SESSION 34 · STANDALONE PLAN

Adapting to the Opposition — Looking at Them, Not Just at Us

Match intelligence · Reference format: U12 9v9 · 60 minutes · 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	**Warm-up**	34.1 Hunt or Hold
0:10 – 0:25	15	**Technical practice**	34.2 Two Problems
0:25 – 0:40	15	**Skill game**	34.3 The Switch
0:40 – 0:55	15	**Conditioned match**	34.4 Read Them
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

Almost everything in this set is about us — how we build, how we press, how we score. Tonight is about them. Under-12 players almost never look at the opposition as a thing with a shape and a plan; they see eleven individuals who happen to be in the way, and they play exactly the same football against a team that presses high as against a team that sits on its own box. **The two problems have opposite answers, and that is the whole session.** If they press high, the space is behind them — go over or round, and the fastest player in your team becomes your most important one. If they sit deep, there is no space behind at all, so patience, width and cutbacks are the answer and the temptation to shoot from thirty metres is the trap. Getting that wrong costs more goals than any technical failing. There is a second half to this, and it is more important than the tactics. **A squad that looks at the opposition stops being surprised by them.** Most under-12 collapses happen because something unexpected occurs — they press us, they have a huge striker, they score early — and nobody has ever been asked to notice and describe what is happening. Tonight the squad is asked to name it out loud, which is the beginning of being able to do something about it.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Recognise a high press** and choose the route over or round it.
- **Recognise a deep block** and choose width, patience and cutbacks.
- **Notice when the opposition change** what they are doing.
- **Describe what the other team is doing** in a sentence.
- **Change our own football** because of what we have noticed.

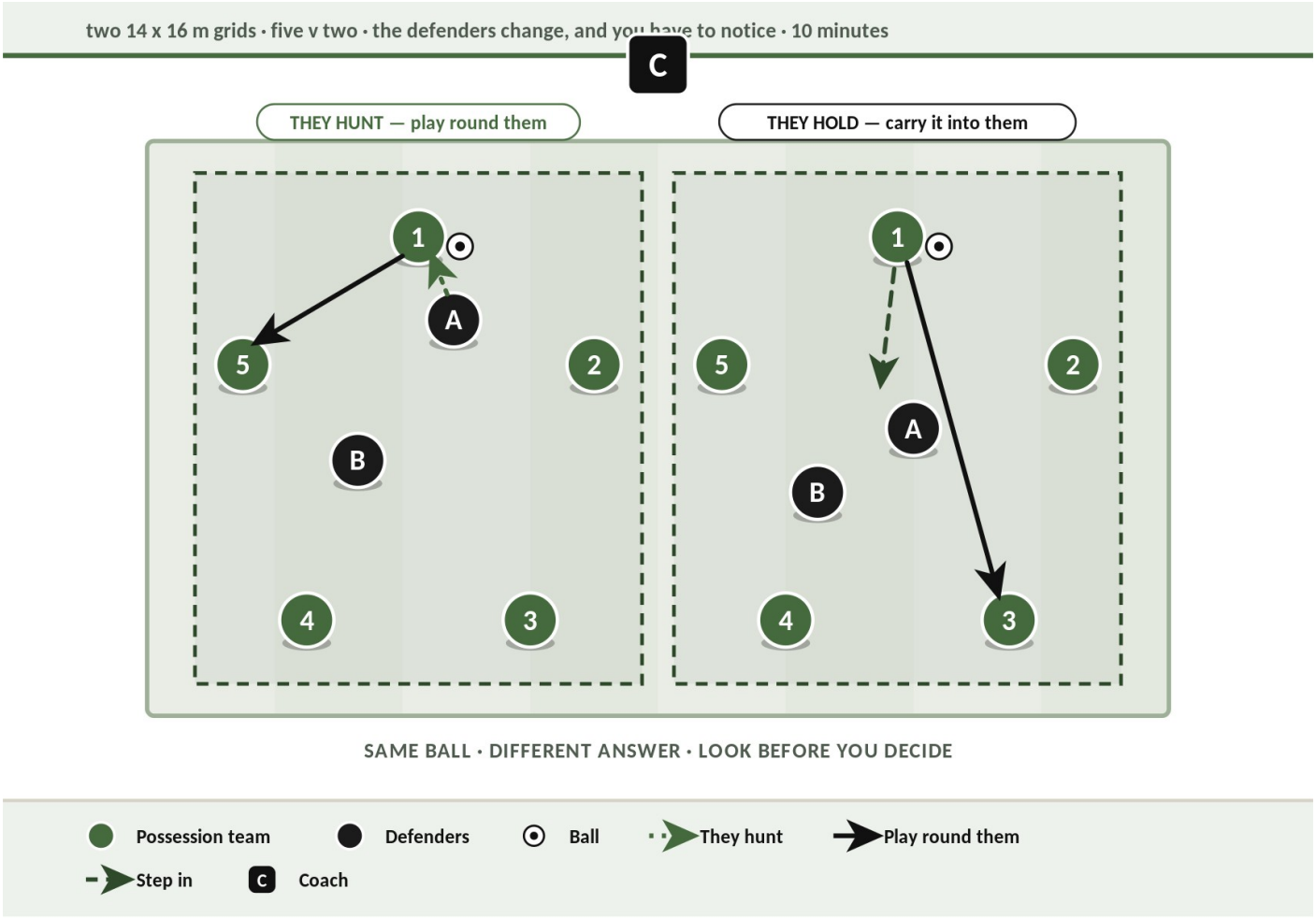
KIT LIST

*Ground needed: about 60 × 45 m. The distinctive thing about tonight is that **half the coaching happens by whispering.** In 34.3 and 34.4 you give one team a secret instruction and the other team's job is to work out what it is. Write the instructions down beforehand so you do not improvise something unreadable — good ones are simple and visible: press every goal kick with three, drop everybody behind the halfway line, always attack down their left, foul nothing, show everything outside. And say once, clearly, that noticing is not cheating: a team that watches the opposition and works them out is doing exactly what good players do.*

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	20	All practices
Flat markers	52	Grids, half-pitches and blocks
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	34.2, 34.3 and 34.4
Paper and pen	1	For writing secret instructions
Stopwatch or phone	1	Timing the switches

34.1 HUNT OR HOLD

A familiar rondo in which the defenders switch, on your call, between hunting the ball and holding their position. The possession team is not told which — they have to notice, and the answer is different each time.



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SET UP

- **Two 14 × 16 m grids**, seven or eight players in each.
- **Five outside, two in the middle.**
- **The two defenders are given a card or a call** — HUNT or HOLD — every forty-five seconds, quietly.
- One ball per grid, spares outside.
- Coach between the grids with the calls.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and passing. **Collect the Session 33 homework** — *what did the leading team do with the ball at the end?*
2. **Minute 3 — plain rondo** for ninety seconds so the rhythm is established.
3. **Minute 5 — introduce the switch.** *Every forty-five seconds I'll tell the two in the middle to hunt or to hold. I won't tell you which. Work it out.*
4. **Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *How do you know which one they're doing?* You want *they come at us* versus *they wait* — and then: *so what changes?*

5. **Minutes 7–10 — scored.** 1 point for playing round a hunt; 1 point for carrying into a hold. **Nothing for using the wrong answer, even if it works.**

RULES & SCORING

- **HUNT:** the two defenders press the ball aggressively. **HOLD:** they stay compact and wait.
- **Against a hunt, the possession team must play round** — a first-time pass away from the pressure.
- **Against a hold, somebody must carry the ball into them** before passing.
- **1 point for the right answer.** Nothing for the wrong one, however it turns out.
- The call changes every forty-five seconds.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	First-time passing away from pressure, and carrying at a stationary defender — two techniques the squad already has, chosen by circumstance rather than habit.
Tactical	**Pressure creates space behind it; no pressure creates space in front of it.** That single sentence covers both halves of tonight and is worth writing down.
Physical	Standard rondo load with natural rests.
Psychological	Some players will guess rather than look. Scoring only the right answer forces looking within about three minutes.
Social	Somebody has to say it out loud — *they're holding!* Encourage it now; it is the whole point of 34.3 and 34.4.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Playing the same way regardless	The habit tonight exists to break. *Which one are they doing?*
Carrying into a hunt	*They're coming. Round them, not into them.*
Passing round a hold	*Nobody's coming. Take it in and make somebody come.*
Guessing without looking	*How do you know? Tell me what you saw.*
Defenders not committing to the call	The practice fails if the two in the middle are lukewarm. Be specific with them.

ASK THEM

- How do you know which one they're doing?
- If they hunt, where's the space?
- If they hold, where's the space?
- Who should be saying it out loud?
- Did that work by accident or on purpose?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
The call changes every twenty seconds.	**The call changes every ninety seconds.**
Three defenders with only one of them hunting.	**Announce the call out loud** for the first three minutes.
One touch for the possession team.	**Bigger grid.**
Add a third call — SPLIT, where one hunts and one holds.	**Six against two.**

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The possession team changing its answer with the call.

Somebody naming it out loud.

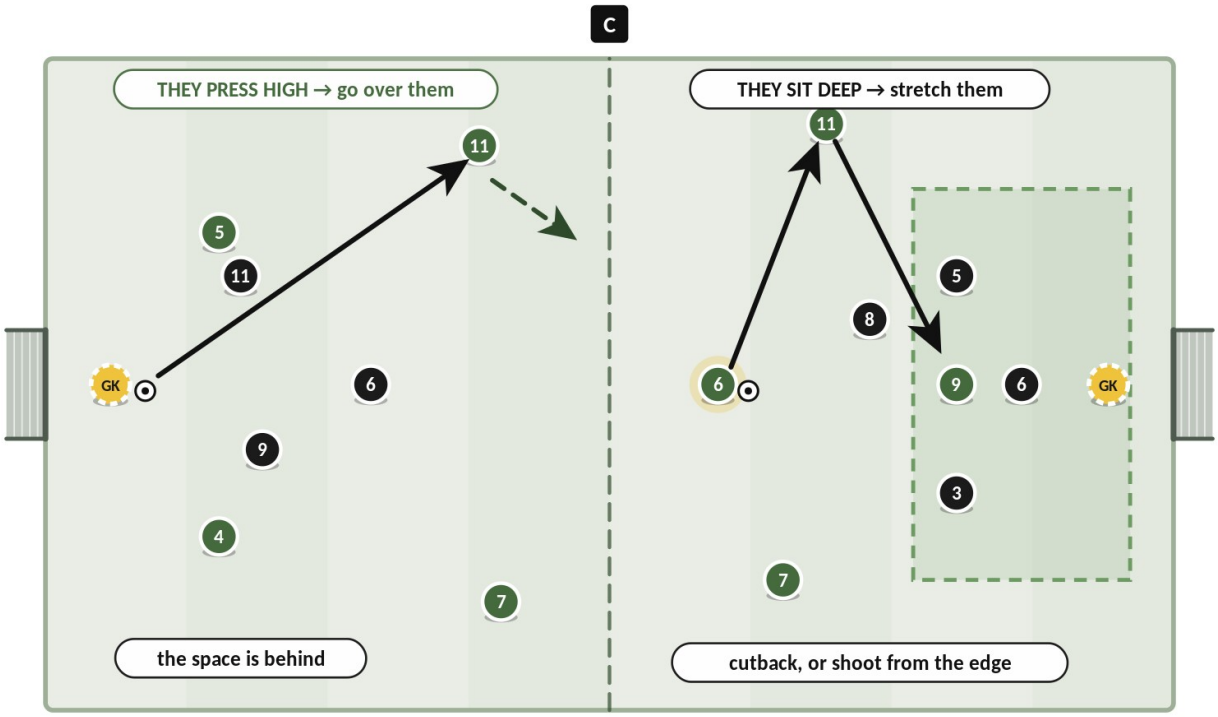
Points being scored for the right answer rather than the lucky one.

Defenders committing fully to whichever call they have.

34.2 TWO PROBLEMS

Two half-pitches, two opposite problems, and eight minutes on each. One end is a team pressing high; the other is a team sitting on its own box. The squad plays both and finds that almost nothing they do is the same.

two half-pitches · they press high, or they sit deep · a different answer for each · 15 minutes



LOOK AT WHAT THEY ARE DOING · THEN PICK THE ANSWER

Us · Them · Goalkeepers · Ball · Their block · Pass · Run · C Coach

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SET UP

- **One pitch split into two half-pitches**, each with a **full goal and goalkeeper**.
- **End A — the high press:** four of us against three of them, who press from the moment the goalkeeper has it.
- **End B — the deep block:** four of us against four of them, who may not leave their own third.
- Split the squad in half; each group does eight minutes at one end and then swaps.
- Balls at both ends; coach moves between them.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set both ends up in 90 seconds** and say only this: *this lot press, that lot don't. Work out the difference.*
2. **Minutes 0–4 — no coaching at either end.** Let them use the wrong answers.
3. **Minute 4 — thirty seconds at each end.** At the press end: *where's the space?* Behind. At the block end: *where's the space?* Wide, and in front of them.
4. **Minutes 5–8 — scored.** Press end: 1 for getting the ball out through them, 2 for going over them to a runner. Block end: 1 for a shot, 2 for a goal from a cutback.
5. **Minute 8 — swap the groups over**, and say nothing at all for the first two minutes of the swap.
6. **Minutes 8–15 — second round**, with the second group usually solving it faster because the first group will have told them.

RULES & SCORING

- **Press end:** the three defenders press from the goal kick and may not drop off. **1 point** for getting out through them, **2** for going over them.
- **Block end:** the four defenders may not leave their own third. **1 point** for a shot, **2** for a goal from a cutback.
- Eight seconds per repetition at the press end; twenty at the block end.
- **Nobody may be told which answer to use** — only asked where the space is.
- Swap ends at minute 8.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Two very different passes: the driven ball over a press, and the patient short pass against a block. Also the long carry, which is how you attack a deep block without a pass.
Tactical	**Against a high press, the fastest player is the most important one** — the space behind is enormous and it lasts about two seconds. **Against a deep block, the most important player is the one who is patient** — every rushed shot from twenty-five metres is a goal kick and a chance to reset for them.
Physical	The press end is sprinting; the block end is not. Split accordingly if you have a tired group.
Psychological	Playing against a deep block is frustrating, and frustration produces long shots. Name that before it happens and it happens less.
Social	When the groups swap, listen for the first group briefing the second. That is exactly the behaviour you want on Saturday.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Playing short into a press	*They want you to. Where aren't they?*
Shooting from distance against a block	*How many of those went in? Try one more pass.*
Nobody running in behind at the press end	The route only exists if somebody goes.
No width against the block	*They're eight players in a box twenty metres wide. Make it forty.*
The same answer used at both ends	The thing this practice is designed to expose. Ask rather than tell.
Groups briefing each other at the swap	Praise it loudly.

ASK THEM

- Where's the space when they press?
- Where's the space when they sit?
- Who's the most important player against a press? And against a block?
- How many of our long shots went in?
- What did the other group tell you?
- Which problem is harder? Why?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Press end: four defenders. Block end: five defenders.	**Press end: two defenders. Block end: three defenders.**
Six seconds at the press end.	**Twelve seconds** at the press end.
No shots from outside the box at the block end.	**Walk each answer through** before starting.

HARDER	EASIER
Both ends running at once with the coach absent — self-managed.	**Give them the answer** and practise the execution instead.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Different football at the two ends.

Balls going over the press to a runner.

Width and patience against the block.

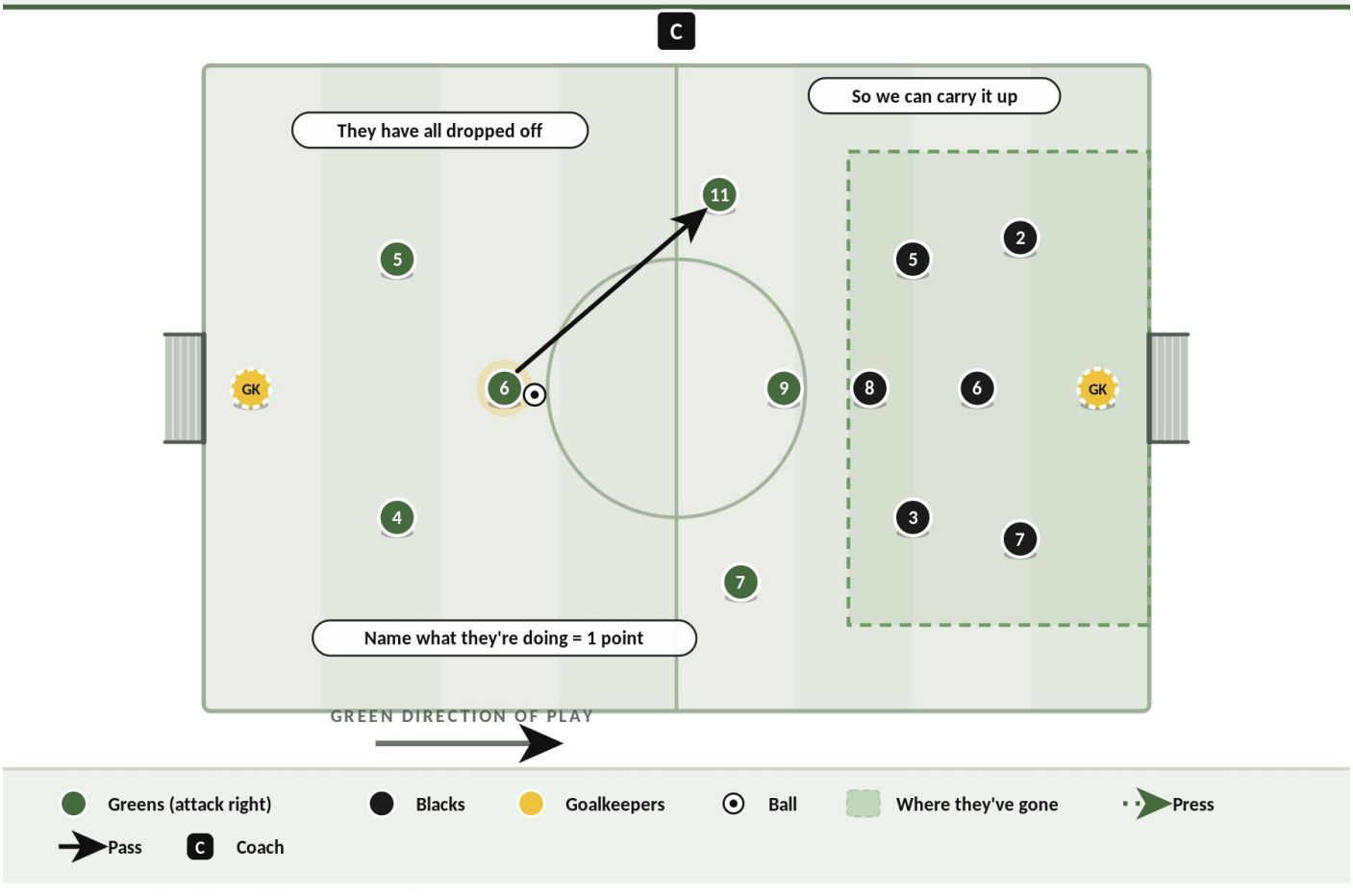
Fewer long shots by minute 12.

Groups briefing each other at the swap.

34.3 THE SWITCH (6 v 6 + GKs)

A normal match in which one team is quietly given a new instruction every three minutes. The other team's job is to notice, say what it is, and change accordingly — and they score a point for naming it correctly.

44 x 30 m · one team gets a whispered instruction · the other has to work out what it is · 15 minutes



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SET UP

- One pitch, **44 × 30 m**, both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- 6 v 6 outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes every three minutes.
- **Write four instructions on paper beforehand.** Suggested: *press every goal kick with three* · *everybody behind the halfway line* · *only attack down their left* · *stay in your positions, no overlaps.*
- Give the instruction to one team quietly at a drinks break or during a stoppage.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.**
2. **Explain in two sentences:** *Every three minutes I'll tell one team to do something. The other team gets a point for telling me what it is — and another point if you change what you're doing because of it.*
3. **Minutes 0–3 — first instruction**, given to the reds. Let the blues play blind.
4. **Minute 3 — ask the blues.** *What are they doing?* One guess only. Award the point or don't, and move on quickly.
5. **Minutes 3–12 — three more instructions**, alternating which team receives them.

6. **Minutes 12–15 — both teams get an instruction at the same time**, which is chaotic, funny, and closest to a real match.

RULES & SCORING

- **One team receives a secret instruction every three minutes.**
- **The other team scores 1 point for naming it** and **1 more for changing something because of it.**
- One guess per instruction — no fishing.
- The instructed team must follow the instruction properly, even when it costs them.
- Goals count as normal alongside the points.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Nothing new. Tonight is entirely about perception.
Tactical	**Recognising a pattern is a skill and it can be taught.** The clue is almost never the ball — it is where the players are standing when the ball is somewhere else. Say that once; it is the single most useful hint you can give.
Physical	Standard match load.
Psychological	Some players will find this immediately obvious and others will not see it at all, and that gap has nothing to do with football ability. Pair a noticer with a non-noticer and let them talk.
Social	The naming has to be collective. If one player always answers, ask a different one — *what do you think?*

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Nobody noticing anything	Give a hint: *look at where they're standing when we've got the ball.*
Naming it but not changing	The second point exists for exactly this. *Fine — so what are we going to do about it?*
One player answering everything	Rotate who you ask.
The instructed team abandoning the instruction when it costs them a goal	Be firm; the practice needs it followed.
Wild guesses	One guess only, and make it cost nothing to be wrong but nothing to be lucky either.
The final double-instruction spell	Let it be messy. Real matches are.

ASK THEM

- What are they doing?
- How do you know?
- What are we going to do about it?
- Where were they standing when we had the ball?
- Which instruction was hardest to spot?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
A new instruction every two minutes.	**A new instruction every four minutes.**

HARDER	EASIER
More subtle instructions — *drop five metres deeper*, *press only their left side*.	**Very obvious instructions** — *everybody behind halfway*.
No hints at all.	**Give a hint after ninety seconds.**
The naming team must also say what they will change before they get the point.	**Let the whole team confer** before answering.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Instructions being named within a couple of minutes.

Behaviour changing after they are named.

More than one player contributing answers.

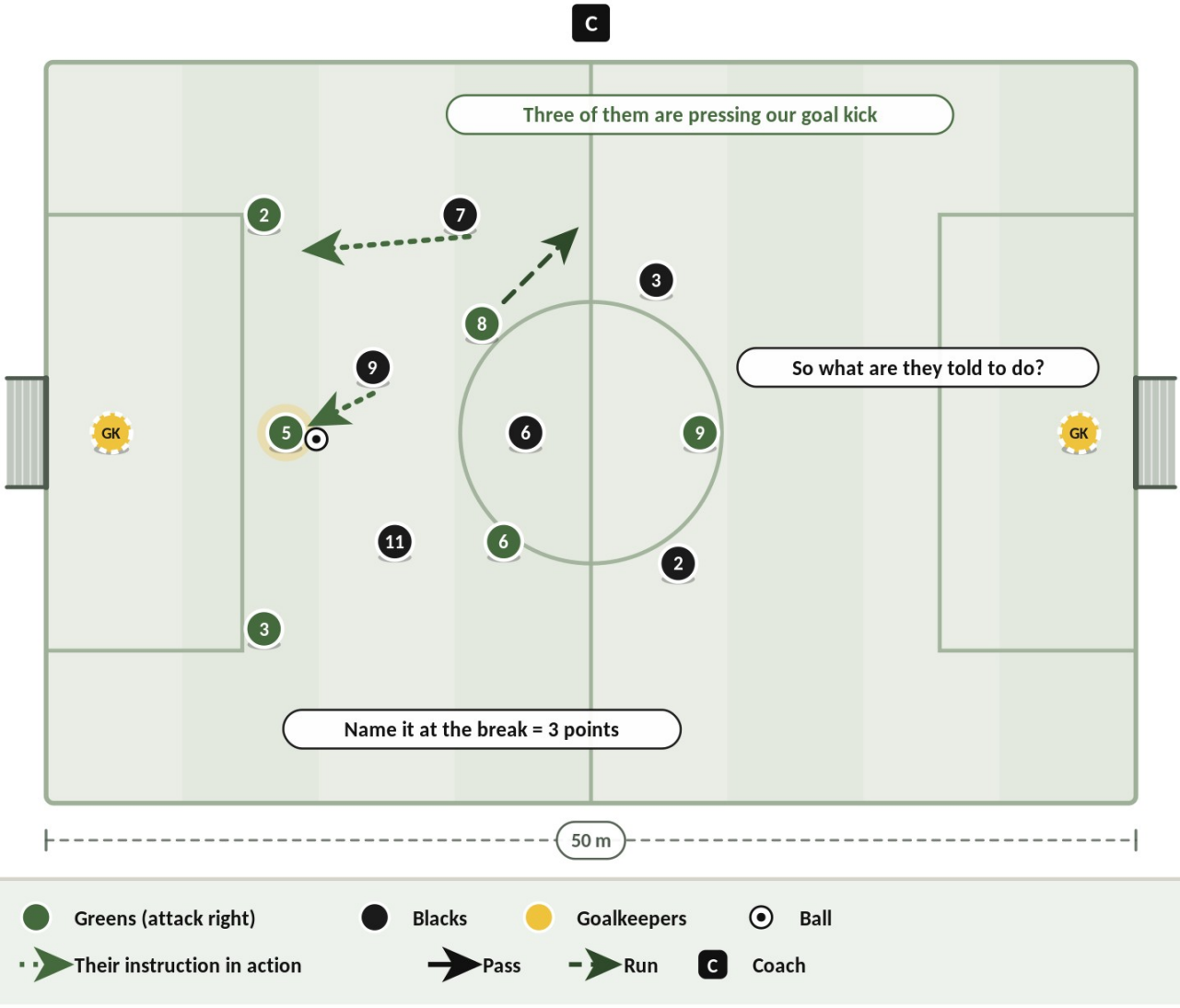
Players looking at the opposition when they have the ball.

The instructed team following the instruction honestly.

34.4 READ THEM (7 v 7)

Both teams get a secret instruction at the start and neither knows the other's. At half time each team has one attempt to name what the other has been doing, worth three points — and then a second half in which they can use what they worked out.

50 x 34 m · a secret instruction each · work out theirs before half time · 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 × 34 m with full-size goals and marked boxes.
- 7 v 7 including goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, play 8v8 or roll substitutes every two minutes.
- **Two instructions written down beforehand**, one per team, given quietly before kick-off.
- Suggested pairing: reds *press every goal kick with three*; blues *keep everybody behind the ball and counter*.
- Coach on the halfway line, mostly silent.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Shape, teams and instructions given quietly in 90 seconds.** Nobody tells anybody.
2. **Minutes 0–7 — first half, no coaching.** Let both teams struggle with something they have not identified.

3. **Minute 7 — the naming.** Each team confers for thirty seconds and gives one answer. **3 points for a correct naming.** Read out both actual instructions afterwards regardless.
4. **Minutes 8–14 — second half with the instructions still live** and now known. Watch whether either team actually uses the knowledge.
5. **Final minute — one question to everybody:** *what would you do differently if you played them again?*
6. **Keep the instructions simple and visible.** A clever instruction that nobody can see is a wasted fifteen minutes.

RULES & SCORING

- **Each team has a secret instruction** which must be followed for the full fifteen minutes.
- **Naming the other team's instruction at half time = 3 points.** One attempt, thirty seconds to confer.
- Goals count as normal.
- **The coach says nothing in the first half.**
- Instructions are read out at half time whether or not they were guessed.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Whatever the instructions demand. Note it rather than fixing it.
Tactical	**The second half is the real test.** Naming a pattern is easy compared with changing your own football because of it, and most squads will name it correctly and then play exactly as before.
Physical	Standard match load, though a *press everything* instruction is tiring — substitute that team more.
Psychological	Being confused for seven minutes is uncomfortable and it is the point. Resist the urge to help.
Social	The thirty-second conference at half time tells you a lot about who listens to whom. Watch it rather than joining it.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Who notices first	It is often not the best player, and that is worth saying out loud.
The conference at half time	Does anybody ask a quiet player what they saw?
The second half	Named and then ignored is the most common outcome. Name it afterwards, gently.
An instruction being abandoned	Remind the team once; the practice depends on it.
A team solving it early	Excellent — and worth asking how.
Whether the answers describe positions or just the ball	Positions is the sophisticated answer.

ASK THEM

- What have they been doing?
- How did you work it out?
- Who saw it first?
- What did we change because of it?
- What would you do differently if you played them again?
- Did anybody ask the quiet ones what they'd seen?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
More subtle instructions.	**Very obvious instructions.**
A new instruction at half time as well, unannounced.	**A hint at minute 4.**
No conferring — one nominated player answers.	**Two guesses each.**
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m).	**6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m** with rolling substitutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

At least one team naming the other's instruction.
A visible change in the second half.
Answers that describe positions rather than the ball.
Quiet players contributing to the conference.
Somebody saying what they'd do differently next time.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *If they press high, where's the space?* Behind them.
- *If they sit deep, where's the space?* Wide, and in front.
- *Which is harder to play against? Why?*
- *How do you work out what a team is doing?* Look at where they stand when we have the ball.
- *What's the point of noticing if we don't change anything?*
- **Name the player who noticed something first tonight** — and if it was a quiet player, say so clearly.
- Finish with next time: *next time the pitch gets bigger and there are two more of them and two more of us. Eleven-a-side starts here.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- **Somebody names what the other team is doing** in the first ten minutes. - **We change one thing** because of it. - **No long shots** if they are sitting deep.	- **Whether anybody looks at the opposition's shape** rather than only at the ball. - **How long it takes us to react** to something they do differently. - **Whether we play the same football regardless** of what is in front of us.	- *What were they doing?* - *When did we notice?* - *What did we change?*

HOMEWORK — "WATCHING A TEAM" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES BEFORE YOU NEXT TRAIN

- **Watch the shape, not the ball.** Fifteen minutes of any match — professional or a game at your club — deliberately watching **the team without the ball.** Where do they stand? How high is their highest player? Write one sentence describing what they are doing.
- **Spot the change.** Watch the ten minutes after a goal is scored and see whether either team changes anything. Usually one does, and it is visible within thirty seconds.
- **Two questions before Saturday.** In the warm-up, look at the other team and answer two things for yourself: are they bigger than us, and do they have one player who is much better than the rest? Both change what we should do.
- *Optional extra:* pick a team from a league you don't follow and after fifteen minutes write down three sentences describing how they play. Then check whether a highlights clip agrees with you.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — match intelligence. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **33** Game Management; **35** The Bridge to Eleven-a-Side; **36** The Last Session.

A natural follow-on. Session 35 — The Bridge to Eleven-a-Side, part one. Two sessions left, and both are about what comes next. A bigger pitch, two more players on each team, and a shape that has to stretch to fill it. Next time covers what actually changes — the distances, the extra positions, and why the middle of the pitch suddenly needs three players rather than two — and it does it on a full-size pitch if you can get one, because the difference has to be felt rather than described.

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.