AGE 5+

Numerical Inferiority: Coaching With Underloads

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Developing football players is a long and challenging process that requires coaches to recognise when to support players and when to stress and test them in order to see significant development and improvement.

Technical qualities, decision making, tactical understanding and physical conditioning are just some of the components that need to be addressed when developing and supporting players.

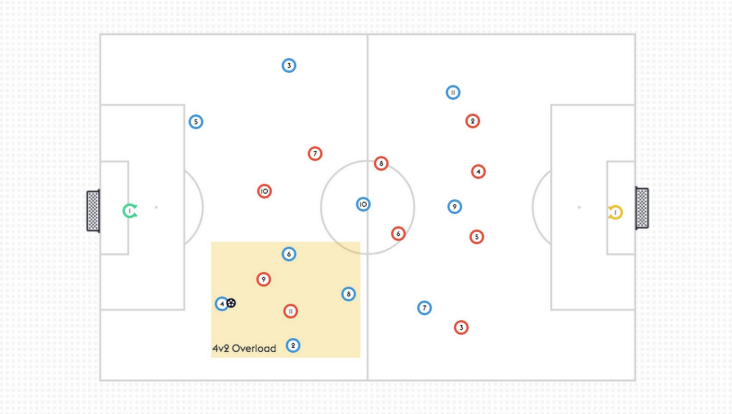
A key component when improving players is to create game-like situations that stress and test players. This may be achieved by creating overloaded situations that provide a higher level of difficulty.

One of the ways of creating these environments is through the players being numerically inferior in practices e.g. having less players than the opposition.

Numerical Inferiority

In the game, coaches often discuss and utilise practices with overloads and numerical superiority, meaning the team we are coaching has more players in an area than the opposition.

Numerical inferiority, or underloading, is the opposite concept and includes the coaches team having less players than the opposition team in a specific practice.

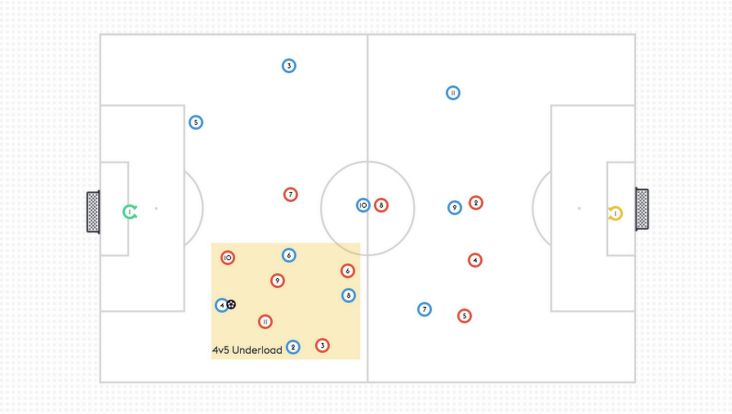


We can see this concept occur in game-specific situations such as when a player has been sent off, thus creating a 10v11 situation. Also, this concept can occur in-game and without sendings off, when opposition players ‘double up’ on individuals, creating 1v2 situations.

The ability to attack against more defenders separates the great players from the good players, but why is it so important to create these types of environments? Here are some reasons:

Qualitative Superiority - Creating Stress

> **'The ability to dominate an opposing player when in 1v1 situations or numerically inferior situations in order to move the ball forwards and by-pass the opposition, with the purpose of moving towards goal.'**



As coaches we often try to increase technical skills through unopposed and overloaded exercises, allowing more time on the ball, more chance of repetition and a safer environment to execute varying technical skills.

These exercises are great for younger players to become accustomed and confident in performing a skill or technique (passing, dribbling, etc) and for them to accelerate their development, and enjoyment through success, in the game.

Numerical superiority is vital to the game and is something that is practiced throughout academies in most countries. 1v1, 2v2, 3v3 practices are all designed to improve players technically and tactically against opposition players and to beat the player in front of them.

However, we need to acknowledge that not every situation in the game is balanced (2v2, 3v3) or to the benefit of the team in possession (2v1, 3v2). Often, the team in possession may have a number of defenders looking to close down the space and the ball in more numbers than there are attacking options.

To promote intense development, we may put players into situations and practices that are numerically inferior. In turn, this promotes better spatial awareness and assessment by players as both time and space to perform a technique with intelligent decision making is reduced.

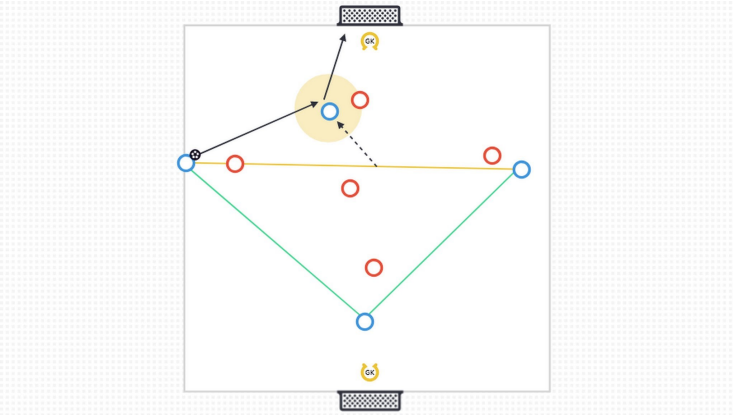
With this in mind, we must prepare our players to not only dominate the 1v1 situations, but also the 1v2 and 1v3 scenarios in possession of the ball. Underloaded exercises create the environment for players to learn and master how to protect and maintain possession when outnumbered.

A great example in the professional game is Real Madrid's midfielder Isco. He has tremendous ability and awareness to beat players not only in 1v1 situations but also in numerically inferior situations.

Positioning as a Team

A huge benefit to underloaded activities is that as well as improving individual players in possession, it also promotes a teams ability and understanding to take up more advantageous positions on the field.

If we can still create depth, width and length through better positioning, creative movement, finding space and adopting positive body shapes, the team can potentially still move forwards just as effectively as if the teams were balanced with equal numbers.



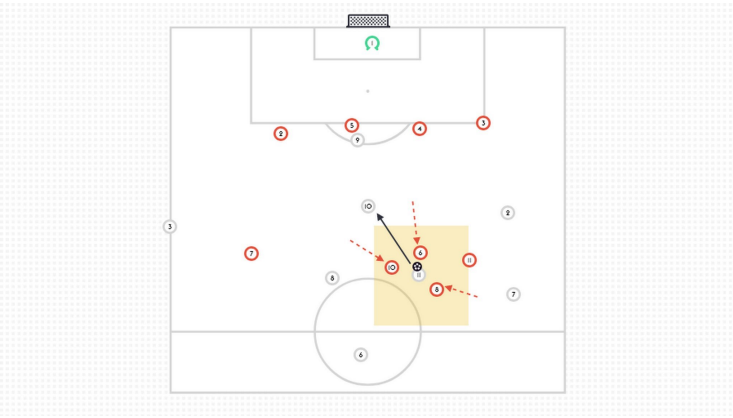
Numerically inferior football exercises create environments and scenarios where players must THINK more and take up positions to be able to retain possession and be successful, constantly challenging the players mental and technical capabilities.

Overcoming modern defensive tactics

> **"No playmaker in the world can be as good as a good counterpressing situation" - Jurgen Klopp**

With the likes of Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool, we can see how the evolution of defending is continuing to change. Pressing in transition is getting quicker and teams are defending higher up the field in order to win the ball back early.

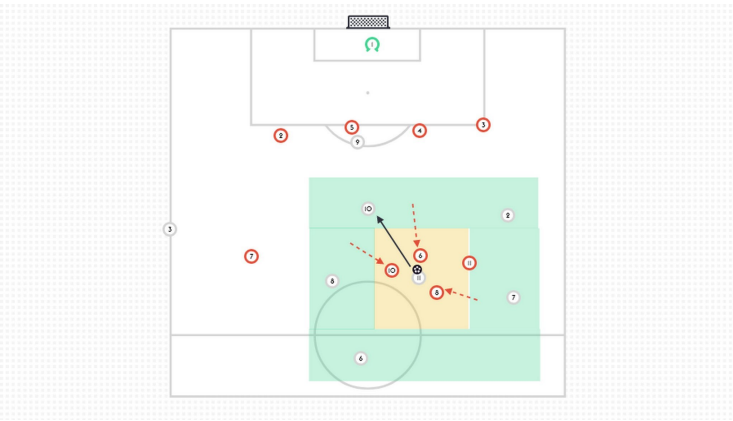
In Liverpool's case especially, we can see how sometimes 2, 3 or even 4 players look to press the opposition, almost terrifying them into misplacing passes or even losing the ball through being tackled.



The negative side to the counterpressing tactic is it leaves space available for the attacker to find their teammates. If a player is technically superior when overwhelmed with players, it can create a lot of attacking possibilities if the press can be exposed.

Therefore, as a number of teams at all levels of the game are adopting a counterpressing defensive tactic it is vital to put players in situations of stress, through underloaded exercises, when in possession.

In this video we can see how individual players are under stressful situations when playing out from the back.



Drawing in opposition players

In the modern game there are a number of world-class players, such as Messi, who appear to be trapped with 2-3 opposition players around them, only to escape and beat the pressure to attack space, often between the lines. In this video, Messi escapes the press of a number of Athletic Bilbao players before scoring.

When a team has a player with the skillset and vision of Messi, it benefits the team as a whole as this individual can draw in a number of opposition players, pulling them out of position and creating space for themselves or their teammates.

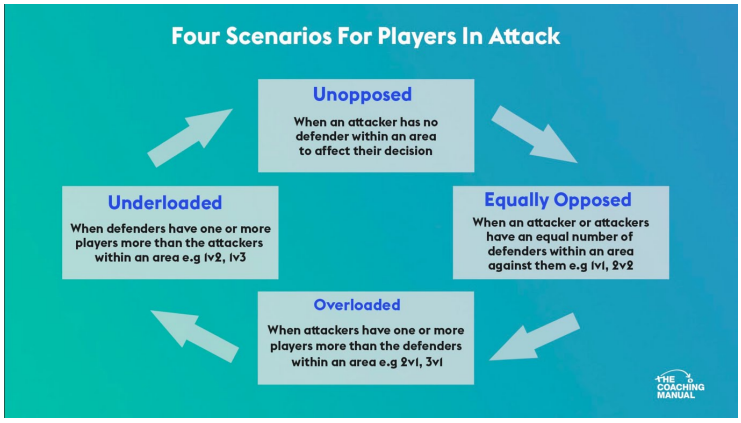
How to prepare players for situations of numerical inferiority

It is quite clear we can't just put players into highly stressed situations such as underloaded practices. This has the potential to damage confidence and produce a negative reaction from the attacking players.

However, it is important that we speak to players and discuss with them the benefits of such exercises, including why we put players into underloaded situations and the benefits this can have within the game itself once understood and a level of capability is achieved.

A great way to build towards qualitative superiority with a numerically inferior environment is to consider four scenarios an attacker may find themselves in when they have possession;

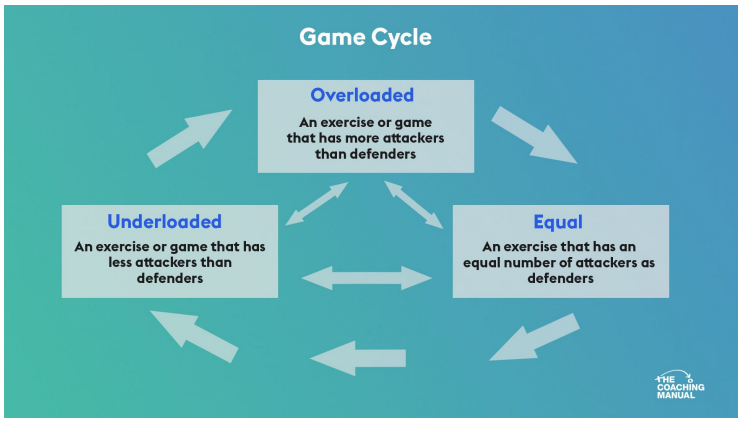
These scenarios will naturally occur in games. To increase the challenge for the players we must consider how coaches can approach building them to an overloaded exercise situation.



We can gradually increase the difficulty of the exercises and games, allowing players to get used to the different phases of the scenarios. Once we have established a pathway to reach underloaded exercises and games, we can then look to change the focus and mix the exercises to challenge the players in different ways, altering the cycle.

Individual Challenges

Another great way of helping players improve their technique and decision making in numerically inferior exercises is by challenging players individually.



By setting individual objectives, such as "you must take at least 3 moving touches (can't stand on the spot and do 3 touches) before passing" creates pressure on the individual. The opposition know that the player must take touches, thus knowing that there could be a possibility of stealing the ball in the time the player must dribble.

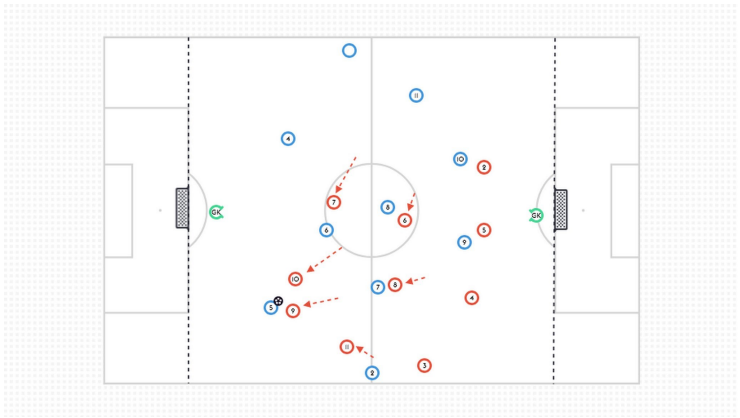
This benefits the player in three ways;

1. Creates a situation of stress as defenders approach, increasing technical qualities to protect the ball or beat a player
2. Forces the player to identify space behind, to the side and beyond defenders to make decisions - encouraging greater Spatial Awareness
3. Causes players teammates to move intelligently and quickly (or with good timing) into space, creating passing lanes for them to receive

Manage the opposition in games

Another great way is to manage the opposition in training games.

In this training game, if we are coaching the Blue team to attack, then we can manage the reds by giving them specific instructions in the game out of possession. For example, we could encourage the team to press high and 'double up' on a specific player.



However, in underloaded games where the numerical superiority is with the defending team we could ask red #6, #7, #8, and #9 to go man for man on the opposition, as red #10 and #11 look to support the press when possible, creating 2v1 situations.

Conditioned Games

Conditioned games are also helpful to reach outcomes of dealing with the ball in underloaded situations.

In the above conditioned game there is a condition on red defenders to not leave their designated area.

However, we can reverse this condition with the attackers not permitted to leave their designated area, whilst allowing defenders to move anywhere. This may create 1v2, 1v3 and 1v4 situations.

Underloaded exercises can be used in normal games (equal numbers) with different conditions and also pre-planned modified games to provide a great platform for players to deal with stressful situations to enhance their decision making and technical qualities.