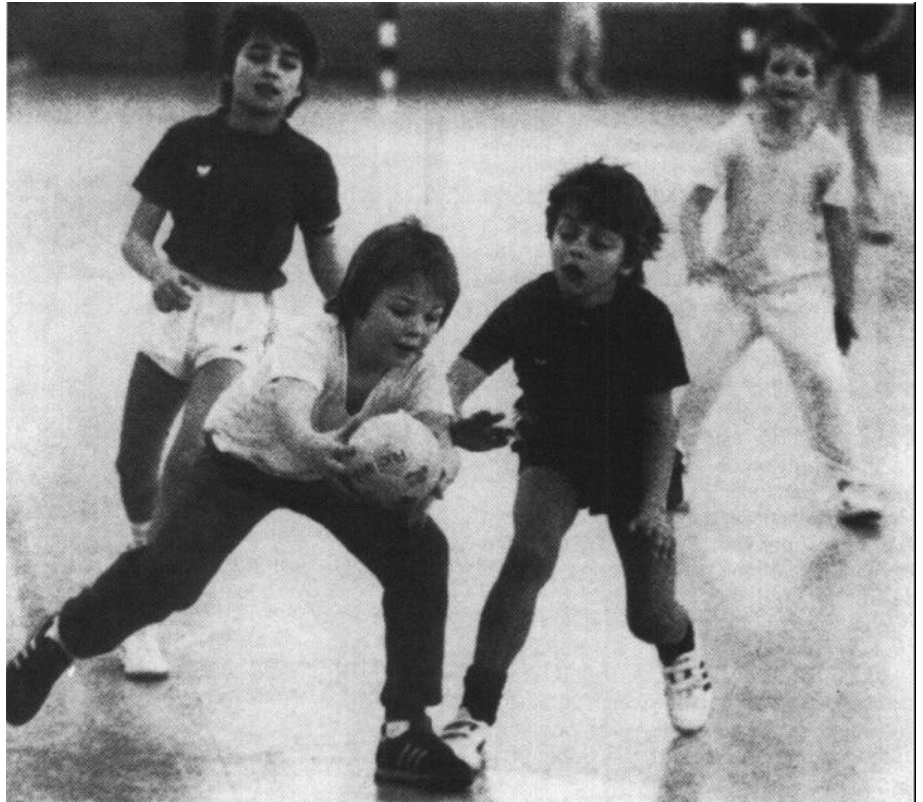


FROM MINI TO MAXI



Children are our future. That is why we devote every attention to them. The same principle applies to handball, except that today we must do more than we did in the past. It goes without saying that the investment in training youngsters today will bear its fruits tomorrow. In this article, Arne Elovsson writes about the efforts made in this direction by the IHF and the Swedish Handball Association.

By Arne Elovsson

Secretary-General of the
Swedish Handball Association

Youth handball has been under discussion in Sweden ever since the beginning of the 1980s. Topics for debate have ranged from facilities to training, competition and early specialization, with the common aim being to make handball as attractive as possible for children and youngsters. Given the fierce competition between the

various different sports, it is essential for handball to develop in a way that will keep it a front runner. If handball is to remain popular in the future in view of the considerable expansion of such rival sports as volleyball and basketball, we are going to have to come up with new ideas to interest children and young people in the game.

HANDBALL

Bearing this in mind, what we have attempted to do is to take into account the abilities and potential that children have and not to pay too much attention to how grown-ups play handball. Handball is normally played in accordance with hard and fast rules, tactical moves and performance targets, which is the way that grown-ups think and act. A child's interest, however, is aroused via play, spontaneity and fun. These factors have, therefore, been decisive in working out our youth programmes. First contact with handball is usually made in one of the 700 handball clubs in Sweden. It is important, therefore, that these clubs should have the facilities to take in young children. For this reason we have regularly analyzed the situation in the various clubs and have found out that the major problems are in finding new officials and appropriate places to play. It is the lack of the latter in particular that has forced us to carry out activities which correspond with the facilities available at the various playing areas. Greater efforts must be made, however, to employ more officials, because youth sport is exclusively in the hands of men and women working on a voluntary basis. If handball is to become more attractive we must find more of these people and give them good training.

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO YOUNG PLAYERS

How do we go about our practical work with young handball players? We start out by playing with soft balls in a game we call "soft handball". It is designed for little boys and girls with small hands playing in rooms where there is not much space. Children aged between six and seven should begin by playing soft handball. They usually do so in recreation clubs, almost all of which have the appropriate rooms available, but this presupposes good co-operation between the handball officials and the staff of the recreation clubs.

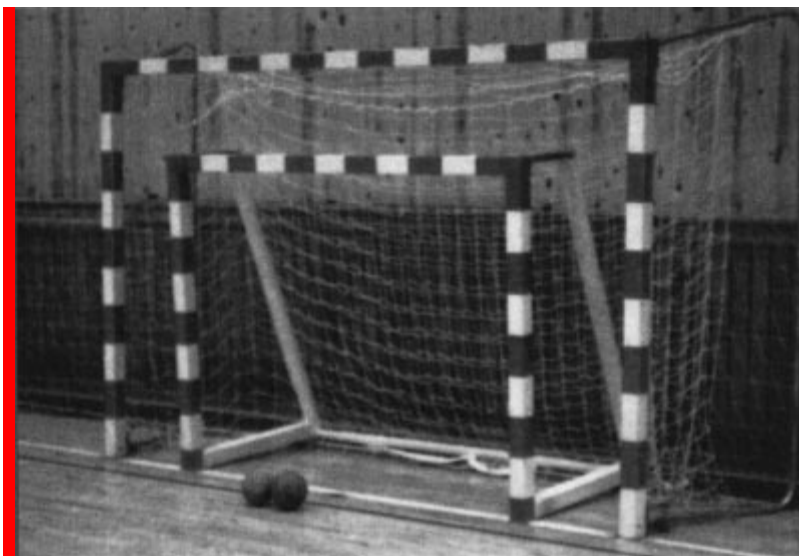
Soft handball can in effect be played anywhere where there is only a small playing area available, for instance in small

halls, in ballrooms, restaurants, etc. The line markings can be laid out using sticky strips and they can be adapted to the given conditions. The ball used for play is a soft handball which has a plastic cover and is easy to hold for children with small hands. It is just as easy to bounce this ball as it is a normal handball. Another advantage is that it does not hurt if you get hit by the ball.

In addition, only very few rules are required. The coach develops the game, as it were, together with the help of the children's imagination. For instance, the only requirement to be made might be that a player has to be outside the semi-circle if a successful throw is to count as a goal. The goal itself measures just 120 by 150 cms, and it should be constructed in such a way that it can be folded up. This means that comparatively little space is needed for storing and transporting the goal.

The fact that soft handball is so easy makes it ideal for children. The boys and girls are free to run around as they like and they have great fun in playing together.

Court and equipment are specially adapted.



It is important that all the children have the same chance of ball contact.



From there we proceed to mini-handball. This is a further step on the path to proper handball. The children are now 8 years of age and at a stage where they can understand various rules and apply them to their own game. The goals are slightly larger - 170 by 200 cms - and the area to be played on is also bigger. Most games are played in gymnasiums or on normal handball courts with the playing area being divided in half to make room for two courts. The 8-year-olds play with a normal handball of the smallest size. At this stage it is still important that all children should be able to play at the same time and have the same amount of contact with the ball. Training should be as varied and diverse as possible. When the boys and girls reach the age of 9 and 10 they are keen to play matches against other teams. This makes greater demands upon them and it is only natural that they should now proceed to a normal handball court. By this time the children have normally been involved with handball for two or three years and they regard themselves as proper handballers.

Nevertheless, care should be taken to differentiate between what is meaningful and less meaningful for ten-year-old children. At this age boys and girls should still train and play together.

ORGANIZING TOURNAMENTS

Another important question is how many players should belong to one team, because all those involved should be able to play. There is ultimately little point in having a team with four to eight substitutes who hardly get a chance to play. Moreover, the goalkeeper should also be involved and switch places with the players on court so that everybody in the team has a chance to test their abilities in as many positions as possible. It is also possible to apply further special rules, which correspond with the development of the children, their pleasure in playing the game and the facilities available.

Proper matches in this age group can best be organized if several teams come

together in one place. For instance, four teams can join up in one place, and each of them plays three matches on the day. This can be done once or twice a month during the season, the advantage being that children, parents and coaches need not spend every weekend being involved with handball matches, and that more time can be devoted to training. The significance of this is that it is just as important to accustom the children to matches and training conditions as it is to aspects of competition in as far as they have an educative effect.

The final stage is youth handball. These youngsters, too, need a challenge in the form of competitive matches. The most appropriate form here are the youth tournaments, which are held every year. The Swedish Association distributes a licence for some 40 tournaments with international participation to be held annually. All told, some 5,000 teams take part in these tournaments of which roughly 1,000 come from abroad, giving these meetings an

international flavour, which is of great importance for the development of the young handball players. The largest and best-known of these tournaments are the "Partille Cup", "Lundaspelen" and "Sweden Open". The "Partille Cup" has been contested for 17 years now and so far teams from 33 countries have taken part in it, giving the "Partille Cup" a good name in youth handball throughout the world.

The Swedish Handball Association is keen to support the clubs in their work and is always open to new ideas. It is undoubtedly easy to stick to what is old, and it is far more complicated to introduce the new. However, this is precisely what is necessary in working with children and youngsters and work in this field must correspond with the latest results in the field of research. For us, this has always been and remains a challenge we gladly accept.

A.E.

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