



## Better Use of Negative Space Ric Miller

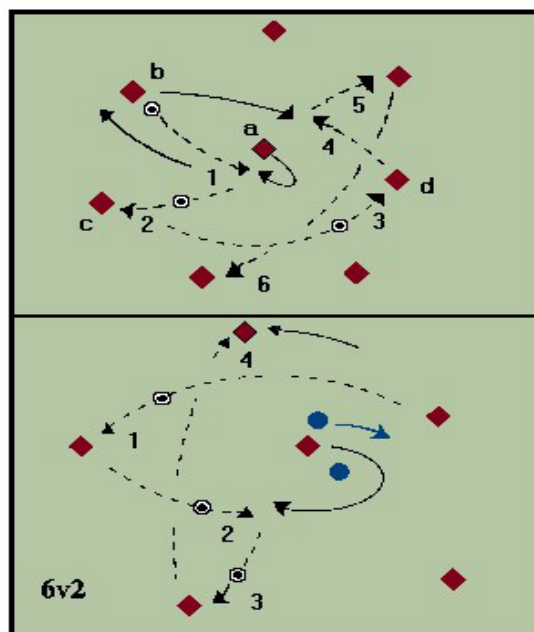
Negative space lies between the ball and an offensive player's own goal. It tends to be less well defended than the space being attacked directly, and because of that, it is useful for holding possession, in relieving pressure, in switching the point of attack, and in creating shots. The reason: Defenders concentrate behind the ball once possession is lost; their interest in the negative spaces on the field lessens as the ball is played forward. The ball dropped back for a shot, the dribble back away from pressure, and the backwards pass are all examples of using negative space.

Bob Gansler, our former national team coach, once even advocated tricking defenders by intentionally playing a ball forward into crowded space, an action designed to draw defenders to the ball, while, at the same time, opening space and reducing pressure in other areas of the field. The passer, resisting a natural temptation to follow the pass, instead steps back away from the player forward in possession. That forward player, the so-called "target" man, draws the pressure then plays negatively. The receiver, now with a less obstructed view of the spaces under attack, can change the point of attack into more weakly defended areas.

The Dutch call such a receiver of the pass back the "window" player. The idea is simple: play forward, draw pressure, play negatively, then play forward again into more dangerous areas. Good teams use negative space purposefully. A window player receiving a pass back at the top of the penalty box drives the ball at goal with a first-touch shot or uses the space created around the ball (really the extra time) to produce the killer through ball.

In the attacking or high middle third of the field, the target receiver, usually a striker, is closely followed by a marking defender. Receiving the ball there oftentimes draws the sweeper out of position and flattens the back of the defense, and that, in turn, creates opportunities for the dangerous ball through. Good teams intentionally use negative space to their advantage: watch Brazil, watch Ajax, watch Virginia.

The key to developing play into negative space is to get players consciously thinking about it. Providing practice sessions that highlight play into negative space helps. The circle activity serves as a proper warm up for the session. A team of 16, divided into two groups, forms circles twenty yards in diameter with a single player at center.



**Diagram 1: Warm-Ups**



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Two versions of the game are shown in the diagram.

At the top, central player (a) runs first away then back toward player (b), who in turn plays him pass 1. The target's first touch lays the ball back (pass 2) to player (c)--the window player--whose first or second touch is to then play the ball forward (pass 3) to player (d). Player (b), having followed his pass inside and exchanged places with player (a), then starts another set of passes with a run toward player (d). Passes 4,5, and 6 follow, as play remains dynamic, the ball never stops moving.

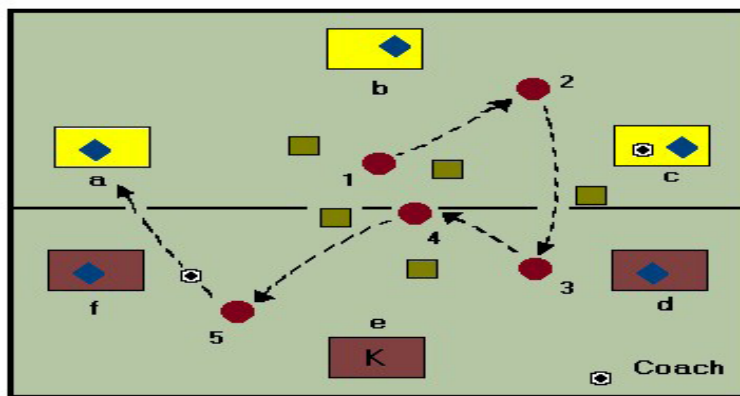
In the lower session--a progression from the one above--two defenders have been added to the mix for a touch of game realism. The same kinds of runs and player exchanges take place, but should a defender win possession, the offensive player causing the loss then defends. Here, the players on the circle's edge must play two touch, though they don't necessarily need to play to the target player in the center.

They can instead play across the circle directly (pass 1), though the exchange of the target player only occurs following the pass inside. The central player here has unlimited touches; he can turn with the ball instead of dropping it back if a lack of pressure allows it. Any pass from the circle's edge must be a skip pass--the passer's nearest neighbor is not eligible. And again, the ball cannot stop moving at the circle's edge without causing a violation and defender exchange. The five players at the circle's edge must constantly adjust their positions to help the passer.

### Technical Performance:

#### Negative Space and Switching Play (the "Three-Ball" Game)

The three-ball game, Diagram 2, highlights one of the important reasons for using negative space: switching the point of attack.



**Diagram 2: The "Three-Ball" Game**

Six, 10 by 10 yard squares are laid out with flat cones on a half field as shown. A group of 16 players has been divided into three teams of five plus a goal keeper. While one team and the goal keeper man the six boxes, the other two scrimmage one another.

The object is to play the ball to one of your three receivers, who themselves are constrained to the receiving boxes. Receivers act as keepers and are free to use their hands. The restrictions: (1) a ball cannot be played to a receiver already in possession of a ball; and (2) only a ball played first forward then back can be played to a receiver in the run of play. Here, players 3 or 5 could attempt play to goals (a) or (b) but not to (c) because the receiver there already holds a ball. When such a



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receiver gains possession, he holds it while the coach serves another. Until all three balls have been entered into play.

After the third ball is held, either one team has captured all three or the two have split possessions. In the first case, the game ends and the losers switch places with the five receivers--the goal keeper stays in place--but in the second, a receiver from the team last scored against puts his ball back into play. The first team to capture all three is declared winner and stays to take on all comers.

### Technical Performance: Attacking Goal

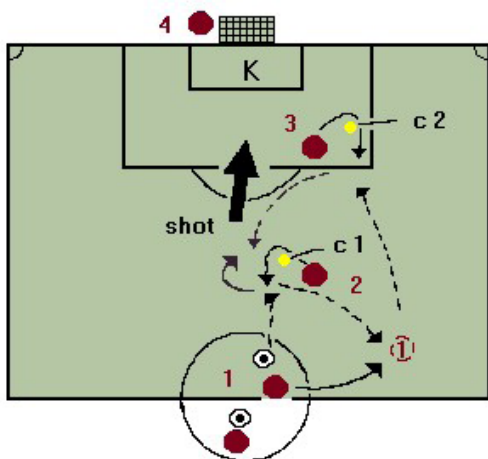


Diagram 3: Using Negative Space on the Attack

Diagrams 3 and 4 bring play into the attacking third. The first highlights shooting, the second final third creative play. In Diagram 3 player 1 passes to player 2, as he comes round cone c1. One then moves laterally to receive the ball back--a "double" pass. With his first touch, he plays the ball forward to player 3, who has just rounded cone c2. Three drops the ball back for two's shot, then the players rotate: player 1 rounds cone c1 to replace player 2; player 2 rounds cone c2 to replace player 3; player 3 goes behind goal to retrieve the next shot (replacing player 4); and player 4 comes to the midline with a ball.

Diagram 4 creates a situation for creative play in the attacking third: an attacking sequence involving target players is orchestrated. Four attacking players are involved: players 1 and 2 start at flat cone markers and make curved runs first away then back towards the ball, while players 3 and 4 attack from near midline.

Following a short dribble, three passes to one, who, in turn, drops the ball back to four. Player four then passes forward to player two, who again drops the ball back to three, following the latter's overlap run. Four follows his pass forward; two continues to step out and create space at his back; and one provides the attacking width by continuing to run down the wing. Two marking defenders and a sweeper defend the attack with a constraint forcing the sweeper to start play between his marking defenders, who themselves begin play by marking targets 1 and 2. Offensive play is limited to two touches, and though play is shown orchestrated here, players are encouraged to improvise.

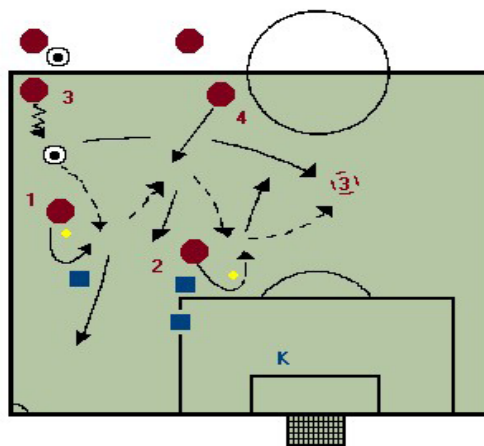


Diagram 4: Creative Play in the Attacking Third



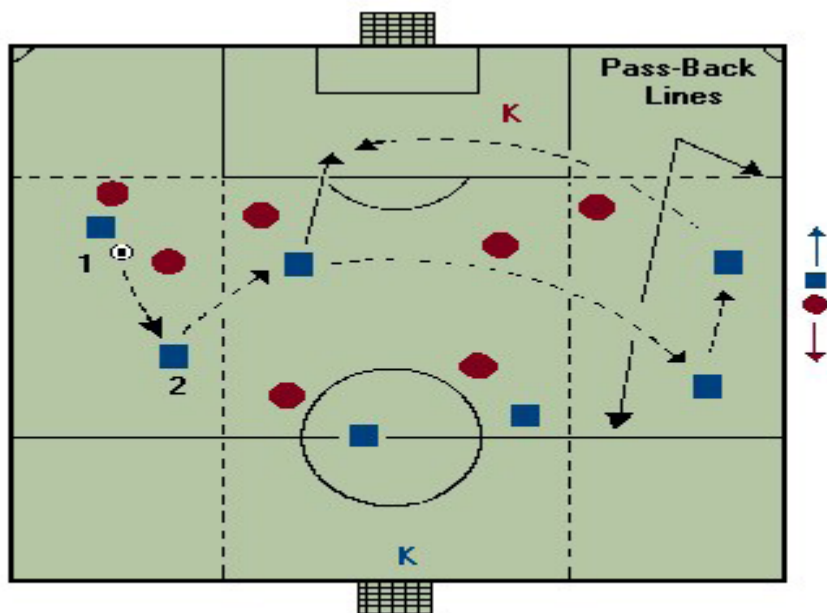
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In the final third, we want play to be unpredictable, to change direction often and quickly. After the ball is played to goal or out of bounds, players three and four reposition themselves as targets one and two, and two new players enter at the midline, and another group of three defenders alternates after each possession. To begin play and acquaint players with the sequence, defenders need not be used. In such play the last pass back to player three would be followed by his shot, by three's pass inside to player four for his shot, or by three's pass wide to player one for the latter's cross.

### Match-Related Play

The session ends with the restricted 8v8 scrimmage shown in Diagram 5. The field is two-thirds regular size with wing zones and pass-back lines marked in flat cones as shown. Each team is organized with two strikers, three midfielders, two marking defenders and a keeper, and play is natural except for a single restriction: a possession won above your pass-back line in the normal run of play must be followed by a pass into negative space, or a free kick is awarded the other team.

The methods for scoring further emphasize the effective use of negative space: (1) a goal scored from a ball dropped back counts four points; (2) scored any other way, the goal counts two points; (3) a single point can be scored on each possession by swinging the ball from one wing zone to the other—switching play; and (4) a single point can be scored by dropping the ball back into negative space. The coach keeps tally.



**Diagram 5: Match-Related 8v8 Scrimmage**

Here, squares have won possession at the wing, well above their pass-back line; consequently, one's first pass is back to player 2, the window man. He, in turn, changes the point of attack and directs play into the opposite wing for a point. On each possession, a team could score six points: by switching the ball from one wing zone to the other, by stringing five passes together, and by scoring from a ball dropped back.

Effective use of negative space is one of many keys to good attacking play. Superior teams use it well. Just watch the Brazilians, Ajax play.