



SESSION 29 • STANDALONE PLAN

Penetration — Three Ways Into the Final Third

Attacking and finishing • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	29.1 Through the Gap
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	29.2 Three Ways In
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	29.3 The Cutback Game
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	29.4 Get In the Box
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

A squad that has done the earlier work can keep the ball, build from the back, react to turnovers and defend as a unit. What is often still missing at this point in a season is the last bit: turning all of that into goals. This theme is about the final third, and it opens with the only question that matters there — **how do we actually get in?** There are three answers and no others. **Pass in behind them. Carry the ball past somebody. Get to the byline and cut it back.** Every goal your squad scores for the rest of their lives will begin with one of those three. Two things are worth saying to the players tonight, both slightly against instinct. The first is that **the run makes the pass, not the other way round** — young players wait to be found and then complain about the pass, when the truth is that a runner who goes early creates a pass that did not exist a second earlier. The second is that **the cutback is the best ball in football.** A pass rolled backwards from the byline arrives with the defenders facing the wrong way, the goalkeeper committed, and the finisher running on to it. It looks unspectacular and it is the highest-scoring pass in the game.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Run before the pass exists**, rather than waiting to be found.
- **Pass into space, not to feet**, when playing in behind.
- **Recognise the three ways in** and choose between them.
- **Get to the byline and cut it back** rather than crossing early.
- **Arrive in the box late** — three attackers in there when the ball comes.

KIT LIST

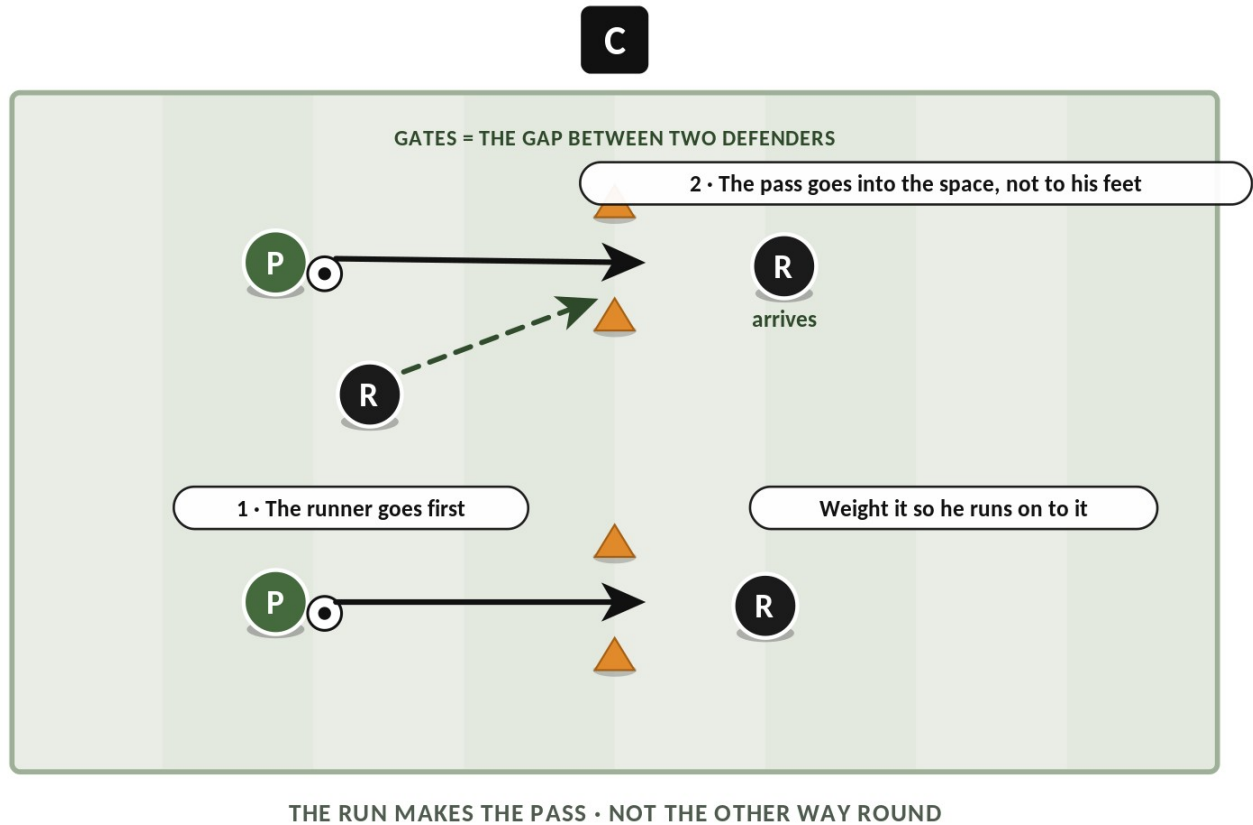
Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. After a month of defending, the squad will be delighted to be scoring goals again — use that energy rather than fighting it, and let the session be loud. One coaching note that governs the whole block: **at this age, praise the pass and the run more than the finish**. Finishing improves slowly and mostly through repetition; creating chances improves quickly and through understanding. A squad that creates six chances and scores one is in far better shape than a squad that creates one and scores it.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	20	Finishing practices need volume
Flat markers	54	Gates, zones, boxes and pitch edges
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	29.2, 29.3 and 29.4
Poles	4	Gates in the warm-up
Goalkeeper gloves	2 pairs	Rotate keepers

29.1 THROUGH THE GAP

Threes working through a gate that stands for the gap between two defenders. The runner goes first and the pass follows — which is the opposite of what most under-12 players do, and the whole point of the exercise.

32 x 18 m • threes • the runner goes first, the pass goes second • 10 minutes



● Passer ● Runner ● Ball ▲ The gap ➡ Pass in behind
 ➡ Run beyond **C** Coach

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SET UP

- 32 × 18 m with **two gates** of 3 m in the middle, made from poles or cones.
- **Groups of three:** a passer, a runner, and one recovering to the start.
- Two groups per gate.
- One ball per group.
- Coach between the gates.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and striking. **Collect the Session 28 homework** — *how many slide tackles did the professionals make in their own box?*
- Minute 3 — walk it.** Runner sets off, passer waits half a second, then plays the ball **into the space beyond the gate**, not at the runner's feet. Ninety seconds.
- Minutes 4–7 — live at pace.** The runner must be moving before the ball is played, and the ball must go through the gate.

4. **Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *Who decides when the pass happens?* You want *the runner*, and it is a surprising answer to most of them.
5. **Minutes 7-10 — competitive.** 1 point for a pass through the gate that the runner reaches in stride; nothing if the runner has to stop or check back.

RULES & SCORING

- **The runner must be moving before the ball is played.** A pass to a stationary player scores nothing.
- **The ball must go through the gate** and be reached in stride.
- **1 point** per successful repetition; nothing if the runner has to slow down.
- Rotate roles every repetition.
- Both feet — alternate which foot passes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Weight and timing. The pass is firm enough to beat the imagined defender and soft enough that the runner does not have to sprint out of play to reach it.
Tactical	The run creates the pass. Say it, then prove it: ask a passer to find a pass while nobody is running, and let them fail for ten seconds. It is a more convincing argument than any explanation.
Physical	Repeated accelerations with recovery. A good warm-up load.
Psychological	Runners who go early and do not get the ball feel foolish. Praise the run itself, loudly, the first four or five times it happens without a pass.
Social	A look or a call has to happen. The best pairs will develop a signal within five minutes.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The runner waiting to be found	The whole practice. <i>Go first. Make him find you.</i>
Passes to feet	<i>Into the space. He's running — pass where he's going to be.</i>
Passes too heavy	<i>He's got to reach it in stride, not chase it.</i>
The passer taking too long	<i>Half a second. Any longer and the gap has gone.</i>
Runners going too early and arriving before the ball	Also a fault — mention the timing rather than just the willingness.

ASK THEM

- Who decides when the pass happens?
- Where does the pass go — to him, or in front of him?
- What happens if nobody runs?
- How hard should it be?
- When exactly should the runner go?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Narrower gates (2 m).	Wider gates (4 m).
One touch for the passer.	Unlimited touches.

HARDER	EASIER
A defender in the gate who may not tackle but must be beaten.	Shorter distances.
Two runners, one ball — the passer chooses.	Runner starts already moving on the coach's call.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Runners moving before the pass, consistently.

Passes going into space rather than to feet.

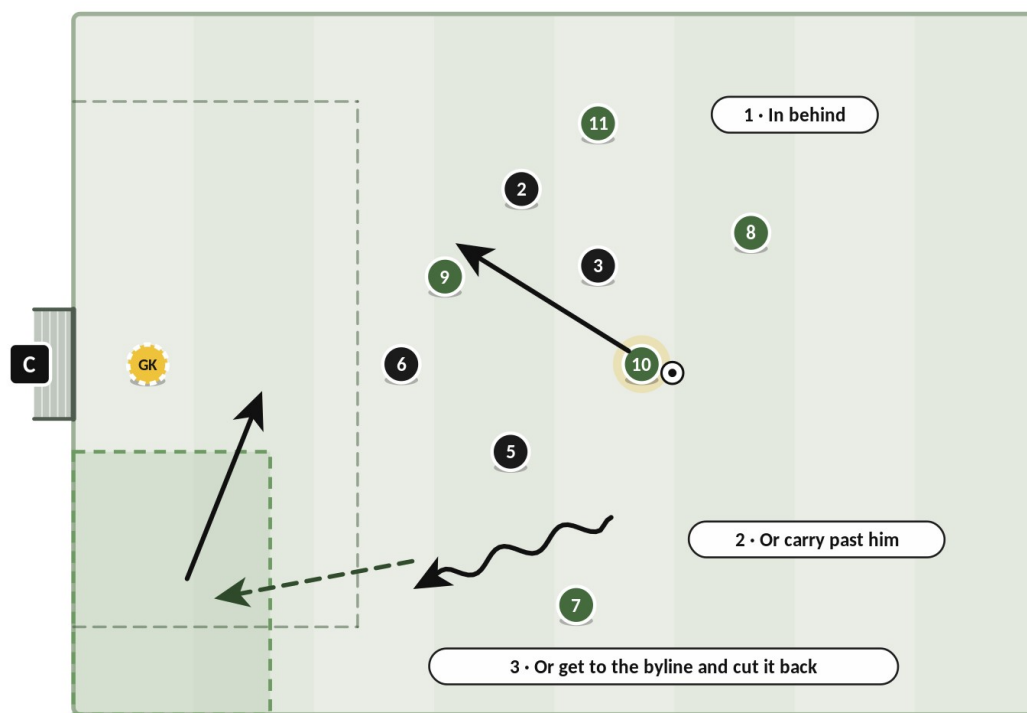
Balls reached in stride.

Somebody signalling.

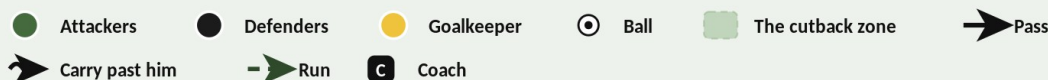
29.2 THREE WAYS IN

Five against four and a goalkeeper in the final third, with three named ways to get in and a different score for each. Deliberately overloaded, because the point tonight is repetition of the picture rather than a fair contest.

44 x 32 m • five v four + keeper in the final third • in behind, past him, or the cutback • 15 minutes



IN BEHIND • PAST HIM • CUT IT BACK — THE CUTBACK IS THE BEST ONE



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SET UP

- 44 × 32 m with a **full goal and goalkeeper** at one end and the penalty area marked.
- **Five attackers against four defenders**, ball starting 30 m from goal.
- **Mark a cutback zone** — the area beside the box near the byline — so the third route has a visible target.
- Ten to twelve per station. Rotate the defenders every two minutes so nobody defends for the whole practice.
- Coach behind the goal with a supply of balls.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 60 seconds.** Name the three routes and write the scores where everybody can see them: **in behind = 1, past him = 1, cutback = 2.**
2. **Minutes 0–4 — free play, no coaching.** Watch which route they default to. It is almost always the shot from distance, which is not one of the three.
3. **Minute 4 — one freeze.** Stop it at the moment the ball reaches the final third and ask the player on the ball: *which of the three is on?* Then ask two teammates: *what are you doing to help him?*
4. **Minutes 5–11 — scored properly.** Announce the totals by route at minute 8.

5. Minute 11 — add the condition that makes the point: shots from outside the box no longer count. Now the three routes are the only routes.

6. Minutes 11–15 — full speed with rotation.

RULES & SCORING

- In behind = 1 point. Carrying past a defender and scoring = 1 point. A goal from a cutback = 2 points.
- From minute 11: goals from outside the box do not count.
- Defenders may not leave the marked final third.
- Each attack lasts twelve seconds, then the next ball comes in.
- Rotate two attackers into defence every two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The through pass with the correct weight; the carry with the ball out of the feet; and the cutback itself, which must be firm and along the ground.
Tactical	Choosing between the three is the skill. In behind needs space behind the defence. Carrying needs a one-against-one you can win. The cutback needs somebody to get to the byline first. And the reason the cutback scores double is that it genuinely is twice as valuable — defenders are facing their own goal, the keeper is committed, and the finisher is running forwards.
Physical	Repeated forward sprints in the attacking third. Rotate as scheduled.
Psychological	This is the enjoyable end of the season. Let the celebrations happen and keep the tempo up.
Social	The cutback only exists if somebody sprints to the byline knowing they will not be the one who scores. Name that player every time.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Shooting from 25 m	The default at this age. The minute-11 condition fixes it faster than talking.
Nobody running in behind	<i>If nobody goes, there's no pass. Who's going?</i>
Crossing from deep instead of reaching the byline	<i>Two more steps and it's a cutback instead of a hopeful ball.</i>
The cutback going to nobody	<i>Somebody has to be arriving. Who?</i>
One player trying to do all three	<i>Which one is on? Pick it and commit.</i>
Defenders standing off	Coach them too — an easy defence makes a worthless practice.

ASK THEM

- Which of the three is on right now?
- What do the other four do to help?
- Why is the cutback worth two?
- How do you know when to run in behind?
- Who's arriving for the cutback?
- What did we score most of? Why?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Five against five.	Five against three.

HARDER	EASIER
Eight seconds per attack.	Fifteen seconds per attack.
Two-touch for the attackers.	Remove the outside-the-box condition.
Only cutbacks count for the last three minutes.	Walk each of the three routes once before starting.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

All three routes appearing across the practice.

Runners going before the pass.

Players reaching the byline before crossing.

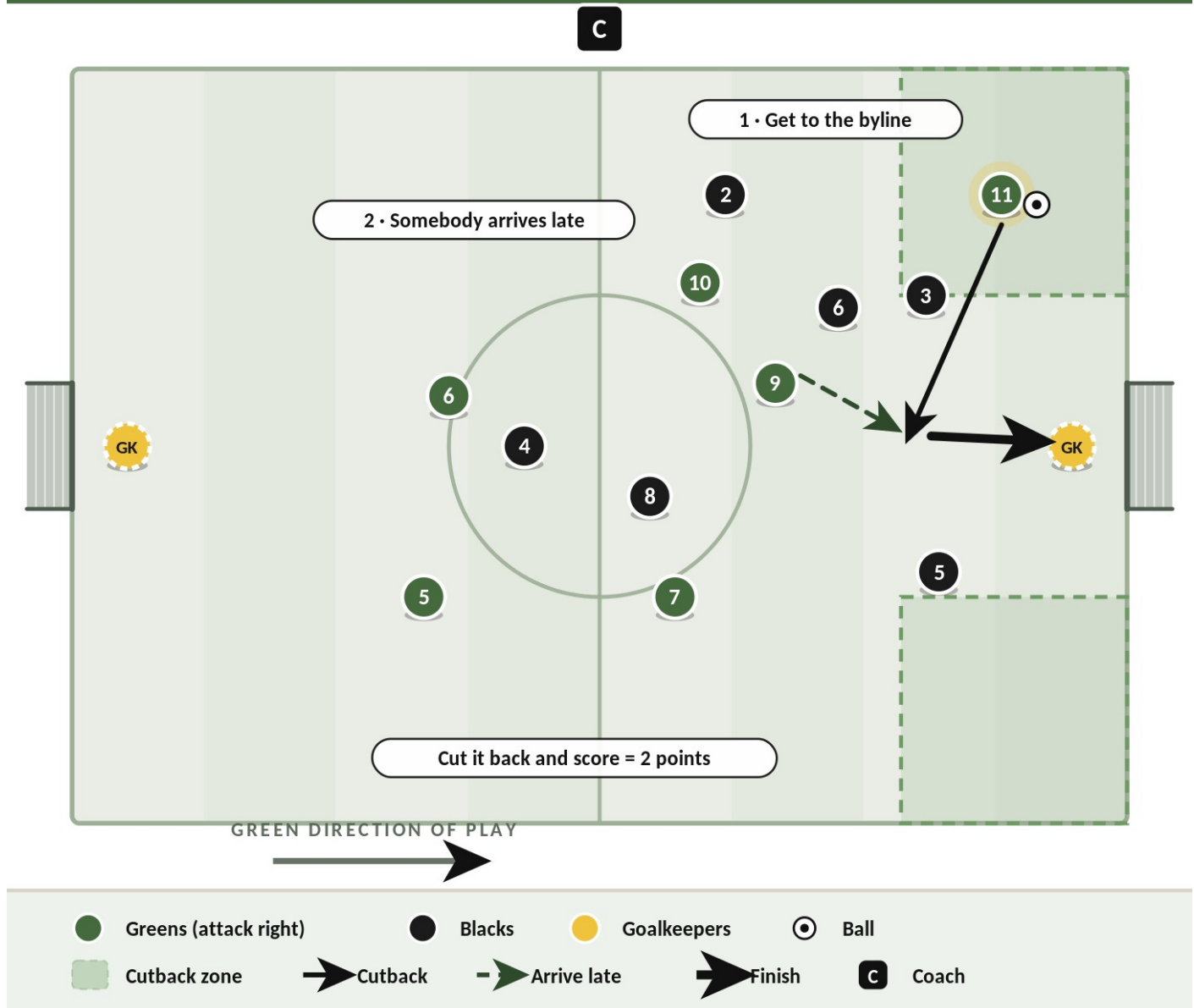
Somebody arriving for the cutback.

Few shots from distance by minute 13.

29.3 THE CUTBACK GAME (6 v 6 + GKs)

A normal game with the cutback doubled and a marked zone to aim for. Fifteen minutes of players deliberately running to the byline instead of shooting from wherever they happen to be.

42 x 30 m • a goal from a cutback counts double • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- One pitch, **42 × 30 m**, both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- **Cutback zones marked** — a 9 × 9 m box beside each goal, near the byline, on both sides.
- 6 v 6 outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes every two minutes.
- Spare balls behind both goals.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in one sentence:** *Goals are 1. A goal from a ball cut back out of that zone is 2.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — play and announce every double loudly.** Name both players — the one who got to the byline and the one who finished.
4. **Minute 5 — one question:** *what's the difference between a cross and a cutback? You want a cutback goes backwards, and they're all facing the wrong way.*
5. **Minutes 6–12 — add the arrival rule:** a cutback goal only counts double if two attackers were inside the box when the ball was played. This stops the lone striker waiting on the penalty spot.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — free play,** scoring retained, and see how many doubles come naturally.

RULES & SCORING

- A goal = 1 point. A goal from a cutback played out of the marked zone = 2 points.
- From minute 6: **the double requires two attackers inside the box** when the cutback is played.
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- Cutbacks must be along the ground.
- Rolling substitutions at natural stoppages.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The cutback must be firm, along the ground and behind the near-post defender. A soft cutback is a goalkeeper's easiest ball.
Tactical	A cross goes forwards; a cutback goes backwards. That single difference is why one is defended comfortably and the other is not. And the second attacker is what turns the cutback from a good idea into a goal — one runner is marked, two are not.
Physical	Wide players will run a long way. Substitute them more often than the central players.
Psychological	The player who sprints to the byline gets none of the glory. Give it to them explicitly, by name, every time.
Social	Watch for the pair who work it out together and start looking for each other. That partnership is worth naming and keeping on the same side on Saturday.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Crossing early instead of reaching the byline	<i>Two more steps.</i> It is almost always two more steps.
Cutbacks lifted off the ground	<i>Along the floor. Every time.</i>
One attacker in the box	The arrival rule at minute 6 will find it.
Everybody sprinting to the near post	<i>One near, one back. Don't all go to the same place.</i>
The finisher arriving too early and having to stop	Timing again — the same lesson as the warm-up, twenty metres higher.
Doubles drying up in the free-play spell	Note it. It usually means the running has become tiring rather than that the understanding has gone.

ASK THEM

- What's the difference between a cross and a cutback?
- How many of us need to be in the box?
- Where should the cutback go — near post or penalty spot?
- Who's getting to the byline?

- Why don't we all run to the same place?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Only cutback goals count.	Larger cutback zones.
Three attackers required in the box for the double.	Remove the arrival rule.
Bigger pitch (48 × 32 m) so reaching the byline costs more.	Smaller pitch (36 × 28 m) so the byline is closer.
Cutbacks must be first time.	Allow lifted cutbacks.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Players consistently reaching the byline.

Cutbacks along the ground and behind the first defender.

Two attackers arriving in the box.

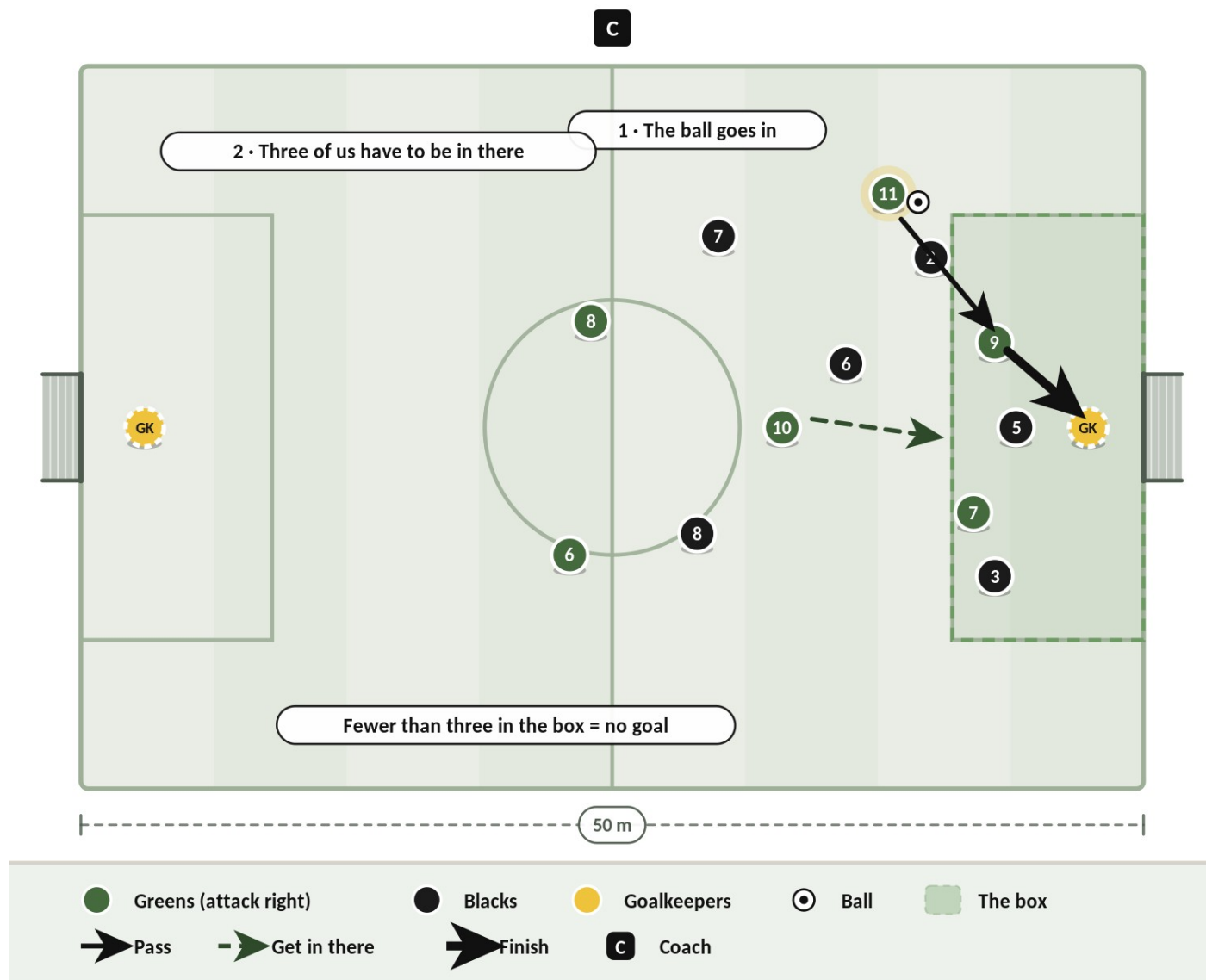
Doubles being scored regularly by minute 10.

The byline runner being celebrated.

29.4 GET IN THE BOX (7 v 7)

One condition, and it is the most useful attacking condition in youth football: a goal only counts if three of your players are inside the box when the ball arrives there. It solves the lone-striker problem in about four minutes.

50 x 34 m • three attackers must be in the box when the ball arrives • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 × 34 m with full-size goals and clearly marked boxes.
- 7 v 7 including goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, play 8v8 or roll substitutes every two minutes.
- 2-3-1 shape assigned.
- **The box markings must be unambiguous** — this condition depends on everybody being able to see the line.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Shape and teams in 60 seconds.
2. Explain in one sentence: *A goal only counts if three of you are in the box when the ball gets there.*

3. **Minutes 0–6 — be exact.** Disallow goals cleanly and without argument. Three or four disallowed goals will change the behaviour permanently.
4. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *who's usually the third one?* The answer should be a midfielder, and it is worth them hearing that arriving late is their job.
5. **Minutes 7–13 — relax it slightly:** three in the box, or two in the box plus one on the edge. This is closer to a real attacking shape and prevents the box becoming a scrum.
6. **Final two minutes — condition removed.** Count how many attackers are in the box on each attack.

RULES & SCORING

- A goal only counts with three attackers inside the box when the ball enters it.
- From minute 7: **three in the box, or two in the box and one on the edge.**
- Keepers restart within eight seconds. No offside.
- The coach's judgement is immediate and final.
- Condition removed for the last two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Finishing first time, because a box with three attackers and three defenders in it gives nobody a second touch.
Tactical	Chances are not created by the player on the ball alone. Three attackers in the box means three defenders occupied, which creates the space the fourth arrives into. And the third runner is nearly always a midfielder — the position that gets forward least and scores the most unmarked goals when it does.
Physical	Serious running for the midfielders. Substitute them regularly and expect the arrivals to slow in the last five minutes.
Psychological	Disallowing a well-worked goal is deflating. Explain once, clearly, then be consistent — inconsistency is what makes conditions resented.
Social	Listen for players calling each other forward. <i>Get in!</i> from a full-back to a midfielder is exactly the sound you want.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The lone striker	The thing this condition exists to fix.
Midfielders stopping at the edge	<i>You're the third one. In you go.</i>
All three arriving at the same spot	<i>Near post, penalty spot, back post. Spread out.</i>
Attacks slowing down so everybody can arrive	A real trade-off worth naming: sometimes the quick chance is better than the crowded one.
Rest defence disappearing	Three forward means three fewer behind. Reference Session 23 and check the balance.
The final two minutes	Count the attackers in the box. That number is your Saturday objective.

ASK THEM

- Who's usually the third one in?
- Where should the three of you be — same place or spread out?
- What does having three in there do to their defenders?

- What's the cost of everybody going forward?
- How many were in the box in the last two minutes?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Four attackers in the box.	Two attackers in the box.
The three must occupy three different areas — near post, middle, back post.	Warning rather than disallowing for the first three goals.
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m) so arriving costs more.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.
Goals must be scored first time.	Count the edge of the box as inside from the start.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Three attackers in the box regularly by minute 8.
 Midfielders arriving late rather than watching.
 The three spread across near post, middle and back post.
 Some rest defence still being maintained.
 More than one attacker in the box after the condition is removed.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *What are the three ways in?* — in behind, past him, cut it back.
- *Which one is worth the most? Why?*
- *Who decides when the pass happens?* The runner.
- *How many of us should be in the box?*
- *Who's the third one in?* Get the midfielders to say it themselves.
- **Name the player who ran to the byline most tonight** — that job gets no glory and deserves some.
- Finish with next time: *next time we finish them. Everything you created tonight, put in the net.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Somebody runs in behind every time we get into the final third. - Reach the byline before crossing — two more steps. - Three attackers in the box whenever the ball goes in.	- How many players are in the box when we put the ball in. Count it three or four times. - Whether we cross early or reach the byline. - Which of the three routes we use most — and which we never use.	- <i>How many of us were in the box?</i> - <i>Did anyone run in behind?</i> - <i>Which of the three did we use?</i>

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

- **Cutback passing.** Mark a target 8 m behind you and to the side. Run to a line, stop the ball, and play it firmly backwards into the target with the inside of the foot. Twenty each side. It is a specific pass and almost nobody practises it.
- **First-time finishing against a wall.** From 8 m, play the ball to the wall and strike the return first time, twenty times each foot. In a crowded box you get one touch and no more.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only how many attackers get into the box when a cross or cutback comes in.** Count it five times and bring the average. It is nearly always three.
- *Optional extra:* find a goal scored from a cutback and watch the runner who does not receive it. He is the reason the space existed.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — attacking and finishing. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **30** Finishing; **31** Attacking Overloads; **32** Creating and Taking Chances.

A natural follow-on. Session 30 — Finishing. Everything created tonight, put in the net. Striking technique for the shots that actually occur in matches — one touch inside the box, the side-foot pass into the corner, the shot across the goalkeeper — plus the two habits that separate players who score from players who nearly score: shooting early, and following every shot in. It is the most enjoyable session of the season and the one the squad will ask for again.

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.