

Roberto De Zerbi

92 Build Up,
Passing
Combinations
and Attacking
Positional
Practices Direct
from De Zerbi's
Training Sessions



Roberto De Zerbi

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Attacking Positional Practices Direct
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COACH PROFILE: ROBERTO DE ZERBI



COACHING ROLES

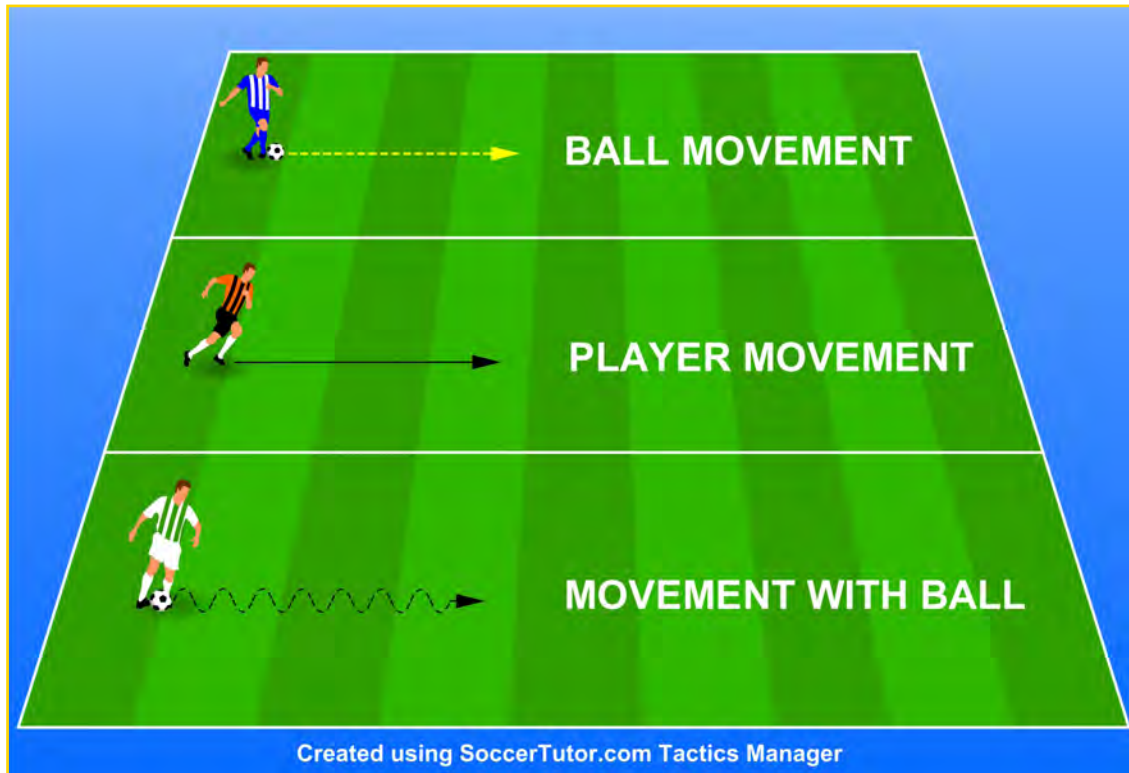
- **Brighton** (2022 - Present)
 - **Shakhtar Donetsk** (2021-2022)
 - **Sassuolo** (2018–2021)
 - **Benevento** (2017–2018)
 - **Palermo** (2016)
 - **Foggia** (2014–2016)
 - **Darfo Boario** (2013–2014)
- **Managing Brighton in the Premier League & Europa League:** In his first season, De Zerbi led Brighton to their highest ever Premier League finish (6th) and their first ever qualification for European competition. This season, they're continuing their strong performance, reaching the Europa League Last 16 by topping their group. As of this book's publication, Brighton's journey in Europe is still unfolding. De Zerbi's impressive impact has established him as one of the best young coaches in world football.
 - **Managing Sassuolo in Serie A:** Took charge of Sassuolo in Serie A and over achieved by finishing in 8th position twice, playing attractive attacking football throughout his time there. He also helped develop and nurture the young players within the squad.
 - **Coppa Italia Success:** Sassuolo reached the semi-finals of the Coppa Italia during the 2018-2019 season, a notable achievement for the club in a major domestic competition.
 - **Ukrainian Super Cup:** Had a successful period at Shakhtar Donetsk before it was cut short due to the war in Ukraine. De Zerbi won the Ukrainian Super Cup in 2021 and left Shakhtar top of the Ukrainian Premier League before the season was cancelled.
 - **Stint with Benevento:** Managed Benevento in the first ever season in Serie A, and his work with the team gained De Zerbi high praise and recognition for their possession-based attacking style of play, which led to him being appointed by Sassuolo for the next season.
 - **Serie C Promotion with Foggia:** Gained recognition as a coach by guiding Foggia to promotion from Serie C to Serie B in the 2016-2017 season. This was a significant achievement for the club.

“Pay attention to what I’m going to say because I’m pretty convinced I’m right – Roberto De Zerbi is one of the most influential managers in the last 20 years.”

Pep Guardiola



DIAGRAM KEY



PRACTICE FORMAT

- The practices in this book are taken directly from Roberto De Zerbi's training sessions at Brighton, Shakhtar Donetsk, and Sassuolo between 2018 and 2023.
- Each practice includes the practice topic/name and clear diagrams with a detailed description.

Passing Combinations



Direct from
Roberto De Zerbi's
Training Sessions

12. Receiving Angles for Build-up Through Lines Support Play Passing Circuit



Variation 1: Combination with One-Two + Give & Go



Practice Description (Variation 1)

This circuit is played with 2 simultaneous balls - the next pass from Position A is played after H receives.

- 1-2. **A** passes to **B**, then **B** to **C** with both opening up to receive around the triangle shape.
- 3-5. **C** passes diagonally to **D**, then **D** passes to **E**, and **E** to **F** with all players checking off their respective cones.

- 6-7. **F** sets the ball back for **E** to move forward and pass to **G**.
 - 8-9. **G** plays a give & go with **F** to receive on the other side of the mannequin.
 - 10-11. **G** passes to **H**, who receives and dribbles to the start position.
- The players rotate their positions **A** → **B** → **C** → **D** → **E** → **F** → **G** → **H** → **A**, and the same sequence is repeated to the right with players positioned on yellow cones.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton training session at AMEX Stadium - 11th April 2023

Variation 2: Combination with Lay-offs + Give & Go



Practice Description (Variation 2)

This circuit is played with 2 simultaneous balls - the next pass from Position A is played after H receives. In this variation of the example on the previous page, the difference is that C now passes to E, who sets the ball back for D to pass to F (see full description below).

- 1-2. A passes to B, then B to C with both opening up to receive around the triangle shape.
- 3-5. C passes to E, who sets the ball back for D. D has checked away, dropped, and then made a curved forward movement to receive the lay-off before passing forward to F.

- 6-7. F sets the ball back for E to move forward and pass to G.
 - 8-9. G plays a give & go with F to receive on the other side of the mannequin.
 - 10-11. G passes to H, who receives and dribbles to the start position.
- The players rotate their positions:
A → B → C → D → E → F → G → H → A.
- The same sequence is repeated to the right with players positioned on the yellow cones.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton training session at AMEX Stadium - 11th April 2023

Roberto De Zerbi's Build-up Play and Attacking Philosophy



Roberto De Zerbi's Key Game Principles for Build-up Play from the Back

1

Bait the Press (Draw Opponents Forward)

- Deliberately **invite pressure with players positioned deep during build-up**. The GK acts as the third centre back.
- **Draw in opponents** with short passes and maximise space further up the pitch to exploit.
- Put foot on ball with the sole of the boot so you can play any way and are not limited to only playing to one side when pressed.

2

Technical Execution

- Control of the ball with precise first touches, quality of pass, and the correct weight of pass.
- Prevent duels as much as possible by **limiting long passes (maintain control)**.
- Wait for the correct forward pass to a link player, who can play a wall pass to a teammate in space facing the opposition's goal.

3

Control the Opposition and the Game

- Control the game with good tactical knowledge, reading the game situation, and making the correct decisions.
- **Possession-based football** to control the game.
- Defensive midfielder/s deep to control the build-up play. Wingers push up high and pin back opposition's defensive line.
- Move the ball to the forward or attacking midfielder in the open space in the centre.

Roberto De Zerbi's Tactical Shape for Build-up Play from Back in Open Play

1a. Build-up Shape with 2-4-4 Structure (Brighton 4-2-3-1)



- Roberto De Zerbi's team invite the opposition's press and draw them deep into their half. The **centre backs (CB) often place their foot on the ball**, leaving the option open to play passes in any direction. The 2 full backs are wide and in line with the **2 defensive midfielders (double pivot)**. The 4 attacking players are in advanced positions to pin the 4 opposing defenders back and away from disrupting the build-up.
- As the opponents are forced to commit players forward, the Brighton **attacking midfielder (AM)** and **forward (F)** can occupy positions in free available space.
- With the **double box structure** shown, Brighton have a **6v4 Overload in the centre of the pitch (highlighted)**, which enables them to play through the opposition's organisation and move the ball forward to their attacking players.

1b. Square Pass (Bait to Press), Third Man Link Player to Move Ball to Free Player + Launch Attack



- De Zerbi's aims are to bait the opposition forward to press and draw them out of position and use a third man link player to move the ball to a free player behind the first line of pressure. Square passes like the one in the diagram example are used to bait the press.
- The **defensive midfielders (DM)** stay behind the 2 red forwards (in shadow) with the aim of receiving via a link player. They do not move at angles to receive directly from the **centre backs (CB)**.
- Once their opponents commit, Brighton play out from the back successfully by following this set tactical structure and principles. Once a link player is used to "bounce" the ball to a free **DM**, Brighton can move the ball into the free available space (highlighted yellow). This space to play is there because the opposition's back 4 were pinned back by the wingers.
- In the diagram example, the **attacking midfielder (AM)** is the link player and the **DM's** pass breaks the midfield line to play through to the **forward (F)**. A good attacking opportunity has been created very quickly with 6 or 7 opponents taken out of the game.

“[Centre backs] have the pleasure of holding the ball, of building the game, knowing that everything starts from them.”



Positional Roles in Roberto De Zerbi's Build-up Play and Attacking Philosophy

1. Play Out from the GK with Ball Playing Centre Backs and Full Backs Supporting the Attack



- **Play out from the goalkeeper** and the centre backs. Establish possession deep in the defensive third and build up play patiently from there, **baiting the press**.
- **Ball playing centre backs** actively participate in the build up play. They play short passes to maintain possession, stop with the ball, carry the ball, etc. They also play forward passes to break the lines.
- **Full backs play a crucial role in providing width** during the build-up phase. They are positioned to receive wide and **push forward to support the attack**.
- With the **wingers high and wide**, De Zerbi likes to **create overloads on the flanks** and stretch the opposition's defensive line.

2. Midfield Structure for Ball Progression, Forward Link Play, and Overloads on the Flank (Create and Score Goals)



- **Well structured midfield** that facilitates ball circulation and **ball progression**.
- Midfielders play a key role in linking the defenders and attacking players, ensuring a smooth transition through the centre of the pitch.
- **Wingers** occupy the wide positions in the front 3 and **stretch the opposition**. They also deliver crosses or cut inside to create goal scoring chances.
- The full backs make deep overlapping runs to help **create 2v1 overloads high up the flank**, as shown in the diagram example.
- The **forward (F)** is the centre point of the attack with responsibilities for hold up play, linking the midfielders with the wingers, making runs in behind, and attacking the box to score goals!

Positional Possession Games



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3. 4v4 (+3) Positional Possession Game in Central Area of the Pitch



Practice Description

- In the area shown, we have 4 blue players with 2 defensive midfielders (**DM**) and 2 wingers (**LW & RW**) vs 4 red players.
- The team in possession (blues) are supported by the 3 yellow neutral players, who play with the team in possession: The right back (**RB**), left back (**LB**), and attacking midfielder (**AM**).
- The game starts with De Zerbi's pass in and the blue team (with help from yellows) aim to maintain possession against the red players' pressing.
- All 7 players in possession make movements to support as shown but must retain their positional roles.
- The red defending team all work together (pressing) to close off the passing angles and try to win the ball.
- If the reds are able to win the ball, they switch roles with the blue team and the game continues with the reds keeping possession supported by the yellows, and the blue players defending.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton training session at Elite Football Performance Centre - 2022

Positional Build-up Play



Direct from
Roberto De Zerbi's
Training Sessions

4. De Zerbi's Specific Coached Patterns to Play Out from Back Through First and Second Lines of Pressure (8+GK v6)



Practice Description

1. The left back (**LB**) passes to **De Zerbi** (**RDZ**), who takes over the role of left centre back (**LCB**) to coach the players.
- 2-6. **RDZ** passes across to the right centre back (**RCB**), who is pressed by the red forward as he takes a forward touch. **RCB** passes back across to **RDZ**. **RDZ** moves inside to meet the pass and pass to the defensive midfielder (**DM**), who sets the ball back for the oncoming **RCB**.

- 7-10. **RCB** passes to the right central midfielder (**RCM**) who is marked from behind, so sets the ball back for **DM** to receive again. **DM** passes to the forward (**F**), who has his back to goal, and sets the ball back for the oncoming left central midfielder (**LCM**).

Variation (9b-10b). Instead of passing to the **F**, **DM** can dribble the ball forward and then play a through pass beyond the marked out end line.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Sassuolo Calcio preseason training session in Vipiteno, Italy - 18th July 2018

14. Build-up Through the 3 Zones with Overloads in a Positional 10v9 Game



Practice Description

- There are 3 zones marked out as shown with a total situation of 10v9. We have 6v4 in Zone 1 and 4v5 in Zone 2.
- The blues aim to build up play through Zones 1 and 2, play a through pass for a runner into Zone 3, and then score through any of the 3 yellow pole gates.
- The red players remain in their zone except the 4 defenders, who can drop back once the ball is played into Zone 3.

- The attacking midfielder (**AM**) can drop into Zone 1 to create a 7v4 advantage to help the initial build-up. Once the ball is in Zone 2, the blue Zone 1 players can all move forward (except the **CBs**).
- In the diagram, the blues consolidate possession in Zone 1, the defensive midfielder (**DM**) receives a lay-off from the forward (**F**) in Zone 2, and the right back (**RB**) makes a deep run to receive and pass for **AM** to finish in Zone 3.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton training session at AMEX Stadium - 11th April 2023

Attacking Positional Patterns of Play



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Training Sessions

“Everyone knows what we have to do in our position, and he expects different things from each position. He gives you enough information to choose the right decision for you. That is good as a player. You can see which decision fits.”

Alexis Mac Allister

Liverpool, Argentina, and former Brighton Midfielder



ROBERTO DE ZERBI'S 2-3-2-3 ATTACKING PHASE FORMATION



Roberto De Zerbi has adapted his style of play during his career but has used variations of this 2-3-2-3 attacking phase shape throughout. The examples to follow in this section are from his early training sessions with Sassuolo using the 4-3-3.

DEFENDERS: The **centre backs (CB)** provide defensive stability. The **full backs (LB & RB)** help form the second line and build-up play in central areas, but also move out of these positions (forward runs) to provide width and deliver crosses.

MIDFIELDERS: The **defensive midfielder (DM)** is deep in the second line with a

crucial role in maintaining possession, ball circulation, and build-up play through the centre of the pitch. The **central midfielders (LCM & RCM)** in the third line play a key role in receiving between the lines, linking the second line with the attackers and creating goal scoring opportunities.

WINGERS: The **wingers (LW & RW)** occupy wide positions in the front 3 to stretch the opposition, deliver crosses, and cut inside to create goal scoring chances.

FORWARD: The **forward (F)** has a central role with hold up play, linking wingers and central midfielders, and scoring goals.

5. Possession in Centre + Forward's Lay-off for Central Midfielder's Through Pass to Winger on Weak Side



Practice Description

1. The right back (**RB**) passes to the defensive midfielder (**DM**).
2. **DM** is pressed by De Zerbi and passes forward to the right central midfielder (**RCM**), who drops back to receive under pressure from the Coach.
- 3-4. **RCM** passes inside to the other central midfielder (**LCM**), who shifts across and sets the ball for the movement of **DM**.
- 5-6. **DM** passes to the forward (**F**), who sets the ball for the oncoming **RCM**.
7. **RCM** plays a diagonal through pass in between the 2 centre back mannequins for the run of the left winger (**LW**), who makes a movement inside the full back mannequin.
- 8-9. **LW** passes the ball across the box for **F** to score. **LCM** and the right winger (**RW**) make runs into the box to provide support and a different final passing option.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Sassuolo Calcio preseason training session in Vipiteno, Italy - 23rd July 2019

Attacking Combinations and Finishing



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8. Short Passing Combination Play and Finishing 3-Stations Circuit



Practice Description

Players work in groups of 5 and move to the next station after a set period of time.

A. Player **A** plays a one-two with **B**, and then passes to **C**, who drops off the mannequin to receive. **C** takes the ball past the mannequin, plays a one-two with **D**, then plays a return pass which **D** receives on the other side of the mannequin. **D** shoots to try and score a goal.

B. Player **A** plays a one-two with **B**, and then passes to **C**, who moves forward off the mannequin to receive. **C** sets the ball for **B** to pass across to **D**. **D** receives, moves towards goal, and shoots.

C. Player **A** passes to **B**, who plays a one-two with **C**. **B** then passes across to **D**, who sets the ball back for **C**. **C** then plays a through pass for **D** ahead of the mannequin. **D** shoots and tries to score.

Source: Roberto De Zerbi's Brighton training session at Elite Football Performance Centre - 21st January 2023



Roberto De Zerbi

92 Build Up, Passing Combinations and Attacking Positional Practices Direct from De Zerbi's Training Sessions

This book provides you with a rare opportunity to use **92 Roberto De Zerbi Build Up, Passing Combinations and Attacking Positional Play Practices**. Find out how De Zerbi coaches his team to produce his **fluid possession-based attacking style with unique build up play patterns to control the ball and dominate opponents**.

Referring to the way Roberto De Zerbi coaches his teams to play with innovative build up play tactics, which are included in this book, Pep Guardiola said *"I think Brighton is playing something unique, special,"* and *"he monopolises the ball in a way I haven't seen for a long, long time."*

Take your chance to coach your team to **bait the press**, play out from the back with **fast and intricate passing combinations**, and create space and **overloads high up the pitch**. Focus on creativity, movement, and rotations with third man link players to break through pressure, positional interchanges to break down defences, and supporting runs to finish attacks quickly and efficiently.

The **92 Practices** included in this book are all **taken directly from Roberto De Zerbi's training sessions at Brighton, Shakhtar Donetsk, and Sassuolo** between 2018 and 2023.

Build Up, Passing & Attacking Positional Practices included:

- Rondos
- Passing Combinations
- Positional Possession Games
- Positional Build Up Play
- Attacking Positional Patterns of Play
- Attacking Combinations and Finishing

Roberto De Zerbi Practice Examples:

- Receiving Angles for Build Up Through Lines Support Play Passing Circuit
- Positional Build Up Play Possession Game in Centre of the Pitch
- Bait the Press and Find the Right Moment to Advance Build Up Play
- Combination Play Wide, Reset to Centre Back, and Attack Through Flank
- Passing Across Back Line and Attacking Through Centre with Inverted Forwards
- Short Passing Combination Play and Finishing 3-Station Circuit



"Pay attention to what I'm going to say because I'm pretty convinced I am right – Roberto De Zerbi is one of the most influential managers in the last 20 years."

Pep Guardiola

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