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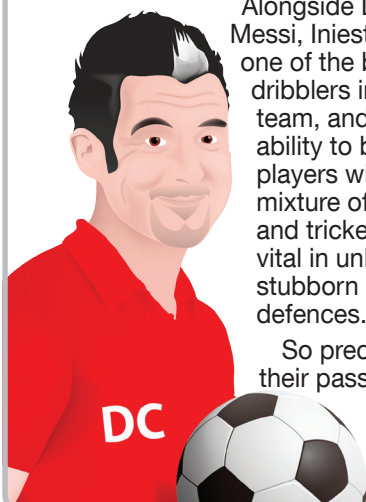
Play Like Barcelona in 9 Sessions

By David Clarke

Barcelona's style of play has ushered in an unprecedented era of success for the club.

The Catalans have dominated domestically and in Europe thanks to a gameplan that prioritises one and two-touch passing, movement and pressing.

Tiki-taka is a style of play characterised by short passing and movement, with players interchanging positions as they keep opponents in their own half and engineer moves that take them closer to goal. Xavi and Andres Iniesta embody this style more than anyone.



Alongside Lionel Messi, Iniesta is one of the best dribblers in the team, and their ability to beat players with a mixture of pace and trickery is vital in unlocking stubborn defences.

So precise is their passing and

sound their technique, it has not been uncommon over the years to see Barcelona walk the ball into the net. It is considered the opposite of 'route one' soccer where teams look to get the ball forward quickly and directly.

Barcelona's monopoly of possession is also a valuable defensive weapon. If the opposition don't have the ball, they can't score, right?

Members of Barcelona's famous academy are taught that technique is a vital prerequisite, together with speed of thought. Barcelona players are judged on their decision making skills and ability to move into space.

The club's players are also remarkable fit. When Barcelona do not have the ball, their players hunt in packs, pressing relentlessly until possession is won back.

When the club won six trophies in 2009 with so many academy graduates, it was seen as a triumph of philosophy and identity.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Clarke'.

David Clarke

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Green Star Media Ltd

Meadow View, Tannery Lane
Guildford, Surrey,
GU5 0AB, UK

Tel: **+44 (0) 1483 892 894**

Fax: **+44 (0) 1483 894 148**

Email:

david.clarke@coach-soccer.com

Publisher:

Kevin Barrow

Editor:

David Clarke

Illustrator:

Michael Ronald

Customer Services:

Duncan Heard

Operations Director:

Toby Curthoys

Managing Director:

Andrew Griffiths

Front cover:

Luke Erhlanderr

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Tiki-taka, the Barcelona way

How to bring some Spanish sparkle to your team's passing ambitions...

Barcelona have put most teams to the sword this season, and much of that is thanks to a brand of soccer – labelled tiki-taka – that is big on short passing. It's a premise that provides a fantastic foundation on which to build any tactical plan.

Modern coaches play lots of passing games with teams, trying to make them into 'mini-Barcelonas'. Players become adept at passing the ball using one- or two-touch play, but it's always quick and done with purpose. After a while, a belief grows that the ball can, if desired, be passed from one end of the pitch to the other at any opportunity.

It is also a good way to coach first touch and control – the players are getting so much time with the ball that technical assuredness becomes second nature to them.

Below is what we believe to be the best way to coach tiki-taka. It's an exercise that can be played with any age group – just change the distances to suit your players.

How to set it up:

- Place three cones in a straight line, with a gap of six yards between each.
- Three players – A, B and C – position themselves, one on each cone.

Getting started:

- Using two-touch – with quick passing and a lively tempo – A short passes to B who flicks to the side for A to run on to and pass to C. B runs to A.
- C controls and passes longer to position A.
- Play for three minutes, then move the cones in by a yard, and continue.
- Keep reducing the distance between the cones every three minutes until they are two yards apart. The play here should be fast and players must control and pass quickly.
- Progress the drill to one-touch – this is when you are getting your players to really take on board the tiki-taka principle – control is vital, as is direction of the pass.
- Also experiment with using different distances between cones in the same line. For instance, make A to B eight yards, and B to C four yards. This gives a greater variety of distances for your players to be passing through, and more to think about. But remember the focus should be on quick passing and one- or two-touch play.

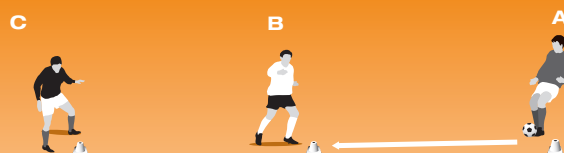
Developing the session:

- Create a 12x8-yard area.
- Keeping players in their thirds, play 2v1, where the two players are attackers and the lone player is a defender.
- Starting at the top end, get the attackers to try to pass their way down the pitch without the defender getting the ball. Begin so that the defender cannot tackle, before progressing into opposed play.

Why this works:

Simple passing sessions are invaluable in so many ways. Not only do they enhance technical skills, but by adding in variables such as one- or two-touch, or changes in passing distance, players' brains are stepping up a level, using anticipation and reactions rather than simple 'eye to ball' coordination. This means that when the mechanics are slowed down in a match situation, players will be able to operate with increased natural accuracy, touch and weight.

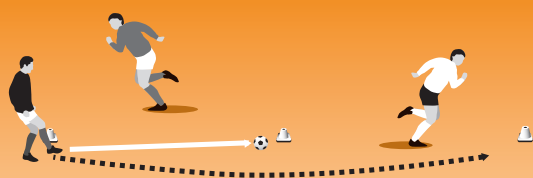
Tiki-taka, the Barcelona way



Player A starts the session passing to player B...



...then moves quickly to collect the sideways flick, before A passes to C



Player C passes to the moving B and sprints into the centre



Moving the cones closer increases the speed of the session

player movement ■■■ pass →

"Tiki-taka is the belief and system of passing the ball into the net. It is space and movement, and in many ways poetry as well."

David Villa, Barcelona

Spanish class

Why one- and two-touch passing is the way to improve your players' game

No matter what the skill level of the player, the aim of all good coaches is to make the ball the player's best friend. The ability to move the ball accurately and efficiently is a crucial part of team mechanics, and if your players are more skilful than their opponents, the chances are they'll be more successful too.

The other factor in one- and two-touch play is speed. After all, pace and precision is a deadly combination at any level.

When coaching one- and two-touch passing, it's important to have an end product – this could be shooting, teeing the ball up for a team mate, or even just sliding it through a set of cones, but it's important to have a psychological 'reward' at the end.

What you want to feed into your players is the confidence that they can move the ball around without relinquishing possession. Give it time and the improvement will come.

How to set it up:

- In the example shown the game is 3v3 (with no keepers), though you can add extra men onto each side.
- Set up a 50x30-yard area with a full-size goal at each end.
- In the middle of the pitch, place a cone (A) 5 yards in on either side.
- Add another 5 yards further in on each side (cone B), at a slight angle, then another cone a further 5 yards in (C). Do this for both teams. You should find that the two final cones (C) run pretty much down the centre of the pitch.
- Finally, create four coned 'goals', each 4 yards wide, placed either side of both full-size goals, and halfway along the touchline towards the corner flag.
- Both teams line all but one player up behind cone A, with the remaining player on cone B. This player has his back to goal.

Getting started:

- The player at the front of the queue by cone A, with one touch, plays the ball into the attacker on cone B and follows his pass.
- The attacking player lets the ball roll across his body, takes one touch to control, another to play the ball into position, before turning and shooting into the goal.
- Attackers should be aiming to hit the corners of the goal. After despatching a shot they move to the back of their team's line.
- Repeat the process for each player.

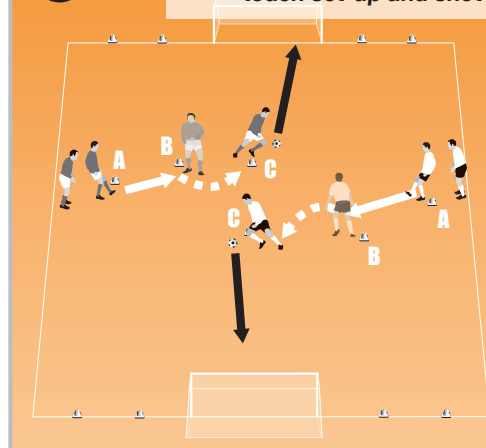
Developing the session:

- Now speed becomes a factor. See which team can complete the exercise the quickest – so it's the first to get three balls into the net, one from each player.
- Next, we advance the number of passes to increase the difficulty further. Players can score in any of the three goals, except this time the first two players must conduct a one-two to start.
- The first player then uses two touches to control and pass into the path of the second player.
- The first player then makes a run, calls out, then receives a pass from the second player.
- A goal can be scored in any of the three goals – but it's the player on the move who decides, instructing loudly which goal he wants the set-up played towards.
- Again add in the element of competition between the two groups to reinforce the need for speed and pressure.
- You can advance both exercises by adding a goalkeeper and a defender to force the attackers to think more carefully about which of the three goals they aim for.

Spanish class

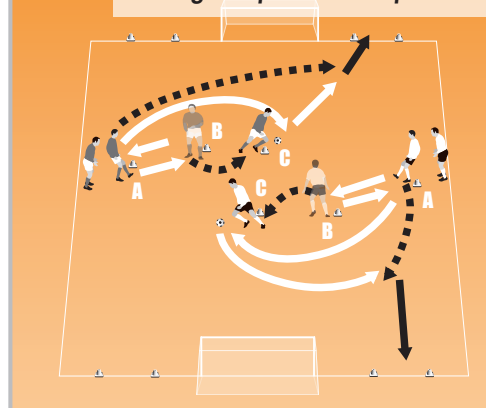
1

The pass leads to a two-touch set-up and shot



2

Developing the session, passing becomes more complex and the goal options more plentiful



pass → running without the ball ...→
running with the ball ...→ shot →

Why this works:

Young players need the three factors this exercise promotes – touch, movement and speed – to be better players. If your coaching can develop these factors, you're sowing the seeds of formidable team play, and technically brilliant individual ability.

Quick feet, quick minds

A classic 'passing and movement' session for your side

Be it the internet connection, the car or something else, it's not uncommon to hear kids say, "it's too slow, can't you make it faster?!" And they say it when referring to matters on the soccer pitch as well.

Getting to the ball quickly isn't all about pace; it's to do with concentration, anticipation plus one- and two-touch feet as well.

If you can get your team sliding the ball around quicker and anticipating the pass, they will be harder to beat and much more able to control matches.

Here are three exercises that make up a fast passing session.

How to set it up:

- The first is passing between two groups of four players. The two lines should be around six metres apart, and facing one another.

Getting started:

- Player A passes to player B then runs to the back of the queue. When each subsequent player receives the ball, he plays it first time to the next player and then runs to the back of his queue.
- Players in these practices must play the ball first time whenever possible, and should be encouraged to use both feet. Younger players can be allowed to control the ball first if necessary, then pass with their second touch.

Developing the session:

- Advance the first exercise by adding a player and start passing with three teams in the same way, albeit this time with each line acting as a point on a triangle. This time the players run to the back of the line on their right after they have delivered the pass.
- Players have a lot to focus on, and their minds have to be quick to deal with the quick exchange of passes and the number of players moving around in front of them.

How an academy team would play it:

- To step this up again, set up like the diagram with a five-yard square in the middle. Players are six yards away.
- The outside player starts with the ball and passes to the player in the middle. He passes back in, before the ball is played wide and back again into the middle. The 'control and pass' nature of this continues until the grey team get around to the white team and the sequence progresses.
- It's technical and may take some practice, but relies on the basics of passing and movement, and is a fantastic way to get your players linking up.

Why this works:

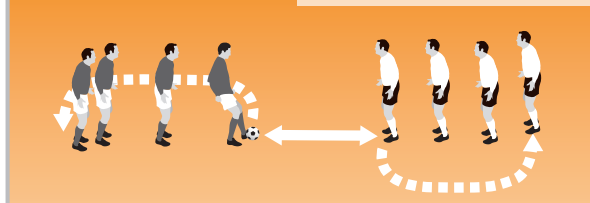
When the ball comes to a player he has to be a quick thinker, both when communicating with his team mate and anticipating where that next player will run to.

This technical link-up play can earn youngsters valuable space on the pitch.

Quick feet, quick minds

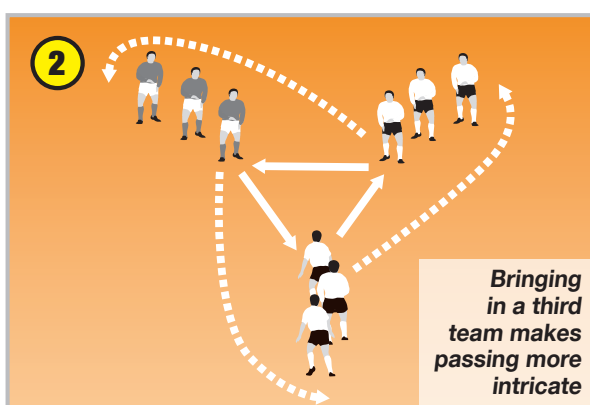
1

Players begin by making simple one-twos



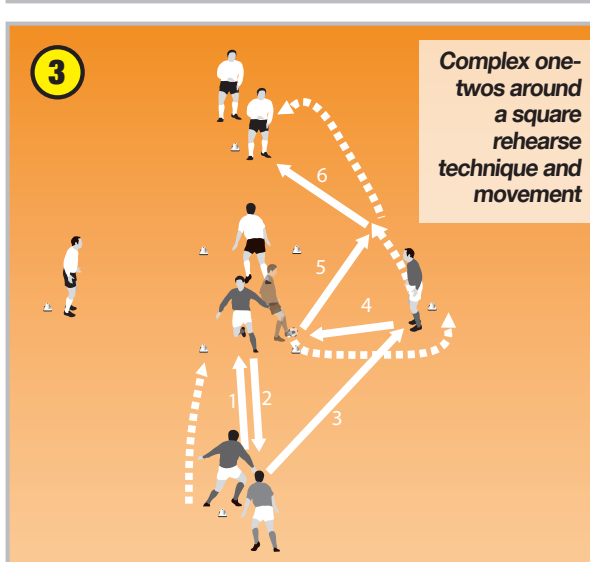
2

Bringing in a third team makes passing more intricate



3

Complex one-twos around a square rehearse technique and movement



pass → player movement - - - →

Feint praise for players

A simple skill that produces fantastic results

Coaching 1v1 skills is always valuable for players. It helps them get into the mindset of beating a player and moving into situations where they can be creative with the ball.

One of the best skills for 1v1s is the feint, especially if it is done at speed. It is one of the simplest yet most effective techniques.

A player on the run is often hard to stop if he has momentum, and using a feint is a simple way of utilising speed and control to skip past the defender.

The feint is a simple move – the player leans one way, then with the outside of his foot takes the ball the other side of the defender. Why not try it with your team?

Demonstrate the skill:

- You may have to practise this yourself before showing your players at training, but that should be standard housekeeping for any move – your players advance their skill set and so do you.
- The technique requires you to have the ball on the foot you intend to move away with. Lean to the left then accelerate to the right taking the ball with the outside of the right foot.
- Start with the demonstration of how it is done, then advance to practise using a stationary player or a cone.

How to set it up:

- Set up a square measuring 5x5 yards with a cone in the middle.
- Place a set of three players on either side of the square about 8 yards away.

Getting started:

- Players dribble towards the square. When they get inside it they should feint left and move the ball right before they reach the cone in the middle.
- When players go right they must take the ball outside the square with their first touch.
- Now repeat with players going left of the cone.

Developing the session:

- To develop, set up a 45x20-yard area with two goals along the top edge and a marked five-yard area in front of the goal.
- Players line up behind two cones, with the exception of one player who, as the defender, starts between the goals.
- The ball is played from the defender to the opposing attacker.
- The attacker runs towards the defender dribbling the ball.
- The defender stays in the 5-yard zone and the attacker must play a feint to beat him, then score in either goal. Having two goals means the attacker can feint in either direction.
- At the end of the phase, the attacker swaps with the defender, passes to the next attacker at the front of the other queue, and play continues.

Why this works:

The feint is one of the best ways to beat an opponent 1v1. It is a relatively simple concept yet one which is practised by all the top players.

Offering this skill to your players means they'll be able to keep possession of the ball for longer periods, can move into new areas and should therefore create better goalscoring chances.

Feint praise for players

1

Foot positioning is crucial for this session to work. The attacker feints left then nudges the ball to the right



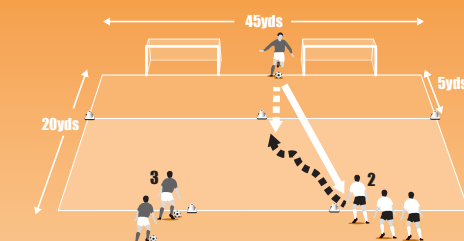
2

Players must make a firm touch to push the ball out of the square



3

The attacker's feint must be well controlled if he is to score in either goal



Dynamic dribbling

A team game of top technique as performed by the world's finest players...

This session is influenced heavily by techniques seen on the Barcelona training ground, a place where teamwork, communication and ball control provide the natural order. It's a fun game that gets players keeping the ball close whilst moving as a unit.

On the face of it, the premise is simple - a group race where one team tries to get a ball around a cone quicker than the other. The problem is the teams must hold hands in a circle and keep the ball moving with one or two touches as the whole group negotiates its path around the cone.

How to set it up:

- For this game, you will need cones and balls.
- Separating your group into teams of four, create an appropriate number of channels – in the example shown, we've used eight players and two channels. In each channel there are two cones, placed 15 yards apart.
- Each team has one ball.
- Each team begins on the left cone, and players hold hands with one another so as to form a circle.

Getting started:

- On your whistle, teams must keep the ball in the middle of their group and pass one-touch as they move to the cone, then around it.
- (For younger age groups allow two or even three touches.)
- The first team to get around the cone and back to the start wins.
- If the ball goes out of the circle players must go back to the start.
- The distance between the cone and the players should alter according to their age and ability, so vary the length and see how they get on. The longer the distance, the more difficult the task.

Developing the session:

- This is for super control freaks, particularly older players. Try your players with the same set-up but this time they must not let the ball bounce on the ground. It's an elaborate 'keepy-uppy' game where each group must keep a ball in the air between them, get around a cone, then back. They can use their heads, feet, legs, and any other part of their body except their hands.
- You can also nominate one player as the 'captain'. He has to guide the group of players by pushing, pulling and talking to them.

Why this works:

This is a good team bonding game that requires skill and technique. Coordination and communication are vital because although players are moving in one direction, some are going backwards, some forwards and some sideways... yet all need to keep an eye on the ball.

Players will buy into this too because they find it really good fun.

TOP TIP: Boys being boys, the prospect of holding hands with one another may not be too popular, so why not tell them to hold sleeves or wrists instead. The effect will be the same – players linking as one circle so as to perform the task.

Dynamic dribbling

1

Teams hold hands, keeping control of the ball within the circle



2

Now players must keep the ball in the air as they repeat the task



Messi's killer instinct

The game has rarely seen such a skilful and effective dribbler as Barcelona's Lionel Messi. Many players can dribble but few do it as incisively as the Argentinian maestro. Rarely does Messi run down blind alleys, instead going straight for the kill as he runs at opposition defenders with a deadly combination of pace and skill. Messi keeps the ball close to his feet and can often throw defenders off the scent by feinting one way before going the other. His quick feet and sudden bursts of speed see him either beat defenders or force them into committing fouls. Extraordinary balance means he is almost always in control and is therefore one of the most difficult players to tackle.

Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo is another world-class dribbler and it is his and Messi's ability in 1v1 situations that make them two of the best players in the world.

On the move

How the game can be won and lost even without a ball...

Movement without the ball is vital to team mechanics for any side. In youth set-ups, it's common for tactical errors to occur when players not in possession fail to react until a team mate on the ball makes a move or calls for a pass.

Young players should always be coached so they move before the ball is played, and this is a session that achieves exactly that. It also offers a number of additional coaching points within its structure, and you can halt the session at any point to show players options and ideas.

How to set it up:

- You need balls, bibs and cones.
- Mark out an area measuring 40x30 yards.
- In each corner you need a square measuring 10x10 yards.
- The session will work with six, nine or 12 players, divided into three teams – the example shown uses nine.
- There are two balls on the pitch at any one time.

Getting started:

- Two teams start with a ball. Each exchanges passes around the area, with the aim of scoring points. This is done when players run into the squares to receive the ball.
- After doing this, they run out of the area with the ball and move on to another area.
- The team without a ball must attempt to win possession from either of the other teams.
- After 10 minutes, progress the session by stating that players cannot go into a square that is already occupied by a player from another team.
- Play for an additional 10 minutes. The winning team is the one that has scored the most points by effectively making passes to team mates in scoring areas.
- To advance the task further, make one of the teams defenders. Rotate this team so that each has a go at blocking scoring runs as well as making them.

Why this works:

The focus should be on the team completing sequences that involve running without the ball, accurate passing, good weight on the pass, and good control at the end of the sequence.

Look for players to mix short passes with longer balls that switch areas of play and search out team mates running into space.

This game works because the player in possession will always have a choice of two passing options providing his team mates are looking to attack space. Dummy runs and overlaps should be encouraged also.

These are all off-the-ball runs that mimic match play, and given the small playing area, you will have plenty of opportunities to freeze play and recommend to players where the more efficient passes might have gone.

On the move

1

Greys and whites score in vacant boxes but blacks are out of possession

2

Here greys are the assigned defenders and look to press whites and blacks

3

Blacks work a scoring pass into their player in the end zone

pass → player movement - - ->

Now try this:

- Create a 50x40-yard pitch. You'll need a goal and a keeper at one end, and an end zone at the other, 7 yards deep.
- Playing 3v3, one team scores by having a team member receive a pass in the end zone. The other team plays a normal game attacking the goal. Switch playing direction after 10 minutes.
- Try to get the team attacking the goal to create opportunities by having their players run without the ball into attacking positions. In this way you can ensure both teams develop the exercise from playing into zones to playing in a match-like situation.

The space race

Rocketing into unmarked areas with this precision passing session

A lot of the basic exercises that teams work on in training involve passing to a team mate. So once players are proficient in that, it's time to coach them in passing into space.

One of the great things about passing teams is that they know how to use space to maximum advantage, and the effects can be devastatingly good.

Even as individuals, the ability to anticipate where a team mate is moving to is an important part of player development – and one that initially takes a while to master. While this can be frustrating for coaches, rehearsing and practising using space will eventually work, so always persevere.

The size of the playing area is important in this practice, because the bigger that area the easier the task is. Therefore, start off in a space measuring 20x20 yards, then make it bigger or smaller depending on how your players cope.

How to set it up:

- In your 20x20-yard area, mark a halfway line to create two boxes.
- There are three attackers and two defenders.
- In one box it's 1v1, while the other has two attackers and the remaining defender in it.

Getting started:

- The idea of the game is to have continuous 2v1s in each box. So for their team to retain possession, one of the attacking players has to move each time the ball changes boxes.
- Start the game in the box that contains two attackers. They must combine before passing to their team mate in the other box.
- As soon as the ball is passed, one of the two players must move into the other box to create a new 2v1 overload. All other players must remain in their designated box.
- While attackers must always be on the move, looking to create space for the pass, defenders are more cautious. They defend passively at first, so can only intercept or force an error, rather than tackle. If they do succeed in winning the ball, they simply put it out of play.
- Time to see how long the attackers can keep possession of the ball.
- Play for five minutes then swap teams around so each player has a go at both attacking and defending.
- Award extra points for feints or skills that create space for the pass.

Developing the session:

- You can develop the session by instructing attackers to make three passes before sending the ball into the other box.
- Encourage attackers to produce a two-touch game so that they control and pass in one fluid movement.
- Allow defenders to tackle.

Why this works:

To retain possession of the ball, attackers must create space to pass into, at the same time sending the defender the wrong way. They need good skills and sound technique to prevent defenders from winning the ball.

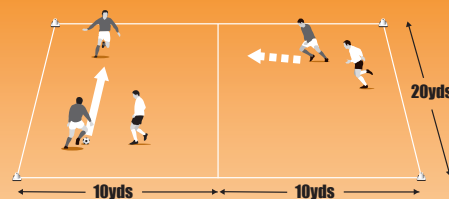
This is a skills workout that makes players think about moving, and how their movement creates space that the defender cannot defend.

You should see signs of improvement in your players if this session is run over a handful of consecutive weeks.

The space race

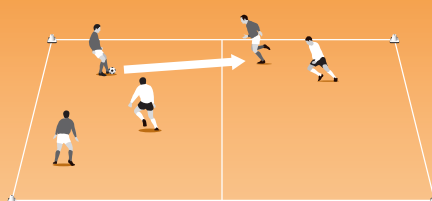
1

The two attackers work the ball into space



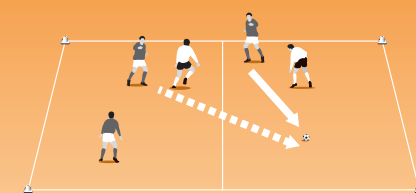
2

A simple pass is made to their team mate in the other box



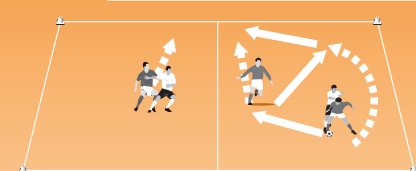
3

His intelligent pass encourages one of the attackers to push into space



4

Now attacking the other way, players show precise passing and clever movement



player movement ... **pass** →

Catalonian keepball

A special session on Spanish superiority in midfield possession

I always find it useful to ask young players what they feel is the best way to stop the opposition scoring. I'll often get someone chipping in with:

"Don't let them have the ball"

And that's right! The best way to keep the ball away from opponents is to ensure your own team keeps hold of it.

I like my players to put 100% effort into making it hard for the opposition to get the ball.

And even when the path forward is blocked, I teach them to get out of situations where play might be turned over by attempting to retain possession via a throw-in or a corner - they can do this by playing the ball off an opponent's leg or shin. Simply kicking aimlessly into an attacking area is a recipe for a counter-attack, so giving the ball away cheaply is not an option.

Here's a game invented specifically for the purpose of keeping the ball - a quick version of it can even be used as a warm-up on a matchday to get players thinking about retaining possession.

How to set it up:

- Set up a 40x30-yard area.
- For this session, you'll need cones, balls and a goal at both ends, with a keeper in each.
- For the first phase don't use the goals - bring them in for the second phase.

Getting started:

- You need two teams of equal number - in the example given we're using 3v3 outfield, plus one substitute.
- In the first phase a team scores a point by making five passes without their opponents touching the ball.
- But if a player from either side knocks the ball out of play or is tackled, he has to swap places with the substitute.
- Advance the game by bringing in goals and keepers so teams have another scoring method - either make five passes or find the net. And combining both scoring methods earns them a bonus point.
- Encourage players in a confined space to play the ball off an opposition player to win a throw-in or corner.
- Play for 10 minutes.

Altering the session to suit:

Older teams (up to Under-16s) tend to understand the principles of this session immediately, although you might find that younger sides can find it difficult to work out whose team the substitute is playing for. They might also be confused as to which way they're attacking, since the turnover of players is so quick. So for younger sides, it might pay to have a substitute for each team, allowing players to stay on the same side at all times.

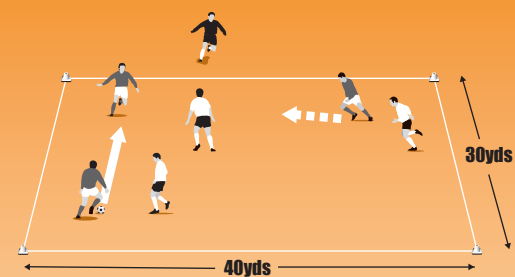
Why this works:

I have seen players so determined not to lose the ball that their shielding skills advance very quickly. They'll also quickly appreciate the effectiveness of playing the ball off defenders' legs or shins in order to win throw-ins and corners. Very quickly, you'll find you won't need to point out who has lost the ball and why - they'll do that themselves and know how to correct their mistake the next time around.

Catalonian keepball

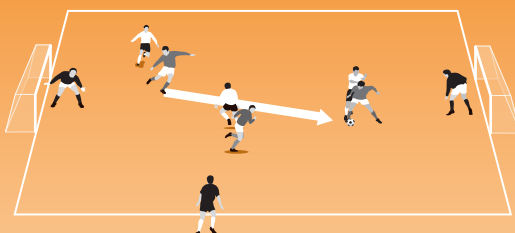
1

Players must show for one another in the tight 3v3 game in order to score points



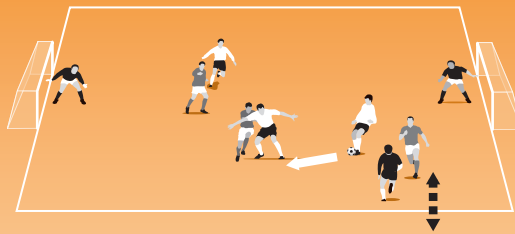
2

Bringing in goals means players can also score via the more conventional method



3

Losing possession requires the player to swap with a substitute



player movement ----> pass -->
player swap ---->

Pressing with purpose

A dynamic session that teaches players how to press successfully

When out of possession, Barcelona are renowned for the intensity with which they attempt to win the ball back, and they do this by pressing quickly with purpose. Their energy and bravery in retrieving possession high up the pitch is now very well established, and sometimes their reputation alone can cause teams to make a bad pass or fail to control the ball.

But at the heart of effective pressing is hard work, concentration and focus, so here's a session designed to make the most impact when not in possession of the ball.

How to set it up:

- The session is comprised of two parts – a six-yard warm-up played in a narrow channel marked out by four cones – and a main 50x30-yard practice area, with a goal at each end.

Warm-up:

- In pairs, player 1 passes to his partner then follows the pass. He must try to slow the player on the ball, whose task it is to get the ball back to the far end from where the exercise started.
- Players are not allowed to tackle – instead they must use a jockeying technique to block their opponent's movement.

Main game:

- This is a standard 4v4 game, plus a keeper in each goal, except for the fact that the player who receives the ball must take three touches before he can pass. This gives the opposing team the chance to close down and press the player before he feeds the ball to a team mate.
- Play this for 10 minutes.

Developing the session:

- Remove the three-touch rule.
- All restarts are with the goalkeepers who must roll the ball out to a team mate – no kicking.
- If either team wins the ball in the opposing half and scores without the ball going back into their own half, they get three points. A goal scored by any other method earns one point.
- Play this for 10 minutes.

Why this works:

The warm-up to this session helps in coaching players to be aware of opportunities in which they can quickly close their opponents down, thus making it harder to pass the ball. It helps to show players that if they haven't got the ball they must work hard to win it back.

The session advances into a positive attacking game whereby a team's ability to press high up the pitch can end not only in regaining possession, but in scoring goals as well.

Pressing with purpose

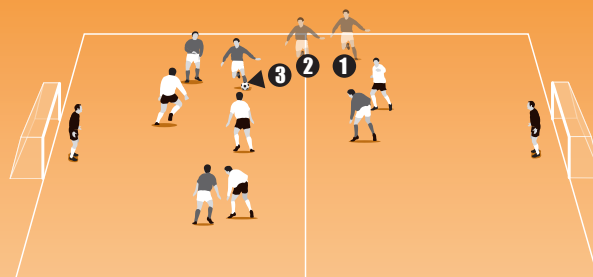
1

At first, players press each other in a simple 1v1 set-up



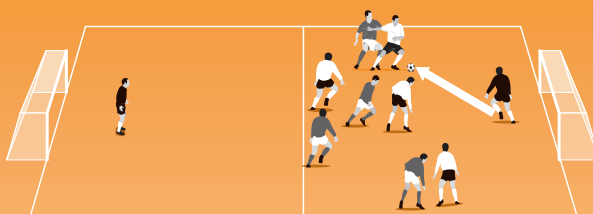
2

In the main game, players must take three touches before passing the ball



3

The greys press high up the pitch with the incentive of gaining three points if they win possession and score



player movement pass