



SESSION 19 • STANDALONE PLAN

The Back Three and the Pivot — Turning Rescues into Structure

Building from the back • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	19.1 The First Line
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	19.2 The First Line of Five
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	19.3 Build and Break
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	19.4 The Structure 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

Once a squad can escape a press, those escapes stop being rescues and become a structure. The difference matters: a team that escapes is relying on somebody making a good decision under pressure, and a team with a structure has arranged itself so that the good decision is obvious. In 9v9 the structure is simple and it has a name — **the first line**. The two centre-backs push wide, the goalkeeper sits between them, and the six stands in front. That is four players spread across the width of the pitch, and against a striker and two wide players it is already an overload. When the press gets heavier, the six drops between the centre-backs to make a back three, the full-backs push up the touchlines, and suddenly there are five across the first line against three or four pressers. This is also the session where positions get named properly for the first time. The principles work has earned the squad the right to be told what a number six actually does, and why the answer is 'stands where the ball can always reach you'.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Occupy the width of the pitch** as a back line — centre-backs outside the width of the goal, goalkeeper between.
- **Show as the six** — in front of the centre-backs, on an angle, never screened by an opponent.
- **Drop in as the six** when the press is heavy, creating a back three.
- **Push on as a full-back** to stretch the press and become the free player.
- **Recognise the overload** — count the pressers and know how many spare players you have.

KIT LIST

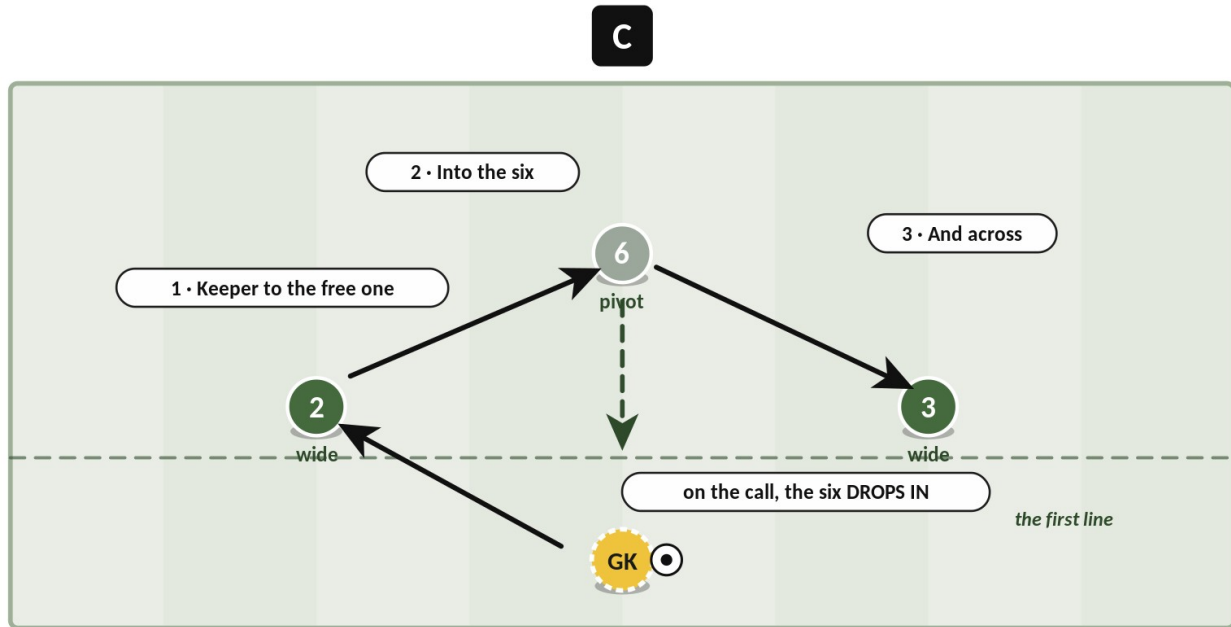
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. Tonight positions get named. Decide in advance which players will be your centre-backs, your six and your full-backs — but tell the squad clearly that these are jobs for tonight, not permanent labels, and rotate at least two players through each role. A child told they are 'a centre-back' will believe it for years.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	64	First-line areas, build thirds, escape gates
Cones (tall)	8	Escape gates (19.2)
Bibs — red / blue / yellow / grey	8 / 8 / 4 / 2	Grey identifies the six in each practice
Full-size goals	2	19.2, 19.3 and 19.4
Goalkeeper gloves	2 pairs	Rotate keepers

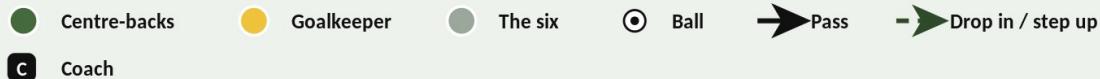
19.1 THE FIRST LINE

Learn the shape before anybody defends it. Groups of four — goalkeeper, two centre-backs, a six — pass and move across a wide shallow area until the positions feel like places rather than instructions.

36 x 16 m • groups of four • shape and movement, no defenders • 10 minutes



TWO CENTRE-BACKS WIDE • KEEPER BETWEEN • THE SIX IN FRONT



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SET UP

- **36 × 16 m area** — deliberately wide and shallow, because that is the shape of a build-up.
- A dashed line 5 m from the back marks **the first line**.
- **Groups of four:** one plays as the goalkeeper (feet only), two as centre-backs on either side, one as the six in front.
- With 14–16 players, run three or four groups in adjacent areas.
- Coach walking the areas, calling "**drop!**" and "**step!**" at intervals.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, free dribbling. **Collect the Session 18 homework** — *which of the three ways out did that team use?*
- Minute 3 — set the shape.** *Keeper in the middle, centre-backs wide, six in front on an angle.* Pass in the shape while moving laterally across the area. Ninety seconds.
- Minute 5 — name the positions out loud.** *Two and three are the centre-backs. Six is the pivot.* Use the numbers all evening from here.
- Minute 7 — add the drop.** On "**drop!**" the six moves between the two centre-backs, making three across the back; on "**step!**" they move back in front. The shape must keep working through both.
- Minutes 8–10 — rotate roles.** Everyone plays every position for at least ninety seconds, including the six.

RULES & SCORING

- **Centre-backs stay wide** — outside the width of a goal, if there were one.
- **The six is never in a straight line** between the goalkeeper and either centre-back.
- The goalkeeper uses feet only.
- Two touches maximum from minute 7.
- Rotate roles every 90 seconds.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Firm passes across 12–18 m. Receive side-on. The six should always be able to see both centre-backs and the goalkeeper without turning their head twice.
Tactical	The shape exists so that the ball can always reach somebody. Width at the back is not decoration — it makes a single presser cover twenty metres instead of five.
Physical	Gentle lateral movement, which is the movement pattern of a defensive line. Good preparation for the session.
Psychological	Some players will be delighted to be given a position and some will be disappointed. Repeat the framing: these are jobs for tonight.
Social	The six calls "drop" or "step" for themselves once they understand it — the position that organises itself is the one that works.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Centre-backs drifting narrow	<i>Wider. If you're both in the middle, one player can mark you both.</i>
The six standing behind the centre-backs	<i>In front, not behind. You're the next pass, not another defender.</i>
The six screened by an imaginary opponent	<i>If you were being marked, could he reach you? Move a metre.</i>
Shape collapsing during the drop	Walk it once. The drop is the hardest movement of the night and it needs one slow repetition.
Players unhappy with their role	Rotate faster and say it again — jobs for tonight.

ASK THEM

- Where do the centre-backs stand?
- Where does the six stand, and where must they NOT stand?
- What happens to the shape when the six drops in?
- Why do we make the back line wide?
- Six — what do you have to be able to see?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
One touch.	Three touches and no calls.
Add a passive presser who moves between the centre-backs.	Walk the whole shape for the first three minutes.
The six calls their own drop, so the group must react rather than obey.	Fix the roles for the whole warm-up.
Groups of five with a full-back added.	Mark the positions with cones so the shape is visible

HARDER	EASIER
	before it's played.

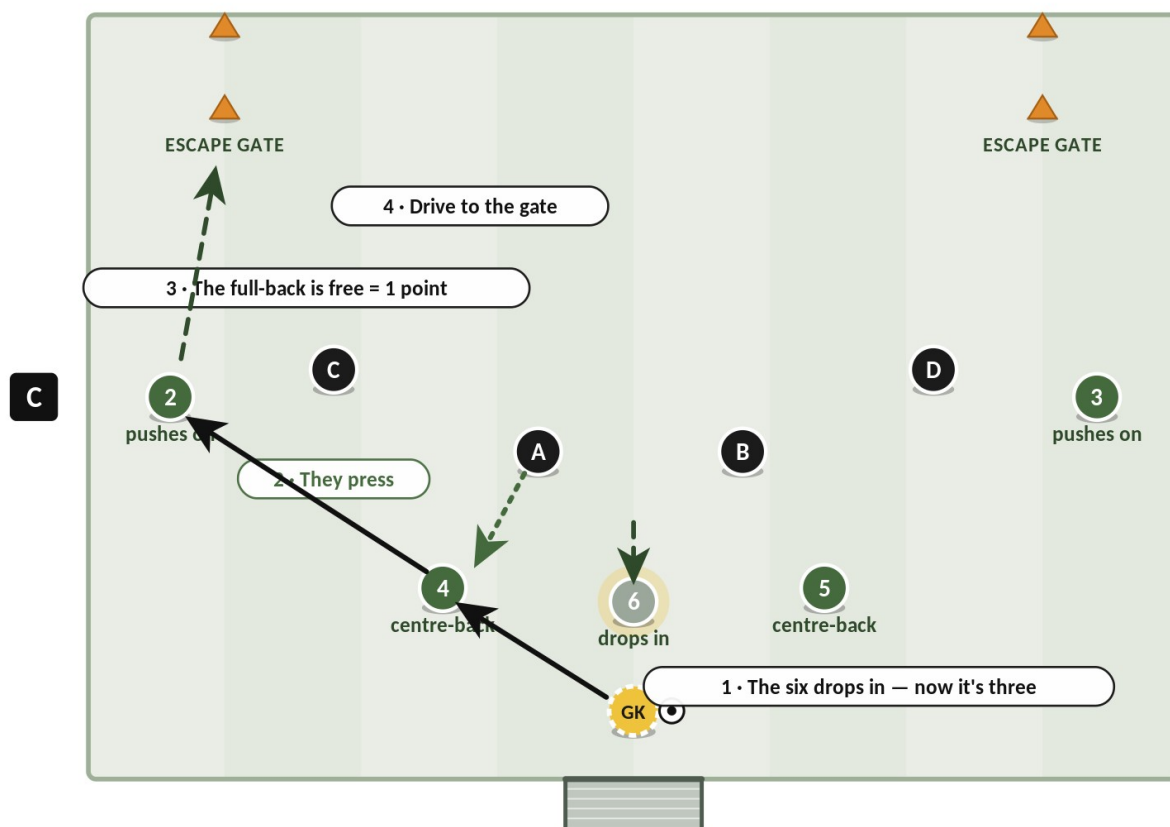
IT'S WORKING WHEN

- Centre-backs consistently wide.
- The six in front and on an angle.
- The drop and the step happening without the shape collapsing.
- Positions being referred to by number.
- Every player having played every role.

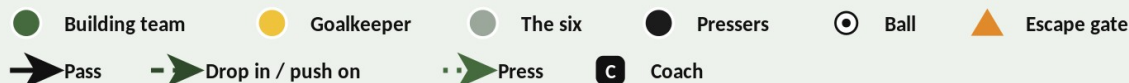
19.2 THE FIRST LINE OF FIVE

The full structure against a full press. The six drops in to make three at the back, the full-backs push up the touchlines, and five players stretch across the pitch against four pressers. Somebody is always free — the practice is learning to find them.

40 x 28 m • goalkeeper + five v four • the six drops in, the full-backs push on • 15 minutes



THE SIX DROPS IN • THE FULL-BACKS PUSH ON • FIVE ACROSS THE FIRST LINE



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SET UP

- One station at each full goal: 40 × 28 m with a 3 m escape gate in each far corner.
- **Building team:** goalkeeper, two centre-backs (4 and 5), a six who drops in, two full-backs (2 and 3) high and wide.
- **Pressing team:** four.
- Eleven per station. With 14–16, run one station with rotations every two minutes, or reduce to goalkeeper + four v three at each goal.
- **Mark the touchlines clearly** — the full-backs must be genuinely wide, and this only works if they can see where wide is.
- Coach positioned to the side where the width of the first line is visible.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Set the picture in 45 seconds. Five of you across the pitch, four of them. Find the spare one.

2. **Minutes 0-4 — with the six in front.** The standard shape from the warm-up, now with four pressing. Let them discover it's tight.
3. **Minute 4 — the six drops in.** *Now you're three at the back and the full-backs are high. Count the players across the pitch — five against four.* Two minutes to feel the difference.
4. **Minute 6 — one freeze, twenty seconds.** *Five against four. Who is the spare player right now?* Somebody points at a full-back. That's the session.
5. **Minutes 6-13 — live and scored.** Escape through a gate for 1 point; 2 points if a full-back receives it and drives.
6. **Minutes 13-15 — pressers may add a fifth.** Now it's five against five and the answer has to come from movement rather than numbers. This is the honest version of Saturday.

RULES & SCORING

- **1 point** for escaping through a gate. **2 points** if a full-back receives and carries it out. **2 points to the pressers** for winning it in the build area.
- The full-backs must stay **on the touchline** until the ball is played to them.
- The six may drop in or stay in front — **their choice**, from minute 6.
- Two touches maximum for the centre-backs from minute 10.
- Ball out or won: instant restart from the goalkeeper.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Long-range accuracy matters here — the pass from a centre-back to a high full-back is 20-25 m and must be along the ground and firm.
Tactical	Count the pressers, then count yourselves. Four pressing against five means one spare, and the spare is usually the furthest player from the ball. The six's decision — drop in or stay in front — should be made by looking at how many are pressing: two pressers, stay in front; three or four, drop in.
Physical	The full-backs cover the most ground and the pressers work hardest. Rotate both.
Psychological	Being the spare player thirty metres from the ball is boring right up until the moment it isn't. Name the patience, as in Session 13.
Social	The six should be organising the shape aloud. If a player is doing that by the end of tonight, you have found your captain.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Full-backs coming inside to help	<i>Stay on the line. You're only the spare player if you're somewhere they can't reach.</i>
The six dropping in every time regardless	<i>How many are pressing? Two? Then stay in front and give us an extra one up the pitch.</i>
Under-hit passes to the full-backs	<i>That's a twenty-five metre pass. Get your body over it.</i>
Centre-backs too narrow after the six drops in	<i>Three across the pitch, not three in the middle of it.</i>
Pressers pressing without a plan	<i>Coach them properly: One to the ball, the others take the nearest passes. Force them one way.</i>
Nobody counting	<i>Ask it every freeze until they do it themselves: how many of them, how many of us?</i>

ASK THEM

- How many are pressing? How many are we?
- Who is the spare player right now?
- Six — when do you drop in, and when do you stay in front?
- Full-backs — how do you become the free player?
- Where should the three at the back be standing?
- Pressers — how would you stop five across the pitch?
- What changed when they added a fifth presser?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Five pressers throughout.	Three pressers.
One touch for the centre-backs.	Add a second midfielder in front of the six.
Full-backs may not receive for a three-minute spell, forcing central solutions.	Passive pressers for the first six minutes.
The escape must reach a full-back to score at all.	Narrower area (34 m) so the passes are shorter.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Five players genuinely spread across the width when the six drops in.

The six choosing correctly between dropping and staying.

Full-backs holding the touchline and receiving in space.

Accurate 20–25 m passes from centre-back to full-back.

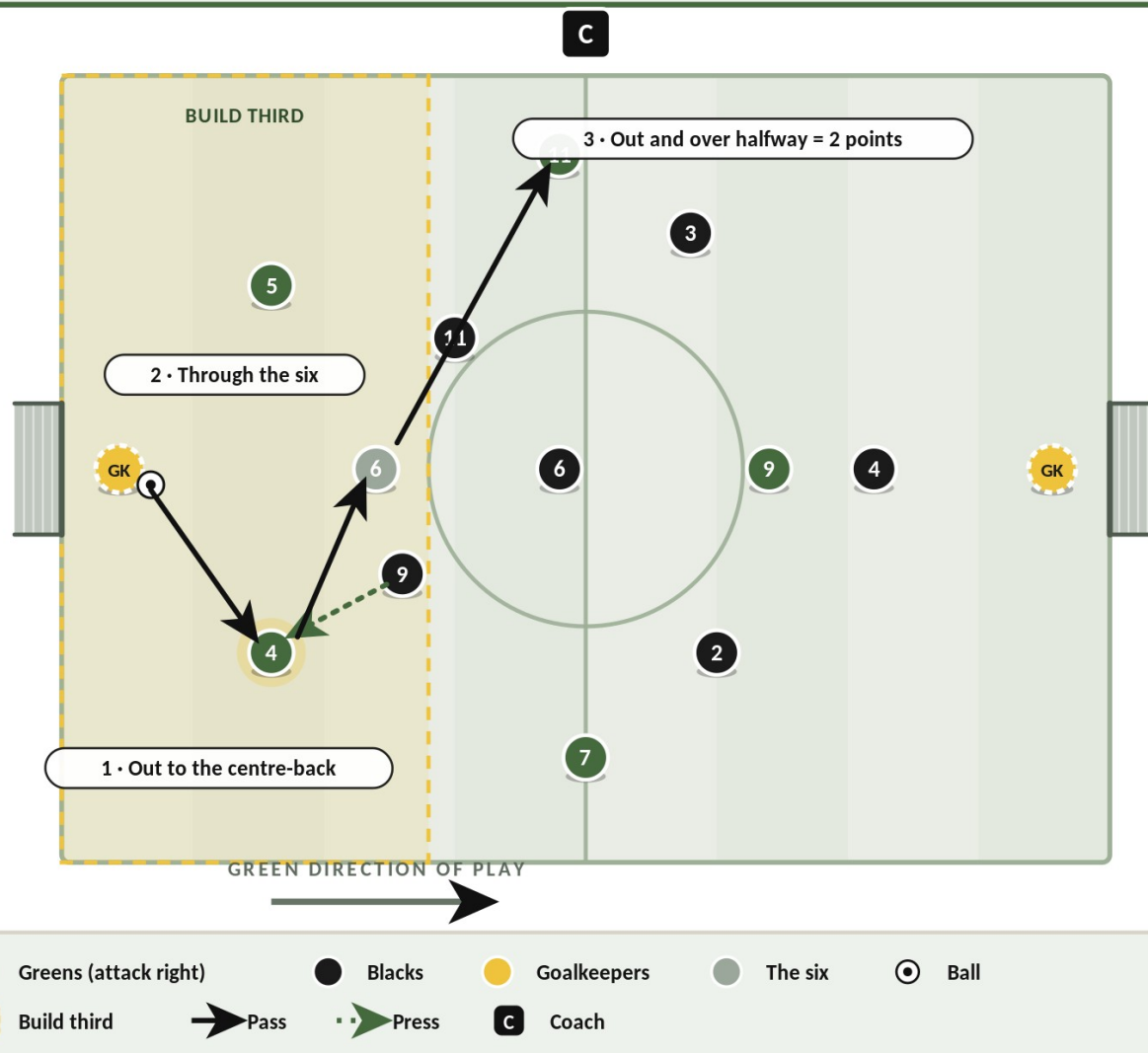
Players counting the press out loud.

The structure surviving when the fifth presser arrives.

19.3 BUILD AND BREAK (6 v 6 + GKs)

A game with one structural rule: the ball must travel through the first line before it can cross halfway. It cannot be hit long over the top of the structure, so the structure has to work.

40 x 30 m • the ball must pass through the first line before crossing halfway • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- One pitch, **40 × 30 m**, using both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- A **14 m build third** marked at each end.
- **6 v 6** outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes every two minutes.
- Each team lines up with two centre-backs, a six, and three ahead of them.
- Coach on the halfway line, outside the pitch.

HOW IT RUNS

- Teams and keepers set in 30 seconds.** Name the positions as you set them.
- Explain in 25 seconds:** *The ball has to go through your first line — keeper, centre-backs, six — before it can cross halfway. No long balls over the top of it. Two points if you build out and cross halfway with control.*
- Minutes 0–4 — let it run.** Watch whether the six ever gets on the ball.

4. **Minute 4 — 45 seconds, one question:** *How many times has our six touched it?* If the answer is 'once', the shape isn't working. Restart.
5. **Minutes 5–11 — add the reward for the six:** any possession where the six touches the ball twice before halfway is worth an extra point.
6. **Minutes 11–15 — rolling subs continue.** Announce successful build-ups by naming the sequence.

RULES & SCORING

- **The ball must be touched by at least two of the first line** (goalkeeper, centre-backs, six) before crossing halfway.
- **Goal = 2. Building out and crossing halfway with control = 2. The six touching it twice in a build = +1.**
- No long balls from the goalkeeper over the first line.
- Rolling subs every two minutes with 15 or more.
- No stoppages within a spell; coaching during substitutions, in a sentence.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Receiving on the half-turn, especially for the six. Firm passing between the lines of the structure.
Tactical	The six is the connection. If the six is not receiving, the team is playing round its own structure rather than through it. The centre-backs must be wide enough to open the angle into them.
Physical	Continuous, moderate. The six is the busiest player and should be rotated.
Psychological	The six's job is unglamorous and central to everything. Praise it by name, repeatedly.
Social	The centre-backs should be telling the six whether they're marked. "Turn!" and "man on!" — the oldest phrase in the set and still the two most useful words in football.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The six never touching the ball	The break question exposes it. Then: <i>whose job is it to find him — him, or you?</i> The answer is both.
Centre-backs too narrow , closing the angle to the six	<i>Wider. Open the passing lane.</i>
The ball going round the structure via the touchline every time	<i>That works. But what happens when they close the line? What's the other route?</i>
The six receiving with their back to the game	<i>Open out. You're the only one who can see forward.</i>
Teams waiting in the build third rather than progressing	<i>The structure is for getting out, not for staying in.</i>

ASK THEM

- How many times has our six touched it?
- Whose job is it to find the six?
- What has to happen for the pass into the six to exist?
- Six — what do you need to hear from your centre-backs?
- When they blocked the six, what was the other route?
- Is the structure helping us or slowing us down?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
All three of the first line must touch it before halfway.	One of the first line must touch it, rather than two.
Two-touch in the build third.	Bigger build third (18 m).
The six must be the player who plays the ball over halfway.	Bigger pitch (46 × 32 m).
Larger pressing numbers — 7 v 6 with an extra presser.	5 v 5 + keepers with more space.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The six receiving regularly — count it.

Centre-backs wide enough to open the angle.

Build-ups reaching halfway under control at least twice per team.

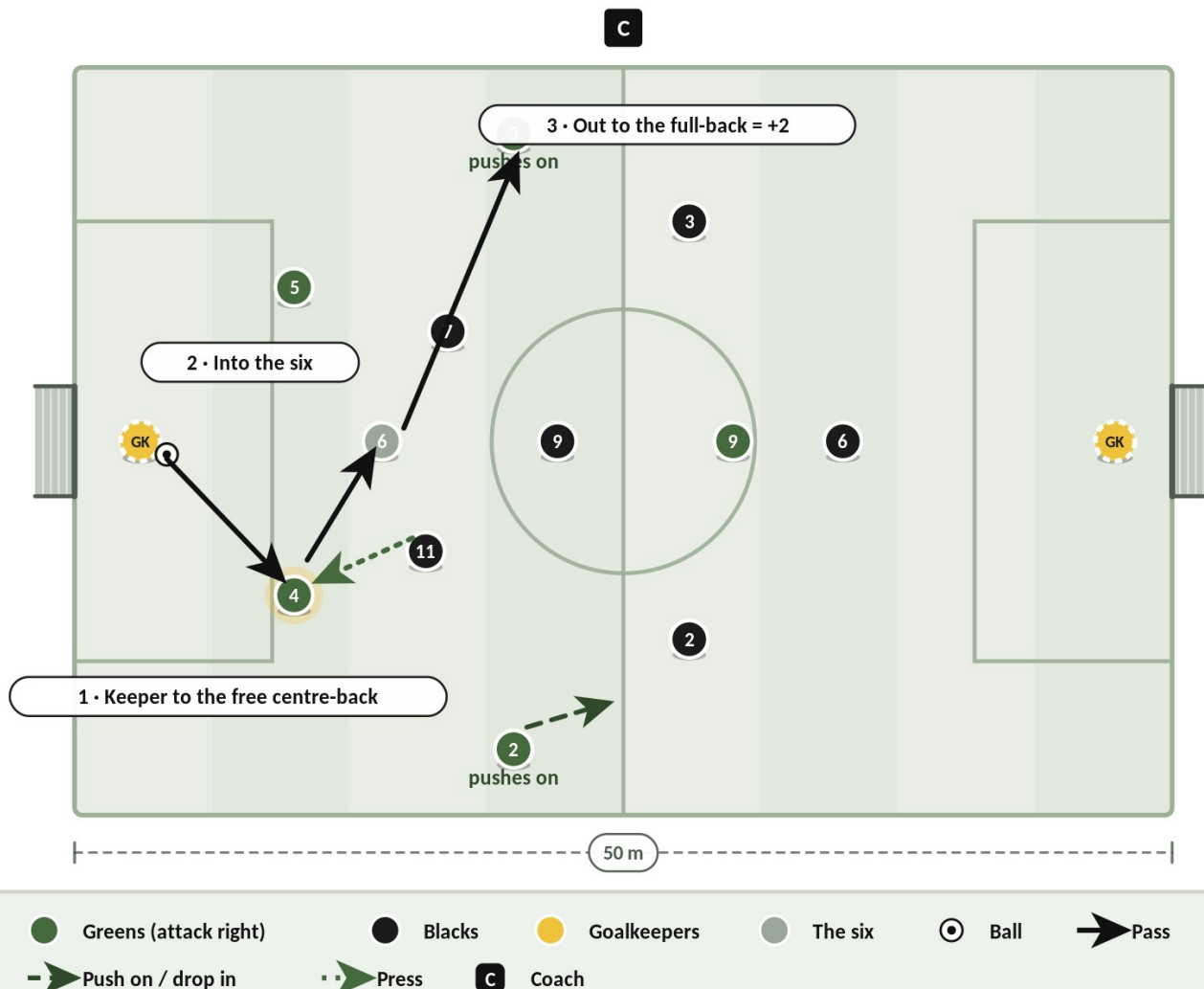
The six receiving open rather than with their back to play.

Both routes used — through the six and round the outside.

19.4 THE STRUCTURE MATCH (7 v 7)

A full match with the positions named and held. The point is not to restrict the players but to let them feel what a structure does — that when everybody is where they should be, the right pass is usually obvious.

50 x 34 m • positions named and held • building through the first line = +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.
- **Positions named out loud as you set up:** goalkeeper, two centre-backs, a six, two full-backs, a striker.
- Coach on the halfway line, outside the pitch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Keep the bibs and teams.** Name every position as you point at the player. 45 seconds.
2. **Explain the condition once:** *Hold your positions when we've got the ball at the back. A build-up that goes through the first line and reaches their half is two points.*

3. **Minutes 0–5 — no interruption.** Watch whether the shape survives contact, and specifically whether the full-backs stay wide.
4. **Minute 5 — drinks break, one question:** *When our keeper has it, where should each of you be?* Get six answers, one per position. Restart.
5. **Minutes 6–13.** Announce build-ups by sequence. Two individual interventions maximum.
6. **Final two minutes — swap the six and a full-back on each team.** Different players, same structure. This tests whether the shape is understood or memorised by individuals.

RULES & SCORING

- **Goal = 3. A build-up through the first line reaching the opposition half = +2.**
- Players hold their positions while their team is building — free movement once the ball is in the opposition half.
- No touch restrictions otherwise.
- Keepers restart within ten seconds and always short.
- Two individual interventions maximum, plus the scheduled break question.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything from the block, at match speed.
Tactical	Structure first, decisions second. When the shape is right the choices become simple. Watch for the moment the structure breaks — usually a full-back coming inside or the six drifting — and note what happens to the build-up immediately afterwards.
Physical	Full-backs cover the most ground; rotate them if the squad allows.
Psychological	Some players will find holding a position restrictive after a run of sessions built on freedom. Frame it honestly: <i>this is the shape that makes the freedom possible.</i>
Social	By the end of this theme the six and the goalkeeper should be running the build-up between them without you.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Full-backs coming inside under pressure	<i>Stay wide. That's the whole point of you.</i>
The six drifting out of the centre	<i>Come back to the middle. You're the connection.</i>
Centre-backs both on the same side of the goal	<i>One of you goes the other way. Always.</i>
The structure held but the ball going nowhere	<i>Shape isn't the point — it's what lets us go forward. What's the next pass?</i>
The shape collapsing when players swap positions	Useful information: the structure is being learned by individuals, not by the team. Note it for the review.
A player unhappy in their role	Swap them at the next break without comment, and note who wanted what.

ASK THEM

- When our keeper has it, where should each of you be?
- Six — when do you drop in?
- Full-backs — how wide is wide enough?
- What happened when we swapped positions?
- Does the shape help you or restrict you?

- Which position would you like to try next time?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Swap all outfield positions at the halfway point.	Fix the positions and don't swap them.
Two-touch in the defensive third.	Bigger pitch (55 × 38 m).
Both full-backs must touch the ball in a build-up for it to score.	Retreat line reinstated for goal kicks.
No pass back to the goalkeeper once the build has started.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling subs.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Full-backs holding the touchline throughout the build.

The six visible and connecting.

Centre-backs split on either side of the goal.

At least three build-ups reaching the opposition half.

The structure surviving the position swap — or, honestly, not.

The goalkeeper and the six organising it between them.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- Circle up and **sit down**.
- *Name the first line.* (Keeper, two centre-backs, the six.)
- *When does the six drop in? What tells you?*
- *How wide should the full-backs be?*
- *When we swapped positions, what happened?* Be honest about it.
- *Which position did you enjoy most tonight?* Ask everybody — the answers will shape your team sheet.
- Finish by reminding them that **these are jobs, not labels**. Nobody is 'a centre-back' yet.

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Centre-backs split on either side of the goal at every goal kick. - The six receives the ball at least five times in our own half. - Full-backs are on the touchline whenever we have the ball at the back.	- How many times the six touches it in your own half. Under three is a shape problem. - Where the full-backs are at each goal kick. Wide, or tucked in for safety? - What breaks the shape first when the opposition press.	- <i>Where were you when the keeper had it?</i> - <i>Six — how often did you get it?</i> - <i>Which position did you feel most comfortable in?</i>

HOMEWORK — "THE LONG PASS" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Twenty-five metres.** Mark it out. Thirty passes with each foot, along the ground, at a target. That is the centre-back to full-back pass and it is the pass this shape depends on.
- **Receive and turn.** Against a wall from 8 m, receive on the half-turn and play the ball to a target **behind you** — sixty repetitions. That's the six's job in one exercise.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **where the defensive midfielder stands** when their team has the ball at the back. Note how often they drop between the centre-backs. Bring the number.
- *Optional extra:* pick any professional team and describe their first line to us next time — who is in it and where they stand.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — building from the back. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **17** The Goalkeeper Starts the Attack; **18** Beating the First Press; **20** Building Under Real Pressure.

A natural follow-on. Session 20 — Building Under Real Pressure, and the review page. The summary session for this theme removes every remaining piece of help: full press, no retreat, no build zone, and the opposition told to hunt. It is the honest test of whether the structure holds when a team genuinely wants the ball back — and it closes this theme with the fifth four-week review before this theme turns everything to transitions. Bring your notes on who wanted which position; the review asks you to decide how permanent any of it should be.

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.