

Building the perfect offense

Part 2: The role of positional play in successful attack-building

by **Norbert Elgert**, head U19 coach, FC Schalke 04, and **Peter Schreiner**, director, Institute for Youth Soccer

As we've seen in every recent international tournament, high-speed attacking soccer is the only way to get an advantage over modern defense systems. An essential component of this offensive strategy is positional play. In this article, Schalke's U19 coach, Norbert Elgert, and Peter Schreiner of the Institute for Youth Soccer (www.if96.de; ps@if96.de) will show you how to train positional attacking with a midfield diamond.



All photos: Axel Heimken

The team in possession sets the pace!

One thing that unites the world's best teams is their ability to maintain possession in virtually any game situation. Even under maximum time and opposition pressure, they're still able to build solid attacks from the back.

A team's skill at holding onto the ball, even under pressure, is the first prerequisite for successful positional attacking. While it's true that most goals are scored within the first five passes after winning the ball, the ability to maintain possession as long as necessary should not be underestimated. It's no guarantee of victory, but it does enable you to determine the pace and rhythm of the game, and to make your opponents run more. In other words, it lets you create the situations that lead to goals.

Perfect positional play—think Spain in World Cup 2010—takes lots of training, starting at an early age. Solid passing depends mainly on two factors:

- off-the-ball play
- flexible, accurate passing technique, even at top speed and under opposition pressure.

Positional games of all sizes, with changing numbers-up, numbers-down and even-numbered situations, are a great way to teach these skills.

PRELIMINARY POSITIONAL PLAY EXERCISES:

Three steps to “Total passing”

The short pass zigzag: Our take

- In our last installment, we gave you a preview of the short pass zigzag, an exercise from Galatasaray Istanbul. After testing that exercise with Schalke's U19 team as well as various youth players from the German Soccer Academy, we created our own version, which we like to call “Total passing.”

What we changed

- Since it's unusual to have 18 or more field players at practice, we redesigned the exercise for 15.
- We turned the original starting cone into three starting cones with different colors (red, yellow and blue).
- This allows players to be constantly switching roles. Once they get back to the starting area, they rotate to the next cone (yellow to red, red to blue and blue to yellow).
- This also requires them to switch directions every round.

AMATEUR ADULT

OFFENSIVE SOCCER: Prerequisites, tips and tricks for players and coaches

Demonstrating techniques



The essentials

- The main technique is direct passing with the inside (or outside) of the foot.
- Beginners may control the ball briefly, then pass on the second touch.
- Controlling the ball is also allowed on misplaced passes.
- Watch to make sure posture and foot position are correct.

Incorporating fakes



Realistic training

- Have players practice doing running fakes at just the right moment (i.e. just before the pass).
- This simulates breaking away from an imaginary opponent.
- At the same time, they should also call for the pass ("Now!").

Describing running paths and passing lanes

Explaining the exercise

- Explain passing lanes and running paths (including after the pass) step by step.
- Players need to stay focused, watching and listening closely.
- Having problems? Reduce the difficulty level: Have players throw the ball, or move them closer together.



Variations, opponents, competitions

Even more realistic!

- As players gain confidence, try changing the exercises:
 - Move cones closer together or farther apart.
 - Change the direction of play (left/right).
 - Add follow-up plays after the last pass.
 - Add opponents.
 - Use small competitions to add time pressure.

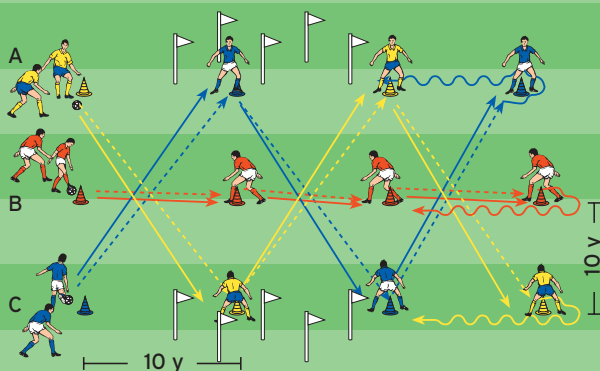


A new version of Galatasaray Istanbul's short pass zigzag

Sequence

- Group A's players play diagonally to the yellow cones, dribble back and rotate to red.
- B's players play straight across to the red cones, dribble back and rotate to blue.
- C's players play to the blue cones, dribble back and rotate to yellow.

- **Level 1:** Players dribble from cone to cone.
- **Level 2:** Players pass from cone to cone. Limit touches (three, two or one) as required for speed.
- **Level 3:** Players pass directly from cone to cone. Two touches are allowed only if another player is in the way.



Variations

- Vary the distances between cones.
- Have receivers stand beside cones.
- Add extra moves on the way back (coordination drills, sprints, slalom dribbling).

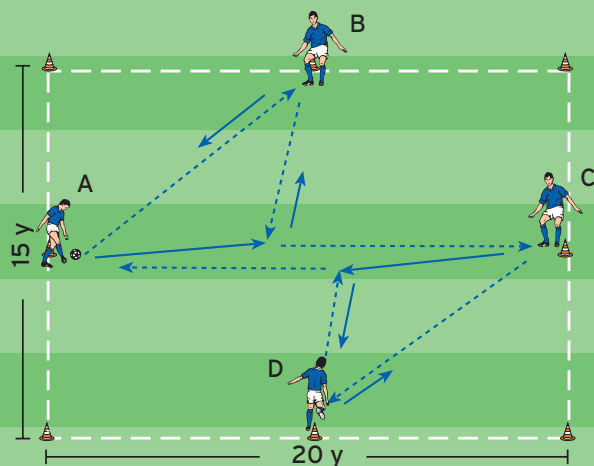
Coaching points

- Work on awareness and field vision.
- Accuracy is more important than speed.
- Make sure players coach each other.
- Passers and receivers must make eye contact.

Building the perfect offense

PASSING EXERCISES FOR MIDFIELD DIAMOND

Basic exercise: Passer and wall player switch positions



Setup and sequence

- Players A, B, C and D form a diamond on a 20 x 15-yard field.
- Player A passes to B and runs to the middle.
- B drops the ball back to A, A passes it off to C, and C passes to D, who runs to the middle, etc.
- C and D switch positions, as do A and B.

Variation

- Players pass in the opposite direction (B to C, A to D).

Tips and suggestions

- Make sure players pass with precision and use both feet.
- All passes should be played on the ground.
- Players can use running fakes.

NUMBERS-UP GAMES FOR MIDFIELD DIAMOND

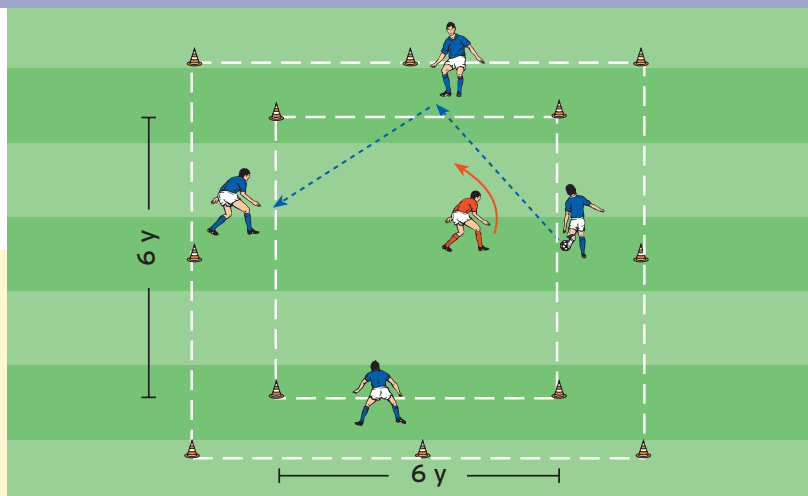
4 v. 1

Setup and sequence

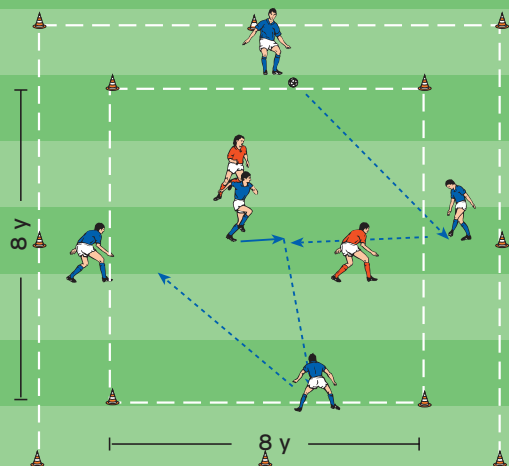
- One defender stands inside a box six yards square or smaller.
- Four attackers stand outside in a two-yard-deep passing zone.
- Passes through the box must be played with one or two touches.
- The attackers must stay inside their zone, but the defender can leave the box.

Tips and suggestions

- Players should take open positions and try to be aware of all the options.
- Receivers should make opening runs.



4 + 1 v. 2



Setup and sequence

- Exercise is the same as above, except there are two defenders and one attacker in a 7- to 10-yard-square box. These players may not leave the box. Passes into or through the box must be played directly (or with two touches).

Variation

- Defenders can leave the box if a passer takes an extra touch.

Tips and suggestions

- Adjust the field size: Smaller is harder for the outside players.
- The inside attacker should look for gaps and help create triangles.
- Work on opening runs, triangles and passing.

Promotion and relegation

Setup and sequence

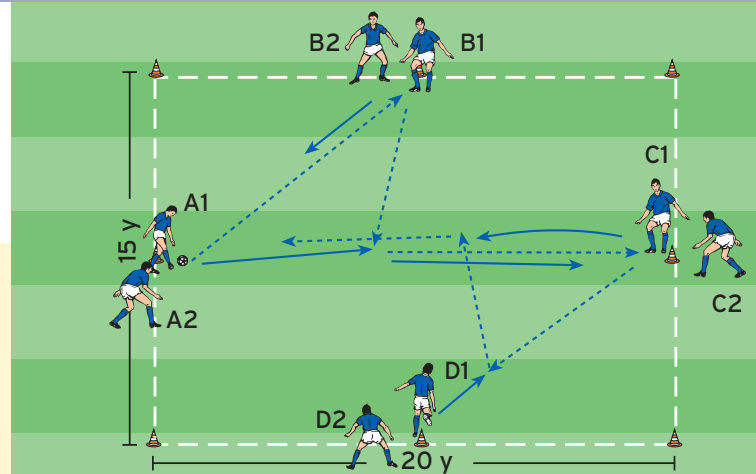
- Setup is the same as at left, except now there are two players at each position.
- After passing to C1, A1 attacks him, so that C1 has to play a “real” wall pass with D1.
- The sequence repeats on the other side of the field.

Variations

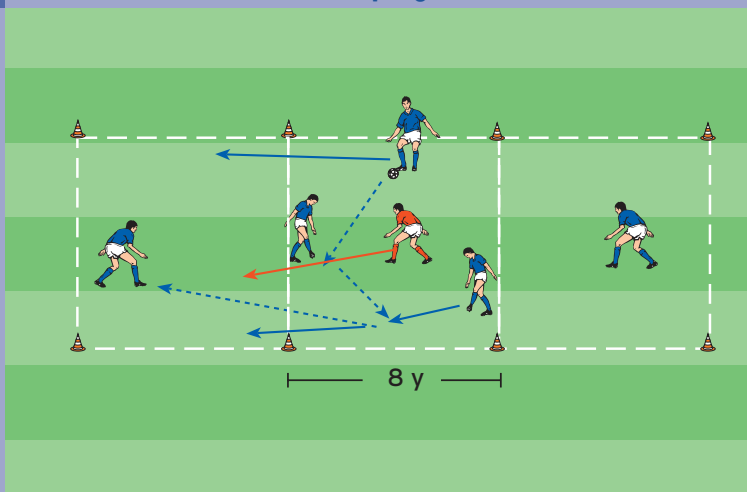
- Players pass in the opposite direction.
- C1 fakes the wall pass and then dribbles past his opponent.

Tips and suggestions

- For passers: Pass directly only when an attacker gets too close. If possible, briefly control the ball before the wall pass.



3 v. 1 + 2 with switch of play



Setup and sequence

- Players play 3 v. 1 keep-away inside the middle box in a row of three 8 x 8-yard boxes.
- An additional passer stands in each of the outside boxes.
- After a switch of play, two attackers and the defender move into the new box for a new 3 v. 1.

Variations

- Mark out buffer zones between the boxes.
- Passers are limited to two touches.

Coaching points

- Forward passing; shifting the point of attack and following the ball; forming triangles

FIG. 1: PASSING: THE TOP TEN COACHING POINTS AND TECHNICAL/TACTICAL TIPS

- 1 As soon as you win the ball and secure it, spread out to open up the field and make it bigger.
- 2 Cover the wings as well as the middle of the field.
- 3 On the wings, take open positions facing the middle. Players in forward positions should stand at a slight diagonal as well, facing one side or the other.
- 4 Coordinate your position changes with your teammates.
- 5 Try to outnumber opponents near the ball and form triangles.
- 6 Try to stay open at all times, whether you're near the ball or not. Constantly adjust your position in relation to your teammates, your opponents and the ball.
- 7 Always look for the gaps.
- 8 Shift the point of attack so that your opponents are forced to run.
- 9 Avoid risky passes and unnecessary dribbling.
- 10 Strive for quality passing and perfect technique.

Building the perfect offense

EVEN-NUMBERED GAMES WITH NEUTRAL PLAYERS

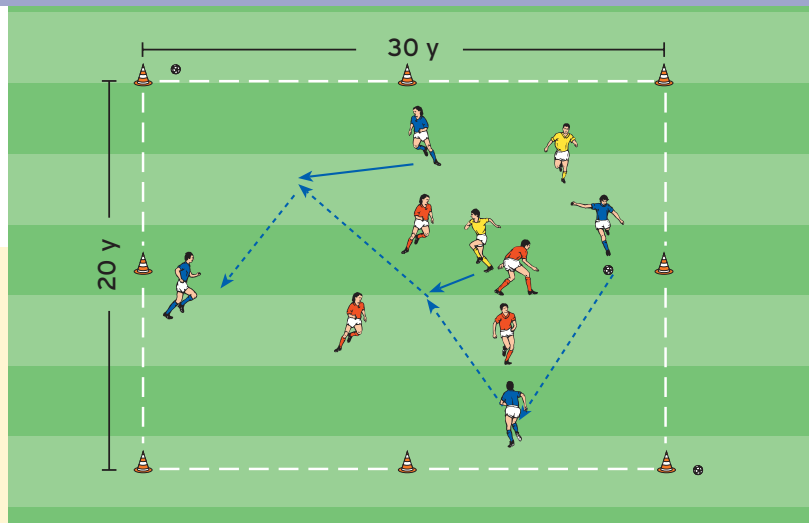
4 v. 4 + 2 neutral players on the field

Setup and sequence

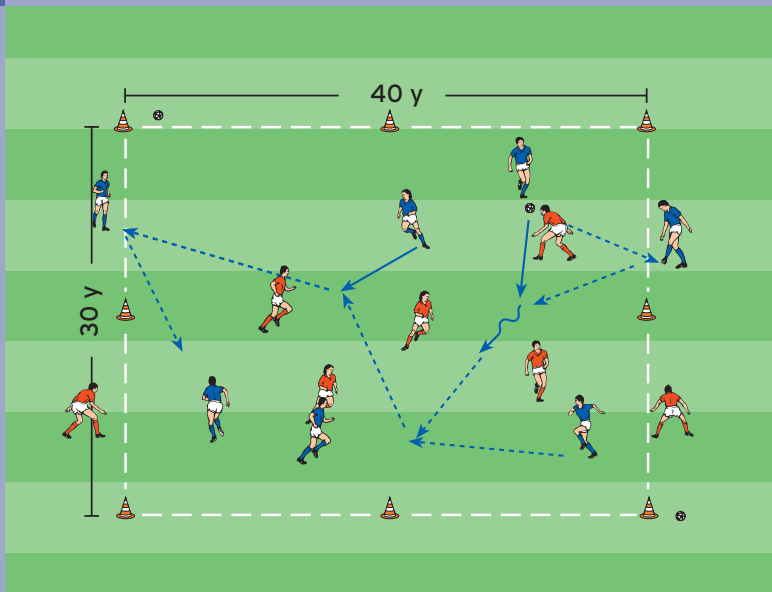
- Teams play 4 v. 4 keep-away with two neutral players on a 30 x 20-yard field. The attacking team scores a point every time it completes eight passes in a row (or 10, or 12).
- Play five three-minute periods so that everyone gets a turn as a neutral player.

Tips and suggestions

- Attackers should:
 - Spread out evenly across the field.
 - Make quick transitions.
 - Cover the middle and the gaps.
 - Take open positions.



5 + 2 v. 5 + 2



Setup and sequence

- Teams play 5 v. 5 on a 40 x 30-yard field.
- Two players, one from each team, stand outside each endline.
- Teams play keep-away (10 passes = one point).
- If they can get the ball from one outside player to the other with no more than four passes, the attacking team scores three points.

Variation

- Inside and outside players can trade positions.

Tips and suggestions

- Attackers should:
 - Shift the point of attack.
 - Move the ball forward quickly, but keep it safe.

“STOP, LOOK AND PLAY” IS OUT!

“First touch” is in!

In positional attacking, the first touch has special significance. The first touch is what sets up the rest of the attack, allowing the next player to immediately pass, play a cross or shoot at the goal. This requires the player receiving the ball to identify the available passing options and choose the best one—*before* the ball gets to him.



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EVEN-NUMBERED GAMES WITH NEUTRAL PLAYERS

5 v. 5 + 4 neutral players on the sidelines

Setup and sequence

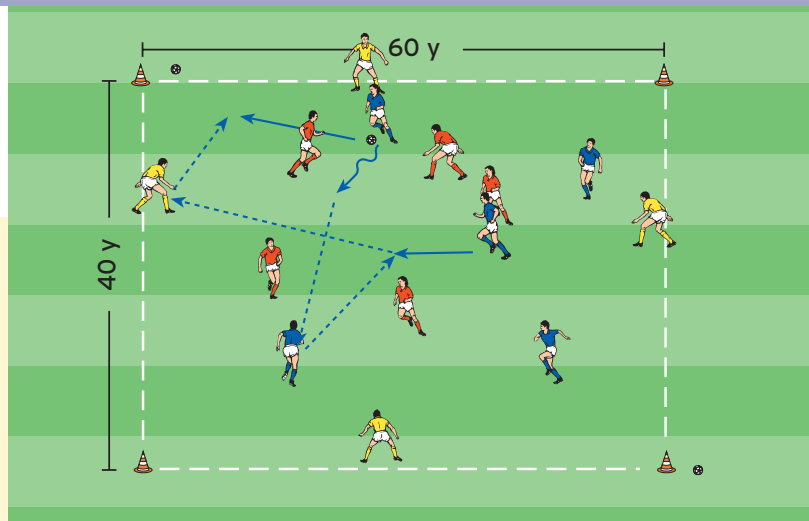
- Teams play 5 v. 5 on a 60 x 40-yard field.
- The attacking team is assisted by four neutral players, who are positioned just inside the sidelines.

Variation

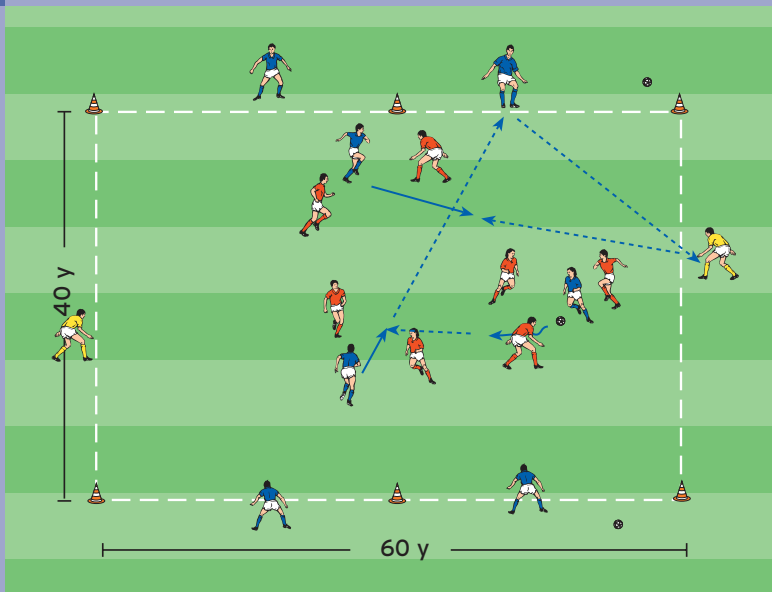
- Limit touches, especially for the neutral players.

Tips and suggestions

- You can use goalkeepers as neutral players.
- To shift the point of attack, passers should alternate between short and long passes, following the ball each time.
- Players should try to outnumber opponents near the ball.



7 v. 7 + 2 neutral players



Setup and sequence

- Teams play 3 v. 7 on a 60 x 40-yard field.
- Two attackers stand outside each sideline, and one neutral player (possibly a goalkeeper) stands outside each endline.
- The attackers on the field work with the outside players to maintain possession. Outside players get just one touch (or two).
- Neutral players are not allowed to pass directly to one another.
- If the defenders win the ball, four of them trade positions with the attackers outside the sidelines.

Tips and suggestions

- Have teams switch roles every three to five turnovers at first.
- If the defenders win the ball, they first try to secure it and rotate players outside. Their first pass must go to a neutral player.
- The team that lost the ball should immediately begin to press.
- Players rotating off should take the shortest path possible.
- Work on awareness and mutual coaching.



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