



REBECCA SAWIUK

Patterns

ANDRÉ THOMAS

Positive approach
to defending

OMAR ADLANI

Building identity, culture,
and high standards

MATT ROSS

Tech savvy

JOHN ALLPRESS

Great expectations

**MANCHESTER
UNITED**

**MICHAEL
CARRICK**

TURNING DEFENCE
INTO A FAST ATTACK



FROM THE CHAIR

ISSUE 188 MARCH 2026

Hello and welcome to March 2026's issue of *Elite Soccer*.

Our cover star this month is Manchester United manager Michael Carrick, who shares a session on turning defence into a fast attack.

Wrexham Women's assistant coach Rebecca Sawiuk explores the patterns that brought her such great success at Burnley.

West Ham United under-15s assistant coach André Thomas looks at a positive approach to defending.

In an exclusive feature, Omar Adlani takes us inside his first months at FC Basel Women.

Chinese Taipei national team manager Matt Ross talks about the innovative ways in which he uses technology to support his coaching.

And John Allpress - former assistant head of academy



player and coach development at Tottenham Hotspur – explores how coaches' expectations can impact on the way their players perform.

Enjoy the edition.

Martin O'Neill

Martin O'Neill, LMA Chair

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FROM THE TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

What Michael Carrick has done at Manchester United is find a way to win.

Having previously been assistant manager and caretaker manager at the club where he spent the bulk of his decorated playing career, Carrick returned to Old Trafford at the start of this year.

Given the head coach role until the end of the 2025-26 season, Carrick has been tasked with stabilising a Manchester United team that many feel have been under-performing for a number of years.

In Carrick's case, 'winning' has predominantly, and most importantly, been getting three points on a Saturday. But it's also been revitalising a group of players, bringing in and aligning a new group staff, and engendering a spirit and a style that gives fans something to get behind.

Carrick's immediate success on his return to Manchester United is the result of many factors, not least him understanding the environment, the expectations and pressures that come with being one of England's most successful clubs, and, therefore, the task at hand. It's no easy feat, and the speed with which he's achieved success is impressive.

Of course, a string of initial positive results is very much just the beginning, but achieving them is another win within itself – earning trust and belief from players, club and fans alike, that gives him the foundations from which to achieve more wins.

Carrick's session in this issue is focused on transitioning from defence into attack and offers an insight not only into some of his principles and tactics, but also the spirit and approach which we've come to see from Manchester United in recent weeks.

Identifying what winning is, and finding ways to do it, is a theme which runs through this issue.

Omar Adlani is another coach that has recently taken on a new role, appointed head coach of FC Basel Women in October last year. In his article, Adlani reflects on coming into the club mid-season.

Not dissimilar to Carrick, Adlani was given the reins



Michael Carrick



Omar Adlani

of a club with a rich history, a passionate fan base, and high expectations. Basel is the biggest club in Switzerland, and Adlani's tasks are to create a strong identity, establish a clear way of playing, compete every week, and win silverware. This is how the club wants him to win.

How he's going about doing it is detailed in the article, which explains his approach to aligning the club, the staff structure, and initial work done with the players.

Matt Ross is currently head coach of the Chinese Taipei national team. He's no stranger to international environments, having previously managed China u15 women and Nepal men and been assistant manager for South Korea Women.

In our interview with Ross, he explains how he's gone about approaching these challenges – understanding the environment, the constraints he's working within, what success looks like, and how to set about achieving it.

A lot of Matt's work has been, as he describes it, bringing elite players into amateur environments, yet trying to give them the best experience possible – one that offers them, and the team, the best chance of winning when they're up against teams and nations equipped with far superior resources.

His approach, both from a conceptual and technological perspective, is detailed in the interview. In many ways it's simple, but extremely effective. It's a case of fitting what works to the situation.

In her 'Patterns' session, provided from her time in charge of Burnley Women, Rebecca Sawiuk reflects on winning: 'Sometimes under the most intense pressure when you sit in the hotseat, winning brings relief rather than joy, and so, for me, in my footballing environments, having fun, highlighting achievement and of course, scoring goals, are the best source of joy.'

It's an interesting take on the concept of 'winning' and an example of how Sawiuk has gone about translating her core values of 'integrity, trust and belonging' into tangible outputs both on and off the pitch. Doing this means that winning is both about the team getting three points on gameday and the club maintaining a certain level and status, but also about the smaller wins within the bigger wins. It means that winning, for Sawiuk, marries what her role asks of her and what she, herself, values.

All of these pieces are from coaches at first-team level, meaning that they represent a reality in which winning matches is, ultimately, the bottom line. The way in which these coaches have sought to deepen and enrich the meaning of what winning is, and how it's done, beyond the success of the numbers, is impressive.

At a youth development level, arguments around 'winning' are long-standing, usually wrapped up in questions like: Does winning at youth level matter? Do players need to learn how to win? Can winning and development stand alongside each other? Our broad answer to each of those questions would be yes.

The session on a positive approach to defending, provided by West Ham United under-15s assistant



Matt Ross

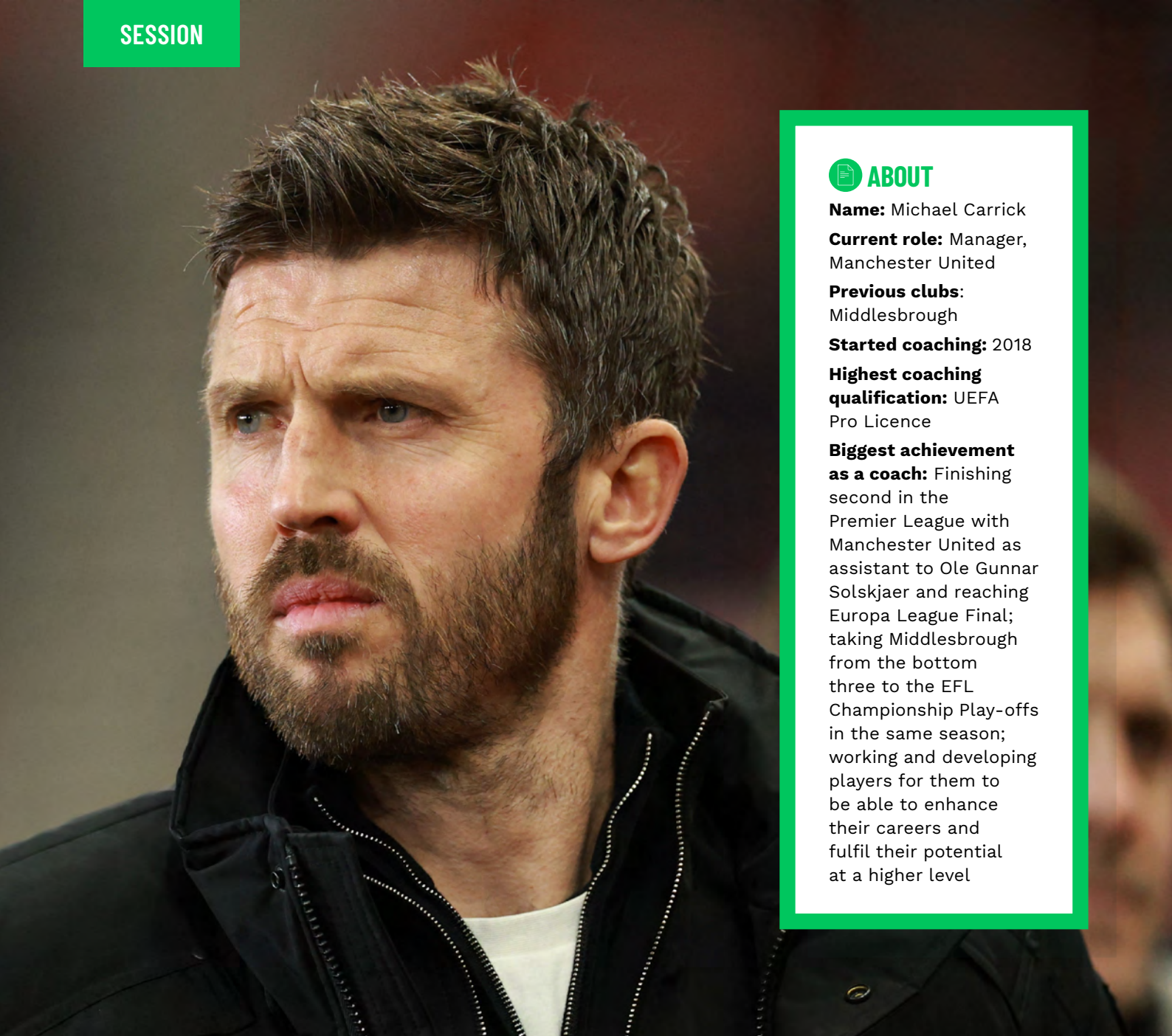


Rebecca Sawiuk

coach André Thomas, is an example of how winning may present itself for him and his team. At the level he's working at, it's about preparing players for the future by ensuring they understand the principles of the game, and have clarity about what these mean specifically at West Ham. These principles, if employed effectively, should also give the team a chance of winning in 'get three points on matchday' meaning too.

Our more considered answer to each of the questions posed above would be the same in a youth context as they are in a first-team context. We'd encourage you to reflect on your environment. More specifically: What does winning look like in your environment? What are the ways you have been tasked with winning? What does winning mean for you and your players? What are the wins within the wins? And, finally, once you've landed on all of that: how do you find ways of winning?

Ben Bartlett, *Elite Soccer* Technical director



ABOUT

Name: Michael Carrick

Current role: Manager, Manchester United

Previous clubs: Middlesbrough

Started coaching: 2018

Highest coaching qualification: UEFA Pro Licence

Biggest achievement as a coach: Finishing second in the Premier League with Manchester United as assistant to Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and reaching Europa League Final; taking Middlesbrough from the bottom three to the EFL Championship Play-offs in the same season; working and developing players for them to be able to enhance their careers and fulfil their potential at a higher level

MICHAEL CARRICK MANCHESTER UNITED

SESSION

TURNING DEFENCE INTO A FAST ATTACK

This session is all about turning defending into a fast attack. We do this by working together as a unit, staying connected, and blocking or screening passes. Players need to know what's behind them in order to know what and where they need to block off. We are looking to press, regain and then breaking to score, by

looking for a trigger to jump and apply pressure while blocking passing lines and cutting off angles.

Players enjoy the balance of free play with a structure to enable game-related situations that are very realistic, the combination of fast, loose attacks on transition to controlled second phase which gives a lot of variety to both attacking and defensive actions or habits, and the fact that the session has something for everyone to take valuable learnings from, which keeps everyone fully engaged.

Once the players understand the structure, routine and flow of the session then it's the decision-making which is the main challenge, changing or flipping from fast and direct to slower more controlled. Different speeds and situations with different numbers of players requires concentration and understanding; it's not repeating the same action over and over again, but certainly has continuity in the practice to enhance learning.

We would run this session regularly depending on fixtures, possibly every two or three weeks.

MICHAEL CARRICK: HEAD COACH, MANCHESTER UNITED

BORN: 1981, WALLSEND, UK

MANAGERIAL CAREER

Manchester United (caretaker)

Nov 2021–Dec 2021
Played: 3 W: 2 D: 1
L: 0 Win %: 66.67

Middlesbrough

Oct 2022–June 2025
Played: 136 W: 63
D: 24 L: 49
Win %: 46.32

Manchester United

Jan 2026–present
Played: 5 W: 4 D: 1
L: 0 Win %: 80



PLAYING CAREER

Position:
Defensive
midfielder



Clubs

1. West Ham United (1999–2004)
2. Swindon Town (loan) (1999)
3. Birmingham City (loan) (2000)
4. Tottenham Hotspur (2004–2006)
5. Manchester United (2006–2018)



ABOUT THE CLUB

MANCHESTER UNITED.
EST. 1878

OVERVIEW

League: Premier League

Head coach:
Michael Carrick

Location:
Manchester, UK

Ground: Old Trafford

Capacity: 74,197

Current preferred formation

4-2-3-1

MICHAEL CARRICK

TURNING DEFENCE INTO FAST ATTACK

SET-UP

Area: Full pitch
Equipment: Balls, bibs, mannequins, flat markers, mini goals, full size goals

Number of Players:

Players: 18 + 3 goalkeepers

Session time:

Regain and break:
 At coach's discretion
 Wave game: At coach's discretion

REGAIN AND BREAK

We set up on a half pitch, with an area marked out around the centre circle, two mini goals positioned as shown, four mannequins positioned ahead of the penalty box and a full size goal in place.

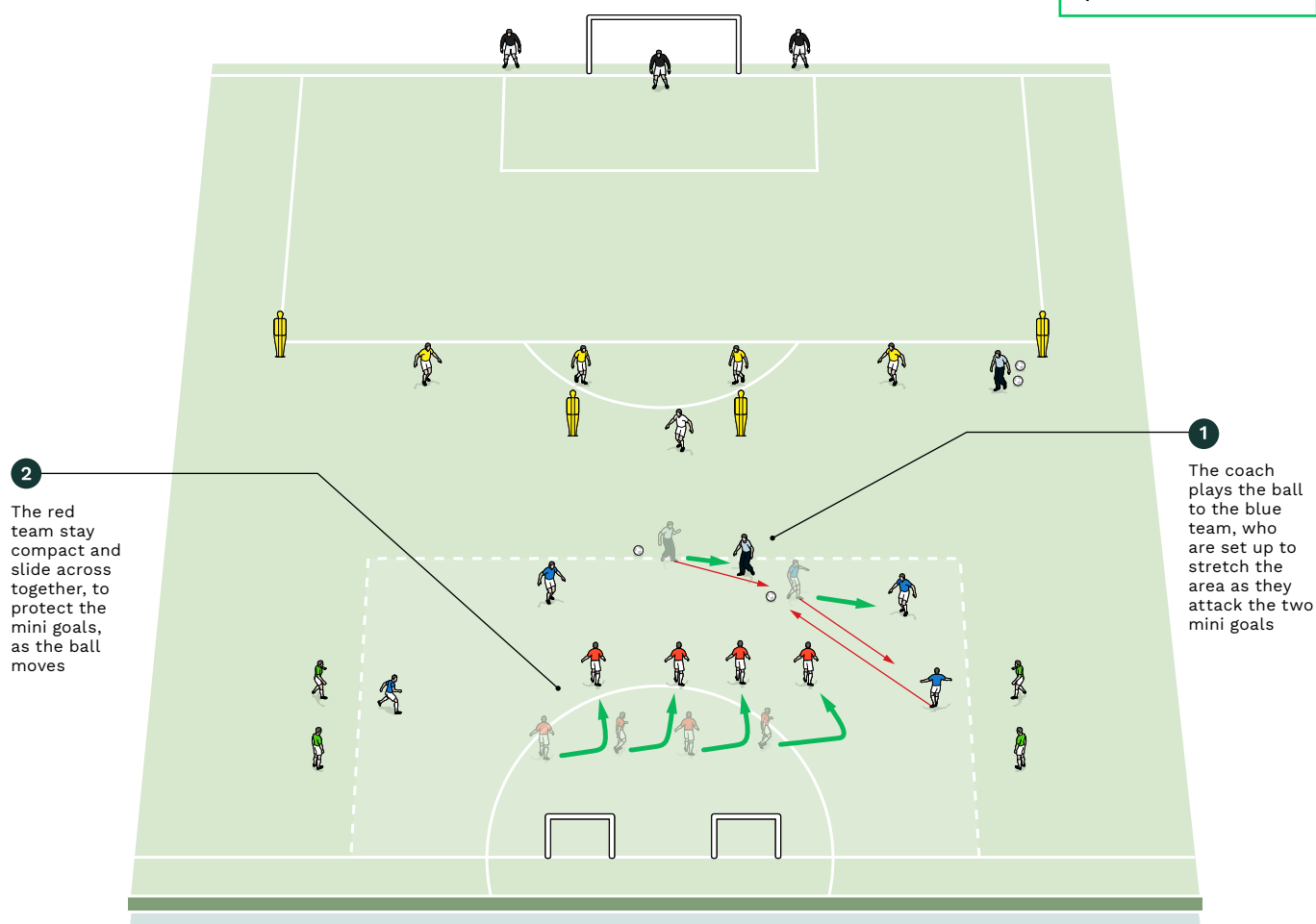
We have four teams of four, two in play at a time. One goalkeeper is in goal, with others ready to rotate in when teams rotate. Two coaches are on pitch to support different phases of the practice.

The practice starts when the central coach plays the ball to the team attacking the two mini goals. This team is set up to use the full width of the area. The coach joins in with them, creating a 5v4 against the defensive team of four. The defensive team is working together to protect the mini goals, looking to stay compact, force the ball wide and identify triggers to press and close the space to the ball, ultimately regaining it to break [1a].

[1a]

KEY

Ball movement	→
Player movement	→
Dribble	→
Optional movement	→



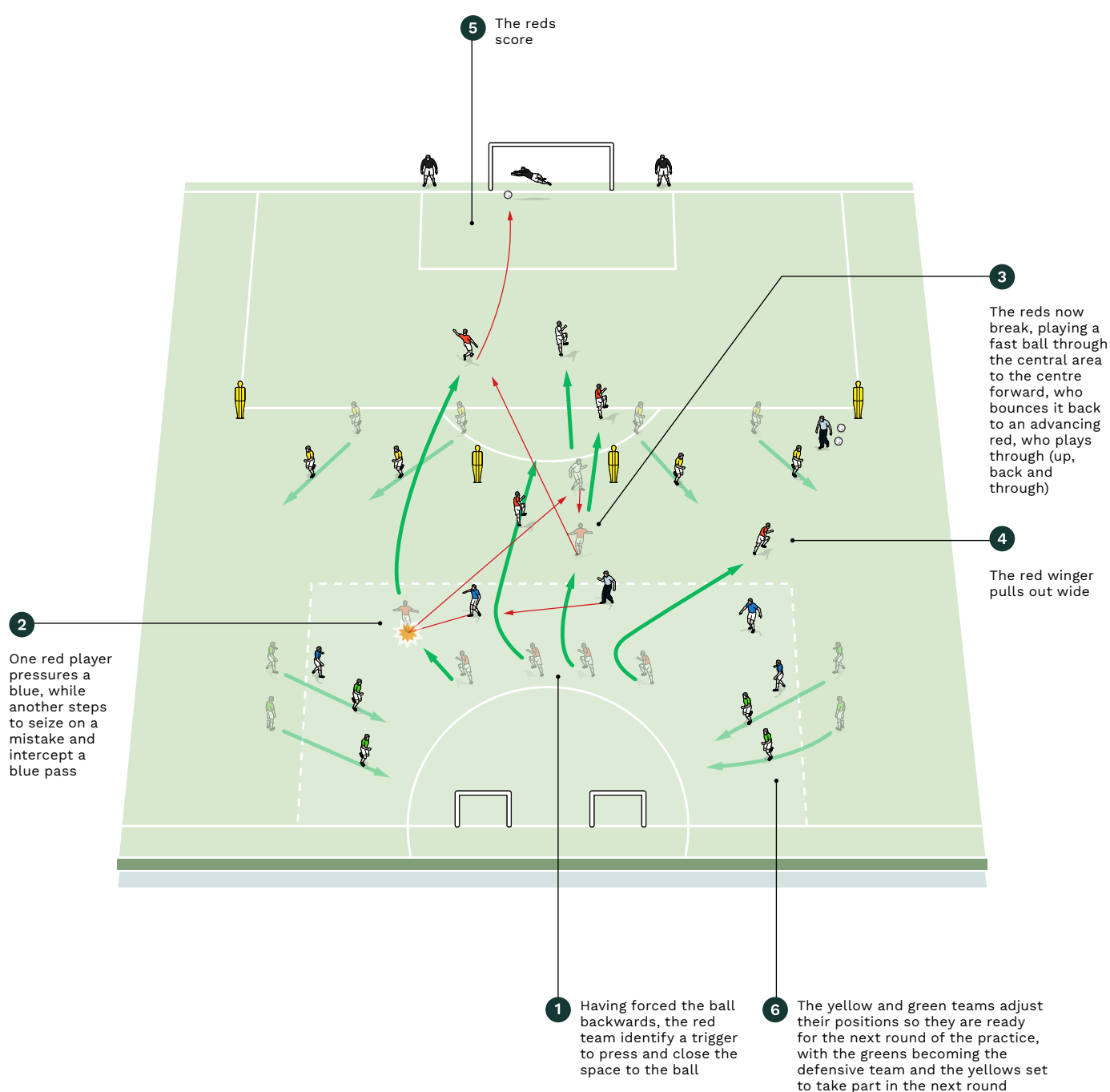


When the defensive team breaks, the first ball should be a fast ball through the central area, to the centre forward outside of the box. This player can then bounce to a progressing player, creating an up, back and through, and ultimately resulting in a shot on goal [1b].

While three of the attacking players attack with the centre forward, the wide player has gone wide to receive a pass from the coach out wide. The player bounces this pass back to the coach, then makes a curved run around the mannequin to receive a forward ball from the coach.

[1b]

KEY [Click to show](#)





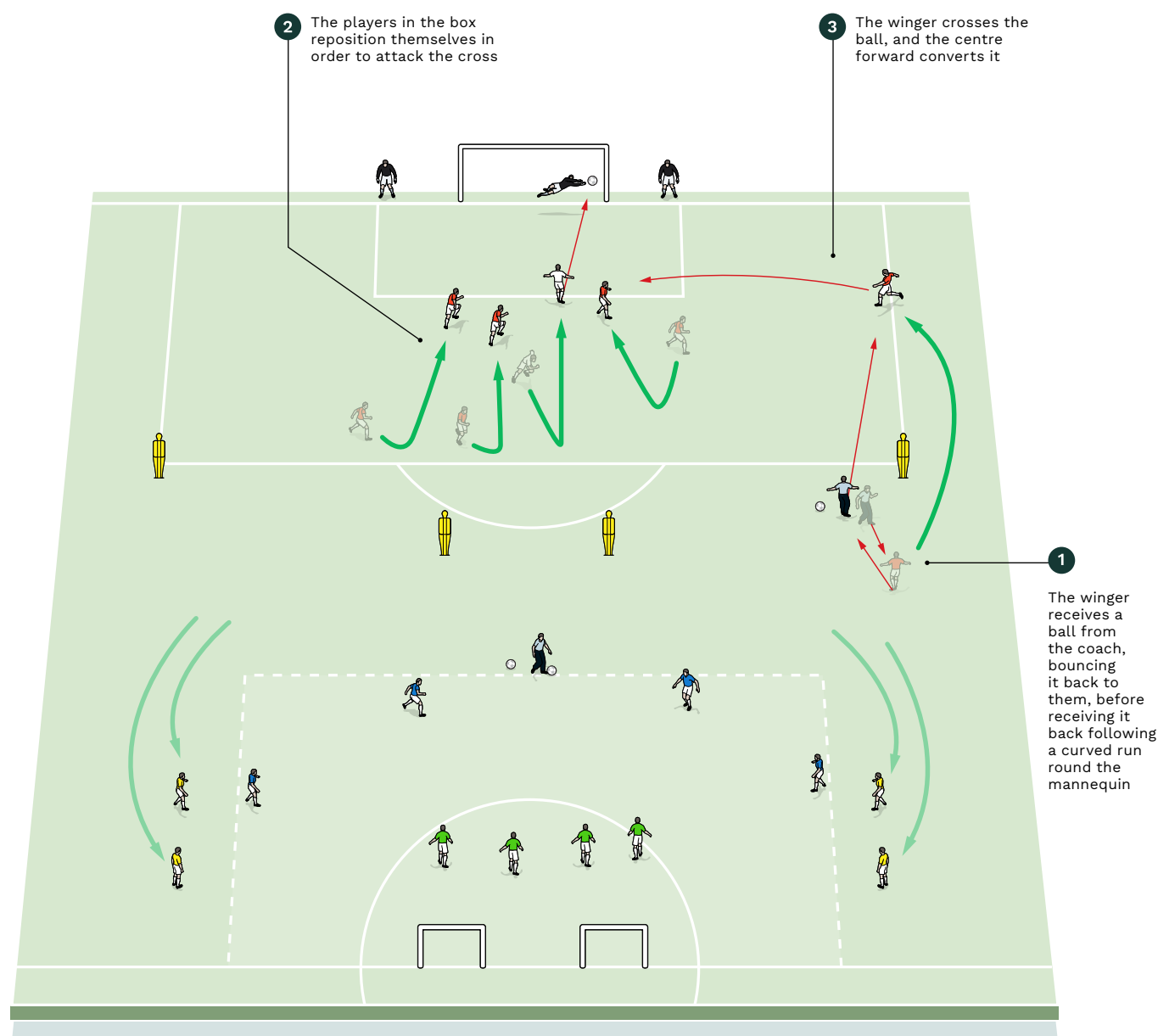
The winger crosses the ball for one of the attackers, who have retreated to be in a position to attack the cross, to connect with **[1c]**.

While the two phases of this practice are taking

place, the other two teams of four adjust their positions to allow for the rotation of teams and the continuation of the practice. The goalkeepers rotate after each round.

[1c]

KEY [Click to show](#)





WAVE GAME

We set up from edge of box to edge of box, with the width extended two yards either side of the box. Two full size goals are positioned as shown, and flat markers are used to indicate the playing area for the first phase of the practice.

We have three teams of six, with one coach on the pitch to support the team in possession.

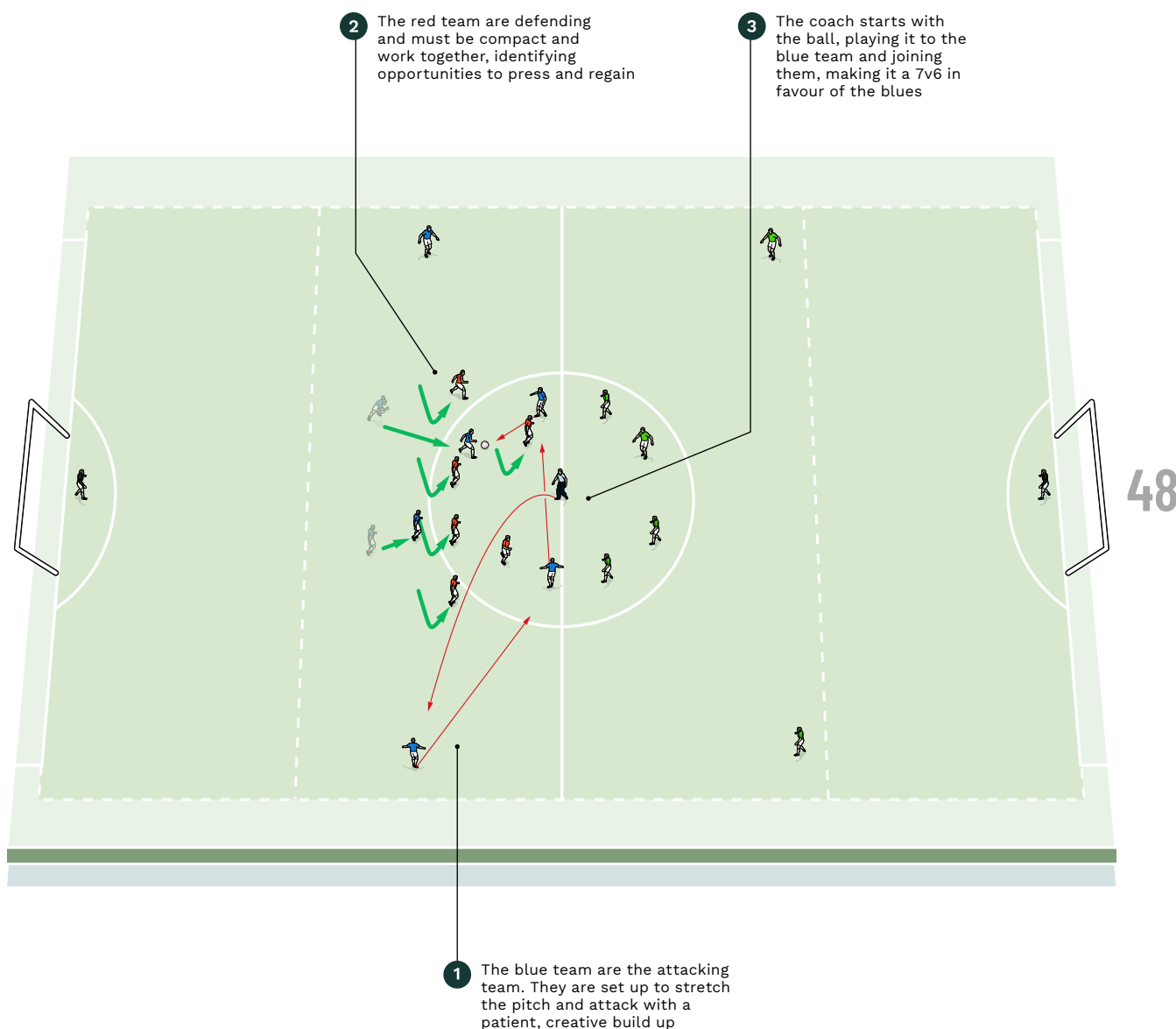
The practice starts when the coach plays the ball to the in-possession team. The coach supports this team,

making it a 7v6. The in-possession team are encouraged to stretch the pitch and to play with patience, looking for the ideal opportunity to open up the defence and score. If they score, play restarts and they get a second attack. After this second attack, teams are rotated.

As with the regain and break practice, the defending team are looking stay compact, force the ball wide and identify triggers to press and close the space to the ball, ultimately regaining it to break [\[2a\]](#).

[2a]

KEY [Click to show](#)





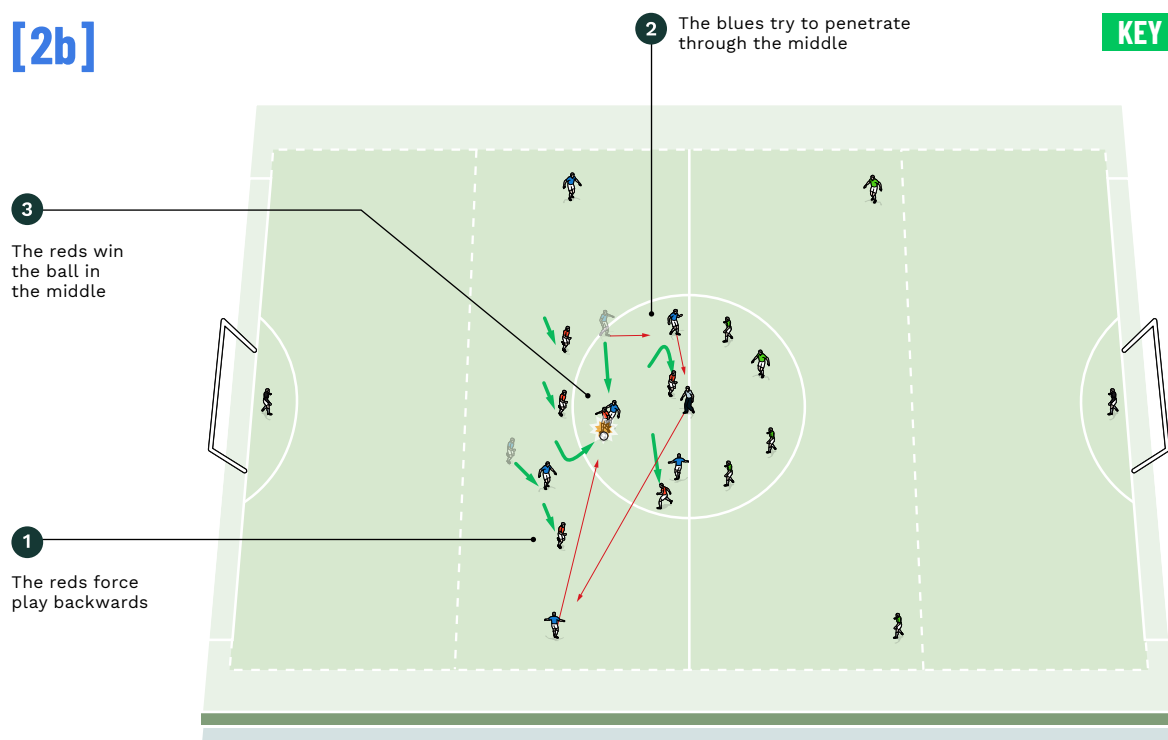
If the defending team win the ball, they play through the coach to transition to attack [2b]. Four players attack the other half of the pitch, facing two players from the third team – the left back, right back and two midfielders don't defend, only the central defenders do. The transitioning team are encouraged

to play fast, penetrating quickly with crossover movements [2c].

Once the attack is complete, the teams reset their shape, and the defending team from the last round now starts as the attacking team in the other half [2d].

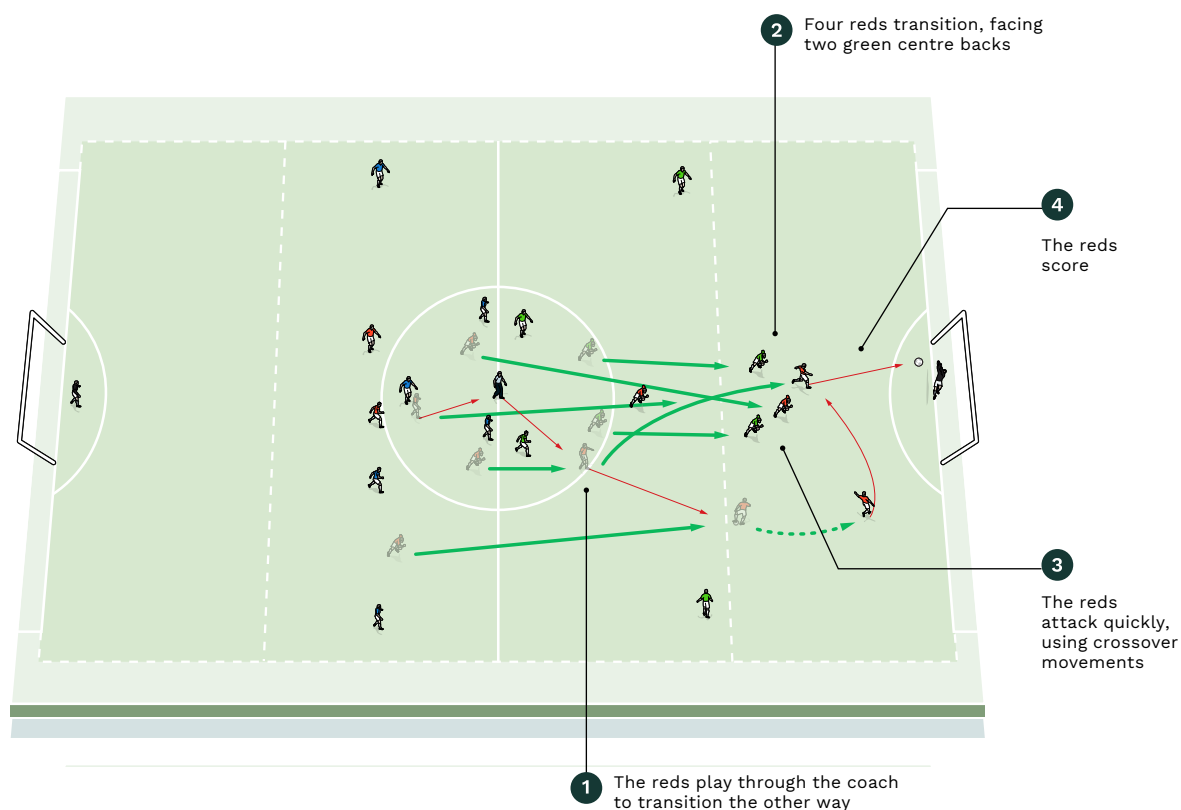
The practice continues in waves.

[2b]



KEY [Click to show](#)

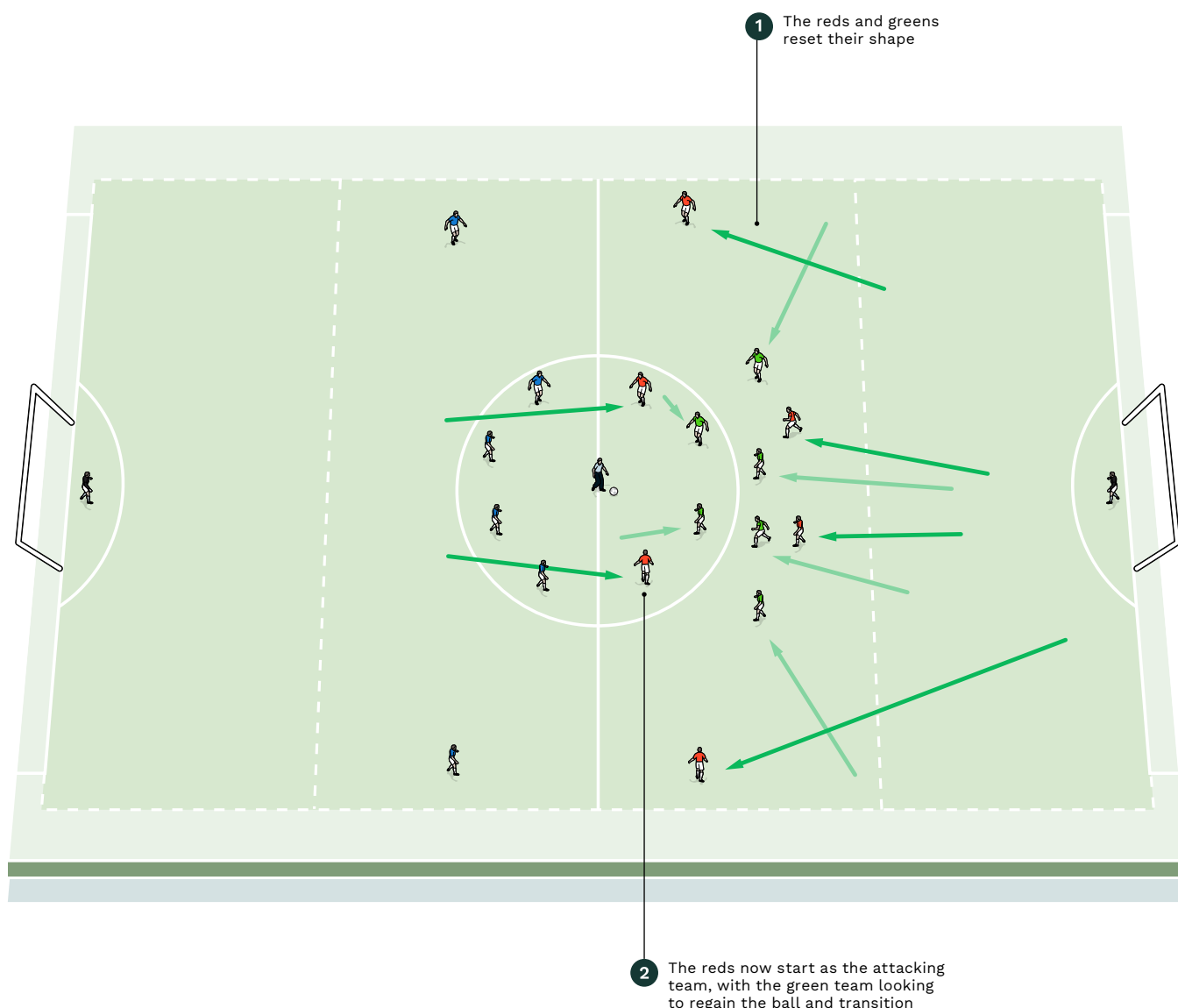
[2c]





[2d]

KEY [Click to show](#)



COACHING POINTS

WHAT ARE THE KEY THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR?

We are looking to promote two types of attack: one fast penetration, with crossover movements; one slower and more creative, using patience with decision-making around when and how to penetrate, picking the moment to open up the defence, moving the ball, and making use of lots of forward runs.

WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL MISTAKES PLAYERS MIGHT MAKE AND HOW DO I AVOID THEM?

To start with it can seem quite messy and maybe success with attacking can be limited but as players improve their understanding then it becomes very clear quite quickly and the changes in the roles within the attacks become apparent. I want to see them recognising and behaving in different ways within the session depending on what phase they are in.



ABOUT

Name: Rebecca Sawiuk

Current club:

Wrexham Women

Role: Assistant manager

Previous clubs:

Burnley Women,
Loughborough, Oxford
United Women,
Watford Academy
(Boys), England talent
pathway (Girls)

Started coaching: 2005

Highest coaching

qualification: UEFA
A Licence, Advanced
Youth Award,
LMA Diploma

REBECCA SAWIUK WREXHAM WOMEN

SESSION

PATTERNS

My experiences in the game have been diverse, enriching and often taken me outside my comfort zone. As I've moved through my journey, I have been grounded by my core values of integrity, trust and belonging – that's what football is about to me. Sometimes under the most intense pressure when you sit in the hotseat, winning brings relief rather than joy, and so, for me, in my footballing environments having fun, highlighting achievement and, of course, scoring goals are the best source of joy.

At Burnley Women we strived to build a technically proficient team, which meant we often controlled the ball, dominated possession and played our game in the opponent's half. In the first season our in-possession average was 51% and season two rose to 65%; both our game model and weekly structure would mirror this. I haven't always worked this way, but at Burnley we spent 75% of our focus on us and our in-possession play and 25% on our opponent and our out-of-possession structure.

I had a clear game model which was centred on being

“all about the ball”, using the ball with intent, winning it back as early as possible and having control, which was embedded within our culture by design. We had a shared language, which meant what we called the Burnley Women DNA could be pulled through into MDT working processes, analysis, session design and how we worked with players. The game model for our in-possession play was based on positioning on the pitch, not positions; it was dynamic and we coached using both a set of principles and patterns of play. The principles and patterns were fundamental to how we played; we were well-known for playing an exciting style of football, scoring big goals and being relentless with our energy.

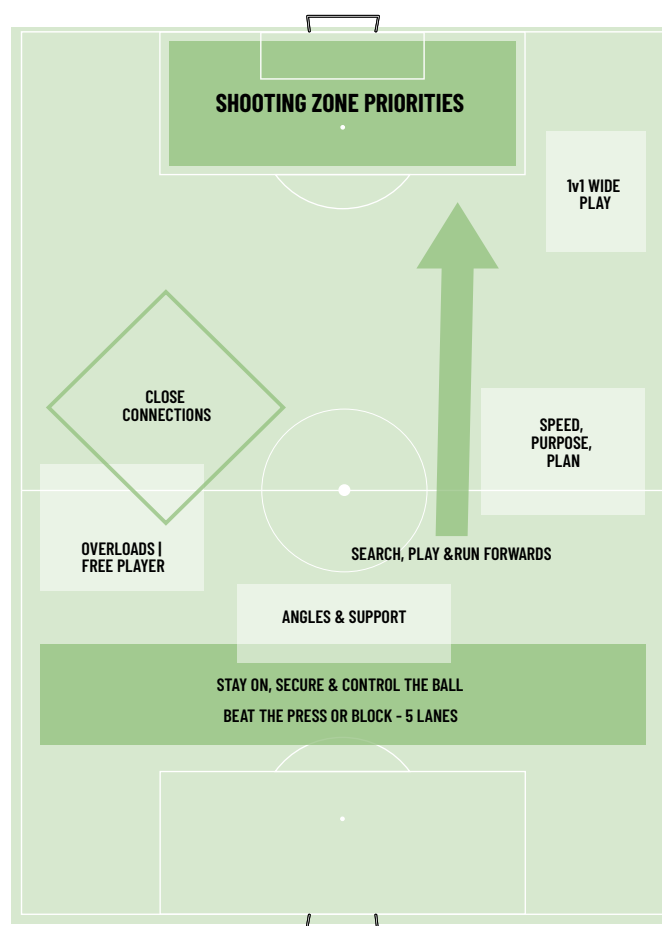
As the programme evolved, more and more teams would set up in low block scenarios, and this session meant we could specialise in preparing the patterns, pictures and principles we would need each week to beat the low block. My general coaching methodology is based on practice design mirroring the real game, as much transition, two teams, direction, pressure, goals etc as possible.

This session is about preparing and delivering on the game plan, introducing the key patterns and principles for the week, and creating contextual repetition and simplicity while being grounded and supported by the physical weekly recommendations. Within our weekly football structure our MD+2 was smaller distances, more technical with a higher number of modifications to manage. MD-2 would be focused on our game plan, MD-1 would be revisiting important game plan objectives, whilst focusing on high intensity competition. This session was a core part of our MD -/+ 3 routine which was our DNA/principle-focused day.

Players enjoy the game-like design, and ability to transfer the thinking or pictures to the fixture at the weekend. In the tactical rondo component they enjoy the small-sided competitive nature of the practice, and in the DNA Rondo, it's intense, fast and competitive, and players enjoy and celebrate goals, combinations and patterns. Players enjoy the high ball rolling time, the way each practice mirrors a game, and the aspects of competition that's built into each component. These were all core practices that we would do weekly, or bi-weekly, meaning that players spent time working on their game, their development or the plan rather than time 'learning the practice'.

I've found being the coach in a session is like being the conductor of an orchestra. It's my job to make sure the transitions are sharp, every phase is set up, the space to player ratio is on point so you're not adjusting mid-session. Staff know the session, their role, their coaching points or priorities; we all have to be clear and aligned before to ensure we maximise every moment we have on the grass together. Now, in my experience that's what makes everyone tick: it creates energy which you can feel, which energises others, and you can see this in quality, behaviour and actions in the sessions. Players thrive when the sessions are intense and the ball has restarts that are sharp but real with variety. For example, if you're playing against a long, direct team that are going to put you under real direct vertical pressure, then design a structured start that mirrors this.

Then I've found when players understand the vision, their role and responsibilities on the grass and how they contribute to the team, that's what makes them tick - when they're getting success, when they're being challenged, when their team-mates are making them work harder to fight for their place in the starting 11. What gets smiles on faces is how we connect with each other, conversations, praise, expectations, challenges, coaching, supporting, giving them time, showing you care about them, their journey in the game and you want to help them to be the best version of them.



DNA IN POSSESSION
Beat the press or block - 5 Lanes
Stay on, secure & control the ball
Search, play & run forwards
Overloads free player
Close connections
Angles & support
1v1 wide play
SHOOTING ZONE PRIORITIES
Speed, purpose, plan

PATTERNS OF PLAY
Switch of play
Double switch
Up set through
Up set around
Up set over
Opposite pocket
Roll in movement
Overlapping full-back
Inverted full-back



Above: These are my in-possession principles and patterns of play which I would share and use as key reference points with staff and players.

Left: This is an image of my shooting zone priorities, I would work on the SZP in the finishing rondo specifically, these would be tailored to players' IDP areas of work. For example, player X might need to work on crossing delivery, player Z might need to work on being a full-back in the half-space and player A might need to work on first touch with type of finish in the box.

REBECCA SAWIUK PATTERNS

SET-UP

Area: Full pitch
Equipment: Mini goals, cones, discs
Number of Players: Up to 20 + 2 goalkeepers

Session time:

90mins (including warm-ups and structured extras – not pictured)
 DNA rondo: 18mins
 Tactical rondo: 20mins
 Finishing rondo: 25mins

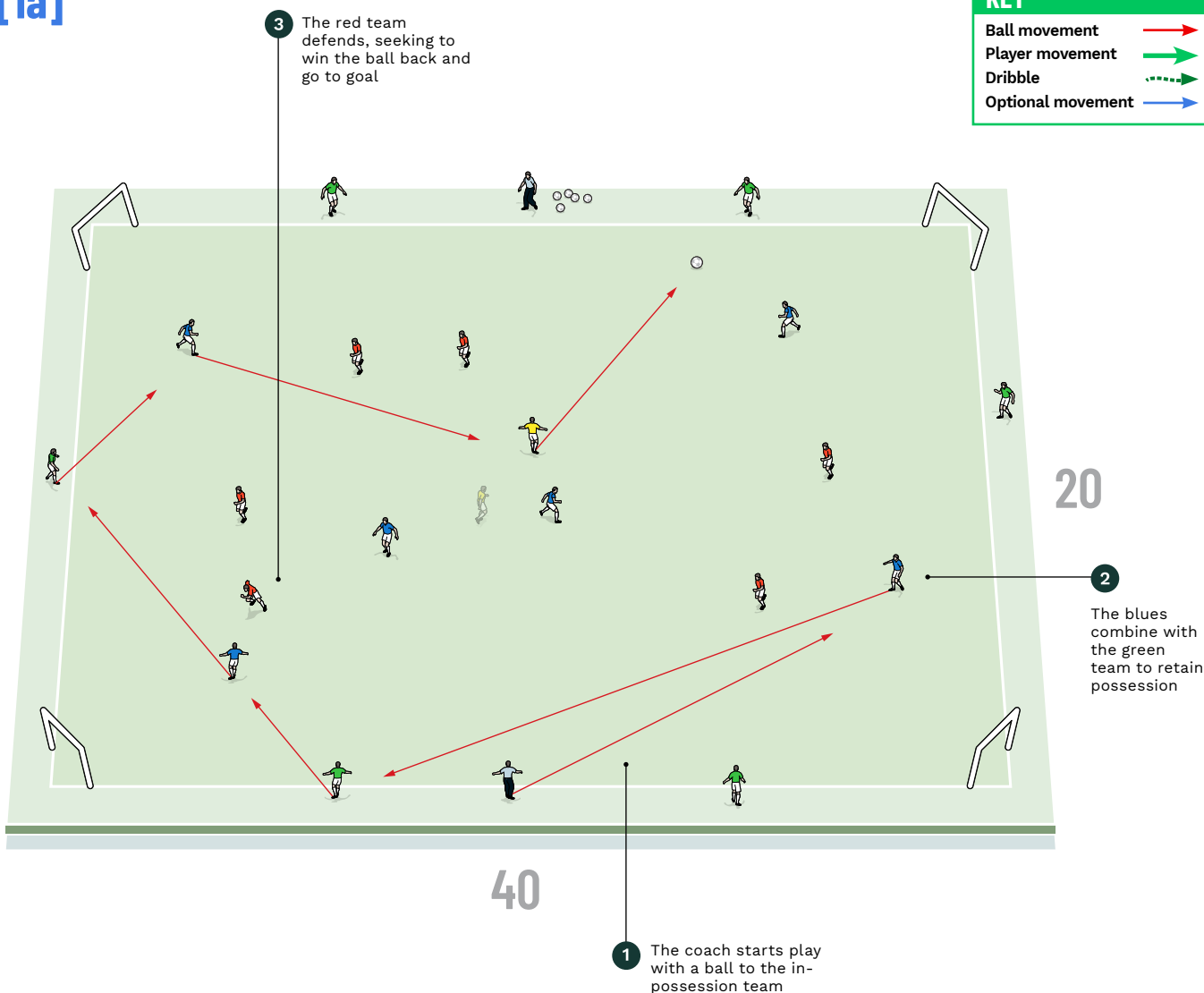
DNA RONDO

We set up in an area 20-25 yards by 30-35 yards, depending on outcomes. The DNA rondo is intense, fast and competitive. Players enjoy and celebrate goals, combinations and patterns. We split the group into three teams; one team in possession focusing on ball retention, one team pressing to regain and score in the mini goals

and one team resting/outside as bounce players, with one bounce player inside.

We play for 60-90 seconds then rotate. For example, in the first play blues are in possession, reds are defending and greens are outside. In the second play, greens are in possession, blues are defending

[1a]





and reds are outside. And in the third play, reds are in possession, greens are defending and blues are outside. We repeat this three or four times.

We focus on the brilliant basics – release, relieve, retain and regain – alongside key principles or pattern introduction. For example, we might focus on opposite pocket play or switch of play if we felt the opposition defended in one quarter of the pitch.

To start the practice a coach serves the ball to the team in possession. The in-possession team then

attack the mini goals [1a]. The in-possession team work on the key patterns.

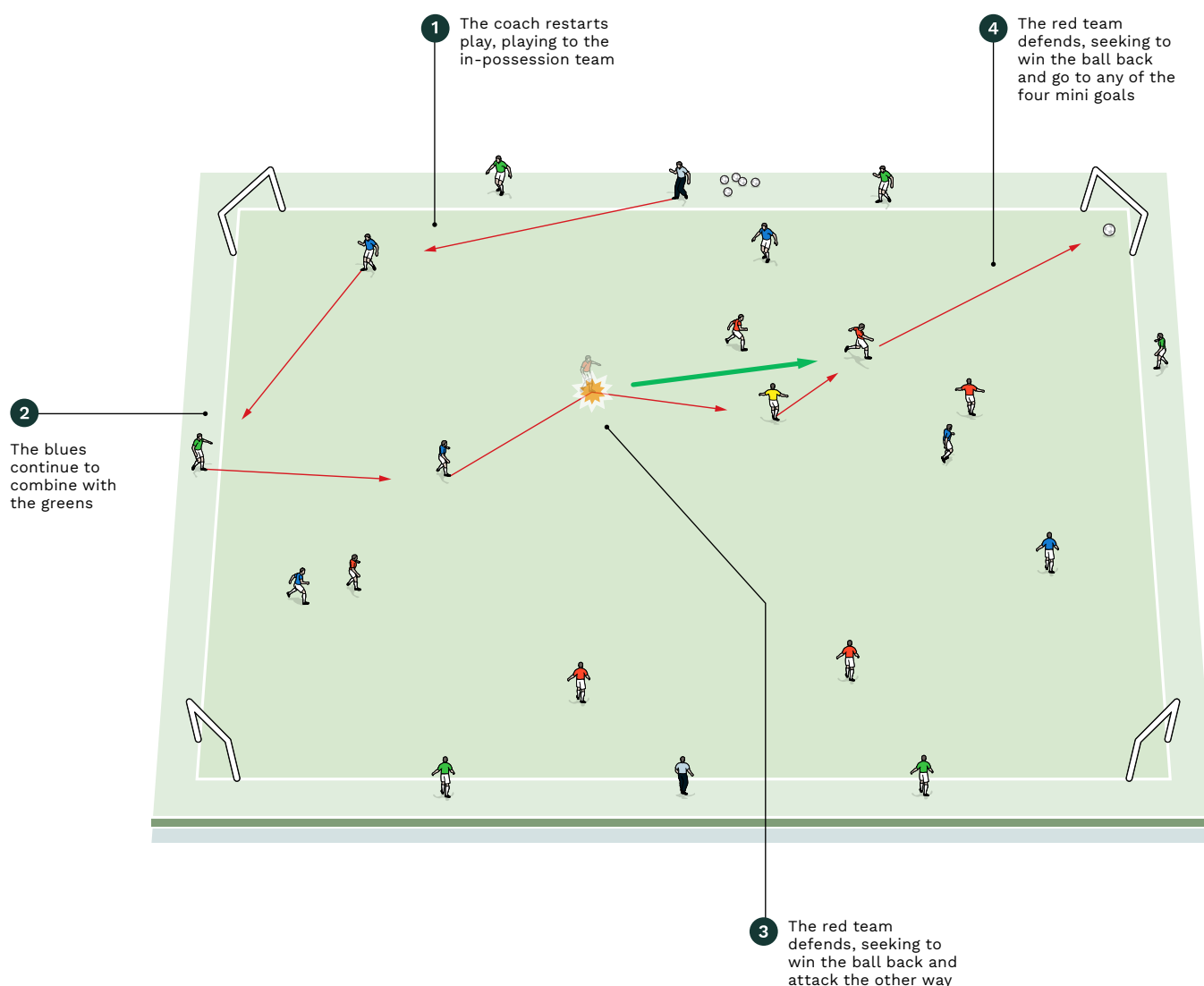
The coach restarts the game by playing to the in-possession team [1b]. Here the reds intercept, and transition quickly to score.

Play continues, with teams rotating. We run this for nine reps of two minutes.

Additionally, players on the outside can move sides, be tackled and they can react to block/defend the mini goals.

[1b]

KEY [Click to show](#)



“We focus on the brilliant basics – release, relieve, retain and regain – alongside key principles or pattern introduction”



TACTICAL RONDO

The tactical rondo focuses on game plan patterns: Who does what? When? Where? And why? We work 90-120 seconds on and 30-45 seconds off. Each team is given a shape/structure that mirrors the predicted game scenario for the weekend.

We set up 11v11, or 11v10 or 10v10. In a micro version, we work the pictures of build v press in open play and transfer those priority patterns for game solutions into key personal.

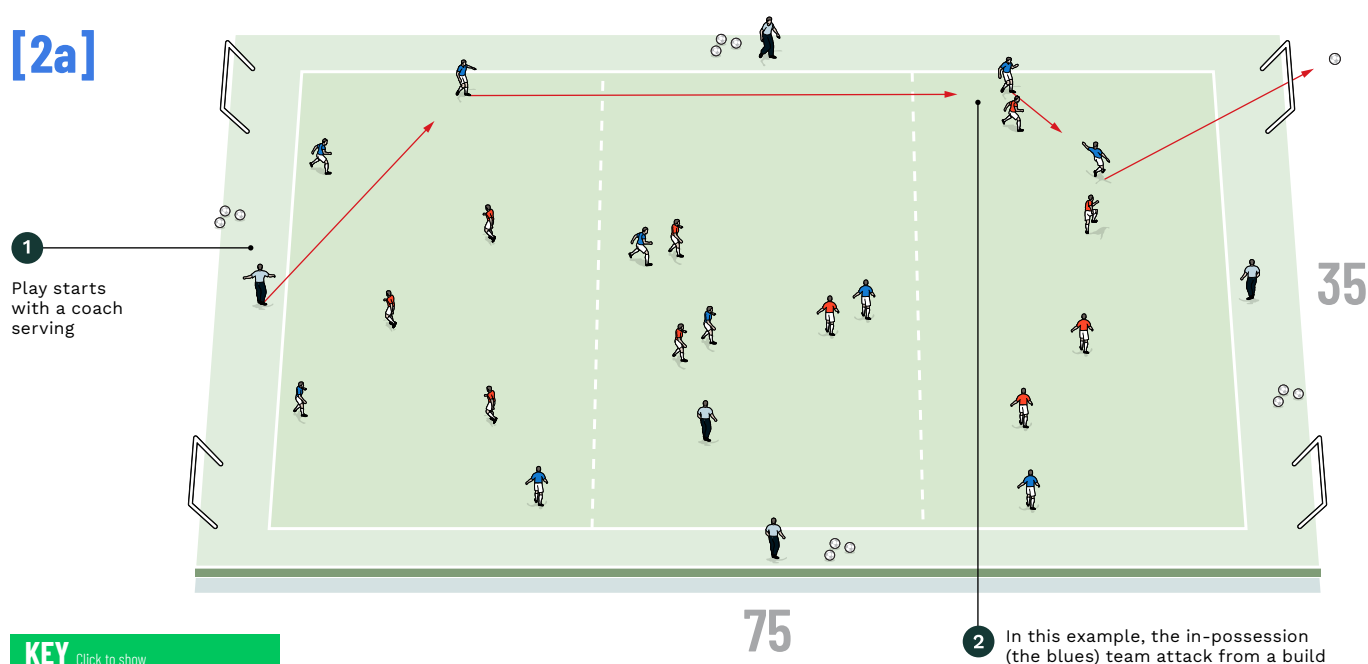
We set up in an area 75x35 yards, with mini goals

on the corners. The pitch is divided into three zones and players are locked in, four coaches serve the ball into different zones. Each time, play starts from the goalkeeper/server, or the coaches who play into the midfield zone.

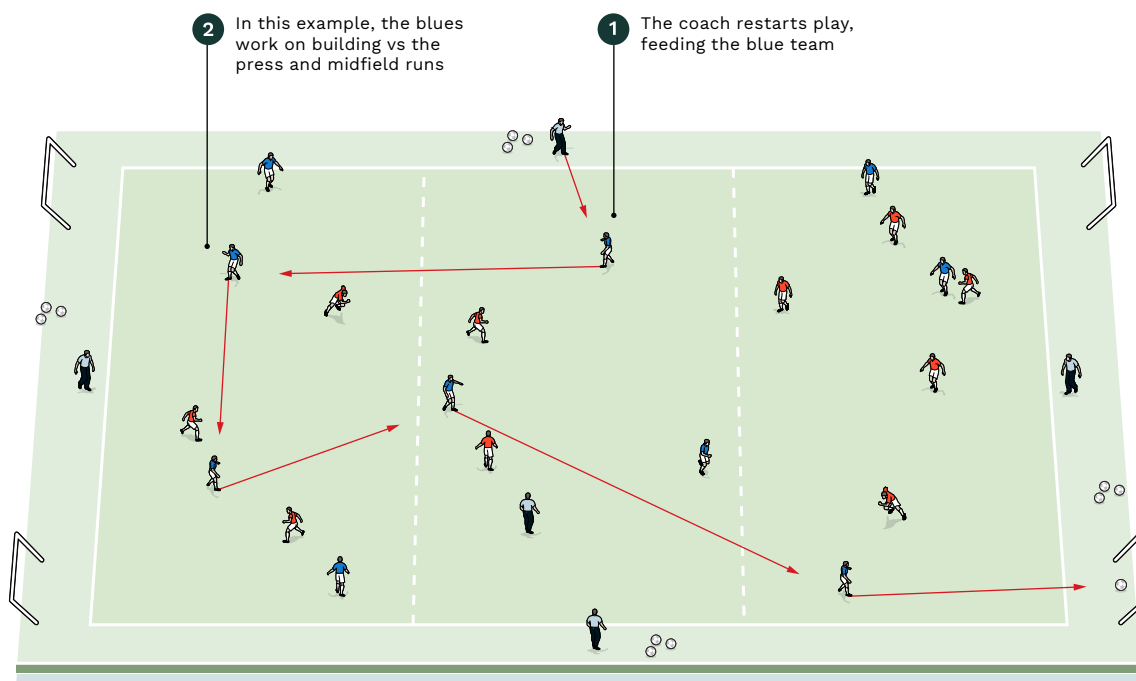
The in-possession team runs through various plays, including starting from a build [2a], building vs the press (this might be a 2 or 3, wide trap, central trap, man for man or pendulum press) and balls into midfield back to goal or forward facing [2b], incorporating specific patterns [2c], and exploiting to score [2d]. In this practice I would also work on the pressing plan.

This practice would run for 20-22 minutes.

[2a]



[2b]

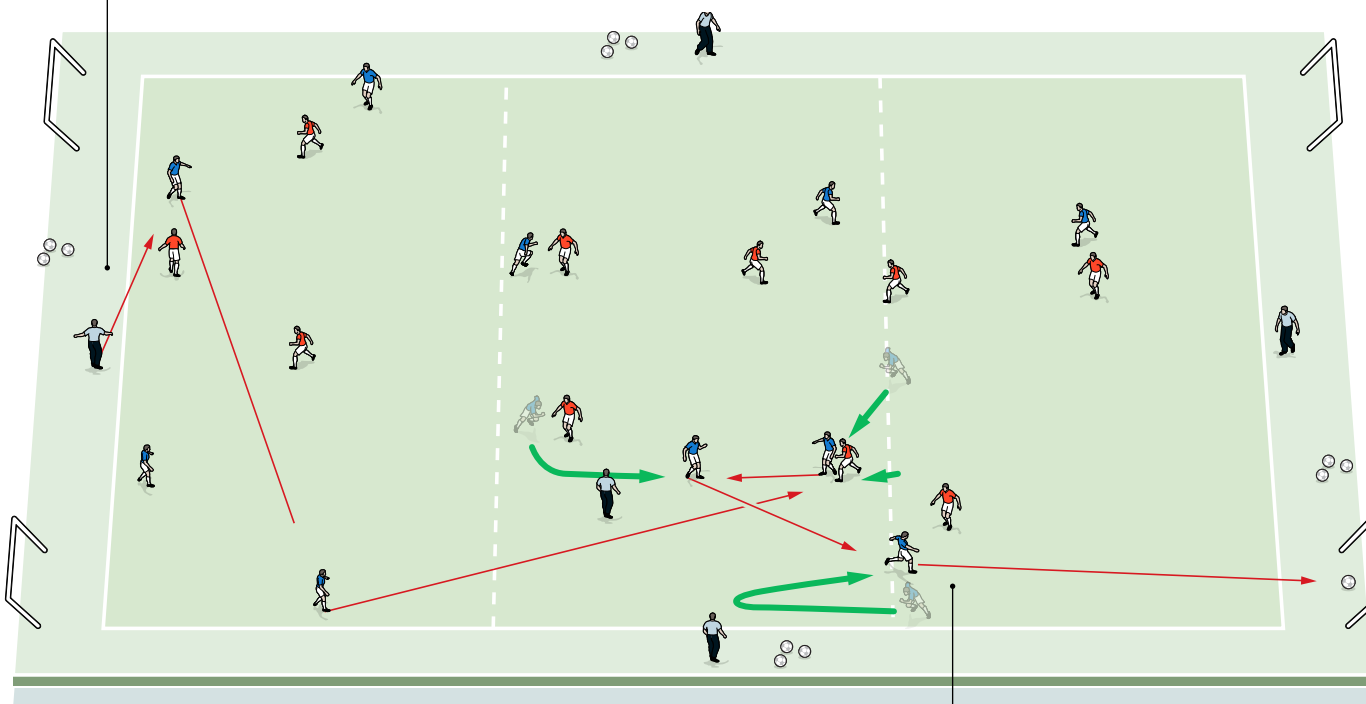




[2c]

KEY [Click to show](#)

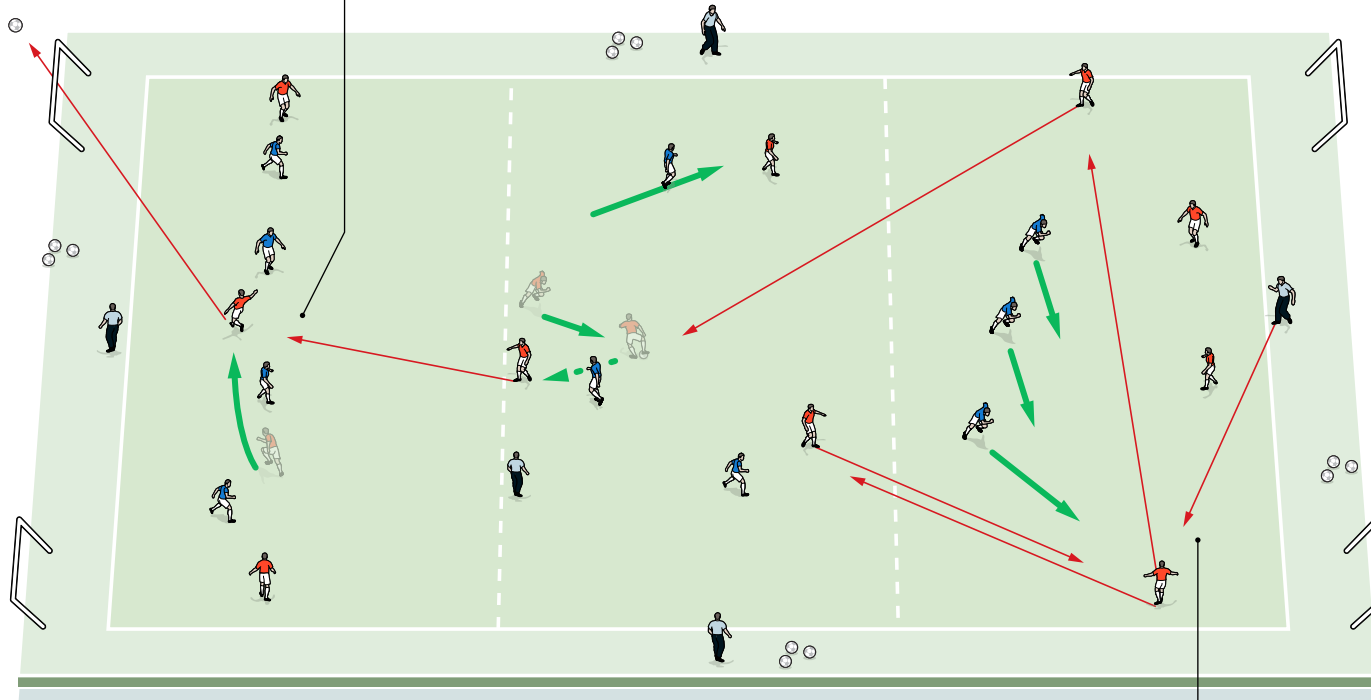
1 The goalkeeper restarts, feeding the blue team



2 In this example, the blues continue to work on building vs the press and midfield runs, with specific patterns incorporated

[2d]

2 In this example, the in-possession team (reds) work on exploiting to score



1 Now the reds are the in-possession team, play starts with the goalkeeper



FINISHING RONDO

The finishing rondo enables us as a team to specifically work on our in-possession structure for beating low blocks or our defending shape in our lower block structure. We run this practice 3.5-4 minutes on and 1 minute off, with the coaching taking place during the 1 minute off.

There is high geographical game transfer, and we work in a pressurised, realistic space. We focus on the finish phase of the game and what key patterns or shooting zone priority objectives we're chasing in that phase of the game for the opposition.

We set up on roughly half a pitch. We have two goalkeepers, two coaches, and two teams of 10 in place. The shooting zones are painted on the grass

or flat discs are used, alongside the five lanes. A few examples of this might be one week, the second six-yard box might be open for cut backs, or if you're playing against a back five you might want to disconnect the wing-back and play into half space, or you might try to target deliveries into the back post.

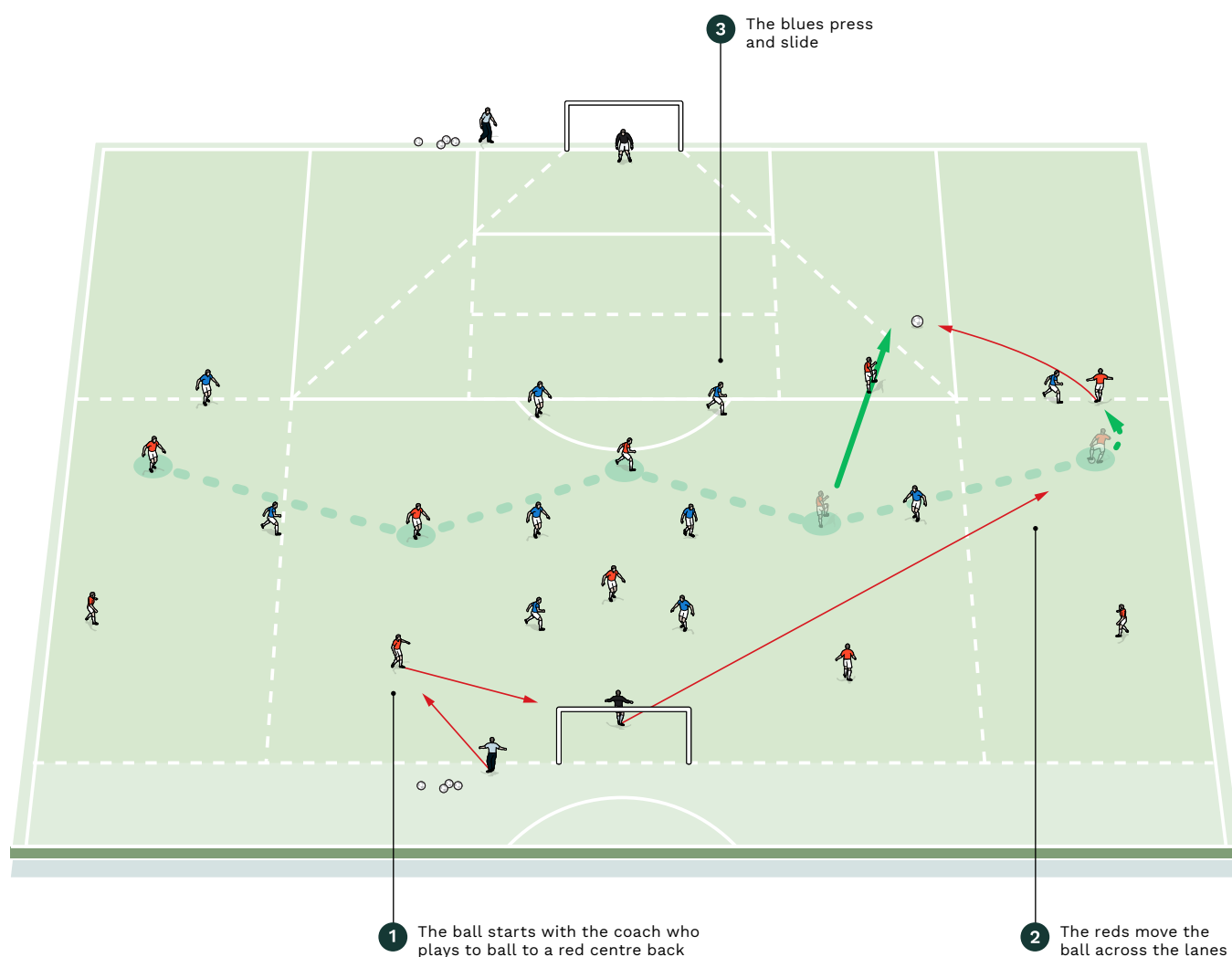
It's important to add, every week we would have one or two finishing practices where both the goalkeeper and types of finishes would be profiled and delivered. This is something I use in my role now.

The coach begins by playing the ball to the red centre back. From there, the reds move the ball and blues slide as they do [\[3a\]](#). In this example, the reds convert [\[3b\]](#).

As a progression you can add a variety of structured starts into this practice eg throw-in, long pass or even a set play.

[3a]

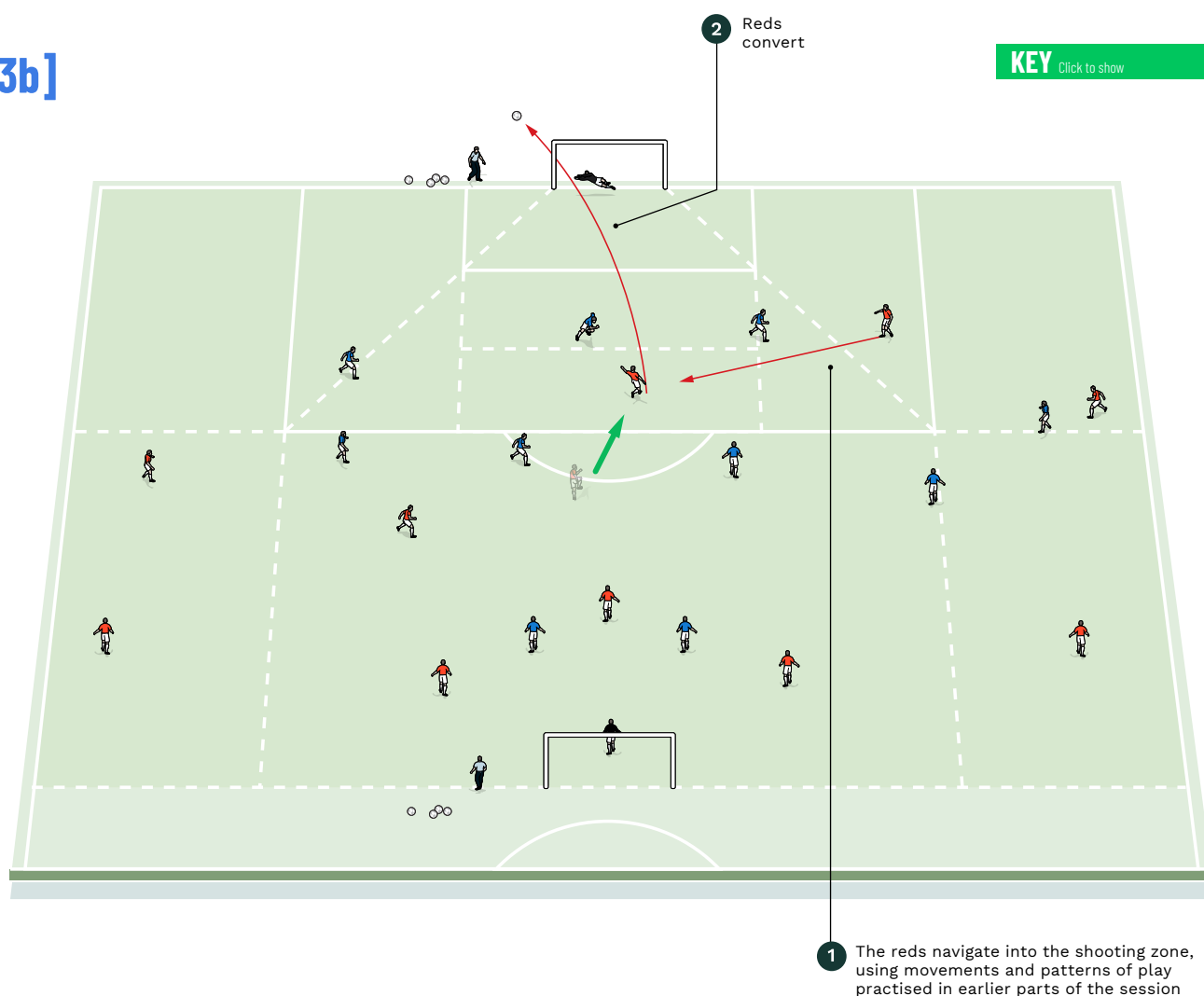
KEY [Click to show](#)



"The rules are the game, as we would work through the game plan and see what players had retained from the two days' training before"

[3b]

KEY Click to show



PROGRESSION AND EXTRAS

As a progression, once a week we would do an 11v11 game on a -3 within the weekly plan. This would be an opportunity to add in the goalkeeper boxes as reference points to work on goalkeeper restart in the build or box reference points in the high press. In the 11v11 again it would mirror the real game: throw-ins,

corners and there would be a structured start in and around the halfway line that a coach would control to enable us to create quick pictures for general open play. The rules are the game, as we would work through the game plan and see what players had retained from the two days' training before.

COACHING POINTS

WHAT ARE THE KEY THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR?

In the sessions during the week, players would often get coaching individually linked to their IDP working aims and objectives:

for example, that could be a receiving skill, first touch, body shape or scanning point. This would be a golden thread that I valued, knowing the players well enough to praise, see and understand their individual programme outcomes in the week.

 ABOUT
Name: André Thomas**Current club:** West Ham United**Role:** Under-15s assistant coach**Previous clubs:** Queens Park Rangers, Leyton Orient, AFC Wimbledon**Started coaching:** 2014**Highest coaching qualification:** UEFA A Licence**Biggest achievement as a coach:** Receiving an award for and being listed on the 2024 Football Black List as an influential figure making a positive impact in the game and society

ANDRÉ THOMAS

WEST HAM UNITED

SESSION

POSITIVE APPROACH TO DEFENDING

The game of football in its simplest format is an invasion game where you succeed by scoring goals and stopping goals. There is no right or wrong way to play, just impactful and effective principles set out to guide the outcomes of stopping, making and scoring goals. The more insights we have from different backgrounds and cultures about preferred principles will add to the game as it creates variations of game problems and solutions.

I want my team to be decisive and be sure of what to do and why to do it. This allows the execution of the intention to be the only focus in the moment.

This session is important as it reflects on my beliefs about football, particularly the out-of-possession principles. It's great for player

development because it gives them the opportunity to gain clarity of when and how to apply these principles while making decisions on how to defend to help them succeed and win the game.

This is all about developing a positive approach towards defending in a game. It has been created to provide relevant information to players when out of possession while engaging them psychologically to have pride in defending and doing so with a purpose.

Players really enjoy defending with a purpose and a passion, implementing individual and team tactics to defend, and having their mindset changed towards defending, although sometimes they may struggle psychologically and socially with how to react after conceding a series of goals in quick succession.

I would run this practice when I feel the out-of-possession principles are not being used well enough which could be due to the desire to implement them or the understanding and clarity of when and how to apply them. This session usually works well to introduce or refine information. Without having a clear understanding of what you're going after as a coach, delivering this session would fall under the category of facilitating. However, this practice is set up to provide as many opportunities to defend when organised, when unorganised, with an underload or with an overload, so it's key to know what it is you're after, so when the picture appears you can step in and deliver the coaching points to support the players' development.

ANDRÉ THOMAS POSITIVE APPROACH TO DEFENDING

SET-UP

Area: Dependent on age group, ability and numbers

Equipment: Cones, full size goals, discs

Number of Players: At coach's discretion

Session time:

Team game:
30 minutes

TEAM GAME

We set up in an area to be adjusted according to the number of players available to you; consider their age and stage. Mark out the area widthways in thirds using your discs. We set up in two teams with equal numbers.

This activity runs under normal match rules, but with some special conditions. When defending, all

players must occupy two of the three thirds, without a gap in between. Both teams start with ten goals. A team loses a goal every time they concede. The team with the most goals left wins the game.

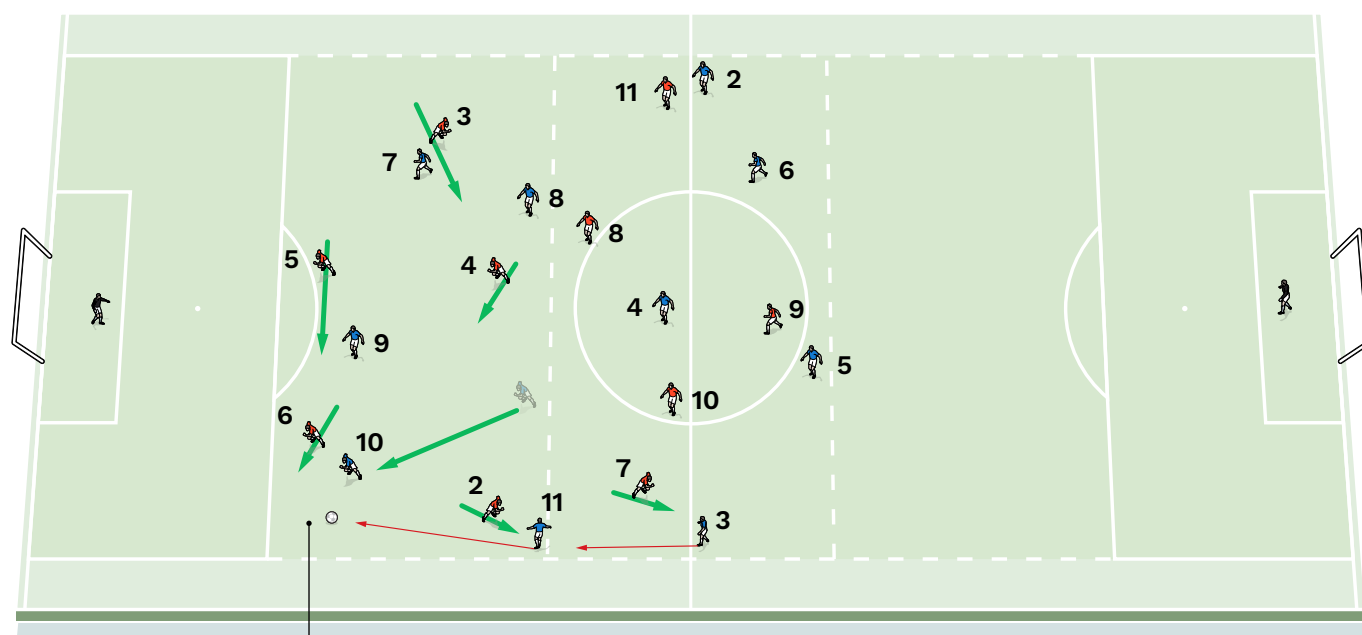
In this example, we are playing 11v11 with the blue team seeking to score **[1a]** and the red team defending **[1b]**.

We run this for three reps of eight minutes.

[1a]

KEY

Ball movement	
Player movement	
Dribble	
Optional movement	



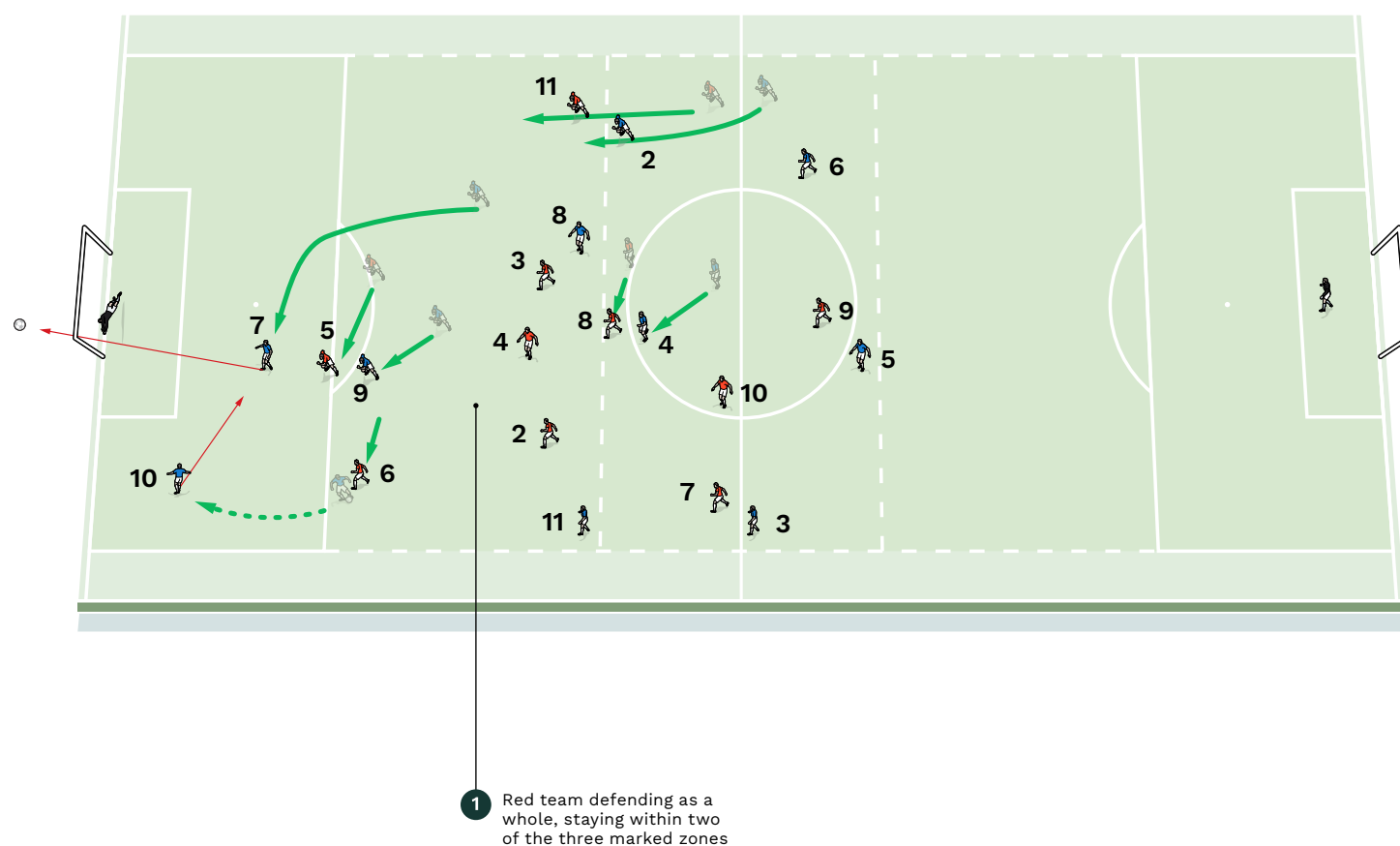
1 Blue team in possession, seeking to score

To progress the session, I would remove the lines which created the three zones, and add in lines running the length of the pitch to create five channels [1c]. This adaptation will allow me to see how the

players maintain their distances without the width references but now try and occupy three out of the five channels without a gap in between, using the length line references.

[1b]

KEY Click to show

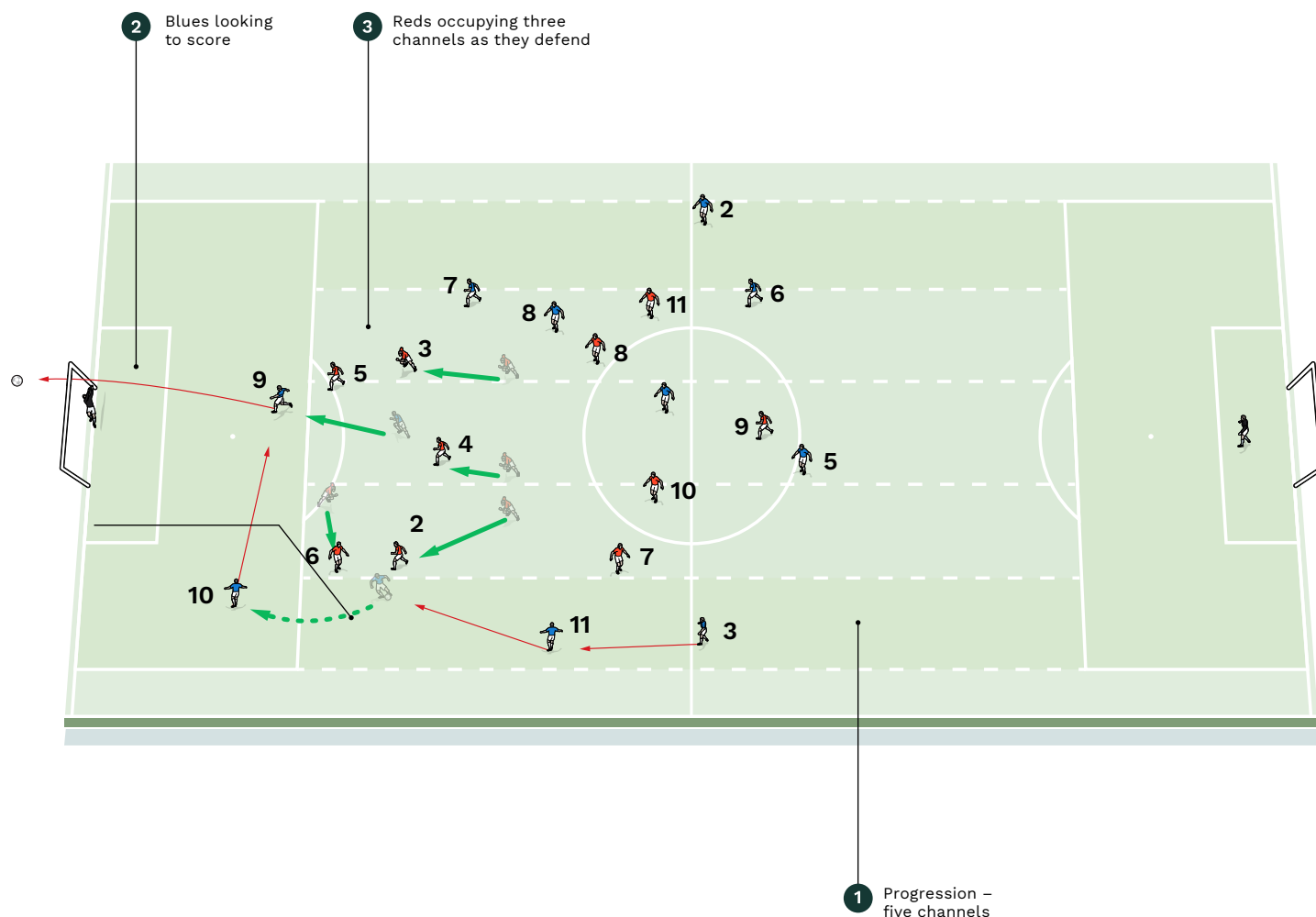


"Both teams start with ten goals. A team loses a goal every time they concede. The team with the most goals left wins the game"



[1c]

KEY [Click to show](#)



COACHING POINTS

WHAT ARE THE KEY THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR?

Throughout the session, I would be observing:

- if players are trying to delay the opposition and how
- if they are getting compact and when
- if they are providing cover and balance when there is pressure on the ball
- when around their own goal if they try to show control and restraint to defend without mistakes.

The intent would be encouraged throughout.

While all these things may be happening, my focus would be on one or two principles

maximum, and this needs to be clear for the players as well. Players would then receive coaching points linked to these principles and their decisions. For example, if it was decided to apply pressure on the ball high up the pitch, we would discuss coaching points around speed and angle of approach for the player pressing the ball; the players around the ball would receive information about locking on to the nearest supporting player for the opposition and keeping them on the outside shoulder, whilst the ones away from the ball would be prepared to defend the space vacated in behind by adopting a side on body shape which allows you to go either direction quickly. I would also look at the actions before, during and after a moment.



BUILDING IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND HIGH STANDARDS

IN AN EXCLUSIVE FEATURE FOR *ELITE SOCCER*, **OMAR ADLANI** TAKES US INSIDE HIS FIRST MONTHS AT FC BASEL WOMEN ALONGSIDE HIS STAFF TEAM

Settling into FC Basel has been incredibly smooth, but from the very beginning there was no time to ease into the role. The season was already under way, games were coming quickly, and we needed to work immediately. Implementing a completely new way of playing and a new way of training during competition is always demanding, but the openness and commitment I encountered within the club made it possible.

Change is never simple. Players arrive with habits shaped over many years, and asking them to think faster, play braver, and operate with higher intensity requires trust and clarity. For me, the key has always

been belief — belief in the ideas, belief in the process, and the ability to transmit that belief to players and staff alike. Once that conviction is shared, people commit fully.

FC Basel is not just any club. It is the biggest club in Switzerland, with a history, a responsibility, and expectations that come with it. That level of demand is something I was already familiar with from previous experiences, and it is exactly the environment I wanted to be in. The project is ambitious but clear: to create a strong identity, establish a clear way of playing, compete every week, and bring championships back to FC Basel.



UNDERSTANDING THE CLUB ENVIRONMENT AND BUILDING CULTURE

From the first days inside the club, I felt the ambition and responsibility that surrounds FC Basel. There is strong structure, high professionalism, and people who genuinely care about the badge. But ambition alone is not enough: it needs direction.

A major focus early on was creating alignment:

- clarity in communication
- consistency in behaviour
- shared understanding of principles
- a daily standard that reflects where we want this team to go.

We've worked hard to create an environment where players feel safe to express themselves, to make mistakes, and to take responsibility, while also understanding that accountability and intensity are non-negotiable. Culture is not built through slogans; it is built through repetition, through daily habits, and through how everyone behaves when things are difficult.

WORKING WITH THE TEAM: CHANGING HABITS AND CREATING IDENTITY

One of the biggest challenges in coaching is changing long-established habits. From the beginning, our focus has been on increasing tempo, improving decision-making, and raising intensity across all phases of the game.

We've asked the team to:

- take responsibility in possession
- dominate with and without the ball
- press aggressively and collectively
- understand spacing and timing
- approach every action with intention.

Training sessions are always built from the game model. Every exercise has a clear purpose; there is no "random" work. Players understand why we are doing something, how it connects to match situations, and what behaviours we are trying to reinforce. The response from the players has been outstanding. Their hunger, openness, and willingness to learn have accelerated the process and allowed us to implement a proactive, brave style of football.



Camille Surdez



Pasi Hilli



FC Basel

GOALKEEPING AS A CORE PART OF THE GAME MODEL

A crucial part of our identity is the way we integrate goalkeeping into the team model. For us, the goalkeeper is not a separate unit; they are a core part of how we play.

This is where Pasi Hilli plays a fundamental role. Pasi operates as the goalkeeping coach while also supporting me in key functions as an assistant coach. He fully supports me and the rest of the staff, while taking responsibility for ensuring that our goalkeepers serve the team's playing identity at the highest possible level.

His responsibilities include:

- integrating goalkeepers into the team game model
- responsibility for set pieces
- opponent analysis
- active involvement in team training
- helping design and implement tactical principles
- supporting both goalkeepers and outfield players.

Goalkeepers need to understand the same principles as the rest of the team — positioning, timing, superiority, pressing triggers, rest defence. We don't isolate them; we train these concepts with them. Every training exercise has a purpose, and goalkeepers are involved in that purpose.

Feedback is also a key element of Pasi's work. He analyses GoPro footage from both matches and training sessions, allowing for very precise, contextual

feedback. This supports not only goalkeeper development, but also helps outfield players understand spacing, build-up decisions, and defensive structures from a different perspective.

This integration has significantly raised our collective level and reinforced the idea that everyone contributes to the same identity.

PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE AND AVAILABILITY

With the playing style we want to implement, physical preparation is not optional: it is foundational. Samu Kauppila, our fitness coach, plays a vital role in making sure the players are physically able to express our game model week after week.

Our style demands repeated high-intensity actions with short recovery periods, not only within sessions, but between training days and after matches. Samu's work focuses on supporting players so they can tolerate, recover from, and adapt to these demands.

On the pitch, our aim is to progressively overload intensity rather than volume. Special attention is paid to exposure to high speeds and high-intensity actions, ensuring every player is regularly exposed across sessions and training weeks. This exposure is intentionally fluctuated so that the long-term trend of high-speed running continues to move upward.

When the competition calendar allows, we often follow a structure of three weeks of increasing load followed by one week of reduced load. By carefully monitoring these exposure patterns, we can identify individual players' "worst-case scenarios"; for example, unusually high peaks in high-speed running (>19 km/h).



This allows us to:

- adjust training around these peaks
- deliberately prepare players to tolerate them
- progressively make these peaks less exceptional.

Over time, what was once a “worst-case scenario” becomes part of the normal weekly demand. While numbers never guide everything, when a player hits new physical highs, we believe expectations for that player should evolve accordingly. This makes physical development more auto-regulatory and individualised.

Beyond football training, we use small doses of targeted complementary work, such as strength and aerobic conditioning, to overload systems that are not always sufficiently stimulated through football alone. Because players respond differently to similar loads, Samu also assesses neuromuscular readiness weekly using jump and strength tests, helping us fine-tune loading and keep players healthy and available.

ASSISTANT COACHING AND DAILY LEADERSHIP

Camille Surdez brings a unique and extremely valuable perspective to our staff. A former professional player in Switzerland and France, including time at Girondins de Bordeaux, she ended her playing career in Basel in 2022 due to knee osteoarthritis. Since then, she has also become a mother, a life experience that has added depth, balance, and clarity to her leadership.

Camille returned to the club as an assistant coach with huge motivation and ambition. Although she hadn’t worked with Pasi or me before, in just a short time we’ve built a very healthy working relationship based on trust, open dialogue, and shared responsibility.

She brings:

- strong understanding of the players’ reality
- excellent communication
- daily presence and intensity on the pitch
- a clear competitive mindset.

From her perspective, the daily learning process has been intense and inspiring. As Camille explains: “I learn an enormous amount every day working alongside Omar. He is a very experienced coach with a clear, demanding, and ambitious vision of the football he wants to implement. I particularly appreciate the high standards he sets for the players, as well as the intensity and tempo of the training sessions. Here, it’s not just about saying we want to be champions: we truly put the work in to make it happen, both on and off the pitch.

“Working in this environment is extremely motivating. Omar gives us a lot of responsibility, involves us fully in decision-making, and allows us to express ourselves within our respective roles. Being part of this staff is very rewarding, and I look forward to continuing to learn from him, to grow, and to contribute to the club’s project.”

Camille is deeply involved in training, preparation, and decision-making. She learns quickly, challenges ideas, and brings her own perspective, which is exactly what I want in a staff member. We are a young, complementary staff with a lot of potential, united by a common ambition.

What I appreciate most is her commitment to high standards. Here, we don’t just talk about wanting to be champions: we work like champions every day, on and off the pitch.





STAFF UNITY: THE FOUNDATION OF THE PROJECT

None of this works without strong staff dynamics. I'm proud of the environment we are building: one where everyone is involved, trusted, and accountable. Roles are clear, but collaboration is constant. Debate is encouraged, alignment is essential, and once decisions are made, we move forward together.

This unity creates clarity for the players. It creates stability. And it allows us to push standards without losing trust.

Beyond the coaches, we have Laurène Léopoldes, our head physiotherapist, who ensures players stay healthy and recover effectively from both training and matches. Her work is essential in keeping the squad available and at peak condition. Stefani Liebhardt, our masseuse, supports recovery, manages muscle strain, and helps players maintain physical readiness throughout a demanding season.

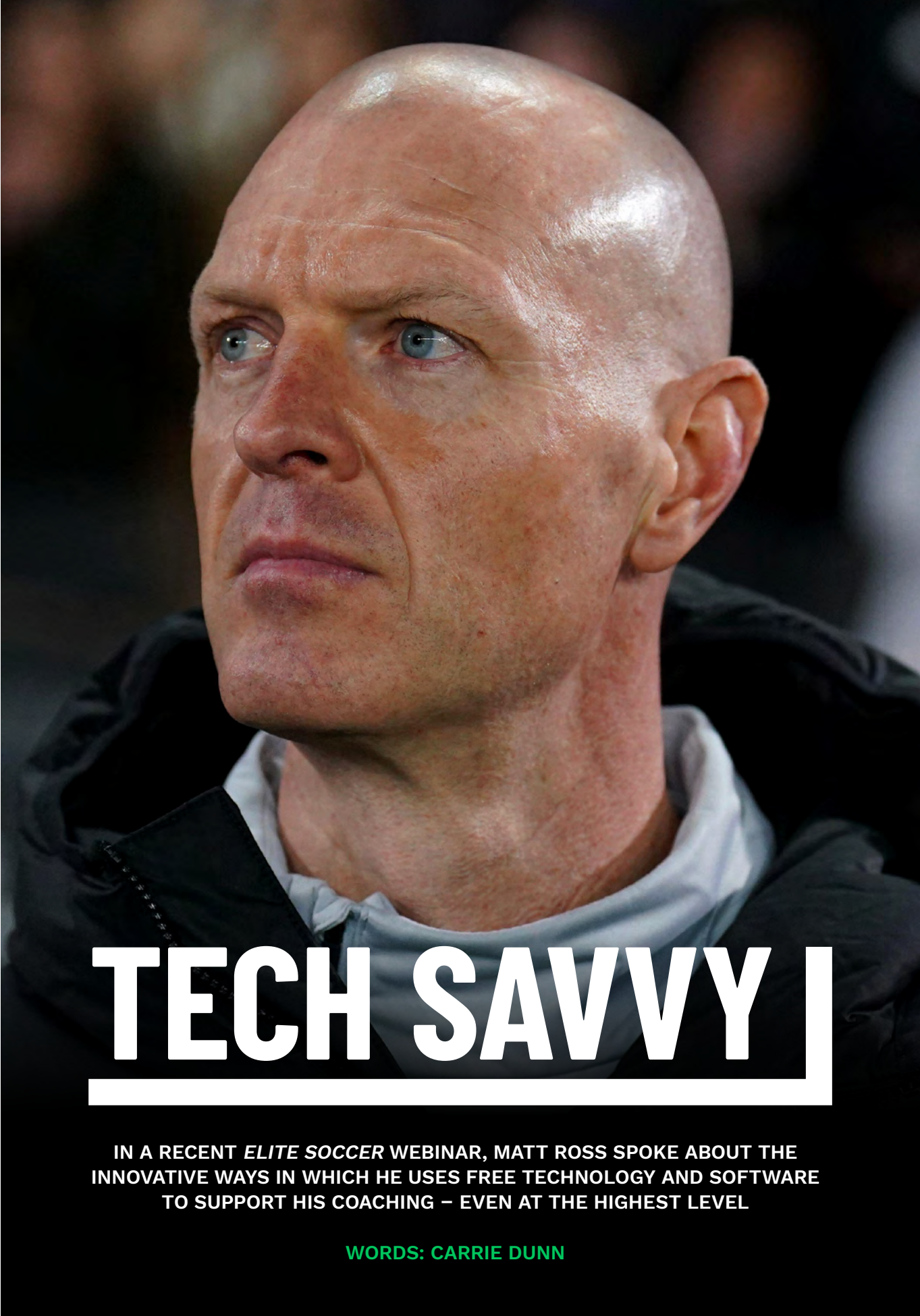
Perhaps most importantly, Najim Hamdani, our kit manager, is a cornerstone of the daily operation. He ensures everything runs smoothly behind the scenes, from equipment to logistics, allowing players and staff to focus entirely on performance. His dedication, reliability, and attention to detail make him an indispensable part of the club's functioning.

This wider staff ecosystem, from physiotherapy and recovery to kit management, allows the coaches and players to concentrate fully on training, preparation, and competition. Their contribution is often unseen by fans, but it is critical to building the culture, structure, and stability we rely on every day.

LOOKING FORWARD

We are still at the beginning of this journey. Building identity, changing habits, and creating sustainable success takes time, patience, and consistency. But the direction is clear, the foundation is strong, and the daily work reflects the ambition of this club.

FC Basel has history, responsibility, and expectations. Together – players, staff, and everyone around the club – we are working every day to build something worthy of that badge.



TECH SAVVY

IN A RECENT *ELITE SOCCER* WEBINAR, MATT ROSS SPOKE ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE WAYS IN WHICH HE USES FREE TECHNOLOGY AND SOFTWARE TO SUPPORT HIS COACHING – EVEN AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

WORDS: CARRIE DUNN



Matt Ross in coaching action

Being a national team manager doesn't mean you're laden with resources.

Just ask Matt Ross, currently in charge of Chinese Taipei following spells with Nepal, and previous stints working in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, China, Sweden and Germany.

His journey has taken him all over the world, from grassroots to elite – and it has given him a fascinating insight on how to do his job on a shoestring.

“You'd really be surprised the levels you can work at that you walk into a club or to a national association and there's nothing there,” he says. “You don't have any scouting equipment, you don't have any testing equipment, you don't have a management system, there's no GPS, there's no cameras.”

He adds: “We want to provide an environment that's as professional as possible, that is somewhere where the players can feel appreciated, can feel that their work's being recognised – and as coaches, we also would like that kind of situation too.”

Even at national level, he says, players are still amateur or semi-professional, and not getting paid – so perhaps it is no wonder that there is no spare cash for software or equipment.

And that often means there is little money to pay for staff. Matt reflects: “I went to Nepal alone with two local staff. I always work with local staff and was fortunate enough to have an excellent assistant come with me from Australia just for two FIFA windows, and then he had to leave again. So I'm used to working by myself – so no analyst, no fitness coach, no even goalkeeper coach.

Matt relies on the Google suite of programs, plus a combination of YouTube and QuickTime for video,

and Keynote for presentations – and has recently personally invested in Tactic Scout and Tactic Advanced, which he describes as “really fantastic”.

Before a camp or before starting a job, he prepares a presentation to outline his long-term plan – and he does something similar ahead of a tournament, using Keynote to go through the upcoming training sessions and friendly matches. Using clear eye-catching visuals is particularly helpful when he is communicating with people who don't have English as a primary language.

But it's not all about public-facing data. He uses Google Sheets to manage information that needs to be shared only with a few people – or sometimes just for his own reference.

“Walking into Nepal, a country of 30 million people, Mount Everest on this side, jungle on that side, forest on the other side – nobody had an idea where the players were.





Nobody knew who the talents were, where they lived, where they were born, so just using Google Sheets was something that I could share with other people within the FA. We can fill it in real time, get all the details...very easy way to keep track of everything.”

He has a similar spreadsheet available for talent identification.

“I could be at a match with an iPad or even with the phone,” he explains, “and it just comes up as a form and I can go through. I give the ratings one through 5. If I need to type down a little comment, it’s straight in. If I have the luxury of a scout or a scouting network, they can all be feeding that straight into the Google Drive, so I can see that in real time. I can see the scouts that have done their reports. I can see the score straight away.”

And once a player is within his set-up, they can collaborate with him on an assessment sheet that gives them plenty of valuable data. The coach assessment form doubles as a player self-assessment, breaking the game down into aspects including in possession, out of possession, as a supporting player, the transitions, decision making, execution, football fitness, and psychology. That means when players want to know about how he’s making decisions, he can point to this document.

“To sit down with a player and go through this form, it will always become obvious to them the things they do really well and the things that they’re really lacking because they can see straight away through the wording of it,” he says.

“So for example, we played the match last week and the players would fill out this form and I would get to see the results and it would form the basis of their individual development plan and the plan to go forward for them as well before the next camp.”

And he also asks players to fill out a form first thing every morning – which then shapes how he approaches the rest of the day.

“That’s a mandatory requirement before you get to breakfast: how you slept, the quality of the sleep, current energy level, basic things, mood, stress level, any injury information.

And I get to see that in real time. I get to see who wakes up three seconds before breakfast or who’s up early, who’s feeling good.”

That combines with daily body weight monitoring and liaison with the team physiotherapist, meaning they can then decide who isn’t able to take a full part in the day’s training and who needs additional rehab.

“It allows me to then adjust the session in the morning or in the afternoon based on the information,” he concludes.

And Matt is also keen to use the old-fashioned forms of communication as well where possible. He presented each player with a notebook and encouraged them to write in them, with the coaching staff supporting them to create their IDPs in the same way.

“The players would have notebooks full - would have 20, 30, 40 pages, written feedback from us, ideas of their own, and we would just sit and discuss.

“Yes, we’d all love technology and what can you do if you don’t have it - don’t forget the basics as well, pen and paper.”

Although adapting the technological tools available to him has been a test of ingenuity, he also thinks it’s made him a better coach.

“All of these exercises for me are important for my coaching growth, because not being fed anything to go into a club and be given anything means that I’ve had to develop all these things through reading, through research, through speaking to more experienced coaches.”

He adds: “I spent the first 10 or 15 years of my career wanting to be tactically astute, wanting to be able to solve problems, get the Xs and the Os right and it’s only been really lately in the last two or three that I’ve gone more towards, I feel, being a better manager of players.

“Having more information, including my gut, as well as some of the tech, leads me to have more interaction.”

And he admits: “I think I would struggle now to go into a big FA and there’s everything that you’ve ever dreamed of, because I’ve grown accustomed to using these using these methods - and it means more contact with players rather than just seeing someone’s live stats on their GPS.”

Indeed, Matt believes that this skill set has got him to where he is today. Having qualifications and flashy presentations might get you in the door, he says, but it’s the human side of coaching that will keep you in the building.

“The more you think about football, [and] express it, either visually or on pen and paper, the more you understand it,” he says.



Matt Ross, as Nepal national team head coach, presents an award to Nepal Super League player Bakary Mane



GREAT EXPECTATIONS

IN HIS LATEST FEATURE FOR *ELITE SOCCER*, [JOHN ALLPRESS](#) - FORMER ASSISTANT HEAD OF ACADEMY PLAYER AND COACH DEVELOPMENT AT TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR – EXPLORES HOW COACHES' EXPECTATIONS CAN IMPACT ON THE WAY THEIR PLAYERS PERFORM

Coaches' expectations can significantly influence what they think of a player's performance. It is vital a coach has realistic ideas of what an individual is ready to produce in training and matchplay, as experience alone can have a significant impact on performance in any specific set of circumstances. For example, a player taking part in their 100th league match is in a very different event physically, psychologically, socially and emotionally from one playing in their first.

Experience counts and the pressure of inexperience is real. Nobody plays better under pressure. The very best and the more experienced players know how to maintain their performance levels. The trick is not to play worse.

The training and match environments are multifaceted ones with actions being contingent upon a very broad range of interconnected and interacting factors that go way beyond the traditional psychological, social, physical and technical domains.

A player's performance will depend on the type of event (a league match, knock-out, part of a tournament, friendly), the opposition, the quality of the squad available, experience, age, fitness, readiness, form, climate, weather or how long you have to prepare.

The coach's job remains the same, though: to move the players from not knowing to knowing stuff and to teach them what to expect and what's expected of them as they progress along their development pathway.



HARD WORK AND COMMUNICATION

The key areas of a coach's expectations of their players' performances traditionally revolve around effort and attitude. The coach will look out for hard work, dedication to the task in hand, punctuality, a deliberate focus on practice and a positive attitude. They will often reward effort and intent as much as skilful decision-making and execution of techniques.



Players will also be expected to understand their roles within the team and do their jobs, make smart decisions in and out of possession and apply in matchplay what they have learned and practised in training regularly.

Helping players to manage their nerves, maintain concentration and focus and demonstrate resilience when they make mistakes or things go wrong is much harder for the coach to assess in the heat of battle. Encouraging words are helpful but 70 per cent of communication is non-verbal, so behaviour and body language are crucial to any conversations the coach may have with the players either privately or in team meetings.

QUICK DECISIONS

In football, nothing ever happens in exactly the same way more than once, but many very similar things happen a lot, and success or failure often depends on playing well in the big moments. Everything can change in a split second. But smaller moments when the right decisions have to be made and techniques executed to a high standard matter too. These things can be unexpected and occur very quickly sometimes without a player realising their significance at the time, like a tackle, block or interception that regains possession, or a simple one-touch pass that retains it.

When judging a player's contribution to the team's performance and the impact of an individual on the game, the coach must be on the lookout for such actions - especially if a player is the spider in the web, whose influence is often only noticed when they are not there.

Also, when a player is young and has been encouraged to play with courage, to try things and not be concerned so much with mistakes, the coach must be ready to praise effort and intent to a greater degree and note that when assessing the overall performance.

When things go well, they look effortless, but even for a youngster, who lacks consistency, a lot of unseen work and preparation will have gone into being able to execute such actions to a high standard. But that skilful moment is not owned by the player or combination of players until it appears in training or the match, because nobody has seen that exact moment before. It may be fleeting but still deserves merit and admiration.

Not all actions are of equal consequence. A hat-trick in a friendly against lesser opposition is still an achievement, but does not bear comparison to scoring the winning goal in a World Cup final. Nevertheless, when big moments appear, players must be ready to take advantage and step up to the plate because when they do, they inevitably get better. The youngster scoring a hat-trick against lesser opposition should be practising finishing for the time the opponents are tougher and more skilful, and the coach should note that about the performance.



MAKING MISTAKES

To help players prepare to manage big moments as they occur training should resemble the reality of matchday to a large extent as much as possible. Football can be messy and chaotic and to be effective players have to regularly make the right decisions and skilfully execute the right actions at the right time under pressure. In this challenging environment, it helps if players can stay focused and direct their attention to the next moment, next task and next action. So if they do make a mistake they can quickly reset and aim to make their next pass, next interception or next header a good one.

The coach can help the players learn to manage these moments in the game by focusing their attention on specific actions they have to execute inside the game situation. These take the form of challenges that do not compromise decision-making. By using the right language, the coach can focus players' attention on the next action. For example:

- Look for opportunities to pass forward off one or two touches
- Be ready to play forward as a first action
- Try to get the ball back without tackling.

These challenges and ones like them can be directed to individuals, units or the whole group during a 20-minute training block where messiness and chaos is actively encouraged or in match play where it can occur naturally within the flow of the game. If the coach

wants skilful play to become reliable under pressure, then it needs to be stress-tested so that in the big moments players can perform to a very high standard.

Every time the coach gets together with the players, they need to focus their attention on the challenges ahead and the opportunities that such challenges present. The coach should encourage a mindset of humility and confidence in the players: humility so nobody gets ahead of themselves and realise they still have to get better, and the confidence to be able to move towards those challenges as they arise. The environment should encourage players to focus on opportunity and what is possible. Mistakes should be embraced as part of a learning and practice pathway and not something to be afraid of making. This mindset will allow the players to play in the moment, play with courage and try out things in the heat of battle of matchplay, not just in training or against weaker opponents. That's how players find out how good they can be, and when evaluating performances the coach should take these factors into account.

MATCHPLAY MOMENTS

A football match or training session is a series of moments that require players to act and react. These events can happen quickly even in junior grassroots and youth academy matches. Sometimes a player doesn't have the time to think about things but must act instinctively to retrieve a situation or execute an action. It's important a coach does not get caught up





in the expectation of what a player should do in any given situation. The coach does not see exactly what the players see so should keep an open mind. Players in the peloton sometimes catch and even surpass the early high-fliers.

A coach should know the standards required for players to progress and what good, great and elite looks like so they can challenge the players and teach to the top. Not having expectation of where players may eventually end up playing out their careers is not the same as not having standards and challenges for the current training session or match day.

Standards relate to things that are controllable and based on personal levels of performance. The questions for the individual are – how can you go home a better player? If you think your performance was worth a 7 out of 10, how can you make it an 8? The job of the coach is to help the players meet certain standards of performance that we know they are capable of and encourage them to push those boundaries and strive to progress and improve.

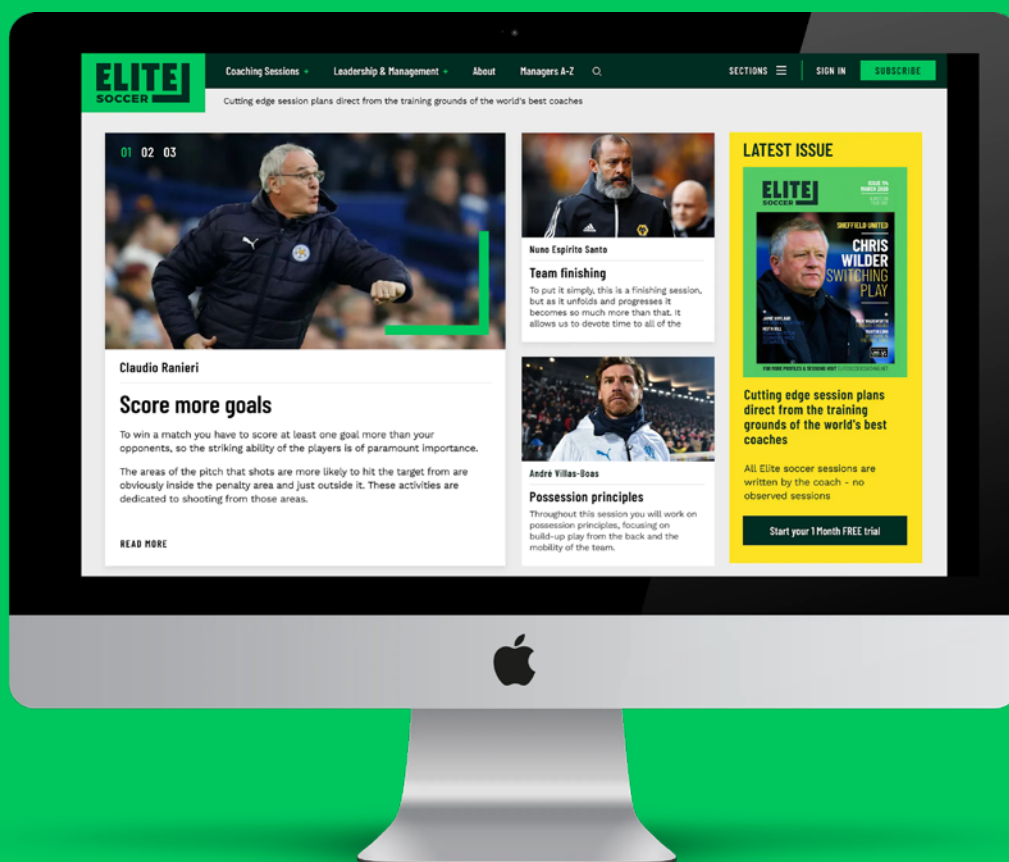
No matter how much planning goes into a game at grassroots, academy, under-18, under-21, senior or international level things inevitably go wrong. That's the game. The plan always changes when it hits the pitch. For this reason, players need structure. They need to know that their coach would rather they made a mistake than didn't try anything, and that if they do make a mistake their reset is to try to make the next thing they do a good thing.

Fear of making a mistake will shut a player down, whereas mistakes, like everything else in football, are just moments and noise to be sucked up and dealt with. For that to happen the player must know the coach has their back 100 per cent. If this is truly the case the players will know they will be free to optimise their performances without the negative impact of failure.



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Arsène Wenger

"I look forward to receiving every issue"

José Mourinho



CELEBRATING 15 YEARS AS THE COACHES' CHOICE

