

“RECOGNIZING THE MOMENT TO PLAY”

Developing Anticipation, Imagination, and Awareness in Your Players

As coaches, we must teach players to establish in their minds what to do with the ball **BEFORE** they receive it, not **AFTER**. Encourage players to look before they receive the ball to be aware of their options in advance. For example, if a player only has enough time to pass the ball with one touch, he needs to know where his pass is going before the ball arrives. By improving anticipation, we help players become faster with their overall decision-making.

Anticipation begins with awareness. At every instant, your players must observe where the ball is coming from and how it is traveling (in the air, on the ground, quickly, slowly, etc.). They must also have the ability to look beyond the ball, maintaining an awareness of the relative positioning of teammates and opposition players, and the direction in which each player is moving. The following coaching points will help you improve your players' awareness of their surroundings:

- **Keep your head up.** Avoid looking down at the ball, and consequently not observing what is around and where players are in relation to each other.
- **Look before receiving.** Anticipate the next pass before you receive the ball by looking over both shoulders and thinking ahead. With younger players, equate this concept to a bird on a fence looking around.
- **Maintain an "open" body stance.** Do this by turning "side on" (half turned) for greater peripheral vision, and by taking an angle of support that allows you to see most (if not all) of the other players on the field.
- **Focus on the first touch.** Relax as you receive the ball so you can control it quickly, and move the ball away from pressure on your first touch to create more space and time.
- **Communicate to help the receiver.** Use brief phrases like "Man on", "Turn", and "Time" so that players on the ball know whether or not they are about to be pressured by the opponent. Practice this type of verbal communication during non-competitive activities to simulate game situations.

Anticipation also requires imagination. To anticipate their future options, players must first be able to imagine how their teammates and opponents are likely to react following each touch of the ball. They must also have insight into the use of the ball and how various techniques can be employed to both control the ball and play it into different spaces. The next set of coaching points will help cultivate imagination and creativity among your players:

- **Change pace.** When you receive the ball, accelerate with it to get away from nearby defenders.
- **Change direction.** Turn with the ball on your first touch to move off at new angles. A change of direction can be especially effective when combined with a change of pace.
- **Look for opportunities to take a "big first touch".** Before the ball arrives, look for spaces away from both your current position and nearby opponents. Play the ball into these open spaces on the first touch to "get behind" the defense quickly.
- **Move off the ball to provide support.** Once you have made a pass, look to support others in possession so you can receive the ball again. Avoid standing still or "admiring your pass", since this effectively takes you out of the game. Move aggressively to support the next pass as the ball is traveling to a teammate.
- **Switch the play.** Let the ball run across your body to change direction and switch play, saving a touch by using your upper body to disguise your movement and the pace of the pass to help you. Recognize the available space behind you before you receive the pass.
- **Take advantage of crossover runs.** Instead of relying solely on the pass, create deception through takeovers and "fake-overs". Use your inside foot to exchange (or keep) the ball, and accelerate away from the crossover point as a decoy run.
- **Alternate between one- and two-touch play.** Change the attacking rhythm frequently so that players must always think two (or more) moves ahead of the current situation. Supporting players must quickly find angles off each receiving player so the ball can be delivered with just one touch.
- **Play without communication.** Challenge your players to think for themselves with no help from others, i.e. no verbal or non-verbal help (such as calls of "Man on", "Turn", clapping, or pointing).

Your players must rely on their anticipation, imagination, and awareness to aid their decision-making process. At any point in time, each player must decide the following:

THE DECISION MAKING THOUGHT PROCESSES THE PLAYER IS GOING THROUGH AT ANY ONE TIME IS AS FOLLOWS:

1. **OBSERVING WHERE THE BALL IS COMING FROM.**
2. **OBSERVING HOW THE BALL IS COMING.**
3. **KNOWING WHERE THEIR TEAMMATES ARE.**
4. **KNOWING WHERE THE OPPOSITION PLAYERS ARE.**
5. **DECIDING “WHAT” SHOULD THE PLAYER DO WITH THE BALL. THE TECHNIQUE / SKILL TO USE (EMPHASIS ON A GOOD FIRST TOUCH) - PASS, RUN, SHOOT, CROSS, DRIBBLE, DUMMY / LEAVE. (NARROW THE LIST OF POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FROM ALL AVAILABLE OPTIONS).**
6. **OBSERVING “WHERE” TO PLAY THE BALL. (ASSESS OPEN SPACES AND SUPPORTING OPTIONS ON THE FIELD).**
7. **DECIDING “WHEN” TO PLAY THE BALL. (TIMING OF THE TECHNIQUE / SKILL USED).**
8. **DECIDING “HOW” TO PLAY THE BALL. (SELECT A SPECIFIC SKILL TO USE).**

9. **DECIDING "WHY" A GIVEN CHOICE IS BEST. (COMPARE ALL OPTIONS WITH THE TEAM'S TACTICAL OBJECTIVES).**

If a player is being closed down as he receives the ball, he may have to determine the answers to these questions before the ball arrives. Otherwise, with time on the ball, he can wait for the right moment depending on the positions of his teammates and the opposition. This is when reaction plays a part in the process. As the other players move about the field of play, they constantly create new situations for the player on the ball to assess and respond to with the correct pass, dribble, run, shot, cross and so on.

To put these concepts into practice, I recommend that you follow a training progression that begins with "shadow play". These types of activities lack pressure from an opponent, and thus allow a developmental program to take place without a loss of possession caused by defensive pressure. Although there are no defenders, shadow play should include other players who effectively simulate pressurizing situations by working in the same area. This stage of the progression will give your players a chance to develop **composure** on the ball, which is a critical element for future success!

Next, introduce opposition, initially using an overload situation (such as 5v2 or 6v3). During this stage, reinforce the idea of "**playing ahead of the game**" by looking beyond the ball to anticipate future options. Encourage players to remain **composed** with the ball and **relax under pressure**, while also using correct technique to perform each task efficiently and effectively. The players must pay particular attention to the **first touch** of the ball.

Finally, you should include full-scale practices to put players in the **pressure situations** they face on the field in regular team play. The coach must try to build into the player each observation as it happens. Over time and with much practice the player learns to assimilate each observation more quickly until eventually they all combine in the mind into one. Players must be both psychologically and physically prepared to meet the demands of the game. Their development in these respects will be ongoing throughout their playing career, and will be further influenced by the experience gained from every coaching session and every game played over time. The degree of improvement a player attains using these methods depends on his commitment (in terms of repetition of practice and belief in the system) and level of ability. Don't expect results overnight. Players have to be patient in learning this approach as it takes time and great concentration to develop, but in the end, they should benefit from improved decision-making that allows them to work ahead of the opposition.

COACHING IDEAS FROM THE BOOK

A.I.A.: IDENTIFYING LEVELS OF AWARENESS

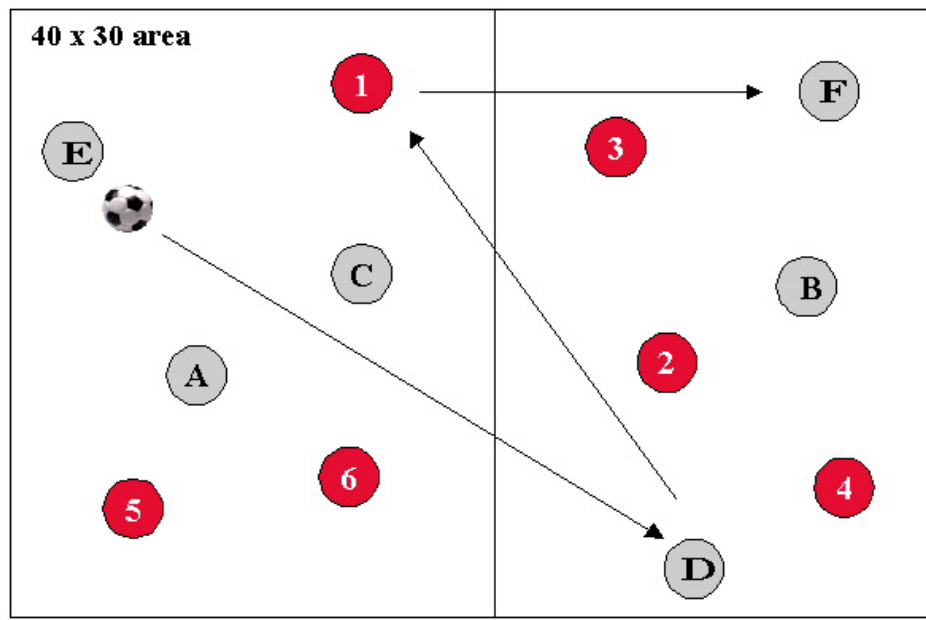


Diagram 32

1. Start with one team only to simplify the process for the players as an easy introduction to the idea. Then divide them into two teams later once they are starting to master the idea. Have the players stand still and pass the ball around the group. They must look before they receive the ball to see where they are passing to. Make it 2 then 1 touch.
2. To ensure they are looking have the players **call the name** of the players they are passing to **before** they pass the ball. When they don't call the name you know they haven't looked ahead of the ball. Observe which players can't do this and allow them 2 touches and more time and look to see how they improve with practice.
3. Develop – Have two teams and have them pass to opposite colors so the choices are halved so the players have to be even more aware of where they are passing to before they receive the ball. Introduce 2 balls to the session then 3 and so on but players continuing to stand still and not move to keep it simple to get success. Have them

begin to move around the area slowly to make the decision making more difficult as players are harder to find because of this.

DEVELOPMENT

1. This is the **basic beginning** of the A.I.A. session where we have **all** the players moving **freely** passing and moving within their own team. Divide the group into two teams again. Begin with one ball being passed around a team and as they become proficient introduce another ball to increase their A.I.A. qualities.
2. Have the teams play throughout **both** grids to **spread** the play out and get the players comfortable and composed. As they improve you can change it to playing in **one** grid only so there is less room to work in and things happen more **quickly**. This is a test of their A.I.A. ability.

TWO TEAMS PLAYING THROUGH EACH OTHER

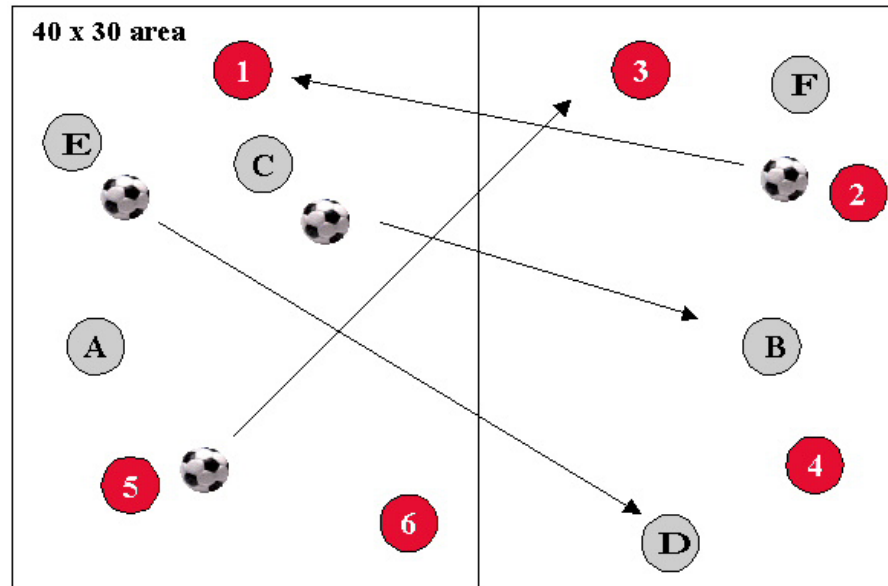


Diagram 34

1. The following information forms the **basis** of what we are trying to achieve with this session.

Technical / Tactical Design

- a) The players must play with their heads up (so they view what is around).
 - b) Look over the shoulder before receiving the ball.
 - c) Body stance is open to receive the ball.
 - d) Awareness of teammates positions on the field before receiving the pass.
 - e) Awareness of opponent's positions on the field before receiving the pass.
 - f) Move the ball on the first touch away from pressure into space (or 1 touch transfer). Receiver moves the ball away at an angle off their first touch.
 - g) Passing to space to move players into a better position on the field.
 - h) Passing to the player's feet.
 - i) Turns / dribbles / 1touch / 2 touch / free play etc.
 - j) Communication (verbal, physical or through eye contact).
 - k) Angles / distances of support.
 - l) To increase competitive edge - Passer pressures receiver by closing them down after the pass.
2. As you practice with your team don't try to develop all the previous pages key coaching points all in one session, it may be you have to spend several sessions on just establishing the first key point of getting the players to play with their head up and not looking down at the ball all the time when they have it.
 3. Once you believe you are getting success with this, only then must you move to working on the second point in your next practices.
 4. This process of learning is the same as in the introduction where there are several things the player must think about even before they receive the ball beginning with seeing where the ball is coming from and so on up to the selection of the pass.

TWO TEAMS PLAYING THROUGH EACH OTHER THEN BECOMING COMPETITIVE

1. Once they have got good at this introduce a competitive element to the game. Have 1 ball to play with and make it a possession game. Introduce another ball so each team has 2 balls to focus on so at the same time one teams players can be defenders trying to win a ball back and at the same time be attackers having possession of the other ball.
2. It may be that a particular player is involved in trying to win a ball back but has to be aware that other teammates have possession of the second ball and she/he may have to adjust his/her thinking and positioning instantly if a player looks to pass the second ball to her/him. This helps the mind prepare for instant transitions from attack to defense and defense to attack. They need to be aware of changing their focus; one second trying to win a ball but the next making themselves available to receive another ball from a team mate already in possession.
3. On changing from a defender to an attacker by receiving the second ball which this players team has possession of, this player must think about where the other players are who are free to pass to, to keep the momentum of the move going. Going back to the A.I.A. principles this player has to know where the ball is going before receiving it to have the best chance of keeping possession of this second ball.

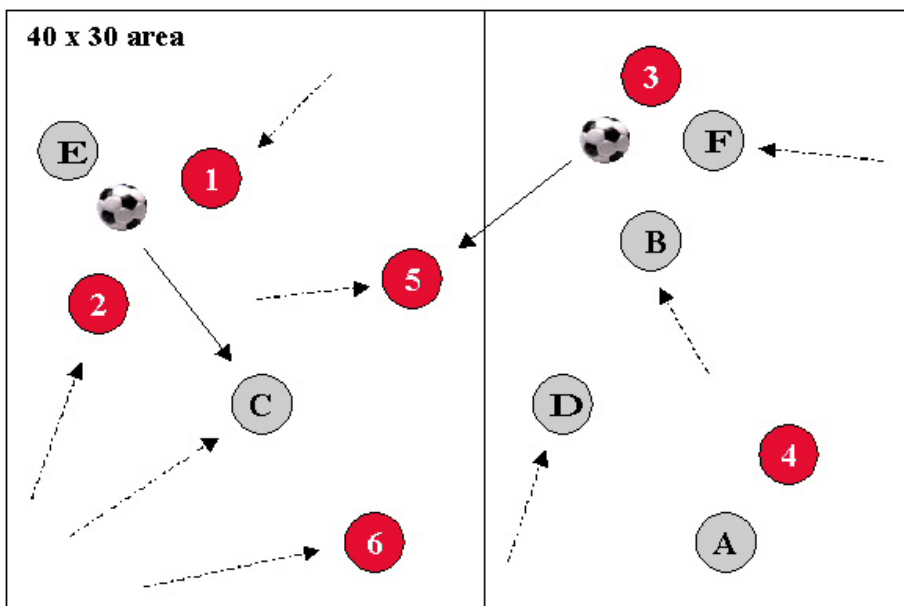


Diagram 42

4. Next stage may be that the team wins back the first ball so they have 2 balls to keep possession of. This means the players are constantly looking around the area they are playing in focusing on keeping two balls, as soon as a player receives and passes on one ball they are looking to receive and pass the second ball and so on.
5. Above, each team has a ball to keep possession of and at the same time try to win possession of the ball they haven't got.
6. Observe; (C) and (D) make movements to support (E) to keep the ball, at the same time (B) and (F) close down (double team) (3) on the other team in possession of the other ball.
7. Observe; (1) and (2) close down (E) to win back the ball and (5) and (6) move into space to support and receive a pass from (3).
8. Develop by playing with 3 balls. Awareness must be really sharp now with so much to think about; which balls we have in our possession and consequently where we have to position to keep possession but also which balls we haven't got and how we need to work to try and win them back.
9. Decision making now is being tested to the fullest capacity, do I support the balls we have, do I defend to win back the balls we haven't, do I change mid-stream as the opportunity presents itself. Every player needs to be aware of all these options. When we go back to one ball with two teams playing simple possession, the A.I.A. instincts of the players should be more developed and sharp as a needle.

NUMBERS GAME: PASSING IN SEQUENCE

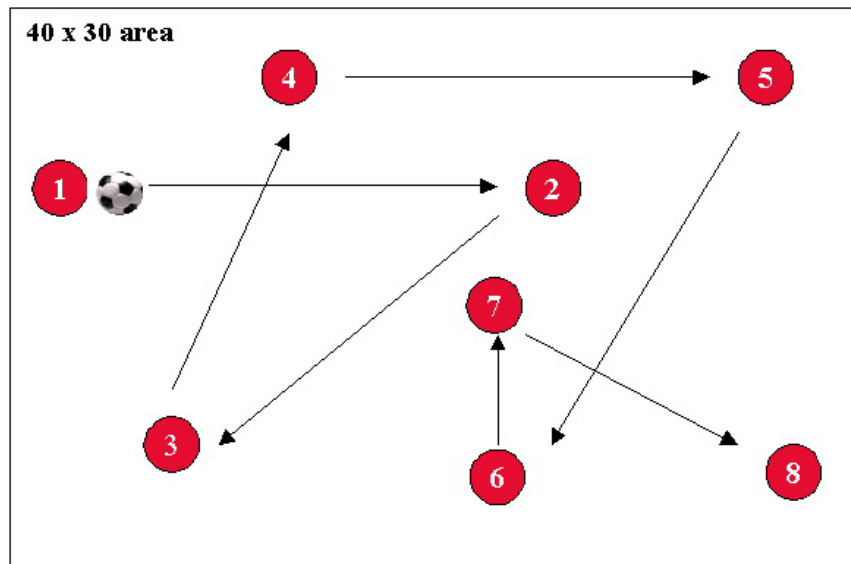


Diagram 51

1. 8 Players and only 1 ball to begin. Players must pass in **sequence** i.e. 1 passes to 2; 2 passes to 3; 3 to 4 and so on to 8 who passes to 1 and we begin again. You can have players **static** to begin then have them passing and **moving**.
2. Player **receives** from the same person and **passes** to the same person each time. This develops great awareness of time, space and player positions. Continuous work on and off the ball.
3. Awareness of: **where** the player you **receive** from is and **where** the player you **pass** to is. Because of this players begin to **anticipate** the pass to them and where it is coming from. Also they must look to where it is going to (where is the player they are passing to?).
4. We are trying to create a situation where players are looking **two moves** ahead not just one. For instance as (1) is about to pass to (2), (3) should be looking to support (2) for the next pass already, looking two moves ahead before the ball leaves (1). At the same time (3) should be looking to see where (4) is.
5. **Peripheral Vision Development** results from this.
Ask players to make it difficult to find them by lots of movement off the ball to **test** their teammate's vision.
6. **Develop:** Use **two** balls then **three** balls at the same time. Start with a ball at (1) and (5) then at (1), (4) and (7). To keep the sequence going players must move the balls quickly with few touches hence their peripheral vision development improves dramatically. As soon as they have passed one ball off the next one is arriving so **quick thinking** is needed to make the correct decisions.

TRANSITION GAME – DEFENCE TO ATTACK / ATTACK TO DEFENCE

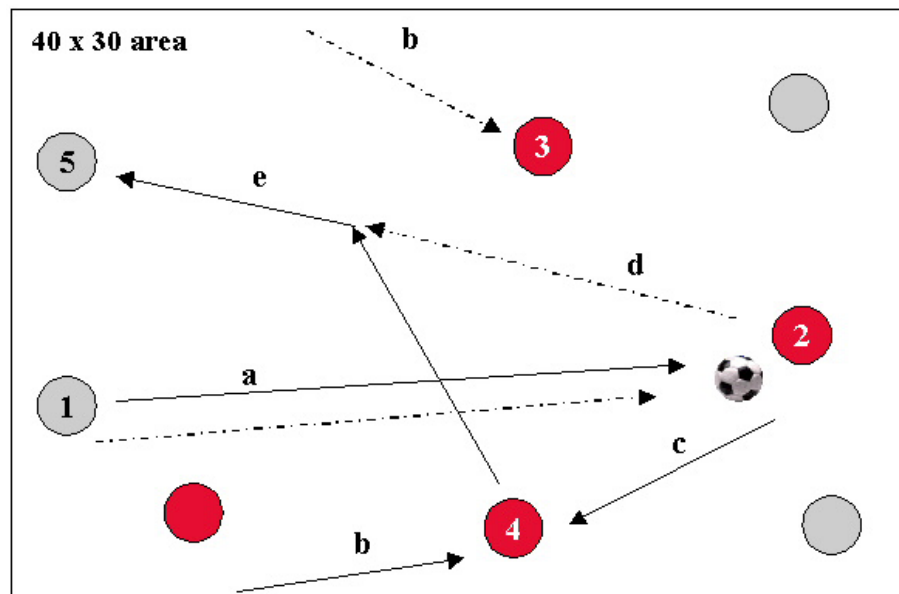


Diagram 56

Two teams / one ball, passing to anyone.

1. Passer (1) plays the ball to the receiver (2). The passer (1) then becomes a defender and must pressurize receiver (2).
2. Receiver (2) must work a 1 – 2 around the defender (1) with a support player. Try to establish support on both sides of the receiver so there are two options available to support (3 and 4).
3. Work on angles and distances of support (**triangular support**), timing of the pass depending on the closeness of the defender, quality of pass, preferably off the front foot to aid the disguise of the pass. Receiver accepts 1 – 2 from support player (4), passes to a new receiver (5) and becomes the new defender and the cycle begins again.
4. **Routine** – a) 1 passes to 2 and pressurizes. b) 3 and 4 move to support 1 (thinking two moves ahead). c) 2 pass to 4. d) 2 run around 1 to receive (give and go). e) Now 2 pass to 5 and becomes the defender.
5. **Develop** – Increase number of balls, passing to opposite color only but support from same color i.e. pass opposite, support same. Quick decisions required. Passer plays the ball to receiver and closes down as a defender; receiver must move the ball away first time or draw defender in and move the ball off at an angle away from the pressure.

SPECIFIC PERIPHERAL VISION COACHING SESSION

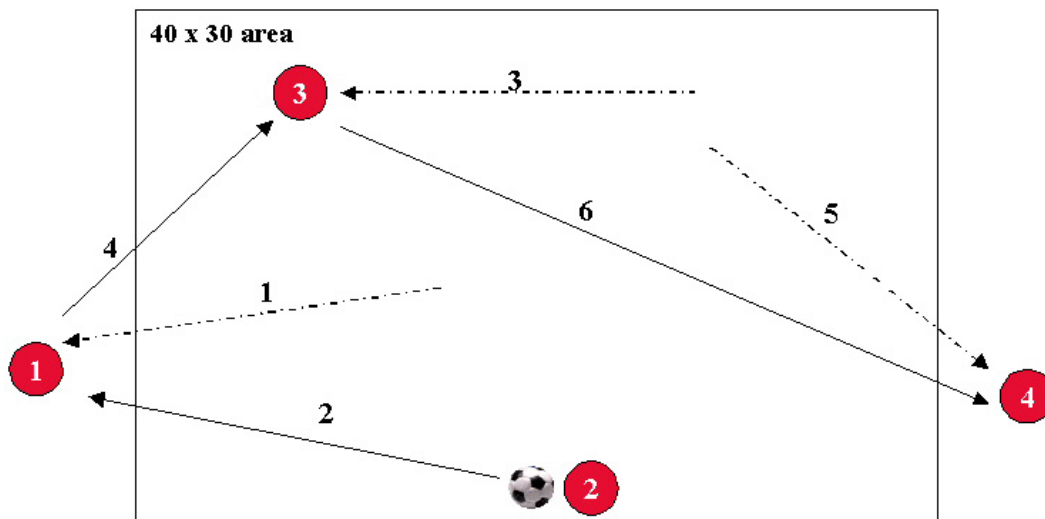


Diagram 65

This is a simplified set up to get initial understanding. Increase numbers as previously e.g. two teams of six. We started earlier with one ball and six players for example so each person on the ball had five choices of pass to make and that was easy.

Now we must **identify one** and **only one** pass and must try to make it. That pass is to the person who runs outside the zone. This player is the **free** player (unmarked). The session goes as follows:

1. Player (1) runs **outside** the area (perhaps after several passes within the zone). Player (2) on the ball **sees the run** and must **pass** to (1). As (1) is about to receive (as the ball is traveling to him or her) (3) moves into a position to **support** (1) showing anticipation and awareness. As (3) receives the pass, (4) makes a run out the area.
2. (3) Has **already** seen the run by (4) and passes. (4) Brings the ball back in and the game continues. This is an indicator of how quickly players recognize the run and consequently make the pass.
3. Hence players are beginning to look one and two moves ahead of the ball. It doesn't need to happen so quickly in terms of the next player running outside but it serves as an example. The run can be likened to a penetrating run into the attacking third where the player hasn't been picked up or tracked and is in a great position to attack and score if the passer sees them and makes that pass.

Further developmental ideas and ideals of this practice leading to the introduction of defenders as opposition but in an attacking overload situation.

4. Within the zone there are many choices of pass but as soon as a player makes the run outside that is **the** pass to make. Coach can determine the **tempo** of the game e.g. to avoid too many running out at the same time the coach can signal to an individual player to move out without the others knowing so only one at a time goes out.
5. Once the free player is outside and waiting for a pass see how many passes are made inside the zone before someone sees the right pass i.e. to the outside player. This is an indication of which players play with their heads up (and hence have good peripheral vision) and which don't, (hence have poor peripheral vision or even none at all).

6. The fewer touches on the ball the player needs to get the ball there the greater their anticipation of the run. (One touch is the ultimate aim to develop where as the ball is traveling to the player, at the same time another player makes their run out; they see the run and make the pass at the same time).
7. More touches means more reaction time needed and in a game situation this may mean the player being caught in possession before they get around to making the pass.
8. Initially the coach may see several passes made within the area whilst a player stands and waits outside until someone sees them; this will happen less and less as you practice and as the players improve their peripheral vision. The exciting part of this is when the coach sees one of their players make the right pass quickly in a game situation due to the work they have done in this session.

DIRECTIONAL A.I.A. SESSION FOCUSING ON PASSING / SUPPORT AND RUNNING WITH AND WITHOUT THE BALL

LONG PASSING

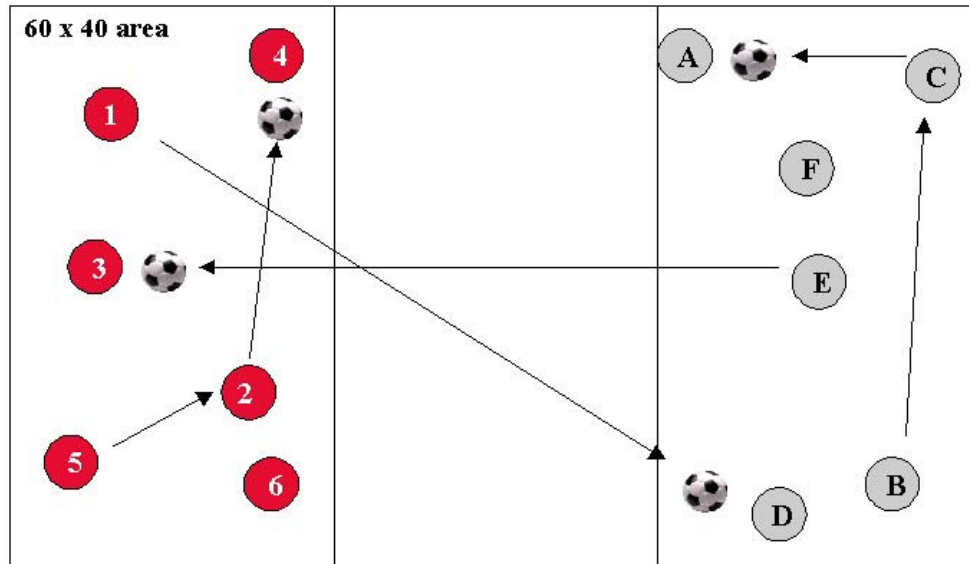


Diagram 66

1. You can use various numbers of players at each end of the grid in this sequence. **Pass and move** in own grid until **eye** contact with a player in the **other** grid (or a call) then play a **long pass** to that player.
2. Balls are constantly changing grids; players have to have **awareness** in their **own** grid to receive but also **awareness** of when a pass is on from the **other** grid (must have head up and be constantly looking around to see this). If they don't observe where their own teammates are or those in the other grid are, they won't be successful with this so they **must** play with their **head up** and have the ability to look **away** from the ball as well as **at** it, observing all the options that are on both in their own grid and the other one.
3. **Conditions** – Ball can't bounce between grids for chipped or lofted passes, or must be driven along the ground with pace for quick passing.
4. Develop **Running with the Ball** across the grids. Pass and move within own grid then a player picks a moment to run and takes it. **Keep balance** of balls in each grid. Can start with one in each; try to avoid two in one grid at once. Increase to two balls per grid.
5. **Long pass** then **follow** the ball (supporting the pass) into the other grid so **not only** balls being transferred but **also players**. Players must move as **quickly** as possible to support in the other grid.

PASSING AND SUPPORT DIRECTIONAL TARGET GAME

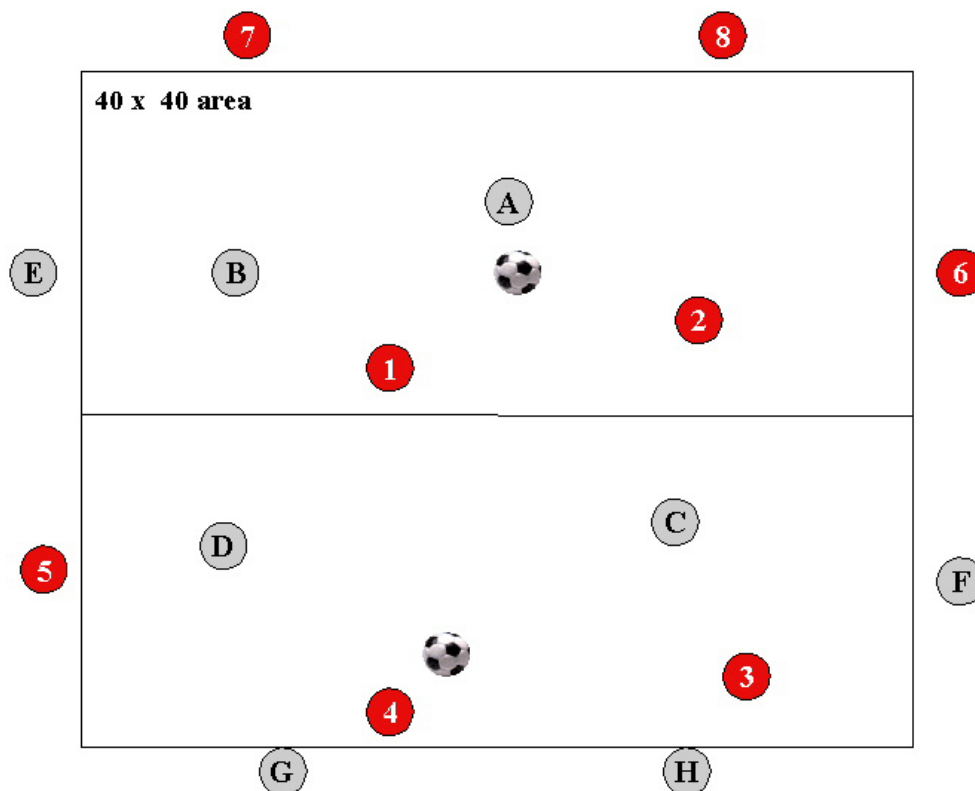


Diagram 82

1. Start with two balls and two teams passing and playing through each other, **no opposition**. Develop by having two balls per team to work with. Have the players play in a relaxed composed way to begin. Develop into a **competitive game**.
2. This is a 4 v 4 target game (you can vary the number of players). Players must get the ball to their **own** end targets; if they do they retain possession as a reward. Before they can go back to a target they must pass the ball back into their **own half** of the field. Targets have two touches and can pass to any of the four players. Players can use support on the outside (1 or 2 touch). Inside players no touch restriction.
3. This is an intensive workout with little rest keep it short so players perform with **quality**, rotate outside players in. If a team wins the ball back in their attacking half they can go **direct** to their targets (same as regaining the ball in the attacking half and shooting for goal).
4. **Observe the Attacking Team** –Recognize their movement **off** the ball for example to work the ball into their own half see if the players make runs early in there as soon as the ball is at a target, some should support short and some long so the target has choices.
5. **Observe the Defending Team** – see if they are sucked to the ball or they recognize runs **off** the ball and track players making runs away from the ball into the other half.
6. To lessen the workload and keep everyone involved have players **switch** with targets and outside side players when they pass to them.

ELEMENTS OF PLAY THE TARGET GAME TEACHES.

1. **Attacking as a Team and as Individuals.**
 - a) **Creating Space** by running **off** the ball to receive or to help a teammate receive.
 - b) Developing **quick support** play working angles and distances incorporating switching play using the side players.
 - c) **Passing** long and short to targets and to teammates.
 - d) **Receiving and turning** in tight situations and dribbling in 1 v 1 situations.
 - e) Lots of **touches** on the ball for the players in this practice.
 - f) **Quick decision-making** is required in this session because the numbers are small, the area tight and the transitions rapid.
2. **Defending as a Team and as Individuals.**
 - a) **Pressurizing** players on the ball to **regain** possession.
 - b) **Supporting** pressuring players and **tracking** runners off the ball.
 - c) **High pressure** to regain possession in the attacking half to be able to go straight to the target to score.
3. **Transitions** from defense to attack and attack to defense, quick decision-making and improved **concentration** as the switch occurs. **Interchanges** of positions between inside players, targets and side support players.

4. As a coach you can work in this session how to **defend** properly as individuals and a team or how to **attack** properly as individuals and a team.

CONDITIONS TO IMPOSE TO CHANGE THE FOCUS OF THE GAME

1. **No** restriction on touches **then** three, two or one touch but only if it is on to do so. Introduce **neutral** player so 5 v 4 overloads in the middle if possession isn't kept easily.
2. **Interchanges** of players outside to in, inside to out as they pass the ball observing the quality of the pass and the first touch of the receiver or performing a crossover.
3. Have one teammate at each end so you are **attacking both ends** but once you have passed to one target you keep possession and must try to get to the other target. You can't go back unless the opposition wins the ball then you get it back, only then can you go back to the same target.
4. To lessen the workload and keep everyone involved have players **switch** with targets and outside players when they pass to them. This causes a constant **transition** of players and focuses the player's concentration. The team can only score if they get an **overlap, crossover or 1 – 2** in during the build up.
5. **No talking** so players have to rely on their own vision to play.
6. Players **move into** the target zone to **receive** (timing of run and pass) so we don't play with actual targets, different players can then become the target player.
7. **Man – Marking** – Have the players man mark so they must track a player when they haven't the ball and they must lose their marker when they have the ball. This is a good test to see who is working hard and who isn't as they have a designated job to do. You as a coach can see who works to get free of their marker and who works hard to prevent the player they are marking get the ball.

By Wayne Harrison, UEFA "A" License

This unique coaching program focuses on the development of each player's soccer instincts: (Anticipation, Imagination, Awareness) through the use of specially designed training sessions. While this is quite possibly the most important aspect of a player's soccer development, it is also the most difficult to coach. In this book, the author provides many practical exercises and small sided games to help players **Recognize the Moment to Play**.

About the Author

- This article was provided by Wayne Harrison, Director of Coaching for Eden Prairie Soccer Club in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, USA. An UEFA "A" licensed coach, Wayne played professionally for Blackpool F.C. and in Finland for Oulu Palloseura and previously served as the Director of Coaching for the Blackpool Football Club's "Center of Excellence". In addition, he has coached for a number of other professional and semi-professional teams, including Accrington Stanley F.C., Bamber Bridge F.C., Lancaster City F.C.; Workington Reds F.C. and Carlisle United F.C. You can write to him at wharrison@integraonline.com.

