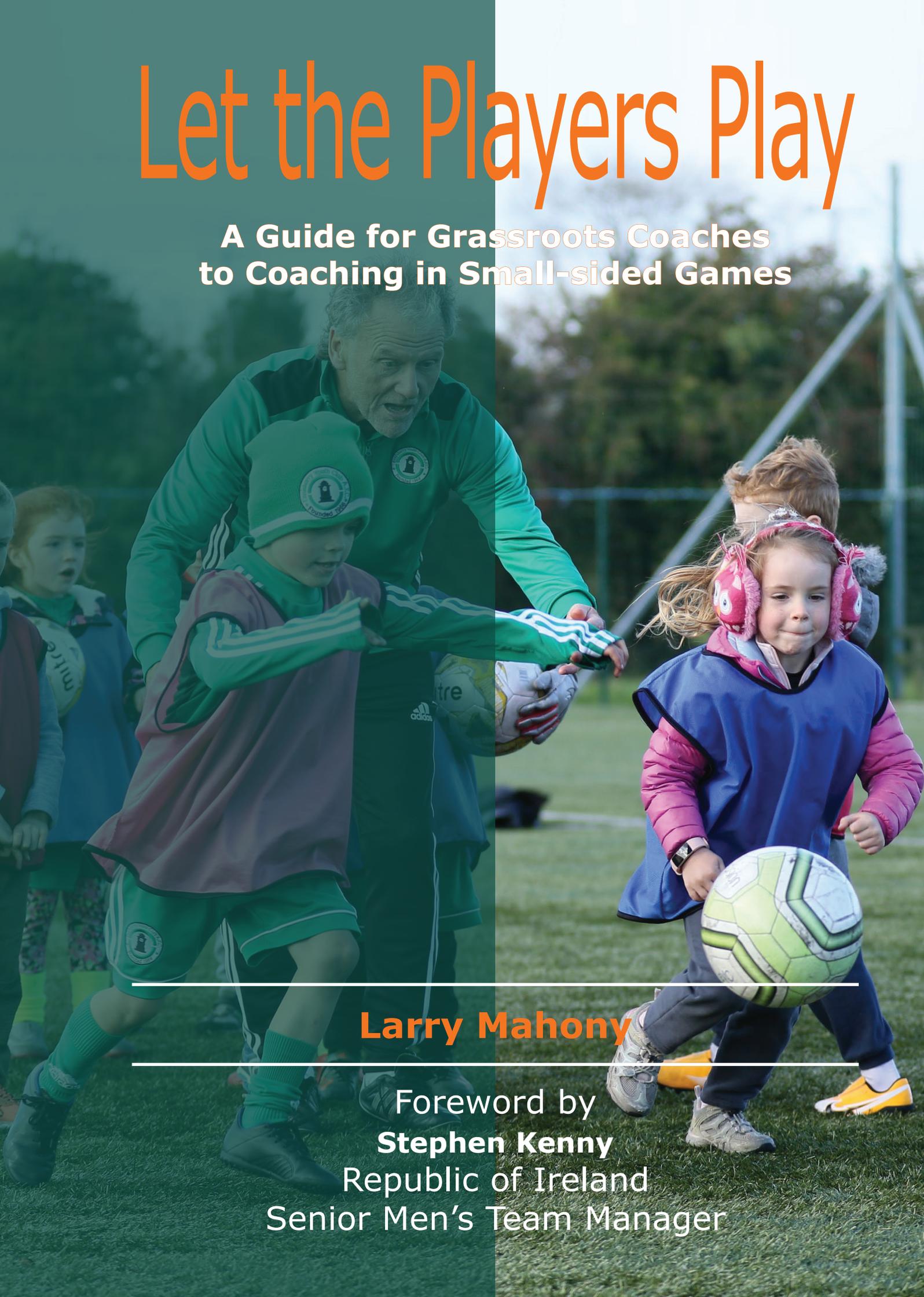


Let the Players Play

A Guide for Grassroots Coaches
to Coaching in Small-sided Games



Larry Mahony

Foreword by
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Foreword

The 2020 season saw Atalanta emerge in both Serie A and the Champions League as a team with really exceptional physical data and a capacity for late comebacks. This coincided with the appointment of Jens Bangsbo, the vastly experienced fitness coach. His name sparked a flashback as I vividly remembered our tutor Larry Mahony on the UEFA A Licence course in Dublin in the early 2000s ask the question “who has read Bangsbo?” and tell the group “you need to read his books to digest his innovative ideas on football fitness, as the days of footballers running long distances in training are over!” Larry has worked as a Head Coach, Academy Director and Coaching Tutor in a lifetime dedicated to football in Ireland. He has worked in the professional game with Shamrock Rovers and Bray Wanderers, in the development of young players with many different clubs, and has had a huge influence on emerging coaches in his position as Senior Tutor with the FAI. In practical sessions he is particularly strong on creative attacking play, and his presentations on planning and communication have given many coaches a more enlightened way of coaching and improving players.



He has a gift for simplifying what might be complex concepts and this, in a nutshell, is what this book is all about. He presents grassroots coaches with a sensible, uncomplicated pathway for teaching young players in small-sided games, which will allow their players to unlock their potential to play skilfully, intelligently and competitively. Most importantly, there is a huge emphasis on helping the players to make decisions for themselves, in order to solve the playing problems that these games pose them. The clarity and attention to detail is impressive, but this is not just a book of dry coaching points – in it, you get a flavour of the creativity and humour he brings to his coaching of young players. He never loses sight of the fact that football, for all players young and old, should be conducted in a positive environment where the elements of fun and laughter can enhance creativity. This is a book that all coaches can refer to and learn from a man who has given so much of his life to Irish football.

Stephen Kenny
Republic of Ireland
Senior Men's Team Manager

PART ONE INTRODUCTION

- OVERVIEW
- THE PLAN
- THE PLAYERS
- THE COACH
- THE GAMES
- RONDOS, TRIANGLOS AND DIAMONDOS
- SUMMARY



OVERVIEW

Coaches, with the aid of the internet, can nowadays watch the practice sessions of the world's top clubs, access hundreds of session plans from all levels of the game, and even download the full-season training plans of top clubs. This has resulted in modern trends in coaching filtering down to the grassroots game, but not necessarily with good results; what suits the top players may not be right for those at the opposite end of the game. The practice grounds of youth football clubs are now covered in cones, hurdles, poles, speed ladders and mannequins. Yet years of trying to figure out the best way to help players has taught me that the more cones there are, the further the training is from the real game and the less young players like it.

It delights me to see how coaches, nowadays, so actively seek information, but I see too many directly copy the routines of the top clubs in an honest effort to provide quality learning experiences for the young players in their care. The drills and fitness routines they put the players through may have some value - and the players may even enjoy them - but moving in pre-determined patterns or moving over and through obstacles they will never encounter on the field of play does little to improve their football intelligence.

Inexperienced coaches will continue to get bogged down in details, if at first they don't take a step back to see the big picture in terms of how their youngsters grow and mature as footballers. With this in mind, I have created a model for the development of young players' attacking play, which I believe is simpler than previous versions. It is guided by the ancient coaching philosophy of ***"Let the players play!"*** and the more personal 'philosophy' of ***"Don't itch where you can't scratch!"***

More than anything else, the players must have fun, and footballers of all ages have most fun when they are playing games. To develop football intelligence, they must play for countless hours, so the majority of their practice time should be spent in games, where the picture is constantly changing and challenging their football brains. Learning through playing games has to be more beneficial than moving in pre-determined patterns defined by the adults around them (otherwise known as drills, or, in more scientific terminology, The Boring Method). They must, like you and I did when we were children, spend their day in school looking forward to playing with their friends in the evening's session.

“Don’t itch where you can’t scratch!” means, in practical terms, that your coaching would never outstrip the readiness of the players. When choosing what to do, everything would be guided by the gifts Mother Nature has bestowed on them. Coach the players according to what they are physically and psychologically ready to do and never, ever, pick a fight with her! Conflict between what the players are being asked to do and what they’re able to do usually drains their confidence and, on a more fundamental level, makes practice sessions no fun.

PHASE	CHARACTERISTICS
<i>GET TO KNOW THE BALL!</i>	The youngest players learn how the ball reacts with all the surfaces of the body
<i>MASTER THE BALL!</i>	The players learn to receive and manipulate the ball to dribble, turn, and shoot
<i>MOVE THE BALL!</i>	The players learn to combine with their team-mates in order to move the ball behind opposing defenders
<i>MOVE YOURSELF!</i>	The players learn creative movement to counter the improved defending of opponents
<i>GET TO KNOW THE GAME!</i>	The players learn the specifics of their roles in the eleven-a-side game

Notice how there are no indicators of age alongside the phases; the boys and girls move from one phase to the next as they mature as players and, more importantly, as young people. In this way, this differs from other player pathway models. They move on only when they are ready, with the most talented players progressing at a faster rate.

This book, then, concerns the coaching done in the games in the ***MOVE THE BALL!*** phase; coaching in which simplicity is the key. In this way, it might be seen as a kick back against the internet-inspired trend of overcomplicating football for youth players and, also, a plea to coaches to accept that their job is not to complicate the learning environment, but to simplify it.



THE PLAN

This is a guide for coaches in how to develop players' football intelligence, by coaching in the game during practice sessions. It is not concerned with specific soccer techniques, but with the learning of team skill. It focuses exclusively on how young players learn to relate to and communicate with each other to become a team. It outlines their journey from playing a highly individual, dribbling-based game to a more structured team-oriented passing and dribbling game. Promoting a coaching philosophy of guided discovery, it will help coaches to ask relevant questions, provide the necessary answers, and ultimately give the players the ability to make decisions for themselves.

To do this, it employs the most logical of logical progressions. We start with the smallest team unit - two outfield players - and at different stages, when the players are ready to learn more, we add just one player to the team. We don't initially talk of positions; we just ask the players to see the spaces between them and the possibilities for linking up together, and ultimately see the best options for the team. We take a slow, patient approach to building their knowledge, fostering independent thinking by gradually exploring playing choices in 2v2 and 3v3, as we work towards the learning of the three basic roles of wide player, central playmaker and front player, in the 4v4 game. This understanding of these key roles is the foundation of all positional play. When the players have become familiar with these in the 4v4 games, they will find that stepping up to 7v7, 9v9 and 11v11 is relatively easy.

These roles are outlined in their most basic form and we employ a simple strategy of giving the players a thorough grounding in the basics of positional play. They must learn to play in position before they learn how to change position; extra mobility will be added to their game in the next *"Move Yourself!"* phase.

This book ambitiously aims to provide a completely comprehensive guide, with the intention of preparing coaches for all the playing situations they will meet as they work their way through the games. I have tried to include every playing problem the players will face and every coaching point you will have to make to help them solve each problem. These points are presented in a very specific order; the exact order in which I have learned to present them to the players. There are many, many coaching points covered, but these are revealed gradually in a very deliberate manner - 'shared out' among the practices - so that the players are not blasted with too much information all at once. There is nothing theoretical here; I have seen every situation detailed happen on the training field.

Many years of trial and error have taught me that this is an order that works and I have learned, over all these years, to bite my lip and resist the temptation to jump ahead and veer off the plan. I have now reached the stage, at a very ripe age, where I can ignore playing mistakes which I know will be addressed further on down the road, though there was a time when the enthusiasm of youth would never have allowed me do this. This approach has a distinct advantage if you're a beginner coach, because you can learn with the players as you go along, all the time readying yourself for what's coming next. If you are more experienced, you may appreciate the simplicity of this approach and how it has pared down the teaching of the game to its simplest form.



THE PLAYERS

Each stage of a young player's soccer development must be seen as part of a whole. You, the coach, must appreciate that the children in your care are developing as children first and players second. How they mature as players will run parallel to how they mature as children.

At the youngest ages, children are, by nature, completely self-centred, so it shouldn't surprise us when they display self-centredness when they first step onto the field. They strangely ignore the advice of wise adults who shout at them to spread out and pass the ball, preferring instead to swarm around it, with absolutely no thoughts of their team-mates. Coaches who are really wise don't, as I have said already, pick a fight with Mother Nature – they recognise that if the players are wired to be individuals, we can only teach them as individuals. They can see that games at this stage are a continuous sequence of one-on-one duels, at the heart of the swarm. Smarter coaches know that if their players are going to be in a swarm, they must concentrate on arming them with the skills to deal with it. Consequently, the focus of all early practice is on developing touch and individual dribbling and turning skills, seen as part of an overall strategy of developing the players as individuals before we begin the process of developing them as team players. The youngest years are spent on learning individual technique and then applying that technique as skill, mainly in one-on-one practice and in training games no bigger than 3v3. Even in these three-a-sides, coaches must observe the players as individuals, encouraging them in the duels rather than looking for passing combinations between them.

So, when do players move from being focussed only on themselves and the ball? Without being glib, the answer is always the same: it's when they're ready. This readiness must be judged holistically, in terms of their football and personal development. As children mature, their physical, emotional and social growth will, in most cases, be mirrored by their growth as players. Off the field, at home and in school, they are being asked to become less self-centred and think more of others; on the field they are also asked to be less self-centred and think more of others. With help from you, their appreciation of the other players around them will grow and gradually they will shift from being highly individualistic to being eager members of the group. In this regard, it could be said that your understanding of children is more important than your understanding of soccer. When they think as individuals, we will teach them as individuals; when they are capable of looking outward, away from themselves, we'll teach them to look outward.

Most children are capable of this more mature thinking by the time they come to their U10 season, so this season usually sees the shift to coaching them as team players. Age, however, will not be the only indicator of readiness; the previous learning of the players must be taken into account before moving on. After quite possibly spending as much as five seasons at practice focused on individual development (ages four to eight), they should, at this age, ideally have a good level of touch, which, the players and coach must understand, is at the heart of all attacking skill. In the smaller game, good touch allows them to welcome the ball to them, stay calm on it, and show their skills. As the game opens up for them, certainty that the ball is under control gives them confidence to lift their eyes away from it, and a certain level of composure. Football intelligence is all about making decisions and everyone, young or old, makes better decisions with a cool head. You will ask the players many times

“Are you calm enough to do this?”

The sounder a player's touch, the greater his confidence and the greater his vision.

“When the player's confidence comes up, his head comes up!”

A clear focus on developing the individual, with a proper emphasis on touch and dribbling skills, should have the players arrive at this stage, capable, in small games, of

- receiving the ball in a composed way / welcoming the ball to them
- settling on the ball and looking forward / not in a hurry to get rid of it
- using fakes and dummies to go past an immediate opponent
- using a variety of turns to evade opponents / turn away from trouble

They should, critically, understand the value of “taking the bounce out of the ball” and bringing it down to the ground. Young players tend to deal with a bouncing ball by reaching up for it and putting it back in the air. Keeping the ball on the ground helps in every way. On an individual level, it’s easier for the receiver to work with; on a team level, it makes combination play easier.

“Everything is easier when the ball is on the ground!”

Sometimes, because we take it for granted, we forget that the players, during this initial period of development, should always be encouraged to be technically competent on both sides. Two-footedness is a quality that all young players should strive for.

Once they arrive at this stage, you will expect them to continue to play with a positive attitude in every session, with the inquisitiveness, desire to learn new skills, and the natural lack of fear that characterise all children of this age. During this process, we hope that youngsters will play like youngsters (Attack! Attack! Attack!), while, at the same time, learning to see that positional play is more effective. Children (and many adults) will often resist this notion, but it is your job to show them how it can be a liberating - rather than restricting - experience, allowing each player more space to express themselves. When working in the small games, you, without being in any way dogmatic, must help the players to see that playing in position is a positive thing and that running around wildly rarely works when we’re trying to build moves as a team. Coaches must realise, though, that there is a difference between ‘putting players in position’ and showing them that playing in position will facilitate the team’s aim of moving the ball towards the goal and scoring.



THE COACH

Just how, then, can we go about teaching football intelligence to our young players?

Above all else, the coach of young players must understand that each stage of the children’s game is unique and must then, consequently, be capable of resisting the natural temptation to rush the players towards the adult version of the game. The worst mistake a coach can make is to hurry the players into that grown-up game, without first laying a very solid foundation of understanding how they communicate and combine with each other, in a soccer sense.

Already, we have talked about how you must accept that the first years of the players’ involvement must be devoted to the development of the individual, in a chaotic game setting. In accepting this, you must display the key personal quality of the coach tasked with teaching the game to young players: patience. You must show patience in huge amounts when setting about putting some order on that chaos, as you build the team by adding just one player at a time. This shows itself, most importantly, in how you deal with the young players as individuals and, in a football sense, by how you guide them towards working out solutions for themselves. Patience will also be crucial in choosing the right time to progress from one phase of training to the next.

It's a fact of soccer life that a lot of young players are taught by young coaches, and the one characteristic that young people are not known for is their patience. This has always been the way of the world, but, unfortunately - because of what these coaches are seeing on the internet - their players are now being asked to do things that are even more difficult than what players of earlier generations were asked to do. None but the best ten-year-olds, for example, will be playing clever reverse passes into the path of diagonal runners, although, nowadays, many may be asked to!

Even more patience will be needed if you adopt the policy of helping the players to see things for themselves on the field. Rather than position players by shouting "spread out!" and putting them in place, we want to teach them to position themselves. Independent thinking on the field is a concept to which a lot of lip service is paid, but often coaches can find it difficult to find practical ways to instil this independence in their players. You can do this quite simply, though, by putting them in relevant situations and then asking relevant questions. In doing this, you must be prepared to step in and stop the games. It's nice to say, as many in the game do now, that the game is the best teacher, but even senior players need guidance from the coach.

I continuously refer to 'football intelligence' in this text, and never miss a chance to nurture it, on or off the training field, but I never use the term when talking to the players. Even though there are quite a few of them here, I never use 'ten-dollar words' on the field. I just ask them to read the game; to look away from the ball to see what's going on around them. There is no secret to achieving this – you must continually ask them to do it. You know that, in the heat of the game, players will often fail to see opportunities and, immediately, the picture will change. This is why you must always be ready to stop the game, and stop it at the correct moment.

Over the years, I have come to an understanding with every group I work with, no matter what age they are, that I will only coach in the first half of the games and that the play will be free in the second half. I have found that the players, even up to professional level, will put up with the stoppages in the first half if they know that the second half belongs to them. This doesn't mean that they won't hear reminders from me in the second half, if I think they may be necessary, but I try to say as little as possible from the sideline.

Questioning must be the main coaching tool in your armoury, used with the aim of helping the players to read the game and make decisions without your direct intervention. They do this through a process of looking away from the ball to see the positioning of the other players, both for and against. They learn that every positional choice that they make will have the initial aim of forcing the opponent to also make a choice and we teach them to read the opponents' reactions and come up with solutions to the playing problems they pose. We're teaching the players to read these opponents' reactions and come up with solutions to the playing problems they pose. This is the practical application of this philosophy – the nuts and bolts of reading the game. The coach uses questioning to identify the choices, then leaves it up to the players to find them, rather than continually pouring out the information to them. As they begin to feel the power of their choices, their confidence skyrockets.

If you don't normally question your players and are used to always telling them what they should do, it may take you a little time to get your head around it and become proficient at posing the right questions at the right time. You may be a little nervous in changing your coaching style. Thankfully, there is a shortcut you can use here, which you can use to ease yourself into working this way. Looking at this process logically, you will only have to step in when the players have come up against a playing problem that needs to be solved, so you can always begin by asking:

"Can you see a problem here"?

You may get the answers you want, straightaway, or this general question may have to be followed by more questions, specific to the problem. Once you start to coach like this, though, it won't

take you long to become skilful at using the right question at the right time. A word of warning, though: in some situations, you may have to ask numerous questions before the players will see what you want them to. Even senior players won't make all the decisions for themselves and will need a coach to point them in the right direction. If the players are struggling to come up with solutions to playing problems, you may have to echo your old schoolteacher, who used to tell you that "the answer is in the question!"

"We already have someone on the left, we already have someone on the right, we already have someone at the back, so where should you go?"

Once again, patience is the key. Even though there may be times when the temptation is there to just give them the answer, you have to remember how much you want the players to experience that injection of positivity they get from working it out themselves. Your persistence is worth it.

You must show the greatest patience when deciding that it's time to move the players on to their next phase of learning. Moving up a number (2v2 to 3v3, etc.) marks a move up to a different phase and a different level of understanding, and is wholly dictated by the players' progress. It is your job, therefore, to assess when they have progressed sufficiently, in order to step up. There is a danger that coaches will only undermine their players' confidence - and consequently their future learning - by being too eager, although with the best intentions, to move them on. The ability to choose the right moment to do this often highlights the difference between the art and the science of coaching, with the art of coaching only learned after many years' experience. Choosing which points to start with, deciding when to move the players' learning on, being patient and 'sharing out' the coaching points between the practices, are all things you will see experienced coaches do. They pick their way through a well-defined plan, safe in the knowledge that when they're finished, months or even seasons down the road, their players will have had a thorough and relevant soccer education.

Although there are many publications which indicate age guidelines, you must always remember that chronological age is not the main indicator of how quickly or slowly the players may move along the pathway. All children will develop at their own pace. When you do decide to move on, remind yourself that these practices have to be seen as part of a whole, and then set about reminding the players too. You do this by constantly referencing what you have done in the previous stages. The learning is empirical; the players must not forget what they learned in 1v1 when they move into 2v2, and so on. Each time you progress, you must build a bridge to the work done previously and only then add a new layer of learning. Even though this just seems like common sense, this type of joined-up thinking is all too often absent in youth training programmes - even at professional academy level.

Some final words of advice for the coach: Never stop showing your love for the game. Despite this new emphasis on positional play, you have to ensure that there remains a naturalness about the play. There needs to be buzz around the games in training that's as close as possible to the buzz around the unsupervised games that the players would play in the street or in the park. This resonates with the natural desire to win and the confidence that carries the youngest players past the many mistakes they will make. Do not encroach on that by being stiff or overly serious and be aware of your coaching and - by extension the performance of the players - becoming mechanical. We have already talked about the importance of touch, but remember that touch can desert even the best players if, for whatever reason, they are not relaxed when they're on the field. Tension is the enemy of smooth technical performance and good decision making, so you must ensure that your coaching style is not affecting your players in this way. In a different way, your coaching should have a light touch; both you and your players should enjoy every minute of practice.



THE GAMES

Experience has taught me that more progress will be made if the majority of practice time is devoted to playing games. I have gone from racking my brains as a young coach, trying to find newer and newer drills to fill sessions with, to a stage where I will typically only use one drill as a warm-up before moving onto games in some shape or form. In these games, whether 2v2, 3v3, or 4v4, there are certain things you will always want to see.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPOSURE

As we have said, the players should come to 2v2 practice with the tools to succeed in one-on-one situations. In applying the strategy of first training players as individuals, you would have spent your time up to now with a clear focus on the development of touch and dribbling skills. You would have worked hard on the simple dribbling principles of moving the defender one way before explosively moving the ball the other way. Critically, to allow this to happen, you would have first worked on calming the players down when receiving and then settling on the ball. If, for whatever reason, you haven't covered this vital foundation of play and your players display the (quite natural) tendency to get excited on or near the ball, you may have to go back a step and help them in this regard. Calmness and composure is indispensable if the players are to play in any way skilfully.

You may find at this stage that, because they're only human and especially because they're only children, the composure of some players who were able to play one-on-one well will desert them when they move to 2v2 and the pace of the practice increases. You may even be surprised that some of your better players uncharacteristically experience this, but usually this loss of composure is temporary. Never lose sight of the fact that the progress of young players is never in a direct line; mixed in with all the great forward steps they take will be some backward and sideways ones. Be patient and remind, remind, remind!

DEFEND PROPERLY...

All practice is only of value to the attacking players if the defenders offer them a realistic challenge. It's vitally important, therefore, that all your players work hard when it's their turn to defend. If it's too easy for the attackers, they're not getting the full benefit of the practice. This, of course, means that the whole team is not getting the full benefit of the practice.

It has to be noted that defending properly is not something that comes easily to players of this age, but energetic defending should have been encouraged right from the first time that the players started playing one-on-one. The instructions, however, are very basic and are painted in very broad strokes...

“Rush back straight away to guard your goal!”

“If you lose it, try hard to get it back straight away!”

Now, you will have to insist that the defending players must start on the goalside of their opponents and resist the natural temptation to stand in front of the attackers. This is a concept with which many young players struggle, but it is important for your team's practice that the players have some understanding of positioning to guard their goal. You don't need to go into great detail yet, but the players must be able to pick up goalside positions if the practices are to be realistic, from an attacking point of view.

(Along the way, they will pick up some defensive tips, and there will be times, for the sake of the practices, when you will specifically address the defending. In my experience, though, disciplined

and organised defending is a step beyond the mental ability of the youngest age groups. This has led me to delay formal defensive coaching, with most groups, until the U13 season. (*“Don’t itch where you can’t scratch!”*)

...BUT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF BAD DEFENDING

There’s good news and bad news here; your players will not start out understanding defensive principles, but neither will the players they play against. Bearing this in mind and acknowledging that the defending won’t be perfect, the players can learn a very basic rule, right from when we first start to coach in 2v2; take advantage of bad defending. Coaches of a certain vintage will be familiar with the term “never look a gift horse in the mouth”, but most of today’s youngsters would look at you in bewilderment if you said that to them. Young players, though, at an age when, for most, going to birthday parties is a common feature of their lives, will easily relate to

“If someone wants to give you a present, take it!”

We are going to teach the players ways to work together to open up the way to the goal, but if opposing defenders leave a clear, easy route to the goal open, it would be bad play to ignore it. If we can go through to goal without the need for build-up, we go through and shoot. At no time should a game in training become an academic exercise in making passes for the sake of it. We can never lose sight of the fact that we’re looking to get behind the other team, shoot and score. This is advice that will always be relevant, and which the players can take with them for the rest of their playing days.

“If the defenders let you, just go and score!”

INDIVIDUAL PLAY IS STILL IMPORTANT

The change from one stage to another is not an abrupt one, so be wary of forgetting the dribbling and turning skills that you have spent so long on, just because you start to look more closely at passing. Asking players to link up does not mean asking them to stop dribbling. Remember that your attacking play must have punch! Moving the ball fluidly with quick passing and movement will open up defences, but the higher you go, the more difficult this will be. If you have players that can take one or two opponents out of the game by dribbling well, the balance of any well-organised defence can be disturbed. Players moving from this phase to the next should be able to do both.

A huge amount of your time in 2v2 and 3v3 will be spent on spreading the players apart. In 2v2, they will learn to spread across the field before learning the importance of spreading across and down the field in 3v3. Even though they are now learning to make space as a team, there is still a massive focus in these smaller games on players showing their individual skills, by dribbling when the opportunity presents itself. In these games, every player should be free to dribble, on the condition that they immediately try to win the ball back if they lose it. Accordingly, the initial positioning of the player or players off the ball will be to move defenders away to allow the individual to attack the facing defender. It wouldn’t be logical to ignore dribbling, now that the players, through better positioning, have more space to do it. Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water!

PLAYERS PLAY IN EVERY POSITION

Watch out for players gravitating to their preferred side or to what they perceive as their own position (usually as a result of being told to do so by a well-meaning adult). As a natural extension of your teaching of individual skills with both left and right foot, you must ensure that each player has experience of playing on both the left and the right in the 2v2s. They should then go on to experience playing in the deep forward position in the 3v3s and playing as the defender/playmaker in 4v4. In all the games, the players should take turns to play in goal, even if your team already has designated goalkeepers. This is especially important in the 3v3 games, where the goalkeeper initiates every move, effectively playing the role of server.

Even if a player's skill set and temperament may clearly point to him eventually becoming an attacker or a defender, playing in the direct opposite position will give him an insight into what makes a player effective in his preferred position. By playing at the back, for example, front players learn which type of movement causes problems for defenders, and vice versa. Every season that passes moves each player nearer to a specialised position, but the solid grounding that playing different positions gives will imbue your players with an extra layer of confidence, that will always serve them well.

QUICK TRANSITION

The use of the word 'transition' has become very fashionable in football in recent years, but this has always been a hugely important element of the game. People who now see transitioning from defence to attack, or vice versa, as a sophisticated team tactic might be surprised to hear that work begins on this right from the first time that the players play 1v1. The golden rule of 1v1 is that the players must play with a positive energy, so they are told, in their very first session:

"If you lose the ball, try to get it back straight away!"

"If you win the ball, try to score straight away!"

In this way, we teach them to recognize how important it is to react automatically at the 'magic moment' when the ball changes hands. Once learned, they carry the habit of reacting quickly in this way into all the games. If they haven't developed this mindset in 1v1 practice, you will have to address it immediately in the 2v2 games, and constantly remind the players in the 3v3s and 4v4s. Like all good habits with children, the secret is to catch them early!



RONDOS, TRIANGLOS AND DIAMONDOS

The warm-ups and games should be supplemented by the use of the tried and trusted 'classics'; 5v2, 3v1 and 4v2. These numbers-up practices are a vital element in the development of football skill. In order to understand why, you must ask yourself the question:

"How is skill learned?"

Those of you with any experience of the game will straightaway answer "practice, practice and more practice!" and you will, of course, be right. If I was then to ask "what kind of practice?" you may have to think a little before answering. Before attempting, now, to do so, maybe we should pause to look at the nature of technique and skill and what I see as the crucial difference between the two. I believe that it is in the understanding of this difference that the key to effective skill learning lies.

Technique refers only to the mechanics of receiving, striking and guiding the ball - how the body specifically interacts with the ball, irrespective of the situation.

Skill, on the other hand, is the application of that technique in the game. It is how the player interacts with the ball and the situation around him.

This may seem like a fussy observation, but it's vitally important that coaches understand this and its implication for their coaching. Technique practice is the 'how', skill practice is the 'which, where and when?' Hours and hours of repetitive, but stimulating practice must be devoted to both.

There can be no high-level skill without high-level technique, but even the most outstanding technique is only a platform for the work on skill that has to follow. The skill is applying that technique at the right time, in the right place, under the pressure of opponents, time and space. This is why, even in your own team, you can often see players with excellent ability playing unskilfully. Players who relate well to the ball (who have very good technique) often find that their technique fails when it is put under pressure. We've all come across the fantastic ball juggler who struggles to control the ball in games. There are less obvious examples, however, such as the winger with great touch and quick feet who repeatedly runs into defenders until he loses the ball, or the defender with great long passing ability who constantly gives the ball away by trying to play over the opposition's defence. The presence of defenders forces players to make decisions and the difference between skilful and unskilful play is the ability to make the correct game decisions. Skill, then, is only improved with repeated exposure to the demands of the game.

This brings us back to the question of which type of practice? It is not difficult to see that the players must start with unopposed practice and also that they must, ultimately, play in games to learn, but coaches often fail to recognise that there is an intermediate step between these forms. The obvious implication of what we've said is that there must be some form of opposition in practices if players are to develop skills that will not fail them in match situations. I have learned the hard way over the years that working on technique in unopposed practice will not imprint that technique as a skill on a player's game. This, in turn, throws up another question – how can a young player learn a skill when there's always a defender breathing down his neck? Logic tells us, then, that pressure must be applied gradually, if technique is to be transformed into skill. We start with no opposition and gradually add it until the players are practicing in fully-opposed situations.

This strategy can be illustrated with a simple three-step skill development ladder. The coach's job is to implement the strategy patiently and shrewdly, in order ultimately to accelerate the players' learning.

STEP 1 – UNOPPOSED PRACTICE

STEP 2 – PART-OPPOSED PRACTICE

STEP 3 – FULLYOPPOSEDPRACTICE

The basic 'rondos' sit snugly on the middle rung of this ladder, fulfilling the functions of part-opposed practice. They allow the players to challenge their technique and test themselves under a level of pressure that they can cope with. These 'numbers-up' practices give the attackers a clear advantage, but challenge them, with various degrees of difficulty, to make real game decisions, at real game speed. In practical terms, they allow the players to read match-like situations, make some passes, establish some rhythm and meet with some level of success in every session. In these practices, the players develop a well of good playing habits to draw from. They're not classics for nothing!

I joke with the players that 'rondo' means 'round', so it's only a rondo if we play in a circle. Nowadays, though, all the numbers-up games are called rondos, so I stubbornly call 3v1s 'trianglos' and 4v2s 'diamondos'!

In 5v2, the players learn to “Play simple!”, “Play early!” and “Play away from the defenders!” Seeing that the defenders are on one side and playing to the other side prepares the players for the 2v2 situation when both defenders are drawn to the ball and the player on it decides to pass instead of dribble.

3v1 reinforces the need for players to move sharply if they want the ball and specifically relates to the two wide players moving along the line to show for the ball.

4v2 emphasises moving the ball patiently, with the players learning to play sideways passes until the defenders are opened up to allow the through pass, as they do in the 4v4 game.



SUMMARY

My aim in producing this guide is to be as comprehensive as possible. It, hopefully, will prepare you, the grassroots coach, for all the situations and problems that may arise in the games, so that there are no surprises lying in wait for you. There is no guarantee that some players, somewhere, won't come up with some strange play, but I am confident that everything you need is here.

I would recommend that you read each section through and become familiar with the planned progressions, before starting the work with your players. Please don't, when you're reading, fall into the coach's trap of looking for what isn't included. Yes, I know that there are no check runs, one-twos, overlaps or positional rotations included here. I haven't forgotten any of these: they're not included because these variations are for further on down the road, when the players have attained a solid grounding in team play and are mentally ready to add these moves to their game.

Most coaches don't like to hear this, but all of the work here is going to take time. Your rate of progress is dictated by what you see on the training pitch, not what you see on the page. Typically, there is two seasons' work here and these are typically the U10 and U11 seasons. Unfortunately, anyone who has children of their own knows that, when children are concerned, there is no such thing as typical, so anything may happen to alter this timescale. My advice is to err on the side of taking extra time to complete the work rather than rush through it. If you are going to try to deliver all the coaching points in a short space of time, the players will spend more time listening to you than playing.

Your players should finish their time with you, with the ability to link up with their team-mates, in attacking and defensive situations, irrespective of formations and 'modern' trends. Most importantly, know who you are and where you are. You're not a coach at the Barcelona Academy, so you won't be doing Barcelona Academy training with your players!

"Here we go!"



- INTRODUCTION
- ORGANISATION / STARTING POSITIONS
- DRIBBLE OR PASS?
- READING THE SECOND DEFENDER
- THE THREE-TRY RULE
- PLAYING WITH THE GOALKEEPER
- RE-SETTING
- TAKING IT INTO THE BIG GAME
- SUMMARY



INTRODUCTION

When we move to coaching 2v2, we start building the team by focusing on the smallest possible unit. Two players learn to combine to get behind the opposition and score.

This stage marks the first maturing of young children from individuals into team players. You, the coach, however, must appreciate that the move to 2v2 does not represent a concrete cut-off point between what has been, up to now, mainly a dribbling-based game, and the more grown-up passing game. It is very common, at this stage, to see the players - because they can more easily see opportunities to pass - to think only of passing and disregard all their previous 1v1 lessons on facing up to defenders and taking every opportunity to dribble. Doing this, of course, doesn't make sense. All their previous learning cannot be just thrown away; everything they learned in 1v1 must be brought with them into 2v2.

You and the players must realise they are always layering more football knowledge onto what they've already learned. It is human nature for all players, young or old, when they enthusiastically take on the challenge of a new practice, to forget what's gone before. You can show them, though, how they must take their learning from the previous practices along with them. Everything they ever do in practice is relevant to their game and is logged in their 'on-board computer', to be called up in the future.

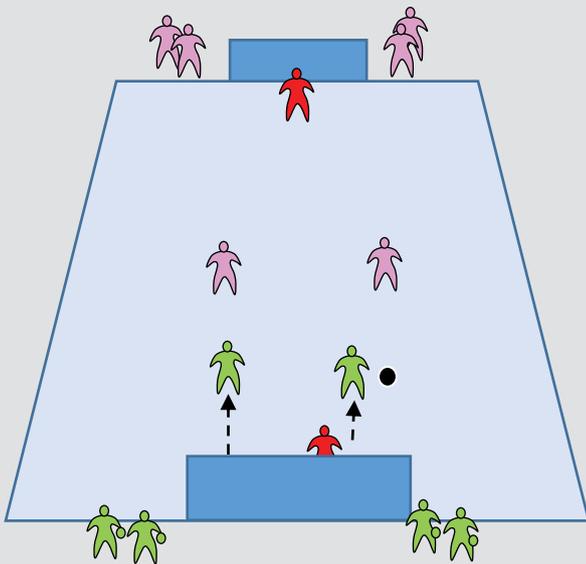
Passing now becomes a more important element of team play, but we're still at the stage where dribbling is the first option for the player on the ball. Now, though, it's dribbling with an added awareness of the bigger picture around him or her. It's still the children's version of the game, with lots of dribbling and some passing.



ORGANISATION/STARTING POSITIONS

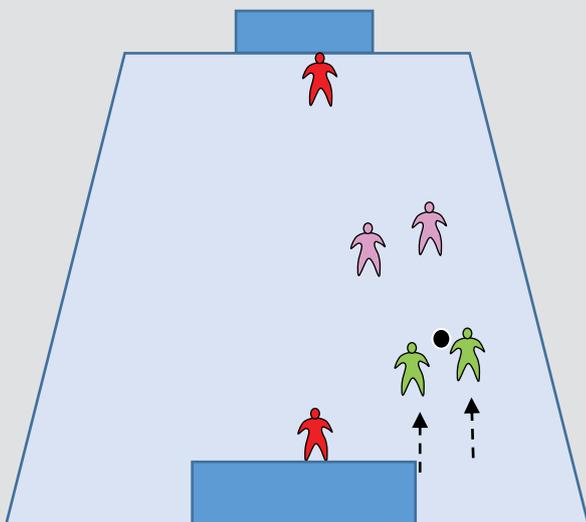
2v2, in a 30m. by 20m. area, with 2 goalkeepers. The pairs take turns, with the next two coming on, nice and quickly, as soon as a goal is scored or the ball goes out of play. Use more than one pitch if you have a large group, and have six players, at most, on each. This set-up allows the players enough rest to ensure that the level of intensity always stays high, while avoiding having them waiting for too long between turns. Let the groups change pitches regularly, so that they play against different opponents.

As soon as the second attacker is introduced, we always play with a goalkeeper. This allows both players to move forward safely, with the keeper always providing support from behind. It doesn't have to be your 'real' or regular goalkeeper; one of the players from the next waiting pair can go in goal. In the initial stages, you can allow the goalkeeper to pick up back-passes or put a **'no pressing the keeper'** rule on the defending players.



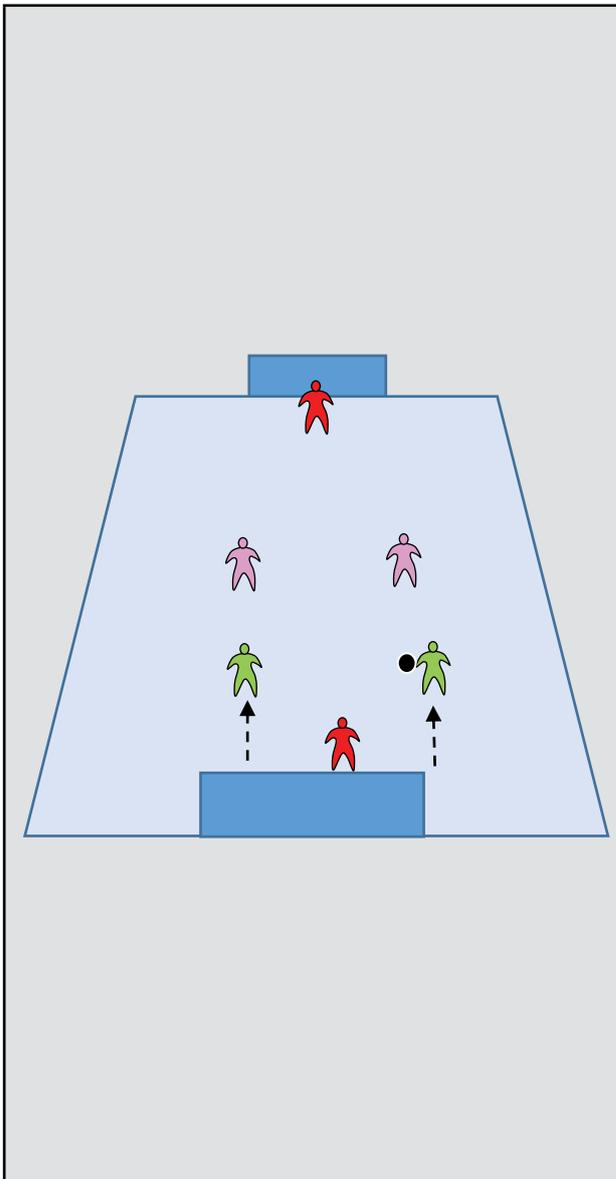
The players don't start marked; they're allowed come out with the ball, as they did in 1v1 practice. This ensures that the practice is always weighted in the attacking team's favour. Each 'go' starts with an attacker facing forward, ready to dribble.

When they progress to 3v3, they will learn to work against tighter marking, but there is very little need for them to do this now, as they are very unlikely to be faced with tight-marking opponents in games, at this age.



You will find, at first, that most of your players will come out close together, making the defenders' job easier. It would be highly unusual for young players to split apart before they come out; it would be even more unusual for them to split down the field into deep positions.

This usually presents you with your first opportunity to step in and influence the players' positioning.



You can do this by asking some or maybe even all of these simple questions:

“Have you got much room there?”

“Would you like more space than that?”

“Can you move somewhere to get yourself more room?”

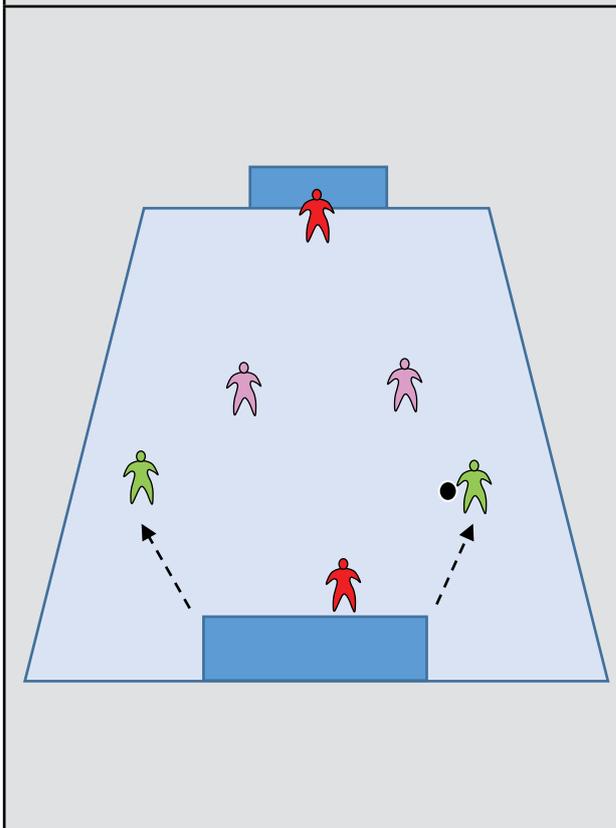
“Can you move somewhere to make things easier for yourself?”

“Does that make things easier for your partner as well?”

“Can you move somewhere to make it harder for the defenders to cover the two of you?”

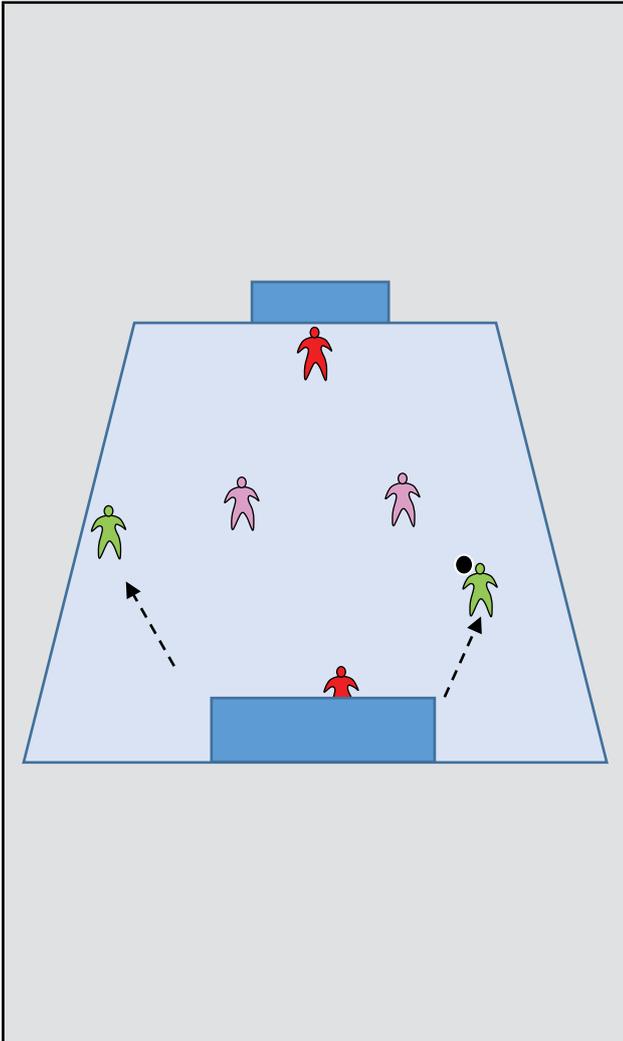
Ultimately, you’re going to ask the players to

“Read the game!”



It won’t take long for the players to see that spreading apart will make their job easier, and make the job of the defenders more difficult. They will also quite easily recognise that if they stay together and fail to spread, their positioning allows the defenders to defend effectively against both of them - without having to try too hard.

Understanding this, they will start each play differently. Now when they come onto the field, they will move wide, away from each other, with each player coming from a different side of the goal.



When moving away from his partner, the player off the ball can move all the way to the touchline.

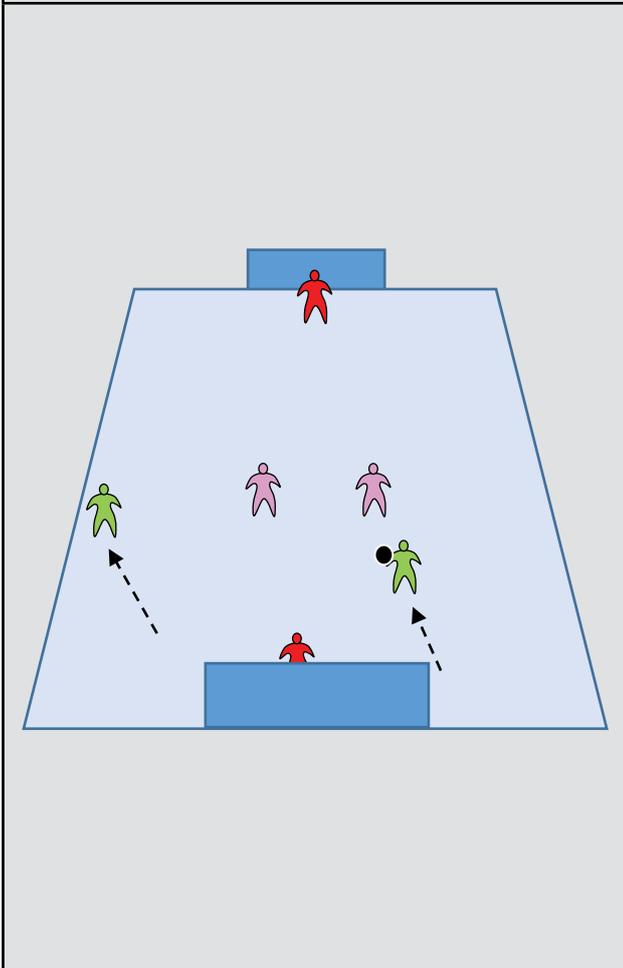
To cause the most discomfort for his opponent, he moves forward to threaten the space behind the defender, without moving into an offside position.

The defender on his side must now decide whether to stay with him or move to help his team-mate challenging for the ball.

“So what’s happened?”

“By spreading out, you may get some space for yourself (if the defender decides not to come near you) or you may get some space for your partner (if the defender follows you out to the side)!”

“It’s all about getting space!”



You may find that, when the player off the ball moves wide, his partner may continue directly up the middle with the ball. This still allows the defenders to position closely together, so the player on the ball should also move wide before attacking the defender.

“Do you have to take the ball up the middle?”

“Can you get yourself some more space?”

Most players will see that they’ll get more space for themselves by moving to the side. Once they see this, they now have two simple rules for starting:

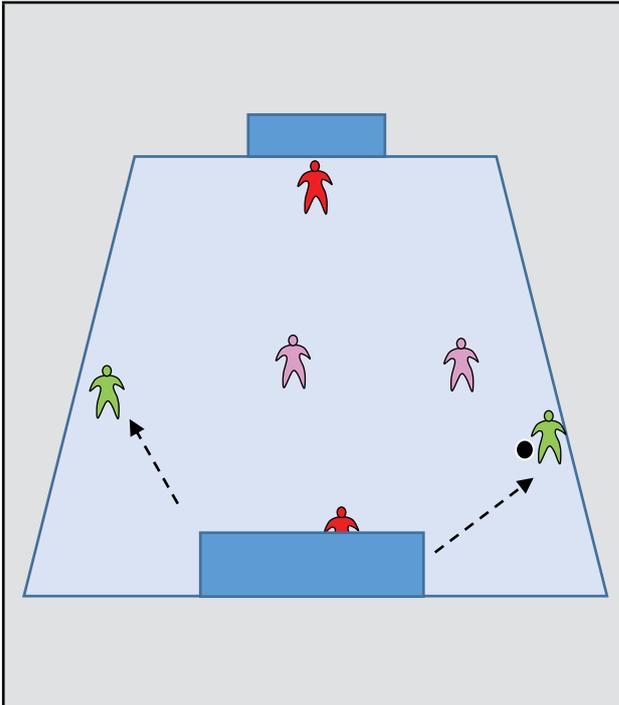
“Take a side each!”

“Don’t have two players on the same side!”

This begins the process of the players seeing things for themselves. We want them to spread out after seeing the picture around them, rather than being told to do so by adults. They discover the golden rule by themselves – two players shouldn't be in the one space. I tell players this, in a fun way:

"Stay out of his garden!"

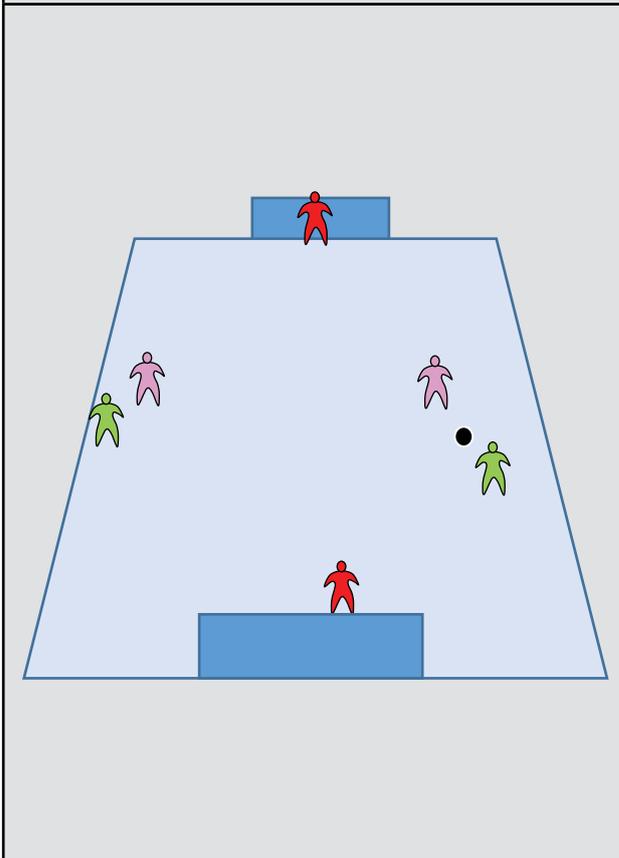
This is a reference to my own youth, when we played football on the street and were always being admonished by neighbours when the ball found its way into their small, but well-kept gardens.



We now have the two players spreading apart, but in different ways...

As we have said previously, the player off the ball, to cause the most discomfort for his opponent, moves all the way to the touchline. If the player with the ball does the same, though, he cuts down his option of going outside the defender. We ask him:

"Well done for moving to the side, but if you go all the way to the line, can you go past the defender on the outside?"



The answer to this is for the player on the ball to come out to (what we call in Ireland) a 'wide-ish' position – as wide as he can go, while still leaving enough space outside him to move into, if he so chooses.

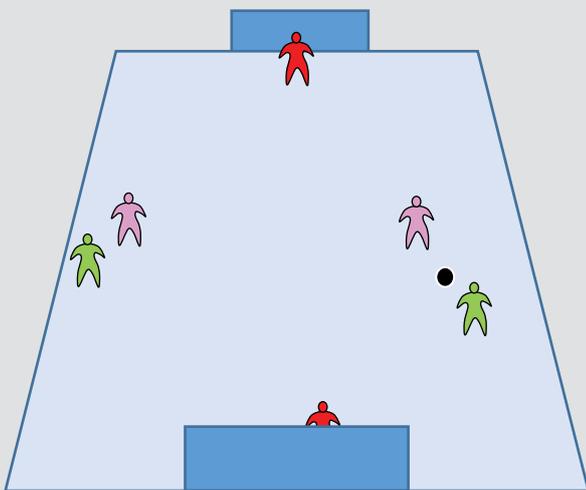
To facilitate this, he should direct the ball at the inside leg of the defender.

"Can you dribble to open up some space on the outside?"

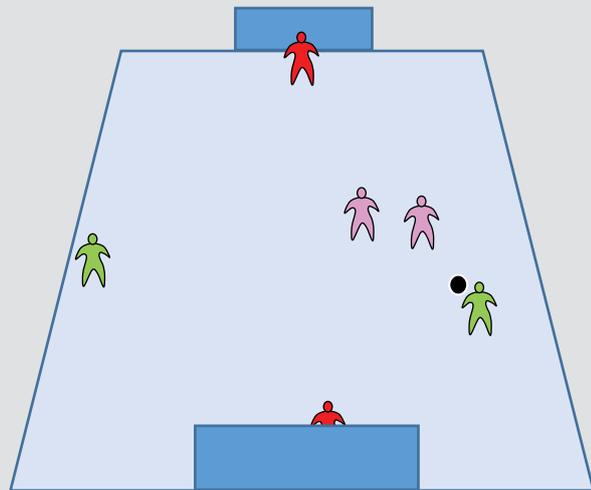
Some young players may also feel extra pressure if they find themselves right up against the line, so approaching the defender in this way will take this worry away from them.

The attackers now understand that the primary aim of moving away from each other is to pull the defenders apart, creating space between them that they can exploit. But the defenders will not always do what we want them to – opponents, unfortunately, have a habit of spoiling even the best-laid plans. Spreading apart, though, will always bring about some reactions from them, in terms of their positioning in relation to each other. The challenge for you is to teach the players to read these reactions, see the opportunities they present, and then take advantage of them, in order to get behind the defenders and score. Once they learn to do this, and are beginning to play with added awareness, this process must be repeated every single time they are faced with an attacking situation, in training or in competitive games. At this early age, they are taking their first steps towards being effective readers of the game.

It comes as a surprise to many inexperienced coaches that the choices their players make are so influenced by the positions that the defenders take up. Assuming that, quite naturally, the defender nearest to the ball will usually challenge for it, it is the position of the second defender that we must particularly look out for. With this in mind, there are two basic pictures that you and your players may see. You will find that most younger players, when they find themselves in the role of second defender, take up a position at one extreme or the other...



They either go man-to-man, with the second defender following the player off the ball all the way out to the wide position...



Or get drawn to the ball, leaving the player off the ball free.

The positions the defenders take up will influence the player on the ball in the first, most basic tactical decision he will have to make...

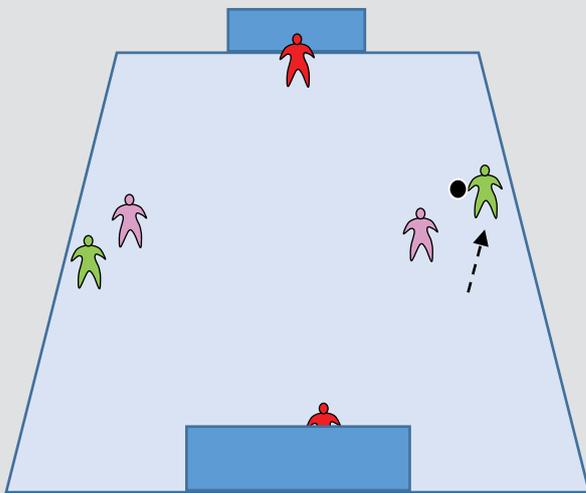


DRIBBLE OR PASS?

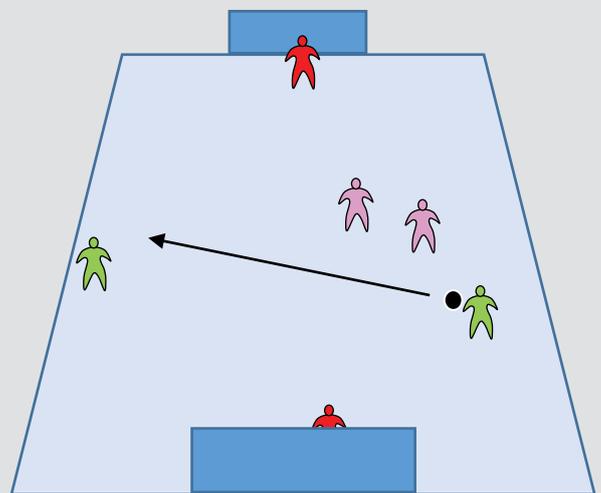
In the previous phases, you will always have encouraged your players to dribble with their heads up. Now, if you ask them *“why must you get your head up?”* most players will still answer *“to see the defender”*, referring to the player who positions in front of the ball, blocking the way to goal. In 2v2, after asking that question, you should follow on by asking *“which defender?”*, because the player on the ball must now learn to look for the positioning of both players. He must see the opportunities that their positioning presents him and then respond in a way that best serves the team’s aim of getting behind the defenders and scoring.

At all times, the players must ask themselves *“Where is the second defender?”* as it is the position he takes up that is vital to the attackers’ decision-making. This is their first introduction to the concept of continuously looking away from the ball for the positions of opposing defenders. *“See everything!”* will be a slogan you will use from now on, all the way up to when you’re coaching your players in the eleven-a-side game.

In both situations, you must help them to see what is the best option for the team, and I cannot emphasise enough that it’s their job to see this, not yours. When you question them, they won’t find it difficult to come up with the two most straightforward solutions:



Taking the first defender on in a one-on-one duel if the second defender stays away...

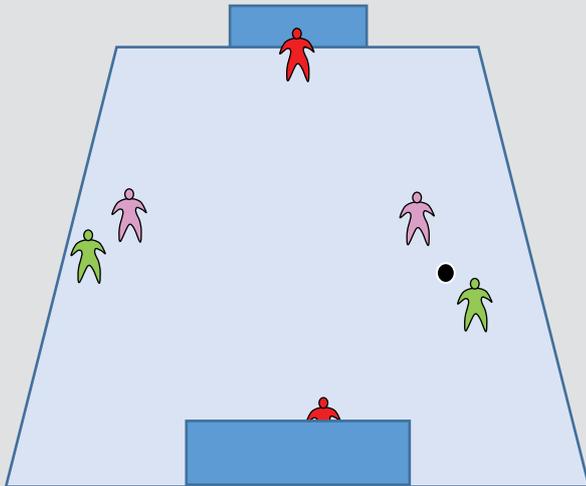


Or passing to the free attacker if the second defender is drawn to the ball

These are simple, very general solutions, but the players must be calm and controlled enough to see them. They must take the time to actually move their heads to see the options presented by the positioning - good or bad - of the defenders.



READING THE SECOND DEFENDER



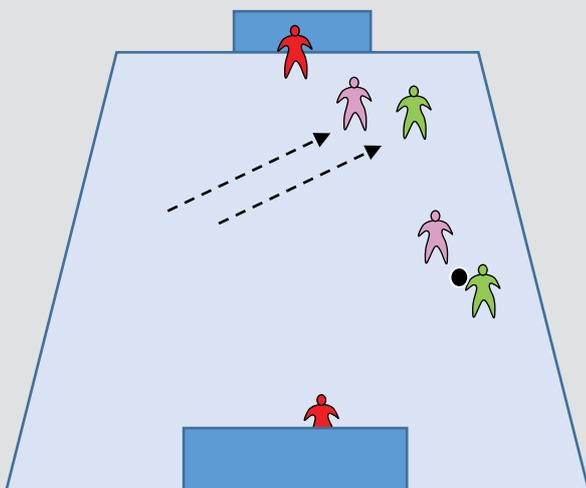
If the second defender follows him out, the wide player must recognise this and learn to ignore the very natural temptation to run. He should move out wide, relax and stay out wide. By doing this, he anchors the second defender, leaving his team-mate to get on with the task of beating his immediate opponent in a 1v1 duel.

“Well done for moving him out!”

“If you bring him out, do you need to move?”

This is a specific example of how young players begin, at this stage, to realise that the game is not just about getting the ball for themselves.

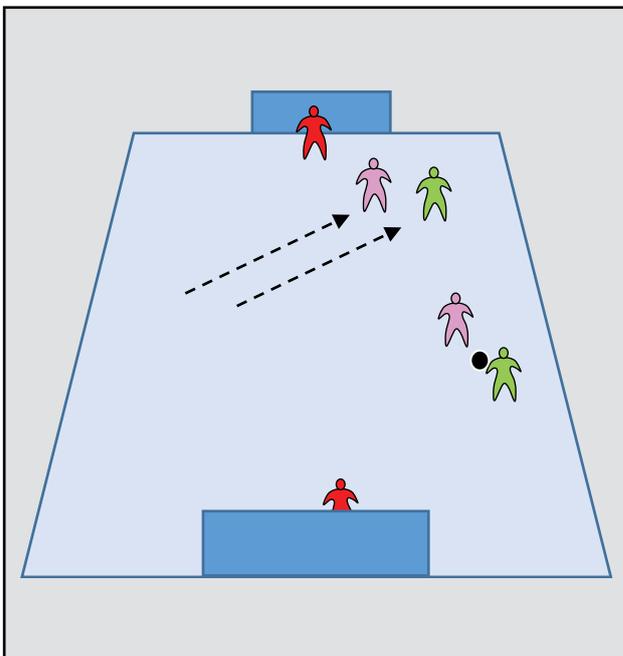
“If you bring him out, you’ve done a good job for the team!”



Unfortunately, it may take your players some time to understand this and to learn to fight the natural inclination to run when they don’t actually need to.

You will find that the player off the ball often loses patience and runs without thinking of how the run will affect the situation, especially for his partner.

One such run to especially look out for is the run in behind the first defender, which, at this stage of the players’ learning, only serves to block up the space that the dribbler wants to go into.

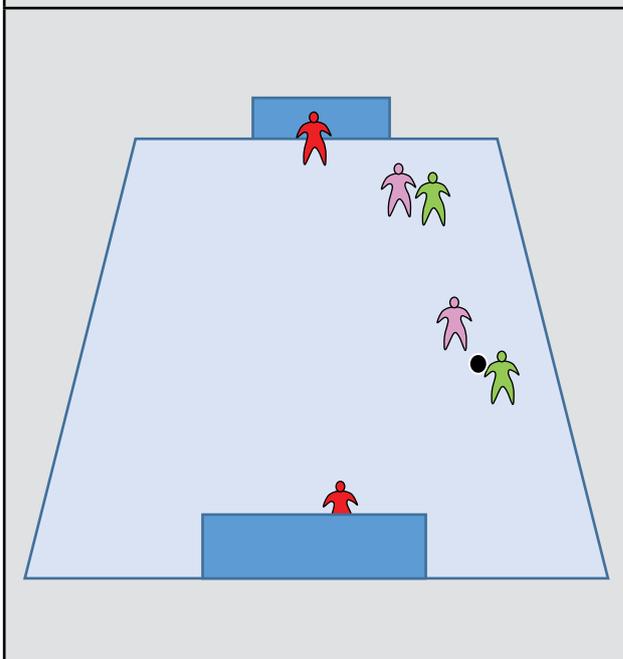


Your job now is to point out how that move might not make football sense.

“Well done for showing great energy, but does your team-mate really want you to run in there?”

“You opened up the space for him to dribble into, but now you’ve run into that space!”

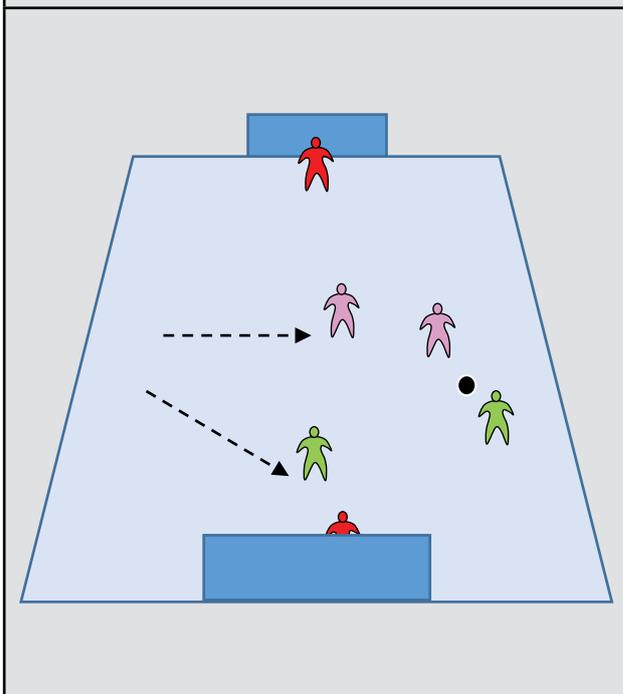
“It’s only a space as long as there’s no-one in it!”



By freezing the play, you can show that the run brings the second attacker into a place where the player on the ball cannot pass to.

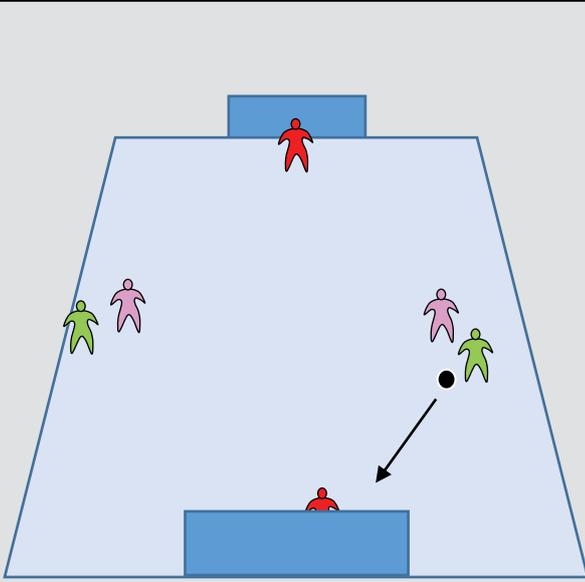
“Can he get a pass to you there?”

If you ask the players to freeze and then change places, you can help the runner to see the move from the passer’s viewpoint. By doing this, he will see that the passer cannot get the ball to him if he goes into that ‘dead’ space behind the first defender.



On the other side of the coin, many young players will recognise that it’s easy to get the ball for themselves by dropping behind the dribbler, but they must be discouraged from doing this. They must trust the player on the ball to look after it, while they make it difficult for the second defender, rather than making it easier for him to help his team-mate and guard the goal.

Again, by good use of questioning, we can help the players to work out why the player on the ball doesn’t need this support from behind...



“Does your mate need you there?”

“Has he got help there already?”

“Why doesn’t he need you to help him from behind?”

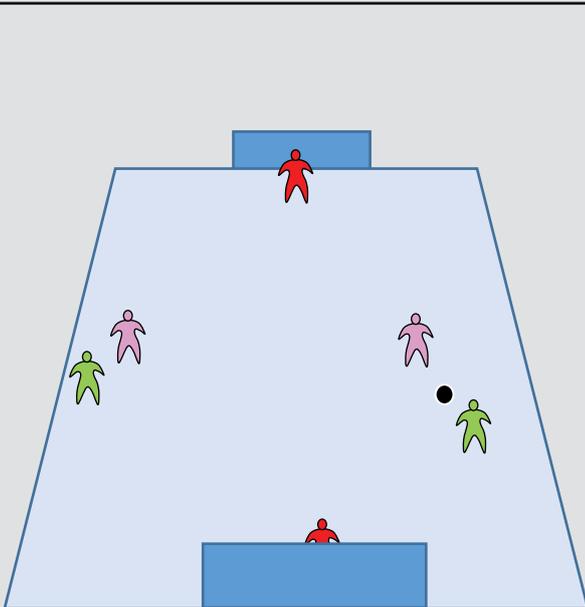
The answer to the last question is because the goalkeeper is there. If the player on the ball is pressed hard by the defender and feels he cannot complete the dribble, he can always turn around and pass back to him.

Whether the second player is tempted to run ahead of or behind his mate, your message to him remains the same:

“Get wide and have the patience to stay wide!”

“You don’t have to run so much!”

“You’re doing a great job for the team by staying out there!”

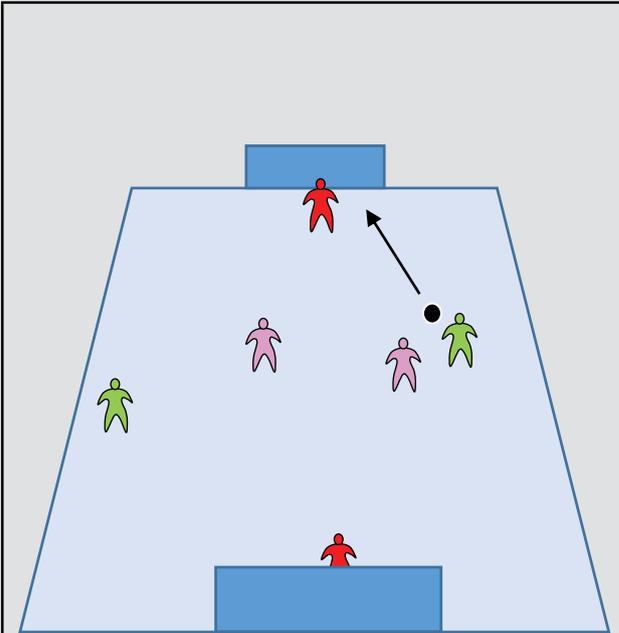


“Head up!”

Once we have the second attacker occupying the second defender, your focus will be directed to the decision-making of the player on the ball.

You must re-emphasise the need for him to calmly and positively apply his dribbling skills. He should approach the defender in a composed, controlled way, with his head up.

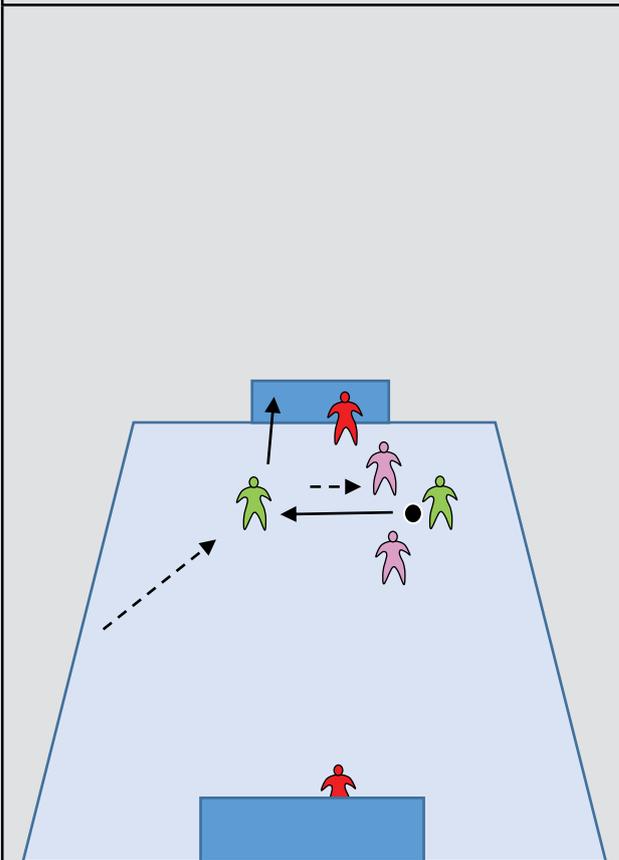
You will have always taught him to dribble with his head up, but now it becomes even more important. In 1v1, he had no choice; the only option was to take the defender on. Now, he has to see both defenders and make his choice in response to their positioning.



As soon as he recognises that the second defender has stayed away and is concerned only with his team-mate, he must seize the moment and attack the defender with a positive, aggressive dribble.

“Can you get past him and score?”

If the dribble is successful, he shouldn't hesitate in getting his shot away or going around the goalkeeper to score.



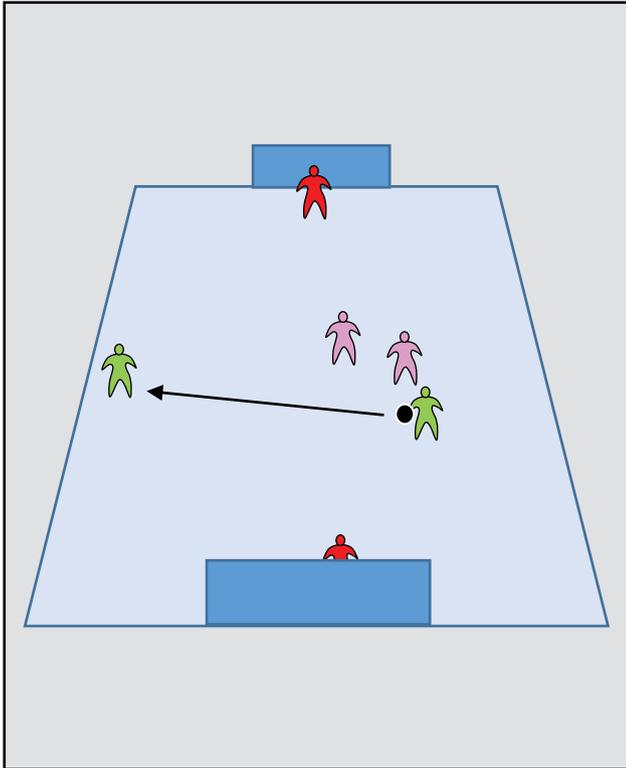
If he beats his player and the second defender moves across to block him, he may roll the ball square for his partner, who has read the situation and has come in from his wide position, to score.

This is a situation which occurs time and time again in 2v2 practice. Many young players, though, will choose to ignore the player across the box and insist on shooting, often from a poor angle. This is an example of the self-centredness that is a natural characteristic of this stage of development. You must now demonstrate how the roll across the goal area is the best option for the team; it presents the second player with an almost certain goal.

“Who has the easiest chance to score?”

“If he has a better chance of scoring, should he get the ball?”

“Play for the team!”

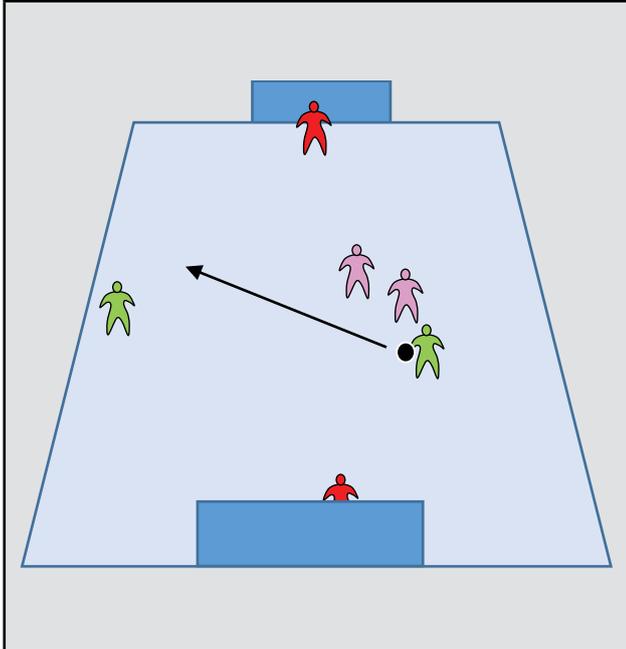


If the second defender is drawn towards the ball, as the majority of players of this age usually are, the player in possession must read the game, see how this move by the defender will leave his partner free, and pass to him.

Now that passing is an option, we must pay attention to it. Young players, when they see that the pass is on, will often tend to play it directly to the feet of their partner, rather than look to play behind the defenders.

“That’s a good pass, but could it be better?”

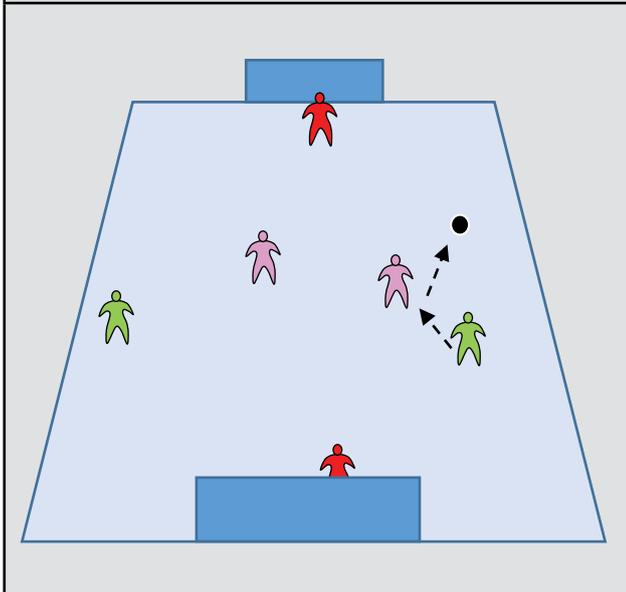
“Could you get him nearer to the goal?”



The exact positioning of the second defender will dictate the direction of the pass. If his positioning allows it, however, it should be played through, into the space in front of the second attacker - putting both defenders out of the game.

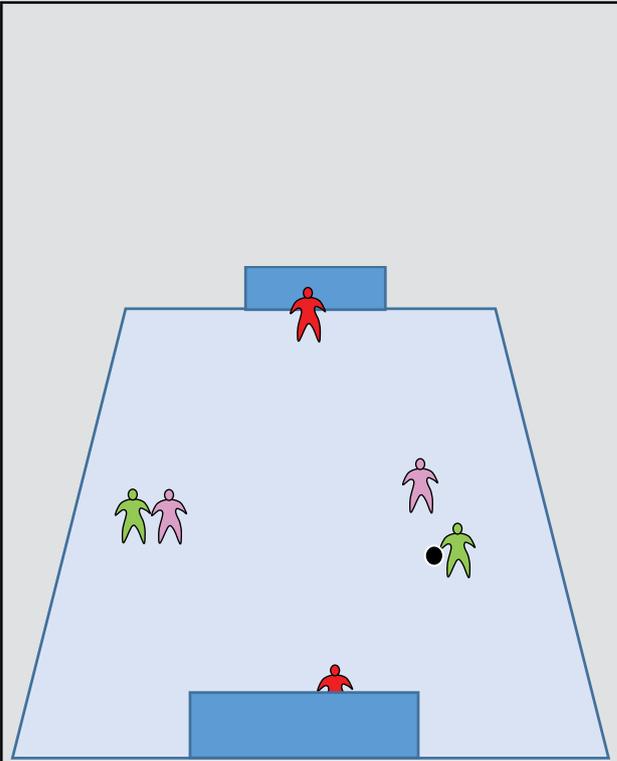
This is when we see the value of the second defender positioning high, rather than dropping behind the ball.

“If you can get in behind, get in behind!”



If the second defender adopts a good half-and-half covering position, the dribbler must recognise this and still be brave enough to attempt the dribble. He will learn, by trial and error, that the best way to beat the defender is usually on the outside.

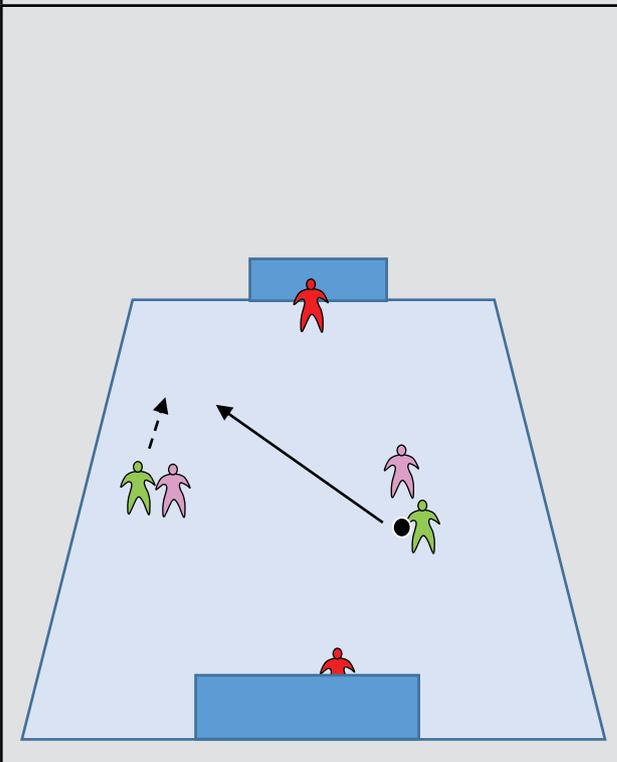
To give himself a greater chance of success, he should first direct his run at the inside leg of the defender to take him further inside. He should feint to go inside and then accelerate with the ball, past him, on the outside.



There will be exceptions to the general rules. Normally, we would demand that the player on the ball dribble when the second defender moves away, but, sometimes by marking too closely, that defender invites the pass into the space behind him.

He may come up too far, ending up square to the attacker, or may even stand across him, in an effort to block the direct pass to his feet. If he does this, he is not guarding his goal and because he has to turn, the attacker must be favourite to win a race for the through ball. Both attackers should see this.

“I know we’ve asked you all to dribble if the second defender moves over, but can you see an easier way to get through?”



If the player on the ball passes into the space behind the defenders and the player being marked runs for the through pass, both defenders can be put out of the game.

All your players must recognise this as a much more economical way of getting in behind the defenders. Because they’re defending poorly, we can get in behind with just one run and one pass.

They will do a lot more work on recognising opportunities for through passing in the 3v3 games, but they should see this, for now, as another chance to

“Punish bad defending!”



THE THREE-TRY RULE

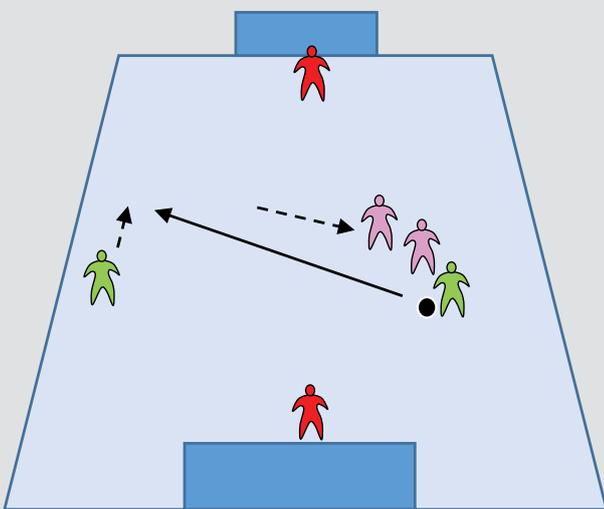
It is natural for players who have been used to playing a lot of 1v1, to see 2v2 as a very different game - a passing game. They must be helped to understand that, at this stage, we are still looking at dribbling as our first attacking option. At this point, the main reason for spreading out is to allow more room for the dribble. Passing is not yet the priority, so chances to dribble should not be rejected in favour of playing passes for the sake of playing passes. Later in their development, the players will learn the value of playing what seem to be aimless passes with the aim of pulling defenders out of good defending positions, but that tactic is a long way down the road from where they are now. At this stage, the dribbler is the main man and the player away from the ball is, in effect, doing his best to pull the second defender away from him.

There will be, however, many times when the dribbler will try to get past the defender, only to be forced back by him. When this happens, we always encourage him to try again, as long as he's still in control and the situation in relation to the position of the second defender hasn't changed. In fact, we give him the freedom, if he's forced back, to try again a couple of times. Common sense then dictates that if he's tried three times and hasn't got past the defender, he moves the ball on, to either of his team-mates.

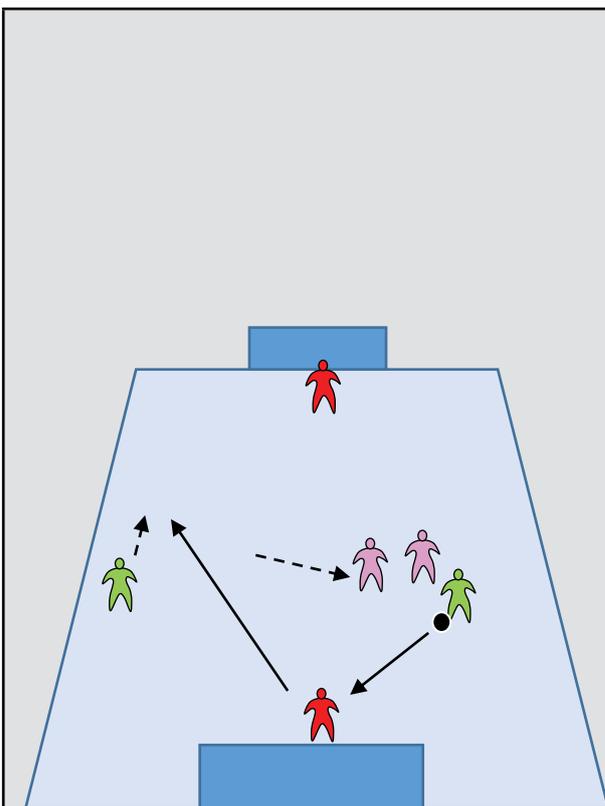
*"If you try it three times and you don't get through,
we'll try to get through somewhere else!"*

"Two or three tries will draw the two defenders in!"

"if you hit a brick wall, try somewhere else!"



There is a good chance, though, that the repeated efforts to take the defender on will draw the second defender to the ball, anyway. The dribbler must recognise this and, straight away, move it to his partner, who now has been freed up.



The second defender may be drawn so close to the ball, though, that he ends up closing down the option of the pass to the other side. You will find that, sometimes, the player on the ball panics when faced with this added pressure, and still tries to pass to his teammate, only to have it blocked.

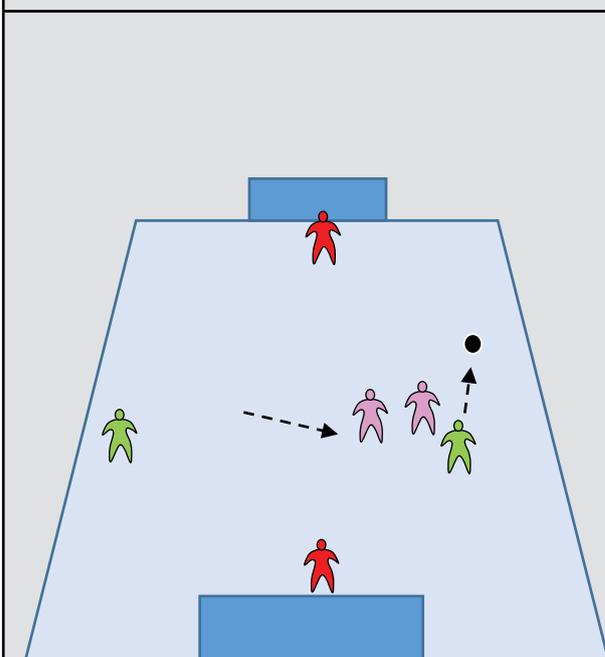
“He’s free, but you can’t get it straight to him. What can we do to get it to him?”

If he doesn’t see the answer, you can ask

“Can someone else get it to him?”

This should help him recognise that he can turn, roll a pass gently back to the keeper, who plays the second attacker through with a first-time pass. The second attacker, again, must resist the temptation to drop behind the ball.

“If the keeper’s there, you don’t have to drop back!”



“Yours!”

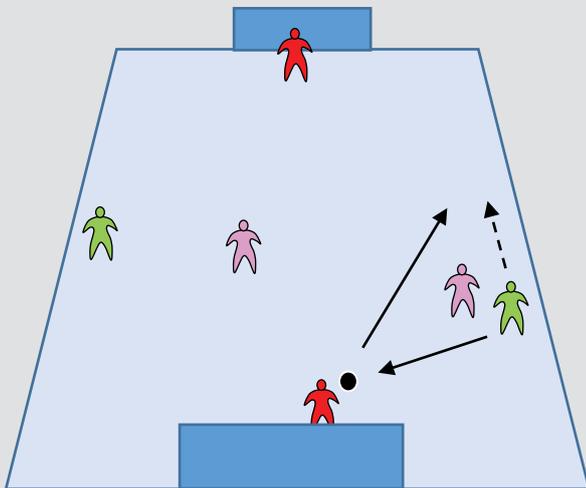
Another exception to a general rule: Even though we’ve told the players that they should pass when they get the defenders pulled in, the player on the ball can be really clever in the same situation by using his partner as a decoy. He can pretend to pass, before turning on the outside and beating both defenders with the one move. He can even call ***“Yours!”*** to his partner, as he does so, to add to the deception.

This type of play appeals to young players, who will take great delight in deceiving the defenders in this way. Such inventive, attractive plays can fool even the best defenders, so you should not be afraid to open up your players’ minds to decoy play, even at this early age. As an added bonus, they will have fun trying it!



PLAYING WITH THE GOALKEEPER

Quite often, the ball will find its way back to the goalkeeper. The opposing defenders will sometimes press hard and force his attackers to pass back to him. His defenders may win the ball back in a tight area and choose to go back to him to take the pressure off them, or he may make a save and hold the ball. Whenever he gets the ball, play must continue. Sometimes in the initial stages, when the players are only getting used to the organisation of the practice, some of them will even stop completely, thinking their turn is over when the keeper saves. We want them, though, to react in the completely opposite way.

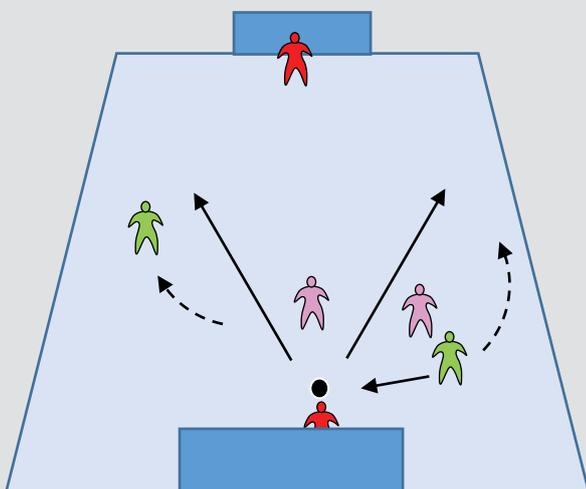


Regardless of how the keeper ends up with the ball, his two team-mates must see the moment he gets it as an opportunity to immediately get in behind the defenders, if one or both of them are drawn to the ball.

If the defender forces the player on the ball to pass back, he doesn't stand still as it's on its way, but sprints in behind the defender for the through pass from the keeper.

"Can you catch them out when it goes back?"

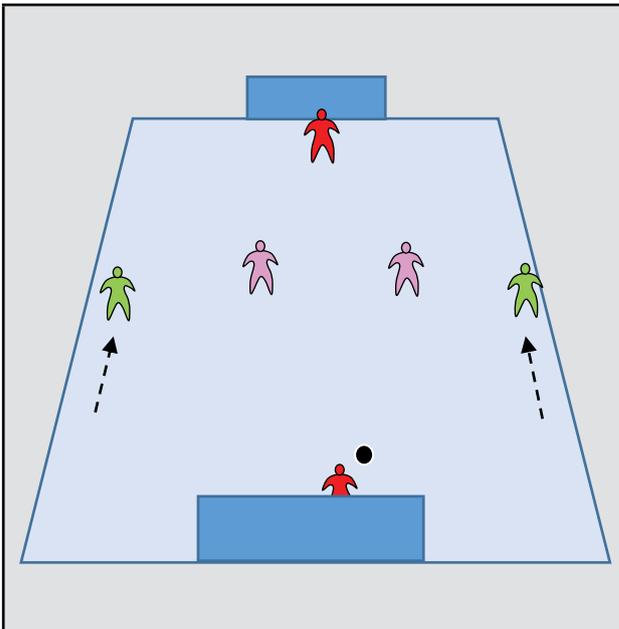
This is quick transition from defence to attack, at its most basic, individual, level.



If the defenders win the ball from narrow defensive positions and choose to go back to the goalkeeper, they should again open out really quickly, to catch the other team out.

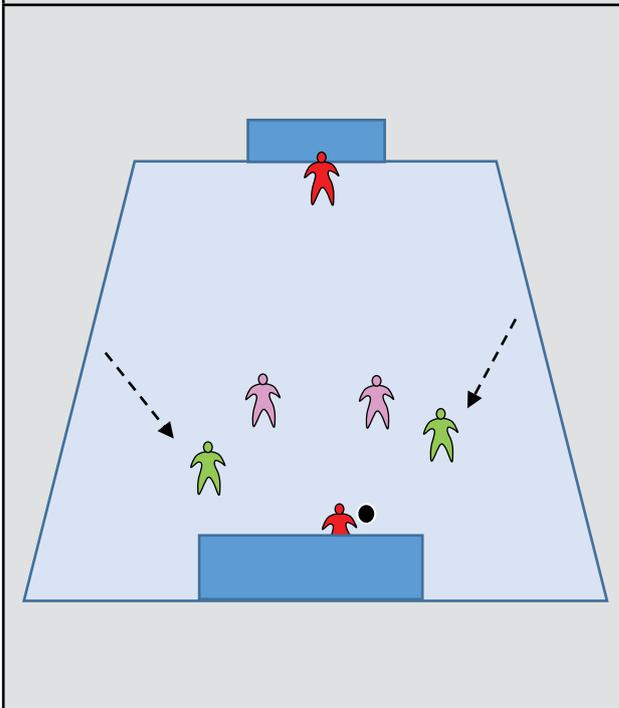
They should also react quickly in the same way when the goalkeeper saves. As soon as it's certain that he has the ball in his hands or safely at his feet, they should split wide in an effort to catch the opposition watching the ball or even following in to challenge the goalkeeper. Again, we ask the three of them (including the goalkeeper):

"Can you catch them out?"



If the defenders immediately take up good defensive positions and deny the keeper a chance to play behind them quickly, the answer to **“Can you catch them out?”** is no. Now, the keeper should calmly stay on the ball, in order to allow both attacking players time to re-position high and wide.

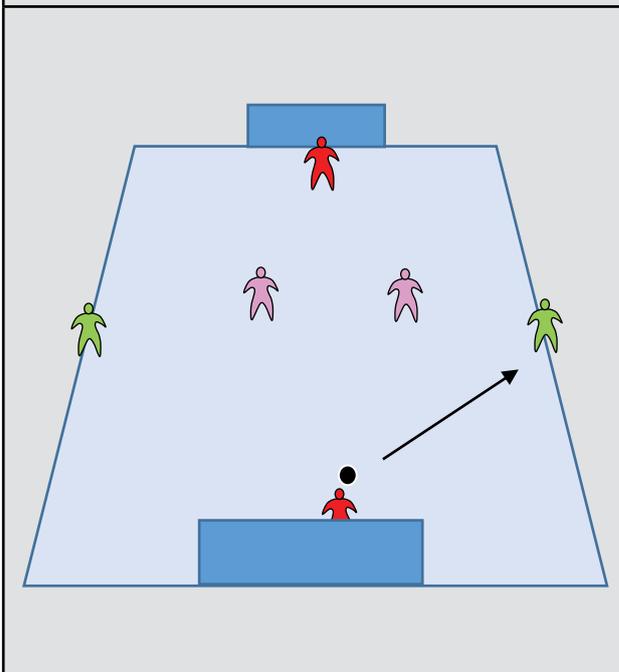
The previous situation demanded a fast, reactive response, whereas this is calm and controlled.



From these high and wide starting positions, the players must avoid coming back on top of the keeper to look for the ball. If they do this, they make the job of the defenders easier by limiting the space available to them to play in. Most importantly, by positioning this way, they limit their vision of the play – they can only see down the field.

“What can you see now?”

“Can you move in a way that allows you to see everything?”

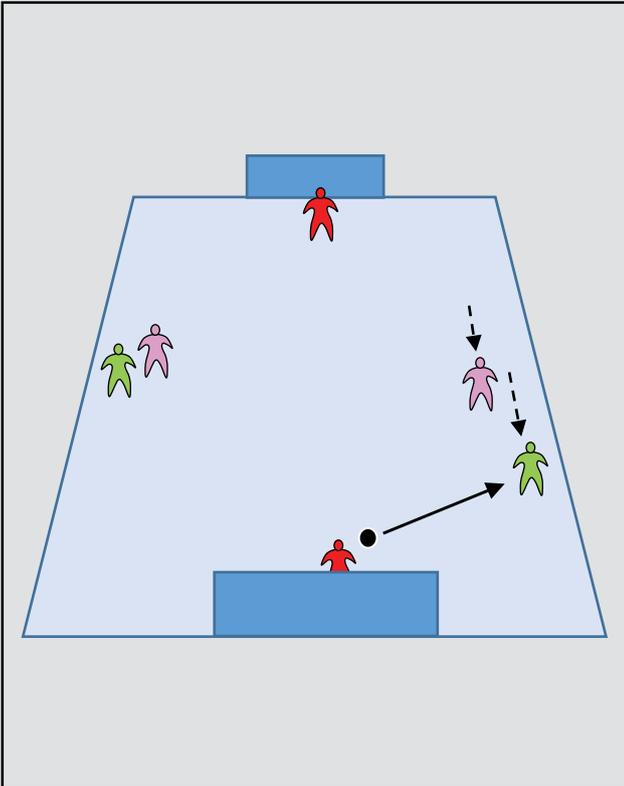


This situation gives us the opportunity to remind them again to

“See everything!”

They should re-position up the field with their feet along the sideline, looking into it, rather than looking directly back towards the keeper.

If one or both of the defenders stay off, preferring to guard the path to the goal, the keeper can play directly to the player in space.



If, on the other hand, one or both of the defenders get tight, we ask the players to move sharply off their markers and come down the line for the ball, rather than run directly towards the keeper. They will work out how moving down the line, with their feet open, opens up their vision of the field.

“Come down the line for it!”

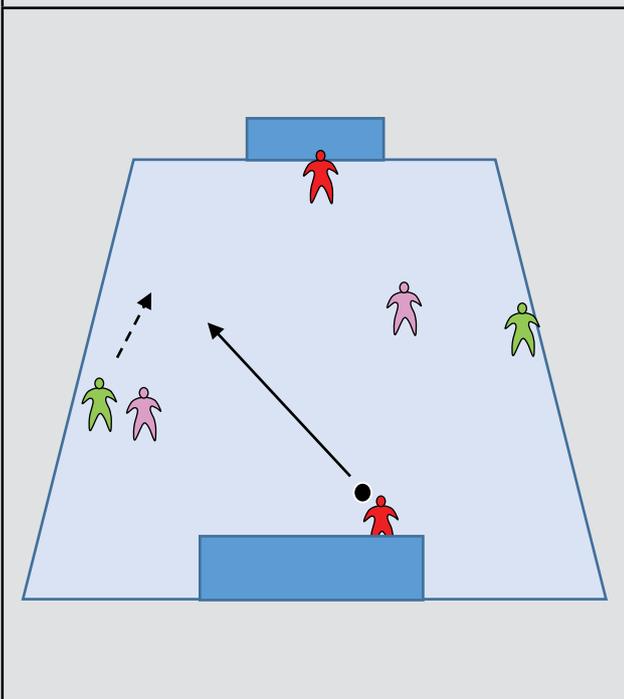
You don’t need to go into much detail here. At this age, this movement will usually be enough to win the attackers enough space to comfortably receive the ball. The topic of how and when to move off a marker will be looked at closely in the 3v3 games.

The role of the goalkeeper is vital here. When he has the ball, he must choose and play the correct pass. You will find that young players, when playing in goal, will often try to ‘win the game’ with the first pass and will ignore opportunities to play to the feet of the attackers, choosing instead to look for an immediate through pass, whether or not this pass is ‘on’. Players doing the keeper’s job in the 2v2s must realise that their main role is to initiate the play, not play killer passes!

“Don’t try to force it in!”

“Just get it started!”

“Give it to the player who has the most space!”

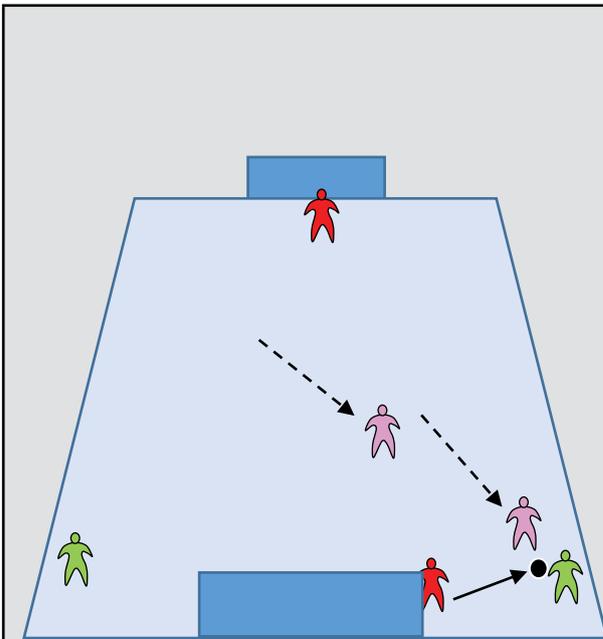


Having said that, you must also remind the players that we never look a gift horse in the mouth. If a defender takes up a poor position, allowing a direct through pass, the goalkeeper should play that pass.

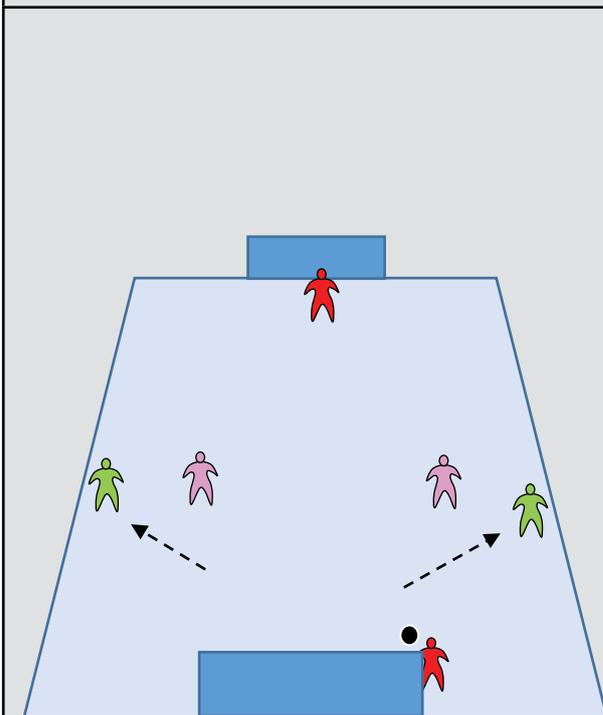
“If the defender comes up too close, what can you do?”

“Punish bad defending!”

“Play to win!”



Both players may spread apart well when the keeper gets it, but stay too far down the field, effectively ending up in the corners. Young players often do this and young goalkeepers often choose to give them the ball, with the result that the defenders ‘smell blood’ and see this as an opportunity to squeeze up tightly to win the ball near the goal. Even the youngest players seem to have a natural instinct to ‘go after’ a player in the corner. They have a subconscious understanding of how the two marked lines make things harder for the player on the ball and easier for them. This is a situation that most players at this stage will find very difficult, with the result that the ball is often lost in these very dangerous positions.



By questioning, you can show them how and why they should avoid this.

“Why was he able to close you down?”

“Where should you go before you look for the ball?”

“Well done for spreading apart, but could you have got yourself more space?”

The solution is to make sure that they spread out and move up the field, with the keeper waiting for them to get into these positions before giving them the ball.

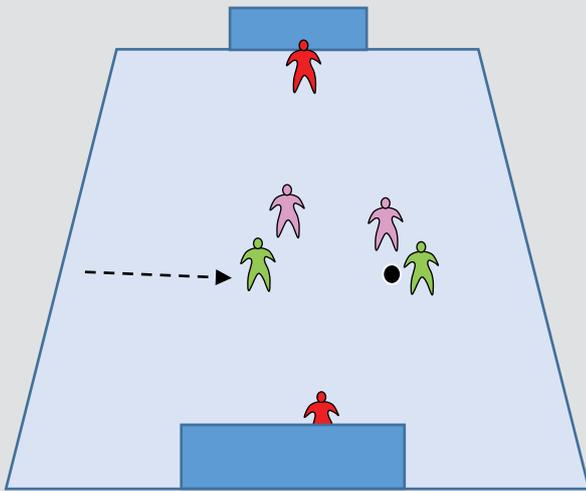
As they progress through the 3v3 and 4v4 phases, you will often have to remind them to

“Stay out of the corners!”

The ball in the goalkeeper’s possession changes the nature of the game; the players must now learn to play with their backs to the opposition’s goal. As they develop and become comfortable with this, you may even start every ‘go’ from the goalkeeper. This has the added advantage of preparing them for the 3v3 games, in which every move starts from him.

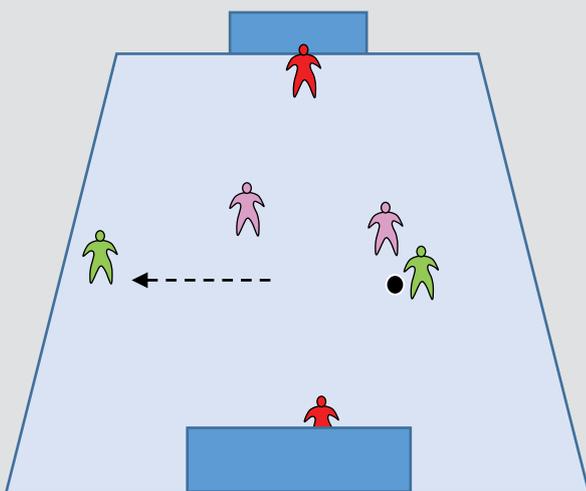


RE-SETTING



You will no doubt be aware, by now, that, with youngsters, things don't always go according to plan. You will find that your players, naturally, will often forget to stay spread and will narrow in towards each other again, especially when the second player gets drawn towards the ball. This will happen over and over again in the early stages of learning to play this way, so you will have many opportunities to correct it.

The way to do this, though, is not to just simply shout *"spread out!"*



You can help them, but, as usual, your intervention is aimed at helping them to see the problem and the solution by themselves.

"What's happened here?"

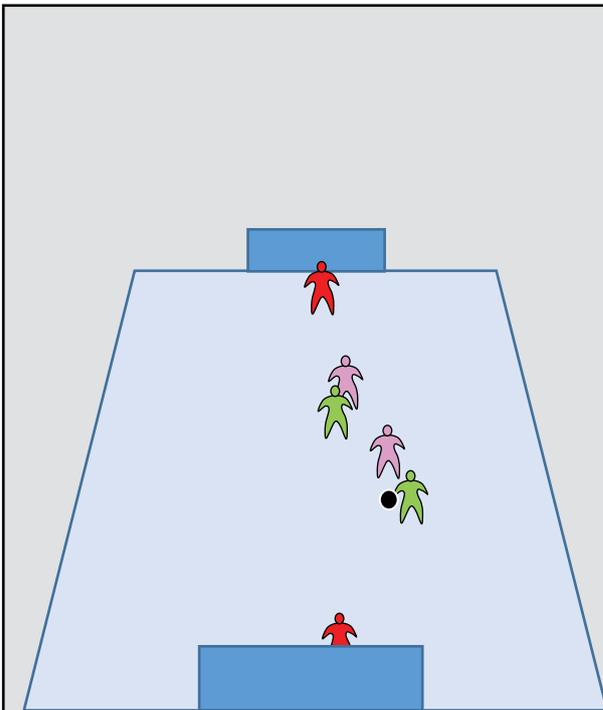
"What can we do about it?"

If you stop the play at the right moment, the players will easily recognise the problem and how it can be sorted out.

The playing skill here, though, is in seeing what has happened, and then quickly 're-setting' by moving away again when the play is in motion.

"If you catch yourself doing something wrong, can you sort it out for yourself?"

It is worth repeating, yet again, that it is the players who must see this for themselves.

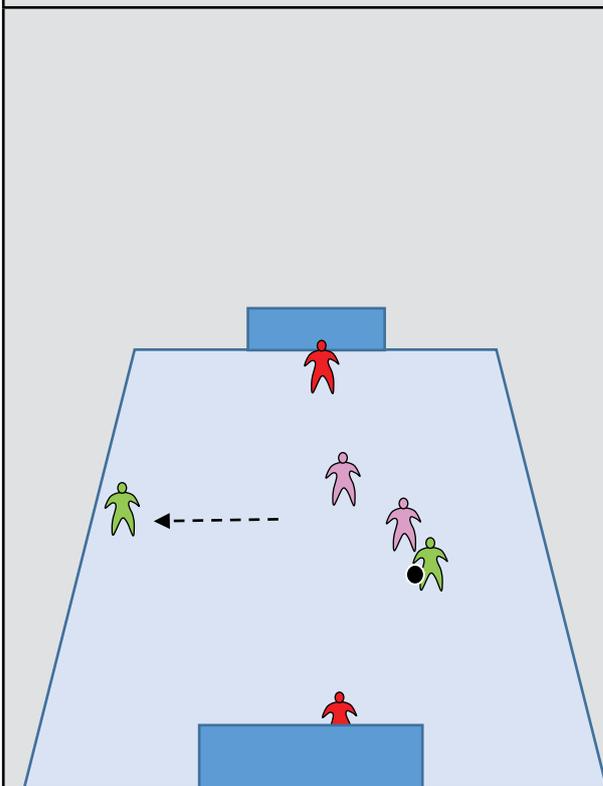


One specific instance of this 'narrowing-in' will see the player off the ball move directly in front of his partner and stand, blocking the way to goal. You ask him, when this happens:

"Are you helping him by being there?"

Here is another very good opportunity to use that old trick of the coaching trade that we used earlier, and freeze play to ask the two players to change places. In this way, the player off the ball gets a clear picture of the problem he's giving his partner. Once he can see that his positioning is likely to hinder, rather than help his partner, you ask:

"If you find yourself 'stuck' in front of the man on the ball, what should you do?"



Again, the solution is to re-set, with the player off the ball moving away.

The players, after seeing this, are left with a very, very simple guideline:

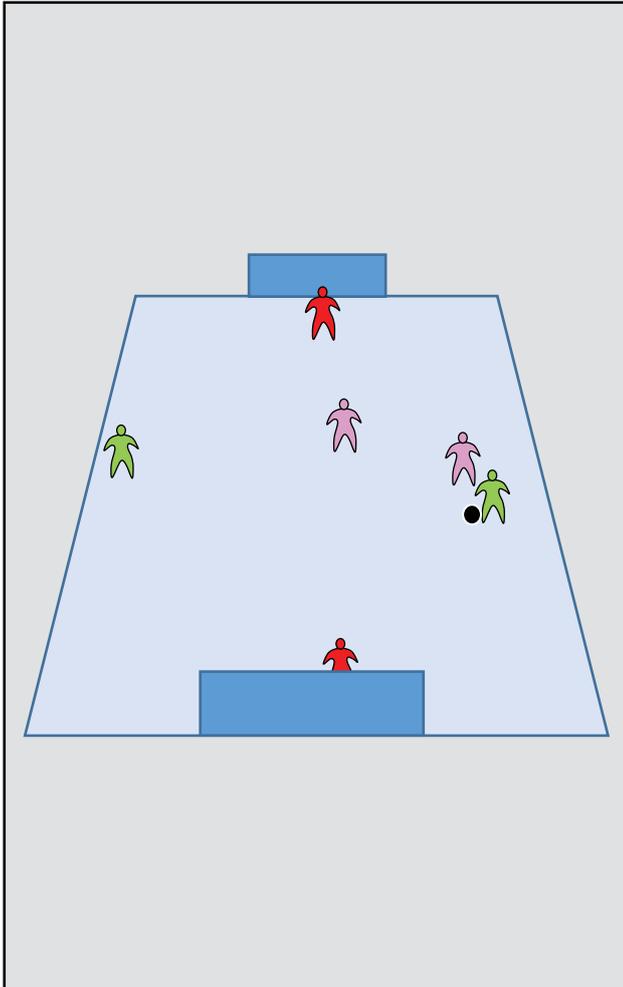
"If you find yourself in front of your partner, move out of his way!"

Prevention is better than cure, though. At the risk of using negative terminology, you can simplify this by saying

"Don't get in his way!"

The key here is to lay down a principle and remind the players of the big picture, in regards re-setting:

"If you catch yourself doing something wrong, can you sort it out for yourself?"

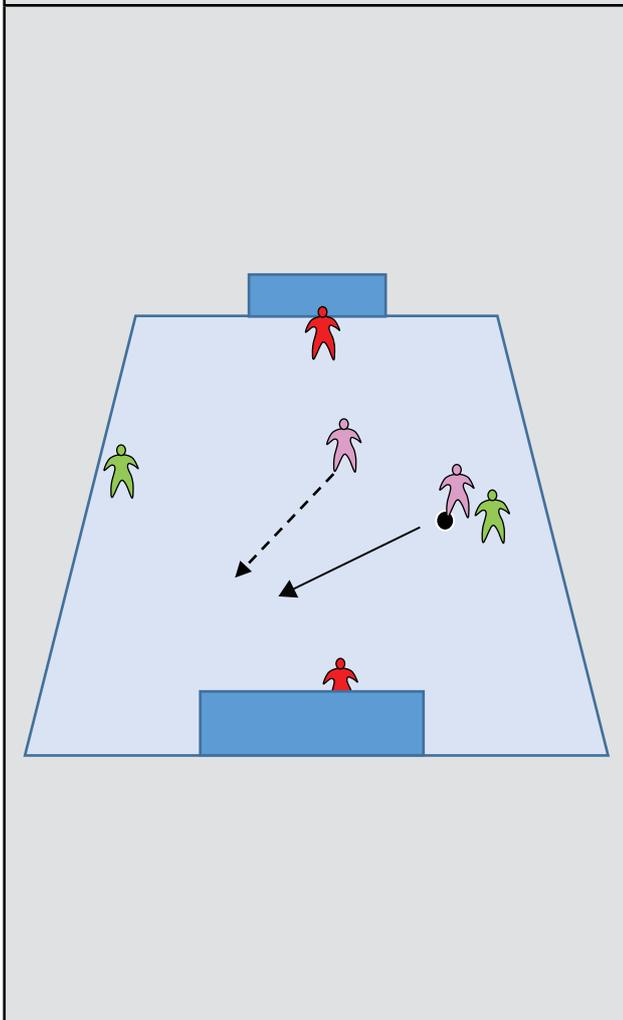


The defending pair must also have an understanding of the need to spring apart when they win the ball back.

In their 1v1 training, you would have demanded that each individual react immediately to defend, when they lost the ball. Now, we ask them, as a pair, to immediately move from defensive to attacking positions when they win the ball from the attackers.

“Why do we want you to get at them straight away when you win the ball back?”

They must understand that the ‘magic moment’ when the ball is won back will find the opposite pair spread apart - and therefore vulnerable to being attacked straight away.



We have already taught them do this when the ball goes back to the goalkeeper, but they must be capable of doing it in the heat of the moment, when the situation around them is more fluid.

If the second defender reacts quickly when his partner wins the ball and sprints forward immediately, there is an excellent chance of catching the attackers spread and being successful with a through pass.

“If he wins the ball back, can you get in straight away?”

This, of course, is counter-attacking at its most basic; even at this young age, we are preparing the players to be effective at the ‘magic moment’ when the ball changes hands.



TAKING IT INTO THE BIG GAME

An added bonus for both the coach and the players is that playing 2v2 is hugely enjoyable, but you will not, of course, spend every minute of practice on it. In addition to practicing different technical skills and working on the basics of possession play in the part-opposed practices, you will also play bigger games, but the bulk of your coaching input will occur in the 2v2s.

When it comes to game time in practice, I would caution you to avoid jumping directly into training games of more than five-a-side. In your games, you will want to see the good work that the players have been doing in 2v2 shine through, but bigger numbers on the pitch will always lessen the chance of this happening. If you have a panel of twelve players, mark out two pitches and play two three-a-sides; if you have sixteen, play two four-a-sides, etc.

In these games, you will be active in helping them to transfer what they have learned in the 2v2s into a game that is only somewhat bigger. These are the 'serious fun' games but if like most coaches you reward your players with a big match at the end of each session, that is when you withdraw and let the players play freely and just have fun. Remember:

"Don't itch where you can't scratch!"

Initially, you shouldn't expect too much in these games. What you're looking for, first, is for the players to start positioning away from each other and stop blindly following the ball.

"What have we just been doing in the 2v2s? Stay out of his...?"

You will not be looking for formal positioning in these games; there are no forwards, backs or wide men yet.

"You can move where you like, but we still don't want any two players in the same space!"

If each player has understood that he shouldn't be in the same space as a team-mate, and moves accordingly, the team is suddenly spread all over the pitch. It may be a little artificial, but, in order for the players to clearly see the effect of this, you may have to tell the defending players to move with, and stay beside, the players who spread apart. By spreading apart, the players achieve two things. Firstly, they ensure that the team has a player in every part of the field. More importantly to players at an age when they are still self-centred by nature, they also give themselves space in which to play.

The call from you when you see the players forgetting this and being drawn in on top of each other towards the ball is not ***"spread out!"***, but ***"look around!"*** If the players have taken the lessons from the 2v2s on board, they will see what has happened, look around for available space and move apart. Only when they are spread, will you begin to see their improved decision making. You can't have one without the other!

This is yet another time when you may have to calm the players down. Young players tend to run into the ball with their first touch, already on the move before they have secured control of it. We will reach a point when you'll be asking players to think a move (or even two moves) ahead, but, for now we ask them to stop, look, and see when the ball arrives at their feet. ***"Take a touch, steady yourself and assess!"*** They can then, with a calm head, see all the options open to them, just as they have done in all their 2v2s.



2v2 SUMMARY

Each step on the development ladder places a new set of demands on the players. As they gain more experience of playing 2v2, they develop the confidence to look away from their immediate opponent and see the bigger playing picture as it unfolds around them.

The emphasis now is on reading the game. In practical terms, this means that they learn to be calm enough to look for the positioning of their team-mate and, even more crucially, the positioning of the defenders. This reading of the defenders is vital; for every action they take, the attackers should be able to come up with a positive action to counter it. The players, though, are not being pre-programmed to do as the coach tells them; they are being given the tools to independently come up with solutions. These solutions are easier to see in this, the smallest of small-sided games, but, in 2v2, we're laying the foundation for the players to follow the same process in the cut and thrust of the full eleven-a-side game. No matter how many there are on the field, if the opposition pose a playing problem, the players will look for their own solution to counter it.

Each player comes to this phase with the ability to control the ball and dribble. They come out of it with the ability to control, dribble, and link up with an attacking partner. From a more technical viewpoint, in learning to stay apart, they have, in coach language, had their first introduction to the attacking principle of width.





INTRODUCTION

It would be fair to say that 2v2 is more of a practice and that 3v3 is more of a game. Even so, the pitch size stays the same as in the 2v2. Every play is started by the goalkeeper, who, in effect, plays the role of server for the three outfield players. We still don't use throw-ins, as starting from the keeper each time allows the players a simpler, clearer picture of how they should position.

Even though the extra player has been added, the focus is still on the individual player; how she can find team space in relation to her team-mates and then individual space for herself away from her direct opponent. We are not too concerned, yet, with how the three outfield players combine. This is an intermediate step between the 2v2 game, characterised by lots of dribbling with some passing, and the 4v4 game, which is moving a lot closer to the adult version, with more passing than dribbling.

We have worked on team space in 2v2, by giving the players the basic idea of moving apart. As they are older now and a little more aware of the need to guard their goal, the individual defending will be better. Because of this the players should now begin to view the game in terms of working against an individual opponent, in what, at each particular moment in the game, is their own part of the field. The good news is that, at this age, the defending will not be so improved that the attackers find it too difficult to make forward progress.

We use a warm-up, now, which is specific to the 3v3 game. It is designed to give you and the players a head start in teaching and learning to play in this way. Many technical points are covered in the warm-up which transfer directly to the game, so you will find yourself constantly referring back to it, reminding the players of how they warmed up.

Patience is not a characteristic of children of this age, so we don't expect or really want to see too much of it in their football. Even though the option of going back to the goalkeeper is always there, we still want youngsters to play like youngsters and attack aggressively when they get the ball. Starting each move from the goalkeeper gives them a head start, in this regard, as they are always guaranteed to receive the ball in attacking positions.

It may seem an old-fashioned approach in this age of ball-oriented and zonal defensive systems, but many games, even at the highest levels, are still won or lost by individual duels. 1v1 and 2v2 taught the players how to take on an individual opponent; 3v3 places these duels in a more positional, team-oriented context.

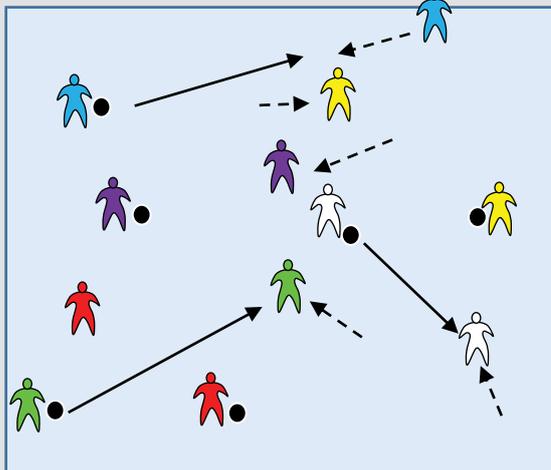


THE 3V3 WARM-UP

The organisation of this warm-up couldn't be simpler. All the players are in a 30 - 40m. square, with a ball between two. They move freely, around the square, passing only to their partner.

It's now that we look at passing in detail for the first time. In particular, we look at how any two players combine to make a successful pass. We don't do this in a straight-line, regimented way, as in most passing drills, because we want the warm-up to specifically prepare the players for the games to come. Even though they are unopposed, it is not a drill. The direction and timing of the passing and movement is not determined by the coach, so the players are actively involved at all times in reading the game and making decisions. As happens in the game, passing, moving, and decision making are combined.

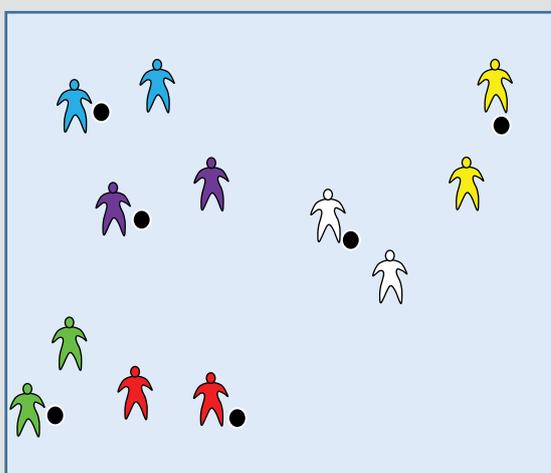
To simplify things, we give the players a 'passing formula' to use. It's an uncomplicated formula, but it's one that players, at every level, frequently get wrong; it's remarkable how often mistakes are made in the seemingly simple process of two players linking up for a pass. The majority of the 3v3 coaching points are actually covered in the warm-up, so a huge part of your job will be to show the players how these transfer into the game.



First things first: you just ask the players to take care with their controlling and passing. I have often spent whole sessions just repeating **“Make sure!”**, mantra-like, to each player as she received the ball.

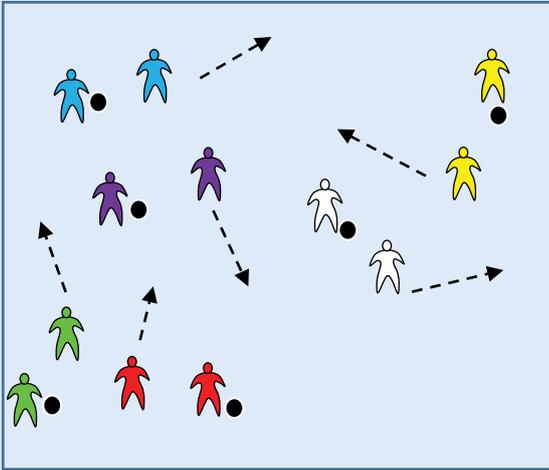
Because the 3v3 game sees a small shift towards a more passing-based game, you will need to pay some attention to passing technique - how the players actually play their passes.

Many players at this age will play passes of the sloppy, floppy variety, while others will constantly overhit theirs. Sometimes young players just need to be reminded of what a good pass looks like, and that the pass should suit the receiver, not the passer. By asking them to take care, while demonstrating an accurate, well weighted pass, you can often bring about a substantial improvement in your players’ passing. I have always found this to be the case, if the players have done the work and have developed a good level of touch in the previous phases. These players have good passing inside them!



One of the reasons for poor passing is the players following each other around, as they pay little or no attention to the other pairs moving about them. Because her partner is following her closely, the player on the ball may feel under pressure to rush her passes. If a number of the pairs are doing this, as is often the case, the whole picture can look very chaotic.

Often, the players will fail to communicate properly; the player on the ball will give it to her partner when she’s not looking for it and the player off the ball will move for it before her partner is ready to play it.



To help the players sort this out, you will ask

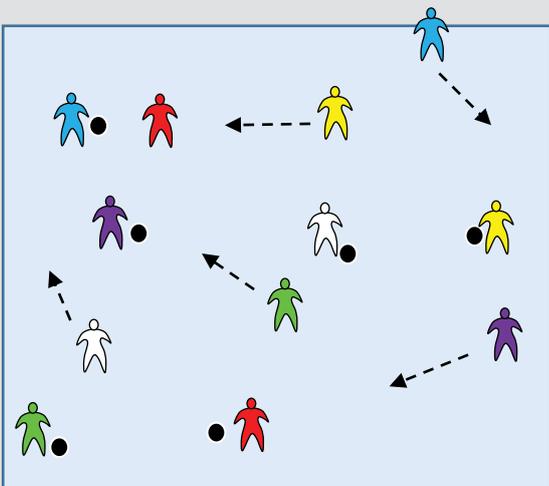
“Does this look like football?”
(No, it doesn’t.)

***“Do you follow your partner around
all the time in a game?”***
(No, you don’t.)

“What did you learn to do in the 2v2s?”
(Stay apart.)

***“What have we asked you to do, from the
first day we started, when the ball comes to
you?”***
(Settle on it.)

We want the player on the ball taking her time and relaxing on the ball, while her partner moves away from her.



To emphasise these two elements, we even ask the players to ignore each other for a few seconds while they keep moving around the area.

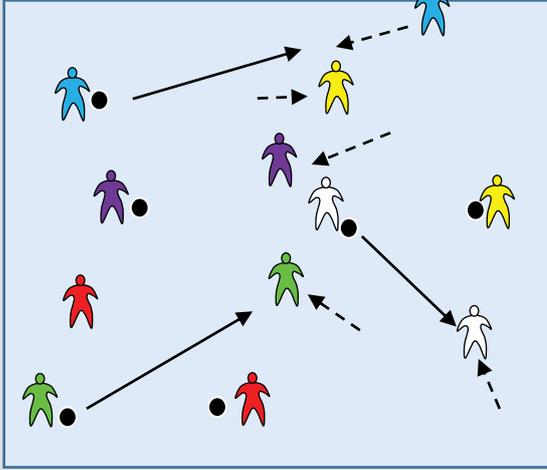
To the player on the ball:

“Stay on the ball and enjoy yourself!”

To her partner:

“Clear off! Stay away from her completely!”

This is an exaggeration of what happens in a game, but we’re happy to do it this way in order to add weight to the messages we gave them in the 2v2s. What we’re actually doing is setting the scene for the really important stuff to follow.



After they have their little spell apart, they look for each other again, in a very specific way.

To the player on the ball:

“How will you know if she wants the ball?”

To the player off the ball:

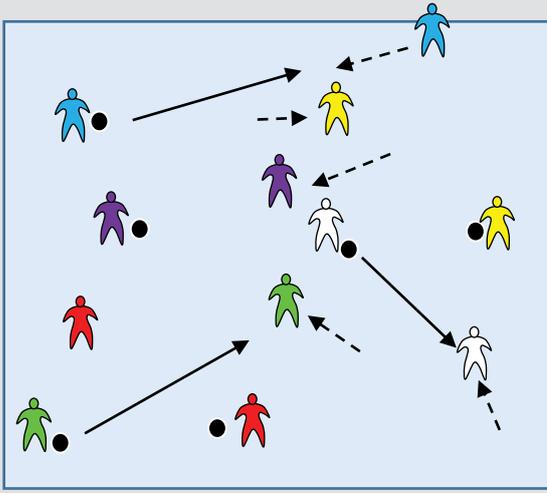
“How will you know if the pass is on?”

The players may think that these are trick questions, but they’re not. The simple, blunt answer to both is

“Look at her and see what she’s doing!”

In time, you will refine this to:

“Take the time to see what she’s doing!”



When we have both players looking to see what the other is doing, we can ask the player off the ball:

“How do you know that she’s ready to pass to you?”

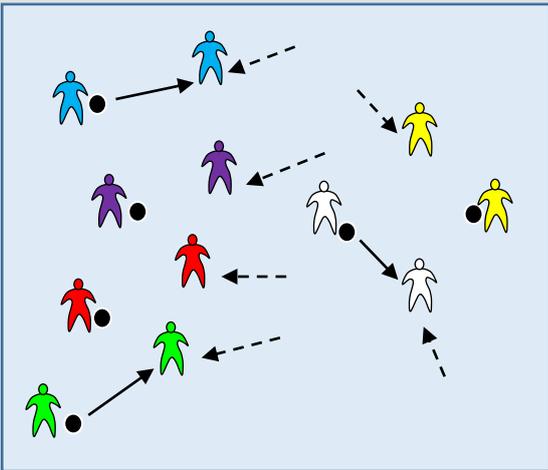
If the ball is out from under her feet, in playing distance, and she’s looking for her partner, she is ready to play it. She must have her head up, if the pass is to be made.

“Head up!”

When the time is right and both players’ eyes meet, the pass is made.

“Eyes!”

After doing this a few times, they will fall into an easy rhythm of moving apart, relaxing, coming back together for the pass, and then calmly moving apart again.



You will find that even though the players will initially move apart, they will gravitate back towards each other again. This results in many passes that are too short, some only as short as two or three metres. Again:

“Does this look like football?”

You can follow this question by asking:

“How many passes as short as that are played in a game?”

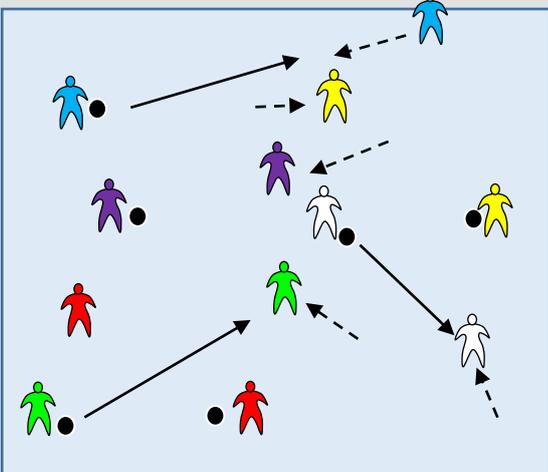
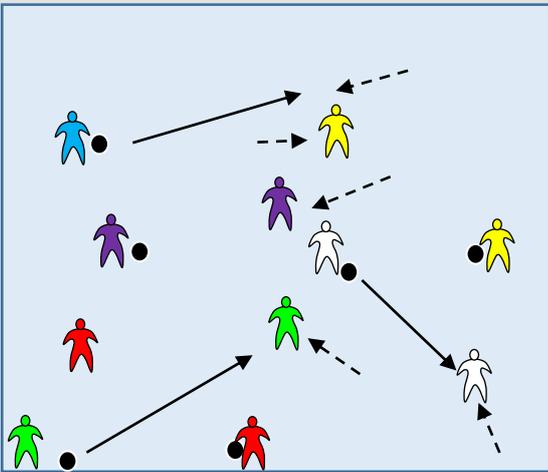
“What do most passes in a game look like?”

You can then demonstrate a pass over ten to fifteen metres and ask:

“How can we make sure that the passes look like this?”

They will easily recognise that the player off the ball must look for it from further away, but you can reinforce the message by telling the player on the ball:

“Don’t give it to her if she comes too close to you!”



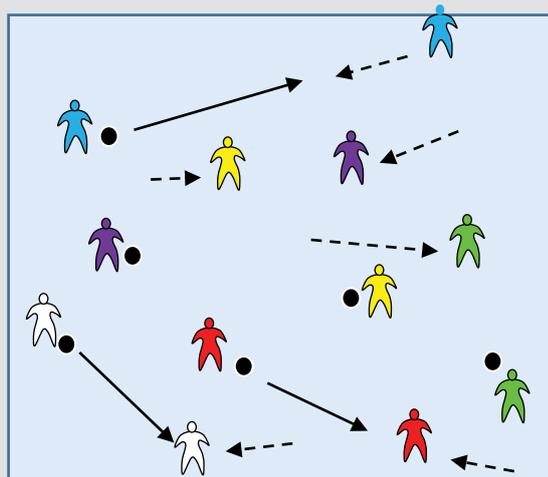
We now have the players keeping a good distance between themselves and successfully making passes, with everything being done at a steady jogging pace. Now is the time for them to use their imagination, in an effort to inject some pace, and bring the practice even closer to what happens in a game. You ask:

“Imagine there’s a player on you. What will you have to do to get the pass?”

The players will easily come up with the answer:

“Move quicker!”

Each time you come in to help, you make the practice more game-like. Once you've asked for quicker movement, what you'll find is that the whole practice lifts, with all the players moving fast, all the time. They go from jogging all the time to running at a fast pace all the time. This, though, is not the effect you're looking for. One-paced attacking, whether that pace is fast or slow, is easily defended against. Just as you did in the previous phases when you taught them how to dribble effectively, you must now show them the value of changing pace.



With the players now looking for each other and making passes, we have, most importantly, the player on the ball looking up for the movement of her partner. **“Head up!”** is the first part of the formula for making successful passes.

Now we want the player off the ball to look for it in a more match-specific way. She must be more assertive in letting the player on the ball know that she wants it.

“How do you let your partner know when you want it?”

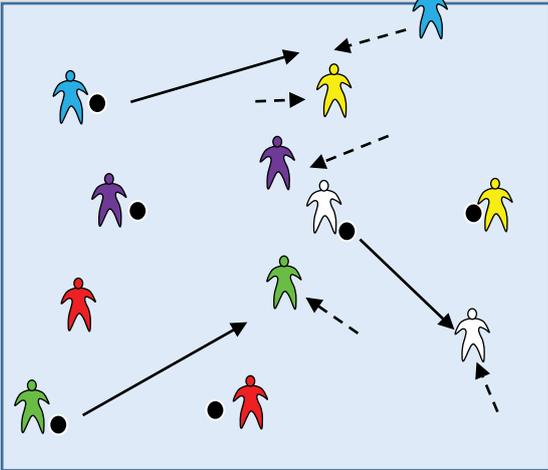
Most of the young players I have worked with have answered **“By calling!”**, but this is not the answer we're looking for. Calling has its place, especially in the organisation of defence, but we really want our players, when we have the ball, to communicate through body language.

“If you call, you're telling the defender when you want the ball!”

“Can you surprise her?”

To surprise and lose a marker, we must have that assertive change of pace; a short, sharp movement for the ball. This change of pace kills two birds with one stone.

“If you change pace, you get away from your marker and you let your partner know that you really want it!”

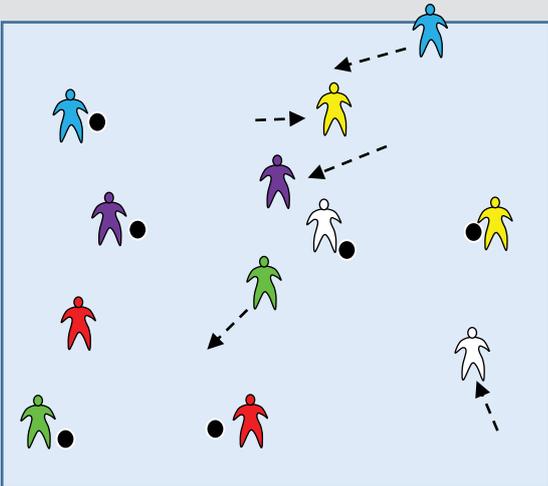


In many countries, including Ireland, this assertive movement is called 'showing' for the ball.

"When her head is up and she's ready to pass, show for it!"

The Spanish ask their players to 'offer' for the ball, but, no matter what language you use, you can tell your players:

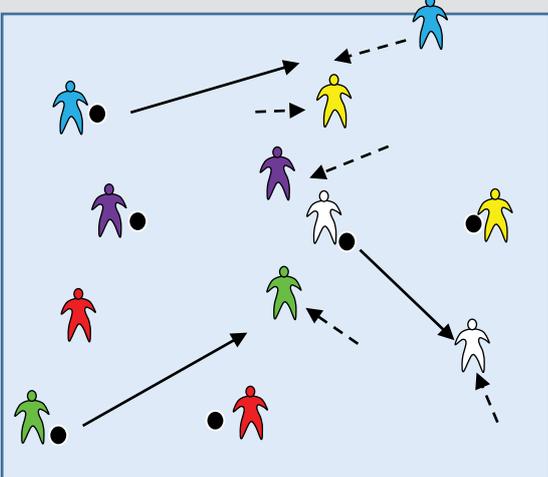
"There's looking for the ball and there's REALLY looking for the ball!"



We now have the first two parts of the passing formula in place

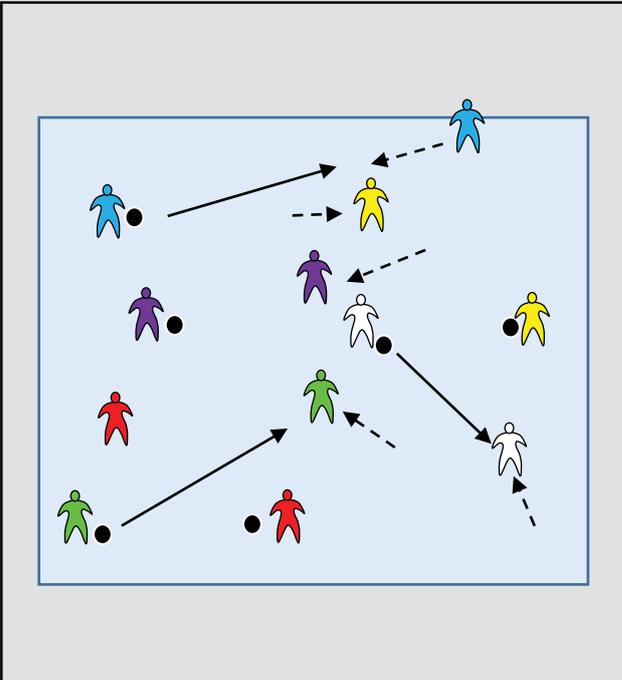
"Head up!"
and
"Show!"

We have the player on the ball with her head up and we have her partner moving for the ball. All the ingredients are there for the pass to be made, but the timing of it is vital.



The players should now know what showing for the ball looks like. Again, it's a short, sharp movement away from a defender – it's definitely not a long run and it's most definitely not slow. In order to avoid the run becoming a long one, the player on the ball must pass immediately - as soon as her partner moves for it. This completes the formula:

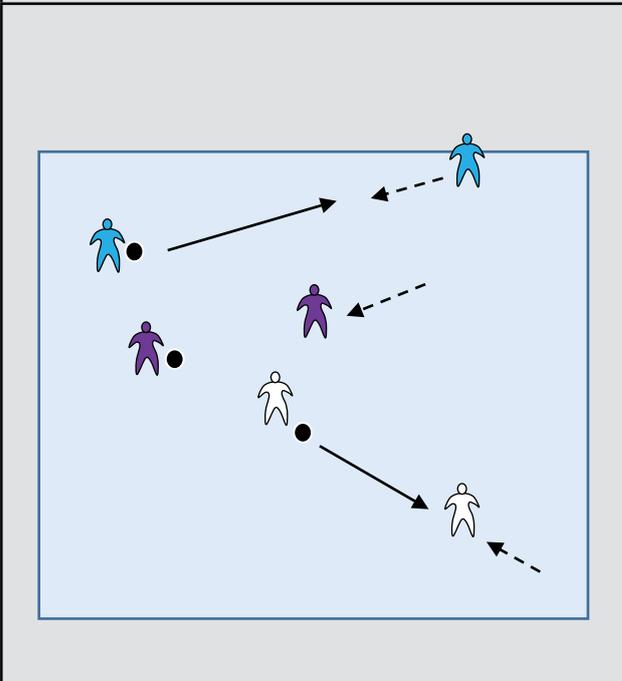
"Head up!"
"Show!"
"Pass!"



A problem arises, when the pass doesn't come on time; the defender will have time to catch up on the attacker. You ask the players, again, to use their imaginations.

“If you have a defender on you, what will she do if the pass doesn't come when you want it?”

They may not immediately see the importance of this in the unopposed practice, but will see it very clearly when they actually have defenders against them in the game.



On a very fundamental level, there are only two types of run the players can make and, consequently, two types of pass they can play. I find it very useful to actually ask the players what these may be:

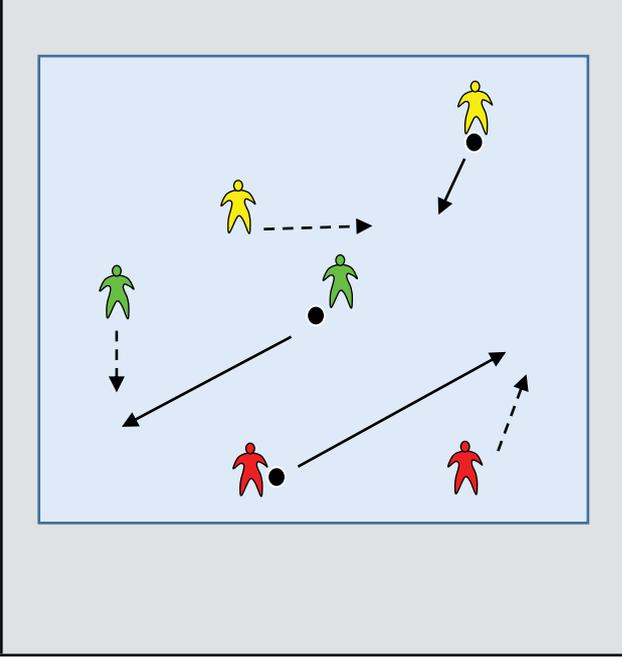
“If I was to tell you that there's really only two types of run that you can make, could you tell me what they are?”

They can move towards the ball for the pass directly to their feet...

“If she's moving towards you, where do you play it?”

or away from the ball, for a pass into space.

“If she's moving away from you, where do you play it?”



The pass into space is the more difficult, as the passer must judge the speed and direction of her partner's run. The test of this pass is whether or not the runner has to break her stride to get onto it.

You will find that the majority of passes, initially, will be passes to feet, so you may have to demonstrate the pass into space.

It may surprise you to see how many times young players will get this communication wrong. Passes get played into space when the run is for a pass to feet, and vice versa, but this is not something that only happens in the children's game. In an effort to get them to think a little more about their game, I often ask young players to watch out for professional players making the same mistakes in TV games. This most basic connection between players can break down in the heat of battle, even though the message is simple:

“If she moves to you, give it to her feet, if she's running into space, play it into space!”

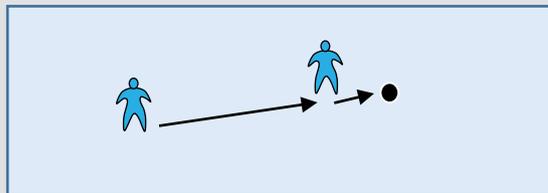
Once the players are familiar with the warm-up, we can advance it by asking the players to turn away from their partner as they receive the ball.

“Use your imagination! There's a defender behind you!”

“Can you get turned and face her?”

At first, you will see them take two or three touches to get turned fully. You can then ask:

“Can you get turned in one touch?”



To do this, they must present their controlling foot to the ball and take just enough pace out of it, so that it ends up just behind them, but remains in playing distance. Their aim is to complete a full 180-degree turn; they move for the ball facing in one direction and end up fully facing the other way. In turning this way, they must pivot on the non-controlling foot. So the message is:

“Don't turn – spin!”

When they first try this, they can go through it slowly. You will notice that most players will move towards the pass and stop just before it arrives, so that they can concentrate on the timing. This is not how the turn should look when it's mastered.

“If you stop before it reaches you, what will the defender do?”

“What must you do to make sure that this doesn't happen?”

If you're confident that they have the touch that allows them to do so, you must encourage the players to be brave enough to 'run all the way into the ball' and turn quickly - all in one explosive movement.

When they have mastered the technique of spin-turning, you can ask them to mix their controlling up, by sometimes controlling the ball safely in front of them and sometimes spin-turning. When they are doing this well, you can introduce tactical calling from the passer. She may call **"turn!"** or **"man on!"** as she plays the pass, and her partner must respond with the appropriate controlling choice.

The receiver, though, cannot just rely on the call from the passer for her awareness of the defender.

"That's a good call from your partner, but how else will you know where the defender is?"

The answer here is to turn their heads to look over their shoulder, for the movement of the imaginary defender.

"Can you be calm enough to look over your shoulder?"

"If you're doing this, what are you looking for?"

They will be looking to see if they have enough space to turn and face up. They should be calm enough, with no opposition now, to do this. There will be a lot of focus, at the later stages, on doing this, fully opposed, in the games, so you are just introducing the concept and planting a seed here.

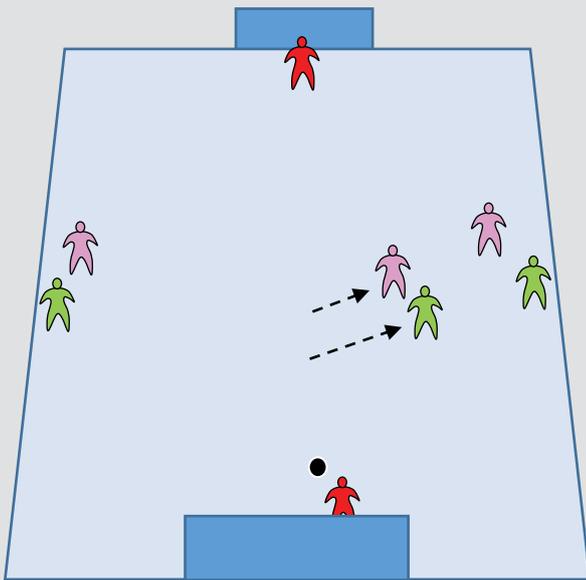
When you first start to use this warm-up, it will take up a lot more time than a standard one. Because there is so much information in it, it is almost a technical session in itself. As the players become used to it, though, the time it takes will shorten. When the players become very familiar with the passing formula, you may advance the practice by using less footballs and letting the players give and receive passes from any other player in the square.

This warm-up is invaluable to me, as, over time, it's become the only unopposed general passing and movement practice I use. This happened organically, but, strangely enough, I have heard that Eric Harrison, the youth coach of the famous *Manchester United Class of '92*, did the exact same thing. Great minds think alike!



3v3 ORGANISATION / STARTING POSITIONS

3v3 plus two goalkeepers in a 30m. by 20m. area. Every turn now starts with the goalkeeper, and play continues, as in 2v2, until the ball goes out. As the players progress, they may take extended turns of 90 seconds or 2 minutes, with the ball coming back into play from the goalkeeper each time it goes out of play.



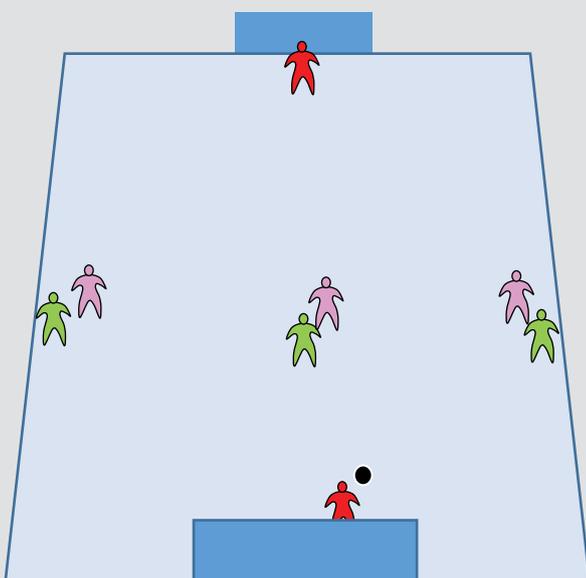
When we introduce the third player, the first effect, invariably, will not be one that you want; there's now an extra player running towards the ball and crowding things. We start the process of sorting it out by asking the players where they think she should go.

“We have a player right, we have a player left, so where can she go?”

If she moves to take up position towards either of the sides, you can ask:

“Can you see a problem there?”

The players, having seen this situation many times before in 2v2, will recognise that there's two players “in the one garden”.



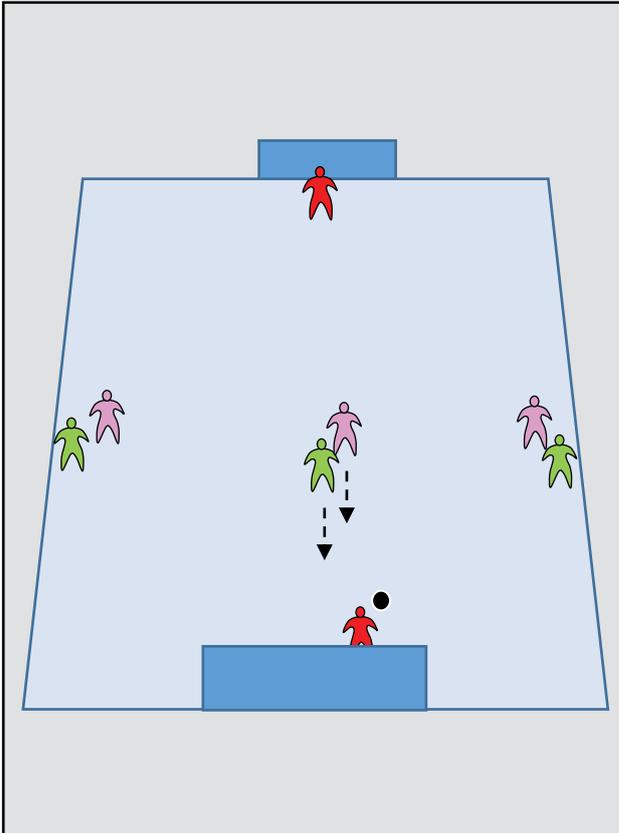
If they suggest that she moves into a central position, in line with them, you can ask the same question:

“Can you see a problem there?”

followed by

“Do you think it's a good idea for all three of you to be in a line?”

They should be able to see that each one of them has much less space if they are in one horizontal line.

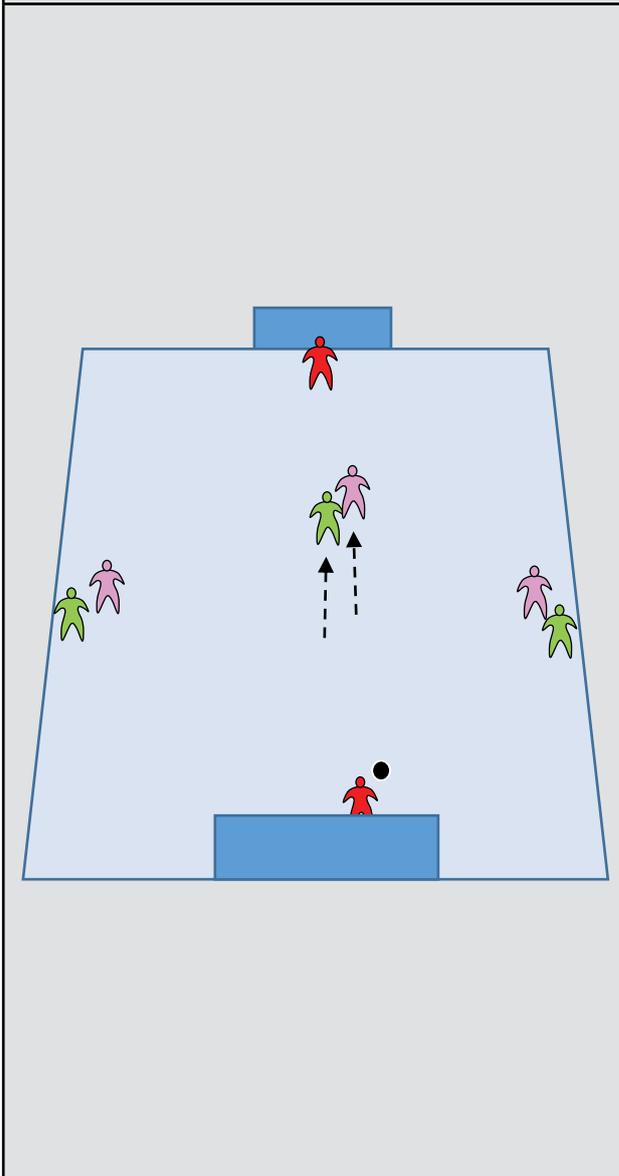


She may move out of this straight line by coming down the field towards the goalkeeper. You may then ask:

“Are you moving into someone else’s area?”

“Do we already have someone there?”

You want the players, as they did in 2v2, to recognise that the new player doesn’t have to go into that space, as the goalkeeper is already there to start the moves and make herself available for back passes when they can’t play forward.

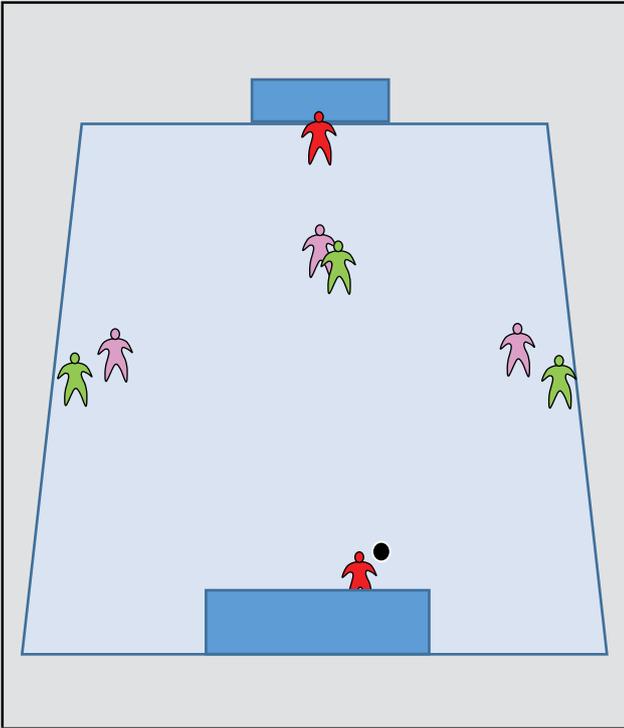


After evaluating the other choices, they will work out that the third player should move in the other direction, ahead of her two teammates, into a forward position.

She will push forward, but must make sure that she stays in passing range. Pushing too far would be the equivalent of standing in the six-yard box during a build-up in the full game. This is why the pitch size wasn’t expanded when we added the extra player - we are still at a stage when we want the players to come close together for short passes.

“Now we have a player on the left, a player on the right and a player up front. What’s the big picture?”

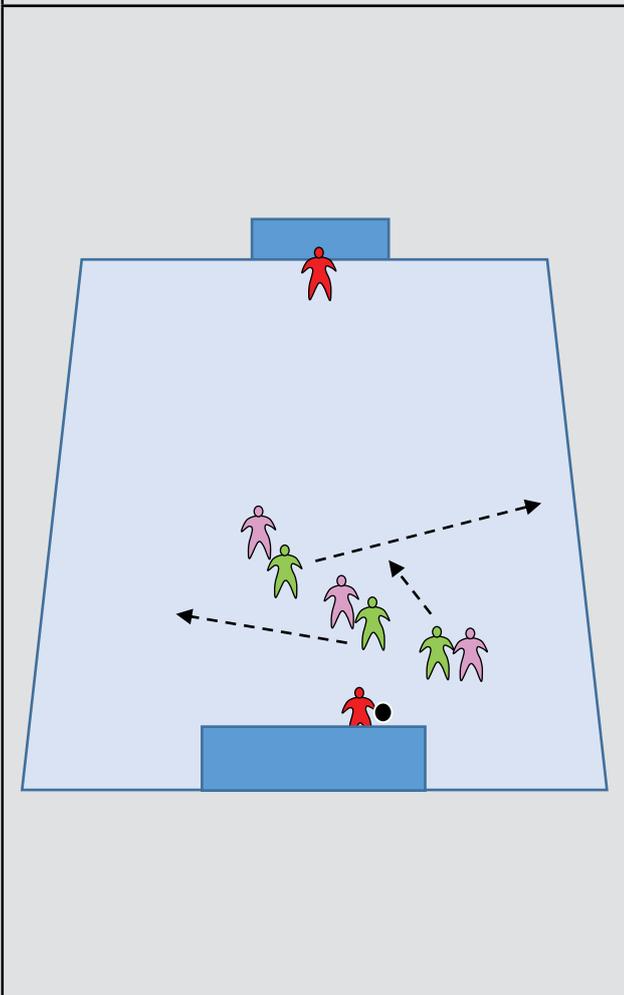
They should be able to recognise that between them they’re covering every part of the field. You can now explain to them that this is one of the main reasons why we ask players to play in positions.



Once the players have 'found' these positions, the game will look a lot different than the 2v2s did, when each turn began with the pairs coming out from their own end with the ball. We now have two lines of attack ahead of the goalkeeper when she has the ball. Because the players are now a little older - and more aware of their defending responsibilities - there should be two lines of defence matching up against them. It looks a lot more like a real game.

When the goalkeeper has the ball and is under no pressure, she can wait for the players to find the positions before starting the play.

The players, though, should not fall into the trap of thinking that one particular position is theirs. We have already stressed the importance of playing in different positions, but they must now be aware that they can end up filling more than one position in the course of one 'go', as the play unfolds around them.



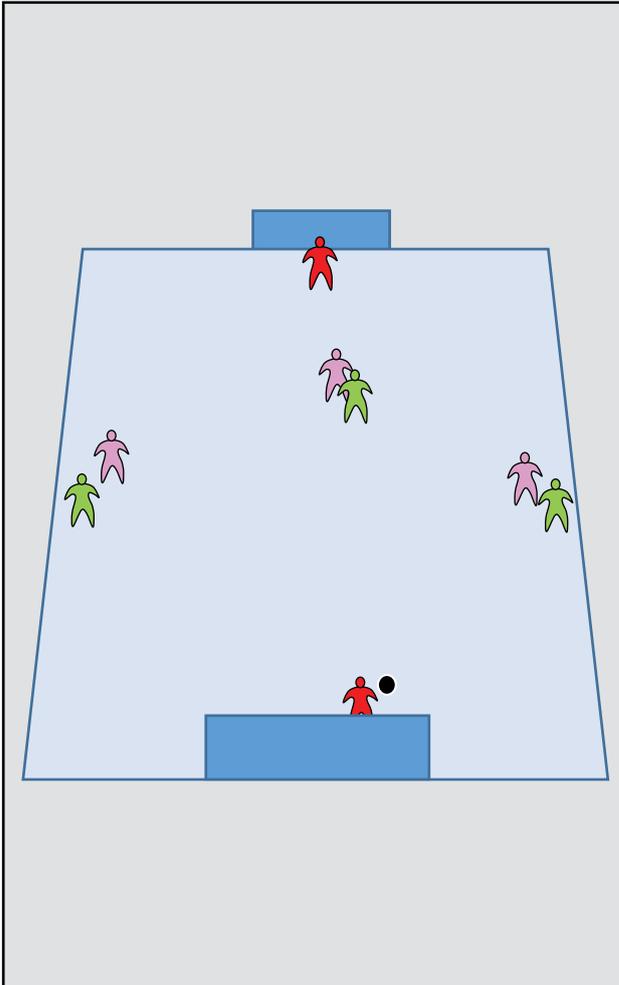
When they defend they will narrow in to guard their goal and may find themselves pulled out of the positions they started in, especially when the attack comes close to the goal. When the goalkeeper saves, for example, they will have to immediately spread apart and find the three positions again, but they should not waste time getting there. If you see two players crossing over to get to 'their' positions, you can ask:

"Who should go to the left (or right, or up front)?"

The answer will always be the same:

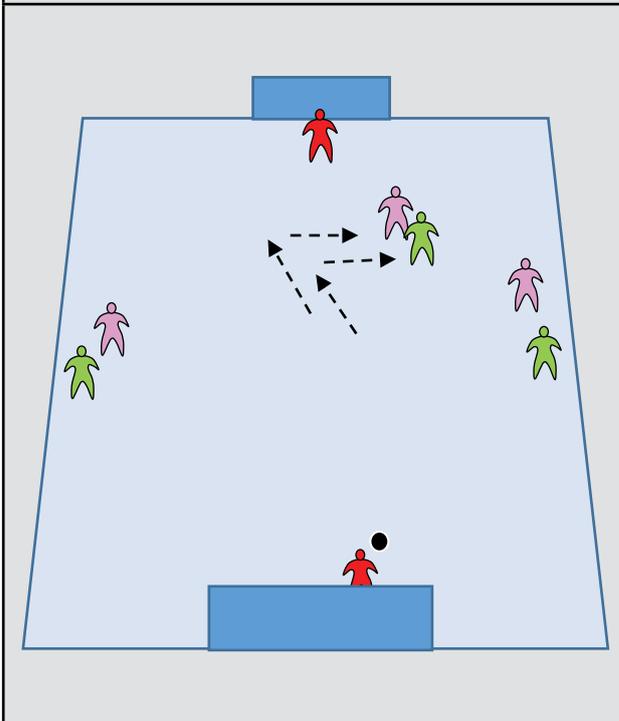
"The nearest player!"

This is another example of the players learning to read the game for themselves. They must look around, see the empty positions, and move to fill them, quickly, whether those were the positions they started in, or not.



If your group has the usual mix of personalities you find in children of this age, you will probably have realised by now that you have two types of player; those who don't run enough, and those that run too much – the 'standers' and the 'athletes'. Closer positioning by the defenders usually affects these 'types' in different ways.

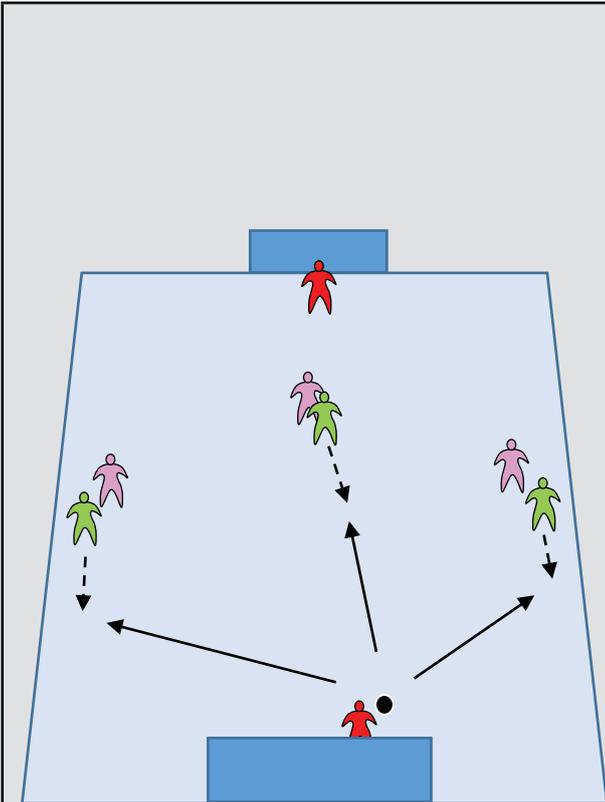
The 'standers' will move into the positions and then, not surprisingly, stand still. They either think they're not 'on' to get the ball because the keeper can't give it to them if they're marked, or they cannot see the danger of losing the ball if the keeper gives it to them in a standing position. We need to help these players see that, in order to work effectively against their markers, they will need to expend more energy.



The 'athletes', on the other hand, are the ones that allow themselves to become excited by the closer marking of the defenders. They run blindly around the field, often making two or three continuous runs, backward and forward, in an effort to shake the marking defenders off.

We need to curb the running of these players and help them realise that, in terms of expending energy, sometimes less is more.

Now you can see how you will need to get more energy from the standers while at the same time harnessing the energy of the athletes. The players now begin to see the relevance of what they did in the warm-up. With opposition now involved, they must see how the sharp, short movement we asked for will be necessary to win them enough space off their markers to have the ball.



Because we're going to work on movement, it's best to address the standers first (if you do have some in your group).

"Do you want the ball?"

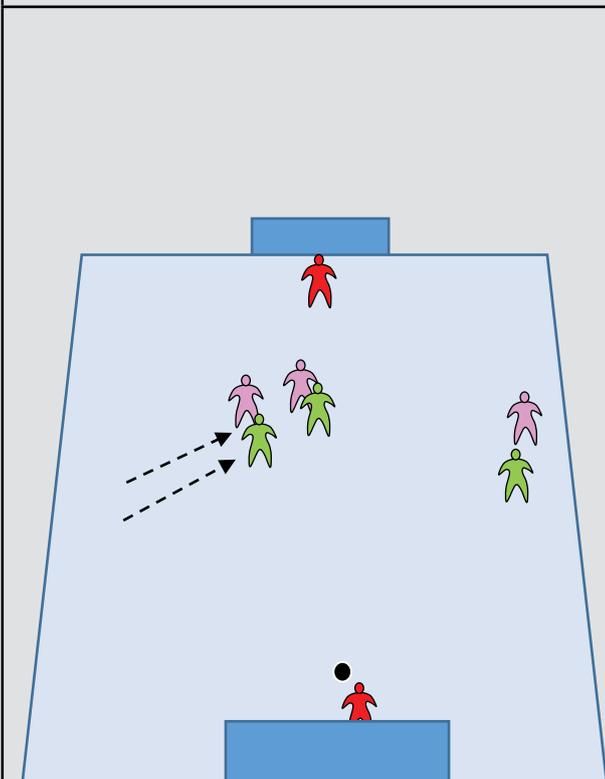
"If you stay there beside your marker, can you get the ball?"

"What did you do in the warm-up when you wanted the ball?"

We want them to see the need to make the short, sharp and well-timed movement they learned in the warm-up - down the field, for a pass from the keeper to their feet.

"Move if you want it!"

"If you move first, you will get to the ball first!"



On the other side of the coin, if the athletes are running wildly, they will end up running out of position and into their team-mates.

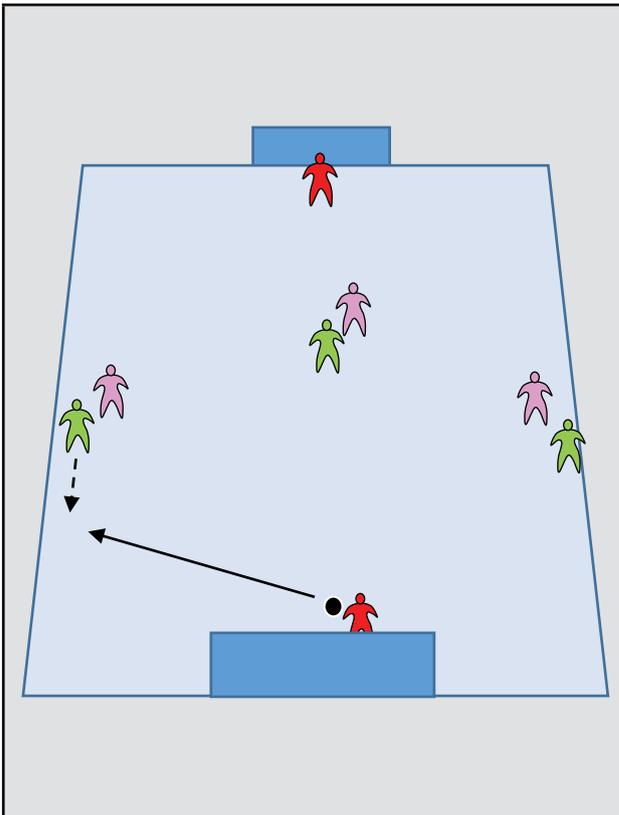
"Can you see anything wrong with running there?"

The players, having seen this situation many times before in 2v2, should recognise that such runs will again lead to the team having two players in the one space.

"Keep out of...?"

When this happens, they should also be able to see that this will leave another part of the field empty.

"If we have two players in one space, how does that affect the big picture?"

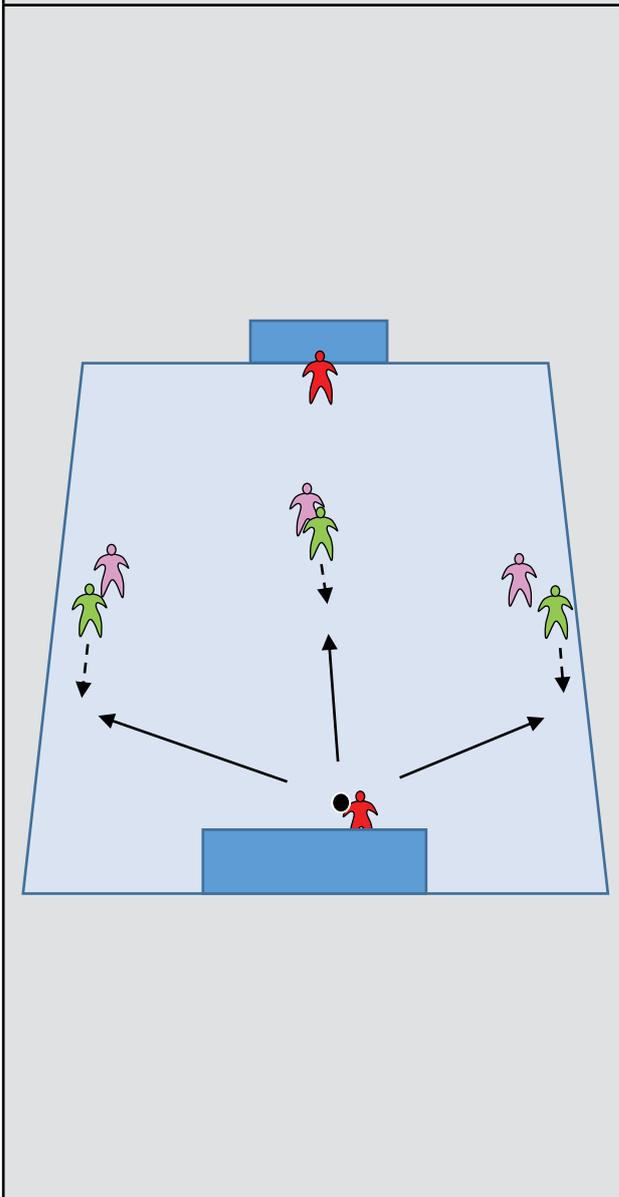


The beauty of focusing on the standers before the athletes is that the athletes get to hear the message at the same time, especially in relation to moving first. If they haven't picked up on how this affects them, you can ask:

"If moving first gets you to the ball first, do you really need to move so much?"

Thus, the underlying message to all of the players – standers and athletes alike - is

"You don't need to run out of position to get the ball!"



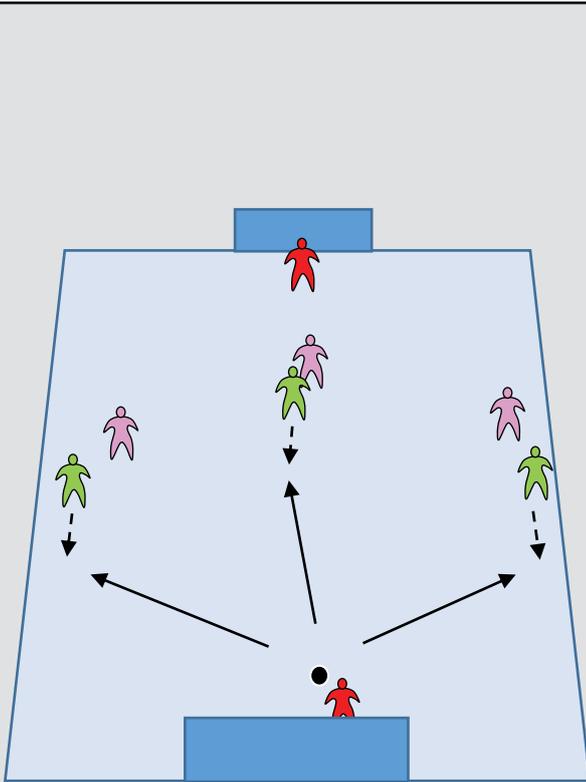
Now, for the athletes, the two lines of questioning are combined:

"So, if we want you to stay in your part of the field and we want you to move off your marker, where do you go?"

Once again, the answer is to make a short, sharp and well-timed movement - down the field for a pass to their feet - just as they learned to do in the warm-up.

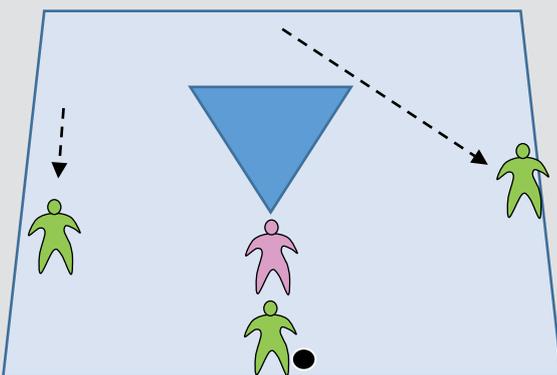
After you've helped both the standers and the athletes, each player should know that we want her to show for the ball when the keeper looks up, and that we want her to do so, though, only in her own part of the field.

The players have worked this out for themselves, before being told how to do so by an adult. This is the complete opposite to how, unfortunately, most of our young players are introduced to positional play.



It may seem too predictable to have all three players coming down the field towards their keeper, but you and your players must realise that this is just a starting point.

Both players on the sides will already know, from the 2v2s, to come back down the field for the ball. Players of this age - who have just moved into this phase - don't usually have the passing range to play the front player in behind the defence from such a deep position. So it makes sense to ask her, too, to start off by coming towards her team-mates in order to link up with them. There will be a time when the forward players learn when to make blind-side runs off the back of defenders, but for now there are two factors limiting this: the shorter playing field and the inability of players of this age to play accurately over longer distances.



Moving down the line for the pass and moving out of the defender's 'shadow'.

Because of this emphasis on coming short for the ball, the work done alongside the 3v3s - in 3v1 'trianglo' practice - is especially relevant.

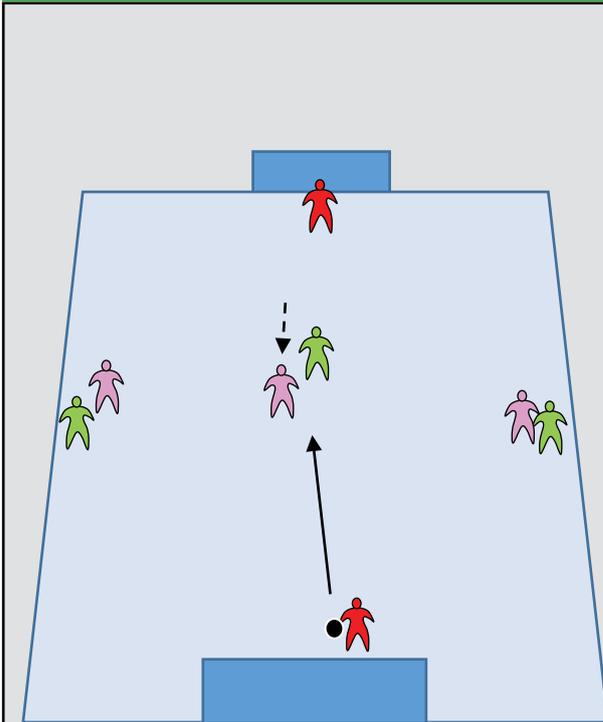
When playing 3v1, the players must repeat the short, sharp movements we want from them, over and over again. Because they are in a 10-yard square, they are always close to the ball, so there must always be a sense of urgency about their play. We want them to take that sense of urgency with them into the 3v3 game.

3v1 particularly relates to the movement of the wide players, down the field towards the ball in search of a sideways pass. They must constantly move out from behind the defender (out of her 'shadow') to make themselves available for the pass, to always receive with their feet open, looking inside to see all of the square.

"See everything!"



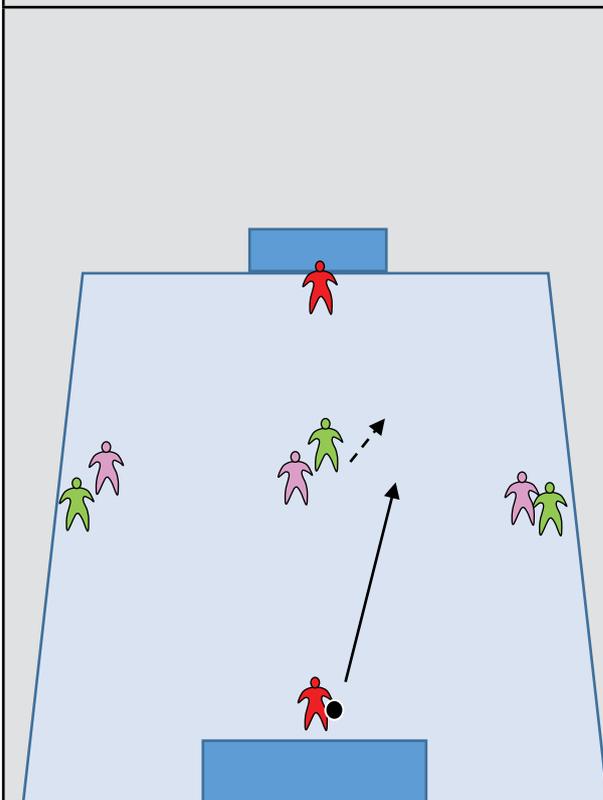
A LITTLE WORD TO THE DEFENDERS...



Human nature will often lead the defenders to anticipate the pass from the keeper and step in quickly ahead of the attacker to win the ball. This is because the attacking players will initially come down the field as requested, and the players in defensive positions know they will (because they're all on the same team, hearing the same messages). This is obviously not realistic, since in competitive games, the attackers will always have the advantage of moving first. The defenders can't jump the gun and move ahead of the attacker before the pass is played. You can ask a defender when she does this:

"Can you see any danger by jumping ahead of her like that?"

"Are you guarding your goal by doing that?"



If she can't see the danger in this, you can ask the keeper:

"Can you play a better ball here, other than the ball into her feet?"

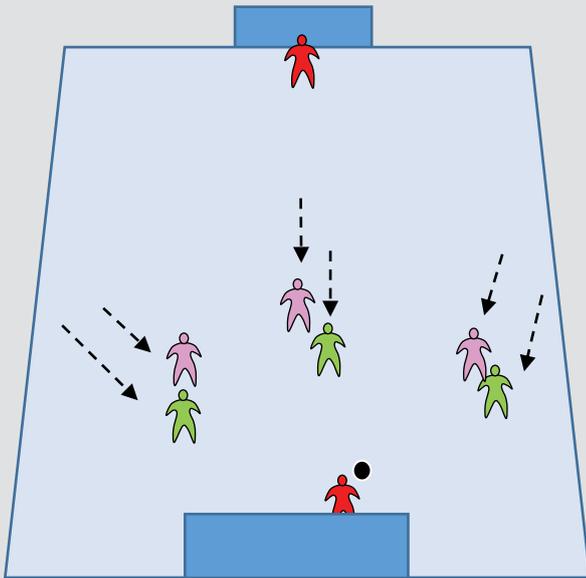
By playing a through pass for the front player on the side away from the defender, the goalkeeper will help you show the defenders why they must start in goal-side positions.

The message to all the players now is, because we're all on the same team, the defenders shouldn't deliberately 'spoil' the attacks.

Even though we're primarily concerned at this stage with the team's attacking play, here is an example of how the players will always be picking up little snippets of information about how they should defend. This serves as preparation for the formal training in defending which will come later.



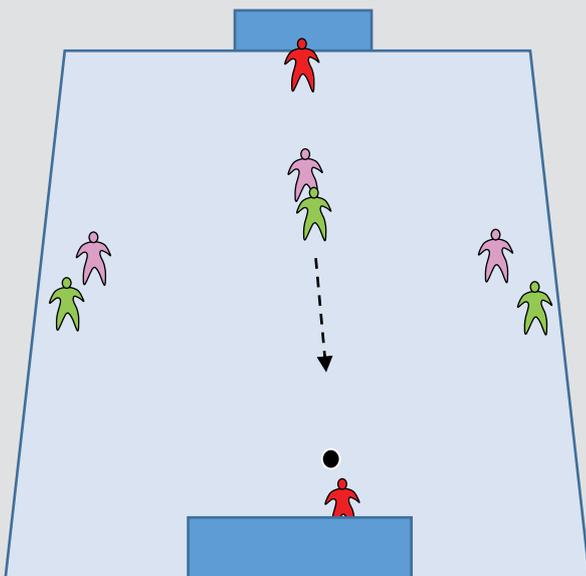
TIMING OF RUNS



Once you have the players moving off their markers, you may find that they often end up in deep positions, too close to the goalkeeper. When this happens, it's usually a matter of timing, so once more you will find yourself referring back to the to the passing formula of:

"Head up!" "Show!" "Pass!"

The problem may be with the timing of the outfield player's movement, or with the timing of the pass from the keeper.



If a player moves before the goalkeeper is ready to pass, she will be too deep by the time the keeper is ready to give her the ball.

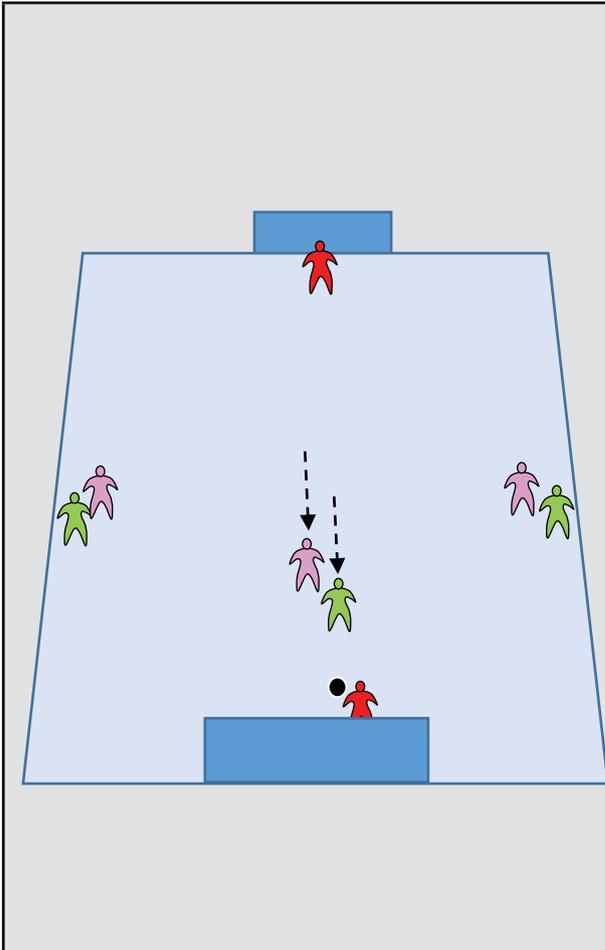
"Is there a problem with you coming so far back?"

"How can you make sure you get the ball further up the field?"

"Did you forget to check something before you moved?"

The solution is in the eyes! The players' eyes must meet in the warm-up, so they must meet in the game. The player must connect up with the keeper before moving, and the keeper's body language must be right, before she moves to ask her for the ball. The keeper must have the ball in a playable position, have her feet ready to play it and, vitally, have her head up. Again...

"Head up!" "Show!" "Pass!"



In relation to the player’s movement, the timing of the goalkeeper’s pass must also be right. You may often see her delay too long before passing, with the result that the players end up on top of her. You must ask her:

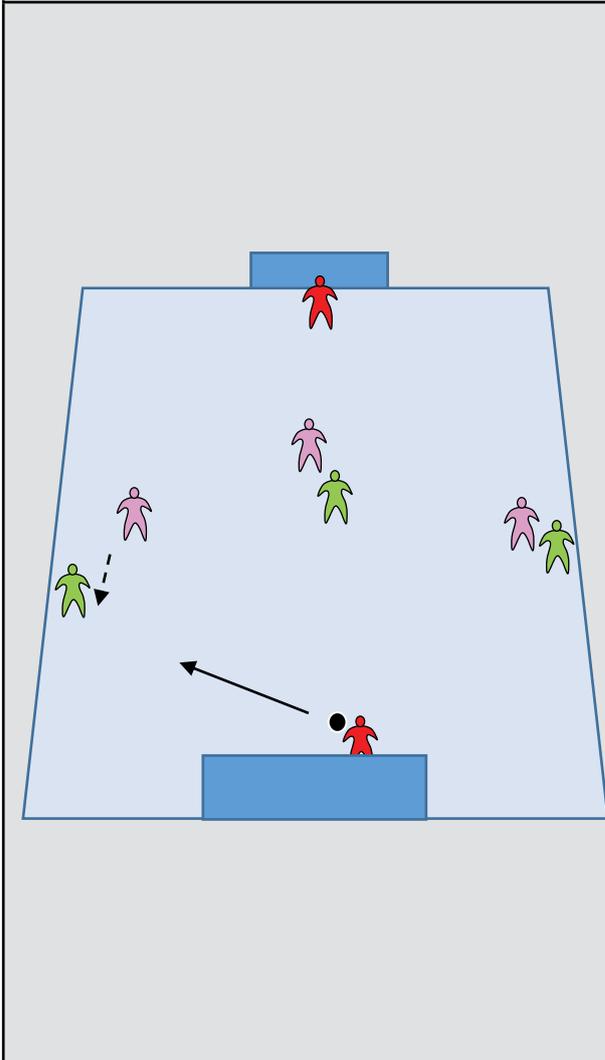
“What’s the formula?”

“When should the pass be played?”

The keeper must appreciate that the pass must be released at the moment the player moves.

Once again...

“Head up!” “Show!” “Pass!”



If a player just takes those three or four sharp steps off her marker, a delayed pass will lose her the advantage she gains over the defender. If she makes her move and the ball doesn’t come, the defender will catch up with her. When this happens, you will ask the keeper:

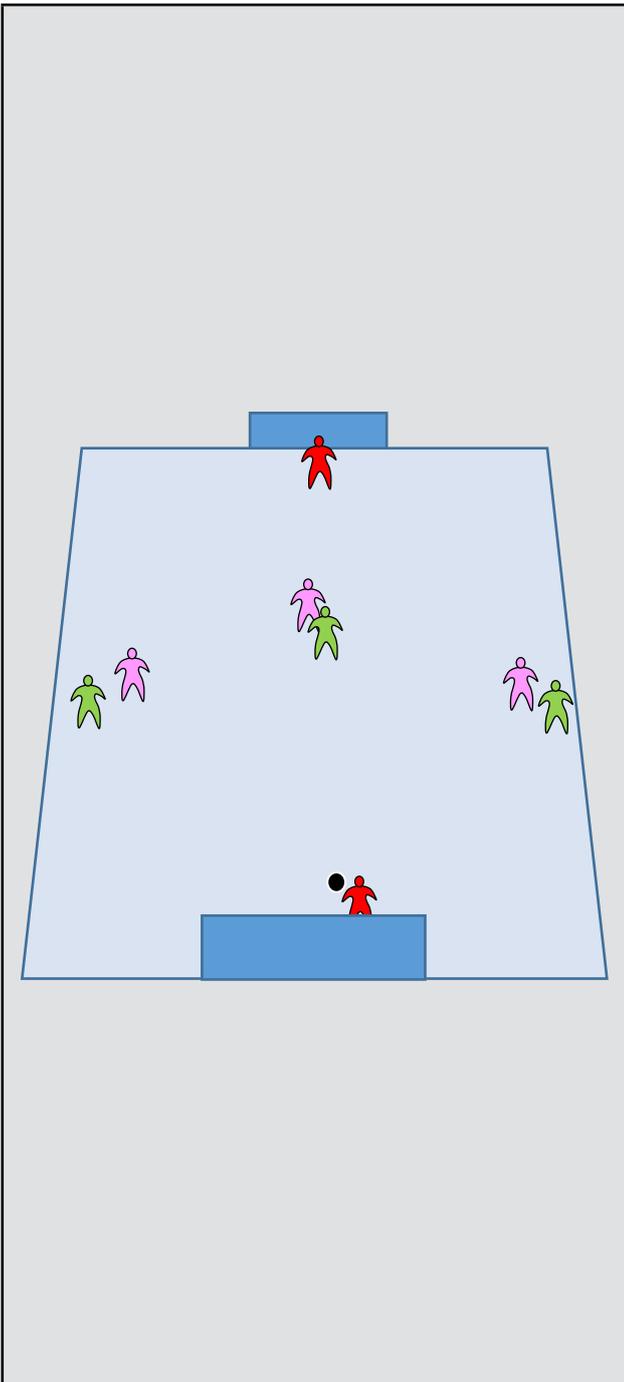
“Did she move well off her marker?”

“Why did the defender catch her up?”

You can then demonstrate the difference in how the attacker will receive the pass in space if it comes on time and how, If the pass is delayed, the defender catches her up.

Yet again...

“Head up!” “Show!” “Pass!”



Often, the reason for the goalkeeper delaying the pass is a fear of passing into a marked player. Some young players think that their team-mates aren't open for a pass unless they're in a big chunk of space, with the result that they won't play the pass if the player looking for the ball is not completely free. If you ask the keeper in this situation ***"Is she free?"***, she'll probably answer ***"No!"***. You can then ask:

"OK, the defender is fairly close, but if you take a chance and give it to her, will she get to the ball first?"

If she tries it and the pass is successful, everyone learns that:

"If you give it to her at the right time, she'll get to it first!"

Even though you're speaking to the keeper, the message is for everyone:

"Don't be afraid to play to a marked player!"

"Trust your team-mate!"

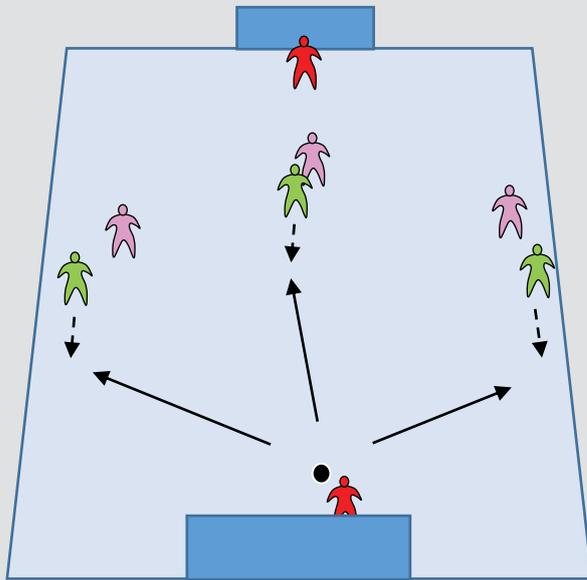
"Head up, show, pass!"

You can now appreciate how the messages the players got in the warm-up - in terms of connecting up, moving properly, and passing on time - must be repeated over and over again. Because the defenders are closer, they must become accustomed to playing to marked team-mates and learn to be comfortable when receiving the ball with defenders near them. They should see that the sharp movement they learned serves two purposes - it gets them away from their markers and it conveys the message to the keeper that they really want the ball.

When you begin to see your players playing passes into marked team-mates, what you are seeing is a new level of confidence in your team's play. Players off the ball are showing increased confidence in themselves by looking for the ball - even though they're marked - and the passers are showing increased confidence in them by giving it. You may have some players who are already doing this naturally, but for the majority of youngsters, this is a major step up in their game.



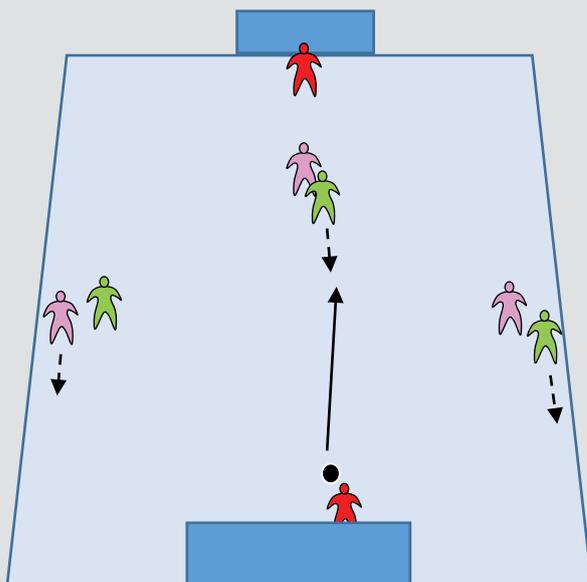
THE GOALKEEPER AS SERVER



Once you have helped the keeper to get the timing right, you can begin to focus on her choice of pass. In reality, it's mostly a free choice because, with no defender pushing onto her at the start of each move, she's for the most part playing as a server.

As she gets the ball free to start each move, it makes sense to ask her to vary the serves, sharing the ball evenly between the two sides and the front.

This may be a little unrealistic, because in a game we would ask any player on the ball to play the most positive pass she could, but it is important that, in practice, every player gains equal experience of receiving the ball in these positions.



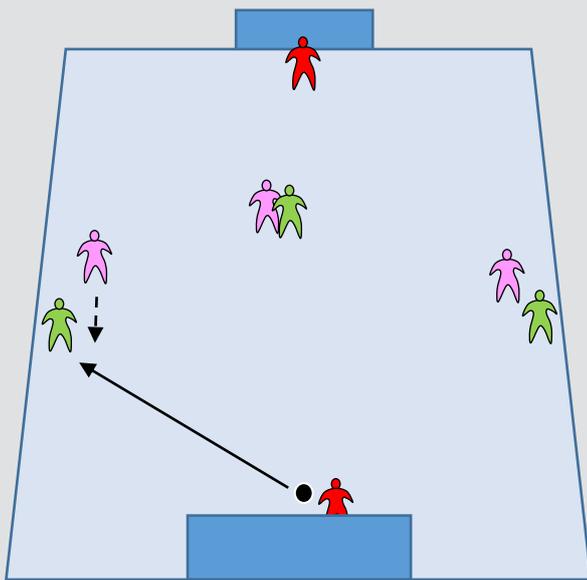
A distinct advantage of starting each move with the goalkeeper is that we can make sure that we get many repetitions of the 'new' pass up to the front player's feet.

This, in effect, is the most positive pass she can play, as it moves the team nearer the goal and puts two of the three defenders out of the game. If we weren't asking the keeper to 'share' the serves between the three players, this would always be the preferred pass. As the players get older and move through the different phases, they will find that this initial pass into the front 'sparks' many of the team's attacks.

This may be a good time to remind you of the need for all the players to play in all positions. Playing with their back to goal will, for a lot of young players, have a strange feel to it, so it's very important that everyone experiences it.

Irrespective of which team-mate the keeper chooses to play to, the pass must have certain qualities. As we have seen, it has to be timely, released at the precise moment that the receiver moves off her marker. It is vitally important, too, that it's nicely weighted to suit the receiver. If it's too soft, it invites the defender to step in and intercept; if it's played too heavily, it gives the receiver an unwelcome controlling problem.

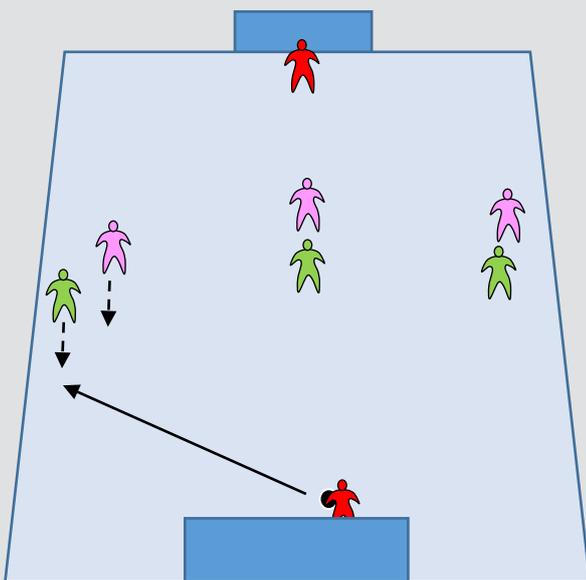
At this stage, these might be classed as the obvious qualities of a pass. Now, though, we want to refine that initial starting pass from the keeper in terms of what would probably be regarded as the most obvious quality: accuracy.



Even the youngest players, by the time they've reached this stage, will be familiar with the word 'accurate', even though it's a pretty big one for them! If you were to ask them what an accurate pass is, most will answer:

"One that goes straight to her feet!"

You must show, though, that sometimes this may not be the correct answer. With the wide player moving off her marker to come down the field to look for the ball, the pass aimed directly at her feet often gives the defender the chance to step in to win the ball across her.



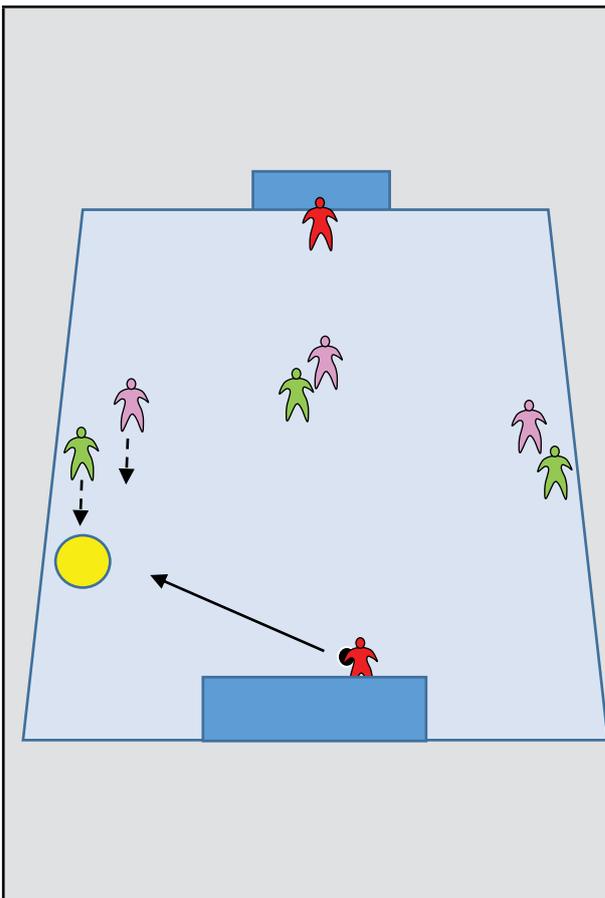
This will present you with the opportunity to introduce a new concept to the players: passing to the unmarked side, or the back foot, of the player looking for the ball.

"That wasn't a bad pass, but the defender got it!"

"Can you put it somewhere she can't get it?"

This might be one of those situations where it may take you more questions than usual to come to the right answer. You may have to ask the wide player:

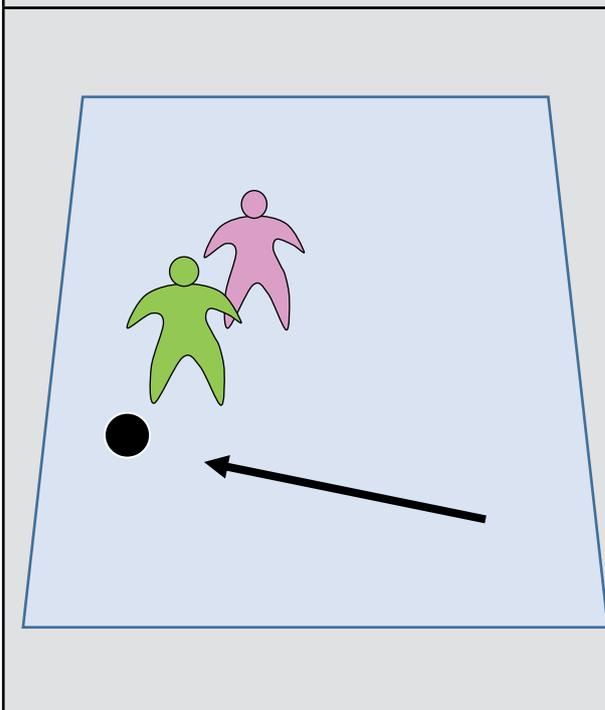
"Which foot would you prefer it to?"



We want the players to see that the pass should arrive at the foot of the attacker which is furthest from the defender. This will be to the right foot of the player on the left side, and vice-versa.

This may cause some confusion, though, as the pass is actually played into the space a little deep of the player's run, rather than directly to her foot.

It is important that the players understand that the weight of the pass needs to be just right, so that the player and the ball arrive into that space at the same time.



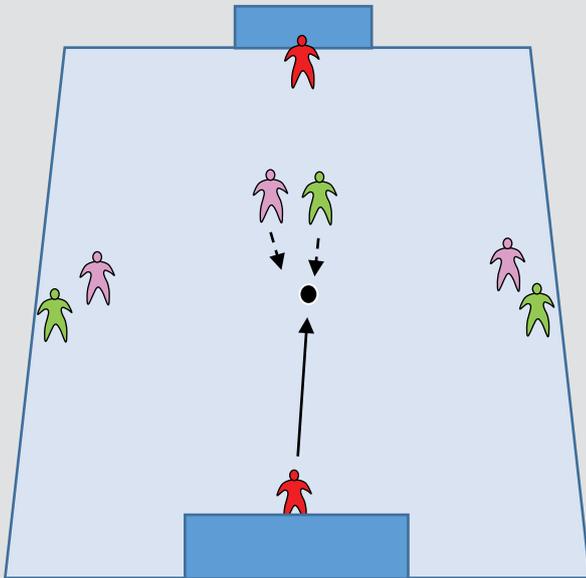
If her movement doesn't win her some space and the marker manages to stay tight to her, she will receive the ball in a position where it is automatically protected by her body - the defender cannot come through her to win the ball.

If she does get enough space away from the marker, she can quickly spin-turn with the foot nearest the defender and face up.

Defenders of this age, in most instances, won't actually manage to stay tight to the attacker when she makes her move down the field. The short and sharp movement will, more often than not, win her enough space to receive, turn, and face up to the defender. Because it is possible that the defender may get tight, we prepare the players to counter this type of marking anyway. Whereas it is an individual tactic that may not have to be used too often against tight marking at this age, more and more passes will have to be played to the back foot of players in forward positions when the players get older and opposition defences become more organised.

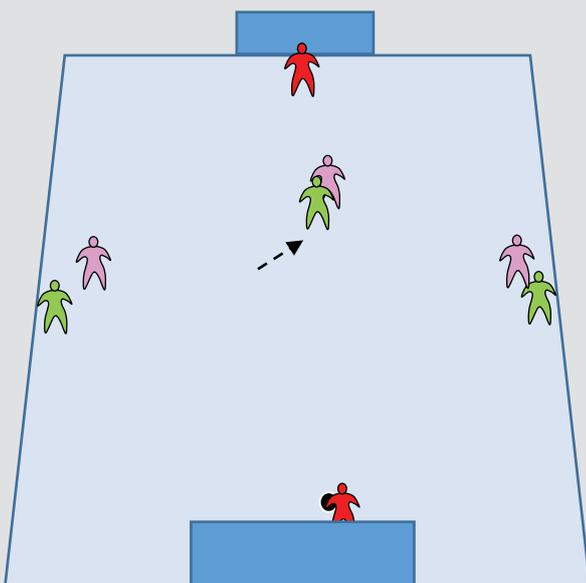


THE FRONT PLAYER



We spoke earlier of how the 'new' player, moving ahead of the two side players, may feel awkward in this advanced position, with her back to goal. More often than not the player in this position, after moving up, has some trouble in working out how she should position herself in relation to the defender.

You will most likely see this player place herself level with her marker, standing alongside her. This means, however, that when she moves down the field for the ball, it's a much more even race than it needs to be to get to it first. When this happens, the forward pass from the goalkeeper is, more or less, a 50-50 ball. Both players have an even chance of getting it.



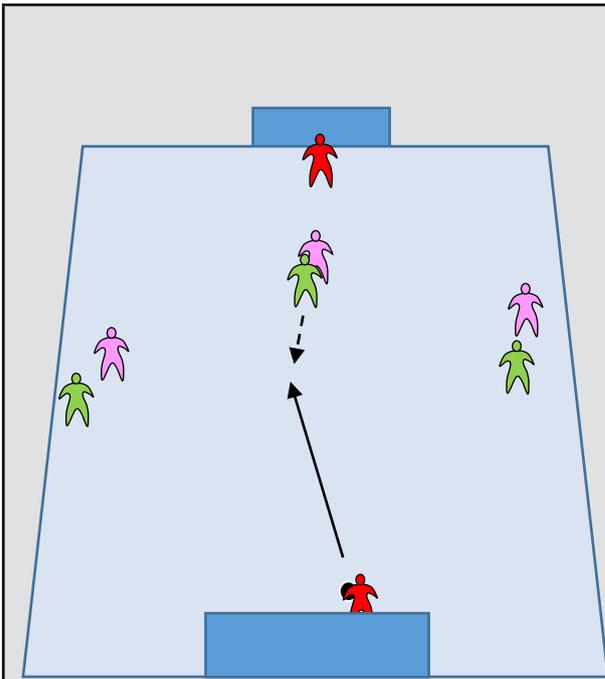
To help solve this problem, you'll have to ask her to do something that goes against all the basic instincts of a young player (and many adult players, too).

"Is there anywhere you can go, or anywhere you can stand to make sure that you'll get to the ball before her?"

It surprises most players and coaches to learn that Instead of moving away from her marker to maintain her own space, she should move onto the defender to 'cover' her with her body.

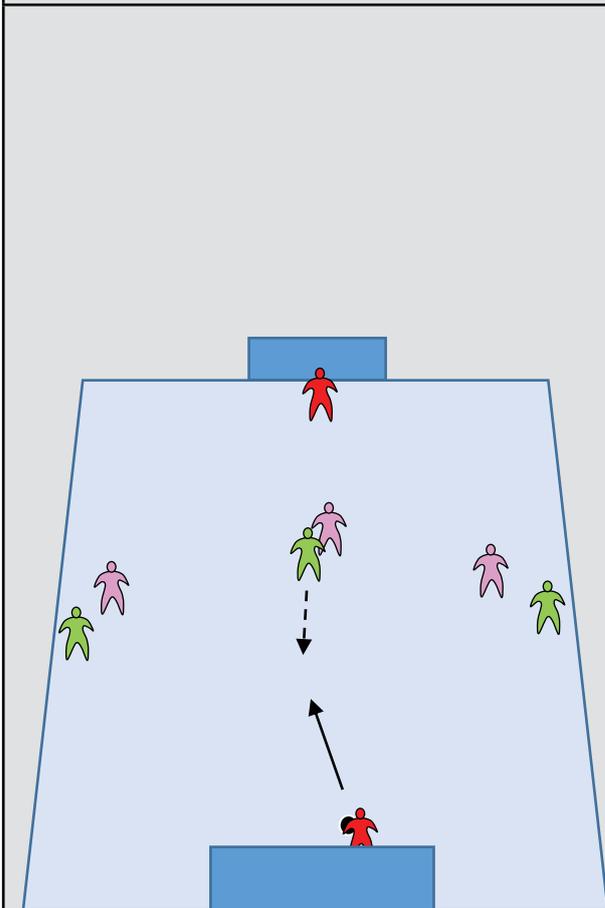
"If you start there, who should get to the ball first?"

This should now become the front player's 'default' starting position, from which she'll move for the ball. We ask her to always ***"Be a target!"*** for all her team-mates.



Now when the front player comes to look for the ball, the keeper will have this clearly defined target to hit. She will not, though, just play a pass in her general direction. Depending on the position of the defender, she will also have - just as she did when the wide players looked for the ball - an unmarked side to pass to.

Now, with the front player looking for the pass in this way, we will have all three outfield players showing well for the ball. The keeper is spoilt for choice!



Once she has taken up this starting position, she must learn not to run out of it into wide or deep positions. Because it's the 'new' position and because the player who goes into that position is higher up the field by herself, the likeliness of her doing this is extremely high.

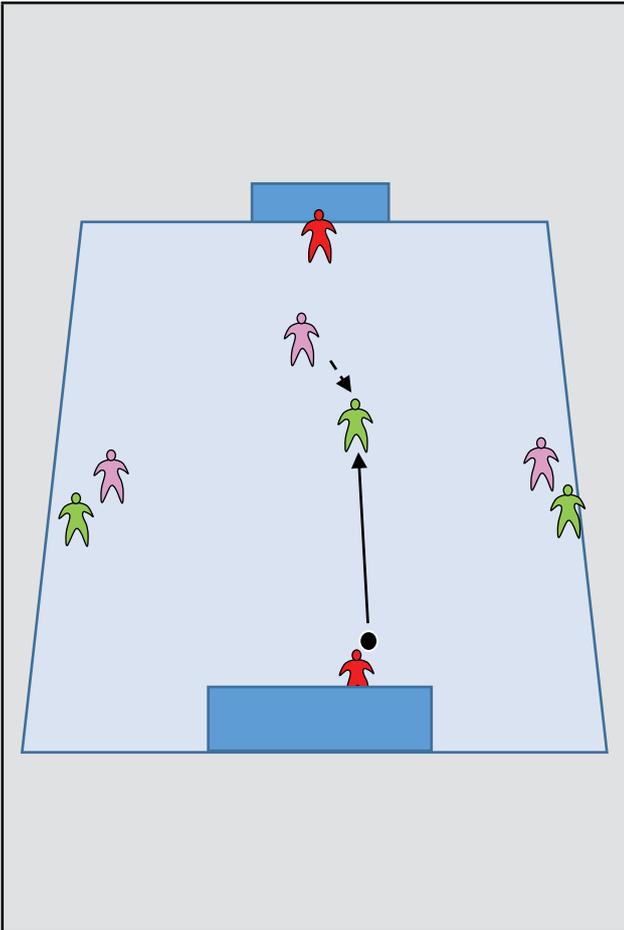
When you see this happen, you can use simple logic and basic common sense to encourage her to stay up.

"You're getting the chance to play near their goal, why would you want to come away from there?"

You can remind her that, if the timing is right, she can stand until a team-mate on the ball looks for her, take only two or three sharp steps down the field, and still be first to the pass played up to her. You ask her to always:

"Stay up and stay in the centre!"

By staying forward and central, and by timing her movement off her marker properly, she will always be available to provide a focal point for the attack.

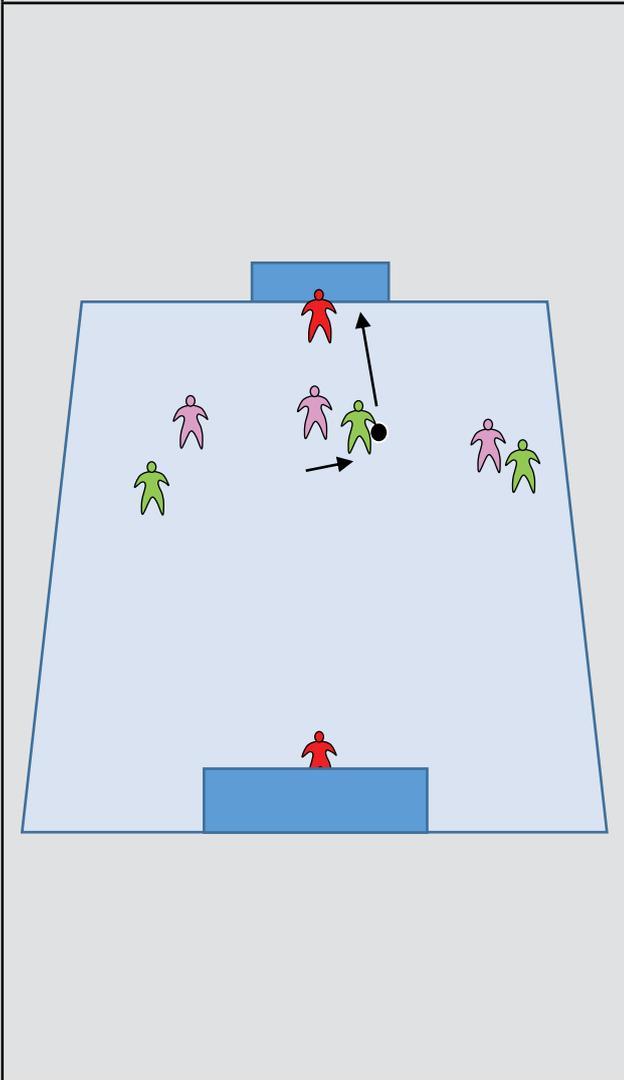


When she receives the ball, her first option - at this stage - is to try to turn, face up to the defender, dribble past her and shoot.

Usually, the younger the group, the more chance she has of getting turned. Young defenders often start in a tight-marking position, but tend to drop off when the ball is played up. Even so, we don't want her turning 'blind' into the defender. You ask her:

"How will you know where she is?"

Because of her starting position, she has no option but to start by looking down the field. She can compensate for this, however, by glancing over her shoulder for the reaction of her marker, as she moves down the field for the ball. Don't forget - you have prepared her for doing this, in the warm-up.



Once she decides that she has enough space to turn, she should do so as quickly as possible.

"How should you turn?"

This is where the spin-turn you introduced in the warm-up comes into its own. You can remind her:

"Don't turn – spin!"

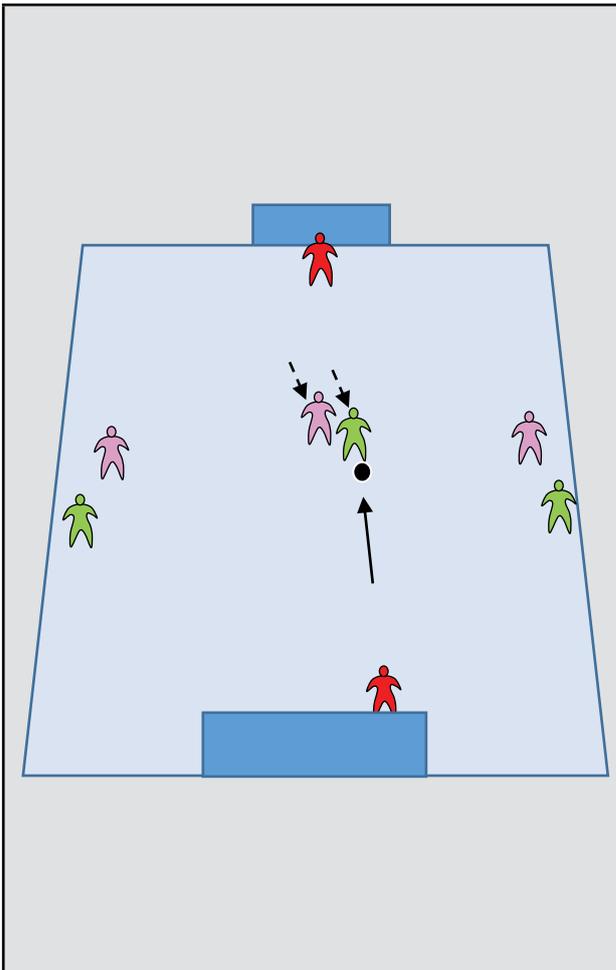
Once she gets turned, she is in the perfect position to take the defender on and shoot.

She must be positive in trying to get her shot away as quickly as possible.

"Take the ball!"

"Take the defender on!"

"Take your shot!"



If the defender closely follows her and stays really tight, turning will be much more difficult. If she tries to turn and loses the ball, you can ask:

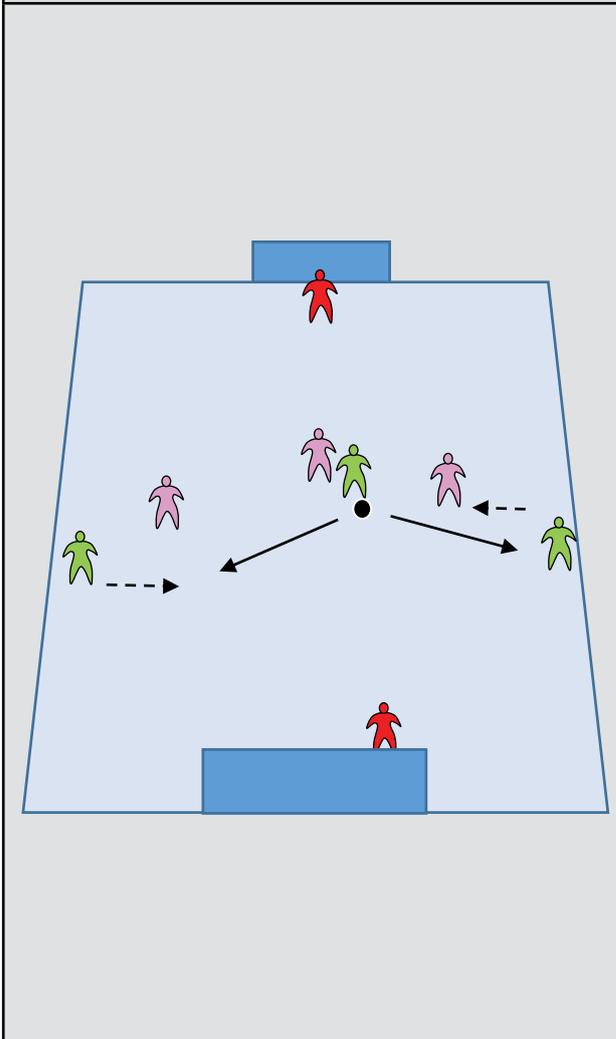
“Is turning a good idea when she’s that tight to you?”

“What might you be better off doing?”

She should recognise that she must protect the ball when the defender stays tight.

“How must you control it?”

We have already shown all the players how, in this situation, they must control with the foot furthest from the defender, while keeping their body between the defender and the ball.



Once she has the ball secured in this way, that’s the signal for the other two players to move to help her. You first ask them:

“Does she need help?”

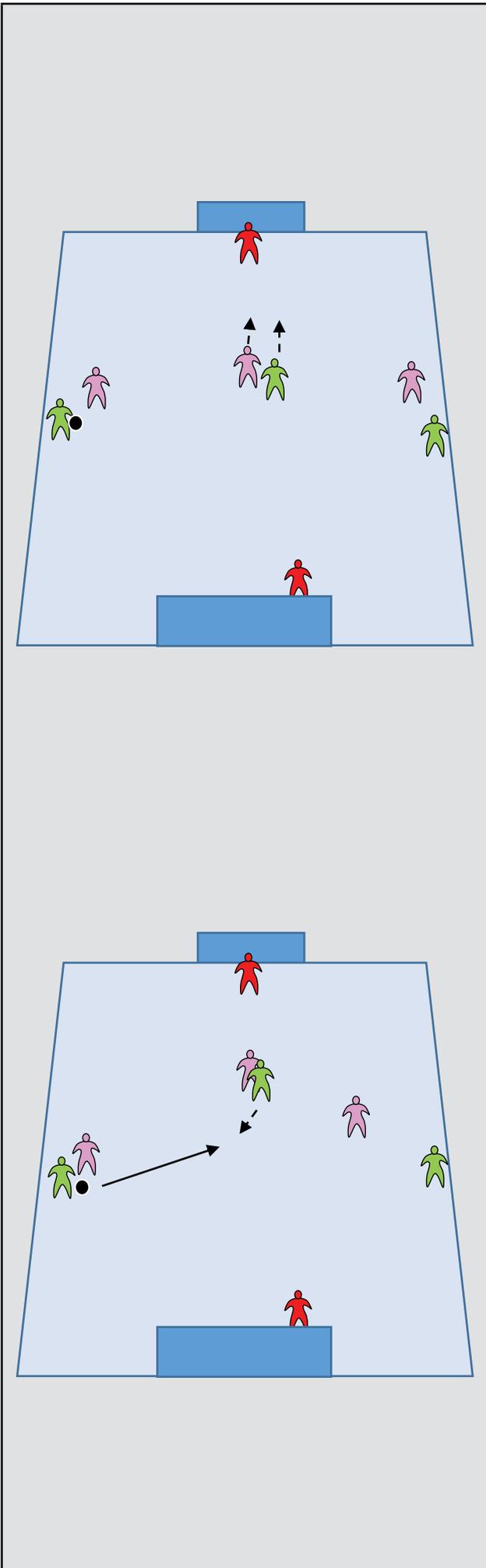
If they decide that she does need it, you ask:

“Where can you go to help her?”

At this stage, I don’t really focus on where they move as long as they move ‘out of the defender’s shadow’ (as in 3v1 practice), to give her a passing option. They may not even have to move if their marker is drawn back towards the goal, leaving them free to have the ball.

Once they have made themselves available, the front player rolls the ball off to them.

“If you can’t turn, control and roll!”



Those questions you asked the wide players are vital, because we want all the players to get into the habit of asking themselves the same two questions when their team-mates are on the ball.

If a wide player has the ball, for example, the front player must read the game and decide whether to come to help her or stay away. She should ask herself:

“Does she need help?”

If she’s comfortable on the ball, facing up and going at the defender, the front player must see this and react accordingly. You ask:

“If she doesn’t need you, is there anything at all you can do to help her?”

“Can you do anything to give her more space?”

If she pulls away from the ball onto the blind side of her marker, she may draw the marker with her - leaving more space for the dribble.

“Leave her to dribble!”

If, for whatever reason, the wide player looks unlikely to beat the defender, it is still easy for the front player to come back to offer herself for the pass played into her feet. You may ask her:

“Is she looking for you?”

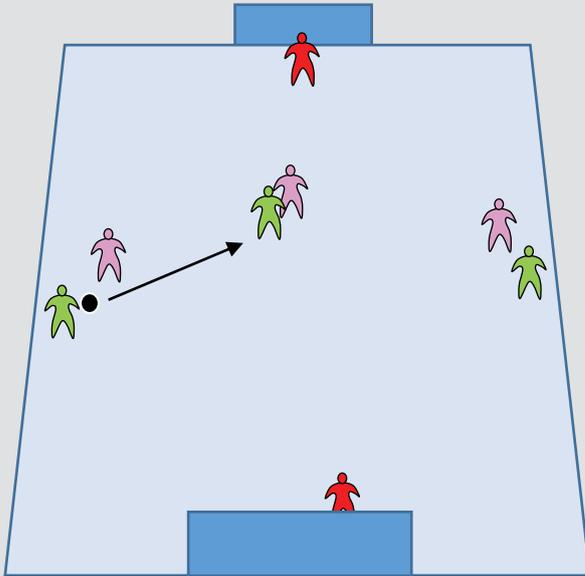
but it’s better if she asks herself:

“Does she need help?”

“Where can I go to help her?”



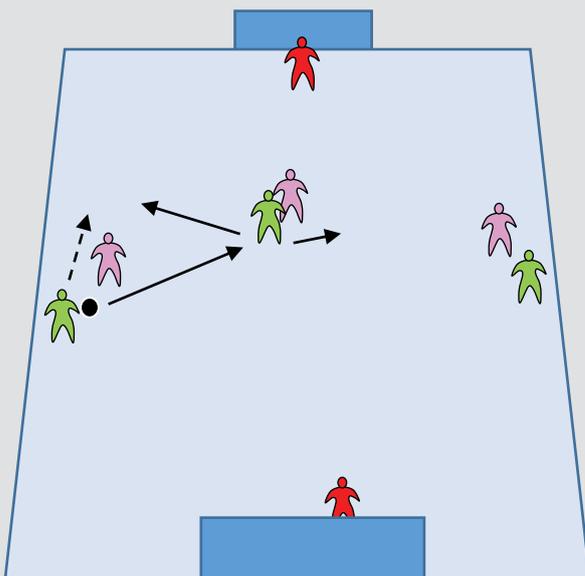
THE WIDE PLAYERS



Nothing much changes for the wide players when they move to 3v3. Their primary aim is still to get the ball, get turned and dribble at the defender. But with the third player ahead of them now, they have the opportunity to add more variation to their game.

The 'dribble or pass?' choice they had to make in 2v2 has changed a little, though. They can still dribble or pass to the other wide player, but now might choose to play a forward pass into the feet of the front player.

By choosing to dribble sometimes and pass at other times, we aim to keep the opponents guessing. If we always pass, the team's play becomes predictable; if we always dribble, our play is just as predictable. If the opposition know how we're going to attack them, they can defend more effectively against us.



The wide player can play this pass into the front player and, after playing it, run in behind the defender to give the front player the option of playing a return pass to her, in a classic 'one-two' move. You can encourage this, but you won't need to go into great detail yet. One-twos - or wall passes as they are also known - will be taught specifically in the next **"Move Yourself!"** phase.

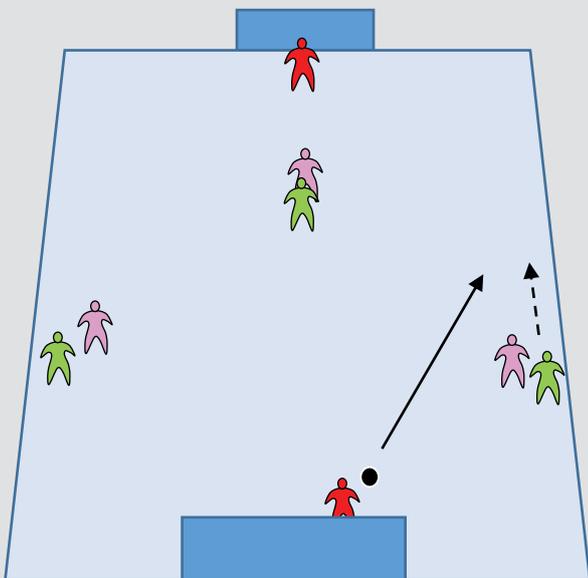
This run also gives the front player the opportunity to use her as a decoy and surprise her marker by turning the other way, towards the goal.

As we did in 2v2, we can encourage the front player to 'act up' when playing the decoy move by calling **"Yours!"** in order to fool the defender.



PLAYING THROUGH PASSES

Some young players have a natural feel for playing effective passes behind defenders, but you will have to help most of your players to recognise the cues for playing through successfully. The structure of the 3v3 game allows for direct through passes from the goalkeeper, but you must always bear in mind that this is an unrealistic situation in relation to the full game. The players benefit, though, by having a simple, clearer picture in front of them, which presents them with repeated opportunities to read the game in relation to running and passing in behind defenders. We are still at a stage where defenders – for a lot of the time - are ball-watching and not paying enough attention to the players they are marking. So there will be many openings for through passes.

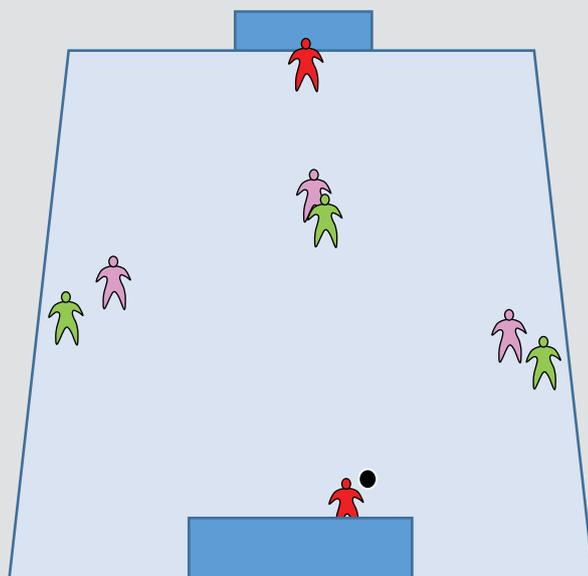


Up to now, we've always asked the players to come down the field to look for the ball, but now we are going to ask them to look for opportunities to run in the opposite direction - for direct passes in behind the defenders.

For a through pass to be successful, certain factors must combine. As I say to the players, often to their bewilderment:

"All the ingredients must be right, for the cake to rise!"

They must learn to recognise these ingredients...



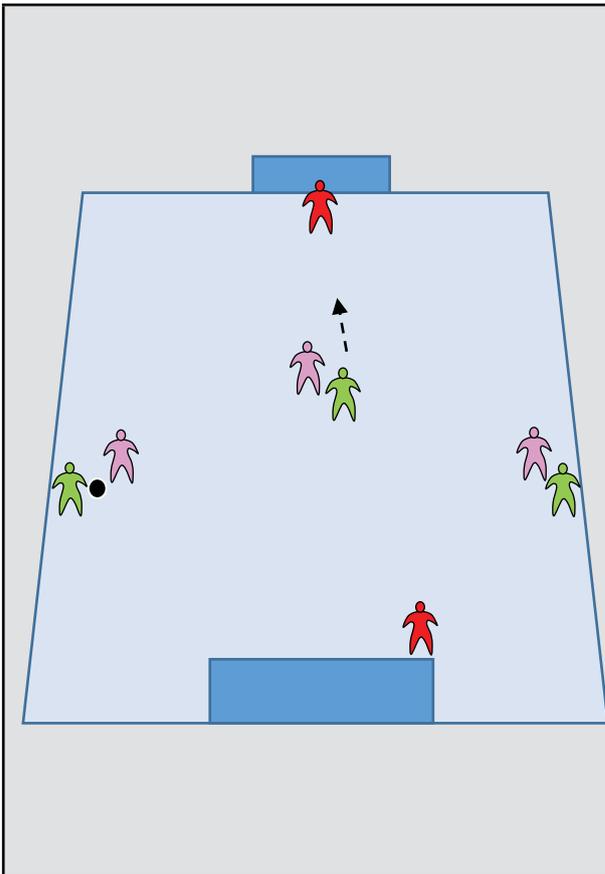
First Ingredient:

The player on the ball has the space to play the ball forward.

"Has she enough space to play it forward?"

"Can she play it through to you?"

Because the goalkeeper starts most of the moves in 3v3, there are many chances for her to play forward, so the other players can always be on the lookout for the through pass when she has the ball.

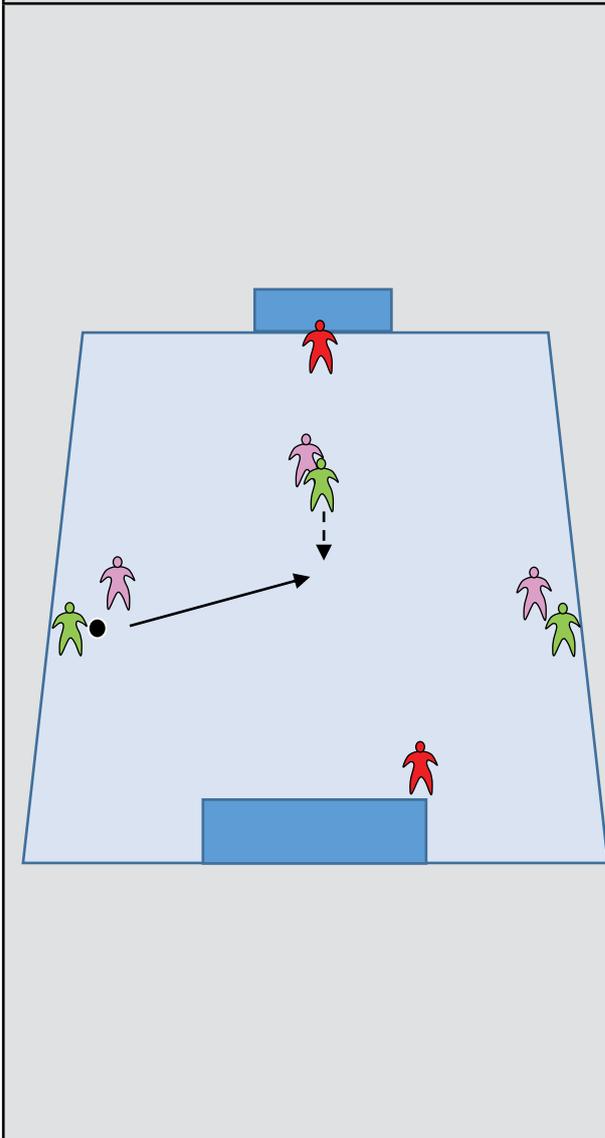


Things may be different, though, in situations the players face further up the field.

At this age, you will often see players running away from the player on the ball - in their enthusiasm to get in towards the goal and score - looking for a through pass when it's not really 'on'.

Here, the left player has the ball and is facing forward. The front player sees this and immediately rushes forward, looking for a through pass to put her in on goal. She does this instinctively, without first pausing to

“Read the game!”



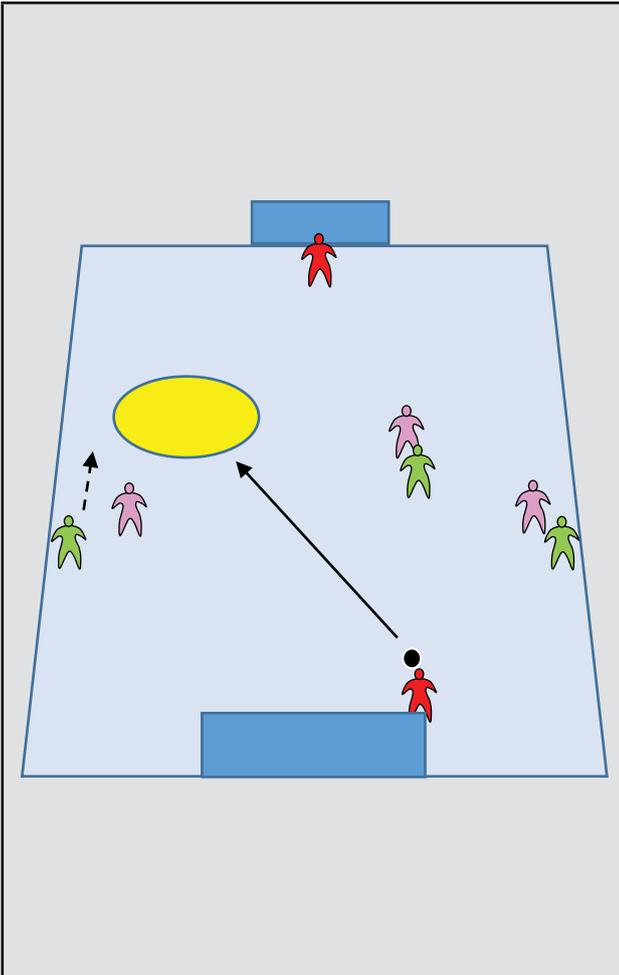
What she has failed to factor in, though, is the position of the defender nearest to the ball. By coming up and pressing the player on the ball, she is denying her the space to pass forward. We now ask the front player the same questions:

“Can she play it through to you?”

“Has she enough space to play it forward?”

Because the player on the ball can't play it into the space behind, she will have to come back down the field, into a position almost level with the wide player, if she wants the ball. (This again refers back to the work being done in 3v1 practice on moving 'out of the defender's shadow'.)

Once the players have read the player on the ball, they must turn their attention to the situation away from the ball, as other factors must align for the pass to be on.



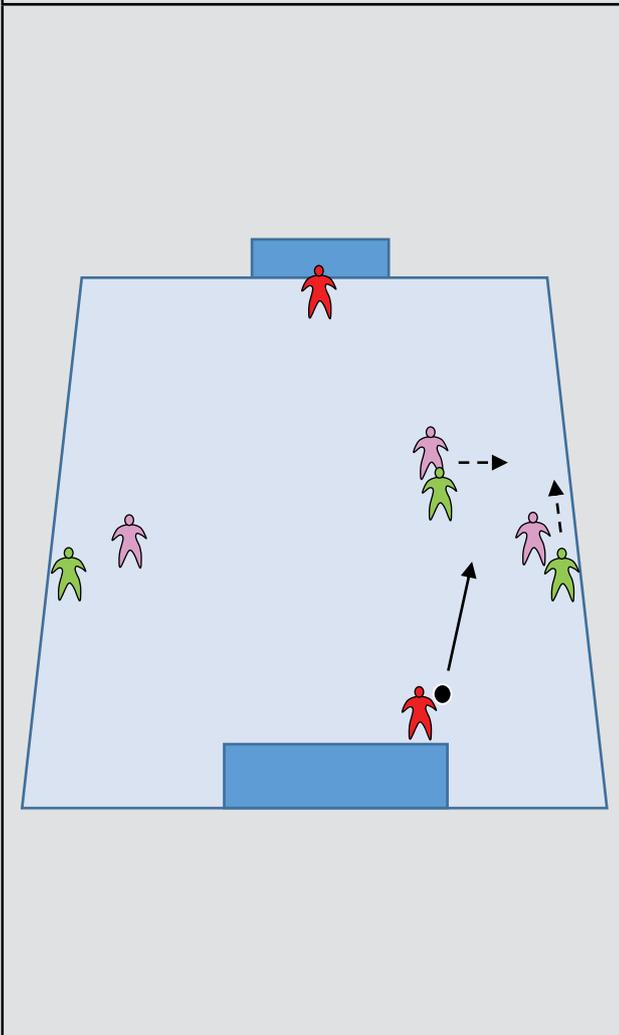
Second Ingredient:

There is open space available for the pass to be played into.

“Is there space there for you to run into?”

Here, the goalkeeper has the ball on the right of the goal and, because of this, the front player has been drawn to that side to look for it. As a result of this, the player on the left can see a nice chunk of space behind her marker, and is encouraged by this to try the run in behind.

On seeing this, the keeper may attempt to play the through pass.

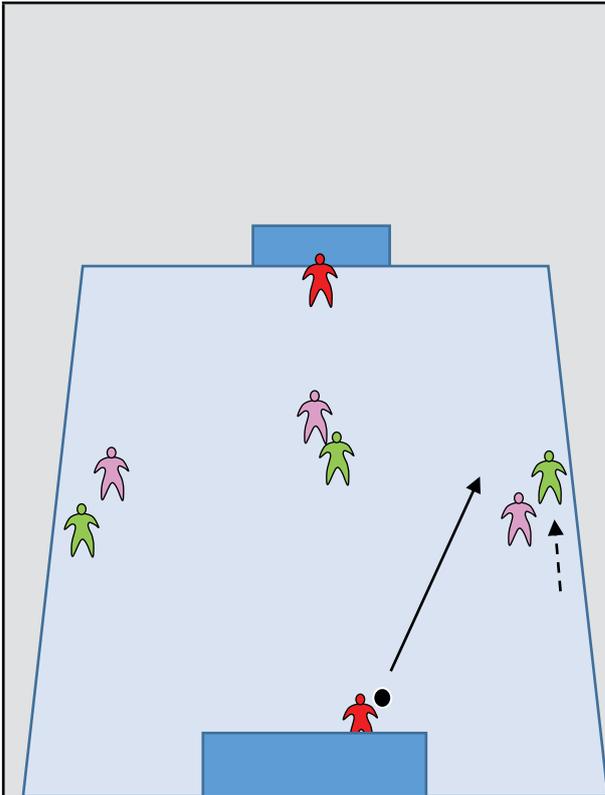


The right-sided player, in the same situation, may also try to run in behind. By coming over to that side, however, the front player has brought the defender over with her, with the result that there is less free space behind the left defender.

Because there is a very limited space, and because the central defender will find it easy to move across and cut out the pass aimed for that space, it is likely to be intercepted.

“Is there space there for you to run into?”

In this situation, the answer to that question is a resounding **“No!”**, so the right sided player must move in the opposite direction, back down the field, if she wants the ball.



Third Ingredient:

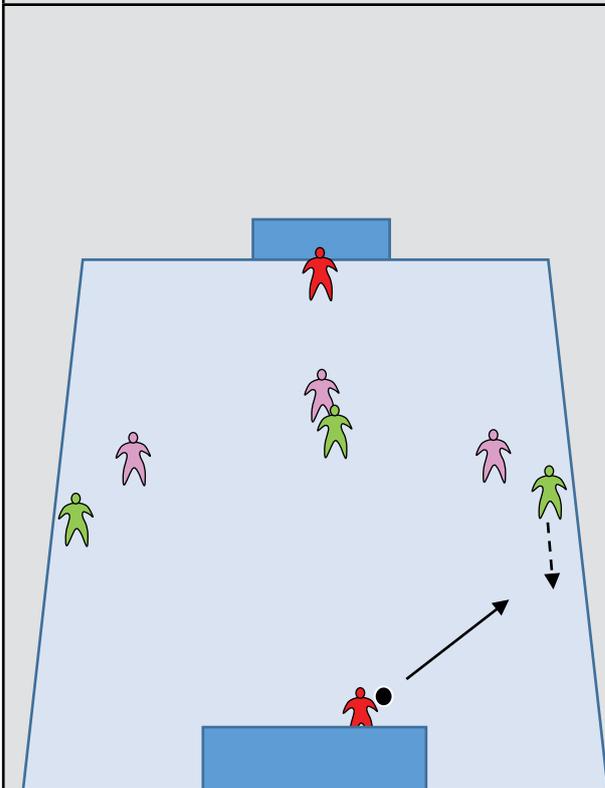
The positioning of the defender allows the attacker to be favourite to get to the ball first, when it's played through.

Once the first two ingredients are right - with the team as a whole creating enough space to allow the through pass - it comes down to the individual battle between the attacker and defender; runner versus marker.

In deciding whether to go for it or not, the attacker must read the positioning of her marker and calculate the odds on being first to the through pass.

“How close is she to you?”

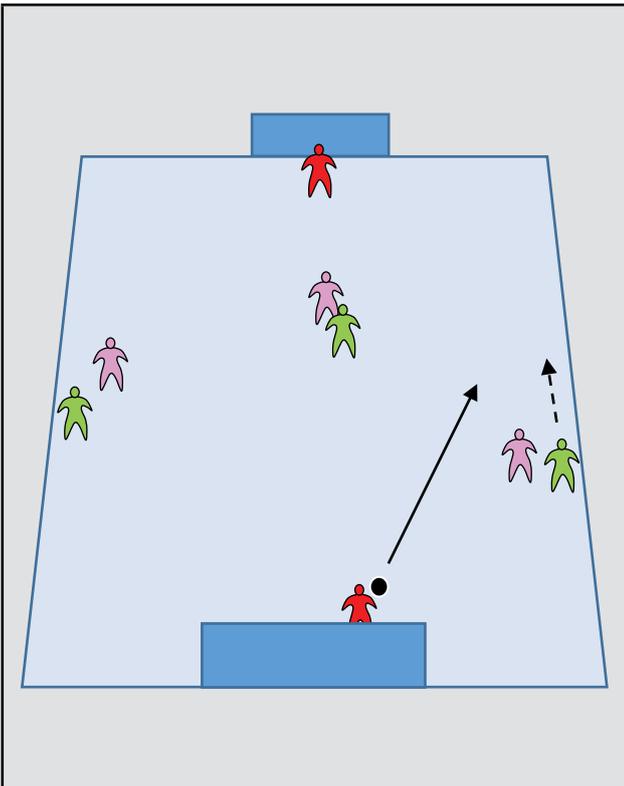
“Can you get to the through pass before her?”



When you first encourage the players off the ball to run for through passes, you will find that they will try to get in behind without taking the time to read their markers, in this way.

If the defender positions well, sitting off the attacker at the correct angle and distance for guarding her goal, she will have a head start in a race between the two of them, if a pass is played in behind her. She has ensured that the odds are in her favour. The players must understand that good marking by the opponents won't allow the direct ball in behind.

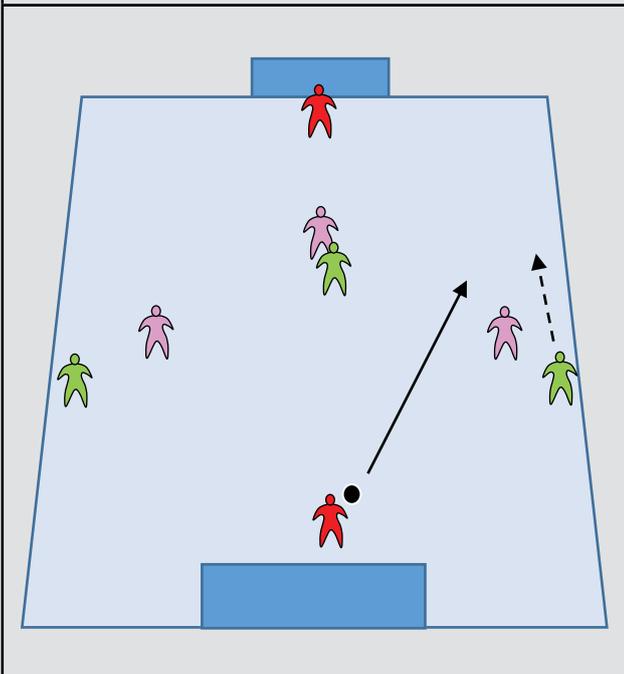
After reading the defender and seeing this, the attacker comes down the field for the pass to her feet. Because the defender has chosen to mark her loosely, she is likely to win herself enough space in which to turn.



If, on the other hand, the defender makes the mistake of marking too tightly, or even standing square to the attacker, the odds of being first to the through ball will change in the attacker's favour.

This is because the defender has to turn, while the attacker, if she has positioned her feet to see the field, is already facing forward.

After recognising the poor positioning of the defender, the attacker bursts forward to receive the through pass. It should be nicely played into the open space, and nicely weighted so that she doesn't have to break her stride.



Reading the defender may not just be a matter of reading her position, but also assessing her physical capabilities.

As they mature, players must learn to read the strengths and weaknesses of their immediate opponents. If the attacker realises that she has a distinct advantage over the defender in terms of speed, she may not have to wait for a positional slip from her, before setting off for the through pass. She may win the race, even if the defender picks up a good defensive position. In soccer, speed is king!

When executed well, a through pass looks uncomplicated, but we have seen that there's a lot going on to make it work. The players must calculate the odds in a split second, by asking themselves the questions you used to lead them towards playing these passes.

"Has she enough space to play me in?"

"Is there space there for me to get into?"

"Can I get there first?"

For players of this age, seeing and playing through passes like this is very skilful play.



3v3 SUMMARY

3V3 is a very clear 'halfway house' between the highly individual youngsters' game and the more mature team game. The players learn the importance of spreading down as well as across the field. In coaches' language, they have been formally introduced to the attacking principle of depth.

They are learning to work as a team to spread the opposition apart and cover every part of the field. They are still at a stage, though, where they are doing this with the aim of allowing each individual more space in which to show her 1v1 skills in a duel with her immediate opponent. We want each player to take responsibility for a certain part of the field and 'deliver' in that area. These duels are no longer just about face-to-face dribbling; many will first require the attackers to first move away from their markers in order to receive a pass from a team-mate.

Even though the players are also working on movement in 3v1, alongside the 3v3s, we still don't focus too closely on combination play in the games. They are free to pass to their team-mates, but we don't ask them to do this as a matter of priority. The main lesson they take from the 3v1 practice at this stage, is that they must move if they want the ball. More specifically, they must move out of the defender's 'shadow' to make themselves available for team-mates' passes. Most importantly at this age, the players learn when to come down the field for the ball and when it is 'on' to run in behind for through passes.

I don't talk to the players in detail about forming triangles all over the field. I realise that this goes against the conventional teaching of support play, but I believe it is better to wait for the fourth outfield player to be added. In this way, we can teach a more complete type of positional play with all-round support for the player on the ball.

In 3v3, therefore, the players learn to move to get the ball for themselves. In 4v4, they will learn to mostly get the ball with the intention of quickly moving it to a team-mate, with the ultimate aim of disrupting the defensive organisation of the other team.



INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the fourth outfield player, the players will move closer to the positional relationships they will have in the full game. Consequently, the playing field is expanded to 40m. by 30m.

Depending on their ability, it may have taken you anything up to two seasons to get to this stage, so they are now more mature and capable of understanding more detailed concepts. They are being asked, in every aspect of their lives, to act more responsibly, so we're going to ask them to be more responsible to the team. The step up to 4v4 marks the move away from an emphasis on individual play in 3v3, to placing the emphasis on team work to get behind the opposition and score.

We now talk, for the first time, in terms of specific positions, but in reality we have been teaching positional play by stealth. Without being told that these are their positions, the players have been picking up information about how to play as a wide player and how to play as a front player. With the addition of the fourth outfield player, we will have all the basic positions covered, and the players will take a major leap into playing a more positional game.

The team's plan and the role of the fourth player unfold in tandem. We are going to now look to put passing moves together, and the main man in knitting these moves together will be the fourth player – the playmaker.



THE 4V4 WARM-UP

We use the same basic structure as the 3v3 warm-up (3v3WU), with all players moving freely in a 30m. square. Use a ratio of one ball for every three players. Unlike the 3v3 warm-up, in which they were paired off, they are free to pass to whoever they choose.

We are using the same basic structure as the 3v3WU, albeit with a different emphasis, so before you move on to anything new, you have the opportunity to review the passing formula and check that the **“Head up! – Show! - Pass!”** rules are being followed. You can remind the players to maintain realistic distances between themselves, connect up with their eyes, change gear when showing for the ball, and take care with their passing and controlling. Watch out, because there are more players moving around freely, for players passing to others who haven’t looked for it.

There is one major difference in the two variations of the same set-up. In the 3v3WU, the players were asked - in between passes - to relax away from each other for a few seconds before re-connecting for the next pass. Now we want the tempo of the practice to increase significantly, with no ‘down-time’ for them at all. With this in mind, choosing to use one ball for every three players was not an arbitrary decision; for every player who has a ball, there should be two players free to receive it from him. If you find that certain players are following each other around, as they may have done when they first encountered the 3v3WU, you may impose a rule which prohibits any player from playing the same ball twice in a row. This increases the need for the players to be looking around quickly to see where they can get the next pass. Right from the start of the warm-up, the players should be actively engaged, both physically and mentally.

“Alive all the time!”

“You’re either on the ball, or you’re looking for the ball!”

“No down time!”

“You’re not going to win games by standing!”

We don’t apply the traditional ‘two-touch’ rule, but if the players are really switched on, you should see plenty of two-touch play. With players always showing for him, the player on the ball should be able to

“Get it and move it!”

with the minimum amount of time between controlling and passing.

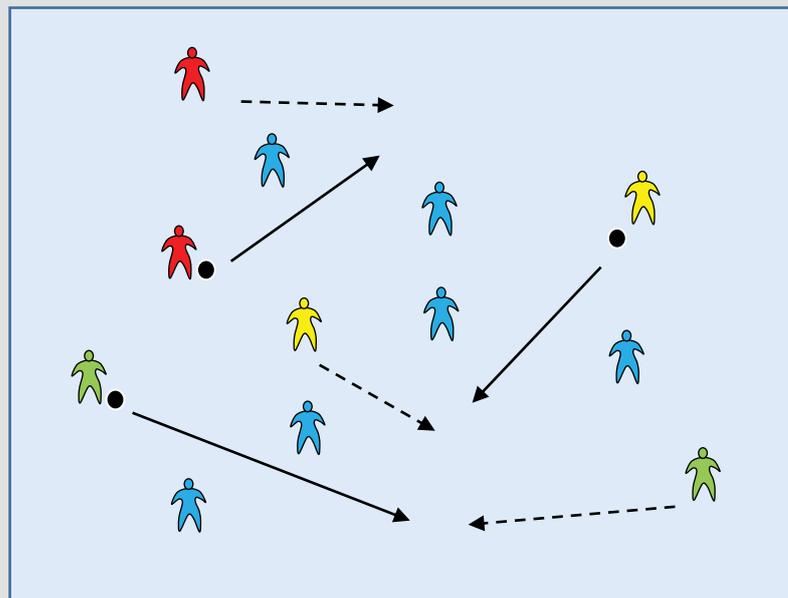
You will need to watch out for players playing too quickly, though. You will probably find, if passes are being misplaced, that a large percentage of these will be first-time passes. The players need to realise that the ball can still be moved quickly if they take two touches, and that controlling it first makes it easier to ensure that the pass reaches its target and that the team keeps the ball. For the players making this mistake, **“Get it and move it!”** may have to be amended to

“Control it and pass it!”

You may also see small groups of three or four players finding their own 'patch', so they can avoid the other players getting in their way. Whereas this is initially acceptable as they find their rhythm, it won't be long before you ask them to do the opposite; move in amongst the crowd and find a gap, through which a pass can be played.

You can actually impose a rule to ensure that this happens:

"You can't play a pass unless it's between two players!"



***"Use your imagination. They're on the other team.
Can you get between them?"***

"Can the player off the ball find a gap?"

"Can the player on the ball pass through the gap?"

The players, in the 4v4s and 4v2 practice, will become familiar with this concept of splitting defenders in order to make themselves available for the pass. In 4v2, in particular, they learn to move the ball in order to create gaps between the defenders, and then exploit these gaps.

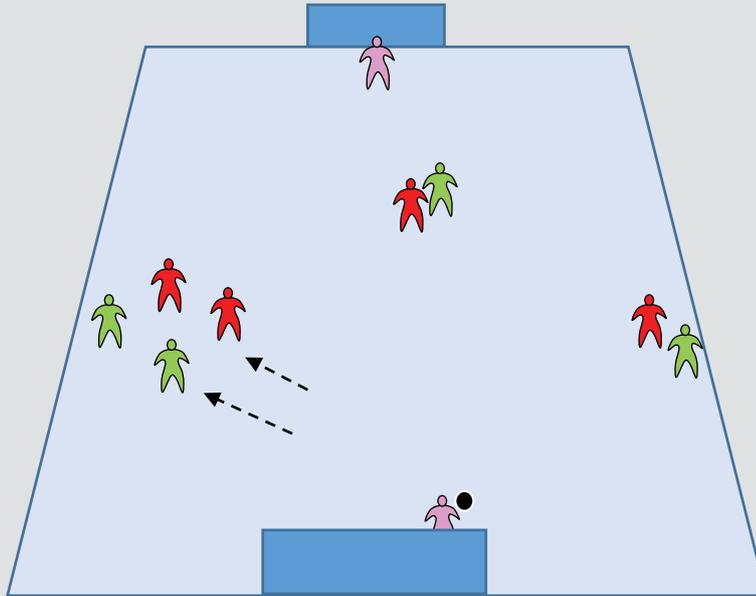
You needn't go into too much detail on this. Whereas there was a lot of technical information in the 3v3WU, this warm-up is more concerned with mindset. The message we're getting across is that we're looking for an increase in tempo. For that to happen, the players need to be more switched on and committed to working a little harder physically. Even more than the 3v3WU, the warm-up sets the scene for the games to follow.



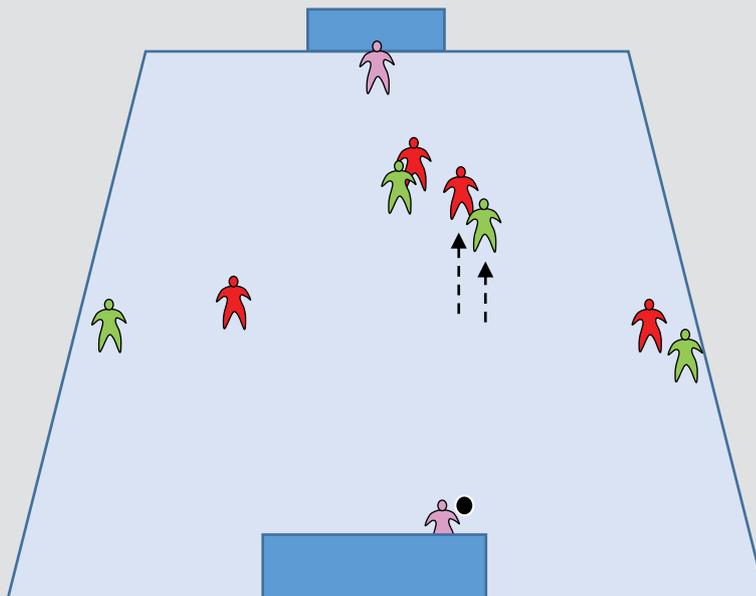
STARTING POSITION

We introduce the fourth player in the same way we introduced the third player; we ask the players where they think he should go.

He may move toward either of the sides. You ask *“Can you see a problem there?”*

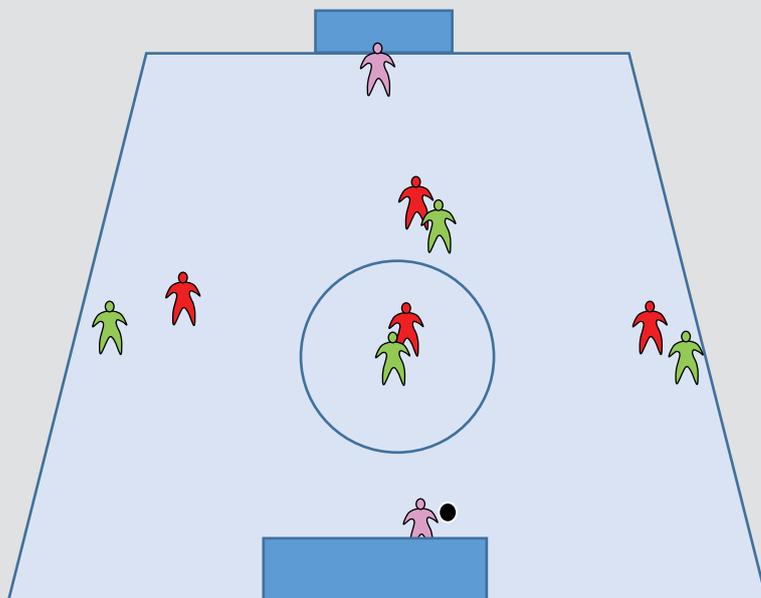


Or he may move toward the front. Again, you can ask *“Can you see a problem there?”*



The players, having seen this situation many times before in 2v2 and 3v3, will recognise that - if he moves into someone else's area - we're going to have *“two players in the one garden!”*

The player, in an honest (and smart) effort to keep himself clear of the other three, may pick up position in the 'hole' in the centre of the field. Although this seems like a quite logical move, it unfortunately still presents the team with a playing problem.



“Well done for finding yourself some room, but can you see that there still might be a problem?”

This might be a difficult question for the players and it might take three or four questions from you before they land on the answers you’re seeking. If the ‘new’ player can’t work it out for himself, the goalkeeper and the front player may be the key players in this process. Both should be able to see that by positioning where he is, he’s standing in the passing line between them, blocking the pass from the keeper up to the feet of the forward player. In 3v3, the players learned that this pass would always be the preferred pass in this situation, as it moved the team further up the field, closer to the opposition’s goal. You can ask them:

“Is he causing a problem for you two by being there?”

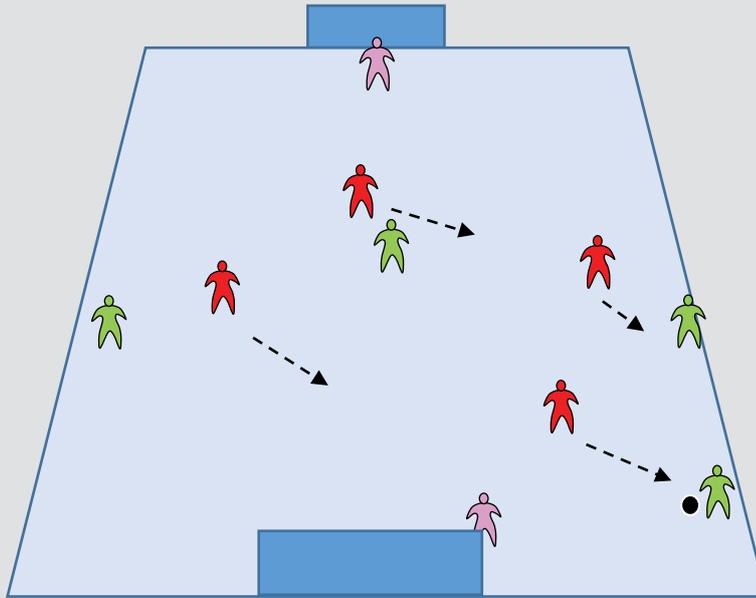
“Which pass did we ask you to especially look for in the 3v3s?”

More plainly you can ask:

“Is he in your way there?”

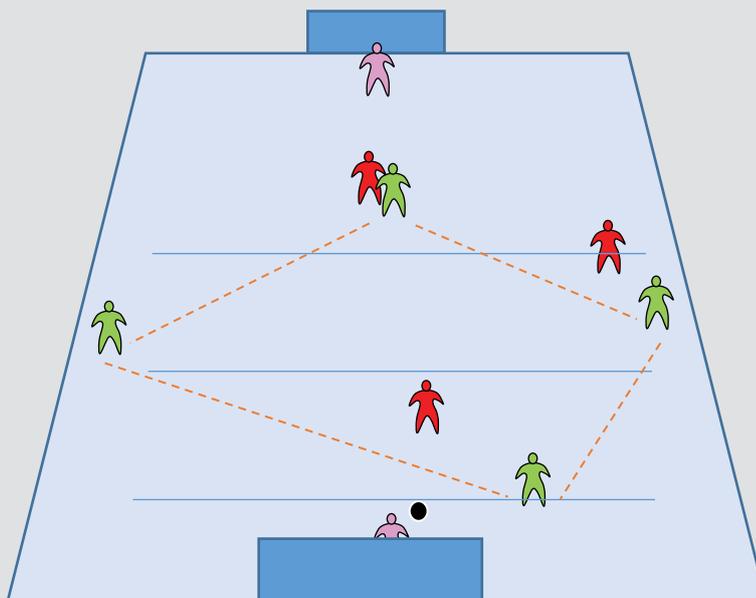
“Is he stopping you doing something?”

All the players should recognise that he must move out of there and find himself a position where he can enable, rather than block that pass forward.



To do this, he may move into an 'empty' corner to look for space, but this may also cause problems for the team. As we have said to the players in wide positions right from the start; positioning deep in the corner is an open invitation to the opponents to come up and put us under pressure.

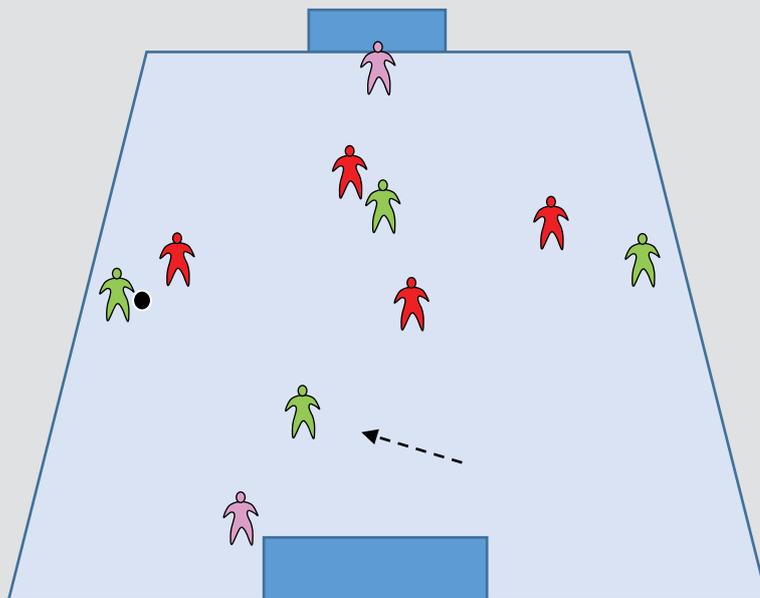
The answer we're fishing for is, of course, "at the back in the middle". He looks, therefore, to position himself centrally, so that he stays out of the other players' places, but to one side of the goal, so that he doesn't block the pass into the front. In the four-on-four, when he's the only player in this position, he can choose either side, which allows the wide player on his side to position a little further forward.



By positioning in this way, he adds another line of attack to the team. We now have three outfield lines of attack; the back player is (obviously) at the back, the two wide players are in 'midfield' and the fourth player is up front. The four players are now in a fluid diamond shape.

You may find that the players, quite rightly, will remind you that in the 3v3 you asked them to stay in more forward positions - away from that space - because we already have the goalkeeper there. In response to this, you must explain that we now can have another player who can come forward and join attacks from that position, rather than just anchor the attacks from the rear, as the goalkeeper has done up to this point.

“Of course we have the keeper there, but what can he do that the keeper can’t do?”



They should have no problems in recognising the benefits of having another outfield player:

“It’s a good position to attack from! He can come all the way up the field to join in!”

They will learn, once we have the player in that position, that his job will be to join in all the attacking moves, all the time. Rather than seeing this player as a defender, they should now look upon him as a playmaker, who will always be available to offer support to them.

When the players have understood that this is how the extra player will be operating, you can help them to see how the shape of the team has changed.

“With him there, what shape are you four in now?”

They will see that they are in a diamond shape. They won’t appreciate this for a while yet, but this shape will form the basis of their positional play in the 7v7, 9v9 and 11v11 games. They now begin to see and appreciate the positional relationships between the four ‘points’ of the diamond.

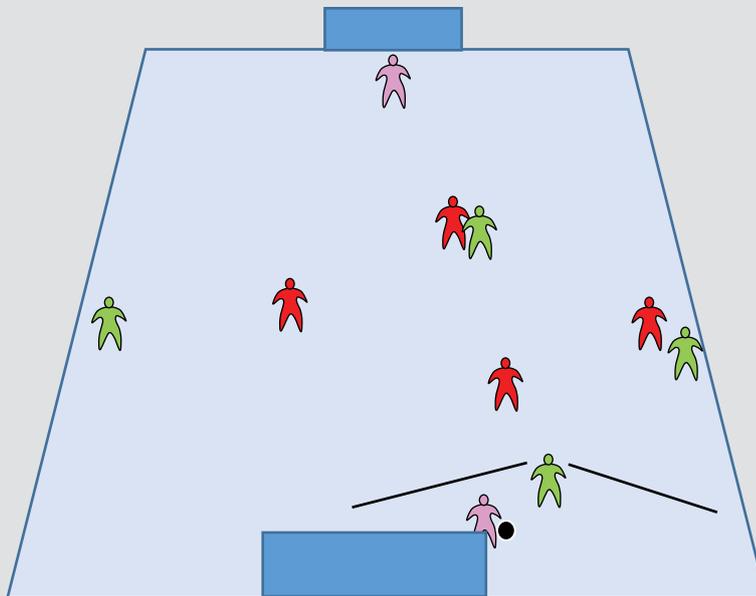
Again, this understanding is enhanced by the work they do alongside the 4v4 games, in 4v2 practice. The 4v4 diamond is obviously a lot bigger than the 4v2 diamond, but the playing principles are applied in the same way, in both.

Once the new player has found this position, the first challenge for him is to do what we've asked all the players to do, time and time again, since they started playing in the 2v2s. That is to position themselves so that they can:

"See everything!"

When first playing in this position, most young players will, without realising it, put themselves at a disadvantage when looking for the ball from the keeper. They will position themselves with their feet facing directly towards him, with the result that the goalkeeper is literally the only player on the field that they can see. When you see your back player pick up a position like this, you can simply ask him:

"What can you see there?"



When he answers that he can only see the goalkeeper and that end of the field, you can then ask him:

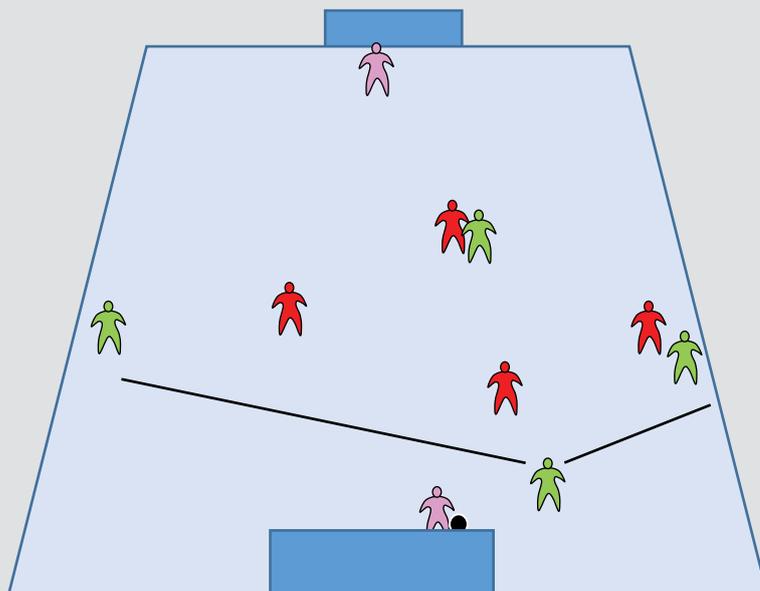
"Is that a good position for you?"

"Is that a good picture you see there?"

All the players will recognise that this isn't a good position for him to be in, having spent a lot of time learning to look into the field, rather than down the field, in the 3v3 games. You then ask him:

"Is there any way you can stand so that you can see everything?"

You may have to be especially patient here as, in my experience, it can take young players a little while to work this one out.



They must learn that he, and any player who finds himself in that position, should do exactly the opposite to what he's doing now. He should face directly up the field and see everything, because, as he will learn, seeing everything is especially the job of the back player. He must angle his feet and head to include the keeper in his field of vision, though, rather than completely turning his back on him and on the ball.

This is one of the main reasons for insisting on playing with a goalkeeper, rather than have one of the four play in goal, or even have a small unmanned goal, as youth teams often do in training. If there was no goalkeeper, it would be the job of the back player to start every move; he would therefore be allowed the luxury of automatically facing forward. In free play, he must learn to quickly get into position when the goalkeeper gets the ball, and, as he's doing so, open his feet to see the field.

Once he finds himself in that position, a game of cat-and-mouse between him and his immediate opponent begins.

If the attacker comes up tight to him, he must hold his ground and again resist the temptation to run away in an effort to shake him off. If he does run, you can ask him:

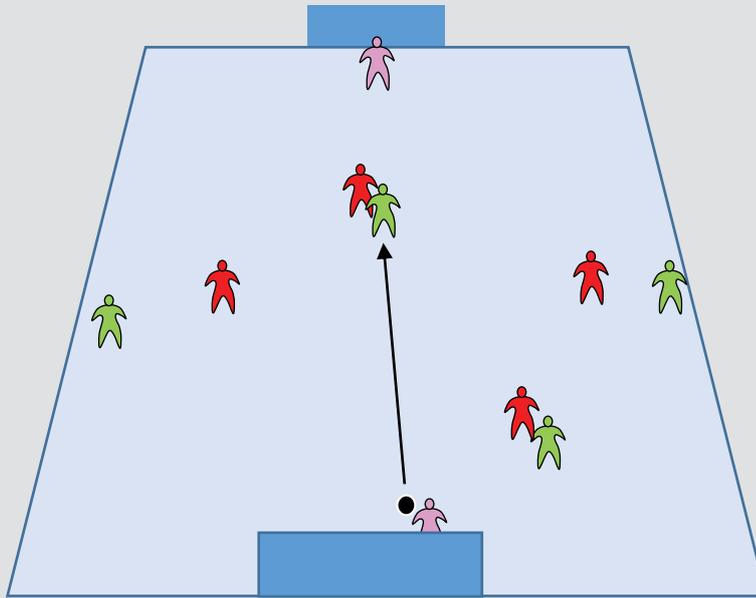
"If you run out of that position, where are you going?"

All the players will, by now, be able to recognise the fact that he can only run into ***"someone else's garden!"***.

Each player learned, all the way back in 2v2, that holding a position could help their partner by keeping a defender away from them. Now you can help them to see how, in a different way, holding this position affects the game.

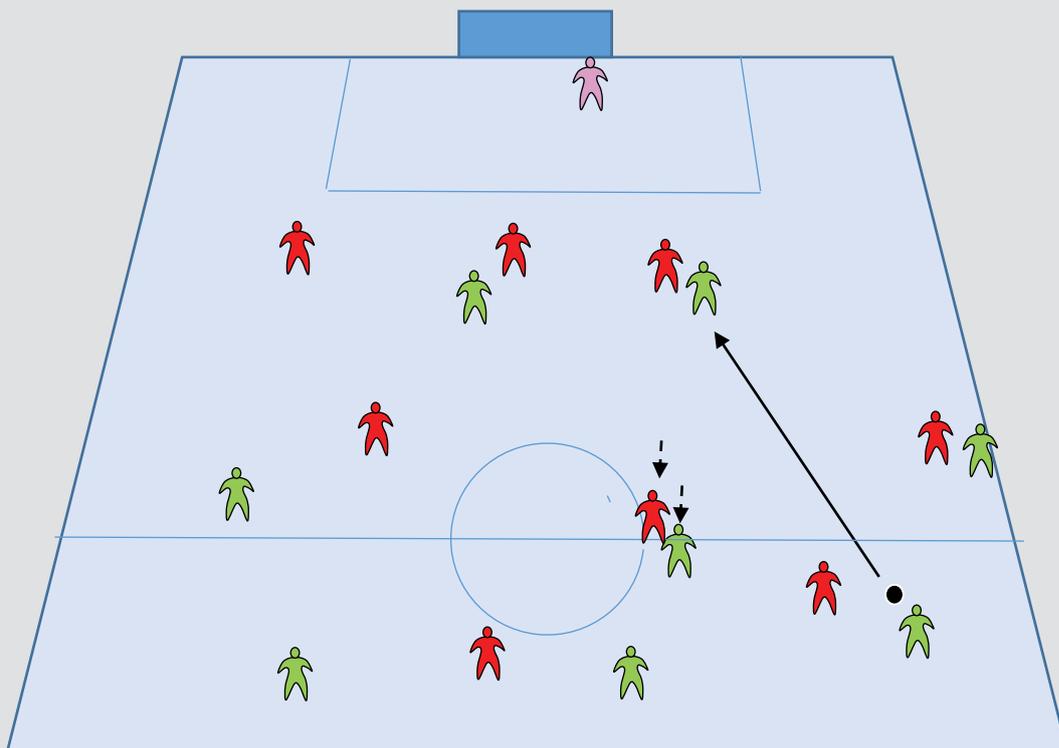
"If you stay where you are and relax, are you doing anything to affect the game?"

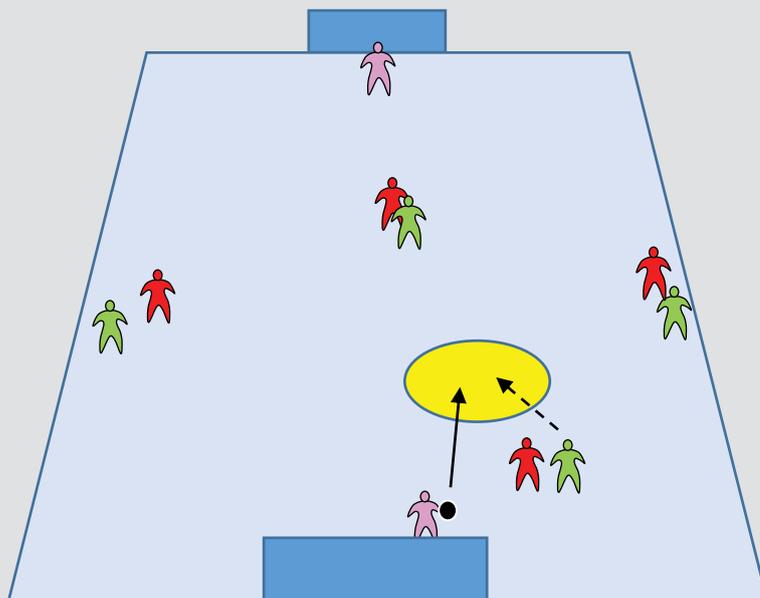
The players should be able to see that the path is clear for the goalkeeper to play directly to the front player. By holding his ground, the back player facilitates this penetrating pass, by keeping the forward off the passing line. In 3v3, this pass put two defenders out of the game; in 4v4 it goes one better.



This is the players' introduction to the role that midfielders play in opening up passing lanes for deep vertical passes into their front players. This will be a very important element of the team's midfield play when they get older. By laying this important building block now, you ensure that they will be well prepared to do this when they move on to play in 7v7, 9v9 and 11v11 games.

Forward pass in 9v9 game, with the midfielders opening up the passing line:





An unusual exception may occur here if the defending forward makes the mistake of coming too tight to, or level with the back player. You ask him, when this happens:

“If he comes up that close to you, what can you do?”

By positioning this closely, he leaves an unguarded space behind him and the ingredients for a through pass, which the players learned to look for in 3v3, are all there:

- The player on the ball has the space to play the ball forward
- There is a good space behind the defender into which the attacker can move
- The positioning of the defender allows the attacker to be favourite to get to the ball first

The players should remember the (admittedly slightly eccentric) analogy we used:

“If all the ingredients are right, the cake will rise!”

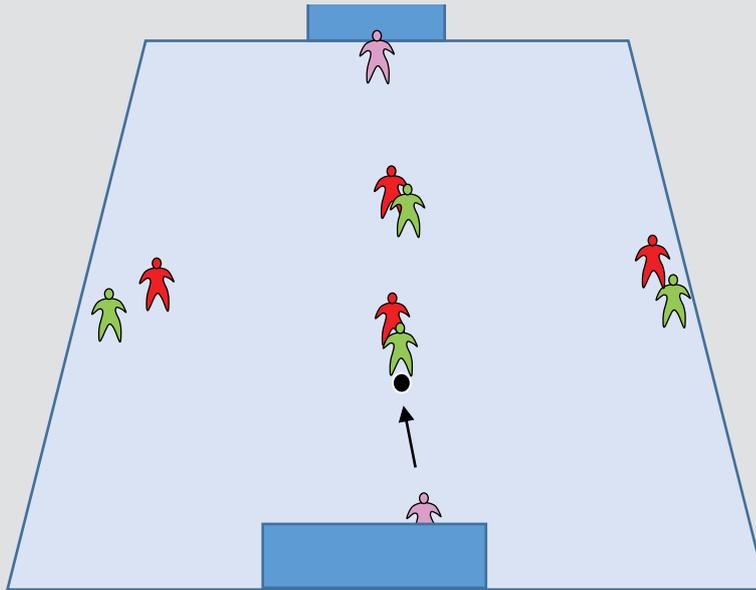
Having learned in the previous games to read these cues, the back player bursts past him for the pass into that nice chunk of space. As we have always said he should, he exploits poor defending by the opponent. He remembers that we should always:

“Punish bad defending!”

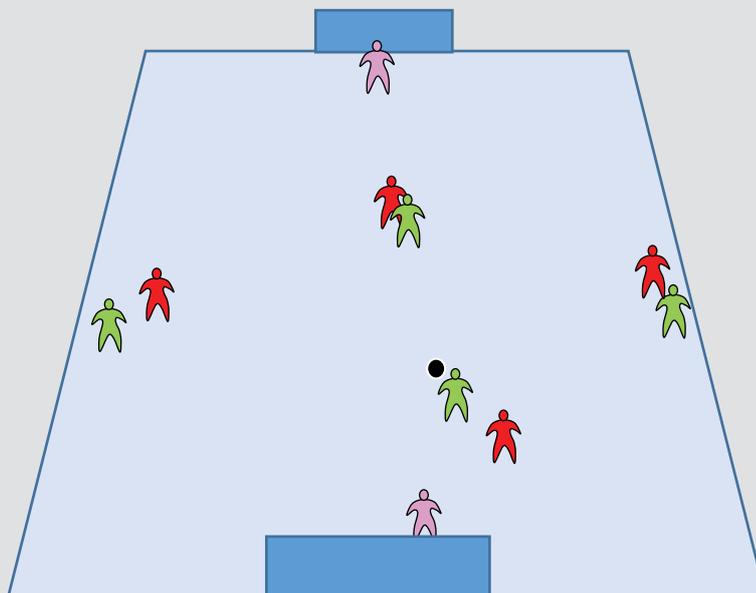
This is not a situation that should occur too often, especially now that your players should have a better understanding of defending on the goalside, but they should be able to recognise it when it does - and be ready to take advantage of it.

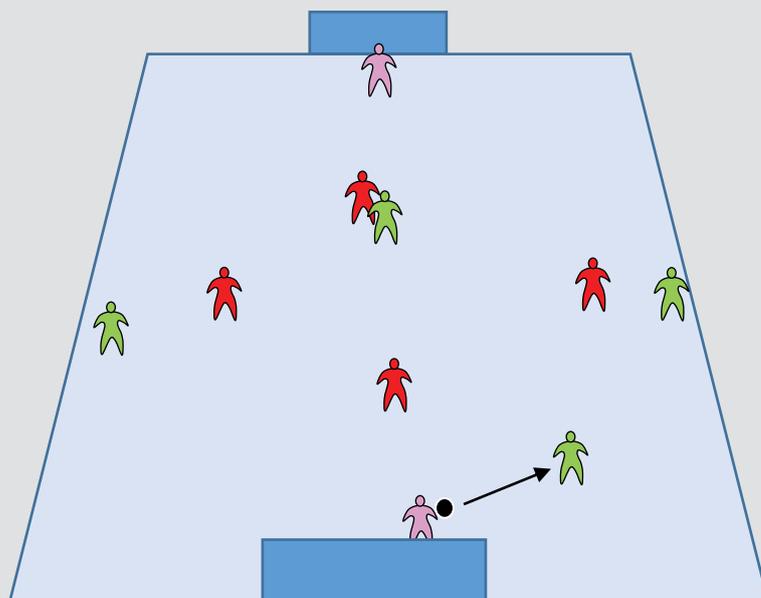
This may lead to some confusion in the minds of the players, as we previously had asked the fourth player, when he was introduced as the 'new' player, to stay out of this area.

The difference here lies in the fact that in the original situation we saw the opposing defender taking up a good defensive position, on the goal side of him. Because the defender is positioned well, he would end up receiving the ball, facing down the field, with a marker at his back, If the keeper was to give him the ball in this situation. The players will easily understand that this is not how we want our playmaker to receive the ball.



In the situation we've just looked at, the opposite is the case. He will be moving onto the pass from the goalkeeper, facing forward, in space, creating a 2v1 situation in the centre, near the opposition's goal. All the players can easily see that this is the ideal way for him to receive the ball.





Rather than position closely to the playmaker, the attacker may choose to move off him, drop back towards his goal, and block the keeper's direct pass to the front player. This is likely to happen after the ball into the front player has been played a few times and the defenders realise that allowing this to happen is not such a good idea. If and when they call the forward to 'sit off' him, you simply ask the playmaker:

"If he does that, what can you do?"

He'll easily see that he can now get the ball for himself from the keeper. This is the first of his playmaking duties; to get himself on the ball so that he can start directing play. Even though he must actively defend against their front player when the other team have the ball, he must not play like a centre back. Central defenders, after all, usually stop when they play a ball forward into the midfield or forward line. He must be prepared to be constantly involved. You can remind him of what was said in the warm-up and also give him a very simple guide to how to approach this role:

"You're either on the ball, or you're looking for the ball!"

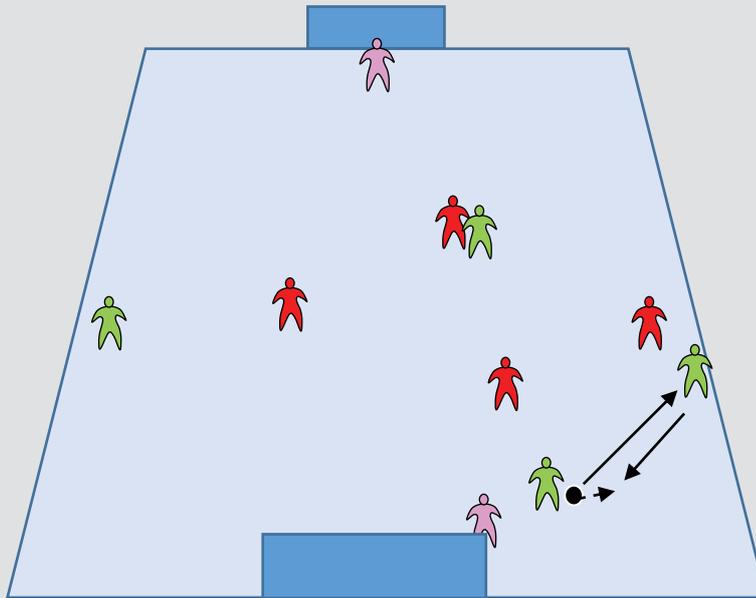
"When they have the ball, you're a defender, when we have the ball, you're a midfielder!"

If you're lucky enough to have a player who naturally wants this involvement and moves all the time, you will just have to refine his movement, in terms of angle, timing, and distance. If you have players who just tend to stand in this position when the ball is moved, you will have to make them aware of their responsibilities in terms of playing with the necessary level of energy. For both types of players, you will have to do 'The Big Demo'.

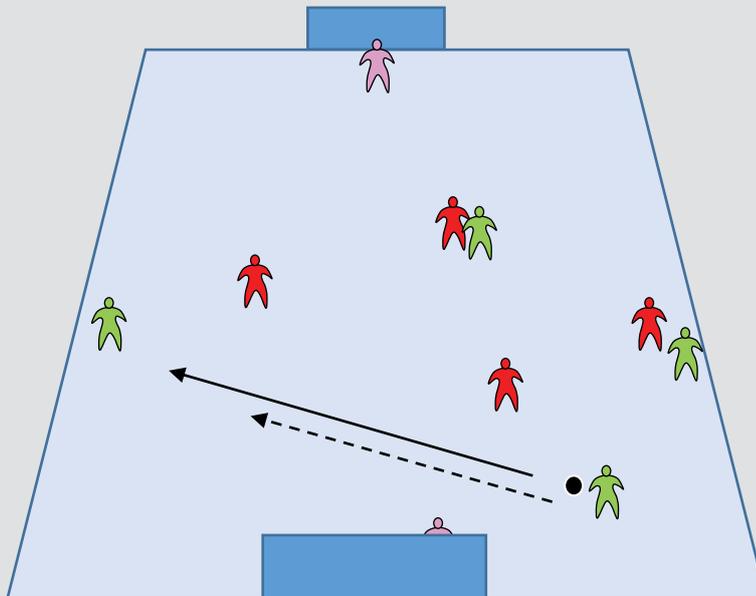
You must take the earliest opportunity to go in and do this demonstration. Of the hundreds that you will do for your team, this is one of the most crucial, in terms of setting the scene for how the team will play. You must show the players how the playmaker operates. You will be surprised, if you do this with noticeable enthusiasm and energy, just how effective it can be in setting the tone for every single game that follows.



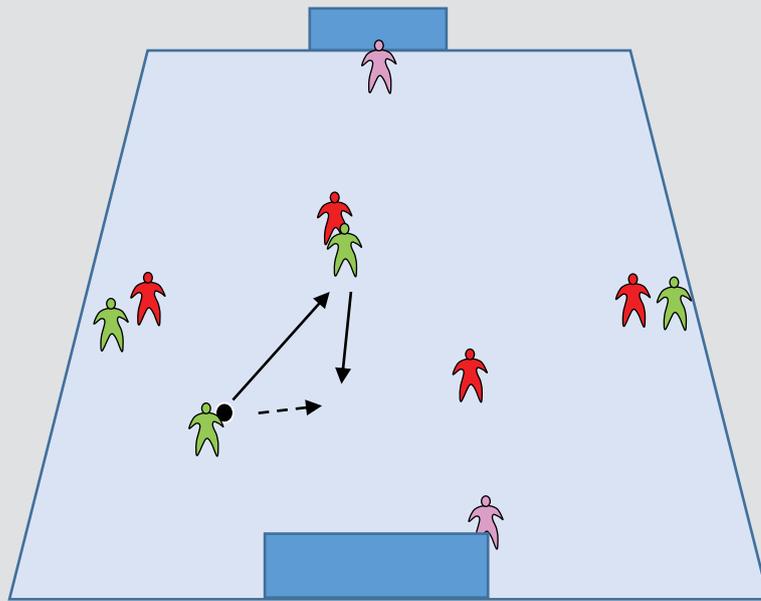
THE BIG DEMO



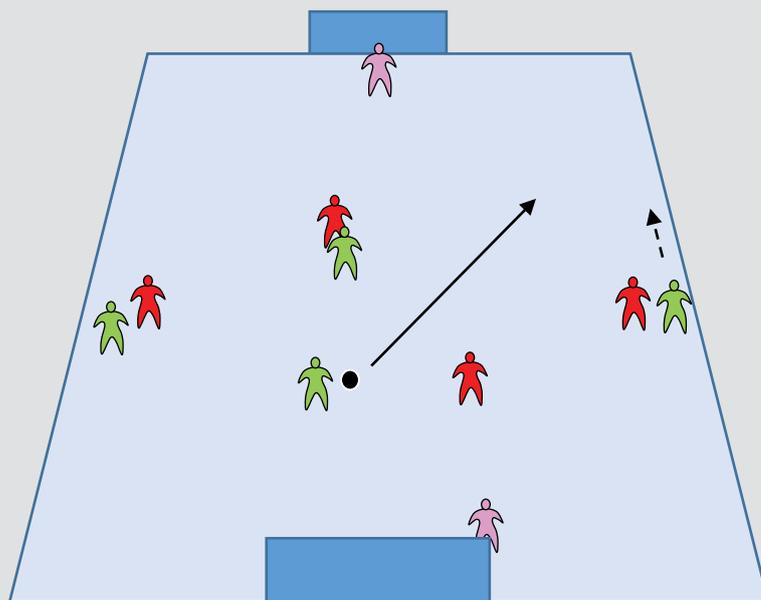
The demo starts with the goalkeeper on the ball. Because he has it, you will start in the playmaker's position, just in front and to the side of him. You get the ball from the keeper, play it to a wide player, and shift sideways to get it back from him...



You control the return pass, open your body out to play to the other wide player, and go to get it back again...



You get it back from the wide player, play it into the front player and move sideways to get it back again...



And, finally, you play it through to a running wide player.

Your aim will be to control and pass with only two touches each time. You might not be physically capable of moving very quickly, so you might want to use that old coach's trick of doing the demo in slow motion. It's really important, though, that you convey a sense of urgency, so that the players understand, as in the warm-up, that you want the ball moving quickly from player to player. You are telling them and showing them the plan:

"We move the ball to move them, so we can go through!"



THE PLAYMAKER AND THE PLAN

Developing the playmaker's game goes hand in hand with the development of the team's plan. The move you showed in **THE BIG DEMO** may have been a little unrealistic, with maybe too much emphasis on the playmaker, but by orchestrating it in this way, you show how vital the job of the playmaker is to the team plan. The plan is to move the ball quickly and, as the main support player, his is the most critical role in its practical application. We want him involved in everything, offering support in every part of the pitch, as the ball is passed quickly from player to player. We want the players to move the ball around the field, from position to position, so that, eventually, spaces open up between defenders, so that we can play through and go on to score. (This is why the demo must finish with the through pass.)

Up to now, we have often looked at how opposition players are likely to defend against us. Even though players of this age will have become much more conscious of their individual defensive responsibilities, their individual positional play and defensive co-operation with their team-mates will still not be very skilled. With the overall aim of moving the ball quicker than the opponents can adjust, good positional play, with quick passing and movement, will open up opposing defences. We start by spreading out to pull them apart, and then move the ball to pull them out of position. This is the basic starting point and, as always, you must make the players aware of the big picture before colouring in the details.

You may have to explain clearly that 'move the ball' refers to the ball moving quickly from player to player. Young players - especially at the stage they're at now - often misinterpret the call to move the ball, thinking that you're asking them to dribble with it. It will make it clearer for them if you specifically ask them to move the ball, not from player to player, but from position to position. You tell them:

"Move the ball from one position to another!"

"You aren't moving quicker, the ball is!"

On the other side of the coin, you must watch out for the players who, possibly in their desire to please you, play too quickly. As a result, their passing and control suffers. You will have to tell them that:

"Moving the ball quickly is different to getting rid of the ball quickly!"

They must be reminded to calm down to make sure of their passes, while still playing with the required urgency. All your players must be able to find the correct balance between composure and speed. In all sports, speed is hampered by tension and a lack of composure, so you will, time and time again, repeat:

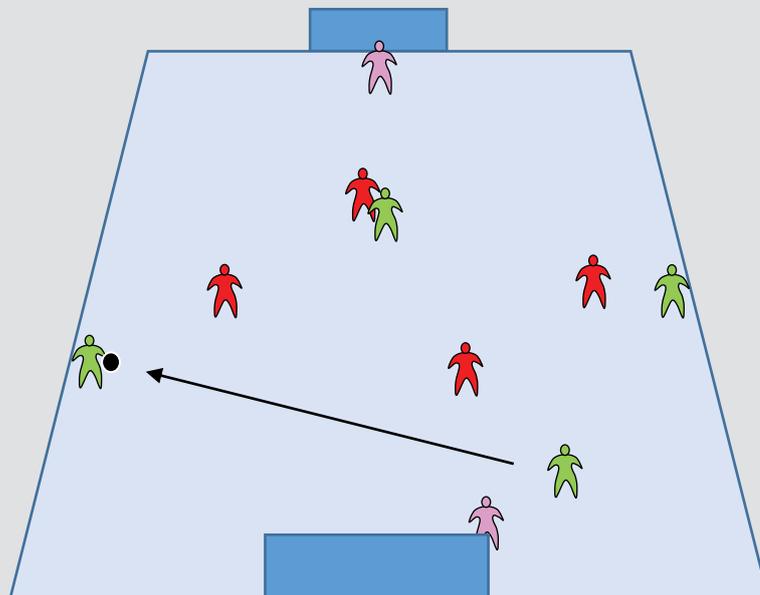
"You aren't moving quicker, the ball is!"

This approach is sparked by the introduction of the fourth player, who acts as the catalyst for the change to a quick-passing, more positional game.

When the players played 3v3, the player who took on the main supporting role was the goalkeeper and, sometimes, we had to remind him that his job was to just get the play started, rather than look for 'killer' passes. Now we have an outfield player at the back of the team, whose role is move to all areas of the field, knit moves together and be creative.

Again, we want him to be mentally and physically engaged at all times; he should never be standing at the back simply watching what's going on. He will nearly always be the back man in the diamond, but he'll always be involved. He must adopt the mindset of the star player who believes that he's going to be the pivot around which his team's attacking play revolves, but he must at the same time work unselfishly for the team.

You must be ready to go in to assist him if you see him standing still, when he should be moving to help a team-mate on the ball.



“Great ball out to the wide man, but what did you do when you played it?”

“Once it goes out to him, what should you do?”

“Because you're the centre player, who must you help?”

He should see that he must move to help each one of his team-mates when they have the ball, in whatever part of the field they have it. The other players know, then, that he's always going to be there to help them. They can receive the ball and look to go forward, safe in the knowledge that they can always choose to go back to him if they're forced to do so by the defenders. You remind the playmaker:

“You're at the back, but you're not standing at the back!”

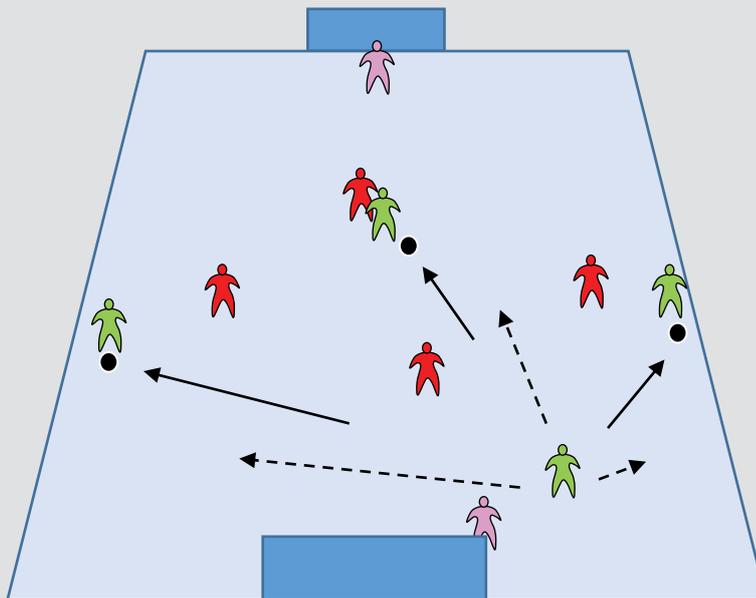
“Always help the man on the ball!”

Because he constantly offers help to everyone, moving left and right, and up and down the field, you will expect him to be on the ball a lot. I might go as far as to say that you should *demand* that he be on the ball a lot. At this stage, we are laying down the basics of the playmaker's job for him:

"We want you on the ball!"

"We want you to run the game!"

"We want you to be in charge!"



Whichever pass he chooses to play, he must be ready to move after it to support the receiver. At first, you will be happy just to see him move; the details of the timing, angle, and distance of each supporting run will come later.

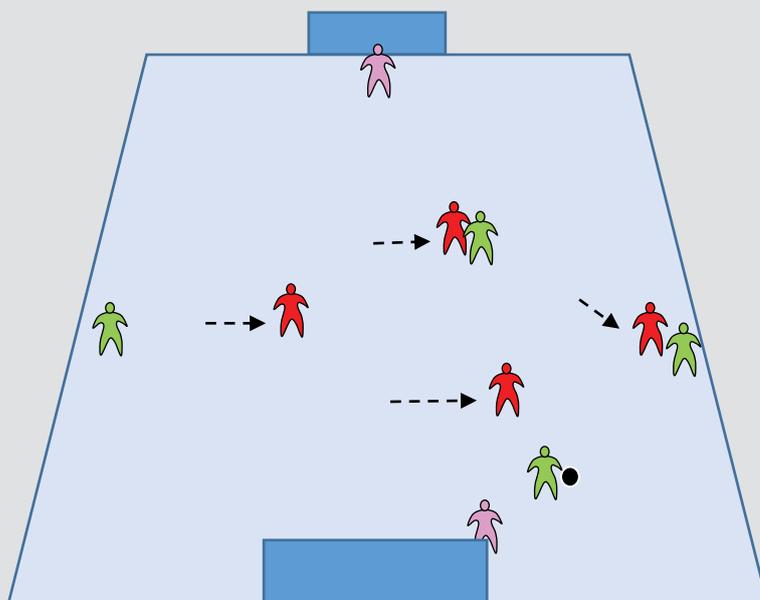
This might seem like a tall order for any player of this age, but all the players should know that you're going to help them to become this type of player. We want all the players who play in this position to think of themselves as midfield schemers. There are no defensive or attacking midfielders at this age; that kind of specialisation comes later.

Initially, you can help yourself and the players by being a little bit selective about which players you put in this position, in the sessions when you initially focus on it. You will have a very good idea, at this stage, of which players in your group have the necessary skills and personality to play this role. So, in the interest of getting a rhythm and giving the players a picture of how the plan works, I would advise you to use these players almost exclusively at the start. Eventually, you will want all of the players to experience every position, but this little bit of cheating will help the team as a whole. When you get to the point of giving the other players a shot, you might discover a new playmaker for your team!

When the playmaker receives the ball from the goalkeeper, he can fall into the trap of playing slowly; of waiting for things to happen in front of him rather than making things happen, himself. Some players have a picture in their heads of a top player slowing everything down and try to copy this style, whereas others are looking to play 'killer' passes straight away and ignore the simple options around them. Neither type of player does what a top-class player in this position does; link things up quickly. The playmaker's the player who makes things happen.

"Well done for getting on the ball, but if you stay on it too long what happens?"

He needs to realise that the playing picture rarely improves if he stays on the ball. When he gets the ball from the keeper the play is spread, with the defenders' organisation probably at its most open. If he delays and 'sits' on the ball, the opponents are most likely to tighten their defensive positioning - and his passing options will be much more limited.



"How can you make sure that things don't close up for you?"

The advice to the player at the start of these moves, therefore, is the same as it was in the warm-up:

"Get it and move it!"

He should aim, therefore, to move the ball while the play is open, even if it means playing sideways or back to the keeper. We tell him:

"Don't wait - just roll it!"

He doesn't delay in getting the moves started, and 'spreads' the ball around his team-mates.

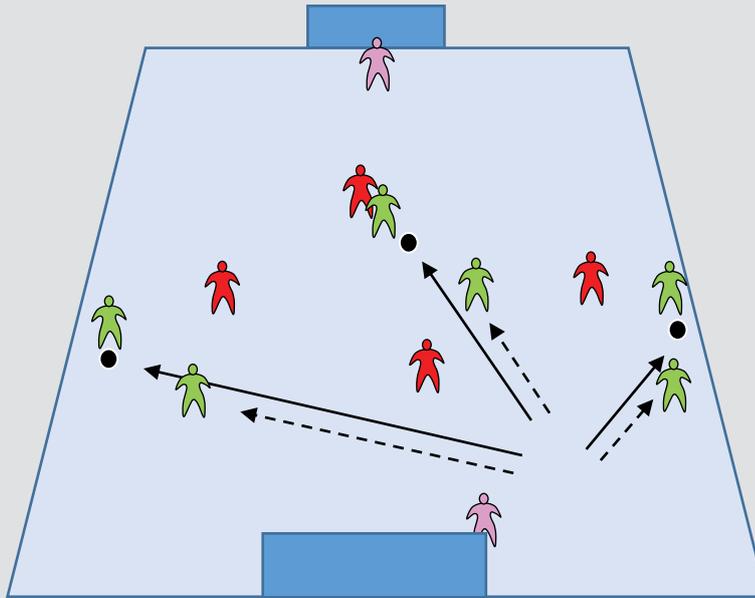
"Spread it around!"



TIMING AND DIRECTION OF RUNS

When you have the playmaker moving the ball and then moving himself to help the receiver, you can start to look a little more closely at his supporting runs.

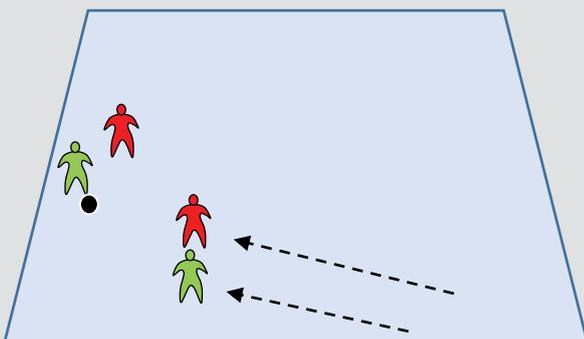
Initially, when you have him running enthusiastically, you will find that he will run directly after his passes, and often end up on top of the receiver.



“Well done for passing and moving, but what happens if you run straight after the ball?”

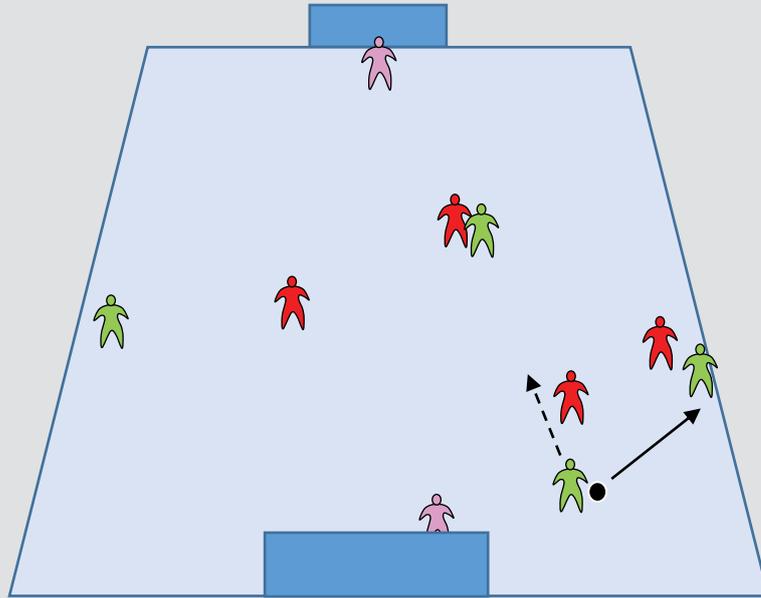
The players should be able to see that this will cause a problem, in terms of space, for the receiver. When the ball is on the way to them, some players will actually feel pressurised if they see the ball and the runner coming quickly towards them, and subsequently end up miscontrolling the ball.

This direct run after the pass may also help the opposing front man to more easily defend effectively. When defending, most young players, when the ball is passed beyond them, will automatically follow the ball back in an effort to help their team-mates. If the playmaker comes along the same line towards the ball, the defender can stay close to him and help his team-mate as well. This puts even more pressure on the receiver.



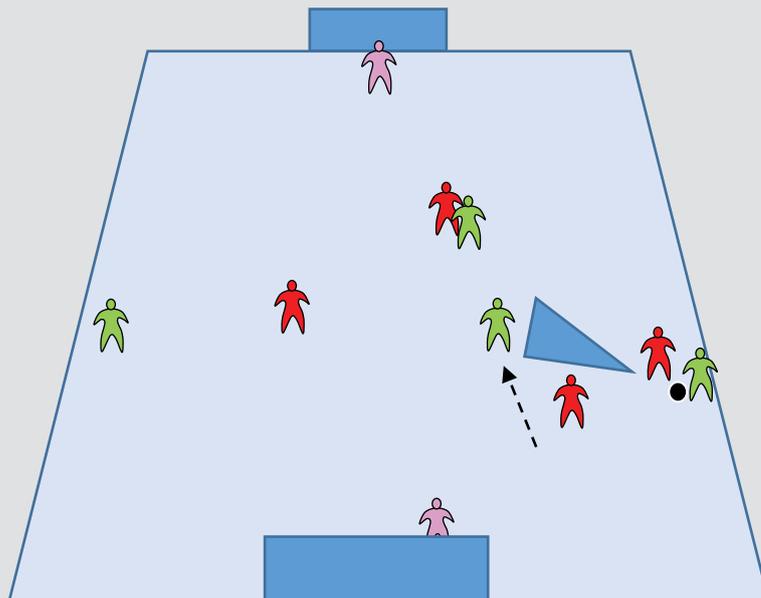
This is an element of the cat-and-mouse game between the playmaker and his immediate opponent, which we spoke about earlier. He must learn to move in clever ways that will cause problems for the defender rather than for himself.

As well as discouraging him from directly following his passes, you may also have to put the brakes on his forward running. This will be done in different ways, depending on whether he plays sideways to a wide player, or forward to the front man.

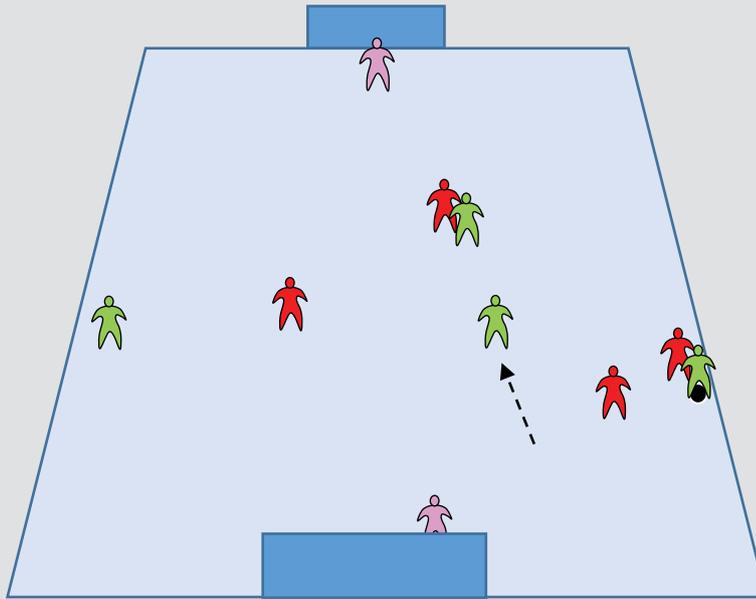


Many players in the playmaker position will play to the wide man and, in their enthusiasm to attack, immediately run forward into the space ahead of them, where, if the wide defender gets tight, the wide player can't pass into. He goes from a position where he is offering help to one where he can't help the player on the ball. If he does this, you can ask him:

"If you go in there, can he pass to you?"



Even if the wide player gets turned, the playmaker's position in the pressing defender's 'shadow' does not allow the pass to him. He's in a 'dead' space where the wide man can't pass to. In showing this, you can, once again, reference the 3v1 practice, and its particular relevance here.



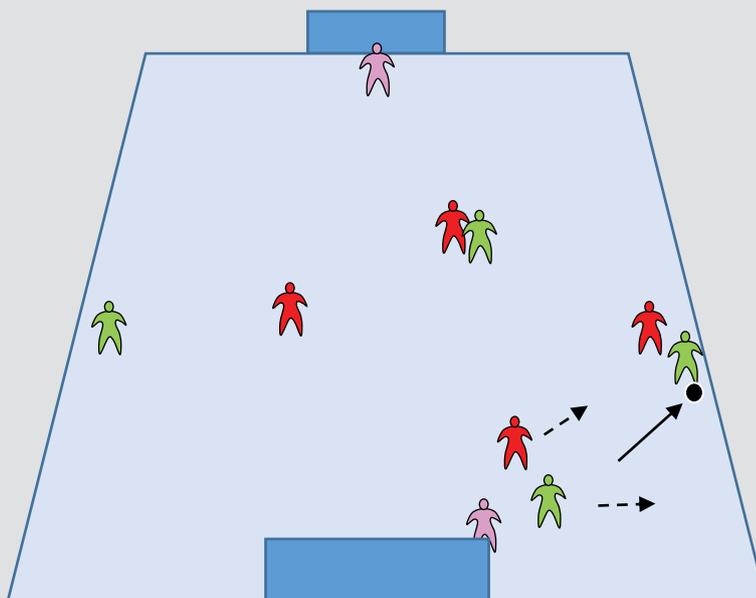
If the pressing defender defends really aggressively and stops the wide player from turning, the playmaker's run has left him in an even weaker position. He is facing back down the field, with no support, with a defender tight on his back and, possibly, another defender (their forward player) coming at him from the front.

You can then ask:

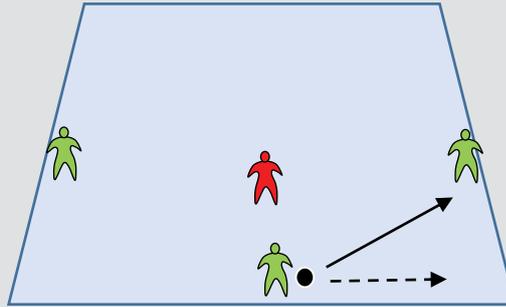
"If you can't run forward, where should you go?"

"Where can you get yourself some space, and still help him?"

Instead of bursting forward, he should immediately shift sideways - giving himself a start on the defender. By doing this, he will surprisingly get help from the defender.



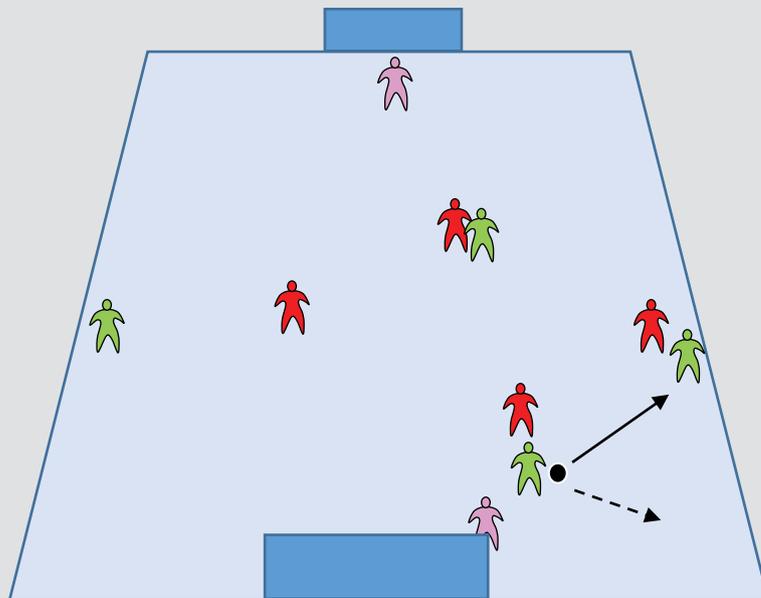
The defender - probably without realising it - will automatically drop towards his goal and, in doing this, will turn his head to see where the pass goes. As he does this, the playmaker moves sideways, away from him, winning himself some valuable space.



This sideways 'pass and move' is exactly what the players learned to do in 3v1 practice, alongside the 3v3 games. When you see them making this move in the game, you will know that they have grasped the concept of making passing angles for the player on the ball, which, as we have previously mentioned, they learned in simpler terms as 'moving out of the defender's shadow'.

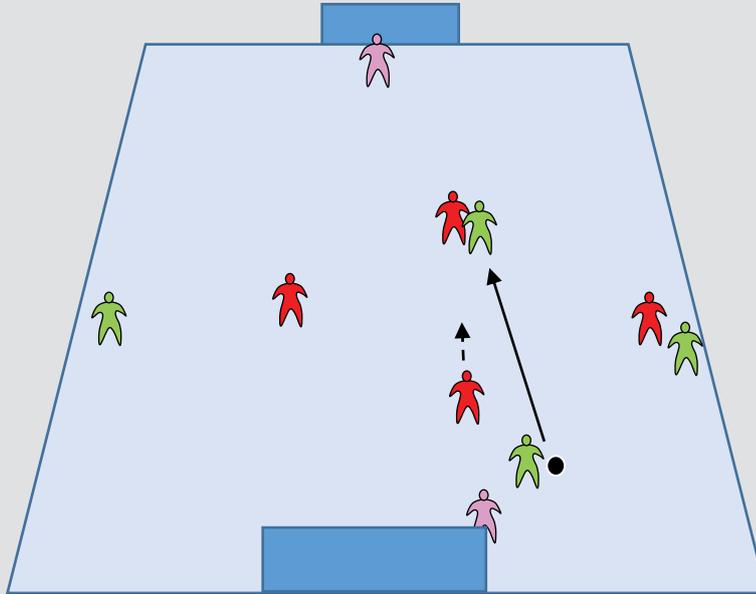
As we have seen, this move is effective in winning space for the playmaker when the forward follows the ball or automatically drops back towards his goal. If, however, he is less than enthusiastic about his defending duties, as many forwards are, he may just stand when the sideways pass is played, and not drop back at all. This leaves him a little closer than the playmaker would like, so he must react a little differently, in order to win himself more space away from him. You ask him:

"If he doesn't drop back, can you find a bit more space somewhere?"

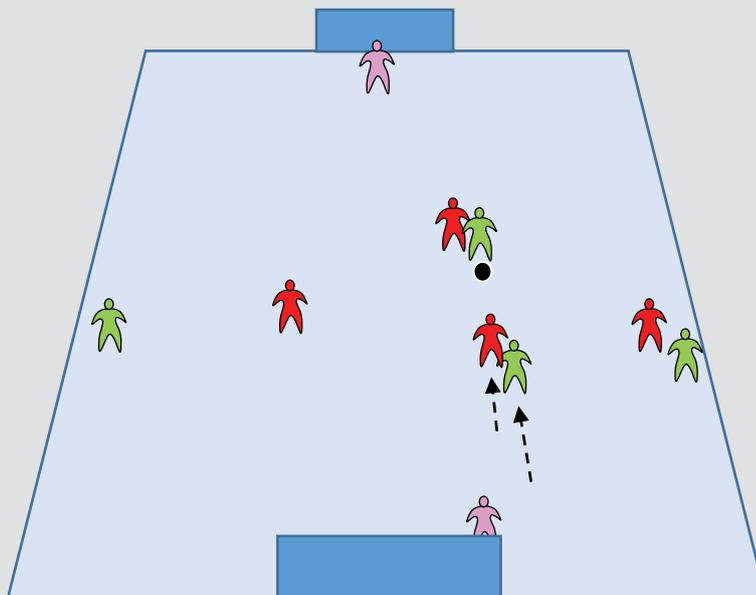


To find this extra space, the playmaker's run must now be to the side and two or three metres back down the field. This is a run which the 3v1s will not prepare the players for and this is probably the one weakness of rondos (trianglos) being played in the squares – the players would end up out of the playing area if they were to move backwards for space like this.

Whereas the supporting run came immediately after the sideways pass, the nature of a run to help the front player after the ball has been played forward to him is completely different. Both types of run, though, seek to take advantage of the natural tendency of defending players to 'sag' back towards goal when the ball is passed beyond them.



Moving sideways after the pass out wide won space for the playmaker, because he moved first and got himself a start on the defender. When the pass is played vertically into the front, though, the defender, because he is already in a goalside position, already has the start.



An early run now from the playmaker is only likely to 'collect' the defender on the way. Not only does the playmaker end up tightly marked, but, again, having two players running quickly towards him is likely to put extra pressure on the receiver.

This is one more example of the cat-and-mouse game with the defender that the playmaker must engage in. You ask him:

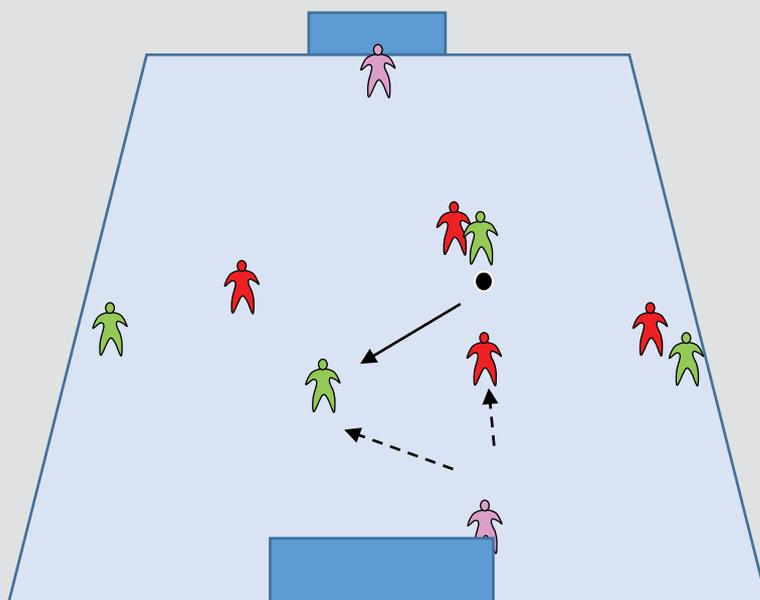
“Why can’t you get there free?”

“If you can’t get there before him what can you do? ”

This is another situation in which the players may take some time to come up with the solution. Knowing that the defender is likely to drop towards his own goal, the playmaker delays his run to see exactly where he moves to. Even though this is a much more complex situation, the player is doing what you first taught him to do when you started coaching him in the 2v2s; reading the reaction of the defender.

“If he’s going to go back to his goal, where can you go?”

“Have any spaces opened up for you?”



The answer is to play the pass, delay long enough for the defender to make his move, and then pop around him – once more moving out of the defender’s ‘shadow’. If he does this, the front player can see him clearly and pass back to him if he chooses to do so. This delayed sideways run also gives the front player more time to control the initial pass, without his mate putting him under added pressure by rushing towards him.

“Wait! Read him! Move around him!”

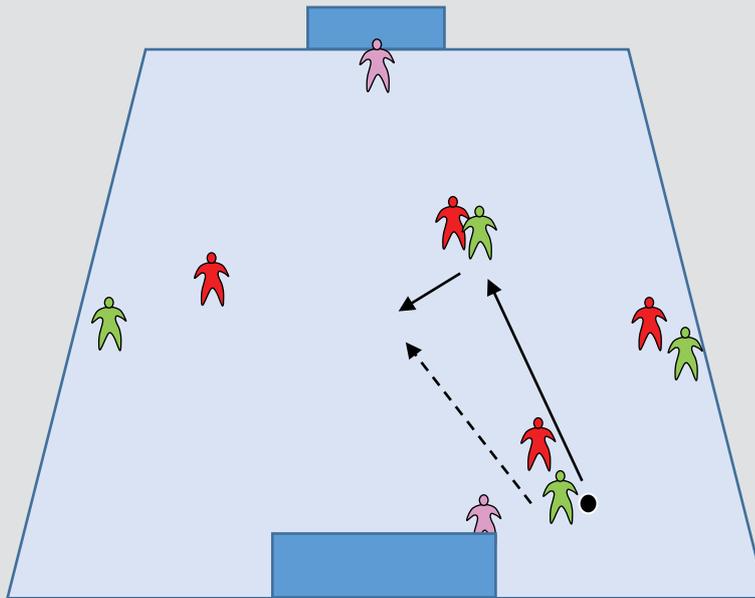
“Read the game!”

This process is repeated by the playmaker every time the ball goes into the front, whether he plays it up himself, or the keeper or either of the wide players play it.

Timing his forward supporting runs in this way is based on the expectancy of the opposing defender doing his defensive duties properly. Just as we saw before, when the pass was played to the side, the defending player will sometimes be lazy and will just turn to look at the ball. The playmaker must recognise this and take advantage of it.

“Read the game! Is he going back?”

“If he doesn’t go back, what can you do?”



This is one situation where the playmaker can feel free in bursting forward, because the run will leave him free behind the opposition’s first line of defence. As we have said, right from the start, we always look to:

“Punish bad defending!”

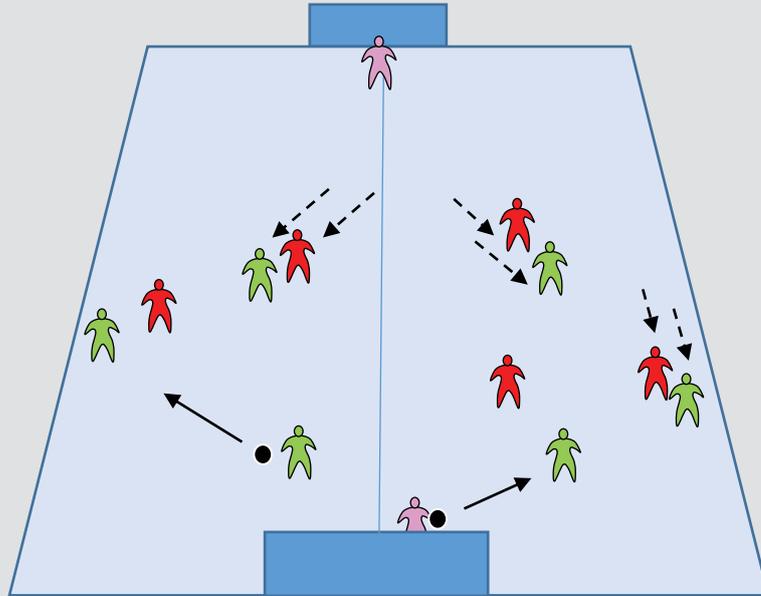
The playmaker now has a simple guideline for the timing of his supporting runs:

“Play it wide, move straight away; Play it forward, wait!”

In terms of direction, players who play centrally can spend as much of their time ‘sliding’ sideways, as they do running forward and back. It may seem like a strange analogy, but I liken this movement to the pendulum of a grandfather clock. The playmaker finds space by swinging from side to side, patiently waiting for the right moment to spring forward. I actually remind the players by saying ***“Tick, tock, grandfather clock!”***, even though I’m not really sure that, nowadays, young players actually know what a grandfather clock looks like.

All the playmaker’s decisions in these situations will hinge on the process of reading the reactions of the defender and finding the best solution to the problems or opportunities that his reactions present.

While you're spending quite a bit of time with the playmaker, you cannot ignore the other players. Despite all the work we've done up to now on the passing formula, you will still see mistakes in timing, all over the field. One specific mistake is when players ahead of the ball move too early to help a player when the ball is on the way to him. Wide players and front players may come down the field as the ball is moving sideways, with the result that they're on top of the receiver by the time he has the ball under control and looks up.



Once again you will find yourself asking the usual questions about the passing formula, showing for the ball, and timing.

“Well done for showing for the ball, but have you got your timing right?”

As well as considering the problem of timing, it may also be useful for the players to think in terms of the lines of the team. By showing for the ball too early, they will find themselves positioned too deeply; in effect, they have come down the field into a different attacking line.

“When he looks up, what does he see?”

“Whose line are you in?”

The solution is to stay ahead of the ball, in your line, until the player on the ball gets his head up and looks for you. In the “Move Yourself!” phase, they will learn to interchange position and move between the lines, but, for now, the simple call to the players is:

“Hold your line!”

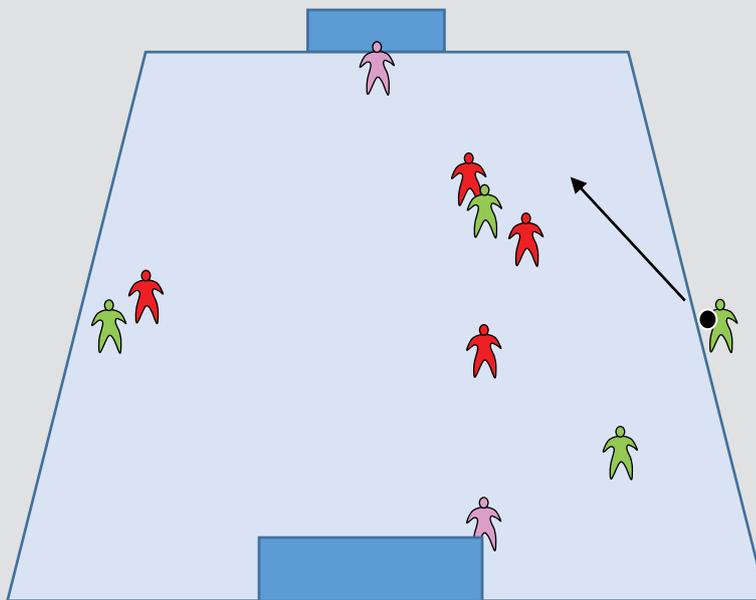
For you, in coach language, you're teaching the players to maintain depth in attack. At all times, you will look for clear demarcation between the team's attacking lines, while at the same time acknowledging that this might not always be possible.



THROW-INS

It might surprise you to see that we have waited until 4v4 to use throw-ins in the games, but there are very specific reasons for this. I am prepared to wait until the players have a good understanding of spreading apart, which they have been working on since they started in 2v2, and moving off a marker, which they learned in 3v3, before working on this aspect of the game. I also want the fourth outfield player involved so that there are more options for the thrower. If you have used throw-ins in the smaller games, you will know how problematic they can be, especially in 2v2, in which the thrower has only one player to throw to. Now, in the context of greater team structure, they are ready for more organisation around throw-ins. They should now be able to work this organisation out for themselves, using what they have already learned.

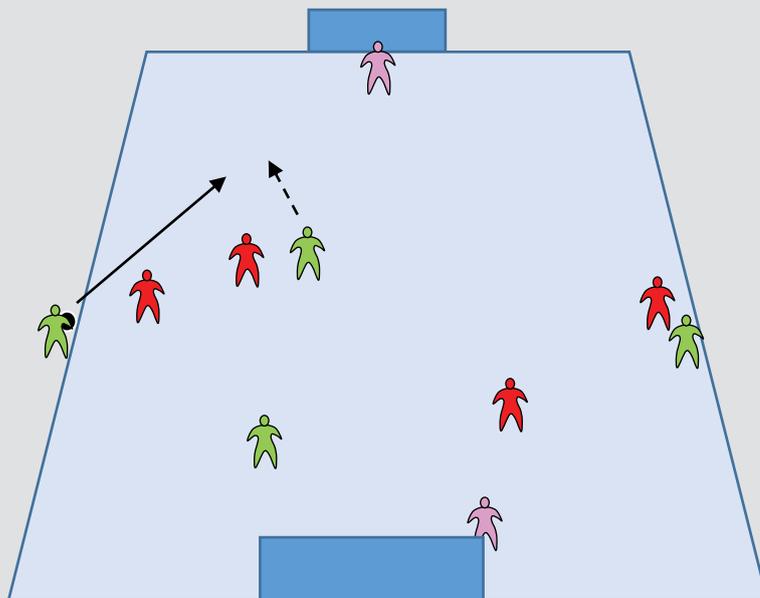
The first thing you will have to do, believe it or not, is to limit expectations around the throw-ins. With the thrower completely unopposed and the ball in his hands, most people think that a team would be almost guaranteed to keep possession from the throw. I have never worked with a group, though - children or adults, amateur or professional - who didn't want to complicate its throw-ins. There is something in human nature that makes players think, because the ball is in their hands, that they're going to split the opposition with their throw. The result is that, way too often, the ball is given away. Even at the highest level, you will see players ignore available team-mates only to throw it past them to another player in a much tighter situation.



I would be very happy, especially at this age, if my players are managing to keep possession from the majority of the throw-ins awarded to them. The message to the green (or, as the case may be, yellow, or red, etc.) team is simple:

“Just throw it to a green!”

This is not to say that it isn't possible to get through directly from a throw-in, and if the opposition give us the opportunity to do so, we will gladly take it. The best chance of doing this, at this age, will be to take the throw-ins quickly. All players, young or old, are liable to switch off momentarily when the ball goes dead, and this will be the first time you switch your players on to exploiting this tendency. Eventually, you will ask them to apply this thinking at all set plays, and not just throw-ins.



Your first step is to influence the nearest player to the ball to go and get it quickly. (To facilitate this, it's a good idea to place spare footballs around the sides of the field.)

“If you get it quickly, what might you be able to do?”

If he's fast to get it, he may see a chance to catch the others out. Asking him to get it quickly has the added advantage of switching all the other players on too. You ask them:

“Do you have to wait for them to mark you?”

The players, when asked, will all know the obvious answer to this question, but, believe it or not, some young players will deliberately wait until everyone is marked, before throwing the ball. The next question will be:

“If you're not marked, where should you look to get it?”

We want them to first look to run free in behind the defenders. If they can get in, they should run forward. If the defenders are not marking, but standing in goalside positions, the through ball will not be on, so they may stay in the space they have been given and ask the thrower to give them the ball to their feet.

If the quick throw is not on, then we must get ourselves organised.

The first thing we will have to sort out is who's going to take the throw. You have probably already seen that in every young team there is a hierarchy that becomes apparent at throw-ins. You may have witnessed one of the bigger personalities in your team come over, take the ball from the player that has it and say **"I'm taking it!"**. If the playmaker (being the playmaker), for example, decides that he wants to take it, you can sort this situation out by reminding him of his main job. You ask:.

"What side is the throw-in on?"

"Whose job is it to play on the left?"

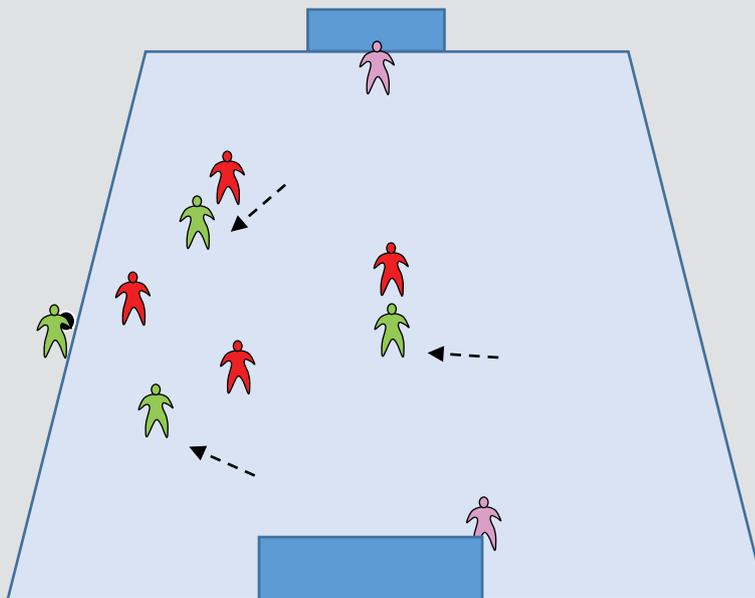
"Where do we want you to be?"

"Do your own job!"

The same applies to any player who moves out of position to take a throw. The players will soon concede, though, that for the sake of the team's shape, it makes sense for the right-sided player to take the throws on the right and the left-sided player to take them on the left. Using the same logic, they will agree that the other players should work from their own positions, too. The front player should stay up front and the playmaker should stay behind the ball, with both positioning as centrally as they can.

Irrespective of who is taking the throw, your next problem will almost certainly be the players forgetting their positional responsibilities and crowding around the ball. If this happens, you can ask: **"What did you learn in 2v2?"** and hint:

"Stay out of his...?"



This, of course, is a reminder to the players to look around them, see how close they are to each other, and move apart.

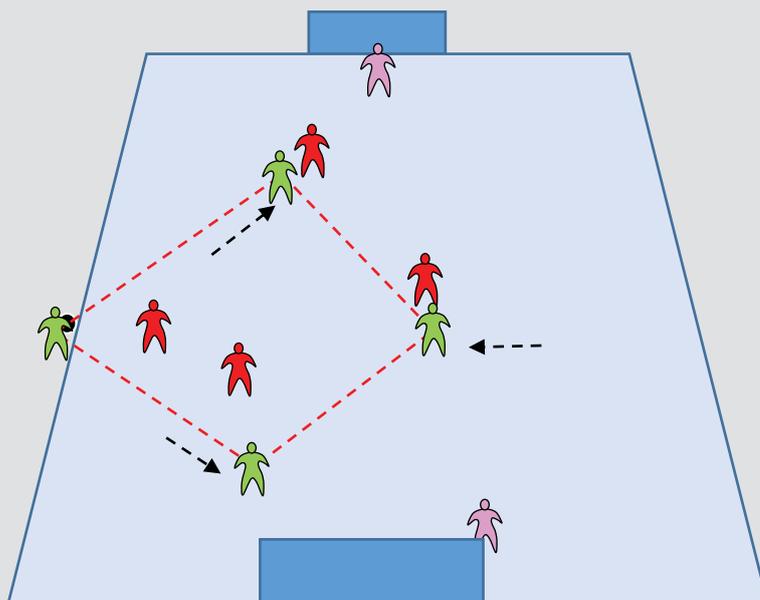
It shouldn't take more than one reminder for the players to move apart, but they usually don't move far enough. In their enthusiasm to have the ball, they will still position too close to the thrower. A good question to ask when you see this happening is:

"If the ball was in play here, on the ground, where would you be?"

Again, all you are doing is asking each player to do his job. If the ball was on the ground, the front player would push forward and the playmaker would drop back, and both of them would move to more central positions. The exception here is the wide player from the far side. This is the one time, at this age, when we ask him to come off his side during the build-up, because the thrower (unless he's unnaturally strong for his age) won't be able to reach him there. If, after you ask them to spread out, he moves out to the far touchline, you can simply ask him:

"Can he throw it to you over there?"

We want him to come over just far enough for the thrower to be able to reach him, and no further. He should just come into the thrower's range.

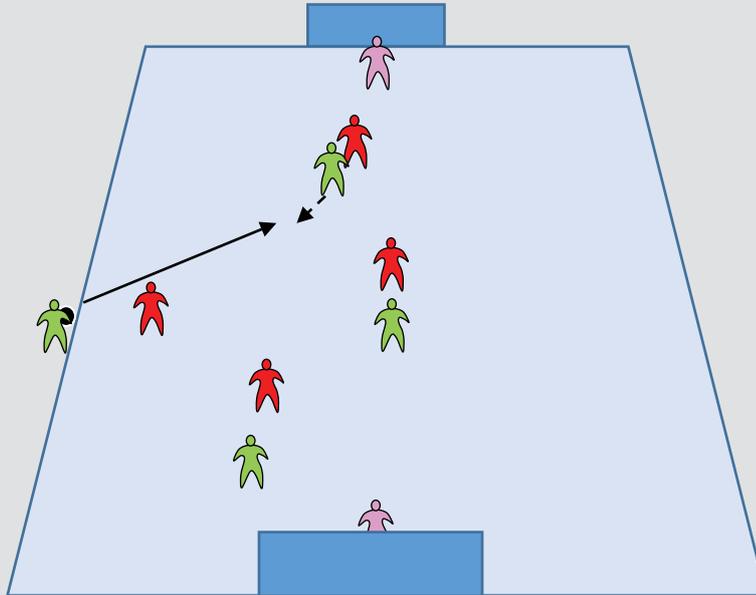


He cannot come over and find himself in the same space as the front player or the playmaker. If he's the right-sided player, he's still completing the diamond shape on the right side; it's just that the diamond is smaller.

With the diamond shape filled, the players should be able to recognise that all you're asking them to do is to play in position. Once they move to their starting positions, we ask them to read how their markers react to them, especially in relation to whether they move to block the ball into the front player. First, we ask the thrower:

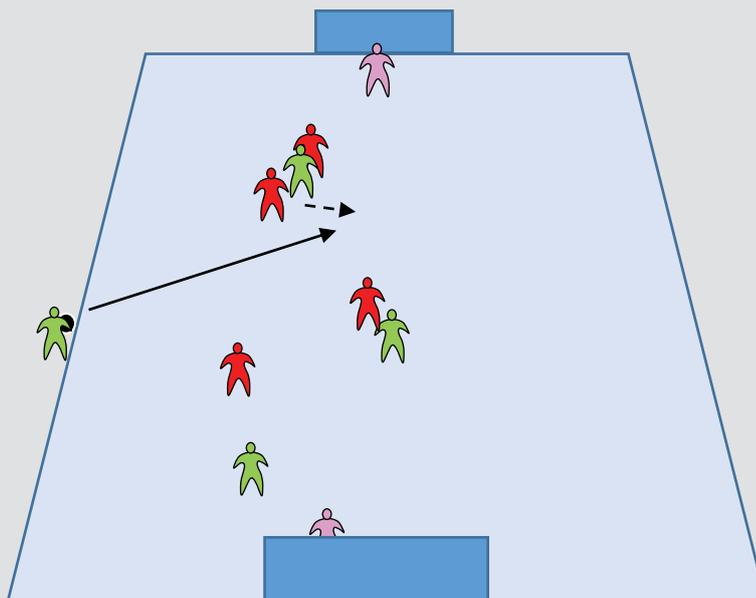
"What's the best ball you can play?"

If the opposing wide player, as most younger players will do, just stands in front of the thrower, the ball can be thrown directly into the feet of the front player. This is our preferred throw-in, as it puts three of the four defenders out of the game. Just as the players have learned to look for this pass whenever possible when the ball is at their feet, they do the same when it's in their hands.



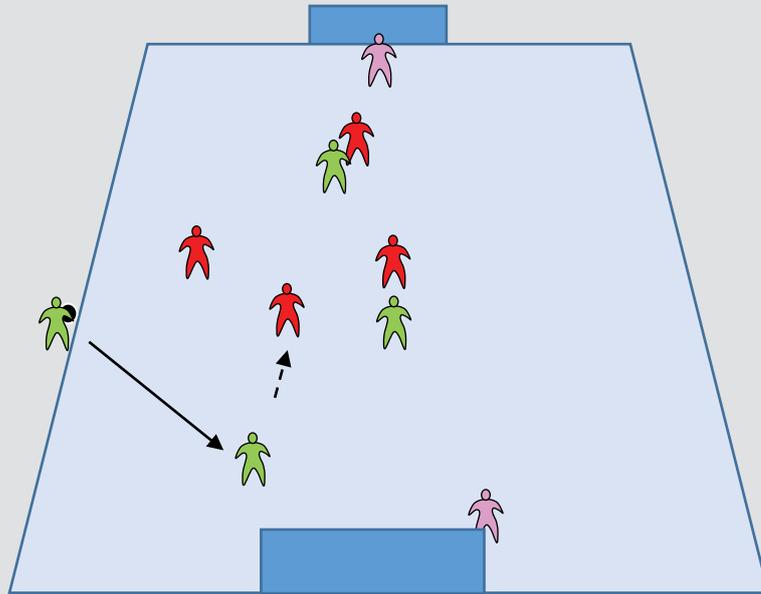
If, however, he drops back to screen in front of him, the front player must move a little more cleverly. (Bear in mind that very few teams you play against at this age will defend this way.) You ask him:

"If he stands in front of you, where can you go?"

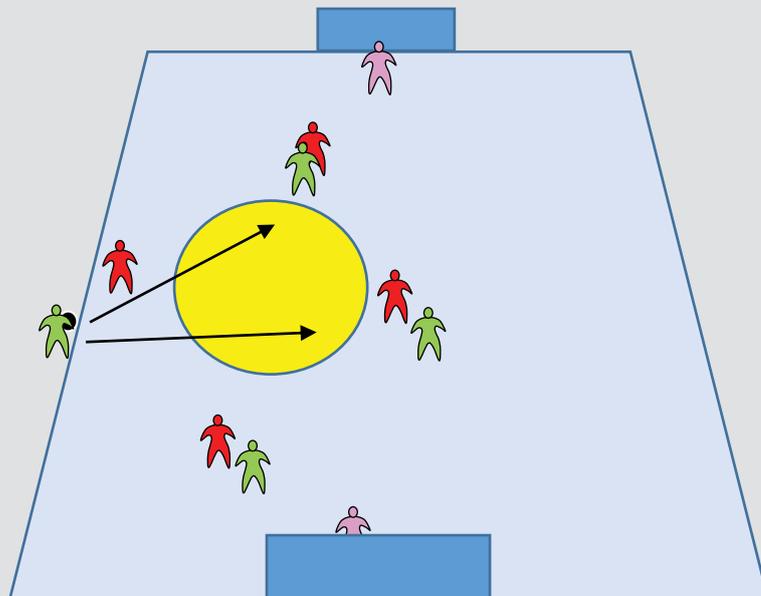


Instead of coming down the field, he should move sideways for the ball thrown inside him. He 'pops around' the blocking player, to receive the ball thrown immediately.

If their front player also drops deep to close up space and discourage the ball into our front player, this leaves the playmaker free to have the ball.

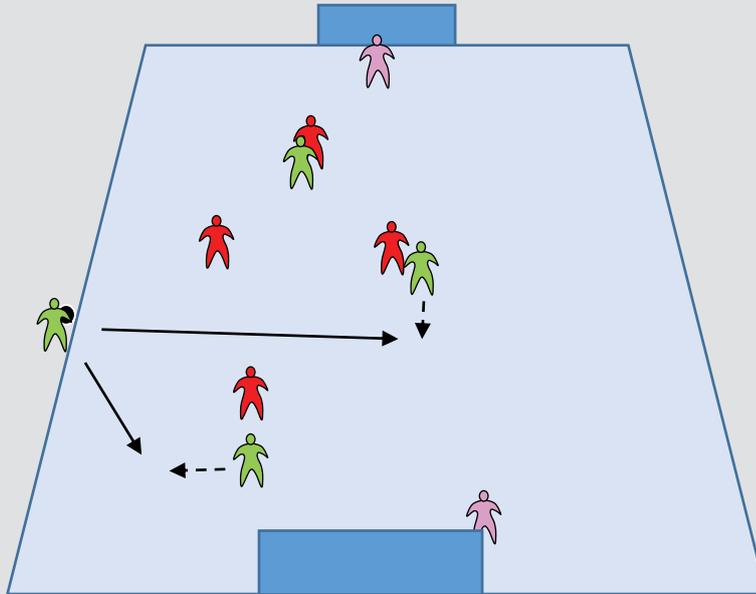


If he does the opposite and goes all the way up to the playmaker, this opens up an even clearer space for the front man or wide player to receive the ball in.



You may point out that this is another example of how a player, just by standing in position, can do a really good job for the team.

This does not mean, however, that the playmaker only stands still in this situation and doesn't involve himself in the play. The thrower may decide, for some reason, that he can't safely throw the ball forward and looks to go back to him. When he sees this, he shifts across, as he would if the wide player was on the ball in open play. His timing must be right; he must be patient and wait until the thrower looks for him, rather than go over too early and block up the space for himself.



The wide player who has moved over also shows for the ball like he would in open play. We don't want him running straight towards the thrower, closing down the space for himself and, more importantly, also closing his own field of vision. Instead, he positions ahead of the ball and moves exactly as he would on the touchline, by coming down the field, for the ball thrown to the foot furthest from the defender.

There is an emphasis on the thrower to release the ball as soon as the players move off their markers, putting the correct weight on the throw as he would if the ball was at his feet. All the players just need to be reminded to do what they have learned already; at throw-ins, they just follow the passing formula:

"Head up! Show! Pass!"

"The second he moves, throw it to him!"

Whoever the thrower gives it to is free to play. In seasons to come, the players may learn to use pre-rehearsed routines, with the aim of penetrating the opposition from throw-ins. For now, though, the aim should be to keep possession from most if not all of the throw-ins we win. We want our throw-ins executed with the minimum of fuss; the players take up position, move off their markers, and the thrower gives it to them. We constantly remind them to

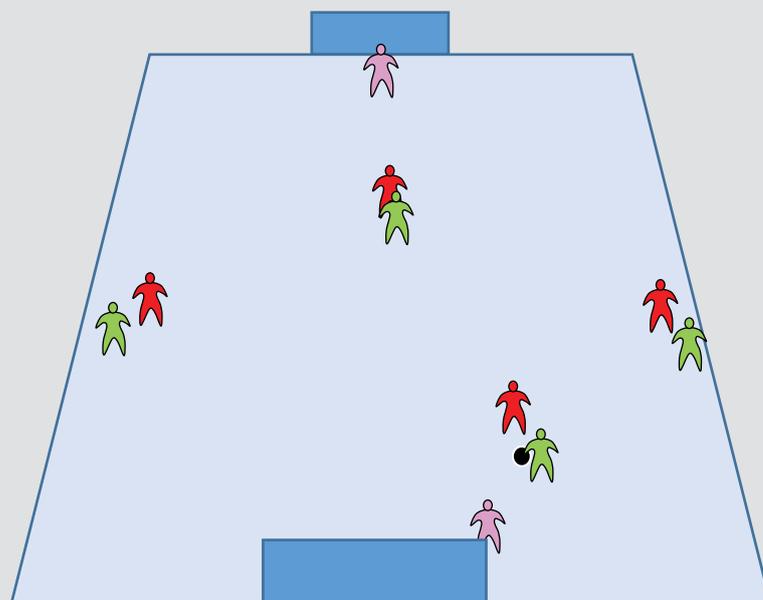
"Just throw it to a green!"



RISK AND REWARD

We have already spoken about how the introduction of the fourth player adds a third attacking line to the team. Once you have the players thinking in these terms, you can start to influence them to think about where and when they must play safely, and where and when it might serve the team for them to take risks. Now, the decision whether to dribble or pass is not only influenced by the positioning of the defenders, but also by the part of the field in which the player with the ball finds himself.

The players are now familiar with the style of the playmaker. He gets the ball and moves it from the back of the team and, because he operates as the deepest player, he is probably the one who dribbles the least in the 4v4. He gets it and moves it, gets it and moves it, hopefully with the minimum of touches, in order to keep the ball moving quickly from position to position.



If he does choose to dribble from a deep position, he presents you with one of those tricky situations for the coach: do you wait until he loses the ball before you talk to him about this, or do you ask:

“Can you see the need to be safe there?”

Although we always try to avoid framing questions negatively, you will probably have to ask:

“What if you lose it there?”

The players won't need much help to see the need for safety; most know instinctively the danger of handing the opponent a chance in front of their own goal. Players who don't will eventually see this for themselves if they try to dribble and lose the ball in the area close to their goal. Losing the ball in these positions often results in goals being given away.

It may be better to approach this situation in terms of risk and reward, rather than safety and risk. The reward for beating the defender in our half, after all, may not be worth the risk. Even if a player dribbles successfully there, it's still a considerable distance to goal, and the defenders will have plenty of time to recover to good defensive positions. You ask:

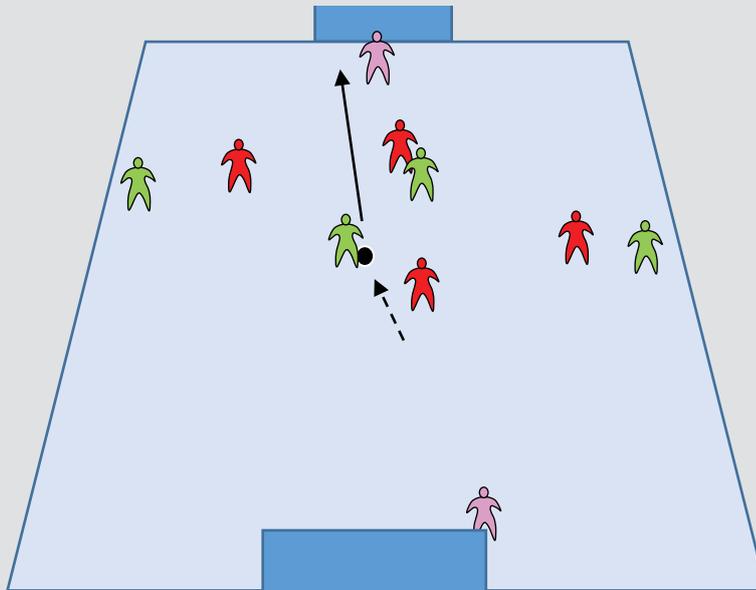
“Even if you beat him there, are you really going to hurt the opposition?”

You want the players to understand that:

“Even if you beat him there, you still have a lot of work to do to get forward!”

On the other hand, you cannot dogmatically tell the playmaker that he cannot dribble. A player with the ability to take defenders out of the game in central positions near their goal can win games for the team. In this part of the field, the reward outweighs the risk.

“In which part of the field will you get the best reward for your dribbling?”



Common sense, therefore, tells us that the best choice for him would be to pass from deep positions, while looking for opportunities to dribble nearer the opposition goal.

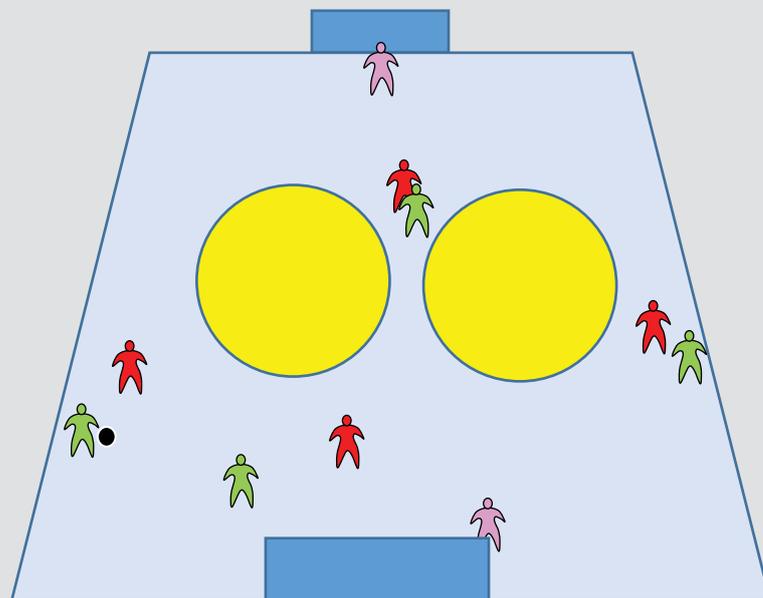
This, though, is not a hard and fast rule of ***“No dribbling in your own half!”***. The players must still be allowed to make choices for themselves, as the game will always throw up exceptions to any rule. Even in the deepest positions, there will be times when an opponent will dive in to tackle, making it easy for the player on the ball to take it past him.

Allowances also must be made when the playmaker has a clear physical or technical advantage over his direct opponent, which almost guarantees him success in taking the ball past him. If you're lucky enough to have a player like this, it would be going against common sense to restrict him in this situation. Again, there can't always be hard and fast rules; how you view these situations will be dictated by the abilities of the players you work with. It's yet another pointer to the difference between the art and the science of coaching.

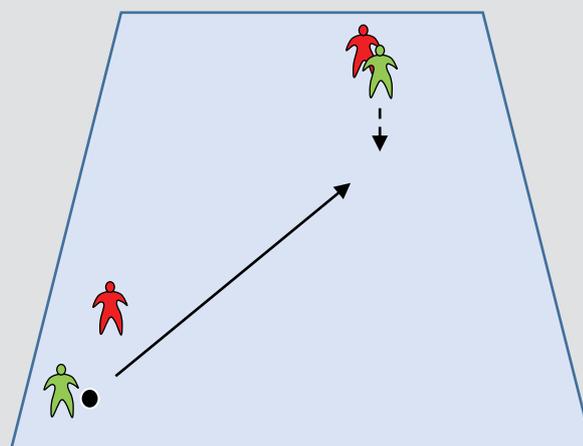
The wide players learned in 3v3 that the first priority, when receiving the ball, is to get turned and face up to their immediate opponent. We asked them to then see the dribble as their first choice, and to use the pass into the front player as a variation that would keep the defenders guessing. Now we are asking them, if they end up on the ball in deep positions, to look at the situation from a different viewpoint. They, like the playmaker, must calculate between risk and reward before choosing the option which best serves the team.

To help them to decide, you should ask them to look at how having the ball in a deep position affects the team as a whole. Looking at the big picture, if a wide player is on the ball in a deep position, and the opposing defender has come out with him, it means that the front player is left with more space to play in. You ask the players:

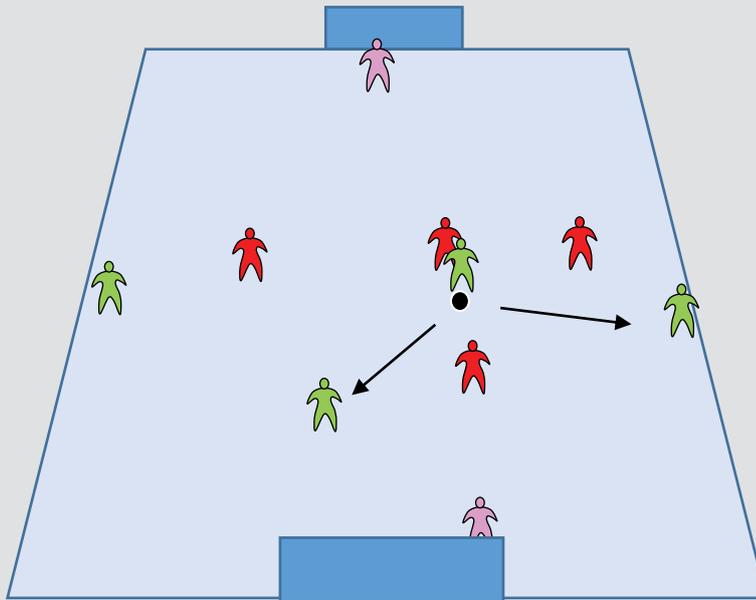
“If you have the ball in a deep position, is there more space somewhere else?”



In this situation, it makes sense to play a direct pass into the front, if the positioning of the pressing player allows it. Once again, this pass puts three defenders out of the game.



At the other end of the field, the front player has the least amount to lose by attempting to dribble, so we keep encouraging him to get turned, face up to the defender, and get past him. The key to this, in terms of risk and reward, though, is actually his location on the field; distance from the opposition goal is now an important factor. Just as it was with his team-mates in the other positions, it becomes a matter of where and when he decides to dribble.



In terms of positioning, you will always look to have him as far forward as is realistically possible. There will be times, though, when, as a result of aggressive defending by the player at his back, he is forced back into deeper positions with the ball. If he continuously risks losing it by choosing to dribble in these positions, you can ask him the same question you asked the wide player:

“In which part of the field will you get the best reward for your dribbling?”

You may also ask him to see his decision to dribble in terms of the team’s overall plan. Our aim is to keep the ball moving and keep play open in the build-up, so it certainly doesn’t help the team to have it ‘stuck’ in one part of the field. As we have said before – opponents will usually move into stronger, rather than more open defensive positions when the ball isn’t moved.

“We’re moving the ball well, but what happens if you hold on to it there?”

Both questions should help him to see that, when he’s in deeper positions, the team is best served by sticking with the ***“Get it and give it!”*** advice he got in the warm-up. Common sense again tells us that the best choice for him would be to pass when he’s deep, while waiting for opportunities to dribble nearer the opposition goal. Unlike the wide players, who can play forward or go back to the playmaker from deep positions, his passes in this situation will mostly be back down the field to supporting players.

Reading the game in terms of safety and risk is another part of the process of becoming more responsible to the team. As the players mature, they will see for themselves that they must not hand the opponents clear chances to score, near their goal. It will not be difficult for them to understand the need for safety in their own half, even though, up to now, they have been free to dribble in all parts of the field. They may even have worked this out for themselves already. They won't resist the simple guidelines you give them, which, in practical terms, are beginning to limit the amount of dribbling they will do in the game.

In general, then, our plan is to pass out of our half and save the individual stuff for theirs. Although the halfway line serves as a good marker for the players, it should not be seen as a literal cut-off point for either the passing or the dribbling game. There will always be situations in the game that demand our players to be flexible, so there will be times to dribble in our half and times, even very close to the opposition's goal, when passing is a better option than dribbling. We should be happy to see players taking individual responsibility in such situations, as long as they're trying to do the right thing for the team.

You can consolidate this message for the players, by reminding them in many different ways:

"In our half, do the team thing, in their half, do your own thing!"

"Take care in your own half, take a chance in theirs!"

"Pass out of our half, so we can dribble in theirs!"

"Move it from an area near your goal to an area away from your goal!"

"Move it safely!"

"Very little advantage to be gained by dribbling in your own half!"

"Play in their half!"

We have reached the stage when we ask each player to play unselfishly for the team rather than for himself. Each decision he makes will be based on him asking:

"What's the best thing I can do for the team?"

Again, this is a tricky area of team building for the coach, best approached with a light touch in a non-dogmatic way. It's not easy to produce players who are responsible to the team and, at the same time, are capable of highly effective individual actions. With patience and the increased experience that will come from the many mistakes that you and the players will make, you can give them an understanding of the need to balance risk and reward, in a very, very practical way.

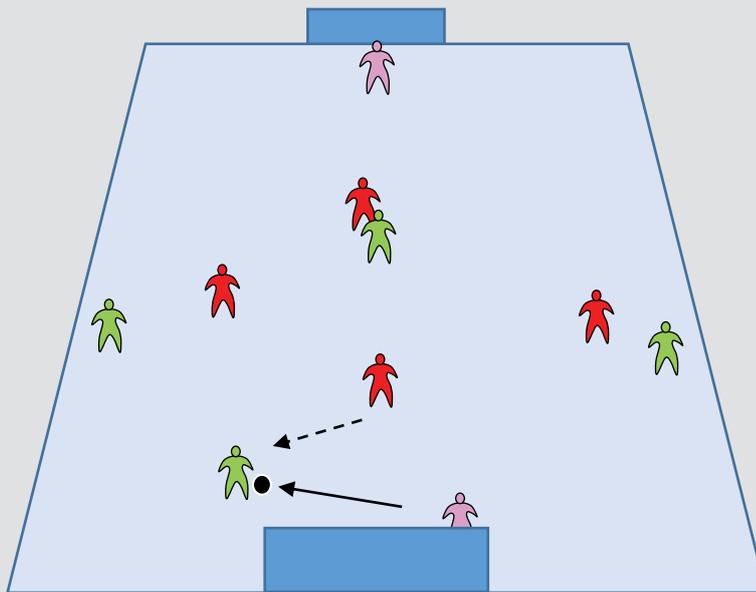


PATIENCE / SWITCHING PLAY

4v4 sees the players move to a passing-based game, but it also sees them transition from a naturalistic, all-out attacking style to a more calculated (but, hopefully, not too calculated), patient way of playing. 3v3 is all about attack, attack, attack, but 4v4 can involve starting an attack in one part of the field, hitting a road block, turning around, and trying to get through somewhere else. Without overcomplicating our approach, we now introduce them to more indirect ways of breaking down opposing defences.

Once again, in terms of the big picture, our plan is to move the ball quickly, keeping the play open until spaces appear between defenders, but there will still be times when the play ends up in tight areas. In such situations, you may still see the players attempt to continue going forward, even though there is little chance of breaking through, and a high chance of the ball being lost. Your job will be to help them recognise, in such situations, that the direct route may not be the best way to get through.

You may get an early opportunity to introduce this idea when the playmaker gets the ball from the goalkeeper and is energetically closed down by the opposing forward, who had initially chosen to 'sit off' and block the pass into the front.



When faced with this situation, two previous guidelines should help the playmaker:

“Safe in your own half!”

“Get it and move it!”

Young players, though, often get excited when pressed hard in this position. They may try to dribble their way out of trouble, when not really set to do so, or may allow themselves to be rushed into playing a poor forward pass.

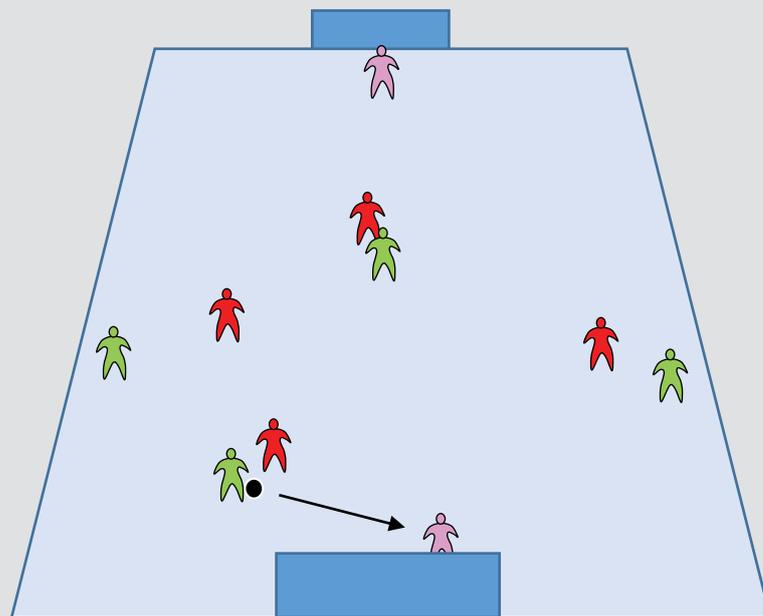
If the playmaker loses the ball, or puts a team-mate into trouble with his pass, you can ask:

“If you get closed down quickly, what can you do?”

“If you can’t go forward, what can you do?”

The simple solution is to roll the ball back to the keeper. Despite being switched on to the idea in 2v2 and 3v3, you will still find that some players will not recognise this as an option, without some help from you. You may need to remind them, once again, to:

“Stay calm and read the game!”



This very specific situation gives you the opportunity to lay down another general guideline:

“Turn around if it doesn’t look good in front of you!”

“Go back and start again!”

The advice is given to the playmaker, but all the other players will hear it at the same time and get that message. I know it might be a little silly, but I ask all the players:

“If you were going through the jungle and you came to a swamp, what would you do?”

The answer you want is:

“Turn around and try to go another way!”

They now know, when they are closed down, that they always have the option of turning around and trying to go another way.

The playmaker has the goalkeeper to go back to, whereas he will be the player to make himself available 'as an escape valve' when the wide or front players are forced back.

When he is offering help to the wide player, watch his eyes. If you see that they are only on the player with the ball, you can simply ask him:

"What are you looking at when you're moving over?"

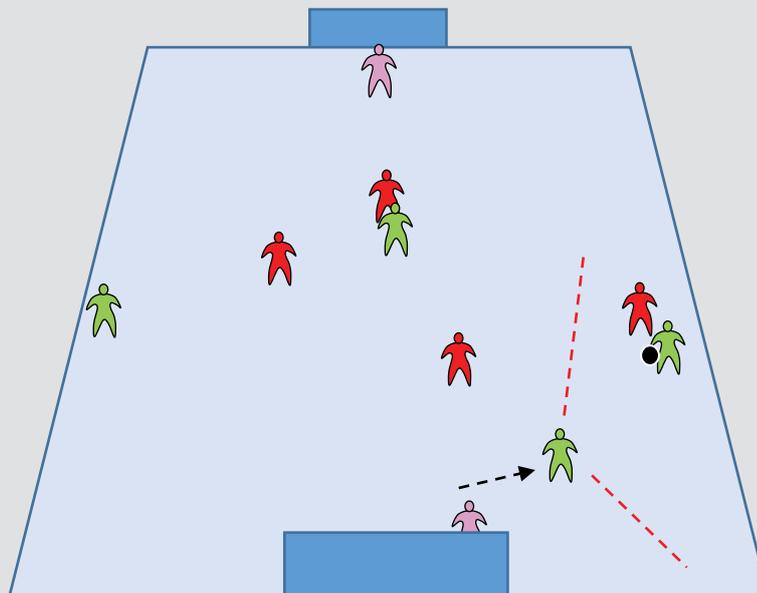
When he tells you that he's reading the situation around the player on the ball, you can then ask:

"What else could you be looking at when you're running to help him?"

We want to encourage him to start looking away from the ball, to see the positions of all the other players, so that he's prepared to play out of that tight area quickly. He should, especially, look over his shoulder, to see how the wide player on the far side is positioned. This is the start of the players learning to 'take pictures', in order to 'get ahead of the play'. Ask him:

"When you're going to help him, do you know what you're going to do next?"

"Can you think a move ahead?"



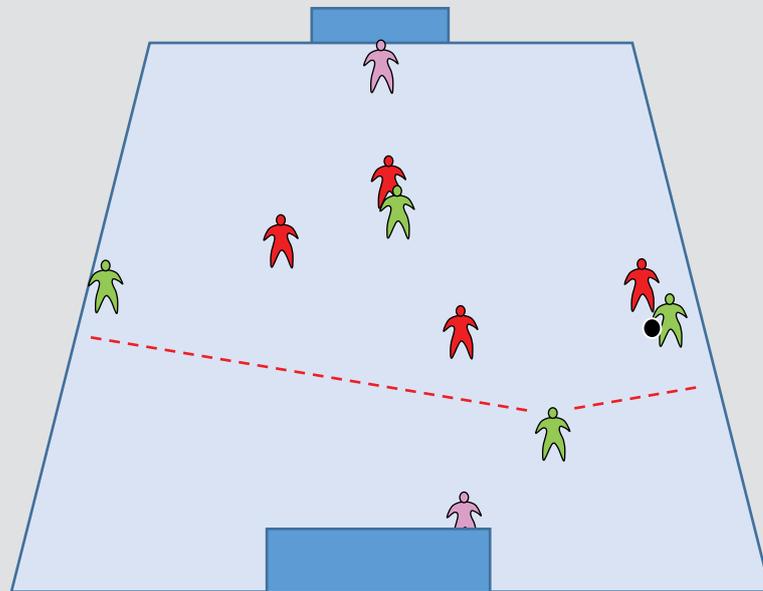
The positioning of his feet when he arrives in his supporting position is vital to this. He has already learned to have his feet open, looking up the field, when looking for the ball from the keeper. In the heat of the moment, though, he may forget to do this and end up facing the sideline, limiting his vision of the rest of the field. Ask him:

"What should you be able to see when you arrive?"

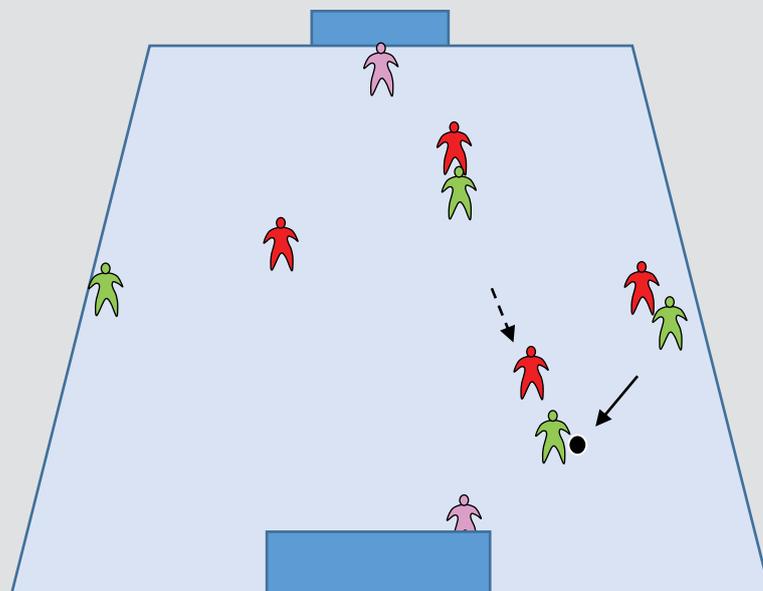
It won't surprise you to hear that the answer is the same as it's been since the players started in 2v2:

"See everything!"

With his feet open, he can see all the passing possibilities ahead of him, safe in the knowledge that he can always go back to the keeper if he receives the ball and decides that, for whatever reason, he can't play forward.



If the wide player decides to use his help and passes back to him, the nature of his controlling touch is crucial. His first touch may open up or close down his vision of the field.

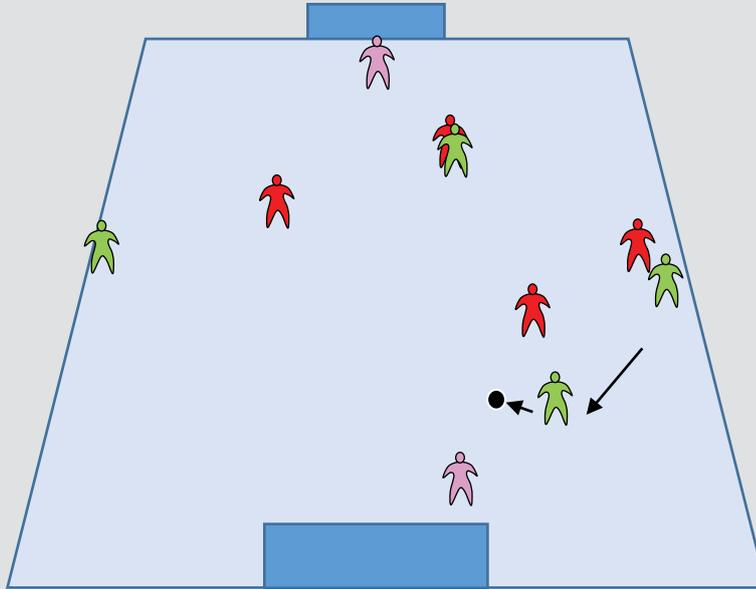


If he controls with the foot nearest the passer and leaves the ball on that side, his passing range may be limited to that side only, if he comes under pressure from the forward. This is not to say that he won't be able to shift the ball and play to the other side of the field, but controlling the ball in this way certainly makes it more difficult for him to so.

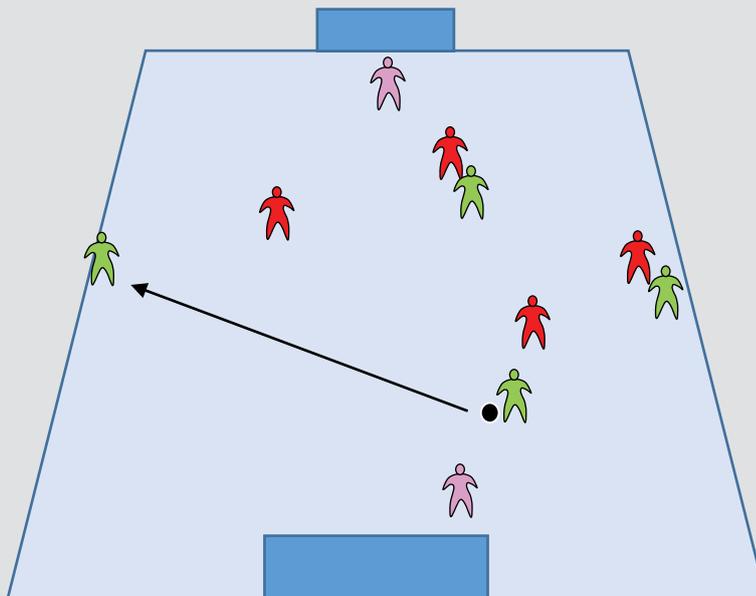
If you see him control the pass in this way, you ask:

“That’s a good touch, but if you control it there, where can you play your next pass?”

“Can you control it so that you can see more?”



If he takes the ball with his inside foot, he opens the other side and can choose to switch play out to the wide player on that side. He doesn't have to play the switch; this first touch gives him the option of going out to the other side, but it also gives him the option of continuing to play on the same side, if he so chooses.

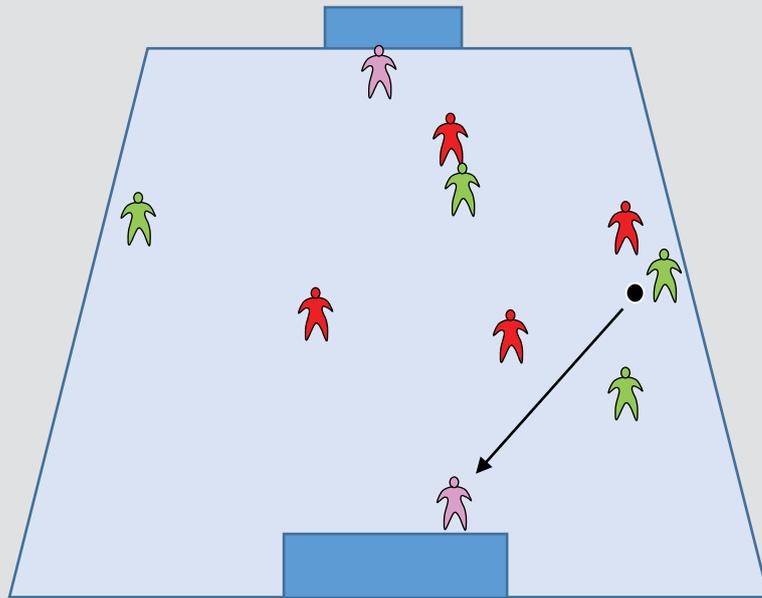


How quickly he plays and where he plays to will depend, like every other decision he makes, on the reaction of the defenders, but in 4v4 there will be many opportunities to open out and play to the other side. If the players are going to play patiently, switching play in this way must become an integral part of their game.

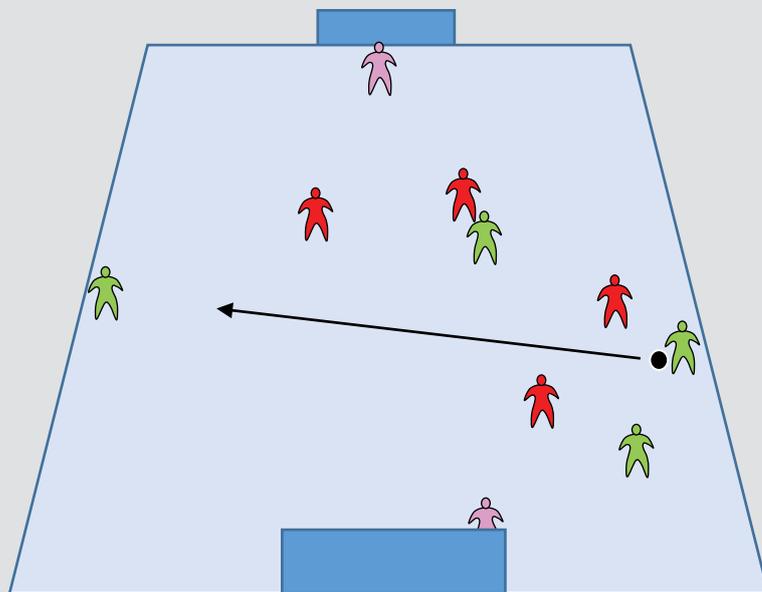
Sometimes, when he's closed down, you may see the wide player choose to 'skip' the playmaker and pass all the way back to the goalkeeper. It's not a hard and fast rule, but we would prefer to see this pass used only when the wide player, for whatever reason, cannot play it to the playmaker. In general, we don't want the ball going back further than it has to, and, in 4v4, we want to hammer home the message that we want to see the playmaker on the ball as much as possible, dictating play.

"Do you need to go back that far?"

"Don't go back further than you have to!"



Wide players, if they have the passing range, may also switch play all the way across to the wide player on the other side. They can, quite literally, miss out the middle man.

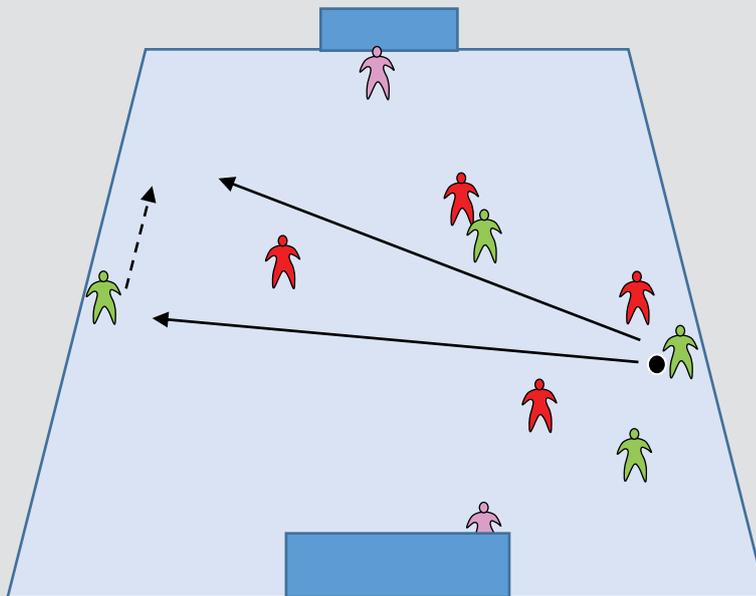


When first asking your players to do this, you must show a ‘feel’ for what they are capable of, as some of them may not yet have this pass ‘in them’. In another example of the art, rather than the science of coaching, you can employ the same coaching trick you used when choosing which players would be the first to take on the job of playmaker. When you see the player who is most likely to be able to execute this pass is in a good position to do so, but is limiting himself to short passes on his own side, you can ask him:

“Can you look a little further?”

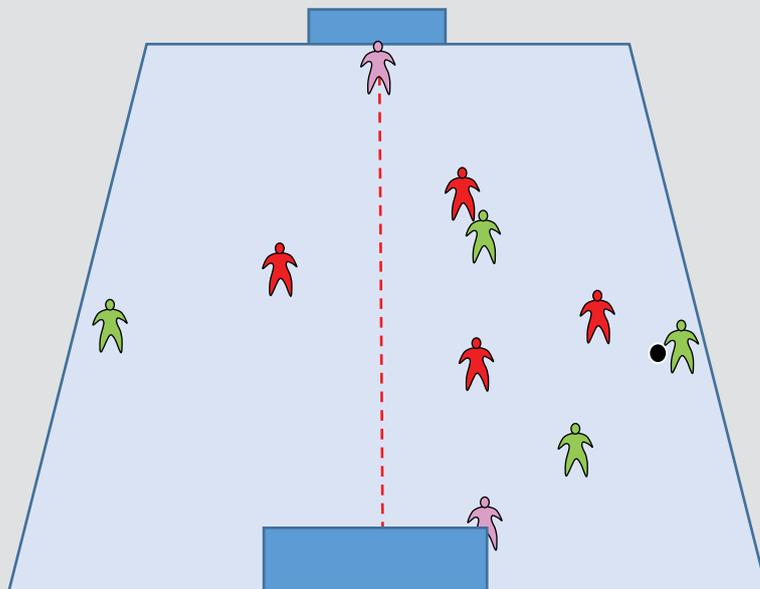
“Is there anyone else you can pass to?”

Even if that player is well capable of playing this switch, his decision to play it or not will depend on the positioning of the defenders. In effect, he must read the defender nearest to him and, at the same time, judge the position of the defender furthest from him. He can’t even consider playing the big switch if his immediate opponent is tight to him because the defender is forcing him, by his closeness, to focus completely on keeping control of the ball. On an even more practical level, the closeness of the defender doesn’t allow him the space to swing his leg for the long pass. If this isn’t the case, and the defender stays far enough off him, he will be able to look away for the positioning of the far defender. If this defender has moved in too far, or has been drawn too far forward, he will leave the space for the wide player on the other side to receive the crossfield pass.



The pass may be to the feet of the receiver if the defender moves in to cover his team-mates, or, preferably, played into the space behind him if he moves too close to the attacker. Once again, both players, as they learned to do in 3v3, must check to see if all the ingredients are there for a successful through pass, and go for it if it’s ‘on’. If it isn’t and the switch is to the feet of the wide player, he should not delay in aggressively dribbling at the defender, in order to take advantage of the extra space, before the other defenders move over to help their team-mate.

When you first work on switching play, you can help the players understand the concept quicker by asking them to look at the big picture, in terms of where the most space is on the field. Specifically, you can ask them to see the field as two halves, divided, not only by the halfway line, but by an imaginary vertical line, from the centre of one goal to the centre of the other.



“If we look at this half, what’s the game?”

“If we look at the other half, what’s the game?”

These questions may seem a little obscure, but what we’re trying to do is get the players to recognise that there’s a 3v3 game going on, on one side of the field, and 1v1 going on, on the other. You ask the players:

“Which game gives us the best chance of getting through?”

“Do the math!”

They should see the logic of quickly switching play from the crowded side to the other, more open side.

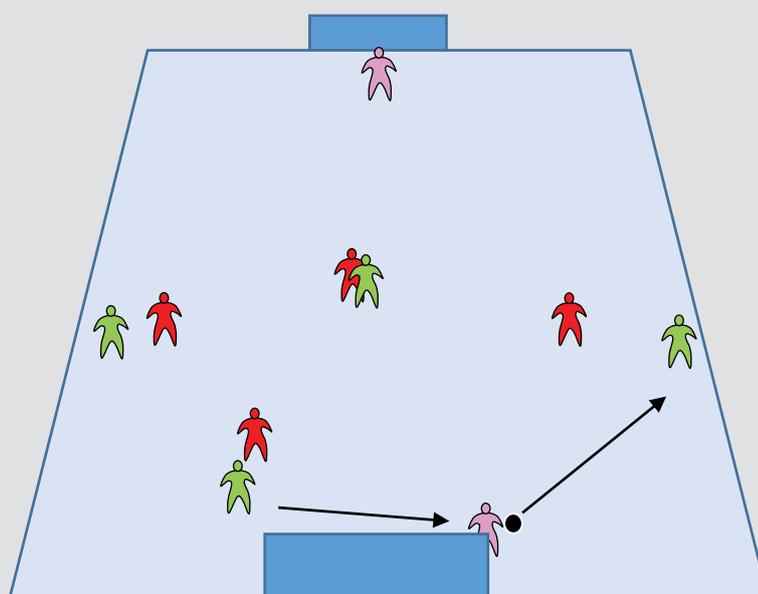
If the players are taking these messages on board, their game should now look a lot different to how it looked in 3v3. They are now playing with more patience, recognising when it’s not on to go forward, turning around and moving the ball to try break through somewhere else. A large amount of time has been spent on working with the playmaker in order to facilitate playing in this way. Now that we have established the basics of this game, we begin to focus more on the jobs of the other players and look at the combinations they can use to open up defences and score.



THE GOALKEEPER

With the emphasis of the team's attacking play shifting now to passing and moving, the role of the goalkeeper takes on new significance. Gone are the days when he would have been seen as a separate department of the team, with the weakest part of his game being his distribution with his feet.

We spent a lot of time with the goalkeeper in 3v3, but, because of the way those games were organised, he was always allowed the luxury of starting each move without any pressure. Now, with the players playing more patiently, he will be more involved in continuing as well as starting moves. When it comes back to him, he must decide whether to keep the ball moving quickly or to take time on it in order for the players to re-set and find their positions. We will look for him to take a more active role in maintaining the tempo of each move.



As a central player, he will in many ways play like the playmaker, especially when taking the ball from one side of the field and switching it out to the other side. The positioning of his feet, the quick sorting of his feet to open up with his first touch, and the pass to the back foot of the wide player are all out of the playmaker's playbook.

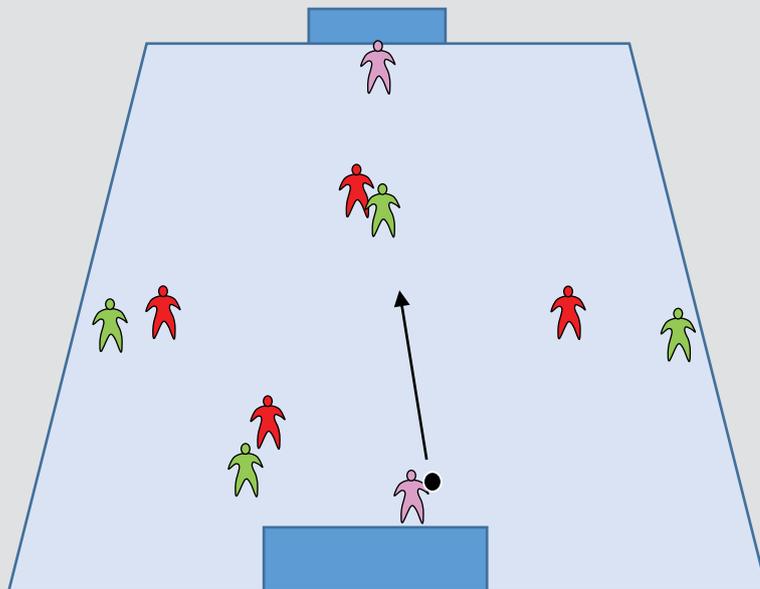
If the ball is passed back to him, it is very likely it's because that side of the field has been closed down, so it makes sense that his first thought would be to move the ball over to the more spacious side. You can ask him:

"Why have they gone back to you?"

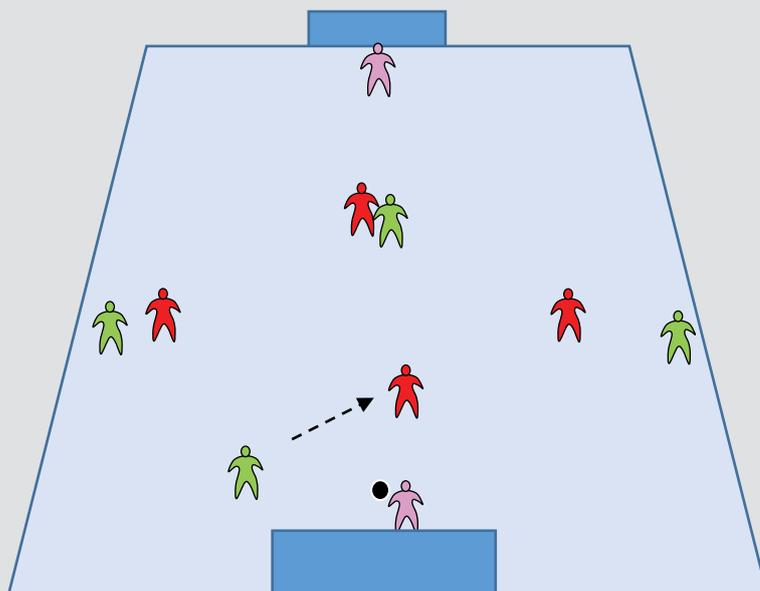
"So what is the best thing to do?"

This is a situation in which the keeper will find himself, time and time again, when the team is learning to play patiently.

With the greater emphasis on patience, though, the players, including the keeper, must not fall into the trap of constantly playing across the back for the sake of it. If a pass to a player further up the field is on, especially the pass directly into the front player, the keeper should play it. As we have seen when we worked with the playmaker, he will be able to 'feed' the front player quite often if the opposing front player comes up to mark tightly.

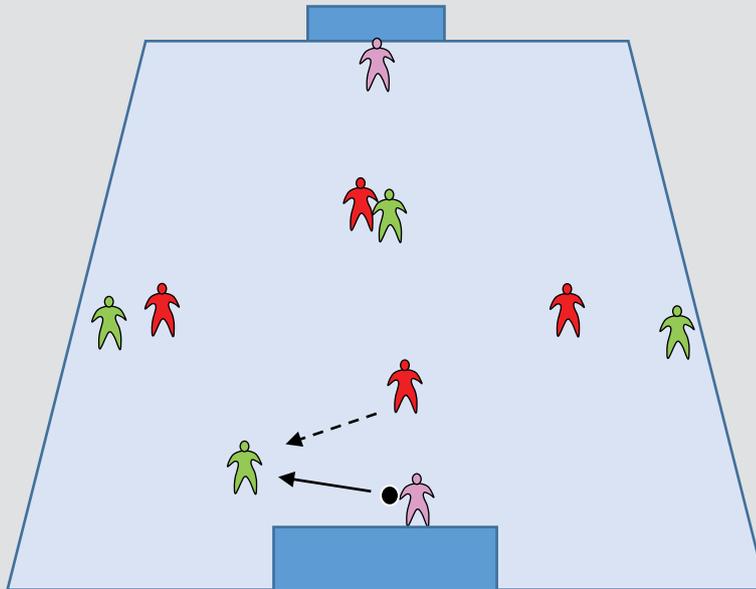


It is more than likely, though, at this age, that his team-mates will get fed up with this happening and pull their front man into the centre to block the direct pass into the front. Although it's less likely, the front player may even see for himself that he is being put out of the game each time this pass is played and may decide to sit off the playmaker, preferring, as good defenders do, to have the play in front of him, rather than behind him.



Irrespective of how it comes about, the front man dropping back will leave the playmaker free to take a short pass from the keeper.

If the front player stays off the playmaker and maintains a blocking position, the keeper will stay and offer him support from behind. The playmaker is free to play forward, but knows that, if he has to, he can safely pass back to him. If, however, the front player defends energetically and moves forward immediately to press him, this will present the two of them with a problem.



If he is prepared to shuttle continuously between his blocking and pressing positions, he can pin both of them in, and we can end up with the ball going back and forth between the keeper and the playmaker. The front player is doing an excellent job for his team by denying the forward pass, but, rather than lose patience and give the ball away, as many young players do when faced with this situation, the players must work out how to counter what he's doing. You ask them:

"Is there any way we can catch him out of his position?"

This is another of those situations where the players may need some extra help from you to see the solution. You can ask the keeper:

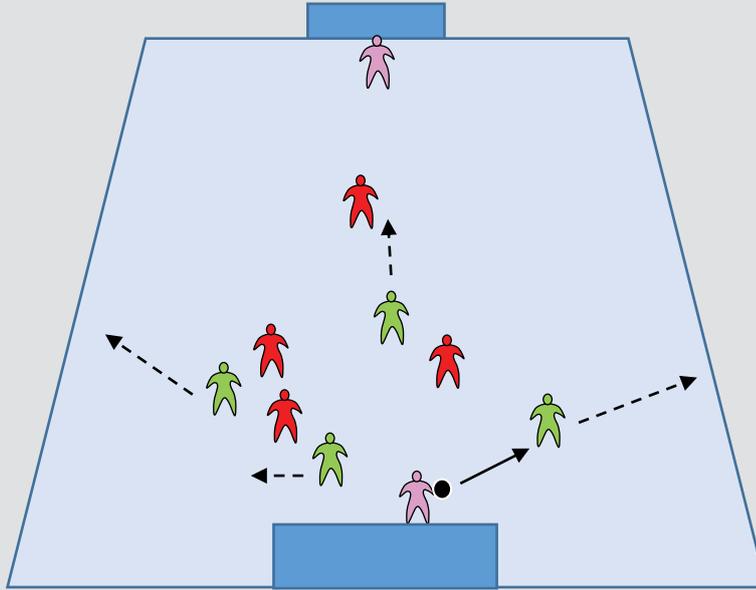
"If he's pressing him, is your line up to the front open?"

We need all the players to see that the key here is to catch the forward out of position by playing at a quicker pace.

"If we do it a little quicker, can we catch him out?"

To do this, both players must be capable of playing first-time passes safely. They cleverly set the forward up by playing two well-weighted passes that can be struck first-time, in an effort to catch him in between the pressing and blocking positions. This is another example of players being asked to think a move ahead of the play, and the keeper, just like the outfield players, must be capable of doing this.

With the new emphasis on maintaining a quick tempo, you must also watch out for the keeper playing too quickly. This is especially important when the ball is won back from the opposition and the players are moving out from narrow defensive positions into their wide and long attacking spots. If the opposition are slow to recover to good defensive positions, the quick transition from defence to attack can be really effective, but you must look out for the common mistake of the keeper playing the ball into the backs of players on their way out.



You ask the keeper:

“Should you give it to him if he’s not ready?”

The answer to this question is obvious, but he doesn’t have to wait for a player to be all the way out to his position to release it to him. If the player clearly wants the ball and is moving free to his position, the keeper will time the pass to arrive at that position at the same time as the player does. Even though you’re talking to the keeper, this will be another opportunity to remind the players of the passing formula, as he, just like every other player, should not give the ball to a team-mate who hasn’t looked for it.

You will probably, by now, have a player or two who are beginning to specialise as goalkeepers, but there will always be times in training when you need other players to play in goal. They should all be aware of how important it is for the keeper not to give the ball away so near the goal by playing too quickly. It is an unfortunate fact of goalkeeping life that no-one notices when the keeper keeps play moving, but they certainly remember when he gives the ball away to opposition forwards in positions near his own goal.

Even when you are focusing on the goalkeeper, you will have many opportunities to address the problems the team might have if the players rush to challenge the keeper when he has the ball at his feet. You will find that it’s a natural thing for young players to follow shots or passes into the keeper. The players should realise that charging at the keeper usually has the effect of leaving an outfield player free to receive the ball. They should only challenge the keeper when they are certain that they have a chance of winning the ball.

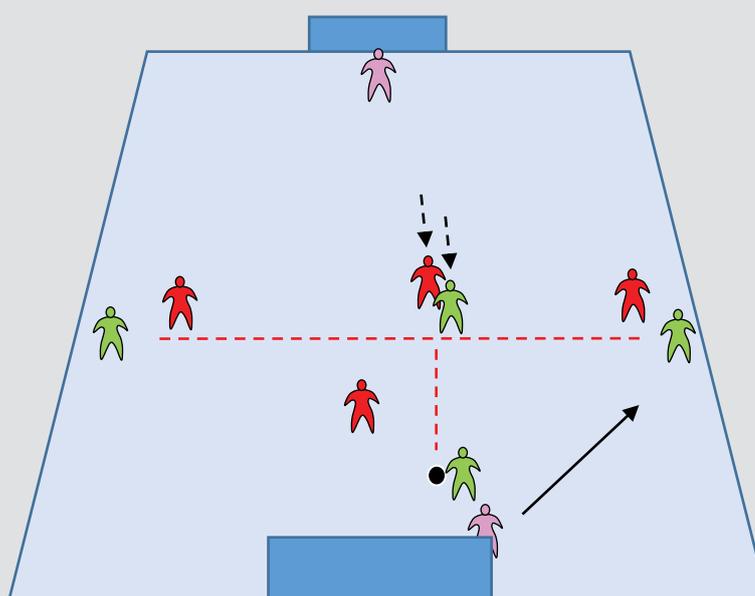


THE FRONT PLAYER

We saw in 3v3 how, by moving upfield, the third player added depth to the attack. In asking him to play in the advanced position, we emphasised that he should stay as close as was practical to the goal, so that he could take the ball, take the defender on, and take shots.

With the emphasis now on combining to create chances, you may see the front player coming too far down the field into deep positions to join in with his team-mates. As a result, the team ends up in a 'T' rather than a diamond shape. When this happens, you may ask:

“What’s the first job of the front player?”



Hopefully, the players will innocently (and wisely) answer “To score goals!”, so you’ll have to change the question to:

“What’s the first POSITIONAL job of the front player?”

You can take this opportunity to refer the players back to the diamond shape and ask:

“What shape do we want the team to be in?”

“What’s the shape of the team now?”

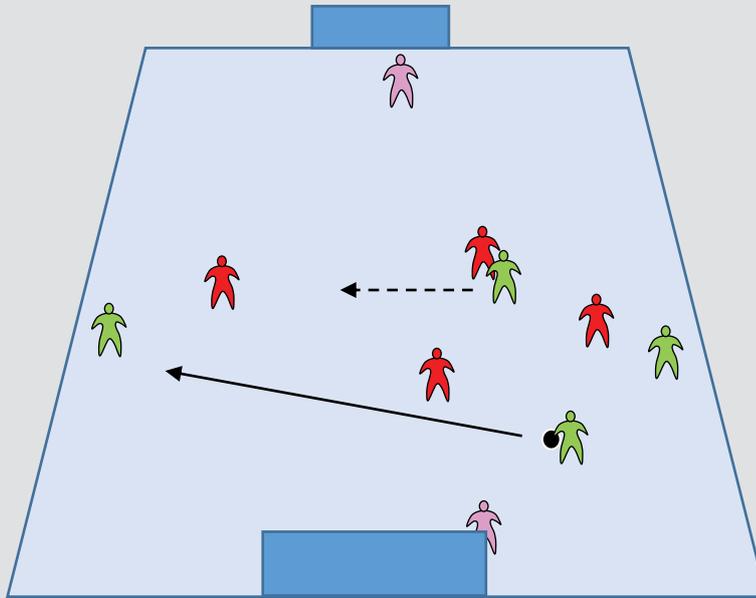
They should be able to see that the front player’s first job is to push up and keep the length in the attack. You can, without sarcasm, ask:

“How can we get into their half if we don’t have any players in their half?”

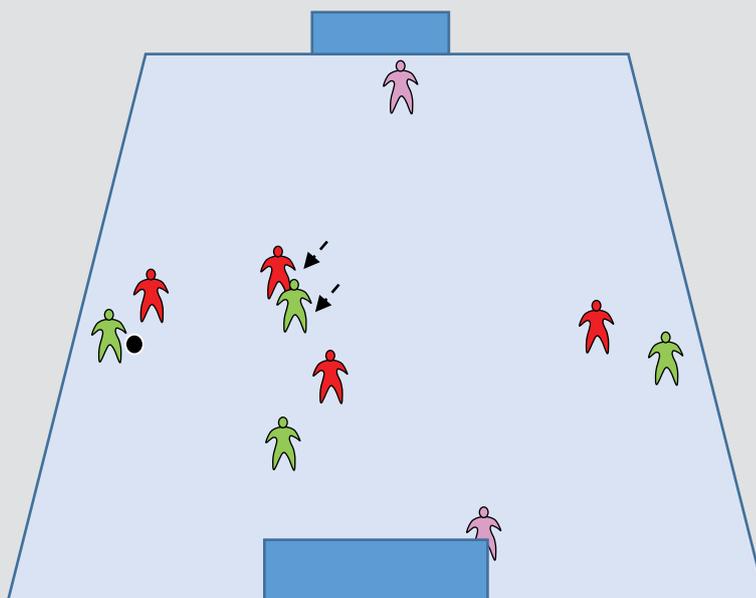
It’s the front player’s job to stay up; it’s your job to make sure he understands this and stays up.

Often the reason for him being too deep is that he doesn't re-position in a forward position after being involved in the early stages of a move. You will see many situations when he starts well forward, but, with each consecutive pass, ends up coming further down the field.

Here he has come down the field for a pass from the playmaker, who decides not to use him and instead switches play out to the other side. Being prepared to work hard for the team, he immediately moves across to offer support to the wide player.



With the wide player being pressed by the defender, he offers him help by stepping off his marker again, with the result that he ends up in a position that's almost square to the ball.



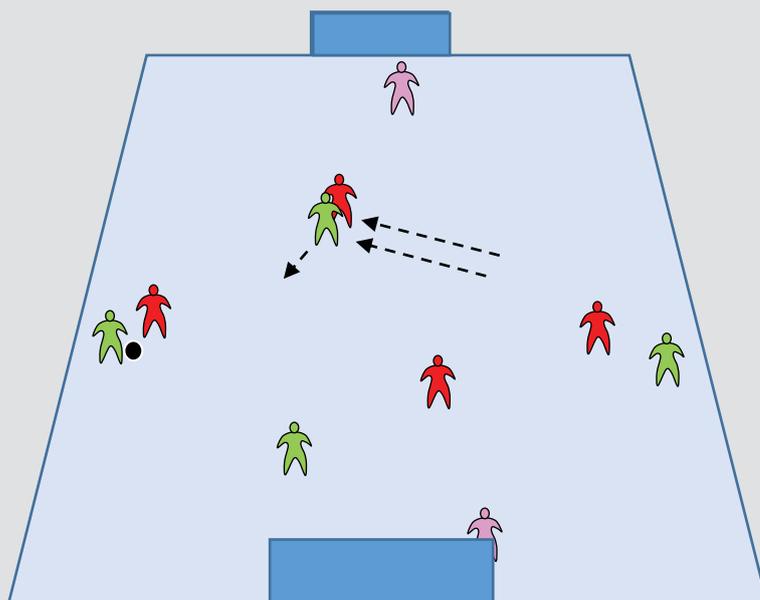
Once more, the depth has gone from the attack and the team is almost in a 'T' shape, instead of having the four players in a diamond again.

This can also be seen in terms of the team's attacking lines. When we introduced the playmaker, we added a third line to the team, but by coming too deep, the front player actually takes that third line away. When you see him coming out of the forward line like this, you must ask him:

“Well done for getting over, but are you too close to him there?”

“How did you end up on top of him?”

“Can you make a different run, so that this doesn't happen?”



It may take the players some time to work out that he should move forward as he goes across to help, effectively making a diagonal run. He can then offer help well ahead of the ball from this higher position at the point of the diamond.

This is only one example of how he must recognise that he's come too deep for the ball, before moving away to re-lengthen the attack. He must develop the habit of moving down the field to get the ball, and moving up again if he doesn't get it or gets it and lays it off. He should continually be asking himself the simple questions:

“Am I at the top of the diamond?”

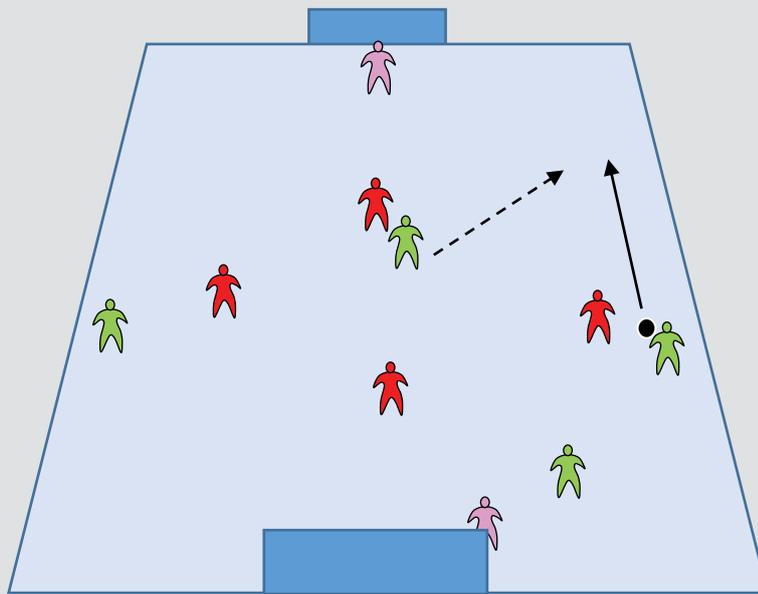
“Am I keeping the length in the attack?”

“Am I making sure we have three lines of attack?”

He must see himself as the focal point of the attack, and attempt to keep himself ahead of the ball at all times. Nowadays, there are negative connotations to the term 'target man', but it might be useful for you to use it when explaining the role of the front player. Once he does the first job of lengthening the attack, he provides this focal point for the other players by continuously showing for the ball - providing them with a 'target' for going forward.

As well as trying at all times to stay forward, he should, as much as is practical, attempt to maintain as central a position as he can. If, for example, the wide player is on the ball, he can show inside for the pass played into his feet rather than run down the side. The logic is simple – why move away from the goal?

Young players in this position, however, often have a tendency to run blindly down the sides when the wide player is on the ball, effectively blocking the space behind the defender which the winger may wish to move into. When the players first started in 2v2, we looked at the possible negative consequences of this move, which may lead to the front player being pinned into the corner, facing the sideline, with a defender tight to his back.



Although we would always wish to avoid that situation, we don't completely discourage this run now, because we can now acknowledge that sometimes it can be successful. What we're trying to avoid is the front player repeatedly ending up in the corner with the defender tight to him.

This is another example of the players learning to read their immediate opponent. The forward can consciously attempt that run, specifically to test how his marker reacts to it. If the defender doesn't follow him and lets him get turned on the ball in that position, it wouldn't make sense for you to stop him making that run. Our question to this player is:

"Does that run work?"

If he is meeting with success by making that run, you will be happy to adopt a policy of

"If it works, do it!"

while at the same time acknowledging that staying inside will more than likely prove to be a better option when the players come up against more skilled defenders, who will certainly not allow him the luxury of being able to turn freely in this situation.

If he does win space off his marker and the wide player passes to him, he must get turned to face the goal as quickly as possible. Once he's in this position, you must help the other players to see that this movement will leave the team unbalanced. We want them to look at the team shape and see that, in very simple terms, we now have two players on the right and no-one in the centre. You ask:

“If he comes out to the side, what's the problem?”

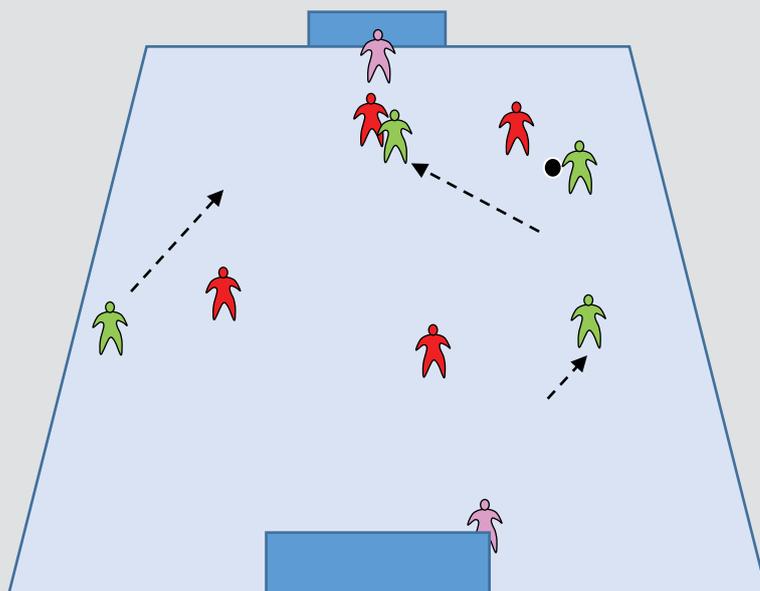
“If he's in the wide position, who's up the middle?”

Once they recognise this, they must work out what they'll have to do to get the team back into shape. To begin the process of working out the solution to this team problem, we can ask all the players:

“If he moves out there, whose job is he doing?”

We want the wide player to recognise that the front player has taken his place and has taken on his job, and so ask him:

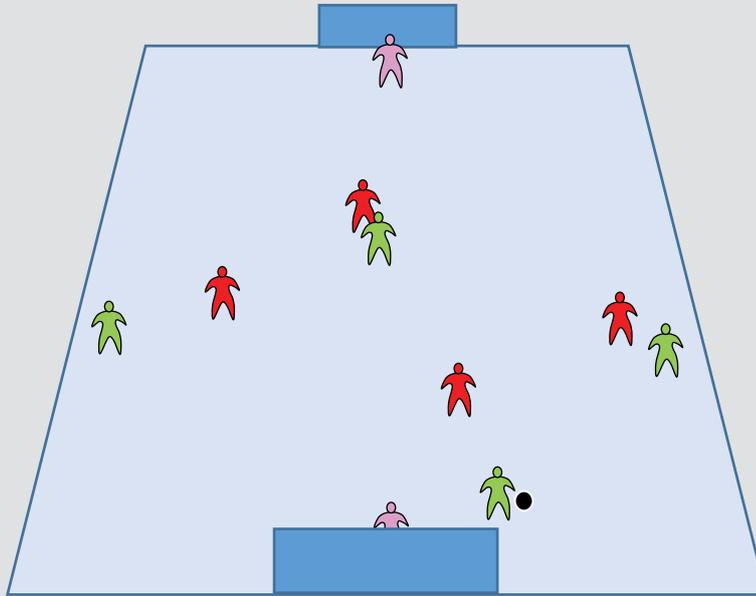
“If he's doing your job, what should you do?”



He should recognise that he must not follow the ball in support of the front player, but should immediately move towards the centre to balance the attack. By moving ahead of the ball in this way, he brings the team back into the diamond shape, even though it becomes a much flatter diamond as we get nearer to the goal. In simple terms, the team is back in shape - we are back to having a player on the right, a player on the left, a player up front and a player at the back.

This move inside has the added advantage of emptying the space for the playmaker to come into from behind, in order to support the front player (now the right-sided player) on the ball.

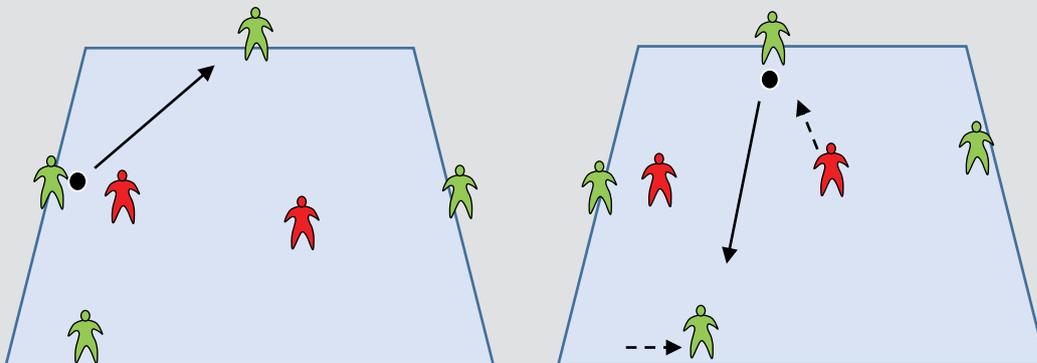
In the 3v3s, it was relatively easy for the front player to get the ball, as there was no opponent blocking the direct serve up to him from the goalkeeper. With the opposing front player playing centrally, he will often prevent a direct pass to him, from either the keeper or the playmaker. He must now be prepared to move, to provide a target for these players when they're on the ball, deep in their own half. If he's not making himself available in these situations, you can ask him:



“Can he get it to you there?”

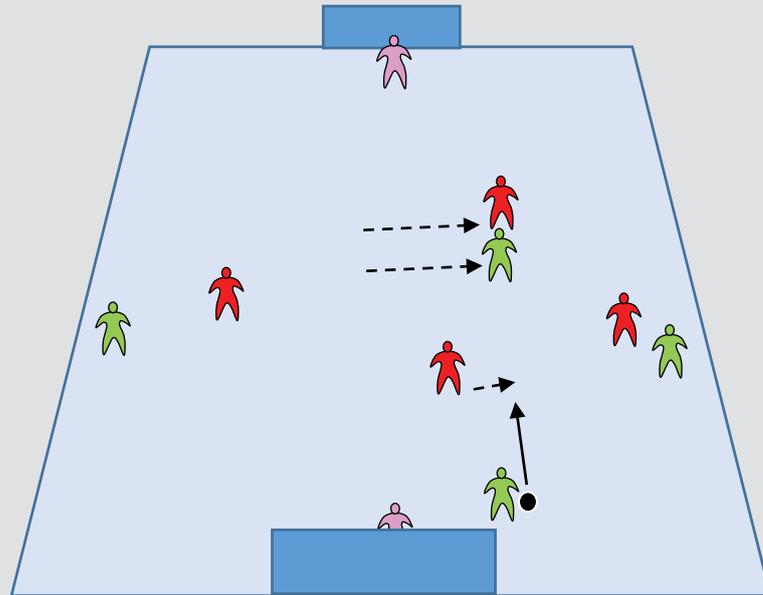
“Where can you go to give him a target?”

He must understand that he has to move to get himself in the gap between their front and wide player, so that his team-mates can pass forward to him through that gap. Don't forget that the players were prepared for this in the 4v4 warm-up. They should also now be practicing doing this in a more focused way, alongside the 4v4s, in 4v2 practice.



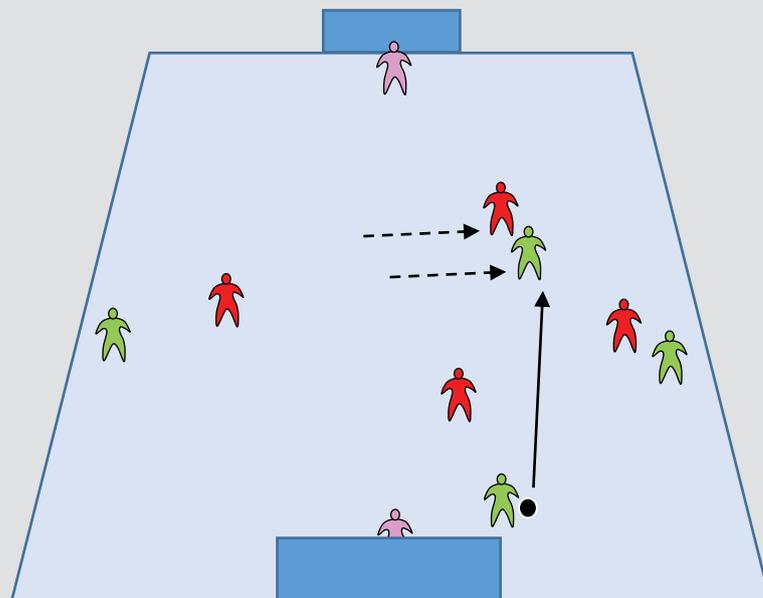
In the squares, the player on the far side to the ball has to move into the gap, ‘splitting’ the defenders to allow the ‘forward’ pass across the square.

You may find sometimes that he moves into the gap, but doesn't come far enough to allow for the pass into him to be played safely. Because of this, the pass may be close enough to one of the defenders for him to intercept it. If this happens, you ask the front player:



“Well done for getting in the gap, but can you make the pass safer?”

“Can you move where neither of them can cut out the pass?”



We want him to come into the middle of the gap between the two defenders. The gap may be big or small, but he should see that ‘splitting’ it in half makes the forward pass as safe as it possibly can be. Once again, you can refer back to how the players did the same thing in the warm-up.

If he works at staying forward and getting into gaps like this, the front player should find himself getting plenty of the ball. In the 4v4, we still have a situation where it's 1v1 at the back, so there will be many opportunities for him to attempt to turn past the defender. Because he is the most advanced player, he will be operating near their goal and has the most licence to risk losing the ball, but common sense tells us that he cannot put the ball at risk every time he gets it. He must be responsible to the other players on his team. We certainly want players who are capable of turning defenders, but they must judge, in the context of responsible team play, when they can do it successfully. Your defenders, at the same time, should now be a lot more capable of preventing the turn, so the concept of 'control and roll', which the players learned in 3v3, will become a much more important element of the front player's game.

"If you try to turn all the time, what happens?"

If he tries to turn every time, the defender will begin to read him, with the result that each consecutive attempt has less and less chance of succeeding. On the other hand, as the need to be able to play with his back to the goal increases, we cannot allow him to become the type of player who only controls and rolls.

"If you lay it off all the time, what happens?"

"Are you making it harder or easier for the defender by doing that?"

Again, if he does this, his play becomes predictable and the defender's task is easier than it should be. His best approach is to always mix up his game to keep the defender guessing; sometimes he will control and roll, sometimes he will turn past the defender. I advise my front players to use their best moves sparingly, controlling and rolling two or three times in a row - in a deliberate attempt to lull the defender into a false sense of security - before explosively turning past him on the next ball.

You will easily spot the player who dribbles too much and consequently loses the ball, but you will have to be more observant to notice the player who plays too many backward passes.

You may also have a front player who overuses first-time passing. This is actually something that we didn't see much of in the past, but since the emergence of the modern Barcelona teams and their tiki-taka short passing style, it is common to see young players attempting to copy their heroes by repeatedly attempting first-time passes. This is not a problem in itself, but it may become one for the team if the ball is being given away too much because of it. This is heightened when it's the front player who gives the ball away in this way, frustrating his team-mates who have done good work to get the ball up to him in the first place. They have a right to expect him to keep the ball for the team. We can remind him of how, in the warm-up, it was pointed out that playing with two touches still equated to moving the ball quickly - while also keeping the ball safe for the team.

"If you have time, take time!"

The underlying message to the front players is that they must be responsible to the team, but over-reliance on one attacking move will make their play predictable.



THE WIDE PLAYERS

In 2v2, and more specifically in 3v3, our wide players learned to stay wide and work the line. In 4v4, you and your players will take a much more detailed look at how they do this.

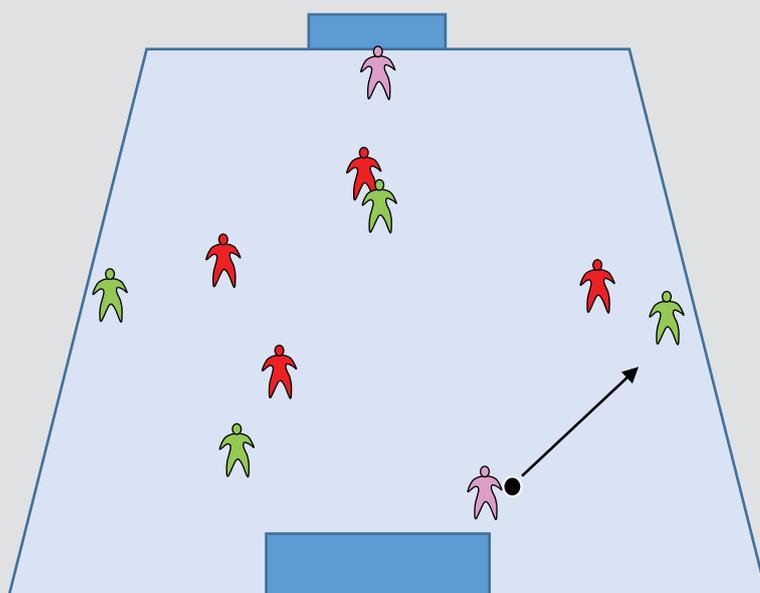
If the team plan is to keep the players wide, the other players must be tuned into this, and be prepared to 'feed' the ball out wide. This may seem like a statement of the obvious, but it's surprising how often small games like this go for extended periods without the wide players being fed. Back players, especially, may be reluctant to play to a marked wide player, choosing instead to pass back to the goalkeeper, despite being encouraged in the 3v3 to trust their team-mates in this situation.

The wide players must continually make themselves available when the team has the ball, by moving up and down the line with their feet on it. Years ago, when I was growing up, and wide players were called wingers, you always heard them being told to:

"Get chalk on your boots!"

This, of course, was a reference to how the pitches were marked, in those days, with lime, rather than paint. They were being told to stay out wide, with both feet on the touchline.

Moving inside to look for the ball in order to unbalance the opposition's defensive organisation will come at a later stage. As we said in the introduction: players must become very good at playing in position before they learn to change position. As we have referred to before, place-changing is covered in the next ***"Move Yourself!"*** phase. Wide players must first learn to play wide and do their basic job before variation is added to their game.

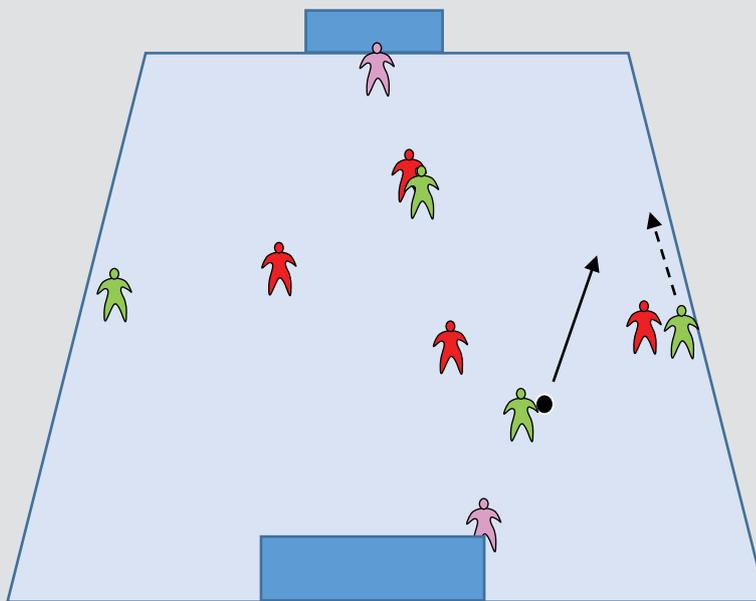


Even though the playmaker will be the main 'feeder' of the wide players, especially when he switches play, the goalkeeper may go direct to them as he did in 3v3. We'll see later how and when they move to get the ball from the front player.

We add detail in a way that tries to simplify, rather than complicate the game for the wide player when he gets the ball. We present him with four basic scenarios and help him to work out how he can recognise and deal with each, in a way that serves the best interests of the team.

In doing this, we assume that the defender marking him will always take up a goalside position against him. If the defender positions poorly, especially by coming too tight to him, we expect him to recognise - as he learned to do in 3v3 - that all the ingredients are right for him to run directly for the pass in behind. You must watch for wide players who get into the habit of only coming down the field even when it's relatively easy to get behind the defender. The key is the player reading the position of his immediate opponent; once again, you may have to remind your players to:

"Punish bad defending!"



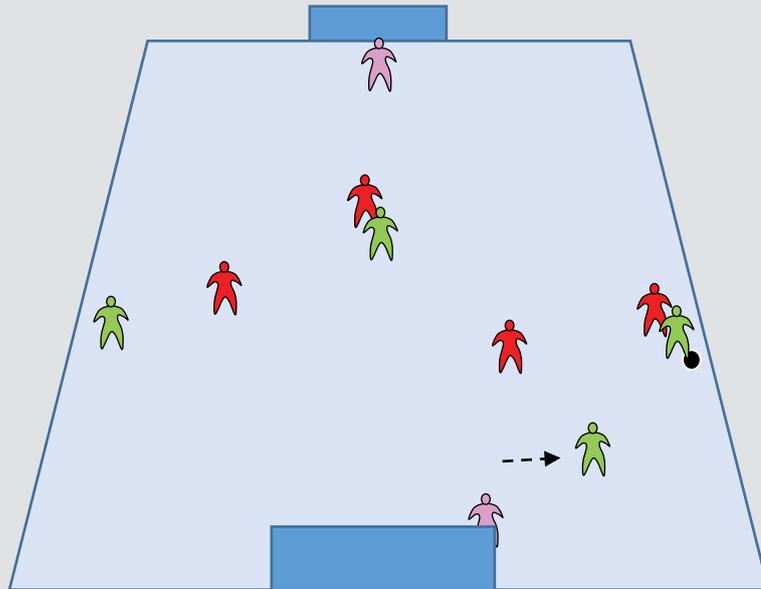
With the defender goalside, we're asking the wide player to show more awareness of the bigger picture than he did in 3v3. He can receive the ball in four basic situations:

- * In his own half, with the defender tight to him
- * In his own half, with the defender staying off him
- * In the opponents' half, with the defender tight to him
- * In the opponents' half, with the defender staying off him

As he moves down the line for the ball, he must be calm enough to recognise which of these situations he finds himself in, especially in relation to what his marker is doing. As before, the halfway line is used as a guide, rather than a hard and fast cut-off point; a player may sometimes need to play safely when he's a couple of metres into the other team's half. On the other hand, he may decide to run at a defender from a position just inside his own half. Every situation is different.

First Situation: Own Half, Defender Tight

The wide player has moved down the line for the ball from the playmaker, and his marker, defending well, has followed him closely. Despite the closeness of the marker, the playmaker shows confidence in him and gives him the ball, before moving to support him.



By placing his feet on the line, the wide player can read the position of his marker. In recognising that the defender is tight to him, and because he's in a relatively deep position in his own half, his first priority should be to protect the ball. Young players, though, when first faced with this situation, tend to do the opposite and turn blindly into the defender. This is an ideal situation for you to lay down the first markers in terms of safety and risk.

“Is it a good idea to turn there?”

“Have you the space to turn there?”

“Are you in a part of the field where you should look to turn?”

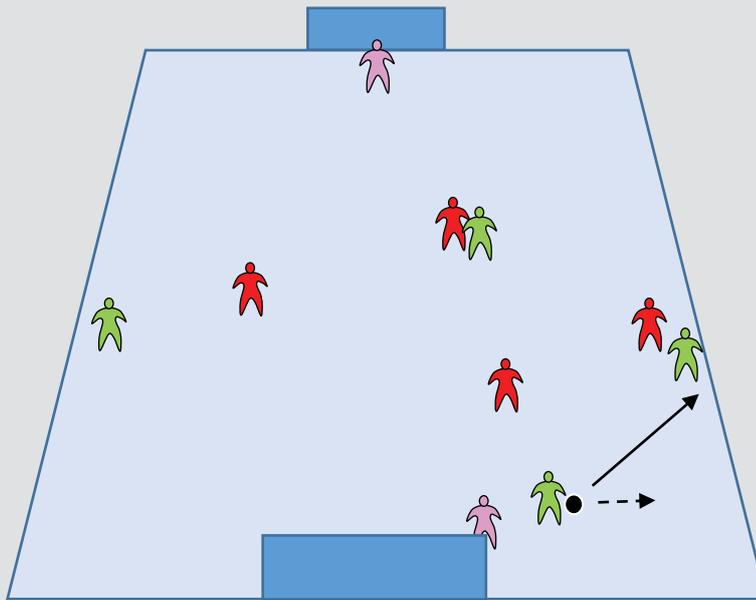
Most of the players should be able to see that if the player on the ball finds himself in this situation, with a defender tight to him, he should first protect it and then lay it off:

“Control and roll!”

In terms of the big picture, they should understand that having the ball ‘stuck’ in such a deep position doesn't really serve our purpose – in our own half, we want it moved, and moved quickly, out of any tight situations.

“Keep the play open in our half!”

There is a modern trend for ‘wrong-side’ wingers and wide players who often choose to come inside as their first option, looking to shoot with their stronger foot when they get near the goal. As we have said before, we want all our players at this age to experience playing in every position, but it can still be reasonably assumed that wide players on the right will be predominantly right footed, and wide players on the left, left footed. Although this gives them an obvious advantage when facing forward, it puts demands on their non-dominant side when they have to move down the line with a marker tight to them, as we have asked the playmaker (or the keeper) to pass to the foot furthest away from the defender, when the attacker is marked.



Right-footed players, therefore, should control with their left foot and vice-versa, but you will often see players favour their ‘good’ foot in this situation. In an effort to protect the ball by keeping their body between it and the defender, they then end up facing the sideline. When you see this happening, you ask:

“What can you see in that position?”

“How did you end up in that position?”

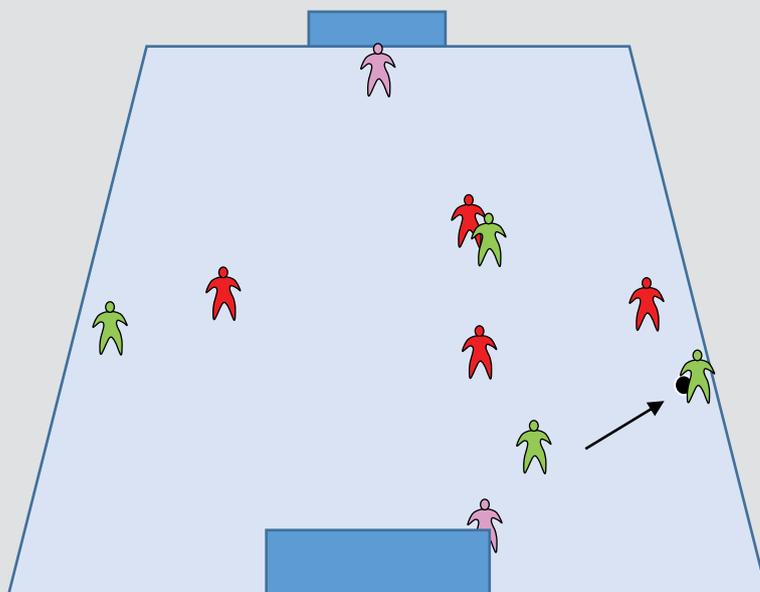
You will just need to remind them again to turn their body into the field and

“See everything!”

This is a situation that shows the value of being two-footed. Players will need a good level of competence if they are to calmly control the ball with their ‘other’ foot while a defender is tight to their back. Although I have used them here, I never use the terms ‘good foot’, ‘weak foot’ or ‘bad foot’ when I’m talking to young players about this. Their preferred foot is their ‘chocolate’ foot and their other foot is their ‘vanilla’ foot. This removes all negative feelings they may have about this focus on their ‘weaker’ side.

Second Situation: Own Half, Defender Stays Off

The wide player has moved down the line for the ball from the playmaker and the defender, this time, has chosen not to follow him closely. Again, the playmaker shows confidence in him and gives him the ball, before moving to support him.



The players will be very familiar with this situation after encountering it many times in the 3v3 games. They know that their priority here is to get turned and face up to the defender. Now the emphasis is on doing it quickly, before the defender can make up the ground that he has lost. You ask:

“How can you get turned quickly?”

They should remember to do this by using the spin-turn they were introduced to in the 3v3 warm-up. If a player is having problems with this, you can ask:

“Which foot do you use to turn?”

Because the defender is allowing him space, he can use the foot nearest to the marker to control and turn in one movement. Once again, we put it simply to the players - the wide player on the right will spin and open up the field for himself with his right foot; the player on the left will do the opposite. Although it's fashionable to use the terms 'front foot' and 'back foot' at the moment, I avoid them, as I have found that they always lead to confusion at this age.

You can help the players to see things clearer by comparing this situation to the last:

“If he's tight, control with the foot furthest away from him!”

“If he gives you space, use the other foot!”

Third Situation: Opponents' Half, Defender Tight

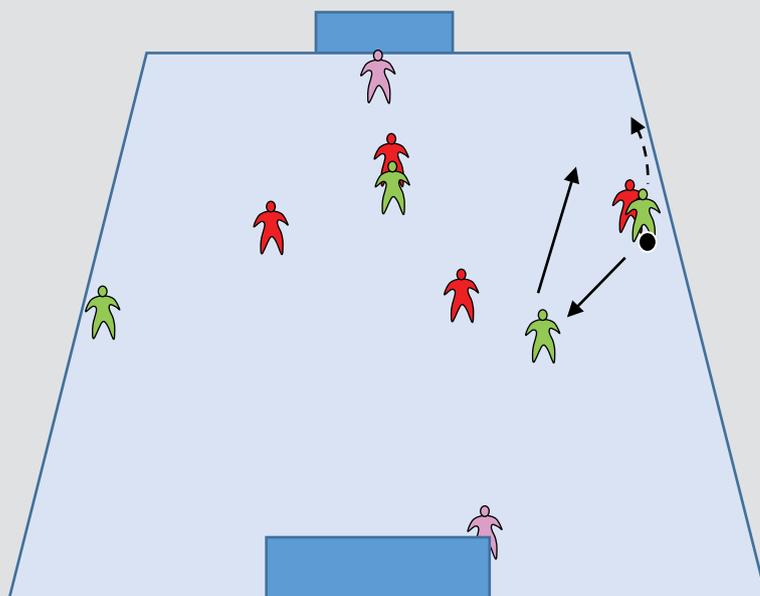
The playmaker has moved further forward with the ball and the wide player has moved down the line to show for it, with the defender following him closely. The playmaker once again shows confidence in him and gives him the ball, even though he's marked.

Because we're in their half now, safety is not as high a priority. You remind the players:

"When we're in our own half, we look to play safely!"

"When we're in their half, we look to get through!"

In advanced positions the players are free to use their individual skills to beat the defender, so the attacker may try to use his turning skills and go past the defender himself. If he wants to combine with his team-mates, he must have the confidence to lift his head to look away from the ball, even though the defender is really tight to his back.



The easiest player to combine with from this position will be the playmaker, but the wide player should not lay the ball off and think that his work is done.

"Can you do something after you lay off?"

If he cannot immediately see the option of spinning behind for the return you can ask:

"Where does the defender look when you pass it back?"

The attacker should be able to see that if the defender's eyes follow the ball, it gives him a great chance of getting in behind him for a return pass from the playmaker.

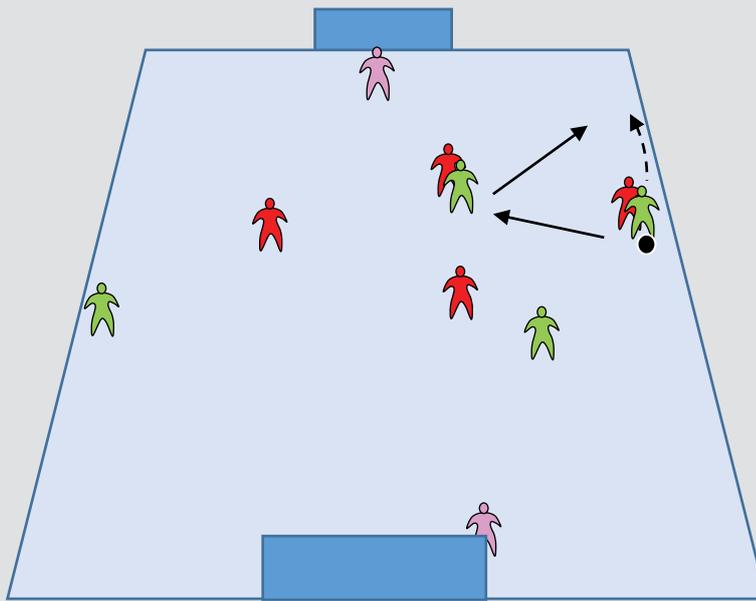
"Every time you lay it back, try the spin in behind!"

Linking up with the front player will be more difficult from this position, as the wide player must be calm and confident enough to look over his shoulder for his mate, while protecting the ball from the defender. What gives him this confidence is secure control of the ball with the foot furthest from the defender. You ask him:

“Are you protecting the ball?”

“Can you look over your shoulder?”

“Can you be calm enough to look for the front man?”



If he looks over his shoulder and can see a clear path to the front player, he can play it into him and sprint in behind for the return. This is an example of what the professionals call playing ‘around the corner’. Since the defender is so close, this first pass will have to be played with the foot furthest from him. This again highlights the importance of the players being able to play off their ‘vanilla’ side.

If he has done this successfully two or three times, the defender may start to anticipate this pass and take an extra half step to the inside to block it. Although this may make the pass into the front player more difficult, it presents the wide player with a nice opportunity to get himself past the defender on the outside. You ask:

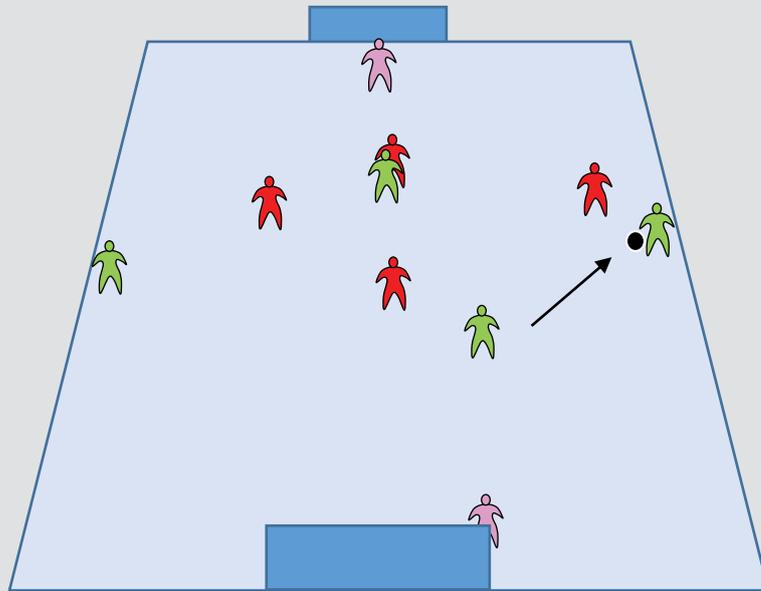
“Can you see what he’s doing now?”

“If he blocks the inside pass like that, what can you do?”

To take advantage of this and surprise the defender, the attacker can fake to play the pass again and turn past the defender on the outside, using a ‘Cruyff’ turn or a similar skill. A ***“Yours!”*** call will once more add to the deception. Again, the player will have to execute this turn on his ‘vanilla’ side.

Fourth Situation: Opponents' Half, Defender Stays Off

With the play moved into the other team's half, the wide player has moved down the line for the pass from the playmaker, and the defender has failed to follow him closely. The playmaker quickly gives it to him.



Recognising that the defender has stayed off him, he quickly turns and gets facing forward - as he did in his own half when the defender reacted in the same way. This is the situation every wide player wishes for; the ball at his feet, in space, facing forward, and in the opposition half.

The first and most obvious thing we ask him to do now is the first and most obvious thing we asked him to do when we first looked at the same situation, all the way back in the 2v2s. It was what he was asked to do in 3v3, too; take the defender on. Once again, at this stage, we are asking our wide players to play in the old-fashioned way:

"Get on the touchline!"

"Get on the ball!"

"Get past the full-back!"

"Get the ball in the box!"

This may be a good time to point out that asking players to link up in 4v4 does not mean asking them to stop dribbling. Remember – your attacking play must have punch! Moving the ball fluidly with quick passing and movement will open up defences, but the higher you go, the more difficult this will be. If you have players that can take one or two opponents out of the game by dribbling well, the balance of any well-organised defence can be disturbed. Players moving from this phase to the next should be able to do both!



THREE BIG IDEAS

When the players are capable of putting moves together and playing with a nice rhythm, it's time for you to ask a little more of them in terms of playing to a more detailed plan. When they are good at keeping the ball, they can be introduced to the concept of 'engineering' moves by moving the ball and manipulating the positions of the opposition players.

This may sound like a very sophisticated strategy, especially in the light of what we have always said about the importance of simplicity, but we can present it to the players as three simple tactics:

- Pulling defenders down the field to play in behind them
- Pulling defenders over to one side of the field in order to exploit space on the other
- Using the up-back-through variation of the tactic of third-man running

In general terms, we use these tactics to take advantage of opposing players - physically and mentally - being drawn towards the ball.

Some of the actions involved may have been covered already - and the players may be successfully using them. Now, though, we ask them to view these actions in terms of how they affect the shape of the opposing team as a whole, rather than just the players near them. They must become capable of seeing a bigger picture.

Up to now, we have always asked the players to read the situation in front of them; to be in the moment and use their football intelligence to come up with solutions to the problems posed by the opposition. We have asked them sometimes, since moving to 4v4, to think a move ahead of the play, but now they have reached the stage where they will try to think one or two moves ahead, all the time. They must think of what's going to happen rather than just focus on what's happening now. You can ask them:

“Can you be so in charge of the game that you actually make this happen?”

“This is the plan; can you guys make it happen?”

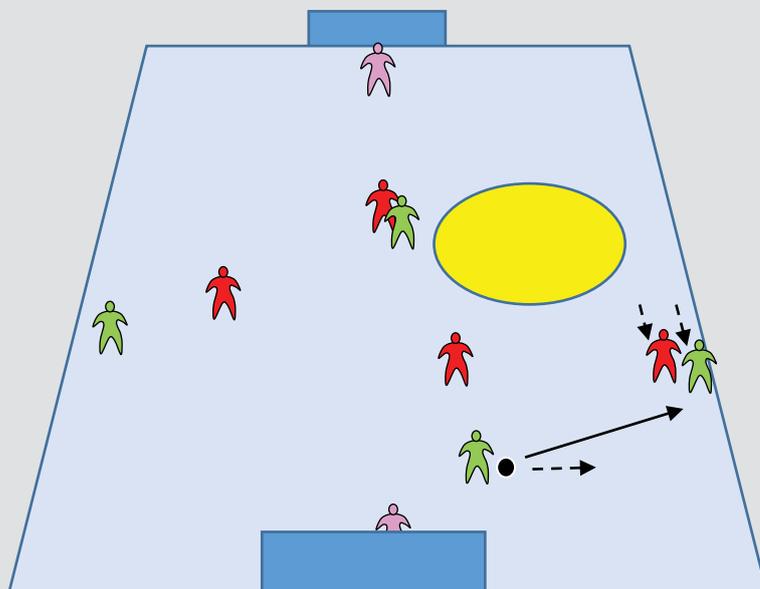
At the same time, you will be asking the same questions of the players in the 4v2 practice, albeit in a more general way. As we have said before, 4v2 teaches the players to move the ball to move the defenders, so that we can go through them. Although the concept of thinking a move ahead can be covered in 5v2 and 3v1, and you may have touched on this idea already, I recommend that you wait until now to work on it specifically.

Learning to do this will not be easy for your players. These tactics are the high point of the work covered in the 4v4 games, and you may have to spend a lot of time working on them. Although this period will present them with challenges that may prove difficult, they have, up to now, done a lot of work which would have prepared them for it. They have reached the stage where you will already have one eye on what lies ahead of them in the next development phase. The players are ready for these tactical ideas, and they're almost ready for the extra mobility in the ***“Move Yourself!”*** phase.

First Big Idea - Pulling The Wide Defenders Out

Your players have reached a level of competence and confidence where they can employ the tactic of moving the ball into a tight area with the intention of coming out of it. When using this tactic, the playmaker is giving the ball to the wide player with the express intention of pulling his marker away from their central defender. Because of this, it actually suits the team to play against opponents who defend energetically and stay tight when our players move off them for the ball. In 3v3, the players learned to trust their team-mates and give them the ball when they're tightly marked. We're now at the stage of being able to take advantage of that tight marking.

We can use this tactic in three ways; to pull the defender away to allow the front player more space to play, to pull the defender out for the wide player to spin in behind him, and to combine the two to get the wide player in off the front player.



The move starts with the playmaker passing to the tightly-marked wide player and – since the opposing forward has blocked the direct pass into the front - moving sideways to support him. Once again, he must pay attention to playing to the back foot of the wide man so that he automatically takes the ball in a protected position. Once he has it, you must again remind the players to look at the big picture here:

“If the defender has come down the field, what’s happened elsewhere?”

We want them to see that playing to the wide man has pulled the defender away from his back defender, and has created more space for the front player. We then ask:

“How can we take advantage of it?”

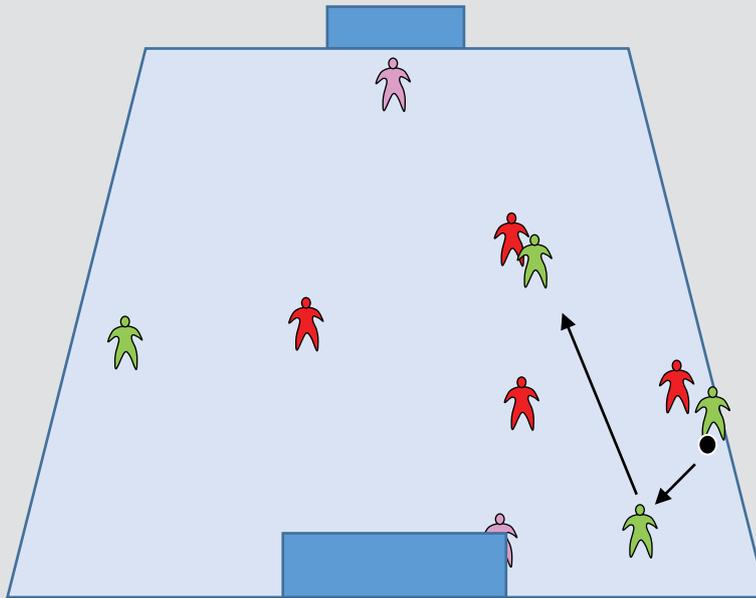
The players should be able to see that, if it’s at all possible, they should get the ball up to the front player quickly.

Once you know that they understand the need to play quickly into the front player, you can then ask them:

“How can we do that?”

“Who’s in the best position to give it to him?”

They will see that the playmaker, because he is in space and is facing forward, will have a much easier job than the wide player to do this. Most defending front players won’t move quickly enough to maintain their blocking position, so his sideways movement should open up a gap between their forward and their wide player for him to play through.



When the ball comes back to him, he immediately ‘pops’ a first-time pass through the gap, into the front player, who must ensure that he’s tuned in to what we’re doing. We’ve already worked with him to make sure that he ‘splits’ that gap and also that he covers the marker’s body with his – if he does both of these things well, this pass can be played safely to him. All the players must appreciate why it must be played first-time:

“How quickly should he play it?”

“Is the gap going to be there for long?”

It’s also important that the wide player is tuned into the plan, too, because the quality of his lay-off is a vital element of the play. You ask him:

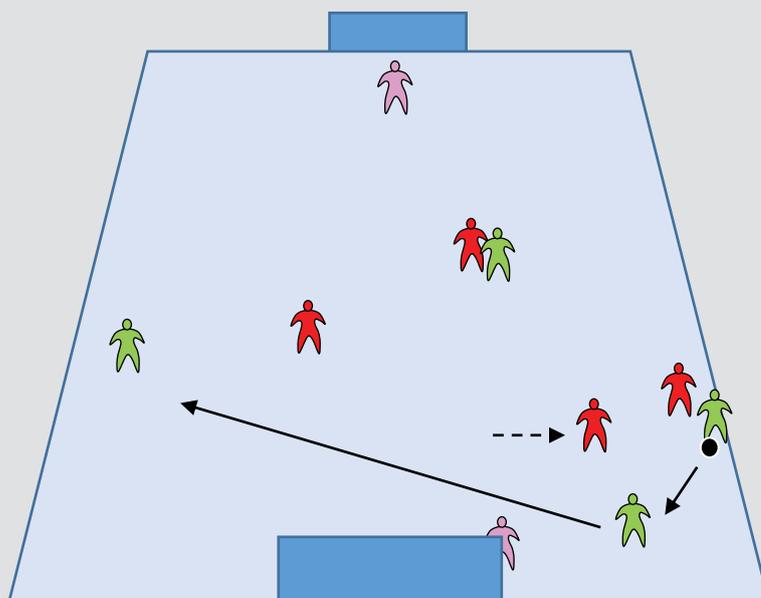
“If we want him to play first-time, what sort of pass should you give him?”

He must make the lay-off soft, and play it to the side away from the forward, so that the ball is sitting up nicely and - as I say to the players - ‘just asking to be played first time’.

This relatively simple manoeuvre will switch the players on, as a group, to the idea of thinking a move ahead in the game. As with most of the play in 4v4, it hinges on the playmaker's willingness to take charge and make things happen. He knows when he plays the initial pass that he's going to get it back and 'pop' it. He's the man with the plan. At the same time, all the players can be working on forming this habit of thinking a move ahead, in their 4v2 practice.

They can also be specifically working on replicating this move, although over shorter distances. The structure of 4v2 allows this pattern - following a set-up pass with a first-time pass through the two defenders - to be repeated over and over again. Your job, when working with the players in the squares, is to constantly relate what the players are doing to what you want to see happen in the games.

The players, though, cannot approach this move in an obvious, blatantly pre-planned way. In the middle of the action, they must still be reading the reactions of the defenders, and be ready to adapt if they - as they have a habit of doing - do something to spoil the plan. If for example, the forward does a good job for his team and defends in a lively way by shifting over immediately, the playmaker must recognise this, realise he can't play up to his own forward, and react accordingly.



He does this by opening out to the opposite side with his first touch and playing to the wide player on that wing. He may even choose not to take a controlling touch and switch the play, first-time. Whatever he decides to do, he must do it quickly and confidently, again looking like he's in charge, dictating the play.

Because we're directing play down one side, the other flank should be open anyway, so the switch in play may be possible every time. We'll look closely at setting the opposition up for this later.

For the moment, we have looked at how the wide player can pull the defender out in order to open up space for the pass into the front. Next, we can work with him on getting himself free into the space that his movement has opened up behind his marker. He, like the playmaker, is now involved in a game of cat and mouse with his immediate opponent.

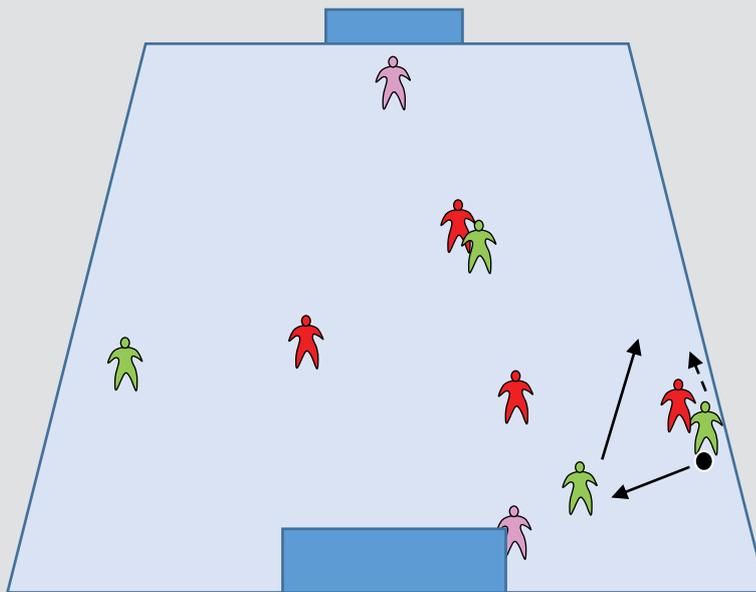
In the previous move, we were happy for the wide player to pull the defender down the field in order to allow the front player to have the ball in more space. It suited the team for him to move the defender out and stay in the deep position. Now we're going to ask him to step up his energy and explosiveness, so that he can exploit the space he's created in behind his marker for himself. In simple language, we introduce this idea by asking him:

"Can you give the defender a harder time?"

He may already be playing with a high level of energy, but if you see him lay the ball off to the playmaker and stand - waiting to see what his team-mate is going to do with it - you can ask him:

"Can you do something else when you lay it off?"

We want him to realise that he can immediately burst into the space behind the defender - which his own movement has opened up - for a possible return pass from the playmaker. Again, the quality of the pass is vital - he must ensure that his lay-off is weighted so that the playmaker's return pass can be played first-time.



Without realising it, he has already set this trap for the defender by coming down the field and looking for and accepting a pass when he's marked tightly. He can spring that trap in two very different ways, and we'll look at both in detail.

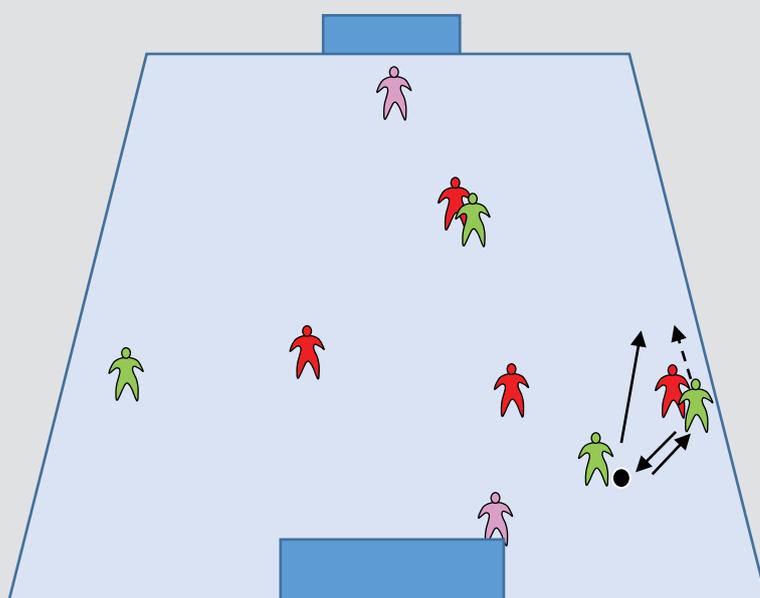
Before he springs the trap, he can pull the defender even further away from his goal by deliberately taking one or two more touches down the field. In the process, he brings himself almost square to the playmaker, while all the time protecting the ball. In this way, he 'winkles' the defender even further out of position. There is a certain cleverness in this; not only is he physically drawing the defender away from his goal, but he's leading the defender and his team-mates into thinking that they're pushing us back and have the situation under control. This is an old pro's trick that, if you look closely at top - level games, you'll see the most skilful attacking players use.

Once more, the game of cat and mouse between the wide man and the defender is in play. If the defender has been caught a few times by the attacker 'winkling' him out, he may anticipate the spin and move early towards his goal when the ball is laid off to the playmaker, with the result that he wins the race to the ball. You then have to ask the wide player:

"You've caught him a couple of times that way, so now he's expecting it!"

"How can you keep him guessing?"

He's beaten the defender by taking touches, so now he's going to spring the trap by doing the exact opposite – instead of taking those extra touches to draw him further out, he's going to 'bounce' a first-time pass back to the playmaker. As soon as he plays the pass, he immediately bursts into the space behind for the return pass, leaving his marker for dead.



Most players, when they see how effective that spinning in behind is, will have great enthusiasm for the move. Watch out, though. Players that get excited when they do this - in their haste to get in behind - will rush the lay-off and play a poor pass. You tell them:

"First things first; get your pass right!"

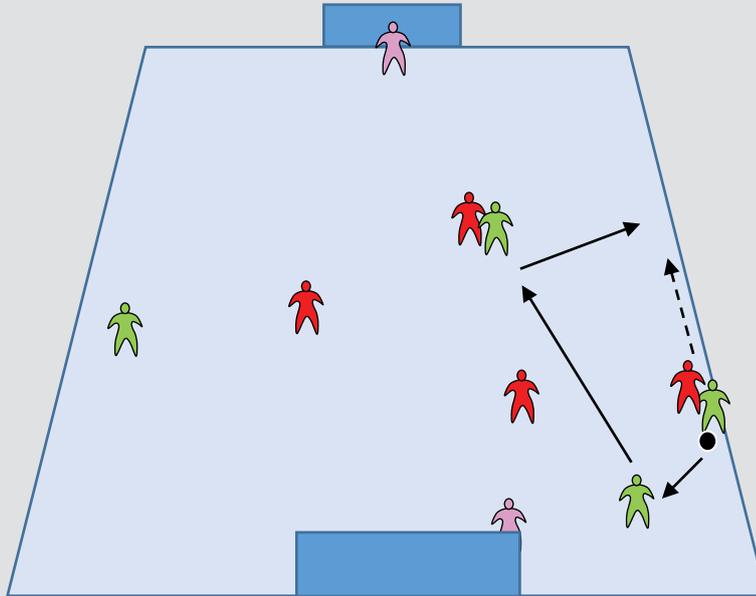
"He can't give you a return pass if your pass isn't right!"

Even if their attempts to work this move may lack precision at this stage, and because spinning behind when the ball is laid off is a really good habit to get into, I have no problem with telling the players:

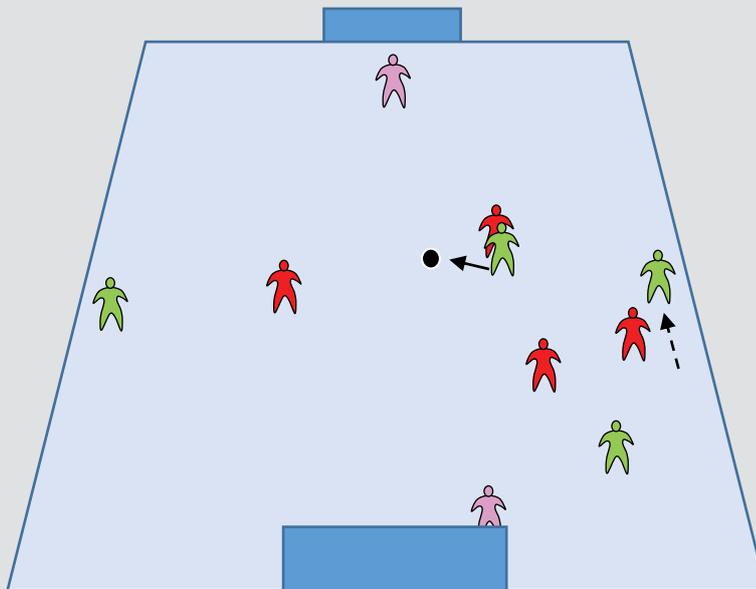
"Every time you lay off - spin!"

Any player who consistently does this will certainly be giving the defender a harder time. This new aspect of the ongoing battle of wits between attacker and defender is another taster for the work on extra individual and team mobility that the players have ahead of them in the following ***"Move Yourself!"*** phase of development.

To really keep the opposition guessing, the two previous moves can be combined. If the wide player spins after laying off to the playmaker and the playmaker plays into the front player, he may find himself free behind the defender for another first-time pass from the front player. You may not even have to coach this. You will find that it will often happen naturally if the wide player automatically spins and the front man sees him running free in behind the defender.



Continuing with the theme of keeping the opposition guessing, the front player always has the option of using the run of his team-mate as a decoy and turning inside towards goal.



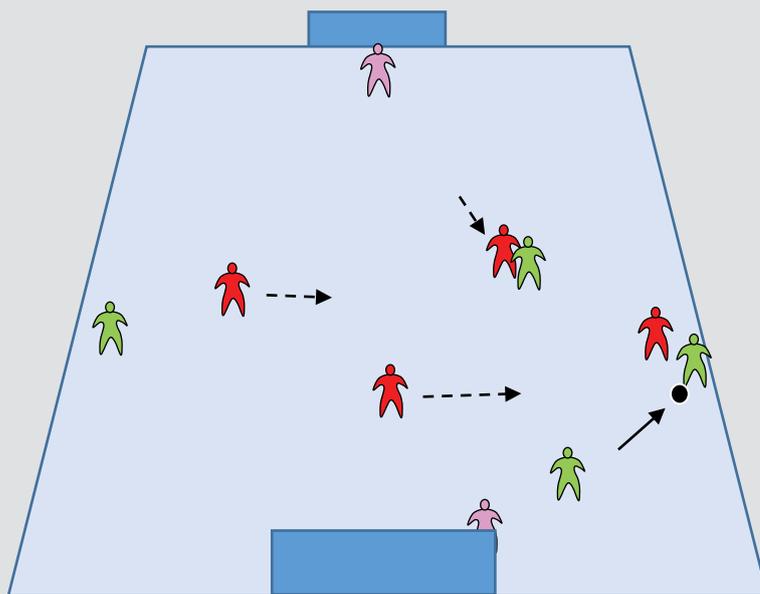
With these clever, attractive attacking plays, we start the process of giving the players a greater 'menu' of attacking options, which will build and build as they move through each phase of their development. These moves all start with the wide player coming down the line for the ball, to pull the wide defender away from his goal. Once they have understood the basic concept of manipulating the opposition like this, they can learn to do it in different ways.



'ENGINEERING' THE SWITCH IN PLAY

We have already asked the players to “do the math!” and recognise how movement of the ball down one side of the pitch can result in a 3v3 on that side, leaving a 1v1 for our wide player on the other side if it can be switched quickly out to him. If players of this age can do this effectively, the switch in play can be a highly effective attacking weapon. Young defenders rarely have the discipline and know-how to counter the wide player who has the discipline and know-how to hold his wide position. We now ask them to not just recognise when it happens, but to actually make it happen.

Drawing their players in, in order to switch play out to the other side, is not a concept which is beyond the understanding of young players. You cannot introduce this to your players, however, until they are capable of keeping possession with multiple passes. Time has passed and we are nearing the end of this development phase, so it is reasonable to expect that your players are well up to this task. If you have spent the appropriate amount of time with them working in the 5v2, 3v1 and 4v2 practices, alongside the games, they should be capable of keeping the ball when they're positioned closely together on one side of the field.



Again the playmaker must be prepared to play into a tight area with the intention of eventually coming out of it. He once again shows confidence in the wide player by giving him the ball even though he's tightly marked. Now though, rather than asking them to continue to attack and break through down that side, you will ask all the players to do something different:

“Can we make three or four passes down this side and keep the ball?”

We know that human nature will lead defending players, on the far side to the ball, to drift inside. We can be relatively certain, too, that the more passes made, the further they will come in. By keeping the ball down the same side, we're ‘inviting’ them over, while cleverly disguising the fact that we're actually setting them up for what is to come.

The 'keep-ball' sequence of passes may include passes into the front man and back to the goalkeeper. We want it to seem, to the opposition, that the attack lacks thrust and direction. It should look like a sequence of passing for the sake of passing, that's going nowhere. Just as we did when the wide player deliberately moved back down the field with the ball in the previous moves, we want them to think that they are pushing us back and that they have everything under control. As the number of passes is building up, the playmaker should be sneaking a look over to the far side, in order to read the situation in regards to the position of the furthest defender.

Once the players have made some passes and sense that the switch is on, the ball will go back to the playmaker, from either the wide player or the forward, in a very specific way. You ask them:

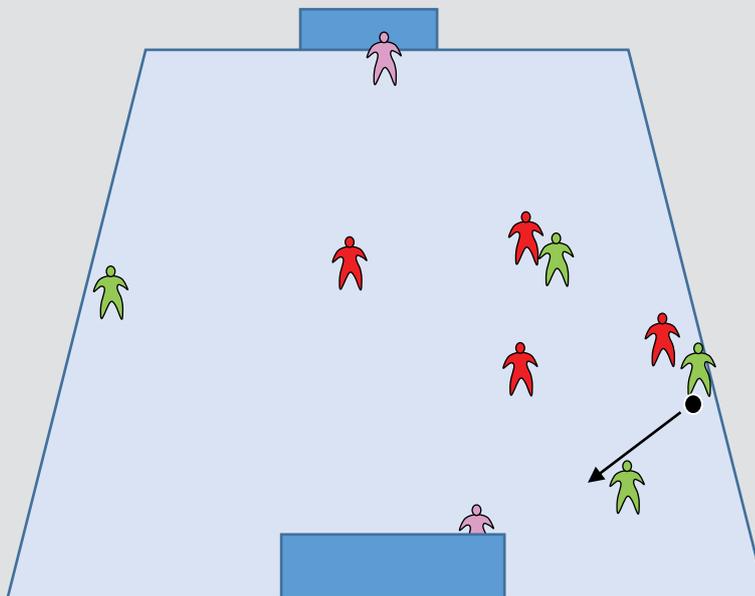
"Have we pulled them over?"

"Is the switch on now?"

"If you know that he's going to switch it, where should your pass go?"

You may even direct your question to the playmaker:

"You know that you're going to switch it, so where do you want it?"



In another very specific example of the players thinking a move ahead, we want this set-up pass to go to the inside foot of the playmaker. This saves him an extra touch on the ball to open up to the far side. If he's looked away from the ball and got his feet in the right position - and the pass is 'asking to be played first-time' - the playmaker can ping it out, if he feels that the situation on the far side allows him to. As we have said before:

"If all the ingredients are right, the cake will rise!"

Once we have set the opposition up and decided that the switch is on, we must ensure that we take maximum advantage of it. We remind the players to be as positive as possible, and be quick to punish the imbalance in the defence. When he opens out to see the far side, we ask the playmaker:

“What’s the most positive pass you can play?”

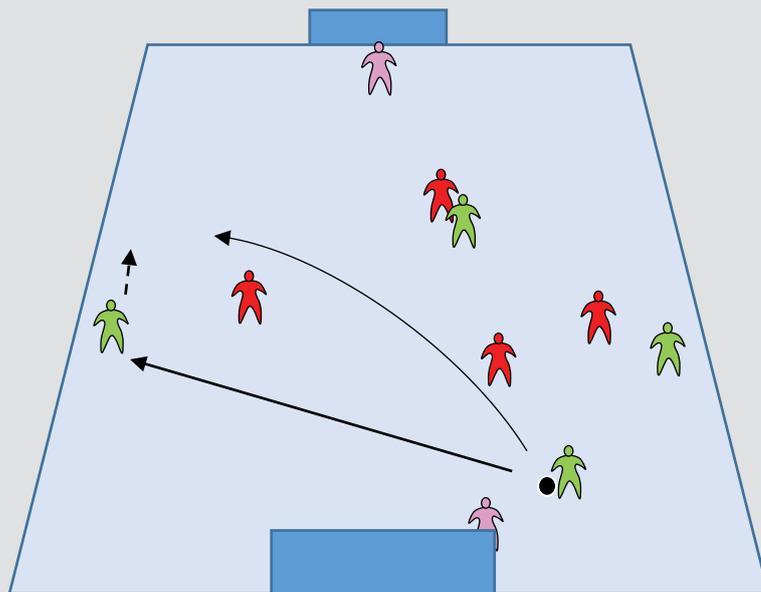
His options are to play to the feet of the wide man or play him in behind the defender. By now, the players know that the pass in behind should be their preferred choice.

“Which one do we want you to play?”

“How will you know if it’s on?”

They should also know that the determining factor will be how far in, or how far forward, we have managed to pull the defender; how far he has allowed himself to be attracted to the ball.

“Where’s the covering defender?”



Both players must be tuned into reading the defender’s position, especially the wide player:

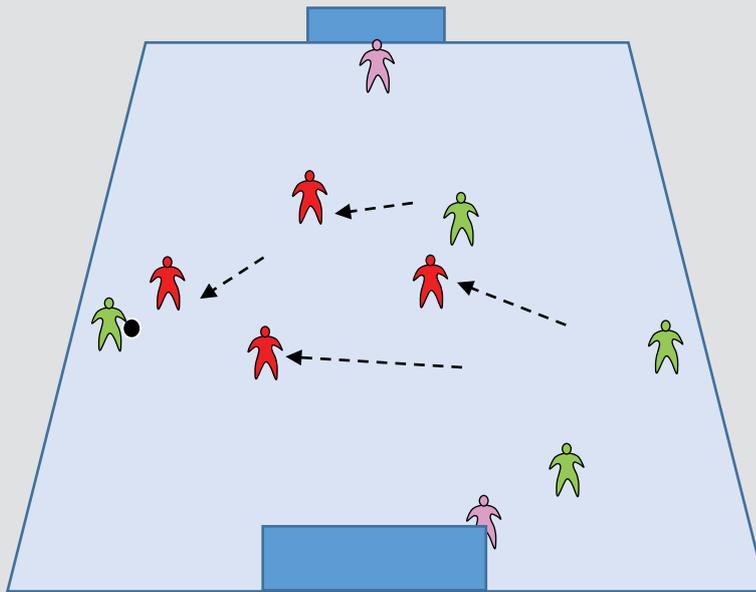
“What’s your first choice?”

“Can you get in behind him?”

If the defender drops off the attacker to guard his goal and stay close to his team-mates, he leaves the wide player in a lot of space to receive the switch. If he comes up and gets too close to him, he leaves himself open to the switch being played in behind him. Whatever he decides to do, he cannot win.

Once again, the players must learn to read the position of the defender for themselves. The first pass they will look for is the one in behind the defence, but if they see that the defender is in a good position to stop the through ball, the switch is played out to the feet of the wide player.

When he receives it, there is, as we have said before, an onus on him to take immediate advantage of the situation. Too many wide players, because they receive the ball in so much space, 'sit' on it and allow the other defenders to get across and recover their goalside positions. In effect, they allow the 1v1 situation on that side of the field to become 3v3 again.



If you see your wide player do this, you ask him:

“If you delay when you get the ball, what happens?”

He should be able to see that they have moved over, in the time he has been sitting on the ball.

“What must you do to stop this happening?”

We want to see the wide player show real urgency by getting the ball out of his feet with his first touch, directing it at the defender and aggressively taking him on. The quicker he gets at the defender, the more momentum he can build up before he reaches him, making it as difficult as possible for the defender to stop him.

“If it’s 1v1 when you get it, make sure you play 1v1!”

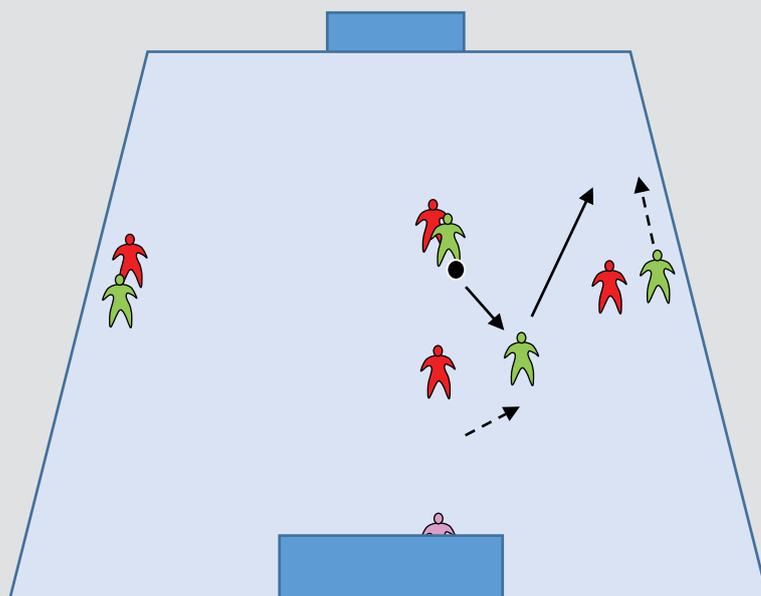
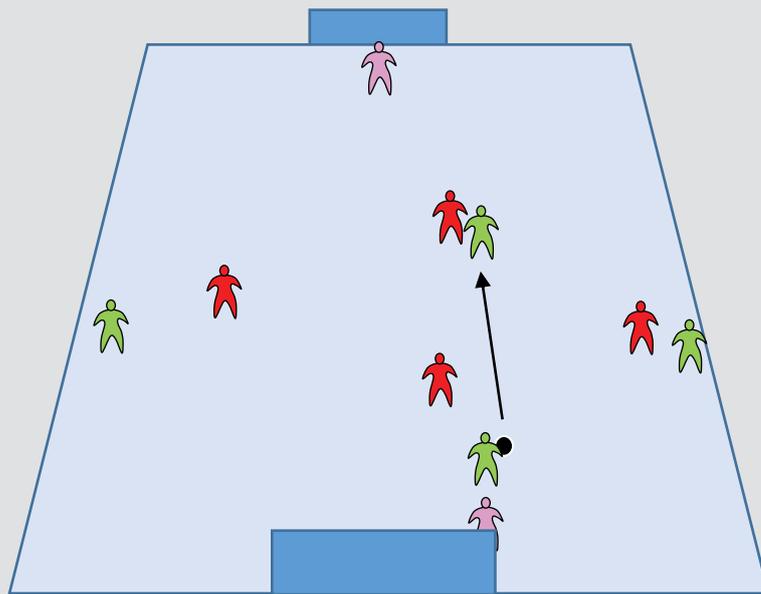
Contrary to what most players and coaches think, the wide player must not call for the ball and alert the defender to the fact that the switch is coming. You tell him:

“We’re working on this side to send him asleep, so don’t wake him up!”



UP-BACK-THROUGH; THIRD-MAN RUNNING SIMPLIFIED

Third-man running is the very fashionable tactic that is totally dependent on players thinking a move ahead. As two players interpass, a third player moves off them in anticipation of receiving the next pass. Its success hinges on the defenders' attention being drawn to the first two players as the third man sneaks into a dangerous position away from the ball. 4v4 allows the players to get a very clear, simple picture of how this works. The ball is played into the front man, and he lays it back to the supporting playmaker, who plays it through to the running wide player.

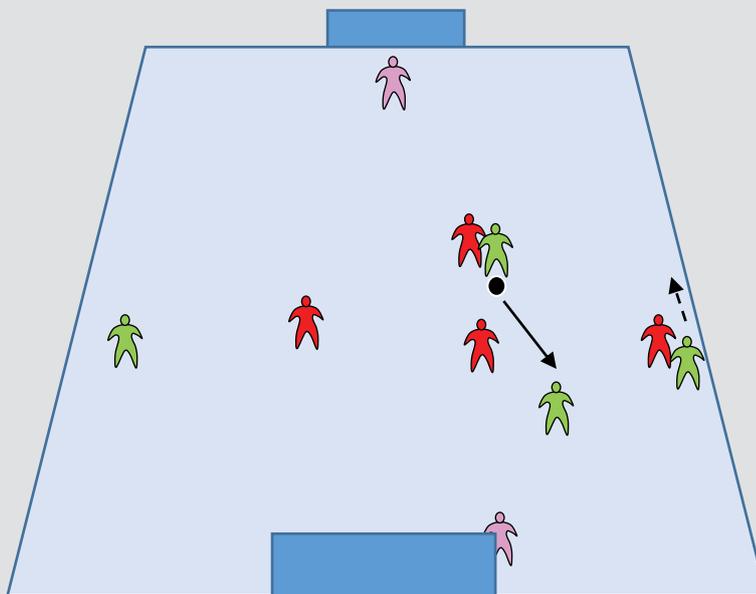


Again, we are setting the opponents up; drawing them in, in order to play in behind them.

Although it can look like it's fast-paced, especially when it's executed on your television by top-class players, this is a tactic that doesn't need to be hurried. Its effectiveness lies in a change of pace when the third player springs forward, so the early parts of the move can be deceptively slow. Instead of playing quickly with one or two touches, the front player can take one or two extra touches, while the playmaker delays before making a late run around his defender. Once again, we are trying to fool the opponents into thinking that they have everything under control.

This 'slow play' will be a clue for the third man - the wide player - that we're setting up the move. We've already clued our wide players in, when we worked on switching play, to 'quietly' position away from the ball and, in a similar way, he can lull the defender into a false sense of security by being patient, even to the extent of looking disinterested. You ask him:

"Can you send your marker asleep?"



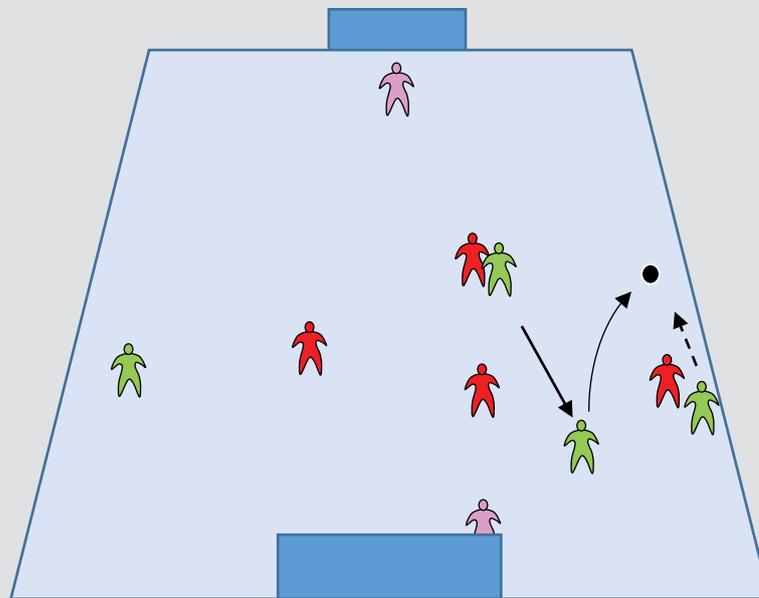
For him then, the most crucial element is the timing of the 'spring' forward. You will often find that your wide player will lack patience and show his intentions to the defender too early. Running too early like this gives the defender a chance to catch up before the playmaker can play the pass. You ask him, simply:

"When should you run?"

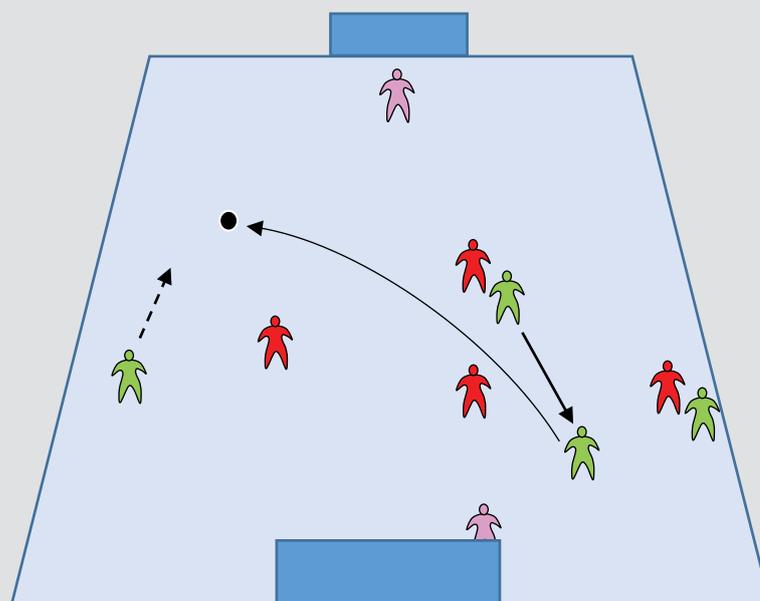
His cue is the lay-off from the front player. As soon as the ball is played back, he goes, and goes hard. His aim is to surprise the defender, by catching him at the moment he looks to see where the ball has been played to. Even if he's in a relatively good defensive position, the element of surprise and the explosiveness of the run can still catch him out.

With this in mind, you might condition the game so that the wide player has to always run when the front player lays it off to the playmaker. You will only do this in the initial stages to 'promote' the move, as eventually you want the players to read these cues for themselves.

A small technical note here: players in the playmaker position who are competent in playing off the outside of their foot can 'bend' the through pass without giving the defenders a clue as to their intentions. This is because of the short backswing involved in playing with the front foot.



The absolute 'icing on the cake' of up-back-through play in 4v4 is playing the wide player on the other side in. A player who can execute firm reverse passes can play this ball, again without giving the defenders a clue to his intentions.



Both these could be regarded as advanced passing techniques, but they are not beyond the capabilities of good players of this age. If you have done the work with them and the players have fully bought into it, your players will be good players at this stage.

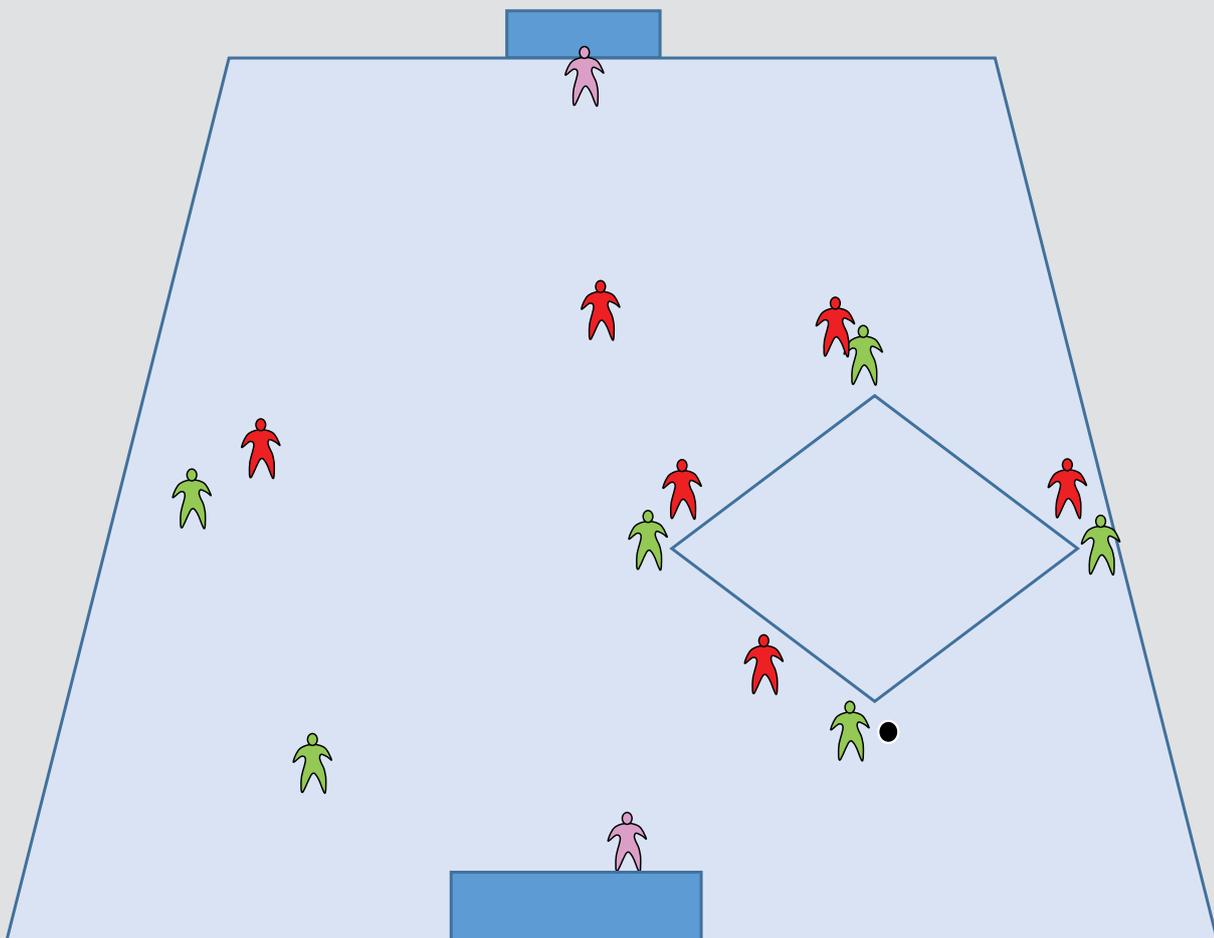


4v4 SUMMARY

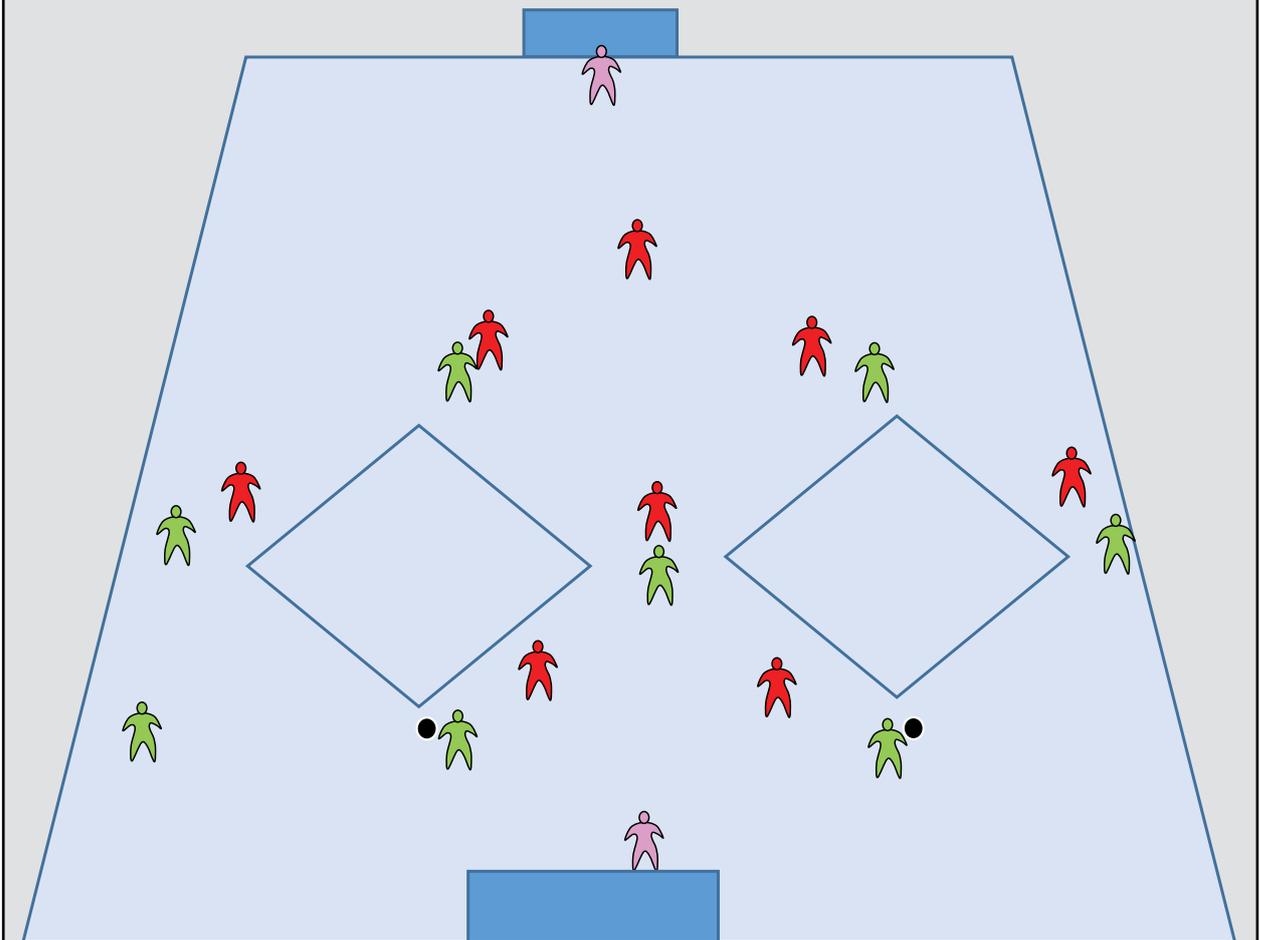
The players have come to this phase as individuals, and will now move from it as team players capable of unbalancing opposing defences with quick movement of the ball between them and good 1v1 dribbling and turning skills. The natural selfish behaviour of the players when they were younger has been replaced by unselfish running to help the player on the ball. Instead of moving the ball just for himself, each individual player has learned to move the ball to others - and then move himself in an effort to realise team goals. They come into this phase with the ability to control and dribble. They come out of it able to control, dribble, and link up with their team-mates.

They now have a solid grounding in the three basic roles of playmaker, wide player, and front player, and have a good understanding of how to relate to each other in a diamond shape. With this understanding, they can move on by slotting that diamond into the bigger games, before eventually moving into the full game.

When they move on to 7v7, they bring their diamonds with them and look to make the same moves.



And then do the same thing in 9v9



As you come to the end of this development phase, you might take a step back, look at how far your players have come, and give yourself a little pat on the back. With your help, from session to session over the course of maybe two seasons, the players have added to their football intelligence and imprinted many good playing habits onto their game. They will now have an expanded 'menu' of moves and combinations which they, not the coach, will choose from, during the course of every game.

Each group of players is different, so the journey will be longer for some than for others, but it should have been - for both you and the players - a hugely enjoyable and productive one. Together, you have gone from 2v2 to up-back-through!



This comprehensive guide promises to help grassroots coaches deliver the most difficult and most important part of any coaching curriculum: coaching in the game. It is not concerned with specific soccer techniques, but with the learning of team skill. Starting with the smallest unit – two outfield players – it focuses exclusively on how young players relate to and communicate with each other to become a team. It outlines their journey from enjoying an individual, dribbling-based game to playing in a more structured, team-oriented passing and dribbling style.

Many coaches are good at running drills, but very few can provide timely and accurate instruction for players on how to actually play the game, in the game. Now they can find out what to teach, the order in which to teach it and vitally, how to communicate this information to young players. It's the result of many years of trial and error and is – we believe – the first book to attempt to help coaches in this way, with this level of detail.

Larry Mahony is a former FAI UEFA 'A' Licence instructor with over 30 years of coaching experience. He has provided expert coaching for players at every level of football in Ireland, from the youngest beginners all the way up to the professionals of Ireland's National League. A former youth international himself, he was previously first-team coach at Ireland's premier club, Shamrock Rovers, as well as Drogheda United, Bray Wanderers and Athlone Town. He has worked with underage international teams and – as coach on the FAI player education programmes – was instrumental in the development of full internationals Roy Keane and Mark Kennedy. He was also a national cup winner as head coach of the University College Dublin women's team.