



SESSION 22 • STANDALONE PLAN

Counter-Attacking — The Three Seconds After You Win 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	22.1 Win It and Go
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	22.2 The First Pass Forward
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	22.3 Go or Keep
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	22.4 The Counter 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

Session 21 the squad learned that the ball is at its most winnable in the three seconds after they lose it. Tonight they learn the mirror image: **the ball they have just won is the most dangerous ball in football.** The reason is simple and worth saying to them in exactly these words — the team that has just lost possession was attacking, which means their players are in the wrong places, their defenders are outnumbered, and nobody is organised. That situation lasts about five seconds and then it is gone. Most under-12 teams waste it entirely. They win the ball and pass it sideways, or backwards, or take three touches deciding, and by the time they look up the moment has closed and they are playing against eight organised defenders again. The habit tonight is one sentence long: **the first look after you win it is forward.** Not the first pass — the first *look*. If the forward pass is on, play it. If it isn't, keep the ball and nothing is lost. But a player who never looks can never see it.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Look forward first** in the moment the ball is won, before any other option.

- **Play the first pass forward** when it is available, without a touch wasted.
- **Run beyond the ball** — a counter-attack needs someone ahead of it.
- **Judge go or keep** — recognise when the counter is on and when it is not.
- **Attack at speed with fewer players**, because a counter is rarely a full-team attack.

KIT LIST

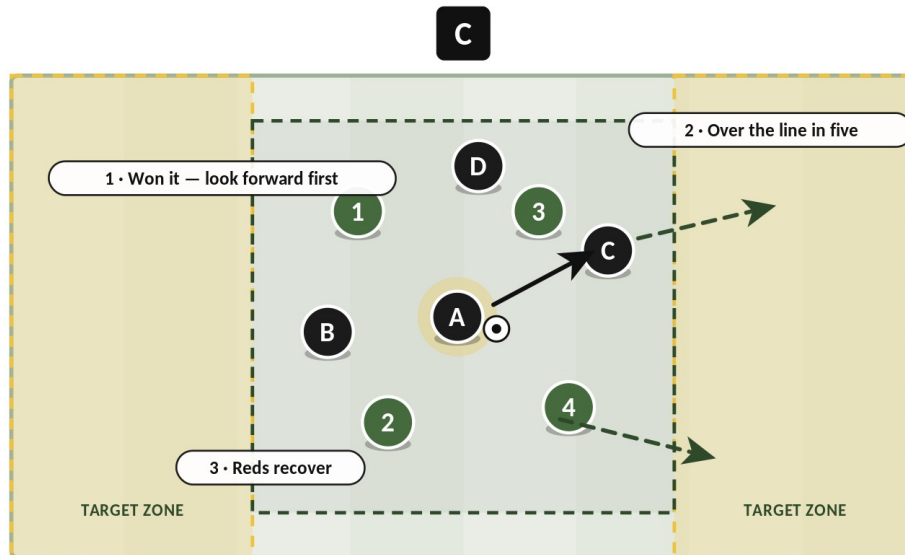
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. Tonight is faster and more enjoyable than in **Session 21** — counter-attacking is the part of transition that players actually want to do. Use that. The whole session hangs on one instruction that you should repeat until it is boring: **first look forward**. Say it in the warm-up, say it in every freeze, and say it on Saturday. And when a player looks forward, decides the pass isn't on, and keeps the ball instead — praise that as loudly as a goal, because that is the decision you are really teaching.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	48	Squares, target zones and pitch edges
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	22.2, 22.3 and 22.4
Mini goals	2	Counter goals in 22.2
Stopwatch or phone	1	Counting eight and ten seconds

22.1 WIN IT AND GO

Four against four in a middle square with a target zone at each end. Win the ball and you have five seconds to get it over a line — which is only possible if somebody is already running and somebody looks forward straight away.

30 x 16 m • four v four in the middle square • win it and cross a target line in five seconds • 10 minutes



THE FIRST LOOK AFTER YOU WIN IT IS ALWAYS FORWARD

● Greens ● Blacks ● Ball ■ Target zone ➔ Forward pass ➔ Run beyond / recover C Coach

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SET UP

- 30 × 16 m, with a 14 × 13 m square in the middle and an 8 m target zone at each end.
- Four v four inside the square. With 14–16, run two areas or rotate a group in every ninety seconds.
- Each team attacks one target zone.
- Balls with the coach for instant restarts.
- Coach at the side of the middle square.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Minutes 0–3 — arrival. Greet each player by name, ball each, free dribbling and passing in pairs. **Collect the Session 21 homework** — how many players reacted in the three seconds after their team lost it?
2. Minute 3 — possession only. Four v four in the square, keep the ball, no target zones yet. Two minutes.
3. Minute 5 — open the target zones. Win the ball and you've got five seconds to carry or pass it into their zone. Count out loud.
4. Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds. What has to happen in the first second? You want two answers: someone looks forward and someone runs.
5. Minutes 7–10 — competition. 1 point per successful break-out. Announce the score and let them play.

RULES & SCORING

- Four v four in the middle square, both teams free to move anywhere.
- Win the ball and you have five seconds to get it into the opposite target zone — carried in or passed to a teammate arriving in it.
- 1 point per break-out. 1 point to the other team if they stop it within the five seconds.

- Ball out: coach serves immediately.
- Nobody may stand in a target zone waiting — you have to arrive.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The first touch after winning the ball must go forward or into space, never back under your own feet.
Tactical	A counter needs a runner. However quickly you look forward, if nobody is moving ahead of the ball there is nothing to look at. The run and the look have to happen in the same second.
Physical	Short, sharp, repeated efforts with natural rests. A proper warm-up rather than a fitness drill.
Psychological	Enjoyable and fast — a good contrast to the discipline of Session 21 . Let it be loud.
Social	The runner has to be seen. Listen for players calling for the ball as they run rather than after they have arrived.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The first touch going backwards	<i>Which way are you facing when you win it? Turn as you take it.</i>
Nobody running ahead of the ball	<i>Who's ahead of him? Nobody. So there's no pass.</i>
Waiting in the target zone	Give the ball to the other team. The rule teaches timing.
Slow decisions after the win	<i>Five seconds. You've used two looking at your feet.</i>
Passing sideways out of habit	<i>Forward first. If it's not on, then sideways is fine.</i>

ASK THEM

- What has to happen in the first second after you win it?
- Why does the runner matter as much as the passer?
- Which way should your first touch go?
- What do you do if the forward pass isn't on?
- How does it feel when they counter on you?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three seconds instead of five.	Seven seconds.
Two touches maximum.	Bigger square (16 × 14 m).
The break-out must involve two players — no solo carries.	Solo carries allowed and encouraged.
Five v three so the ball is harder to win in the first place.	Three v three so the picture is simpler.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

First touches going forward.

At least one player running ahead of the ball every time it turns over.

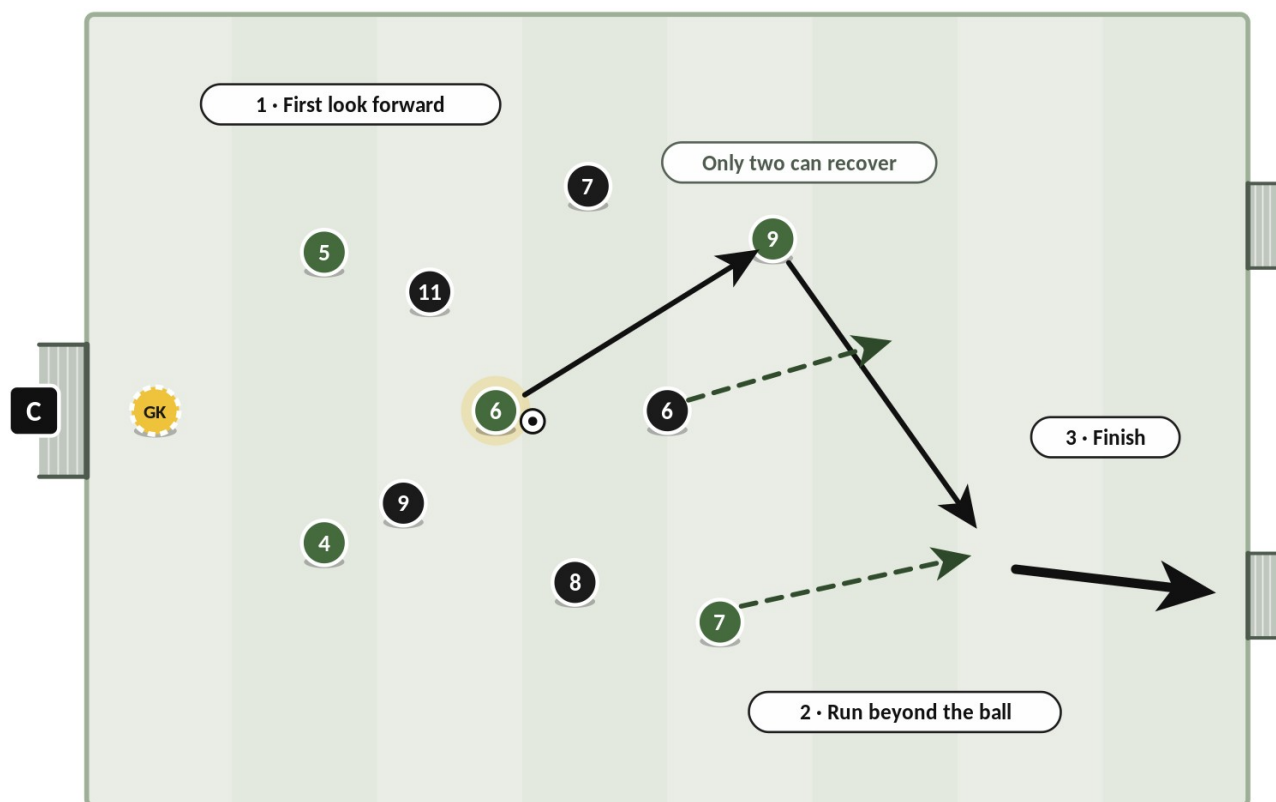
Break-outs happening within five seconds, regularly.

Nobody loitering in the target zone.

22.2 THE FIRST PASS FORWARD

The real picture. One team attacks a full goal; the other defends, wins it, and counters into two mini goals at the far end — with only two opponents allowed to recover. Numbers up, space ahead, eight seconds to use it.

44 x 30 m • defend the big goal, win it, and counter into the two mini goals • 15 minutes



WIN IT • FORWARD FIRST • RUN BEYOND • FINISH IT INSIDE EIGHT SECONDS



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SET UP

- 44 x 30 m with a full goal and goalkeeper at one end and two mini goals at the other.
- Five blues attacking the full goal; five reds defending it and countering into the mini goals.
- Eleven or twelve players per station. With 14–16, add a rolling substitute pair changing every ninety seconds.
- Spare balls with the coach behind the full goal.
- Coach beside the full goal so you can see the whole counter unfold in front of you.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 45 seconds.** Blues attack, reds defend. When reds win it, you've got eight seconds to score in a mini goal — and only two blues are allowed to chase back.
2. **Minutes 0–4 — live, no coaching.** Watch what the first touch and first look after the win actually do.

3. **Minute 4 — one freeze, thirty seconds.** Stop it the instant a red wins the ball and ask the winner: *what can you see?* Then ask the two forwards: *where should you be right now?* Restart.
4. **Minutes 4–10 — scored.** Blues score 1 in the big goal. Reds score 2 in a mini goal inside eight seconds, 1 if they take longer.
5. **Minute 10 — swap the roles** so both groups counter and both groups get countered on.
6. **Minutes 10–15 — add the judgement rule:** if the reds win it and the counter is clearly not on, they can score 1 by keeping the ball for six passes instead. Now *go or keep* is a real choice with a real reward.

RULES & SCORING

- **Blues score 1** in the full goal. **Reds score 2** in a mini goal within eight seconds of winning it, **1** after eight seconds.
- **Only two blues may recover** once the ball is won. The rest must wait until the counter finishes.
- From minute 10: **six completed passes = 1 point** to the reds as an alternative to countering.
- Reds cannot dribble the ball into a mini goal from closer than 6 m — it must be passed or struck from distance.
- Ball out or goal: immediate restart from the coach to the blues.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Two techniques carry the whole practice: the forward pass of 15–25 m played first time or in one touch, and the finish into a small target under fatigue.
Tactical	Look before you touch it. The best counter-attackers have decided where the ball is going before it arrives. And the counter needs width or depth ahead of the ball — two mini goals rather than one exist precisely to teach them to attack the space nobody is defending.
Physical	Long sprints forward, which is exactly what a counter costs. Build in a real drink at minute 10 when the roles swap.
Psychological	Counters fail more often than they succeed, even at professional level. Praise the decision, not just the goal.
Social	The player who wins the ball needs to hear a call. If the forwards are silent, the counter is guesswork.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The winner taking three touches	<i>Look before you touch it. What did you see?</i>
Forwards standing still while the ball is won	<i>The pass exists because you run. Go before he looks up.</i>
Everybody counter-attacking	<i>Three of you go. Somebody has to stay.</i> A counter that leaves nobody behind is a goal conceded next time.
Sideways first pass	Freeze it and show them the forward pass that was on. Once is enough.
Countering when it obviously isn't on	<i>Was that on? What else could you have done?</i> This is why the six-pass option exists.
Blues attacking carelessly because losing it feels costless	Score the blues properly and remind them that conceding a counter is how matches are lost.

ASK THEM

- What can you see the moment you win it?
- Where should the forwards be before you look up?
- How many of us should go on a counter?

- How do you know the counter isn't on?
- Which mini goal is easier to score in? Why?
- What happens to us if the counter breaks down?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six seconds instead of eight.	Ten seconds.
Three blues may recover.	Only one blue may recover.
Two touches for the countering team.	Bigger area (50 × 32 m) so the space ahead is obvious.
The counter must involve three players before the finish.	Start with the coach serving the ball to a red so the win is given rather than earned.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

First look forward, consistently, from the player who wins it.

Forwards moving before the ball is won.

Counters completed inside eight seconds.

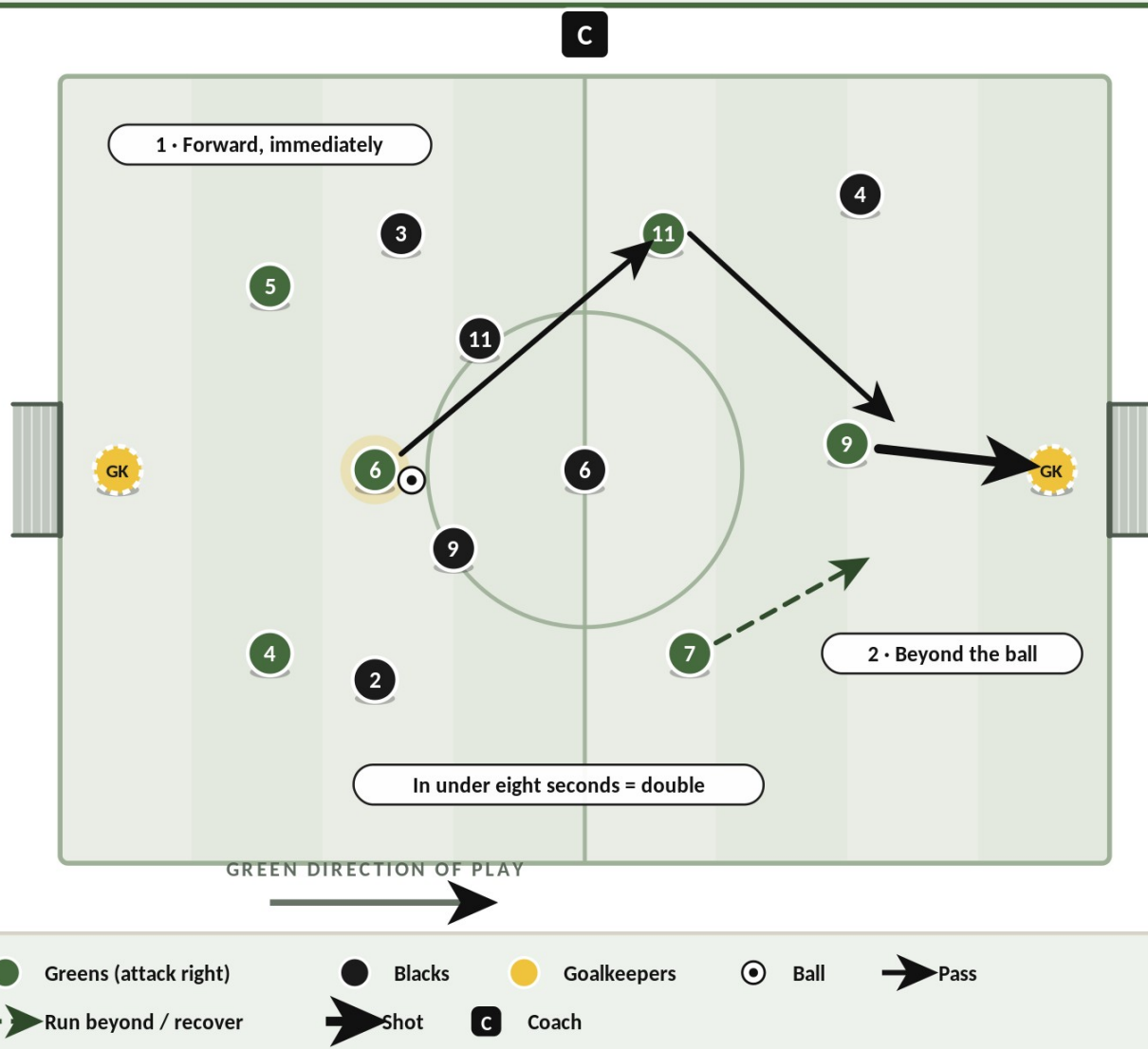
Three or four players going, not all five.

The six-pass option being used deliberately when the counter isn't on.

22.3 GO OR KEEP (6 v 6 + GKs)

A normal match with one number attached: score within eight seconds of winning the ball and it counts double. The condition makes the counter worth attempting; the scoreline makes wasting possession worth avoiding. The squad has to weigh them.

40 x 30 m • score inside eight seconds of winning it and it counts double • 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.
- No zones, no restrictions — only the timing condition.
- Spare balls behind both goals for eight-second restarts.
- Coach on the halfway line with a stopwatch, calling the count.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in 20 seconds:** *Score within eight seconds of winning the ball and it's worth two. Otherwise a goal is one. Everything else is normal football.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — count out loud** from every turnover so the eight seconds becomes something they can feel rather than something they are told.
4. **Minute 5 — one question:** *how many of our counters have actually been on?* Expect an honest and slightly deflating answer. That is the point.
5. **Minutes 6–12 — stop counting.** Award the doubles silently and announce them after the fact. Watch whether the forward look survives without your voice.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — final spell**, and deliberately praise two decisions **not** to counter as loudly as you praise the goals.

RULES & SCORING

- A goal scored within eight seconds of winning the ball = 2 points. Any other goal = 1 point.
- Goalkeepers restart within eight seconds.
- No offside.
- The coach counts out loud for the first five minutes only.
- Rolling substitutions at natural stoppages.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Passing range under fatigue. A counter usually needs one pass of 20 m or more played accurately while sprinting.
Tactical	Go or keep is the whole lesson. A counter is on when there is space behind their defence, a runner already moving, and fewer defenders than attackers ahead of the ball. If any one of those three is missing, it isn't on — and keeping the ball is the better decision, not the coward's one.
Physical	Repeated maximal sprints. Substitute generously and expect quality to fall in the last three minutes.
Psychological	The doubling reward can make players greedy. The antidote is praising restraint out loud, repeatedly, in front of everybody.
Social	Watch for a player who consistently makes the run that creates the option even when they never receive it. Name them publicly — that work is invisible otherwise.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Forcing counters that were never on	<i>Three things have to be true. Which one was missing?</i>
Nobody running ahead of the ball	<i>There's no counter without a runner.</i>
The whole team pouring forward	<i>Who's left at the back? Count them.</i>
The eight seconds being wasted on one heavy touch	<i>Look before it arrives.</i>
Doubles stopping once the counting stops	Say nothing for two more minutes before intervening.
A team sitting deep to farm counters	Legitimate and worth naming out loud — that is a real tactic and they have found it themselves.

ASK THEM

- When is the counter on? Give me three things.
- How many of ours were actually on?

- What's the cost of countering when it isn't on?
- Who's making the runs that nobody's using?
- Is keeping the ball ever the braver choice?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six seconds for the double.	Ten seconds.
Triple points for a counter finished by a player who was inside their own half when the ball was won.	Keep counting out loud for the full fifteen minutes.
Two touches in your own half.	Smaller pitch (34 × 26 m) so the goal is closer.
Bigger pitch (46 × 32 m) so counters need genuine running.	Award the double for reaching the final third rather than scoring.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Forward looks happening immediately and consistently.

Runners going ahead of the ball without being told.

Counters attempted when they are on and declined when they are not.

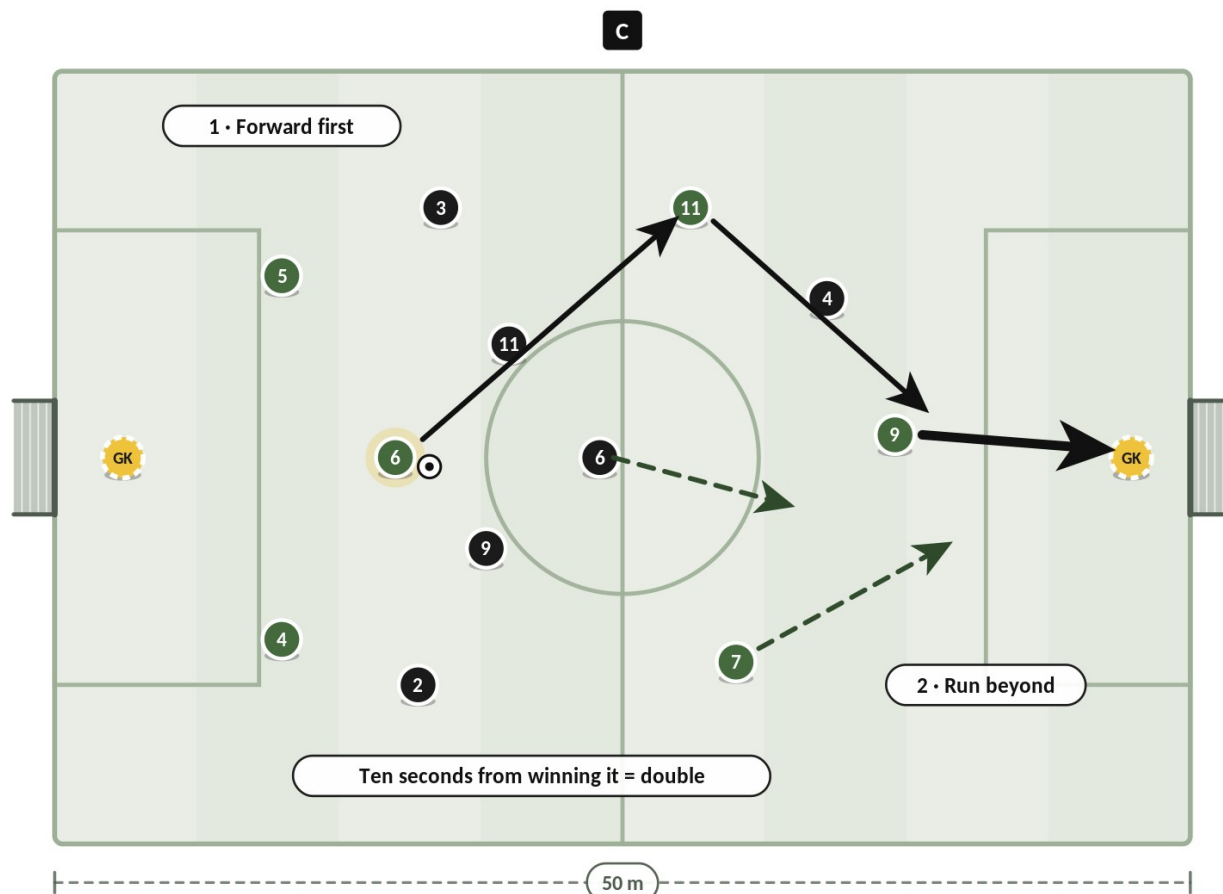
Doubles still being scored after the counting stops.

Somebody able to explain the go-or-keep decision in their own words.

22.4 THE COUNTER MATCH (7 v 7)

Both halves of the transition moment in one game. Ten seconds to score after winning the ball for a double — and **Session 21's** five-second counter-press still live. Now every turnover matters to both teams at the same instant.

50 x 34 m • goals scored within ten seconds of winning the ball count double • 15 minutes



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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.
- **Both transition conditions live** — counter-press reward and counter-attack reward.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Shape and teams in 60 seconds.**
2. **Explain both conditions in two sentences:** *Score within ten seconds of winning the ball and it's worth two. Win the ball back within five seconds of losing it and your next goal is worth two as well.*
3. **Minutes 0–6 — play and announce.** Call *counter live* and *double live* as they happen so the squad hears both behaviours being valued equally.

4. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *which is harder — the three seconds after we lose it, or the three seconds after we win it?* There is no right answer; the discussion is the point.
5. **Minutes 7–13 — add the balance rule:** a team that loses the ball while counter-attacking with more than four players forward concedes a corner. This teaches that counters have a cost.
6. **Final two minutes — all conditions removed.** Watch what stays.

RULES & SCORING

- Goal within ten seconds of winning the ball = 2 points.
- Winning the ball back within five seconds of losing it makes your next goal worth 2 (carried over from Session 21).
- From minute 7: losing the ball with more than four players ahead of it concedes a corner.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- Both conditions removed for the last two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything at match speed — the forward pass, the run beyond, the finish while breathing hard.
Tactical	Transition is one moment seen from two sides. Every turnover is simultaneously somebody's counter-press and somebody's counter-attack, and the team that reacts first usually wins the exchange. The four-player rule teaches the other half of the truth: a counter that fails with six players upfield is how good teams concede.
Physical	The heaviest session of the block so far. Rotate freely and let the last three minutes be slower.
Psychological	Two live conditions is a lot to hold. If the squad looks confused, drop the counter-press condition and keep the counter-attack one — do not persist with clutter.
Social	By now there should be a trigger word for pressing. Listen for whether a second word has appeared for the counter — many squads invent one themselves.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Both conditions being chased at once and neither being done well	Drop one for five minutes. Clarity beats completeness.
Six players on every counter	The corner rule will do the teaching for you. Give it without comment.
Defenders never joining a counter	<i>Sometimes it's you. When?</i> Late in a match, at 1–0 down, with space ahead.
The forward look disappearing as they tire	Name it rather than fixing it: <i>this is minute 12 — this is when it gets hard.</i>
Who reacts first at every turnover	That player is your transition player. Tell them so.
The final two minutes	Whatever survives with nothing scored for it is what they have actually learned.

ASK THEM

- Which is harder — after we lose it or after we win it?
- How many should go on a counter?
- What does a failed counter cost us?
- Should a defender ever join the counter? When?
- What's changed about the moment the ball turns over?

- Did we keep doing it in the last two minutes?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Eight seconds for the counter double.	Twelve seconds.
Three-player limit ahead of the ball on a counter.	Drop the counter-press condition and run the counter-attack reward alone.
Both conditions plus a two-touch rule in your own half.	Remove the four-player rule.
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m) so counters are longer and the judgement is harder.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Immediate forward looks at match speed.

Three or four players committing to a counter, not six.

Counters declined sensibly when they are not on.

Both transition behaviours visible in the same game.

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

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *What's the first thing you do when you win the ball?* — the answer is **look forward**, and it should be instant.
- *What three things have to be true for a counter to be on?* Space behind them, a runner already going, and more of us than them ahead of the ball.
- *How many of us should go?*
- *What's the cost when a counter fails?*
- *What do you do if the counter isn't on?* Keep it. Confirm that this is a good decision, not a timid one.
- **Name two players** who made a run that never got used, and say out loud that the run created the option even though nobody saw it.
- Finish with next time: *we've done the moment we lose it and the moment we win it — next time is what everybody else does while those two things are happening.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- First look forward every time we win the ball, in every third of the pitch. - At least one player running beyond the ball on every turnover in their half. - No more than four players ahead of the ball on a counter.	- Where the first pass goes after we win it — forward, sideways or backwards. Count all three. - Whether anybody runs before the ball is won. - What a failed counter costs us — track whether we concede from any of them.	- <i>Where did our first pass go after we won it?</i> - <i>Who made runs that nobody used?</i> - <i>Was there a counter we should have taken and didn't?</i>

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

- **Turn and pass long.** Start with your back to a target 20 m away. Have the ball played to you (or roll it against a wall), turn out with the first touch, and hit the target with the second. Thirty repetitions each side. This is the exact skill of the first pass on a counter.
- **Head-up dribbling.** Dribble 20 m at three-quarter pace while counting how many times you can look up. Ten runs. A player who cannot lift their head while moving cannot counter-attack.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only where the first pass goes after a team wins the ball**. Tally forward, sideways and backwards. Bring the three numbers — they are usually more even than players expect, which is a useful lesson in itself.
- *Optional extra:* pick a forward and watch only their movement in the moment their team wins possession. The best ones are already running before the tackle is made.

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: **21** Counter-Pressing; **23** Recovery Runs; **24** Transition Decisions.

A natural follow-on. Session 23 — Recovery Runs and Defensive Transition. The unglamorous third of this theme, and the one that decides whether the other two are safe to attempt. When the counter-press fails and the counter breaks down, somebody has to run back — and *where* they run matters far more than how fast. Recovery lines, getting goal-side, delaying rather than diving in, and the discipline of the player who stays behind while everybody else attacks.

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.