

WINNING WITH

# INVERTED FULLBACKS

ATTACKING



by Luca Bertolini

# **Winning with Inverted Fullbacks Attacking**

*By*

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### **A need: the first kind of inverted fullback**

When a naturally left footed player was missing it was the reason to bring a right footed player to the left side as fullback; but he was asked to learn to play and to send cross passes with the left foot, because the usual runs were along and straight on the flanks, receiving the ball with the outside left foot.

These are five inverted fullback pioneers:

- Nilton Santos, a World Cup winner in 1958 and 1962
- Silvio Marzolini, five times a champion with Boca
- Giacinto Facchetti, italian right footed left-back of Internazionale Milan
- Tommy Gemmell who played for Celtic Glasgow
- Ruud Krol, maybe the greatest left fullback of the "Total Football" era at Ajax and Holland.

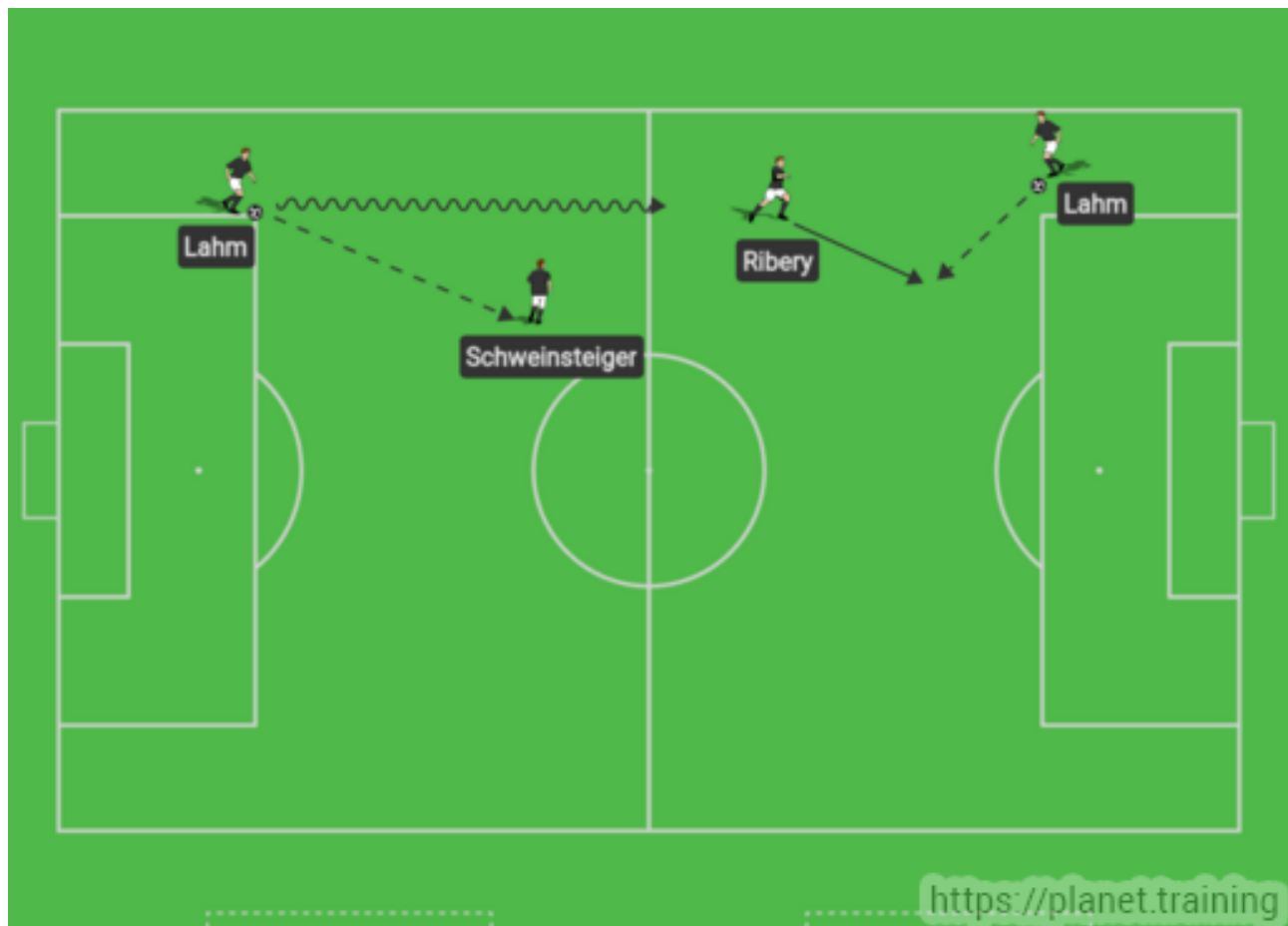
## How to take advantage of the inverted fullback when in possession

A second kind of inverted fullback made his appearance during recent years; the appearance was not only a need, but a useful player, a support for the inverted wingers during the possession phases of play. The first players of this kind we may think about could be Philipp Lahm, Cesar Azpilicueta, and Javier Zanetti (Inter).

These three names are not recalled randomly; they are chosen to illustrate a tactical development of the past recent seasons. These players were very useful as link players for the inverted wingers.

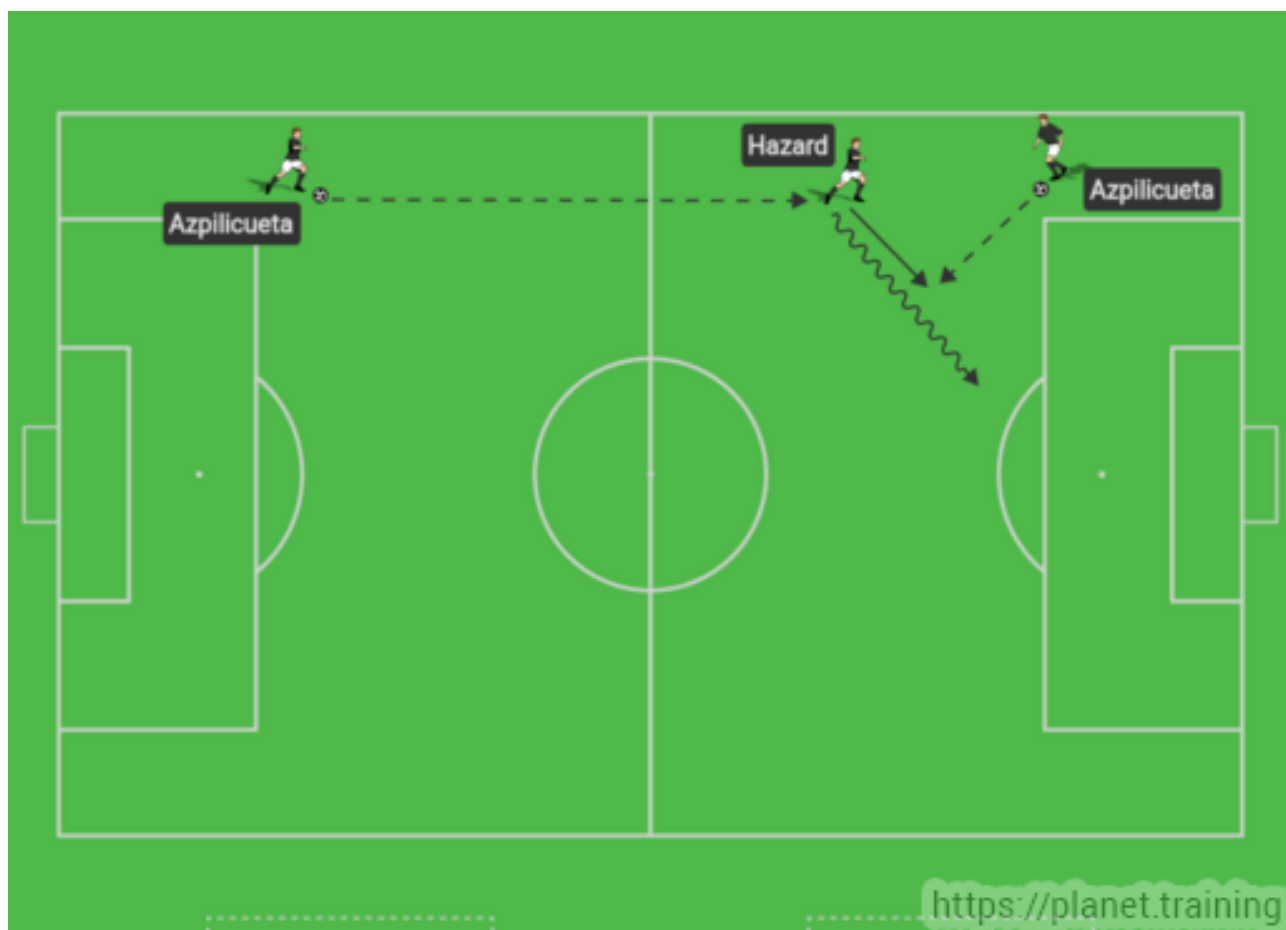
Philipp Lahm, during Jupp Heyncke's first seasons at Bayern Munich (2011-2013), was a link player on the left flank, between the defensive and the midfield pair of players and again, between the midfield line and the advanced players, behind the center forward.

Moreover, he was a link player and a support for Frank Ribery, the second inverted winger of Bayern Munich, together with Arien Robben on the right side.



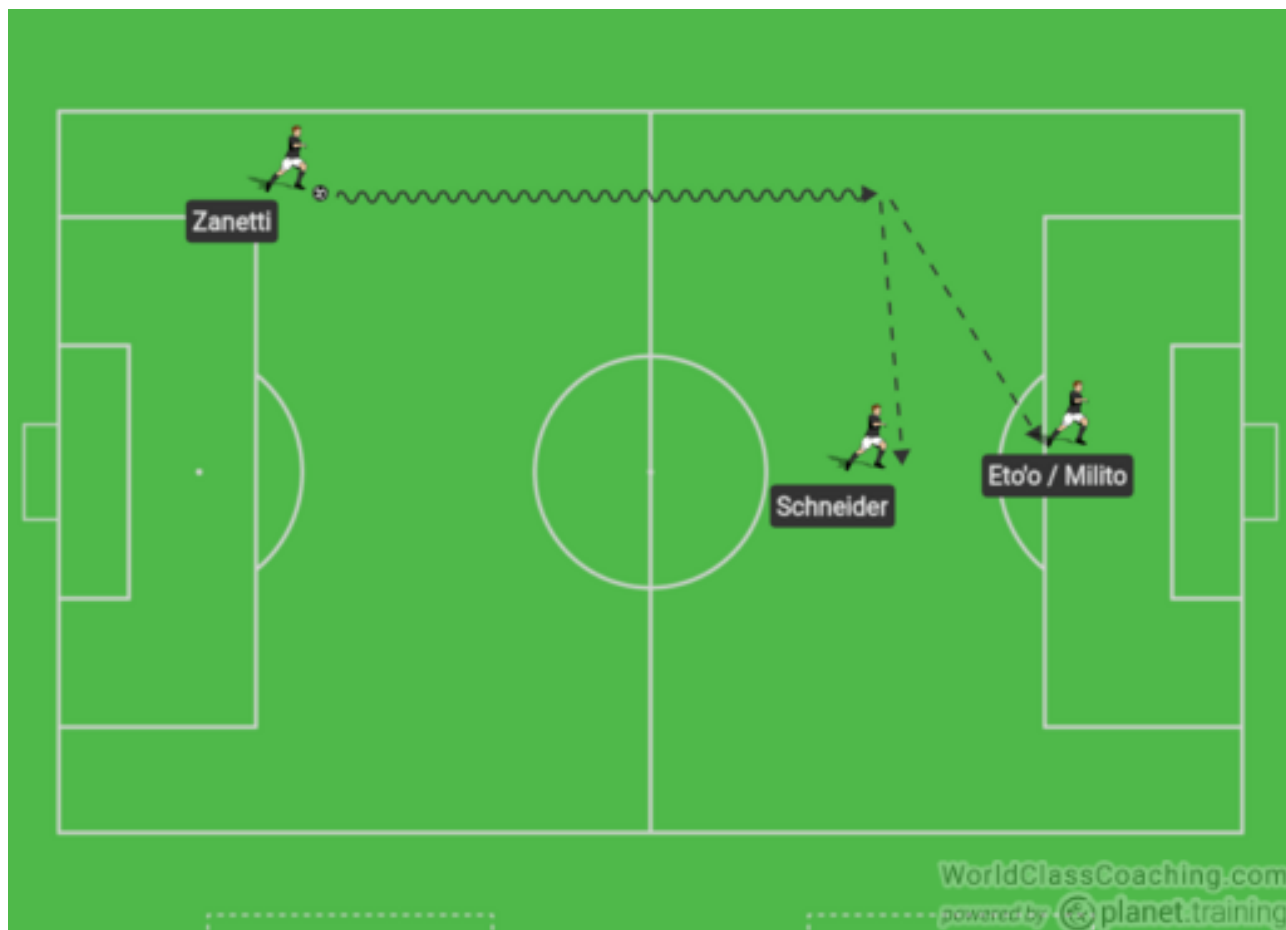
Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea 2013-2014) was the left fullback of Mourinho's defense.

If we go back and watch the matches of that season, we see how he was the player who dribbled the ball up the field, passing toward the inside and on the run of the right footed advanced midfielder Hazard; or who passed the ball directly on the left to keep the possession always together with Hazard.



If we go back with our minds to the Mourinho's Internazionale Milan treble season (2009-2010), Javier Zanetti was used in many matches as inverted left fullback, after many season as right fullback or right center midfielder; on the right side Maicon was always in the starting line.

As the basic tactic was to stay placed under the line of the ball when the opposition was in possession, Zanetti was often asked to dribble to the ball up inside the final third and to pass the ball toward Schneider and Eto'o or Milito.



All these players were simply right footed ones on the left side, with a tactical way of play that was quite similar to a left footed player.



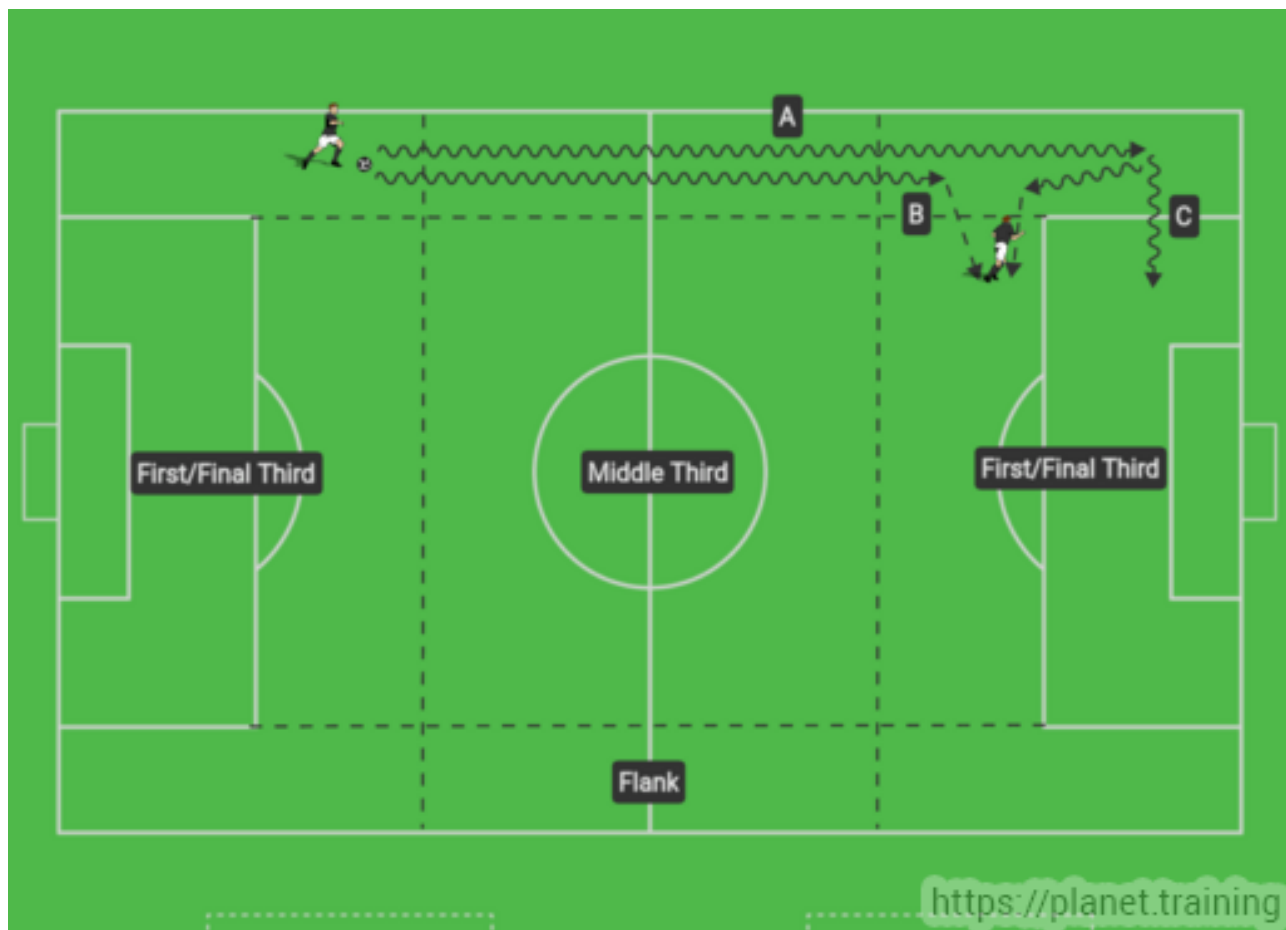
## A new concept of "inverted fullback"

Thinking about a usually accepted division of the field, we may draw it as follows:



And these are the conventional directions of runs of the old style inverted fullback:

- A. Dribble along the flank as deep as possible and then turn inside to pass toward a winger or a midfielder without the ball
- B. Dribble just inside the final third and pass toward the center
- C. Send a cross pass after a change of direction with the right foot or with left foot if possible



Bielsa and Guardiola started to divide the field in sections of space to be covered, rather than thinking about to the space as to be exploited when a team is in possession, or to be saved when the team is not in possession, through the division of the roles among the players.

From this concept of the space of the field, half spaces are identified on the pitch; they are not free spaces to be covered with simple defense or attacking runs, but they are spaces where the players must be active. Any player can play inside them and can cover them, from this point of view.



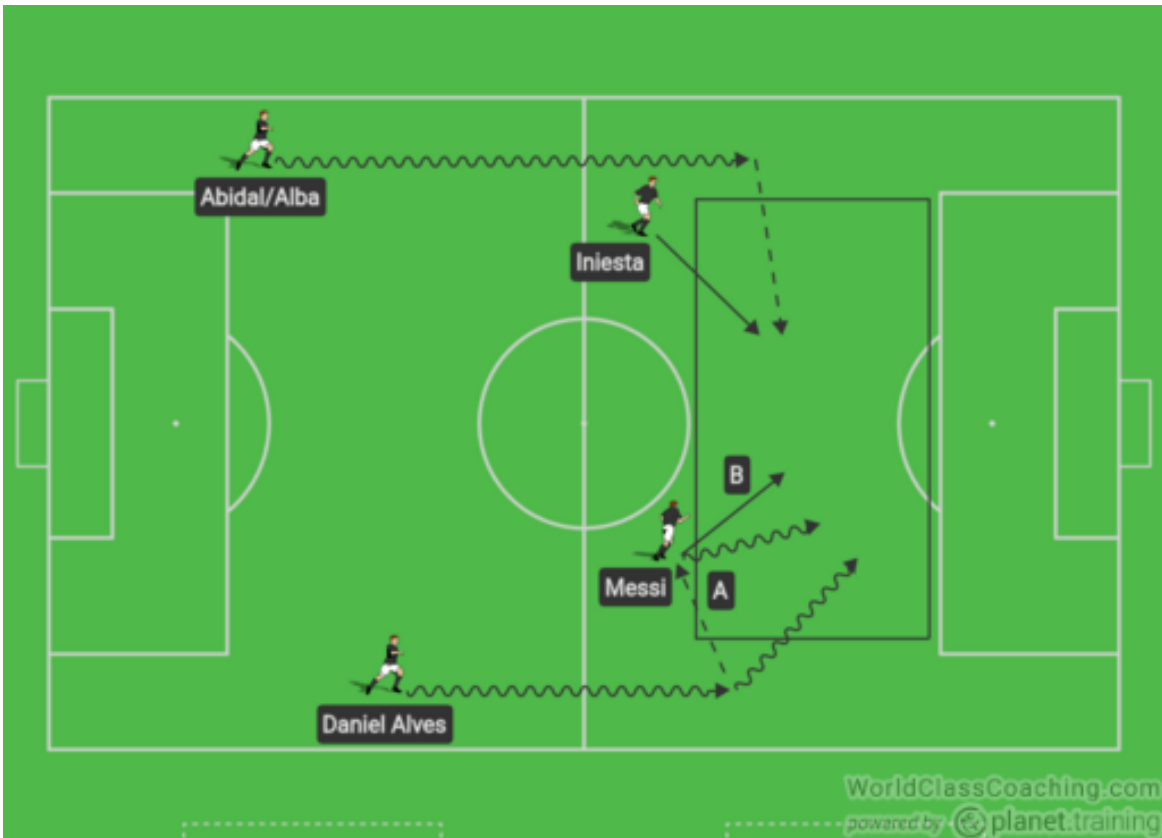
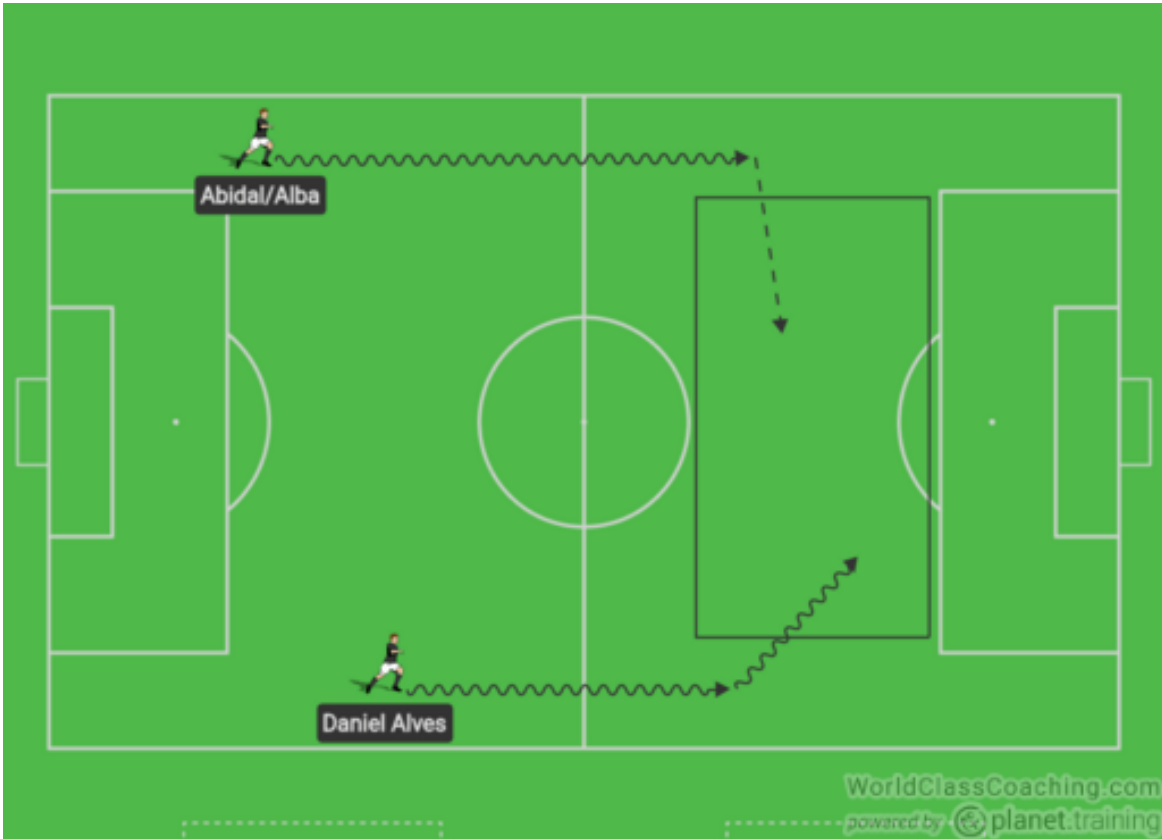
If the spaces must be occupied and if the players are not conventionally placed on the pitch with their roles anymore, all the defenders can be considered attackers when the team is in possession and the roles on the pitch depend on the situation of the moves.

And from now on, "Inverted Fullback" doesn't mean inverted foot anymore, or anyway, not only. It has to be thought as an "Inverted Run"; not along the sideline, but inside to support the midfielders.

What is very important in this way of thinking is the placement of the players inside different squares and spaces and not on the same lane. This is the reason why the fullbacks start to play inside the field.

Maybe the very first type of "Ultimate Inverted Fullback" cannot be found among the formation of Guardiola's seasons at Barcelona, where Daniel Alves and Eric Abidal/ Jordi Alba were used to play on the right foot flank where they were used to support wide the building up phase of play, dribbling toward the penalty area only to finish the move.

Guardiola's seasons as Bayern Munich and Manchester City manager are more interesting, from this point of view. Inside this book, many of his tactics will be underlined.





Mauricio Isla, a central midfielder or a right winger played as right fullback.

Arturo Vidal, another right footed central midfielder for the clubs he played for (Bayer Leverkusen, Juventus Fc and Bayern Munich), was placed on the pitch as left winger, to come inside during the possession phases and to leave the wide spaces free for the forwards (Sanchez, Valdivia and Suazo or Gonzalez).



Bielsa tried to use this new concept of "inverted fullback" during the seasons at Athletic Bilbao (2011-2012 and 2012-2013), becoming the runner up of the Copa del Rey and of the Europa League.

If Barcelona's organization during those seasons can be called "positional play," we may call the style of play of Bielsa's Athletic Bilbao as "liquid football," also thanks to the inside runs of the inverted fullbacks.

When the team was playing with his famous 3-3-1-3 formation, Bielsa usually lined it like it follows:



Oscar de Marcos and Iraola both played like "inverted fullbacks," moving inside during the attacking phase and supporting the midfielders.

It is very interesting to notice that De Marcos was a right footed winger or forward.

Gabilondo and Muniain were used to start from a wide position and then to run inside without the ball too, or to receive as wide as possible and dribble inside toward the opposition's goal.

The never ending runs of all the players while in possession, made the basic formation "liquid," and without a precise shape.

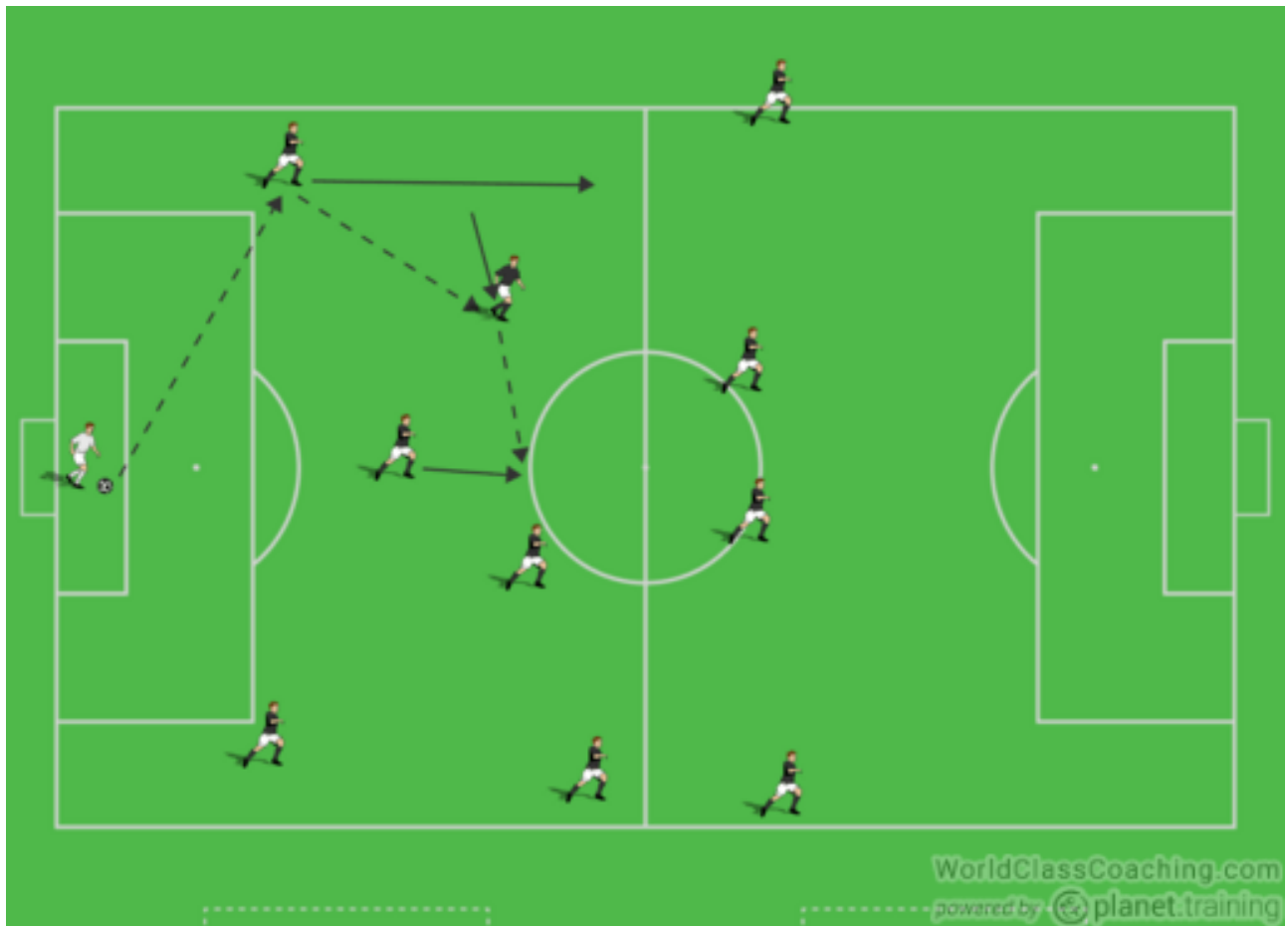
This is what Guardiola's Barcelona did, but just in the middle and final third, and not through the inverted fullbacks.

As the field is divided in spaces to be occupied, the placements of the players evolve time to time inside each single situation of the move and the patterns of play become positional play, moreover while the team is building up from the back, or playing out and near the opposition's penalty area too.

Thanks to this "philosophy or style of play," the idea of the fullback and of his right foot on the flank has changed, and he now is a very important player as his performances and technique are crucial for the possession phases of play.

This is a potential general building up from the back situation to play out: the second pass is played toward a space to be covered.

For this reason a fullback becomes a sort of a center midfielder, creating a potential numerical advantage in the middle third.



The fullbacks become midfielders, and they must be able to build up, to help and to make the possession phase safe first; and also to play decisive passes. The inverted fullback is not an inverted footed player anymore, or not only, but he's a fullback running inside rather than just an overlapping wide player.



This is the way Guardiola planned the building up and the possession phases during the three seasons as Bayern Munich manager (2013-2016). Lahm and Rafinha were the right fullbacks, Alaba and Bernat were the left ones during those seasons; but only nominally.

Lahm was the center point of the team possession tactic which was created by Guardiola to guarantee the numerical advantage in the middle third and during the building up phases of the moves; we may say the same when Rafinha and Alaba were the fullbacks as they were used to run toward the center of the field for the same reason.

This way the numerical advantage was ensured both inside the defense third, 3 v 2, and with 5 players in the middle third.





It's always hard to tell what kind of role a Bayern player had with Guardiola, as Lahm had played as right and left fullback, as center midfielder, and even like an advanced midfielder; and all the players we talked about before have played as modern inverted fullbacks.

And if we would have to sum up the players' tactic during those seasons, we could say:

- when the team was not in possession, they had to play like a classic fullback;
- when the team was in possession phase, they had to play inside the center middle third to manage the ball leaving free outside space on the flanks in the middle and final third.

Easy to say, very hard to plan and to carry out on the field.

And it's harder if the concept of positional play must be respected:

- The spaces must be occupied;
- They must provide short and long passing solutions
- Midfielder and forwards will play along the outside lanes

## The "inverted fullback" and "La salida lavolpiana"; how to build up from the back

From this point of view, it's very interesting to analyze how this way of play matches the very well known "La salida lavolpiana" (the La Volpe placement of the players while building up from the back). Here's the basic formation for this kind of formation's shape:



When this building up tactic is successful, the center player is able to overcome the first opposition line of pressure, thanks to a pass or dribbling the ball over it.

The two outer and wide players must be able to create numerical advantage, inviting the nearest opponent to put pressure, and then playing inside the free spaces that are supposed to be created.

When the first line of pressure is overcome, Lahm for Bayern Munich, or the "inverted fullback" in general, can play in the middle third, as extra player. For this reason, one of the midfielder can run up on the field to play near the forwards or very close to a second midfielder, like, as instance, De Bruyne and David Silva. The second "inverted fullback can now decide to run wider and to overlap, if the defense is a line of four,



or to keep the team balanced if the defense is a line of three players.



Here's an example of building up phase positions of this 2017/2018 season, while playing out, from Guardiola's Manchester City with three at the back.

They are placed on the pitch as La Volpe asked his players to do; the difference is the center back is in possession instead of a center midfielder, and the inverted fullbacks (Otamendi and Delph) are playing replacing the outer center defenders. This way all the other players in the middle third can play higher on the field and a high density is ensured all over the opposition's half.



When the fullbacks play "inside" the field, rotations and changes of position among the midfielders are allowed; and these exchanges make the possession phase more unpredictable: they create chances to free the teammates between the opposition lines,



or to take advantage of the whole width of the field,



and then to attack the opposition goal.



To use both the feet is very important, as general requirement, because the left back should receive with the left foot, directing the side of play toward the center of the field, playing with the right foot then; and it is obvious that the exact opposite happens on the other side.

Therefore, a left footed player on the right could more easily orient the ball control inside the field, with the inside part of the right foot or the outside part of the left foot, and then he could look for the best pass lanes using his natural foot; this could be true according to the prior principle of play.

But the basic technical skills to orient the ball control toward the center while receiving and the skill to scan the field like a playmaker become essential.

As we already have covered, the inverted foot or side is not the first condition; using both feet is important for the playing combination, as the fullbacks are now considered as midfielders.

In this picture it's very clear how Walker (the player in possession) is playing as "inverted fullback," being right footed and on the right side of the field.

The direction of play toward the center of the field means "Inverted Fullback," but not the feet; and it's like this thanks to Pep Guardiola.



## How to coach it

### Exercise 1: 2 + 1 v 2, 2 v 1 duels to build up with inverted fullbacks or 2 v 2



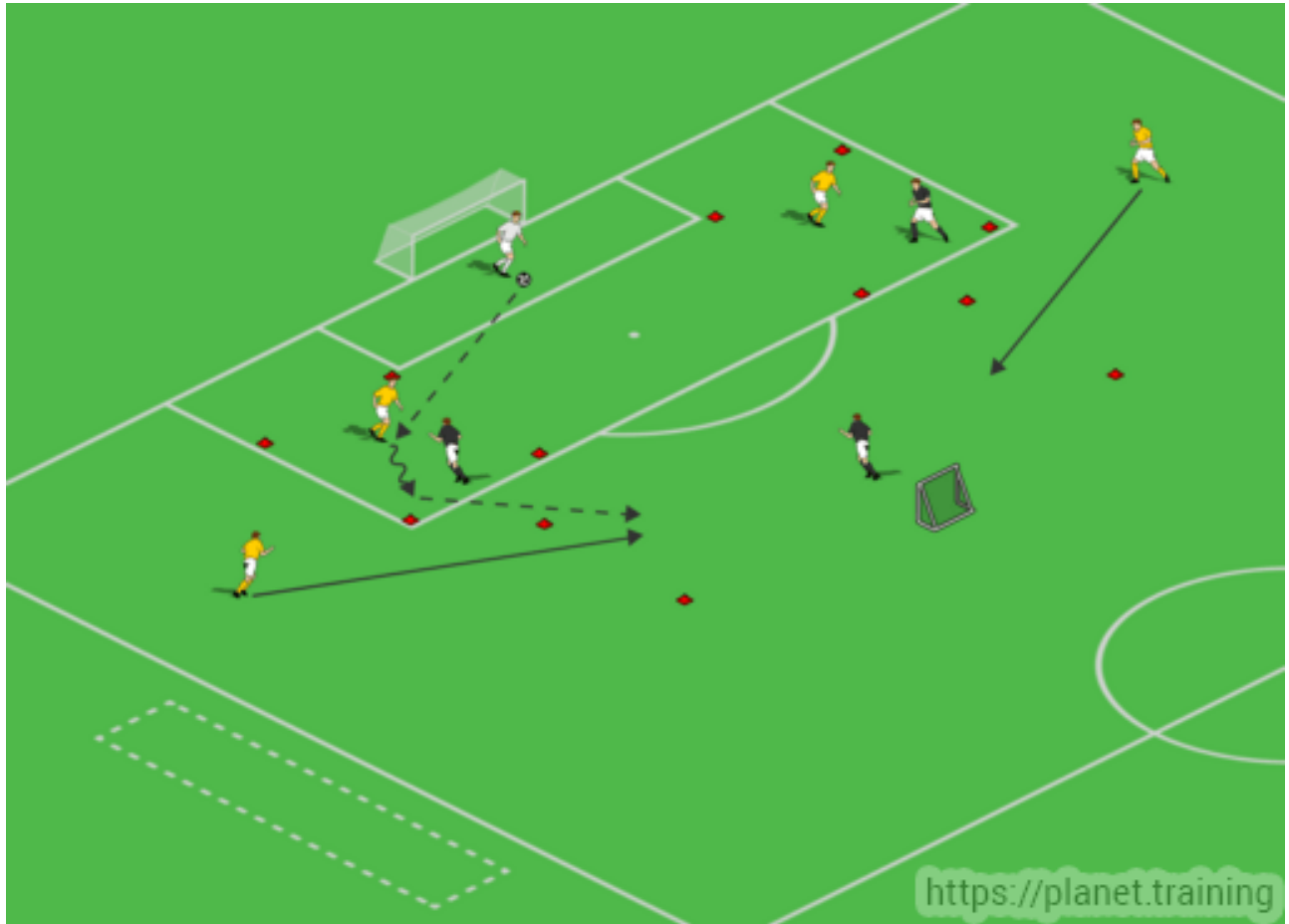
Two squares are placed on the upper corners of the penalty area and a double 1 v 1 duel is played inside them.

Two fullbacks are placed wider and out of the penalty area.

The third forward is placed inside a center rectangle, just out of the penalty area.

The goalkeeper is in possession of the ball.



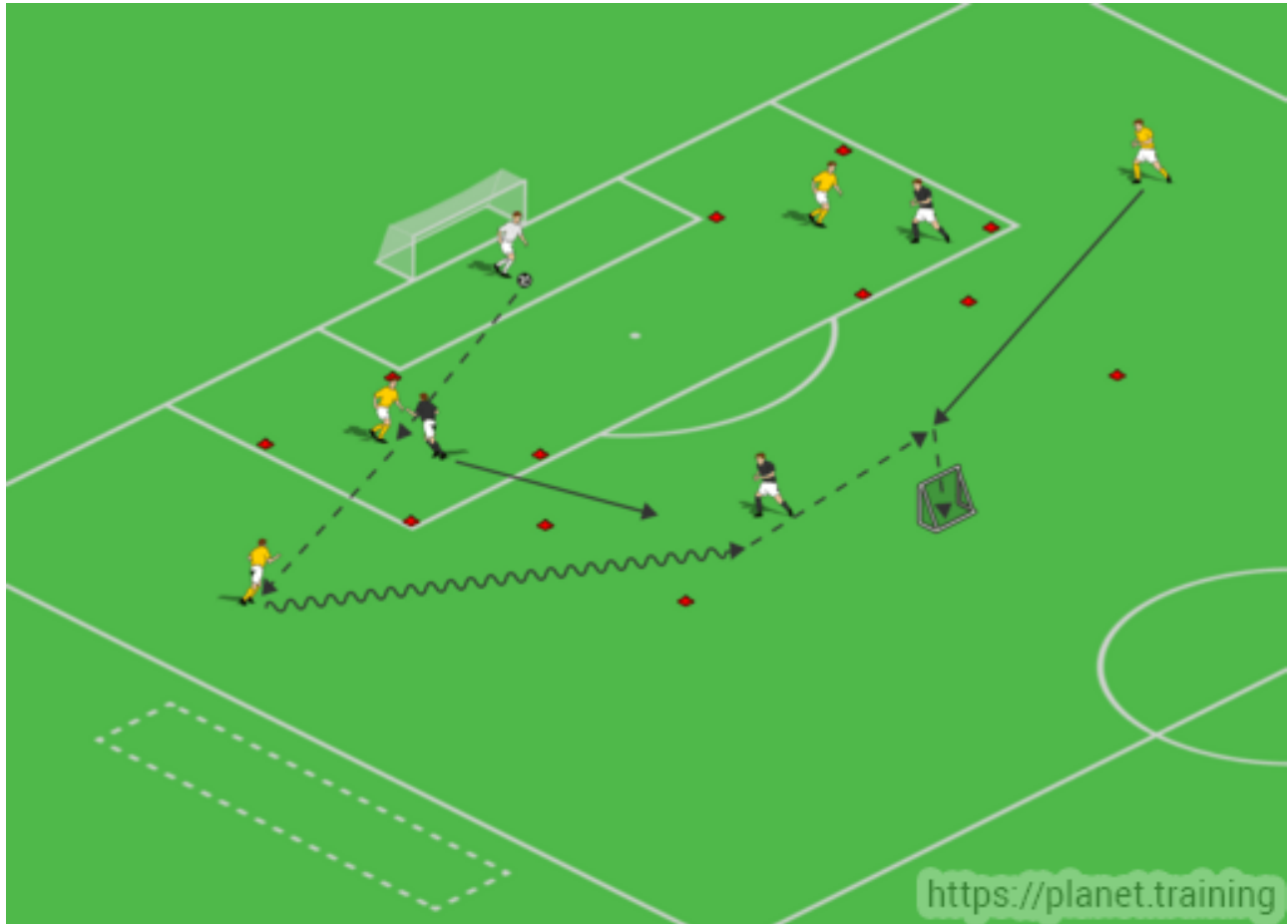


The goalkeeper passes the ball toward the center defender inside one of the squares, and he must win the 1 v 1 duel to pass it again on the run of the fullback.

The fullback is running toward the center square together with the opposite teammate.



A 2 v 1 duel is now played inside the center rectangle to finish in the mini goal.



If the center back is not able to pass the ball inside the center square, he can decide to pass wide toward the teammate, who can dribble toward the center square to finish, together with the opposite fullback.

But in this situation, the first forward, who was playing the 1 v 1 duel, can run back to create a 2 v 2 duel, equalizing the number of players.



**Exercise 2: from 1 v 2 to 2 v 2, 1 v 1 duel to finish or 3 v 2**



Two squares are placed inside and outside the penalty area.

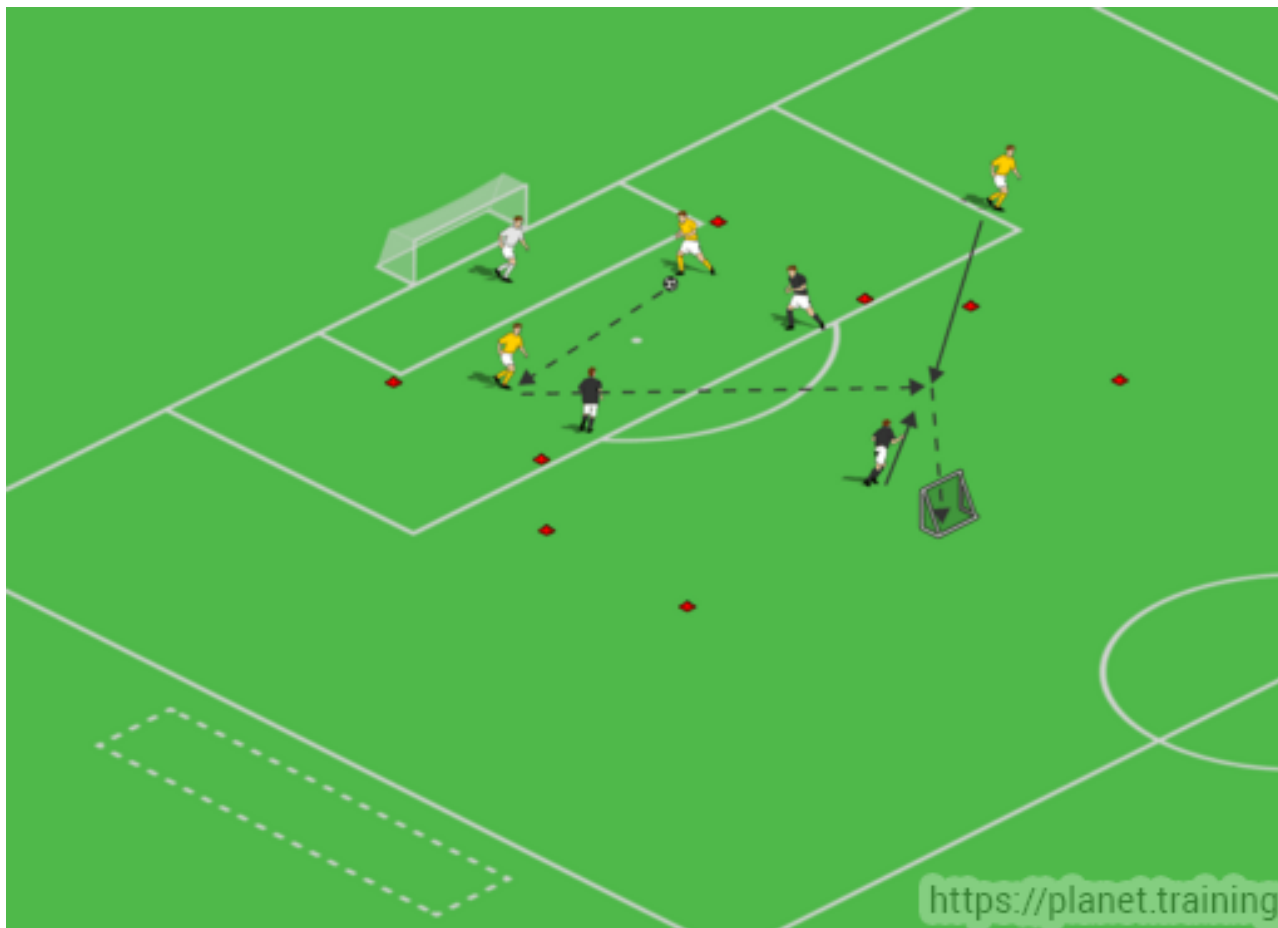
One defender is outnumbered 1 v 2 inside the first square at the beginning, and another forward is placed inside the outer one.

Two fullbacks are placed wide and out of the penalty area.

The goalkeeper is in possession of the ball.



As the goalkeeper passes the ball toward the first outnumbered defender inside the nearest square, one of the fullbacks must run inside to create a 2 v 2 duel, equalizing the number of players.



The objective of the players now in possession is to pass forward inside the square out of the penalty area, where the second fullback must run to receive and to finish.



If the forwards win the possession, they play a 3 v 2 duel to finish and to score in the regular goal with the goalkeeper.

**Variation:**

- Both the fullbacks run forward inside the outer square; the first receiver must pass as soon as possible
- If the forwards win the possession they play 2 v 3 to finish; this rule makes the recovery of the ball easier

**Eye on:**

- Speed of play to win the 1 v 2 or the 2 v 2 duels
- Timing of runs without the ball of the opposite fullback
- Passing combinations to win the counter attacking duels



### Exercise 3: from 1 v 2 to 2 v 1 duels to finish or 2 v 2



Two squares are placed inside and outside the penalty area.

One defender is outnumbered, playing 1 v 2 inside the first square at the beginning.

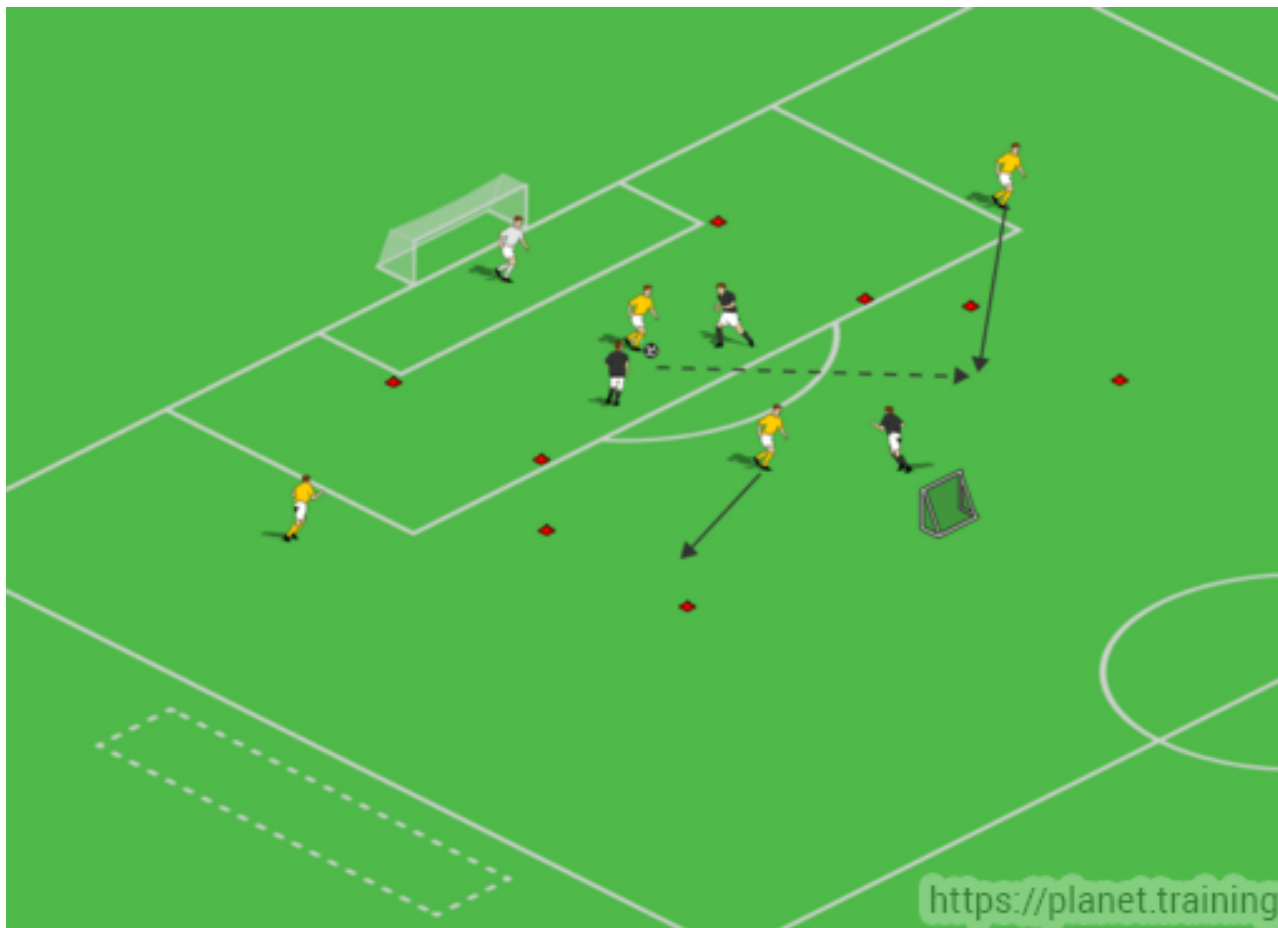
One midfielder and another forward are placed inside the outer square.

Two fullbacks are placed wide and out of the penalty area.

The goalkeeper is in possession of the ball.



The goalkeeper passes the ball toward one fullback out of the penalty area; as he receives, he must pass the ball toward the center cone's area, where the outnumbered defender must control and save the possession.



As the center defender receives, the opposite fullback must run inside the upper cones' area to create a 2 v 1 duel.

His teammate must move to be unmarked.



The move must be finished in the mini goal, as the fullback must pass the ball on the run of his teammate toward the center.



If the forwards win the possession they play 2 v 2 to finish and to score in the regular goal with the goalkeeper, inside the lower cone's area.

The fullback who started the sequence must equalize the number of players.

**Variation:**

- The center defender decides the fullback who must receive, running toward him, to play a fast passing combination and to send the ball forward
- If the forwards win the possession they play 2 v 3 to finish; this rule makes the recovery of the ball harder for the defender

**Eye on:**

- Speed of play to win the 1 v 2 duel to build up or the 2 v 1 duel to finish
- Timing of run without the ball of the opposite fullback
- Skill to be unmarked in the center to finish
- Passing combinations to win the counter attacking duels

**The "inverted fullback" during the possession phases; let the midfielders play.**

The first goal, and maybe the most important goal, of the modern inverted fullbacks tactic is to create numerical, qualitative and positional advantages against the opposition inside the middle third.

This goal comes from the basic idea to build up the moves and to play out from the back and with safe but concrete possession of the ball.

Numerical advantage: create numerical advantage near the ball to make the possession phase safe.



This is a picture of a Champions League match that Man City played against Napoli. Otamendi, the left fullback of a line of three at the back, is in possession in the middle third, and he creates a 4 v 3 situation to manage the possession.

The other three of the midfield line are Delph (on the left), Fernandinho (on his right) and Danilo (wide on the right).

This way the other two center midfielders, Gundogan and De Bruyne can stay place higher on the field and they can decide to play between the lines or to support the forwards.

Qualitative advantage: place the best 1 v 1 skilled players in the right positions to be decisive



This is another picture of the same Champions League match that Man City played against Napoli.

In this move Leroy Sanè, one of the most skilled player in dribbling and mastering the ball, can play 1 v 1 against a defender toward the opposition goal.

These kinds of players are usually placed wide at the beginning of the final stage of the attacking moves, and then they run toward or to dribble toward the opposition goal, playing 1 v 1 against the defenders.

At this stage of the attacks, these duels can become outnumbered situations 1 v 2, as in this picture, where Aguero is facing two Liverpool's defenders during a Premier League match.

Guardiola often invites the opposition's pressure deep, to free a support player from the back, when the moves must be finished.



Positional advantage: place as many players as possible in a suitable position to finish.



As the play out phase has been carried out also through an inverted fullback, two of the advanced midfielders are now able to play very high on the field.

In this picture, Silva and De Bruyne are placed along the defense lane of Liverpool, so they can either drop back to receive unmarked, or they can attack the opposition goal together with the forwards.



In this second picture, two forwards are in positional advantage, even if they are outnumbered 2 v 4, as they can face the opposition goal, exploiting the spaces among Liverpool's defenders and also behind them.



One player in the lower part of the middle third must always be a support for the team, to create numerical advantage and to make the possession phase safe.

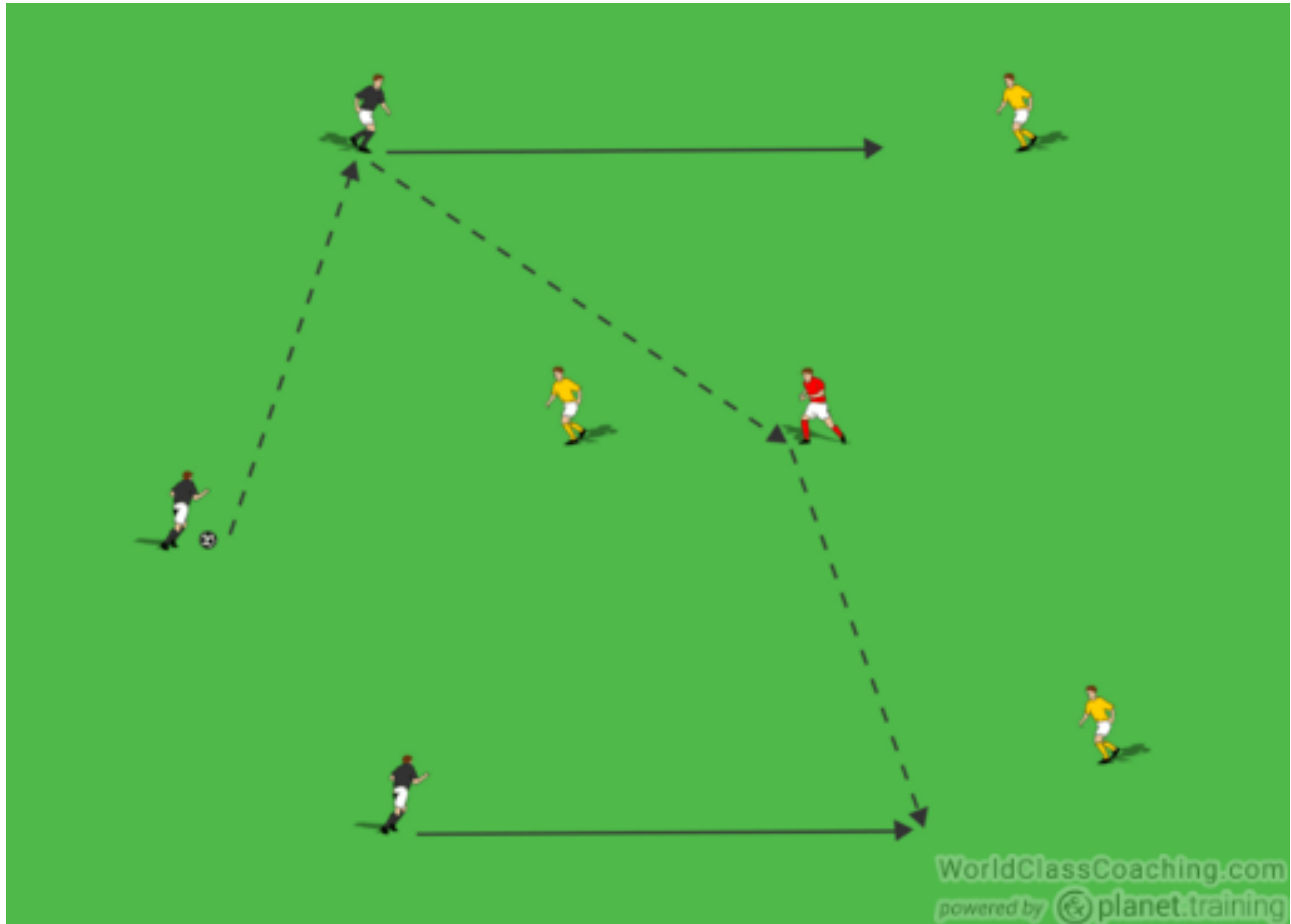
This is the basic concept of the positional play in general, not only of Guardiola's positional play.

The numerical advantage is always an important principle of play.



This could be a possible positional game to coach this situation.

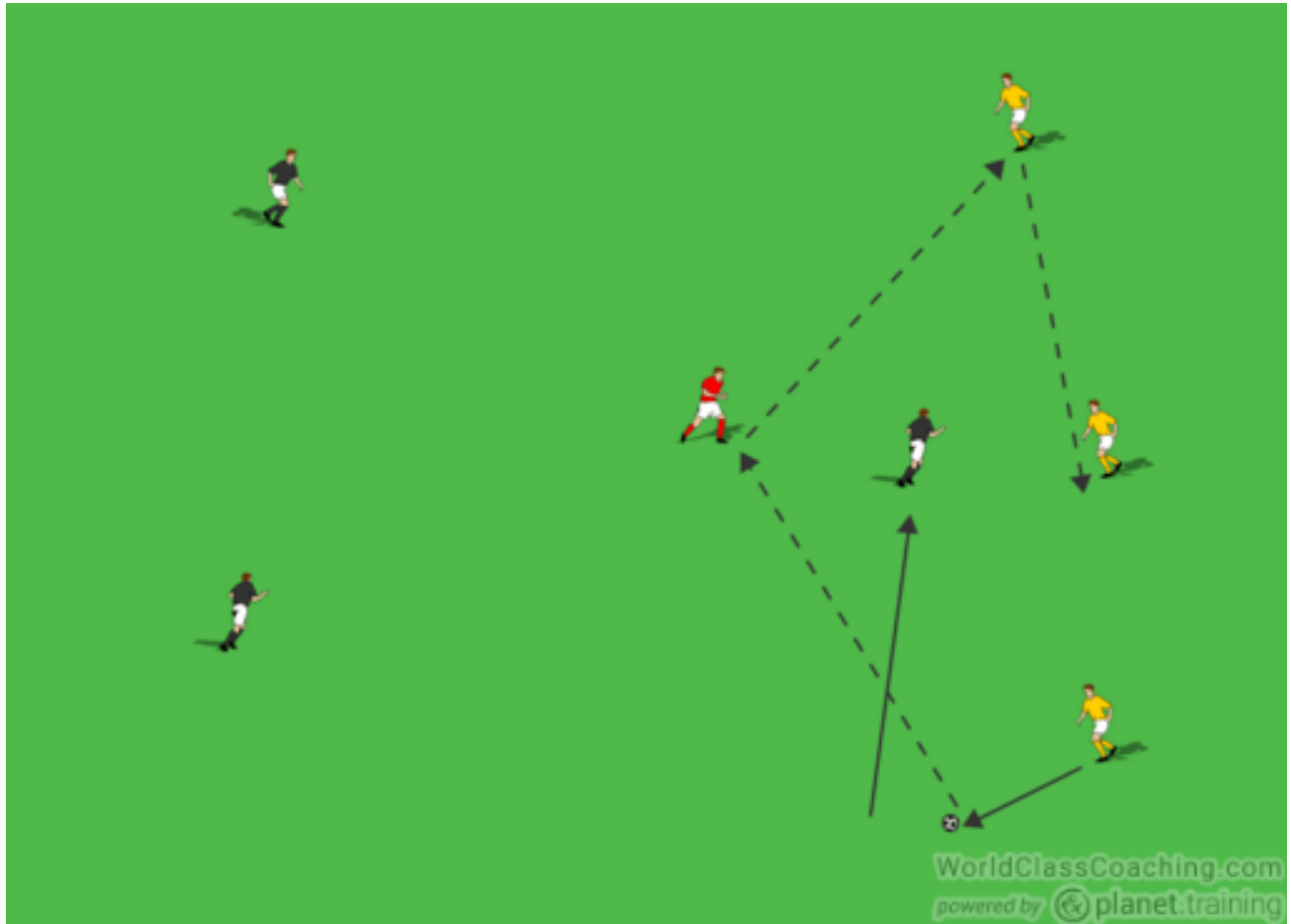
**Exercise 4: 3 v 1 duel at the beginning and 3 v 2 in the second phase, to keep the numerical advantage at every stage.**



Three players are in possession of the ball and they are placed along one of the shorter sides of a rectangle.

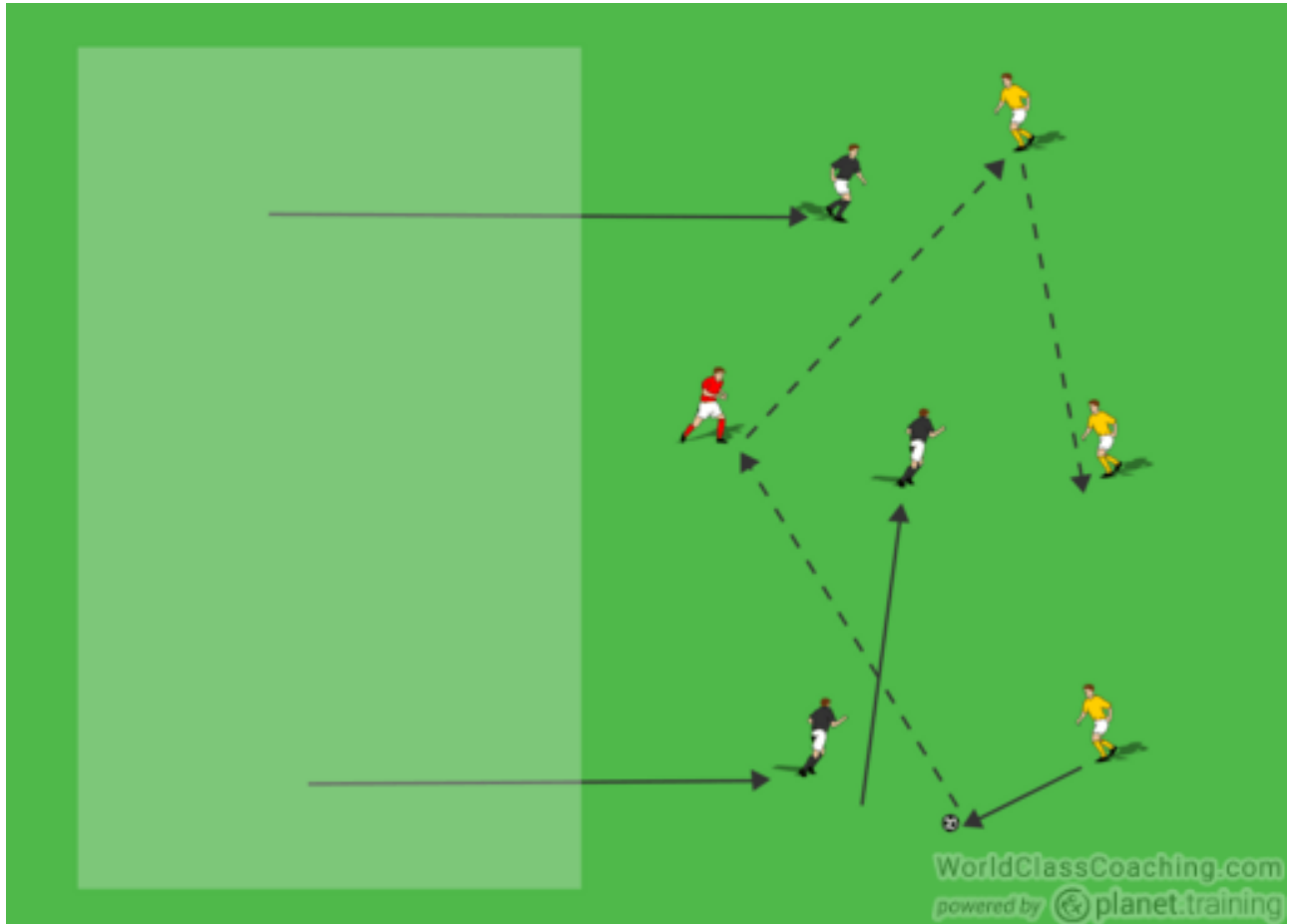
One defender is facing them and two others are placed along the other shorter side of the rectangle.

The players in possession must be able to send the ball toward a free player, who is placed between the defense lines and then they must receive another pass from him to change the side of play.



If the defenders win the possession, they play the same way from the opposite side.

It is very clear how the inverted fullbacks allow the creation of a numerical advantage and how they allow playing out with safe possession against all the types of opposition attacks together with the center midfielder; both if the opposition has two or three forwards in the starting line.



If the opposition tries to put high and strong pressure with more players, if the play out is enough fast, free spaces can be exploited in the upper part of the middle third and in the final third as consequence.

**Eye on:**

- Timing of runs without the ball of the opposite fullback
- Passing combinations to pass the ball among all the players and through the red free player
- Stay balanced when the possession is lost

If both the fullbacks run or dribble inside the field, the central midfielders are allowed to move higher up to support the forwards, and they are free to play between the opponents' defense and midfield lines to receive the ball.



The second goal, in the upper area of the middle third, is to free the best quality players, as they don't have to build up the moves, but they "just" have to bring the moves to the final stage near or inside the final third.

As these players are free to play, the opposition's defense phase of play is supposed to be unbalanced.

The opposition's center backs must decide if they have to put pressure or to stay balanced inside the defense lines, leaving space at the back or in front of them.

If we go back to the seasons of Pep Guardiola as manager of Bayern Munich, four or five players were often free to play and to exchange their positions in the middle third.



If we think about the seasons of Pep Guardiola with Manchester City, David Silva, Kevin De Bruyne, and Ilkay Gundogan are the players who are taking the main advantages, as they are free to play and to exchange the position on the field at every possession phase.



Otamendi is in possession in the middle third; Silva decides to play as playmaker in addition to Fernandinho.



And De Bruyne is free to play on the forwards' line, before dropping back between the opposition's lines.



Here Danilo is on the ball inside the field, David Silva is playing between the opposition lines. De Bruyne is on the forwards' line and he could attack the depth over the last opposition defense line



Here again Otamendi is in possession, Gabriel Jesus drops back. David Silva and De Bruyne can play as outside forwards on the left and on the right, together with Aguero in the center.





In this move, De Bruyne attacks the depth, exploiting the spaces that were created by the opposition defense, as they had to decide if to put pressure on the midfielders or to cover the spaces toward their own goal; and it's very clear how they are now on late.

If we would have to sum up the advantages for the free midfielders, we would write:

- enough time and space to exploit.
- the option to play together with the forwards
- the option to play wide and create a numerical advantage together with the wingers against the opposition's fullback, helping the 1 v 1 duels we are now going to describe.

## 1 v 1 wide duels

Having the numerical advantage and high density of players in the center area of the middle third, there should be more space out wide, as the opposition wingers must run inside the field to try to equalize the number of players.



The opposition defending winger must decide if he has to run inside the field to overcome the numerical disadvantage, or to support the fullback who is defending against the attacking winger.



And this defensive need creates 1 v 1 duels between the wingers and the opposition's fullbacks.

Building up the attacking move on one side, and then quickly switching the side of play toward the other, the wingers should be free to play a 1 v 1 duel with positional advantage.

Coming back again with our minds to the seasons of Pep Guardiola at Bayern Munich, he used the traditional wingers like Ribery, Robben as inverted players; all them had good seasons from scoring goals point of view with him.



Robben was used, as always, to dribble toward the center from the right side with his left foot and to finish.



Ribery often dribbled to exploit the deep spaces and send cross passes for the center forwards.

As Manchester City manager, Guardiola seems to let many player free to exploit the wide spaces, taking advantage of the 1 v 1 duel, during these seasons.

This is the most interesting and main concrete realization of "Liquid Football" and of the "Inverted Fullbacks," as we were talking about the beginning of this book.

These free wide players can be defenders...



...Mendy is playing on the left...



...Walker on the right.

These players can be defenders and midfielders together like in this move with Mendy and De Bruyne,



or forwards like Leroy Sanè.



## How to coach it

### Exercise 5: From 3 v 2 to 5 v 4 or 4 v 3



A 3 v 2 duel is played inside a rectangular square in the middle third at the beginning.

One center midfielder and two inverted fullbacks play against two defense midfielders.

Three forwards (two wingers and one striker) are placed in the final third against four defenders and the goalkeeper.



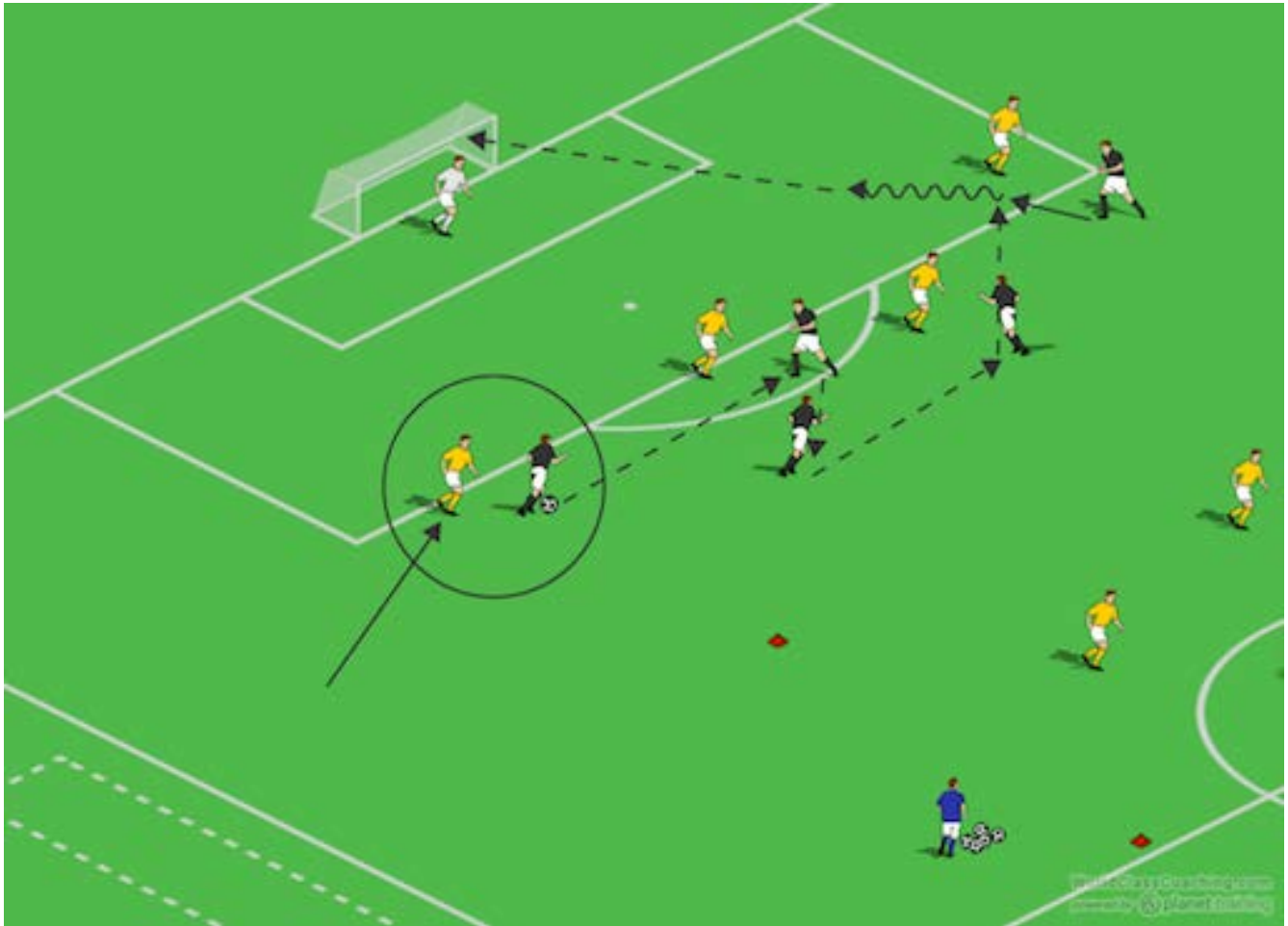


When all the players of the possession team have touched the ball and the possession is made safe, one of the wide winger can receive the ball.



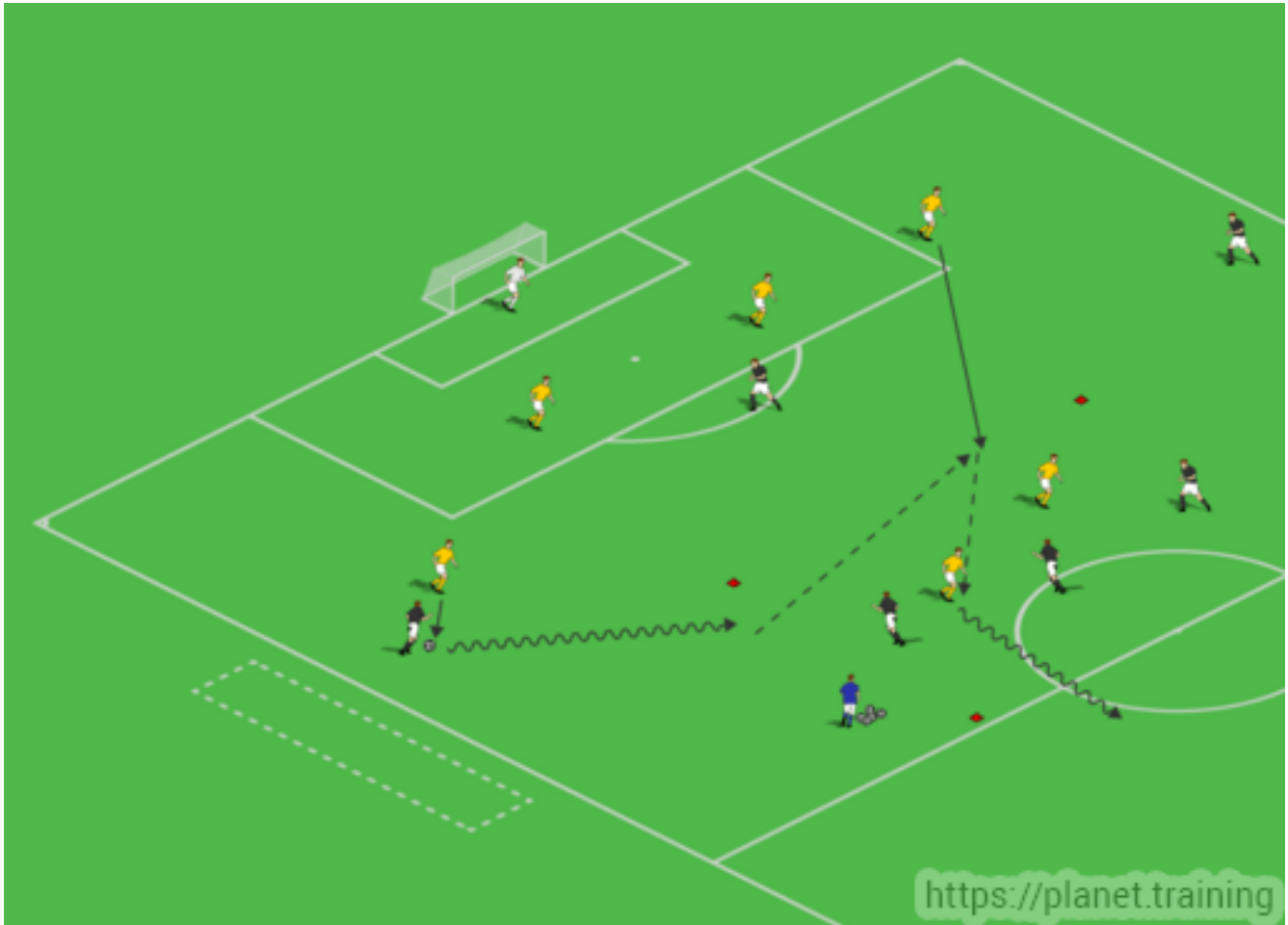
Two of the three midfielders can run up to support the attacking move and to create a 5 v 4 + goalkeeper duel in the final third while the winger in possession is dribbling toward the goal.

The third player must keep the formation balanced.



The winger in possession must win a 1 v 1 duel against the nearest defender and the pass toward the center.

All the attacking players must have touched the ball and the move must be finished on the other side by the opposite winger.



If the defenders win the possession, they must counter attack 4 v 3 while the fullbacks are running inside the field.

The move must be finished dribbling through the rectangle where the exercise started and over the end line.

**Variation:**

- One inverted fullback can run wide to create a 2 v 1 duel on the flank
- 2 v 2 duel must be maintained in the center rectangle to be balanced
- The moves must be finished as soon as possible without a fix number of touches
- Counter attack with the same number of players (3 v 3) to stay balanced after the recovery of the ball

**Eye on:**

- Speed of play to win the 3 v 2 duel
- Skills to win the 1 v 1 wide duel
- Finish at speed
- Timing of inside runs without the ball