



SESSION 21 • STANDALONE PLAN

Counter-Pressing — The Three Seconds After You Lose It

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

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	21.1 Five Seconds
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	21.2 The First Three Jobs
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	21.3 Lose It, Win It
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	21.4 The Five-Second Match
0:55 – 1:00	5	■ Reflection	Questions and homework

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

this theme opens with the moment most youth teams ignore entirely: the second after they lose the ball. Watch any under-12 match and you will see the same thing — a team loses possession and everybody stops. Heads go down, hands go on hips, somebody looks for the referee. Two seconds later the opposition are through. Those two seconds are the most valuable in football, because the team that has just won the ball is at their most disorganised. They are off balance, facing the wrong way, and their first touch is usually poor. **The ball is never easier to win than immediately after you have lost it.** Tonight the squad learns that losing possession is not the end of the attack — it is the start of the next chance to win it. And there is a second, quieter benefit that matters just as much: a team that counter-presses stops sulking. There is no time to be annoyed about the tackle when your job starts half a second later.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **React inside one second** of losing the ball, without waiting to be told.
- **Know the three jobs** in the counter-press — press the ball, cut the nearest passes, block the ball going forward.

- **Understand that only the nearest three go**, and everybody else recovers.
- **Recognise when the counter-press has failed** and drop into shape instead of chasing.
- **Stop reacting to losing the ball emotionally** and start reacting to it tactically.

KIT LIST

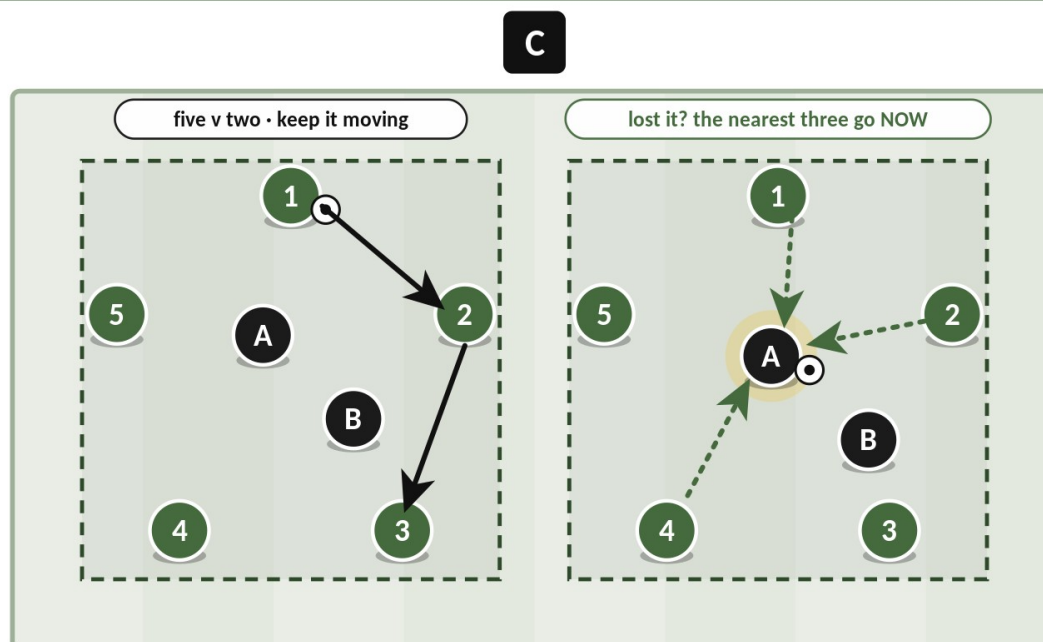
Ground needed: about 60 × 40 m. This is a loud session by design — the counting is part of the coaching. Tell the squad at the start what tonight is about in one sentence: when we lose it, we've got five seconds to get it back, and everybody knows their job. The single most useful thing you can do all session is count "five — four — three — two — one" out loud every time the ball changes hands, so that the number becomes a habit rather than an instruction.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	48	Rondo grids and pitch edges
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	21.3 and 21.4
Mini goals	2	Regression option in 21.2
Stopwatch or phone	1	You will be counting to five out loud a lot tonight

21.1 FIVE SECONDS

A familiar rondo with one new rule that changes everything. Lose the ball and you don't walk into the middle — you and the two nearest players hunt it back immediately, and if you get it inside five seconds nothing changes.

two 12 x 12 m grids • five v two • lose it and the nearest three hunt it back • 10 minutes



THE BALL IS NEVER MORE WINNABLE THAN IN THE FIRST FIVE SECONDS

● Possession team ● In the middle ● Ball ➔ Pass ➔ Counter-press **C** Coach

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SET UP

- Two 12 × 12 m grids, seven or eight players in each.
- Five outside, two in the middle to start.
- One ball per grid, spares on the outside.
- Coach between the grids, counting out loud.
- Everybody in the same bib colour except the two in the middle.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, free dribbling and juggling. **Collect the Session 20 homework** — *what did the professional team do after they lost it playing out?*
- Minute 3 — plain rondo, no new rules.** Five v two, two touches. Let it flow.
- Minute 5 — add the rule.** *If you lose it, you and the two nearest go and get it back. You've got five seconds. Get it back in five and nothing changes — you stay outside.* Then count out loud every single time.
- Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *Why is the ball easy to win straight after you lose it? You want because they're not ready yet.*
- Minutes 7–10 — competition.** Count successful counter-presses per grid. Announce the score.

RULES & SCORING

- **Two touches** for the possession team.

- **Lose the ball and the nearest three go immediately** — the player who lost it plus the two closest.
- **Won back inside five seconds:** everybody keeps their place. **Not won back:** the player who lost it goes in the middle.
- **A five-second win counts as 1 point** to the group.
- The two in the middle score 1 for winning it and surviving five seconds.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Two-touch passing under pressure; the tackle or interception itself, made front-on and at speed.
Tactical	Nearest three, not everybody. A counter-press is three players doing three jobs, not seven players chasing one ball. The moment more than three go, the exit is enormous.
Physical	Repeated short accelerations from a standing start — the exact demand of counter-pressing. Naturally intermittent, so no separate conditioning is needed.
Psychological	This rule punishes the sulk. There is no time to be annoyed, and by minute 8 you will see the mood change.
Social	Somebody has to shout <i>press!</i> or the three don't go together. Notice who does it.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Everybody chasing at once	<i>Three of you. Who are the three?</i>
Nobody reacting for a full second	<i>Count with me. Five, four...</i>
Players standing still after losing it	<i>You lost it — that means you go first.</i>
Diving in and getting beaten	<i>Get there fast, then slow down. Arrive, don't lunge.</i>
The rule making the rondo scrappy	Widen the grid by 2 m and let the passing breathe again.

ASK THEM

- Why is the ball easy to win straight after you lose it?
- How many should go? Why not everybody?
- What happens to their heads in the first second after they win it?
- What do the other four do while the three are hunting?
- How does it feel to lose the ball now compared with last month?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
One touch for the possession team.	Unlimited touches for the possession team.
Three seconds instead of five.	Bigger grid (14 × 14 m).
Smaller grid (10 × 10 m).	Seven seconds.
Six v three — more bodies, less space, faster reactions.	Only the player who lost it presses to start, adding the other two after three minutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

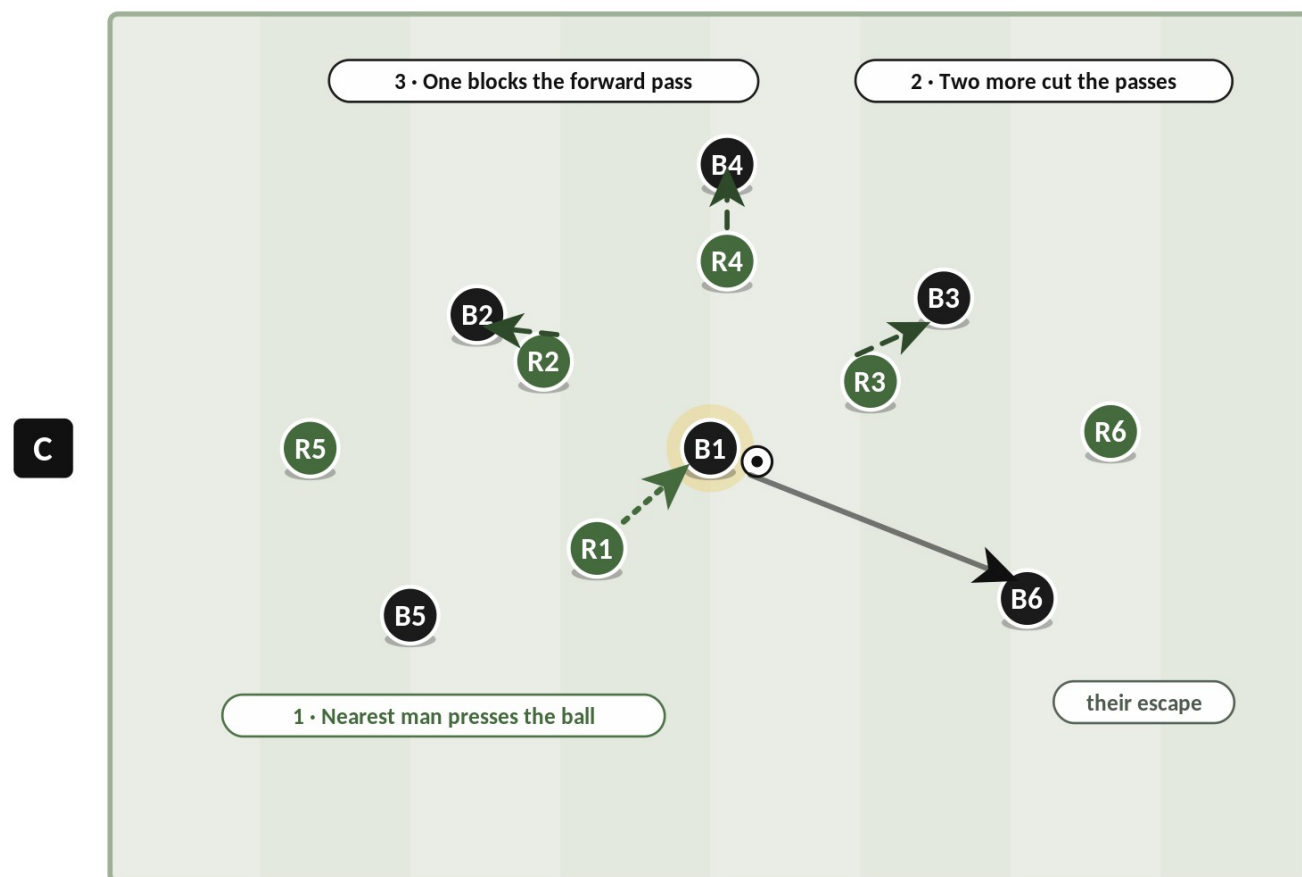
Reactions inside a second, without a call from the coach.
 Three players going, not seven.
 Fewer heads dropping after a loss.

The counter-press succeeding often enough to feel worth doing.

21.2 THE FIRST THREE JOBS

Slow the moment down and name the three jobs. One player presses the ball, two cut the nearest passes, one blocks the ball going forward. Done together it takes half a second; done separately it does nothing at all.

36 x 26 m • six v six • the three jobs in the moment the ball is lost • 15 minutes



PRESS IT • CUT IT • BLOCK IT • ALL THREE IN THE SAME SECOND

- Counter-pressing team
- In possession now
- ⊙ Ball
- ➡ Press the ball
- ➡ Cut the pass / block behind
- ➡ Their escape pass
- C Coach

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SET UP

- **36 x 26 m**, no goals — this is a possession practice with a transition rule.
- **Six v six.** With 14–16, add two neutrals who always play with the team in possession, or run rotations every two minutes.
- Score by completing **six consecutive passes**.
- Coach on the touchline with a whistle for freezes.
- Mini goals available if you want to add a target (see progressions).

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 30 seconds.** Six passes is a point. Play for two minutes with no transition rule so the passing rhythm establishes.
2. **Minute 2 — introduce the three jobs.** Walk it through once, static, with one team: *when we lose it, the nearest man goes at the ball, the next two cut the closest passes, and one of you gets behind the ball so it can't go forward.* Ninety seconds, no more.
3. **Minutes 4–9 — live, with freezes.** Freeze on the whistle at the moment of a turnover. Ask three players: *what's your job right now?* Ten seconds each, then play on. Three or four freezes maximum.
4. **Minute 9 — one question to the group.** *Which of the three jobs are we worst at?* It is almost always the fourth one — nobody wants to run backwards to block the ball going forward.
5. **Minutes 9–15 — scored properly.** Six passes = 1 point. Winning the ball back inside five seconds = 2 points. That scoring tells them which behaviour you value more.
6. **Rotation:** swap two players between teams every three minutes so nobody settles into one job.

RULES & SCORING

- Six consecutive passes = 1 point. Winning the ball back within five seconds of losing it = 2 points.
- Two-touch maximum for the team in possession.
- Only the nearest three or four counter-press — the rest recover towards their own goal side.
- If the counter-press fails, the pressing team must **drop and reorganise** — no chasing across the whole area.
- Ball out: restart with the team who did not put it out.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Approaching the ball at speed then decelerating to arrive balanced. A counter-press that ends in a lunge is a counter-press that ends in a free-kick.
Tactical	The three jobs are simultaneous, not sequential. Pressing the ball without cutting the passes just moves the ball. Cutting the passes without pressing the ball gives them time to pick a longer one. The block behind is the job nobody wants and the one that decides whether it works.
Physical	Very demanding in short bursts. Build in a proper drink at minute 9.
Psychological	The instruction is not <i>win the ball</i> — it is <i>do your job</i> . A player who cuts the nearest pass has counter-pressed successfully even if somebody else makes the tackle. Say that out loud.
Social	One voice has to trigger it. If nobody triggers, appoint a player for two minutes and then remove the appointment.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Only one player reacting	<i>He's gone. Who's cutting the pass?</i>
All six players charging	<i>Three. The rest of you get behind the ball.</i>
The press arriving late and lunging	<i>Fast for four steps, then small steps. Arrive on your feet.</i>
Nobody blocking the ball forward	Freeze it and show them the pass they just allowed. This is the one worth freezing for.
Chasing after five seconds	<i>It's gone. Get back and set up.</i> Knowing when to stop is part of the skill.
Passing quality collapsing under the new pressure	Add a neutral for two minutes to restore the rhythm.

ASK THEM

- What are the three jobs?
- Which one do we forget?
- Who decides when we go?
- What should you do if you're the fifth-nearest player?
- How do you know the counter-press has failed?
- What happens to us if we chase for fifteen seconds instead of five?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three seconds instead of five.	Seven seconds.
One touch for the possession team.	Add two neutrals permanently.
Eight passes for a point, so possessions last longer and turnovers are more costly.	Bigger area (42 × 30 m).
Winning it back must be followed by a pass before it counts — no kicking it away.	Four passes for a point.

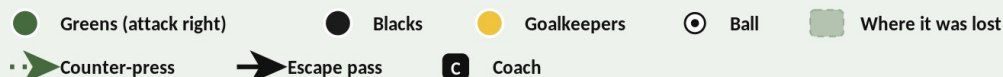
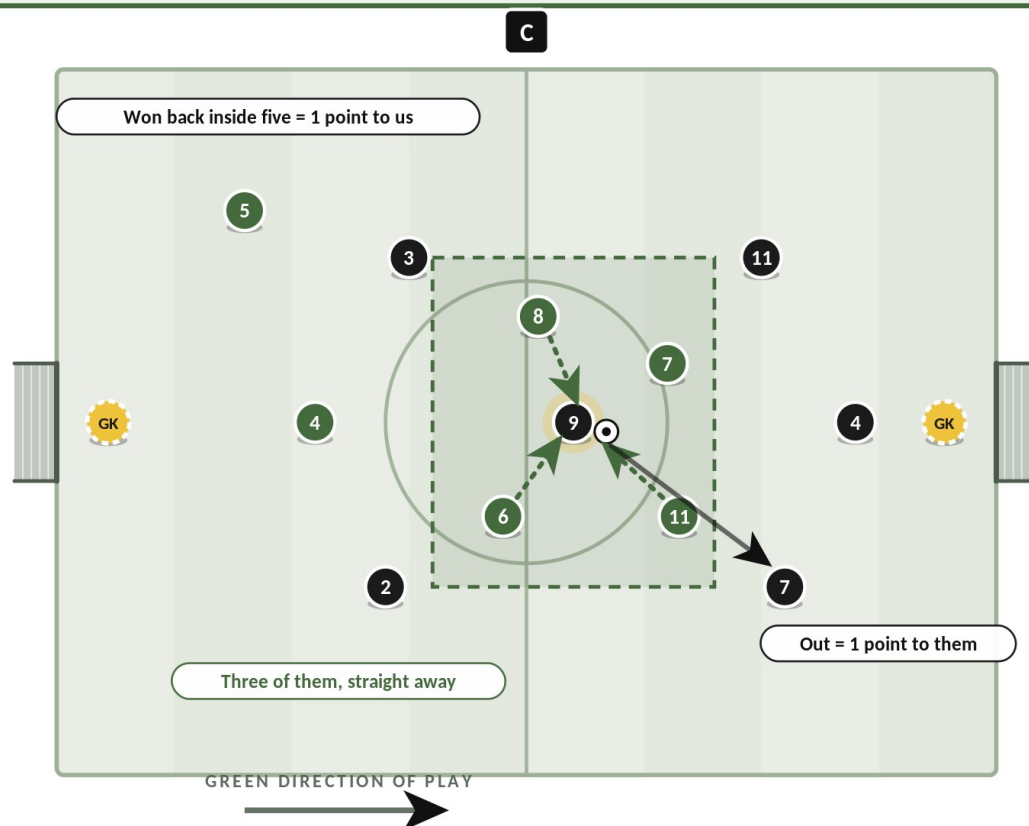
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Three or four players reacting together, not one or six.
The nearest passes actually being cut, not gestured at.
At least one player consistently getting behind the ball.
The pressing team dropping and reorganising when it fails.
The 2-point score being reached regularly by minute 14.

21.3 LOSE IT, WIN IT (6 v 6 + GKs)

Both halves of the moment scored equally. Win it back inside five seconds and you get a point. Survive the counter-press and get out of that area and so do they. Now both teams have a reason to be sharp in the same three seconds.

40 x 30 m • win it back inside five seconds = 1 point • escape the counter-press = 1 point • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- One pitch, **40 × 30 m**, both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- 6 v 6 outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes every two minutes.
- Normal football — the only additions are the two transition scores.
- Spare balls behind both goals for instant restarts.
- Coach on the halfway line, counting out loud.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.**
2. **Explain in 20 seconds:** Goals are 2. Winning it back inside five seconds of losing it is 1. Getting out of the counter-press with a pass to a free player is 1. Both of those are worth having.
3. **Minutes 0-5 — count out loud on every turnover** and announce the points as they happen. The counting is the coaching.
4. **Minute 5 — one question to each team.** To the team that has counter-pressed better: *what do you do first?* To the other: *how did they get out of it?*
5. **Minutes 6-12 — stop counting out loud.** See whether the reaction survives without your voice. This is the real test.

6. Minutes 12–15 — announce scores by category so both behaviours are visible, then finish with two minutes of straight football.

RULES & SCORING

- Goal = 2 points. Winning the ball back inside five seconds = 1 point. Escaping the counter-press with a completed pass to a free player = 1 point.
- Goalkeepers restart within eight seconds — a slow restart kills transition work.
- No offside.
- The coach counts to five out loud for the first five minutes only.
- Rolling substitutions at natural stoppages.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Two techniques matter: the front-on tackle or interception, and the first touch away from pressure by the player being counter-pressed.
Tactical	Both jobs are the same picture from opposite sides. The team that has just won the ball has one clean pass available before the press arrives, and finding it is the entire escape. Point that out to both teams in the same sentence.
Physical	Genuinely intense. Substitute regularly and keep the drinks short and frequent.
Psychological	Losing the ball now has an immediate job attached to it, which is the fastest cure for sulking that youth football has.
Social	Listen for the trigger word. Some squads say <i>press</i> , some say <i>now</i> , some say <i>go</i> . Let them choose it and then insist on it.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The reaction dying when you stop counting	Say nothing for two more minutes. If it still doesn't come back, one reminder only.
Players counter-pressing from thirty metres away	<i>You're too far. Get back and set up instead.</i>
The team who wins it panicking	<i>One clean pass. Where is it?</i>
Fouls in the counter-press	Give the free-kick every time and be strict. A counter-press that fouls is worse than no counter-press.
Goalkeepers dawdling at restarts	<i>Eight seconds. Transition starts with you.</i>
One team dominating both scores	Change one player between the teams rather than talking about it.

ASK THEM

- What's the first thing you do when we lose it?
- How did they get out of your press?
- When you win it, where's the free player?
- Is it always right to counter-press? When isn't it?
- What word are we going to use to trigger it?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three seconds instead of five.	Seven seconds.

HARDER	EASIER
Winning it back inside five seconds makes the next goal count double.	Bigger pitch (46 × 32 m).
Smaller pitch (34 × 26 m).	Keep counting out loud for the full fifteen minutes.
Two-touch for both teams.	Score the counter-press only and drop the escape point until the reaction is reliable.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Immediate reactions in the first second of every turnover.

The reaction surviving after the counting stops.

Escapes happening too, so the practice isn't one-sided.

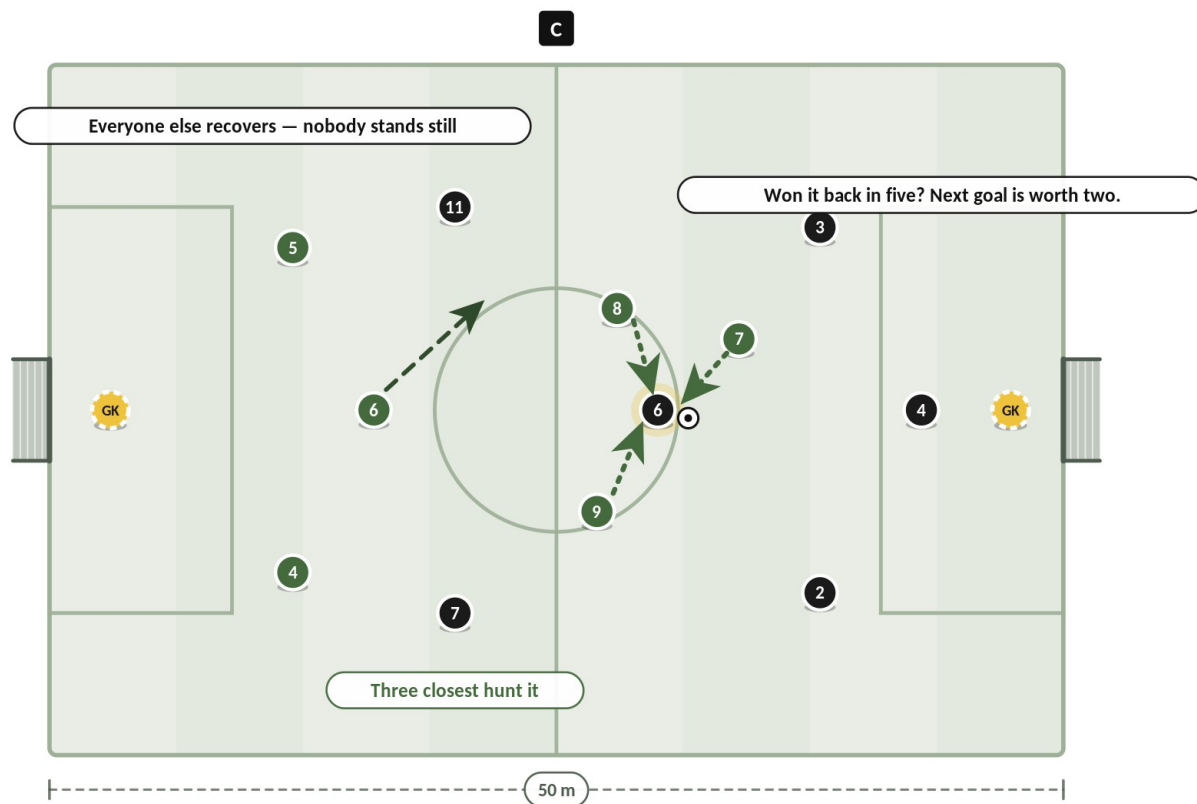
Few fouls in the counter-press.

A trigger word being used by the players.

21.4 THE FIVE-SECOND MATCH (7 v 7)

A proper match with one condition that makes counter-pressing worth doing: win it back inside five seconds and your next goal counts double. The reward is delayed, which is exactly why players have to think about it rather than just react.

50 x 34 m • win it back within five seconds of losing it and the next goal counts double • 15 minutes



● Greens (attack right) ● Blacks ● Goalkeepers ● Ball ● Counter-press ● Recovery run
C Coach

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SET UP

- 50 × 34 m with full-size goals and marked boxes.
- 7 v 7 including goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, play 8v8 or roll substitutes every two minutes.
- 2-3-1 shape assigned.
- **Announce the double-goal condition clearly** and keep the running count yourself.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Shape and teams in 60 seconds.**
2. **Explain the condition in one sentence:** *Win it back within five seconds of losing it, and the next goal your team scores is worth two.*
3. **Minutes 0–6 — play, keeping the count.** Say *double live* whenever a team earns it, so everybody knows the stakes have changed.
4. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *when is counter-pressing the wrong idea?* Guide them towards two answers: when nobody is close enough, and when everybody is already tired late in a match.

5. **Minutes 7–13 — add the balance.** Anyone who counter-presses from more than about fifteen metres away hands possession to the other team. Now they have to judge distance, not just effort.
6. **Final two minutes — remove all conditions.** Watch whether the behaviour stays.

RULES & SCORING

- **Winning the ball back inside five seconds of losing it makes your next goal worth 2.** Otherwise a goal is 1.
- From minute 7: **counter-pressing from more than fifteen metres away concedes possession** to the other team.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds.
- No offside.
- Free-kicks given strictly for fouls in the press.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything at match speed. Note the tackling technique and whether players arrive balanced.
Tactical	Counter-pressing is a decision, not a duty. The fifteen-metre rule teaches the judgement that the five-second rule alone cannot: if you are not close enough to affect it, your job is to get back, not to run at it.
Physical	The heaviest load of the session. Substitute generously in the last five minutes and let the tempo drop.
Psychological	Watch what happens after a team concedes. A squad that counter-presses well tends to restart faster and complain less.
Social	The trigger word from 21.3 should now be audible in a match. If it is, name the player who used it.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The reaction fading as they tire	Expected and worth naming: <i>last ten minutes of a match — this is when it's hardest and most valuable.</i>
Players sprinting thirty metres to press	<i>Too far. What should you have done?</i>
Defenders being dragged out by the counter-press	The back line stays; counter-pressing is mostly a midfield and forward job.
Nobody getting behind the ball	The one job that keeps disappearing. Ask, don't tell.
The double-goal condition being forgotten	Announce <i>double live</i> louder. The reward has to feel real.
The final two minutes	Whatever survives without conditions is what the squad has actually learned tonight.

ASK THEM

- When is counter-pressing the wrong idea?
- How far away is too far?
- What's changed about how it feels to lose the ball?
- Who should never counter-press? Why?
- What happens to their team in the first second after they win it?
- Did we keep doing it in the last two minutes when nothing was scored for it?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three seconds for the double.	Seven seconds.
Losing the ball and not counter-pressing at all concedes a corner.	Remove the fifteen-metre rule entirely and keep only the reward.
Ten-metre rule instead of fifteen.	Bigger pitch (55 × 38 m).
Both teams press every goal kick, so transitions happen constantly.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Reactions inside a second, consistently, at match speed.

Three players going and the rest recovering.

Players choosing not to press when they are too far away.

Few fouls.

Faster restarts and better body language after conceding.

The behaviour surviving the final two minutes with nothing scored for it.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *How long have you got when we lose the ball?* — the answer should be instant.
- *What are the three jobs?* Press the ball, cut the nearest passes, block it going forward.
- *How many go? What do the rest do?*
- *When is counter-pressing the wrong idea?*
- *What's our word for it?* Confirm it and use it from now on, every session and every match.
- **One thing to say and mean:** *losing the ball isn't a mistake any more — it's the start of the next chance to win it.*
- Finish with next time: *if this week was the three seconds after we lose it, next time is the three seconds after we win it.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- React within one second of losing the ball, every time, in the opposition half. - Three players press, everybody else recovers — no herd chasing. - No fouls in the counter-press.	- How long it takes us to react after a turnover in their half — count it. - Whether anyone gets behind the ball to block the forward pass. - Body language after losing possession compared with a month ago.	- <i>How quick were we after we lost it?</i> - <i>How many times did we win it back straight away?</i> - <i>Did we know when not to press?</i>

HOMEWORK — "THE FIRST SECOND" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Reaction starts.** Ball on the ground, stand two metres away facing the other way. On your own count, turn and get to it in as few touches as possible. Twenty repetitions. Counter-pressing is a reaction skill before it is a running skill.
- **Tackling technique against a wall.** Approach a stationary ball at speed from 6 m and stop dead over it, balanced, without lunging. Twenty times each side. The most common counter-press error is arriving too fast to stay on your feet.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only what the team does in the three seconds after they lose the ball**. Count how many players react. Bring the number.
- *Optional extra:* pick one player in that match and watch only them for five minutes after each turnover. Most of what they do happens without the ball.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — transitions. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **22** Counter-Attacking; **23** Recovery Runs; **24** Transition Decisions.

A natural follow-on. Session 22 — Counter-Attacking: the three seconds after you win it. The other half of the same moment. Tonight the squad learned that winning the ball back is a job; next time they learn that the ball they have just won is the most dangerous ball in football, because the opposition are committed forward and disorganised. Speed of decision, the first pass forward, and running beyond the ball — plus the judgement that separates a good counter from a wasteful one: knowing when to go and when to keep it.

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.