

**SALFORD CITY**

**Graham Alexander  
& Chris Lucketti**  
**Defending in the  
final third**

**SET-UP**

**AREA**

Two thirds of a pitch

**EQUIPMENT**

Balls, bibs, cones, 2 full size goals

**NUMBER OF PLAYERS**

18 players + 2 goalkeepers

**SESSION TIME**

60 minutes

**Overview**

This session is all about defending in the final third. It's a practice that we use regularly as it replicates situations that defenders face in games every week. We feel that defending properly gives teams the opportunity to go on and win games – and the key to good defending is repetition in training, whether that's defending as individuals in wide areas or defending as part of a back four unit. It's also important to win the first contact with the ball, whether that's in the air or on the ground, and this session is the ideal preparation for that.

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

**Defending the final third**

We set up on two thirds of a full size pitch with a goal and goalkeeper at each end. We're using 18 outfield players, split into a red team of 10 and a blue team of 8. The teams are set up as shown, with the blues defending the short end of the pitch and the reds defending the long end. In front of the penalty area defended by the reds, three 20-yard zones are marked across the pitch with cones: a 1v1 box on either wing and a wider 4v4 box in the centre.

**Play 1:** The coach starts play by teeing up one of the blue defenders. The defender receives the ball and plays

**1a DEFENDING THE FINAL THIRD: PLAY 1**

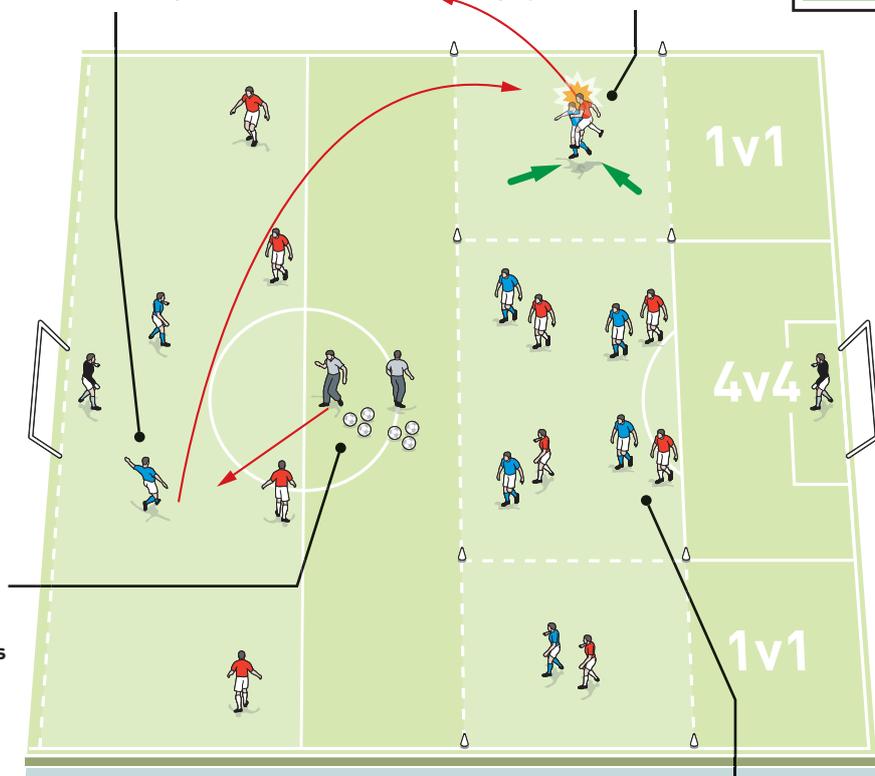
**2** The blue defender plays a lofted pass into one of the wide 1v1 boxes in the other half of the pitch

**3** A red full back competes in the air with a blue wide player and clears the ball

**KEY**

- Ball movement →
- Player movement →
- Player movement →
- Dribble .....→

**1** The coach starts by passing to one of the blue defenders



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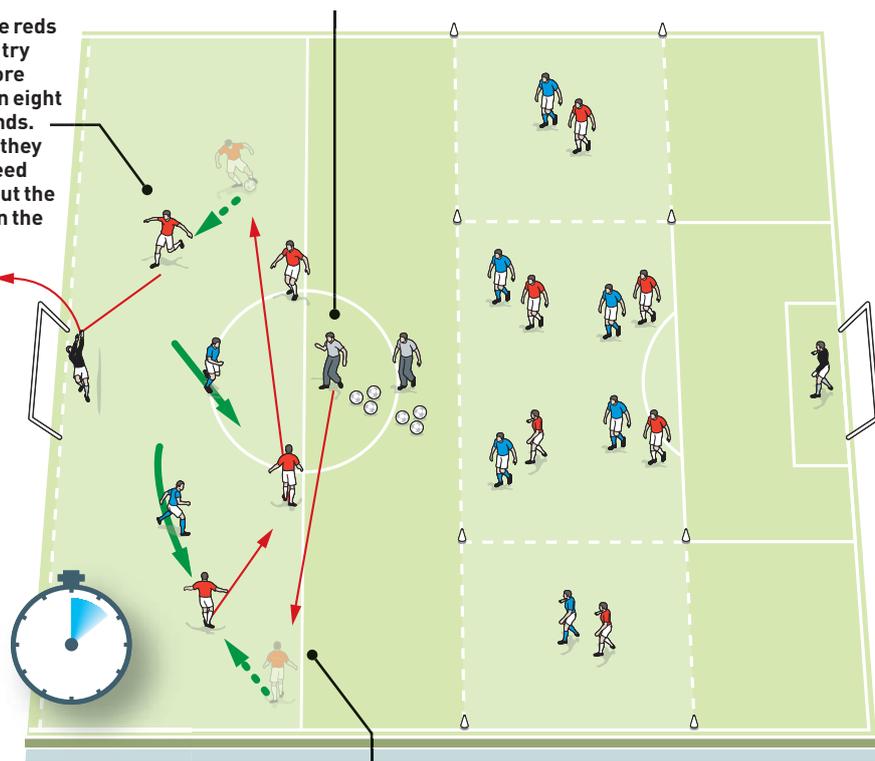
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**4** The covering positions of the red defensive unit need to be compact to stop a blue attack in case the red full back fails to clear the ball

**1b**

**1** Straight after the red full back clears the ball, the coach launches a red attack at the other end with a second ball

**3** The reds must try to score within eight seconds. Here they succeed and put the ball in the net



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**2** The red forwards attack with a 4v2 overload

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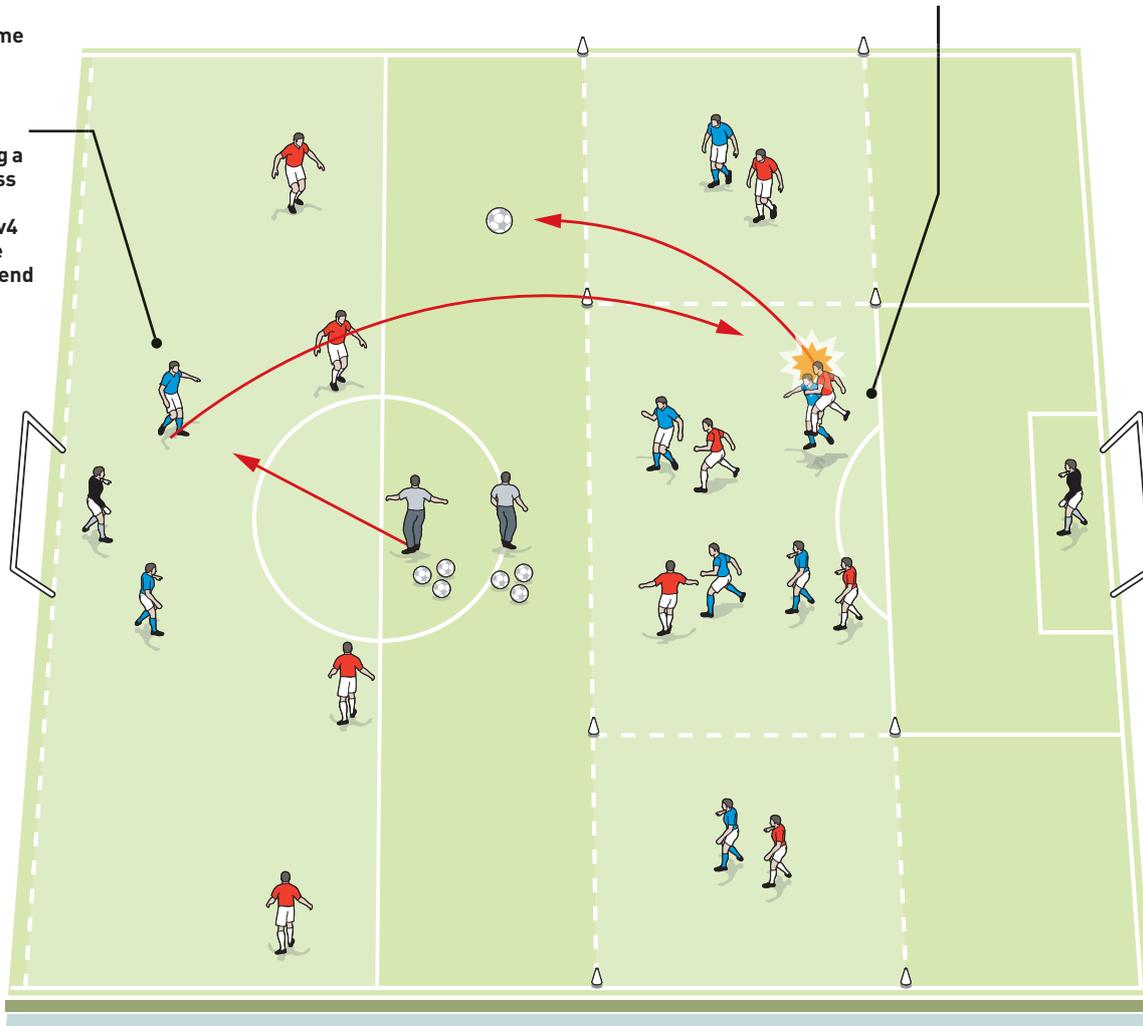
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**2 DEFENDING THE FINAL THIRD: PLAY 2**

**KEY**  
 Ball movement →  
 Player movement →  
 Dribble .....→

**2** A red centre back competes with strikers in the air to head the ball clear. If he is successful, the coach then launches another 4v2 attack at the other end, as in diagram 1b

**1** This time the blue defender launches an attack by playing a lofted pass into the central 4v4 box at the opposite end



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“It’s important to win the first contact with the ball, whether that’s in the air or on the ground”

a long, lofted pass into one of the wide 1v1 boxes in the other half of the pitch, where a red full back competes in the air with a blue wide player to clear the ball, as shown [1a]. In case the defender fails to win the ball, the covering positions of the rest of the red defensive unit need to be compact to stop a blue attack. However, if the red full back is successful and wins the first

contact, the coach then plays a ball to the red forwards at the opposite end, who attack with a 4v2 overload, as shown [1b]. They must try to score a goal within eight seconds. We then repeat both these attacks, this time starting with a lofted pass into the other wide 1v1 box on the opposite wing [not shown].

**Play 2:** To start the next attack, the

coach tees up the blue defender to play a lofted pass into the 4v4 box at the opposite end, where a red centre back will compete with strikers in the air to head the ball clear, as shown [2]. If the red centre back is successful and wins the first contact, the coach plays a ball to the red forwards at the opposite end, who then attack in a 4v2 overload, just as before in diagram 1b.

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**Play 3:** This time the coach starts play with a ground pass played directly to a blue winger in the wide box and he goes 1v1 against the red defender. The rest of the players in the red back four must stay compact and shift over to cover as the blue forwards attack. If the red defenders are successful and clear the ball, as shown [3], the coach plays another ball into to the red forwards at the other end and they attack with a 4v2 overload again. They

have eight seconds to score. We then repeat both these attacks, this time starting with a ground pass into the other wide 1v1 box on the opposite wing [not shown].

**Play 4:** This time the coach plays a ground pass directly into the central 4v4 box, where four blue attacker go up against two red centre backs and two red central midfielders. The reds must use good communication and effective shot-blocking to

deny goal scoring opportunities. If the red defenders are successful and clear the ball, as shown [4], the coach then plays a ball to the red forwards at the opposite end, who have eight seconds to score by attacking with a 4v2 overload.

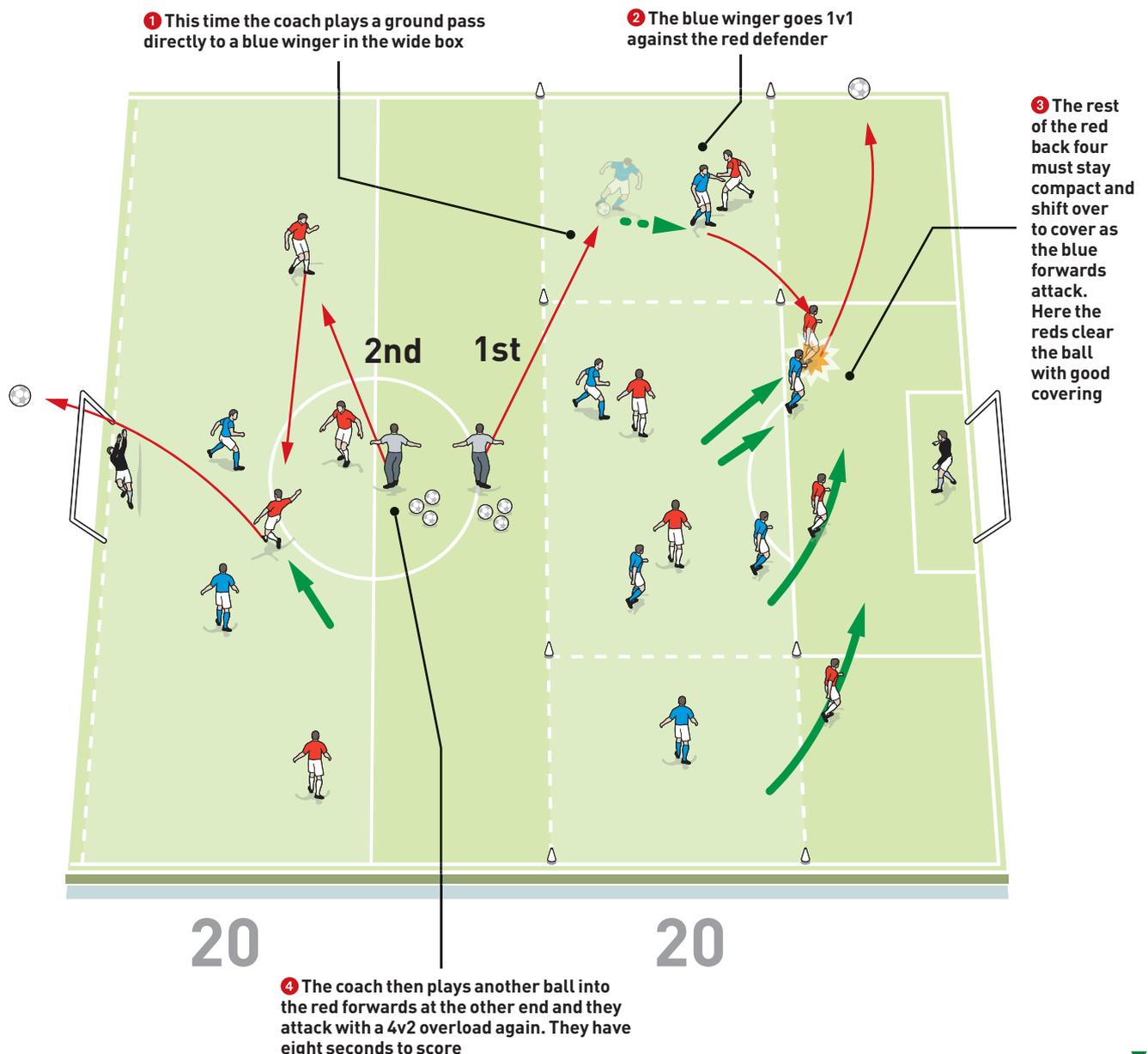
**KEY**

- Ball movement →
- Player movement →
- Dribble →

**What are the key things to look out for?**

We want to see that defenders know how to judge the flight of the ball and can

**3 DEFENDING THE FINAL THIRD: PLAY 3**

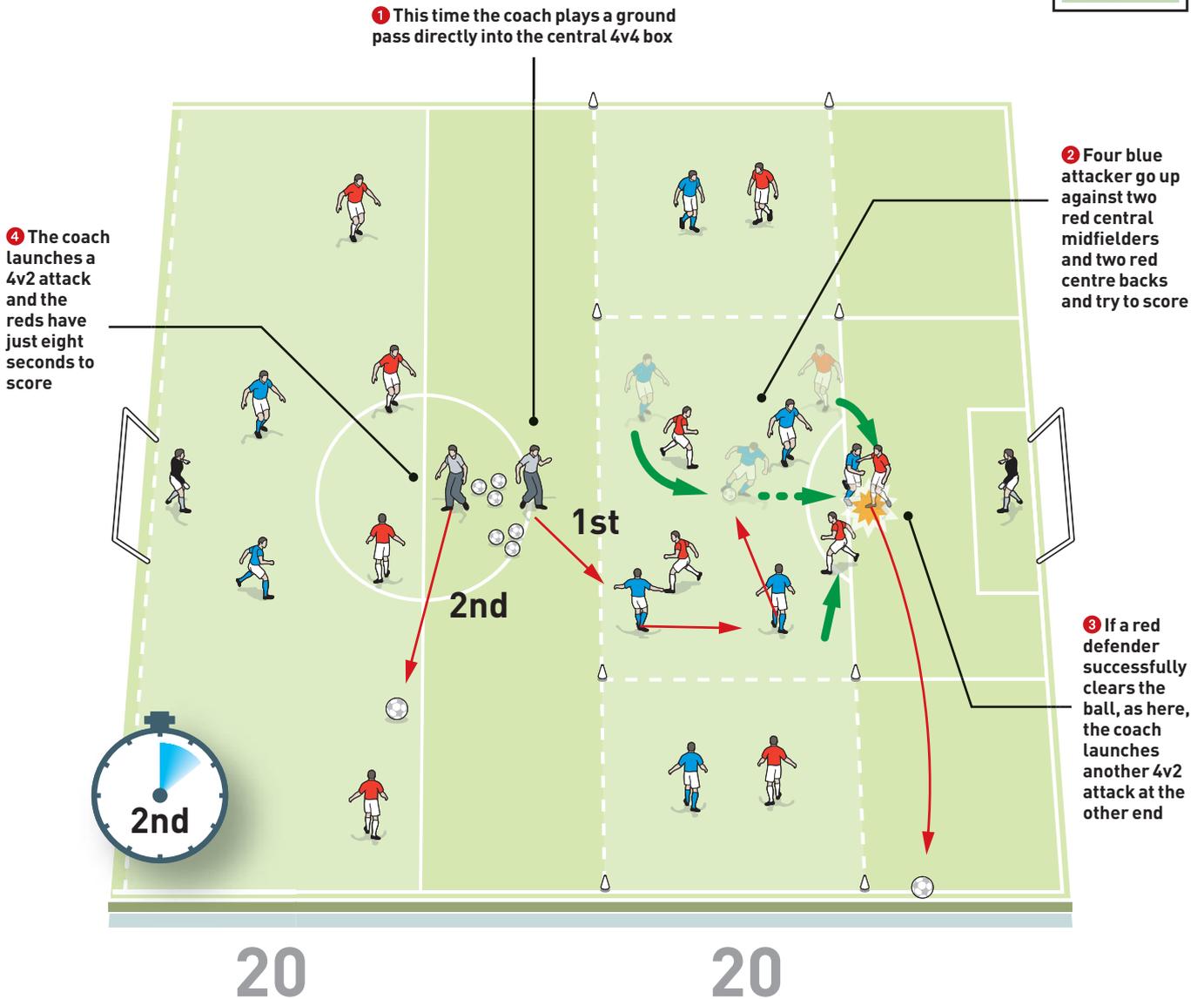


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**4 DEFENDING THE FINAL THIRD: PLAY 4**

**KEY**

- Ball movement →
- Player movement →
- Dribble →



“We like to see defenders demonstrating that they are able to spot weaknesses in their opponents, such as a weaker foot to show them onto”

attack it in the air before their opponents can get to it. We also want to see that defenders have the ability to defend 1v1, and can demonstrate the physical strength, speed and agility to stop their opponents. Football intelligence helps and we like to see defenders demonstrating that they are

able to spot weaknesses in their opponents, such as a weaker foot to show them onto. Communication when defending in a 4v4 is important, as is knowing when to press the ball and when to give depth in covering positions. And we like to see bravery from defenders when they move to block shots and crosses.

**What are the typical mistakes players might make and how do I avoid them?**

Typical mistakes include diving in on your opponent and giving reckless fouls away, which lead to dangerous set pieces. Patient defending is needed to make an opponent work hard to beat you.