



SESSION 26 • STANDALONE PLAN

The Compact Block — Making the Pitch Small

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	26.1 The Square That Follows
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	26.2 The Block
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	26.3 The Band
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	26.4 Make It Small
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 25 the squad learned the three jobs. Tonight those jobs get a shape to live in. Watch an under-12 match and you will see two teams spread across the entire pitch — a striker on the halfway line, a goalkeeper on his own line, and forty metres of grass between them containing nobody. Every pass into that space is dangerous, and every one of them looks like a great pass when in fact it is simply an empty pitch. **The single most useful defensive idea in youth football is that you make the pitch small when you haven't got the ball.** A nine-a-side team defending well occupies a rectangle roughly twenty-five metres by twenty-five metres, which is about a fifth of the pitch, and the rest of the pitch is given away deliberately. The gaps that matter — between the defenders and the midfielders, and between the players in each line — are eight or nine metres, not twenty. **And the compact block is the thing that makes everything else in this curriculum work.** Counter-pressing needs three players close enough to hunt together. Press, cover and balance needs the covering player within five metres. A team that is spread out cannot do any of it, however well they understand it. This session does not add a new skill. It creates the conditions in which every other skill becomes possible.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Keep the whole team inside about 25 metres** from the deepest outfield player to the highest.
- **Hold eight to nine metres between the lines**, not twenty.
- **Slide as a unit** when the ball moves sideways, rather than individuals chasing.
- **Understand that the striker is the front of the block**, not a spectator waiting upfield.
- **Give away the space that doesn't matter** — the far touchline and the area behind the ball.

KIT LIST

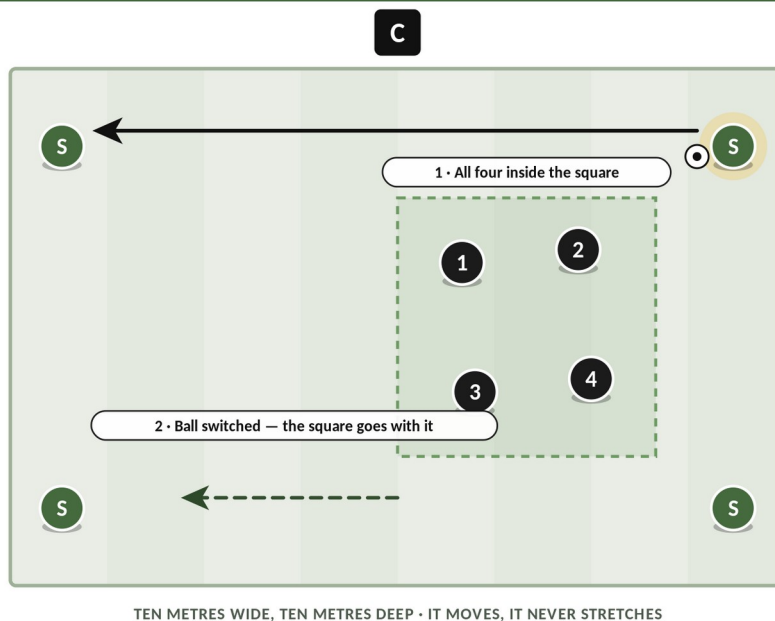
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. Take two minutes before the squad arrives to actually measure twenty-five metres and mark it. Almost every coach — and every player — overestimates it badly, and the whole session depends on the distance being real rather than approximate. One more thing worth doing if you possibly can: stand somewhere high, even a few steps up a bank or a stand, during 26.2 and 26.4. Compactness is the one thing that is invisible from the touchline and obvious from above. If a parent can film thirty seconds from height, show it to the squad next time.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	16	All practices
Flat markers	60	Squares, bands and pitch edges — this session needs a lot of marking
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	26.2, 26.3 and 26.4
Poles	6	Marking the band in 26.3 so the players can see it
Tape measure or measured strides	1	Worth marking 25 m accurately once

26.1 THE SQUARE THAT FOLLOWS

Four servers pass the ball around the outside; four defenders inside have to stay within a ten-metre square that moves towards the ball. The square is imaginary but the discipline is real, and it teaches sliding as a unit in eight minutes.

30 x 20 m • four servers outside, four defenders inside • stay inside the square, and the square follows the ball • 10 minutes



● Servers ● Defending four ● Ball ■ The block → Switch → The block slides C Coach

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SET UP

- 30 × 20 m with **four servers**, one on each side.
- **Four defenders inside**, working as a unit. With 14–16, run two areas or rotate a four in every ninety seconds.
- Mark an approximate **10 × 10 m square** in the middle with four cones — it is a reference, not a cage.
- Servers may pass to each other freely; defenders try to intercept.
- Coach outside with spare balls.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and passing in pairs. **Collect the Session 25 homework** — *how far infield did the far defender stand?*
- Minute 3 — walk it.** Servers pass slowly; the four defenders shuffle so that all four stay roughly within a ten-metre square that keeps the ball on its edge. Ninety seconds at walking pace.
- Minute 5 — jogging pace.** Servers pass more quickly, including across the middle. Defenders slide. Freeze it once and ask: *how far apart are you two?*
- Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *Why do we all move when the ball moves?* You want *because otherwise there's a gap.*
- Minutes 7–10 — competitive.** Servers score 1 for ten consecutive passes; defenders score 1 for an interception, **2 if all four were inside the square when they won it.**

RULES & SCORING

- **Four servers outside, four defenders inside.** Servers have two touches.
- **All four defenders must stay within about ten metres of each other.**

- **Servers score 1** for ten passes. **Defenders score 1** for an interception, **2** if the unit was together.
- Defenders may not leave the area.
- Rotate the four defenders every ninety seconds.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Sideways movement without crossing the feet; scanning to see the ball and your nearest teammate at the same time.
Tactical	The block moves as one object. If one defender chases and the other three stay, the shape is broken and the pass goes through the gap. The distance between defenders matters more than the position of any one of them.
Physical	Continuous low-intensity movement — a genuinely good warm-up for the legs and hips.
Psychological	Chasing the ball feels productive and sliding feels passive. The double point for a unit interception is what corrects that.
Social	Somebody has to call the slide. <i>Across! Across!</i> is enough.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
One defender chasing the ball	<i>You've left three behind. Come back and take them with you.</i>
The unit stretching to twenty metres	<i>Look at the gap between you two. Could I pass through it?</i>
Sliding too late	<i>Move when the ball moves, not when it arrives.</i>
Defenders standing still and reaching	<i>Feet, not arms.</i>
Servers making it too easy by passing slowly	Score them properly and it stops.

ASK THEM

- Why do all four of you move when the ball moves?
- How far apart should you be?
- What happens if one of you chases and three don't?
- Which pass are you trying to stop?
- Who calls the slide?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six servers, four defenders.	Four servers, five defenders.
Bigger area (36 × 24 m) so the sliding distances are longer.	Smaller area (24 × 16 m).
One-touch for the servers.	Walking pace for five minutes.
Eight-metre square instead of ten.	Mark the square with cones and let them stand in it before adding movement.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

All four moving when the ball moves.

Distances between defenders staying under about ten metres.

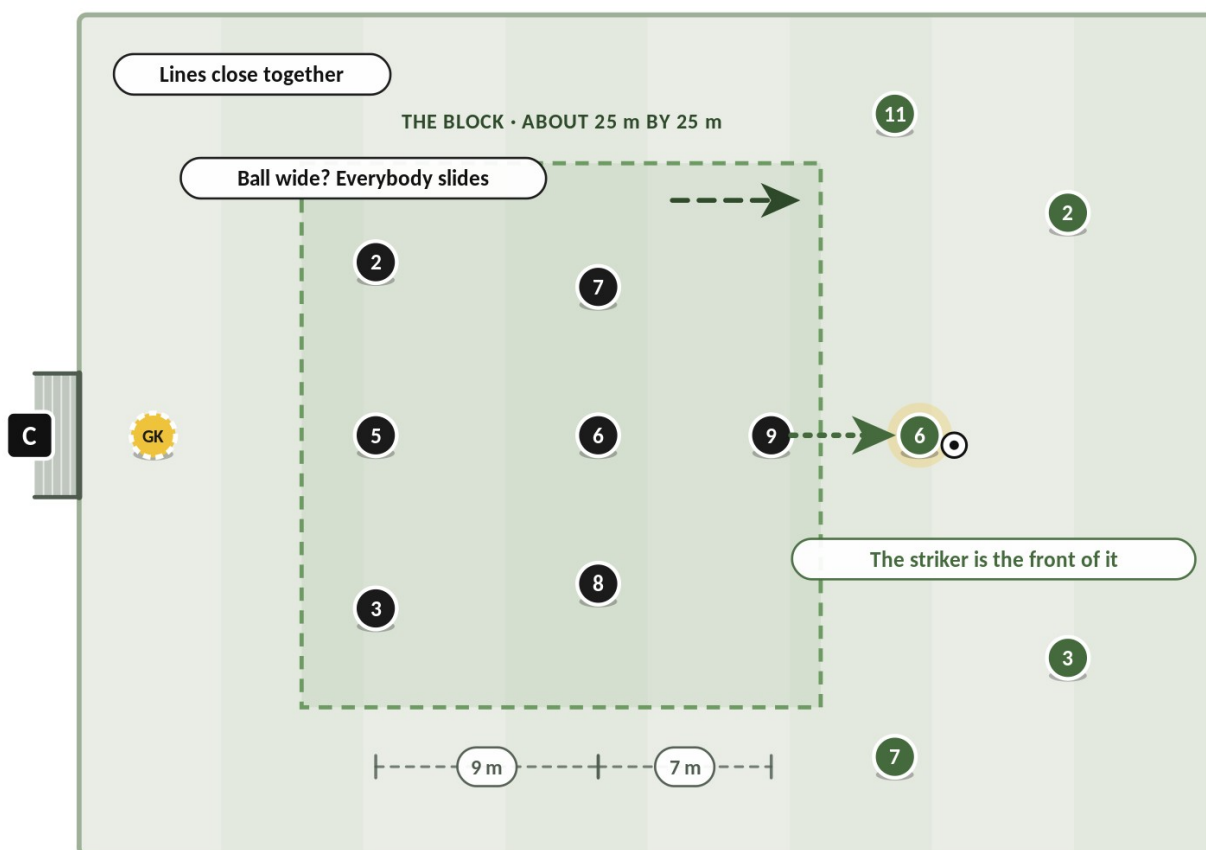
Interceptions coming from the unit rather than from lunges.

Somebody calling the slide.

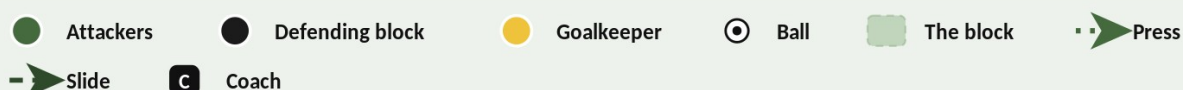
26.2 THE BLOCK

The whole defending shape at once. Seven attackers work the ball around a full defending unit that has to stay inside about twenty-five metres square. Slow at first, then real, until the shape holds itself together without you saying anything.

46 x 34 m • seven attackers v the whole defending shape • about 25 m by 25 m • 15 minutes



SHORT FROM FRONT TO BACK • NARROW FROM SIDE TO SIDE



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SET UP

- 46 x 34 m with a full goal and goalkeeper at one end.
- Seven attackers with the ball; seven defenders in a 3-3-1 block plus the goalkeeper.
- Mark the block boundary with markers the first time — a 21 x 22 m rectangle is close enough — then remove them at minute 8.
- Attackers score in the full goal; defenders score by winning the ball and passing to the coach.
- Coach behind the goal, or higher if there is anywhere to stand.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Set it up in 90 seconds. Walk the block into position and let them see the shape once, standing still.

2. **Minutes 0–4 — walking pace.** Attackers pass around; the block slides. Stop it three times and ask about distances: *how far from him? How far from the line in front?* Nine metres is the answer both times.
3. **Minute 4 — add the striker's job.** The single defender at the front is not waiting for a counter — he is the front of the block, and his job is to stop the easy forward pass. Sixty seconds.
4. **Minutes 5–10 — three-quarter pace, scored.** Attackers 1 for a goal. Defenders 1 for winning it, **2 if the whole block was inside the markers.**
5. **Minute 8 — remove the markers.** The shape should now hold from memory. This is the moment the practice either works or needs another walk-through.
6. **Minutes 10–15 — full speed with rotation.** Swap seven and seven at minute 12 so everybody defends.

RULES & SCORING

- **Attackers score 1** in the goal. **Defenders score 1** for winning it, **2** if the block was intact.
- **No more than about nine metres between lines** and about nine between players in a line.
- **The block may not be more than about 25 m from front to back.**
- Attackers must play through or around — no long balls over the top for the first eight minutes.
- Ball out or goal: restart from the coach to the attackers.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Sliding, turning to face the ball, and the front defender's angled approach that shuts off the inside pass.
Tactical	Nine metres between the lines is the number that matters. At twenty metres, a pass between the lines beats six players at once. At nine, the same pass is contested by two. And the space behind the block is given away on purpose — the goalkeeper covers it, and it is a far less dangerous space than the one in front of your own goal.
Physical	Constant small adjustments rather than sprinting. Tiring in a different way; rotate at minute 12.
Psychological	Defending in a block feels passive to players who like tackling. The point to make is that a good block means the ball keeps arriving in front of you rather than behind you.
Social	The block cannot hold without talking. Two calls are enough: <i>slide</i> and <i>step up</i> .

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The gap between defence and midfield growing	The single most important thing to watch. Freeze it and stand in the gap yourself — the picture is unanswerable.
The striker drifting upfield	<i>You're the front of the block, not a spectator. Come in.</i>
The block dropping deeper and deeper	Compact does not mean deep. <i>Stay where you are — they haven't beaten anyone yet.</i>
Individuals stepping out to press and leaving a hole	One goes, the rest slide with him. Same as in Session 25 .
The shape falling apart when the markers come off	Put them back for two minutes without comment and try again.
Attackers finding it too easy	Check the distances rather than blaming effort. It is almost always nine metres becoming eighteen.

ASK THEM

- How far should you be from the man in front of you?

- Where's the space we're giving them? Why is that all right?
- What's the striker's job when we haven't got the ball?
- What happens if the gap between the lines gets big?
- Should we get deeper or stay where we are?
- What do you shout when the ball goes wide?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Eight attackers against seven.	Six attackers against seven.
Long balls allowed from the start.	Leave the markers down for the whole practice.
A 20 × 20 m block instead of 25.	Walking pace for eight minutes.
The bonus point requires the block intact and the ball won in front of it.	Narrower area (38 m) so the sliding distances are shorter.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Around nine metres between the lines, sustained.

The whole unit sliding together.

The striker inside the block.

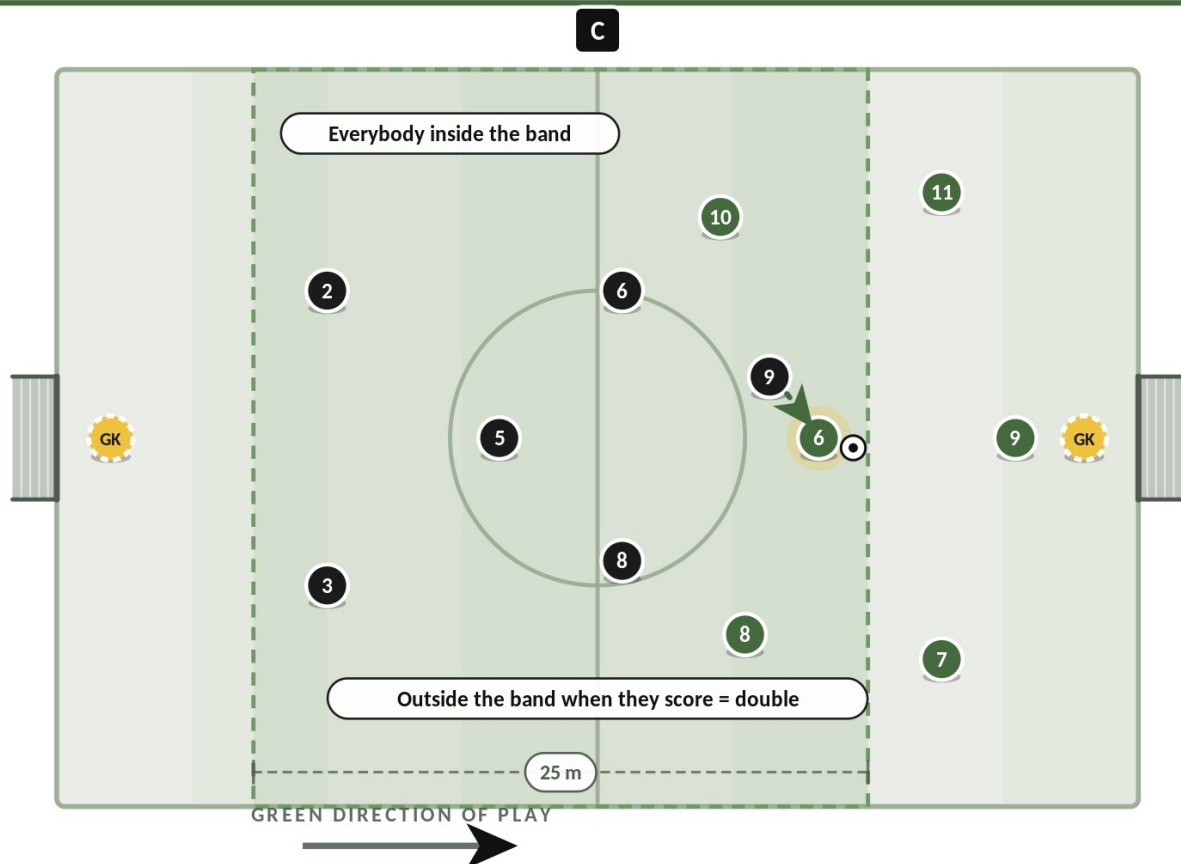
The shape surviving the removal of the markers.

Bonus points being scored regularly by minute 13.

26.3 THE BAND (6 v 6 + GKs)

A game with a visible band marked across the pitch. When you haven't got the ball, your whole team has to be inside it. Concede while somebody is outside and the goal counts double — which makes the straggler everybody's problem, not just yours.

44 x 30 m • when you haven't got the ball, your whole team fits in a 25 m band • 15 minutes



● Attacking greens ● Defending blacks ● Goalkeepers ● Ball The 25 m band
➡ Press C Coach

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SET UP

- One pitch, 44 × 30 m, both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- A 25 m band marked across the middle with poles or markers on both touchlines.
- 6 v 6 outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes every two minutes.
- The band applies to whichever team does not have the ball.
- Coach on the halfway line judging the band.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.
2. Explain in two sentences: *When you haven't got the ball, all six of you must be inside the band. If they score while one of you is outside it, the goal is worth two.*
3. Minutes 0–5 — be visible about it. Call out *outside!* by name when someone strays, without stopping play. Four or five of those and the habit starts.

4. **Minute 5 — one question:** *who's usually the one outside the band?* It is nearly always the striker, and it is worth them hearing it from their teammates rather than from you.
5. **Minutes 6–12 — competition.** Play properly with the doubling live. Announce every doubled goal loudly and identify — without blame — which player was outside.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — remove the band markers** but keep the rule. Watch whether the shape holds without the visual reference.

RULES & SCORING

- The team without the ball must have all six outfield players inside the 25 m band.
- A goal scored while any defender is outside the band counts double.
- The band moves with play — it is the space between your deepest and highest player, judged by the coach.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- Markers removed for the last three minutes, rule retained.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Nothing new — this is entirely positional.
Tactical	The striker who stays upfield costs his team the whole midfield. Six defenders in a band is a wall; five defenders and a hopeful striker is a wall with a door in it. The trade-off is real and worth stating: you lose the quick counter, and you gain a team that is genuinely hard to play through.
Physical	Demanding for the forwards, who now have to run back forty metres and then forward again. Substitute them more often than the defenders.
Psychological	Strikers hate this rule. Give them the counter-attacking reward from this theme alongside it if morale dips — the two conditions work well together.
Social	The doubling makes the whole team care about one player's position, which produces both good communication and, if you are not careful, blame. Watch the tone.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The striker outside the band	Expected and constant. <i>Come in — you can go again when we win it.</i>
The back line dropping to the goal line	The band has a back edge too. <i>You're too deep — push up.</i>
Players inside the band but not connected	Being inside a band and being compact are different things. Watch the gaps as well as the edges.
Teammates blaming the straggler	Address it immediately: <i>he's running more than any of you.</i>
The shape holding once the markers come off	The honest measure. Say so.
A team going long to avoid the work	Legitimate, and worth naming as a real tactic rather than a cop-out.

ASK THEM

- Who's usually the one outside the band?
- What does it cost us when one player stays out?
- How deep is too deep?
- Are we inside the band and still stretched? What's the difference?
- What do we get in return for all this running?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
A 20 m band.	A 30 m band.
Both teams must be inside a band, in and out of possession.	Five players inside rather than all six.
Bigger pitch (50 × 32 m).	Keep the markers down for the whole practice.
A goal conceded while stretched counts triple.	Smaller pitch (38 × 26 m) so the band covers most of it anyway.

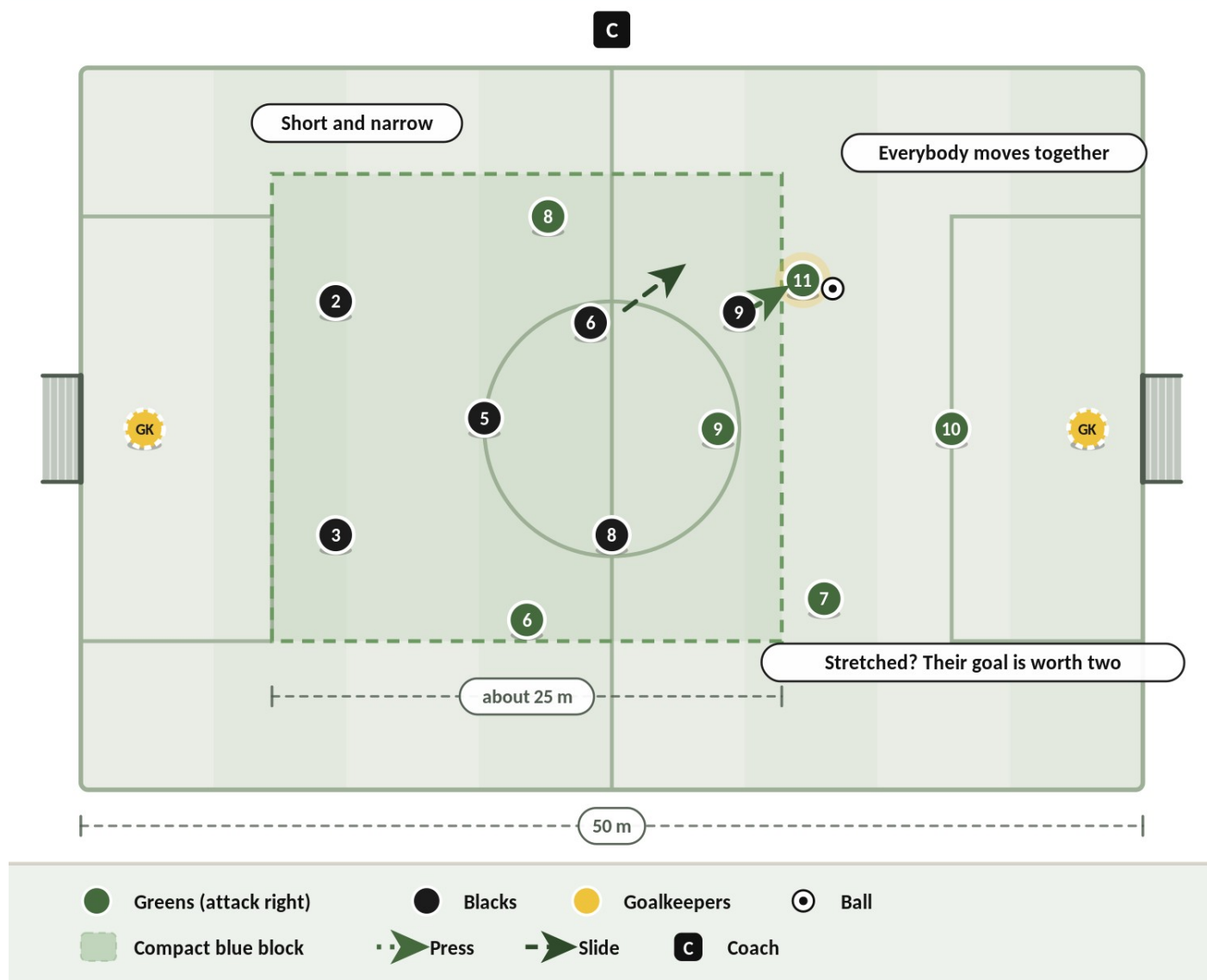
IT'S WORKING WHEN

All six inside the band most of the time by minute 8.
Few doubled goals in the second half of the practice.
The back line neither too deep nor too high.
The shape surviving without the markers.
No blaming.

26.4 MAKE IT SMALL (7 v 7)

A full match with one measurement attached: if the opposition score while your team is stretched beyond about twenty-five metres, the goal counts double. No zones, no markers — just you, watching the distance between the highest and deepest player at the moment the ball goes in.

50 x 34 m • concede while stretched and it 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 marked band.** You judge the distance by eye, and you should tell them that.
- Coach on the halfway line, or higher if there is anywhere to stand.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Shape and teams in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in one sentence:** *If they score while you're stretched — more than about twenty-five metres from your deepest to your highest — it counts double.*
3. **Minutes 0–6 — play and judge.** When a doubled goal happens, say so calmly and describe the picture: *your striker was on the halfway line and your back three were on the six-yard box.*
4. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *what does being compact stop them doing?* Guide towards *playing through us*, and point out that they have been forcing the opposition wide all evening without noticing.
5. **Minutes 7–13 — add the counter-balance:** a team that wins the ball while compact gets a double for their next goal too. This stops the session becoming purely defensive and connects it to this theme.
6. **Final two minutes — all conditions removed.** Watch the shape.

RULES & SCORING

- A goal conceded while stretched beyond about 25 m counts double.
- From minute 7: **winning the ball while compact makes your next goal worth 2.**
- The coach's judgement is by eye, immediate, and final.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- All conditions removed for the last two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Match-speed sliding and stepping up. Note whether the back line steps forward together when the ball is cleared.
Tactical	Compactness is what makes the pitch feel small to the opposition and big to you. A team that holds twenty-five metres forces every attack into the wide areas, which is exactly where you want it — and which is what Session 27 is about. Say that now so the block has a through-line.
Physical	The hardest physical demand of the block, because compactness means the whole team moves every time the ball does. Substitute generously.
Psychological	This is the session where a squad first sees itself as a team rather than eleven — or nine — individuals. If you get one moment where the whole shape slides together, stop the game and let them look at it.
Social	<i>Squeeze!</i> is the word most teams settle on. Whatever they choose, insist on it.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The distance from front to back at the moment a goal is conceded	The measurement that drives the whole practice.
The back line failing to step up after a clearance	<i>Out! Out!</i> The most valuable single moment of compactness in a match.
The block getting deeper as they tire	Expected in the last five minutes. Name it: <i>this is when it's hardest.</i>
Attacks being forced wide	Point it out the first time it happens — the squad will not notice it themselves.
The gap between the lines rather than just the overall distance	A team can be twenty-five metres deep and still have a hole in the middle.
The final two minutes	Whatever survives with nothing scored for it is what they have learned.

ASK THEM

- How far apart were we when they scored?
- What does being compact stop them doing?
- Where are we making them play instead?
- When should the back line step up?
- What's our word for it?
- Did it feel like a smaller pitch?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Twenty metres instead of twenty-five.	Thirty metres.
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m) so compactness requires real running.	Mark the band so the judgement is visible rather than by eye.
Both conditions plus the five-metre press rule from Session 25.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.
A stretched concession counts triple.	Drop the second condition and keep only the defensive one.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Around twenty-five metres held for most of the match.

The back line stepping up after clearances.

Attacks being pushed into the wide areas.

A visible unit slide at least once that you can stop and show them.

The shape surviving the final two minutes.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *How big should we be when we haven't got the ball?* — about twenty-five metres, and they should be able to point to it.
- *How far between the lines?* Nine metres, not twenty.
- *What space are we giving away? Why is that all right?*
- *What's the striker's job when we're defending?*
- *Where are we making them play?* Wide — and that is on purpose.
- **If you got a moment where the whole shape moved together, describe it back to them.** Compactness is invisible to the players and this is the only way they will see it.
- Finish with next time: *we've made them play wide — next time we deal with what happens when they get there.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Twenty-five metres from our deepest to our highest whenever we haven't got the ball. - The striker comes back inside the block. - The back line steps up together after every clearance.	- The distance from front to back at the moment each goal is conceded. Write it down. - Whether the block slides or individuals chase when the ball is switched. - Where the opposition end up attacking — through the middle, or wide?	- <i>How big were we when they scored?</i> - <i>Did we step up after the clearances?</i> - <i>Where did we make them play?</i>

HOMEWORK — "TWENTY-FIVE METRES" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Learn the distance.** Measure twenty-five metres once, properly, and then pace it out until you can judge it by eye. Do the same with nine metres. A defender who cannot estimate these distances cannot hold a shape, and almost nobody can estimate them without practice.
- **Lateral shuffling.** Twenty seconds of side-stepping in a low stance, twenty seconds rest, ten times through. This is the movement a compact block is made of, and it is the one that fails first when players tire.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only the distance between the highest and deepest outfield player of the team without the ball**. Notice how small it is, and notice what happens in the moments it stretches. Bring one example of a goal conceded because a team was stretched.
- *Optional extra:* watch the same team's striker when they are defending. He is almost never where a twelve-year-old expects him to be.

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: **25** Press, Cover and Balance; **27** Defending the Wide Areas; **28** Defending the Box.

A natural follow-on. Session 27 — Defending the Wide Areas. A compact block does not stop attacks; it decides where they happen, and the answer is almost always out wide. So next time is about what happens when the ball arrives there: showing the winger down the line rather than inside, defending the cross, the near-post and far-post jobs in the box, and the second ball that decides more under-12 matches than anything else.

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.