Overview:
The session is about playing into positive pockets behind the opposition midfield upon regain of possession. For a team such as ours, the sum is greater than our parts, and we need to be particularly realistic in our thinking. Michael O’Neill
Positive pockets

**SET-UP**
- **AREA:** Use of a full pitch
- **EQUIPMENT:** Balls, cones, goals, mannequins, mini-goals
- **NUMBER OF PLAYERS:** Up to 22
- **SESSION TIME:** 75mins each

**What do I get the players to do?**

**Warm-up (not shown) (15mins)**
One of our coaches will run a conventional warm-up to get players ready both physically and mentally.

**Stage 1 (12mins, 90secs x 4, two groups)**
Setting up as shown (1), this is 4v4 in the box. After two passes players can then transfer to the grey player in the centre, then to support the ball in the opposite box. If successful, the team maintains possession; if not the other team keeps the ball and then takes up the task themselves.

**What are the key things to look out for?**
Players for the team in possession are encouraged to find ‘the pocket’ in between opponents before transferring – they need to volunteer to move into tight possession areas.
Grey players must work off the angles to facilitate movement of the ball from one end of the area to the other.
Pass restrictions can be removed as players become more adept, but rarely can the transfer be rapid as the team with possession needs time to move across into the empty space.

Analysis led us to realise that possession equalling success versus the Faroes was a myth. Instead, we found that they lost 80% of their goals from moves of a possession phase of fewer than five passes. Long periods of possession therefore reduced our chances of scoring, while positive pockets encouraged accelerated, dynamic attacks.

So upon turnover we needed to have a trained process of getting players quickly into positive pockets behind the midfield, and finding those players – notably Oliver Norwood and Steven Davis – within one or two passes. This session moves from training in isolation through the coached phase, to ending with the players finding the moment in the game.

We would run this session four days before the game and the workload broadly comes in at 5,500-6,500 metres, with 30-50 accelerations/decelerations. Any nearer the game and there would be a danger of fatigue.
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Stage 2
(18mins, two groups with rotation)
Setting up as shown (2), the ball starts with the defensive midfielder, who chooses the full-back with an initial deep pass. The ball is then played into the pocket - where mannequins represent opponents - for the attacking central midfielder. When he receives and turns this is the trigger for a team mate to break the line from wide. This is in keeping with getting the ball there in two passes.

When the winger has broken the line and received, it’s the cue for our three key attacking players to ‘hit the box’. While the pocket player’s instruction is simple - he must make a positive, attacking pass in one or two touches - we still want to explore ways of developing the role of the wide player. We can do this either by encouraging him inside (for a direct run on goal) or recommending he goes outside the full-back. In an instance where the midfielder is ‘low’ and cannot make it into the pocket, we would expect the wide player to drift in to occupy that space.

Stage 3 (15mins)
Setting up as shown we organise with eight attackers and three defenders (3). The ball starts with the defensive midfielder who chooses the full-back with an initial deep pass. The game is then played within the lines of the box with players encouraged to come into the pocket (with the mannequins acting as outside midfielders in a four) and make runs ‘from out to in’ leaving the gap for the full-back.

Players can only ‘activate’ an attack when they receive the ball within the lines of the mannequins.

If an attacking midfielder finds this pocket then the wide player keeps his width; if the wide player finds the pocket, the full-back is responsible for the width.

The aim here is to try to move the opposition full-backs into the pocket, leaving their centre-backs engaged with our striker. If a full-back is engaged the defensive unit becomes so narrow that the wide player can break lines centrally, or the full-back can be in a high position to cross.
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Stage 4 (15 mins)
Setting up as shown with a 9v8 and opposition midfielders replacing the mannequins (4), the first attack allows the pocket to activate the route forward. Except now the second ball represents a situation in a live game whereby whites, upon regains, look for the mini-goals, giving the game shape and inviting a competition element. This allows space to find pockets.

The match element invites players to find pockets in different areas as well as allowing the space for more to develop naturally. The ball must go into the positive pocket within three passes of possession being regained (which means the player must be ready in the pocket within two). When in there it’s likely, at first, players will choose to feed the wide player, but as a game progresses they will grow more comfortable in the role and will discover central situations where the pocket is most open.

What are the key things to look out for?
Where technical play is concerned we want to see receiving on the back foot and on the half-turn, and players checking over their shoulders as the ball comes in to them. Hips should be facing towards the goals and the intention should always be to pass up the pitch. Finally, players should not stop the ball—they should always be on the move with it.

For tactical observations players must never make square passes on a turnover as these allow the opposition to get back and cement defensive shape, and must be clear as to whether they should get to the pocket or play into the pocket. The man in the pocket should never play backwards, and we want to see attacks finished in five passes.

We want to encourage players to be positive, not just in retaining the ball but in feeling able to take the risk of losing it with shots, crosses and dribbles. In some matches the mistake is actually in not taking the risk though this may vary depending on the opposition, scoreline or game plan.

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