

# 3. Soccer-specific training I

## 3.1 A methodological approach to preparing for competition

Before beginning to study the methodological process through which we will develop our playing style, we will establish **rondos** as a methodological approach to shape the athlete.

Rondos bring together two particular features that must be constantly sought in training: on the one hand, to understand the athlete's self-organization and, on the other, to understand the internal functioning of the game.

Based on this interpretation of the player, we will briefly describe some features of the game. Soccer is a game of mixed elements, of penetrated spaces, of almost total and permanent disorder. If these traits are highlighted in the practice of soccer, players will be able to frame their performance within the changing playing dynamics and will be able to interpret these.

In summary, we examine two points of analysis:

- 1- The athlete and the characteristics that define him/her as dynamic and complex are composed of structures, with their respective systems; in continuous interaction with the surroundings.
- 2- Soccer and its changing and unpredictable dynamic.

We understand that the methodological approach should be adapted to the above-mentioned contexts. Rondos provide practical resources in order to develop a training program.

It is understood that this type of approach stimulates the players, since it provides situations that simulate a real game (Owen, Twist and Ford, 2004).

Before beginning the analysis of rondos from FC Barcelona's perspective, we will present several definitions by other authors:

They are games played on a reduced area of the playing field, where the players, normally distributed throughout the peripheral zone of the limited area, try to



maintain possession of the ball against a lesser number of players aiming to recover it (Portugal, 2006, p. 25).

It is a game with a numerical superiority of two or more players, in which the main objective is to regain possession of the ball, starting from an initial, pre-established layout. This activity has many elements and variants that make it a useful element in a soccer player's training process, as its high degree of specificity fosters motivation among the players (Martinez, 2010, p. 6).

Soccer is a communicative and social game, so removing the player from the context that affects his/her performance is not recommended, since the functions of each player depend on a common functioning, and are a result of being in a state of constant interaction (Cano, 2010, p. 33).

### **Rondos as a path to competition**

One of the main objectives of training is to practice sport-specific exercises. According to Seirul-lo, an exercise represents the fundamental structure of the athlete's learning and training process.

Designing teaching and learning proposals involves establishing positive and meaningful relationships between the practice of an exercise, the objectives and contents to be addressed, and the player's level of motor skills. The motor experience of a given practice can enhance certain types of learning or skills, which can facilitate the development of the player.

An exercise is defined as a situation simulating the competition context, which allows for selectively enhancing a certain component of the practice and increasing or reducing its level of demand.

The conditions under which training exercises are carried out determine the effectiveness of information sources. This leads to the self-configuration of the athlete's functional structure (Seirul-lo, 2017). An effective player will be able to identify the modifications of the environment in each exercise, and adapt or adjust his/her motor actions to this changing context. In rondos, players receive information on the orientation of their teammates and opponents, the trajectories of opponents, and the available spaces in which they



have a current or potential advantage, in addition to the standard numerical superiority used in the rondo.



## Specificity

Rondos are currently one of the most popular approaches among coaches because the adaptations generated in the practices will be transferred to the game, thanks to their relatively high level of specificity. In comparison, other exercises lack the necessary cooperation-opposition in the shared space and decision-making. Evidently, there are exercises with a higher degree of specificity, such as situation games. However the rondo is an optimal exercise for any training session, due to its simplicity, low conditional demand and continuous contact with the ball.

Training must be carried out under specific conditions, depending on the characteristics of each sport. This specificity in the methodological approach is a key principle in generating solutions for adaptation within training. This is characteristic of rondos, since they guarantee activation of the player's structures, to a greater or lesser extent, and promote a higher transfer to games.

In this regard, Pedro Gómez (2014) discusses some of the advantages provided by this type of approach: greater participation of the players involved, and thus more repetitions of the exercise, usefulness in the conditional structure, the need for various types of efforts, and definition of sectoral behaviors (spaces in the zone).

It should be noted that the use of this type of exercise does not generate a sufficient level of specificity for some of the variables in soccer. In this case, we refer to the dimensions of the playing field, the number of players involved and the modification of the rules. There are other exercises that can meet these needs.

Before going into detail on how rondos are executed according to FC Barcelona, we will analyze the contributions of Daniel Guindos (2015) on the subject.

According to Guindos (2015), the exercises applied during training can be divided into three categories:

- Introductory.
- Optimization.
- Main exercises or cool down exercises.

In this description, the author argues that rondos are very useful in the introductory exercises. For Guindos (2015), rondos are small-sided games with opponents, in which there are usually few or no position changes because of the reduced space.

Rondos mark the beginning of team play. This provides a sample, on a smaller scale, of what occurs on the playing field. It would be unfair to discuss rondos without mentioning Laureano Ruiz (2010) who, in



the 1970s, was the first to implement this training exercise for team sports.

He asserted:

We don't think it's about running more to play better. Working as a group is key, when everyone is playing the same game; united by intelligence and playing skill. You don't have to be physically gifted to succeed. Soccer means running and thinking. The determining factors are intelligence, mental ability in information processing, and team play (Ruiz, 2010 p. 28).

Before competing, one must go through a process based on reasoning and order. This process begins at the most basic level and instills the criteria that we consider most relevant to succeed in playing soccer, regardless of the objectives or the playing model.

The objectives when applying these types of ideas are aimed at improving certain aspects of the player, for example:

- Improve his/her relationship with the ball.
- Improve his/her body position and profile. This allows the player to correctly perform each of the passes in which he/she intervenes.
- Use both legs to optimize the pass to a teammate, either on the left or right side.
- Maintain possession of the ball through 1 or 2 touches.
- The possibility to identify where to direct the next pass before receiving the ball.

Group elements, on the other hand, are practiced in another type of exercise.

In the possession stage, the typical rondo in our practice aims for **maintaining possession of the ball**. It is not enough to simply prevent the ball from being stolen. An attempt is made to ensure that, in each player's action, he/she is in a position that assists his/her teammate. In turn, the pass made by the player must aim to help his/her teammate to avoid losing the ball. The objective is not to play to avoid failing yourself, but to play so that your teammates do not fail.

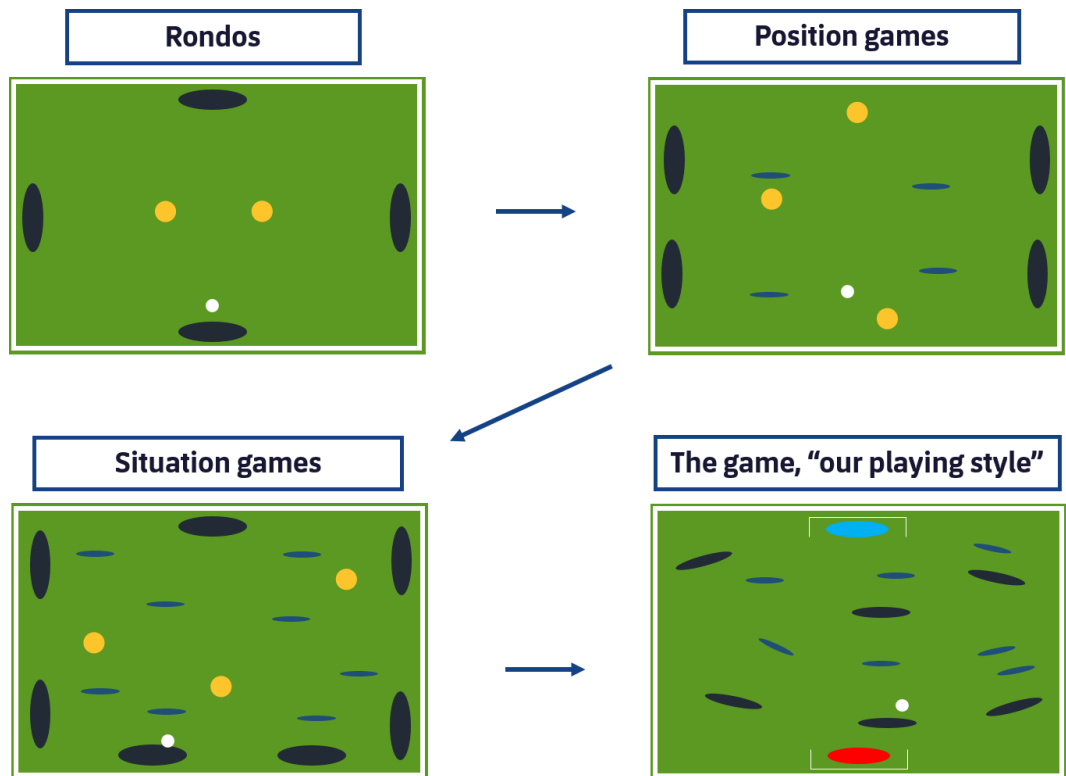
Players must be constantly moving in order to create pass lines for both short and long passes. Short passes eventually run the risk of being intercepted, due to the proximity of the opponents in the recovery stage. A long pass alleviates this pressure and finds a player far away or *third man*. The possessor must always have more than 2 pass lines.



Next, we will observe the stages of the process on the path to competition, from the perspective of FC Barcelona. Here, we can see that rondos are the first step in the training stage.

### 3.2 Stages of the process

Figure 1: Stages before the game



Source: Prepared by the authors.

- 1- Rondos.
- 2- Position games.
- 3- Situation games.
- 4- Game (our playing style).

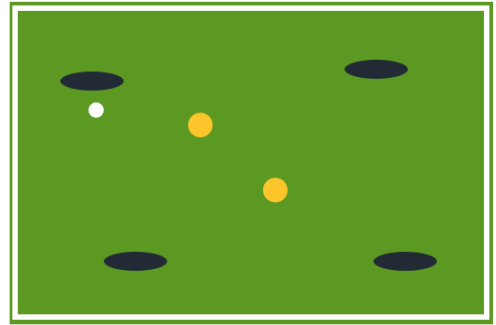
**Rondos**, the beginning of team play. Laureano Ruiz:

All of the concepts addressed in the methodological application of the rondos are of the utmost importance, since they are "small games".

The rondo is a continual game in which the location of the players is pre-established, according to an intelligent location of the space in which the possessors are placed, so that they are interconnected as effectively and efficiently as possible. By applying these types of exercises, starting in the training stages, the young players will be able to occupy the space in a logical way, acquiring and adhering to the principles that govern the internal functioning of the game.

**Figure 2: Rondos**

A player can be seen behind the ball with a teammate on his left, another on the right and one ahead. All of the concepts learned can be applied in a game.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

## Practical application

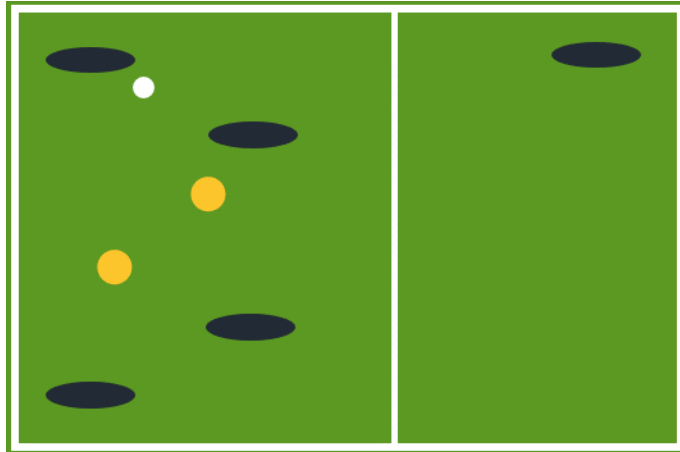
Below, we can observe some practical examples of the most commonly used rondos.

- Example of a rondo 4-2 +1 with 2 spaces.

In the following example, the field will be divided into two zones. In one, 4-2 is played, and an offensive player is waiting in the other zone. A minimum or maximum number of passes must be made, with the aim of provoking a change in orientation of the player located in the other zone. If successful, three offensive players and two defensive players will pass the ball, in order to continue with the 4-2 scenario in the next zone.

In order to more closely reflect the reality of the game, we don't require a number of passes, but rather take advantage of the right moment to change spaces.

## Figure 3: 4-2 +1 with two spaces



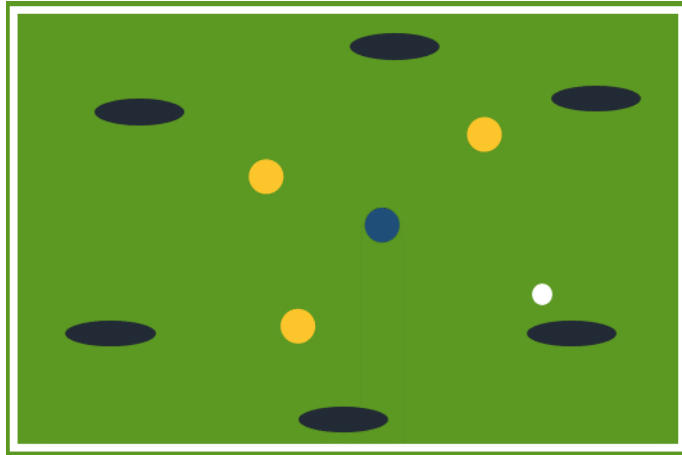
Source: Prepared by the authors.

In this case, the aim is to play with the open players, rationally occupy the space, and provide solutions to the possessor by continuously creating pass lines. As for the players recovering the ball, they should close the pass lines, apply pressure in response to changes in orientation, and accumulate players in the zones where the ball is located.

- Example: rondo 6-3 +1 inside.

6 players outside the rondo, 3 players to recover the ball, and a neutral player inside. The team with the ball scores if it can reach the neutral player and pass the ball between the two opponents. The neutral player, in turn, must return the ball outside of the rondo to a player other than the one who received the pass. An optimal way to score by following these rules, for example, is for the neutral player to move away from the ball and look behind the retrievers. In turn, outside players must keep the ball, but also be aware of the possibility of making a scoring pass, which, in terms of transferring this to the game, would be a pass that gains space behind the opponents.

**Figure 4: 6-3 +1 on the inside**

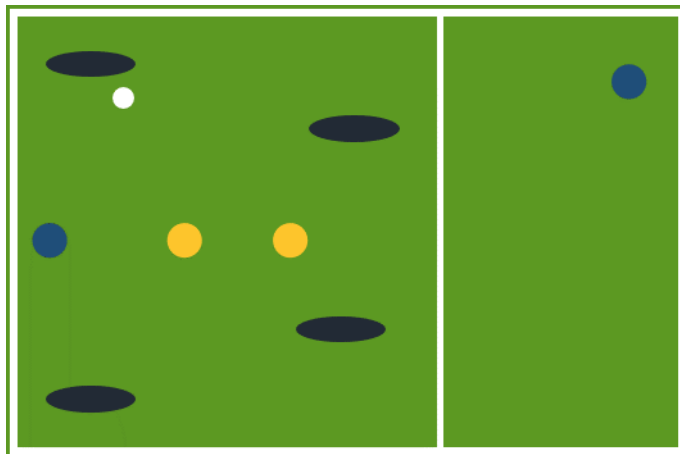


Source: Prepared by the authors.

- Example of rondo 4-2-2.

As seen in the example in Figure 3, two zones will be divided. 5-2 is played in one zone, with an offensive player in the other. Under the same objectives as the previous example, they will move to the other zone after a certain number of passes to play 5-2.

**Figure 5: 4-2-2**

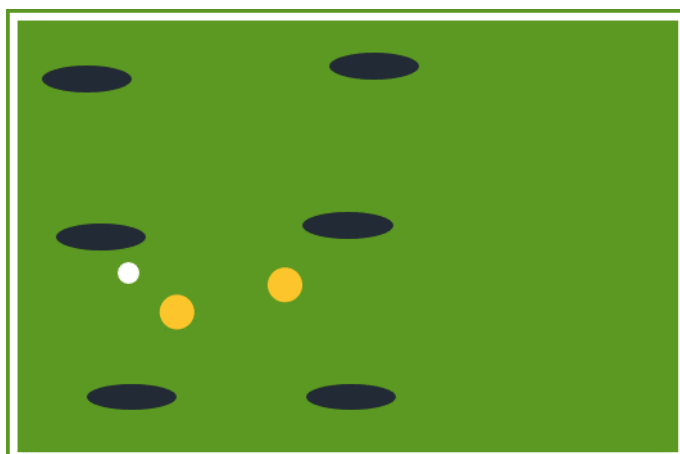


Source: Prepared by the authors.

- Example of rondo 6-2 with the ball.

In this case, 6 players must keep possession of the ball while 2 try to recover it. The players form pairs, with 2 located on each side and 2 in the center. The moment one of the players of the pair passes the ball to a distant player, the one who passed the ball and his partner exchange positions with the middle pair. In this case, this is where training on change of position begins, which enables the mobility of the players.

**Figure 6: 6-2 (ball)**

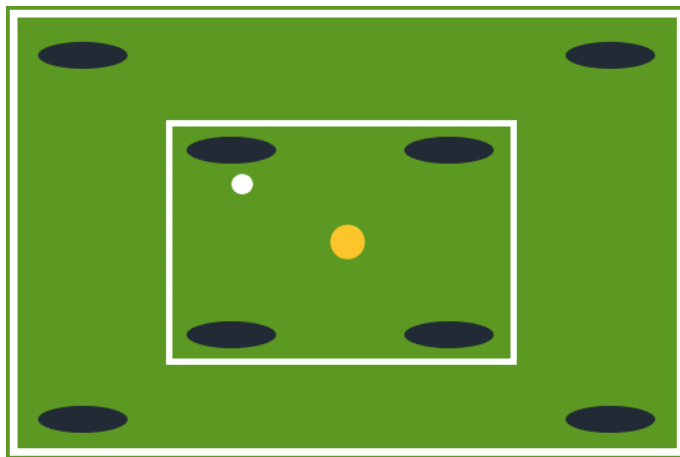


Source: Prepared by the authors.

- Example of a double rondo.

This is performed in a double reduced space in the red zone, in which 4 players must keep possession of the ball while 1 tries to recover it. A certain number of passes to be made and then go to the outside square with a long pass. The player who makes the pass changes position with the receiver, who will have to bring the ball into the red square again, passing to one of the 4 internal players, who will then become a defensive player. During the game, the player who recovers the ball changes position with the one who lost it. In this type of approach, we begin working on the long pass.

**Figure 7: Double rondo**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

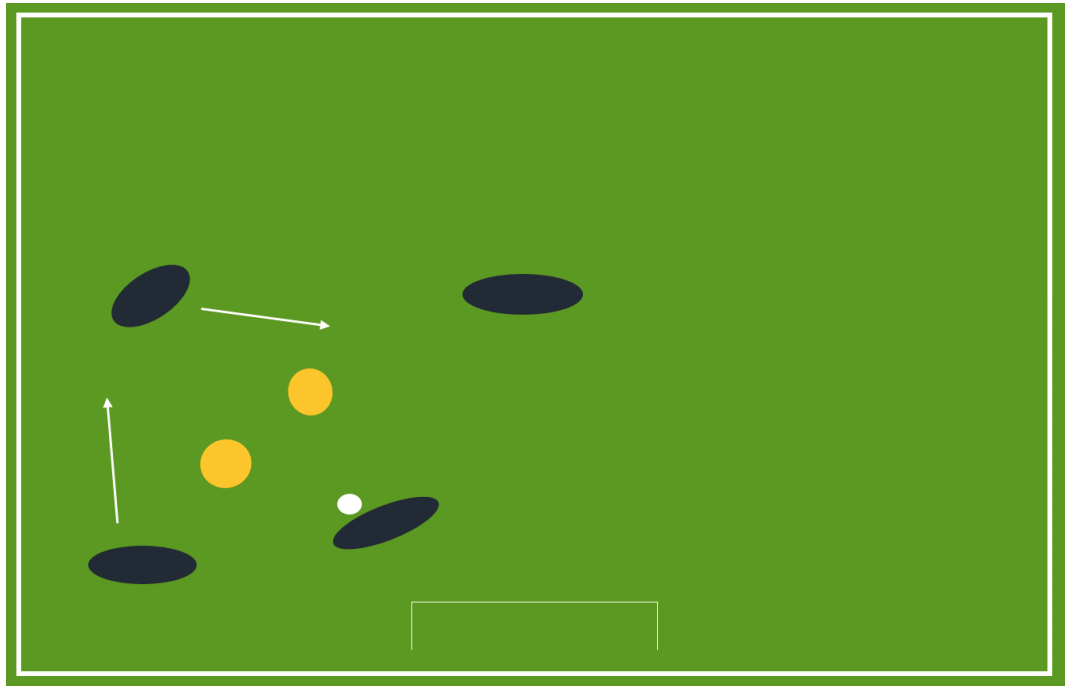
- Example of a rondo by positions.

Specific playing situations are recovered and turned into a rondo. In other words, we design specific situations in which we allow players outside of the rondo to make predetermined movements, just as they would in a real game.

Specifically, we can perform a 4-2 rondo, where the 4 players are left central defender, left wingback, left winger and left inner midfielder (imagine a 1-4-3-3). The two retrievers could be one forward and one winger of the opposing team. The central defender and inner midfielder would serve as a rondo for the previously mentioned positions, but we add a rule of mobility: if the left wingback moves in search of pass lines towards the area of the winger, the latter must move perpendicularly towards the center (to approach the inner midfielder). This movement would leave the corridor free for the

wingback. Thus, this player must be aware not only of the ball, but also of the position his/her teammate in a more tactical way.

**Figure 8: Rondo by positions**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

This rondo is a preliminary step before performing other types of exercises, such as position games. A rondo is performed because the functional distances are reduced, and because there are players who practice as if performing a rondo (although they are given a role of delimitation in order to create a context for those who no longer play as if performing a rondo; in this case, the wingback and winger).

- Example: rondo soccer 7.

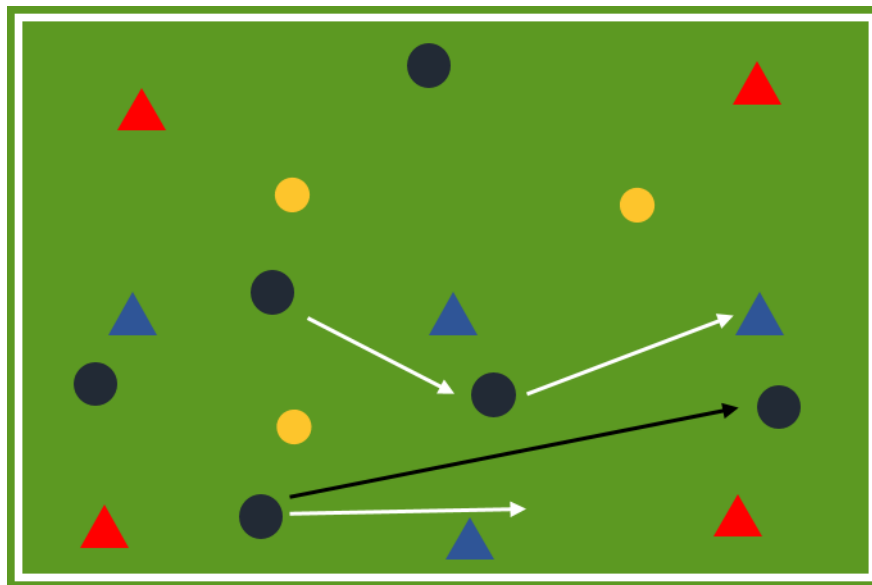
In this style, all of the players perform with predetermined positions, according to the positions of football 7, by means of the system 1-3-2-1.

The objective is to make at least 3 passes to each of the 3 rondos (see Figure 9). When switching to the small rondo, some players perform the movement of the playing system itself, as indicated by the white arrows. When switching to the big rondo, 5 (1 forward, 2 midfielders, 2 wingbacks) play against 2.

You can mark the retriever who must move to the small rondo (the most advanced player or another) in order to exchange positions. If they steal the ball, they must make two passes or find a coach with the ball, for example.

Variant: do not force a minimum of passes, but start the game so that they do not reach the first rondo quickly, which means reaching the forward in order to score.

**Figure 9: Rondo soccer 7**



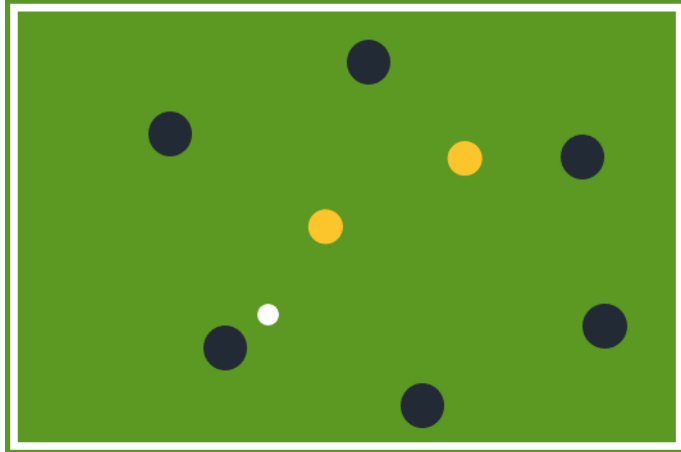
Source: Prepared by the authors.

- Example of a playful rondo.

A 6-2 rondo is created, and the only difference compared to others is that, when stealing the ball (not a loss of possession), the 8 players must look for a new outer playing space. This is not possible, however, in the case of players who are already on the outside, in which neither of the two have sides. If two players reach the same space at the same time, those who stole the ball are given priority, and if two outer players coincide, then the coach decides. The two players who no longer have space will be the next to steal the ball.

This is a playful challenge that is incompatible with some of the objectives shown below. An initial, basic approach to a "*change in thinking*" can be made when our team loses the ball, and we must quickly go out and steal it, leaving our position behind.

**Figure 10: Recreational rondo**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

### **Objectives, concepts and criteria**

- Learn to want to possess the ball as a team. The team concept starts with the rondo from the first moment. It's not about individuality when it comes to possessing the ball, it's about working as a team.
- Optimize the coordinating (COO), cognitive (COG), socio-affective (SAF), emotional-volitional (EVO), and creative-expressive (CEX) aspects of the game. All of these concepts or structures must coexist simultaneously in the rondo exercises.
- Identify, interpret and practice the elements of **our playing style** in spaces of mutual assistance.
- Adapt our socio-affective playing style to the continuum of the game. Soccer is complex and continuous, and it's not about ending a play after a pass or a kick, but rather understanding the permanent dynamics of the game in which we are always connected.
- **All players** participate in the possession stage, along with recovery if the ball has been lost. Playing means knowing which of the two teams possesses the ball, and with it, outperforms the opposing team. For this, cooperation of all players in the two halves of the game (understood as one within the continuum of the game) is essential.

- Rondos can also have a playful component, making these ideal for the start of the session. They help focus the player's attention on the exercises planned by the coach and serve as a type of coordination warm-up.



### 3.3 Objectives of rondos

**For the possession stage** (involves COO - COG - SAF - EVO aspects)

- The ball is ours and we can't lose it. **Everyone** should enjoy playing.
- Improve the short pass and guided control (use both legs and different contact surfaces). Passes and control, situated in a reduced space, are part of our playing style.
- To give continuity to the game: to release the ball at the start, as well as before, during and after with the same inertia as the pass, aiming for the following action and avoiding crossing the line of the ball. The pass is not an action that ends after it is completed.
- Learn to look, see, predict, anticipate and decide.
- Short and long game alternatives, outside and inside (long pass). When performing a rondo, there is always a teammate who is furthest away and available for a long pass (outside and inside), in order to secure the spaces behind the opponents.
- Offer pass lines, repeat passes, and give support (encourage communication).
- Deceive and surprise the retrievers (unexpected pass). Tricking the opponent and our mutual understanding are two variables that go together; you cannot have one without the other. It is important to make the most of a good group performance. Knowing our teammate and understanding the action he/she will perform, just by observing his/her initial movement, gives an advantage of tenths of a second. This is possible through a high level of optimization of the socio-affective structure and can be achieved, among other ways, through hours of training in highly specific situations, from rondos to games.

**For the recovery stage** (this involves SAF and EVO aspects)

- Feint to deceive the opponent in this recovery stage. Feint.
- Do not hit.
- Cover the dominant foot.
- Communication between retrievers to block the path of the ball.



"When FC Barcelona reshuffles in order to recover the ball at the speed of light, its structure can take on any type of formation without a predetermined layout" (Cano, 2012, p. 33).

We should emphasize that these two structures, SAF and EVO, are of the utmost importance in the concept of recovery. The positive relationship between players will provide benefits of cooperation to the team and greater chances of recovering the ball. **Willingness** is essential in order to try to recover or keep the ball.

#### **Objectives to practice in the possession stage (choose 1)**

- Improve short pass and guided control (use both legs).
- Learn to look, see, predict, anticipate and decide.
- Options to play on the outside and inside.

#### **Objectives to practice in the recovery stage (choose 1)**

- Feint to recover the ball.
- Do not hit.
- The 1st player stays with the ball, the 2nd with the opponent.

#### **Concepts, criteria and efficient information (for the coach)**

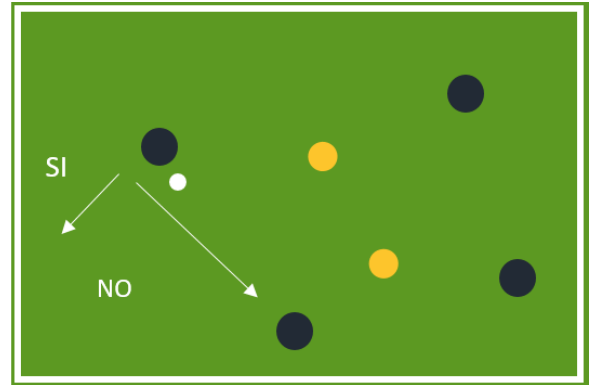
- Provide the player with individualized and efficient information in each pause of the game.
- Change the positions of the players. Everyone changes all the time. This is crucial so that the profiles are different, and to vary the style of the possession plays. In addition, it allows the player to understand how decisions are managed in each space of the playing field. It is essential to work on this aspect from an early age.
- If the ball is recovered by both of these players, then they should both exit to allow the passer and receiver to enter. The success of a move is the result of something having been done well before. The same happens with moves that fail.



## Concepts in 4-2 formations

Figure 11: Criteria for possession

### Crterios para la posesión



Source: Prepared by the authors.

**Before passing:** look, correctly position the body, keep the feet active and feint before receiving the ball, in order to deceive the opponent and provide a pass line to the possessor.

**During the pass,** there are two possible options. It is important to remember that the opponents always affect our possibilities.

- a- Control oriented towards the best free space and pass (the more unexpected, the better).
- b- Mark the nearest opponent to generate a 2-1 with the teammate, and thus achieve numerical superiority.

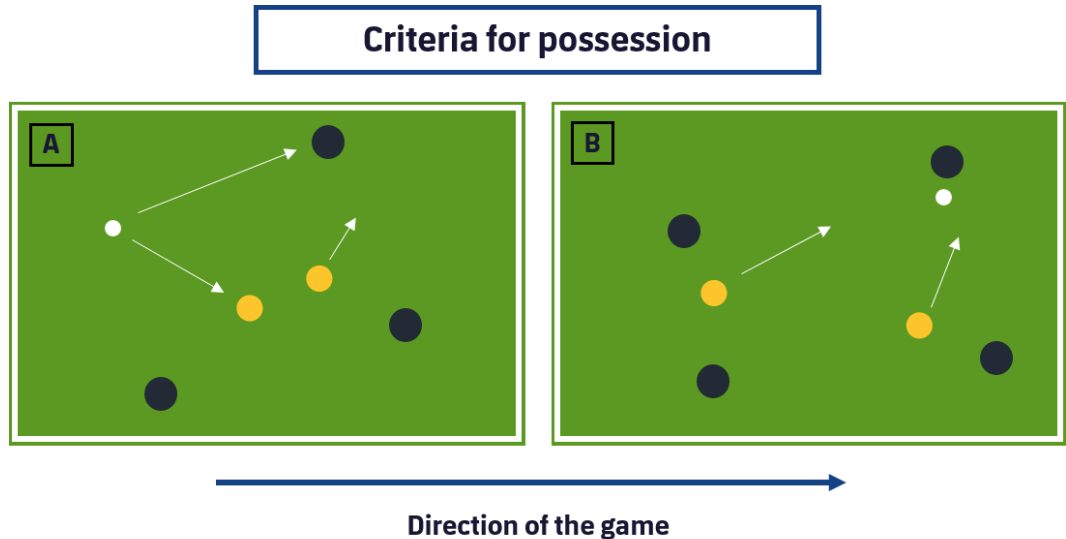
**After the pass:** give the receiving teammate an exit on a different line from the ball's trajectory.

#### At all times:

- Maintain mobility.
- Occupy the sides but not the corners or angles of the playing space.
- Keep the feet active.
- Correctly position the body to see all the spaces in the game (look near and far) in order to choose the best alternatives for a short game (side pass) and long game (between the two opponents).

- The best supporting position for the possessor (emergence, continuity, progression, attracting the third man playing on the line).

Figure 12: Criteria for recovery



Source: Prepared by the authors.

### Before the pass:

Agitate the possessor on his/her dominant side, forcing him/her to use the less dominant leg.

Place yourself in the middle between the two opponents and stay positioned, preparing for a possible 1 on 1 situation with your teammate if faced with a situation of mutual assistance in the recovery stage.

### During the pass:

- 1- Occupy the space between the two opponents and stay positioned in order to consider the possible intermediate pass.
- 2- Agitate the possessor by cutting off the trajectory of the pass behind him/her, towards the third man.

### After the pass:

- 1- When we have recovered the ball, it will be necessary to make 3 passes in order for the ball to be ours. A good option is to repeat pass 1 -> 2 and, in the third pass, leave that zone to avoid losing the recovered ball. At the same time, provide sufficient time to reorganize the players who were waiting for

ball recovery (evidently, this does not usually happen when practicing rondos, although you can perform exercises with continuous cycles, for example, with transitions: with and without the ball, etc.).

#### **At all times:**

- Do not follow the trajectory of the ball.
- Position the body to see as much of the field as possible and at least 3 opponents.
- Cut 1 or 2 pass lines from the possessor.
- Give the possessor only one option to escape.
- One defensive player must pressure the possessor (entry) and the other must cover him/her.
- Take advantage of the error (in a pass, ball control, etc.) to put more pressure on the possessor and force him/her to lose the ball, followed by recovery.

#### **Suggestions**

It is not necessary to practice more than one concept for each time the rondos are practiced. The aim is to do so with sufficient time and within a planned process.

All of the elements observed help instill **good habits** in the players who undergo training processes. Keep repeating these exercises, because once the player acquires bad habits, it is very difficult to correct what has been learned. Neuroscience shows us that it is easier to create new neuronal links than to recall existing ones (what has already been learned). The training stages are essential because it is where motivation for learning and play prevails.



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