



SESSION A7 • STANDALONE PLAN

Four v Four — The Session Where the Coach Says Almost Nothing

Contingency — when the plan does not fit • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 12–20 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	A7.1 Arrive and Play
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Rolling games	A7.2 The League
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Extended game	A7.3 The Long Game
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Free play	A7.4 Free Play
0:55 – 1:00	5	■ Reflection	Two questions, and home

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 least complicated session in the folder and quite possibly the most valuable. **Four against four is the smallest game that contains all four moments of football** — attacking, defending, and both transitions — and it produces roughly five times as many touches per player as nine-a-side, a 1v1 every few seconds, and a decision on every single touch.

Every major federation's development research points at it, and more importantly it is what children play by themselves when no adult is present, which ought to tell us something. **The hard part of this session is not the organisation. It is the silence.** Coaches talk. We talk because we care, because parents are watching, because a quiet coach can look like an idle one. But an intervention every ninety seconds means a squad that stops playing every ninety seconds, and within a couple of months you have players who look at the touchline before they make a decision. **Tonight you will say almost nothing for fifty minutes**, and you will find that everything in the curriculum shows up anyway — support angles, pressing, transitions, cover, the free man — because those things are not inventions of coaching. They are what the game does to people who are allowed to play it. **Run this when the squad is tired, flat, over-coached, or has had a hard week.** Run it in the middle of a heavy block. Run it the Tuesday after a bad Saturday. And run it at least

once a month regardless, because it works.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Maximise touches, decisions and 1v1s** — more of all three than any other session in the folder.
- **Let the principles appear on their own**, without instruction.
- **Give the players ownership** of teams, rules and arguments.
- **Practise coaching restraint** — the hardest skill on this list, and it belongs to the coach, not the squad.
- **Finish a session that they ask to keep playing.**

KIT LIST

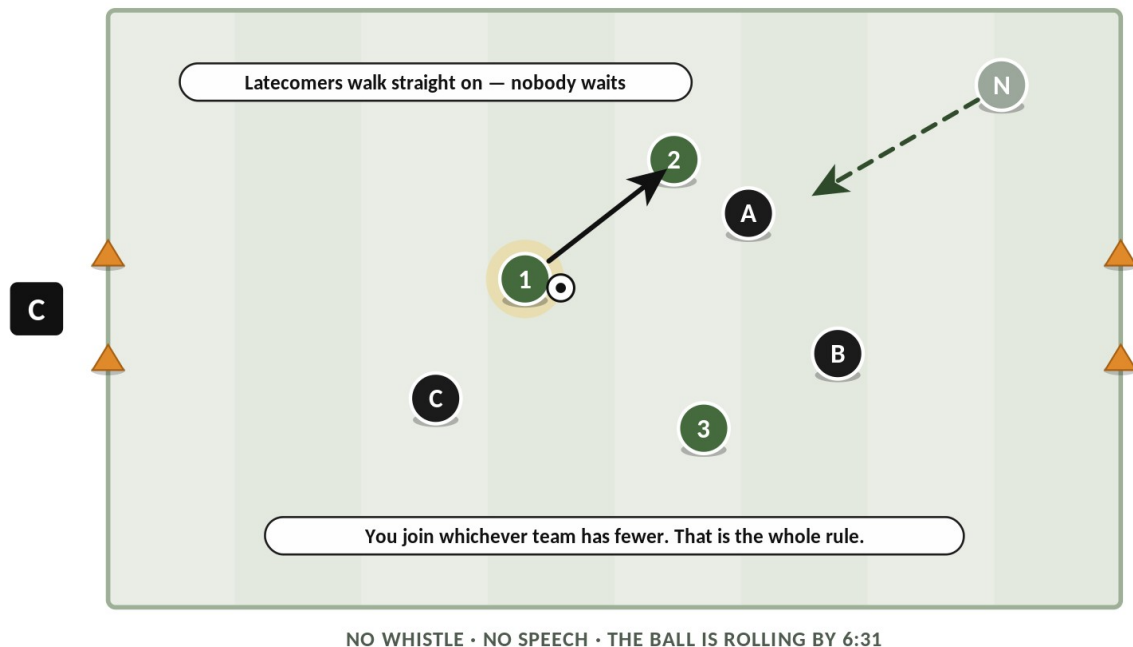
*Set every pitch before anybody arrives. The entire point of tonight is that no one waits, and that starts with you being ten minutes early rather than the players being ten minutes patient. **Ground needed: about 48 × 30 m**, which is a third of a pitch. Two 24 × 14 m pitches for the league, one 44 × 30 m for the long game, and 44 × 28 m for free play — you are re-marking twice, so use flats and keep it quick. **The rule for the coach, written down so it is a rule and not a mood:** you may speak at four moments — the ninety seconds of set-up at the start, the timing calls between games, one question at the halfway point of the long game, and the two questions at the end. **That is it.** Not corrections, not encouragement every thirty seconds, not "good lad" on a loop. **Praise by name, once, when something genuinely deserves it, and otherwise keep your mouth closed and your eyes open.** You will notice more about your squad tonight than in any other session this season, precisely because you are watching instead of talking.*

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs	8	One per pitch plus spares round the outside
Flat markers	30	Pitches and gate goals
Bibs — four colours	4 × 5	Four teams of four; colours save ten minutes of arguing
Mini goals	2	For the long game — full goals if you have them
A watch	1	Your only real job for fifty minutes

A7.1 ARRIVE AND PLAY

The game starts when the fourth player arrives. No whistle, no line-up, no explanation. Whoever turns up next joins whichever team has fewer.

30 x 20 m • the game starts when the fourth player arrives • no whistle, no line-up • 10 minutes



● Greens
 ● Blacks
 ● Just arrived
 ● Ball
 ▲ Gate goals
 ➡ Joins the smaller team
C Coach

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SET UP

- One 30 × 20 m pitch with gate goals at each end, set before anybody arrives.
- A ball in the middle and spares round the outside.
- Bibs in two piles at the side — players take one as they walk on.
- No cones for lining up, because there is no lining up.
- Coach outside the pitch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Before the first car arrives, the pitch is ready and a ball is on it.
2. Players two, three and four arrive. The moment there are four, the game starts. Nobody blows anything.
3. Every subsequent arrival joins the team with fewer players. They do not ask. They do not warm up separately. They walk on.
4. Say nothing at all for the first six minutes. Not one instruction. Greet each player by name as they pass you, and that is your entire contribution.
5. Minute 6 — if the pitch has more than twelve on it, split into two games. Do it by pointing, not by speaking.
6. Minutes 6–10 — keep it going until the squad is warm, then move on with one sentence: *right, four teams.*

RULES & SCORING

- **Game starts at four players**, whatever the time.
- **You join the team with fewer**. That is the whole rule.
- Gate goals count from either side.
- Ball out means a new one in, immediately, from wherever.
- **No coach speech**. None.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything, but do not name any of it. The warm-up is the game; the game warms them up.
Tactical	Uneven teams are a feature, not a fault. A 5v3 for ninety seconds teaches overload and underload better than a drill about overloads, and it resolves itself when the next player arrives.
Physical	Self-regulating. Children who play a small-sided game warm themselves up more effectively than most structured warm-ups, provided the area is small enough.
Psychological	The message of the first ten minutes sets the tone of the whole evening. Tonight's message is: this is yours.
Social	Watch who greets whom, who chooses which team, who plays with whom. You will learn more about your squad's social map in these ten minutes than in a month of normal sessions.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Your own mouth	Genuinely the main thing to monitor for the first ten minutes.
Anybody hovering at the side	Point them on. Do not explain.
Very uneven teams for too long	One quiet swap, no announcement.
Latecomers looking for permission	Wave them on. They will stop asking by week three.
Injuries from cold starts	The only reason to intervene. It is a game, not a sprint, so this is rare.
How quickly it self-organises	Faster than you expect. That is the point.

ASK THEM

- Nothing. This practice has no questions.
- *(Save them. You have four at the end.)*

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller pitch.	Bigger pitch.
Two touches.	Wider gates.
Two balls at once.	Two games rather than one crowded one.
Narrower gates.	Start at six players rather than four if arrivals are slow.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

The ball rolling within a minute of the fourth player arriving.

Nobody standing still at any point.

The coach having said nothing but names.

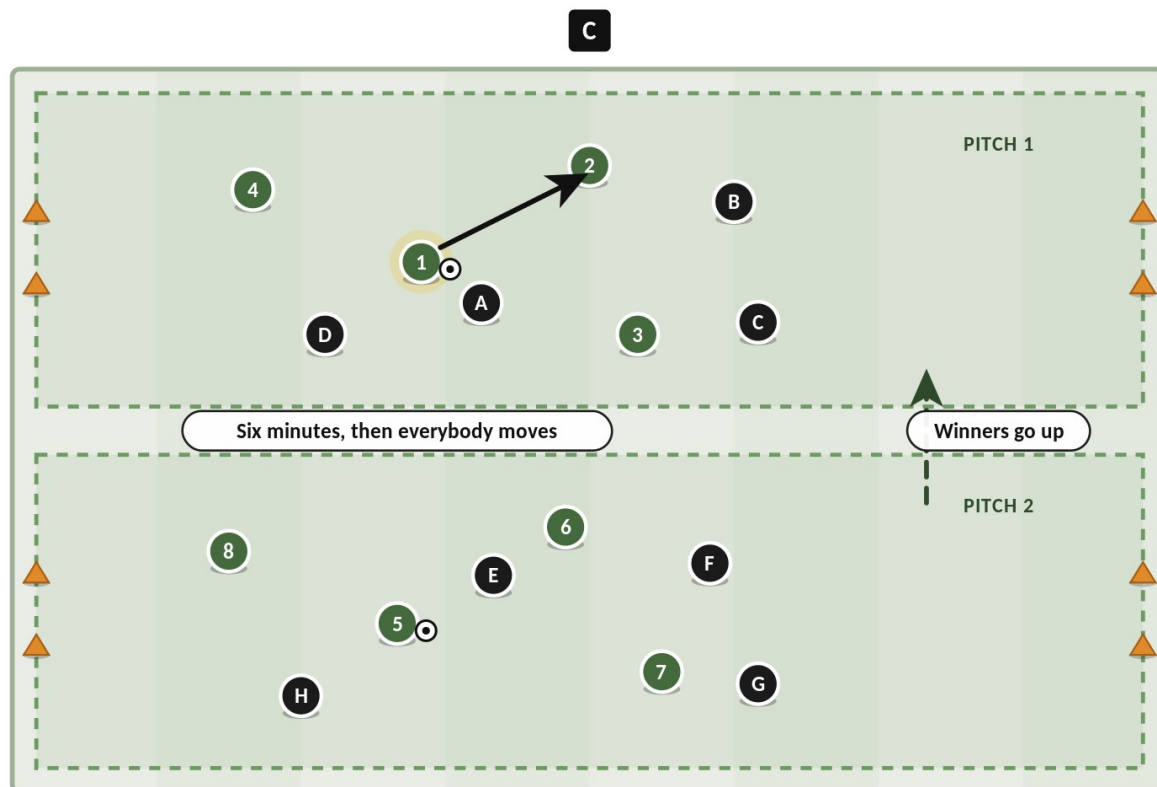
Teams evening themselves out without instruction.

The squad warm without a single stretch being mentioned.

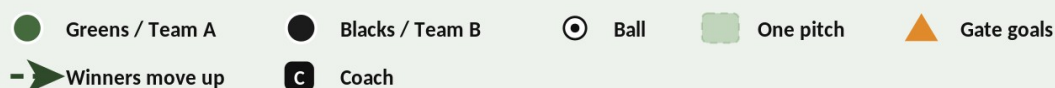
A7.2 THE LEAGUE

Four teams of four, two pitches, six-minute games, everybody moves. The most game time per minute of any format, and the coach's only job is the watch.

two 24 x 14 m pitches • four teams of four • six minutes, then everybody moves • 15 minutes



FOUR TEAMS • ROLLING GAMES • THE COACH KEEPS TIME AND NOTHING ELSE



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SET UP

- **Two pitches, each 24 × 14 m**, side by side with 2 m between them.
- **Gate goals** at each end of each pitch, 3 m wide. No keepers.
- **Four teams of four**, four colours. With eighteen or twenty, make teams of five and roll a substitute each.
- Balls behind every gate.
- Coach in the gap between the pitches, with a watch.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Ninety seconds to make four teams.** Mix abilities roughly and do not agonise — the rotation fixes any imbalance within twelve minutes.
2. **One sentence of explanation:** *six minutes, winners move up, losers stay. Go.*
3. **Minutes 0–6 — first games.** Say nothing. Walk the gap. Watch.
4. **Minute 6 — call time and rotate.** Winners from pitch two go up to pitch one; losers from pitch one come down. Twenty seconds, no speeches.

5. Minutes 6–12 — **second games**. Still nothing.

6. Minute 12 — **rotate again, third games to the end**. If you must say something, make it one name and one word.

7. **Keep no table**. They will keep it themselves, perfectly and loudly.

RULES & SCORING

- **Four v four**, no keepers, gates count from both sides.
- **Six-minute games**, then everybody moves.
- **Winners up, losers stay** — the simplest rotation there is.
- Instant restarts, always. A ball out is a ball in.
- **The coach keeps time and nothing else**.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Everything appears. Note what breaks down; write it on your hand for next time rather than saying it now.
Tactical	A 4v4 with no keepers means every player defends and every player attacks . There is no position to hide in, no specialist role, and no way to be uninvolved for thirty seconds.
Physical	Six minutes is a hard shift. The rotation gap is genuine recovery. This is well-designed conditioning that nobody will experience as conditioning.
Psychological	Winning and losing every six minutes normalises both . By the third game the result matters less and the football is better — which is a useful thing for a squad to discover about itself.
Social	Teams of four form fast and dissolve fast. Nobody carries a bad game for long.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
The clock	Your actual job. Be exact — they will notice if you are not.
Your urge to coach	It will peak around minute four of game one. Let it pass.
Rotations dragging	Twenty seconds. Call it, point, and start the clock.
One team losing all three	Swap one player at the second rotation. Say nothing about why.
Arguments over goals	Let them settle it. Only intervene if it stops being football.
What you are learning	You are watching your squad play unmanaged football. Take mental notes; they are worth more than tonight's coaching would have been.

ASK THEM

- Nothing during. Save it.
- *(One question at the end of A7.3, two at the end of the session.)*

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller pitches.	Bigger pitches.
Four-minute games, more rotations.	Eight-minute games.
Two touches.	Wider gates.
Three v three on the same pitches.	Five v five if numbers are high and legs are tired.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Three full games per team in fifteen minutes.

Rotations in twenty seconds.

The coach having spoken only to call time.

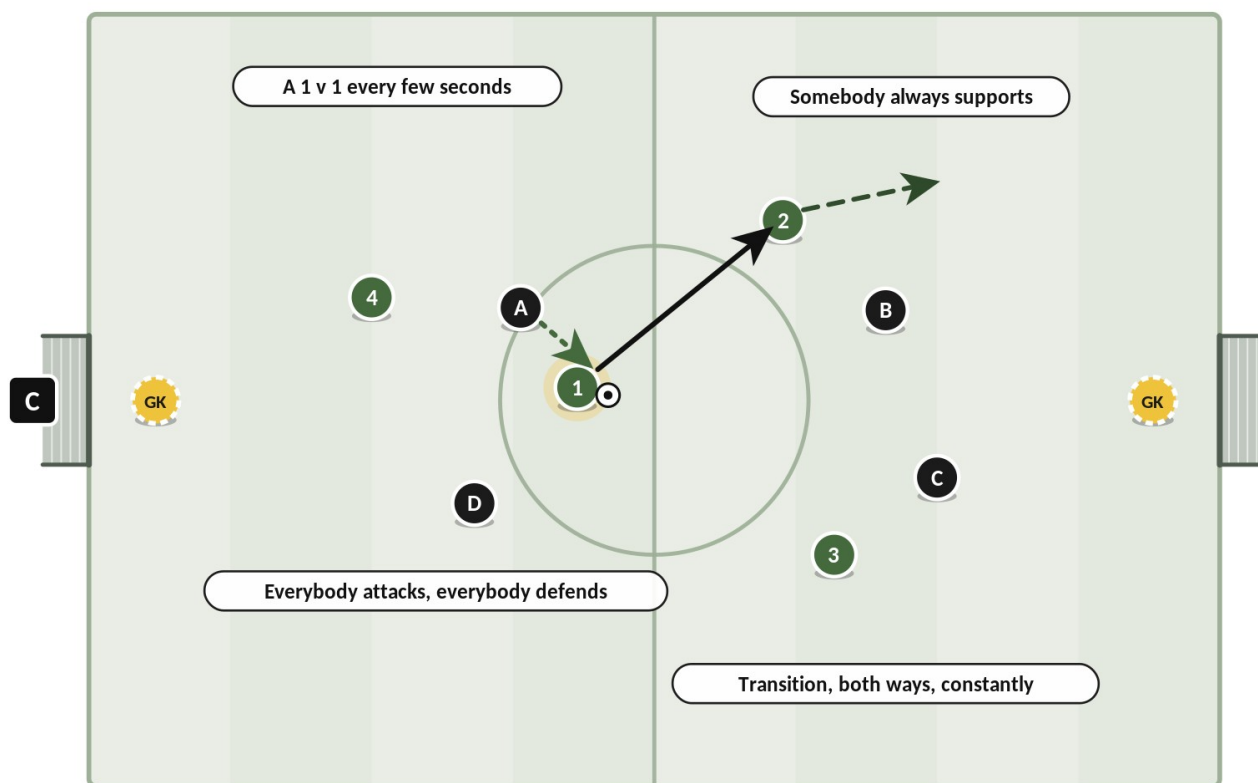
Players keeping their own score without being asked.

Quality holding up in the third game.

A7.3 THE LONG GAME

One four-a-side game with keepers, played for a proper stretch. Long enough for patterns to form, problems to appear, and the squad to solve them without you.

44 x 30 m • 4 v 4 with keepers • every principle in the curriculum, unprompted • 15 minutes



NOTHING ON THIS DIAGRAM WAS COACHED • ALL OF IT WILL HAPPEN



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SET UP

- 44 × 30 m with a goal at each end and a goalkeeper in each.
- **Four v four outfield**, keepers rotating every four minutes.
- With a large squad, run two of these or roll substitutes every three minutes.
- Balls behind both goals.
- **Coach behind one goal, not on the touchline.** It makes staying quiet easier.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set up in sixty seconds.** *Four each, keepers, that goal and that goal. Go.*
2. **Minutes 0–7 — say nothing whatsoever.** This is the longest silence of the evening and the most valuable.
3. **Watch for the four things on the diagram:** a 1v1 every few seconds, somebody always offering support, everybody attacking and defending, and transitions in both directions constantly. **You will see all four within ninety seconds and you will not have asked for any of them.**

4. **Minute 7 — rotate the keepers**, and ask your one question of the practice: *what's different about four a side?* Take two answers. Do not add a third of your own.
5. **Minutes 8–15 — play on**, silent again. Rotate keepers once more.
6. **If something is genuinely going wrong** — one team miles better, or a player having a bad time — fix it by swapping a player, not by making a speech.

RULES & SCORING

- **Four v four plus keepers.**
- **Keepers rotate every four minutes**, no exceptions and no volunteers-only.
- Normal rules. Corners, goal kicks, the lot.
- Instant restarts from the side.
- **One coach question at minute 7.** Otherwise silence.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	You will see the true state of your squad's technique tonight, because nobody is being helped. That is information worth having.
Tactical	Everything in the thirty-six sessions appears here unprompted. Press, cover, support, switch, transition, rest defence. The curriculum did not invent them; it named them and gave them practice time. Four v four produces them on its own.
Physical	A sustained fifteen minutes at moderate-to-high intensity. Rotating keepers gives everybody a breather without anybody sitting out.
Psychological	A long game teaches game management — how to respond to going a goal down with eight minutes left, which no short practice can teach.
Social	Fifteen minutes is long enough for leaders to emerge. Note who organises when nobody is telling them to.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
All four principles appearing	The point of the practice. Look for them deliberately.
Who leads when you don't	Often not the player you would expect.
Who hides	In a 4v4 it is nearly impossible, which is why this is such a revealing format.
Keeper rotation	Every four minutes, everybody, no negotiating.
Your own silence	Count how many times you nearly spoke. It is a useful number.
The quality over fifteen minutes	It usually improves. Coaching often prevents that.

ASK THEM

- *What's different about four a side?* — the only question, at minute 7.
- Take two answers. Do not add your own.
- *(Everything else waits until the end of the session.)*

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller pitch.	Bigger pitch.

HARDER	EASIER
Three v three plus keepers.	Five v five plus keepers.
Two touches for the last five minutes.	Bigger goals.
No throw-ins — kick-ins within four seconds.	Rotate keepers every three minutes if it is a cold night.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

All four principles visible without being coached.

Fifteen minutes played with almost no stoppages.

The coach having spoken once.

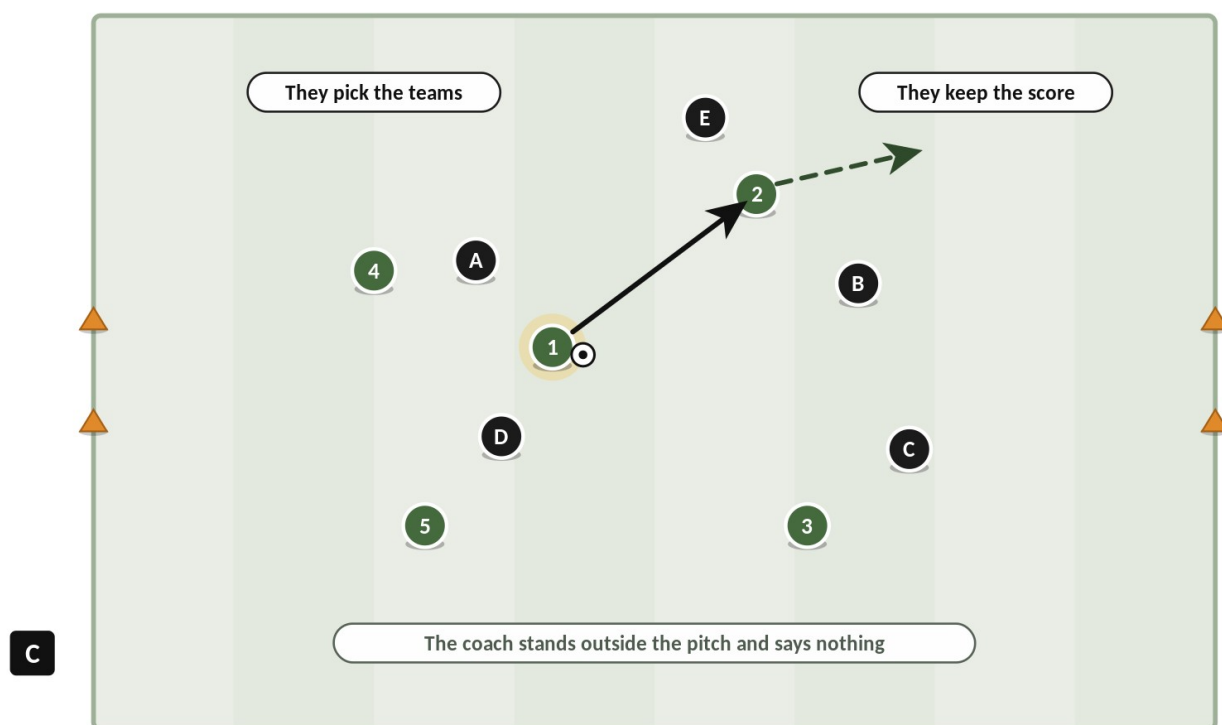
A leader emerging.

Football that is better at minute 15 than at minute 2.

A7.4 FREE PLAY

Their game. They pick the teams, set the rules, keep the score and settle the arguments. You stand outside the pitch and say nothing at all.

44 x 28 m • they pick the teams, they set the rules, they settle the arguments • 15 minutes



THE BEST FIFTEEN MINUTES OF THE WEEK • AND THE EASIEST TO RUN



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SET UP

- 44 × 28 m with gate goals, or whatever they decide to use.
- Hand them the bibs and a ball and step off the pitch.
- If they ask how to pick teams, say *however you like*.
- If they ask the rules, say *up to you*.
- Coach outside the pitch, watch in pocket, mouth shut.

HOW IT RUNS

1. One sentence to start it: *last fifteen minutes are yours. Sort it out.*
2. Then step off the pitch and stay off it. Physically leaving the playing area is the single most effective way to keep quiet.
3. Expect two or three minutes of chaos while they pick teams. Let it happen. This is the practice, not a delay before the practice.
4. Say nothing about the teams they pick, even if they are lopsided. They will fix it themselves, usually within one goal.

5. **Let them settle their own arguments** — was it in, was it a foul, is it 4–3 or 4–4. This is genuinely one of the most valuable things football does for children and adults routinely take it away from them.
6. **Intervene only for safety, or for genuine unkindness.** Nothing else. Not even for a handball.
7. **Stop them a minute before the end**, while they still want more.

RULES & SCORING

- They pick the teams.
- They set the rules.
- They keep the score.
- They settle the arguments.
- The coach stands outside the pitch and says **nothing** — safety and unkindness excepted.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	They will try things they would never try in a coached practice, because nobody is watching in the evaluating sense. Some of it will be excellent.
Tactical	Free play is where creativity actually lives. Every practice with a condition on it narrows the options; this one removes all the conditions and finds out what they do.
Physical	They will run more than you would have asked them to, and they will not notice.
Psychological	Autonomy is one of the strongest known drivers of long-term motivation in sport. Fifteen minutes a week of genuinely unsupervised football is a serious investment in whether these children still play at sixteen.
Social	Negotiating teams, resolving a disputed goal, including the quiet one — this is the part of football that has nothing to do with football and matters most.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Yourself, mostly	Standing outside the pitch is the whole technique. Do not drift back on.
How they pick teams	Watch who gets picked last, and quietly design around it next time. Do not fix it now.
Who settles disputes	Your future captain, possibly.
Anybody excluded	The one social thing worth a quiet word — afterwards, to an individual, not to the group.
Rules they invent	Often better than yours. Some are worth stealing.
The clock	Stop while they still want more. Always.

ASK THEM

- Nothing during. Not one word.
- *(Two questions at the end, and then home.)*

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Nothing. You do not condition free play. That is what makes it free play.	Nothing.

HARDER	EASIER
<i>(If it needs a condition, it is a different practice and belongs earlier in the session.)</i>	<i>(If they cannot organise it in week one, they will in week three. Let them learn.)</i>

IT'S WORKING WHEN

- Teams picked without you.
- Arguments settled without you.
- Fifteen minutes of football you had no part in.
- Somebody asking for five more minutes.
- You having said nothing for the last quarter of an hour.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- **Two questions only, and then let them go.**
- *How many touches do you think you got tonight compared to a normal session?* The honest answer is roughly five times as many.
- *Did you enjoy that more or less than usual?* Take the answer at face value, whatever it is.
- **And a note for the coach, which is the real reflection.** Count how many times you nearly spoke tonight and did not. Then ask whether the football was worse for it. **It almost certainly was not**, and that is the finding this session exists to produce.
- Run this once a month. Not as a rest week, not as a reward, and not as a night off — **as one of the most productive sessions in the folder**, which is what it is.

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Fewer instructions from the touchline — try halving them and see what happens. - Let them solve one problem themselves before you offer the answer. - Praise decisions, not just outcomes.	- Whether players look at the touchline before deciding. If they do, that is on us, not them. - Whether the 4v4 habits show up — everybody attacking, everybody defending. - How they respond to going behind, now that they have played fifteen-minute games.	- <i>Did anyone tell you to do that, or did you see it?</i> - <i>What did you sort out yourselves today?</i> - <i>Was it more fun than training?</i>

HOMEWORK — "GO AND PLAY" · EVERY WEEK, IDEALLY MORE THAN ONCE

- **Organise a game yourself this week.** Four of you, a green or a yard, jumpers for goalposts, no adults. Pick the teams, make the rules, settle your own arguments.
- **Do not report back.** It is not homework in the checking sense. Nobody will ask how it went.
- **If you cannot find three friends, two is a 1 v 1** and that is a completely legitimate game.
- *The reason:* nearly every player who becomes very good has thousands of hours of unsupervised football behind them, and none of those hours were organised by a coach. **Tuesday nights matter. The other six days matter more.**

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; **A6** Odd Numbers.

A natural follow-on. Session A8 — Movement, Landing and Growing Bodies. The last of the supplementary set, and the one most likely to keep a player on the pitch rather than on the sideline. A proper athletic development session — running mechanics, jumping and, above all, landing — built for eleven- and twelve-year-olds whose bones are growing faster than their tendons. It also covers what to do about the sore knees and heels that appear in exactly this age group, why the agility ladders and hurdles sitting unused in your kit bag are finally useful, and the honest guidance on heading that every under-12 coach should have written down somewhere.

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.