



SESSION 28 • STANDALONE PLAN

Defending the Box — The Last Thirty Metres

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	28.1 Get In the Way
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	28.2 The Last Defender
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	28.3 No Cheap Goals
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	28.4 The Defending Exam
0:55 – 1:00	5	■ Reflection	Review, with the players

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

Everything in this theme has been about stopping the ball reaching the last thirty metres. Tonight is about what to do when it gets there anyway, because it always does. Three ideas, and all three are about restraint rather than aggression.

The first is the block. Getting in the way of a shot is a save, and it is a skill: close the distance fast, then take small steps and arrive balanced and big. Most under-12 defenders do the opposite — they amble in and then throw themselves at the last moment. **The second is the ball played in behind.** The instinct is to turn and sprint at the ball, which loses a yard and invites a shove. The habit is to run alongside, shoulder to shoulder, steering the attacker away from the goal and towards the corner flag while the goalkeeper decides whether to come. **The third is the one that decides matches: do not go to ground in your own box.** A slide tackle in the penalty area is a penalty about a third of the time even when it is clean, and there is no under-12 defender alive whose tackling is good enough for those odds. Standing up is not timid. It is arithmetic.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Block shots properly** — close fast, arrive balanced, front foot.
- **Defend the ball in behind** by running alongside rather than at the ball.
- **Steer attackers away from goal** rather than trying to win it back immediately.

! Stay on your feet in the box. No slides, ever.

- **Communicate with the goalkeeper** — away, or mine.

KIT LIST

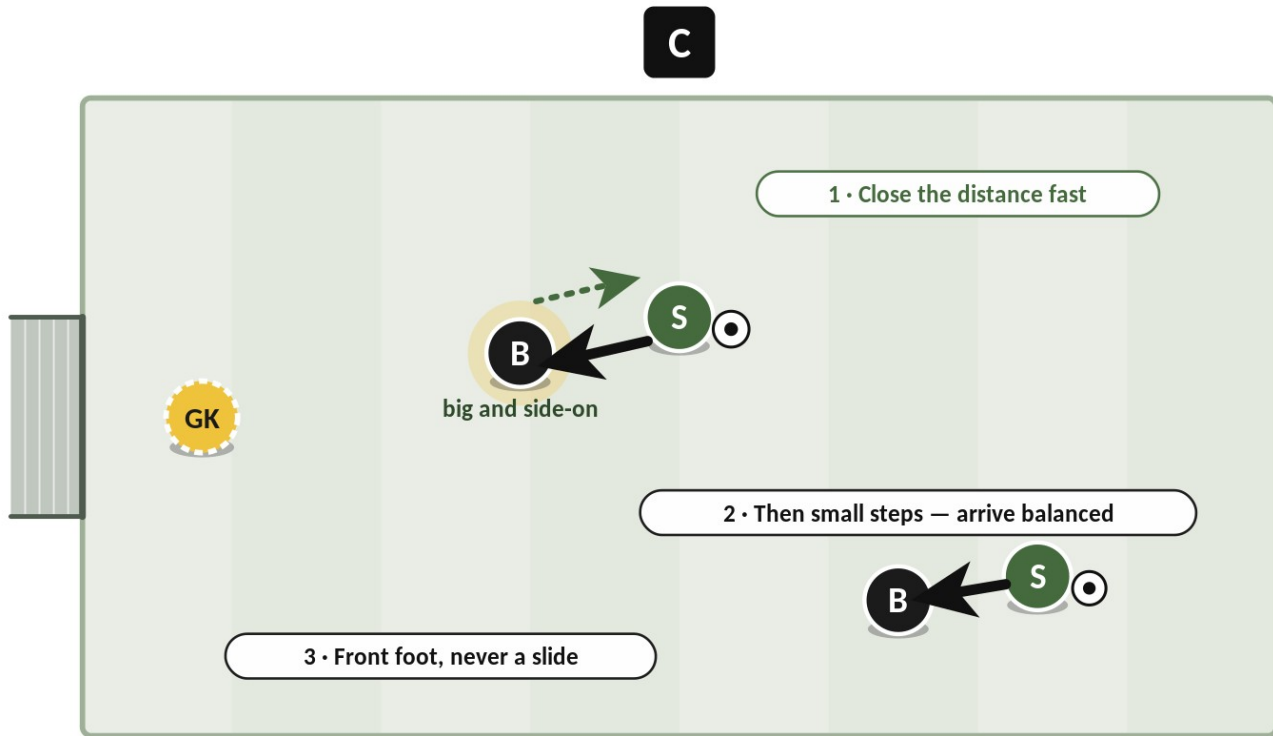
Ground needed: about 55 × 40 m. Protect the last five minutes for the review page — it closes a month of the least glamorous and most valuable work of the season. One safety note that matters tonight more than any other session: **be strict about slide tackles from the first minute**. If you let one go in the warm-up you will spend the rest of the session arguing about it, and somebody will get hurt. The rule is simple and absolute — nobody goes to ground, in any practice, for sixty minutes.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	20	Shooting practices need volume
Flat markers	52	Boxes, channels and pitch edges
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	All practices
Goalkeeper gloves	2 pairs	Both keepers work hard tonight
Notebook	1	For the exam match — counting, not coaching

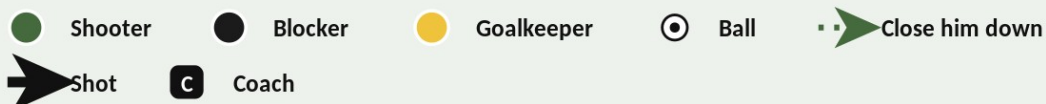
28.1 GET IN THE WAY

Blocking as a technique rather than an accident. Close the distance fast, then small steps, then big and side-on with the front foot forward. Twenty repetitions each and it starts to look deliberate.

30 x 16 m • pairs • close the distance, then make yourself big • 10 minutes



A BLOCK IS A SAVE • A SLIDE IS A PENALTY



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SET UP

- 30 × 16 m with a **full goal and goalkeeper** at one end.
- **Pairs — a shooter and a blocker.** Shooter starts 15 m from goal; blocker starts 4 m in front of the goal.
- Two or three pairs working at once, queueing behind.
- Balls at each shooting position, plenty spare.
- Coach beside the goal.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and striking gently at the goal. **Collect the Session 27 homework** — *how many wingers got inside the full-back?*
- Minute 3 — walk the technique once.** Sprint four steps, then three small ones, then set: feet apart, side-on, front foot forward, hands in. Ninety seconds.
- Minutes 4–7 — live.** Shooter has three touches maximum and must shoot. Blocker closes and blocks. **No sliding, from the first repetition.**

4. Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds. *Why do you slow down at the end? You want so I don't run past him.*
5. Minutes 7–10 — scored. Blocker 1 for a block, 1 for forcing a shot wide. Shooter 1 for a goal. Swap every repetition.

RULES & SCORING

- Shooter has **three touches** and must shoot within five seconds.
- Blocker scores **1** for a block or for forcing the shot wide; **shooter scores 1** for a goal.

! No sliding. A slide scores nothing and the shooter gets a free shot from 10 m.

- Blockers must start behind a marker and may only move when the shooter's first touch happens.
- Swap roles every repetition.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The deceleration is the skill. Sprint, then short steps, then set — side-on, front foot towards the ball, hands tucked in. Feet apart and low, not upright and narrow.
Tactical	Distance is everything. A blocker two metres away blocks; a blocker five metres away is a spectator with a good view. And the angle matters as much as the distance — arriving between the ball and the goal, not beside it.
Physical	Repeated short sprints and decelerations. Genuinely good warm-up loading.
Psychological	Blocking a shot hurts sometimes, and players who have been hit once become reluctant. Use a size 4 ball at proper pressure, keep the shooting distance sensible, and never let anyone shoot at close range at a face.
Social	Pair players sensibly by size for this one. A very small player blocking a very big striker's shots is not a fair or useful exercise.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Sliding	Stop it every single time, from the first one. No exceptions tonight.
Arriving at full speed and running past	<i>Fast, then slow. Four big steps, three small ones.</i>
Turning away from the ball	The most common instinct and the most dangerous. <i>Face it. Side-on, not back-on.</i>
Blocking from too far away	<i>Two metres. He can't shoot through you from there.</i>
Shooters blasting from 15 m every time	<i>Three touches. Get closer and pick your spot — it makes the practice harder for the blocker, which is the point.</i>

ASK THEM

- Why do you slow down at the end?
- How close do you need to be?
- Where should you be — between him and the goal, or beside him?
- What happens if you turn your back?

! Why do we never slide?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Two shooters against one blocker.	Shooter starts further out (20 m).
Shooter starts closer (10 m).	Blocker starts closer to the shooter.

HARDER	EASIER
One touch and shoot so the blocker has less time.	Shots along the ground only.
Blocker starts further back.	Walk the technique twice more.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Deliberate deceleration before the block.

Side-on, front-foot body shape.

Blocks happening regularly by minute 8.

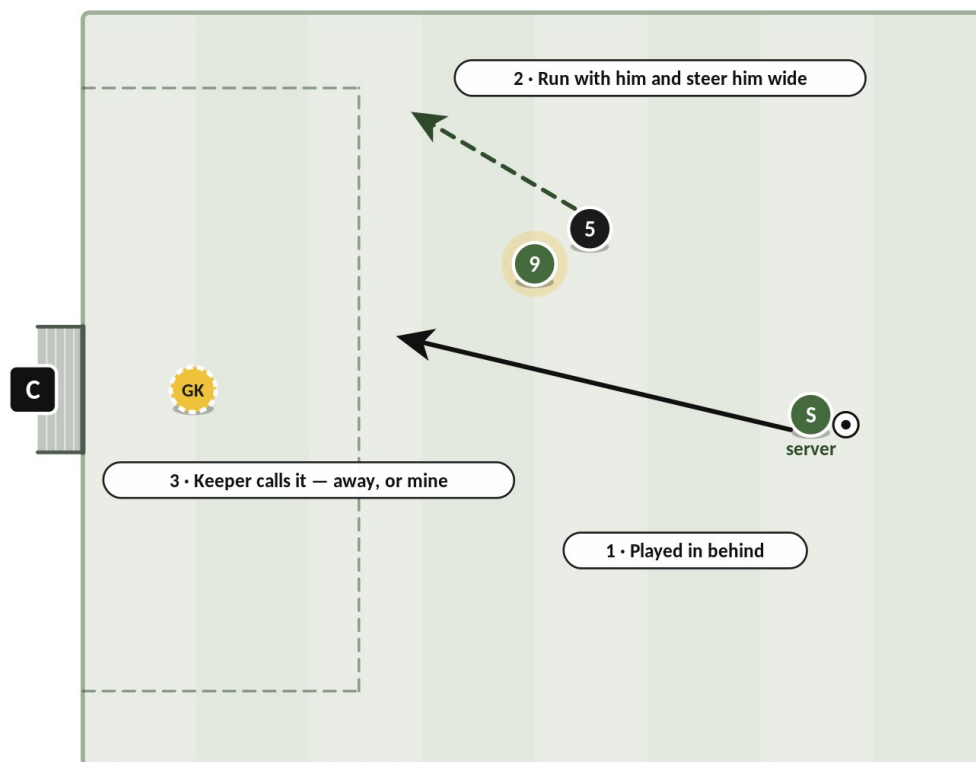
No slides at all.

Nobody turning their back.

28.2 THE LAST DEFENDER

The ball played in behind, which is how most goals against a compact block arrive. The habit is to run alongside rather than at the ball, steer the attacker away from goal, and let the goalkeeper make the decision out loud.

36 x 30 m • balls played in behind • run with him, steer him away, let the keeper decide • 15 minutes



NEVER DIVE IN • NEVER TURN YOUR BACK • SEND HIM WHERE THE GOAL ISN'T

● Attackers ● Defenders ● Goalkeeper ● Ball → Ball in behind
 → Run with him / steer him C Coach

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SET UP

- 36 × 30 m with a **full goal and goalkeeper** and the penalty area marked.
- A **server** plays balls in behind from 25 m; **one attacker and one defender** start level, 8 m in front of the server.
- Ten to twelve players; queue two attackers and two defenders, rotating every repetition.
- Serve alternately to the left and right sides so both are practised.
- Coach beside the server.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 45 seconds.** Server plays the ball in behind; attacker and defender both go.
2. **Minutes 0–4 — no coaching.** Almost every defender will sprint at the ball, get there second, and end up chasing. Let it happen four or five times.
3. **Minute 4 — walk the alternative.** Run *with* him — shoulder to shoulder, on the goal side, steering him towards the corner rather than the penalty spot. Ninety seconds.

4. **Minutes 5–10 — live, scored.** Attacker 1 for a shot on target, 2 for a goal. Defender 1 for steering him wide of the box, 2 if the goalkeeper collects it.
5. **Minute 10 — add the goalkeeper's call.** The keeper must shout *away* or *mine* on every repetition. The defender must obey it.
6. **Minutes 10–15 — full speed with rotation** every repetition so everybody does both jobs at least three times.

RULES & SCORING

- **Attacker scores 1** for a shot on target, **2** for a goal. **Defender scores 1** for steering him wide, **2** if the keeper collects.
- ! **No slide tackles.** A slide concedes a goal to the attacker automatically.
- **The goalkeeper must call** *away* or *mine* every repetition from minute 10, and the defender must obey.
- The defender may not touch the ball until it has bounced once or the attacker has touched it — this forces the running technique rather than an interception.
- Alternate the serve left and right.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Running shoulder to shoulder while looking at the ball; turning the hips to steer without using the arms. And for the keeper: the decision to come, and the volume of the call.
Tactical	Do not try to win it — try to make it worthless. An attacker forced to the byline with the keeper set has almost no chance of scoring. A defender who lunges to win it has a one-in-three chance of conceding a penalty and a two-in-three chance of being beaten. And the goalkeeper is the only player who can see everything — which is why the call belongs to them.
Physical	Repeated long sprints. Give a real break at minute 10 and rotate the keepers there too.
Psychological	Being run in behind is frightening and defenders panic. The instruction <i>you don't have to win it</i> is calming and true, and it is worth repeating.
Social	This practice is the best communication training a goalkeeper gets all season. If the keeper is quiet, stand behind the goal and make the call with them for three repetitions.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Sprinting at the ball rather than with the man	The whole practice. <i>Run with him, not at it.</i>
Turning the back on the attacker	<i>See him and the ball. Shoulder to shoulder.</i>
Diving in as a last resort	Automatic goal. Be unbending.
Steering towards the penalty spot rather than the corner	<i>Ask: where do you want him to end up?</i>
Silent goalkeepers	The single biggest improvement available to most U12 teams and it costs nothing.
Attackers taking it too wide themselves	Coach them too — a good attacker cuts back inside, and the defender needs that problem.

ASK THEM

- Do you have to win the ball?
- Where do you want him to end up?
- What happens if you turn your back?
- Goalkeeper — what's your call?
- Why is a slide the worst option here?

- Which side should you be on?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Two attackers against one defender.	Defender starts a yard in front.
Server plays the ball earlier, so the defender starts a yard behind.	Slower, higher serves.
Attackers may cut back inside.	Walk it through twice more.
The defender must also stop the cutback, not just the shot.	Remove the goalkeeper call until minute 12.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Defenders running alongside rather than at the ball.

Attackers being steered wide of the box.

The goalkeeper calling every repetition.

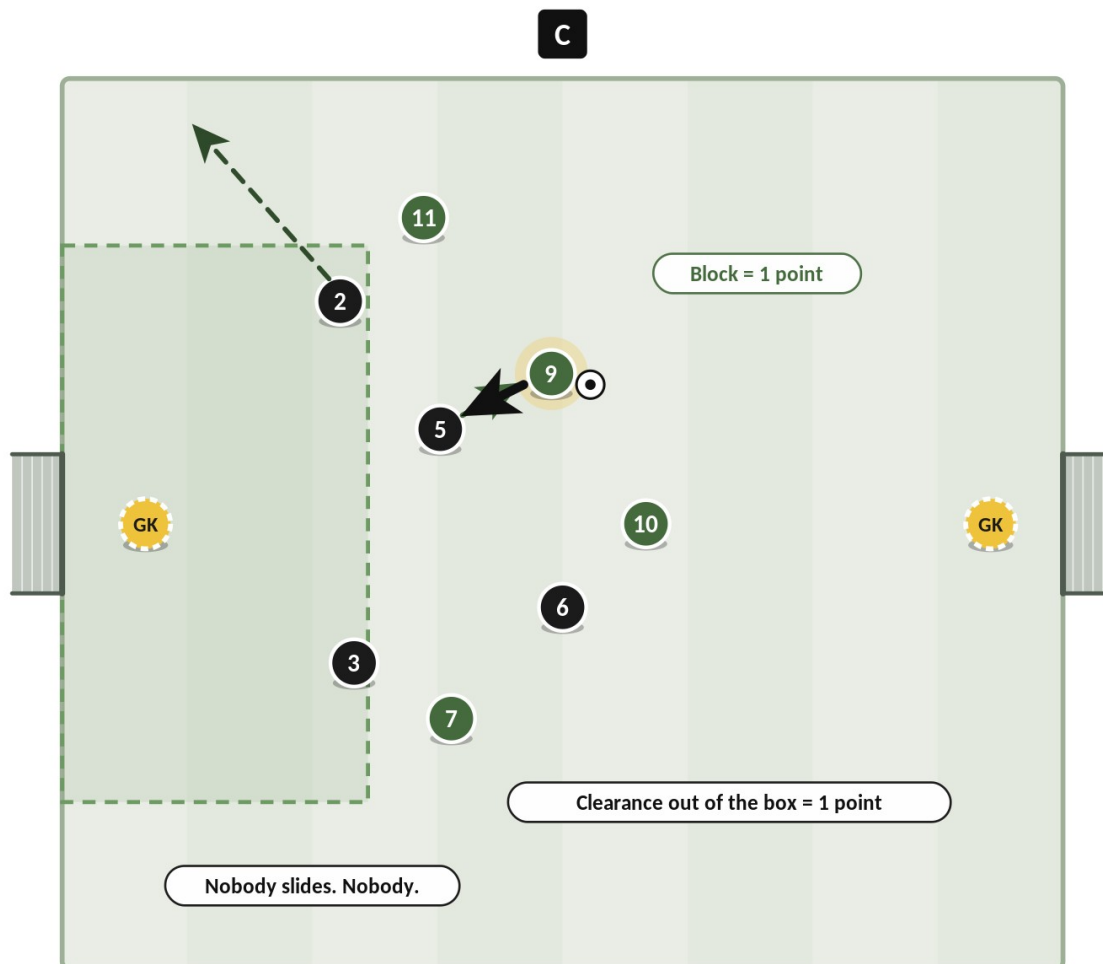
No slides.

Defenders staying calm when beaten for pace.

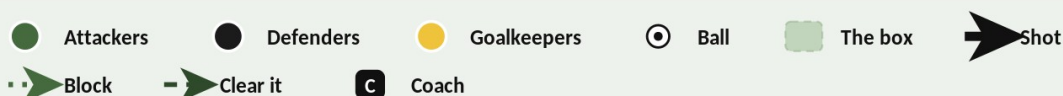
28.3 NO CHEAP GOALS (5 v 5 + GKs)

A short, wide pitch so that almost everything happens near a box. Blocks and clearances score, which turns fifteen minutes of defending into something worth competing for rather than something to survive.

36 x 32 m • everything happens near the box • blocks and clearances score too • 15 minutes



BLOCKS AND CLEARANCES SCORE • SO DEFENDING IS WORTH DOING



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SET UP

- **36 x 32 m** — deliberately short and wide — with **full goals and goalkeepers** at both ends.
- **Boxes marked** at both ends.
- 5 v 5 outfield plus two goalkeepers (12). With 14–16, roll substitutes every ninety seconds.
- Spare balls behind both goals for fast restarts.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain the scoring in one sentence:** *Goals are 2. A block is 1. A clearance out of the box is 1. And nobody slides — a slide is a penalty, every time, no argument.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — award the defensive points loudly and by name.** The whole design depends on defending feeling like scoring.
4. **Minute 5 — one question:** *how many of their shots have actually reached the goalkeeper?* The answer is usually far fewer than they think, and it is a good moment.
5. **Minutes 6–12 — competition** with both scoreboards visible. Give a penalty for every slide without discussion.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — remove the defensive scoring.** Watch whether the blocks keep happening.

RULES & SCORING

- A goal = 2 points. A block = 1 point. A clearance out of the box = 1 point.

! No slide tackles anywhere. A slide in the box is a penalty; outside it, a free-kick and a point to the other team.

- Short pitch, fast restarts, keepers within six seconds.
- No offside.
- Defensive scoring removed for the last three minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Blocking under real pressure and clearing with the right surface — laces or forehead, high and wide, not a toe-poke across your own box.
Tactical	A shot blocked is exactly as valuable as a shot saved, and far more likely. In a busy box, the defender is nearly always closer to the shooter than the goalkeeper is. And clearing across your own box is how good teams concede — high, wide, and away, every time.
Physical	Very intense because the pitch is short. Substitute every ninety seconds and mean it.
Psychological	This is the practice where defenders enjoy defending. Watch for the player who has spent the season wanting to be a striker suddenly throwing themselves in front of shots.
Social	Both goalkeepers should be organising constantly. Reward it verbally more than anything else tonight.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Sliding	Penalty. Every time. The consistency is the coaching.
Clearances across the box	<i>Across your own goal is how they score. High, wide, away.</i>
Defenders standing off shots	<i>You're two metres away. Get in the way.</i>
Blocks with the face or chest rather than the front foot	Technique, and worth stopping for once.
Nobody picking up rebounds	The second ball again — same lesson as in Session 27 .
Blocks disappearing when the scoring is removed	The honest measure. Note it for the review.

ASK THEM

- How many of their shots reached the keeper?
- Where should a clearance go?
- Who's closer to the shot — you or the goalkeeper?
- Why is a slide a bad idea in there?
- Who's picking up the rebounds?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six attackers against five defenders.	Bigger pitch (44 × 32 m) so there is time to set.
A block is worth 2.	4 v 4 so the box is less crowded.
Even shorter pitch (30 × 32 m).	Keep the defensive scoring for the full fifteen minutes.
Clearances must reach a teammate to score.	Shots from outside the box only.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Regular blocks, deliberately made.

Clearances going high, wide and away.

No slides at all.

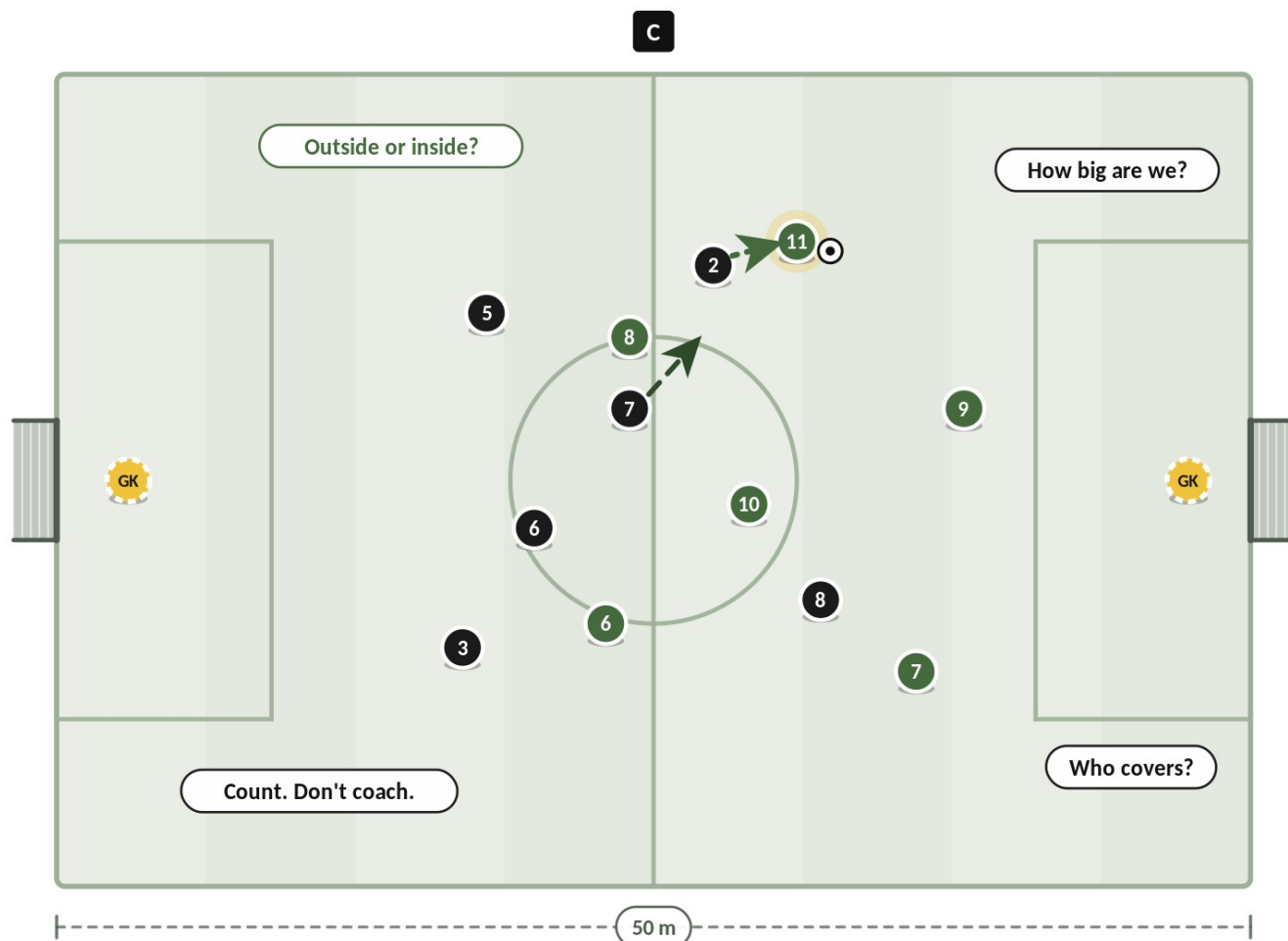
Rebounds being picked up.

Blocks continuing after the scoring is removed.

28.4 THE DEFENDING EXAM (7 v 7)

No conditions, no coaching, a notebook and seven minutes of silence. Four things to count, all of them from this theme, and none of them anything the squad can fake once you stop talking.

50 x 34 m • no conditions, no coaching for seven minutes • just count • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 × 34 m with full-size goals and marked boxes. **No conditions.**
- 7 v 7 including goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, play 8v8 or roll subs every 90 seconds.
- 2-3-1 shape assigned and then left alone.
- Four spare balls behind each goal.
- **Coach on the halfway line with a notebook.**

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Keep the bibs and teams. Shape in 30 seconds.**
2. **Say one sentence:** *Normal football. I'm not going to say anything for a while.* Then stop talking.

3. **Minutes 0–7 — complete silence.** Count four things: how many players go to the ball at once; whether the far side tucks in; the distance from front to back when the ball is in your half; and slides in the box.
4. **Minute 7 — drinks break.** Read the four numbers out flatly. One question: *what do those numbers tell you?*
5. **Minutes 8–13 — play on.** Two individual interventions maximum, and only on what they identified themselves.
6. **Final two minutes — free play,** then straight into the review page while they are still on the pitch.

RULES & SCORING

- **No conditions.** Goals are goals.
- Keepers restart within ten seconds. No offside.
- **The coach says nothing for the first seven minutes.**
- Two individual interventions maximum after the break.
- **Slide tackles still banned** — the one rule that stays.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Whatever survives. Note it rather than fixing it.
Tactical	The four this theme markers: one presser not three, the far side tucked in, about twenty-five metres front to back, and nobody on the floor in the box.
Physical	End of a hard block. Expect quality to fall and let it.
Psychological	Watch the body language when they defend well for a spell. A team that has learned to defend together looks different — calmer, closer, quieter.
Social	Listen for who organises. In defending, it is almost always either the goalkeeper or a centre-back, and that player is your captain.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
How many go to the ball	The single number that summarises this theme. One is right; three is a habit that has not gone.
The far-side player	In, or marking a winger thirty metres from the ball?
Front-to-back distance when defending	
Slides in the box	Should be zero. If it is not, that is next time's first conversation.
Who organises the defence without being asked.	
The last two minutes	Everything you need for the review is in them.

ASK THEM

- What do those four numbers tell you?
- How many of us went to the ball?
- How big were we?
- Where was the far side?
- Are we harder to play against than we were a month ago? Honestly?
- Which of the four is our weakest?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Both teams press high from every restart.	Reinstate the five-metre press rule for one team.
Smaller pitch (44 × 30 m).	Bigger pitch (55 × 38 m).
Two-touch for both teams.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling subs.
Swap all positions at the halfway point.	Reduce to ten minutes and give the time to the review.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

One presser, not three, most of the time.

The far side tucking in without being told.

Around twenty-five metres front to back.

Zero slides in the box.

Somebody organising audibly.

A full page of notes.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- This is the **end of this theme** — take the full five minutes.
- *What are the three jobs?* Press, cover, balance.
- *How big are we when we defend?* About twenty-five metres.
- *Which way do we send the winger?* Outside.
- *What are the four jobs in the box?*
- *What do we never do in our own box?* Slide. Make them say it.
- **Name every player once** and give each of them one thing that has improved since you ran Session 25.
- Finish with what's coming: *last month of the season — we work out how to win matches, and then we start getting ready for eleven-a-side.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- No slide tackles in our box. Not one, all match. - Blocks rather than standing off when they shoot. - Run alongside, not at the ball, when they play in behind.	- How many shots we block compared with how many reach the keeper. - What happens when the ball goes in behind — do we panic or do we run with them? - Whether the goalkeeper calls away or mine.	- <i>How many did we block?</i> - <i>Did anyone go to ground in the box?</i> - <i>What did the keeper say when they got in behind?</i>

HOMEWORK — "STANDING UP" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Deceleration.** Sprint 8 m, then stop under control in three short steps and hold a low, side-on stance for two seconds. Twenty repetitions. This is the whole blocking technique and it needs no ball and no partner.
- **Shoulder to shoulder.** With a family member or friend, jog side by side for 15 m while staying in contact at the shoulder without using your hands. Ten repetitions each side. It feels silly and it is exactly what defending a ball in behind requires.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only what defenders do inside their own box**. Count the slide tackles. It will be nearly zero, and that is the lesson.
- *Optional extra:* watch a goalkeeper for five minutes and count how many times they shout at their defenders. Then decide whether ours does it enough.

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; **26** The Compact Block; **27** Defending the Wide Areas.

A natural follow-on. Session 29 — Attacking Principles and Finishing. Once a squad can keep the ball, build from the back, react to turnovers and defend as a unit, these sessions put the ball in the net: penetration and the final third, creating and finishing chances, attacking overloads, and the composure in front of goal that no amount of tactical work can replace. After that, the season closes with match intelligence and the step up to eleven-a-side.

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.

Review — where the squad stands on defending as a team

Complete this within a day of Session 28. This theme is the one that makes a team hard to play against, and the honest measure is the count from Session 28.4 — how many players went to the ball at once when nobody was watching for it.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE SEEING

AREA	WHAT YOU SHOULD NOW BE SEEING
Press, cover, balance	Three jobs, three players, decided by distance from the ball rather than by position. If the squad can name their own job mid-game, this has worked.
The far-side player	Tucked in towards the middle rather than marking a winger thirty metres away. The most visible improvement of the block and the easiest to check.
Compactness	About twenty-five metres front to back, nine between the lines. Compare a photo or clip from September if you have one — the difference is usually startling.
Wide defending	Full-backs showing the winger down the line, and a second defender shutting the inside pass.
The box	Four jobs filled on crosses — near post, middle, far post, edge — and somebody picking up the second ball.
Discipline	No slides in the box. This is a behaviour, not a skill, and it either exists or it doesn't.
Vocabulary	Press, cover, balance, slide, squeeze, show him the line, near post, edge, away, mine. Forty-two phrases across the whole set.

SQUAD AUDIT — FILL THIS IN

QUESTION	PLAYERS
How many players went to the ball at once in Session 28.4? Give the worst number and the usual number.	
How big were we front to back when defending in the exam match?	
Where does the far-side player stand now, compared with Session 25?	
Which full-back is most reliable at showing the winger outside? Which needs the most work?	
Who filled the edge of the box on crosses? Anybody?	
How many slide tackles in the box across the whole block? It should be zero.	
Who organises the defence vocally — the goalkeeper, a centre-back, or nobody?	
Has the goalkeeper started calling <i>away</i> and <i>mine</i> ? If not, that is the first job of this theme.	

IF THE SQUAD HAS THIS COMFORTABLY

- **Keep one defensive condition live in every session for the rest of the season.** The five-metre press rule is the most useful single one.
- **Start naming the defensive organiser before matches.** Somebody has to own it, and telling them makes it real.

- **Introduce the offside line** if your league plays it at 9v9 — a compact block that also steps up is a genuinely difficult team to score against.
- **Give the goalkeeper a defensive coaching job:** one thing to shout, every match, until it is automatic.
- **Film thirty seconds from height** during a match and show it to the squad. Compactness is the one thing they cannot see from inside it.

IF THE SQUAD IS STRUGGLING

- **Drop back to press and cover only.** Two jobs done well beat three done vaguely, and balance is the one that can wait.
- **Keep the block markers down** in practices for another month. There is no rule that says the scaffolding must come off on schedule.
- **Work on compactness alone.** One number — twenty-five metres — is worth more than any refinement of it.
- **Check the physical side.** Defending as a unit means everybody moves every time the ball does, and a squad that cannot hold a block may be tired rather than unwilling.
- **Address the sideline.** Defending sessions produce shouting from adults more than any other topic, and *get stuck in!* from a parent undoes an hour of *stay on your feet*.
- **Be honest about slides.** If they are still happening, stop everything and spend a full session on it. It is a safety issue as much as a tactical one.

CARRY THIS FORWARD

The three habits worth carrying into anything you run next: one presser rather than three, twenty-five metres front to back, and nobody on the floor in the box.

The players-to-the-ball count is your ongoing measure. It should sit at one, occasionally two, and never at four.

Where this sits. Every phase of the game is now covered — the individual, the duel, the partnership, possession, the build-up, transitions, and defending. This theme is about putting the ball in the net, and this theme is about being ready for what comes next.