

# SOCCER COACH WEEKLY

FEB 25-MAR 3, 2022  
VOL 2, ISSUE 41  
BY SUBSCRIPTION ONLY



## STARS OF AFRICA

RANJI RAGBEER ON THE RISE OF THE AFRICAN COACHES LEAGUE



Vol 2, Issue 41  
Feb 25th-Mar 3rd, 2022

**Soccer Coach Weekly website and monthly digital magazine** offers proven, easy to use soccer drills, coaching sessions, practice plans, small-sided games, warm-ups, training tips and advice. The resources are created for the grassroots youth coach following best practice from around the world and insights from the professional game.

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Soccer Coach Weekly is published by Green Star Media Ltd, MBX124, 19 Moorfield Road, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 1RU, UK.  
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FROM THE EDITOR

# Driving ambition and social change

**Soccer, as we know, can be a vehicle for ambition and social inclusion.**

The African Coaches League (ACL), founded by Ezirim Kennedy in 2020, was set up with the stated aim of using soccer to lift youngsters on the continent out of poverty.

It is also trying to raise standards and improve opportunities for coaches in Africa and the African diaspora, and has 1,500 members already.

In this issue, we speak to the ACL's Ranji Ragbeer - who coaches in the US with Athens United - to explore the group's aims and ambitions.

You can hear the full interview on our podcast - either click the link on page 10 or subscribe via your usual podcast provider.

Steph Fairbairn, who did the interview with Ranji, has also penned this week's Coach's Column.

She writes about her experience as a grassroots coach in learning to accept help from parents on matchday, and getting right the tricky balancing act between parent involvement and appropriate distance.



The African Coaches League is an offshoot of the Yagazie Foundation, which ran this camp in Lagos

Coaching expert Tom Hartley has provided a list of 10 ways you can enhance your own personal development.

Meanwhile, Buffalo-based Jason Milne has contributed this week's session plan, on transitioning at speed.

We also give you a possession-based practice, ending in productive goalscoring opportunities.

Have a great week!

*Andrew*

Got a session plan or practice that you want to share with fellow coaches? Or want to write an article? Email us: [production@soccercoachweekly.net](mailto:production@soccercoachweekly.net)

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**Steph Fairbairn:** Originally from Newcastle, Steph is FA Level 1 qualified and head coach at London-based Dalmain Athletic Girls FC, where she manages the Under-13s league team.

**Jason Milne:** Head women's varsity coach at City Honors School in Buffalo, NY., and club coordinator for the Buffalo United Soccer Club. Has coached boys and girls at ages 6-18 since 1998.



**Tom Hartley:** Coach programme and pathway manager at UK Coaching and assistant manager at Oxford United Women. Spent 10 years at the Football Association and three years at Arsenal Women.



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Ranji Ragbeer of the African Coaches League

# Don't fly solo: make use of keen parents

If you get offers of help, don't be too proud to accept, says **STEPH FAIRBAIRN**

**Grassroots coaches are often left to our own devices, trying to juggle what can seem like a million things at once – and feeling like we're not getting any of them right.**

For inexperienced coaches, it is hard to identify when you might need some more support. If you are just figuring out what coaching actually entails, how are you meant to know what your role should look like?

It took me a while to decide on my boundaries. The main way I began to implement some of them - and relieve some of the pressure - is by cultivating a group of parents that can help me out in various ways.

I realised that, for a while, I was dead set on minimising parent involvement. I was afraid of their judgement, worried about asking too much of them and keen to make sure I kept the line between coaching and parental influence on players.

Then I realised something. A lot of parents want to be involved, and both things - getting parents to support you, and maintaining that distance between parents and coaches - are possible.

I have gone from having to beg parents on the sidelines to run the line for me, to having three vying for the role, a stand-in referee, two people to warm up the goalkeeper, three people to help with matchday admin, and a couple of people who are comfortable stepping in to run the team when I'm away.

I am lucky in that my club sends these parents on courses to build their skillset and confidence - but the most important thing has been building relationships.

The biggest relationship I've built has been with a parent who is now my assistant coach. The one Dad that was brave enough to run the line for me a couple of years ago is now my right-hand man.

He would come over when I was doing my teamtalks and I could see his interest, so I started asking him for his input. I really liked what he said and how he was with the team.

From there, it grew - he became my assistant on matchday, I asked him to join us on training days, and now we meet for coffee each week to discuss how we can best support our players.



**Getting parents on board as assistant coaches to help out with matchday duties - like running the line - can take a lot of pressure off of you**

I have to admit - it hasn't been the easiest thing for me to let someone help me in this way. I've had a lot of questions: is he so interested in helping because he thinks I'm

**"Support and challenge is a better place to be than struggling alone..."**

doing a bad job? Would he have made his presence so known if I was male?

Working with someone else throws me a different set of challenges than working alone did. Sometimes I disagree with his ideas, or the way he's done something. But

support and challenge is a far better place to be in than struggling alone.

Often, too, my ego and expectations of myself have got in the way: I'm the one with the coaching qualification, I should be the one able to do this.

To work through this, I repeatedly remind myself of a few things.

Working in grassroots coaching is tough. Working with kids is tough. You can't do it all by yourself. Everyone needs some support. New ideas and approaches will only challenge you and help you grow. Nothing is ever going to be perfect. Most importantly: if it helps your players, it's the best and right thing to do.

So accept the help you are offered and that you need and appreciate it, too.

After all, they're giving up their time in the same way you do.

# Transition at speed

## WARM-UP

This three-part practice encourages players to work as a unit and switch the point of attack. **By JASON MILNE**

### WHY USE IT

This is a dynamic warm-up that progresses from slow to medium pace.

### SET UP

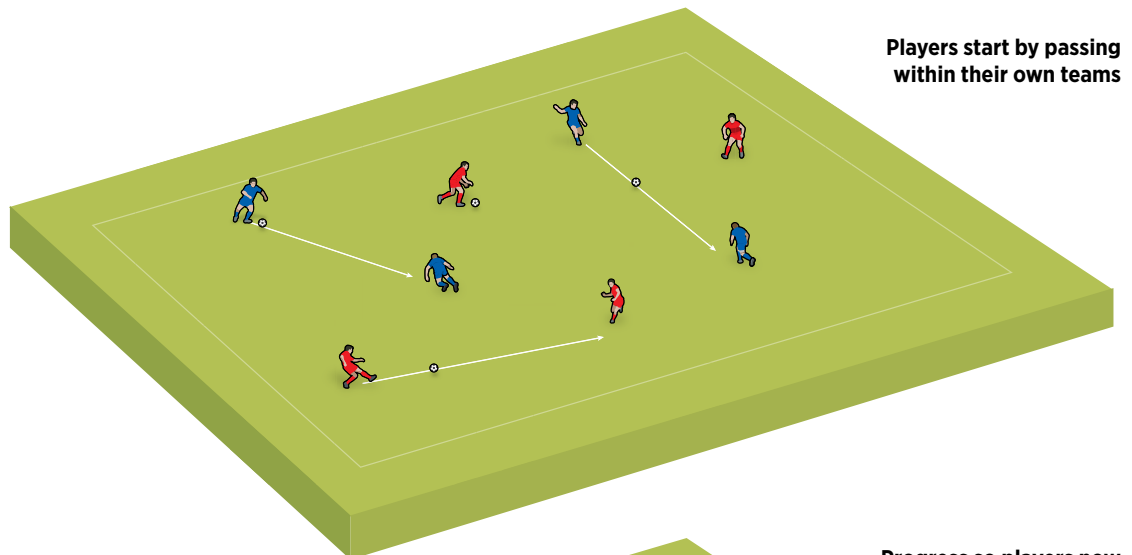
Set up within the 18-yard box, or similar-sized space, relevant to the age and ability of your players. Split players into two or three teams, with two to four balls per team.

### HOW TO PLAY

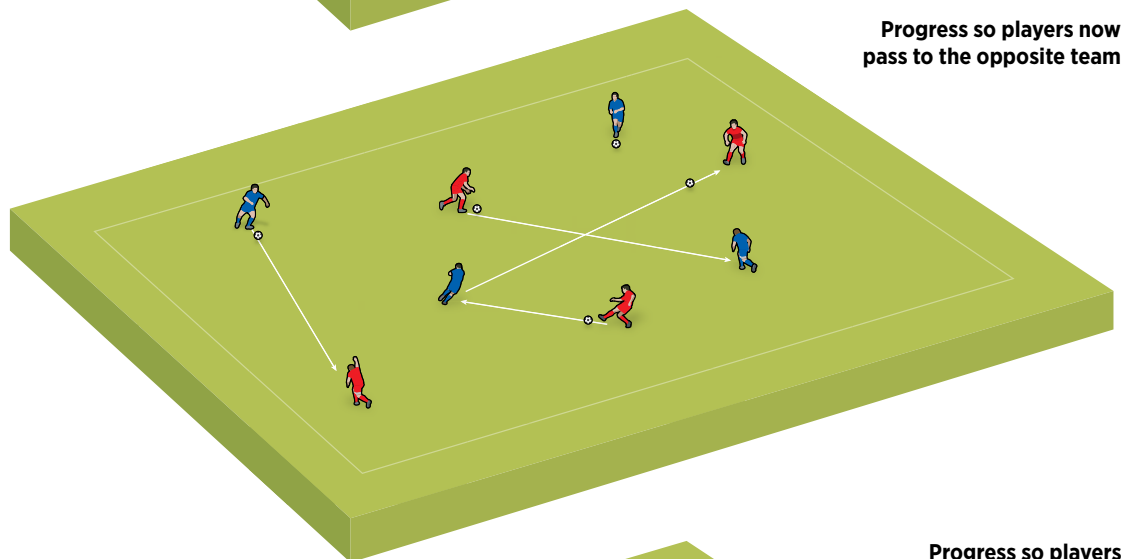
The warm-up begins by teams passing among themselves within the 18-yard box, Red to Red, Blue to Blue. Players move among one another in space, moving with and without the ball, changing pace and direction. Players pass and receive the balls using all surfaces of the foot. Begin simply with passing with the inside and outside of foot and then progressions may include receiving the ball from behind, receive and turn, takeovers, one and two-touch passing, pass to other group (e.g. Red to Blue).

### COACHING POINTS

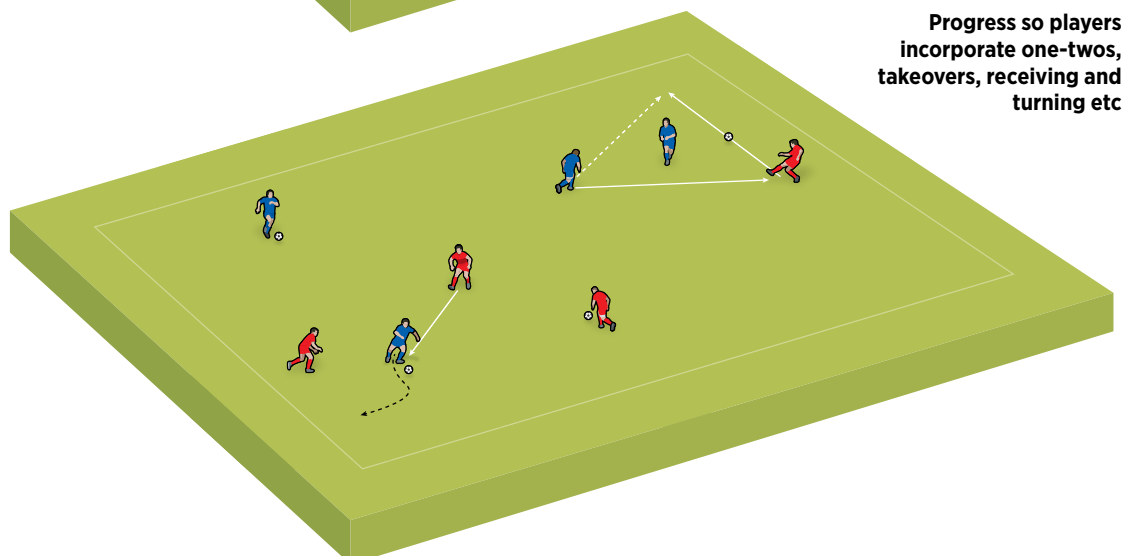
- Communication: eye contact, hand gesturing, speaking with intent.
- Pace: movement with and without the ball should vary
- Creativity: opportunity for players to work on their own one v one dribbling, body positioning and feigning, receiving, playing with head up with vision for next pass or off-ball movement



Players start by passing within their own teams



Progress so players now pass to the opposite team



Progress so players incorporate one-twos, takeovers, receiving and turning etc

Player movement 

Ball movement 

Run with ball 

Shot 

# Transition at speed

## PRACTICE

This three-part practice encourages players to work as a unit and switch the point of attack. **By JASON MILNE**

## WHY USE IT

This is a competitive and fun practice, which encourages switching the point of attack, communication, working as a unit in both defending and transitioning to attack.

## SET UP

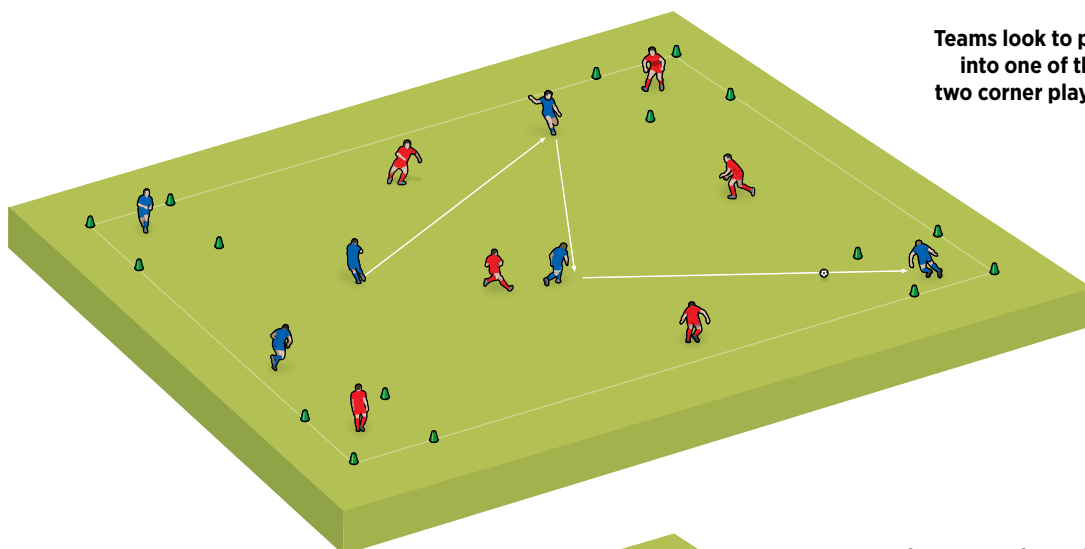
Mark out an area relative to the age and ability of your players. Set out a square in each corner. Divide players into two teams, ideally 6v6 with 4v4 in the middle and two players from each team in diagonally opposite corners.

## HOW TO PLAY

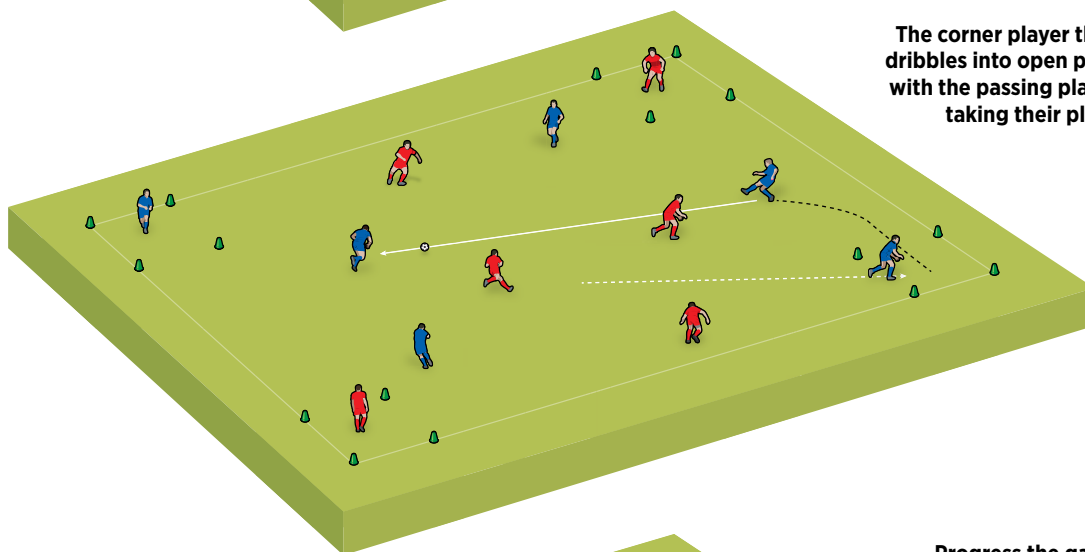
Teams play 4v4+2. Teams look to possess and score by successfully completing a pass to player in the corner. If the pass is successfully completed, the passing player switches places with the receiving player without play stopping. If the other team wins possession, they look to transition quickly and play to their corner players. The first team to successfully complete five passes wins the game. Variations include one and two-touch passing, volleys into the corners, or adding a neutral player who cannot score but plays with the team in possession.

## COACHING POINTS

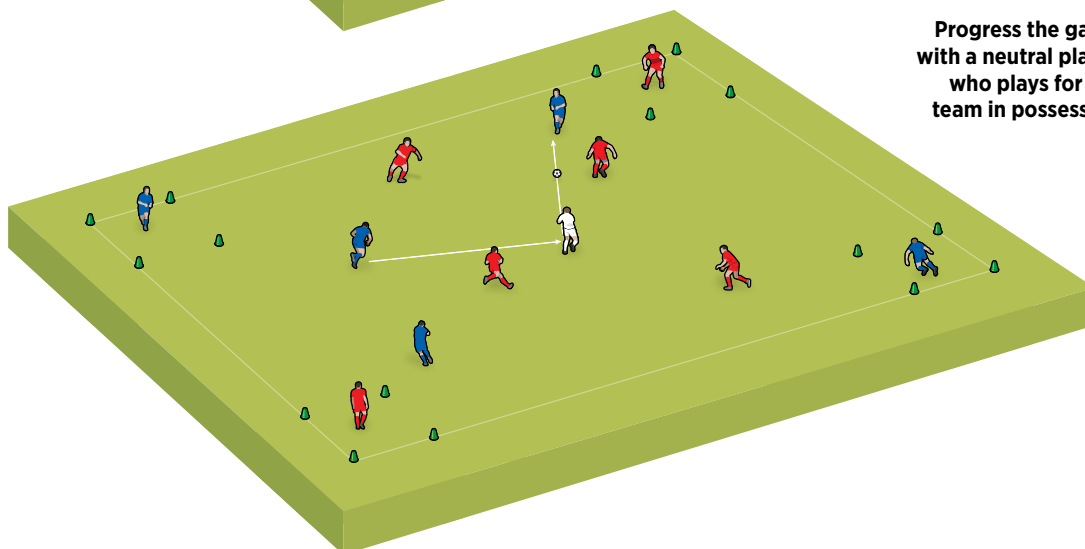
Quick transitioning between attacking and defending. Finding shape quickly when in possession and first, second and third player defending, communication, switching the point of attack.



Teams look to play into one of their two corner players



The corner player then dribbles into open play, with the passing player taking their place



Progress the game with a neutral player who plays for the team in possession

Player movement 

Ball movement 

Run with ball 

Shot 

# Transition at speed

## SMALL-SIDED GAME

This three-part practice encourages players to work as a unit and switch the point of attack. **By JASON MILNE**

### WHY USE IT

This small-sided game allows players to now apply concepts of the previous practice to attacking a goal, and subsequently defending.

### SET UP

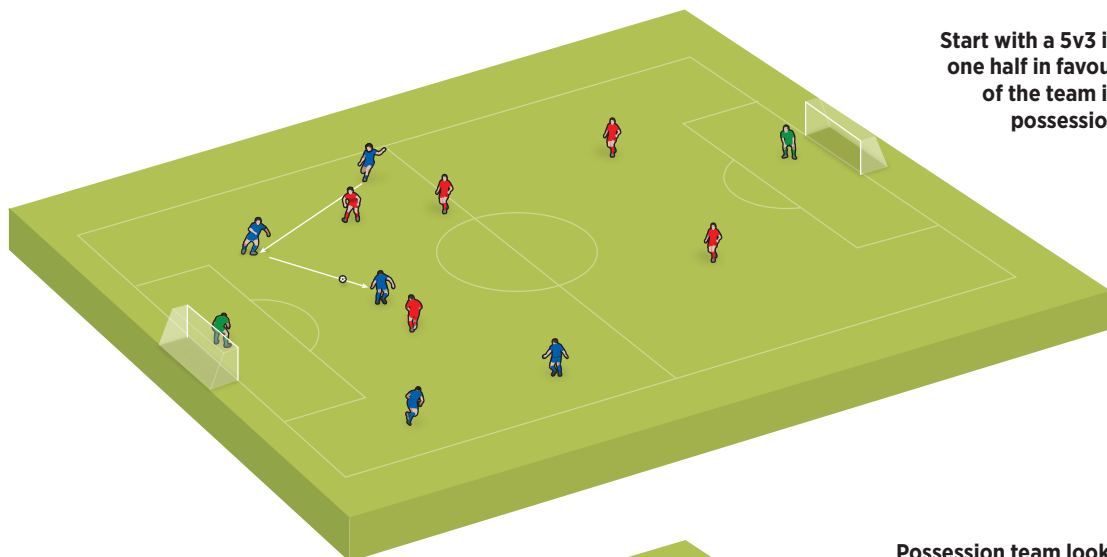
Set up a playing area relative to the age and ability of your players, with a goal at each end. Play 5v5 with goalkeepers.

### HOW TO PLAY

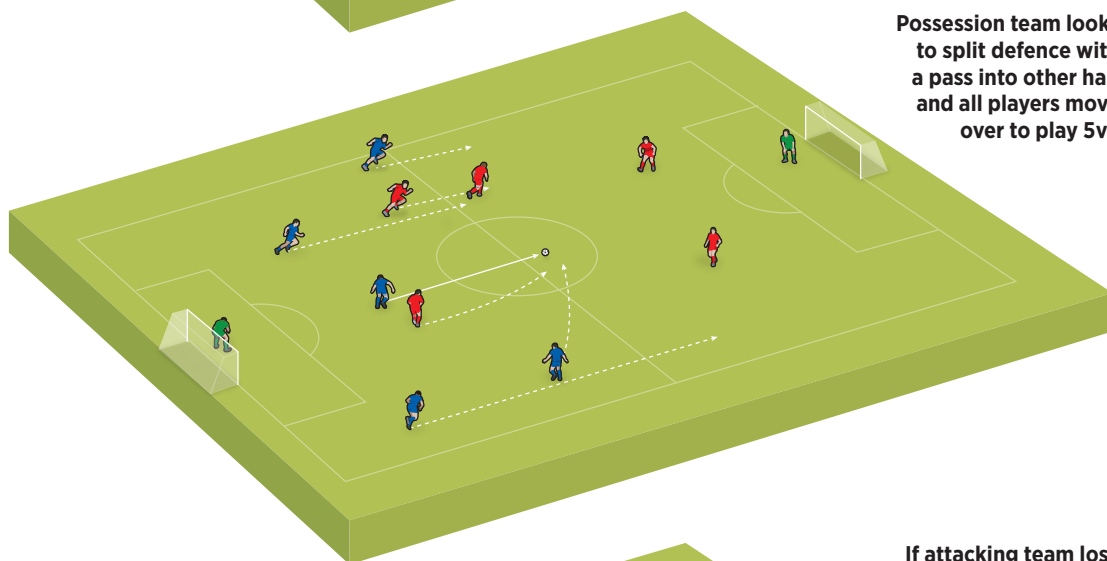
On one half of the field, play 5v3 (outfield players). The team with five aims to keep possession and split the defenders with a pass into the other half. All players then move into the other half, where there are already two waiting defenders, to play 5v5. The attacking team continues to attack the goal, aiming to score. If the defending team regains possession, two players who were previously attackers drop back into the other half, and the new team in possession play with a 5v3 advantage - again aiming to break into the other half to try and score.

### COACHING POINTS

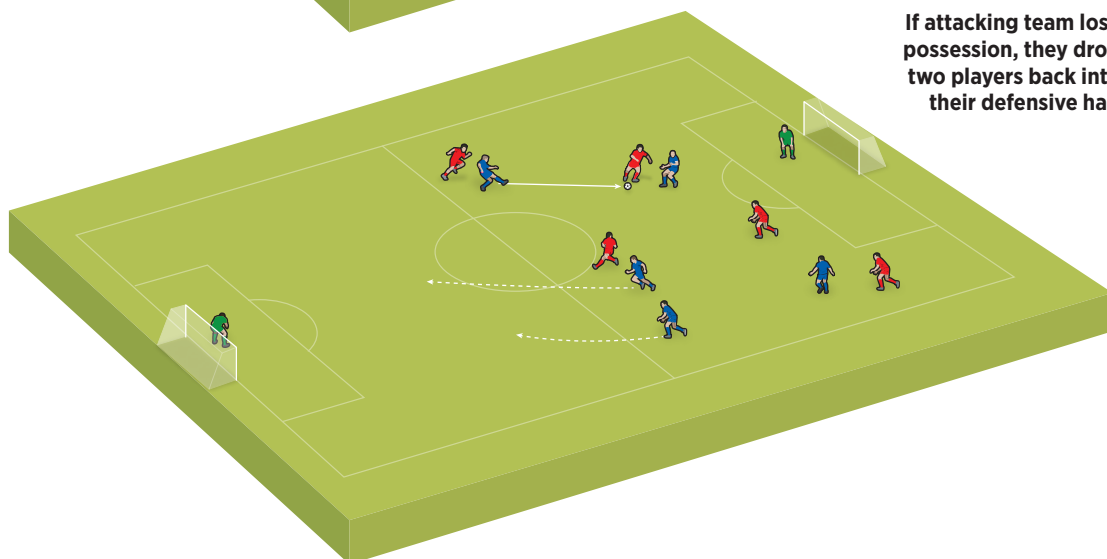
Ball movement, player movement off the ball and quick passing to create the split, then quick transition into offensive half. Finishing, transition to defending, communication.



Start with a 5v3 in one half in favour of the team in possession



Possession team looks to split defence with a pass into other half and all players move over to play 5v5



If attacking team lose possession, they drop two players back into their defensive half

Player movement 

Ball movement 

Run with ball 

Shot 

# 10 steps to support your development

**TOM HARTLEY** provides suggestions for self-improvement as you coach others

**As you plan and deliver sessions to improve your players, it is easy to overlook your own development.**

But continuing to learn about yourself, your methods and your goals is very important. As the New Zealand rugby union team asks: "Where are you growing?"

It is a simple question - but can provoke some answers from within that further your self-improvement.

Here are 10 top tips on how to support your own learning and development.

**01 TAKE TIME TO REFLECT** Reflection improves your practice as a coach. It can take many forms but engaging in it in some way will improve your coaching craft. You may use a model or template, or just preserve some time to gather your thoughts.

**02 GET A COACH DEVELOPER** A coach developer doesn't tell you what to do or fix problems you have as a coach. But they will hold up mirrors and help you see your coaching from a different perspective, while asking questions and nudging your thoughts. Consider it positive disruption!

**03 FILM YOURSELF COACH** Watching video of yourself coaching can make you squirm. But it is brilliant feedback and gives you the opportunity to reflect in super-objective, high definition. You don't need fancy kit - just an iPhone with a tripod.

**04 MAP OUT YOUR NETWORK** Having an understanding of who you can go to within your network to get support with different things can be really useful. You are likely to have people who can be a sounding board, idea grower, critical friend, success celebrator, and more.

**05 SEEK FEEDBACK** Gaining feedback on your coaching can really help you build your self awareness. It supports your growth and development,



Reflecting on your sessions and asking for feedback from trusted members of your network are among the tools you can utilise to improve as a coach, says Tom Hartley

especially if you are happy to listen to some of the uncomfortable stuff. Try and be specific in how you would like the giver to help you.

**06 READ WIDER THAN YOUR SPORT** We can all end up reading the same things as our peers. It is great to have shared interests, but there is a risk of developing 'group-think' or creating an echo chamber. Reading - or watching or listening - on the fringes of your world can be ace.

**07 CHALLENGE YOUR VIEWS AND BELIEFS** While we are on that point of echo chambers, think about what makes you who you are as a coach. Why do you coach the way you do? Are there some things you are potentially missing that could maximise your performance?

**08 SPEND MORE TIME PLANNING** Purposeful planning can improve your understanding of performance while coaching. Taking time to plan more than your Xs & Os is also important. What are the questions you are going to ask? How are you going to engage the athletes?

**09 TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF** Want to look after your athletes? Start by looking after yourself. How do you expect to give players the best possible experience if you haven't slept or eaten well, or not had time to rest and recover?

**10 CREATE AN IDP** When it comes to your learning and development, having a plan will help point in the right direction. You might have clear goals you want to achieve, or some fuzzy goals with a general direction in mind.

# Five passes to attack

## PRACTICE

Give players goalscoring end product to their possession and teach when to play forward and when to shoot.

## WHY USE IT

For your team to be successful in getting the ball into shooting positions, they must find a balance between exploiting space and not losing the ball. Patience is the key – keeping possession and delaying that scoring pass can often result in a better chance.

## SET UP

Create an area measuring 40x20 yards. Play 6v4 with two neutral keepers. You need balls, bibs, cones and goals.

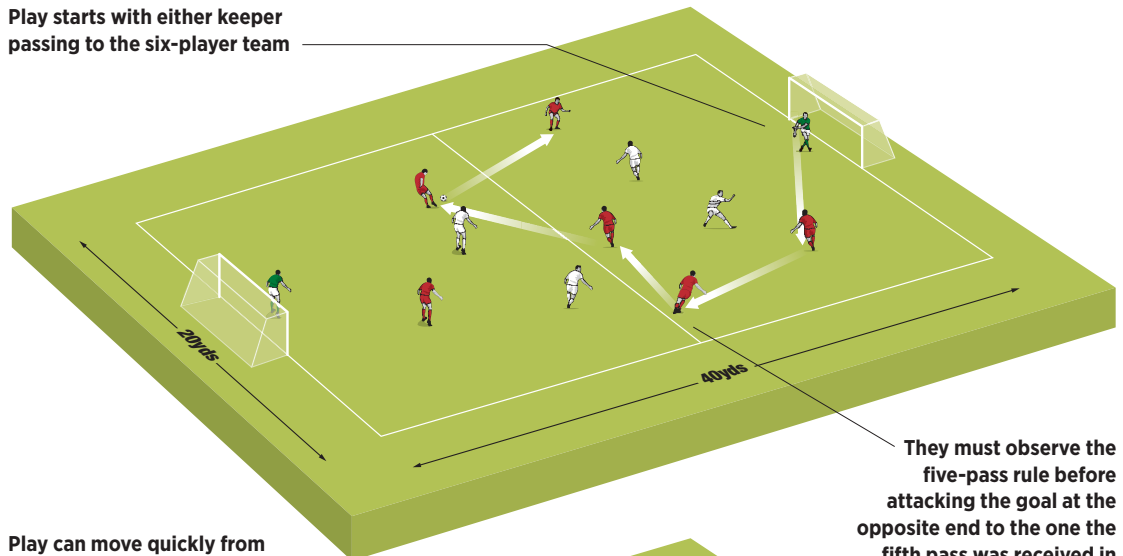
## HOW TO PLAY

The team of six needs to make five passes before attacking. Once reaching five passes they can start looking for an opportunity to attack – but when ready they must attack the goal in the other half of the pitch from where the fifth pass was received. The team of four try to win the ball back and counter-attack into either goal. Teams can score in either goal, so no offsides.

## COACHING POINTS

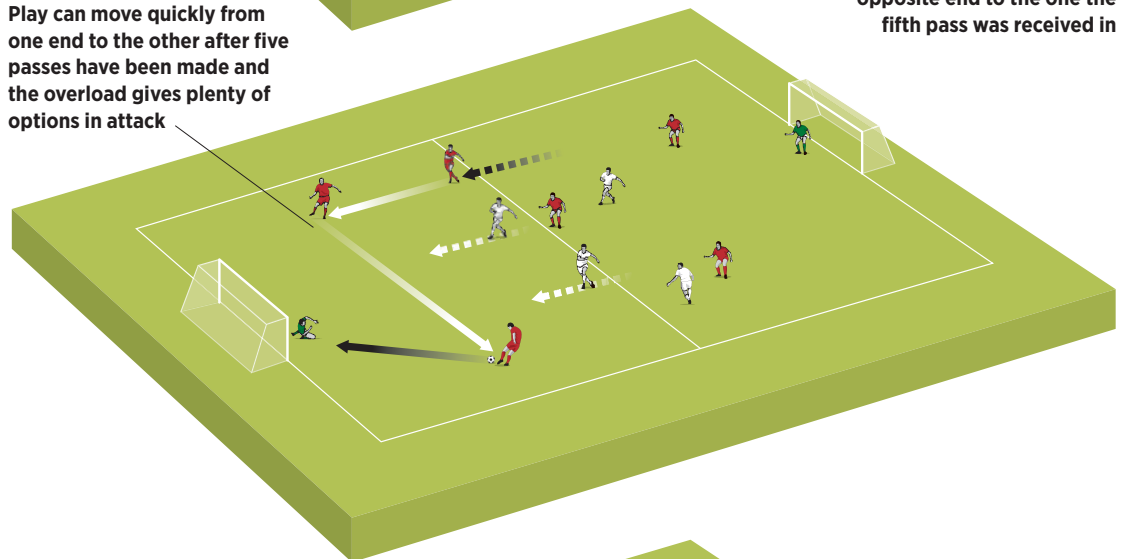
Players should recognise when to play forward and move to support the pass. They should play quickly to take advantage of the space from the overload situation. This means awareness of space is crucial. Coaches should look for players switching play or bringing the keeper into play.

Play starts with either keeper passing to the six-player team

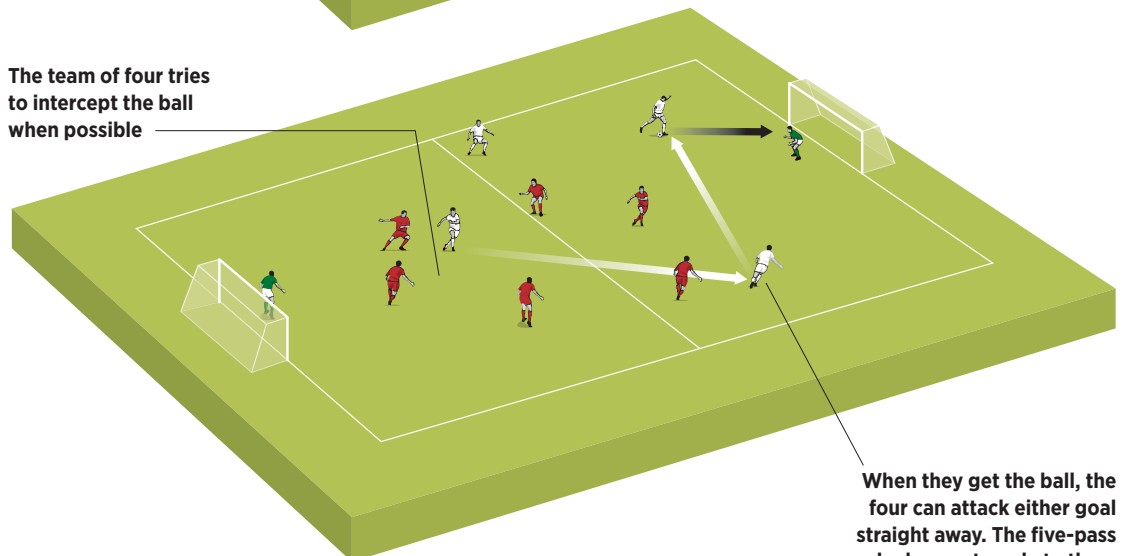


They must observe the five-pass rule before attacking the goal at the opposite end to the one the fifth pass was received in

Play can move quickly from one end to the other after five passes have been made and the overload gives plenty of options in attack



The team of four tries to intercept the ball when possible



When they get the ball, the four can attack either goal straight away. The five-pass rule does not apply to them

Player movement 

Ball movement 

Run with ball 

Shot 



# Using coaching to 'lift kids out of poverty'

Formed in 2020, the African Coaches League aims to transform lives. **RANJI RAGBEER** explains their mission and philosophy to SCW's **STEPH FAIRBAIRN**

**The African Coaches League (ACL) was set up in 2020 by Ezirim Kennedy, with the aim of leveraging coaching to lift people on the continent out of poverty.**

Now, with around 1,500 members, it hopes to solidify its presence and its purpose.

An offshoot of the Yagazie Foundation, a charity that "engages and enables the vulnerable, the marginalized and the less privileged teenagers and youth", the ACL offers its members support, education, opportunities to give back and the chance to both give and receive mentorship.

Ranji Ragbeer, a coach at Athens United in Georgia, USA, is one of the founding members of the ACL.

We caught up with him to find out more about the League, its membership, what it offers, and how you can get involved...

**SCW: Can you give us a bit of an overview of what the ACL is and why it was set up?**

**RR:** "I met Ezirim, a Nigerian national, at a coaching course in Orlando, Florida. We hit it off, began to talk and when he went back to Nigeria, we kept in touch.

"His focus with the Yagazie Foundation was to try to use football as a tool to help Africans lift themselves from poverty.

"He quickly recognised, as a coach himself, that the linchpin in this whole thing, the glue that keeps it all together, is the coach. So that was the driving force behind the ACL.

"Very quickly, we've grown to over 1,500 members globally, including several national team coaches. One of our patrons is Vin Blaine, head coach of Jamaica.

"The whole impetus is to get coaches to leverage football to help lift Africans, both in Africa and in the diaspora, out of poverty. That's the key. That's our mission."

**SCW: Have you got members all the way down to those just starting out as well?**

**RR:** "Absolutely. We've got coaches who are just beginning their journey in their teens, up to seasoned old goats like myself.

"We've got youth coaches, we've got university coaches, we have professional



**The African Coaches League, founded in 2020, has the aim to "engage and enable the vulnerable, the marginalized and the less privileged teenagers and youth" of the continent**

team coaches, we've got adult amateur coaches. It runs the gamut.

"One of our big focal points, actually, is to bring education to the members. We run training courses at a fraction of what they would cost elsewhere, because some of our members are instructors, so they help out."

**"ACL's focus is on leveraging coaching to lift Africans out of poverty..."**

**SCW: What are some of the other activities that the league does? If you're a member, what can you expect?**

**RR:** "We're just starting, but the main things you should expect, first of all, are support and camaraderie.

"We have several WhatsApp groups, where members post questions and videos of what they have done and ask for feedback. So camaraderie is a big one.

"The other thing is education. In the year and a bit that we've been around, we have run at least four training classes. One was in person, where we had coaching support from outside Africa come in, and we've done several online courses as well.

"Another big thing is the focus on leveraging coaching to lift Africans out of poverty. The Yagazie Foundation had an inaugural camp - with the support of Kellogg's, Coca Cola and the Brazilian consulate - in Lagos called the YES Camp, the Yagazie Education and Sports Camp.

"That initiative is something we're going to continue doing, bringing kids into an environment where they are safe and we can help them stay out of trouble and focus on football and education.

"The last thing we're going to ask coaches,

especially ones in developed countries in Europe, the UK, the US and Canada, is to help out and contribute.

"My club did a fundraiser, where we collected kits and sent them to Africa for kids who just didn't have them. It was great because we could see the Athens United logo on kids all the way in Africa."

**SCW: In terms of support, does that take the form of mentorship? Do you look at some of your coaches, where they want to go and maybe match them up with other coaches?**

**RR:** "We don't have anything formally put together yet, although that has been discussed.

"We certainly are expecting coaches in a local area to work with one another and be part of that organisational mindset. I've been contacted by members in Africa, even though I live in the US, to take a look at some of their lesson plans and what some of their curriculum components look like.

"In the digital age, you've got so many options, so we shouldn't limit ourselves to local [coaches]. But where it exists, it should be leveraged."

**SCW: In terms of your membership, what does the gender split look like?**

**RR:** "We're working on that. Out of 1,500 members, we have 100 females. Our founder, Ezirim, was invited to speak at a forum for female black coaches in Canada, so we are looking for females.

"The sport has certainly got a problem globally, bringing females into it at a level where they're given the respect they're due.

"The Women's World Cup is a fantastic spectacle, for example. But in certain parts of the world, the men's game overshadows the women's game. But we can't let that be a gating factor on bringing more women into the game to play, as well as to coach.

"Especially for young girls, aged 8 to 14, having a female leader and a female voice on the sidelines makes a big difference.

Girls seem to respond more effectively with female coaches.

"Men can be there too, and men can be effective, don't get me wrong. But at a young age, I think it's good they know that if this coach is a good role model, that's who they can be - 'I can be like her'.

"So we need to do more on recruiting women, that's for sure."



**Ezirim Kennedy set up the African Coaches League in 2020 - it now has 1,500 members**

**SCW: Do you think there's also a lack of recognition in some of the top leagues around the world for African coaches? Is that something you as a group are aware of and are trying to help address??**

**RR:** "Yes, 100%. Coaching generally for Africans is a big challenge. Here in the US, the NFL opened up a can of worms because they have regulations in place [the 'Rooney

always said 'pick it up and give them a reason to pick you'. So I think we have to burn the candle at both ends.

"Being focused on education within the ACL is a major component of why we might overcome that.

"Because our reason to pick will be proving that everyone, no matter where they're from, can aspire to and reach the top level and they shouldn't be limited by their gender or their race. It's awful that we have to even talk about it."

**SCW: How do people get involved with the African Coaches League?**

**RR:** " We [have a website](#), so you can go there and click 'join'. That's the easiest way.

"You don't have to be African to be part of our group. We do have a sister organisation called Friends of the ACL, so you can actually join as a friend.

"We have members from everywhere who are contributing, so anyone who is interested in our mission - to leverage coaching to help lift Africans out of poverty - we want you.

"The world is way too big for us to exclude anyone."

**"You don't have to be African to join us. The world's too big to exclude anyone..."**

Rule'] which requires franchises to interview black candidates and candidates of colour in their hiring practices.

"It's degenerated into just having a checkbox instead of it being a meaningful outreach for inclusion.

"I think Africans have that challenge globally. It's a big problem, but my dad



**"My advice to anyone starting out? Make it fun, not take yourself so seriously and commit to education. Become a sponge for it..."**

HEAR THE FULL INTERVIEW WITH RANJI, INCLUDING HIS PERSONAL BACK STORY, HOW HE BECAME A COACH AND HIS TIPS FOR NEW COACHES, ON OUR PODCAST — [CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD](#)