



SESSION 35 • STANDALONE PLAN

The Bridge to Eleven-a-Side — What Actually Changes

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	35.1 Longer
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	35.2 From Nine to Eleven
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	35.3 The Big Pitch
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	35.4 First Go at Eleven
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

Next season the pitch gets about a third bigger, two more players arrive on each team, and — in most leagues — offside starts being given. It is the biggest single change in a young footballer's life so far, and the way it is usually handled is to say nothing until the first pre-season friendly and then watch a confused player sprint forty metres to close somebody down. Two sessions is not much, but it is enough to remove the surprise. **And the honest headline is reassuring: almost nothing actually changes.** The three ways in are the same three ways in. Press, cover and balance is still press, cover and balance. The block is still about twenty-five metres — it does not get bigger just because the pitch does, which is the single most useful thing you can tell them tonight. **What changes is distance and duration.** A switch of play is thirty metres rather than fifteen. A recovery run is forty metres rather than twenty. A press that used to take three seconds now takes six, so pressing alone becomes even more pointless than it already was. The football is identical; there is simply more of it between the moments.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- Pass accurately over 25–35 metres, along the ground.
- Understand the 4-3-3 shape and where the two extra players go.
- Keep the block at about 25 metres even on a much bigger pitch.
- Recognise that distances change and principles do not.
- Experience the size of an eleven-a-side pitch rather than being told about it.

KIT LIST

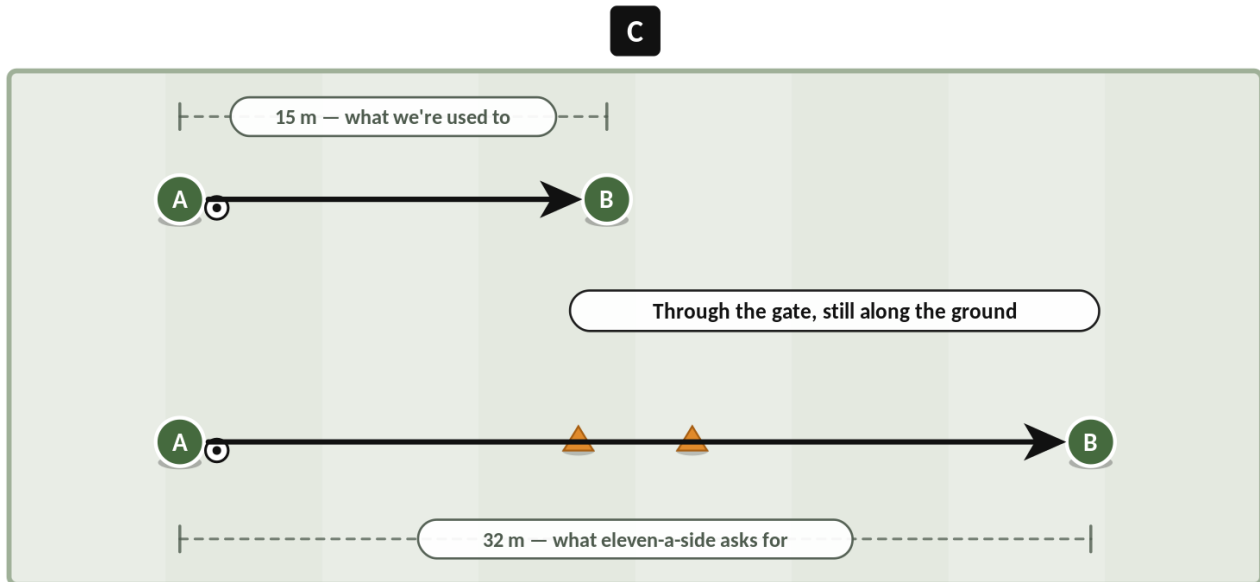
Ground needed: *as much as you can possibly get*. This is the one session of the year where the size of the pitch is the content, so book the biggest space available, borrow an eleven-a-side pitch if the club has one, or take the session to a park. **With 14–16 players you cannot play eleven-a-side, and you should not pretend to.** The answer is to play 7v7 on a pitch that is far too big — which produces exactly the feeling the squad needs and is honest about what you have. If you can arrange a joint session with another age group or another team for the last fifteen minutes, that is better still, and it is worth a phone call.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	20	All practices
Flat markers	60	A big pitch needs a lot of marking
Bibs — red / blue / yellow / grey	8 / 8 / 4 / 2	Grey identifies the two extra positions in 35.2
Full-size goals	2	Ideally the real 11-a-side goals if you can get them
Poles	6	Marking the block and the lines
Tape measure or measured strides	1	For marking 25 m and 13 m accurately

35.1 LONGER

The same pass they have played all season, at twice the distance. Most of the squad has never been asked to pass thirty metres accurately along the ground, and they will find out tonight whether they can.

44 x 18 m • pairs • the same pass, twice as far • 10 minutes



BIGGER PITCH • LONGER PASSES • SAME TECHNIQUE, MORE OF IT

● Passers ● Ball ▲ Gate ➔ Pass C Coach

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SET UP

- 44 x 18 m or as long as the space allows.
- Pairs, starting at 15 m and working out to 30–35 m.
- A gate of 4 m in the middle of the long distance, so the pass has to be accurate as well as long.
- One ball per pair; spares at both ends.
- Coach in the middle.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and passing. **Collect the Session 34 homework** — describe a team you watched in one sentence.
2. **Minute 3 — start at 15 m.** Two-touch, both feet. Ninety seconds at a distance everybody is comfortable with.
3. **Minute 5 — move out to 25 m, then 32 m at minute 7.** Add the gate at the longer distances.
4. **Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *What changes about the technique?* The answer is *almost nothing except how hard you hit it* — which is worth them discovering rather than being told.
5. **Minutes 7–10 — scored.** 1 point per pass through the gate reached in control; nothing for a ball that has to be chased or that leaves the ground.

RULES & SCORING

- **Along the ground.** A lofted pass scores nothing, however accurate.
- **Through the gate** at the long distances.

- **Both feet** — alternate in threes.
- The receiver must control it within two touches.
- Move out to a longer distance every two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The technique for a 30 m pass is the same as for a 10 m pass with a longer backswing and a firmer strike — laces or inside of the foot through the middle of the ball, ankle locked, head still.
Tactical	Longer passing is what makes a big pitch playable. A team that can only pass fifteen metres will be pinned into one corner of an eleven-a-side pitch and will spend the season chasing.
Physical	Light. This is technique, not conditioning.
Psychological	Some players will find thirty metres genuinely beyond them, and that is a growth issue rather than a technique one. Say so, and give them 25 m instead of 32 m without any fuss.
Social	Pair by size and strength for this one, or the smaller players spend ten minutes failing.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Lofting it	<i>Along the floor. Hit through the middle of it.</i>
Leaning back	The cause of almost every ball that goes into the air. <i>Head over it.</i>
Short backswing	<i>Longer swing, not a harder kick.</i>
Only using the strong foot	Enforce the alternation; weak-foot range matters more at 11-a-side.
Smaller players struggling	Shorten their distance without comment.

ASK THEM

- What changes about the technique?
- Why does it have to stay on the ground?
- What happens to a team that can't pass thirty metres?
- Which foot is harder? Practise that one.
- Where should your head be when you strike it?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
40 m.	25 m maximum.
One touch.	Three touches.
A narrower gate (3 m).	Wider gate (6 m).
Moving receiver rather than a stationary one.	Allow a bouncing ball as long as it is reachable.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Passes staying on the ground at 30 m.

Both feet being used.

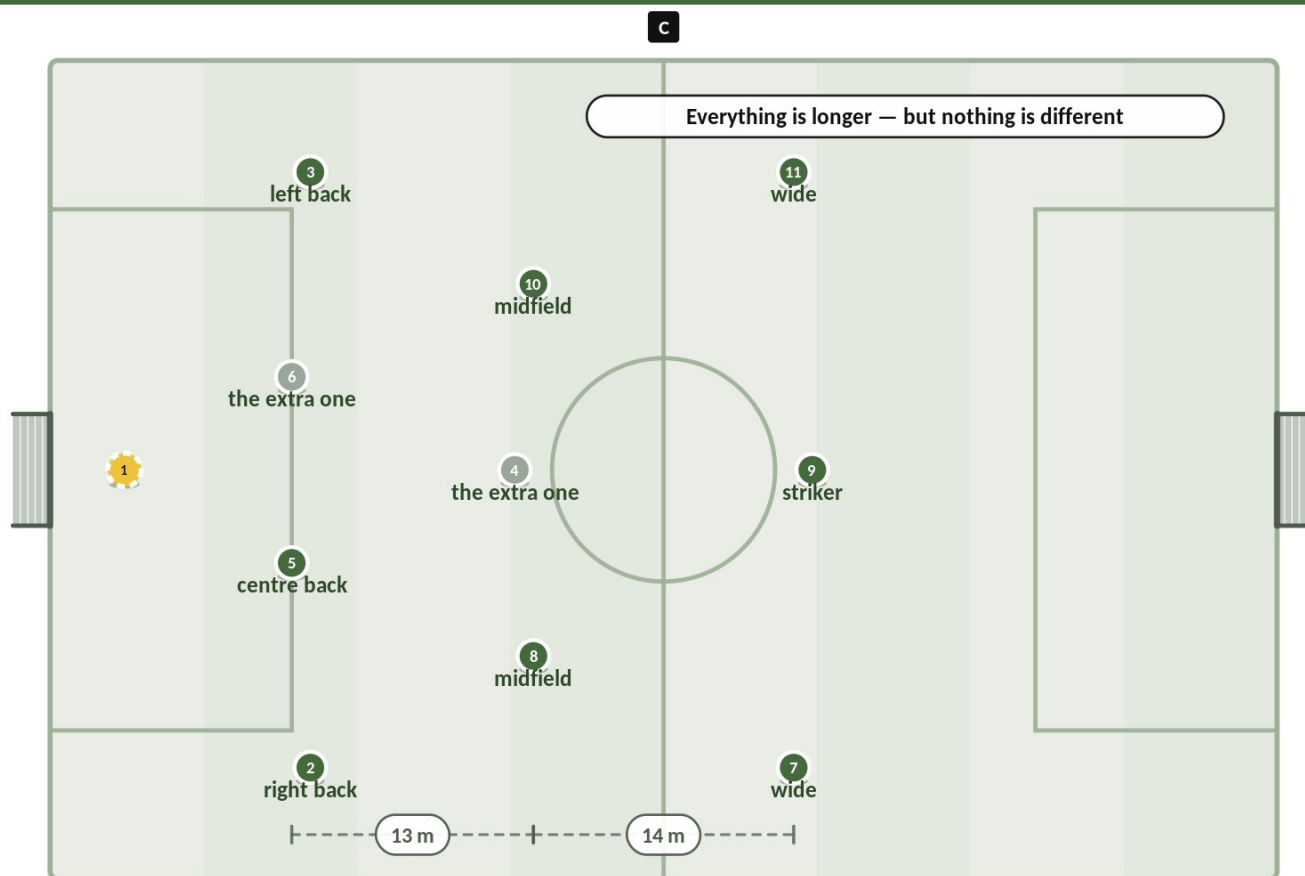
Receivers controlling within two touches.

Nobody being asked to do a distance they physically cannot.

35.2 FROM NINE TO ELEVEN

Walk the shape. Where the two extra players go, what the four positions across the back actually do, and why the middle of the pitch now needs three. Fifteen minutes of walking and talking is worth more here than any amount of playing.

a youth eleven-a-side pitch • 3-2-3 becomes 4-3-3 • the two grey players are the new ones



FOUR AT THE BACK • THREE IN THE MIDDLE • THREE ACROSS THE FRONT

● The nine we know ● The two extra ● Goalkeeper C Coach

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SET UP

- The biggest pitch you can mark out, with both goals.
- Eleven players in position if you have them, or seven with the missing positions marked by poles and named out loud.
- Two grey bibs for the two positions that did not exist at nine-a-side — the fourth defender and the third midfielder.
- No opposition for the first eight minutes.
- Coach walking among them.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–4 — walk the shape into place.** Name every position out loud as it stands: *right back, two centre-backs, left back; three across the middle; two wide and a striker*. Let them stand still and look at each other.
- Minute 4 — the two new jobs, ninety seconds.** The extra defender means the centre-backs are now a pair rather than a trio, and the extra midfielder means one of the three can sit while two go forward. Nothing more complicated than that.

3. **Minutes 5–9 — walk the ball around** with no defenders, stopping every thirty seconds to ask one player: *where should you be now?*
4. **Minutes 9–13 — add four defenders** and play at half pace. The shape should hold and the distances should feel long.
5. **Minute 13 — measure something.** Walk the distance between the back line and the midfield line and count it out. Thirteen metres. It is bigger than they think and smaller than they fear.
6. **Minutes 13–15 — rotate four players into new positions** so nobody leaves thinking they have been assigned a job for life.

RULES & SCORING

- **Walking or half pace throughout.** This is a positional practice, not a game.
- **Everybody names their own position** when asked.
- **The two grey players explain their job** to the group once each.
- Rotate at least four players through unfamiliar positions.
- No scoring.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Nothing. Tonight is geography.
Tactical	Four at the back is two pairs, not a line of four. The centre-backs work together and each full-back works with the winger in front of them — which is exactly what the squad already knows from this theme, with one more player. And the third midfielder is what makes attacking safe: one sits, two go, which is Session 23's rest defence with a proper name.
Physical	None. Use it as recovery.
Psychological	Players will immediately ask which position they will play next season. Be honest: you do not know, and at twelve nobody should have a fixed one. Say it clearly, because the anxiety is real.
Social	Getting the grey players to explain their own job to the group is worth doing properly. It is the best test of whether an idea has landed.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Players standing too close together	The commonest reaction to a big pitch. <i>Spread out. Look how much room there is.</i>
The full-backs standing next to the centre-backs	<i>Wide. You're a full-back, not a third centre-back.</i>
Anxiety about positions	Address it directly and move on.
The three midfielders standing in a line	<i>One of you sits. Two of you go. Not all three of you level.</i>
Nobody asking questions	Ask them instead: <i>what's different about your job?</i>
Players enjoying a new position	Note it. It is often the most useful thing that happens tonight.

ASK THEM

- What's your position called?
- Who do you work with?
- What's different about your job compared with nine-a-side?
- How far apart are the lines?
- Which of the three midfielders sits?
- Grey players — explain your job to everybody.

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Add six defenders and play at three-quarter pace.	No defenders at all for the full fifteen minutes.
Introduce offside and explain it here, statically, where it is easy to see.	Mark every position with a pole and let them stand on it.
Rotate everybody through two unfamiliar positions.	Cover the back four only and leave the midfield for next time.
Ask each line to explain the line in front of them.	Walk it twice rather than adding pace.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Everybody able to name their position and who they work with.

Full-backs standing genuinely wide.

One midfielder sitting rather than three in a line.

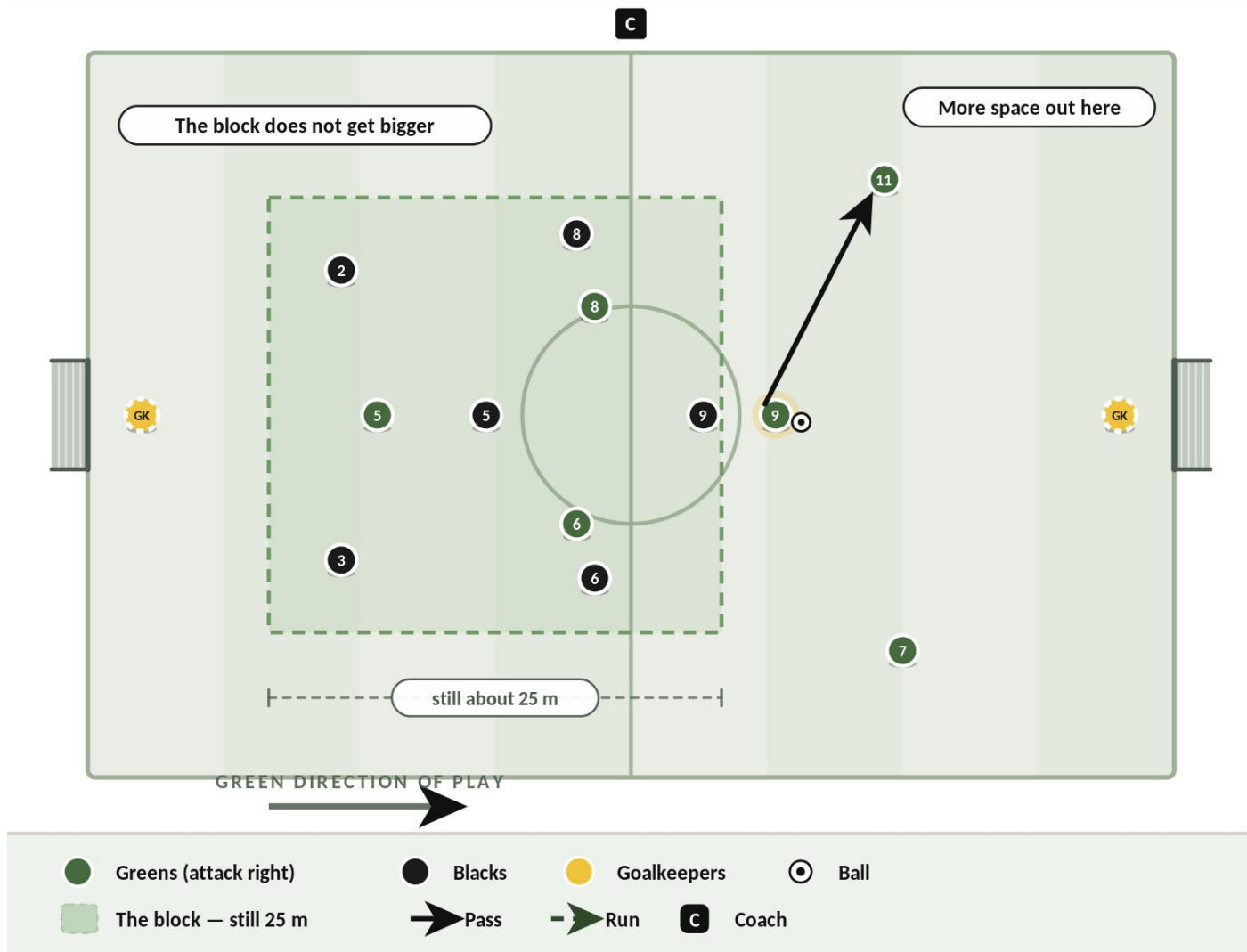
The grey players able to explain their jobs.

Somebody discovering they like a new position.

35.3 THE BIG PITCH (7 v 7 + GKs)

The game they have played all season, on a pitch that is far too big for the numbers. It produces the exact experience of eleven-a-side — long distances, lots of space, and the discovery that the block still has to be twenty-five metres.

60 x 40 m • the same game we always play, on a pitch that is far too big • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 60 x 40 m — deliberately far too large for 7 v 7.
- Both full goals, as far apart as you can manage.
- 7 v 7 outfield plus two goalkeepers (16). With 14–15, play 6 v 6 and make the pitch no smaller.
- Mark a 25 m block on the pitch with poles so they can see that it does not grow.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.
2. Explain in one sentence: *Normal football. The pitch is twice the size. The block is still twenty-five metres.*
3. Minutes 0–5 — play and let them spread out. Most teams will stretch to fill the pitch when defending, which is the error the marked block exists to expose.

4. **Minute 5 — one question:** *how big should we be when we haven't got the ball?* Point at the poles. *That big. Not that big.*
5. **Minutes 6–12 — scored.** A goal conceded while the block is stretched beyond the poles counts double, exactly as in Session 26.
6. **Minutes 12–15 — free play**, and see whether the squad has understood that a bigger pitch means more running between the moments, not a bigger shape.

RULES & SCORING

- **Normal football** on a deliberately oversized pitch.
- **A goal conceded while stretched beyond about 25 m counts double.**
- Keepers restart within eight seconds — long distances make slow restarts fatal.
- No offside yet.
- Rolling substitutions every two minutes; the running load is high.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Longer passing under pressure, and the long carry — on a big pitch, dribbling forty metres into space is a genuine option for the first time.
Tactical	The block does not get bigger. This is the single idea of the practice and it is counter-intuitive: a bigger pitch means you give away more space, not that you cover more of it. Which also means the ball can be switched much further — so the far-side player has to look across, not just in front.
Physical	The hardest running of the block. Substitute every two minutes and expect the quality to drop late.
Psychological	A big pitch is intimidating and some players will hide in it. Watch for the player who has gone quiet and give them a specific job.
Social	Talking has to be louder over longer distances — a genuine and slightly funny discovery. Let them work it out.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The block stretching to fill the pitch	The whole practice. Point at the poles rather than explaining.
Nobody switching the ball	There is more room to switch than ever before and it is usually the last thing they try.
Players hiding in the space	<i>Come and get involved. Where's your nearest teammate?</i>
Everyone exhausted by minute 8	Substitute more. This pitch is bigger than their fitness.
Long carries into space	New and worth praising — at 9v9 the space to do it did not exist.
Quiet play	<i>Nobody can hear you from forty metres. Louder.</i>

ASK THEM

- How big should we be when we haven't got the ball?
- What's easier on this pitch? What's harder?
- How far can you switch it now?
- Where's the space? There's a lot of it.
- Who can you hear?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Bigger still (70 × 46 m).	50 × 36 m.
A 20 m block rather than 25.	8 v 8 so there are more bodies.
Add offside.	Remove the doubling rule and just point at the poles.
6 v 6 on the same pitch.	Longer substitution intervals if the group is tired.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The block staying around twenty-five metres.

Switches of play being attempted.

Nobody hiding.

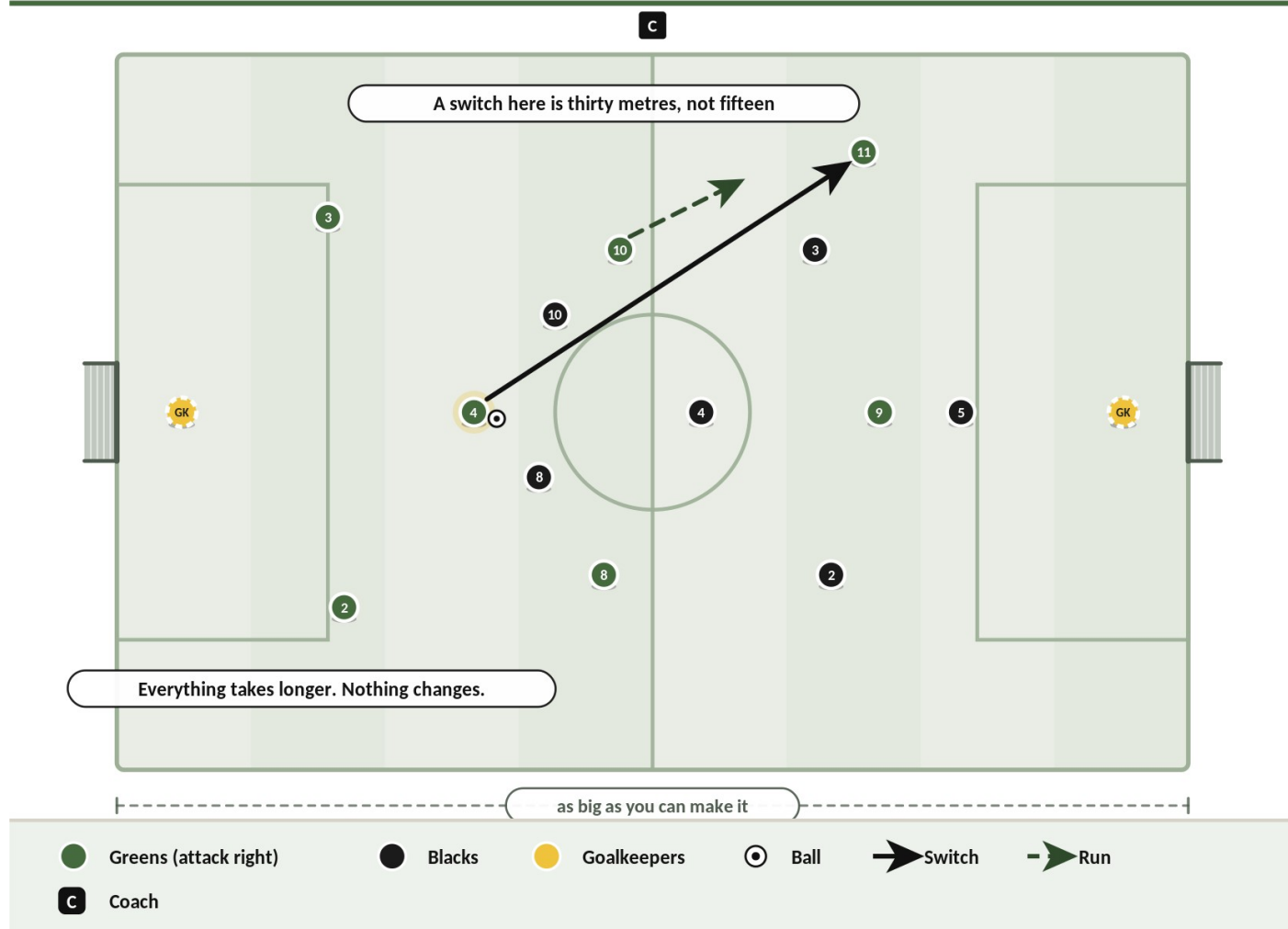
Long carries into space.

Louder communication by minute 10.

35.4 FIRST GO AT ELEVEN

As close to eleven-a-side as your numbers allow, on the biggest pitch you can find, in the 4-3-3 shape from 35.2. Fifteen minutes of feeling it. There is very little to coach and a great deal to notice.

the biggest pitch you can get • the shape from 35.2 • fifteen minutes of feeling the distances



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SET UP

- **The largest pitch available**, with both goals as far apart as possible.
- **If you can borrow players** — another age group, a parent or two, a coach — do it and play as close to 11 v 11 as you can.
- **If you cannot**, play 7 v 7 or 8 v 8 in the 4-3-3 shape with the missing positions marked by poles and named.
- Shape assigned from 35.2, with everybody in the position they walked.
- Coach on the halfway line, saying very little.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Shape and teams in 90 seconds**, using the same positions as 35.2 so nothing is new except the movement.
2. **Minutes 0–6 — play, with almost no coaching.** Two reminders maximum, and both about distance rather than decision.
3. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *what's the hardest thing about this?* Expect *it's so far* and *I can't hear anyone* — both correct and both solvable.

4. **Minutes 7-13 — play on**, and introduce offside if your league will use it. Explain it once, simply, and give it generously.
5. **Final two minutes — free play**, then finish with the squad standing in the middle of the pitch looking at how big it is.
6. **Note who copes and who struggles**, because it is rarely the players you expect.

RULES & SCORING

- **As close to eleven-a-side as numbers allow**, in the 4-3-3 shape.
- Keepers restart within ten seconds.
- **Offside introduced from minute 7** if your league uses it — explained once and given generously.
- Rolling substitutions; the running load is the highest of the season.
- No other conditions.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything at longer range. Note who can pass thirty metres under pressure and who cannot — it is next season's individual programme.
Tactical	Nothing new is being taught. Every principle from the last a full season applies unchanged; only the distances differ. Say that explicitly at the end, because the squad will assume they are starting again.
Physical	The most demanding fifteen minutes of the year. Substitute freely and stop early if the quality collapses.
Psychological	Some players will love the space and some will be swallowed by it. Both reactions are normal and neither predicts next season.
Social	Communication over long distances is a genuinely new skill. If the squad finishes the session shouting more than they started, that is a result.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Who copes with the space and who disappears in it	Rarely the players you expect.
Passing range under pressure	The clearest technical marker for next season.
Whether the block holds	The main carry-over from 35.3.
Communication	Everybody goes quiet on a big pitch at first.
Reaction to offside	Introduce it gently and expect confusion. It takes months, not minutes.
Enjoyment	Most squads love this session. If yours doesn't, the pitch is probably too big even for this.

ASK THEM

- What's the hardest thing about this?
- What's actually different from what we've been doing?
- Who could you hear?
- How far did you have to run to press?
- Which position felt best?
- What do we need to get better at before next season?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Full eleven-a-side if you can borrow the players.	A smaller pitch (55 × 38 m) if the running is too much.
Offside from the start.	No offside at all.
A full-size adult pitch if one is available.	Ten minutes, then finish with a walk-around.
Twenty minutes rather than fifteen.	Fewer players, more substitutions.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The 4-3-3 shape recognisable throughout.

The block still around twenty-five metres.

Passing range holding up.

Louder communication than at the start.

The squad finishing curious rather than daunted.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *What's actually different about eleven-a-side?* — the distances. Push until somebody says it.
- *What's the same?* Everything else. Say it plainly.
- *How big is the block on a big pitch?* Still twenty-five metres.
- *What's the hardest new thing?* Usually the long pass and the shouting.
- *Which position felt best?* Ask everybody, and remember the answers.
- **Say clearly that nobody has a fixed position at twelve**, and that next season will involve trying several. It removes a real anxiety.
- Finish with what's coming: *last session of the season next time. We play, we look back at the whole year, and we work out what each of you takes into next season.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- One pass of over twenty-five metres from each outfield player. - Keep the block at twenty-five metres whatever the pitch size. - Talk louder than usual.	- Who can pass thirty metres accurately under pressure. Write the names down. - Whether the shape stretches as the pitch gets bigger. - Who thrives in space and who shrinks in it.	- <i>How far were our longest passes?</i> - <i>Did we stay compact?</i> - <i>Who could you hear?</i>

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

- **Long passing against a wall or a fence.** From 25 m, strike fifty balls low and firm, alternating feet. Count how many stay under waist height. It is the single most useful technical thing your squad can do this summer.
- **Run the distances.** Jog the length of an eleven-a-side pitch, then walk back, five times. It is not fitness training — it is so that forty metres stops feeling like a surprise.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any eleven-a-side match, watching **only one full-back**. Notice how far they are from the centre-backs, how often they are the furthest player from the ball, and how much of the game they spend jogging.
- *Optional extra:* find out which position you would like to try next season, and one thing you would need to get better at to play there. Bring both.

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; **34** Adapting to the Opposition; **36** The Last Session.

A natural follow-on. Session 36 — The Last Session, and the End-of-Season Review. A season of work, and a final hour that is mostly football. A warm-up the squad chooses, a game of their design, and a proper match with nothing coached at all. Then the end-of-season review — what changed, what each player takes forward, and an honest look at the a full season. It is the most enjoyable session of the year and the most important five minutes of the year, in that order.

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.