

COACHING *THE* 4-2-3-1



BY STEVIE GRIEVE



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WORLD CLASS COACHING

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Introduction to 'Coaching the 4-2-3-1'

Hello, and thank you firstly for taking the time to open the front page of this book, it is a great honour for me to have the opportunity to write a book of such importance in the modern game. There are many books on coaching various formations and I have taken inspiration from Michele Tossani's book 'The coaches guide to the 4-3-3' to give me a guide for a format for this book. I would like to thank Mike Saif of World Class Coaching for giving me this fantastic opportunity, as without his trust in me I wouldn't be doing this and also to Tom Mura for editing this book.

The Beginning of the 4-2-3-1

An explanation of how the 4-2-3-1 system grew in popularity and the coaches who established it as one of the most widely used systems in the world.

The beginning of the 4-2-3-1

The 4-2-3-1 started taking some shape around the time of just before Euro 2000, with Arsene Wenger's Arsenal starting to evolve from a 4-4-2 with Dennis Bergkamp dropping deep to play behind Ian Wright, Nicolas Anelka then after Anelka left, Thierry Henry. Various wingers provided support higher up the field knowing Patrick Vieira was behind them anchoring the midfield with Emmanuel Petit. Similarly, the French World Cup Winners who then won the European Championship in 2000, used a similar formation as Arsenal, using Didier Deschamps as the anchor man, playing beside Emmanuel Petit in the centre of midfield and Zinedine Zidane as the attacking midfielder, making a triangular central midfield with Zidane as the number 10, and with a vast array of players able to play wide and centrally, including Thierry Henry, Youri Djorkaeff, Robert Pires and David Trezeguet, used 4-2-3-1.

From this point on, the usual 4-4-2 formation which had dominated the 90's was beginning to evolve, with some teams using players who could drop into the hole and play as an advanced playmaker, with the central midfielders becoming deep lying playmakers who stay behind the ball and only occasionally break forward, players like Paul Scholes would do this from midfield brilliantly. Over the next 12 years from Euro 2000, more teams would play with a 4-3-3 which is now evolving like 4-4-2 into a 4-2-3-1 with players rotating positions and able to play in various areas of the field comfortably.

The 4-4-2 is outnumbered in midfield and as the 4-2-3-1 plays over 2 midfield lines, when the 2 central midfielders drop off to find possession, they can turn and when pressed, have a central out ball. Jose Mourinho said about playing in a 4-3-3 (which also uses a triangular midfield, although inverted in 4-2-3-1)

"Look, if I have a triangle in midfield – Claude Makelele and 2 others in front – I will always have an advantage of a pure 4-4-2 where the central midfielders are side by side. That's because I will have an extra man. It starts with Makelele who is between the lines. If nobody comes to him, he can see the whole pitch and has time. If he gets closed down, it means one of the 2 other midfielders are open. If they are closed down and the other teams' wingers come inside to help, it means there is now space for us on the flank, either for our own wingers or full backs. There is nothing a pure 4-4-2 can do to stop things."

Mourinho was stating this about a 4-3-3, and it is the same in a 4-2-3-1; having 3 central midfielders in a triangle, there is always a spare player when pressed in midfield or space on the sides if wingers tuck in to help against a 4-4-2. If for example both central midfielders pressed the 2 in the 4-2-3-1, a pass into the hole for the number 10 is available. If the wingers tuck in and press, the full backs can be released. If possession is lost in a 4-2-3-1 in this position, there are 6 players who can defend, instead of 5, giving more security in possession.

Mourinho's example of 4-2-3-1 v 4-4-2



The midfield is easily penetrated with the 2 central midfielders pressing the ball and now the attack is 4v4.



The wingers tuck in to press the ball and the space is now on the side to attack, possibly making a 2v1.

I think that Jose Mourinho has been the manager to find the most success out of the 4-2-3-1 recently at Real Madrid, where he has toppled the unstoppable looking Barcelona and even managed to win in the Nou Camp, 18 months after losing 5-0 at the same venue when using a 4-3-3 to match Barcelona all over the field. Various national teams have been using the 4-2-3-1 in recent years, including Germany, Spain (who mix 4-3-3 and 4-2-3-1), Brazil, Portugal and Holland. At the Olympics we saw teams like Japan and Mexico also use the 4-2-3-1 to success – Japan beating Spain 1-0 and Mexico winning the Olympics, beating favourites Brazil 2-1 in the final.

The success of the 4-2-3-1 is due to its flexibility and the ability to easily evolve quickly into a new formation without changing too many players' positions drastically – Dropping the wingers 15 yards deeper creates a 4-4-1-1, pushing the wingers 15 yards forward and moving the attacking midfielder deeper creates a 4-3-3, and this can be invaluable in the modern game when players are rotating positions to create spaces in the defence, but this can also be used in an offensive phase, where you can outnumber a midfield quite easily when the full backs push forward, creating a 2-4-3-1 formation and allowing a huge overload in midfield, over two lines, allowing more opportunities to penetrate the midfield line in a pure 4-4-2. The ability to create triangles and provide support all over the field for the player in possession is a necessity as teams play with faster pressure on the ball and force teams to play with 2 touches at most.

Many teams have now adapted the 4-2-3-1 as their main formation as they know that should it start to become known and predictable, a couple of quick positional changes can allow more freedom for the attack and gives the opposition the problem of how to re-adjust to the new attacking shape, as they may have set-up all week in training to play against a 4-2-3-1 but with the flexibility it has, they have adapted to a new formation, like 3-5-2 as Manchester City will sometimes use in the 2012/2013 season, pushing the full backs into midfield and changing the configuration of the team or making a change to find the right balance of players to cover the positions needed to re-adjust to the change of shape. In the Champions League, we have seen Manchester United play 4-2-3-1 at home then move to a 4-1-4-1 away from home with the wingers dropping deep, and one of the central midfielders pushing forward to allow 4 players to support the lone central striker on the counter attack – a swift adjustment like this can stop the momentum of the oppositions attack or help add an extra player able to support when on the counter attack or if they play a wide game with lot of overlaps and crosses.

The 4-2-3-1 formation allows coaches to choose the best balance for their team at any point of a game; play defensively with the wide players pressing and tracking attacking full backs, the central midfielders able to help cover inside of the full back in the common scenario of a winger cutting inside onto his stronger foot, or to move to a more attacking game with the wide players able to tuck in and allow more space on the outside for attacking full backs to use the space on the sides and play almost with 4 central attackers, 3 of whom between the lines of defence and midfield.

Teams who have been successful using the 4-2-3-1 in recent seasons:

Real Madrid – La Liga winners 2011/2012

Spain – World Cup Winners 2010, European Championship winners 2008, 2012

Manchester City – Premiership winners 2011/2012

Borussia Dortmund – Bundesliga winners 2010/2011 and double winners 2011/2012

Chelsea – Champions League Winners 2011/2012

How can we as coaches teach this to our players, and what are the things we should look for in our players to allow success playing this flexible formation?

The 4-2-3-1 Basic Set Up

This chapter explains how the 4-2-3-1 is organized and how it differs from the 4-4-2, 4-3-3 and 4-5-1.

The 4-2-3-1 Basic Set Up – Why is it different from a 4-4-2, 4-3-3 or 4-5-1?

The 4-2-3-1 is different because it allows flexibility that the other formations cannot match, it allows mass coverage of spaces on the field and leaves no real gaps between players, 4-4-2 leaves a large space ahead of the wingers to run into and run back into to defend, this space is smaller for a 4-2-3-1 in a 4-3-3, there is a lot of space between the midfield and centre forward, unless players from midfield move forward into it, the wingers move inside or the centre forward moves deep into it, leaving spaces in midfield, wide or at centre forward respectively. The 4-5-1 covers the hole line across the middle of the field but to play against a 4-2-3-1, players must drop off or push ahead of the line to compete, leaving spaces to play triangles and penetrate the lines. The only weakness that the 4-2-3-1 may have is that often they will only attack with 4 players; 5 if a midfielder moves ahead, leaving a space in the area between defence and midfield, or 6 if the full backs both push forward – leaving spaces on the sides for a counter attack. If a team is brave, both full backs and a midfielder will move forward to play in attack with 7 players, often against a similar number of defenders.

If only 4 players attack v a 4-4-2, they attack 4v8, against a 4-3-3, they attack 4v7 and a 4-5-1, it is 4v9, so support from one of the midfielders and at least one of the full backs is a must to allow at least some form of competition against a well organised defence.



In attack, the back 4 should be spread wide with the full backs creating a triangle between defence and midfield, making it easier to build attacks from the back. As there are 2 players in the centre, players can make runs ahead of the ball to open up a space for a longer pass inside to the far side central midfielder,

which can speed up the play from defence into attack. The 3 attacking midfielders play around 10-15 yards ahead of the 2 central midfielders, able to leave enough space to drop deep and possibly create overloads against a 2 man central midfield, but also to offer passes behind the opposition midfield line to turn and attack the back 4. They also play very high up, looking to play close enough to the lone striker to allow quick combinations with the other attacking midfielders to supply penetrating passes and crosses into the box, but also to allow quick support runs to help the lone striker play against 2, 3, 4 or 5 defenders. Some coaches, like Vicente Del Bosque of Spain, ask the wide players to play very narrow and leave the outside space for the attacking full backs, some coaches like Sir Alex Ferguson of Manchester United, ask the wide players to stay wide and leave central space for full backs to play inside and this can help with the speed into the defensive transition phase. This also gives the wingers they have who are good at crossing; Nani, Valencia and Young, space to do so, knowing the central players will use the space to get into positions to score.

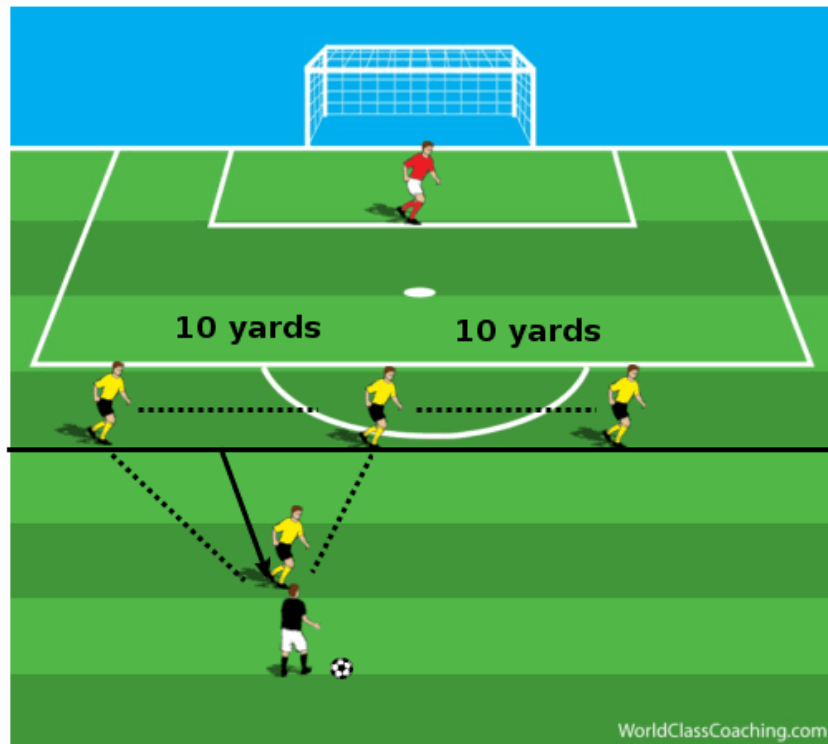
Teams will generally vary how they attack depending on certain players – one wide player may play as a pure winger whereas the other winger may play inside – Navas and Iniesta for Spain play in this manner when Del Bosque makes the Navas for Silva change in some games when Spain are struggling for width when Arbeloa is the right back. Navas is the right winger whereas Silva likes to play inside on his favoured left foot, so this opens up new solutions to the problems well organised defensive systems may provide.

General Rules in defending

The biggest problems in defending is how and when to balance marking responsibilities and covering spaces. In my opinion, I have had the best success when defending spaces and zones when the ball is far away, making sure passing lanes are covered and players are within pressing distances, and when the ball is closer to the goal, mark opponents closer and work in groups of 2 or 3 to win the ball back. Defensive central midfielders should be quick enough to cover across and help the full back, particularly when playing against a tricky winger like Ronaldo, or against a team who play in tight spaces, like Spain, Barcelona and Arsenal.

Individual Defensive Responsibilities in a Four player defence

Centre Backs



The main responsibilities for the centre backs in any back 4 is to ensure that when the ball does reach the last line of defence, they are able to make tackles, headers and blocks, to stop shots and win possession, then whenever possible, distribute play accurately from defence into midfield, looking to start counter attacks wherever possible.

To do this, the central defenders play in positions relevant to the ball position, opposition player's position and team-mates positions. They should play in zones and mark opposition players when they enter the zones that they are playing inside.

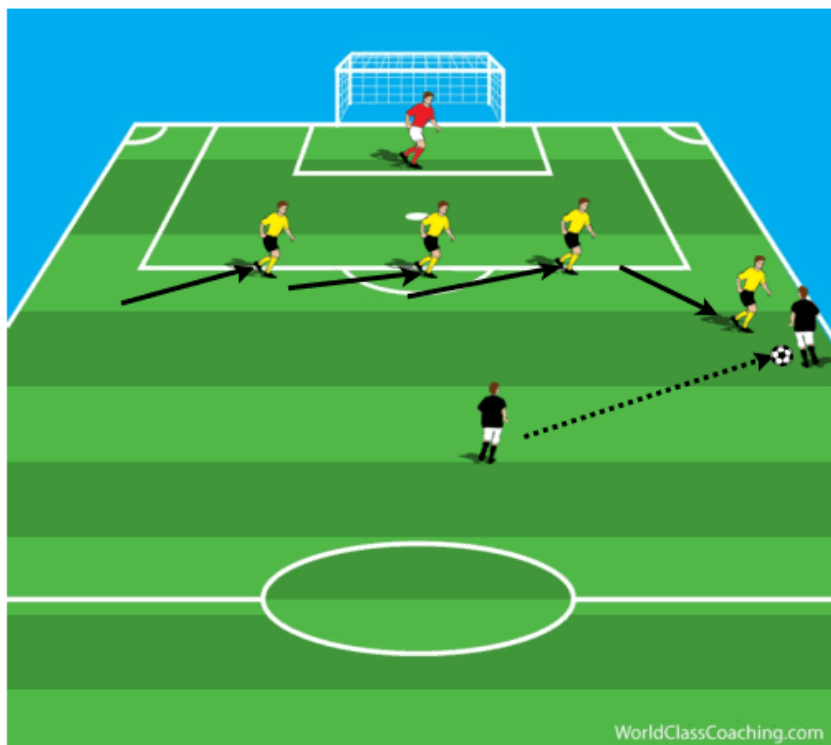
The nearest central defender should press the ball at a 45 degree angle, forcing play to the defensive strong side and the attack's weak side when possible. The team mates should look to create the correct distances between each other, around 10 yards, certainly no more than 12, and create a 'defensive triangle' when the ball is pressed. The far side full back will balance the defence creating a back 3 as the ball is pressed.

In a 4-2-3-1, there will be occasions where the two central midfielders can press the ball instead of the central defenders, allowing them to keep shape in the defensive line, making it easier to stay in shape, mark opponents and keep clean sheets.

Often in a 4-2-3-1, the central defenders will consist of one very good footballer who is more of a tactical covering defender who reads the play well, who plays beside a solid and often aggressive team mate, who attacks high balls and is first to press the ball, like Vidic and Ferdinand of Manchester United,

or Pique and Puyol of FC Barcelona, Vidic and Puyol being the aggressive players, Pique and Ferdinand being the tacticians and football playing defenders of the pairings.

Full Backs



As the ball is passed wide, the back 4 moves over quickly as a unit, maintaining the correct body shape to see all opponents, team mates and the ball. The full back presses the ball and depending on the structure, forces play wide or inside. The defence make a back 3 across the defence again with no more than 12 yards between the players.

Full Backs in a 4-2-3-1 would generally be players who are very comfortable in both defensive and attacking scenario's, with speed and can defend individually well in a 1v1 against a fast, skilful winger, but with good positional sense when defending deep and in numbers. Phillip Lahm of Bayern Munich and Ashley Cole of Chelsea are good examples of players who can perform the attacking and defensive parts of the role well.

Central Midfielder

The central midfielder's job varies and depends on where the ball is. If the ball is far away from goal, they will try to screen the front of the opposition's attackers and block direct passes into feet, allowing the players ahead of them to press the ball. When the ball is wide, for example at the opposition full back who is in their own 3rd of the field, they will shift over as a pair, making a 'see-saw' effect, one pushing over to cover the middle part of that half of the field, looking to cover between the central attacking midfielder and the wide player, but close enough to help his own full back if the ball is passed down the side to the winger. The other central midfielder will cover the central line and look to keep the midfield balance at the correct distance away from his team-mate. He may cover inside and slightly deeper if there is an opportunity of a dribble or a diagonal pass through the midfield line, or he may

push slightly higher up than his team mate if there is a passing option inside that will most likely be used to find a way out from the wide areas, he may press and slow down play, or read the pass and make an interception if he is in the correct starting position close enough to show the pass to where he wants it to go and then intercept it in transit.



Most teams will have a balance of two different types of the following players;

- An '*Anchor Man*' – a solid defensive player who will hold position and can do the less glamorous roles well; Pressing, tackling, interceptions, tracking runners, and covering for a full back or centre back - Dunga, Brazil 1994 captain for example, or Rino Gattuso, ex-AC Milan and Rangers.
- A '*Quarterback*' - a player who is able to dictate play from deep and find both short and long passes with ease, who may not be the quickest or the best tackler - Andrea Pirlo of Juventus for example, or Xabi Alonso of Real Madrid.
- A '*Box-to-Box*' midfielder, who has the speed and energy to get around the field and can help out team mates in every position when possible. This player is normally able to perform most midfield skills well, but not a specialist passer like Pirlo, or a specialist defensive midfielder like Dunga, but has the speed Pirlo doesn't have, or the creativity Dunga didn't often demonstrate - Sami Khedira of Real Madrid for example, or Bastian Schweinsteiger of Bayern Munich.

Attacking Midfielder

The attacking midfielder's role in the defensive phase can be to screen the pass into central midfield, mark the defensive midfielder to stop him having any influence in the match – you would do this to someone like Pirlo or Busquets who can receive and build attacks well from between defence and midfield. He can also move forward to help the centre forward press the ball as would happen in a 4-4-2,

which can mean that he moves ahead of his position and leave the defensive midfielder alone – this could be useful when playing against a 4-4-2 and chasing a goal as we can rush the opposition into passes forward where we have more players to win possession, and as we already have 2 central midfielders who can play 1v1 against the central midfielders, the 3rd player may not always be needed when a team is playing patiently in defence 5v1 (GK and back 4 v lone striker). There are different types of attacking midfielders who can play as a number 10:

- The '*chief creator*' – A player who excels in finding the killer pass at the right time, but retains possession under pressure close to the opposition goal, like Xavi for Spain, or Ozil for Germany
- The '*Late runner*' – A player who is a specialist at making late runs into the box and scoring from around the edge of the box, who keeps play simple and always supports the striker, Like Paul Scholes for Manchester United, or Frank Lampard of Chelsea in their younger days.
- The '*Magician*' – The player who has flair, creativity and an eye for goal, who is the epitome of what a number 10 should be; intelligent entertaining and effective. Players like Messi, Maradona, Zidane and Ronaldinho and perfect examples of a number 10.

In transition to defence after losing the ball, this player's 1st job is to either press the ball if he is within 10 yards of it, or get back into his position to make the midfield triangle complete, re-shape then defend from the set positions of a 4-2-3-1, possibly making play predictable depending on the coaches requirements of this player. Some teams have this player take no part in defending, as Messi does for Barcelona, Zidane did from France; Ronaldinho did for Barcelona and Brazil, and Maradona of Argentina.

Wide Midfielders

The wide midfielders' initial role in the defensive phase is to press the full backs and make sure that they don't have too much time on the ball. Most teams now play with attacking full backs and the position of the wide attacking players can affect how attack minded these players are. Cristiano Ronaldo plays directly against Dani Alves when Real Madrid play Barcelona, and because of the threat Ronaldo poses to Alves, especially on the counter attack, Pep Guardiola had been known to change formation to give Alves some support and extra security by asking Busquets to drop into centre back and move Pique to right centre back of a back 3 to cover some of the space left by Alves' raiding runs down the right that Ronaldo wouldn't always chase back from. Not chasing back would give Ronaldo plenty of time and space to run into with or without the ball on the counter, as his direct opponent would often be found inside the Real Madrid defensive 3rd playing as Messi's overlapping decoy running to create space. With Pique covering Alves' position, he knows as Busquets and either Puyol or Mascherano are both inside, he has 2 covering central defenders to allow him to firstly stall the counter attack and secondly, win the ball. Ronaldo has used this 'no tracking back' system to great use and has started scoring more often against Barcelona.

Sometimes a wide midfielder will track all the way back, especially against a much stronger opponent, and the wide midfielders almost play 1v1 against an attacking full back the whole game, leaving the full back 1v1 against the opposition winger. Some teams who don't have an attacking full back but a very tricky winger will find that a team playing 4-2-3-1 will have dropped the wide attacker very deep to help provide extra support for when the winger is in possession. You may also see one of the central midfielders coving inside in this scenario and find that players like Arjen Robben play 1v3 commonly against a 4-2-3-1 defence. Overall, this players' main role defensively is to stop full backs from being

influential in an attacking sense by playing a clever game, sometimes chasing back, sometimes staying forward, but always applying pressure on the ball when possible.

Striker

The strikers' role in the 4-2-3-1 is to press the 2 central defenders and be clever when they don't have the ball, can you find a position they don't like you being in to disrupt the shape in transition? Some strikers press a centre back then stay on that one player as the other centre back is not a great footballer, and may be the main passer into midfield, perhaps like Thiago Silva of AC Milan (now PSG) is, Thomas Vermaelen of Arsenal or Gerard Pique of Barcelona is. Some teams who play very defensively will ask the striker to screen the defensive midfielder and stop passes going into him, leaving the 2 central defenders free.

The 4-2-3-1 Against Different Systems

This chapter focuses on how the 4-2-3-1 system can be used to defend against the other most popular systems: 4-4-2, 4-3-, 4-5-1, 3-5-2 and also against another team playing a 4-2-3-1.

TEAM DEFENDING

4-2-3-1 Defending against a 4-4-2



4-2-3-1 defence is in Yellow.

The basic set up for the 4-2-3-1 against a 4-4-2 would be to play the wide attackers 1v1 against the full backs, the attacking midfielder to play between the central midfielders and move across to one side as the ball moves there, with the 2 central midfielders close enough to press and cover as the ball is moved wide. The 2 full backs should play inside the wingers but close enough to quickly pressure if the ball is passed wide, with the central defenders playing 1v1 against the strikers.

The key areas against a 4-4-2 are the central midfield area and the central defensive area – the midfield have a 3v2 initially but a striker who drops into midfield may create a 3v3 and the near side central midfielder may have to drop off or screen the front of the striker to block passes into him. Players should be spread out initially as when play is passed wide, players can move across and play to a shape and a way of pressing/covering/balancing the defence. Some teams will start off narrow then move wide, meaning that clever central midfielders can find space as players move away from the central positions to press wide. The back 4 should have the full backs slightly more tucked in than in the image as some teams who play 4-4-2 play a direct style and look for flick on headers to knock into the path of their strike partner. 2 narrower full backs can help against this way of playing. If it is more of a footballing team, then full backs can start wider, but be wary of diagonal passes into the gap between full -back and centre back.

4-2-3-1 defending against a 4-4-2 with the ball at full back



As the ball is passed across to the full back, the near side winger will arc across and either force play to the touchline or inside. As there is a 3v2 scenario in the centre, sometimes the coach would ask to force play inside and try to win possession in the centre of midfield. The central attacking midfielder will shift across and pick up the near side central midfielder – occasionally he might screen the front to block the pass – and the far side winger will tuck inside to play within the width of the 6 yard boxes. He may play in line with his full back if the coach has given a rigid shape to play to.

The 2 central midfielders are the key players in this defensive shape, here they will press the side of the ball, and the far side player will cover the central line. As the ball is far away from goal, he should look to cover spaces and allow his team mate to cover the winger and central attacking midfielder, but also offer some protection and help play 2v1 with the full back if the ball is passed into the wingers' feet. He should look to screen and block the pass into the striker if he drops off from the back 4.

The back 4 will move over to the side of the ball – the near side full back will be close enough to pressure the winger quickly if the ball is passed forward to them, with the near side centre back able to mark the striker if he stays forward, if he drops off, talk to the central midfielders to keep an eye on him as centre backs shouldn't go wandering too far from the defensive line. The far side centre back will pick up the centre line and be aware of any movements by the other striker, with the far side full back tucked in to help his team mate. If play is switched to the opposite side, move across quickly in transition and re-shape accordingly.

Key Points to emphasise when the opposition full back is receiving the ball

- Press, but don't dive in – stay on feet and force a pass back or a mistake
- Team mates should move as a unit, but covering inside and screening/marketing opponents
- Central midfielders should be close enough to cover attacking midfielders and close enough to help out full back is pass is played down the line to the winger
- Far side full back tucks in to make a 3v2 centrally

4-2-3-1 – Back 4 and middle 2 defending against the 4-2 attack of a 4-4-2, ball in final 3rd



As the ball is passed wide, the midfield stays behind the ball and allows the winger the option to pass or dribble forward, using the midfielders as security. The back 4 moves across and plays tight, no more than 12 yards apart between players of the now back 3 as the full back presses the ball. He can force play inside as he has the near side central midfielder helping to double up inside; this stops the pass into the corner which the striker could run onto, and allows a 2v1 scenario should the winger try to dribble inside. The far side central midfielder should cover just inside the central line and look to shift across but protect the back 4 first, rush out and pressing isn't really needed here with 2 central strikers behind the midfield. Stopping penetration into the strikers is a priority.

The aim here is to stop forward passes or dribbles and pass back into midfield. In an 11v11 game, the 3 other midfielders would come back and place additional pressure from behind on the 2 midfielders. As we are close to goal, the central defenders should play close to the strikers and not allow them to turn if they receive a pass. The far side full back should have an open body shape and be aware of the movements of the far side winger as he can run inside to offer a cross into the far post.

Coaching Points:

- Don't dive in; stay on feet and don't be eliminated, don't go down to 5v6
- Stay in shape; pressing and covering as the ball moves, rushing out to press leaves spaces
- Communication; if one presses, who covers? Who marks the opponents? Keep the defence tight

4-2-3-1 Defending against a 4-3-3



Against a 4-3-3, you can almost play a man-man marking system all over the field, with both teams having 1 centre back spare from having a direct opponent at all times. This is particularly useful if you are playing against a team with slow players, or who play with a slow tempo build up. The wide midfielders could pick up the runs of the full backs, or leave them alone and attack into the space in transition, giving the full back a problem of when and how often to attack. The attacking midfielder can mark or screen the defensive midfielder at the bottom of the triangle, making it difficult for him to influence the game in attack, while the two central midfielders can play 1v1 against their opposition central midfielders. The 2 full backs can play 1v1 against the wingers, but again, do they help the attack and be caught out in transition, or will the wingers follow their attacking runs? The centre backs look to mark the striker and leave the other to cover the space behind. If the striker was to drop off, the defence in most cases could leave him to go, depending on the ball position and where his team mates are – most teams playing without a centre forward are generally not going to create much but Barcelona (Messi) and Spain (Cesc Fabregas) are two players who cannot be allowed too often to drift off, receive on the half turn and look to penetrate the defence.

Generally, this is a formation which could start off wide and move across when the ball is played, but Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid played with players pressing then marking the player who had just passed the ball, instead of dropping back into shape and covering team mates, which has worked to good effect, which I will talk about and show an image from a match as a demonstration of how they did this from a Barcelona goal kick at the Nou Camp, and from throw ins at the Nou Camp.

With the ball at full back



As the ball is passed across to the full back, the striker may press the ball then stay on that player, stopping a return pass back which means that a longer pass across defence may happen – the striker could position himself well enough to force a chipped pass which is more difficult to execute and more difficult to control under pressure from a pressing opponent.

The Wide midfielder may show play inside, as he has the central attacking midfielder marking or screening the defensive midfielder, potentially stopping any pass inside to this player, with the far side winger tucked in to help either; mark the far side central midfielder of the opposition, or to allow pressure on the far side defenders should the ball be passed there.

The central midfielders will work as a see-saw; one will mark the near side central midfielder of the opposition, while the other central midfielder should cover the central line, able to help out one of his team-mates nearby. Note that this could make a 4 v 3 diamonds in the central area of the field, with one player covering the space behind the midfield line.

The back 4 have to move across as a unit, but the far side central defender may have the most difficult role – the opposition far side winger may play wide and leave a lot of space inside, but not be able to make diagonal runs into the box, but if he stays narrow, he could offer a diagonal pass between the full back and centre back if the play penetrates the midfield too easily. He can also drop off into the space where no player would be designated to mark him and if he is followed into the space, a far side switch to the full back that has pushed forward may be available.

The near side full back should play close to the winger, but not close enough to be exploited with a pass into the winger in the space behind if the midfield is penetrated.

The centre backs should be aware of the movements of the striker and one should be tight enough to make it difficult for the striker to receive and do anything constructive with the ball if he does receive a pass from either full back or through the midfield if it is penetrated.

With the ball in the final 3rd



When the 4-3-3 is in attack, generally the full back on the side of the ball will be supporting, so this can make it a 6v7 overload to the attacking team. In the scenario where play has broken down and the midfield has been penetrated, the back 4 and middle 2 must try to stop the extra man in midfield from gaining an advantage. Leaving the defensive midfielder and full back or far side midfielder creates different problems but ensuring that no 2v1's are created centrally or on the sides are a priority here. Keep play in front of you.

The full back should press the winger with the near side central midfielder moving over to mark the closest central midfielder of the 4-3-3, with the other central midfielder covering the central line. The defence should try to keep the play in front of them and to one side – a clever 4-3-3 team here would change formation to a 3-4-3 or 2-5-3 to exploit the space on the sides, playing 1v1 in the centre but being able to pass through the line into one of the 3 forwards, or use the sides for a 2v1 against the full back with the attacking full back and winger. In this case, the 4-2 defence should shift over and ensure that the full back has protection with a central midfielder, the far side central midfielder should make sure they are in position to press and block off passes into the strikers feet once the ball comes away from the wide area.

Coaching Points:

- Stop 2v1's on the sides and centrally when possible

- Always shift over quickly to help the full back
- Block passes into the strikers feet
- Cover the central line at attempt to keep play in front and one side of the field
- Prioritise marking schemes – leave the defensive midfielder as he should be the deepest player
- When the full back presses the ball when it is wide, the defence should have 1 of the now back 3 spare, marking the 2 other forwards.

4-2-3-1 Defending against a 4-5-1



When playing against a flat 4-5-1 formation, the 4-2-3-1 is outnumbered across the central line 5v2, but as it has players ahead of and behind this line, it means that they can screen the front when defending, but also pressure from behind quickly. As the opposition have 1 striker, the 2 full backs may be able to push up into midfield, making a 4 and leaving a 2v1 in the last line of defence, where only quick intricate passing through midfield, a dribble past a couple of players or a long pass may result in the striker receiving close to the goal.

If the full backs do push up into midfield, they would have a 7v5 overload including the players pressing in front, meaning that the 5 in midfield need good movement to find ways to get onto the ball.

If the ball is passed through the midfield into one of the wingers, midfielders must run ahead of midfield and play close to the striker, possibly even running ahead of the striker onside to score.

With the ball at full back



With the ball at the full back position, the 3 attacking midfielders should all move over and press the ball. Because there are more players able to receive in the midfield than can press from behind, play should be forced back or wide, not inside, where the full back would have 3 central midfield options or a switch to the winger or full back, depending on approach to the ball before passing via pressure. The central attacking midfielder should cover inside and stop any passes through that line of play, possibly playing 1v1 against the nearest central midfielder, or the player who should drop off into the space between defence and midfield. The far side wide midfielder should cover inside and try to help cover as much of the passing lanes into feet in midfield as possible. If he is playing against 2 particularly fast players in the full back and wide midfield positions, he should play slightly wider to press the switch pass earlier.

The central players will use the 'see-saw' system – one will cover the space behind the wide and central attacking midfielder, making a triangle, the other covering the central line able to press any passes or dribbles that come into his zone. If play is switched, drop off diagonally and press, moving as a 'see-saw' with the other central midfielder.

The full backs can play slightly higher than against a 4-3-3 as the wide players are positioned much deeper. This may leave space for passes in behind but with the near side centre back able to cover that pass with the far side central defender able to mark the striker with support from the far side full back, who makes it a back 3. The far side full back should be aware of the movements of the winger behind him as a long diagonal switch could catch him out if he isn't concentrating.

Ball passed short into strikers' feet



If the ball is passed short into the strikers feet with support coming from deep, the full back and central defender should cover and make a 'defensive triangle' to cover on both sides, the marker should go tight and force play into trouble in midfield. The players should press the ball in a 3 quickly and make sure play is not switched to the space; at worst, force a pass backwards then move over in transition as that's where the space is, and likely the next pass. The pressing full back should drop off to cover the run from the winger into the space he left to go press the ball, the near side centre back has moved over to cover the pass into this space. As he does this, depending on the runners' positions, the full back can cover inside.

With the ball in the final 3rd



If the midfield is penetrated, with the winger in possession, the nearest full back should press the ball and show him wide to the touchline, and force him into the corner. Passing across the field can result in overloads and lots of 3rd man runs from this formation, so forcing play into the corner and blocking crosses can be effective in stopping the late runs from midfield. The near side central midfielder should cover inside to help the full back but also be aware of runs from midfield late into the box when play is forced wide. The far side full back should not get dragged inside as a deep cross can easily eliminate this player while they are inside trying to pick up runners from midfield inside the box.

Coaching Points:

- Force play away from the central overload scenario
- Play tight to the winger and stop the cross
- Correct body shape when the ball is wide – open up to see all players, the ball and team mates
- If play is switched, move fast in transition to the new position of the attack with communication

4-2-3-1 Defending against a 3-5-2



Against a 3-5-2, the 4-2-3-1 has many problems inside the oppositions half – it can be 4 v 7 and the 3-5-2 may find it easy to get out of their half with the ball using this formation. The front 4 need to position themselves to allow themselves short enough distances to quickly cover passing lanes forward and allow the defence time to move forward into a position which makes the field smaller and easier to defend.

With the ball at full back



As the full back receives the ball, the nearest winger should press the ball and force play wide where there is no real support already available. The attacking midfielder and near side striker may need to move over to offer a pass forward down the line. The full back should push forward and screen the front of the striker to only show a long and high pass into the corner for a forward pass.

The attacking midfielder should pick up the nearest central midfielder and the far side winger should play between the far side central defender and central midfielder, to help cover both passes, but allowing quick pressure of these players if required and quick enough. If the player isn't the quickest, they can drop in and re-adjust shape and start again.

The central midfielders need to cover closely behind the 3 players in front, but be aware of the position of the attacking midfielder, he should be stopped from receiving away from pressure and if possible, screened and marked at all times, as he can be the player to release the full backs in the final 3rd.

The near side central defender should mark the closest striker, the far side central defender cover the central line and the far side full back be aware of the far side wing back, and the strikers runs inside. The far side central defender should mark the striker if he moves into that zone.

With the ball in the final 3rd



If the wing back is released and is ahead of the midfield line of 3, the central attacking midfielder player should look to cover inside and help out, rather than leave a 3v4 in case of a counter attack. This extra support makes play a 7v7 and more manageable. The full back should press the wing back, asking the near side centre back to cover as he presses. The near side centre back will probably be marking the striker so he should try to play tight and force play back if the ball is passed into the striker. The far side central defender covers the central line but marks the striker if he moves over into his zone. The full back must watch out for the far side wing back joining the attack centrally as this will be his man.

The near side central midfielder should make sure that the passing lane into the striker is cut off and the far side one will be asked to mark the attacking midfielder if he stays central, if not, let him drop off and keep play in front of the defence.

Coaching Points:

- Press quickly and force play away from support
- Block passing lanes into the strikers feet
- Keep play in front of the midfield 2
- Move quickly to re-establish a shape if play is switched to the opposite full back
- Full back should cover inside centre back if he gets dragged wide to cover the strikers run

4-2-3-1 Defending against a 4-2-3-1



The 4-2-3-1 against a 4-2-3-1 is not like a 4-4-2 against a 4-4-2 in the sense that it doesn't really cancel itself out, by playing 1v1 all over the field, the 4-2-3-1 has a back 4 against a lone striker, with the full backs not playing directly against the wingers; there is space between the winger and full back meaning that to play directly against each other, either the full back needs to play high, leaving space behind in the corner of the defence, or the winger needs to play high against a deep full back, meaning that there is space for his own attacking full back to come forward.

In the centre, 2 central midfielders play 2v1 against the attacking midfielder, although with the flexibility of this formation, possibly one of the central players will venture forward to help the attack, leaving a possible 1v1 in the centre between the attacking midfielder and central midfielder. In a 4-4-2 v 4-4-2 battle, the central midfielders and wingers play 1v1 and if they attack, play against the opposition full backs, which can make it easy to play predictably but also defend against a predictable attack. The 4-2-3-1 offers less possibilities of cancelling out your own attacking game against any other formation because only a 4-3-3 comes close to providing similar playing positions in the same areas of the field.

Some systems will allow the attacking midfielder (number 10) to have a free role and not take too much interest in the defensive phase, preferring to manage their energy to be able to attack with speed and intelligence. Players who sometimes are given this freedom – Lionel Messi and Cesc Fabregas (Barcelona), Mesut Ozil (Real Madrid), Wayne Rooney (Man Utd), Juan Mata (Chelsea) and Shinji Kagawa (Man Utd)

Messi plays as a 'false 9' for Barcelona and plays with no real position, able to manage his energy for attacking.

With the ball at full back



As the ball is passed wide to the full back, the near side winger should press quickly to stop the pass into the wingers feet down the line, the central attacking midfielder should shift over and block the pass inside to the attacking midfielder then move forward to play closer to the central midfielder who will have dropped off to offer inside to start the attack centrally. The striker should support and press if needed. The far side winger should play ahead of the line and block a pass to the opposite full back, pressing the back 4 when passed into the defensive line again. When this happens, the central midfielders should push ahead of the attacking central midfielder and close off any spaces between the lines, looking for interceptions.

The near side central midfielder is covering the winger and is close enough to help play 2v1 with the full back against the winger if the ball reaches him. The far side central midfielder balances midfield by covering the central line, close enough to the attacking midfielder to discourage a pass into him, but able to intercept if it is.

The back 4 should press the near side winger before he receives the ball, stopping him from turning and running at the defence. The rest of the defence make a back 3 covering centrally and marking the centre forward as it will be a 3v1. The far side full back must be aware of the movements of the far side winger.

Coaching Points:

- Press and cover quickly
- When possible, move quickly to intercept passes
- Correct distances between players, not too narrow to leave the switch open.
- If you get beaten, recover quickly and get behind the ball or stop the next passes

With the ball in the final 3rd



The near side full back presses and the remaining players make a back 3 as usual. The near side central midfielder covers inside the full back, with the far side central midfielder holding position inside the central line, making a 3-3 shape. In the event that a full back and central midfielder helps the attack, either one of the near side winger or central attacking midfielder should come back to recover, the other staying in position to offer a penetrating pass in transition when the ball is won.

Coaching Points:

- Establish a shape quickly and block passing lanes forward
- Press and cover, get close to players before they receive the ball
- Force mistakes and move as a unit, leaving minimal space between the lines, no more than 8m.

Variations of the 4-2-3-1

There are a number of variations that can be used within the basic 4-2-3-1 format depending on the qualities your players possess.

Variations of the 4-2-3-1

Many teams around the world employ the 4-2-3-1 as their preferred formation, and many coaches use the players they have to play it with slight variations; some teams play with a deep playing number 10 who dictates play from deep then supports from behind the ball, some teams play with a number 10 who has no fixed position, some teams play with 3 central attacking midfielders and some teams play with pure wingers whose job it is to supply crosses into the box for the runners from midfield. All the ways of using the 4-2-3-1 have their own strengths and weaknesses, which I will discuss later on. Some of the systems – especially for national teams, can help exploit the strengths of certain players within the team – Ronaldo of Portugal, and Ozil of Germany, for example.

Spain 4-2-3-1 – Vicente Del Bosque’s different systems, using a ‘false 9’, 3 narrow attacking midfielders who can change positions, and a substitution tactic to change shape in a 4-2-3-1.

Spain’s 4-2-3-1 is probably the most complex 4-2-3-1 system in use in football today, as there are so many variables of how they play depending on which players they have on the field, and who they are playing against.

The most recent line up is: Casillas; Arbeloa, Ramos, Pique, Alba; Busquets, Alonso; Silva, Xavi, Iniesta; Cesc.

Silva and Iniesta like to cut inside and find passes, then make runs into space to find the next pass, when possible, they will run ahead of midfield to penetrate the lines, sometimes moving into a new position which can mean that they are unmarked, make a 2v1 or have forced the defence to find a new way of re-adjusting the defensive shape to try and stop the attack from developing.



An example of how Cesc drops off from centre forward, Silva taking the centre forward position.

Spain's different 4-2-3-1 systems – Cesc plays as the 'False 9'.

Cesc Fabregas is the 'false 9' in the system, as he is more of an attacking midfielder who can play as a centre forward as he has good awareness around the box. He will drop off on a regular basis and play in midfield with Xavi, Silva and Iniesta, making the system look like a 4-2-4-0. The wingers in the Spanish 4-2-3-1 play narrow, so the width is provided by the full backs, which stay wide and offer outballs when play is too congested in the centre to build an attack with quick passes and dribbles.

In Britain, many pundits on TV (admittedly, mainly ex-strikers) criticize the system and ask how can this system work. The way it works as around 20 years ago, a Futsal team in Spain introduced a "4-in-a-line" formation, a massive change from the regular diamond and square shape systems. Teams would press up to the ball and the 4 in a line formation would look for little triangles, lobbed passes and 1-2s behind the defence to find a pass to make a 1v1 against the goalkeeper, with a player running from deep to offer a pass to eliminate the goalkeeper for a tap-in.

Since Spain is a massive Futsal playing country, most children who play football will also play Futsal, exposing the players to this type of attacking system from a young age. The players will all have an understanding of the 'drop off and turn' type of attack, knowing that the space behind the defence is the 'striker' in effect, as the back 4 are more worried about the penetration behind the defence. This allows the 'false 9' to drop off and play in front of the defence, knowing that the attacking midfielders will rotate the position with runs ahead of the defence for through passes or 1-2's. Barcelona also employ this system, albeit in a 4-3-3 with Lionel Messi as the 'false 9' – the threat for the defence comes from the dribble at the defence, and diagonal runs from wingers for penetrating passes and 1-2's. The system in a 4-2-3-1 isn't too dissimilar but has Xavi playing closer to the goal in Spain's 4-2-3-1 than he does in Barcelona's 4-3-3.



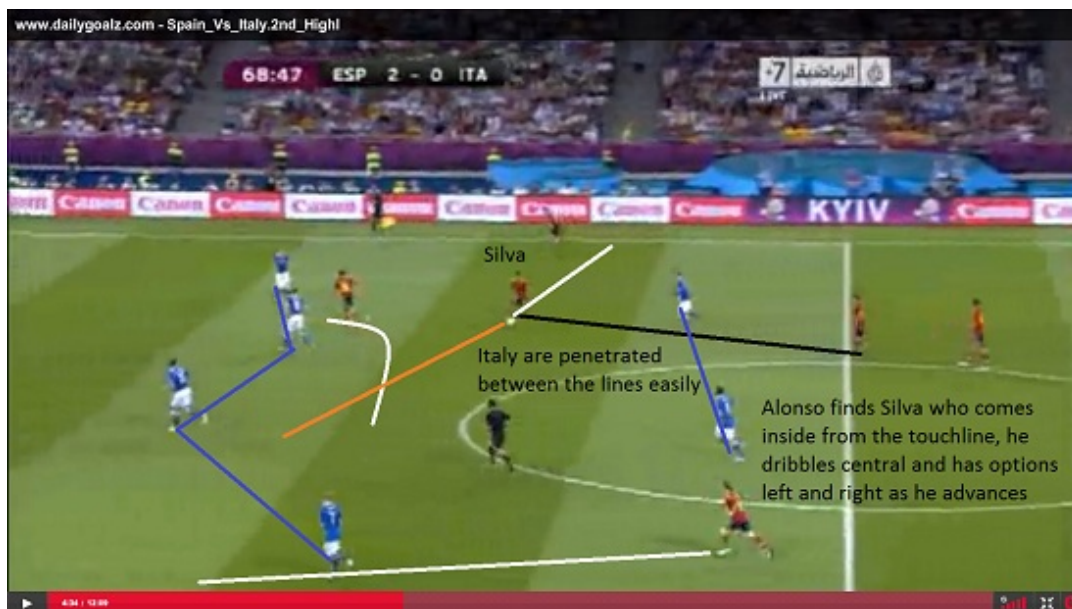
Cesc drops off between the lines, close to Iniesta, Silva makes a diagonal run, and Xavi stays central.

Spain's different 4-2-3-1 systems – Narrow Attacking Midfielders

Often in the modern game, we see teams playing with 'inverted wingers' who will cut inside and play against a defender's weak foot. Players such as Ronaldinho, Messi, Ronaldo, and Thierry Henry all specialised in attacks cutting in from the 'wrong side' onto their stronger foot. The problem in attack is sometimes this can cause a lack of balance to the attack, as players are less willing to play the old fashioned way of playing 1v1, dribbling on the outside and crossing into the box. The players listed, are specialists at receiving the ball, cutting inside and making a final pass or shot with the stronger foot – last season Messi and Ronaldo combined scored over 120 goals playing either wide or in the channel of the 'wrong side'; Messi in the right centre channel and Ronaldo on the left wing.

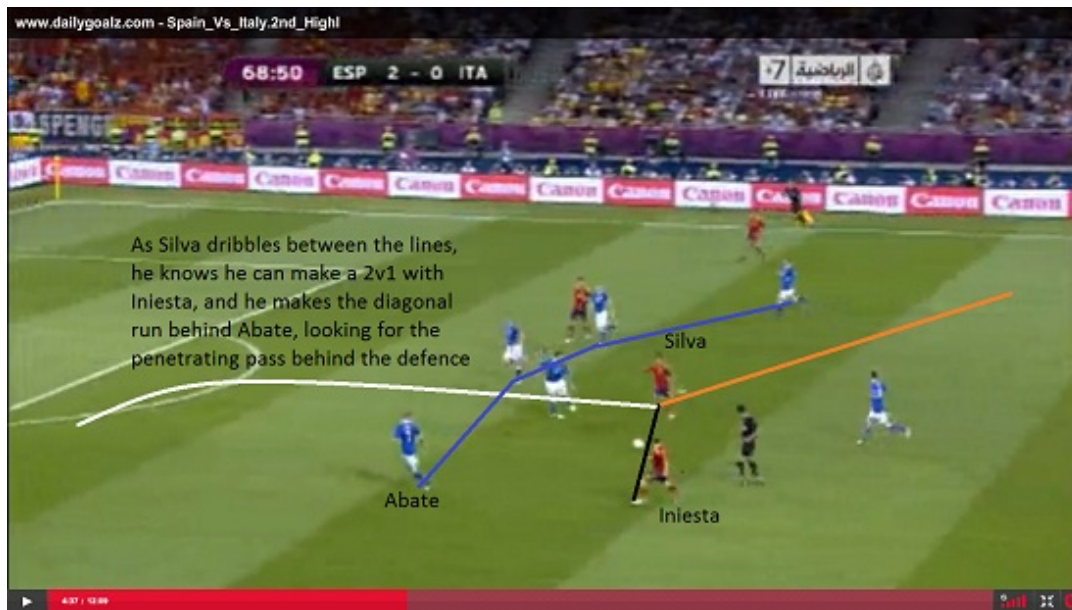
Spain play with the same idea, but instead of having an inside forward like Ronaldo playing on the touchline, offering width then cutting inside, Spain use playmakers – Iniesta on the left channel and Silva in the right channel. Neither is a pure winger, or a particularly brilliant shooter, so these players cut inside looking for combinations around players in tight spaces, 1-2's, triangulation play and switches of play to the space which will have opened up. Another benefit to this system is having full backs who are willing to support the attack – Spain have Jordi Alba on the left who in particular is willing to support the attack – in his youth and up to last season, he was a left winger and this attacking mentality he has certainly helps Iniesta in the left channel with different attacking options.

Silva Cutting Inside to Penetrate the Italian Defence



Silva has started wide but moves inside after the space is created. As he moves inside Arbeloa is on the overlap on the right. Cesc was positioned in the hole with no marker, but as Alonso passes inside, Cesc arcs a run right to create central space. Iniesta starts narrow and will now run forward to support Silva, who will see Iniesta and develop the attack from the left of centre.

Silva passes to Iniesta and continues his run to make a 2v1 against Abate



Silva has dribbled into Xavi's position, which has stayed behind the play. As the pass is played to Iniesta, Silva continues his run behind Abate and offers a 1-2 as there is a 2v1 on the left side. Note Arbeloa's position on the right side – he is almost playing as a right winger, with Cesc on the shoulder of the far side centre back.

Silva's 1-2 pays off and is now in a crossing position to pick out Cesc at the far post



Silva's diagonal run after the pass allows the 2v1 and the penetration behind the defence. Cesc's arced run away from play that initially created space now allows him to find space inside the box. He reaches the pass from Silva but can't quite get enough power in the touch to score.

Del Bosque's 4-2-3-1 – with a central striker and narrow attacking midfielders

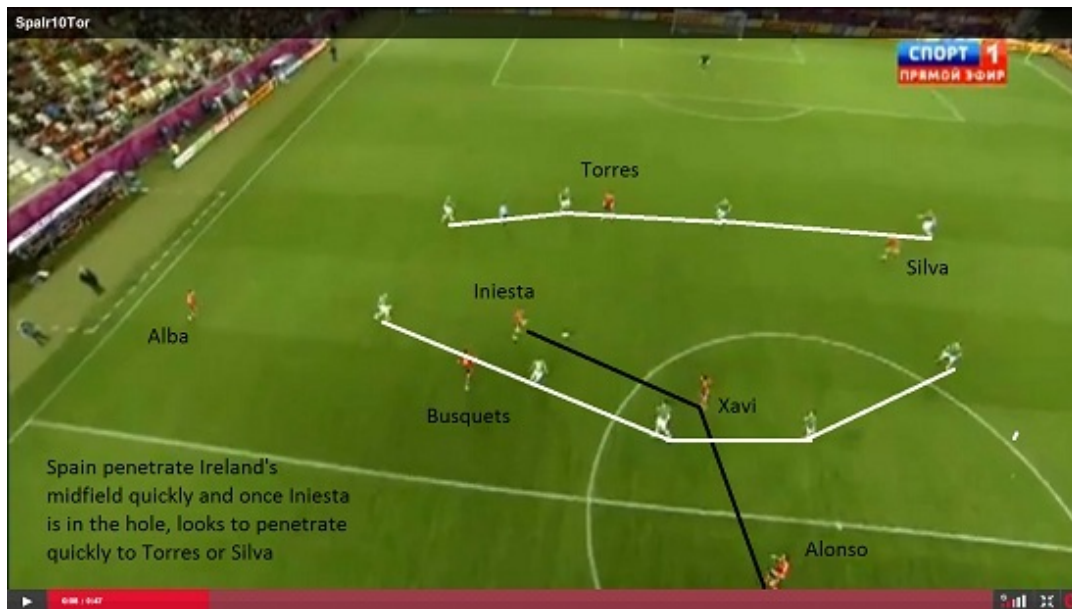


The variation for Spain when playing the 4-2-3-1 is to use a central striker, usually Fernando Torres or David Villa, although David Villa before he broke his leg, played on the left side of the attack, with his ability to cut inside, link the play and shoot with his stronger right side.

Torres, when he is on his game is an unplayable penetrative striker, who always looks for the pass behind the defence to go 1v1 against the goalkeeper. The difference between Torres making runs in behind and Cesc dropping is off that Spain will usually always have a player on the last line of the defence, allowing the creative players to find passes into the space behind the defence for Torres to run behind and stretch the defence, whereas when Cesc plays as the 'false 9', the striker is the space behind the defence and the threat from players running ahead of the ball for the pass behind, unmarked, with 3 or 4 players making these runs and forcing the defence to always be aware of runners from midfield.

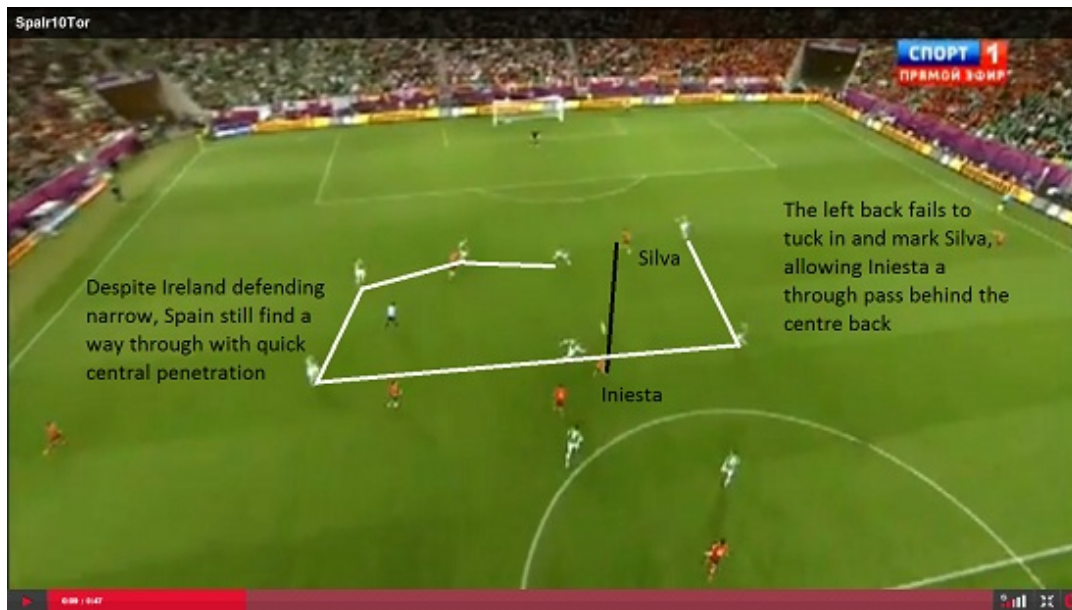
The main benefit playing with Torres as a central striker instead of Cesc is that when play breaks down, Torres offers instant penetration behind the defence as he is quick and has this mentality, whereas Cesc isn't so quick and prefers to join in the attack to help build it – Torres is a pure finisher.

Spain playing with a central striker – Torres on the last line creates space for Silva



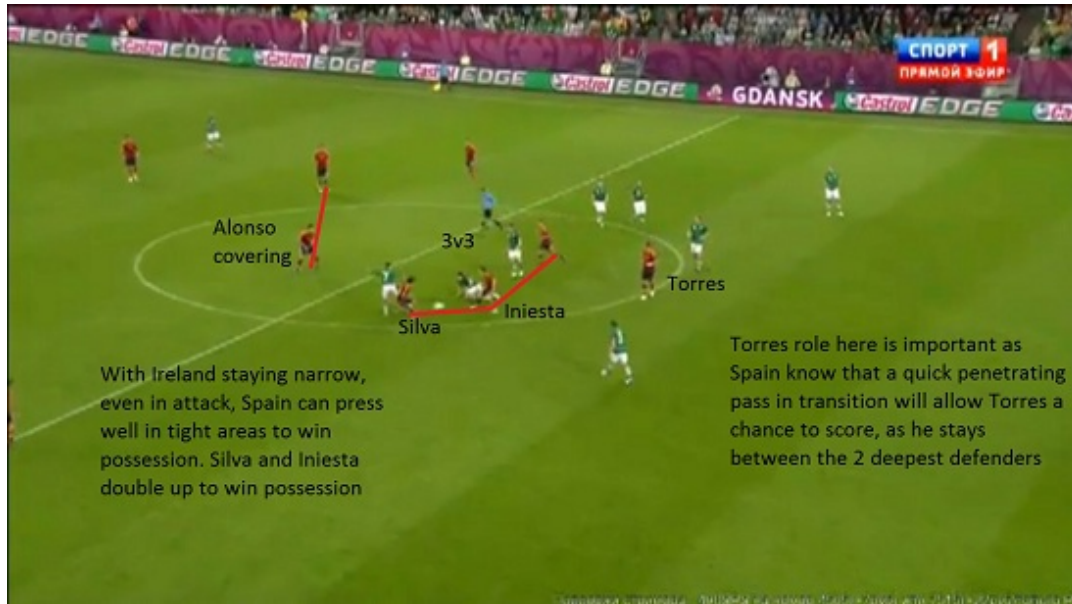
Torres is playing close to 3 defenders here, but Silva has decided that he can help Torres with a run forward – The Irish defence have shifted over to pick up Torres and left space between the left centre back and left back, which Silva runs into. When the midfield is penetrated, Iniesta has 2 options – Torres on the left or Silva on the right. Note Xavi, Iniesta and Silva all narrower than the Irish defence and midfield, with Alba and out of picture, Arbeloa offering width.

Torres' presence takes the focus away from Silva's run



As Torres has pulled slightly off-centre, Silva has some space, and Torres' presence in the last line of defence means he must be quick. Ireland defend narrow but the run from Silva is picked out by Iniesta, which leads to a goal by Torres when Silva's bad touch rolls into his path, he beats a defender before scoring into the top corner for 1-0 Spain and Torres' 1st goal of the tournament.

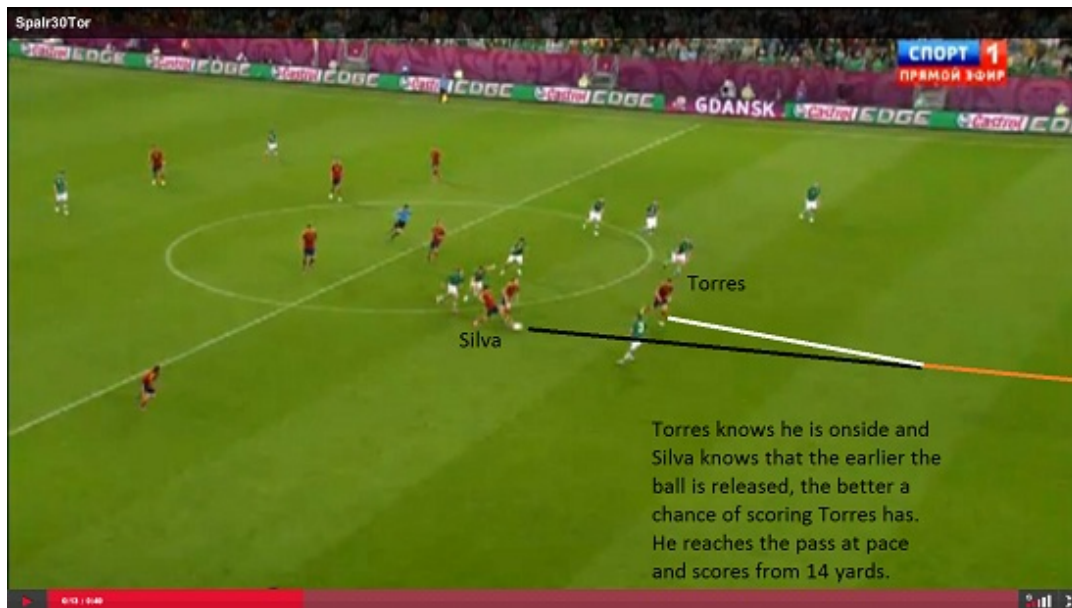
Torres' speed in transition offers a quick through ball and a chance to score



Ireland play too narrow to help deal with Spain's narrow attacking midfielders, but having Torres in the team allows for a quick through pass – Spain and Ireland play a 3v3 with Alonso covering behind the midfield 3 pressing, with Torres cleverly positioned in the space between the centre backs.

Note all 3 attacking midfielders inside the centre circle trying to win possession back.

Iniesta passes to Silva who quickly plays a through ball for Torres to score his 2nd goal



As the ball is won, Torres instantly starts running behind the defence, knowing he is onside (despite the defenders arm being up for offside). Silva doesn't hesitate, and passes behind, Torres runs through to score. With Cesc in the team, I don't think this turnover of possession would've been punished as quickly as Cesc may have wanted a pass to feet to turn, run then find another pass behind the defence closer to the goal, and the chance may have been lost.

Spain's 4-2-3-1 – Navas provides width on the right



Spain have another variation of the 4-2-3-1 which is to take off Silva or Pedro and play Jesus Navas on the right side, as he is more of a pure winger than almost any other player in the Spain squad. As Silva would normally cut inside onto his left foot, and start play from a central position, Navas coming on offers more width and a new solution to play 1v1 on the right side, to play on the outside as he is right

footed, very fast and likes to play 1v1 against his opponent, knowing against most players he will win a race over most distances.

A regular pattern of play is for Navas to play very high on the right and for a pass to be played across, then 2 or 3 team mates move to the edge of the box to look for cutbacks or crosses into the box, for Navas to create space to find a runner inside the box for a tap in. He, like most Spanish attackers, plays with some freedom but his primary role is to stay wide and offer a new solution to break down the attack.

Navas helped create the winning goal in the World Cup Final as it was his dribble from inside his own half that created enough space from eliminating opponents in the 115th minute of the game.

Navas' introduction gives Spain new possibilities



Navas receives the ball seconds after coming on, and runs 1v1 against Van Bronckhorst the left back. He knows he can outrun the defender on the outside and looks to make the space to find a cross.

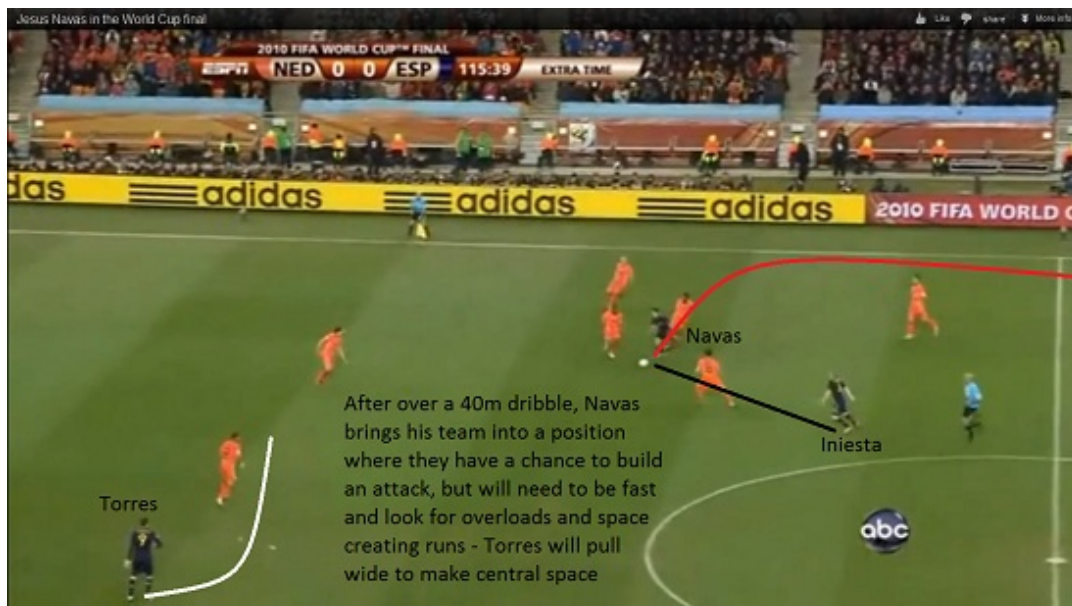


Navas creates the space and drives a low cross into the box, which is deflected into Villa's path. Villa's shot is blocked on the line and stops Spain from going 1-0 up.

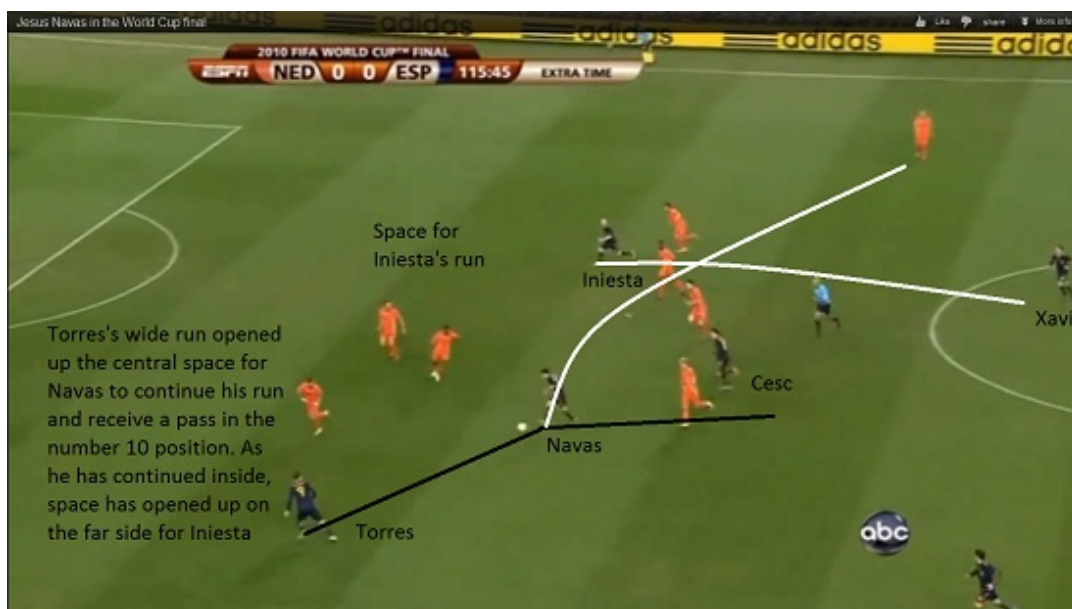
Navas' dribble drives Spain forward in the last minutes to win the World Cup



Navas receives a pass from Puyol, and his 1st thought is to try and dribble away from his opponent, which he manages and can sprint away from. Xavi is offering a pass inside as this is Spain's usual style and how they get away from pressure – with quick intricate passes. Navas tries a new idea.



After over 40m of a dribble, he is forced inside, but he can find Iniesta with a pass. This has allowed Spain a chance to build an attack, but will need to attack with speed, look for overloads and space creating runs – Torres has started the space creating already by moving to the left and outside of the defence.



Navas lays off to Iniesta who backheels the ball to Cesc, who then finds Navas in the space between the lines – after his pass inside to Iniesta, he continued his run centrally and changes positions with Iniesta (who was already out of position playing in the centre of the 4-2-3-1). Iniesta now has space in front of him if anyone can find a pass into him.



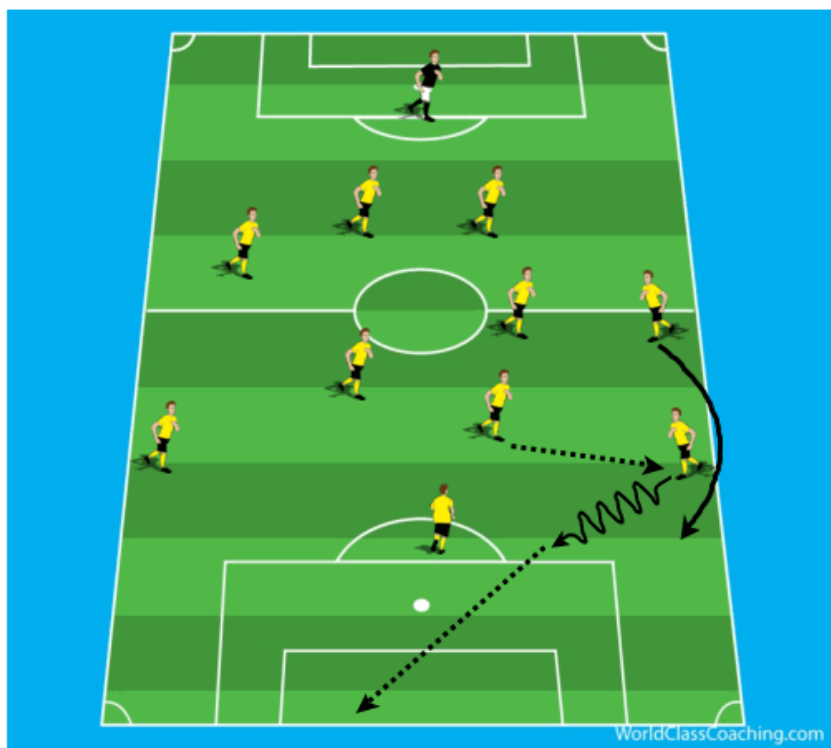
As Navas passes to Torres, Iniesta has continued his run into the space on the left, and although Torres' cross was intercepted, it broke loose to Cesc who continued his run to the edge of the box. Cesc takes a touch, drawing in an opponent before releasing the pass right to the feet of Iniesta, who scores to win the World Cup for Spain.

Overall, I think the Del Bosque system is the best 4-2-3-1, but this variable system is aided by some of the best players in world football, and certainly the strongest international side, as proved over the past 4 years, winning the European Championship in 2008, World Cup in 2010 and then retaining the European Championship in 2012.

Jose Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 – Ronaldo and Di Maria provide different abilities on the sides

In Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid 4-2-3-1, he has built a very strong team unit, which uses the individual players' abilities very well. For example, Xabi Alonso in central midfield can play long and short passes with ease and this helps vary the attacking angles and types of passes they can play. They have 3 regular attacking midfielders: Mesut Ozil, who doesn't really have a position, he is the number 10 and floats around the field looking for space and generally plays close to his attacking team mates to provide short passing options for quick combinations down the sides or use his agility to turn and find a new pass to the other side. Angel Di Maria, who plays on the right and is left footed, he likes to cut inside and look for reverse passes into diagonal runs, or shooting opportunities but is also very adept at playing long diagonal passes, from deeper positions. On the left of the 4-2-3-1, Cristiano Ronaldo, who has a powerful shot and is very fast and skilful in 1v1's, and these abilities are used when he is allowed to cut inside and shoot from around the box – Ronaldo scored almost 50 goals in the 2011/2012 season and many were from this sort of attacking scenario – receiving on the left, cutting inside and shooting. He also comes in from the side when Di Maria has the ball, looking for a long diagonal pass or a cross to the back post to use his speed and ability to head the ball well from inside the box to score, as he has done for Manchester United in the Champions League Final, and against Barcelona in the Copa Del Rey Final.

Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 – Ronaldo cuts inside to shoot with overlapping full back

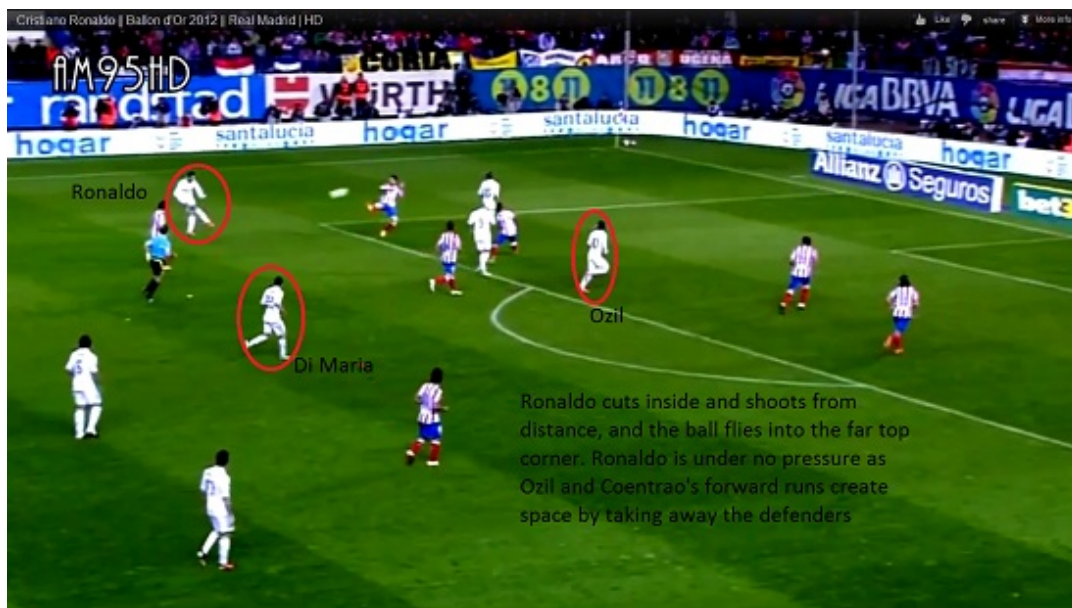


A regular feature of Real Madrid's play is the use of Cristiano Ronaldo's ability to cut inside and shoot from the left hand side. Marcelo or Coentrao regularly overlap to give Ronaldo a decoy run and a new option in case he is crowded out by several defenders.

Coentrao passes and runs ahead of Ronaldo to create the space to shoot



Ronaldo receives the pass and looks for the space to cut inside and shoot. Ozil's forward run will help take away central pressure, while Coentrao's forward run will help take away pressure from the full back. Ozil, Di Maria and Ronaldo are all circled to highlight the freedom of movement in the Real Madrid midfield. Di Maria has moved inside to help overload the centre as Atletico are also playing with a 4-2-3-1 formation.



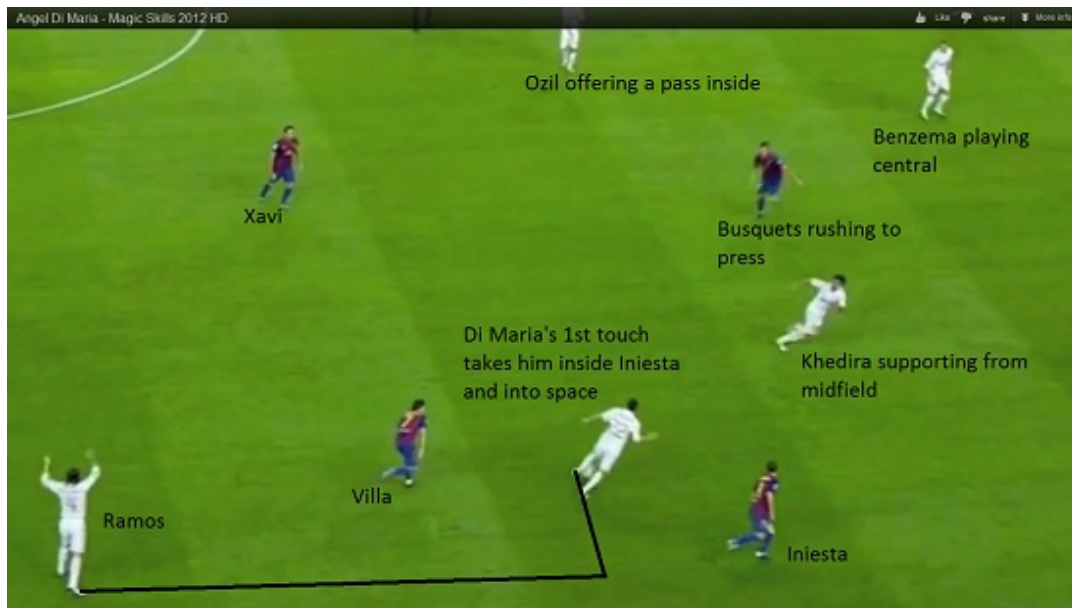
Ronaldo has the space created and on his 3rd touch, he blasts in a shot from 30 yards which flies into the far top corner, under no pressure. The reason he is under no pressure is because Ozil and Coentrao made the forward runs to take away the players who may have pressured Ronaldo's shot.

Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 – Di Maria Cuts Inside for through pass

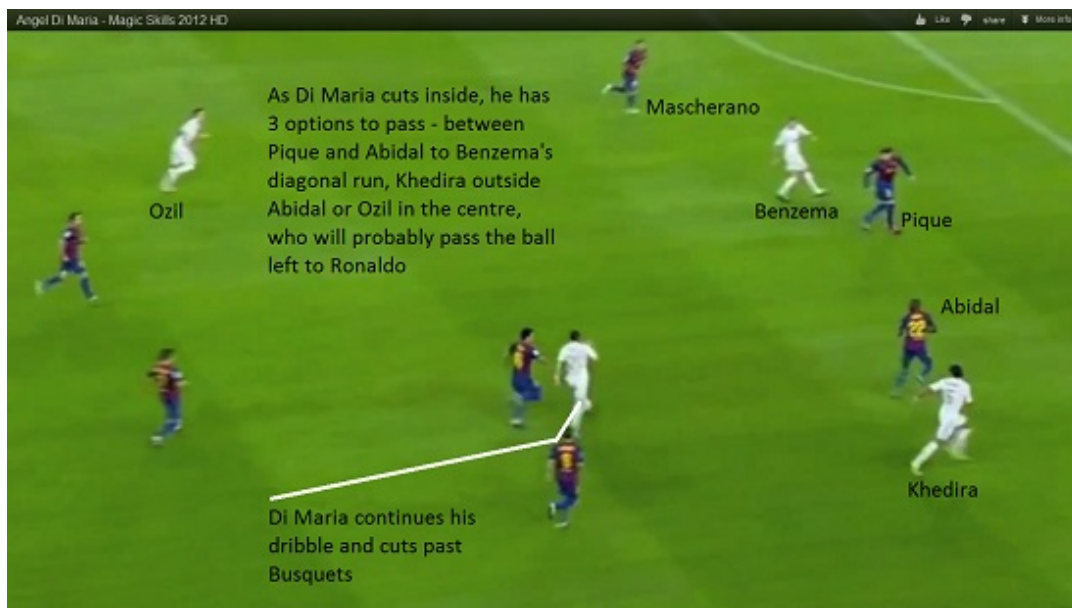


Another feature of the Mourinho 4-2-3-1 is that they play with 'inverted wingers', players who generally stay wide and cut inside when in possession. For Ronaldo, he likes to cut inside and use his incredible long range shooting when cutting in from the left, Di Maria likes to make more assists from the left. He will dribble and cut inside to look for a straight through pass into a diagonal run, either from Benzema, Higuain or Ronaldo, depending on who is in the centre forward position.

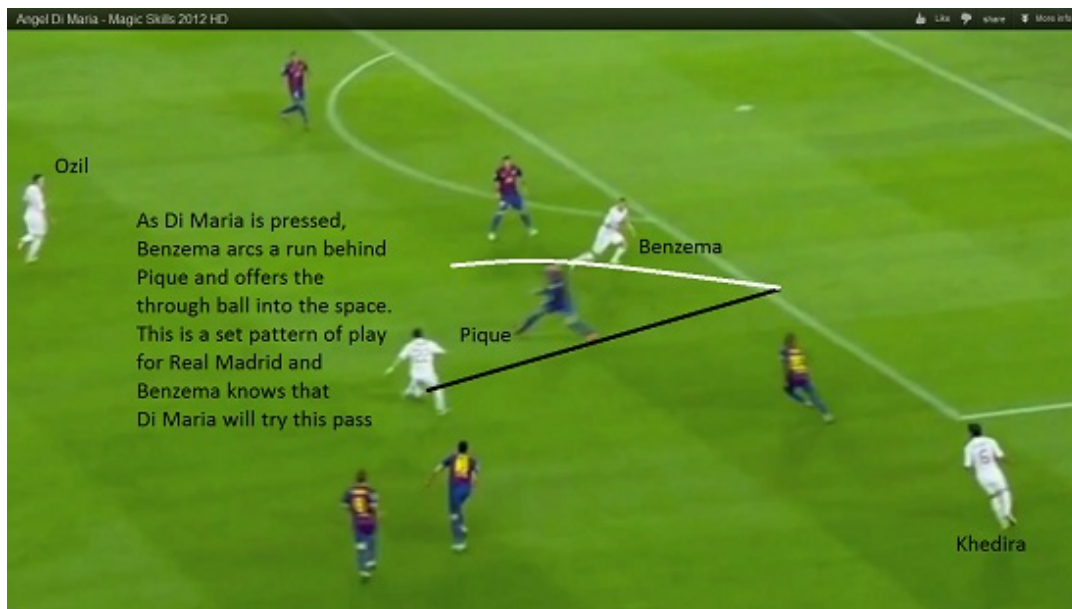
Di Maria dribble and through pass against Barcelona



Ramos passes to Di Maria who's first touch takes him inside of Iniesta and away from Villa. Khedira makes his usual supporting run from midfield to help the 4 main attackers break down the defence. Di Maria will be pressed by Busquets who has rushed across to cover the dribbling space and pressure Di Maria.



Di Maria cuts away from Busquets and Khedira makes the run wide to offer an alternative pass to the outside of Abidal. Real Madrid has a regular pattern of play from a Di Maria dribble like this and Benzema knows what should happen next. Ozil is offering a pass into the centre and would probably look for Ronaldo on the left of the attack



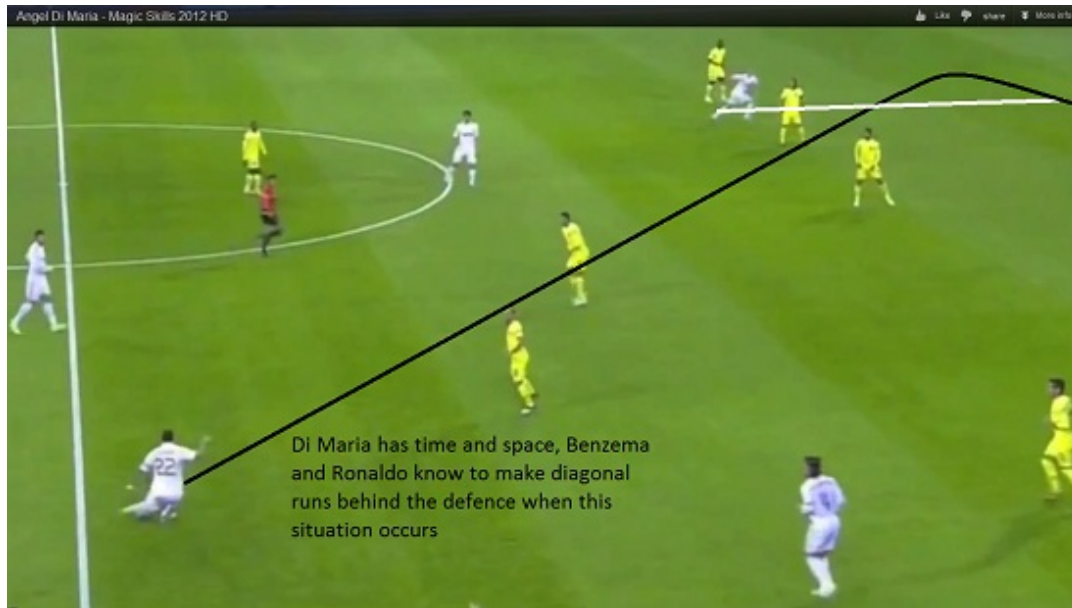
As Pique pressures the ball, Benzema arcs his run behind Pique to offer the pass, which Di Maria plays, Benzema may be slightly offside but Valdes makes a good save from this attack.

Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 - Di Maria cuts inside for the long diagonal pass

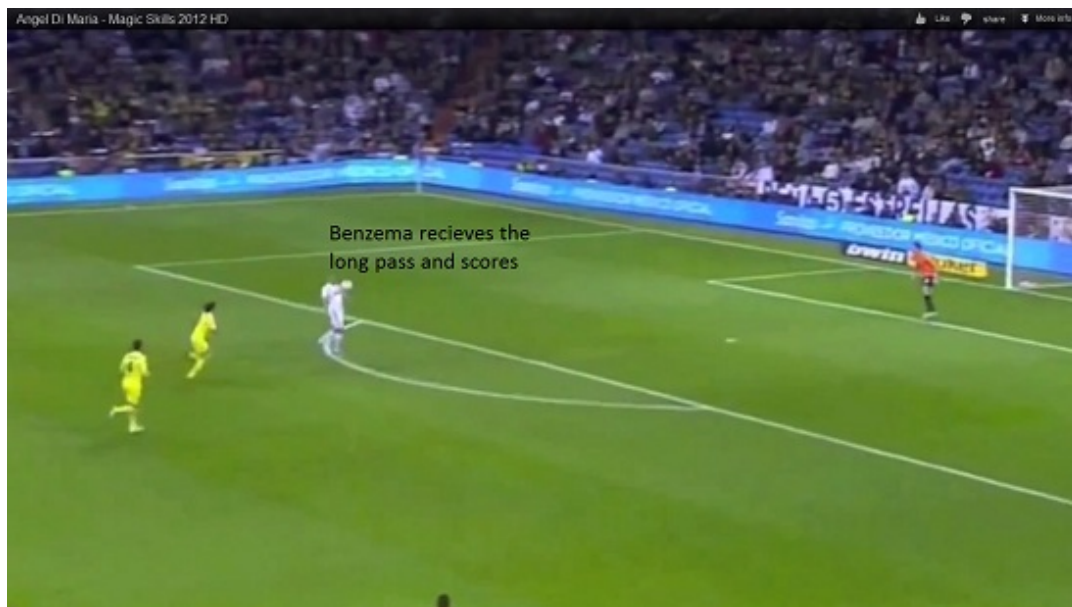


Di Maria is also able to play long passes effectively. With Ronaldo, Higuain and Benzema, all are fast attackers; Di Maria can exploit any large spaces behind the defence with a long pass, diagonally over the top of the defence.

Di Maria finds Benzema in space with a long pass to score



Di Maria has time and space, and with the defence playing high, and no pressure on the ball, Benzema knows to make the run behind the defence, expecting the long pass from Di Maria. If the far side centre



back was to cover a couple of yards deeper, maybe the pass would be more difficult.

Benzema is in lots of space and a good first touch sets the ball down into a position to score from Di Maria's well executed long pass.

Di Maria switches play to open up the attack into the far side space and overlapping run



Di Maria cuts inside and Ronaldo makes the diagonal run to take up Higuain's position at centre forward, knowing Di Maria could try the diagonal killer pass. Coentrao is the left back and will sprint forward to maintain width on the left now that Ronaldo has moved into the centre as Higuain moved right to help build an attack between the lines.

Coentrao receives in space on the far side and could cross for Ronaldo inside the box



Coentrao attacks the space left by Ronaldo on the left side, and receives the long pass from Di Maria. He takes a good touch to get the ball under control, and knowing Ronaldo is a threat from crosses, makes some space and delivers a cross, narrowly missing Ronaldo in the centre.

Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 – Counter Attacking

One of the main reasons Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 is so effective is speed. With pace on both sides from Ronaldo and Di Maria, centrally from Ozil and Benzema (not forgetting Callejon, Kaka, Higuain and now Modric), they have speed in counter attacks. Another reason it is so effective is because they have players all over the field willing to join in a counter attack – Khedira loves to break forward from his deep position, as does Marcelo and Coentrao from left back, and occasionally we will see Arbeloa, Pepe and Ramos breaking forward from defence too. With most Real Madrid counter attacks consisting of at least 4 players breaking forward at pace, and most of the play being 2 touches on the counter, with almost every pass ahead of the runner, they are possibly the most dangerous team in Europe on the counter attack.

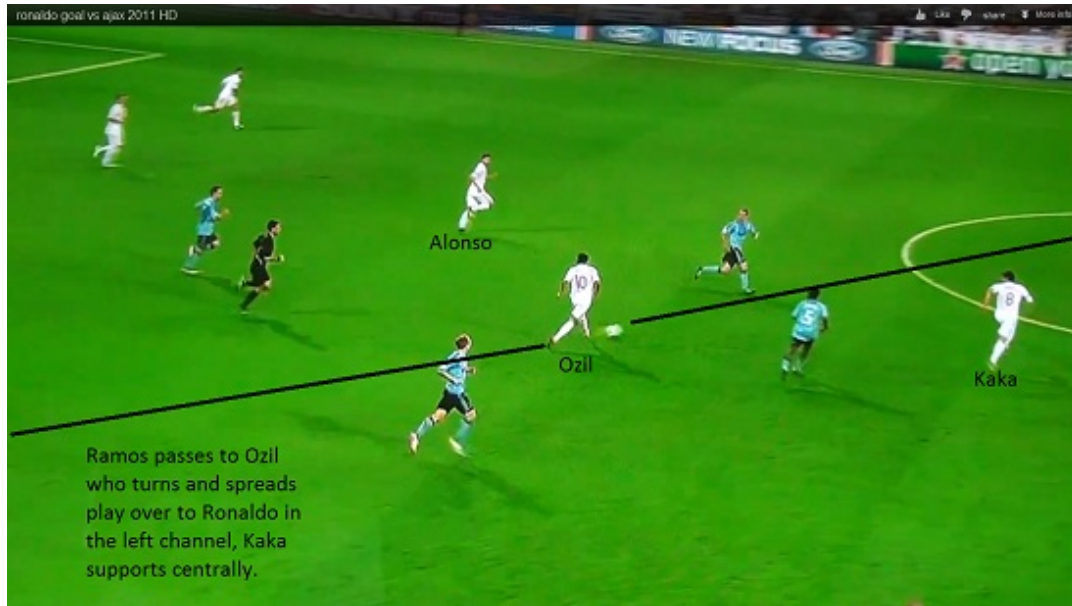
Real Madrid counter attack movements after defending a corner against Ajax



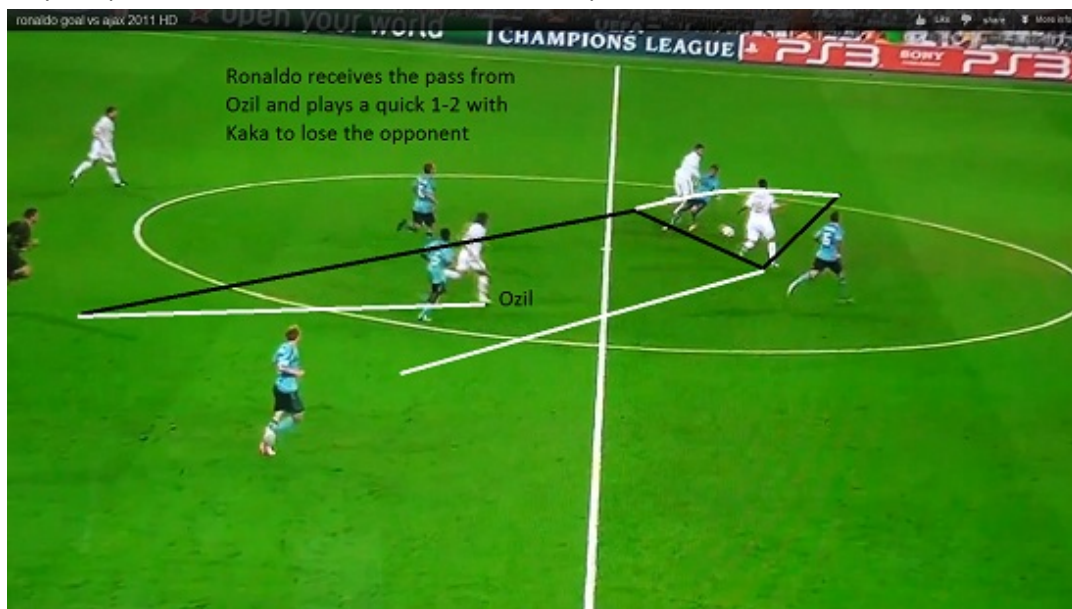
Ramos finds Ozil, who finds Ronaldo on the other side. Kaka supports centrally and plays a 1-2. As the 1st pass comes from Ramos to Ozil, Benzema and Coentrao sprint forward and join the attack from deep. When Ronaldo and Kaka play the 1-2, play is again opened up to the far side – Coentrao has run almost 70m to receive the pass and has Benzema on the other side of him. Coentrao plays the pass into Benzema's feet, and without taking a touch, passes into the box where Ronaldo runs onto the ball and smashes a shot past the goalkeeper for a fantastically executed counter attack.

I have images from the match below and I hope this will show the speed of the players and the counter attacking mentality that Real Madrid have – pass forward, break at speed and pass into players stride.

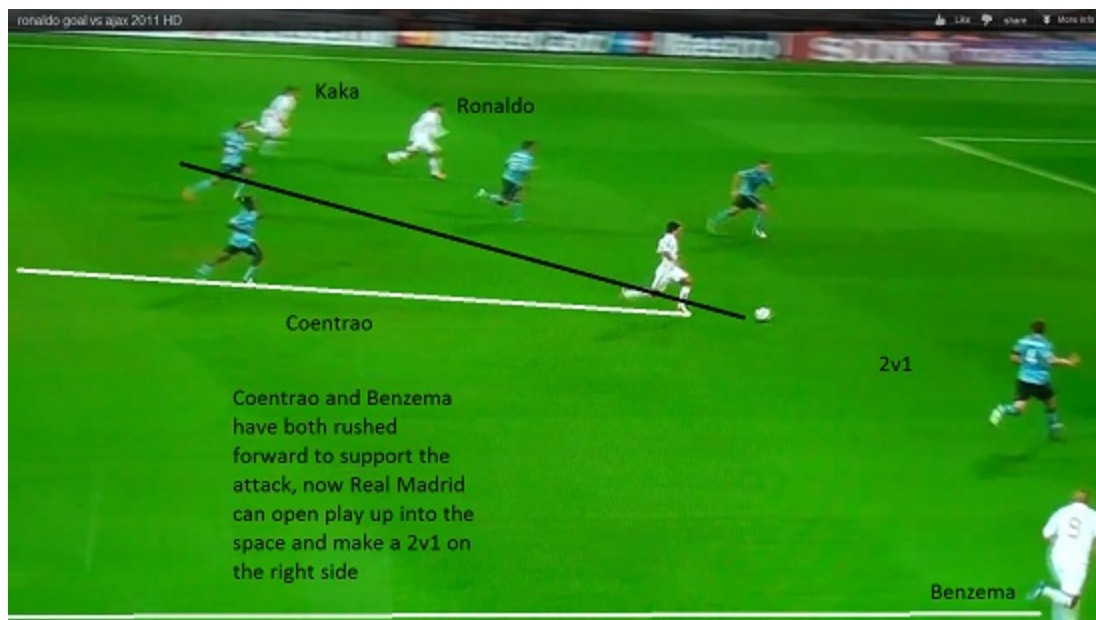
Real Madrid Counter Attack v Ajax



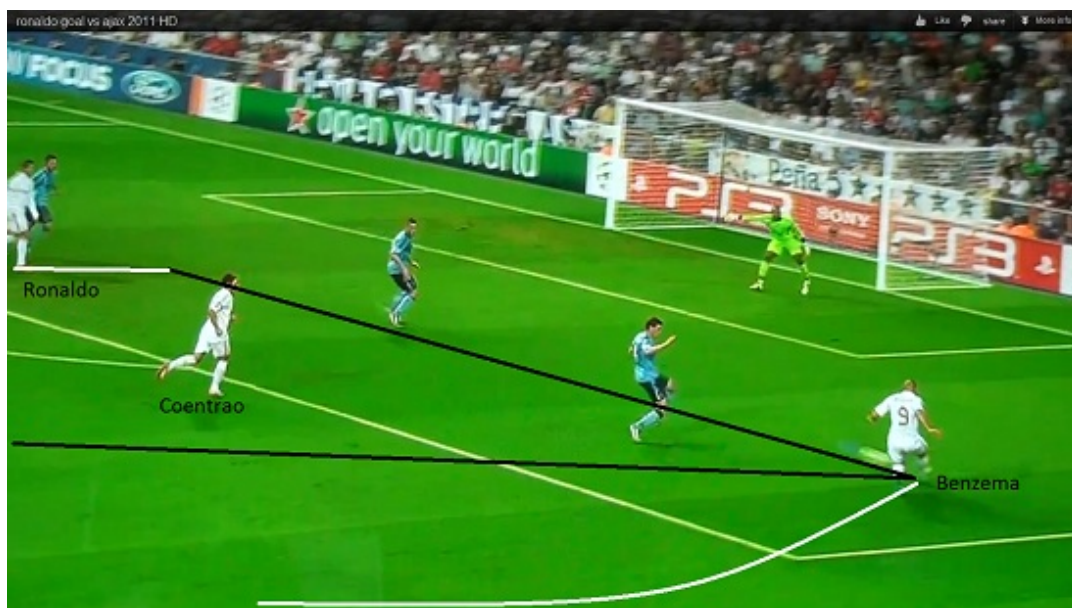
Ramos receives a pass out of defence and starts the counter attack with a pass inside to Ozil, who has stayed up with Kaka and Ronaldo. Ozil turns and passes left to Ronaldo.



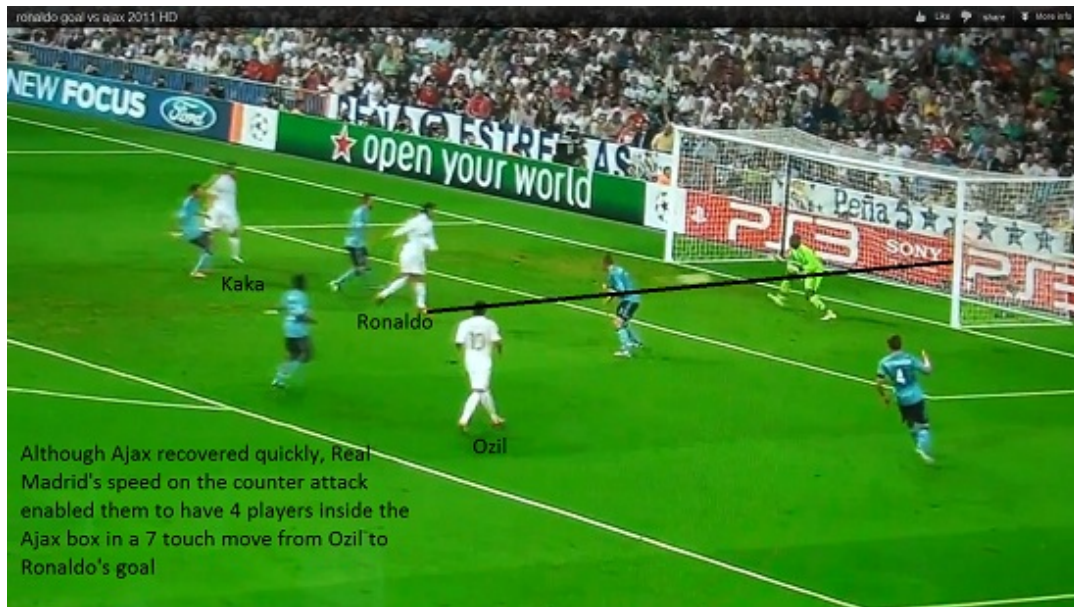
Ronaldo is pressured but manages to poke a 1-2 round the defender with Kaka's supporting run. Ozil has begun his run forward.



Coentrao almost comes from nowhere to sprint into the attack and has a 2v1 with Benzema, who has also run from nowhere to support the attack. Benzema is the next pass as this allows Kaka and Ronaldo an opportunity to enter the box and score from a cross or pass.



Benzema passes low and hard 1st time into the box, and Ronaldo gets across the front of his opponent, allowing him to reach the ball 1st and blast a shot past the Ajax goalkeeper from the penalty spot. From Ozil's pass to Ronaldo's final shot, the move had 7 touches, Ozil, Ronaldo, Kaka, Ronaldo, Coentrao, Benzema and finally Ronaldo. Including Ramos initial pass, there was 10 touches involving 6 players. This counter attack shows incredible speed, accuracy, consistency, and penetration and game intelligence to counter attack in this manner, especially against a Champions League opponent. Ajax recovered quickly, which further shows how good this counter attack was in particular.



Ronaldo's final touch in the counter attack results in a fantastic goal and one of the best counter attacks in recent memory.

I think that although Vicente Del Bosque's variety within Spain's attacking 4-2-3-1 is the best, Jose Mourinho's 4-2-3-1 isn't far behind, because they also have lots of variations of how they can play both centrally and wide from deep positions and close to the goal. Di Maria and Ronaldo can both penetrate from deep and close to the goal, both can score and provide assists, both can play centrally and with Mesut Ozil playing as the number 10, they have a player who can keep attacks fluid and accurate with his clever movement in the centre. Just as importantly, they have good balance in the centre, with a deep lying playmaker in Xabi Alonso, and a box-box midfielder in Sami Khedira who likes get forward and support the attack regularly, as we saw in the Barcelona match image when Benzema received a through pass from a Di Maria dribble. The defensive organisation – looked at in the defending section of the book, is also critical to the way this Real Madrid team play with such a high level of consistency.

Developing the 4-2-3-1

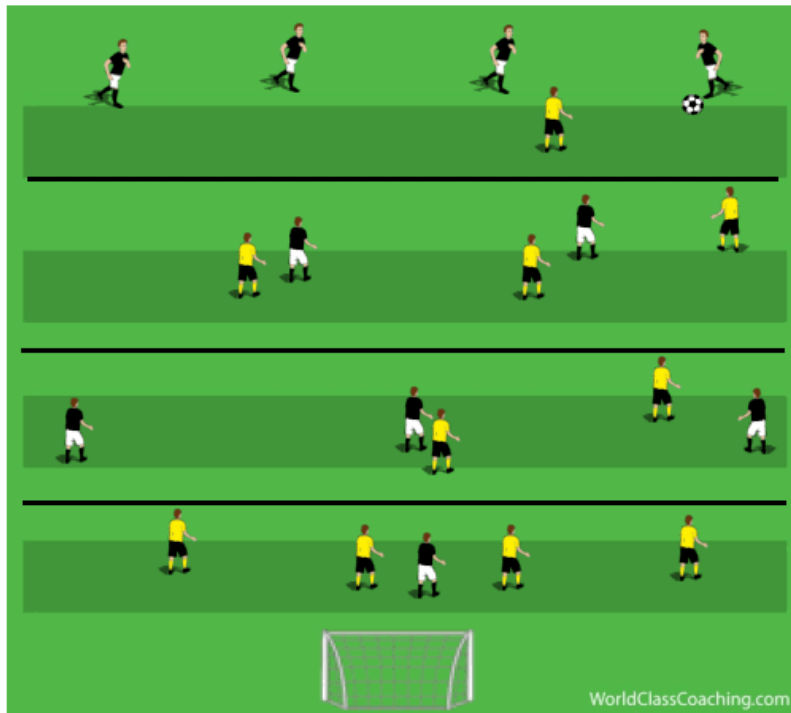
Defending

In the defending section of the book you will find 15 positional diagrams followed by 8 progressive training sessions to build the coherence between the defensive lines and individual and small group aspects of defending such as defending and preventing crosses, pressing and covering, midfield defending and the transition to attack after winning the ball, to help with where players should start and move to based on the position of the ball and opposition.

The formations and positional diagrams for the 4-2-3-1 come before the training sessions and include positional diagrams for starting positions from a goal kick, when the opposition full back has possession and the ball in a wide position in the final 3rd, generally against a 4-2 defensive shape.

Diagrams include playing against the following formations: 4-4-2, 4-3-3, 4-5-1, 3-5-2 and 4-2-3-1.

Frontal and behind pressing and covering

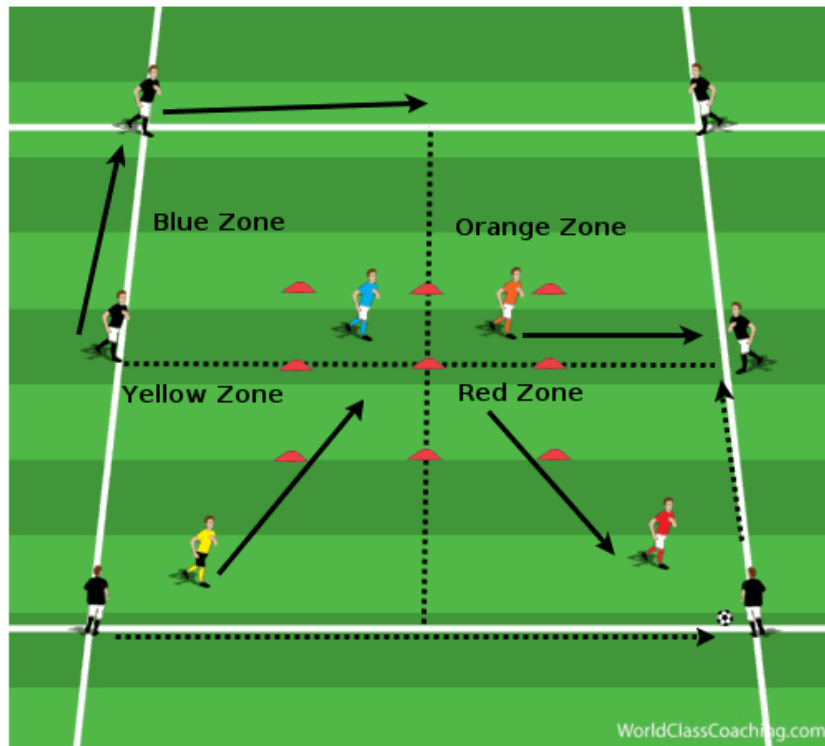


2 teams play in a 4-2-3-1 formation, with set zones to emphasise correct distances between the lines and how far covering and pressing distances can be. The field should be around 40 yards – 50 yards long and around 55 – 70 yards wide, where possible.

In the example above, the striker has pressed the left back and the right winger has blocked the passing lane into the striker, as a pass is played, 1 player from each zone can move forward or back.

Training Session – Defending in a 4-2-3-1 – Pressing and Covering

Session to develop pressing and covering in a 4-2-3-1



Place 3 or 4 players inside a central zone. With 4 players, all players have 1 zone, with 3, the players closest to the ball play inside the zones; the 3rd player plays behind and makes a triangle.

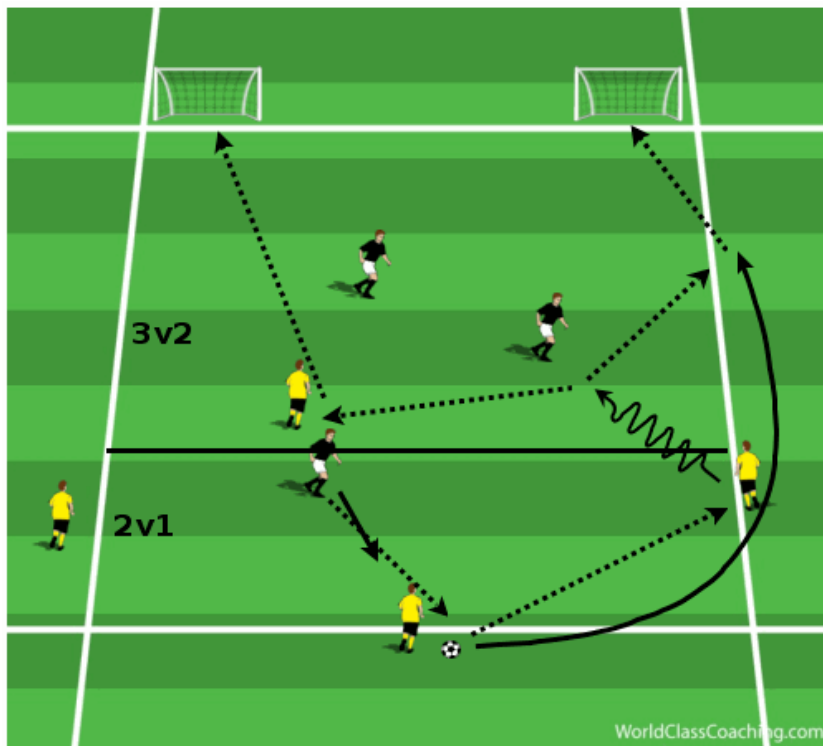
When the ball is passed, the closest player to the ball sprints out to press the ball as above;

The yellow has pressed the ball, but it has been passed wide. The red presses as the ball reaches his opponent, the yellow drops back into his zone while the orange is ready to sprint out to press the next pass if it is passed right, the yellow will press again if it is pressed left. The blue will cover behind the red and orange and be ready for if the players behind him move round to fill in the spaces and can press if these players receive the ball. Attacking players can move positions to fill in the spaces in the centre to create short passes.

Coaching Points:

- Be ready to press quickly and put the attacker under pressure
- Sprint out and get into good body position to force play into a team mate
- Recover quickly into position and be ready to press again
- If the ball is passed into a central player, you can take the risk and double pressure

2v1 defence with covering players to a 3v2 attacking overload



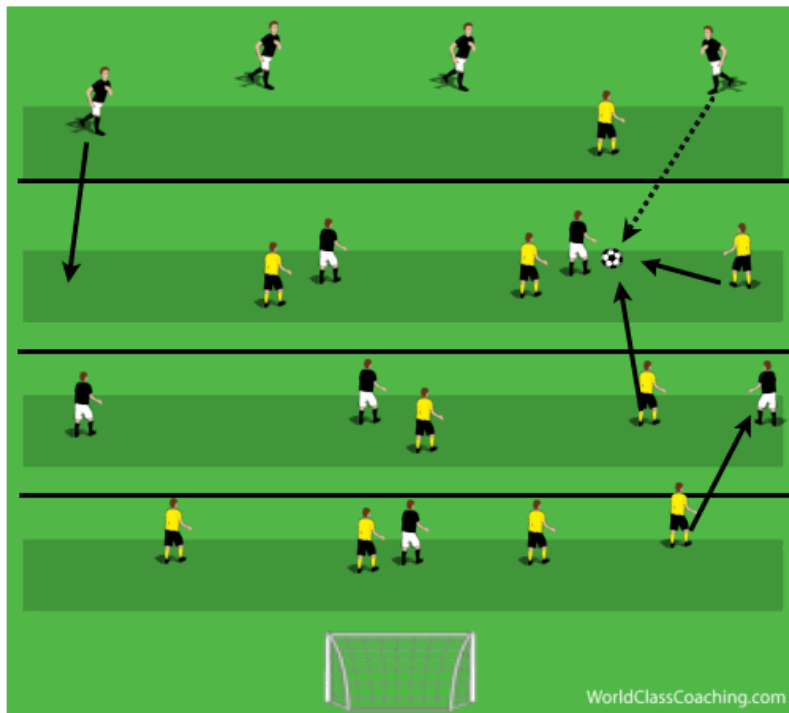
The defender passes into the central attacker, presses and forces play to one side. The covering defenders quickly move over to press the winger, the deeper covering player can cover the central line area in position to press any pass across.

Progressions/Variations:

- The defender who passes the ball out can drop into the 3v2 zone to make a 3v3 and either tracks the overlapping player if he overlaps, if he stays centrally, make a defensive triangle.
- Once comfortable, play with a front 3 against 4 in the initial zone, with the 2 players in the deeper zone to simulate a 3-2 defence. In the attacking zone can be 1v2, 2v2 or 2v3 depending on numbers or which system you may be playing against in future.
- Reduce to 1 central goal

Coaching Points:

- Press and cover team mates, close enough to win the ball when you press
- Drop off then move forward as ball is moved wide
- Block off passing lanes forward and follow players in position when they can receive a pass



As the ball is passed into midfield, the winger has come inside to press as he knows the passing lane isn't used and the full back will come out to pick up the winger if the central midfielder tries to pass round the corner into the winger. The nearest central midfielder presses from behind as he knows the full back will discourage the pass into the winger. Defensively they need to look out for the far side full back being released with a pass into defence then wide, so the far side winger will need to pull wider away from the player he is marking just now to cover the distance earlier and quicker to press the full back if he is passed to.

The central covering midfielder should stay close to the central attacking midfielder and not allow him time to press. If the ball is passed back, the full back and central midfielders who moved out of their zones should return to starting positions and re-set the shape.

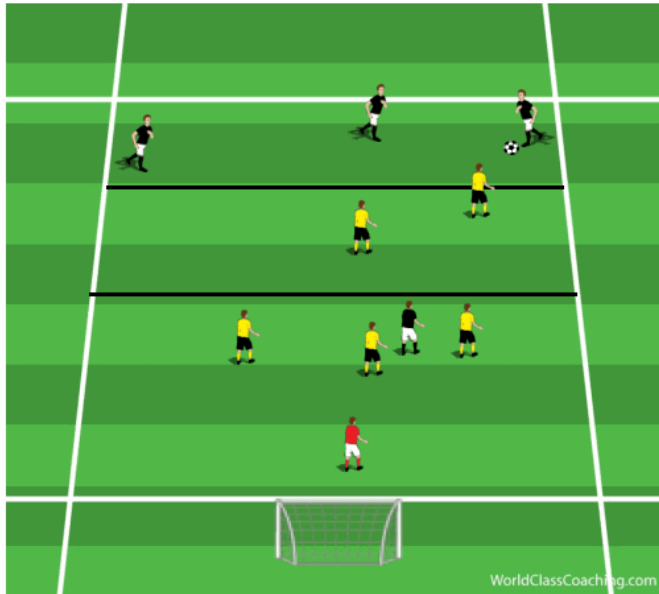
Coaching Points:

- Anticipate passes and move early
- Press and cover well using communication
- Reshape after each pass
- Be aware of movements of defensive players around you and cover the movements
- If you see a player can be released in the next or the pass after, move early to recover

Finish the session with 7 a side matches playing 2-3-1 to work on pressing from the front and covering from behind.

Training Session 2 - 4-2-3-1 – Back 4 and holding players

Activity 1 – Central Midfielders - frontal screening.



The 2 holding players stay inside an 8 yards deep x 16 yards wide zone. They move across the grid, dropping off and moving forward to close down passing angles and block or intercept passes into the striker. The back 3 should talk to the midfield and tell them where to move and work as a unit to stop passes going into the striker. If he receives, 1 player can move into the attack and support the striker.

Coaching Points:

- Move as a pair in midfield, using a 'see-saw' system
- Communication from team mates to know where and when to move
- Relevant body shape on the move and in position
- Close down and tighten passing angles when possible

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in an attacking midfielder to play close to the holding midfielders
- Add in a 2nd striker
- Add in a 4th defender
- Allow players to change zones in the attacking team to deal with movement from behind

Transition play – Winning possession near the touchline to start an attack



The near side defenders and midfielders play 5v4 against an attack. The attack gain 1 point for each 5 passes they play. When the defence win possession, they must quickly find a pass into one of the 2 small target goals where one of the attacking midfielders would be expected to be positioned.

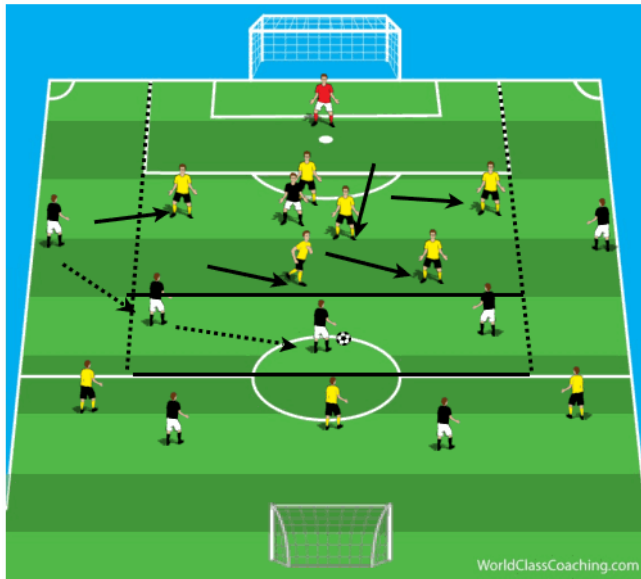
Coaching Points:

- Move and press as a unit
- Stay in position and try to win possession as a pass is played
- If the midfielder presses the ball, the non-marking centre back should move up and look to cut off the pass into the striker
- Relevant body shape when moving and pressing

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a far side full back that covers inside a far side winger – if the 4 make 4 passes, they can switch play over to the side for a 1v1. Defence and midfield re-shapes centrally. If full back wins the ball, pass into another small goal on that side.
- Play 5v5 inside the box
- Add in a covering defender who tries to intercept the pass
- Add in an attacking midfielder who receives and dribbles over an end line

Line of confrontation and transition to attack



The box in front of the half way line is a 'safe zone' for the attack – no defending player can move inside here, although the 3 players inside this zone can all exit the zone to attack. The line of confrontation is the end of this zone so the back 4 and 2 holding players have a line they know not to rush ahead of and leave space behind. The wide zones on the sides are so the full backs have a 1v1 and one of the holding players can move outside to if needed to make a 2v1. The other central midfielder can move over but must be aware of a switch of play to the far side. In the example above, the ball is moved across the field and the defence has re-adjusted accordingly. As there may be a small space to pass into the strikers' feet, the non-marking centre back has moved forward to cut off the pass, with the marking centre back able to cover across to pick up a pass into the space to his left.

When the defence win possession, they should try to find one of the 3 attacking players who try to score.

Coaching Points:

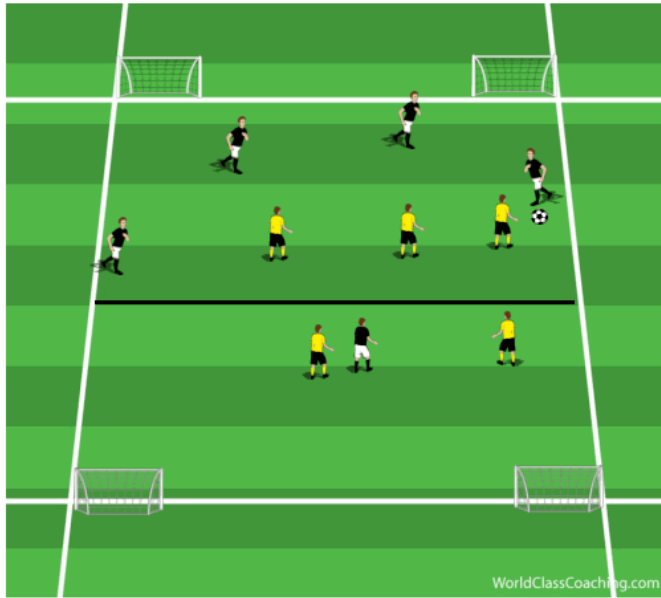
- Press and cover as a pair, work as a 'see-saw'
- Close off passing lanes
- Back 4 move back, forward and across when the ball moves
- Quick transition to attack when the ball is won

Progressions/Variations:

- Remove the confrontation line and wide line
- Play a different attacking formation (above is 4-3-3 based)
- Give a time limit and change over after x minutes, see which team can score the most counter attacks/goals

Training Session 3 – Holding 2 and Attacking 3

Activity 1 – distances and shape



Split a 30 x 20 yard field into 2 halves with 4 goals. The Yellows play 2-3 against Blacks who play 4-1.

The Yellows should stop the blacks from finding the pass into the attacking half, and when they win possession, try to score into 1 of the 2 wide goals. The Blacks will try to score into the 2 wide goals on the other side. If the ball is played into the other half, one of the Blacks can enter and make it 2v2.

Coaching Points:

- Stay close enough to team mate to cover and support
- Be in a position to press the next pass
- Screen the passing lane into the striker and stop forward passes
- Move diagonally back and across if play is switched
- If the ball is won in the Yellow defensive zone, one of the 2 holding midfielders can support the attack, but be wary of the counter attack

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in 2 wide players who act as Attacking full backs for the yellows, but as 2 wingers for the Blacks for a 7v5 attacking overload – in 4-2-3-1 width is very important in defence and attack
- Move to central goals and play with 2-3 formations with 2 touch wide players
- Enforce a no talking rule so that players learn the importance of communication

Activity 2 – Transition to attack – Full Back pushes forward to help the midfield play 6v5



Mark out a box, 30 yards long by 40 yards wide. The Blacks attack with the full back and 2 holding players and 2 attacking midfielders. The Yellows defence with the full back, 2 holding midfielders and the 3 attacking midfielders. The Blacks should look to find a way to find the striker who is outside the box with a pass and supporting run to score. If the Yellow's win possession, they will try and find the striker and make supporting runs to score. Above, the central midfielder intercepts a pass forward and plays a pass behind the defence into the run of the striker. The central and left attacking midfielders have supported inside for a pass to score.

Coaching Points:

- Press and Cover as the ball is passed around the box
- Maintain shape and communicate, to drop off and make sure players are marked/screened
- Look for interceptions and the killer pass in transition

Progressions/Variations:

- Add a central defender to play v the striker
- If the blacks make 6 passes, they can switch play over to a wide player who will attack 1v1 against a full back, with the central defender v striker in the centre
- Remove the box and play up to the width of the box a Black 4-4-1 to play v Yellow 3-2-3-1

4-2-3 v 4-2-3-1 – Counter Attacking Practice



The Blacks play 4-2-3-1 v the Yellow 4-2-3 formation. The Yellows play 9 v 10 and when they win possession, look to counter attack quickly over the line with passes and dribbles. Players must not go chasing the ball and remember the distances between players are important, and moving forward to close down passing angles while closing off passing lanes into midfield are a crucial element of the defensive strategy. Above, the right back is in possession. The full back plays close to the winger, leaving a back 3 as the far side full back tucks in. The 2 holding players cover the spaces making an 'M' formation, playing close to the attacking midfielder and stopping passes into him. The 3 attacking midfielders press the ball and closest passing options, with the far side player playing almost in line with his full back, wide enough to shut down a long switch to the far side.

Coaching Points:

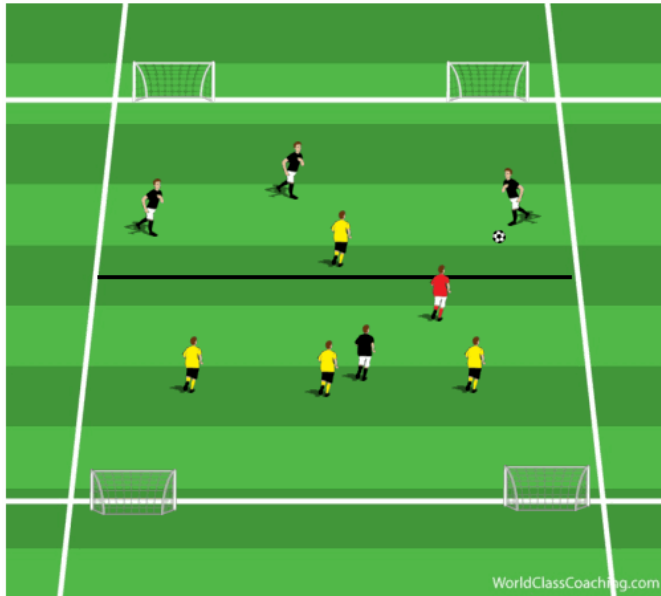
- Press, cover, balance and communicate at all times
- As the ball moves, so does the defence
- Be aware of movement behind as well as in front
- Force play back - Disallow passes into midfield and the striker as quickly as possible
- Be decisive when pressing the ball, where will play be forced?
- Speed in transition to cross the end line

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a striker and a goalkeeper and play a short field match – 70 yards
- Play games of 15 minutes then swap roles – what are the scores?
- Play against different formations, what is different playing against 4-2-3-1 than 4-3-3?

Training Session 4 – Transition to Attack

Win possession in midfield to start a counter attack



Split a 30 x 20 yard box into 2 halves with 4 goals. In both halves there is a 3v1, with the red player a full time defender. This means that the defence have a 5v4 advantage. The red player could be a central midfielder or full back that has pushed up or a deep lying forward who is helping defend.

The player inside the single box must not go deeper than the central line, but 1 player from the box with 3 defenders may push ahead of the line to help press the ball, the red player also can do this to make a 3rd player inside this half, but this leaves more space to penetrate behind and attack into.

Once you win possession, 3 players can attack inside the other zone, the red changes teams and will press the ball, if the red win's possession, he becomes an attacker too.

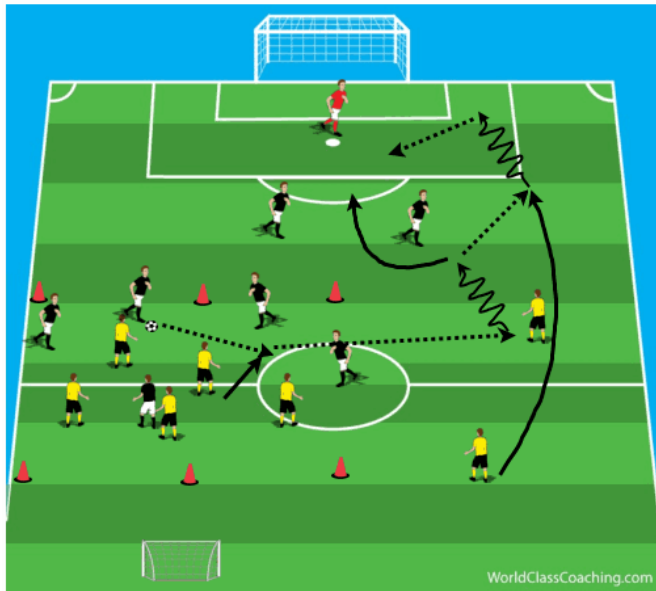
Coaching Points:

- Press and cover behind the line play, communicate with the striker where to force play
- Anticipate the next pass and press early if you can intercept or force a mistake
- The red can use initiative in defence – cover the line of 3, help the striker or block passing lanes into the striker

Progressions/Variations:

- Play against different attacking systems, 2-2, 1-3, diamond (defensive line stays the same)
- The red changes to an attacker to play 4v5
- Use central goals and a goalkeeper
- Have 2 wide players who can act as a wall for 1 touch play – the development phase of attacking transition when the defence win possession or building attacks in a 4 (+2) v 5

Winning Possession to switch play to winger and full back 5v5 + 2v2



Mark out a 20 yard long by 30 yards wide zone.

The Black attack play 5v5 against a full back and 2 holding players and 2 attacking midfielders. The far side winger and full back start in positions relevant to the starting positions of the team mates.

The Blacks try to exit the box and score into the small goal 10 yards behind the zone. If the Yellows win possession, they should switch play to the winger who will have the full back as overlapping support against 2 defenders.

Coaching Points:

- Stay in shape to win the ball, using the 'M' shape
- In transition, find the pass wide quickly, the overlap should begin as play is switched
- Be fast and decisive on the counter attack
- Try to eliminate a defender or play 2v1

Progressions/Variations:

- The players in the starting zone recover into shape and the attack becomes 7v7
- Play with 2 large goals with a striker to find against 1 or 2 central defenders after 5 passes
- The yellow attacking full back becomes a Black and is the outball for the Blacks after 5 passes inside the zone, the yellow winger will be the recovery player if Black is attacking
- If Yellow switch play to the winger, the Black winger will be the recovery defender
- Add an extra 2 wide players – an attacking full back for Yellow and Black

A diagram of a soccer field with green grass and white lines. At the top is a goal with a goalkeeper in a white jersey. At the bottom is another goal with a goalkeeper in a blue jersey. Several players are positioned on the field, wearing red, black, yellow, and white jerseys. Red cones are placed around the field. Black arrows indicate movement paths: a long dashed arrow from the center to the right, a solid arrow from the center to the left, and a wavy arrow on the right side. A soccer ball is located near the center-right. The text 'WorldClassCoaching.com' is at the bottom right.

On the outside of the box are 2 neutral players who will be the outball from the centre – if the Yellows are attacking, these players are the wide attackers, if the Blacks win possession; they are the 2 attacking full backs.

After the ball is switched wide, defend as a whole team to stop a goal. If play goes out or a goal is scored, restart in the centre with the team who just attacked. All the attackers join in to score.

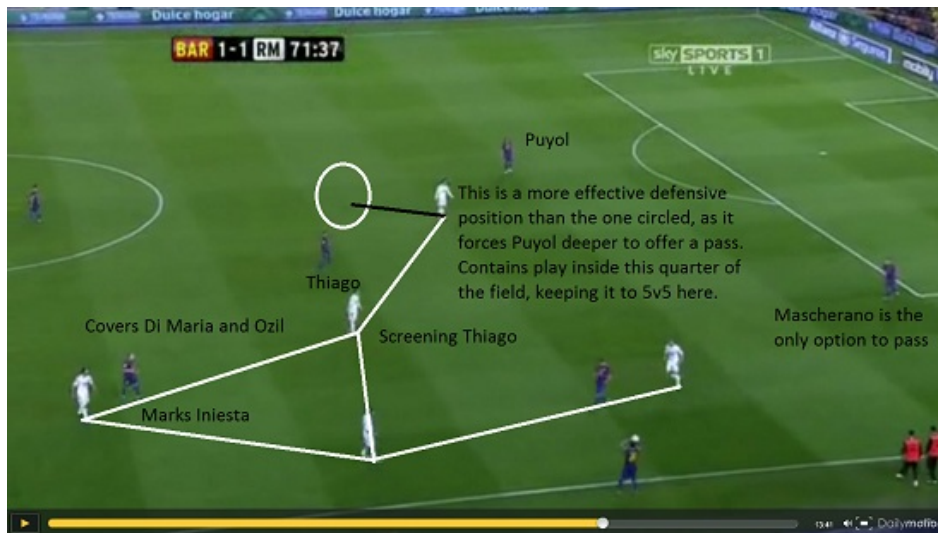
Coaching Points:

- Progressions/Variations:**

- ## Coaching the 4-2-3-1

Training Session 5 – Defending Throw In's

Defending Throw in's in the opposition half

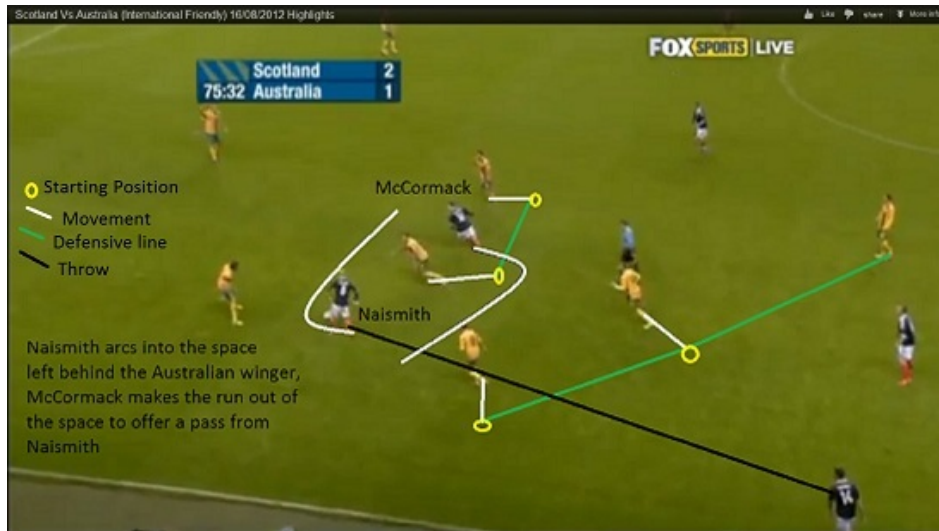


Barcelona has a throw in around 30 yards from goal. Real Madrid have 5 players inside the Barcelona half trying to contain possession in this area and hopefully win possession high up the field.

They make a defensive triangle between the thrower and Iniesta, who is the furthest player inside the half within reaching distance. The bottom of the triangle marks Iniesta. The left side of the defensive triangle is screening Thiago and the right side of the defensive triangle will take responsibility to screening the passing lane to Iniesta if the thrower receives a return pass.

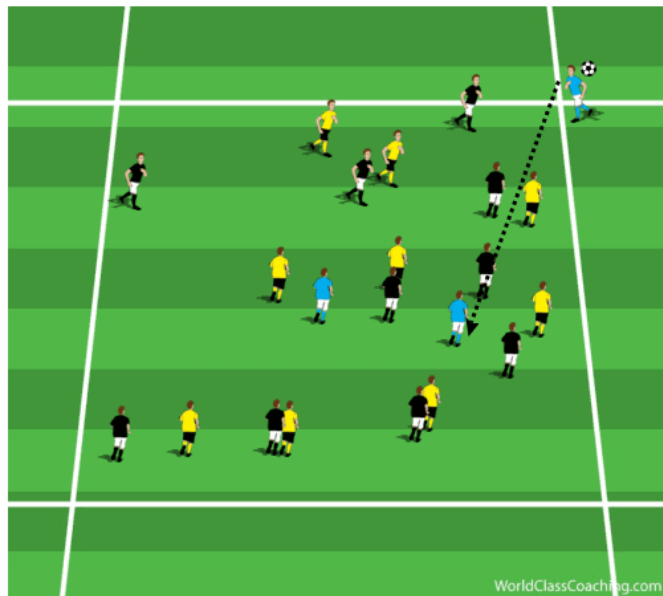
Benzema and Ronaldo push higher up, to defend on 3 lines. Ronaldo on the left of a 4-2-3-1 should be in the position circled, but by pushing ahead of it, he is in a more effective defensive position against Puyol who must move deeper to offer a pass now. Benzema is closest to Busquets who is the short pass option. He stands on the opposite side to Busquets because if he was to stand goal side, Busquets would receive, turn and try to find Xavi in the centre or pass easily back to Mascherano. As he can pass faster than a throw can be thrown, Benzema picks up a clever position. Mascherano is left as the only real option here, from which Real Madrid forces Barcelona back.

Scotland v Australia – Scotland scores from a badly defended throw in inside Australia's half



Australia have set up badly from the throw in, The 2 holding midfielders are too far away from the ball and this leaves space that Naismith can arc into and receive. McCormack can see Naismith moving and his run inside takes the eyes away from the side of the ball Naismith will receive in.

The reason the space is there for Naismith is because the right side holding midfielder is too central and this means there is space to move into.



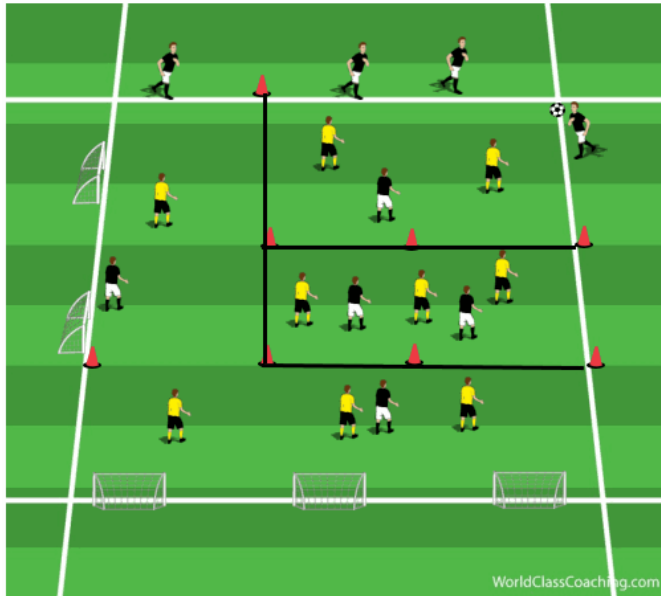
Yellow – where Australia was positioned, Black – Better positions to stop the throw into the space where Naismith received. Blue – Naismith and McCormack

Reasons why these positions are better;

The right side central midfielder can block the throwing lane into Naismith's run (Black Player)

The space is more towards the touchline instead of central; this way we can force play outside to the extra defender – the touchline.

Training Session for defending throw in's



Split a 30 yard grid into 2 sections, a main grid 18 yards long and 20 yards wide, a 2nd grid 12 yards long and 20 yards wide. Inside the large grid, will be the thrower and 3 receivers, against 2 defenders – the wide attacking midfielder and central attacking midfielder.

Inside the 2nd grid will have 2 receivers and 3 defenders – the full back and 2 central midfielders.

At the base of the box will be the 2 central defenders, and on the outside of the box, the wide attacking midfielder and full back. The full back plays in line with the central defenders and winger.

The Black team have possession at a throw in around 40 yards from goal. The role of the Black team is to score into one of the 5 small goals positioned around the field. The Yellows should try to cut off passes and win possession.

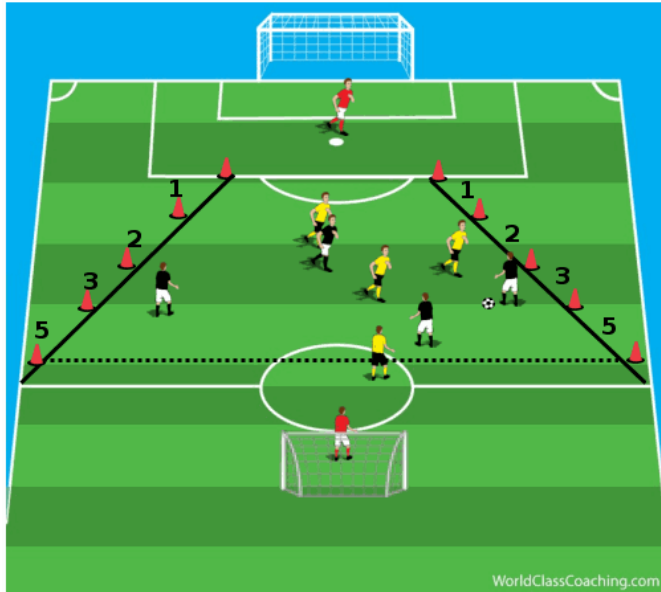
Coaching Points:

- Stay in shape and move with runners to make it difficult to receive passes
- Block off passes into space and contain play within the zone
- Correct distances between the lines and covering players
- Maintain correct body shape when marking and pressing

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in small goals behind the defence to simulate passing into a striker
- Play with less defensive players and add in a striker to allow for attacking in transition
- When possession is won, try to pass into one of the 2 small goals on the side of the field to simulate switching play
- Add in attacking full backs and look to build a way out of the zone from winning possession

Training Session 6 – Midfield defending – Forcing play wide



Set up an area with a line from the middle of the goal to the corner of the half. Mark out 4 x 8 yard sections on the width of the field on both sides. The defence play with the 2 central midfielders and the attacking midfielder against 4 attackers. The defence win points for how high up the field they can force play outside, the closer to the goal is less points, further away more points.

If the midfield wins possession, they can pass into the striker behind the dotted line who can score and gain 6 points for the team. He will be pressed by the Black team to speed up the attack.

If the attack (Black team) scores, all points scored by the defence are cancelled out. Have 5 attempts at scoring, enforce a time limit or play up to x amount of points for the defence, see which defence can get up to i.e. 10 points in the lowest amount of attacks. A shot saved = 1 point for the GK but 0 for defence.

Coaching Points:

- As there is an attacking overload, don't get caught too narrow and allow an easy switch into space
- Don't dive into tackles
- Relevant body position and foot position to force play wide and away from goal
- Communication between the 3 midfielders

- One of the central defensive midfielders can push ahead if it helps force play back or wide

Progressions/Variations:

- Play a central defender behind the midfield and use a diamond defensive shape
- Add in an extra attacker and make the zone slightly wider or narrower depending on success
- The defence/player are only allowed x amount of tackle attempts – making sure they time the tackles well and learn when to try and win the ball and when not to win the ball
-

Midfield defending – Using the midfield 5 to force play wide and support in transition



The practice is similar to before except the touchline is from the front post to the corner of the half. The midfield 2-3 shape defends and tries to force play outside the line to stop the attack. If the defence win possession, they can pass into the striker who plays 1v1 against the defender to try and score – the 3 attacking midfielders should try and support to create an overload on the counter attack.

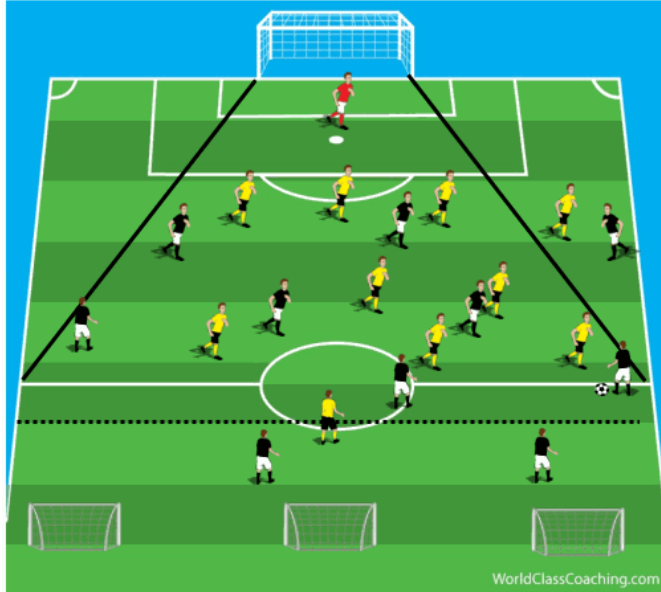
Coaching Points:

- Press the ball and force wide, players inside should cover passing lanes
- Holding midfielders cover behind the front 3 to stop penetrating passes
- Communication and body shape to see all across the field when covering positions

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in 2 extra attackers to help work on overloading and working on defensive mentality
- Add in 2 central defenders behind the midfield to allow the midfield to press higher
- Add in a 2nd central defender to play against the striker in transition, can join in the attack

Whole Team Defending – Winning Possession in midfield



The same set up as previously, but with 3 small goals to score into on the counter attack. The whole team plays but uses the lines as a guide for defending inside the lines when the ball is on the far side. Above, the winger in the 4-3-3 has moved wide and offered a pass down the line, but the full back has gone out to mark him. The back 3 covers inside with the middle 2 in front. The 3 attacking midfielders all try to press the ball and force it wide away from space, looking to find the striker on the counter attack and support to score into one of the small goals.

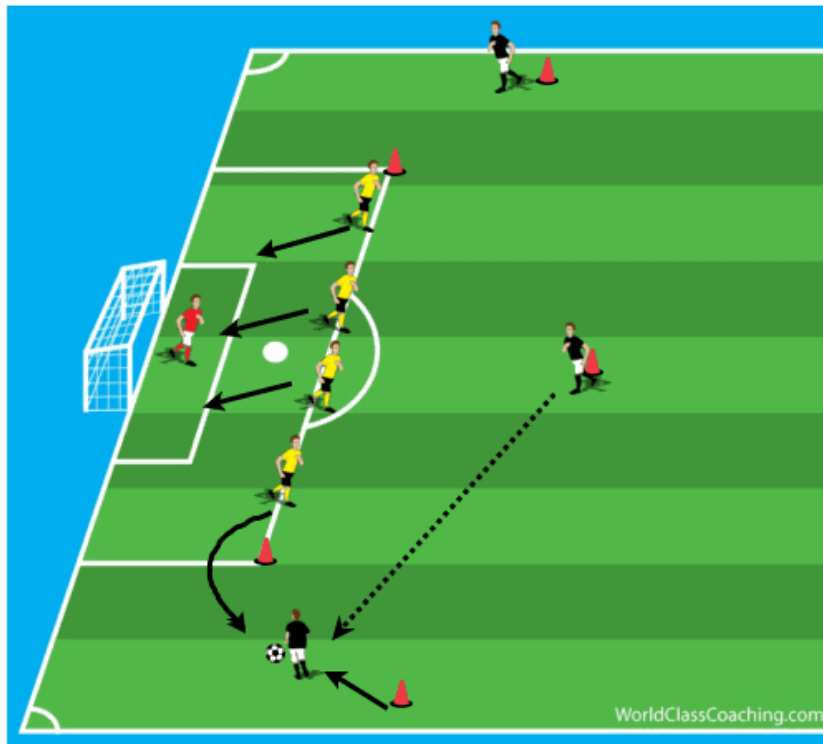
Coaching Points:

- Use the lines as a guide – only the full back and wide midfielders should drift into the wide zones
- Maintain players in the central zone, stopping the opposition from attacking through the centre
- The attacking midfielders shouldn't rush too far out, the half way line is the line of confrontation and should stick to the defensive shape, moving in a 'see-saw' motion across the field

Progressions/Variations:

- Remove wide lines and allow play to continue as normal
- Play against different formations
- Remove small goals and use a central goal with a GK

Training Session 7 – Defending Crosses in a 4-2-3-1



Start off the session with passing inside the cone for the winger to run onto and cross into 2 centre backs. Move into playing with a back 4 – the full back presses the winger and shows him wide. The defence moves backwards as the full back presses with an open body shape to allow them to see the field and any incoming attackers.

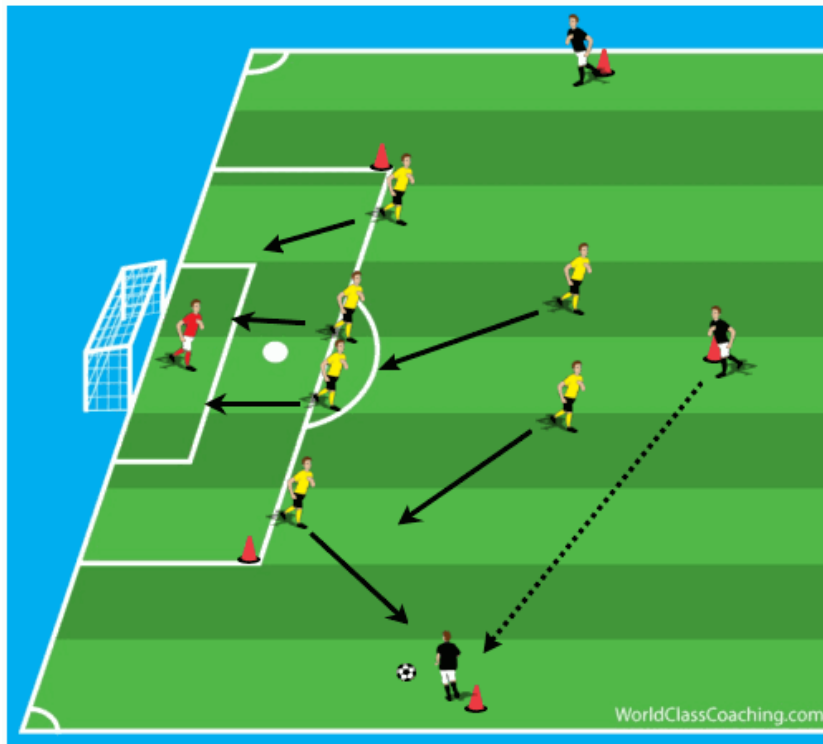
Coaching Points:

- As the full back presses, drop back into a position to defend the cross
- Full back - Force play wide and away from goal
- Centre Backs - Turn the body open to see any incoming attackers and team mates
- Communication – players should be able to mark a zone when there are no opponents
- When a striker is added, play 'touch tight' and 'goal side'
- Concentration – don't get caught ball watching, see the movement and players around the box, and attack the ball early

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a striker or 2
- Have the far side winger join in the attack looking for a cross
- Have the winger cut inside and cross – the defence should push out as a unit and make any attackers offside. This can stop the cross coming in if done properly
- Play an overlapping full back for a 2v1 on the side

Back 4 and 2 holding midfielders – Defending Crosses



This time, when the ball is played wide, the full back and defence make the same movements, but the near side central midfielder comes over to play 2v1 and cover inside the full back v the winger. The other central midfielder should cover the centre line on the edge of the box as this is the most important space that goals are scored from. (Zone 14 according to UEFA)

Coaching Points:

- Central midfielder covers behind the full back so he can cover the space quickly down the line if the full back is beaten, but inside enough to cover the cut inside to cross and stop it
- Far side central midfielder provides a screen on the central line to help with runners and rebounds
- Far side full back must not switch off – he must move as a unit with the central defenders

Progressions/Variations:

- Play with an overlapping full back in a 2v2
- Instead of the covering midfielder doubling up, the wide midfielder should do this and allow the central midfielder to have 2 players at the central edge of the box
- Play wide a wide zone where the players can only be pressed and block crosses, no tackles
- Have runners from midfield – different formations allow different runners from different areas

11v11 game – 4-2-3-1 v 4-2-3-1 – wingers' zone



Wingers can receive in the wide zone but cannot be tackled, only pressed. Crosses can be blocked.

Coaching Points:

- Protect the defence when crosses come into the box
- Make sure when the winger cuts inside, everyone pushes out
- When possible, double up on the winger to stop the cross
- Defenders maintain open body shape when dropping back to see all of the play, movement from attackers, team mates and possible spaces to clear the ball to, to start a counter attack

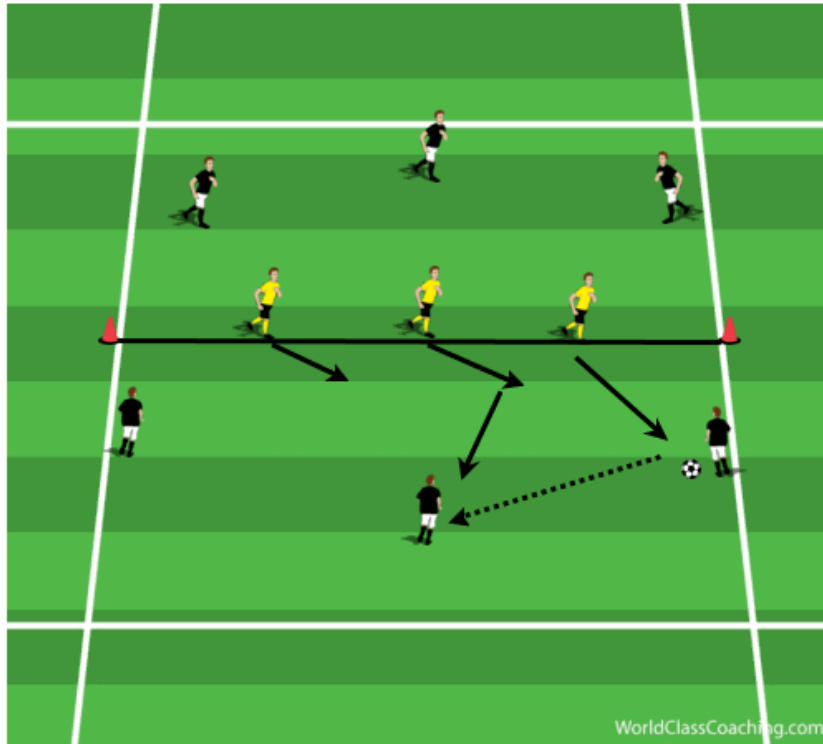
Progressions/Variations:

- Allow tackles inside the wide zone
- Change formation and allow the defence to play against different wide systems i.e. 4-3-3

Defending central attacks in a 4-2-3-1

Some teams like Barcelona, Arsenal, Spain and AC Milan focus much of their attacking play through the centre, and we need to know how to deal with this type of attack. Generally, allowing the ball to be passed wide then blocking the passing lane forward is a good way to deal with this, making sure that players are able to be pressed quickly, but close enough to discourage passes into the midfield.

3v3 Interception Game



Place a central line that the midfield stays ahead of. The players take responsibility for a zone and the player inside that area. Players should press quickly and forces play wide. Supporting team mates should cover inside but not too narrow – if the ball is passed inside we need to press and block the passing lanes to stop the penetration to the other side.

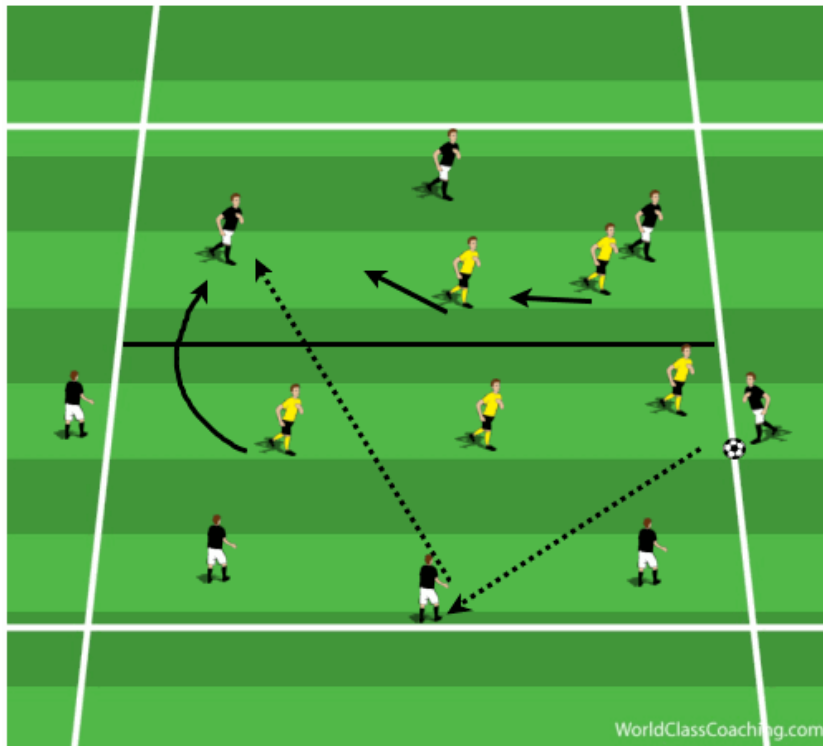
Coaching Points:

- Communication to ensure the pressing of forced wide and cover is given inside
- If the ball is wide, make an arc, if central, make a triangle with cover on both sides
- Players look to get into positions to intercept passes to the other side when not pressing

Progressions/Variations:

- Make the area larger and play 4v4
- Play with 1 player pressing inside the zone and 1 player covering in the opposite zone, with 2 interceptors who move along the half way line (diamond shape)

Pressing the central attack in midfield – 2-3 shape



Make an area with 2 full backs playing 1 touch on the outside, close to the half way line, with 3 players offering to try to split the defence centrally from inside the zone. Wide players cannot pass into the opposite half.

If the ball is passed into the opposite box, one of the 3 pressers joins the opposite box to play 3v5 again with the 2 players becoming the central midfielders looking to intercept forward passes.

Coaching Points:

- Stay narrow then move wide as a unit
- Move as a unit, looking to cut out passing lanes forward
- Show play wide to reduce the 2 player advantage where possible
- Deeper midfielders should cover the side of the ball to make the penetrating pass difficult

Progressions/Variations:

- One of the 3 midfielders can play close to the half way line to turn and pass into the opposite side, like a number 10 in a 4-2-3-1
- Allow the wide players to penetrate the line but they stay as 1 touch wall players

Defending against a central attack – Wide Zone Game



The team sets up in a narrow 4-2-3-1, the width of the penalty box. Above, they play against a 4-3-3. If the ball is passed wide, the wide midfielder gets outside the line of the ball and stops a pass forward into the winger who will move wide to offer an outball. Players on the outside play 2 touch, in the centre, no restrictions.

When the ball is passed wide, one player presses the full back. The player most able to receive in the centre should be marked and force play back into defence. Above, the number 10 will press the player most able to receive and this will leave a space behind the midfield line. The non-marking holding player should move up slightly and close down the space to stop a penetrating pass into this space. If a pass is intercepted, stop the game and restart play with the intercepting team as the central attack, with the opposition playing with everyone between the widths of the edge of the box.

Coaching Points:

- The defence should stop the central players from receiving passes, forcing passes wide
- Cover space left by players pressing the ball and leave no easy to find penetrating passes
- Don't dive in – teams who attack centrally look for small spaces to open up for 1-2s and dribbles, diving into tackles opens the chance for others to leave position and be exploited

Progressions/Variations:

- If the defence win the ball back, they have 5 seconds to try and score unopposed
- If you are dribbled past, you are out of the game for 5 seconds.
- If you have a 1-2 played around you, you are out of the game for 5 seconds.



Emphasise on pressing distances, covering, when to press and why and where to cover, and introduce speed in transition for when the team wins back possession – can they quickly counter attack to score and where will the space appear, and how to create space to open up either an overload or a pass to a clear player near the goal.

Developing the 4-2-3-1

Defending – A tactical analysis

Barcelona v Real Madrid, Camp Nou

April, 2012.

Barcelona needed to win to get back into the title hunt; a win for Real Madrid would seal the title as a 9 point lead could never be caught.

Real Madrid have been getting closer to Barcelona in each game since the infamous 5-0 win for Barcelona in Jose Mourinho's 1st game in the Nou Camp.

This game I will look at how Real Madrid stopped Barcelona from breaking them down in their 4-2-3-1 (almost) man-man marking formation.

The 4-2-3-1 in defence

Many teams and many coaches play with similar ways in a 4-2-3-1 but the biggest test of your defensive system is playing away at the Nou Camp. To demonstrate the roles and positions players have, I have selected the Barcelona v Real Madrid match from the end of last season, where Real Madrid won 2-1, and it was down to incredible organisation, desire to win and a game plan to stop Messi and Iniesta from receiving and using the ball effectively around the goal, then finding counter attacks in transition.

Real Madrid shape when Barcelona has the ball in the defensive line



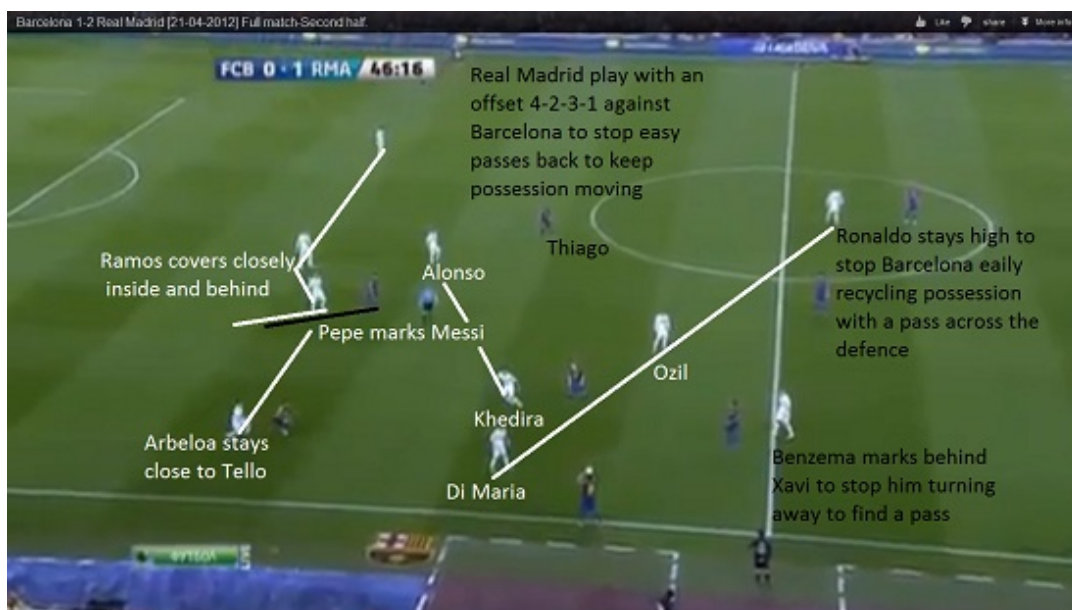
Real Madrid shows the game plan from kick off. Ozil has pressed out of position to make a 4-2-4 formation, with Alonso close to Messi and Khedira close to Iniesta. Xavi had dropped off but both Ozil and Di Maria can press him. Benzema screens Busquets and stops any passes going to Busquets from the defence.

Real Madrid force play backwards and press quickly



As Thiago is forced to turn back, he passes backwards and everyone in Real Madrid push up quickly and don't allow spaces for Barcelona to move and pass into, and stop them from settling quickly in the 2nd half.

4-2-3-1 defending a throw in



As Barcelona have a throw in, Real Madrid play more of a man-man system. Pepe drops back with Messi to discourage a pass into Messi, with Ramos covering the other side and behind. Arbeloa stays close to Tello to force play backwards. Khedira is close to Iniesta and can help if the ball is thrown to Tello (as per his body shape shows he expects the throw here). Di Maria marks the thrower, while Ozil and Ronaldo make a diagonal line to try and contain play in that space. Benzema stays behind Xavi to stop and easy

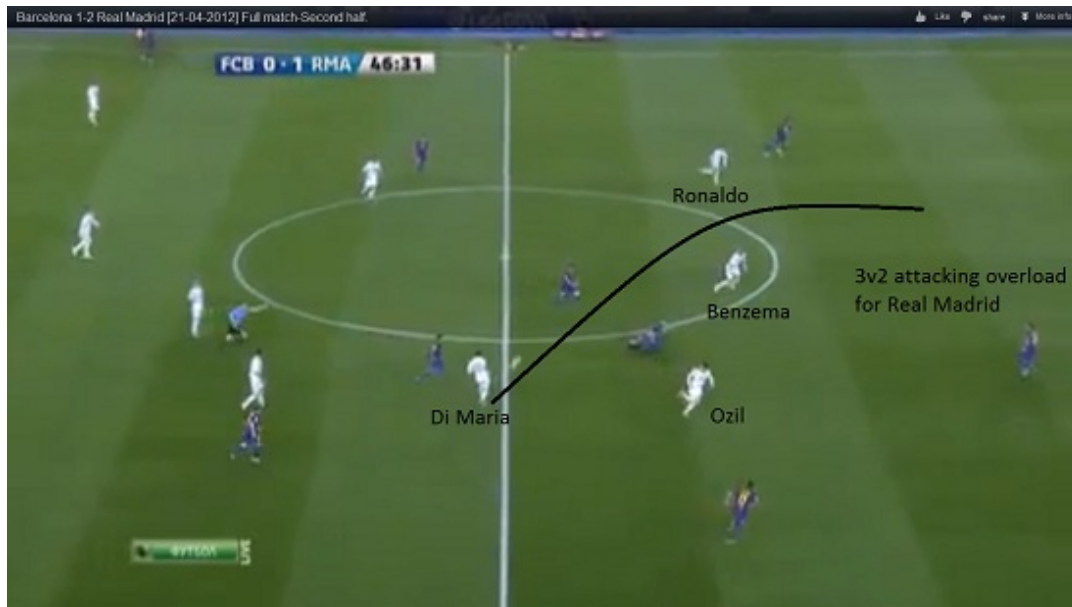
turn back to keep possession. Ronaldo stays highest to stop easy recycling of possession across the defence. He is also helpful here in the transition phase to counter attacking.



As Xavi receives, he is confronted by 2 players and Benzema from behind. Pepe doesn't let Messi away and Alonso moves over quickly to press Messi from behind, even before he might receive, leaving Thiago.

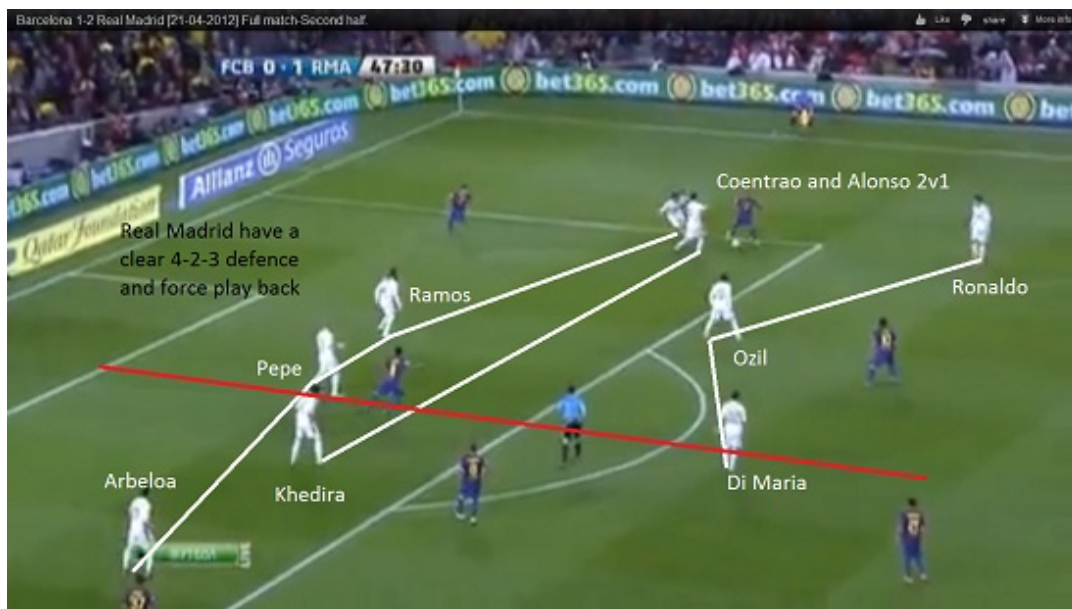


Busquets receives and both Ozil and Benzema chase him down. He makes 3 turns to find a pass but can't, and is dispossessed. The ball breaks loose to Di Maria who launches a counter attack.



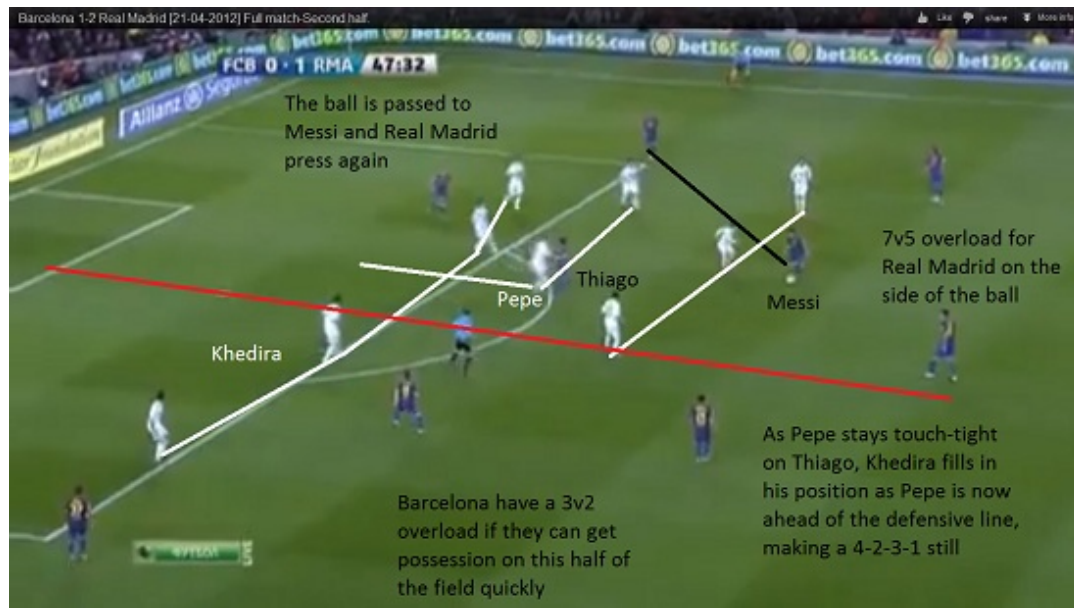
Real Madrid now have a 3v2 attacking overload but Di Maria makes a short pass and Barcelona win the ball back quickly and the chance is lost.

Real Madrid defend their own penalty box and defensive 3rd



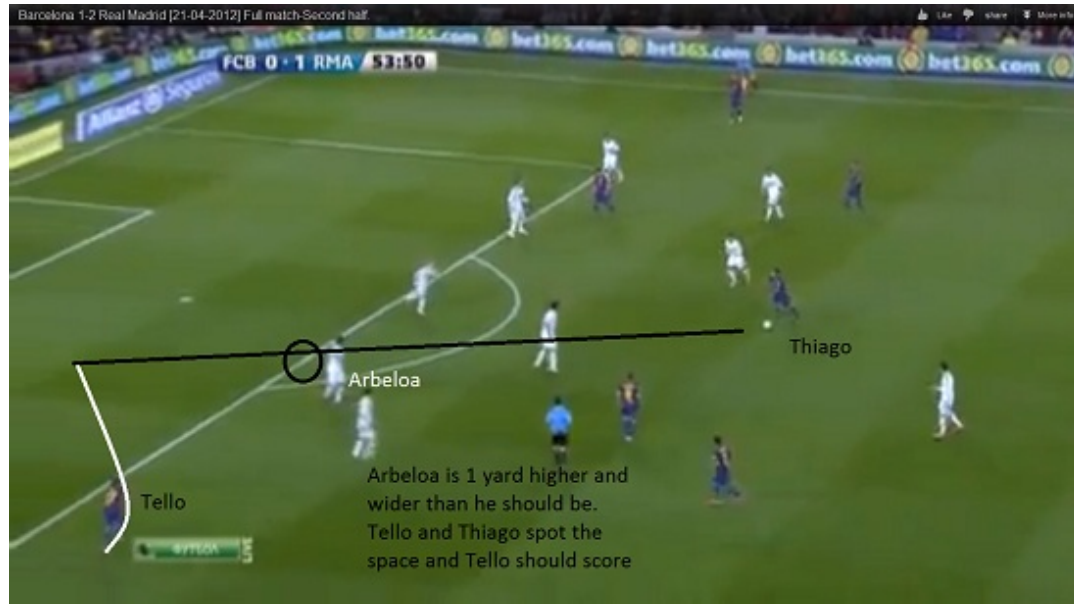
Coentrao and Alonso play 2v1 against Alves, forcing him back outside the box. The red line is the centre line; Pepe covers the centre line with Ramos slightly ahead of him. Alonso has moved over from his position in front of Ramos to press Alves, Khedira covers the other side of the line as Pepe will stay touch-tight to Thiago from this position. Khedira can cover Pepe. Ozil, Ronaldo and Di Maria are the 3 ahead of the play but Ozil can press Messi if he receives. Ozil has dropped back as Messi would make the run into that space for a pass from Alves into a position where he is likely to shoot and possibly score. Di Maria covers centre to cover the dribble inside from Messi should he receive, forcing another pass away from goal.

Real Madrid press Messi and win possession on the edge of the box at Khedira



As Messi receives, he cuts inside looking for a way through the defence. He dribbles across when he could've opened up the attack where Barcelona has a 3v2 on the other side. Pepe has stayed touch-tight on Thiago, stopping a pass into him, with Khedira filling in and completing the back 4. Real Madrid has a 7v5 overload on that half of the field.

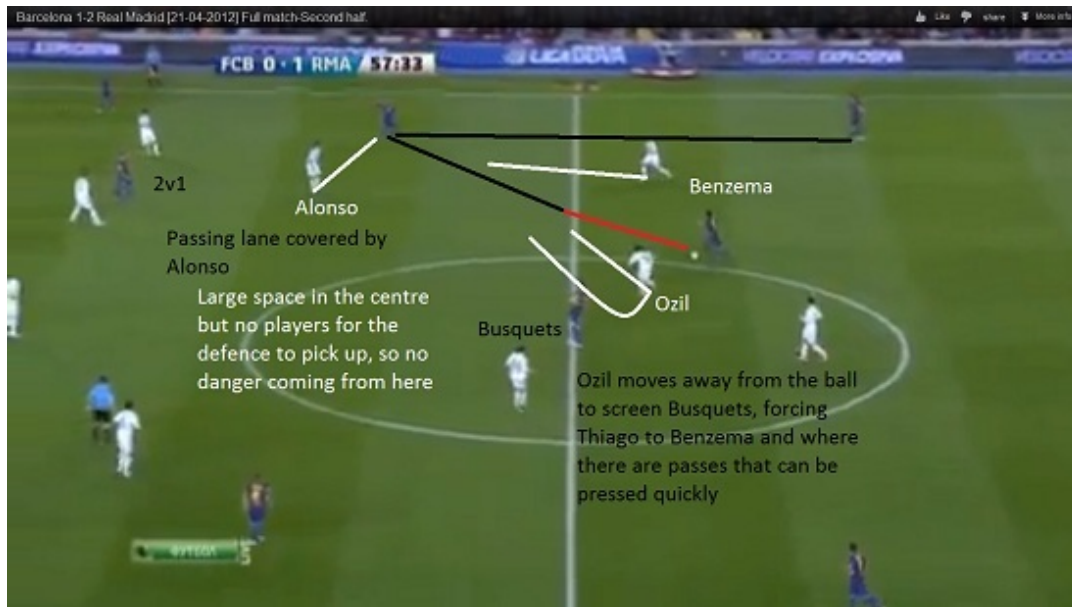
Arbeloa loses concentration and his positioning - Barcelona should score from it



Arbeloa has moved slightly out of position, maybe a yard high and wide from where he should be (circled). Thiago spots the tiny mistake as does Tello who arcs the run to stay onside. Thiago plays the pass into the space and when Thiago arrives with his body shape set, a goal is expected, but he doesn't get his knee over the ball and curls the ball well over the bar for a goal kick. Against Barcelona,

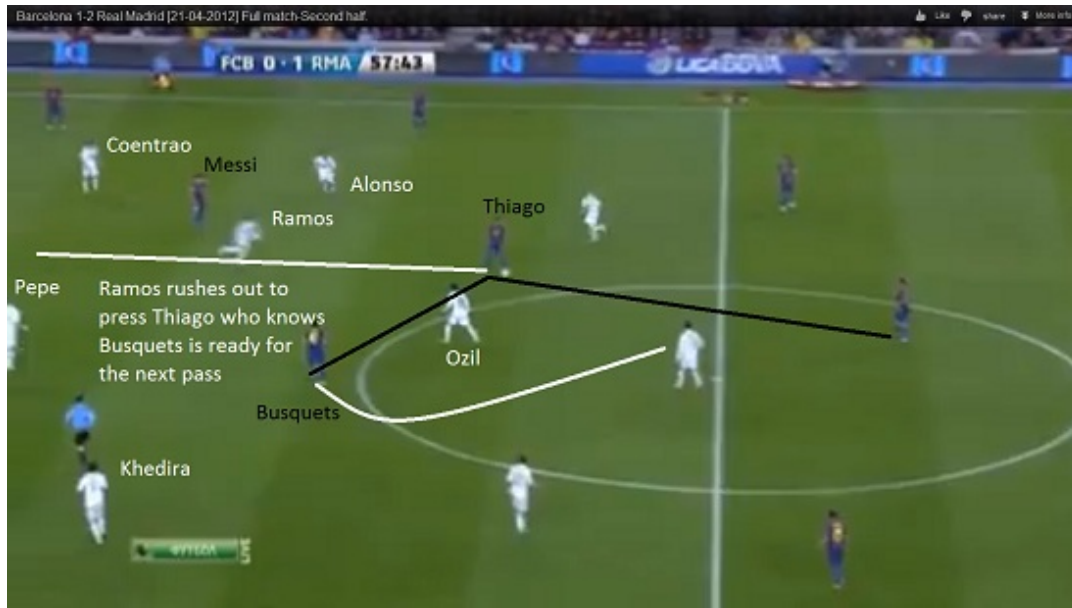
positioning, concentration and pressing all need to be done, and although Arbeloa is at fault, the ball should've been pressed to stop the pass.

Blocking Busquets and Messi forces play into trouble and makes Barcelona pass back

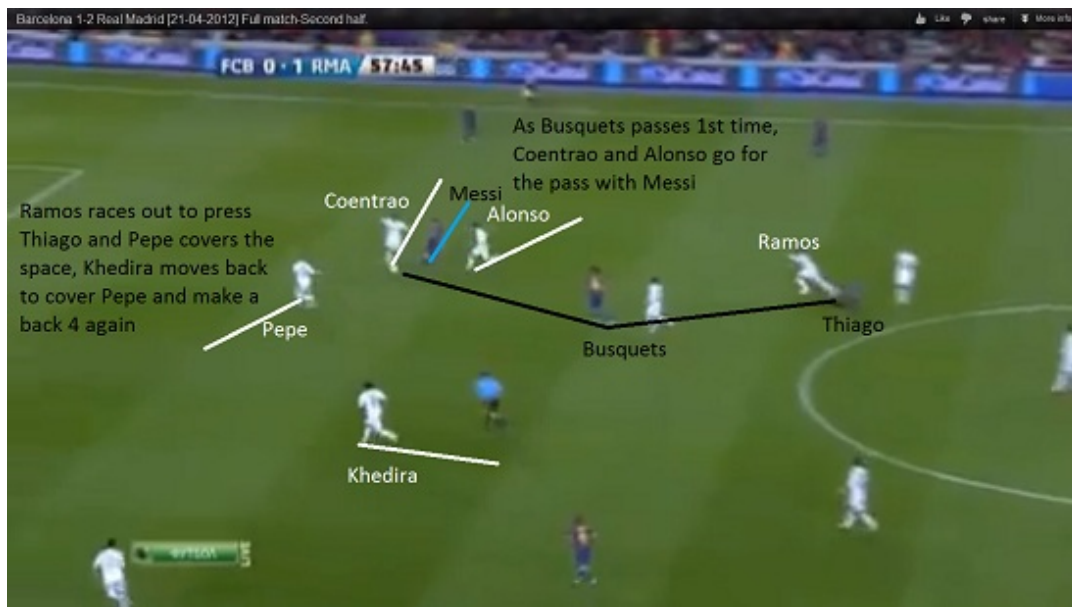


Ronaldo and Benzema have switched positions to give each other some rest from pressing the ball at the front constantly. Ozil moves from his position to block the pass to Busquets, forcing him into Benzema and Alonso, with Messi's passing lane covered by Alonso,, he has one passing option, who he knows will be pressed by Alonso. The pass is made after a dribble then knocked back to Puyol to start again. There is a large space in the centre as Khedira has been asked to not cover the space but play close to Iniesta.

Expecting 1-2's and pressing the ball before it is passed stops the attack



Thiago receives and is aware he is being pressed by Ramos, and that Busquets is moving into space. Thiago eliminates Ramos by playing the pass 1st time. Alonso's body shape suggests he expects to cover Ramos's space and maybe a pass into Messi.



As Busquets does what is expected, Alonso and Coentrao, who have both deliberately played slightly away from the normal set up's position to accommodate playing against Messi, are close enough to race for the loose pass and Coentrao gets there just before Messi, with Alonso doubling up had Messi received. Pepe moved across to cover Ramos run from defence and Khedira was dropping back to cover Pepe covering Ramos, to ensure the back 4 was never left wide open by playing with 1 centre back who went missing.

Messi in possession in the centre of the final 3rd – Double up and force back



As Messi is unbelievable with the ball at his feet, it takes several players to stop him. Real Madrid in this game have screened the front and kept 2 beside him to limit his influence on the game. Here, he receives in space in front of the back 4, who immediately drop off and cover the space behind to stop any passes he may find. Alonso and Ozil make sure he has pressure on him. Ozil needs to drop back to help as Khedira has been assigned to mark Iniesta, and has done to good effect. If Khedira had ran across to press Messi, Iniesta would've been the next pass and Barcelona have a 2v1 against Arbeloa, so Khedira's positional intelligence and Ozil's determination to help Alonso has again stopped Messi from being dangerous.

In my opinion, the 4-2-3-1 in defence is possibly the most secure of all formations as it allows good coverage of all the lines, minimal distances between the lines, small distances between players in each line, defensive triangles between defence and midfield 2, and midfield 2 and attacking 3, with again good spacial coverage between the 3 attacking midfielders and striker.

In this particular game, the 4-2-3-1 allowed Real Madrid to press high, be aggressive when hunting the ball down and allowed an almost man-man marking game which when the ball was passed back, allowed then to charge in on the blindside to win the ball or stop Barcelona turning and passing back.

Developing the 4-2-3-1

Attacking

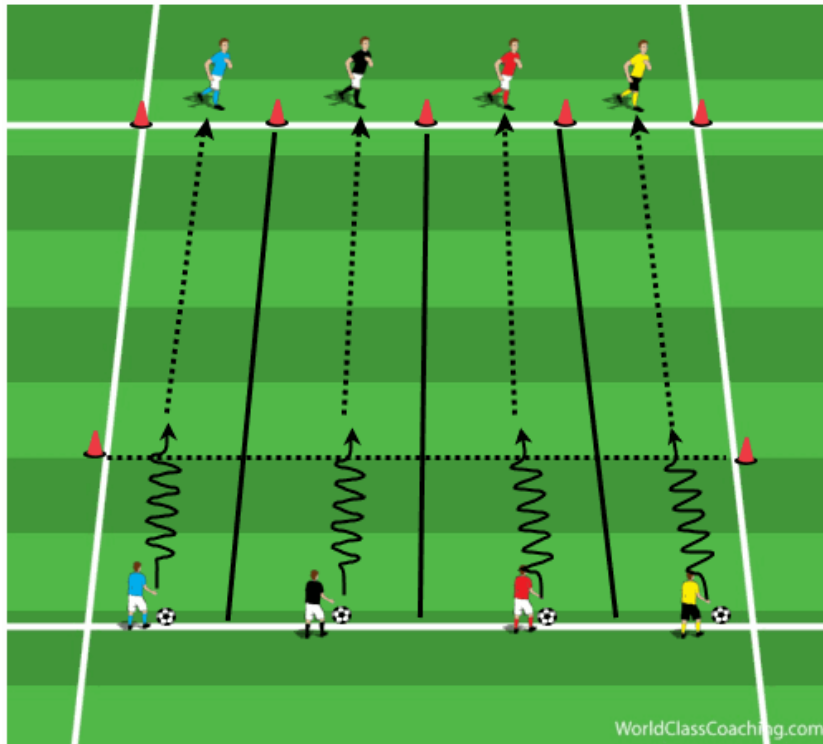
In this section you will find training sessions for;

- Passing – Small Group Play
- Passing – Triangulation
- Passing – Possession Games
- Crossing and Finishing Practices
- Developing Width
- Developing Penetration
- Developing Support Play
- Developing Positional Rotation
- Building from GK into Defence
- Building from Defence into Midfield
- Building from Midfield into Attack
- Counter Attacking in a 4-2-3-1
- Finishing

All of these aspects of play are important in a 4-2-3-1 and the coach should look at specific ways to build a better attacking unit using a dual themed session, such as penetration to enhance counter attacking play.

Coaching the 4-2-3-1 – Passing – Small Group Exercise's

Dribble and pass – 4m dribble and 8m pass



Players dribble across the dribble line and pass forward to their team mate. This is a race between the dribblers to see who can get the ball to their team mate and under control the quickest.

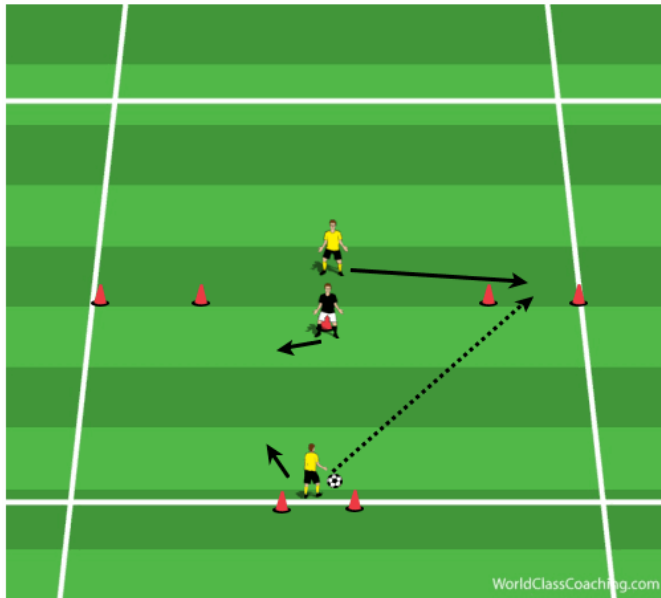
Coaching Points:

- React fast to the start command
- Quick dribble – can use 1 heavy touch or a couple of small touches to move under control
- Body shape and standing foot in the right position to allow a fast, accurate, receivable pass

Progressions/Variations:

- Place a defender 5m behind the receiver, who presses and tries to win the ball as it is passed, He should hold up the ball and return the ball back to the dribbler
- The receiver turns and shoots into a GK
- The receiver turns, dribble 1v1 and tries to score into a GK

Fake Passes to find a team mate



Make an area 10 yards wide with 2 yards goals on the sides. Place a defender 1 yard in front of the passing gates. The Passes should fake a pass before making a pass between the gates. If the pass is intercepted, not between the gates, or not receivable, the passer becomes the defender.

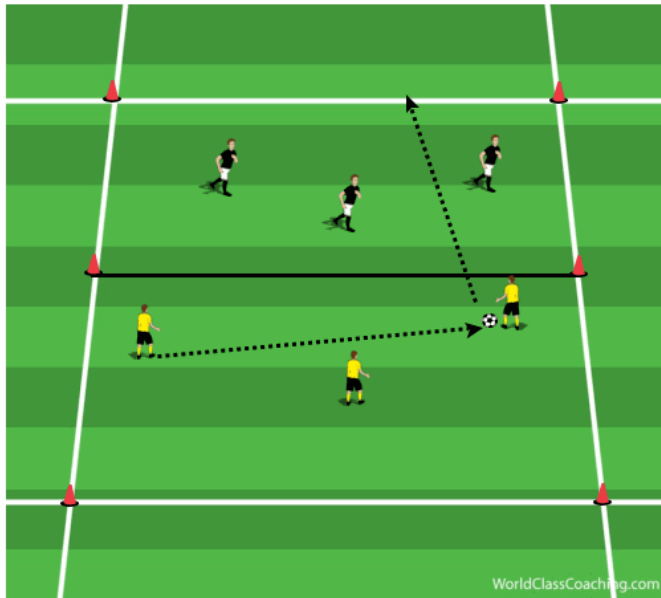
Coaching Points:

- Turn the body and make the fake a big fake – a small fake won't fool the defender
- Make eye contact and a visual agreement with the receiver quickly to where the pass is played to
- To make the fake smooth, keep the knee over the ball and turn the hips to change direction

Progressions/Variations:

- Place a Goal behind the receiver who turns and shoots
- Place a 2nd defender on the end line, who presses the receiver to stop the shot
- Place an end player to offer a 1-2 with the receiver before scoring

3v3 End Line Game – Split the opponents to score



Players play 3v3 with a central line (like a game of volleyball). The players cannot cross the central line, cannot run with the ball, and can only play with 2 touches. No high passes are allowed, and will be penalised with a free kick for the opposition if the ball comes above ankle height. To score, the ball must cross the end line with a pass.

Coaching Points:

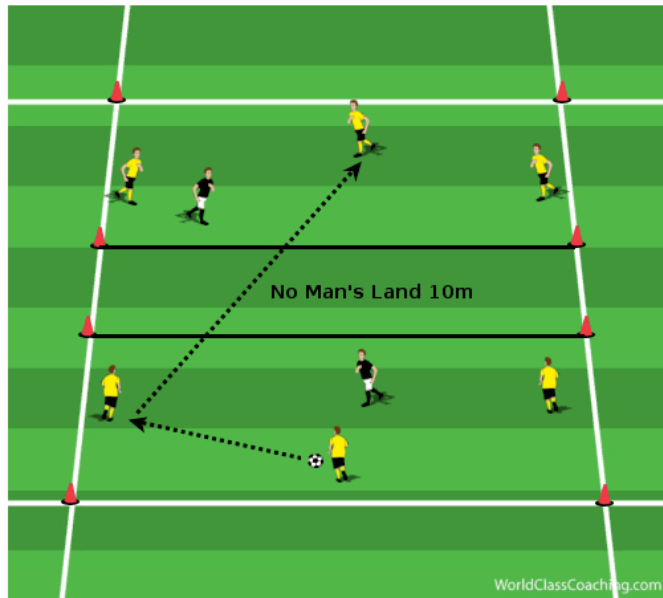
- Knee over the ball when passing, hips point to direction of target
- Fake a pass to make an opponent move
- Look to see the space to split the opponents before you receive or pass the ball
- Play 1st time whenever possible

Progressions/Variations:

- Add a team mate behind the end line to try to pass to
- Team mate can turn and shoot
- Add in a defender to play 1v1 against the striker
- Play 4v4 inside the zone
- The final pass must be played 1st time to find the end line or team mate

Small Group Passing – 4-2-3-1

Faking passes to switch play



Make 3 zones with the central zone unoccupied. 3 attacking players play 3v1 in a 15m wide by 10m long box, with a 10m no man's land in between the boxes. The Yellow's must play 2 touches and try to find a pass into the far side box without it being intercepted.

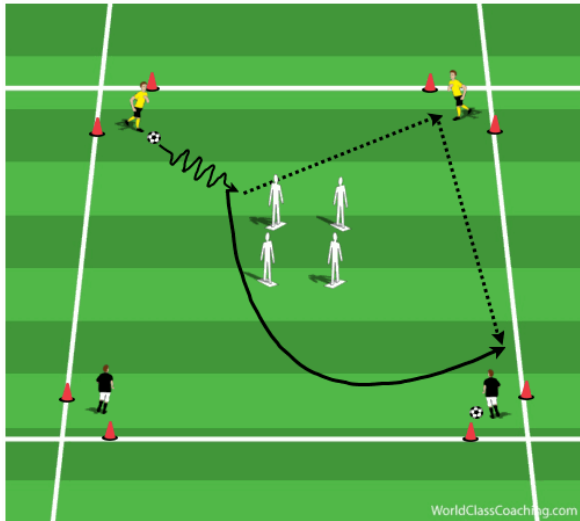
Coaching Points:

- Fake passes to create space to switch play
- Keep the ball moving quickly at all times
- Rotate positions and try to pass away from the area the defender can intercept
- Audio and Visual communication to ensure players know where the ball can be passed to
- Under pressure, pass quickly away from the defenders reach

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 4v2 inside each zone with 1 defender inside no man's land to intercept passes
- After play is switched boxes, the Yellows gain 1 point. See which team can make the most points inside x amount of minutes. If a pass is intercepted, minus 2 points.

Fake Pass and movement for the return

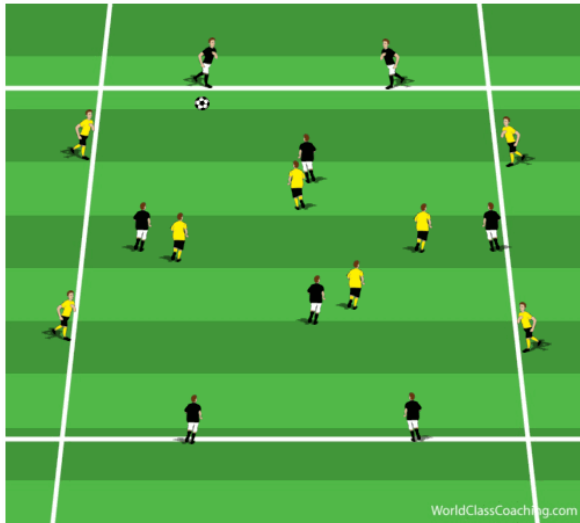


Dribble inside towards the mannequin, fake the pass right then pass to the left. After the pass, arc round the central box of mannequins to offer a return pass into the far corner. Both groups work at the same time.

Coaching Points:

- Dribble in at speed, turn hips to fake then turn back to pass over to team mate
- Visual and Audio Communication for the 1-2 pass
- Quick feet with heels off the ground after the pass to make the run to offer the return pass
- Let ball run across the body before passing into the runners stride

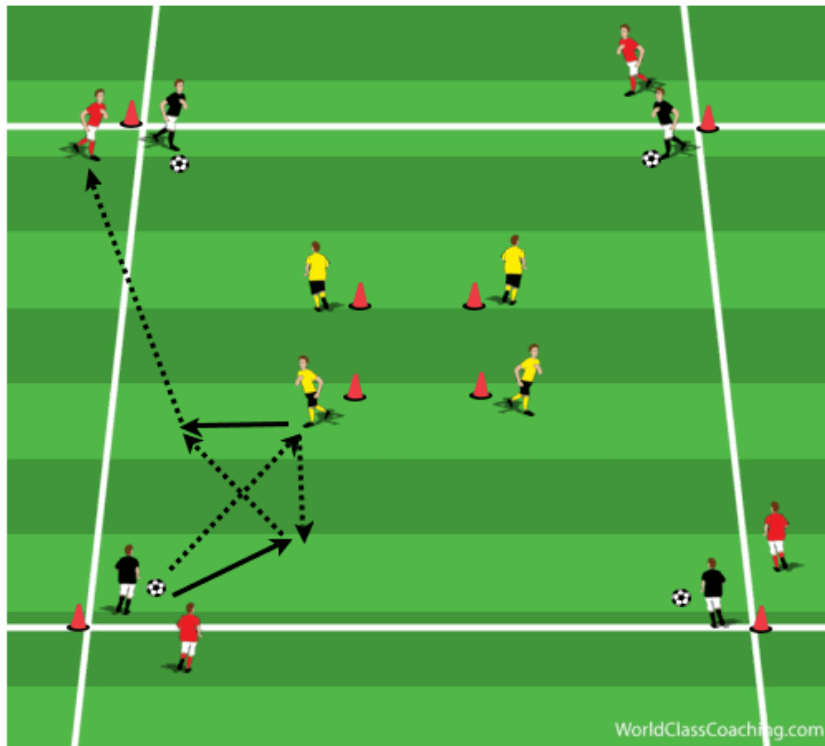
Directional Possession



The Black team try to get the ball from one end line to another for 1 point. If the opposition win possession, they do the same but width ways, scoring 1 point for getting the ball across the field.

Use fake passes, quick passes and 1 touch passes to be successful. Movement off the ball is vital.

Developing Triangulation in a 4-2-3-1 - Session 1



Mark out a 20 x 20 yard box with a small box inside the centre which is 8 yards away from the corner where the ball will be passed from.

The Black player will pass into Yellow, who will lay off to the right for the Black players run. The Black will pass into the stride of the Yellow who pulls away into the space, Yellow will then pass up to Red into the corner. Repeat – Black becomes Yellow, Yellow becomes Red.

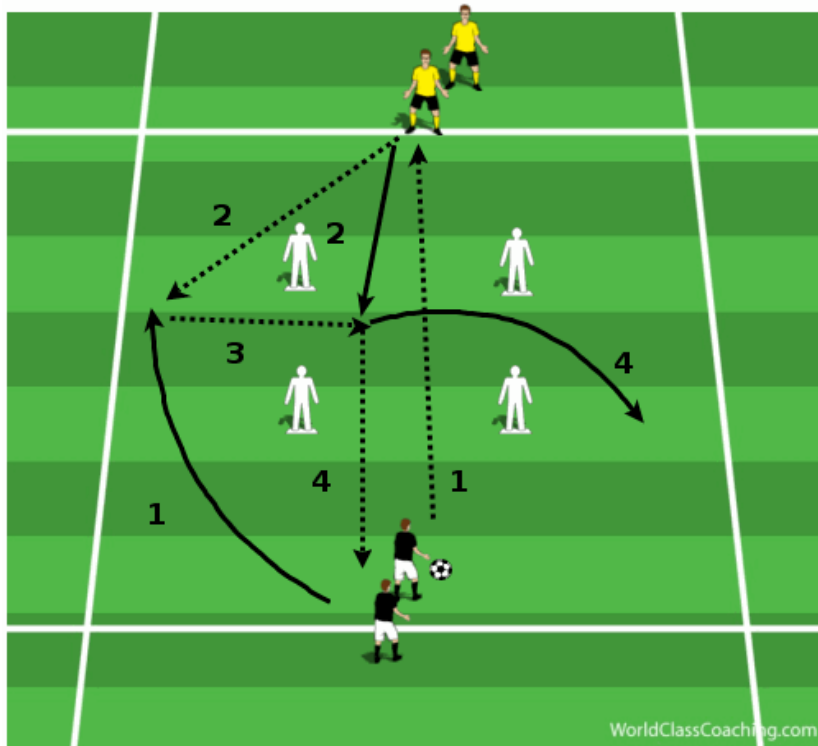
Coaching Points:

- Lay off a pass into the stride that can be passed 1st time
- Turn the knee and hips into the direction of the pass
- Visual and Audio communication

Progressions/Variations:

- Ask the Yellow and the Red to check away before receiving the pass
- Black can pass using a backheel or 'Ronaldinho' pass
- Rotate to play the other direction
- Instead of passing to red, add a 4th player (Blue) who is a passive defender – Yellow and Red play a 1-2 round him. Red would then take the ball and become Black to restart the activity

Playing 1-2s between opponents



Black passes up to Yellow through the box (1) then offers into the space to the side between the 2 defenders (1). Yellow will pass to Black (2) then run into the space between the defenders (2). Yellow will receive the pass into the box (3) then pass up to the blacks (4) before moving to the side of the box to ask for the next pass (4). The next pass will be a 1-2 between Black and Yellow to restart the activity. After the Black plays the 1-2 with Yellow into the box, Black becomes Yellow at the end.

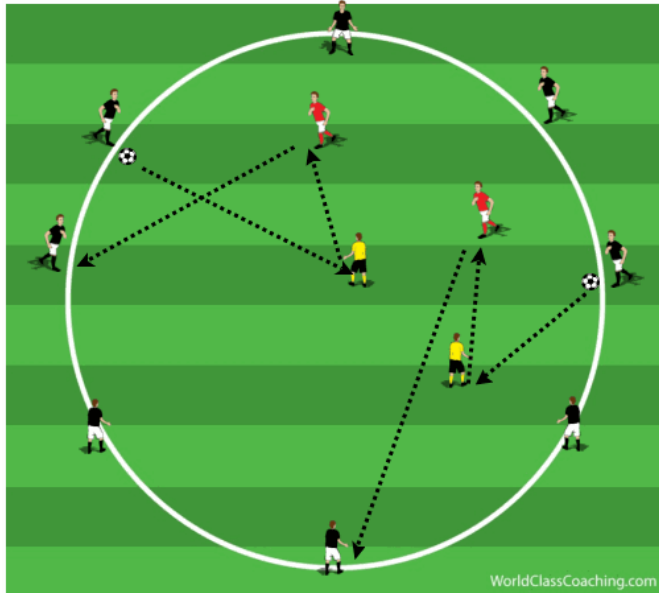
Coaching Points:

- Pass with the back foot
- Knee and hip point to the direction of target, knee over the ball
- Angle body to receive the pass when moving wide for the 1-2
- Audio and Visual Communication

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 1 touch at all times
- Make groups who work as a team – which team can make the most passes from Black to Yellow? Give a time limit, the 1st team to make it up and back x amount of times or how many 1st time passes can be made in a row? Make it competitive!
- Play weak footed or using a Backheel or 'Ronaldinho Pass' – develop flair and weak foot

Triangulation to find an attacking pass



Make a circle with two teams of 2. A Black on the outside will pass into Yellow, who will lay off into Red, who will find a forward pass into a Black in space on the outside. Black will then pass into Yellow who will again lay off to Red to find a different Black on the outside.

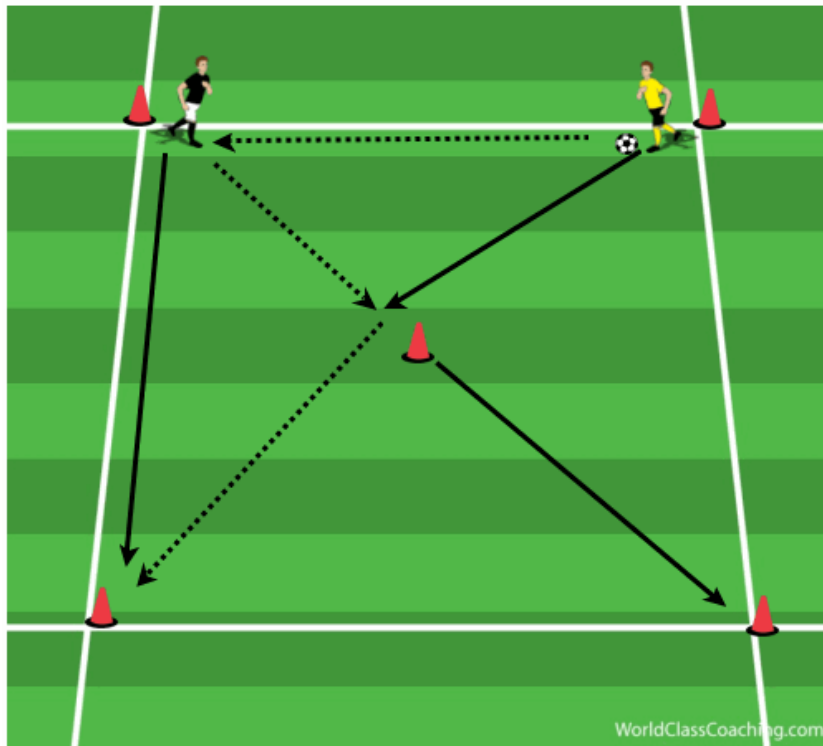
Coaching Points:

- Yellow and Red need to know where each other are at all times
- Red should be able to receive a lay off without the need for Yellow to turn
- Yellow should cushion a pass that Red can pass 1st time to the outside
- After the cushion pass, Yellow moves early to receive from the Black on the outside again
- Audio and Visual Communication to lay off, where to pass to and where to move again

Progressions/Variations:

- After Yellow lays off, he will look for a return pass from Red to play the final pass
- Allow either player to be the last passer after a 1-2
- Add a passive defender (Blue) to play against each group, who will begin to press the Red and Yellows to ensure they keep possession under some pressure. Defender can intercept loose passes. They can press from the front, back, side or try to intercept from Black.
- Make a competition – which team can pass to all of the outside players 1st under no pressure? Who can do it with a Blue playing against them

Developing Triangulation in a 4-2-3-1 - Session 2



Make a 12 x 12 yard box, play 2 touch. Yellow passes over to Black, then runs to the central cone for the return pass. Black passes to the central cone then offer a return pass to the corner from Yellow. Yellow will pass into the corner then pull away to the far corner to restart the activity at Black.

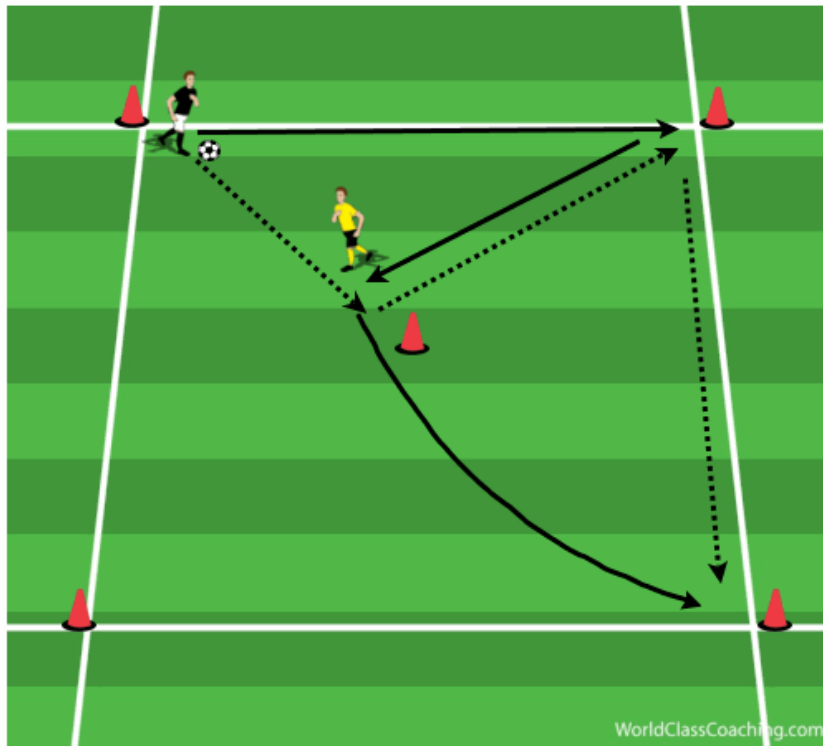
Coaching Points:

- Pass firmly into the stride of the player
- Ensure the correct weight and angle is placed into the pass
- After the pass, make a quick acceleration to receive the next pass slightly in front of you
- Audio and Visual Communication to ensure passes are accurate and receivable

Progressions/Variations:

- Make a competition in teams of 2: Who can get from the start to the bottom and back again in the fastest time? How many times can your team do it in 1 minute?
- Play 1 touch
- Play weak footed

Triangulation 1-2's using a backheel 'Ronaldinho Pass'



Yellow passes over to Black then makes a run to the central cone (like the last activity). Black makes the pass then runs to the space Yellow started at. Yellow plays a backheel pass into Black then spins into the far corner to receive the next pass. Repeat so Yellow has made 4 backheels to all corners.

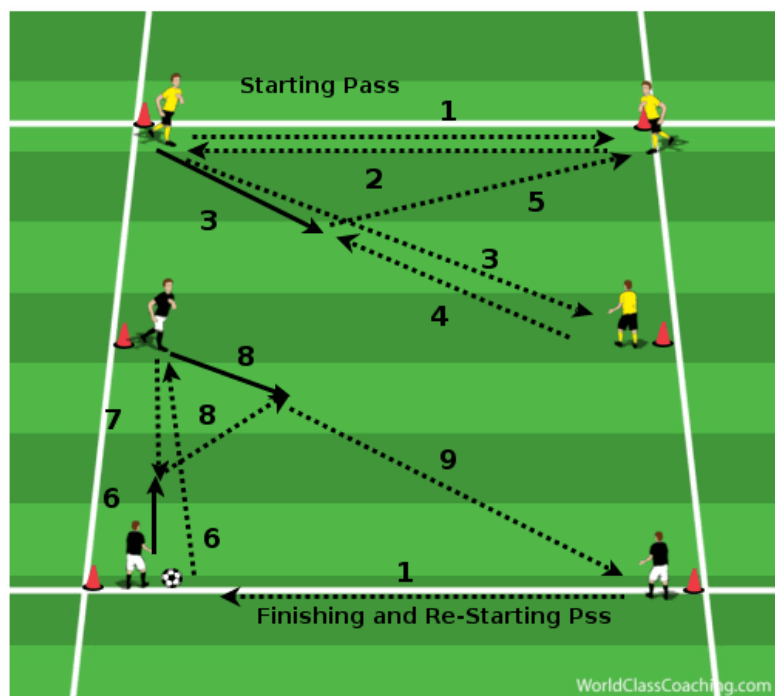
Coaching Points:

- Turn hips away from direction of the pass on contact
- Knee over the ball, push from the knee to flick the ball into the run of the receiver
- Fast spin run round the corner to receive on the far side – keep the momentum up!

Progressions/Variations:

- Play weak footed
- Make a competition between groups
- Add a passive defender who runs with the backheel player to make timing & fluency better
- Add in a 2nd player who may try to cut out the return pass

Developing Movement, Angles, Distances and Accuracy on the move



Sequential Passing – Yellow Group demonstrate the 1st 5 passes in the sequence, Blacks demonstrate the last 5 passes.

(Yellow Group) Switch across to far side (1), Receive return pass (2), Pass diagonally across and move to the ball (3), Receive return pass (4), Pass diagonally across into the corner (5)

(Black Group) Corner Player passes forward and moves towards the ball (6), Play the ball back (7) then move forward into in line with far side player (8), Pass across to far side player (9) Restart (1)

Coaching Points:

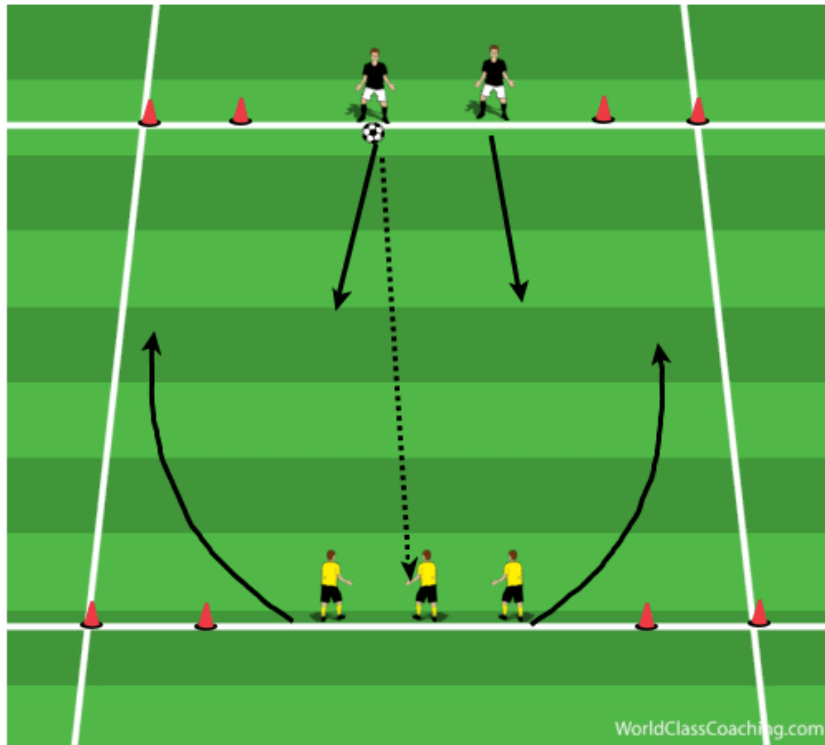
- Pass accurately to feet or to space for 1st time pass
- Move with correct body shape to make the next pass easy
- Roll the ball into the path of the runner
- Make triangles when playing a forward moving 1-2
- Meet the ball when the angle needs shortening to tighten up the play and improve speed
- Audio and Visual Communication – who receives the next pass? Help your team mates!

Progressions/Variations:

- Make a competition between the groups of 3, who can do it the quickest? Who can do it all 1st time? Who can do the most amounts of circuits of 9 passes in 2 minutes?
- Do it weak footed
- Make the return pass in a 1-2 a backheel pass

Developing Width – Session 1

These sessions can be a preparing session to building into crossing and finishing, defending wide attacks and defending crosses. They can also be used as a way to improving the way the team attacks in wide areas, looking at how players react to each team mates movements with the ball.



3v2 attacking overload.

Make a field 20 yards wide by 15 yards long, or the opposite if you have quick attackers.

The defence pass out and play 2v3; the attack can only score by dribbling through the small goals in the corner (1m-3m wide). Rotate positions each time, play with intensity.

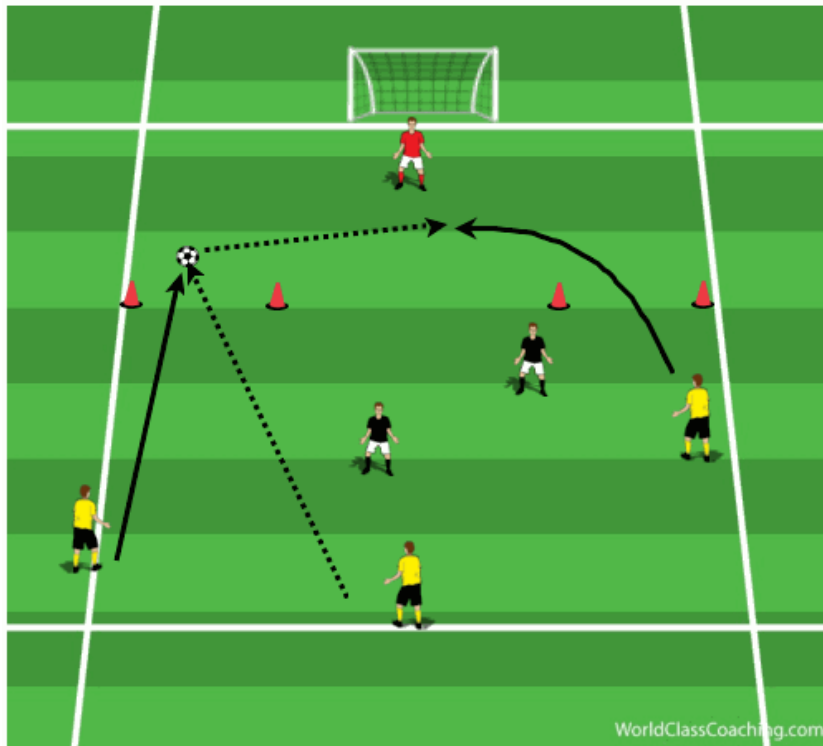
Coaching Points:

- Move wide as soon as the attack are passed the ball
- Have body ready to receive on the half turn
- Try to open up a passing lane where your 1st touch can take you past the defensive line

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 2v3 through the team sizes up to 4v4 and possibly a defensive overload i.e. 4v5
- Make gates smaller if attack find it easy to score
- Make field narrower and longer

Defence v Attack – Wide goal penetration line



Play 2v3 as before but when players dribble or receive a pass through the end zone, they can pass to a team mate to score unopposed. Defenders cannot go deeper than the penetration line.

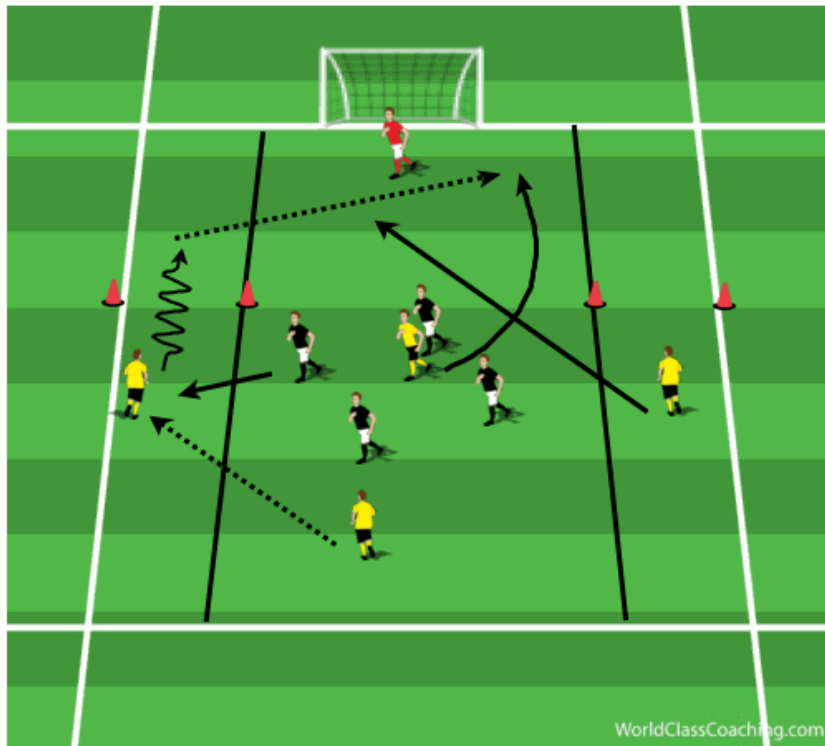
Coaching Points:

- Try to isolate a defender and play 2v1
- Check runs and try to open up a passing lane into the gate if a pass to feet isn't possible
- The playmaker should stay behind the line of the wingers to ensure ball retention
- Be unpredictable; if you always pass back 1st time, the defender will not be pressured, if possible, receive on the half turn and try to go into the gate, if not, switch play again.

Progressions/Variations:

- Play up to 4v4
- Play 3 touch maximum
- Ask wingers to dribble through the gates to improve 1v1 ability
- Finish must be 1 touch
- Make a sweeper who covers the space behind the penetration line to block the cross

4v4 Wingers Game



The attack plays 4v4 against the defence, to score; the attack must go through the gates before crossing or shooting. If the attack loses the ball, change over and become the defending team. The defence must all play inside the central zone and only 1 can enter when the ball is passed wide.

Coaching Points:

- Wingers should check runs to offer a pass behind or drop in to receive on half turn
- Be aggressive and attack minded in the 1v1
- When switching play to the opposite side, play with minimal touches
- Striker should be moving the defender away from the side of the ball, play on blindside

Progressions/Variations:

- Make 2 penetration lines – 1 for both teams – if defence get across the line, switch over
- Add in a goal at the end so both teams can score after a wide gate dribble over the line
- Defenders can start in the wide zones but the attack can penetrate centrally

Finish the session with a 7 a side match in a 2-3-1 and condition the match so goals can only be scored from the player in the winger's zone final pass.

Developing Width – Session 2



Make a field with a large goal and 2 small corner goals. Only goals scored in the big goals count. Above, the Yellows have the right to score into the big goal and gain a point. If the Blacks win possession, they should score into one of the small corner goals. If they do score, they have the opportunity to attack next time into the large goal. The team who scores the most goals in the large goal are the winners; the opposition must do a forfeit.

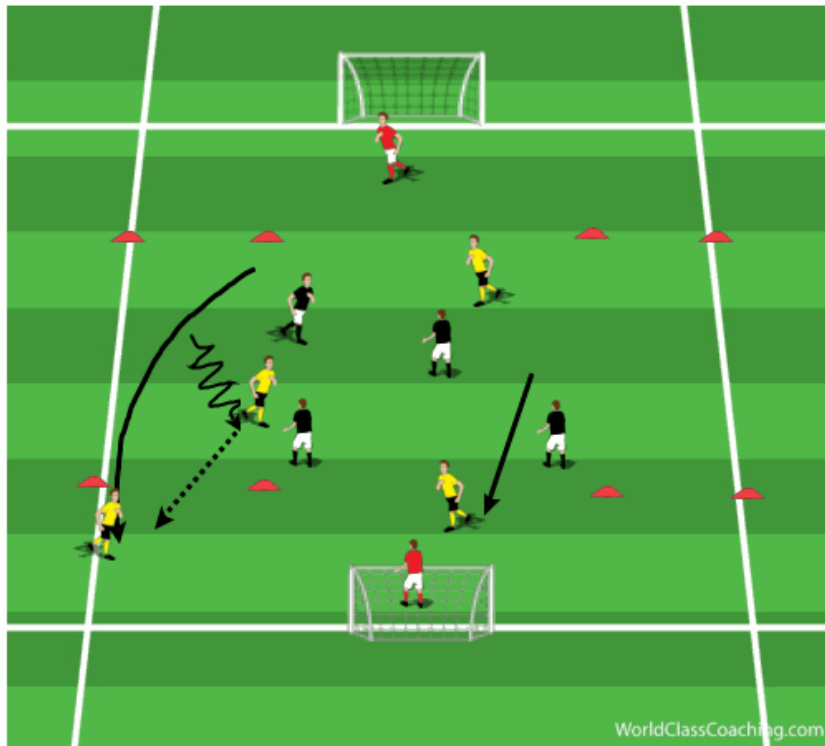
Coaching Points:

- Look for ways to play wide triangles to make and exploit space to score
- When you win possession, quickly attack the space and look for overloads
- Use the width of the field and keep possession, they can't score if you have the ball

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a back 4 and play 4-2-3-1 v 4-2-3-1, players must pass or dribble through a wide gate to allow them the opportunity to score.
- Play a wide v central game into 2 central goals, find out why certain systems are effective

Wide Gate Game – 4v4



Teams play on a 30x30 yard field and before they can score, they must dribble or pass through one of the small cone goals close to the opposition goal.

Coaching Points:

- Play the ball around and look for overloads on the sides to make penetration easy
- Movement from wide to centre to help score when the final pass is made
- Defend wide enough to cover spaces and move over as a unit

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a central goal for a 6 goal game, gives the defence the problem of playing with the right amount of wide coverage, as width creates central space
- Players can score from anywhere but 2 points are awarded for a goal from a wide position

Switching Play – Using width in transition



Some teams play with lots of players around the ball, then as the defence start to close in on the ball, the attack have players who can switch play to the other side and find overloads and new attacking solutions. The defence need to move fast to re-shape and this causes spaces for the attack to exploit if the defence don't recover into shape fast enough.

The Attack must find a way out of the 5v4 situation and switch play to the other side to the full back, winger and closer, the central midfielder. Above, the winger receives and has an overlap option to pass to into the space; the players in the initial box will react and attack the penalty box.

Coaching Points:

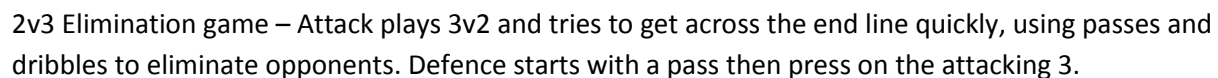
- Pass and move to create the space to find the extra player who can switch play
- The switch pass must be driven to allow less time for the defender to close down the ball
- Wide players should anticipate the switch and start movements early
- Team mates should be quick in getting into scoring positions, like in Crossing and Finishing

Progressions/Variations:

- The attack doesn't need to go through the wide gate
- The attack can attack in the same channel – the players should be quick to get into shooting positions, the far side players need to be brave and get themselves into the box at the far side – the other central midfielder can attack the edge of the box and switch roles.

Finish the session with a match where if a goal is scored from a switch of play, or a cross, 2 points are awarded.

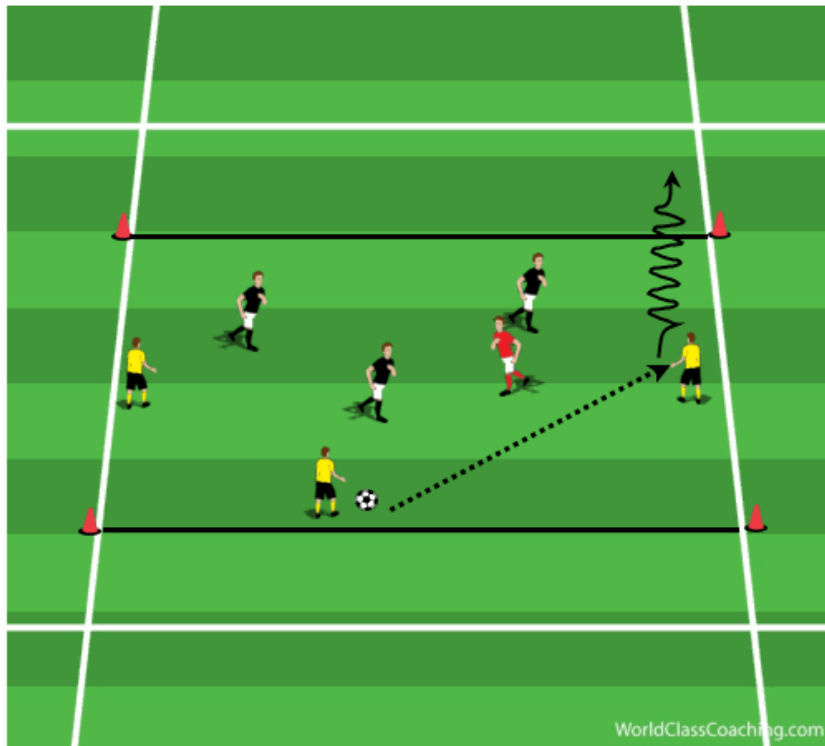
One of the main benefits of the 4-2-3-1 is the amount of penetration and different options on how to penetrate there are. Players can dribble to penetrate a line or eliminate a defender, they can play passes to eliminate players or defensive lines, or they can do a combination of both. In midfield with the 2 full backs, often you will see a 4-3 shape with a mobile striker offering short then spinning to offer to the sides of the centre backs and between centre back and full back.



- Be decisive in the attacking phase, will you dribble or play the pass to eliminate a player?
- Communication between players, who to pass to or where to dribble to
- Fake the intention, using feints such as stepovers when dribbling, or a fake pass.

- Play up to 4v4
- Add in a goal 10-20 yards behind the defensive line to score into
- If the defence win the ball from an attacker (passing or dribbling) switch roles
- Make a competition between attacking teams of 3, who can get 5 out of 5?

Offside defensive lines – 3v3 with playmaker



Make a grid 25 yards wide by 15 yards long. Play 3v3 with a playmaker for an overload attacking advantage. To score, receive a pass ahead of the line or dribble across it.

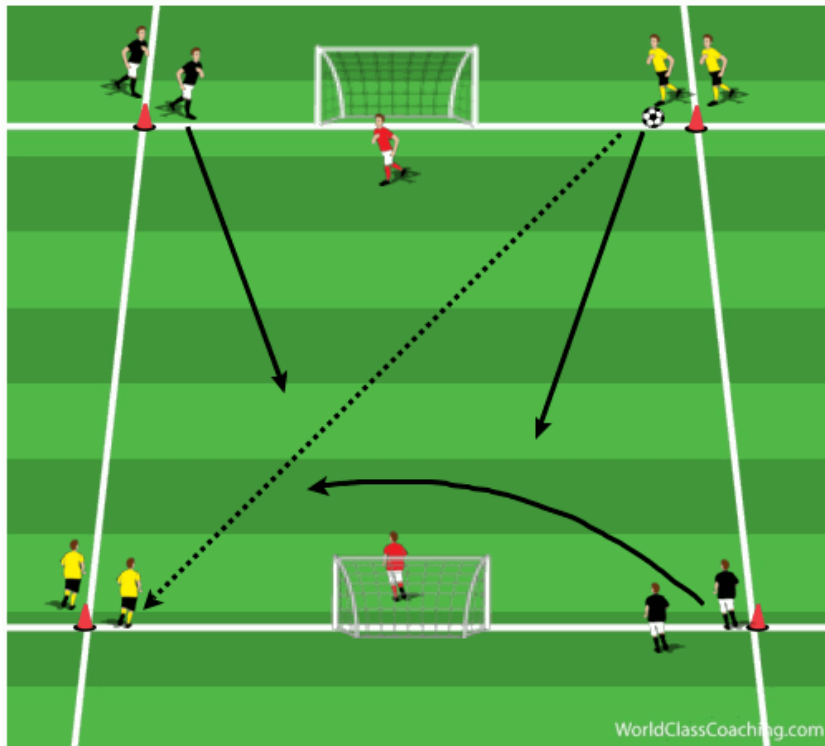
Coaching Points:

- Use the playmaker to keep possession
- Create spaces to allow penetration of the line or a 1v1 to eliminate an opponent
- Be decisive in possession
- Be aggressive when dribbling 1v1 or making the run to receive the through pass

Progressions/Variations:

- Place a goal 1-20 yards behind the line to score from the dribble or final pass
- Add in a sweeper to play behind the line, who will clear up heavy passes or dribbles
- Play with a full time defender for a 3v4 defensive overload
- Play a competition between teams of 3v3 and see who wins the tournament

Penetration with a recovering defender



The Yellows work as a team to score into one of the goals; the Blacks have a pressing defender and a recovering defender to play 2v2. Eliminate one of the opponents quickly to allow the best chance of an easy goal.

Coaching Points:

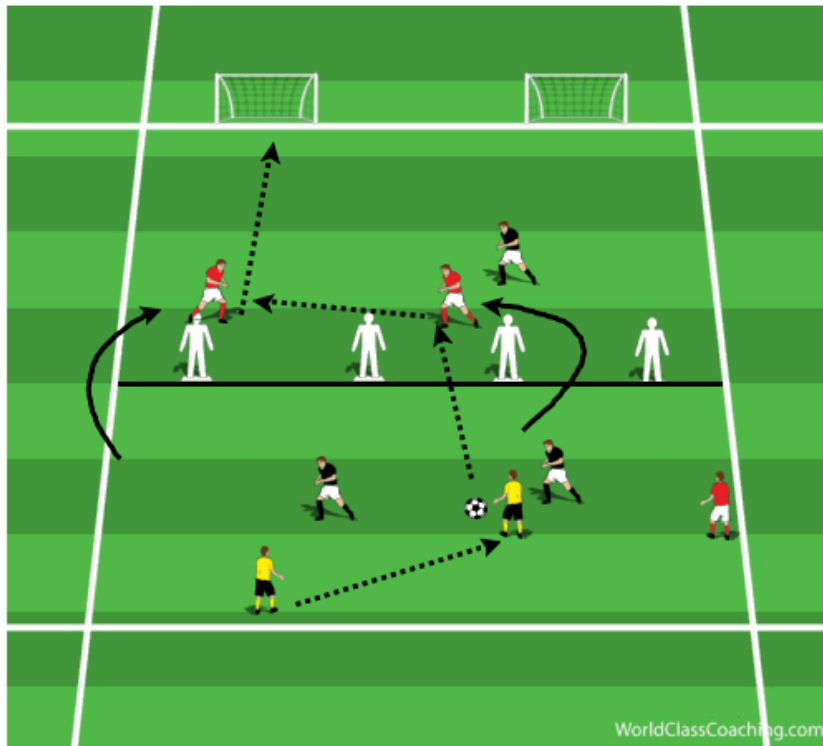
- Speed and angle of support to unbalance the defender to allow penetration into the closest goal
- If the recovering defender is quick to recover but is close to the player in possession, switch play and attack the GK 1v1
- Play quickly and try to use different ways to penetrate (dribble, through pass, 1-2's)

Progressions/Variations:

- Change the position of the players to give a clear 1v2 with a recovering defender
- Only give one goal to score into
- Have a target player on the opposite side that can receive a direct pass and play in 2 touches

Finish the session with a match, if a player is dribbled past, he must leave the field for 1 minute. The team who tries the most penetrating dribbles should find that there will be more space for passing as there are fewer players in the opposition to stop passes into space for penetration.

Developing Penetration – Session 2



Overload game, 2v2 +3. Have 2 small corner goals then make a line along the centre and place mannequins on the line to act as players to play a pass between 2 defenders. There will be a covering defender inside this zone ready to press the Reds when they enter the zone.

The Red players – the 3 attacking midfielders - have dropped deep to help the 2v2. One space is created, a red should arc a run into the space behind the line and receive a pass. One of the other attacking midfielders can support and receive the next pass to score into one of the small goals.

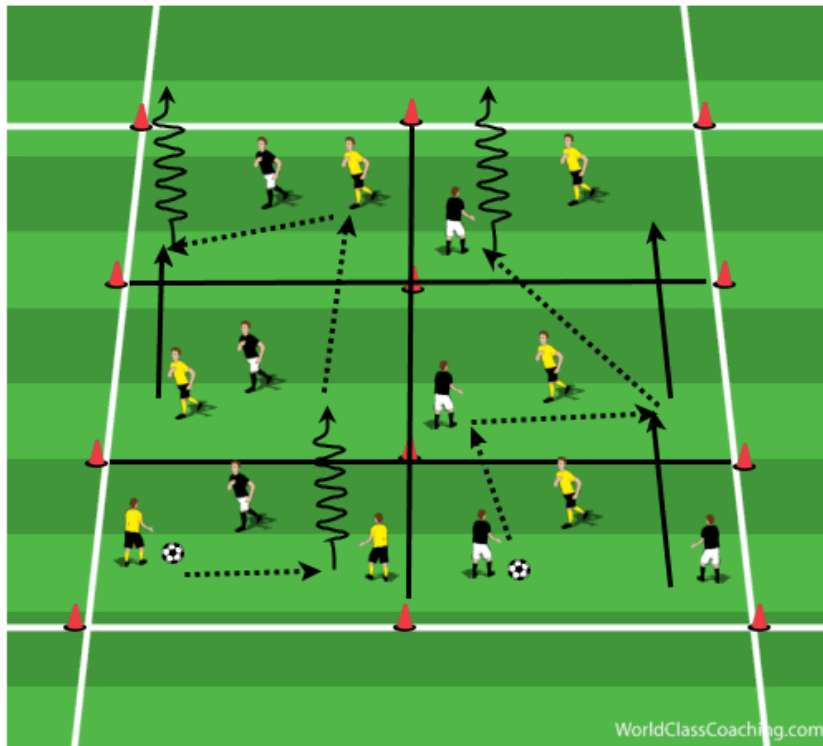
Coaching Points:

- Arc a run when the next pass can be played into your feet quickly
- Think ahead, do you use 1 touch or 2?
- Can you dribble away from an opponent to make the next pass?

Progressions/Variations:

- Play with 3 defenders inside the initial box
- Add a 2nd covering defender (like in a 4-2-3-1)
- Add a striker who stays in the top zone to act as a central outball against 2 defenders

Gauntlet Game – 4v3



Make a field 20 yards wide and split it into 2. Make it 30 yards long and split it into 3 grids, 10 yards long each. (6 10x10yard boxes)

In the bottom box is a 2v1, the attack must find a way to penetrate the opponent's defensive line and enter the next one, with a dribble or a pass. 1 player for the deeper box can move up in support.

Above left: Yellow receives and dribbles into the next box, the striker at the top box offers to the side, and receives. The 2nd player in the middle box moves to support the striker and offer a pass inside the box to dribble over the end line.

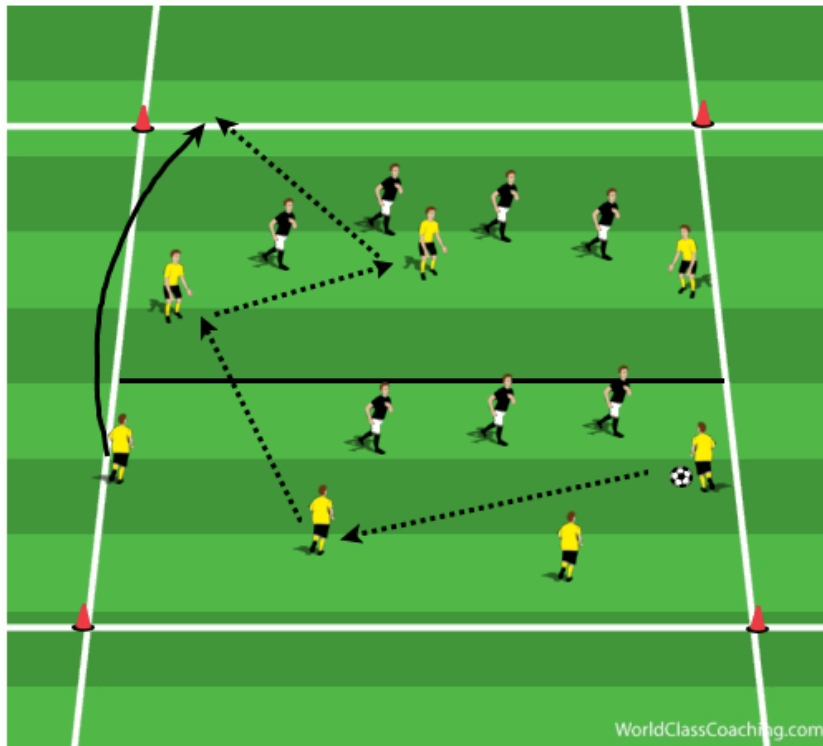
Coaching Points:

- Play decisively
- Take advantage of the 2v1's
- Movement ahead of the ball and from behind in support of the player in possession
- Try not to go backwards, play 1st time passes when possible to move forward at pace

Progressions/Variations:

- Add a 2nd defender into each box after making the zones slightly wider
- Place a goal at the end of the grid to score into after the final pass or dribble
- Play 2 touch maximum
- Play weak footed

4-3 Midfield Shape Penetration Activity



Make a central line across the 30x40 yard box. The players will play 4v3 inside the initial box then try to penetrate into the other box, where one player will support from deep, making a 4v4. To score, cross the end line with the ball.

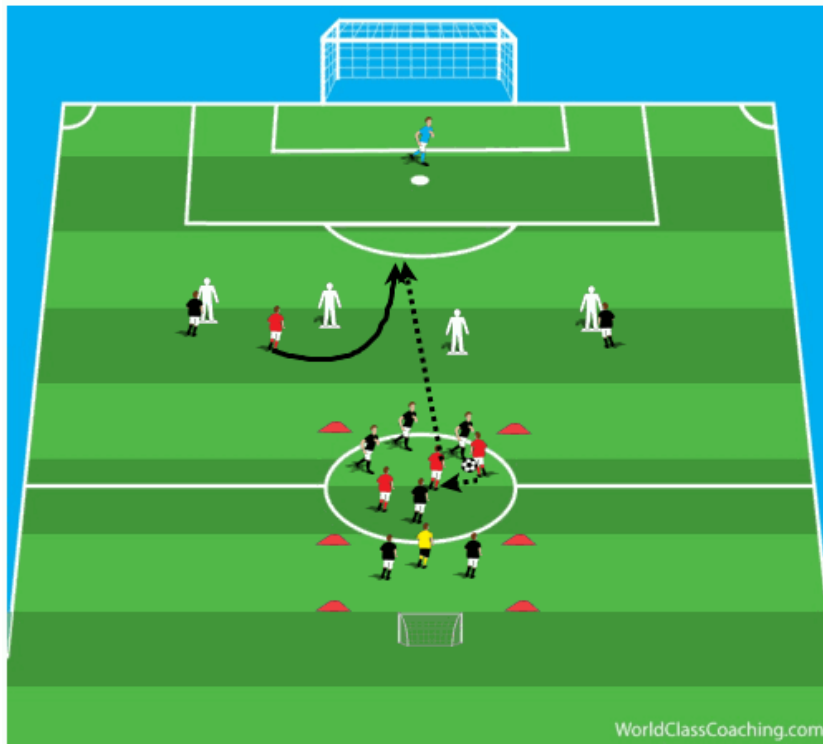
Coaching Points:

- Players in the 2nd zone check away and lose markers before the pass arrives
- Communication, Audio and Visual
- Rotating positions to cause confusion to marking schemes and create space
- Keep possession until a good opportunity to play a 2v1 on an opponent is open (above)

Progressions/Variations:

- Add an end zone with a striker v defender to play direct to the striker and have deep support runs from midfield to penetrate the last line
- Place a goal behind the grid 20-30 yards away and break ahead of the line to shoot
- If the opposition win the ball in the initial zone, they can score into the goal in front of them
- Make 1 player a full time dribbler – he can only pass after trying to dribble past an opponent.

Transition to penetration in the opponents half



Mark out a small box around the size of the centre circle, play with 4 (Black Team) attackers who try to pass into the 2 further ahead attackers before scoring into the small goal behind.

The Reds try to win possession (with the yellow covering behind) and then penetrate with a quick pass into the strikers run. Two recovering defenders will be positioned outside of the widest mannequins at full back.

Coaching Points:

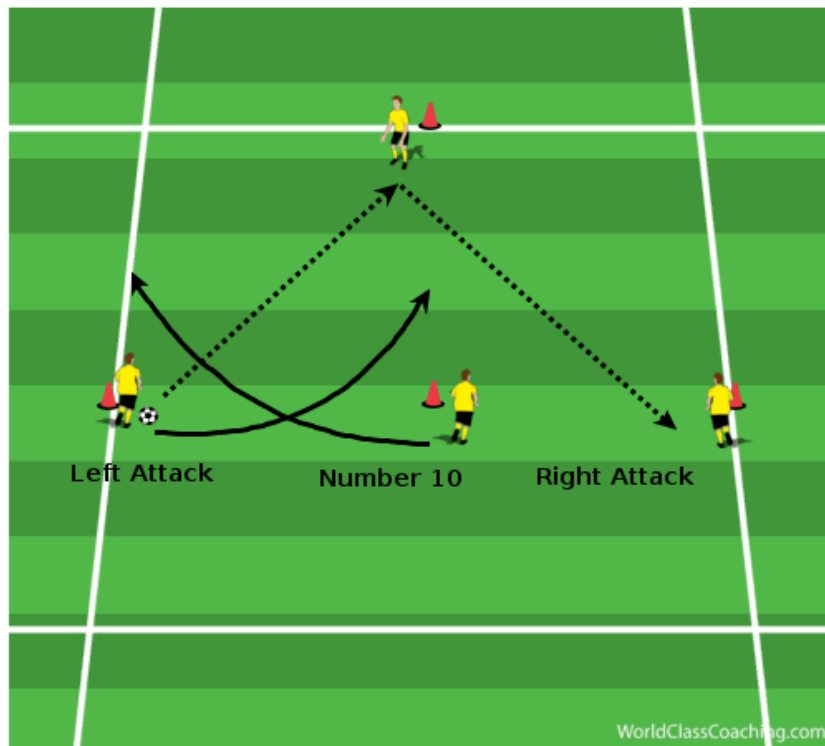
- Play the ball quickly after you win possession, high or low passes
- Timing of the run, and body shape on the run, composure in front of goal
- Don't hesitate, there are 2 recovering defenders!

Progressions/Variations:

- Make a defence from 3 or 4 players, remove mannequins – striker must make a run through or drop off to receive and have a deep supporting run to look for a pass behind the defence
- Play with 3 in attack – 2 wingers and a striker, and vary the penetrating options; dribble or pass to find the way through the defence

Finish the session with a game with offside lines; if the players penetrate the offside lines while staying onside, they can score.

Developing Positional Rotation



Left Attack starts with the ball, passes into the striker and arcs inside to offer a 1-2. The number 10 will arc round to the left to fill in the position left by the left attacker moving infield. Repeat with the wide and central players rotating each time until players start to do it automatically.

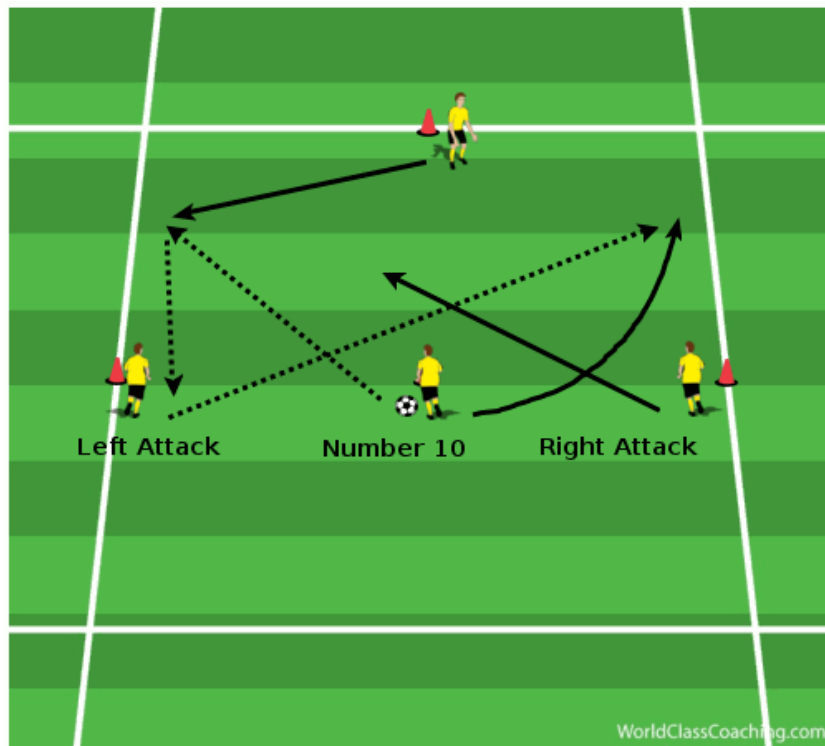
Coaching Points:

- Players should move to meet the ball and keep the attack fluid
- Pass the move inside from the wide position, Pass then move wide from a central position
- Communication between players to tell each other where they are going.

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 1 touch
- Above, after the pass is made to the Right Attacker, he plays a 1-2 with left attacker (in the number 10 position) to cross the end line. A variation could be a wide run from the striker to switch play to the far side for the number 10 in the left attack position.

Striker Movement Rotation



The Number 10 starts with the ball. The striker moves wide left to offer a pass forward. The number 10 will move to the right to allow the central space for the Right Attacker to move inside to help the striker. Left Attack will spread play into the space for the number 10 who is now wide right.

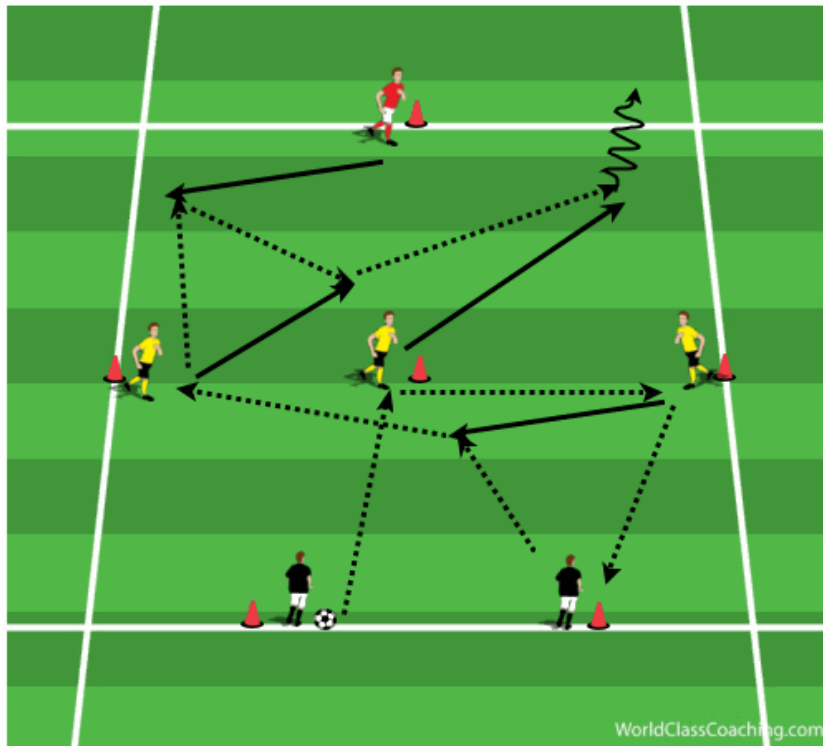
Coaching Points:

- Play the ball in triangles
- Pass slightly ahead of the next player to allow an easy 1 touch pass
- Open the body shape to receive the ball on the run

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a defender on the strikers back
- Make a line where 1 defender presses the midfield so they need to pass and move then change positions to lose the opponent
- Move up to 2 defenders
- Place a goal 20 yards behind the zone to score into

Shadow Play for Positional Rotation



Set up 2 central midfielders (Black), 3 attacking midfielders (Yellow), and 1 striker (Red).

The play should be made in a fixed movement to allow players to pass and move to rotate positions in a fluid and rhythmic motion.

Above, the left central midfielder (LCM) passes into number 10 who passes wide to the Right Attacker (RA) and moves ahead of the RA position. RA passes back to RCM, who returns the pass back to RA in the number 10 position. RA passes wide to LA, the striker moves wide and offers a 1-2 with the LA, who switches play to the number 10 in the RA position.

Coaching Points:

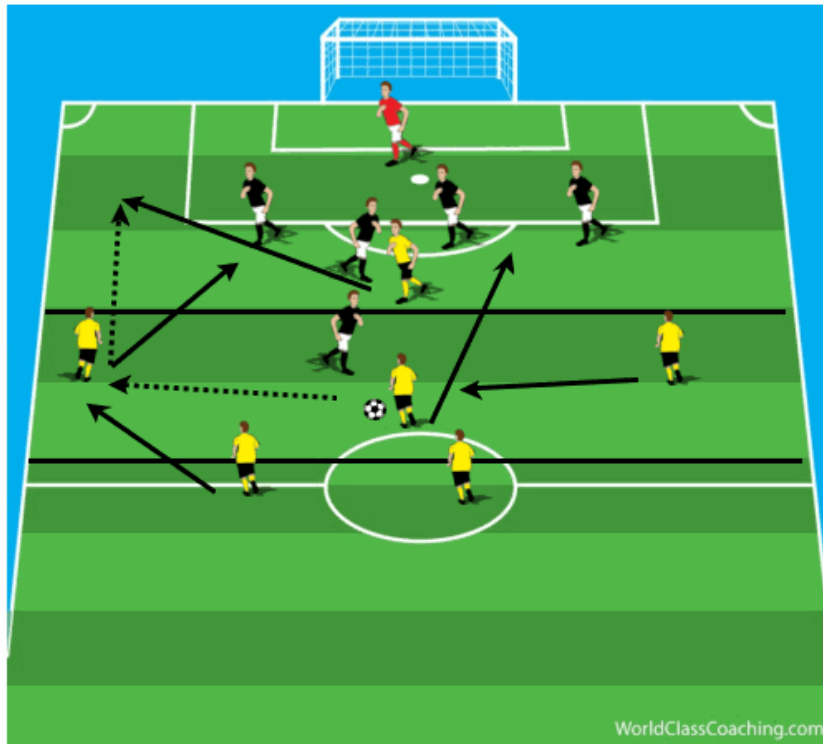
- Play the ball into the stride of the runner
- Move the ball quickly
- Audio and Visual Communication
- After each pass, leave a space for other players to move into

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a passive man-marker for the front 4
- Make the area into 9 zones for the 6 players, 3 zones in 3 lines, 1 player per zone

Finish the session with a game and encourage players to rotate positions, stopping when a player has stood still when opponents are close, and showing why making a run into a new position creates space for a player from a different position.

Developing Positional Rotation – Session 2



Make a field with 3 zones; the bottom zone is for the 2 central midfielders to recycle possession. The middle zone is for the 3 attacking midfielders to play against 1 holding midfielder, the top zone is for the striker against the back 4.

Above; the number 10 passes wide to the LA, the striker pulls wide and offers a forward pass from LA. The number 10 after his pass moves to in line with the back post, the LA after his pass moves inside to offer a pass back from the striker. The near side central midfielder moves into position to cover the LA's position, the RA moves inside to pick up the number 10's position.

Coaching Points:

- Players should have freedom to move wherever they like, but ensuring that positions are left and filled quickly. Keep safe possession until a 2v1 or 3v1 opportunity occurs and exploit it
- Ask players questions to find out why they moved to certain positions and what they thought the outcome may be.

Progressions/Variations:

- Play with 2 or 3 central midfielders to defend against the 3 attacking midfielders
- Add in a striker for the defending team to press the central midfielders
- Add in attacking full backs
- Place a goal for the defending team to counter attack into a try to score

Grid Game – 9 zones for 7 players



Play 2 teams in a 2-3-1 formation. Make 9 squares all 15 yards each (45x45 yard field).

Players cannot occupy and stay inside a zone where a teammate is already in. They can run through a box to provide support but not play inside.

Black team are attacking, the 2 central midfielders occupy 7 and 9, and the striker has moved to zone 3 from 2. The attacking midfielders are placed across zones 4, 5 and 6. Above, the LCM passes into number 10, who lays back to RCM, then makes a diagonal run to zone 1. The RCM passes into the RA, who plays into zone 1 for the number 10. The RA could use the space left in zones 5 and 2 to offer a 1-2 to shoot. If play breaks down, recover into a default shape of 2-3-1 and the position you are in will stay the same.

Coaching Points:

- Pass and move between zones with freedom
- Communication and Awareness to know where space will appear and when to fill it effectively
- If you need to, dribble past your opponent and draw an opponent close to the ball and open up some space for a team mate

Progressions/Variations:

- Allow 2 attackers inside 1 zone
- Allow 2 defenders inside 1 zone
- Allow 2v2s inside one zone
- Add in neutral players on the side who play 2 touch – attacking full backs

Full Pitch Game – 11v11



As before, make a field with grids, this time 15 long x 24 wide.

Attackers and defenders can play 2v2 inside any grid, try and rotate positions when possible and if one of the wide midfielders' moves inside, full backs pushes forward into the space.

Coaching Points:

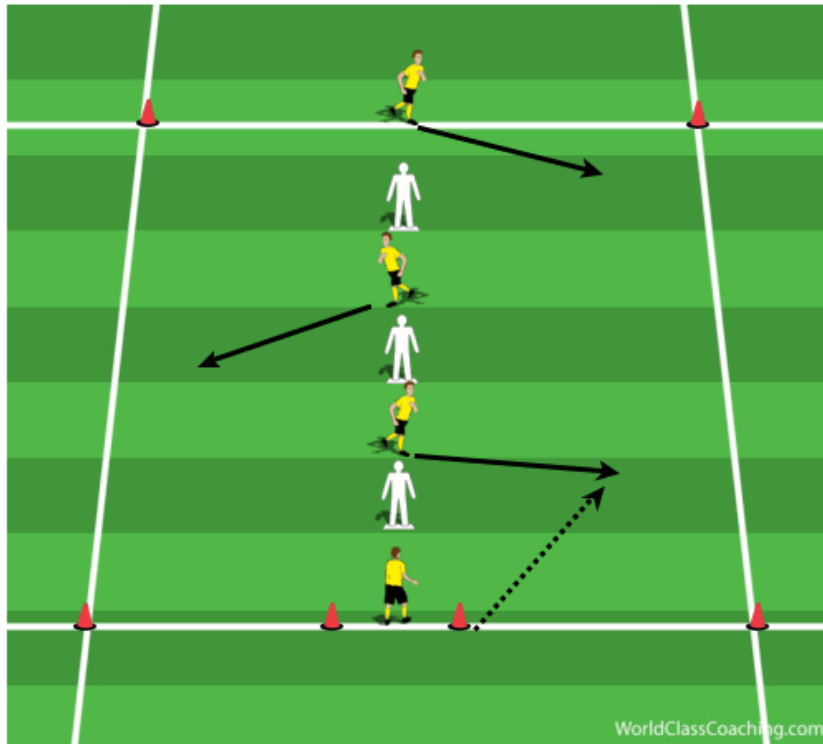
- In central defence and midfield, make sure at least 3 players cover the central zones when the ball is in attack
- Full Backs stay wide and time runs forward, in support and in overlapping
- Striker can move out of position and drop deep to play with number 10 (Spain 4-2-3-1)
- Watch team mates moves off the ball and see where space will appear to receive the ball, some moves are made to create space for others, some moves are made to link play

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 3 touch inside the 4 central zones
- In the number 10 zone, players *must* try to play 1-2s to break ahead of the midfield line

- Wide players *must* try to play 1v1 and dribble past the full back
- Allow 3 players inside any zone to make more space around the field

Developing Support Play – Session 1



Make a 12 yard wide by 24 yard long area, with 3 sections.

The players 1st player triggers the 2nd and 3rd players movements, the 2nd player moves to the opposite side to offer a triangle support movement, the 3rd player offers a straight pass movement.

Play through the players, moving up a position each time.

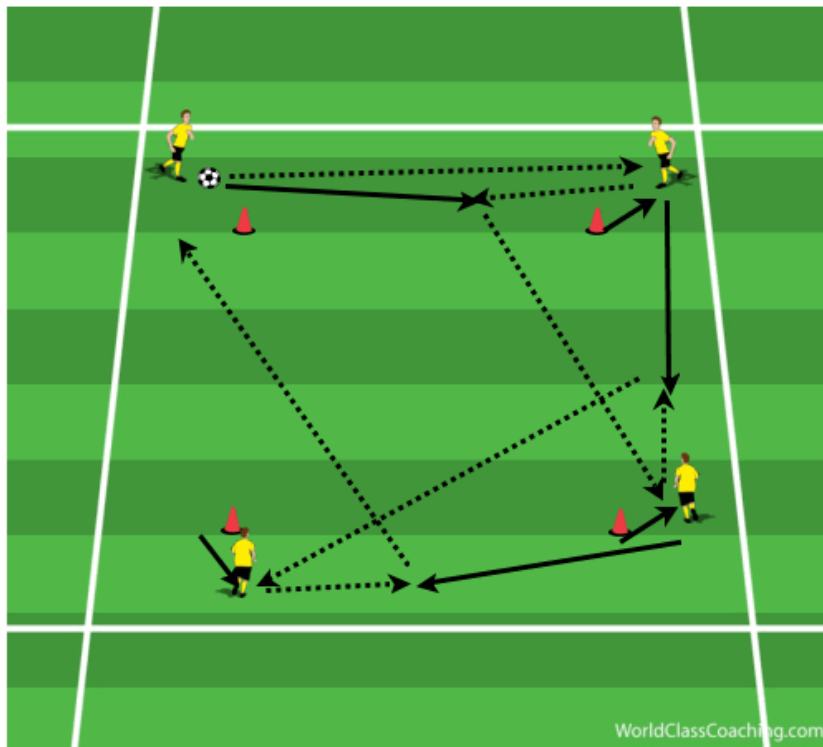
Coaching Points:

- On the move, open up the body and scan the play to see both team mates and the ball coming in
- Pass with the back foot to the back foot
- Make sure there is a clear passing lanes between the 'opponents'
- Audio and Visual Communication

Progressions/Variations:

- Place a marking defender on each player, the players will try to lose the opponent to receive the pass – move at the right time, not too early or too late
- Add the defender and allow the player to turn and go past the defender, the support run may make this easier as the defender knows there is a possibility to pass
- The 1st and 2nd players play a 1-2 then pass to 3, then from 3-1-2 in a triangular motion to find different passing movements to work on support play, angles and accuracy of passes

Long – Short – Long: Angles and distances of support for triangulation



5 players square.

2 players begin at the starting cone, and 1 at the others. Pass round the box initially to get a feel for checking away from the defender (cone) then taking the 1st touch towards the intended pass direction, developing fluency and rhythm in passing.

Move onto the practice above. The 1st player makes a long pass to the other side, then arcs away from the pass to open up a better angle for the switched diagonal pass to the opposite side. The player who made the lay-off, arcs away from the ball and looks for the lay-off from the player receiving the next pass. Fill in the space the team mate has left.

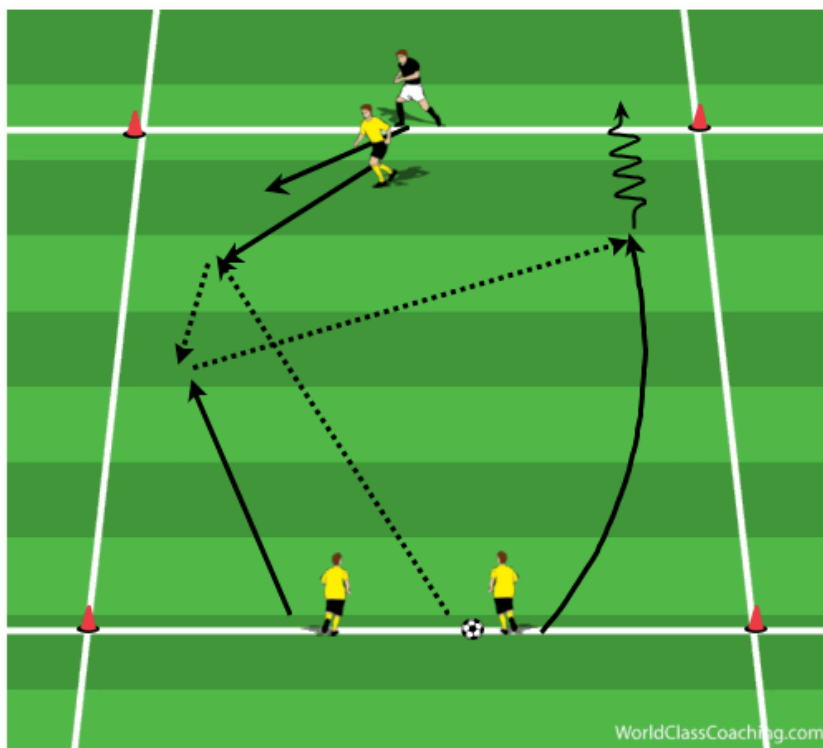
Coaching Points:

- Arc to the left if passing diagonal to the right
- Quick feet after lay-off to start support run for the next pass
- Set body shape early to make the next diagonal pass

Progressions/Variations:

- Add targets to avoid in the middle of the box and ask players to pass through them
- Add in a target to avoid on the outside to ensure players open up passing lanes before the 1st touch of the player before them
- Make a competition between groups, which team can complete a box the fastest?
- How many boxes can they complete in 1 minute

Deep support play – striker offering a pass forward



3v1 scenario.

The 2 bottom players will pass back and forth until the striker drops deep to show for a pass into feet. He will check his run then move to where he wants to receive the ball.

Above, the striker lays-off and has support close and in front of him; he lays-off while the initial passed arcs wide to offer the next pass in space – Deep support and wide support from midfield

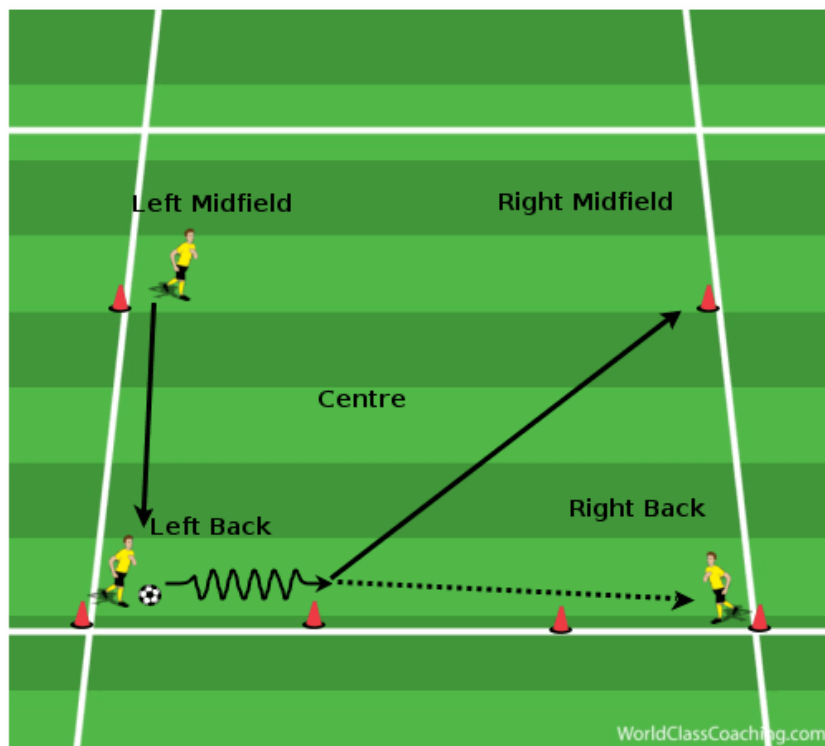
Coaching Points:

- Striker moves in after signalling where he wants the ball to be played
- Players work out who supports short and who supports by making an outball
- Quick passing to exploit space

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 3v2 up to 4v4
- Add in a zone separation line – the 2 at the bottom play against 1 defender, the striker plays v 2 defenders in a 3v3, for example
- For a 4-2-3-1 specific drill, play 3 inside the bottom grid v 2 defenders and the striker v 2 defenders in the top zone – players can rotate positions, make diagonal runs and make overlaps to create the space to get over the end line.

Developing Support Play – Session 2



Butterfly Rotation – Offering passes and rotating positions

The ball starts at left back. He dribbles inside to the cone then passes over to the player at right back. As the ball is passed, the passer will run through the centre, offering a pass inside, but continue his run to right midfield. As this run is made, the player at Left midfield will drop back into left back to offer a pass across. The player on the ball will dribble inside to the cone; sprint through centre and up to left midfield – the player at right midfield drops back to offer the next movement.

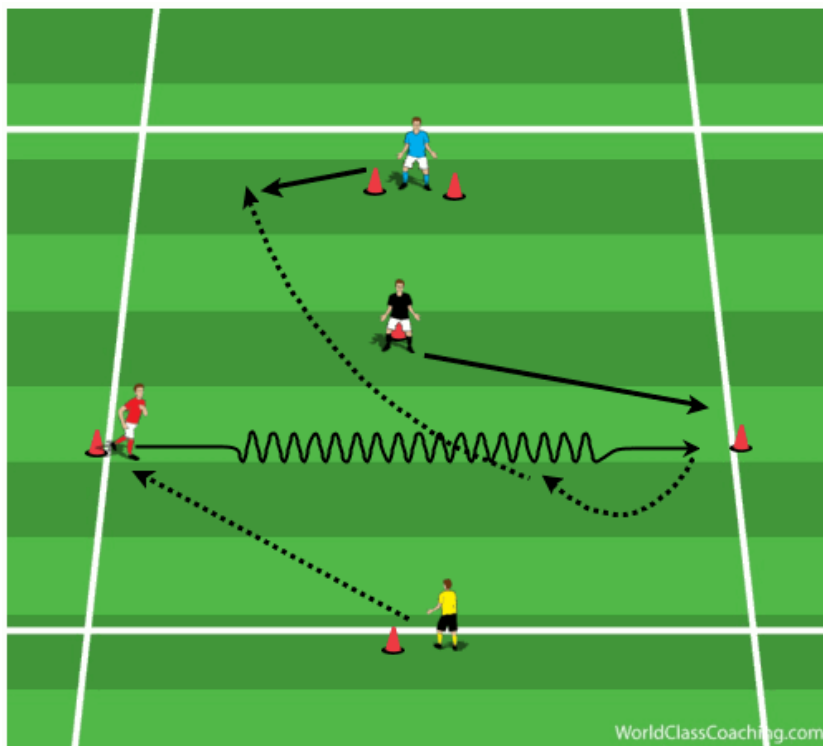
Coaching Points:

- Dribble quickly to the cone with the body protecting the ball – dribbling from right back inside will mean dribbling with the left foot as a defender will be added in later
- Accurate and fast pass over to the opposite side
- Quick acceleration and slight deceleration as you enter the centre, accelerate to midfield
- 1st touch moves towards the dribble direction, use outstep or sole to protect the ball on touching the ball forward to begin the dribble

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a pressing defender to both sides, who shuttle in a triangular motion; press the ball, jockey the dribbler then track the runner to the centre. This player presses the next player at full back.
- After the 3rd rotation, the full back running through centre will receive the pass in the centre but return back to the passer at full back and continue running to midfield (double 1-2)
- Add in a 4th player to the rotation, players move in and out of all corners and create small spaces with the possibility of passing up the line or back across like in a match

Support Play – finding a team mate under pressure



Yellow passes to Red, who dribbles across to the opposite side. Black will press the ball as Red dribbles. Red will use a variety of turning moves to protect the ball. As he turns, Blue will offer a forward pass.

Coaching Points:

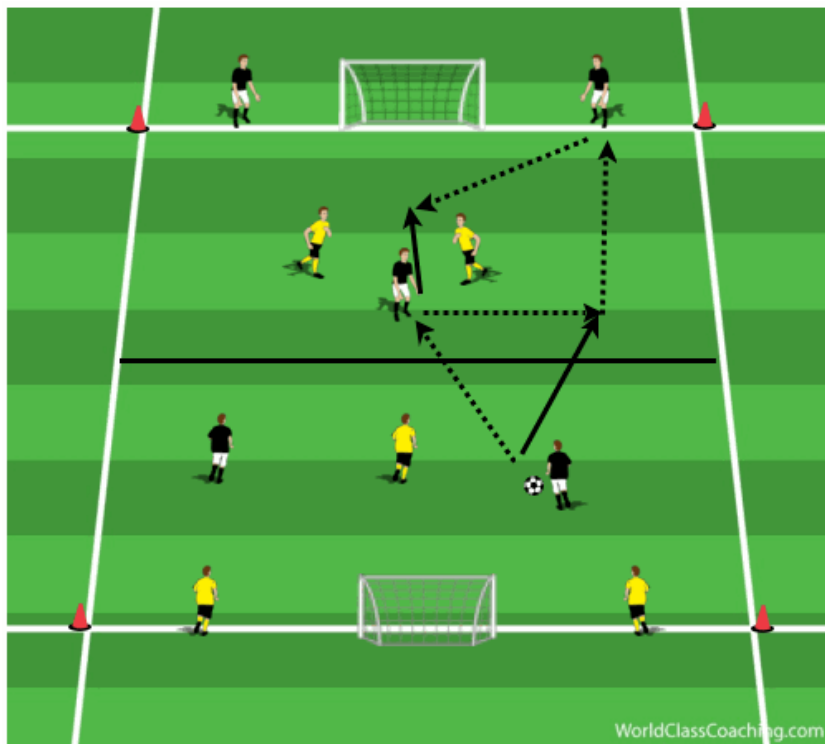
- Red takes 1st touch towards the dribble direction

- As Red is pressed, Blue should make a quick movement to offer a passing lane.
- Audio and Visual Communication between all players

Progressions/Variations:

- Red checks his run before receiving
- Pass to Black who passes to Red then repeat the sequence from there
- Add in a 2nd defender behind Black who tries to stop the pass into Blue
- Red can play a 1-2 with Blue and dribble over the end line
- Add a goal 15 yards from the end line to score into
- Dribble from different starting points, i.e. Black starts, plays 1-2 with Red, passes up to Yellow. Yellow dribbles into the space on the right, Red presses the ball, Yellow turns away from Red. Blue offers a 1-2 pass around Black who started the practice, then score.
- Add in a defender who rushes out from the goal to stop the shot – if inside the Blue can receive another pass inside the box to score.

Support play to score



3v3+2 games

Make a field 30 yards long by 25 yards wide. Place a goal at both ends with 2 attacking players beside the goals. Make a central line to encourage passing forward and support runs from deep – only 2 players from the attack can be in the attacking half at any time.

To score, the ball must be played into the end players who have 2 touches to make a pass for a team mate to shoot or pass to a team mate to shoot with the next pass. Above, a 1-2 is played to the end player who is open, who passes into the centre for a tap in for the striker who has lost his marker.

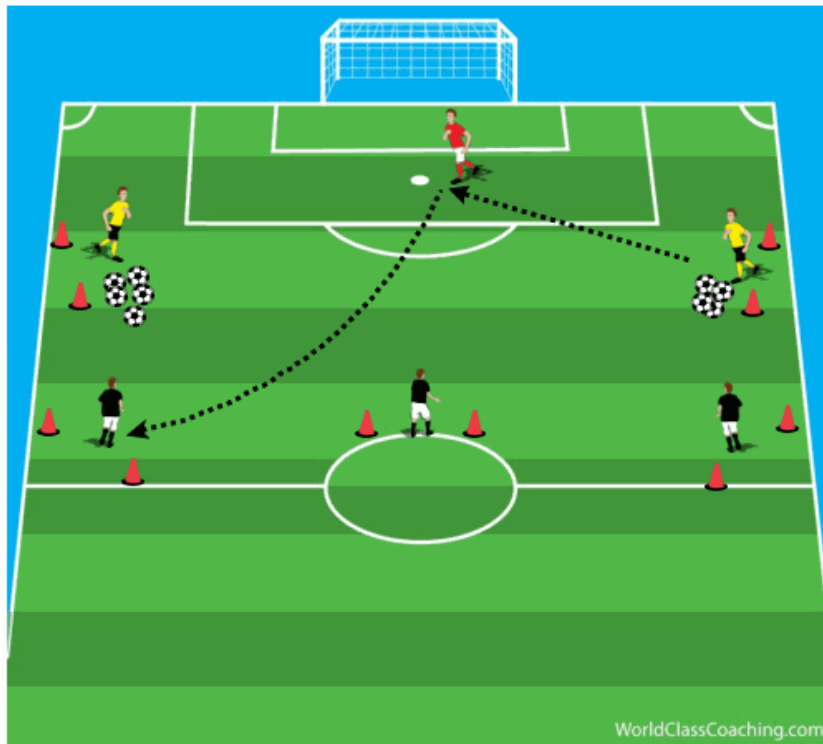
Coaching Points:

- The striker should make some space by offering different movements; checked runs to drop deep, circled runs behind the defenders or a diagonal run to pass wide
- Quick support from the defensive box, the passer doesn't need to be the supporting player
- Play with minimal touches, let the ball do the work

Progressions/Variations:

- Play 3v1 in both zones to replicate the conditions in a 4-2-3-1
- Play with 1 touch wide full backs in the defensive zone
- Change to a 2-3 formation to replicate building into attacking midfield
- Play with a 4-2 formation to replicate building from defence to midfield

Building from the GK into Defence



Receiving and Distributing

Players start in the full back position, pass into the GK, who collects and passes out to one of the 3 Black target players.

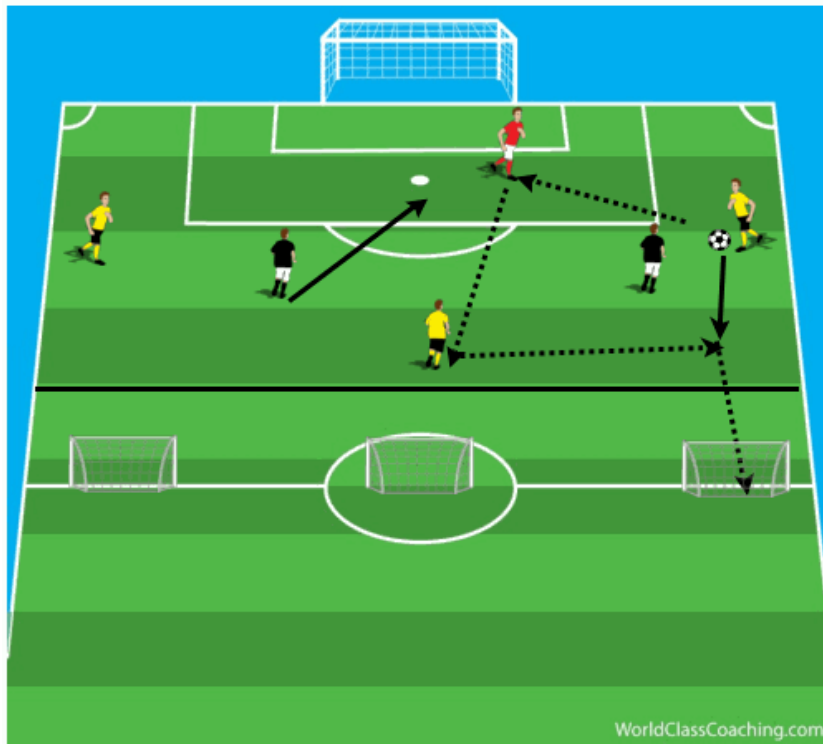
Coaching Points:

- Adjust position to receive outside of the goal width
- Scan play before you receive
- Set 1st touch for your intended pass direction
- Hips, knees and feet through the ball towards the target player
- Loft the pass

Progressions/Variations:

- Cross into the box for the GK to throw out to any of the Target players
- Ask GK to roll ball and kick it to target player

Distribution under pressure



Start the game with a pass from the Black to a full back, which is then pressed. The Gk will receive from the full back and find a pass out of the box to score into one of the 3 small goals.

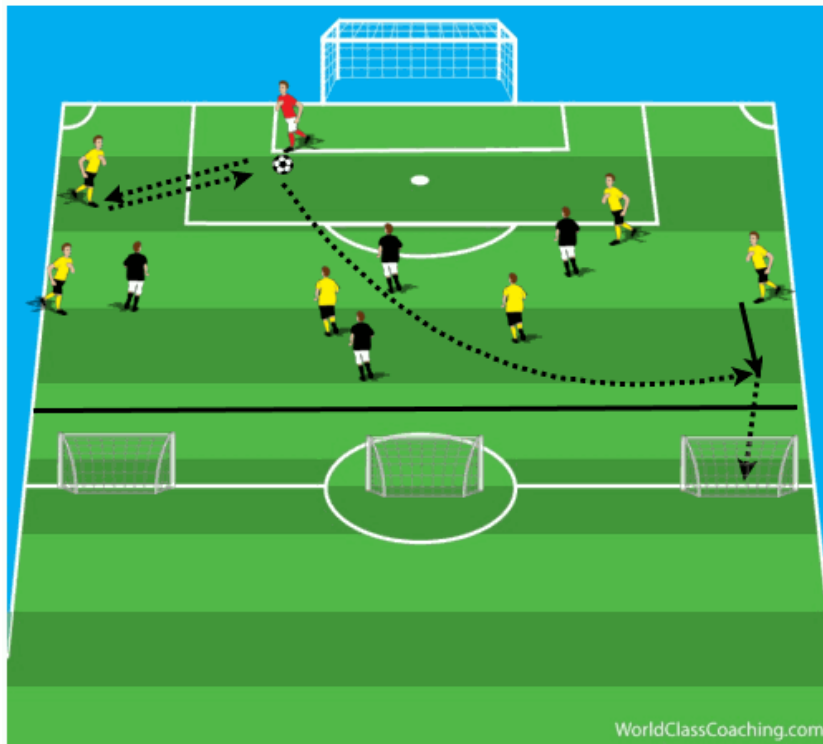
Coaching Points:

- Early decision to find the next pass
- Move to receive where the passing lane is largest
- Movement off the ball to receive and score

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a 3rd presser
- Add in 2 centre backs
- Add in a covering player to top the pass into the goal

Building an attack from a Goal Kick



The Goalkeeper starts from a Goal Kick and passes short, and receives again to find a pass into the midfield. Above, the GK plays a 1-2 then switches play into the space for the full back to receive.

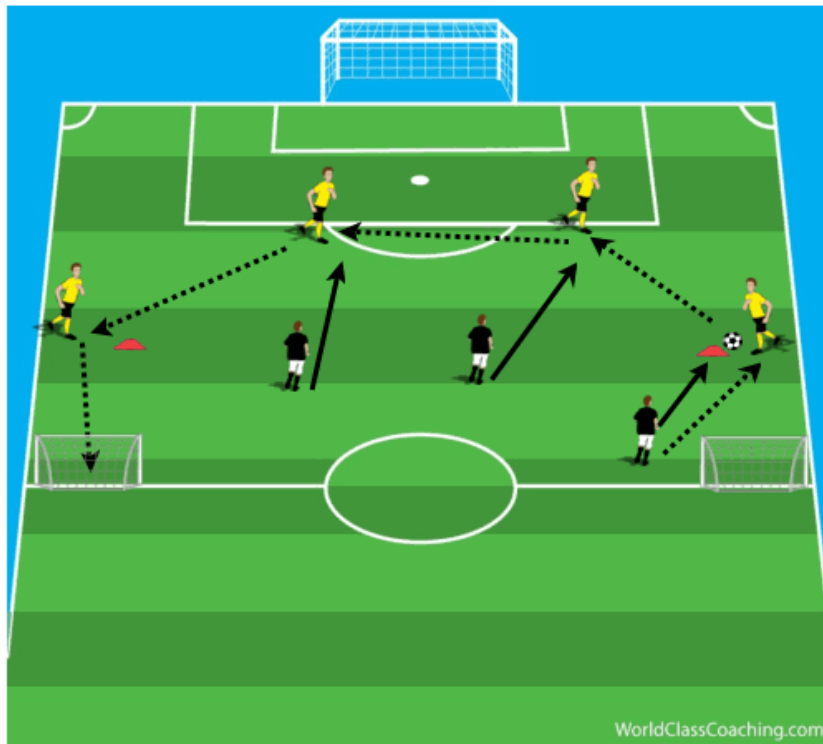
Coaching Points:

- Pass away from pressure
- Look for space
- If GK is able to play long passes into space, encourage them to try to open up attacks
- Always make yourself available for a pass back if the defence are struggling to find a way out

Progressions/Variations:

- Play with a 4-2-1 formation, against different opposition formations
- Build up to a 4-2-3 formation and ask the GK to look for different options via throws from collecting a cross, receiving a back pass or saving a shot and starting a counter attack.

Building from the back in a 4-2-3-1 – Passing out of defence under pressure



Initial stage – defence pass and move the ball across the defence until all players are receiving on the back foot, making eye contact with the next player and passing accurately to the next player.

Move onto above - The winger passes to the full back and presses the ball. Full back must turn away from pressure and pass across the defence, the far side full back passes into the small goal.

Build this up so that eventually there are 3 attackers pressing the ball, meaning the back 4 need to drop a little deeper to create more space to find the outball to the far side full back.

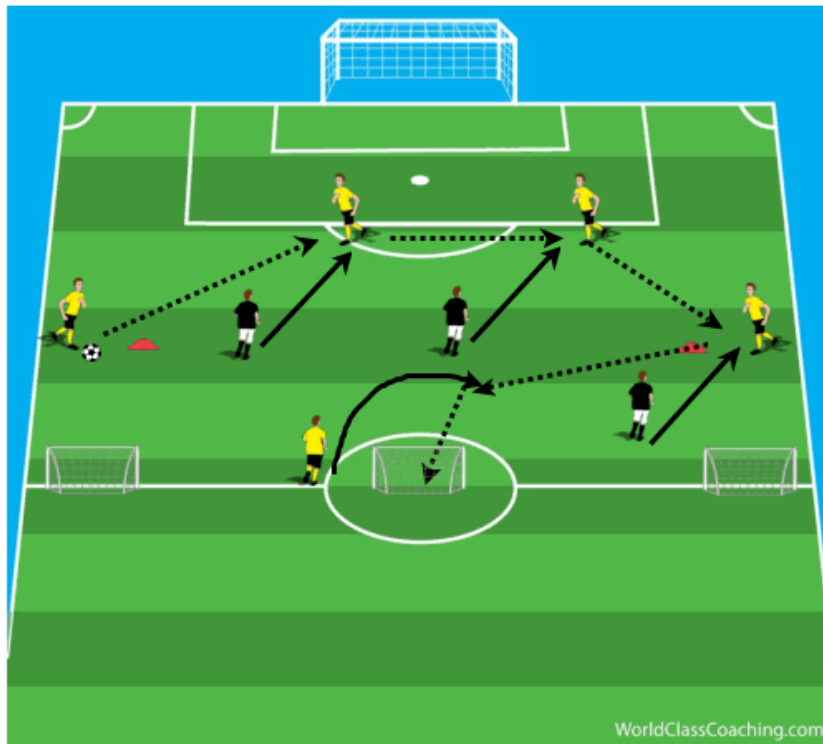
Coaching Points:

- If under high pressure, skipping a pass across the defence with a pass to the far side central defender from full back can release pressure quickly
- Scan play before you receive, see how much time and space you have
- 1st touch towards intended target – team mate or small goal

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in the GK who can help relieve the pressure by playing a long pass into the small goals
- Add in a 4th presser and try to pass out of defence – full backs may need to dribble
- Add a central goal so central defenders can pass out of defence

Find the midfield under pressure – Busquets Practice



The defence repeat the same sequence as before, but now they have a holding midfielder to find. When the holding player receives, they will play no more than 2 touch, to touch and score or find a team mate who will score. Above, the holding midfielder receives on the half turn and passes.

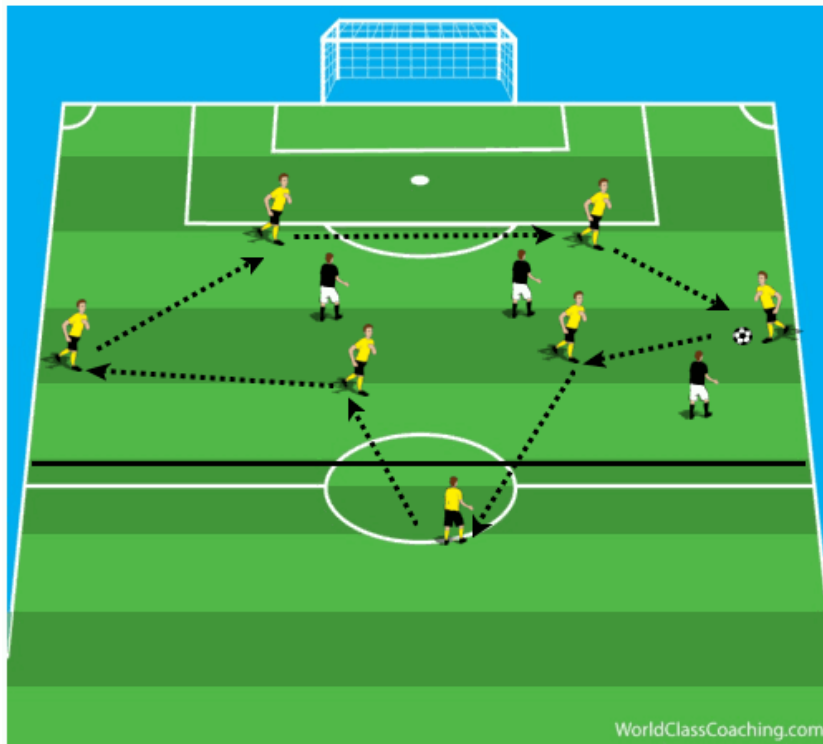
Coaching Points:

- Holding midfielder watches the eye and body movements and anticipates space opening up
- Early communication to demand the pass inside
- If you can't receive on half turn, touch and switch to full back to pass forward

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a player to cover the pressing 3 and pick up the holding midfielder
- Add in a 2nd holding player – work as a see saw in midfield to open space for team mate
- Place a covering player who tries to block the pass into a goal
- Play 2 touch only

Team shape practice – find the attacking midfielder ‘in the hole’



Players in defence and midfield pass and move inside their area's to open up an opportunity to find the attacking midfielder. This player returns the pass to the other holding midfielder who restarts the practice by feeding the ball to the full back to re-start the practice.

Coaching Points:

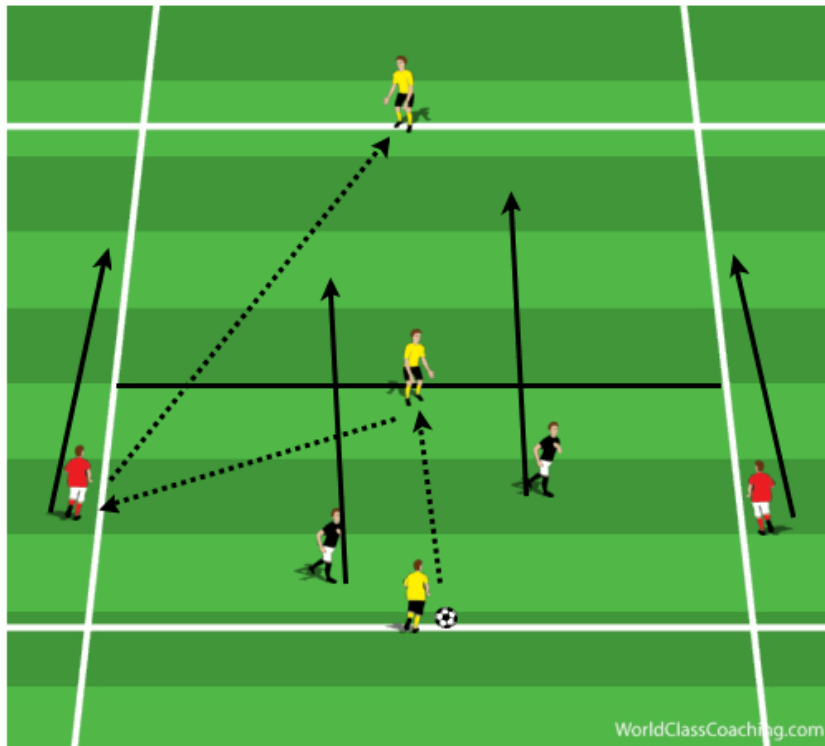
- If the central defender has possession and the full back is blocked, pass into midfield to pass wide
- Holding players work as a 'see-saw', but should check away before moving in to offer a pass
- If possible, use the 'circle run' technique in midfield (Xavi Movement)
- Attacking midfielder should call "in the hole" when the 2nd pass is into his space (like above)

Progressions/Variations:

- Add a player to mark the attacking midfielder and pressure from behind
- Instead of finding the attacking midfielder, find a winger who can stay wide or move into the channel
- Players should be asked to play 1 touch as they should now be comfortable with the routine

Finish the session with a small sided game with a wide field and 3 goals on each line, playing with a 4-2-1 formation, using the patterns of play practised in training. Full Backs should be encouraged to attack and be the wingers in preparation for the next session.

Building from the back – Session 2



The Reds are the supporting full backs, the Yellows are central players. The central line is the border of the 2 boxes (both boxes are 15 yards wide and 10 yards long).

The players pass the ball around the box and after all players have touched the ball, the ball can be transferred into the far away players feet who passes 1st time to one of the supporting full backs, and the activity is repeated – all players touch the ball and transfer the ball back to the start.

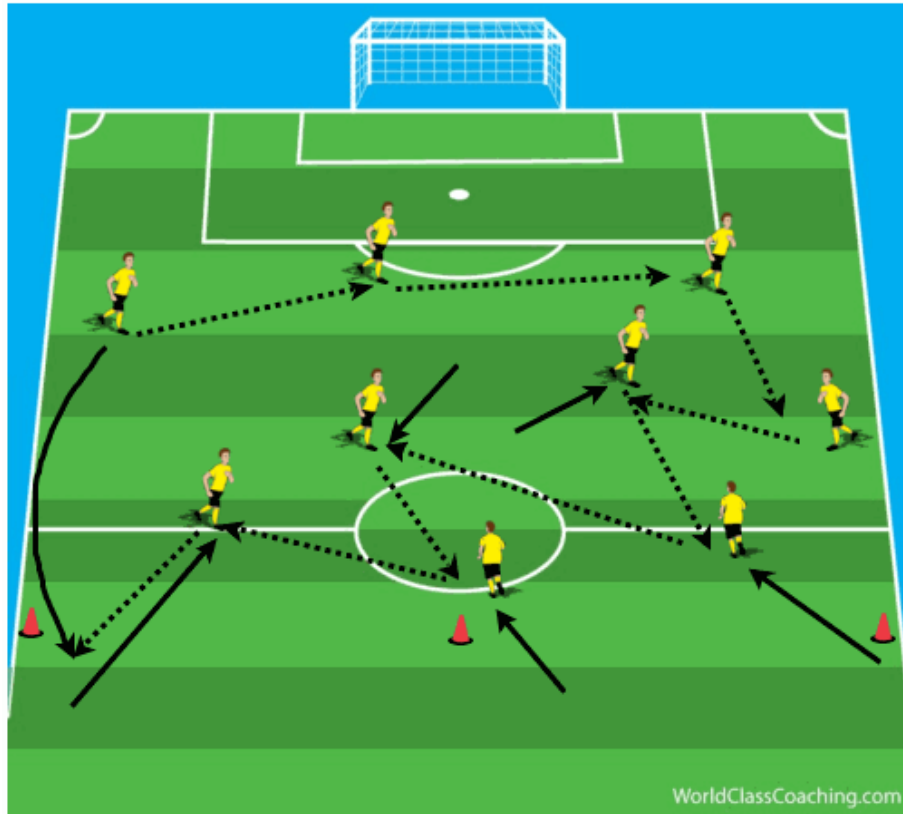
Coaching Points:

- Receive with options left and right with an open body shape
- Early decisions
- When possible, split the opponents
- Communication for playing the forward pass and speed of movement to support
- Faked passes can create space when opponents are close

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in a goal 15 yards behind the end zone – the players must all touch the ball before laying off to shoot, or turning to shoot
- Add in a covering defender who presses the ball
- Allow a 2nd attacker to offer a pass away from pressure to score
- Add a 2nd defender to press from the goal to add pressure to the 2nd attacker (2v2)

Shadow Play – Building into midfield to develop fluency, rhythm, timing and communication



Shadow Play – The defence pass into midfield, which looks to make triangles with the attacking midfielders, and make sure that they come to meet the play. Try to build from right to left then across again with a full back overlapping the play to provide support when the winger moves infield.

Coaching Points:

- Meet the ball when you drop in
- Read the play and think ahead of the game – Who receives next? Play 1 touch or 2?
- Look to make triangles and build with fluidity and rhythm
- Communication between players “In the hole”, “switch play wide” or “1-2”
- Holding Midfielders work as a pair and ‘see-saw’ one presses ahead and one covers

Progressions/Variations:

- Play with wide attacking midfield options
- Play with 3 central or offset (1 wide, 1 in the channel) attacking midfielders
- Add in a striker and look to build through the midfield, using overlaps and striker movement
- Add in 2 pressing players’ v defence, 1 for holding players, 2 v attacking midfielders.
- Move onto a shadow play exercise with 11 v 6, 7 or 8 defenders, keeping the ball

Team Shape – Pattern of Play from a Goal Kick



GK → RCB → RB → RCM → LCB → LB → LAM → LCM → CAM → RAM → CF → CAM → Cross into the box

As the RB receives, the CAM should drop in to offer a pass forward, but also to keep the opposition guessing. RAM should check his run and offer a forward pass.

After the LCB passes into LB, the LCM should tell him to pass into LAM then ask for the pass back.

When LCM receives, RCM should drop into space and offer a pass back to get into the habit of demanding the ball from team mates. CAM should offer and receive on the half turn if possible.

As the CAM receives, RAM moves inside, and this is the trigger for the RB to move forward and support.

As CAM passes to RAM, he should overlap and rotate positions to offer a wide pass, RB will be behind in support incase the CF needs a new option as the CAM may not be in position early enough.

As the play is build up to the right, the LAM should move inside and attack the box when possible. The LB can move forward to help if the coach wants to play a possession game around the opposition penalty box. If not, drop back and make a back 3 with a CM in front so they are covered in transition in a match should play break down.

Give the Pattern of Play 8 attempts on each side (the optimum number of repetitions for players to start becoming in tune with the triggers, movements and pictures the play will have and change)

Try new patterns of play that you can make up and ask the players for some ideas depending on the type of players you have (a wide running striker for RB → RM → CAM → CF triangulation on the right)

Building from Midfield into Attack – Session 1

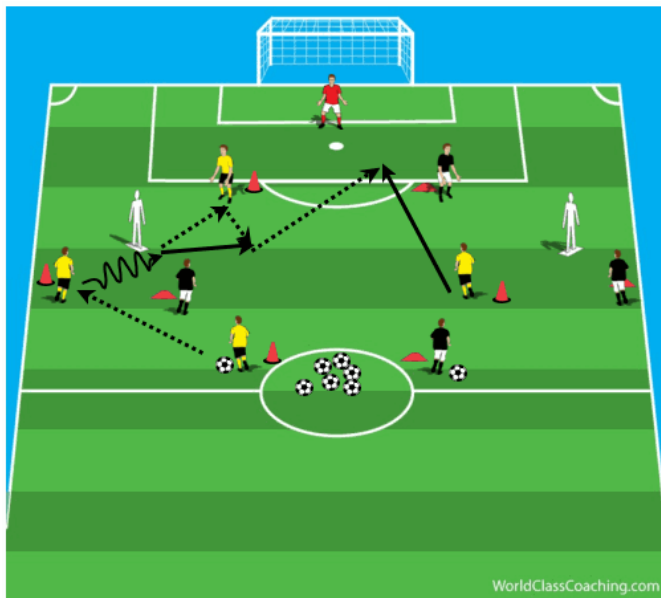
This is a series of ways to build familiarity, fluidity and visual triggers for a variety of attacking patterns from a position in midfield, involving, 3, 4 and 5 players – Full Back, Central Midfield, Winger, Attacking Midfield and Striker.

Coaching Points for all attacking exercises:

- Timing of the runs
- Body shape to receive on the run and deliver quickly
- Visual and Audio Communication
- Angle and speed of lay-off's
- Weight, Angle and spin on the pass (add backspin to slow the pass down)
- Movement to get onto the final pass – check runs more than once, triangles inside the box
- Pick out a player rather than 'hit a danger area'

Progressions/Variations:

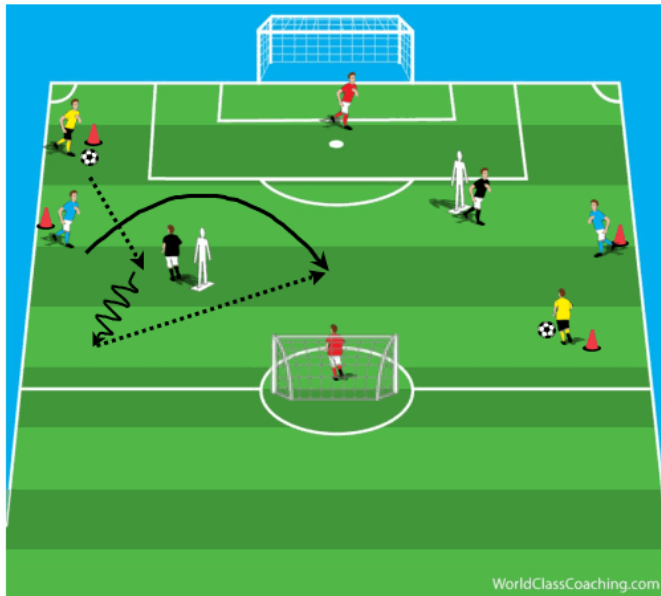
- Check runs before you receive
- Ask players for different variations of movements
- Add in passive, pressing defenders
- Add in centre backs who defend crosses or through passes
- Play everything 1 touch
- Through balls must be played with backspin



Winger receives, cuts inside and plays a 1-2 with the striker. The Far side attacking midfielder makes a diagonal run behind the defence to receive and score.

Variation:

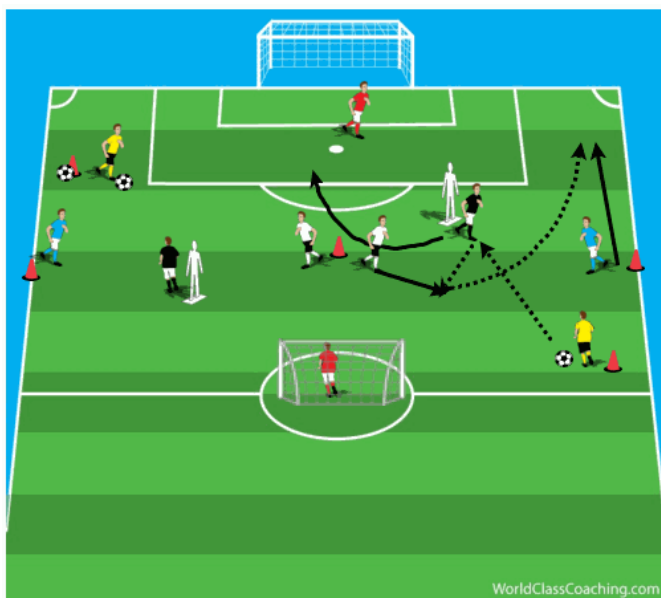
- 1-2 is followed by a reverse pass into the overlapping run by the 1st passer or striker in channel.



Full Back passes into striker, who fakes a lay off to the winger who moves inside. Striker turns into the corner and cuts back for winger to score.

Variations:

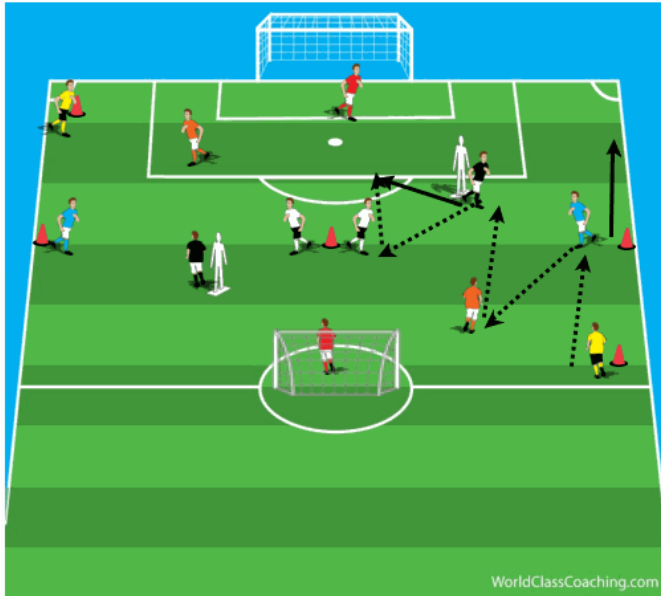
- Play 1-2 with winger for striker to cross.
- Lay off for winger to shoot from central position.
- Full back overlaps when pass is played inside to winger to create a decoy run



Full back passes into striker, who lays-off to the attacking midfielder who moves over in support. The winger makes a run forward and offers a pass into the corner. White and Black enter the box to score.

Variations:

- Winger plays a 1-2 with the full back to start the attack

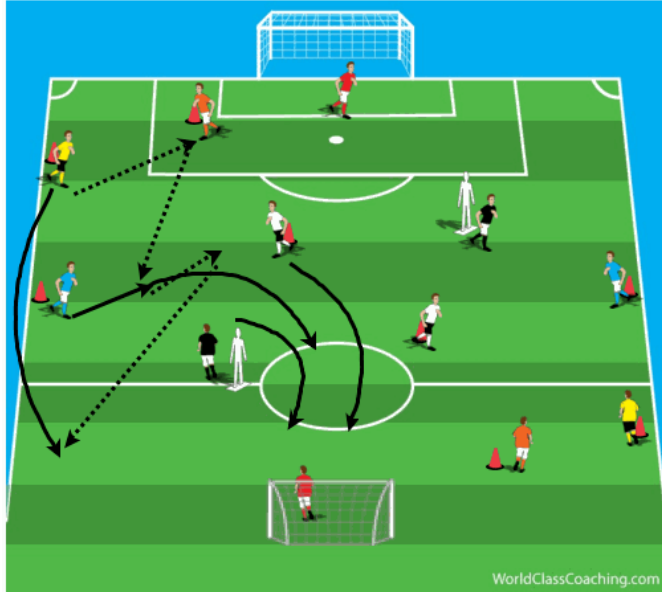


Full back passes to winger who lays off into central midfield. CM passes up to striker who lays off to attacking midfield, makes a run for the return through ball to score.

Variations:

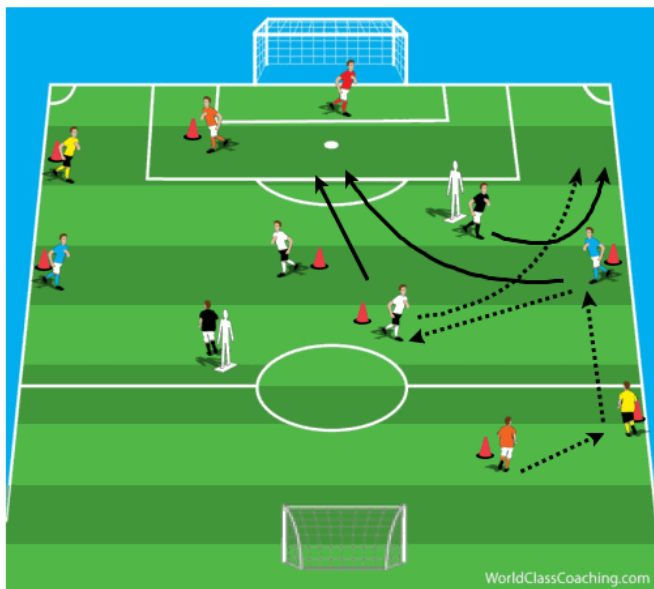
- Attacking Midfielder fakes pass through the centre and passes to winger on the side
- Full back overlaps and receives from attacking midfielder
- Centre Mid passes into Attacking Midfield to pass into the overlapping full back

All variations end up with at least white and black inside the box.



Full back passes into centre midfield, which passes into the winger who has moved inside. He lays off to attacking midfield that passes into the overlapping full back. Look for triangle of inside the box.

Variation: Attacking Midfield passes into the striker for a 1-2 before passing into the overlapping run



Centre Mid passes into Full Back, who passes 1st time into Winger, who passes 1st time into Attacking Midfield, as this happens, the striker arcs a run into the corner for a pass, leaving space for the Winger and Attacking Midfielder to get inside the box for a cross.

Variations:

- Attacking Midfield lays off to Centre Midfield who has moved up to support and CM passes into the corner to the striker pulling wide
- Winger passes back to the full back, who passes into the striker in the corner
- Winger passes back to the full back, who passes into the AM to make the pass
- Full back passes into AM, who passes wide to Winger, who plays a pass down the line.

Finish the session with an 8 v 8 match, looking for patterns practiced during the session, stopping only to ask questions for why a decision is made, which visual clues could've prompted a different decision and how could play have been supported with the run made, or with a new run to support play in a different way.

Encourage players to find different solutions to build an attack from midfield and allow as much creativity as possible – how can players influence the game with dribbles, decoy runs, 1 touch play, positional rotation and switches of play for overloads.

Building from Midfield into Attack – Session 2



Mark out 4 zones as above, where the defence and attack have guides as to where players would be positioned in a match. In the main zone, the full back, holding midfielders, attacking midfielders and winger play against the full back, two holding midfielders and three attacking midfielders in a 5v6 defensive overload.

If the Black team win possession, they should try to score into one of the medium sized goals in the space where the full back has left. If the Yellows create enough space, they should try to find the striker who plays in another zone against 3 central defenders. On the far side, there is the opposite full back and winger on their own, with space ahead.

If the defending team score, switch over and see who can score the most goals – only goals scored into the central goal count.

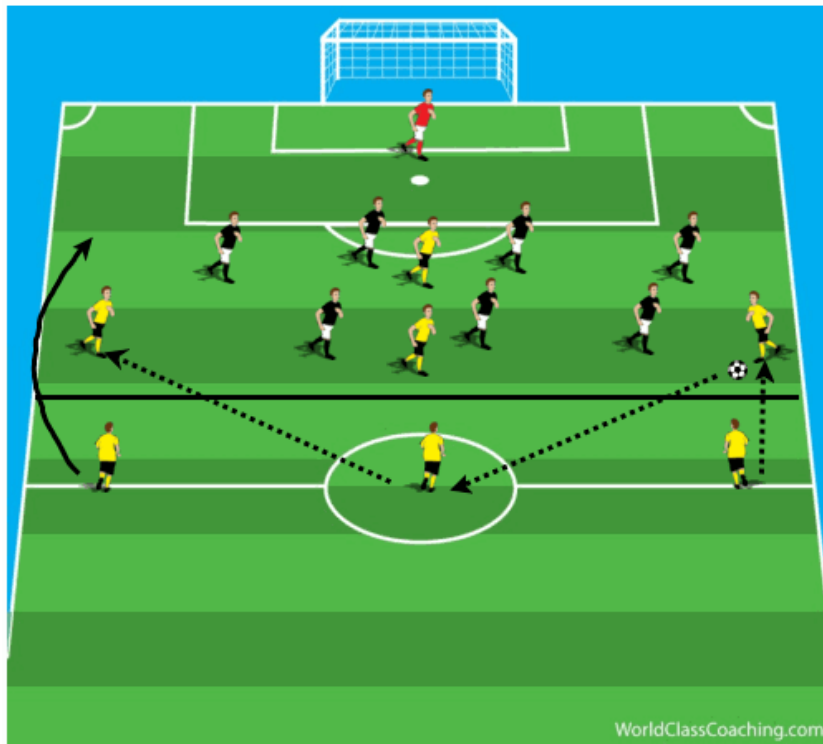
Coaching Points:

- Try to create the space to build an attack through the striker, or switch play to find the players on the far side.
- Look to use the variety of attacks practiced in the previous session, against opposition
- If you lose the ball, press quickly and tuck into a defensive shape to win possession back

Progressions/Variations:

- Play against different formations in midfield – above is a 4-2-3-1.
- Ask that all attacks are built through the striker
- Far side winger can join in to make it 6v6 inside the main box to provide new solutions

Breaking down a determined midfield and defence



Make a field with a 'safe line', where 2 full backs and 1 holding midfielder play. The ball can be passed back into this zone, although the ball must come back out of it within 3 touches to the attack.

Play for 10 minutes then change over teams and see which team can be the most successful in breaking down a defensive minded opponent. The defence must cleanly win possession and keep it for 3 seconds to stop the attack.

Above, the ball is passed back and switched; the full back has left the safe zone and went to make a 2v1 on the overlap.

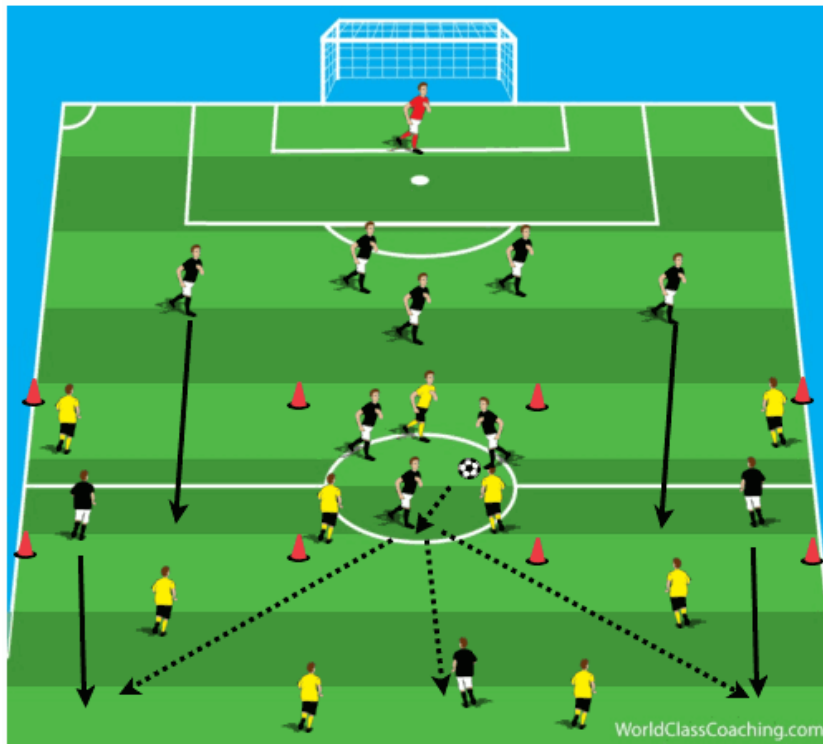
Coaching Points:

- Vary the attacking patterns – players should break forward from behind the 'safe zone' to provide extra players into the attack.
- Try to find a weak point in the defence and exploit it – is the left back defending too narrow? Overlap and exploit the space on the left when play is switched.
- Can the holding midfielder tackle with his left foot? If not, dribble to his left!

Progressions/Variations:

- Play against a different formation defensively, above is 4-3-3, play against a 4-5-1
- Place a striker and a goal behind the Safe Zone, if the defence win the ball, attack!
- Play a time limit game, or an attack limit game

Transition to Attack Game – 3v3 in central midfield with outballs



Play a full field match – marking out a wide central zone, with a smaller zone in the centre. In this zone, play 3v3. The 1st team to reach 4 passes should transfer the ball into the attack and then support the play. The near side full back should join the attack as the ball is passed forward. The wingers of both teams must play within the area marked out to define the 4-2-3-1 formation.

Coaching Points:

- Inter-pass and move quickly
- Be aware of the possible outball – to feet or into space
- Wingers should expect to chase back and help defend if not attacking
- Players inside the central box should recover into defensive shape quickly
- Attack with speed!

Progressions/Variations:

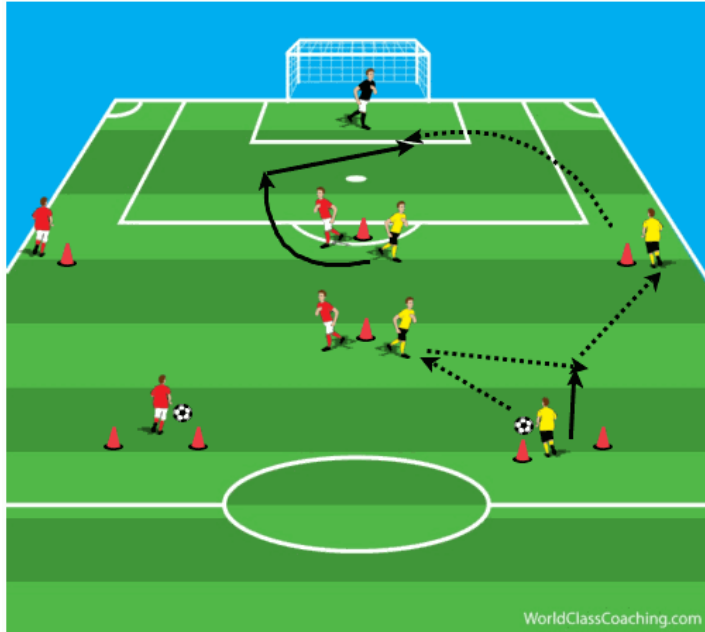
- From the central box, on the 4th pass, the player in possession can dribble out
- Pass to any player in the 4th pass, defence, wingers or striker
- Play must go through the centre forward from the central box, high or low passes
- Link a 1-2 with a central box team mate to escape the box, no number of passes needed

Finish the Session with an 11v11 match, asking players to find ways to break down a compact defence with a variety of attacking patterns, 1v1 moves, and combinations or counter attacks.

Crossing and Finishing – Basic session

The initial phase of developing crossing and finishing will be working on fluency of movement between players, variations of crossing scenarios, accuracy of passes and the movements to receive the cross inside the box.

As a general rule, the striker should make more than 1 checked run, like 'Chicharito' for Man Utd.



Four player movement between CM, AM, WM and CF.

CM passes into AM, who lays off to CM who moves forward, who passes wide to the winger. The striker begins his run away from the ball as the pass is played wide, the winger will take a touch the deliver to the front post where the striker will run across to from back to front.

Coaching Points:

- Winger should receive on the half turn to take 1 touch then deliver
- Visual and Audio communication between players
- Striker and winger must know where to deliver and where to run; arc away to dart across
- Deliver where the goalkeeper can't collect the cross

Progressions/Variations:

- Players check away before receiving
- CM can pass and overlap to give decoy run to provide extra space for cross
- Add passing defender to show crossing angles for winger and striker
- Add in central defender to mark striker
- Move to 2 central defenders if crossing and attacking reach good standard



4 player movement between CM, AM, WM and CF.

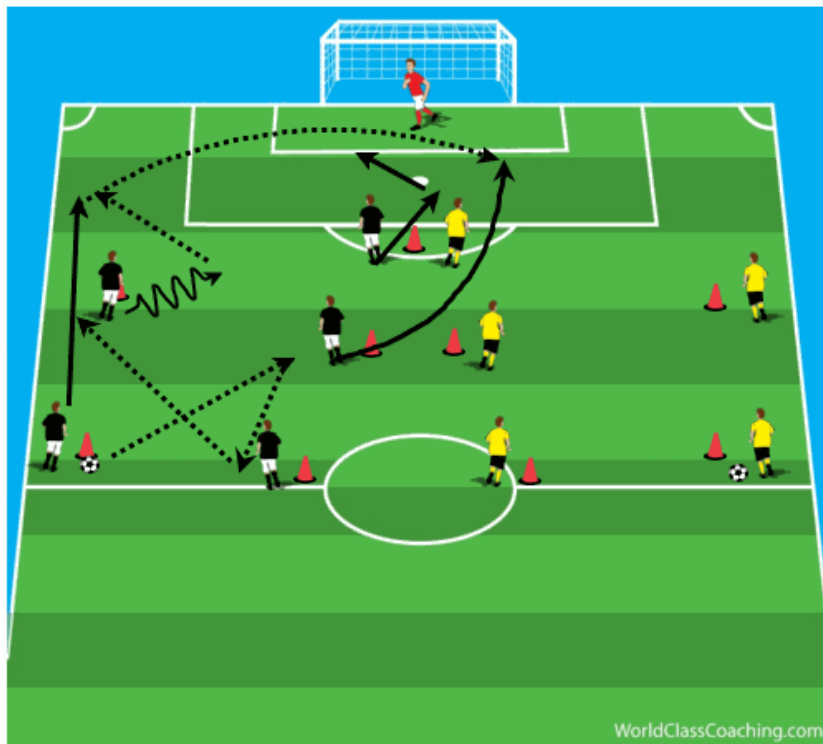
CM plays 1-2 with AM, and then passes wide to winger. As AM returns ball back to CM, he will make a diagonal run down the line for the winger to pass into his stride to make a cross to the striker. Winger will make a run inside to the edge of the box to offer a cutback to shoot. Striker makes the run away from goal then a quick dart across to the front post as the cross is made.

Coaching Points:

- Timing, speed and direction of the run to offer the 2nd pass is crucial, must arrive on time
- Weight of pass from winger to allow a cross on the run

Progressions/Variations:

- Add in central defenders
- Add in a pressing full back
- AM backheels back to the winger who crosses 1st time for the striker
- Fake pass and use the diagonal run as a decoy to cross



Five player movement involving the FB, CM, AM, WM and CF.

FB passes into AM who passes back to CM, AM makes way into the box. CM passes diagonally into the winger, who has the FB overlapping. Winger cuts inside then passes wide into the overlap to cross, to the AM and CF, both players in line with the posts.

Coaching Points:

- Weight of passes to allow 1 touch play
- Speed and timing over overlapping runs
- Timing and angle of the pass to the Full Back
- Angle, height and speed of the delivery – pick a player rather than ‘hit an area’

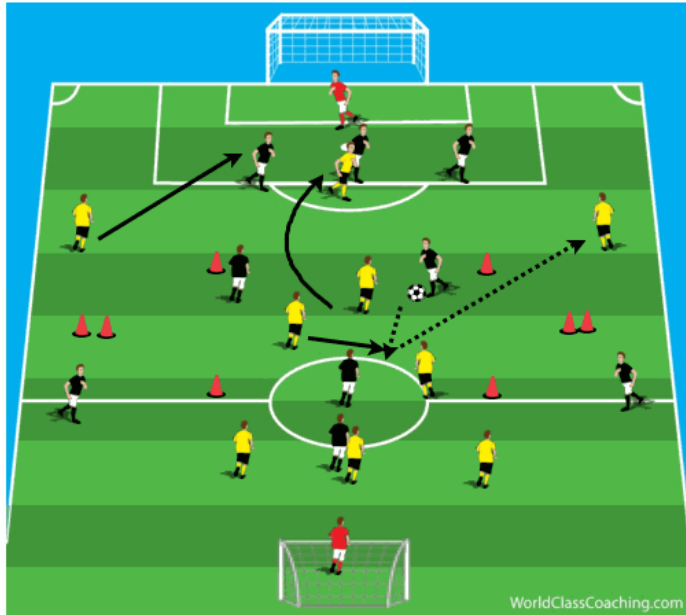
Progressions/Variations:

- Add in Full back to press the winger as he cuts inside
- Ask CM to join in at the edge of the box for a rebound
- Add in a defensive midfielder to track the run from the AM
- As winger cuts inside, pass back to CM who supports and passes wide to overlap, the winger will join in the attack inside the box

End of the session:

Finish with a match on a 40x pitch width field with a wingers zone – only the winger can enter the zone and has 2 touches to set and cross into the box – We want in a basic session for the winger to get as many repetitions of delivering a ball as possible. If the crosses are of a good standard allow a full back to press the ball inside the wide zone. He can block or stop the cross but not tackle.

Crossing and Finishing – Session 2 – Developing the outball in transition and building an attack



Make a large central square to play 3v3 or 4v4 inside. If the Black team makes 5 passes, they can switch play wide to the winger who has 3 touches to receive and deliver a cross. 2 of the players from the box can support and offer extra runners into the box. If the Yellows win possession, they pass wide in transition to counter attack. The winger has 3 touches to deliver the cross.

Coaching Points:

- The Yellows want to close off passing lanes and force mistakes to win possession
- The Black team should be looking to make the 4th pass into a player who can pass forward
- Quick support when passing wide. The far side winger, striker and 2 runners should be ready
- Pick a player out, don't just 'hit a danger area'
- Players should attack front post, centre and back post 5-8 yards and penalty spot

Progressions/Variations:

- Full back presses the winger who can dribble past and cross
- Winger can go past full back then continue into the box to make a cutback to late runner
- Ask a player to offer a 2v1 overload with an overlap or underlap – decoy or pass option?

Build an attack to pass wide or play wide in transition to counter attack



Blacks play 3-2-1 inside the centre of the field; Yellows play 2-2-1-1. If the attack makes 6 passes, they can switch play wide to look for runners and make a cross, but the opposition wingers will be chasing back to help defend. If a team makes an interception, they counter attack with a wide pass.

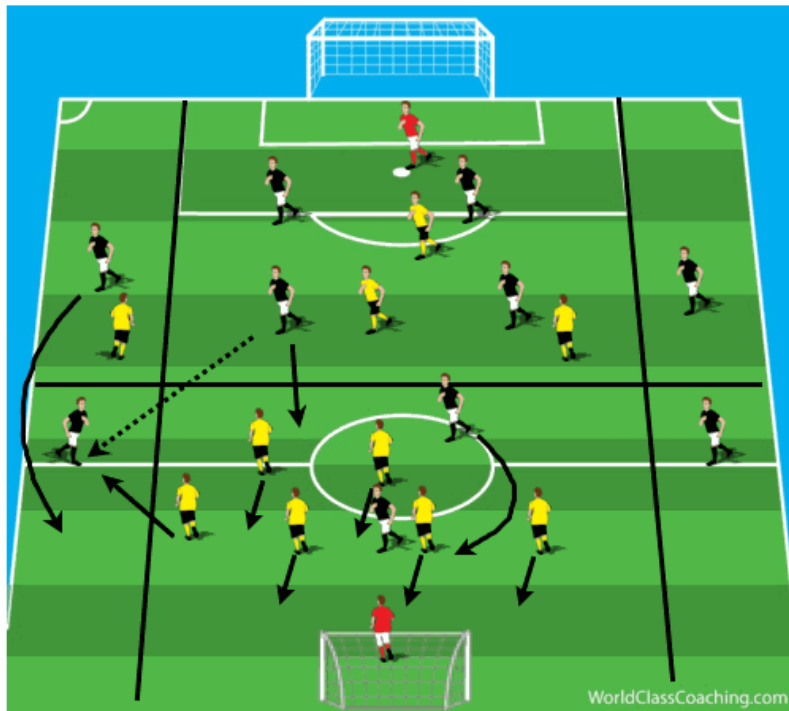
Coaching Points:

- Think ahead, where are the easy passes and where can you move to help keep possession?
- Can you make the 5th pass to a team mate under no pressure to allow them to make an easy pass wide to the winger?
- Can you think ahead of the game and see the pass wide, and make your supporting run into the box early?
- If the full back is out early, can you make an overlap for a 2v1 to cross?

Progressions/Variations:

- The defending team can all play narrow but will work harder to find an outball when they win possession
- Players can rotate positions but ensure there is someone wide enough to receive a pass wide and cross.

Grid Game – Positioning in transition when the ball is wide



Make an area 70 yards long and pitch width. Split into 4 full back zones and 2 central defending zones (for a 4-2 defensive shape v a 3-1 attacking shape).

As in the defending crosses session, the defence press the ball and drop off with an open body shape. When the pass is passed wide here, the defensive mentality will start.

Move into the correct zones to defend from, this will make the attack need to time runs into the right positions to receive the cross, or recover the rebound to shoot. It is very important for the 2 holding midfielders to cover the area between the posts on the edge of the box.

Above, the Black team attacks. The ball is passed wide, so that player or his CM team mate will support the attacking midfielder, striker and far side winger, to offer 4 crossing targets. The full back may offer an overlap. If the Black's lose possession, the Yellows should counter attack with a 4v4 (Back 3 and holding midfielder v 3 attacking midfielders and striker).

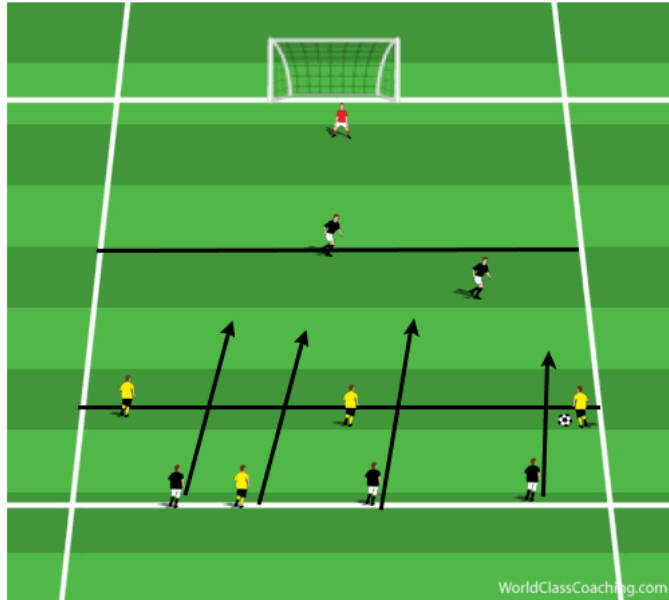
Coaching Points:

- When the ball is wide, make a 2v1 against the full back
- Quick support into the box
- Fill the dangerous positions – front post, back post, penalty spot and central 6 yards

Progressions/Variations:

- Players can rotate positions – left foot on right side for different crosses
- Cutback option to shoot from distance if defence win most crosses
- Look for 1-2s behind full back if the dribble is against a strong 1v1 tackler but slow runner

Developing Counter Attacks in a 4-2-3-1 – Encouraging speed, decision making and penetration



The counter attack starts with the wide attacker and the attack have a 3v2 initially. The attack start with the ball then once the 1st pass reaches the target; the 3 recovering defenders start running back, as does the attacking midfielder in support. The attack should play with speed, forward passes and penetrating runs and passes and try to score without any of the recovering midfielders getting behind the ball.

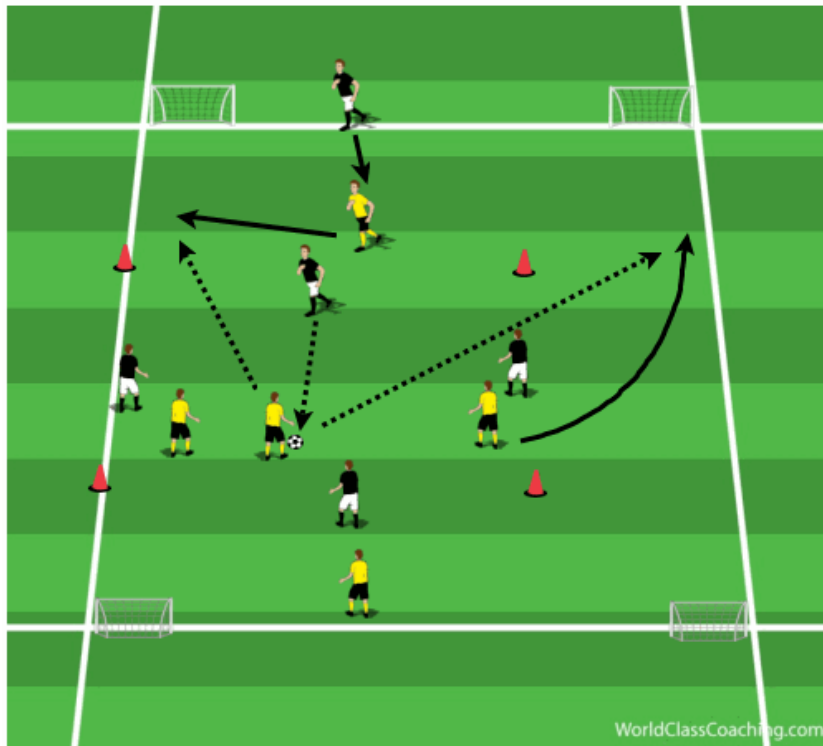
Coaching Points:

- Play with speed and pass into the stride of opponents
- Minimal touches on the ball to keep the pace of the attack high
- Try to find the player in space and eliminate a defender early

Progressions/Variations:

- Start with 2 wide players, a number 10 and a striker in a 3-1 formation against 3 defenders
- Give a time limit in which the attack must have taken a shot by
- The attack starts when a deep midfielder passes the ball 20 yards into the feet of one of the 3 attacking midfielders or the striker, past the line of recovering midfielders, then attack.
- Start off with a long clearance from a corner kick, with the 3-1 shape positioned so that when the striker receives near the halfway line, he has options in front and to the side, playing 4v4 at the back, with as many players as possible running back/forward to support.

Counter attacking in transition – win the ball to start a counter attack



Two teams play 3v3 possession inside a box, with a target player at the end of the box, 10 yards outside the box with the goals a further 20 yards away. If the team play 6 passes, they can pass into the striker and support. If the opposition win the ball, they launch a counter attack. Above, an interception is made and the attacker makes either a pass forward or a wide pass to score into one of the 2 small corner goals.

Coaching Points:

- Press and cover to get into position to win the ball
- Move early from the box to make supporting runs for the passer
- Look for 1-2s if the receiver has their back to goal

Progressions/Variations:

- The target man chases back to defend
- Play with an overload inside the box of 4v3 or 5v3, the 3 win the ball and counter attack into large goals, the 4 or 5 player team must make 6 passes before advancing from the box as a group
- Add in a back 2, 3 or 4 and have 1 player attack against them to provide a forward pass to lay-off to the runners from midfield on the counter attack
- Play with a 3-1 formation ahead of the box against a back 4. Inside the box is a 5v2, if the 2 win the ball, play into the 3-1 attack and attack. The 5 should keep possession inside the box.

Counter attacking in a match scenario – Counter Attacking from the defensive 3rd



Both teams play 4-2-3-1, with the Yellow team who are defending, have the central attacking midfielder inside the defensive 3rd helping out the 4-2 formation. When the Yellow team win possession, they should launch a counter attack into one of the wingers or the striker. The attacking midfielder will support, as will one of the central midfielders and one of the full backs.

Play 10 attacks and see how many counter attacks can enter the opposition half – 1 point, how many shots are taken - 1 point each and how many goals are scored – 3 points each (1 goal is 5 points for crossing half way, shooting and scoring), then change over. The attack should try to score and if they do, take off all of the points the counter attack team have scored, as concentration must be kept up.

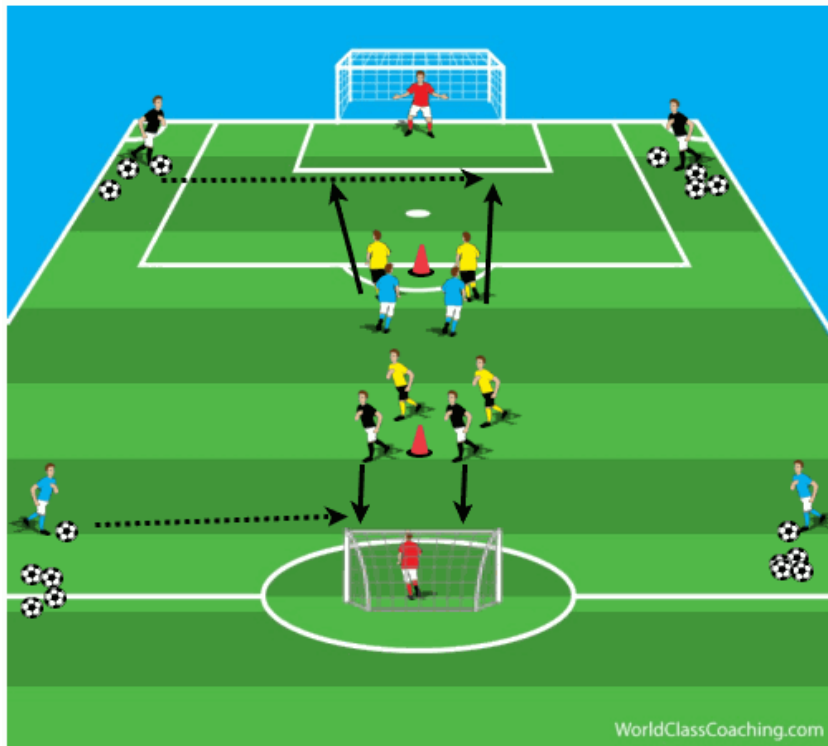
Coaching Points:

- The defence should work hard to block passing lanes, press wingers and stop the opposition from playing
- When possession is won, launch the attack forward quickly and support from deep
- Penetrate behind the defence into space quickly and take a minimum amount of touches
- Be unselfish inside the box, a pass to a team mate who has an easy chance to score is better than taking a shot from a difficult angle or position which could easily be saved or blocked

Progressions/Variations:

- Enforce a time limit of how long the counter attack can take before a shot must be taken
- Enforce a touch limit for the team on the break i.e. 8 touches from initial pass to scoring

Finishing – Session 1



Set up teams of 2 and have 2 feeders that start with the ball and drill in low crosses across the goal 8 yards out. Both attackers enter the box to the front and back posts as the winger lifts a hand up.

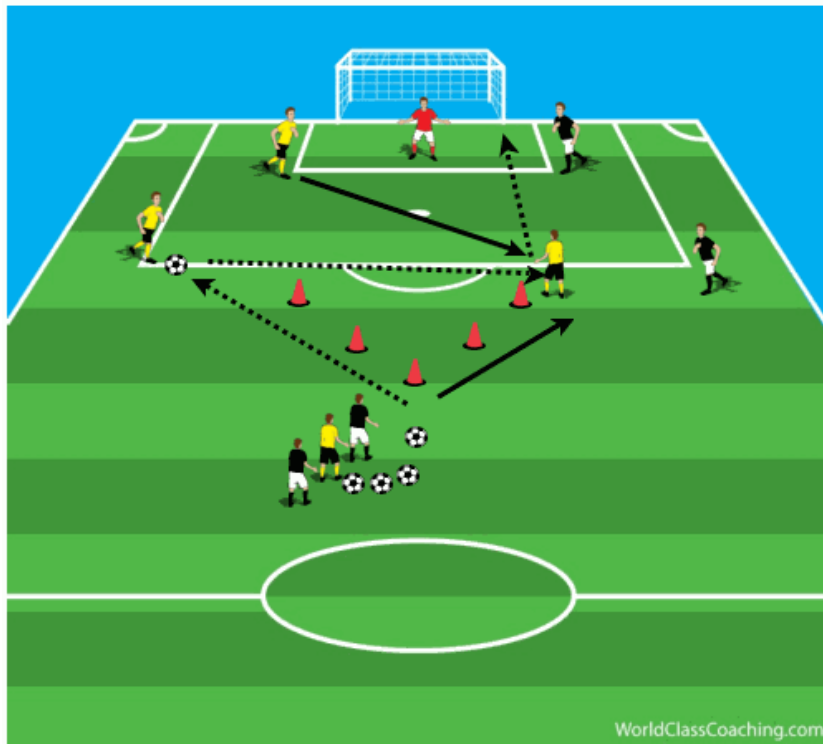
Coaching Points:

- Drill the ball across the box
- Communication, which player goes to the front or back posts?
- Body shape on the run to finish 1st time
- Use the power in the ball to redirect the pass into the box
- Knee over the ball to keep it low
- If the ball is shot from the front post, try and score into the front post
- If the ball is slightly behind, turn the hips away from goal and use a 'Ronaldinho Pass' finish

Progressions/Variations:

- Pass wide and attack the box
- Offer crosses to head or volley into the goal
- Drill the ball from the goal line and front post player dummies the ball for team mate
- Add in a defender who rushes out from the goal line to press, shooting from 12 yards.
- Make a competition between the teams, i.e. Yellow v Blue with Black passing
- Give teams x amount of attacks or a time limit between the 2 teams and take a score
- Use weak foot to score

Running at an angle to strike under pressure



Set up 2 groups, Yellows pass to Yellow, Black to Black. Pass the ball to out edge of the box and make a quick run to out other side of the triangle to receive the return pass and shoot. As the ball leaves the passers foot, the defender will sprint out and try and block the shot.

Switch positions, Defender, passer, shooter. If passer fakes and shoots, shooter becomes passer.

Coaching Points:

- Return the pass into team mates stride with some pace
- Set the body shape early on the run to decide which foot, surface and type of strike to use
- Accuracy over power
- Stay calm when the defender presses the ball – use them as a guide for where to shoot
- See the position of the Goalkeeper. If they are far enough from the line, try to chip them
- See how many different strikes players can use to find different ways of scoring a goal

Progressions/Variations:

- Ask the defender to press as the ball reaches the return passer
- The return passer can fake the pass, then turn and shoot – becomes the defender.
- Add in a 2nd pressing defender to rush out from the other side but on the goal line
- Require players to shoot with a specific technique and work on improving that technique, for example, chips, curling to near post or far post, near or far post driven, or a 'Thierry Henry' shot (opening up the foot and body late to curl into the far corner)
- Attacker can fake to shoot and dribble past the defender for a 1v1 against the goalkeeper

Finishing from distance under pressure



Pass to the corner of the box, where the attacker will take a touch and try to curl the ball into the far top corner. As the ball is passed, a defender will rush out and try to stop the shot.

Coaching Points:

- Open up the body
- Let the first touch on the back foot set the step to strike
- Use the defender as a guide
- Strike diagonally across the ball to add swerve and dip
- Aim for the far post and keep it on target

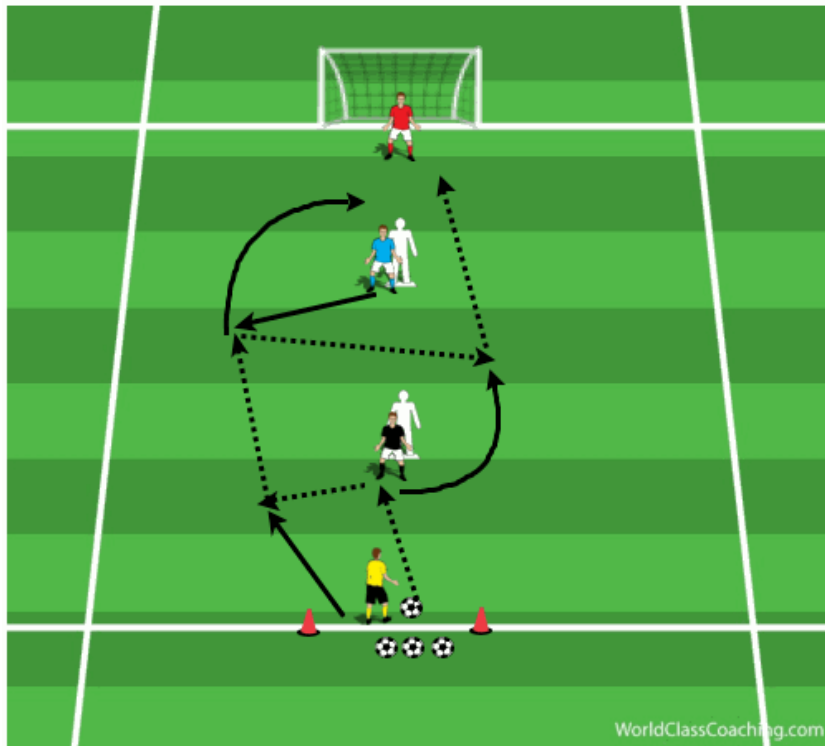
Progressions/Variations:

- When the defender presses, the shooter can fake and cut away from the defender to shoot
- Take a touch, fake, then play a pass to the 3rd player who shoots from inside the central cone
- 1st player overlaps and runs into the centre – the receiver can fake, dribble and cross
- Shooter receives, passes into the 3rd player who returns the ball to shoot 1st time from a newer and easier angle to score from – use different techniques to score with 1st time.

Finish the session with a match with goals 30 yards apart to encourage shooting from any position on the field, and developing the defensive mentality to stop shots to stop goals.

Give the players a challenge to score 3 each, with 3 different techniques – Placed shot, curled shot, drilled shot, chip, 1st time shot, header, volley or rounding the GK. See how many ways you can score, and from how many different positions.

Finishing – Session 2



Build up play and finishing from 15 yards

Yellow plays a 1-2 with Black who spins and asks for the pass from Blue who receives from Yellow, Black shoots. Rotate 1 position up, Yellow→Black→Blue.

Coaching Points:

- Passing angle to set up the next pass
- Let the ball run across the body before shooting
- Try different types of shots to score, driven, curled, placed, chipped

Progressions/Variations:

- Blue outside spins and cuts back from goal line for Black to shoot from different pass and angle
- Blue spins outside and chips for a volley or header
- Add in a defender who pressed as the final pass is played
- Make the distance longer or shorter
- Make a competition between 2 groups and see which team scores the most in x amount of time or the most from x amount of shots. Forfeit for GK keeping a clean sheet

3-1 v back 3 attacking scenario



The attack must find a way to open up a space to shoot from scoring range. Above, the winger receives and dribbles 1v1 and shoots or crosses to the far post for a back post tap in.

Players should look for as many different variations as possible to create space to score from.

Coaching Points:

- Be creative, if the goalkeeper is 10 yards from his line, chip him!
- If the ball is bouncing, try a volley, high or low
- Can you make an overlapping run to make a 2v1 and offer an outside pass then a cross or a finish?
- Players should try to dribble to make space to shoot or pass
- Use the defender as a guide, and if possible, as a block for the goalkeepers vision
- Fake a pass before a shot, this can delay the next movement and allow a space to score

Progressions/Variations

- Play against a back 4
- Play against a back 4 and defensive midfielder
- Have x amount of attacks and change roles, see which team gets most shots on target
- Add a goal on half way line, if the defence win possession, they find the target man and score, either direct from the target man who turns and shoots, or from a lay-off and shot

4 Goal Game – Corner to Corner



Make a field 30 yards squared, and make a box 20 yards squared inside it, placing 1 large goal (or 7 a side goal) in each side line.

Teams play 3v3 inside the box, with 2 goals to score into, and 2 goals to protect. If you can't shoot in one goal, try the other. Keep the ball moving and try to find ways to create space and score.

Coaching Points:

- Try to create space for yourself to shoot
- Use the defenders as a shield to block the goalkeepers view
- Play combinations with team mates to find a shooting position
- Be creative! Use a variety of shooting techniques for different scenario's

Progressions/Variations:

- Allow through balls, with the perimeter of the central box being the offside line
- Play 4v4 to make the game tighter and more difficult to find time and space to shoot
- Allow dribbles outside the perimeter line to play 1v1 with the goalkeeper
- Add a target man beside each goal for a 1-2 shot then change roles
- Add a winger for each team who can receive and cross for the runner who passed the ball
- Play a 5 minute match and see who scores the most often, and most variety of strikes, curled, placed, driven, chipped, 1st time, rounded the goalkeeper, toe poked, outside of the foot

End the session with a small field match (maybe 30-40 yards long by 40 yards wide for 7v7) and encourage shooting from all angles and distances.

4-2-3-1 – An attacking Analysis

Spain v Italy, Euro 2012 Final

An analysis of some of Spain's attacking play using the 4-2-3-1 in the European Championship Final, which Spain won 4-0, playing against Italy's diamond 4-1-2-1-2 formation.

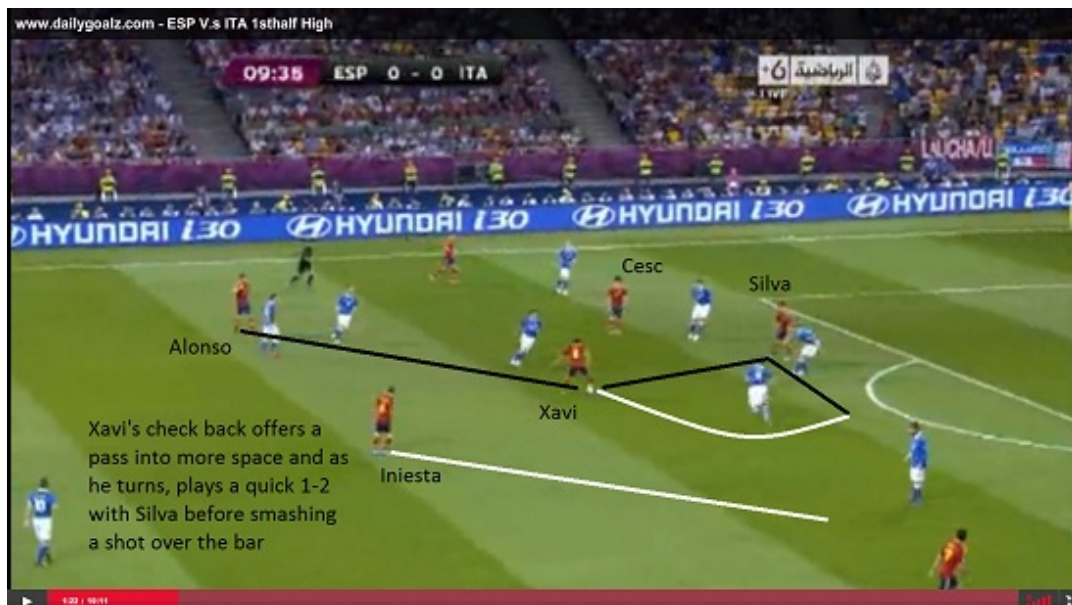
4-2-3-1 in Attack – Spain v Italy, European Championship Final

In the final of Euro 2012, Spain played with a 4-2-3-1, with the full backs playing high, midfield playing narrow and offering 1-2s and penetration as often as possible. Xavi was the number 10 playing behind Cesc, but with Silva regularly making diagonal runs into Cesc's space, like in the diagram on Vicente Del Bosque's 4-2-3-1.

Spain opens up Italy with Xavi in the number 10 position



Xavi switches play and moves forward, behind the Italian midfield line, between two opponents. Alba receives and as this happens, Cesc drops off and Silva takes up his position as the 'false 9'. Iniesta starts dropping deep to offer a pass across midfield as an alternative to Xavi in the space between the lines.

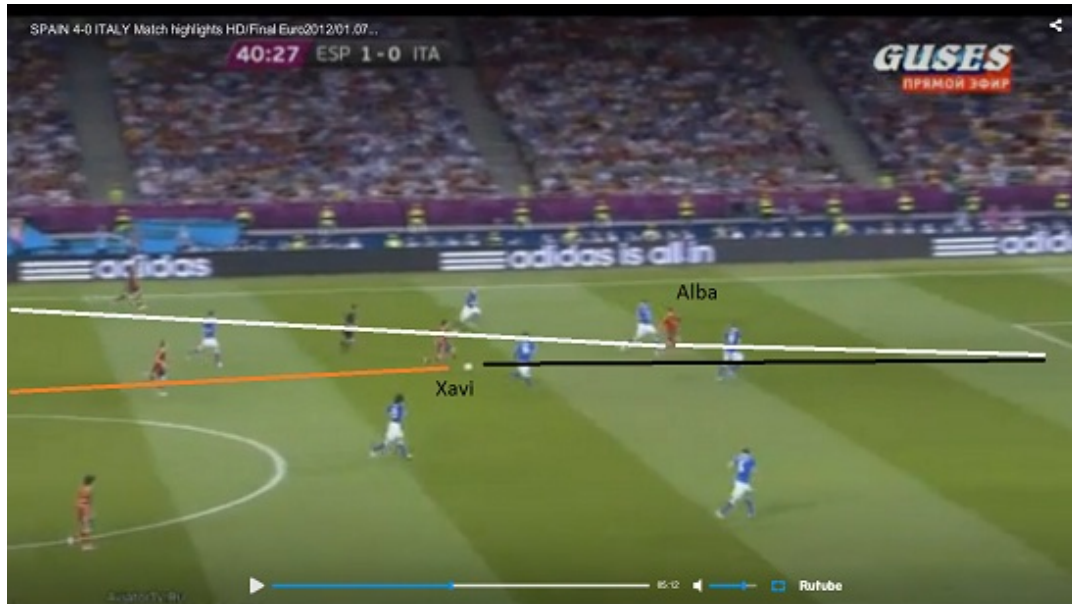


Xavi receives and turns in the space between the lines, with Pirlo pressuring. Silva drops off to offer a 1-2 and Xavi passes right and runs left into the space. He receives the return pass on the edge of the box and smashes a shot just over the bar.

Spain score from the 4-2-3-1 shape – Alba runs ahead of Cesc to become the centre forward



Cesc receives the long pass from Casillas, and then heads it down to Alba. Alba has Iniesta and Xavi as central passing options, with Silva on the far side.

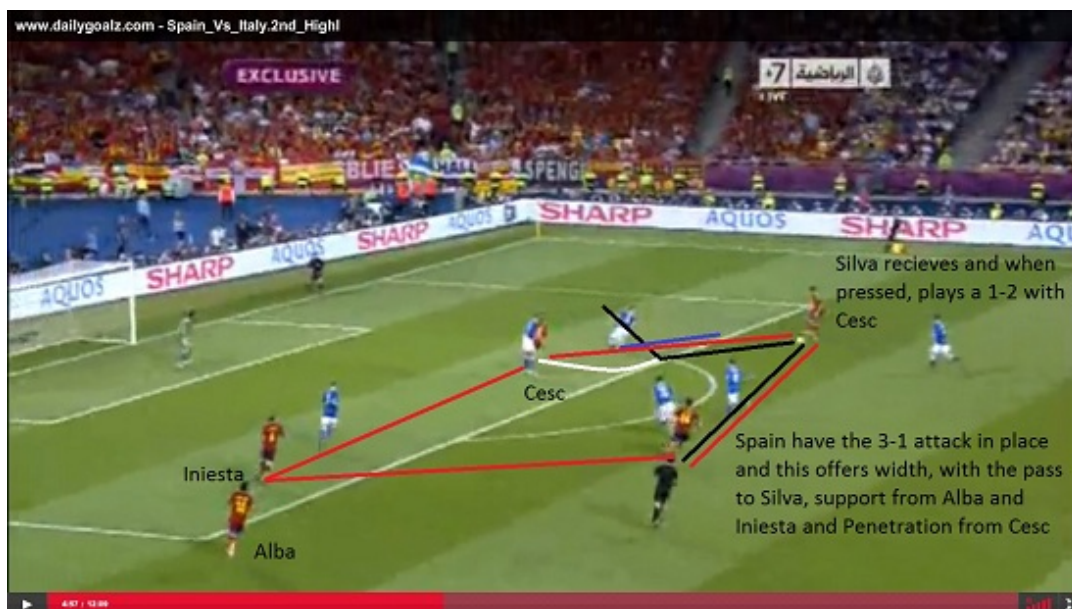


Alba passes infield to Iniesta then Xavi, who breaks ahead of the defence into the hole, with Alba running ahead in support. Xavi wants to penetrate the defence with the final pass, and Alba's speed allows this. Alba receives then with his 2nd touch on the run, passes the ball away from Buffon on the goal, 2-0.

Alonso and Xavi change positions to become the number 10



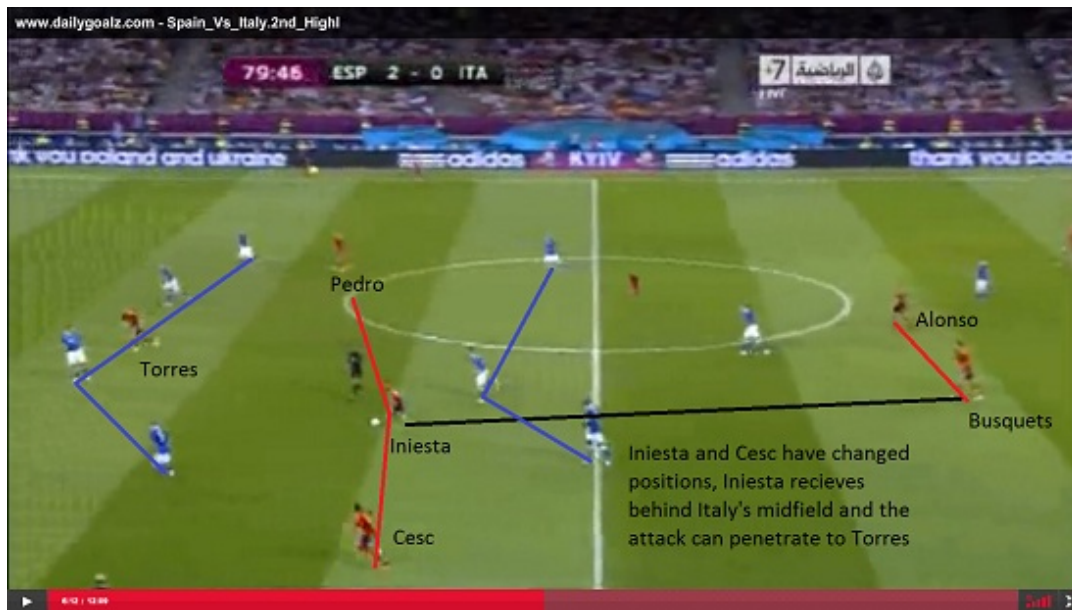
Xavi passes sideways to Alonso who drives into the space with the ball, he has Cesc making a diagonal run across the defence and Silva wide, both on his right, Iniesta looking for a pass to feet outside of the defence with Alba offering an overlap to the left. Alonso uses the pass to Silva on the right.



Silva receives the ball and Cesc quickly checks back to offer a 1-2, which Silva expects from Cesc. The midfield and attacking shape is formed perfectly here as a diamond – Alonso is giving depth to the attack incase play needs recycled.

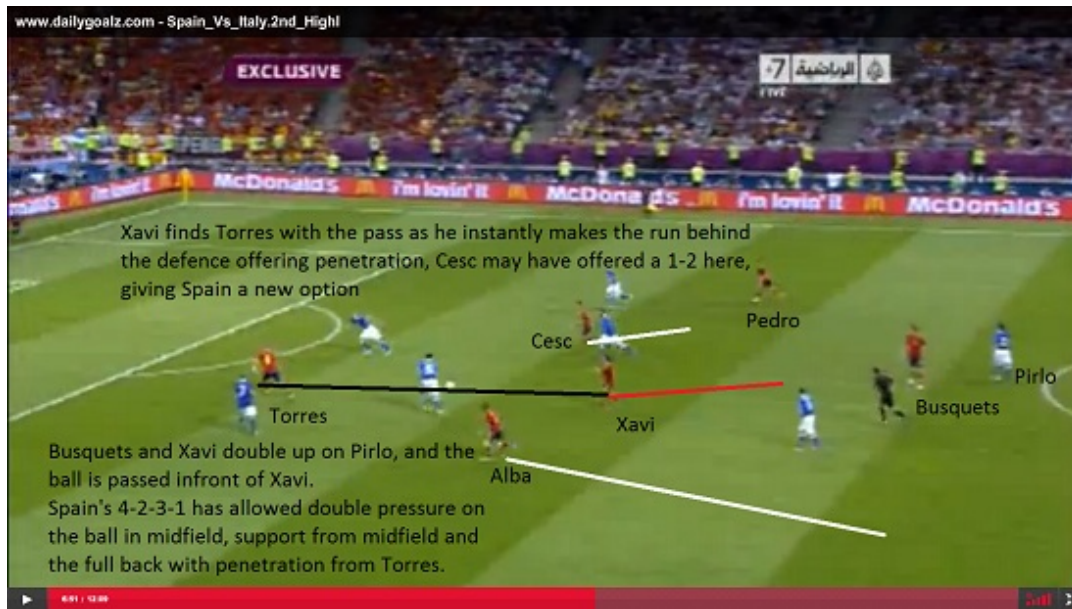
Silva and Cesc play the 1-2 and Silva is able to cross to the back post, but the ball is headed away and the chance is lost, although it was a well organised attack with everything good in a 4-2-3-1 – width, penetration, support, positional rotation, triangulation and a crossing opportunity.

Iniesta receives in the number 10 position to almost give Torres a 1v1



Alonso finds Busquets in midfield who passes a ball 1st time into Iniesta, with he and Cesc having changed positions now Torres is on as the penetrative number 9 (as opposed to Cesc's 'false 9'). Iniesta turns and has Pedro and Cesc as support on the sides, but Torres' diagonal run offers a chance to penetrate the defensive line and give him a 1v1 against Buffon. The pass is cut out but again 2 players in front and 3 players between the lines cause's problems for Italy.

Torres' goal for 3-0 – the 2-3 midfield press the ball well and Torres scores from a quick transition attack



Busquets and Xavi double up on Pirlo, and win possession, the ball breaks loose ahead of Xavi and instantly, Torres looks for the pass behind the defence offering penetration. Cesc and Pedro are supporting on the right with Alba left, but Torres as the lone striker with space to pass into him is the best decision for Xavi. Torres receives and with his 2nd touch, scores.

In attack, Spain's 4-2-3-1, although the most complex attacking 4-2-3-1, is also the one we should look to coach, because it is game intelligence and technique based, which in the long term development phase, is something we should look to achieve.

Obviously, this is a special generation of Spanish players, and although this team were missing Carlos Puyol and David Villa, they look like a team who can continue in this vein for years to come, especially with Iker Muniain, Sergi Roberto, Thiago Alcantara, Ander Herrera, Javi Martinez, Isco and many other young players emerging who all know how to play between the lines, look for 1-2s and make 3rd man runs to receive the 3rd pass.

I hope that the training excersizes and diagrams can help you to coach your players to build up and improve certain aspects of play needed to effectively play a fluid 4-2-3-1, and the defensive sessions and diagrams which can help players know where to be, and why when they are out of possession as individuals and in small groups.

Coaching the 4-2-3-1 Videos



If you've been looking for a way to coach your team how to play the 4-2-3-1, you've just found it. Coaching the 4-2-3-1 is a special 12-part video series which provides a comprehensive tactical and training guide to this exciting formation. Utilized by Real Madrid, Chelsea and the most successful sides in the Euro 2012 tournament, the 4-2-3-1's flexibility and attacking power is fast becoming the formation of choice for leading coaches all over the world.

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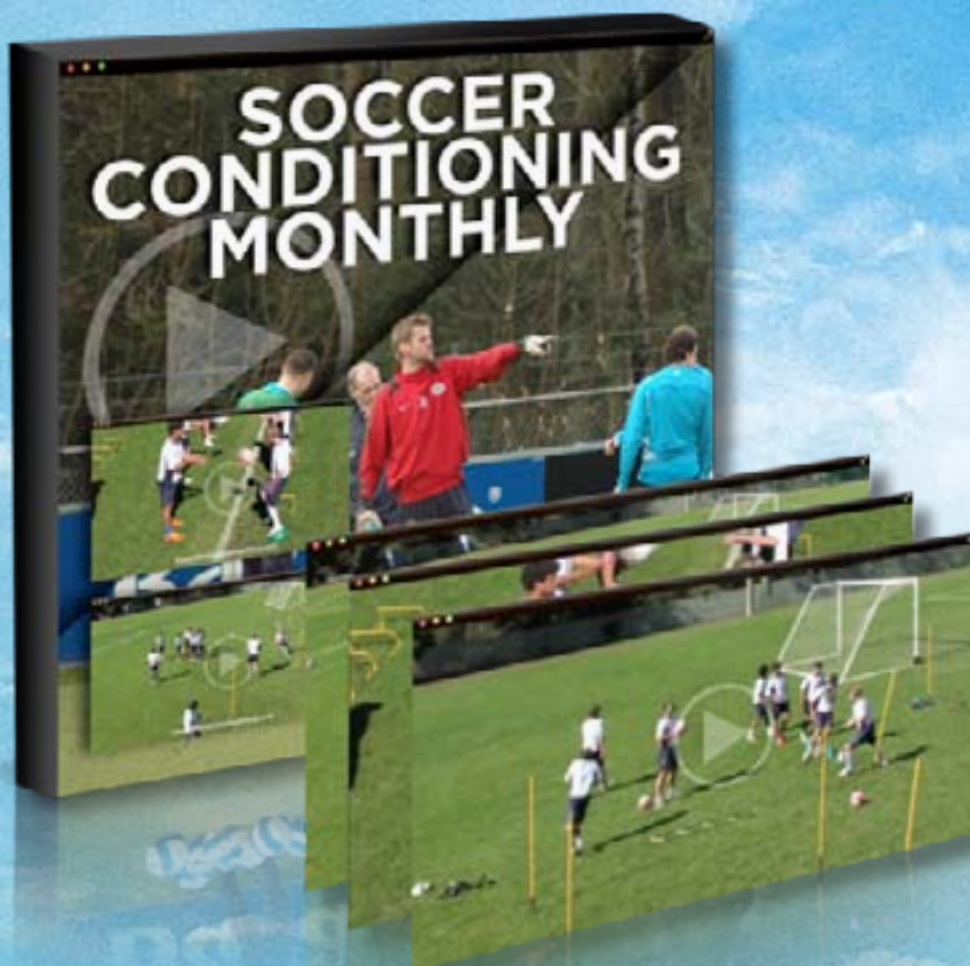
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