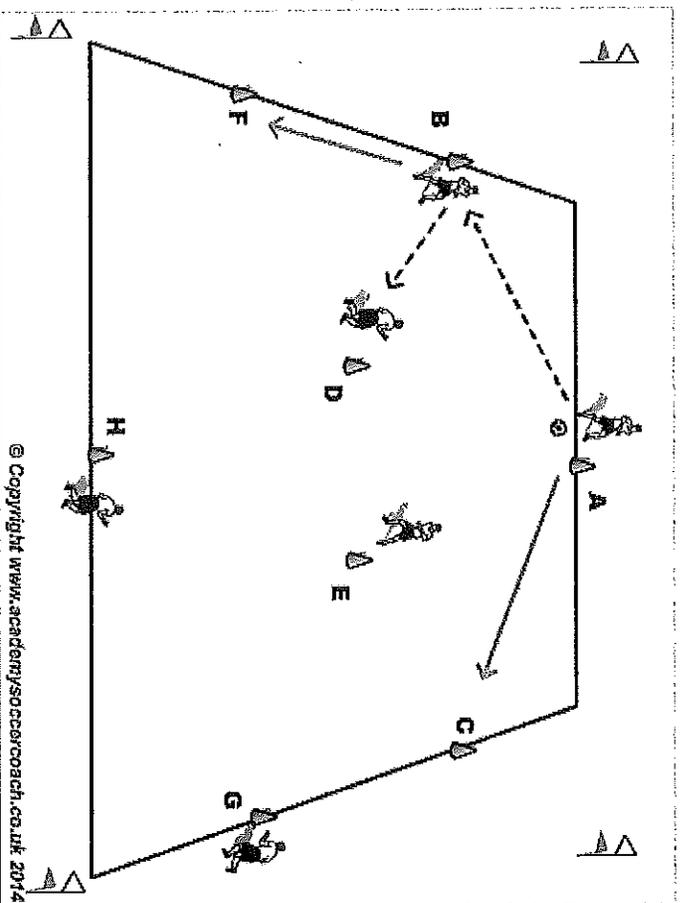


- As service goes into the air, now challenge players to keep the ball in the air for their pass also

Exercise Four

Too many passing exercises are dominated by passes in straight lines or where, if there is movement involved, players are encouraged to follow their pass. The reality is that the game challenges players to do so much more. Therefore, we must challenge our holding midfielder to open up in possession, play at different angles, and move in relation to the position of the ball. This exercise focuses on all of the above.

Six players are involved and the exercise takes place in a 20x40 yard area where the cones are arranged as shown from A-D. There are four poles in the corners that are located 15 yards from the playing area. Each player starts on a cone and two cones are unattended.



Player A starts the exercise and can pass to anyone in the area. After passing the ball, he/she must then sprint to one of the two open cones. The second player must do the same and the sequence then continues. You cannot play back to the person who passed you the ball and you also

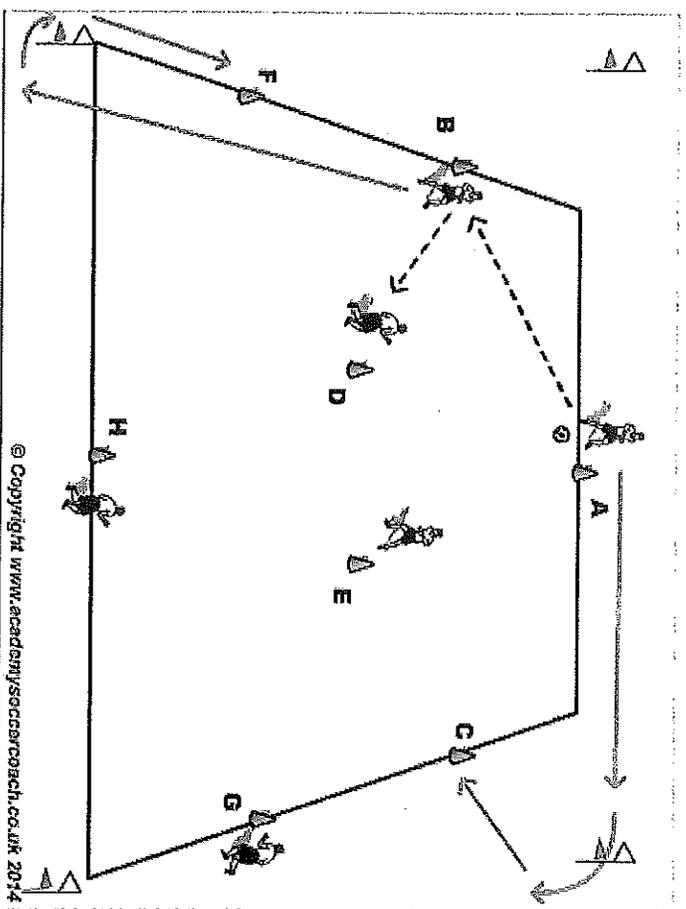
cannot play square passes. For example, B cannot play C, D cannot play E, and F cannot play G.

Coaching Points

- Players must get their heads up to see what their options are and which player is at what cone.
- Because they cannot play square passes, players must be encouraged to open up in possession.
- Weight of the pass is of vital importance within the group. Too soft and it slows down the movement, too firm and the receiver is immediately at a disadvantage.

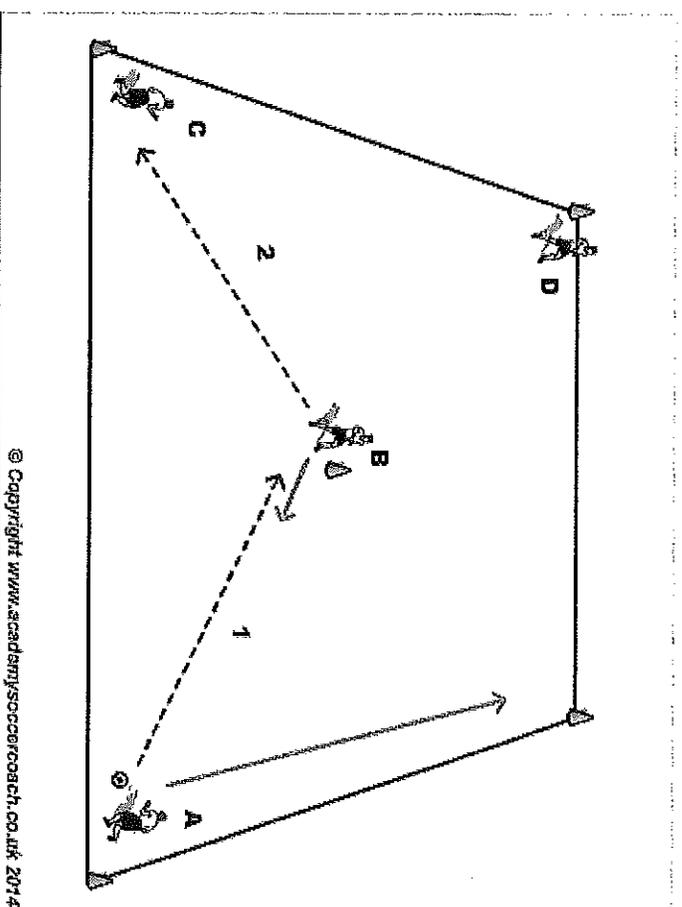
Progressions

- Players are limited to two touches. This will place a huge emphasis on the quality of their first touch.
- Players must pass and receive using alternate feet. Again, this emphasizes first touch but also challenges the body shape of the player receiving the ball.
- Challenge the group to get twenty passes in one minute. This number increases or decreases due to the skill level of the players. Now the speed and intensity of the exercise will increase and you should be drilling for more mistakes.
- After every pass, players must now sprint around one of the four poles on the outside before re-entering the playing area. This increases the physical demand on players as well as the mental demands, of concentration and decision making with additional stimuli to deal with. (See below)



Exercise Five

Although it may seem that a holding midfielder does not cover much ground, they must learn to use intelligent movement in order to create space for themselves and teammates. This exercise focuses on passing and movement in a midfield area. A lot of passing exercises that incorporate movement involve a 'follow your pass' pattern. The reality of the modern game, however, requires that players actually move in a different direction to the pass itself. When you watch the great Barcelona midfield of Xavi, Busquets, and Iniesta, you see their movement patterns in terms of angles of support rather than simply crowding around the ball. They understand how to create space for themselves and others. This helps the player in possession because they now have an option that can release pressure, rather than a pass that allows the opposition to press.



The set-up takes place in a 15x15 yard square with a cone in the middle. The midfielders are in groups of four. One midfielder starts in the middle so there is one cone free at the perimeter at all times. The rules are simple: after passing the ball, players must take up a new position at the cone that is free. Players cannot pass the ball straight back from where they received the ball.

In the example below, play begins with a pass by player A into the middle to player B. After the pass, player A moves up to the free cone right ahead. Player B controls and passes to player C, and must then move to the space that player A vacated. The pattern continues.

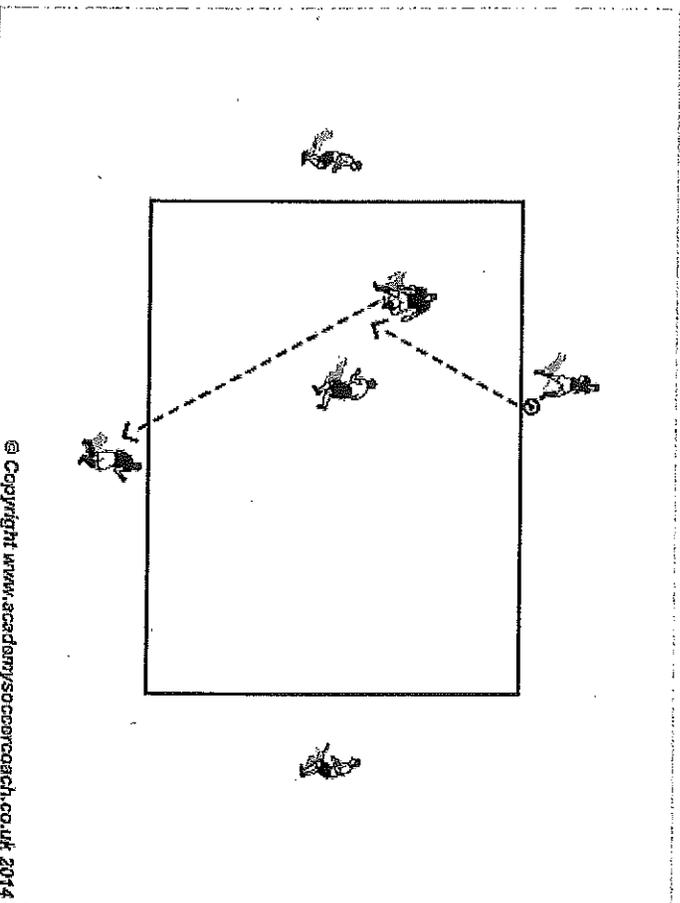
Coaching Points

- Technically, the weight and direction of the pass are key. Play the ball where the next player wants to go with their next pass. The receiver can make this easier by signaling exactly where they want the ball.
- Players need to make decisions before the ball arrives. The quicker the tempo, the more challenging it becomes to make these decisions quickly.

Exercise Seven

Consistency of passing is a common theme when we discuss the demands of an elite holding midfielder. However, isolated technical exercises may not guarantee success in game situations. Below is a 1v1 exercise that focuses on receiving the ball under pressure, trying to create space, and transferring the ball from one area to another.

The exercise takes place in a 15x15 yard square, which can be adapted to suit the skill levels of the players. There are two teams of three players. Two holding midfielders start in the middle with a target player on each side. The rules are simple: the team in black gain a point by transferring the ball vertically from one side to the other. Alternatively, the team in white scores by transferring the ball across from one target player to the other. The target players cannot play to each other, so play has to go through the holding midfielder in the middle. Target players are also limited to two touches. Play for 90 seconds before rotating players.



Coaching Points

- The holding midfielder who can successfully create space consistently will win this game. It is important that they do not receive the ball facing the passer. Instead, they should look to get 'sideways on' so they can face passer and target.
- Receiving skills will also be put to the test. If the holding midfielder has created enough space to play forward, he/she should look to receive the ball on the back foot and 'open up'.
- Do not force possession. If possession turns over it could result in a goal. Therefore, if it is not on to play forward, encourage the holding midfielder to go back to the passer and take a new position.
- Because it is a 1v1 game in a tight area, defensive transition is critical to success. If players cannot apply pressure quickly enough, they will struggle to stop the opposition player from scoring.

Progressions

- Restrict the outside players to one touch. As well as challenging them technically, it will also test the player in the middle to find space quicker.
- Keep the score rolling, play 1 minute sets, and have a team winner. This should add a competitive element that will help improve the speed of play.

Conclusion

The holding midfielder is very much a position which is over-coached but under-taught. They also seem to suffer most when it comes to new fashionable terms which coaches cannot wait to use as they are encouraged to take the role of 'double pivots' who can combat 'false nines' that operate 'between the lines'. Yes, the game is changing and yes, the holding midfielder's role is expanding, but let's not overcomplicate it. Instead, our focus must be on the type of holding midfielder we have available; establish a clear understanding of the system we would like them to operate in, and then cater our training program accordingly. It is a position which combines traits of both the artist and the soldier. It requires intelligence, mobility, technique, and leadership. As Italy and Manchester United are finding out, a Pirlo or Scholes do not come around