



SESSION 23 • STANDALONE PLAN

Recovery Runs — What Happens When It Goes Wrong

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

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	23.1 Get Goal-Side
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	23.2 The Recovery Line
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	23.3 Stop the Counter
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	23.4 The Two Who Stay
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

The transition sessions teach a squad to hunt the ball and to break at speed. Tonight is the session that makes both of those safe to attempt. The counter-press fails perhaps half the time. The counter-attack breaks down more often than it scores. In both cases the same thing happens next: the opposition are running at a defence that isn't there. What the squad does in the following four or five seconds decides whether the ambition of the last fortnight is worth having or is simply a way of losing 4–2 every week. There are two ideas tonight and they are both slightly counter-intuitive, so they are worth saying plainly. **The first: run towards your goal, not towards the ball.** A recovering defender who chases the ball arrives behind it and useless; one who runs to the space between the ball and their own goal arrives ahead of it and useful. **The second: the first defender back should not try to win the ball.** His job is to slow it down until help arrives. A tackle that fails is a goal; a delay that works is a defence rebuilt. This is not a glamorous session, and the squad will not love it the way they loved **Session 22**. Do it anyway. Teams that can only attack are not good teams — they are entertaining ones.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Run to the goal side of the ball**, not at the ball, when recovering.
- **Delay rather than tackle** as the first defender back.
- **Recover inside first** — protect the middle and let the wide space go.
- **Understand rest defence** — that some players stay behind while others attack.
- **Rebuild the defensive shape** rather than defending as scattered individuals.

KIT LIST

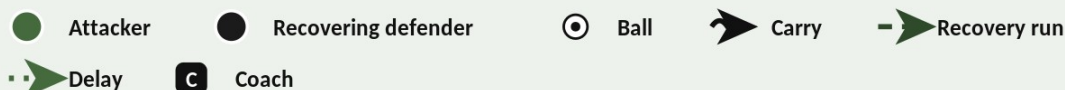
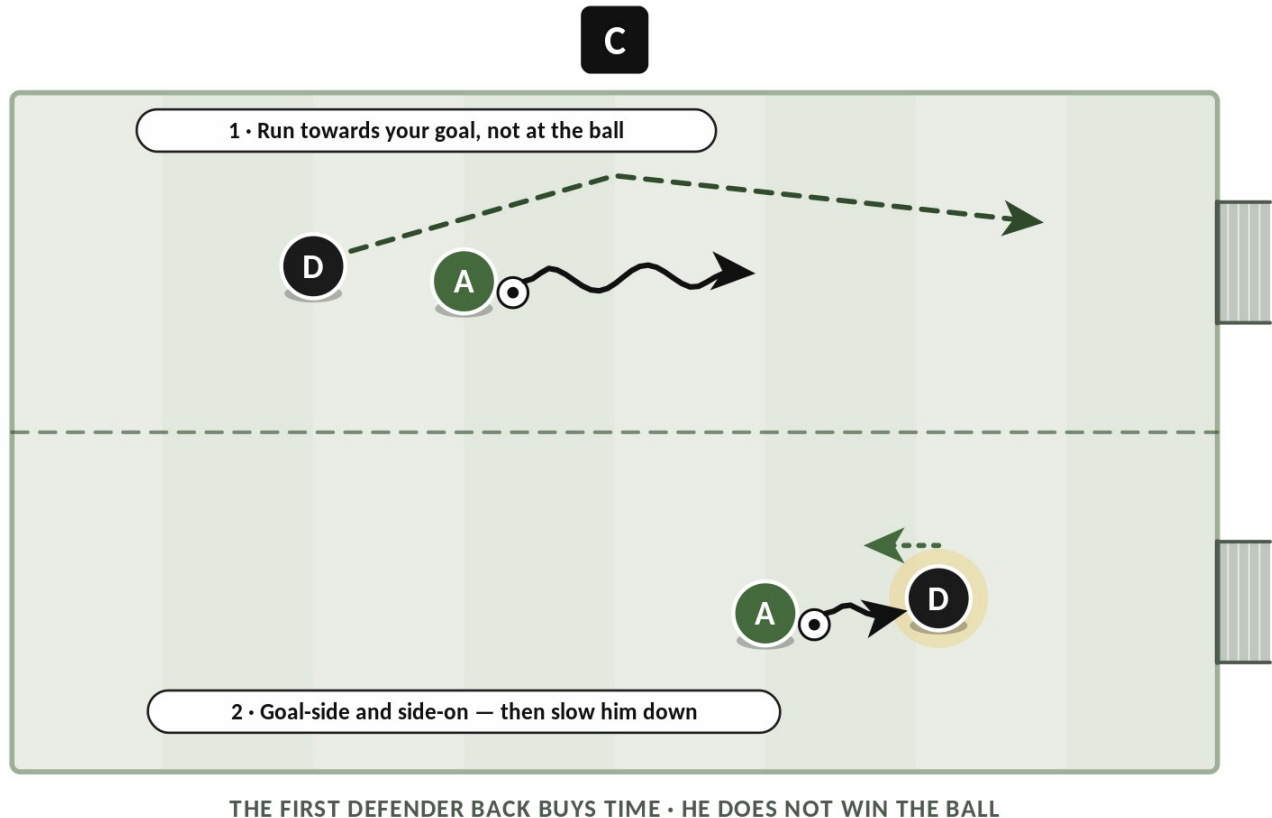
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. Set expectations honestly at the start — tell the squad this is the session that lets them keep doing the fun stuff. If they can recover properly, you can let them counter-press and counter-attack all season. If they can't, you'll have to make them sit back, and nobody enjoys that. Framed that way, twelve-year-olds will work at it. Framed as "defending practice", they won't.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	50	Lanes, recovery lines and pitch edges
Bibs — red / blue / yellow / grey	8 / 8 / 4 / 2	Grey identifies the two who stay
Full-size goals	2	23.2, 23.3 and 23.4
Mini goals	2	Targets in the warm-up lanes
Poles	4	Optional lane markers in 23.1

23.1 GET GOAL-SIDE

The recovery run on its own, in a lane, at pace. An attacker sets off with a head start; the defender has to get back past them on the inside and turn to face the ball before the goal is reached.

32 x 18 m • two lanes • run to your goal, not to the ball • 10 minutes



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SET UP

- 32 x 18 m split into two lanes, each with a mini goal at the far end.
- Pairs — one attacker, one defender — working in each lane, queue of two behind each start.
- The attacker starts **four metres ahead** of the defender.
- Balls at each starting point, plenty spare.
- Coach between the lanes.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and turning at your call. **Collect the Session 22 homework** — *where did the first pass go after teams won the ball? Give me the three numbers.*
- Minute 3 — walk the recovery line once.** Show it rather than describe it: jog the wrong way (chasing the ball) then the right way (running at your own goal), so they see the difference. Sixty seconds.
- Minutes 4–7 — live pairs.** Attacker sets off, defender recovers. The defender's target is to be **goal-side and side-on** before the attacker reaches the goal — not to tackle.

4. **Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *Why not just run at the ball? You want because you'd arrive behind him.*
5. **Minutes 7–10 — add the finish.** Attacker may now shoot. Defender scores a point for forcing the shot wide or delaying long enough for the coach to count to four.

RULES & SCORING

- **Attacker starts four metres ahead** and attacks the mini goal.
- **The defender may not tackle from behind.** He must get goal-side first.
- **1 point to the defender** for being goal-side and side-on before the attacker reaches the goal, or for a count of four without a shot.
- **1 point to the attacker** for a goal.
- Swap roles every repetition; everybody does both.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Running mechanics: sprint the first four steps, then get low and small as you arrive. Body turned so you can see the ball and your goal at the same time.
Tactical	The recovery line is a line to the goal, not a line to the ball. The shortest useful route is the one that puts you between the ball and the thing you are protecting.
Physical	Repeated 20 m sprints with recovery between repetitions. A genuine warm-up load with real football purpose.
Psychological	Defenders lose this repeatedly at first. Point out that a recovery run that fails but forces the shot wide has done its job.
Social	Pairs should be swapped every couple of minutes so nobody is always the slower one.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Chasing the ball from behind	<i>Where's your goal? Run at that.</i>
Arriving square and getting turned	<i>Side-on. Show him the outside.</i>
Lunging on arrival	<i>Don't tackle. Slow him down.</i>
Giving up when beaten	<i>Keep going. Half of these get saved by the second effort.</i>
Attackers slowing down to make it fair	<i>Full speed. He needs the real problem.</i>

ASK THEM

- Why not just run straight at the ball?
- What do you want to be able to see when you arrive?
- What's your job when you get there — win it or slow it?
- How does the attacker make it hardest for you?
- What happens if you dive in and miss?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six-metre head start.	Two-metre head start.
Longer lane (26 m) so the sprint is more demanding.	Shorter lane (16 m).
Two attackers against one recovering defender.	Attacker at three-quarter pace for the first two rounds.

HARDER	EASIER
The defender must also touch a marker on the inside before engaging.	Remove the mini goal and score only for getting goal-side.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Recovery runs angled towards the goal, not the ball.

Defenders arriving side-on and balanced.

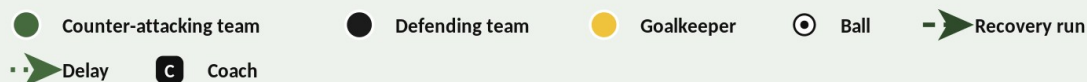
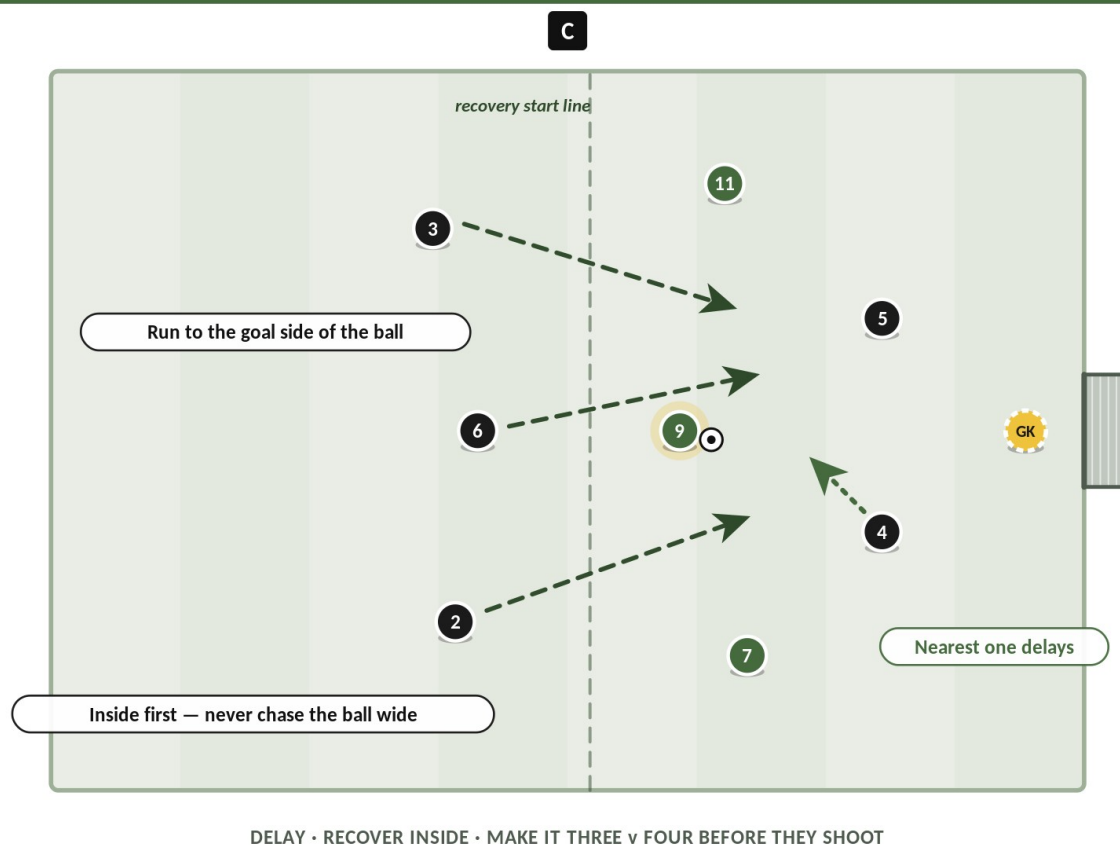
Delays rather than lunges.

Second efforts after being beaten once.

23.2 THE RECOVERY LINE

Three attackers break against two defenders while three more defenders recover from behind. The attack should score if the recovery is wrong and should be smothered if it is right. Same picture, twice a minute, until the running lines change.

46 x 32 m • three v two breaking, three recovering • run inside the ball, not after it • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 46 × 32 m with a full goal and goalkeeper at one end.
- Three attackers break from the halfway line; two defenders are set in front of the goal; three defenders start behind the ball on a marked recovery line and may only set off when the attack starts.
- Twelve or thirteen players including the keeper. With 14–16, rotate a group of three in every ninety seconds.
- Coach beside the recovery line with the balls, serving each repetition.
- Rotate so everybody recovers and everybody attacks.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 45 seconds.** Serve the ball to the middle attacker; the three recovering defenders go on your call.
2. **Minutes 0–4 — live, no coaching.** Almost every recovering defender will run straight at the ball. Let them, and let the attackers score.
3. **Minute 4 — one freeze, forty seconds.** Stop the play with the recovering defenders mid-run and ask them: *if you keep running there, where will you be when he shoots?* Then walk the correct line once. Restart.

4. **Minutes 5–10 — scored.** Attackers score 1 for a goal. Defenders score 1 for winning the ball or forcing the attack backwards; **2 if the attack ends with four defenders behind the ball.**
5. **Minute 10 — add the delay rule:** the nearest defender may not tackle until a second defender has recovered. This forces the delay habit and is the single most valuable condition in the session.
6. **Minutes 10–15 — full speed with rotation** every ninety seconds.

RULES & SCORING

- **Attackers score 1** in the full goal. **Defenders score 1** for winning it or forcing it backwards, **2** for finishing the phase with four behind the ball.
- **Recovering defenders start on the coach's call** and must run to the goal side of the ball before engaging.
- From minute 10: **the nearest defender may not tackle until a second defender has recovered.**
- **Recovering defenders must pass inside the ball**, not around the outside.
- Eight seconds per repetition, then reset.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Sprinting while looking over the shoulder; arriving balanced enough to change direction.
Tactical	Recover inside first. The middle of the pitch is where goals come from, so the recovering player fills the centre and lets the wide space go. And the delay is the whole practice: two defenders holding up three attackers for four seconds turns a three-against-two into a three-against-five.
Physical	Long sprints with short rests. Watch for form breaking down and rotate rather than pushing through it.
Psychological	Defending a counter feels hopeless at first. The scoring exists so that a well-defended phase feels like a win even when no ball is won.
Social	The defenders in front need to communicate with the ones recovering behind. Listen for <i>hold him!</i> or <i>I'm in!</i>

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Running at the ball rather than the goal	The one thing worth freezing for. Show it once and then ask rather than tell.
Recovering round the outside	<i>Inside. Give him the touchline, not the middle.</i>
The first defender diving in	<i>Count to three before you go. Who's coming?</i>
Defenders in front backing off too far	There is a balance — delay does not mean retreating into the goalmouth. <i>Slow him, don't invite him.</i>
Recovering players jogging when the attack looks lost	<i>Half of these get saved by somebody who kept running.</i>
Attackers going too slowly	The practice only works at full speed. Score them properly.

ASK THEM

- Where should you be running — at the ball or at your goal?
- Inside or outside? Why?
- When can the first defender go and win it?
- How long do we need to survive before it's even?
- What's the worst thing the first defender can do?
- Attackers — what makes it hardest for them?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Four attackers against two , with three recovering.	Two attackers against two , with two recovering.
Six seconds per repetition.	Recovering defenders start closer.
Recovering defenders start five metres further back.	Ten seconds per repetition.
The nearest defender may not tackle until two others have recovered.	Walk the recovery lines with the whole group once more — repetition of the picture is not wasted time.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Recovery runs angled at the goal, consistently.

Players filling the middle before the wide areas.

The first defender delaying rather than tackling.

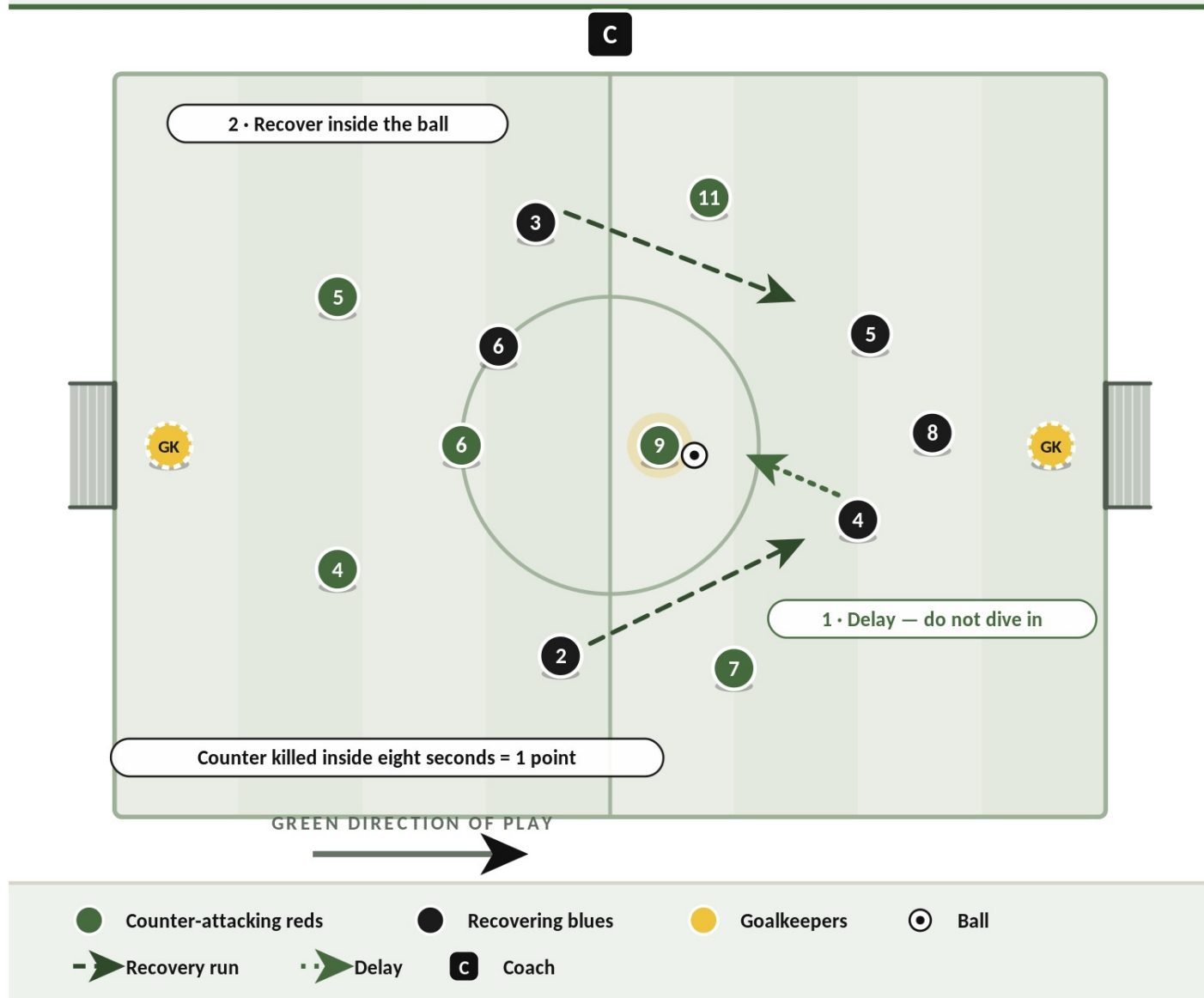
Phases ending with four defenders behind the ball.

Attackers finding it harder by minute 12 than they did at minute 2.

23.3 STOP THE COUNTER (6 v 6 + GKs)

A full game in which killing a counter-attack scores as well as scoring does. **Session 22's** condition stays live, so one team is trying to counter within eight seconds while the other is trying to survive those same eight seconds. Both are being rewarded for the same moment.

40 x 30 m • kill their counter within eight seconds and you score too • 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 — only the two timing conditions.
- Spare balls behind both goals.
- Coach on the halfway line with a stopwatch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in 25 seconds:** *If you score within eight seconds of winning the ball, it's worth two. If you stop their counter inside eight seconds — win it, force it backwards, or force it out — you score one too.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — call both out loud** as they happen so the squad hears that defending the moment is worth as much as attacking it.
4. **Minute 5 — one question to the defending side:** *who's the first one back, and what's his job?* You want *slow it down*, not *win it*.
5. **Minutes 6–12 — add the discipline rule:** the first defender back may not tackle for two seconds. Awkward at first, then genuinely transformative.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — remove the two-second rule** and see whether the delay habit stays without it.

RULES & SCORING

- **Goal within eight seconds of winning the ball = 2 points. Any other goal = 1 point.**
- **Killing a counter within eight seconds = 1 point** to the defending team — the ball won, forced backwards, or forced out of play.
- From minute 6: **the first defender back may not tackle for two seconds.**
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- Rolling substitutions at natural stoppages.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Jockeying at speed — the hardest defensive skill there is, because the defender is running backwards and sideways while the attacker runs forwards.
Tactical	Defending a counter is a numbers race. Every second of delay is another teammate arriving. A defender who understands that will never dive in, because diving in stops the clock in the attacker's favour.
Physical	Very demanding both ways. Rotate freely and let the last three minutes be slower.
Psychological	Scoring the defensive job is what makes it worth doing. Announce those points as enthusiastically as the goals or nobody will believe you value them.
Social	The recovering players and the defenders in front have to talk to each other. Silence here is the most common cause of a conceded counter.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The first defender lunging	The two-second rule will fix it faster than any instruction.
Everybody recovering to the same place	<i>One of you goes to the ball. The rest fill the middle.</i>
Recovering wide instead of inside	<i>Inside first, every time.</i>
Defensive points being ignored by the players	Read the two scores out separately at minute 8 and again at the end.
Delay disappearing when the two-second rule is removed	Note it and say so — that is the honest measure of the session.
Attackers slowing down to avoid conceding the defensive point	Legitimate, and worth naming: <i>see what you've made them do?</i>

ASK THEM

- Who's the first one back? What's his job?
- What does every second of delay buy us?

- Inside or outside — where do the rest of you go?
- What happens if he dives in and misses?
- Which is worth more to us tonight — the goal or the stop?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six seconds to kill the counter.	Ten seconds.
Three-second no-tackle rule.	Remove the no-tackle rule and coach the delay verbally instead.
Bigger pitch (46 × 32 m) so counters have more space.	Smaller pitch (34 × 26 m) so recovery distances are short.
Two defensive points only if the phase ends with four behind the ball.	Score the defensive stop only , dropping the counter reward for five minutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

First defenders consistently delaying.

Recovery runs going inside the ball.

Defensive points being scored as often as goals.

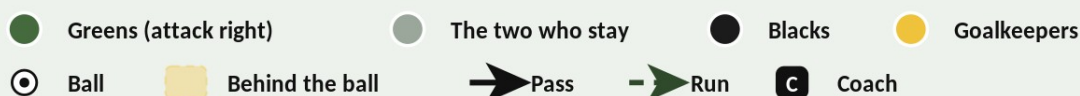
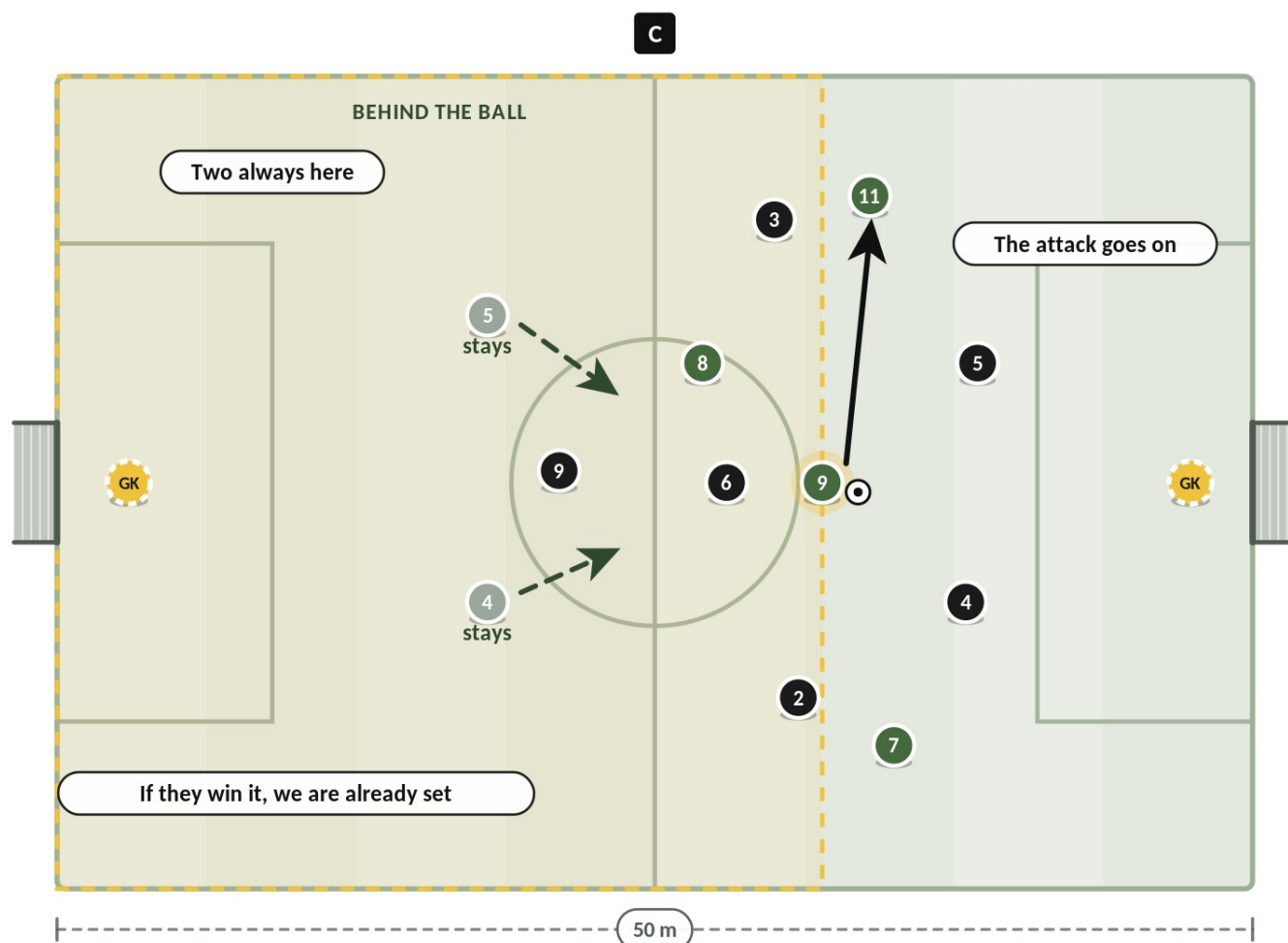
Talking between the recovering players and those in front.

The delay habit surviving the removal of the two-second rule.

23.4 THE TWO WHO STAY (7 v 7)

Rest defence, made visible. Two named players must always be behind the ball while their team attacks. It looks like a restriction and is actually the thing that lets everybody else attack freely — which is exactly the point the squad needs to arrive at themselves.

50 x 34 m • two players must always be behind the ball • 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.
- **Two players per team wear grey bibs over their kit** — these are the two who must stay behind the ball.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Shape, bibs and the two grey players named in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in one sentence:** *The two in grey must always be behind the ball. Everybody else attacks normally.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — play.** Award a free-kick against any team whose grey players get ahead of the ball. Two or three of those and the habit forms.
4. **Minute 5 — swap the grey bibs** to two different players so the job is not permanently the defenders'.
5. **Minutes 6–11 — one question at the drink:** *what does having two behind the ball let the rest of you do?* You want them to arrive at *attack without worrying*.
6. **Minutes 11–15 — remove the grey bibs entirely** and see whether two players choose to stay without being told. That is the whole session in one observation.

RULES & SCORING

- **Two named players per team must always be behind the ball** while their team has possession.
- Breach: **indirect free-kick** to the other team where the ball was.
- Grey bibs swap to two different players at minute 5.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- **Bibs removed for the final four minutes.**

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Nothing new. Tonight is positional.
Tactical	Rest defence is what makes attacking safe. Two players behind the ball turn a conceded counter from a three-against-one into a three-against-three, which is a defendable problem. Say the trade-off out loud: we are giving up two attackers to gain the freedom for four others to go.
Physical	Lighter than the previous two practices. Deliberately so — the squad has done a lot of sprinting tonight.
Psychological	Being one of the two who stay feels like a punishment until a counter is stopped because of it. Point that moment out the first time it happens.
Social	In the last four minutes, watch who volunteers to stay. That is a genuine leadership signal and worth naming at the end.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Grey players drifting forward when the team attacks	The free-kick teaches it faster than you can.
The two staying too deep	Behind the ball, not on the goal line. <i>Stay connected — you're still in the game.</i>
Nobody staying once the bibs come off	The honest result. Name it neutrally and make it Saturday's objective.
The two who stay switching off	<i>You're not resting. You're the reason they can go.</i>
A counter being stopped because of them	Stop the game for ten seconds and show everybody why it worked.
Which players volunteer in the last four minutes	

ASK THEM

- What do two players behind the ball let the rest of you do?
- Where exactly should those two stand?
- Should it always be the same two? Why not?

- What happens when nobody stays?
- Who volunteered at the end — and why did you?
- Is staying behind the ball a boring job or an important one?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three must stay behind the ball.	One player stays instead of two.
The two who stay must also be within fifteen metres of each other.	Warning instead of a free-kick for the first three breaches.
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m) so the distances are real.	Keep the bibs on for the whole fifteen minutes.
Rotate the grey bibs every two minutes so everybody does the job.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The two staying without reminders by minute 8.
 Counters visibly harder to complete against a team with two behind the ball.
 The squad able to explain the trade-off in their own words.
 At least one player choosing to stay after the bibs come off.
 Nobody treating the job as a punishment.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- When you're recovering, do you run at the ball or at your goal?
- What's the job of the first defender back? — slow it down, not win it.
- Inside or outside? Confirm inside, every time.
- What does every second of delay buy us?
- Why do two players stay behind the ball? Push until somebody says so the rest of us can go.
- **Name the player who made the best recovery run tonight** — and specifically describe the run, so everybody can picture it.
- Finish with next time: *next time is the last of this theme, and it's the one where you decide for yourselves — press it, counter it, or keep it. No conditions telling you which.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Every recovery run goes towards our goal, not towards the ball. - The first defender back delays — no dives in, all game. - Two players stay behind the ball whenever we attack.	- Whether recovering players go inside or chase wide. - How many counters we concede compared with the last two matches. - Who stays behind the ball without being told.	- <i>Where were you running when they broke on us?</i> - <i>Who stayed back? Did we ever have nobody?</i> - <i>Did anyone dive in and get beaten?</i>

HOMEWORK — "THE RUN BACK" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Curved sprints.** Mark two points 20 m apart. Sprint between them along a curved path rather than a straight one, ten times each direction. Recovery runs are almost never straight, and running a curve at speed is a skill in itself.
- **Backwards and sideways.** Twenty metres of side-stepping and twenty of controlled backwards running, five times through. This is what jockeying a counter-attacker actually costs, and most under-12 players have never practised it.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **what the defending team does when a counter starts**. Count how many players run back and where they run to. Notice how few of them run at the ball.
- *Optional extra:* pick a holding midfielder and watch only them while their team attacks. Most of what they do is standing in the right place doing nothing, which is the hardest job on the pitch to appreciate.

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**; **22 Counter-Attacking**; **24 Transition Decisions**.

A natural follow-on. Session 24 — Transition Decisions, and the review page. The summary session for this theme, and the one with no conditions at all. Press it, counter it, or keep it — and nobody is going to tell them which. The transition work meets a match in which every turnover is a genuine choice, and the review that follows measures whether the squad reacts to the ball changing hands at all.

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.