

# **SMALL-SIDED GAMES**

## **PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENTS**

**This resource is designed to support coaches in delivering a more play-centered, small-sided game approach — regardless of the age, level, or ability of the players in your training environment.**

**Small-sided games are widely recognized as a powerful tool for player development. They provide more touches, more decision-making opportunities, and a greater sense of involvement for every player on the field.**

**By integrating this approach into your sessions, you create a learning environment that is dynamic, inclusive, and enjoyable — allowing players to grow through the game itself.**



# Standards

In collaboration with Member Association (MA) staff, Canada Soccer has developed the Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards to ensure that game formats are aligned with players' age and stage of development. These standards are designed to support a consistent and holistic approach to player development across the country, fostering an environment that prioritizes skill acquisition, enjoyment, and long-term participation.

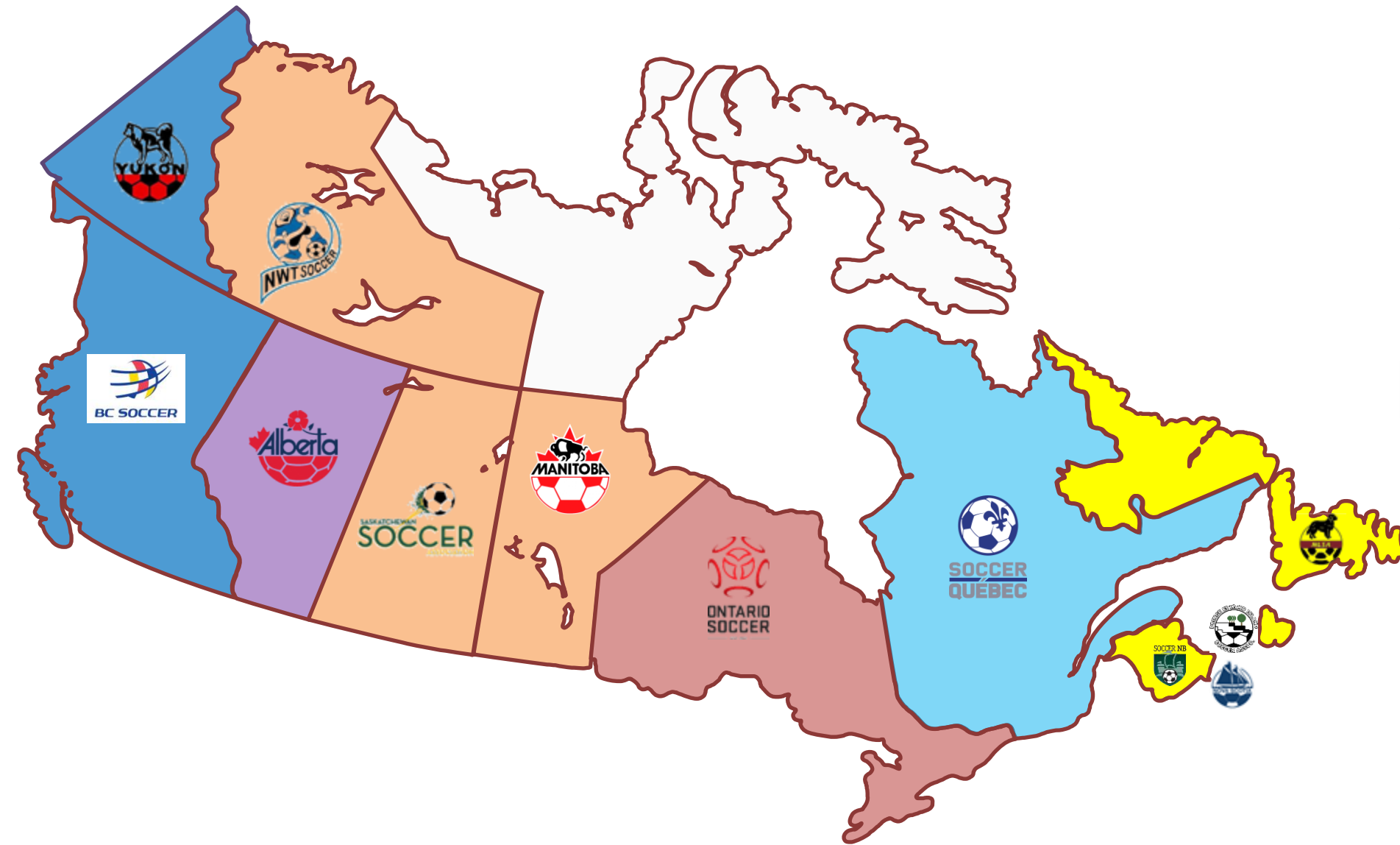
[CANADA SOCCER GRASSROOTS STANDARDS](#)



# Vision

**Develop skilful, confident, and happy young players through engaging small-sided, play-based environments that build physical and technical foundations while challenging children to problem-solve and develop holistically.**

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**A Small Sided, Games Based,  
Approach Nationally For  
Developing Players aligned to  
Canada Soccer Grassroots  
Standards.**

# The future player



# Environment

**Kids love to play.**  
**Happy Children**

**Allows players to explore  
curiosity and imagination.**  
**Try New Skills**

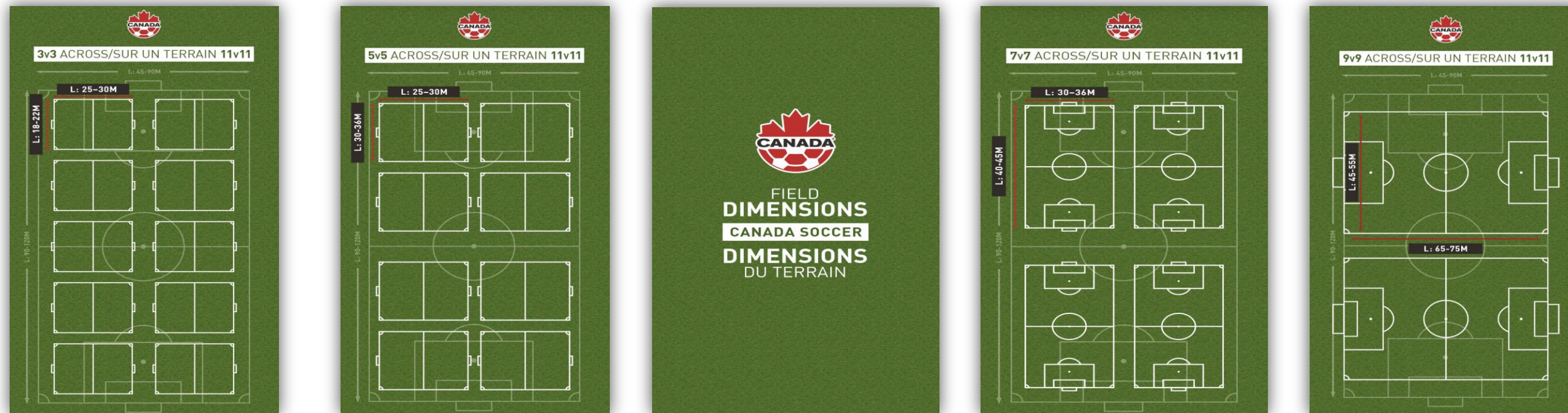


**Players must think faster, move  
quicker, and engage in the game  
constantly.**  
**Players Can't hide**

**All moments of the game present.**  
**Attacking – Defending – Transition**

# **SOCCKER THAT SUITS**

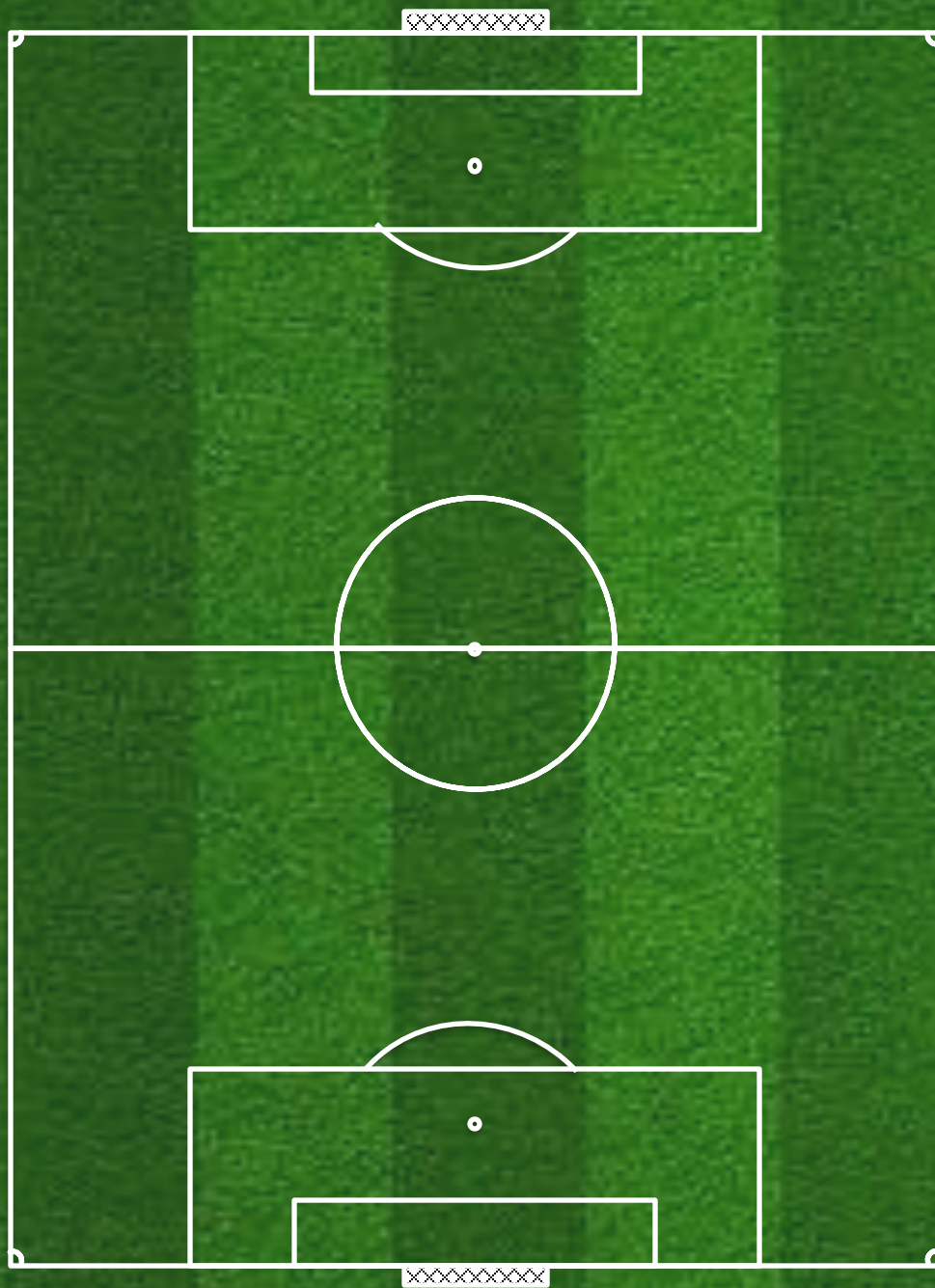
# Appropriate Size



**Small-sided games (SSGs) played on modified pitch sizes enhance technical, tactical, physical, and psychological development in players. SSGs increase the number of ball touches, successful passes, dribbles, and goal-scoring opportunities per player, accelerating technical learning**  
(Ford et al., 2010; Hill-Haas et al., 2011).



# Small-Sided Games



**Higher frequency of passing, dribbling and tackling in SSGs.**

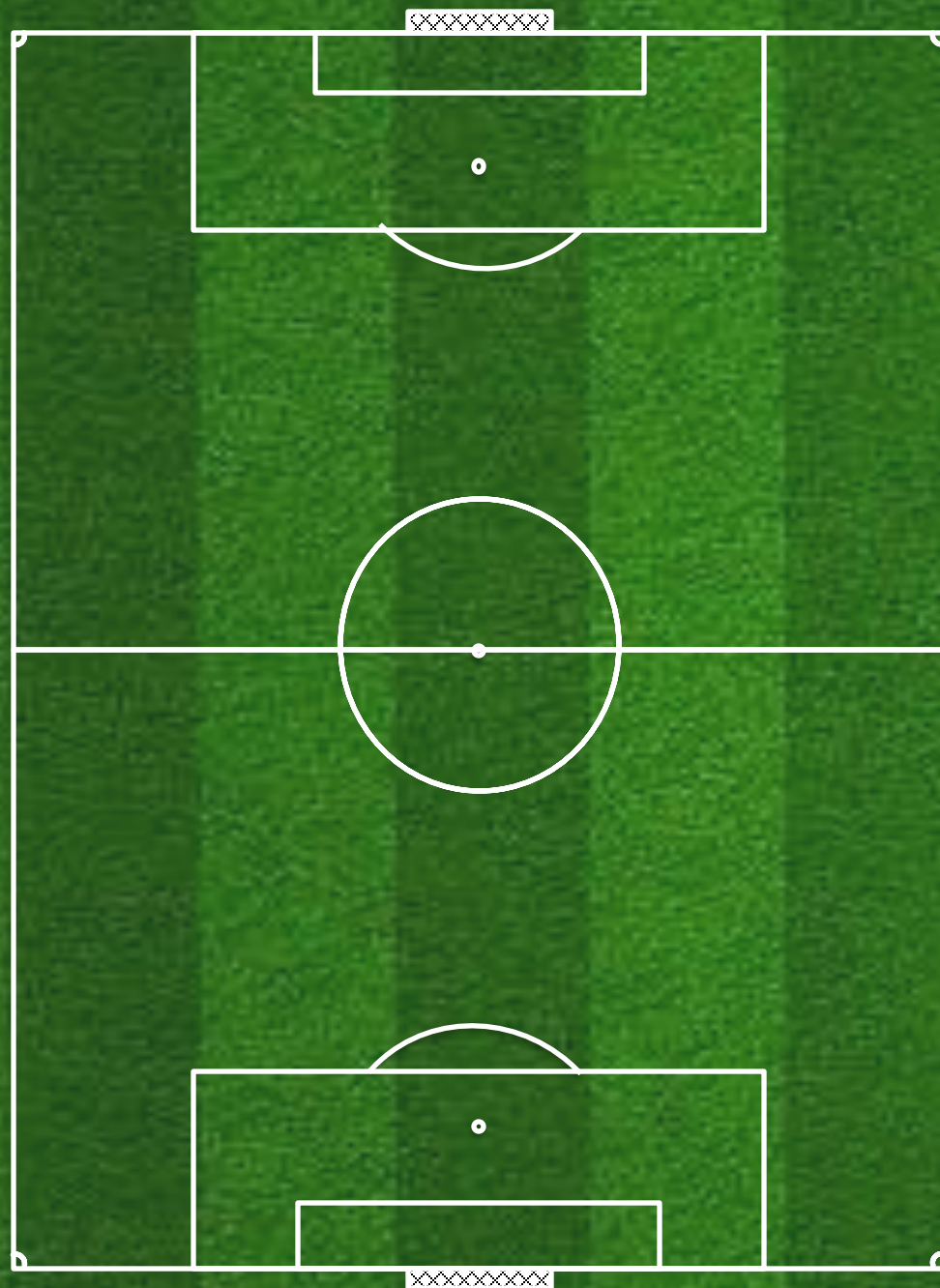
**More child-centered and not controlled by the coach.**

**Children can migrate to an area of the field they feel comfortable.**

**Increase playing time & participation.**



# Small-Sided Games



**Increased number of touches on the ball.**

**Increase mobility of young players.**

**Boost self-esteem through frequent success!**

**Every child is part of the game.**

**Learn to dribble pass or shoot with opposition nearby.**

**More opportunity to express themselves.**

# Small Numbers

## **IN POSSESSION, IT ALLOWS FOR:**

- ✓ **Easier decision making related to the individual, team opposition, space & goals**
- ✓ **Dispersal and age-appropriate movements**
- ✓ **Players to connect with and support their teammates**
- ✓ **Movement to help teammates in a unit.**

## **OUT POSSESSION, IT ALLOWS FOR:**

- ✓ **Intercepting**
- ✓ **Marking**
- ✓ **Players consider quick regains**
- ✓ **Covering**
- ✓ **Pressing & chasing**

# Larger Numbers

## **IN POSSESSION, IT ALLOWS FOR:**

- ✓ **More team than individual play**
- ✓ **Increased game realism**
- ✓ **Decision making related to the individual, team, opposition, space & goals**
- ✓ **Dispersal and create space**
- ✓ **Movements to help teammate**
- ✓ **Physical challenges (distance)**

## **OUT POSSESSION, IT ALLOWS FOR:**

- ✓ **More team/unit defending than individual**
- ✓ **Intercepting**
- ✓ **Marking**
- ✓ **Player consider quick regains**
- ✓ **Covering & balance**
- ✓ **Pressing & chasing**



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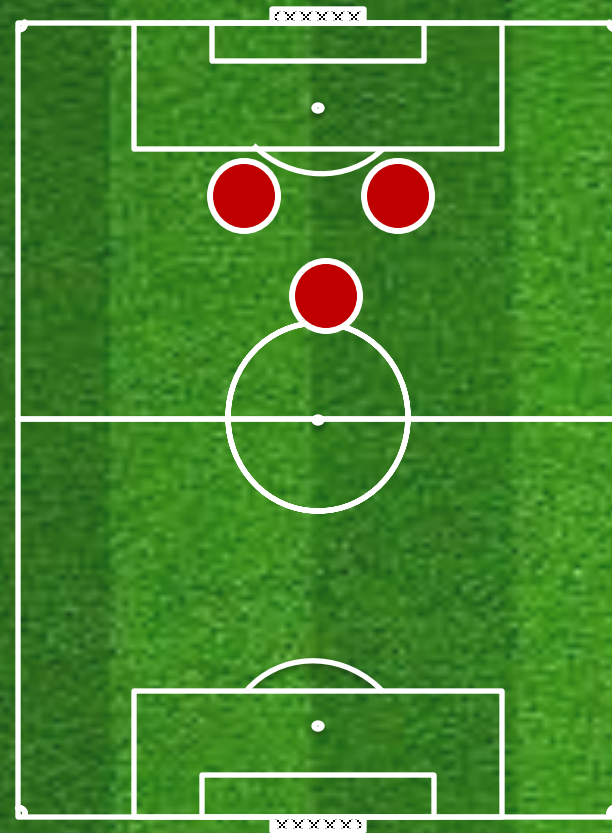
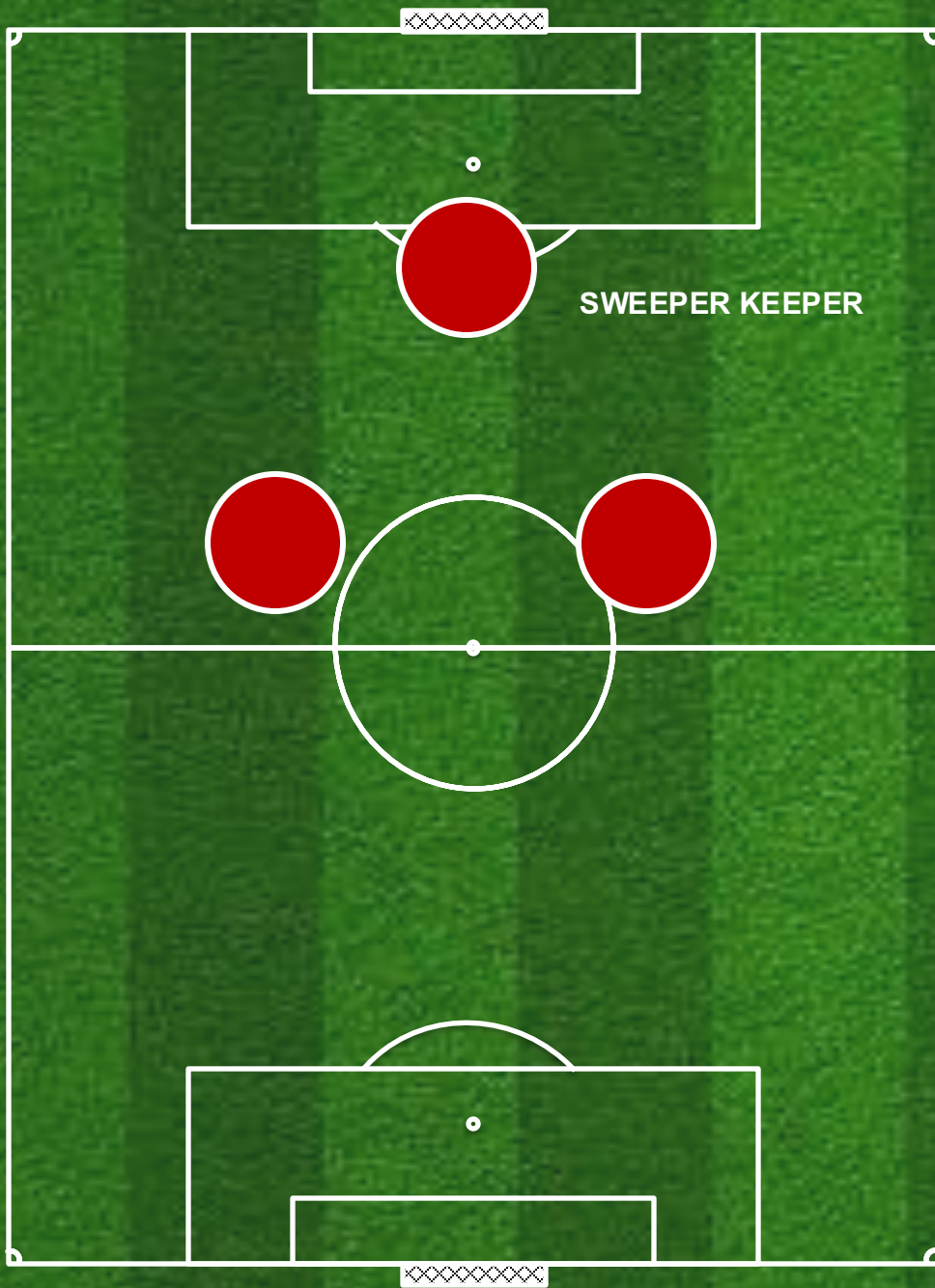
# **MATCH DAY**

## **SYSTEMS TO PLAY**

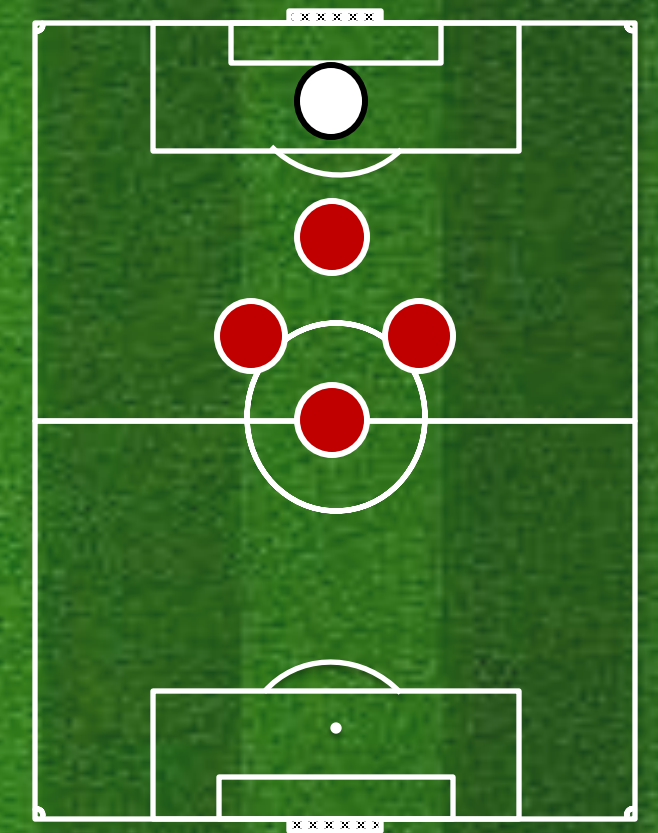
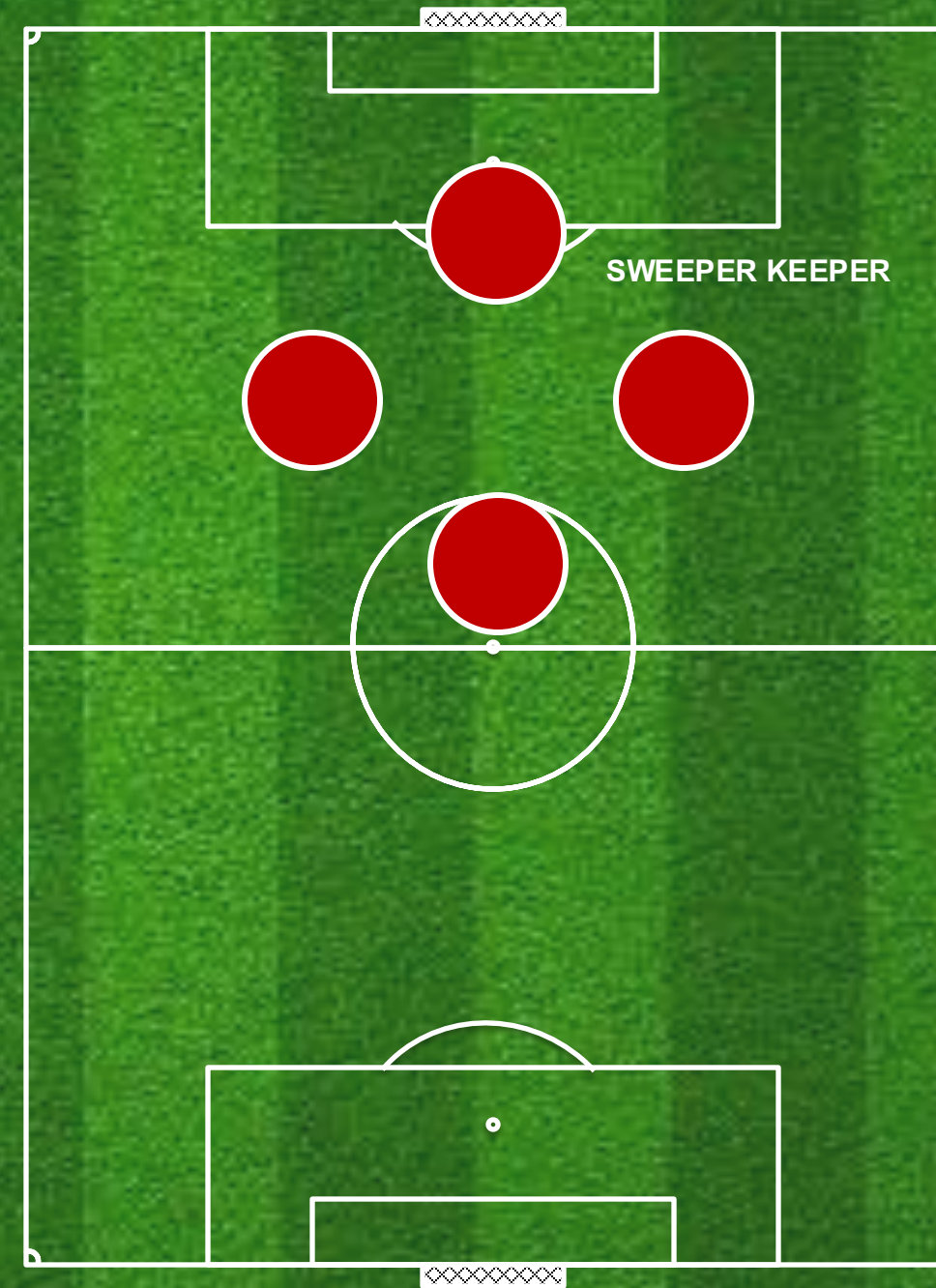


# Small-Sided Games

## U6/U7 FORMATIONS



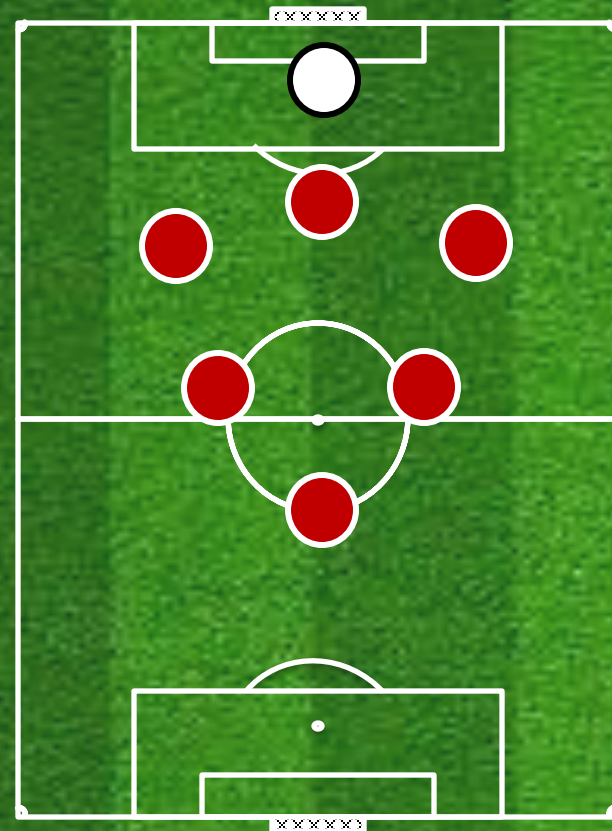
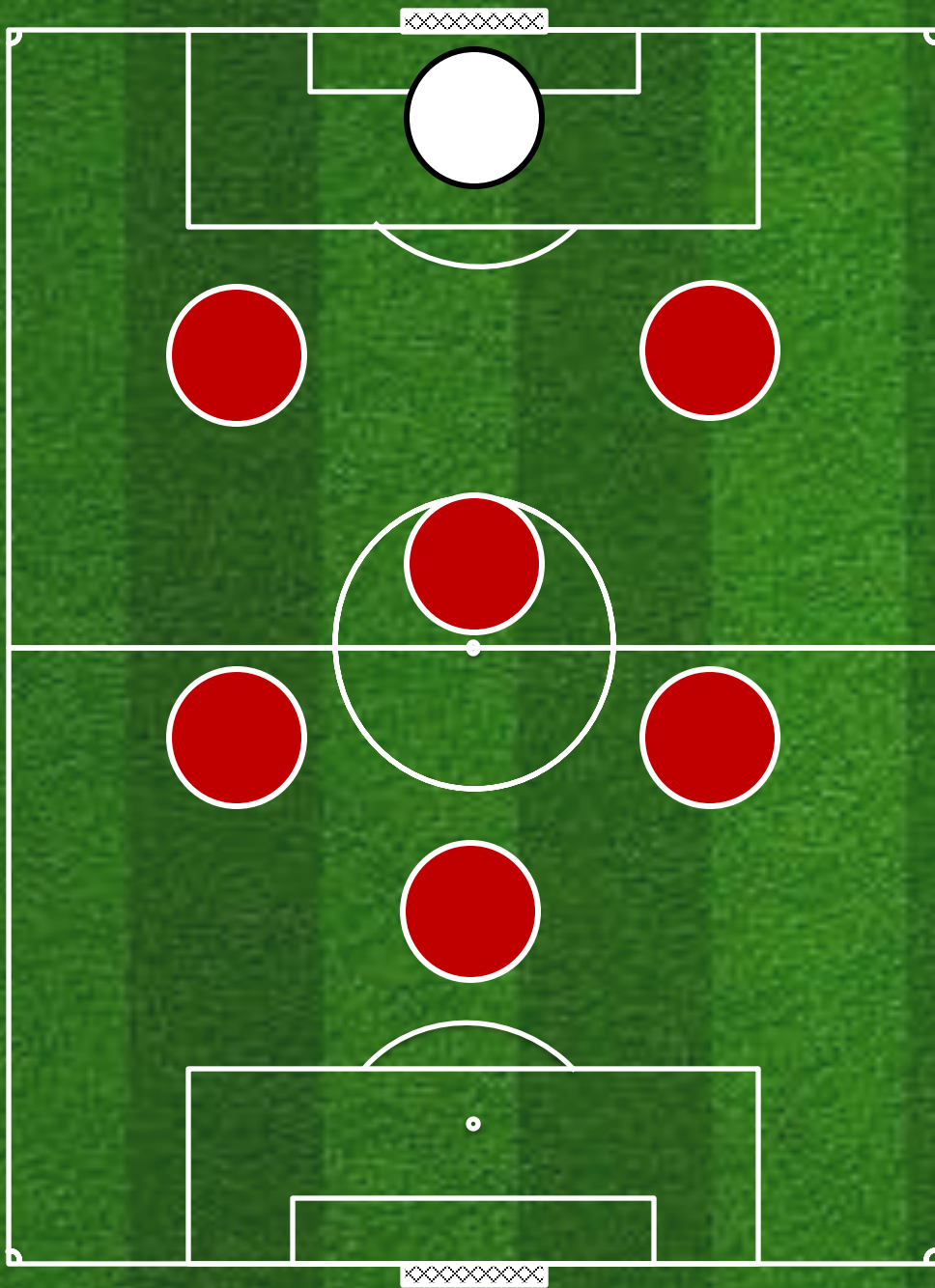
## U8/U9 FORMATIONS



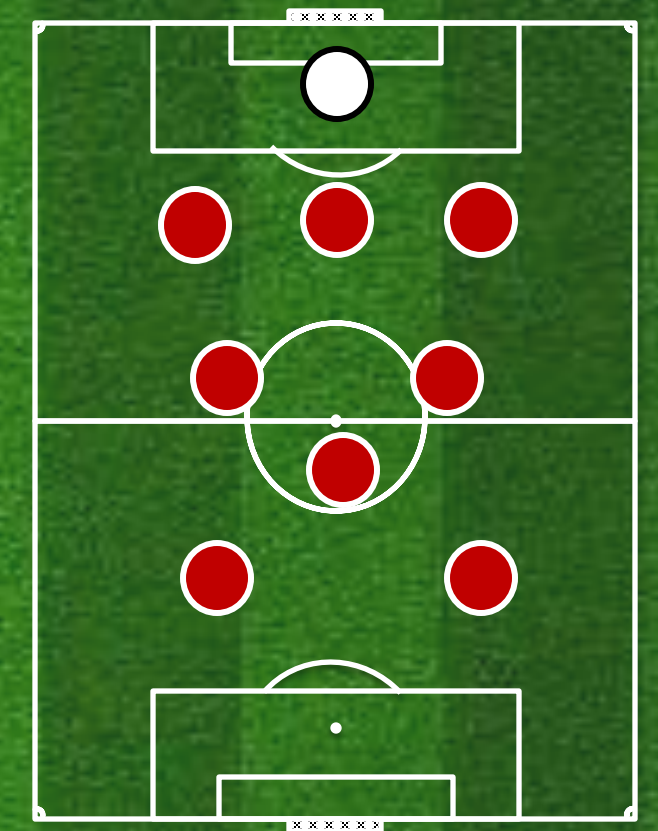
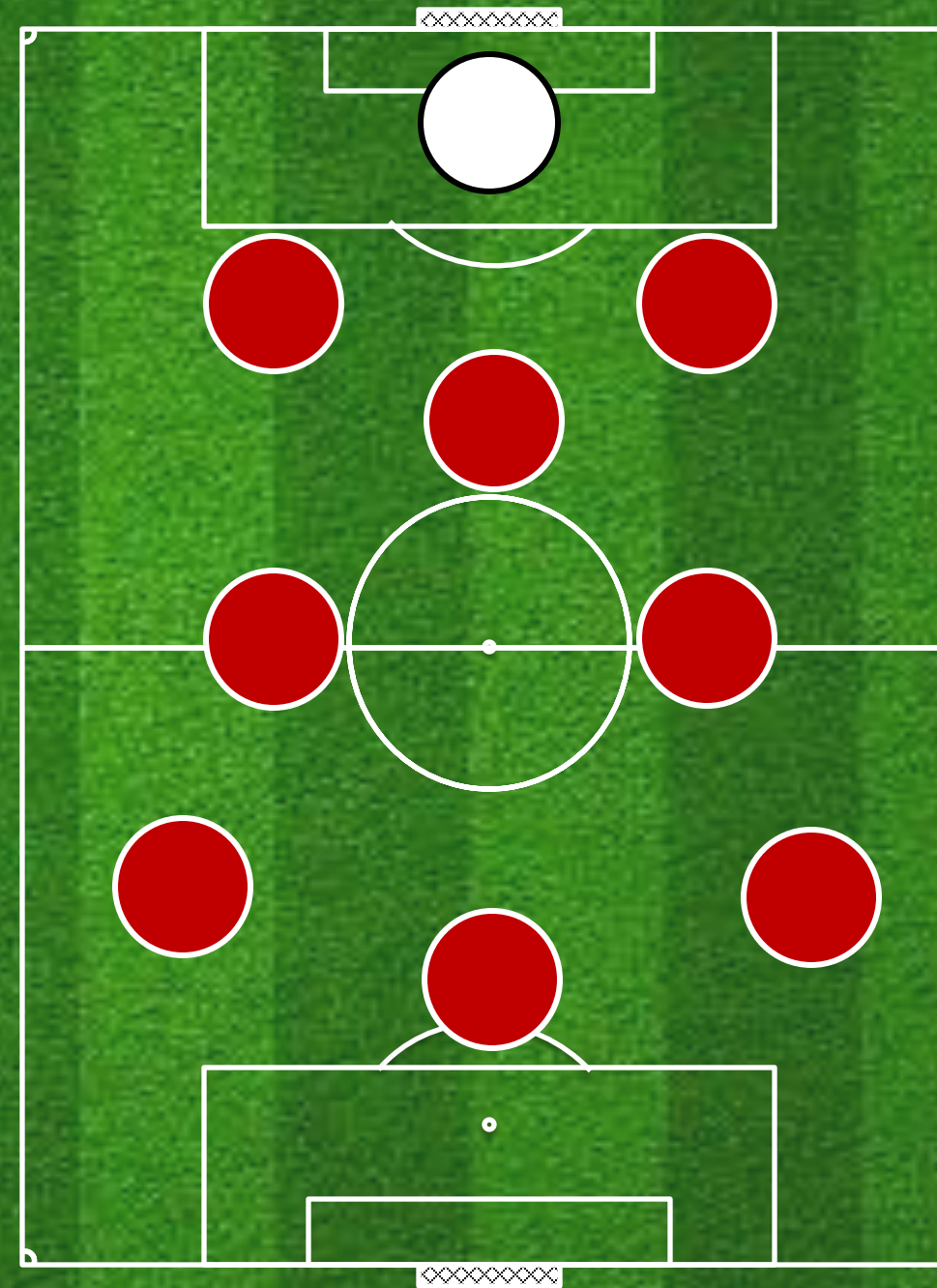


# Small-Sided Games

## U10/U11 FORMATIONS



## U12/U13 FORMATIONS





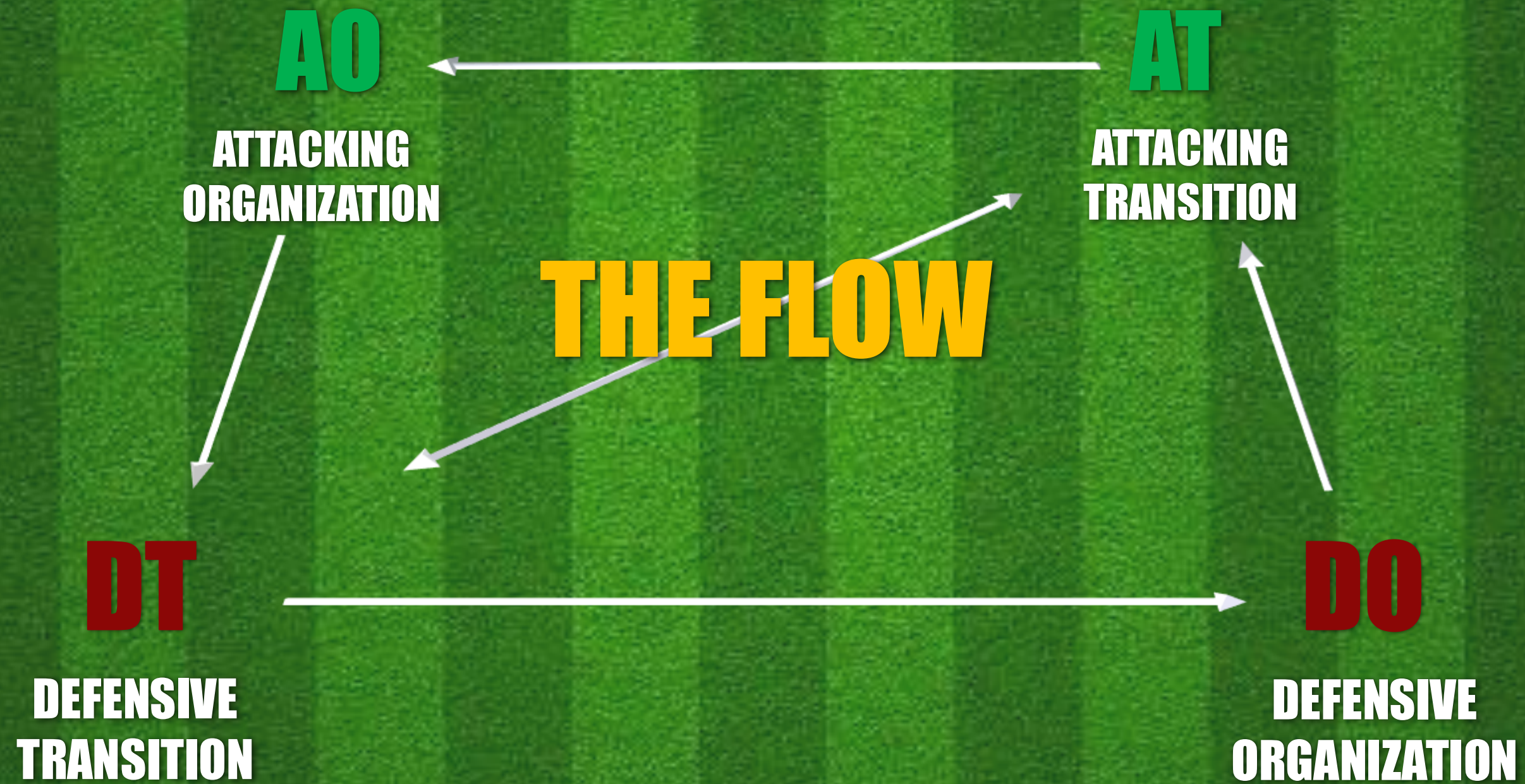
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# **MATCH DAY**

## **COACHING CONCEPTS**



# THE 4 MOMENTS OF THE GAME





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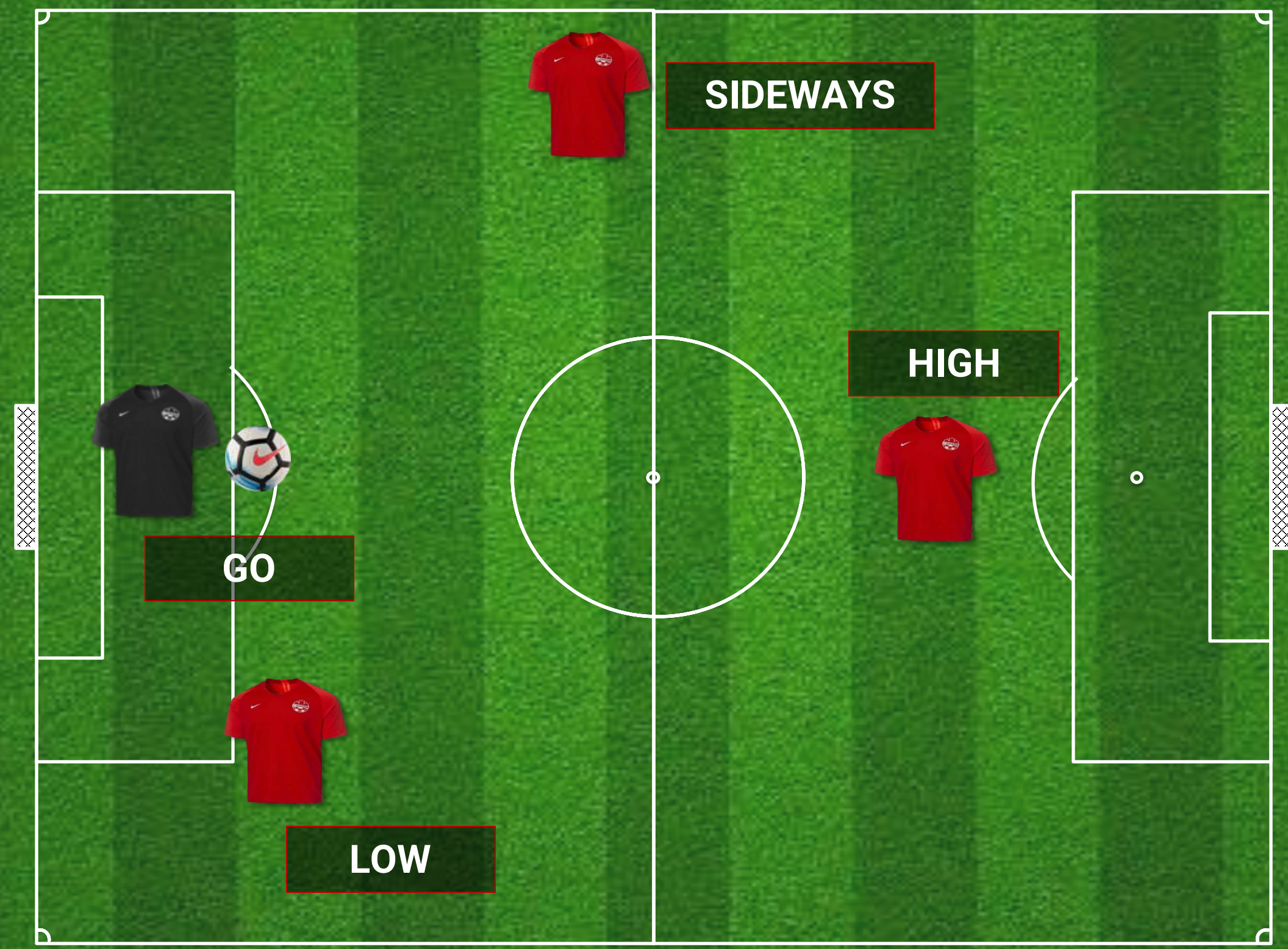
# **MATCH DAY**

## **CHILD FRIENDLY CONCEPTS**



# SHAPE (HIGH – LOW - SIDEWAYS - GO)

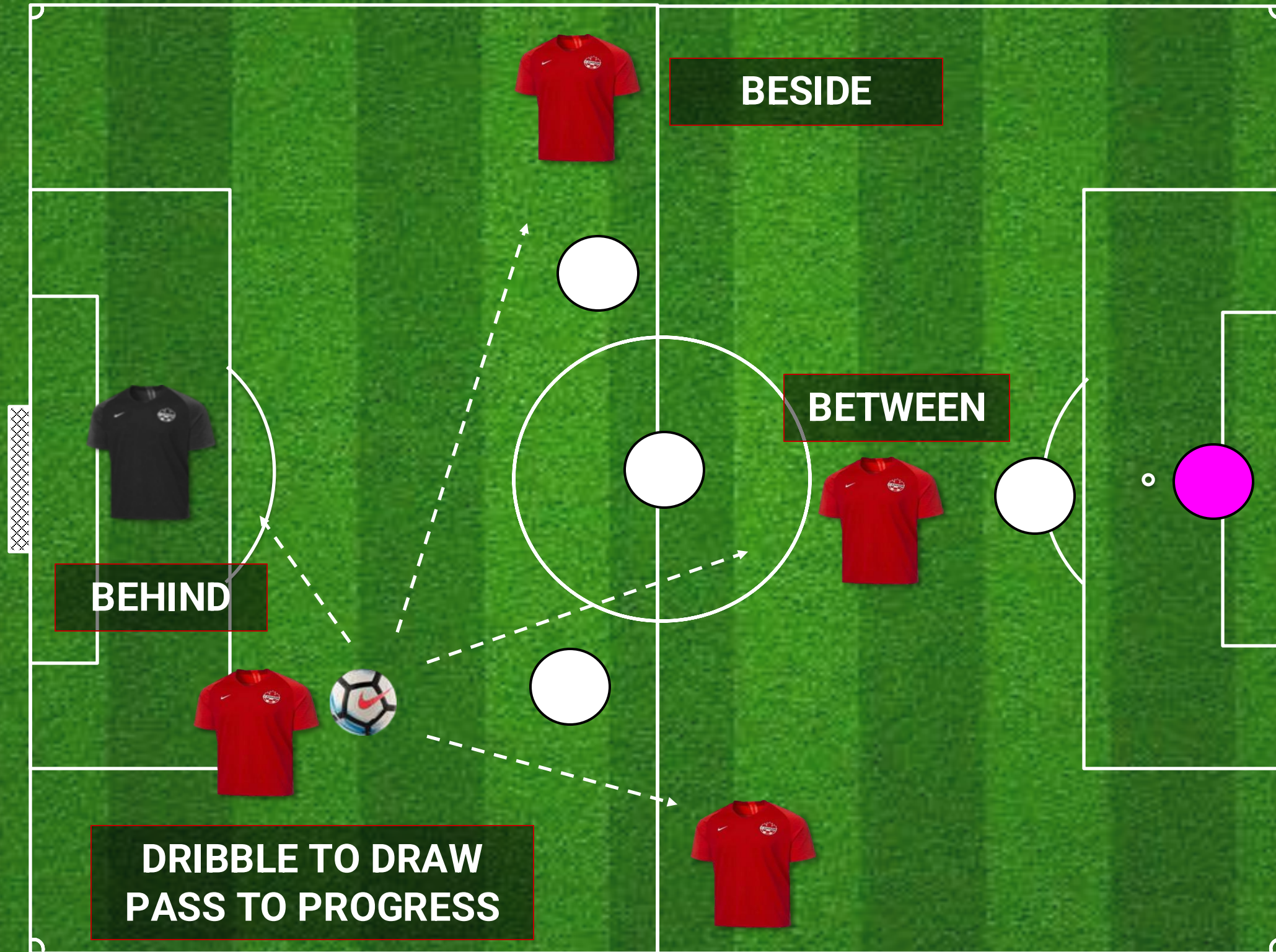
# AO





# PLAY BESIDE - BETWEEN - BEHIND

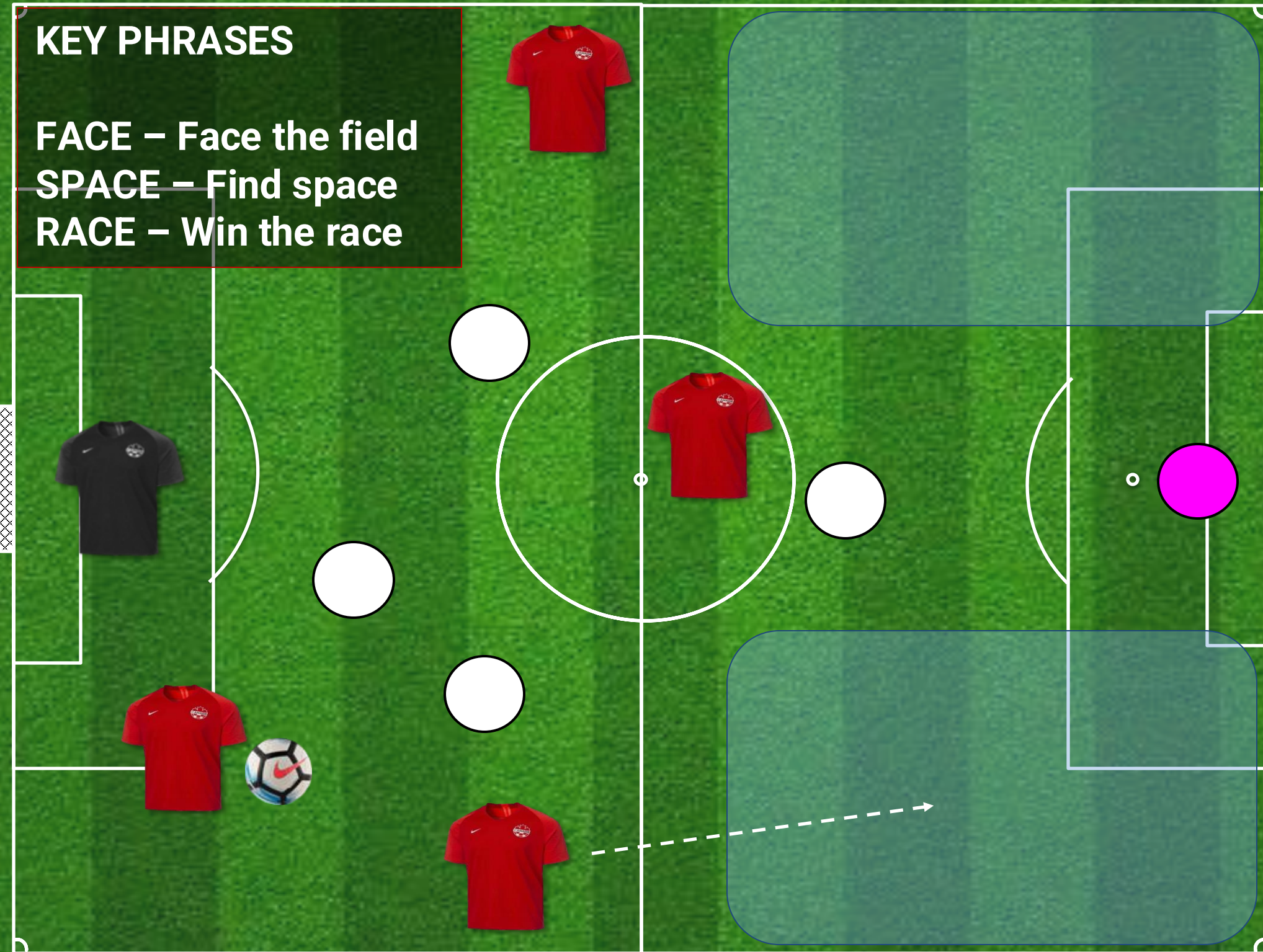
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# “RACE TO THE SPACE”

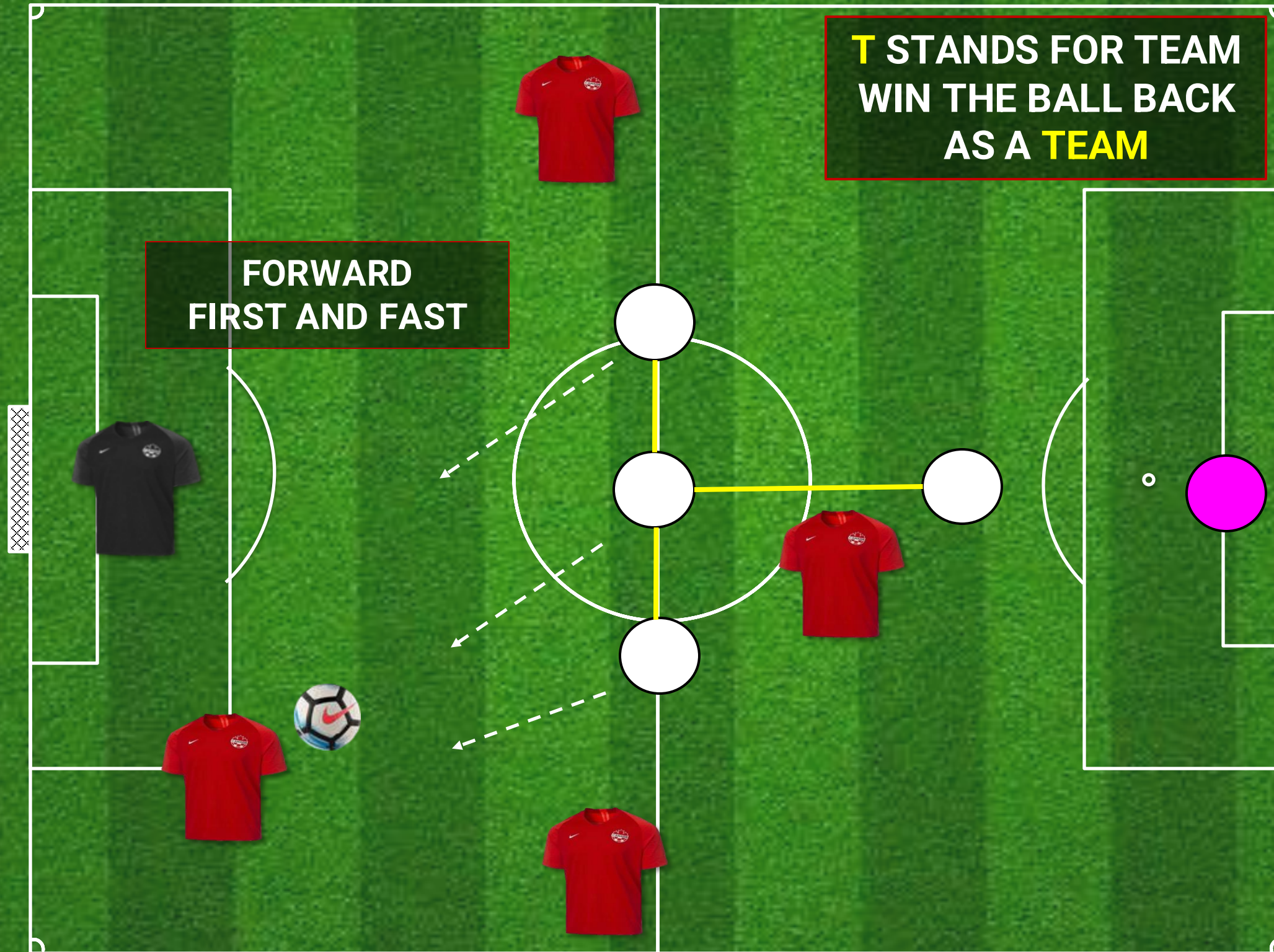
# AT





# “WIN IT BACK AS A PACK”

# DO





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# COACHING

**PROBLEM BASED COACHING**

**VS**

**SOLUTION BASED COACHING**

# PROBLEM BASED COACHING

*“Today, the problem we will try to solve is, how to score goals quickly in a SSG”*

# The soccer problem

**Problem-based coaching encourages coaches to *set a challenge or problem* instead of prescribing the exact solution. The coach designs activities that present realistic game situations and asks guiding questions rather than giving instructions. This approach allows players to:**

- **Think independently**
- **Experiment with different solutions**
- **Learn through trial and error**
- **Develop confidence in their own decision-making**

**Players are encouraged to ask questions, communicate with teammates, and adapt their actions based on what they see. Over time, this creates smarter, more adaptable players who can solve problems under pressure.**



# SOLUTION BASED COACHING

*“Today we are going to work on dribbling”*

# The soccer problem



**Solution-based coaching, on the other hand, often provides players with a specific topic and a single clear objective. *(for example, “play out from the back in this exact way”).* While this can be useful for introducing concepts, it can also:**

- **Limit decision-making and creativity**
- **Reduce player ownership of learning**
- **Encourage players to look to the coach for answers**
- **Remove opportunities to explore multiple ways to succeed**

**When players are told exactly what to do and how to do it, they may execute well in training but struggle to adapt when the game doesn't go as planned.**



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# **SSG EXAMPLES**

## **Training Environment**



# SMALL-SIDED GAME ROTATION

Example:  
Using Station approach

Theme:  
*'Progress The Ball Forwards'*



TWO GOAL GAME

FOUR GOAL GAME

TARGET GAME

ONE/TWO GOAL GAME

Providing players with a realistic context  
Positioning a goal at each end of the pitch  
introduces a real game dynamic .

identifying and exploiting space, switching the ball,  
executing precise passes, and maintaining  
defensive principles.

Target games are utilized to develop technical  
elements of attacking play. largely shaped by scoring  
system, and the specific challenges.

Given the mixed-ability nature of a group,  
players may find the task easier than others.  
ensuring that all players remain appropriately  
engaged

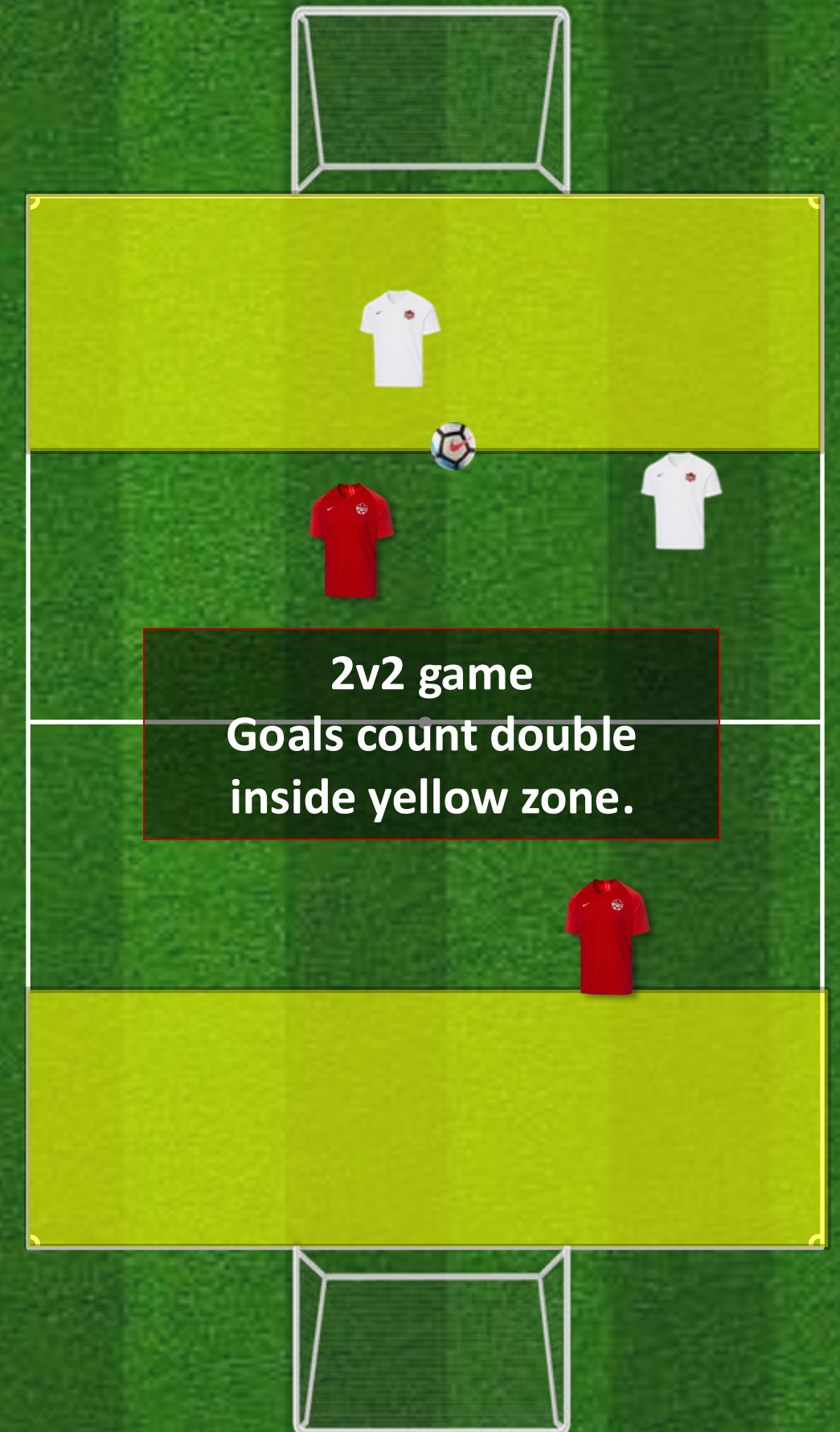
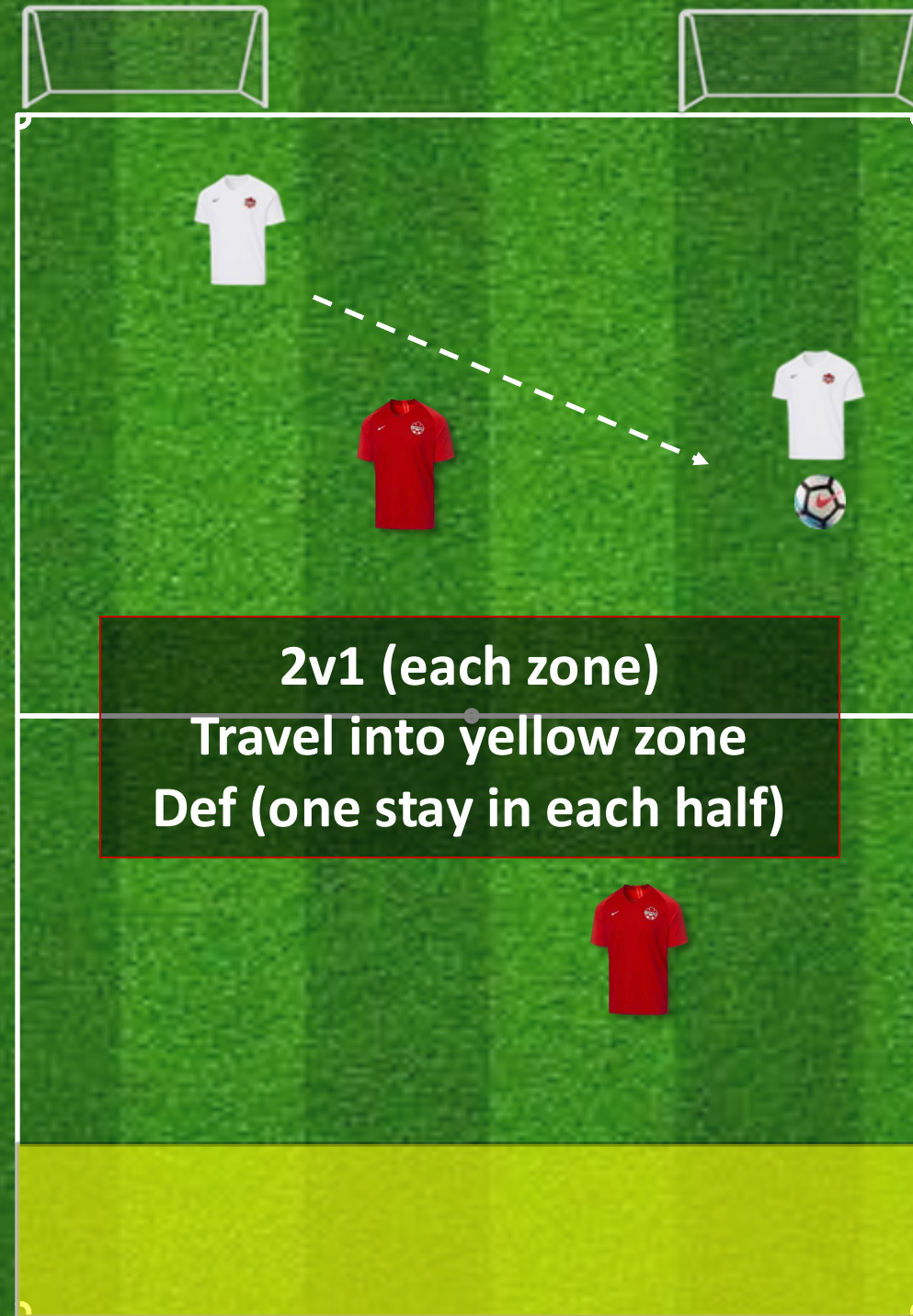
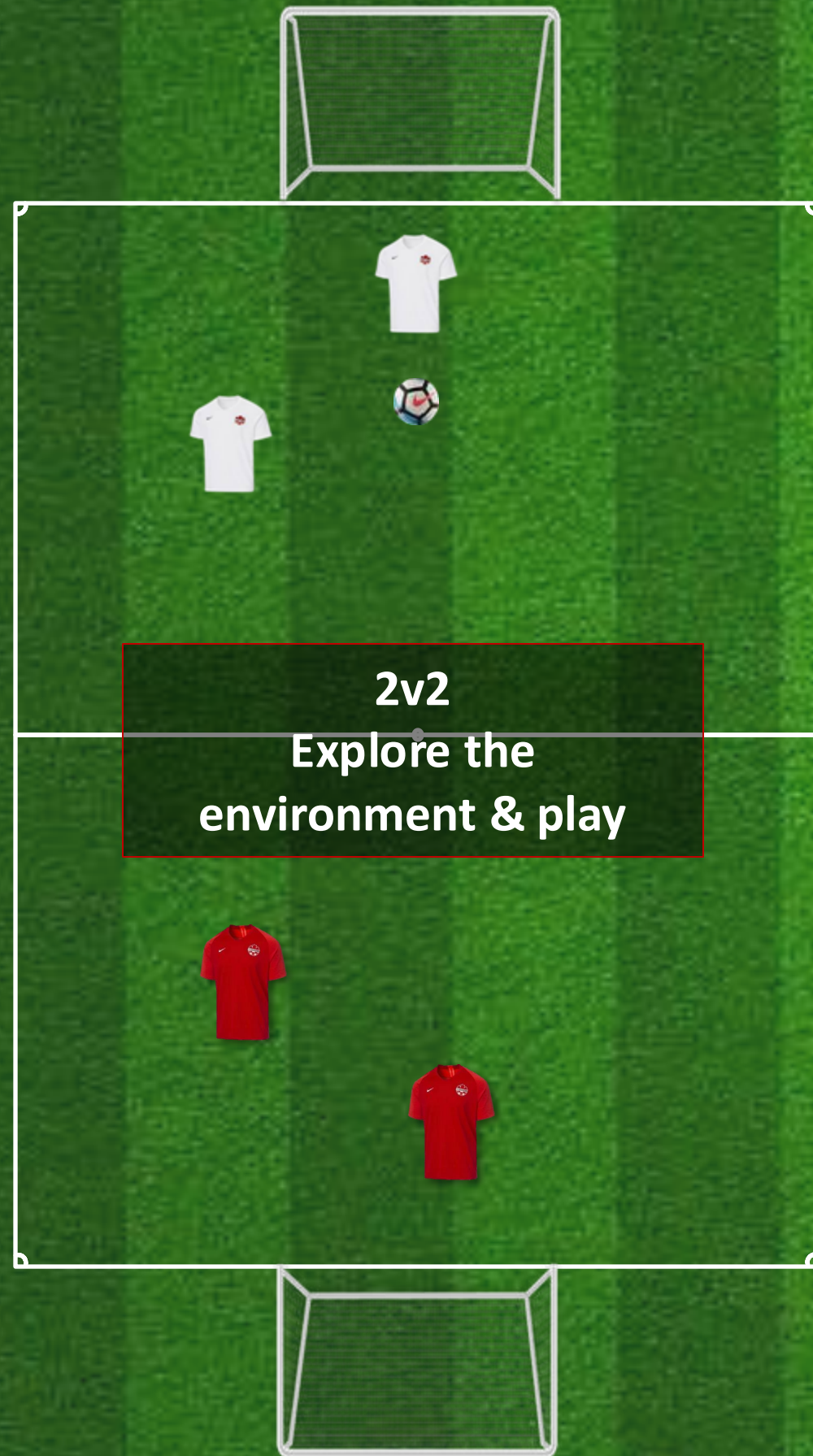
# Game rotation

- **Variety of problems to solve within one theme**
- **Opportunity to meet new friends**
- **Work with different coaches**
- **Able to express themselves with techniques & ideas**
- **Caters to their attention span**
- **Great learning environment**
- **Access to the best coaches at the club**





# GAME - ACTIVITY – GAME



# Game – Activity – Game

- **Start with a guided discovery game**
- **Allows players to explore and try skills without coach interference (intro game)**
- **Start in a real game format allowing players to reflect and try new things**
- **Adds technical elements and focus on technical actions ( Example; receiving the ball skills) provides the repetitions**
- **Players can build understanding of what the objectives are in bite size information**
- **Learning can be memorable**



# Coaching tips

- **Ensure players get to play a match every session!**
- **Try not to stop the game too often, children want to experience the ‘flow’ of the game.**
- **The game is essential a series of 1v1,2v2,3v3 etc and players should experience these varieties in games. Play random formats!**
- **Appreciate what it’s like to be young and what children’s version of the game is like. Make the game simple and easy to play.**
- **Make the environment safe where children can make mistakes and confident to ask the coach questions.**



# Types of play



## Unstructured play:

Children playing on their own, their rules. No direction given and great way to start to session.

## Guided play:

Focus on the outcome, not the process. Guide someone who cannot see - point them in the right direction - we are there to help them when they get stuck or when they cannot get past the obstacle

## Structured play:

Objectives, rules, guidelines. Keep it simple. Make it look like soccer!

## Exploration play:

Every time you score a goal you can add a rule or change a rule. “what would you like to change?”



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**GROUPING PLAYERS**

**EVERYONE IS PART OF THE GAME**

# Grouping

**Small-sided formats like 2v2, 3v3, or 4v4 provide great opportunities for player development and engagement.**

**At the end of the day, it's simple — kids just want to play. The more touches, involvement, and enjoyment they get from the game, the more they learn and grow.**

**Rotating groups throughout a session encourages adaptability, builds more chemistry, and helps players learn to communicate and collaborate with a wider range of peers.**



# Grouping

For players aged 12 years of age and younger (Under 13), the use of practice groups and the creation of teams from the larger training group on an ongoing basis is the preferred approach from Canada Soccer.

- *Ability*
- *Maturation (- /+)*
- *Friendships*
- *Birth date*
- *Experience*
- *Random*
- *Children Decide*
- *Mixed age pools*
- *Gender or mixed gender (cautious)*



# Grouping

**Do they need a greater challenge?**



**Do they need a more suitable challenge?**



# GROUPING PLAYERS EXAMPLE



## PLAYERS FORGING AHEAD

This practice is designed for players who are progressing quickly and need additional challenges to continue their development. By playing in a 3v2 format on a reduced playing area, players are pushed to improve their technical execution, speed of play, and decision-making under pressure.

This setup is ideal for players who are ready to work ahead of the group, refine technical skills, and stretch their tactical understanding in a dynamic, game-realistic environment.



# GROUPING PLAYERS EXAMPLE



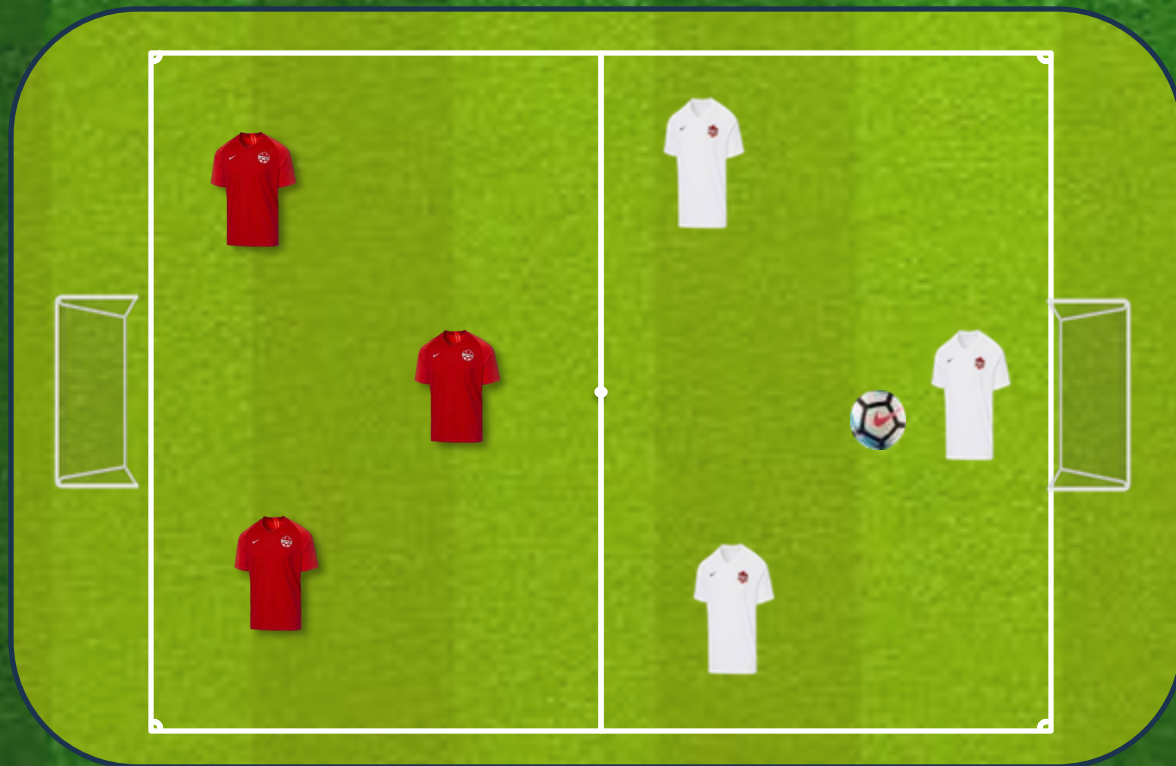
## PLAYERS WHO CAN COPE

This practice is designed for players who are developing steadily and can comfortably cope with a moderate challenge. Using a 2v2 format helps them build confidence while still pushing them to improve their technical ability, awareness, and decision-making at a manageable pace.

The setup encourages players to recognize opportunities, make simple combinations, and it provides the right balance between support and challenge, helping players strengthen their fundamentals in a realistic, game-like environment.



# GROUPING PLAYERS EXAMPLE



## PLAYERS WHO ARE STRIVING TO KEEP UP

This practice is designed for players who may be finding the game challenging and need extra support to build confidence and develop their basic skills. Using a 3v3 format on a larger sized area gives them more time on the ball, clearer decisions, and simpler situations to read.

The setup helps players experience more success by allowing them to focus on simple passes, basic movement, and understanding how to work with a teammate. It reduces pressure while still creating realistic game moments.



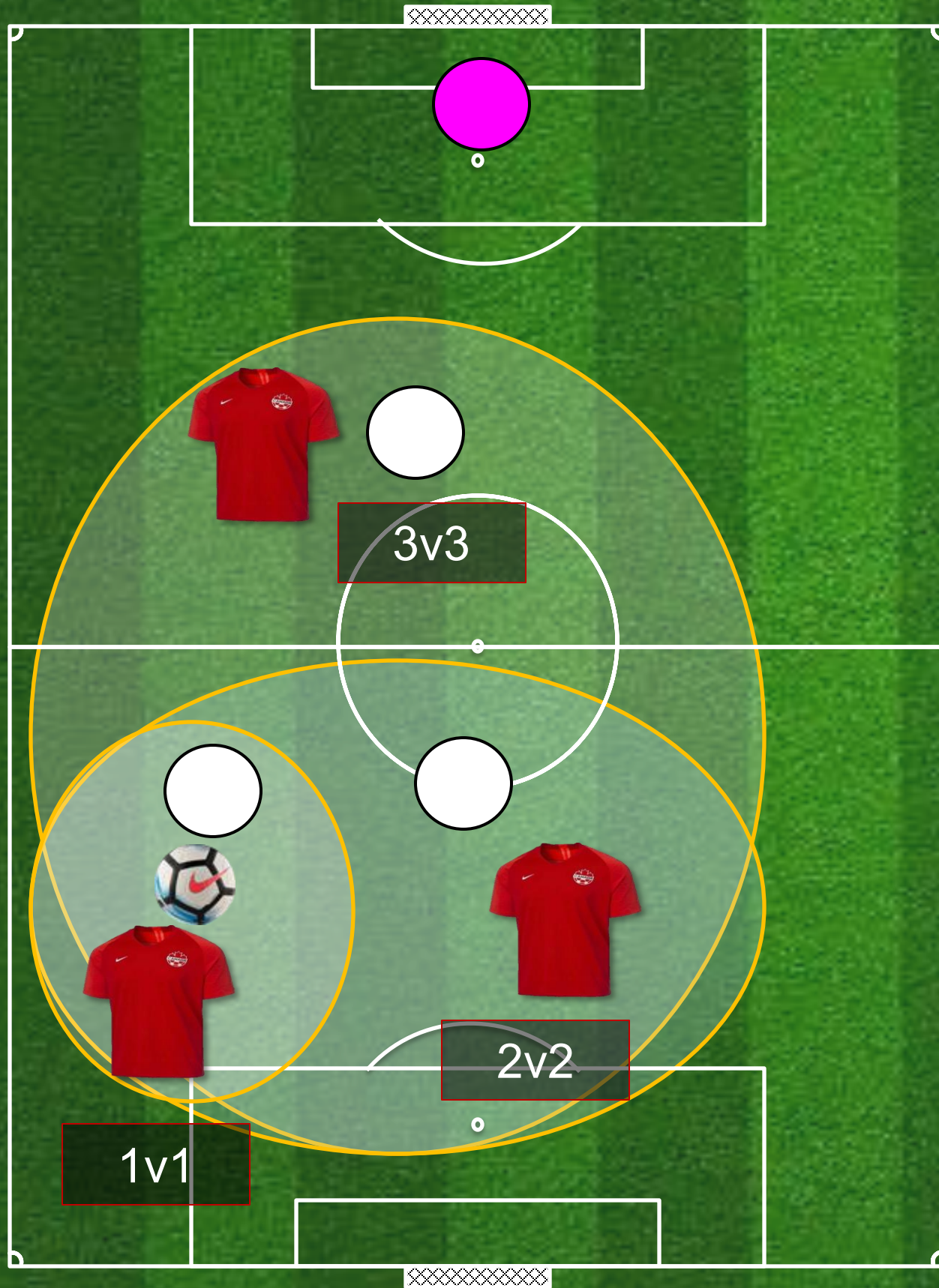
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# **SMALL SIDED GAMES**

## **OBSERVATIONS**



# GAME SITUATIONS



## INDIVIDUAL OBJECTIVES

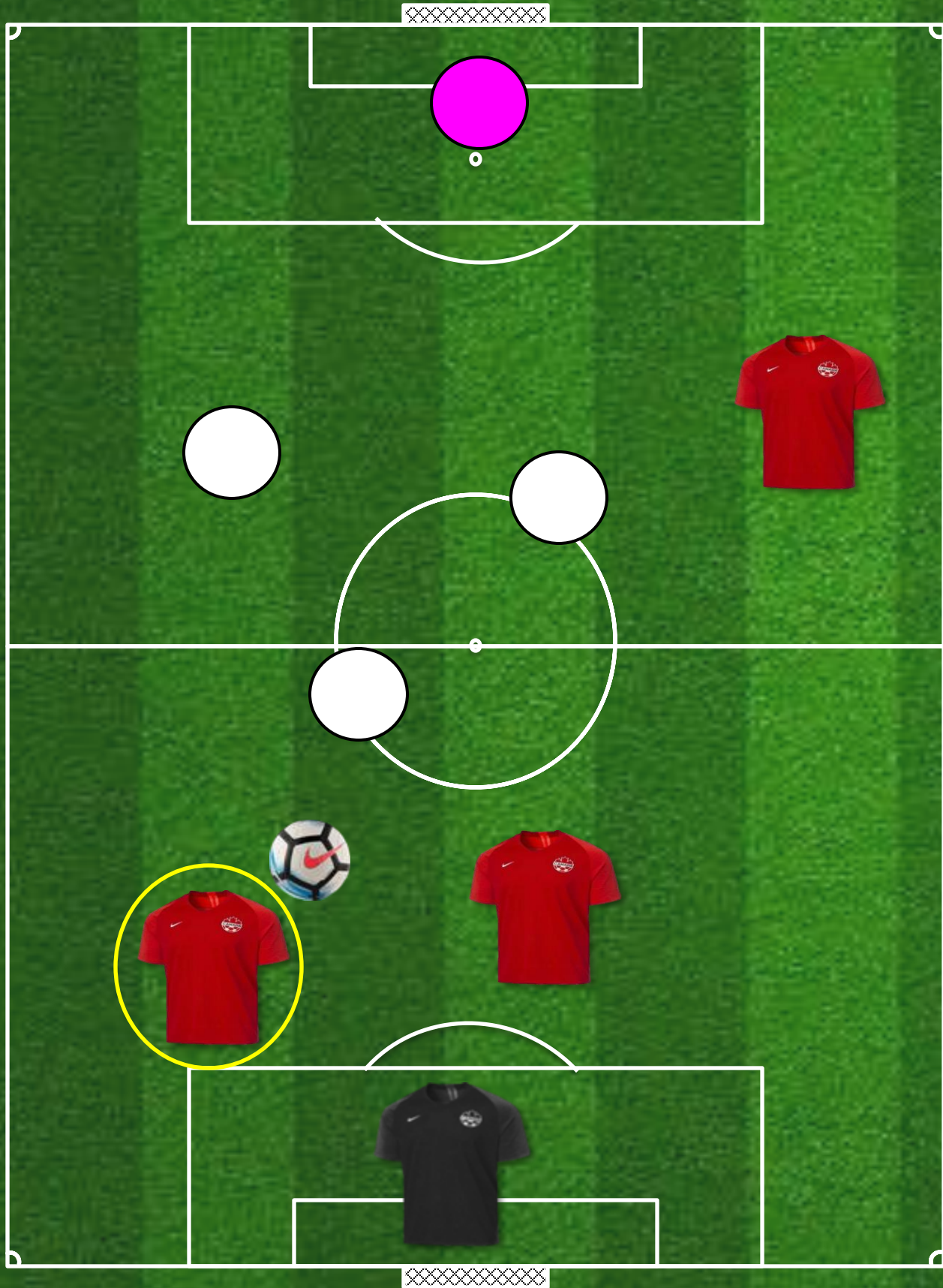
**1v1 protector v pressing player**  
**Confident to stay on the ball**

**2v2: 1v1 near teammates**  
**How to Create 2v1 – come and play with your friend**

**3v3: Near – Can the possessor play forwards & direct**  
**Players at various heights.**



# ON, AROUND & AWAY FROM THE BALL



Are they using body positioning, feints, or changes in pace to manipulate their marker to play forward?

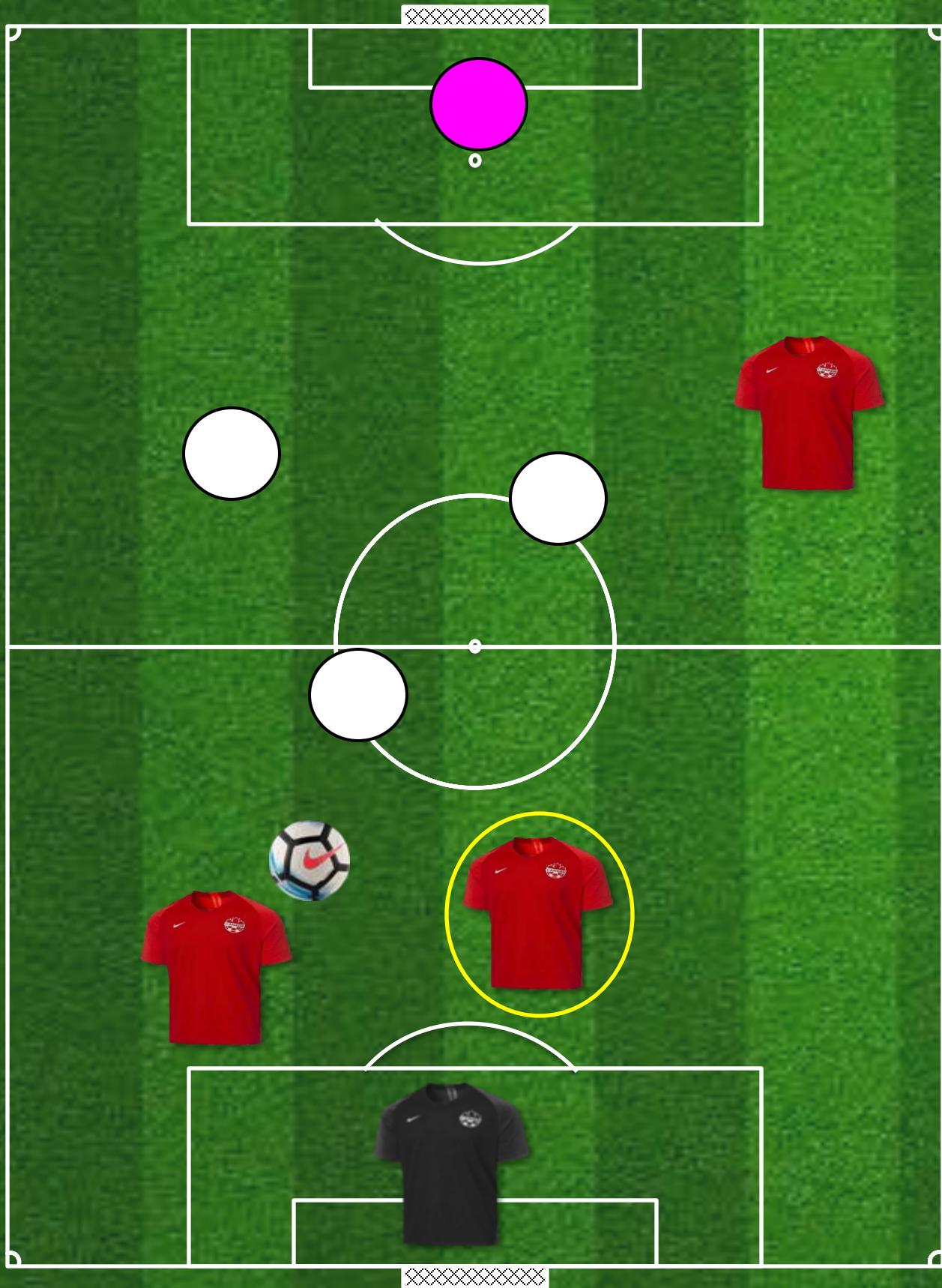
Are they deliberately attracting pressure to draw defenders in, creating space elsewhere for teammates?

If so, are they using a quick touch, turn, or burst of speed to beat their opponent and exploit the space behind?

**PRAISE THESE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS EVEN IF THEY DON'T COME OFF!!!**



# ON, **AROUND** & AWAY FROM THE BALL



Look at the number and quality of options available to the player in possession.

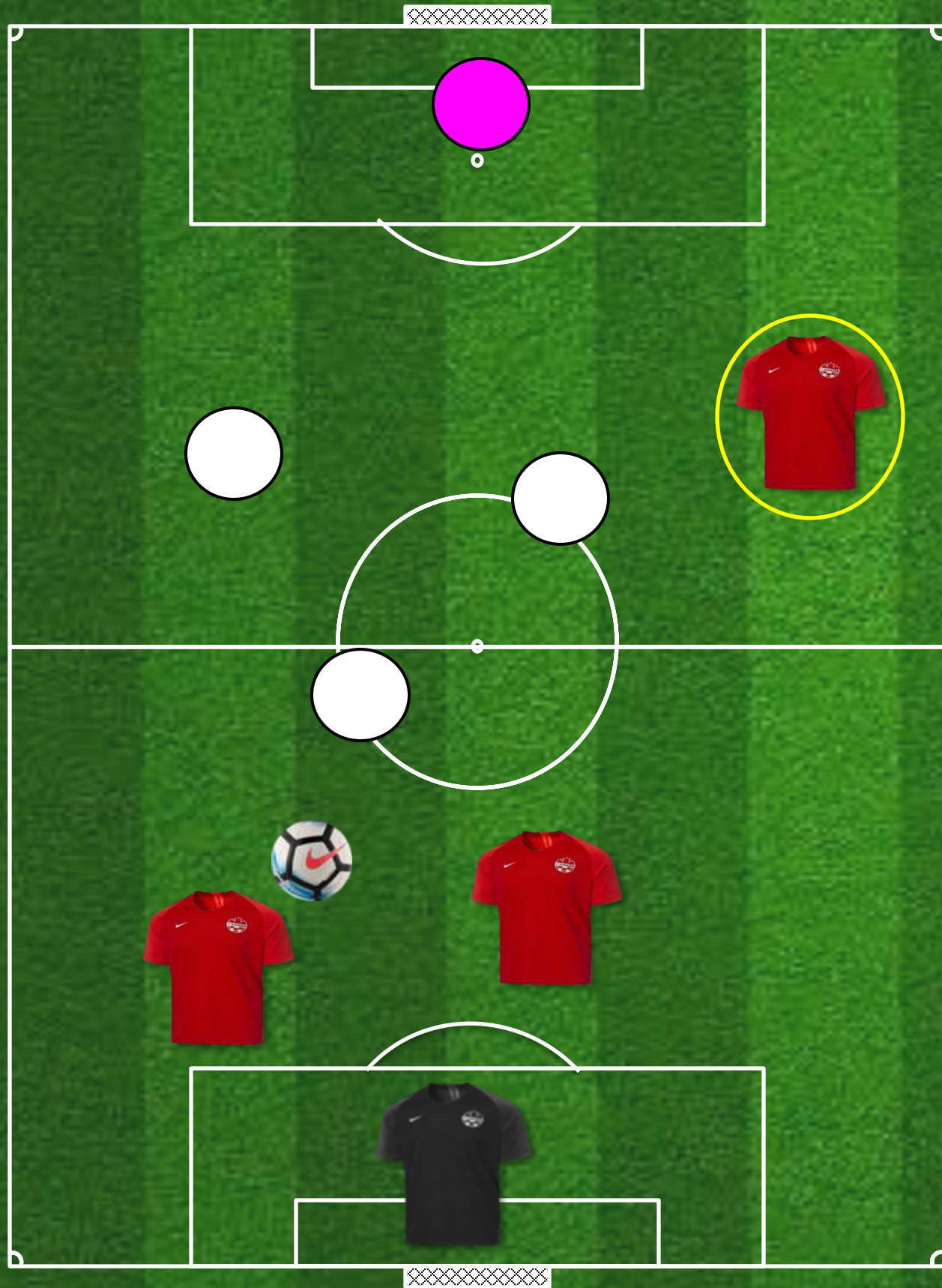
Are teammates moving into space to offer clear, safe, and realistic passing lanes?

Are they doing so quickly enough ?

Are they positioned at varying depths and angles to allow the player multiple choices — for example, a backward option for security, a lateral option for circulation, and a forward option to break lines?



# ON, AROUND & AWAY FROM THE BALL



Observe how players move to create space, offer support, or make runs when they don't have the ball to create depth.

Look at spacing between players, team shape, and whether players are in effective attacking or defensive positions.

Notice when players choose to support, press, mark, or recover — and whether those decisions are timely.



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# **SMALL SIDED GAMES**

**DID YOU S.C.O.R.E ?**

# Design

**S**coring system

**C**hallenging

**O**pposition

**R**ealism

**E**qual teams



# Design

**S**coring system (How do player's score?)

**C**hallenging (“*Try to score one touch*”)

**O**pposition (2v2,3v3,3v2,4v3 etc.. Variable games)

**R**ealism (Looks like a real soccer game)

**E**qual teams (Group teams fairly for enjoyment)



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# **SMALL SIDED GAMES**

## **PITCH DESIGN FOR OUTCOMES**



**FIELD USED FOR ATTACKING  
OR DEFENSIVE MOMENTS AND  
PRESSING CHALLENGES**



**FIELD USED FOR  
PENETRATION  
(DRIBBLE/PASS) OR  
OVERLOAD CHALLENGES**




**FIELD USED FOR DISPERSAL  
OR SWITCHING PLAY**



**FIELD USED FOR SIMPLE  
TEAM SHAPE CONCEPTS**



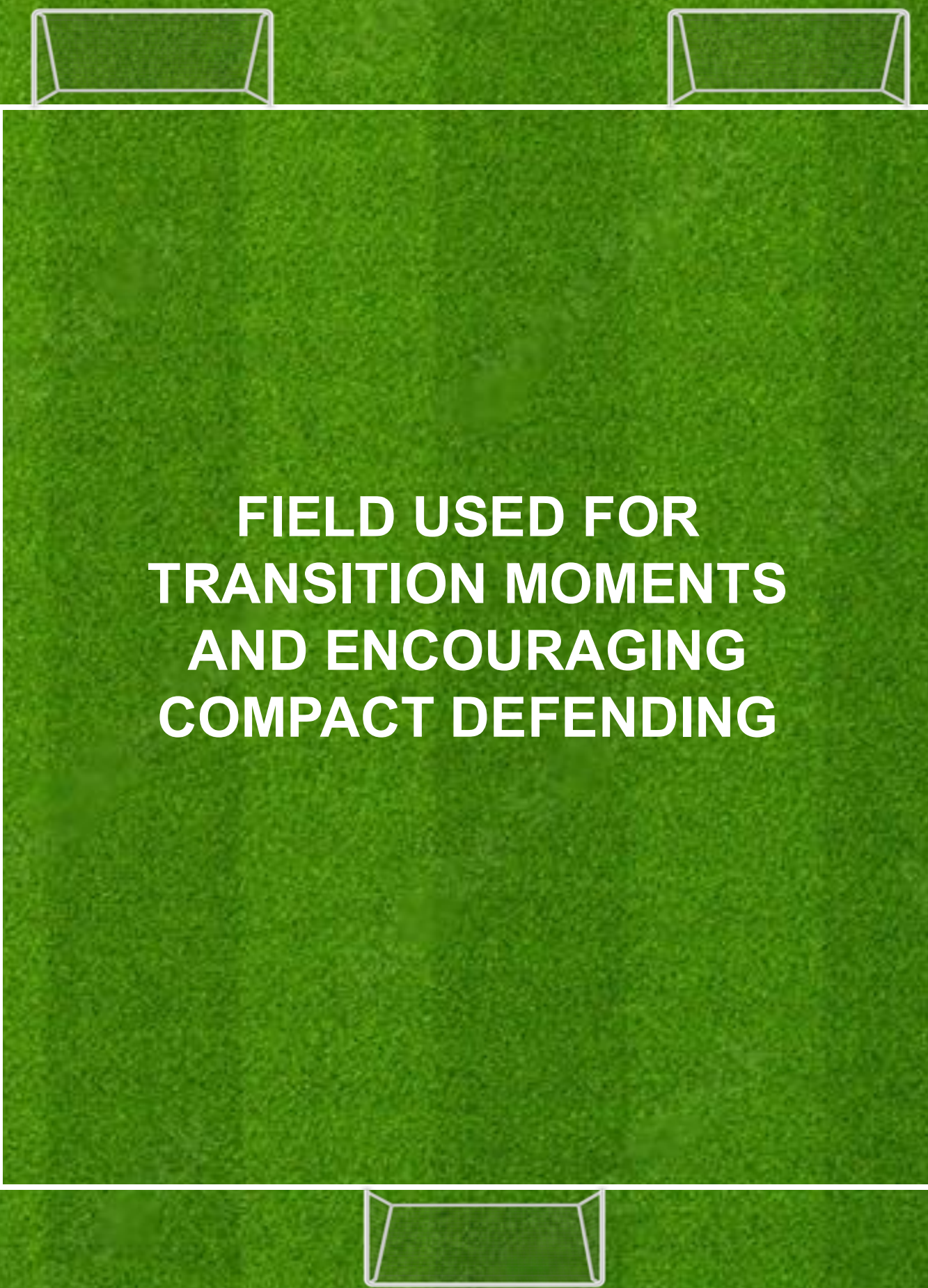
**FIELD USED FOR  
PENETRATION &  
TRANSITION**



**FIELD USED FOR  
DISPERSAL, SWITCHING  
PLAY OR SUPPORTING  
PLAYERS WITH TIME IN  
POSSESSION**



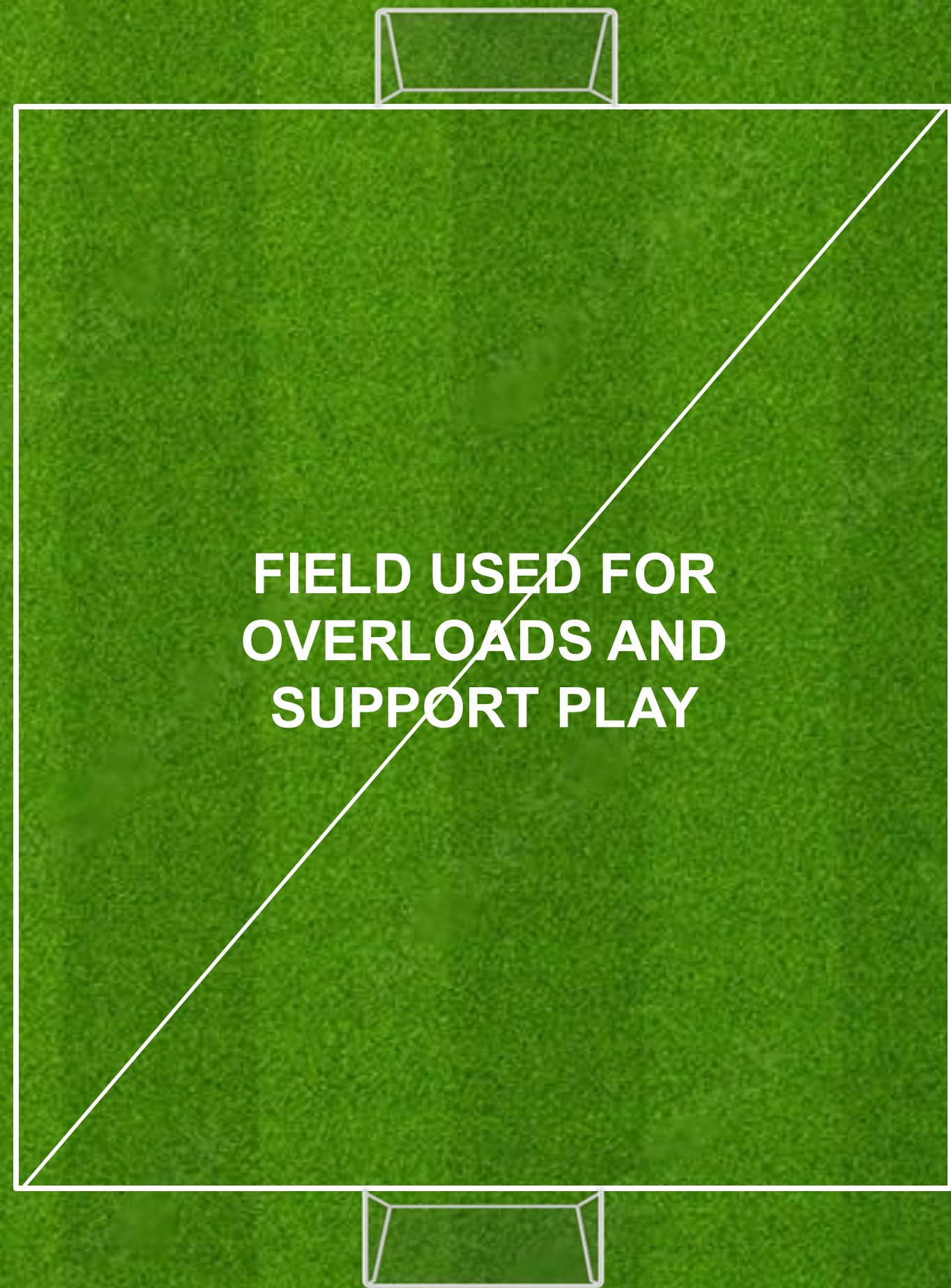
**FIELD USED FOR DISPERSAL,  
SWITCHING PLAY OR  
SUPPORTING PLAYERS  
DECISION MAKING IN SUPPORT  
PLAY**



**FIELD USED FOR  
TRANSITION MOMENTS  
AND ENCOURAGING  
COMPACT DEFENDING**



**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT  
PLAY AND SCORING FROM  
WIDE AREAS**



**FIELD USED FOR  
OVERLOADS AND  
SUPPORT PLAY**



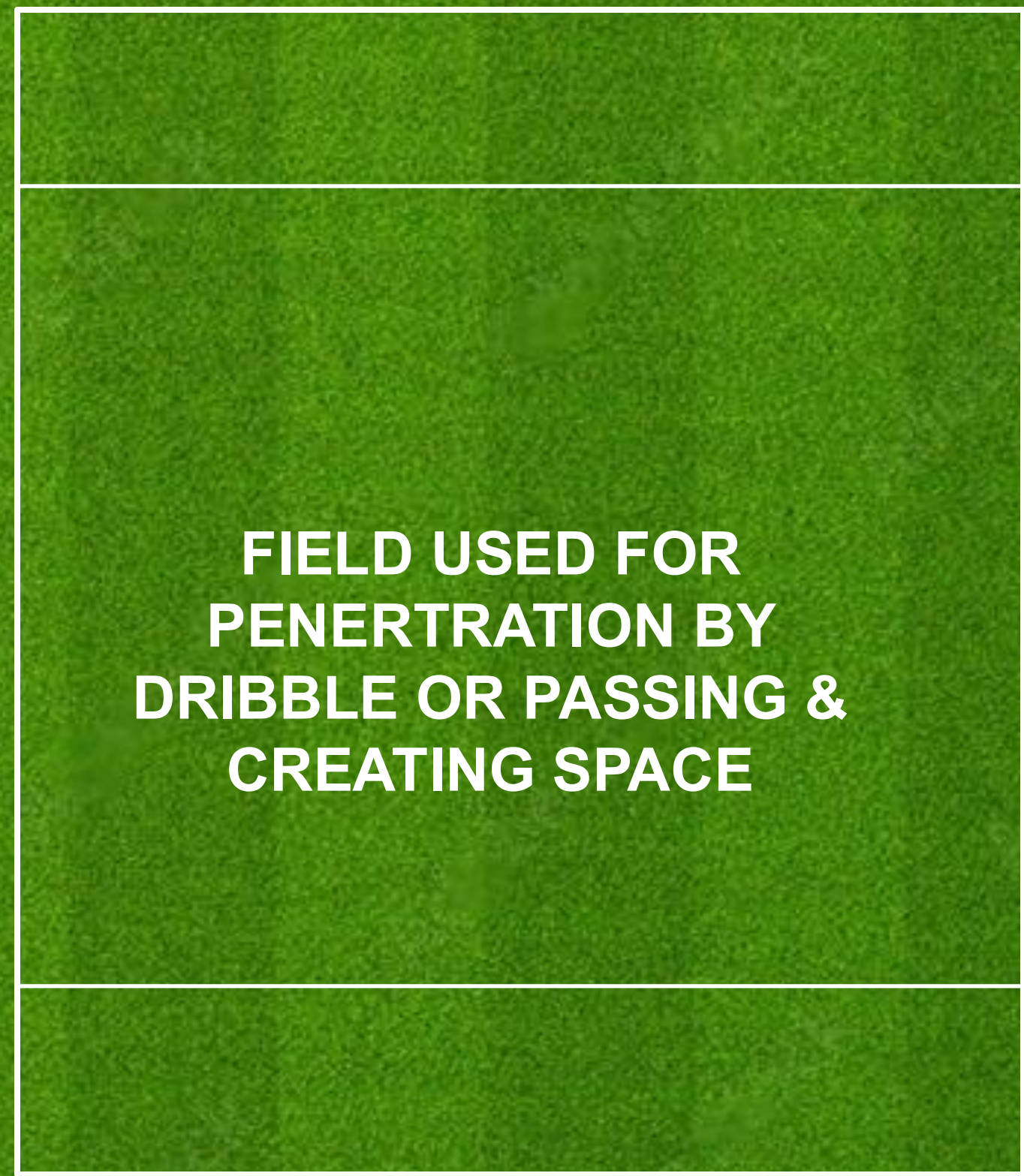
**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT  
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AND OVERLOADS**



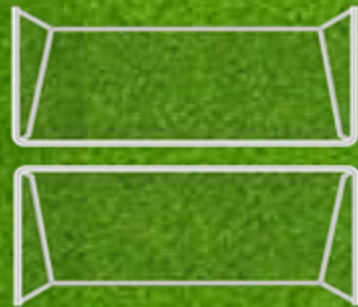
**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT  
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**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT  
PLAY**



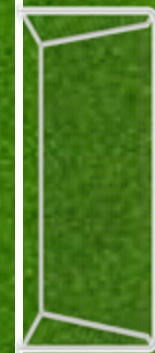
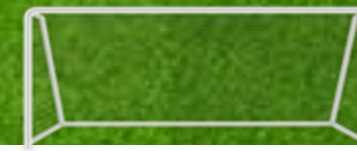
**FIELD USED FOR  
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**FIELD USED FOR PASSING  
& RECEIVING TECHNIQUES**



**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT  
PLAY AND TRANSITION  
MOMENTS**



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# **SOCCKER THAT SUITS**

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