

Opening space on the counter-attack

Session overview

Introduction: Cognitive preparation

Part 1: passing and running in behind

Part 2: 3v3 into a counter-attack

Part 3: counter-attacking from a low block (9v9 plus goalkeepers)

Key coaching points

- When passes played by midfielders into attackers are correctly weighted and timed, it enhances a team's chances of achieving a successful outcome in counter-attacking moves.
- Quick decision-making when making runs in behind and playing passes increases a team's chances of scoring on the counter-attack.
- Maintaining good spatial awareness and body shape at all times allows players to prepare themselves for a transition.
- Bending their runs and being aware of their team-mates' movement gives players more space in which to attack.

INTRODUCTION: COGNITIVE PREPARATION

Before the players come onto the pitch, it is important to ensure they understand the fundamentals of an effective counter-attack. One way to do that is to get them to discuss tactics in groups.

Explanation

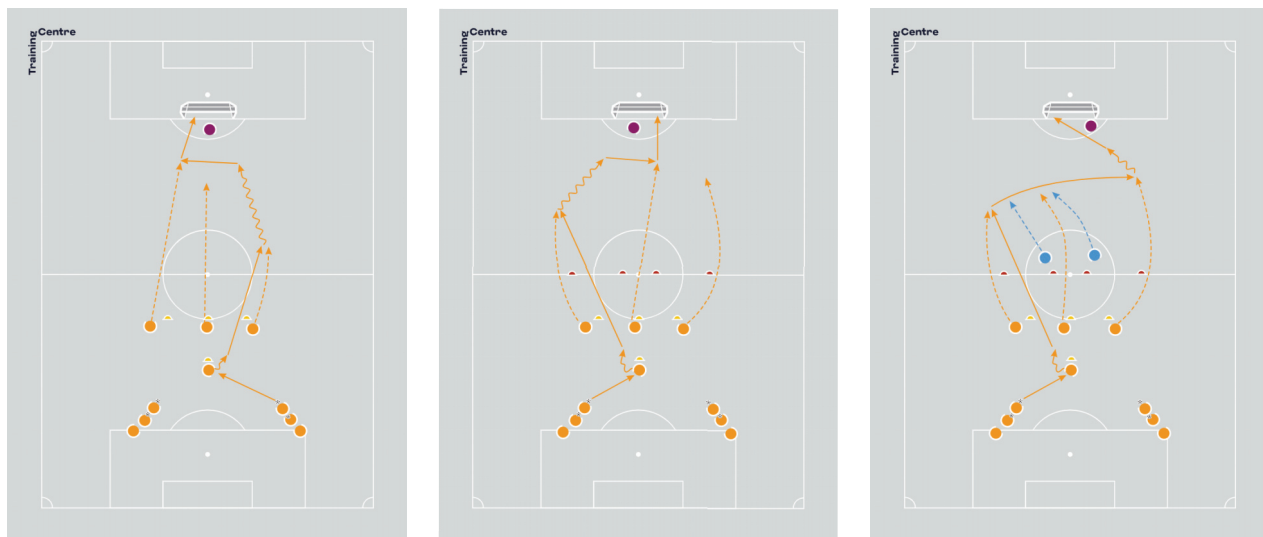
- Split each team up into smaller groups – for instance, two groups of 3 and one group of 3 plus the goalkeeper.
- There are various different ways of forming these groups. You might choose to divide the squad by their positions, so you have a group of 3 defenders plus the goalkeeper, a group of 3 midfielders and a group of 3 forwards.
- Alternatively, you could have one player from each area of the pitch in each group: for example, 1 defender, 1 midfielder and 1 goalkeeper.
- Once they are in their groups, the players should discuss how best to counter-attack amongst themselves.
- Once the smaller groups have discussed their ideas, they should share them with the rest of the squad.

Coaching points

- Think about how to execute a good counter-attack. What are the key points to bear in mind?
- What do players need to do to build an effective counter-attack, both individually and collectively?
- Encourage the players to come up with key words and phrases they can use on the pitch to orchestrate a counter-attack.
- Make sure the players have all the key principles clear in their minds so that they can apply them to the exercise.
- Encourage the group to identify players with specific skills that might help the team make the most of the transition phase.
- If the players do not raise them in the discussion, prompt them to think about aspects like the need to move quickly, communication, making sure your first pass is accurate, creating width and depth, making diagonal runs, and pushing up as a unit

PART 1: PASSING AND RUNNING IN BEHIND

This first exercise focuses on the players' speed and movement during a counter-attack. When through-balls are played into the space in behind, it allows attackers to move at pace and combine with each other with a view to creating a goalscoring opportunity as quickly as possible, thereby reducing the time that the retreating defence have to reorganise themselves.



Organisation

- Mark out a 70x40m playing area.
- Set up one full-size goal with a goalkeeper.
- Position four cones along the halfway line: one 3m either side of the centre mark and the other two 10m either side of the centre mark.
- Place a second line of three cones 10m inside the opposite half to the full-size goal, positioning the three cones an equal distance apart.
- Position a single cone 10m from, and parallel to, the middle cone in the second line.
- Create two ball stations 15m from, and parallel to, the two outer cones in the second line.
- Position an orange-team player at each of the three cones in the second line.
- Place an orange-team player at the single cone.
- Place 2 orange-team players at the ball station on the left, and 2 blue-team players at the ball station on the right.

Explanation

- The aim of the exercise is for the players to work on counter-attacking moves.
- The exercise begins with a player at the ball station on the right playing a pass into their team-mate positioned at the single cone.
- This player receives the ball half-turned forward and pushes it beyond the cone on their first touch, before playing a through-ball between any of the red cones and into the path of one of the 3 attackers, who set off from their stations at the second line of cones.
- As soon as the receiving player turns, the 3 attackers run inside the cones on the halfway line and combine to have an attempt on goal as quickly as possible.
- Once the through-ball has been played, the next three orange-team attackers take up their positions in the second line in readiness for the sequence to be repeated.
- If there are no players at the ball station to play the initial pass, a member of the first group of attackers plays this pass.
- Once all of the orange team have taken part in a counter-attack (three rounds), the teams swap roles.
- The team to score the most goals wins.

Variations

- Variation 1: This variation places the emphasis on the players' runs. The attackers that occupy the outer cones in the second line make their runs outside the outer cones along the halfway line, whilst the centre-forward bends their run around either of the two inner cones on the halfway line.
- Variation 2: Introduce 2 defenders from the non-attacking team to prevent the attacking team from scoring. The offside rule applies in this variation.

Coaching points

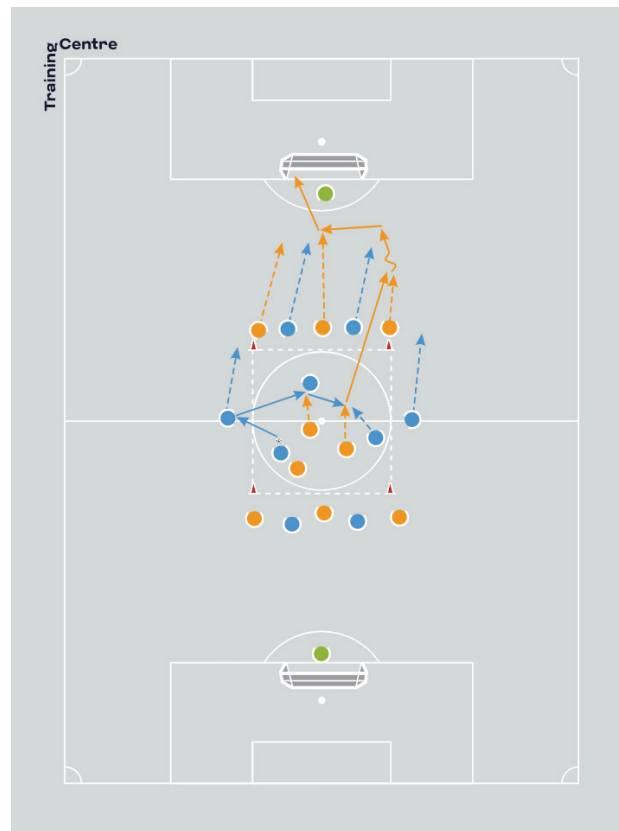
- Players must perform the exercise at maximum intensity levels to increase efficiency.
- The through-ball played by the player in the second line should be weighted so as to ensure that the attackers can run on to it and the goalkeeper is unable to

come out to claim it.

- After the ball has been played into either wide attacker, the centre-forward should ensure that they stay behind the ball in readiness to receive a cut-back.
- The two out-of-possession attackers should coordinate their runs to avoid attacking the same area.
- By bending their runs, the attackers add an element of unpredictability that the opposition defence has to deal with, while it also allows them to occupy better goalscoring positions.

PART 2: 3V3 INTO A COUNTER-ATTACK

This second exercise focuses on the turnover of possession during a counter-attack and helps the players to prepare for such moments. By asking one team to focus on keeping possession and the other to try to win the ball back, both sets of players get the chance to work on defensive and attacking transitions.



Organisation

- Mark out a 70x40m playing area.
- Place a full-size goal at either end of the playing area and a goalkeeper in each goal.
- Mark out a 20x20m inner playing area in the middle of the 70x40m playing area.
- Divide the group into two teams of 9 players.
- Set up a 3v3 in the inner playing area.
- Position a blue player on each side, and outside, of the inner playing area to act as a joker/neutral player.
- Position 2 blue players at each end, and outside, of the inner playing area to act as defenders.
- Position 3 orange players at each end, and outside, of the inner playing area to act as attackers.

Explanation

- A 3v3 is contested in the inner playing area.
- The blue team try to retain possession for as long as possible and can use the outside neutral players.
- The orange team try to dispossess the blue team.

- Immediately after winning the ball back, the orange team launch a counter-attack towards the nearest goal by playing the ball into one of the 3 orange players situated outside the inner playing area.
- The 3 orange players break away and combine to try to score.
- The 2 blue defenders try to prevent the orange team from scoring.
- Each team perform the sequence between four and eight times.
- The team to score the most goals wins.

Variation

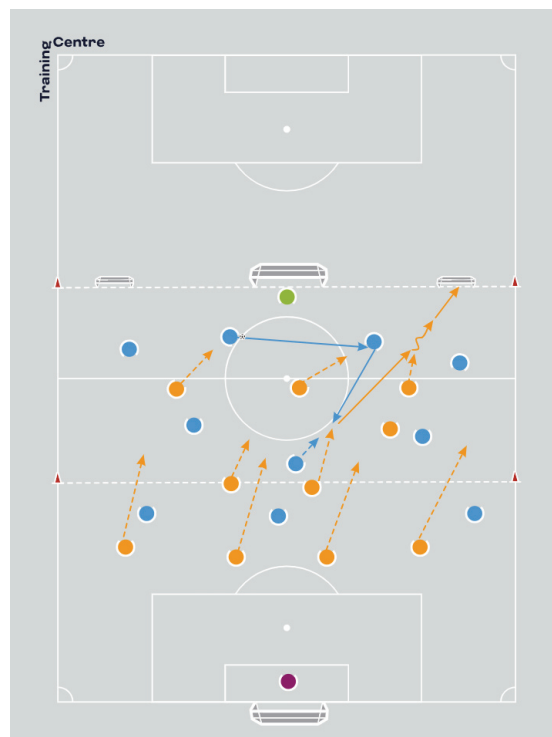
- Variation 1: Once the counter-attack is initiated, 2 orange-team players from inside the inner playing area can join the counter-attack. Once the counter-attack is initiated, 1 defender from inside the inner playing area can join the defending team to stop the counter-attack.
- Variation 2: Arrange a 4v4 or 5v5 inside the inner playing area to work on positional play involving wing-backs, centre-midfielders, defensive midfielders, etc.

Coaching points

- Being on their toes at all times allows the players positioned on the outside of the inner playing area to react more quickly to the counter-attack.
- Players should also look to initiate the counter-attack by playing the ball into their team-mates following a tackle or interception
- Once they have regained possession, the counter-attacking team should look to play the ball away from pressure and into space.
- When they gain possession, players should seek to play passes between the gaps in the opposition's defence and into open space for their team-mates to latch on to.
- Counter-attacking players should occupy spaces in the gaps between defenders and adopt an open body shape to offer their team-mates passing angles.
- Players should make good decisions on the ball, based on their team-mates' movement and the opposition's pressure.
- Players should look to play passes into central areas to free up space for team-mates out wide.

PART 3: COUNTER-ATTACKING FROM A LOW BLOCK (9V9 PLUS GOALKEEPERS)

The final exercise focuses on counter-attacks launched by a team set up in a low block. When a side adopt such a strategy, it can make it more difficult for them to build a successful counter-attack, as they simply do not have enough players ahead of the ball. This exercise encourages the counter-attacking team to move forward as a unit with a view to exploiting spaces left in behind by the recovering defence.



Organisation

- Mark out a 60x50m playing area.
- Place a full-size goal at either end of the playing area and a goalkeeper in each goal.
- Position two mini-goals either side of, and 15m from, the full-size goal at one end of the playing area.
- Use cones to mark out the counter-attacking team's defensive third.
- Divide the group into two teams of 9 players.

Explanation

- The exercise begins with the blue team attacking towards the end of the pitch with just the full-size goal (and not the two mini-goals alongside the full-size goal).
- The blue team aim to build up play and score into the full-size goal.
- If the blue team score, they are awarded three points.
- The orange team aim to win the ball and launch a counter-attack.
- If the orange team score into the full-size goal, they are awarded three points.
- If any of the orange-team players are inside their defensive third when their team score, they are awarded just one point.

Coaching points

- Encourage the counter-attacking team to push up as a unit, which improves their chances of gaining more points.
- The out-of-possession team should set up in a low block so that once they win the ball, they have more space in which to counter-attack at pace.
- Once the counter-attacking team have won possession, they can enhance their chances of launching a successful counter-attack by moving the ball away from pressure and into space.
- Players should be alert to the transition and make runs in behind as soon as their team win the ball.
- Off-the-ball movement is important and players should look to occupy pockets of space before the transition has even taken place.
- When defending, players should protect the penalty area and force the attacking team into wide areas.