

## THE CORE CHANGE

Beginning with the **Fall 2026** season:

- Age groups will be determined by a national **School Year** calendar (August 1 to July 31).
- This replaces the previous Calendar Year system (January 1 to December 31).
- **Why?** This national mandate is designed to group players with more of their school peers, improve social alignment, and streamline the college recruiting pathway. More to come below...

## IMMEDIATE IMPACT: WHAT STAYS THE SAME?

It is vital to note that nothing changes for the current Spring 2026 season.

- Current teams remain together through Spring/Summer 2026.
- Competition schedules and training plans remain intact for the current cycle.
- No player movement will occur until the official transition period begins.

## THE TRANSITION TIMELINE

We have developed a deliberate, player-centered timeline to ensure a smooth adjustment for all families.

Date	Activity & Groups	Details
March-July 2026	Competitive	While continuing with their current teams, players will attend select training sessions within their new age groups to help them adjust to the school-year grouping. More info to follow.
(Recreational) May 2026 Games begin 3-4 <sup>th</sup> week of August	<u>United League 2026 Fall Recreational</u> Registration Opens late May	We anticipate this new age-alignment national mandate will be welcomed for many within the United League. It provides the opportunity for players to play with their friends and classmates in most situations.
June 1 & 2, 2026 Dible Soccer Complex	ISC Competitive Soccer Players: U11-U15	Official tryout/player placement will be held and decisions for the 2026–27 season will be made for these age groups.

<b>June 15-16, 2026</b> <b>Dible Soccer Complex</b>	ISC Competitive Soccer Players: U16+	Official tryout/player placement will be held and decisions for the 2026–27 season will be made for these age groups.
<b>August 2026</b>	Fall Season Begins	The 2026–27 season officially begins. This marks the first competitive season under the new school-year age group system.

## PHILOSOPHY BY PROGRAM: HOW WE APPROACH TRANSITION

### UNDERSTANDING OUR APPROACH

While the **United League Recreational program** and the **ISC Competitive** will both shift to the national school-year age groups, our approach to forming teams under this new system differs significantly based on the goals of each program.

#### (1) Recreational Soccer (Recreational U4-U13)

- **Philosophy:** Social Cohesion and Continuity. In our Recreational program, the priority is the joy of the game, friendship, and community. We understand that for a recreational player, "the team" is often defined by *who* they play with, not *what level* they play at.

**Our Approach to the Transition:** We aim to be as flexible as possible to keep friends and formed teams together. We want your child to play with their friends and classmates. Since the new age groups better align with school grades, this change should actually make it *easier* to keep classmates together.

#### (2) Competitive Teams (U11-U19)

- **Philosophy:** Optimal Environment. Within our competitive teams, our priority is long-term player development. Our goal is to place every player in a competitive setting where they can grow the most. We aim to find the right balance where a player is challenged enough to improve yet confident enough to take risks, avoiding both the stagnation of being too comfortable and the frustration of being overwhelmed.

**Our Approach to the Transition:** We are approaching this change with the goal of building more cohesive and stronger teams. By aligning with the school year, we establish a clear competitive pathway that supports both confidence and long-term ambition. We are dedicated to placing your child in a role where they can truly contribute, compete, and thrive alongside their peers.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S. SOCCER AGE GROUPS

**(Phase 1) The Original School-Year Era (Pre-2016):** For decades, youth soccer in the United States operated on a **School Year** calendar (August 1-July 31). This system was intuitive for American families.

- **Alignment:** Kids played with their classmates.

- **Recruiting:** College recruiting was simple because teams were composed of players typically graduating in the same year (e.g., "Class of 2010").
- **High School:** Teams generally moved into High School soccer together without leaving 8th graders behind.

**(Phase 2) The "Birth Year" Mandate (2016-2026):** In 2016, U.S. Soccer implemented a major initiative called the Player Development Initiatives (PDIs). A central part of this was a mandatory shift to **Calendar Year (Birth Year)** age groups (January 1-December 31).

- **The Goal:** The primary motivation was to align American youth soccer with the international standard used by FIFA and European academies. The belief was that this would streamline the identification of youth National Team players and remove the confusion of converting ages for international tournaments.
- **The Reality:** While it helped National Team scouting (which impacts <1% of players), it created significant friction for the other 99%.

**(Phase 3) The Return to School Year (2026 Onward):** After nearly a decade of data and feedback, national associations U.S. Youth Soccer and US Club Soccer determined that the costs of the Birth Year system (social disruption, trapped players) outweighed the benefits. The decision to return to **School Year (August 1-July 31)** in 2026 is a move to prioritize the player experience over international administrative alignment. It restores the link between soccer teams and school grades, ensuring that **no player is "trapped" alone** while their teammates go to High School or College.

## 2026-27 SEASONAL YEAR AGE GROUP CHART STARTING FALL 2026

Birth Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2024	U3	U3	U3	U3	U3	U3	U3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2023	U4	U4	U4	U4	U4	U4	U4	U3	U3	U3	U3	U3
2022	U5	U5	U5	U5	U5	U5	U5	U4	U4	U4	U4	U4
2021	U6	U6	U6	U6	U6	U6	U6	U5	U5	U5	U5	U5
2020	U7	U7	U7	U7	U7	U7	U7	U6	U6	U6	U6	U6
2019	U8	U8	U8	U8	U8	U8	U8	U7	U7	U7	U7	U7
2018	U9	U9	U9	U9	U9	U9	U9	U8	U8	U8	U8	U8
2017	U10	U10	U10	U10	U10	U10	U10	U9	U9	U9	U9	U9
2016	U11	U11	U11	U11	U11	U11	U11	U10	U10	U10	U10	U10
2015	U12	U12	U12	U12	U12	U12	U12	U11	U11	U11	U11	U11
2014	U13	U13	U13	U13	U13	U13	U13	U12	U12	U12	U12	U12
2013	U14	U14	U14	U14	U14	U14	U14	U13	U13	U13	U13	U13
2012	U15	U15	U15	U15	U15	U15	U15	U14	U14	U14	U14	U14
2011	U16	U16	U16	U16	U16	U16	U16	U15	U15	U15	U15	U15
2010	U17	U17	U17	U17	U17	U17	U17	U16	U16	U16	U16	U16
2009	U18	U18	U18	U18	U18	U18	U18	U17	U17	U17	U17	U17
2008	U19	U19	U19	U19	U19	U19	U19	U18	U18	U18	U18	U18
2007	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	U19	U19	U19	U19	U19

## 5 POSITIVE BENEFITS WE CAN EXPECT FROM THE TRANSITION

The return to **School-Year Age Groups** is widely viewed as a "correction" that benefits the vast majority of youth players in the U.S. system. Here is a breakdown of why this change is a positive step for player development and family experience.

**(1) Social & Emotional Alignment:** It better aligns players with social connections through school.

- **The Benefit:** In the U.S., a child's social life typically revolves around their grade in school. The previous birth-year system split friends by an arbitrary January 1st cutoff.
- **Why it Matters:** Especially at the recreational level, when players are on teams with their classmates, they feel a stronger sense of belonging. This social comfort leads to better retention (kids don't quit) and better team chemistry on the field. It simplifies life for parents, too, as school carpools and school schedules align more naturally.

**(2) Better Development for Younger Players:** It keeps kids playing small-sided games longer.

- **The Benefit:** By shifting the calendar down, the "average" age of a team drops slightly (by about 6 months). This means players spend a bit more time in developmentally appropriate formats (4v4, 7v7, 9v9) before rushing to the full-sized 11v11 field.
- **Why it matters:** Small-sided games are critical for skill acquisition. Players get more touches on the ball and have to make quicker decisions. Extending this phase—rather than rushing onto a massive field where athleticism dominates skill—is better for long-term technical growth.

**(3) A Later Entry Into Advanced Pathways:** It reduces the rush into high-pressure competitive environments early.

- **The Benefit:** The shift to school-year age groups effectively lowers the average chronological age of a team by approximately six months. This structural change naturally "taps the brakes" on the youth soccer timeline, keeping the focus on development rather than destination.
- **Why it Matters:** By slightly lowering the age profile of each group, we gain a valuable window to keep players engaged in local, socially driven environments for longer. This delays the onset of travel and higher financial commitments, allowing kids to prioritize fun and friendships. We know that extending this younger age "social play" phase is statistically one of the best ways to ensure happier players who stay in the game for the long haul.

**(4) Solving the *Trapped Player Problem*:** It removes the secondary season issue for U15 players.

- **The Benefit:** This is arguably the most critical logistical fix. In the birth-year system, a U15 team was often a mix of 8th graders and 9th graders. The 9th graders left to play High School soccer, leaving the 8th graders "trapped" without a full team or a league to play in.
- **Why it Matters:** The school-year system keeps the entire team together. 8th graders will typically play with 8th graders; 9th graders will typically play with 9th graders. The team stays intact, training continues uninterrupted, and 8th-grade families aren't forced to scramble for "orphan" teams.

**(5) A Complete U19 Season:** It fulfills the U18/U19 year with the same players.

- **The Benefit:** Previously, the oldest age group (U19) was often decimated because the oldest birth-year players had already graduated high school and left for college, leaving the remaining high school seniors with a depleted roster.

**Why it Matters:** By aligning with the school year, the "U19" season matches the Senior Year of high school for most players. The team stays together for one final, cohesive season (often a critical recruiting year) before everyone graduates at the same time.

## 2026-27 AGE GROUP CHANGES: COMPREHENSIVE FAQ

### (Section 1) The Basics (What & Why)

**What exactly is changing?** Starting in the Fall 2026 season, youth soccer age groups will be determined by a national School Year calendar (August 1-July 31). This replaces the current Birth Year Calendar Year system (January 1-December 31).

**Is this decision unique to ISC?** No. This is a nationwide mandate adopted by Nebraska and Iowa Soccer Associations, U.S. Youth Soccer (USYS), US Club Soccer, and AYSO. ISC is aligning with these national standards, just like other clubs in the state and across the country.

**Why is this change happening?** The national governing bodies identified three main benefits:

1. School Alignment: More players will now play with their classmates and grade-level peers than in the previous system, improving social cohesion.
2. Reducing the "Trapped Player" Issue: The new calendar significantly reduces the number of 8th graders left behind without a team when their older teammates move to High School soccer.
3. Clearer Long-Term Pathways: Aligning age groups with graduating classes simplifies the college recruiting process, making it easier for scouts to evaluate players within their true academic peer group.

**When does this officially start?** The new age groups go into effect for the 2026-27 season (starting August 2026). The current Spring 2026 season remains completely unchanged.

**My child was born between August 1 and December 31. What does this mean for them?** Under the old system, these players were the youngest in their age group. Under the new School Year system, they will become the oldest in their age group. This often provides a leadership opportunity and a confidence boost.

**My child was born between May 1 and July 31. What does this mean for them?** Under the new system, these players shift from the middle to the youngest in their age group. While initially challenging, John O'Sullivan (Changing the Game Project) calls this the "Underdog Advantage." Because these players cannot rely on physical size to win, they are forced to develop superior technique, faster decision-making, and "grit" to compete. Long-term data shows that "youngsters" who stick with it often surpass their older peers because they develop a higher Soccer IQ and cleaner skills out of necessity.

**Will players be organized strictly by their school grade?** No. Players will be organized by "School-Year Age Groups" (August 1-July 31), not by their specific academic grade.

Here is the difference: While the new system will naturally align most players with their classmates, "Grade Level" is an academic designation that varies from family to family (due to children starting school early or late, repeating a year, or varying state enrollment dates).

"School-Year Age Groups" use a strict national birthdate range (August 1 to July 31). This ensures a nationwide consistent, fair, and objective standard for safety and competition, regardless of a player's individual academic path.

**Why are teams organized by the August 1–July 31 date range rather than strictly by "Grade Level"?** While the new age group system is often referred to as "School Year" because it aligns better with school grades than the calendar year, we will use the nationwide age groupings of August 1st to July 31st date range for safety and fairness.

We cannot organize strictly by "Grade" because grade levels are variable, whereas birth dates are factual. Organizing strictly by grade can create significant risks:

- The Age Gap Risk: Because kids start school at different ages, are held back, or skip grades, a single grade level can include children whose ages span 2+ years.
- Physical Safety: We already see significant physical differences within a standard 12-month age gap. If we were to widen that window to 24+ months (as seen in strict grade-based grouping), the physical

disparity becomes dangerous. A "held-back" 13-year-old competing against a young 11-year-old in the same grade poses a real safety concern.

- **Developmental Fairness:** When age gaps widen beyond 12 months, the disparity in talent and physical maturity widens considerably. Keeping the grouping within the August 1–July 31 window ensures players compete with and against peers of similar physiological, emotional, and social maturity.

### **What if my soccer age group is different from my actual school grade?**

You will be placed in the age group determined by your birth date (August 1-July 31), but there is flexibility depending on your program level.

- **The Rule:** We use the August 1-July 31 birth date ranges to form teams. This ensures fair competition and aligns with the new national standards.
- **The Exception (Playing Up):** If a player is "young for their grade" (e.g., they are in 8th grade, but their birth date places them in the 7th-grade soccer group), they may be allowed to play up to stay with their classmates, provided they are developmentally ready. Playing up decisions will be made by the Director of Coaching.
- **For Recreational Players:** We know that for our recreational program, the priority is fun, friendship, and playing with peers. If the new age group separates a recreational player from their classmates or friends, we are very open to "play up" requests to keep those social groups together. Please reach out to United League Director, Chris Conley, to discuss this.
- **Playing Down:** Consistent with national rules, playing down at the Recreational United League and ISC Competitive levels (playing in a younger age group than your birth date allows) is not permitted.

**Why was August 1st to July 31st selected as the age range?** -After a detailed analysis by youth soccer governing bodies across the nation, the August 1st to July 31st range was selected because it captures the most players in the same grade nationwide. This ensures consistency for tournaments, leagues, and recruiting beyond our state borders.

**Will my child repeat an age group?** For players born August 1st to December 31st, they will generally repeat the same age group in 2026-27 that they did in 2025-26, unless they play up into an older age group.

**Do large age group changes like this happen often?** No. This change is a rare, structural shift designed to benefit the majority of players throughout the remainder of their youth soccer journey. We don't anticipate your child experiencing any additional age-group changes during their time in youth soccer.

## **(Section 2) Teams & Rosters – ISC Competitive**

**Will my child's current team be broken up?** Some teams may remain largely intact if the majority of players share the same school year age group. However, many older and advanced-level rosters will see changes. Our priority is not just "keeping a team together," but placing individual players in the environment where they will thrive socially and competitively.

**Can't we just "grandfather" our current teams so it stays together?** Unfortunately, no. Because our teams compete in state and national leagues (Nebraska League, Iowa Premier League, etc.), we must strictly adhere to the roster rules of those governing bodies. If we kept a roster "as is" based on birth year, we would be ineligible to compete against clubs following the new School Year mandate.

**Can my child "play up" to stay with their current team?** "Playing up" is permitted in specific cases based on developmental readiness and Director of Coaching evaluation. However, it is not the default solution for keeping a roster together. Decisions are made player by player, not team by team.

**Can my child "play down" to stay with friends?** No. Nebraska Soccer Association, US Club Soccer, and USYS rules are strict regarding playing down in age groups. Players must compete in their age-appropriate group (or a higher group).

**Who will be my child's coach?** Coaching assignments are determined by our Director of Coaching to ensure the best fit for each team's developmental level. The specific coaching slate for the 2026–27 season will be announced prior to player placements in June 2026.

**What is "Age Group Training" beginning in March?** Beginning in March 2026, ISC will introduce training for ISC Competitive teams where players practice within their new school-year age groups.

- **Purpose:** To help players meet potential new teammates and help coaches assess the pool of players in the new age bands.
- **Format:** This replaces a standard team session. It is not a high-pressure tryout; it is an integration and identification opportunity.
- *U11-U15 boys and girls dates will be announced very soon.*
- *U16-U19 boys and girls will have scheduled age group sessions June and early July after high school soccer is completed.*

It is expected that all players will attend their assigned Age Group Training sessions. Absences should be communicated through your team coach, TeamSnap.

**Will the Spring age group trainings be just for training, or are players being evaluated?** Both. At ISC, internal player evaluations are a year-round process, but these specific sessions allow us to better understand how players fit within their new, broader peer groups, a necessity especially this year. While these trainings provide us with important insight, formal tryouts/player placement will still be held in June, aligning with the official tryout window for the Nebraska Soccer Association and our other governing bodies.

### **(Section 3) The Transition Timeline (Spring & Summer 2026)**

**Does anything change for the Spring 2026 season?** No. All teams, training schedules, and league plays remain on the current Birth Year system through the end of the Spring 2026 season.

**When will we know our team for next year?** Official player placement for ISC Competitive decisions will be released in June 2026, following the standard tryout/player placement timeline.

### **(Section 4) Competition & College Recruiting**

**How does this affect High School soccer eligibility?** This change improves High School alignment. Previously, birth-year age groups often split a single team between 8th graders and High School Freshmen, causing the "trapped player" issue in the fall. The School Year system ensures that age groups align more closely with Freshman/Sophomore/Junior/Senior classes.

**Will this hurt my child's college recruiting process?** No. In fact, it is expected to help. College coaches recruit by graduating class (e.g., "Class of 2028"). Aligning club soccer age groups with school grades makes it easier for scouts to evaluate players against their direct academic peers, streamlining the recruiting pathway.

**Is there a missed season during the switch?** No. Unlike the switch from school year to calendar year, players will not miss an age group or year of play. In fact, players born August 1 - December 31st will stay in their 2025-26 age group one more year in 2026-27.

### **(Section 5) Recreational Soccer**

**Does this apply to Recreational soccer, too?** Yes, the age parameters will shift for Rec soccer as well, but with more flexibility through our in-house programming, players and teams shouldn't experience much change.

**Can United League players request to play with classmates?** Yes. Since the new age groups align better with school grades, requests to play with classmates will actually be easier to fulfill under the new system. Please keep in mind, we try very hard to accommodate requests, however, not all requests can be accommodated.