



Heading

Tags: `individual-technical` `standalone` `heading` `aerial` `set-pieces`

Kicker: Ten different weeks install corner and cross routines, and every one of them ends the same way — with somebody attacking a high ball. The programme has trained the delivery all season and never once trained the contact. Both penalty boxes on a Saturday are decided in the air, and this is where that gets built.

Session Overview

FIELD	VALUE
Session theme	Heading — Attacking Headers, Defensive Headers and the Aerial Duel
Short summary	Four stages building heading from the ground up: unopposed technique and confidence at low intensity, the attacking header as a genuine finish, the defensive header and the aerial duel under real opposition, and a closing live game that rewards winning the ball in the air at both ends. Pairs directly with the set-piece library — every routine in it assumes this session's content.
Total duration	50 minutes across four practices
Goalkeeper requirements	Both goalkeepers should attend — Practice 3 trains their claim-or-stay decision and command of the area directly, and Practice 4 gives it live conditions.
Area layout	Open paired space for Practice 1, a full box working area for Practices 2–3, a 40 x 30 m game area for Practice 4.
Equipment	A generous supply of balls, cones marking service and attacking positions, two sets of bibs, one full-size goal plus a second goal for Practice 4.
Contingency — lower attendance	Practices 2–3 run fine as small rotating groups with a single goalkeeper; Practice 4 scales to 5v5 without losing the aerial emphasis.
A note on load	Heading volume is managed deliberately even with adults: Practice 1 uses soft, self-paced service; Practices 2–3 cap individual repetitions through rotation rather than queue-free volume. Any player who takes a blow to the head comes off and stays off — the concussion guidance in the club's match-day material applies to training nights exactly as it does to Saturdays.

PRACTICE 1 — SOFT CONTACT (ARRIVAL)

Duration: 8 minutes · **Training load:** Low

Tactical purpose: Grooming the basic contact — forehead, eyes open, mouth closed, neck braced — at a volume and pace each player controls, so confidence is built before any height, speed or opposition arrives.

Organisation: Pairs, one ball per pair, five metres apart, with space between pairs.

Walkthrough: One player serves underarm at head height, the partner returns a controlled header to hands — ten each, then swap. Progress to a gentle two-touch header rally where the pair keeps the ball up between them.

Rules: Underarm service only, at a pace the header can control. The server's job is to make their partner look good, not to test them.

Coaching points:

- *Technical:* contact on the forehead, eyes open through the flight, and the ball struck rather than received — the header goes where the forehead points.
- *Physical:* the power comes from the trunk arching and snapping forward, not from the neck alone — the neck stays braced, the body does the work.

No diagram, guided discovery questions, or progressions are attached to the arrival activity — it is deliberately kept simple so the session's teaching time is protected for the three main practices below.

PRACTICE 2 — ATTACK THE BALL (ATTACKING HEADERS)

Duration: 14 minutes · **Training load:** Moderate

Tactical purpose: Builds the attacking header as a genuine finish — a moving player meeting a moving ball and directing it downward, past a live goalkeeper — rather than a standing player letting a cross hit them.

Organisation:

- **Pitch dimensions:** full box, with a wide service position on each side
- **Players:** rotating group of attackers, two wide servers, one goalkeeper
- **Goalkeeper involvement:** live and reacting throughout
- **Team sizes:** individual attacking runs, one attacker at a time
- **Neutrals:** the wide servers deliver crosses by hand-throw first, then by kicked cross
- **Equipment:** a supply of balls at each service position, cones marking the attacker's starting point and the two service positions
- **Starting positions:** as shown in the diagram
- **Ball supply:** at each wide service position
- **Restart:** next attacker starts their run as the previous attempt resolves
- **Coach position:** behind the goal, able to see the attacker's run, contact and placement together
- **Rotation method:** each attacker takes alternate services from the left and right before rotating; servers rotate in every few minutes
- **Direction of play:** always toward the same goal

Practice walkthrough: The attacker starts at the penalty spot area, checks away, then attacks the delivery from the wide server, meeting the ball in front of them and heading down toward a corner past the live goalkeeper. Service starts as a sympathetic hand-throw so the timing and contact can be built, and progresses to kicked crosses once the contact is reliable. The movement — check away, then attack the ball's flight — is coached as hard as the header itself.

Rules: The attacker must meet the ball moving forward. A header taken flat-footed, waiting under the flight, doesn't count even when it goes in.

Coaching points:

CORNER	POINT
Technical	Contact through the top half of the ball, directing the header downward — a header into the ground is hard to save; a header floating upward is a routine catch.
Tactical	Attacking the space in front of the ball's flight, not waiting under it — the attacker who moves toward the delivery beats the defender who stands and jumps.
Physical	Timing the jump off one foot on the move, arriving at the highest point as the ball does.
Psychological	Genuine commitment to the contact — a hesitant header is both less effective and, in a real duel, less safe than a committed one.
Communication & leadership	None required — this is deliberately isolated individual technical work.

Tactical roles: **Attacker** — times the run and the jump, and directs the finish downward. **Servers** — deliver a genuinely attackable ball, progressing the difficulty only as the attacker succeeds. **Goalkeeper** — provides a live picture and reacts to every attempt.

Decision-making triggers: a delivery in front of the attacker is the trigger to attack it early and head down for a corner; a delivery behind or above forces the choice between a glanced redirection and letting it run — recognising which delivery has arrived is the whole judgement.

Communication language used: none specific — the emphasis is on movement and contact.

Guided discovery questions:

1. Where was the ball when you decided to start your run — and was that early enough?
2. What's the difference between the headers the keeper saved and the ones they couldn't reach?
3. When the delivery was behind you, what were your real options?

Progressions:

1. Replace hand-thrown service with kicked crosses from open play positions.
2. Add a passive defender goal-side, so the attacker's movement has to create the free contact before the header can happen.

Regressions:

1. Return to hand-thrown service if the timing of run and jump is breaking down against kicked delivery.
2. Shorten the service distance so the flight is easier to read while confidence builds.

Common problems and corrections:

PROBLEM	WHY IT HAPPENS	COACH RECOGNISES BY	STOP OR FLOW?	INTERVENTION	RESTART
The attacker waits under the flight instead of attacking it	Watching the ball rather than reading where it will arrive	A standing jump from a flat-footed position under the delivery	Stop	Freeze-and-correct: walk the run again — start position, check away, attack the space in front of the flight	Resume
Headers float upward at a comfortable height for the goalkeeper	Contact through the bottom half of the ball, often with the eyes closing at contact	Attempts arriving at the keeper's chest height or over the bar	Stop	Freeze-and-correct: rehearse contact through the top half, directing down — return to hand service briefly if needed	Resume

Coach interventions used in this practice: freeze-and-correct for a flat-footed waiting header and for upward contact.

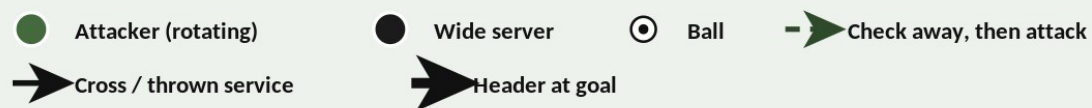
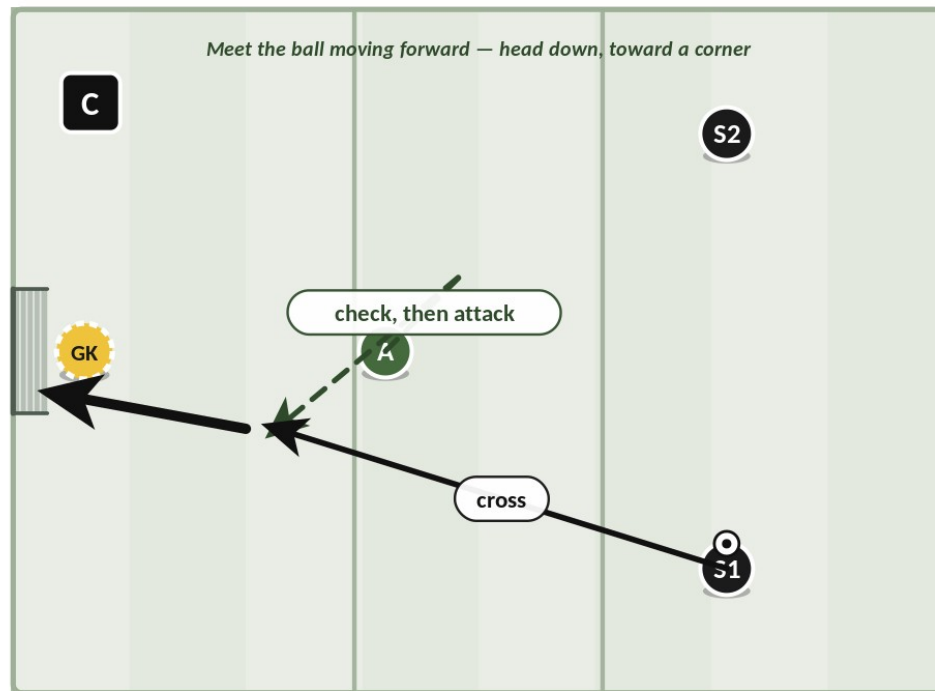
Success indicators:

- Attackers consistently meet the ball moving forward, in front of their body.
- Headers are directed downward toward the corners, not floated centrally.
- Timing holds when the service progresses from thrown to kicked delivery.

Coach's eye: the run matters more than the leap — the players who score headers on a Saturday are rarely the ones who jump highest, they're the ones already moving when the ball leaves the crosser's foot.

TC5.2 ATTACK THE BALL — Attacking Headers

Full box • wide service, checked run, header down past a live keeper • 14 minutes



Castlewellan Town FC • Senior Coaching Curriculum • Heading (standalone) • Diagrams not to scale

PRACTICE 3 — FIRST TO IT (DEFENSIVE HEADERS AND THE AERIAL DUEL)

Duration: 14 minutes · **Training load:** Moderate-high

Tactical purpose: Builds the defensive header — high, wide and long, under a genuine opponent — and the goalkeeper's claim-or-stay decision over the top of it, which is where most amateur defending of crosses and set pieces actually breaks down.

Organisation:

- **Pitch dimensions:** full box
- **Players:** rotating pairs of one defender and one attacker, a server, one goalkeeper
- **Goalkeeper involvement:** live throughout — every delivery is also a live claim-or-stay decision, with the keeper's call binding
- **Team sizes:** 1v1 aerial duels under each delivery
- **Neutrals:** the server delivers a high, contested ball into the marked central zone
- **Equipment:** a supply of balls at the service position, a marked central landing zone
- **Starting positions:** as shown in the diagram
- **Ball supply:** at the service position
- **Restart:** next delivery once the previous duel resolves
- **Coach position:** side-on to the duel, able to see body positions and the keeper together
- **Rotation method:** defender and attacker swap roles every few deliveries; pairs rotate out to manage heading volume
- **Direction of play:** the defender clears away from goal; the attacker attacks toward it

Practice walkthrough: The server delivers a high ball into the zone in front of goal. The defender's job is first contact — a header directed high, wide and long, never flat across the box. The attacker contests genuinely, looking to head on target as in Practice 2. Over both of them, the goalkeeper makes a live decision on every delivery: come and claim, or stay and command — and when the call is "keeper's", both outfield players clear the path. The duel is coached honestly: body between opponent and ball, jump off one foot with a raised arm for protection, eyes on the flight.

Rules: The keeper's call is absolute — a defender who attacks a ball the keeper has called for gives away the practice's only "goal against" regardless of what happens next. Defensive clearances that go high, wide and long score for the defender; anything flat and central scores for the attack.

Coaching points:

CORNER	POINT
Technical	Defensive contact through the bottom half of the ball — height first, then width, then distance, in that order of priority.
Tactical	First contact beats clean contact — a defender who gets any touch first controls the moment; the one who waits for a perfect header usually never gets it.
Physical	The duel is won before the jump: body across the opponent, one-footed take-off into the ball's line, arm raised for protection, not for fouling.
Psychological	Bravery with judgement — attack the ball fully or leave it fully on the keeper's call; the half-committed challenge is the worst of the three options.
Communication & leadership	The goalkeeper's early, loud, binding call — "keeper's!" or "away!" — is the single most coachable habit in this practice.

Tactical roles: **Defender** — first contact, high wide and long, and total respect for the keeper's call. **Attacker** — a genuine contest, applying Practice 2's movement under opposition. **Goalkeeper** — an early decision and an unmissable call on every single delivery, then full commitment to it.

Decision-making triggers: a delivery the keeper can attack in front of the six-yard area with a clean path triggers the claim; anything deeper, flatter or through traffic triggers "away!" and the defenders take it. Silence is the one wrong answer.

Communication language used: "keeper's!" and "away!" — early, loud, and binding, matching the language used in the programme's defending-the-box work.

Guided discovery questions:

1. Defender — when you lost the duel, was it the jump you lost, or the position before it?
2. Keeper — what told you to come for that one and stay for the one before it?
3. What happens in a real box when the keeper's call comes late — or doesn't come?

Progressions:

1. Add a second attacker so the defender must defend the ball and the runner beyond it.
2. Deliver from genuine corner and wide free-kick positions, connecting directly to the set-piece library's defensive picture.

Regressions:

1. Reduce the contest to passive attacker pressure while defensive technique is rebuilt.
2. Shorten and soften the service so the flight is easier to judge.

Common problems and corrections:

PROBLEM	WHY IT HAPPENS	COACH RECOGNISES BY	STOP OR FLOW?	INTERVENTION	RESTART
Defensive headers go flat and central — the classic second-ball goal	Contact through the middle of the ball, often from a poor body position under it	Clearances landing at the edge of the box, centrally, at an attacker's feet	Stop	Freeze-and-correct: rehearse contact under the ball — height first, wide second, long third	Resume
The keeper calls late, or not at all, and two players go for the same ball	Decision left until the flight is already dropping	Defender and keeper arriving together, or both hesitating and neither attacking it	Stop	Freeze-and-correct: the call is rehearsed at the moment the ball leaves the server, not when it drops	Resume
The defender jumps under the ball rather than through its line	Watching the opponent instead of the flight	Repeatedly out-jumped despite equal or better physical tools	Let it flow, then a natural stoppage	Question: "where were your eyes when the ball was in the air?"	Resume

Coach interventions used in this practice: freeze-and-correct for flat central clearances and for the late or missing keeper's call; reflective questioning for the mistimed duel.

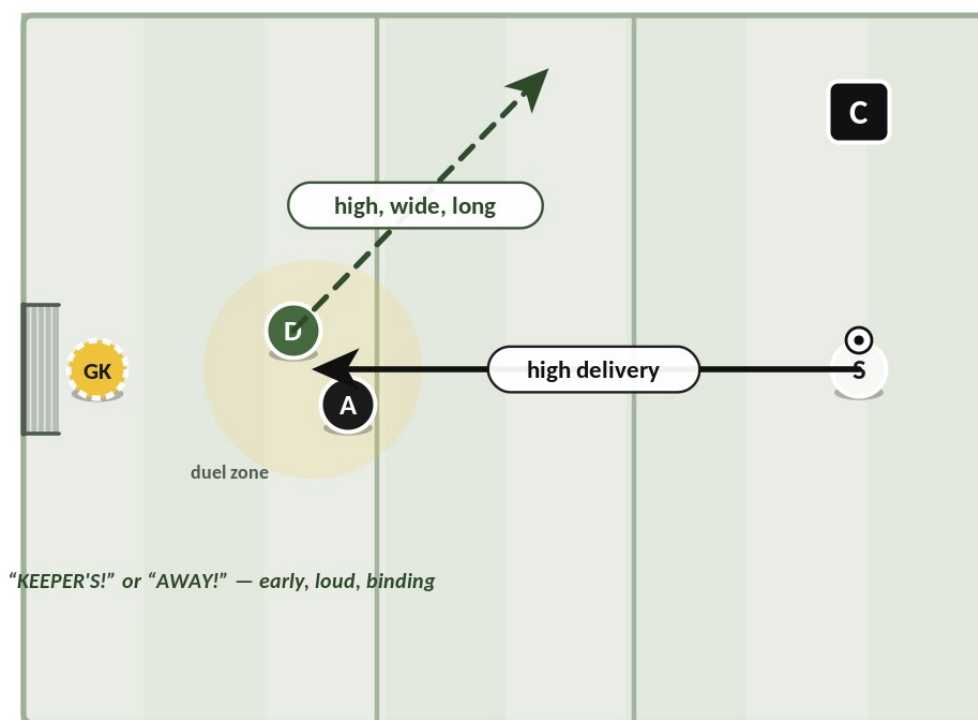
Success indicators:

- Defensive headers go high, wide and long as a habit, not an accident.
- The keeper's call comes early and loud on every delivery, and is respected every time.
- Duels are contested with full commitment and a protected, legal jumping technique.

Coach's eye: watch the moment just before the jump, not the jump itself — the duel is usually already decided by whose body is between opponent and ball when the delivery arrives.

TC5.3 FIRST TO IT — Defensive Headers & the Aerial Duel

Full box • contested high service, keeper's call binding • 14 minutes



- Defender
- Attacker
- Server
- ⊙ High service
- ➡ Defensive clearance — high, wide, long
- Coach

Castlewellan Town FC • Senior Coaching Curriculum • Heading (standalone) • Diagrams not to scale

PRACTICE 4 — WIN BOTH BOXES (CLOSING LIVE GAME)

Duration: 14 minutes · **Training load:** Moderate-high

Purpose: Closes the session with a live game built to produce aerial moments at both ends, so attacking headers, defensive headers and the keeper's command all get tested under real, unscripted conditions.

Organisation:

- **Pitch dimensions:** 40 x 30 m with a full-width crossing channel on each side
- **Players:** two teams of 5-6 plus a neutral wide server in each channel, with goalkeepers
- **Goalkeeper involvement:** both keepers live, with their claim-or-stay call binding exactly as in Practice 3
- **Team sizes:** 5v5 or 6v6 plus two neutral wide players
- **Neutrals:** one wide server per channel, playing for the team in possession, uncontested in the channel
- **Equipment:** bibs for both teams and the neutrals, a supply of balls, marked channels
- **Starting positions:** open play
- **Ball supply:** near the halfway line for quick restarts
- **Restart:** standard small-sided game rules
- **Coach position:** mobile, watching the boxes rather than the buildup
- **Rotation method:** neutrals swap with outfield players every few minutes to share the aerial load
- **Direction of play:** both directions

Practice walkthrough: A normal game, with one condition shaping it: the wide neutrals cross early and often, and a goal scored with a header counts double. Defensively, a clearance that reaches beyond the channel line — high, wide and long — restarts possession for the defending team rather than conceding the second ball. The keepers call every cross exactly as rehearsed. Everything the session has built now has to survive opposition, fatigue and a score.

Rules: Standard small-sided rules; headed goals count double; a defensive header cleared beyond the channels earns the defending team possession; the keeper's call is binding.

Coaching points:

CORNER	POINT
Technical	Practice 2's downward attacking contact and Practice 3's high-wide-long defensive contact both holding up in live play.
Tactical	Attackers moving before the cross is struck; defenders taking first contact rather than perfect contact; keepers commanding their area.
Physical	Repeated jumps and duels under fatigue, with technique holding rather than degrading.
Psychological	Commitment in the duel at both ends when it matters to the score.
Communication & leadership	The keeper's call, and defenders organising who attacks the ball and who covers the second contact.

Tactical roles: the full set from Practices 2 and 3, now live — attackers timing runs onto crosses, defenders winning first contact, keepers deciding and calling every delivery.

Decision-making triggers: all triggers from Practices 2 and 3, now arriving unscripted and at game speed.

Communication language used: "keeper's!" / "away!" as rehearsed, plus defensive organisation around who attacks the cross.

Guided discovery questions:

1. Which headed goal tonight was won by movement rather than by jumping — and what does that tell you?
2. Defenders — how many of your clearances would have survived a real second-ball situation?
3. What's the one aerial habit from tonight you want to see on Saturday?

Progressions:

1. Require all attacking play through a channel before a goal can be scored, further increasing crossing volume.
2. Award the double also for a defensive header that directly launches a counter-attack, rewarding the clearance with intent.

Regressions:

1. Let the neutrals deliver by hand if kicked crossing quality is starving the game of genuine aerial moments.
2. Drop the double-goal condition if it's producing hopeful long balls rather than genuine crossing play.

Common problems and corrections:

PROBLEM	WHY IT HAPPENS	COACH RECOGNISES BY	STOP OR FLOW?	INTERVENTION	RESTART
Crosses arrive but nobody attacks them	Movement habits from Practice 2 dissolving under game load	Deliveries dropping in the box with every attacker flat-footed	Let it flow, then a natural stoppage	Question: "who was moving when the ball left the wide player's foot?"	Resume
Defenders head flat and central under game pressure	Reverting to comfortable contact when tired and contested	Second balls repeatedly falling to the attacking team at the edge of the box	Stop	Short group intervention: re-set the priority order — height, width, distance	Resume

Coach interventions used in this practice: reflective questioning for static attacking movement; a short group intervention for flat defensive clearances.

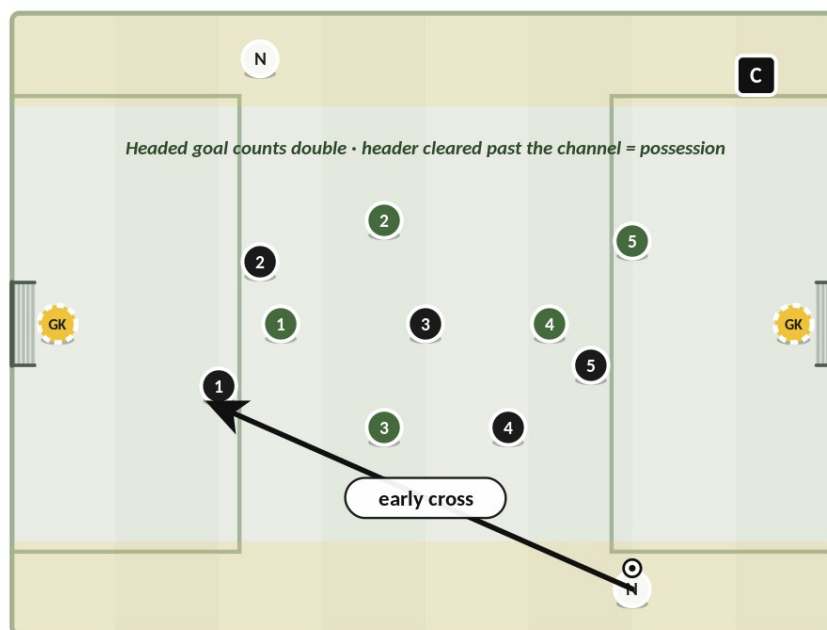
Success indicators:

- Headed chances are created by movement, not hoisted hopefully into a crowd.
- Defensive clearances keep earning the beyond-the-channel possession reward under fatigue.
- Both keepers call every cross, early and audibly, for the full 14 minutes.

Coach's eye: count silent crosses — every delivery that arrives without a keeper's call is the exact moment this session exists to remove, and there should be fewer of them at the end of the game than at the start.

TC5.4 WIN BOTH BOXES — Closing Live Game

40 x 30 m + wide channels • headed goals double, cleared headers earn possession • 14 minutes



● Team A ● Team B ○ Neutral wide server ⊙ Ball □ Crossing channel

Castlewellan Town FC • Senior Coaching Curriculum • Heading (standalone) • Diagrams not to scale

Written by Alan Cunningham with Claude AI • Castlewellan Town FC • Standalone Individual Technical Session