

# Italy U15 National Team

Contributed by long-time subscriber, Dave Brown. This practice was observed during a Coaches Familiarization Tour to Italy with GoPlay Sports Tours. Dave Brown holds a USSF "B" License and is currently the coaching and program director of the Cascade Avalanche and Shooting Stars Soccer Clubs located in Snohomish County, north of Seattle. For further information contact James Mathews at 1-800-888-ACIS or by email at [james\\_matthews@acis.com](mailto:james_matthews@acis.com).

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Antonio Rocco (Head Coach, Italian Boys U15 National Team) forms part of the team of national youth coaches that come under the jurisdiction of the director of all the youth national teams, Ottaviano Bianchi. Bianchi is the famous former manager of Napoli during the Maradona era. This session focuses on the positioning and roles of defenders in a "Flat Back Four". The sessions were held at a small training field attached to the headquarters of the Italian National Coaches Association. The squad of 19 field players were split into two groups (the three goalkeepers trained separately). The session was first done with a group of 10 players and then repeated with the remaining nine. The two-hour session had four separate parts.

- **Warm-Up:** The focus is on general positional sense and roles, with an emphasis on responding to two specific situations (defense challenged by an attacker in a wide position and defense challenged by an attacker in a central position).
- **Shadow Play:** The focus is on a defensive player's response to being challenged by a ball carrier and the supporting position when the nearest teammate is being challenged by an attacker.
- **Build up from 4 v 1 to 4 v 4:** Emphasis on positioning

and roles assumed at a high tempo.

- **Modified Scrimmage:** Emphasizing the main points from the training session.

## General Points of Interest

Sixteen of the 19 boys were six feet tall. The remaining three were around 5'9" and all were of a powerful build. All of the players were very quiet and deferential to the coach. The atmosphere was of relaxed, but serious work.

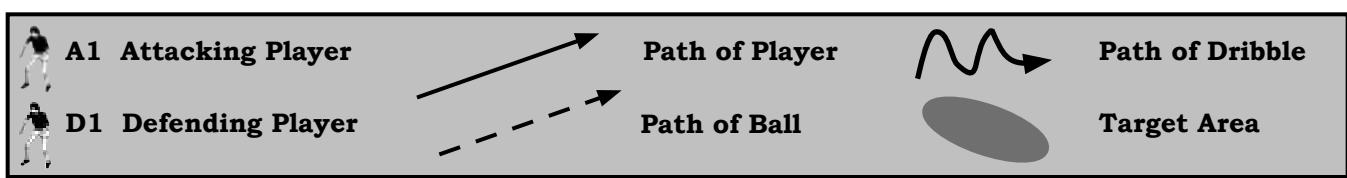
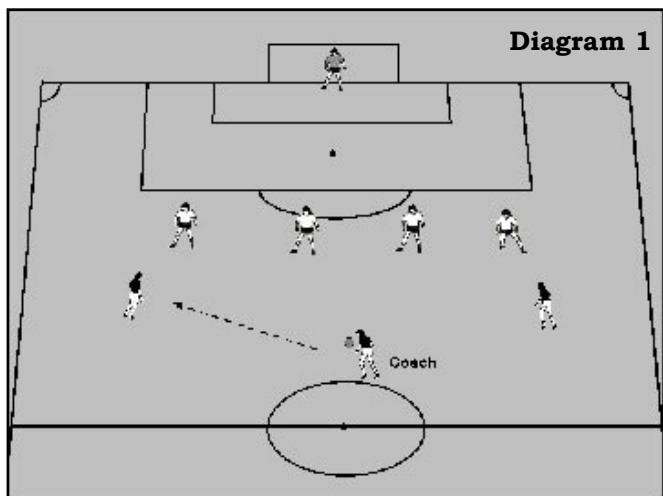
## Warm Up

Following an "agility" warm-up (quick footwork through small cones) and a stretch, the players took the field in the formation shown in diagram 1. The goalkeeper for this session was a rotating field player, but the session could use a 'real' goalkeeper and goals as shown.

## Organization

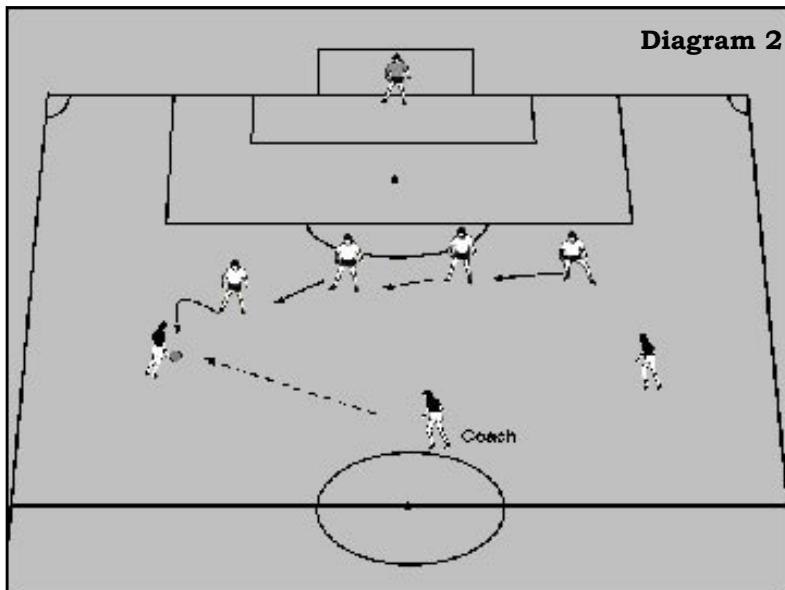
Play 3 v 4 plus a goalkeeper for the defending team. The coach acts as the middle player of the attacking triangle whose role is to circulate the ball from wide to middle to wide again. During this time the back four players adjust positions to counter the threat from a wide player or one from the coach in a central position.

Tackling was not a feature of this exercise, only "closing down".



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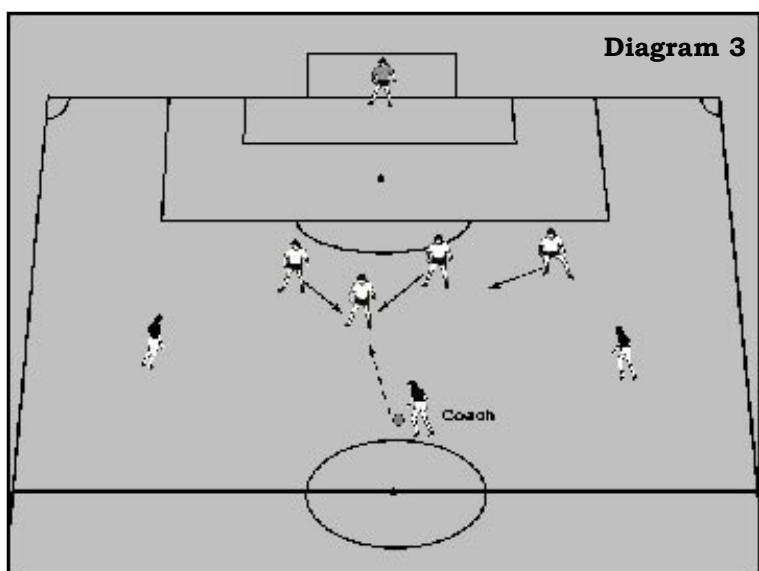
Diagram 2



## Playing The Ball Wide

When the ball was played into a wide position, the nearest outside defender would challenge the player by closing him down quickly and forcing him infield into the covering defender (center back/stopper) who takes a very close supporting position. The other center back slides over to cover him, as does the opposite outside defender.

Diagram 3



## Pressure From The Center

When the attacking challenge came from a central player, one of the center backs stepped up to challenge with the other center back and the closest outside defender forming a "positive triangle". The other player was instructed to hold in a line with the last center back and not to drop off deeper. As the defense was challenging near the edge of the penalty area, it was the goalkeeper's duty to intercept any through balls. (The defensive line was formed and held about two yards in front of the penalty area).

## Coaching Points

- The quickness of the center backs to come and challenge an attack from the middle
- The communication by that center back with the other center back as to who would step up and who would drop off

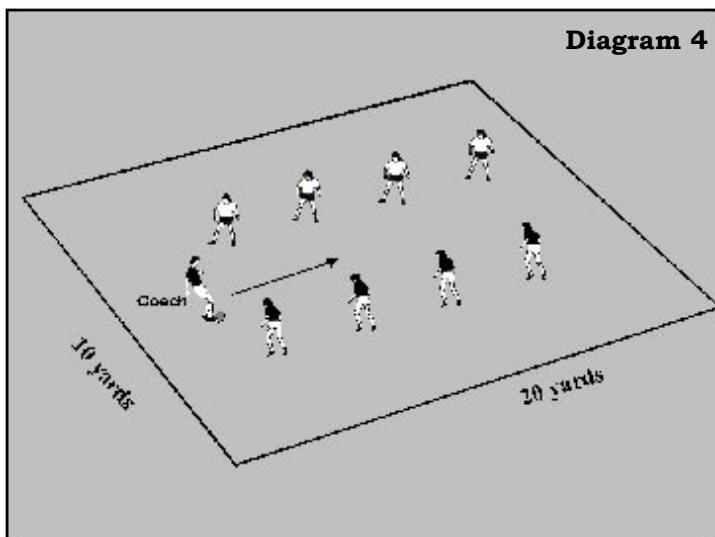
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Diagram 4



## Shadow Play

This was a simple drill with players in mostly static positions as shown in diagram 4. The coach was very particular and demanding that they get relative body positioning exactly the way he wanted it. The players simply lined up in the positions of two opposing “back fours” and the coach jogged with a ball through the middle.

Diagram 5

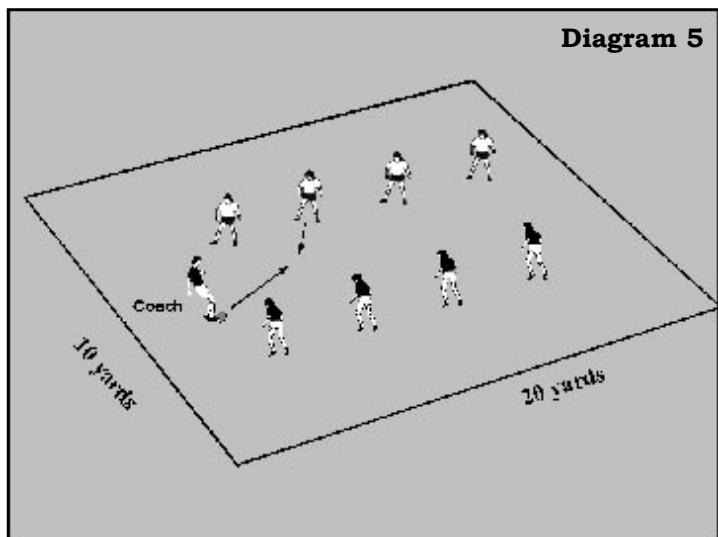
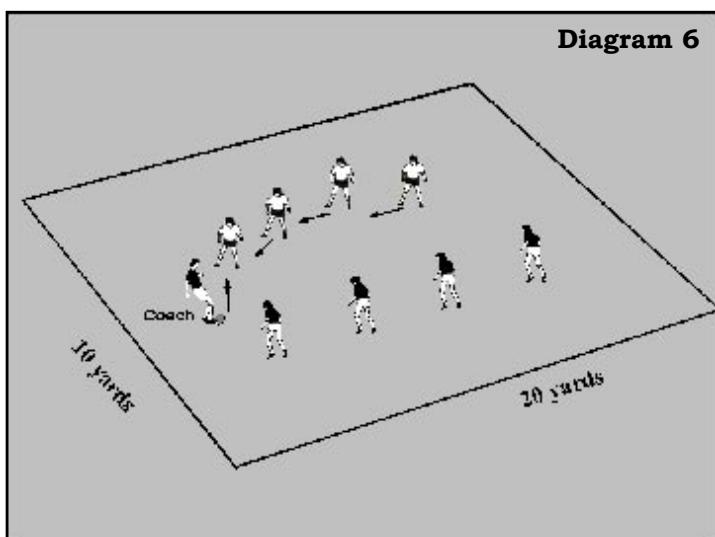


Diagram 6



## Progression

The exercise in diagram 5 was advanced to emphasizing the role of the supporting player, then the two nearest supporting players and finally with all four players responding to the position of the player with the ball and his own teammates.

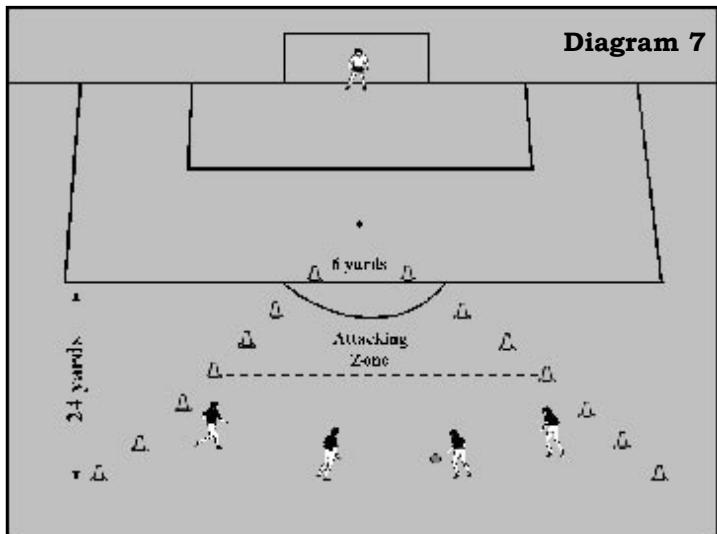
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## Build-Up from 4 v 1 to 4 v 4

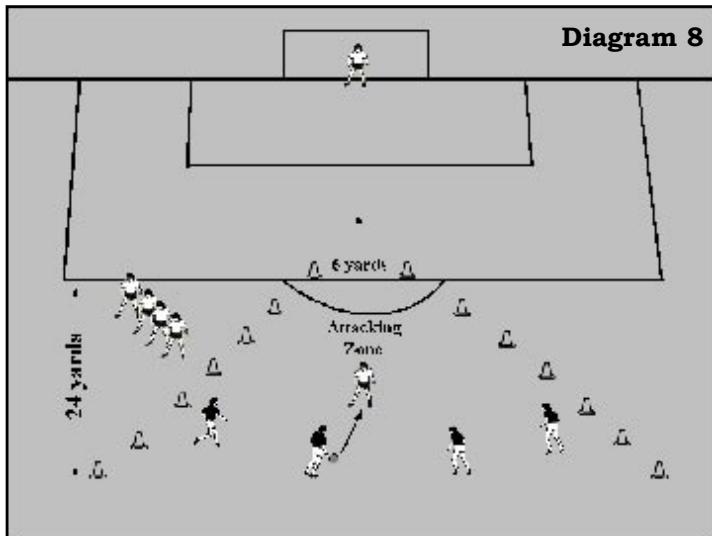
Emphasis again was placed on defensive player positioning and the roles within the flat back four. The focus was on good body positioning and quick feet.

## Set Up

The area used for this drill was a modified triangle funneling towards the goal as shown in diagram 7. The attacking team was set in a “crescent” formation of two wide players and two central players.



**Diagram 8**



## 4 v 1

Four attacking players circulated the ball among themselves without interchanging positions. When an opening was created, they attacked the goal and went 1 v 1 against the defender. The attacking players were not allowed to circulate the ball more than one or two positions at a time and the ball was played on the ground.

*Note: Only one attacking player was allowed in the attacking zone at one time.*

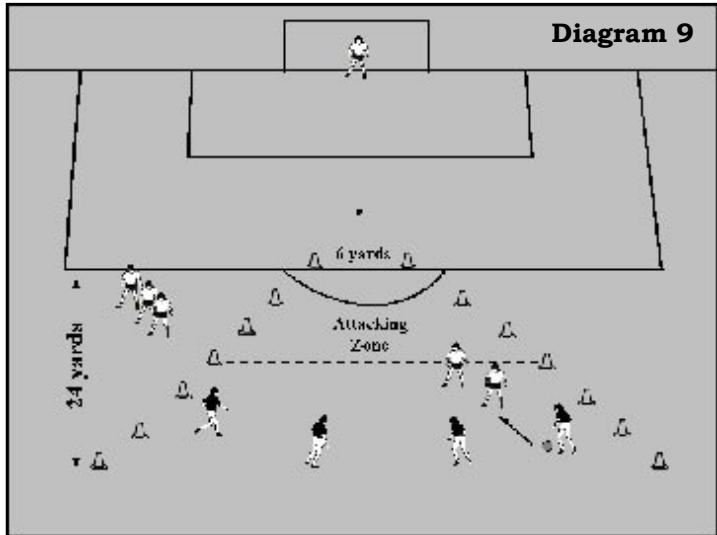
## 4 v 2

Again, only one attacker could drive into the attacking zone with the emphasis still on defensive support play. The wide attacking player was always shown inside, now into a covering player as shown in diagram 9. The attacking players advancing from a central position were pushed into other defenders as well.

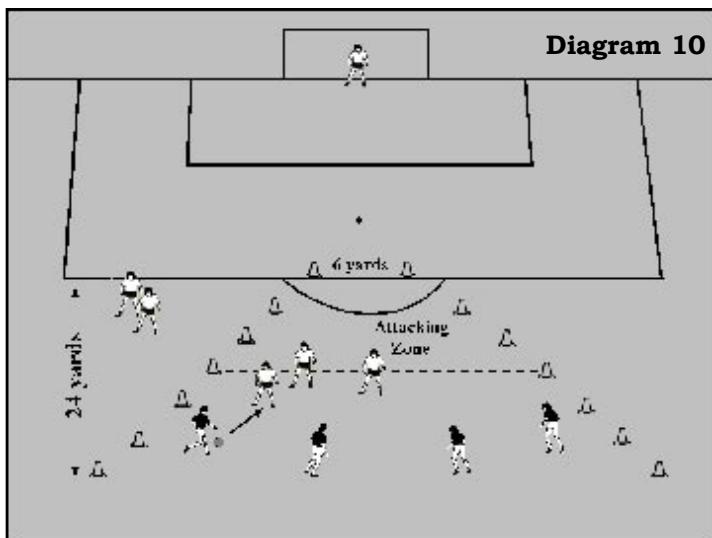
## Points

As the defending team knows that the attacking team can only advance one player at a time, the covering defender is close enough in support to be nearly double teaming the other player. Each player got into position immediately and worked very hard to adjust their position as the ball was circulated among the attacking players.

**Diagram 9**



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## 4 v 3

Same organization with the emphasis now on the defensive positioning of the third or “balancing” defender.

## Point

This was the first area of real emphasis by the coach and where he took time to correct almost every player as their first tendency was to be both farther and deeper than he wanted them to be.

## 4 v 4

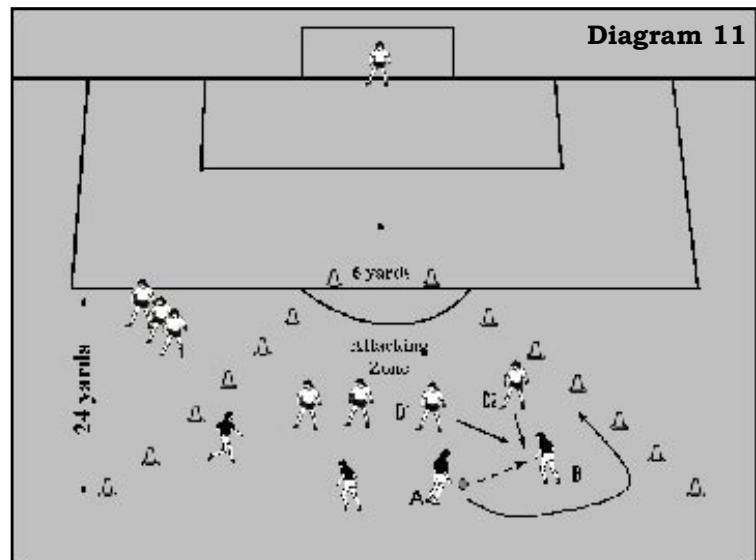
For the first time, the attackers were allowed to interchange positions in one prescribed way - by an overlap. (One of the central attacking players played the ball to the wide player closest to him and then overlapped behind him.) Still, only one player was allowed into the attacking zone at a time.

Attacker A has the ball and passes to attacker B and starts his overlapping run. Defender D1 responds by double teaming attacker B. On completion of the overlap, defender D2 now releases his original player (B) to defender D1 and is free to track attacker A as he makes his overlapping run.

## Coaching Points

The back four players were coached to handle the situation as follows:

- Nearest center back double teams
- The wide defender “passes on” or “releases” the original player and tracks the overlapping attacker. This way the back four never loses its shape.



## Points

The portion of the session which the players found most difficult was when players were allowed to move from their set positions (i.e. overlaps) and this is where the coach was most explicit in his direction.

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## Small-Sided Game

To end the session, the coach joined in to play 5 v 5 in a 20 x 20-yard area. The game was played for 10 minutes. Goals were scored by dribbling across the opponent's end-lines. The play was extremely quick and the tackling highly competitive.

