

4-3-3

ATTACKING



**FORMATION
SERIES**

4 – 3 – 3

Attacking

By

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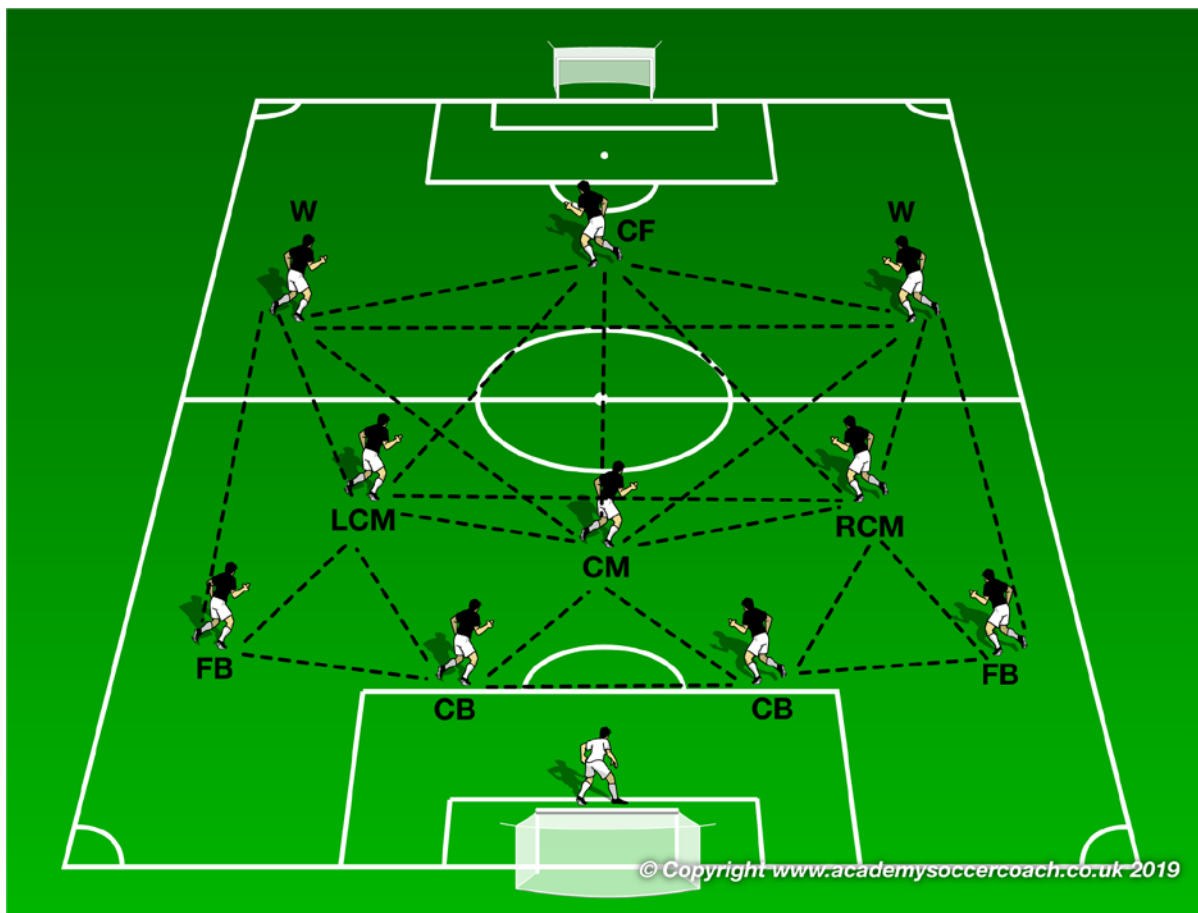
Introduction

A 1-4-3-3 team formation is usually set-up with 3 player lines with a balanced spread of them over the pitch, shaping 'triangles' and creating good conditions for possession and attacking style of play.

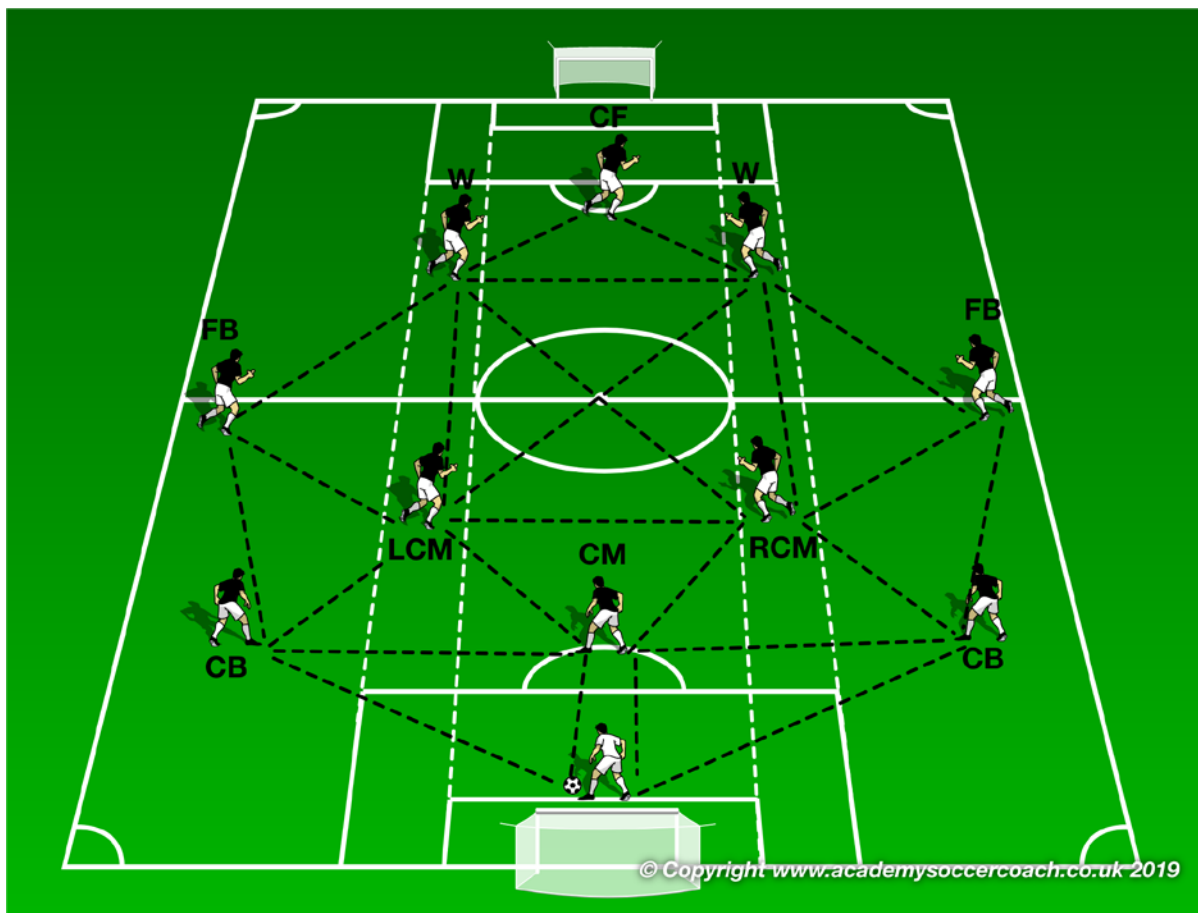


These are the main pros from an offensive point of view:

- Effective positional play thanks to the players' triangles; this way all the ball carriers have always a forward support, a back or side option for a pass time to time.



- Easy building up and playing out patterns and passing options, exploiting the half spaces with at least 2 players on each side (with a center forward); in this example, the half spaces are covered with 1 player inside each part and each half of the pitch, as the CM has drop deep between the CBs and the middle third is managed by the outer midfielders. The wingers run inside to create space for the fullbacks.



- False 9 variation: as the striker plays as false 9, in between the lines, the outer midfielders stand higher on the field, to overload the center; the lower pivot drops deep between the CBs and who doesn't receive from the goalkeeper, he must cover the half space in front of him, accepting a potential 2 v 2 duel, as the receiver should try to play/dribble forward.



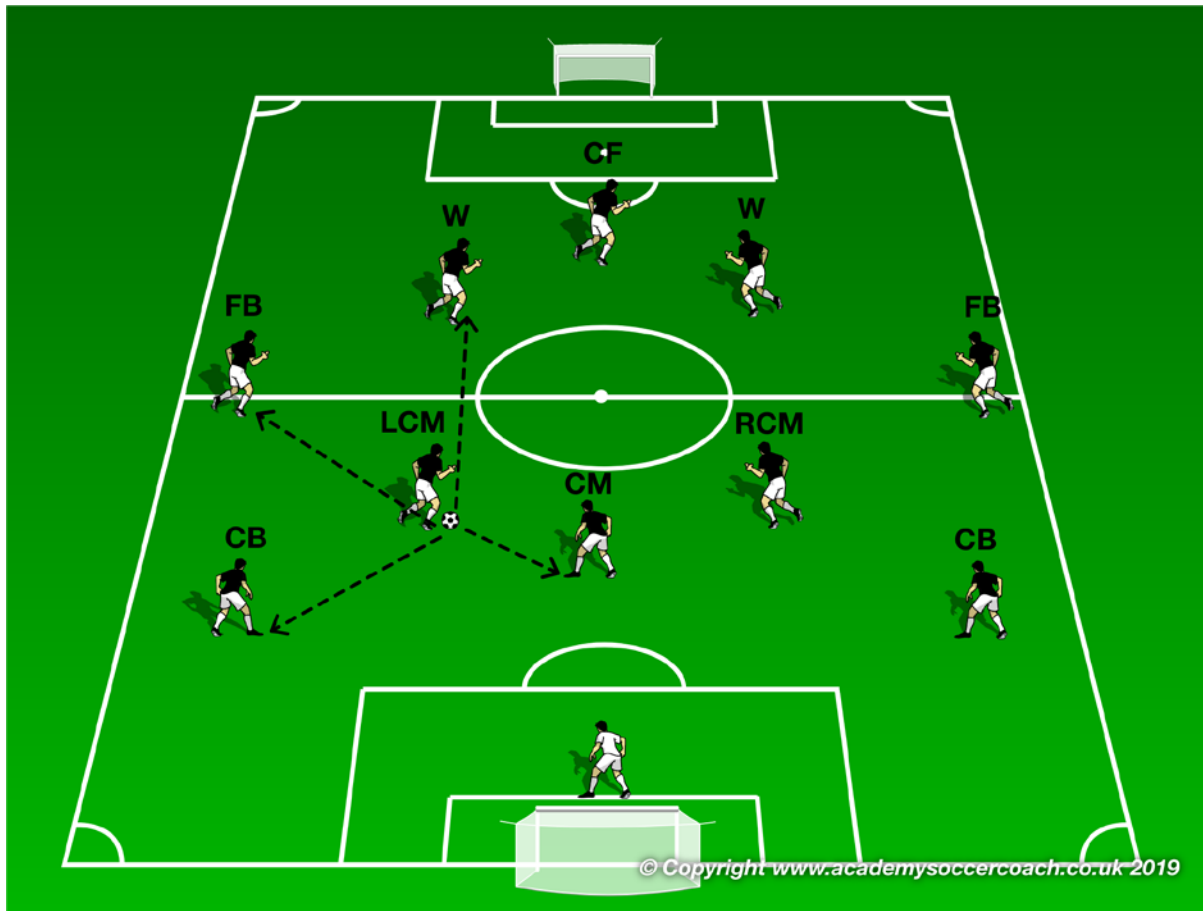
- The center midfielder can be a lower pivot, shaping a midfield triangle with a lower point (this is the usual shape to start the famous "La Volpe Exit" with the lower pivot in between the CBs who move wide and the fullbacks push up and wide toward the middle third)...



...Or an advanced midfielder, (shaping a different kind of triangle in the middle third, more similar to 1-4-2-3-1 formation). In this option, one of the outer midfielders usually becomes the balance player in front of the CBs to save the defensive half preemptively. The half spaces can be exploited by an inverted fullback together with the wingers or even by the advanced midfielder following the ball position.



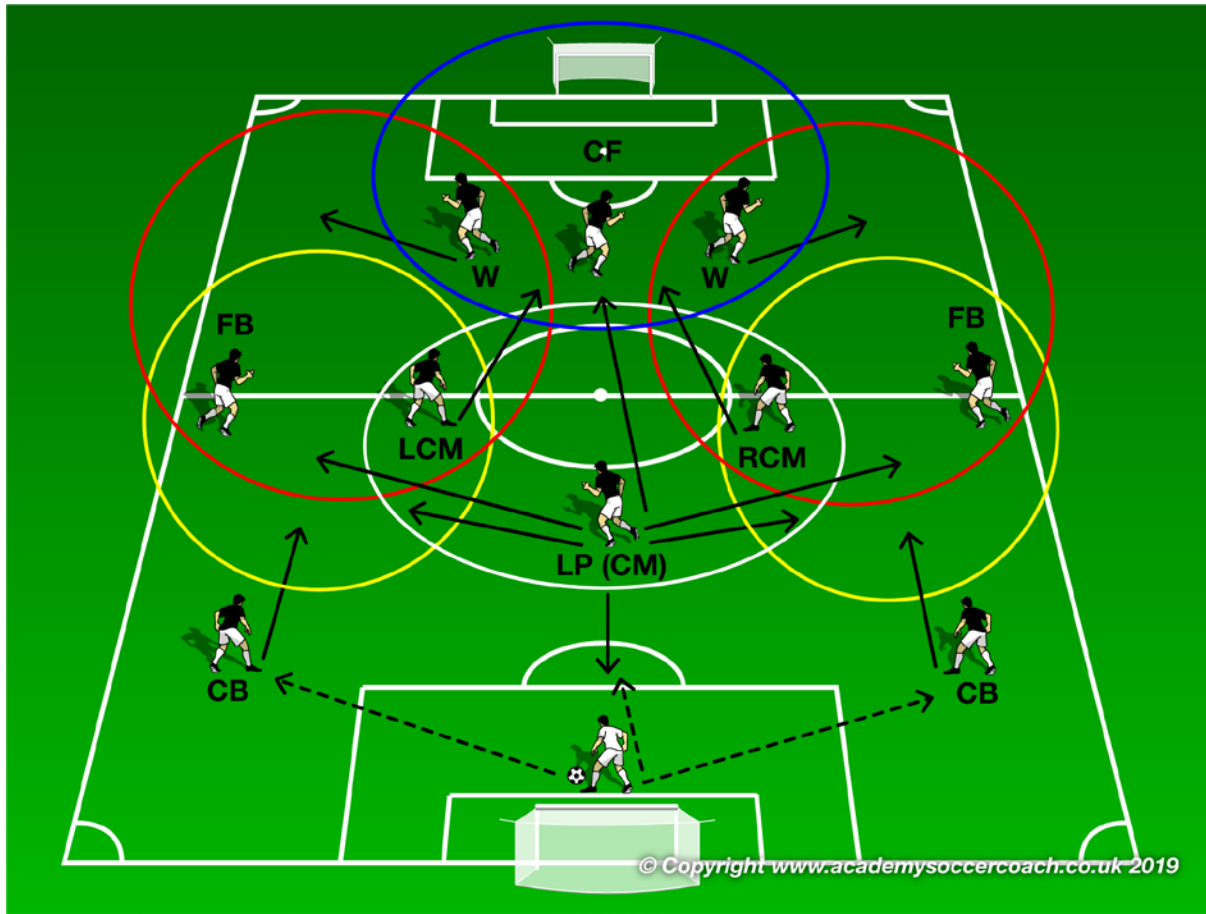
- A back, a forward, and a wide support for the ball carrier are used to maintain possession. Every ball carrier should have as many options as possible to progress the move or to save the possession during transitions to attack or when under pressure. The best situation possible, if the player in possession were a point (LCM), is to have a forward option to overcome an opposition line with a through pass (W), a wide option to overcome the opposition line sideways (FB), an internal option to favor a switch side of play or to give the teammates more time play (CM) and a back pass option to avoid the opposition pressure (CB).



- At least 1 player who can always move between the opposition defense lines; this movements are easier in a 1-4-3-3 starting shape; in this example, the new triangle, moving in between the lines are shaped by RCM+CF+W, RCM+CF+FB or LP+CF+LCM.



- Easy and quick combinations through short passing sequences thanks to positional play; 1-4-3-3 is very helpful to create groups of 3 or 4 players who can manage the possession and progress the move. The center positional play combinations are usually shaped by CM + LCM & RCM (+ CF if he drops back) and by LCM+RCM + CF & Ws inside the final third. Wide combinations of play are usually shaped by CB+FB+CM & the outer CM and by FB+CM & W.



- Creative and varied attacking play using the width of the field. As the current tendency is to overload a flank (or a specific zone of field) to switch the side or play out toward a weak area into the opposition defensive shape, when attacking phase of 1-4-3-3 is shaped in a 1-3-4-3 inside the opposition half, a 3 v 2 duel is very easy to create along the opposite flank from the ball position.



- Wide wingers beside the center forward (wingers are decisive, as if they are usually placed wide, they must provide width before running inside; in this case, the outer midfielders are free to run through the opposition defense shapes to receive in behind)...



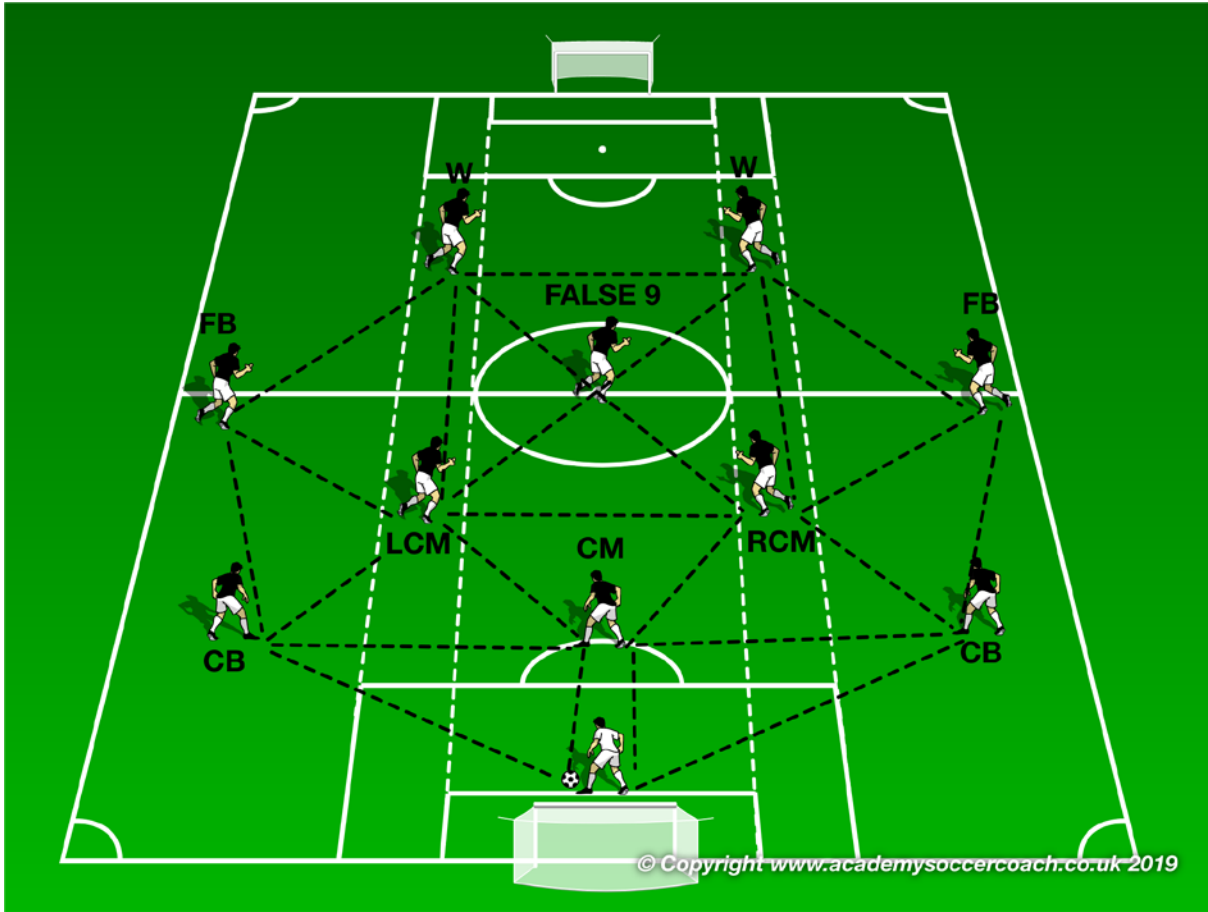
...Narrow wide forwards are placed behind the center one (if the wingers play more as second forwards, then the fullbacks will provide width and the outer midfielders must cover them along the flanks)...



...Or one advanced midfielder is placed behind two center forwards (the advanced midfielders must play between the opposition line, the width is again provided by the fullbacks and the outer midfielders stand along the half spaces).



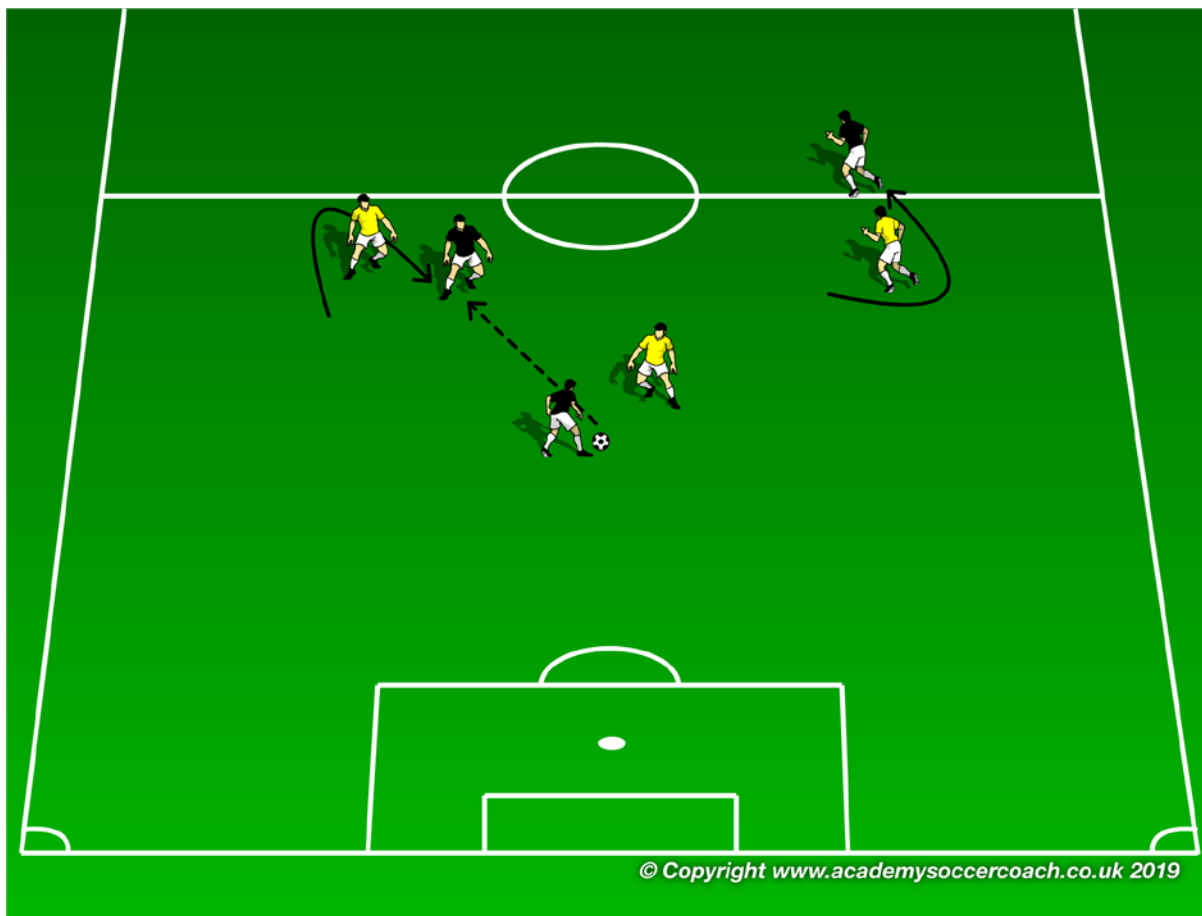
- Advanced center striker or "false nine" option.



Basic attacking principles of play

The commonly recognized attacking principles of play in soccer are:

- **Penetration:** to break through the opposition pressure lines or to find a gap in the positional play inside the first third and middle third to save the possession while progressing the move by passing, receiving, dribbling and running without the ball and through the last opposition defense line to finish by passing, receiving, dribbling and running without the ball and shooting, taking the defending players out of positions.
- **Mobility:** players make runs into different areas of the field in order to invite the defenders out of their positions or to create numerical advantage near the ball, following the positional play style of the team. It's very important to make different movements when 2 potential receivers are placed in front of the ball carrier:



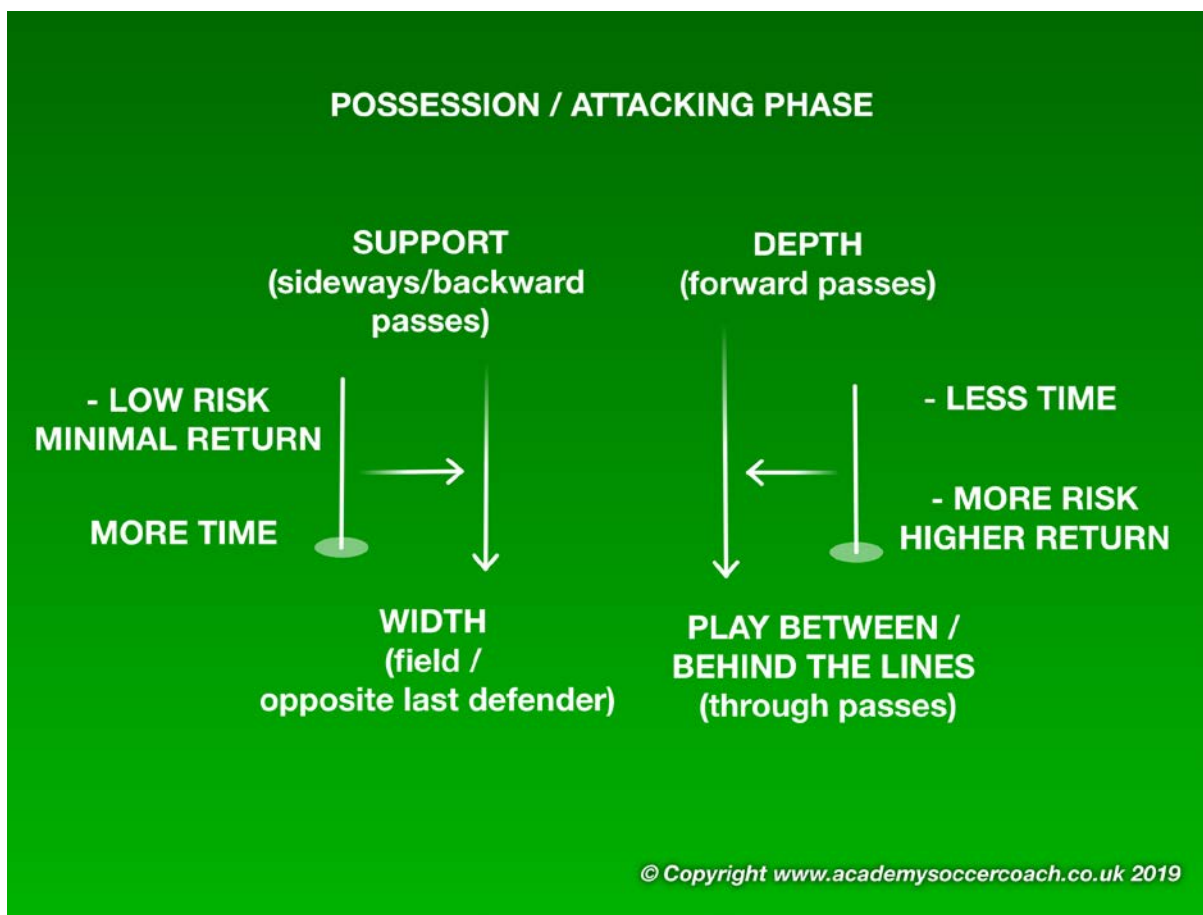
Mobility through right timing runs is effective when the team can:

- Create numerical advantage around the ball zone
- Create triangles and rhombuses
- Shape and maintain width with wingers and fullbacks.
- Shape and maintain depth; centre backs should create options when midfielders cannot play forward and midfielders when attackers cannot play forward in the final third.

- Create diagonal passes options during the first and middle third build-up and vertical passes and combinations options in the final third.
- **Support:** a player of the possession team receives a pass and he must maintain the possession, the teammates provide backward and sideways options to the player in possession. The main goal of the support actions is to save the possession, passing sideways to move the opponents or the nearest opposition pressure line or backward to save the possession, looking for new spaces or a switch of side.

Two important principles to maintain the possession are width and depth.

- **Depth:** when a player of the possession team receives a pass and he must progress the move toward the next third of the field, the teammates provide forward options to the player in possession. The main goal is to move the ball forward, overcoming an opposition line or player to arrive as quickly as possible near the opposition goal, taking the attacking phase to the finishing stage or to a shoot on goal. When the fullbacks and centre midfielders have possession depth comes from centre-backs and goalkeeper but also from the centre forward. Making the field as big as possible when in possession with maximum width and depth is important not only to create space for yourself but also to create space for others to play in or to exploit by moving into.



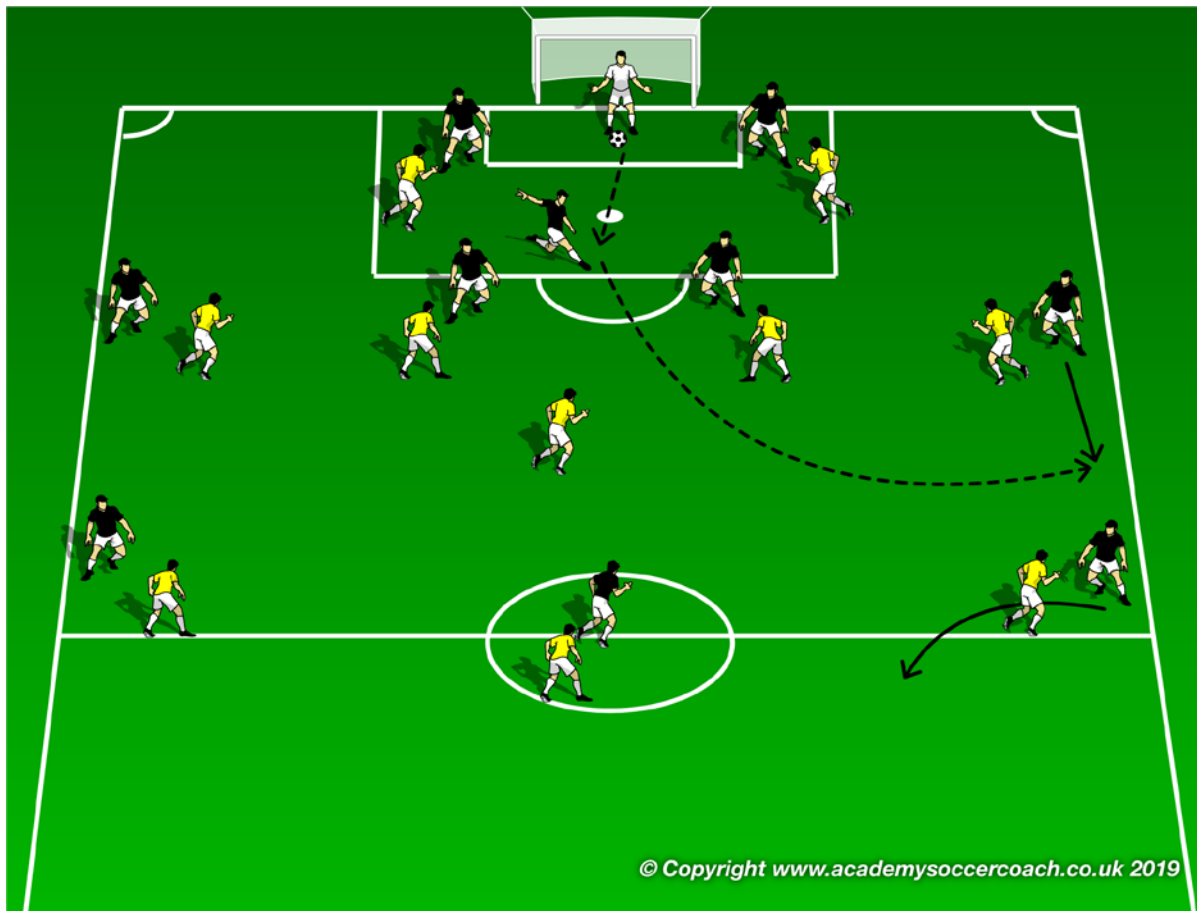
- **Width:** the attacking team attempts to stretch the opponent's defensive or pressure shape using the width of the field, the wider point of the opposition lines (the opposite last defender from the ball position) or the distances between and among the opponents.

The goal is to invite the defenders out from a compact shape while covering the dangerous areas in front of goal, creating space. The attackers move the ball to change the point of attack to find a space between or behind the defense.

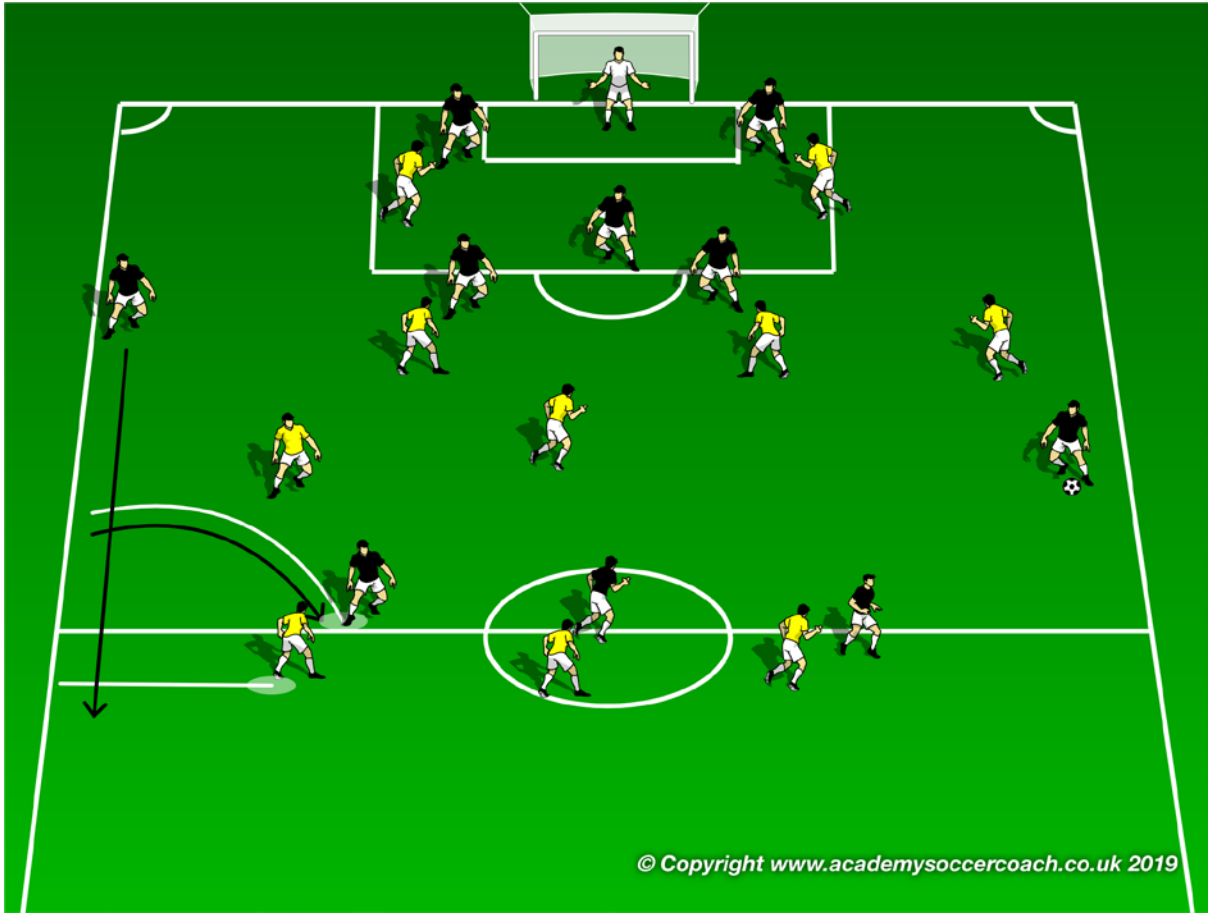
When playing a 1-4-3-3 system the width when in possession inside the first third should come from the fullbacks and from the wingers. When a fullback receives the ball, the centre back must drop off to create depth and as a result, space to maintain possession if a forward option is not available.

As the play develops into the middle and final thirds, fullbacks should provide the width together with the wingers, who have more freedom to make diagonal runs and interchanges of positions with the centre forward.

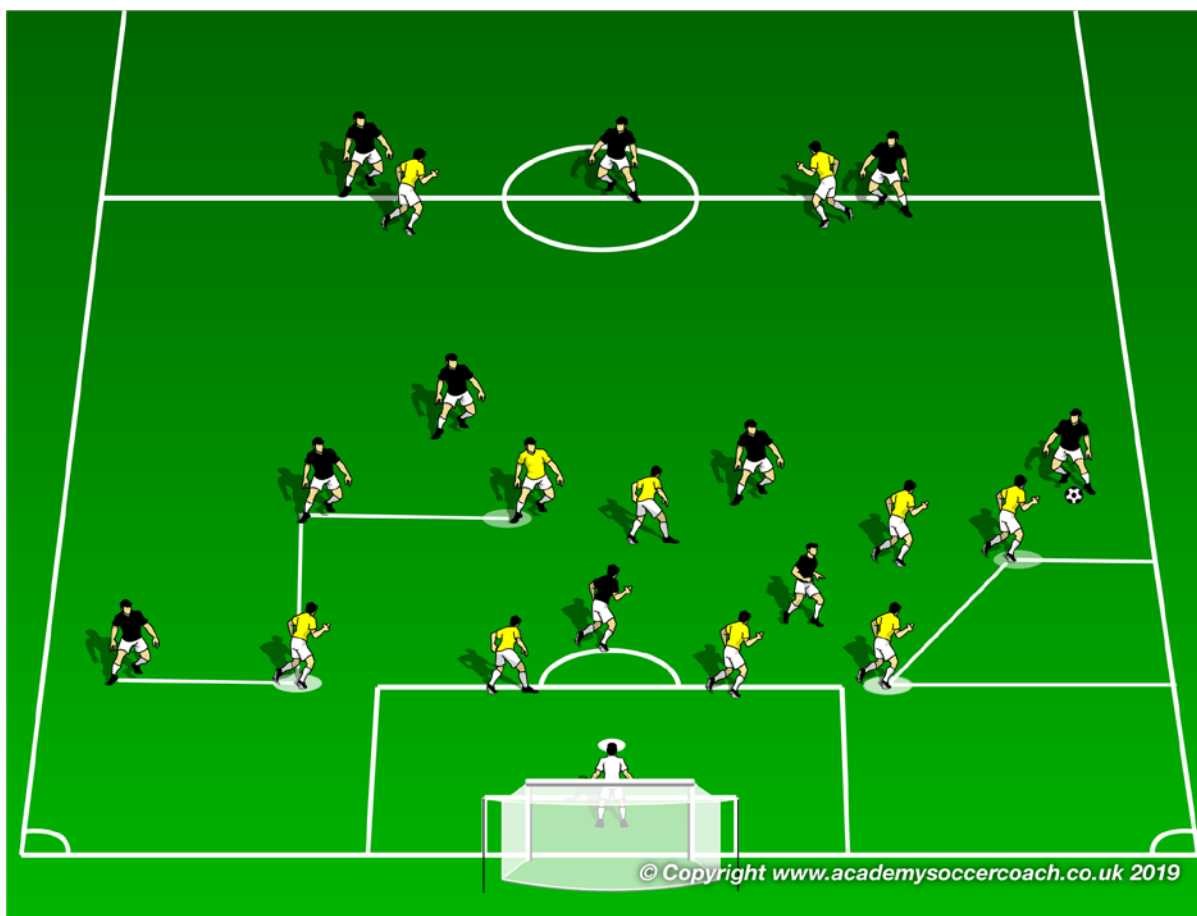
- **Width of the field:** this is the classic definition, with a player (usually fullbacks and wingers) who touches the sideline to stretch the opposition defense block. If it's possible the pass should be received at the back of the opponent and with a teammate in front of the receiver who creates space forward.



- **The wider point of the opposition lines:** width can be also created by pinning the wider player of the opposition along the opposite flank from the ball position, to create space wider for an overlapping teammate.

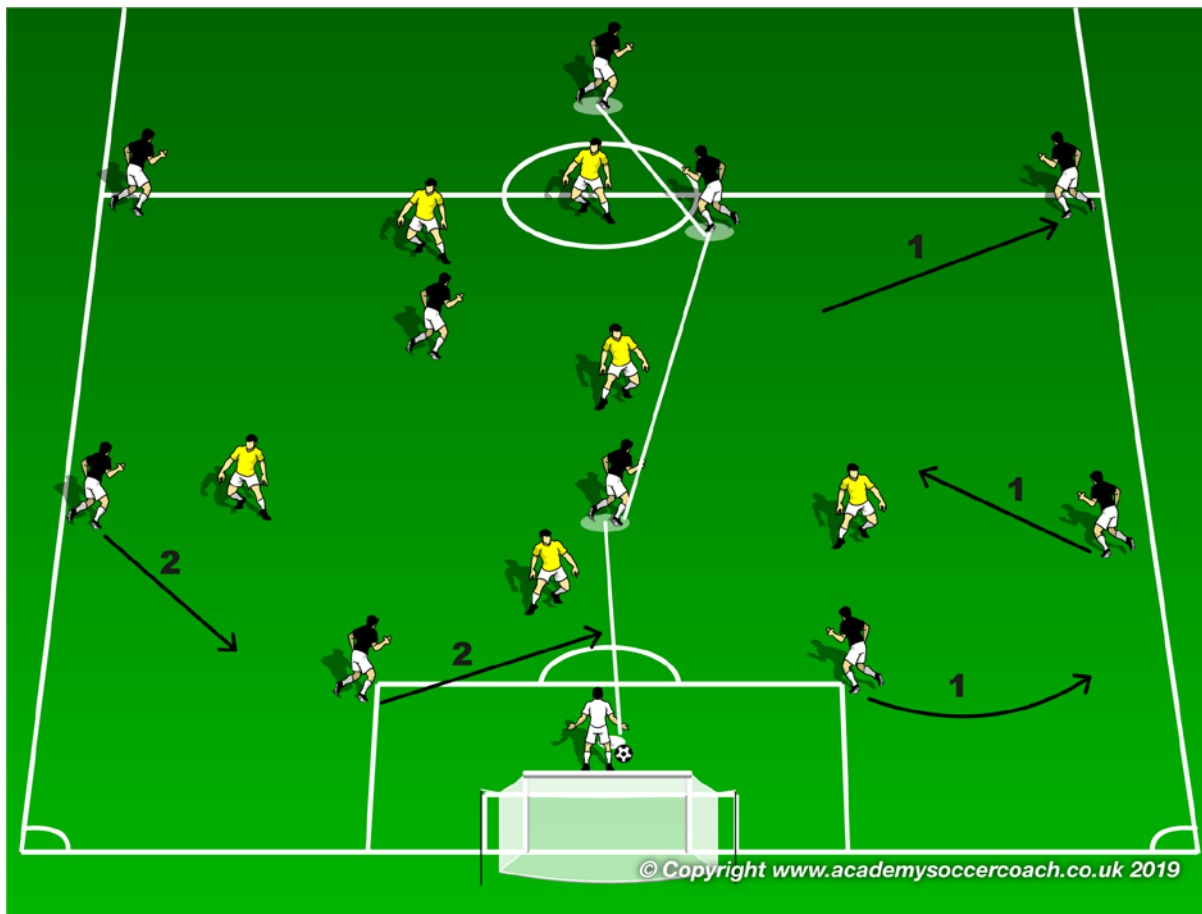


- **The distances between and among the opponents:** every player who can dribble past the direct opponent is providing width. Every player who can receive a pass unmarked square to or next to the opponents between him and the sidelines is providing width.



Possession and Key Attacking Principles

Building up from the back and playing out: when the goalkeeper starts the possession phases (building up from the back) and when the ball is recovered (the transition phase should happen as quickly as possible to counter attack, if possible, or to shape the team, in order to give the best possible options for the new ball carrier), width should be created using the fullbacks and/or wingers (but with center backs also inside the first third). Depth should be provided by the goalkeeper, center backs, center midfielders and center forward (center backs should be able to break down an opposition pressure line in the first third; the center forward should be able to overcome another pressure line in the middle third, to play all around the final third.)



The first goal should be to play forward to overcome the lines of the opposition, when the closure of passing lanes is the main defending strategy, but when this is not possible, the build-up or play out phases should be useful to maintain the possession, to buy time, move the opponents and find exploitable spaces; in this second situation, positional play around the ball is very important to ensure possession of the ball for the team and to manage the opposition pressure.

This allows the team to control the game, creating gaps within the opposition shape to exploit and put less pressure on the team. The mobility of players, creating the correct options, space, angles and balance with high tempo especially within the midfield three is the key to lead the first phase of possession to successful and effective actions.

Creativity: to try to break down defenses by employing the element of surprise. Skills such as back-heels, cut backs, flicks, feints and fakes are all used to this end. Comfort on the ball is critical and this training starts in the 1st stage of development. When playing in a 1-4-3-3 system, the centre backs and the defensive midfielder give a solid defensive base, allowing freedom for the attacking midfielders and the three forwards to be creative, trying to break down the opposition, penetrate and create goal scoring opportunities.

Positive possession-based play:

Diagonal Passing: when players' positioning, body shape and movements are correct, diagonal passing options come naturally, ensuring safety behind the ball if possession is lost and more available options for the new ball carrier, as he has the option to pass forward or back.

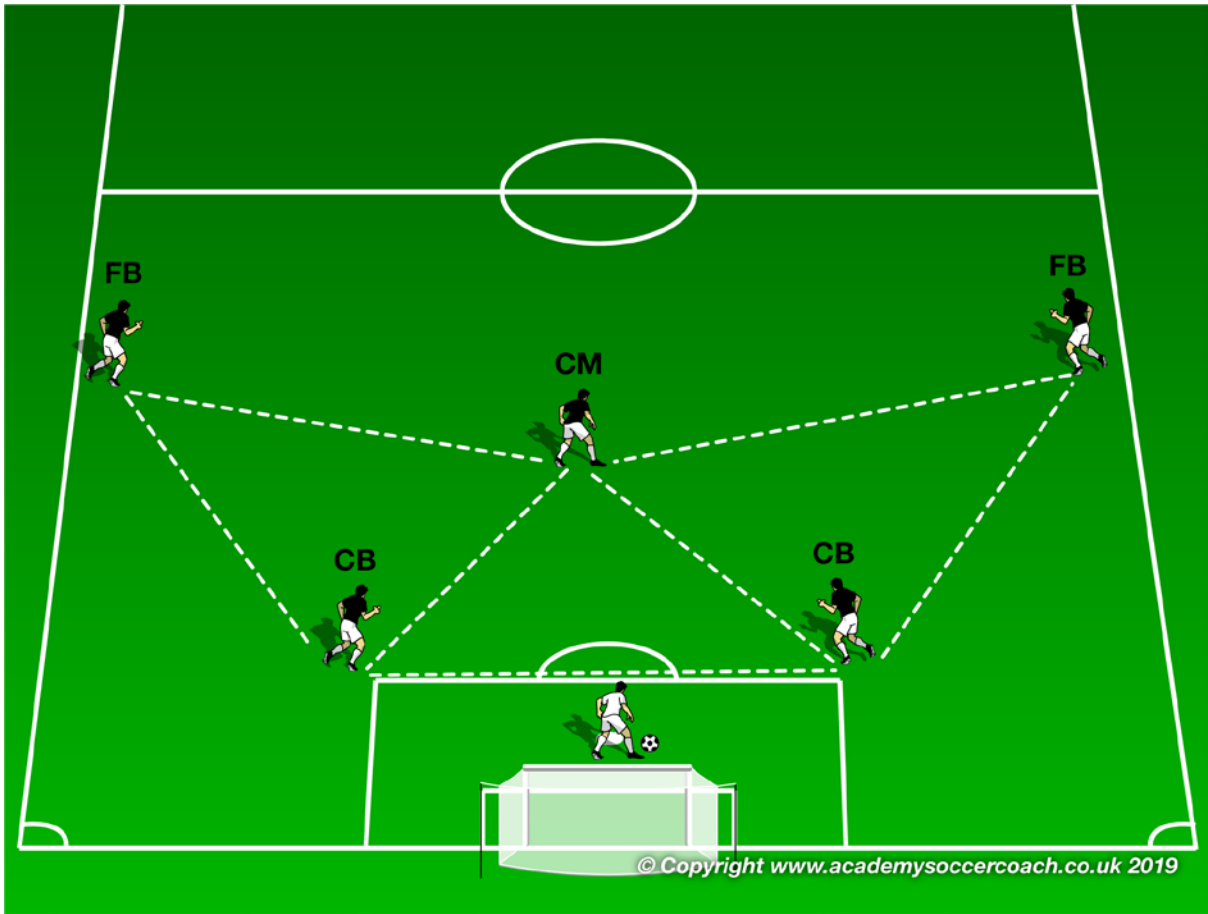
A possible combination can be performed by the defensive midfielder who can pass to either of the centre midfielders and then up to the centre forward. When the defensive midfielder plays the pass, he immediately moves to create a new option for the teammates to pass back, when under pressure.

Diagonal passes and overlap combinations: the first possible diagonal pass can be played from the fullback to the winger. Once the pass is played the winger must dribble inside, inviting the opposition fullback inside and creating space for the fullback of his team to run into. The winger can then pass into the space along the fullbacks' paths or play toward the center forward, who can then perform the final diagonal pass into the space for the fullback to run onto from deep.

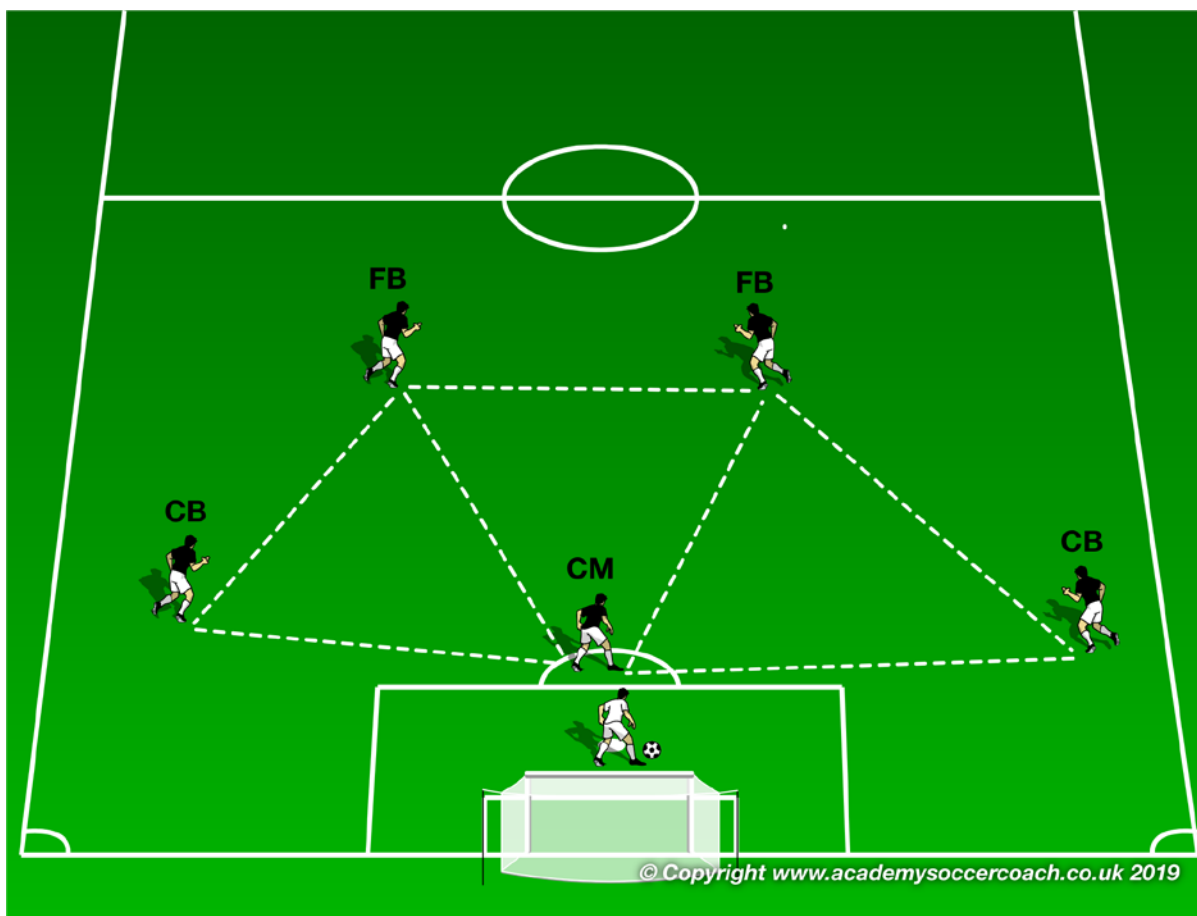
Vertical Passing: they are used during attacking phases to penetrate opposition lines, as they can pull a lot of opponents out of their defensive positions, bypassing the entire defense or midfield with one pass. For example, after combinations in central areas, vertical passes can be made into the space for the wingers making diagonal runs.

Creating the correct options: to create the correct options, making angles with depth and correct distance in between to create triangle and rhombus shapes that can be exploited with vertical and diagonal passes are necessary for the development of the attacking phase.

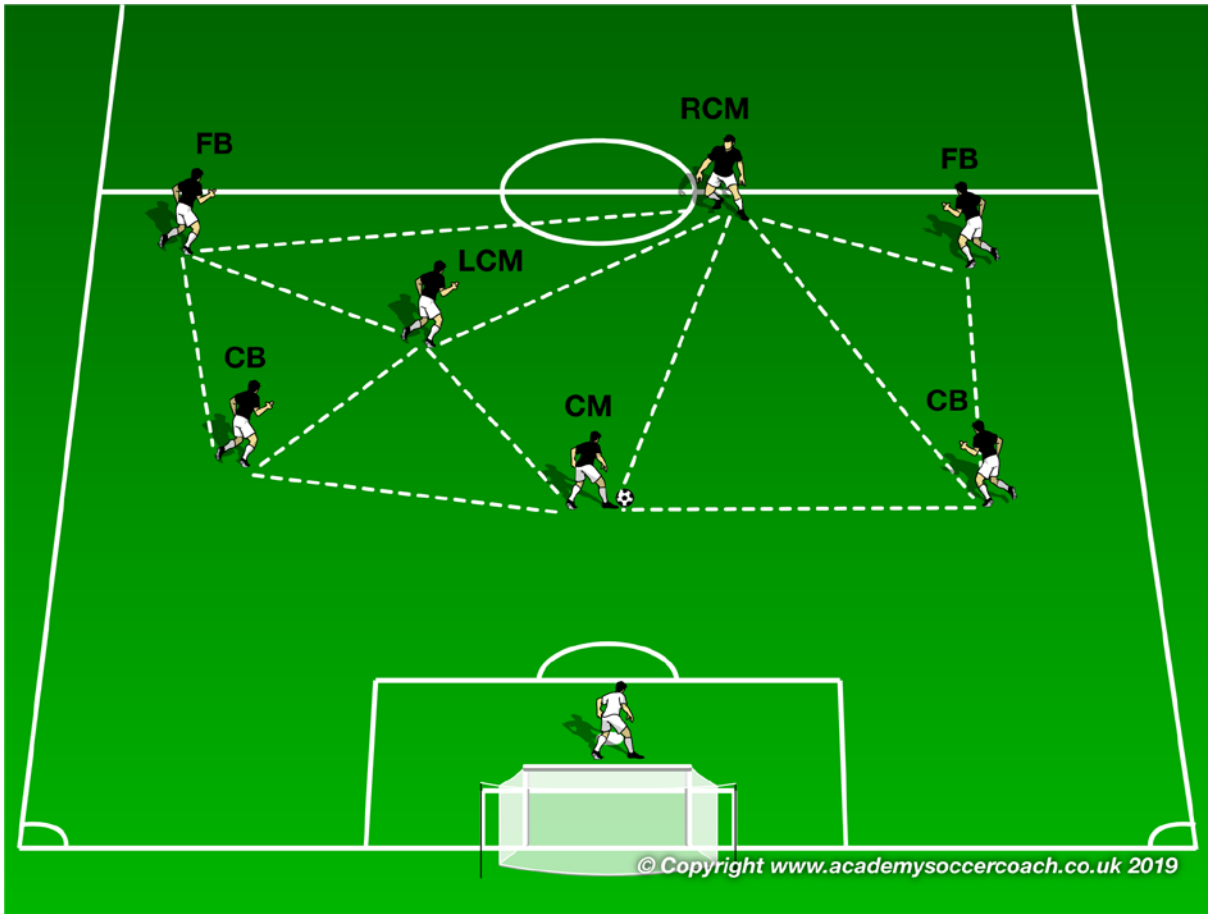
1) If fullbacks use the maximum width and the centre backs and the defensive midfielder provide depth between them to create the first triangles, offering various different options.



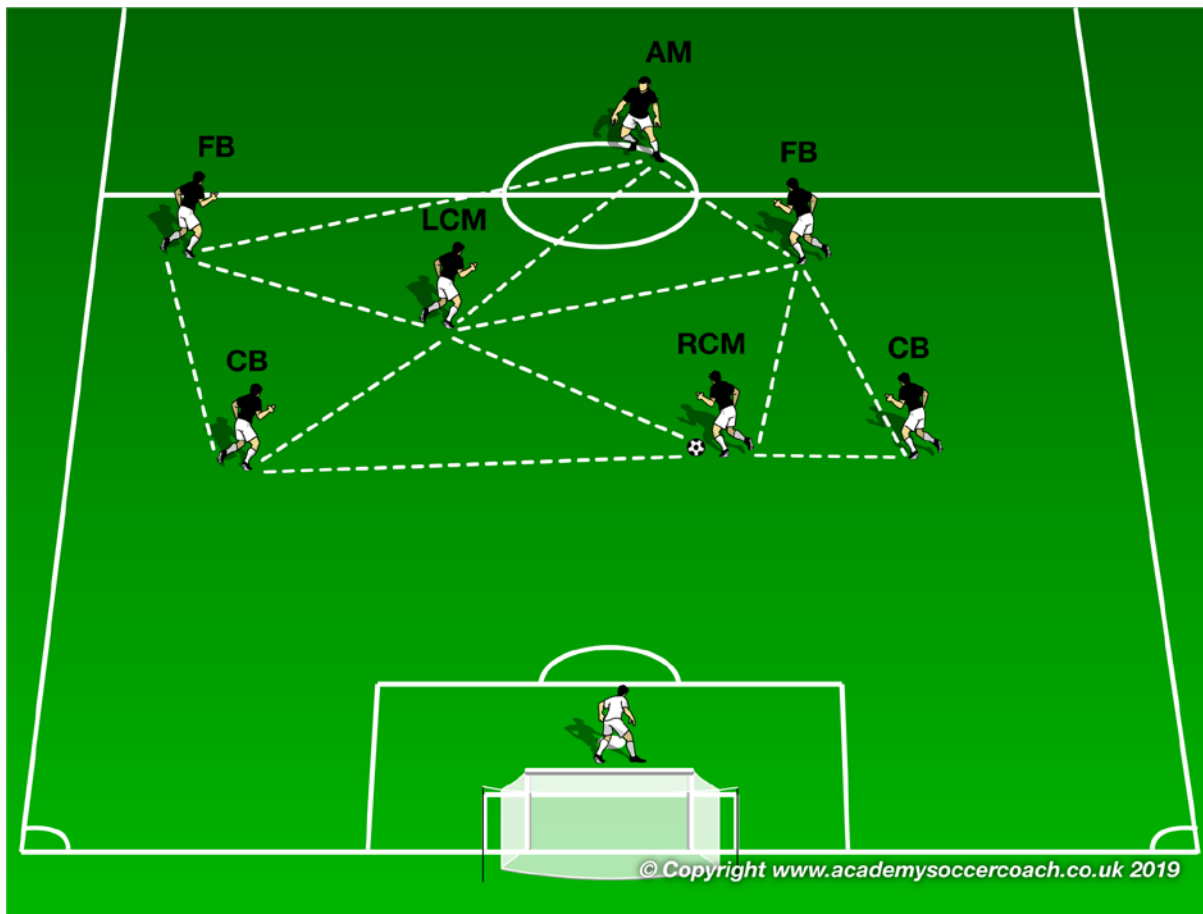
2) If fullbacks run inside to provide depth in the middle third, the centre backs move wide and the defensive midfielder provide depth at the back, between them, to create the first triangles, offering other kinds of options.



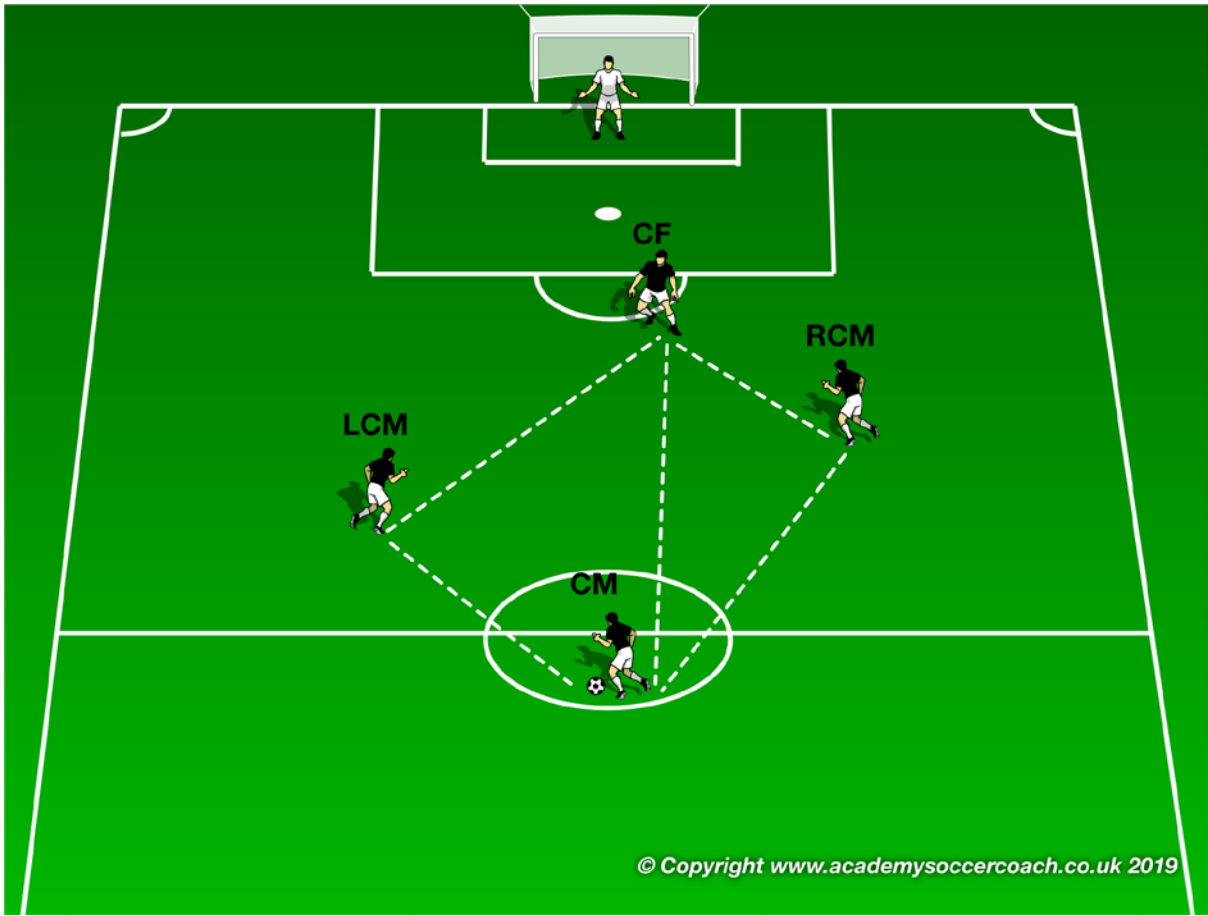
3) The defensive midfielder at the base of the triangle provides depth, balance and an option to play back to, if the forward pass is not available. The right and left centre midfielders give an option either side not being on a straight line.



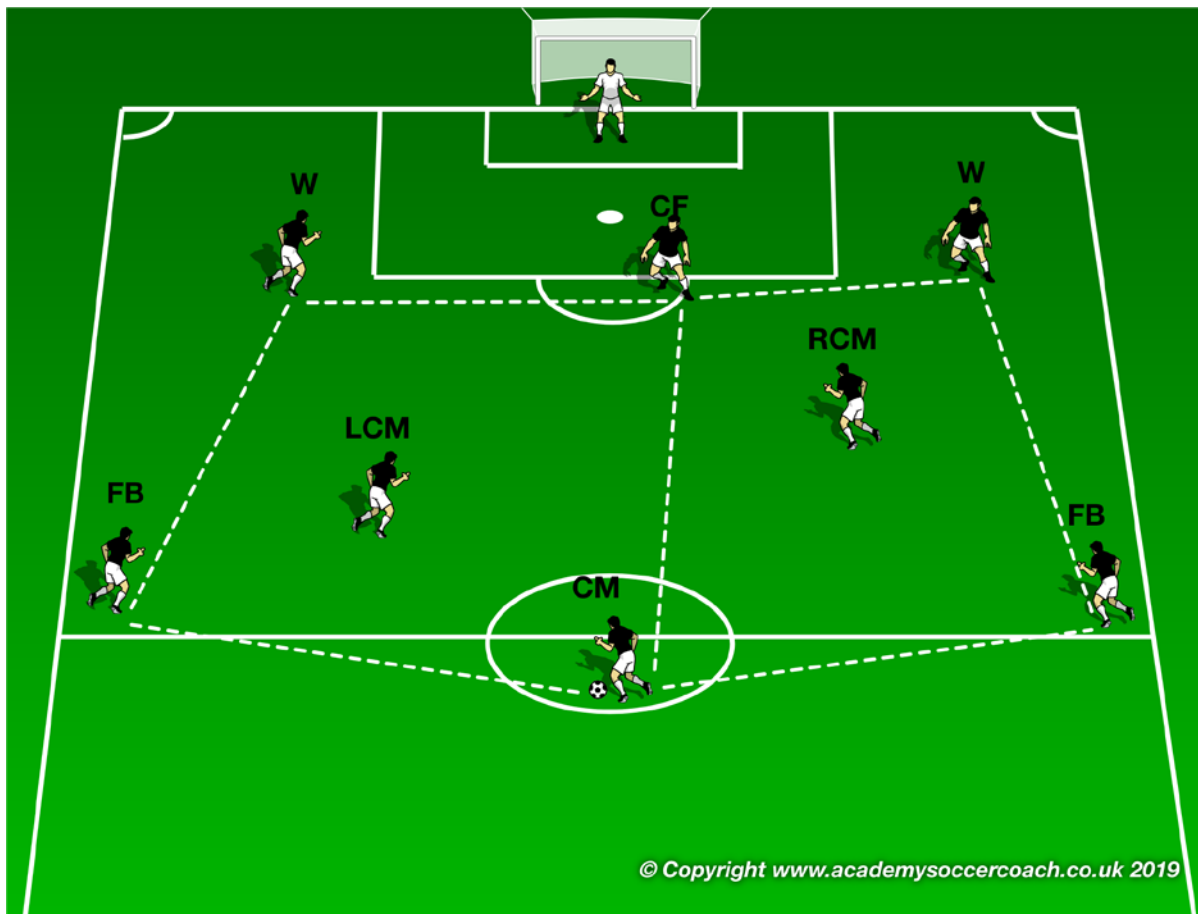
4) If the center midfielder is an advanced player, the other 2 must provide depth and balance (the lower one) and a side option, being placed wider in relation with the position of the upper one.



5) The defensive midfielder together with the right or left centre midfielder and the centre forward create other options of a triangular shape creation options.



6) A rhombus can be created using one of the fullbacks, the centre midfielder, a winger and the centre forward.

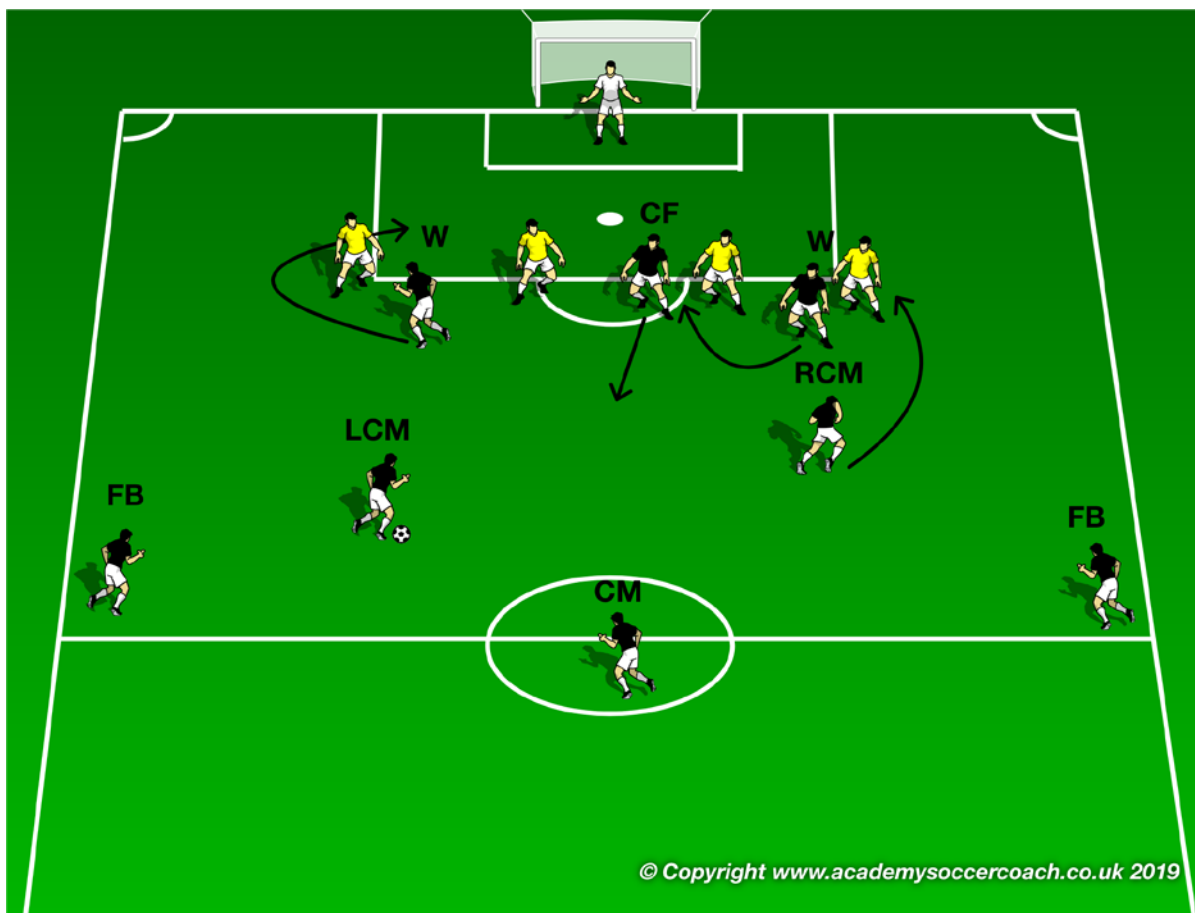


7) Another alternative rhombus option is shaped through the center of the field with midfield 3 and the center forward.

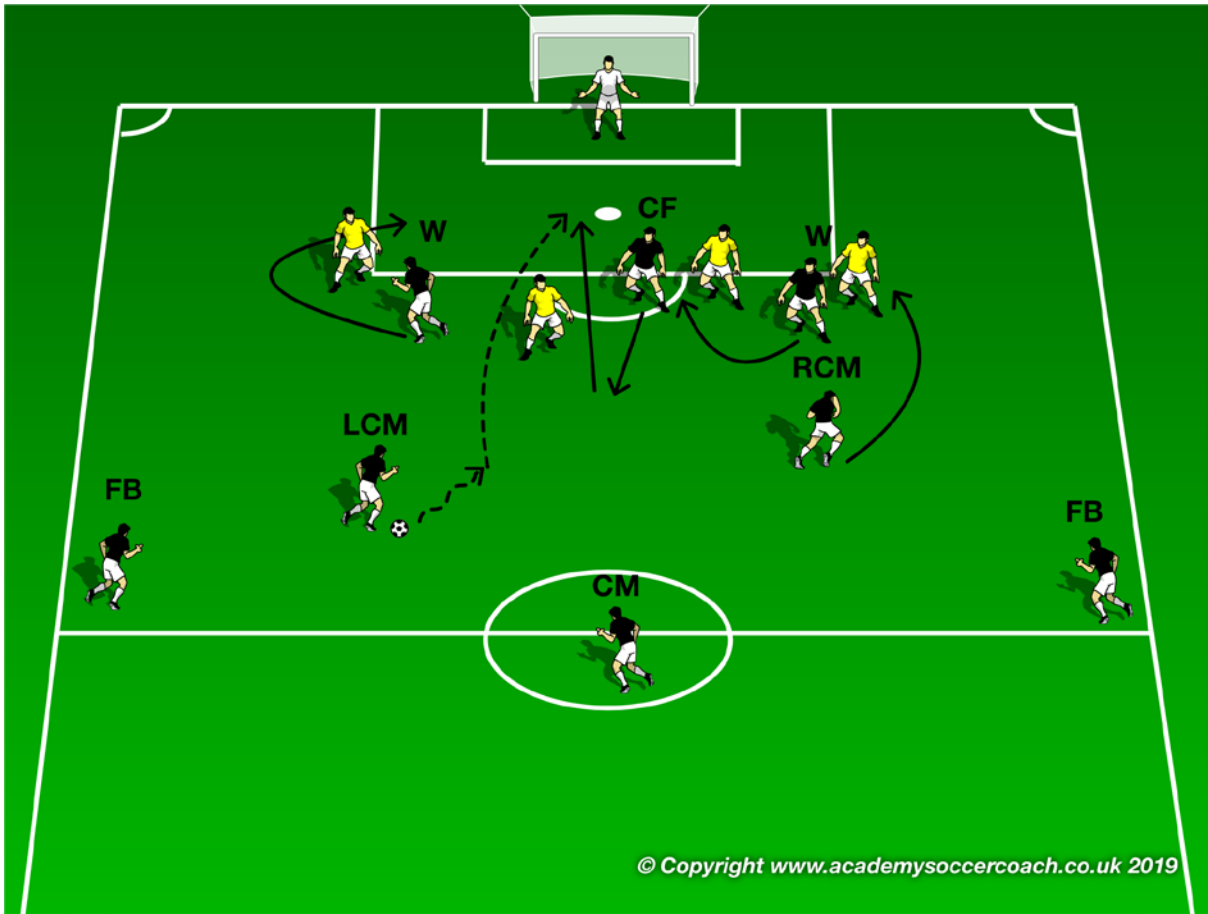


Movement Without the Ball - Variations of Runs

1) Runs in behind the opposition back four: when the midfielders or fullbacks are in possession, the centre forward or the wingers can make penetrating runs in behind either to receive the pass or to create space for others to exploit. They will first drop in short before spinning off and making the run in behind. The timing of run and pass is important to remain onside and to create an initial distance from the defender.



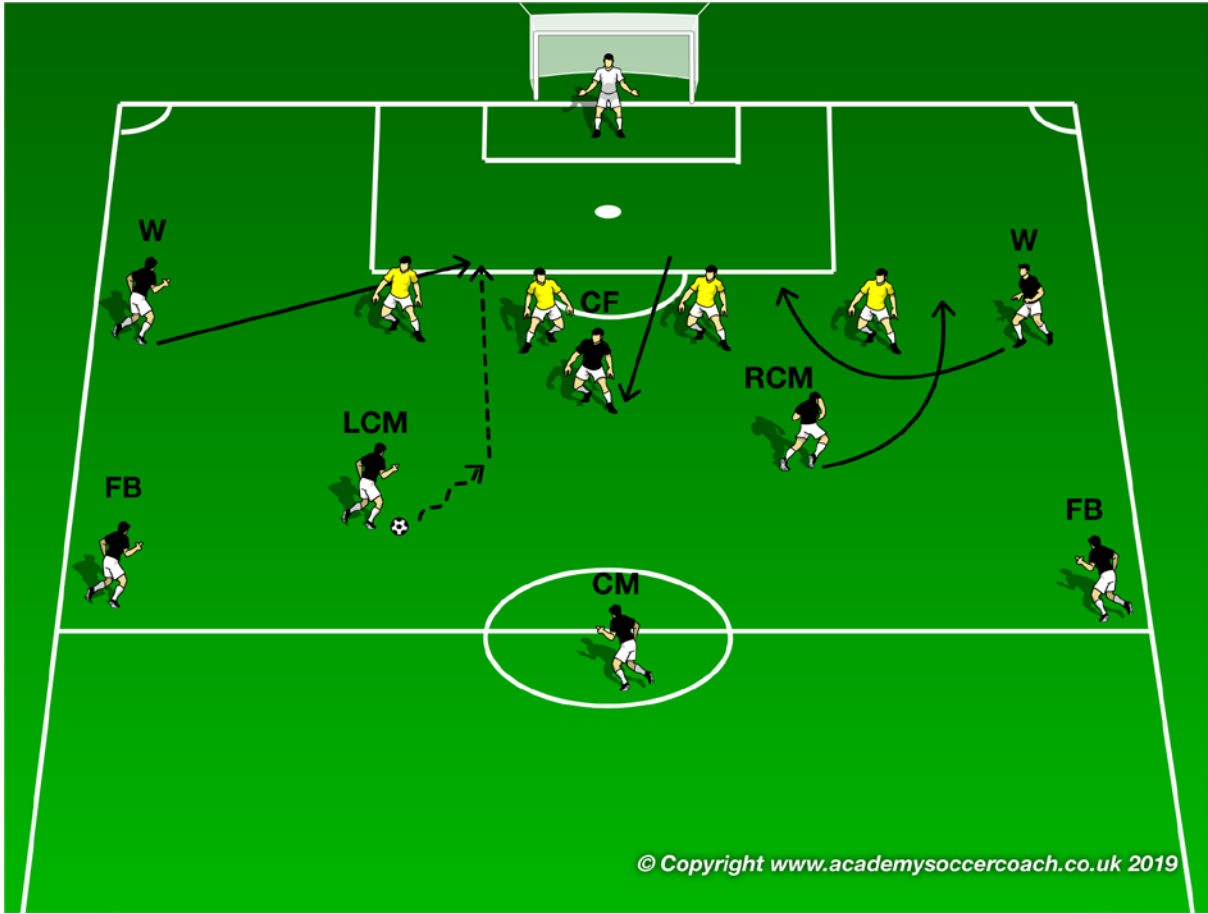
In the first example on the left the centre forward can receive the through ball in behind the centre back.



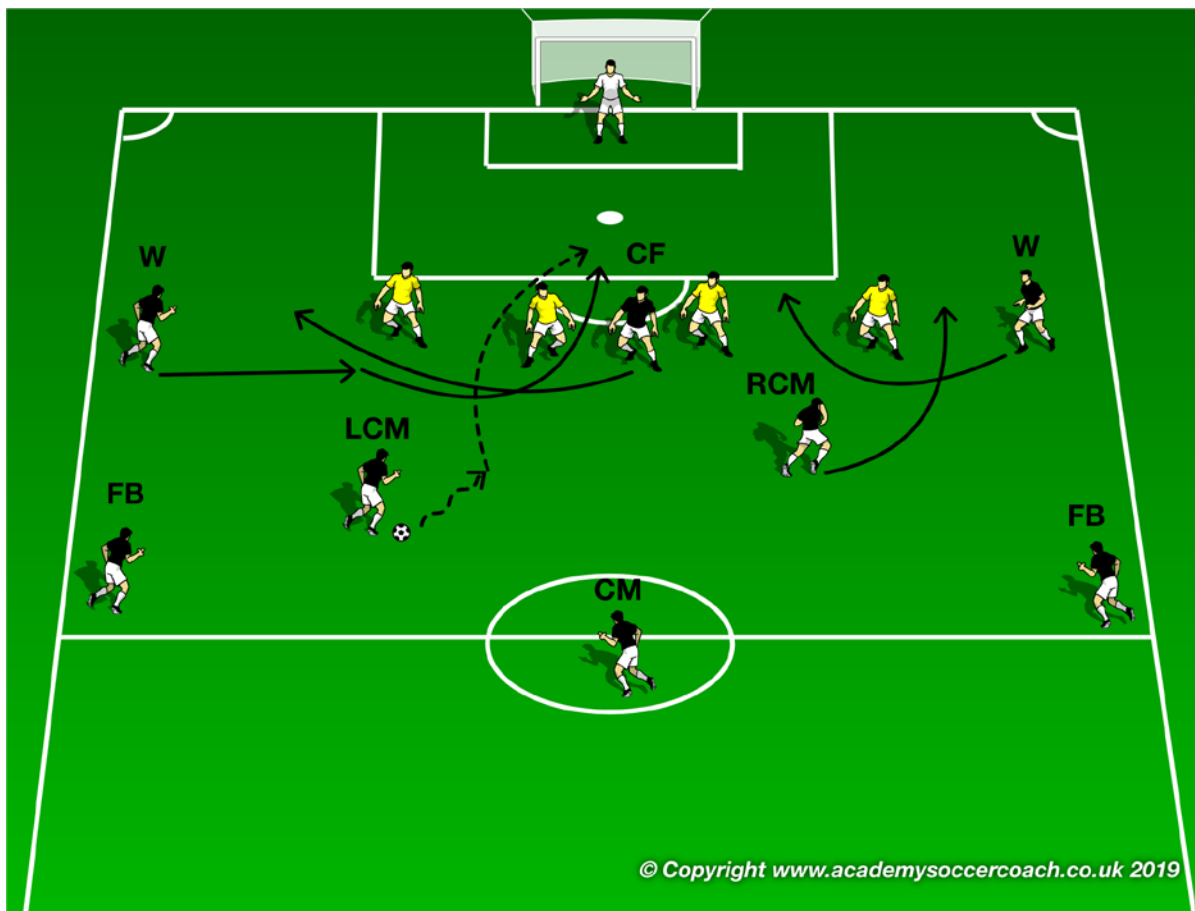
In the second example, the centre backs closely marks the centre forward but space is now created for the winger to run inside.



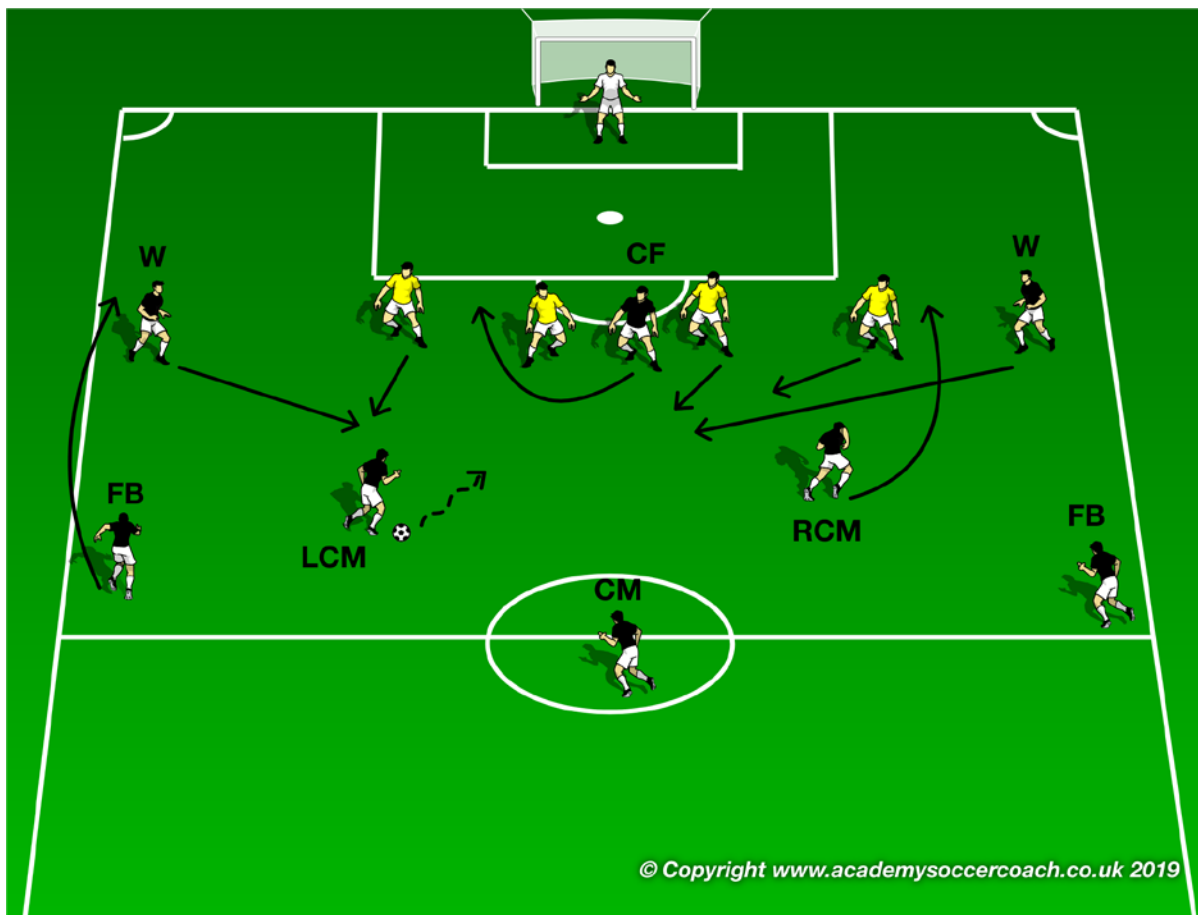
2) Diagonal runs: the wingers can also penetrate behind the defense by making diagonal runs, when they provided width during build up and possession phases. As one midfielder receives the centre forward makes a movement in the opposite direction to invite the centre back away and this allows the winger to make the run inside and behind the fullback.



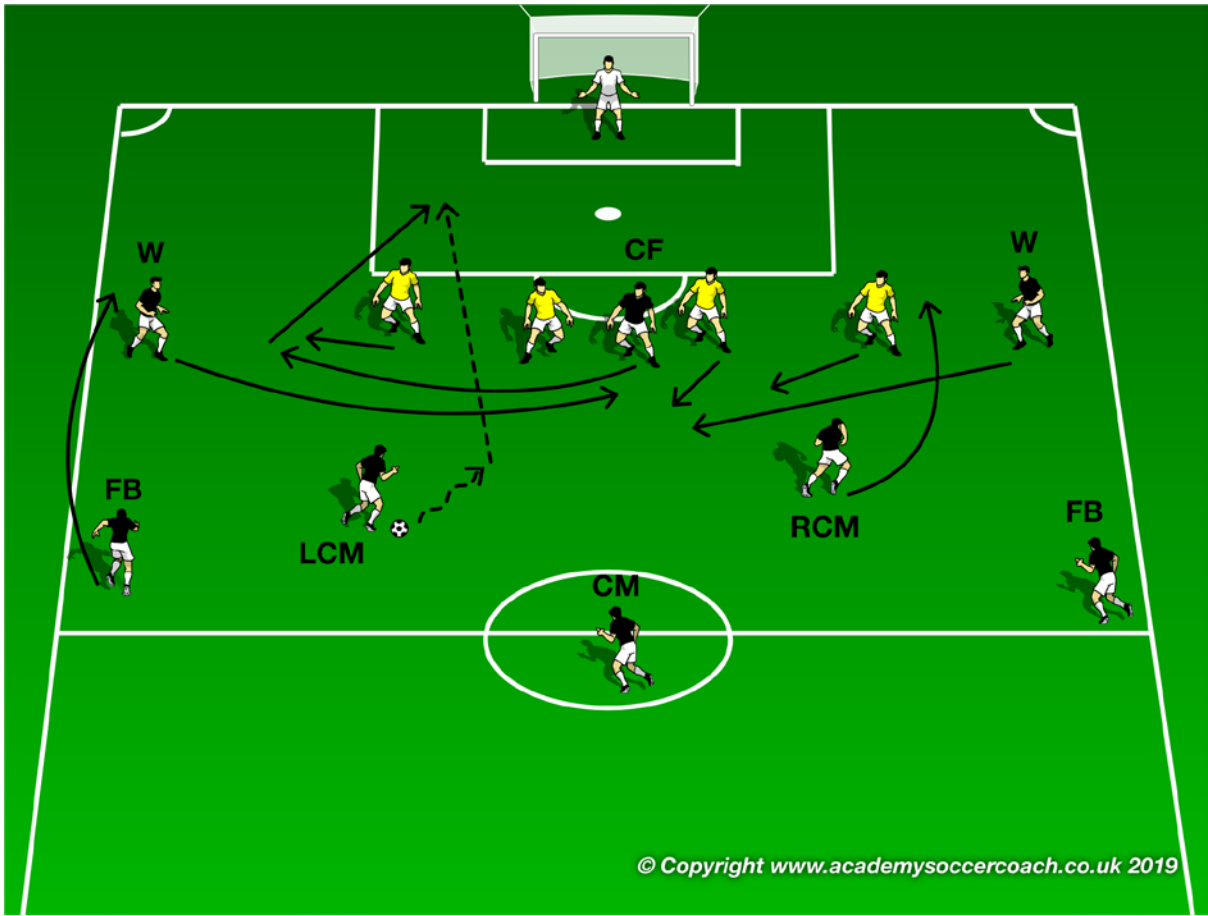
3) Channel Runs and interchange: the center forward can also make a run into the channel and interchange with one of the wingers, forcing the defenders to make decisions if to remain or to track the opponents. The ball carrier can then pass to one of the wingers or to the center forward if he has created space away from the opposition defender.



4) Interchanging and replacing options: being fluent in our movement as a team is much more effective in creating space to first lose markers and second, to make runs in straight lines with play frequently going sideward. In this first example, the wingers drop short and therefore the fullback or the wide midfielder can replace the wide positions and push higher up the field to give an option for the midfielders to play.



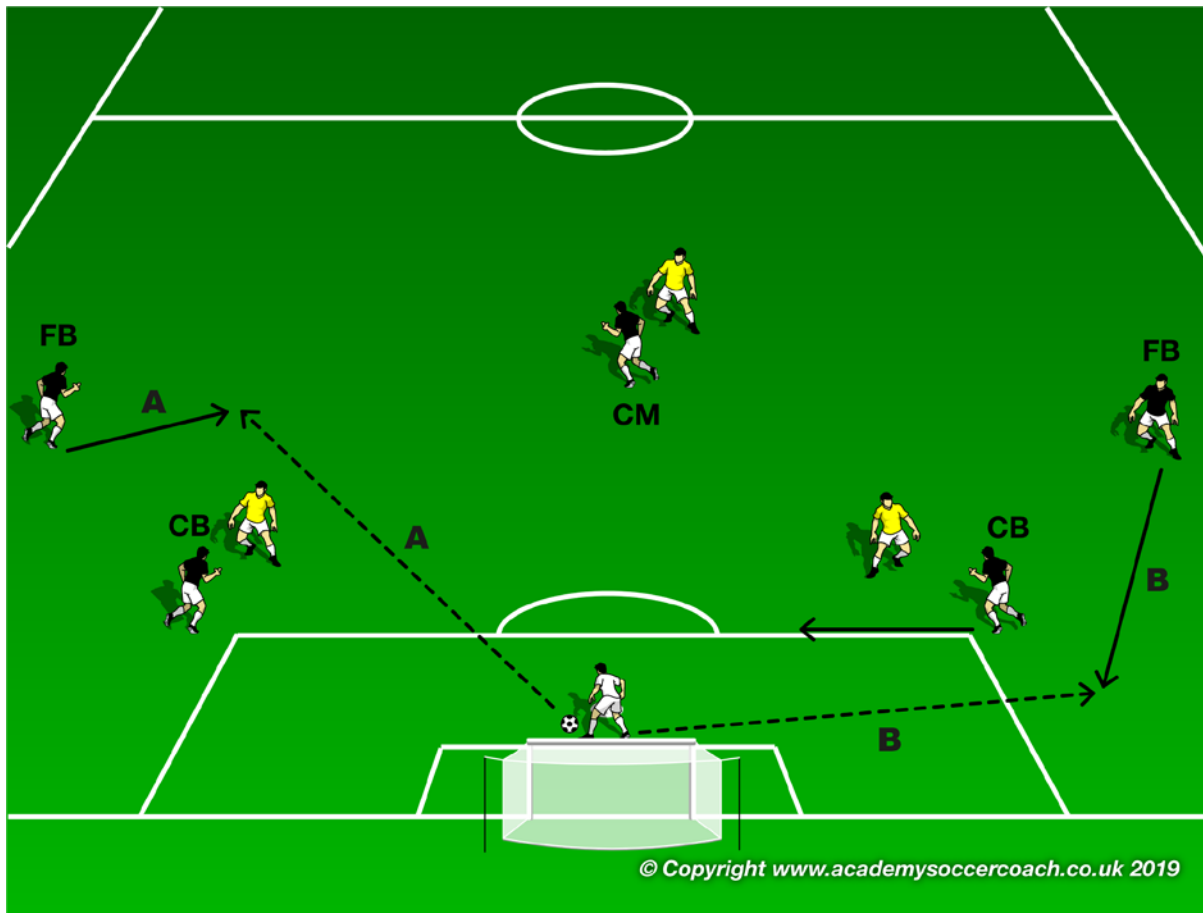
In the second example, the centre forward pulls wide to make a run into the channel. The winger then moves inside to become the centre forward and create space for the centre forward to exploit.

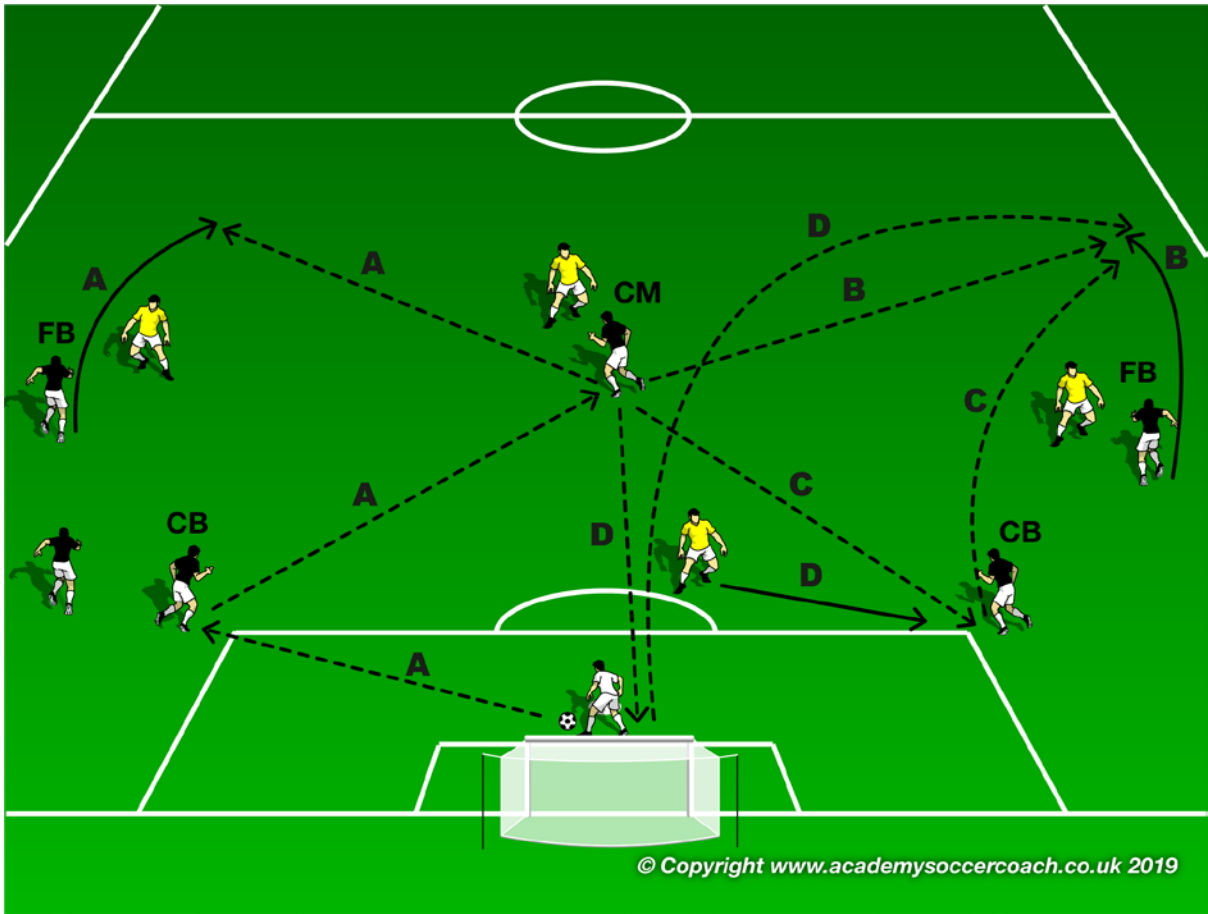


Player's Roles and Responsibilities

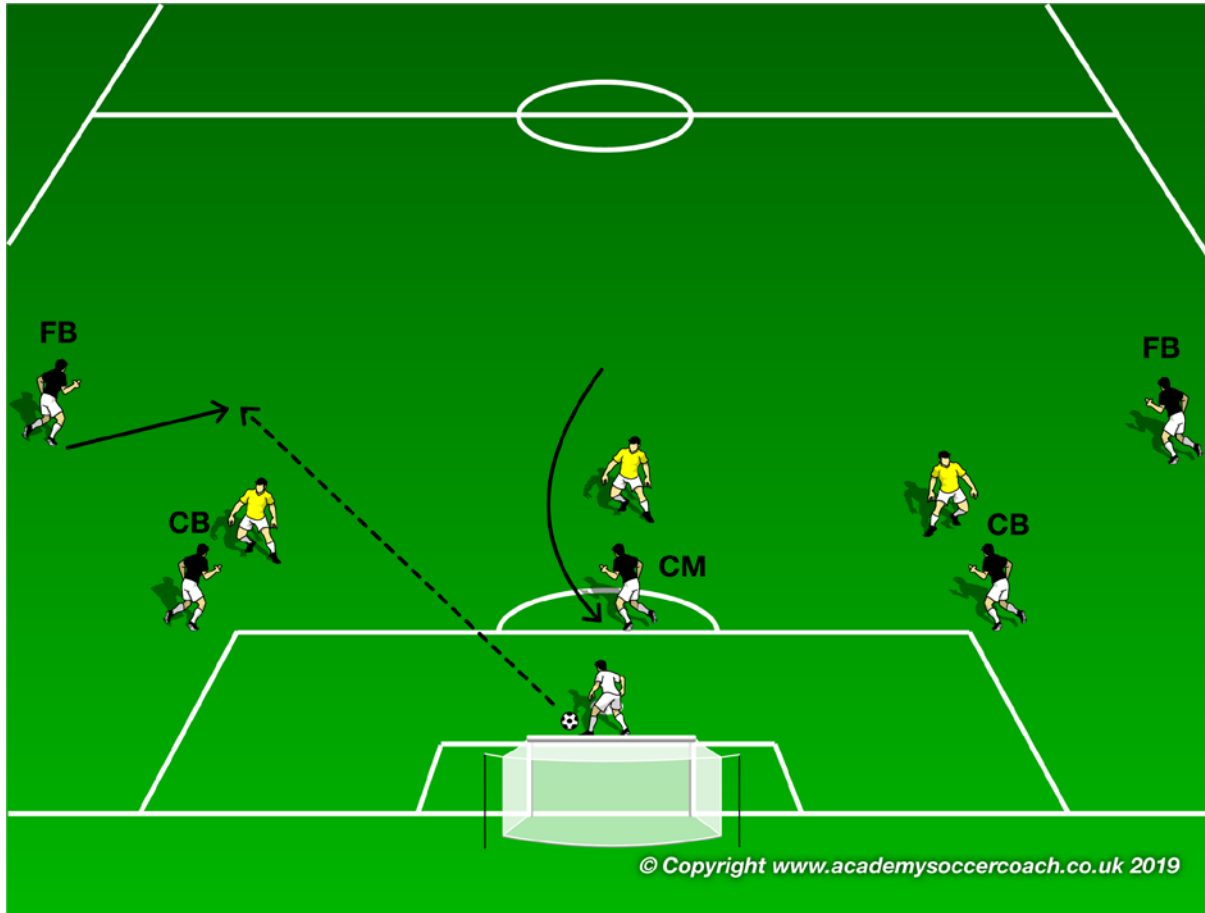
Goalkeeper:

- He is able to help his teammates with instruction, exploiting his back position and perspective to see the whole field
- He has good technical skills with both feet and with hand passes
- He is able to start the build up phase with short or longer precise passes
- He can receive a back pass with the right body shape to play out, maintaining possession safely
- He can recognize the teammates who could be potentially pressed and countered in 1 v 1 duels or who could outnumbered while receiving and he is able to change target quickly



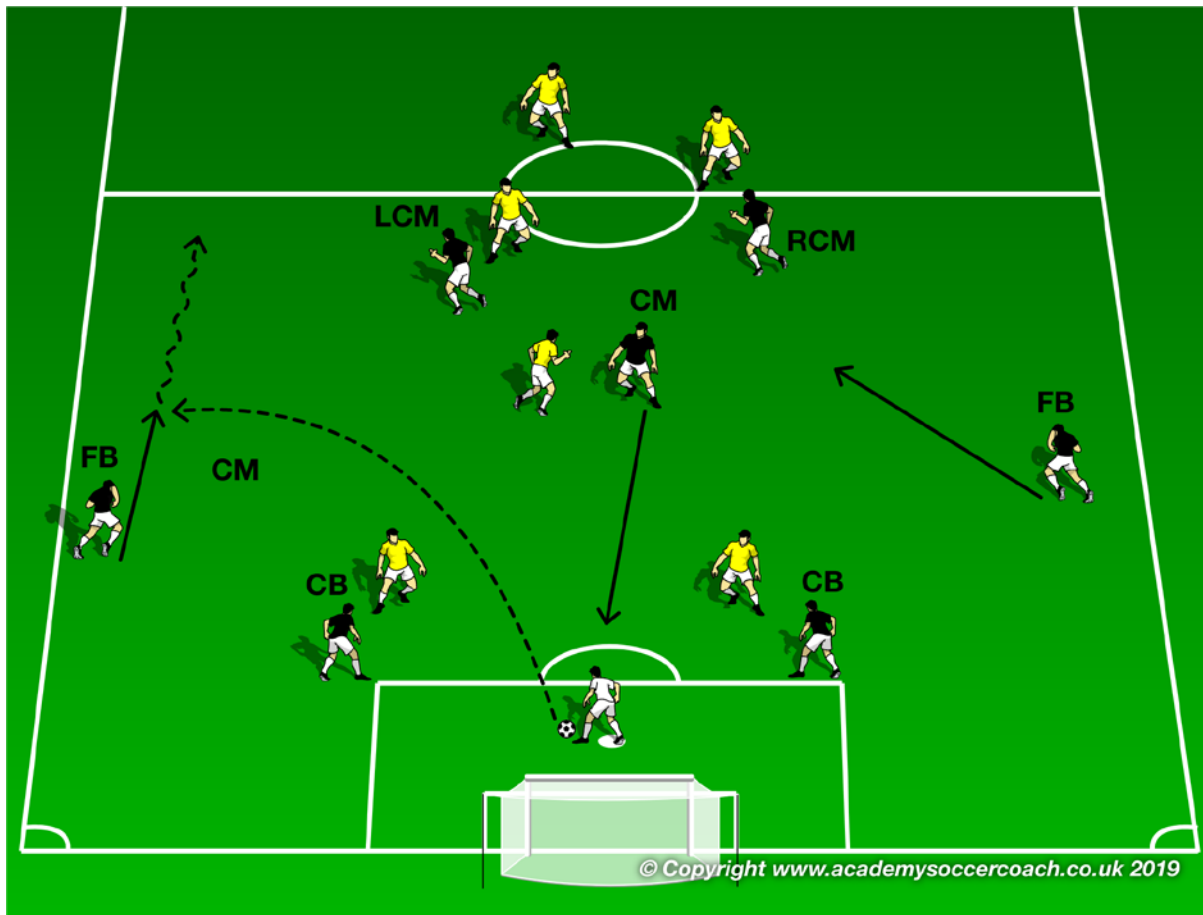


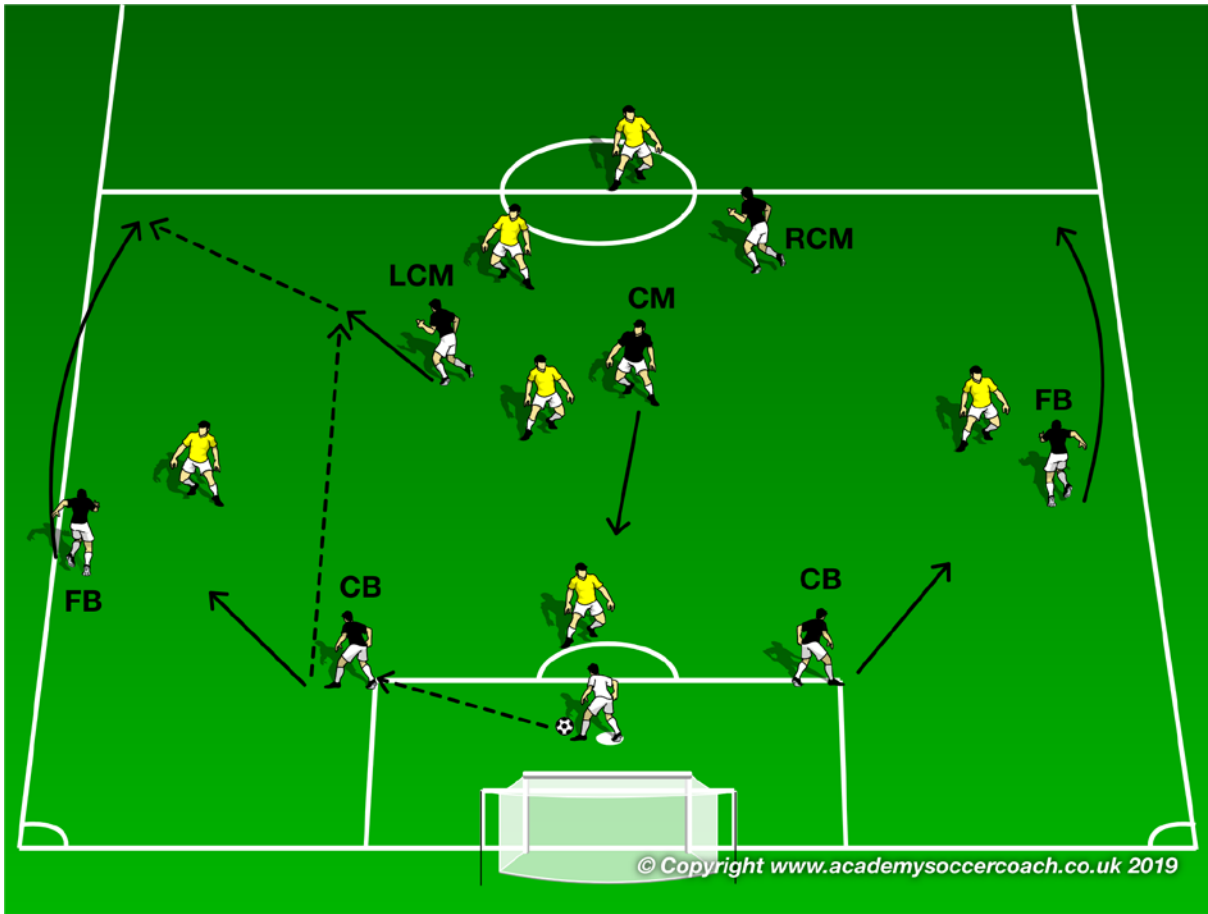
- Able to overcome an opposition pressure line with 1 pass



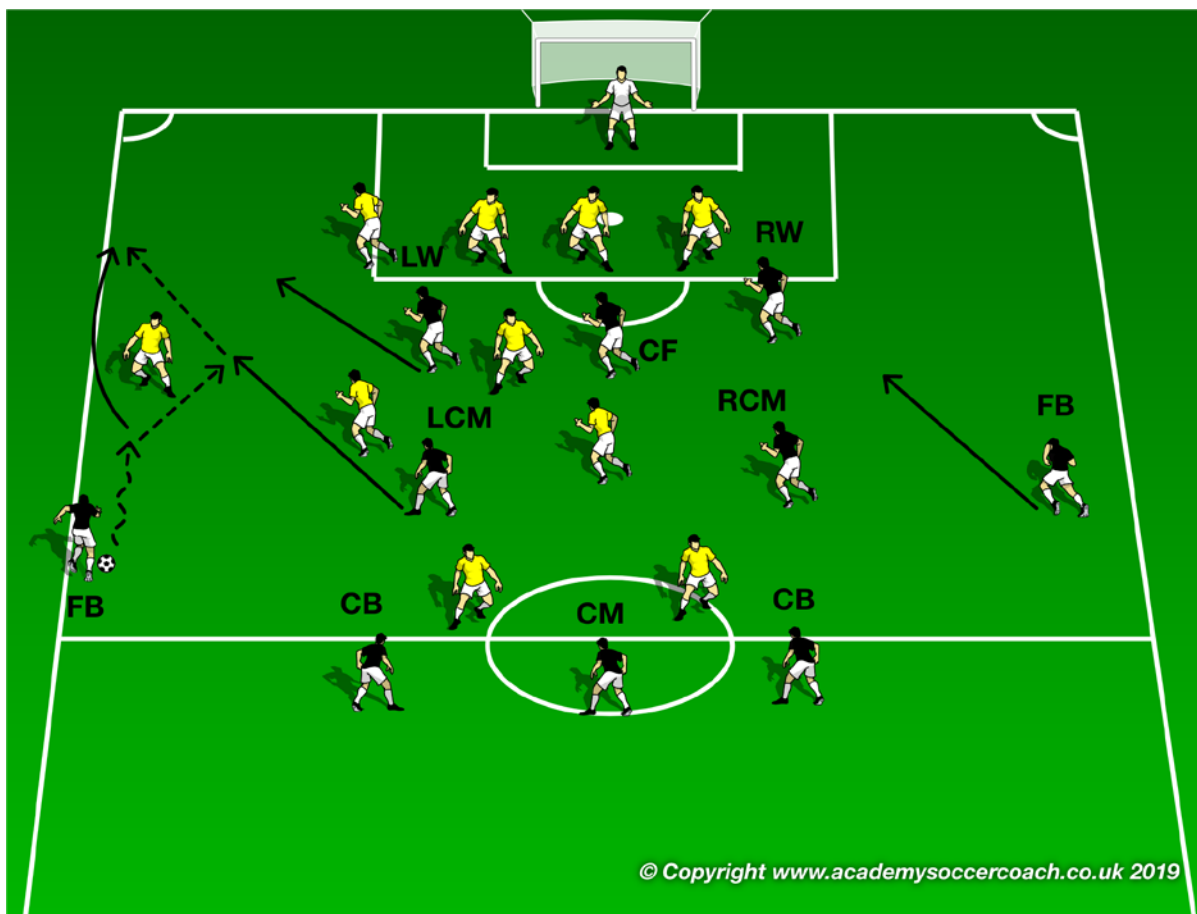
Fullbacks:

- They must be well positioned to continue the building-up phase (when to stay wide or when to shift across the center to support the midfielders)

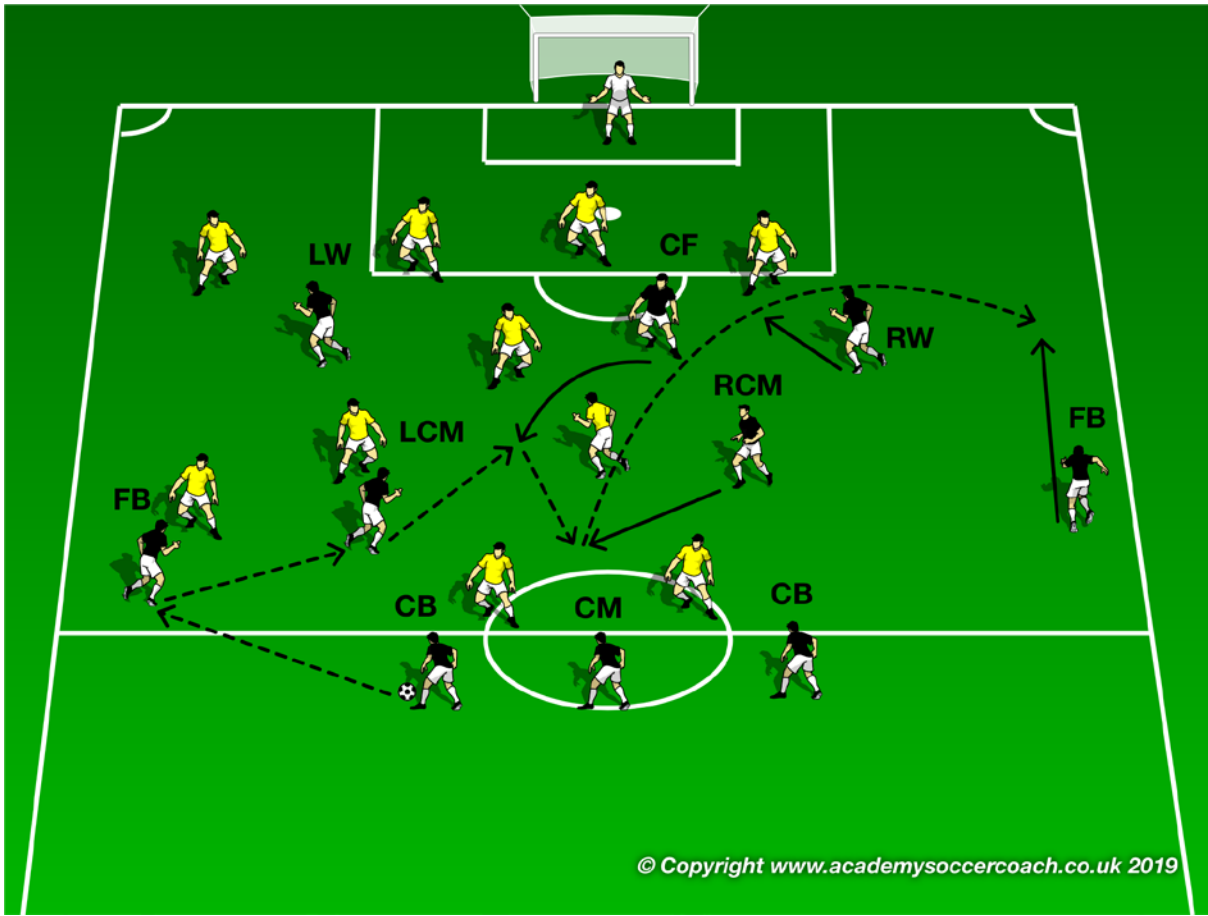




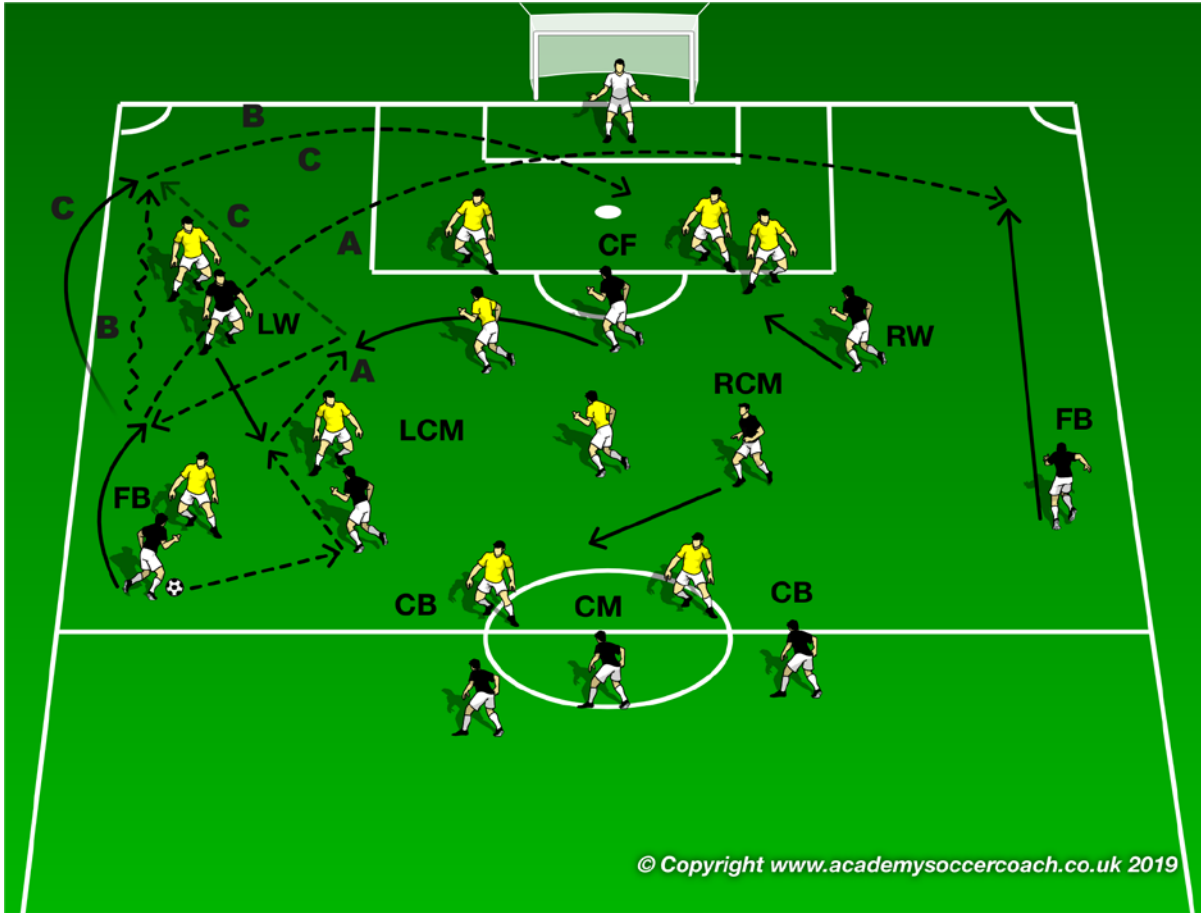
- Dribble the ball and combine with teammates to push up, recognizing the chance to exploit space and to create numerical advantage



- They are wide support for the attacking phase in the middle and final thirds

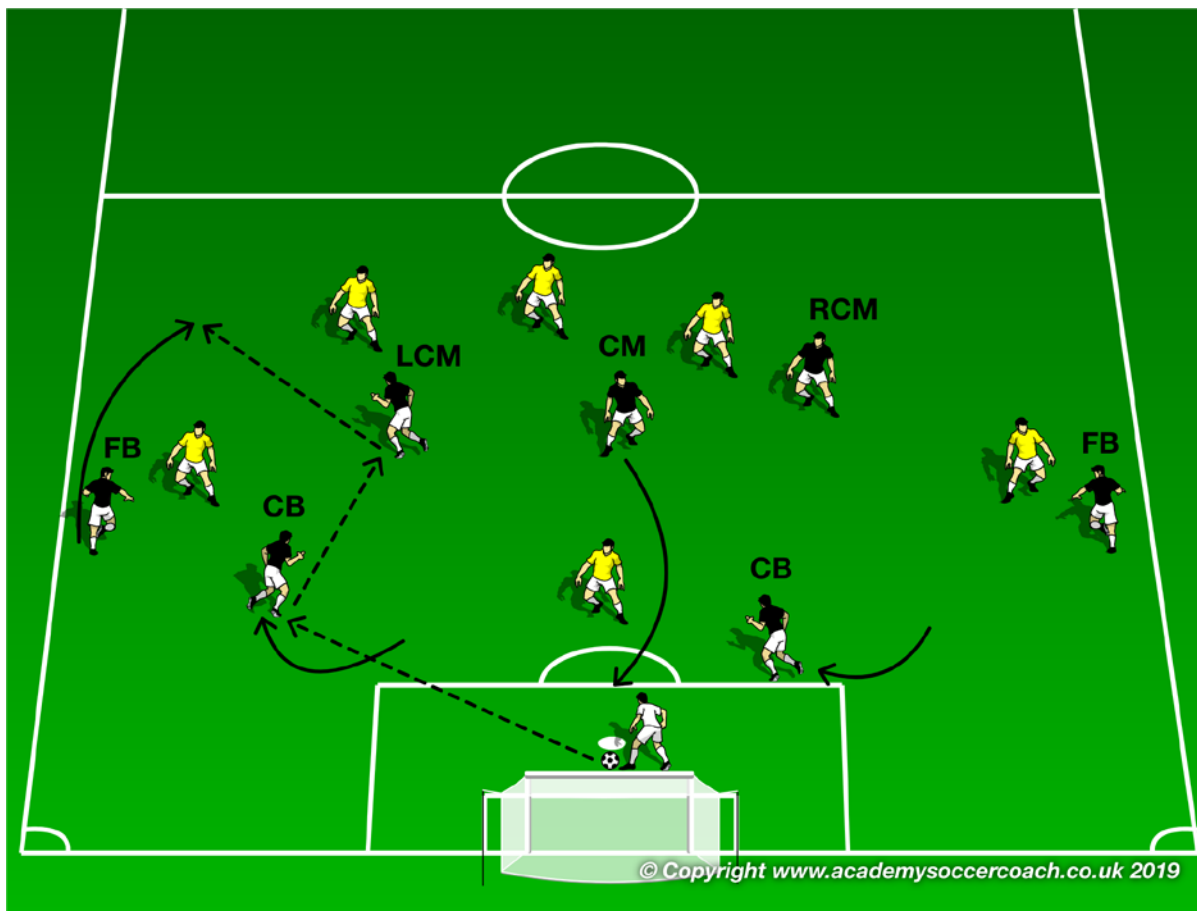


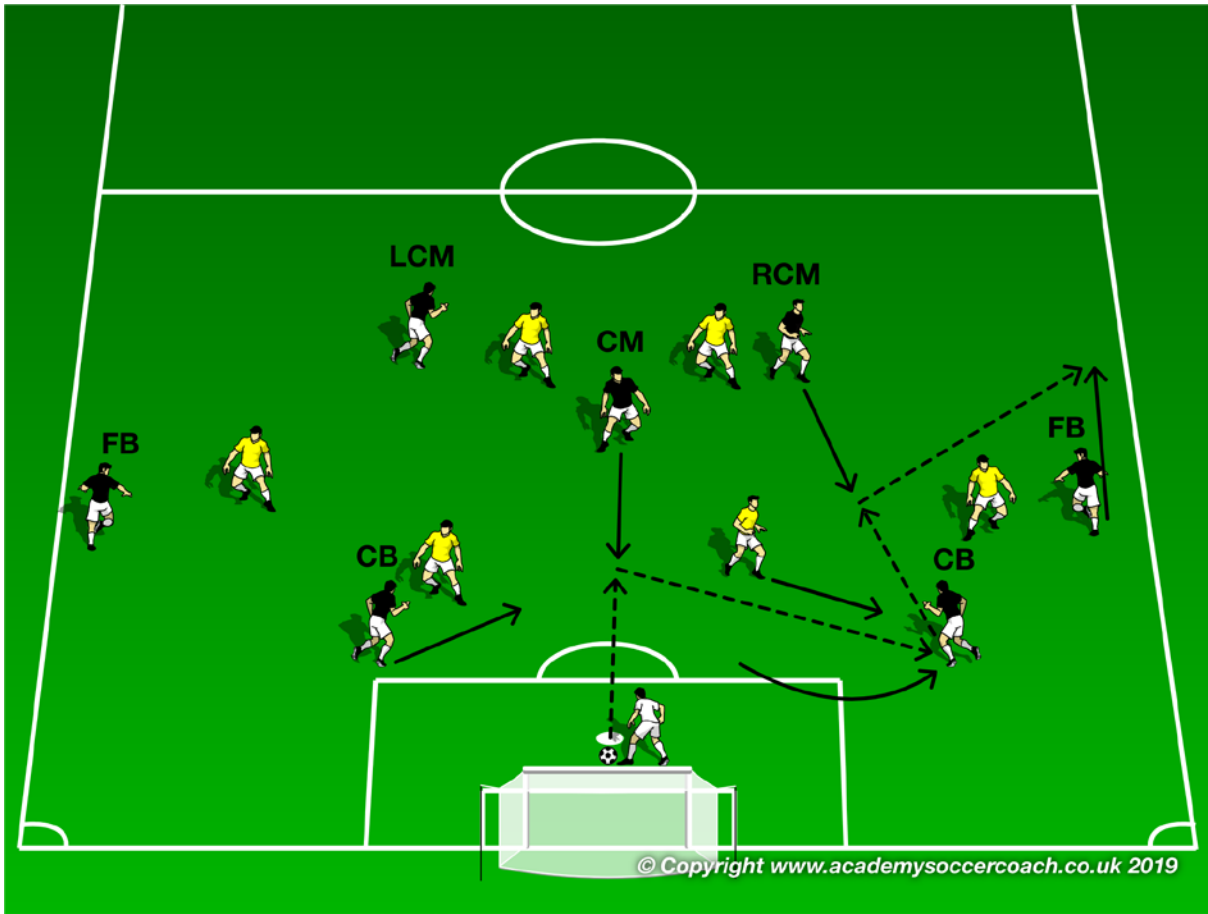
- Good technique in positional play to maintain the possession, in crossing and switching side of play



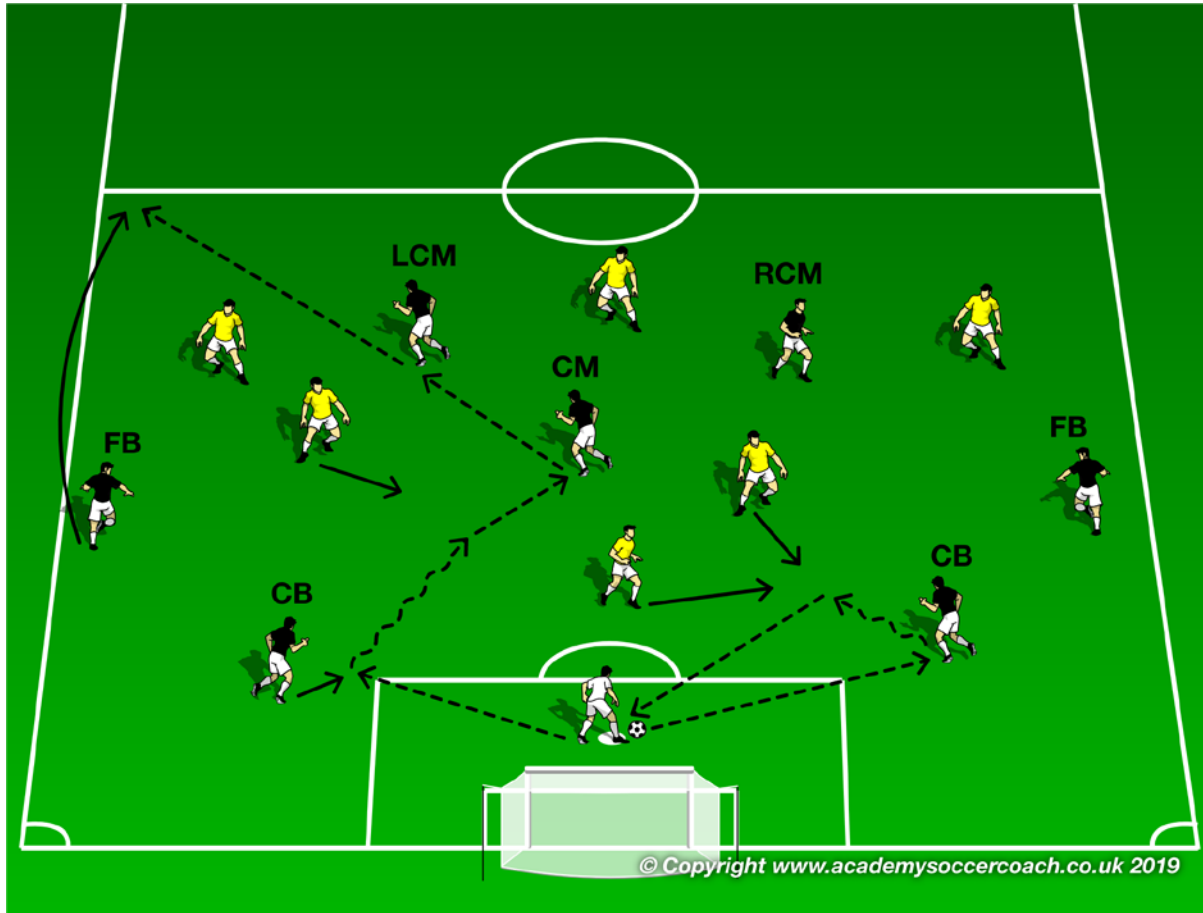
Center backs:

- They have good technical skills with both feet
- Right positioning while building up, if the opposition is pressing with 1 center forward and 2 wingers or with 2 center forwards

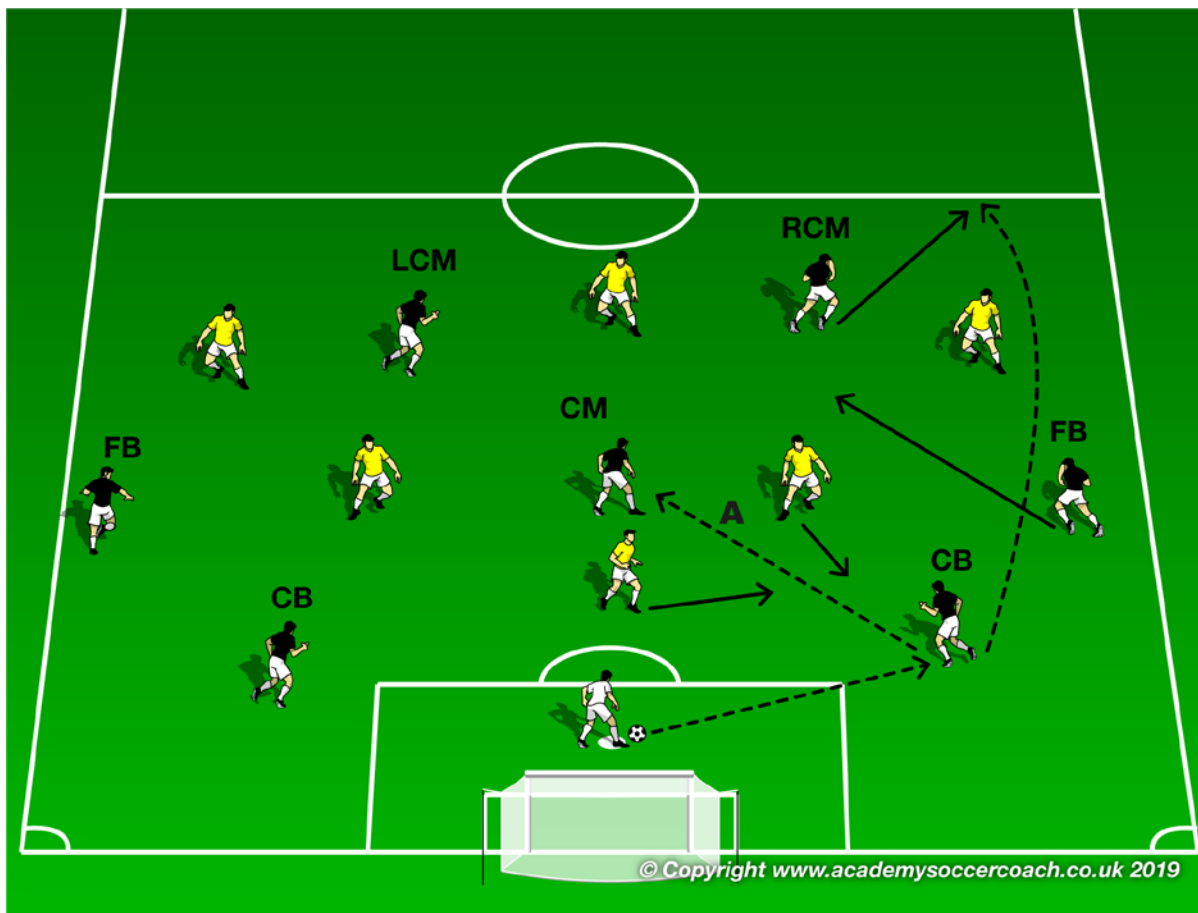




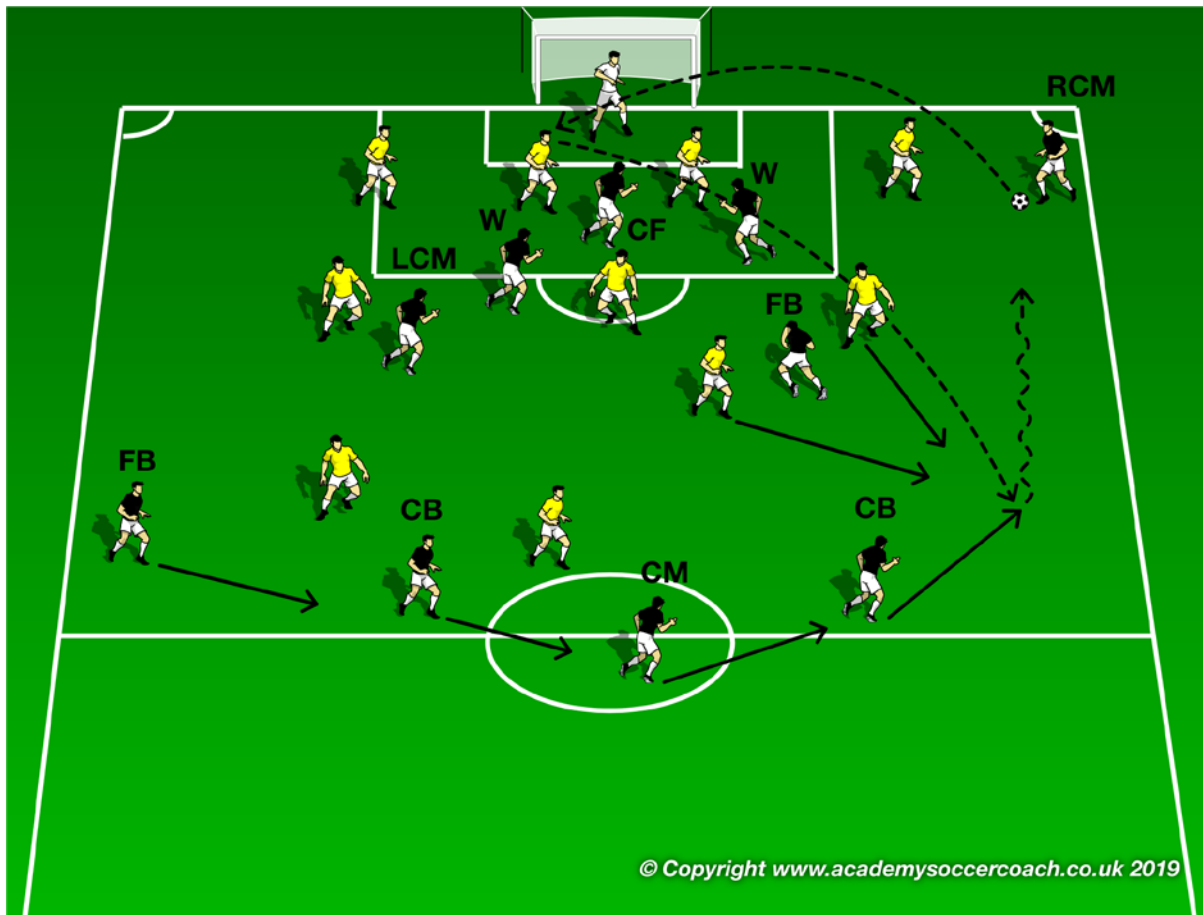
- Cooperation with the goalkeeper to escape the positional pressure of the opposition



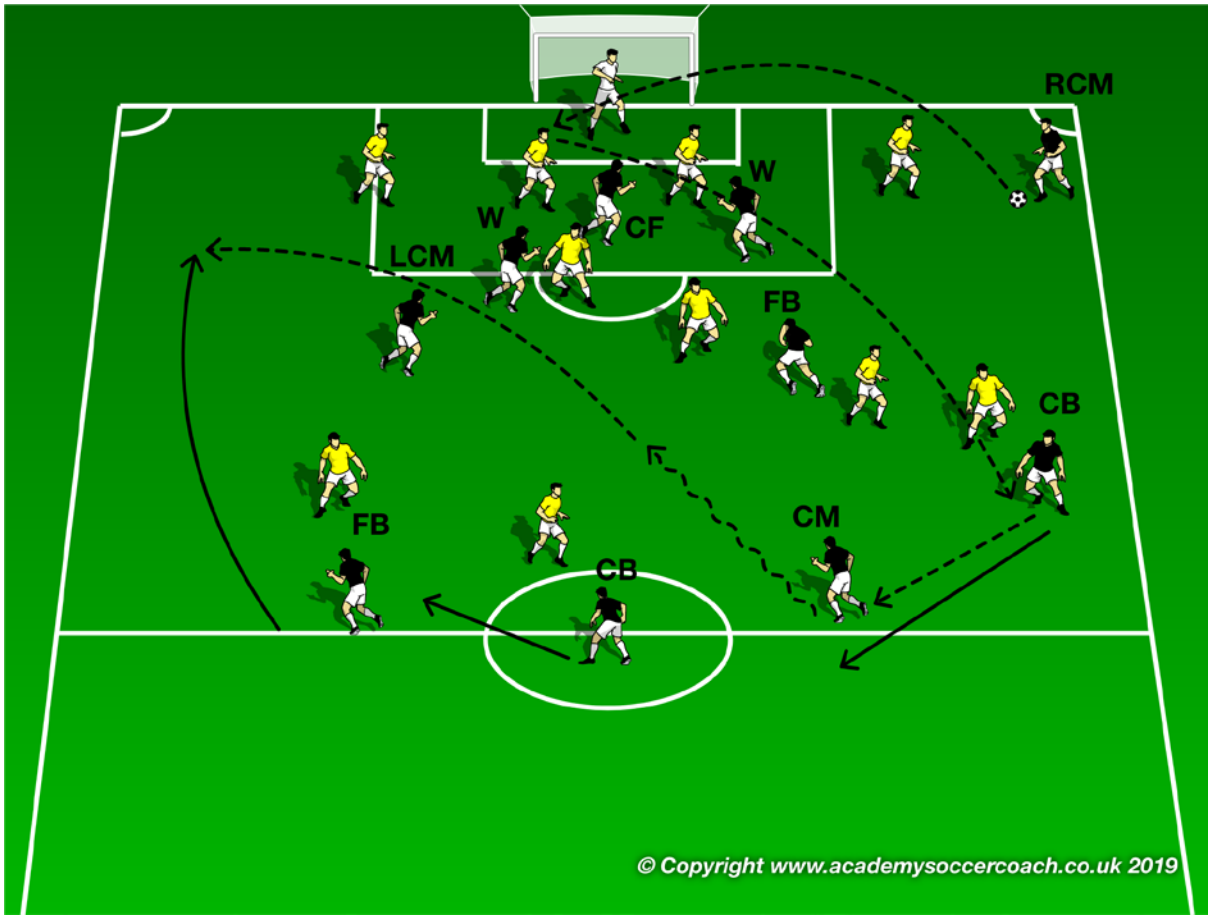
- They are able to overcome 1 or 2 pressure lines with a ground or aerial long pass



- They push up in the middle third to balance the team while attacking, often together with the center midfielder, shaping a back 3 line that can be useful also to build up again if the team is forced to play back

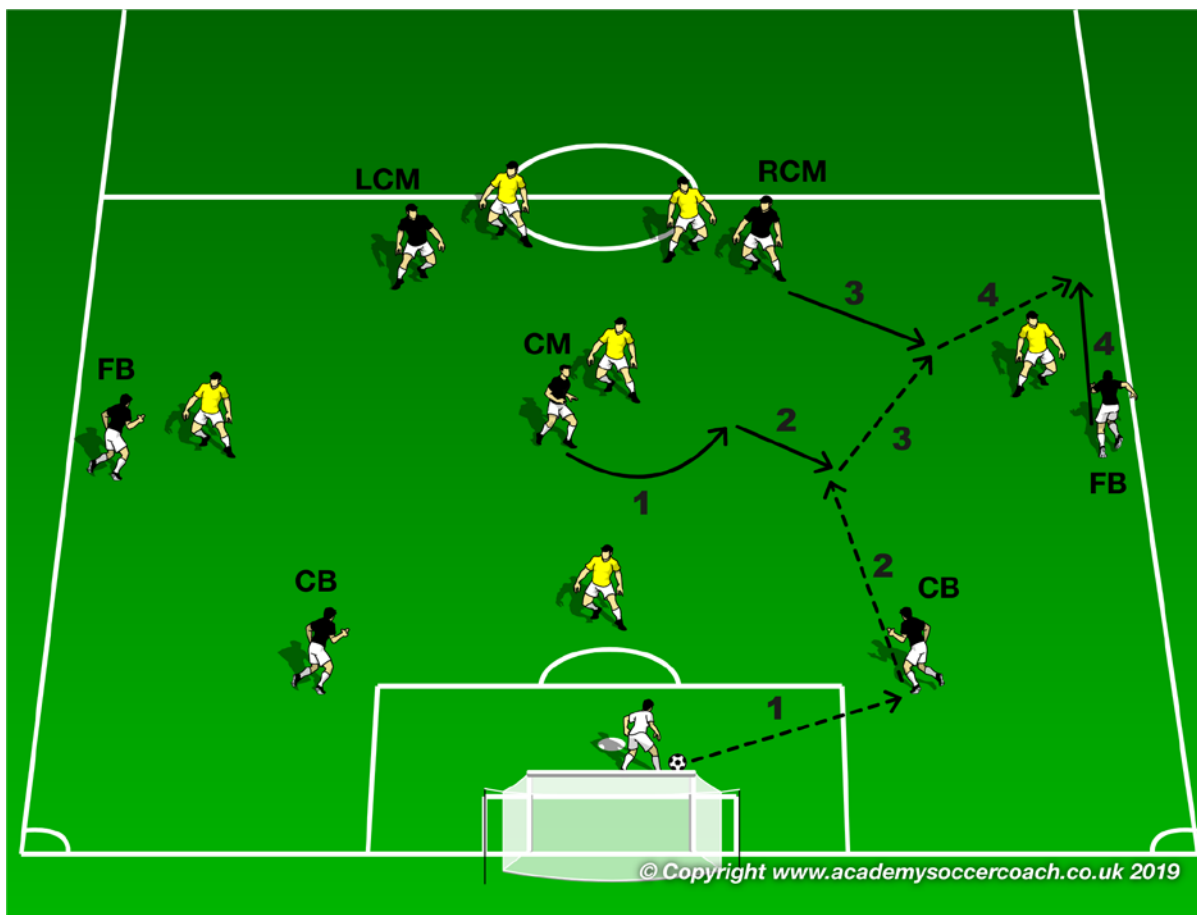


- Back support to play out and to switch the side if it's not possible to progress the moves

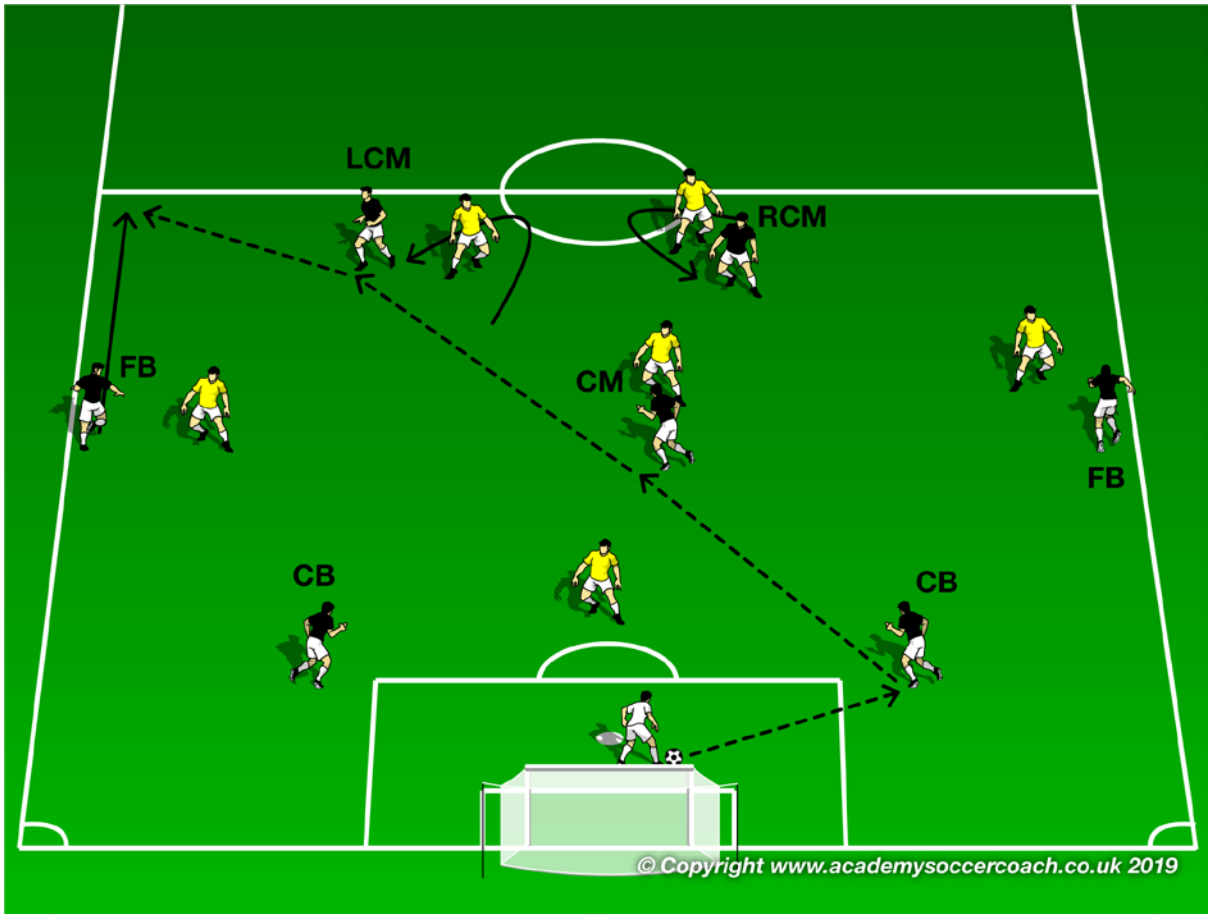


Center midfielder (lower pivot):

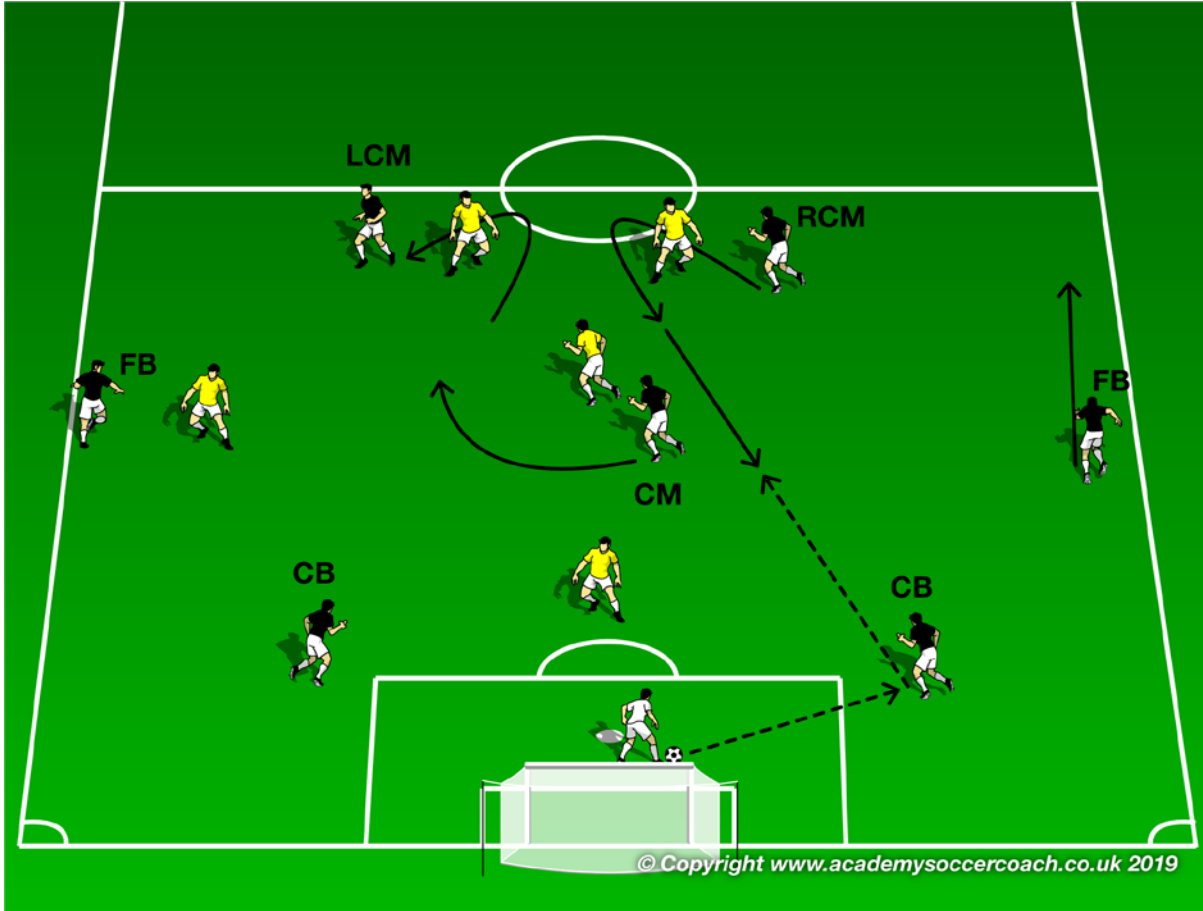
- Good technical skills for passes and through balls with both feet and to protect the ball against the opponents
- He must know how to escape the marker while building-up to call for the ball and be ready to be always an option



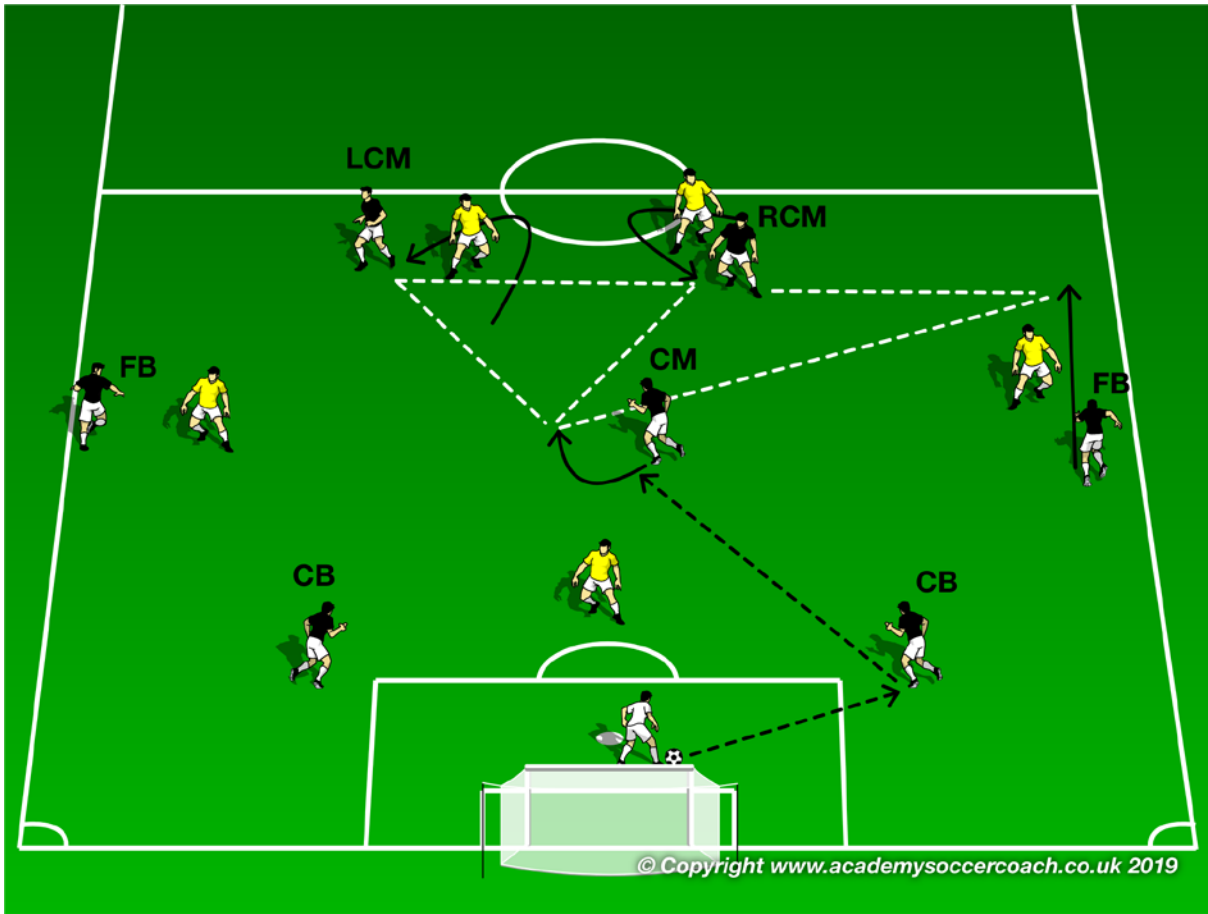
- He knows how to scan the field to find the best option and target teammate



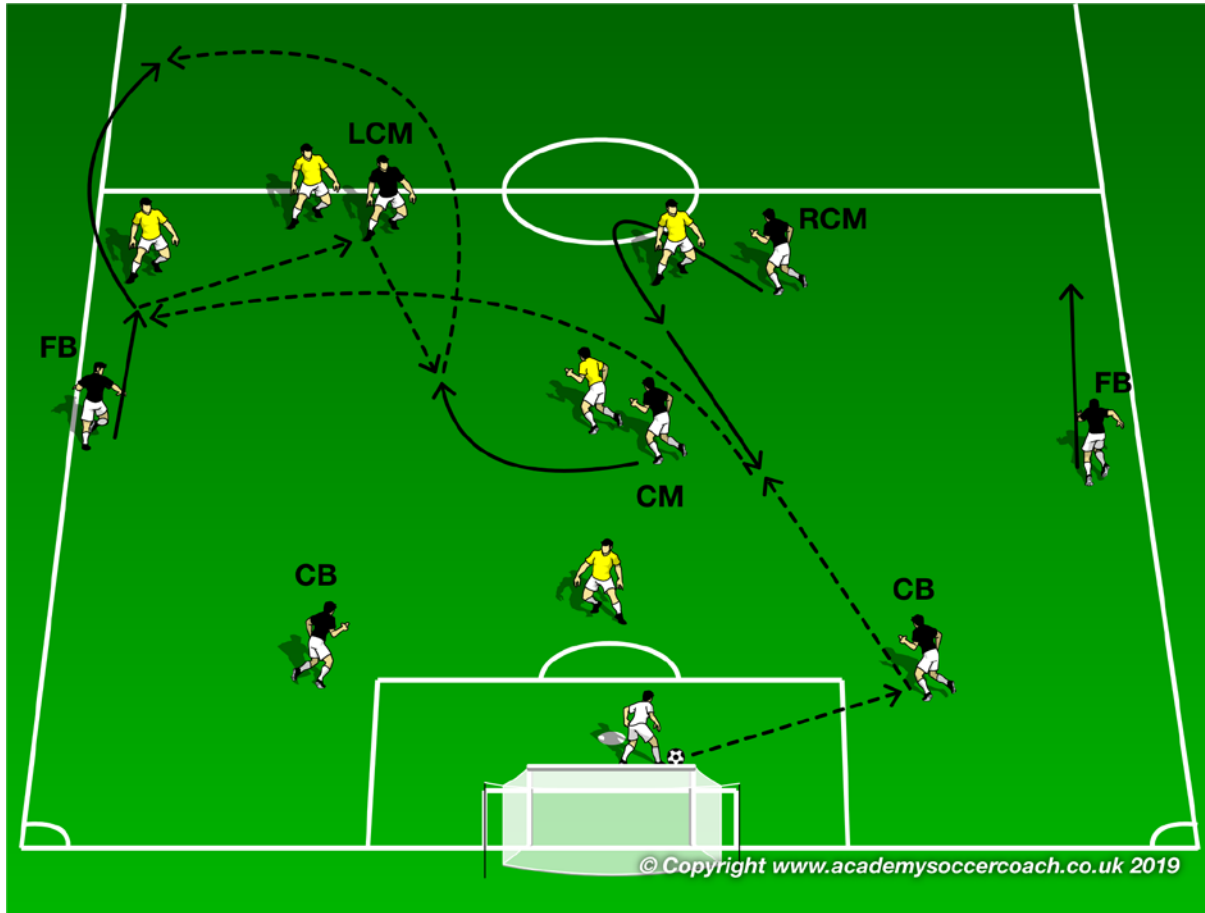
- Space creation to receive and to progress the move with short passes and longer balls



- Skills to combine with all the teammates with 2 touches after creation of a triangles; he is the lower vertex usually



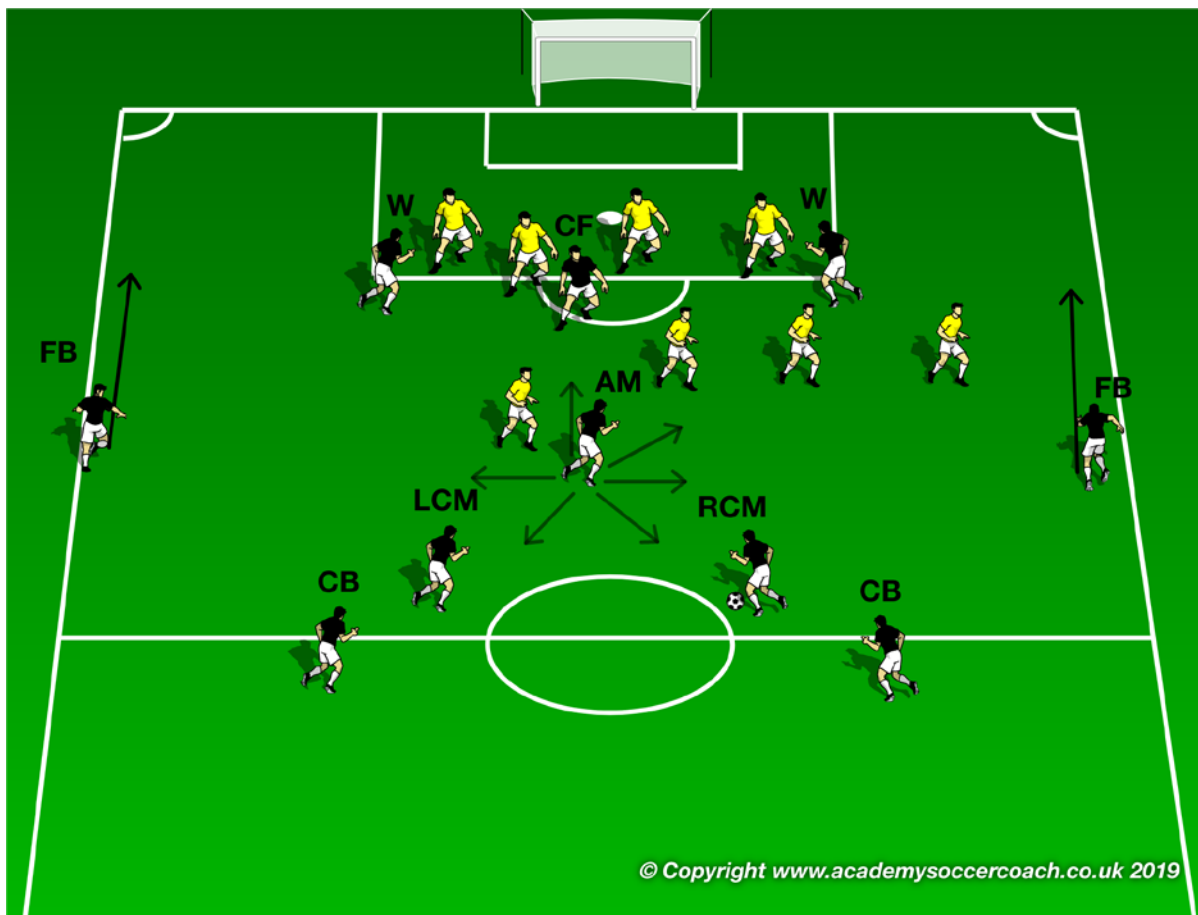
- Creation of 3rd man combinations



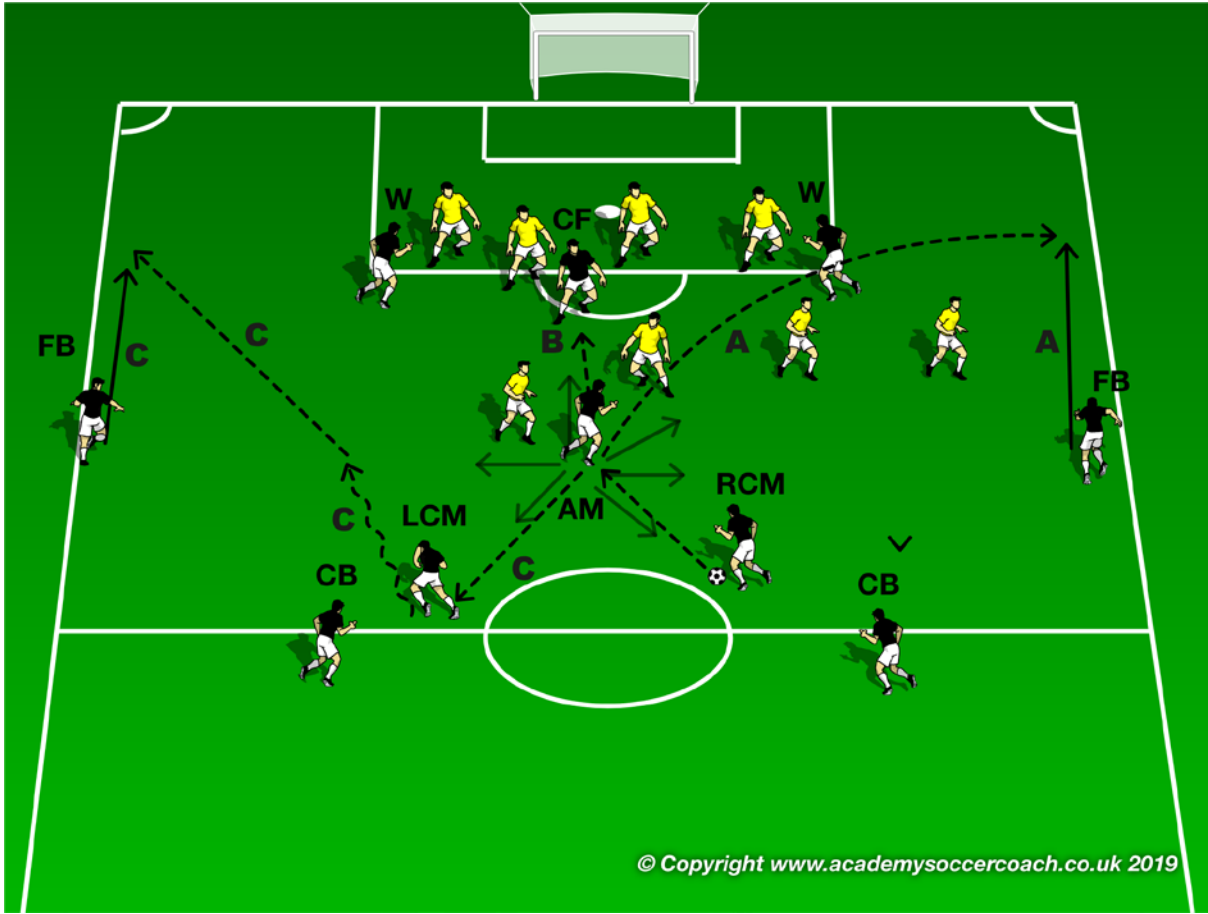
- Good finishing and shooting skills

Advanced midfielder(s):

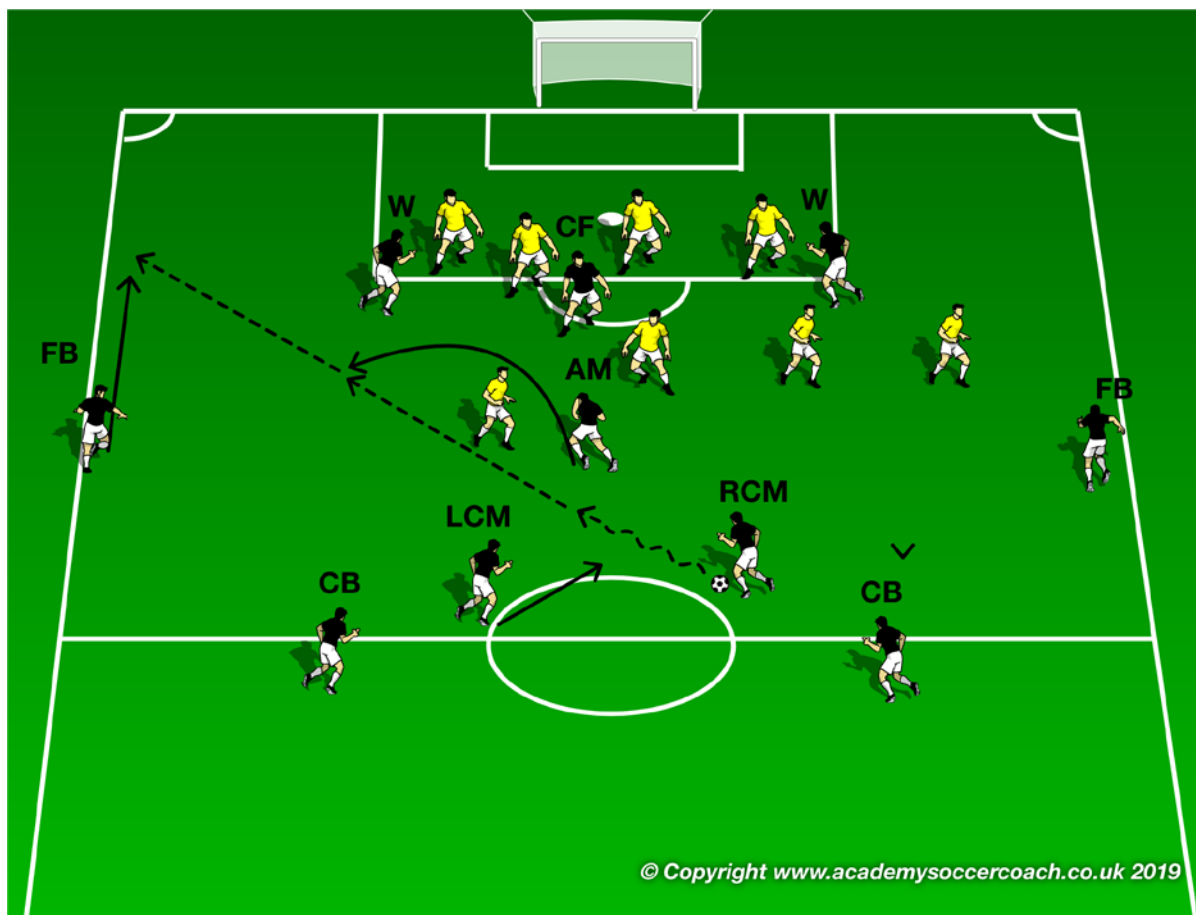
- Can play with both feet
- Scan the field as a center midfielder to combine with 3rd men



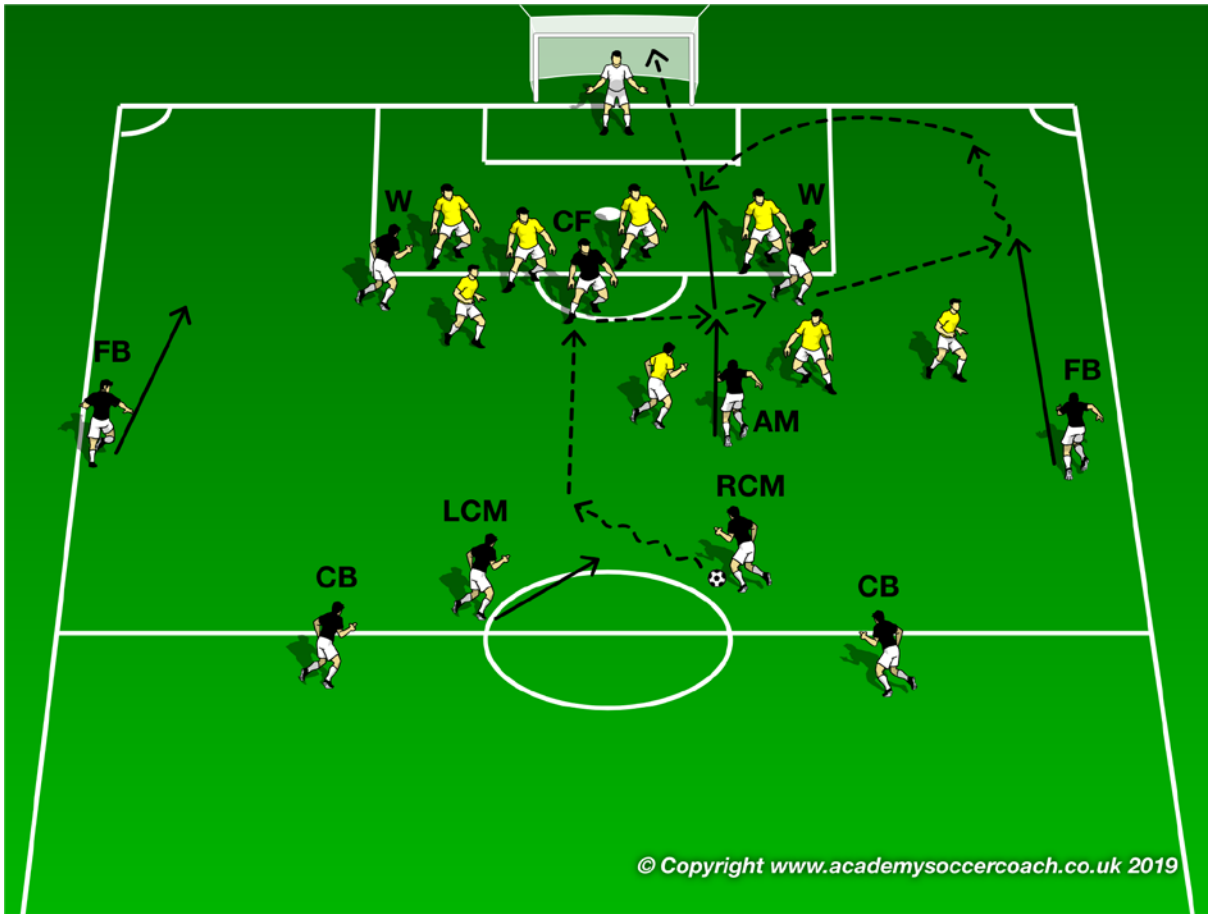
- Make the right choice regarding the opponents...



...and the available spaces



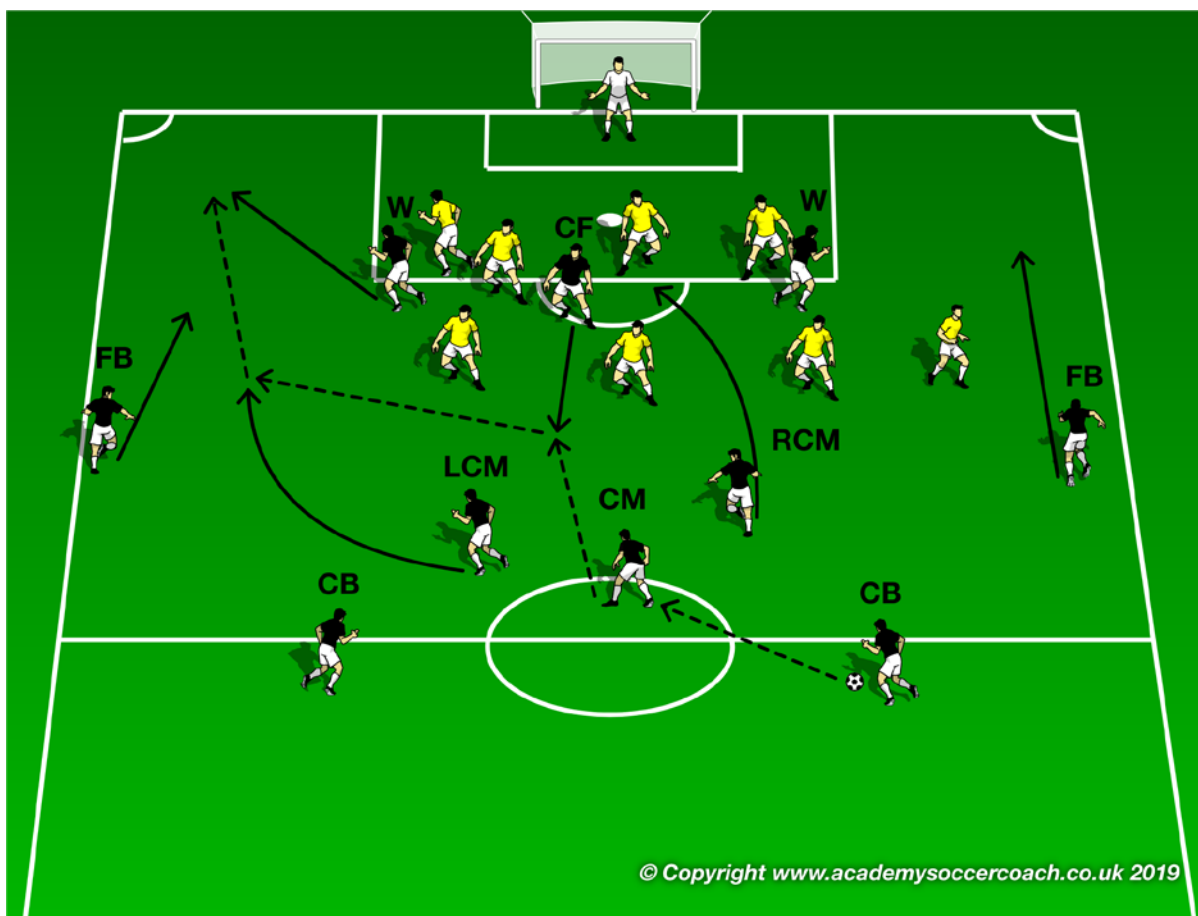
- Create individual opportunities for the team
- Play with good penetration skills against opposition defense



- Good finishing and shooting skills

Outside midfielders:

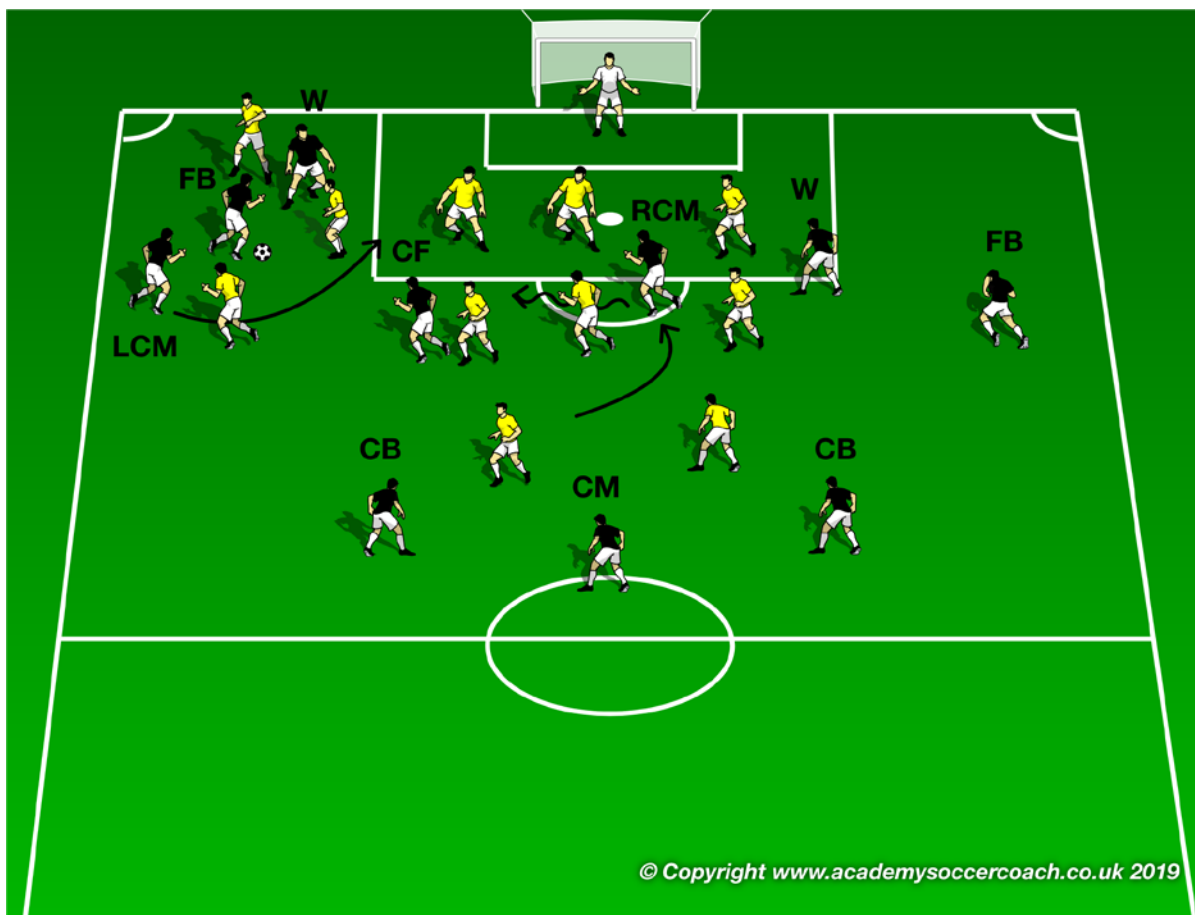
- They are very good at moving away from the ball to create space and at moving without the ball to be options



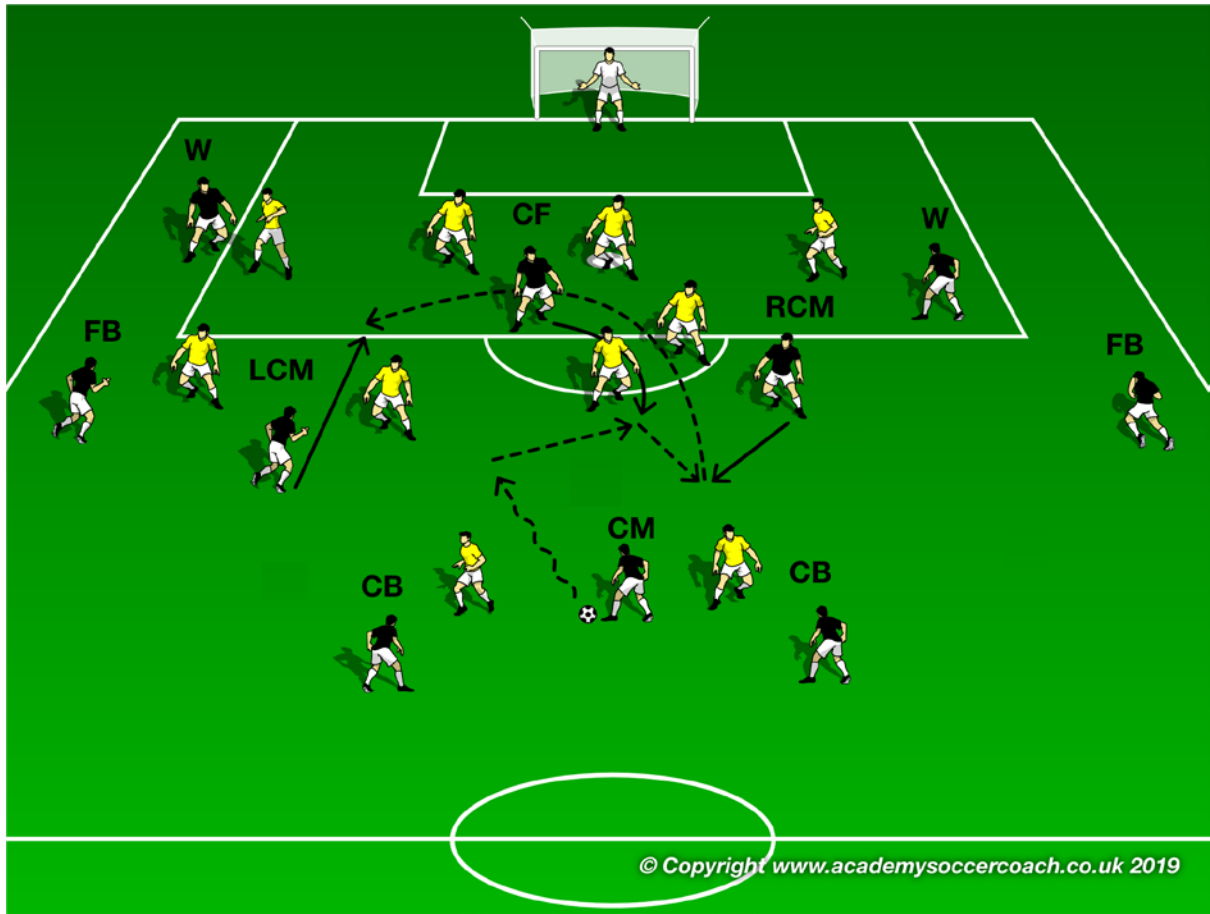
- Good positional play to provide width and to overcome the opposition lines

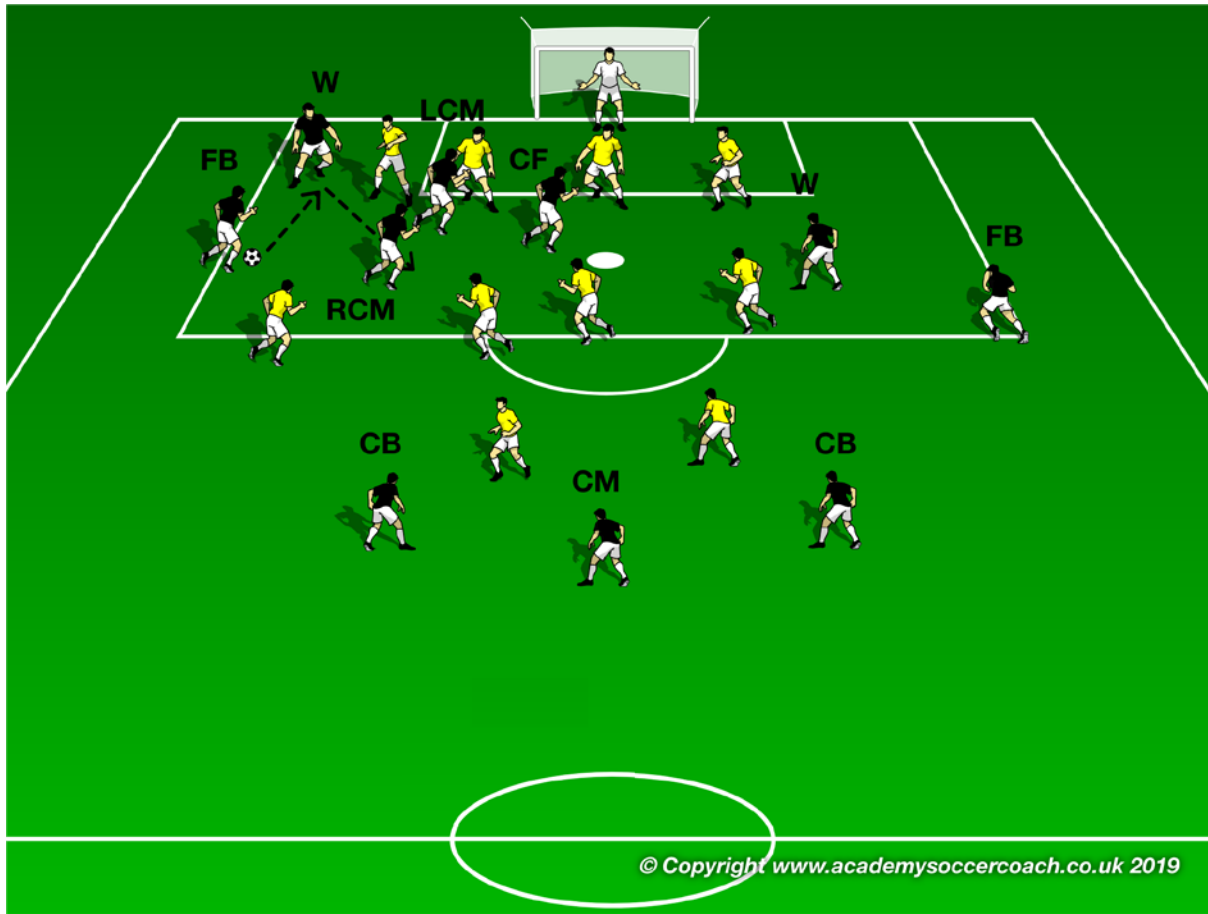


- Blind runs to play in between the opposition lines



- Speed of play, accelerations, and changes of rhythm
- Back support for the forwards and the wingers

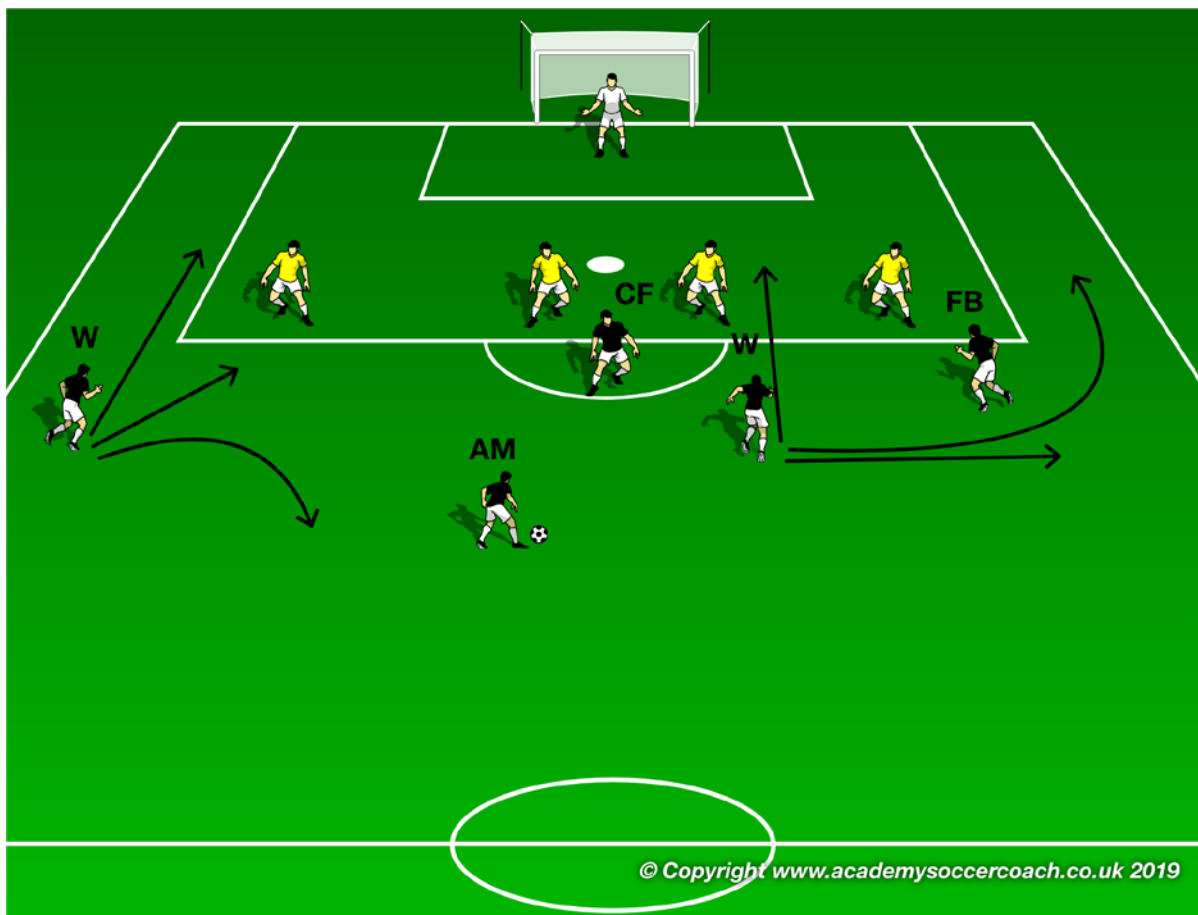




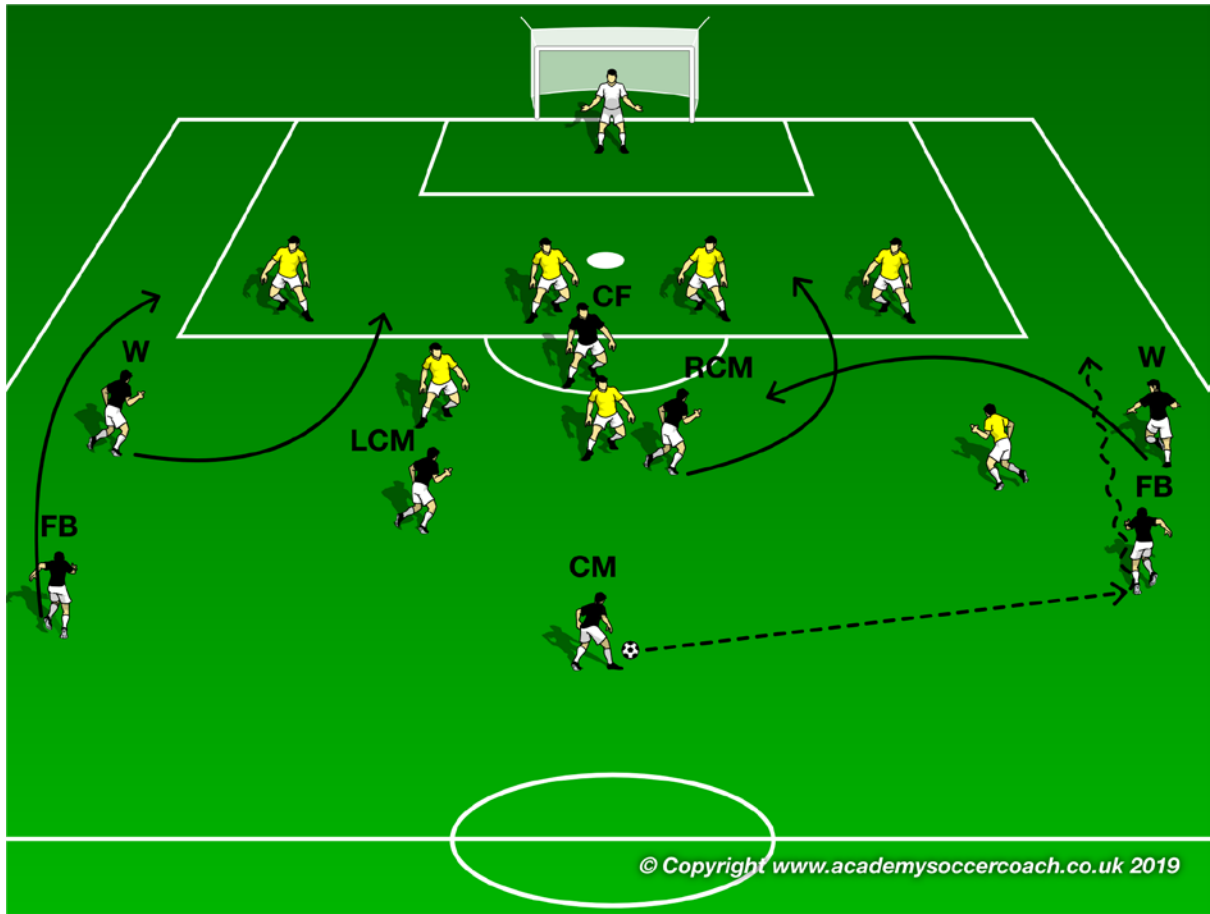
- Provide assists for teammates
- Good finishing and shooting skills

Wingers:

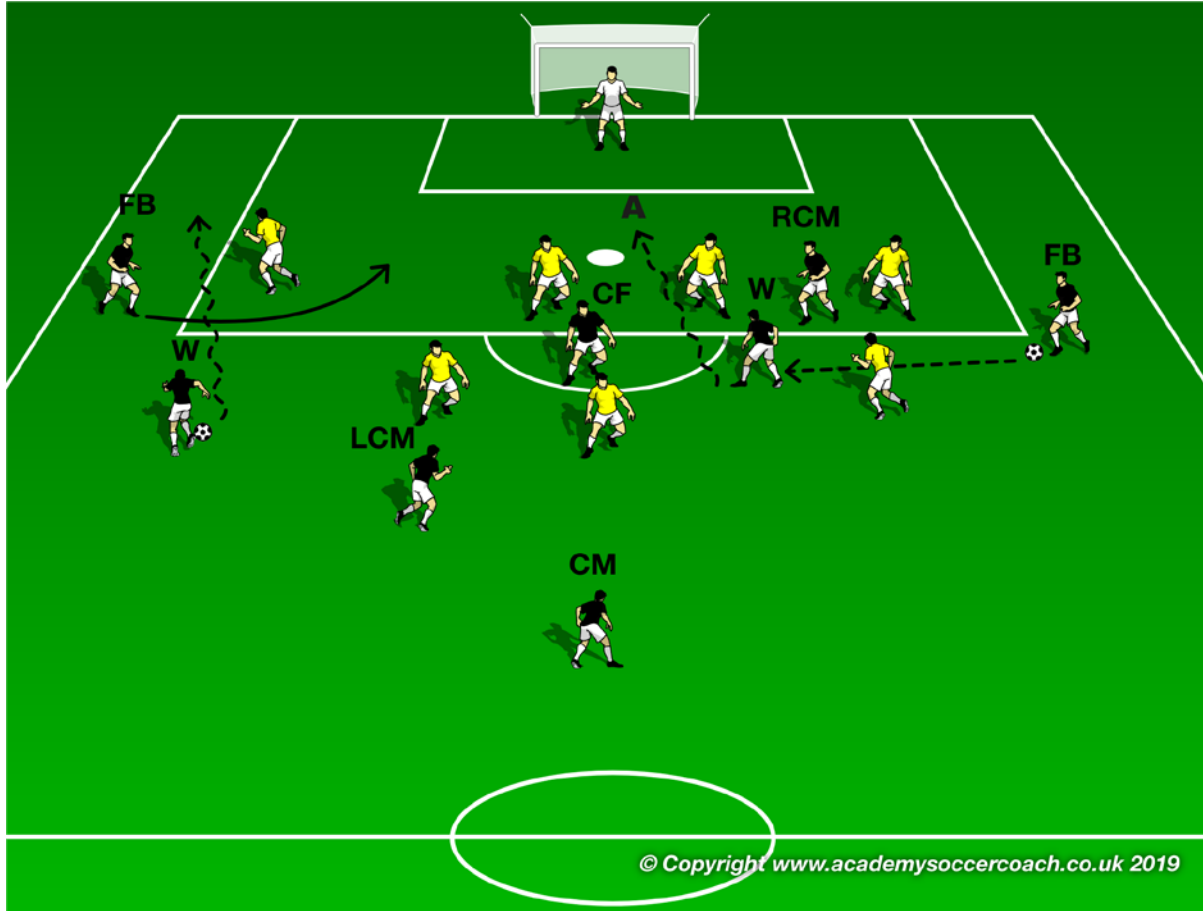
- Can play with both feet, especially if they play as inverted wingers
- They are always available to receive on their run paths and with various movements



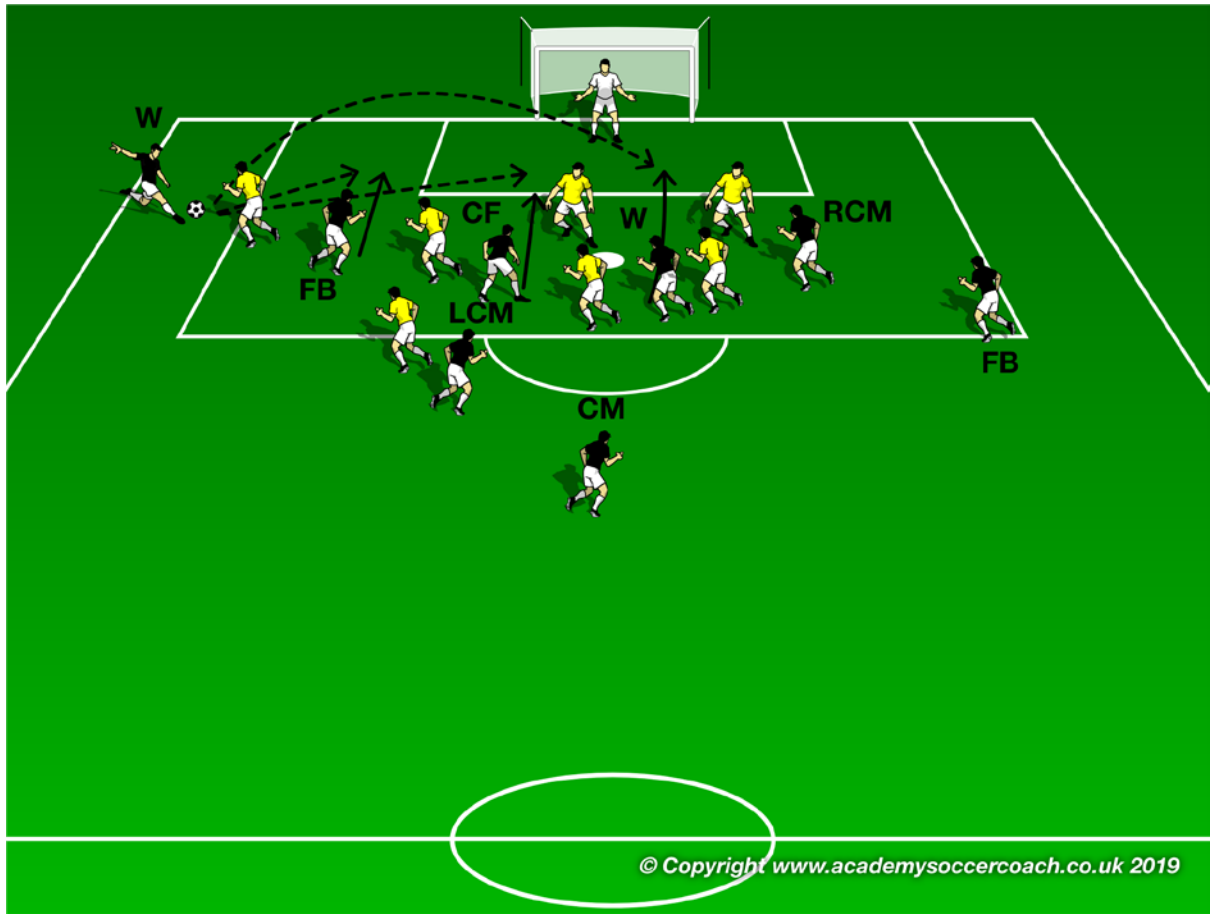
- They are very good at moving away from the ball to create space and at playing without the ball



- Overcome the opponent inside and outside

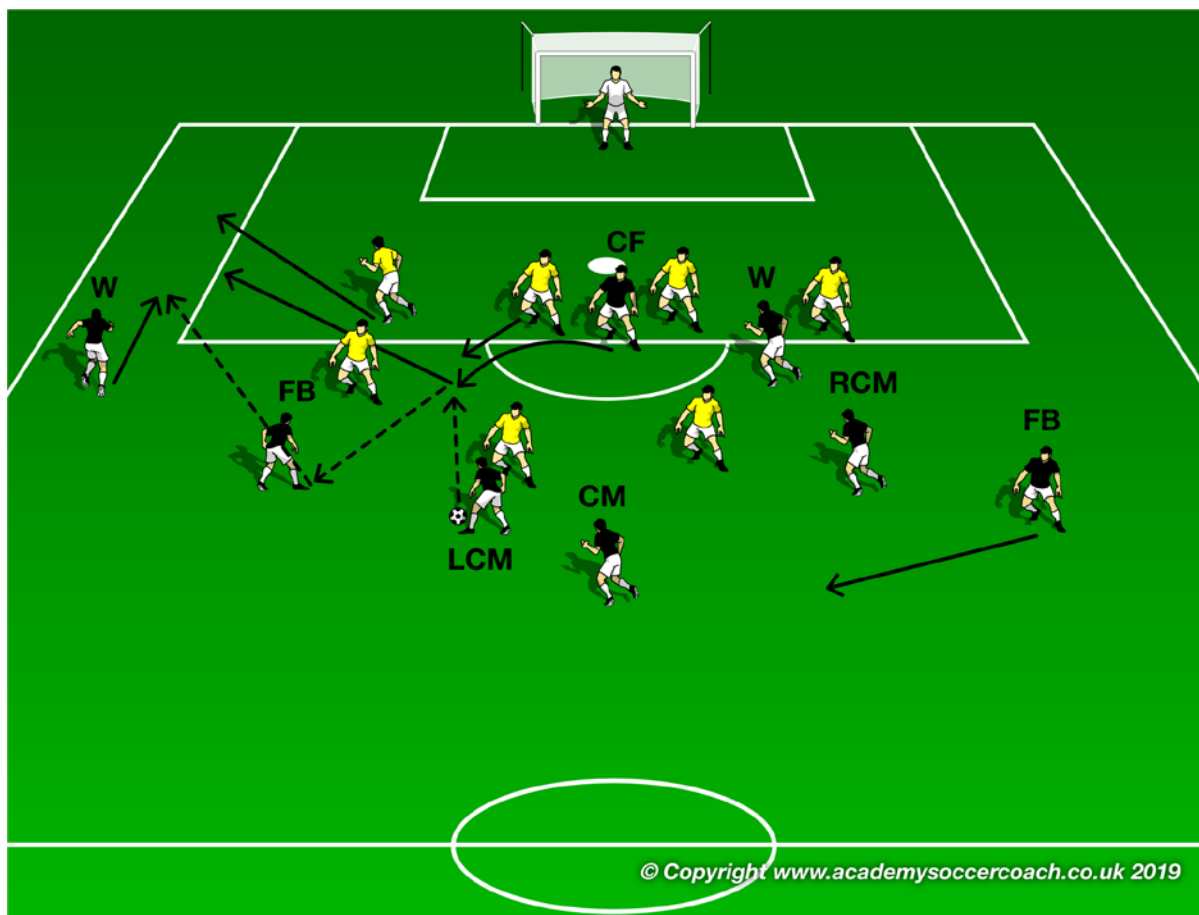


- Can play passes, crosses and through balls
- Speed of play, accelerations, and changes of rhythm
- Their attacking vision must lead to scoring opportunities

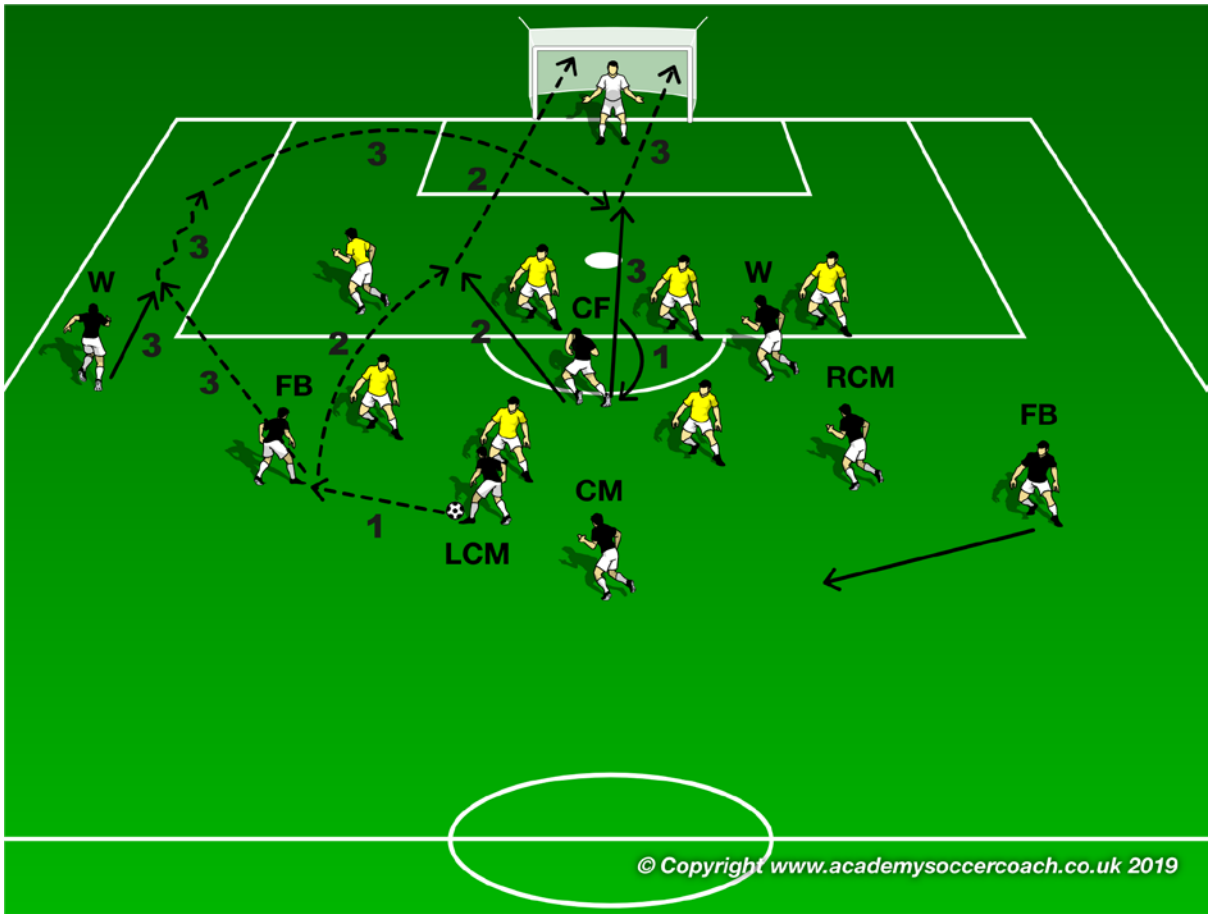


Center forward:

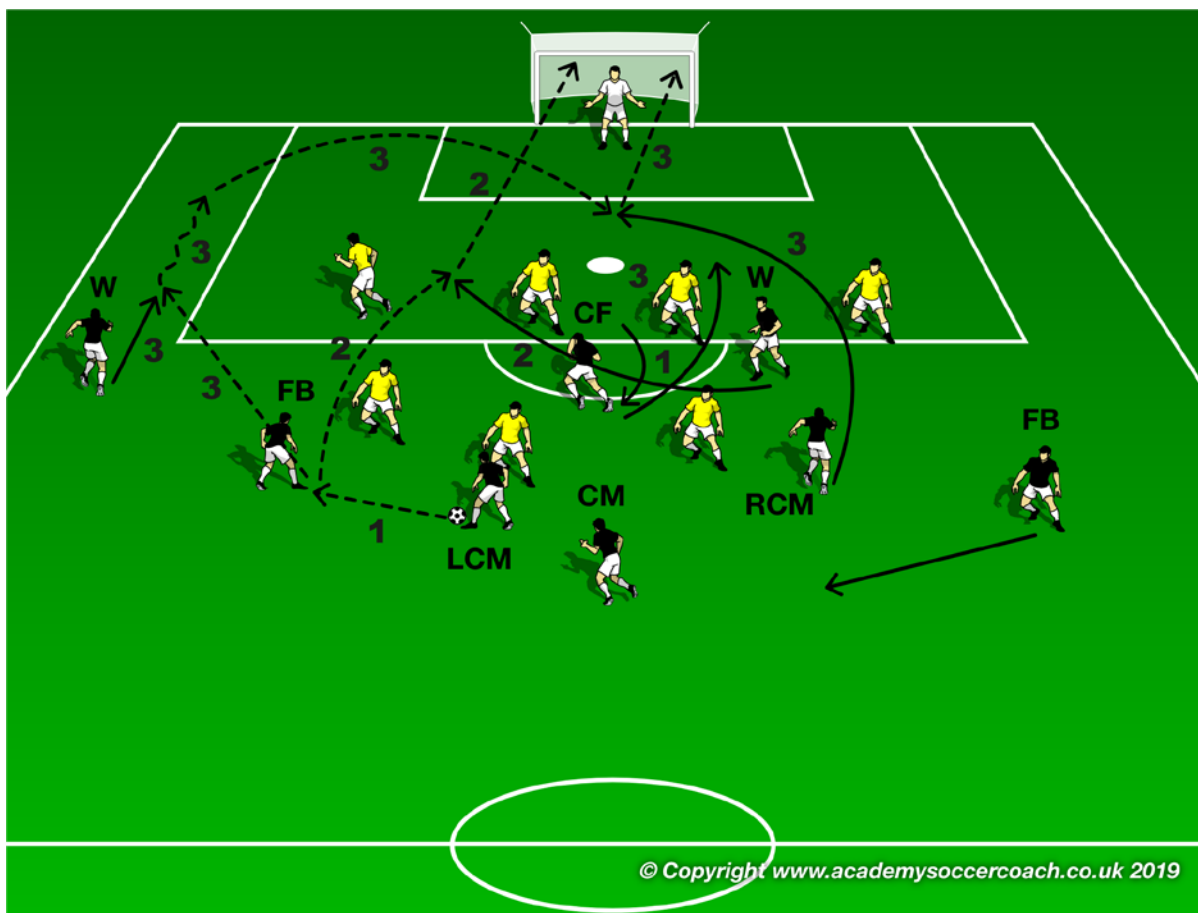
- Can play with both feet
- Scan the field and the opposition defense line before receiving to find the best solution to finish or to progress the move if he is facing his own goal and he is able to save the possession if he is facing his own goal and to cooperate with midfielders



- He tries always to be unmarked and to face the opposition goal

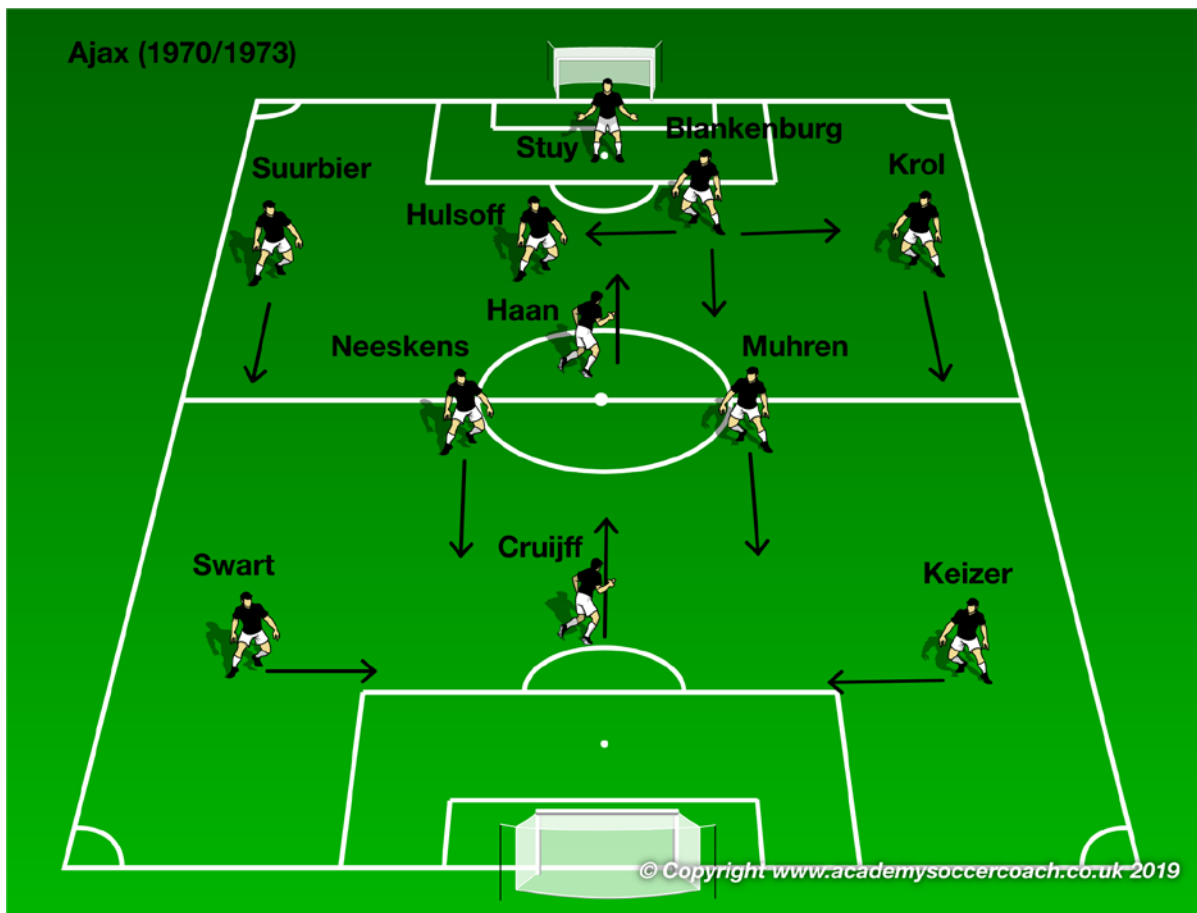


- He create space for teammates if he doesn't receive
- Creation of opportunities with and without the ball



1-4-3-3: history, lines up and applications

1-4-3-3 system was not invented by the Dutch but their application created the "Total Football" thanks to Rinus Michels. It used the space through players movements even out of their positions and roles, and the pressing tactic to win the ball back. The results were the Ajax of the early 70's...



...And the orange Holland national team of 1974...



(...And in part of 1978).



Michels also took "Total Football" to Barcelona in the middle 70's, from which the Spanish developed their own style that culminated with Barcelona 2008/2012...

Barcelona (2008-2012)



...And with 2010 World Cup win (2 European Cups 2008 / 2012 must be added).



Crujff and Van Gaal evolved the system further, arriving to a 3-4-3 variation during the 90s.

Nowadays best applications of the 1-4-3-3 have been showed by Sarri's Napoli in Italy, by Zidane's Real Madrid in Europe, winning 3 champions league in a row (2016/2018) and by Liverpool, during last 2018/2019 season.

The essence of the so called "Sarri-Ball" is a possession soccer with ball retention and quick verticality, as key factors of his 1-4-3-3 formation that is shaped of technically skilled players, who must be tactically disciplined until the final third, and who are then invited to show their individual qualities in the final third.



Napoli 1-4-3-3 was made of runs, rhythm, possession and dynamism. Ball retention inside the opposition half allowed to control the game and to be effective in transitions to attack.

Despite having his star on the wane, Reina seemed to be perfect for Napoli, thanks to his technical ability with the ball and his strong personality.

Albiol and Koulibaly were a complete CBs couple; the first one who is technically skilled and the second one with pace and power skills and being confident with the ball anyway.

The two full backs were very complementary with Ghoulam always trying to overlap and Hysaj more stationary to shape a line of 3 at the back.

Sarri has three specific roles in midfield usually: the deep-lying playmaker was Jorginho, who manages the tempo of the move, the aggressive box to box midfielder, Allan, and the attacking midfielder, who links attack and defense, Hamsik.

The front 3 were also very different in their roles and positions: Insigne usually ran inside and forward from the left, creating space for Ghoulam. Mertens became a successful striker, after the sale of Higuain and the double Milik's injury. Callejon always played as classic winger down the right side.

Napoli was also very interesting for its fluidity and the changeable shape on the field, while building up from the back and the while playing inside the opposition half.

1-3-4-3 while building up...



...1-3-3-4 while attacking.



Real Madrid developed the possession phase building up from the back, but the ball circulation was not exasperated; width in the middle third and depth through vertical passes to find the 3 forwards were the main principles and the possession was preparatory for depth attacks.



With possession Real Madrid tried to make the field as wide as possible and Kroos was the midfielder who helped to build up the attacks, through his wide range of passing skills, even when Casemiro was playing as a CDM.

Marcelo and Carvajal played in very advanced positions giving to the forwards the chance to be free to attack as the full backs had to play in wide areas of the attacking half.

Modric and Kroos were the pivots of the attacking phase organization inside the opposition half, covering the space on the center-right and center-left due to their skills to play toward the opposition goal and, in case of a loss of possession, they were the first players in counter-pressing actions.

The main goal of possession was passing the ball from one side to the other to create gaps in the opposition defensive lines, overloading one side through short and quick passes, to free one fullback along the opposite half to exploit their skills in 1 v 1 duels and in crossing toward the box.

To create the best conditions for Ronaldo and Benzema inside the box was very important for Real's finishing chances starting from the second post, when the outside player would have received the ball.

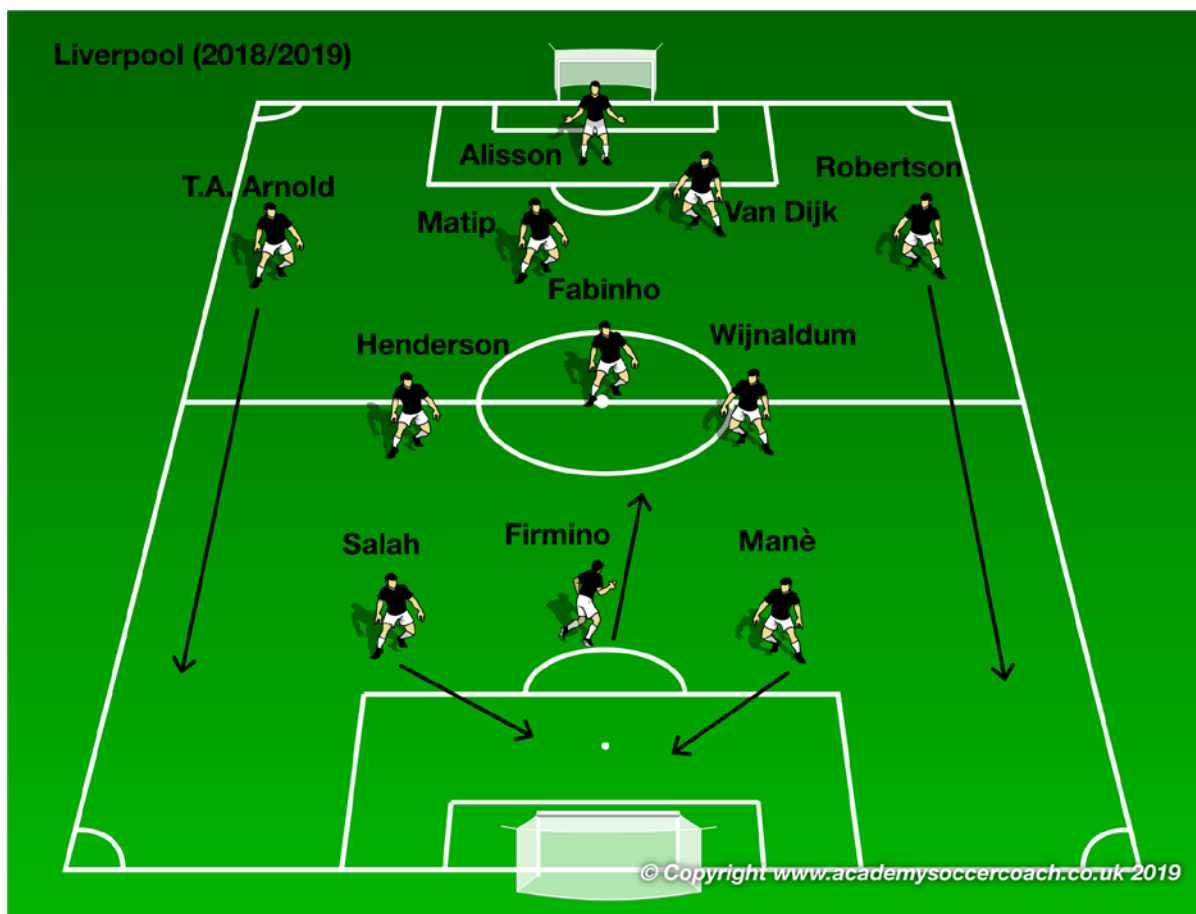
1-3-4-3 while building up



...1-2-3-5 while attacking



Liverpool's version 2018/2019 has been basically similar to Real Madrid as final goal; the pure holding midfield sector, the rhythm and the repeated look for depth spaces have been the main difference that can be found.



The lack of creativity among the skills of the midfielders has been balanced by the tireless work of the fullbacks along the flanks.

Klopp is known all over the world as the best spokesperson of counter-pressing and negative transitions; but Liverpool of the last season seemed to feel very comfortable with the ball in building up and retaining possession. Sure, in a different and more direct way.

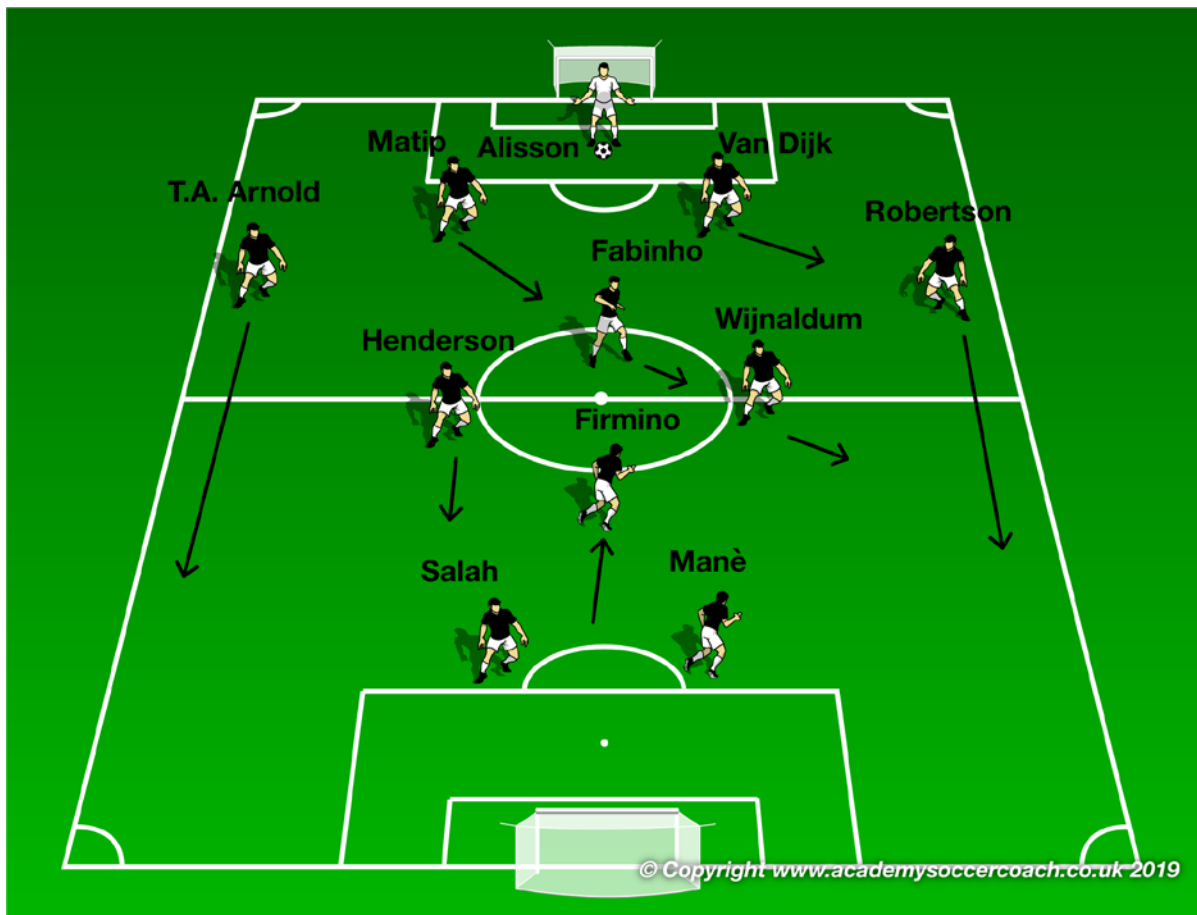
The first goal has been to free the one fullback, giving him the chance to dribble or to pass the ball toward the middle third.

The CF Firmino has been tasked with a support role in the middle third to help quick passing combinations and switches of side.

Salah and Manè have repeatedly attacked the depth behind the defense opposition line both if the potential pass could have come from the middle third or the flanks.

The midfield sector has had the role of support with the goal to win the second times of the ball and to prevent the opposition from counter attacking.

1-4-3-1-2 while building up...



...1-2-3-5 while attacking

