



SESSION 15 • STANDALONE PLAN

Playing Forward — When to Keep and When to Break

Possession principles • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	15.1 The Forward Gate Grid
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	15.2 Keep or Break
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	15.3 Six Then Forward
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	15.4 Break the Line Match
0:55 – 1:00	5	■ Reflection	Player-led review

USING THIS SESSION

This is a standalone plan. It does not depend on any other session in the set and can be run whenever it is useful to you — as a one-off, out of order, or repeated. Nothing here assumes the players did something last week.

U12 nine-a-side is the reference format, not the audience. The session is written at 9v9 because something has to be, and the phone index adapts it to the other four Irish FA formats — pick your team at the top of it and this session will tell you whether to run it as printed, scale it, adapt it, or leave it for another age.

Scaling up, and down as far as 7v7, is a matter of numbers. Keep roughly the same space per player: to 7v7 that is about a fifth smaller with a player off each team, to 5v5 about a third. **For eleven-a-side** add ten to fifteen metres to the length of the bigger practices and put the extra players in as outside players or a second team, never in a queue.

Below U10 it is not just a matter of size, because the game itself is different. There is no offside, no throw-in — restarts are a dribble or a pass in — no referee, and no league result. At U8–U9 the technical practice usually wants shortening or dropping. At U6–U7 there are no goalkeepers at all and the four-phase hour is the wrong shape entirely. The Formats tab in the phone index has the rules for each stage.

WHY THIS SESSION MATTERS

A team that can keep the ball but never progresses it has learned half a skill, and it is a half that can quietly become a habit. Width, depth and support angles will have made this squad noticeably better at retaining possession — and there is a real risk that they now start passing sideways beautifully and going nowhere. Tonight fixes that, and it does so by teaching a judgement rather than a technique. There are two kinds of pass in football: the pass that keeps the ball, and the pass that breaks a line. Both are correct, at different moments. The forward pass is more valuable and more expensive — it wins the ball forty metres of ground when it works and hands the opposition an attack when it doesn't. The skill is not 'always play forward'; it is knowing which of the two the moment is asking for, and then executing it without hesitating. Under-12 players tend to be at one extreme or the other. Half of them force forward passes into crowds; half of them never try. Tonight is about the middle.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- Recognise when a forward pass is on — a teammate ahead of the ball with space to receive.

- **Recognise when it isn't**, and keep the ball without treating that as a failure.
- **Play the forward pass decisively** once the decision is made, rather than half-hitting it.
- **Break a line** — play a pass that takes two or more opponents out of the game.
- **Understand the cost** of a forward pass that is intercepted, and weigh it against the reward.

KIT LIST

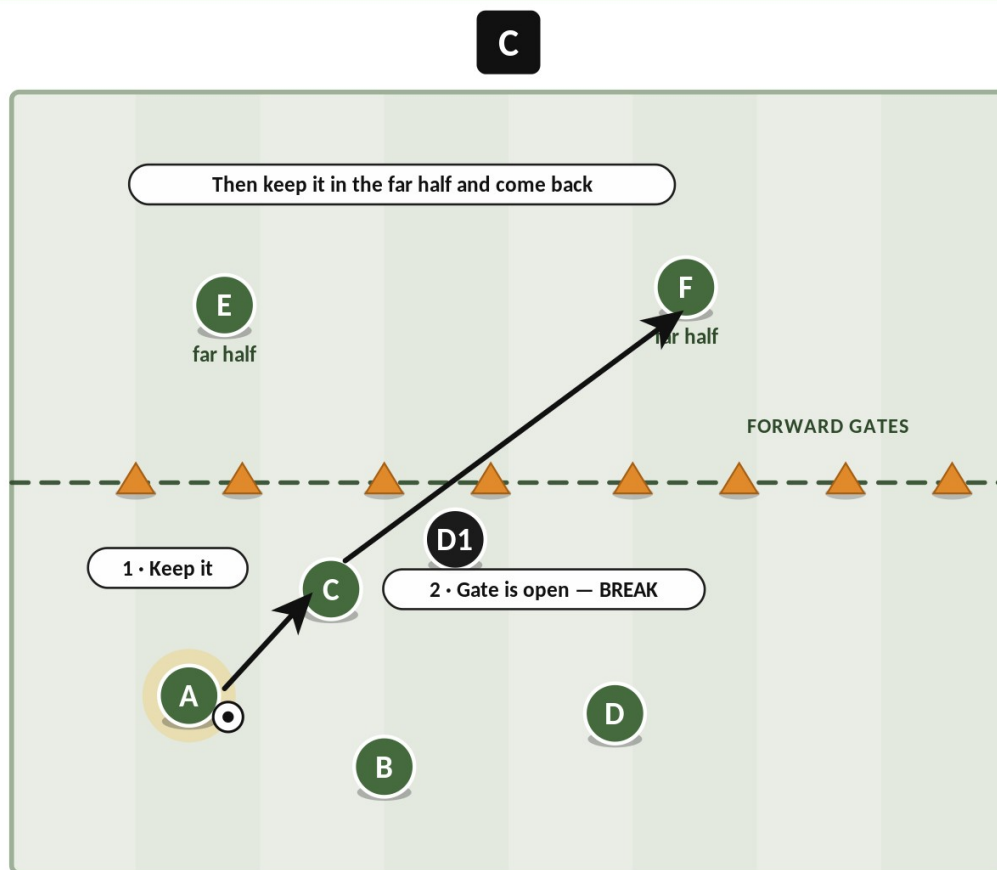
Ground needed: about 60 × 40 m. Every practice tonight is split by a line, because 'forward' has to mean something specific and visible. Mark those halfway lines clearly — a vague line produces a vague decision.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	60	Halves, gates, pitch edges
Cones (tall)	16	Forward gates (15.1)
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 2	15.1 onwards
Mini goals	4	Skill game (15.3) — two per end
Full-size goals	2	Conditioned match (15.4)

15.1 THE FORWARD GATE GRID

Make the decision physical. A group keeps the ball in one half of a grid and may only progress through one of four gates in the middle line. A defender patrols those gates, so sometimes forward is on and sometimes it isn't — and the group has to tell the difference.

28 x 22 m • groups of four • keep it until a gate opens, then break through • 10 minutes



KEEP IT UNTIL FORWARD IS ON • THEN TAKE IT WITHOUT HESITATING



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SET UP

- 28 × 22 m grid divided in half by a line of flat markers, with **four 3 m gates** built into that line.
- **Groups of four in the near half, two teammates waiting in the far half.** One defender patrols the gate line.
- The ball may only cross the line **through a gate**.
- Balls at the grid edge so early arrivals start immediately.
- Coach on the touchline, level with the gate line.

HOW IT RUNS

- 1. Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, free dribbling. **Collect the Session 14 homework** — *how many options did the player on the ball usually have?*

2. **Minute 3 — keep it only.** Four players keep the ball in the near half against one defender. No gates yet. Ninety seconds.
3. **Minute 5 — open the gates.** *Now, when a gate is free, play through it to one of the two up there. Then they keep it and come back.* The defender may guard whichever gate they choose.
4. **Minute 7 — the rule that matters.** *If no gate is open, keep the ball. Don't force it. Say it once and then only ask about it.*
5. **Minutes 8–10 — count both.** Groups count forward passes completed AND forward passes intercepted. The second number is the interesting one.

RULES & SCORING

- The ball crosses the line **only through a gate**.
- **An intercepted forward pass gives the ball to the defender** and the group starts again.
- The defender may guard any gate but may not leave the line.
- Two touches maximum from minute 7.
- Groups count completions and interceptions separately.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The forward pass through a gate must be firm and along the ground — a floated one gives the defender time to move. Receivers in the far half should be moving to line themselves up with a gate.
Tactical	Move the defender before you play through. A pass across the near half drags them one way and opens a gate on the other. Patience is a weapon, not an absence of ambition.
Physical	Continuous movement in a confined space with sharp changes of angle. A gentle warm-up compared with the last month.
Psychological	Both errors are worth naming out loud: never trying, and always forcing. Ask which one each player thinks they are — most of them know.
Social	The players in the far half must call which gate is free. They can see the picture; the ball carrier often can't.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Forcing the pass into a guarded gate	<i>Was that gate open, or did you want it to be?</i> Then point at their interception count.
Never attempting the forward pass	<i>How many have you completed? None?</i> Then we're not going anywhere. Both numbers matter.
Passing across without moving the defender	<i>He didn't move. Why would a gate open?</i>
Receivers in the far half standing still	<i>Line yourself up with a gate. Make yourself findable.</i>
Floated passes through the gates	<i>Along the ground and hard. Give him no time.</i>

ASK THEM

- How do you know a gate is open?
- What can you do to make a gate open?
- What's worse — never trying it, or trying it when it's not on?
- What should the players in the far half be doing?
- How hard should that pass be?

- What were your two numbers — completed and intercepted?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Two defenders on the gate line.	Five gates and no defender for the first three minutes.
Three gates instead of four.	Wider gates (5 m).
One touch in the near half.	Three touches.
A forward pass must be completed within eight passes or possession changes.	Two receivers per gate area in the far half.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Forward passes attempted **and** completed, in roughly equal proportion.

The defender being moved before the pass is played.

Firm, ground passes through the gates.

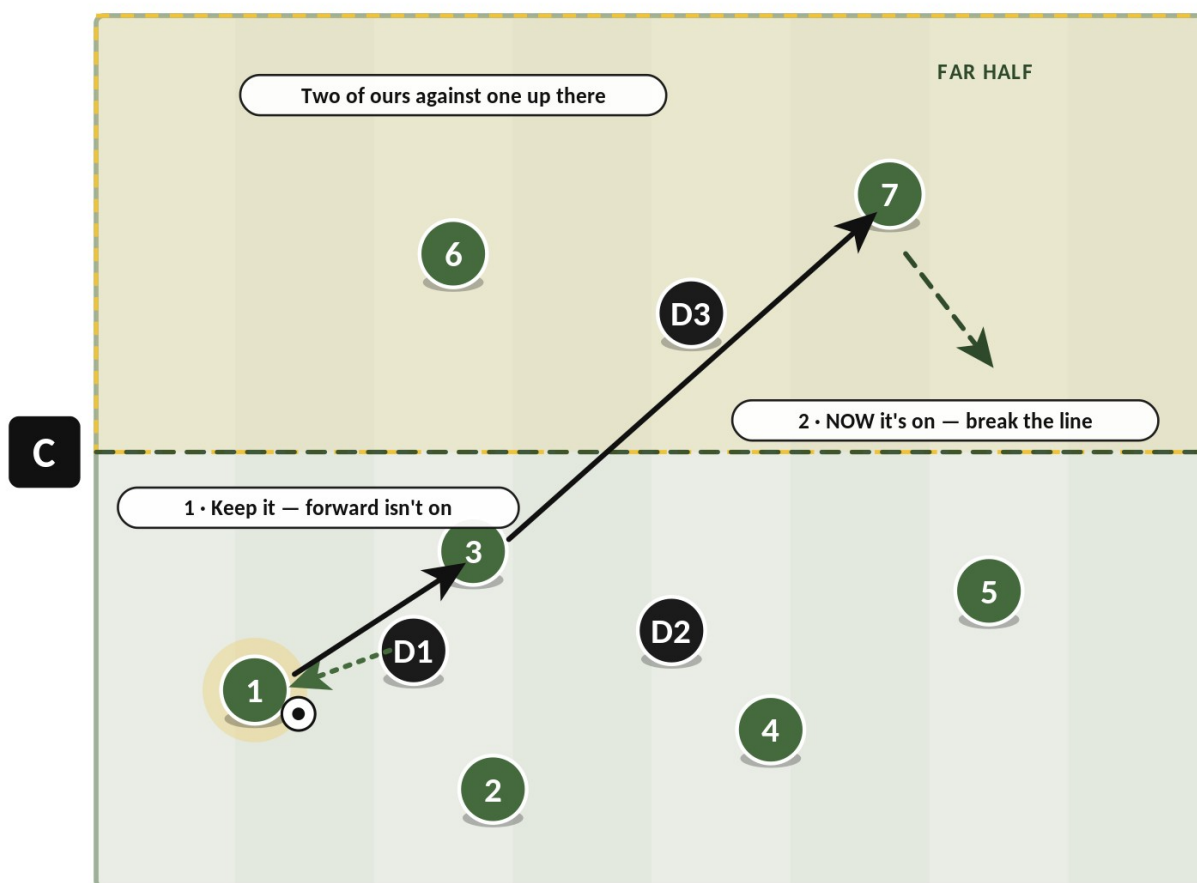
Receivers in the far half positioning themselves in line with gates.

Players able to state both of their numbers.

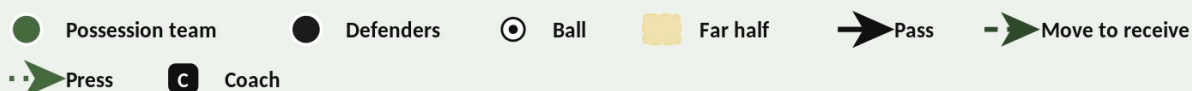
15.2 KEEP OR BREAK

The judgement in its clearest form. Five against two in the near half, two against one in the far half. The five can keep the ball almost indefinitely — but their job is to find the moment to break the line, because two against one up there is a chance and five against two down here is not.

26 x 20 m in two halves • five v two below, two v one above • find the moment • 15 minutes



A FORWARD PASS THAT IS INTERCEPTED COSTS MORE THAN A SIDEWAYS ONE • CHOOSE WELL



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SET UP

- One area **26 × 20 m**, divided into two equal halves by a clear line of flat markers.
- **Near half: five in possession against two defenders. Far half: two attackers against one defender.**
- Nobody crosses the line except the ball — this keeps the two pictures clean.
- One ball plus two spares with the coach.
- Coach standing on the dividing line where both halves are visible.

HOW IT RUNS

- 1. Set it up in 40 seconds.** Five against two down here. Two against one up there. Your job is to find the right moment to get it up to them.

2. **Minutes 0–4 — free.** No scoring. Let them work out that keeping the ball in the near half achieves nothing on its own.
3. **Minute 4 — one freeze, twenty seconds.** Stop the ball and ask: *is forward on right now? How do you know?* Get two or three answers, then restart.
4. **Minutes 4–10 — scored.** 1 point for a completed pass into the far half; **2 points** if the receiver up there can turn and face forward. 1 point to the defenders for an interception.
5. **Minutes 10–15 — the counter-cost.** If the defenders intercept a forward pass, **they score 2** — which makes forcing it genuinely expensive and sharpens the judgement immediately.
6. **Rotation:** swap the far-half players and the defenders every three minutes so everybody experiences both decisions.

RULES & SCORING

- **Players stay in their own half.** Only the ball crosses.
- **1 point** for a completed forward pass; **2 points** if the receiver can turn. **2 points to the defenders** for intercepting one (from minute 10).
- Two touches maximum in the near half from minute 8.
- The far-half players must be moving to make themselves available — a static target doesn't count.
- Ball out: instant restart with a spare.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Head up before the pass. The forward ball is usually driven, along the ground, into the receiver's front foot if they can turn and into their back foot if they can't. Weight matters more here than anywhere else.
Tactical	The moment arrives when a defender commits. Two defenders covering five players cannot stay compact forever — a pass across the area drags one across and the passing lane opens behind them. Keeping the ball is what creates the moment; it is not an alternative to it.
Physical	Constant repositioning. The two defenders work extremely hard — rotate them on schedule, not when they're exhausted.
Psychological	The 2-point penalty for a lost forward pass will make some players stop trying entirely. Watch for that and counter it directly: <i>I'd rather you tried three and lost one than tried none.</i>
Social	The far-half players must communicate constantly — <i>turn!, man on!, now!</i> They are the only ones who know whether the pass is worth playing.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Endless sideways possession with no attempt to progress	<i>How many points have you scored? Keeping it isn't the job — it's how you get the job done.</i>
Forcing it every time and giving the defenders four points	<i>Look at the score. What's that telling you?</i> The arithmetic teaches faster than you can.
Passing forward without looking up	<i>Did you see him? Or did you just hope?</i>
Far-half players standing still	<i>You're the ones who make it possible. Move so he can find you.</i>
The forward pass under-hit	<i>That's the most important pass we play. Hit it properly.</i>
Defenders sitting deep to block the line	Excellent defending — praise it, then ask the attackers: <i>if they sit deep, what does that give you instead?</i>

ASK THEM

- Is forward on right now? How do you know?

- What makes the moment arrive?
- What's the point of keeping the ball if we never go forward?
- How much does a lost forward pass cost us?
- Far-half players — what do you need to shout?
- Should the pass go to his front foot or his back foot? What decides?
- Which is worse — trying too often, or not enough?
- Defenders — what were you trying to stop?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
One touch in the near half.	Six in possession against two.
Three defenders in the near half.	Remove the interception penalty entirely.
The receiver must turn for any point to be scored.	Three attackers against one in the far half.
A forward pass must be attempted within ten passes , or possession changes.	Bigger area (30 × 24 m) with a wider passing lane.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Forward passes attempted at sensible moments rather than constantly or never.

The defenders being moved before the pass is played.

Receivers in the far half turning to face forward.

Firm, driven forward passes.

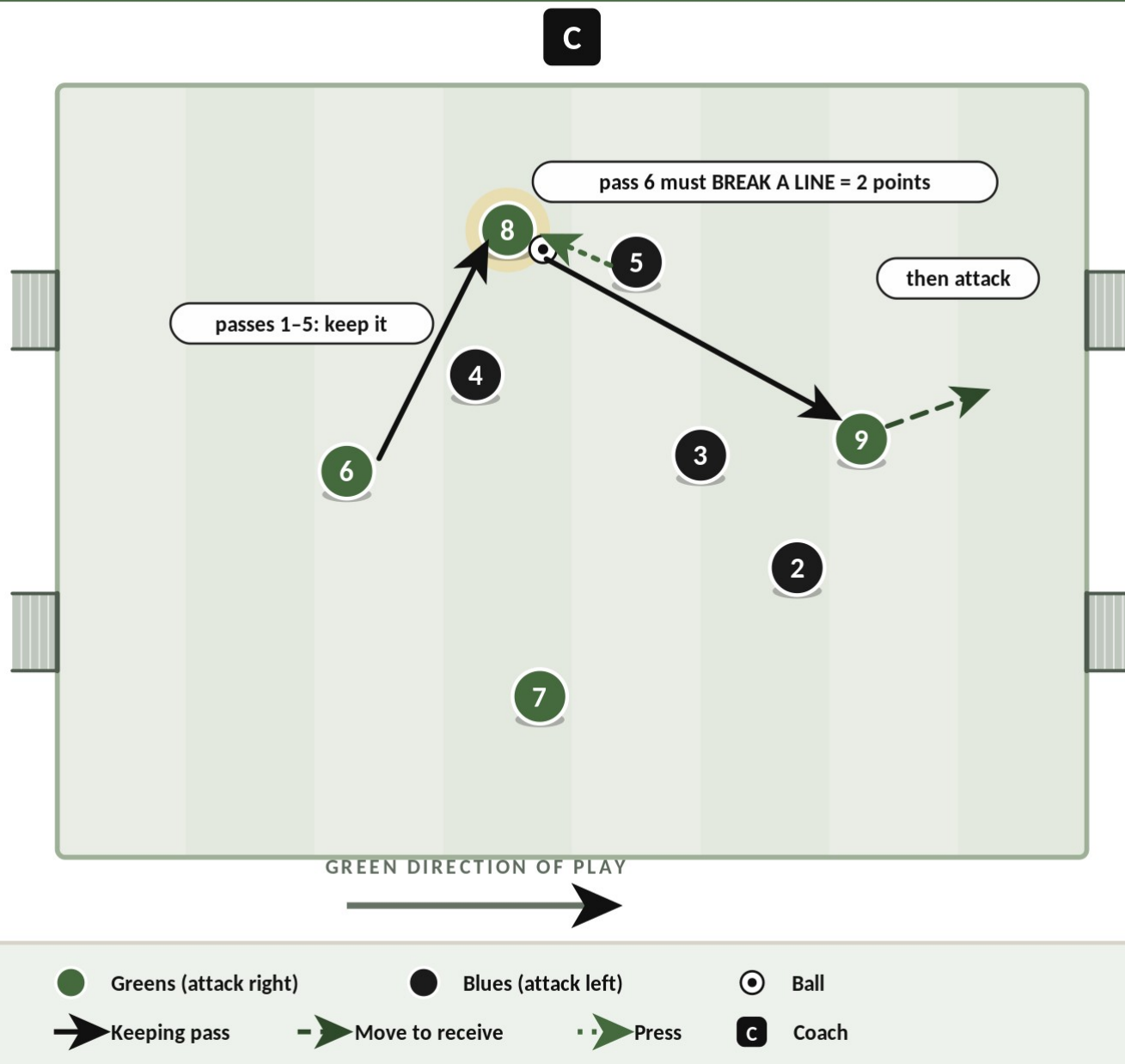
The scoring balance shifting towards the attackers between minute 10 and minute 15.

Players able to explain **why** a particular moment was or wasn't on.

15.3 SIX THEN FORWARD (4 v 4)

Session 14's six-pass sequence returns, but it no longer scores on its own. The sixth pass must break a line — so possession becomes what it should be, a means of creating the moment rather than an end in itself.

32 x 24 m • six passes only scores if the sixth breaks a line • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- Two pitches, each 32 × 24 m, side by side with a 5 m corridor between them.
- Per pitch: **two mini goals at each end**, 4 red bibs, 4 blue bibs, 2 balls.
- 4 v 4 per pitch (16). With 14, run 4v4 and 3v3. With 15, run 4v4 and 4v3.
- Teams count their own passes out loud, as in Session 14.
- Coach in the corridor between the pitches with a spare ball.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Bibs out while you explain.** Balanced teams.
2. **Explain in 25 seconds:** *Goal is 2. Six passes in a row is worth nothing on its own — but if the sixth pass beats an opponent, that's 2 points. Three minutes. Go.*
3. **Game 1 — no coaching.** Watch whether teams keep the ball waiting for the sixth pass, or forget the count entirely.
4. **Between games 1 and 2, one question:** *What are passes one to five for?* You want the answer *moving them about* rather than *waiting*.
5. **From game 3, add the choice:** a forward pass that breaks a line at **any** point in a sequence scores 1, and the six-pass version still scores 2. Now they can choose between patience and immediacy.
6. **Four games of three minutes with 45 seconds between,** ladder as usual.

RULES & SCORING

- **Goal = 2 points. A sixth consecutive pass that beats an opponent = 2 points.** From game 3, **any line-breaking pass = 1 point.**
- 'Beating an opponent' means the ball travels past at least one opposition player to a teammate.
- The count resets on any turnover.
- Ball out: the coach rolls a new one in immediately.
- No stoppages. Coaching in the 45-second gaps, as a question.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Driven passes through gaps. Receivers taking the ball on the half-turn so a line-break isn't wasted by a poor first touch.
Tactical	Passes one to five are not filler — they are what opens the gap. Every sideways pass should move an opponent. A team that passes sideways without moving anybody will never find a sixth pass worth playing.
Physical	Three minutes on, 45 off, four times. Moderate load; the thinking is the demanding part.
Psychological	Some players will hoard the ball waiting for a magic sixth pass. Others will hit the first forward ball they see. Name both patterns without naming the players.
Social	Players ahead of the ball must show themselves — the line-breaking pass exists only if somebody is beyond the line.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Sideways passing with nobody moving	<i>Did that pass move anybody? Then what did it achieve?</i>
Rushing to the sixth pass and forcing it	<i>Was it on? If not, pass seven is allowed.</i>
Nobody positioned beyond the line	<i>Who's forward? Nobody? Then there's no pass to play.</i>
Forgetting the count	<i>Count out loud. If you don't know where you are, you can't plan.</i>
Teams abandoning the condition and just shooting	Read the scores aloud between games and let the numbers make the case.

ASK THEM

- What are passes one to five for?
- How do you know the sixth one is on?
- What has to be true for a line-breaking pass to exist?
- Is it better to break the line on pass three or pass six? Why?

- Which team moved the opposition most? How could you tell?
- What happened when you forced it?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
The sixth pass must beat two opponents.	Four passes then forward.
Two-touch maximum.	Any forward pass counts, whether or not it beats anyone.
Only line-breaking passes score at all — no goals count.	Add a neutral player who plays for whoever has the ball.
Eight passes then forward.	3 v 3 on 30 × 22 m — more space and clearer lines.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Sideways passes visibly moving opponents rather than just circulating.

Line-breaking passes attempted at genuine moments.

Players positioning themselves beyond the opposition line.

Audible counting.

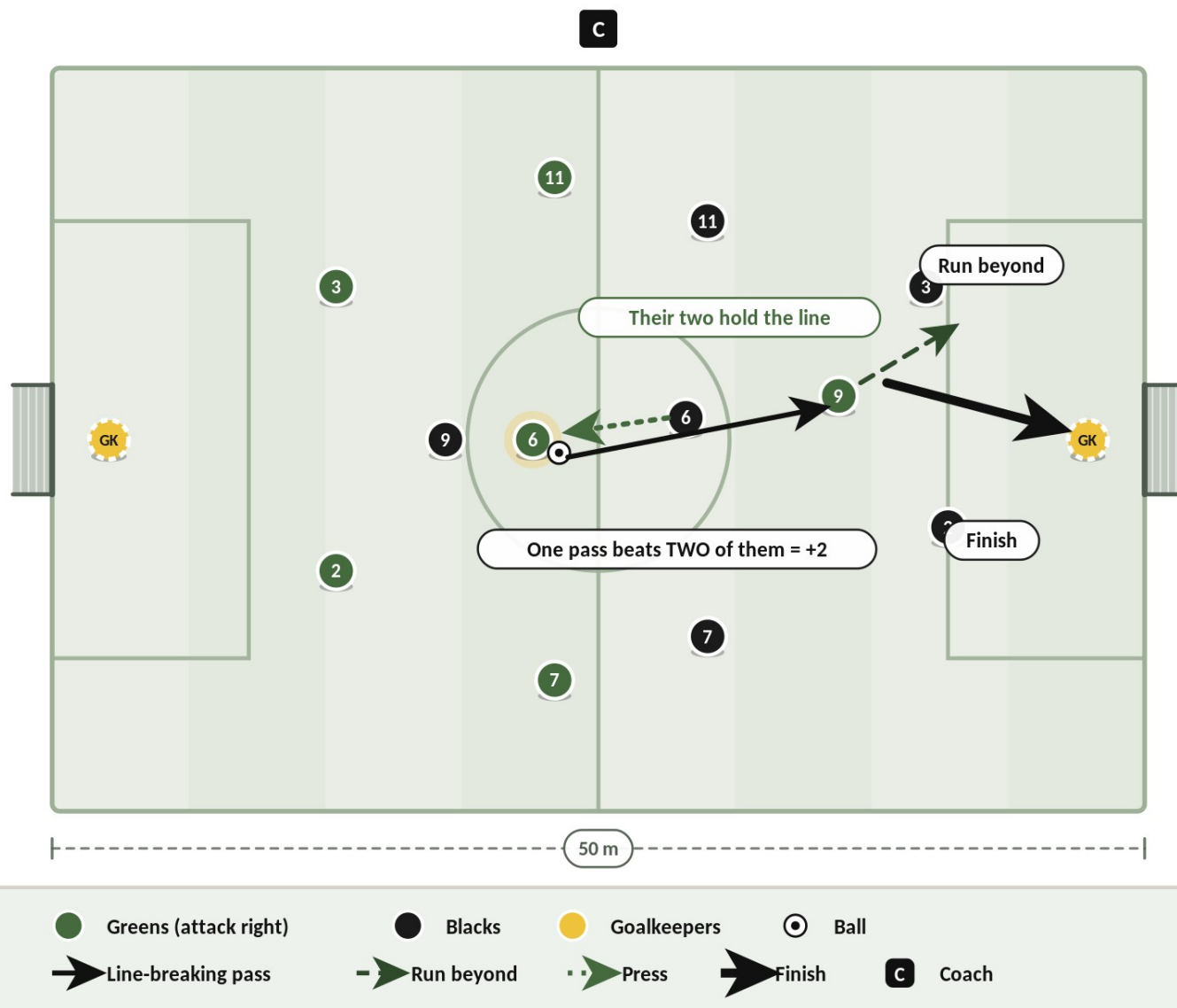
Both teams scoring the sixth-pass bonus at least once by game 4.

Fewer forced forward passes in games 3 and 4 than in game 1.

15.4 BREAK THE LINE MATCH (7 v 7)

One bonus, and it is the most valuable action in football: a single pass that takes two or more opponents out of the game. Everything these sessions have built — width, depth, angles, patience — exists to make this pass available.

50 x 34 m • a pass that beats two or more opponents = +2 • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 x 34 m with full-size goals.
- Four spare balls in the back of each goal.
- 7 v 7 including goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, play 8v8 or roll subs every 90 seconds.
- 2-3-1 outfield shape. Remind the striker their job is to be beyond the last line, not to come and get it.
- Coach on the halfway line, outside the pitch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Keep the bibs and teams.** Keepers and shape in 30 seconds.
2. **Explain the condition once:** *One pass that beats two or more of them is worth two points. That's it.*

3. **Minutes 0–5 — no interruption.** Count the line-breaking passes. In most U12 teams the answer for five minutes is one or two.
4. **Minute 5 — drinks break, one question:** *How many of their players did our last pass take out of the game? Then: what would we need for one pass to take out three?* Restart.
5. **Minutes 6–13.** Announce every line-breaking pass and name the passer **and** the player who made themselves available beyond the line.
6. **Final two minutes — no conditions.** Watch whether they keep looking forward or revert to sideways.

RULES & SCORING

- **Goal = 3 points. A pass that beats two or more opponents and reaches a teammate = +2.**
- The pass may be along the ground or in the air, but must be **controlled** by a teammate.
- No touch restrictions. This is a match.
- Keepers restart within five seconds; a goalkeeper's pass that beats two opponents counts.
- Two individual interventions maximum, plus the scheduled break question.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Head up before the pass. Driven and firm, into the correct foot. The receiver's first touch decides whether the line-break is worth anything — Session 2, still earning its place.
Tactical	Width and depth create the gaps; patience opens them; the forward pass exploits them. The whole block in one sentence. In a 9v9 the most valuable line to break is the opposition midfield — beat those three and there is nothing between your midfielder and their back line.
Physical	Fifteen minutes of continuous match play. Moderate demand; the striker does the most running, mostly unrewarded.
Psychological	Praise the attempt, name the cost, and let them find the balance. A squad that only plays safe is as broken as one that only plays forward — say that explicitly.
Social	The player beyond the line has to demand it. Name them every time, because they are the reason the pass exists.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Every pass sideways — a beautiful, pointless carousel	The break question does the work: <i>how many did that pass take out?</i>
Long balls that beat five opponents and nobody	<i>Did anyone control it? Then it took nobody out of the game.</i>
The striker dropping deep	<i>If you come to it, who's beyond them? Stay high and be the reason we can play forward.</i>
Midfielders receiving square and unable to look forward	Straight back to Session 1: <i>open out before it comes.</i>
Goalkeepers not looking forward	<i>Can you beat two of them with one pass? Look before you roll it. this theme shortly.</i>
Sideways passing returning in the final two minutes	Note it and raise it honestly in the reflection.

ASK THEM

- How many of their players did that pass take out of the game?
- What would we need for one pass to take out three?

- Which line is most valuable to break in a 9v9?
- Where does the striker have to be for a forward pass to exist?
- Is a safe pass always the right pass?
- When the conditions came off, did we keep looking forward?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Only passes that beat three or more count.	Any forward pass that reaches a teammate counts.
A goal only counts if a line-breaking pass came first.	Bigger pitch (55 × 38 m).
Two-touch in your own half.	Award the bonus for the attempt if it's a genuine chance.
The goalkeeper must complete one line-breaking pass per half.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling subs.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

At least four line-breaking passes across the two teams.

A striker holding a high line.

Midfielders receiving open and looking forward before their first touch.

Both patience and penetration visible in the same possession.

The behaviour surviving the final two unconditioned minutes.

The player beyond the line being named and thanked.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- Circle up and **sit down**.
- *What are the two kinds of pass?* (One that keeps it, one that breaks a line.)
- *How do you know which one the moment is asking for?*
- *What are passes one to five for?* — the answer is *moving them about*, and it's worth chasing until somebody says it.
- *Which are you* — *someone who forces it, or someone who never tries?* Ask it lightly; most of them know.
- *When I took the conditions off, did we keep looking forward?* Tell them honestly.
- Finish by naming **one player who kept the ball well** and **one who broke a line**, and say that the team needs both.

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- At least four passes that beat two or more opponents. - The striker holds a high line rather than dropping in to get involved. - Nobody is criticised for a forward pass that doesn't come off — by anyone.	- Count line-breaking passes. Pick one half and count them. Four is good; one is a possession team going nowhere. - Where the striker stands when we have the ball in our own half. - Whether midfielders receive open. A square receiver cannot play forward, however much they want to.	- <i>Tell me about a pass you played that took two of them out of the game.</i> - <i>Was there a forward pass you saw but didn't play? What stopped you?</i> - <i>Did we keep the ball well and go nowhere at any point?</i>

HOMEWORK — "HEAD UP" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Look before you pass.** Against a wall from 8 m: every time the ball comes back, **look over your shoulder before your first touch**, then pass. Sixty repetitions. It's Session 1's habit applied to Session 15's decision, and it's the difference between seeing a forward pass and not.
- **Driven passing.** From 18 m, hit thirty passes with each foot as hard as you can **along the ground**, aiming to hit a target. The line-breaking pass is almost always a driven one and most U12 players have never practised it.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match. Every time a team plays forward, **count how many opponents that single pass took out of the game**. Bring the highest number you saw.
- *Optional extra:* watch the same match and find one moment where a team deliberately passed sideways to move the opposition before going forward. Describe it.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — possession principles. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **13** Width and Depth; **14** Support Angles; **16** Possession Under Pressure.

A natural follow-on. Session 16 — Possession Under Pressure, and the review page. The summary session for this theme puts everything together and then makes it harder: smaller spaces, more defenders and a counter-press, so the squad discovers whether their possession survives contact with a team that genuinely wants the ball back. Session 16 also closes this theme with the fourth four-week review and prepares the ground for this theme, where the goalkeeper joins the build-up properly and the team learns to play out from the back.

Or simply run this one again. Nothing in the set has to be done once. A session repeated three weeks later with a harder progression is usually worth more than a new session the players are meeting cold.