

Target Group: Elite Professional

Age: 14-first team

Focus: Coaching A Midfield Diamond



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In football, systems continually come in and out of fashion. A common system amongst Europe's elite can become dormant almost overnight, only to return years later. In the 80/90's 4-4-2 seemed to be the default until teams started to play a back three to negate the two strikers with an overload. The introduction of one striker systems then meant that the 3v1 situations at the back allowed for an overload elsewhere therefore the back three largely went into hibernation. In recent years, the majority of Europe has been accustomed to playing 4-2-3-1 until Guardiola and Bielsa brought us a modern evolved version of Cruyffs Ajax. Through the years, the 4-4-2 diamond is not a formation that has been particularly popular for any prolonged period at any point; Instead it has been used sparingly by various managers at the elite level. The most notable teams in recent times to employ it with success were Juventus en route to their Champions League Final last season and Brendan Rodgers with Liverpool's near title winning campaign two years ago.

With the recent popularity of analysis and online social media vehicles, football can frustratingly become a numbers game to the point where it loses its relevance. In terms of moving the blocks and manipulating the opponent's defensive lines, the principles and movement patterns are far more important than the numerical structure on paper. The most important principle in possession is to get your own players in specific areas of the pitch that you want them to be. More so, when is a 4-1-3-2 (Chelsea 2009) not a 4-4-2 diamond (Liverpool 2013), when does a 4-2-3-1 (Real 2012) become 4-3-3 and when does 3-4-3 (Ajax) become less of a diamond and more of a 3-4-2-1 (Martinez 2012)?

When a team sets up with a diamond, there are various ways of playing it both in and out of possession. Both the players outside of the diamond and philosophy of the coach influence the shape, movements and requirements within that diamond. For example, a 3-diamond-3 would have

automatic width from the wingers, therefore the main function of deep lying playmaker would be to dictate and control from behind. Whereas, in a 4-diamond-2 system, the width has to come from the full backs therefore the deep lying playmaker would now have huge responsibility to drop in and out of the back line at the right times (making a back three) both with and without the ball. The system and structure that the team sets up with has a huge impact on the movement patterns of the diamond. It is also worth noting that the patterns would change depending on what the opposition are setting up with. For example, if the opposition play 4-2-3-1 then we may focus on playing into line one of the diamond and getting combinations on this line before playing into the higher lines. The function of this would be to drag out one of the pivot players to then isolate our number 10, rather than him receiving in no space or against two pivots. This is just one example as the different combinations of movements according to the opposition would take far too long to document. Taking these tactical variations into account, I feel it would be best to describe the way in which I want my teams to play and how I would begin to setup a diamond midfield based on these criteria.

From a personal point of view, I want my teams to impose their style on the opponent by dominating the ball for a minimum of 65%. The returns here technically and tactically mean that we can get our attacking players in positions on the pitch that we need them to be, if we don't dominate the ball then we have no control. In dominating the ball, I want to dictate and control the defensive lines of the opposition and drag their players into zones where we want them. To do this, there are various methods I like to use to develop the principles. This session below is how I begin the first three sessions with the midfield players in order to get across the philosophy that I want.

PART ONE – ESTABLISHING OPPOSITE MOVEMENTS IN A TWO AND ISOLATING 1V1's



The setup is a 12x12 area with a 2v2 in the middle and two targets either side. The targets are neutrals and play for whichever team is in possession, greens play together and reds play together (two of these are setup at the same time)

The setup begins by establishing the movement patterns of two midfielders playing together. The target player holds the ball whilst the players in possession get used to moving reacting to each other. The principles of playing on the opposite movement to the other player is the main principle, the three main movements of the players are highlighted on the right hand side. Both players can never be on the same line both horizontally and vertically, here is where the principle of playing on two lines is engrained. Straight-line receiving is established as a principle that should rarely happen – ANGLES, ANGLES, ANGLES. The ball then comes into play, open touches with the aim of simply playing forward every time. Whilst playing on opposite movements, it also gives the coach the opportunity to coach the relevant INDIVIDUAL techniques (half turn, open shoulders, see both targets, receive back foot when possible, receive front foot when pressed, outplay 1v1 etc) in addition to the COLLECTIVE techniques (play around the corner, bounce back to free the higher player, use inside and outside passes, etc).

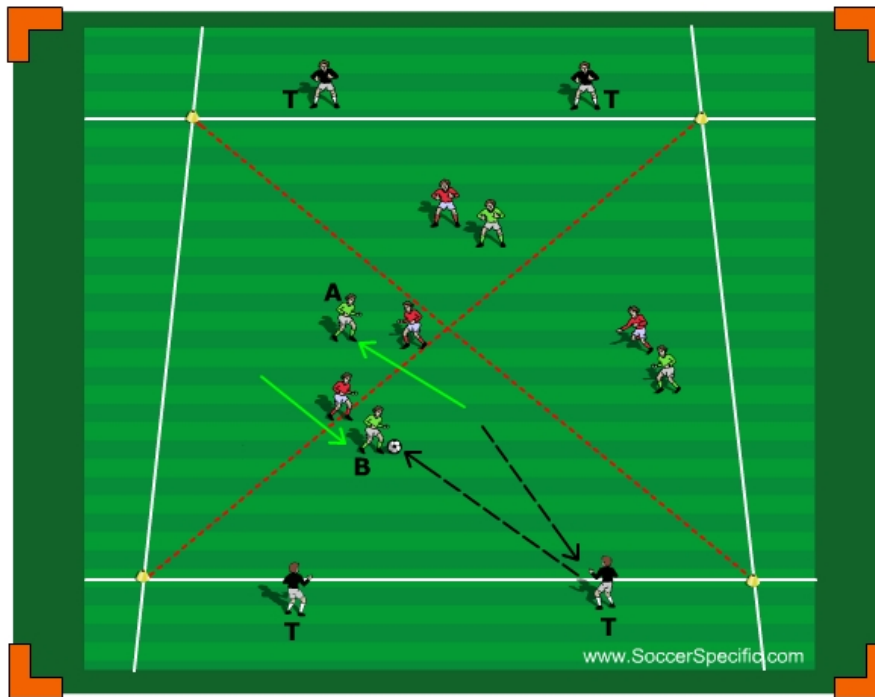
In terms of individual movement, players get used to starting out of the eyeline to then drop in late and explosively whilst also developing their double movements to dominate their opponent without the ball (away to come short and short to receive high).

Note: When the players play on two different lines it isolates 1v1 situations where players then have to find ways to play forward through twisting and turning techniques. Therefore, in addition to establishing opposite movements in a two the players get repetition of the Xavi and Iniesta type work to dominate opponents in 1v1 situations. With 86% of 1v1 situations at the elite level being with pressure from behind, players get repetition of this. The session basically looks exactly like a small section of the 11v11 pitch has been picked up and dropped on the training field.

PART TWO – ESTABLISHING THE DIAMOND PRINCIPLES

The two groups now come together to create the 4v4. Depending on both the technical quality of the players and the tactical understanding, the timing of bringing both groups together will vary. The elite players can do this within the first session whereas it would be harmful to put the players in the 4v4 situation if they cannot both dominate their opponent with and without the ball in 1v1 situations and also understand the patterns when in a two. The 1v1 work needs to have been a pivotal part of their development where they have an understanding of how to dominate their opponent in all four 1v1 situations – defender in front, behind, on the side and on the angle.

The setup is a rectangle area (size depends on ability) with two targets either side. The central area is 4v4 and there are flat markers which have been placed diagonally from the corners of the box to create four triangle areas. The rules of the game are exactly the same; transfer the ball from and to the target players at the top, unlimited touches and 3 minute games with 45 second off.



The session begins by the teams trying to play forward into either of the two targets at each end. The target players represent realistic positions in a game. For example, if the ball is with the left target at the bottom, this could be a left back playing into the diamond or a centre back, the top two players would then be two strikers.

The first point to bring in is that the team in possession must always be represented in all four triangle boxes. This automatically establishes multiple receiving lines within the unit and gets players reacting to each other. They do not have to stay in one zone but if one player comes into their zone, they must rotate out and find the spare one. This now improves players awareness of space, gets them looking for the movements of the opposition's defensive lines and also makes it harder for opponents to defend. The opposition will likely want to defend together in a cover and support mechanism as opposed to being dragged out of shape on different lines and defend 1v1, thus our job is to do to them what they do not want. As players begin to rotate and interchange, begin to coach the diamond to play on three different lines at all times. Once the basic rotation and movement has been established, players are ready for the tactical element of the session.

SPECIFIC BASIC TRIGGERS

- 1- The target players have to play one pass to each other before playing back into the diamond. By doing so, this horizontal pass replicated two centre backs circulating play around a horse shoe back four – something which happens dozens of times per game. This square pass is the trigger for rotation as it would be too far for the deep-lying midfield player to sprint across the pitch to now receive from the opposite centre back. As the target player opens up to play his pass, the deep-lying players spins vertically and the nearest side of the diamond drops down a line to receive. He now becomes the controller for this episode.
- 2- Anytime one of the midfield players sets the ball back to one of the targets, he must spin out. He is only playing back because he is pressed therefore he must clear that space now for another player to drop down a line.

- 3- When the target player plays into the deepest player, if he is pressed he bounces the other target player in one touch and the widest diamond player then opens on the wide angle to receive. This creates a great opportunity to play a direct pass into the highest player (no10) and isolate him 1v1 against the opposition's pivot.
- 4- If the deepest player receives the ball under no pressure and looks forward, the diamond must open up (by widest players moving horizontally) to really drag out their defensive shape. The deep-lying player can then either drive with the ball or can find the spare player.

FINAL PART

In order to prepare the midfield diamond for game realistic situations, the session can be focus on playing specifically against a particular system. For example, if the opposition play a 4-3-3 then setup the reds with four players and the greens with three asking the latter to press with two higher players and one sitting. Here, the coach can build in the relevant movement patterns he wants to isolate, dominate and control specific areas of the pitch and press. There will be specific spaces the coach wants to exploit, there may be a certain player that can be isolated or there may be a specific combination to drag out the opponent's defensive lines. There will vary and cannot be documented on one session plan. The final part of the puzzle would be to bring the whole picture together and play an 11v11 game and focus on the diamond operating exactly how you want on a full pitch against fully realistic pressure. If the components have been carried out correctly prior to the 11v11, then the diamond should operate in tandem. To summarise, the progressive stages of learning when establishing a midfield diamond are:

- 1 Coach 1v1 situations with a focus on pressure behind & receiving techniques (pressure & in space)
- 2 Coach 2v2 situations establishing opposite movements and two receiving lines
- 3 Coach various combinations as a two in order to play forward
- 4 Bring in the midfield diamond and establish the zones to occupy
- 5 Coach the diamond to interchange and rotate using relevant triggers
- 6 Develop the diamond into an 11v11 game

For coaches to jump straight to points 5 or 6 without establishing the previous four would be ludicrous

Tims book, which has elite level session plans and exercises, can be purchased at www.playfromtheback.com