



SESSION 20 • STANDALONE PLAN

Building Under Real Pressure — No Help At All

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	20.1 The Hunted Build
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	20.2 No Help
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	20.3 Two Minutes of It
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	20.4 The Build-Up Exam
0:55 – 1:00	5	■ Reflection	Review, with the players

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

Every piece of scaffolding comes off tonight. No retreat line, no build zone, no protected first pass, no gates to aim at. The opposition are told to hunt, and the squad has to decide — over and over, with a scoreline and tired legs — whether they believe in what they have spent a month learning. That decision is the real content of this theme. The technical work is straightforward: split wide, show in front, find the free player, and know the three ways out. What is difficult is holding your nerve at 1–0 down with a striker running at your goalkeeper. This session does not add anything new; it removes everything, and then measures what is left. And there is one thing worth telling the squad plainly before you start: **the aim is not to play out from the back every single time.** It is to be able to. A team that can build under pressure and chooses to go long is playing football. A team that goes long because it has no other option is just hoping.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- Build under a genuine press with no artificial help.
- Choose between the three ways out — round, through, over — with no coach naming them.

- **Hold the structure while tired**, in the last third of the session.
- **Recover after losing the ball** in the build-up, and try again immediately.
- **Know when going long is right** — and be able to say why afterwards.

KIT LIST

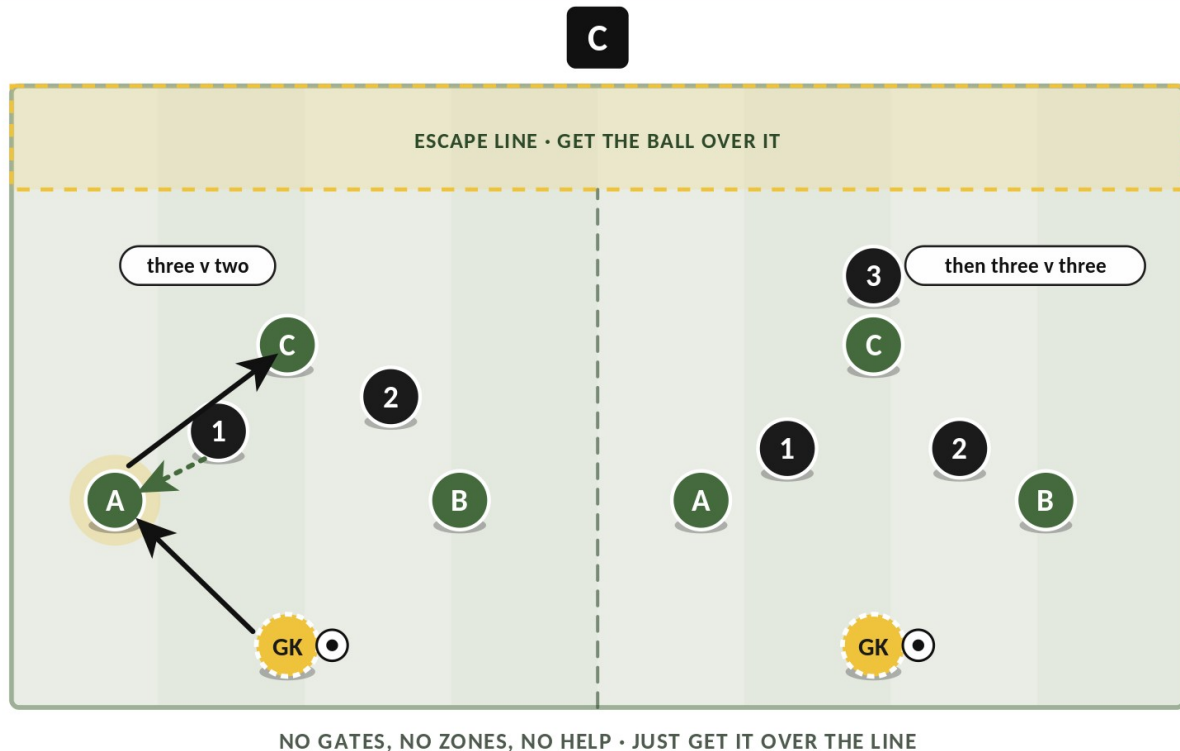
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. Protect the last five minutes for the review page; it is a conversation about a month of hard, uncomfortable work and the squad has earned it. Tell them at the start that tonight is the hard one and that the pressing teams are supposed to be horrible.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	52	Escape lines and small-area edges
Bibs — red / blue / yellow / grey	8 / 8 / 4 / 2	Grey identifies the six
Full-size goals	2	20.2, 20.3 and 20.4
Goalkeeper gloves	2 pairs	Rotate keepers
Notebook	1	For the conditioned match — you will be counting, not coaching

20.1 THE HUNTED BUILD

Small, fast, uncomfortable. A goalkeeper and three against two, then against three, with one job — get the ball over a line thirty metres away. Ninety-second rounds so nobody has time to settle.

two 15 x 16 m areas • keeper plus three v two, then v three • 90-second rounds • 10 minutes



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SET UP

- Two areas, each 15 × 16 m, side by side, with an **escape line** across the far end of each.
- **Goalkeeper plus three against two** to start; against three from minute 6.
- Seven or eight per area with rotations.
- No gates, no zones — the whole far line is the target.
- Coach between the areas with a stopwatch.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, free dribbling. **Collect the Session 19 homework** — *how often did that midfielder drop between the centre-backs?*
- Minute 3 — three v two.** Ninety seconds per round. Count successful escapes per round.
- Minute 6 — three v three.** Same ninety seconds. The count will drop sharply and that's the point.
- Minute 8 — one question, twenty seconds.** *What changed?* You want *no spare player*, so we had to move them first.
- Minutes 8–10 — final rounds** with the groups choosing whether to play out or go long over the line. Both count; the choice is theirs.

RULES & SCORING

- **Ninety-second rounds**, rotating the pressers every round.
- **1 point** for crossing the escape line with the ball under control; **1 point to the pressers** for winning it.
- From minute 8, a **long ball over the line that a teammate controls** also counts.
- The goalkeeper must start every repetition.
- Loose ball: instant restart from the goalkeeper.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	First touch away from pressure; firm, accurate passing at 10–15 m.
Tactical	With no spare player, you have to make one. Movement creates the overload that numbers used to provide.
Physical	Sharp and demanding for the pressers. Ninety-second rounds with rotation is a sensible work-to-rest pattern.
Psychological	Three against three at the back is genuinely hard and losing the ball is frequent. Keep it fast and light — the tempo stops anyone dwelling on mistakes.
Social	Short calls only. There isn't time for anything longer.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Panic on the first press	<i>Ninety seconds, lots of goes. Take your time on this one.</i>
Nobody moving to create space	<i>Three against three — where does the spare player come from?</i>
The goalkeeper rushing the first pass	<i>He can't tackle you in there. One extra second.</i>
Long balls chosen instantly once available	<i>Was that a choice? Tell me why.</i>

ASK THEM

- What changed when they added the third presser?
- Where does the spare player come from when you haven't got one?
- How long do you actually have?
- Was the long ball a choice or a panic?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three v four.	Four v two.
Sixty-second rounds.	Bigger areas (20 m).
Two touches maximum.	Passive pressers for the first two rounds.
Long ball removed entirely.	Two-minute rounds with more recovery.

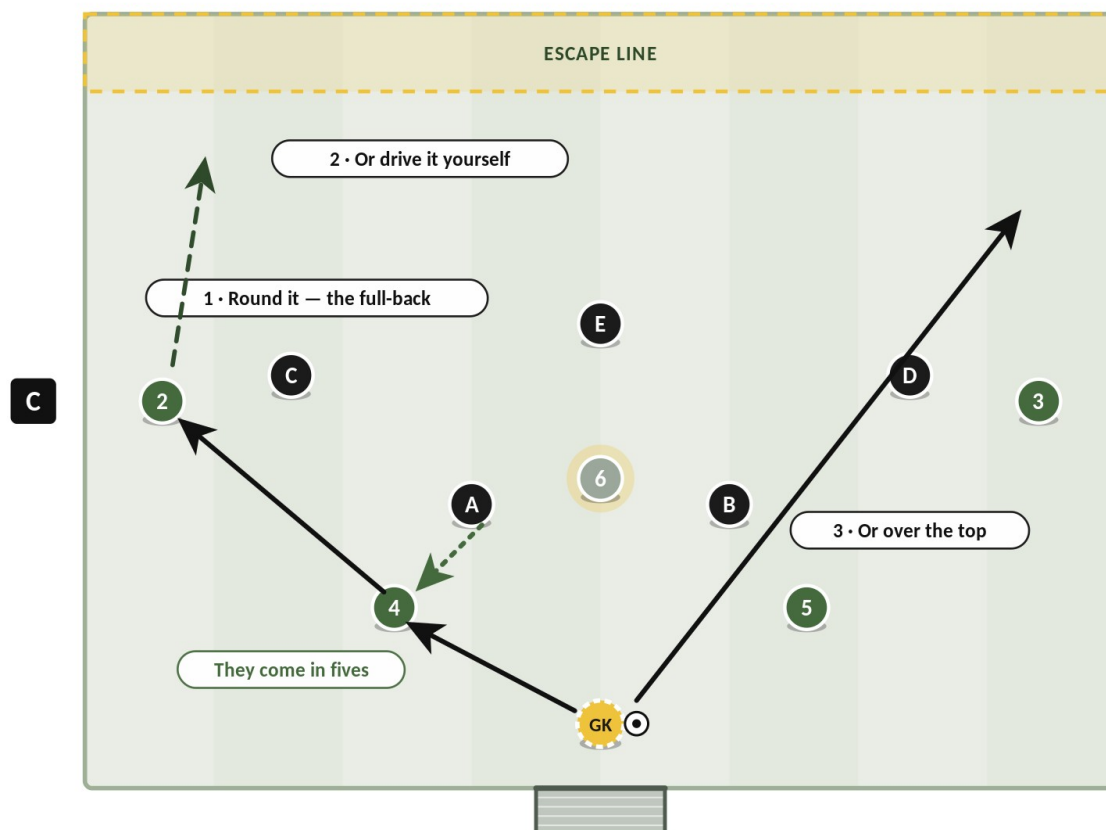
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Escapes still happening at three against three.
 Movement creating space rather than numbers providing it.
 Goalkeepers composed on the first pass.
 Long balls used as decisions, not escapes from thinking.

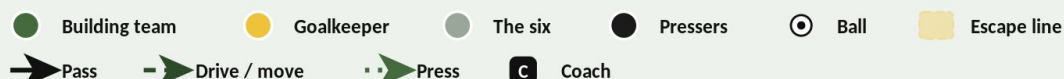
20.2 NO HELP

The full structure against equal numbers, with nothing to help it. Five against five plus a goalkeeper, no zones, no gates, no retreat — just a line to cross and three ways to get there.

40 x 30 m • goalkeeper + five v five • no retreat, no zones • cross the line to score • 15 minutes



SAME THREE WAYS OUT • NOTHING TO HELP YOU • THIS IS SATURDAY



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SET UP

- One station at each full goal: 40 × 30 m with an **escape line** across the far end.
- **Building team:** goalkeeper, two centre-backs, the six, two full-backs. **Pressing team:** five.
- Eleven or twelve per station. With 14–16, run both goals or one station with rotations every two minutes.
- **No marked gates or zones.** The players find their own routes.
- Coach to the side with almost nothing to say.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 30 seconds.** Five of you, five of them, plus the keeper. Get it over the line. You know the three ways.
2. **Minutes 0–5 — no coaching at all.** Watch which route each group defaults to and how quickly the structure breaks.
3. **Minute 5 — one freeze, twenty seconds.** Which of the three did you just use? Was it the right one? Ask two players. Restart.

4. **Minutes 5–12 — scored.** 2 points for crossing the line along the ground; 1 for a long ball that a teammate controls; 2 to the pressers for winning it in the building half.
5. **Minutes 12–15 — the pressers add a sixth.** Now the building team is genuinely outnumbered and going long becomes the correct answer more often. This is a lesson, not a punishment — say so.
6. **Rotation:** swap the two teams every three minutes; rotate goalkeepers at the halfway point.

RULES & SCORING

- **2 points** for crossing the escape line with the ball under control. **1 point** for a controlled long ball over it. **2 points to the pressers** for winning it in the building half.
- No zones, no gates, no restrictions on the press.
- The goalkeeper starts every repetition.
- **Each group must be able to name the route they used** — the coach asks at random.
- Ball out or won: instant restart.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything under real duress. The first touch and the 25 m pass are the two techniques that decide this practice.
Tactical	Equal numbers means somebody has to be created. The six dropping in, a full-back pushing on, or a centre-back driving — each of those movements manufactures the spare player that the numbers don't provide. When six press five, the space is behind them and the long ball is right.
Physical	Hard for both sides. Rotate on schedule, not on exhaustion.
Psychological	Turnovers will be frequent and some will lead to goals. The tone you set here decides what survives into this theme.
Social	By now the six and the goalkeeper should be organising without you. If they are silent, that's the thing to note in the review.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The structure dissolving under pressure	<i>Where should you be? Get back there and start again. Once, then let them find it.</i>
One route used exclusively	<i>Which of the three have you not tried?</i>
Long balls chosen because thinking is hard	<i>Name the reason. If you can name it, fine.</i>
The six disappearing	<i>He's the connection. Where is he? Ask the centre-backs, not the six.</i>
A group giving up on playing out	<i>Step in properly: You've done this for a month. Two more goes.</i>
Pressers disorganised	<i>Fix it — an unstructured press makes the practice too easy and teaches nothing.</i>

ASK THEM

- Which of the three did you use? Was it right?
- With equal numbers, how do you make a spare player?
- When they added a sixth, what changed?
- Is going long ever the right answer? When?
- Six — how often are you getting it?
- Pressers — what were you trying to force?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six pressers throughout.	Four pressers.
Two touches for the building team.	Bigger area (46 × 34 m).
No long ball.	Reinstate two escape gates to give the routes a target.
The escape must involve four different players.	Pressers start ten metres deeper.

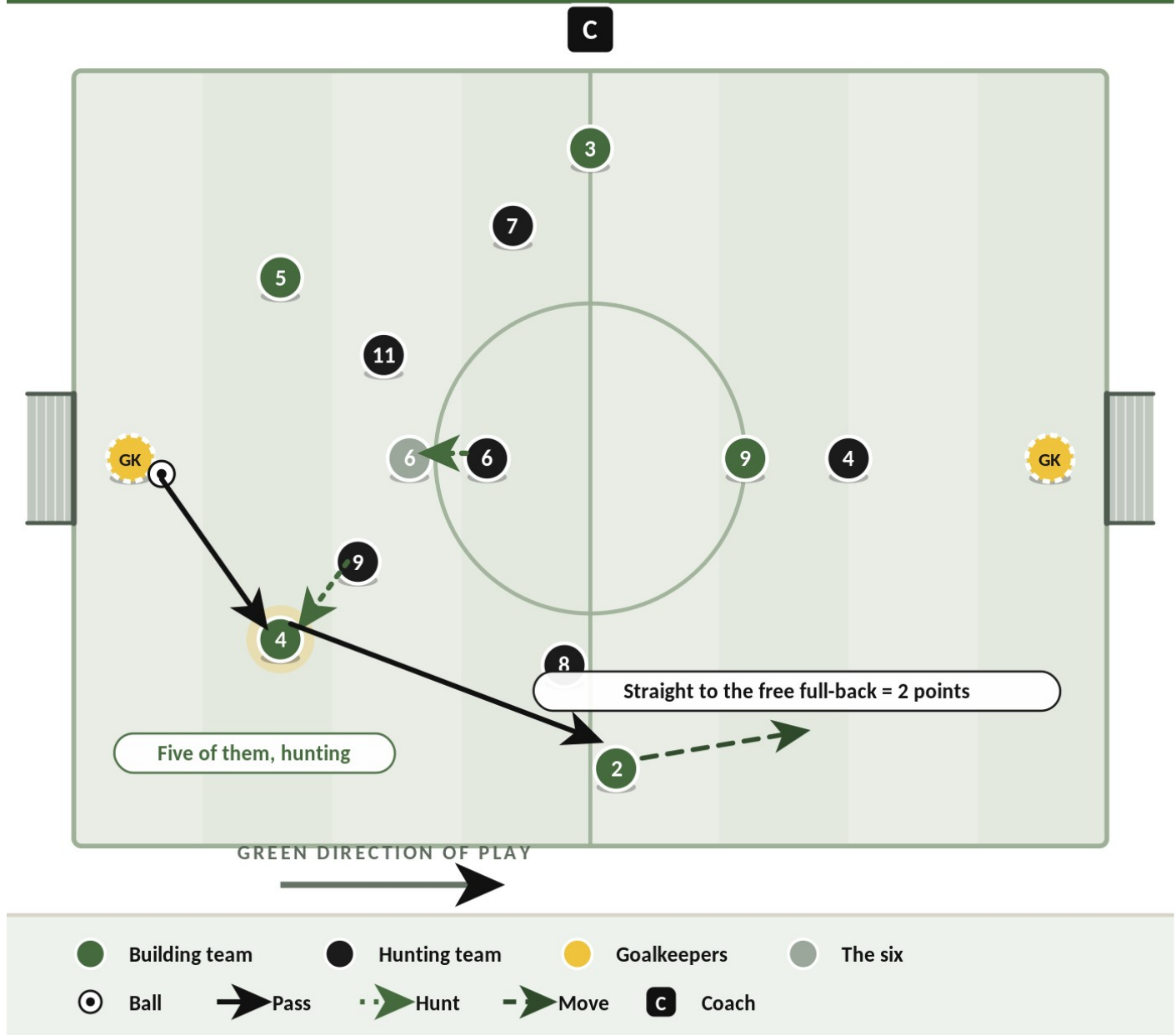
IT'S WORKING WHEN

All three routes appearing across the practice.
The structure re-forming after it breaks.
Players able to name the route they chose.
The long ball being chosen with a reason at six against five.
The six involved regularly.
Nobody giving up on it.

20.3 TWO MINUTES OF IT (6 v 6 + GKs)

One team is told to hunt the ball for two minutes — properly, aggressively, as a unit. The other has to keep building. Then they swap, so both jobs get done and both get praised.

40 x 30 m • one team hunts for two minutes, then they swap • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- One pitch, 40 × 30 m, using both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- 6 v 6 outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes between spells.
- **Announce the hunting team before each two-minute spell.** They press from the goal kick, as a unit, for the full two minutes.
- Spare balls behind each goal.
- Coach on the halfway line with a stopwatch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams and keepers set in 30 seconds.
2. **Explain in 20 seconds:** Reds hunt for two minutes. Blues build. Then we swap. Building out and getting into their half is 2 points; winning it in their build third is 2 points.
3. **First spell — no coaching.** Watch both jobs.
4. **After the first swap, one question to each team.** To the hunters: *who goes first, and what do the other four do?* To the builders: *where was the free player?*
5. **Spells three and four — add the fatigue factor:** the hunting team presses for two minutes with no substitutions, so the last thirty seconds are genuinely tired. Note whether the building team recognises when the press weakens.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — final two spells,** announcing scores by category.

RULES & SCORING

- **Building out into the opposition half = 2 points. Winning the ball in the opposition's build third = 2 points.** A goal is 2.
- Two-minute spells with fifteen seconds between; the hunting team swaps each spell.
- Short goal kicks by default; a long one is allowed and scores nothing either way.
- No stoppages within a spell.
- Coaching happens in the fifteen-second swaps, in one sentence.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Composure. The first touch under a five-player press is the whole game.
Tactical	Watch the press get tired. After ninety seconds of hunting, the gaps appear — a team that keeps building is rewarded in the last thirty seconds of every spell. That is a genuine tactical lesson and it applies directly to matches.
Physical	Two minutes of hunting is brutal and deliberately so. Give a proper rest at the halfway point.
Psychological	Both jobs scored equally. The squad should finish this practice respecting both.
Social	Hunting requires constant talking. Listen for whether the pressing team communicates or just runs.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Hunting as five individuals	<i>One goes, four cut the passes. Otherwise you're just running.</i>
Builders going long the moment the press starts	<i>You've got a spare player somewhere. Find him.</i>
The building team not noticing the press weakening	<i>They've been running for ninety seconds. What's changed?</i>
Goalkeepers rushing	<i>Nobody can tackle you there. Look first.</i>
The hunting team giving up after sixty seconds	<i>Two minutes. That's the deal.</i>

ASK THEM

- Hunters — who goes first, and what do the other four do?
- Builders — where was the free player?
- What happens to their press after ninety seconds?
- Which job did you prefer?
- What's the hardest part of being hunted?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three-minute spells.	Ninety-second spells.
Two-touch for the building team.	Bigger pitch (46 × 32 m).
The hunting team scores 3 for winning it in the build third.	Add a neutral player for the building team.
Smaller pitch (34 × 26 m).	The hunting team presses at three-quarter pace.

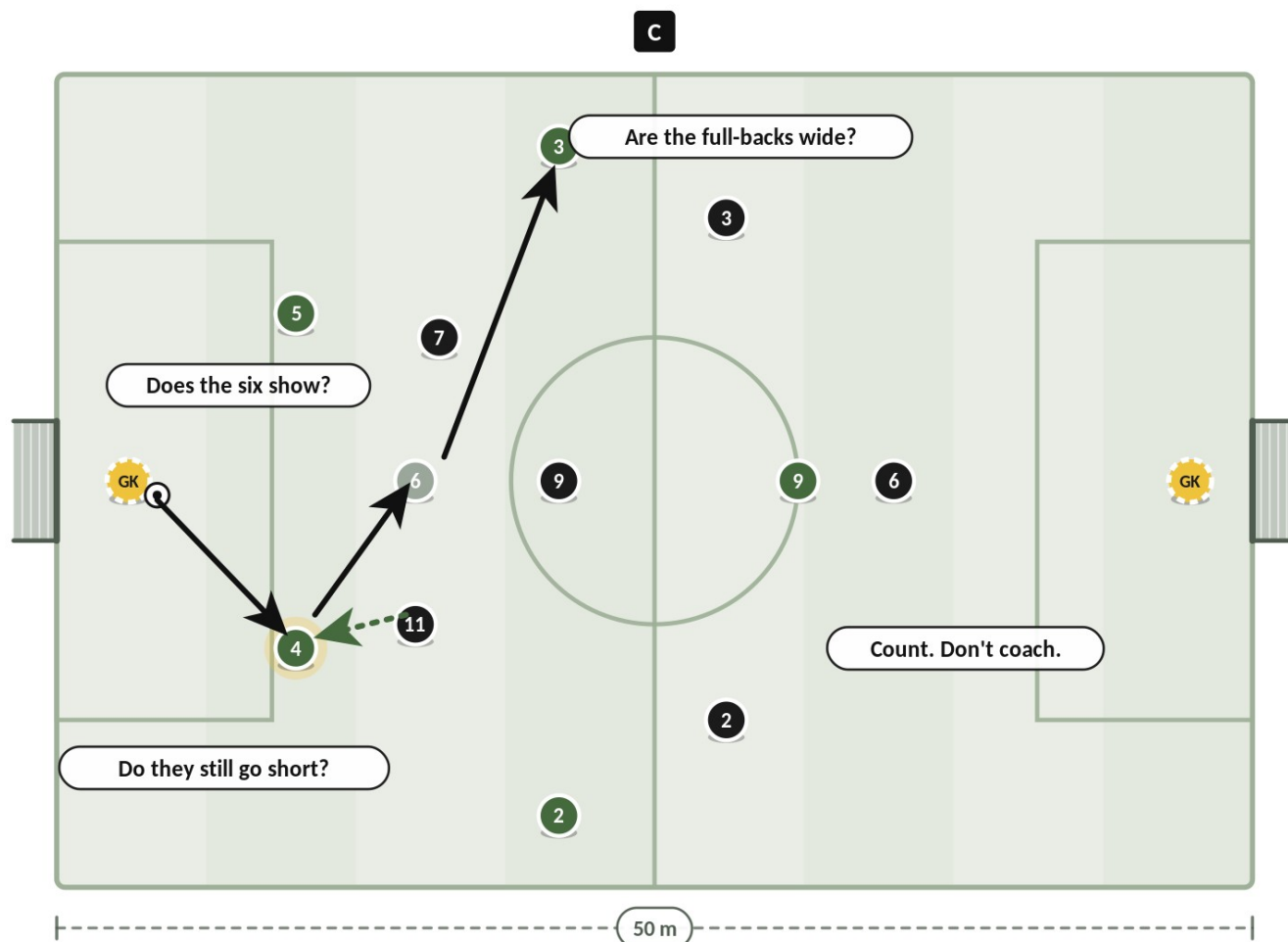
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Organised hunting rather than chasing.
Building continuing into the second minute of each spell.
The building team exploiting the tired press late in a spell.
Both scoreboards moving.
Constant talking from the hunting team.

20.4 THE BUILD-UP EXAM (7 v 7)

No conditions at all. A full match, a scoreline, and you standing on the halfway line with a notebook counting rather than coaching. What the squad does at their own goal kick when nobody is making them is the honest answer to this theme.

50 x 34 m • no conditions, no coaching for seven minutes • just count • 15 minutes



● Greens (attack right) ● Blacks ● Goalkeepers ● The six ● Ball
➡ Pass ➡ Move ➡ Press C Coach

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SET UP

- 50 × 34 m with full-size goals. **No markings, no conditions, no retreat line.**
- 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 shape assigned and then left alone.
- **Coach on the halfway line with a notebook.** Nothing else.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Keep the bibs and teams.** Shape in 30 seconds.
2. **Say one sentence:** *Normal football. I'm not going to say anything for a while.* Then stop talking.

3. **Minutes 0–7 — complete silence.** Count: short goal kicks versus long, six involvements, times a full-back was wide, times the structure held under a press.
4. **Minute 7 — drinks break.** Read the numbers out, flatly, without judgement. Then one question: *what do those numbers tell you?*
5. **Minutes 8–13 — play on.** Two individual interventions maximum, and only on the thing they identified themselves.
6. **Final two minutes — free play,** then straight into the review page while they're still on the pitch.

RULES & SCORING

- **No conditions.** Goals are goals.
- Goal kicks may be short or long — the choice is entirely the players'.
- Keepers restart within ten seconds.
- **The coach says nothing for the first seven minutes.**
- Two individual interventions maximum after the break.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Whatever survives. Note it rather than fixing it.
Tactical	The four this theme markers: short goal kicks, split centre-backs, an involved six, wide full-backs. Count all four.
Physical	End of a hard session and a hard block. Expect quality to drop and let it.
Psychological	Seven minutes of silence is difficult for a coach who cares. The information is worth it.
Social	Listen to who organises the build-up. That player is your captain in everything but name.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The ratio of short to long goal kicks	The single number that summarises this theme.
Whether the six shows when nobody asks them to.	
Full-backs under pressure — wide, or tucked in for safety?	
What happens after a mistake — do they go again, or go long for the rest of the match?	
Who talks during a build-up.	
The last two minutes	Everything you need for the review is in them.

ASK THEM

- What do those numbers tell you?
- How many did we play short when nobody made us?
- What stopped us the other times?
- Which of the three ways out did we use most?
- Are we better at this than we were a month ago? Honestly?
- What do you want to do about the ones we went long for no reason?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Both teams press every goal kick with five.	Retreat line reinstated for one team.

HARDER	EASIER
Every goal kick must be short.	Bigger pitch (55 × 38 m).
Two-touch in the defensive third.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling subs.
Swap all positions at the halfway point.	Reduce to ten minutes and give the time to the review.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

More than half of goal kicks played short with nobody enforcing it.

Centre-backs splitting automatically.

The six involved in most build-ups.

Full-backs wide even under pressure.

The squad going again after a mistake.

A full page of notes.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- This is the **end of this theme** — take the full five minutes.
- *What are the three ways out?* (Round, through, over.)
- *Where does everybody stand when the keeper has it?* Get an answer per position.
- *How many did we play short tonight when nobody made us?* Read the number out.
- *Is going long ever right?* When? Make sure they know it is a decision, not a failure.
- *What do we do when it goes wrong?* This is the question the whole block has been about.
- **Name every player once** and give each of them one thing that has improved since you ran Session 17.
- Finish with what's coming: *later on we work on the three seconds after the ball changes hands.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- More than half our goal kicks are played short. - The six receives the ball at least five times in our own half. - We go again after the first mistake, whatever it costs.	- The short-to-long ratio. One number, whole block. - What happens after a build-up error — do we keep going? - Whether the structure appears at all without you naming it.	- <i>How many did we play short?</i> - <i>What happened after the one that went wrong?</i> - <i>Were we better than we were a month ago?</i>

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

- **One-touch wall work.** From 6 m, fifty one-touch returns with each foot. Under a real press you often get one touch, and this is the only way to make that touch reliable.
- **Long and short.** Thirty passes at a target 25 m away and thirty at one 8 m away, alternating, with each foot. Building from the back needs both ranges in the same movement.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **what a team does after they lose the ball playing out from the back**. Do they stop doing it? Bring the answer — it's almost always no.
- *Optional extra:* pick the best goalkeeper you can find on video and watch only their feet for ten minutes.

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; **19** The Back Three and the Pivot.

A natural follow-on. Session 21 — Transitions. The block that connects everything. Counter-pressing in the three seconds after losing the ball, counter-attacking in the three seconds after winning it, recovery runs, and the judgement of when to counter and when to secure. It is deliberately placed here rather than at the end of the season, because transition behaviour is what makes possession and pressing worth having — and because a squad that can now build from the back has something worth protecting.

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.

Review — where the squad stands on building from the back

Complete this within a day of Session 20. This theme is the one that changes how a team looks, and the honest measure is the short-to-long goal-kick ratio in Session 20.4 when nobody was enforcing anything.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE SEEING

AREA	WHAT YOU SHOULD NOW BE SEEING
The goalkeeper's feet	Receiving side-on, passing accurately over 20 m, and choosing rather than clearing. Compare with September honestly — this is usually the biggest individual improvement of the season.
The first line	Centre-backs outside the width of the goal, keeper between, the six in front. It should form without instruction.
The six	Available on an angle, receiving on the half-turn, dropping in when the press is heavy. If the six isn't touching the ball, the structure isn't working.
Full-backs	High and wide, and understanding that being the spare player means being far from the ball.
The three ways out	Round, through, over — all three available, and chosen rather than defaulted to.
Nerve	Continuing to play out after conceding from it. This is the whole block in one behaviour.
Vocabulary	First line, the six, drop in, push on, time, man on. Twenty-five phrases across the set.

SQUAD AUDIT — FILL THIS IN

QUESTION	PLAYERS
What was the short-to-long goal-kick ratio in Session 20.4?	
How many times did the six receive the ball in the exam match?	
Which goalkeeper is most comfortable with their feet? Which needs the most work?	
Who is your most composed centre-back under pressure? Who panics?	
Which full-back holds width when it's uncomfortable?	
Who organised the build-up vocally? That's your captain.	
Did the squad continue playing out after a mistake, or abandon it?	
Who asked to play in a different position after Session 19? What did they ask for?	

IF THE SQUAD HAS THIS COMFORTABLY

- **Take the structure into this theme as a starting point** — a team that builds well has something worth counter-pressing to protect.
- **Add a counter-press condition to every build-up practice**: five seconds to win it back after losing it in your own third.
- **Give the goalkeeper an outfield role** in one practice per session from now on. The best U12 keepers are the ones who train as footballers.
- **Start rotating the six** deliberately — three or four players should be able to do the job by the end of the season.

- **Introduce the second midfielder dropping in** as an alternative to the six, which is the next step in build-up sophistication.

IF THE SQUAD IS STRUGGLING

- **Keep the retreat line in matches for another month.** There is no rule saying you must remove the scaffolding on schedule.
- **Reduce the build-up to goalkeeper plus two centre-backs.** Three players who understand it beat five who don't.
- **Practise the goalkeeper's feet separately** — ten minutes before each session with whoever is keeping. It is the bottleneck in most U12 teams.
- **Allow the long ball freely.** If the squad is frightened, forcing them to play short manufactures anxiety rather than skill.
- **Check the pitch.** January ground is uneven and a bobbling ball ruins build-up work. If your surface is poor, do this indoors or on 3G if you possibly can.
- **Address the sideline again.** Building from the back is the behaviour most likely to attract shouting from adults, and it is the behaviour most easily destroyed by it.

CARRY THIS FORWARD

The three habits worth carrying into anything you run next: the goalkeeper as a footballer, the first line forming automatically, and the nerve to go again after a mistake.

The short-to-long ratio is your ongoing measure. Track it across the next few matches; it will move slowly and then suddenly.

Where this sits. The individual, the duel, the partnership, the team in possession and the build-up each have their own theme. Transitions connect them — because everything you have taught only matters in the three seconds either side of the ball changing hands.