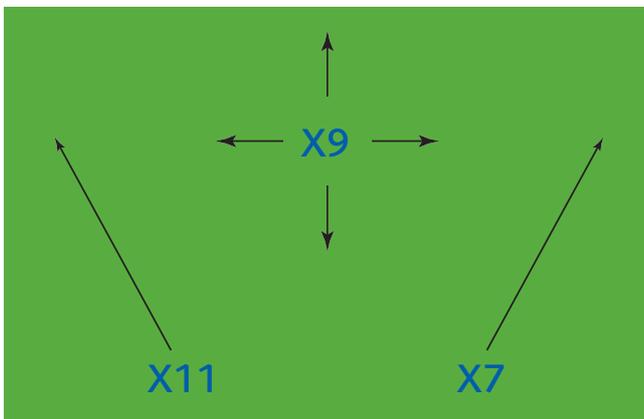# Playing with a front three

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As you may be aware, the technical script of The Football Association Youth Teams encompasses the philosophy of playing with three attackers.

In today's modern game the majority of teams play with a back four. In respect of attacking and defending against the back four, the flexibility of a front three from an offensive as well as defensive standpoint can be quite varied.

Prior to my arrival at The FA last year, I had developed a policy at Derby County's Football Academy of playing with a front three. This took the form of one central advanced striker, with two narrow front men in behind.

The width of the team came from two wing backs, while a central midfield two, protected the back three. At the time, the personnel I had at my disposal meant we were strongest within this system. The qualities of the front three were:

● a good target player at the helm who received the ball well under pressure. He had physical presence, who although not the quickest, was extremely good at bringing the two other strikers and midfield players into play.

● the qualities of the two narrow strikers in behind were running at defenders with the ball, while also making positive runs in behind and between them
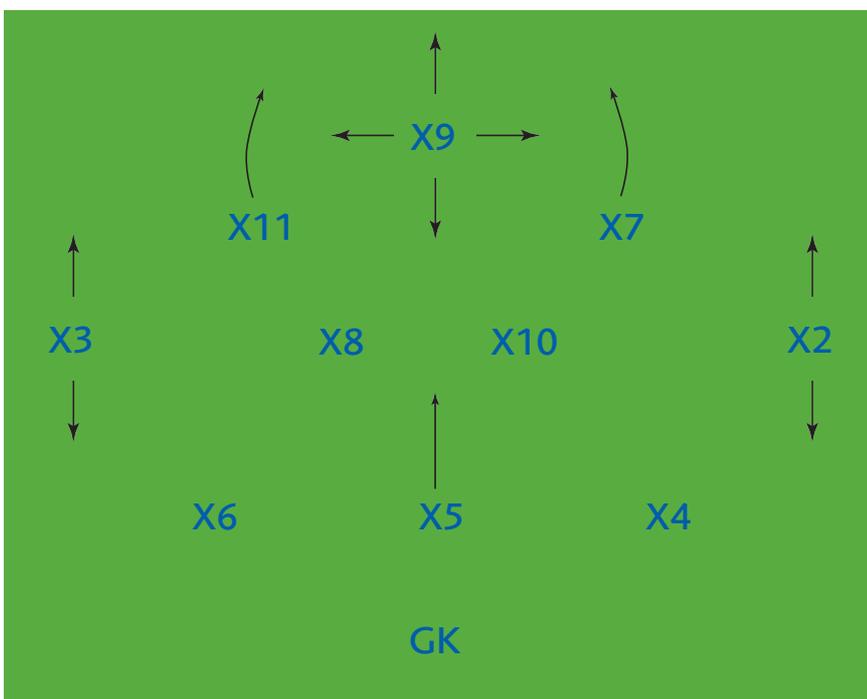
It was our belief at the Club that we developed the system around the players at our disposal. However, making sure the players understood the strategy and tactics was the most important issue and this was done through the usual theory and practical sessions.

My return to The FA in 2002 resulted in a slight change of thinking on my behalf. Here the system was firmly laid down, four defenders, three midfield players and three attackers. This obviously became easier to achieve as selection is taken over a much bigger pool of players. This also meant continuity and a degree of understanding between all the international youth teams. Time spent on practice prior to an international is limited, therefore establishing the principles makes for easier learning. However, there is obviously a degree of flexibility within the playing of three attackers. The usual way is to play a central striker (number 9) with a deep lying forward (number 10) and two wide players (number 7 and number 11). There is obviously width in this formation and the qualities of speed, creation of individual space and a positive attitude by the two wide players, is extremely important. The Dutch have played this system over the years as

well as anybody. A central striker with presence and two wide players who like to attack the full backs both inside and outside was common practice.

Modifications to the front three include two strikers and a wide player, while a front two and one in behind ('in the hole') is also much used. There is now a large proportion of international as well as Club teams developing this policy of attacking with a three. In my last year with the England Under 17 team, of the 15 games played prior to our qualification to the European Finals in May, seven international teams played with a front three. As mentioned earlier, there are modifications and variations within it, but it is my belief that the reasons behind playing with a front three are two fold.

Defensively it provides a solid base in order to defend further up the pitch. The three attackers can effectively defend high up the pitch against a back four if this is the strategy. If, however, we want to relinquish space and retreat to the middle third, withdrawing the front two wide attackers means we would effectively defend with a midfield five. The decision when to press would be triggered in this middle third, with the hope of denying space behind and forcing the opposition to play in front of us.

From an attacking perspective, it also generates more fluidity and flexibility thereby making us less predictable. Players are affected by two main things: movement of the ball and movement of players. If the ball can be moved quickly from end to end and side to side, it obviously makes life more difficult. This allied to effective movement behind, in between and across defenders, results in confusion and uncertainty in a back line. There are obvious qualities allied to this, namely good players who can pass the ball accurately in front and behind defenders. The awareness of when and where to deliver the pass is key, as is the timing, angle and speed of the movement in order to create and exploit the space either in front or behind. The various types of movement are highlighted and reflect generally the position on the pitch, ie central or wide.

The importance of patterns of play are constantly rehearsed, sometimes in a practice with a numerical advantage to the attackers, in order to achieve success, but later in a more challenging environment in either reduced space or with an equality of numbers. Within coaching this is the acid test and determines whether they tried to understand, but can't readily identify the when, where and how or whether they have gained from the practice by making some excellent decisions. In my time as a coach, players who make the grade at the top level invariably pick up the 'cues' much quicker and generally make more correct decisions. Technically they obviously need to be proficient but it is the game understanding which differentiates the good youth player from a youth international. This is obviously allied to certain mental and physical characteristics, particularly in today's modern game which require speed of thought as well as athletic movement.

To summarise, these are some of the qualities required to become an effective front player, playing in a formation with three attackers:

Number 9

Technical, Physical and Mental

- Good receiver – feet and space
- Finisher – floor and head
- Composure
- Turner
- Pace
- Strength
- Authority/Leadership

Skill

- Creating and exploiting space (when, where and how)
- Understanding when to play quickly
- Defensive understanding – when to press, when to retreat

Number 7 and Number 11

Technical, Physical and Mental

- Running and dribbling
- All round crosser
- Pace
- Good engine
- Positive/Invention
- Finisher – head and floor
- Receiver and Turner

Skill

- Creating individual space:
  - in front
  - behind
  - side
- Positional interchange – when, where and how
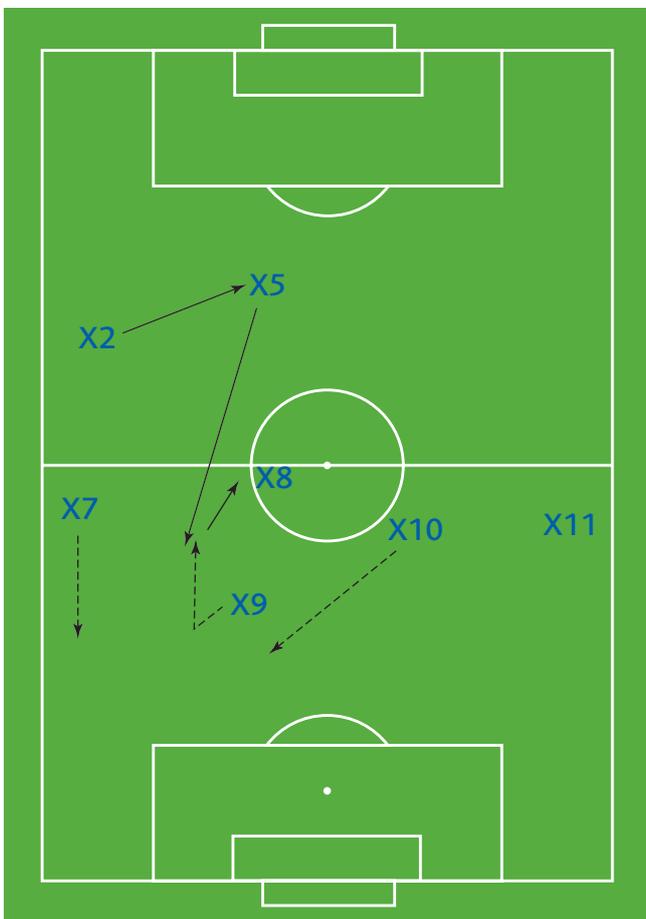- Defending 1 v 1 and knowing when, where to recover.
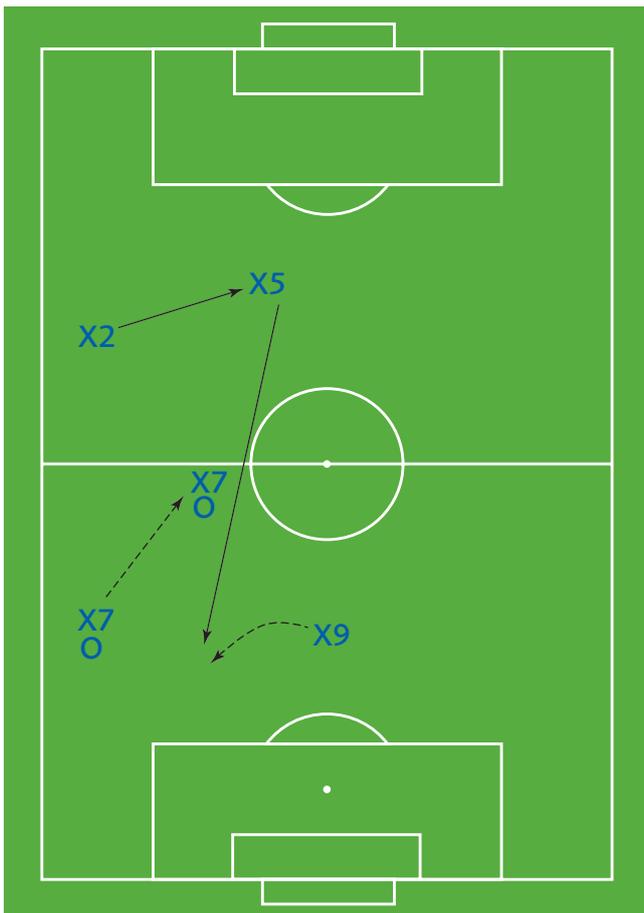
MOVEMENT DRILLS – CENTRALLY

Number 1

Organisation

- X2 passes to X5
- X7 runs infield to receive (tightly marked)
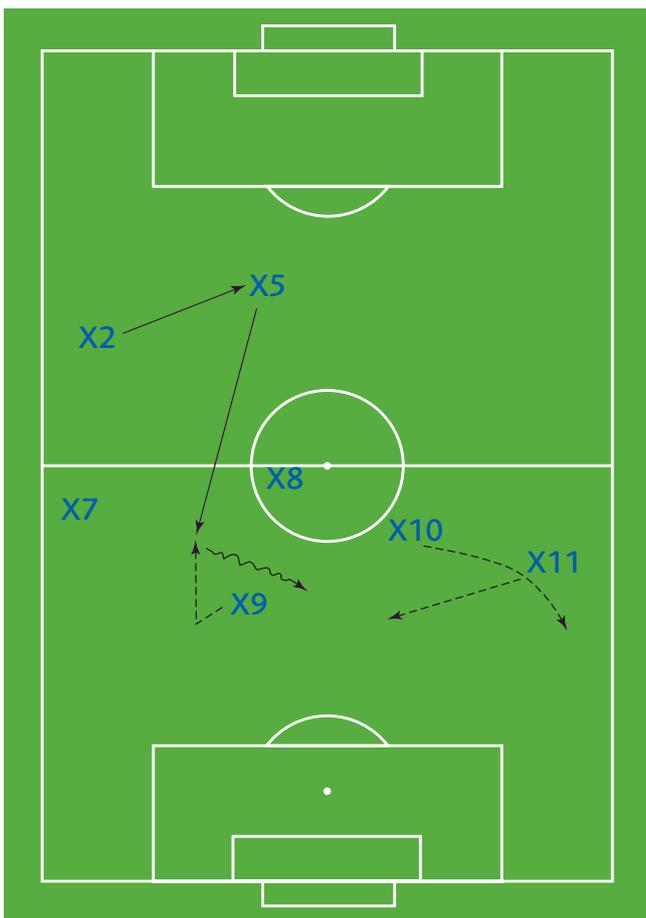- X5 hits angled pass for X9 to spin

Number 2

Organisation

- X2 passes to X5
- X9 checks back to receive from X5
- X9 sets back for support player X8
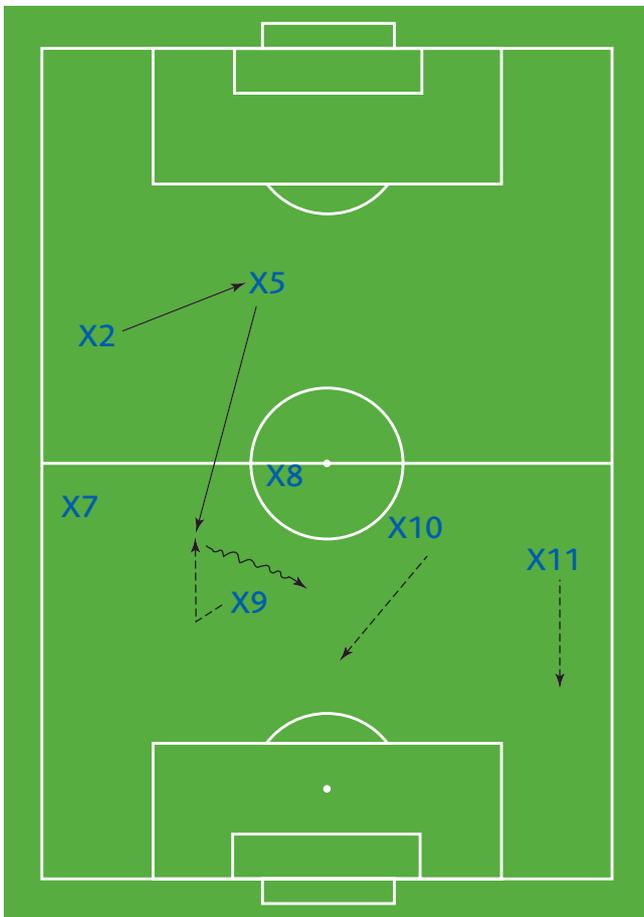- X9 spins in field

Options by X8: play in X7 or into X10 who makes diagonal run behind X9.
Alternative: use runs by X7 and X10 as decoy and switch play to X11

Number 3

Organisation

- X2 passes to X5
- X9 checks back to receive from X5
- X9 turns in field with the ball
- X11 times his run in field for possible pass by X9
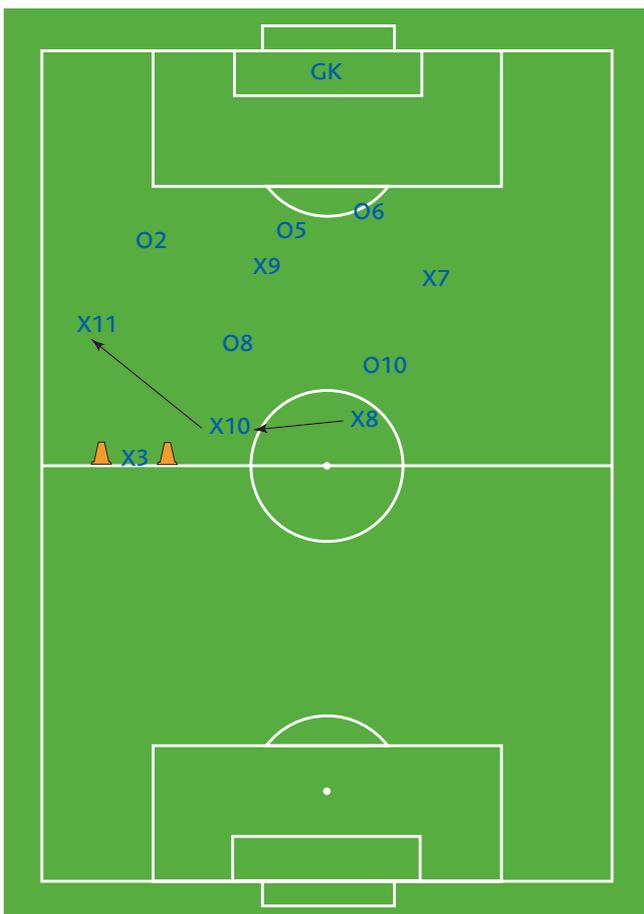- X10 runs into space vacated by X11 for possible switch pass by X9

Number 4

Organisation

- X2 passes to X5
- X9 checks back to receive from X5
- X9 turns in field with the ball
- X10 times his diagonal run for possible straight pass by X9
- X11 maintains width for possible switch pass by X9

## FUNCTIONAL PRACTICE – WIDE PLAY (Number 11 / Number 7)

Organisation

- X8 plays to X10 who is off his marker and plays wide to X11

Key points

- If X11 has space – open up and be positive
- Move ball either side of O2 to exploit the space
- X9 keep away, but offer support
- If O2 tighter – create individual space by X11 – either:
    - **i)** away down line to check back
    - **ii)** come back and then check in field across O2
    - **iii)** come back and then check in behind O2

Decisions: Can I turn and go forward or do I need support player?
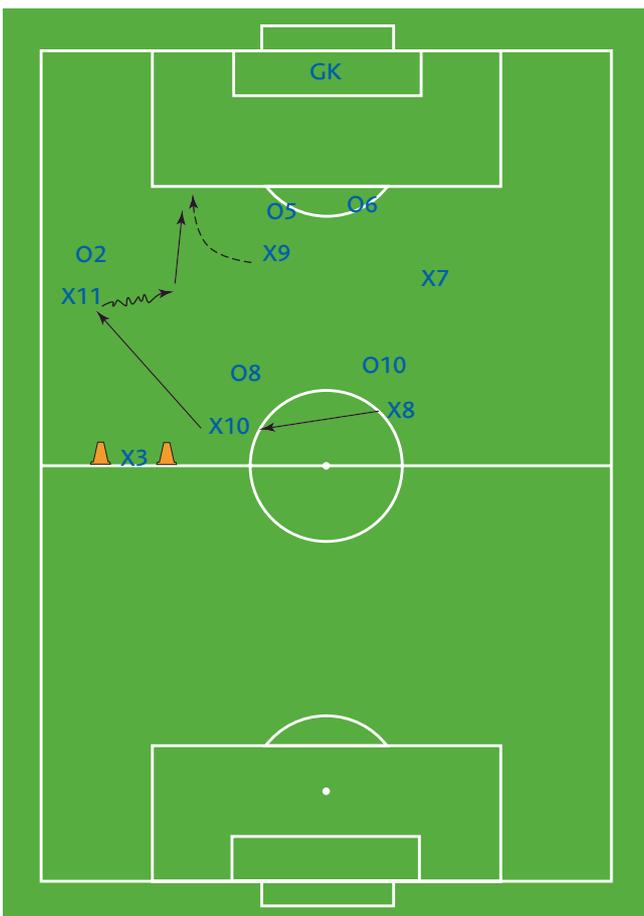
OPTIONS FOR X11
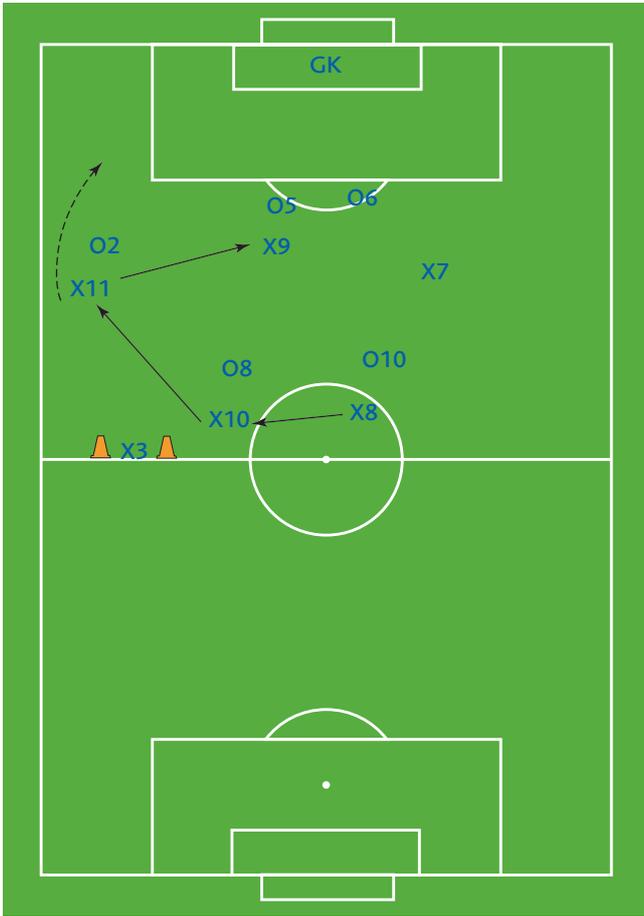
Number 1

Organisation

- X10 plays to X11
- X11 plays first time into X9 for 'give and go' behind O2

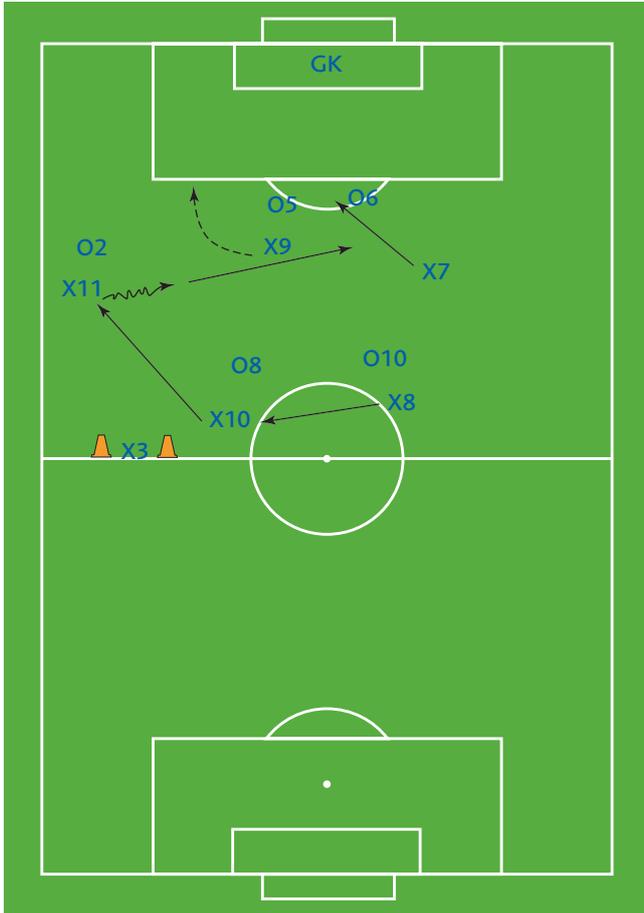Alternative: X11 can give and go with X10

Number 2

Organisation

- X10 plays to X11
- X11 takes ball in field
- X9 makes run down sides for pass by X11

Alternative: X11 use decoy run by X9 to drive further in field by X11 for shot or pass to X7
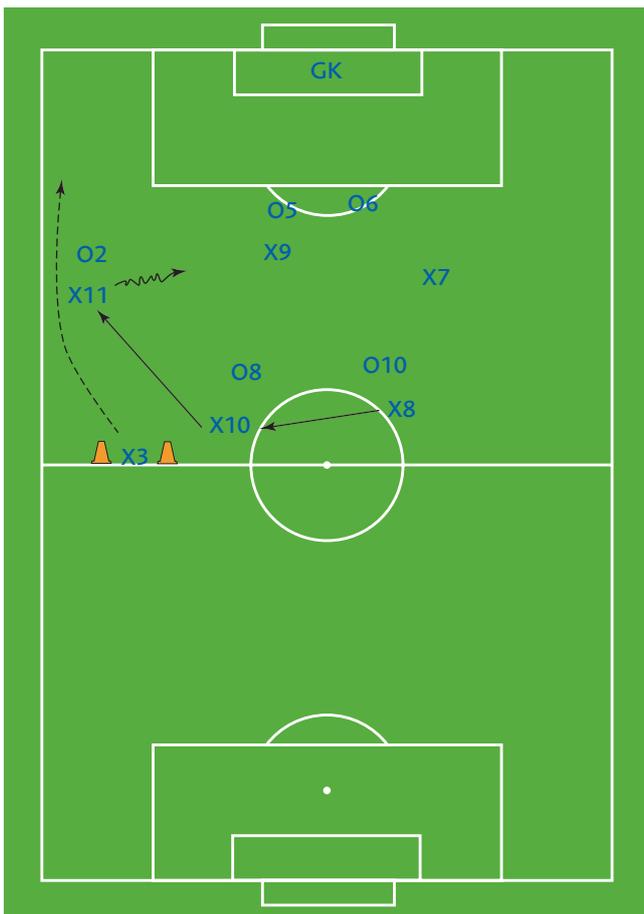
Number 3

Organisation

- X10 plays to X11
- X11 takes ball in field and passes to side of X9 for X7 to make run in field
- X7 can either shoot or play in X9

Alternative: X8 makes run in behind X9

Number 4

Organisation

- X10 plays to X11
- X11 takes ball in field

Options 1, 2, 3 or introduce run by X3 for overlap.