

A man in a dark blue suit, blue shirt, and dark tie is holding a white and black soccer ball. The background is a blurred stadium with bright lights and a green field.

developing an

ELITE COACHING PHILOSOPHY

in possession

TIM LEES

Developing an Elite Coaching Philosophy: In Possession

By Tim Lees

To respect the confidentiality and trust of professional managers, coaches and players, the basic origins, sources and guidelines to many of the sessions in this manual will remain anonymous.

The setups and principles are being used frequently at the very elite level of professional football, both academy and first team.

The sessions are split into various categories; there is, however, a strong overlap and link between them all. A setup may have one specific function principally, but will develop various other core principles of the game. A playing from the back/building play session, for example, will also develop pressing from the front for the opposing players. It would be unwieldy to list all the technical, tactical, physical and psychological returns for each individual session. Instead, the core principles of each specific topic are noted. Furthermore, the sessions emphasise setups without going into in deep tactical detail around any specific system and the demands within that system. The specifics of a philosophy are the attribute of the individual coach and manager; these will probably change with each game and in accordance with the opposition, conditions, stage of the season etc. This manual aims to provide core principles of developing an elite philosophy and ideas of how to create this environment in training and preparation. There will be lots of points throughout this manual where the reader disagrees with something that is written; this is why football is so popular, fascinating and contentious.

If this manual contributes just one thing to every reader then it has served its function.

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Contents

Influences	page 5
The Starting Point 2019 and Beyond	page 6
Introduction	page 7
Personal Rules	page 9

Playing Philosophy

The Four Moments	page 13
In Possession	page 14
Receiving Lines	page 15
One v One Situations	page 16
Overloading	page 19
Counter Attacking	page 22

Sessions

Possession, Small Sided Games, Shape	page 26
One v Ones	page 49
Transition	page 64
Counter Attacking	page 66
Session Structure	page 74
Progression and Evolution	page 76

Influences

Like any individual striving to achieve the highest possible level of proficiency in his or her profession I have many influences. Possibly the biggest would include **Pep Guardiola**, **Roberto Martinez** and **Marcelo Bielsa**. They provide extremely similar yet very different philosophies.

The dominance of Guardiola's Barcelona team will be remembered for years to come and possibly appreciated more as time goes on. I take particular inspiration from his methods of how to overload specific areas of the pitch, how to control the tempo and rhythm of a game and how to manipulate the opposition in terms of space. In these three specific areas, Guardiola has not just been pioneering and innovating, he has reinvented those principles. The depth of his methods and the purity behind them, the reluctance to change principles under the most extreme pressure and persistence in thinking outside the box, are extraordinary. His teams have movement patterns that are totally unique. For me, he is the best.

I was fortunate enough to work at Wigan Athletic when Roberto Martinez was first team manager. The way in which he was the only Premier League manager to regularly implement a back three system, with "average" Premier League players, yet consistently dominate teams in possession was a great education for me, especially as his team was in a constant relegation battle. I was fortunate enough to watch this system evolve every week, to speak to Roberto in detail about philosophy and construction of such, and to manage his training camp in Spain. Amongst other things, it was through Roberto that I really began to understand the importance, detail and relevance of dominating one v one situations. This process saw me go completely full circle, where I found myself coaching the same things I had done a decade earlier, only now I knew exactly how and where it related to the big picture, the long term picture, the full picture.

His philosophy reinforced to me personally, that the style of which the team adopts is the most rewarding and important principle of coaching this game. Many people will disagree with this statement but I admit that I am a totally unreconstructed purist. When Roberto's team passed Manchester City off the pitch to win the F.A. Cup (City averaged £16.4 million per player, Wigan totalled £12.8 million for the entire team), it inspired me hugely. It is vital to constantly keep learning and I am fortunate enough to have been personally inspired by one of the very best.

Marcelo Bielsa is arguably the most underrated and understated coach in world football. His high tempo principles both with and without the ball, his methods of how to create space and how to overload are pioneering. The movement patterns, rotations and intensity of his sides are incredible. I constantly adopt his spare man at the back principle which refers to however many strikers the opposition play up, he operates with one more defender; no more, no less; and this, by definition, constantly changes during the game. The inspiration here will have undoubtedly have been Johan Cruyff but the fluidity with which Bielsa's back line changes

tactically within games is unique. Guardiola describes him as the 'best coach in the world' - watch his teams and realise the wisdom of the statement.

Simplicity is key:

"Great teams own the pitch and they own the ball. That means when you have the ball, you dictate play and when you are defending, you control the space." **Arrigo Sacchi**

To make things look simple, however, first must come detail and microscopic analysis. To teach the game to younger ages, you have to know the full picture and then be able to unravel this for the relevant ability and age. Making football look simple is a complex procedure.

The Starting Point: 2019 and Beyond

In order to develop players for the future, we first must have excellent knowledge of the end. The starting point therefore when designing a long term player development programme, must be to understand what the game will demand of elite players in five years time and beyond. If we prepare a thirteen year old for the elite game as it stands now, that skill-set might not be as relevant in a few years time. The best managers speak about how the speed of the Premier League increases each pre-season. This progression must be put under the microscope in all four Long Term Player Development areas; technically, tactically, psychologically and physically, the latter seeing the biggest change with each successive year. At the outset this may appear to involve some guess work, but using the stats at the elite level over the last ten years we can draw several conclusions:

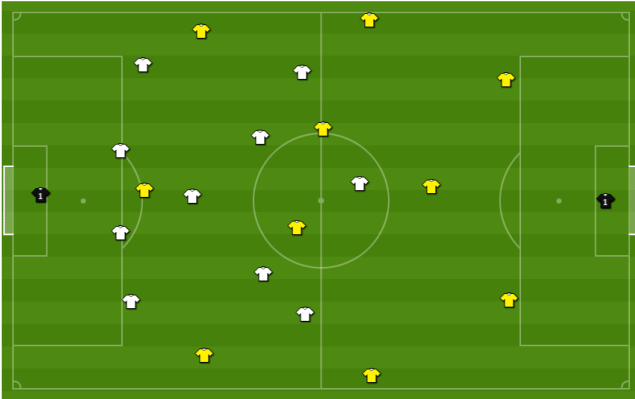
- **There are 48% more successful passes than in 2004**
 - **80% of passes are now one or two touch**
 - **78% of passes are now under 25 yards**
 - **Games can feature over 1000 passes per game**
- **There is much less time and space in the opponent's half**
- **Players rotate and play in multiple positions per game**
- **There are twice as many receiving situations as in 2004**

In short, these points mean that it will be vital to produce technical players who can receive in tight spaces under pressure, can play quick combinations, can dominate players in 1v1 situations and be tactically flexible in order to find space. From a physical point of view, players will not play at the elite level unless they possess an excellent change of direction, great agility, speed over short distances, good proprioception and explosive power. Psychologically, their attributes must include being competitive, able to handle pressure and resilient to setbacks and repetition. All sessions must, therefore, aim to inculcate these qualities in players.

With this said though, it must be acknowledged that we can learn so much from history as tactical patterns have a habit of coming in and out of fashion. The back three system, for example, disappeared in the 1960s in place of the back four but then reappeared in the 1980s. A decade later the system all but disappeared again as teams started to favour systems incorporating one striker, meaning that the extra man was peripheral, leading to an overload elsewhere. The system then had a resurgence in Italy in the last few years, however, and drew particular public attention through Guardiola's brilliant (Bielsa inspired) Barcelona side. In fact, it could be argued that Guardiola at times played the old W-M formation, popular or even standard from the 1920s until the early 1960s.

Introduction

One of the best pieces of advice I was given came from Nick Cox, manager of the 'Harefield Project' which saw over fifty players progress from Watford F.C.'s academy into its first team squad in just under three years. On my first day coaching the 12-16s we spoke in depth of session principles and philosophy; *"from the second players turn up at 5.00pm to when they leave at 6.30pm, every single movement, exercise or drill they do should look like a section of the game has been cut out from above and dropped onto the training pitch. It should be position relevant and*



include the repetitive decisions they make in a game. Cut out the piece of the pitch and put it on the training field; whatever area that may be." This simple message has stuck with me for years. Whether it be a centre back cutting inside with pressure from the front to overload into midfield, a midfield trio working on rotation patterns or a full back simply working on his disguised passes into lines three or four, it all should

look exactly like the real thing. This sounds such a simple principle but upon visiting 'elite' academy, first team or grassroots sessions, its practice would not be commonplace. The number of sessions in spaces and areas that are not realistic to the game, the amount of movements practised which do not happen on a weekend, the lack of repetitive decision making, the number of sessions based around the deficiencies of last weekend instead of being part of the long term plan is staggering.

This manual contains opposed sessions only. There are no unopposed drills, movement patterns or repetitive technical practices. This is not to say I neglect these types of sessions at all but my personal philosophy is that I believe players should be training as close to the real game as possible, as often as possible. I believe in consistently putting players in scenarios they will face on a weekend, making realistic decisions frequently and consistently. The best way for players to learn how to play the real game is to play the real game. If it doesn't look like the real thing then why bother as it won't transfer across come weekend.

With this said, lower down either in terms of ability level or age, players will lack the technical proficiency in pressurised situations and game understanding. Throw technically deficient players into an 11v11 and you should be in another sport! Players need to acquire the relevant skill and technique in various formats. If, for example, an under 10 is struggling on receiving on the back foot, twisting his hips and opening his shoulders to play forward, he will need constant repetition of this unopposed, to master the technique before he can apply it under pressure. If he continually trains in this format though, he will eventually receive perfectly under no pressure but then he will have to build in awareness and first touch going in different directions in accordance with the pressure. You then ask the question, should we not have just

learned under varying pressure in the first place then? At the age of 16 and above, at the elite level, top coaches can see which players have had lots of unopposed technique work and which have had constant game repetition in their younger ages. The patterns are in everything they do. **It requires an elite coach to drip feed in the decision making process along the journey, at the right times.** If the decision making is not brought in at the relevant time, players get lost in the system. There are thousands of players in this country who were victims of this, yet could have had full time careers in football.

I try to get the balance between playing in small tight areas and bigger, match realistic spaces. I personally think that we are in an age where there is an obsession with putting players in extremely tight spaces, reducing thinking time and thus increasing awareness and speed of decisions. There is no doubt that the success of Barcelona in recent times has influenced this. I worry that a constant programme of this over a long period would produce players who always want to receive to feet, who never break lines, who never run in behind and who can't operate in big spaces. This produces 'five a side' and one/two touch players who find it difficult to affect the game. The real game is not played in a 20x20 area.

I feel there is another common problem with coaches putting on imaginative drills, where the players are learning specific movements of that practice as opposed to the actual game. The multiball is flying, there is movement everywhere, players running off on different angles across each other. The session looks visually busy, uneducated parents/media/staff will watch on the side and think it is brilliant but in actual fact, most of these sessions have no relevance to the game. You cannot expect something from a player if you have not practised it hundreds of times in training. There has to be a clear relationship between training and games.

During the past few years I have been fortunate enough to be asked to present and document my philosophy for different clubs, conferences and interviews. In trying to do so, I have concluded that it is actually impossible to document a playing philosophy. The reason for this is the same as why coaches are disappointed when they watch one specific session from a first team coach, yet learn nothing. The microscopic detail comes in the prep with the players, the conversations during the game and at half time, the video analysis, the individual requirements of that specific player, the long term plan, the phone conversations, the evolution of the system and variations within games. These details cannot be documented as it would take decades to write the variables. Instead, I will try to give an insight into the core principles I work from everyday.

Personal Rules

I do not believe in rondos. I believe in small sided possession work in boxes but not circle rondos with large numbers of players standing still. I understand the value of them and that the Spanish players look incredible with the ball flying around at the speed of light but I feel time could be better spent doing more constructive things. If you turn up to any non-league session in England on a Tuesday or Thursday night, you will see these take place either as a warm up or full session, known as 'circle'. I feel it is thought as 'acceptable' to do this because everyone does it. To back up my logic, I did an analysis for three months on rondos from non league to Champions League and in a ten minute rondo, players got an average of nine touches of the ball. In addition, many of these touches involve a 1-3 yard pass. I feel the benefits are more in the social corner; 'banter', inculcation of team spirit and a light hearted introduction to a session. In my opinion, it is time lost purely from a development point of view.

I do not believe in netball/handball. This game became acceptable when Rafa Benitez did it with Liverpool and the videos went viral when they won the Champions League but my argument is so simple – how many times do you catch the ball on a match day? Yes I understand the rotation and movement patterns can be established but this would be beneficial for 2-4 year olds where they are incapable of controlling a football thus need to get pattern recognition and movement repetition, not elite players. Why not just do it through possession or a small sided game?

I do not do unopposed movement patterns against mannequins. I understand their value but there are no decisions being made, there is no function to the rotation and there is no space to interchange into with no opposition. The player does not have to react or time his movement and everything can become unrealistic very quickly. I work on movement patterns in opposed scenarios whether that be heavily overloaded for success or in small sided games. Mannequins don't tackle.

I do not believe in numbered systems. There is an over obsession with the 4-3-3 system and players playing the role of the specific number on the shirt. This emphasis has been influenced heavily by Ajax and Barcelona. A number 7, for example, is the winger who comes on the inside, the number 6 does not go ahead of the ball, the number 8 plays in a vertical corridor and the number 10 stays in between the lines. I feel that there is such a huge emphasis on creating specific players for positional slots that it will create robots long term. 4-3-3 systems generally create deep lying midfielders who cannot go ahead of the ball, play on higher pockets or break lines. 4-2-3-1 is predominantly about finding the 10, but when the 10 has to play centre midfield in a pair the first team he can't do it; he is the quintessential luxury player but we created him! For me, this type of system and philosophy is too regimented, predictable and robotic. Players need freedom and ultimately the emphasis on that will create tactically flexible players who are adaptable. At the elite level, managers need players who can change roles in the system in a single moment, players who can feel the tempo and rhythm of matches and possess game management skills, not players who need to be constantly coached through the games.

The argument for the ‘numbered system’ will be that Barcelona’s academy has been one of the most successful in the world using this philosophy. To put this argument into perspective, however, allow me to explain the recruitment and coaching structure.

In England, the youth systems of professional clubs have players signed to them from 9-18 years old, with most clubs also having an under 21’s team. All clubs in England are awarded a category status, ranging from 1-4, based primarily around finances and facilities. If a club wants to sign a player from another club, they have to pay compensation which increases each year the child has been signed at his existing club. The sums of money involved in a youth transfer become astronomical for a child who is a long way from making a first team appearance. Due to the costs involved, there are only a select few clubs who can afford to buy players, usually the Category One clubs. Even the top Category One clubs cannot afford to be paying large sums of money on a regular basis for youth players. On the contrary, imagine a system where one club can send scouts around the whole country to watch any other professional club’s games, and if they see a player they like then they can sign that player for absolutely nothing. They also have local housing and the finances to move that child into a host residence. Effectively therefore, you have the pick of the nation. This is the luxury that Barcelona and Real Madrid have. In Spain, there is no compensation, only a small pay back, later down the line. Real Madrid are statistically the most successful club in the world for producing young players. Imagine being Rayo Vallecano who are in the suburbs of Madrid and have an excellent youth set up with a great philosophy. Any time you have a player who shows any promise or improvement, Real sign him. To summarise, is it the ‘numbered’ system or ‘compensation’ system that has made Barcelona so successful in Spain?

I find it humorous when big clubs in England buy players from lower category clubs but claim them as their own ‘academy products’. Many Category Three clubs in England scout players at eight years of age, coach that player three times per week for years, support that child’s family then that player is classed as another club’s youth product. It is not particularly difficult to send a scout to watch a game between two professional clubs and see who the best player is.

Possession games have to have a purpose. I do not use possession games unless they are directional or have a function. Players always should be thinking “*what is the best way through the pitch?*” I find possession games without direction become unrealistic as movements have no logical purpose and thus do not transfer to the game. Retaining possession just to keep the ball is a waste of time.

Game Management Strategies. I believe in working extensively on game management scenarios with the players. This works better with older and more elite players than younger or grassroots. In game management, I am not referring to taking the ball to the corner to waste time or smashing it long to keep it away from our goal. The tactical elements of managing the game provides players with motivation and targets, and develops a strong psychological profile. The scenarios may include score lines, change the rhythm of a game, specific timings with tactical problems, one man less, changing the system within the game etc. which all develop

tactically flexible players who can understand and adapt to conditions on their own, creating independent thinkers. I usually give one team the scenario, then the teams change around and the opposition deal with the same scenario to eventually have a winner. Scenarios include:

- Your team is winning 2-0 and have 10 minutes to win the game. Strategies here may include dropping deep to protect and counter, domination of possession to kill the game, dropping to a trigger point, full backs being defensive instead of going forward, changing to a specific formation (i.e. 4-3-3 to 4-2-3-1) and pressing the opposition high to prevent rhythm etc.
- You are losing the game 1-0 and have 10 minutes to win it. Strategies here may include a more attacking philosophy, aggression through the lines as opposed to retention and circulation, putting an extra player up front, changing to a back and three pushing wing backs on the 5th receiving line etc.
- The opposition are down to 10 men and you have 10 minutes to win the game from 0-0. Strategies here may include playing with maximum width by leaving wingers out both sides to stretch the opposition, not panicking and being patient, keep the opposition running and tiring them physically through circulation etc.
- If the opposition like to drop deep into a low block and are difficult to break down, allow them possession and get them to play higher up the pitch. Drop off to a trigger point to encourage them to play expansively, try to entice their full backs on then look to hit them in transition.

The conditions are endless but must relate specifically to the team and their needs.

After planning the detail of a session, I ask myself **would I like to be a player in this and does it happen on match day?** As a player, I took part in so many bad sessions delivered by coaches with 'great' reputations. Through having these bad experiences it taught me what not to do. Many coaches would say the enjoyment of the session for a player is not important but I disagree. Keeping players motivated is the biggest battle; a player should never be able to guess what they are going to be doing in the session. My belief is that a young player should come away from every training session with the same three things:

- **Having worked hard**
- **Having enjoyed it**
- **Having developed and learned**

I try to question everything. I try to review every session I do and every game I watch: What worked? What did not work? Why did he make that movement there? Why did he receive in that way? Why is the manager playing this system against that? Why is that player staying in that space? I try to question everything I see and everything I do. I find this a great way of self improvement.

The most important principle in this whole process, one that is frequently neglected at all levels of football from grassroots to first team, is to remember that **we are here for the players**, not

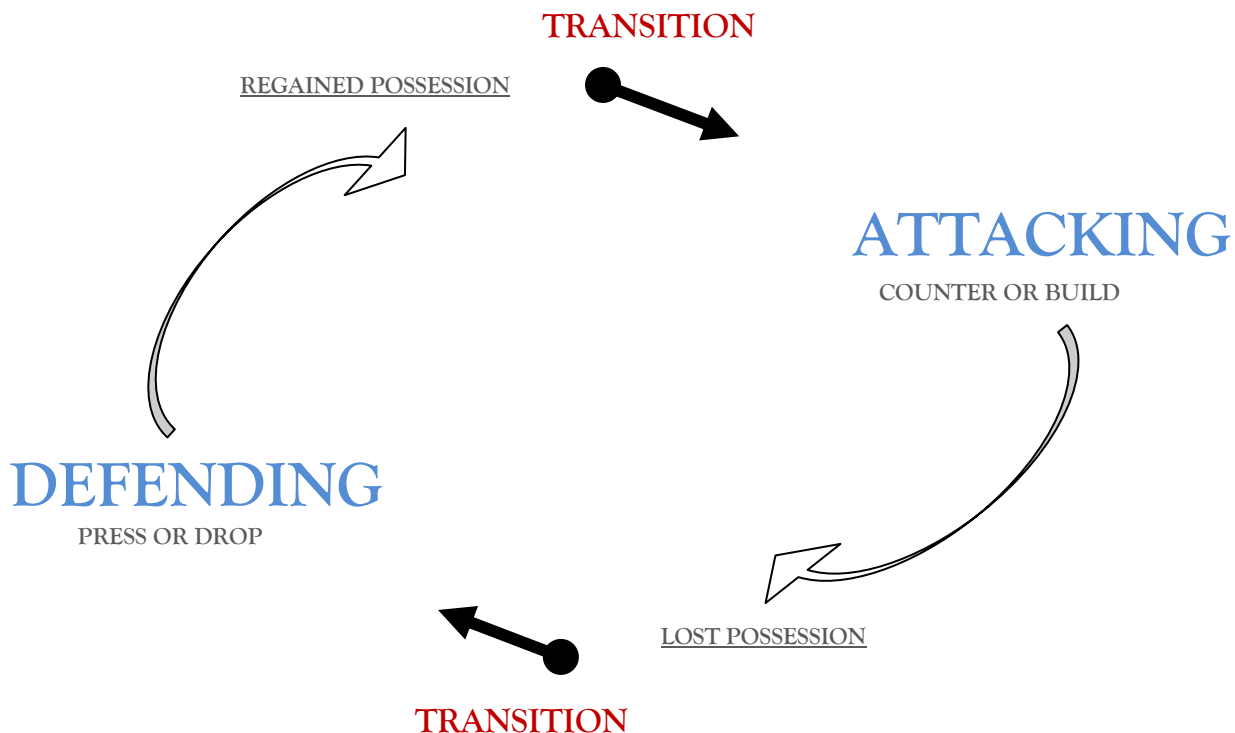
the other way around. There are so many coaches who forget that the reason we are managing a specific group of players, is for them, not for ourselves. The professional game in England is littered with coaches who use young players as vehicles for themselves to progress in the game. The people that matter the most are the players. If we focus on that principle alone then it is a great start.

Playing Philosophy

The Four moments

When analysing the shape, system, strengths and weaknesses of any team, there are four main areas that one must consider. Any elite player development programme should revolve around these four 'moments' of the game. These 'moments' have been part of football since the conception of the game, just not having this specific terminology. Jose Mourinho brought particular public focus to these 'four moments' prior to his Chelsea appointment in 2004. Every team is always playing in one of these four moments (with the exception of set pieces);

1. In possession
2. Out of possession
3. Counter attack
4. Counter defend



This manual's focus is purely on the attacking two moments; **in possession**, and **counter attacking**.

In Possession

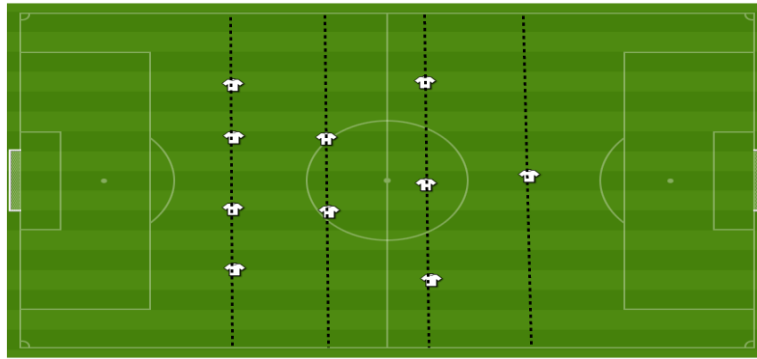
In possession of the ball I insist on specific principles. These principles never change regardless of the system and in their most basic form they are:

- Play from the back when possible, having knowledge of why we shift the press, how to play against various systems and all pressing styles
- Play with width, depth and five receiving lines
- Trade spaces through interchange and rotation
- Have knowledge of how to drag opponents out of all defensive shapes
- Create overloads and find the spare player (explained in detail later on)
- Be comfortable receiving in all types of individual pressure
- Be comfortable receiving in high pressure zones
- Trust each other to play out of pressure
- Possess tactical flexibility in terms of movement and positions
- Foster a system that allows for multiple players on higher lines whilst not being outnumbered centrally
- Progress overloads in wide areas
- Recognise where the spaces are
- Promote a high focus on creating space through individual domination without the ball
- Dominate 1v1 situations

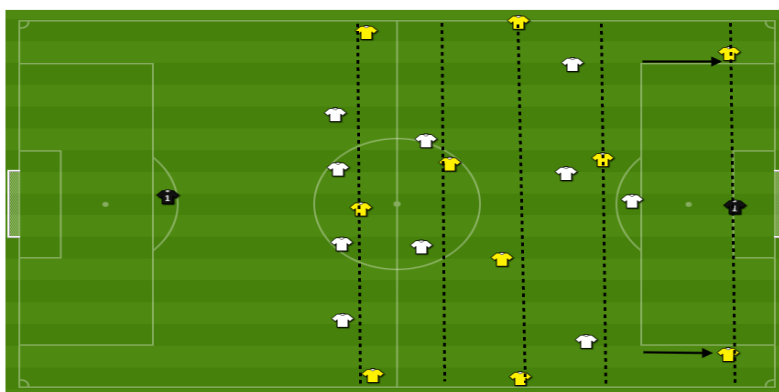
It is imperative to control the game through expansive possession, but the possession must have a purpose. The actual percentage of possession is not the number one priority. What you do with the ball when you have it, is, however. It is vital to open out the pitch and control the spaces. This is done through expansion (width and depth), rotation, interchange and tactical flexibility with a very high demand on technical excellence. The starting point is playing with expansive shape. The team must find a way of playing with width and depth whilst always fully utilizing its best players. The best players must be in the areas of the pitch which will bring out their superior qualities. The system must be built around the players, not the players fitting into a specific system. Once the team know how, where and when to open up the pitch effectively, they must have an understanding of exactly how to trade spaces and control the lines by moving the opposition's block, whether that be low, medium or high. The key to this is recognition of the receiving lines. This principle is the platform for everything.

Receiving Lines

The principle of playing on multiple receiving lines is fundamental to controlling the game in possession. Most teams want to defend on three or four lines. Think of any modern system, 4-2-3-1 for example; managers want to stay compact and narrow but when looking at the pitch in terms of depth and layers, there will often be four main defensive lines:



Regardless of where on the pitch this system is set up (deep, middle or high), the idea is to move these players around so that spaces open up to operate in. The spaces may be in front (deep block), they may be in between (units dragged out and disjointed), they may be around (narrow shape) or may be in behind (high defensive line). If you look at it logically in analytical terms, it would therefore make sense to operate on eleven different receiving lines so that the opposition are completely spread out and moving from their relevant zones. This is obviously unrealistic, however, as you would be far too open on the turnover of possession. Having tried and experimented for many years, I have found the principle of playing on five different lines as extremely effective and players recognise these during games. If I am a centre back in possession, asking me to quickly look through the pitch and recognise eleven lines is impossible. I will use the diagram below as an example of one particular situation...



The yellows are in possession (4-3-3) with the whites pressing in a 4-2-3-1 (four lines). The goalkeeper has the ball and the centre backs would go roughly to the corners of the box as a point of reference. Recognising they will be pressed upon receiving, the drop down the box to increase the distance between the receiving lines. Now, every yard they drag the white strikers higher results in more space for the second line (or them) to receive. As soon as the ball is played out to one side, the white's press is then dragged to that side of the pitch, therefore the

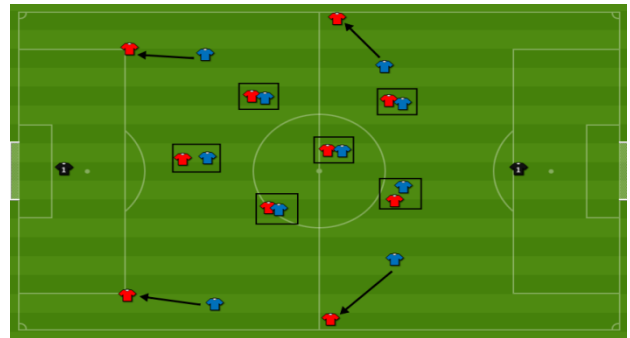
space is then freed on the opposite side. Often goalkeepers will bounce centre backs to invite the press, to then play through, isolating 3v2 situations. The game of trading spaces through movement, rotation and recognition of which receiving line the press is on, begins.

Once the players begin to see receiving lines and the lines of pressure from the opposition, a possession-based game really begins to develop. Reacting to each other, playing on opposite movements and recognising the spaces are critical. This education takes time and constant repetition in training, but the layers of the pitch are absolutely key. The types of practice in training, along with relevant, consistent messages, are key to developing the style and understanding. This is why the system becomes less relevant as the principles take over.

One v One Situations

One of the most misinterpreted concepts in football

Once the expansive shape has been developed and receiving lines are established, the game comes down to who can play forward through overloading and who can dominate one v one situations. As soon as the phrase 'one v one situation' is used, the majority of people think that this relates to a winger with the defender in front, isolated in space where he uses skill and trickery to beat his man, Cristiano Ronaldo being the best current example. This is not what I am referring to. To provide some background to this, here are some statistics I gathered after analysing the Premier League and La Liga for a full season:



- Top players have over 2,700 receiving situations per season
- 75% of receiving situations in elite football are with pressure behind
- Top players have a retaining percentage of over 88% in 1v1 situations
- Top players find a way to play forward after receiving 61% of the time

To summarise years of documentation, stats and research, one v one situations can be split into five categories all in relation to the defender's position:

- **Defender Behind**
- **Defender In Front**
- **Defender On The Side**
- **Defender On The Covering Angle**
- **Domination Without The Ball**

Defender Behind



This is the most common position of the defender when receiving a ball at the elite level. 75% of one v one situations are with the opposing player applying pressure from behind. This relates directly to the future game statistics and resultant requirements quoted at the beginning of this manual; restricted space, aggressive pressing, constant pressure on the ball, compact lines and the increase in physical speed and athleticism. The players who can consistently dominate opponents applying pressure behind are the ones who sell for multi-million pound transfers; the game changers. These players find a way to play forward and break lines in scenarios where it seemed very difficult to do. Think of the current best players in the world and what makes them so good; no doubt they will all be effective with the defender behind. We can cite Zidane, Maradona and Messi, arguably the best three of all time. When receiving under pressure, some players turn in one touch, some put disguise on their receiving by 'showing the obvious and doing the opposite', yet others take multiple touches with various turns. There is no one specific blueprint or pattern. The top players have their own individual way, which is undoubtedly shaped by their childhood playing experiences when growing up. Luis Suarez, for example, is fantastic at operating in tight areas, bouncing off players and wriggling away from defenders using his body; techniques learned fighting his way against older boys in street football as a child. Ronaldinho was outstanding with the soles of his feet, improvising in tight areas and using reaction trickery acquired in his futsal background as a child. Zinedine Zidane claims that he learned most of his technique playing in cobbled streets against his friends, his first touch therefore having to be impeccable. Some players receive with the inside of the foot, some turn with the outside, yet others use the bottom of the studs (South Americans in particular). Roberto Martinez speaks of the need for developing players with freedom and expression, putting them in pressurised 'street football' so that they figure their own way of getting through the traffic. He says that coaches should not be prescriptive of how youngsters receive to play forward; *'don't ever say you must receive back foot here, you must receive outside of the foot here. Allow them to find their way.'* The premise here is that the very best players all receive with pressure behind, yet consistently find a way to play forward, in their own individual way.

Defender In Front



This is the classic, crowd pleasing one v one situation where the defender is isolated and the attacker dominates on the inside or outside. This could be done through change of speed, change of direction, unbalancing the defender through skill/trickery or all of these. The key is getting the defender in a position where his weight is transferred onto one foot, he is off balanced or where he has to go through all of the phases: turning phase, acceleration phase then top speed whereas the attacker is already near top speed.

Defender On The Side

This refers to when the player in possession has had a touch upon receiving. His body shape now is side on to the defender, using the arm to protect and maintain distance and hiding the ball often with the front foot (farthest away from the defender). The types of turns used here are to change direction in order to create space to play forward or to circulate play. Common effective turns to negate defenders on the side are the Cruyff turn, inside hook, outside hook, drag back 'V' (Busquets), fake pass step over and the stop turn. This scenario is most frequently used by central midfielders.

Defender On The Covering Angle

This refers to the position when the defender is not set and is approaching the attacker from an angle, commonly when the attacker has already beaten one player. Most teams now set up with a cover and balance mechanism throughout the pitch. Considering midfield, whoever presses should ideally have balance in behind. Once a player has pressed, it follows that if he is beaten then the covering player now presses. His position therefore is coming from a covering angle as opposed to straight on pressing (pressure behind or pressure in front). The most common turn used by the attacker in this situation is the Maradona or Zidane 360 spin. Mesut Ozil is outstanding 1v1 with the defender on the covering angle.

Domination Without The Ball

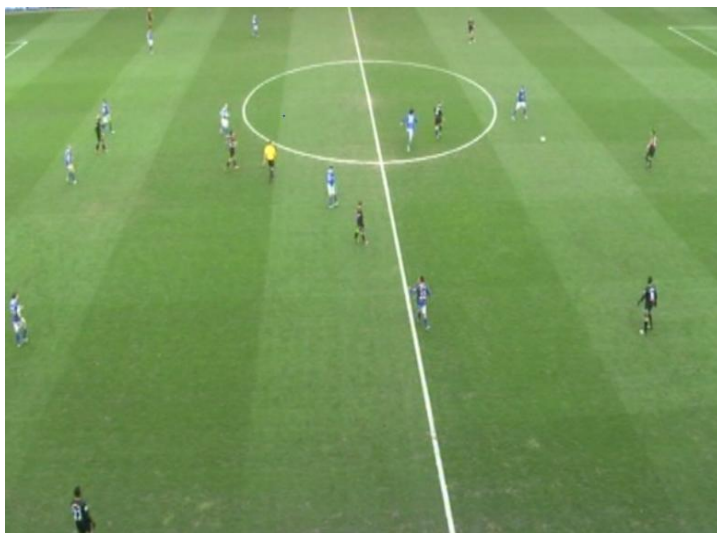
Domination without the ball is absolutely vital, especially when coming against top full backs who can defend well 1v1. Often in the modern game, players have to show quick feet in 1v1 situations because they were not clever enough to create space for themselves in the first place. Movement without the ball is the precursor to receiving. The very elite players are unpredictable without the ball; they keep their opposing player guessing as to whether they will show to feet, whether they will try to play on the shoulder, whether they will start out of the eye line then drop deep or whether they will sprint and make forward runs to break lines. The best players have excellent double movements, meaning that they explode in behind to come short or come short to then explode in behind. When you add one v one domination with the ball to excellent domination one v one without the ball, you have a player that is elite. Cristiano Ronaldo is arguably the best player in the world currently, who can dominate his opponents equally with the ball as without. **Every player should practise frequently (training), mentally rehearse (before games) and analyse (video) which types of pressure they are most likely to be under each game, pertinent to their position (and opposition at elite levels).**



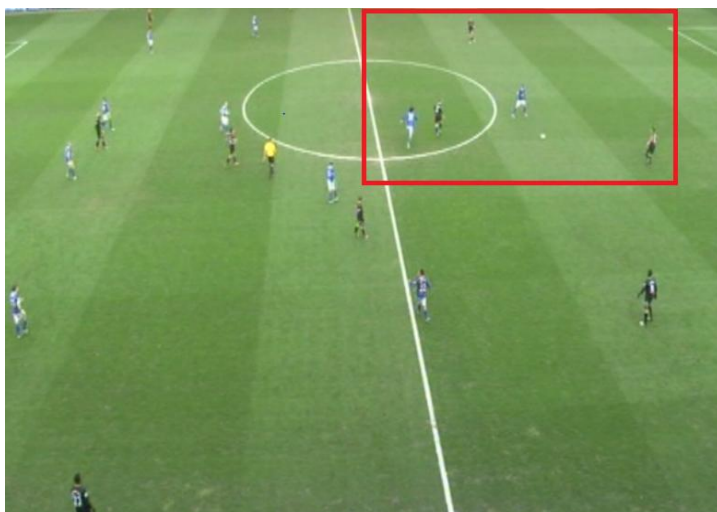
Overloading

The function of overloading is a fundamental part of the game. Pep Guardiola is arguably the world's greatest advocate of overloading the opposition. The simple version of overloading is based around the specific system in place and the principles of that system. For example in a basic form, a 4-4-2 diamond vs a 4-3-3 has a central overload of +1 therefore the former will likely try to dominate and play through the centre of the pitch.

The more complex version of overloading lies with the players. **Players must view the game as small numerical situations in order to gain territory through numerical supremacy; mini games within the game, if you like.** You will hear commentators use phrases like 'play in triangles', 'play give and go's' or 'play with each other'. These do not highlight the actual methods and structure behind overloading. Players have to identify, recognise and exploit 'in the moment'. We speak all the time about '*in the moment*', which refers to players being tactically flexible and not mechanical, predictable and having to be told exactly where to go. They have to see the spaces in the game. To provide more detailed analysis, I have provided some examples:



The picture left shows the black team in possession. They are playing from the back with the opposition (blues) dropping to a medium block. The blues are defending centrally with compactness between the lines. The black team are opening out the pitch expansively, playing with a back three. The space is limited centrally and it is difficult for the centre back in possession to play through the lines.



The figure left shows the exact same freeze frame. The same picture can show recognition from the centre back that there is a 3v2 overload. If the centre back played a horizontal pass it would likely be cut out, thus they are open on the transition. The centre back has played into the deep lying midfielder who will bounce out to the other centre back. This will then shift the two strikers and the whole midfield press. It should

be impossible for the two strikers to win back the ball from three players in approximately 40 yards wide x 25 yards height area. The way I phrase this to players in training (and match analysis sessions) is that if we went on to the training pitch and asked 3 players to keep possession from 2 players in a 40x25 area, the pressing players would never win back possession. Therefore, they need to view the game as mini numerical overloads in order to move, shift and drag out the opposition, not an 11v11 match. It's conceptualisation.

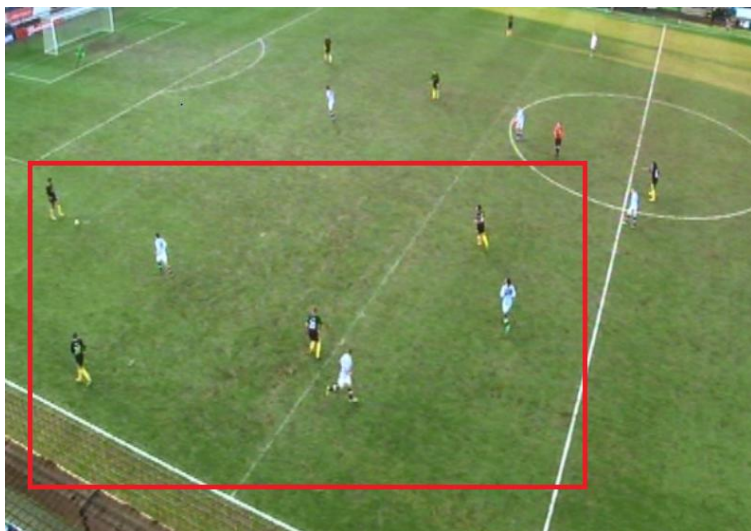


The picture left shows the white team attempting to press high with two strikers, the reds are playing out. The red team's centre backs have split and deep midfielder has dropped in to receive. This is extremely likely to be a 4-3-3 vs 4-4-2. I have seen this situation so many times live at games where the crowd are unhappy and demonstrate their anger at the

team 'messing around at the back' and 'playing stupid football' but there is so much purpose behind this. The bravery of playing from the back, if done effectively, results in time and space higher up the pitch, and, separately, later on in games. It is so hard for teams to press high for 90 minutes. Looking at this scenario as a numerical situation, the red team have a 4v2 situation (with the GK) in approximately 25x60 yard area. The whites should never win possession.



The figure left shows the black team in possession isolated to the right hand side. They are looking to play out in a 4-3-3 setup with the light blues looking to press high in a 3-5-2.



The same freeze frame shows a 4v3 situation in a huge area of the pitch.

It could also be seen as a 2v1 overload (CB, RB) or 3v2 (CB, RB, CM).

The above examples show how overloading can dominate and control opposing teams. The freedom of movement from players will create numerical overloads through tactical flexibility. The players will gain understanding of this through constant movement practices in training and possession games where they have to create an overload. In a possession-based team, players should constantly be thinking in terms of finding the spare man in order to play forward. Trading spaces, reacting to each other and having great awareness/timing of movement are absolutely imperative. To watch the overloading principle at its most prominent and advanced stage(s), view any Pep Guardiola team.

When coaching players in the Foundation ages (9-11years) it is absolutely imperative that a huge part of the process is understanding and dominating 1v1 and 2v1 situations. If players come into Youth Development ages (12-16s) being able to dominate all five one v one situations and control 2v1 scenarios, the patterns are then set (both cognitively and technically) to develop the bigger areas and higher numbers tactically. The principle of dominating 2v1 situations then apply throughout all of the pitch in the 11v11 format, in both moments (counter attacking and in possession domination). From my experience, if players come out of these ages with poor knowledge and ability to dominate 1v1/2v1 situations then the process becomes very difficult.

Counter Attacking (Positive Transition)

The 'transition' refers to the turnover of possession. If one team has possession then they open the pitch out playing with width and depth in order to retain possession and/or play forward. Upon losing possession, they then have to recover their positions to make the pitch narrow and compact. The period in between the two shapes is known as 'the transition'. The transition can be referred to as positive or negative, the former where the team wins possession and the latter where they have just given possession away.

At the very elite level, many games are decided in the transition phase. Jose Mourinho once said "*the transition is the most important phase of football, it is the best time to catch someone out of position*". In the past decade, with players becoming physically stronger and more explosive coupled with the constantly improving defensive compactness, teams are generally much more difficult to break down than in years gone by. Once a team has setup their defensive organisation with relevant distance between and within units, particularly in a low block, clear cut chances are so much harder to create. As a result, the best time to attack and score goal is when the opposition are not organised; in transition. This is known as a 'counter attack'. One third of all goals in the Champions League since 2012 have been scored from counter attacks with them also being the leading source of goals for teams who were in winning situations. The most recent International tournaments had a high prominence of countries closing down high up the pitch, aggression without the ball and condensing the lines. Countries who won games often had less possession but broke at speed after regaining high up the pitch. The types of counter attacks though can be split into the following categories:

The Direct Counter Attack (regained in middle or deep area of the pitch)

This refers to the situation of when the team has won possession and play from back to front early. This scenario will happen when there is space in behind and a forward player is making a run on the shoulder of defenders. Its most common scenario is against a possession-based team who have progressed their way up the pitch and have not narrowed off or dropped upon the turnover.

From a High Regain

This refers to a point in play when the team have been pressing high up the pitch and have regained possession. The opposition are out of shape/balance and there are spaces to exploit. In the 2010 World Cup, Germany were fantastic at this.

Collective

Here, I am citing a situation in which the team have won possession and progress their way through the pitch quickly with fast combinations and passing sequences. Its most common scenario is when a team has played through the lines and a player has opened up and drives up the pitch with the back line ahead of him with runners going in behind.

The construction of a counter attack actually begins when the opponent is in possession. Teams will set up defensively, retreating or pressing certain areas of the pitch in anticipation of a counter attack. They will designate specific players to press more than others, will set traps tactically, will leave certain players ahead of the ball and will try to make the opposition play into a particular area with the purpose of regaining and countering. Players should be aware of which areas of the pitch the opposition are vulnerable - in terms of spaces left, specific weaknesses of individuals, disorganisation, numerical disadvantages or common patterns observed. Players should be looking for potential areas for success before the opponents get organised (this time period is on average 4-6 seconds). In terms of the team's own principles upon winning possession, its first response should be to have a mindset of always going forward (maintain momentum as backwards passes allow for recovery). This should include forward runs to support the ball carrier, early decisions, awareness of the movements ahead of the ball and the quality of the final pass, cross or shot. Steve McClaren speaks of the first pass importance upon winning possession from a deep defensive block *"the nature of a counter attack means that your team have defended compactly without the ball and have regained it. The first pass therefore can afford to be risky as your team is generally already behind the ball. Whoever regains the ball can really risk that first pass in behind or through the lines as really, there is no risk as you are not out of balance if it is not successful"*.

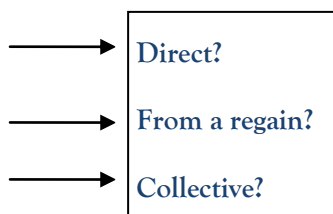
Under Guardiola, Barcelona work on a principle that the person who has regained possession must offload immediately. The theory was based around their defensive principles of working extremely intensely to press the ball. The player who wins back possession has the worst awareness on the pitch as he has been focusing so much on getting the ball back (head down, one focus); he has absolutely no awareness of the pictures around him. He must thus offload it to another player who has better vision and perception of the pitch. The idea here is to move the ball away from pressure if the counter attack is not on, thus building and circulating again.

Interestingly, there is a theory influenced heavily by Johan Cruyff, that the transitions actually should not exist. Cruyff says that Barcelona were so successful under Pep Guardiola because they were rarely in transition. They perceive transition as 'wasted time'. His theory is based around their principles in possession; they tried to play the majority of their game in the opposition's half, overloaded the central areas of the pitch and had high numbers ahead of the ball. These principles meant that upon the turnover, they were all within close proximity to press the ball and cut off the immediate passing options available to the opposition.

To summarise it in its most basic format, my personal philosophy (in possession only) looks like this:

POSSESSION GAINED

Counter Attack?



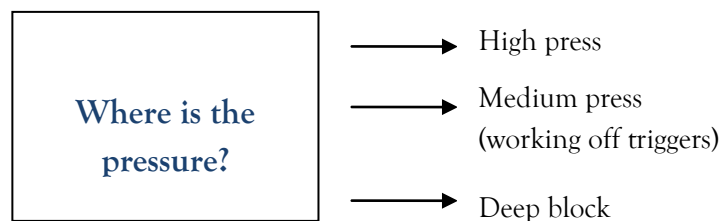
TECHNICAL

Half turn receiving
 First touch to go forward
 Forward passes with variety and accuracy
 Line breaking passes
 Dribbles
 Dominate 1v1 situations defender in front
 Types of finish (all)

TACTICAL

8 seconds to goal
 Crossruns
 Forward runs
 Overload situations 2v1, 3v1, 3v2, 4v2, 4v3
 Intensity in decisions, runs & movement
 Speed
 Always vertical run to stretch defenders

Build?



Establish receiving lines
 Which one?

Dominate One v One Situations

- In front
- On Side
- Behind
- On Angle
- Without ball

Create Overloads

- Where?
- How?
- Who?

MOVEMENT & ROTATION

- React to others
- Possess tactical flexibility
- Find the spaces
- Move and drag the press
- Develop individual awareness

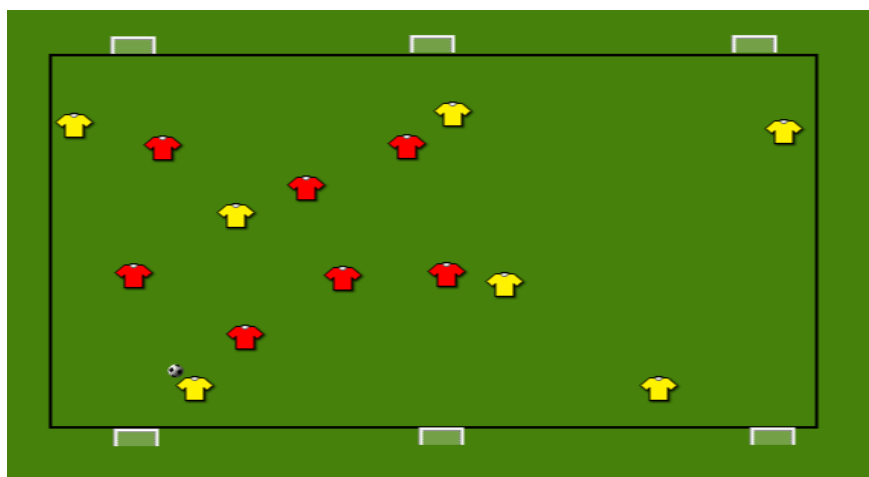
Sessions

Possession, Small Sided Games, Shape

"The most difficult teams to play against are those who move the ball across the pitch. It saps your legs. They probe, probe, probe and make you lose concentration then kill you with that vertical pass. Barcelona were the masters"

Gary Neville

Switching Play, Circulation and Recognition of Pressure Areas



6 goals, 3 at each end

Pitch is wide but not long

Format is 5v5 up to 11v11

Teams score by passing into one of the small goals. Yellows defend one end whilst reds defend the other. The shape of the pitch (wide) dictates that the players have to create space horizontally and circulate play as there is limited space through the lines vertically.

In the diagram above, yellows have possession with reds defending.

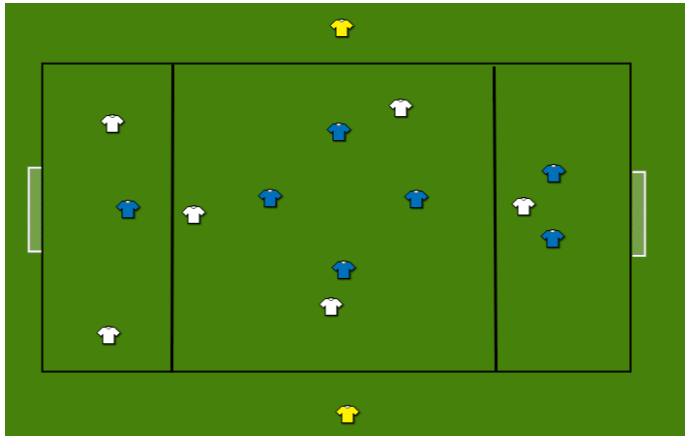
The principles of team in possession are width and depth, angles centrally and good decisions in possession. The yellows are looking to score in one of the goals and thus have to figure out which is the best goal to attack. Players have to recognise where the opposition is pressing constantly. They have to have good awareness of the opposition, checking continually and knowing the pictures as the ball is travelling. They need to consistently think in terms of – where is the space?

Ball circulation (transferring laterally) is imperative in order to shift the press. Rest in possession and keep the opposition running. Once the reds start sliding, pressing and covering for long periods then the spaces will begin to appear in between, as they lose concentration. Players **MUST** make movements against the direction of circulation to create space – opposing players focus on the ball sliding laterally in their unit(s). Starting movements out of the eyeline of opposing players and in the opposite direction to the circulation are so hard to defend against.

There has to be a high technical emphasis on passing, playing safe side, first touches away from pressure, quick decisions, one touch play, back foot receiving and patience in deep areas to drag the reds out if they sit deep.

Switches of play are done through long passes, clever angles in behind when wide players are pressed, coming out of pressed areas to go around the back and defender on the side turns to change the direction of play.

Circulation, Switching Play and Patience in Possession



Three zones

2v1 (CB vs CF) both ends with GK

3v4 (Trio v Diamond) centrally (underload vital)

Coach the white team

Floating players on the outside (yellows)

The goalkeepers or coaches are in goal to play out. The focus of the session is to make the white team patiently circulate possession, searching for the right opportunity to progress. To begin, players can only play in their respective zones.

Whites begin in possession. The first thought of the two centre backs should be to split as wide as possible, creating a 3v1 (with the goalkeeper/coach) to play from the back. This is a common scenario faced on game day with lots of teams pressing with one striker (4-3-3, 4-2-3-1), giving you the first pass and looking to isolate the press down one side. The centre backs must be comfortable receiving; if the striker gets across to prevent forward passes then they must understand the need for patience by using the goalkeeper to go back the other way. A striker should not steal possession 1 vs 3.

The midfielders work on the movement principles that the coach desires. These may change for each game depending on the opposition; the specifics would take pages to document, and are for a later submission. In short, they need to play on three different lines, both horizontally and vertically, react to each other to find space, rotate and interchange, open their shoulders out to see both goals and drag the opposing unit out of cover and balance.

In the above session, the whites are outnumbered centrally, thus they need to recognise that the spaces are wide. Ball circulation therefore is the key. Switches of play (long passes, change of direction, turns and playing backwards to circulate fast) are so important. Taking multiple touches and slowing the game down centrally play into the opposition's strengths of having an overload. Wingers need to show clever angles and movement to receive, with midfielders dropping deep on the angle as well as centre backs, when wide players are pressed.

PROGRESSIONS – a couple of basic principles I generally use...

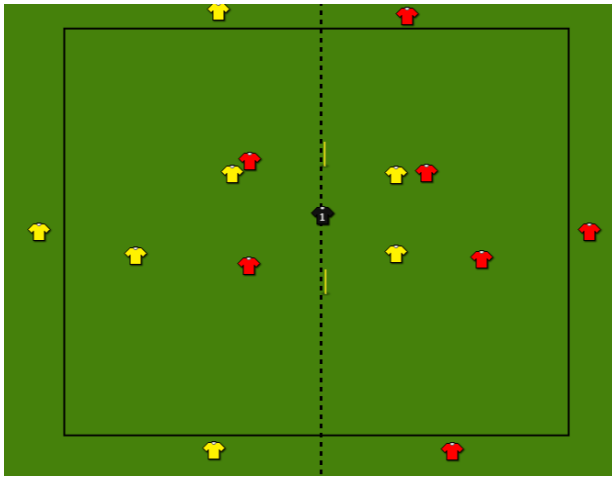
One defender can overload into midfield, driving out with the ball. When they do so, it is vital that midfielders make movements away from the ball on the blind side of the opposing midfielders. If they come towards the ball (often happens), then the opposing midfielders can mark them whilst being able to also press the centre back. If the midfielders go away from the ball then the opposition has a decision to make: do we press the centre back and leave our man or do we drop? The team in possession then begin to dictate and control the spaces.

Depending on the principles of the team, the striker can drop in as a false nine to create a 4v4 situation. When this happens it is important that both wingers provide the height now as wide forwards (Barcelona) otherwise the central zone becomes congested with no penetration and opposing back line can steal yards higher.

Wide players can come inside but not both at the same time. They need to be educated on when to do this and when to provide width. Also focus on the types of deliveries from them and relevant movements in the box.

Promote forward, line breaking runs from midfielders and quick combinations with the 9 in and around the box.

Circulation, Switching Play and Types Of Finish



Area size dependent upon the numbers

Poles in the centre for a goal that can be used both ways (no netting)

Goalkeeper in middle for both teams

7v7 game in this diagram

The game is continuous, intense and extremely competitive.

The session can focus on virtually any tactical theme – circulation, rotation of movement, switching play, movement from wide players, movement from a front two or three, when to come in off the sides, width and depth on the turnover, compactness defending etc.

This specific session focuses on circulation of play to free a 9 or 10. The basic structure is that the yellows can only score through the centre goal from left to right. The reds can only score from right to left. The players on the outside cannot come inside the pitch.

If the yellows are in possession on the left side, the farthest player acts as a left winger; the opposite side is the right winger with the player on the left a central midfielder. The two yellows in the middle are two strikers who must combine to score against the two reds. The game is 2v2 inside the pitch but the two strikers can bounce outside players thus they are 5v2 in possession. The two reds defend the goal and if they win possession, they must show a range of pass to find any teammate on the opposite half. The reds then attack in the same format.

If a goal is scored or shot goes wide/over, the game continues, hence the ball turns over to the opposite team on the other side. If the goalkeeper saves, he distributes to the team who did not have possession (real to the game).

AREAS TO FOCUS ON

Coach circulation around the midfielders to shift the defence and create spaces centrally for verticality.

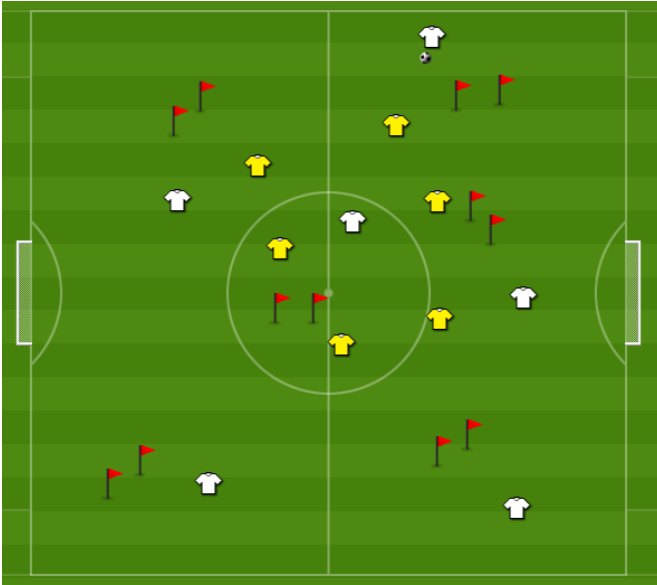
Demand dynamic movements from the strikers, reacting to each other playing on opposite movements to drag the centre backs apart. Defenders want to defend in a compact and balanced manner so drag them into areas they are uncomfortable with. Encourage different types of finishes from strikers – one touch from crosses, headers, angled shots, from a dribble, combinations as a two, volleys, rebounds etc.

Look for different types of crosses from wide players – head up, recognition of the striker's movement(s).

PROGRESS

***One or two players can overload on the inside areas from wide positions. The players have to identify which is the best player to overload, whether this be a midfielder joining in centrally, a winger coming on the inside or opposite winger coming back post for a cross. Here, wingers can play opposite side and develop their cutting inside moves to finish (Ronaldo).

Recognition of Pressure and Quick Thinking



Area size dependent upon the numbers

Poles or cones spread out randomly throughout the pitch

Poles two yards apart

Teams should be evenly matched ideally but for squads who are finding it difficult to retain possession, use overloads of +1 or + 2

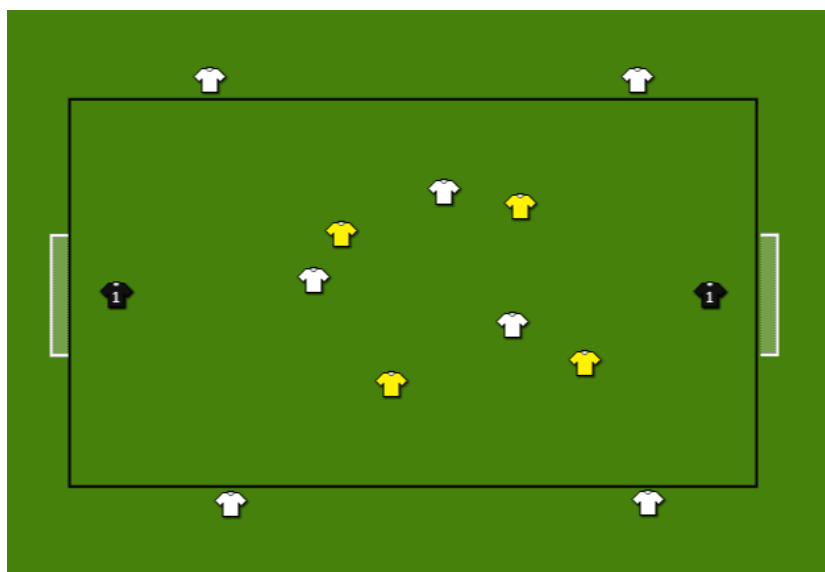
Have goalkeepers preferably in each goal but the gates (flags) are randomly spread throughout the pitch.

Teams score in the goals as a normal game but must retain possession using width, depth, rotation and clever movements. Encourage reacting to each other in order to retain the principles.

Teams get a point for dribbling or passing through a gate, two points for a normal goal. First to 15 points wins, or 4 minute games.

Players should constantly be thinking: Where is the spare gate?

Midfield Rotation (whites). Pressing and Countering (yellows)



Area very tight

Goalkeepers in each goal

Four yellow players (press and counter)

Whites on outside are relevant positions to GK (centre backs or full backs)

Whites in middle are central midfield three

Session is two directional.

White team have four players on the outside and work on retention only – keep possession, use both goalkeepers and play through the central midfield three. The whites on the outside are viewed as realistic positions to the game, thus if the GK has the ball, the deeper two are centre backs who have split or full backs with the higher then two wingers or strikers.

Outside players are restricted to one/two touches and can bounce the goalkeeper. They work on constantly feeding the midfield three in central areas (real to game).

Goalkeepers work with both feet, switching play off the back foot, coming out of pressed areas and playing through lines (recognition of deep lying player dropping in or higher lines depending upon the pressure).

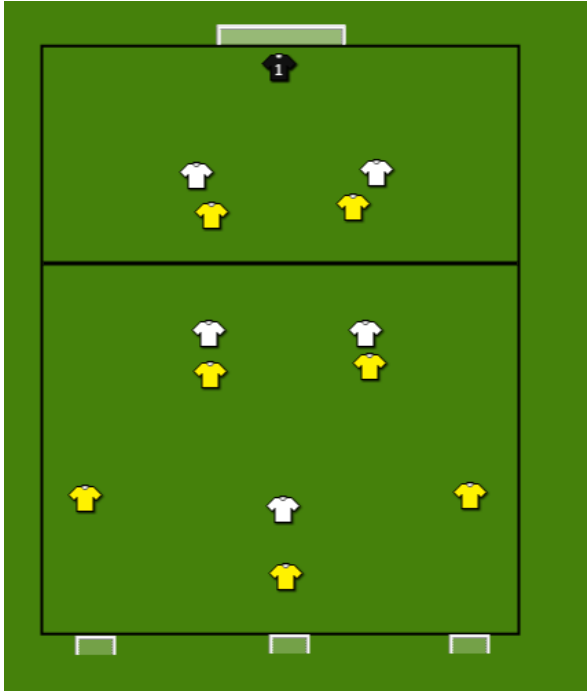
Midfield three work on reacting to each other, playing on different lines, on receiving techniques, one touch play around corners, and body shape when ball is with full backs (outside players are viewed in real match patterns).

The yellow team press and if they win possession, are 4v3 to goal. Outside players cannot come inside. Yellows score in either goal. Yellows can press goalkeeper and outside players and must close the lines together, showing narrowness, compactness and intensity/aggression in the press. Try to isolate whites into one corner (realistic to the game) as white outside players cannot play to each other. The pressing intensity can be established, i.e. when to close lines and what are the triggers to press?

This is a great game for a midfield three and defenders to develop quick and realistic decisions. Progress to outside can play to outside thus if a right back is in possession, he can play forward down the line to what would be a right winger or crossfield diagonal to what would be a left winger or striker on the diagonal far shoulder.

The tempo of this session is the key, both in and out of possession.

Developing Movement of the Front Two



Big area, two zones, players stay in respective zones

Large goal at one end with three smaller goal at the other

2v2 in the top zone (centre backs against strikers)

5 v 3 in favour of the yellows in bottom zone

The 5v3 in the bottom zone represents realism to the game. The yellows setup as three defenders (centre backs or full backs) as the bottom three with two midfielders ahead.

The whites setup as two defenders in the top zone, two screening midfielders, then one striker high.

The coach begins by feeding the yellow defenders. They must find a forward pass with the priority being the top zone strikers. Vary the pass, depending on the screening midfielder's positions – driven through the lines, lofted over the press, reverse if in wide areas, disguised, bounce the CM to drag screeners out etc.

The yellow midfield two, vary their movement to shift the screeners defensive structure.

Once the build up play and patterns have been established, the strikers must work different types of movement to create opportunities at goal. Coaches will work on their specific philosophy here. I personally work on a few general principles:

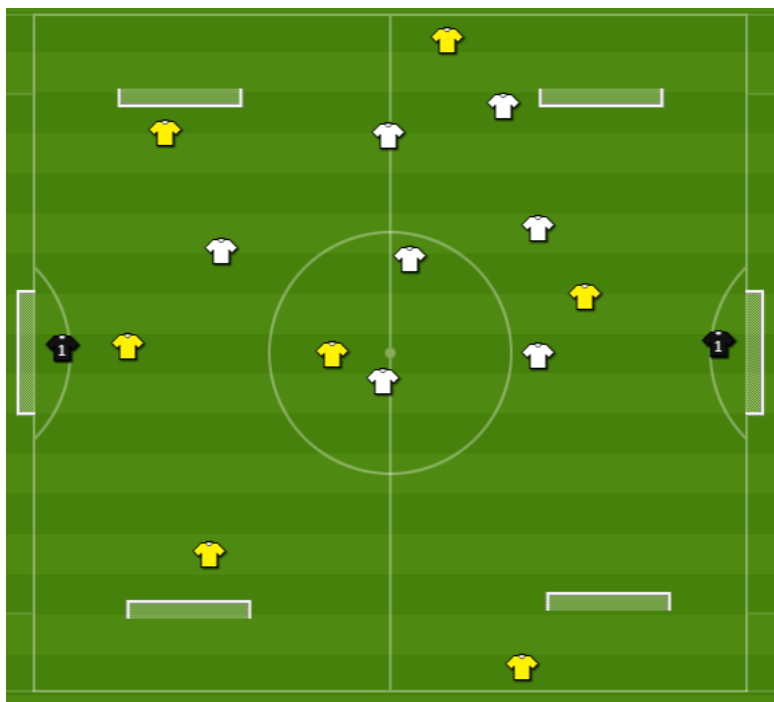
INDIVIDUAL ...

- Late and explosive movements to get in behind
- Dragging of defender deep to spin in behind
- Specifics that the individual needs or is strong at
- Laziness on the build up then trigger for movement when the player in possession gets his head up
- Pinning and retaining in 1v1 situations (pressure behind)

AS A TWO...

- Opposite movements, reacting to each other
- One player to drag defender deep or laterally creating space for the other to spin in behind
- Combinations as a two (around corners, support in front if pressed, combine with midfielders etc)

Circulation and Playing With A False Nine



Area relative to number of players

Two main goals with goalkeepers in

Four goals spread 4 yards from touchline facing the touchline. Poles are best to use if available

Game is even numbers minimum of 5v5 – 11v11

This game is very popular with South American coaches, particularly Chilean teams.

The set up is extremely simple. Normal rules, no conditions.

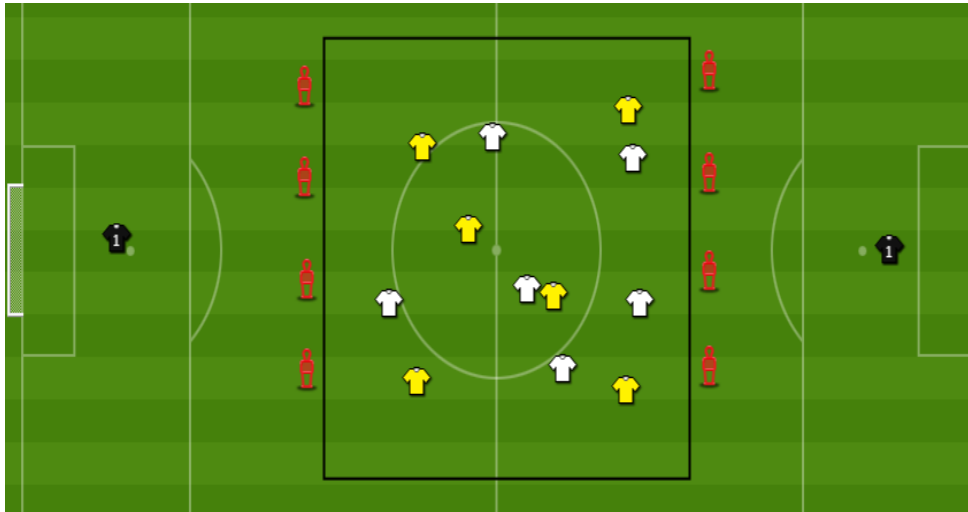
The team in possession play with width and depth; team out of possession work on defensive philosophy (press high, work off triggers or deep block). Yellows score two points by going directly to the big goal with the goalkeeper in OR one point on the side goals in the opposition's half. They cannot score in the side goals in their own half.

The side goals encourage width, circulation, 2nd/3rd line passes and switches of play.

The shape can focus on full backs giving maximum height upon the turnover of possession, wingers staying wide with a false 9 dropping in or one winger staying wide on the side of the ball (asymmetry). The setup really encourages wingers to stay high and wide when the 9 drops in as they get success through the side goals. The 9 can go roaming onto deeper lines to drag defenders out.

It also develops individual techniques of turning defender on the side to change direction of play, long diagonals, going backwards to go forwards and early passes through lines from GK and centre backs. Players need to recognise where the pressure is.

Developing Midfield Runners Who Break Lines – Break The Five Channels



Area size dependent upon numbers

Possession box in middle area

Mannequins setup outside of central possession box

Must be space in behind the mannequins both sides

Goalkeepers both goals

Possession on the inside, whites go one way and yellows the other.

When one team has made 5 passes, it can play a pass in behind for a midfielder to break the line to receive and go 1v1 vs goalkeeper. No defensive runner can recover past the mannequins.

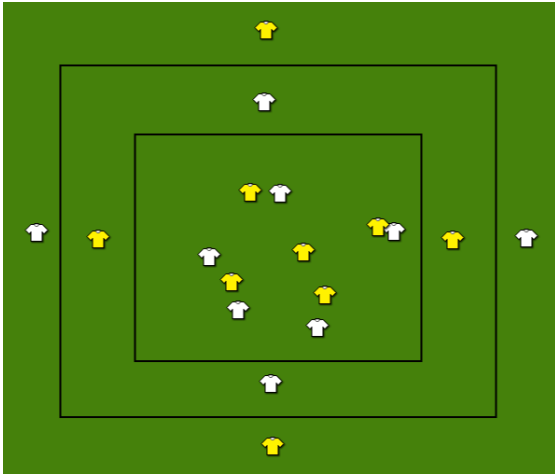
Promotes the timing of movement, anticipation of the forward pass by reading body shape, double movements to spin in behind, explosive movements once no pressure is on the ball and man in possession gets his head up, penetrate the five channels (in between and around the back four) through different types of movement etc.

The session is great for developing and encouraging players to run in behind as opposed to feet.

Progress the session, depending on how much success the players achieve. Change the number of passes or bring in one defender behind the mannequins who feeds players in possession through depth in behind, but also defends in behind on the turnover.

The midfielder runners can now increase to two creating 2v1's to goal. The session then can develop into counter attacking as one player can recover into the defending zone.

Line Breaking Passes and Developing The Screening Midfielder



There is a small box central with 5v5 inside

There is another box around that with two players from each team with a side each.

There is a final area outside that with two players again from each team on a side each.

The session looks to incorporate a complicated set up but this isn't the case.

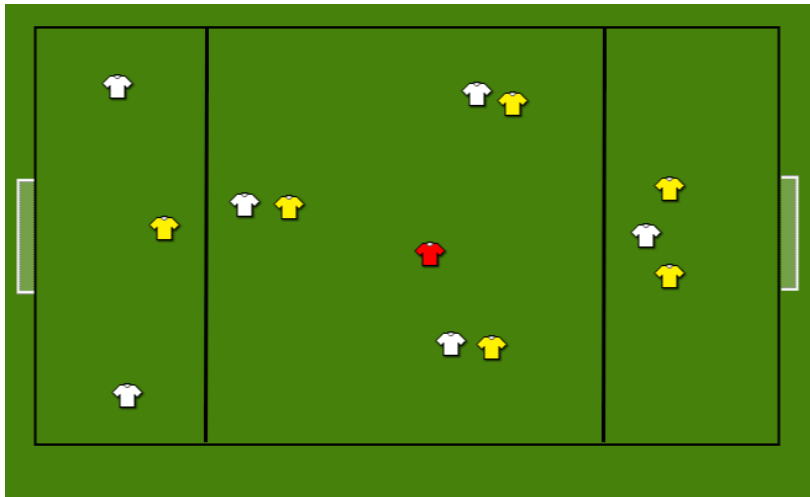
In short, the players in the central zone are keeping possession 5v5 (or higher numbers if required). Their aim is to pass to the far outside player on their team and receive back again. The difficulty is that the middle zone players are in positions where they are screening passes. The far outside players must give constant angles to receive in accordance with the pictures that are happening centrally. The middle zone players will keep checking their shoulders to stop passes and check movement to block the line thus double movements and timing movement when the screener is looking at the ball – are vital.

The middle zone players must constantly get their body between the ball and the outside player and check their shoulders for the movement of the outside player (screening centre midfielder checking for movement of the striker(s) in a game). Once an outside player has played through the lines, they must twist their hips quickly, turn and press screening off the pass back into the middle.

If the central players play to the far outside and receive back again, they get a point. This is a great game for constant angles, looking for space and developing screening players.

The game can be progressed to bringing in goals on the outside with goalkeepers in each. The goalkeepers work on their communication to the middle screening players of the movement of the striker ('right shoulder, left shoulder' etc).

Playing Out Of Pressure Zones OR Establishing The Press



Three zones

Two goals with GK or small goals

3v3 centrally

Floater in middle zone

The session is a normal three zone game. 2v1 either side to play out with a 3v3 centrally.

Teams work on playing out of pressure areas when underloaded.

The floater is used as an extra defender as opposed to an extra attacker in possession.

This can be used specifically for individuals who are struggling with their pressing techniques, application or fitness.

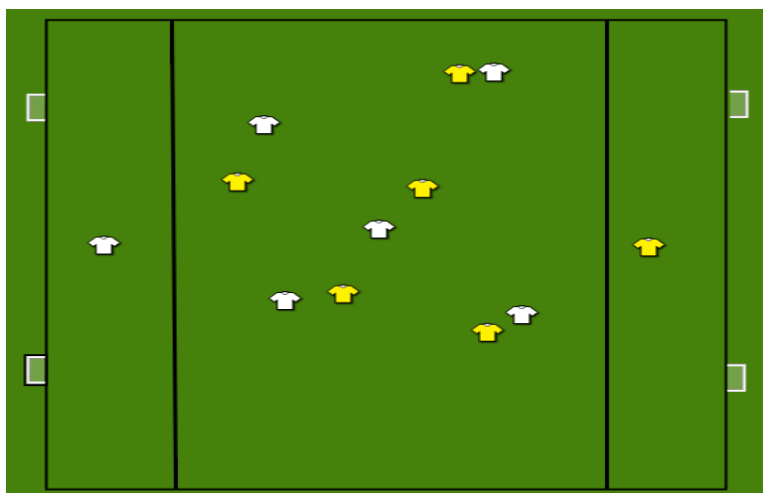
The game must be for short periods due to the intensity of pressing and physical demands.

The floater can be placed in any zone and can be more than one.

Players gain confidence in establishing the press as they get lots of success of shutting down the lines and pressing high flooding the opposition's half.

Show into predictable areas, touchlines, quarter up the pitch etc.

Playing Off The Number 9



Three zones

The end zones are narrow areas (3-5 yards)

Small goals on the outside, no goalkeepers

5v5 minimum centrally

This session is used at all levels but is very effective.

The 5v5 centrally retain possession.

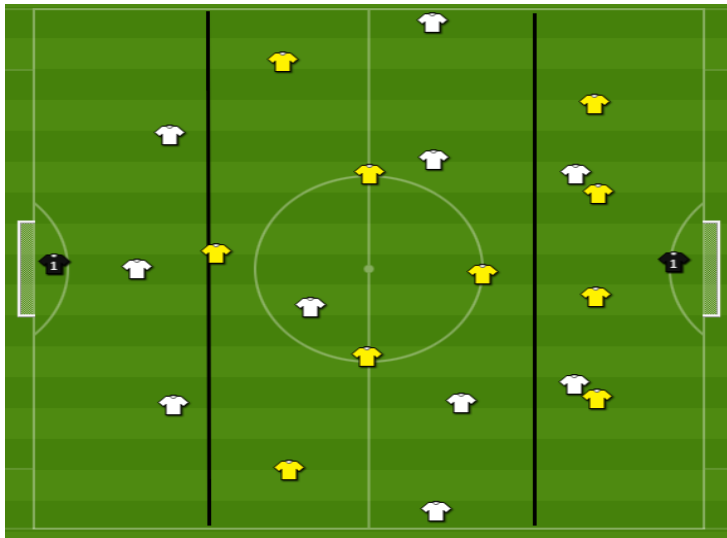
One striker plays in the end zone and can move laterally anywhere in that zone.

The team in possession only score one way but must bounce off the striker before scoring. This encourages quick passes through the lines, clever angles from the strikers and third man midfield runners as the ball is played through to the 9.

Quick combinations with and off the 9.

The session can also be used to play with depth behind the ball, the 9 being a centre back instead. Teams therefore get a free pass backwards for pressure relief and success in establishing circulation.

Three Zone Shape Game (3-5-2 system)



Three zones

Two goals with goalkeepers

8v8 – 11v11 (any numbers)

This game involves a three zone setup to establish specific principles of the chosen system of the team. It is adaptable with any system but the three zones specifically focus on the responsibility and roles of positions in possession.

The diagram above shows the whites in a 3-5-2 against the 4-3-3 of the yellows. The movements of a 4-3-3 are well documented with many teams playing it. The above diagram works on the whites 3-5-2 principles. These will change dependent on the coach, I personally use this session to establish these good responses, reactions and habits:

Centre backs split as wide as possible with the security of the extra central defender. If pressed by one striker, they have 4v1 in their opening zone to play out. In this scenario, the centre back can overload in midfield with a higher start position; the Busquets role under Guardiola. The midfield three then play much higher in the game.

The wing backs go as high as possible into the third zone and pin back the opposition full backs. This creates a 4v4 on the 5th receiving line (yellow back four against two wing backs and two strikers) thus the back four can get dragged apart and dislodged easily (4x 1v1's).

There is now a 3v3 centrally and the rotation of the trio can be wider than normal because there is extra width/space due to aggressiveness of the wing backs/pinning of opposition's full backs.

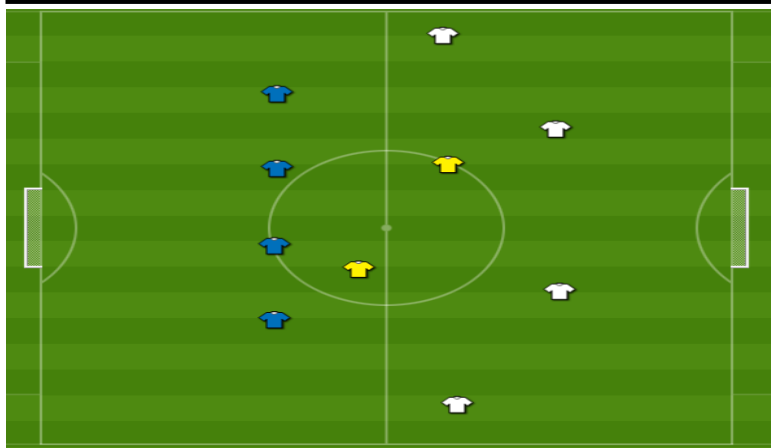
The method of overloading and playing out will now depend on the positioning of the yellow wingers. If they press the three centre backs in zone one, the goalkeeper can play 2nd/3rd line passes into the centre midfielders or wing backs can drop down a line to receive as opposing full backs are reluctant to press so high up. If the yellow wingers drop into the midfield zones to help out the central three (likely once they have been played through a few times in games) then one of the centre backs now ALWAYS drive out with the ball and overload centrally.

One of the white midfielders can make forward line breaking runs or have very high positioning so the system looks more like a 3-2-1-4 and is extremely aggressive (excuse the 'bingo' numbers here).

This is a system that can control and dictate the spaces through bravery in deep areas. If the opposition press high and patience in deep areas is shown to play through the press, there are lots of spaces/numbers in higher areas of the pitch to operate and exploit. The flexibility/composure of the back three in possession is very important. They must always recognise how many strikers the opposition is playing with and never have +2 (use the Bielsa extra man at the back principle). Three defenders against one striker means that the side is underloaded somewhere else.

The benefit of the 3-5-2 system is that the team can play with two strikers, whilst retaining aggressive width and never be outnumbered centrally yet rarely open on the turnover centrally with the extra centre back (like 4-3-3).

Back Four In and Out of Possession



Area size is just over half a pitch (full width advised for realistic distances)

Two back fours line up (could also work with one full midfield unit if squad does not have enough defenders)

No goalkeepers

Two centre midfielders (or three) in yellow

This session works the back four(s) movement, shape, techniques of switching play, angles to receive and their transition in and out of shape. Both teams line up with their players in relevant positions – RB-CB-CB-FB

The whites begin with possession. Full backs push high and wide, centre backs split to approximately the corners of the box but approx 5 yards higher. The white left back begins in possession. The white left centre back gives depth in behind for the switch of play around ‘the horse shoe’. The right centre back splits around width of the box with the right back narrowing off around five yards ahead of the right centre back. The right back does not give maximal height and width as the ball is on the opposite side thus needs to be ready to cover on the turnover.

The left back begins by dribbling forward then putting on a turn (Cruyff, inside hook or outside hook) and then plays backwards to the left centre back. As soon as the left back puts on a turn and body shape shapes up to play backwards, the right back now gives width then height, in that order. The trigger for the switch of play around the back is the body shape of the left back. The whites then circulate the ball around the back four with the same shape in reverse. The whites should focus on back foot receiving, opening their body out to come out of tight areas, fast ground passes through the centre of the ball and quick decisions to do so. Slow circulation results in the opposition sliding over in a game thus the focus is FAST CIRCULATION in order to free someone up on the opposite side.

Whilst the whites are circulating, the blues (other back four) act as if they are defending in a real game. They must become compact (10 yards between each defender), have a high line which is relative in distance to the ball (top teams will be between 20-25 yards from the ball, high enough to get pressure on from advanced players but deep enough to not be played in behind), slide laterally with the ball etc.

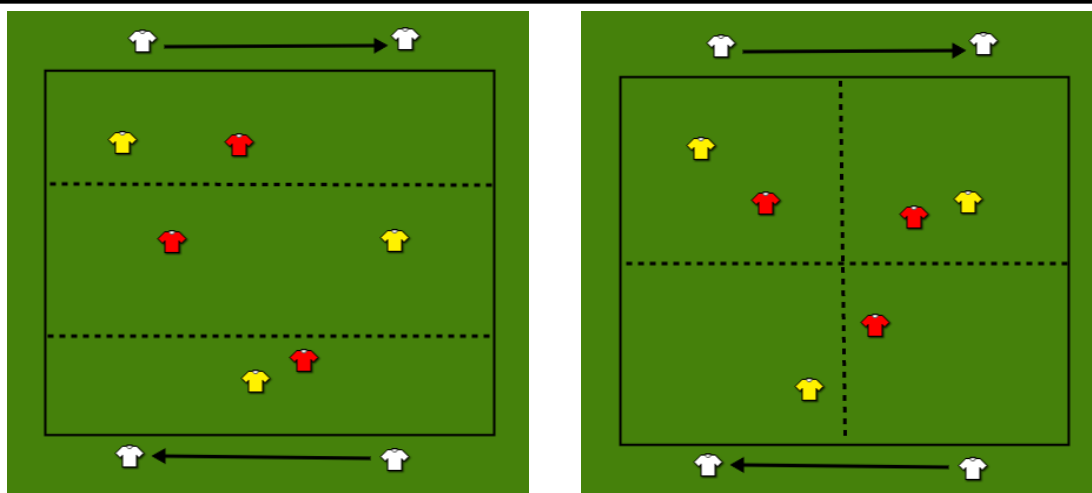
The whites turn the ball over to the blues, either after a set amount of passes or on the coaches’ call. The blues now drop out on positive transition to retain in horse shoe shape, the white now act as a defensive unit.

Whilst the circulation and defensive principles are working from both teams, the yellow two centre midfielders show on opposite angles to receive. Here, the angles and principles of the midfielders can be established. They can either bounce the defenders to retain possession OR the coach can demand that the centre mids can switch play to the opposite back four when they decide. Now, the back fours are reacting to triggers from the midfielders (see the open body and intent to either play back or open out) establishing realistic pictures to the game.

PROGRESSION

The yellows now press the back four and if they win possession they rest (motivation). Here, more yellows can be on the side waiting to rotate, the number of yellows can increase or the yellows can have two or three in each half pressing a four. The session can also include a centre midfielder with the back four playing against a defensive three thus creating 5v3 in possession. The variables are down to the coach and how much success the defenders are getting.

Central Midfield Rotation Principles



The session can be set up in either of the two practices above. The basic premise is two whites on the outsides, top and bottom, represent two centre backs and two strikers as targets. There is a 3v3 centrally all of whom are centre midfielders. The starting midfield three in a game must play together to establish mutual understanding of movements, timings, patterns, techniques and combinations.

The whites play on, whichever team has possession. The idea of the game is to receive and play forward to the targets, both ways. Players must individually focus on receiving back foot to play through lines when possible, finding space, reacting to each other, double movements to dominate 1v1 without the ball, play on three different receiving lines, always show angles to receive, starting movements out of the eye line of defenders so they cannot see both ball and player, drop in/make movement when the opposing player turns his head to look at the ball, find a position receiving where if the ball is played the player can open out in one touch and play forward - there is no point finding space if the opposing players can make up the distance on the press as the ball travels. The messages from the coach should always be in terms of teams thinking in receiving lines, different angles and priority of playing forward. The details are then down to the individual coach about what he specifically wants - this will change game to game (opposition based).

BASIC ROTATION PRINCIPLES

If a midfielder plays a backwards pass to the centre backs, he is doing so because he is pressed. Any set back to centre backs, therefore, **MUST** be preceded by a rotation (setting player spins out) unless there is a really obvious space to give an angle, shuffling backwards and thus creating a 2v1 to play forward. The other rotation principles will lie in the coach's philosophy and what the opposition do - it would take too long for me to document all of these specific instances.

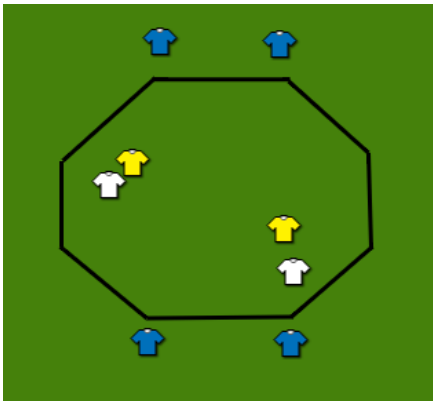
PROGRESSIONS

Players have to be represented in different boxes (right diagram) and cannot have two attacking players in one box, defensive team have no restrictions. This condition encourages playing with rotation. Players have to be represented in all different layers of the pitch vertically in the left diagram. This condition encourages multiple receiving lines.

The centre backs on the outside must play a lateral pass to each other before playing back centrally. This lateral pass replicates two centre backs playing around the horse shoe (principles of previous session). A square pass from centre backs is a trigger for rotation, thus whichever the deepest centre midfielder is, must now make a vertical movement onto the next line as one of the higher midfielders drop down a line to receive (it is too far for the deepest player to now sprint across 30 yards to receive, so the triangle just flips around). This is why it is vital to have tactically flexible players who can receive and play both under, and ahead of the ball and capable of receiving in all types of pressure.

Upon rotation, the player who is deepest and spinning out must do so into the traffic (into the bodies and pressure). By rotating into the pressure, he will likely take the highest pressing player with him, even momentarily, thus creating space for a movement from a higher midfielder to receive.

Rotation As A Two (Team Receiving & Movement Principles)



This session aims to establish the same principles as the previous one. In my opinion, this is the best session in the manual and one I use on a regular basis at all ability levels. It establishes core receiving, movement and decisions required in every position. The players must understand that this session's principles apply everywhere on the pitch. The blues represent any position playing forward to any other position on the pitch.

There are two target players in blue, either side, with a 2v2 in the middle.

The shape of the pitch produces very tight situations. The line with the two targets (bottom and top) is 12 yards in length, the distance from the two ends is also 12 yards with the diagonal lines 3-4 yards long. These measurements are important.

The game is 2v2 with players looking to receive open shoulders, back foot, play through lines etc.

The two middle players who lose possession have to narrow off on the turnover because blues can play straight through to the other blues thus they must prevent this when possible (NB, the priority in a game is to keep the ball in front of you). This also works on when to screen and when to press from a defensive point of view.

The shape of the area dictates specific principles in possession:

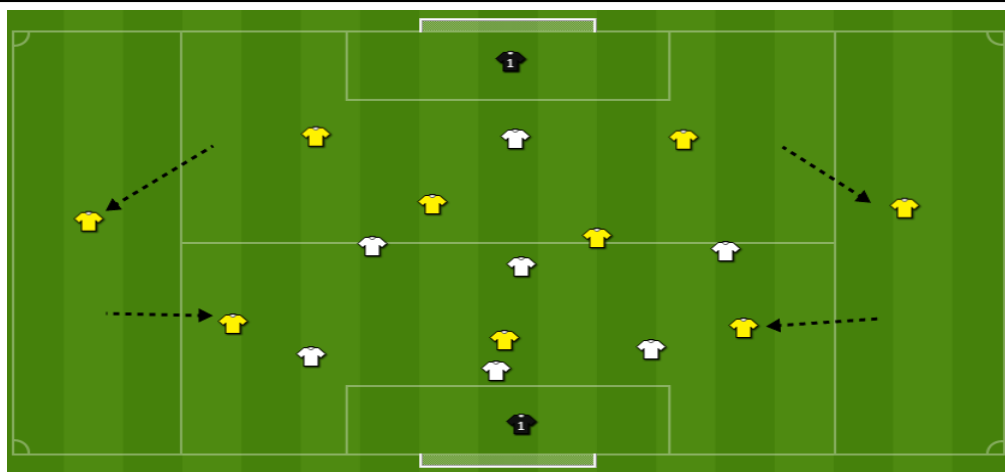
- Do not receive in a straight line, see both players
- Players have to play on opposite movements and react to each other
- Play on two different lines, never be on the same one vertically
- Play around corners and support, move on the blind side of the defender as his head turns to look at the ball – create 2v1 higher
- Players have to drop out on angles when the deeper player has possession as that is where the space (and pitch) is set

PROGRESSION

POSITION SPECIFIC: The two blues have to play a square pass before playing back centrally. This now is a trigger for rotation. From a tactical point of view, when play looks to circulate around the two defenders, can a midfielder start on the opposite side and drop out on the angle wider than the centre back. All top midfielders at the elite level now do this as it drags opposing midfielders into wider areas and also allows aggressive height for the full back.

- Players have to play on one touch (make decisions before ball is at their feet thus increasing awareness and increasing the tempo)
- Players have to play on two touches (not one or three) this dictates that players always have to take their touch away from pressure, again increasing awareness of where the pressure is
- All in to finish. See if the players now know when to use one touch, two touch, receive away from pressure or dominate 1v1

Full Back(s)/Wide Player (s) Relationship/Beating Teams Down The Sides



Two zone game with wide pitch. Two channels either side of the pitch approximately 8 yards in width.

Goalkeepers both goals. Yellows play 4-2-3 (replicates 4-3-3 without a 10), whites play 3-3-1 (replicates 4-3-3 without extra full back to get across and wingers to stop full backs progressing). The system and numbers can be adapted, depending on the coach's philosophy and system in place. To begin however, the opposition need to play a narrow shape to give the yellow players success of the principles.

Coach works with the yellow team. The back four begin inside the top zone, as soon as the GK gets possession they expand/open the pitch up/give width (however the coach phrases it) – full backs disperse wide then high into the outside zones (width, THEN height is important as width stretches opposition and passes can be played in front). The GK and centre backs now have 3v1 to play out as the whites drop into the bottom zone to defend 3-3. Wingers also give maximal width and height to really open up the pitch.

Goalkeeper now works on first line pass or second line driven to full backs.

The idea of the game is to give success to the full backs and wingers. To begin with, no defenders can go in the outside zones to give confidence to full backs combining with winger – play and overlap if winger is in off the line, if winger is wide then underlap and support from behind if winger has space and looks to deliver early.

PROGRESS QUICKLY TO ENSURE REALISM

One white defender can go out to stop/prevent/defend crosses. Isolate different types of 2v1 scenarios and highlight where the full back should support and when.

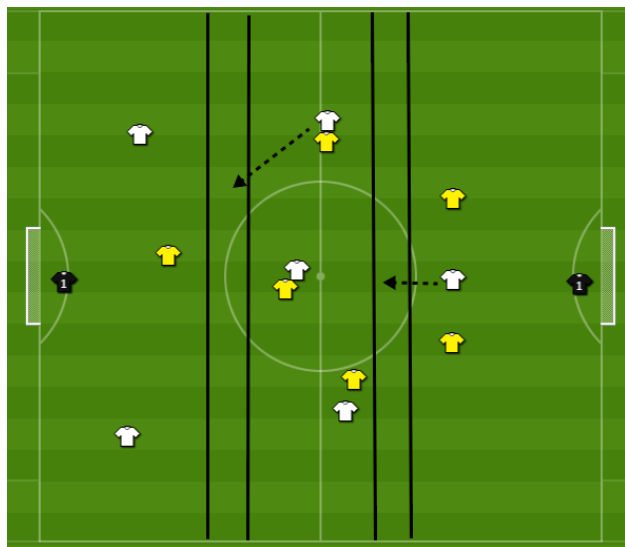
Can the winger go roaming inside (triggers of defenders/c.mids unopposed and head up) to find space and full back now gives attacking width and height?

Focus on the types of cross from full backs/wingers and range of deliveries depending on the white defensive structure and yellow's movement.

Circulation is key in this game to keep freeing up the full backs/wingers. Also work on the transition side – opposite side full back covers around rather than both full backs giving maximal height. This would be more realistic with whites playing two strikers thus one full back has to provide cover.

To finish, take the zones out and check understanding in a real game where whites can defend anywhere.

Getting In Between The Lines/Opening Teams Centrally



Normal pitch, size dependent upon numbers

Goalkeeper s in both goals

Zones horizontally across the full width of the pitch approx 3 yards width

The zones/strips are in relevant areas generally between both the units

This game can become unrealistic unless managed appropriately. The individual actions and timing are key.

The setup can include any numbers, the game above being 6v6 outfield with two GK's.

The teams set up in whatever system the coach demands but players can drop in the horizontal strips and receive under no pressure. If they drop into these zones across the pitch, opposing team cannot press them until they come out of that strip/zone.

PRINCIPLES AND PROGRESSIONS

Does the coach want high to low movements or low to high?

Does the coach want specific players to drop in between (i.e. number 10, false 9, deep lying player in the deeper zone etc.)?

The player dropping in between has to receive back foot to play out.

The player dropping in has to play one touch out (open shoulders, see the movements, know the pictures etc.)

The player dropping in cannot go backwards after receiving inside the zone

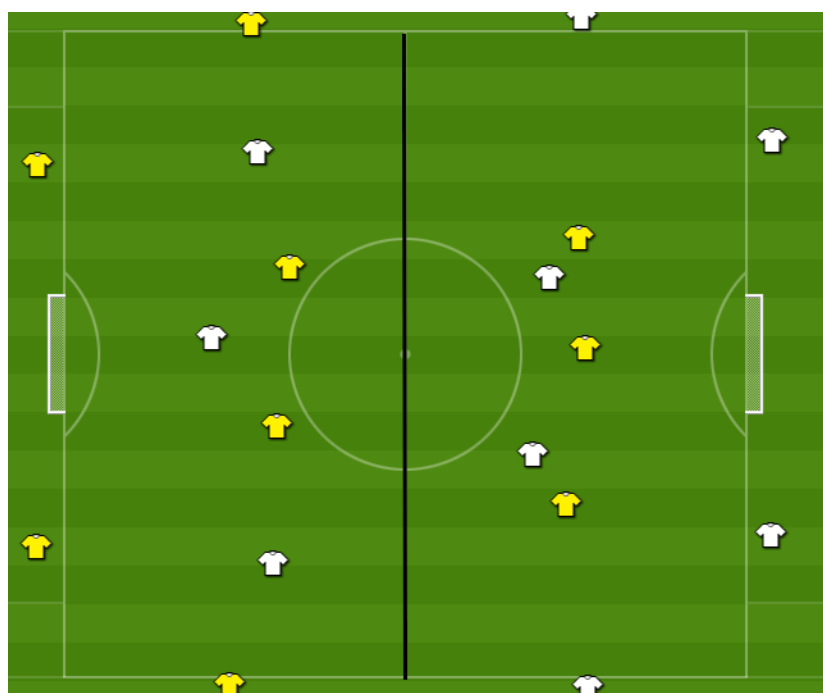
The player receiving has to drive out of the zone before he can make a pass.

The player receiving has to have his first touch out of the zone (line breaking, verticality and positive mindset).

Goalkeeper has to play into one of the zones (recognition of 3rd and 4th lines)

Can players rotate who goes in the zones? Receiving lines.

Close Finishing



Two goals either small (no GK) or preferably full size with goalkeepers in

Each team has 3 defenders in their half, 2 strikers in the opposing half

There are 4 players on the outside of the opposite half

78% of goals at the elite level are scored with one or two touches. This session encourages this.

The outside players can only play in their zone (wingers anywhere on the outside up to the halfway and by-line, end players between the corner and goal) and are on one touch

Strikers and defenders can only stay in their respective halves. Only strikers can score and are outnumbered 2v3.

The session encourages quick combinations. There are no offsides thus the defenders cannot squeeze high as they have to worry about the bounce players on the outside. The 2 strikers can receive and use any of their team.

Defenders have to circulate and switch play to move the opposing strikers but play through the lines when possible either to the outside players or strikers.

Can the strikers combine as a two to get shots off?

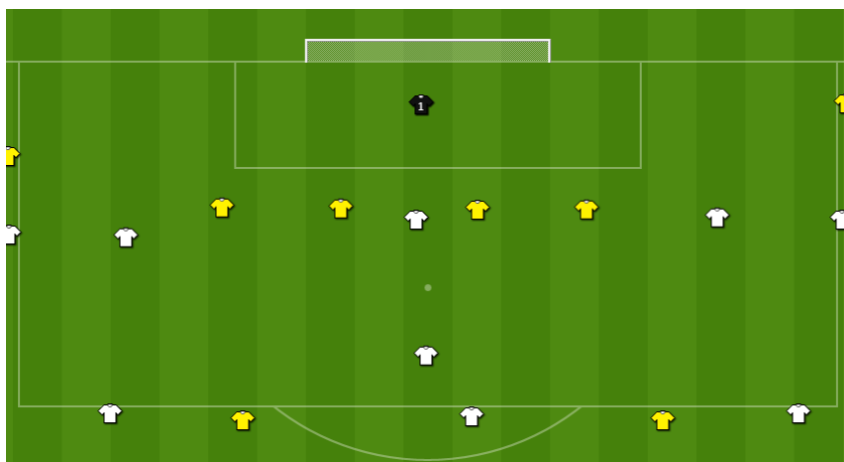
Can the strikers play off the bounce players to create overloads?

Can the strikers show clever movement to lose their defender and dominate without the ball 1v1?

The tempo of the session should be very quick as there is always a pass through the lines to the outside players.

Strikers can be on open touches but must try to finish in one or two OR it can be conditioned that they have to score off one and two. They get huge repetition here of crosses, one touch finishes in tight areas, volleys, headers, turns 1v1 etc.

Front Three Combinations, Movements and Types of Finish



One goal with goalkeeper

18 yard area used only

Any numbers can be used but the attacking unit of players in the respective system are used inside (in this example winger, winger, striker, number 10 from a 4-3-3)

Reiteration: 78% of goals at the elite level are scored after one or two touches. This session encourage this.

The whites have both wingers, their striker, and 10 all inside the 18 yard box against a back four. Yellows defend blocking, intercepting, stopping shots, showing away from goal, defending 1v1, cover/balance etc. whilst the whites must combine to score. If yellows win the ball they retain and can use the outside players.

On the outside of the box are players evenly spread out alternating yellow-white-yellow-white etc. and can only play to their colour.

Wide players on the sides focus on crossing (position specific)

Inside players can use the outside to bounce and dominate opposing players without the ball.

Whites work on combinations, movements, wingers coming inside to finish, all types of finish etc.

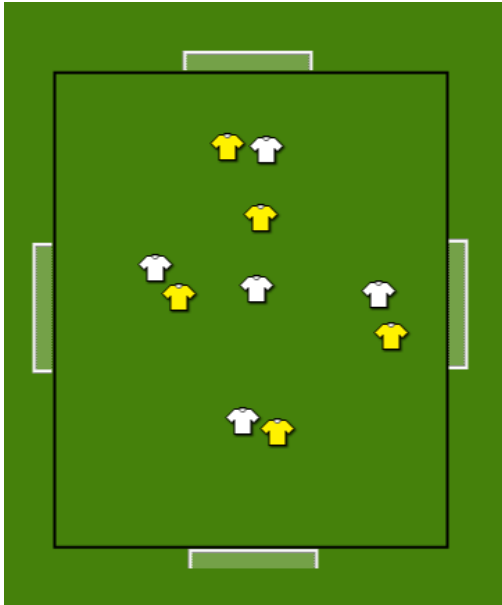
PROGRESS

For a generalised fun finishing practice, change the players in the middle or if the inside player plays to the outside player, they must switch positions (be careful here as good inside players never play out!!!)

Outside players can finish – realistic as they would shoot from the edge of the box if under no pressure

This is more of a fun game than development.

Technicians Game!



Small area, dependent upon numbers

Small goals x 4 with no goalkeepers

This game focuses intirely on different techniques, top players love it.

The session is split into games of 4 minutes with a forfeit at the end for the losing team. Teams get a point for winning each bout of 4 minutes.

Teams must score in the small goals, pitch is long but narrow. The games are as follows:

4 minutes vertical game only (play through lines and angles to receive)

4 minutes horizontal game only (circulate)

4 mins 20 passes (retention)

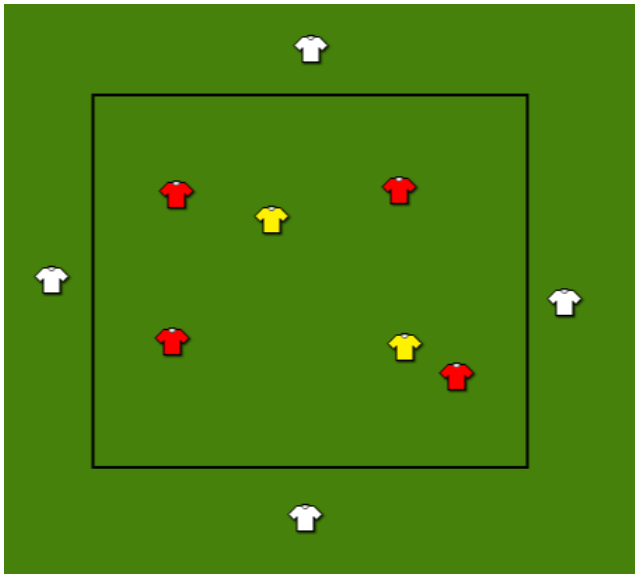
4 mins any goal (playing in 360 degrees)

2 mins volleys only (aerial control)

2 mins two player aerial set volley (one player must set annother on no bounce to score)

2 mins chest volley (must score from a chest then volley)

Retention and Angles of Midfielders



Whites are outside players and must retain possession.

Reds press the whites and work for 90 seconds

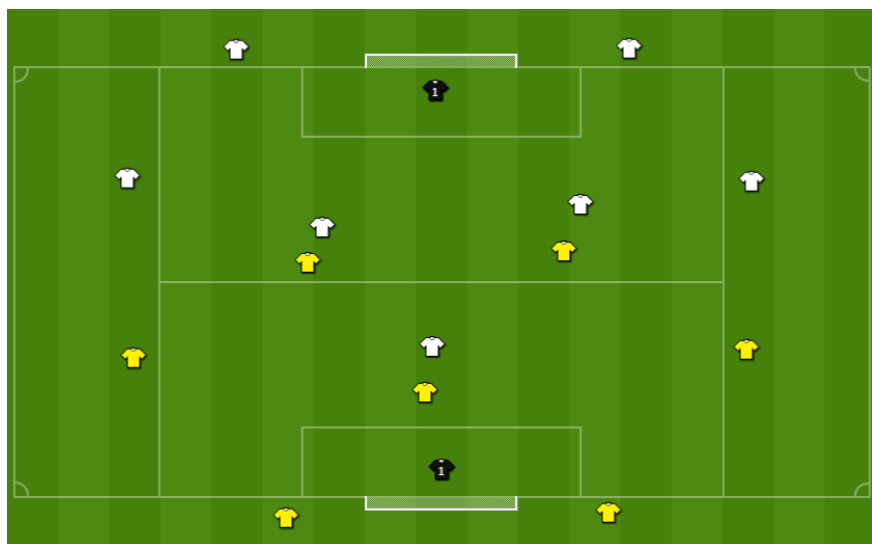
Yellows are overloads for the whites creating 6v4 in possession.

Focus on angles of the yellows always playing on different lines and looking for space inside. Get in between the reds and try to play off the back foot as much as possible. Come out of tight areas and switch direction of play as much as possible.

Change the whites for reds after 90 seconds.

Quick decisions and receiving in pressure areas are key points for the yellows.

Back Four Horse Shoe Retention and Centre Midfielder Angles



Two 18 yard areas, back to back.

Goalkeepers in each goal

Two back fours on the outside

Three central midfielders vs three central midfielders centrally

This works best if the goals are poles OR if the goals are set back 5 yards behind the by-line. This enables circulation around the back four, particularly centre back to centre back passes.

3v3 centrally

Back fours on outside in relevant positions. Teams can only score one way (yellows from bottom to top and whites vice versa). The back four start in possession and their shape replicates in possession principles at all times.

The three central players must work hard to find space, rotate and receive often 1v1 pressure behind. FIND A WAY TO PLAY FORWARD AND GET SHOTS OFF.

TACTICAL POINTS

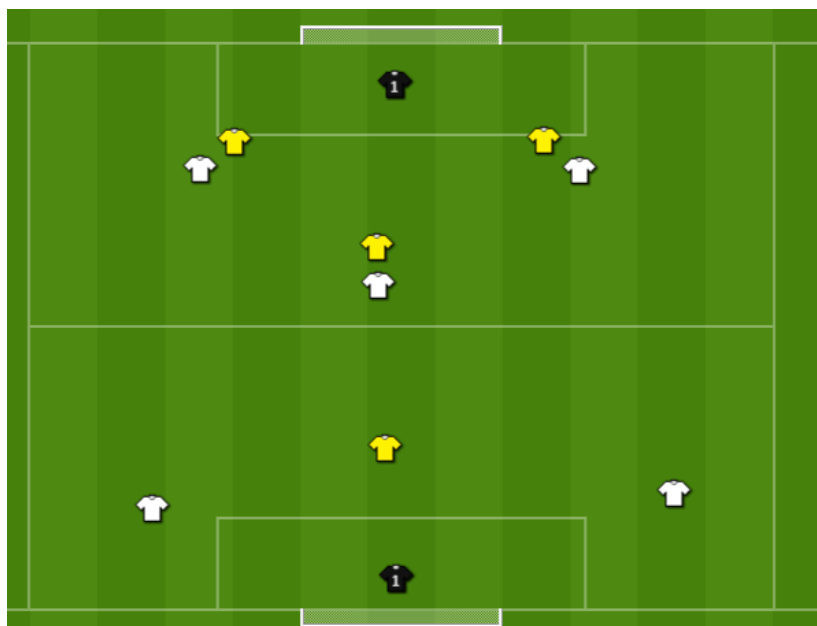
Rotation principles highlighted in earlier session.

Only one player (deep lying) can drop in bottom zone to receive from back four in possession, their horse shoe shape creates a basin to drop inside and receive. If he sets back, then he spins out and other midfielder drops down a line to receive. This encourages players to run in behind and run off opposing players instead of always coming to feet.

PROGRESSION

Players cannot set back to back four if they have received – this encourages players receiving 1v1 under pressure and finding a way to get out (Modric).

Rotation of the Front Three in a Diamond Against 4-3-3



Two 18 yard boxes set up with GK in each

Yellow go from top to bottom setting up with two centre backs and a screening midfielder in the top zone. One striker at the bottom.

Whites go from bottom to top setting up with two centre backs in the bottom zone, a tip of the diamond player behind two strikers

This is one of the only specific tactical sessions in the book based around attacking final third movements of a 4-4-2 diamond, against a 4-3-3. The isolated section of the game is 4-3-3, centre backs and screener playing against the tip of the diamond and two strikers. The white defenders merely act as service and realism on the transition to goal for the yellows on the turnover. Whites begin with the ball. The game basically cuts out whites full backs and bottom three midfielders acting as a function like practice (for the F.A.!).

White centre backs receive open shoulders and play forward. They work on line breaking passes and although the distance is not realistic, the actual patterns and recognition from centre backs will benefit more from smaller distances through getting more success. The tip of the diamond and two strikers can only receive in the top zone and must combine 3v3 to goal.

Can the tip of the diamond play around corners and support through forward runs?

Can the strikers drag the defenders down a line so that the tip of the diamond can run in behind?

Can the tip of the diamond drop down, then spin out far shoulder so that the striker can come inside to receive?

If the yellows begin to defend high can the centre backs look to slide strikers in behind?

Can the centre backs in possession bounce the tip of the diamond to drag the centre backs high, to then play driven passes with quality in behind for strikers?

How clever can the 3v3 be with and without the ball to create shots?

PROGRESS

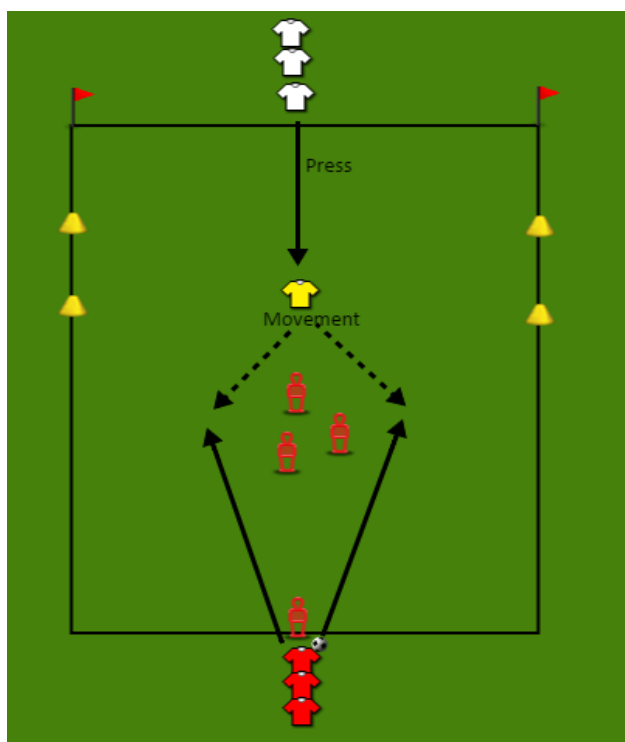
Take out the zones and the players now have flexibility to roam where they like. The principles and methods of creating space should still be the same. The only difference should be that the whites can drag apart the yellow defensive structure more.

What is our press like on the defensive transition? Are we organised and intense with our pressing on the turnover?

One v One

Situations

Dominate Receiving Pressure Behind



10 X 15 area

Mannequin(s) centrally 4 yards ahead of red players

Two gates either, side two yards wide (yellow cones)

5 yards ahead is the end line

Reds must begin by touching ball out of their feet either side of the mannequin.

Yellow player must begin behind the mannequin(s) as high as the yellow zone. Upon the red player's first touch out, yellow must show any angle to receive (either side). He can drop down or move laterally to find passing angle and space. Trigger for the movement is when the red player gets his head up.

When the red player has his first touch, the white player can press the yellow.

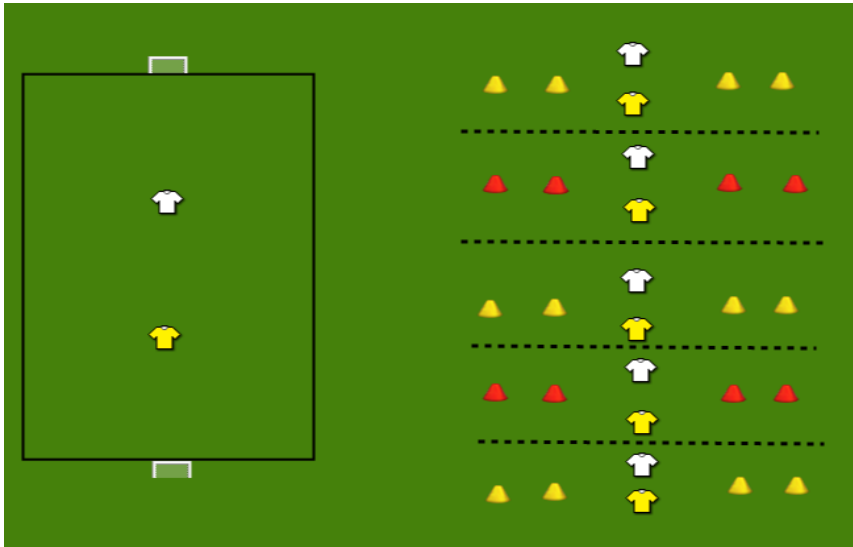
Yellow player receives and gets one point for dribbling through the yellow gates, two points for getting to the end line (red flags).

Whites work on speed of pressure and 1v1 defending techniques.

Yellow players focus on whether to turn in one touch or play off the back foot to face the defender up, hiding the first touch if pressed by showing disguise (shoulders, hips, feet), recognising how close the defender is pressing (awareness), body work 1v1 and types of turns to get forward if the defender becomes on the side.

Reds replace yellows by following pass and the carousel continues...

Dominate One v One Pressure On The Side



Small pitch to left with two small goals

Multiple gates set up to right

Cones are 2 yards apart for each gate

Gates are 5-6 yards apart

Players split into pairs, yellow vs white

The gates to the right are multiple 1v1 games.

The yellows have the ball and must find a way to get through one of the gates 1v1.

The whites cannot tackle across nor come over the imaginary line between the cones but can step in front of the gates to stop the white from entering through.

The whites work on agility to change direction and block the gates, they can intercept only stopping entry through the gate.

Whites must show changes of direction, disguise, stop-start actions and turns to get defender off balance and get through a gate. Turns will include Cruyff, inside hook, outside hook, stop turn, drag V, behind back leg etc.

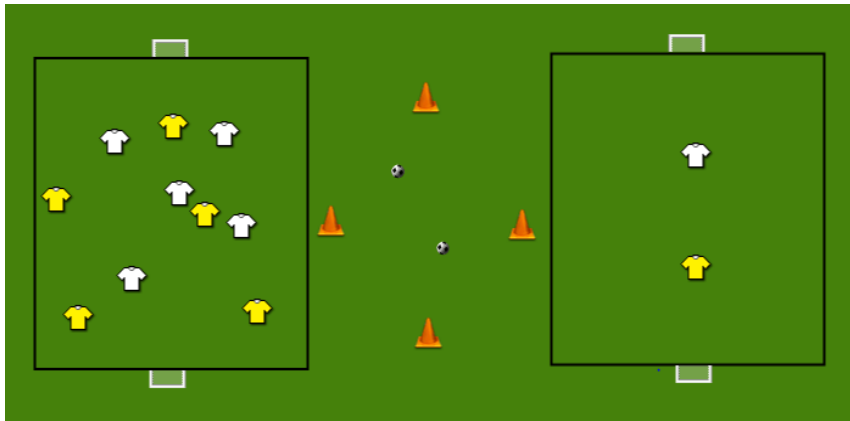
Players work for 45 seconds and every time they get through a gate they get a point. The defenders then change with the attackers for 45 seconds. Whoever has the most points after 90 seconds wins.

Promotion-and relegation; winner moves up, loser moves down.

The winner of the top gate (yellow cones in diagram) enters the pitch on the left where they go 1v1 to goal (can include goalkeepers). The idea of the game is to be on the pitch with the finishing thus it encourages competition.

A coach supervises the top pitch and serves in passes to vary the type and position of pressure; behind, in front, on side, on angle, without ball and aerial receiving.

One v One – Different Types Of Pressure



- Two pitches identical in dimensions
- 15 yard gap in between pitches
- Two goals either side (can be small or bigger with goalkeepers)
- Numbers adaptable
- Has to have two coaches

One pitch has identical numbered teams (i.e. 5v5 in the above diagram). The other pitch has a 1v1.

Every player on the left pitch has a number 1-5.

The coach on the left coaches receiving in 'street football' type game, with reduced thinking time and constant pressure from all positions.

The coach on the right coaches one v one domination, predominantly defender in front.

The coach on the right hand side calls out 'number ones' and they have to come out of the 5v5 and enter the 1v1 game. The game on the left now becomes 4v4 with the right 2v2. The coach then calls 'number twos' thus the left game becomes 3v3 as does the right. The process continues until the left game is 1v1 and the right 5v5.

The detail comes in coaching the numerical situations:

The 2v2 works on **opposite movements** and playing on two different lines to receive. All relevant techniques (half turn, back foot if possible, disguise if pressed, body work 1v1 etc) – this establishes the patterns in a 2v2 whilst isolating 1v1 situations. When you play on different lines you isolate 1v1s automatically.

The 3v3 works on midfield rotation of the central three.

The 4v4 works on movements of a diamond or methods of overloading centrally (wingers coming inside to make a four, false nine dropping in etc).

If planned properly, the teams can be set up so for whatever specific returns the team needs i.e. two/three centre midfielders play together for movement patterns, centre backs play together for cover/balance etc.

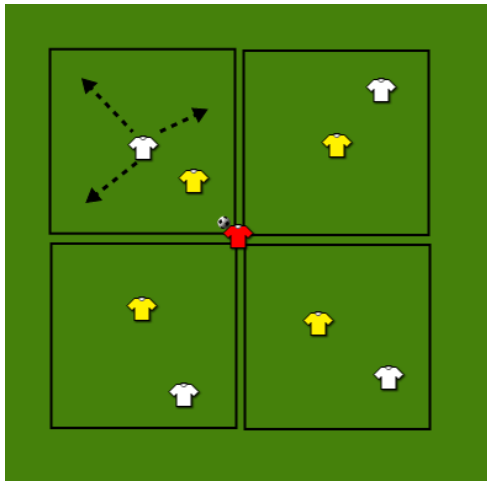
PROGRESSION

If the objective of the session is to create overloads, counter attacks or recognition of numerical advantages, the space in the middle can be used appropriately. As players come from the left pitch to the right, they must complete a challenge before entering. This competition element will mean that one player finishes before another thus creating an overload in the right hand game. Challenges can be based around the current method of work such as elements of technique or even have a physical output.

ADDITION

At first team level, the pitches can be used for emotional control against officials. One coach can be biased against one team on a pitch by giving decisions against them or send a player off thus they have to manage the situation.

Domination Without The Ball and Playing Forward



Area split into four boxes equal dimensions (approx 12x12)

One v One in each box

Central midfielder centrally between them all (red)

A simple exercise.

Red player has possession and must play to one of the whites. Whites cannot play to each other, they can only play through the red. The red player can receive and bounce any other white.

If yellows win possession then they now play through the red.

Domination without the ball is vital. Start movements out of the eye line of defenders and drop onto relevant angles appropriately. Timing of movement and disguise is imperative. Double movements and unpredictability.

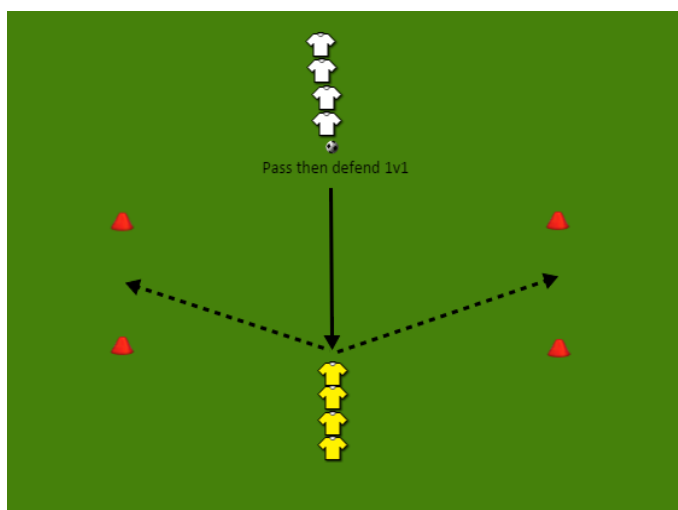
Condition the game appropriately depending on what focus is required:

- Red centre midfielder must play on one touch (around corners, half turn, head on a swivel, decision before he has received etc.)
- Players must have more than two touches before playing back to the red (encourages 1v1 domination)
- Red player can be pressed
- Teams do not have to play through the red and can play straight into another box
- Players can leave their box to overload 2v1 but must play through the red
- Recognise where the space is and relate it to the game (i.e. white plays to red, red is pressed thus bounces other white as a CB-CM-CB combination to play forward thus playing from the back and dragging defenders out of shape)

PROGRESSION

Bring in goals at either side or on the ends of each box and players must turn to finish. Can bring goalkeepers in appropriately. By putting just two big goals in, players have to work on finishing on the angle.

One v One Domination – Angled Movements, Agility and Changes of Direction



Defenders in white

Attackers in yellow

Cones 2 yards apart vertically

Distance between cones 6 yards minimum

Whites begin with the ball and play a fast ground pass into yellows and then press 1v1

Yellows must receive with positive first touch and then attack 1v1. They score a point by getting through any of the gates on the side

Aim is to show disguise, skill, turns, changes of direction and effective moves in order to shift the defender and get him off balance/weight transferred onto one foot.

Show the obvious, do the opposite. Using exaggeration is the key.

If the attacker is quick out with a good first touch then the defender's position will be in front

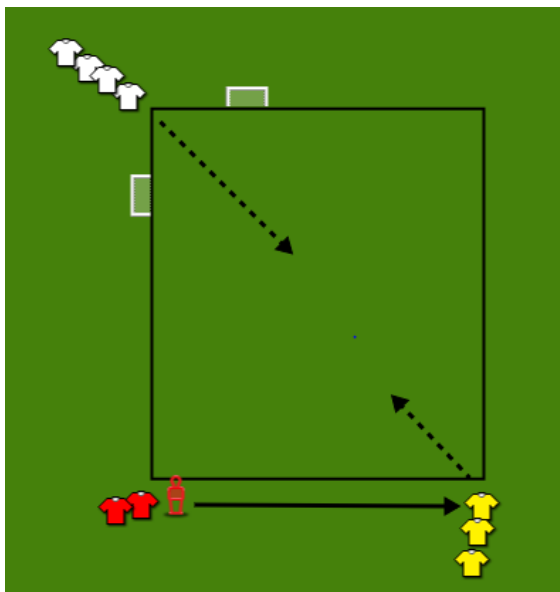
If he has a touch on the angle to take the defender to one side then the defender's position will be either on the side or covering angle.

Effective turns will include Cruyff, inside hook, outside hook, Maradona 360, drag back etc.

Defenders work on their 1v1 defending techniques.

Progress to aerial and bouncing passes so that the receiving player has to quickly bring the ball down (realism)

One v One Domination – Defender In Front



Defenders in white

Attackers in yellow

Reds as feeders

Two goals set 3 yards in from the corner

Reds start with the ball and have a touch away from the mannequin. They play fast ground pass into yellows who must receive and score by passing into any one of the small goals.

Whites defend 1v1 (can only press when reds have first touch) with the goals purposely isolated to one side so that defenders can defend realistically. Show to the touchline and don't allow attackers to come back inside.

Yellows first touch positive and attack whites with realism. Often defenders will try to show away from goal as the attacker wants to come on the inside thus this exercise deals with that realism.

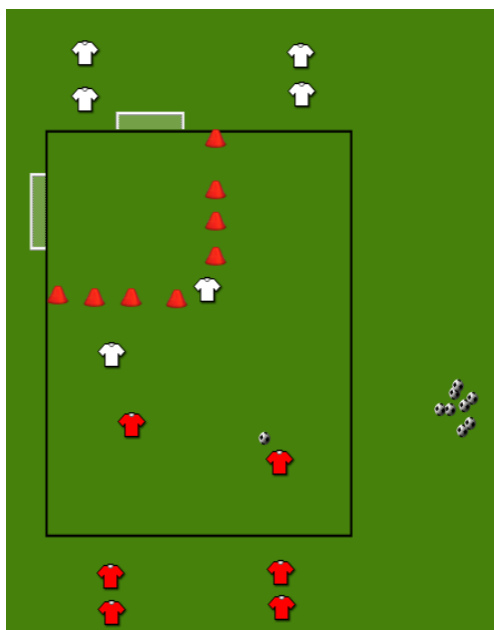
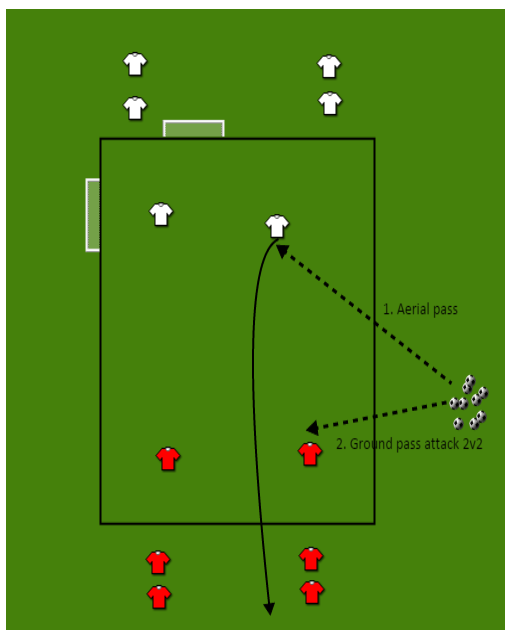
Attacker must find a way to play forward into the goals which replicates 1v1 domination to play through the lines.

PROGRESSIONS

Reds play aerial passes and bouncing balls into yellows

To focus on defending 1v1, whites can play one touch into goals early thus encouraging defenders to get between goal and attacker, having awareness of positioning and what is behind them and stopping forward passes whilst focusing on defending techniques.

One v One Domination – Two v Two Situation



Similar setup to previous drill on bigger area

Defenders in white line up either side of bottom goal

Attackers in red line up at the top of pitch

This exercise has a big defensive focus.

Coach begins by throwing in aerial ball for one of the two defenders to head for distance. Relevant technique required – side on, leading arm up to protect, contact slightly underneath the middle of the ball etc. The defender who does not challenge must give cover in behind (relevant distance and angle).

The ball is then cleared and the attackers in red must receive (if the ball is cleared over them then the coach sends a 2nd ball in) using aerial control and relevant body part, bringing the ball down as quickly as possible. They then attack the small goals 2v2.

Defender in front techniques – dribbling, get defender of balance, 1v1 moves etc.

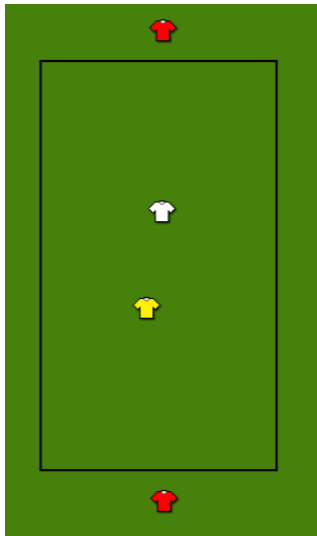
2v2 overload principles; overlaps, underlaps, create space, movement, forward runs etc.

PROGRESSION

Bring in a centre forward who plays back to the goals thus creating 3v2. Attackers now look to dominate the area through clever play, quick combinations and isolating 1v1 situations through clever movement off the ball.

Can work on defenders 2v2 cover/balance techniques and principles.

One v One Domination – Receiving To Play Forward



10x15 area

Red players as targets either side

Yellow attacker

White defender

This is one of the simplest yet most effective and productive exercises.

White and yellow player are 1v1 against each other and must find a way to play forward to the targets.

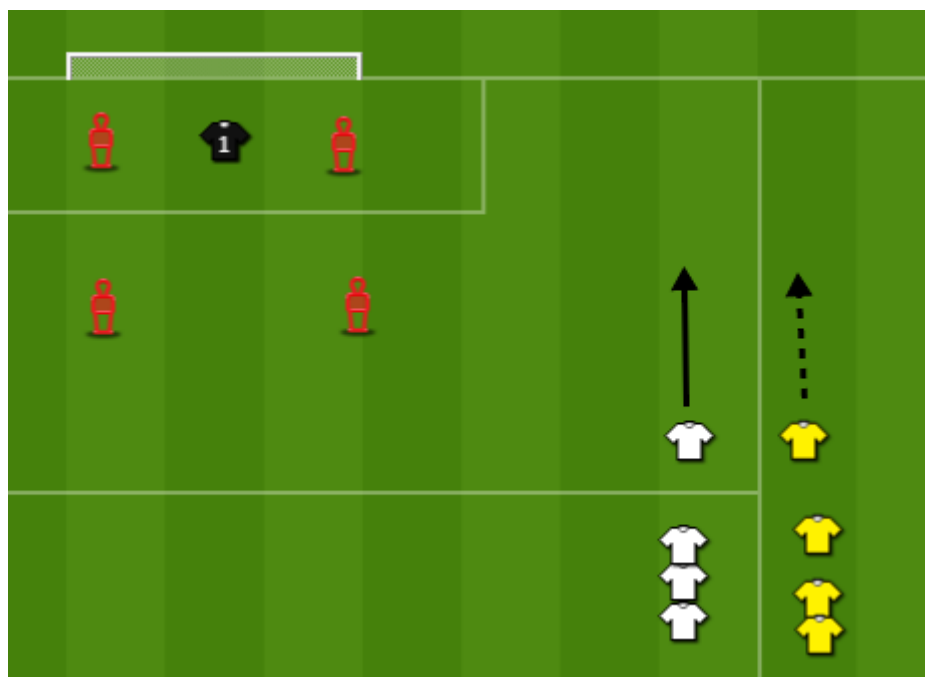
Coaching points will include:

Movement and domination without the ball, starting movement out of the eye line of defender and waiting until the defender looks at the ball before moving, open shoulders and half turn receiving, awareness of pressure, receiving back or front foot, hiding the ball through disguise, body work 1v1, protecting and shifting the ball, 1v1 moves (varied defender position) and playing one touch around corners.

There is often an obsession of making this area extremely tight so that there is limited space thus the attacker is always under pressure. Personally, I feel this area needs to be varied to give players space to dominate 1v1 without the ball. In a tight area, players are receiving 1-3 yard passes from the target but in a real game they are often receiving that pass over long distances (i.e. a full back plays into a winger). The added element of coming to the ball and receiving at pace as opposed to receiving stationary is an important element of this 1v1 scenario.

This exercise relates to every position on the pitch; defender receiving from a goalkeeper, full back receiving from centre back, winger receiving from full back, striker receiving from midfielder etc.

One v One Domination – Finding A Way To Deliver (wingers & full backs)



Isolated to one side on the edge of the box

Yellows line up as attackers

Whites defenders inside the box

Mannequins set up as 'second six yard box'

A version of this is accessible on Youtube, coached by Marcelo Bielsa at Athletic Bilbao.

Yellow player begins with the ball on the corner of the box.

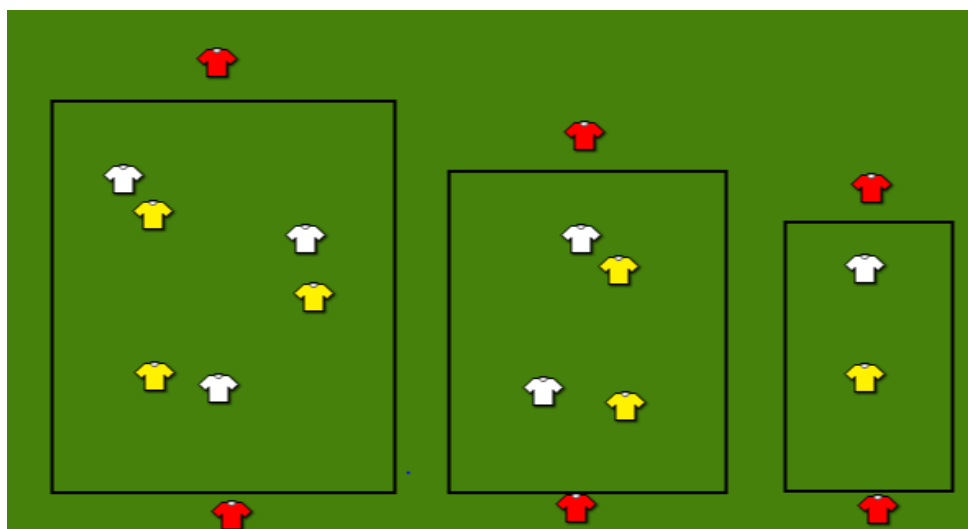
White player starts off inside the box parallel to the yellow.

Yellow player must stay outside the box but show changes of direction, speed and acceleration to deliver into the mannequined area. Yellow player must show a range of cross:

- Early whipped delivery (defender has not pressed nor blocked the path thus the yellow can whip around the defender)
- Drilled delivery (enough room from defender to drill a straight cross with pace)
- Stand up (yellow has got to the by line and must stand the ball up to beat the covering defender)
- Cut back (yellow has faked to deliver and worked an opportunity to cut back onto left foot and deliver)

Session then can work the same principles but yellows work to get a shot at goal. The yellows now start at the corner of the box again but must work across the box laterally to find a way to shoot.

Understanding How The One v One Relates to 2v2 and 3v3



Different sized areas

1v1 game on right = 10x15

2v2 game in middle = 12x12

3v3 game on left = 15x15

Targets either end in red

Displays similar principles to a previous session, above.

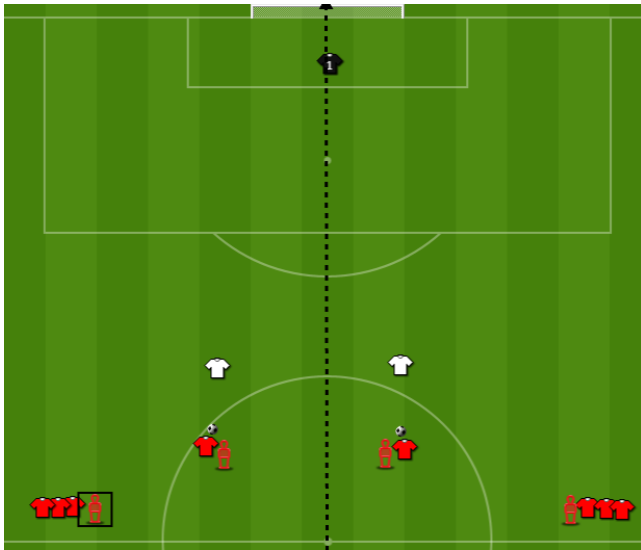
1v1 possession with targets on the right focuses on individual domination with and without the ball.

2v2 possession with targets in the middle focuses on opposite movements where both players react to each other. Play on two receiving lines, highest player reacts to deepest player as he can see the ball and player whereas deepest can only see the ball. Constant opposite movements as a two.

3v3 possession with targets on the left focuses on rotation of three players. Three different receiving lines, opposite movements, one player always receiving high for a penetrative pass through lines. If deepest player passes back to the target (centre back in a game) then this is the trigger for rotation. Player who sets the pass spins out into pressure and traffic (key) thus releasing teammate on next line and angle.

Players rotate around after each 3 minute game thus repetition of different numbered scenarios. By the end, players should begin to understand how the 1v1 movements and domination links straight in with the 2v2 then the 3v3 formats. The scenarios should always be linked in to the real game with appropriate triggers and decisions, in direct relation to the coaches' specific philosophy and method of playing.

One v One Domination Defender In Front



Whites are defenders

Goalkeeper in goal

Reds attack just outside the halfway 'D'

Line of flat markers straight down the pitch

Mannequins set up on edge of the 'D'

Excellent for defenders working 1v1 techniques.

Reds on the sides take touch off the mannequin and play fast ground pass into other red receiver on the mannequin. Receiver opens shoulders, first touch forward and attacks the white defender 1v1. Their only aim is to get shots off but they cannot step over the coned/dotted line.

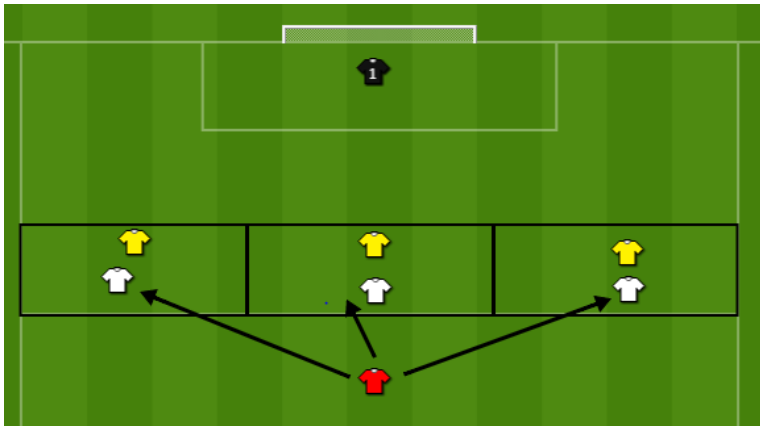
1v1 defender in front techniques and moves (step over, inside/outside Matthews, drop shoulders etc.)

Defenders work on body shape (side on), distances from the attacker, low body stance to enable change of direction, feet in relation to ball, twist hips upon attacker shifting, force attacker away from the box, patience to win the ball.

So much of the elite level now is showing attackers into specific areas and deflecting play as opposed to actually battling 1v1.

Progress to 2v2.

One v One Domination To Get Shots At Goal



Three zones on the edge of the box (make big to start)

1v1 in each zone

Red player as midfielder outside of the zones

Goalkeeper in goal

White players must receive in their zone and either go 1v1 to get a shot off (stay inside their zone) or bounce back to the red player to circulate.

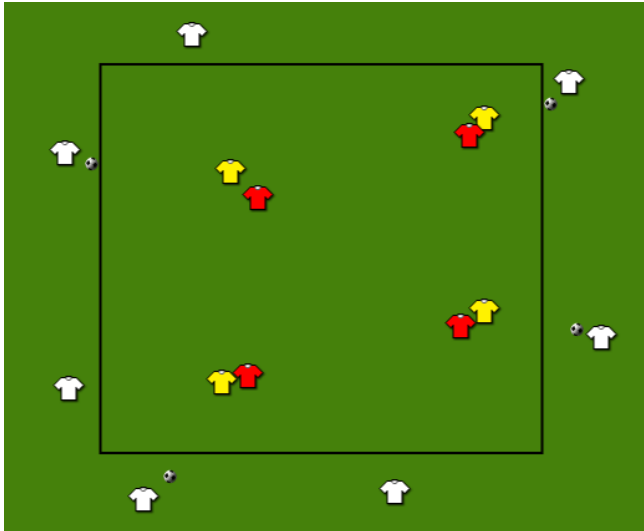
Yellow players defend 1v1 and stop shots at goal.

The red player is on two touch maximum working on circulation simply feeding the white players. He needs to show awareness of white's movements, quality of passing, disguised passes (hide these by open shoulders to reverse), passes with inside and outside of foot, and playing safe side (away from defender).

Whites must dominate yellows without the ball (double movements) and show a range of moves 1v1 to get shots at goal. Vary the types of finish (low, driven, Thierry Henry bent far post, one touch, wrong foot, volley, outside of foot, toe poke in tight area (Ronaldinho v Chelsea) etc.)

Progress to whites can receive in behind the yellows offside line thus introducing forward and line breaking runs.

One v One To Play Forward & Domination Without The Ball



White players on the outside with ball each (or two less balls than whites to start)

Yellows and reds pair up 1v1 and can only press/attack that player

Whites begin with the balls and yellow/reds line up opposite one white each.

Yellows receive and reds defend.

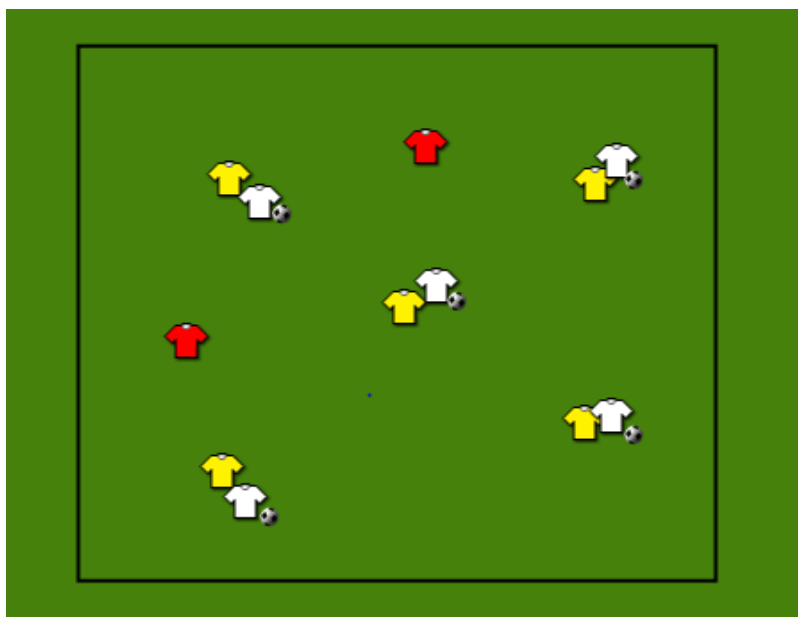
Yellows must receive under pressure and find a way to play to any other white on the outside.

As soon as they have played to a white, they must move to find a pass from another white.

Place an importance on 1v1 domination without the ball to find and create space, retaining under different positions of the defender and types of pressure and 1v1 moves respective of this position.

Players then rotate roles.

One v One To Retain



Whites pair up against yellows 1v1

2 red players as overloads

The whites have a ball each

The yellows defend only against their white partner

The reds are overload players

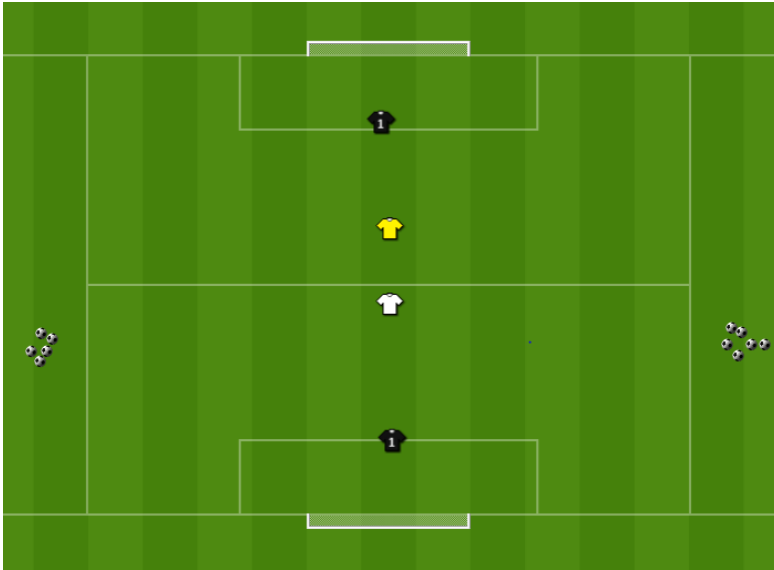
The whites must simply keep the ball 1v1 and not allow the yellows to steal. If yellows steal then they now retain 1v1. The idea of the game is to constantly use your body in 1v1 situations. If space is in front then dribble 1v1. Once the player has beaten the defender 1v1 then the defender is now pressing from behind thus the type of retention and method changes.

Players work for 60 seconds and then rest.

The red players are overloads and act as pressure relief for the players in possession. Reds are on one touch and create 2v1 situations (relating to the philosophy).

NOTE: A Brazilian coach who used to work in Spain once told me that he saw Ronaldinho practising this type of session inside the centre circle against two youth team players at Barcelona. He apparently used it as an after session ball manipulation exercise and was known to keep the ball for two minute periods.

One v One To Finish



Goalkeeper in each goal

Size of area is 18 yard box maximum

Yellow against white

Coaches or players either side of pitch with lots of footballs

An extremely simple game but so effective for development of attacking players.

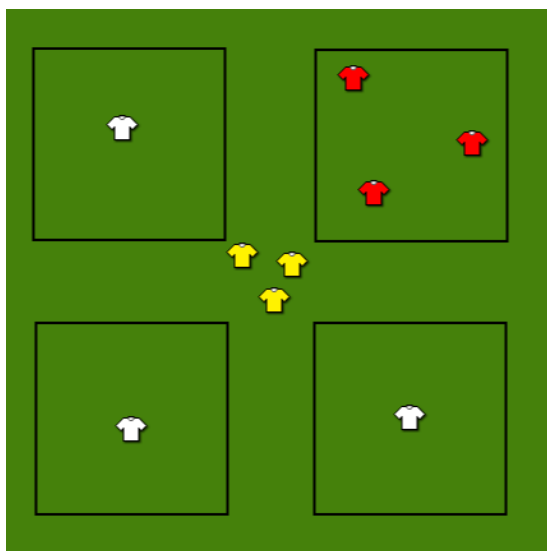
1v1 in the middle, players/coaches on the outside constantly feeding passes into the attacking player, both aurally and on the ground.

1v1 to goal; players work for 60 seconds and the player who scores receives the next pass. Different types of 1v1 receiving, domination without the ball, range of shots and angles to receive.

The game can either be directional (players can only score one way thus use the goalkeeper) or both ways (encourages turns).

Transition

Three Team Transition



Three boxes all equal in size. Small area, depends upon the ability of retention in tight areas and/or pressing ability of the players

Three teams of three players

One team starts in the middle of the squares (yellows)

One team is all in one box (reds)

One team has one player in each of the other boxes (whites)

I am not a huge fan personally of the session but it is done at some top clubs by very good coaches.

The reds begin with the ball. One yellow must come from the middle and press, aiming to win back possession. If the reds achieve 5 passes (3v1 situation), they now must switch play to one of the whites. As soon as any white receives, the other two whites now must all go to that specific box and keep the ball 3v1 – another yellow now presses. In effect, the yellows now are the red in the previous episode. As the whites are retaining, the reds now must go and find the three empty boxes with one player going in each. The process continues.

If the yellows win possession, whichever team they won it from now go into the middle as the pressing team. The pressing team need to win possession and switch play to the team that is spread out in each box.

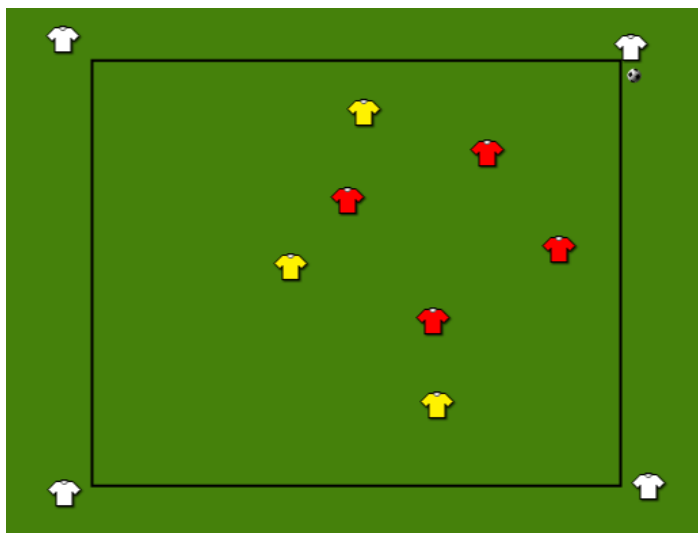
This session sounds (and reads) complicated and it takes a while for the players to get it but when they do, the transitions are quick and the intensity is very good.

It focuses on retaining in 3v1 situations, and quick transitions on both turnovers.

I would argue that the idea of winning possession is to disperse and expand quickly thus players coming towards the ball to retain in a tight area is not realistic. With this said however, the quick expansion upon switching play and the quick transition to press if possession is lost, is realistic.

Players love this session, which is why it is included.

Guardiola Transition Game



The area size and practice can change dependent upon numbers but this works best with 11 players. Keep the area tight

Four whites on the outside of the box in a corner each.

Four reds centrally.

Three yellows centrally (ideally central midfielders or players who play in the pockets)

I have no problem citing the influence of this session; for one thing, it is available to watch on Youtube. Pep Guardiola made this exercise very popular with Barcelona on open training session days in front of the media.

The whites work on the outside of the square and retain possession. They can play outside to outside anywhere but play through the yellows centrally too.

The yellows always stay in the middle as the +3 overload.

The reds must press the whites and yellows thus outnumbered 4v7. If they win possession, they quickly expand to the outside and the whites come inside exchanging positions.

This is extremely realistic to games – on the defensive transition the team pressed the ball quickly going from expansion to compactness. Upon winning possession, the team go from compactness to expansion. The quicker both transitions happen, the greater the advantage for the relevant team.

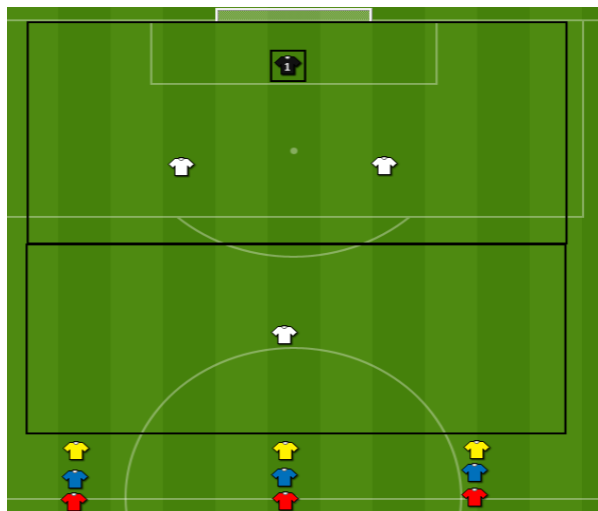
Important points defensively are; nearest man to press the ball, prevent the man in possession getting his head up to play forward, cover and balance in behind, doubling up on the man on the ball, reading body shapes and which side the pressure is put on in order to get relevant covering position, the importance of the first four seconds pressing, closing the net on teams and squeezing into predictable areas.

In possession, the points can include: quick expansion, first touch away from pressure, playing quickly from pressed zones, circulation, movement of the midfield three and angles to receive, one touch combinations out of pressure and playing through lines.

Counter Attacking

Beginning: Counter Attacking Principles

It is important that these sessions are done in the logical progression that they are listed...



Two zones, the top one is longer than the bottom.

Both zones width of penalty box

Goalkeeper in top goal

Two defenders in top zone (whites)

One Midfielder in bottom zone (white)

All other players in 3 lines 10 yards in from the halfway line

The coach has footballs ready at the bottom zone on the outside and plays one ball into the yellows. The yellows must break and get into the top zone. The white presses them and tries to stop them reaching the top zone thus 1v3.

If the yellows get through to the top zone, they now go 3v2 to goal. The white midfielder cannot recover into the top zone, he can only win possession in his zone. The two defenders cannot enter the top zone.

If the whites win possession or yellows miss the goal, the coach now plays a ball into the next three players (blues) and the process repeats.

Points to focus on include:

- Speed and intensity of attacks; only forward or sideways passes allowed – nothing backwards
- 8 seconds to goal (coach counts this out loud)
- Crossruns and overlaps to isolate 2v1's
- 1v1 defender in front moves (dribbling and running with the ball)
- Movements to penetrate the three channels (sides and in between defenders)
- Different types of finish
- Drag apart the two defenders through clever movement, shift the balance
- Passes in front of players and to break lines

PROGRESS

If the whites win possession, they can break to the line 3v3 through passing or dribbling. This creates opportunities for attackers to counter the counter.

Bring in a striker who starts against the two defenders back to goal. This now creates 4v2 and allows passes through the lines early and realistic counter attacks using the number 9 to make the defenders run backwards and/or play on shoulders. This dynamic adds more realism and different combinations/movements.

Counter Attacking Game: Recognise Where the Overload is



This is extremely simple but effective at establishing recognition of where the overload is, establishing a tempo to the attacks and defending outnumbered.

It is a normal game, any numbers but both teams must be equal. No floaters allowed.

Goalkeepers in the big goals, pitch must have good length to it, width is not absolutely vital but the players need space to operate in.

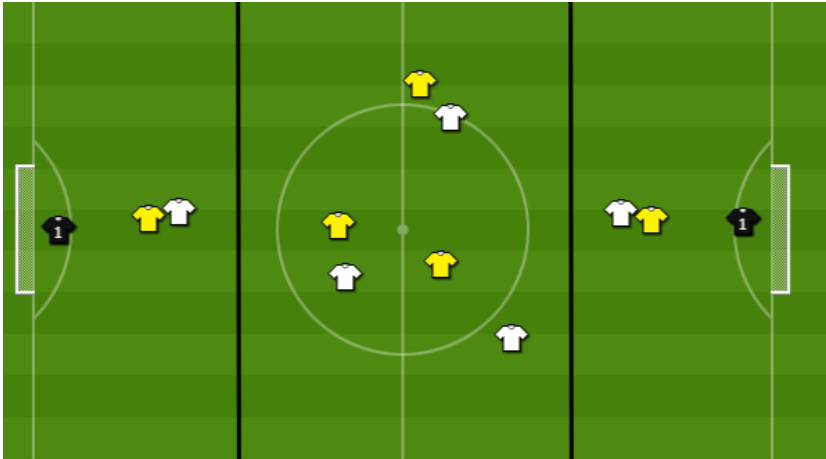
The only condition on this game is that whoever gives possession away (whether it be a pass, shot, dribble, dispossessed) must run around a designated object. The object can be a pole off the pitch, the opposition's goal etc.

When one player runs off the pitch, there is now an overload momentarily. The team in possession have to figure out very quickly where the overload is, attack the space(s) and shift the opposition.

The smaller numbers the game has, the more success. The ideal format is 4v4-6v6.

On paper, the session sounds amateurish but it is extremely effective and players love it.

Counter Attacking Principles



Three zones, small pitch

Two goals with goalkeepers

1v1 in end zones

3v3 minimum centrally

Possession centrally in the 3v3, after 3 passes any two players from the team in possession break to the end zone to create 3v1. Teams go both ways, meaning that the end zone players are both attackers and defenders. Different types of movement, runs, passes and 1v1's all come out of this with lots of success.

The 1v1 defenders in each end zone must try to deflect and show the overloads away from goal.

PROGRESS

The game then becomes more realistic by being directional; teams only go one way. Now, the midfielders centrally can set up as a deep defence protecting the back player. Team in possession do not have to break after three passes, they can do so anytime. This now focuses on dragging midfielders out of their shape to then counter.

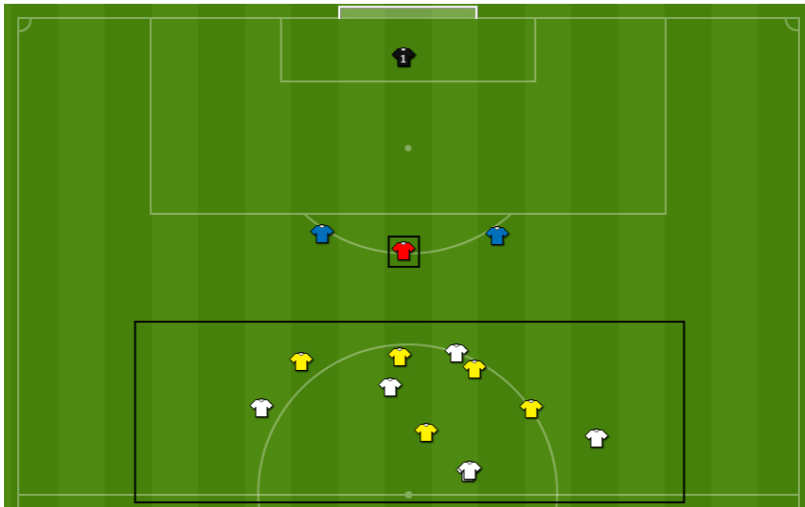
Points to focus on include:

- Dragging midfielders out of shape to break quickly in the spaces left
- Crossruns and overlaps to isolate 2v1's
- 1v1 defender in front moves (dribbling and running with the ball)
- Movements to penetrate the channels (sides of defender)
- Different types of finish
- Passes in front of players and to break lines

PROGRESS

Add in more defenders

Progression : Basic Counter Attacking Against Two Centre Backs



Half a pitch

Goalkeeper in main goal

Two blues are defenders

Red is a striker

5v5 in the box minimum but can be any number

The box must be very wide to give space for the function of the session

This is a direct progression from the previous session.

The possession box (5v5 in the above diagram) has two teams (yellow v whites). Whichever team is in possession has to retain the ball for five passes. Once one team gets to five passes, two players of that team break out of the box and attack the goal with the red striker.

The team in possession, after getting five passes, can dribble outside the box, play in behind first time to the striker or play striker's feet and break 3v2.

Make use of the overload(s).

8 seconds to goal and **all of the principles in the previous session must come out** here just in a bigger game and more realistic.

If teams struggle to get to five passes, either make the area bigger or reduce the number of passes.

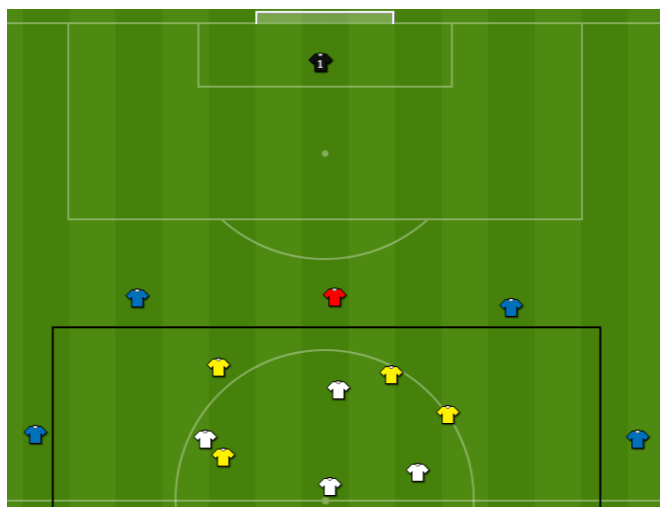
PROGRESS

More attackers

More defenders

Realistic back four v front three (depends on numbers available)

Counter Attacking Against a Back Four



Half a pitch

Similar setup to last session but wider box

Full backs now added in on the sides in addition to the two centre backs (blues)

Red striker in between again

4v4 centrally but can be any numbers

The blues set up around the possession in a horse shoe shape, full backs high and wide, centre backs split.

The 4v4 in the middle retain possession and must get 5 passes. Whichever team is in possession, the blues are the overload to retain. For example, if yellows have the ball they can bounce the blue outside players thus creating 8v4 in possession. The blues offer constant angles, realistic to game scenario.

Whichever team gets to 5 passes can now break, with the red striker, to goal. Two of the players in the box break out to create 3v2 against the centre backs. If the team in possession use the principle in earlier sessions, the blue full backs should not be able to recover. If decisions are delayed, they are now breaking 3v4 – realistic to the game.

This is also a great session for a back four defending on the transition.

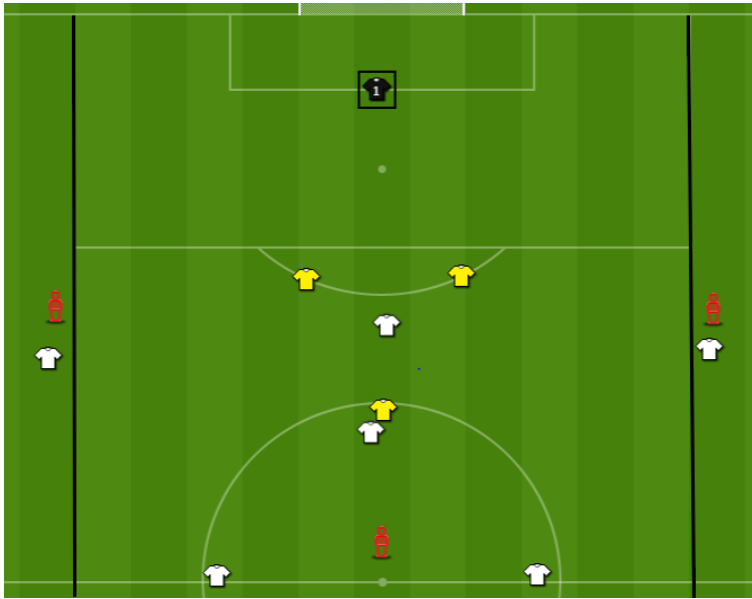
How clever can the red 9 be to find spaces?

How fast can the possession players find the 9 and join in?

The variations of movement in this session are endless and depend on the coaches' philosophy.

The session can also be against a back three to prepare for relevant opposition. (Now the spaces will be down the sides or in behind if the centre backs have tendencies to follow strikers deep).

Counter Attacking Patterns in a 4-2-3-1



Half a pitch

Goalkeeper in large goal

Yellows set up with 2 defenders and one screening midfielder

Whites set up with one striker, two wingers, a 10 and two screeners

One mannequin centrally and two out wide as full backs

The coach begins by playing a ball into the white centre midfielders on the halfway line. The whites then have 8 seconds to get a shot off. See what patterns and decisions come out. Coach relevant movements to create space, verticality, forward runs, forward passes etc.

Then build in specific patterns from the positions – this will change depending on the coach and the team's strengths.

Who do we want on the ball?

Who do we want exploiting in behind?

Is our 9 a hold up player bringing others into the take or does he want to penetrate?

Have the wingers got explosive movements in behind?

Can our centre midfield pivot players show range of pass and accuracy to exploit the relevant spaces?

Which of the pivots break or do both sit?

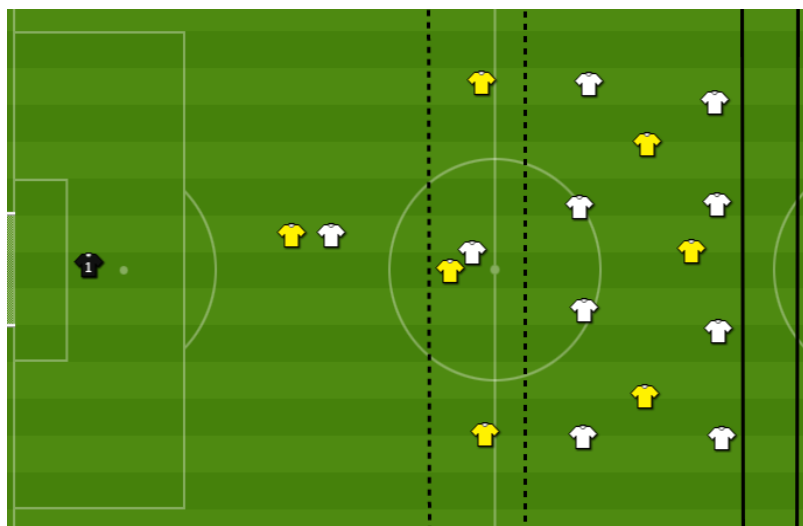
How does the 10 find space on the transition and what are his roles?

The basic scenario on the counter attack is that the defenders want to drop, protect the centre of the box, stay narrow, force play wide and not be dragged apart. Therefore, the attacking team must look to find the spaces and drag the centre backs apart both laterally and down the pitch through decisions in possession and clever movement(s).

PROGRESSION

Add in another yellow defender and midfielder. Yellow midfielder begins with the ball and must dribble out try to get to the halfway line. White can press; theoretically, the yellows should never get to the halfway line against four whites thus this now works on counter attacking **from a regain** in the middle third of the pitch. This session allows for all types of counter attack from all areas of the pitch.

Counter Attacking From Triggers – Specific Shape



Three quarters of a pitch. Edge of the box in width

Goalkeeper with one or two defenders (yellow) ahead against one attacker (white)

Middle strip (dotted line) goes full width horizontally, approx yards 5-8 yards in depth with 3 yellows against a white number 10

The bottom zone then has the rest of the players. Whites in two banks of four, yellows must be underloaded.

There is then an end zone

If the players have good understanding of recognising and exploiting small overloads, this session is superb for counter attacking realism from their shape in a game (applicable to any system). It prepares specifically against teams who like to dominate possession and send both full backs in aggressive positions.

The white team are setting up with a 9 and 10, dropping two banks of four behind the ball. Again, this system is used just to explain the session in the simplest format.

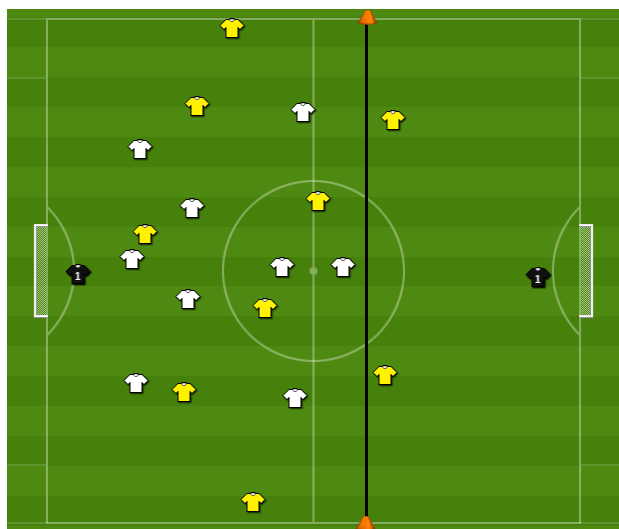
The yellow centre back begins in possession (centre back or two preferably if numbers available). He gets a free pass into the middle zone with the yellow overloaded 3v1. Yellows have one simple role in the practice, find a way into the end zone. They are outnumbered in the top zone 8v3 thus will have to be very clever to break out. The three midfielders (3v1 in the zone) can circulate and wait to play through the lines to the three yellows.

Whilst the yellows are circulating, the whites shift, slide and cover in their two banks constantly adjusting to relevant distances (pressure? no pressure? movement? etc.) Upon gaining possession through good screening and pressing positions, they must break to goal through the 9 and 10. Two midfielders can join in and the yellows cannot recover into the bottom zone.

The coach works on whichever principles he chooses from this shape. He may want specific wingers joining in, midfielders breaking, types of movement specifically from certain players etc. It is a great practice to prepare for a real game and recognition of transition opportunities. The yellow opposition can line up exactly how the relevant opposition would as preparation before a game.

The realism comes from setting certain traps defensively, showing into certain areas to counter, blocking specific lines, looking to isolate certain players from the opposition to press and countering from regains.

Tactical and Specific: Counter Attacking From Triggers



Normal match, size depends on numbers

This diagram shows 10v10

The most important factor of the set up is that area needs to be long to create space vertically

Teams must be set up in preparation for games and opposition

The coach works with the whites in the above diagram.

There is a line of flat cones a few yards from the halfway line in the opposition's half.

The condition is simple, when the yellows get possession the whites have four seconds to drop behind the coned line which acts as a trigger line. After the whites have done this a few times, the yellows should begin to send their full backs high, centre backs start higher, wingers come inside and congest the central space and centre backs drive out with the ball.

The white's striker always plays on the opposite diagonal to the ball on the far shoulder of the defender. This gives height for the long pass counter attack early and also makes the centre backs uncomfortable not being able to see man and ball pulling them towards their own goal and creating space for midfield runners.

Can the white number 10 show the opposition the deep lying playmaker and find a distance where he can encourage that pass but get pressure on to steal when the ball is played? If play develops past the 10, can he find pockets of space in anticipation of the turnover?

Can the whites get the yellow midfielders running towards their own goal?

Wingers for the whites can start extremely narrow thus encouraging the yellow's full backs high showing them the space(s). Full backs have to be ready to jump and be aggressive in this scenario and wingers ready to intercept as the opposition's heads go down to pass. Setting traps will develop as the defending team get success through dropping deep.

PROGRESSION

Work on game related scenarios and give the team a target i.e., you are winning the game against a big club with top players and need to protect your lead.

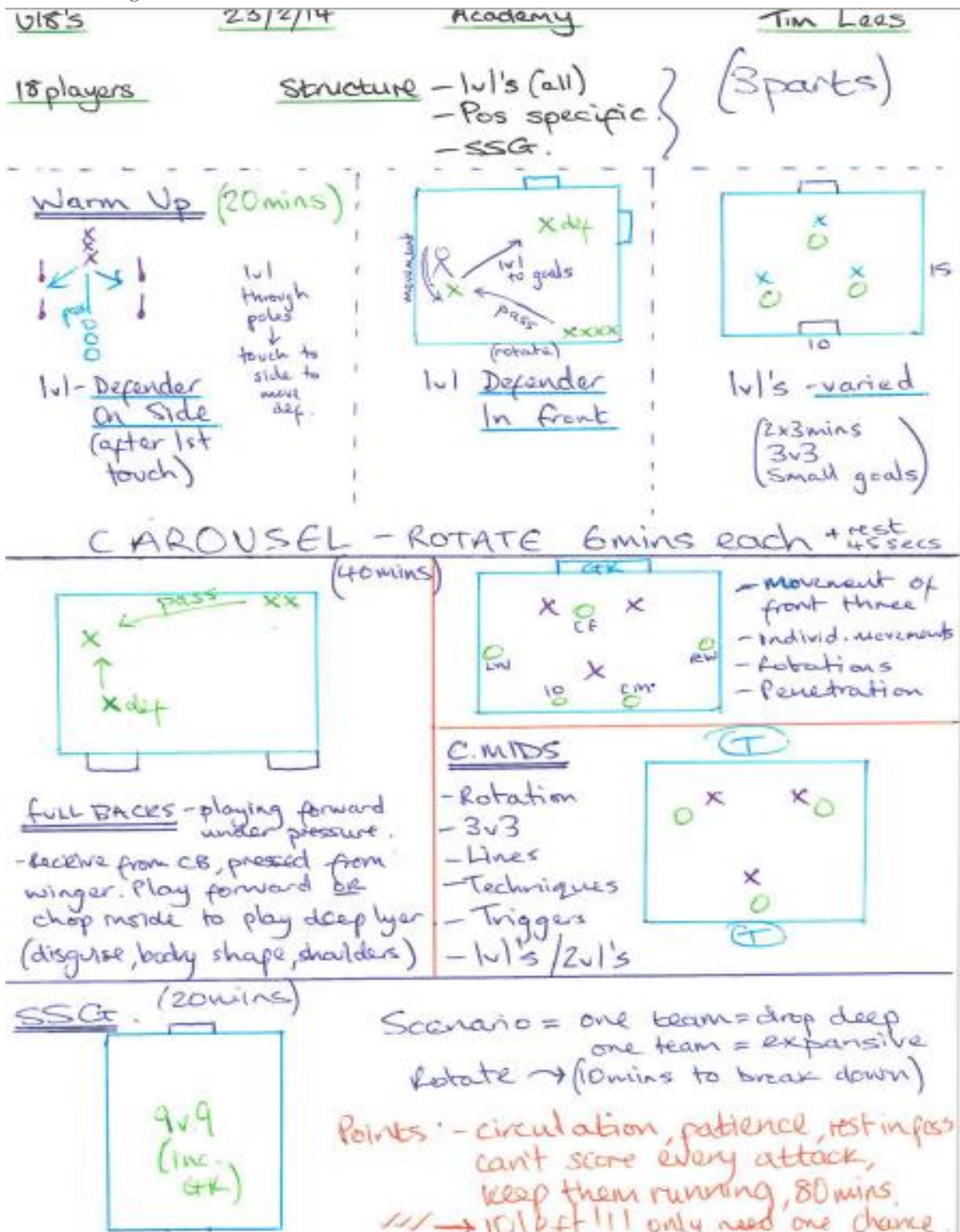
Build in specific points where the team press high instead of always dropping deep dependent on the coaches' philosophy i.e. throw in, goal kick, bouncing ball, slow pass, backwards pass, player facing own goal, pass to full backs, press specific player etc.

These sessions are all taken from an elite football level, formulated and carried out by some of the most reputable coaches in the world. The difficulty in documenting sessions comes in detailing the tactical elements within the setup, because the movements and decisions that players make have so many variables. I could, for instance, draw the movements of how to create space in a midfield diamond as a quartet but this would be slightly presumptuous given that every coach has his own methods. For these reasons, I have merely given basic coaching points and likely pictures that develop in each session. The real detail, especially tactically, comes from the individual coach's philosophy and is dictated by player profiles. Again, I could say: *"When the deep lying midfielder receives on the back foot and opens his shoulders on the half turn, the sides of the diamond open out and look to receive to feet on angles, dragging the opposing midfielders laterally"*. The profile of the side of the diamond player might, however, be explosive, yet poor receiving 1v1 pressure behind, therefore he is better suited to breaking the line with a forward run and playing off two strikers. Looking at the long term picture, principally at under 12s, it would be the correct process to coach that player to come to feet as he has many years to develop receiving under pressure, and the eventual outcome of that game is irrelevant and secondary to player development. At first team level, though, where results are paramount, the process is less about development and more about winning and this affects the coaching process.

Session Structure

In terms of actually structuring a session, the important thing to acknowledge is that there is not one specific blueprint to develop players. As coaches, we all want players to be flexible and adaptable; we must show the same traits. The traditional way of structuring a session is technique~skill~game where players learn a specific unopposed technical component, are then put under pressure in a skilled practice and finish with a small sided game. Although some new coaching courses portray this method as dated, there is absolutely no doubt that it is an extremely effective way of working. There are however, so many ways to structure a practice. The new F.A. Youth Courses focus on developing the environment and emphasise the importance of using whole-part-whole. All elite coaches will conclude that it is about finding the balance of unopposed, opposed, multiple techniques, games, random, variable etc. Personally, I like to always incorporate individual work for a minimum of 20 mins at some point (this may be at the beginning, middle or to finish) which has a high focus on 1v1's/receiving under pressure, varying the direction of that pressure. I am a big advocate of position specific work and small sided games as much as possible. The 1v1 work could be done as a whole squad, specific to the individual or on a generic carousel. I like to vary the ways 1v1 practices are setup. The players may not be specifically told they are working on 1v1's but the exercises are structured for these returns. Below is an example of a session I have previously done which has the following focuses (excuse the terrible handwriting!):

- ✓ Specific focuses for each of the three parts but not **one** specific topic throughout
- ✓ Every component relates back to the philosophy
- ✓ Each activity includes decisions players constantly make in the game
- ✓ Lots of 1v1 repetition (all variations) both attacking and defending
- ✓ Lots of individual based coaching and position specific work
- ✓ Game management strategies
- ✓ Huge technical focus



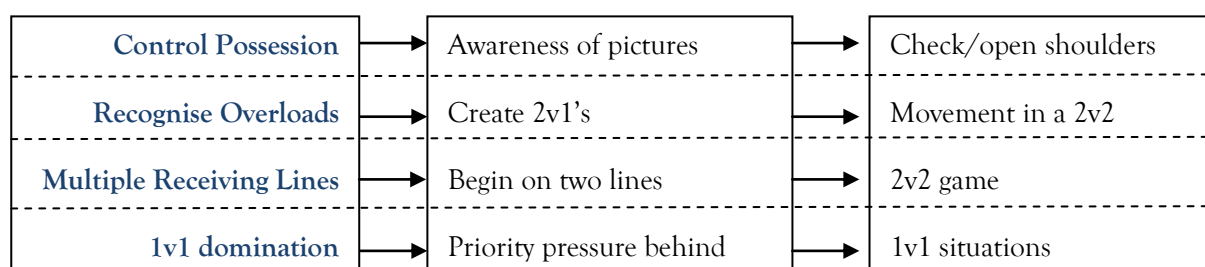
Progression and Evolution

The criteria and requirements of periodising a player's development, long term, are commonly accepted as:

- Specific in terms of age, ability and stage of maturation
- Appropriate in training volume and intensity
- Having a relevant work load
- Incorporating various physical components (flexibility, core stability, proprioception, resistance, endurance, speed etc.)
- Managing appropriate recovery between sessions

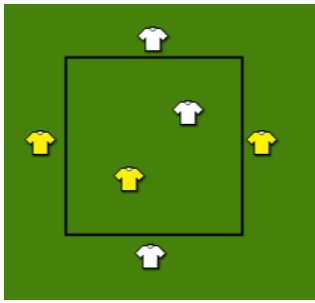
A whole book could be written on the topic of periodisation alone. In academy football, a season is typically planned from a tactical point of view, with examples including 'playing from the back', 'playing through midfield' or 'final third play'. Alternatively, or sometimes additionally, there may be a technical focus such as 'receiving', 'passing' or dribbling'. The areas of work covered within a season will change according to both the club's philosophy and type of player each club wants to create. The actual length and duration of each block of work will also vary with some clubs doing one week topics, others six weekly whilst several have a focus on the deficiencies of the previous game. Instead of debating periodisation, as it is a hugely subjective topic, I feel it is important to highlight the actual stages of planning for a specific topic, with the evolution and progression always at the forefront. For example, the long term goal may be for the team to play expansive, possession based football recognising overloads and dominating 1v1 situations but trying to develop all these areas at once would be the equivalent of a weightlifter trying to double his one rep max in a week. The structure has to be relevant to begin with, progressive and evolve at the right times to keep players out of their comfort zones. It is important to know how and when to progress the detail to players, and at what specific time. Let's use an example of how to break down a long term target:

LONG TERM TARGET = dominate 1v1's, control possession, recognise overloads



Therefore, the session to begin with, must have the four criteria from the right hand box to establish the principles:

Session One – getting players to open shoulders



The session may actually begin unopposed to start the process right from the beginning. The area is a 10x10 area. Players are in groups of three with one player in the middle, two on the outsides, opposite each other. The central player simply has to receive from one outside player and play to the other outside. Players must open their shoulders able to see both players. Progressions include back foot receiving, check shoulder for where the outside player is (outside player can now move anywhere laterally), angled receiving (no straight line) and any type of 1v1 move (imaginary defender) before playing forward. All of this time the players have to find space as there is interference from the other player playing the opposite way. This may be the only objectives from session one – but it builds the patterns both technically and cognitively.

Session Two – applying those principles under pressure



The same principles apply but the decision making process is added in. The area stays the same size but the situation is now 2v2 centrally with targets either side. The focus is to open shoulders, find space, back foot receiving and play around corners when possible. The whole theme is around establishing a mindset of playing forward.

Session Three – evolving the movement

The session is exactly the same but now players can consistently play forward, they need to be able to dominate players in 2v1 situations. Focus can be on opposite movement and double movements (individual) to create space. The session has to now look at controlling the spaces with relevant timing, triggers and rotation patterns.

Session Four – dominating 1v1

Now that players can play forward and find spaces, they will at times be isolated in situations where they have to dominate a player 1v1 to get out of a situation. The session can begin where players simply receive front foot when pressed behind and set back with good body work. The progression then will evolve where the receiver uses turns, tricks and skills to find a way to play forward.

This process will likely take a long time as opposed to four sessions but I am merely providing an example of how the principles begin and progress. This process brings us full circle to the opening statement made in this manual: *“To teach the game, you have to know the full picture and then be able to unravel this for the relevant ability and age. Making football look simple is a complex procedure.”*

I hope that as well as specifics, I have got over to the reader the absolute importance of learning, evolving, having an open mind, being a sponge for information and needing to think outside the box. That's not only the penalty box. Everyone can always learn and add to his/her bank of knowledge. To quote Satchel Paige: "*How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?*" Or Socrates (the Greek philosopher, not the Brazilian midfielder): "*The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.*"

And my reflections on the manual and the next steps? Be humble and hope that readers have got something from the manual. And if the latter applies, consider other future manuals on aspects not covered: these include, for example, 'out of possession' and 'technical practices'.

I'll leave you with Robert Martinez' words to players:

Jugar Sin Miedo.

Play Without Fear.

Developing an Elite Coaching Philosophy: In Possession

This comprehensive dossier provides, in forensic detail, a strategy on how to create and establish a specific playing philosophy in possession. It draws on experiences from the highest levels of professional football in the modern era.

Contained in it is an examination of the principles involved. This is then rationalised by numerous examples of professional academy and first team sessions with full images and diagrams of explanation. There is a full description of methods of how to construct a specific environment and style.

The manual includes:

Principles: The Four Moments, Receiving Lines, One v One Situations, Overloading, Counter Attacking and Game Management Strategies.

Session Plans: Possession, Shape Work, One v Ones, Playing From The Back Flexibility, Transition, Counter Attacking and Session Structure

