Introduction

The enclosed exercises have been used in our training sessions as we worked towards playing with the 4-4-2 diamond formation for the forthcoming campaign, starting at the very beginning of preseason.

Although some of the exercises are not formation specific, they work on elements of the game which are vital in making the formation work. All the exercises described have been used successfully in our training sessions, and have produced improvements, learnings, and most importantly of all, enjoyment.
Using the exercises to create a session

There are twelve exercises shown here, which if you used a combination of two of them in each training session could create over 100 different training sessions.

However in addition, some of the more game related exercises can be used in different ways depending on what you are trying to achieve as a coach – ie coaching defending or attacking play, in possession vs out of possession.

The key coaching points are split to show how each exercise can be used in different ways, so in reality, using a combination of these exercises with different coaching focuses, perhaps adding in a few others of your own, can give you hundreds of interesting and enjoyable training sessions.

The diagrams were created using the excellent FA Coaches App in association with i-Drills.
How our training sessions work – structure and aims

At this level of the game, there are a number of familiar issues with putting on a good session that facilitates learning, improvement, and enjoyment.

Players at this level are not playing for money, nor for a contract at the end of the season. They play for enjoyment and hopefully to keep their place in the team come the weekend.

There are other issues that get in the way. Work, family, holidays. The coach has to be prepared to adapt the session based on last minute changes to available personnel. Each exercise has a selection of adaptations, not only to make the exercise either easier or more challenging, but also for situations where there aren’t the personnel to run the exercise as described.
Fitness can also be a major issue at this level, as ultimately the coach/manager is relying on individual players to maintain a decent level of fitness in their own time. When a team has either one or two sessions a week, usually only for up to two hours, there is a choice – either dedicate part of the session for fitness work, or ensure that the players are carrying out a good level of their own fitness work.

Personally I prefer the latter option, particularly during the season. While we may do some fitness work early in pre-season, and I certainly recommend carrying out fitness tests to assess what level the players are at during this period, our sessions are used to concentrate on technical and tactical work. Plenty of the exercises here will require a good level of fitness anyway, and any player not at the required level will soon show up! As a result, you will notice that all the exercises described here use a ball – for me this is a must.
I also learned from a fellow coach that setting up drills to get the players properly stretched before a session is something that one of the senior players can carry out while I set out the main exercises. As with others at this level, we use a shared facility so have to wait for the previous users to clear off the surface. I’ve therefore instructed the players that they are responsible for ensuring they are properly stretched and warmed up to start the session. Players generally respond well to having responsibility in the session.

Finally, another thing I learned early on in my coaching career was that players love to finish a session with a game, so this is something we always incorporate as a minimum to the final 20 minutes. This can be longer, perhaps with restrictions on the players (two touch, three touch etc...) for a period, but towards the end, remove the restrictions and just let the players play. And if the scores are level at the end of the game, there’s nothing like finishing with a penalty shoot out or crossbar challenge!
Equipment

Below is a list of equipment that it’s well worth having available.

• Balls (most important thing!)
• Bibs (three different colours)
• Cones (standard “space marker” type)
• Goals (full size, 7-a-side, and the small “pop-up type)
• Whistle (unless you have a good “wolf whistle”!)
• Pump
• Pen/Paper to take notes
Exercises
1. General Possession Warm-Up

Set-Up:

• 40 x 30 yards area
• 12 players (divided into three teams of 4)

Equipment Required:

• Balls (plenty around the edge to keep the play active)
• Bibs (three colours)
• Cones

Aim:

This is a great warm up exercise for training sessions and also pre-match. Not only does it work on the basics of possession and movement, but because of the constant switching of roles and team mates, requires players to be “switched on” and alert.
Description:

The players are divided into three equal teams. Two of the teams play together while in possession, while the third team try to win the ball back (so effectively 8 v 4). When the possession turns over, the team that lost possession becomes the “defending” team, while the other two teams now work together in possession.

In this example, the Blues are playing together with the Greens while the Reds are trying to win the ball.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

• Quality in possession
• Decision Making
• Movement off the ball
• Making pitch as big as possible
• Reaction to losing possession

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

• Pressing as a unit
• Making pitch compact
• When/where to press
• Reaction to winning possession
Adaptation:

- Player numbers – can be any multiple of three for the teams eg 9, 12, 15 etc....
- If number of players is not multiple of three, try with two equal teams with the remaining players acting as “neutrals”, playing with whichever team is in possession – these can also be restricted to a certain number of touches
- If the in-possession team is dominating, make the pitch smaller
- If the in-possession team is dominating, restrict to two or three touch
- If the out-of-possession team is dominating, make the pitch larger

Progressing Session:

This is a good general exercise for further work on either in or out of possession – hence it is also a good pre-match warm up.
2. Possession & Switch Warm-Up

Set-Up:

- 40 x 20 yards area divided into two halves
- 10 players (divided into two teams of 5)

Equipment Required:

- Balls (plenty around the edge to keep the play active)
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Two small goals (pop-up goals are ideal)

Aim:

This is a similar exercise to the first one, except it adds the dimension of an end target. It works on keeping possession, making the pitch as big as possible, but also searching for the right opportunity to break into the opposition half and score. In terms of the 4-4-2 diamond formation, it is key for the midfield diamond especially to keep possession and penetrate at the right time.
Description:

The players are divided into two teams. The team in possession has to complete a minimum five passes within one half – once they have done so, they then attack the goal at the opposite end of the pitch. The exercise is therefore multidirectional as either team could attack either goal.

In this example, the Reds are in possession and trying to complete five passes.
With five passes completed, the Reds attack to try and score at the opposite end.

**Key Coaching Points – team in possession:**

- Quality in possession
- Patience
- Decision Making
- Making pitch as big as possible
- Reaction to losing possession

**Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:**

- Pressing as a unit
- Making pitch compact
- Reaction to winning possession
Adaptation:

- Player numbers can be any even number to make two equal teams. If you have an odd number, have one player as a “neutral” working for the team in possession.
- If you don’t have pop-up goals, add end zones and make team in possession complete a pass into the end zone rather than scoring.
- If you have two goalkeepers, make the pitch bigger and use larger goals.
- The in-possession team must be tested, but if neither team is completing the initial five passes, either make the pitch larger or reduce the number of required initial passes.

Progressing Session:

This is definitely more of an exercise for progressing to exercises involving possession and penetration
3. Shape Warm-Up

Set-Up:

• Half a pitch (marked)
• 11 players in formation (including goalkeeper)

Equipment Required:

• Balls

Aim:

This exercise was used several times early on during the season as the team was getting used to the formation. It’s very much a warm-up exercise to be done at the start of the session, and we’d usually mix in some stretching at regular intervals.

The main aim is to get used to players knowing where they needed to be positionally as the ball is played around, what movement they should be looking to make, and getting to know where their team mates are in the overall shape.
Description:

The team sets up in formation as the goalkeeper plays the ball out from a goal kick. As the ball is passed, the team adjust their positions and make movements based on triggers (eg full back breaking forward when central midfielder can turn, opposite full back tucking in on cover). The pace of the exercise is generally fairly slow paced, with regular pauses to correct positional play or to do some stretches.

In the above diagram you can see the shape clearly set out, and some suggested movement from the players.
Key Coaching Points:

• Positional Play
• Movement triggers

Adaptation:

• More than 11 players – add opposition players to passively press the team in possession
• Less than 11 players – play without players in selected positions and/or cone off an area of the pitch if required
• Add extra balls in to challenge players awareness

Progressing Session:

This is a great warm up for Pattern of Play and Phase of Play exercises that work on team shape.
4. Positional Exercise

Set-Up:

• 40 x 30 yards area with zone around the edge of minimum five yards
• 18 players

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• Bibs (three colours)
• Cones

Aim:

This exercise is a real favourite of mine and I’ve seen versions of it used at all levels of the game including some of the young Spain sides and Premier League teams.

As well as the basics of possession and movement while in and out of possession, it teaches the team to “make the pitch large” when in possession. Also where they should be positionally, which breeds confidence and familiarity that can be taken into matches. It is therefore important to put players in their correct positions in the exercise.
Description:

There are two main teams, both with seven players who play a possession exercise against each other. There are then four neutral players – two of which operate in one of the “outer” positions, and two who operate centrally. All the neutral players play for the team in possession creating an 11 v 7 exercise. When the team are in possession, six players take up positions outside the square, with one remaining central. The team out of possession all go inside the square and are not allowed outside of it (this makes outside the square effectively a “safe” zone for the team in possession.

When possession turns over, the two teams switch as quickly as possible reflecting the need to switch from compact to big and vice versa in a match situation.

It is worth noting that when we have a goalkeeper involved, I always use him as one of the neutral players on the outside, as they need to be able to use their feet effectively in matches.
See the above example with each player labelled with their “normal” position on the field of play. Here Reds are in possession with Green as “neutrals” (including the goalkeeper), and Blues trying to win possession.
Possession has turned over, so Blues drop into the wider positions to make the pitch big, Reds drop into the area to try and compact the space.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Positional Play
- Possession
- Good technique & body position
- Making pitch big
- Positive reaction to losing possession

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- Effective pressing
- Angles and body shape
- Being compact
- Quality when winning possession
Adaptation:

- With different numbers of players, you can reduce the number of neutral players, or reduce the number of players on each team (e.g. with matchday squad of 14 we have done 6 v 6 with two neutrals including the goalkeeper)
- Different size pitches (particularly for different player numbers)
- Restrict neutral players to two touches
- Restrict all players to limited touches

Progressing Session:

As mentioned above, this exercise has been used effectively as a warm-up for match situations. In a training session, it is a good initial exercise when working on positional play, and also on reacting to turnovers of possession.
5. Pattern of Play – Playing From The Back

Set-Up:

• Half to two-thirds pitch
• 12-14 players

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• One full sized goal

Aim:

The aim of this exercise is to help players make effective decisions when playing in a specific formation, to teach the players various triggers, and moves on from the Shape Warm Up described earlier, to playing at full pace.

By creating these situations in the players’ minds, we are hoping to breed familiarity on a match day when similar situations take place.
Description:

Ten players are set up as the outfield players in formation. The three other players are two central defenders and a goalkeeper.

From a set starting position (see over the page), we practice two or three scenarios and create set patterns of play. For example where we are being pressed, where the opponents are sitting deeper, and situations where we need to switch play.
In this first example, from the goalkeeper’s clearance, the central defender knocks down to a supporting midfielder, who lays back for the defensive midfielder to play a diagonal ball wide to the full back bursting forward. The full back will then go on to cross for the strikers, who make intelligent movement to get in front of their markers.

We would use the opposite wing and mirror the movements in the next play, with the goalkeeper’s clearance hit towards the other central defender.
In this example, we practice a situation where our defence is being pressed, and therefore we are looking for a longer pass.

Here the starting point is similar with the central defender receiving a long pass from the goalkeeper, but after gaining possession, the ball is hit longer to one of the two strikers, who then lays off to the overlapping full back.

This play enables us to work on the strikers’ movement (you will notice one coming short to receive the ball, with the other making a run in behind for a potential flick-on).
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Positional Play
- Tactical Play
- Movement Triggers

Adaptation:

- Where more players are present, perhaps add an opposing striker to provide passive pressure on the defenders/defensive midfielder, full backs, or opposing midfielders.
- Where there are fewer players available, work on one side of the pitch and cone a zone on the other side.
- Alter the starting position

Progressing Session:

From this session we would move into Functional or Phase of Play exercises, working on these patterns of play with more opposition.
6. Effective Pressing

Set-Up:

• 40 x 20 yards area divided into two halves
• 12 players

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• Bibs (two colours)
• Cones

Aim:

This very simple exercise works on effective teamwork when out of possession, to not only win the ball, but also to make effective use of it to ensure possession is retained.
Description:

The players are split into two equal teams (6 v 6). One team starts in possession in one half. Four of the opposition team are allowed into the same area to try and win the ball in a 6 v 4. If the four players win the ball back, it is immediately transferred to the two players in the other half of the pitch, who are then joined by their team mates plus four of the opposition. Rules can be added for example points for a team completing ten passes to pressure the defending team to win the ball back quickly.
The first part of the exercise sees a 6 v 4 with Reds in possession, and Blues trying to win possession in one half of the pitch. The two remaining Blue players remain alert, but in the opposite half.
The Blues win possession, and immediately switch to one of their team mates in the other half. The play is now switched to the other half where the six Blues try to keep possession with four of the Reds trying to win it back.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

• Making the area big
• Possession
• Movement
• Positive reaction to losing possession – can we win it straight back?

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

• Making the area compact
• Working as a team – pressing, support angles
• Reaction to winning the ball back – quality switched ball and working hard to support the other players
Adaptation:

• With fewer players, work with two smaller teams and a small area – as long as you have one player in the opposite half when out of possession
• With more players, work with two bigger teams and a larger area. Try to keep the number of players left in the half without the ball to a minimum.
• If odd number of players, add a neutral player to always play for the in possession side.
• If out of possession players are struggling, reduce the playing area, and vice versa. Alternatively, restrict the in possession team to two/three touches.
• With larger number of players, you can add wall passers on the outside of the area.

Progressing Session:

We would likely progress from this exercise to a phase of play exercise working on pressing from the front, winning the ball back and attacking the goal.
7. Switching Play

Set-Up:

• 50 x 30 yards area
• 14 or 16 players

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• Bibs (two colours)
• Cones
• Six small goals (pop-up goals or cones)

Aim:

This exercise is all about switching play, which is a vital element of playing with a 4-4-2 diamond formation. It is incredibly simply to set up and play, but is probably as effective as any in teaching players when to switch. It also has several adaptations both for player availability and progression.
Description:

The players are divided into two equal teams, and pitch is set up with three goals along each long side – one central and two wide. The aim for each side is to switch the ball effectively to be able to score in one of the three goals.

Here it is the Reds in possession, keeping the ball, drawing the opposition in to one area before quickly switching the ball to score.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Quality possession
- Movement
- Quick play to move the ball quickly from one side to the other
- Play in small area to attract opponents into area to enable switch via a longer pass

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- Positioning
- Effective pressing

Adaptation:

- The exercise can work with different numbers of players, as long as the two sides are equal.
- With odd numbers, use the extra player as a neutral who plays with whoever is in possession.
- If you have a goalkeeper or two goalkeepers, they can add to the progression of the session (see below).
- The area can always be altered if either side struggles.
Progressing Session:

There are a number of progressions to the session. First one is to use two cones as each goal, so that you add an extra player outside the pitch area to receive a pass through one of the goals. The addition of this player means the team in possession has to work with the player to complete a pass through the “correct” goal. Alternatively, this player can be defensive, so the team in possession has to score through one of the two undefended goals. Goalkeepers can also be used for this role, either in front of, or behind the goals.

A further progression is to set the exercise up on a larger area (eg half a pitch) with a full sized goal at one end. The players then work from the goalkeeper to score in one of the three smaller goals at the other end.
8. Finishing

Set-Up:

- Area 40 x 30 yards with two full sized goals
- 10 players plus two goalkeepers

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (two colours)
- Cones
- Two full sized goals

Aim:

This exercise is simply about finishing, which no matter which formation you play is absolutely vital. How many times have you done an exercise where you feed the ball into the coach’s feet, receive it back to have a shot at goal, unopposed and with no relation to the reality of a match situation? This exercise recreates the intensity of the match situation in a compressed area that means you have to finish quickly and with quality. It also prepares the goalkeepers for realistic situations and requires them to react quickly to rebounds etc...
Description:

The pitch is set up as shown and an intense small sided game takes place. When goals are scored, the goalkeeper serves the ball out to their own team to restart.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

• Quick play to create opportunities
• Finishing
• Reacting to opportunities from rebounds

Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

• Pressing to create opportunities to score
• Quality first pass when regaining possession

Key Coaching Points – goalkeepers:

• Quick distribution
• Reactions
• Quick recovery after initial save
Adaptation:

- If only one goalkeeper, play multidirectional so team must complete pass in end zone (replacing second goal) before attacking goal.
- With different player numbers, adjust the area as required.
- If there are odd numbers, use the spare player as a neutral working with the players in possession.
- If a neutral is involved, restrict them to not being able to score.
- Restrict the number of touches allowed to encourage quick play.
- Restrict shooting to only being first time.

Progressing Session:

This exercise is a good one to do before working on an attacking phases or patterns of play.
9. When to Press

Set-Up:

• 22 players
• Full sized pitch

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• Bibs (two colours)
• Full Sized Goals

Aim:

This exercise is essentially a full 11 v 11 with the emphasis on teaching the players tactically, how they are going to defend as a team. We aim to show the players the appropriate time to press the opposition when out of possession and ensure when pressing takes place, that the rest of team is set up correctly to provide support and cover.
Description:

Set up is 11 v 11 on a full sized pitch. Play starts with a specified starting position (for example the ball played through to one goalkeeper). The exercise is then live, with the coach stopping the game to instruct players or groups of players tactically.

Example set-up for coaching pressing in the diamond formation. The ball is played out to the opposition defensive midfielder, so the Red no.10 closes down, with the strikers covering passes to wide areas.
Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

• Pressing when nearest the ball
• Support
• Cover
• If press not possible, can we delay?
• Dictate where play goes
• Positioning when no pressure on ball

Adaptation:

• As this is an 11 v 11 phase of play exercise, it can be adapted for any number of sessions, both in possession and out of possession.
• If fewer players are available, the session can work on a smaller pitch – coaching the principles and tactics.
• If goalkeepers are not available, use a sweeper at the back instead.

Progressing Session:

The natural progression from this exercise is what to do when the ball is won – counter attacks and finishing. If player availability allows, this exercise can be repeated over a number of sessions until all tactics are covered.
10. Playing Out From the Back

Set-Up:

• Half or two thirds of a full sized pitch
• 15 players (including a GK)

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• Bibs
• One full sized goal, two small goals (use cones if required)

Aim:

The aim of this exercise is to get the goalkeeper, back four, and the more defensive of the midfield four comfortable playing out from the back, and also teaching when is the right time to play from the back, and when to look for an “out” ball.
Description:

Set up with one team with a goalkeeper, back four, defensive midfielder and two central midfielders. The opposition consists of two strikers, a number 10, two midfielders and three defenders. A starting point is set (either a goal kick, or one of the opposition defenders overhitting a pass to the goalkeeper). The goalkeeper then looks to play out from the back. If the team is pressed, the team have the option to play a channel “out” ball into one of the two small goals.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Correct positional set up (eg wide full backs)
- Rotation of midfield three
- Confidence to play where overload exists
- Playing through Defensive Midfielder
- When to play short, when to play long.

Adaptation:

- Players can be added or removed from either side as appropriate. For example, adding one striker to the team in possession as an alternative “out” ball, or adding more players to the out of possession team to put the team in possession under greater pressure.
- Playing in a smaller area can give the in possession team greater confidence in a match situation on a full sized pitch.

Progressing Session:

The exercise can be progressed to a full 11 v 11 exercise as appropriate.
11. Overlapping

Set-Up:

• Half pitch
• 16 players

Equipment Required:

• Balls
• Bibs (two colours)
• Cones
• One full sized goal, two small goals (use cones if required)

Aim:

The role of overlapping is vital in the 4-4-2 Diamond Formation, whether it be the full back from deep, or for example, one of the midfielders supporting the forward players. This exercise concentrates on overlapping in wide areas. The exercise can take an initial practice, where the wide areas are zoned off, allowing the full backs space to move and provide crosses, then can progress into a full phase of play with no restrictions.
Description:

The players are divided into two teams. The defending team has a goalkeeper, back four, defensive midfielder and two central midfielders. The attacking team has one deep lying midfielder, two full backs, two central midfielders, a number ten and two strikers. The exercise has a starting position (as a suggestion, the goalkeeper playing the ball to the opposing deep lying midfielder), and the game is then live. There are two zoned wide areas. Each zoned area is only allowed one attacking player in it at each time. There are two small goals on the half way line for the defending team to counter attack into. The goalkeeper then looks to play out from the back. If the team is pressed, the team have the option to play a channel “out” ball into one of the two small goals.
In this example, Blues in possession play the ball from one of the defenders into a midfielder – this is the trigger point for the full back to overlap to receive the next pass.

An alternative would be for the full-back to cut inside and allow the midfielder to overlap. The restriction of only allowing one player in the wide zone at a time is key to the learning.
Key Coaching Points – team in possession:

- Trigger movements, when to overlap
- Movement of players inside to create space to overlap
- Opposite movement from other full back (to cover counter attack)

Adaptation:

- If fewer players available, remove one central midfielder from each team
- The exercise can also be more a function (so only working on one wide area at a time)

Progressing Session:

The obvious progression is the removal of the zones so the teams play without restrictions. Further players can also be added to the session taking it up to a full 11 v 11 exercise.
12. Creating Overloads

Set-Up:

- 70 v 30 area divided into thirds
- 17 players including two goalkeepers

Equipment Required:

- Balls
- Bibs (three colours)
- Cones or Markers
- Two full sized goals

Aim:

This is another favourite. Creating overloads is one of the key concepts of the 4-4-2 Diamond formation, and this exercise works on players moving into different zones of the pitch to create overloads to allow the team to play through the thirds of the pitch.
Description:

The pitch is divided into thirds with the central third being slightly larger. The teams line up in 2-3-2 formations, with goalkeepers at each end and one neutral player in the central area. When in possession in the defensive third, one of the three midfielders drops in to create a 3 v 2 overload. In the central zone, the neutral player creates the overload for the team in possession, and in the final third, one of the midfielders joins in to again create a 3 v 2. If the team out of possession wins the ball, they should go for goal as quickly as possible.
Reds have possession in this example, so one of the three Red midfielders drops into the defensive zone to make a 3 v 2. Once the ball is passed into the central zone, the player returns into the midfield zone to create a 4 v 3 overload with the neutral Orange player.

**Key Coaching Points – team in possession:**

- Possession
- Good movement
- Good decision making
Key Coaching Points – team out of possession:

- Defending when outnumbered
- Quality when winning possession

Adaptation:

- The size of the area can be adapted as skill levels require or to challenge the players further.
- If goalkeepers are not available, use either small pop up goals, or players have to complete pass in additional end zone.
- If extra players are available, use larger area and different formations eg 3-4-3. The main thing is that teams should be equal in each zone if possible.

Progressing Session:

Progress to full size game session and removing zones, so players have to recognise the right areas to overload without the guidance of the marked zones.