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Dear Kiddie Kickers Coaches and Parents,

This spring season, we are introducing and implementing the "BALL BOSS" method for restarting play with our Kiddie Kickers I & II programs. This was discussed at the preseason coaches meeting and was discussed and demonstrated on Opening Day, this past Saturday, April 4<sup>th</sup>. I would like to take this opportunity to expand a little further on this concept so that we can all best support the players in their development.

**FORMAT:** By definition, a "restart" is a time of the game when the ball/play is stopped due to a foul, a goal, or whenever the ball goes out of play/boundaries. When a goal is scored or the ball goes out of play/boundaries, an adult designee will restart play quickly. This individual will have as many available soccer balls at his/her feet and will be located at the middle of the field, out of play/boundaries, on the technical side of the field (in between the coaches and bench players, opposite the parent side). The individual serving as the "BALL BOSS" can be one of the coaches (I recommend teams taking turns providing the BALL BOSS each half), but it can also be a responsible adult/parent who is able to kick the ball into play and to a player's feet in a safe and fair fashion.

**RATIONALE:** While the "BALL BOSS" method of restarting play is a commonly used tool during training sessions for all levels of play, after observing the Kiddie Kickers games this past fall, it was clear to me that over half of the allotted time for each game was spent with the ball out of play/boundaries. It was my assessment that this occurred for two reasons:

1 – Children in this age group (ages 4, 5 & 6) are not at the skill level to keep the ball in play (and by the way that is perfectly ok ☺)

2 - What we know about the children in these age groups is that throwing the ball in is a complicated skill for them. Worrying about the ball, all the while making sure their feet remain on the ground and arms come behind their heads – this is a lot for these little ones to manage at once because a throw-in is a serial skill. In his book, *Beyond X's and O's*, Jack Hustlar speaks of serial skills. He says they require "linking related skills together in a flowing motion." For instance, in dribbling a basketball up the court, a child needs to know how to dribble, how to run and dribble, how to dribble and look up while running. It also wouldn't be a bad idea if he or she could keep track of all the other players on the court, too. That's at least four different skills in one action. These are serial skills, meaning you have to juggle and link them together if you are to be successful. Hustlar reminds adults that for many children, especially young children, serial skills are nearly impossible to remember and to execute, particularly during the added pressure of the games. Because they struggle with a serial skill like a throw-in, much of game time is spent correcting their mistakes, and much of "game-play" is lost as a result.

With these things in mind, it was my suggestion to our SDP Director, that we institute the "BALL BOSS" to allow for a more "free-flowing" experience for the kids.

The "BEE-HIVE" or "HERD BALL" effect is often present in this age group – that is ALL of the players tend to gravitate toward the ball in one big "clump." An added benefit of the "BALL BOSS" is that there is an opportunity to break up the hive or herd by restarting play in a new area of the field. As you know as parents, these kids are very egotistical (everything is me, my mine – you know, they all want to use THEIR PERSONAL ball at practice, etc) – and by the way, this is ok too! Along these lines, because we know that 4 vs. 4 often turns into 1 versus 7 (you know, these little ones are even trying and take the ball from their own teammates!), the "BALL BOSS" approach allows that person to break play up by restarting play in an area of the field that had not recently been explored or to a player who had not contacted the ball in recent minutes. In this age group and at this level of play, participation and inclusion are the most important priorities.

**DON'T BE ALARMED....** Sometimes, the "BALL BOSS" will restart play by playing the ball to a team who didn't knock it out last, or they may play a ball that is not clearly anyone's property. Part of the game for the kids is for them to learn how to win balls from each other and challenge for what we call unclaimed "possession" as 50/50 balls – anyone or everyone has a 50/50 chance of getting it! I know that in our overzealous culture of separating the winners and losers you might be tempted to get emotionally involved with how play is restarted – please resist. Trust me when I tell you that it really doesn't matter to the kids. Playing is what is most important to them. There was a study done many years ago where a large sampling of kids were asked if they would rather be on a winning team where they didn't get playing time, versus a playing on a losing team where they got to play and touch the ball. Hopefully it won't surprise you that 80% + of those surveyed preferred to play on a team where they were able to play in the games and experience equal opportunities to contact the ball.

**AND ON THE WINNING FRONT....**In this age group while we may think the kids know the score and care about it, they really don't. We, the adults, are the ones who care about these things. There is a great story in a book written by Bob Bigelow titled "Just Let the Kids Play" (I highly and strongly recommend this book to anyone involved with any youth sport) that illustrates how our younger children approach winning and losing:

"If coaches would listen to the kids more, they'd hear that most of them care far less about the score than do the adults. A coach of ten-to twelve-year-old girls described one of his softball games at a field that did not have a scoreboard. One of the girls came running in from third base in the middle of the game. 'Coach,' she said, 'my parents just got here and they want to know the score.' He told her the score was 15-2. But the girl had one more question: 'Who's winning?'" (Just Let the Kids Play, pg. 182)

**IN CLOSING...**I hope you can embrace the reasoning behind the ideas above, in particular, the rationale regarding the implementation of the "BALL BOSS" method of re-introducing the ball into play. I welcome any feedback and/or discussion from/with you that you might have on this issue as the season progresses.

Finally, I invite you to visit our website at [www.concordsoccer.com](http://www.concordsoccer.com) - there, in the "helpful resources" section located at the top of the page, you will find materials for coaches, players, and parents alike. In all sections, you'll find helpful articles that address age and developmentally appropriate issues that are on the forefront of today's youth soccer/sport culture.

Thank you for your interest and involvement in Concord Soccer and I look forward to seeing you on the fields!

Sincerely,

*Fran Kulas*

Director of Coach and Player Development

