

WIN WITH **DEFENSIVE** PRESSURE



by Luca Bertolini

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Introduction

The first idea of defensive pressure: Arrigo Sacchi AC Milan

"My arrival in Milan was very difficult. Meeting the team was very difficult, there was mistrust, but not prevention fortunately. I was used to saying different things about soccer, about the mentality to be placed on the field and about the planning of training sessions.

They thought I was a heretic coach. The environment of soccer and some of the journalists considered me subversive, different, an opponent. I was causing distress to their leadership and their role as holders of old-fashioned knowledge; on the other side, the young and the less conservative soccer people looked at me with interest." (Arrigo Sacchi)

Sacchi was the coach of the Italian 2nd league team during the 1986-87 season and his AC Parma defeated Liedholm's AC Milan two times; the first one during a summer friendly match and the second one in a national cup match. AC Parma zonal marking and strong pressure made AC Milan's chief Silvio Berlusconi "fall in love" with him as he wanted to sign him no matter what.

The Milan of Arrigo Sacchi was born during the summer of 1987 and that team has changed the modern history of soccer. Even today, the most popular soccer philosophies are based on the fundamental ideas of Sacchi.

Guardiola, Mourinho, Bielsa, Ancelotti, Klopp, Simeone, Sarri--everyone studied him, and everyone recognized his importance in their soccer training and playing philosophy; they developed the ideas in their own way, but the soccer that is played today at a high level is the one originally thought of by the last great coach-philosopher of Italian football.

Before Sacchi, all the Italian teams played with a "mixed zone." Trapattoni's Juventus FC and Gigi Radice's Turin were the most popular teams that were using those tactics at the end of the '70s and the first half of the '80s. They required the players to cover the spaces and to mark the opponent systematically and at the same time. Sacchi was a revolution; he played with a "zonal marking."

Sacchi won the league in his first attempt in 1987-1988, without Marco Van Basten, as he was injured for most of the season. Then he won two Champions Leagues and two Intercontinental Cups in a row during the following seasons.

Sacchi required his players to be active during the defensive phases of play through strong pressure against the opposition. The goal was to play with a zonal marking team defensive phase. The bases of everything were intelligence, concentration, a right placement of the players on the field and the skills of the players to choose the right movements. The defensive phase always started from the forwards who had the task of putting pressure against the opposition defenders while playing.

The second interesting point of his style of play was the offside trick that was a direct consequence of the pressure on the opposition; that was the first idea of defense running forward.

The biggest victory of Arrigo Sacchi was to convince those great players to follow him. The key to success of that team was the pressure and the ability to remain short and small on the field--the space between the defensive line the attacking line was small.

Sacchi removed the back free player and he placed four defenders on one moving line that was flat only when the ball was played in midfield and in possession of the opponents. The first reference of the defense placement was the ball, the second reference was teammates' placement, and third, the opponents.

The very basis of all this was the "team." The player needed to express himself within the team and inside a precise order set by the coach. He wanted clever men to be able to understand what he asked and generous men to make their intelligence useful for the team.

Note that the goalkeepers could catch the ball with hands after a back pass at that time. When we talk about pressure, we mean pressure against the possession phase and the attacking phase of the opposition; in the middle third and in the first third. The defense line was always very high even inside the opposition half.

Sacchi AC Milan defensive principles of play

High defense back four line. The basic formation was a 1-4-4-2 with the three lines of field players very close to one another. The line of defenders was always placed very high on the field, defending forward and using the offside tactic systematically.

The high defense allowed more space and time to be placed correctly, prevent space closures, to be short and close on the field, avoiding any attempt of opponent transitions through pressure and creating chances for transitions to attack.



We may say that the defense line attacked the "opposition's uncovered balls." When the ball was uncovered, Sacchi asked the defenders to run backwards to cover the space between them and the goal to defend, but coming back to run forward at a first side or backward pass of the opposition even if the receiver could look at their goal.



Sacchi based his team's defensive phase of play on the systematic offside tactic. At that time for FIFA the "passive" or "active" offside players were the same and anyone beyond the last defender was offside.

Defend running forward. The defenders were placed very close to one another, sliding toward the side of play. They always attacked the ball to recover the possession.



Put strong pressure on the opponent with possession. The nearest player to the ball had to press 1 v 1 the opponent in possession waiting for a double marking or even for 3 or 4 teammate near the ball.



Put strong pressure against the opponent with possession. 2 v 1 duels are played against the opponents in possession.



Create numerical advantage near the ball. The lines of defenders and midfielders were very close to each other and this helped to create numerical advantage near the ball; moreover when they had to defend the first third,



and even inside the middle third. The attempt to isolate the opponent in possession from his teammate is very clear.



In this picture is very clear as the center backs and the center midfielders are so close to shape a 4 v 2 duel against the opponents.



Put pressure high on the field. Thinking about that times when the goalkeeper could catch the ball with his hands, to press high could easily avoid that. But if and when the possession was lost in the middle third, the first idea was to stay placed in the same area to press immediately and recover the possession



When the possession was lost inside the final third, the principle of defense play was the same; stay and press to recover the possession or to stop the possession phase of the opponents. Considering how all the defensive tactical ideas kept all the players behind the ball line starting from the middle third or the first third, high pressure defending was born.



So, what is the heritage of the most famous and maybe the most influential team of history? The idea of defense to recover the ball as soon as possible with high, strong, and systematic pressure and closing spaces to prevent the opponent's transition to attack.

The three principles of play currently in use

Thinking about the current game, these principles of play are the references for all the defensive phases, even if the rules of the game have changed.

Two rules change the game's history more than all the others:

- only the active players near the ball and in front of the goalkeeper are considered as offside players when placed beyond the defense line
- the goalkeeper can't catch the ball with hands after a back pass of a teammate

The formations, the roles of the players, and the pattern of play are even changed, but these principles of play can be easily recognized in current matches. I would not include the rhythm of play, as AC Milan used to play with a very basic speed, both when in possession and when not in possession.

1. Defend to recover the possession as soon as possible and as near as possible to the opposition goal; not only to save the attacking attempts of the opposition.
2. The strong and systematic pressure against the opponents, moreover, on the first player in possession during the transitions to defend just after when the ball is lost. 1 v 1 duels and double marking duels are almost the same as Sacchi's seasons. The biggest difference is the goalkeeper who can be attacked as all the other opponents as he must play the ball with feet and the very high pressure as direct consequence.
3. The passing lanes' closure through the placement of the players is now used on the field to avoid the building up from the back and the play out moves of the opposition, first of all.

If we analyze two practical defensive principles of play that are coming from those pioneering seasons, they would be:

1. High and strong 1 v 1 defensive pressure
2. Close the passing lanes inside the opposition's half

High and strong 1 v 1 defense pressure

One of the most important principles of soccer is moving the ball forward by advanced pressing and counter pressing to make the forward passes more difficult.

Vertical passing in the first phase of build-up helps quick forward progression on the field, overcoming the opposition pressure lines, but the receiving player often faces towards their own goal.

The defending players may now think about the potential direction of a pass before it's made, looking at the player's body or leg positioning and other players. But careful choices must be made: if the first idea is not right, the defenders may have less time to anticipate the forwards or they may move in the wrong direction.

The goal of a 1 v 1 defense should be to press the nearby opponents who could be placed in a suitable position to receive, to limit their reaction speed and timing as well as to limit the decision making of the passing player. The support structure of the attacking team should be unbalanced.

All the defensive schemes in soccer, man marking or zonal marking, will leave a space somewhere on the field; it's important to be sure that these spaces are in the least dangerous area and farthest from the goal area. From this point of view, the 1 v 1 pressure aims to stop the attacking phase of the opposition as soon as possible and as far as possible from the goal.

There are **three key principles** to successful 1 v 1 defending:

1. **Quick Pressure:** The player near the ball must “close the space” as quickly as possible as soon as the ball is played to his opponent. Close the space on the opponent as the ball is arriving to the attacker. The defender must:
 - Intercept the pass
 - Put pressure on the first touch of the opponent and recover the ball off of a poor first touch.
 - Contain the attacker, reducing the space to turn or pass
2. **Touch Tight Pressure:** When closing down space, slow down about 5 yards/meters from the opponent and gradually take away the remaining space in a controlled defensive position.
 - Make the forward feel uncomfortable
 - Limit the attacker's vision of the field
 - Cut off forward passing lanes
3. **Patient Pressure:** Most attacking chances are created through poor and impatient defending; the general rules can be:
 - Don't dive in
 - Ready to take the ball when it's exposed
 - Tackle on the opponent when ball is exposed

The high pressure and 1 v 1 duels on the goalkeepers can have two main objectives; the first one is to avoid the building from the back of the opposition. In this picture, if the goalkeeper would pass to one teammate out of the penalty area, the receiver would be under pressure immediately.



Here again the same situation; 1 v 1 on the goalkeeper and 1 v 1 just out of it and another attacking player who could press the opponents behind the two first duels.



The second one is to recover the ball in the middle third winning the possession after the long kick of the opposition goalkeeper.



Then numerical advantage near the ball is needed to gain possession. In this picture a 2 v 2 duel is played on the ball, but three other players are placed close to the ball area and free to receive.



When the team in possession forces the build up from the back phase of play, then the defensive high pressure in the final third becomes useful to prevent forward passes.

This picture is interesting because it shows a 2 v 2 duel with one player who is pressing the opponent in possession and who can close a side forward pass. A third player is placed just out of the duel area again to close forward passes.



Looking back to Sacchi AC Milan, the principle of play is the same; 1 v 1 duels in the final third and close the forward passes lines.



When the first line of pressure is overcome, the first player of the opposition who receives must be under pressure to direct the play backwards or sideways.



The forwards of the defending team must now close the backward passing line and the midfielder must keep the pressure on the opponent while he's carrying the ball.



All the players in possession have a potential direct opponent who can press him; a 4 v 4 duel is played here; the left fullback is forced to kick the ball forward because of the pressure of the forwards. Two center midfielders are placed just behind them.



The same midfielders are those who must direct the opposition phase of play backward, inside a general 5 v 5 duel, where a zonal 3 v 3 against the defenders of the possession team is played.



Looking at this situation on the flank, all the players of the team in possession are, or potentially are, under 1 v 1 pressure, as they receive and control the ball. A 4 v 4 general duel can be noticed.



Here again the same situation; 4 v 4 (double 1 v 1) on the flank and the possession phase is sent backward and outward



Strong front 1 v 1 on the ball and 1 v 1 duels at the back on the nearest opponents to avoid forward passes and close down the sideline the possession phase.



1 v 1 duels to anticipate the opponents near the ball and to force a long pass.



If we look at this picture where the possession team is playing out, it's clear as all the defending team players are running toward the potential direction of pass to press the receiver. A double 1 v 1 has been already played between the left center back and left full back of the possession team and the center forward and the right winger of the defending team.



Here again all the defenders and midfielders next to the ball could be under 1 v 1 pressure. A general 5 v 5 can be noticed inside the defense half of the possession team.



Equal number of players near the ball during the possession phases of the opposition must be recurrent principle of defensive phase when a 1 v 1 pressure tactics is desired,.

A 5 v 5 situation is easily recognizable and the opposite winger of the defending team is ready to be the first player to put pressure on the other side.



A 3 v 3 is played on the ball (center midfielders 2 v 2 and the center forward vs the center back) and two more players near the playing area ready to replace the teammates if they are beaten.



The defense plays a 3 v 3 duel on the ball and a 1 v 1 in the weak area.



The defense plays a 1 v 1 duel on the ball and a general 5 v 5 duel as well.



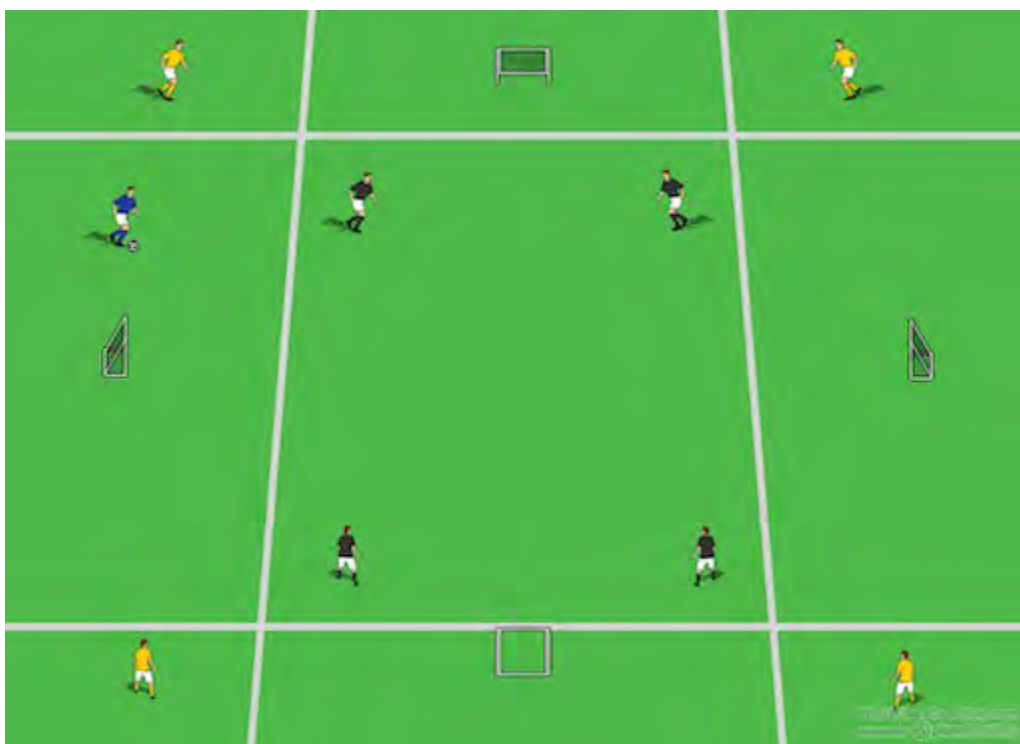
Play an immediate 1 v 1 against the opposition midfielder if the first line of defense pressure is passed.



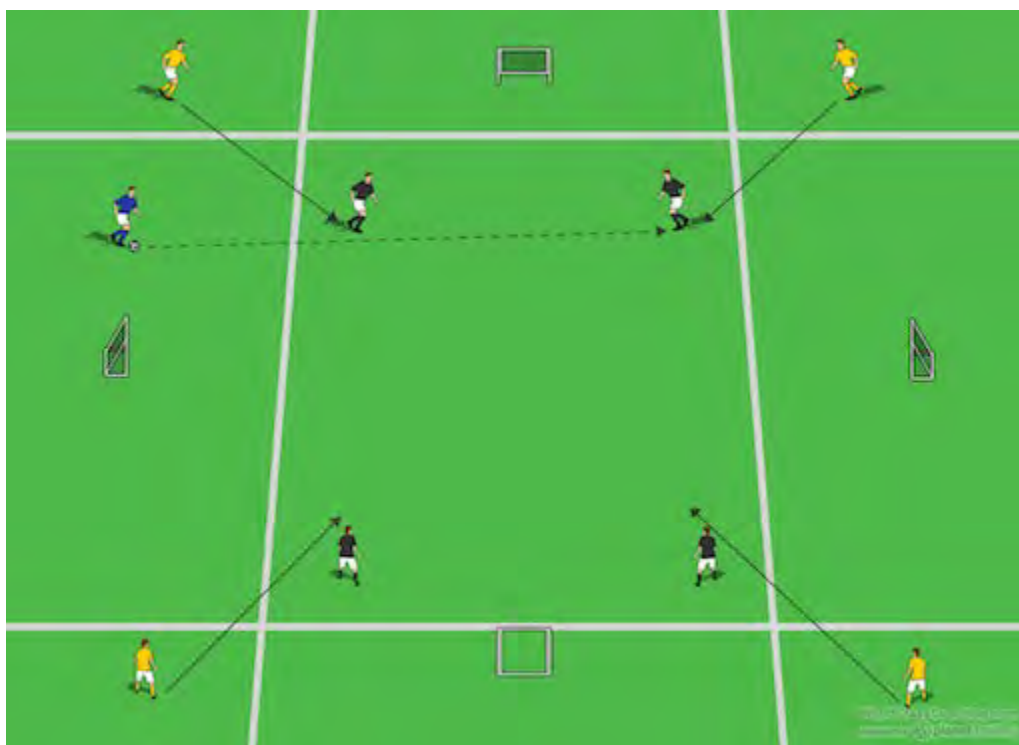
How to coach it:

Multiple 1 v 1 inside a 4 v 4 multi direction duel

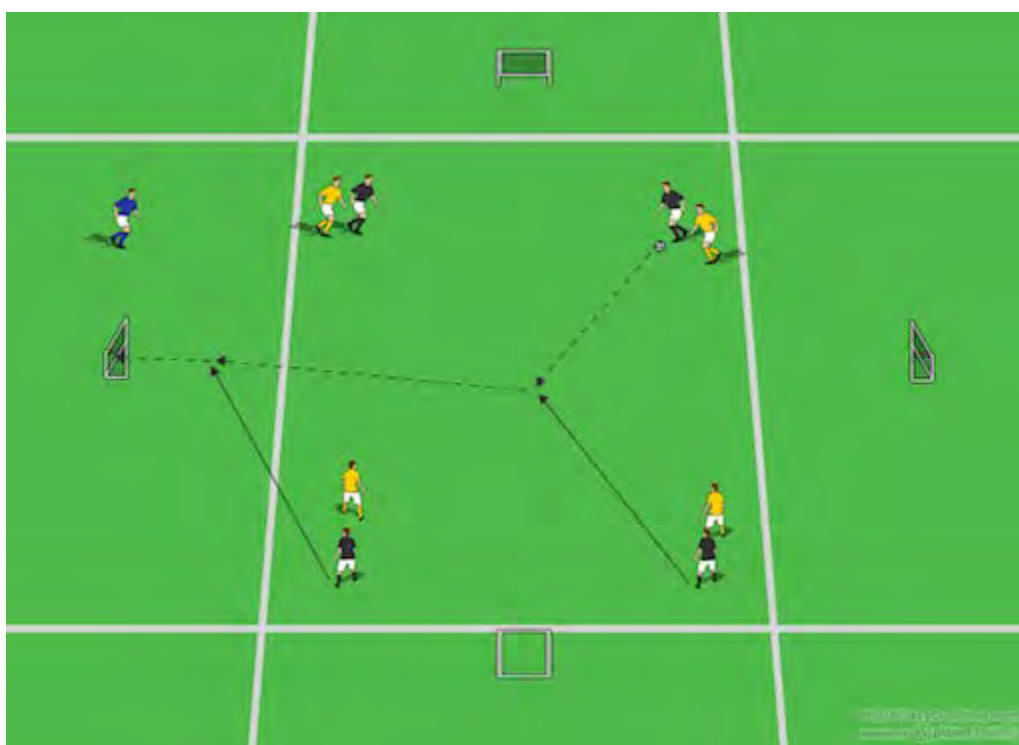
Four forwards are placed on the corners of a rectangular pitch and four defenders outside the same corners 2-3 yards from and behind the forwards. Four mini goals are placed out of the main playing area and along the side of the rectangle. The coach is in possession of the ball.



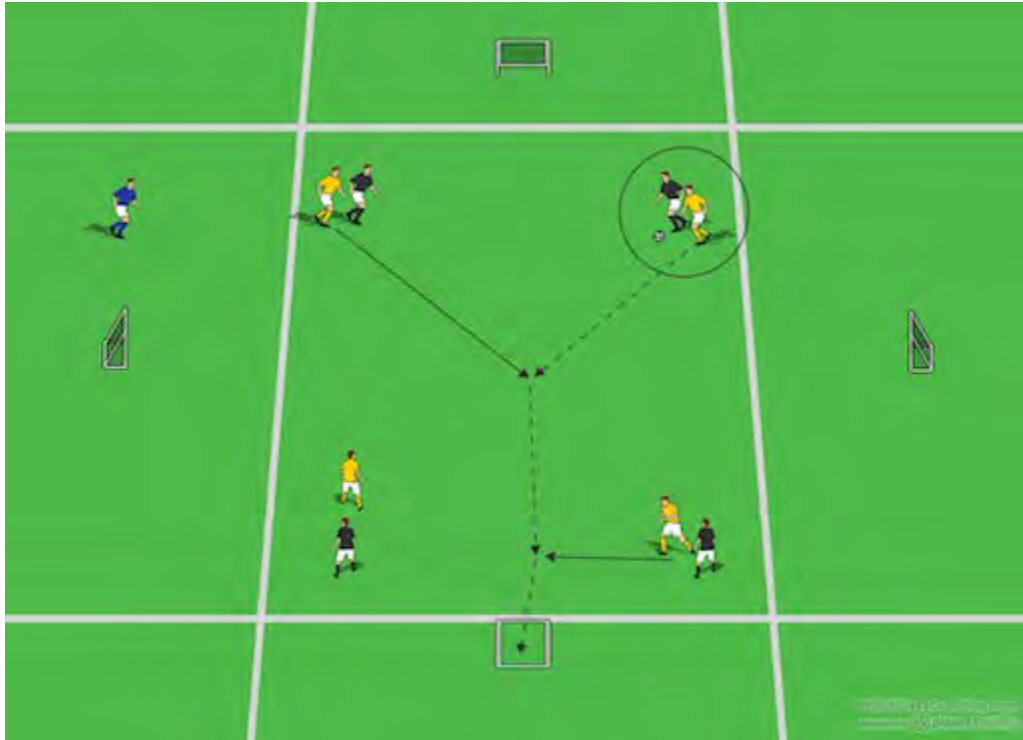
The coach passes the ball toward one of the forwards and a multiple 1 v 1 is now played; 1 v 1 with the defenders at the back along the side where the ball is received and 1 v 1 duels to anticipate the forwards on the opposite side.



The forwards must try to score in one the side mini goal related to the first player who received the pass from the goalkeeper; the scorer must receive a pass over the end line and behind the defender.



If the defenders win the ball they can play freely to score, but in one the mini goals placed out of the upper or lower side of the pitch.



Coaching Points:

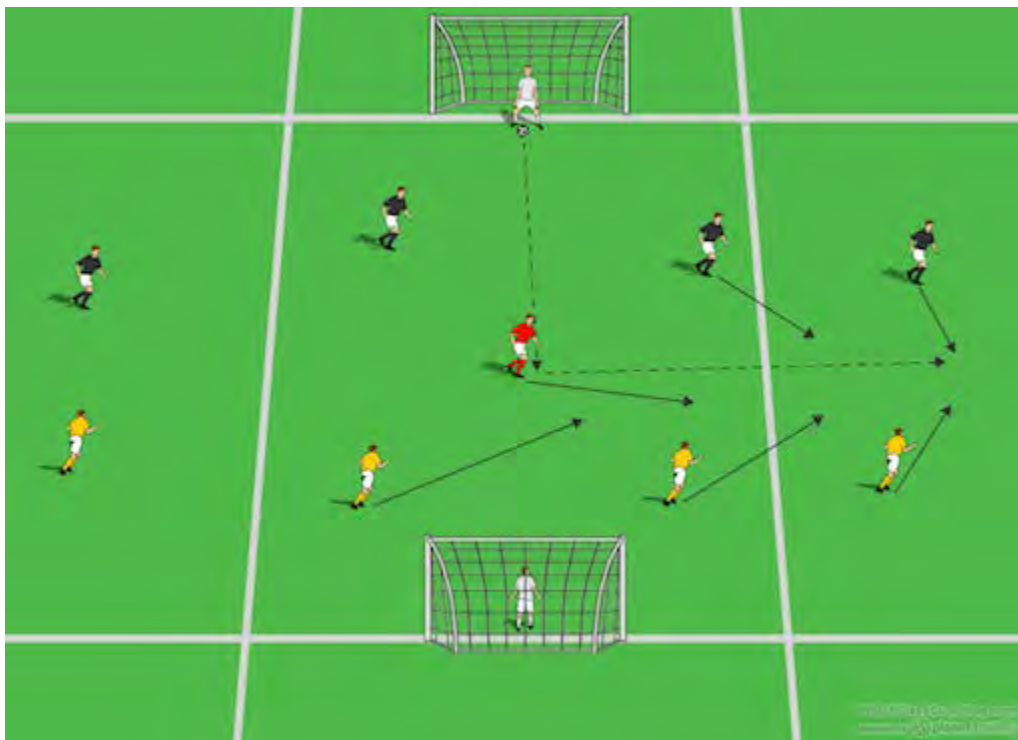
- Press the opponents while receiving the pass
- Close the space between the opponents and the goal
- Anticipate the opponent
- If possession is lost, mark the player to avoid counter attack

Multiple 1 v 1 in the strong side

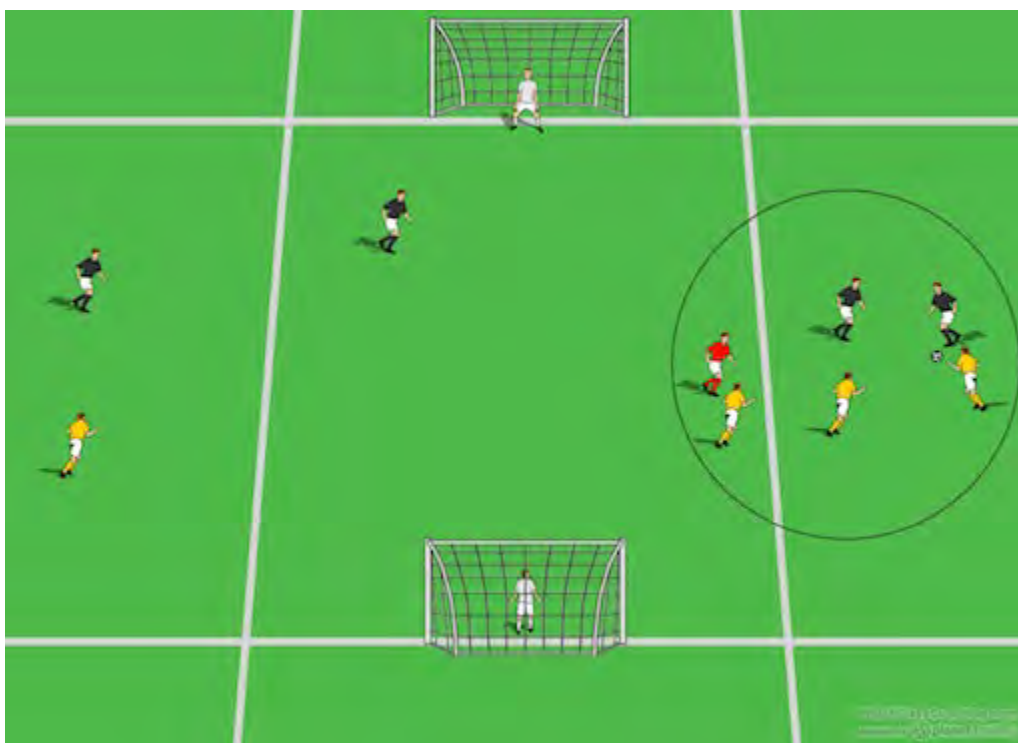
Two teams of four players are placed inside a three areas field; two players from each team in the middle and one from each team on both flanks. One neutral player is placed in the middle between the lines. One goalkeeper is in possession.



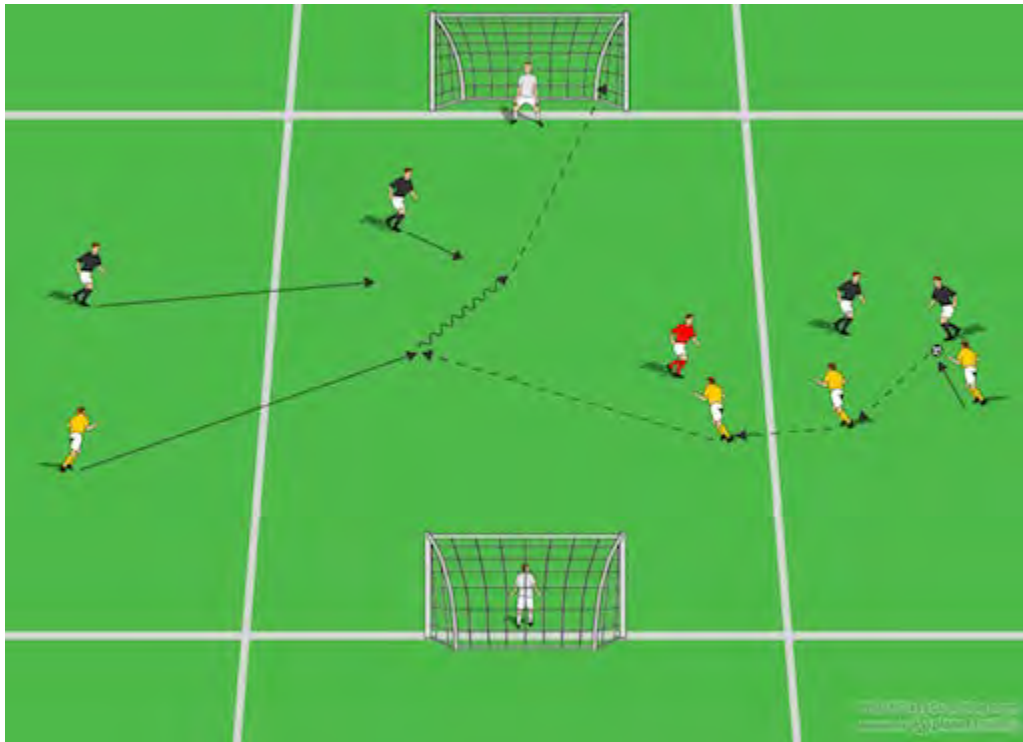
The goalkeeper of the back team is in possession and he passes the ball toward the neutral player who must send the ball wide on the flanks to create a strong side and a weak side.



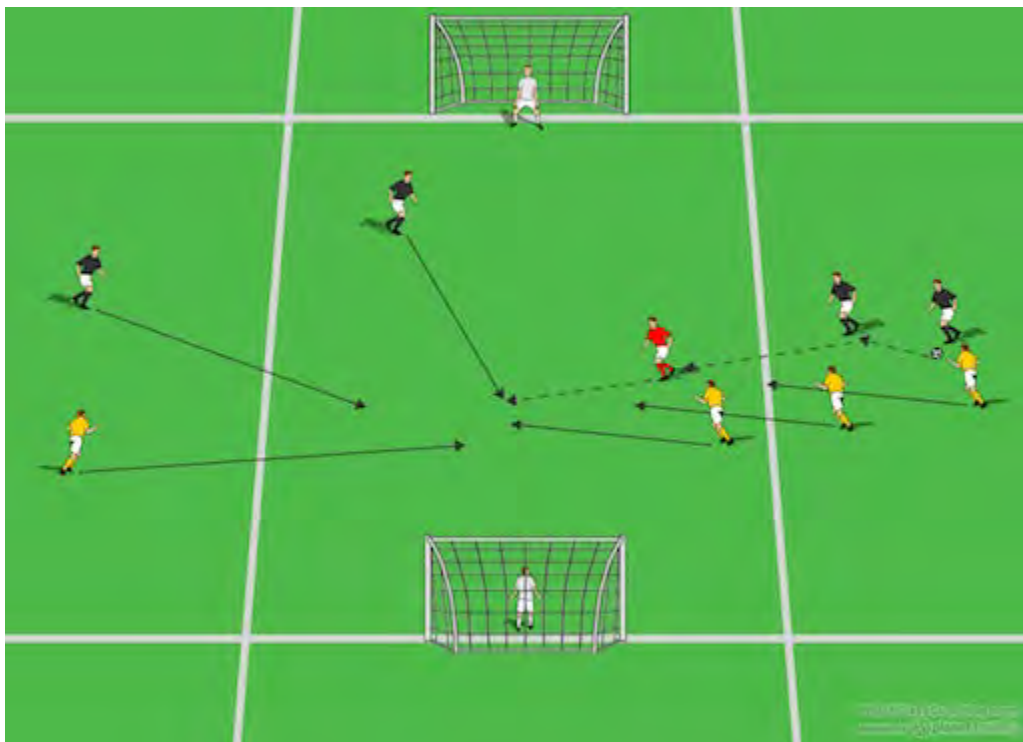
A 3 v 3 duel is now created along the flank, with multiple 1 v 1 duels. 3 defenders (the fullback and the center backs) must mark the opponents and the neutral player, to recover the possession as soon as possible.



The goal for the defender is to recover the possession on the strong side and then to switch the direction of play toward the weak side where a teammate must finish playing outnumbered 1 v 2.



If the forward team is able to keep the possession, the defenders must create a strong area, trying to pressure 1 v 1 against the opposition even if they are outnumbered 4 v 5.



Coaching Points:

- Pressure timing to create the duel with equal number of player on the strong side
- Recover the possession as quickly as possible
- Quick finishing in the weak side of the opposition
- Create defensive density in the center

Close the passing lanes.

First of all, let's underline the difference between the passing lanes and the passing channels. The passing lanes can be considered as “gaps between opponents.”

It is a space available for a ball to be passed through as it's wide enough so that no defender can run to cover it or can extend the leg to cut off the pass. The distance between the player in possession and the teammate who is waiting for the ball must be short enough and the pass hard enough that defenders don't have time to react and to close the space.

The goal for the team in possession is to play a ball into space and behind a defense line for another teammate who is placed forward on the field, to open space and maintain forward progression.

A passing lane is missed when the gap where the second teammate could be ready to run in and behind the defenders is not recognized by the player with the ball; or on the other side, when this gap is being covered by a third player of the defending team at the back of the two who are placed on the gap's line.

In this following picture it's very clear as all the passing lanes are covered because a third player is closing all the gaps among the defending teammates; if the player in possession passes short, the receiver will be under strong pressure, if he passes longer, the third back player could easily intercept the ball.



A passing channel can be referred to as the space between the most outside defending player near the ball and the sideline. From a technical point of view, the difference between the passing lane the passing channel is that the sideline of the field is a passive defender as it closes the space to play in.

A pass in the channel should follow the direction of run of the potential receiver and generate a cross pass into the penalty box to finish the attacking phase. A pass on the ground is easier to control for the receiving player, but there must be enough space to play the ball through, and it's quite easy to be closed by the defending player.

It is easy to see how channel and lane can be used interchangeably. From a defense point of view, if the goal is not to recover the ball as soon as possible, the best way to avoid the building up from the back and the play out phases of the opposition seems to be to close the space for a pass between the opponents, and direct the possession phase toward the space the most outside player and the sideline.

In order to leave a man free at the back themselves, the man-marking team will ask the strikers to press both of the opposition center backs. Depending on which player has the ball, the striker has to shift laterally to defend that player. If the center back is able to dribble forward with the ball under the pressure of the defending attacker and he is able to invite the pressure of a midfielder, he may create serious issues for the defensive structure of the opposition.

This is the reason why closing the passing lanes directing the possession of the opposition along the outside passing channels may be a better solution if 1 v 1 pressure tactics can't be played with the right timing. Similar tactics may be made when the opposition team is able to build up from the back systematically.

In this following picture, the center striker closes a potential forward passing lane for the goalkeeper and he directs the build up phase outside. Two teammates are ready to put pressure on the center backs.



As the ball is played outside between the opposition center back and the fullback, all the passing lanes toward the center are closed and the play out phase is directed toward the flank.



We see a clear 1 v 1 pressure keeping the opponent turned toward the sideline, which is, as we saw before, another semi-active defender, as it limits the space of action for the player in possession.



Even when the opposition is able to play passing combinations to free a forward teammate, it's now easier to close him outwards and to avoid developments of the attacking move toward the center space of the first third.



In this following picture it's clear how the attackers of the defending team are closing the vertical passing options of the opposition goalkeeper, and he has to kick the ball away to avoid the pressure.



In this footage two attackers are closing the passing lane toward the center play of the possession team and they could press the outer opponents too if they received the ball.



In this other situation, a first attacker is pressing on the opponent in possession, and the second one is closing the forward passing option toward the center midfielder. The only chances available are a back pass or a risky horizontal pass. If the player in possession tried to dribble out, he would be under strong pressure of the nearest opponent.



As we saw before, passing channels are easier to cover than the passing lanes, and for this reason pressing runs force the opponent towards the flanks. But the fullbacks, or the outer defending players in general, need to adapt the position that has to be related to the pressure direction.

The wide compactness and the right lateral distance among the defending players are useful to close the more dangerous passing lanes. Also, the horizontal compactness requires the team to shift towards the ball to create a numerical advantage or to equalize the number of players near the ball to close the passing lanes.

6 v 5 duels inside the opposition half,



and 3 v 3 near the ball.



3 v 3 on the ball to direct the opposition phase of play backward and 3 other player who are ready to close the passing lanes. This happens thanks to wide compactness on the left and the weak area that is covered with three other players.



In this following match situation, we see a 4 v 3. The only solution seems to be a backward pass, as two players would be under pressure as they receive the ball and the horizontal pass is covered.



Wide compactness and numerical advantage are recognizable.

Another principle of play, thinking about compactness, is the density of players near the ball, creating a strong side near the ball and covering the weak area too. In this footage a 4 v 2 near the ball can be noticed as well as two more players who are ready to cover the space in the middle and on the opposite flanks.



Here again, we see a 3 v 2 duel near the ball on the right and three other players ready to close down the spaces in the center and left.



4 v 3 duel near the ball on the right and two other players ready to close down the spaces in the center and left.



Wide compactness and the passing lanes closure are not enough to recover the ball while playing and not only with a throw-in or a free kick. These are the defending individual moves that can bring the team to recover the possession:

- The interception of forced forward pass



- Attack 1 v 1 on the opponent if he is facing his own goal



- Recover the space quickly if the ball control is hard for the receiver, moreover during the second time of the ball sequences



- Strong pressure on the opponent to win the possession



- Take advantage of the space behind the opponent's lines



Here again the same principle of play inside the defensive half:

- Wide compactness behind the ball line with a 1-4-5-1 formation



- Attack 1 v 1 on the ball control of the opponent and recover the possession after a potential technical mistake of the opposition



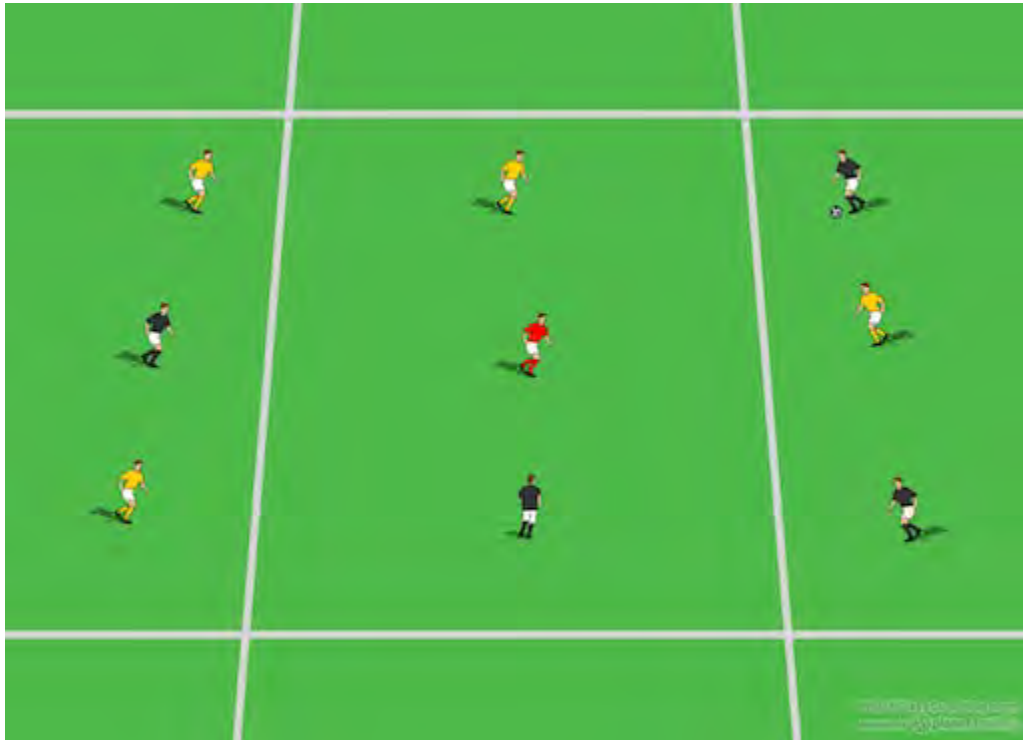
- Take advantage of the space behind the opponent's lines



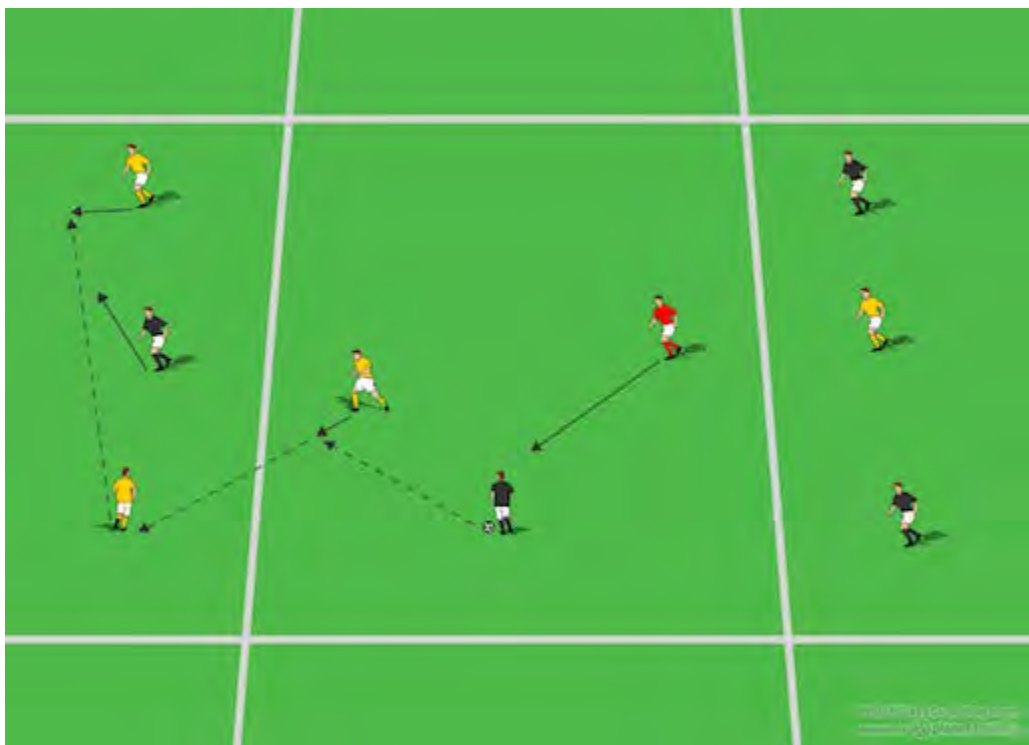
How to coach it:

Small Sided Game: alternate colors passing lanes blocks.

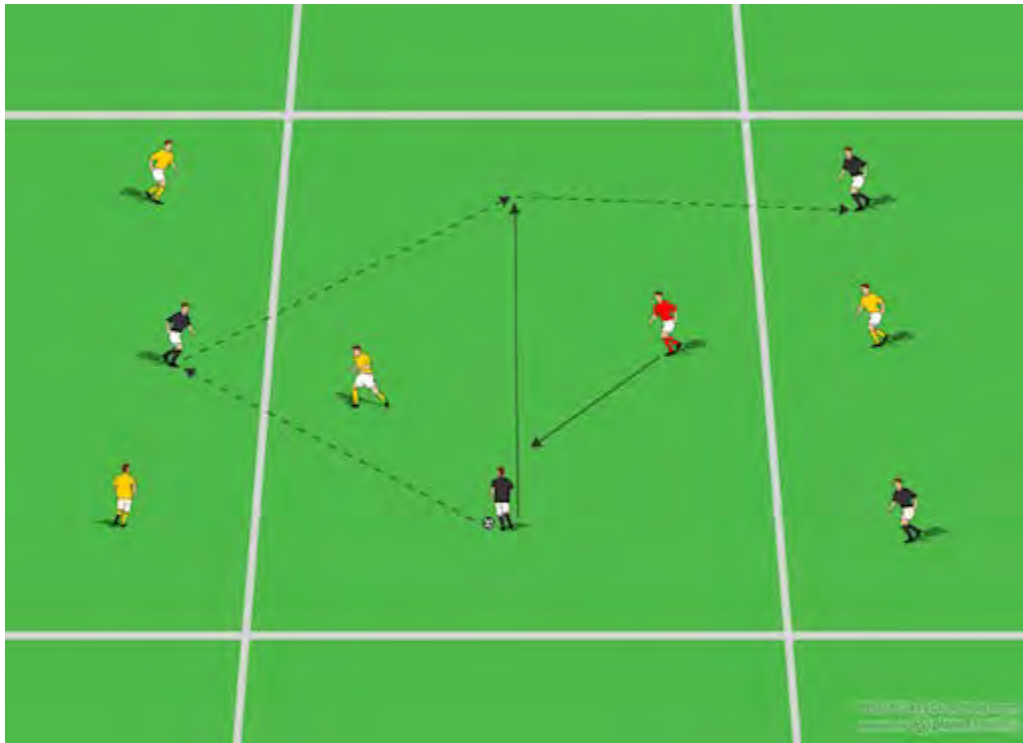
A pitch is divided into three areas; two black players and a yellow one are placed on the right, two yellow players and a black one on the left, and a 1 v 1 duel in the middle together with a neutral player. One black player is in possession inside the left part of the pitch.



If the defender is able to recover the possession, he must pass the ball toward the side with two players to keep the possession; the black player must try to intercept the ball during the passing combination of the opposition



If the black player is able to keep possession after the first pass, he must play a wall passing combination with the outnumbered teammate and pass back again inside the area where the 2 v 1 duel is played. The yellow defender and the neutral player must close the passing lanes.

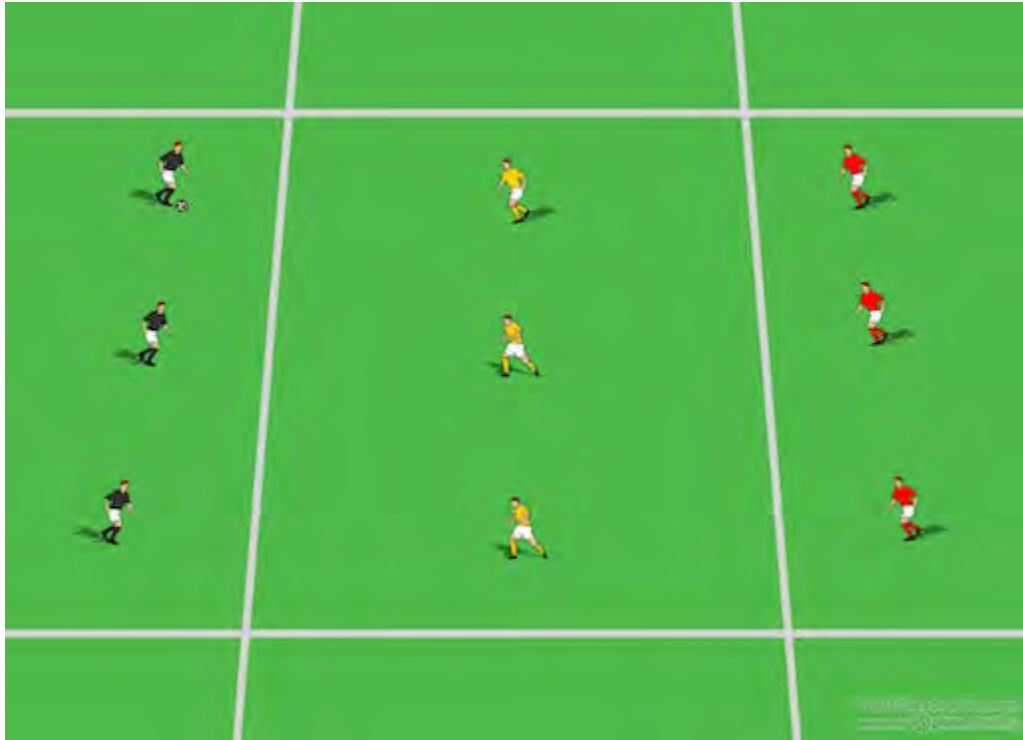


Coaching Points:

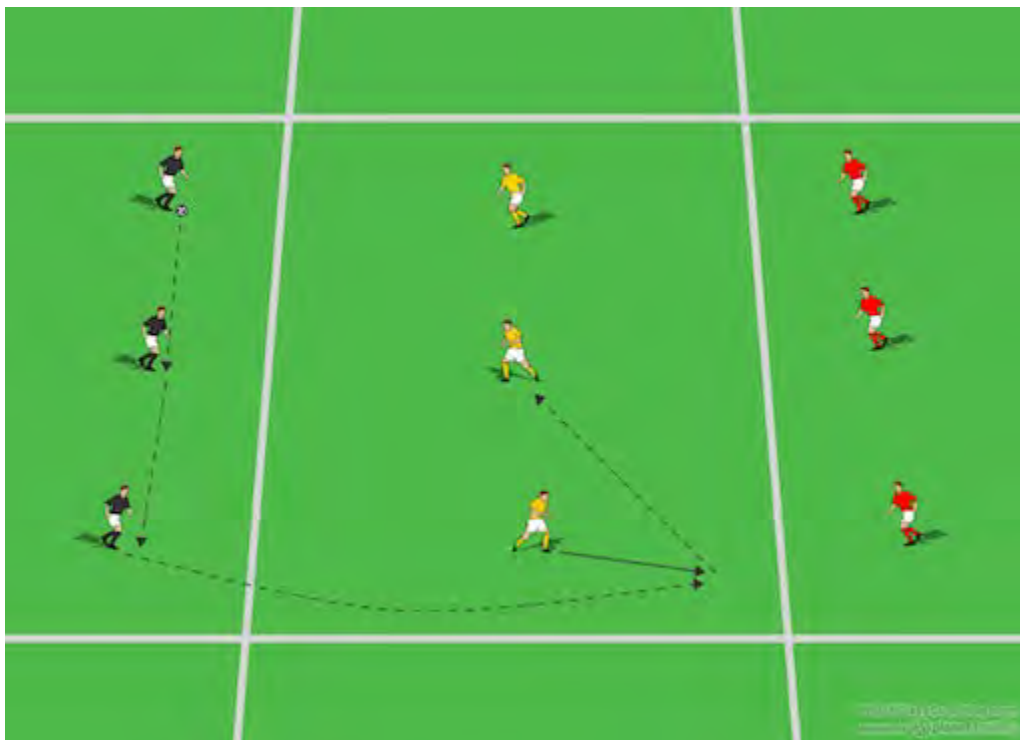
- Be placed in between the opponents
- Close different passing lanes
- Alternate the pressure on the opponent and the block of passing lanes while defending in numerical advantage.

Small Sided Game: alternate colors passing channels blocks.

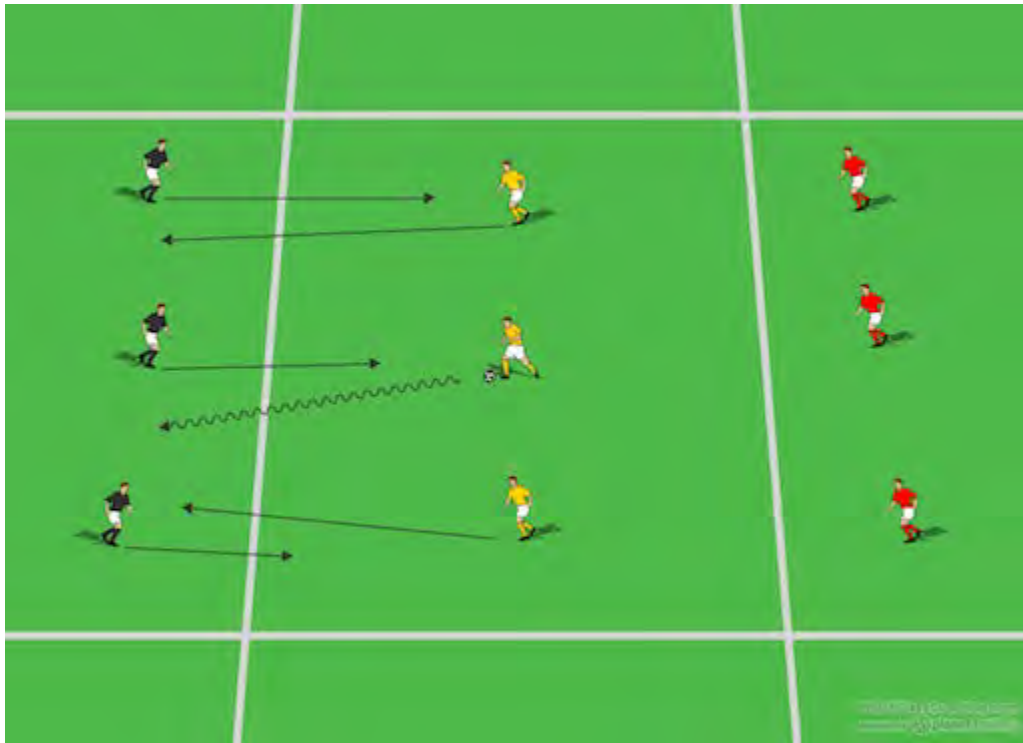
A pitch is divided into three areas; three black players are placed on the left side, three yellow players are in the middle and three red players are placed in the opposite outer area. One black player is in possession inside the left part of the pitch.



The black players must pass the ball among themselves until an outside passing channel can be found. The yellow defenders must try to close the outside passing channels and to intercept the ball.



If the defenders are able to win the possession they must dribble the ball out toward the opposite direction where the ball came from; the black players can try to press them for a fix limit of time while running inside the center area.



Coaching Points:

- Be placed in between the opponents
- Pass the ball quickly during the possession phases if a passing channel is not found
- Close the passing channel trying to intercept the ball
- Press the opponent quickly to win the ball back again