

MANIPULATING TRAINING VARIABLES

Planning the next training session is one of the challenging tasks for the coach. What to coach and how to coach it should be an enjoyable, if sometimes perplexing enterprise.

The first step in planning the session is deciding what to coach. How does the coach decide what to coach? Observation of the team during its previous game is the best answer. The game tells us what to coach and coaching methodology tells us how to coach it. Depending on age, the coach will assess team shape, the work of the four blocks (GK, backs, midfield, and forwards), and individual performances in attack, defense, and transition.

While training the individual should take primacy when coaching youth, group and collective tactics may be emphasized as players reach the mid and late teens.

With younger players (those five to eleven or twelve years) the team assessment might pose these questions. Did everyone have an equal chance to play? Did the field size and number of players ensure that all the kids could “find the game”, i.e. each of the players had plenty of ball contacts and opportunities to score a goal? Did spectator attitude and demeanor provide a positive playing atmosphere for the players? Did the coach encourage dribbling, freedom of movement, creativity, no fear of risk- as opposed to “playing the game for the players”- yelling what to do, who to pass to, not to dribble, etc? Was the result of the game suppressed in favor of player development and the kids having a fun experience?

From watching the team’s previous game, the coach chooses one or two topics that need to be addressed in the ensuing training sessions. There will be themes that the coach addresses on a consistent basis over a properly planned, rhythmical training year, but from game to game specific individual, block, or team needs arise that the coach must attend to in training.

The construction of a training session is based on a few guidelines. For the younger ages, (five to eight or nine years), the session is all about creating a safe and fun play environment that includes a soccer ball. For players nine to fourteen or fifteen years, the session is thematic with the emphasis on technique and the individual duel. This session proceeds from simple to complex with the progression from individual to small and then larger group activities and always finishes with a game involving all players attending that practice.

For the mid and especially, the late teen years into adulthood, the training session is based on the concept of “distributive practice”. The session will be “distributed” among two or three topics. Learning theory indicates that attending to two or three topics is

more beneficial than spending the whole session on one topic (e.g. spending the whole session on heading) - players lose interest and attention if too long a time is devoted to one topic. An example of a distributive practice might be one when the coach works on playing from middle to final third for twenty or so minutes, consolidation of the back four for twenty or so minutes, and finishing for twenty or so minutes. The session would conclude with a game of twenty or so minutes. The topics for the session would be those the coach deems most important to the improvement of the players/ team based on his/her observation of the team in its last game.

The game tells the coach what to work on. Next, the coach must decide what methodology will create the best soccer learning environment. The best soccer learning environment is one that will result in transfer of what is done in training to the game. Training must mimic the game. The more the coach can make the learning environment (training) precisely replicate what the players will experience in the real game, the more realistic the training is and the more it will transfer to the game.

Part of methodology is the knowledge of how to create different playing environments by manipulating variables such as: the size, shape, and division of space and the use of channels, corridors, and neutral zones; the number of players to involve; the use of neutral, target, and support players (inside or outside a space); restricting touches, etc. By manipulating one or more variables the coach creates a proper learning environment that will alter player behavior, e.g. make a space larger- more running and longer passing is required; make a space smaller- tighter technique is required.

One of the critical variables for the coach to manipulate is the goal. We can vary the size, number, position, and shape of goals to elicit various playing behaviors.

Diagram 1 shows a simple 3v3 exercise on an appropriate size field. By making the goal wider, e.g. five steps wide instead of three, it is easier to score. This will force defenders to have to pressure the ball earlier and closer to prevent a goal. By changing the size of the goal, the coach alters the playing behavior of defenders so that they must close down the player with the ball earlier and more aggressively.

Diagram 1

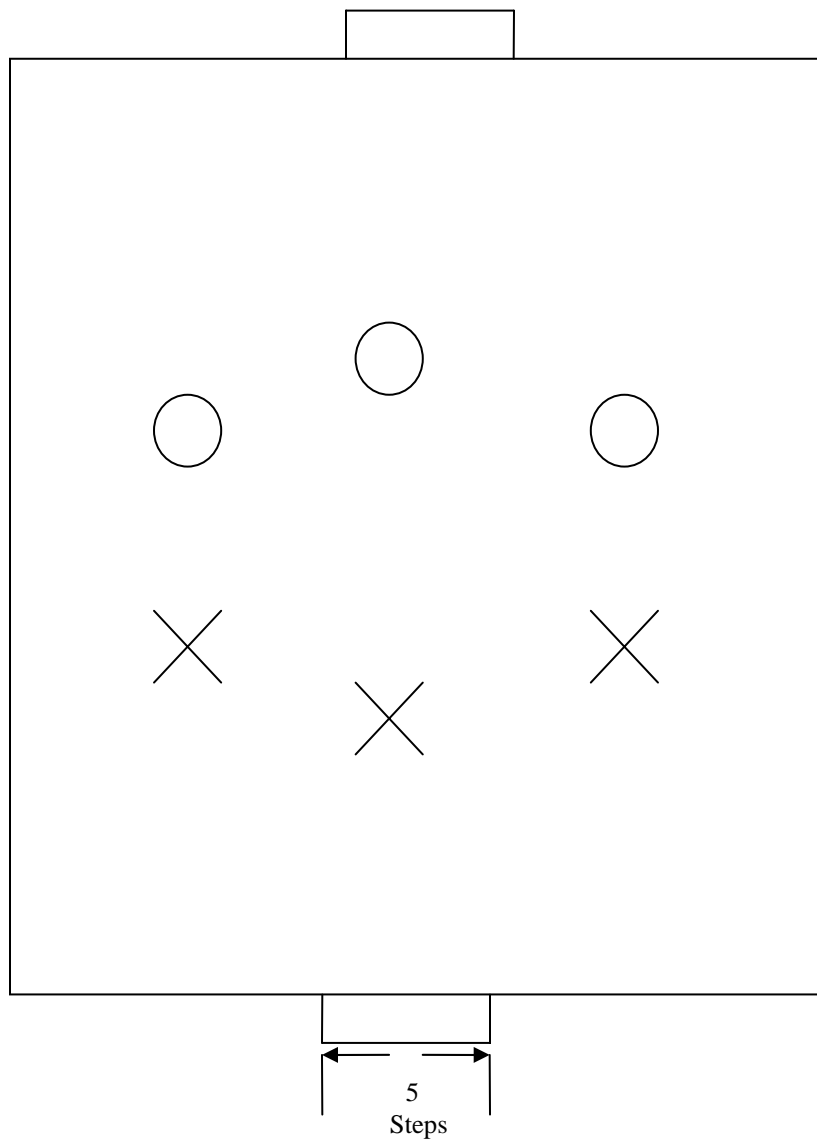


Diagram 2 shows attack vs. defense in half a field. The O attackers try to score in the large goal as they normally would. When the defenders (X's) win the ball they play to one of the three small goals at the half way line. The three small goals are analogous to attacking teammates of the X's and a pass from the defense through one of the small goals is like a successful pass to an X forward.

Diagram 2

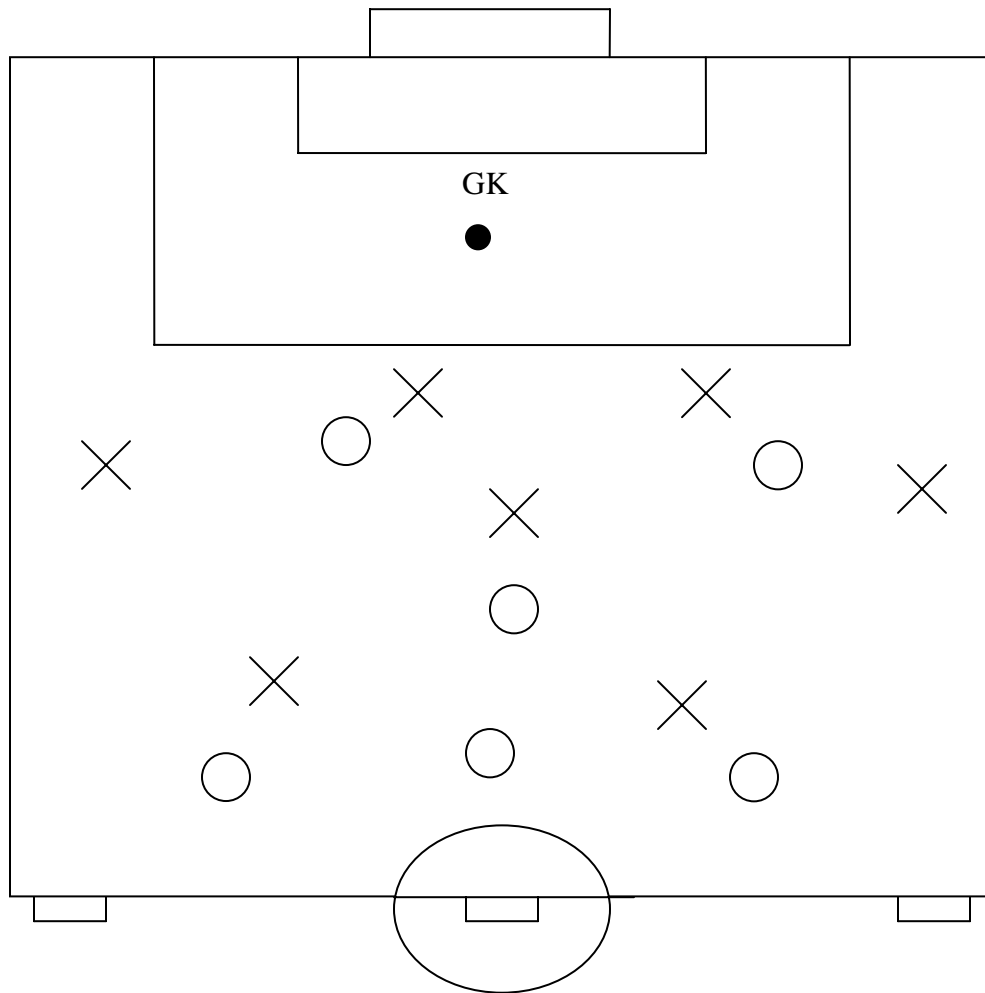


Diagram 3 shows a variation of the previous exercise. Here, two diagonal goals are placed connecting the touchline with the half way line; size of the goals about the length of the large goal or according to the ability of the players. Placing goals in this manner emphasizes building out of the back and unbalancing the opponent when one goal is blocked. An adaptation of the exercise was made famous by the immortal Dutch coach, Rinus Michels. With even numbered teams (7v7—9v9) the team attacking the two diagonal goals, upon scoring (an x player must receive the ball in the triangle formed by the touch line, half way line, and goal line), would immediately change directions and attack the large goal. As this is a transition exercise, the opponent team must now instantly defend the large goal until they win the ball back and now they attack the two diagonal goals. When they score, they attack the large goal.

Diagram 3

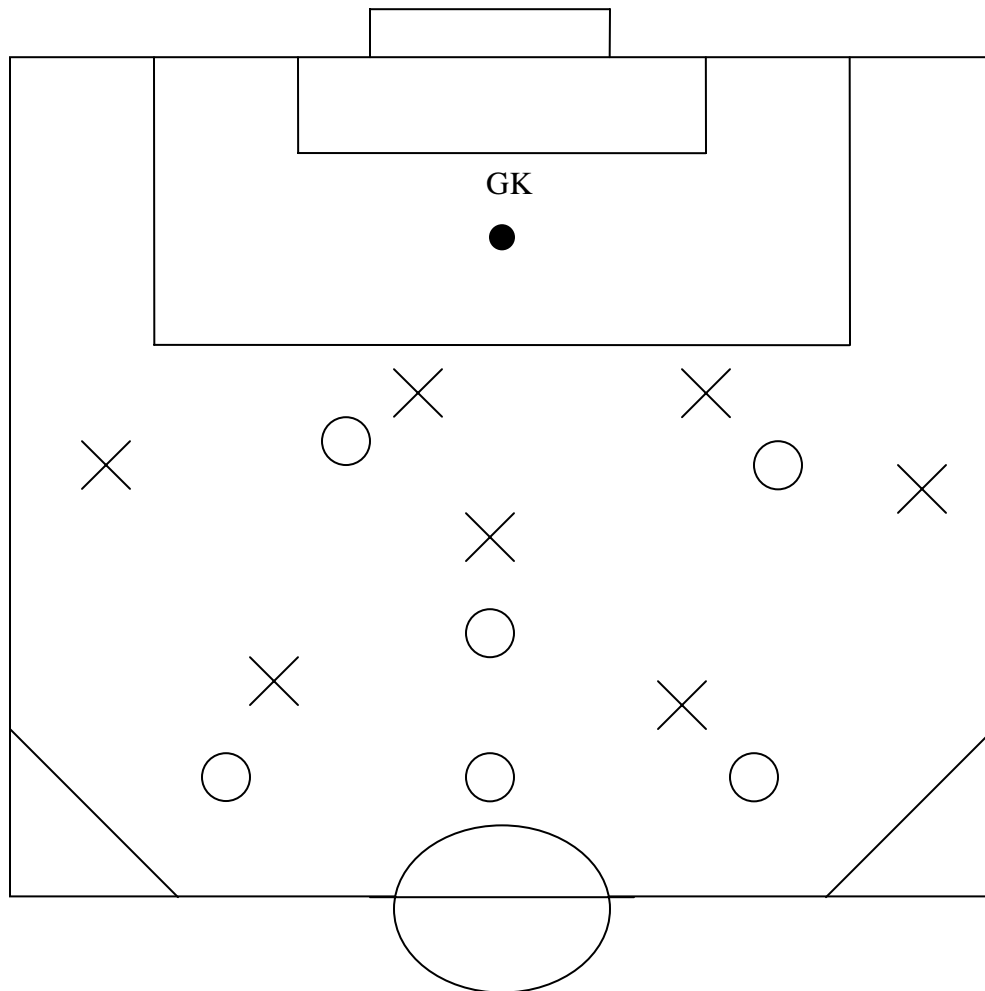


Diagram 4 shows a 6v6 game on an appropriate sized field. Two smaller goals are placed wide on the goal line a few yards in from the touchline. The placement of two small goals wide will condition players to spread out, change the point of attack, and recognize that when one goal is blocked, they must keep possession before attacking the other goal.

Diagram 4

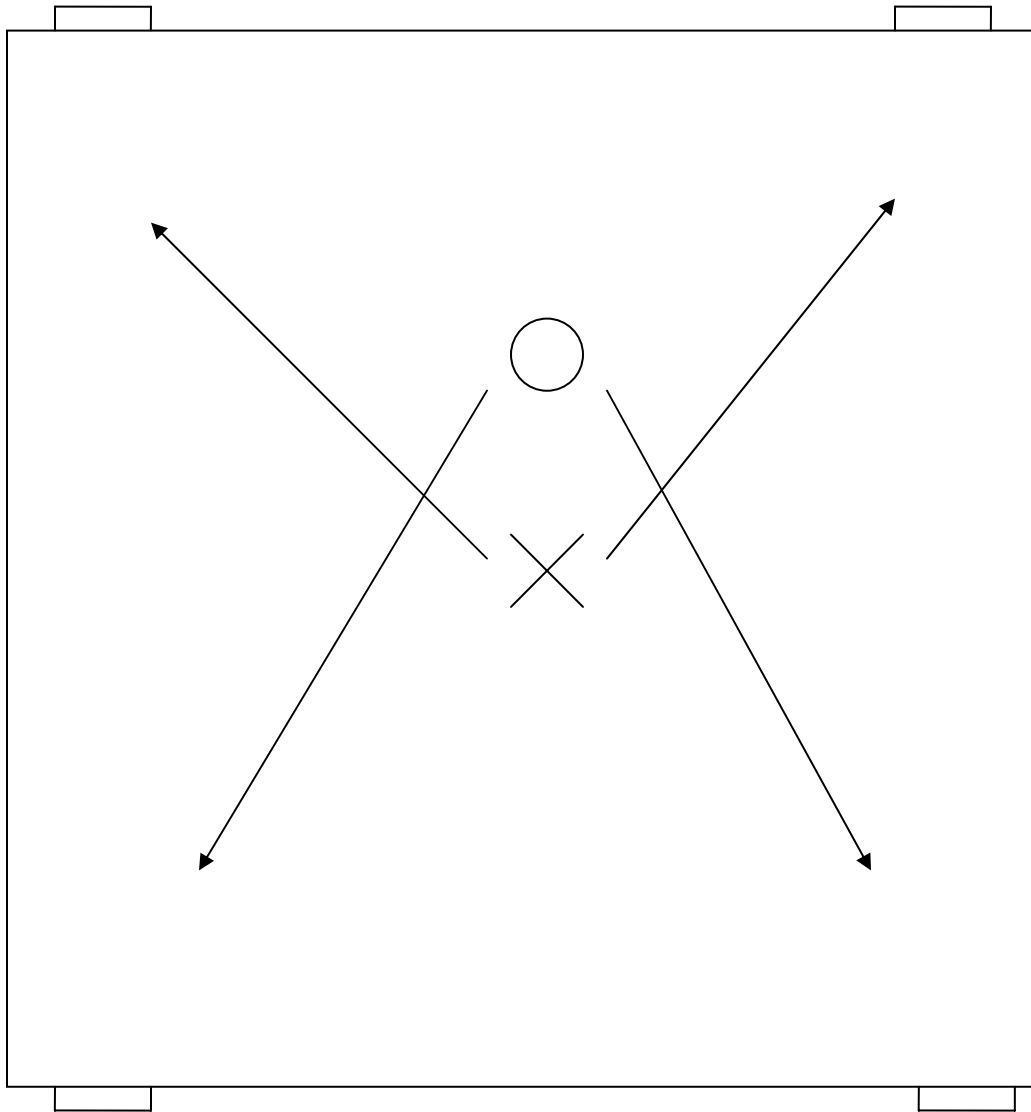


Diagram 5 shows a variation of the four goal game with the X team attacking the large goal and the small goal on the right touchline. The O team attacks the other large and small goals.

Diagram 5

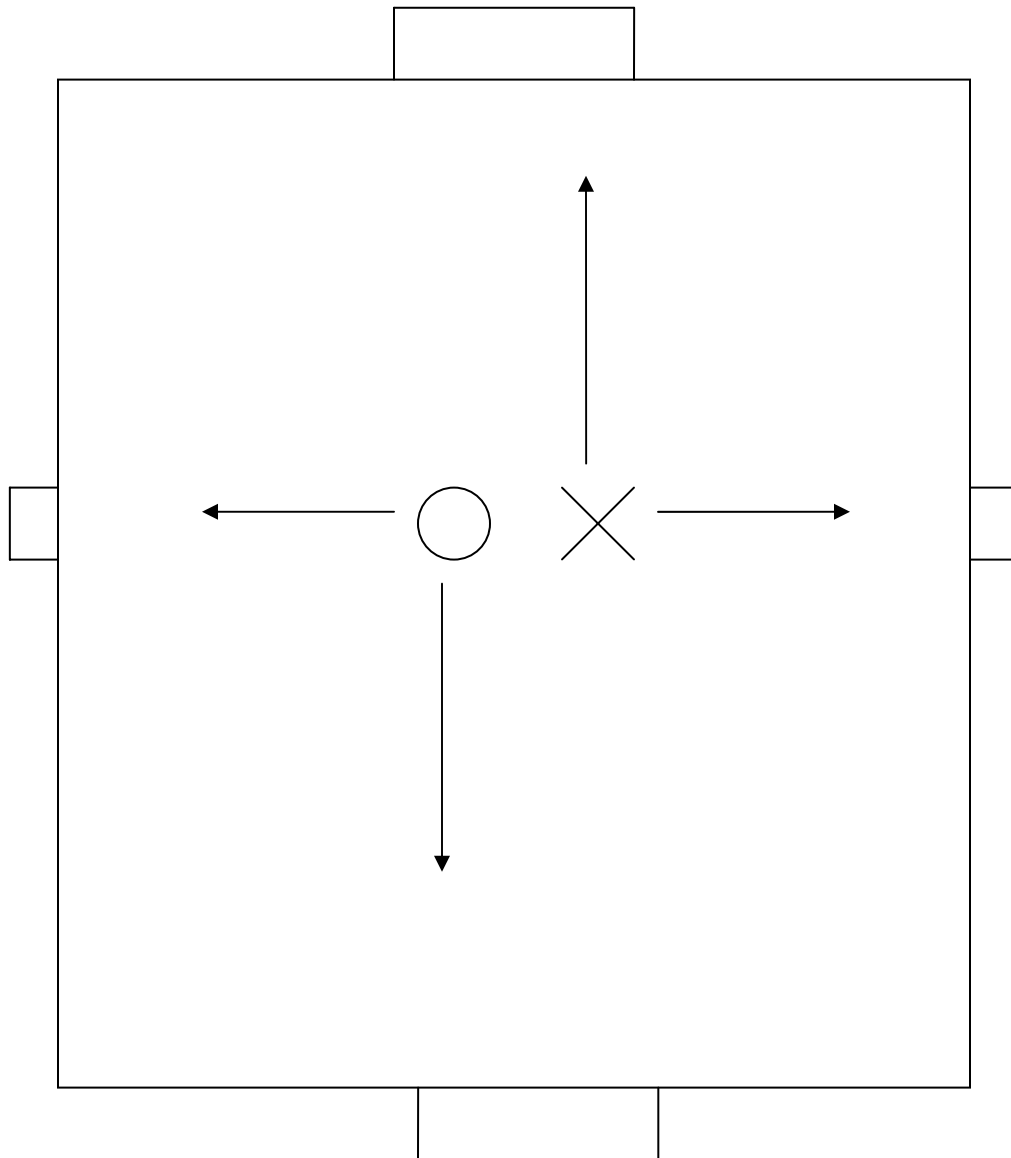


Diagram 6 shows two goals placed diagonally from each other and well inside the respective goal lines. The space behind the goal may be used to prepare an attack to score. A variation is to allow the attacking team to score into either side of the goal it is attacking. This exercise is unusual, but allows players to explore space and find alternative ways of approaching goal.

Diagram 6

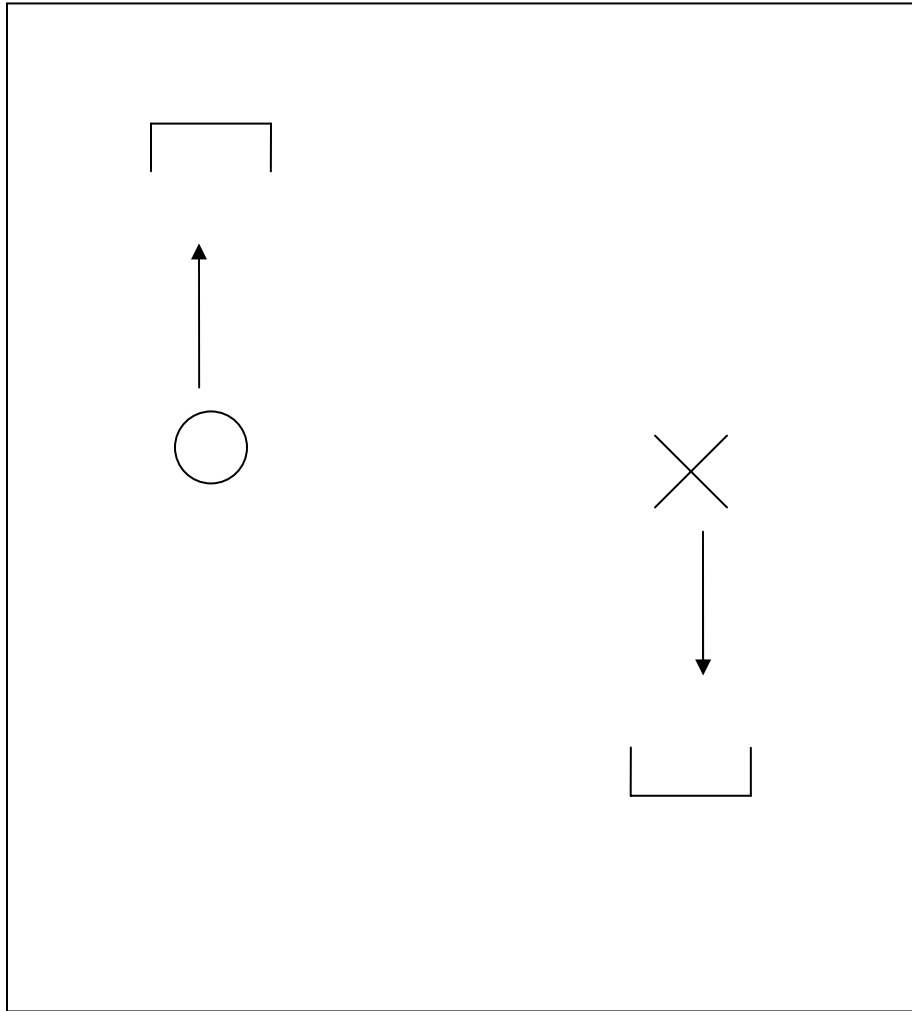


Diagram 7 shows two goals placed centrally in an appropriate sized space, the goal mouths facing outwardly. Players will spread out and use the entire playing area to find space to create scoring opportunities. This is a lively and fun exercise that promotes lots of chances to score.

Diagram 7

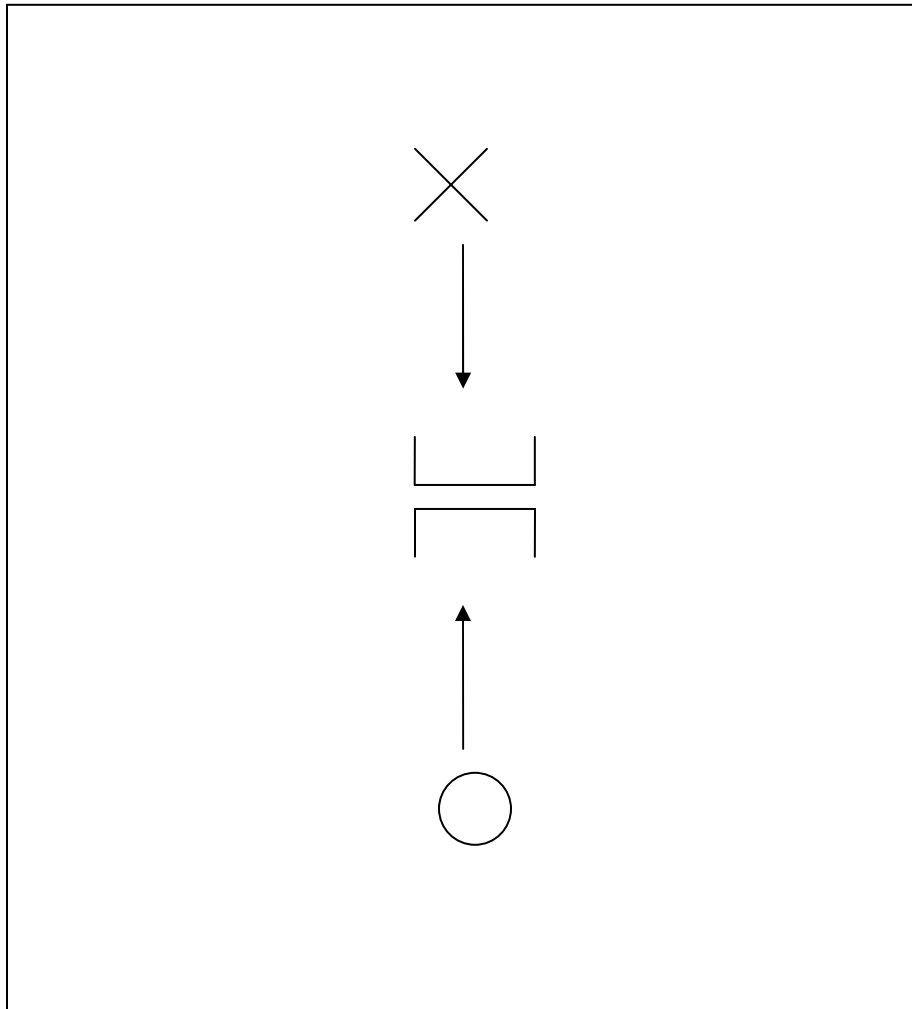


Diagram 8 shows the use of an uneven number of goals with uneven numbered teams. On an appropriate sized field, four X's play vs. three O's. The X's defend three small goals and the O's defend two small goals. The X's will look to keep possession and probe for a chance to score into one of the two goals; while the O's will have to keep an organized shape, keep the ball in front of them, and look to counter at speed into one of the three X goals. This exercise calls for a team to adopt a certain mentality and tactic depending on whether they are numbers up or numbers down.

Diagram 8

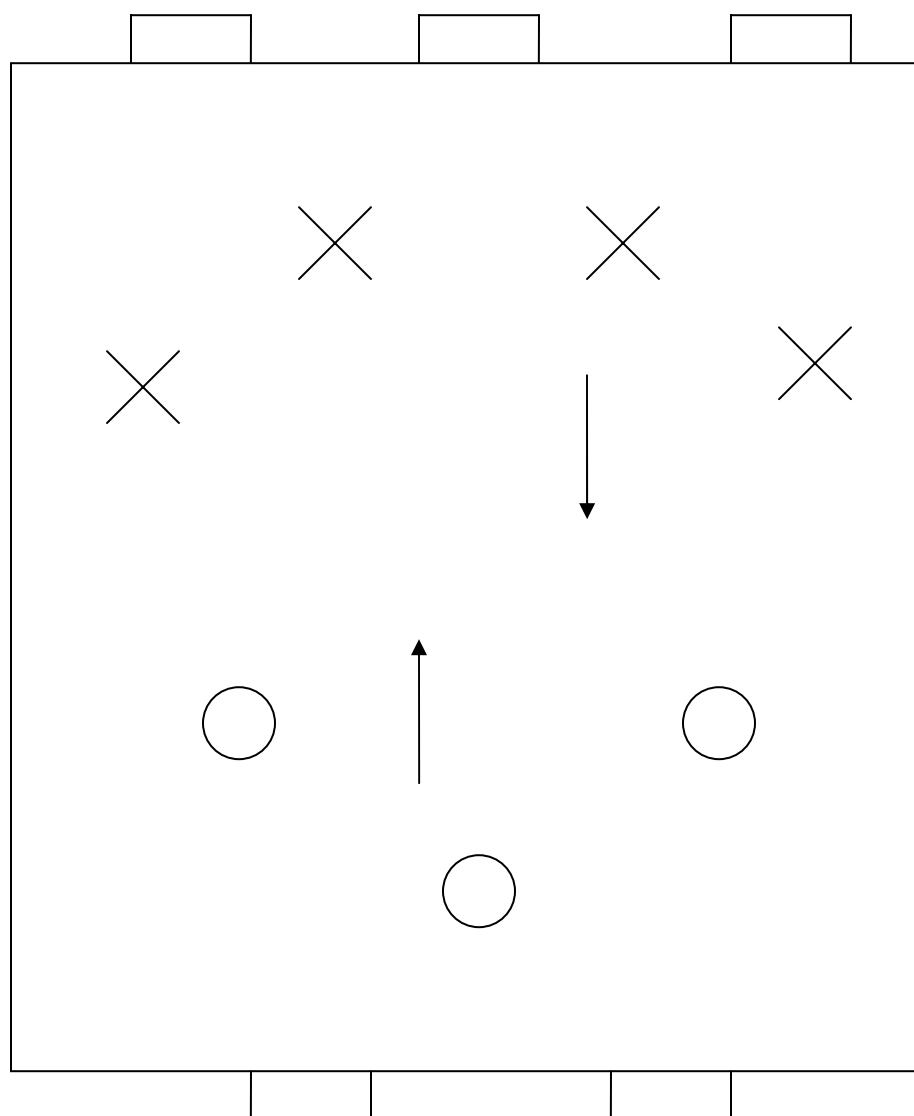


Diagram 9 shows the triangular goal game. Three coaching sticks (corner flags) are placed so that a triangular goal is made on an appropriate sized field. There will be three faces; 1, 2, & 3, for players to score into. Two Goalkeepers defend the three goals. Playing a 7v7 or 8v8 game the players use the whole field to try and score in any of the three goals. Players will use the entire space, change the point of attack, and then go at speed to a lightly defended goal. Many chances to score are created and players will come up with inventive ways to finish.

Diagram 9

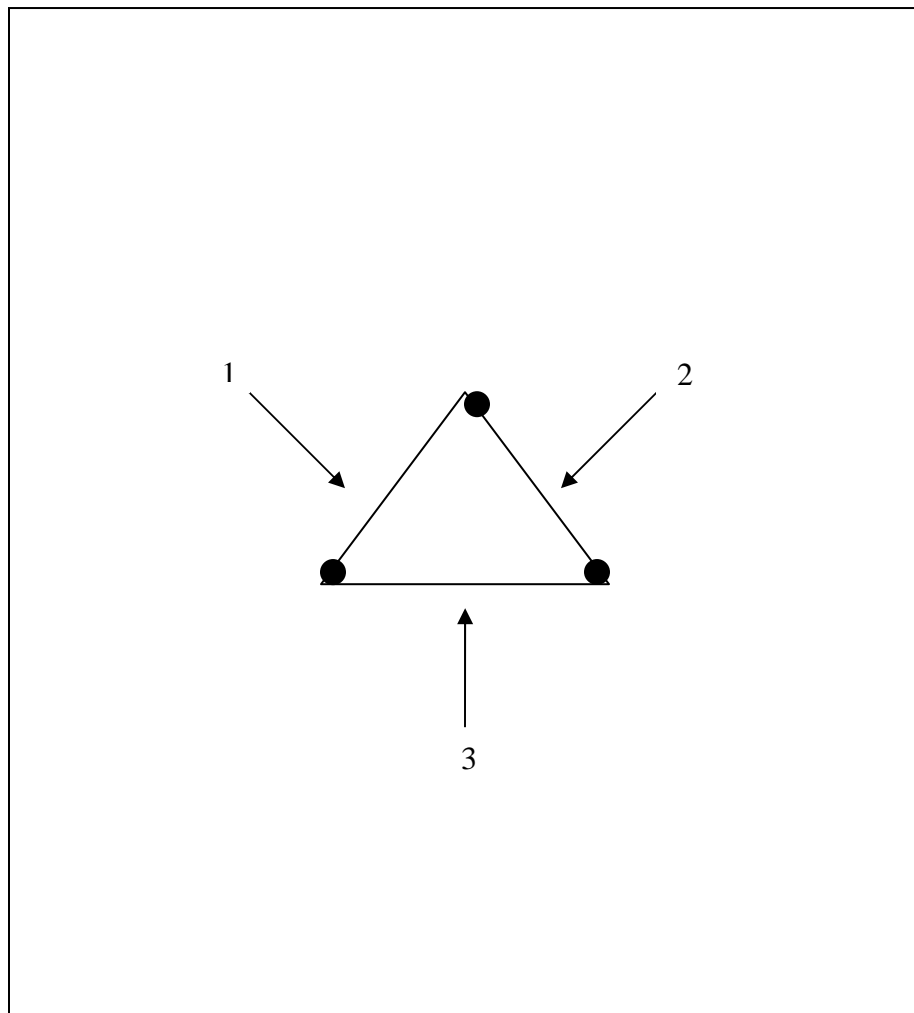
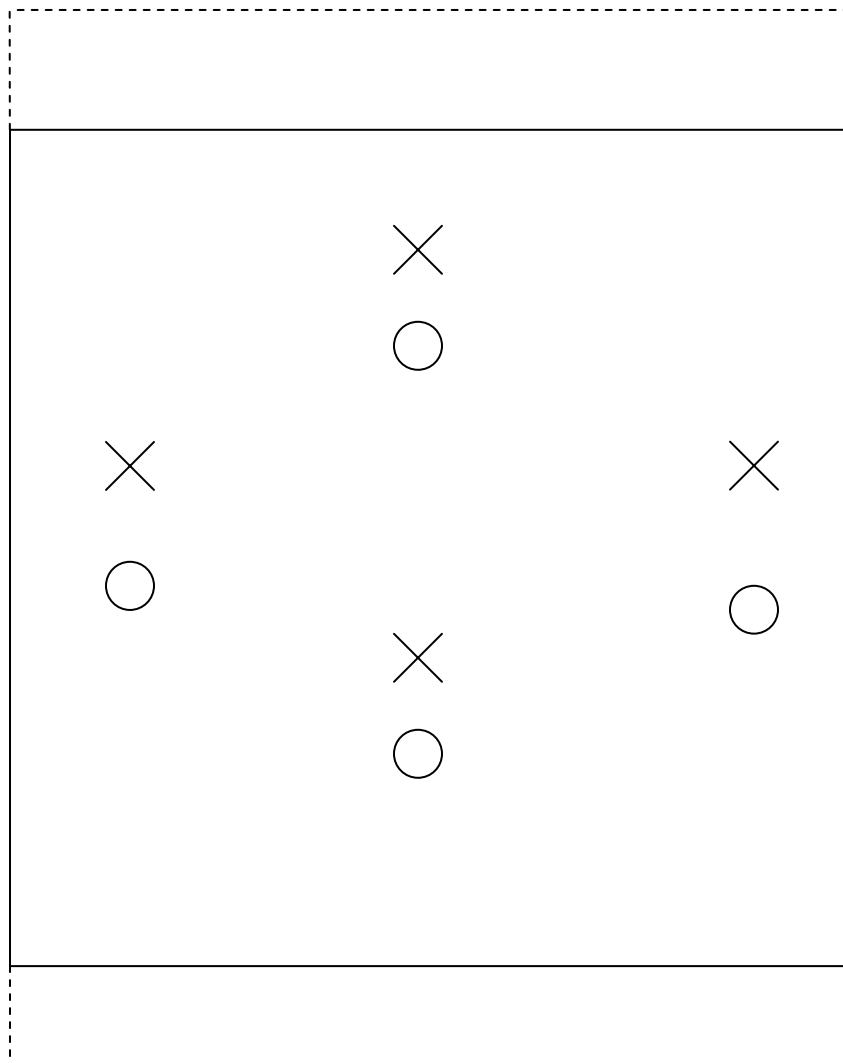


Diagram 10 shows a 4v4 exercise on an appropriate sized field. In this exercise the entire goal line is used as the goal. The objective is for a player on one team to be able to stop the ball on the goal line with his/her foot. Using a line as a goal may be utilized as an exercise for possession and progression to the next third. By adding a box (dotted lines) and requiring that a team scores by having one of it's players receive the ball in the box, (the ball must precede or arrive at the same time as the player who receives the pass- a player can't go stand in the box and wait for a pass) the exercise will emphasize achieving penetration and timing runs. A variation of this exercise will emphasize transition. When, for example, an X player has stopped the ball on the goal line, he/she immediately plays the ball back to an X teammate and the X's attack the opposite goal line. If the O's win the ball, they attack the appropriate goal line and if the ball is stopped on the line, that player attempts to play the ball back to a teammate and the O's attack the opposite goal line.

Diagram 10



The number of players used in the preceding exercises are just examples. The coach must adjust the number of players involved and the size of space to meet the purpose of the exercise. Also, it is important to understand what “an appropriate sized space” is. A general guideline is to use 10-12 yards of vertical space per field player on one team. So a 3v3 field will be approximately 30-35 yards long, a 5v5 field will be approximately 50-60 yards long. The width will be 60% of the length. The coach will adjust these dimensions according to the ages of the players and the objective of the exercise.

By manipulating various training variables, the coach can create a soccer environment that will alter player, block, and /or team behavior. With thought and preparation training sessions may be constructed that allow the game to be the teacher, thereby limiting the number of coaching interventions. For example, if the coach wants to emphasize and reinforce the importance of team compactness, all exercises should include a half way line and no goal may count unless all players on the attacking team are in the attacking half of the field when a goal is scored. Implementing this concept imprints players to “travel with the ball” so that if a vertical ball is played, the attacking team “travels” vertically so that there are numbers of attackers in position to support and continue the attack to goal. If possession is lost, by traveling vertically (as a team) we have all our players in the opponents half of the field to pressure and win the ball back immediately.