

A QUICK GUIDE TO THE

1-4-3-3



by **LUCA BERTOLINI**



A Quick Guide to the 1-4-3-3

By

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Introduction:

In this e-book we are going to analyze a possible development of the 1-4-3-3 system of play, one of the most known, most important, most used and coached way of giving shape to soccer teams on the field, all over the world.

For this reason this e-book doesn't aim to be an ultimate overview; the goal is to underline how the principles of play of a team are carried out on the field. It is going to analyze the 1-4-3-3 basic formation during the defensive phases of play in the first part and during the possession and attacking phases of play in the second part.

In this following picture, the classic basic 1-4-3-3 formation is shaped on the pitch: a line of four defenders, a triangle midfield and the last line of three forwards.



If we would have to summarize with few words the classic situations of this system of play we may divide the players and the roles on the pitch into three parts.

The four defenders often play like they would in the 1-4-4-2, with zonal defending during the non-possession phases and running forward to support the attacking moves during the side by side play in the middle third during the building phases when the team is in possession. In recent seasons, man-marking is coming back as an important principle of play as the speed of the moves and the intensity of the rhythm of play are getting faster.

They still play as a block to cover the width of the field and close off spaces where attackers could run in, but as the ball is lost, the distances among defenders and the forwards are very short and the old order of the defenders on the same line or on two lines is not used anymore by now.

The three midfielders usually play in a triangle shape and the center midfielder can be a lower or upper vertex for the other two midfielders; usually he is a center playmaker just few yards away from the defense line.

The midfield block plays and is usually placed as near as possible to the ball in the middle third and the opposite outside forward must cover the space of the weak side if a move is being carried out along the side lines.

Usually the outer forwards create a line of five in the middle third when the possession of the ball is lost and it's not possible to put pressure.

One of the midfielders can be often unmarked in the space to receive the ball, both if there is a defensive triangle or an offensive triangle shape on the field.

The center forwards are usually the ones of the three who don't run back and stay placed as high as possible to be an option as the ball is recovered. The outside forwards are the players with the hardest role, together with the midfielders; they must cover the spaces to avoid the creation of dangerous moves of the opposition in the middle third, if the midfielders would have to run out of their position and, at the same time, they must always support the side by side play and the attacking moves.

If the developments on the field of this system of play must be looked for, the main all- pervading principles of play that the team wants to carry out must be found out, first of all. In this e-book they are:

- the numerical advantage near the ball and against the opponent in possession
- different defending shapes depending on the third of the field to be saved
- a clear division of the team among attacking players and defending players during the possession phases of play
- to be sure of preventively man-marking and of saving the spaces, if the ball is lost

Nowadays, soccer, after Guardiola's Barcelona seasons I would say, is based more on principles of play rather than on the player's role inside a formation on the field.

"I am very good in placing the players on the field, but it's a pity because then they move and run while playing," I read somewhere.

I think that in the following pages it will be clearly shown that the 1-4-3-3 system of play and its developments on the field are created as a consequence of the principles of play of the team we are going to analyze and not vice versa.

The 1-4-3-3 on the field



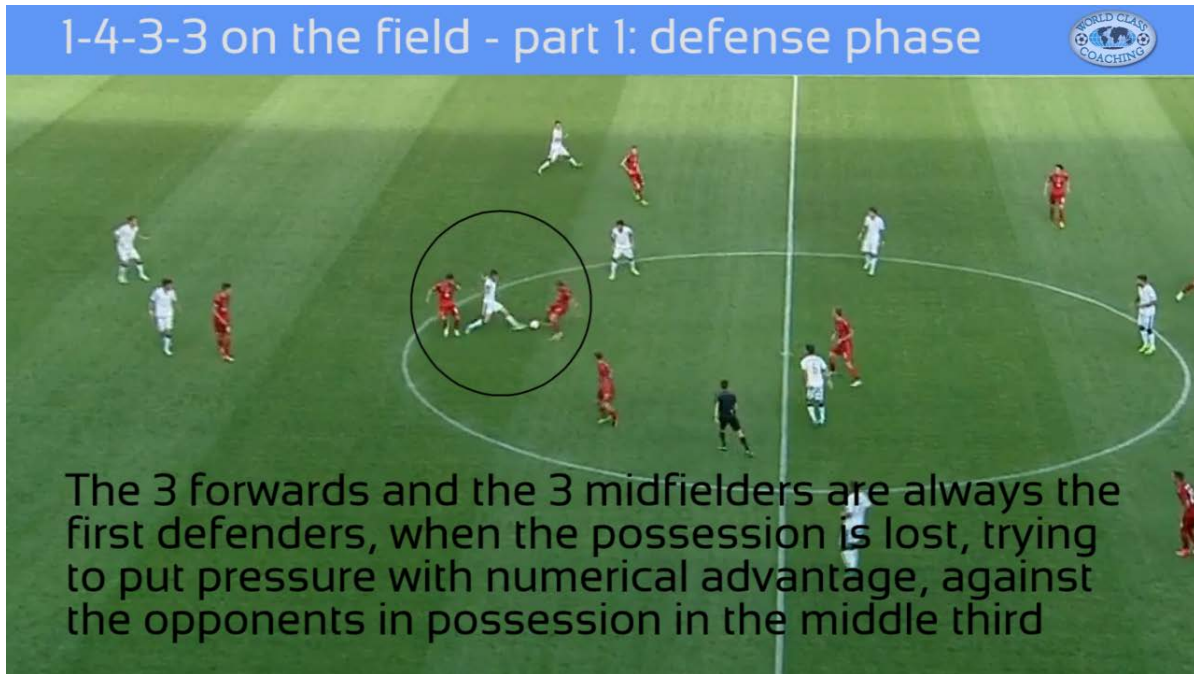
Part 1

The 1-4-3-3 on the field



Defense phase

In this first defensive situation, the six advanced players (the three forwards and the three midfielders) are the first defenders during a negative transition, and they try to put pressure in numerical advantage (2 v 1) against the opponent in possession; one of the center midfielders is defending together with the center forward who dropped back.



This is clearly a double marking principle of play during the negative transition phases, as the same situation can be found both in the middle third and in the final third when the possession is lost; it doesn't matter if it is during a building up phase, a side by side phase of play, or a finishing phase.



When the double marking is not possible, the first goal is to play immediate 1 v 1 counter-pressing, if the move is being carried out in the final third, to force the possession phase of the opposition and to close the forward pass lanes.



If the whole team must stay placed in the defending half, the three forwards (or at least two of them) have to create numerical advantage on the ball while the midfielders close the pass lanes and save the last defense line of four.



If the forwards are able to force the direction of the opposition build up phase, the six advanced players come back to put strong pressure to win the possession or to end the move anyway.



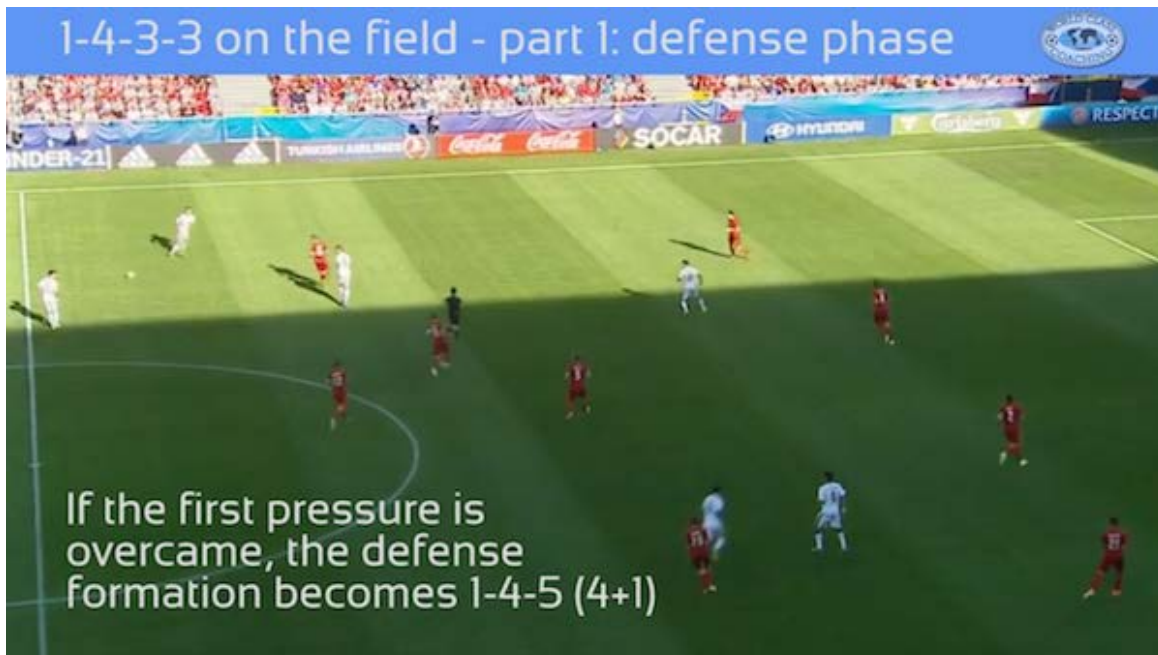
In this move two of the three forwards disturbed and forced the direction of the opposition's build up phase of play toward the goalkeeper, who then has to kick the ball away because of the pressure.



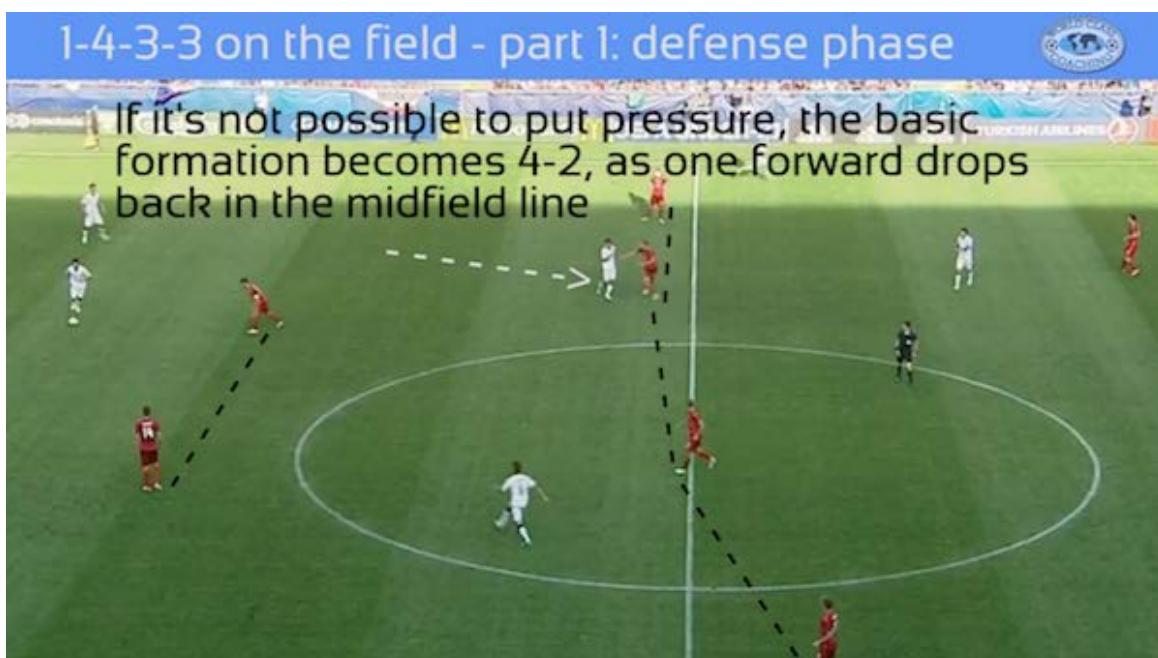
In this way, the midfield line can close forward pass lanes and stay away from the defense third, forcing again backward the opposition possession phase.



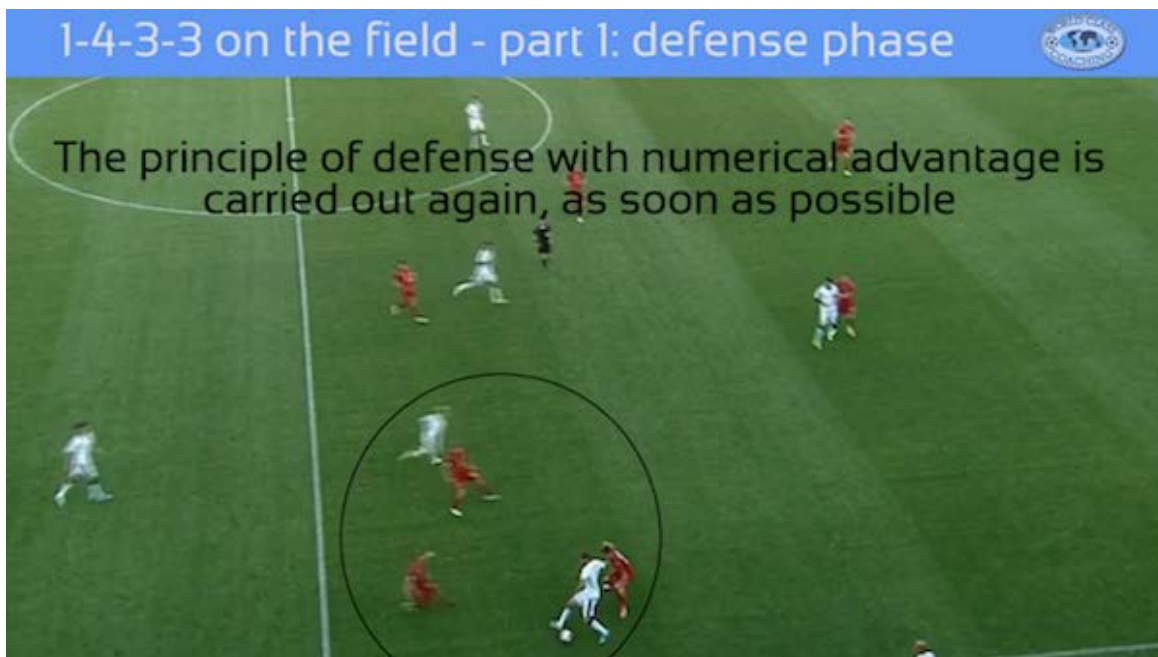
In this move it is very useful to notice how the high pressure is overcome by the opposition, who can play forward on the field. The first basic 1-4-3-3 develops in a classic 1-4-5 defensive formation in the final third, but with the midfield line which is organized with a 4+1, as the fifth player is running back after a double marking attempt.



The midfield line is basically made of three players, but it can be shaped also with four players if one opponent tries to run without the ball to cut the line out; in this case the outside forward runs back to cover the flank and the center midfielder marks the opponent on, or the forward follows him directly. The main objective is, again, to create a numerical advantage on the ball as soon as possible.



These following pictures are very interesting because they show what we were talking about in the introduction; the basic formation of a team is a consequence of the principles of play and not vice versa. In this first picture, the team seems to be unshaped and nearly unbalanced, but a 3 v 2 situation on the ball is very clear.



In this second situation, two of the three midfielders are close to the opponent in possession to send him backward, playing 2 v 1, the third one is getting closer, and the two outside forwards dropped back to shape a line of five in the middle third. To force the direction of play is more important than the risk of creating space; thus, the line of five and the line of four defenders are placed high.



Again the team seems to be unshaped and nearly unbalanced during another move, but a 2 v 1 situation on the ball is very clear and all the opponents are marked. The opposition must play backwards.



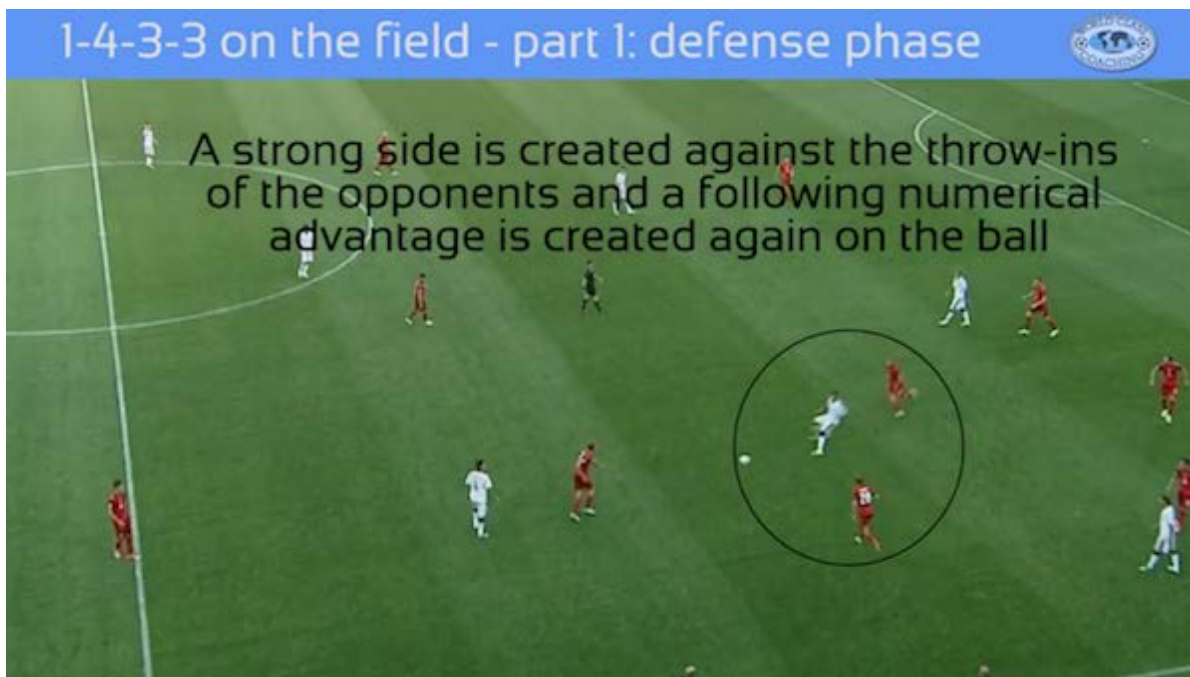
In this next move, the team is better 4-3-3 shaped, even larger on the field, but the forwards follow the basic defense principle of play: create numerical advantage (2 v 1) against the opponent in possession, playing closer to each other.



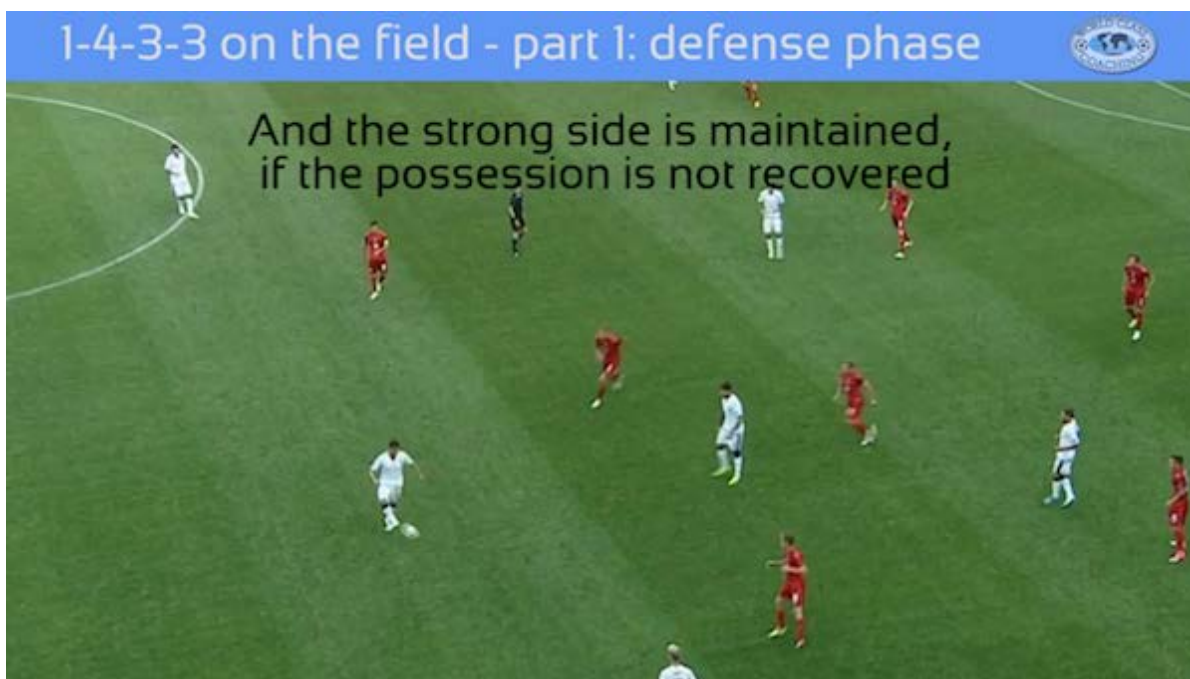
The same principle of play is followed and developed in the final third; 2 v 1 numerical advantage is on the ball and all the other defense players are potentially able to double mark another recipient of a pass among all the opponents.



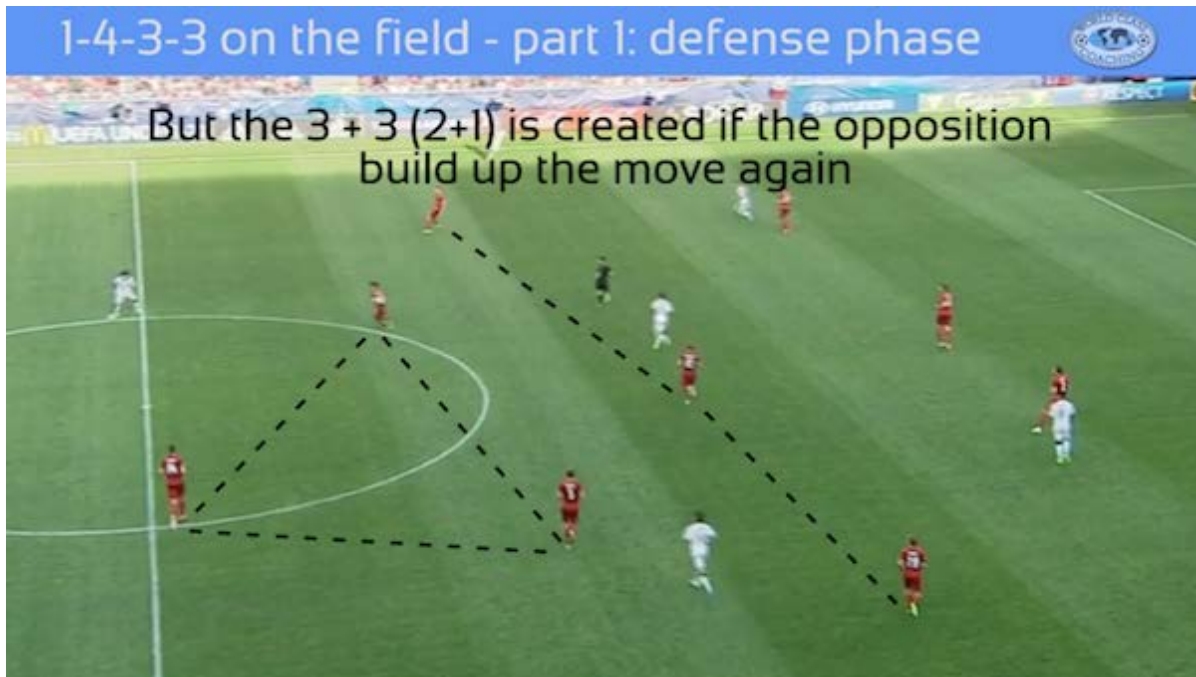
The defensive principle of play is very clear from this sequential throw-in situation; a very strong side is created as well as an immediate numerical advantage against the first receiver.



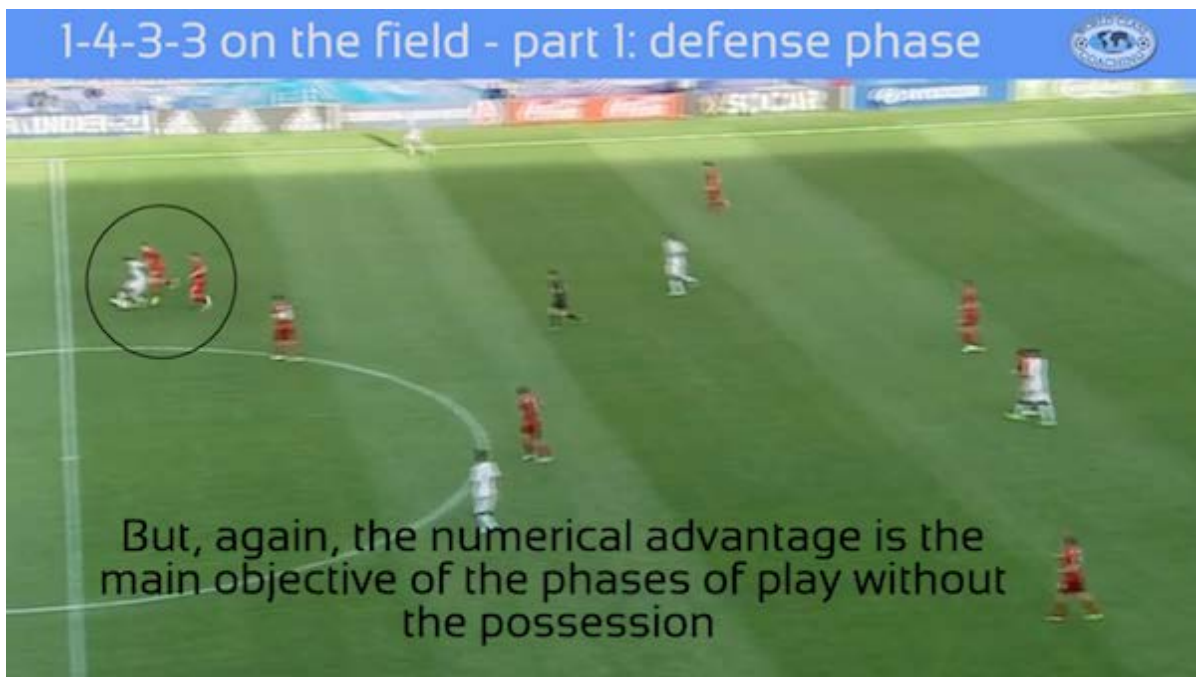
If the possession is not recovered, the strong side is maintained near the ball until the opponent must play back to build up again...



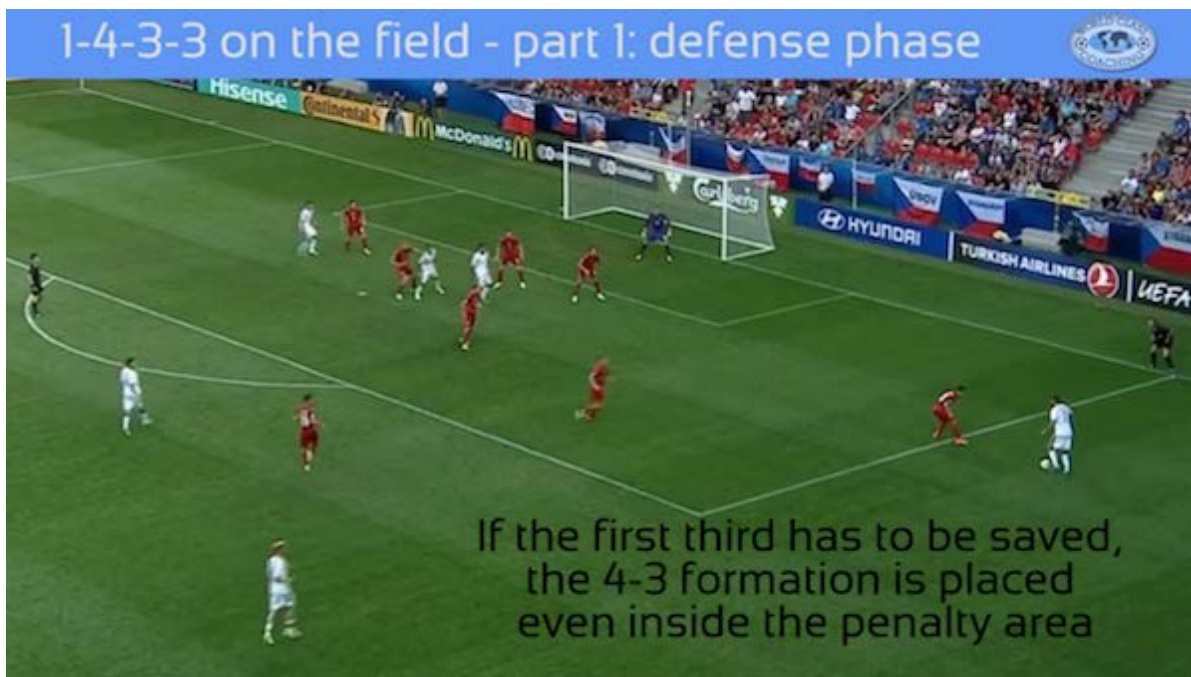
...and the team positions on the pitch in a starting 4-3-3 formation with the lines close to one another if there's no chance of pressure.



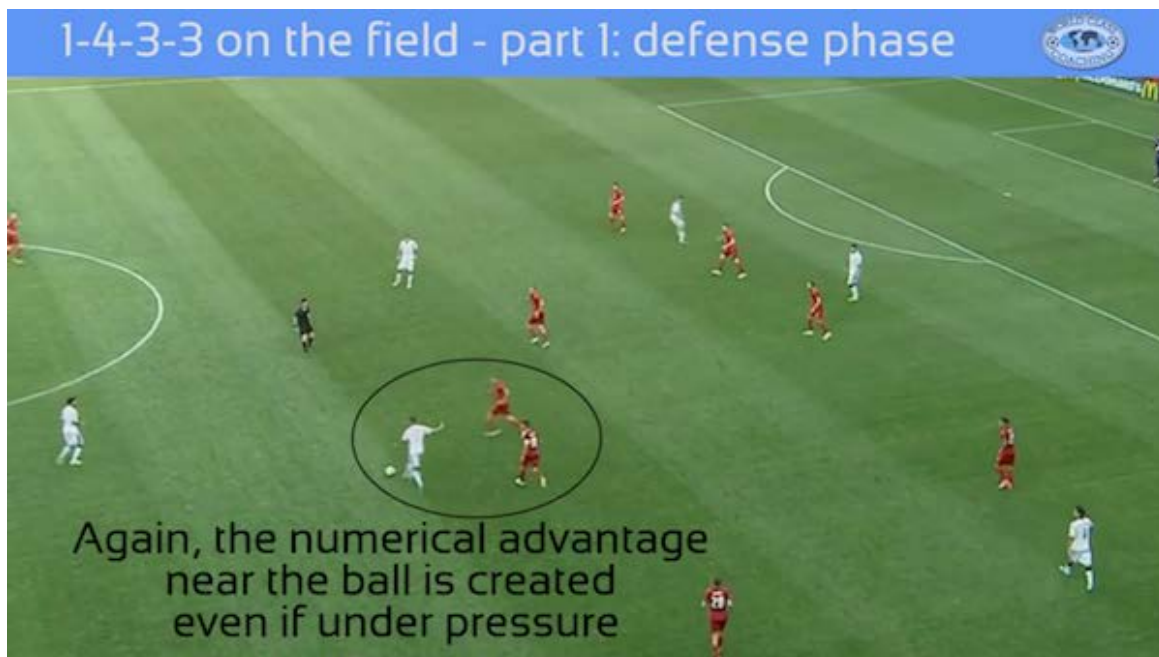
But whatever are the developments of a move, at least a 2 v 1 situation is created again as a double marking chance is possible and as the opposition play by play can be forced backwards.



If the midfield line is cut off, for instance after a rebounds phase of play, the defensive tactical idea is to create numerical advantage near the most dangerous parts of the field, even conceding a potential cross pass through a 1 v 1 duel. Being sure to mark the opposition with the highest number of players possible inside the box and to have a double marking chance, as the player in possession is getting closer to the penalty area are more important principles of play.



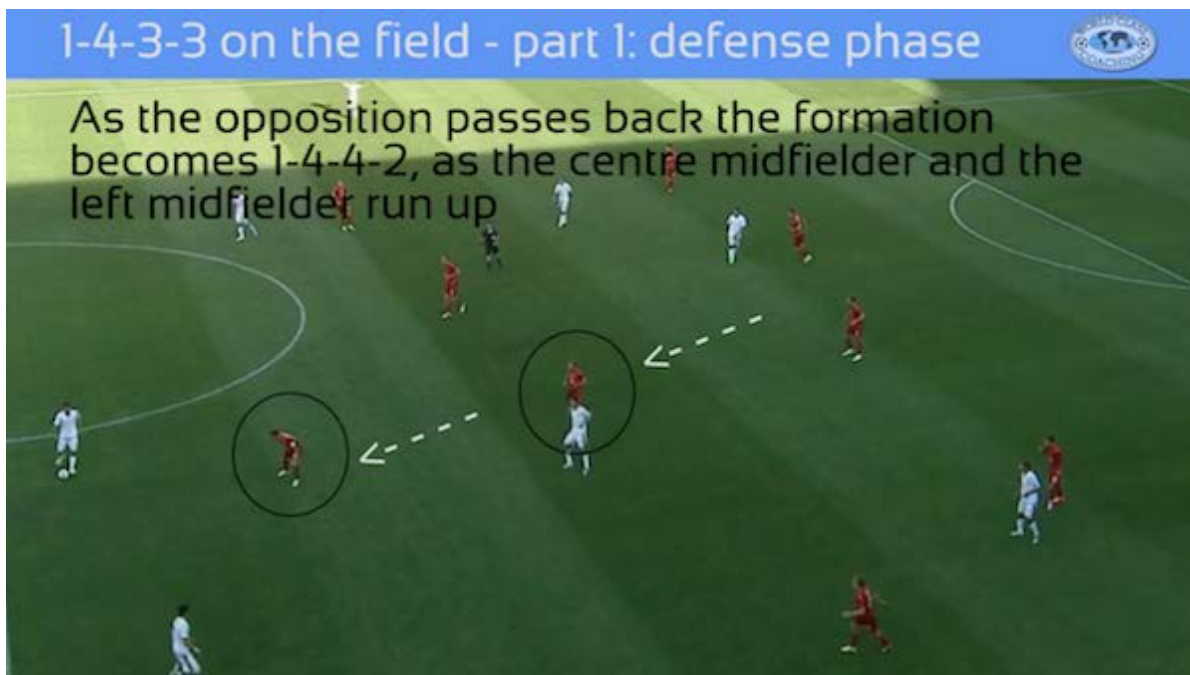
If the midfield line is on late against the build up or the attacking phases of the opposition, a line of 5 players is created in the middle third to ensure the numerical advantage on the ball in the center, as well as on the flanks, if the opposition tries to play wide. If possible, the defense forces a back pass and can run up on the field.



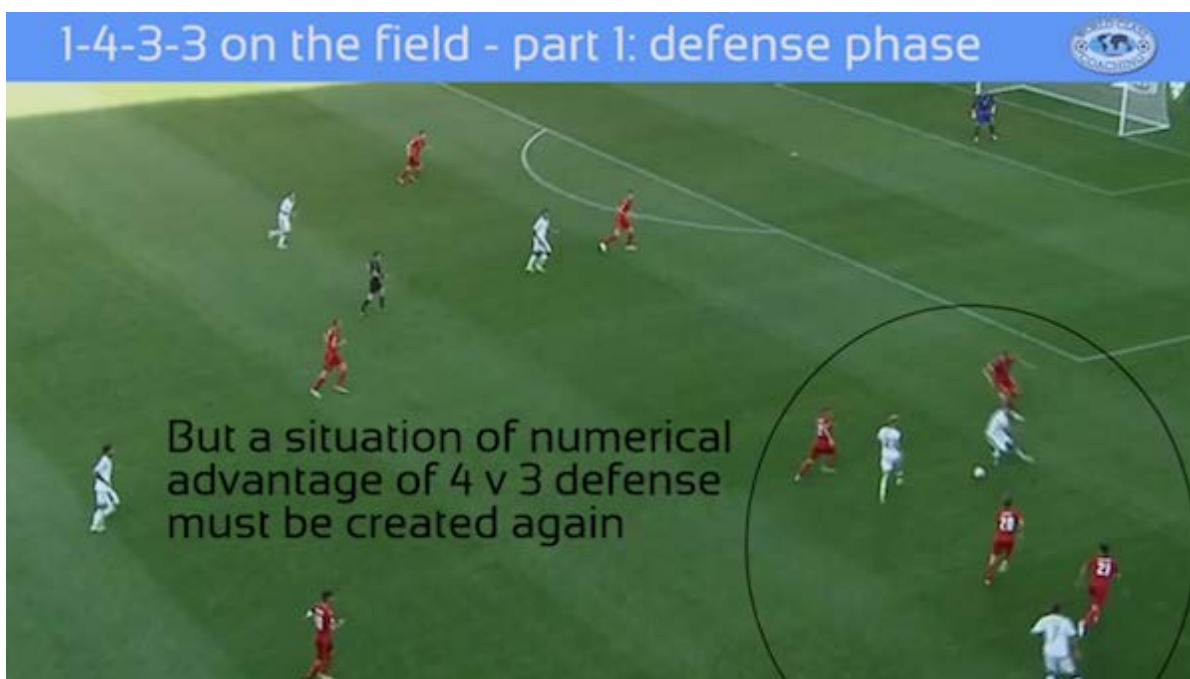
In this situation, as the opposition attacks with the same kind of tactic, 3+3, the defensive formation becomes 1-4-1-4, with the center player who is placed just few yards away from the defense line, the other two center midfielders very close to each other and to him. The outside forwards play as wingers to create a line of four. This way the double marking on the opposition is easier all over the playing area.



As the direction of play is then sent backward, the center player and the left one (depending on the side of play) run up to play with a temporary 1-4-4-2 formation.



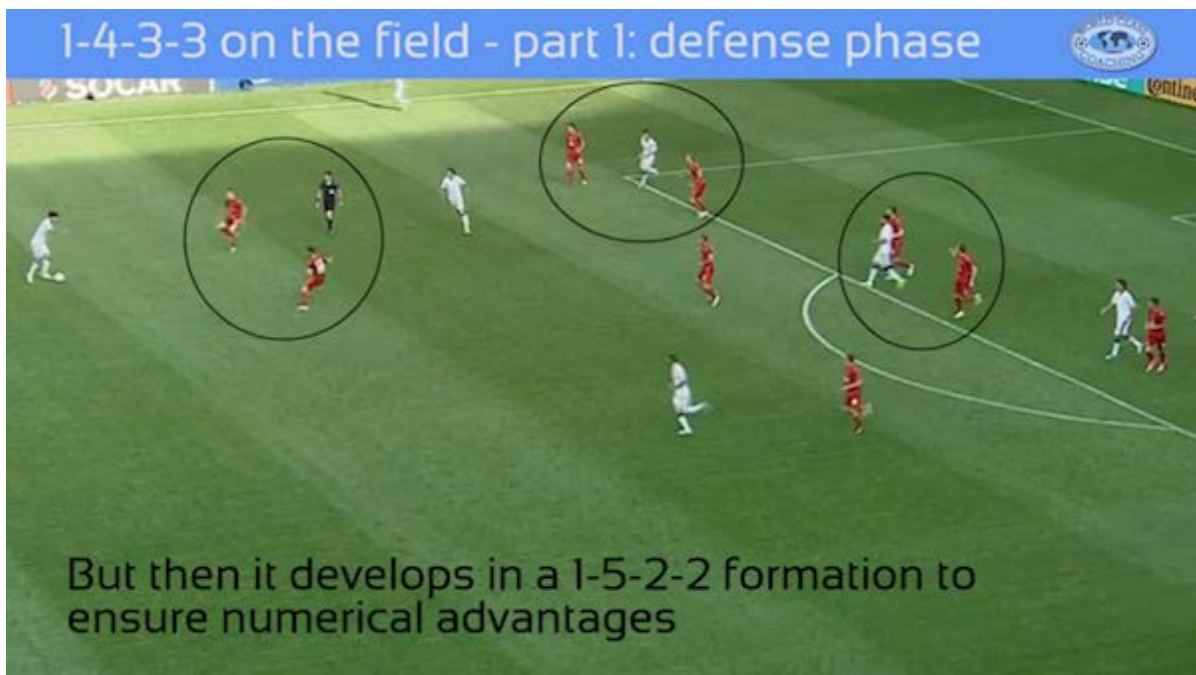
This last is developed again as a 4 v 3 situation of defense; numerical advantage is created again on the flank as the ball is lost during the positive transition, even through an unbalanced defensive shape.



Here again a 1-4-1-4 formation is shaped to save the final third, to ensure numerical advantage against the opponent with the ball and against all the potential receivers...



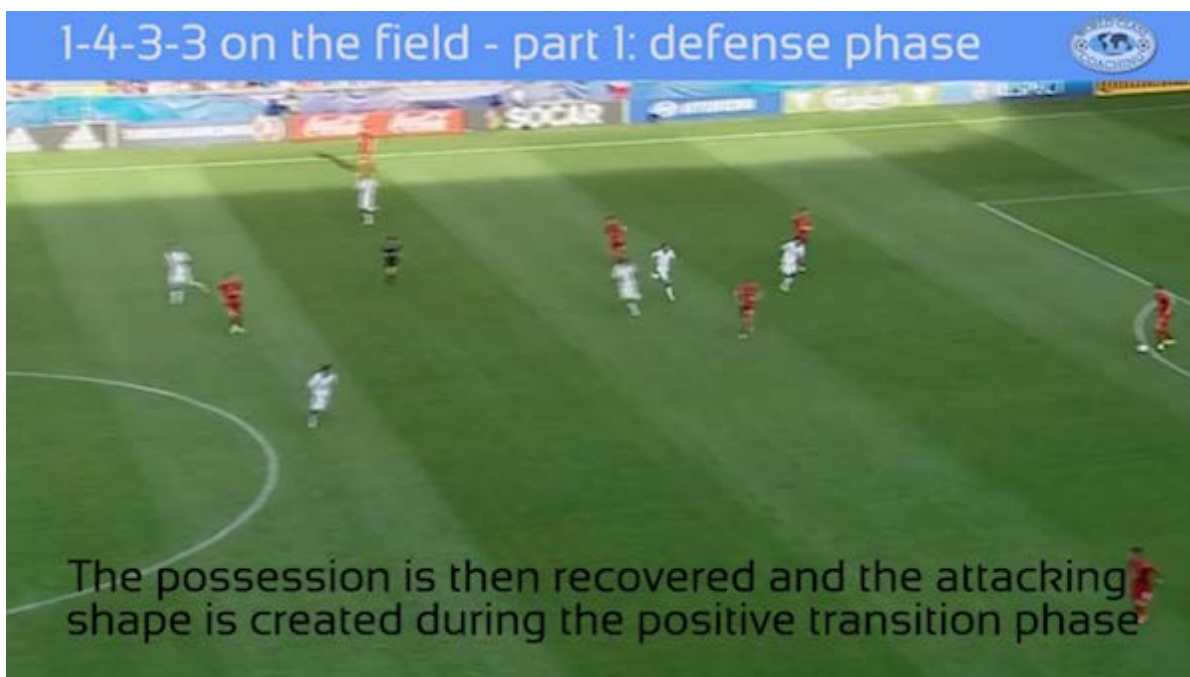
...but it develops into a 1-5-2-2 formation to ensure, again, the numerical advantage (2 v 1) against four opposition's forwards and to force the direction of play toward the side line.



It's very interesting to look at the defensive move here; the midfield line is cut off and the center back marks the man on, following him toward the side line and waiting for a double marking of team mate, while the center midfielders cover his position. Here again there is a 1-5-2-2 defensive formation near the penalty area.



As the possession is gained back, the formation on the field develops during the transition to attack phase, and it becomes a triangle midfield with three forwards ready to attack the deep spaces forward...





...and the three forwards are placed along the whole width of the field ready to receive or to run inside toward the center.



How to Coach It

Exercise 1: 11 v 11 game

Objective: to coach all these defense formations we've discovered during this analysis and to organize a positive transition phase if the possession is won back.

Organization: half field (at least), 22 players (2 goalkeepers included), cones, additional regular goal.

Two teams are placed with a 1-4-3-3 formation inside a space equal to half plus 10-15 yards more and divided into three parts (one again, in two).



Sequence: The goalkeeper of the attacking team starts to build up a possession phase, and the forwards of the defense team run inside the lower part of the middle third.



Two more midfielders run inside the upper part of the first third to put pressure 5 v 4, or to force the direction of play toward the side line.



The fullback must be able to pass the ball toward the middle third where the possession team is in numerical advantage 3 v 1 at the beginning.



Three midfielders together with one forward must be able to recover the space and create a midfield line of four, to create a numerical advantage 4 v 3.



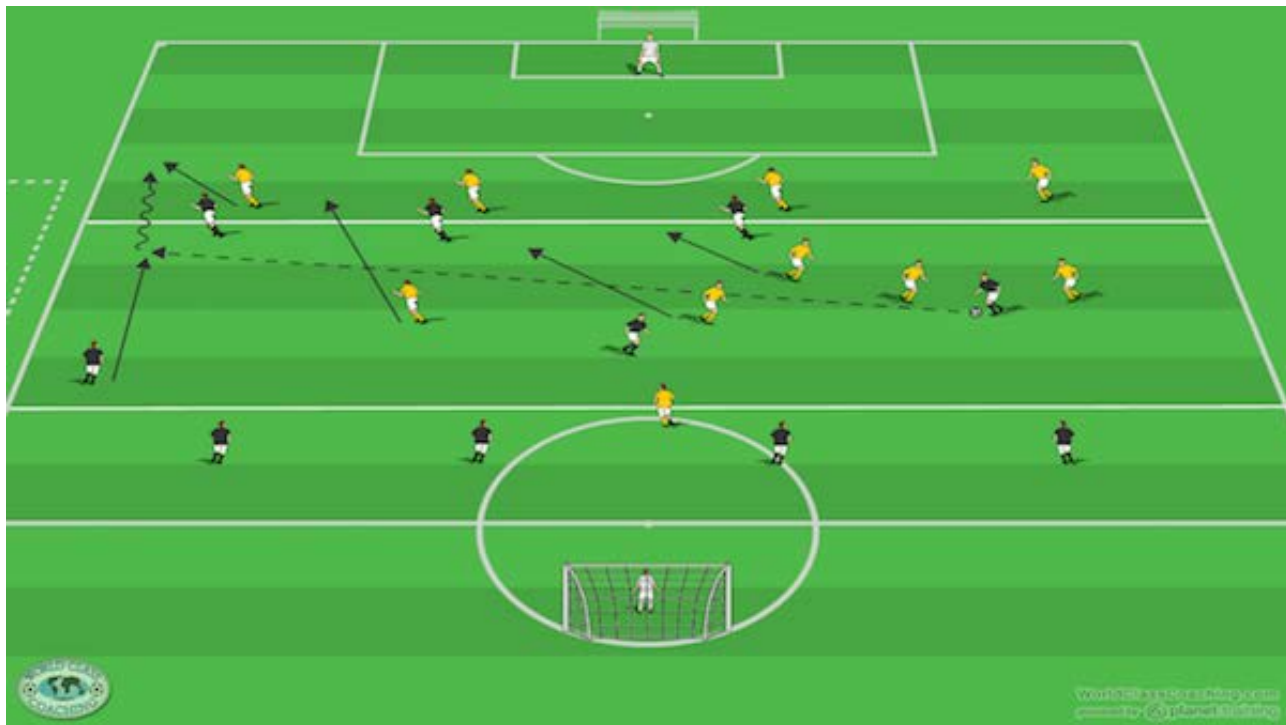
If the attacking team maintains the possession yet, the defense formation must become a 1-4-1-4 to save the first third with a second forward who drops back.



The defensive shape must be organized to have the chance of 2 v 1 duels all over the middle and first third.



If the possession is again maintained by the attacking team, the defensive formation must develop in a line of five with a forward who drops back deep to ensure again 2 v 1 duels.



All the forwards should be potentially double marked as they receive a pass.



Coaching points:

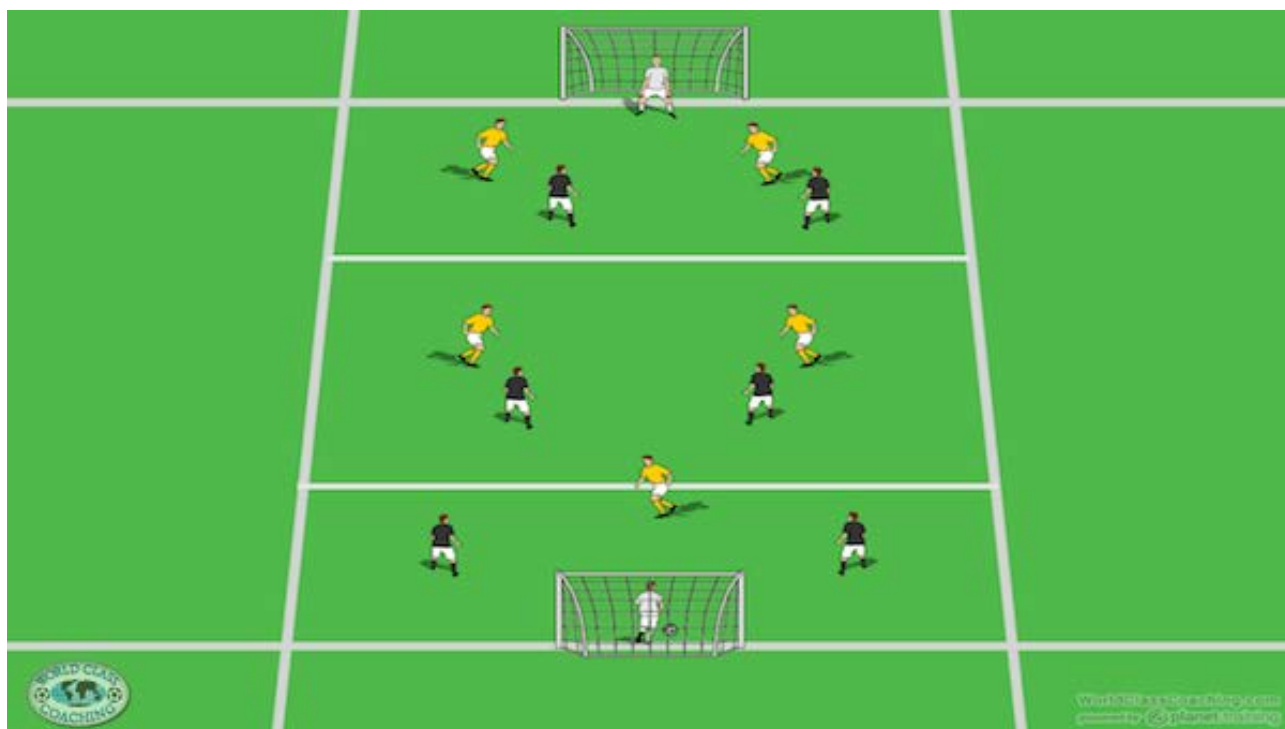
- To put pressure in the final third
- To create a strong side to put pressure
- To recover the positions in the middle third
- To ensure numerical advantages if the possession can't be recovered
- To double mark the opponent in the first third

Exercise 2: 2 v 1 Small Sided Game

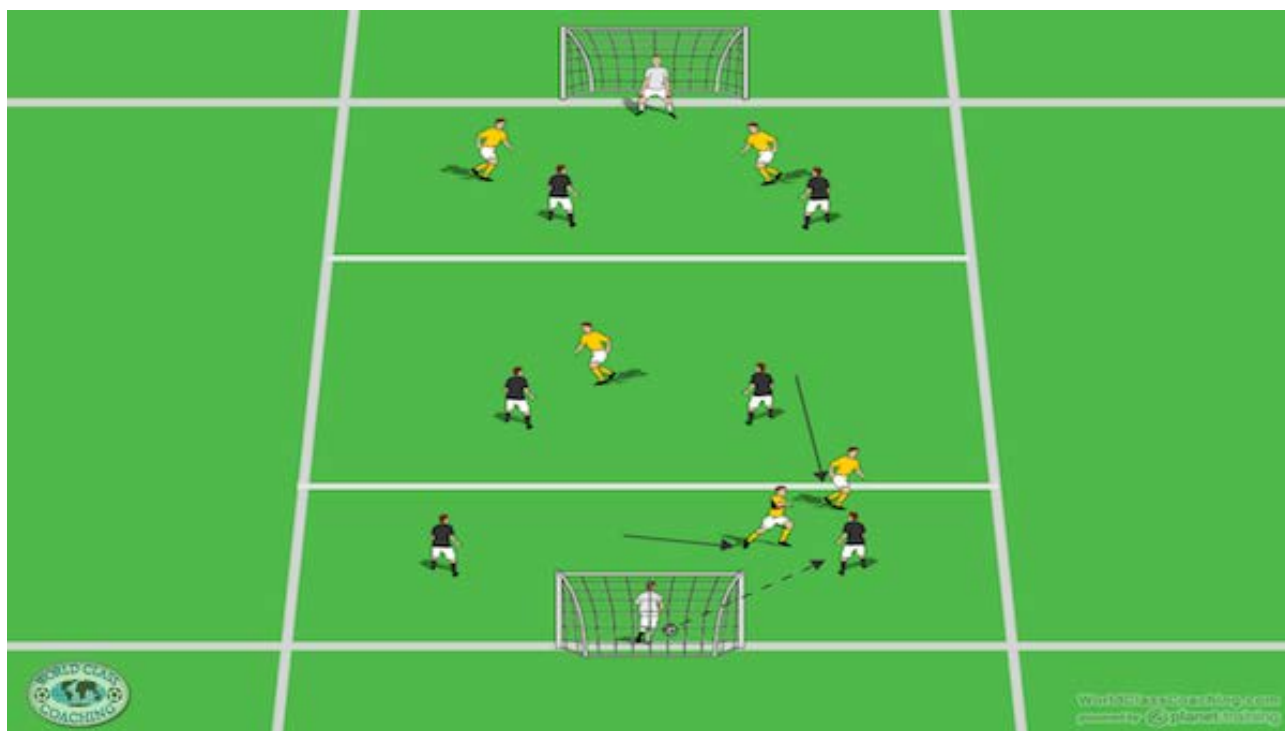
Objective: to coach the defensive double marking on the opponent with the ball.

Organization: 40x25 yards pitch, 13 players (2 goalkeepers included), cones, additional regular goal.

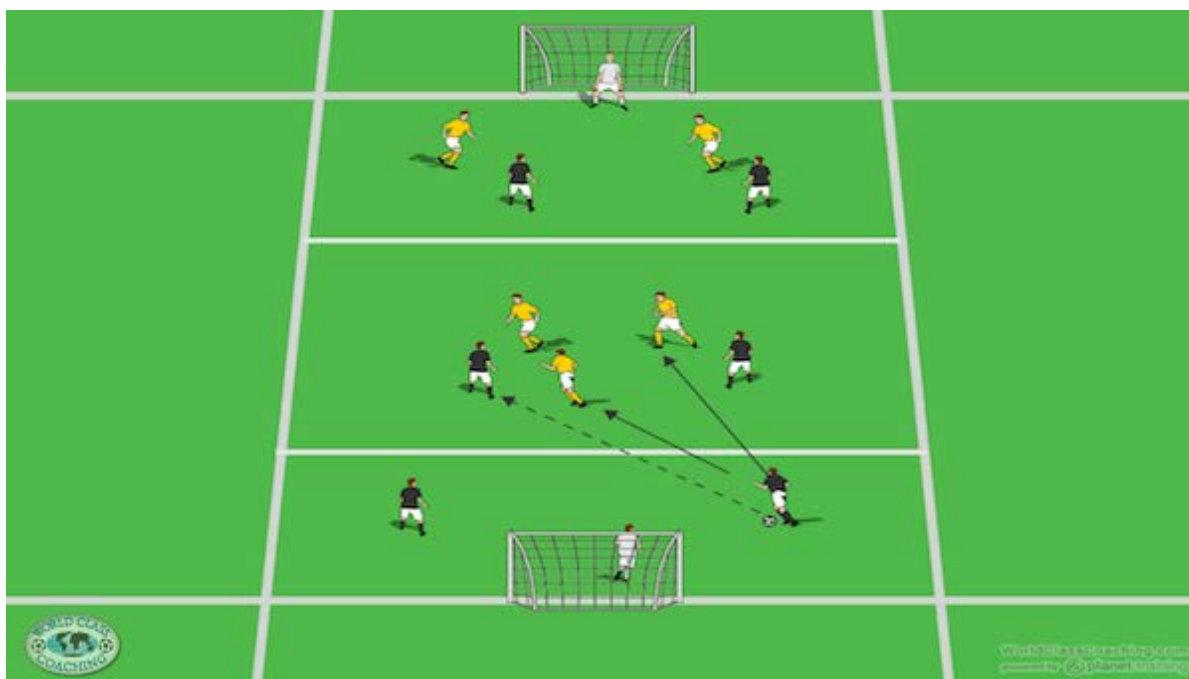
The pitch with two regular goals is divided into three areas; 2 v 2 starting situations are played inside two of them, and a 2 v 1 duel is played in the outer area where the goalkeeper starts the sequence.



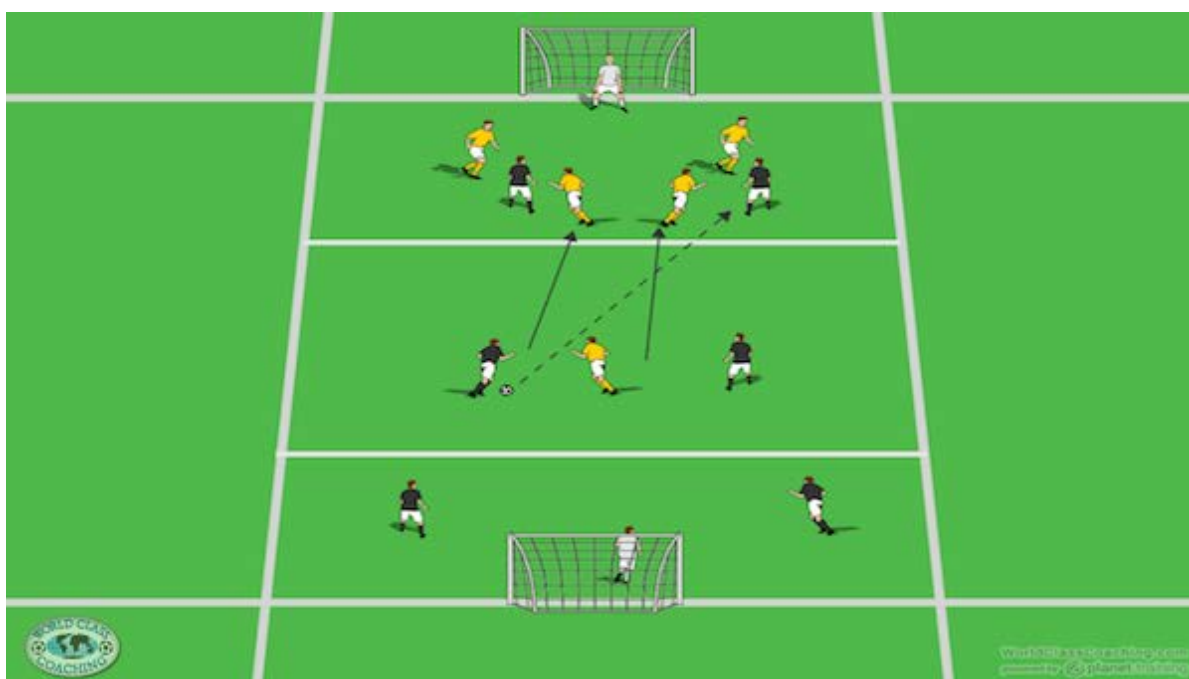
Sequence: the goalkeeper starts to build from the back, passing the ball to one of the two black players in the lower area; a second defender must run inside to create a 2 v 1 numerical advantage on the ball and a general 2 v 2 duel.



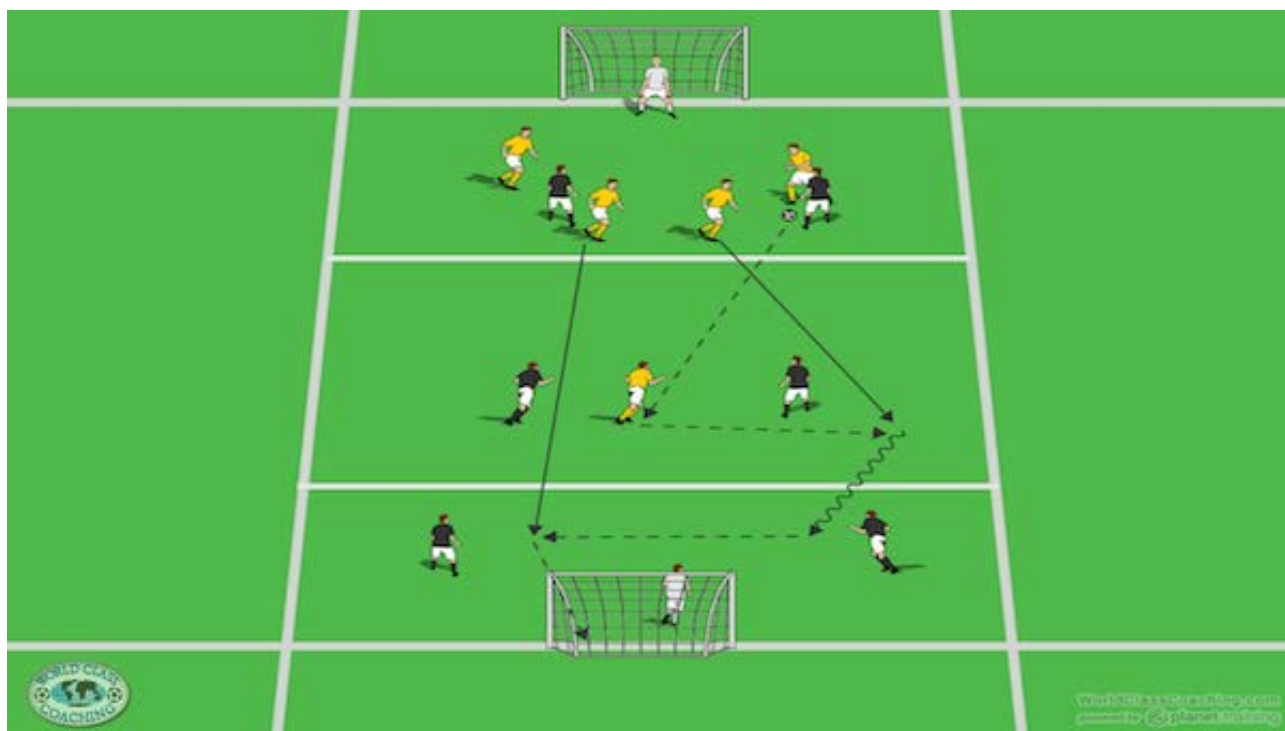
If the first receiver is able to pass the ball forward inside the middle third, where a 2 v 2 is played at the beginning, the two defenders must drop back and one of them must create another 2 v 1 duel on the ball; a general 3 v 2 numerical advantage for the defenders is now created.



If the players of the attacking team in the middle third are able to pass the ball forward inside the final third, where another 2 v 2 duel is played at the beginning, two of the three defenders must drop back again to create a double 2 v 1 duel against the forwards. A general 4 v 2 numerical advantage for the defenders is now created; the fifth defender must win the second balls.



Wherever the defenders can recover the possession, four of them can counterattack and only the last two black defenders can be active in this phase. A general 4 v 2 situation is then created during the transition to attack.



Coaching points:

- How to double mark the opponent from the build up phase till the finishing phase
- How and where to drop back to double mark the opponent
- Create numerical advantage on the ball quickly
- Fast counter attack as the possession is recovered

The 1-4-3-3 on the field



Part 2

The 1-4-3-3 on the field



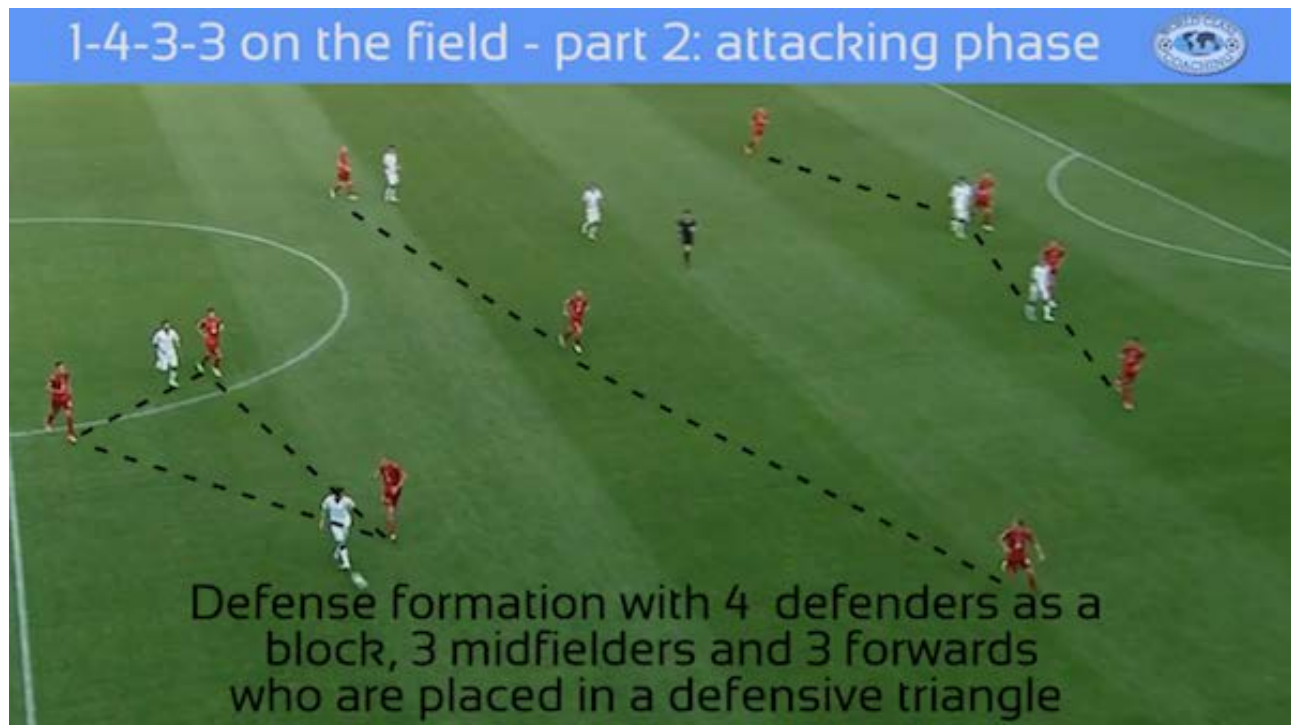
Attacking phase

This second part of this e-book is about the transitions to attack and the developments of the attacking moves, starting from the defensive formation shapes.

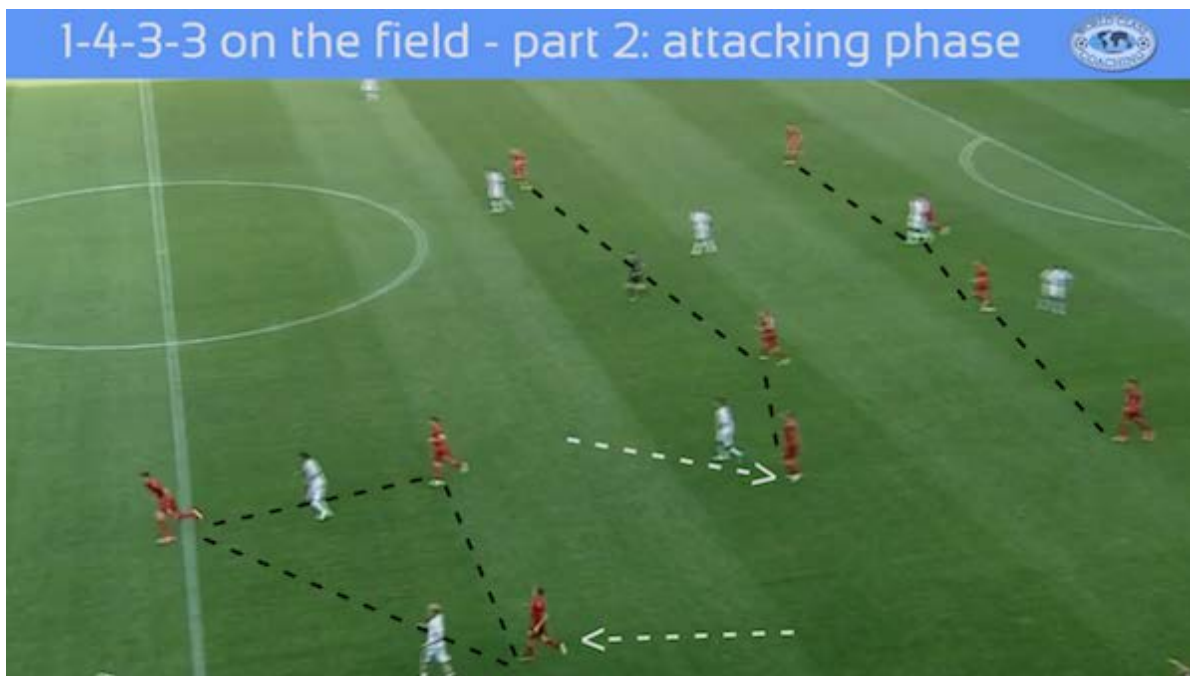
First of all, let's look again at the main all-pervading principles of play that the team wants to carry out on the field: the numerical advantage near the ball and against the opponent in possession too.

This is an example of 1-4-3-3 defense formation when the pressure tactic against the building up phase of the opposition is not possible: a forward's triangle playing 3 v 2, a line of 3 midfielders playing a potential 3 v 2 situation and a line of 4 defenders against two opponents where a double marking chance is very clear through the full back inside runs.

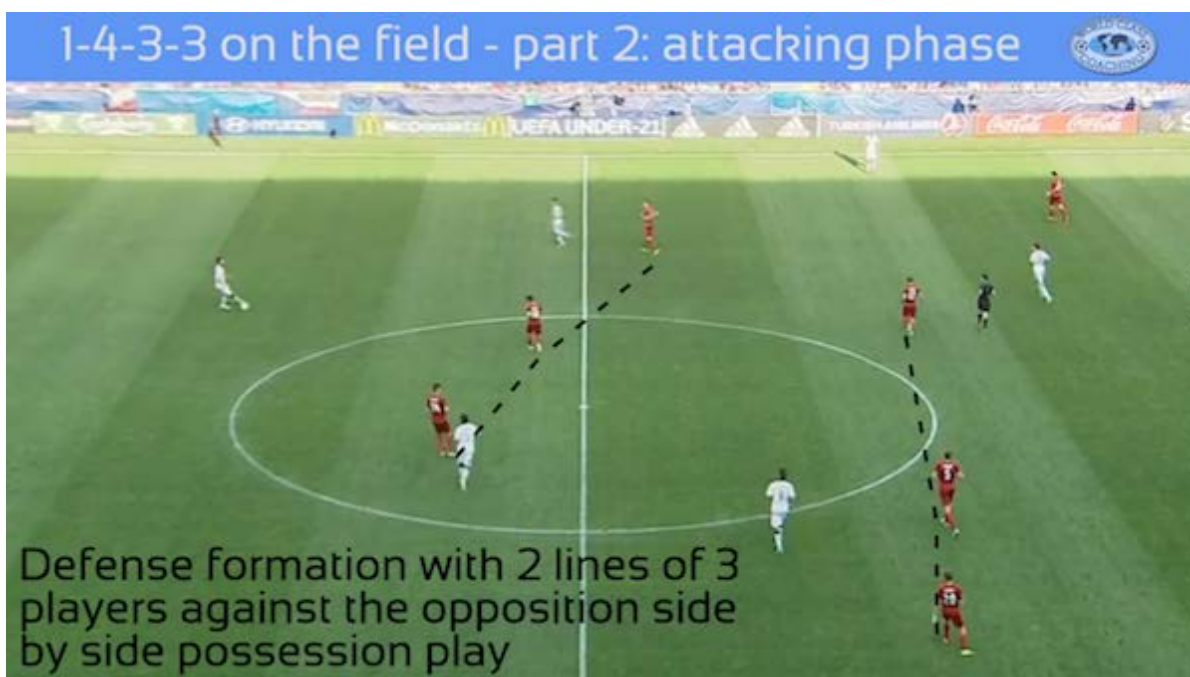
If the midfielders are outnumbered, a strong area near the ball is created to be at least in equal number of players.



Here we can look again at 3+3 lines of defense formation where the first goal is to close the vertical pass lanes to the opponents while they are building up or playing side by side. It's very interesting to notice the strong side to play 3 v 2 thanks to a run forward of the outside midfielder, who is closer to the ball, and how the forwards cover his position.



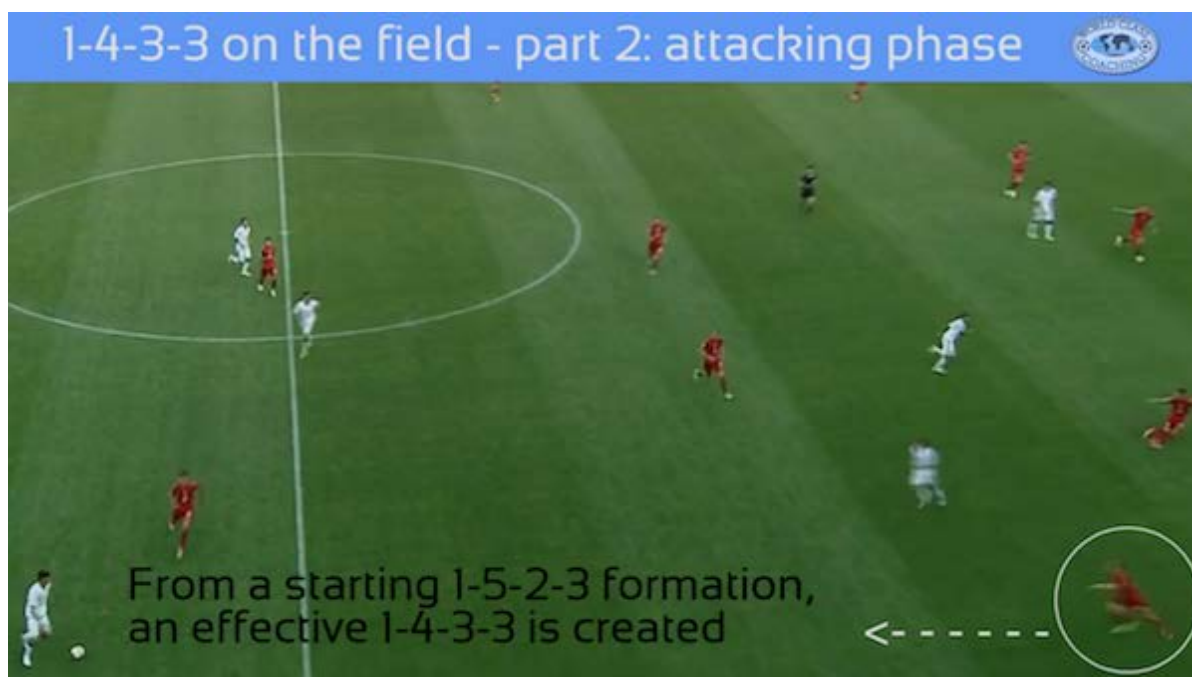
As the direction of opposition's play is sent backwards, the two lines of three are positioned again to close the pass lanes and to create a general numerical advantage situation of 6 v 4.



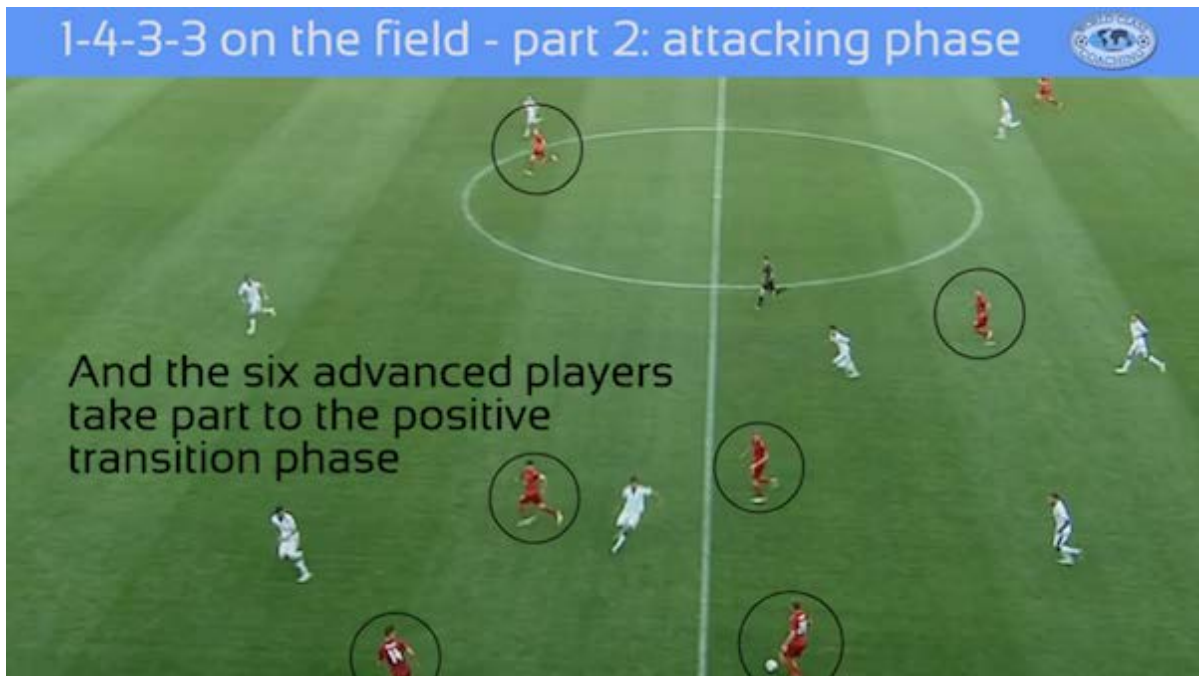
If we analyze this 1-4-3-3 formation, we can see how it is a clear development of a temporary defensive formation from a 1-5-2-3 basic shape in the lower part of the field, during the defensive phase of play.



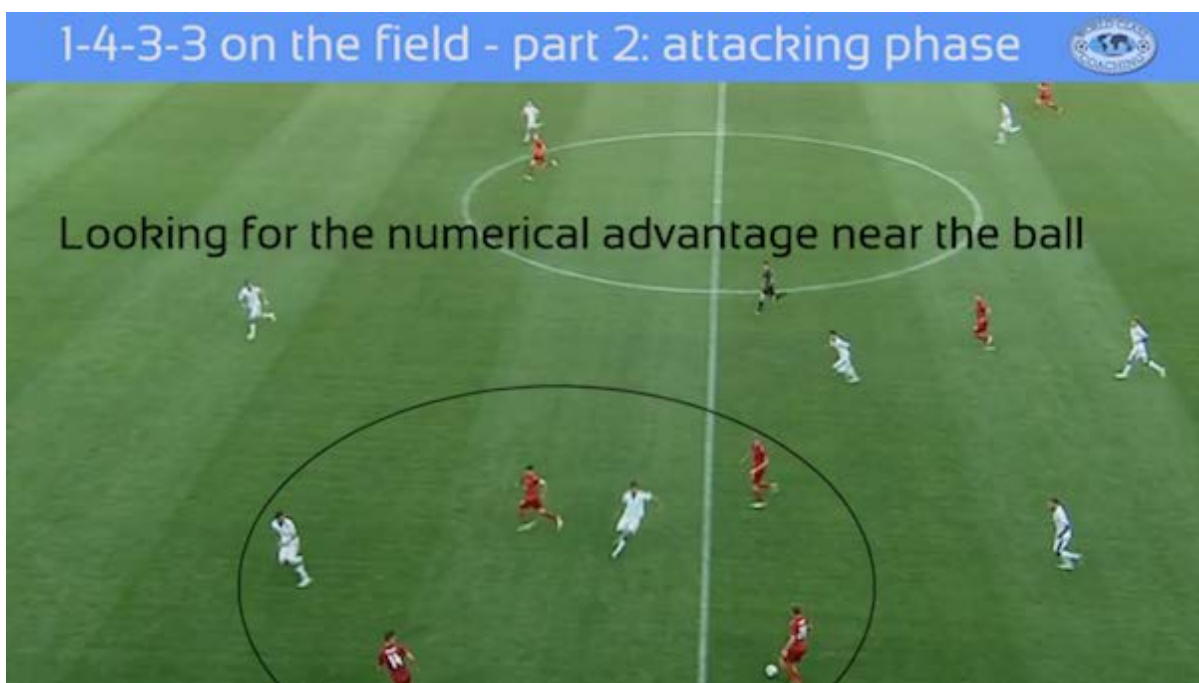
One the outside forwards becomes a full back of the line of five. The possession is then recovered through the pressure of the center forwards who are dropping back; the six players of the advanced line are those who can organize the positive transitions and the counter attacks.



As the possession is ensured, the counterattack shows how the defense style and the move situations always influence the possession phase (and vice versa); as the team is near their own goal, the only way to ensure the possession is to avoid the counter-pressing, dribbling the ball up the field and to wait for a running team mate without the ball.



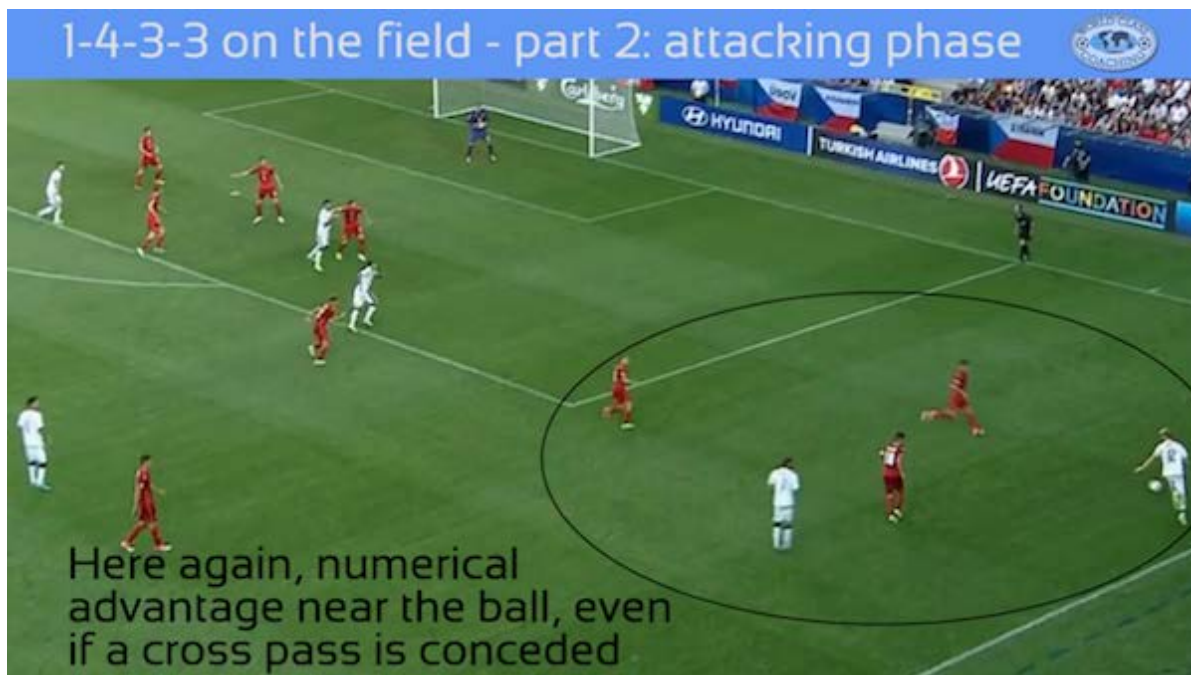
The teammates must always create numerical advantage situations near the ball, even during the possession and attacking phases.



It's interesting how the possession is often recovered thanks to the center forward who drops back to put pressure against the opposition's play maker when the defensive situation requires covering the spaces rather than marking the opponents on.



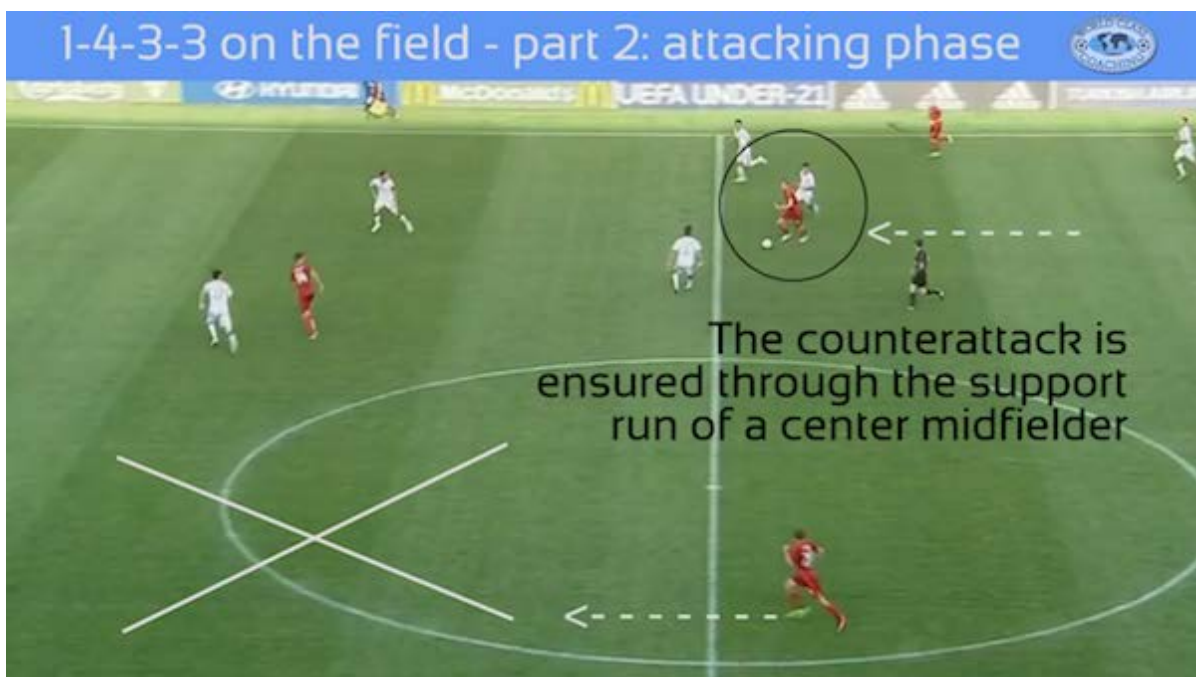
In this move, where the team must defend the final third, it is again very clear the intention to create numerical advantage near the ball, even when the team is shaped into two lines of four. The outside forward of the flank where the ball is played recovers the space becoming a fourth midfielder.



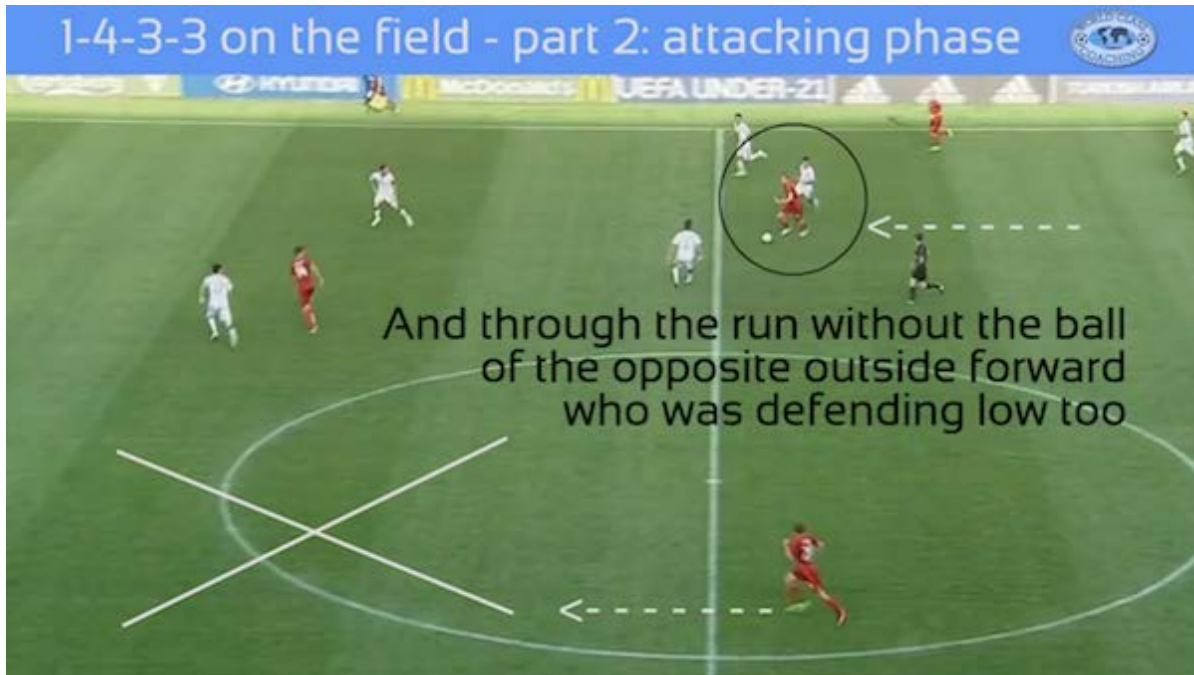
The opposite forward must try to stay placed near this line to save the weak side, dropping back deep. This is a very useful defense run, because if he is able to recover the possession of the ball, he can start the counter attack in the weak side.



This side is the previous weak one for the defending team, and it's now supposed to become the strong one of the team who lost the possession, as this phase should be avoided as far as possible from the penalty area.



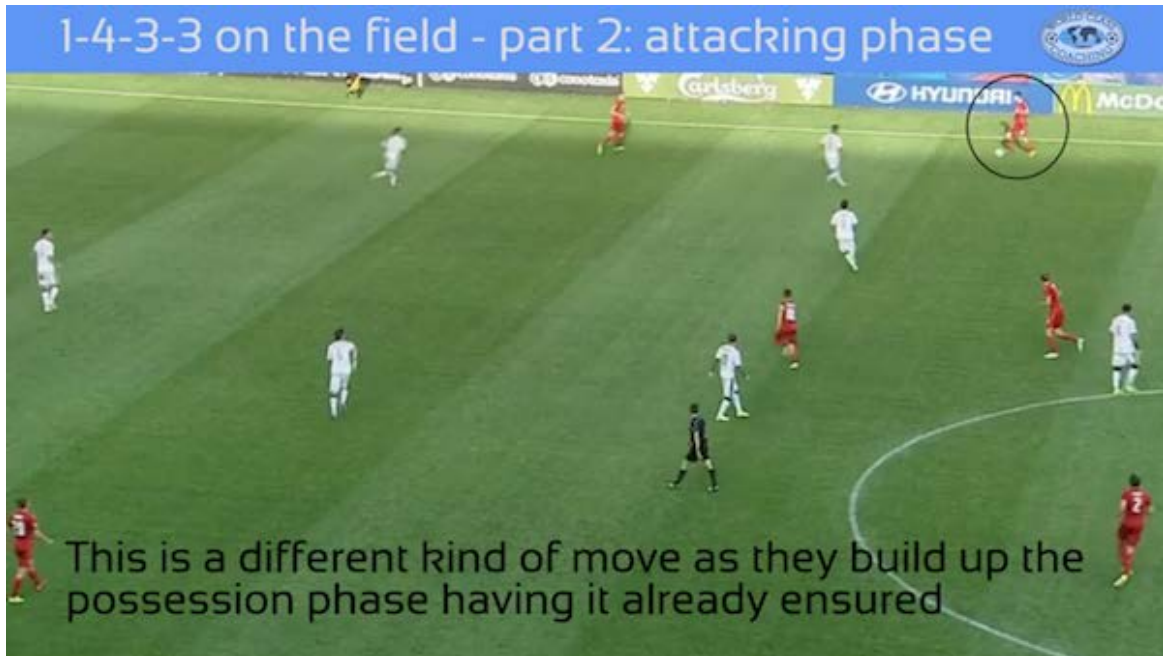
If the midfielders are able to follow the move and to support it in the strong side and in the weak one too, the attacking move can be organized and the finishing phase can be approached very quickly.



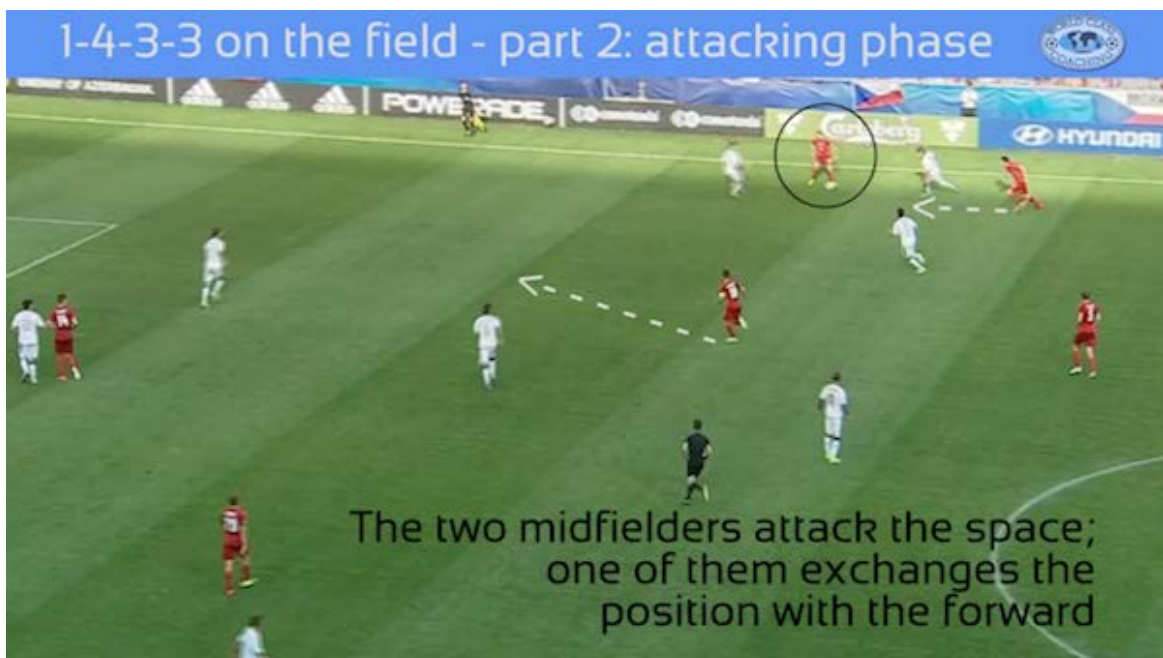
At this point the midfielders are asked to attack and win the second balls.



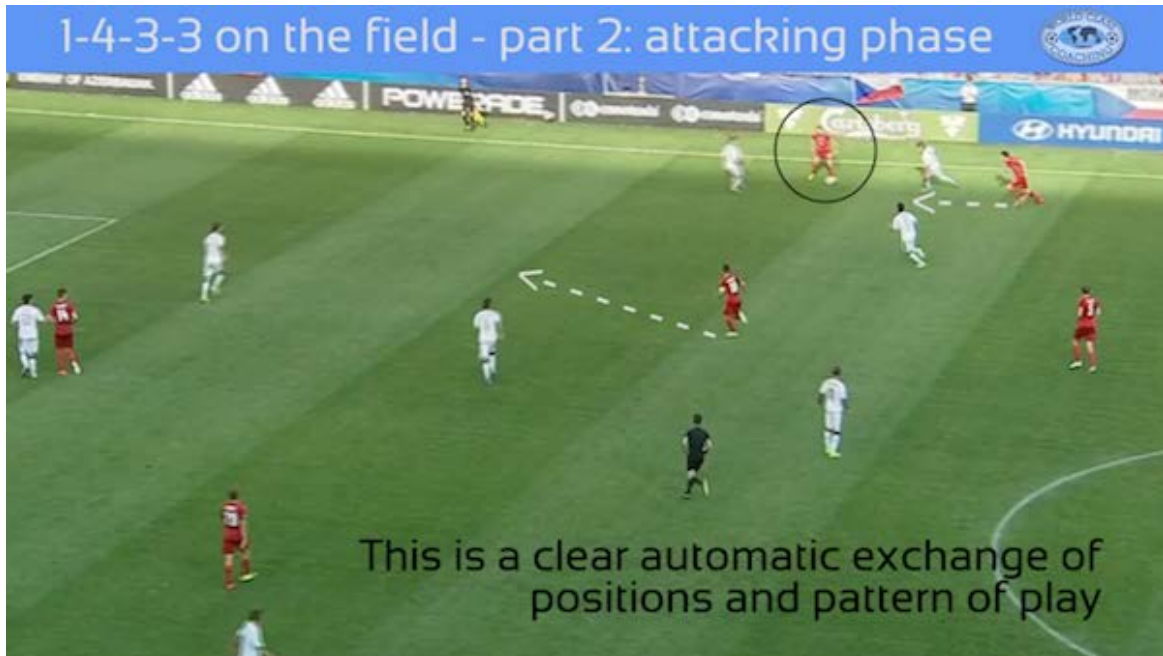
Below is a different kind of possession phase as it's not coming directly from a transition phase of play, as the possession is already ensured; for this reason all the midfielders are supporting the play by playing inside the opposition half. When the attacking move must be built up through a possession phase, another all-pervading principle of play is very clear; six attacking players have the objective to finish the move: the three forwards and the three midfielders.



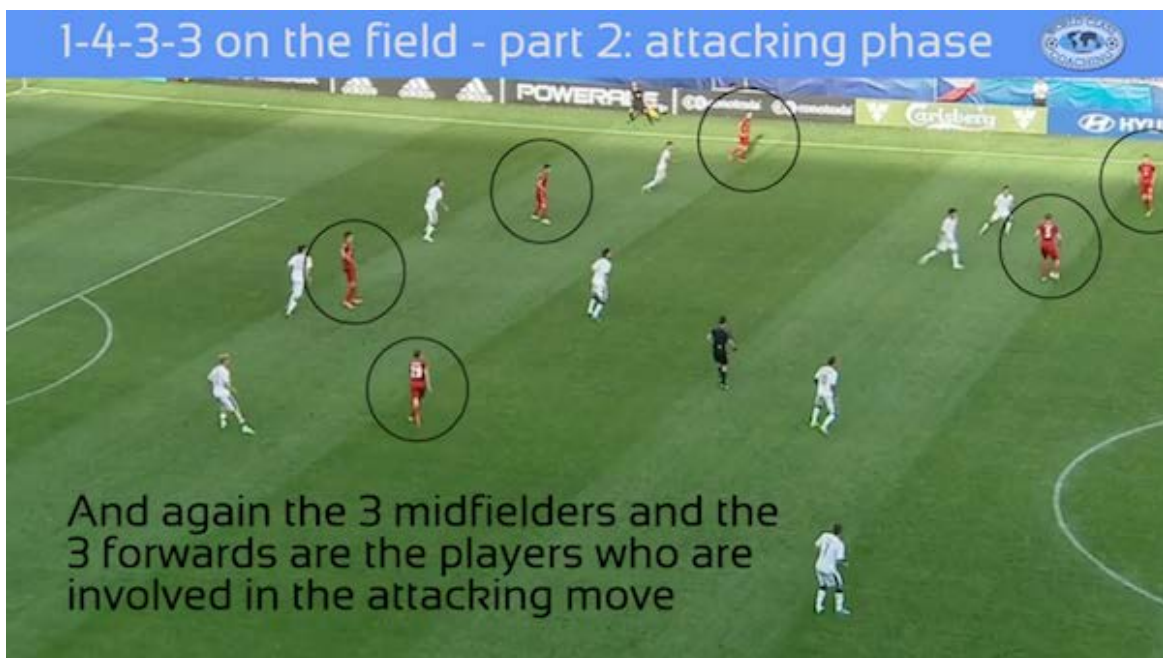
As a forward is in possession, two midfielders can attack the space; again the principle of 6 attacking players is very clear: the four at the back play as support, staying placed high to avoid counterattacks if possession is lost.



Talking about the 1-4-3-3 formation, the player who usually drops back to receive and to create space behind him, is the center forward. This is an interesting development, as an outside forward drops back and two midfielders attack the space behind him. The center forward can decide to attack the same space to create a strong side or to run toward the opposition's penalty area to receive a potential cross pass.



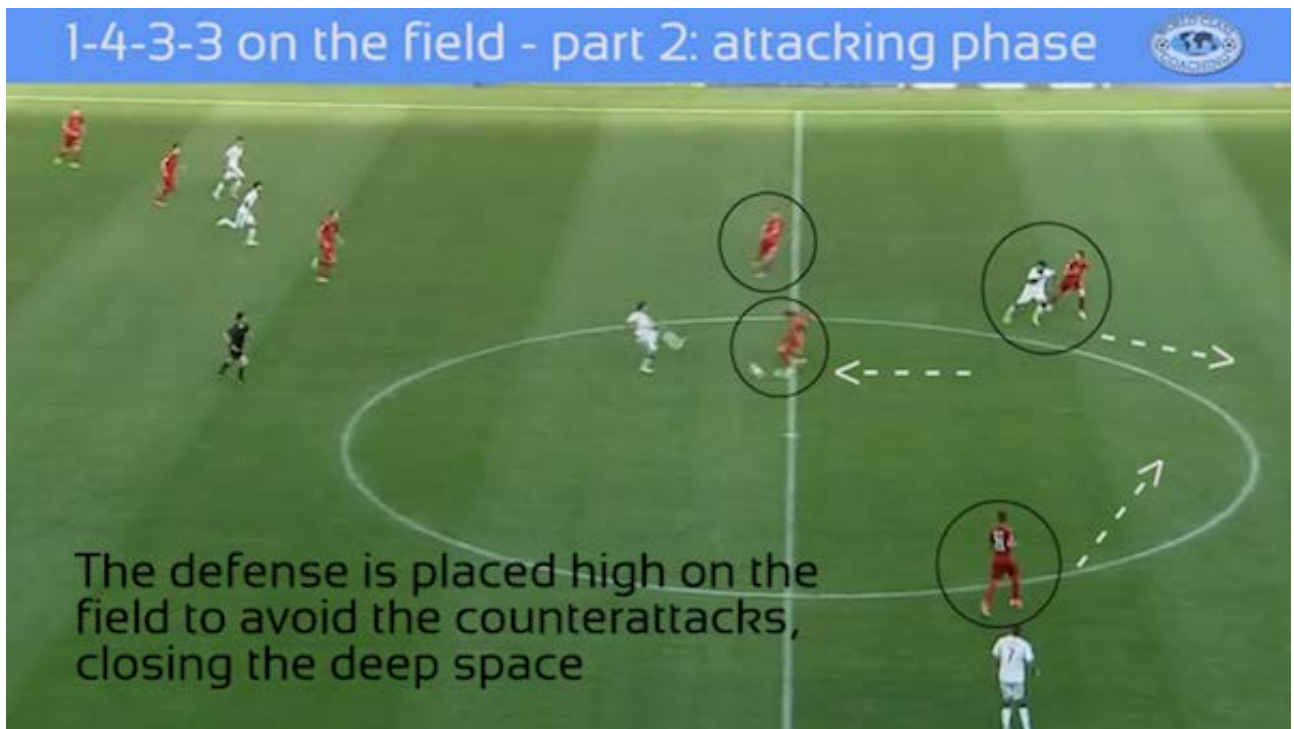
If the move can't be finished and it has to be built up again, the principle of the six attacking players is respected even with the players in different positions; the outside right forward is now a winger (or a right midfielder) as well as the left one. The two midfielders are attackers in the strong side.



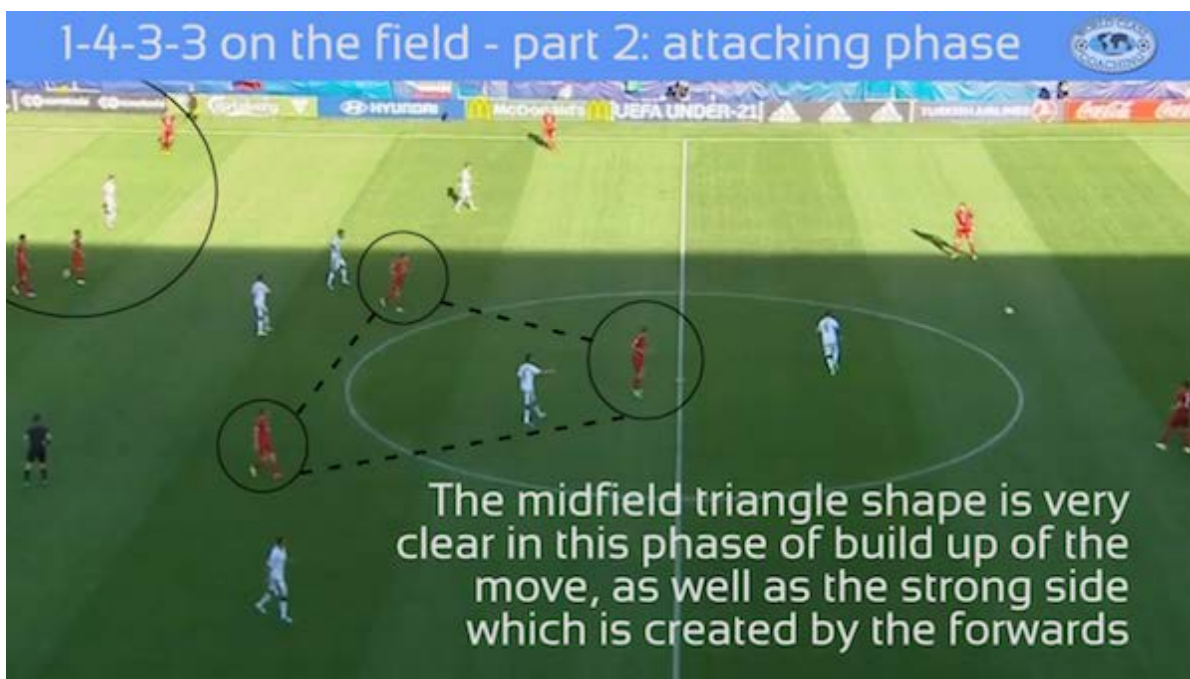
The defenders have only support role to keep the possession safe if there are no space to bring the move to the final stage.



The four at the back have mainly defending roles: they have to attack a second ball high on the field, running forward, as well as to run back to save the deep space against the opposition's forwards.



If the possession phase can be built up without pressure, it very clearly leads to the principle of the midfield triangle, with a lower play and two center midfielders. Another idea is also very clear: create a strong side with all the three forwards which leaves a big part of attacking field free for the midfielders. This is the opposite one more often, which they can run through without the ball.



Four players are building up in a strong side and a fifth one (the left midfielder) is running through the weak side of the opposition.



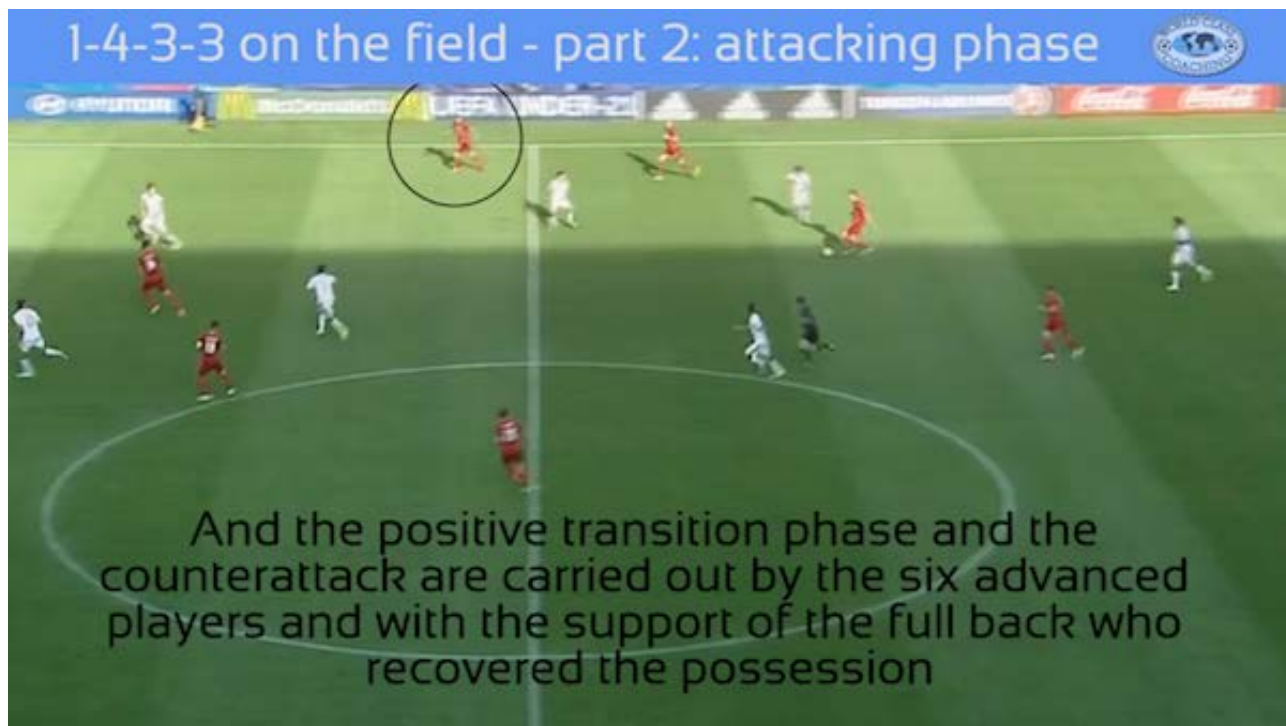
This is another formation shape of two lines of four players and one of them must always put strong pressure against the opponent with the ball. Usually he is the center forward who is dropping back.



The first player who recovers the possession and who can ensure it is also the one who must organize the transition phase (the full back here).



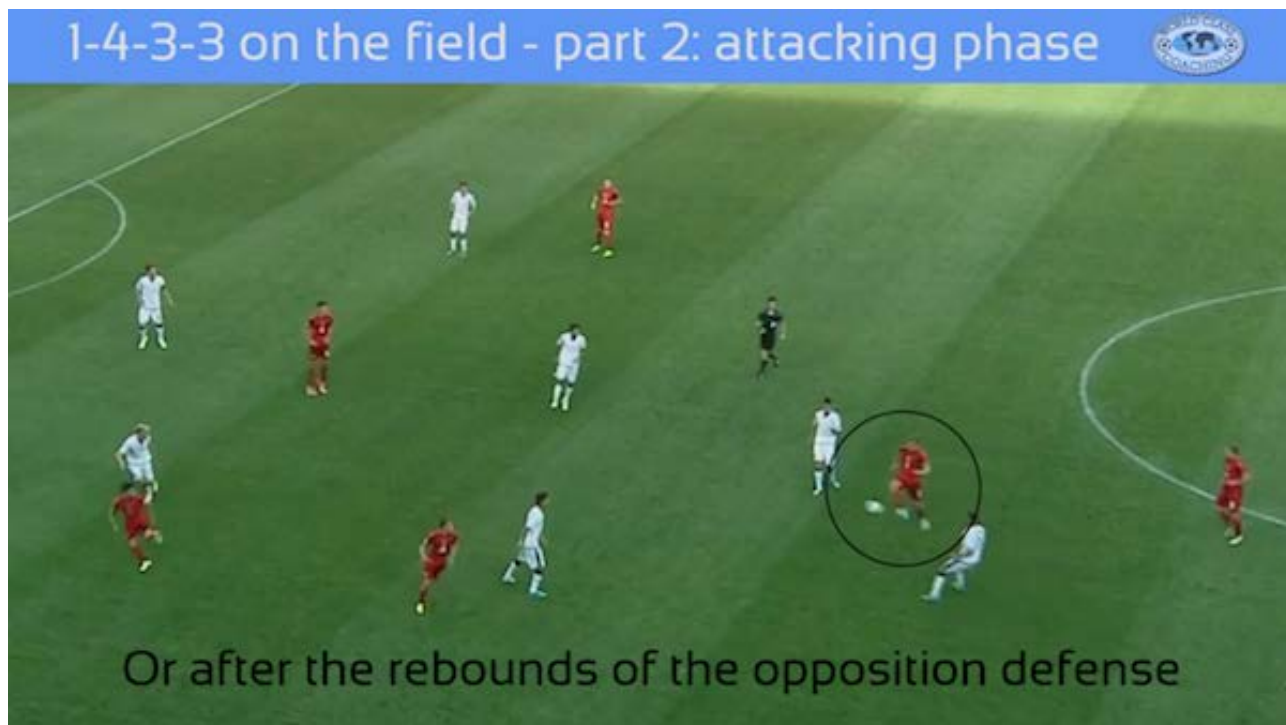
The principle of six attacking players is again followed as one of the midfielders covers his position at the back.



In this last part we are going to analyze the long passes which are often useful to make the team run forward on the field as well provided that the triangle midfield is able to win the second balls in different situations; after a long ball of the goalkeeper...



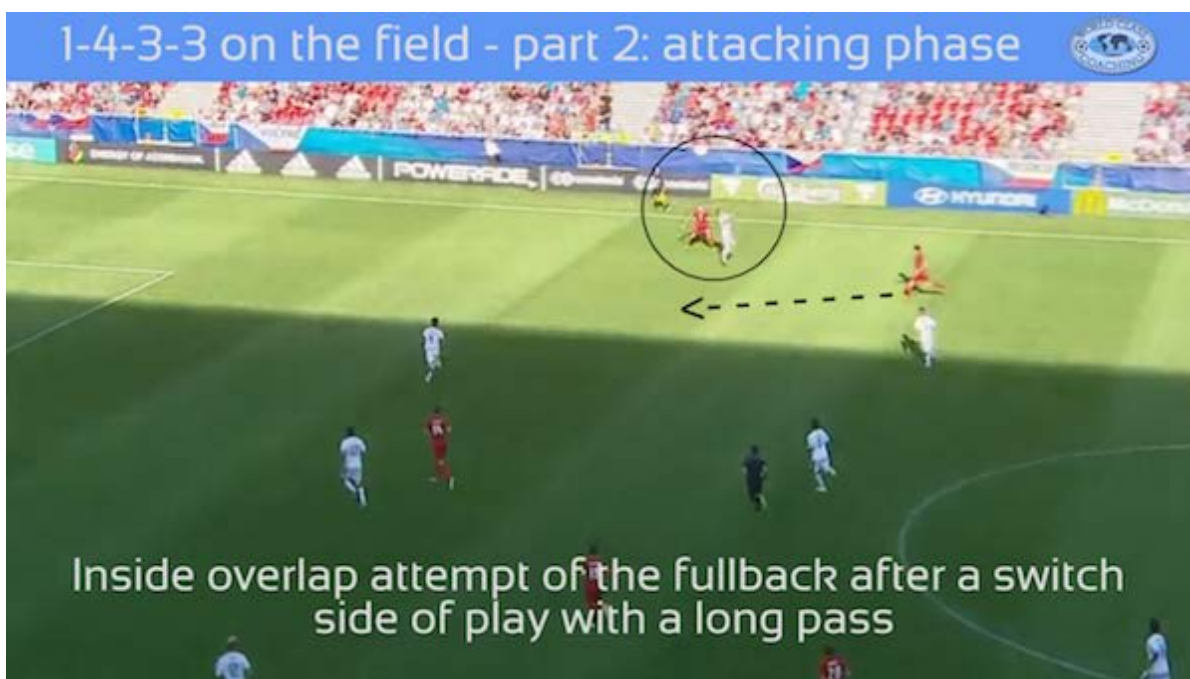
...after rebounds to keep the possession...



...or to finish just outside the penalty area also.



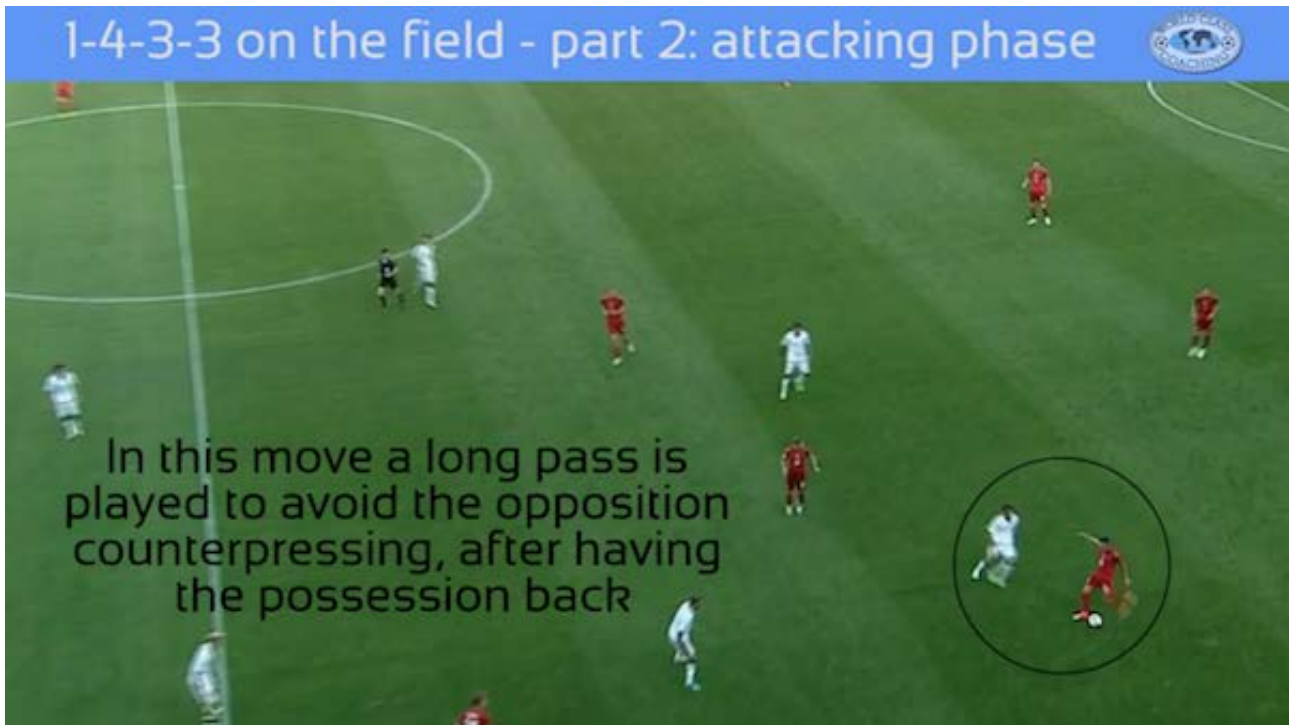
A second kind of long balls is used to switch the side, to avoid the pressure of the opposition and to find a space to combine through an overlapping run wherever it is, inside or outside. Here again the full back supports the attacking move, but the principle of six advanced players is clearly respected again.



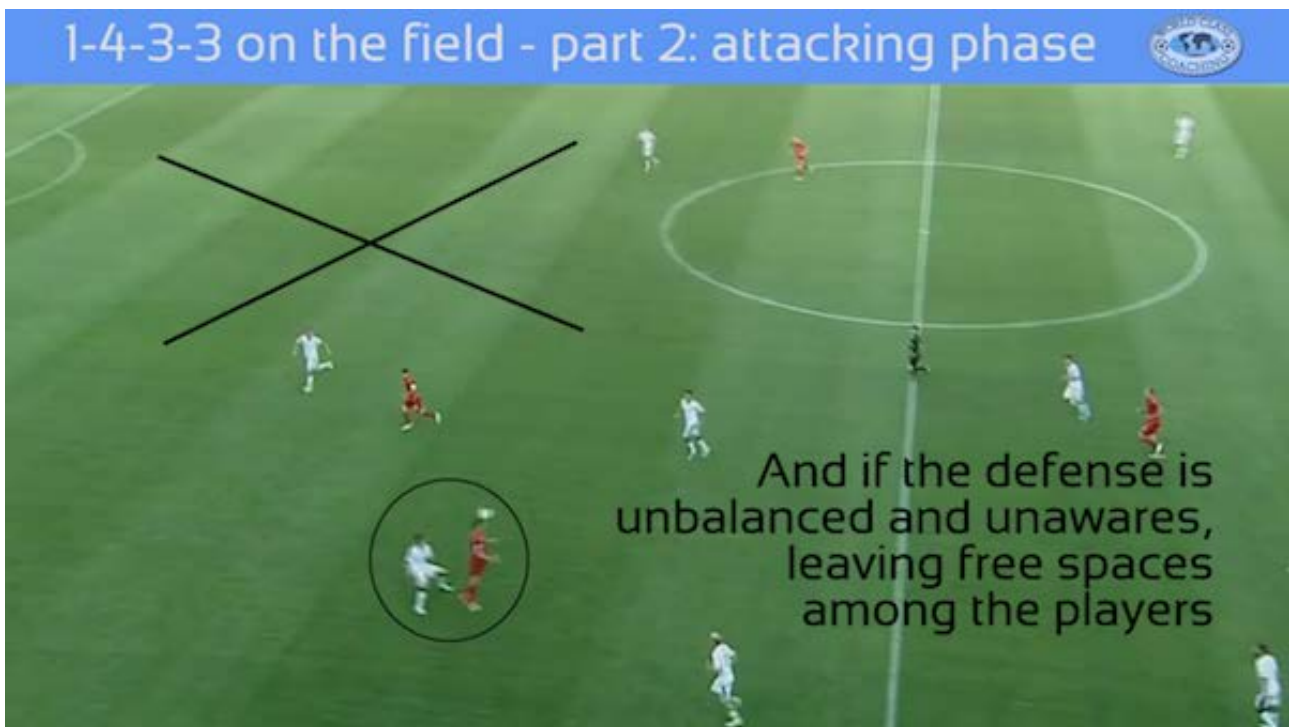
In this situation the pass lanes are closed, so the solution is to play a long ball to bring the team up on the field and to win the second balls, through strong pressure and high density of players.



The same principle allows to avoid the counter-pressing of the opposition and to try to find the defense out of time...



...a useful space to play in and to finish as in this last move which ends with a goal



1-4-3-3 on the field - part 2: attacking phase



A finishing chance is conceded



How to Coach It

Exercise 3: 10 v 9 game

Objective: build up the moves fast, support the attacking phase and stay balanced to prevent counter attacks.

Organization: half field (at least), 19 players (1 goalkeeper included), cones, additional mini goals.

One team of ten players is shaped into a 4-3-3 attacking formation and the defensive one is shaped into a 1-4-2-2. The field is divided into four areas: a small one where the move must be built up after the kick of the goalkeeper, a second small one where the forwards of the defending team start, a third middle one where a 3 v 2 duel is played and the final third where the defenders are in numerical 4 v 3 advantage at the beginning.



Sequence: As the four defenders of the attacking team receive the long pass, they must be able to send a full back inside the next area with two passes, playing 4 v 2.



The full back must pass forward again and the midfielders must be able to build up quickly in the middle third playing in numerical advantage 3 v 2. All of them must support the attacking move then.



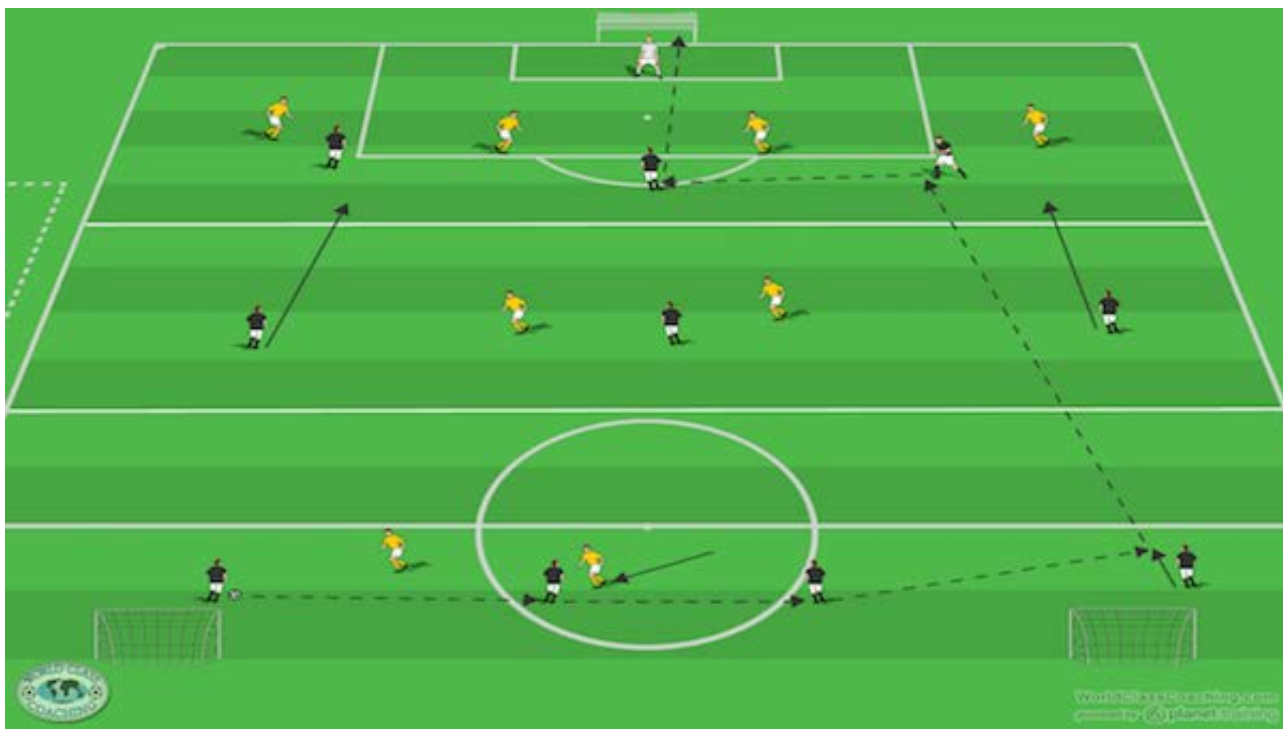
The forwards are outnumbered 3 v 4 in the final third when the first of them receives; but they are helped by the three midfielders at the back and then two midfielders can run inside the final third to create a strong side and to finish playing 5 v 4.



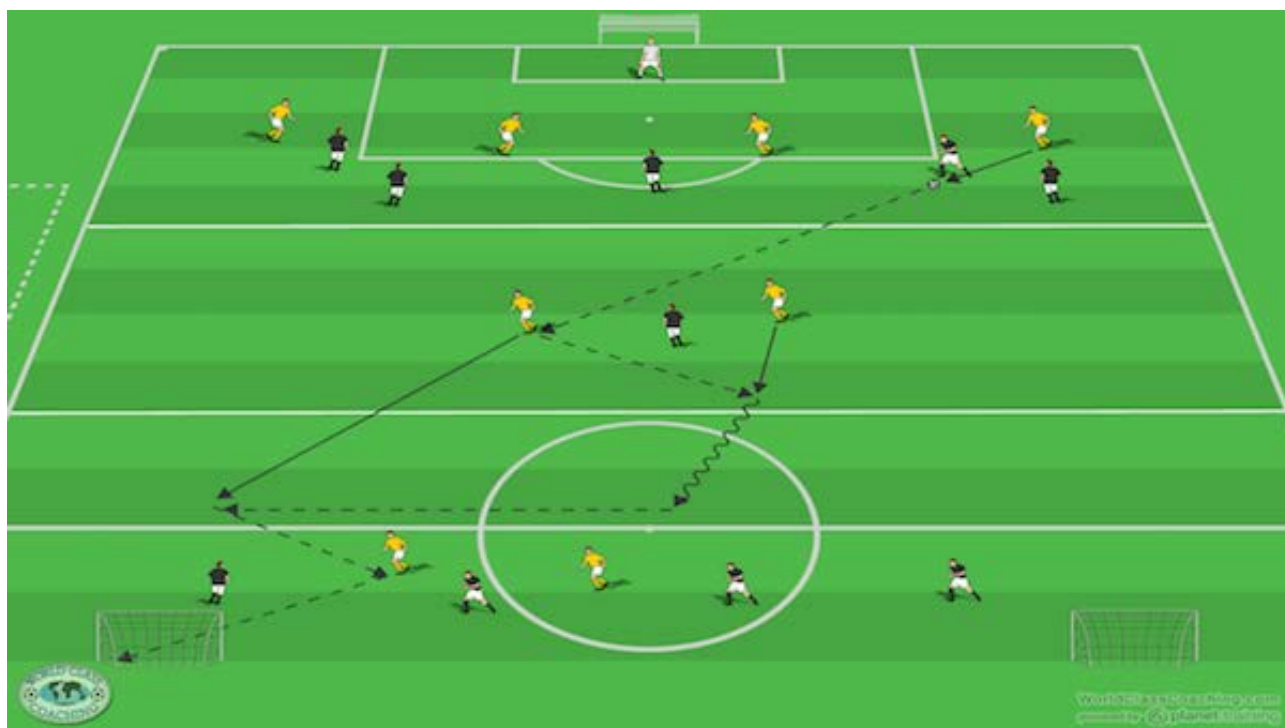
The sixth one is the player who must try to win the second balls and who must build up the moves again near the opposition's penalty area if they can't finish quickly.



If the defenders of the black team are forced to play more than two passes to build up, the fullback must play a long ball toward the forwards in the final third and the midfielders must run up to support the move.



If the defenders are able to recover the possession they can counter attack, playing 2 v 1 in the middle third and scoring in one of the two mini goal; in this case the four black defenders must be able to save the space and defend the strong side.



Coaching points:

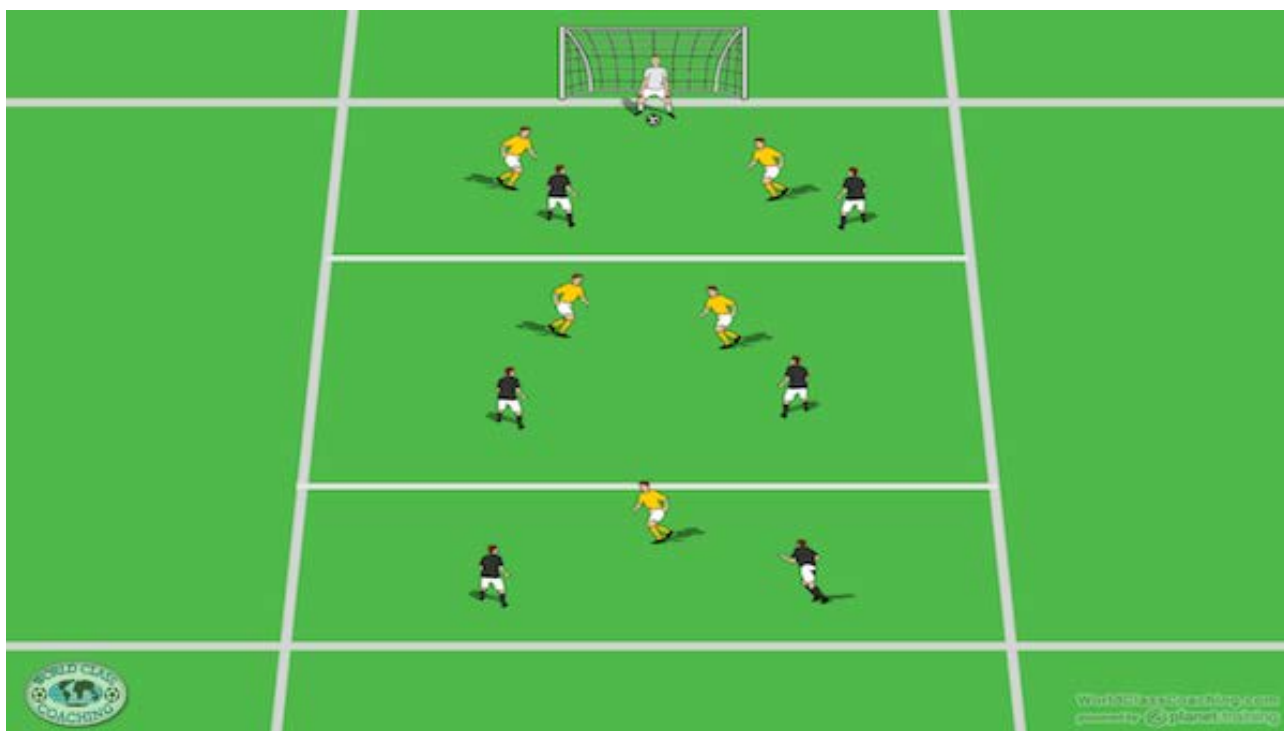
- To build up of the moves fast
- To play vertical with quick combinations in the middle third
- To support the attacking move to win the second times of the ball and the negative transition
- To defend the strong side if the ball is lost

Exercise 4: 3 v 2 Small Sided Game

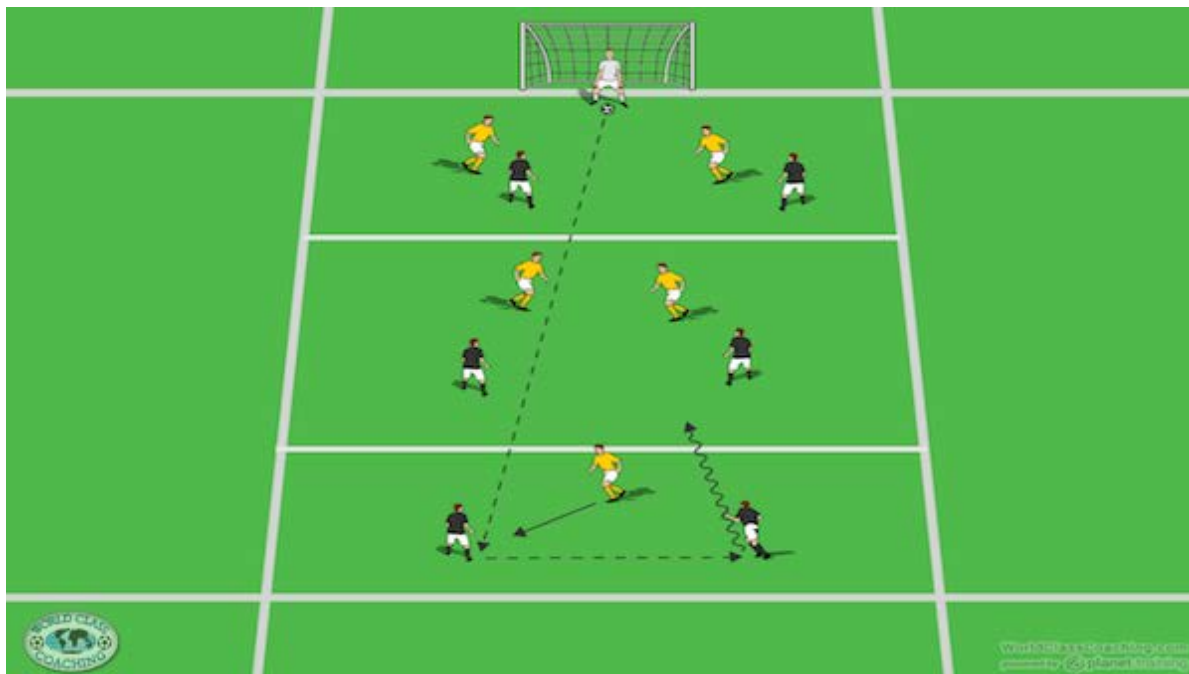
Objective: to coach the creation of the numerical advantage while attacking.

Organization: 40x25 yards pitch, 11 players (1 goalkeeper included), cones.

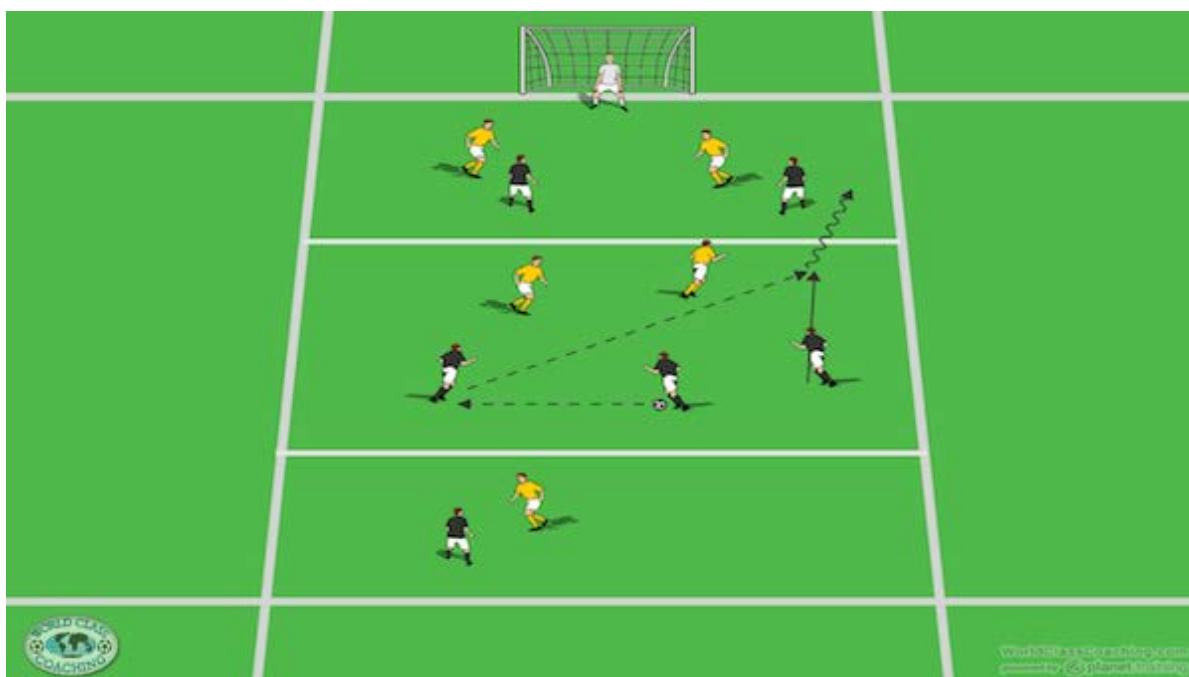
The pitch with one regular goal is divided into three areas. A 2 v 1 starting situation is played inside the lower build up area, and two 2 v 2 duels are played in the other two areas.



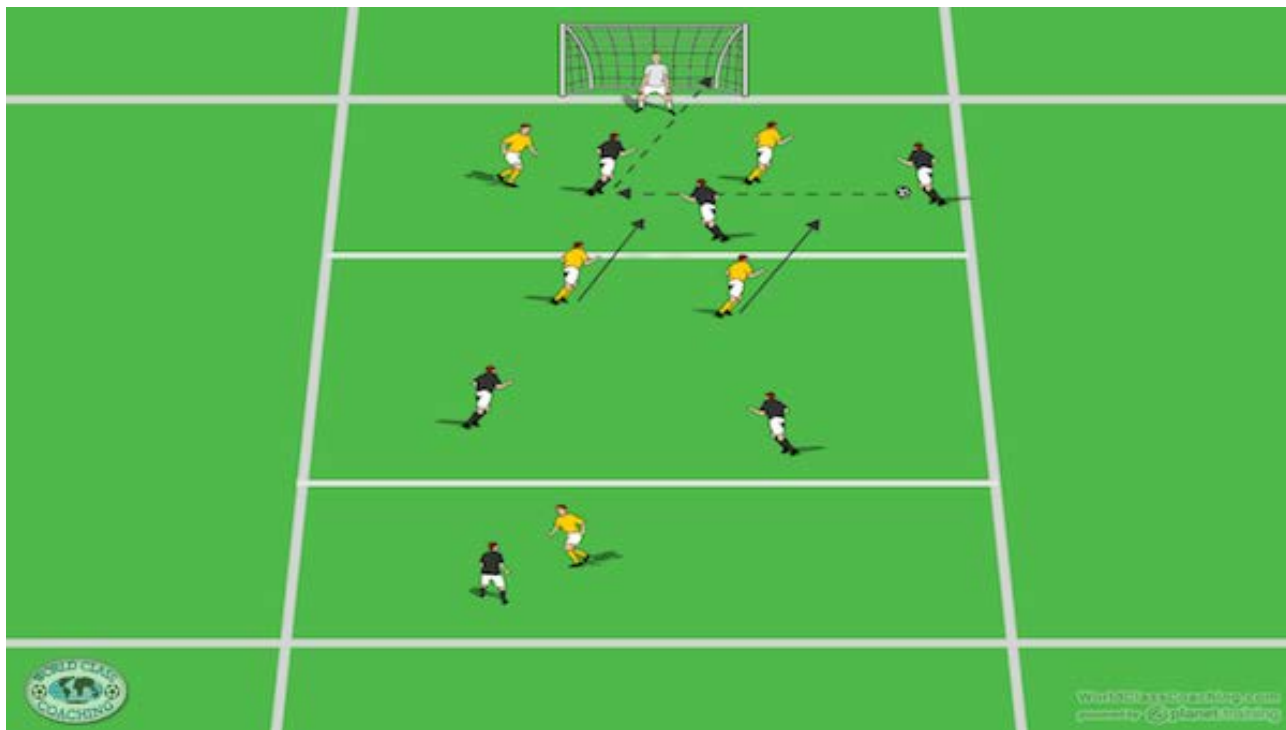
Sequence: The goalkeeper starts the sequence, passing the ball toward the lower area; the two players of the attacking team must solve the 2 v 1 numerical advantage situation within 5 seconds after the first ball control. One of them must be able to dribble or to receive inside the upper area. If no one can, the possession is gained by the defending team.



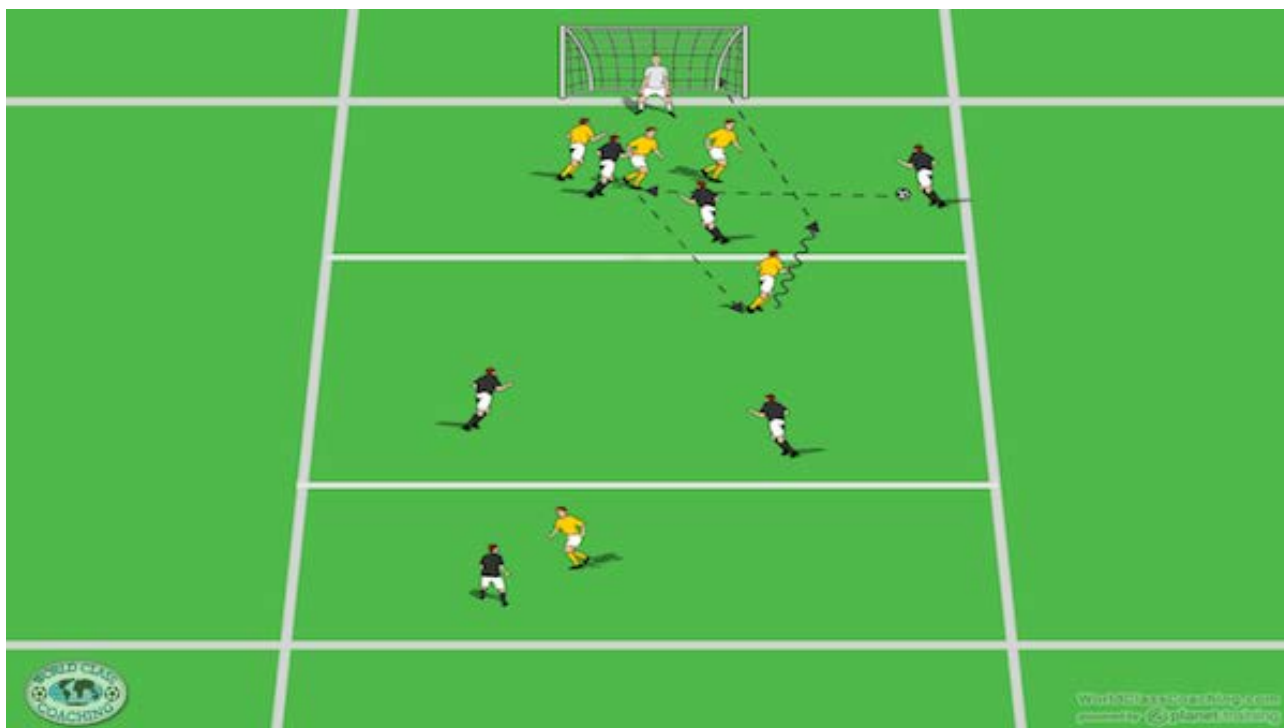
When the player of the attacking team dribbles inside the middle third, a 3 v 2 situation is created; only one of the two players who started the move can play inside the middle third. Again, one of them must be able to dribble or to receive inside the final third within 5 seconds. If they can't, the possession of the ball is won by the defending team.



When the midfielder of the attacking team dribbles inside the final third, another 3 v 2 duel is created at the beginning; only one of the three players can play inside the final third from the middle third. Two defenders can run back to create the only possible numerical advantage 4 v 3 for the defending team.



Whenever the defenders recover the possession they can try to finish in the fastest way possible toward the same goal.



Coaching points:

- To build up of the moves fast
- To play vertical with quick combinations
- To create numerical advantage when in possession
- To finish quickly