



SESSION A5 • STANDALONE PLAN

The Small Space Session — Frozen, Flooded, or Somebody Else Has the Pitch

Contingency — when the plan does not fit • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	A5.1 The Box
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	A5.2 Four Goals
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	A5.3 Winner Stays
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	A5.4 Futsal Rules
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

Six or seven nights a season the plan is not available. The pitch is frozen, or flooded, or the under-14s have the good half, or you have been moved into a sports hall with a floor that eats studs. Most coaches respond by running whatever they had planned in a quarter of the space, which does not work, or by giving the squad a ball and standing back, which works better than the first option and teaches nothing. **This session is designed for the space you have actually got — about a quarter of a pitch, no full-size goals, and a surface you would rather not slide on.** It is not a compromise. Small spaces are where the highest number of touches per player happens, and a squad that plays 4v4 with four goals for fifteen minutes has had more decisions, more turns and more shots than the same squad in a 9v9 on grass. **The only genuine losses are running distance and long passing,** and neither of those is the thing your squad needs most in January. Two design rules run through everything: **no queues,** because a small space plus a queue is a session where two people play and twelve stand in the cold; and **no sliding,** because hard ground and tarmac take skin off.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Get a very high number of touches** in a small area.
- **Turn and change direction** under pressure in tight space.
- **Scan constantly**, because in a small area the picture changes every second.
- **Play quickly** — one and two touches by necessity rather than instruction.
- **Enjoy an evening that could easily have been cancelled.**

KIT LIST

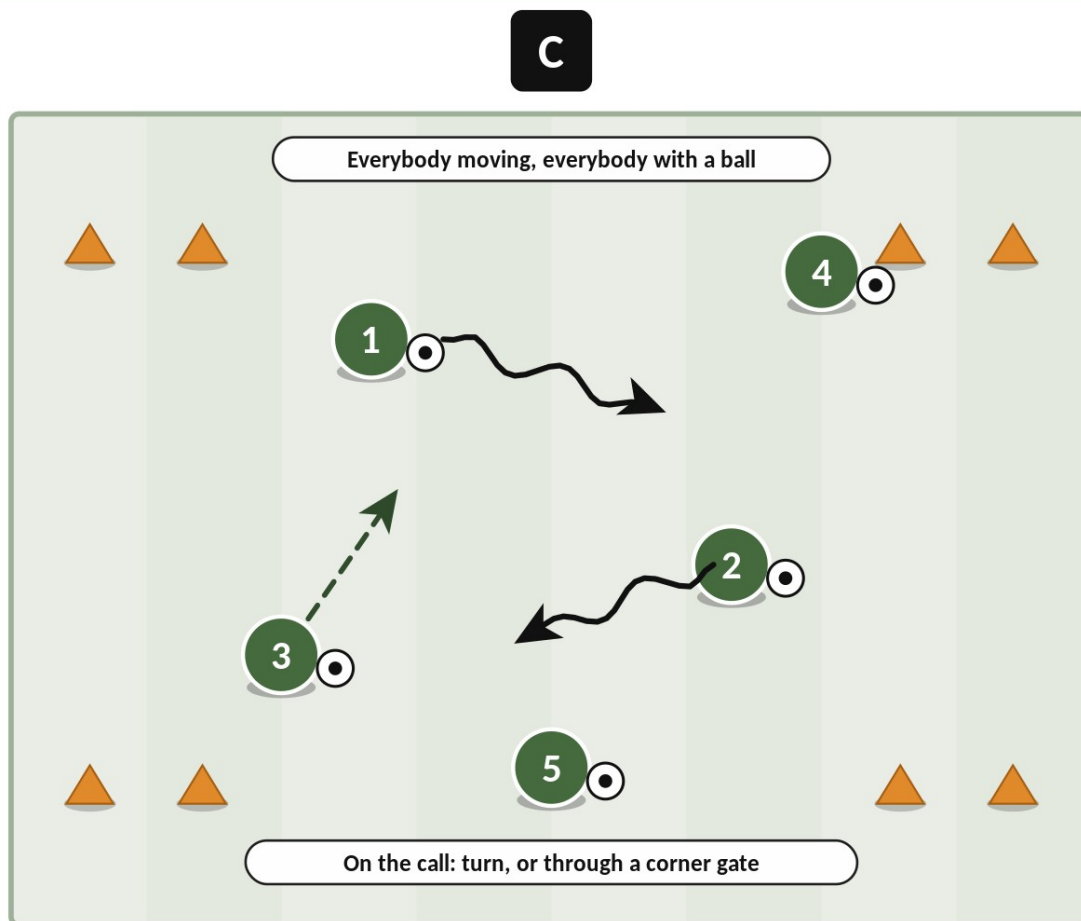
Ground needed: **about 34 × 22 m in total, and every practice fits inside that.** It works on a quarter of a pitch, a 3G corner, a sports hall, a tennis court, or a decent car park. **Surface notes matter more than usual here.** On a hard indoor floor use trainers rather than boots and a futsal ball or a slightly deflated size 4 — a normal ball indoors is uncontrollable and the session becomes a fetching exercise. On tarmac, ban sliding absolutely and check for glass before anybody arrives. On frozen grass, be honest with yourself about whether it is safe at all: if the surface is rutted and rock hard, twenty minutes of ball work and a conversation is a better session than an hour of turned ankles. **And the psychological point:** tell the squad at the start that this is a proper session rather than a fallback. They will believe you, because it is true.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs — one each if possible	16	The warm-up needs a ball per player
Flat markers	40	Everything is marked with flats, not cones, on hard surfaces
Bibs — red / blue / grey	6 / 6 / 4	Three teams for the rotation game
Cones or poles for small goals	16	Eight 2–3 m goals across the session
Futsal ball or slightly softer size 4	2	Indoors or on tarmac — a normal ball is unmanageable

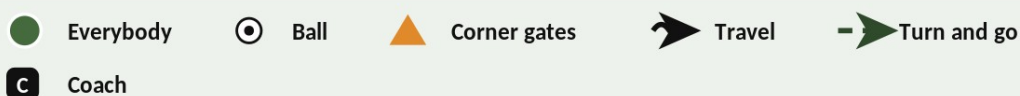
A5.1 THE BOX

Everybody in one small area, everybody with a ball, nobody waiting. Ten minutes of touches, turns and looking up — and the warmest anybody will be all evening.

24 x 18 m • everybody with a ball • turns, traffic and no queues • 10 minutes



NO QUEUES • NO LINES • NOBODY WAITING



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SET UP

- 24 × 18 m, or whatever you have — smaller is fine and arguably better.
- A ball each. If you do not have sixteen, pair up and share, alternating every thirty seconds.
- Four gates in the corners, 2.5 m wide.
- Nothing else.
- Coach in the middle with the group.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Minutes 0–3 — arrival. Greet each player by name and get them straight into the area with a ball. No standing, no talking through the plan.

2. **Minute 3 — traffic.** Everybody dribbling in the same space, heads up, avoiding each other. The area is deliberately too small, so it is genuinely difficult.
3. **Minute 5 — turns on the call.** Shout a turn — inside hook, outside hook, drag back, Cruyff — and everybody does it. Ninety seconds, four or five calls.
4. **Minute 7 — the gates.** On the call, everybody dribbles through a corner gate and back into the middle. It adds direction and a bit of urgency.
5. **Minutes 8-10 — the shrinking box.** Take a metre off each side every thirty seconds. By the end it is chaos and everybody's head is up, which is exactly the point.

RULES & SCORING

- **A ball each**, or one between two with a thirty-second swap.
- **No contact and no barging** — the area is small and getting smaller.
- **Turns on the call**, everybody at once.
- **Nobody stops moving** for ten minutes.
- The box shrinks in the last two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Close control, small touches, and turning with the outside of the foot. In a crowded area the ball never leaves the feet.
Tactical	Scanning, forced by geography. In a box this size a player who does not look up collides with somebody within about four seconds, which teaches the habit more effectively than any instruction.
Physical	A proper warm-up — continuous, varied, and it warms cold hands and feet faster than anything static.
Psychological	Starting the moment they arrive sets the tone that this is a real session, not a wet-weather holding pattern.
Social	It is noisy and it should be. Let it be.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Heads down	The shrinking box fixes it without a word.
Big touches	<i>Small ones. There's no room for a big one.</i>
Players drifting to the edges	<i>Through the middle. That's where it's hard.</i>
Anybody standing still	The one thing to correct.
Collisions	Expected and fine, as long as nobody is barging.

ASK THEM

- How do you avoid each other?
- Which turn is easiest in a tight space?
- What happens to your touches when the box gets smaller?
- Where should you be looking?
- Is this harder or easier than a big pitch?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller box from the start.	Bigger box.
Weak foot only for two minutes.	One ball between two.
Two players without a ball acting as obstacles.	No shrinking.
A defender trying to kick balls out.	Fewer turn calls.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Heads up.

Small touches.

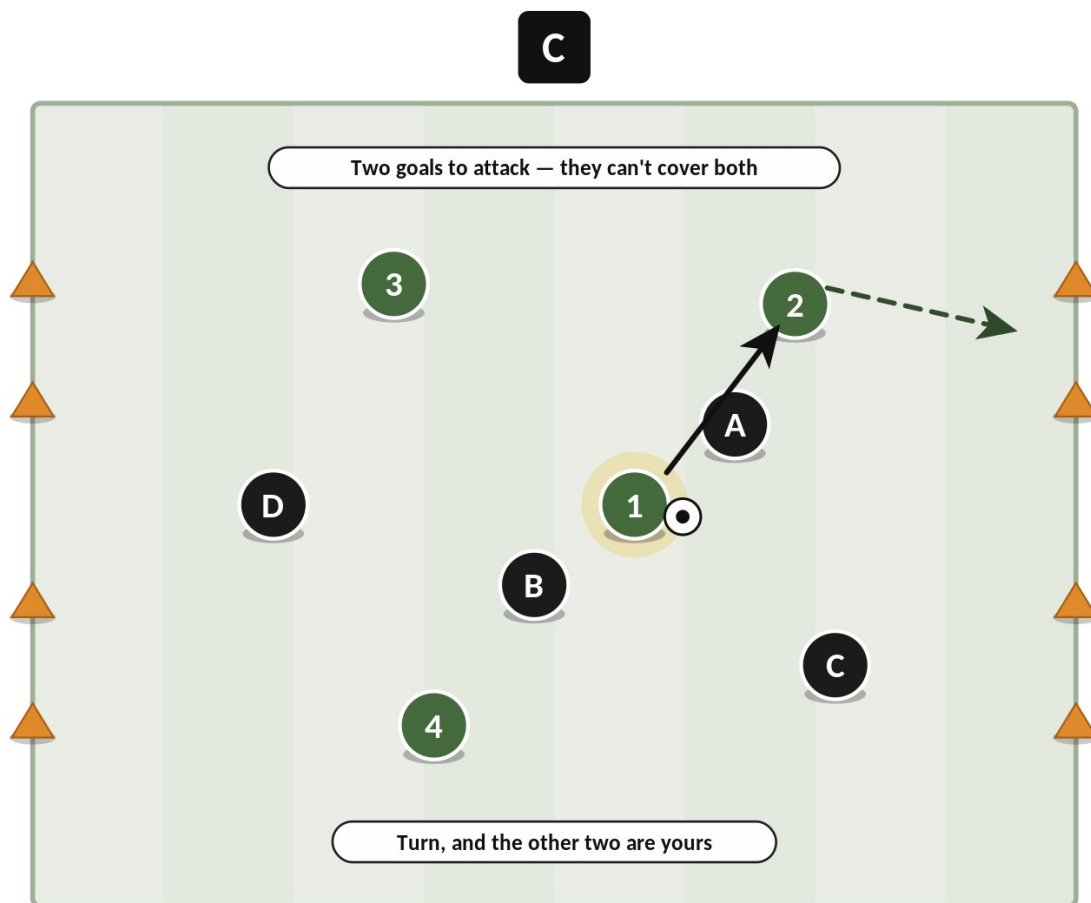
Nobody standing still.

The shrinking box producing more looking rather than more collisions.

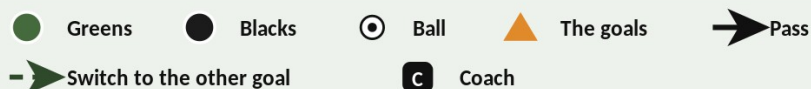
A5.2 FOUR GOALS

Four against four with two goals to attack and two to defend. It is the best small-space practice there is, because the picture changes every three seconds and a team that turns finds two undefended targets.

26 x 20 m • four v four • four goals, no keepers, and nowhere to hide • 15 minutes



FOUR GOALS MEANS THE PICTURE CHANGES EVERY THREE SECONDS



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SET UP

- 26 x 20 m, with **two small goals at each end**, 3 m wide, made of markers.
- **Four against four**, no goalkeepers.
- With 14–16, run two pitches side by side or rotate a four in every two minutes.
- Spare balls at the sides for instant restarts.
- Coach between the pitches.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 45 seconds.** *Two goals that way, two that way. No keepers. Go.*

2. **Minutes 0–5 — play, no coaching.** Let them discover that switching attack from one goal to the other is nearly always free.
3. **Minute 5 — one question:** *why is it easier to score in the far goal?* Because everybody has followed the ball to the near one, which is the entire lesson of the practice.
4. **Minutes 6–11 — scored.** 1 point per goal, **2 if the ball has been switched from one goal to the other** in the same attack.
5. **Minute 11 — two touches maximum**, which in this space is more than enough and produces a noticeable jump in speed.
6. **Minutes 11–15 — rotate the teams** so everybody plays everybody.

RULES & SCORING

- **Four goals** — two to attack, two to defend. No goalkeepers.
- **1 point** per goal, **2** if the attack switched from one goal to the other.
- From minute 11: **two touches maximum**.
- Ball out: instant restart from the side, no throw-ins.
- Rotate teams every four or five minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Turning, first touch away from pressure, and the short pass under immediate pressure — the three techniques the whole main curriculum is built on.
Tactical	Two goals cannot both be defended by four players. The moment a team over-commits to one, the other is open — which is Session 31's overload idea in a form small enough to see in three seconds.
Physical	High intensity in short bursts, with almost no long running. Ideal for a cold night or a hard surface.
Psychological	Nobody can hide in a 4v4. Watch for the player who suddenly has to be involved and enjoys it.
Social	Four is the largest number that still feels like everybody matters. Expect a lot of talking.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Everybody chasing one goal	The whole practice. <i>There's another one behind you.</i>
Nobody turning	<i>Turn. Look at what's behind you.</i>
Big touches in a small space	The two-touch rule at minute 11 sorts it.
One player dominating	Rotate the teams rather than saying anything.
Slow restarts	Instant, from the side. Keep the ball rolling.
Quality dropping	Small pitches are intense. Rotate more often than feels necessary.

ASK THEM

- Why is the far goal easier?
- When should you turn?
- How many of them can defend two goals?
- What's your first touch doing?
- Which goal is free right now?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
One touch for two minutes.	Bigger pitch (30 × 22 m).
Smaller pitch (22 × 16 m).	Unlimited touches.
Three against three in the same space.	Five against four.
Only switched goals count.	Wider goals.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Attacks switching between the two goals.

Frequent turning.

High touch counts for everybody.

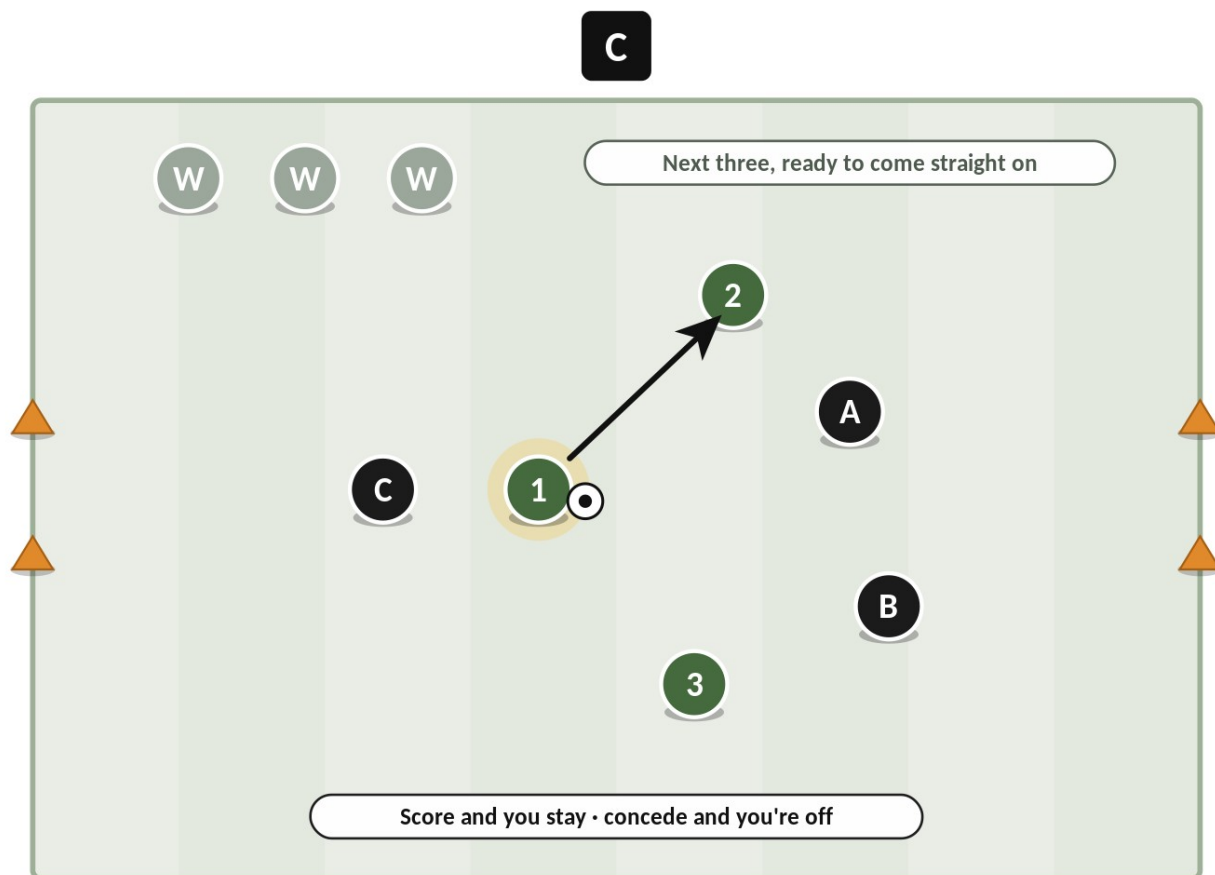
Nobody hiding.

Constant talking.

A5.3 WINNER STAYS

Three against three, ninety seconds, and the next three ready to come straight on. Almost no organisation, very high intensity, and a rotation that means nobody is off for more than three minutes.

30 x 20 m • three v three, ninety seconds, next three on • 15 minutes



NINETY SECONDS • NO STOPPAGES • EVERYBODY PLAYS EVERY THREE MINUTES



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SET UP

- 30 × 20 m with one small goal at each end, 3.5 m wide.
- Teams of three, four or five teams depending on numbers.
- Two teams on, the rest waiting on the side — but standing ready, not sitting.
- One ball on the pitch, spares behind each goal.
- Coach with a stopwatch and nothing else.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams of three, sorted in 60 seconds. Mix abilities rather than balancing them precisely — this format tolerates it.

2. **Explain in one sentence:** *Ninety seconds. Score and you stay on, concede and you're off. If it's nil-nil, both teams come off.*
3. **Minutes 0–8 — run it continuously.** No stoppages, no coaching, no talking except the timer.
4. **Minute 8 — one question to everybody:** *what's different about three against three? You want there's nowhere to hide and you get the ball all the time.*
5. **Minutes 8–15 — keep it running,** and keep a rough tally so there is a winner at the end. The tally matters more to them than it does to you.
6. **Resist coaching entirely.** The format does the work and interrupting it wastes the best part of the session.

RULES & SCORING

- **Ninety-second games.** Score and you stay; concede and you go off. Nil-nil and both teams change.
- **Waiting teams stand ready** at the side and come on within five seconds.
- **No stoppages** — ball out means the nearest spare is played in immediately.
- ! **No slide tackles.**
- Keep a running tally of wins.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything, under constant pressure. Note what breaks down but do not stop the game to fix it.
Tactical	Three against three is the smallest game that contains everything — a triangle in possession, press-cover-balance out of it, and a transition every few seconds. Say that once at the end rather than during.
Physical	Ninety seconds is close to maximal, and the rest between games is genuine recovery. A very efficient way to load a squad on a small surface.
Psychological	Winner-stays is the most motivating format in youth football. It also produces disappointment for the team that keeps losing — watch them and mix a player in if it becomes miserable.
Social	Teams of three form identities within about five minutes. It is one of the few formats where quiet players end up organising.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Teams sitting down while waiting	<i>Standing, ready. Five seconds and you're on.</i>
One team losing every time	Swap one player quietly between games.
The tempo dropping	Ninety seconds is the maximum. Do not extend it.
Anybody hiding	Impossible in a three. Note who suddenly cannot.
Your own urge to coach	Resist it. This is the format working.
Arguments about the score	Keep the tally yourself and be visibly fair.

ASK THEM

- What's different about three against three?
- How often are you getting the ball?
- Who's the spare player when you're attacking?
- What happens when one of you goes and the other two don't?
- Which team's winning?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Sixty-second games.	Two-minute games.
Two against two.	Four against four.
Two touches.	Bigger pitch.
Smaller pitch.	Both teams stay on a nil-nil and play another ninety seconds.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Games starting within five seconds of the last one ending.

Very high involvement for everybody.

Quiet players organising.

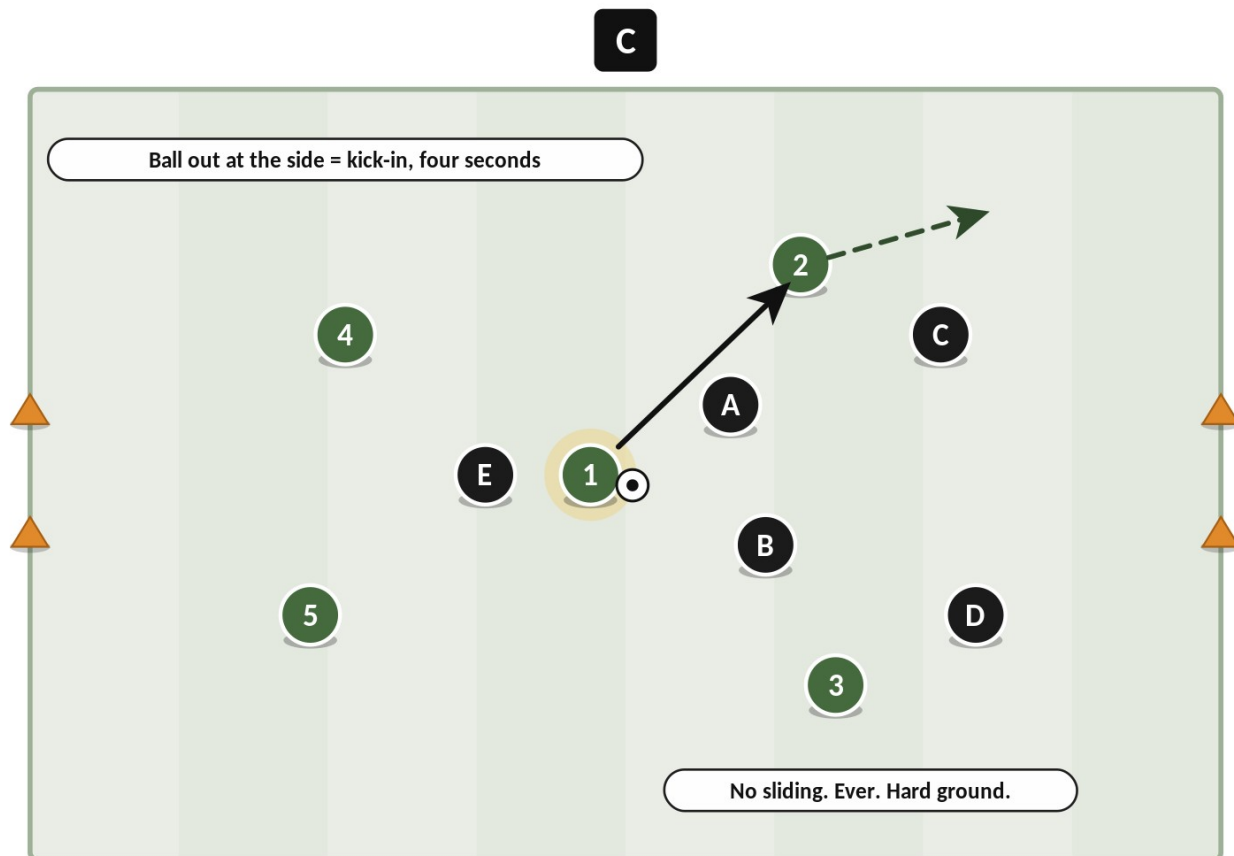
The coach saying almost nothing.

Somebody asking to keep playing at the end.

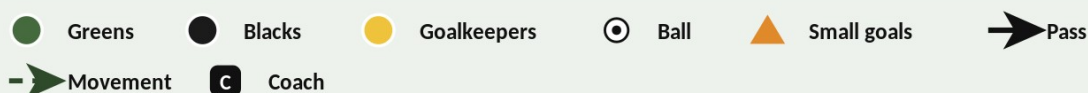
A5.4 FUTSAL RULES (5 v 5)

Five against five with futsal restarts — kick-ins instead of throw-ins, four seconds to restart, and no sliding. It keeps the ball rolling almost continuously and it is the closest thing to a real match that fits in this space.

34 x 22 m • kick-ins, four seconds, no slide tackles • 15 minutes



SMALL PITCH • BIG NUMBERS • A TOUCH EVERY FEW SECONDS



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SET UP

- 34 x 22 m with **small goals** at each end, or full goals if you have them.
- 5 v 5 with goalkeepers if numbers allow; 5 v 5 outfield with small goals and no keepers if not.
- With 14-16, roll substitutes every two minutes so everybody plays most of it.
- Balls positioned all round the outside for instant restarts.
- Coach on the side with a stopwatch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams and goals set in 60 seconds.
2. Explain the three futsal rules in twenty seconds: Ball out at the side is a kick-in, not a throw. Every restart within four seconds. Nobody slides.

3. **Minutes 0–6 — play.** The four-second rule keeps the ball in play far more than a normal match and the tempo is noticeably higher.
4. **Minute 6 — one question:** *how does this feel different?* Usually *faster* and *I'm always involved* — both correct.
5. **Minutes 7–13 — add one futsal habit:** the sole of the foot. Stopping and rolling the ball with the sole is the defining futsal touch and it transfers directly to tight areas on grass.
6. **Minutes 13–15 — free play,** no conditions, and let it finish on a high.

RULES & SCORING

- **Kick-ins** from the side, not throw-ins.
- **Four seconds** for every restart — kick-in, goal kick or corner.

! No slide tackles, on any surface, for any reason.

- Ball out at the end line: goal kick or corner as normal.
- Rolling substitutions every two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The sole of the foot — stopping the ball, rolling it, dragging it. It is the technique small spaces reward most and it barely appears in eleven-a-side coaching.
Tactical	Everything happens faster and closer. The principles are unchanged — support angles, press and cover, transition — but the distances are three metres rather than fifteen, which is why futsal players read the game so well.
Physical	Continuous and intense with very little long running. Substitute regularly; the load is higher than it looks.
Psychological	This is meant to be the most enjoyable fifteen minutes of a night that could have been cancelled. Make sure it is.
Social	Small pitches produce loud football. That is the correct outcome.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Slow restarts	Four seconds. Count out loud for the first two minutes.
Anybody sliding	Stop it immediately and explain the surface once.
Big touches	The pitch punishes them without any help from you.
Players using the sole	Praise the first person who does it properly, by name.
Substitutions being forgotten	Set a timer; small-sided football is more tiring than it looks.
Enjoyment	If this is not the best part of the evening, something has gone wrong.

ASK THEM

- How does this feel different?
- Why is a kick-in quicker than a throw?
- What can you do with the sole of your foot?
- How often are you getting the ball?
- Would you rather play this or a normal match?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Two touches.	Six v six so there is more help.
Four v four in the same space.	Six-second restarts.
Three-second restarts.	Bigger pitch if you have it.
Goals only count from inside your own half of the attack.	Throw-ins instead of kick-ins if the surface is very slippery.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The ball in play almost continuously.

Restarts inside four seconds.

No sliding at all.

Somebody using the sole of the foot deliberately.

A squad that leaves happy on a night that nearly did not happen.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *How many touches do you think you got tonight compared with a normal session?* Far more, and worth saying.
- *What's harder in a small space? What's easier?*
- *Why is the far goal always the free one?*
- *What can the sole of your foot do?*
- *Would you rather have had this cancelled?* Nobody ever says yes.
- **Tell them plainly that this was a proper session**, not a substitute for one. It changes how they respond next time the weather is bad.

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Small touches in tight areas — the pitch is bigger but the habit transfers. - Quick restarts, as if the four-second rule still applied. - Turn and look for the free side.	- Whether the tight-area control from tonight shows up on grass. - How quickly we restart compared with the opposition. - Who looks comfortable in a crowd — small-space football reveals it.	- <i>Did the small stuff from Tuesday help?</i> - <i>How quick were our restarts?</i> - <i>Where was the free side?</i>

HOMEWORK — "A BALL AND A WALL" · WHENEVER THE WEATHER IS BAD

- **Sole rolls.** Roll the ball side to side under the sole of each foot, a hundred each, then drag it backwards fifty times each foot. Two square metres of space is enough and it is the most useful indoor practice there is.
- **Turns in a doorway.** Mark a metre of space and practise the four turns from tonight — inside hook, outside hook, drag back, Cruyff — twenty each. Tight control is built in tight space.
- **Wall passes.** Fifty one-touch returns against a wall from 3 m, then fifty from 6 m. It is the whole of passing technique in a hallway.
- *And the honest one:* on the nights training is cancelled, twenty minutes with a ball in a small space is worth more than the session you missed.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Same theme — contingency. These cover the same ground from other angles and can be run in any order, before or after this one: **A6** Odd Numbers; **A7** Four v Four.

A natural follow-on. Session A6 — Odd Numbers. For the night eight players turn up, or twenty-two. Every session in this curriculum assumes fourteen to sixteen, and neither of those two evenings is rare. A6 gives you a full hour that works with a small group and a full hour that works with a very large one, using the same four practices scaled in opposite directions — plus the honest guidance on what to cut when there simply are not enough bodies for the plan.

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.