



SESSION 25 • STANDALONE PLAN

Press, Cover and Balance — The First, Second and Third Defender

Defending as a team • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	25.1 First, Second, Third
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	25.2 The Diagonal
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	25.3 Never Alone
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	25.4 The Unit 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

Back in this theme the squad learned to defend one against one — stay on your feet, show him one way, be patient. That is the foundation, and it is also the reason so many under-12 teams defend badly: they have eight players all doing the same individual job at the same time. Football is not eight one-against-ones. **It is one player pressing the ball and everybody else doing something different because of it.** this theme is about that difference, and it starts with the three jobs that never change: **press, cover, balance.** The player nearest the ball presses it. The next nearest positions himself behind and inside the presser, so that if the presser is beaten there is somebody there. The third tucks in towards the middle and guards the space on the far side, because that is where the ball goes if the attack switches. Those three jobs describe every defensive shape ever devised, from a back three to a full pressing system, and a squad that understands them can be given any structure you like. A squad that does not will chase the ball in a herd for the rest of their careers. **The single sentence for tonight: never two players on the same job at the same time.**

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Identify the first defender** — the one nearest the ball — instantly and without argument.
- **Cover correctly** — behind and inside the presser, close enough to help and far enough not to be beaten by the same pass.
- **Balance the far side** by tucking in towards the middle rather than marking the far winger.
- **Never press without support** — one goes only when somebody is with him.
- **Slide as a unit** when the ball is switched, so the shape re-forms on the other side.

KIT LIST

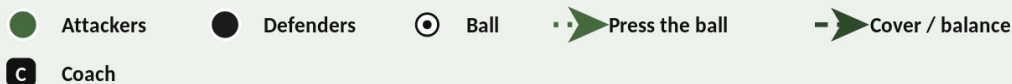
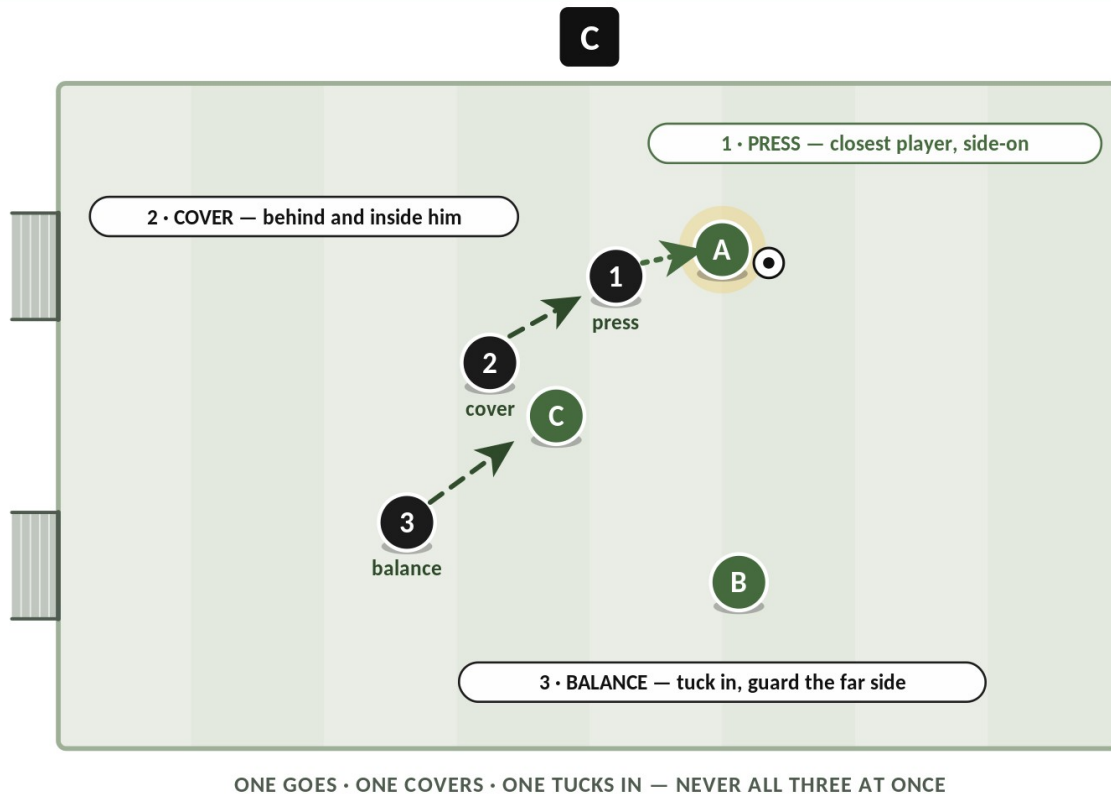
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. Three words carry the whole block and they should be said perhaps fifty times tonight: **press**, **cover**, **balance**. Use them exactly and never interchangeably — if the vocabulary slips, the concept goes with it. Worth knowing before you start: defending sessions are usually the least popular of the season at this age, and the reason is almost always that the practices give them nothing to win. Every practice tonight scores the defending team. That single design choice is what makes the session enjoyable rather than dutiful.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	50	Areas, lines and the five-metre zones
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	25.2, 25.3 and 25.4
Mini goals	2	Targets in the warm-up
Poles	4	Optional — marking the width of the back line in 25.2

25.1 FIRST, SECOND, THIRD

Three against three to two mini goals — the smallest number of players in which all three defensive jobs exist at once. Small enough that nobody can hide, and short enough that everybody does all three within ten minutes.

32 x 20 m • three v three to two mini goals • everybody learns all three jobs • 10 minutes



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SET UP

- 32 × 20 m with **two mini goals** at one end, about 9 m apart.
- **Three attackers against three defenders.** With 14–16, run two areas or rotate a three in every ninety seconds.
- Attackers score in either mini goal; defenders score by winning the ball and dribbling over the halfway line.
- Balls with the coach behind the mini goals.
- Coach at the side.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and turning. **Collect the Session 24 homework** — *give me one moment where you'd have chosen differently.*
- Minute 3 — walk it once, statically.** Put three defenders out, roll a ball to one side, and name the three jobs as they happen: *you press, you cover, you balance.* Then move the ball across and let them adjust. Ninety seconds, no longer.
- Minutes 4–7 — live.** Play it properly. Every time you stop the practice, ask one defender only: *which job are you?*
- Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *What's the worst thing three defenders can do? You want all go to the ball.*

5. **Minutes 7–10 — scored.** Attackers 1 for a goal; defenders 1 for winning it and getting over the halfway line. Rotate so everybody defends.

RULES & SCORING

- **Attackers score 1** in either mini goal. **Defenders score 1** for winning the ball and dribbling over the halfway line.
- **Only one defender may press at a time.** Two on the ball is a free-kick to the attackers.
- Ninety-second rounds with rotation.
- Ball out: coach serves immediately to the attackers.
- Everybody defends at least three rounds.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything from this theme — side-on stance, patience, showing one way. It should be second nature by now; if it isn't, that is the note to take.
Tactical	The jobs are decided by distance from the ball, not by position or by name. Whoever is nearest presses. That means all three change constantly, and a defender who thinks <i>I'm a defender</i> rather than <i>I'm the second one right now</i> will always be in the wrong place.
Physical	Short and sharp with rotation built in. A proper warm-up.
Psychological	Twelve-year-olds all want to be the one who tackles. Covering feels like doing nothing. Point out the covering player every time a press succeeds because of them.
Social	The three jobs need naming out loud — <i>I'm first, you cover</i> . Encourage it now; it becomes essential in 25.4.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Two defenders pressing the same ball	Give the free-kick. It's the fastest teacher in the practice.
The covering player standing square beside the presser	<i>Behind him and inside. If he's beaten, where are you?</i>
The third defender marking the far attacker	<i>Come in. The ball's over there — the danger's in the middle.</i>
Nobody pressing at all	<i>Who's nearest? Then it's you.</i>
Jobs not changing when the ball moves	Freeze it once and ask three players who they are now.

ASK THEM

- Which job are you right now?
- How do you know whose job is whose?
- What's the worst thing three defenders can do?
- Where exactly should the covering player stand?
- Why does the third one come inside rather than following the winger?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Four attackers against three defenders.	Three attackers against four defenders.
Bigger area (36 × 24 m) so the distances are real.	Smaller area (26 × 18 m).
Defenders must complete a pass after winning it for the point to count.	Walk it through statically twice more.

HARDER	EASIER
Three mini goals so the switch is constant.	Coach calls the jobs out loud for the first three minutes.

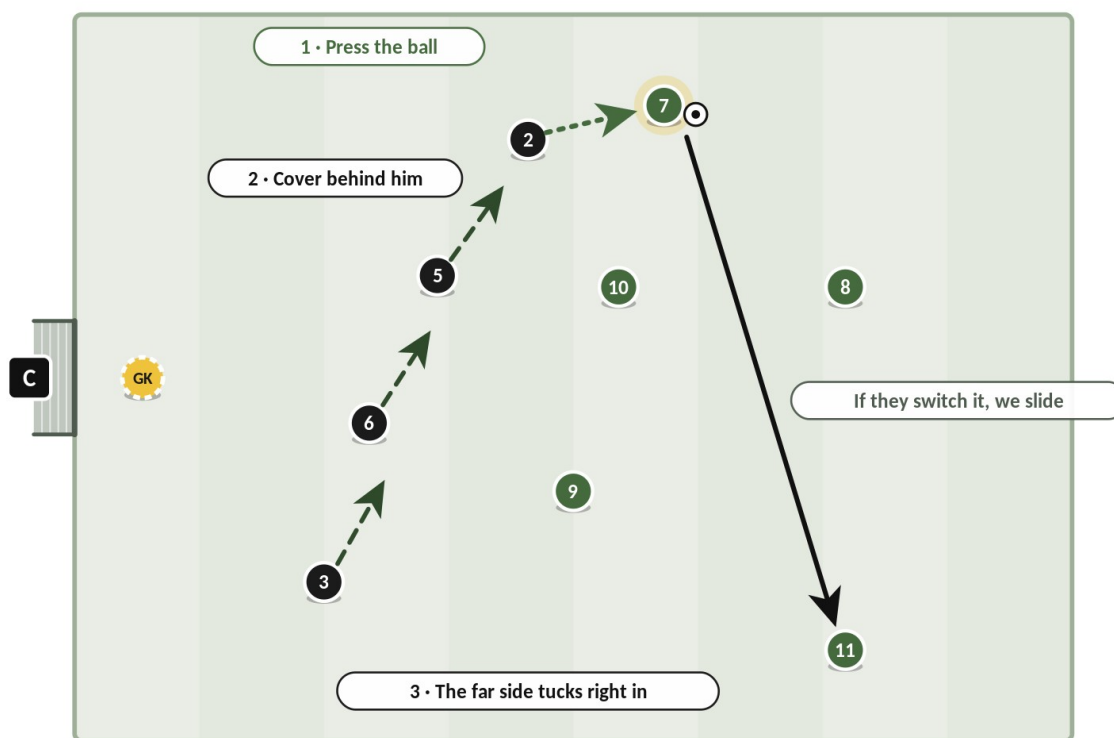
IT'S WORKING WHEN

- Only one defender pressing at a time.
- The covering player positioned behind and inside.
- The third defender tucking in rather than following the far attacker.
- Jobs swapping as the ball moves.
- Players naming their own job when asked.

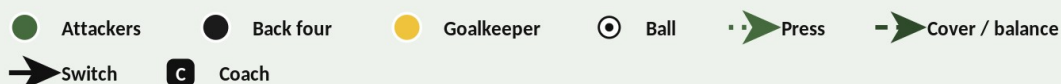
25.2 THE DIAGONAL

The same three jobs across a full back line. Five attackers try to work the ball from side to side; four defenders and a keeper hold a shape that slopes towards the ball and slides when it is switched. The picture the squad should leave with is a diagonal, not a straight line.

44 x 32 m • five attackers v a back four + keeper • the shape slopes towards the ball • 15 minutes



THE BACK LINE IS A SLOPE, NOT A STRAIGHT LINE



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SET UP

- 44 × 32 m with a **full goal and goalkeeper** at one end.
- **Five attackers** working across the top; **a back four** defending. The attackers may not go behind the back line until the ball does.
- Ten to twelve per station. With 14–16, rotate the back four every two minutes so everybody defends.
- Attackers score in the full goal; defenders score by winning it and passing to the coach.
- Coach beside the goal with a supply of balls.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 45 seconds.** Attackers pass among themselves and try to break in; back four defends.
2. **Minutes 0–3 — walking pace only.** Move the ball slowly from side to side and let the back four slide. Stop it three times and ask the far full-back: *how far in should you be?* The answer is always *further than you think*.
3. **Minute 3 — introduce the slope.** Show it once from behind the goal if you can: the near defender is highest, the far defender is deepest and narrowest. Ninety seconds.

4. **Minutes 5–10 — live at three-quarter pace.** Attackers may now attack. Defenders score 1 for winning the ball, **2 if they win it having kept the diagonal.**
5. **Minute 10 — add the switch.** The attackers must attempt a switch of play at least once per possession, so the back line has to slide properly rather than holding one position.
6. **Minutes 10–15 — full speed with rotation** every two minutes.

RULES & SCORING

- **Attackers score 1** in the full goal. **Defenders score 1** for winning it, **2** for winning it with the shape held.
- **The back four must stay connected** — never more than about 8 m between neighbours.
- The far defender must be **inside the width of the goal**. If they aren't when the ball is won, no bonus point.
- From minute 10: **at least one switch of play per possession.**
- Ball out or goal: restart from the coach to the attackers.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Sliding without crossing the feet, and staying side-on so the whole line can see the ball and the space behind.
Tactical	The far defender is the one everybody gets wrong. Under-12 defenders follow the player nearest them, so the far full-back stands on the far touchline marking a winger who is thirty metres from the ball — and the middle of the pitch is empty. Say it plainly: when the ball is over there, you come in here. The far winger is not your problem until the ball reaches him, and by then you will have slid across.
Physical	Continuous sideways movement. Less intense than it looks but tiring in the legs; rotate on schedule.
Psychological	Holding a shape is boring compared with tackling. The bonus point exists to make the boring thing scoreable.
Social	The back line has to talk constantly — <i>slide, tuck in, I'm in</i> . A silent back four is a broken back four.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
A flat back line	The most common error. <i>Who's the deepest? It should be whoever's furthest from the ball.</i>
The far defender marking the far winger	The single most valuable correction in the practice. Freeze it and show them the gap in the middle.
Gaps opening between defenders	<i>Eight metres. If he can play between you, you're too far apart.</i>
The line collapsing backwards as one	Sliding is sideways, not backwards. <i>Across, not back.</i>
Nobody pressing the ball at all	A shape with no pressure is just a queue. <i>Nearest one, go.</i>
The shape re-forming slowly after a switch	Time it. Three seconds is good; six is a goal conceded.

ASK THEM

- Who should be the deepest defender?
- Where should the far full-back be standing right now?
- What happens if you all stay flat?
- How far apart should you be?
- What do you shout when the ball is switched?

- Whose job is it to press when it comes to the middle?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six attackers against four.	Four attackers against four.
Two switches per possession.	Walking pace for the first five minutes.
A back three instead of four.	Mark the correct positions with poles and let the defenders find them.
The bonus point requires the far defender inside the six-yard width.	Narrower area (36 m) so the sliding distances are shorter.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

A visible diagonal rather than a flat line.

The far defender inside the width of the goal.

The line sliding within about three seconds of a switch.

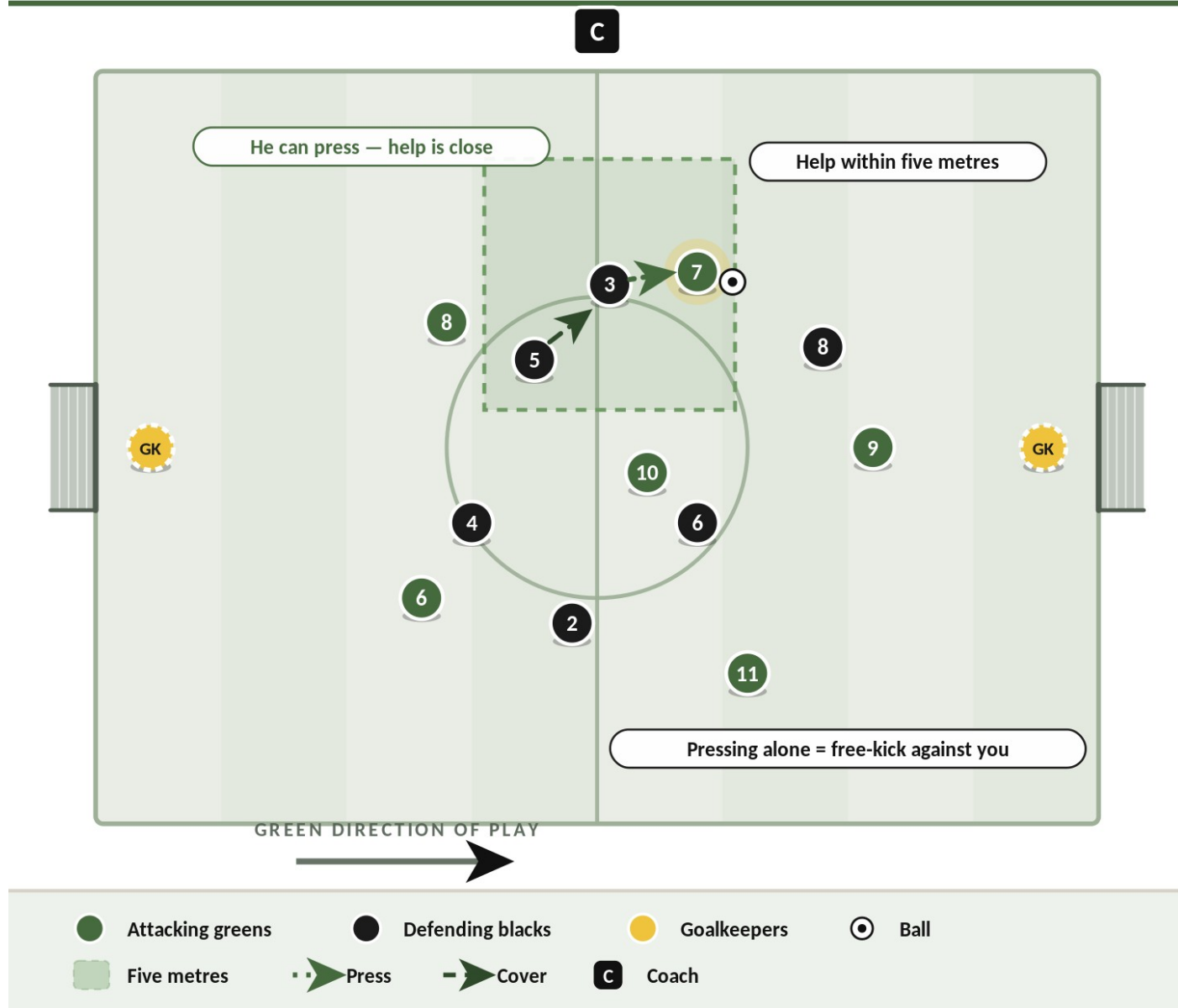
Constant talking across the back four.

Bonus points being scored regularly by minute 13.

25.3 NEVER ALONE (6 v 6 + GKs)

One rule, and it does all the coaching: you may only press the ball if a teammate is within five metres. Suddenly nobody can chase, everybody has to arrive in pairs, and the shape holds itself together without you saying a word.

40 x 30 m • you may only press if a teammate is within five metres • 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.
- **The five-metre rule applies to both teams** for the whole practice.
- Spare balls behind both goals.
- Coach on the halfway line judging the rule.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in one sentence:** *You can only go and press the ball if one of your own is within about five metres of you. Press on your own and it's a free-kick against you.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — be strict.** Give five or six free-kicks in the first three minutes. The rule teaches nothing if it is enforced loosely.
4. **Minute 5 — one question:** *what do you have to do before you can press?* You want *look for who's with me* — and once they say it, they will start doing it.
5. **Minutes 6–12 — score the defending.** 1 point for winning the ball with support within five metres; goals are 1. Announce both scores.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — remove the rule** but keep the point for supported wins. Watch whether players still arrive in pairs.

RULES & SCORING

- You may only press the ball if a teammate is within about five metres. Breach: indirect free-kick against you.
- A goal = 1 point. Winning the ball with support within five metres = 1 point.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- The coach's judgement on the five metres is final and immediate.
- Rule removed for the last three minutes, points retained.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Approach speed and body shape while pressing — all this theme material, now with a partner.
Tactical	Support distance is the whole game. Too far and the presser is alone; too close and one pass beats both of you. Five metres is roughly right at this age, and the players will find it themselves within ten minutes.
Physical	Less running than an ordinary game, because chasing is banned. A useful recovery practice inside a hard block.
Psychological	The rule frustrates the most enthusiastic defender in the squad for about four minutes. Once they realise they win the ball more often in pairs, the frustration turns into cooperation.
Social	The rule forces communication because you cannot press without checking who is with you. This is the most reliable talking practice in the whole curriculum.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Pressing alone out of habit	Free-kick, every time, without discussion.
Two defenders arriving at exactly the same place	<i>One presses, one covers. Not both.</i>
Nobody pressing at all because nobody is close	<i>Then move so somebody is. Get closer to each other.</i>
Players checking over their shoulder before pressing	Exactly right. Name it out loud so everybody copies it.
The support standing square rather than behind	<i>Behind and inside. Same as the warm-up.</i>
Pairs falling apart when the rule is removed	Note it — that is the honest measure of whether the habit formed.

ASK THEM

- What do you have to check before you press?
- How far away should your support be?
- What happens if your support is too close?
- Who presses and who covers when you both arrive?

- Is it easier or harder to win the ball in pairs?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three metres instead of five.	Seven metres.
Two teammates within five metres before pressing.	Warning instead of a free-kick for the first five breaches.
Bigger pitch (46 × 32 m) so the distances are harder to keep.	Smaller pitch (34 × 26 m) so everybody is naturally close.
A breach concedes a corner rather than a free-kick.	Apply the rule to one team only and swap at the halfway point.

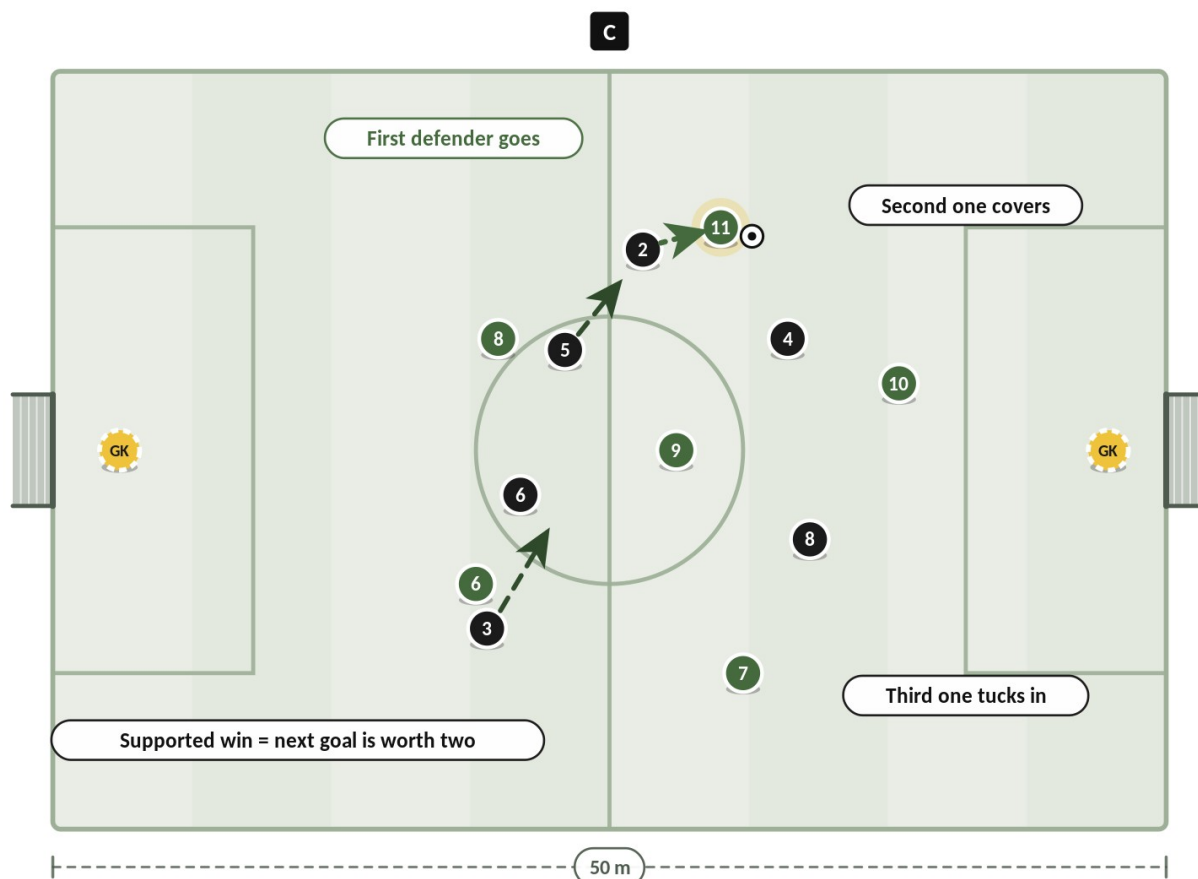
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Almost no free-kicks by minute 8.
 Defenders visibly checking for support before pressing.
 One pressing, one covering — not two pressing.
 Supported wins being scored regularly.
 Pairs surviving the removal of the rule.

25.4 THE UNIT MATCH (7 v 7)

The three jobs in a full match, with one reward attached: win the ball with support close by and your next goal counts double. The condition is deliberately gentle, because tonight the point is that the squad can already do this if they think about it.

50 x 34 m • win the ball with support close by and the next goal counts double • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 x 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.
- **No pressing restrictions** — only the reward.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Shape and teams in 60 seconds.
2. Explain in one sentence: *Win the ball with a teammate within five metres and your next goal is worth two.*
3. Minutes 0–6 — play and announce. Call *supported!* whenever it happens so the behaviour and the reward stay connected.

4. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *when we defend, how many of us should be doing the same job?* The answer is one, and it should now be obvious to them.
5. **Minutes 7-13 — add the naming rule:** the pressing player must shout *press* and the covering player must answer *cover*. It sounds artificial and it works.
6. **Final two minutes — everything removed.** Watch whether pairs still form.

RULES & SCORING

- **Winning the ball with a teammate within five metres makes your next goal worth 2.** Otherwise a goal is 1.
- From minute 7: **the presser calls press and the coverer answers cover.**
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- Free-kicks given strictly for fouls in the press.
- All conditions removed for the last two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Match-speed defending. Note whether this theme individual habits survive under fatigue.
Tactical	Every defensive shape is press, cover and balance repeated across the pitch. In a 2-3-1 the three midfielders are doing exactly what the three defenders did in the warm-up, twenty metres higher. Say that explicitly — it is the idea that turns a set of drills into a way of playing.
Physical	Standard match load. The squad has had a lighter session than the rest of this theme and should still be fresh.
Psychological	Defending well as a unit produces a very specific feeling — the game gets quieter and easier. If the squad notices it, say so out loud.
Social	The calling rule at minute 7 is the important part. A back line that talks is worth two that don't.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Herd chasing when a team goes behind	The classic under-12 collapse. <i>One goes. Where are the rest of you?</i>
The far side not tucking in	Freeze it once — the picture from the halfway line is always damning.
Midfielders pressing without the defenders sliding	The two lines must move together, or the gap between them becomes the whole game.
The calling being self-conscious	Join in yourself for a minute. They will follow.
Supported wins happening naturally by minute 10	Say so. Progress within a session is worth naming.
The final two minutes	Whatever survives with nothing scored for it is what they have learned.

ASK THEM

- How many of us should be doing the same job?
- Who's the first defender right now? How do you know?
- Where should the far side be?
- What do you shout when you go?
- Did it feel easier when we defended together?
- Where does this happen in midfield as well as at the back?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Three metres for the supported win.	Seven metres.
All three jobs must be called — press, cover, balance.	Drop the calling rule.
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m) so the sliding distances are real.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.
Unsupported presses concede a free-kick as well as scoring nothing.	Award the point immediately rather than doubling the next goal.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

One player pressing, not three.

The covering player behind and inside, consistently.

The far side tucking in without being told.

Audible calls by minute 10.

Supported wins in the last two minutes with nothing scored for them.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *What are the three jobs?* — press, cover, balance. Everybody says it together once.
- *How do you know which one you are?* Distance from the ball, not your position.
- *Where does the covering player stand?* Behind and inside.
- *What does the far player do?* Comes in, not across.
- *What's the worst thing we can do when we defend?* All go to the ball.
- **Name the best covering player tonight**, not the best tackler — and explain why you picked them.
- Finish with next time: *next time we do the same three jobs with the whole team at once, and we make ourselves small.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- One player presses the ball — never two, never five. - Somebody is always covering behind the presser. - The far-side player tucks in towards the middle.	- How many players go to the ball at the same time. Count the worst example. - Where the far full-back stands when the ball is on the opposite wing. - Whether the back line slides or stays flat when the ball is switched.	- <i>How many of us went to the ball?</i> - <i>Where were you when the ball was on the other side?</i> - <i>Who covered you when you pressed?</i>

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

- **Side-on shuffling.** Ten metres of side-stepping in a low stance without crossing your feet, ten times each direction. This is how a covering defender moves, and it is the movement most under-12 players have never practised.
- **Shadow sliding.** Mark five points in a line across a garden or hall about three metres apart. Have someone call a number; slide to it side-on, always facing the same way. Two minutes on, one minute off, five times.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only the defender furthest from the ball**. Notice how far infield they stand and how rarely they mark anybody. Bring one moment that surprised you.
- *Optional extra:* watch a goal conceded from a cross and work out which of the three jobs was missing. It is nearly always balance.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — defending as a team. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **26** The Compact Block; **27** Defending the Wide Areas; **28** Defending the Box.

A natural follow-on. Session 26 — The Compact Block. The same three jobs applied to the whole team at once. How short and how narrow a nine-a-side team should be, why the distance between the lines matters more than any individual position, and the single most useful defensive habit in youth football: making the pitch small when you haven't got the ball. It is the session that most changes how a team looks from the touchline.

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.