

Essential 3-5-2 and 3-4-3 Training Exercises



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Introduction

The enclosed exercises have been used ourselves in training sessions working on the 3-5-2 formation.

The exercises are a mix of specific tactical work for playing three at the back and with wing-backs, plus also specific requirements within the game plan such as playing out from the back and counter-attacking. We have also included a couple of warm-up exercises. We have also included adaptations to work more on the 3-4-3 formation.

All the practices have been used successfully in our training, and have produced enjoyable sessions which have seen improvement and a successful implementation of the formation. All coaches have the challenge of player availability and different numbers to the planned session, so we have tried to also include adaptations for player numbers and to increased or decreased difficulty.

The diagrams were created using the excellent [Tactics Manager](#) by [SoccerTutor.com](#).

Equipment

Below is a list of equipment that it's well worth having available.

- Balls (most important thing!)
- Bibs (three different colours)
- Cones (standard "space marker" type)
- Goals (full size, 7-a-side, and the small "pop-up type)
- Whistle (unless you have a good "wolf whistle"!))
- Pump
- Pen/Paper to take notes
- Mannequins (harder for some coaches as they're not as easy to carry around, we've tried out [these fold-up ones!](#))

Exercises

1. Rondo Warm-Up

Set-Up:

- Approx 30 x 15 yards area
- 13 players

Equipment Required:

- Balls (plenty around the edge to keep the play active)
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones

Aim:

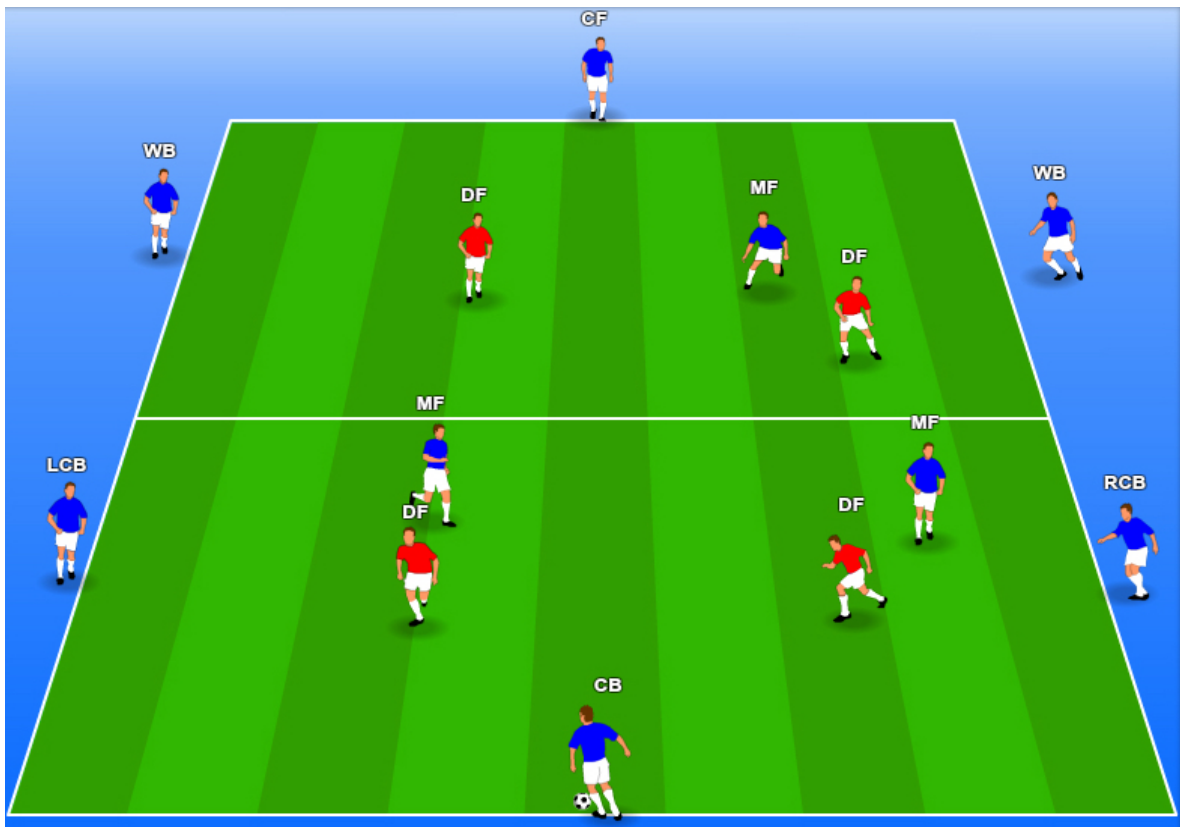
This variation on a well-known warm-up focuses on both team shape, and the vital rotation of the midfield three. On the defensive side, the coach can work with the four defenders on effective pressing.

Description:

The players in possession (Blues in this example) set up with six players on the outside and three centrally. The defenders (Reds here) all play centrally.

The team in possession look to keep hold of the ball playing either round the edge or through the central players, with the defenders pressing to try and prevent them doing so.

Defenders score points for winning possession, award points for team in possession for number of passes or completing a task (eg from CB to CF via MF).



Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Positional play
- Open body position to receive
- Quality touch/pass
- Decision Making
- Awareness of others (particularly central players)
- Movement/Rotation (central players)
- Play forward where possible

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- Pressing as a unit
- Making pitch compact
- When/where to press

Variations/Progression:

- Restrict defensive players to only two in each half of the area
- Restrict number of touches for team in possession
- Work with 3 v 3 in the centre with a turnover of possession (three in control play with the players on the outside but switch to defending when possession turns over)
- Adjust size of area to increase/decrease difficulty

2. Simple Screening Practise

Set-Up:

- Approx 30 x 15 yards area
- 12 players

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (three colours)
- Cones

Aim:

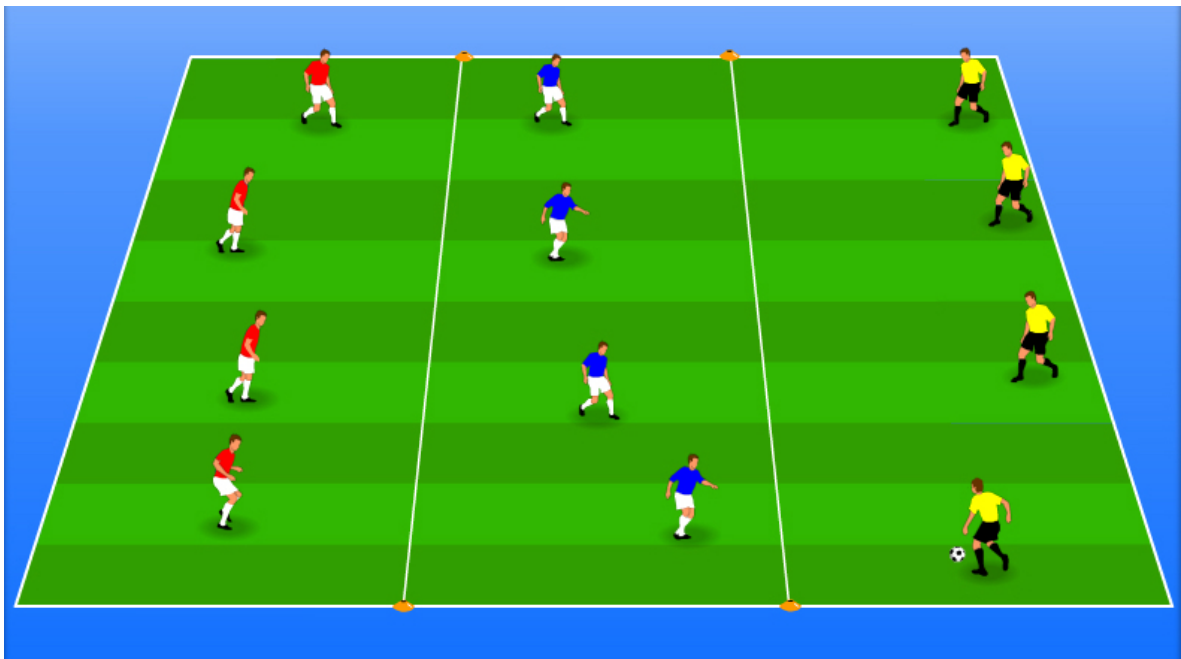
Improve defensive screening which is important when using 3-5-2 and 3-4-3 and adopting a less aggressive press, particularly when forwards and midfielders are defending from the front.

Description:

The players are divided into three teams of four players. Two of the teams keep possession with a defending team in the middle.

One of the teams in possession start with the ball, looking to find spaces to pass through to the other team, with the defending team screening passes and trying to intercept.

The teams in possession score points for completing a pass between them, with defenders scoring points for interceptions.



Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Patience
- Open body position to receive
- Spotting killer pass and execution
- Decision Making

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- When to press, when to drop
- Defensive shape
- Screening
- Support and cover

Variations/Progression:

- Exercise can work with different numbers (anything up to 6 v 6 v 6)
- Limit touches for possession team at each end
- Allow one defender to go into end zone (should alternate to keep defensive shape)
- Add attacker as link player in central area

3. Midfield Rotation

Set-Up:

- Either grids or use 1/3 pitch
- 11 or 12 players

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (three colours)
- Cones

Aim:

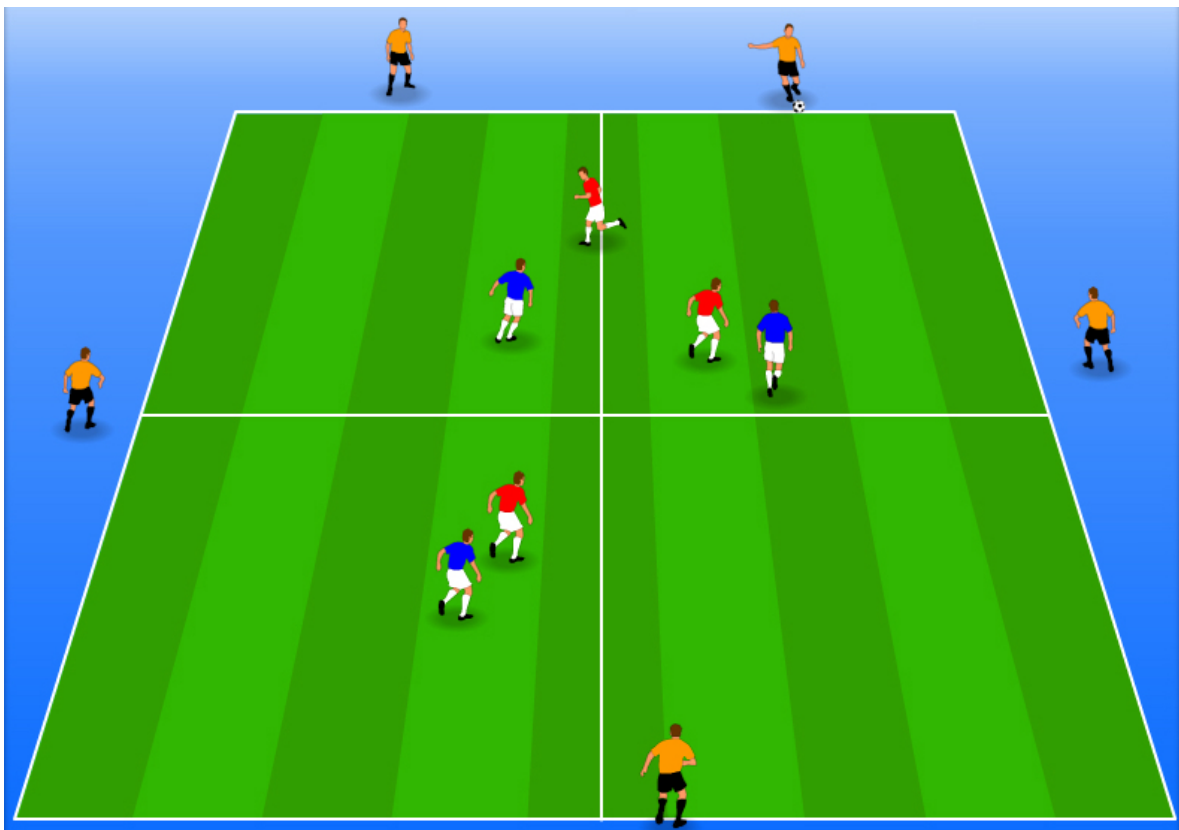
Improve movement and possession in central midfield areas and encourage rotation of midfield three.

Description:

The players are set up as follows – two teams of three in the central four squares, wing-backs or wide players on either side, one or two defenders at one end, and forward player at the other. The aim is to get the ball from the defender(s) to the attacker via the central area, using the wide players for wall passes.

The three central players not in possession defend and try to win the ball.

Players in the central area are restricted to one player from each team in an individual square.



Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Awareness
- Movement
- Open body position to receive
- Thinking ahead
- Decision Making

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- Screening
- Support and cover

Variations/Progression:

- The practise can be adapted for the two man midfield, working on angles to receive – one player dropping to receive, the other playing higher.
- If players struggle initially, remove one of the teams of three and practise with no opposition – work on awareness of other players movement to create space.
- As a progression, remove the central grid and allow free movement.

4. Crossing and Finishing

Set-Up:

- Full width x 36 yards (two penalty boxes)
- 16 players (including two goalkeepers)
- Penalty boxes coned off

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Two goals

Aim:

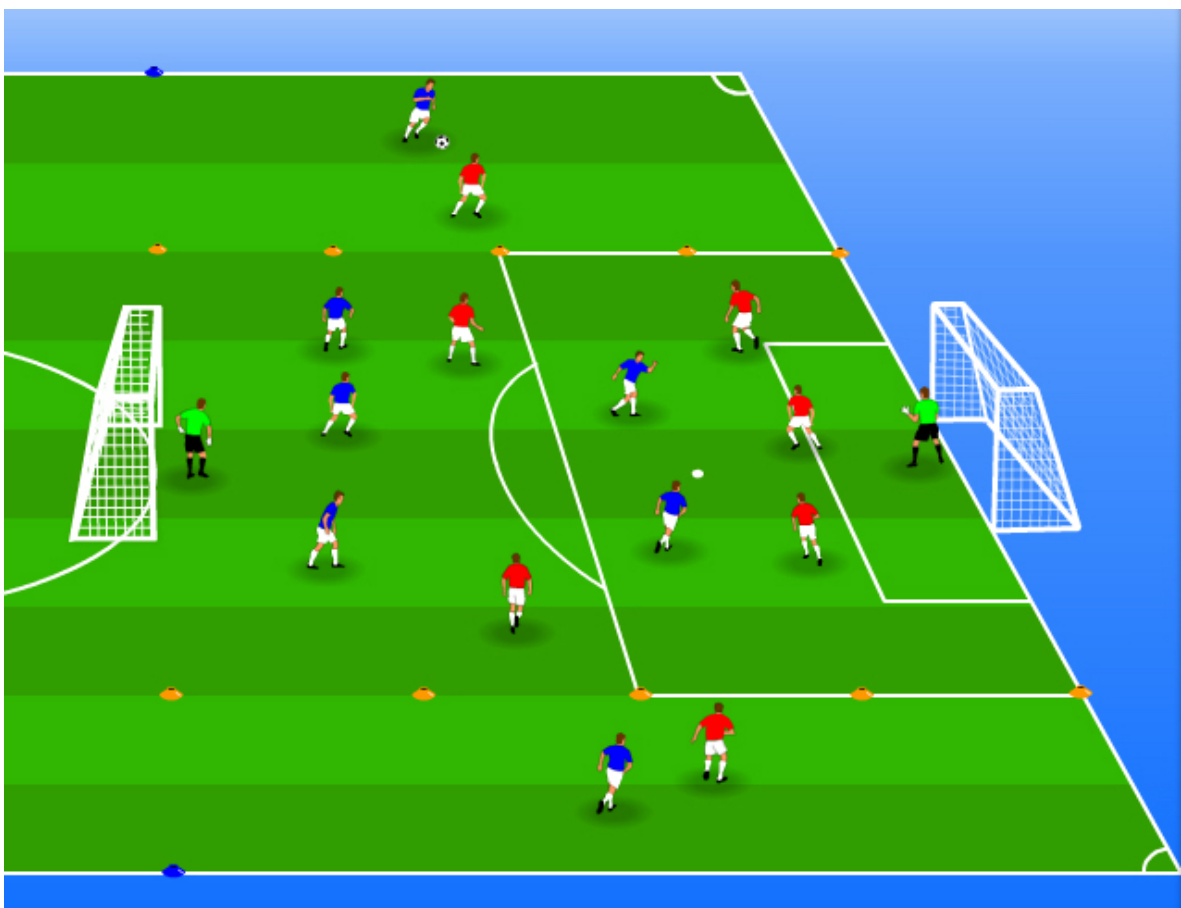
This intensive practise is great for working on defending and attacking wing-backs, as well as crossing and finishing. Can also be used for working with defending in central areas.

Description:

The players are divided up into two teams of seven plus goalkeepers, made up of three defenders, two wing-backs and two attackers.

Play starts with one of the 'keepers who distributes to one of the wing-backs in the wide zones. They look to beat their opponent and deliver a cross for the attackers to score.

If the opposition win possession, they must play via a wing-back to score.



Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Goalkeeper distribution
- Wide play – beat opponent and cross
- Passing
- Decision Making
- Finishing

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- Defending in wide areas
- Defending crosses
- Goalkeepers dealing with crosses

Variations/Progression:

- Play with neutral wing-backs who play for the team in possession
- Remove the central split so play 5 v 5 in central areas
- Allow wide players into central areas

5. Midfield possession & playing into forward

Set-Up:

- Approx half pitch
- Approx 20 x 20 square centrally at opposite end to goal
- Wide areas zoned off
- Minimum 11 players

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Goal

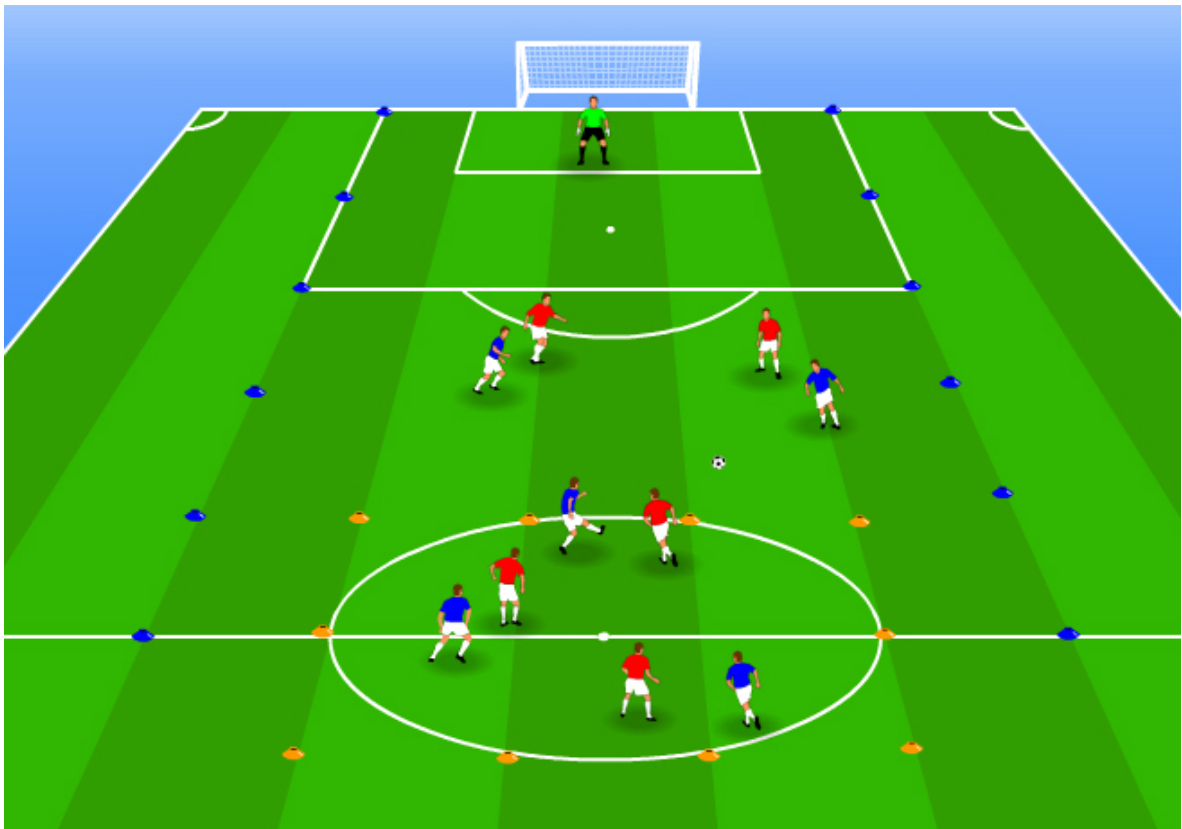
Aim:

Improve link play between midfield three and forwards, including striker dropping off into space to receive, and midfield support from deep.

Description:

The practise starts in the smaller square with a 3 v 3 possession exercise – one team must complete five passes before playing into one of the strikers.

Once the ball is played, one midfielder can join the strikers to make a 3 v 2 overload, and look to score.



Key Coaching Points:

- Passing/movement in square
- Awareness of forward pass to striker – think one pass ahead
- Striker movement to receive (one drop into space, other attack space in behind)
- Positive attitude in 3 v 2 to score
- Good movement and quick play to create goalscoring opportunities
- Finishing

Variations/Progression:

- Add wide players (wing-backs) plus two additional defenders – wide players play in coned zones
- Allow one defensive midfielder to drop back to defend when ball is played out
- Add defensive midfielder to shield the striker movement
- Remove zones and play full width

6. Pattern of Play

Set-Up:

- Approx half to two-thirds pitch
- 13 players including goalkeeper – option to add other defensive players as progressions

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Goal
- Optional mannequins

Aim:

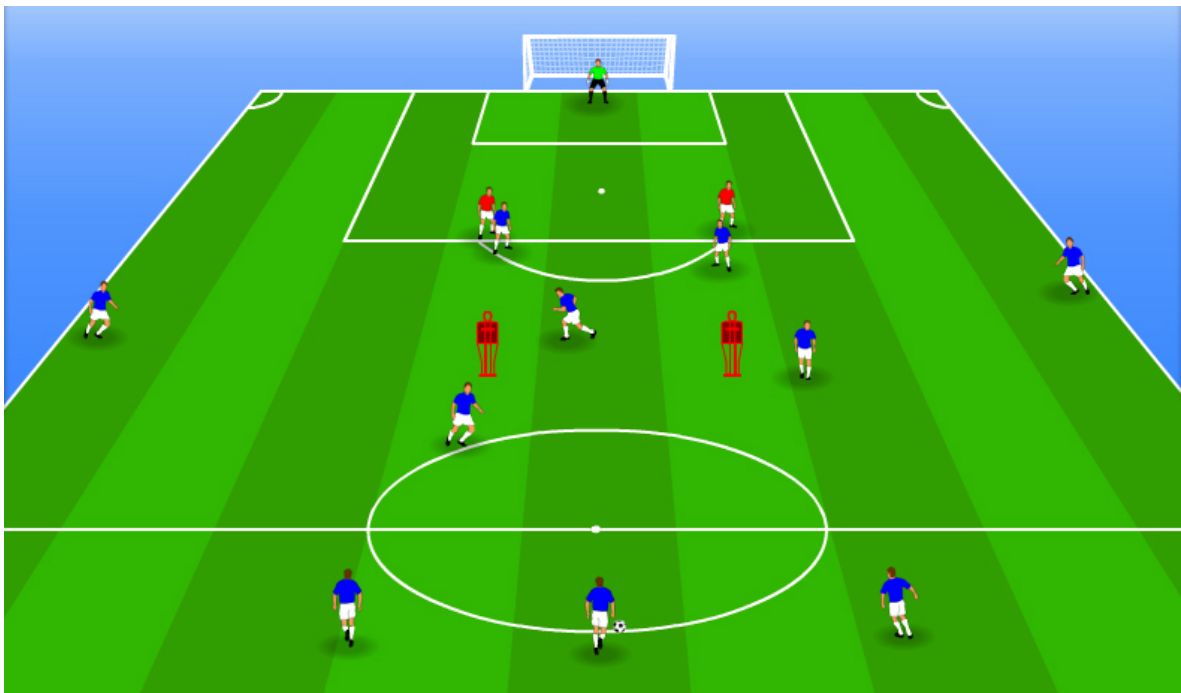
To practise patterns of play in possession, work on trigger movements, creating chances and scoring. This exercise can then progress into the Phase of Play in exercise 9.

Description:

The practise can either start with the goalkeeper clearing to the main team's centre-back or with the coach feeding the ball to the same player.

The players work on set patterns of play and trigger movements – moving the ball, switching play, using wide areas and creating chances. The two defenders are restricted to defending in and around the penalty area. Cones can be used to show start positions and movements and mannequins can be used as obstacles to prevent easy or unrealistic passing channels.

Play should be at match pace, and touches should be restricted if required to keep tempo up.



Key Coaching Points:

- Movements of individuals
- Triggers
- Player rotation
- Overlaps
- Crossing and finishing

Variations/Progression:

- Additional defensive players can be added where appropriate – for example, defensive midfielder to screen balls into strikers' feet and full-backs to defend wide areas
- The coach can work on various patterns of play as deemed appropriate

7. Functional practice for defending in wide areas with a back three

Set-Up:

- Approx half pitch with one wing coned off
- 13 players including goalkeeper
- Optional feeder/target player

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Goal

Aim:

Building understanding of defensive responsibility when playing with a back three. Includes role of the wing back and the deepest lying midfielder.

Description:

The practise starts either with the feeder player or with the coach playing to one of the attacking players. The attacking team (Reds in this example) look to score, with the defending team (Blues) trying to win the ball and play to the target player or into a target zone.

The coach should brief the defence on how to defend in wide areas...should one of the wide centre-backs cover wide areas, should the defensive midfielder drop in to provide extra cover, what are the roles of the wing-backs.



Key Coaching Points:

- Starting position
- Responsibilities
- When to press, when to hold
- Communication

Variations/Progression:

- Create overload on attacking team to put additional pressure on defence (can use feeder as deep lying player)
- This practise can easily progress to a phase of play exercise across the width of the pitch

8. Phase of Play – Playing out from the back

Set-Up:

- Half to two-thirds pitch
- 17 players including goalkeeper

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Goal

Aim:

Improve team's ability to play out from the back, including use of the wing-backs, midfield rotation and working against an aggressive press.

Description:

The practise starts with the team in (Blues in this example) looking to play out from a goal kick scenario. The team look to complete a pass or run the ball through one of the small goals at the opposite end.

The opposition (Reds) look to win possession and score in the main goal. The coach should instruct the team how they should play (ie aggressive press or drop off and defend deep).



Key Coaching Points:

- Starting positions (goalkeeper tees up centrally, split wide centre-backs, high wing-backs, offset central defender to allow midfield to receive)
- Movement to create space
- Angle/body position to receive
- Decision Making
- Patience
- Movement/Rotation (midfield players)
- Timing of runs (particularly wing-backs)
- Play forward where possible
- Reaction to losing possession

Variations/Progression:

- Add a striker on the team playing out and defender on the opposition to give a further option (longer pass, feed off striker lay-off)
- Play with only two central midfielders (particularly if you are working on 3-4-3 over 3-5-2)

9. Phase of Play – Attacking combinations

Set-Up:

- Half to two-thirds pitch
- 16 players including goalkeeper

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Goal

Aim:

Improve play in the middle and attacking thirds, creating chances and scoring goals, including wing-backs, wide players (in 3-4-3) and midfield runs from deep.

Description:

The practise starts with the goalkeeper for the defensive team (Reds in this example) playing a "misdirected" pass to one the attacking team (Blues here).

The attacking team must then construct attacking moves to create chances and score goals. The attacking team's prime objective is to score, if the defenders win possession they should look to maintain and complete a pass past the end zone line to score.



Key Coaching Points:

- Angle/body position to receive pass
- Decision Making
- Positive movement/passing
- Patience
- Timing of runs in final third
- Overlaps
- Combination Play
- Crossing
- Finishing
- Reaction to losing possession

Variations/Progression:

- Work with wing-backs and wide players in 3-4-3
- Remove one player from defending team if attacking team are struggling to create chances
- Addition of a deep lying defensive player on attacking team for more direct play
- The practise can be reconfigured to work on defending from the front (see next exercise).

10. Phase of Play – Defending from the front & counter-attacking

Set-Up:

- Half to two-thirds pitch
- 16 players including goalkeeper

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Goal
- Optional Mini-Goals

Aim:

Teach tactics for defending from the front, including how aggressively to press, when to press, when to drop, and screening.

Description:

The practise starts with a goal-kick for the team in possession (Reds in this example). The team are looking to play out and score in one of the mini-goals at the far end (alternatively complete a pass over the end zone or hit a target player).

The coach is focusing on the opposition (Blues here) and working on tactics to win possession and then counter-attack, particularly when to press and when to drop, and reacting positively to winning possession.



Key Coaching Points:

- Starting position (high or medium press)
- When to press, when to drop off
- Screening
- Support and cover
- Maintain possession at turnover
- Quality first pass after turnover
- Counter-attacking
- Reaction to losing possession (again)

Variations/Progression:

- Set up shown is 3-5-2 with mid press against a 4-4-2. You should set up based on likely opponent tactics and your own formation.
- Remove one player from defending team – work on covering when a man down
- Extend to $\frac{3}{4}$ pitch and add strikers to team playing out and defenders to team trying to win possession



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