

WINNING WITH

INVERTED FULLBACKS

DEFENDING



Winning with Inverted Fullbacks Defending

By

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General Observations and Patterns of Play

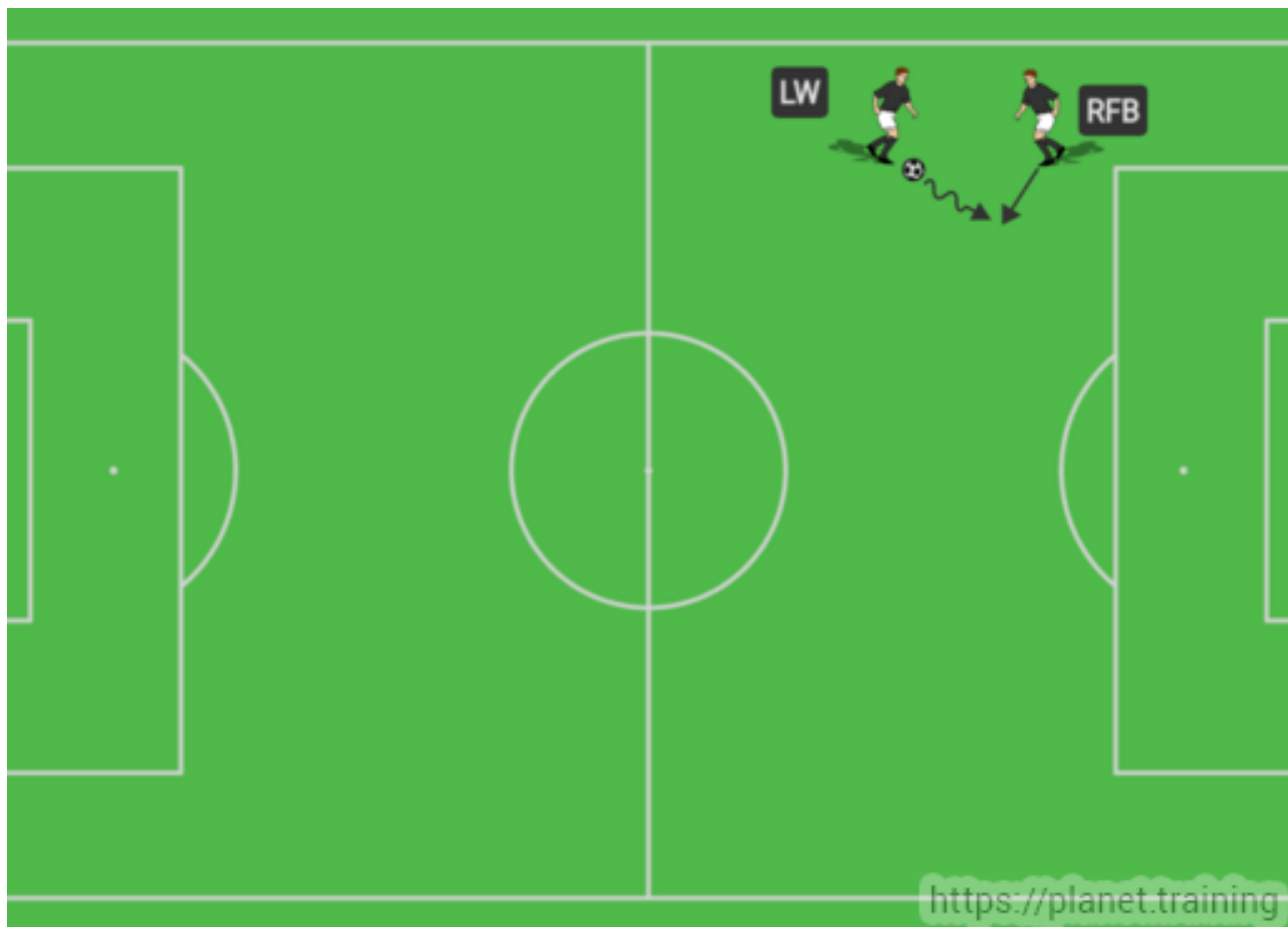
Even if inverted fullbacks have been mainly used to counteract the trend of the inverted wingers thanks to their defensive capacity, their attacking role has increased also.

In recent seasons, inverted wingers posed many problems to the opposition.

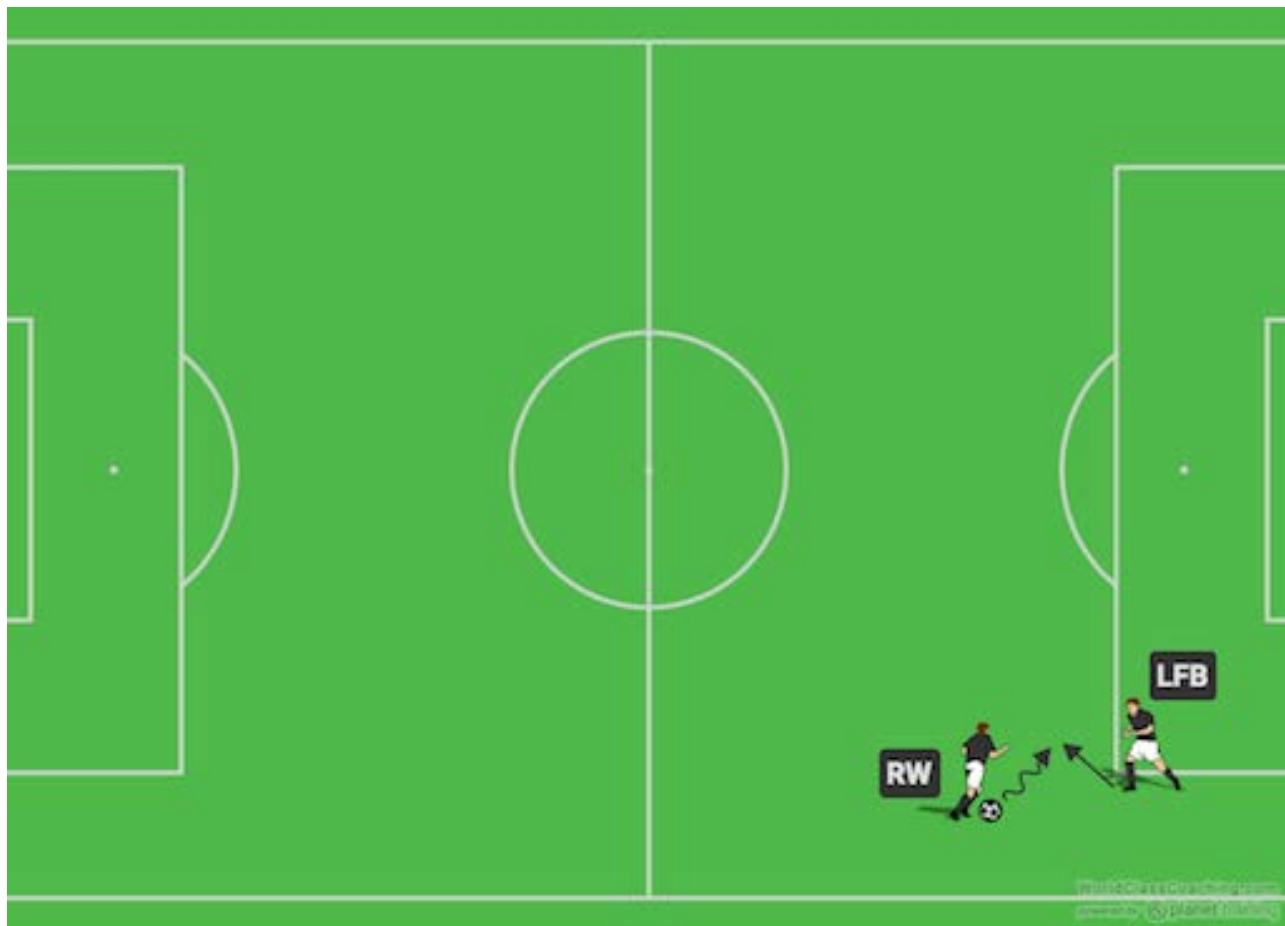
An inverted winger (someone who plays on the opposite side toward the center and toward the side of their preferred foot) often creates problems for conventional fullbacks, who are forced to defend on their weaker side, while it also drags them inside, leaving space out wide.

If we think about the inverted fullbacks from a defensive point of view, we find that they can mark the wingers that like to cut inside to be involved in the game.

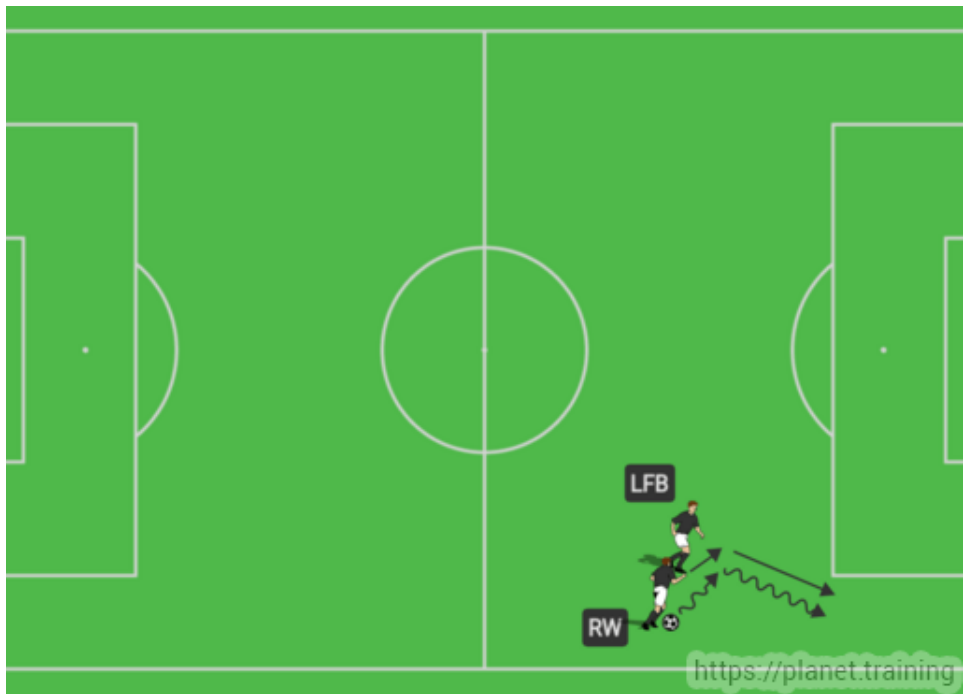
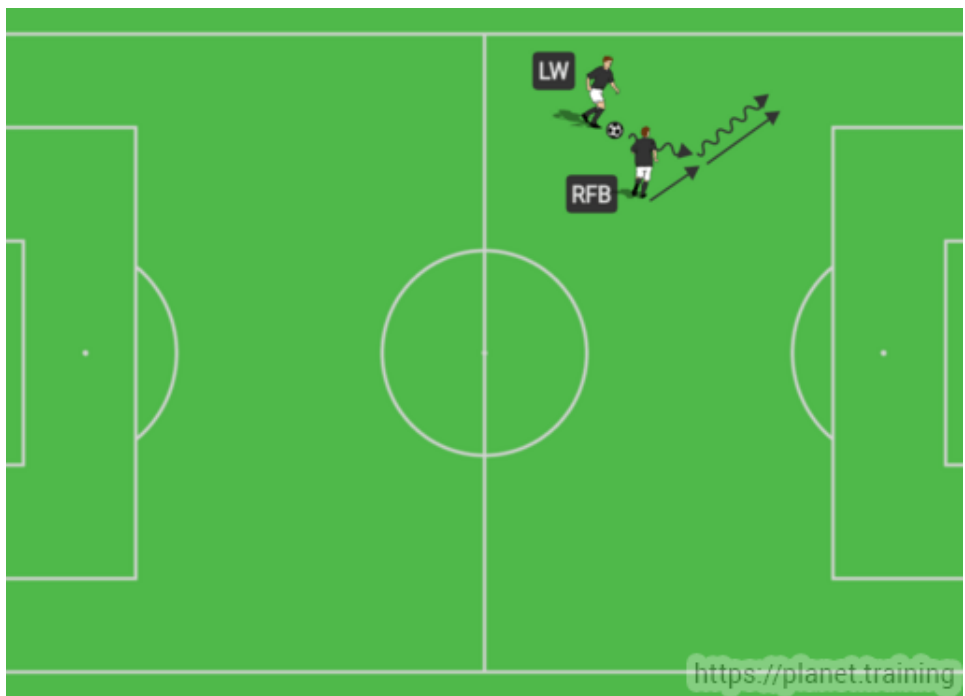
This is right if the winger is playing as inverted player and if the fullback is playing on the opposite side related to his foot: right-footed winger on the left and left-footed fullback on the right and left-footed winger on the right and right footed fullback on the left.



This could be the first benefit, as the fullbacks are able to oppose and to put pressure against the winger on their strong foot, while they are trying to dribble inside the field.



If we think about the position on the field of the inverted fullbacks, regardless of their strong feet, we may find that this way are they often effective in nullifying the inverted or false wingers, directing them down the sideline, as the center of the space to be defended is already occupied.





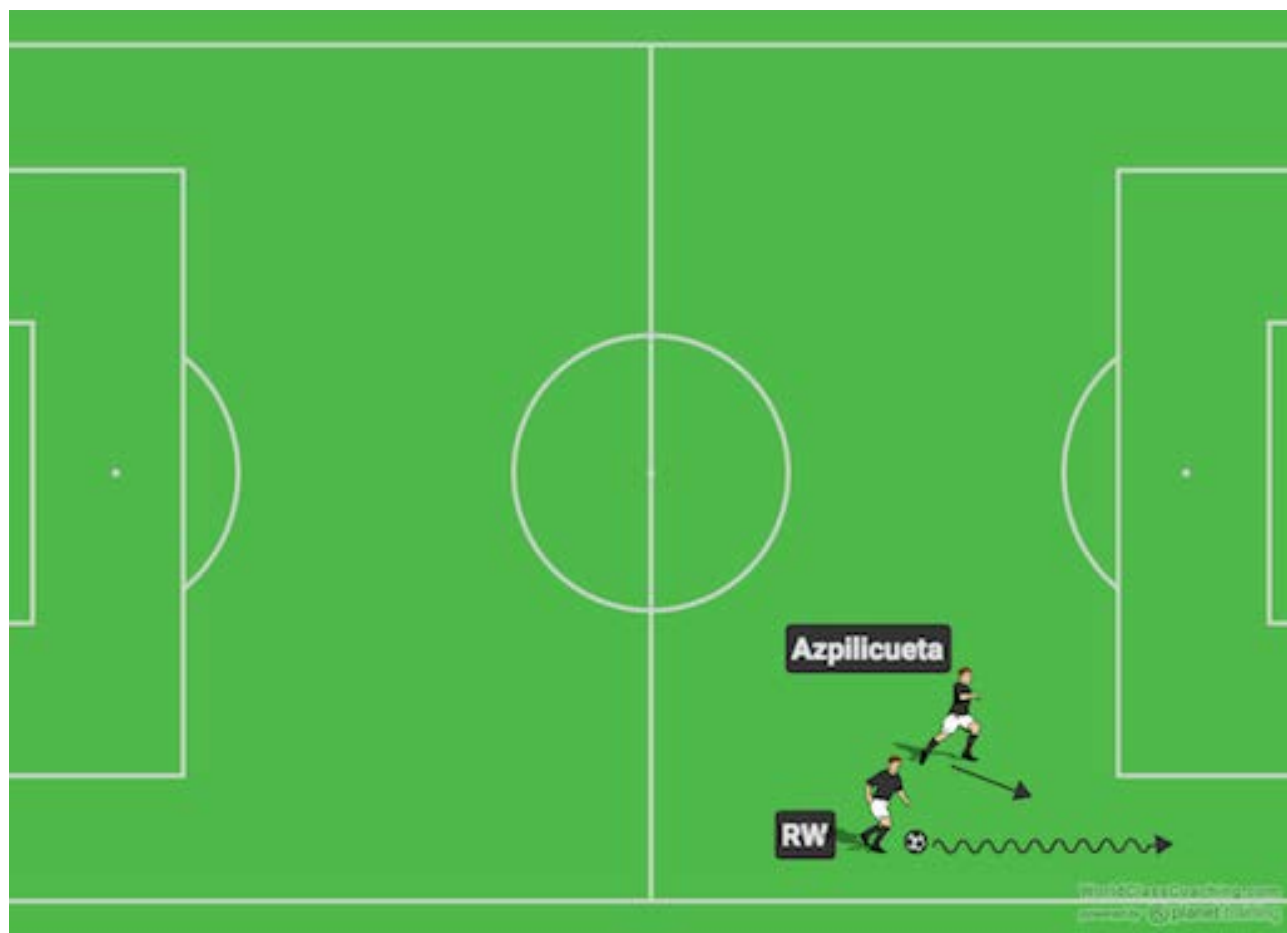
In this defensive situation, Otamendi is covering the center space, preventing Liverpool's inverted winger Salah from dribbling inside the center of the final third and directing him toward the sideline.



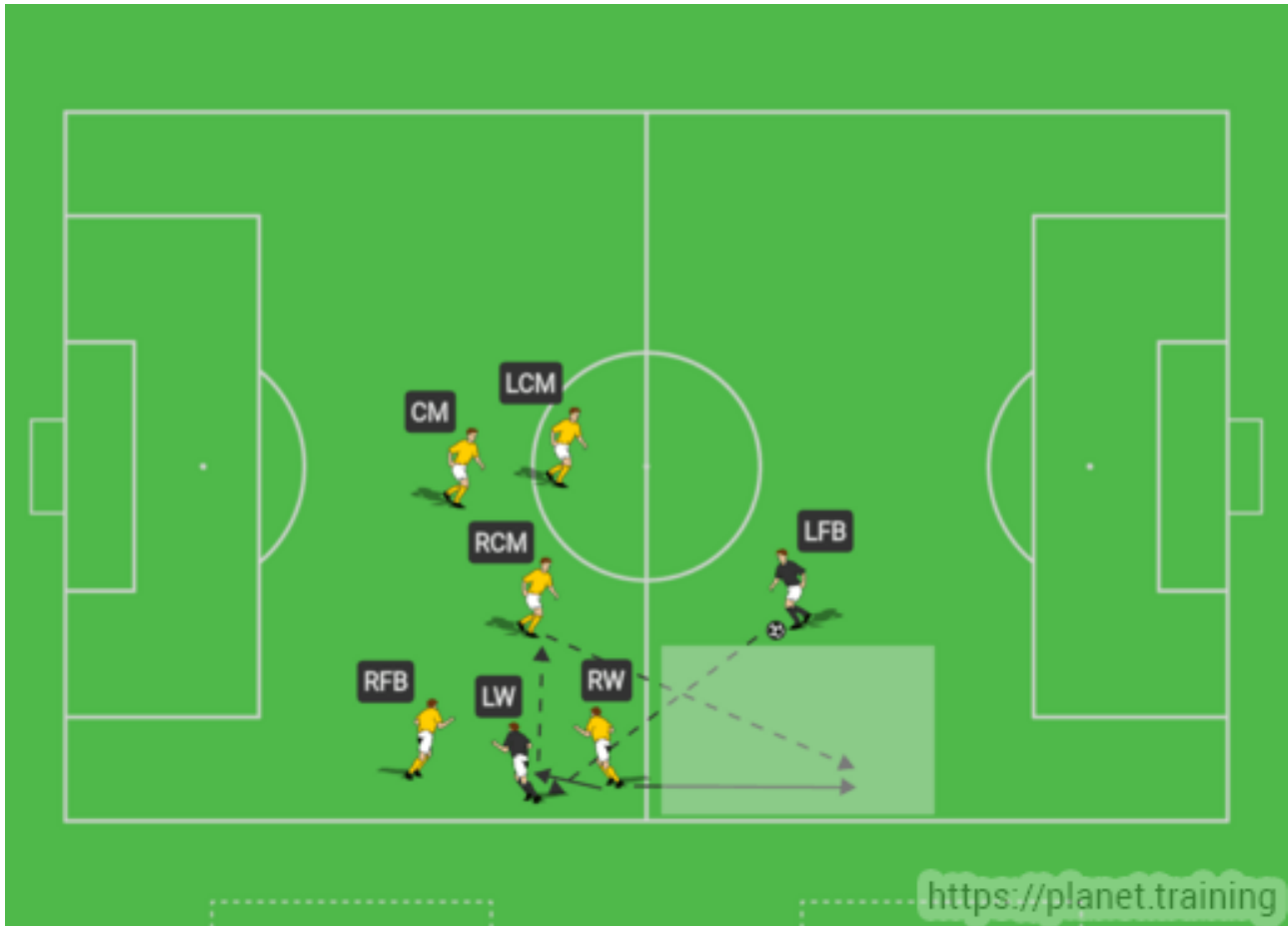
Salah is forced to play with his weak right foot along the flank and he loses the possession in the end.

If we still think about the inverted fullback as an inverted-foot player, an issue for him could be created by the traditional wingers, as those players often dribble the ball along the flank with the strong foot and then they try to send cross passes toward the penalty area.

In this situation the fullback is forced to defend with the weaker foot. Chelsea's defender is César Azpilicueta; when he plays as a right-footed left fullback, he is often forced to defend with his left foot and the traditional wingers may overcome him on the outside.



An issue related to the position of the modern inverted fullback, is the risk of overlapping runs for the players in front of them if their teammates lose possession in the middle third.



This can pose problems when defending as the opposition can double up the mark against the winger playing in front of the inverted fullback.



This move is very similar to the previous one, but Otamendi is on late when he covers the space and Salah is able to overlap behind him. If the opposition wingers are inclined to play near the sideline, the inverted fullbacks are forced to defend on their weaker foot and they may leave free spaces on the flanks.

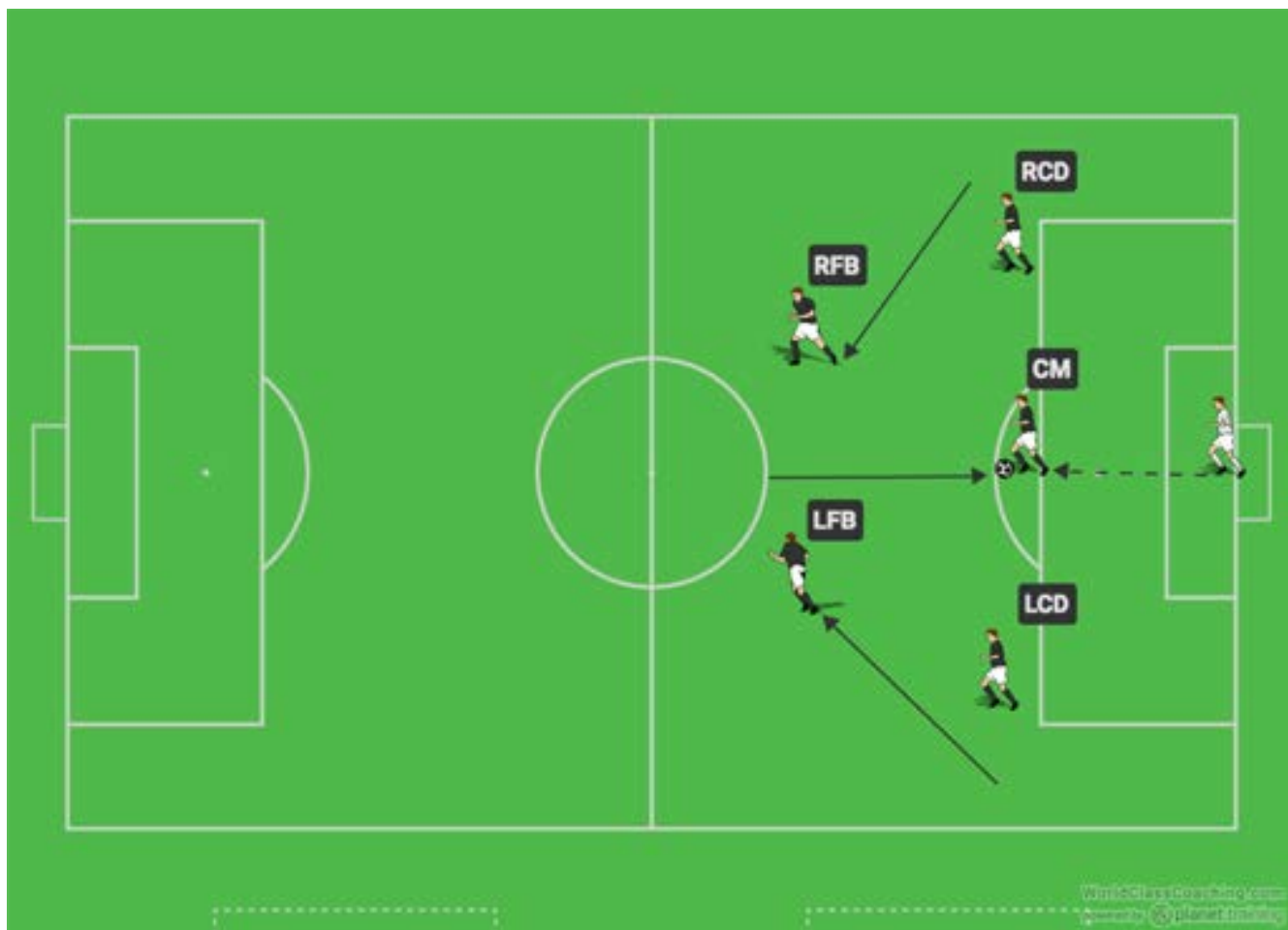
And here Salah is able to counter attack on the flank even if he is outnumbered.



We may then say that the inverted fullback is more efficient when the opposition team has players who like dribbling and running inside the field, as those kind of moves are already and easily protected.

Pep Guardiola's Manchester City plays with interesting ideas on how to fix these issues:

- The fullbacks move into the middle of the pitch whenever City has the possession





In this move Fernandinho drops back, even if the center back is in position to ensure numerical advantage 4 v 2, and to help the inverted fullback to play out.

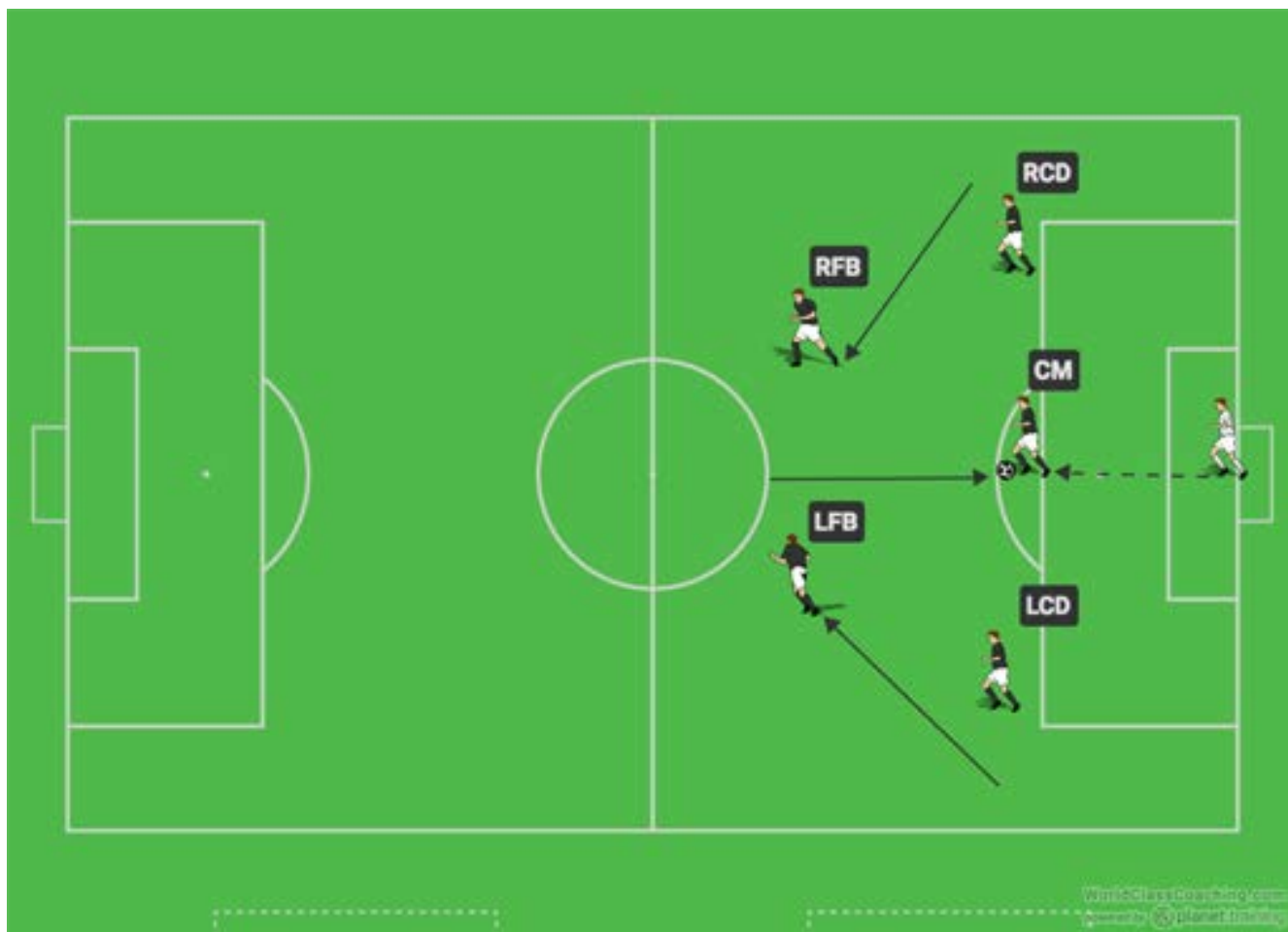


- The wingers push high up on the flanks to provide width





- The midfielders drop in between the two center backs to form a solid base of three defenders



The inverted fullbacks are able to man-mark the opposition's forwards moving inside during the previous building up phase,



and this placement of the formation reduces the risk of being caught out on the counter attacks, when they are on time, as we saw before.

If the inverted fullback is on late, and he can't mark the opponents while he's on the ball, the role of the balance midfielder becomes very important, as he provides the coverage of the free spaces on the flanks.



Moreover, if the wingers are able to play as high up the pitch as possible, forcing the opposition's fullbacks towards their own goal, they can prevent them from leaving their defensive positions.



In this move, De Bruyne is on the ball as center forward (he can be placed in that position, thanks to the balance center midfielder near the defense line) and Sterling is placed very wide on the right. All the opposition's midfielders are on late here.

The opposition left winger of the 1-4-3-3 formation of the opponent must run back from the final third to mark him on, as we are going to see in the next pages.

In this second example, Leroy Sanè is on the ball on the left; De Bruyne and Gundogan are placed very high on the same line of the forwards.



The right fullback and the right midfielder of the 1-4-3-3 opposition's formation are marking him.

This way 3 players are quite free on the weak side and counter attacks are again probably avoided, as only the center forward of the opposition is still high on the field; all the others are placed behind the ball line.

The risk of counter attacks should be avoided also because the opposition wingers are supposed to double mark the wide forwards, as Napoli's Insigne is doing against Sterling, trying to help his teammate, the left back Ghoulam.



Even if the possession can be recovered, it's very hard to counter attack, as only the center forward is again still placed high on the field.



The opposition midfielders are then supposed to mark the inverted fullbacks in the middle third during the building up phases of play.



In this first example, Allan, the right midfielder, is pressing Otamendi, closing the center spaces and the passing line toward the balance midfielder Fernandinho.

Danilo, the other fullback, is placed inside the right area of the middle third; if he had the possession, Hamsik and Insigne, the left midfielder and the left winger of the oppositions would have to try to put pressure against him.

De Bruyne and Gundogan are again placed between the opposition lines; if the passing lanes are not covered properly, they could receive, turn, and play freely toward the opposition goal.



In this second example, Otamendi is on the ball again inside the center area of the middle third and he's under the pressure of the playmaker of Napoli, Jorginho, who had to run toward him to avoid a forward pass. The other two midfielders, Hamsik and Allan would be probably on late against the opponents.



Here again, Danilo is on the ball, while he is playing very closed to the final third, and Hamsik must press him to avoid forward passes toward De Bruyne, who could dribble toward the penalty area and shoot on goal.



This last example is quite different from all the others; the right winger Calleon is placed very close to the inverted fullback and the right midfielder of the three is replacing his position on the flank to try to stay balanced.

But a clear space is available at the back of the left midfielder who has ran toward the center to equalize the number of players near the ball.

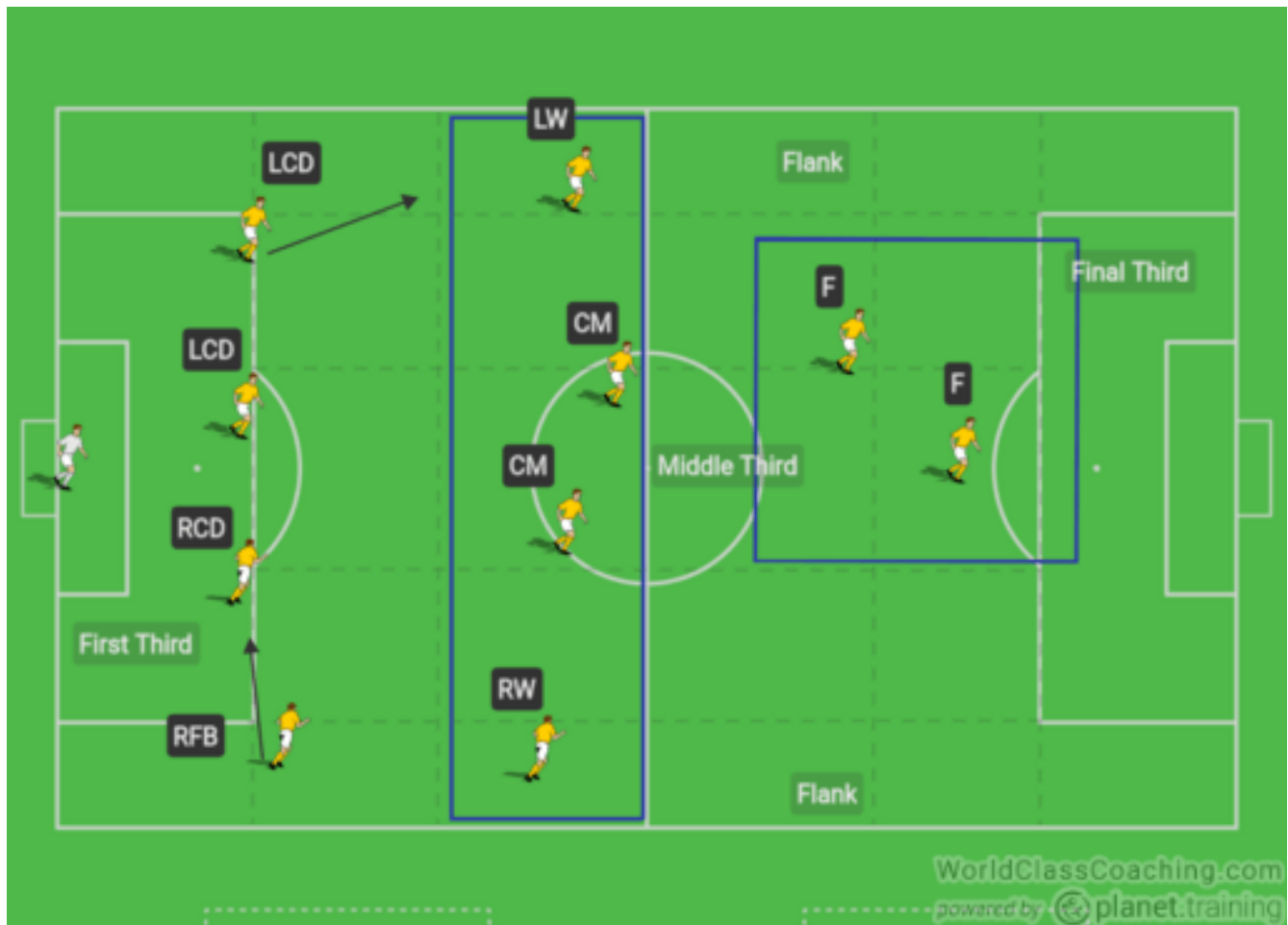
Prevention of the opposition's counter attacks and possession phases: the high pressure with equal number of players and the counter pressing

If we talk again about the development of the classic roles of the players on the pitch after the change of idea about the spaces on the field that Bielsa first and then Guardiola inspired during the recent years, like we did in the first volume, we now may say that also the defensive placement of the players does not depend on the role on the pitch, but from the principles of play of the team.

The main differences among all the formations of the starting lines were the defenses with the back four or the back three inside the 1-3-5-2 or the 1-3-4-3.

Let's have a brief look to the common rotations of the players inside the defense lines:

1-4-4-2: the back four stay usually on the same line and they move following their next teammate of the line, both if the defense is placed high or to defend the depth.



If the center defender runs forward, the other three move toward the center to cover the space and they are placed on two lines; here again, both if the defense is placed high or to defend the depth.



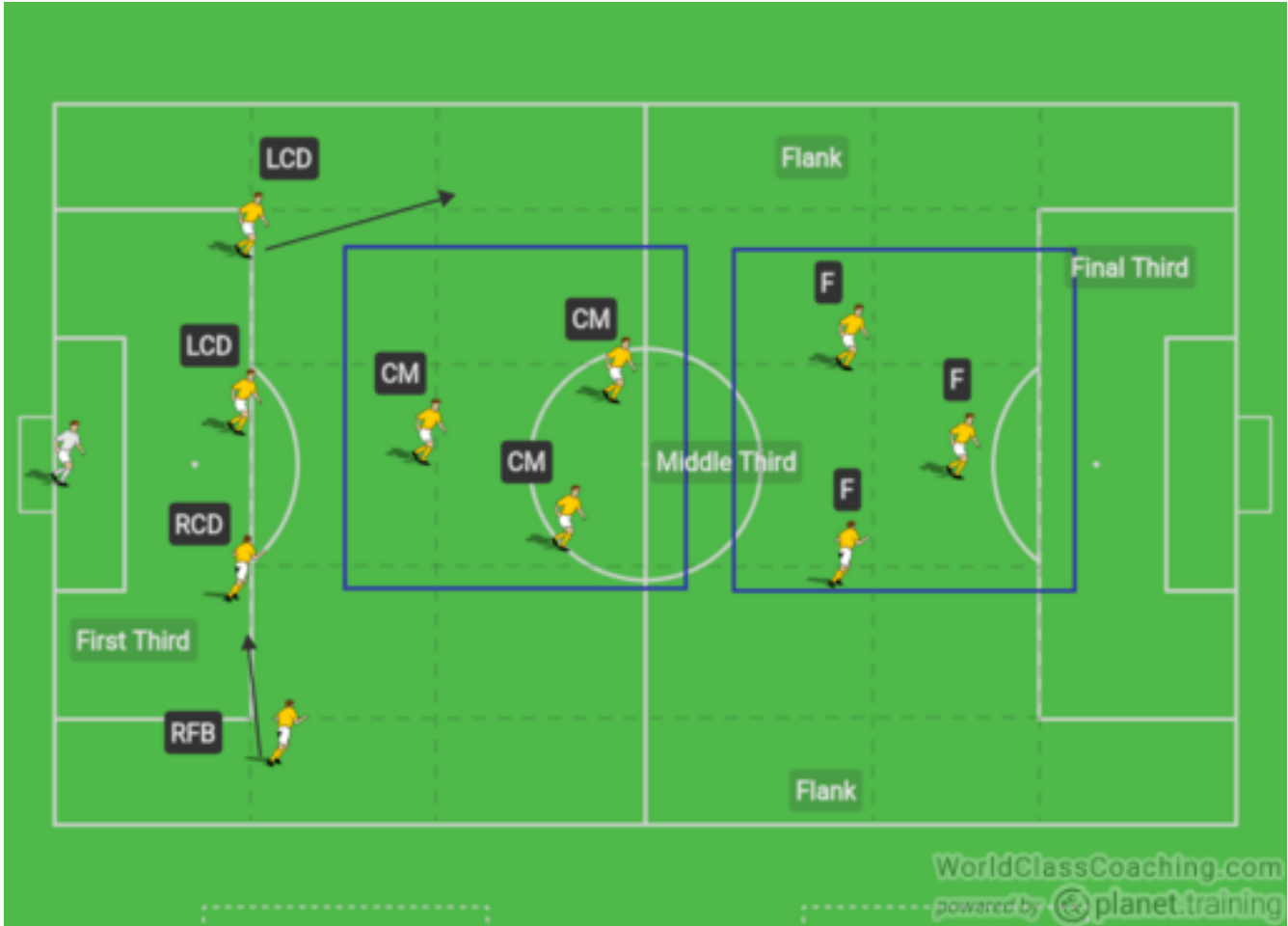
The center midfielders can be placed on the same line, like in the picture, or with a lower and an upper player in the center; but basically, the defensive runs don't change from this point of view.



These are interesting positions of the Man City back four; the inverted fullbacks are placed toward the center; their main goal seems to be to close forward passing lanes, rather than to send the opposition toward the side line.

And this is another proof of how the principles of play are more important than the roles; Pep Guardiola uses the inverted fullbacks both with the back four or the back three.

1-4-3-3: the main difference with the 1-4-3-3 formation is in the defense phase of the midfielders and of the forwards, as they usually defend as block both in the middle and on the flanks.



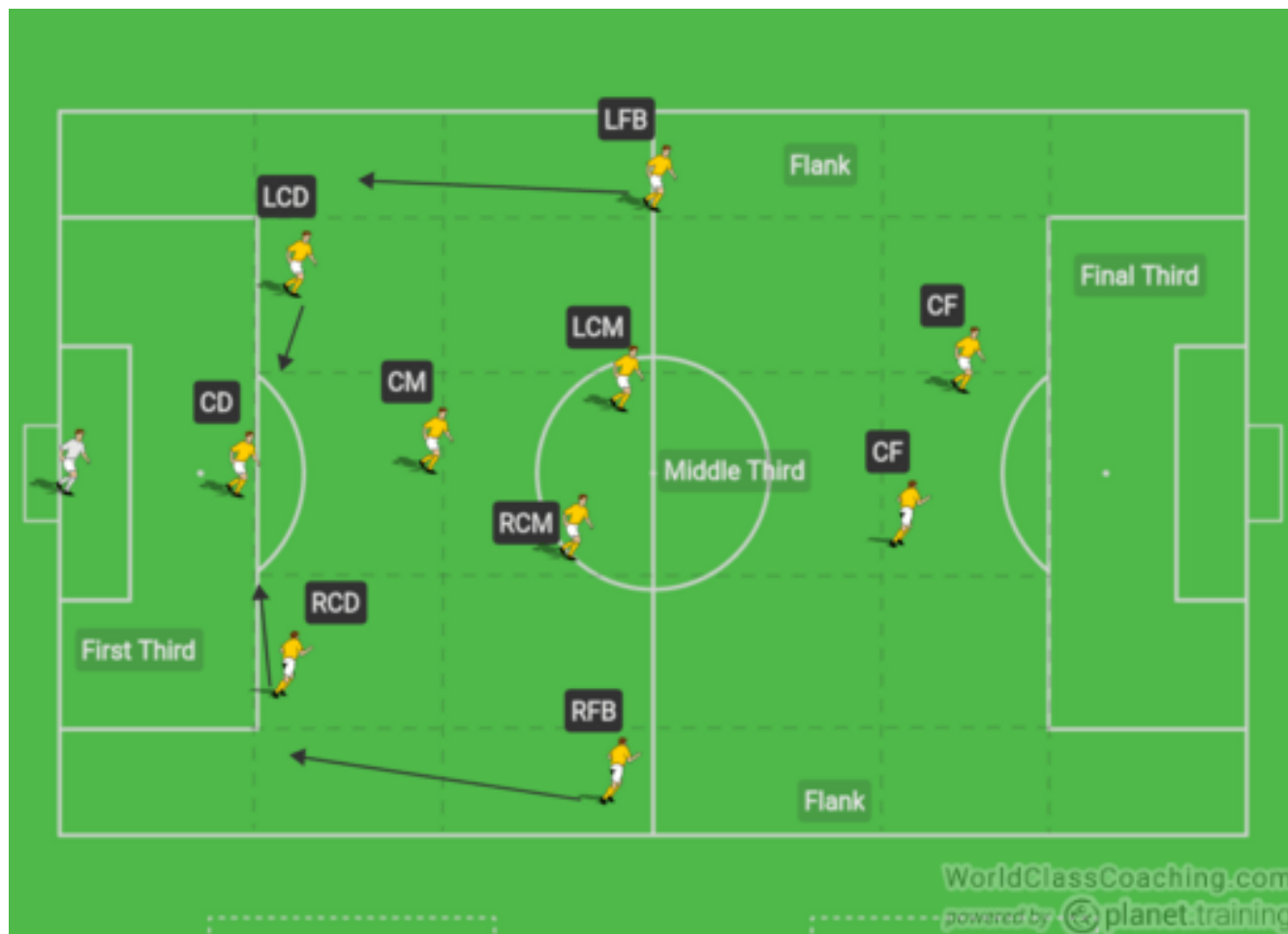
The general moves to defend the width or the depth are almost the same and the midfielders must save the area near the ball as block when the team is on the ball

1-3-5-2: if we look at the back three, generally three center defenders, they are generally helped by the fullbacks or by the wingers on the flanks. We can call them depending on the main attitude to attack or to defend.

When both the wingers play on the line of the defenders, the width is usually covered properly, and they work all together to stop the opposition's attack and forwards higher on the field.

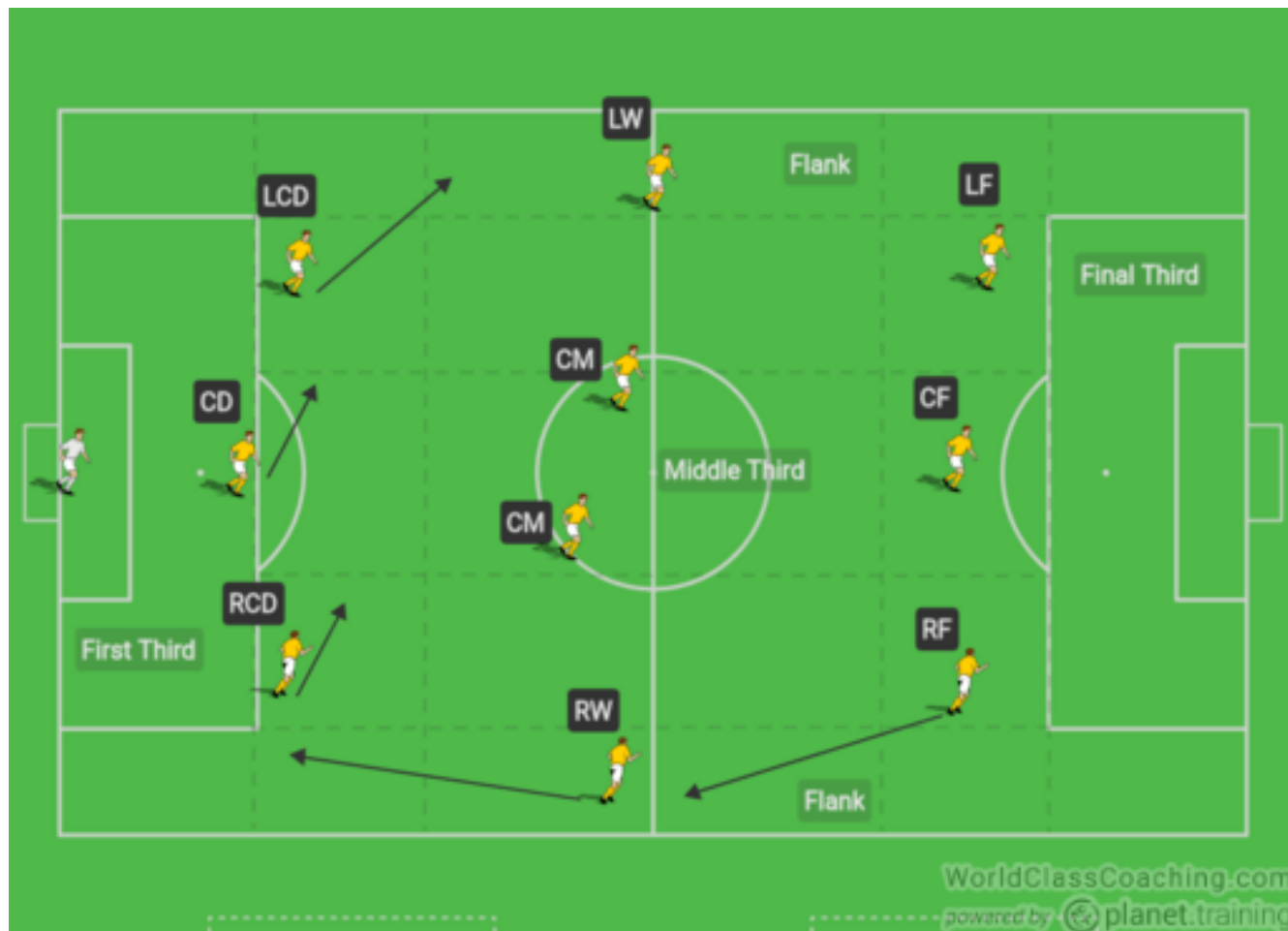
When they are not able to play this way, it could be very difficult to play the transitions to attack when the ball is won back, as almost seven or eight players are placed in the first third, as the three midfielders are supposed to help the defense.

The depth protection is always ensured by the three center defenders.

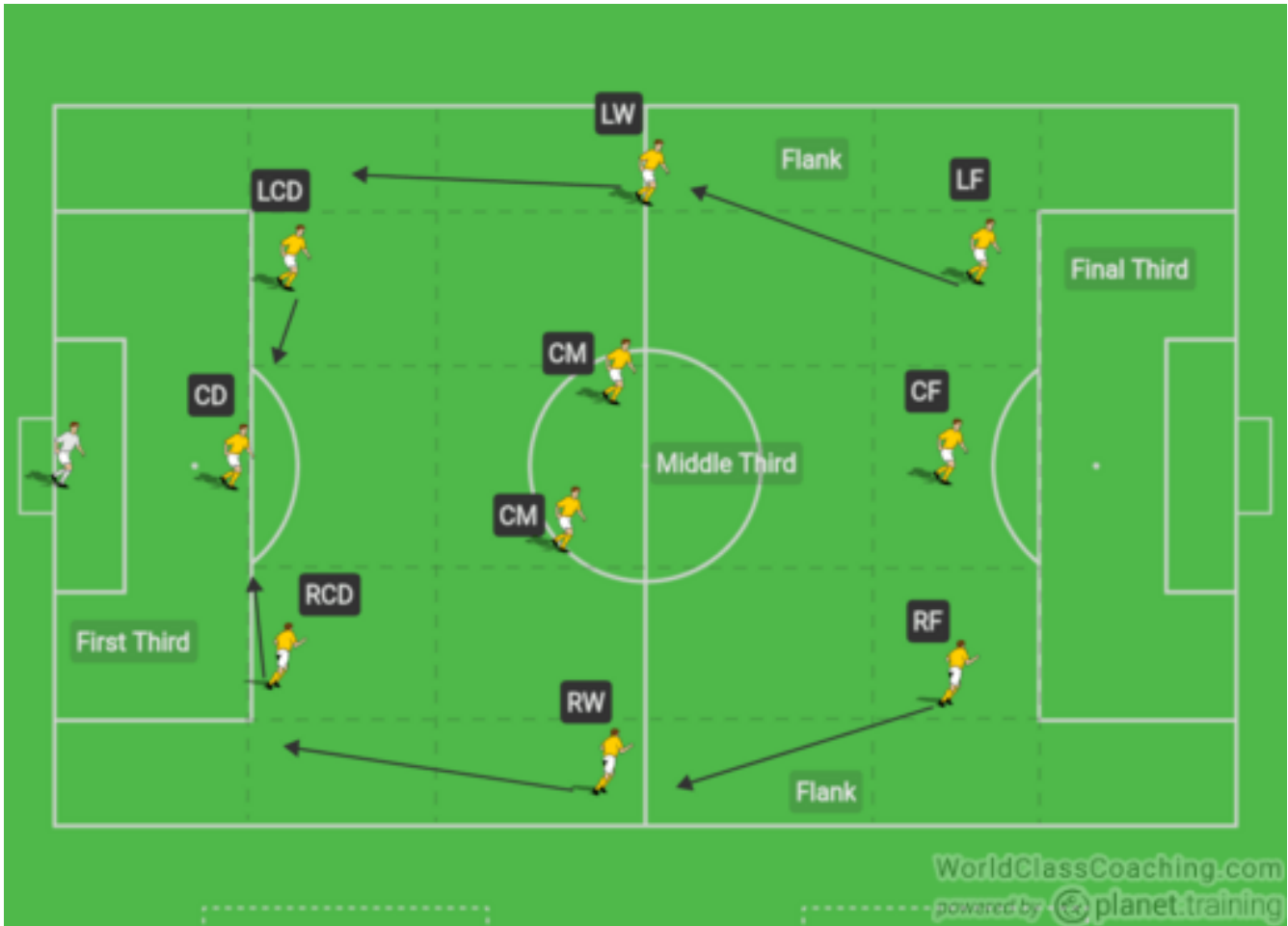


The back three have another usual development, when the defense line evolves in a line of four, with one winger who plays on the same line of the defenders; the width is now usually covered as a defense with four players, depending on the side of attack of the opposition.

The depth protection is ensured by the two center defenders.



The same process of defense can be found, as general tactic, in the 1-3-4-3 formation, used last season by Antonio Conte's Chelsea. Alonso used to play on the left and Moses on the right sides of the middle third formation, and David Luiz, Azpilicueta and Cahill as the back three.



These are two Chelsea's highlights of a Premier League match of last year against Manchester City: from the 1-3-4-3 formation when in possession,



to the 1-5-4-1 formation if the team was not in possession, with the wingers on the line of the defenders and the outer forwards on the same line of the midfielders.



But again, we must "thank" Pep Guardiola for believing in principles of play rather than in the roles on the field. Principles of play are followed both during the possession phases of play and during the defense phases of play.

High pressure with equal number of players and counter pressing are the main principles of play that allow Pep's Manchester City to play with inverted fullbacks and to revolutionize the idea of defense phase and of players' positions.

If we want to sum up this concept, we could say: defend with common principles of play rather than with positions and roles.

1) Press high when the opponent is building up. Two of three midfielders, De Bruyne and Gundogan, are playing a 3 v 3 duel on the same line of the forwards. Both the center defenders and the playmaker of the opposition are under pressure.

The wingers, Sanè and Sterling, are covering the half spaces and the chance of vertical passes together with the center balance midfielder Fernandinho.

Sanè and Sterling would be able to press both toward the center against the opposition midfielders Allan and Hamsik, and toward the opposition right and left fullbacks.



These positions and pressure tactics couldn't be possible without the support of the inverted fullbacks inside the center spaces in the middle third; if they weren't there, there would be space for the opposition to be exploited behind the wingers and to counter attack.

Here again a 2 v 2 duel is played on the opposition's center backs and a potential 3 v 3 duel on the opposition midfield trio; and again, Gundogan and De Bruyne can press high thanks to the inverted fullbacks in the middle third.



A 3 v 3 duel is being played against the opposition goalkeeper and the center backs. De Bruyne and Gundogan are playing as center forwards here.



When the first pressure is overcome, the inverted fullbacks are ready to play against the opposition midfielders or forwards in the middle third, together with the balancing midfielder.



Danilo is very high on the right here to be close to the opposition left winger, and Delph and Fernandinho are on Calleon, and they are ready to play a 2 v 1 duel against him. Having the first pressure line overcome by the opposition means to have half of the players on the other side of the ball, and the inverted fullbacks have now a very important role of balance.



They usually mark the opposition forwards on (Delph is on Calleon, the right winger and Danilo runs toward the center to close the space that could be exploited by Insigne, the left inverted winger of Napoli); this way, they allows the five players, who are usually placed very high on the field, to cover the spaces between the lines and then to be placed between the midfield and the attacking lines of Napoli.

2) Equal number of players near the ball in the middle third. The concept of balance for Guardiola is again very revolutionary during these seasons as Manchester City manager.

To be balanced means to have the same number of players near the ball and another player near it, but out of the high density area.



In these kinds of duels, the inverted fullbacks become very important. A 3 v 3 duel is being played on the right side of Man City here, and the right fullback Danilo is taking part as third player on the ball, together with Sterling and De Bruyne.

Fernandinho is just out of the ball's area and he can create a bigger 4 v 4 duel if the opposition midfielder receives the ball.

The opposite fullback Delph can cover the space against the nearest forward of the opposition, being already placed in the center of the middle third. The inverted fullbacks become balance players in this defensive tactical idea.

In this second example Fernandinho is recovering the space from the center of the middle third to create a 2 v 2 duel and the fullback is a balancing player just out of the ball's area, covering spaces that could be exploited by the opposition's winger.



Let's now have a look to this move: a general 7 v 6 duel with numerical advantage situation for Manchester City can be noticed inside the opposition half. A double 2 v 1 duel is played on the ball (Sanè and Gundogan against Allan) and on the easiest passing option for the opponents in possession (Fernandinho and Delph against Callejon).



These following moves are two examples of numerical advantage on the ball (3 v 1), where the left fullback Delph ensures balance in the first example,



and he takes part to the pressure phase during the second one, where the opposition possession phase is directed backwards.



3) Counter pressing phase. As the inverted fullbacks are often placed in the middle third and high on the field, they also take active part in the transition to defend phases. These phases for Guardiola teams mean moreover counter pressing phases.



They can play as balance players, if the first or the second opponent in possession is already under the pressure of a teammate, like Delph in this move, where Sanè is already on the ball and two other midfielders, De Bruyne and Gundogan, are very close to the ball as well.



In this second example, Delph on the left and Danilo on the right, are saving the defense half together with Fernandinho, the balance center midfielders, during a 2 v 2 duel on the ball.

As we already realized in the first pages of this e-book, as the inverted fullback plays usually in the center during the possession phases, when the ball is lost they are able to mark or to put pressure on the opposition forward, to avoid counter attacks first of all. For this reason they can take active part to the counter pressing phase, marking or disturbing the opposition attackers, if forward passes are played.



In this move, Delph is sprinting toward his direct opponent, Callejon, to press him as he receives the first pass after having the possession back.





In this second example Delph is pressing the oppoisiton midfielder, Allan, to send him backwards and prevent him from playing out.

It's very interesting to notice how the fullbacks alternate their positions, depending on the side where the counter pressing is being carried out.



Daniol, the right fullback, is taking part to a wide duel to win the ball back,



and the left fullback Delph is covering the center space in the middle third, as the first pressure has been overcome.

Another interesting point of view is the 1 v 1 mark he brought against Calleon for the whole match against Napoli, during this 2017/2018 Champions League match.



Here Delph is closing the space toward the center again, during a similar move, where the first pressure was overcome.

So, if we sum up all the characteristics of a modern "Inverted Fullback," or if we sum what Gaurdiola made of an originally wide and defensive role, we could write:

- 1) he is able to recover the space during the opposition counter attacks, starting form a center and advanced position,



as well as to play as a center back during the defense phase, if needed.



2) He takes part in the building up phases of play in the first third



and he can play out toward the middle third.



3) he can be a playmaker to manage the second balls in the middle third.



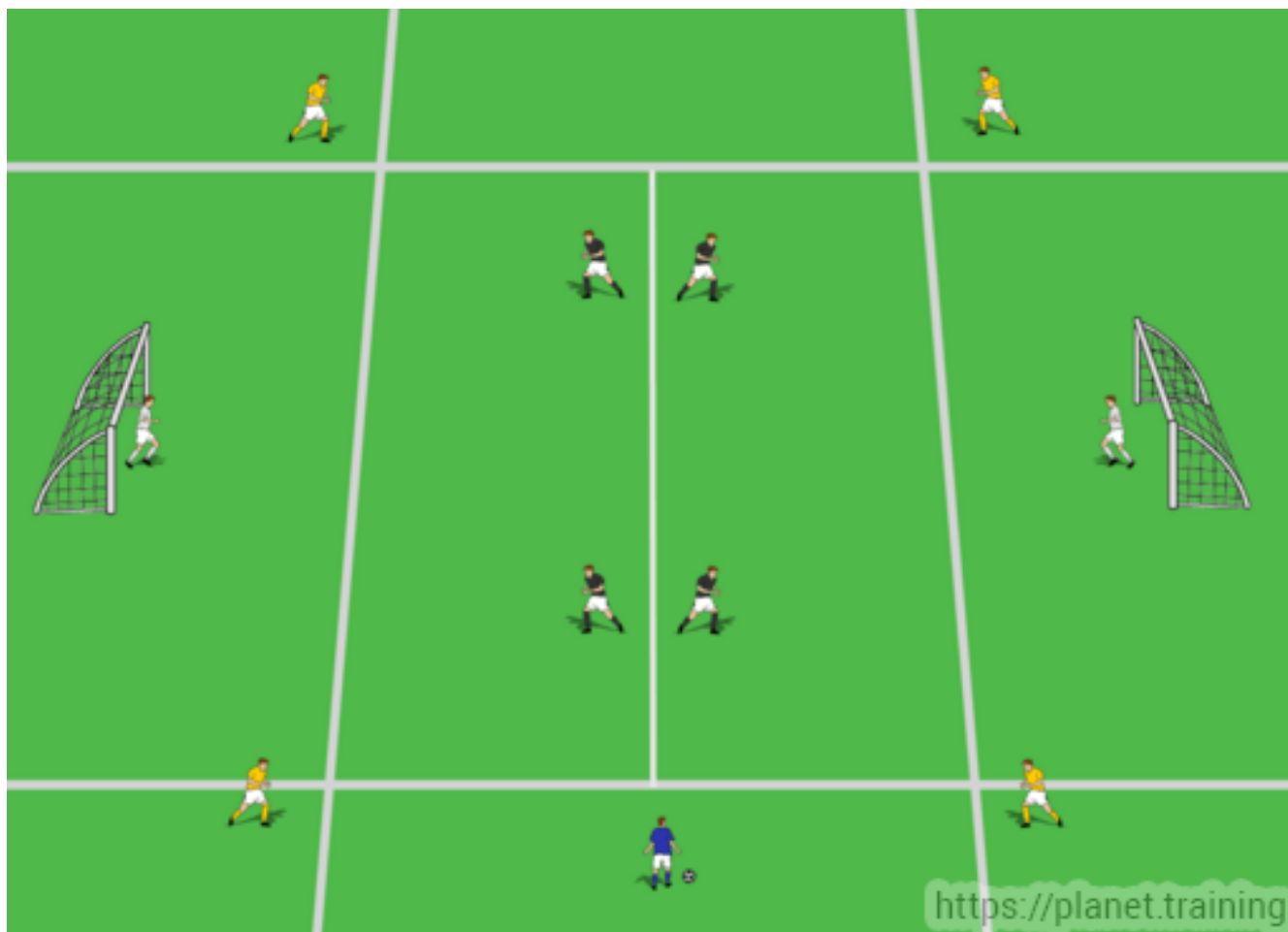
4) He is able to be decisive in the final third.



5) He can provide balance during the finishing phases of the possession.



Exercise 1: Alternate 2 v 2 small sided game with goalkeepers

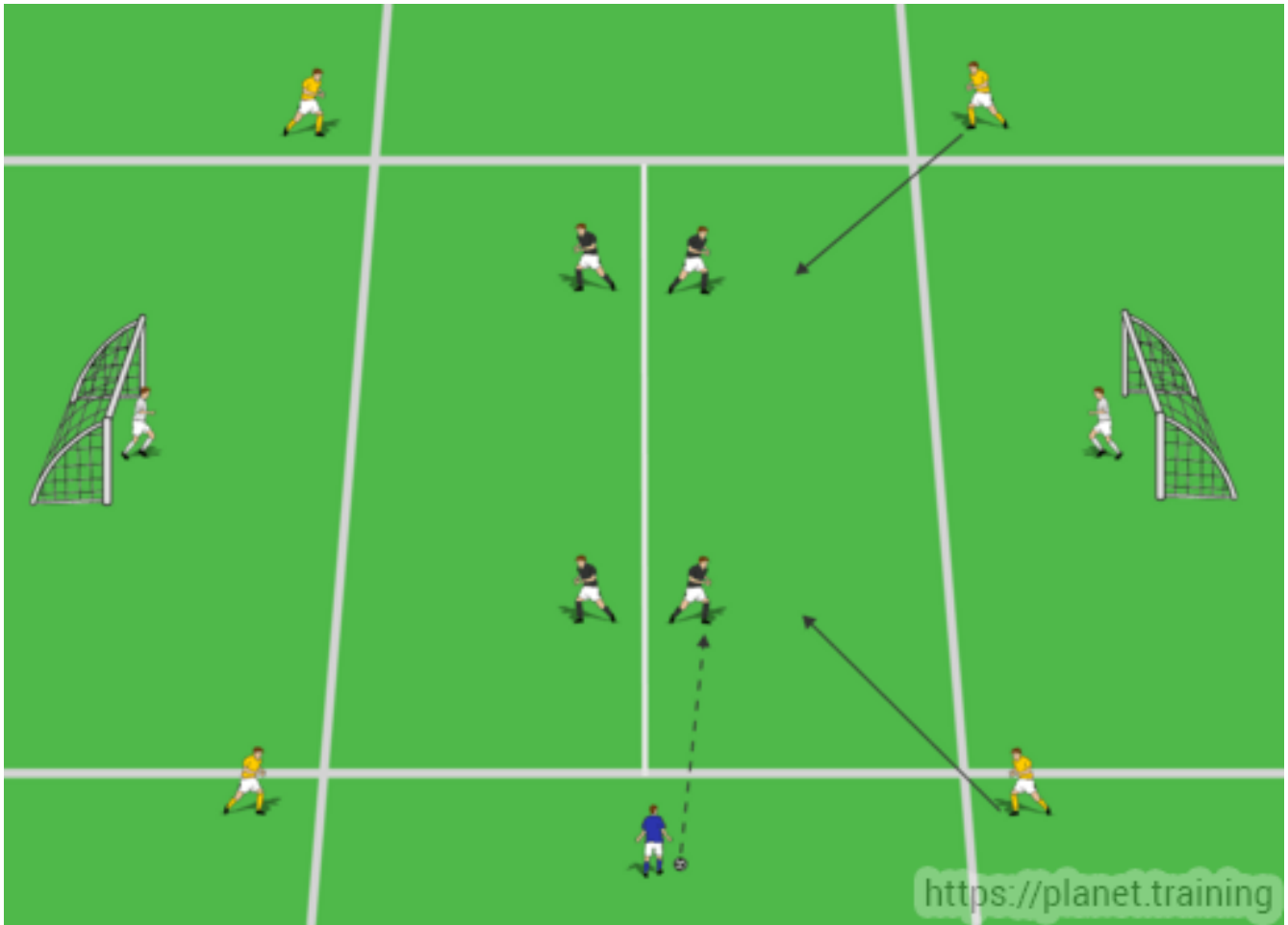


A rectangular small sided pitch is divided into different areas:

- two center areas
- two first/final thirds
- four corner areas
- two flanks

Four attacking players are placed inside the center areas and four defenders start from the corner areas, two goalkeepers are saving the goals.

The coach starts the exercise



The coach decides where to kick the ball between the center areas; this way the first direction of play is found out too.

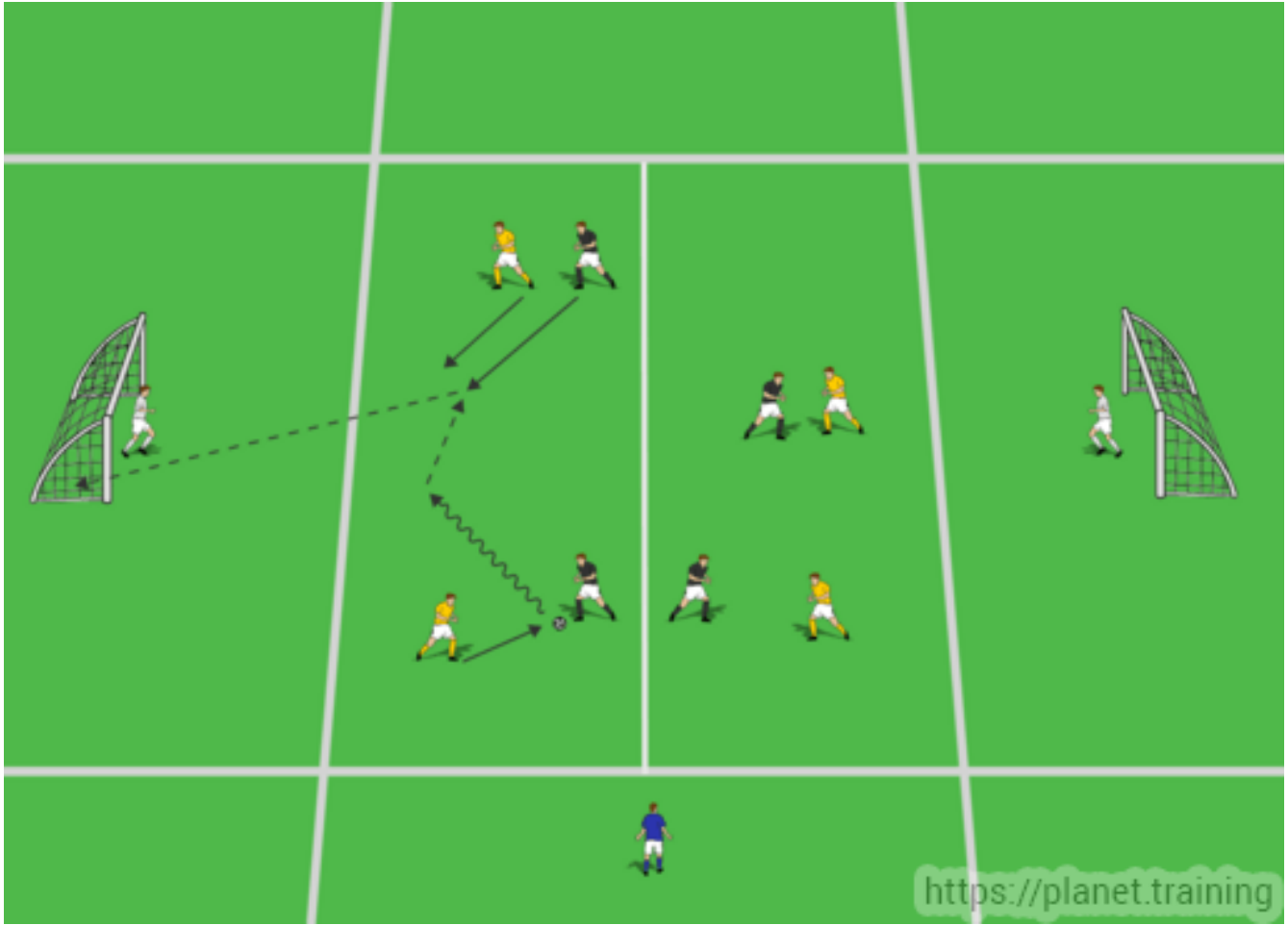
The couple of players now in possession must keep the ball inside their half of center area against the defenders, who run inside from the corners to put pressure and to save the goal as fast as possible.

These players are the inverted fullbacks, who try to close down the center spaces against the opposition forwards.



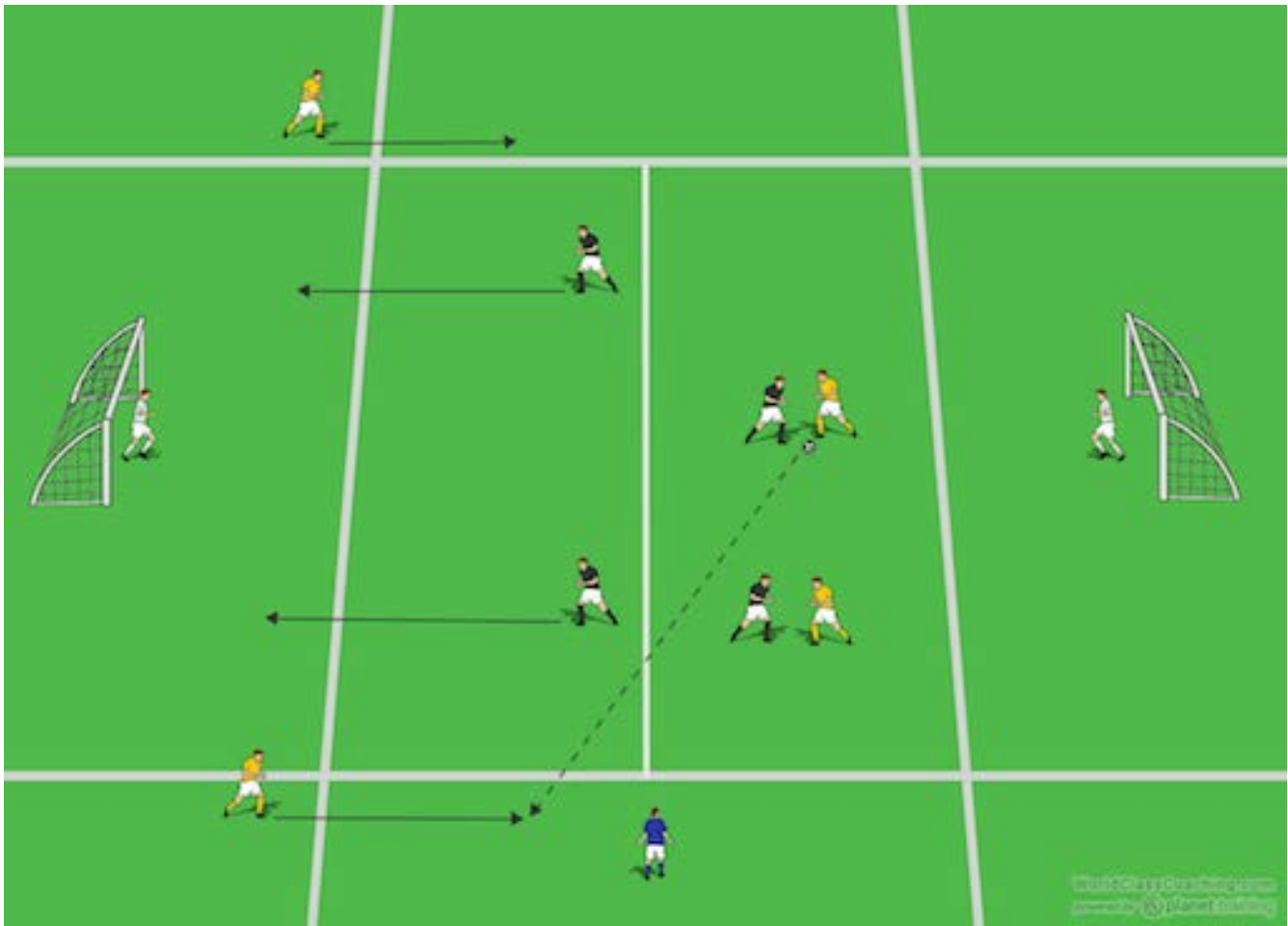
If the yellow defenders win the ball, they pass it toward the other couple of black players inside the opposite half of the center area.

The second couple of yellow defenders must now run inside to put pressure and to save the goal.



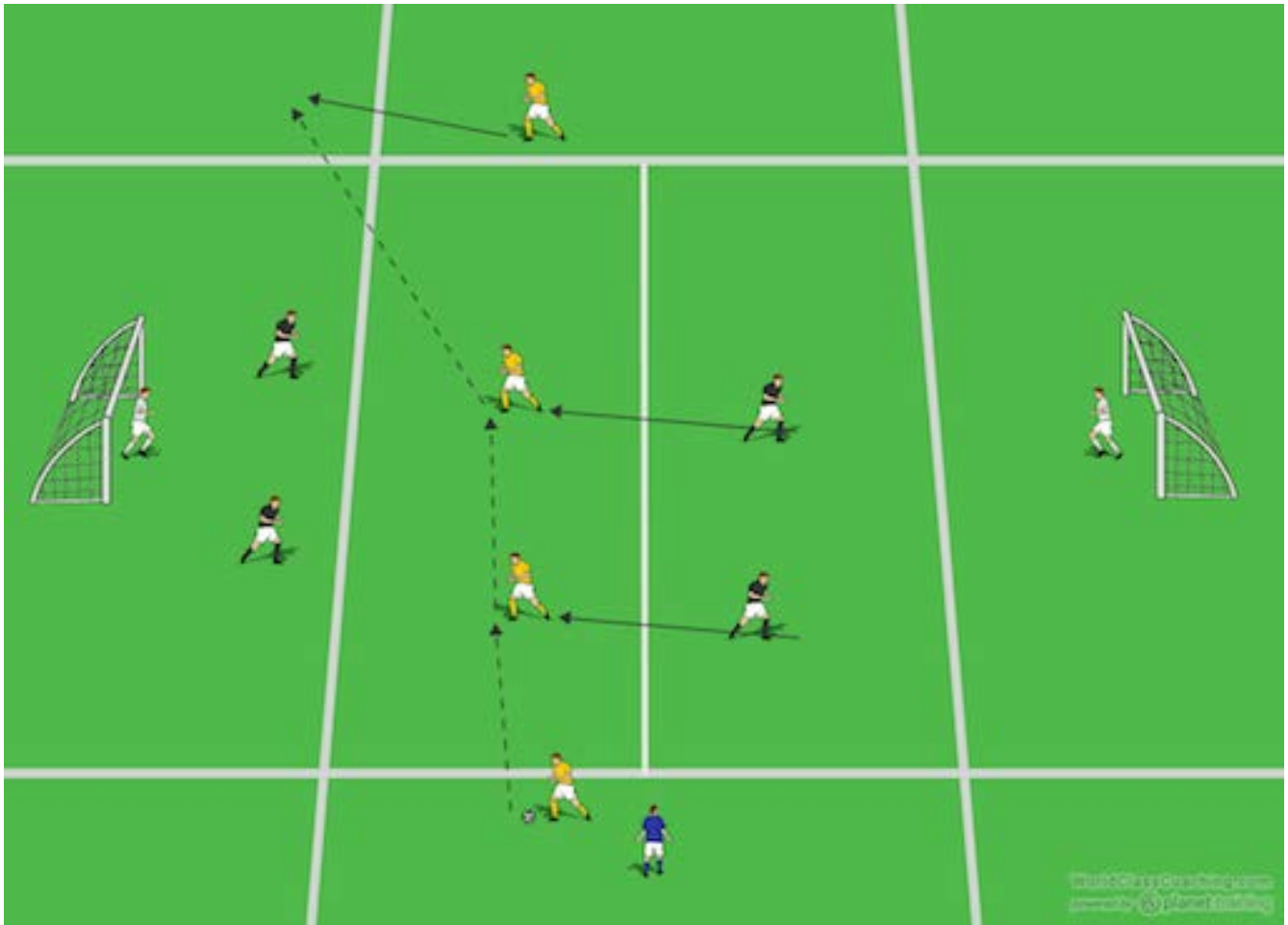
Again, the forwards must finish as soon as possible, but they can shoot only if both of them touched the ball and only if they don't play out of the area.

Variation: creation of alternate numerical advantage 4 v 2 as transitions to attack



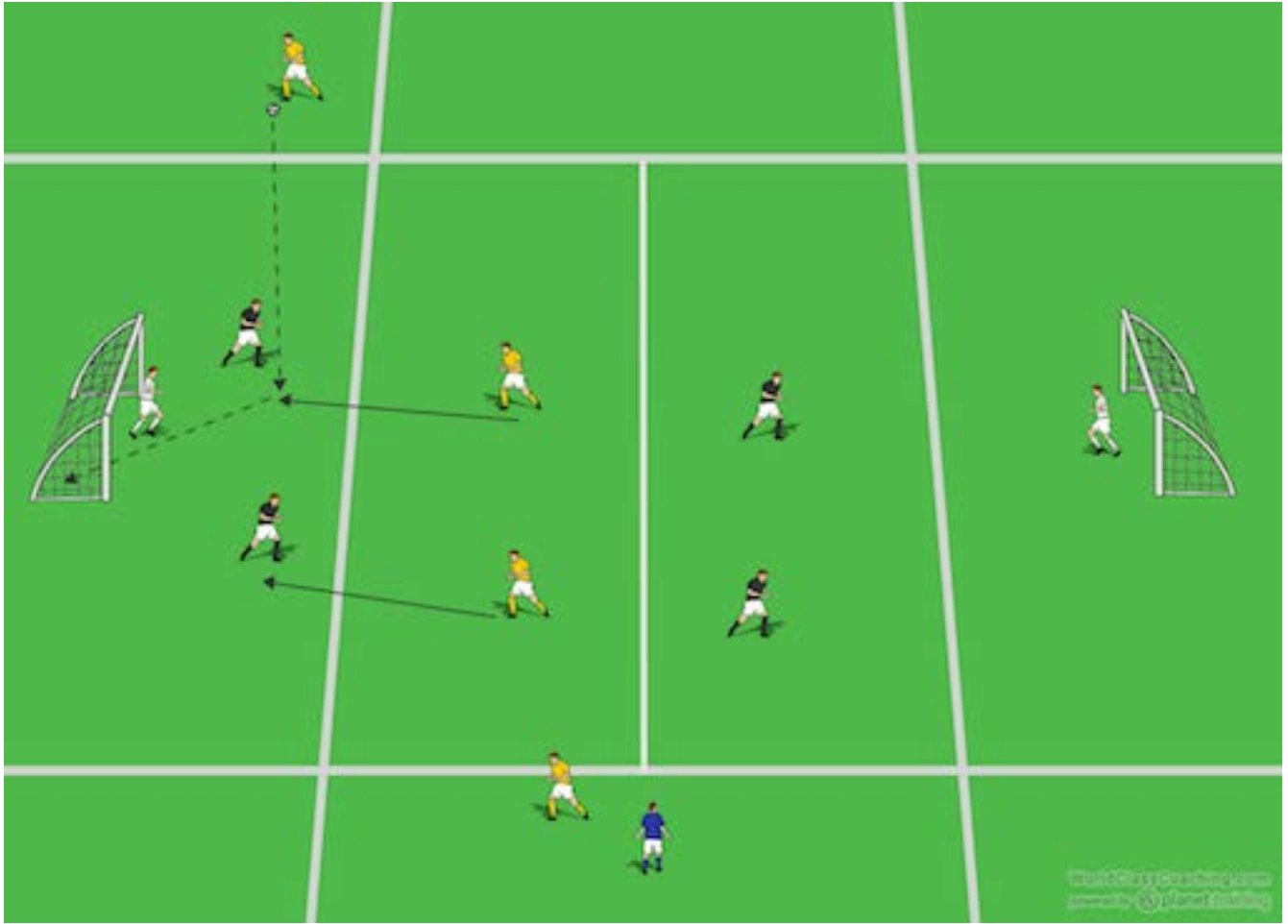
If the first couple of yellow defenders win the ball, they pass it toward the other couple of yellow players, who are dropping back to receive on the flanks, to ensure the possession.

At the same time, the opposite couple of black players must run toward the goal to save the final third as they are now playing outnumbered 4 v 2.

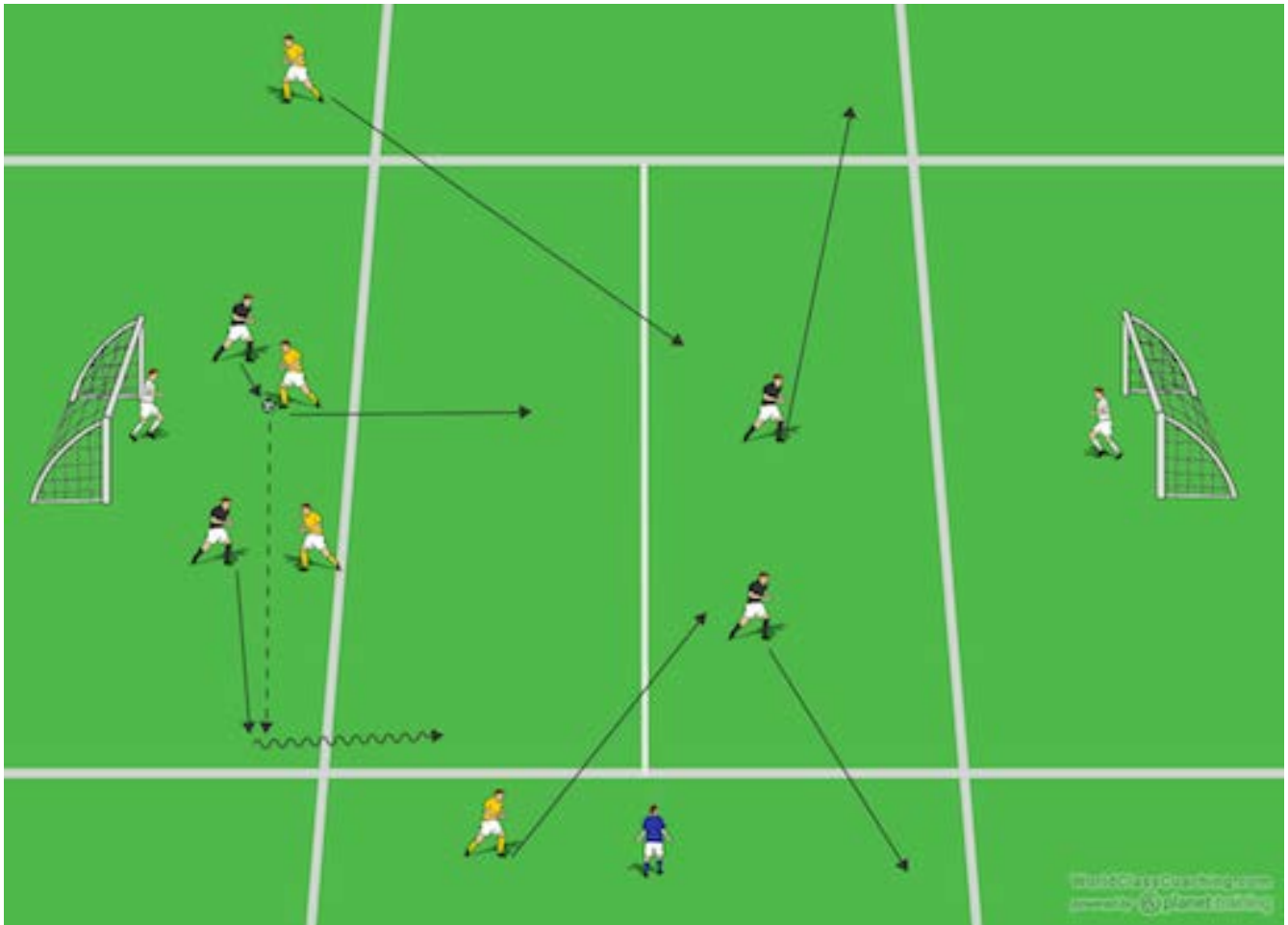


The goal for the players now in possession is to build up and to switch side of play toward the opposite flank against the pressure of the black players who lost the possession.

The inverted fullbacks must put pressure against the opposition possession, dropping back.

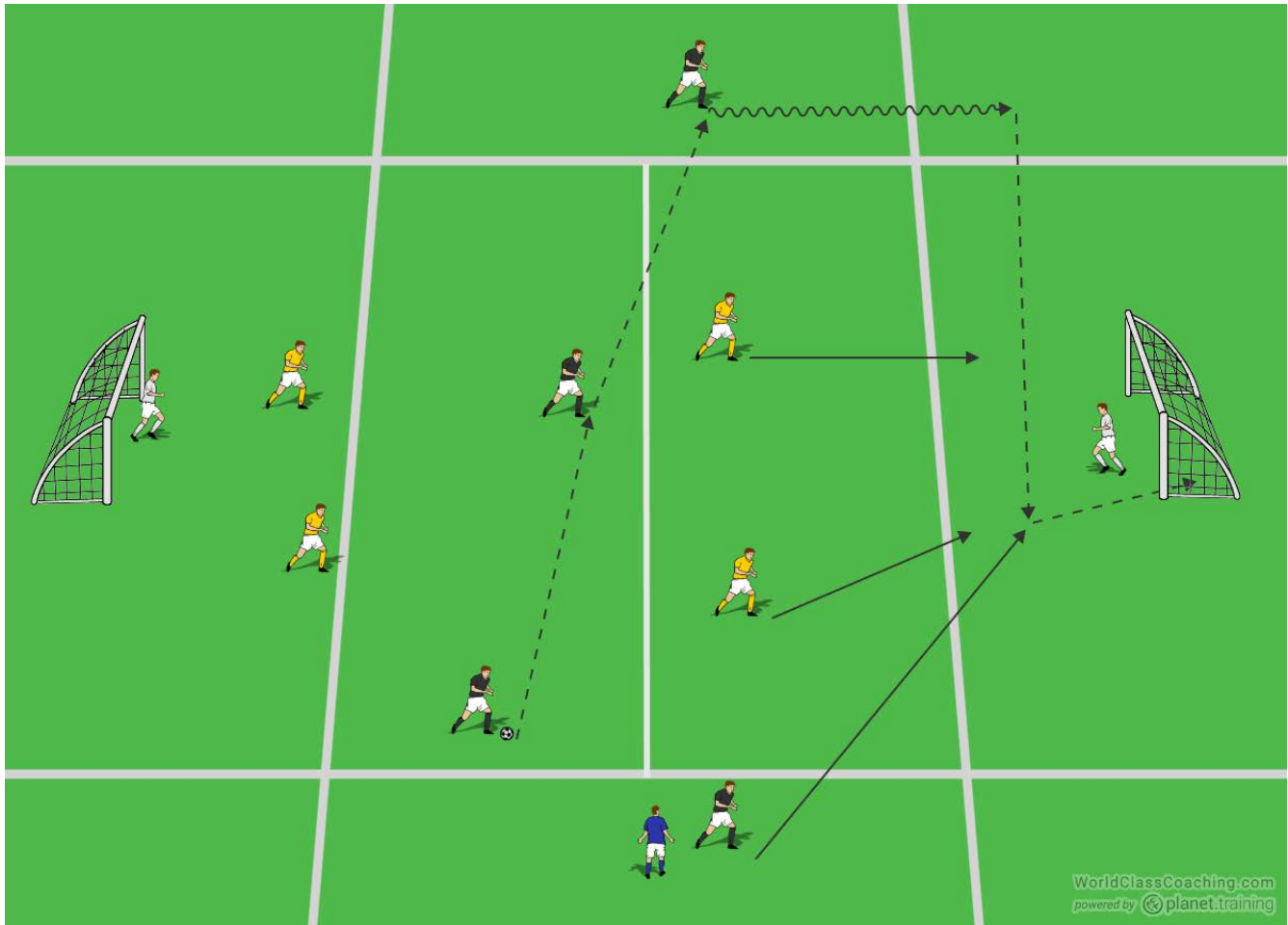


The center players must finish inside the final third from a cross pass.



If the black players win the ball back again, they can counter attack playing 4 v 2, paying attention not to be offside while managing the possession.

The yellow players on the flanks must run toward their first third to cover the space and to save the goal.



The goal for the players now in possession is to counter attack and to allow the opposite outer player to finish from a cross pass inside the final third.

Eye on:

- Timing of pressure in the first 2 v 2 duel
- The reaction speed to defend the half of middle third in the second 2 v 2 duel
- Skills to defend the final third when outnumbered in the first 4 v 2 duel
- Skills to cover the space and save the goals against the opposition counter attacks

Exercise2: 6 + gk v 5 and 2 v 2 + gk



This exercise is set-up inside the penalty area and inside an outer rectangular area in front of a goal. The total space is equal to a third of a pitch or just few length yards more. The pitch is as wide as the penalty area

Six defenders are placed in a 4 - 2 formation inside the penalty area and five attackers are placed inside there too.

Two forwards of the yellow team are placed inside the rectangular area and two of the black one start from the lower corners of the rectangle.

Both the regular goals are covered by a goalkeeper.



The goalkeeper of the yellow team passes the ball to a teammate to start the exercise; the goal for the yellow team is to build up and to play out, passing the ball toward the couple of forwards inside the rectangle.

The black team must press the opponents, trying to be balanced inside the penalty area placing a back player among the five.



The forwards of the yellow team must receive the ball from one of the advanced players of the 4 - 2 formation.

As they receive, two black players, the inverted fullbacks, can run inside and press the opponents to avoid the finishing stage of the move, creating a 2 v 2 duel.



The yellow forwards must score in the additional regular goal.



If a black "inverted fullback" is able to recover the ball, he can dribble out of the rectangle and towards the penalty area to equalize the number of players of the first duel. A 6 v 6 is now created.



The black "inverted fullback" must play outside the penalty area to provide balance and to be a passing option for his team.

The goal for the team in possession is to score as fast as possible through quick passing combinations.



If the yellow players, who are now in the defensive phase, are able to recover the possession, they pass the ball toward the outer rectangle, where a 2 v 1 duel is now played to finish.

The balance "inverted fullback," must try to prevent the finishing phase of the opposition, playing outnumbered 1 v 2.

Eye on:

- Timing of pressure during the first phase of play
- The reaction speed to defend the rectangle area in the second 2 v 2 duel
- Skills to recover the possession and to organize a transition to attack
- Skills to defend outnumbered in the last outnumbered 2 v 1 duel of the balance player