

# Staying cool under pressure in the box

Games for improving your finishing  
by Ernst Middendorp and Frank Eulberg, professional coaches

In possession for more than 60 percent of the game, but just one shot at the goal—and you blew it. Or: 700 shots at the goal, and you couldn't capitalize on a single one. So next week it's shooting practice: Practically every shot sails into the net, balls are

flying past the keeper left and right, players are gaining valuable experience—and on Sunday it all goes wrong all over again. "We've got to watch that this doesn't start turning into a mental problem," the coach tells the assembled reporters.

If only he knew that it is one already! Not in the way he means, though: When players fail to set up or take advantage of shooting opportunities, it's often a question not just of confidence, but also of game action speed.

## The effectiveness of attacking play in soccer

A shot at the goal is the ideal finish to every offensive play. According to French soccer ex-

pert and author Claude Doucet, the average soccer team executes 230–280 offensive plays (passes, opening runs, etc.) per match. However, it takes more than 150 plays to score a goal.

So in purely mathematical terms, the average effectiveness of all offensive plays is just 0.6 percent! That's why it's all the more important to be able to capitalize on the few chances you get.

Will it go in or not? Did the forward boot it past the keeper—or did he just boot it?

BY AXEL HEIMKEN



## Why attackers miss opportunities to score

- They're running fast, but in the wrong direction.
- They know where to go, but they take off too soon or too late.
- They have perfect finishing technique, but they shoot at the wrong time.
- Their timing is right but their execution is bad.
- They make all the right moves at lightning speed—but only at practice.
- They react correctly when their opponents are disorganized, but their finishing is terrible.
- They properly anticipate their teammates' actions ("I know exactly when I need to take off"), but they lose their cool in the box.
- They're always looking for the goal, just like their coach tells them, but they also shoot in hopeless situations.
- They get into the right position in the penalty box, but then they get rattled and can't put the ball in the empty net.



### A chaotic event

An attacker's attempt to score might best be described as a "chaotic event," because in soccer—unlike other sports such as basketball or team handball—individual players' actions tend to be unpredictable even to their teammates.

For one thing, in soccer, you have more players on a larger field. And because they use their feet instead of their hands, they tend to have less ball control and less accuracy in passing.

No matter how well-organized your attacking game may be—no matter how faithfully your players stick to the plan, no matter how intensely they focus on playing the ball forward—attackers will always encounter so-called "decision nodes" that require them to break off the sequence they've practiced and respond to the demands of the situation.

### Let training reflect reality

What this means is that players need to learn how to deviate from the tactical concept without abandoning its technical and tactical fundamentals. To do that, they need not only technical skill, but also a great deal of tactical

### INFO

### PRACTICE GAMES FOR GAME ACTION SPEED

- Match your players' ability level.
- Increase the pace by reducing the number of touches.
- Gradually decrease the size of the field.
- Increase the number of opponents.

flexibility and equal amounts of physical and mental ability.

There are many reasons why attackers fail to score, as shown in the box at left. Your training program needs to take these reasons into account. For example, an attacker in the penalty box—where a single situation involves numerous players, all doing differ-

ent things—must be able to react quickly at any moment in order to be able to shoot with confidence and accuracy.

It takes exercises that are complex, realistic, intense and strenuous to prepare players for situations that recur again and again, yet are never predictable. That's how players learn to keep their cool in match situations.

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## Training methodology

In the following training sequences, we systematically build on simple introductory exercises. Each sequence includes an introduction, main session and conclusion.

### Introduction

These exercises, which follow warm-up, prepare players for the specific tactical aspect of game action speed to be worked on.

### Main session

This phase is primarily devoted to exercises that are very similar or even identical to

match play in structure. They are highly demanding in terms of concentration and will-power/motivation, forcing players to execute plays quickly. The many unpredictable variations provide for plenty of repetitions while avoiding routine movements.

### Conclusion

In these practice games, the moves that were taught in the previous exercises must now be executed in shorter time frames and/or in smaller spaces, which means they must be fast—sometimes faster than in actual match play.

### What's important

In all of the exercises, players should work toward the following:

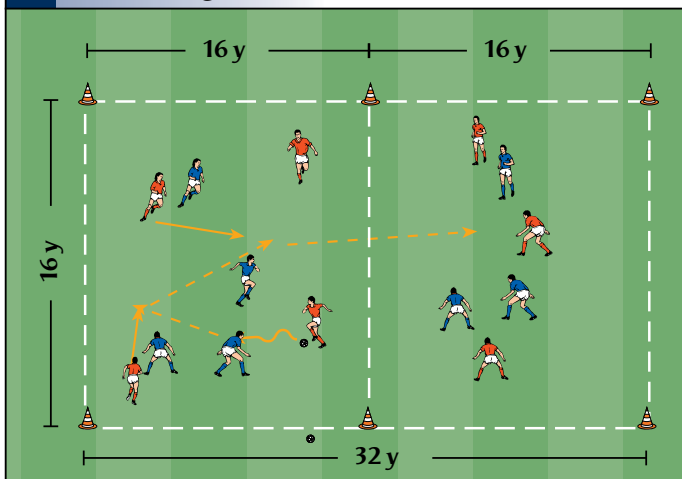
- anticipating complex situations
- paying close attention to the game environment
- reacting quickly (selective reaction speed)
- making the right decisions
- using the correct techniques and tactics
- acting effectively
- playing with determination

The exercise sequences are set up for groups of 14 (Sequence 1), 18 (Sequence 2) and 20 (Sequence 3).

## TRAINING SEQUENCE 1: Forward pass (14 players)

### INTRODUCTION

#### Switching fields



#### Setup and sequence

- Divide a 32 x 16-yard field into two squares of equal size.
- Divide players into two teams of seven (including goalkeepers), creating a 3 v. 3 in one half and a 4 v. 4 in the other.
- Teams play keep-away, passing the ball from one half to the other. Players are not allowed to switch halves.
- Playing time is 4 x 3 minutes with two-minute active rest periods.

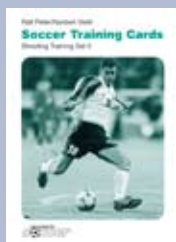
#### Variations

- Limit the number of touches, or require players to take two touches.
- Completing five passes inside a half scores one point.
- One player from each team is allowed to switch halves.

#### Note

- Encourage third-player runs.

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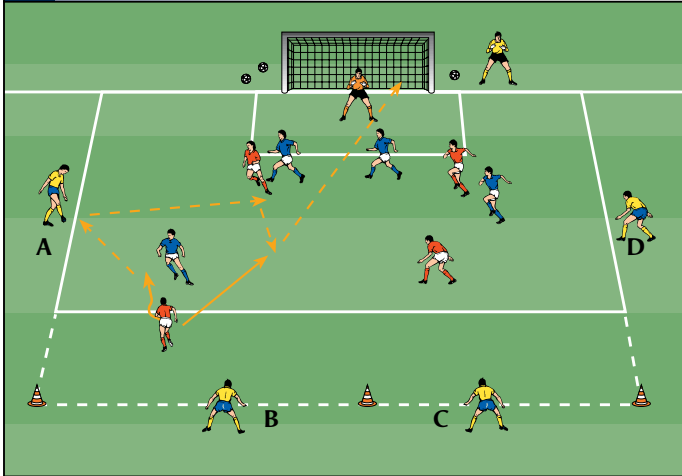
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## TRAINING SEQUENCE 1: Forward pass (14 players)

### MAIN SESSION

#### 4 v. 4 + 4 outside players



#### Setup and sequence

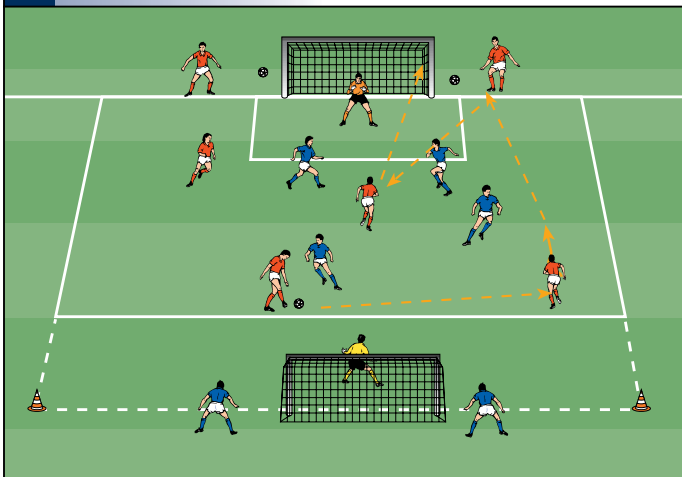
- Field is the penalty box, extended to 20 yards deep.
- Divide players into three teams of four; goalkeepers take turns.
- Teams play 4 v. 4, with four outside players who must pass directly.
- After winning the ball, players must pass it to Player B or C before starting a new attack.
- Playing time is 4 x 3 minutes with two-minute active rest periods; then rotate teams.

#### Variations

- Limit/change the number of touches.
- Third-player runs are required.
- One neutral player is on the field to help whichever team has the ball.

### CONCLUSION

#### 4 + 2 v. 4 + 2



#### Setup and sequence

- Teams play 4 + 2 v. 4 + 2 on two goals with goalkeepers in a field twice the size of the penalty box.
- Each team has four players on the field and two (who must pass directly) flanking the opposition's goal.
- Playing time is 4 x 3 minutes with two-minute active rest periods.

#### Variations

- Limit/change the number of touches.
- Goals scored on sequences involving outside players count double.
- All goals must be set up by three-player combinations, with the first pass involving one of the outside players.

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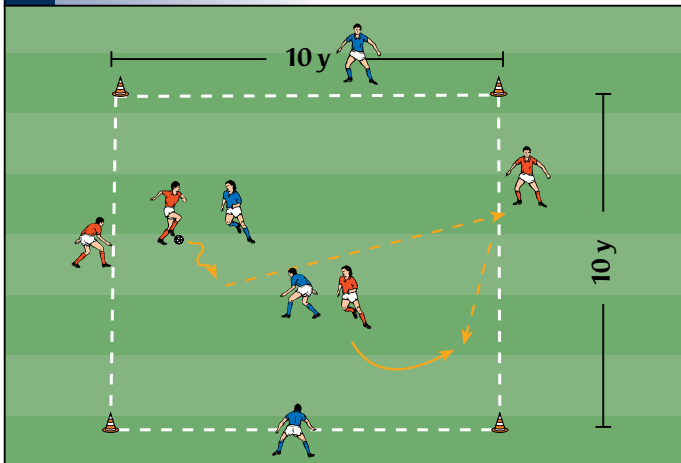
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## TRAINING SEQUENCE 2: Getting out of tight spaces (18 players)

### INTRODUCTION

2 + 2 v. 2 + 2



#### Setup and sequence

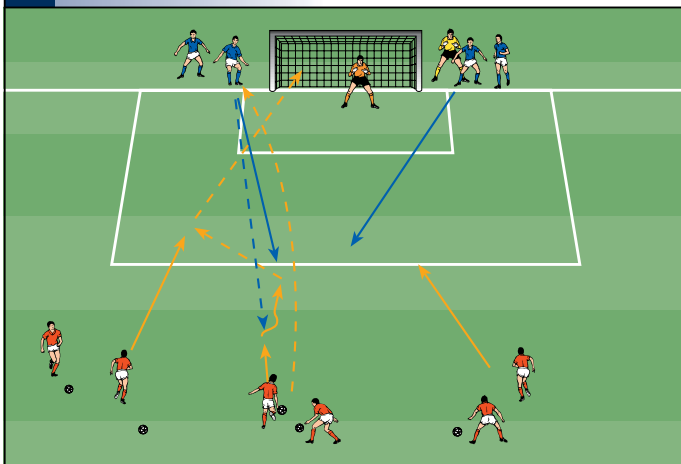
- Mark out two 10 x 10-yard fields and assign two teams of four to each one (note: only one field is shown).
- Teams play 2 + 2 v. 2 + 2 keep-away: Each has two players on the field and two outside.
- Outside players stand on opposite sides and must pass directly.
- Playing time is 4 x 1 minute with one-minute active rest periods.

#### Variations

- Limit/change the number of touches.
- Third-player runs are required.

### MAIN SESSION

Numbers-up attack



#### Setup and sequence

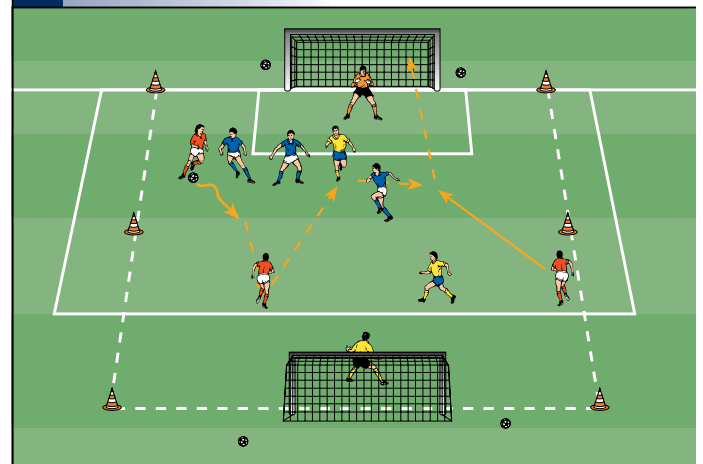
- Field is a half with one goal (goalkeepers take turns).
- Divide players into two teams: defenders beside the goal, attackers 25 yards in front of it. Teams play 2 v. 1 and/or 3 v. 2 on the goal.
- An attacker passes to a defender, who immediately passes back and moves onto the field.
- Attackers try to score; defenders try to keep them from scoring.
- Play ends when the attackers score or lose the ball.
- Players rotate after each round.

#### Variations

- Change the opening play: ground ball, flighted ball, etc.
- Change starting positions: defenders inside, attackers on wings, etc.

### CONCLUSION

3 v. 3 + 2 neutral players



#### Setup and sequence

- Mark out a 30 x 30-yard field with two goals with goalkeepers.
- Divide players into four teams of four: Two teams play 3 v. 3 while the other two rest (e.g. juggling in groups).
- One player from each team acts as a neutral passer on the field.
- Neutral players stay forward and must pass directly.
- The last pass before shooting must be played by a neutral player.
- Playing time is 4 x 3 minutes; then rotate teams.

#### Variations

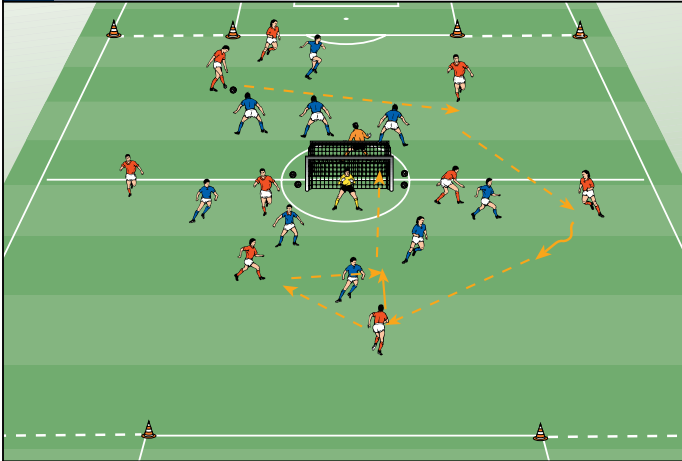
- Limit/change the number of touches.
- Shots must be set up by third-player runs.
- The offside rule does not apply.



## TRAINING SEQUENCE 3: Shifting the point of attack (20 players)

### INTRODUCTION

#### 9 v. 9 on backwards goals



#### Setup and sequence

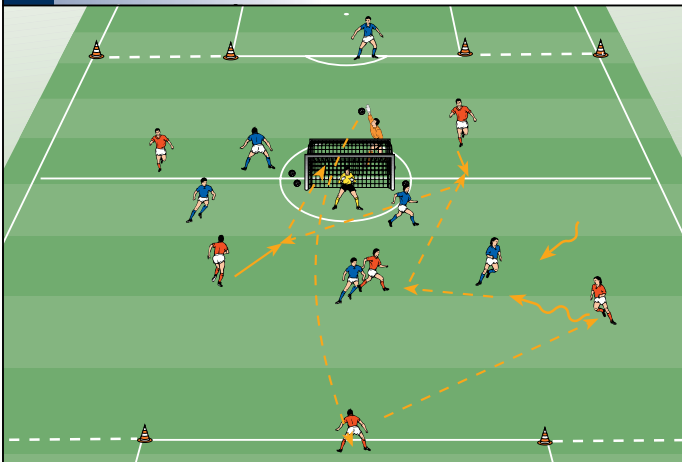
- Field is the area between the penalty boxes. Two standard goals are placed back to back in the center circle, with a neutral keeper in each.
- Place plenty of extra balls by the goals.
- Teams play 9 v. 9 on both (!) goals.
- Each round begins with a throw from a keeper into the opposite half.
- The team in possession can attack on either goal.
- If the defending team wins the ball, players have to complete at least one pass before starting their attack.
- Playing time is 3 x 8 minutes with two-minute active rest periods.

#### Variations

- Limit/change the number of touches.
- The offside rule does not apply.

### MAIN SESSION

#### 5 + 1 v. 5 + 1



#### Setup and sequence

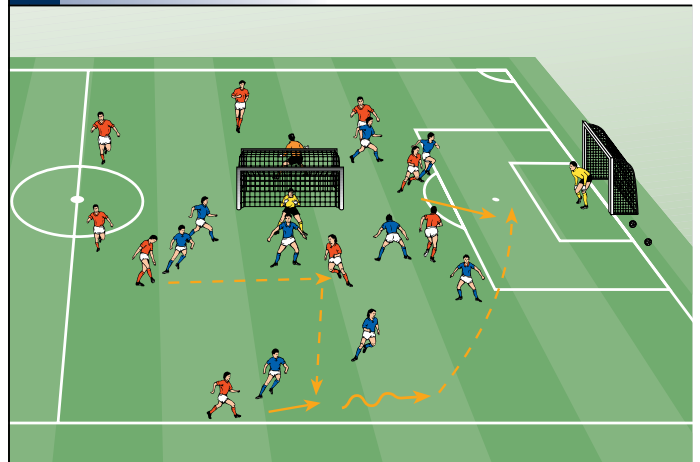
- Field is the same as above.
- Teams play 6 v. 6 on two goals. Each team has a passer on one endline, who must pass directly. A third team sits out.
- Play begins with a throw from a keeper to the far passer.
- If a defending player or goalkeeper wins the ball, he must first pass to a passer. This creates a continuous alternation between defense and attack.
- Playing time is 3 x 4 minutes with two-minute active rest periods.

#### Variations

- Limit/change the number of touches.
- Shorten the field to about 50 yards.

### CONCLUSION

#### 9 v. 9 on 3 goals



#### Setup and sequence

- Place two standard goals with goalkeepers back to back in the middle of a half. A third goalkeeper stands in the goal on the endline.
- Teams play 9 v. 9 on all three goals.
- Playing time is 3 x 8 minutes with two-minute active rest periods.
- Play begins with a throw from a keeper into one of the corners.
- The team in possession can attack on any goal.
- If the defending team wins the ball, players have to complete at least one pass before starting their attack.

#### Variations

- Limit/change the number of touches.
- Goals scored on headers count double.