other end of the field for the ball to arrive.



(1. Player slightly offside (within a body width) highlighting that in JDL we do not deem this 'offside')



(2. Player blatantly offside (3m +) highlighting that this is blatant.)

Offside Rules (Junior Development League U10-13 Girls and U9-12 Mixed)

The offside rule applies to encourage positional awareness and fair play; however, within the Junior Development League, it should be interpreted with flexibility to support player learning and enjoyment. An obvious offside shall be considered when an attacking player is clearly beyond the second-last defender - typically by 2 to 3 metres or more - at the moment the ball is played and is actively involved in play or gaining an advantage.

Marginal or unclear situations, where a player is only slightly ahead of the defender (less than 1 metre), should generally be allowed to continue in the spirit of development and maintaining the flow of the game. Heads of Programs, Coaches, and Game Leaders should work together to ensure these guidelines are applied consistently. The priority is always a positive matchday experience where development and learning are valued over strict enforcement.

Offside decisions will naturally involve some subjectivity. All involved are encouraged to approach these situations with patience and understanding, keeping player learning at the centre.

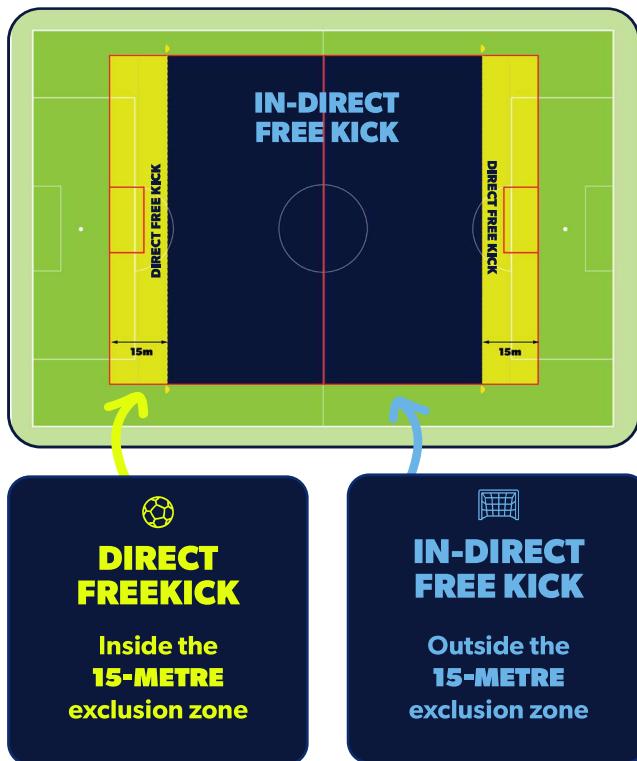
PART A

FOULS AND MISCONDUCT

Free Kicks

Direct free kicks are permitted when awarded inside the 15-metre exclusion zone. This allows players to practise free-kick shooting techniques.

Free kicks awarded outside the exclusion zone are indirect. Teams are encouraged to play short, quick passes and continue the game with fast decisionmaking. Please avoid aimless long balls into the penalty area. An indirect free kick is where a goal can be scored only if the ball subsequently touches another player before it enters the goal.



Penalties

A penalty shall be awarded if a foul listed below is committed inside the penalty area. No indirect free kicks are to be taken within the area, and play may continue if the referee applies advantage.

For deliberate or serious acts of handball, or for fouls and misconduct committed inside the penalty area, a penalty kick is awarded from the 8-metre penalty mark (U10-13), or the 5-metre penalty mark (U9), with only the goalkeeper in position. All other players must remain outside the penalty area and at least in line with the retreat line (exclusion zone) until the ball is kicked.

Fouls and misconduct include:

- Kicking or attempting to kick an opponent
- Tripping or attempting to trip an opponent
- Jumping at an opponent
- Charging an opponent
- Striking or attempting to strike an opponent
- Pushing an opponent
- Tackling an opponent from behind to gain possession of the ball
- Making contact with the opponent before touching the ball
- Holding an opponent
- Spitting at an opponent
- Deliberately handling the ball
- Playing in a dangerous manner
- Impeding the progress of a player

Cautions

In small-sided football we do not typically issue Yellow or Red cards, however we encourage Game Leaders & Coaches to take responsibility for the safety and welfare of all players.

If the Game Leader or Coach believes a serious foul has been committed that would warrant a caution in traditional football formats we encourage them to utilise one of the following techniques:

- Substitute the player(s) from the match for 5 minutes.
- Remove the player for the remainder of the game.
- Game Leader to hand over responsibility of the player management to the coach.

Player Education

Should a penalty or free kick be awarded then the game leader should explain to the players why that decision was given.

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED JDL AGED UNDER 9



Player Numbers: Under 9 football should have a maximum of 7 v 7 on the field including goalkeepers.



Goal Type: It is preferable that portable goals are used where possible however, the use of poles or markers as goals is also suitable. Goal size of 3m x 2m.

Offside

The offside rule applies to encourage positional awareness and fair play; however, within the Junior Development League, it should be interpreted with flexibility to support player learning and enjoyment.

An obvious offside shall be considered when an attacking player is clearly beyond the second-last defender—typically by 2 to 3 metres or more—at the moment the ball is played and is actively involved in play or gaining an advantage. Marginal or unclear situations, where a player is only slightly ahead of the defender (less than 1 metre), should generally be allowed to continue in the spirit of development and maintaining the flow of the game.

Heads of Programs, Coaches, and Game Leaders should work together to ensure these guidelines are applied consistently. The priority is always a positive matchday experience where development and learning are valued over strict enforcement. Offside decisions will naturally involve some subjectivity. All involved are encouraged to approach these situations with patience and understanding, keeping player learning at the centre.

Goalkeeper (Open Play)

The goalkeeper is permitted to handle the ball anywhere within the penalty area. To restart play after making a save or gathering the ball with their hands, the ball must be thrown, rolled, or played from the ground with their feet.

If the goalkeeper chooses not to restart play quickly, Game Leaders should ensure that all opposition players are positioned at least 15 metres from the goal line (outside the penalty area and behind the retreat/exclusion line) before play resumes. If the goalkeeper decides to play quickly the ball is live regardless of where the opposition is stood.

The ball is considered in play once it has been placed or dropped on the floor, thrown or rolled. A direct free kick from the 15m line is awarded if the goalkeeper touches the ball with their hands after it has been deliberately passed back to them by a teammate.

The goalkeeper is NOT allowed to kick or drop kick the ball directly from their hands. The ball must be placed on the ground before being kicked. It must not be kicked on the full, drop kicked, or allowed to bounce multiple times in a drop-kick manner before being struck.

Long passes are permitted when the ball has been placed on the ground, as the focus is on encouraging constructive play and reducing aimless long kicking.

PART B

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED JDL AGED UNDER 9



(Throw allowed)



(Roll allowed)



(Goalkeeper kicking from hands/
drop kick not allowed)

IF A GOALKEEPER KICKS THE BALL FROM THEIR HANDS OR PERFORMS A DROP KICK:



FIRST OCCURRENCE

Reminder from the Game Leader and play restarts with the goalkeeper in possession (ball in hands).



SECOND OCCURRENCE

A direct free kick is awarded from the 15m retreat line.

Ball crossing the touch line (Throw in)

Player faces the field of play, has part of each foot on the ground either on or behind the touch line, uses both hands and delivers the ball from behind and over their head. The thrower must not touch the ball again until it has touched another player. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball is in play once it enters the field of play. A goal cannot be scored directly from a throw in.

PART B

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED JDL AGED UNDER 9

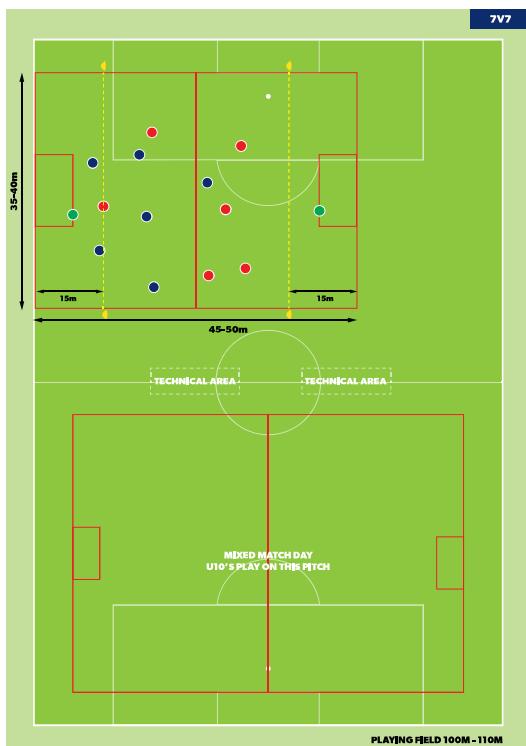
Ball crossing the goal line after touching the defening team list (Corner kick)

Corner kick. A player from the attacking team places the ball inside the corner arc nearest to the point where the ball crossed the line. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball is in play when it is kicked and moves. A goal may be scored directly from a corner kick.

Ball crossing the goal line after touching the attacking team list (Goal kick)

A goal kick should be taken from 1–2m of the goal line within the penalty area. Opponents must remain at least 15 metres from the goal line (behind the retreat line/exclusion zone) and outside the penalty area until the ball is in play. Game Leaders should not allow play to restart until they are satisfied all opposition players have retreated to the correct distance. However, if a Goalkeeper decides to play quickly the ball will then become live. The ball is considered in play once the goalkeeper has kicked it, consistent with 11v11 laws. After the goal kick is taken, defending players may enter the 15-metre exclusion zone and contest the ball.

The intent of this rule is to keep the game realistic and simple for Game Leaders, while the increased exclusion zone provides additional space and time to promote measured build-up play from the back.



NUMBER OF PLAYER	7 v 7
GOALKEEPER	Yes
FIELD SIZE (M)	Length: 45m - 50m Width: 35m - 40m
PENALTY AREA (M)	5m deep x 12m wide
GOAL (M)	3m x 2m Portable Goals
BALL	Size 3
DURATION	25 minutes x 2
HALF-TIME	2 minutes
RETREAT LINE/EXCLUSION ZONE	15m from the goal line and clearly marked by cones

(Playing formats mixed aged Under 9)

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED AND GIRLS JDL AGED UNDER 10 & 11



Player Numbers: Under 10 & 11 football should have a maximum of 9 v 9 on the field including goalkeepers.



Goal Type: It is preferable that portable goals are used where possible however, the use of poles or markers as goals is also suitable. Goal size of 5m x 2m.

Offside

The offside rule applies to encourage positional awareness and fair play; however, within the Junior Development League, it should be interpreted with flexibility to support player learning and enjoyment. An obvious offside shall be considered when an attacking player is clearly beyond the second-last defender—typically by 2 to 3 metres or more—at the moment the ball is played and is actively involved in play or gaining an advantage.

Marginal or unclear situations, where a player is only slightly ahead of the defender (less than 1 metre), should generally be allowed to continue in the spirit of development and maintaining the flow of the game. Heads of Programs, Coaches, and Game Leaders should work together to ensure these guidelines are applied consistently. The priority is always a positive matchday experience where development and learning are valued over strict enforcement. Offside decisions will naturally involve some subjectivity. All involved are encouraged to approach these situations with patience and understanding, keeping player learning at the centre.

Goalkeeper (Open Play)

The goalkeeper is permitted to handle the ball anywhere within the penalty area. To restart play after making a save or gathering the ball with their hands, the ball must be thrown, rolled, or played from the ground with their feet.

If the goalkeeper chooses not to restart play quickly, Game Leaders should ensure that all opposition players are positioned at least 15 metres from the goal line (outside the penalty area and behind the retreat/exclusion line) before play resumes. If the goalkeeper decides to play quickly the ball is live regardless of where the opposition is stood.

The ball is considered in play once it has been placed or dropped on the floor, thrown or rolled. A direct free kick from the 15m line is awarded if the goalkeeper touches the ball with their hands after it has been deliberately passed back to them by a teammate.

The goalkeeper is NOT allowed to kick or drop kick the ball directly from their hands. The ball must be placed on the ground before being kicked. It must not be kicked on the full, drop kicked, or allowed to bounce multiple times in a drop-kick manner before being struck.

Long passes are permitted when the ball has been placed on the ground, as the focus is on encouraging constructive play and reducing aimless long kicking.

PART B

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED AND GIRLS JDL AGED UNDER 10 & 11

IF A GOALKEEPER KICKS THE BALL FROM THEIR HANDS OR PERFORMS A DROP KICK:



FIRST OCCURRENCE

Reminder from the Game Leader and play restarts with the goalkeeper in possession (ball in hands).



SECOND OCCURRENCE

A direct free kick is awarded from the 15m retreat line.

Ball crossing the touch line (Throw in)

Player faces the field of play, has part of each foot on the ground either on or behind the touch line, uses both hands and delivers the ball from behind and over their head. The thrower must not touch the ball again until it has touched another player. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball is in play once it enters the field of play. A goal cannot be scored directly from a throw in.

Ball crossing the goal line after touching the defending team last (Corner Kick)

A player from the attacking team places the ball inside the corner arc nearest to the point where the ball crossed the line. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball is in play when it is kicked and moves. A goal may be scored directly from a corner kick.

Ball crossing the goal line after touching the attacking team last (Goal Kick)

A goal kick should be taken from 1–2m of the goal line within the penalty area. Opponents must remain at least 15 metres from the goal line (behind the retreat line/exclusion zone) and outside the penalty area until the ball is in play. Game Leaders should not allow play to restart until they are satisfied all opposition players have retreated to the correct distance. However, if a Goalkeeper decides to play quickly the ball will then become live.

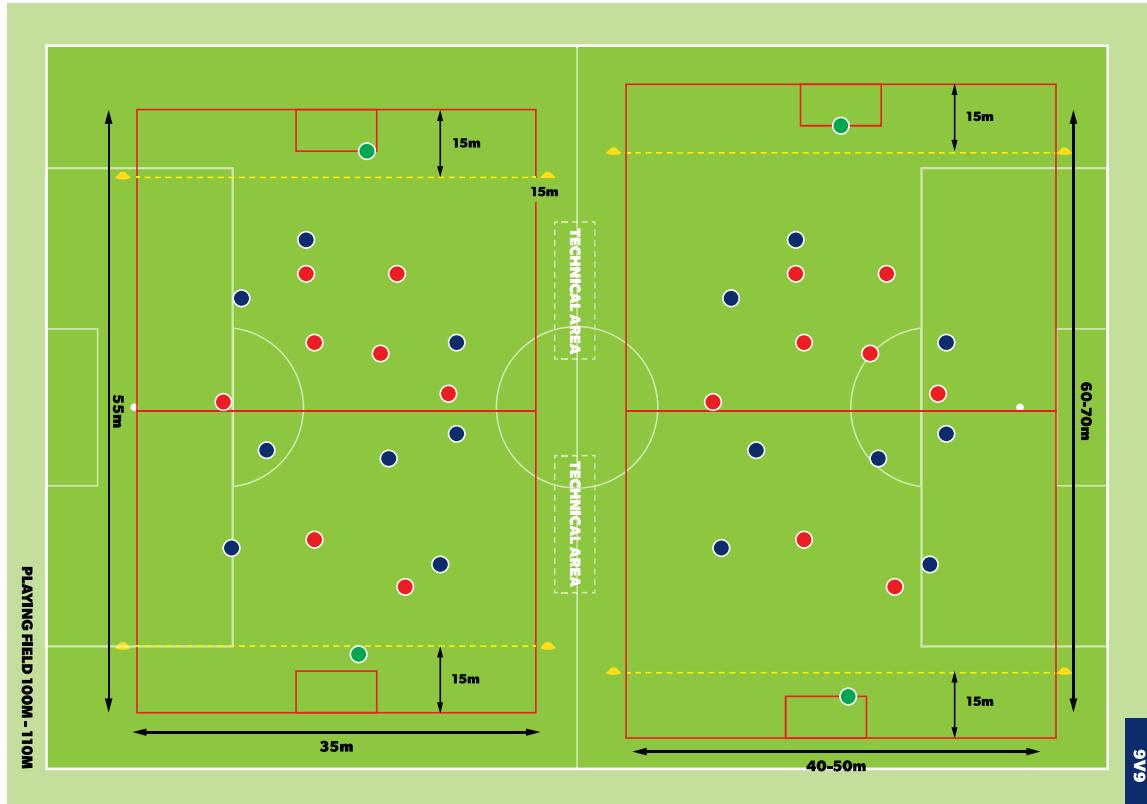
The ball is considered in play once the goalkeeper has kicked it, consistent with 11v11 laws. After the goal kick is taken, defending players may enter the 15-metre exclusion zone and contest the ball.

The intent of this rule is to keep the game realistic and simple for Game Leaders, while the increased exclusion zone provides additional space and time to promote measured build-up play from the back.

PART B

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED AND GIRLS JDL AGED UNDER 10 & 11



NUMBER OF PLAYER	9 v 9
GOALKEEPER	Yes
FIELD SIZE (M)	Length: 55m - 65m Width: 35m - 40m
PENALTY AREA (M)	10m deep x 20m wide
GOAL (M)	5m x 2m <i>Portable Goals</i>
BALL	Size 4
DURATION	25 minutes x 2
HALF-TIME	2 minutes
RETREAT LINE/EXCLUSION ZONE	15m from the goal line and clearly marked by cones

(Playing formats mixed and girls aged Under 10 & 11)

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED AGED UNDER 12 AND GIRLS JDL AGED UNDER 13

**Player Numbers:**

Under 12 & 13 football should have a maximum of 9 v 9 on the field including goalkeepers.

**Goal Type:**

Portable secured goals should be used. Goal size of 5mx 2m.

Offside

The offside rule applies to encourage positional awareness and fair play; however, within the Junior Development League, it should be interpreted with flexibility to support player learning and enjoyment.

An obvious offside shall be considered when an attacking player is clearly beyond the second-last defender—typically by 2 to 3 metres or more—at the moment the ball is played and is actively involved in play or gaining an advantage.

Marginal or unclear situations, where a player is only slightly ahead of the defender (less than 1 metre), should generally be allowed to continue in the spirit of development and maintaining the flow of the game.

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Goalkeeper (Open Play)

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If the goalkeeper chooses not to restart play quickly, Game Leaders should ensure that all opposition players are positioned at least 15 metres from the goal line (outside the penalty area and behind the retreat/exclusion line) before play resumes. If the goalkeeper decides to play quickly the ball is live regardless of where the opposition is stood.

The ball is considered in play once it has been placed or dropped on the floor, thrown or rolled. A direct free kick from the 15m line is awarded if the goalkeeper touches the ball with their hands after it has been deliberately passed back to them by a teammate.

The goalkeeper is NOT allowed to kick or drop kick the ball directly from their hands. The ball must be placed on the ground before being kicked. It must not be kicked on the full, drop kicked, or allowed to bounce multiple times in a drop-kick manner before being struck.

Long passes are permitted when the ball has been placed on the ground, as the focus is on encouraging constructive play and reducing aimless long kicking.

PART B

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED U12 AND GIRLS JDL UNDER 13

IF A GOALKEEPER KICKS THE BALL FROM THEIR HANDS OR PERFORMS A DROP KICK:



FIRST OCCURRENCE

Reminder from the Game Leader and play restarts with the goalkeeper in possession (ball in hands).



SECOND OCCURRENCE

A direct free kick is awarded from the 15m retreat line.

Ball crossing the touch line (Throw in)

Player faces the field of play, has part of each foot on the ground either on or behind the touch line, uses both hands and delivers the ball from behind and over their head. The thrower must not touch the ball again until it has touched another player. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball is in play once it enters the field of play. A goal cannot be scored directly from a throw in.

Ball crossing the goal line after touching the defending team last (Corner Kick)

A player from the attacking team places the ball inside the corner arc nearest to the point where the ball crossed the line. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball is in play when it is kicked and moves. A goal may be scored directly from a corner kick.

Ball crossing the goal line after touching the attacking team last (Goal Kick)

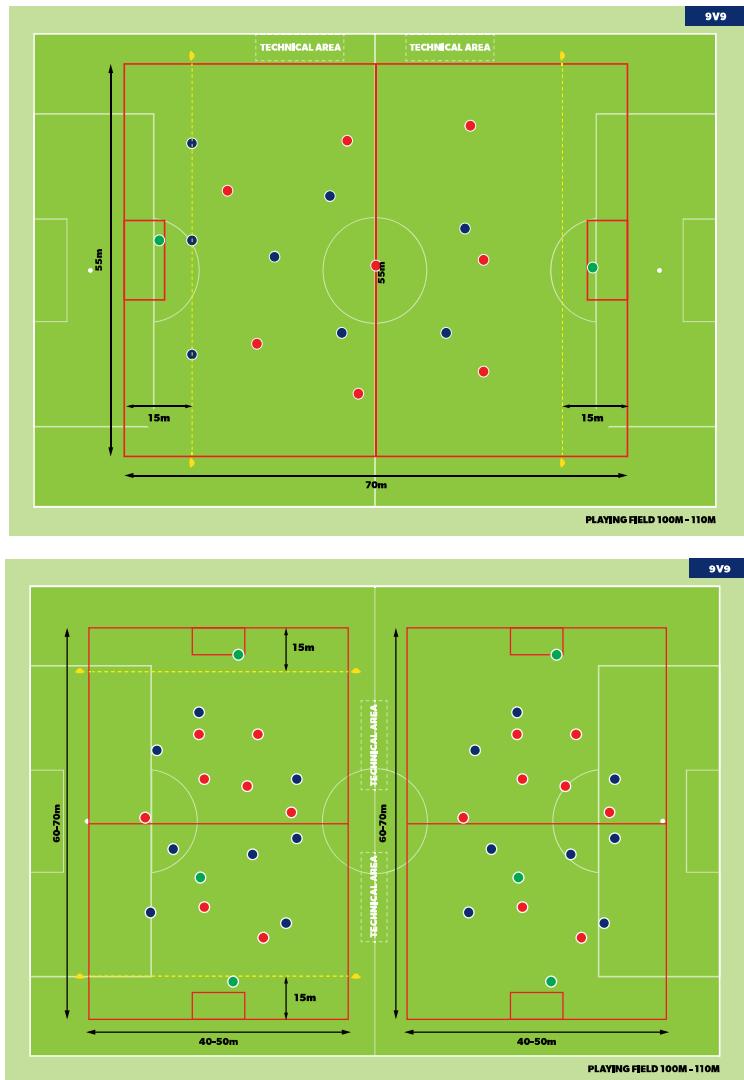
A goal kick should be taken from 1–2m of the goal line within the penalty area. Opponents must remain at least 15 metres from the goal line (behind the retreat line/exclusion zone) and outside the penalty area until the ball is in play. Game Leaders should not allow play to restart until they are satisfied all opposition players have retreated to the correct distance.

However, if a Goalkeeper decides to play quickly the ball will then become live. The ball is considered in play once the goalkeeper has kicked it, consistent with 11v11 laws. After the goal kick is taken, defending players may enter the 15-metre exclusion zone and contest the ball. The intent of this rule is to keep the game realistic and simple for Game Leaders, while the increased exclusion zone provides additional space and time to promote measured build-up play from the back.

PART B

PLAYING FORMATS

MIXED U12 AND GIRLS JDL UNDER 13



(Optional playing formats mixed and girls aged Under 12 & 13. Football NSW recommend the Under 12 & Under 13 to be played as per the 'box to box' dimensions where possible)

NUMBER OF PLAYER	9 v 9
GOALKEEPER	Yes
FIELD SIZE (M)	Length: 60m - 70m, Width: 40m - 50m
PENALTY AREA (M)	10m deep x 20m wide
GOAL (M)	5m x 2m (<i>Portable Goals</i>)
BALL	Size 4
DURATION	U12 25 minutes x 2 & U13 35 minutes x 2
HALF-TIME	U12 2 minutes & U13 5 minutes
RETREAT LINE/EXCLUSION ZONE	15m from the goal line and clearly marked by cones

OVERVIEW

AGE GROUP	UNDER 9	UNDER 10 & 11	UNDER 12 & 13
MATCH LOGISTICS			
Players	7 v 7	9 v 9	9 v 9
Goal (M)	3m x 2m Portable Goals	5m x 2m Portable Goals	5m x 2m Portable Goals
Duration	25 minutes x 2	25 minutes x 2	U12's 25 minutes x 2 U13's 35 minutes x 2
Half-Time	2 minutes	2 minutes	U12's 2 minutes U13's 5 minutes
Field size (M)	Length: 45m - 50m Width: 35m - 40m	Length: 55m - 60m Width: 35m - 40m	Length: 60m - 70m Width: 40m - 50m
Penalty area (M)	5m deep x 12m wide	8m deep x 20m wide	8m deep x 20m wide
Ball size	3	4	4
Retreat Line/ExClusion Zone	15m		
MATCH RULES			
Goalkeeper	Open Play: Must throw, roll, or play from ground; no kicking or drop kicking from hands.		
Ball crossing sideline	Throw In		
Ball crossing goal line after touching defending team last	Corner Kick		
Ball crossing goal line after touching attacking team last	Goal Kick Game Leaders should not restart play until they are satisfied all opposition players are at least 12 metres from the goal line and outside the penalty area. The ball is in play once it is kicked directly out of the penalty area.		
Offside	No Actively discouraged	No Actively discouraged unless in a blatant offside position	
Fouls	See fouls list Common sense approach		
Match results	Not Published		
Point tables	No		
Free Kicks	Direct inside 15m exclusion zone; indirect outside.		
Penalties	5m	8m	8m

FURTHER INFORMATION



Goal type

To comply with Australian Safety Standards, portable goals must be anchored securely to the ground. The use of sandbags or pegs is recommended when using portable goals. For more information on Australian Safety Standards please visit the Product Safety Australia website: productsafety.gov.au

Field markings

Cones, markers or painted line markings are suitable. This includes the penalty areas in the U9 – U13 age categories.

Start of play and re-start after a goal

Pass to a teammate from the middle of the half way line. All players must be in their own half of the field of play. Opponents must be at least 5 metres away from the ball until it is in play. The ball must touch a teammate before a goal can be scored.

Ball in and out of play

The ball is out of play when it has wholly crossed the goal line or the touch line on the ground or in the air, or when play has been stopped by the Game Leader.

Method of scoring

A goal is scored when the whole of the ball passes over the goal line, between the goalposts and under the crossbar. When goal posts are not available and cones are used for goals, a goal is scored when the ball passes between the cones without touching them, below shoulder height of the player.

Shin Guards

Shin guards must be worn by all players without exception

Concussion

Any player suspected of suffering from concussion should be examined by a medical practitioner before returning to play.

As a general rule; "If in doubt, sit it out".

Substitutions

Players may be rotated on and off the field at any time during the game. A coach/parent may make substitutions while the ball is in play, ensuring the player is off the field before the substitute goes on.

Equal playing time should be a priority ensuring all players regardless of age, gender and/or ability get to take the field. Regular rotation of players is key. Kids don't register to watch football – they just want to play! If there is space on the sidelines, substitutes should be encouraged to set up small-sided games or practice their skills in a designated area, not interfering with play.



FOOTBALL
NSW