ELITE SOCCER
COACHING PRACTICES FROM ENGLISH FOOTBALL LEAGUE MANAGERS AND COACHES

BIRMINGHAM CITY
ALEX McLEISH
WHOLE TEAM ATTACKING

• Build-up
• Finishing
• Tempo

Exclusive
Training practices from top professional managers

READING
Brian McDermott
Shot blocking

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Welcome to the first issue of Elite Soccer, the publication that delves into the brilliant tactical minds of English football’s leading managers and coaches.

Working in partnership with the League Managers Association, we’re delighted to be able to present a groundbreaking and unique training resource - a dedicated and evolving tool for professional, semi-professional and aspiring soccer coaches who are looking to widen their scope and knowledge of this great game.

In this, our launch issue, we kick-off with Birmingham City boss Alex McLeish, the man who guided the Blues to a ninth-place finish in the Premier League last season. He’s looking for more goals this term, and has laid on an absorbing coaching session which places every team member in an attacking mindset.

Reading boss Brian McDermott switches attention to the backline, bestowing the virtues of organised pressured defending, while Wales Under-21 boss Brian Flynn puts forward a simple tactical ploy that utilises the unpredictability of a player of any position getting forward into attacking areas.

Add in exclusive contributions from Colchester United’s John Ward, Bury’s Alan Knill and Manchester United’s Head of Human Performance, Richard Hawkins, and I’m delighted to present a unique and unrivalled blend of professional coaching sessions.

I hope you enjoy this issue, and we’ll see you again next month with six more sessions from the cream of English football coaching.

James Evans, Editor

Elite Soccer is a monthly publication for professional, semi-professional and aspiring soccer coaches and is available by subscription only. £97 for 12 issues. To subscribe email duncanh@greenstarmedia.net or call on +44(0) 1483 892 894.
**Whole team attacking**

**Overview**
I use this session to get my players working as a unit and using the whole team to develop an attack. The session utilises all attacking options like fullbacks, wingers and midfielders, and it also relies on good exchange of movements between fullbacks and wingers, and central midfielders and attackers, for example. In theory, the more you repeat in training, the more natural it will become in a game situation.

Typically, we will do this as a technical session on Thursday or Friday in a week where there is no midweek fixture and the game is on Saturday. Monday will be a recovery day, Tuesday a working day (i.e. fitness) and Wednesday a day off. This particular practice paid off last season for the winning goal in our 2-1 win over Blackburn Rovers at St Andrews. The play developed through the defence into the midfield before Stephen Carr overlapped on the touchline and cut back for Cameron Jerome to finish.

**What do I get the players to do?**
Servers stand either side of the goal with a supply of balls. They can pass to any of the attacking players. When a ball is served the attacking players combine to score using a variety of passing and movement. Players should be overlapping and exchanging positions, using variety in when the ball is delivered and where a player chooses to shoot from. When the ball goes dead return to positions and a new ball is served.

**What are the key things to look for technically/tactically?**
It is important that the players maintain a high tempo, keeping the ball and themselves moving. We are looking for accuracy in all crossing and finishing.

Ultimately, we want to see play resulting in a goal or shot on target. With the absence of defenders this shouldn’t be a problem!

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**Whole team attacking: Main session**

**SETUP**

**AREA**
Half pitch

**EQUIPMENT**
Goal, balls

**NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 11**
2 fullbacks
2 central midfielders
2 wingers
2 centre forwards
2 servers
1 goalkeeper

The session starts with the server passing to any player.

The players combine to create a scoring opportunity.

Look for a high tempo with players always on the move.
Alex McLeish
BIRMINGHAM CITY

Alex McLeish is a Scottish football legend who won a total of 21 trophies as a player and manager north of the border. McLeish had spells at Motherwell and Hibernian before being appointed by Glasgow Rangers in 2001 where he won both domestic cups in his first season, and the treble in 2003.

A stint in charge of the Scottish national team followed, including a notable win over France in Paris. McLeish went on to become the most successful Scotland manager ever – winning 70% of his matches.

McLeish moved south of the border in 2007 to join Birmingham City and success immediately followed with promotion to the Premier League in 2009.

He enjoyed a fantastic season in 2009/10, guiding Birmingham on a 12-game unbeaten run – a club record in the top division. The Blues ended the season in ninth place, resulting in the club’s highest finish for more than 50 years.

“IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE PLAYERS MAINTAIN A HIGH TEMPO”

WHOLE TEAM ATTACKING: PROGRESSION

How do I progress the session?
There are a few natural progressions:
1. The servers become central defenders who try to stop the players scoring.
2. Limit the number of touches.
3. Insist that every attack has to include players switching positions.
4. Add more opposition if additional players are available.

How would you put this into a game situation?
Move on to a full pitch. The goalkeeper starts with the ball and passes to a centre half. This gives centre backs practice at playing long passes to the centre forwards. Once the ball has been played forward the players practice the same movements as before. Again, add more opposition if you have sufficient numbers.

Again we want to see a high tempo with accurate crossing and finishing.

We can also insist that every attack involves swapping positions, such as an overlap.

Now, after serving, the servers become defenders.
**Shot blocking**

**Overview**
This session puts the defenders under high-intensity pressure. It works to get players reacting to game-like situations in the box such as shot blocking.

We use this session as over 90% of goals are scored within the box. It is a great practice which works the defenders individually but also as a unit, and promotes a conscious effort to get tight to players in the box restricting their chances at goal.

We do this session once every 2-3 weeks depending on our schedule.

We focussed on this practice in the build-up to our FA cup tie against Liverpool last season as we were aware that players of that quality only need half a yard to score.

We went on to win that game 2-1 at Anfield.

**What do I get the players to do?**
A server plays a ball to either of the attackers on his side of the pitch. The attackers now try to score. As the ball is played the back four react and press the ball as quickly as possible.

Attackers can interchange positions when the ball is live.

The ball remains live until a goal is scored or the ball is cleared from the 18 yard box.

Do four sets of six repetitions with attackers swapping after each rep and the two servers swapping every six reps. Three balls should be served from each side in each set.

**What are the key things to look for technically/tactically?**
If the defenders are slow to react, strikers are encouraged to shoot at every opportunity.

Defenders should not find themselves isolated 1v1.

Defenders should position themselves to force the attackers to the outside (away from goal), not inside (towards goal), reducing the likelihood of an attempt on goal.

“We use this session as over 90% of goals are scored within the box”
How do I progress the session?
Add wingers either side of the box. They cannot enter play but create a natural overload. They can be used for wall passes and to put crosses into the box. Defenders cannot leave the box to tackle the wingers. This encourages defenders to readjust and defend across the line.

How would you put this into a game situation?
The session is already played at game intensity. It can be progressed further by bringing it outside the box in a 6v4 situation continuing to work on the same principles.
In partnership with

ATTACKING PLAY: MAIN SESSION

**Overview**
Goals win games and goals change games. This coaching session incorporates a number of specific drills on shooting and attacking play that encourages players to develop their own shooting ability. It can help to build confidence for forward players with repetition and also provides good practice for goalkeepers.

This session is typically very enjoyable for my players and, with the small-sided games it incorporates, is also good for fitness as they are played at high intensity.

Goals are hard to come by and are to be earned with hard work and patience. Belief and the ability to achieve are vital.

**What do I get the players to do?**
Serve a ball to either forward to start a 3v2 inside the penalty area. Defenders are released when the ball is played by the server. Then introduce wide players to deliver crosses – forwards should vary between attacking the near, central and far post areas. The server can also join in for pull backs and the other winger can join in from the opposite flank.

**What are the key things to look for technically/tactically?**
Shoot low and on target. Angle shots across the goalkeeper, aiming for corners. A good first touch is vital whether used for control, passing or shooting.

Use combination play and movement of forward players to make and use space which creates scoring chances.

Players not shooting should always aim to follow up, looking to score from rebounds.

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1. The ball is served into the area for a 3v2 in the attacker’s favour.
2. The attackers must combine to score. Shots should be low and across the goalkeeper, aiming for the corners.
3. Introduce wide players and encourage variety in forward runs and crosses. The server can also join in for pull backs.

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“Good first touch is vital”
ATTACKING PLAY: PROGRESSION

How do I progress the session?
The session is progressed by incorporating game situations:
Play 4v4 on a pitch 40 yards by 10 yards.
Place spare footballs around the pitch for quick play.
Games last 2-3 minutes with teams rotating, depending on numbers.
Play winner stays on or rotate teams, again depending on numbers.
Progress further by adding two wide players and removing the balls from each side of the pitch.
Wide players are neutral and should return the ball to the team they received it from.
Next, remove the wide players and add front target men either side of each goal.
Target men can be used to play off forward passes.
Again, the players out of the pitch zone are neutral.
Finish by incorporating both wide and forward men (eight neutral players in total).
If necessary, reduce the number of wide players/target players to suit your numbers.

John Ward
COLCHESTER UNITED

Ward has coached or managed at all levels after being mentored in the job by former England boss Graham Taylor as assistant manager at Watford and Aston Villa.
Since then, Ward has had spells in charge of York City, Bristol City and Bristol Rovers.
In 1998 he linked up with Colin Lee at Wolverhampton Wanderers and then had a brief tenure as caretaker boss before becoming number two to Dave Jones. The pair guided Wolves to the Premier League in 2003.
Ward returned to management with four seasons in charge at Cheltenham Town - winning promotion to League One in 2006 - before moving to Carlisle United where he led a near-miss on promotion in 2008 - being beaten by Leeds United in the play-offs.
Ward was confirmed as the manager of Colchester United in May, 2010 following a season as assistant manager, in which he helped guide the club to eighth place in League One.

“Always follow up, looking to score from rebounds”
**THE BACK FOUR – DEFENDING AS A UNIT: MAIN SESSION**

**SETUP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREA</th>
<th>40 x 20 m, 2 m end zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EQUIPMENT</td>
<td>Cones, balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF PLAYERS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 teams of 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What do I get the players to do?**

The session begins with the server playing a ball to one of the teams. The team in possession must try to pass the ball to one of the target players on the opposite side of the area. The defending team must work together to cut off the passing options and prevent the ball reaching the target players. Teams are not allowed to leave their half of the area.

**What are the key things to look for technically/tactically?**

To effectively block the passing options the defending team must be in constant communication. This way the unit can easily decide who should pressure the ball and which direction they try to force play.

Individually, defenders must be aware of their angle and distance in relation to their team mates – preventing gaps appearing in the line – and their opponent.

If a pass is intercepted roles are reversed and the team that lost possession has to stop the forward pass.
How do I progress the session?

Progress the session by requiring the team in possession to play one-twos with their target players. Defenders must be aware of the need to track the runner rather than the ball to prevent the one-two being completed.

Finally, remove the halfway line, allowing the defenders to apply greater pressure on the ball carrier. The unit must try to apply pressure higher up the area, placing greater emphasis on the need to communicate.

How would you put this into a game situation?

Two teams – each with a goalkeeper, four defenders, four attackers and two supporting midfielders – play on a pitch two thirds the length of a full size pitch. When the defenders win the ball, attackers go dead, allowing the defenders to play the ball out to their midfielders or attackers unchallenged.

The two supporting midfielders can only support from behind. Again, the defenders must work as a unit. Now, with the supporting midfielders, they need to deal with the man in the hole. How and when do they apply pressure on the supporting midfielder?
SECRET WEAPONS: MAIN SESSION

SETUP

AREA
3/4 pitch, divided lengthways

EQUIPMENT
Cones, balls

NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 19
10 attackers
8 defenders
1 goalkeeper

Overview

I run this session every time I get the Wales Under-21 team together. The players never get bored of it and it focuses on a crucial aspect of the modern game – the use of fullbacks in attacking positions.

The session should be played at game intensity but without tackling. All tackles are by touch. This means that defenders are less likely to fly into tackles committing themselves – and being easily beaten – or, as happens more and more in the modern game, giving away a free kick.

What do I get the players to do?

Call for one of the defenders to begin an attack. If you call 1 or 2, the attack can only develop down the left, 3 or 4 down the right. The attack begins with a 2v1 situation from which the defenders must get the ball into the midfielders. Now the midfielders must combine to release the static player. The static player starts in a 4-yard square on the edge of the area. He cannot leave the area – and no-one else can enter it – until he has touched the ball.

Once the static player is released the midfielders and forwards can combine to score. Rotate players in groups of four so that all players play in attack and defence and in different positions.

“The players never get bored”
How do I progress the session?

Progress the session to allow all players to be involved, regardless of their field position.

In addition, once the static player receives the ball the nearest full back is released and can join in the attack. The full back cannot move until the ball is touched by the static player.

The full back has a channel marked with cones that only he can enter. The midfielders and centre forward must get the ball to the full back when he reaches the end of the channel, then get into the box for a cross.

Can the attacking team utilise their new secret weapon?

What are the key things to look for technically/tactically?

Position – the three advanced midfielders should play narrow, leaving space for the full back to attack. The addition of the channels for the full backs enforces this.

Numbers – once the full back is released the attacking team must get numbers into the box to attack the cross. They should always be looking to get four attackers in the box.

Quality and timing of the delivery is vital. If the full back is released they need to get the ball into the box when it reaches them.

In the next phase, channels are created that can only be used by the secret weapon – the full back.

The full back is released when the ball reaches the static player.

The full back crosses at the end of the channel. Can the attacking team get numbers in the box to attack the cross?
**15:15 drill**

**Overview**

I use this session to improve players’ aerobic fitness. It can be completed in isolation as one training session or incorporated within a larger session. Improvements on the pitch can be seen in a greater ability to recover from high-intensity bouts and cover more distance at a high intensity.

There are hundreds of drills that can be performed to produce the same effects; the principles behind the drill are the key. This drill requires a few cones and use of the pitch markings. Any number of players can perform it at the same time.

The coach’s view of this session very much depends upon his or her training philosophy. It is not to everyone’s liking as it does not involve a ball. However, it does ensure the players replicate some of the high-intensity speeds they are exposed to in matches and provides a structure from which all players can be overloaded, leading to an enhanced ability to utilise their technical skills.

“The principles behind the drill are the key”

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**What do I get the players to do?**

This drill (15:15) works players for 15 seconds, followed by 15 seconds rest. In its simplest form the players perform the following:

1. Line up on the edge of the penalty area and on the whistle run to the halfway line.
2. Immediately turn and run back to the edge of the penalty area.
3. Rest for 15 seconds before repeating the run.

Perform a total of 10 runs, making the total duration of the set 5 minutes.

Depending on how you set up your coaching session you can have 2 minutes’ rest and repeat the set a further 2–4 times. Alternatively, it is sometimes useful to intersperse small-sided and possession games of a similar intensity with this type of running.

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**What are the key things to look for?**

All I want the players to do is keep a smooth running stride and try to cruise across the ground, maintaining the desired speed.
Richard Hawkins
MANCHESTER UTD

Head of human performance, Richard Hawkins went to United in March 2008, having previously occupied roles with the Football Association and West Bromwich Albion.

In early 2005, Richard joined Bryan Robson’s West Brom as conditioning coach before following Robson to Sheffield United at the beginning of the 2007/08 season. His role with the Blades was short-lived, and a move to United beckoned before the season’s end.

Richard primarily deals with the club’s first-teamers, tracking their rehabilitation programmes and general physical development.

But his longer term strategy is to build a human performance structure throughout the club, ensuring the same framework from the senior stars right down to the Under-9s.

Hawkins joined Manchester United in March 2008.

“IT IS SOMETIMES USEFUL TO INTERSPERSE SMALL-SIDED AND POSSESSION GAMES”

15:15: PROGRESSION

How do I progress the session?

I progress the session in a number of ways:

1. When the players return to the penalty box make them complete a recovery run to the touch line and back.
2. Reduce the recovery time to 10 seconds.
3. Reduce the running time to 12 seconds but cover the same distance.
4. Increase the distance the players need to cover in the 15 seconds.

The last progression is an easy one to manage with a large number of players of different abilities. Players can be assigned to one of three groups, all of which start on the edge of the penalty area.

The bronze group turns at the halfway line, therefore covering about 72m in 15 seconds.

The silver group turns 3m past the halfway line, therefore covering about 78m in 15 seconds.

The gold group turns 5m past the halfway line, covering about 82m in 15 seconds.

Adding recovery runs improves fitness levels as the body works in a pre-fatigued state.

Increasing the distance is easy with the addition of cones. Three levels can be set to enable players of different fitness to work at the same time.

The three groups cover different distances but must do so in the same 15-second time limit.

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