

POLAND

PAULO SOUSA

Attacking
play

+

MARK BOWEN

Defending 1v1 and
against overloads

BRIAN DUTTON

Attacking and
counter-pressing

+

LEE BURCH

Developing the
box midfield

**CHRISTOPHER
EVANS**

Attacking in
pockets



ISSUE 129

APRIL 2021



FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Welcome to the April 2021 issue of *Elite Soccer*, the magazine that likes to share some of the best training sessions by the top coaches in the professional game.

We're delighted to kick off this issue with an interesting international session used by Poland manager Paulo Sousa to improve his team's attacking play. And in contrast we follow this up with a defending session from former Reading boss, Mark Bowen. It is aimed at teaching players all they need to know when defending goal-side of the ball in either a 1v1 scenario or an overload situation.

Brian Dutton, manager of League Two side Walsall, has shared a training session that has all four aspects of the game rolled into one activity. It's focus is on attacking play, but it also educates players in defence, the transition from attack to defence, and the transition from defence to attack.

We have an attacking session from Christopher Evans that teaches players decision making and shows them exactly when, how and why to play

into the pockets to create goal scoring opportunities.

A coach with a wealth of experience in the women's game, Lee Burch was most recently the manager of the London Bees. In this issue he has shared a passing session that looks specifically at the use of a box midfield, which could be used with various

"We're delighted to kick off this issue with an international training session used by Poland manager Paulo Sousa"

playing formations, such as 3-4-3, 4-2-2-2 or 3-4-2-1.

I hope you find that this month's sessions will assist your coaching and please let us know how you get on. We will return next month with five more training ground workouts to help develop your team.

Howard Wilkinson, LMA Chairman

Published by:



Green Star Media Ltd
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United Kingdom
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Design: ATG Media
Photography: Reuters

Published in partnership with:



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Making a smooth transition

**MANAGER PROFILE****PAULO SOUSA**
POLAND

As a player Paulo Sousa represented many of Europe's top clubs, including Benfica and Sporting in his home country of Portugal, plus Juventus, Dortmund, Inter Milan and Espanyol.

He first began his coaching career by joining the backroom staff of Portugal's national team, taking the helm of the U16s before being appointed assistant manager of the senior national team in the summer of 2008. However, in November of the same year he became head coach of EFL Championship team, Queens Park Rangers. He subsequently enjoyed a season as manager of Swansea City, leading the club to its highest finish in the EFL Championship for 27 years, just missing out on the play-offs.

After a spell in charge of Leicester City, he won the Hungarian League Cup with Videoton in 2012 before joining Maccabi Tel Aviv in 2013, where he won the Israeli Premier League in his only season in charge.

He led Basel to the Swiss Super League title in 2015, and he has also served as manager of Fiorentina in Italy's Serie A, Tianjin Quanjian in the Chinese Super League and Bordeaux in French Ligue 1.

He was appointed manager of Poland's national side in January 2021.

SESSION**ATTACKING PLAY**

This session is for offensive play situations when in possession. We will work on aspects of assertive communication, what each player expects from the team and what the team expects from each player within the coach's plan for the game.

We will develop situations that help players understand what they need to do to help their team mates and the play itself. The session will take place in situations with different specificities, ending with strategic aspects for a specific match.

We believe it is essential that anything done in training has an equivalent meaning in a match context for the players. Therefore, anything we propose during the session must be game-related.

The first important aspect is that the ball should take centre stage for these exercises and that all situations are proposed from this perspective. We will give precise information so that players are conscious at all times of why we are doing this exercise and what is expected of them by team mates and by the coach.

This type of session can be recurring as it adapts to the type of play that we want from our team. We may create the situations described here once or twice a week, although no two sessions are ever the same. What we illustrate here in a 4v4+3 exercise may be a 5v5+2 activity in another session; what we show here as a situation play where a team is organized in 4-2-3-1, in another circumstance the team may be set up in a 4-3-3 formation. What we will see repeated are the relations and synergies proposed during the session.

"We believe it is essential that anything done in training has an equivalent meaning in a match context"

PAULO SOUSA ATTACKING PLAY

Set-up

Area:
Up to two thirds of pitch

Equipment:
Balls, bibs, cones,
2 full size goals

Number of Players:
Up to 19 players
+ 2 goalkeepers

Session time:
Passing drill: 20mins
Positional game: 20mins
Situational game: 30mins

PASSING DRILL

In this exercise players move to create a passing sequence. We are using at least four outfield players and we set up as shown [1], with each player starting in the centre of a box marked out by a series of colour coded cones. Each colour represents a different instruction and players should perform one movement before and one movement after contact with the ball, dependent on the colour cones.

Players should move to a yellow cone before a pass is made to them; players should then immediately move to receive the ball on a blue cone; and after making a pass players should move to a red cone to make their next pass, as red cones indicate the following movement. Play is two touch.

The movement before receiving the ball will dictate to the passer when and where the pass should be made. One player starts at each position in the sequence, although at the first position there can be up to three players waiting for their turn to start with the ball.

After running the drill as shown, all three active

players move to the next starting position and we would then run the drill again on the left side of the pitch, this time using player D instead of player C.

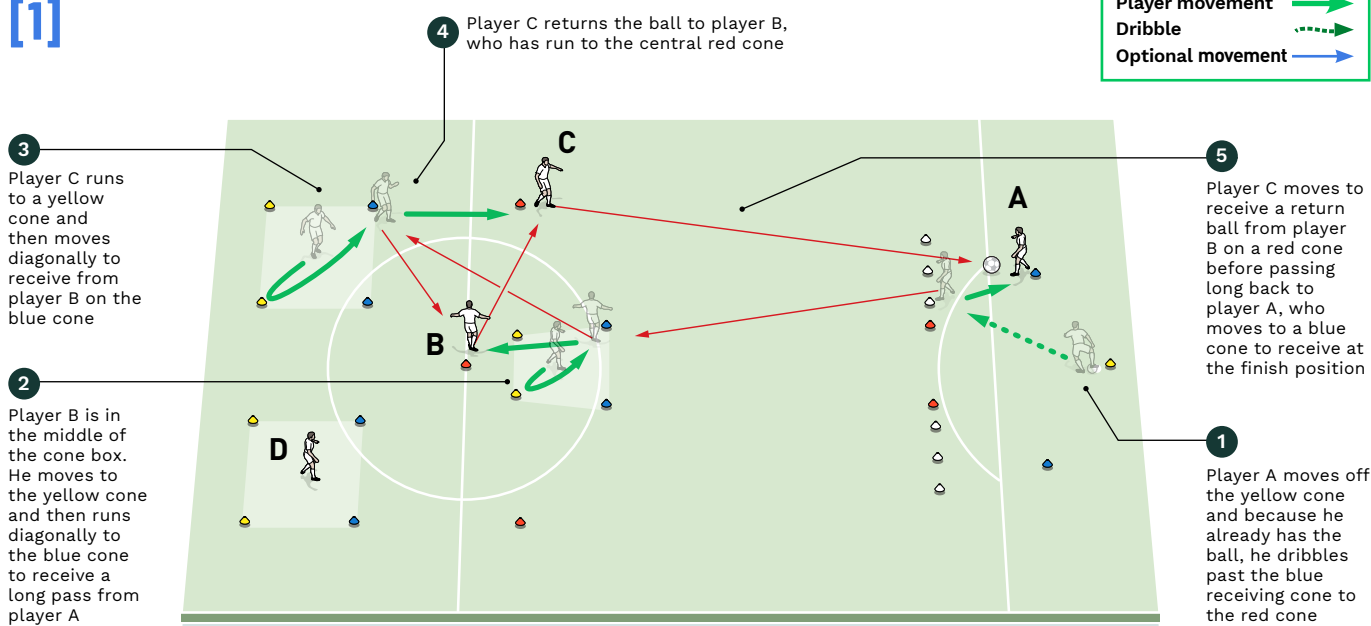
We would have several groups running at the same time but the dynamics of the passing combinations can and should be varied. Lost balls are counted and for each lost balls, five push ups should be performed.

What are the key things to look for?

We want to see players performing one movement before and one movement after contact with the ball, as indicated by the coloured cones. We don't want to see players following the line of the ball after the pass, as that is what the colour coded movement indications are for. The player's run must be different from the passing line.

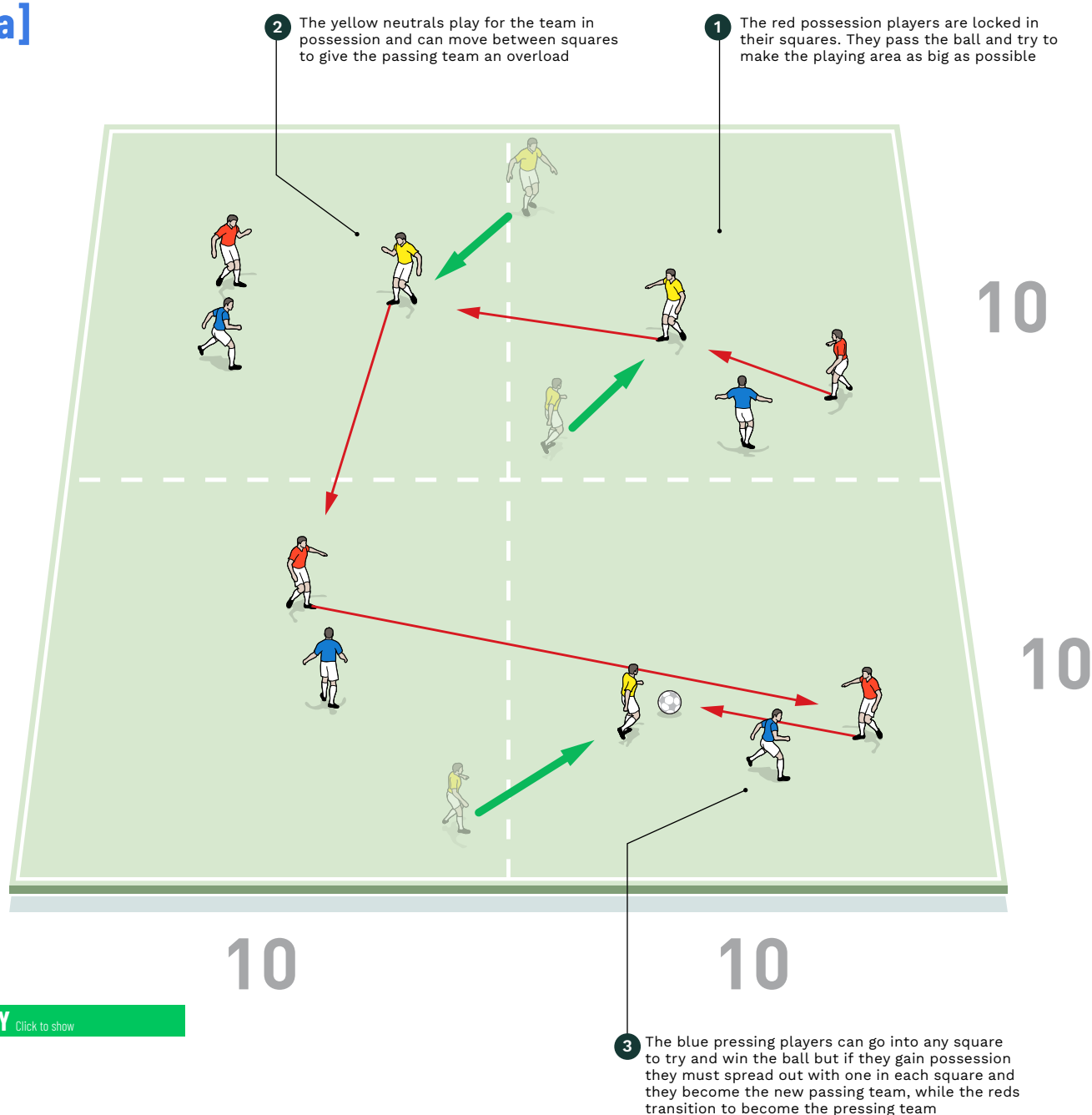
We play with two touches to accelerate footwork and we want to see accuracy in the pass, with players showing they are able to adjust their passing to the receiving player's movement.

[1]



4v4+3 POSITIONAL GAME

[2a]



We set up an area of 20x20 yards divided into four 10x10-yard boxes. We're using 11 players split into two teams of four and a neutral team of three yellows, who play for the team in possession.

The players are set up in the area as shown, with the red possession players starting with one locked in each square but spreading themselves out as much as possible to make the area bigger.

Play starts with the red possession team, who pass with the help of the yellow neutrals, as shown [2a].

The yellow neutral players can move from square to square to help give the passing team an overload in that square.

The team of four blue pressing players can go into any square to try and win the ball back. The aim for the pressing team is to gain possession but when they win the ball, they must spread out with one in each square and pass the ball to keep hold of it with the help of the yellow neutrals, while the team that lost the ball can press to win it back.

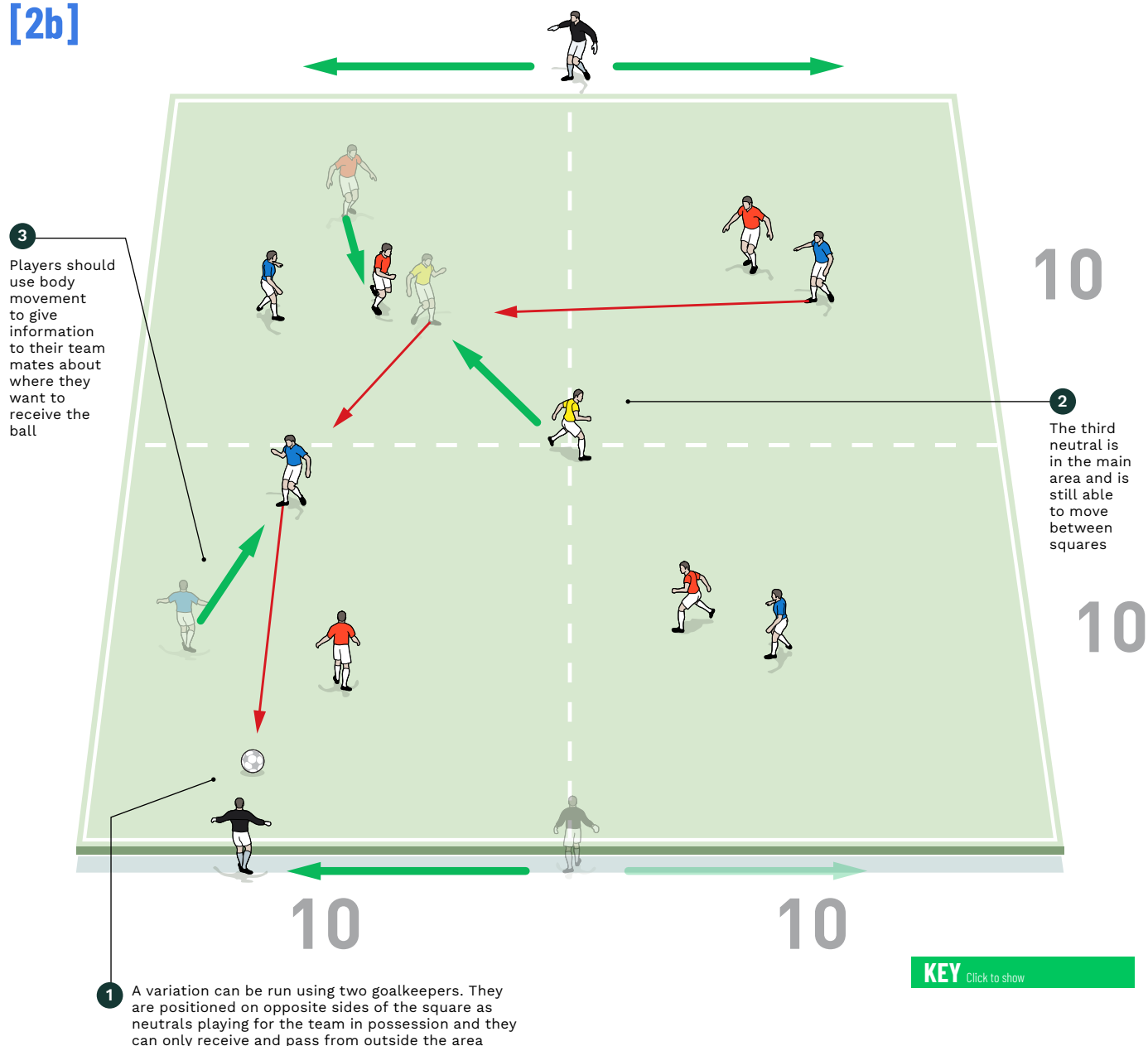
We want to see players recognising the areas with numerical superiority and take the ball to those areas. For example, when there are three pressing players in two of the squares that the passers are playing in, it is time to switch the play to the other side of the area to find the position of superiority. The possession team should then maintain play in the areas of superiority until they attract more opponents towards the ball.

We want to see players using body movement to

give information to their team mates about where they want to receive the ball.

We can also run a variation of the activity to utilise the goalkeepers. We position two goalkeepers on opposite sides as neutrals who play for the team in possession, but they can only play from outside the area, as this allows them more time with the ball at their feet. The third neutral is in the main area and is still able to move between squares, as shown [2b].

[2b]

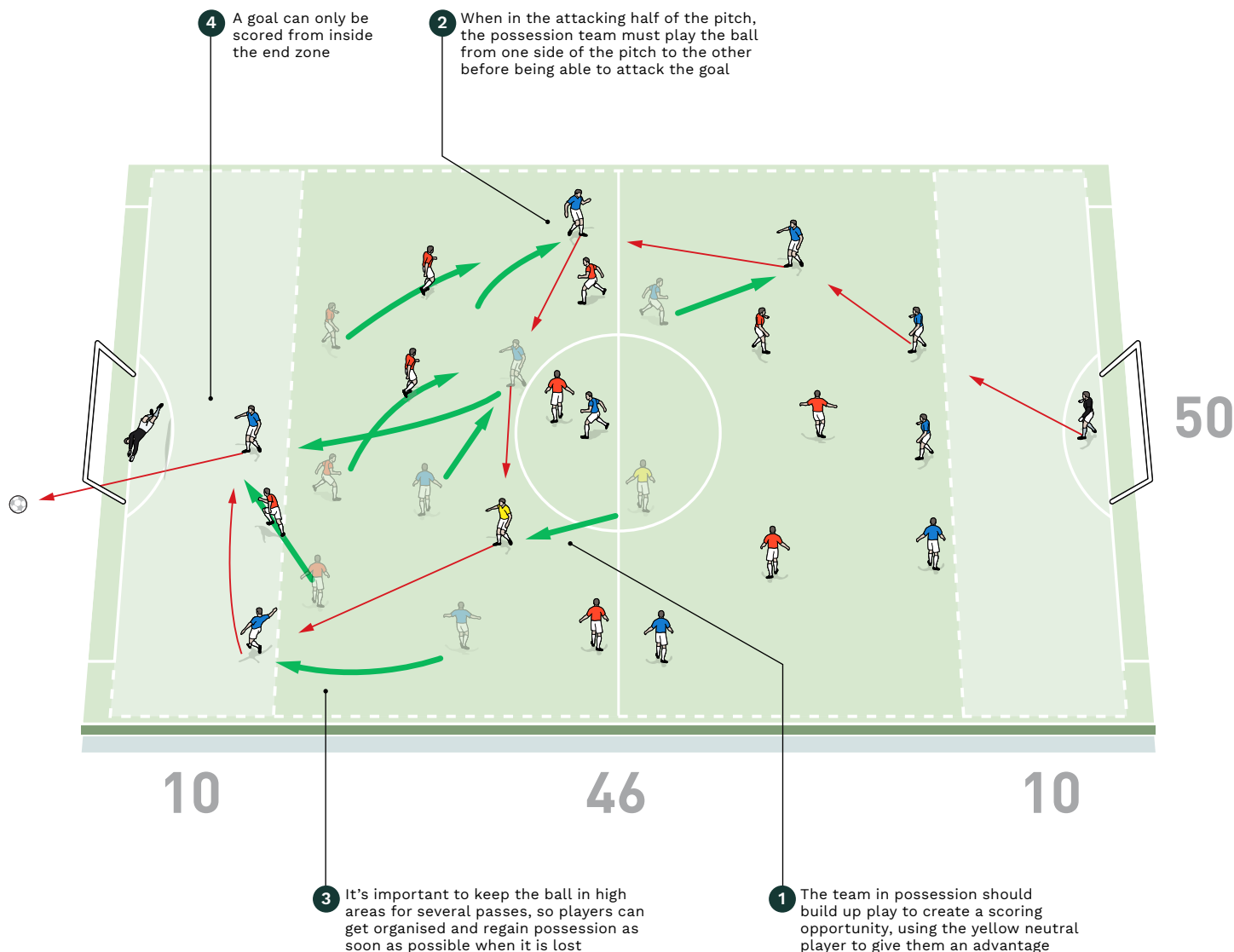


"The possession team should maintain play in the areas of superiority until they attract more opponents towards the ball"

SITUATIONAL GAME WITH DEPTH

[3a]

KEY [Click to show](#)



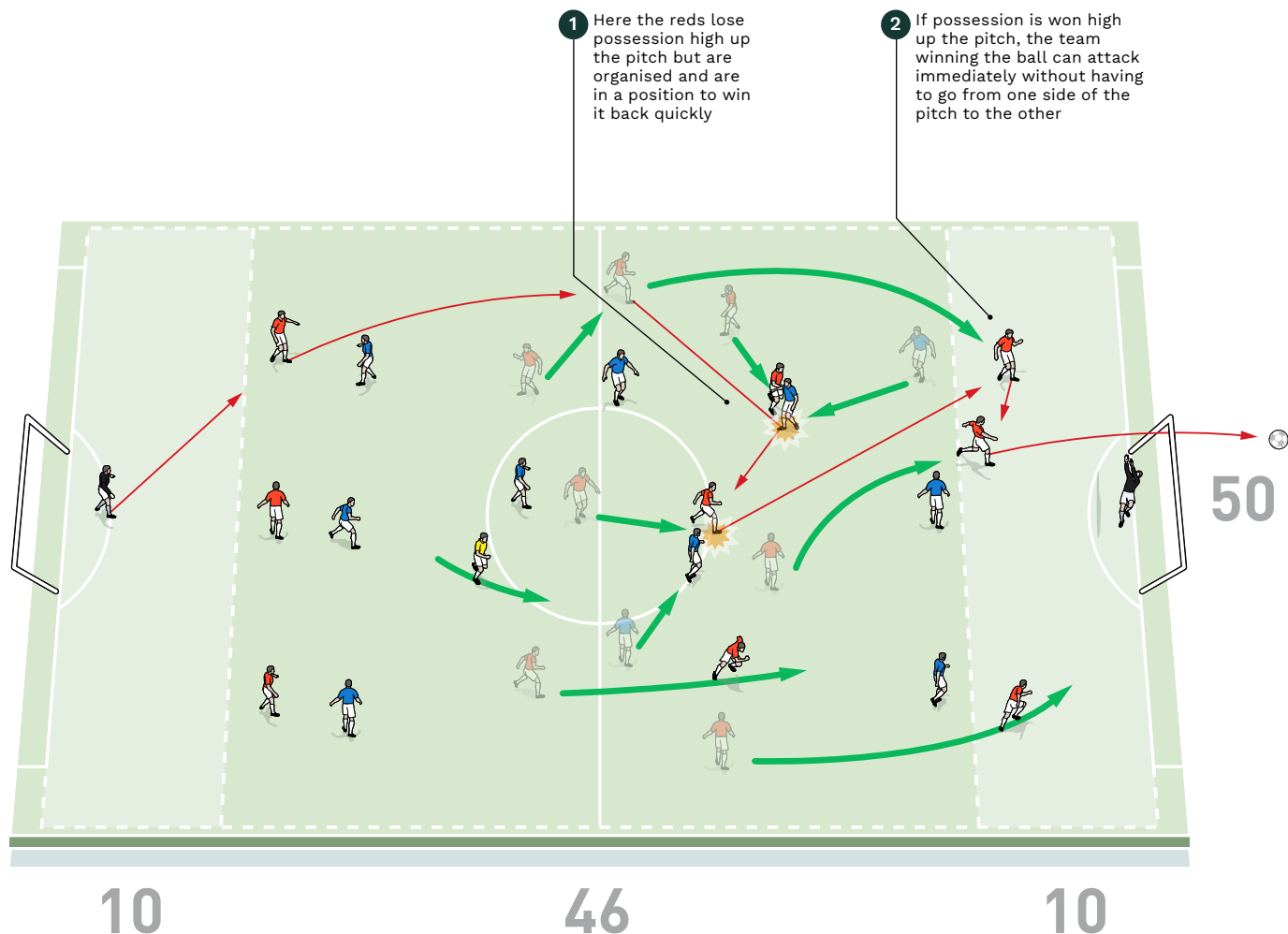
We set up a playing area of 66x50 yards between the 18-yard lines of the pitch, with a goal and a goalkeeper at each end. The playing area includes a 10-yard end zone at each end and teams can only score a goal from inside the end zones.

We're using 19 outfield players split into two teams of nine plus one yellow neutral who plays for the team in possession.

Play starts and restarts from the goalkeeper. The team in possession should build up play to create a scoring opportunity but when they are in the attacking half of the pitch, they must play the ball from one side of the pitch to the other before being able to attack the goal, as shown [3a].

However, if possession of the ball is won high up the pitch (beyond the midfield area), the team

[3b]



KEY Click to show

“We want to see players remaining alert and always ready to play or offer a passing option to team mates”

winning the ball can attack immediately without having to go from one side of the pitch to the other, as shown [3b].

The objectives of the activity are to recognise the offensive dynamics we expect to see in our game, which may vary from week to week.

We want to see the possession players getting the ball safely to the forward areas of the pitch as early as possible and then keep it there. It's important to keep the ball in the high areas for several passes, so that

players can get well organised and regain possession as soon as possible when it is lost.

We want to see players remaining alert and always ready to play or offer a passing option to team mates. Players must communicate to team mates with their movement, showing them where they want the ball to be played. It's also important that when a player is distant from the ball, they should take responsibility for their nearest opponent, so they are able to recover the ball as soon as possible after losing it.

**MANAGER PROFILE****MARK BOWEN**
LMA AMBASSADOR

A defender who played for Spurs, Norwich City and West Ham United, Mark Bowen began his coaching career with the Wales national side, as a member of Mark Hughes's back room team.

He subsequently served as Steve Bruce's assistant manager at both Crystal Palace and Birmingham City, earning promotion to the Premier League with the latter.

He teamed up with Hughes again as assistant manager at Blackburn Rovers, Manchester City, Fulham, QPR, Stoke City and Southampton. He also enjoyed one game as caretaker manager of QPR for the club's 2012 Premier League fixture with Manchester United.

He was most recently the manager of EFL Championship side Reading, a club he had previously served as its sporting director.

SESSION**DEFENDING 1v1 AND AGAINST OVERLOADS**

This training session is aimed at educating defenders in the skillsets, communication ability and decision making needed when they are goal-side of the ball and defending in either a 1v1 scenario or in an overload situation.

In the modern game, when defenders are judged so much on their attacking instincts and on their qualities on the ball, sometimes the skill of defending is overlooked. But I believe that good, conscientious defenders actually pride themselves on the defensive aspects of their game.

This is a session that I would run fairly regularly but perhaps more importantly I would use it when we are due to face a team that plays in a more counter-attacking style, thus mirroring the type of situations that defenders will face at certain times during a game.

In this session defenders are put in situations where their decision making is important, so to get the best out of the players, coaches can make this session reward-driven by introducing a forfeit for the attackers or defenders that come off worst.

"In the modern game, when defenders are judged on their attacking instincts and qualities on the ball, sometimes the skill of defending is overlooked" ►

MARK BOWEN

DEFENDING 1v1 AND AGAINST OVERLOADS

Set-up

Area:

Up to three quarters of pitch

Equipment:

Balls, bibs, cones, 2 goals

Number of Players:

Up to 20 players
+ 2 goalkeepers

Session time:

Defending 1v1, 2v1 & 3v1:
20mins

Defending 2v2, 3v2 & 4v2:
20mins

10v10 game: 20mins

DEFENDING 1v1, 2v1 & 3v1

We set up in the final third of the pitch with a full size goal and a goalkeeper at one end and a central attacking channel the width of the goal marked with cones outside the penalty area. We're using 12 outfield players split into seven attackers and five defenders, although numbers can vary depending on needs.

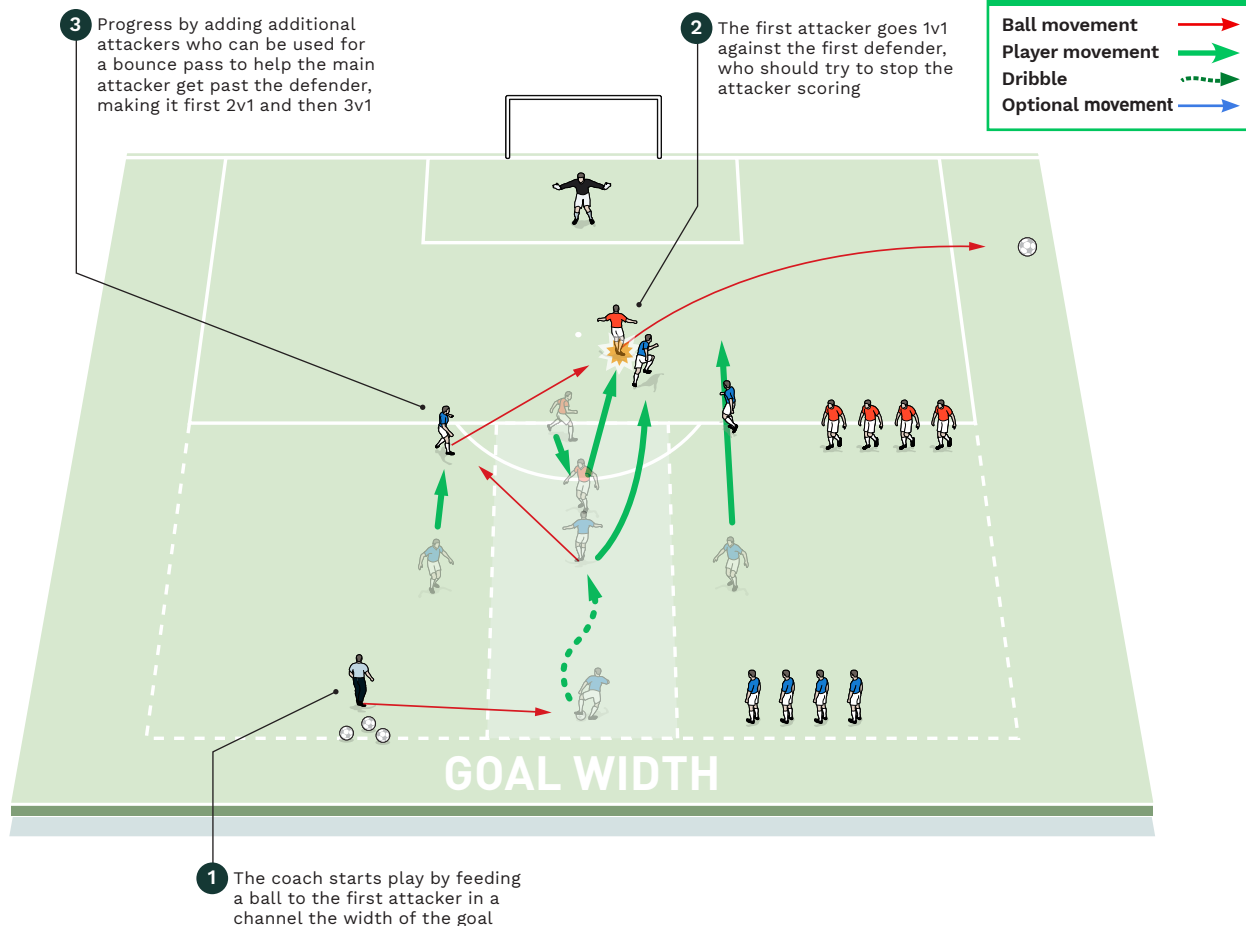
We start the session with the coach feeding a ball to the first attacker, who goes 1v1 against the first defender and tries to score in the goal.

The body shape of the defender is very important and he should get low and try to show the attacker onto the player's weaker side if possible.

To progress the activity, two extra attackers can be added to the 1v1, with one placed on either side of the central attacking channel, making it first a 2v1 and then a 3v1. The additional attackers can only be used to bounce the ball off in order to help the main attacker get around the defender, as shown [1], but the defender mustn't get beaten by wall passes and should not follow the ball – he should keep his attention on the main attacker at all times.

We play so each defender and attacker has three or four goes at the 1v1 before progressing the session every six minutes.

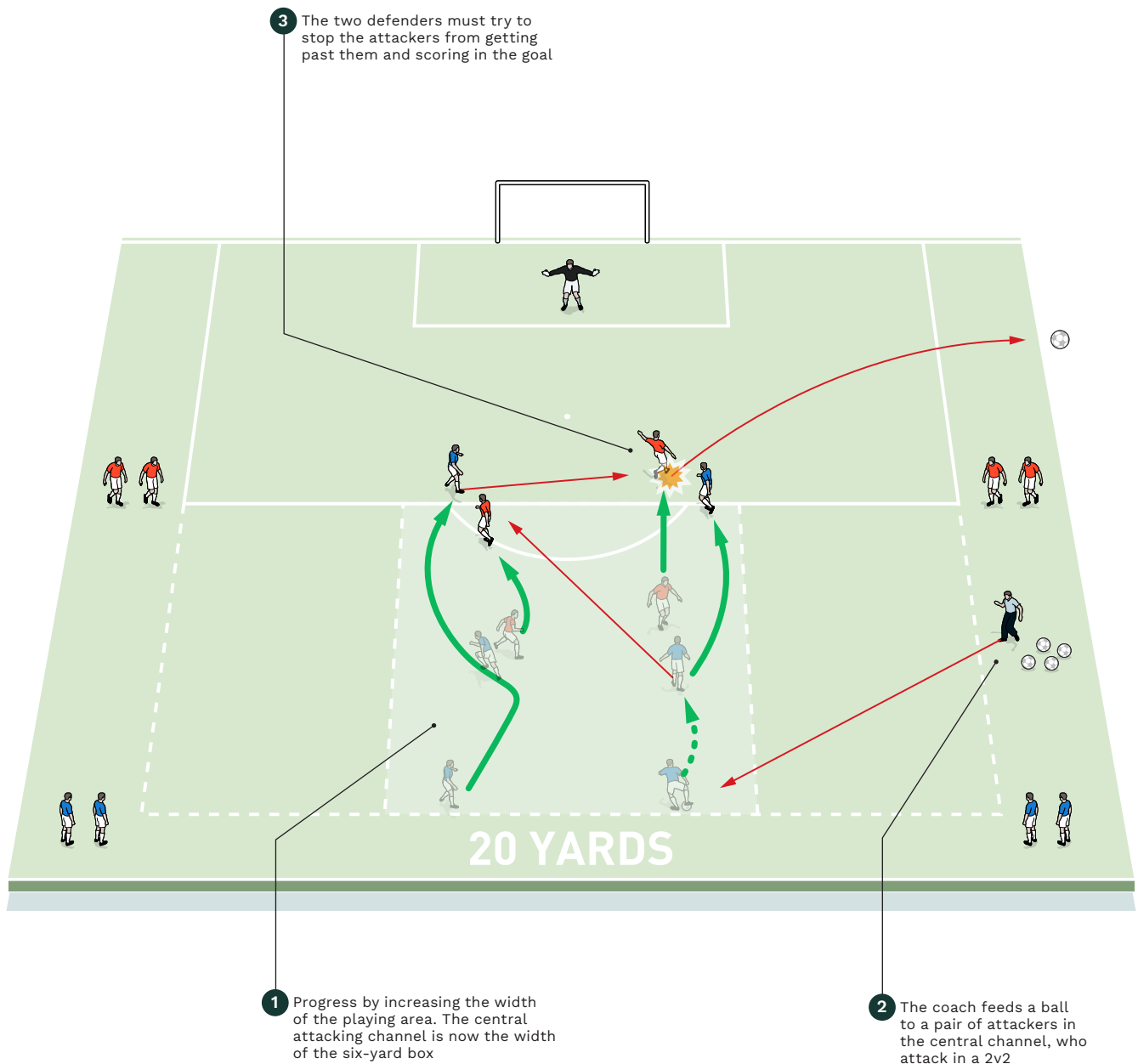
[1]



DEFENDING 2v2, 3v3 & 4v3

[2a]

KEY Click to show



We progress the session further by increasing the width of the playing area. The size of the central attacking channel is now the width of the six-yard box. We start by running a 2v2. The coach feeds a ball

to one of the attackers in the central channel and the pair go up against the two defenders, who must try to stop the attackers from getting past them and scoring in the goal, as shown [2a].

"As the session progresses, the importance of communication grows and defenders have important decisions to make"

After running the activity as a 2v2, we progress it first to 3v3 and then subsequently to a 4v3 attacking overload, as shown [\[2b\]](#), with the attacking channel now increased to the width of the penalty area.

As the session progresses, the importance of communication grows and defenders have important decisions to make about when not to be passive. When the defenders are outnumbered, they have the opportunity to make it a 1v1 or a 2v2 in a wide area by forcing the play into these areas and their body shape and level of aggression should reflect this.

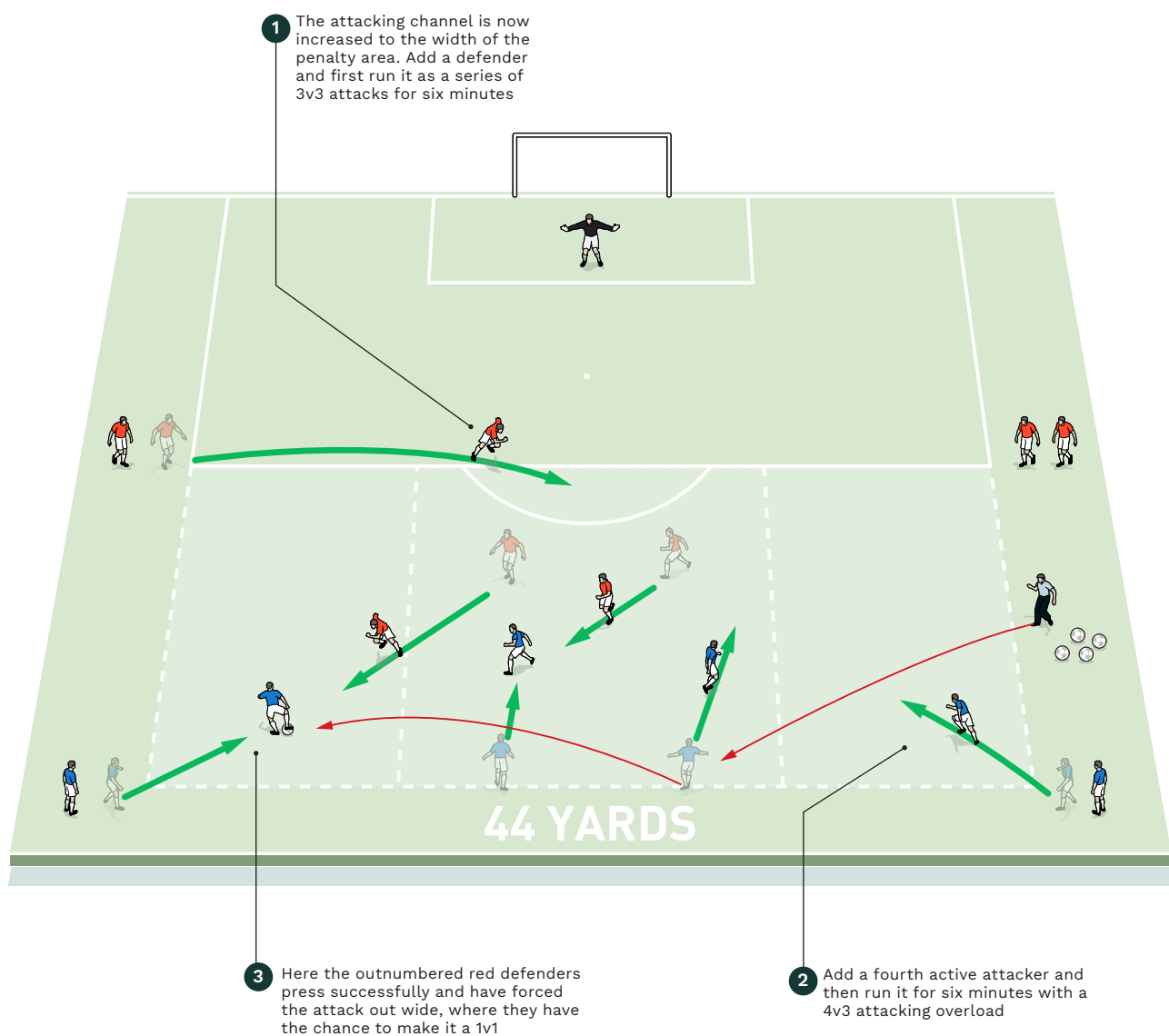
To progress the session further, the area size should

increase each time an additional defender is added, although we never actually go to full width as we don't want the distances to be too large – so it encourages the defenders to be brave and not passive. Another progression can be to add a single deep midfielder to supply the attackers, so the defenders can get caught out by runs in behind and have to react to the threat.

The coach should call obvious offsides and use plenty of praise when defenders get things right. Play each progression in blocks of about six minutes, constantly rotating personnel. After each block review what the players are seeing and learning.

[2b]

KEY Click to show



"When the defenders are outnumbered, they have the opportunity to make it a 1v1 or a 2v2 by forcing play into a wide area"

10v10 GAME

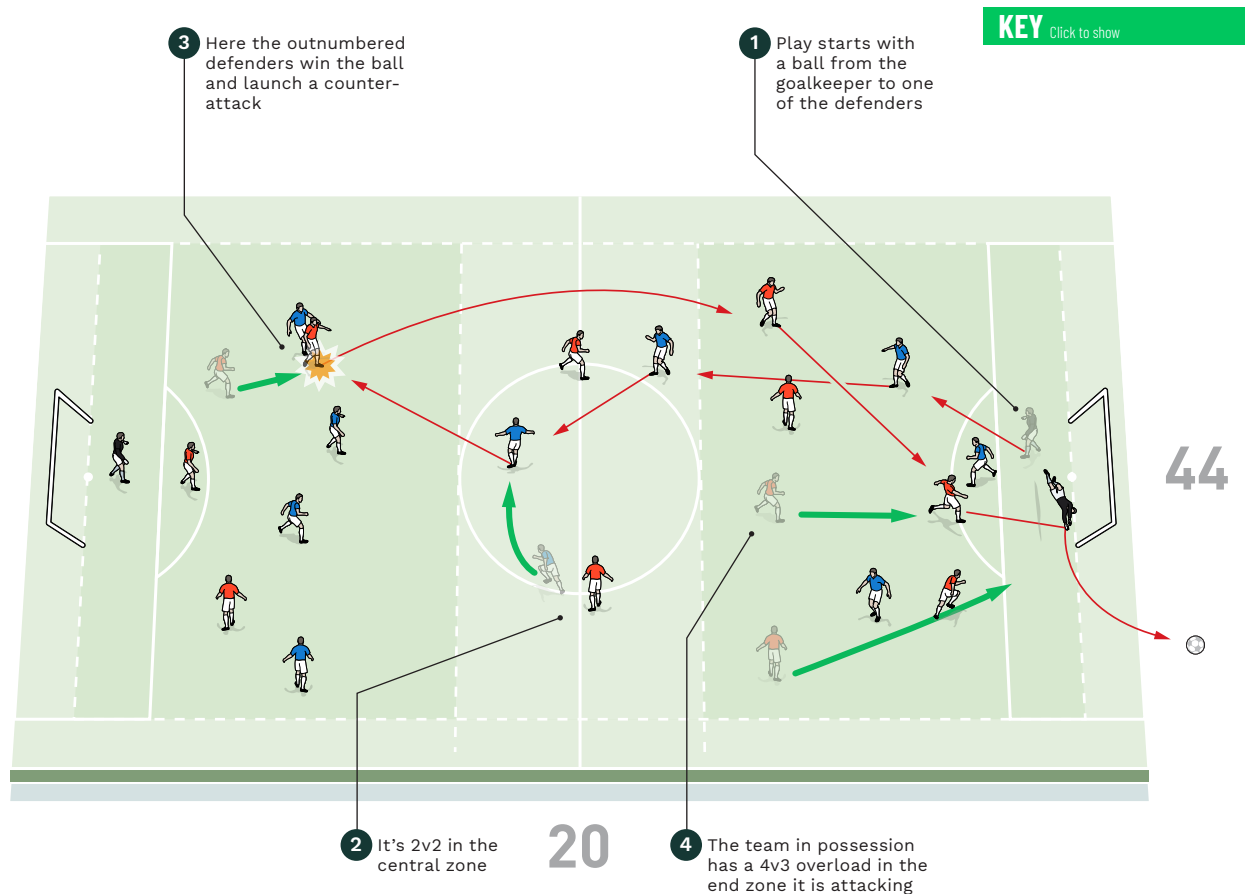
We finish the session with a game. We set up a playing area between the penalty spots of the pitch with a goal and a goalkeeper at each end. We mark two equal-sized end zones either side of a 20-yard central zone.

We're using 18 outfield players split into two teams of 10 including goalkeepers, with a 2v2 locked in the central zone and four attackers going up against

three defenders in each end zone. This creates an attacking overload for each team at the end they are attacking and means the defenders have plenty of opportunities to implement what they have learnt in the session so far.

Play starts and restarts with a ball played from a goalkeeper to the defenders and play should be built up through the midfield, as shown [3].

[3]



COACHING POINTS

What are the key things to look out for?

It is important to encourage the attackers to be bright and fluid in their movement and not just play and move in straight lines. Overlaps from the attackers are desirable in order to give the defenders decisions to make.

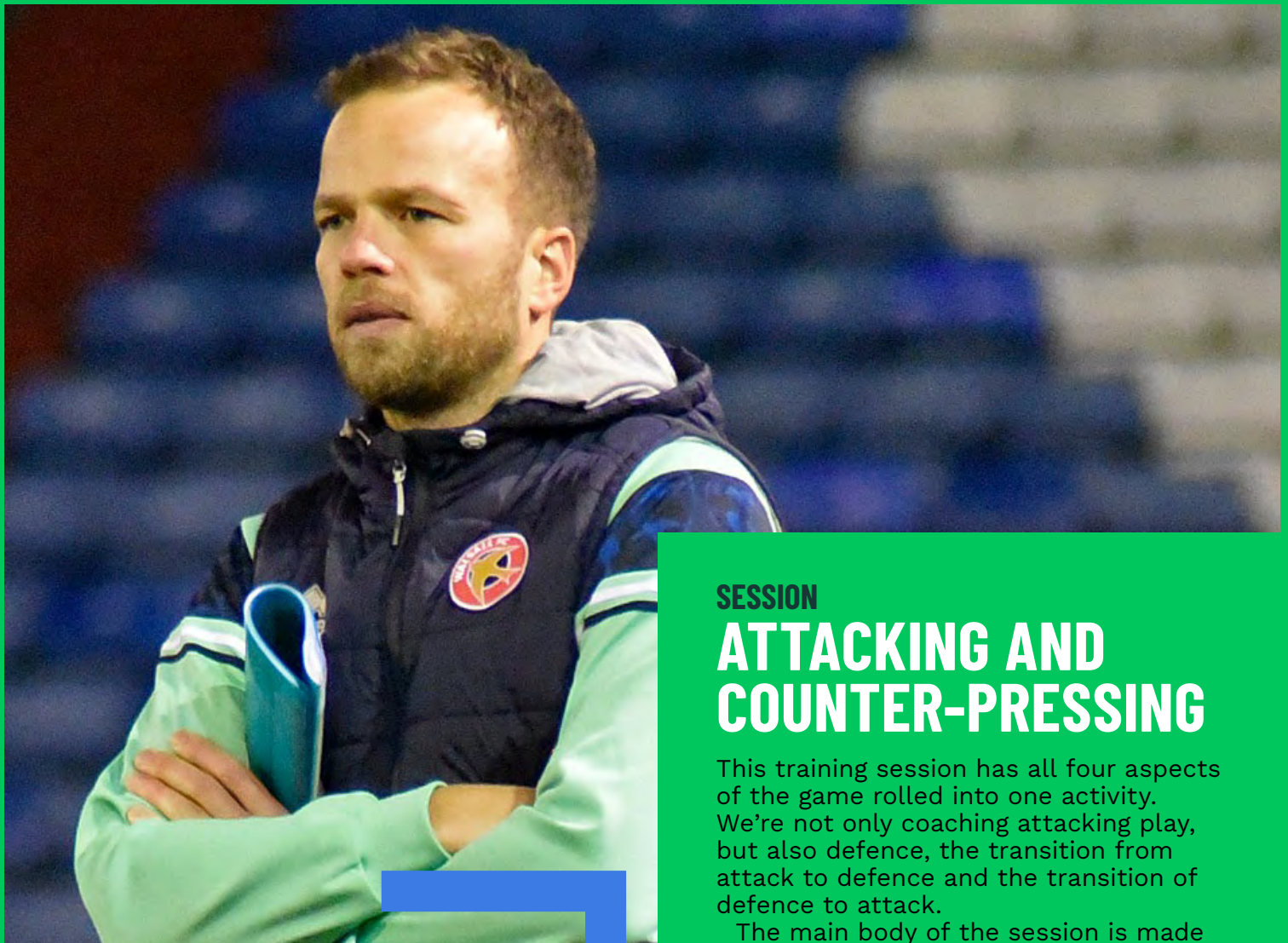
Defenders always have to be mindful of their body shape, their distances from one another and from the ball, and their communication with each other. They shouldn't be passive and should always show they have an awareness of exactly where they are in relation to the goal and where they are on the pitch.

The goalkeepers also have a big part to play in the success of this training session, using clear communication with their defenders.

What are the typical mistakes players might make and how do I avoid them?

Typical mistakes that players might make include not recognising those key moments when attackers are vulnerable, whether that is by having a poor first touch, playing the ball on their weaker side, or being left isolated by poor movement made by their team mates.

Let defenders learn from their mistakes and give them time to get things right. As a coach, don't always step in and correct things too early.

**MANAGER PROFILE****BRIAN DUTTON**
WALSALL

A versatile player comfortable in many positions, Brian Dutton plied his trade around the lower leagues, turning out for Cambridge United, Weymouth, Northwich Victoria, Harrogate, Salisbury City and Havant & Waterlooville amongst many others.

Hanging up his boots in 2017, Brian turned to coaching at League One club Bristol Rovers, where he was appointed U23s assistant coach and overseas scout. He was soon promoted to a backroom role with the first team and his dedicated focus on attacking set pieces saw the attacking set piece conversion rate improve significantly during his time at the club.

In 2019, he joined Walsall as assistant manager and in February 2021 he was promoted to acting head coach of the League Two side.

SESSION**ATTACKING AND
COUNTER-PRESSING**

This training session has all four aspects of the game rolled into one activity. We're not only coaching attacking play, but also defence, the transition from attack to defence and the transition of defence to attack.

The main body of the session is made up of a competitive wave game, which allows for lots of opportunities to attack and score goals and this makes for a highly enjoyable and intensive session for the players.

While it creates plenty of attacking chances, it is also a good activity to rehearse counter-pressing because the attacking team have to counter-press immediately on losing the ball in order to prevent a counter-attack.

If it's a full week of training with no midweek match, it's the kind of session we would run in the early part of the week because of its high intensity nature and due to the large area that the players have to cover.

"This session allows for lots of opportunities to score goals, which makes for an enjoyable session for the players"

BRIAN DUTTON

ATTACKING AND COUNTER-PRESSING

Set-up

Area:

Two thirds of pitch

Equipment:

Balls, bibs, cones,
2 full size goals

Number of Players:

22 players + 2 goalkeepers

Session time:

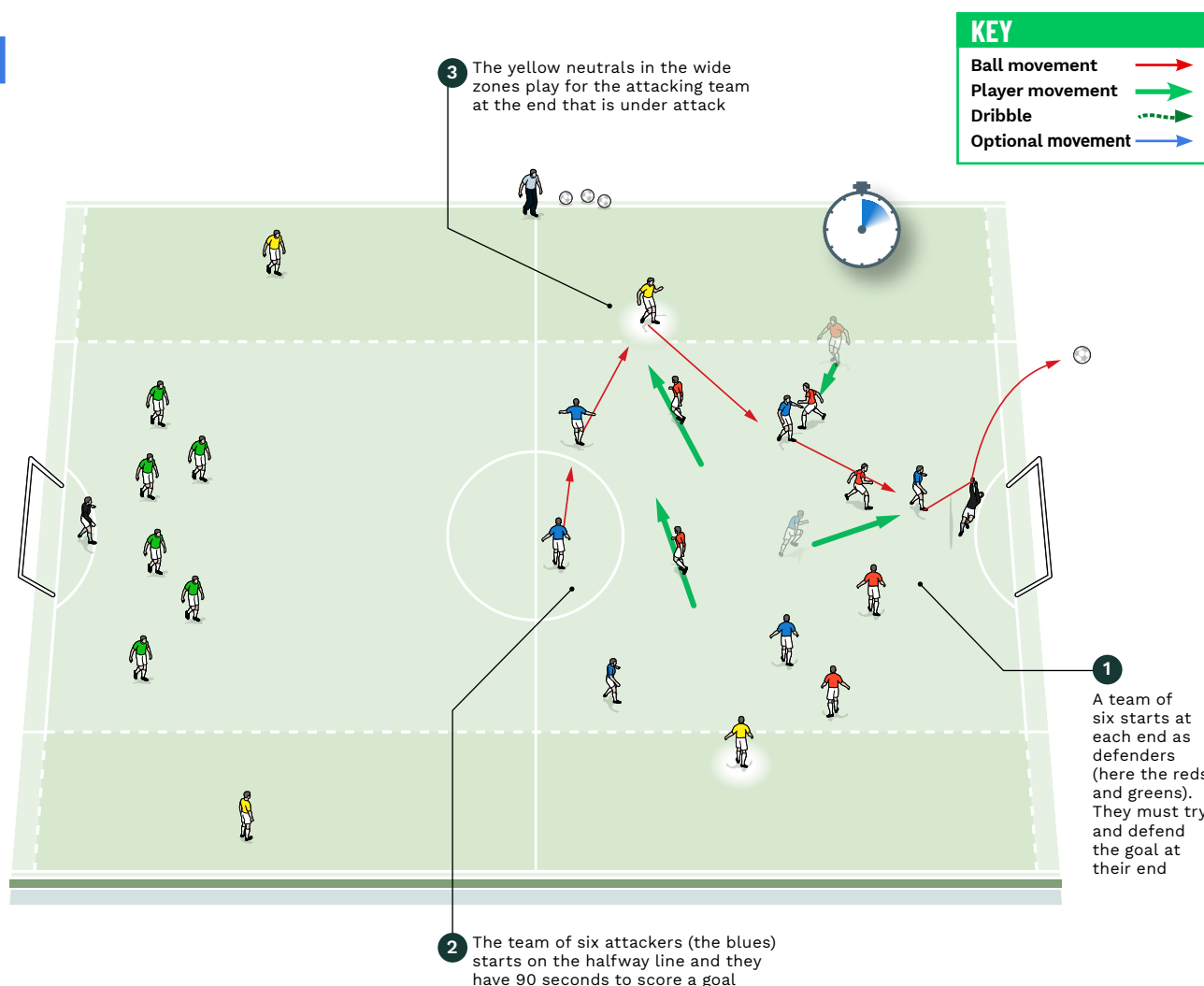
Wave game: 24mins
Progression: 16mins

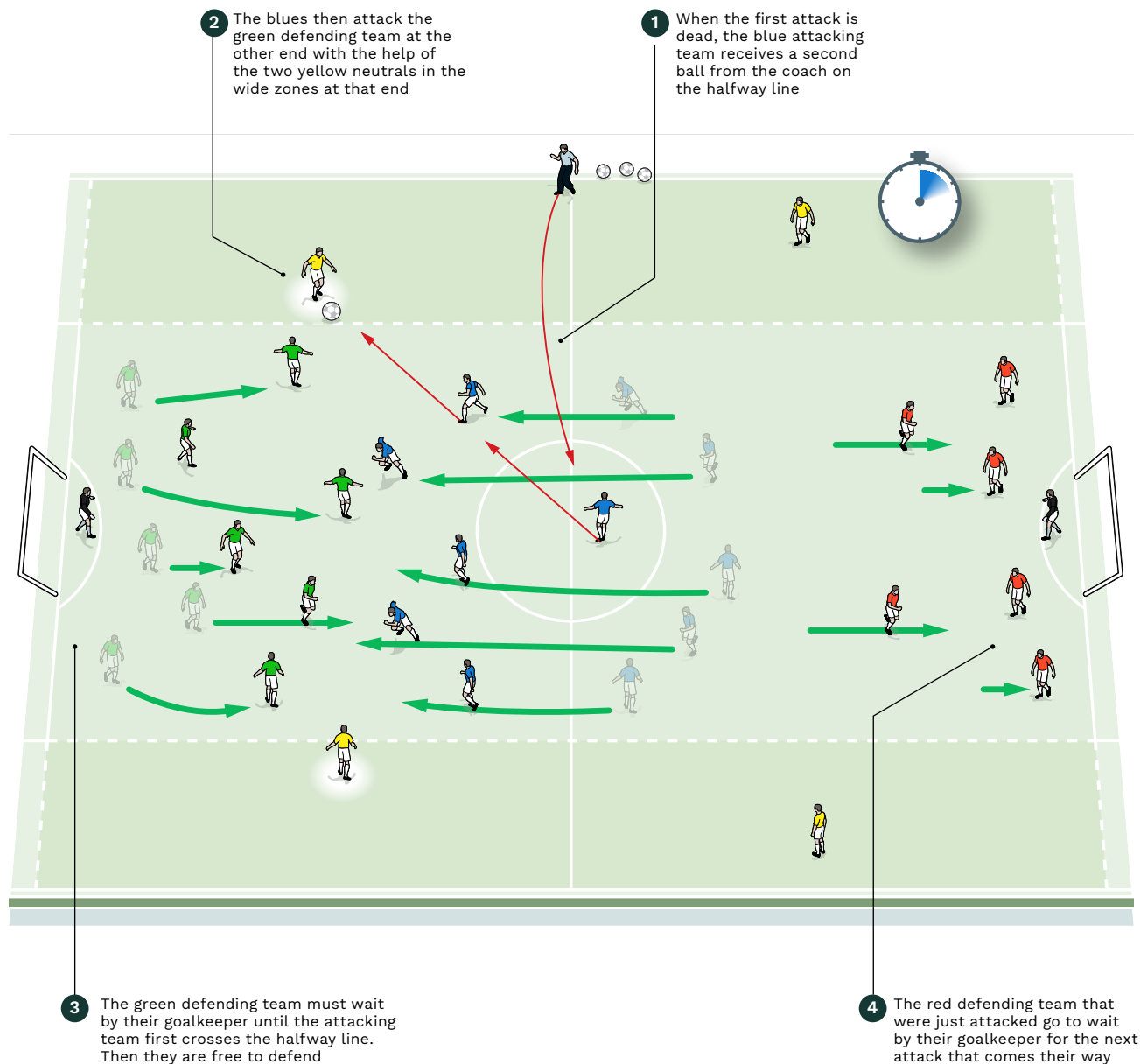
COUNTER-PRESS WAVE GAME

We set up a playing area between the 18-yard boxes, using the full width of the pitch and with wide zones marked out. We position a goal and a goalkeeper at either end. We're using 22 players split into three teams of six and a neutral team of four floaters. The four yellow neutrals are positioned in the wide zones, as shown. A team of six starts at each end as defenders and the remaining team of six starts on the halfway line as attackers.

The attacking team begins with the ball and they must attack one end and create a scoring opportunity, if needed using the support of the two neutral wide players at the end of the pitch they are attacking. This creates an 8v6 overload, as shown [1a], and they have 90 seconds to score a goal. If the ball goes out of play during the initial attack, the game restarts with a throw from the attacking team or the coach will pass another ball in from the halfway line to the attacking side.

[1a]



[1b]
KEY Click to show


If the attacking team is successful in scoring in the first 90 seconds, they receive a second ball from the coach on the halfway line and then they must attack the defending team at the other end with the help of the two neutrals in the wide zone at that end, as shown [1b].

The defending team must try and repel the attacking

team for 90 seconds and if they win possession they should launch a counter-attack by getting the ball across the halfway line to become the new attacking team against the defending team in the other half.

The team that lost the ball must immediately counter-press to prevent the counter-attacking team getting

across the halfway line. The defending team at the other end must wait by their keeper until the counter-attacking team first crosses the halfway line, as shown [1c].

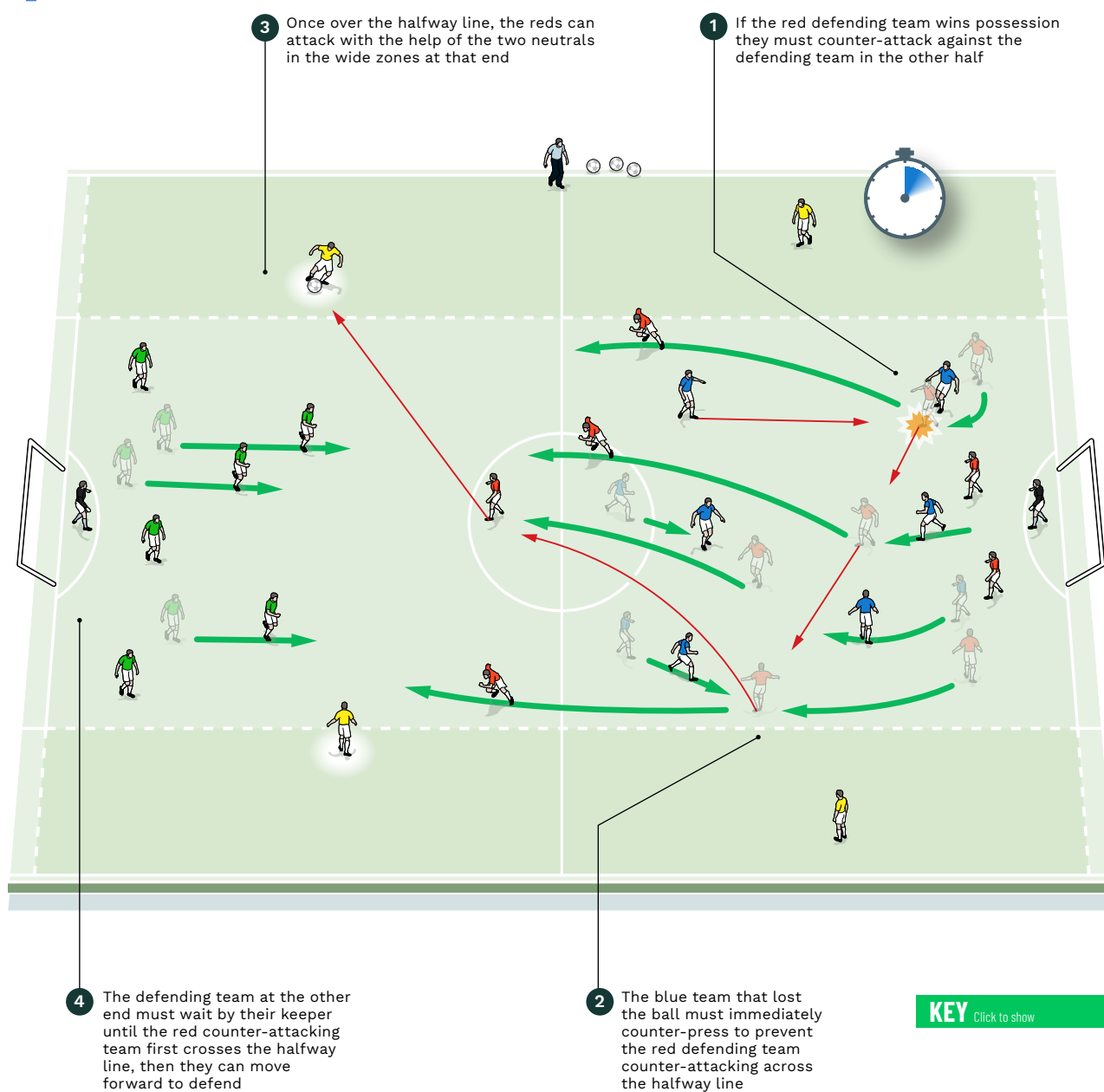
The team with the most goals wins the game.

Before moving on to the progression, we would extend play to the full width of the pitch, with both the attacking and defending teams being allowed

to move into the wide areas. However, the yellow neutrals are still restricted to staying in the wide zones but they can now assist with the counter-press when the attacking team loses possession if play comes into their zones. This helps to stop the defensive team counter-attacking across the halfway line.

“The defending team must try and repel the attacking team and if they win possession they should launch a counter-attack”

[1c]



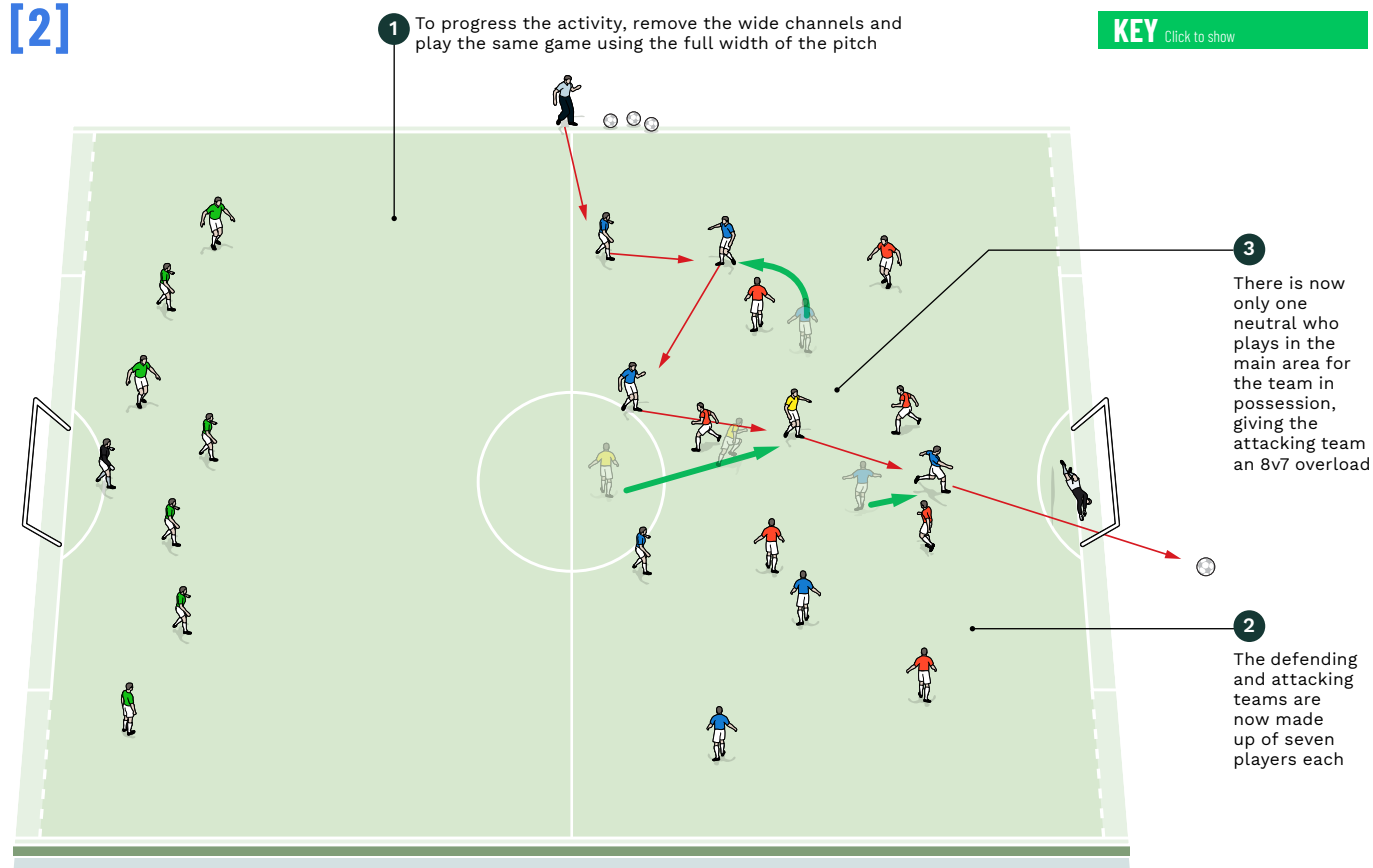
PROGRESSION

To progress the activity, we remove the wide channels and play the same game, using the full width of the pitch. We now have just one neutral, who plays in the main area for the team in possession, and the two defending teams and the one attacking team are now made up of seven

players each, giving the attacking team an 8v7 overload.

We play just as before, with the attacking team going up against the defending team with 90 seconds to score, as shown [2], before being served a second ball by the coach and attacking the defenders at the other end.

[2]



COACHING POINTS

What are the key things to look for?

From the attacking aspect we are looking for players to move the ball decisively and intelligently and also to demonstrate an understanding of how best to use the overload. Most importantly we need to keep a defensive structure to our attacks to prevent being counter-attacked and to help with the counter-press.

Defensively, we're working hard to prevent being attacked through the middle of the pitch and trying to funnel the ball into the wide areas, then setting up to defend the cross and any second phases.

We also want to try and counter-attack when the correct moments arrive, intelligently understanding the risk and reward factors.

What are the typical mistakes players might make and how do I avoid them?

Typical mistakes from an attacking point of view would be players taking too many touches and slowing the game down, and also dribbling when the team is not structured to help defend the counter-attack from an unsuccessful dribble.

Typical mistakes from a defensive point of view would be staying too deep and not quickly getting up to the player and the ball to defend properly.

How would I put this in a game situation?

This session would just roll into a 9v9 game or a 11v11 game.

**MANAGER PROFILE****CHRISTOPHER
EVANS****LMA AMBASSADOR**

Formerly the head coach of Dhaka based Mohammedan Sporting Club in the Bangladesh Premier League, Christopher Evans is a UEFA A licenced coach and sports development consultant.

He has previously coached at Norwich City, working with the centre of excellence U13s and U14s, and with the club's shadow academy. Prior to that, he served as academy team manager in non-league football and as technical director for West London Schools FA. He also worked for Chelsea as a development centre head coach.

SESSION**ATTACKING IN
POCKETS**

This was a session that I first ran with Norwich City's U15s but I adapted it to use in the Bangladesh Premier League with Mohammadan Sporting Club.

I needed to use it because the players weren't stretching opponents with runs in behind, which can allow movement into pockets in front of the back four to create scoring opportunities in key danger areas.

I like this session because when I run it I am fully engaged in controlling the tempo and enthusiasm of the players through the execution of the passing and the timing. It teaches players decision making and shows them when, how and why to play into the pockets.

Due to personnel, the way my teams have played doesn't support many attempts on target from crosses, so this session encourages creativity, good combination play, intricate passing and concise movement in tight areas.

I would run this session twice a week due to the technical and physical outcomes complementing a normal build up session and of course tactically it is part of an overall strategic game plan as well. It forms a key part of my football philosophy and exemplifies the way I like to play the game.

Of course, if the forthcoming opponents or the playing personnel available don't suit the technical attributes, then we may adapt it.

"This is an exciting session because when I run it I am fully engaged in controlling the tempo and enthusiasm of the players" ►

CHRISTOPHER EVANS

ATTACKING IN POCKETS

Set-up

Area:
Up to three quarters
of the pitch

Equipment:
Balls, bibs, cones,
1 full size goal

Number of Players:

Up to 20 players
+ 1 goalkeeper

Session time:

In the pocket 1: 15mins

In the pocket 2: 15mins

In the pocket 3: 30mins

IN THE POCKET 1

We set up on half a pitch with a goal and a goalkeeper positioned at one end. Unopposed wide channels are marked on each flank and a small cone goal is marked out on the halfway line. We're using 14 outfield players, split into an attacking team of eight and a defending team of six.

Play starts with the defensive midfielder passing to the number 10, who drops deep to pick up the ball and play. The number 10 then passes right to the full back in the wide channel and the full back plays a pass into the pocket, which is the space behind the opposition midfield and in front of the opposition back four. If the

quick pass into a pocket isn't on then we can recycle via the full backs to a holding midfielder and switch play with emphasis on quick passing and movement.

What we're looking for is for the pocket player to use the space well and to make a positive, attacking pass in one or two touches. As shown [1], the pocket player receives on the half turn and, within a couple of touches, passes to a player attacking the box.

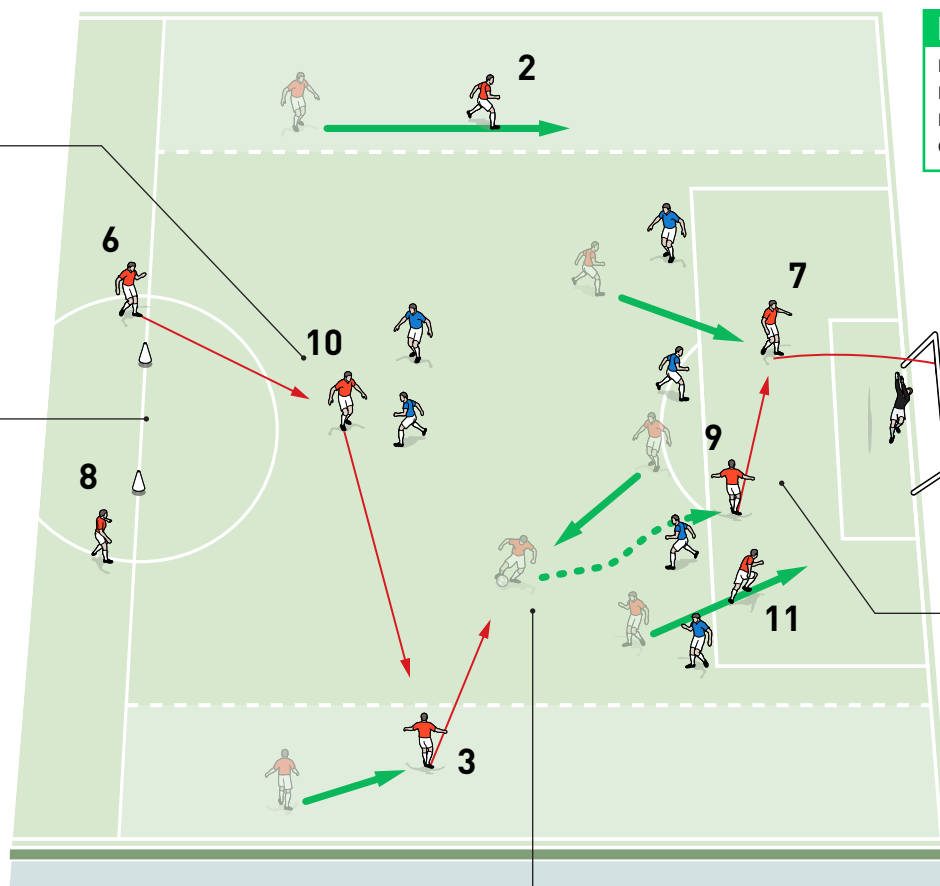
If the defending team wins the ball, they play direct and try to score in the cone goal on the halfway line.

After each ball is dead, reset and play again, varying the wing of attack. We play for 15 minutes.

[1]

1 The number 10 drops deep to pick up the ball and passes to the right back in the wide channel

4 If the defending team wins the ball, they must immediately pass through the coned goal on the halfway line



KEY

- Ball movement →
- Player movement →
- Dribble - - - - -
- Optional movement →

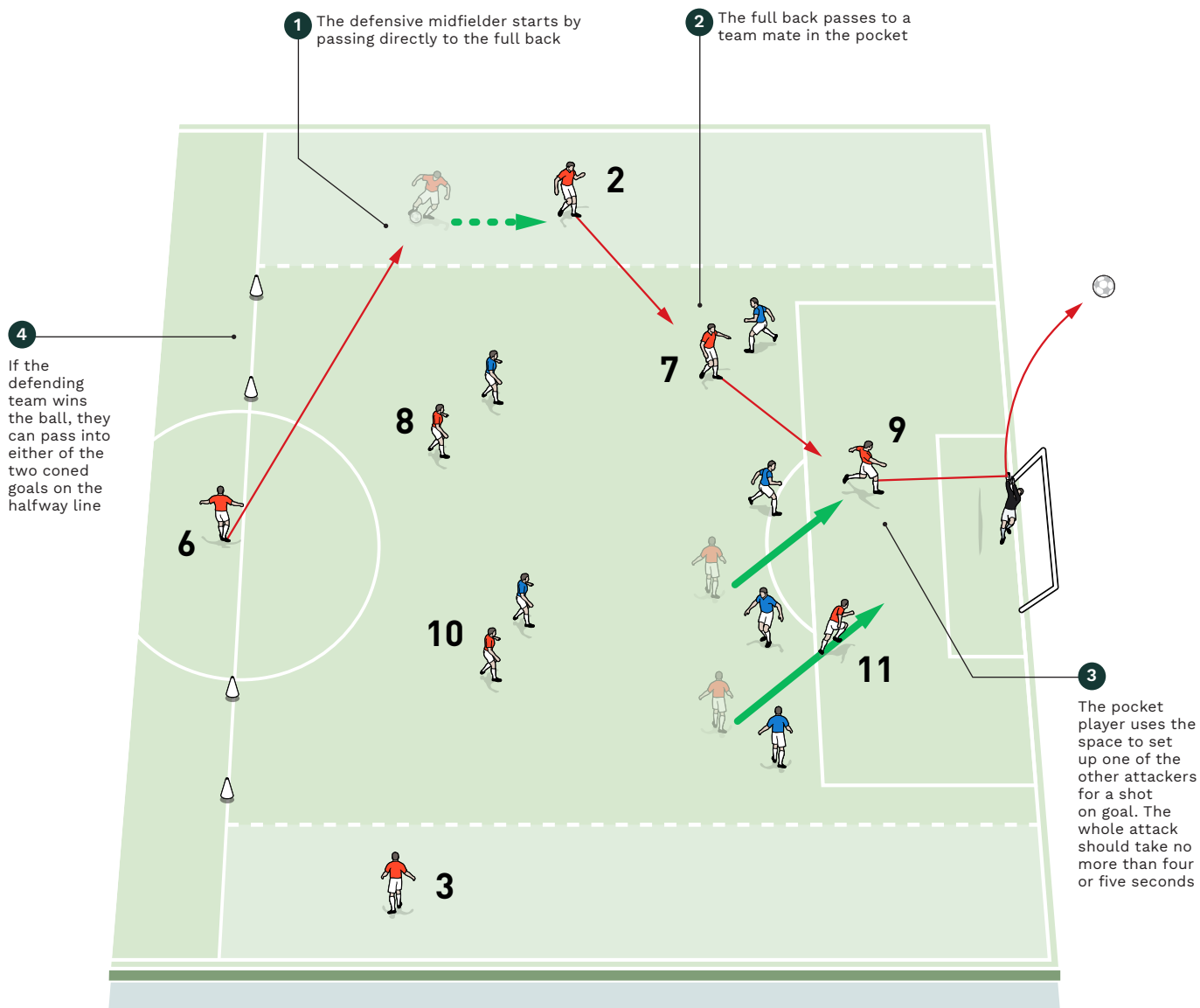
3 The pocket player receives on the half turn and, within one or two touches, passes to another attacker to create a scoring chance

2 The right back plays a pass into the pocket

IN THE POCKET 2

[2]

KEY Click to show



"Play must be quick and it should take no more than four or five seconds from the starting pass to get a shot away on goal"

We set up the playing area as before, but this time two cone goals are marked on the halfway line. We're still using 14 outfield players, split into an attacking team of eight and a defending team of six.

The attacking play is more direct in this activity. A starting pass is made from the defensive midfielder straight to the full back and the opposition can now engage in the wide areas after the first touch. The full back quickly passes into a player in the pocket

of the opposition defence. The pocket player should then create a scoring opportunity for one of the other attackers, as shown [2].

Play must be quick and it should take no more than four or five seconds from the defensive midfielder's starting pass to getting a shot away on goal.

If the defending team wins the ball, they can score in either of the two coned goals on the halfway line. Reset after each attack and play for 15 minutes.

IN THE POCKET 3

Now we set up on three quarters of the pitch, with a goal and a goalkeeper at one end and two cone goals at the other end. We're using 20 outfield players split into two teams of ten, set up in match formations.

Play starts with the attacking team's centre backs and we look for the ball to be moved tactically up the pitch and into wide areas to create scoring chances. If the opposition block a wide area, then we play central but still look for quick movement into pockets. The full backs can take one touch before the defending

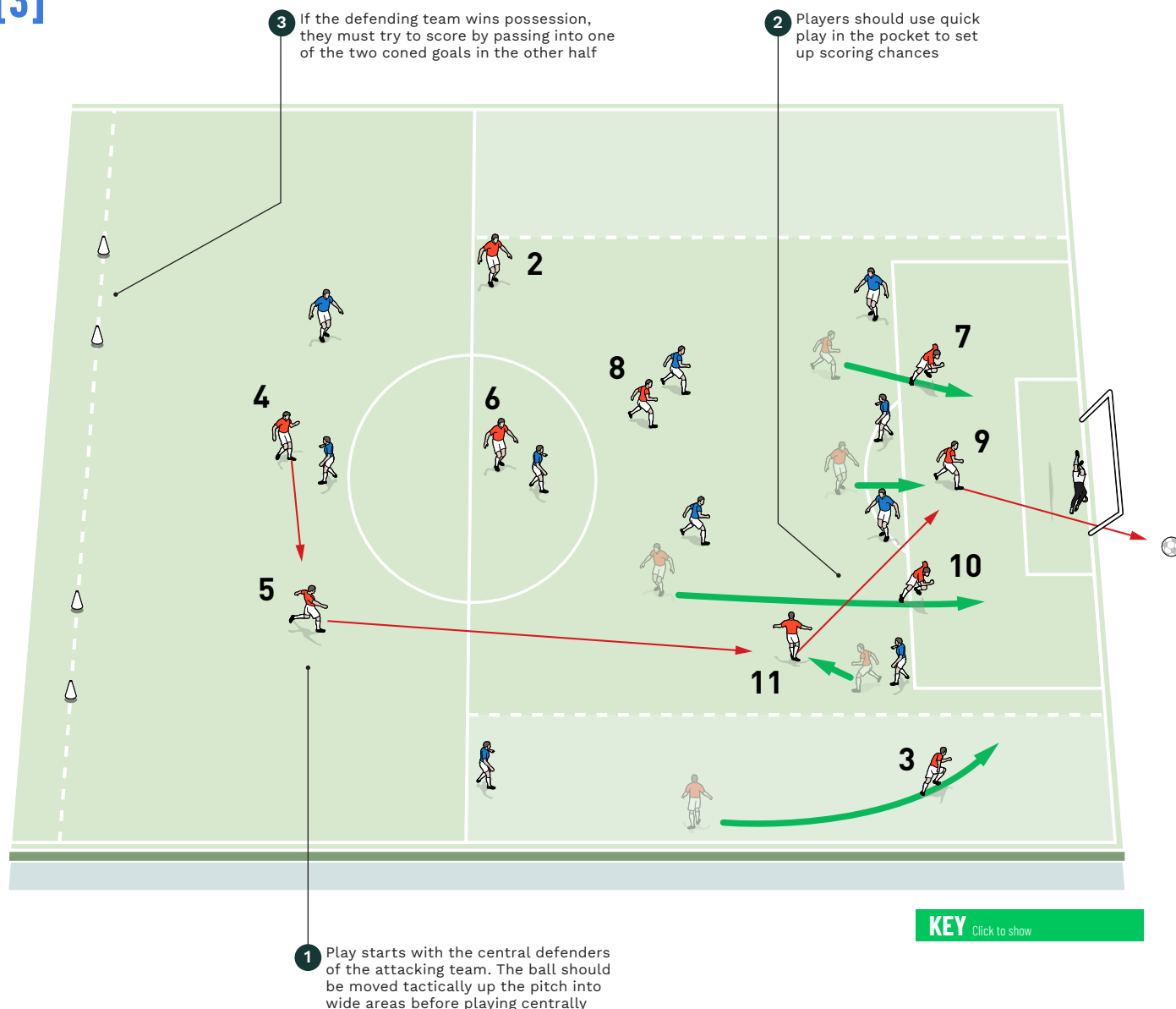
team is allowed to close down into the wide area. Players should utilise the quick play in the pocket that they learnt in the previous activities, as shown [3]. If the defending team wins the ball, they try to score by passing into one of the coned goals in the other half.

This practice is aimed at players of both elite academy level and players in developing countries, as it paints a picture of a structure that may be new to that group of players.

Reset after each attack and play for 30 minutes.

"We look for the ball to be moved up the pitch with speed to create scoring chances, utilising quick play in the pocket"

[3]



**MANAGER PROFILE****LEE BURCH****LMA AMBASSADOR**

Possessing a great deal of experience coaching in the women's game, Lee Burch was most recently manager of London Bees in the FA Women's Championship and prior to that he was head coach of Women's Super League club Yeovil Town Ladies.

He has also managed at Millwall, where he guided the Lionesses to a top-three finish in the FA Women's Super League 2, as well as picking up the LMA's divisional Manager of the Year Award for his work at the club.

He previously coached Hythe and Dibden first team and AFC Totton. He has also worked as an FA skills coach and spent seven years on the south coast working within Southampton and Hampshire's Centre of Excellence, developing female players for the elite pathway.

SESSION**DEVELOPING THE BOX MIDFIELD**

This is a great passing session looking specifically at the use of a box midfield, which could be used in various match day playing formations, such as 3-4-3, 4-2-2-2 or 3-4-2-1.

I like this session because it uses a great deal of realistic game-play repetition and it has a challenging approach that works technically within game situations. The box midfield is used to overload a three-player opposition midfield and to help dominate the centre of the pitch. It helps players to work on the areas of playing out through the midfield box, as well as getting the strikers into key positions centrally.

I would run this practice consistently when moving to a new formation in order to help lay the foundations of our play. Also, the first part of the practice can be used as a go to keep-ball session at any point. If using it to lay the foundations of our play, we would ideally run it in pre-season.

"The box midfield is used to overload a three-player midfield and to help dominate the centre of the pitch"

LEE BURCH

DEVELOPING THE BOX MIDFIELD

Set-up

Area:
Up to 60x30 yards

Equipment:
Balls, bibs, cones,
4 small goals

Number of Players:
Up to 14 players

Session time:
Passing practice: 30mins
Small-sided game: 30mins

PASSING PRACTICE

We set up a playing area of 30x30 yards, split into four 15x15-yard boxes. We're using 11 players initially before adding a further three to progress this activity.

We start with eight red possession players and three blue pressing players. Four of the red possession players and the three blue pressers start inside the main area and the four remaining red possession players are positioned on the outside.

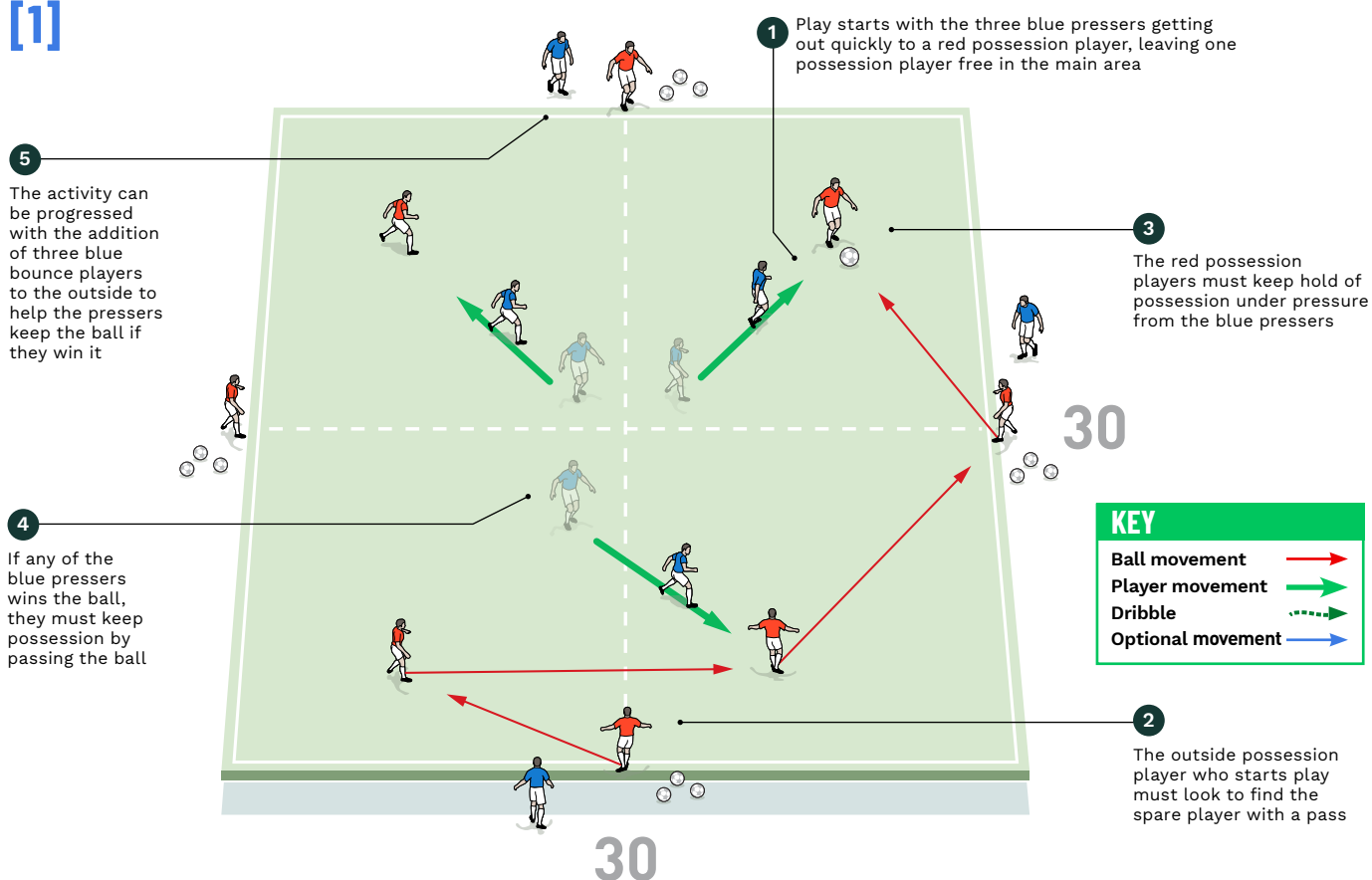
Play starts with the three blue pressing players each getting out quickly to a red possession player, leaving one possession player free. The outside player who starts the practice will look to find the spare red player with a pass and a 4v3 keep-ball practice runs from there. Players can move anywhere in the area.

The four possession players can play bounce passes with the players outside to help them keep the ball, but restrictions such as not going to the same bounce player twice or playing a middle combination before using an outside player should be encouraged.

If any of the three blue pressing players wins the ball, they must try to keep possession. After running it like this initially, we can progress the activity by adding three blue bounce players on the outside to help the blues keep possession if needed, as shown [1].

When the game breaks down, restart play with a pass from a new outside player. After all four feeders have played a ball into the area, rotate positions for both teams.

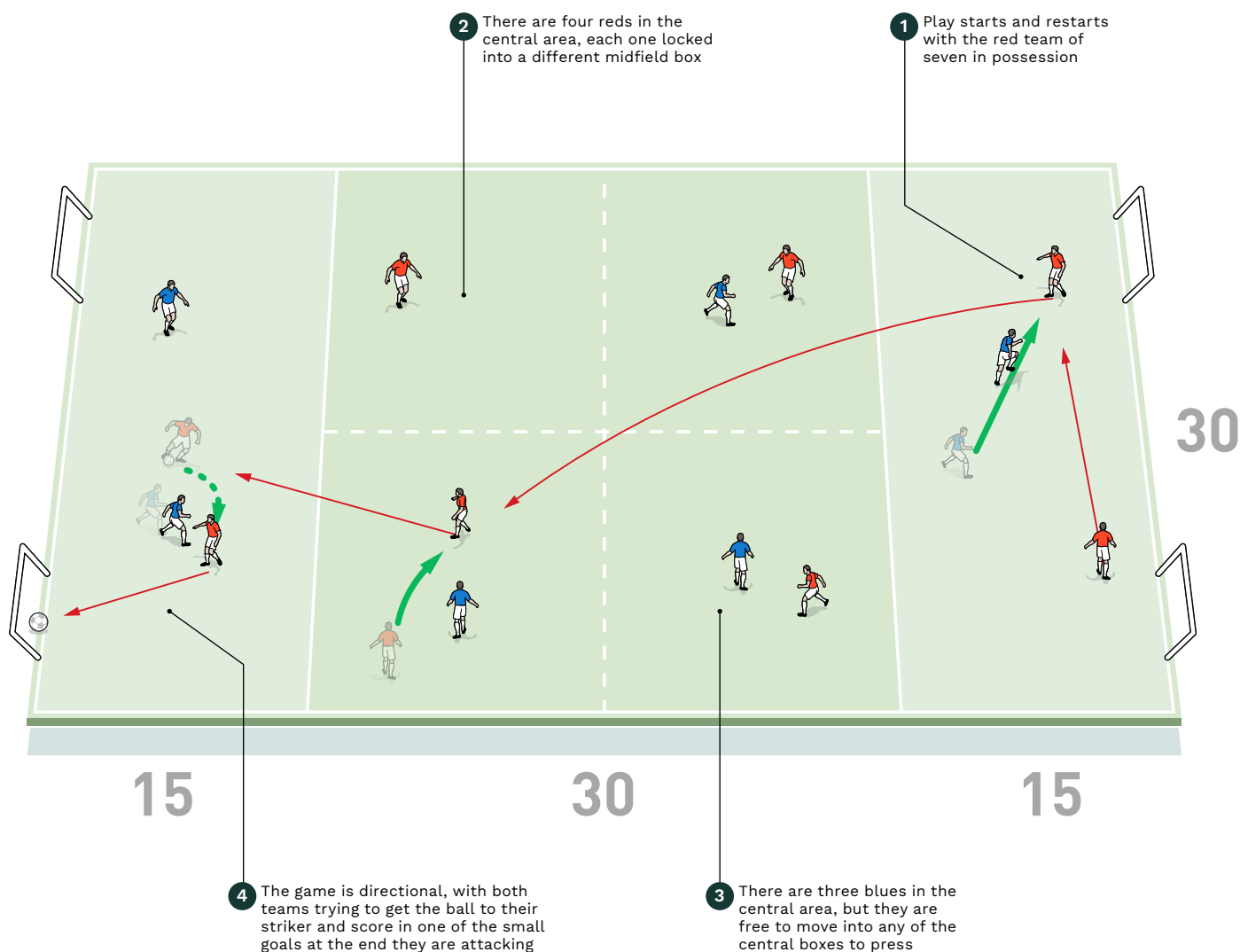
[1]



SMALL-SIDED GAME

[2a]

KEY Click to show



“We want to see players using good angles of support and demonstrating they know how to receive and play to the next player”

We progress the previous activity by extending the playing area by adding two 15-yard end zones with two small goals positioned at each end, as shown [2a]. We're using 13 outfield players split into a red possession team of seven and a blue pressing team of six. There are still four reds in the central area, with each locked into their respective boxes, plus two reds

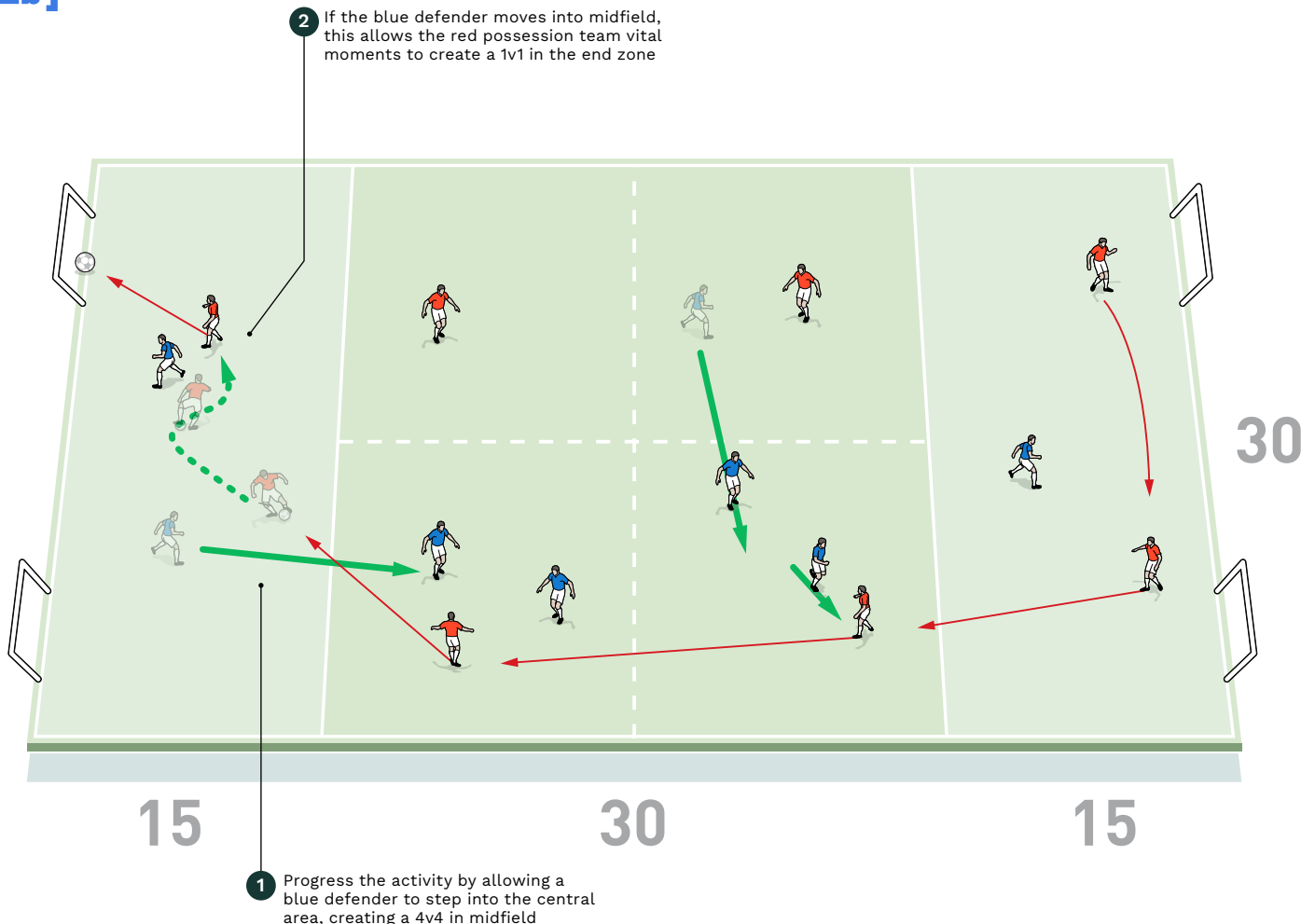
in the end zone they are defending and one red in the end zone they are attacking. There are three blues in the central area, but they are free to move into any of the central boxes to press and can double up with more than one player in a box at a time if needed, plus there are two blues in the end zone they are defending and one blue in the end zone they are attacking. ►

Play always starts and restarts with the red team of seven in possession and the game is directional, with both teams trying to score in the small goals at the end they are attacking.

We can progress the activity by allowing a blue defender to step into the midfield square, creating a 4v4 and giving the red possession team moments to create a 1v1 in the attacking third, as shown [2b].

[2b]

KEY [Click to show](#)



COACHING POINTS

What are the key things to look out for?

This is an in-possession practice and we want to see players using good angles of support and demonstrating they know how to receive and play to the next player. Players should try to create passing lines for each other and support under the ball as well as in front of it.

We want to see that players are able to find the spare player in the overload and that the spare player is in a position to receive and play or drive forward with the ball.

In the small-sided game we want to see the

defender finding the spare player with a strong pass potentially breaking lines, or maybe the forward can bounce it back into the spare player. The midfielders should try to work on switches, rotation and communication to get into key zones and between the lines.

What are the typical mistakes players might make and how do I avoid them?

Common mistakes include players getting caught behind defenders and drifting out of the game when they are the spare player. Players on the ball should look at triggers from the opposition as the defender presses the spare midfielder. Who does it leave? Does it leave space to play into?

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

IMPROVING THE COGNITIVE CYCLE

SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST DAN ABRAHAMS EXAMINES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COGNITIVE CYCLE AND HOW COACHES CAN HELP THEIR PLAYERS PERFORM AT THEIR BEST

“Think quickly. Look for spaces,” said Xavi Hernandez. “That’s what I do: look for spaces, all day.”

Xavi Hernandez was recorded as being the greatest searcher of space in football. Dr Geir Jordet, a Norwegian sport psychologist whose main body of work is focused on visual scanning in sport, recorded Xavi at 0.83 searches per second. In other words, Xavi was relentlessly engaged in visual searching.

This data gives us an indication into the make-up of elite footballers, but it’s not the whole picture. Visual scanning is one part of the equation. What research has shown is that as the game unfolds, footballers engage in a ‘cognitive cycle’. They search, they decide, and they execute.

The cognitive cycle = search-decide-execute

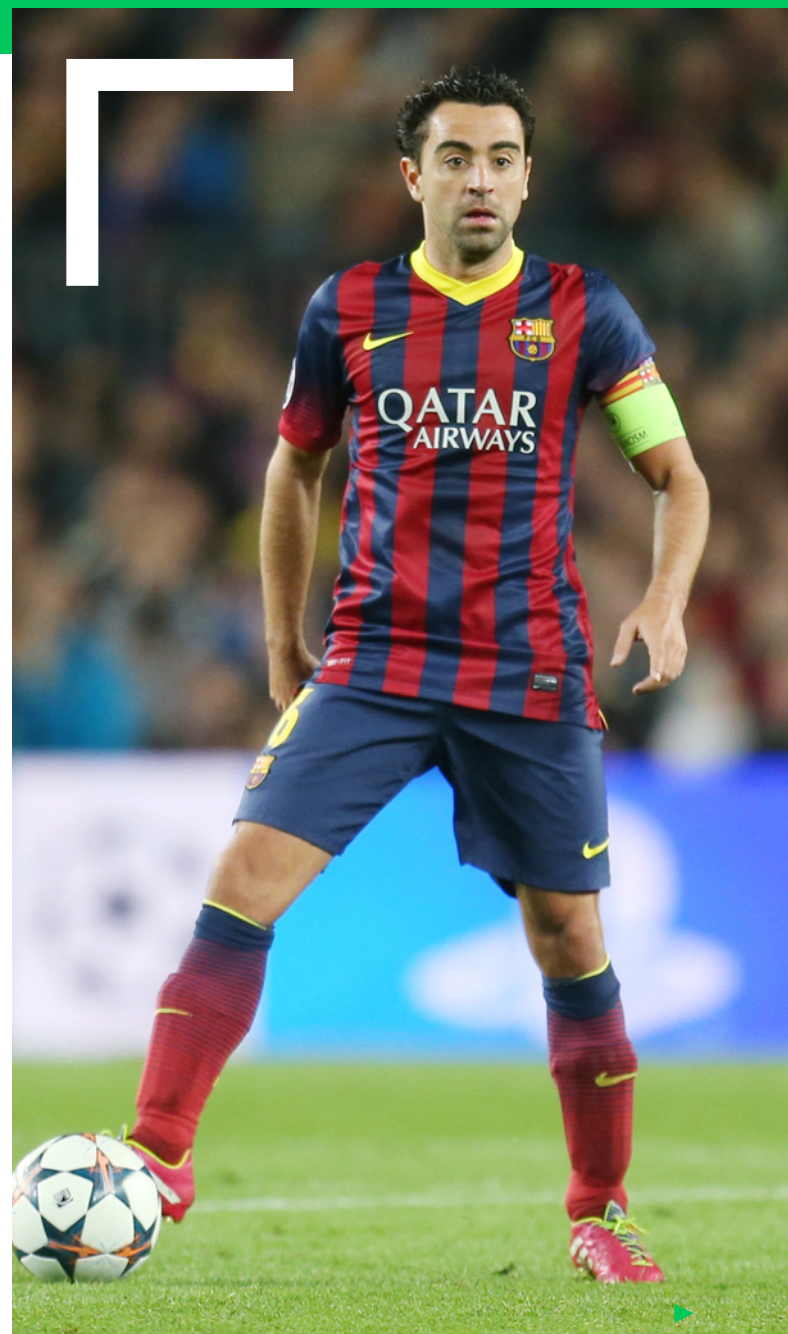
Footballers visually explore their environment – on space as it emerges and dissolves, on the movement of the opposition and team mates, on the ball, and on the relationship between the three – then they make a decision based on what they’ve seen, and then they execute based on their decision.

HELPING PLAYERS IMPROVE

This cognitive cycle happens thousands of times a game and the best players are the ones who do it quicker and more effectively than everyone else. Football may well be a physical game, but without the ability to loop through the cognitive cycle with speed and accuracy, players are more athletes than footballers.

The activities you do in your sessions – the rondos, keep-balls, small-sided games and possession games

“If Xavi holds the record for visual searching, can you challenge a player to get closer to his scanning capacity?”





– help players keep their cognitive cycle razor sharp. But that isn't enough. Even players at the very top level of the game need to be deliberate in their efforts to retain a speedy and accurate cognitive cycle.

So how do you help players improve their cycle, and how do you help the very best maintain their speed and accuracy? Here are some ideas...

Firstly, help players to be deliberate with their search behaviours. Ask them to consider how often they scan their environment. Challenge them to look up and around more. Just by having the conversation you direct their attention towards this vital cognitive component of the game.

If Xavi holds the record for visual searching, can you challenge a player to get closer to his scanning capacity? I did this once with a player at a club where the training ground had built-in cameras around the pitches. We set objectives related to his scanning, and he committed to watching himself back after training to see how often he was scanning. He found that he wasn't as engaged in his environment as he had thought (and this was a player at the very highest level). His initial feedback was simple but important – looking up and around more felt uncomfortable to him – a sure sign that he had the capability to improve his scanning and absorb more information.

Of course, looking up and around is one thing but taking in relevant information to act upon is another. Coach questions can prompt players to consider the

meaning of the clues and cues that are appearing and disappearing in their environment.

The decision part of the cognitive cycle tends to be more automated than the search behaviour. Most decisions happen without conscious thought, largely as a consequence of the thousands of hours of playing and coaching that players have engaged in. Whilst football is a free-flowing sport, it still contains structure and rules, and so players have seen and retained thousands of defensive and attacking plays. Their brains are wired to make instant decisions.

AUTOMATED DECISIONS

But the presence of automated decisions doesn't mean players can't improve their ability to make quicker and more accurate decisions. Doing so is strongly mediated by their ability to pay attention to small pieces of information that provide clues as to how play is going to unfold. These small details can include noticing which way other players are looking, briefly considering whether the opposition is engaging in repeated patterns of play, and checking the body shape and weight shift of a player who may be about to set off on a run.

This is tough to coach, but possible. It can be conducted on the pitch, in training, by asking players questions related to what they're looking at, and what environmental information they're seeing that's influencing the decisions they're making. But it may be preferable to coach this away from training in front of ►

game footage, saying something like: “Notice how the striker got away from you there. It looks like you had scanned that location, but what were you looking at, because you didn’t spot his run quick enough? Can you tell me more about what you’re scanning for and what you’re striving to detect in those situations?”

The word ‘detect’ is a pertinent one. A powerful way to help players become more engaged with the information in their environment as they play (and to consider its meaning in greater depth) is to look to support their ability to be a great detective. Xavi was a great detective of the information sources in his environment that gave him clues as to how play was about to unfold. By taking time to ask players about what they’re striving to detect on the pitch, you can help players think deeper about the rich changing pattern of information that they see as play unfolds.

EXECUTION OF TECHNIQUE

Whilst we want to help players engage in conscious search behaviours, and we want to challenge them to consider the meaning of the information in their environment (as it emerges and dissolves), the final part of the cognitive cycle – the execution of technique – should be automated. Rarely do we want players to pay attention to or to steer their actions.

This technical automation is a result of the millions of touches of the ball they’ve had over their lifetime in the game. It’s a consequence of all the passing activities, the rondos, and the keep-balls.

However, purposefully engaging in some form of technical practice is something all footballers should consciously continue to do. Isolated practice is necessary to retain technique and touch.

Professional golfers will practise their fundamentals every day. They’ll work on their stance and set up religiously in every practice session. Professional tennis players will engage in activities that help them to repeat their basic forehand and backhand motions. Both sports require automated motions that can be repeated under pressure time and again.

The advantage isolated practice has is that information is stripped away (there is no disruption from other players), allowing players to focus on their fundamentals. They can place their attention on the feel of a perfect first touch, on the sensations of a weighted and carefully flighted pass, and on the timing of a 1v1 challenge.

Simply by starting to have conversations with your players about the cognitive cycle, you’ll help improve their ability to work at it. Don’t underestimate the importance of players, even at the very top level of the game, sharpening their cognitive sword.



“The presence of automated decisions doesn’t mean players can’t improve their ability to make quicker and more accurate decisions”

PLAYER CARE

MAKING THE TRANSITION

PLAYER CARE CONSULTANT HUGO SCHECKTER DISCUSSES THE SIX STEPS TO ENSURING A SMOOTH TRANSITION WHEN A NEW PLAYER JOINS YOUR CLUB.

With any new signings, it's vital to hit the ground running. Managers and coaches are often under great pressure for their new players to integrate with the squad as quickly as they can, so those of us who work in player care make sure this is given the best possible chance of happening by getting players and their families settled as soon as possible.

Personally, I have always broken a player's journey with a club into three phases: onboarding, ongoing and offboarding. Obviously, onboarding is the first phase and this stage doesn't end until a player has got the following six major areas of transition organised. Some are not applicable to all players, but they're among the biggest causes of stress to newly relocated families.

1. Accommodation: How this is arranged for a player depends on a number of factors, including budget, length of contract, family size and area where the club is based. But getting players out of the hotel and into something they can call their own is key to their successful transition.

2. Transport: This sounds self-explanatory, but does the player have the right licence to drive in the country where your club is based? Even if they do, are they familiar with rules and how to drive? What public transport options are available? Is it COVID secure? Looking at sensible solutions to transport problems is key. For instance, if they're on a four-month loan, they shouldn't sign up for a 12-month car lease. Suggest other options such as taxis, the bus, the train and help them work out the routes if it's all new to them.

3. Communications: Access to the internet and to a phone is vital for staying in touch, but make sure new signings have all the key numbers they need, know who to call with questions, and are included in all the right WhatsApp groups. It's also important to let them know if there are roaming charges or foreign call charges they should be aware of.

4. Visas: For most this should be sorted before they sign, but does the player have right to work in the country where the club is based? Does the player's visa support family and friends coming to stay as well? And if the club is in the UK, does Brexit change anything for the player and his situation?

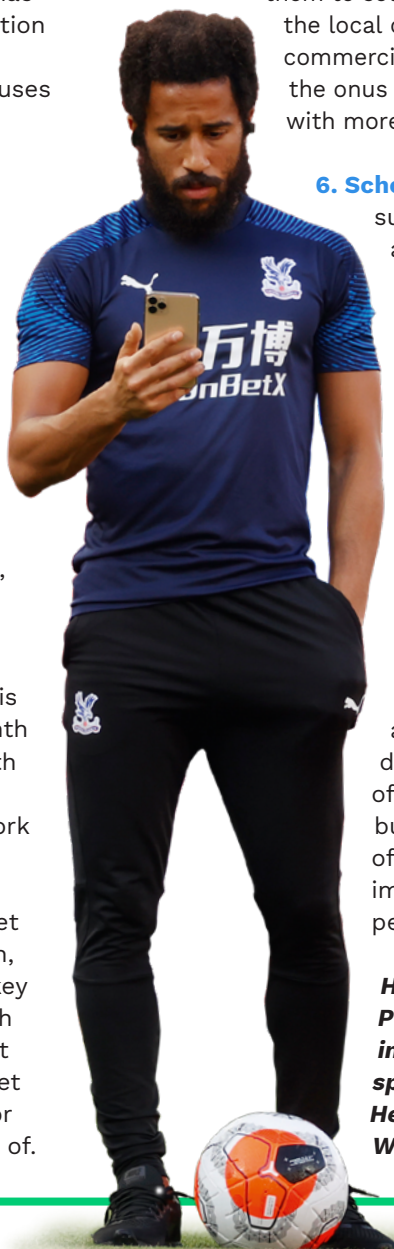
5. Language Lessons: I am a firm believer that players should learn the local language as soon as possible, either through private tutoring or local classes. This allows them to settle in better with their team mates and the local community, as well as help the club with commercial and media obligations. Translators put the onus on the club and do not provide players with more than a short-term solution.

6. Schools: If the player has children, making sure they have appropriate schooling arranged can help a family to settle in. Can you provide a list of good schools or explain how the process works? Players are much more likely to stay with a club if their family is happy.

"Make sure players have all the key numbers they need and are included in all the right WhatsApp groups"

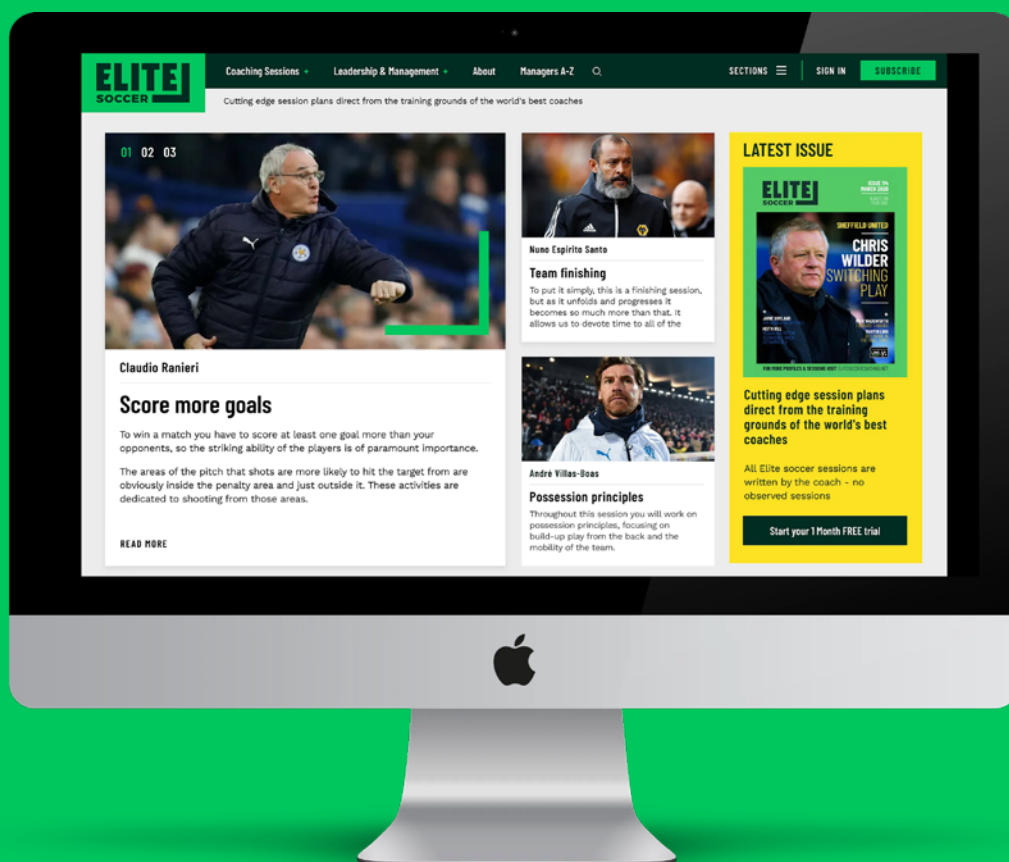
This is far from an exhaustive list and has varying degrees of relevance, depending on your club and the number of players from abroad you're signing, but having at least thought about each of these areas can provide a great first impression and help reduce transition periods for a new arrival.

Hugo Scheckter is the MD of The Player Care Group, a consultancy that implements and improves player care at sporting organisations around the world. He was previously at Southampton and West Ham. www.playercaregroup.co.uk



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