

'The X' Combination



'The X' is another classic coordinated movement pattern you often see used by the better passing sides. It is something you may want to explore with your players. Again, let's look at this pattern of play based on the structured, yet highly mobile platform set in place in our build-up and consolidation phases. What distinguishes 'The X' is that it is an example of attacking flank play where the winger opts to stay wide e.g. looking at first to stretch the play, then drop down the line to receive. This is in contrast to the Classic 1, 2 and 3 combinations where we saw how the winger looks to tuck in or drop inwards.

The diagram shows the basic X pattern. It's an excellent means by which a team can go from the consolidation phase to the incision phase. **We call it 'The X' because it consists of 2 diagonal passes that cross in opposite directions** (No.5 into No.11 then No.3 into No. 9 or No. 10). Assuming good player anticipation, **'The X' can prove very effective, eliminating the opponents attacking and midfield lines with just 2 medium range diagonal passes.** When done well, this transition can take just 3 first time passes.

Variations might involve the full back receiving a set back pass from the winger and then dribbling the ball forward, before playing a "killer pass" into the arriving striker. It's power as an incisive movement can be seen in the way the second diagonal pass moves the ball into an advanced central area in front of the opposition's box.

- Receiving the ball on the half-turn, can the attacker (No.10 in diagram) take 1 touch and shoot?
- Alternatively, can he combine with the winger (e.g. No.11 in the diagram) who, assuming he has pressure behind, can "set and spin", looking to provide width and support to the receiving attacker.
- Otherwise, can the full back overlap to provide the width, assuming he has the pace to do it?

Alternatively, the diagram tells the story of a thousand words. It shows the centre back (5) playing a through pass into the left winger (11) who is tightly marked. The No.11 makes his "two movements" hoping to win space to turn

and receive. His marker, however, doesn't fall for it and remains "touch tight" so No.11 chooses to set a pass back to the left back (3).

For 'The X' to work, the left back (3) needs to have shown good anticipation and moved into a good supporting position "behind the ball". No.11 can now set a pass back to No.3 who pings a diagonal forward pass into No.9 or No.10 as this player arrives in space after a good double movement.

To succeed with this coordinated pattern of play, the players will need to develop a clear picture of how 'The X' movement works. To execute the pattern effectively, they will need to make good, well-timed movements to shake off markers, allowing 1 or 2 touch interplay. They then need to learn how to do this in variable conditions, including against opponents applying high pressure.

Using 'The X' in the transition from the incision phase to the finishing phase could involve the following:

1. Once No.11 has dropped down the line and set the ball back to the full back (3), he spins out around his marking opponent. The idea is for No.11 to quickly get into the wide channel. From here he can provide an excellent attacking support angle for the No.10 arriving into the central space to receive the final pass in 'The X' movement (see diagram). The No.10 can now play in the left winger (11) who can either drive inside and make a cut back pass or move out wide and whip in a cross.
2. Alternatively, the No.10 can combine with No.11, looking to isolate the opposition's full back and perhaps play a one-two around him to create a clear goal scoring chance.
3. The No.10 also has the option, if he receives in space, to open up and strike at goal from 25-30 yards. Failing that, when he arrives in space, he can look to turn and combine with the striker (9) before shooting.

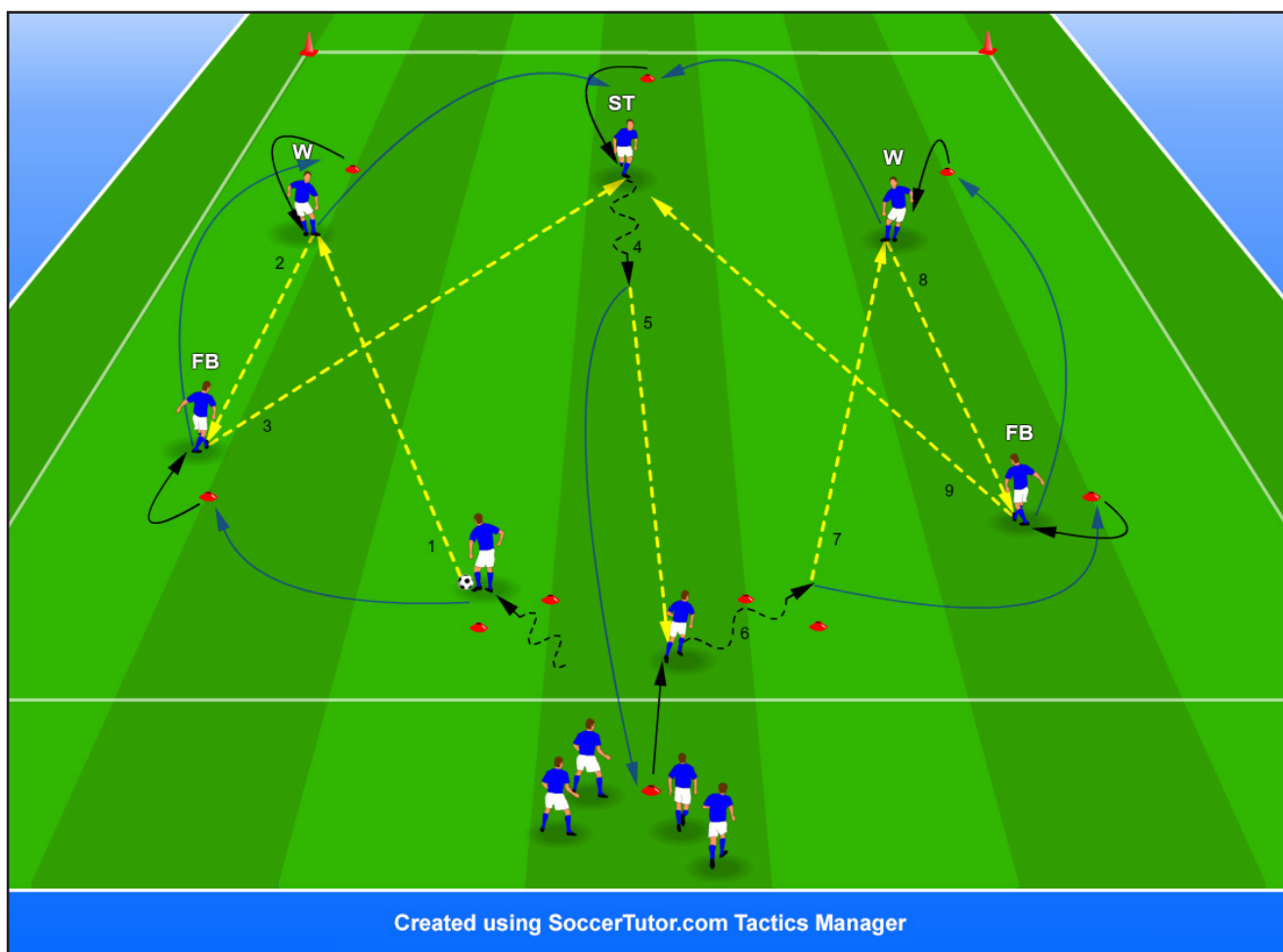
'The X' can also be used when the team is playing out from a deeper position (i.e. in the build-up phase) e.g. with the centre back passing wide from the edge of his box. If the incisive pass from the full back is delivered with precision into a channel between the opposing full back and centre back (assuming they are pushed up around the halfway line), our No.9 or No.10 could easily find themselves "through on goal" in a foot race to the finishing phase.

Assuming our striker completes the move with a shot on goal, the team will have achieved a "long possession chain". This involves starting from the keeper and ending with an attempt on goal without the opposition touching the ball. Of course, this is the stuff of dreams, but get your team well drilled and aware and it can readily happen in any game. To my eye, this is when football becomes truly

special as a spectacle and as a source of genuine, exciting entertainment. Teams with the ability to pull off extended patterns of play like this, retaining possession with strong momentum and quick interplay, set the gold standard in football!

On the following 2 pages we present 2 warm-up practices that are often used to explore the basic mechanics of 'The X'. You can then progress player understanding and awareness through the structured competitive practice we have presented. This will help players explore the 5 key incision combinations, as well as any variations they come up with themselves.

'The X' Passing Combination Warm Up



Practice Organisation

In a 40 x 40 yard area we have a minimum of 11 players and mark out 9 cones in the positions shown.

The practice starts on the left side with a diagonal forward pass towards the winger (W). The winger sets the ball back to the full back (FB) who plays another diagonal forward pass to the striker (ST). Once the striker receives the pass, he dribbles with the ball (at pace) and passes back to the starting gates.

The players rotate to the next position as shown (clockwise direction - blue arrows). We then repeat the same passing sequence to the right with players rotating positions in an anti-clockwise direction.

Ensure to position the cones so that every pass will need to be over 20 yards. This will help players improve their medium range ground passing skills.

Coaching Points

1. Use a tactics board to demonstrate the practice to ensure players understand the pass and move order.
2. Can you play a precise and driven pass along the ground to your teammate?
3. Can you make 2 movements, checking away before then moving to receive?
4. Can you successfully signal where you want the pass delivered?
5. Can you play using only 1 TOUCH? (Maximum of 2 touches - receive and pass)

PROGRESSION

'The X' Passing Combination Warm Up with Pressure & Quick One-Two



Practice Organisation

Using the same structure and layout as the previous practice, we now have a passive opponent and an extra combination between the winger and striker after the third pass.

- As pass 3 is played into the striker, the winger on the opposite side runs across to close him down. Can the striker receive the pass and dribble the ball forward to engage his pressing opponent?
- As the opponent approaches, the winger moves inside and the striker plays a one-two with him. The advanced striker then passes back to the starting gates. The players all rotate positions in a clockwise direction as shown.

We then repeat the same sequence on the right with players rotating positions in an anti-clockwise direction. On the right, the pressing player (winger) comes in from the left.

The pressing players quickly return to their cone after the one-two is completed. Ensure to position the cones so that every pass will need to be over 20 yards. This will help players improve their medium range ground passing skills.

Coaching Points

1. Use the same coaching points as the previous practice.
2. The pressing player should only apply *PASSIVE PRESSURE* at first. Once the players are comfortable, you can progress this to more competitive *ACTIVE PRESSURE*.
3. Challenge the striker to dribble with the ball towards the pressing player and then play a well timed one-two with the supporting teammate. To be effective, the second pass must not be played too soon or too late!

Patterns of Play: Key Incision Phase Combinations (Opposed Practice)



Practice Organisation

Using 3/4 of a full pitch we mark out 9 cones in the positions shown. We have a supply of balls at the start, in the 2 centre back positions (5 and 6). The blue team have a back 4, 3 rotating midfielders in the centre, 2 wingers and 1 striker. The red team have 2 centre backs on the edge of the penalty area and 1 midfielder in the centre (3 v 1 situation) who are all fully active.

The blue full backs and wingers are unopposed so limit them to 2 or 3 touches, depending on player age/ability. We alternate playing on the left and right, starting with one of the centre backs.

The aim for the blue players is to use one of the 5 key incision combinations we have learned in this section, to mount an attack on goal. The centre backs or the coach calls out the combination to be used (e.g. 'The X'; 'The Classic 1'; 'The Classic 2'; 'The Classic 3' or the 'The Classic 3 variation').

The 3 midfielders rotate positions to support play on both flanks. Once the attempt on goal is completed, the players quickly move back to their starting positions and a new attack starts on the opposite side.

Once a combination is executed (e.g. 'The X' as shown in the first diagram above), the winger (7) and full back (2) on the opposite side can join in the attack in the finishing phase.



Diagram 2 (above) shows 'The Classic 3' combination.

Coaching Points

1. Can you "line up with the incoming ball", receive and pass as quickly and precisely as possible?
2. Can you make 2 movements to create space and receive? Can you time these movements well?
3. Can you show a good, "pacey" passing technique over 10/15/20 yards. "Can you ping the pass?!"
4. Can you show good communication - verbal or visual signals i.e. hand signals to show where you want the pass delivered?