



SESSION A6 • STANDALONE PLAN

Odd Numbers — The Night Eight Turn Up, and the Night Twenty-Two Do

Contingency — when the plan does not fit • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 8 to 24 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	A6.1 The Circle
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	A6.2 Add a Grid
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	A6.3 Outside Players
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	A6.4 Split or Shrink
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

Every one of the thirty-six sessions in this curriculum assumes fourteen to sixteen players. **Neither of the two evenings that break that assumption is rare.** In February, eight turn up because of flu, a school trip and rain. In April, twenty-two turn up because the under-13s are off and three lads have brought a friend. Both nights, the coach standing in the car park with a plan for sixteen has a problem — and the usual answers are bad ones. **With too few, coaches abandon the session and just play, which wastes the evening.** With too many, they run the plan anyway and put the extras in a queue, which is worse: a queue is the single clearest sign of a badly designed session, and on a big night you can end up with six children standing still for forty minutes in the cold. This session is not really a session at all. **It is four practices, each built so the same activity works at any number between eight and twenty-four, plus the four design principles that let you do the same thing to any session in the folder.** Learn the principles here and you will never again look at a car park and wonder what to do.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- Run a full, proper session at any number from eight to twenty-four.
- Absorb extra players on the outside, never in a queue.
- Add grids rather than add waiting, when numbers are high.
- Keep every practice recognisable so nothing is lost on an odd night.
- Understand the four scaling rules well enough to apply them to any of the thirty-six sessions.

KIT LIST

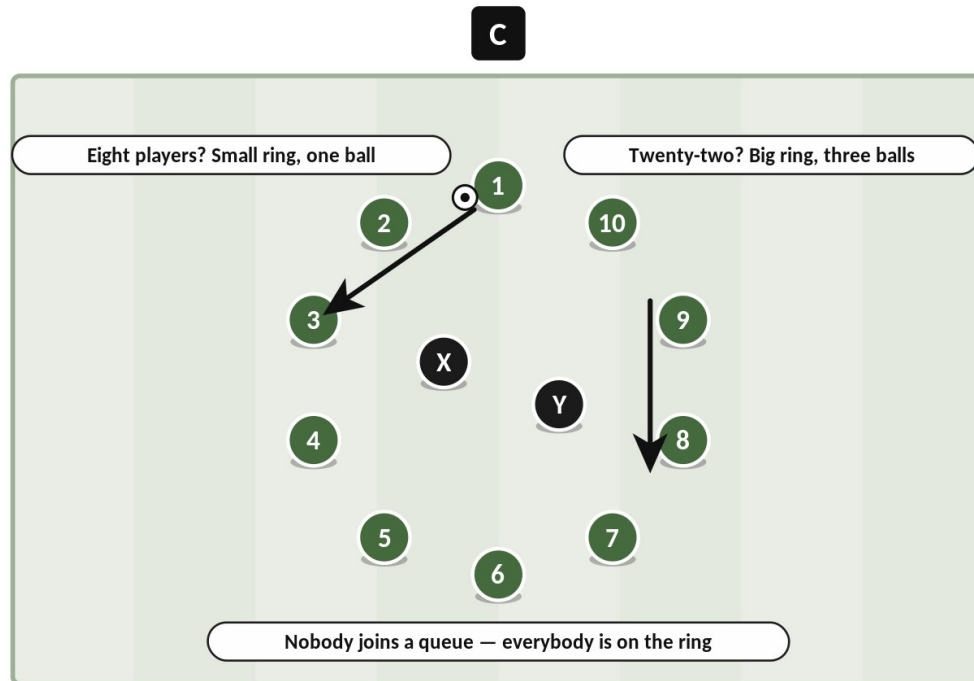
*The four rules, and they are the actual content of this session. One: **extras go on the outside, not in a queue** — a spare player made into a one-touch outside player is a full participant, and the practice barely changes. Two: **add a grid, do not add a line** — if you have twenty-two, run five grids instead of three, and coach by walking between them. Three: **make the area bigger, not the group bigger** — a rondo with fourteen in it is a rondo nobody touches; two rondos of seven is the same practice done properly. Four: **with small numbers, reduce the pitch, not the ambition** — eight players on a 30 × 20 m pitch is a genuinely excellent 4v4, and it does not need apologising for. **Ground needed: 50 × 34 m for the last practice; everything else fits in less.** And one honest warning about the big night: with twenty-two players you cannot coach individually as much, so accept it, talk to the whole group less often and in shorter bursts, and let the practices do more of the work than you normally would.*

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs	12	More than usual — small numbers means more balls each
Flat markers	60	Grids get added and removed all evening
Bibs — red / blue / grey	8 / 8 / 8	Grey is the key colour: it is what spare players wear
Cones or poles for gate goals	16	Eight gates across the session
Mini goals	2	Useful but not essential

A6.1 THE CIRCLE

One ring of players that works with six or twenty-four. The number changes the size of the ring and the number of balls, and nothing else.

one ring • any number from 6 to 24 • make the circle bigger, not the queue longer • 10 minutes



THE RING STRETCHES • THE SESSION DOES NOT CHANGE

● On the ring ● In the middle ● Balls ➔ Pass across or round C Coach

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SET UP

- **One ring**, players about 3 m apart. Eight players make a small ring; twenty-two make a big one.
- **Two players in the middle**. With big numbers, four in the middle.
- **One ball** with a small group, **two or three** with a large one.
- No cones needed at all — the players are the shape.
- Coach inside the ring.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Count the heads as they arrive** and set the ring accordingly. Do not wait for latecomers — they join the ring where they stand.
2. **Minutes 0–3 — passing round the ring**, both directions, two touches. Everyone is involved from the first second.
3. **Minute 3 — passes across**, which means looking through the middle players and choosing when.
4. **Minute 5 — put two in the middle** trying to intercept. Get one, swap with whoever gave it away.
5. **Minute 7 — add a second ball** (a third if you have twenty-plus). This is where the ring starts to demand real scanning.
6. **Minutes 8–10 — move on the pass**. Pass, then jog to a different spot on the ring. The shape survives and the warm-up becomes properly dynamic.

RULES & SCORING

- **Everybody is on the ring.** Nobody spectates and nobody queues.
- **Two touches**, one if the group is strong.
- Middle players win it, then swap with the giver.
- More players means a bigger ring and more balls — never a second turn-taking line.
- From minute 8, move after every pass.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Passing and receiving with the correct foot, and an open body so the next option is already visible.
Tactical	Scanning before the ball arrives — with two or three balls moving, a player who does not look up will be hit by one, which is a memorable lesson.
Physical	Continuous and gentle at first, sharper once movement is added. Suits a group of any size.
Psychological	On a low-numbers night this stops the evening feeling thin. On a high-numbers night it stops it feeling chaotic. Both matter.
Social	A ring puts everybody at the same distance from everybody else, which is quietly good for a squad with a wide range of ability.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Anybody standing off the ring	There is no off. <i>Get in the circle.</i>
The ring collapsing inwards	<i>Step back out. Keep it big.</i>
Passes bobbling	Firm and along the ground. Say it once.
Players not looking before receiving	The second ball fixes it.
A big group getting bored	More balls, sooner.
A small group getting too easy a ring	Shrink it and add a third middle player.

ASK THEM

- How do you know a ball's coming to you?
- When is it on to pass across rather than round?
- What happens if we shrink the ring?
- How many touches do you need?
- Would this work with thirty of us? What would we change?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
One touch.	Bigger ring.
Three balls, whatever the numbers.	Unlimited touches.
Four in the middle.	One ball, one in the middle.
Smaller ring.	No middle players at all for the first three minutes.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Everybody involved within thirty seconds of arriving.

The ring holding its shape.

Heads up before the ball arrives.

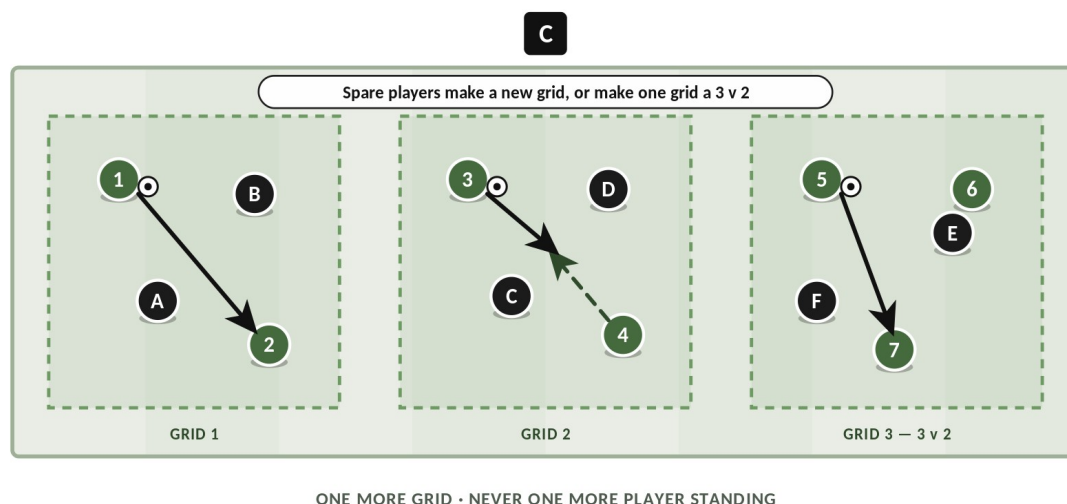
No queue anywhere.

The same practice working whether ten or twenty are there.

A6.2 ADD A GRID

Twelve-metre grids with four players in each. Eight players means two grids. Twenty-two means five. The practice never changes — only how many of them are running at once.

12 x 12 m grids • four players in each • too many players means one more grid, never one more queue • 15 minutes



● Greens ● Blacks ○ Ball ■ One grid → Pass → Support C Coach

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SET UP

- **12 × 12 m grids**, marked with four flat markers each, about 2 m apart.
- **Four players per grid** — 2 v 2 — with a ball in each.
- **Odd numbers go into one grid as a 3 v 2**. That grid is not broken; it is a different practice and it is fine.
- Lay the grids in a line so you can walk the whole set.
- Spare balls along the line.

HOW IT RUNS

- Count and divide in sixty seconds.** Fourteen players is three grids and a 3 v 2. Twenty-two is five grids and a 3 v 2. Do the arithmetic out loud so they see it is deliberate.
- One instruction for everybody:** *keep the ball in your grid for as long as you can. Lose it and win it back.*
- Minutes 0–5 — play, and walk.** Say almost nothing. With a big group you will manage two visits per grid, which is enough.
- Minute 5 — one condition for all grids:** three passes before you can be tackled. It gives the weaker pairs a chance to breathe.
- Minute 8 — rotate grids.** Winners move one grid to the right, losers stay. It mixes abilities automatically and takes twenty seconds.
- Minutes 10–15 — free play in the grids**, and rotate once more.
- Do not try to coach every grid.** On a twenty-two night, pick three moments and make them count.

RULES & SCORING

- **Four players per grid**, 2 v 2, one ball.
- **Spare players make a new grid or a 3 v 2** — never a queue.
- From minute 5: three passes before a tackle is allowed.

- Winners rotate one grid right every four minutes.
- Ball out means straight back in — the nearest spare, immediately.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Close control, turning and the short pass — the same technical content as any of the numbered sessions, running in parallel.
Tactical	Support angles at the smallest possible scale. In a 2 v 2 there is only one teammate, so the angle he offers is either right or wrong and it is instantly visible.
Physical	High touch counts and short bursts. Grids are the most efficient way to load a big group without long running.
Psychological	On a twenty-two night, grids stop the session feeling like a crowd. Everybody has a small home with three other people in it.
Social	The rotation mixes the squad without any team selection, which avoids the same four friends playing together all evening.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Any grid standing still	The one thing to walk over and fix.
Grids drifting into each other	Reset the markers. Two metres between grids is enough.
The 3 v 2 grid dominating	Rotate it so a different pair gets the extra player.
Yourself trying to coach all five grids	You cannot. Choose three moments.
Balls constantly out	Bigger grids, or a rule that the ball must stay in.
A strong pair winning everything	The rotation handles it within four minutes.

ASK THEM

- Where should you stand when your partner has it?
- How many touches before you pass?
- What's harder about two against two than four against four?
- How would we set this up if thirty of us turned up?
- Which grid was the hardest?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
10 × 10 m grids.	15 × 15 m grids.
Two touches.	3 v 1 instead of 2 v 2.
1 v 1 in each grid with a smaller area.	Five passes before a tackle.
Winner rotation every two minutes.	No rotation — keep the pairs settled.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

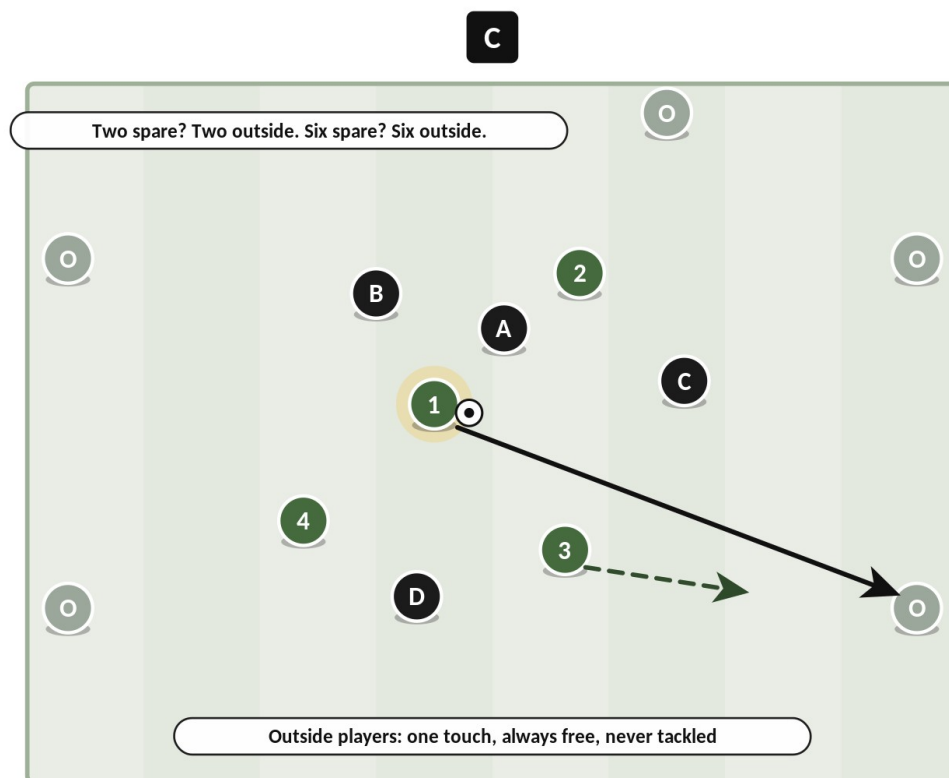
Every grid busy for fifteen minutes.
 Nobody waiting anywhere.
 High touch counts regardless of squad size.

The 3 v 2 grid feeling normal rather than odd.
The rotation happening in twenty seconds.

A6.3 OUTSIDE PLAYERS

The single most useful trick in coaching odd numbers. Every spare body goes on the outside of the pitch, plays one touch for whoever has the ball, and is never tackled. Two spare, two outside. Six spare, six outside.

32 x 24 m • every spare body goes on the outside and plays for whoever has the ball • 15 minutes



THE PITCH STAYS THE SAME • THE EDGES ABSORB THE EXTRAS

● Greens ● Blacks ● Outside players ● Ball ➡ Pass ➡ Movement C Coach

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SET UP

- 32 × 24 m square.
- **Even teams inside** — 4 v 4, or 3 v 3, or 5 v 5, whatever divides.
- **Everybody left over stands on the outside** in grey bibs, spread round the edges.
- Outside players play for **whichever team has the ball**, one touch, and cannot be tackled.
- One ball, spares round the outside.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Divide into two even teams and put the remainder outside.** Say the number out loud — *four each and three outside* — so it is clearly a design, not an afterthought.
2. **One instruction:** *outside players are always on your side. One touch. Nobody tackles them.*
3. **Minutes 0–5 — play.** Ten passes is a point. Using an outside player counts as two of your passes.
4. **Minute 5 — rotate the outside in.** Every three minutes the outside players swap with three from the inside. This is what makes it fair.

5. **Minute 8 — one question:** *why is it easier with outside players?* Because you always have a free option, which is the whole idea of support.
6. **Minutes 8-15 — keep it running and keep rotating.** With a very large group, run two squares side by side rather than putting fifteen inside one.

RULES & SCORING

- **Outside players play for whoever has the ball**, one touch, never tackled.
- **Rotate the outside in every three minutes.** Non-negotiable.
- Ten passes = 1 point. A pass through an outside player counts double.
- Inside players cannot leave the square; outside players cannot enter it.
- Ball out means a new one in immediately.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	One-touch passing for the outside players — genuinely difficult and genuinely valuable — and receiving on the half-turn for those inside.
Tactical	There is always a free man. That is what outside players teach, and it is the same lesson as every possession session in the curriculum, just guaranteed rather than earned.
Physical	The inside is intense, the outside is recovery. The rotation gives everybody both, which is why this format handles awkward numbers so gracefully.
Psychological	Being on the outside must never feel like being dropped. Rotate visibly and on time and it will not.
Social	Outside players talk constantly — they can see everything and have nothing else to do. Encourage it; it is free coaching.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Forgetting to rotate	The one failure that turns this into a queue with extra steps.
Outside players taking two touches	One. Say it once, then let the game punish it.
Nobody using the outside	<i>Who's free? He's free. He's always free.</i>
Outside players switching off	Give them a job: count the passes out loud.
The square getting congested	Fewer inside, more outside — never the reverse.
Very large groups	Two squares, not one big one.

ASK THEM

- Why is it easier with outside players?
- Who's always free?
- What's hard about one touch?
- What can you see from the outside that you can't see from the inside?
- If two more people arrived right now, where would they go?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
One touch inside as well.	Bigger square.

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller square.	Two touches on the outside.
Outside players only on two sides , so the free option is directional.	More outside players , fewer inside.
Fifteen passes for a point.	Six passes for a point.

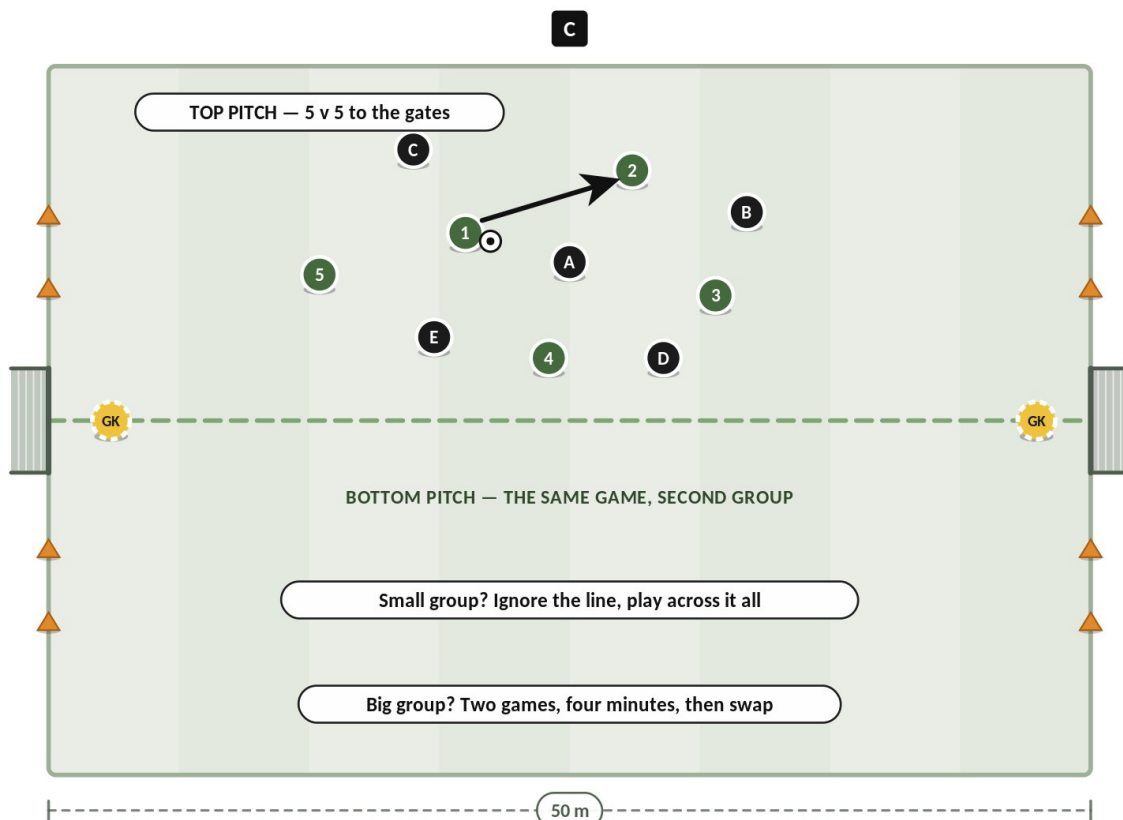
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Every spare player fully involved.
 Rotation happening on time, every time.
 Outside players used constantly.
 Nobody feeling like a substitute.
 The practice working identically at ten players and at twenty.

A6.4 SPLIT OR SHRINK

One pitch that becomes two. With a small group, ignore the line and play one bigger game. With a large group, split it and run two games side by side, four minutes each, then swap.

50 x 34 m • one big game with a small group, or two games side by side with a big one • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 50 × 34 m with a goal at each end and a dashed line straight down the middle of the length.
- Gates at each corner so the split pitches have targets without needing four goals.
- Small group (8–12): ignore the line entirely. One game, full area, keepers.
- Large group (18–24): two pitches, top and bottom, playing to the gates.
- Balls all round the outside.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Decide out loud which version you are running and set it in ninety seconds.
2. Small group version: 5 v 5 or 6 v 6 with keepers across the full area. Normal rules. Big spaces suit small numbers.
3. Large group version: two games of 5 v 5 to the corner gates, four minutes, then the top group swaps with the bottom group so everybody plays everybody.
4. Either version, minutes 0–7 — play with no conditions. After a session about numbers, they have earned a game.
5. Minute 7 — add one condition you have been working on this season: three passes before you can score, or a goal from a cutback counts double.

6. Minutes 12–15 — free play, no conditions, no coaching, and finish on a high whatever the numbers were.

RULES & SCORING

- **Small group:** one pitch, full area, normal rules.
- **Large group:** two pitches, four-minute games, swap opponents each time.
- Corner gates count as goals on the split pitches.
- Everybody plays at least ten of the fifteen minutes.
- Instant restarts from the side.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Whatever the season has been about. The match is the same match regardless of how the pitch was arranged.
Tactical	Space is relative. Eight players on a full area is a passing game; twenty on the same area is a fighting game. Setting the right size for the right number is the most consequential decision a coach makes each evening.
Physical	The small-group version involves more running; the split version more intensity. Both are fine — know which you are giving them.
Psychological	A small group can feel flat. Name it and beat it: <i>there's ten of us, so we get twice as many touches each. Good night for it.</i>
Social	The four-minute swap on a big night means every player plays with and against nearly everybody, which is worth doing deliberately once a month anyway.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Too many players in too small a space	The commonest error on a big night. Split it.
Too few players in too big a space	The commonest error on a small night. Shrink it.
One pitch finishing before the other	Call both swaps yourself.
Anybody sitting out	There should be nobody sitting out at all.
The atmosphere on a small night	Your job. Be louder than usual.
The atmosphere on a big night	Also your job. Be quieter than usual and let them play.

ASK THEM

- Is this pitch the right size for us tonight?
- What changes when there are fewer of us?
- Would you rather play a big game or two small ones?
- How many touches did you get compared to a normal week?
- If eight of us turn up next time, what should we do?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller pitches on the split version.	Bigger area.
Two touches.	Unlimited touches.
Three-minute games with a swap each time.	Six-minute games with fewer swaps.

HARDER	EASIER
No keepers — gates only.	Keepers in both goals on the small-group version.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

- Every player playing at least ten of the fifteen minutes.
- The area matching the numbers.
- Swaps handled without a stoppage.
- A session that did not feel improvised, whatever turned up.
- The squad not noticing that the plan had changed.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *How many of us were here tonight? Then: did it feel like a normal session?* If yes, the evening worked.
- *Where do extra players go?* On the outside. Never in a line.
- *What do we do if there are too many for one grid?* Make another grid.
- *Is a smaller group a worse session?* No — fewer players means more touches each.
- **And for the coach, not the players:** every one of the thirty-six numbered sessions can be run at any number using these four rules. Outside players, extra grids, bigger areas, smaller pitches. **You never need to cancel and you never need to improvise from nothing.**

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Everybody gets meaningful minutes, whatever the squad size that day. - Substitutes stay warm and involved — the outside-player habit applies on the touchline too. - Nobody plays a whole match, and nobody plays five minutes.	- Whether a short squad changes how we play — it usually changes effort more than shape. - How the extra players behave when there are more substitutes than usual. - Whether the players notice, which they generally do not if you have handled it well.	- <i>Did you get enough of a game today?</i> - <i>How was it with a small squad?</i> - <i>Anything feel different?</i>

HOMEWORK — "WHATEVER YOU'VE GOT" · ANY WEEK

- **Play with whoever is there.** Two of you is a 1 v 1. Three is a 2 v 1. Four is a 2 v 2. None of those is a worse game than a full one — they are just different games, and all of them give more touches than nine-a-side.
- **One of you, a ball and a wall** is a full training session. Fifty passes with each foot, fifty first-touch-and-turn, fifty finishes into a chalk target.
- **Organise it yourself once this month.** Message three friends, pick a time, take a ball to the green. Players who arrange their own football improve faster than players who only train on Tuesdays, and that is not a coaching opinion — it is what the research on hours of play keeps finding.
- *And nothing needs to be even.* Three against two is a perfectly good game.

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: **A5** The Small Space Session; **A7** Four v Four.

A natural follow-on. Session A7 — Four v Four. A full hour with almost no coaching in it: four against four, small goals, rolling games, and a coach who says virtually nothing for fifty minutes. It is the format most closely associated with long-term development in every federation's research, it is what children play when adults are not there, and it is the session to run when the squad is tired, flat, over-coached, or simply needs a night that belongs to them. It also happens to be the easiest session in the folder to set up — which is not a coincidence.

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.