

DEVELOPING SOCCER INTELLIGENCE THROUGH 7v7 *by Philip Cauchi*



Volume 1

Developing Soccer Intelligence Through 7 v 7 Volume 1

By

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Introduction.

Various methods are used to develop game intelligence. Small sided games with or without constraints are great tools which help the players, especially the youth to learn how to understand and read the game. The literature presented in this book is about following a methodological approach which guides the coach to deliver both effective and interesting training sessions.

The exercises used or referred to are all based on the 7v7 format. This format is very effective with players irrespective of their age, but who are developing their game intelligence by moving from the simpler 4v4 and into the more complex and more dynamic game involving more numbers. We must be careful when moving to a higher level as the game becomes more complex with more teammates and opponents. It is therefore appropriate to choose a method where the players raise their bar but at the same time they will be competent enough to undergo the challenge, thus stretching their soccer abilities.

The 7v7 has more lines than the 4v4, but less than 9v9 which makes it perfect as the next step in the players' learning process. We can start building gradually from 5v5 or 6v6 if we feel the need to. We can also start playing 7v7 in grids, where players are restricted to particular areas thus giving them the image of team shape in a 7v7. When the players grasp the necessary concepts we can then move to removing the grids. Exercises involving grids are demonstrated in chapter 7.

High level players and teams may also practice 7v7 to develop certain principles of play and especially the relations between the various sectors of the team. With the use of 7v7 the coach may simplify the problem but nevertheless the basic structure of the team still remains. This makes it an ideal scenario to highlight specific problems which will become more visible using this method. Teams from grassroots to top professionals use the 7v7 format. Hope you will enjoy this book and that it helps you in your work with your teams!

Chapter 1 – Guiding the players towards understanding the game.

Prior to the start of a new season, coaches should reflect thoroughly the outcomes they want their players to master through properly planned training and matches during the season. Through notational (video) analysis coaches can better learn in which stage of their development the players are and what skills and outcomes they target to achieve by the end of the season.

It is therefore imperative that clubs have a clear description of how they want their team/s to play. This is known as the game model. It does provide the technical staff to establish a clear common technical language. Furthermore, guidelines on training methodology and the exercises to be used help put all the stakeholders on the same page in designing training sessions. Training sessions should bear the purpose of gradually guiding the team to play in the desired collective behaviour. Thus, a training session is not a unit on its own, but forms part of a string of sessions that points towards the direction of where we aim to get.

A good training programme should aim to help develop habits at the individual, sector, and team collective levels. These habits form the way players interact with each other during the various phases of the game (Bordonau & Villanueva, 2018). Coaches should start planning from the top, which is the game model to be adapted by the team. From there we delve deeper into the related components of the game model starting with the macro principles of play, then sub-principles and into the finer details of the sub-sub-principles. I have mentioned related components as all the principles and sub-principles and therefore the sub-sub-principles must make sense in being at the service of the game model to be implemented.

The above does not only apply to professional and high level amateur teams. When coaching youths, coaches should have a well-defined plan of what they want their players to learn. Therefore, they should use well-designed training situations and exercises that brings out the desired behaviour on the field of play. Just copying an exercise from anywhere (including this

book), doesn't mean that the players will make the desired progress if the exercise doesn't satisfy the outcomes we as members of the technical staff are aiming to achieve.

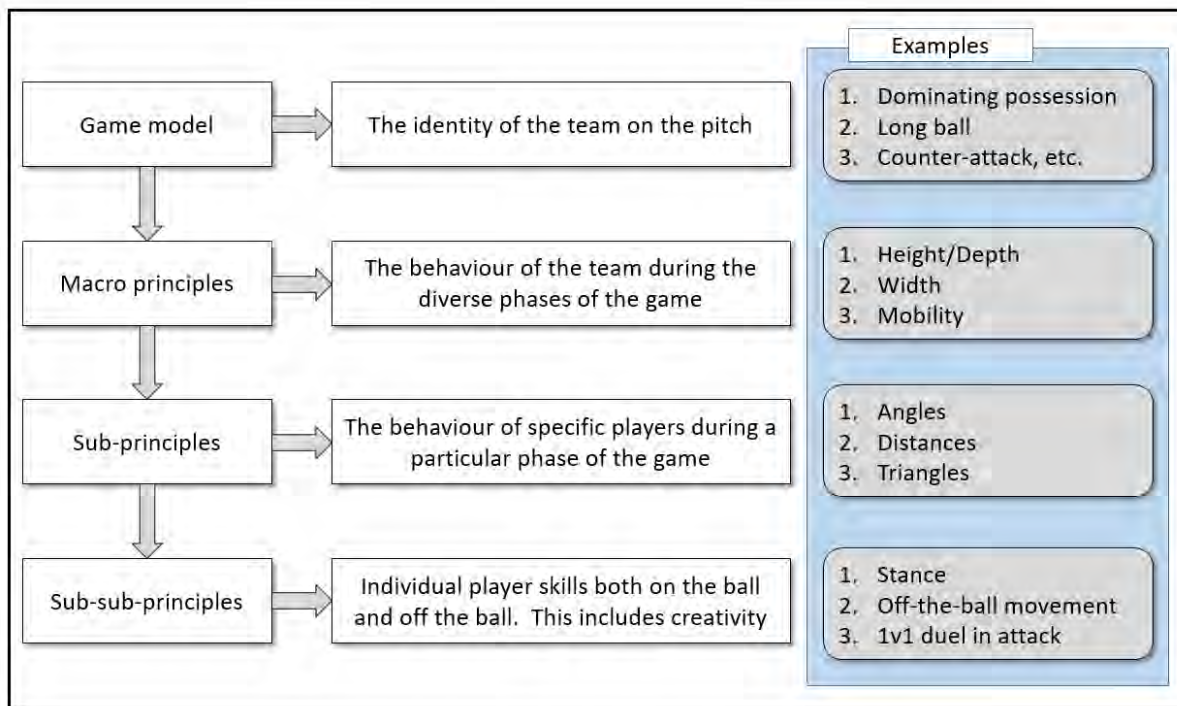


Figure 1 - Breaking down the game model into smaller meaningful components.

The design of training sessions should be done in a way where the meaningful smaller details emerge. These are the habits that we want to develop in our players in a way that the game model could be applied. Each training exercise should be relevant to the game and as realistic as possible. Constraints could be used so to help in the emergence of these behaviours. When designing or selecting exercises we should always keep in mind how will the exercise help improve the performance of the player. Applying the correct stimuli in training aids in a better transference to the game.

The success of an exercise also comes from the players' enjoyment in doing it. This is not only due to the fact that the exercise should be fun in itself, but also as the players feel that they are improving. The more relevant the exercise is, the more coachable it becomes. The players can understand better what they are doing and how it positively effects their game. This makes

correcting much easier as the players can relate better the practice with the game. Exercises should also be adjustable, in what we call variations. They shouldn't be neither easy nor too difficult. However, a bit of discomfort is necessary for the players to get them out of their comfort zone and stretch their soccer capacity threshold.

Well planned and defined programmes should lead to higher success rates and higher results in matches. Matches should serve us as coaches to raise the bar of our players. As an example, we could analyse the improvement in playing vertical (line breaking) passes the team can accomplish over a period of time, or better yet how many scoring chances or goals we can score. From there we can go back and analyse how these goals were created. Thus learn how the team's playing ability has developed over a period of time and create – as Davies (2016) refer to them – *Advanced Area Actions (AAA)*.

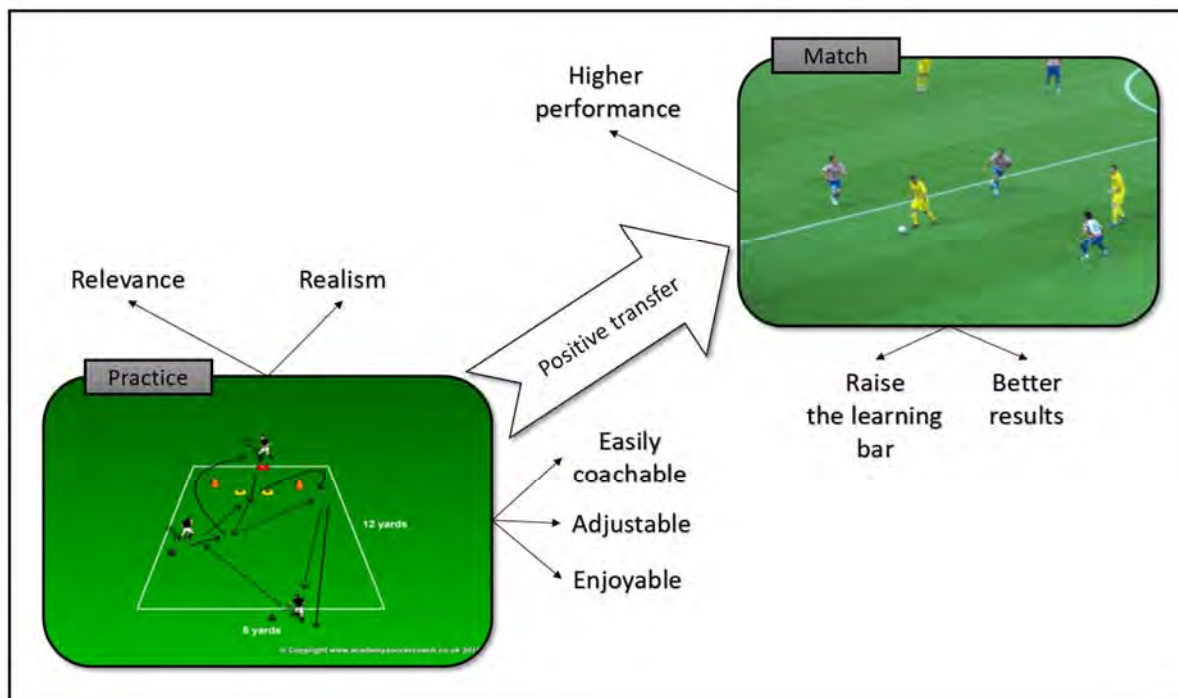


Figure 2 - Affective training means a high level of transfer to the game that increases performance

Before training, the coach should explain the players the key points of the session together with the main aim. This will help the players get to know what is expected of them during training.

During the session, highlighting the key performance outcomes in relation with the aim of the session and more importantly with the game itself should be constantly done. The players will see relevance in the information that we as coaching are providing them. However, more than providing information the coach should evoke the players to think and reason for themselves, thus actively engaging them in the learning process. This is covered into more detail in chapter 2.

Chapter 2 – Debating of ideas.

Defining actions verbally is an effective means of learning. When students define their actions on what they did well and what they could improve, they are also building a sturdier mental picture. It is thus a powerful teaching tool to have the players get together with the coach and discuss the reason for particular decisions they chose during the course of a soccer action. The coach is responsible for leading such a session, which by the way shouldn't take that long and can easily take place during recovery periods.

Coaches should ask the players open ended questions in which they can express their opinions about a specific tactical problem and what the best solution for it would be. Coaches should guide such sessions and let the players themselves discuss solutions. Maybe a whiteboard and a marker would be useful here so that the players can explain better through drawing. We may also ask players to explain the decisions they took in certain instances (Richard & Wallian, 2005). The same players may also be guided towards recognising a better solution, maybe aided by their teammates.

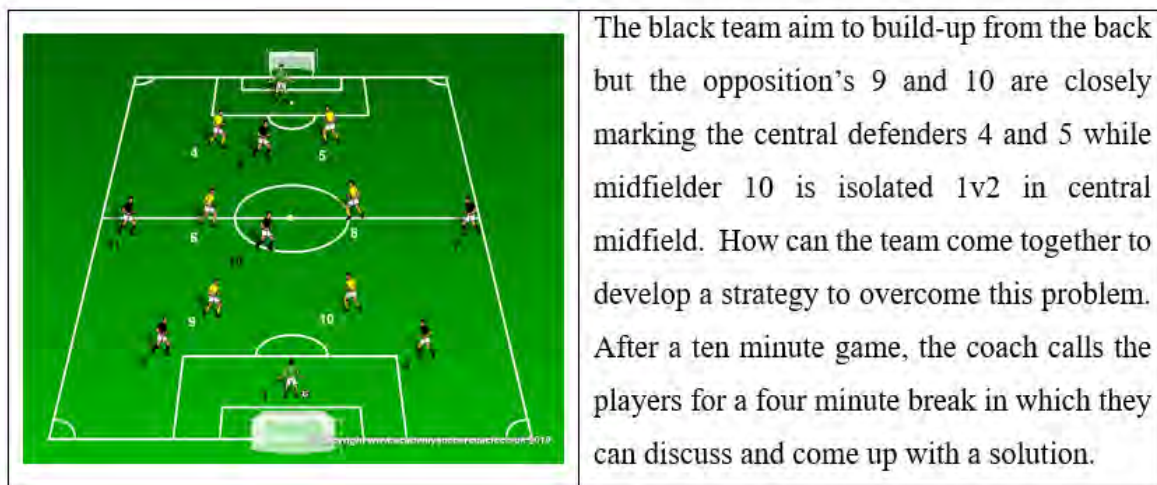


Figure 3 - Let the players explore first.

At first the coach lets the players explore playing the game for ten minutes. The players will face this problem in the first stage of the build-up many times during the game. If not, instead of throw-

ins, corners or even a kick off after a goal is scored, the ball always starts from the goalkeeper of the team in possession as a goal kick. When the coach calls the players in during the break, he will ask them about the problems are they facing during this phase. The other team (yellows) might be given a different task. The players will come up with different suggestions while the coach questions their selections. The coach may give some hints but not the answers. Specific problems that are continuously re-emerging during this phase of play can be highlighted by the coach for the team to keep in mind as the main problem to be neutralized.

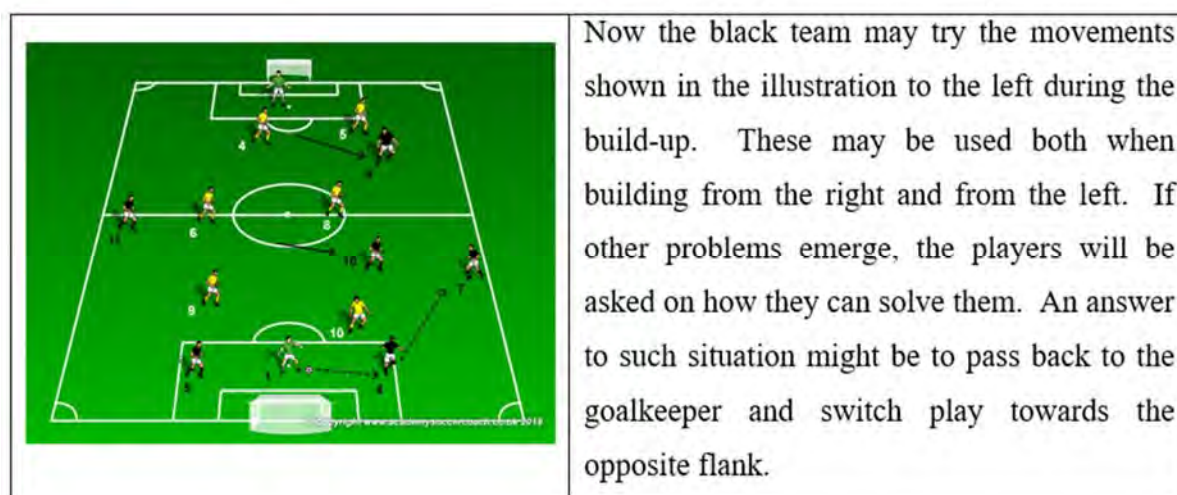


Figure 4 - Discussed ideas now put into practice.

Having the players work together to solve problems develops social skills and therefore teamwork. As a result of an effective teamwork, the nonverbal communication between the players will become stronger. Strong communication links enable the players to effectively read each other's movements and intentions. This is also known as visual communication.

Debating of ideas may not only take place during break periods but also before training sessions. The coach presents the session to the players while explaining the theme and aim of the session and how it relates to performance on the field of play. Carefully selected questions are posed by the coach to the players with the purpose of switching them mentally and prepare them for the tactical decisions they have to make during the training session.

Chapter 3 – Use of constraints in training.

Constraints are carefully selected conditions within a realistic soccer training scenario with the aim of bringing out the desired outcomes (Dibernardo, 2017). The exercise itself forces the players to “survive” by altering their behaviour. The coach therefore does not have to shout or provide instructions. However, stopping at intervals to question players (as already discussed in chapter 2) or to highlight a key outcome is a requirement.

Constraints come in three types; individual, task and environment (Renshaw, Davids, Newcombe, & Roberts, 2019). With regards to the individual player characteristics, a disadvantage in one ability sparks the need to improve other abilities in order for the player to compensate and be successful. As an example, if a player is physically slow she is forced to train her positional awareness to compensate for it.

| Individual | Task | Environment |
|-------------------|--------------------|--|
| Coordination | Specific rules | Weather |
| Speed | Methods of scoring | Temperature |
| Strength/power | Pitch size | Pitch surface |
| Height | Number of players | Pressure from coach, players, supporters, etc. |
| Technical ability | | |

Table 1 - The different types of constraints that may be applied in training.

The individual constraints.

These type of constraints are the physical limitations that a player might have. Playing with such limitations forces the player to compensate by enhancing other abilities. It might be that a player is physically short and therefore finds it hard to compete in aerial duels. As such the player is forced to work more on developing his ball mastery, footwork and agility both with and without the ball. Stance and positional awareness is another ability that the player needs to develop so to be able to intercept passes played into his zone or to win second balls.

The task constraints.

Task constraints have to do with the limitations of the training activity. It might be that we are playing 4v4 in a 40 yard by 30 yard pitch where the players have more space and therefore more time on the ball. Playing the same game on a 30 yard by 20 yard pitch forces the players to make quicker decisions and play more accurate passes as the challenge to create and exploit space is higher. Task constraints can have a direct relationship with the development of a particular playing style. If we play games and positional exercises in small spaces frequently, the players will develop a tendency to play short and quick passes. The players' passing and receiving technique will be sharp and quick. Practicing in these conditions also helps to develop the players' nervous system to perceive the situation from relevant stimuli and apply the correct choice to execute the required motor skill.

The environmental constraints.

The immediate environment surrounding the player also has an implication on performance. Playing on a wet pitch is much different than on a muddy one where the movement of ball is unpredictable and controlling it is much harder. A training session held on this type of surface forces the players to focus more on short passing combinations and individual control of the ball, as otherwise long and high passes will be much more difficult to master (DiBernardo, 2017). The pressure put on by others such as the coach and players also has a huge impact on the performance of the players. An attacker running onto a through pass at speed without any opposition pressure (1v0 plus goalkeeper) is less stressful and less intensive than when having a recovering defender chasing back.

Coaches may use different types of constraints as ways of progressing the players to higher levels. Constraints must be carefully selected by coaches as they enhance the learning environment and evoke the players to think and be themselves critical of their own football actions. When properly planned, constraints guide coaches to learn how the players are evolving in the game. Along the learning route coaches may include new constraints when previous ones have been mastered, thus stretching the performing boundaries of the players (ibid).

The use of constraints in training helps to develop a style of play. The style is the outermost layer of the whole process. Beneath this layer other important aspects of the game emerge. We just see the way our team plays as a result of these interrelated aspects. The way players see the game and act in particular situations is the result of how the team trains. Therefore, the training environment created needs to replicate what happens in a game. This means that if a team possesses technically abled players, training should bring out their best qualities and play within their natural role, inside their line and close to their teammates. An example would be to play a game in training where the players play on a long and narrow pitch. This enables them to collectively figure out ways of how to construct attacks against teams playing with narrow lines. The players will train together and get to know each other. They will learn how their teammates behave in specific situations of the game. Their movements will become automatic and will make better and quicker decisions based on faster processing of the visual stimuli!



Figure 5 – The layers of performance

Chapter 4 – The principles of play.

The principles of play are those rules so to speak that give teams a playing identity. The playing identity is a way of communication between the different elements of a team (the players) and how they respond collectively in a unified manner to various situations and phases of the game. These principles create a common language which should be understood by all the players within the team.

In training every player will undergo through well-planned training procedures that develops habits. These habits are automatic motor actions done in all phases of the game (attack, defence and positive and negative transitions) that players in every position will carry out in relation to the position of the ball, teammates and opponents. The reason why training should be relevant to the players' level, position, system of play and tactics as well as game realistic is the fact that players will develop their ability to select only the relevant stimuli from the environment while discarding irrelevant ones (Dibernardo, 2017). As a result of carefully designed training sessions the information processing power of the players becomes faster (ibid).

When designing a training exercise or situations, specific triggers and responses that we want our players to learn and master need to occur frequently and within a realistic setup.

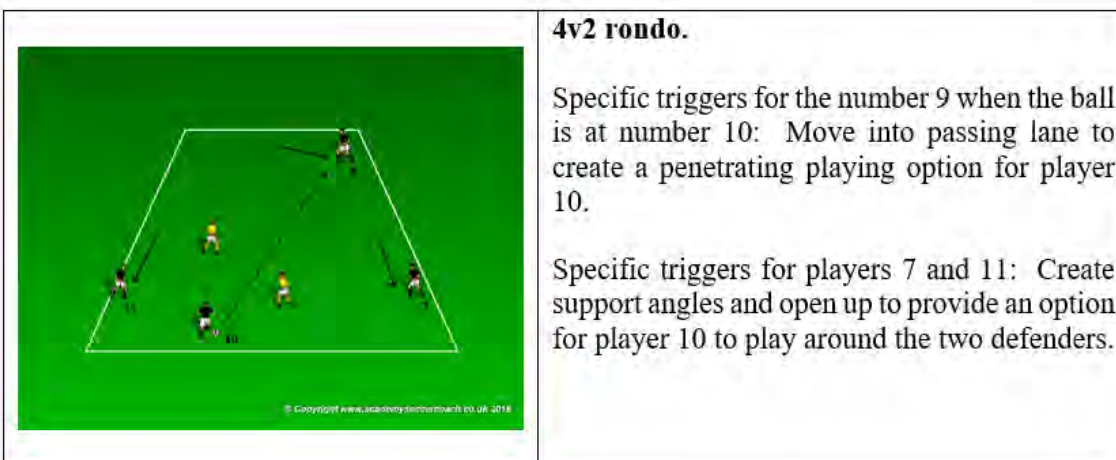


Figure 6 - common triggers for players in a 4v2 rondo.

Figure 6 provides an example of how we can develop the players' habits to apply the correct mechanical movements in a small environment in order to keep possession of the ball. This consists of creating support angles, passing lanes, and bear the proper support stance to receive the ball and play quickly.

The macro-principles of play.

These are the main principles of play which reflects the collective behaviour of the team at a certain moment in a particular phase of the game. Taking from the analysis and work done by Bordonau and Villanueva (2018), we can finalise that the main principles that a team abides during the possession phase are penetration, mobility, width, support and cover and creativity.

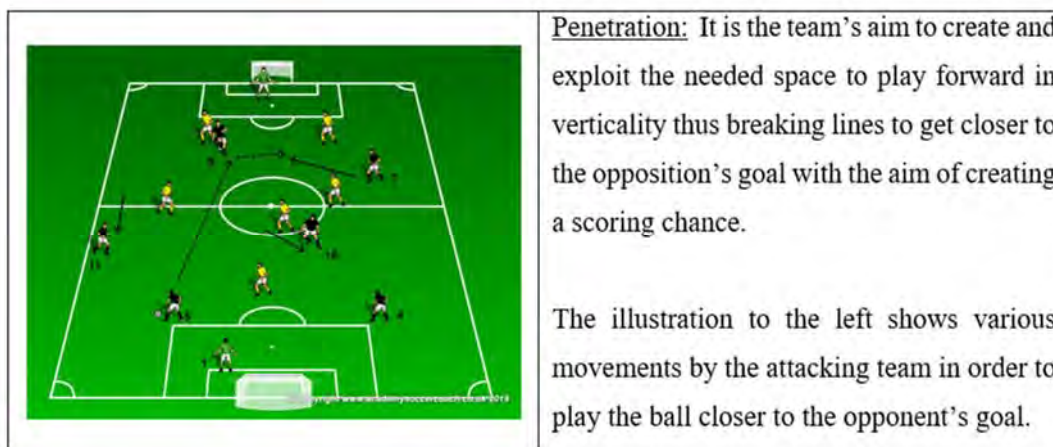


Figure 7 - Off-the-ball collective movements to play in verticality.

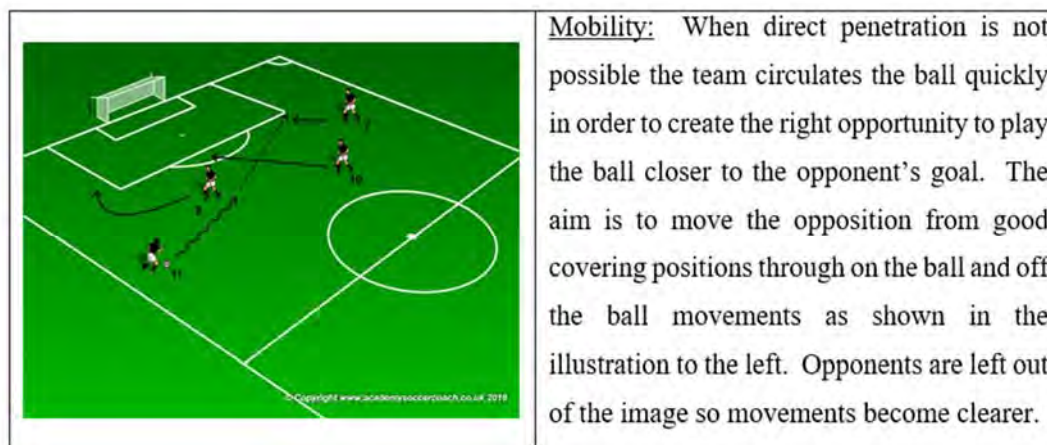


Figure 8 - Mobility in attack to open up spaces.

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p><u>Width in attack:</u> It consists of spreading out the players on the horizontal plane of the team. This is done with the intent of creating gaps from which we can those penetrating passes. The idea is to shift the opposition's defence to create these gaps.</p> <p>In the illustration to the left player 5 switched play to 11 to attack from the opponents' weakest flank.</p> |
|--|---|

Figure 9 - Using width to switch play and attack from the opponents' weakest side.

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p><u>Support and cover:</u> When a player is in possession of the ball, another player should offer support diagonally behind. This position offers the player on the ball a backward passing option as well as being in the appropriate position to delay or press the ball should possession be lost. The highlighted player in the illustration to the left shows a good support/cover positioning.</p> |
|--|---|

Figure 10 - Support and cover provided to the ball-carrier.

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p><u>Creativity:</u> This is a form of improvisation combined with a high level of game intelligence. They are the ones who come up with outstanding solutions to solve tactical problems. Their timing and execution of soccer actions both with and without the ball is of the highest quality.</p> |
|--|--|

Figure 11 – Both on and off the ball, creative players have a great vision of the game.

During the phase of non-possession the principles of play guide us towards reducing the risk of opponents from creating scoring chances. It requires total determination from all players as well as perfect collaboration and rhythm to press at the right moment as well as cut off any escape routes which the opponents might use.

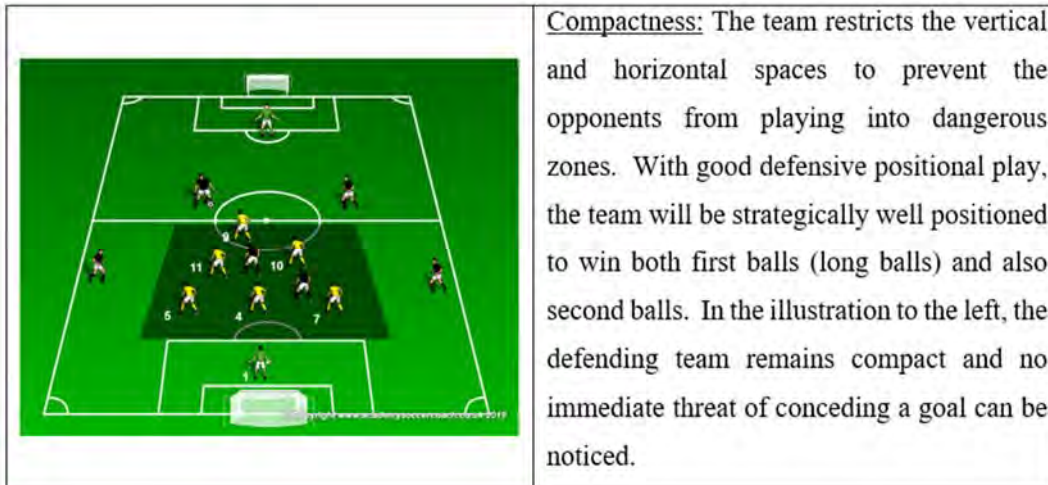


Figure 12 - Defensive compactness entails discipline and high levels of communication

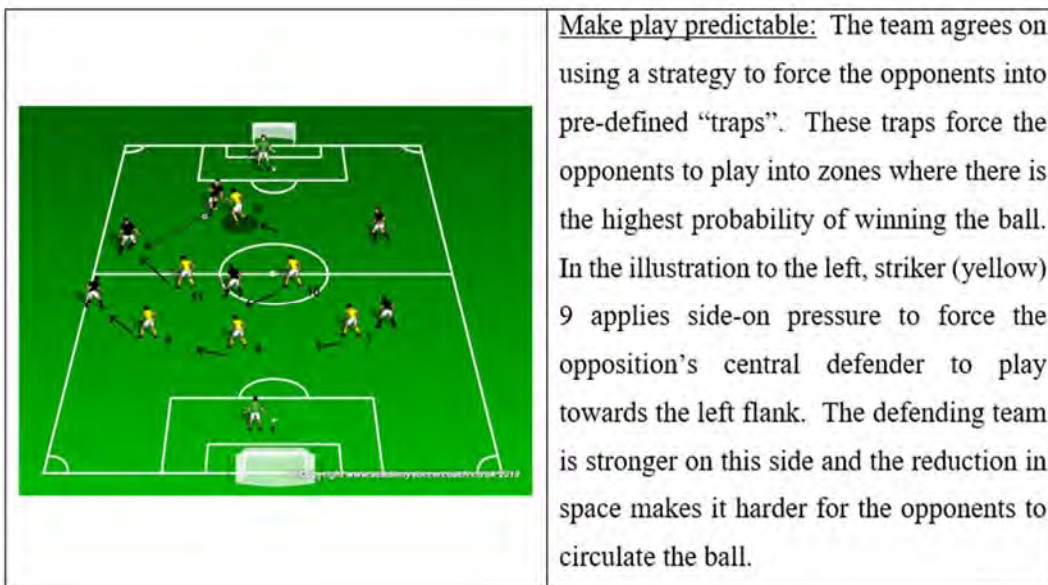


Figure 13 - Identifying the zones where to force the opponents to play.

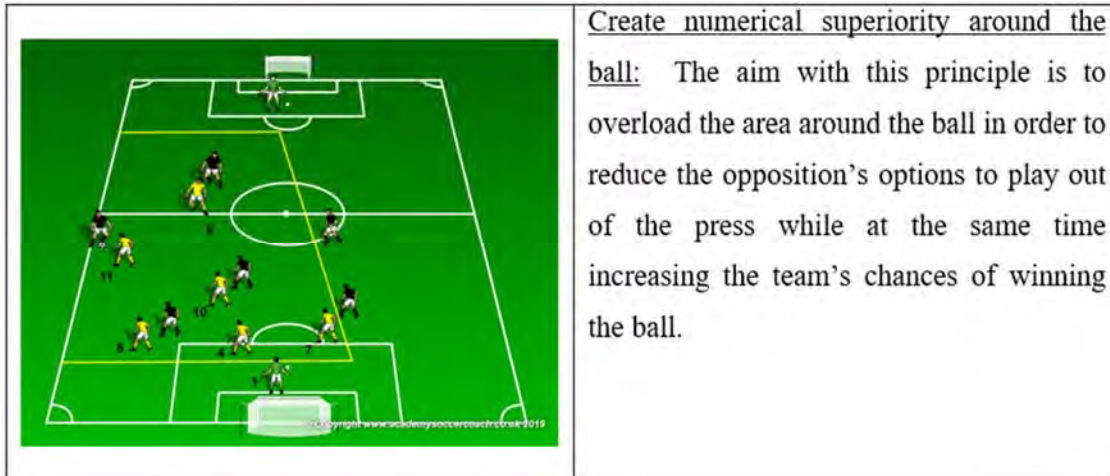


Figure 14 - Creating overloads to increase the chances of winning the ball.

For each moment of the game we create principles (Carvalho, Lage & Oliveira, 2014). These guidelines enable us as a whole collective team to immediately identify what we need to do at any particular situation. We have just described the key principles of play when a team is in possession of the ball and when the opponents are in possession. However, moments of transition (change in possession) are extremely important and they also deserve our full attention. It is therefore of upmost importance to create specific principles for these two other phases of the game; these being the positive transition and negative transition phases.

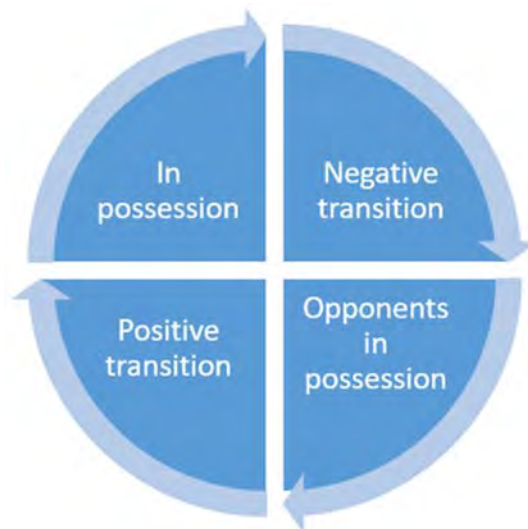


Figure 15 - The four main moments of the game.

The positive transition phase is when we win the ball and from defence we go into an attacking mode. During this phase the first aim is to hit the opponent when they are still unorganised in defence. Therefore, we aim to go on a quick counter attack and quickly exploit the spaces left uncovered by the opponents. Preventive marking and counter-pressing tactics have made hitting the opponent on the break upon winning possession much harder. Teams are being prepared for the loss of possession while they still own it. If playing quickly on the counter is not on we have to make sure to first retain the ball through an organized attack. Therefore, the first step is to get the ball out from the situation where the ball was lost. This is very important as the moment the ball is lost is the normally the best moment for the opponents to win it back. We need to get the ball out of pressure and into open play to secure possession and start the construction of a new attack build-up.



Figure 16 – Initiating a counter attack upon winning the ball.

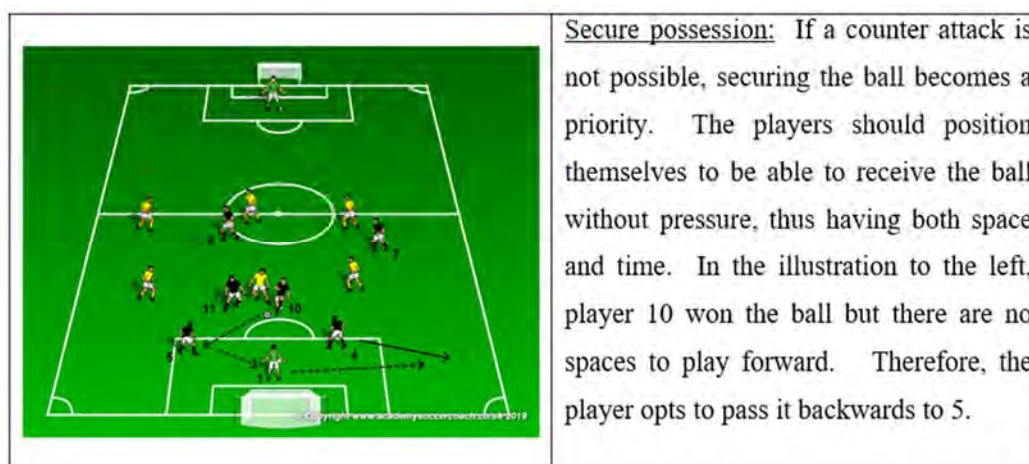


Figure 17 – Securing possession of the ball when a counter attack is not possible.

When in possession, it is imperative to be prepared for the moment if the ball is lost with two major intentions in mind; first to prevent the opponents from creating a scoring chance and the second to regain possession of the ball. The strategic positions of the players during the phase of possession is critical in helping our team achieve these objectives in cases when the ball is lost.

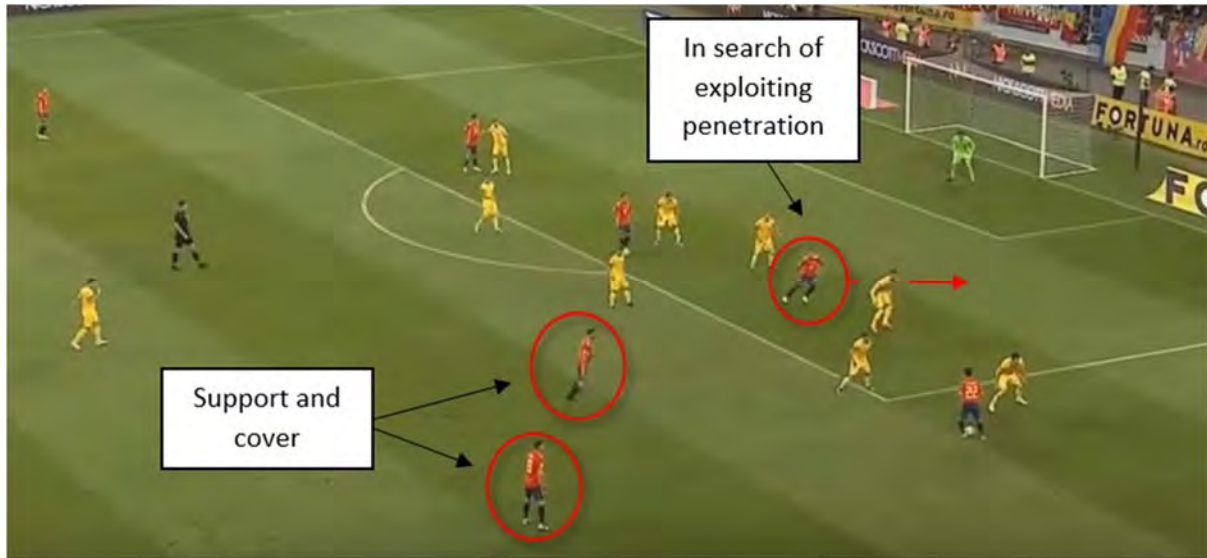


Figure 18 - In attack we should look to penetrate but at the same time have support and cover.

In figure 18 we notice two players behind the ball. This gives the player in possession more options and also security. If forward passes options are not available, the player on the ball has the option to pass the ball back to recycle the attack from a different angle. Furthermore, if the ball is lost there are players who are in a position to apply immediate pressure on the ball.

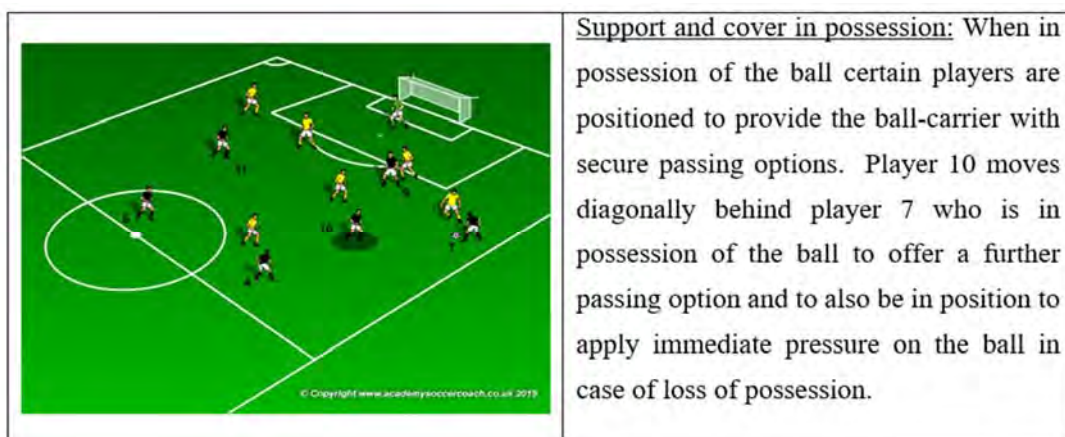


Figure 19 - Support and cover diagonally behind the player in possession of the ball.

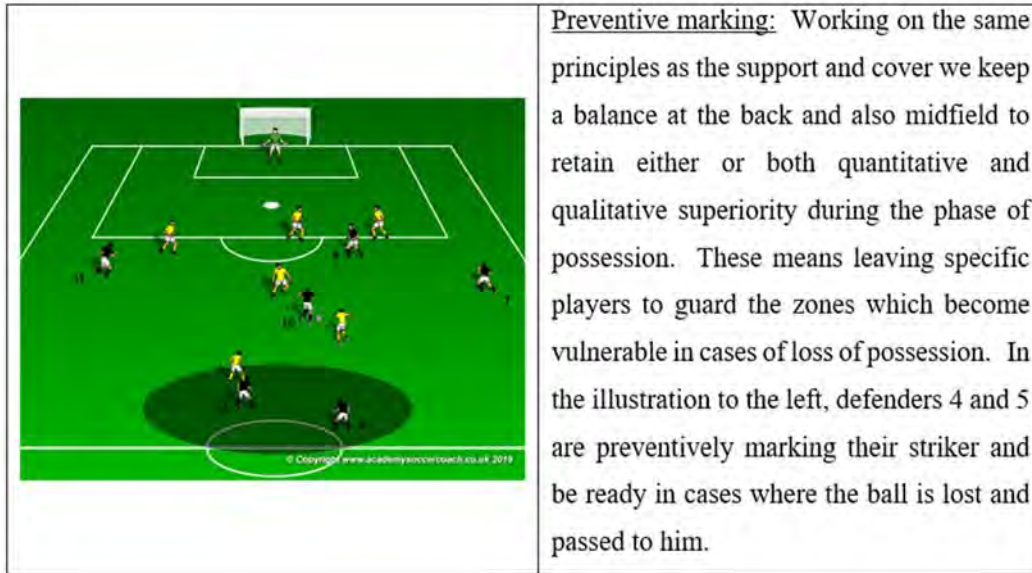


Figure 20 – Leaving a numerical advantage at the back in case possession is lost.

Further to the macro principles of play we also have the sub-principles and sub-sub-principles. The sub-principles are the behaviour of parts of the team or groups in certain situations. As an example, during the build-up phase we might want our full backs to push forward, the defensive midfielder to get into the back line if necessary to create a situation of numerical superiority while our centre backs open up a bit wider. The sub-sub-principles deal with individual tactical information such as the angle and distance of a player from her teammates.

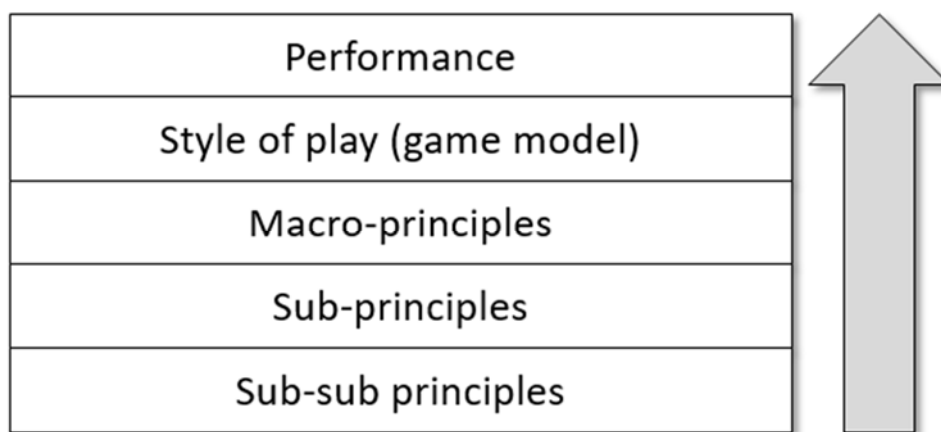


Figure 21 - The layers of team preparation hidden under performance.

Chapter 5 – Creating habits to develop a style of play.

Training should be realistic not only in the sense that it is soccer-specific but also specific to the style of play (game model) we want our team to envisage. Therefore when designing a training programme we should specifically target the development of habits in our players. These habits shape our game model and therefore our identity on the field of play.

Developing habits also relieves the mental pressure that our players go through during the game. Therefore during soccer actions certain movements become automatic and thus the players will not have to think about them, leaving their brain free to focus on the next action. This process does not only saves mental energy but also spares those milliseconds which are necessary for quick decision making. Through habitual training, the players will learn to filter the unnecessary stimuli out and focus on the most relevant ones (Davies, 2013). Selecting the most appropriate motor skill to a given tactical problem will be much faster and more accurate.

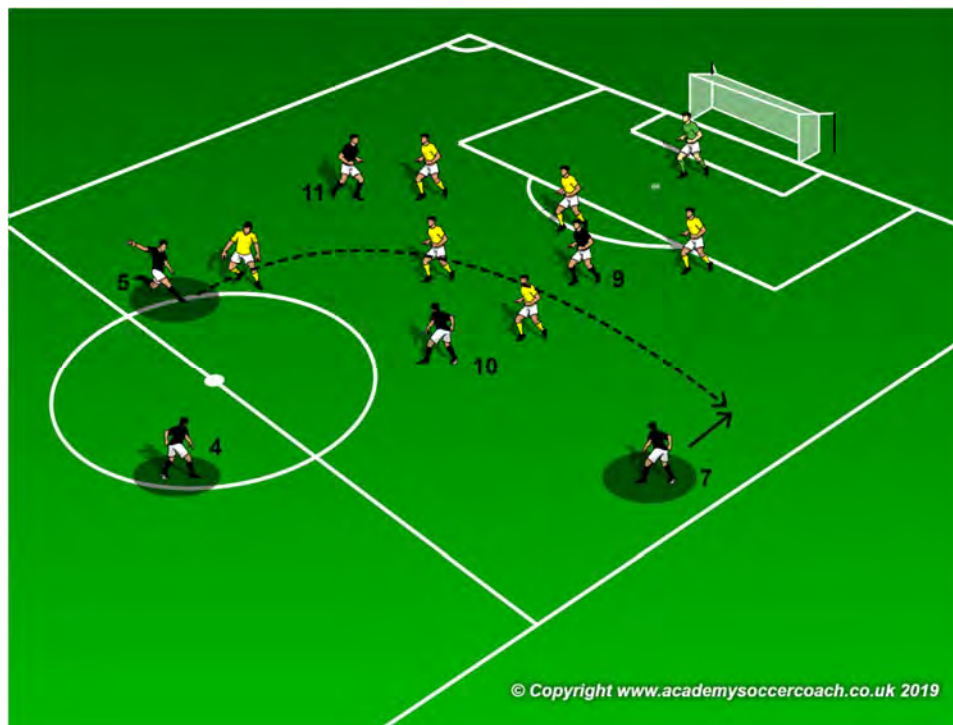


Figure 22 – Example of habits: Player 5 with the ball, player 4 drops to support while player 7 opens wide on the flank.

According to Davies (2013) habits are formed from three components. These are the cue or stimulus to perform the required motor action, a routine or the pre-established behaviour of the player (or players) following the cue, and a reward which is the accomplished outcome of the sequence. The reward is the part that strengthens the behaviour and makes it permanent.

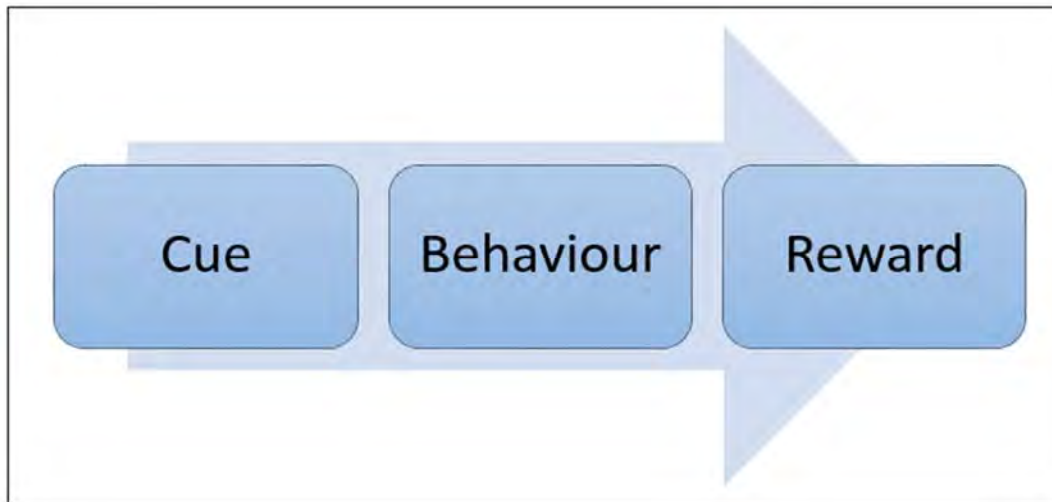


Figure 23 - The process of establishing permanent habits.

We can take an example from a practice design where we play 4v2 to score on two mini goals. The mini goals represents the passing lanes to the striker to whom we wish to pass the ball during a match. In this practice, the players learn to perceive space (cue), they open up to receive the ball or create passing lanes to other teammates (behaviour), the ball is received and played or played directly to a player in an advantageous position who receives and score a goal (reward). The players will then acknowledge the fact that by moving their head to recognise where the space is, and by moving into that space to receive the ball, they increase their chances of scoring a goal. These little details will have a positive transfer to the game, where players will be continuously scanning the field of play to receive the ball in space as this increases the potentiality of the team to secure the ball and to also create vertical passing possibilities.

Habits take a lot of effort and time to develop. Patience is needed by both the coach and players. Ames (2017), recommends starting with small structured plans that are in nature clear to understand and easy to accomplish. The same author suggests allowing the players time to adapt

to these habits. Rushing the players too soon might add unnecessary pressure which interferes with the players' motivation to learn. The more enjoyable the learning process is, the stronger the habits will become.

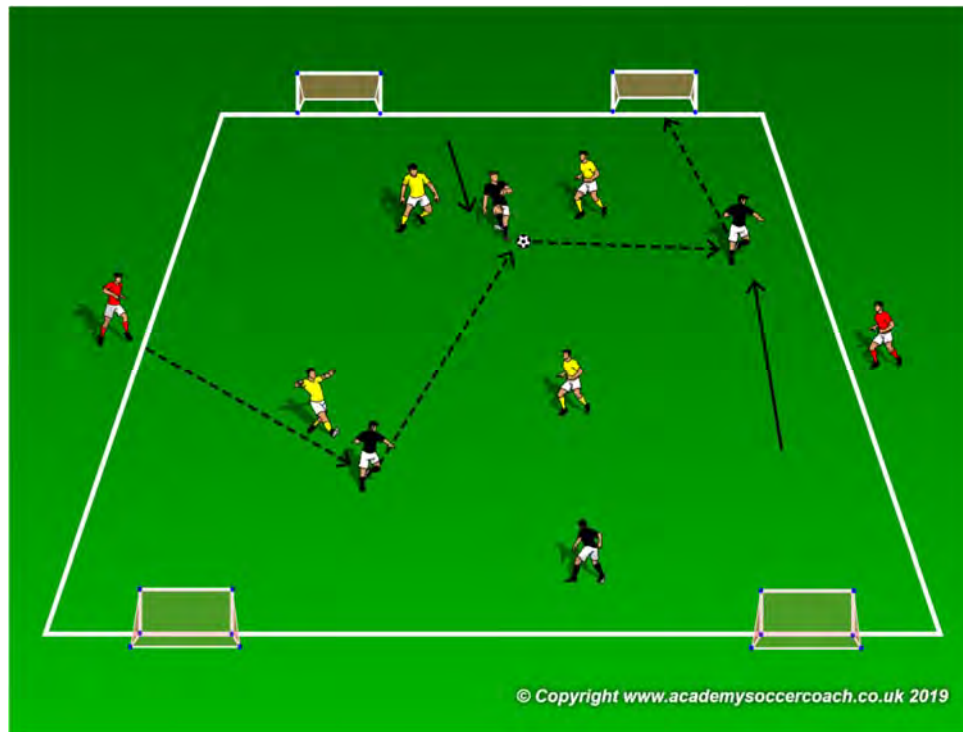


Figure 24 - 4v4+2 on four goals. Developing habits to form passing lanes and play quickly in verticality.

Players should be told what they are practicing and how it will help improve their game. This will increase their motivational levels which in turn increases their desire to learn. The coach might need to simplify the context of the practice. The context should reflect what goes on in a game. However as coaches we can amend it even if we lose some of its realism to make it easier for our players to grasp. The context depicted by us coaches helps the players to identify how they have to act in different game situations. In his book Damian Hughes (2018) provides examples of how FC Barcelona use rondos to develop those small details, the habits (or the sub-sub-principles) that enables the team to play with such elegance and a possession dominant philosophy. If you have ever watched a video of FC Barcelona conducting a rondo you will notice that the area is quite small, with excellent ball control and a high speed of play. The probability is that with our players we would need to enlarge the area as the technical level is much lower. The exercise and its' aim and outcomes however remain the same.

Chapter 6 – The 7v7 using different systems of play.

This chapter takes a detailed look on the 7v7 using different systems of play. We will analyse the needed tactical behaviour of the players for a system to be successfully applied. Detailed analysis will also be carried out by mapping the selected system of play against other systems. We will learn how to capitalize on the strengths of a system and to make the necessary adjustments to hide its weaknesses. The suggested pitch dimensions as suggested by the English FA are 60 yards by 40 yards (Clarke, 2016).

The 1-2-3-1 system of play.



Figure 25 - The basic anatomy of the 1-2-3-1 system of play.

The 1-2-3-1 provides a strong midfield of three and a balanced defence of two. Its flaws lie with playing with only one striker and also the spaces behind the lateral midfielders 7 and 11. These spaces are vulnerable especially in situations of negative transitions. Various passing lanes are

created by the structure and relationship of the players on the pitch. This makes it an ideal environment to teach players to circulate the ball and dominate possession. However, support to the lone striker by the midfielders is necessary for the creation of scoring opportunities. In defence we would need the support of the lateral midfielders in tracking back and cover dangerous zones. This will give the team the needed width in our defensive phase. In the below examples we are always coaching the team in black.

The 1-2-3-1 v 1-2-3-1.

The Individual ability of the players plays a major role when playing against this system of play as we are playing against a well-balanced opponent. 1v1 superiority especially in midfield becomes a pre-requisite. In the first stage of the build-up we have numerical superiority with the goalkeeper and the two central defenders against one striker.

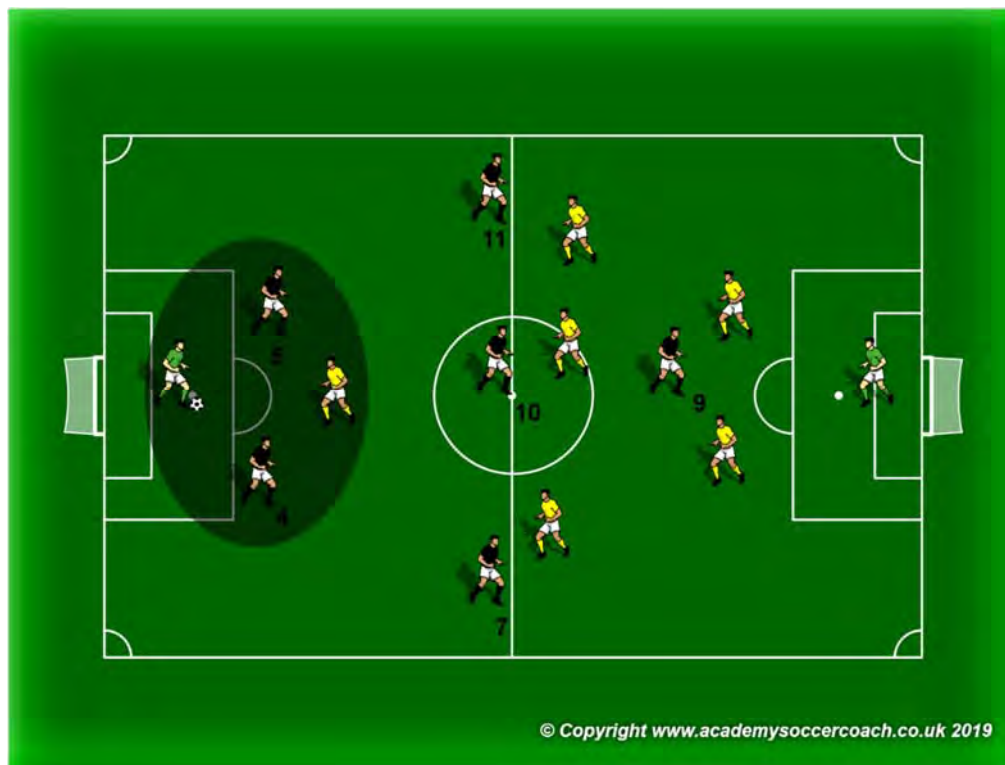


Figure 26 - Numerical advantage at the back during the first stage of the build-up.

In midfield we have a numerical parity. Off-the-ball movement to create the space to be exploited is of high importance. We need to create the numbers around the ball to increase our playing options to play forward in order to create goal-scoring opportunities.

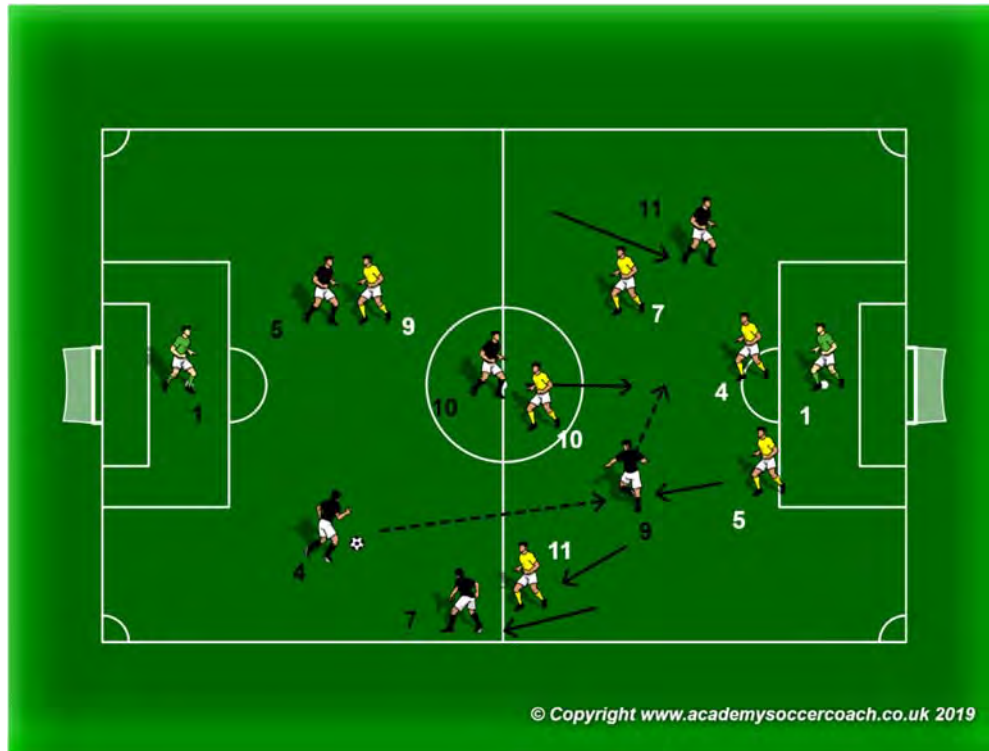


Figure 27 - Off-the-ball movement to create and exploit the space to play forward.

Various options to create the necessary space to play the ball closer to the opponents' goal exist. We should however get to know the opponents' weakest link in the system of play they are using. In the 1-2-3-1 this is the spaces behind the opposition's lateral midfielders 7 and 11. This may be exploited by aiming to play into this spaces at the proper time, so not to give the opponents time to recover. Our lateral midfielders 7 and 11 should be the best two players we have in 1v1 duels. Therefore getting them the ball to confront their direct opponent in promising areas of the field should be part of the strategic plan. These players should not be completely isolated however. Support from behind by our central defenders and also angles of support created by the striker and central midfielder should enable to create more options for the lateral midfielder (the ball-carrier) and more headaches in defence for the opponents. Movement by the striker should be at angles so to create other options for the ball-carrier.

During the build-up or an attack, our striker is outnumbered 1v2 against their central defenders. To help the striker and therefore increase our chances of scoring we require players to push forward. We may use the lateral midfielders to give the team width and have the central midfielder 10 to support from behind. By pushing the lateral midfielders 7 and 11 high and wide forces the opponents to retreat more players back, making them less dangerous to initiate a counter attack should they regain possession of the ball.



Figure 29 - Pushing players forward makes the opponents less vulnerable in the case of a negative transition.

We need to however be prepared for the loss of possession. If we lose the ball we do not want to be caught with our number 7, 9 and 11 out of the game. Therefore, we try to keep the lines compact by having players covering each other, and be balanced at the back by having numerical superiority in key areas of the pitch.

In the defensive phase we have a problem on the flanks. The spaces behind the lateral midfielders 7 and 11 are uncovered. We do not want to shift the central defenders into this zone as this might

open up spaces centrally. Therefore we might require to drop both the 7 and 11 to drop and give the defence more stability. This however will give us a headache of how we can exploit a positive turnover as the options up front are few.



Figure 30 - We are compact at the back but with limited options to play forward on winning the ball.

We might consider having more players up front. First to protect the back line and second to prevent the opponents from playing vertical passes. We will thus have more players applying pressure on the ball with the intent of harassing the opponent and make them lose possession. Our team will also have more players upfront and a higher probability to win the ball away further away from our goal and closer to the opponents! We need however to have a compact back line. Therefore, the weak side lateral midfielder tucks in to form a back three while the strong side lateral midfielder becomes more offensive and moves forward to help the other two offensive teammates (9 and 10) to block forward passing lanes. The distances both between the teammates in the same line and also between the different lines (vertical displacement of the team) have to be compact in the way that restricts the space in which the opponents can manoeuvre the ball in.



Figure 31 - The weak side lateral midfielder tucks in to form a back three while the side strong side lateral midfielder positions himself in a way to prevent penetrative passes with the help of the other offensive teammates 9 and 10.

Should the ball be switched to the opposite flank, the lateral midfielder 11 steps out to apply pressure on the opposite number 7. This will reduce the latter's space and time on the ball and therefore his playing options. The now weak side lateral midfielder, the number 7, tucks in to form a solid line of three at the back.

As in the previous situation midfielder 10 and striker 9 move across to prevent the opponents from playing passes towards the inside. They should frontal mark the players behind them and mark potential receivers within their zone. They should however be alert and not get pulled out of good covering positions. Timing to anticipate passes and to engage themselves into duels with the direct opponent inside their zone comes from their ability to perceive the correct stimuli and make the correct decisions. Whenever one of the players in front of the back line engages the opposition, the other two should cover to protect the inner passing lanes. The three at the back should also

we aim to stretch the opponents both vertically and horizontally, thus creating gaps in their defensive structure. This can be achieved through a well-constructed attack build-up.

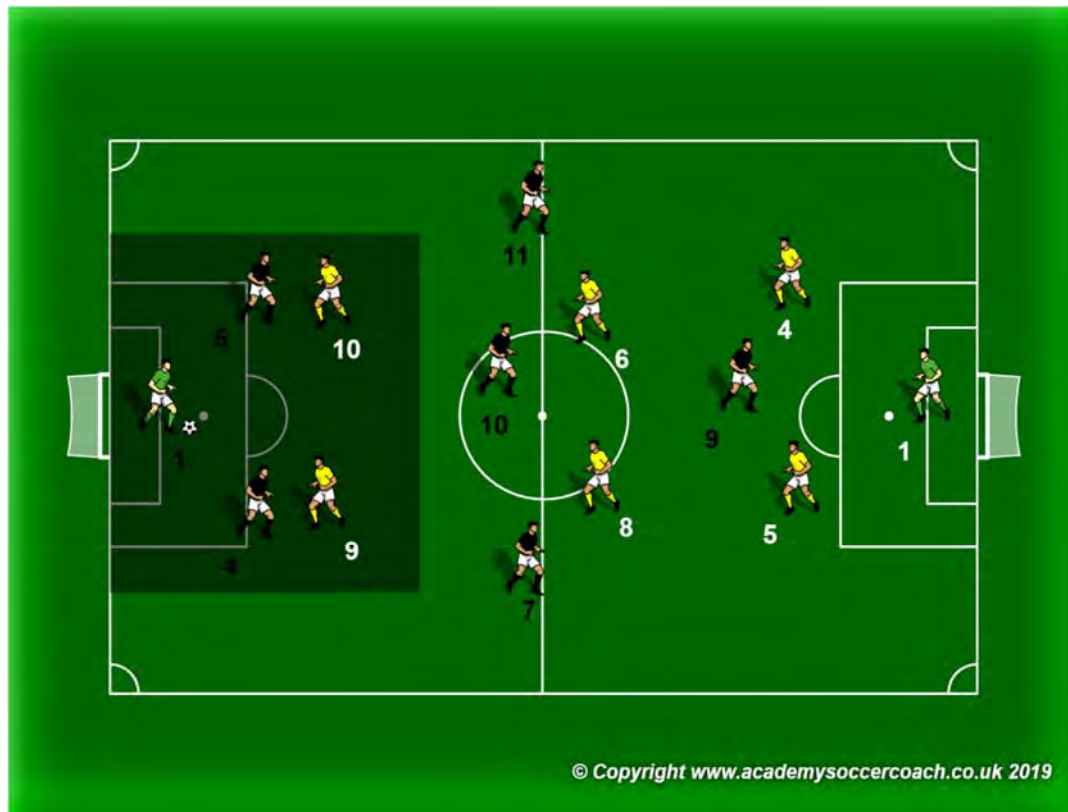


Figure 33 - No options for the goalkeeper to start a constructed build-up from the back.

When building up from the back the midfielders can help up create the necessary numerical superiority. As the opponents are strong and compact in the central vertical channel, it might be very difficult for us to build-up play in these areas of the field. We might therefore want to get the lateral midfielders 7 and 11 involved in the process.

We cannot mention a perfect way to build-up play as this always comes down to the situation and how the opposition replies to our movement. It is however important that we have a well-defined plan knowing both our strengths and the weaknesses of our opponents. From there we can come up with a conclusion on the opportunities we have and which we can exploit.

midfielder 10 who is also good at receiving the ball under pressure inside the penalty area. We might then use the striker to move towards the side to create space in the middle for the central midfielder to insert into the attack. This depends however on the quality and characteristics of the players we have in our team!

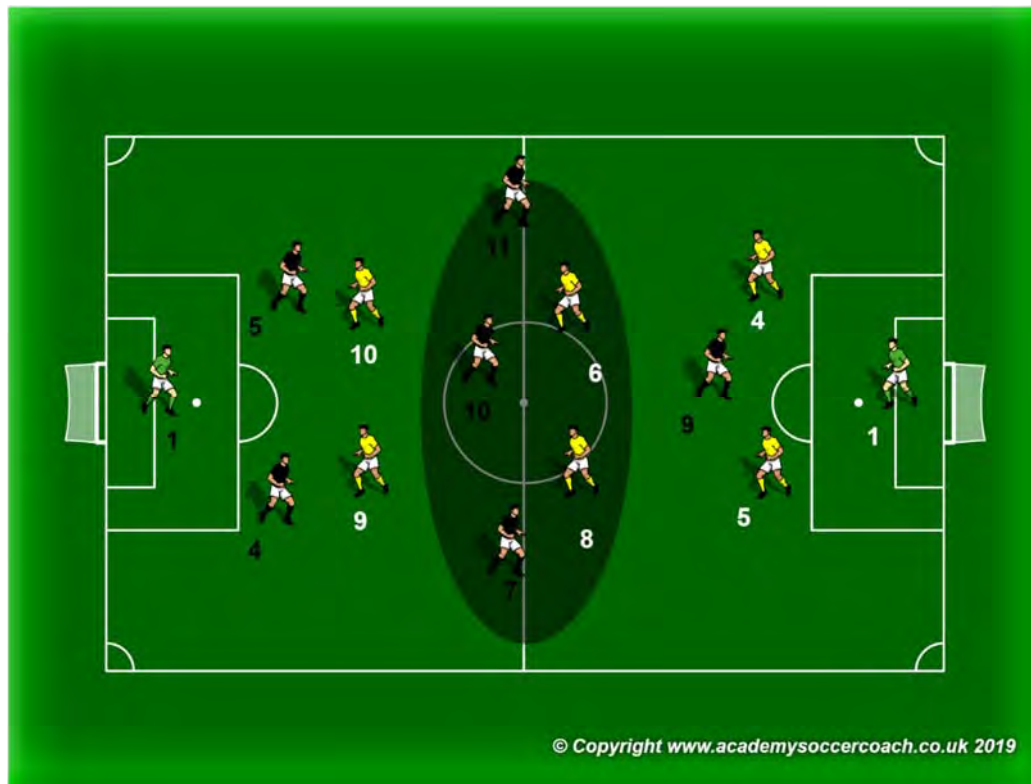


Figure 35 - Outnumbering the opponents 3v2 in midfield.

The midfield players have the responsibility to aid in creating numerical advantage around the ball. Off-the-ball movement is the only way to guarantee success in dominating the game. Players must continuously be on the move creating angles and opening up passing lanes. The creativity of the individual then comes into play on how to break a line with a well-timed pass, a feint with the ball to beat the opponent in a 1v1 duel or a feint to let the ball get to another teammate while creating the necessary space by dragging an opponent out of position (Bertolini, 2019). The individuality of the players bears a huge weight on the success of a team. If players are not intuitive and cannot read and anticipate situations than we lose the right moment to play. That is why players from a young age should be allowed to explore, make decisions and learn from their own decisions and mistakes. Practices even at younger ages should be related to the game. This way the players will

construct mental pictures that will allow them to understand the game better and quicker. Time and accuracy of information are imperative in soccer!

In the defensive phase we need to protect the middle channel; the part of the pitch they are stronger in. Normally we a team deploys a 1-2-2-2 system of play their strengths lie in attacking centrally. We should therefore aim to neutralise their threats!



Figure 36 - Neutralizing the strengths of the opponents by keeping compact centrally and forcing play wide.

In figure 36 we are cutting off the supply to the opposition's strikers. If we analyse the image into more detail, the central defender 5 is isolated on the ball and his playing options are limited. Opponents playing using this formation do not possess any natural wingers and as such they either tend to remain central or if they go wide their threats will be reduced. Theoretically we can remove half of the pitch in which the opponents play thus reducing and ultimately eliminating their options to play forward.



Figure 37 - The striker applying pressure on the central defender to reduce the latter's playing options.

If the opponents have players who are very comfortable on the ball and are flexible in that they can play in different systems, we should be disciplined and remain strong centrally. They might play wide to stretch us so that they can penetrate using the gaps that we momentarily create when shifting.

When shifting, our players should cover each other well! If one of our players gets beaten another player should be covering him and ready to apply pressure on the ball. Penetrating our defence will be thus be a difficult task! We should also take into consideration if the opponents have a player who can play long and accurate passes. A tactic that our opponents might use is to shift us towards one side with the intent to exploit the opposite using a direct switch of play. This is known as the overload to isolate tactic which is typically employed by teams who are able to switch play quickly and with accuracy, thus hitting the opponents from their least defended flank.



Figure 38 – The opponents might switch play directly or through an intermediary player to exploit our least protected flank.

The lateral midfielder on the weakest side must have good positional sense in defence to anticipate any switch in play. Figure 38 shows two ways in which the opposition’s number 6 may switch play – either with a direct diagonal cross-field pass or through the 10. In both situations our number 7 must be correctly positioned to intercept these passes. If this cannot be accomplished, the number 7 should position himself to prevent the ball from being played behind him.

The 1-2-3-1 v 1-2-1-2-1.

Like the 1-2-2-2 system of play the 1-2-1-2-1 is very robust in the middle vertical channel. It is very compact and hard to penetrate, especially when they have different lines and players covering each other. Opportunities for our team to exploit lie on the flanks, especially the pockets to either side of the central defensive midfielder. We should also take into consideration that the opponents outnumber us in central midfield.

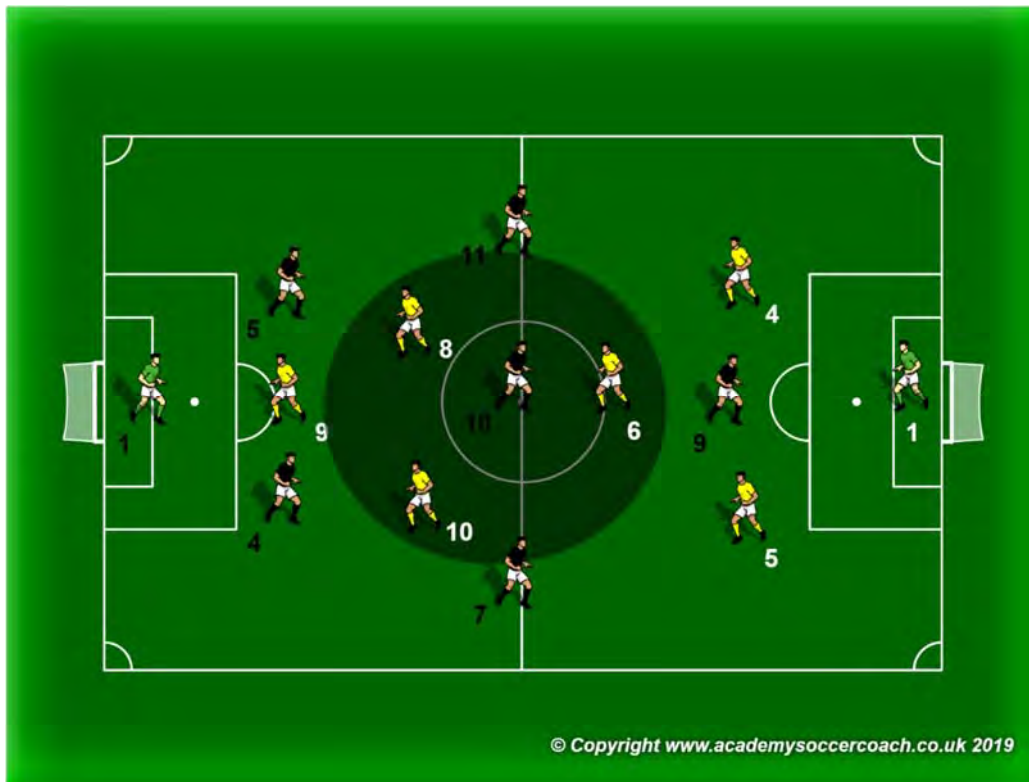


Figure 39 – We are outnumbered in central midfield.

Our strategy in the attacking phase should be to make use of the flanks. The spaces to either side of the opposition's defensive midfielder 6 are ideal. We should aim to get our lateral midfielders to receive the ball high up the field. If these players receive the ball in our own half, the opposition will have the time to close down the spaces. Therefore we have to find a way where one of the two lateral midfielders receives the ball uncontested and closer to the opposition's goal. Our striker plays a crucial role in creating the required space on the flank by remaining centrally.

By having both lateral midfielders high and wide, the opposition's midfielders may be attracted to fill the spaces to the side of their central defensive midfielder. This gives us more numbers and therefore more options to construct the attack. An attacking manoeuvre we might use to break down their defensive organisation is to overload one side and then switch play to the opposite side. Remember, they are playing with a narrow but long block. It is therefore a possibility that they

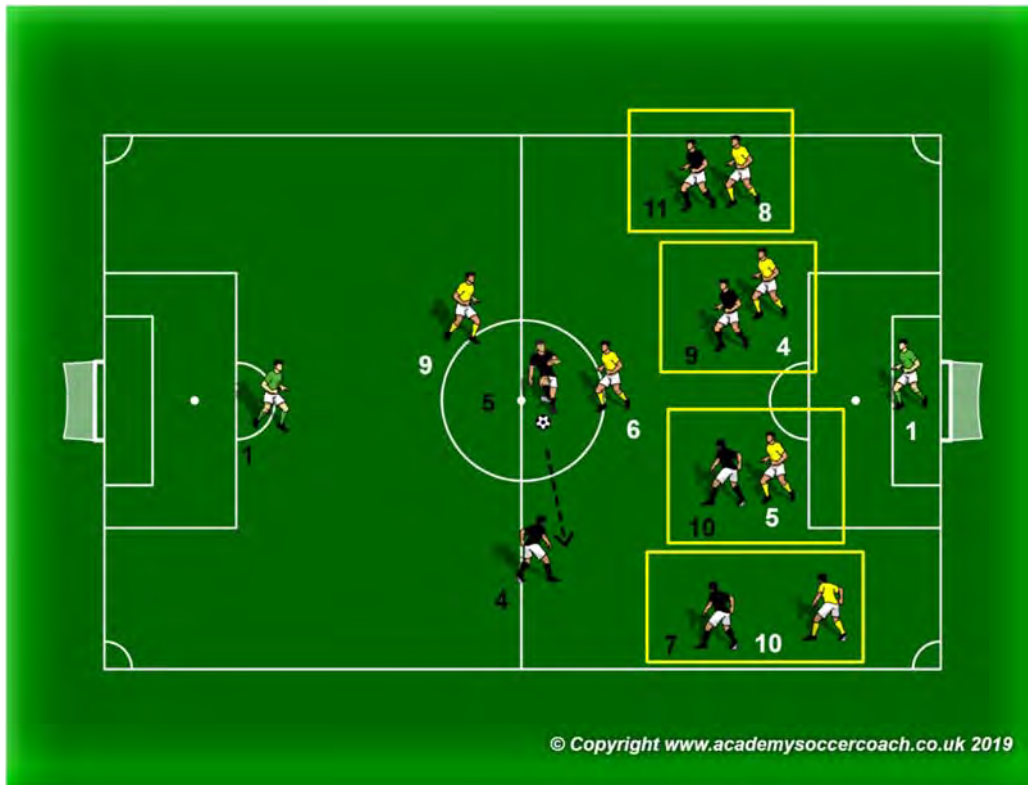


Figure 41 - Creating direct duels in attack and stretching the opponents' back line.

Continuing from the example in figure 41, central defender 4 moved into space to receive. Now the central defender may dribble forward into the space and create a numerical overload. If we possess central defenders comfortable getting forward we have an advantage as we can put more pressure on the opponents.

Leaving only defender at the back might be dangerous especially if the opponents leave two players up front against our centre back. Most probably their central defensive midfielder will track our central defender's forward movement with the ball. We should thus take advantage and make use of the momentary numerical advantage to its maximum. Upon realising the ball, the central defender should move back into position quickly thus regaining the team's balance. Furthermore, when the central defender dribbles the ball forward, the weak side lateral midfielder moves a bit towards the inside and back. This player will be ready to defend and regain numerical parity if possession is lost.

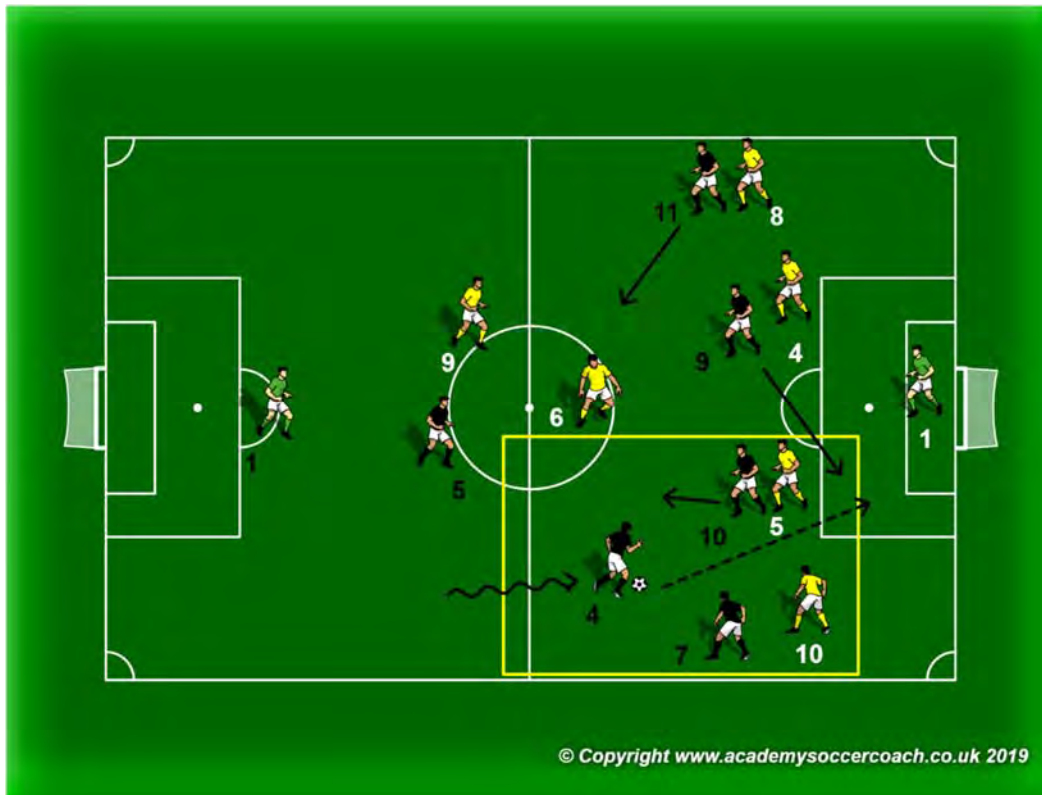


Figure 42 - Creating numerical advantage on the right side with the central defender dribbling forward.

Creating numerical overloads is not easy due to the compactness and the many lines that the 1-2-1-1-2-1 provides. If we do not have high technically abled players but possess players with great physical speed, we give our opponents the dominance of the ball. Our team just falls back and closes down space. We let their central defender come out with the ball, with the intent of creating the space that we aim to use on the counter.

Our lateral midfielders track the opposition midfielders' forward runs while our central midfielder marks their central defensive midfielder. This prevent their central defensive midfielder from receiving the ball and play vertically or switch the point of the attack. Upon winning the ball we aim to hit them on the break with the involvement of our central midfielder and striker. When the ball is won these two players should immediately attack the space the opponents left behind them and be ready to receive long balls played into this space.

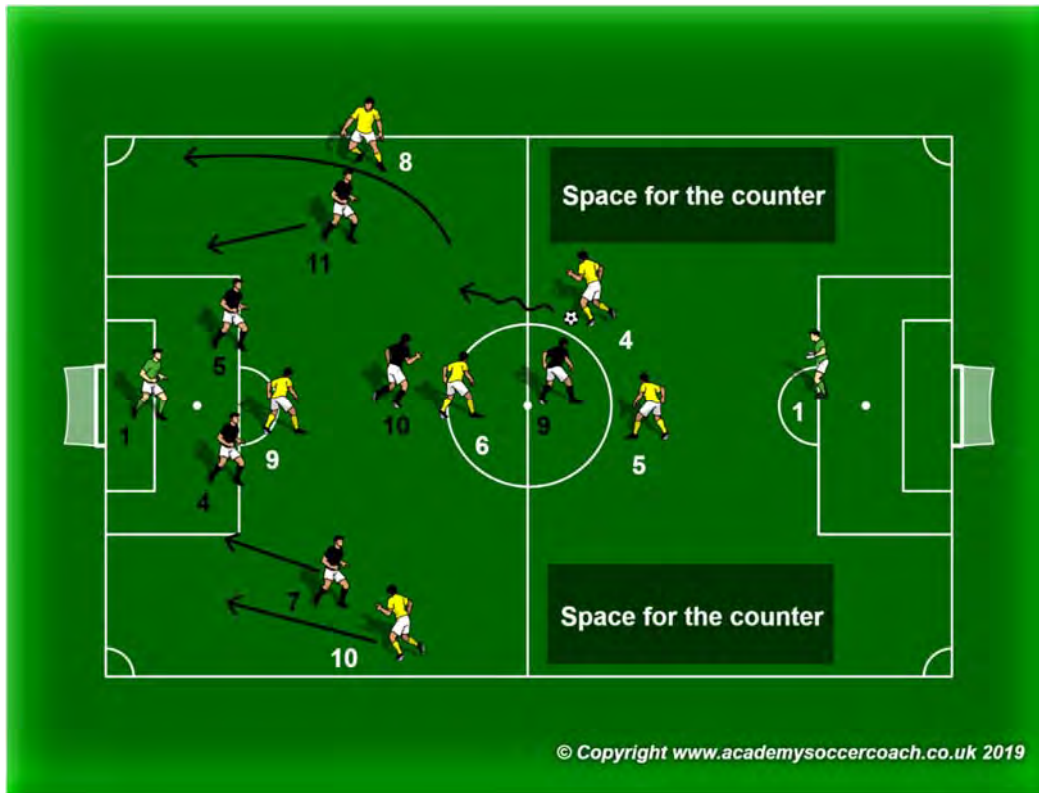


Figure 43 - Being compact at the back and ready to counter.

When the opposition are constructing an attack from the back we have a problem in the defensive phase. The 1-2-1-2-1 system provides them with more lines and options to circulate the ball and play in verticality. We therefore leave our two central defenders against their striker (2v1) at the back, our lateral midfielders tuck inside to mark their central midfielders. If their central midfielders move wide our own midfielders should not follow them and go wide as this will open the passing lane to the striker. Our central midfielder marks the opposition's central defensive midfielder in his zone while the striker's job will be to force play towards the flanks. When the ball is passed to a particular player or enters a specific zone we will move as a unit to close down space and passing lanes with timed pressing actions.

Discipline, rhythm, and timing to win the ball are three crucial factors during the defensive phase. A misjudgement in one of them may open up spaces from which our opponents can create a scoring opportunity.



Figure 44 - Organised defending.

The 1-1-2-2-1 system of play.

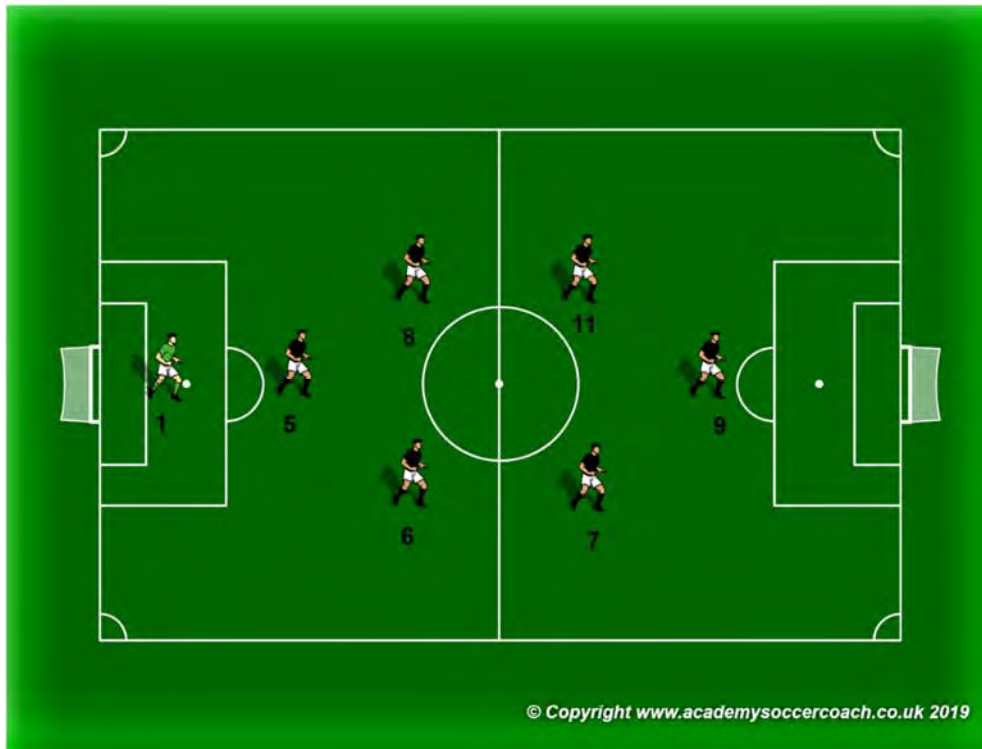


Figure 45 - The basic anatomy of the 1-1-2-2-1 system of play.

Using a 1-1-2-2-1 system of play we have a strong presence in midfield which offers many options for the build-up. The movement of the four players in midfield creates more passing options and opportunities for penetration. Up front we play using a single striker and therefore help from deeper positions from the offensive midfielders 7 and 11 is needed. We might also need our 7 and 11 to provide width in attack with the intent of the stretching out the opposition's defence to create gaps. We are very vulnerable on the flanks in defence. The 6 and 8 might drop back, both or one of them to provide a numerical superiority against the opposition's striker/s. Being crowded in midfield creates the required numbers for us to block any forward passes. However, we need to be careful in not giving our opponents space and time on the ball to play deep into the space behind our defensive midfielders and central defender. In the case the opponents have this opportunity, the defensive midfielders 6 and 8 need to drop to cover the width at the back line.

The 1-1-2-2-1 v 1-2-3-1.

In the first stage of the build-up we are in a 2v1 situation with our goalkeeper and central defender against the opposition's striker. To create further options for the build-up, one of the two central defenders may drop. The main principle here is to create an overload to our favour.

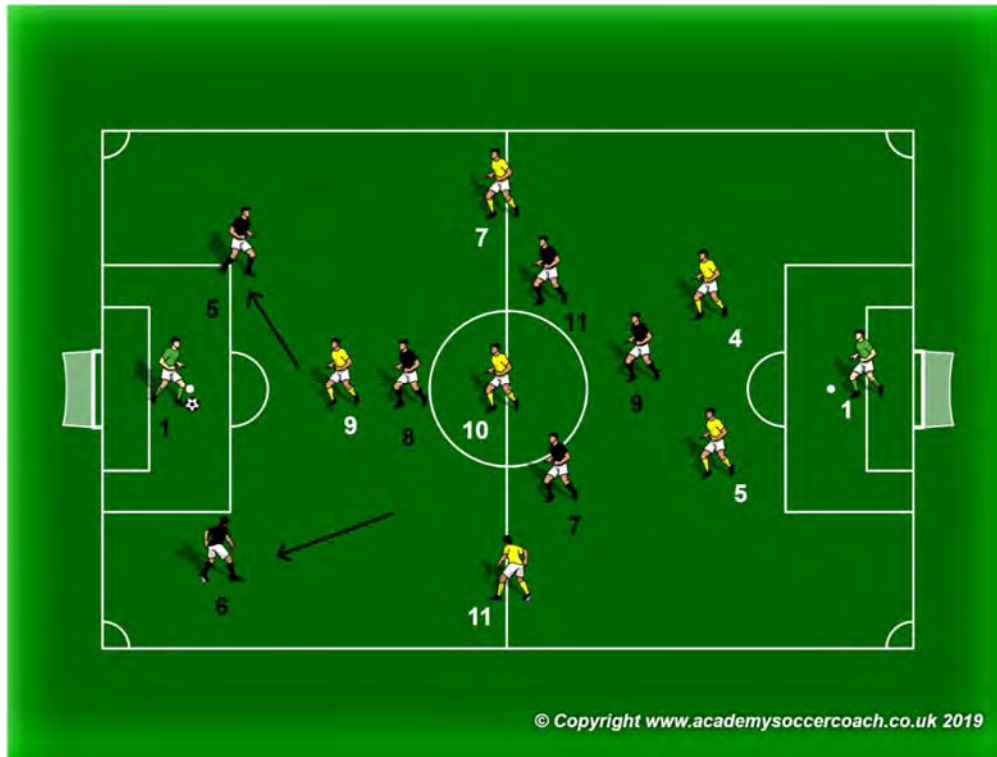


Figure 46 - Creating options at the back during the first stage of the build-up.

In cases where our opponents push forward their lateral midfielders 7 and 11 we will have available space on the flanks for us to exploit with a direct ball. However, not many teams will tactically move their players in this manner as this creates spaces in midfield. The tendency is to either leave their lateral midfielders in midfield or drop them a bit so to prevent a long and direct kick over the midfield sector. This gives us more time and space to build constructive attacks from the back. In figure 46 it is important to recognise the shape created between the midfielders and the striker. Here we have diamond which should give us plenty of options to play deep. Our striker can push forward against their central defenders while midfielders 7 and 11 get into the space between the opposition's defence and midfield.

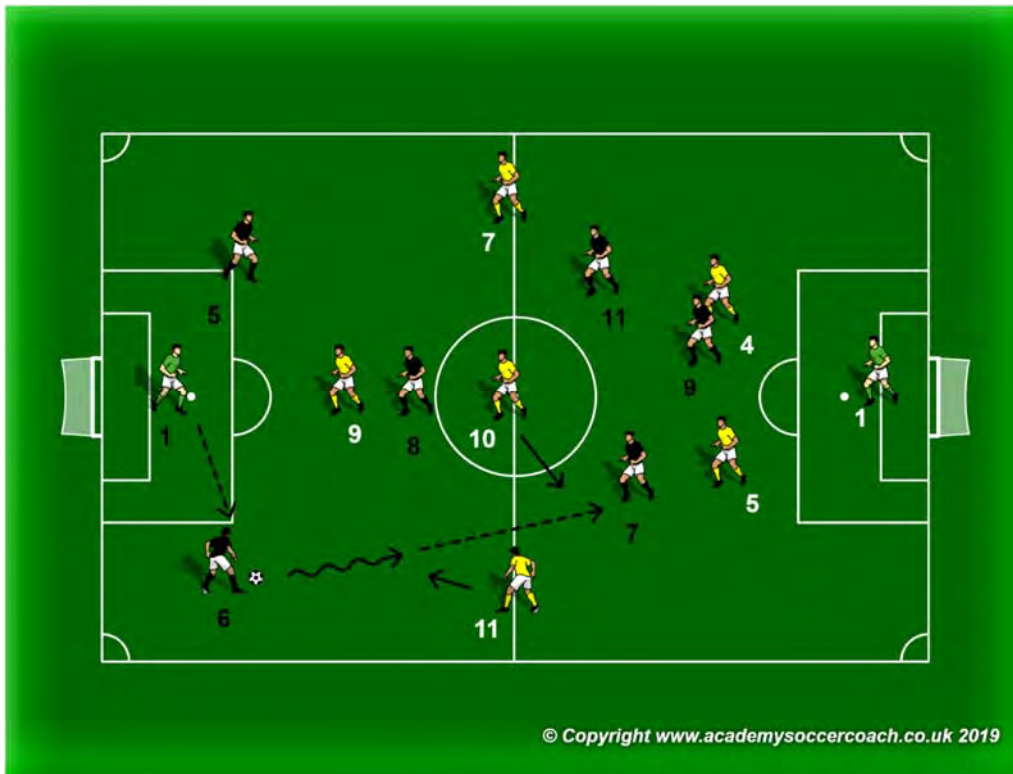


Figure 47 - Playing between the lines to create advanced area actions.

Our aim when building from the back is to create advanced area actions (Davies, 2016). It is our intent to position lateral midfielders 7 and 11 into the space between the opposition's midfield and back line. These two players should move continuously in order to create passing lanes. When the ball is played to 7 or 11 it occurs naturally that the opponents move to contrast the space to prevent them from turning and playing forward. Therefore, movement from the number 8, to receive the ball or create the necessary space, should enable us to create the opportunity to play forward. Figure 48 shows how the number 7 is used as the link player to involve midfielder number 8 in attack.

Being able to play quickly and with accuracy enables us to move the opponents and open up spaces. The quick combination play shown in figure 48 shows how the opponent may be moved to create the necessary opportunities to play forward.

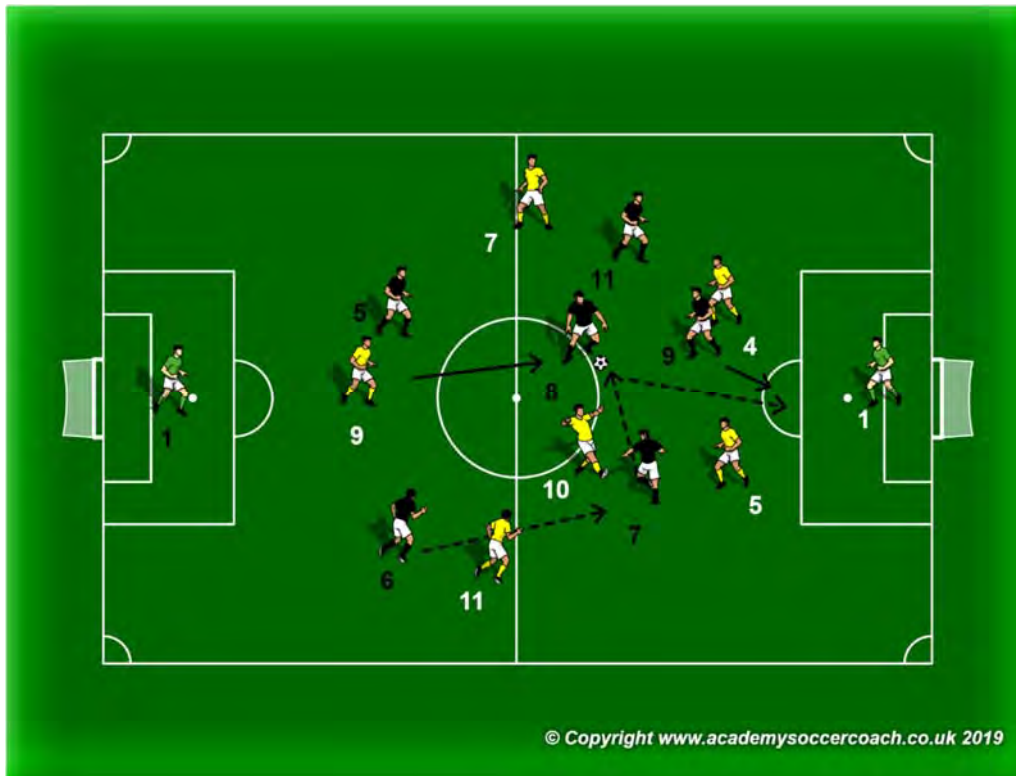


Figure 48 - Number 7 acting as the link player for midfielder 8 to receive facing forward and play the killer pass.

Another tactical manoeuvre which might pay us dividends, is to pull the opposition's lateral midfielder out of position. Thus, creating space on the flank in the final third which could be exploited. This is especially the case where the opponents are compact and well-organised in defence. Figure 49 shows how the central defensive midfielder has dropped to pick up and bring the ball out from the back. This player dribbles forward with the purpose of pulling the lateral midfielder out of position. It is imperative that the other defensive midfielder, the number 8 offers support and thus creates further numbers and support around the ball. The lateral midfielder 7 is required to open up to receive into this space. If the opposition's central defender moves to track our lateral midfielder 7 it means that space is available centrally. This could provide to be an occasion for us to play direct to the striker. Going back to the situation shown in figure 49, the opposite lateral midfielder must then cut inside from his marker's blind spot to attack the second post while the striker attacks the first post. The small details of when to start the run and the angle of the run are imperative to coach. Look at the striker's angle of the run to anticipate the defender on the ball to finish at goal.

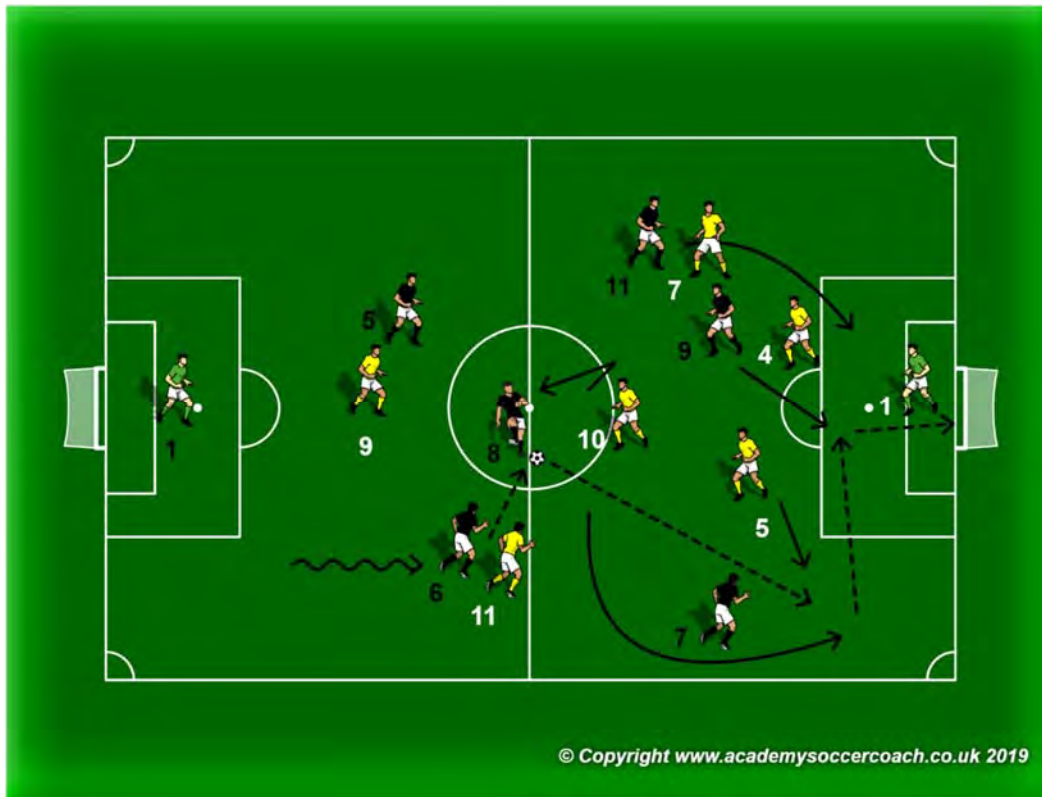


Figure 49 - Engaging the lateral midfielder to create and exploit space on the flank.

If the opponents are hard to break down centrally and the opposition's lateral midfielder does not get pulled out of position what do we do? How are we going to create opportunities for penetration? Well in this case it might be required that we try to overload the middle. However the ball-side lateral midfielder (in this case the number 7) still remains wide so to create further numerical and positional superiority and thus more options to penetrate. We might need to perform some off-the-ball movements up front! The striker might be needed to drop and act as a *false number 9* to help the team create an overload in the middle. Lateral midfielders 7 and 11 remain wide waiting for the right moment to attack a well-played ball behind the defensive line. The timing of their insertion runs is extremely important so not to give the opponents the time to track and intercept the passes played to them or tackle them on the ball.



Figure 50 - The striker 9 dropping to create an overload in midfield.

In the defensive phase if we are not in position to apply immediate pressing, it might be better if we fall back and stay compact. We want to eliminate every space that the opponents might exploit against us. Communication (both verbal and non-verbal), discipline, rhythm, timing and anticipation all play a key role during this phase. As with the other tactical elements these cannot just be explained on the tactics board before a match. Countless hours of quality practice is needed to establish a high level of communication between all the players.

We must remember that our aim is not only to prevent the opponents from scoring a goal, but to win the ball and initiate a counter attack before they can recover. A defensive team structure that has a high probability of delivering good results is the 1-3-2-1 system. The central defensive midfielder 6 and 8 need to drop in line with 5 thus forming a solid block at the back. Lateral

midfielders 7 and 11 take their positions and to work together to deny penetration. The striker's main task is to force play towards the flank where the opponents have less space to manoeuvre the ball and therefore less options to play. The reduced space on the flanks also makes it easier for us to stop the opponents from advancing up the pitch and to win the ball.

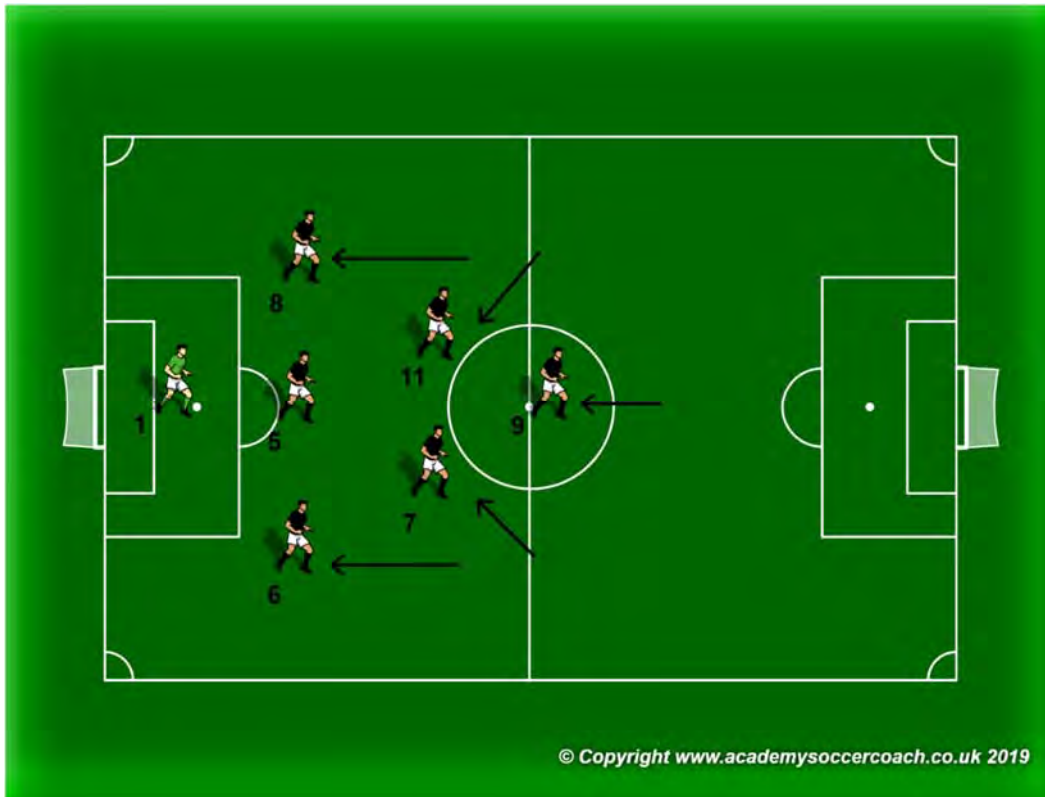


Figure 51 - Getting organised in defence when immediate pressing is not possible.

When the opponents are in possession we should force them to play towards the flank. Once the ball is on this side of the pitch we should press aggressively to win the ball and also to prevent the opponents from playing the ball into central locations. We can set a trap to let them play with purpose to a particular player, typically the player who is technically the weakest or who hesitates under pressure.

The distances between the lines should be minimal, approximately five meters, thus preventing the opponents from playing into the gaps between the lines. If the central defender 5 has to come out

a few steps to apply pressure on a dangerous opponent in the zone behind midfielders 7 and 11 (when set in a 1-3-2-1 defensive system), players 6 and 8 should tuck in to cover.

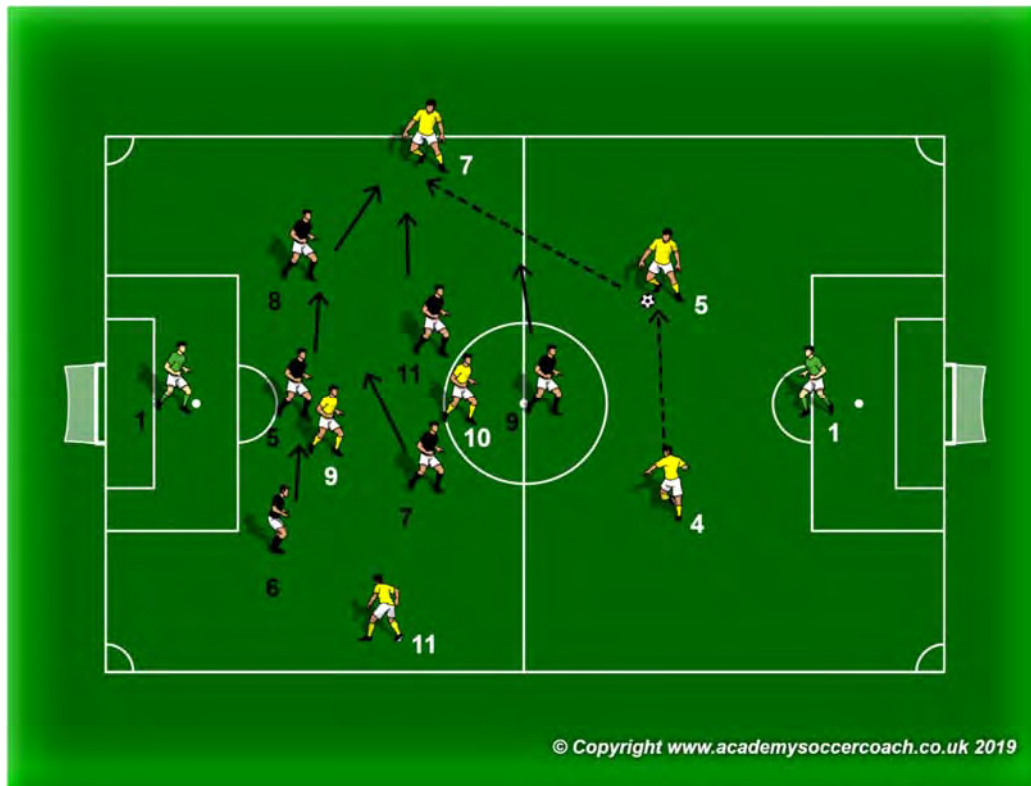


Figure 52 - Making play predictable to the flank and apply aggressive pressing.

The situation depicted in figure 52 shows the movements needed by the players to press and isolate the ball-carrier. The players need to however identify the appropriate pressing moments. Pressing moments in the figure shown above would be: if the opposition's number 7 has a bad first touch, if the pass is played short or if the quality of the pass is poor, if the number 7 receives and lowers his head thus reducing his field of vision and therefore his playing options, and if the first touch was played in the wrong direction thus setting himself into a trap. If the pressing triggers are not available and we press aggressively we risk that the opponents might play around us.

The 1-1-2-2-1 v 1-1-2-2-1.

These two systems of play against each other promise a lot of 1v1 confrontations in different locations of the pitch. Qualitative superiority in these 1v1 situations is of upmost importance in guaranteeing success in creating numerical overload with the intention of unbalancing the opponent. Communication is however of the highest order (Verheijen, 2014) as it guides the organisation of the team and how its different elements (the players) integrate with each other. Through a high level of communication and understanding between the players we will be able to remove the numerical parity and create numerical superiority around the ball, therefore more opportunities to penetrate and score goals. A high level of communication is also fundamental to apply the macro principle of mobility. We cannot have timed interchanging of positions with the intention of opening up spaces if the level of mutual understanding between the players is low!



Figure 53 - Theoretically we have a 1v1 situations in various parts of the pitch.

In the first stage of the build-up we need to create space and options. We might move the central defender to one side in order to get free or open up the middle channel. One of the defensive

midfielder 11 to pull opponent number 7 from the inside passing lane or to act as the link player to pass to number 8. The central defender 5 dribbles forward in both cases so to attract the opposition's number 7. Committing this player ensures that no interference can be made after the pass to either 8 or 11 is made.

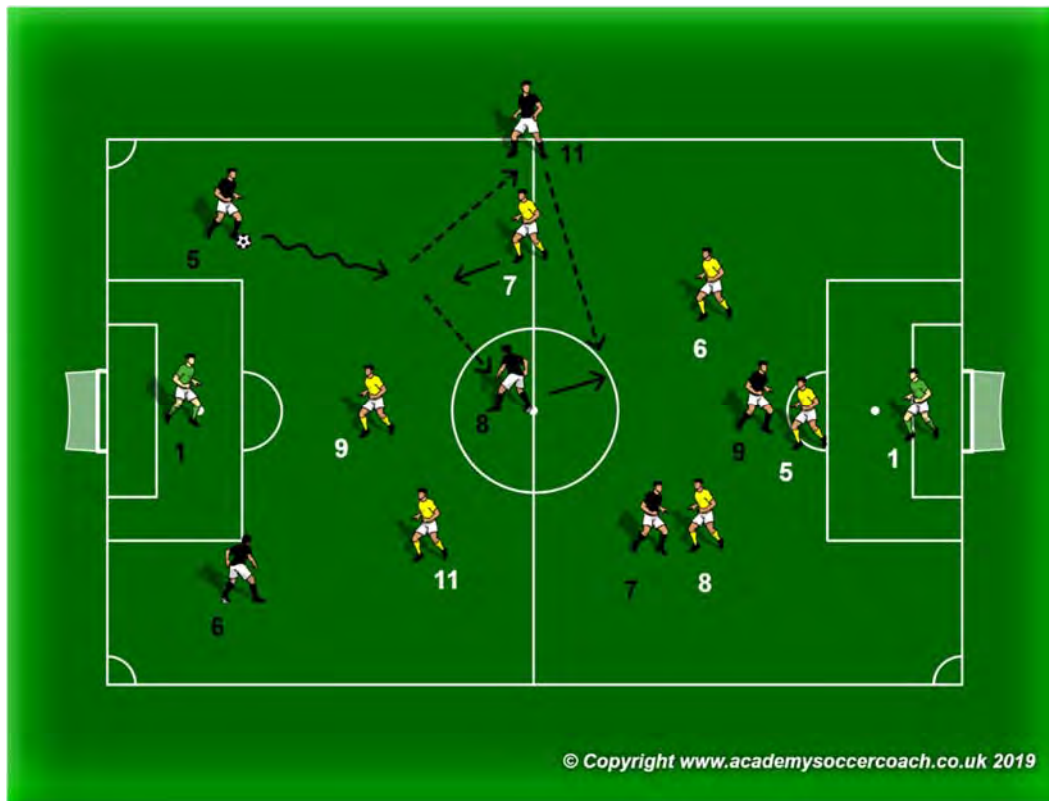


Figure 55 - Creating options for the build-up.

What if however the opposition's 7 and 11 remain inside? What are our options for the build-up? In this case we should have both our 7 and 11 wide with the intention of stretching them and create gaps. There is no standard outcome of such situation but the idea is to play wide so to play in verticality. When the ball is on the flank, the other midfielder 8 should search for pockets of space to either receive the ball or pull defenders out of well organised defensive positions. We intent to disrupt the opposition's well organised midfield block with the ultimate aim to play forward. If the midfielder who moves wide receives the ball he may have two options. The first one will be to pass the ball to the striker and create a 1v1 situation in the final third. The second is to combine

with midfielder 8. The first option is ideal if we possess a striker who dominates direct duels, while the latter is useful if we want to create numerical superiority in attack.

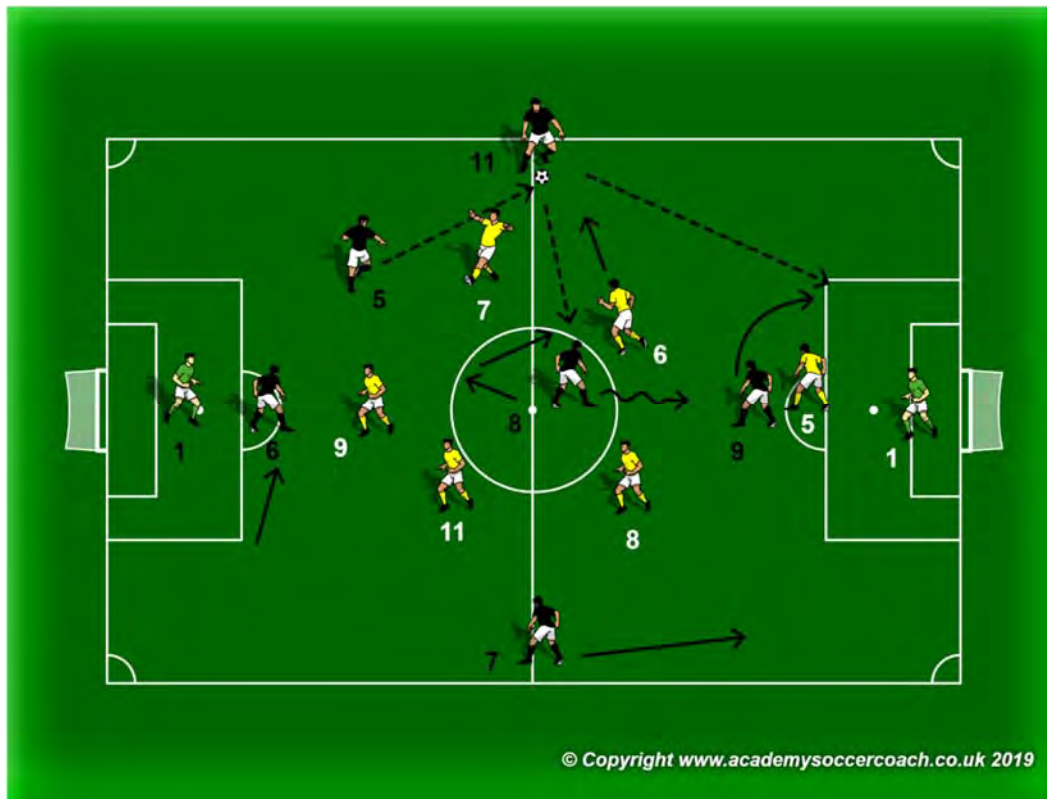


Figure 56 – Midfielder 11 has two major options; to play directly to the striker 9 and create a 1v1 situation in the final third or use midfielder 8 as the link player.

Till now we have provided example of building up constructively from the back. What if we have players who are strong, fast and are able to deliver perfect long balls? This is another weapon in our arsenal which we may use to surprise the opponents, especially if they remain compact in the middle and with only one defender at the back. The first step is to get one of the midfielders or a central defender free to receive so to have the time and space necessary to play long. If we have the goalkeeper who can do it is even better as we do not lose a player from the middle. Timing is imperative! As the ball is kicked long, we must move in a coordinated manner to overload one side of the pitch. If you look at figure 57 we notice that we have four players against three of theirs in the attacking third. After the ball is played, the team must quickly get back into a compact shape. In the mentioned figure, midfielder 8 and central defender 5 move forward. They help in making the area more congested so to offer more playing options if the attack has not been

concluded, while also taking away the space and time the opponents have to counter in the case possession is lost.

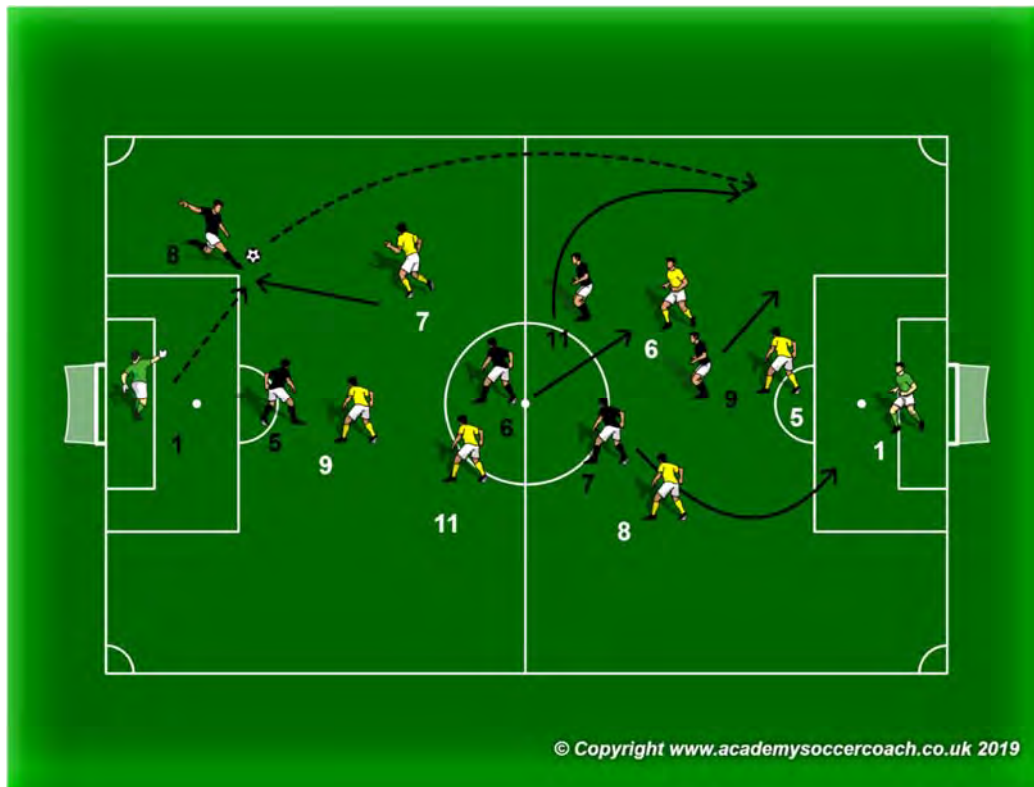


Figure 57 - Playing long and overloading the ball zone near the flank.

In defence we need to move the defensive midfielders 6 and 8 back in line with the central defender. Midfielders 7 and 11 need to tuck back to provide inside cover. We let the opponents play towards the flank zones with purpose while retaining our composure and shape. We should never break our team shape if we are not sure of winning the ball.

The opponents might push their 7 and 11 forward getting the situation to a 3v3 at the back. We should not drop any further and give them space. We just need to prevent them from playing into central areas close to our goal. This is our 7 and 11's job, to protect the inner lane. As the inside lane is congested, the opponents will play towards the flanks. They might have their midfielders 8 and 6 move wide. For us this is not a threat as these two players cannot do us any damage as long as we cut off their options towards the middle. The challenge is how we can win the ball. As

long as we are winning and they cannot score, this is ok. If we are losing and time is running out, this would be a problem for us.



Figure 58 - Retain compactness and close central options.

If we can analyse figure 58 into more detail their number 11 is closed by two of our players, the 6 and 7. This is a 2v1 situation in our favour. Now can we create an overload on this flank and prevent the opponents from switching the ball and attack our weak side? How can we coordinate this as a team? If the opponents manage to play back in order to recycle the attack, can we recover our shape or will we be caught out?

In this situation when the ball is passed by opponent 5 to their 8, our striker should close the return pass to the 5 while our midfielder 7 be ready to intercept square passes played to the inside. Our striker should aim to prevent the ball-carrier from passing back and force him to dribble or pass forward into a trap. If the player on the ball still has space and time to deliver a cross, thus there is an open ball situation, our back line should not move. There is still the danger that our back line

The 1-2-1-2-1 system of play.



Figure 60 - The central pivotal role of the defensive midfielder.

The 1-2-1-2-1 system of play offers many vertical lines and opportunities to play in verticality. Central to this system is the defensive midfielder or the low play maker. If this player has an off day, the whole system might crumble. As shown in the diagram above, we have the formation of two rhombuses. This guarantees better circulation of the ball and a higher probability of penetration. However as it is always the case, this depends on the quality of the players we have to our disposal.

As with other systems of play, the 1-2-1-2-1 is not standard for all phases of the game. Situations and therefore necessities change all the time. The players need to immediately recognise the needs that every situation requires from them. If for example a long ball is played behind the midfield to the right side of the pitch and the right central defender gets out of position to intercept the ball or defend against an opponent, the defensive midfielder must drop into the space being left by the

defender while the opposite central defender retains balance. Furthermore, the two attacking midfielders (8 and 10) need to fill the space left in central midfield and one of them, the number 8 in this case, aids the central defender to double team the ball-carrier. In the attacking phase both 8 and 10 are required to push up to help the striker create scoring chances as well as to score goals. The number 6 needs to retain balance and offer both support and cover outside the penalty area.

The 1-2-1-2-1 v 1-2-3-1.



Figure 61 - The 1-2-1-2-1 v 1-2-3-1

The 1-2-1-2-1 system of play has more vertical lines and thus offers more forward passing options in the middle vertical channel than the 1-2-3-1 does. In central midfield we can easily outnumber the opposition's number 10, if their lateral midfielders 7 and 11 remain wide. In attack we have the striker who is isolated against two central defenders. We must therefore opt to push forward the attacking midfielders 8 and 10 in search of creating numerical superiority in the final third. If

the opposition's defensive midfielders track our attacking midfielders they will leave less players forward and thus have less options to counter if we lose the ball.



Figure 62 - Pushing the attacking midfielders forward to overload the attack.

The weakest point of the 1-2-1-2-1 system is the lack of flank coverage. When the opponents are in possession of the ball we should invite them to play towards the inside where we have a numerical advantage. Here we deeply require the help of the striker. The striker, as the first line of the defence should make play predictable thus limiting the opposition's space and time and therefore the options to play the ball into zones in which they are the strongest. The attacking midfielder on the ball side aims to cut off forward passing options towards the flank we want to eliminate. The rest of the midfield unit tuck inside to make the space more compact, prevent vertical passes and mark potential receivers. The two central defenders should remain close to each other, but be on the alert to attack any balls played over our midfield and directed towards their striker.

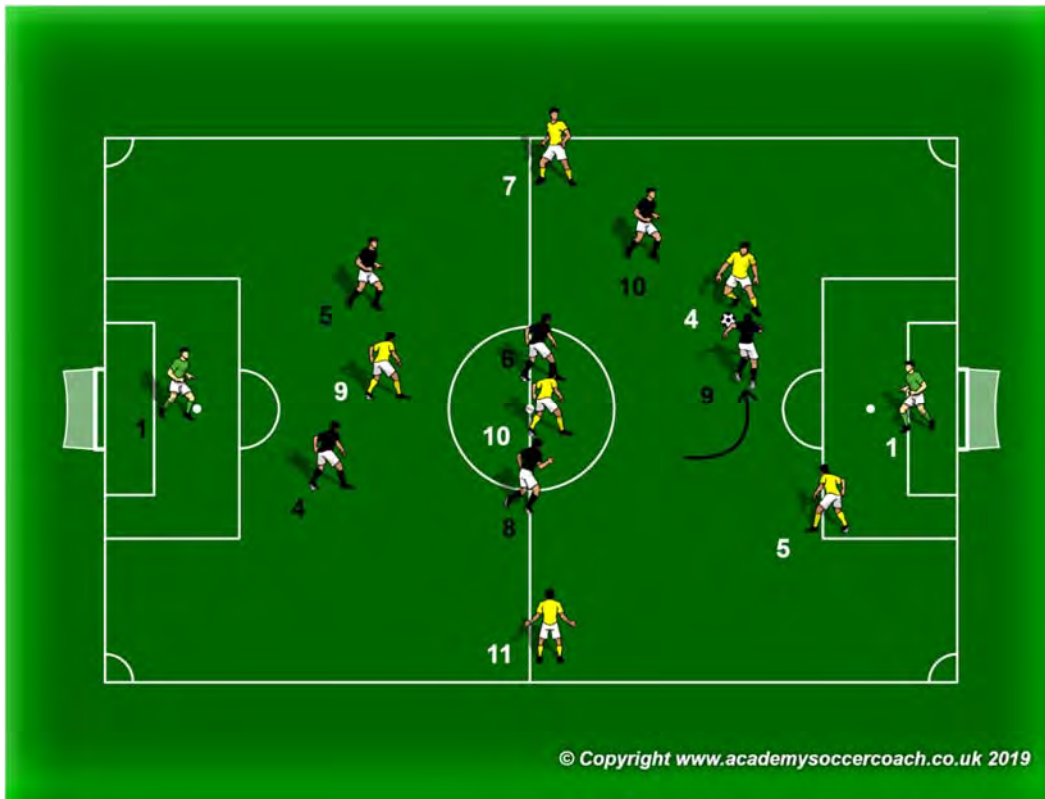


Figure 63 - Forcing the opponents to play towards the inside.

What if however there is no pressure on the ball? Is it wise to apply pressure high up the pitch when the opponents have the time and space required to play out of the press with ease? Remember that if we press we have to do it collectively, otherwise we will be wasting valuable player energy – both mentally and physically. Take figure 63 as a point of reference. If the ball-carrier 4 does not have pressure from the striker 9 and thus has space and time, he might easily play the ball over our attacking midfielder 10 and towards their number 7 who will be free to receive without any pressure on the touch line. This would create many problems for us as the number 7 will have plenty of space and options to exploit.

If no pressure on the ball exists, we would need to drop, period! We will not give the space and the opportunities the opponents need to do us any damage. Therefore we will require our attacking midfielders to drop and overload the central areas. If the ball is played towards their lateral midfielders, we will still have time to apply pressure on the ball and cut off playing options.

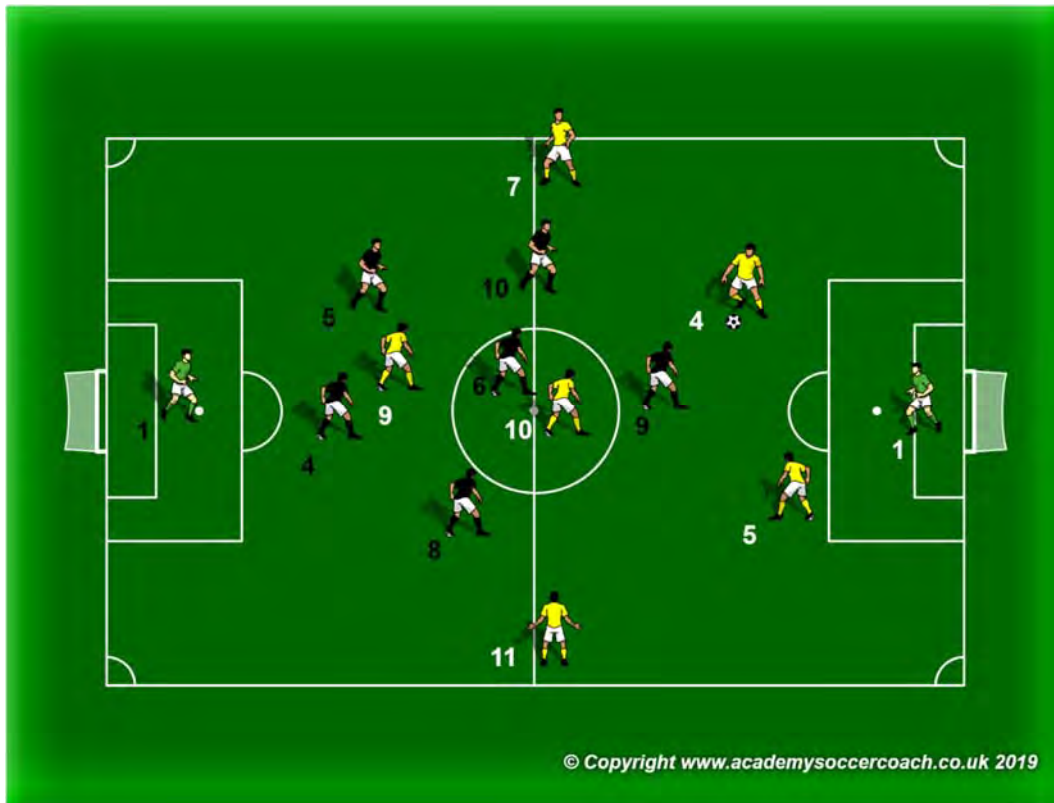


Figure 64 - Dropping when there is no pressure on the ball.

The 1-2-1-2-1 v 1-2-1-2-1.

Both teams are very compact in the vertical middle channel which restricts space and makes breaking lines during the build-up phase harder. Depending on the behaviour of our opponents we might want to make slight changes to the structure of the team in order to create both vertical and horizontal gaps. These gaps enable our players to position themselves between the lines, pull defenders out of a good defensive positions with the ultimate intention of playing forward.

The players need to move in order to create both numerical and positional superiority. Therefore we may have both more numbers than the opponents and also the positioning of our players gives us a competitive lead in securing possession and create goal-scoring actions. This should be done in a manner where our team doesn't become unbalanced at the back and thus be vulnerable for counter attacks.



Figure 65 - The 1-2-1-2-1 v 1-2-1-2-1

We need to identify how we are going to exploit the potential of our best player; the player that is skilful and has the ability to make the difference. We call this player our *'target player'* (Terzis, 2017). That being said we need to also identify the weaker player/s of the opponents and aim to construct play from that part of the field. We will thus need to figure a way on how to get the ball to our target player. If this player receives the ball without any pressure from the opponents, we might be able to create more damage to the opponents.

Let's us take as an example that we want to exploit the offensive skills of our attacking midfielder 10. We know that this player is extremely dangerous when facing the opponents frontally instead of receiving the ball with his back to the defender. Therefore we aim to build from the number 10's side. This shouldn't be too much of a problem as in the initial stages of the build-up we have numerical and positional superiority. Therefore when our central defender 5 receives the ball from the goalkeeper, the attacking midfielder 10 opens up on the left side flank while the striker 9

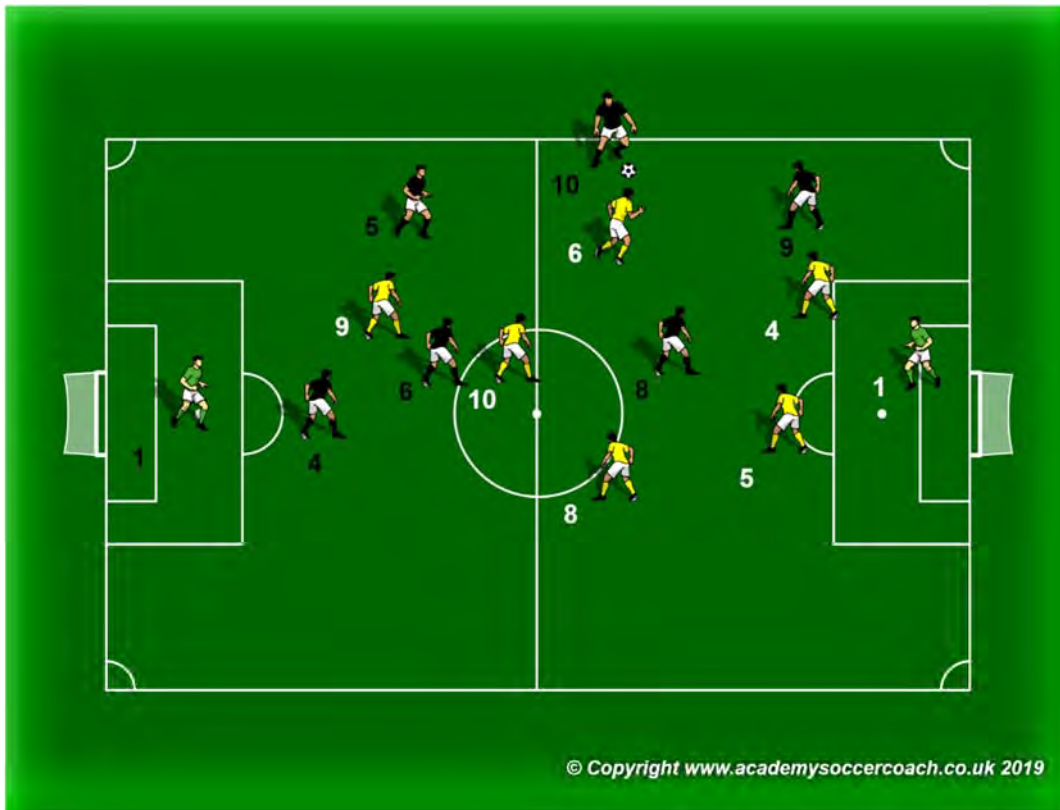


Figure 68 - Overloading the area around the ball.

If the striker moves towards the ball side the team will create an overload around the ball. This will be further aided if we have qualitative superiority (Davies, 2016). This means that if we compare our players' technical abilities with those of the opponents' we are stronger. As such circulating the ball with quick sharp passes and winning direct 1v1 duels will help us get closer to the opponents' goal. If not, overloading our side might become a problem for us as the opponents are attracted too and thus the options to play in verticality will become very slim. We will definitely need to have width in attack. Therefore, we might require to spread out our team along the width of the pitch with the aim of having more options to switch play. We might also consider isolating a player on the opposite side of the pitch, where the ball will be switched to him after attracting the opponents to the other flank.

Figure 69 shows two options of how switching the point of attack can be accomplished. Number 10 can play the ball back to the central defender 5 and then switch play directly with a long pass.

The other is for the number 10 to combine play with 9 and then 6 prior to releasing the ball to 8. The second option is possible only if number 6 seeks the space between the lines where he can receive with enough space and time to switch play.

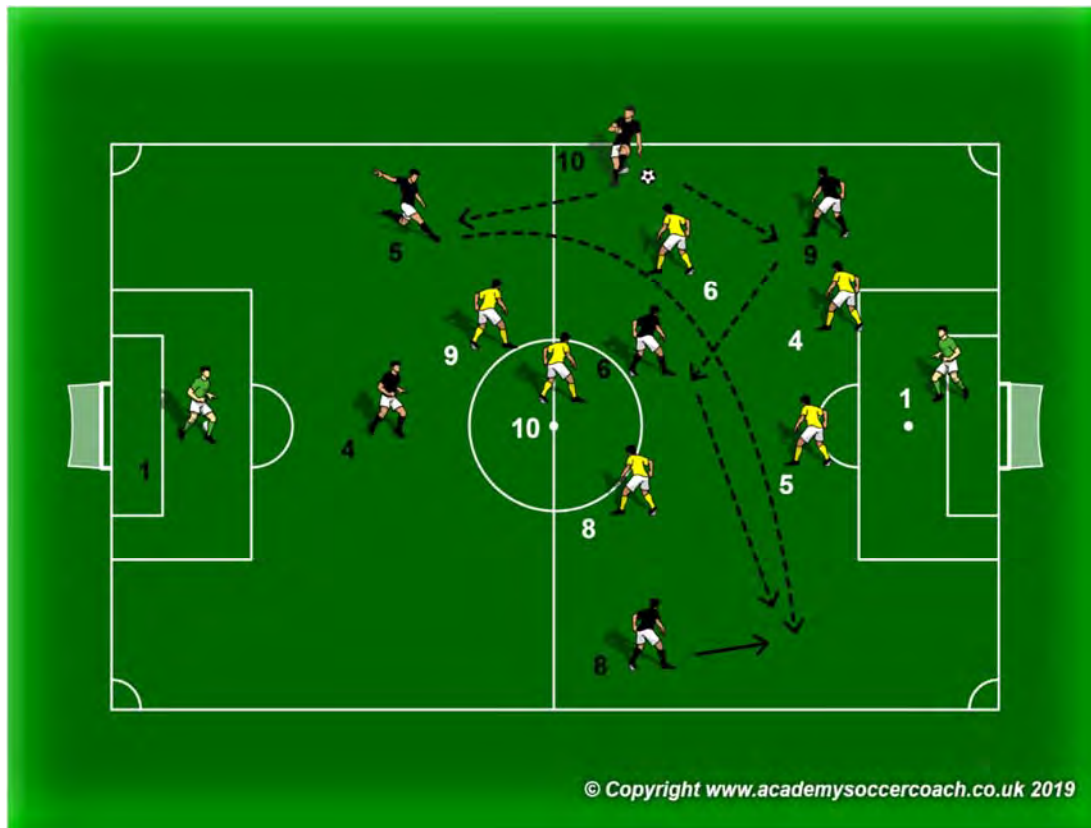


Figure 69 - Overload to switch the ball and attack from the opponents' weak flank.

A weak point which the 1-2-1-2-1 system has is the lack of width and balance in the defensive phase. To cover the width better it might be wise to ask the defensive midfielder to join the two central defenders (figure 70). The attacking midfielders would then reduce their distance in relation with the back line to keep the team compact.

Depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the opponents in comparison with ours, we would either leave the striker up front or ask him to drop and defend. If the opponents leave spaces behind when they are attacking, we may ask the striker to remain high. Upon winning possession we will then look to play direct balls to him in order to exploit the spaces left behind by them.

This however is also score dependent. If we are winning and we want to defend our lead with just a few minutes to go, we might need the help of the striker in joining us to defend. Defending deep with the whole team has its flaws. If the team is defending deep and the ball is won, there will be a problem in the build-up. As we do not possess any players in front of the ball and therefore no length, the space and options needed to play the ball closer to the opponents' goal will be inexistent. This will need our players to quickly open up and for the ball-carrier to play the ball out of pressure in the least time possible.



Figure 70 - Create width in the defence in the phase of non-possession.

If the opponents are building constructively from the back. We can give them space and time in the first stage of the build-up but retain the numbers and be more compact at the back. We drop the attacking midfielders 8 and 10 in line with the defensive midfielder 6. This shape is possible if the opponents are narrow and the possibility that they play long towards the flank does not exist (figure 71). The shape is a 1-2-3-1 but the lines are close, thus the space in which the opponents

can operate is very limited! If the ball is played long and it is won by us, there will be options to play forward as well as the necessary number of players to retain possession.



Figure 71 - Outnumbering the opponents and be compact at the back in the first stage of the opposition's build-up.

The problem becomes more complicated if the opponents push their numbers 8 and 10 wide, therefore having options on both flanks as well as the middle. We can be prepared for this by having our defensive midfielder 6 dropping between the central defenders and the two attacking midfielders moving closer to each other. The team will have width at the back and will also be very compact! The opponents will have the time and space at the back but have limited options to play vertically (figure 72).

The shape of the team takes away the options for the opponents to build-up play from the middle (figure 72). The passing lanes towards their striker are well covered and their defensive midfielder has to drop very deep to receive the ball. This takes away another option in front of the ball for them. If the ball is played long towards a flank, we have the central defender on that side and the

closest midfielder (8 or 10) who double team the opponent on the ball. The defensive midfielder 6 who has now moved into a central defender role, closely marks their striker.



Figure 72 – The defensive midfielder drops to form a compact back three.

When defending using this formation and the ball is on the flank, the central defender and midfielder close to the ball-carrier should start to close him down thus denying him the space to play. The other two defenders (the central defender and defensive midfielder) slide to provide cover as well as mark potential ball receivers in the central zone. Only when the ball is totally covered should the rest of the team press together to compress space. If the player on the ball has space and therefore the opportunity to play, the opponents might manage to play around us. Therefore, prior to sliding the players should be sure that there is pressure on the ball and all the spaces which the opponents might use to get out of the press are well covered.

Figure 73 shows the team applying a collective pressing action in relation to the opponent on the right flank. Midfielder 8 aids defender 4 to double team the ball-carrier and cut off his options.

Defenders 5 and 6 provide balance and cover while marking the opposition's striker. Midfielder 10 is also in a position to intercept any balls played to the striker. Our striker is positioned in a way that if the ball is played back to the opponents' central defenders 5 or 4, he will be in a position to put immediate pressure on the ball or better to anticipate.

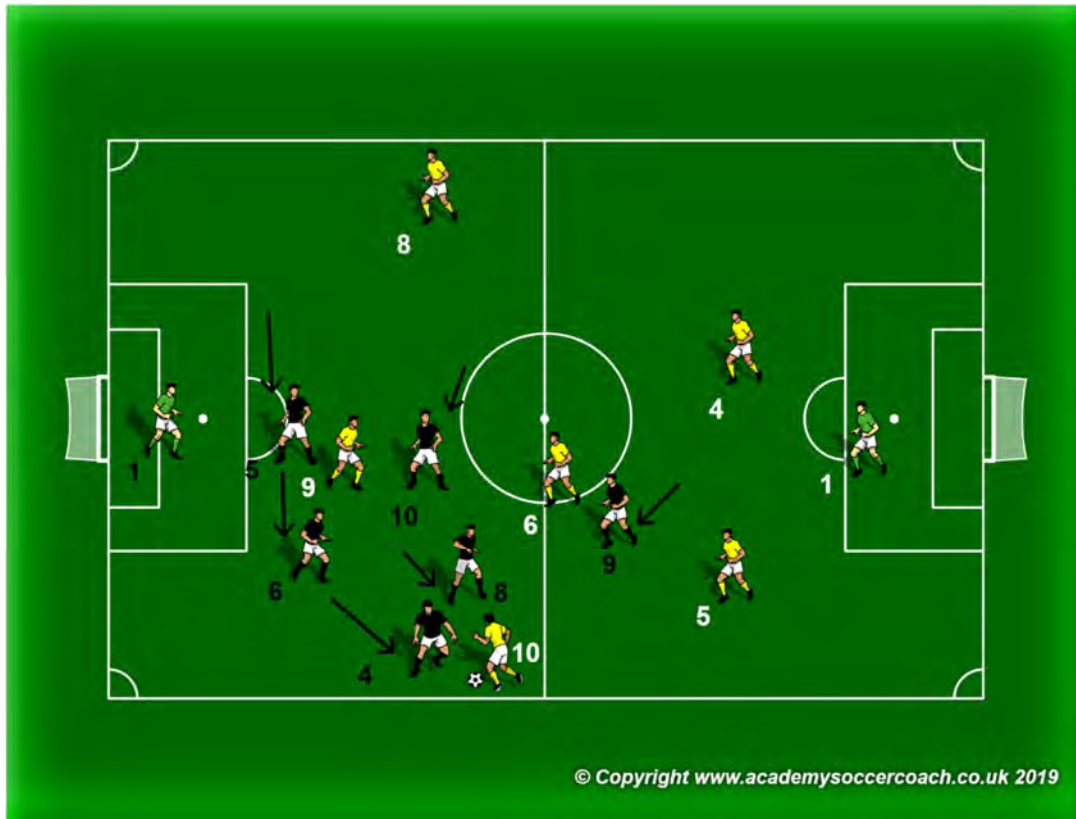


Figure 73 - Pressing as a team to cut off the opposition's options to play and be dangerous.

The 1-3-2-1 system of play.



Figure 74 - The central pivotal role of the defensive midfielder.

The 1-3-2-1 system of play is very strong at the back and also has good midfield coverage. It is as such used by teams that are more defensive minded. It can be very strong defensively but offers more complex challenges for teams when building up an attack. This is due to the limited number of options in front of the ball. The single striker needs support from the midfielders in order to create goal scoring opportunities.

The midfielders are required to join the attack and to also participate in the defensive phase of the game. To increase the team's chances of scoring, one of the players from the back might be needed to attack depth. It is however of upmost importance that whenever a defender moves forward, the team will be covered at the back. This ensures that the team is never unbalanced and that spaces are covered as required.

The 1-3-2-1 v 1-2-3-1.

The main problem lies in midfield in both main phases of the game. During the defensive phase if the lateral opponents 7 and 11 stay wide they may stretch out our team and gain the necessary space to penetrate. In the attacking phase if their lateral midfielders tuck inside they will outnumber us 2v3 in midfield, in which case the options for us to play forward will be limited. As already mentioned we need players from deeper lines to support forward play. Our striker is outnumbered 1v2 and if the opponents' lateral midfielders 7 and 11 tuck inside we will be outnumbered 3v5 in this sector of the pitch.



Figure 75 - The 1-3-2-1 v 1-2-3-1

To win over this challenge and provide more options in attack, the players need to be more mobile. Mobility does not only mean to switch positions and roles but also to create a different structure in the team that enables us to be more creative in the build-up. One way to achieve this is to create more lines and seek to exploit the spaces between the lines.

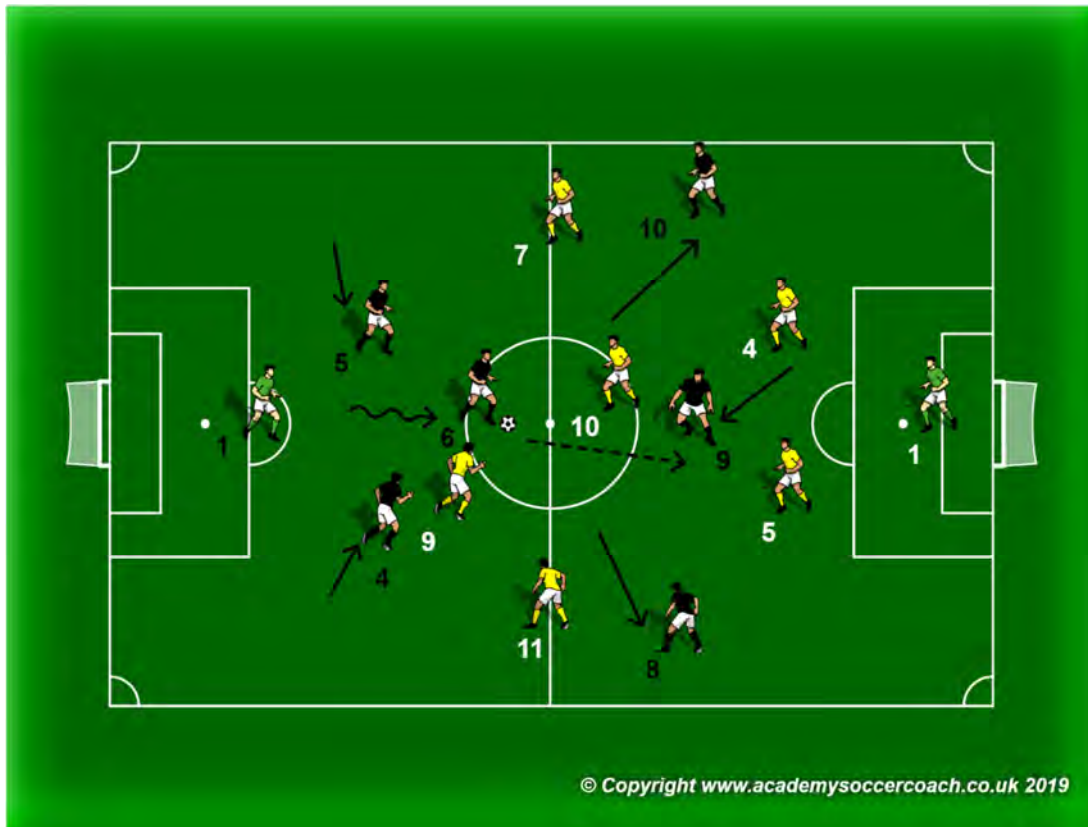


Figure 76 - Central defender 6 coming out with the ball.

In order to create options with the ultimate aim of creating scoring opportunities is to create width, create various lines and angles of play, length, and players who support the attack from the back. In figure 76 we have the central defender 6 who dribbles the ball out of the back line and thus overload the midfield. When one of the central defenders have space in front of them they are encouraged to dribble forward. The central midfielders 8 and 10 open up and create width while the striker 9 drops between the lines in order to receive unopposed (Lambert, 2013). The striker can then play the ball towards the flanks, to a lateral midfielder cutting inside behind the two centre backs, turn and dribble forward himself, or any other action which may deem fit in that situation. We should be ready for the loss of possession. Therefore, the two defenders 4 and 5 must tuck in and remain central, marking and outnumbering the opponents' single striker. The central defender 6 who has now moved forward with the ball should remain in front of the other defenders thus protecting the space in front of them and to also give the team balance in central midfield.



Figure 77 - Creating a 2v1 overload on the flank.

If the opponents are strong in central areas, it may be wise to develop a strategy to attack them from the flanks. Therefore as shown in figure 77, we may create space to be exploited by one of the outer defenders (4 or 5) who move forward to attack with the aim of outnumbering the opponents' lateral midfielder who is marking our central midfielder who has moved wide. Here we create a 2v1 situation to our advantage. Various opportunities may then exist to play the ball behind the opponents' back line. In the situation in figure 77, our midfielder 8 may cut inside from behind the opponents' number 11 to receive a through pass from 4 played between opponents 5 and 11. On the other hand if the opposition's central defender 5 applies pressure on our ball-carrier 4, the latter will be able to play a pass to the striker who will be in an advanced central position. The exact outcome of the attack cannot be neither described and nor depicted. The message here is that in order for us to create goal-scoring opportunities we need to be dynamic in our approach, not to be afraid to push players forward, and be ready for the loss of possession by having players covering critical zones to apply immediate pressure on the ball or delay the opponents' build-up.

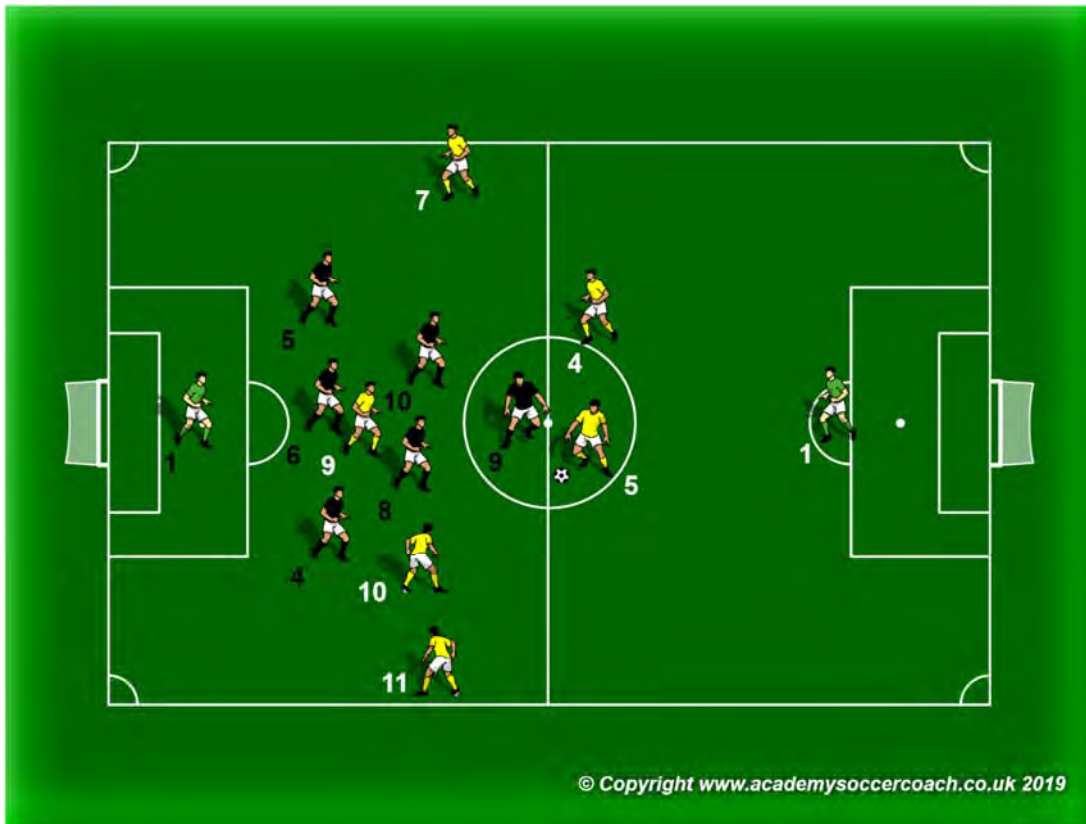


Figure 78 - Being compact in the defensive phase.

Retaining compactness in the defensive phase comes naturally as a result of a solid back three and the two central defenders guarding the spaces in front of them. The major problem is not when the opponents have the ball in central locations as shown in figure 78 but when the ball is on the flanks.

If the ball is played to a flank, we might get outnumbered. To avoid our outer defenders getting outnumbered we will need the help of the midfielders. The other players in the back line can slide over but we might get unbalanced and vulnerable for a possible switch in play towards our weak side. To avoid this if the ball is played into a half space and in front of the back line as shown in figure 79, the midfielder should apply pressure on the ball while the nearest defenders cover. In this case 4 is also marking 11 and closing the passing lane for the same player to run and receive behind the defence.



Figure 79 - Ball played into the half space. The midfielder applies pressure on the ball while being covered by defender 6 and 4.

If the ball is on the flank we try to get the opponents into a pressing trap. As such the team should move as a cohesive unit and prevent the opponents any escape routes. Therefore, the outside defender (player 4 in figure 80) applies pressure on the ball-carrier while the closest midfielder double teams with him. We want to keep the other two defenders (5 and 6) centrally so to prevent getting outnumbered in central areas in front of the goal. If opponent 10 runs forward to receive, our central defender 6 should be ready to anticipate.

A good defensive organisation aids our team to not concede goals. It is however an effective attack that guarantees us wins! Therefore it is not only important to prevent the opponents from scoring, but to dispossess the opponents of the ball so that we can create attacks to score! A way to achieve this outcome is to outnumber the opponents around the ball and deny them playing space and time. In figure 80, the striker 9 is positioned in a way that a backward pass towards 5 is not possible. This leaves the lone opponent against two of our players. We therefore have the upper hand in

numbers and also positional superiority. By creating these kind of situations we increase our chances of winning the ball. The opponent has no other options other than to try and get past his direct opponents 4 and 8 who are double teaming him.



Figure 80 - Cutting off the opposition's playing space and time.

The 1-3-2-1 v 1-2-1-2-1.

Against the 1-2-1-2-1 system of play theoretically we are wasting an extra player at the back as we will be 3v1 in this part of the pitch. Our two central midfielders will also make it difficult for the opponents to reach their striker as we are very compact in the middle. We may however need the help of the striker to mark the opponents' defensive midfielder 6. The main reason being that we are outnumbered 2v3 in midfield. The lack of width in the 1-2-1-2-1 system is also to our advantage. By having the opponents concentrated mainly in the middle vertical sector becomes easier for us to defend. This team structural organization however becomes a problem for us if the

opponents have qualitative superiority and thus tighter spaces and a more aggressive mentality is required from us.

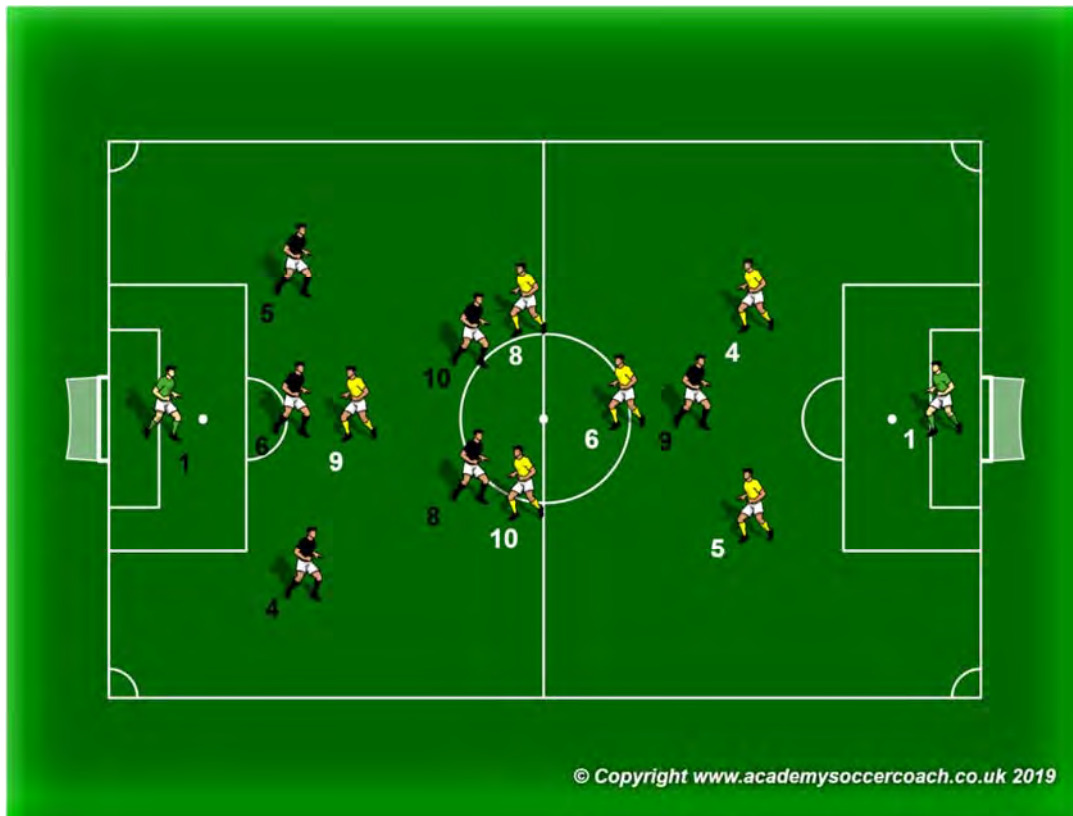


Figure 81 - The 1-3-2-1 v the 1-2-1-2-1.

Having three at the back gives us more numbers and options in the initial stages of the build-up. This might be when starting a new attack from the goalkeeper, or when recycling a new attack in the middle sector of the pitch. We can use the outer defenders as full backs and build-up play from the flanks where there is space. The rest of the team are required to adjust their positions to form various options to play vertical passes.

In figure 82 the outside defender 4 opened up towards the right flank to receive and run with the ball forward into the space. The central midfielder 8 then moves towards the flank to create another option for the team to play in verticality. From this situation the number 8 is in 1v1 situation

(option to play in verticality), while the central defender drops diagonally behind to offer a back pass option in cases where the possibility to play forward are cut off and the need to reconstruct play from a different angle emerges.

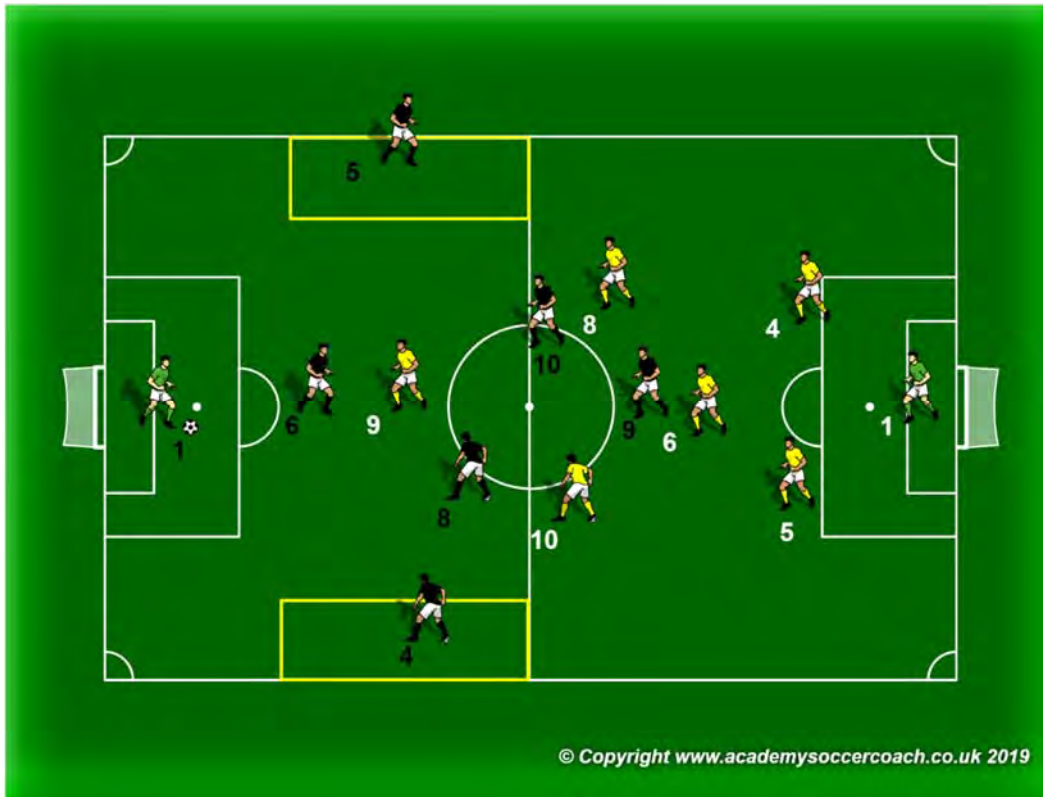


Figure 83 – Space created by the outer defenders moving to a wide position on the pitch.

By having the outer defenders wide we force the opponents to stretch and lose their compact shape. Here we need the involvement of the midfielders to create options to play to through the middle and eliminate lines. The midfielders can receive and switch the ball onto the flank to an outer defender who has moved up as a natural fullback would do in an 11v11 match. Figure 84 shows how midfielder 10 can move into the space to receive between the lines and how he can lay the ball to the full back who has moved high on the flank. If the midfielder receives the ball without pressure, as the defender chooses to remain in his position, he will have the space and time to turn and play vertically and take on the central defender in a 1v1 duel.

When the ball is at the central defender 6, the goalkeeper must always be ready to receive back passes should the central defender gets into trouble as a result of an aggressive pressure from the opposition's striker while their midfielders close the inside passing lanes. The outside defenders may also be required to drop deep in order to create a better passing angle and prevent that the ball will be intercepted in dangerous zones by the opponents. If this happens we risk getting outnumbered in the middle on a counter attack.

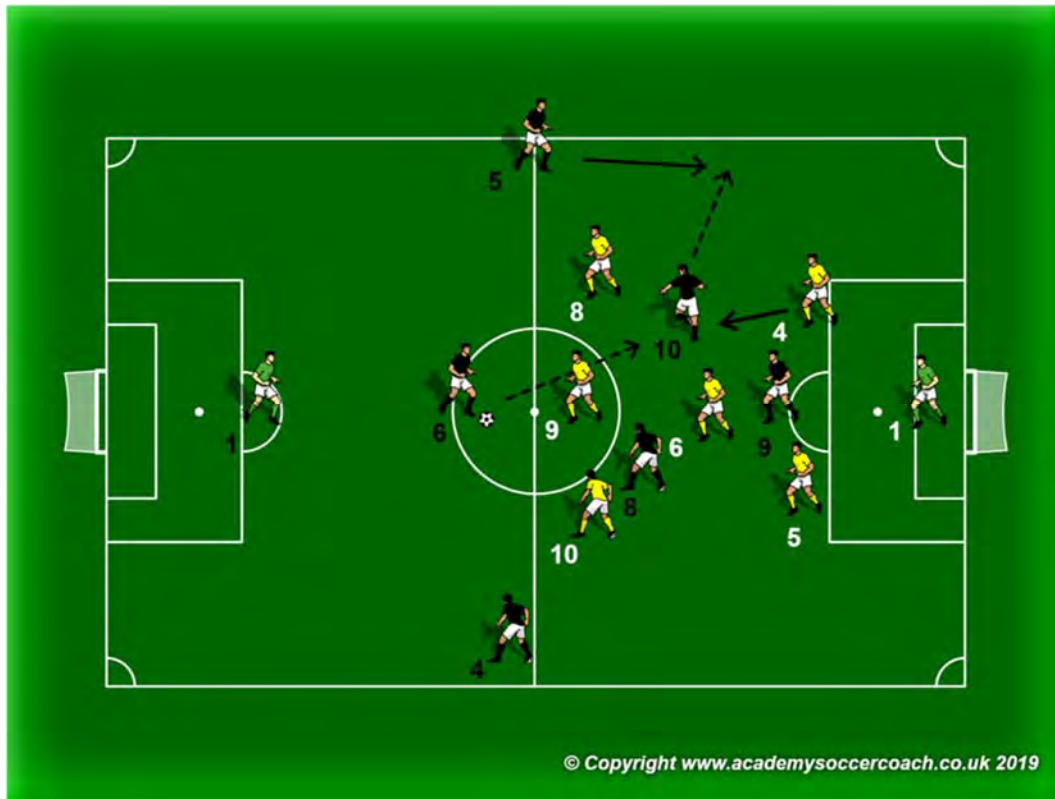


Figure 84 - Penetrating through the middle and using the midfielder as a link player.

In the defensive phase our main aim is to deny the opponents the space they require to build dangerous attacks. Our midfielders 8 and 10 play an important role in this matter where they work together to prevent passes to the striker or into dangerous spaces. The three at the back must retain their distances and mark potential receivers inside their zone. If their direct opponent goes wide they should retain their position and not get pulled out. However, they should retain their opponent in their field of vision and track any dangerous movements they try to carry out from the defenders' blind spot.

If the ball is played towards a flank, the respective defender and midfielder on that flank should collaborate together to prevent the opponents from playing the ball inside towards more dangerous zones. Here it is of utmost importance that the rest of the back line and the other midfielder to tuck in and provide both cover as well as mark potential ball receivers.

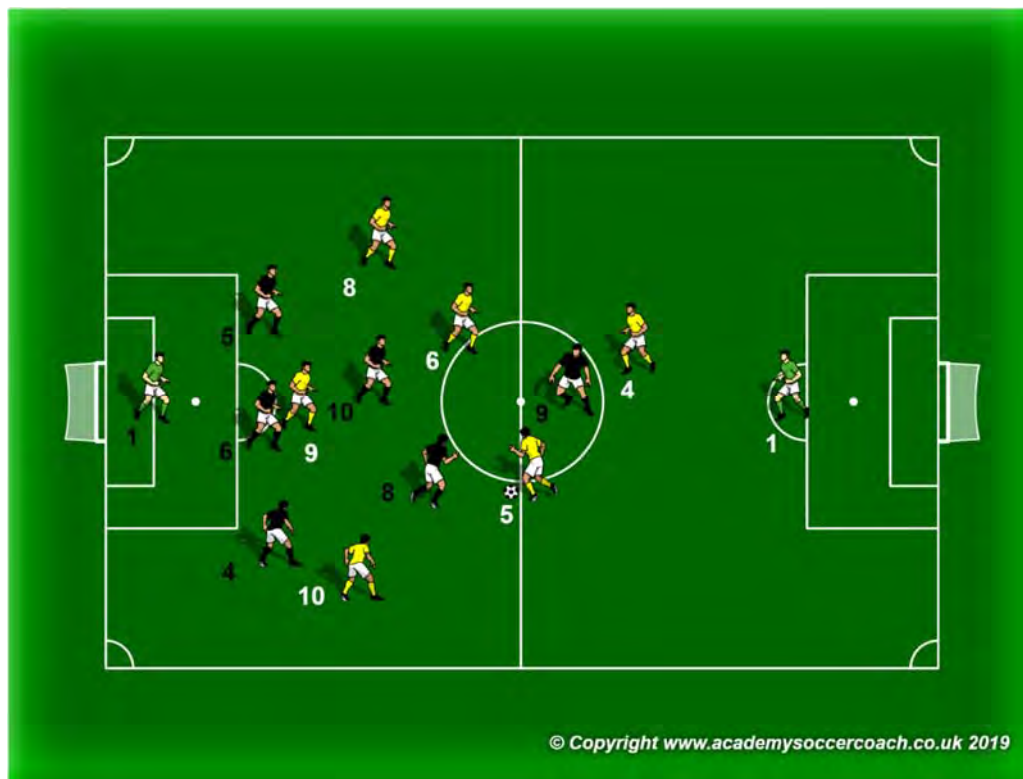


Figure 85 - Retaining defensive compactness when the ball is in the middle.

High level communication is imperative during the phase of non-possession. The players must immediately recognise and adjust collectively according to the necessities that particular situations bring with them.

In most cases if the opposition is playing in a 1-2-1-2-1 system they will convert into another system to utilise width with the intent of creating gaps in our defensive structure. Communication, both verbal but especially non-verbal is key! The team should be ready to adjust its shape without unbalancing ourselves. This means that our shape can be elastic as long as there is proper pressure

on the ball, cover and balance! However, prior to put pressure on the ball we first need to establish a strong and compact shape that will limit the opportunities for the opponents to become dangerous.



Figure 86 - Provide compactness to prevent penetration in central areas.

About the author.



Philip Joe Cauchi has been coaching for the past 18 years where he has coached players from different abilities, gender and age. His specialisation is in developing the potential of youth soccer players. Philip's qualifications include a UEFA A licence, a UEFA Youth A Elite licence, a Soccer physical trainer's licence, a Bachelor of Education with Physical Education and the SAQ® International diploma in developing speed, agility and quickness. At the moment Philip is coaching in Malta with the Mosta F.C. youth academy, which is one of the top academies on the island.

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