

 ABOUT

Academy:

Middlesbrough
Academy

Phase:

Professional
development
phase

Focus: Player
development:
an insight into
developing high-
potential players

FIELDING THE FUTURE

MIDDLESBROUGH ACADEMY OFFERS AN INSIGHT INTO HOW THEY
WORK WITH THEIR HIGH-POTENTIAL PLAYERS IN ORDER TO GET THEM
OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FIRST TEAM, THEN SUPPORT THEM TO STAY THERE



MIDDLESBROUGH FC

EST. 1876

ABOUT THE CLUB

League: EFL Championship

Head coach: Kim Hellberg, since November 2025

Location: Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire, UK

Ground: Riverside Stadium, since 1995

Capacity: 34,742

12TH

12th oldest Football League club in England and Wales

One of the founding members of the Premier League in 1992

2

9

9

1

TWO

Have spent all but two seasons of their history as a professional club competing within the top two tiers of English football

CORE VALUES

Honesty and integrity: Doing the right thing

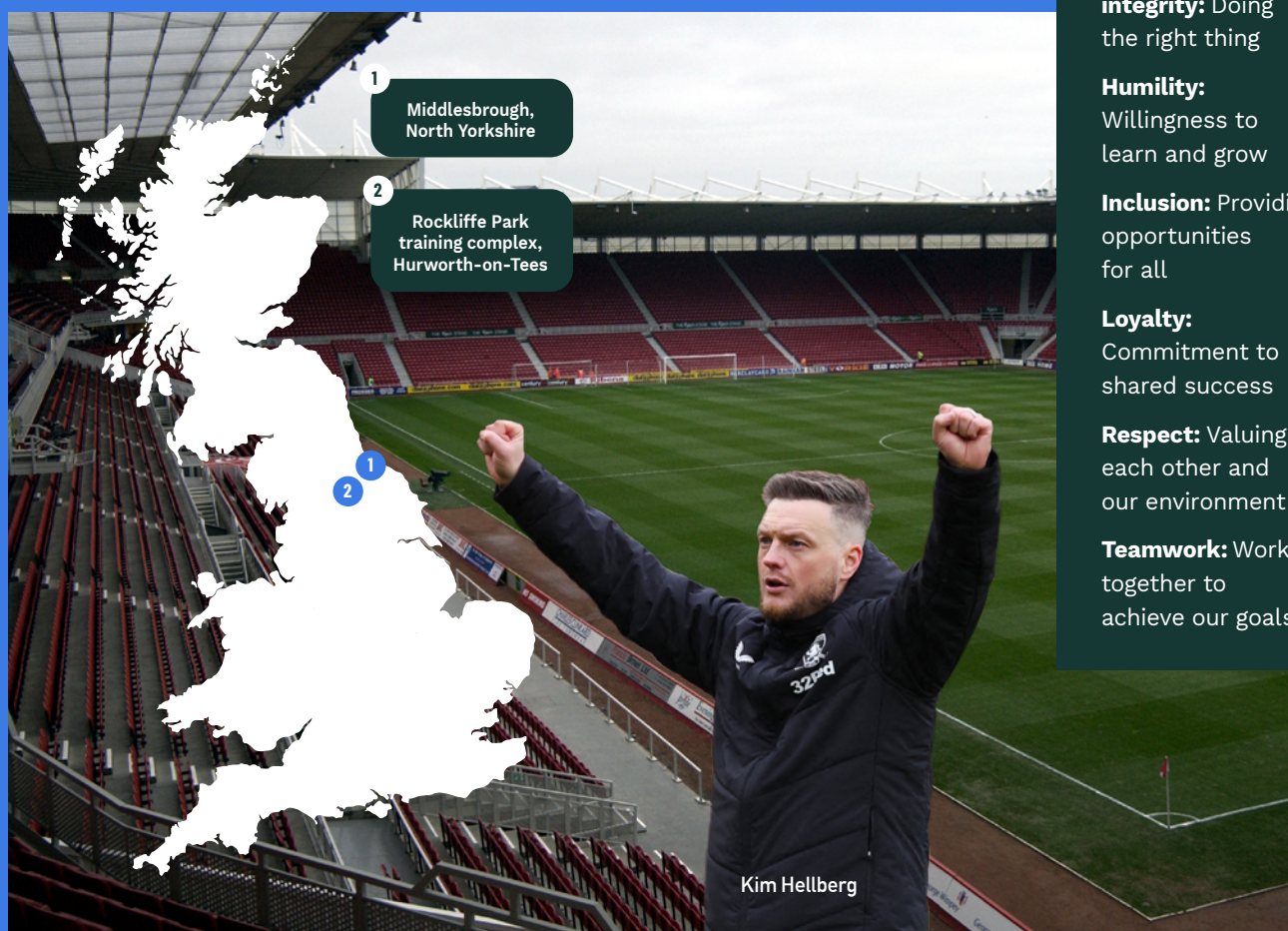
Humility: Willingness to learn and grow

Inclusion: Providing opportunities for all

Loyalty: Commitment to shared success

Respect: Valuing each other and our environment

Teamwork: Working together to achieve our goals



Kim Hellberg



ABOUT THE ACADEMY

Category: 1

Location: Rockliffe Park training complex, Hurworth-on-Tees

Academy manager:
Craig Liddle, since January 2017

Academy graduates

Over 100 academy graduates have played for the Middlesbrough first team, including former first-team captains Jonathan Woodgate, who also went on to manage the team, and Ben Gibson. Current first-team star Hayden Hackney is an example of a more recent academy graduate.

The academy has produced senior internationals, including Woodgate and Stuart Downing, who both played for England, former Scotland captain James Morrison, Northern Ireland international Chris Brunt, and Australian internationals Brad Jones, Luke Wilkshire and Rhys Williams.



Stuart Downing



Ben Gibson



Jonathan Woodgate



THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PHASE

The Boro professional development phase is the transitional bridge between being an academy player and a first-team player. It aims to support players with their transition through the professional development phase, to their first team debut, and then on to becoming an established first-team player.

Though it fields teams in the U21 Premier League and the U18 Premier League, rather than viewing the

professional development phase as two separate teams, the club prefers to see it as an environment that addresses the needs of the players while leveraging the expertise of the coaches.

The aim is to intentionally nurture high-potential individuals by providing personalised coaching, both on and off the pitch, using the high-potential player development approach illustrated below.

HIGH-POTENTIAL PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

Player development model	Our environment	Coaching model	Coach development model
Observations 'Our players don't do this...'	Link/context 'Merging with football'	Connection 'What skills do we need to develop these things?'	Develop 'Individualised coach support'
Conversations 'What do we value in people and players?'	Experts 'Curious to learn from others'	On/off pitch 'What does it look like in these different environments?'	Purpose 'Increase awareness and range of coaching skills'
Outside looking in 'Different views on development'	Research 'How can this inform everyday practice?'	Range 'Only good and bad, not one way of coaching'	
Enhance 'What's the stuff that can improve football?'	Our strengths 'What do we do well?'		



BORO U21s



BORO U18s

BORO U21s



Mark Tinkler

Role: Head coach

Started coaching: 2007

Highest coaching qualification:
UEFA A Licence

As a player:
Midfielder and former England youth international who made over 400 appearances for clubs including Leeds United, York City, Hartlepool and Livingston



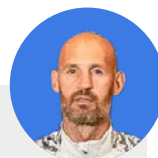
Paul Crager

Role: Assistant coach

Started coaching: 2007

Highest coaching qualification:
UEFA A Licence

BORO U18s



Rob Jones

Role: Head coach

Started coaching: 2012

Highest coaching qualification:
UEFA A Licence

Previous clubs:
Doncaster Rovers FC Academy, Richmond International Academic & Soccer Academy

As a player:
Defender who made over 400 appearances for clubs including Grimsby Town, Hibernian, Sheffield Wednesday and Doncaster Rovers



Stephen Harrison

Role:
Assistant player development coach

Started coaching: 2004

Highest coaching qualification:
UEFA A Licence

Previous clubs:
Sunderland Academy, Newcastle United FC Academy

HIGH-POTENTIAL PLAYER DEVELOPMENT – A SESSION

Session set-up

The one-hour session is designed to:

- Focus on specifically individual high-potential player needs within role/unit specific practices
- Provide high relevance, high detail and high repetition which gives players a chance to practise, discover and make mistakes
- Progress from an individualised practice to a phase of play practice to a full game
- Allow for clear, defined roles and responsibilities, all player-focused, for each of the coaches
- In terms of pitch geography, position each practice on the relevant part of the pitch

PART 1 – 20 MINUTES

EACH FOCUS PLAYER TAKES PART IN AN INDIVIDUALISED PRACTICE



PART 2 – 20 MINUTES

EACH FOCUS PLAYER TAKES PART IN A PHASE OF PLAY PRACTICE



PART 3 – 20 MINUTES

ALL FOCUS PLAYERS TAKE PART IN THE 11v11





PLAYER PROFILES

Player profiles, including strengths and needs ('Our players don't do this', from the high-potential player development model), are assessed by observing the player's capabilities and performance levels, compared to capabilities and performance levels needed at first-team level, all encompassed within the club's game model.

As an example, one problem observed by the coaching staff was defenders turning their bodies to mark square inside the box, resulting in attackers having the advantage of running forwards while defenders are backpedalling and having to turn.

Alongside this, when attackers pull away from the defender, space increases as the defender moves away from the attacker, giving the attacker an advantage in the space in front, as the defender can't close the gap to win the ball back or make contact.

Turning defenders to mark on their side allows them to cross over and match the attacker's run inside the box when travelling at speed. Defenders working inline with the attackers allows them to maintain an awareness of both the attacker's movement and the player on the ball.

Continuing to mark when the attacker pulls away stops the distance from increasing and means the defender stays on the attacker's line.

Using this approach means that when attackers run across the defender, the defender can match and make contact to move in front and beat the attacking player to the ball.

These observations were used to define the development need and design the appropriate sessions for player 2.

"Player profiles, including strengths and needs, are assessed by observing the player's capabilities and performance levels, compared to capabilities and performance levels needed at first-team level, all encompassed within the club's game model"

PLAYER 1

Position

Centre back

Development need

In possession

- Angle and speed of support to progress the ball forwards
- Passing through to higher players, such as the centre midfielders, developing diagonal passing and awareness

Connection to Boro game model

In possession brilliance

Technical details

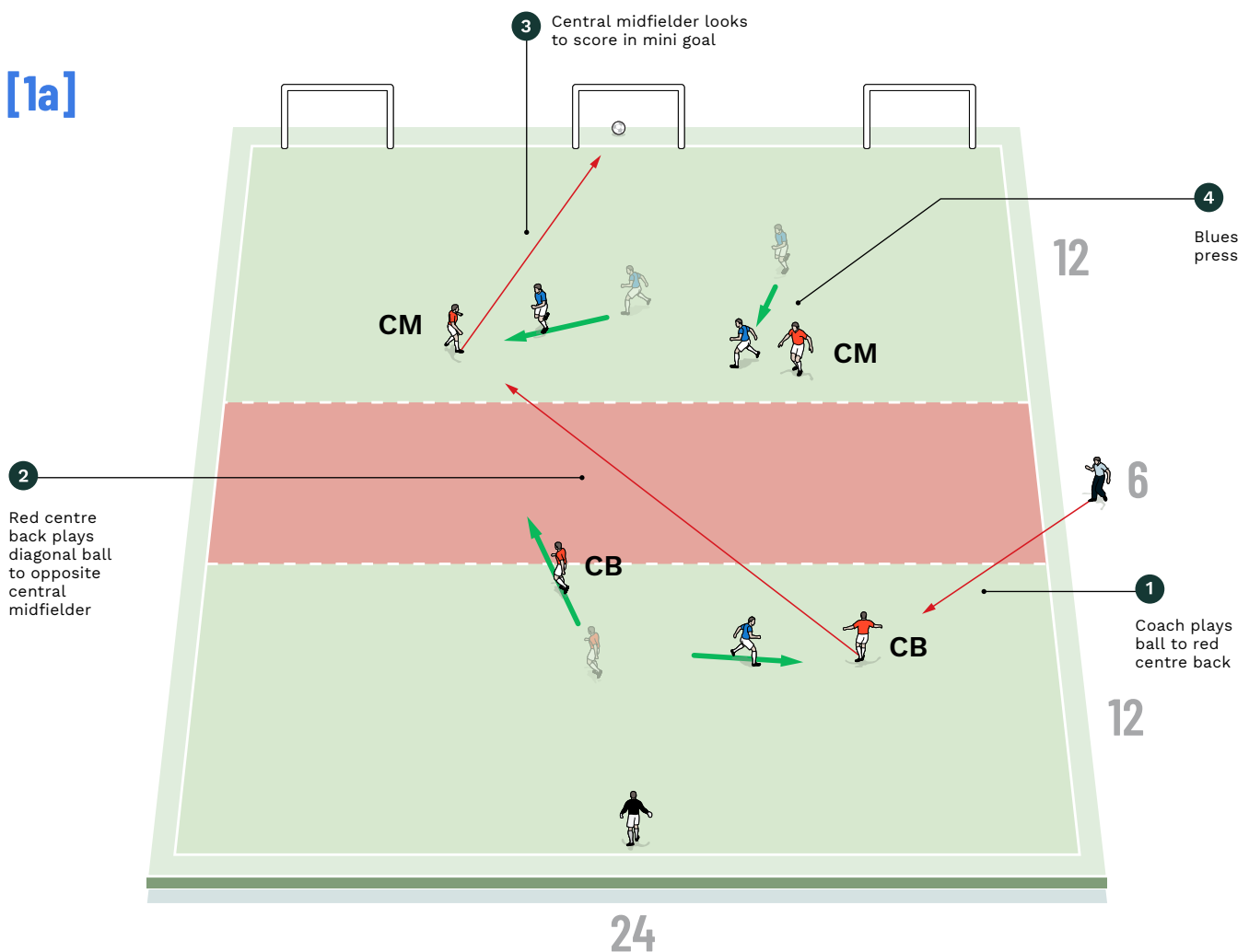
- The centre back should recognise the pressure and the need to support either the player on the ball, or the backward pass to the goalkeeper
- On a backward pass to the goalkeeper, the defenders are encouraged to turn and sprint to offer support before the opposition press
- Once the centre back is in a good support position, he should his body to receive and play the ball forwards
- Once he's received the ball, the defender should look forward for passing options through the lines

PROGRESSING THE BALL FORWARD THROUGH THE CENTRAL MIDFIELDER

This practice replicates progressive passing from the centre backs into the central midfielders, working on the angle and speed of support to progress the ball forwards. We set up in an area 24yds x 30yds, with a 6yd central area (the red zone), and three mini goals positioned as shown.

The red team look to combine and progress with passes into the two central midfielders, with a focus on passes through or on a diagonal to the opposite central midfielder as they seek to score in one of the three mini goals [1a].

[1a]

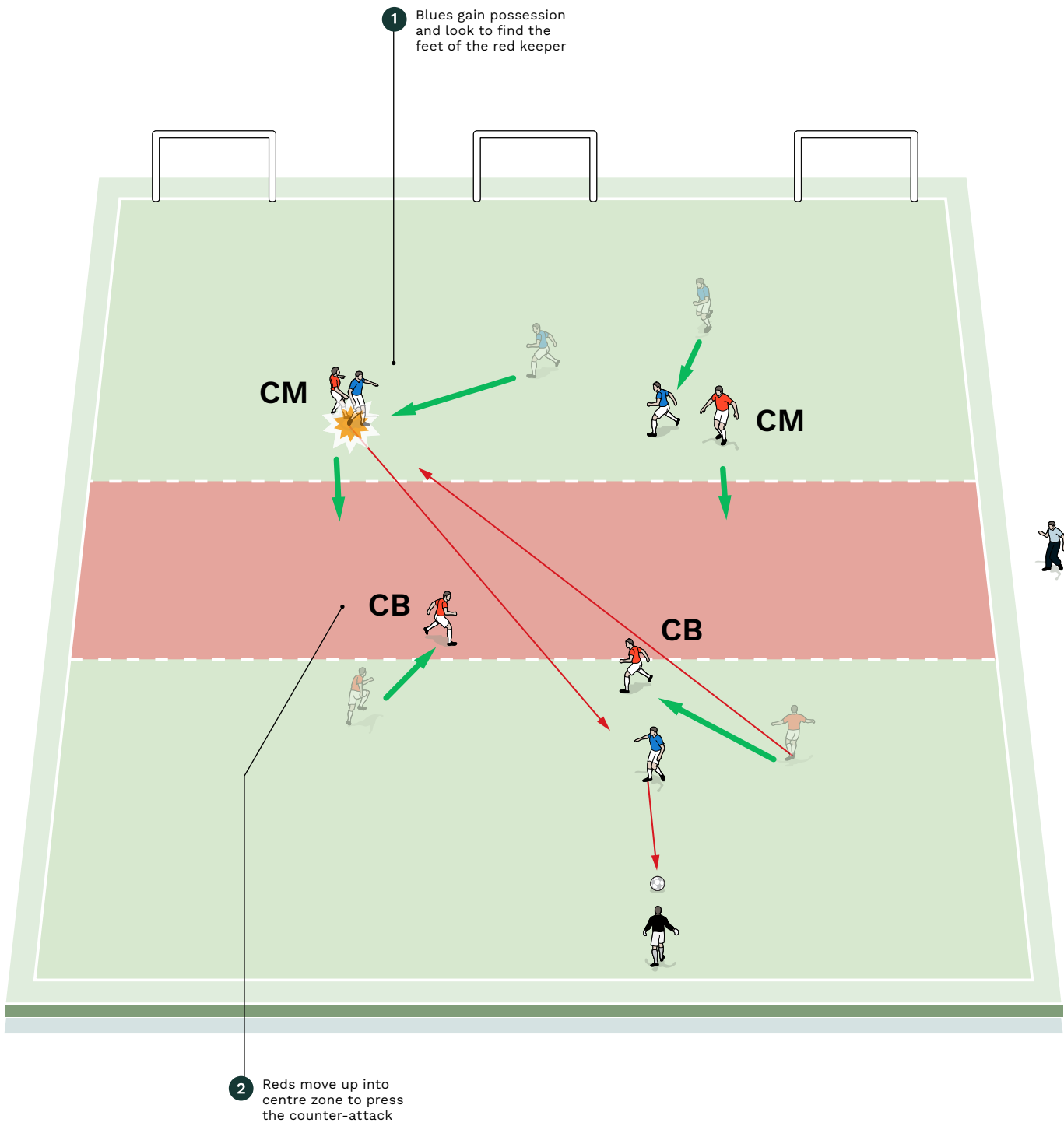


Once the ball has been played through, the red team step up into the red zone to be ready to counter-press and stop attacks, but also to encourage the central midfielder to drop out to

receive and support if it doesn't naturally occur [1b].

If the blues win the ball, they look to find the feet of the red goalkeeper. Play always restarts with the red centre backs.

[1b]



"If the blues win the ball, they look to find the feet of the red goalkeeper. Play always restarts with the red centre backs"

PLAYER 2

Position

Centre back

Development need

Out of possession

- Initiating contact both in and outside of the box
- Recovery into the box to mark or protect space based on role when defending crosses

Connection to Boro game model

Marking in the box principles, including first defender and second defender roles

Technical details

Initiating contact

- Mark in front
- One arm distance
- Nudge, use arms to block, step across attacker

Recovery into the box

First defender

- Intercept or clear the cross
- Recover into the box with the intention of protecting the front space, but if the opposition attackers are a threat, with a numerical advantage, mark
- Position in line with the post, adjusting based on opposition players and threat
- When playing in a back five, the first defender who is zonal can move away from the post towards the corner of the six-yard box, positioning themselves to intercept the cross and cover the wing-back

Second defender

- The role of the second defender is to mark the man as a priority
- When recovering into the box, be aware of opposition attackers as they travel, in a position ready to mark
- Move to stop opposition making contact with the ball first

CENTRE BACK CONTACT AND RECOVERY

This practice works on the centre back initiating contact, in and outside of the box, and recovering into the box when defending crosses.

For the first part, we set up in a 20x20yd square, with a 1v1 in the middle and three players on the outside as

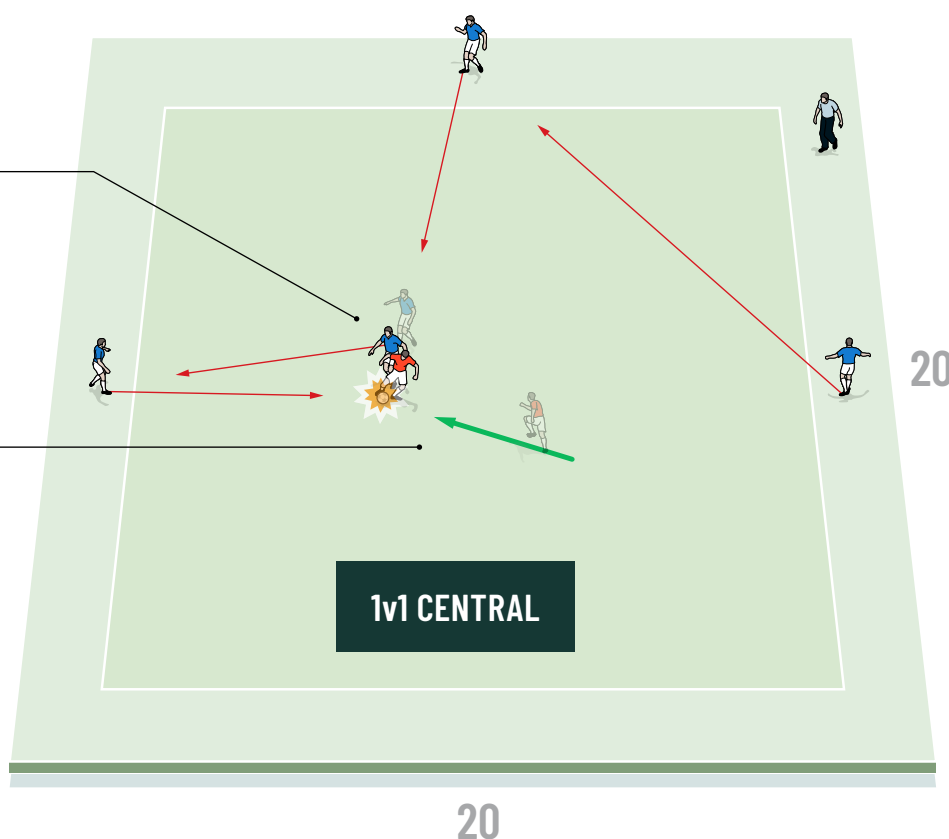
shown. This area should be in the middle of the pitch, to represent accurate pitch geography of outside of the box.

The three on the outside combine with the blue in the middle while the red, the centre back, works to initiate contact to win or intercept the ball [2a].

[2a]

1
Blue central player combines with the outside three to keep possession

2
Red centre back works to initiate contact to win or intercept the ball



For the second part, we extend the width of the area, so it's now 24yds. This area should be on the edge of the box so it represents the centre back working both in and outside of the box. We progress to a 2v2 centrally, so two centre backs now play against two opponents combining with the outside two. The two defenders must recognise when to engage and make contact with their defending partner, supporting and covering [2b].

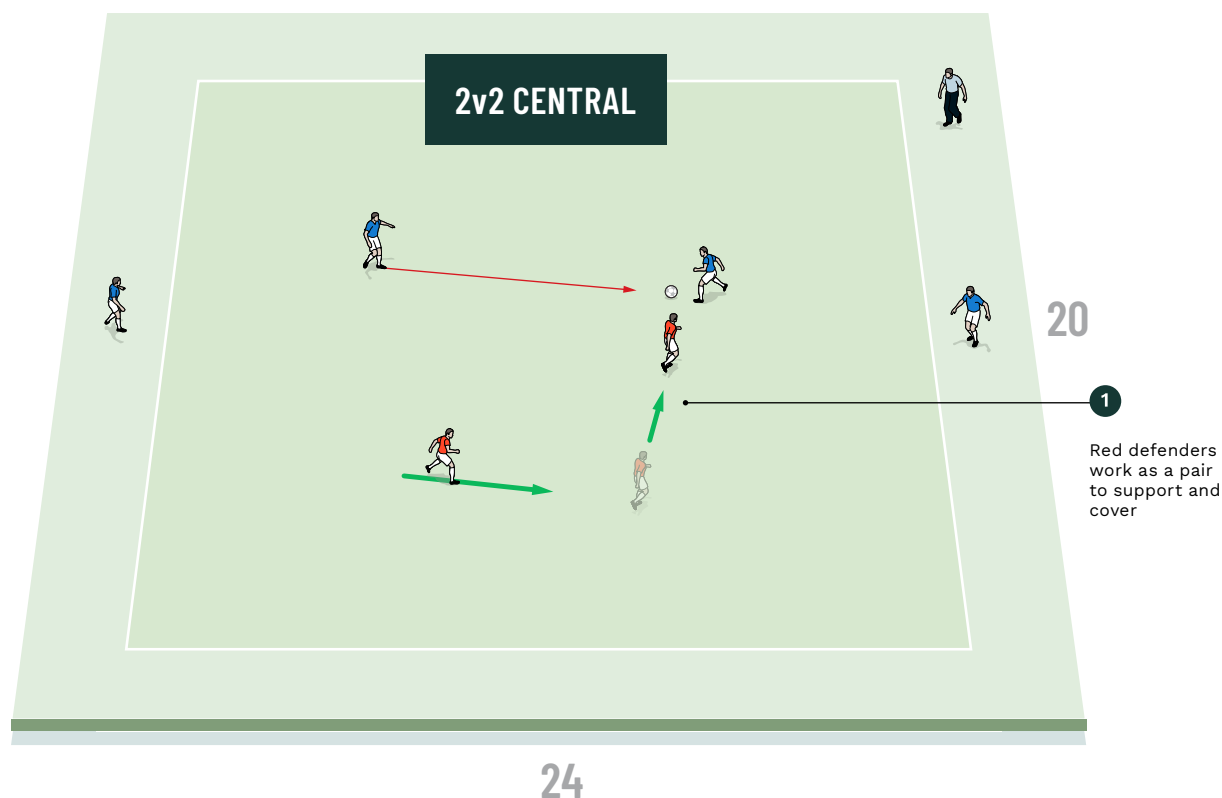
For the third part, we move into an area the width of the box and 24yds in height, and add a goal and goalkeeper. The box should be used for this area.

goalkeeper. The box should be used for this area.

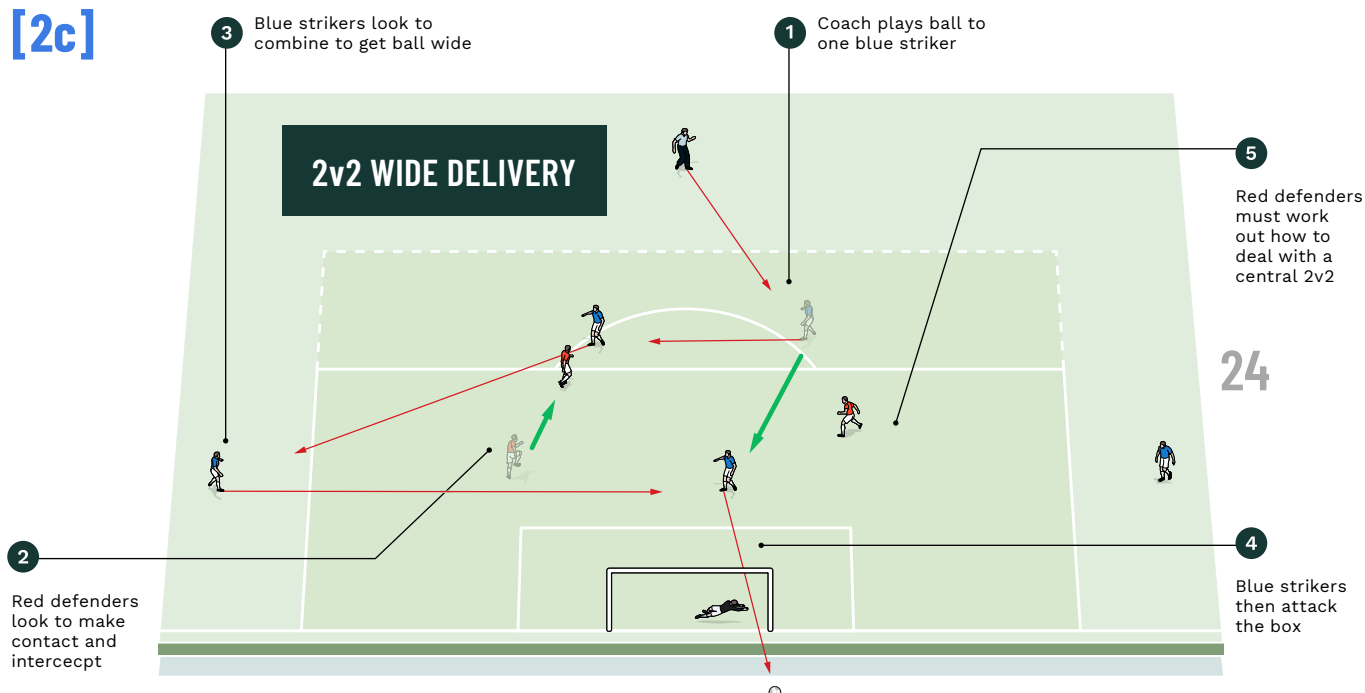
The coach starts play by passing to the feet of one of the strikers. A defender looks to make contact and intercept. The strikers then look to combine to get the ball wide before attacking the box as individuals or as a pair [2c].

Defenders recognise when and how to mark, or when and how to prioritise space. If it's one attacker v one defender, we prioritise marking, if it's 1v2 we work on space and marking, and if it's 2v2 we work on marking.

[2b]



[2c]



PLAYER 3

Position

Central midfielder

Development need

In possession

- Lateral movements to receive and combine with centre forwards
- Diagonal play, including the third man runs and combinations with the 9 and 10

Connection to Boro game model

In possession brilliance

Technical details

- Short combinations
- Timing of movements
- Receiving skills
- Body position

CENTRAL MIDFIELDERS FORWARD COMBINATIONS

This practice focuses on the central midfielder making third-man runs and effectively combining with the nine and ten.

We set up in an area the width of the penalty box and 40yds in length, an extended penalty area, and one end cornered off as shown.

The focus is on short combinations, timing of movements, receiving skills and body position to allow the central midfielder to effectively combine.

In this example, the red central midfielder and attacking midfielders combine to release the centre forward into the extended penalty area to have an effort on goal [3].

[3]

