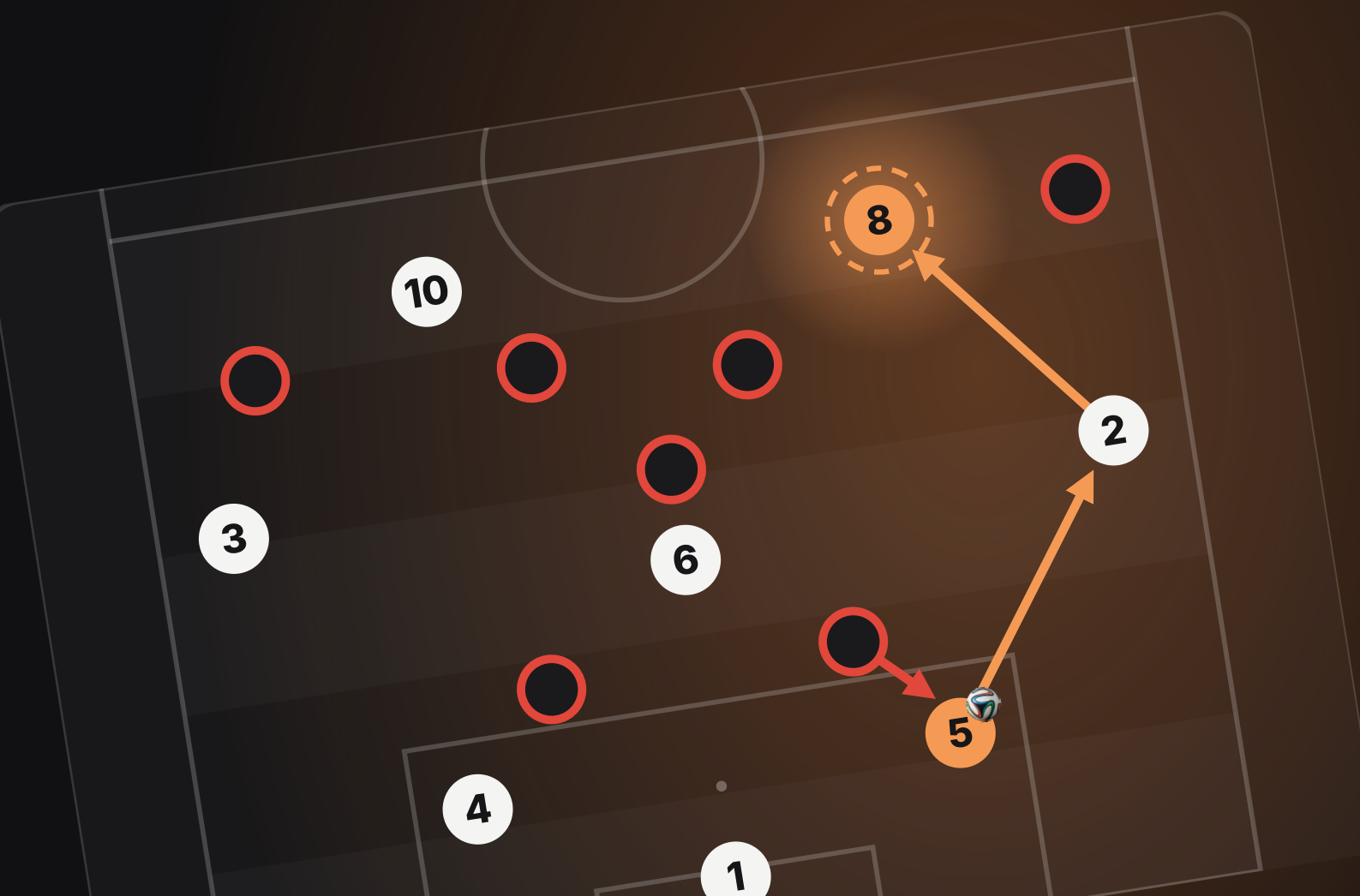




# Playing Out From the Back

Building up against every press: count it, shape for it, bait it, beat it.



# Playing Out From the Back

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By the Total Football Studio coaching team



**Total Football Studio**

[totalfootballstudio.com](https://totalfootballstudio.com)

## **Playing Out From the Back**

Building up against every press: count it, shape for it, bait it, beat it.

The Playbook Series, No. 02

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

# A field guide to the first phase, written for the people who coach it.

Every team now meets a press on the first pass. This book gives you a way to read it, a shape to meet it, the patterns to go through it, a plan for going over it, and twenty sessions to train all of it on the grass.

## Who it is for

Head coaches, assistants, analysts, academy staff and goalkeeper coaches. It assumes you know the game and want a common language for the first phase that your whole staff can use.

## How every chapter works

Problem, principle, pattern, session, cost. Each idea is drawn on a real-scale pitch, each pattern links to a session in [chapter 10](#), and each structure ends with what it costs you if it breaks.

## About the numbers

Every figure in this book comes from a named public source: Opta via the Premier League and The Analyst, FIFA, UEFA and IFAB. The source list is at the back. Distances on the boards are real metres on a 105 × 68 m pitch.

## THREE WAYS TO USE IT

### 1 • Read it front to back

The six steps build on each other. Count before Shape, Shape before Bait.

### 2 • Prepare for Saturday

Find your opponent's press in the matrix ([chapter 6](#)), then fill in the scouting sheet in [chapter 2](#).

### 3 • Plan the week

Use the session finder in [chapter 10](#). Every session trains one step and names the problem it solves.

## THUMB TABS

The coloured tabs on the right edge of every page match the six steps. Flip to a colour to find a step.



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## BEFORE YOU START

# Reading the boards

Every board is drawn to scale on a 105 × 68 m pitch. We always attack up the page, so our goal is at the bottom. Opponents are the white chips with a red ring.

**6**

Our player and role number



Opponent



The free man



Pass



Run without the ball



Pressing run



Space to use

**1**

Order of the passes

**8**

The key players in the move



Joker / neutral (sessions)



Where a player started



Long or lofted ball



Carry (dribble)



Cover shadow: the lane a presser blocks



Danger or trap



Cones and mini-goals (sessions)

## Role numbers

We use the classic 4-3-3 numbers throughout, so a pattern reads the same in every chapter: **1** keeper, **2** right-back, **3** left-back, **4** left centre-back, **5** right centre-back, **6** holding midfielder, **8** and **10** the two central midfielders, **7** and **11** the wingers, **9** the striker.

## Words we use

**First line:** the opponent's front pressers. **Free man:** our player nobody can reach in time. **+1:** one more player than they press with. **Base:** the shape of our first phase. Full glossary at the back.



### Drawn in Total Football Studio

Every board in this book was built in our tactics board, at real scale. Open it and pose your own build-up the same way.

[totalfootballstudio.com](https://totalfootballstudio.com)

## INTRODUCTION

# Build-up is a decision, not a doctrine.

For ten years the Premier League went shorter. Goalkeepers who played 79.3% of their passes long in 2014/15 played 47% long by 2024/25.<sup>1</sup> Then man-to-man pressing spread, and in the opening weeks of 2025/26 the share went back up to 51.9%.<sup>6</sup>

Both trends hide the same truth. Playing out is not a belief you hold or drop. Every goal kick is a decision. How many are coming? Who is free? Is the space short, wide or long? The teams who build well are not the ones who always play short. They read the press faster than it can set, and they pick the right answer.

So this book is built on a sequence of six questions. We call it the spine. Every chapter answers one of them, every pattern belongs to one of them, and every session trains one of them. Learn the order and your players will have a shared way of thinking in the half-second they get on the ball.

We are honest about cost. Short build-up takes you further up the pitch and creates more goals, and it also concedes more. In the first season after the 2019 law change, moves from short goal kicks scored 5 Premier League goals and conceded 9. Long goal kicks scored none and conceded 2.<sup>5</sup> Playing out pays when it is coached. This book is about the coaching.

**Count the press. Pick the shape. Bait them. Go through, round or over. Keep the door shut behind you.**

THE WHOLE BOOK IN ONE LINE

## THE 2025/26 PICTURE

Over the first 210 games of 2025/26, passes per Premier League game fell to 873.3, the lowest since 2012/13, and long balls rose from 93.4 to 99.6 per game.<sup>7</sup> The short game is not dead, but it now has to beat presses that take your men away one by one. Chapter 7 is about exactly that.

## THE SPINE: SIX QUESTIONS, IN ORDER

### STEP 1

#### Count

How many press, and do they mark men or space?

### STEP 2

#### Shape

Pick the base that gives you one more than they send.

### STEP 3

#### Bait

Hold the ball and invite them to jump.

### STEP 4

#### Exit

Play through the space the jump leaves.

### STEP 5

#### Over

When nothing is free, go long on purpose.

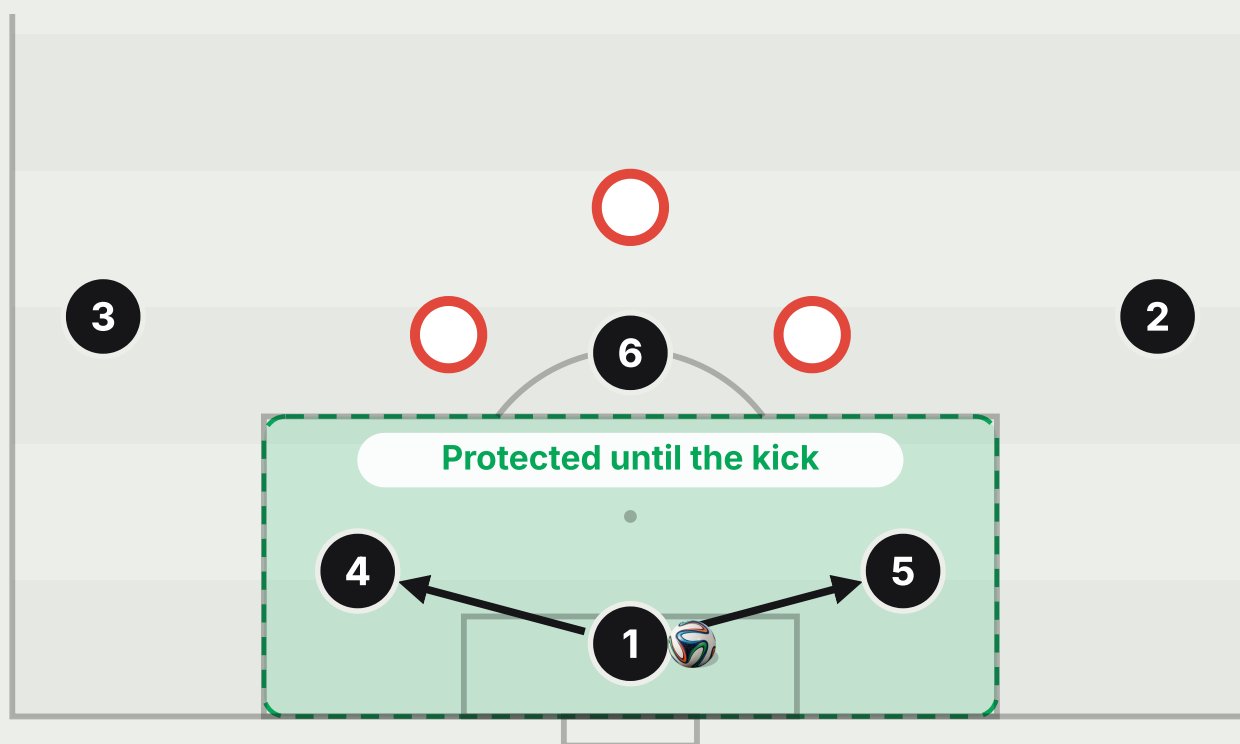
### STEP 6

#### Protect

Know who stays behind the ball, and when to stop.

# Why build up at all

In 2019 the goal kick became a pass. Ten years of data show where that led, and the 2025/26 season shows what happens when the press starts taking your men away one by one.



Since 2019/20 the box is a protected space at a goal kick.

## IN THIS CHAPTER

01 The day the goal kick became a pass

02 Ten years shorter

03 Short against long: the evidence

04 The swing back

05 What build-up is for

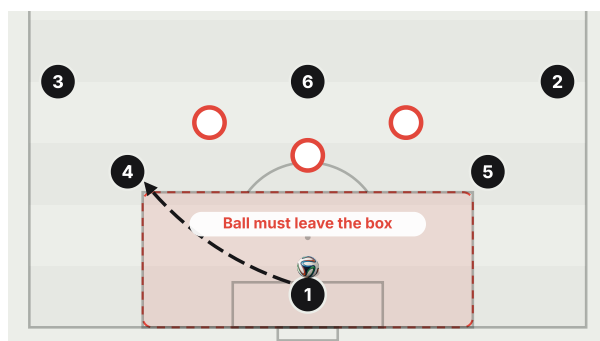
## THE LAW

# The day the goal kick became a pass

From the 2019/20 season, IFAB changed one line of Law 16: at a goal kick the ball is in play as soon as it is kicked and clearly moves. It no longer has to leave the penalty area.<sup>4</sup>

## Before 2019/20

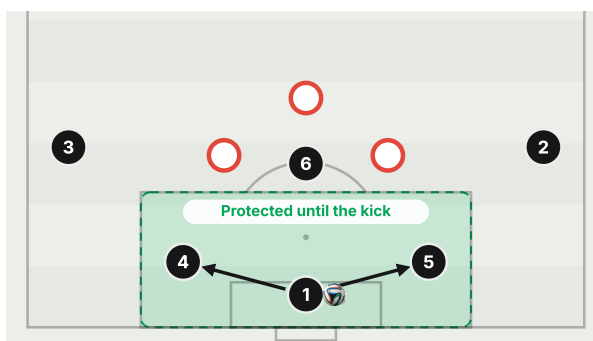
OLD LAW



The ball had to leave the box, so centre-backs stood outside it and the first receiver met the press immediately.

## Since 2019/20

CURRENT LAW



Centre-backs receive inside the box. Opponents must stay outside it until the ball is in play.

## Why one line changed everything

Opponents still have to stay outside the penalty area until the kick is taken. So the first pass now happens in a protected pocket of  $40.32 \times 16.5$  m, with the receiver facing the press and time on the ball. The keeper became the first playmaker, and the centre-back's first touch became a decision rather than a scramble.

The data moved straight away. Premier League goalkeeper pass completion jumped from 56.2% to 61.4% in 2019/20, the biggest one-season rise on record.<sup>2</sup>

# 61.4%

**Goalkeeper pass completion in 2019/20**, up from 56.2%. From 2003/04 to 2010/11 it never passed 46%.

THE ANALYST · OPTA

## WHAT IT GIVES YOU

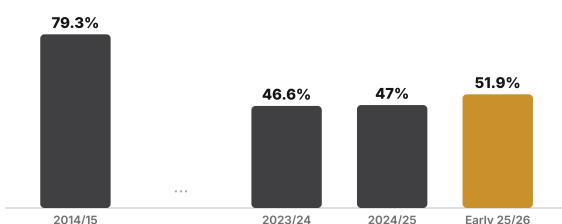
The first pass is free. The press cannot start until the ball moves, so the real fight is the **second** pass. [Chapter 2](#) is about planning it.

TEN YEARS OF DATA

# Ten years shorter

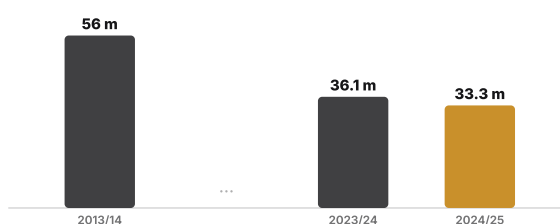
The Premier League is the best-measured league in the world, and it shows a decade-long move from the long kick to the short pass.

## Goalkeeper passes played long 32 M OR MORE



Seasons in between were not published in our sources, so they are left out rather than drawn in.<sup>1,6</sup>

## Average goal-kick length METRES



Almost 23 m shorter in eleven seasons. Open-play passes shrank too, from 40.5 m to 29.7 m.<sup>2</sup>

# 50.7%

Goal kicks that found a teammate inside the box in 2024/25, up from 44.6% the season before.

THE ANALYST

# +73.8%

Successful passes in the defensive third per game: 221.9 in 2006/07, 385.6 in 2024/25.

THE ANALYST

# 75.4%

Vicario's goal kicks that never left the box in 2024/25, the most of any Premier League keeper.

THE ANALYST

## What the curve means for you

By 2024/25 half of the league took most of its goal kicks short, led by Southampton (84.1%), Chelsea and Tottenham (both 80%).<sup>3</sup> Your opponents have spent years designing presses for exactly this moment. A build-up that worked five years ago is now a known problem with known traps.

## What it does not mean

It does not mean short is right. Southampton played short more than anyone in 2024/25 and were relegated. The numbers say the short game spread. They do not say it was always the right call. The next page shows the honest picture.

### WHERE THE FIGHT MOVED

In 2013/14 the average goal kick travelled 56 m, beyond the halfway line. In 2024/25 it travelled 33.3 m and stayed in the kicking team's own half. The contest for the ball has moved more than twenty metres towards your goal, and the press has moved with it.

## RISK AND REWARD

# Short against long: the first evidence

In 2019/20, the first season under the new law, the Premier League compared moves from short and long goal kicks across 288 matches.<sup>5</sup>

|                                    | SHORT GOAL KICKS | LONG GOAL KICKS |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| How far the team got with the ball | 49 m             | 38 m            |
| Shots created                      | 36               | 21              |
| Goals scored                       | 5                | 0               |
| Shots conceded                     | 42               | 34              |
| Goals conceded                     | 9                | 2               |

## The honest reading

Short goal kicks took teams eleven metres further up the pitch and produced every one of the goals. They also conceded nine, against two from long kicks. In that first season, playing short cost more goals than it made.

That is not an argument for the long ball. Teams were in their first months with a new law, and many played out without a structure, a plan for the second pass or a trigger to stop. The upside was there from day one. The downside came from how it was coached, and coaching can fix it.

## +11<sub>m</sub>

**Extra progression** per short goal kick: 49 m against 38 m.

2019/20 · 288 MATCHES

### WHAT IT COSTS

Of the 9 goals conceded from short kicks, every one came from a turnover. A turnover in your own box gives the opponent a shot before you can set. Chapter 9 is about keeping that number down.

### THE RULE THIS BOOK FOLLOWS

Play short when you have counted the press and you have the +1. Go long on purpose when you do not. Never do either by habit.



## SESSION 1 · SHAPE

# 4 v 2 split-pass rondo

The habits every build-up needs: open body, scan before the ball, and the pass that splits two pressers.

6 PLAYERS

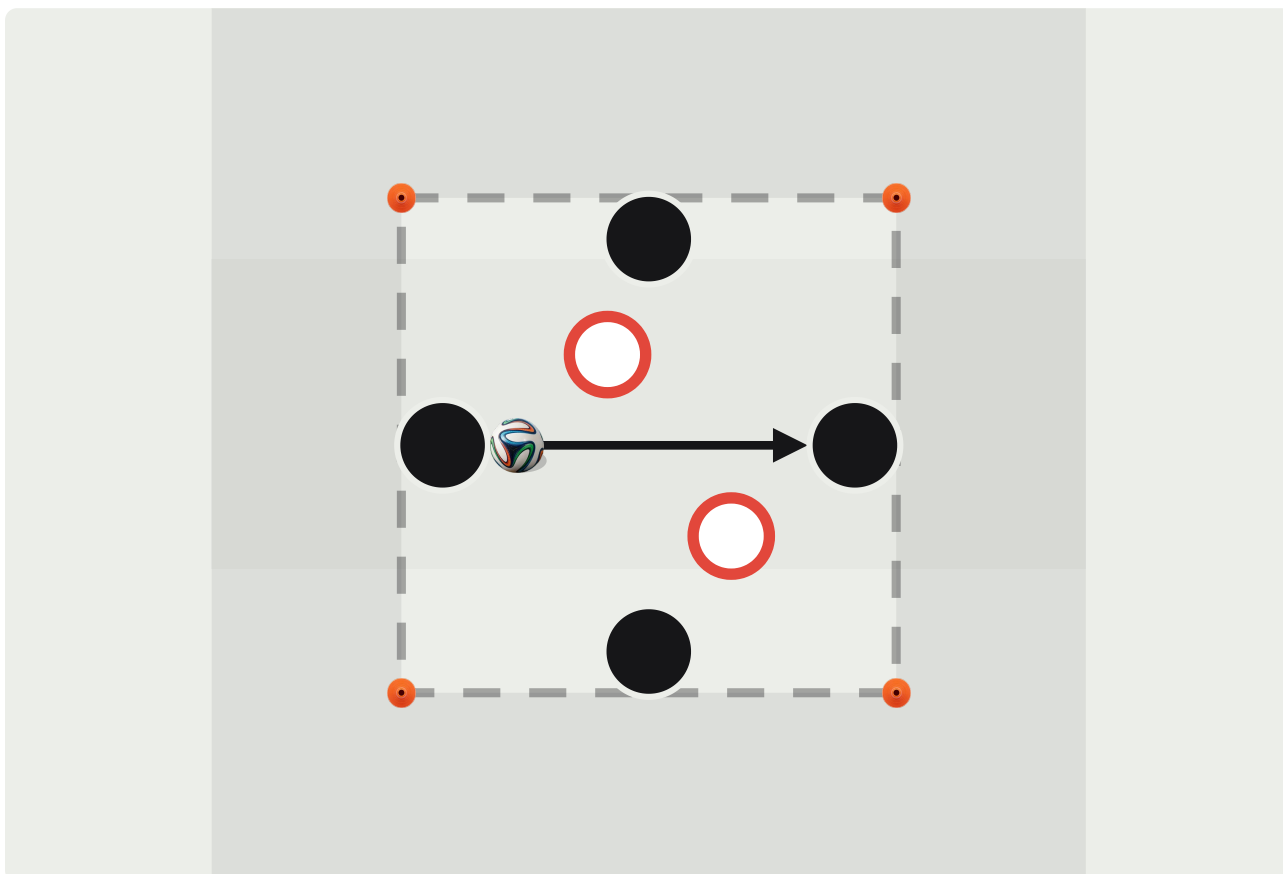
12 x 12 M

4 x 3 MIN

WARM-UP

**Setup**

12 x 12 M



Four on the outside, two in the middle. The split pass between the pair is worth two points.

**HOW IT RUNS**

- 1 Four players on the sides of the square, two defenders inside.
- 2 Keep the ball; two touches maximum.
- 3 A defender who wins it swaps with the player who lost it.

**RULES**

- A pass between the two defenders scores 2.
- Ten passes in a row scores 1.
- No pass back to the player you just received from.

**COACHING POINTS**

- 1 Side-on to receive: hips open to the next pass.
- 2 Look before the ball arrives, not after.
- 3 Split when the pair is more than a stride apart; otherwise move it round them.

**PROGRESS**

One touch on the outside, or 5 v 3 in a larger square.

**REGRESS**

Three touches, or 5 v 2.

**SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE**

Players open up before the ball arrives and find the split without looking down.

**"Open!"****"Split!"**

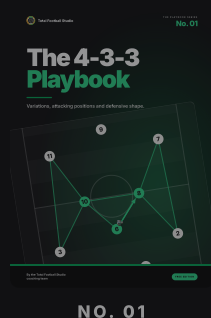


# Every press can be counted. Every count has an answer.

Playing out from the back is not about being brave on the ball. It is about counting the press, choosing the base that leaves a player free, and finding that player. This playbook gives your staff one language for the whole first phase, with the cost of every choice and a session for every idea.

## INSIDE

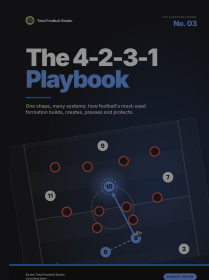
- 01** How to read any press: numbers, marking and triggers
- 02** Four bases: 4+2, 3+2, 2+3 and the Lavalpiana
- 03** Baiting the press: pause, square, show and go
- 04** Eight ways through: the third man, the S, carries and switches
- 05** An opponent matrix for six presses, and how to beat man-to-man
- 06** The planned long ball, second balls and rest defence
- 07** 20 sessions, from rondo to phase of play
- 08** Youth: build-out lines and age bands



NO. 01



NO. 02



NO. 03

Three books, one way of drawing the game. The Playbook Series from Total Football Studio.