



SESSION A2 • STANDALONE PLAN

Defending Set Pieces — The Goals We Give Away

Set pieces • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	A2.1 First To It
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	A2.2 Defending the Corner
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	A2.3 The Long Throw
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	A2.4 The Defending Match
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

This is the more valuable half of the pair, because **under-12 teams concede far more from set pieces than they score from them.** The reasons are always the same and they are all fixable in an hour. Nobody is on the near post, so the flick-on beats everybody. The goalkeeper does not know whether the box is his, so he stays rooted and watches. The defenders back-pedal instead of attacking the ball, which means the first contact always belongs to whoever is running forwards. And the clearance goes ten metres, straight back to the edge of the box, where nobody is standing. **The single most useful correction is the least tactical one: go and meet it.** A defender moving forwards to a dropping ball wins it about four times out of five against a defender waiting for it, regardless of who is taller. Everything else tonight is organisation, and organisation is easy — it just has to be decided before Saturday rather than shouted during it. **One thing to be careful about.** Defending crosses and corners involves heading, and heading is restricted in Irish FA youth football at this age for good reason. Use the guidance in the setup note, keep the volume low, and let the squad clear with their feet wherever the ball allows it.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Attack the dropping ball** rather than waiting for it.
- **Fill the four jobs** — near post, markers, the edge, one stays up.
- **Let the goalkeeper own his box**, and answer his call.
- **Clear it high, wide and away** — never across your own goal.
- **Defend the long throw** by meeting it early, one in front and one behind.

KIT LIST

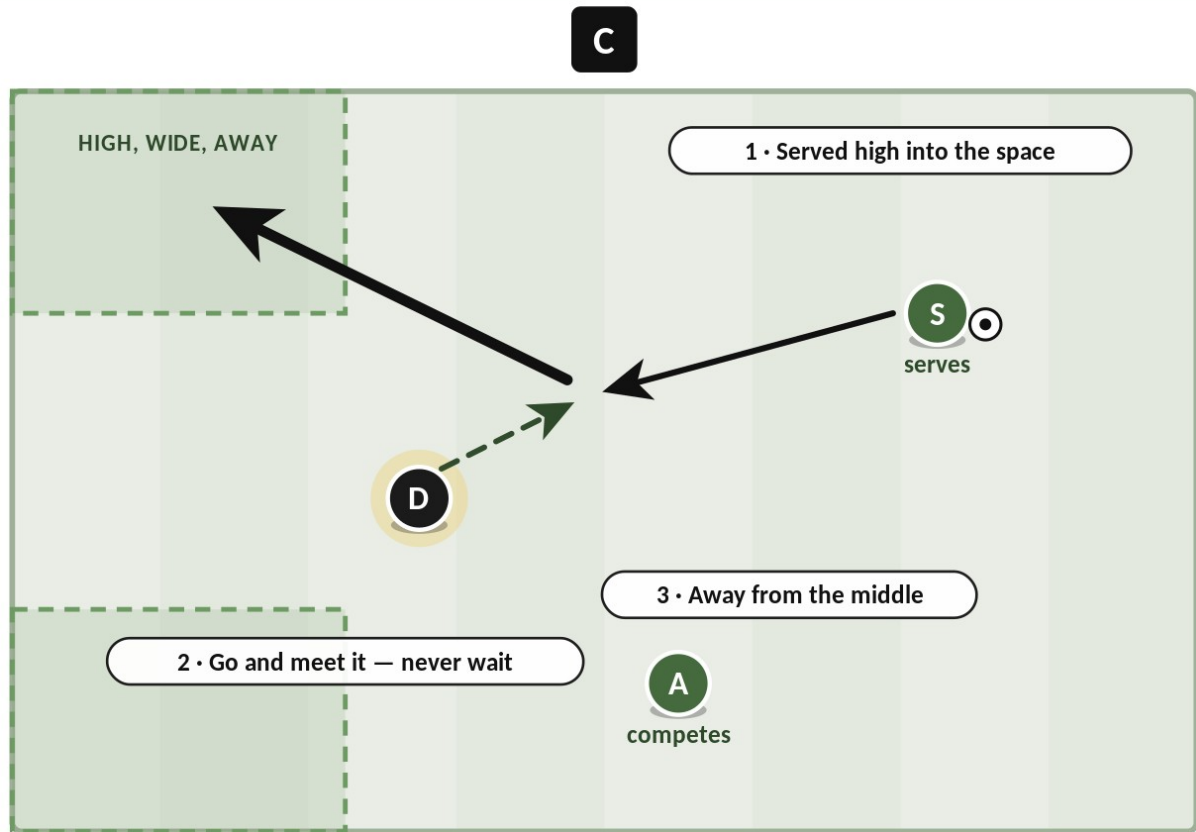
Ground needed: about 55 × 40 m with a marked penalty area if at all possible. **On heading:** the Irish FA restricts heading in training at this age — broadly, a small number of headers per session and none in a session that has already involved heading. Follow whatever the Irish FA currently specifies rather than my summary, keep the count low, use a properly inflated size 4 or a slightly softer ball, and coach the technique — attack the ball, eyes open, forehead, neck firm — rather than the volume. **Most of tonight can be defended with feet**, and the practices are written so that clearing with the foot is always allowed. **Where to use this session:** any time from Session 25 onwards, and specifically after any match in which you conceded from a corner — which is when the squad will actually want to know.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	20	All practices
Flat markers	46	Boxes, keeper's zone and clearing zones
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Two clear teams plus goalkeepers
Full-size goals	2	A2.2, A2.3 and A2.4
Goalkeeper gloves	2 pairs	The keepers are the main characters tonight
Softer or slightly under-inflated ball	2	For any heading repetitions — see the setup note

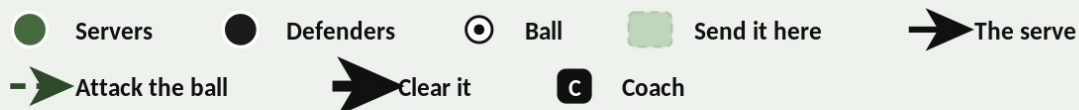
A2.1 FIRST TO IT

A ball served high into a space, one defender and one attacker, and one instruction: go and get it. The defender who moves first wins it almost every time, and ten minutes is enough to prove that to a squad.

32 x 20 m • threes • attack the dropping ball and send it away • 10 minutes



THE FIRST TOUCH BELONGS TO WHOEVER MOVES FIRST



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SET UP

- 32 x 20 m with **two clearing zones** marked in the far corners.
- **Threes: a server, a defender and an attacker.**
- The server throws or chips the ball high into the middle; both players start level, 8 m away.
- Three groups working at once, well apart.
- Coach in the middle.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and passing. **Ask one question at the door:** *how many did we concede from corners last season?* Most coaches do not know either, which is itself the point.
- Minute 3 — first four repetitions with no contest.** Just the defender, meeting a dropping ball and clearing it into a corner zone. Feet are fine and encouraged.

3. **Minute 5 — add the attacker.** Both start level. Whoever moves first usually wins it, and by the fourth repetition somebody will say so out loud.
4. **Minute 7 — one question, twenty seconds.** *Who won most of those, the big one or the one who moved first?* It is almost always the second, and it is the most encouraging thing a small defender hears all year.
5. **Minutes 7–10 — scored.** 1 point to the defender for a clearance into a corner zone; 1 to the attacker for any controlled touch. Rotate all three roles.

RULES & SCORING

- Both players start level, 8 m from where the ball will land.
- **Clear with the foot or the head** — a foot clearance scores exactly the same.
- **1 point** for a clearance into a corner zone; **1** to the attacker for a controlled touch.
- **Heading repetitions kept low** and counted — see the setup note.
- Rotate all three roles every three repetitions.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Meeting the ball on the move, taking off from one foot, and clearing through the ball rather than at it. If heading: eyes open, forehead, neck firm, attack it — never let it hit you.
Tactical	Whoever moves first wins the ball. Size matters far less than a metre of momentum, and this is the practice that proves it to the smaller players in your squad.
Physical	Jumping and short accelerations. Keep the heading volume low and the repetitions plentiful.
Psychological	Smaller defenders assume aerial balls are not theirs. Ten minutes of evidence changes that, and it is worth naming when it happens.
Social	Servers must serve well. A bad serve wastes a repetition — say it once.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Waiting for the ball to arrive	The whole practice. <i>Go and get it. Don't let it come to you.</i>
Backing away under the flight	<i>Forwards. Always forwards.</i>
Clearing it straight back down the middle	<i>Into the corner. Away from where you are.</i>
Anybody uncomfortable heading	Let them clear with their feet, every time, with no comment.
Heading volume creeping up	Count it. Stop when you reach the limit.

ASK THEM

- Who won most of those?
- Was it the biggest or the one who moved first?
- Where should the clearance go?
- What happens if you wait for it?
- Can you clear that with your foot instead?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Two attackers against one defender.	Defender starts a yard in front.
Longer serves so the judgement is harder.	Lower, flatter serves that can be cleared with the foot.

HARDER	EASIER
The clearance must reach a specific corner.	No attacker for the first five minutes.
Defender starts a yard behind.	Bigger clearing zones.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Defenders moving forwards to meet the ball.

Clearances going into the corner zones.

Smaller players winning aerial balls.

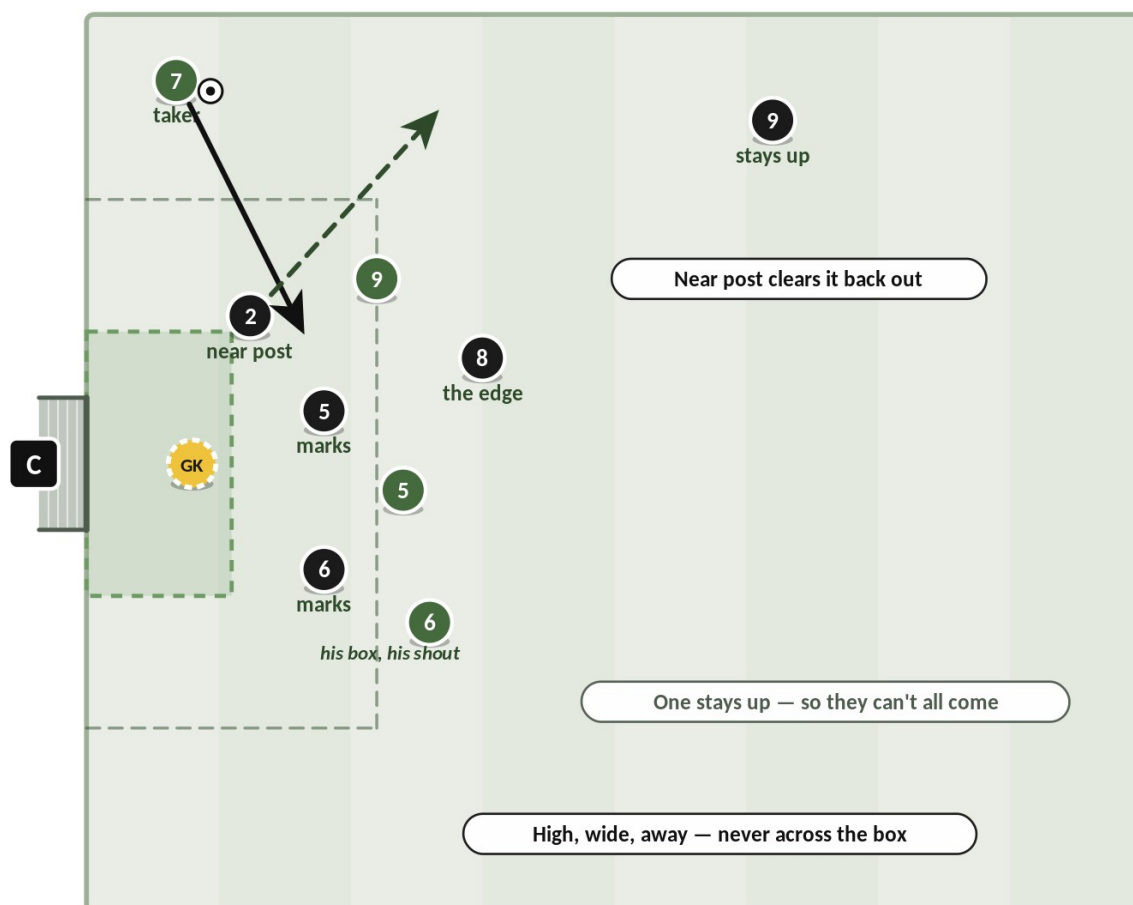
Heading volume low and controlled.

Somebody saying out loud that moving first is what wins it.

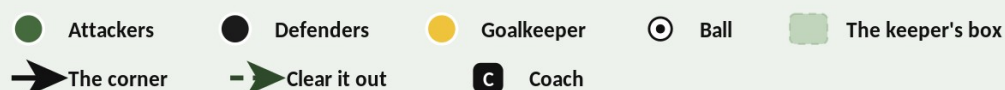
A2.2 DEFENDING THE CORNER

Four jobs, a goalkeeper who owns his six-yard box, and one player left up the pitch. Twelve repetitions and the squad will never defend a corner the way they did earlier.

40 x 34 m • four jobs, a goalkeeper who owns his box, and one player left up • 15 minutes



NEAR POST • MARKERS • THE EDGE • ONE STAYS UP



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SET UP

- 40 × 34 m with a **full goal and goalkeeper** and a marked penalty area.
- **Mark the keeper's zone** — the six-yard box — so everybody can see whose territory it is.
- **Five defenders against three attackers plus a taker**, then even it up as they improve.
- Balls at both corners; alternate sides.
- Coach behind the goal.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Minutes 0–3 — **set the jobs, statically. Near post. Two markers. The edge. One stays up.** Put each player in position and name them out loud. Then explain the keeper's zone: *inside that box is his, and if he calls, you get out of the way.*

2. **Minute 3 — the keeper's call, ninety seconds.** Two words only: "**keeper**" and "**away**". Practise them with three static deliveries so the defenders learn to react to the voice rather than the ball.
3. **Minutes 5–10 — live at three-quarter pace**, alternating sides. Defenders score 1 for a clearance beyond the edge of the box, 2 if they also win the second ball.
4. **Minute 10 — one question:** *which job is hardest?* It is the near post, and the player doing it deserves to be told so.
5. **Minutes 10–13 — even the numbers up** to five against five so the marking becomes real.
6. **Minutes 13–15 — one last thing:** the player who stays up. Point out that leaving one player forward stops them committing everybody, which is worth more than the extra body in the box.

RULES & SCORING

- **Four jobs, named, every time:** near post, two markers, the edge, one stays up.
- **The six-yard box belongs to the goalkeeper.** If he calls, everybody moves.
- **Defenders score 1** for a clearance beyond the edge of the box, **2** for also winning the second ball.
- **Attackers score 1** for a shot on target, **2** for a goal.
- Alternate the corner side every repetition.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Clearing high, wide and away — through the ball, and towards the touchline rather than across the goal. And the goalkeeper's decision: come and claim, or stay and set.
Tactical	The near post is the most important job on the pitch at a corner. Almost every corner goal at this age comes from a flick-on that nobody attacked. And the goalkeeper's voice is the organising instrument — a keeper who shouts two clear words is worth more than any amount of marking.
Physical	Jumping and clearing. Keep the heading count within guidance and rotate the goalkeepers.
Psychological	Goalkeepers are frequently terrified of corners because nobody has ever told them the box is theirs. Telling them, explicitly, changes a season.
Social	By the end everybody should know their own job and the keeper's two words. Test three players at random.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Nobody on the near post	The single most common and most expensive error.
The goalkeeper rooted on his line	<i>It's your box. Come and get it, or shout away.</i>
Defenders ball-watching	<i>See the ball and your man. Head on a swivel.</i>
Clearances across the box	The second most expensive error. <i>Towards the touchline.</i>
Everybody in the box	One stays up. Always. It is worth a point against them if they forget.
Nobody on the edge	Same lesson as Session 27 — the second ball decides more corners than the first.

ASK THEM

- What's your job?
- Whose box is that?
- What are the keeper's two words?

- Where should the clearance go?
- Who's staying up? Why does that help us?
- Which job is hardest?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Five attackers against five defenders.	Two attackers against five.
Two attackers on the near post.	Static deliveries for the first five minutes.
Short corners allowed.	Mark every defensive position with a cone.
The clearance must reach the halfway line.	Foot clearances only if heading volume is a concern.

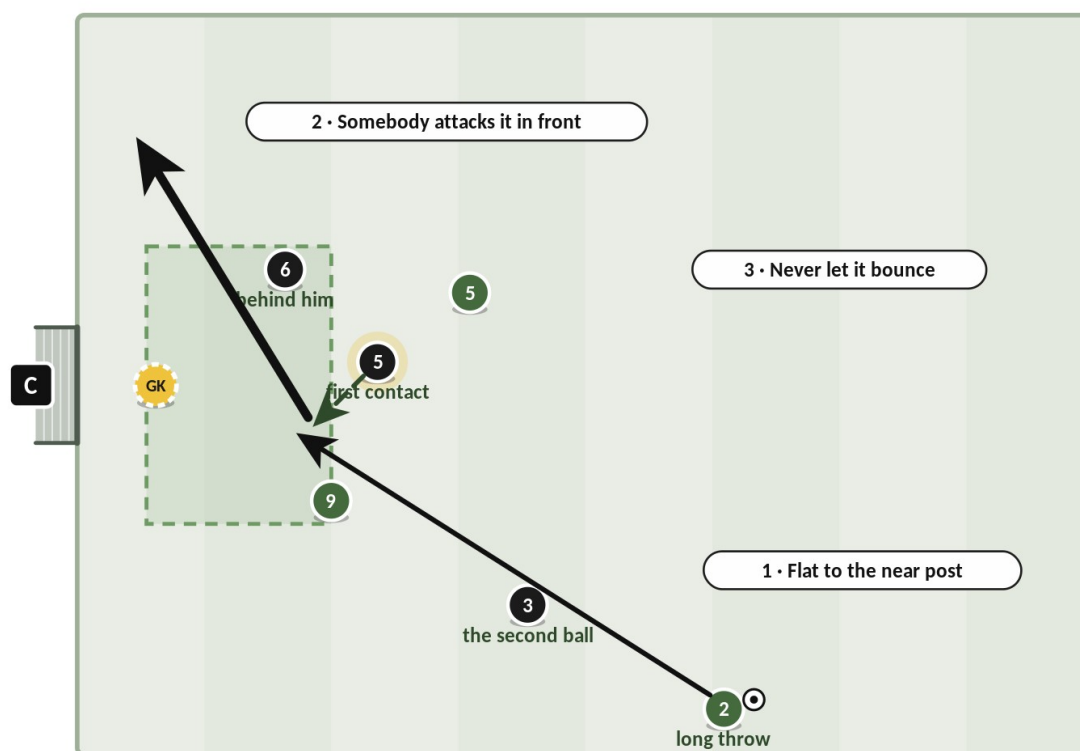
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Somebody on the near post, every corner.
 The goalkeeper calling and being obeyed.
 Clearances going wide rather than across.
 One player staying up.
 Somebody on the edge collecting second balls.

A2.3 THE LONG THROW

The restart that frightens young defenders most and is genuinely the easiest of all to defend — because a thrown ball is slow, predictable and beatable by anyone willing to move towards it.

44 x 32 m • the restart that frightens young defenders and is the easiest to defend • 15 minutes



MEET IT EARLY • ONE IN FRONT, ONE BEHIND • NEVER BACK-PEDAL



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SET UP

- 44 × 32 m with a full goal and goalkeeper.
- Mark the landing area near the front post so everybody knows where it is going.
- Four defenders against four attackers, plus a designated long thrower.
- Throws from about 22 m out; ten or twelve repetitions.
- Coach beside the goal.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Set it up in 45 seconds. They're going to throw it to the near post. Every time. Now stop it.
2. Minutes 0–4 — no coaching. Most squads will retreat, let it bounce, and concede. Let that happen three or four times.
3. Minute 4 — the three rules, ninety seconds. One in front of the target. One behind him. Nobody lets it bounce. That is the entire defence of a long throw and it takes two minutes to teach.

4. **Minutes 5–11 — live and scored.** Defenders 1 for clearing beyond the edge, 2 for winning it in front of the target. Attackers 1 for a shot, 2 for a goal.
5. **Minute 11 — add the wide free-kick** as an alternative delivery so they have to read which is coming.
6. **Minutes 11–15 — swap the teams** so everybody defends and everybody throws.

RULES & SCORING

- **One defender in front of the landing area, one behind it.** Both named before each throw.
- **Nobody lets the ball bounce** — a bounced ball in the box concedes the point.
- **Defenders 1** for clearing beyond the edge, **2** for winning it in front.
- The goalkeeper may come for anything inside his box and must call it.
- Everybody defends at least six repetitions.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Attacking the flight, and clearing first time. A long throw arrives slowly, which makes it the easiest ball in football to time — say so, because the players do not believe it.
Tactical	One in front, one behind. The player in front wins the flick; the player behind picks up everything that beats him. Two players solve a long throw completely. And nobody lets it bounce — a bouncing ball in a crowded box is where the goals come from.
Physical	Moderate. Keep heading repetitions within guidance; most long throws can be cleared with the foot or chest.
Psychological	Squads develop a fear of the big thrower. Naming the plan out loud removes most of it before kick-off.
Social	The goalkeeper should be organising this. If yours is quiet, stand behind the goal and make the calls with them for three repetitions.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Retreating under the flight	<i>Forwards. It's a slow ball.</i>
Letting it bounce	The single fault that concedes from long throws.
Nobody behind the first defender	<i>If he misses it, who's there?</i>
Clearances back into the middle	Same as the corner — wide, always.
Everybody watching the thrower	<i>Watch the space, not the arms.</i>
Fear of the big thrower	Point out how slow the ball is. It genuinely helps.

ASK THEM

- Where is it going? Every time?
- Who's in front and who's behind?
- Why must it not bounce?
- Is a thrown ball fast or slow?
- Whose call is it if it comes into the six-yard box?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Five attackers against four.	Three attackers against four.

HARDER	EASIER
Two possible deliveries — near post or back post — unannounced.	Announce the target before each throw.
No foot clearances in the landing area.	Shorter throws.
A flick-on specialist among the attackers.	Foot and chest clearances only.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Defenders moving forwards to meet it.

One in front and one behind, named each time.

Nothing bouncing in the box.

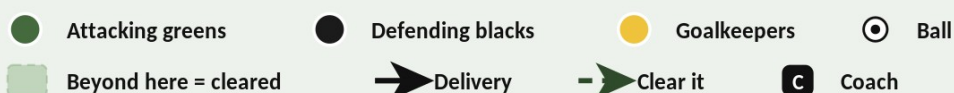
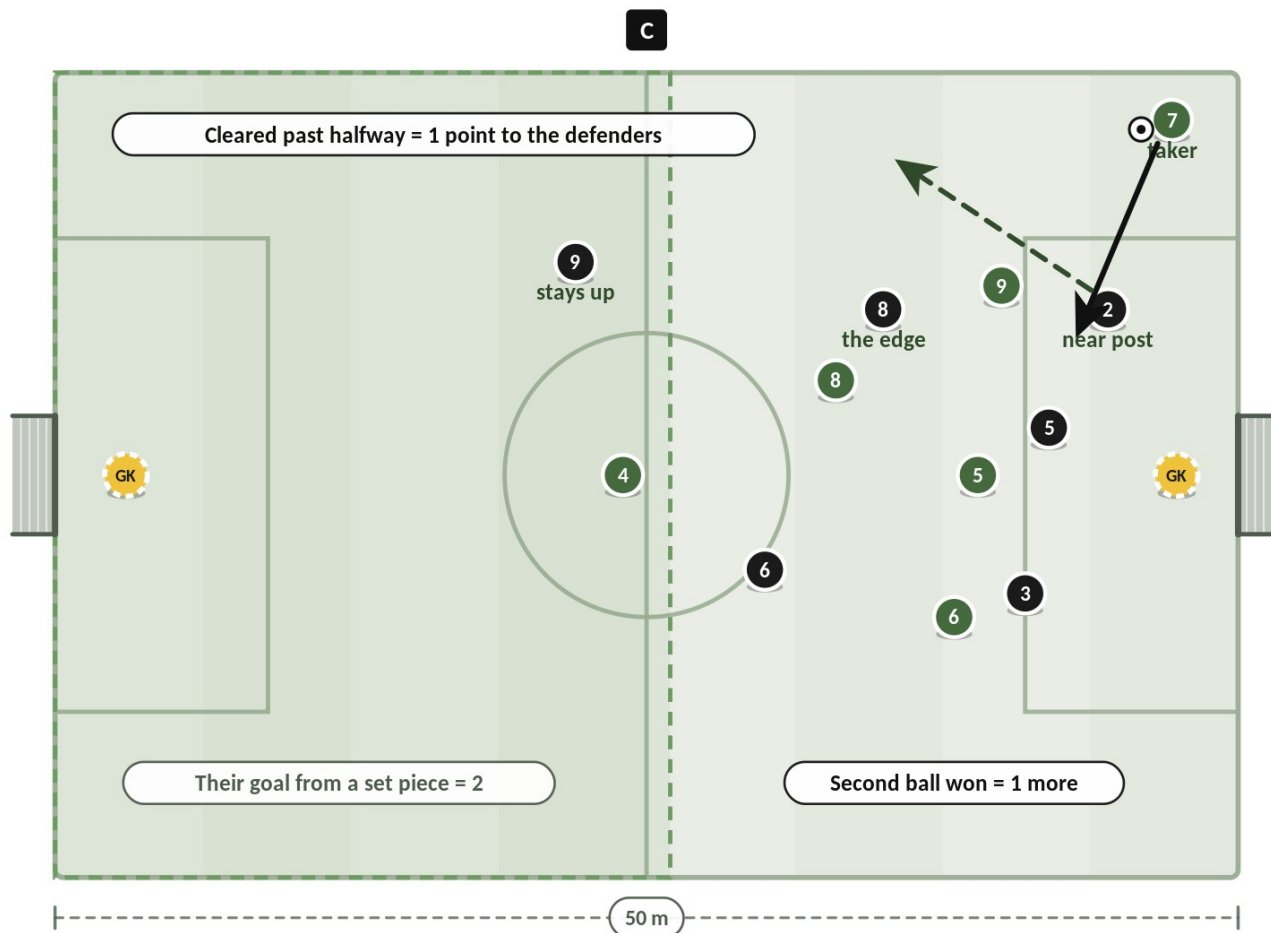
Clearances going wide.

The fear visibly gone by minute 12.

A2.4 THE DEFENDING MATCH (7 v 7)

The mirror of A1.4. Every stoppage is a set piece, and this time the defending team is the one that scores — for clearing it properly and for winning the second ball. Fifteen minutes of repetitions at match speed.

50 x 34 m • every stoppage is a set piece • clearing one properly scores • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 x 34 m with full-size goals and marked boxes.
- 7 v 7 including goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, play 8v8 or roll substitutes every two minutes.
- **Every ball out on the byline is a corner**, whoever put it out.
- Free-kicks given generously in wide areas.
- Coach on the halfway line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Shape and teams in 60 seconds.
2. **Explain in two sentences:** Every ball out on the byline is a corner. Clearing it past halfway is a point to the defenders, and winning the second ball is another.

3. **Minutes 0–6 — play and announce the defensive points loudly.** The whole design depends on defending a set piece feeling like scoring.
4. **Minute 6 — drinks and one question:** *how many of their corners have come to nothing?* Usually most of them, and the squad will not have noticed.
5. **Minutes 7–13 — add the organisation clock:** the defending team has eight seconds from the corner being awarded to be set. If they are not, the attacking team's goal counts double.
6. **Final two minutes — no scoring for defending,** and see whether the four jobs still get filled.

RULES & SCORING

- Every ball out on the byline is a corner.
- Defenders score 1 for clearing beyond the halfway line, 1 more for winning the second ball.
- A goal from a set piece = 2 points to the attacking team.
- From minute 7: the defending team has eight seconds to be organised.
- The goalkeeper must call on every delivery into his box.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Clearing under real pressure, and the goalkeeper's decision-making with bodies in front of him.
Tactical	Speed of organisation decides set-piece defending. A team set in six seconds defends comfortably; a team still arguing about who marks whom at ten seconds concedes. And clearing past halfway rather than to the edge is what turns a defended corner into an attack.
Physical	Lighter than a normal match because of the stoppages — a good option on a heavy pitch or with tired legs.
Psychological	Defending a corner successfully feels like nothing unless somebody names it. Announce every defensive point by name and the behaviour sticks.
Social	Listen for the goalkeeper. By minute 10 they should be organising the whole box, and if they are, tell them so in front of everybody.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Slow organisation	The eight-second clock fixes it. Count out loud.
The near post being abandoned under match pressure	Two reminders, then let the scoreline teach.
Clearances stopping at the edge of the box	<i>Past halfway. Give yourself time to get out.</i>
Everybody in the box	One stays up, still.
The goalkeeper going quiet	The commonest regression. One prompt, then leave it.
The final two minutes	Do the four jobs survive with nothing scored for them?

ASK THEM

- How many of their corners came to nothing?
- How quickly are we getting set?
- Where did that clearance go?
- Who's on the near post?
- Keeper — did you call it?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Six seconds to be organised.	Twelve seconds to be organised.
Only defensive points count for five minutes.	Corners only — drop free-kicks from the condition.
Short corners allowed.	6 v 6 on 44 × 30 m with rolling substitutes.
Larger pitch (58 × 38 m) so clearances have to travel.	Award the clearance point for anything beyond the box, not halfway.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Organised within eight seconds.

Near post filled every time.

Clearances reaching halfway.

Second balls being won.

The goalkeeper audibly running the box.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *Who wins a dropping ball — the biggest, or the one who moves first?*
- *What are the four jobs at a corner?* Near post, markers, the edge, one stays up.
- *Whose box is the six-yard box?* And what are his two words?
- *Where does a clearance go?* High, wide and away — never across our own goal.
- *How do we defend a long throw?* One in front, one behind, and it never bounces.
- **Name your near-post player** — and tell them it is the most important job at a corner, because nobody has ever told them that.
- Finish with the number: *we've conceded from set pieces this season and we've scored from almost none. Both of those change now.*

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Near post filled at every corner. - One player stays up every time. - Every clearance goes wide, never across our box.	- How long it takes us to organise at a corner. Count it. - Whether the goalkeeper calls — and whether anybody listens. - Where our clearances land.	- <i>How quickly did we get set?</i> - <i>Who was on the near post?</i> - <i>Did the keeper call it?</i>

HOMEWORK — "MEET IT" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES

- **Attack the dropping ball.** Have somebody throw a ball high 6 m in front of you; start still, move forwards and clear it with your foot or chest. Twenty repetitions. Keep any heading well within your association's guidance and stop if your neck aches.
- **Clearing for distance and direction.** From the edge of a garden or a wall, strike twenty balls high and to one side. Direction matters more than distance — a clearance across the middle is worse than a short one to the touchline.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any professional match, watching **only how a team sets up to defend corners**. Count how many are in the box, find the near-post player, and find the one left up the pitch. All three are always there.
- *Optional extra:* find a goal conceded from a corner and work out which of the four jobs was missing. It is nearly always the near post.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — set pieces. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **A1** Attacking Set Pieces; **A4** Throw-Ins.

A natural follow-on. Session A3 — The Goalkeeper. The player who has appeared in every session of this curriculum and never had one of their own. Handling, starting position, angles, the decision to come or stay, and distribution as a way of starting attacks rather than ending them — with the outfield players used as servers and finishers so nobody stands around. It is the session that most changes a young goalkeeper's season, and most clubs never run it.

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.