



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 Provincial/Territorial 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.

[**Grassroots Standards Click Here**](#)



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.



**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.**

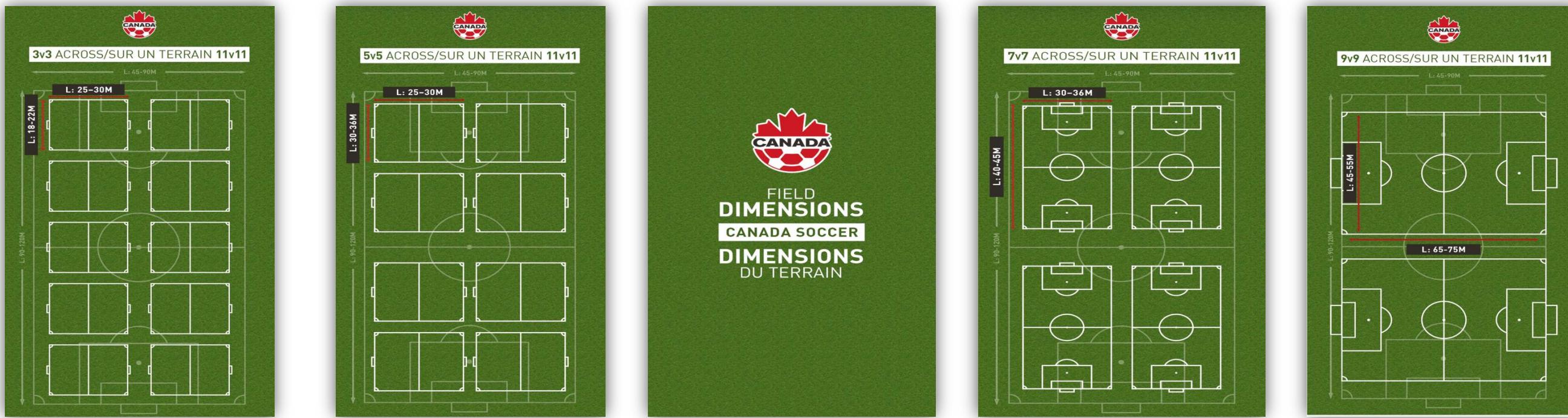
Players Can't hide

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



SOCER THAT SUITS

Appropriate Size

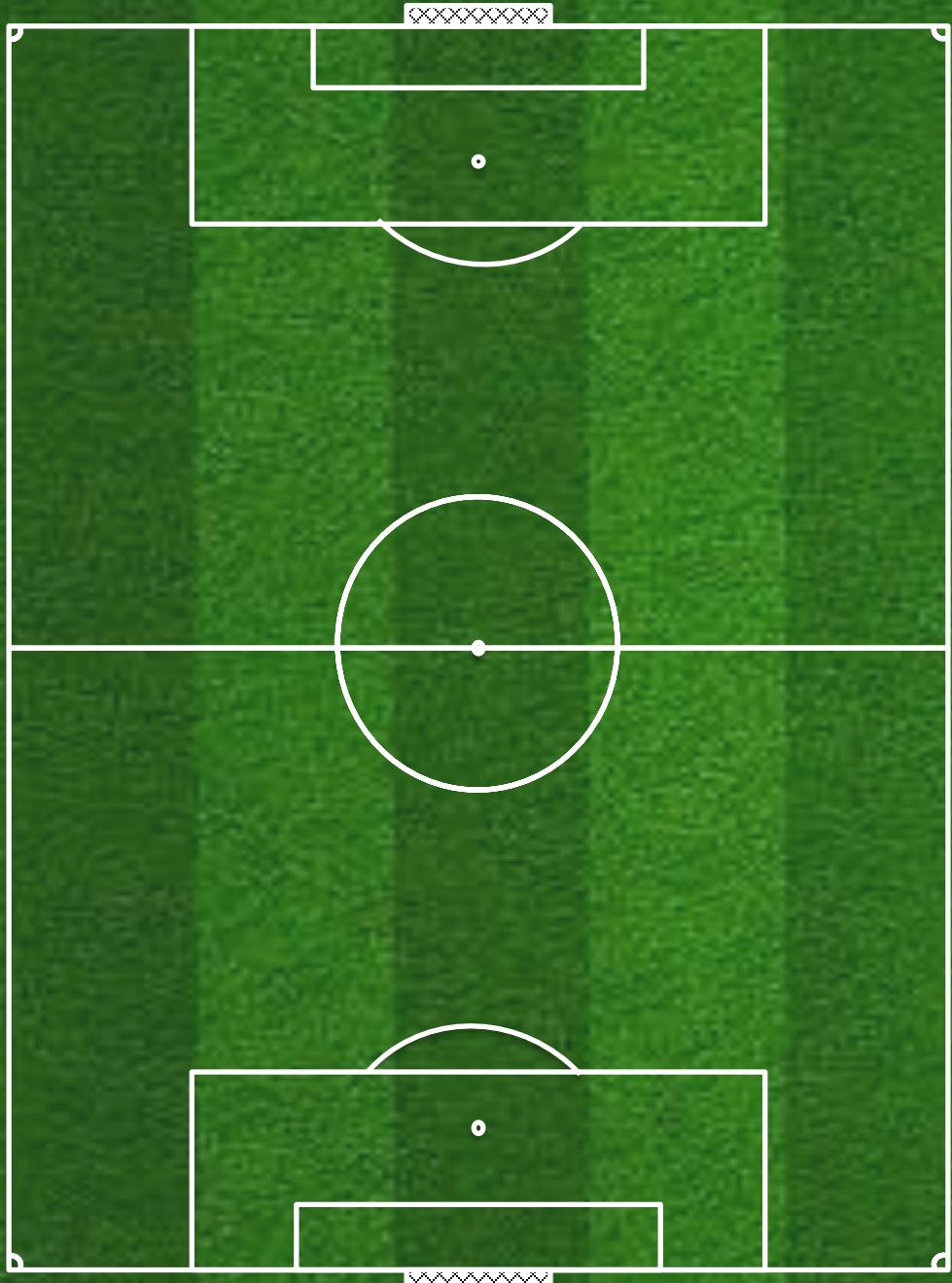


Small-sided games (SSGs) played on modified pitch sizes enhance technical, tactical, physical, and psychological development in players. SSGs increase the number of ball touches, successful passes, dribbles, and goal-scoring opportunities per player, accelerating technical learning

(Ford et al., 2010; Hill-Haas et al., 2011).



Small-Sided Games



Higher frequency of passing, dribbling and tackling in SSGs.

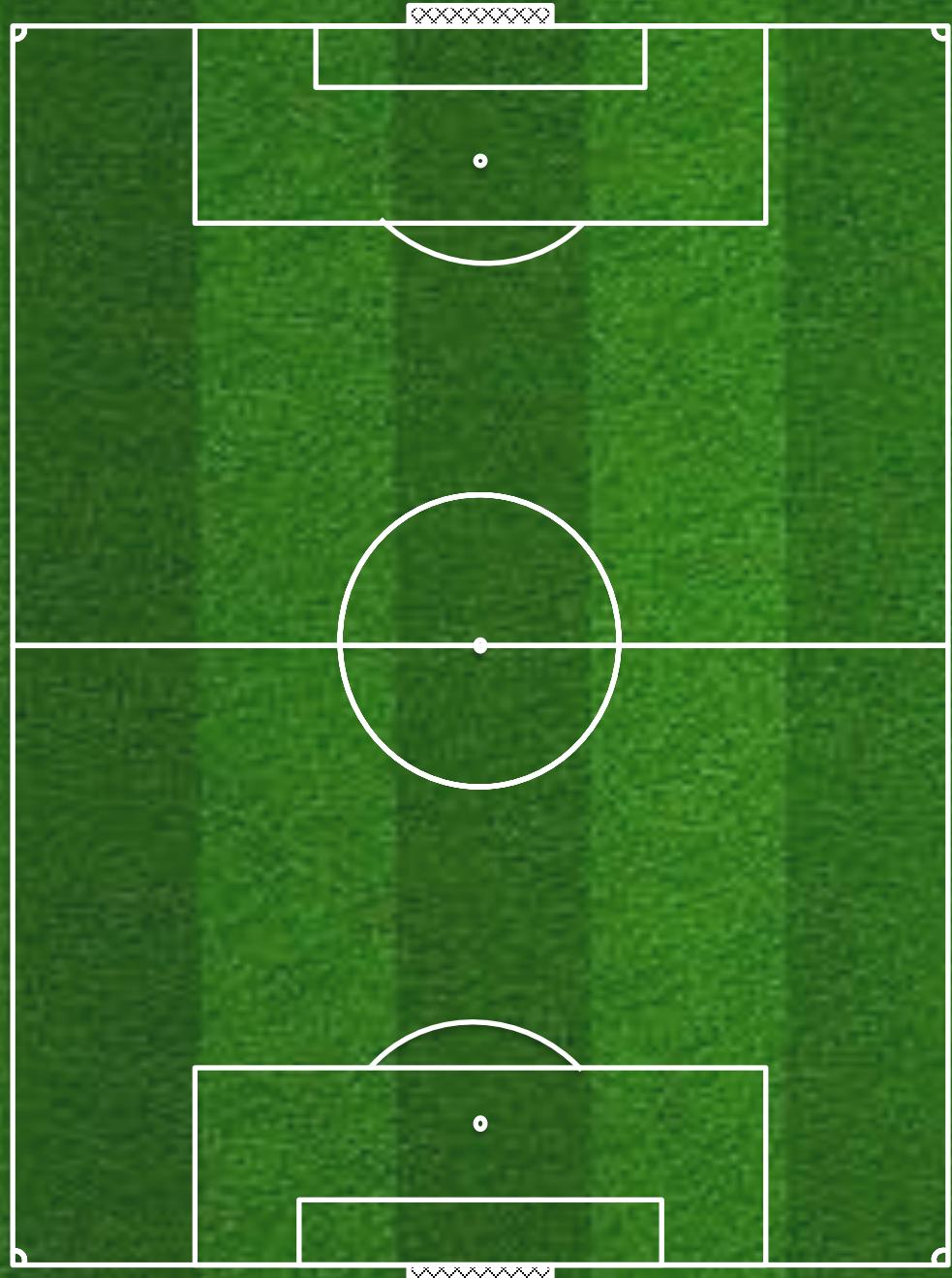
More child-centered and not controlled by the coach.

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

Increased playing time and 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 creating space
- ✓ Movements to help teammate
- ✓ Physical challenges (distance)

OUT POSSESSION, IT ALLOWS FOR:

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

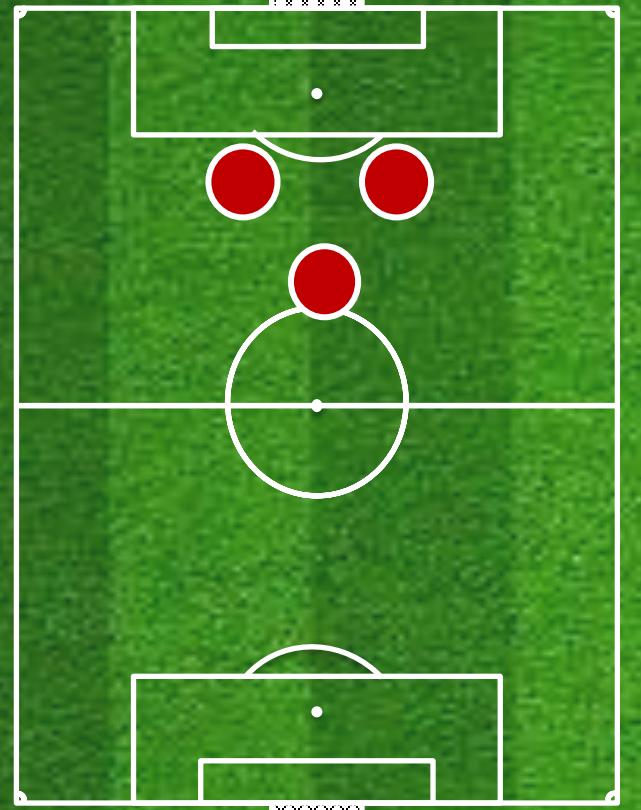
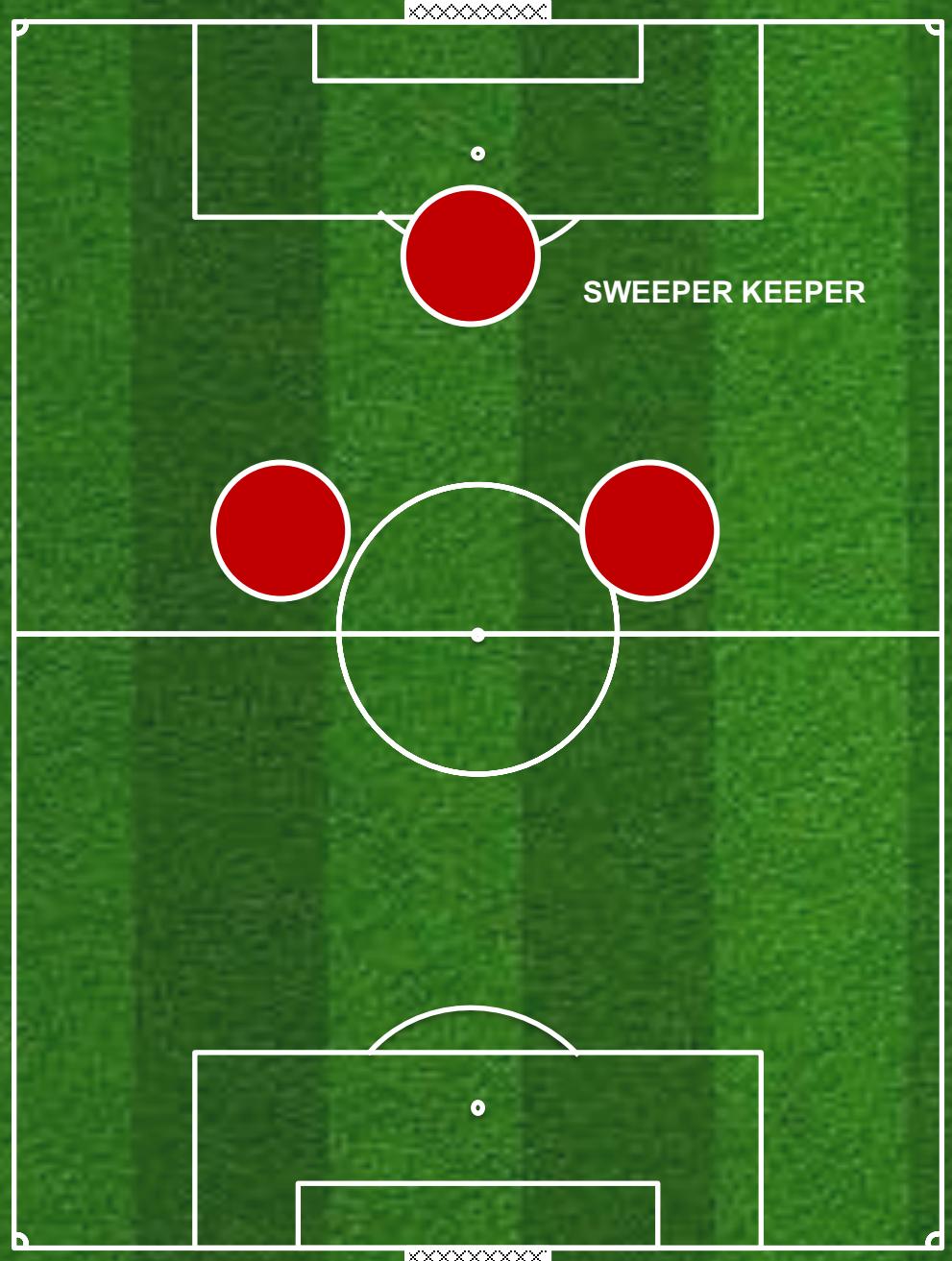


MATCH DAY SYSTEMS TO PLAY

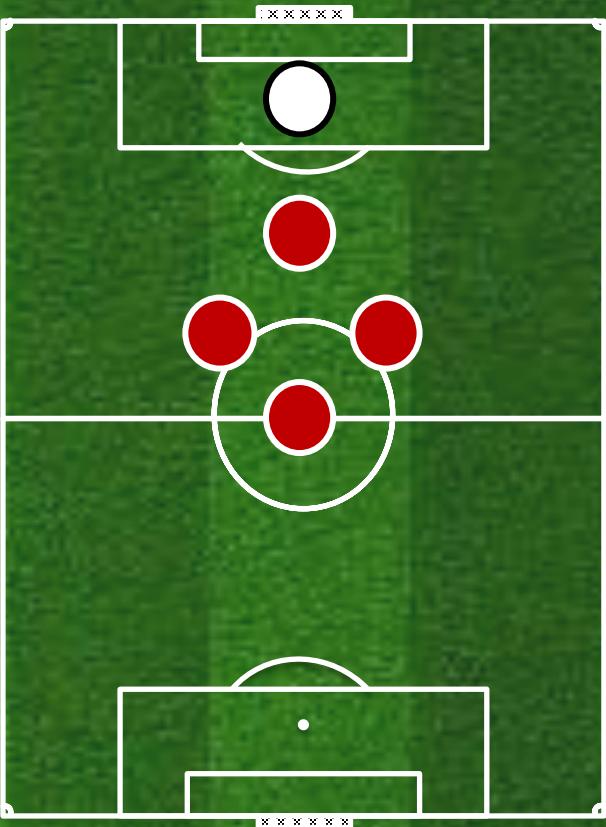
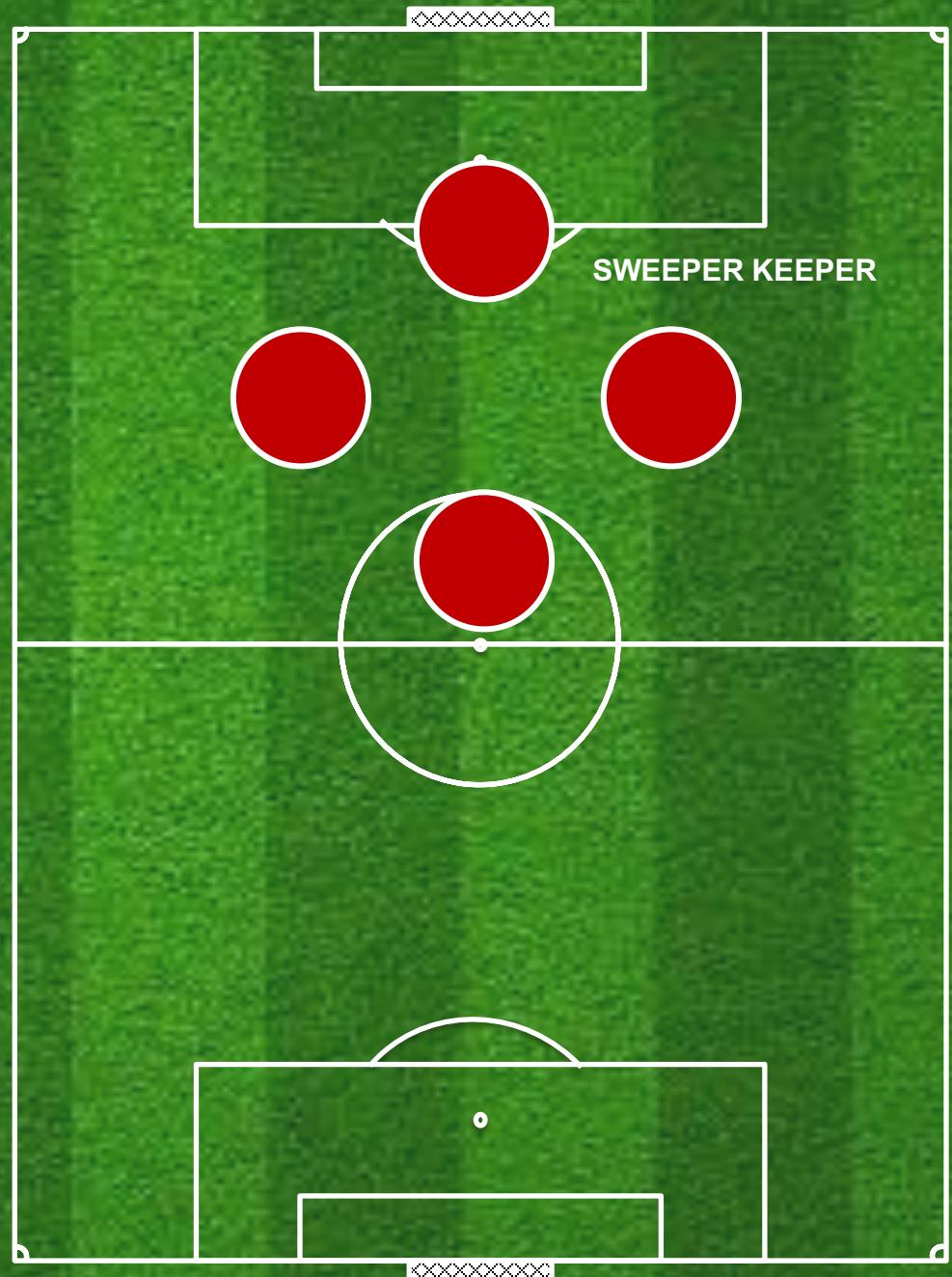


Small-Sided Games

U6/U7 FORMATIONS



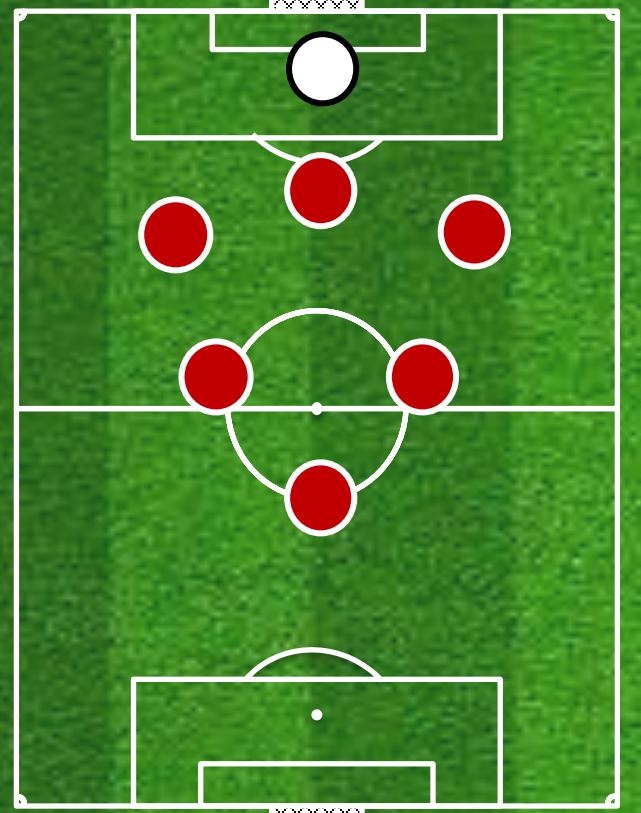
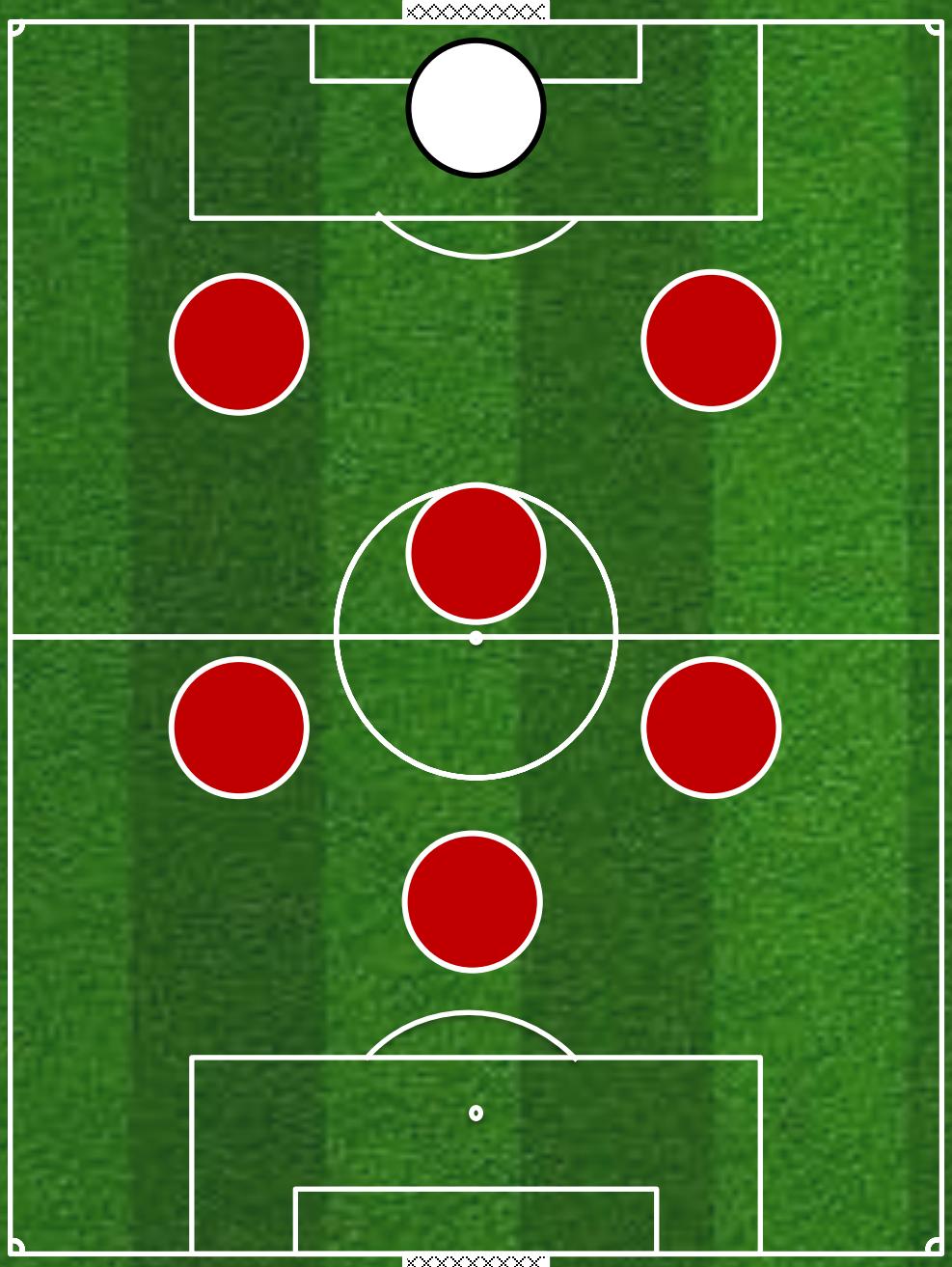
U8/U9 FORMATIONS



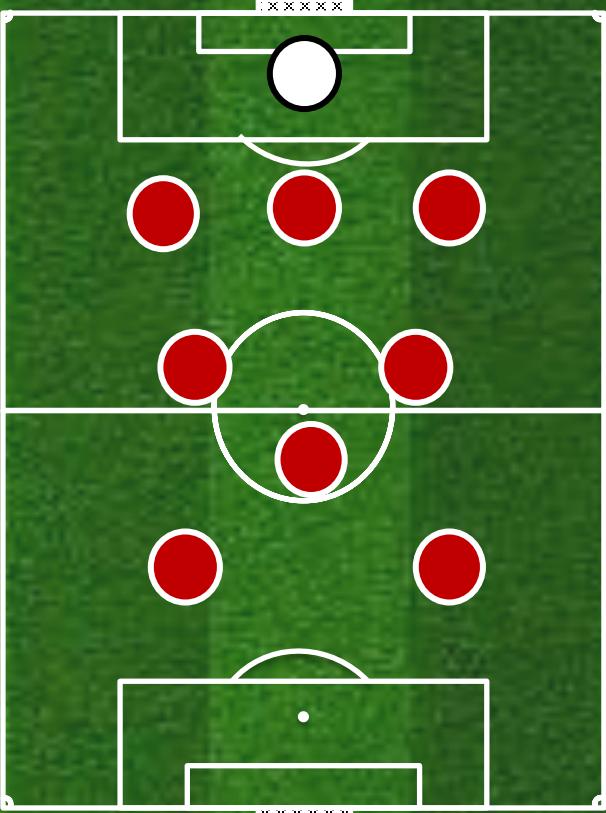
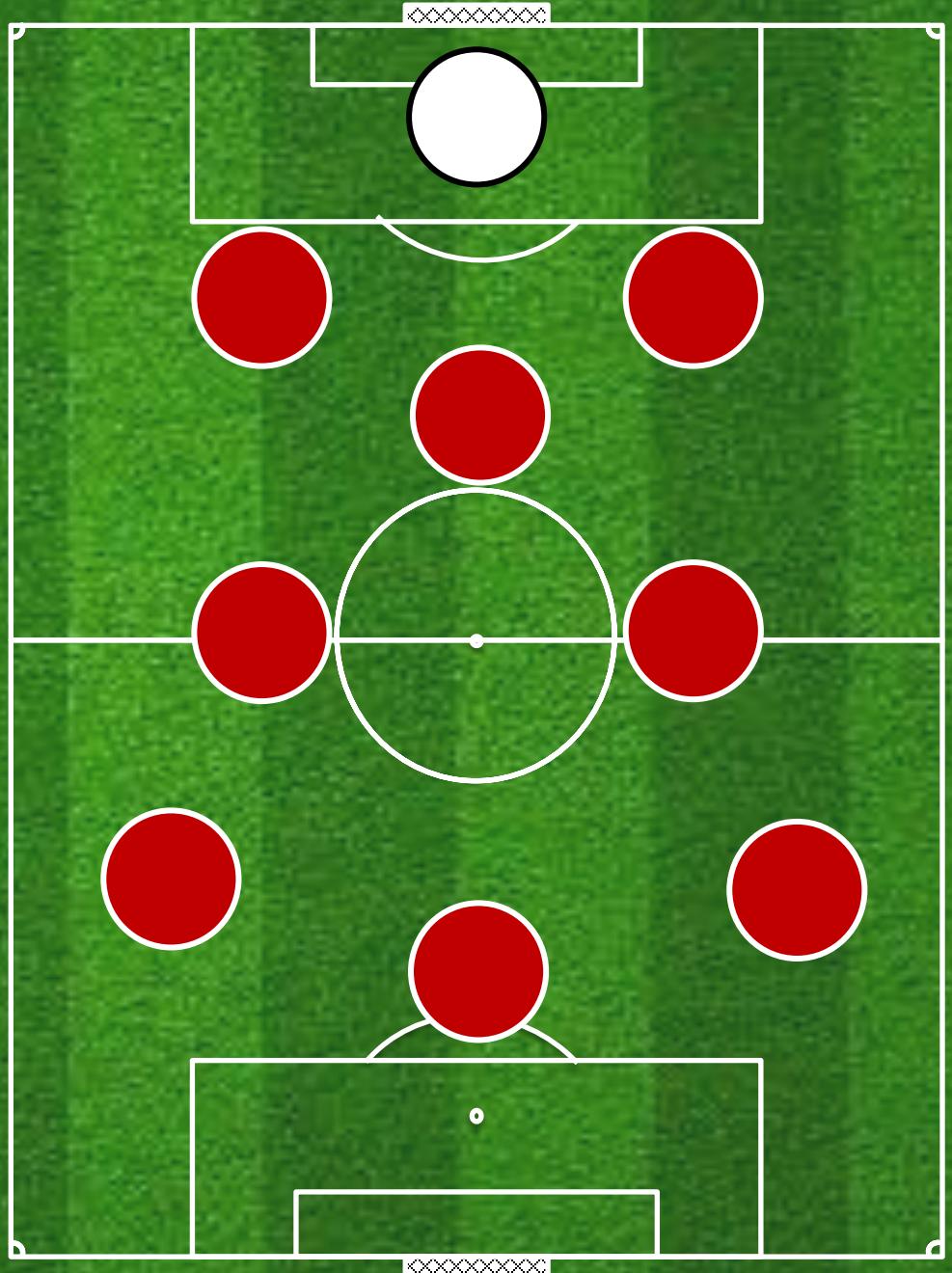


Small-Sided Games

U10/U11 FORMATIONS



U12/U13 FORMATIONS

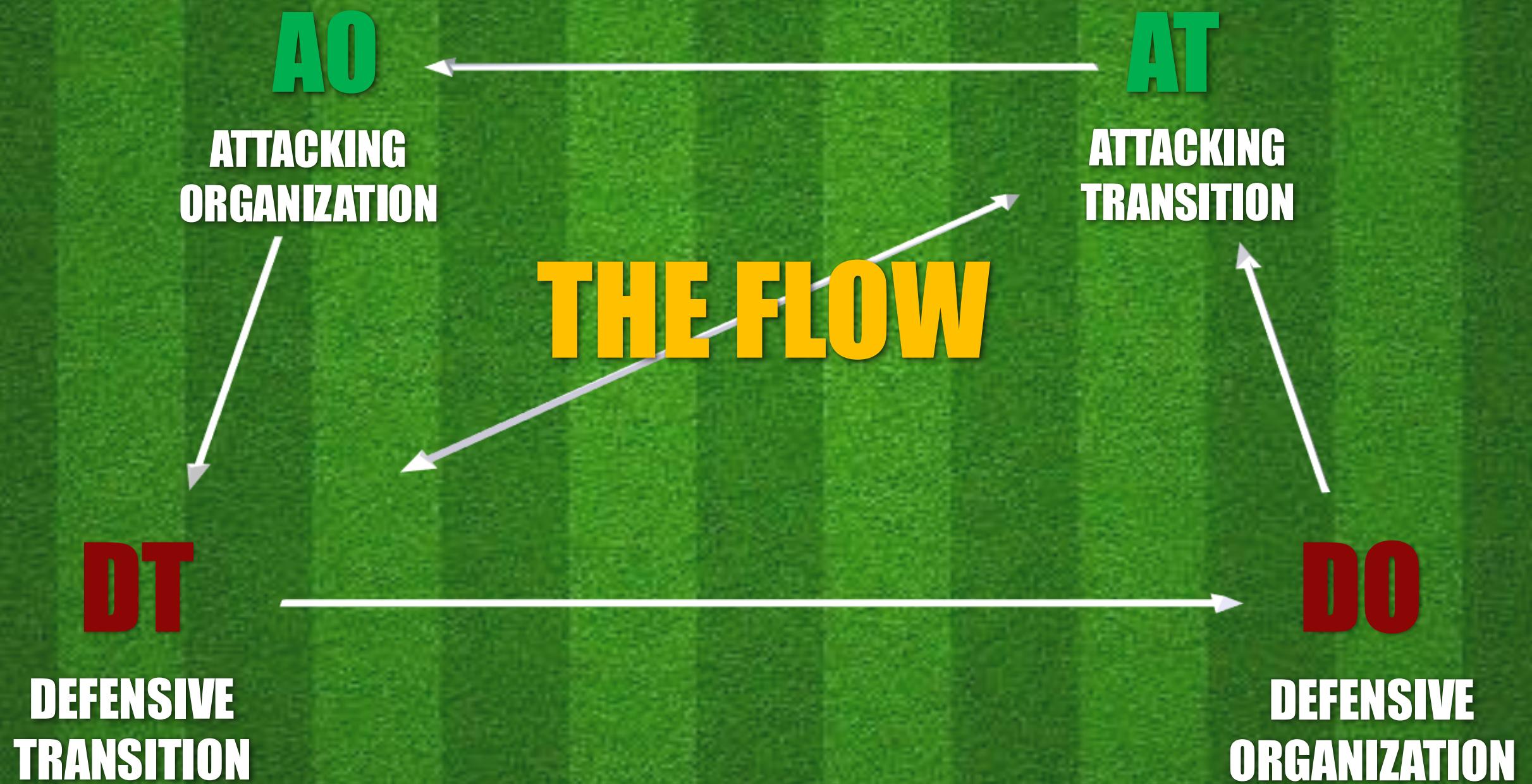




MATCH DAY COACHING CONCEPTS



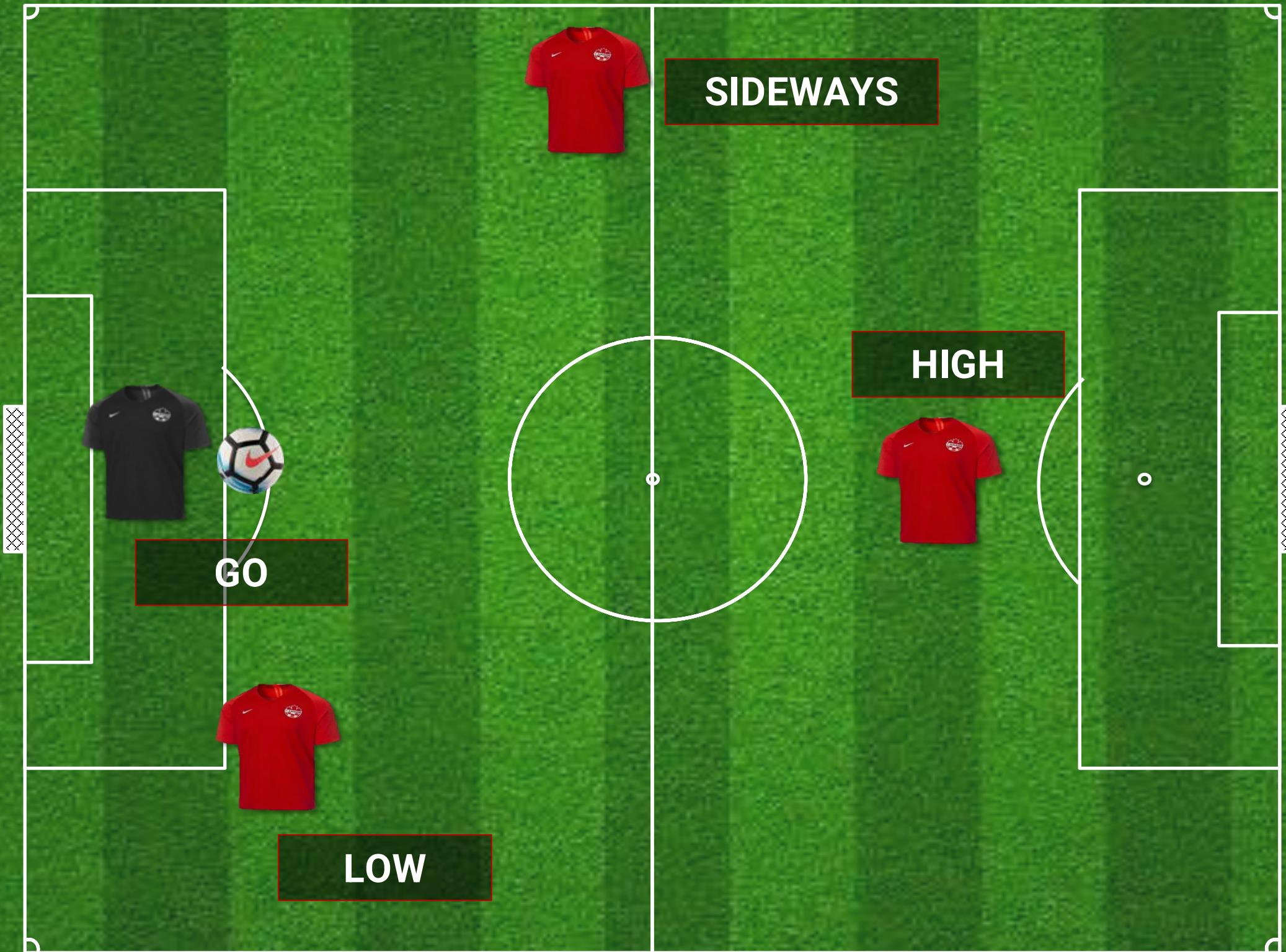
THE 4 MOMENTS OF THE GAME





SHAPE (HIGH – LOW - SIDEWAYS - GO)

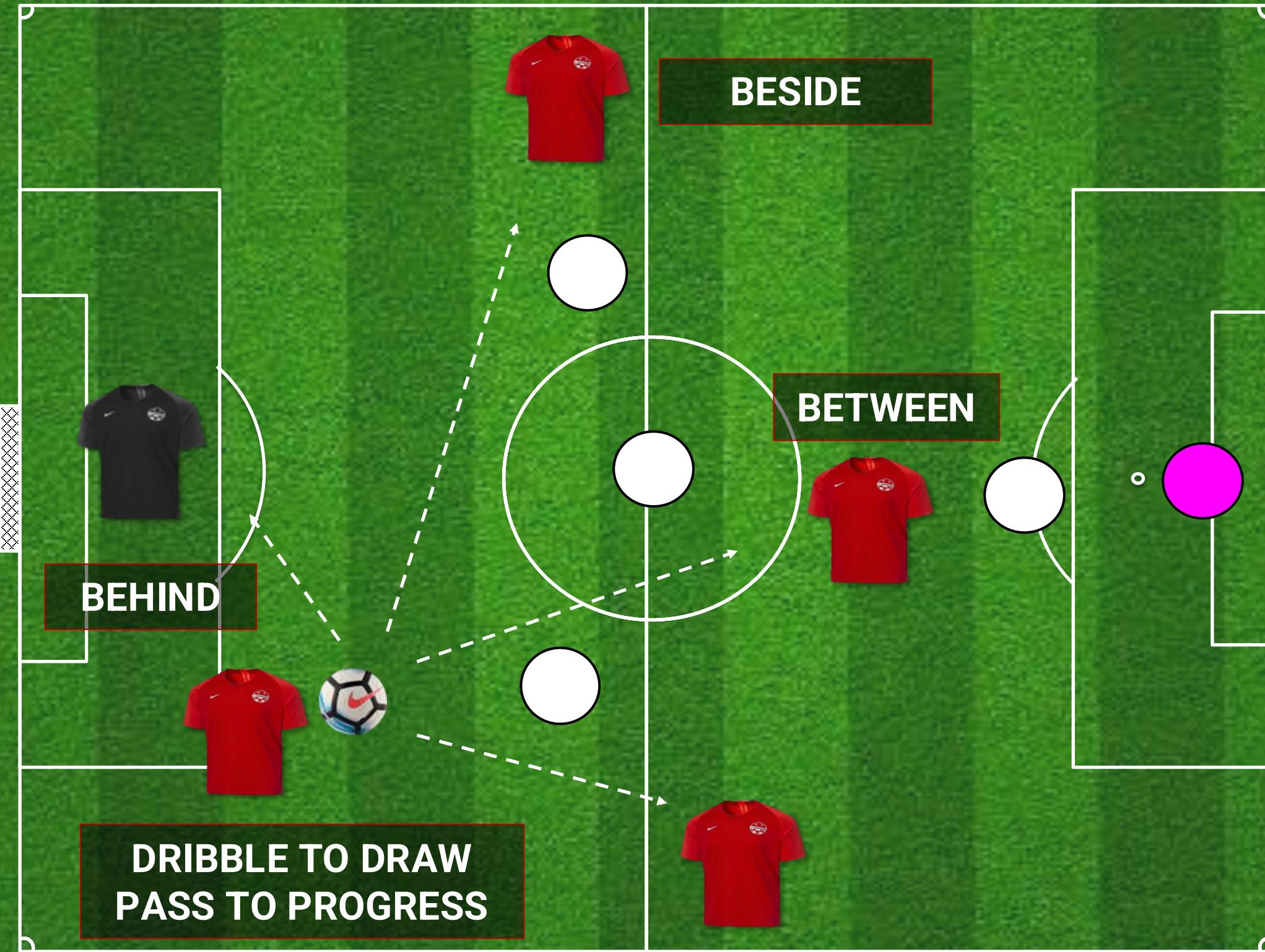
AO





PLAY BESIDE - BETWEEN - BEHIND

AO

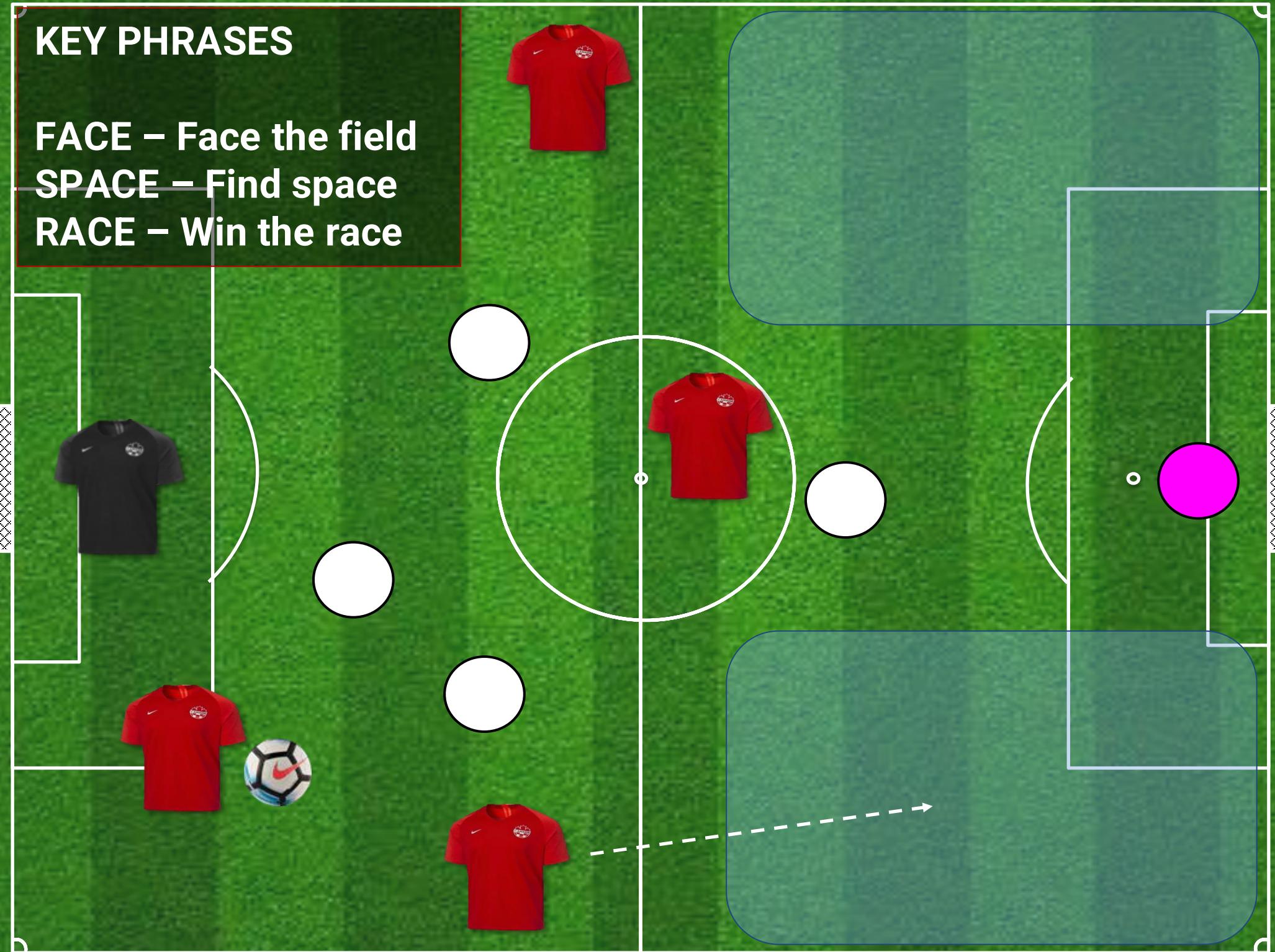




“RACE TO THE SPACE”



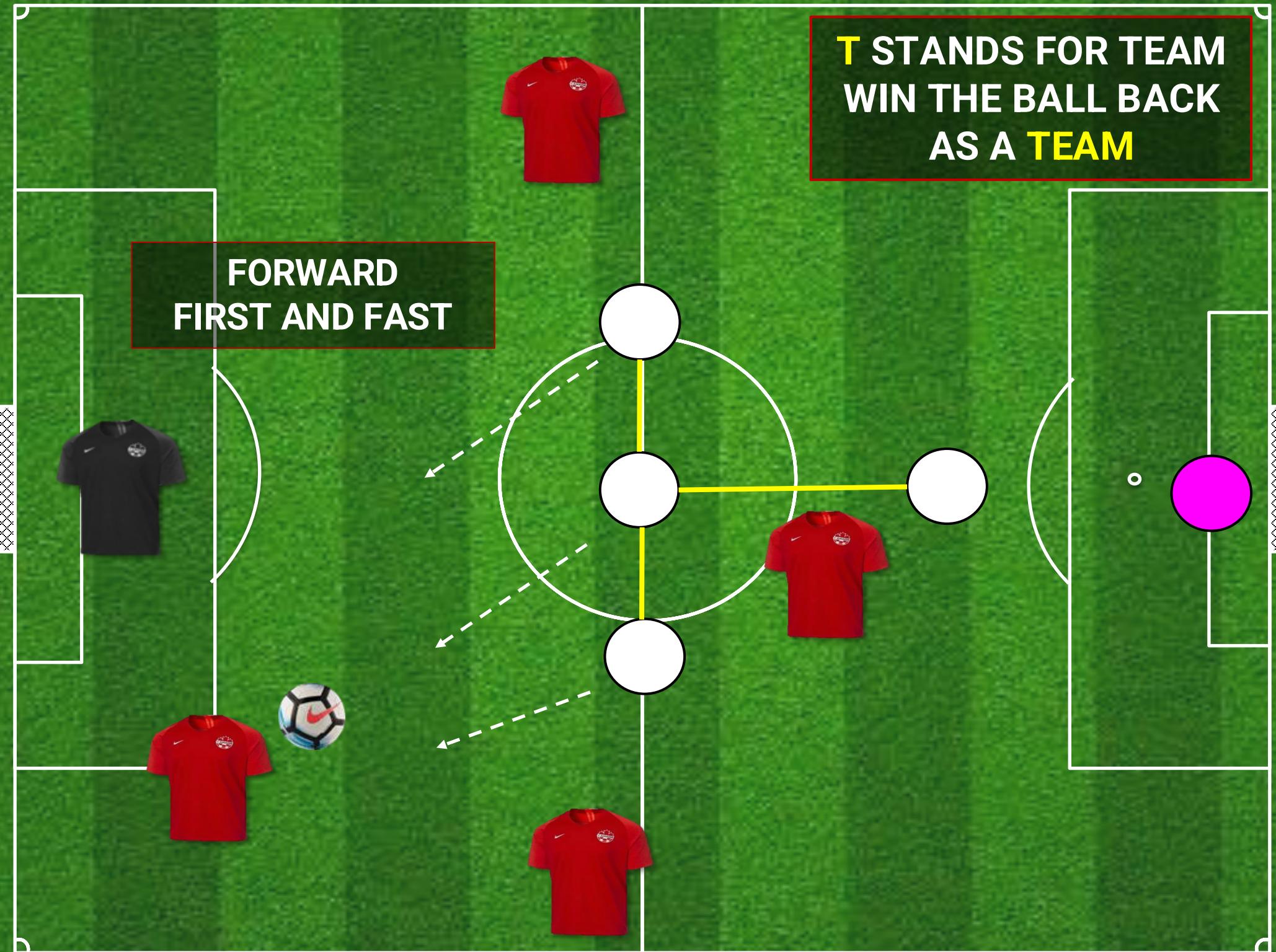
AT





“WIN IT BACK AS A PACK”

DO





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.

SSG EXAMPLES

Training Environment



STATION ROTATION

Example:
Using Station approach

Theme:
*'Progress The Ball
Forwards'*



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.



FOUR GOAL GAME



TARGET GAME

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



ONE/TWO GOAL GAME

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

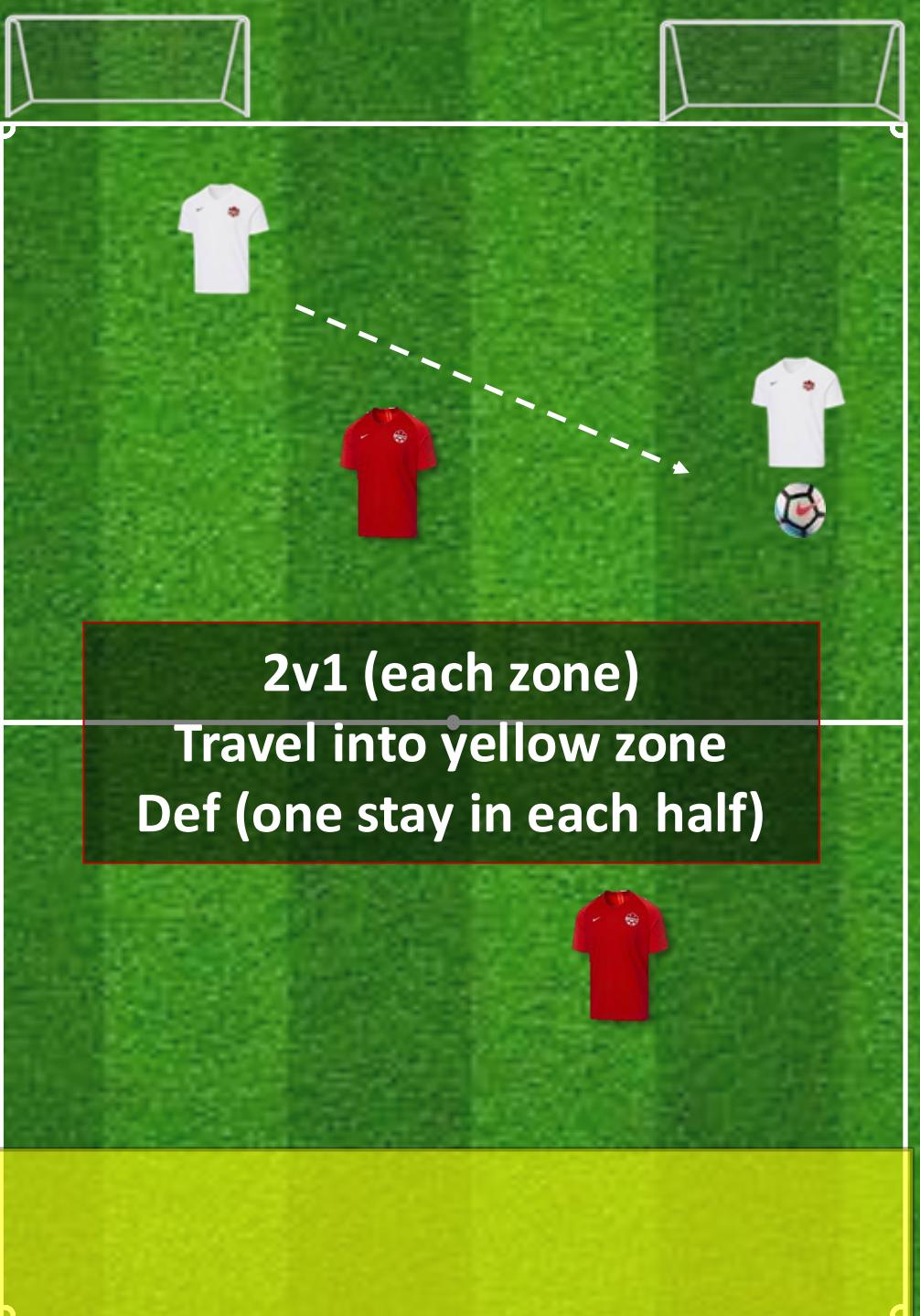
Station rotation

- **Variety**
- **Opportunity to meet new friends**
- **Work with different coaches**
- **Able to express themselves with various activities**
- **Caters to children's 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 essentially 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?”



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*





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 STRUGGLE

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.

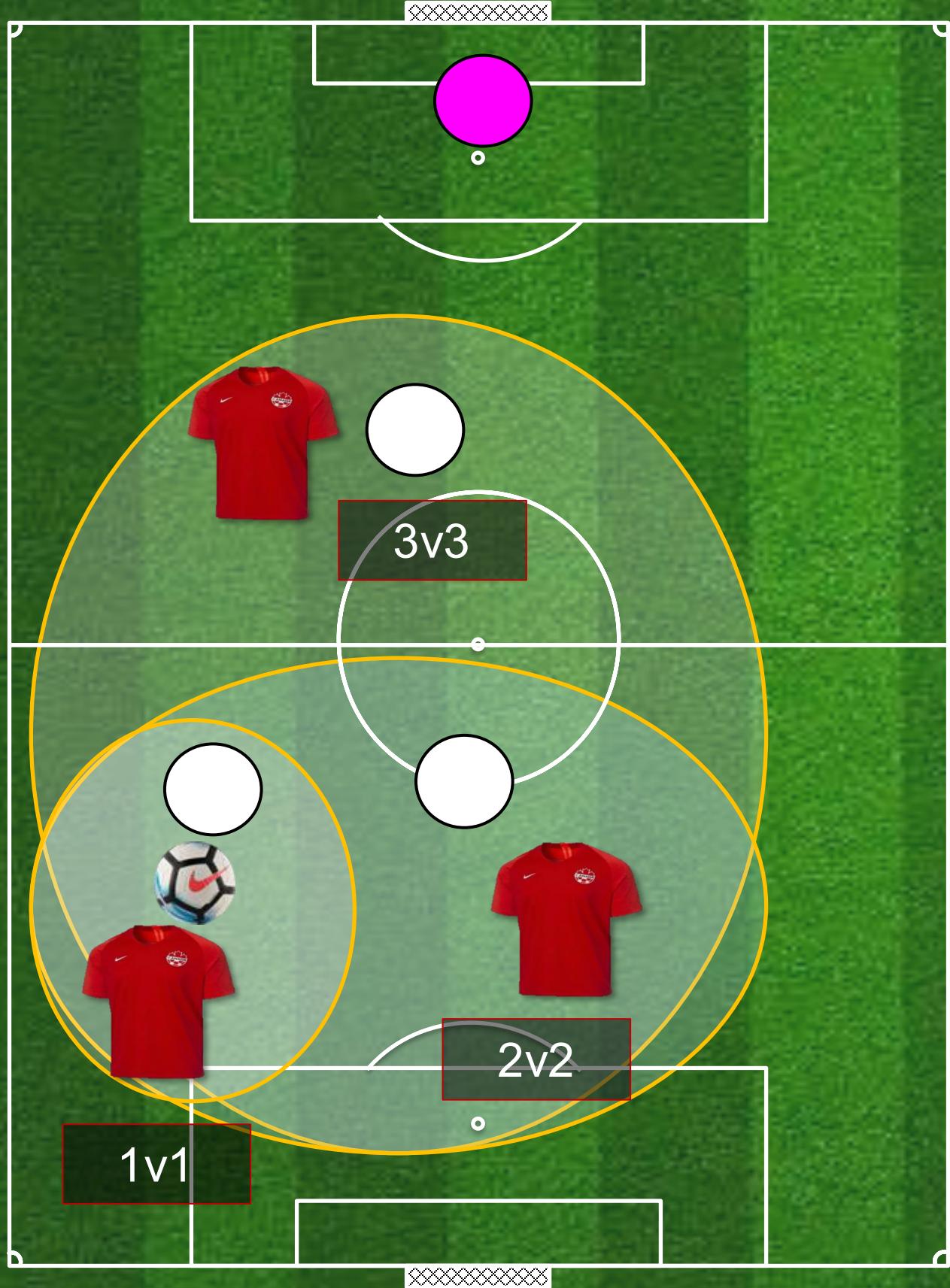


SMALL SIDED GAMES

OBSERVATIONS



GAME SITUATIONS



INDIVIDUAL OBJECTIVES

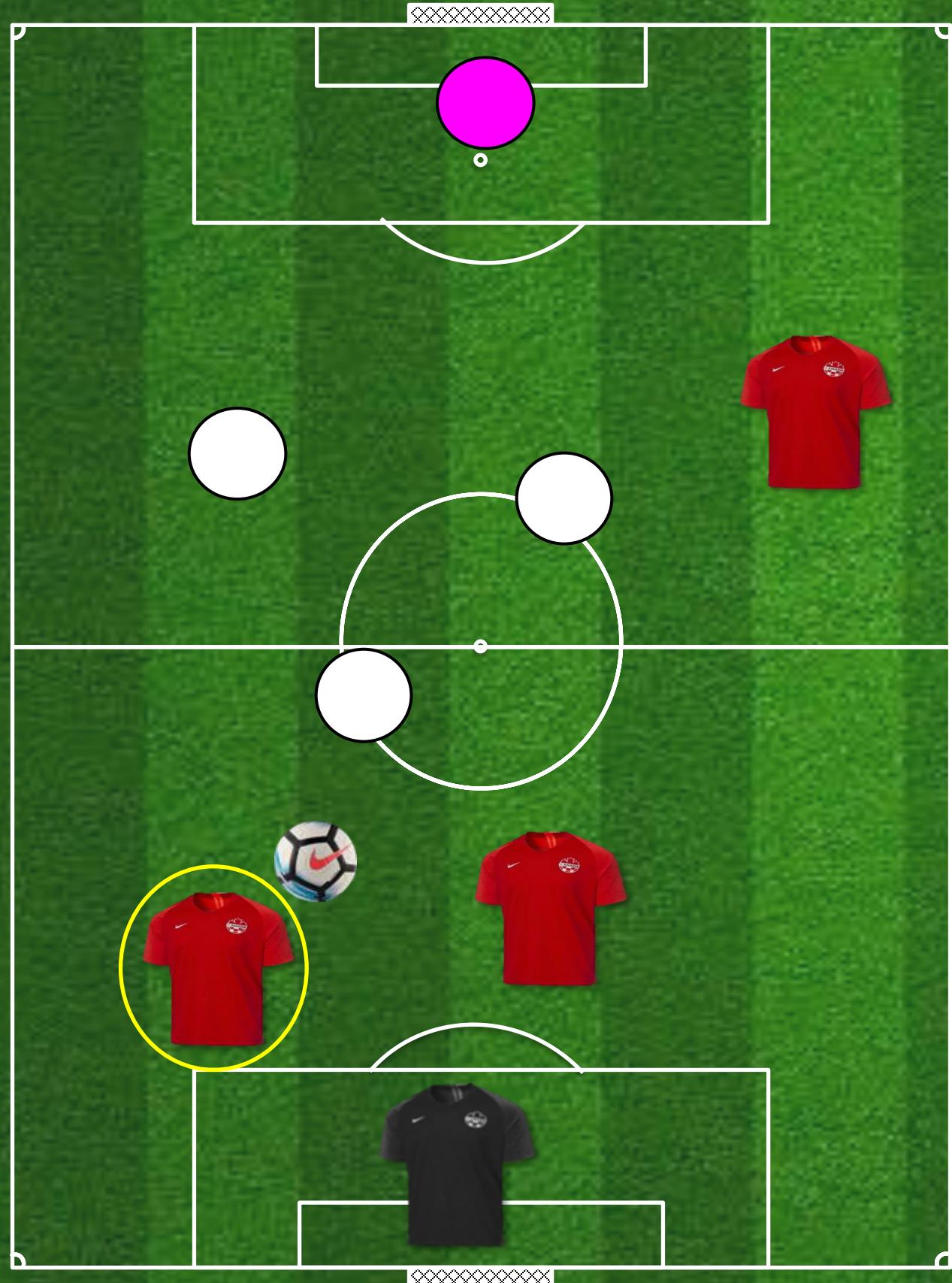
1v1 protector v pressing player
Confident to stay on the ball

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?

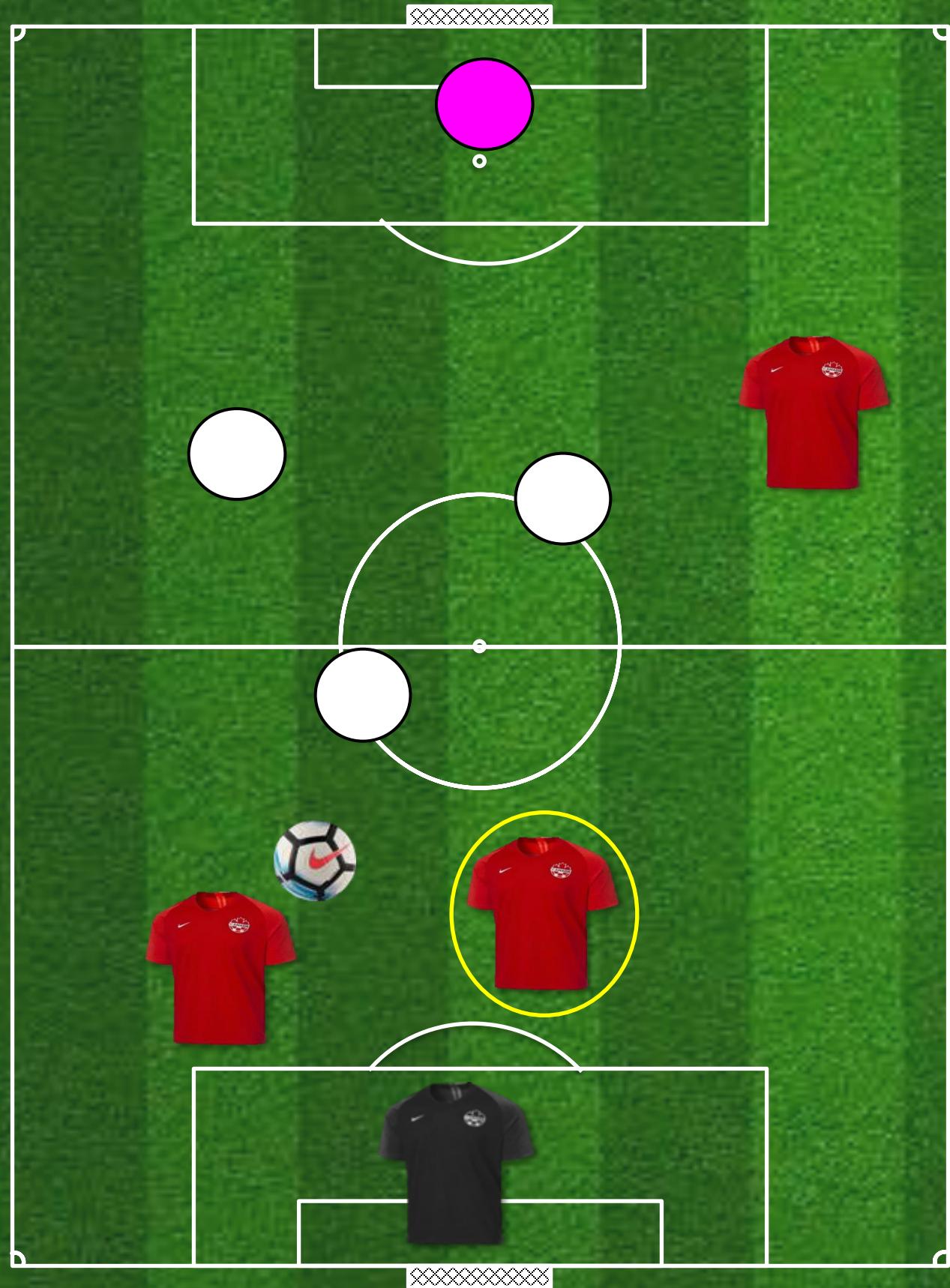
Are they deliberately attracting pressure to draw defenders in, creating space elsewhere for teammates?

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.

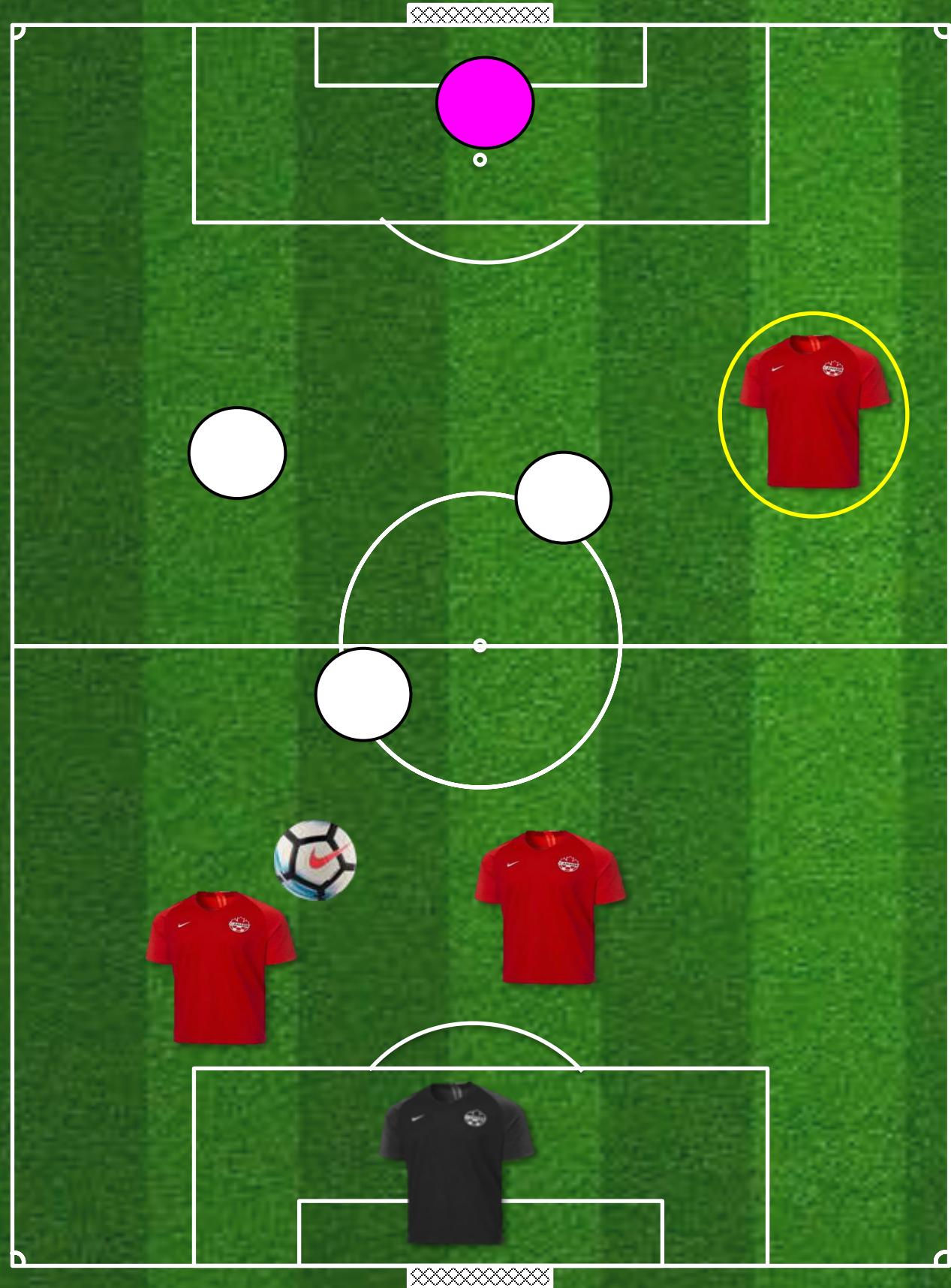
Are teammates moving into space to offer clear, safe, and realistic passing lanes?

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.



SMALL SIDED GAMES

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

Design

Scoring system
Challenging
Opposition
Realism
Equal teams



Design

Scoring system (How do player's score?)

Challenging ("Try to score one touch")

Opposition (2v2,3v3,3v2,4v3 etc.. Variable games)

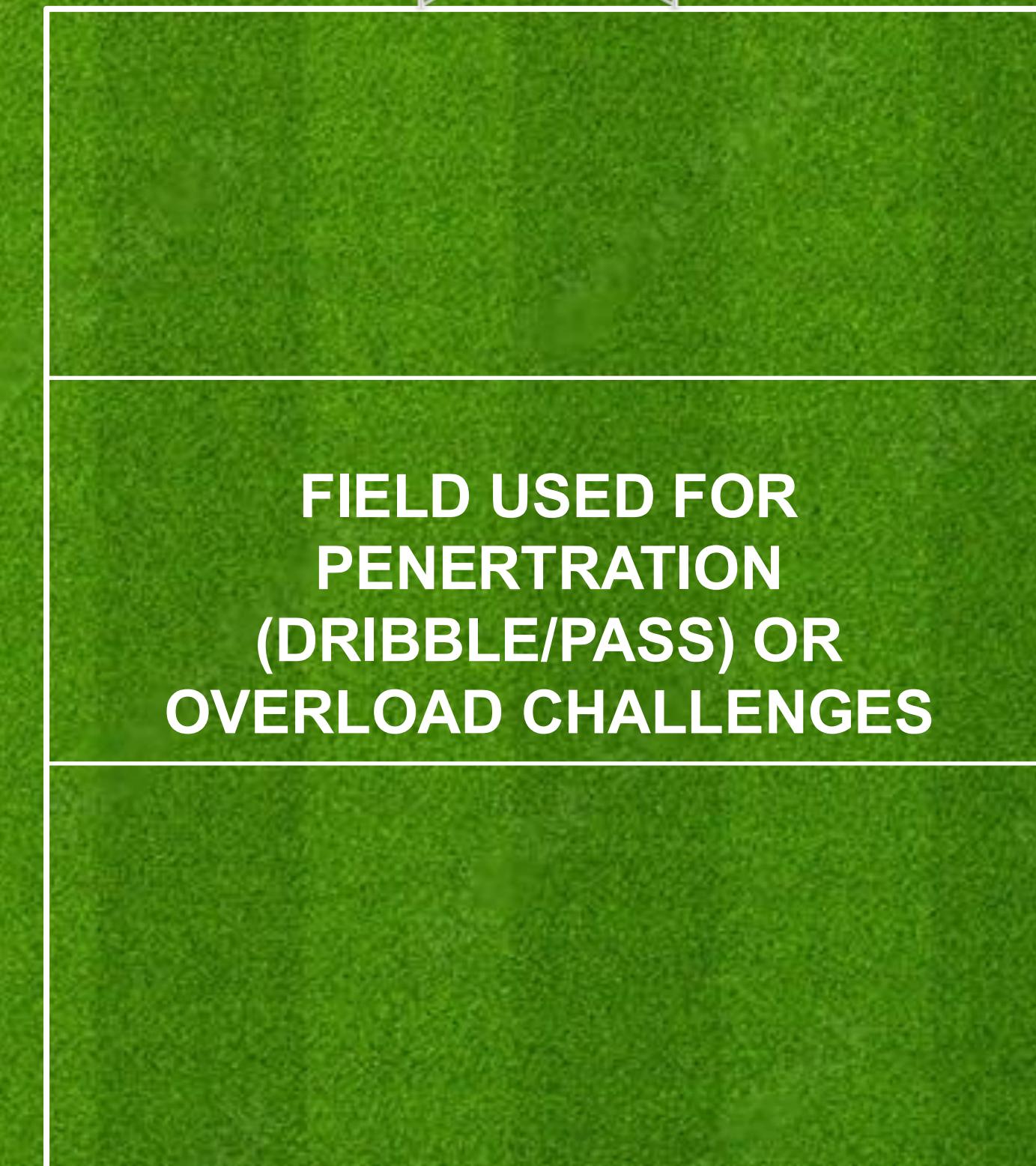
Realism (Looks like a real soccer game)

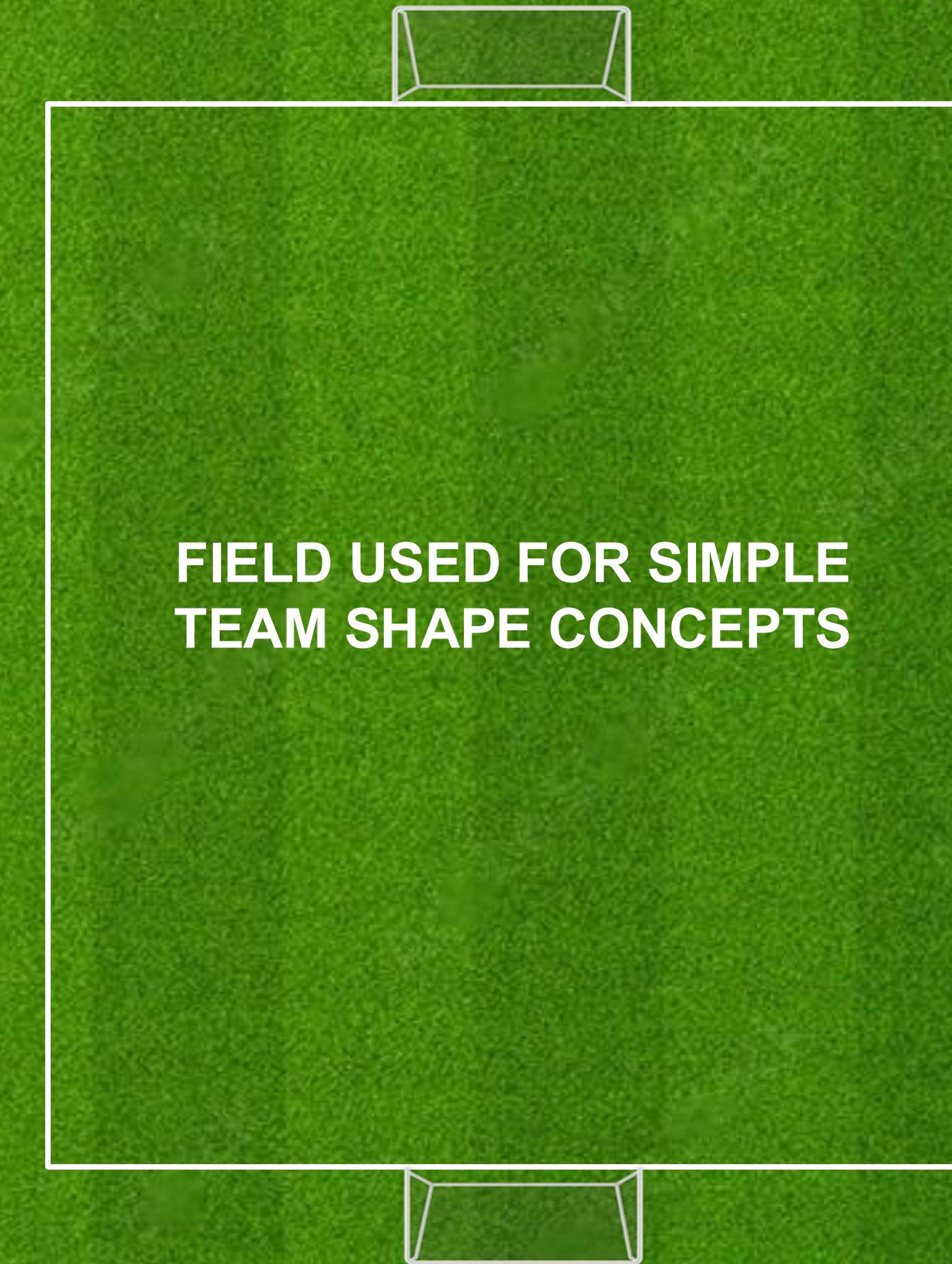
Equal teams (Group teams fairly for enjoyment)

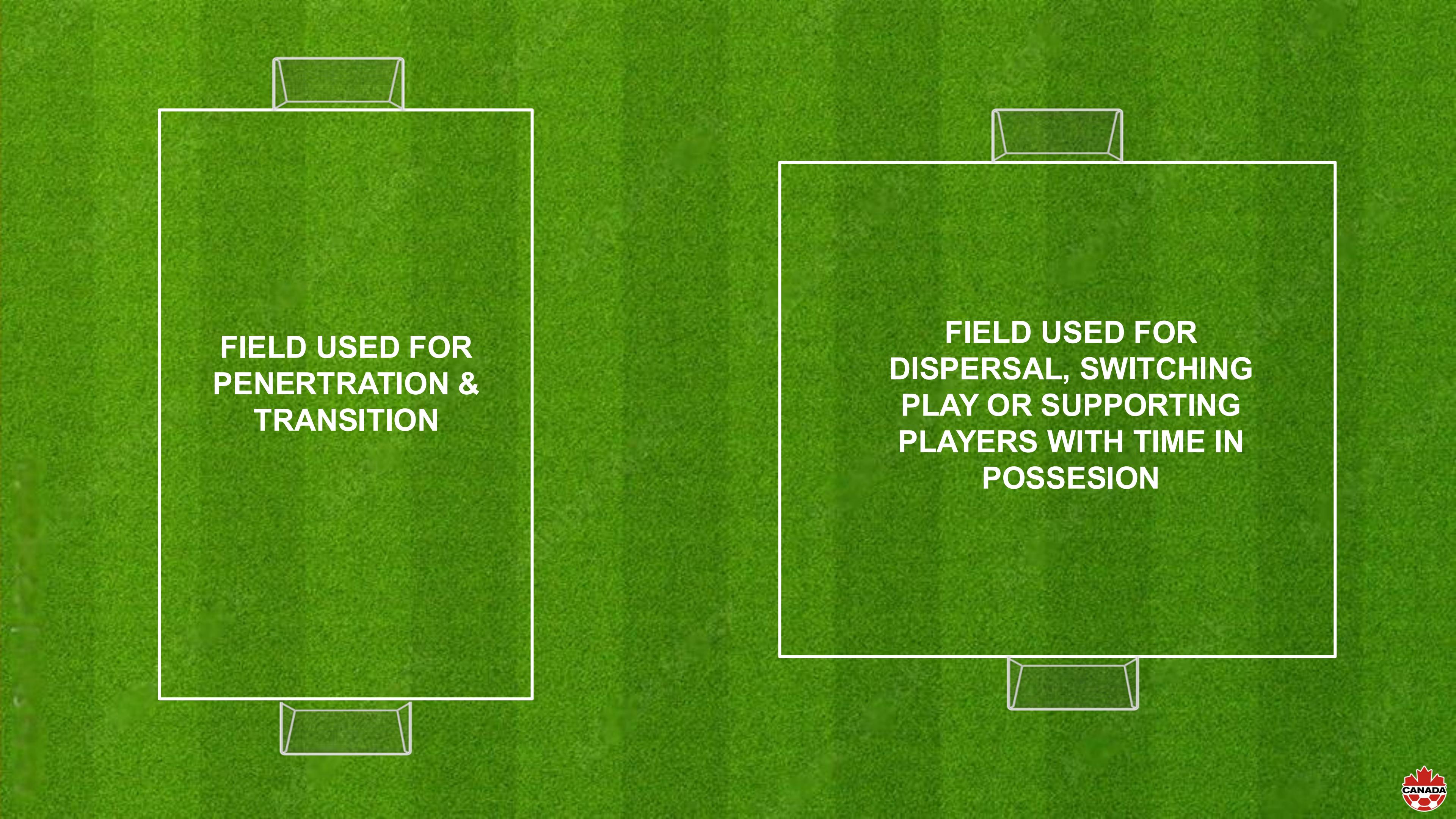


SMALL SIDED GAMES

PITCH DESIGN FOR OUTCOMES







**FIELD USED FOR
PENERTRATION &
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**



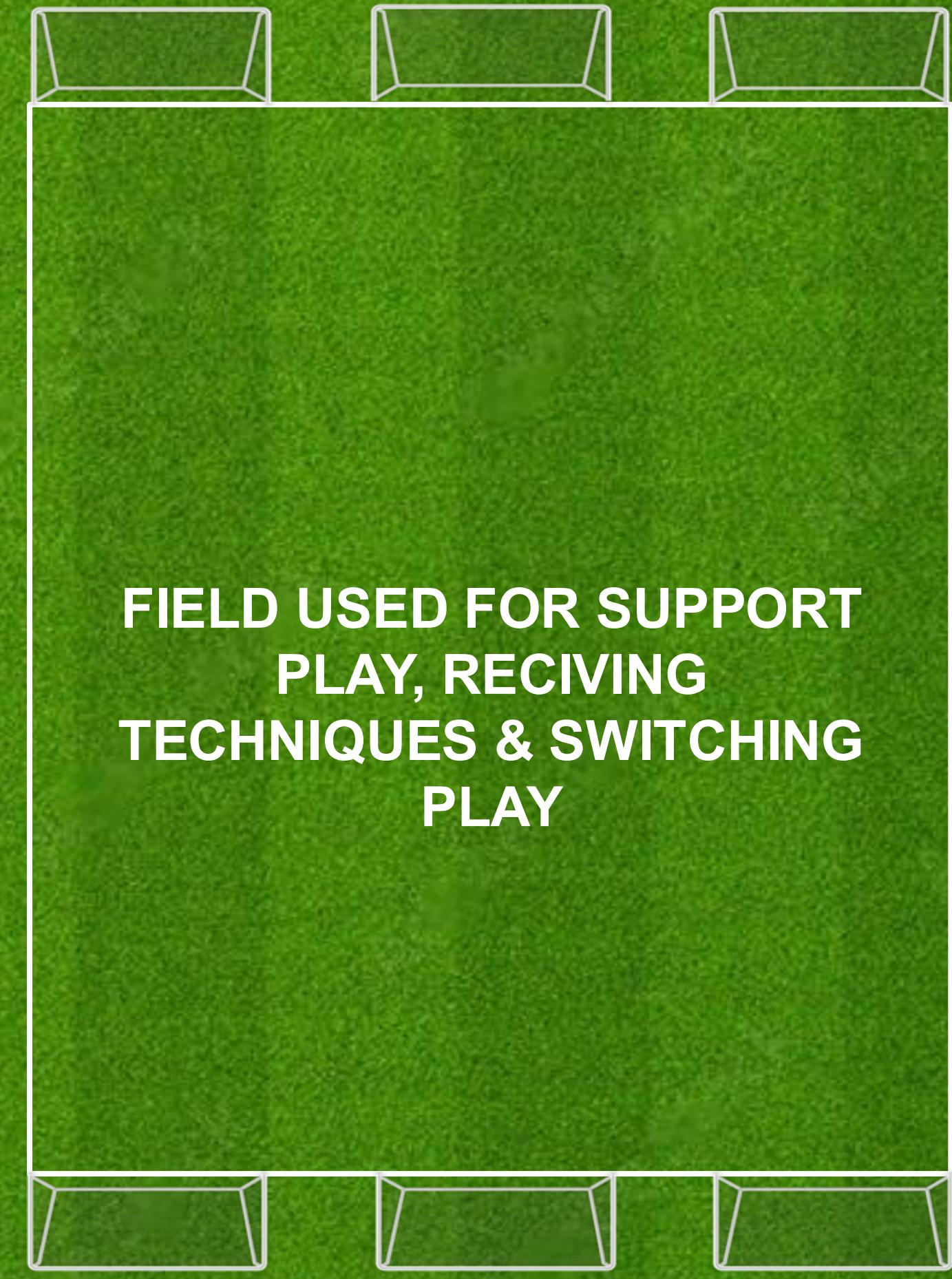
**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT
PLAY AND SCORING FROM
WIDE AREAS**



**FIELD USED FOR
OVERLOADS AND
SUPPORT PLAY**

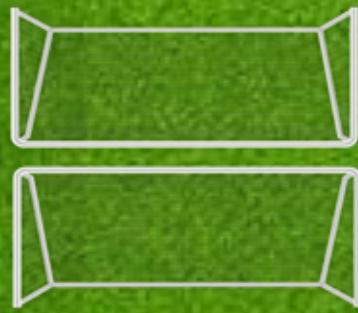


**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT
PLAY, RECEIVING SKILLS
AND OVERLOADS**



**FIELD USED FOR SUPPORT
PLAY, RECEIVING
TECHNIQUES & SWITCHING
PLAY**





**FIELD USED FOR PASSING
& RECEIVING TECHNIQUES**

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



SOCER THAT SUITS