

Winning combinations

Improving your offense with running and passing patterns
by Thomas Voggenreiter, German “B” license holder

It's enough to drive any coach crazy: You practice shooting combinations over and over again, but when game day rolls around, your players don't use them! When you do score, it's more often because of your opponents' mistakes — or a lucky coincidence — than because of the combinations you've practiced.

In this article, Thomas Voggenreiter explains why it really is a good idea to use practiced combinations in match play, and he gives us a set of sample exercises for low-level amateurs.

Even though most amateur coaches don't have the opportunity to study video of their next opponent, they can still provide their players with useful information. In many cases, the coaches have known each other for years, the top scorer has been profiled in the media, etc. By spring at the latest, you should

Overlapping runs force defenders to move around, creating playing space for attackers.

AXEL HEIMKEN

have plenty of information on your opponents.

However, since your colleagues have done their homework too, you can be sure your own top attackers will be tightly marked. Your offense gets bogged down, and as a result, your defenders tend to get overworked: They make more mistakes, and the opposition gets more chances to score.

Fortunately, you don't have to recruit new, unknown attackers every season! Instead, you can use running and passing patterns to expand your offensive repertoire. Synchronizing your running and passing also reduces your chances of losing the ball, because the defensive players involved in your attack are constantly covered.

Before you start practicing the combinations, ask yourself the following questions:

- How can I make the best use of my players' individual skills?
- What's the most appropriate formation to use?
- Can I take advantage of any weaknesses in the opposition's formation?

Players' skills

To take maximum advantage of your players' individual skills (passing accuracy, speed, heading, crossing, etc.), you should set up your running paths and passing lanes accordingly, and you might even consider changing players' positions. Ideally, you should have a variety of appropriate player types at your disposal. Running and passing patterns also give less athletic players a head start over their opponents.

Your formation

Which players take part in the attack? On one hand, it depends on your basic formation: In a formation focused on counterattacking, for example, fewer players start out on offense than in a formation with three forwards. On the other hand, the roles of some players, e.g. inside defenders, limit their involvement in attacking play.

The following sample exercises are based on a 4-4-2 formation with a midfield diamond



(see Fig. 1), because it allows for modern defense tactics such as pressing and following the ball, and because it gives players the versatility to move in all directions.

Opposition's formation and defensive game

A game formation simply describes players' basic positions on the field. It doesn't tell us much about how the team attacks and defends.

In low- and mid-level amateur soccer, most teams use a traditional formation with sweeper, so in the following sample exercises, we will assume that the opposition is using it. Before we move on to the exercises, let's consider some of the basic features of this formation.

Defense formation with sweeper

The classic sweeper has no particular opponent and follows the ball in the middle of the field. He generally stays behind the defense, primarily to provide deep coverage. In a more interesting variation, the sweeper sometimes plays in line with the defense or in front of it.

As a rule, the defenders mark the opposition's forwards. The midfielders play in their assigned area, watching their respective opponents and trading them by switching positions. The attackers take part in the defense in a variety of ways, ranging from deep pressing at the penalty box to dropping back into their own half.

Weaknesses of the sweeper formation

This system is particularly vulnerable in two areas:

- On the wings, the sweeper often arrives too late to cover or help outnumber opponents. In many 2 v. 2 situations on the wings, a simple wall pass is all it takes to get to the end-line and cross.
- The combination of defenders on permanent man-marking and midfielders on zone defense often creates open space for the opposition. If one forward leaves his position, his opponent follows, opening up a space that had been closed, and allowing another forward to take advantage of the hole. Therefore, you should think carefully about where to initiate and execute your attacking combinations — in the middle, where the sweeper is playing interference, or on the wings — and which spaces will need to be opened up and exploited as a consequence.

FIG. 1 ATTACKING IN THE 4-4-2 FORMATION WITH DIAMOND



In this formation, the main offensive roles are played by forwards 9 and 11, central midfielder 10 and wing players 8 and 7. One defender and one midfielder are active on each wing. Whenever their team is in possession, some defenders move up to act as potential receivers. Typically, these are outside defenders 2 and 3, but on teams that function well together, inside defenders 4 and 5 can do so as well.

Therefore, when you practice combinations you should consider the role of defenders in attacking play. By incorporating defenders into your running and passing patterns, you create even more surprises for your opponents!

Training tips

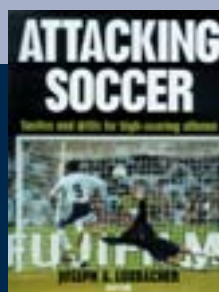
It's a good idea to practice running and passing patterns without opponents at first, adding them once players have begun to internalize the patterns. However, players sometimes find patterns monotonous, so don't spend too much time on any one combination; rotate them frequently instead.

Once the defenders start catching on to the patterns and working to block them, show the attackers alternatives they can use instead. This is the first step toward making patterns appropriate for match play, since running and passing patterns cannot always be used the way they were practiced. Alternatives should play a limited role in your training program, appearing only when the situation dictates.

Will running and passing patterns help you score more goals? That depends on two factors: First, if you use one variation too often, your opponents get used to it. Second, individual plays by defenders can disrupt or block patterns. Therefore, your attackers need to be creative in order to react appropriately to any given game situation.

Structure of the exercises

The following section includes two patterns each for the middle of the field and the wings. Each combination is explained in a series of two diagrams (including opponents), followed by the corresponding exercise. Alternatives allow for variations on the exercises, better simulating actual match play.



ATTACKING SOCCER

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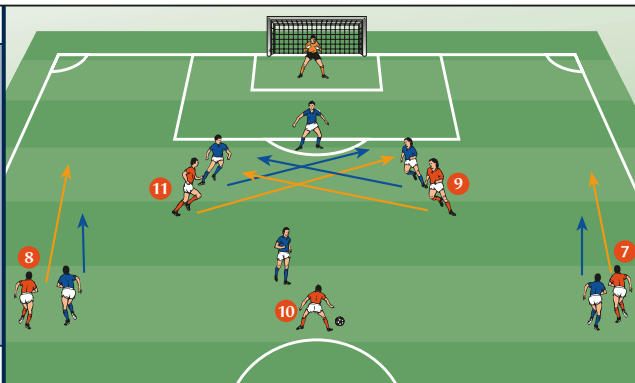
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MIDFIELD COMBINATIONS IN THE MIDDLE

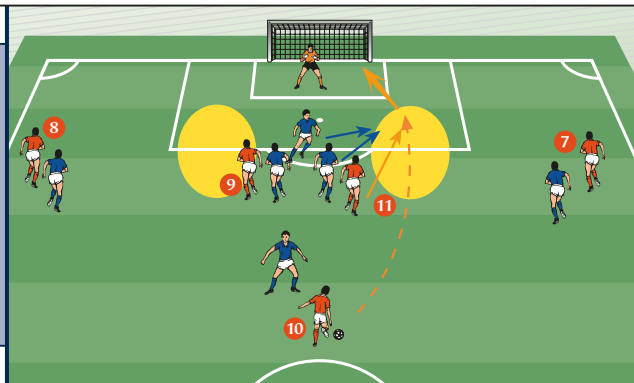
FORWARDS CROSS OVER



► Fig. 1

Sequence

- Forwards **9** and **11** initiate the crossover with a prearranged signal, e.g. a word or eye contact, and then quickly switch positions.
- Ideally they should cross so close together that the defenders get in each other's way.
- Even if the defenders simply trade opponents, the forwards should still have an advantage.
- Wing players **7** and **8** show for a long pass but should stay on the wings to keep space open.
- Fake runs improve the combination by giving attackers an even bigger head start, so players should practice them right from the start. In this scenario, **7** and **8** fake a run to the inside, then start up the sidelines.



► Fig. 2

Sequence

- By crossing over, the forwards have opened up space for each other (yellow areas).
- If **9** and **11** run directly between passer **10** and the sweeper, they block the sweeper's view and maximize their playing space. In addition, the defenders will be trying to avoid a collision instead of focusing on the ball.
- At this moment, **10** passes into the path of **11**.
- Ideally, **11** should try to finish directly, to avoid losing his advantage over the sweeper and defenders

Alternative

- If unable to finish, **11** passes to **7**, who crosses in front of the goal. The forwards try to get to the cross at the near or far post, while **8** waits at the corner of the penalty box.

EXERCISE

Setup

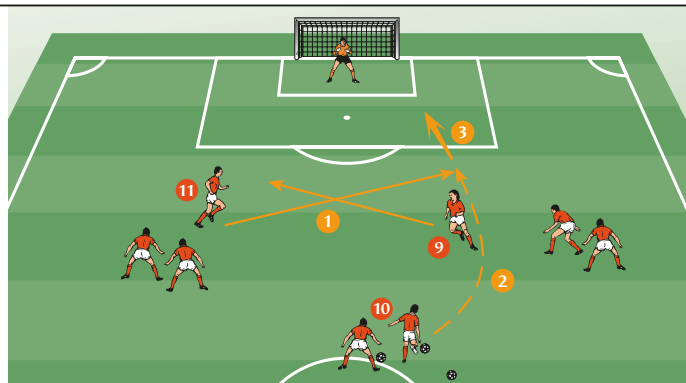
- **9** and **11** stand in front of the penalty box sidelines, 25 yards from the goal line.
- Passer **10** stands outside the center circle with a number of balls.
- Additional players wait behind the forwards, and another passer stands inside the center circle.

Sequence

- Either **9** or **11** starts the crossover on a prearranged signal: Both forwards quickly switch positions (**1**).
- As the forwards move past one another, **10** passes from the center circle into the path of either **9** or **11** (**2**).
- The receiver should ideally shoot directly (**3**).
- Players rotate and the sequence repeats.

Variations

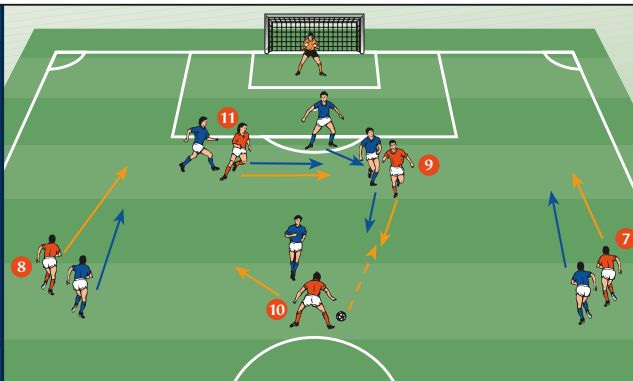
- The coach raises either the left or right arm to show which forward the passer should pass to.
- Passer passes while dribbling.
- Add opponents (interfere only if attackers execute the sequence poorly.)

**Alternatives**

- At the start of the sequence, two midfielders start running up the sidelines from the centerline. The forward passes to one of them if unable to shoot directly (see description above).
- Active opponents mark the forwards. If unable to shoot directly, the forwards pass to a midfielder, who crosses in front of the goal.

MIDFIELD COMBINATIONS IN THE MIDDLE

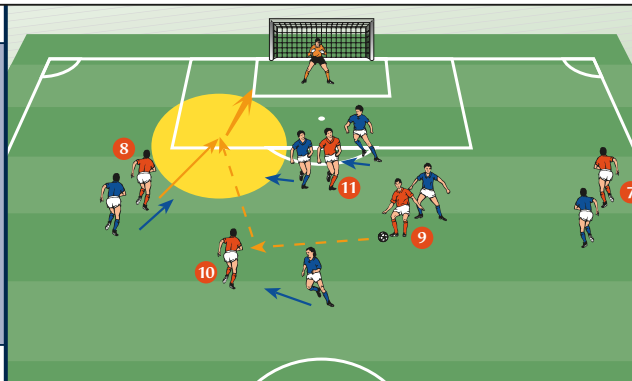
ONE FORWARD APPROACHES



► Fig. 1

Sequence

- 9 shows for a short pass from 10.
- 11 runs into the open space behind 9, taking his opponent with him. The sweeper is forced to turn toward 11 as well.
- 7 and 8 start running toward the goal and slightly inward.
- 10 plays a short pass to 9 and runs around his opponent to receive the rebound pass from 9.



► Fig. 2

Sequence

- 11 has opened up space for 8 (yellow circle).
- 9 drops the ball back to 10, who should ideally lay it off into the path of 8.
- 8 receives and controls the ball and tries to finish quickly, to avoid losing his advantage over the sweeper and defenders.

Alternative

- If 10 is not pressured by his opponent, he can skip the wall pass with 9 and pass into the path of 8. This speeds up the sequence and avoids the danger of a sloppily executed wall pass.

EXERCISE

Setup

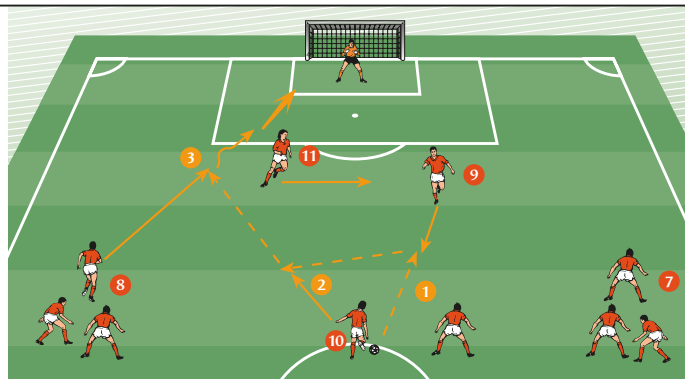
- 9 and 11 stand in front of the penalty box sidelines, 25 yards from the goal line.
- Passer 10 stands outside the center circle with a number of balls.
- 8 stands on the left sideline in front of the centerline.
- Additional players wait behind the forwards, and another passer stands inside the center circle.

Sequence

- 9 takes off explosively toward the passer, showing for a short pass, while 11 runs into the space behind the right forward (1).
- 10 plays a wall pass with 9 while 8 starts sprinting toward the goal (2).
- After the wall pass, 10 should ideally pass directly to 8, who receives and controls the ball and shoots (3).
- Players rotate and the sequence repeats on the opposite side.

Variations

- Simplified version: 10 passes immediately to 8 (no wall pass).
- The coach raises either the left or right arm to show which forward



the passer should pass to.

- Passer passes while dribbling.
- Add opponents, who only interfere if attackers execute the sequence poorly.

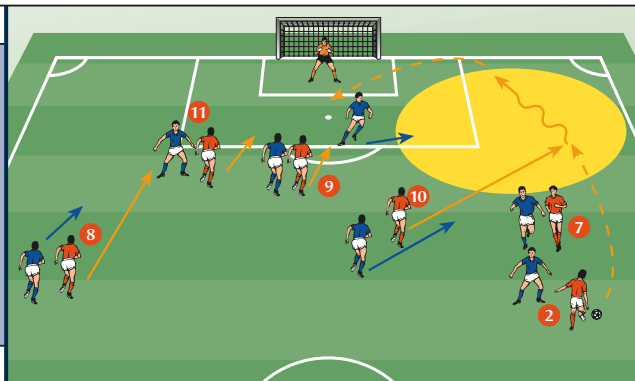
WING PLAYER APPROACHES



► Fig. 1

Sequence

- 7 takes off explosively to show for a short pass from 2, while 9 runs to the inside. Both take their opponents with them.
- At the same time, 10 sprints diagonally toward the right corner.



► Fig. 2

Sequence

- 7 and 9 have opened up space on the right wing (yellow area).
- 10 sprints into this space and receives a pass from 2.
- 10 takes the ball toward the endline. 8, 9 and 11 run into the penalty box.
- If 10 is pressured by his opponent or his teammates are already too close to the goal, then he must cross immediately. But if 10 is not under pressure and his teammates have not reached the penalty box yet, then he can dribble toward the goal first.

Variation

- 7 does a fake run, then runs into the open space himself. He has a better angle on the goal, so he doesn't lose time turning, and he can also observe the rest of the game better while running.

EXERCISE

Setup

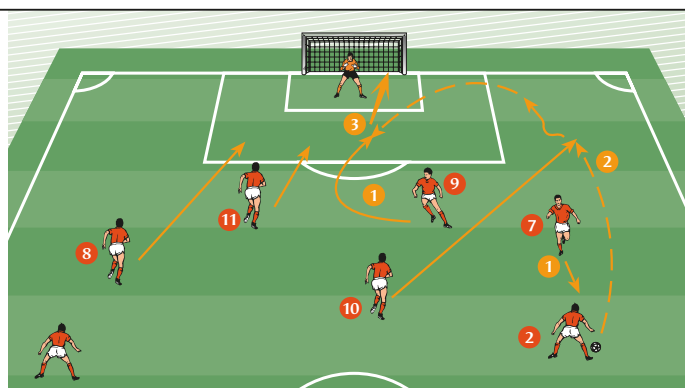
- 9 and 11 stand in front of the penalty box sidelines, 25 yards from the goal line.
- 10 stands about 10 yards behind the forwards.
- One midfielder and one defender are on each wing, and 2 has the ball.

Sequence

- 7 initiates the sequence by taking off explosively to show for a short pass, while 9 runs to the inside (1).
- 10 sprints toward the right corner and receives a pass up the sideline from 2.
- 10 takes the ball toward the endline and crosses in front of the goal (2).
- 8, 9 or 11 scores on the cross (3).
- The sequence repeats on the opposite side.

Variation

- Add opponents, who only interfere if attackers execute the sequence poorly.



Alternatives

- The right midfielder starts with a fake run: He then runs up the sideline himself and crosses.
- After the wall pass with right midfielder 7, defender 2 runs up the sideline and crosses.