



U9-U10

Teaching Formation

# OVERVIEW

All of the efforts put towards individual skills and team skills are of little use if your team isn't in a position to take advantage of those skills. Proper formation is the foundation of any team strategy. Setting up a formation is easy. This is shown at the start of the game when the players always run to where they are supposed to be. Once the ball is put into play, the formation is usually lost.

The U-9 and U-10 game is legendary in the world of soccer. "Bee Ball" is a common phrase describing the typical formation seen in U-9 and U-10 games. The first impulse for any child at this age is to run towards the ball. The game can quickly become ten players chasing a ball around the field like a swarm of bees. Any effort to teach the game of soccer must focus on breaking this instinct and replacing it with solid fundamentals.

For players to continue to play within the formation, they must understand their role in the formation. Placing the players into their positions and teaching roles is too big of a step. Before even putting them onto a full sized field, we will try to teach them the basic concept of a formation, and what goals we are trying to accomplish during the game. This will be more clear as you examine the exercises that follow.

The exercises that follow include not only the exercises themselves, but also a few coaching pointers. Remember we have to do more than teach concepts. We have to teach these concepts in a way that can be comprehended by 8-10 year olds. An example of this technique is in the first exercise. We want the players to take away from the exercise "Make a Diamond". While what we truly want them to understand is "Hold your formation.", this concept is likely too difficult for them to grasp. So we will go with "Make a Diamond." In the end, there will be a series of phrases they are used to hearing. On game day, "Make a Diamond", "Make the pass easier", "Make the Defensive Diamond" and more will mean something specific to the players.

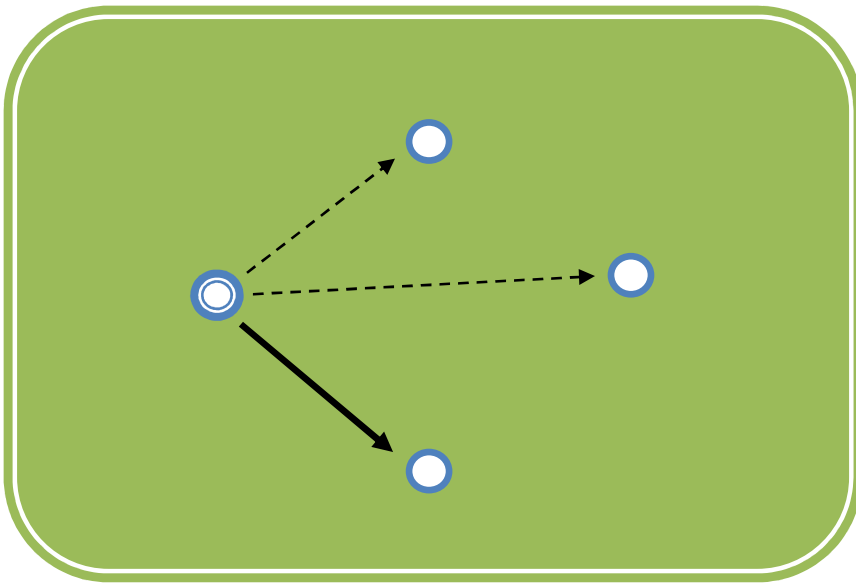
In the following we will develop a team strategy, put forth exercises to instruct this strategy, and establish terminology and catch phrases that can be used and remembered by players in this age group.

## Stage 1 - Setting up the Diamond

### “Make a diamond”

GOAL: Understanding the basic concept of a formation and creating passing options

In this exercise we will introduce a basic formation, the diamond, and work on basic point-to-point passes and receiving of passes.



It is not too important that the players understand they are in a formation at this point. They are making a shape and trying to stay in that shape. We will make the connection for them later.

For right now, just let them pass around in a diamond shape. Anything else that can be done in this shape is wonderful. The goal is to get the players into the formation, and have them respond to “Make a Diamond.”

### OTHER EXERCISE IDEAS

\*Have the players form the diamond, and then run around keeping their diamond shape.

\*Adjust the passing exercise for left foot only, one touch, or the coach can call out the target.

**Introduction of the concept of a formation**

**Focuses on maintaining the formation’s shape**

**Focuses on other skills while keeping the diamond formation a constant presence**

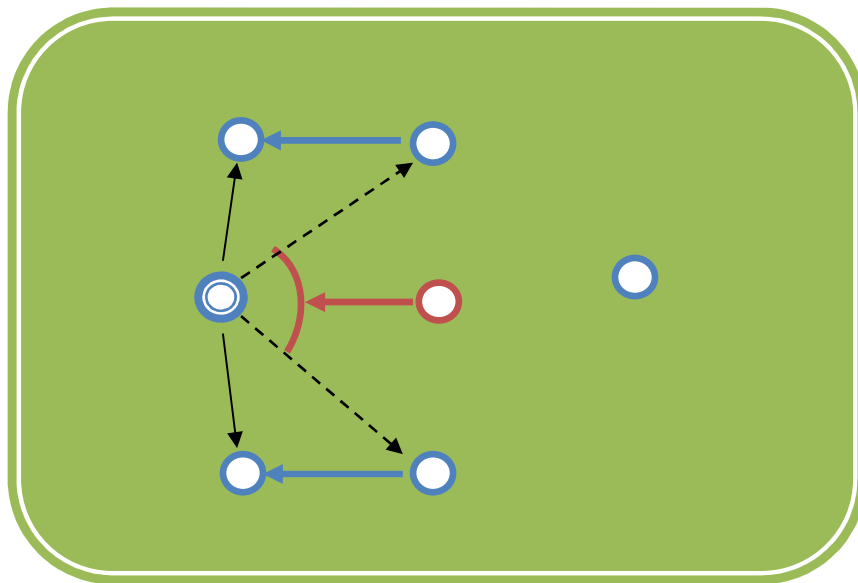
**Creates three passing opportunities for the player with the ball.**

## Stage 2 – Adjusting the Diamond

### “Make the pass easier”

GOAL: Changing the purpose of the formation from a basic shape, to providing options for the player with the ball.

Of course in the last exercise, ball movement was fairly easy. There were no obstacles to passes. Now we will add an obstacle in the form of a single defender.



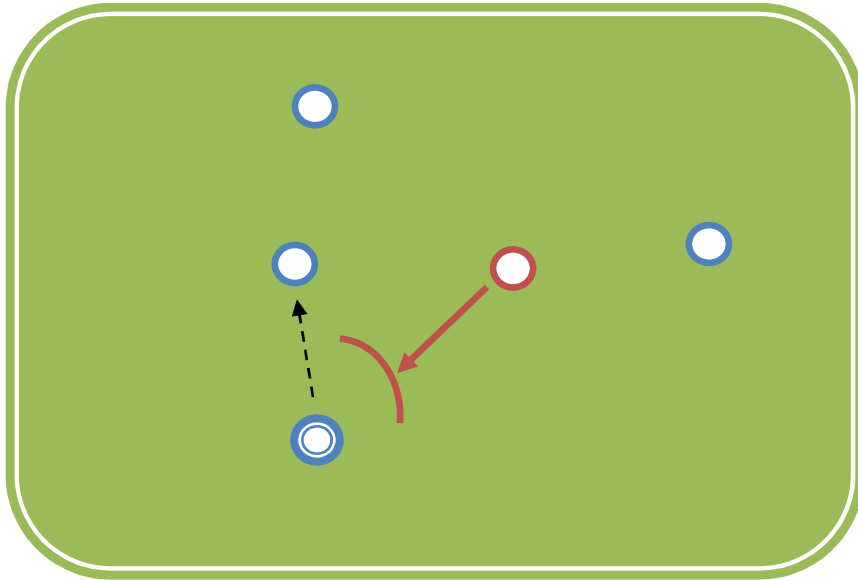
If the players remain in the perfect “diamond”, the defender is basically able to prevent a pass to all three. If the two players on the wings drop back towards the player on the ball, two easy passing options are presented.

The playing space for this exercise should be kept fairly large. The goal here is not to focus on creating space for a pass in confinement, but simply the concept of moving the formation to create passing lanes.

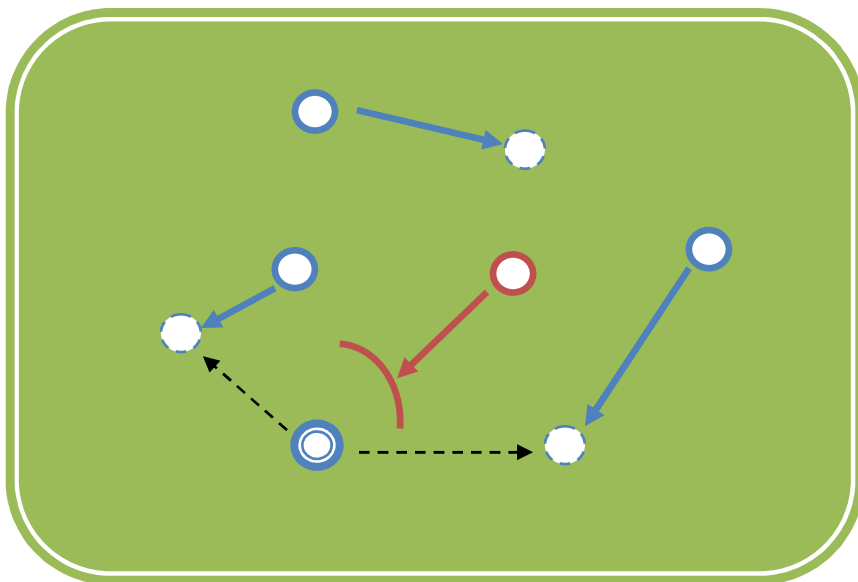
**It is important for players off the ball to create good passing options**

**The diamond represents three passing options, not a geometric shape**

**If you are covered, get open. If you are open, get more open.**



Once the pass is made, in this example, the pass was made to the right, the players must reform the “diamond”. At the point the pass is made, the only legitimate option for the player on the ball is to pass directly back to where the ball came from (shown above). The defender should be able to easily cover this option. If the players off the ball move as depicted below, two easy passing options are presented.



Every time the ball is passed, the two players on the wings should move to a position that creates an easy passing opportunity. The third player moves for a through ball. More importantly, the third player is now in a position to support after a pass to either wing.

## Stage 3 – Onto the Pitch

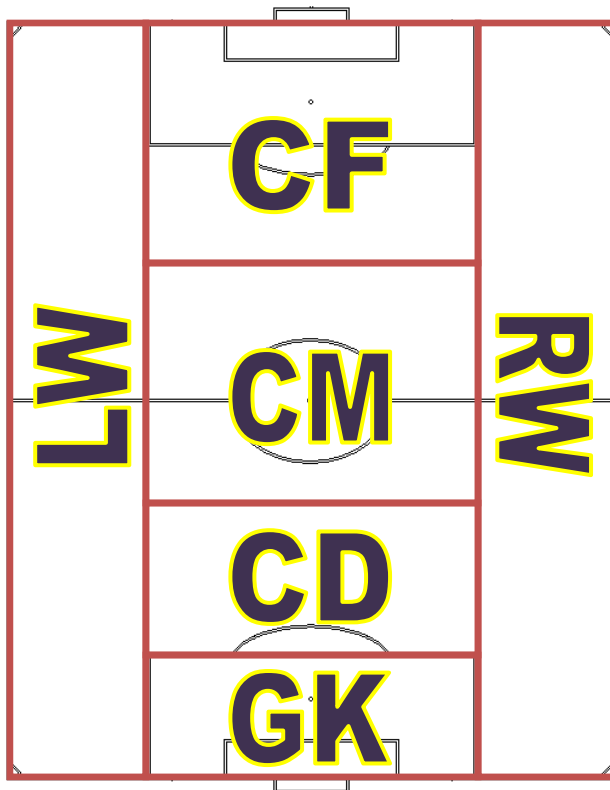
### “Find the Diamond”

GOAL: Applying the diamond concept to the full formation

This exercise is based on the standard 1-3-1 plus a keeper formation used by the club. The roles of the center defender, center midfielder and attacker are fairly simple. Players will quickly pick up on the general roles of these positions. The focus on this exercise and demonstrating the role wings play depending on the position of the ball.

For the time being, ignore situations like covering for a defender that dribbles into attack, back filling for a center midfielder that gains possession on the wing and similar situations.

The first step is to define areas that each position is responsible for. Of course on game day, these areas are less defined. But for the moment, give each position their own exclusive area to operate in.



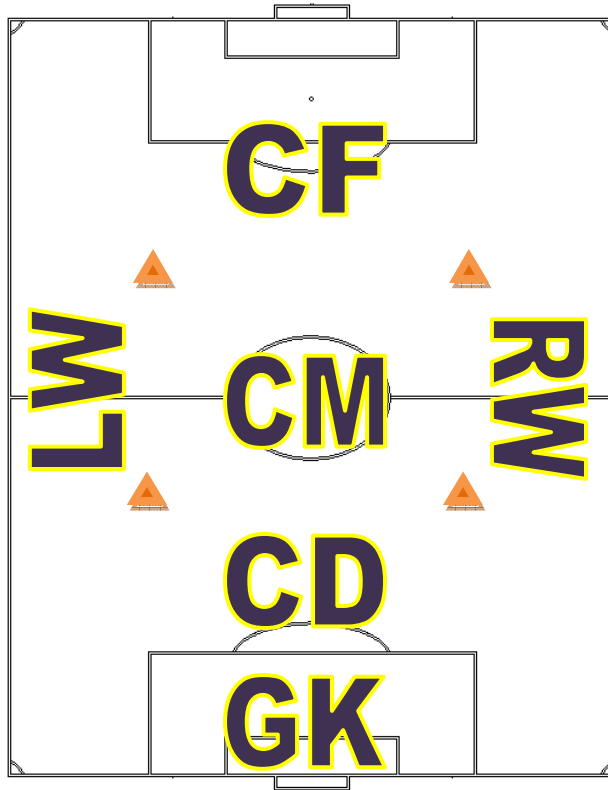
**At any given part of the game, there are likely no more than four players actively involved in the play.**

**Find how the diamond fits into each situation.**

**The positioning and roles of central players is easier. The key is support by wings.**

**For the time being, require the players to remain in their areas.**

Teaching the basics of this formation is easily accomplished with four cones.



The center defender stays in the middle behind the cones.

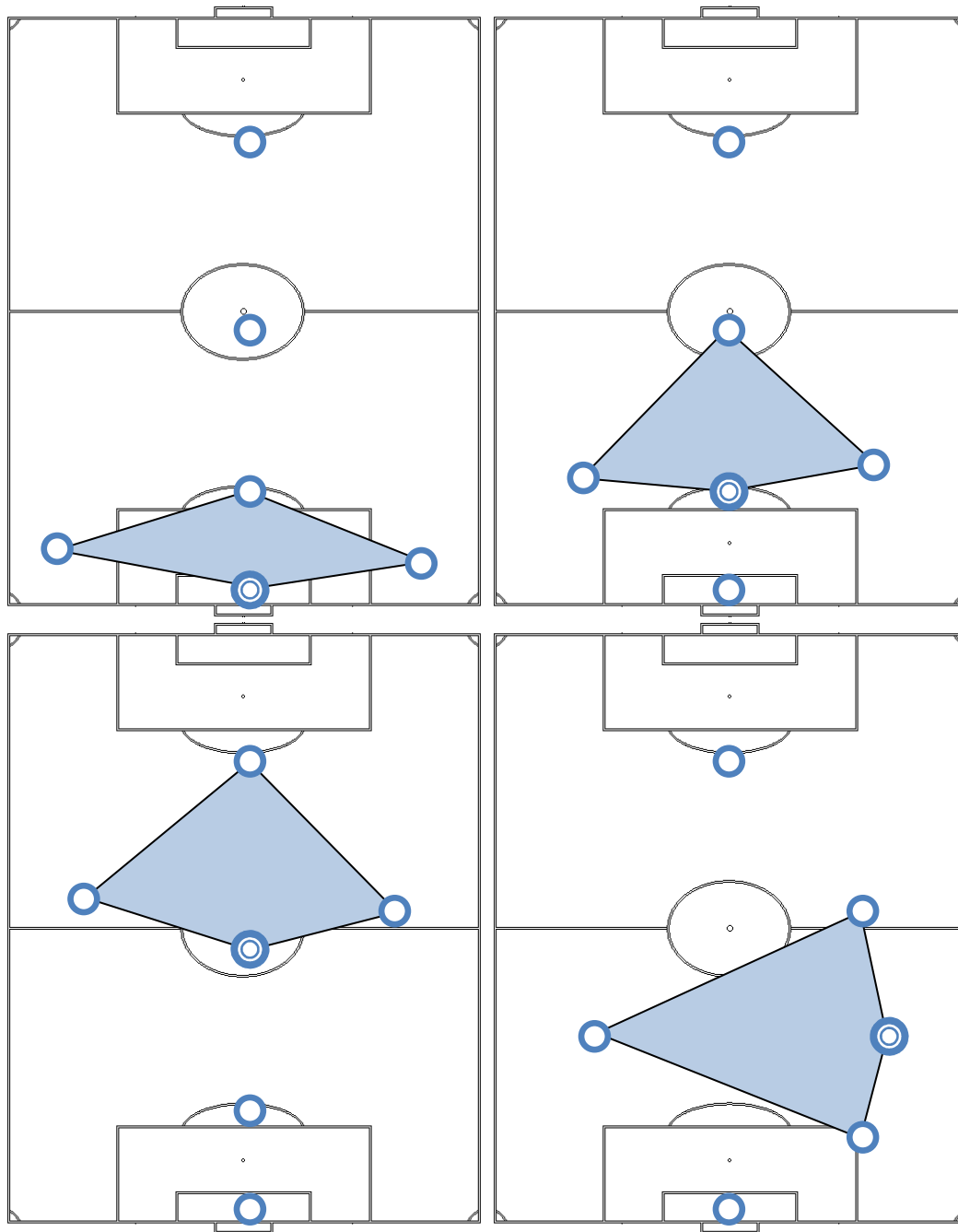
The center midfielder stays inside the cones.

The attacker stays in the middle ahead of the cones.

The wings stay outside the cones and the penalty box.

As players become comfortable with their positions, remove the cones and continue with familiar drills.

Now we tie in this formation to the previous two stages. Depending on where the ball is, the players will try to “Find the Diamond.” Below are some examples of diamonds depending on the location of the ball.



At first, the coach will carry the ball to a player. Have the players find the diamond and identify the three passing options. Walk the ball to another position and repeat.

After this is mastered, give the ball to the keeper. Find the diamond and have the keeper distribute the ball. Have the players move the ball around the field towards the opposing goal. After each pass create the diamond and identify the three passing options.

Eventually allow the ball to move forward without stopping in between passes. Light defense (One or two defenders) can also be added.



## Stage 4 – Expanding the Wings

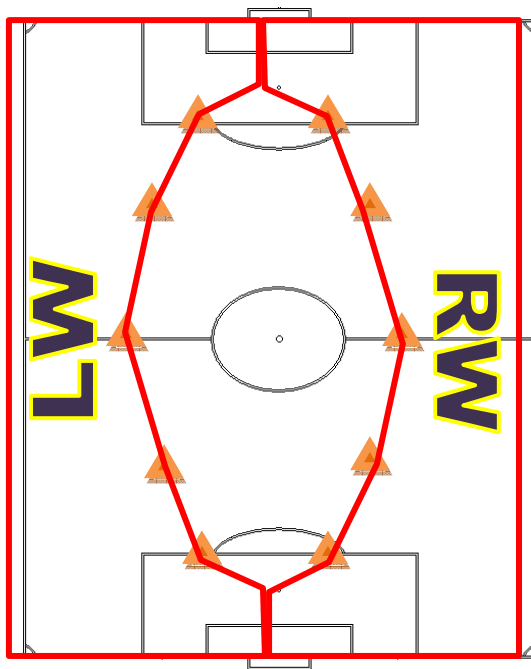
### “The Winger Moons”

GOAL: Expanding the area for the wings near each goal

A very basic strategy for outside midfielders is to get very wide in the middle of the field, and pinch in towards the goals.

Looking at the boxes we put the positions in earlier, the wings as they approach the goals are confined to remaining outside the penalty box. This approach underutilizes the players on offense, and virtually takes them out of the defense.

What we are going to do with the formation now is turn those winger boxes into crescent shapes pushing them in towards each of the goals. Before teaching this step, it is important that the central players are comfortable with their roles and positions as they will not have the aide of cones to guide their positions.



Continue with the same exercises you were doing before, but incorporate this new approach for the wings. Of course the focus of coaching will be on the positioning of wings.

**Wings playing outside either box near the goal are useless.**

**As the ball nears the goal, offensively or defensively, wings need to pinch in towards center.**

**The “Moon” shape pushes the wings outside near midfield, and closer to center by the goals.**

## Stage 5 – Setting up the Defense

### “The Defensive Diamond”

GOAL: Use concepts already familiar to players to establish a defensive strategy.

The 1-3-1 formation places a minimum of four players on attack, and a minimum of four players on defense. With only five players in the field, that means the three mid players (center midfielder and both wings) have to participate in both efforts.

In a full side game, the coach has three to five virtually dedicated defenders to incorporate into the defensive strategy. In 6v6, at least in our system, there is only one dedicated defender. The focus of the defense must be for the initial defender to slow the attack, and for midfielders to fall back in support. Getting players to drop back is alone a challenge. What to do once getting back is an even greater task.

The objective at this age is to keep the strategy and information they must retain simple and consistent. For these reasons we are going to incorporate our offensive diamonds into our defensive scheme.

With the offensive approach we taught a minimum of four players directly involved in the offense. The player in possession and three passing options. For the defense we will keep a similar approach for consistency. The player on the ball, and three in support.

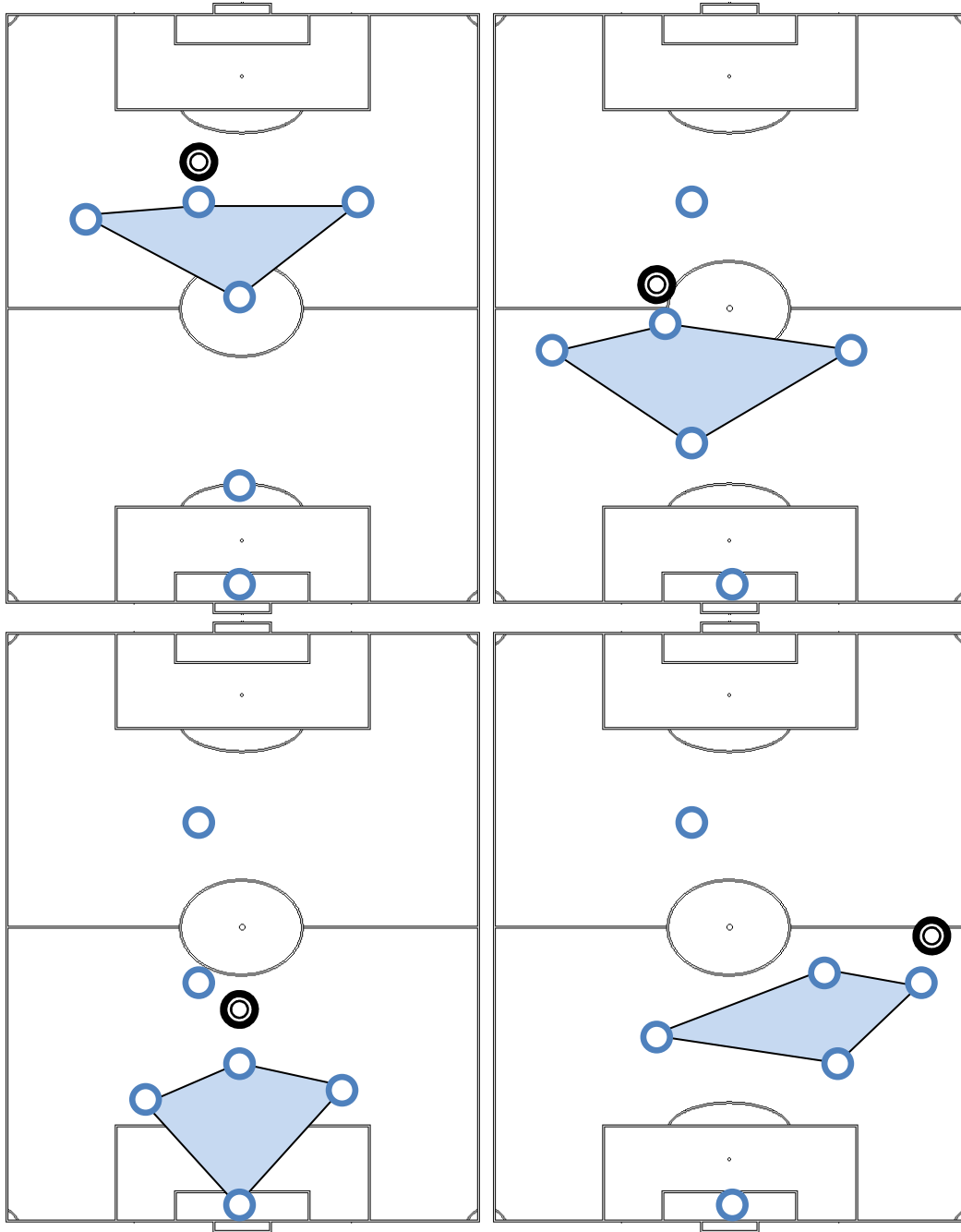
This exercise does not take into account what the other team is doing. The goal here is not marking, identifying passing lanes, etc. The goal is simply to get players in the habit of identifying they have a defensive responsibility, and moving them into a position to help with the defensive effort.

The same exercises we did before moving the ball around the field can be used for this exercise.

**The key to defense is numbers. Get players back to help on defense.**

**Looking at the areas of coverage in the formation, there are four players in the defensive zone. The wings are two of these players and must remember their defensive responsibility.**

**The center defender will be the anchor of the defense. The wings and center midfielder must focus on supporting the defender.**



Players should be able to identify who is going to the ball, and who is supporting.

This is a great opportunity to focus on communication as well.

# "I GOT BALL!"

## Stage 6 – Adding Attackers

### “Who’s Open?”

GOAL: Have players on defense identify and counter offensive threats.

Transitioning from moving the ball around an empty field, to the same goal with defenders present is a difficult step.

Transitioning from defending the ball to defending the ball and accounting for other attackers is even more difficult. Nearly every variable is controlled by your opposition.

We have already accomplished (hopefully) getting players back on defense. If they are adhering to their positions, we should have a decent spread of coverage across the defensive line.

Our formation calls for four defenders during the attack. It is unlikely that the full five field players for the other team are on attack. So numbers should be equal or in our favor. If the other team is sending every player on attack, resign yourself to letting in a couple, and put in twelve on the counter attack.

The first step is to rapidly identify which defender will take the ball. Having one player take the ball is easy. Not having three go to the ball is the challenge. This is where drilling home communication is critical. Again, “I got ball!” is huge.

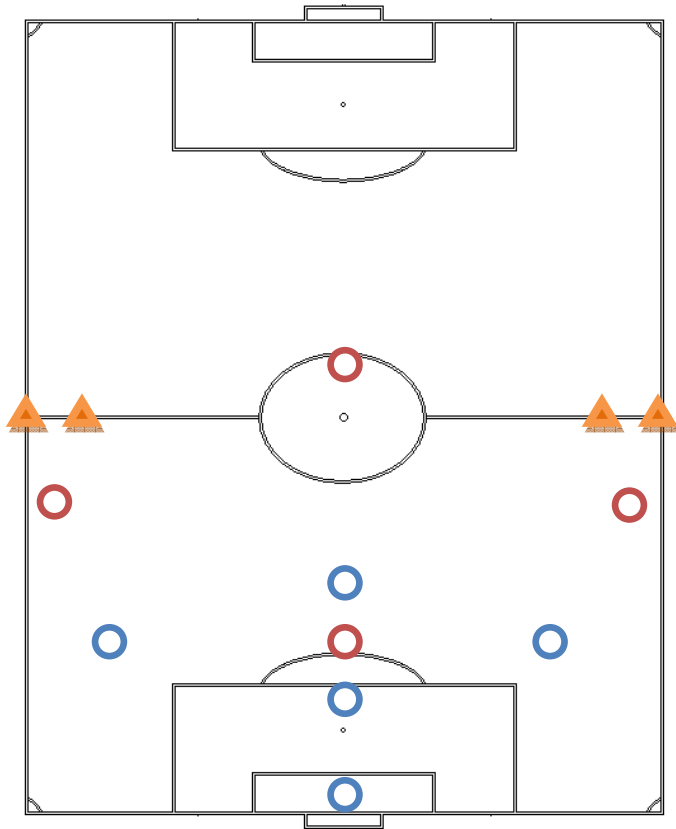
The players off the ball should identify and cover loose attackers. Any remaining defenders should support as needed.

The best way to teach this is repetition. There is no real formula as defensive approach is dictated in large part by offensive efforts.

**The defensive formation and strategy must adapt to the efforts of attackers.**

**Ideally players should be falling back into defensive positions based on what was learned previously. The next step is to identify attackers in their area and respond.**

**Do not forget the lessons already taught. We still need a player going to the ball. All other players should be covering an attacker, providing support to the defender on the ball, or both.**



This is a 5v4 game.

The offense scores with a traditional goal.

The defense scores by passing or dribbling through either set of cones at midfield.

The offense consists of:

- Center Midfield
- Two (2) Wings
- Attacker

The defense consists of:

- Center Midfield
- Two (2) Wings
- Defender
- Goalkeeper

There are always four defensive field players and four offensive players. This is a simple man-to-man scenario.

Goal kicks, throw-ins and corner kicks should be played out. A keeper in possession should distribute the ball back into play.

In addition to practicing defensive marking and positioning and offensive attack, the game requires the defense to push the ball outside, away from their goal. Not a bad lesson to learn.

It might be best to move the offense back well behind the midfield line on restarts to begin their attack. This will require the defense to react to an oncoming attack and on occasion deal with a ball that enters their half from the wings as opposed to constant middle attacks.

## Stage 7 – Putting it all Together

**GOAL:** Have the players identify familiar situations and apply lessons covered previously.

In this final stage we will introduce a couple of new concepts, but largely will focus on bringing all that has been discussed previously together.

The new concepts involve moving out of position, and covering a player who has moved out of position. A good example is a defender dribbling out of defense into the midfield. This actually occurs much more infrequently at this age compared to older groups.

The only position that is truly vital to back fill is your defender. Get the wings and the midfielder in the habit of falling back for the defender if they leave their position pushing forward.

The best way to teach this concept, as well as putting together the other concepts taught is a controlled scrimmage. By controlled we are referring to the willingness to stop the action and instruct on what is observed.

During the scrimmage look for the following keys.

- Identify attack vs. defense. When possession changes, how do players respond. (Particularly the wings)
- Creating passing options.
- On defense do one player call the ball and defend the player in possession.
- Do we have our diamonds? Three passing options on attack? Four defenders on defense?

**Identify attack vs. defense**

**Create passing options**

**Defend the ball**

**Provide support**

**Remember the Diamonds**

**Backfilling players moving out of position**

## SUMMARY

The goal of these lessons was to teach the players to play within the 1-3-1 formation. The players will not execute the formation perfectly. The formation itself is not perfect. No formation is perfect. If there was one, there would only be one formation. Every strategy has strengths and weaknesses. With only five field players, the formation's weaknesses are amplified when compared to an 11v11. However, if executed properly, the approach taught here provides a high chance of success.

If everything has gone as planned, you should have a group that on game day will spread the field on offense, provide passing options, retain formation as the ball moves and provide defensive numbers and support. This is a big part of what you need to accomplish this year.

Now all you need to do is teach them to dribble, pass, shoot, trap, control the ball, pay attention, play defense, execute dead ball restarts and keep their heads up.

Good Luck!