



SESSION A8 • STANDALONE PLAN

Movement, Landing and Growing Bodies

Athletic development • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Movement warm-up	A8.1 The Ladder and the Line
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	A8.2 Landing
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	A8.3 Stop, Turn, Go
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	A8.4 The Movement 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

Somewhere in this age range, bodies stop being small versions of adult ones and start being building sites — but **not all at once, and not on a schedule you can read off a birth certificate**. Two players born in the same month can be three years apart biologically, and the one who has started growing is the one this session is for. **Bones lengthen faster than the muscles and tendons attached to them**, which is why this is precisely the age group where you start hearing about sore knees just below the kneecap and sore heels — Osgood-Schlatter and Sever's disease, both extremely common, both growth-related, and both largely manageable rather than serious. It is also the age at which running technique, jumping and landing are highly trainable, and the window where a coach can genuinely reduce the injuries a player collects over the next ten years. **This is not a fitness session and there is no running for the sake of running in it.** The whole curriculum is built on maximum ball-rolling time and this session does not abandon that — three of the four practices still involve decisions, and the last fifteen minutes is a normal match. What changes is *what you are looking at*. **The most valuable ninety seconds in the whole hour is teaching them to land**, because the way a twelve-year-old lands from a jump is a habit that will still be there at twenty-two, and knees that collapse inwards on landing are the single best-evidenced modifiable risk factor for serious knee injury in football. This is also, finally, the session where the agility ladders and hurdles in your kit bag do something useful — **as tools for teaching posture and landing, not as an obstacle**

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Run properly** — tall, relaxed, arms working, feet under the body.
- **Land properly** — two feet, soft, knees over toes and not falling inwards.
- **Stop properly**, because decelerating badly is how players get hurt.
- **Recognise growth-related pain** and know what to do about it.
- **Understand the current heading guidance** and follow it.

KIT LIST

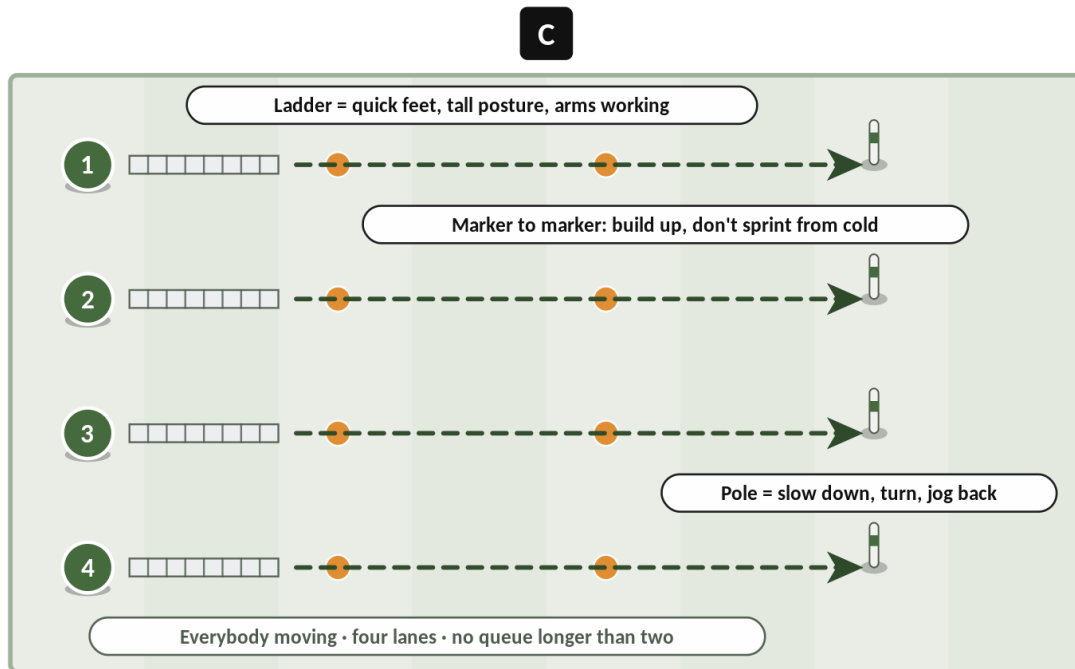
A warning about the two things this session is not. It is not a fitness test and it is not physiotherapy. You are a coach teaching movement skills, not a clinician, and the moment a player has pain that persists, worsens, or makes them limp, the correct action is to send them to a GP or a chartered physiotherapist rather than to manage it yourself. **Intensity is deliberately low and quality is deliberately high.** Every rep in A8.2 should look good. Six excellent landings beat thirty sloppy ones, and thirty sloppy ones are actively worse than none because you are practising the exact habit you are trying to remove. **When quality drops, stop the set. Ground needed: 48 × 32 m**, and the first three practices fit in half of it. Set the four lanes and the three landing lanes before anybody arrives, because this session has more equipment than any other in the folder and you do not want fourteen children waiting while you count hurdles. **Read the appendix at the back before you run this.** It covers growing pains and heading, and both of those are conversations you will have with a parent at some point this season.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Agility ladders	4	Finally useful — for posture, not for speed
Hurdles (low)	6	Ankle to shin height only. No higher at this age.
Poles	4	Turn markers
Flat markers	40	Lanes, landing squares, stop zones
Footballs	10	The last two practices are still football
Bibs	8 / 8	For the match

A8.1 THE LADDER AND THE LINE

Four lanes, four ladders, four poles. Quick feet, then a build-up run, then a controlled turn. The ladders are here to teach posture, not to make anybody faster.

36 x 20 m • four lanes • skip, drive, stride • the ladders finally earn their place • 10 minutes



● Players ▲ Ladders & markers 🚦 Turn poles ➡ Run **C** Coach

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SET UP

- **Four lanes**, each with a **ladder**, two **markers** 9 m apart, and a **pole** at the far end.
- **Three or four players per lane**, so the longest wait is two people.
- Ladders first, then the run, then the pole, then jog back down the outside.
- **Everything is at about 70 per cent**. Nobody sprints in the first ten minutes of a session.
- Coach walking the front of the lanes.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — ladders, walking then jogging.** One foot in each square, then two feet in each square. Tall, chest up, arms bent and swinging from the shoulder.
- Minute 3 — add the run.** Through the ladder, then marker to marker at about 70 per cent, then slow down into the pole and turn.
- Minute 5 — skipping and A-skips.** Knee up, foot under the hip, land on the ball of the foot. Two lengths.
- Minute 7 — sideways.** Through the ladder facing sideways, then a lateral shuffle to the first marker, then turn and run.
- Minutes 8–10 — build to about 85 per cent** on the last two runs, and finish there. **Nobody goes flat out in a warm-up.**
- Three words all season: tall, relaxed, light.** Use those and nothing else.

RULES & SCORING

- **Three or four per lane**, no more.
- **Nothing above 85 per cent** at any point.
- One foot in each square, then two, then sideways.
- **Slow into the pole**, turn under control, jog back down the outside.
- Quality over speed, every rep.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Posture — tall through the hips and chest — and arms that drive from the shoulder rather than flapping across the body. These are the two things a coach can genuinely change in a twelve-year-old's running.
Tactical	None, deliberately. This is the one practice in the folder with no decisions in it, and ten minutes a fortnight is the right dose.
Physical	Ladders do not make players faster and it is worth knowing that. They are excellent for coordination, foot placement and posture, which is exactly why they appear here and not as a speed drill.
Psychological	Children enjoy moving well and noticing they move well. Name it when you see it.
Social	Lanes of three are a good place for the quiet ones. Mix the lanes deliberately.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Heads down, hunched shoulders	<i>Tall. Look at the pole, not the ladder.</i>
Arms crossing the body	<i>Drive them front to back, not side to side.</i>
Heavy, flat-footed landing	<i>Light. I shouldn't hear you.</i>
Anybody going flat out	Stop it. This is a warm-up.
Sloppy turns at the pole	Slowing down is the point. Do it properly.
Queues of five	Add a lane.

ASK THEM

- What should your arms be doing?
- Where should your feet land — under you, or out in front?
- Can you make yourself quieter?
- Why don't we sprint in a warm-up?
- What does 'tall' feel like?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Faster ladder patterns — two in, two out.	Walk the ladder for longer.
Longer run , 15 m rather than 9 m.	Shorter runs.
Backwards through the first marker.	Skip the sideways patterns.
Turn on a call rather than at the pole.	More lanes , fewer per lane.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Tall posture and quiet feet.

Arms driving front to back.

Nobody sprinting.

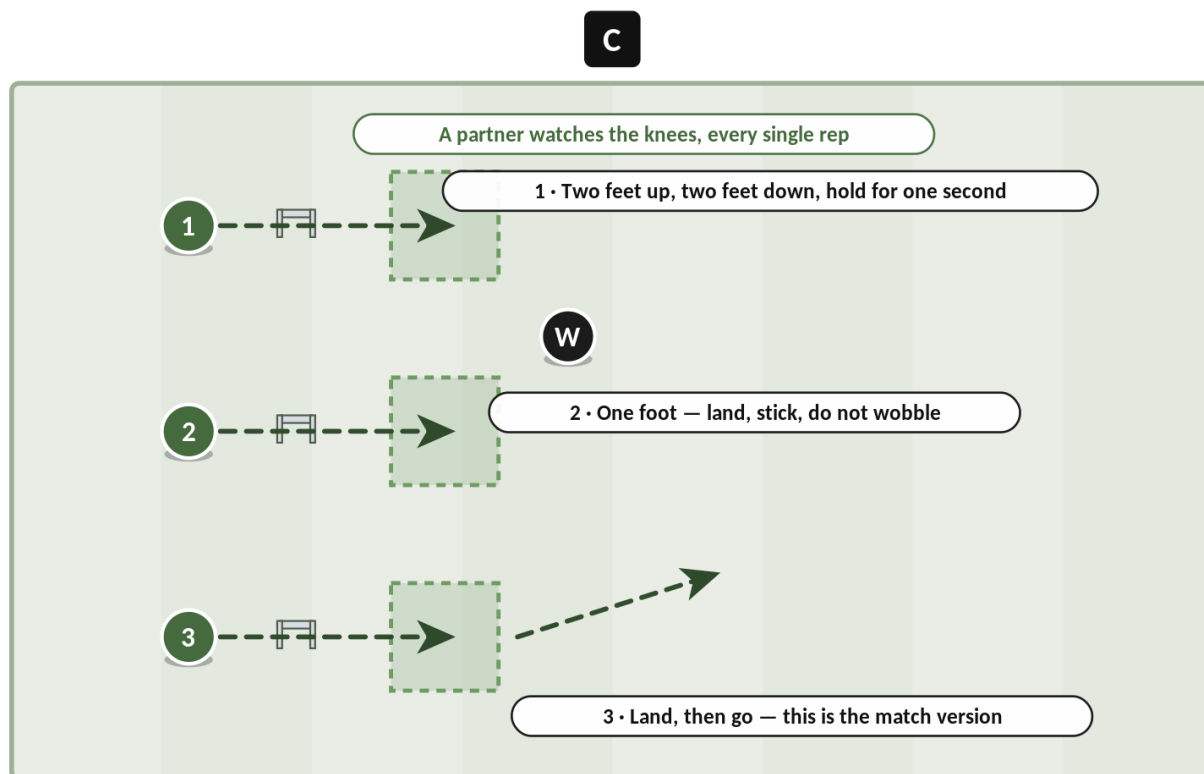
Controlled turns at the pole.

The whole squad warm in ten minutes without a single lap.

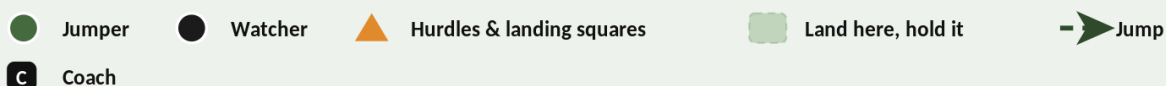
A8.2 LANDING

The most valuable ninety seconds of injury prevention in football, stretched to fifteen minutes and done properly. Two feet, soft, knees over toes, hold the landing.

38 x 22 m • the most useful ninety seconds of injury prevention in football • 15 minutes



KNEES OVER TOES • NOT FALLING INWARDS • SOFT, NOT STIFF



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SET UP

- **Three lanes**, each with a **low hurdle** and a **landing square** marked with four flats about 1.5 m across.
- **Pairs** — one jumps, one watches. **The watcher has a real job**, which is looking at the jumper's knees.

! Hurdles are ankle to shin height. No higher. The hurdle is a cue, not a challenge.

- Five or six reps, then swap. Never more.
- Coach moving between lanes.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Teach the landing before anybody jumps.** Stand still, drop into a small squat, and show them: **feet flat, knees bent, knees pointing over the toes, chest up.** Ten seconds of demonstration.
2. **Show the wrong one too**, exaggerated — knees falling inwards, straight legs, landing with a thud. Children remember the wrong one.
3. **Lane 1 — two feet up, two feet down.** Over the hurdle, land in the square with both feet, **hold it for a full second.** Five reps, then swap.

4. **Lane 2 — one foot.** Hop over, land on one foot, stick it. If they wobble it does not count. Five each leg.
5. **Lane 3 — land, then go.** Land in the square, hold for half a second, then accelerate away. **This is the match version,** because in a game nobody lands and stands still.
6. **Rotate the lanes every four minutes.**
7. **Stop a set the moment quality drops.** Tired landings teach bad landings.

RULES & SCORING

! Hurdles stay low. Ankle to shin. Not negotiable.

- **Five or six reps, then swap.** Quality, not volume.
- **Hold every landing for a full second** in lanes 1 and 2.
- **The watcher watches the knees** and says one word: *in* or *good*.
- Any landing that wobbles does not count.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Knees over toes, not falling inwards. Soft, not stiff. Chest up, not folded forward. Those three cues are the entire technical content and they are worth repeating all season.
Tactical	None. This is one of only two practices in the whole curriculum with no decision in it, and it earns its place on injury grounds alone.
Physical	Landing mechanics are the best-evidenced modifiable risk factor for serious knee injury in football, and knees that collapse inwards on landing are the specific thing being trained out. Ten minutes a fortnight for a season is a meaningful intervention.
Psychological	Frame it as a skill, not as injury prevention. <i>Land like a cat</i> works better than any explanation of ligaments.
Social	The watcher role matters. A player who can see a bad landing in someone else can usually feel it in themselves.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Knees falling inwards on landing	The single most important thing in this session. Stop, show, repeat.
Straight-legged, stiff landings	<i>Soft. Bend and absorb it.</i>
Chest folding forward	<i>Chest up. Look at me as you land.</i>
Wobbling on one foot	It does not count. Do it again, slower.
Quality dropping through a set	End the set. Six good ones is the whole aim.
Anybody raising the hurdles	They will try. Do not let them.

ASK THEM

- Where should your knees point when you land?
- Should you land soft or stiff? Why?
- What does a bad landing look like?
- When do you land in a match?
- Can you land without making a sound?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Land and immediately change direction.	No hurdle at all — jump on the spot and land in the square.
Eyes on the coach, not on the floor, while landing.	Two feet only, skip the single-leg lane.
Land after a header-style jump for the ball.	Three reps rather than six.
Land, then a 5 m sprint.	Hold the landing for two seconds to slow the whole thing down.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Knees tracking over the toes on every landing.

Soft, quiet landings.

Held for a full second without a wobble.

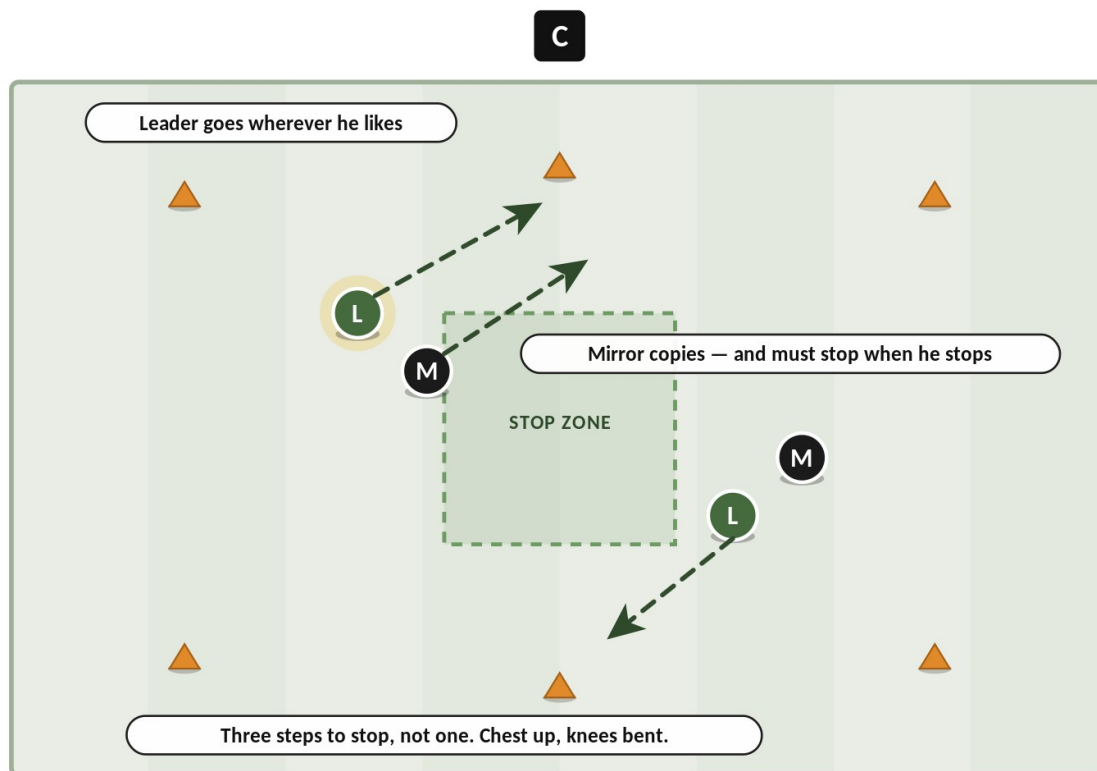
Watchers actually watching.

Six excellent reps rather than thirty rushed ones.

A8.3 STOP, TURN, GO

A mirror game with a stop zone. Anybody can run fast — the skill, and the safety, is in slowing down, and this makes it a game rather than a drill.

38 x 24 m • slowing down is where players get hurt, so we practise slowing down • 15 minutes



ANYBODY CAN RUN FAST • THE SKILL IS STOPPING

● Leader ● Mirror ▲ Markers ■ Stop zone ➡ Movement C Coach

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SET UP

- 38 × 24 m with a **stop zone** marked in the middle, 8 × 8 m.
- **Six markers** spread round the outside as reference points.
- **Pairs — a leader and a mirror.** The leader goes where he likes; the mirror copies at about 2 m.
- Swap roles every ninety seconds.
- Coach in the middle, watching feet.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Pairs, roughly matched for speed.** Mismatched pairs make this frustrating for both.
2. **Minutes 0–4 — mirror, jogging only.** Leader changes direction whenever he likes; the mirror copies. Deliberately slow at first.
3. **Minute 4 — add the stop zone.** Anybody who enters the zone must come to a **complete stop** — chest up, knees bent, three steps to stop rather than one — before leaving it.
4. **Minute 7 — build the speed** to about 80 per cent. Not more, because this is about control.

5. **Minute 9 — add a ball.** The leader dribbles; the mirror defends at 2 m. Now it is football, and the stopping is happening inside a real problem.
6. **Minutes 11–15 — 1 v 1 to the markers.** Leader tries to reach any outside marker; mirror tries to stop him. **The stop-zone rule still applies to both.**
7. **Swap leader and mirror every ninety seconds** throughout.

RULES & SCORING

- **Mirror stays within about 2 m** of the leader.
- **Anybody in the stop zone must come to a full stop** before leaving it.
- **Three steps to stop, not one.** Chest up, knees bent.
- **Swap roles every ninety seconds.**
- Nothing above about 80 per cent.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Deceleration: short choppy steps, hips low, chest up. Stopping dead on one leg with a straight knee is exactly what we are training out.
Tactical	This is 1v1 defending in disguise. Staying with a leader who can go anywhere is the same problem as jockeying an attacker, which is why the second half of the practice becomes real football.
Physical	Change of direction and deceleration are trainable at this age and are where a large share of non-contact injuries occur. Practising them slowly and often is the intervention.
Psychological	Mirroring is genuinely enjoyable and slightly funny. Let it be.
Social	Pairs work better than groups here. Rotate the pairs once at minute 8.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Stopping dead on one straight leg	The thing to fix. <i>Three steps. Bend.</i>
Chest folding over the knees	<i>Chest up when you stop.</i>
Mismatched pairs	Swap them at minute 8.
Speed creeping above 80 per cent	Pull it back. Control is the point.
Mirrors drifting to 5 m	<i>Two metres. Close enough to touch him.</i>
Quality once the ball arrives	It will drop. That is fine and it is real.

ASK THEM

- How many steps do you need to stop properly?
- What happens to your knees if you stop on one straight leg?
- Is it easier to change direction fast or slow?
- When do you have to stop suddenly in a match?
- What's harder — leading or mirroring?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Two mirrors on one leader.	Walking pace for longer.

HARDER	EASIER
Smaller area , more direction changes.	Bigger area.
Ball from minute 4 rather than minute 9.	No ball at all.
Two stop zones.	Mirror at 3 m rather than 2 m.

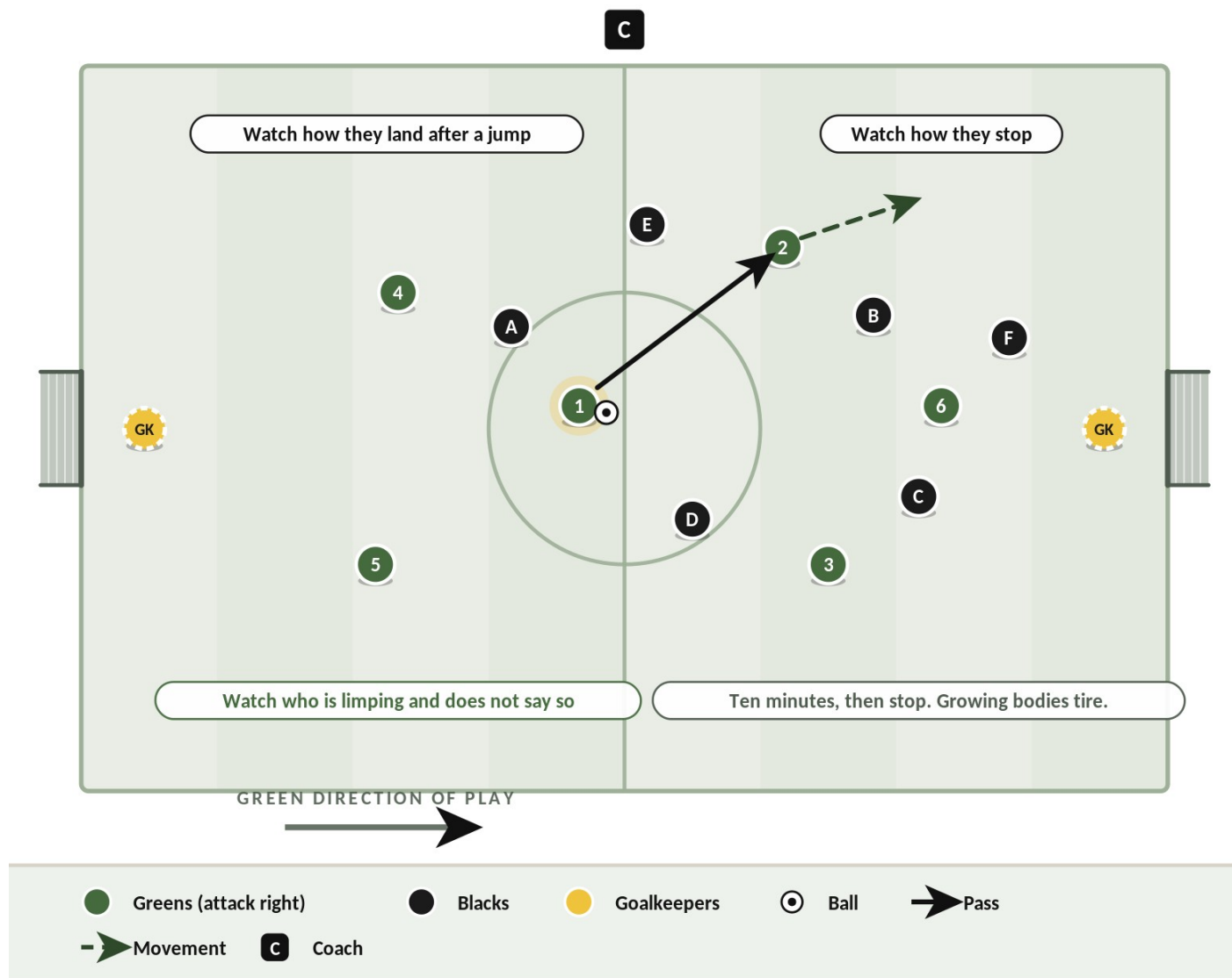
IT'S WORKING WHEN

Three-step stops with bent knees.
 Chest up through every deceleration.
 Mirrors staying genuinely close.
 The stopping surviving once the ball arrives.
 Nobody stopping dead on a straight leg.

A8.4 THE MOVEMENT MATCH

A normal game, watched with different eyes. No movement conditions at all — you are simply looking at how they land, how they stop, and who is quietly sore.

48 x 32 m • the same game, watched with different eyes • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- 48 x 32 m, 6 v 6 plus goalkeepers, goals at each end.
- **No movement conditions.** None. This is a football match.
- Rolling substitutions.
- Balls round the outside for instant restarts.
- **Coach on the side, watching bodies rather than tactics.**

HOW IT RUNS

1. Set it up in sixty seconds and let them play.
2. Minutes 0–10 — a normal match, coached normally if you coach at all.

3. **Watch three things and nothing else:** how they land after a jump, how they stop when they change direction, and who is limping and not saying so.
4. **Minute 10 — stop.** Genuinely stop, even if it feels early. **Growing bodies fatigue faster than adult ones and technique degrades faster with it,** and the last five minutes of a tired session is where the injury happens.
5. **Minutes 10–15 — cool down properly,** walking and easy stretching, and use the time for the reflection questions.
6. **Do not add a movement condition.** The point of this practice is that good movement should survive contact with a real game without being asked for.

RULES & SCORING

- Normal match, normal rules.
- No movement conditions.
- Rolling substitutions.
- Ten minutes of football, then stop, whatever the score.
- A real cool-down, not a token one.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Whatever you have been working on. This is not a movement drill.
Tactical	As normal, if at all.
Physical	This is the observation practice. Landing and stopping technique that only exists in the drill is not technique yet. Note the names of the players whose landings fall apart under game pressure and give them ten seconds each next time.
Psychological	Watch for the child who is hurt and hiding it. At this age players routinely play through growth-related knee and heel pain because they do not want to come off, and a coach who notices without making a fuss is doing something genuinely valuable.
Social	Ending on a match matters, even a short one. Nobody wants a session that finishes with hurdles.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Landings under real pressure	The whole point. Do they hold up?
Stopping and turning at full speed	Same question.
Anybody limping	Quiet word afterwards, not in front of the group.
Anybody rubbing a knee or a heel	See the appendix. Ask them privately.
Fatigue after minute eight	Real, and the reason for the ten-minute cap.
Your own urge to add a condition	Don't. The test is whether it holds up without one.

ASK THEM

- Did you think about how you landed just then?
- Is anything sore? Anything at all?
- How does your body feel compared to the start?
- What's the difference between tired and hurt?
- Would you tell me if something hurt?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Nothing. Do not condition this practice.	Eight minutes rather than ten if the squad is tired.
<i>(If it needs a condition, it belongs earlier in the session.)</i>	Bigger pitch so there is less stop-start.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Good landings surviving into a real game.

Controlled deceleration under pressure.

The session stopping on time rather than running long.

A genuine cool-down.

At least one honest answer to *is anything sore?*

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- *Where should your knees point when you land?* Over the toes. This is the one answer worth drilling until it is boring.
- *How many steps to stop properly?* Three, not one.
- *What are the three words for running?* Tall, relaxed, light.
- *Is anything sore?* **Ask it every week from now on, and ask it in a way that makes an honest answer easy.** At this age they will play through pain to avoid missing out.
- **And the honest framing for the squad:** we do this because we want you playing football at twenty-five, not just at twelve. That reason works better than any anatomy.

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Land properly, particularly after aerial challenges and in the box. - Slow down under control rather than stopping dead. - Tell somebody if something hurts, before it becomes a problem.	- Who lands badly under real match pressure — this is the list for next time. - Who is limping, favouring a leg, or rubbing a knee. - Whether technique holds up in the last ten minutes, when everybody is tired.	- <i>Anything sore? Honestly?</i> - <i>How did you feel in the last ten minutes?</i> - <i>Did you notice how you landed for that header?</i>

HOMEWORK — "TWO MINUTES, THREE TIMES A WEEK" · ALL SEASON

- **Ten landings.** Jump off a step or a kerb, land on two feet, soft, knees over toes, hold for a second. Ten of them, properly. Two minutes, three times a week, for the rest of your football life.
- **Ten single-leg balances**, thirty seconds each leg, then with your eyes shut. It is much harder than it sounds and it does more for your ankles than anything else you could do at home.
- **Ten calf raises each leg**, slowly up and slowly down, especially if your heels are sore.

! And the important one: if something hurts for more than a few days, tell somebody. Growing pains are normal and manageable, but only if an adult knows about them. Nobody is impressed by playing through an injury at twelve.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

Pair it with anything. Movement, landing and deceleration underpin every other session in the set, so this one sits comfortably beside any of them. **Run it every four to six weeks** rather than once — the landing work in A8.2 is a habit, and habits need repeating.

Closest relatives. **A7** Four v Four, for the night the squad needs a lighter load with the same ball-rolling time; **A5** The Small Space Session, when the ground is hard and you want low-impact football; **A3** The Goalkeeper, which is the other session in the set built around one specific physical skill.

And read the appendix before you run it. Growing pains, heading guidance and the concussion rule are the three conversations every under-12 coach ends up having, usually in a car park and usually without warning.

Appendix — Growing Bodies and Heading

Two things every under-12 coach should have read once, written down here so that when a parent asks you in a car park in November, you have an answer.

GROWTH-RELATED PAIN — WHAT YOU WILL ACTUALLY SEE

Osgood-Schlatter disease is pain, tenderness and often a visible bump on the bony lump just below the kneecap. It is caused by the tendon pulling on a growth plate that is still developing, it is very common in active eleven- to fifteen-year-olds, and it is not a disease in any meaningful sense despite the name. It typically settles as growth finishes.

Sever's disease is the same idea at the heel — pain at the back of the heel where the Achilles attaches to a growing bone. It is most common between about eight and fourteen, and it is often worse on hard surfaces and in poor footwear.

What a coach does about them, in plain terms: believe the player, reduce the load rather than removing it entirely, avoid the things that hurt most (usually sprinting, jumping and hard surfaces), make sure boots and trainers are decent and not worn through, and encourage the calf and quadriceps work in the homework section. **Then tell the parents, and suggest they see a GP or a chartered physiotherapist** — particularly if the pain is severe, is getting worse, causes limping, or persists at rest.

What a coach does not do: diagnose, prescribe, dismiss it as growing pains without a second thought, or let a child play through it to avoid disappointing anybody. **You are not a clinician and you should be quick to say so.**

HEADING — THE CURRENT POSITION

Following research linking repeated heading to neurodegenerative conditions in later life, the football associations in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland introduced graduated restrictions on heading in *training* for young players. The broad shape of the guidance is: **no heading practice at all in the youngest age groups, and a strictly limited amount at under-12** — the Irish FA's guidance has been one heading session per month with a maximum of five headers at under-12, rising gradually through the older age groups. (The FAI, which governs the Republic, publishes its own guidance — if you play cross-border fixtures, check both.)

There is no restriction on heading in matches, on the basis that headers in youth matches are rare in any case. Underage players also use lighter balls by age group, which is part of the same picture.

Two practical instructions. First: **check your own association's current guidance before you coach heading at all**, because these rules have been revised more than once since 2020 and this document is not a substitute for the governing body's published position. Second: **there is no heading practice anywhere in this curriculum's thirty-six sessions**, which is deliberate — at under-12 there is more valuable football to coach, and the small number of headers a player needs will arrive naturally in games.

If you do run a heading session within your association's limits, **use a properly inflated, correctly-sized, light ball, keep the numbers low, serve gently by hand, and stop early.**

HEAD INJURIES — THE ONE RULE THAT IS NOT NEGOTIABLE

If in doubt, sit them out. Any suspected concussion — a blow to the head followed by confusion, headache, dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, unusual behaviour, or any loss of consciousness at all — means the player comes off immediately, does not return to play that day under any circumstances, and is seen by a doctor.

This is not a judgement call for a coach on a touchline, and it is not affected by the score, the stage of the game, or how much the player wants to continue. Follow your association's concussion protocol for the return-to-play steps.

Tell the parents what happened, in writing if you can. A short message the same evening is worth more than a conversation the following week.

THE ONE-LINE VERSION

Land soft, knees over the toes. Stop in three steps. Say something when it hurts. And if a head is involved, the session is over for that player.