

Xabi Alonso

82 Passing, Positional
Possession, Games,
Patterns and Attacking
Practices Direct from
Bayer Leverkusen
Training Sessions

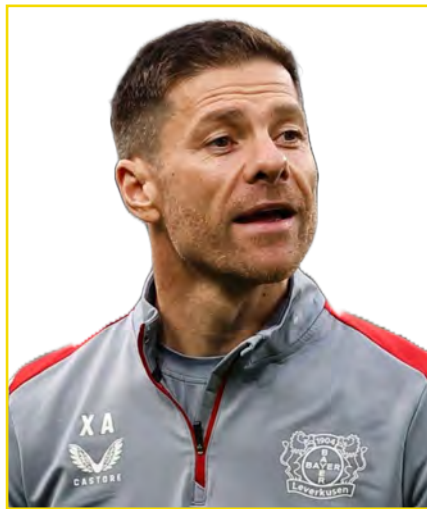
+ Tactical Analysis



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82 Passing, Positional Possession, Games, Patterns, and Attacking Practices Direct from Bayer Leverkusen Training Sessions

+ Tactical Analysis



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Xabi Alonso's Incredible Success at Bayer Leverkusen



Coach Profile: Xabi Alonso



Coaching Career

- Bayer Leverkusen (2022 →)
- Real Sociedad B (2019 - 2022)

Playing Career

- Bayern Munich (2014 - 2017)
- Real Madrid (2009 - 2014)
- Liverpool (2004 - 2009)
- Real Sociedad (2000 - 2004)
- Real Sociedad B (1999 - 2000)

Managing Bayer Leverkusen

Xabi Alonso took charge of Bayer Leverkusen in October 2022 with the club struggling in 17th in the league table. From there, he transformed the team with a dynamic and fluid playing style. The 2023-24 season saw a remarkable **51-match unbeaten run across all competitions**, showcasing high level tactics, quality, and consistency. They won the **DFB-Pokal German Cup in consecutive years (2023 & 2024)** and the **Bundesliga title in 2023-24**, ending Bayern Munich's 11-year dominance.

Managing Real Sociedad B

Xabi Alonso started his managerial career with Real Sociedad B in 2019, significantly improving the team with a focus on possession and high pressing. They were **promoted to the Segunda División for the first time in 60 years (2020-21)**.

Playing for World's Biggest Clubs

Xabi Alonso had an exceptional playing career as a central midfielder known for his passing, vision, and tactical intelligence. He played for **Real Sociedad, Liverpool, Real Madrid, and Bayern Munich**, winning the following trophies:

- 2 x **UEFA Champions League**
- 3 x **Bundesliga**
- 1 x **La Liga**
- 1 x **FA Cup**, 1 x **DFB-Pokal** (German Cup)

Success with Spain on World Stage

Xabi Alonso earned **114 caps for Spain** and played a key role in their golden era, winning the **UEFA European Championships twice (2008 & 2012)**, and the **FIFA World Cup (2010)**.

Xabi Alonso's Trophies and Records at Bayer Leverkusen

2022-2023



DFB-Pokal (German Cup)

2023-2024



Bundesliga (German League)

+



DFB-Pokal (German Cup)

Transformation, Unbeaten Run, and Domestic Success

When Xabi Alonso took over as Bayer Leverkusen's manager in October 2022, the team was in 17th place in the league. By the end of the 2022/23 season, they had climbed to sixth and won the DFB-Pokal German Cup. From there, their trajectory has been nothing but upward.

In 2023-2024, **Bayer Leverkusen achieved a remarkable 51-match unbeaten run across all competitions**, showcasing high level tactics, quality, teamwork, and consistency. Alonso's approach focuses on possession, midfield control, attacking wing backs, high pressing, and quick transitions.

They **won the Bundesliga title, completing an unthinkable feat of going the entire season unbeaten whilst setting club records of 90 points, 89 goals, and 24 goals conceded**. They also clinched **consecutive DFB-Pokal victories (2023 & 2024)**.

European Competitions

Alonso guided Leverkusen to the **UEFA Europa League semi-finals in 2022-2023 and the final in 2023-2024**. Although they were defeated in the final, their performances underscored Alonso's tactical intelligence and the team's growing stature on the European stage.

Player and Team Development

Xabi Alonso successfully integrated young talents like **Florian Wirtz** and **Jeremie Frimpong**, who became pivotal to the team's success. His focus on youth development and tactical innovation has set a solid foundation for the club's future.

Xabi Alonso - Elite Manager

By season's end in May 2024, **Alonso has cemented his status as an elite manager**, combining tactical expertise with game insight, making Leverkusen a formidable force in domestic and European football.

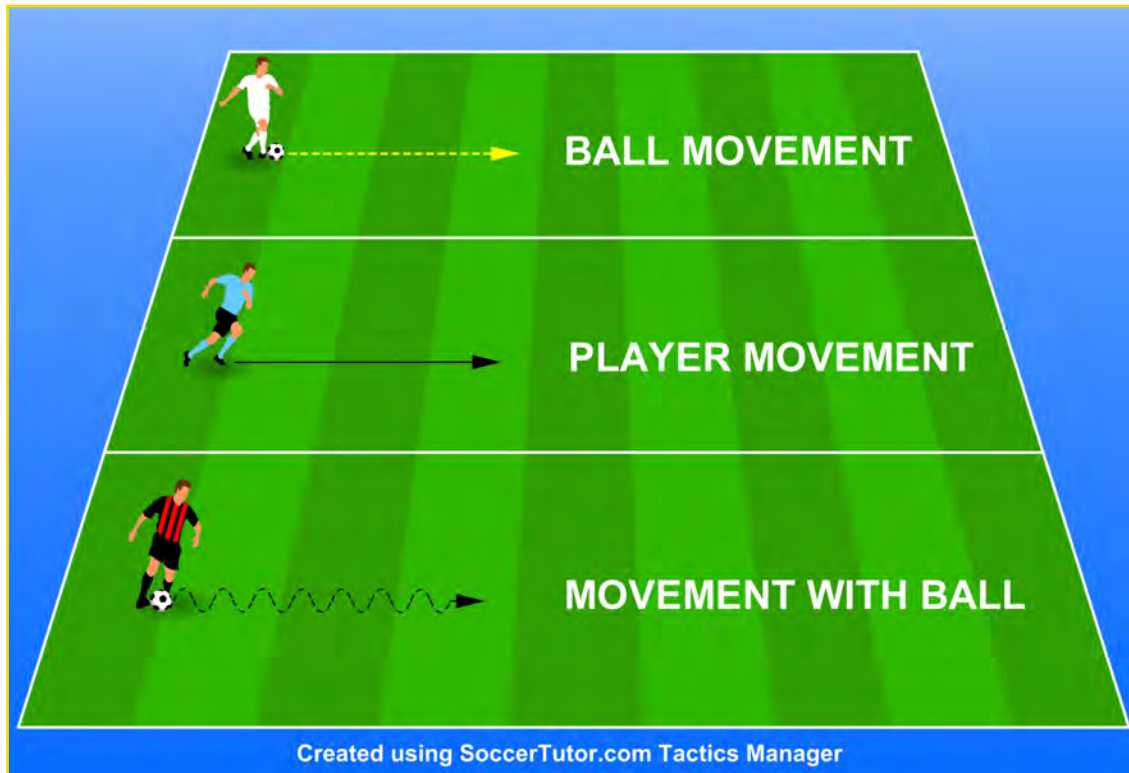


Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen: 3-4-2-1 Formation



- **Hradecky (GK):** Goalkeeper
- **Tapsoba (LCB):** Left Centre Back
- **Tah (CB):** Middle Centre Back
- **Kossounou (RCB):** Right Centre Back
- **Grimaldo (LWB):** Left Wing Back
- **Frimpong (RWB):** Right Wing Back
- **Xhaka (DM):** Defensive Midfielder
- **Andrich (DM):** Defensive Midfielder
- **Hofmann (AM):** Attacking Midfielder
- **Wirtz (AM):** Attacking Midfielder
- **Boniface (CF):** Centre Forward
- **Other Notable Players Used:**
Hincapié, Staniscic, Palacios, Adli, Tella, and Schick.

Diagram Key



Practice and Tactics Format

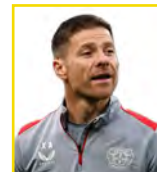
- All of the practices in this book are **taken directly from Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training sessions** between 2022 and 2024.
- Each practice includes the practice topic/name and clear diagrams with a detailed description.
- The tactical examples presented in the book represent consistent tactics and patterns of play observed in Bayer Leverkusen matches during the 2023-24 season.

Passing Combinations



Direct from
Xabi Alonso's
Training Sessions

9. End to End Passing Combinations and Support Play to Break the Lines (Variation 1)



The players are labelled A to F to best illustrate the order of the passing sequence. There are 2 players in positions B, C, E, and F who all rotate in and out after their contribution within the passing sequence (1 or 2 passes) is complete.

Practice Description

- 1-3.** A plays a one-two with B, and then passes forward to C, who drops back.
- 4-5.** C sets the ball back for B to pass to D.

6-8. D plays a one-two with E, and then passes forward to F, who moves to meet the pass.

9-10. F sets the ball back for E to complete the sequence with the final pass to A.

11-12 → The same sequence is repeated as a mirror image starting on the left with A playing a one-two combination with F2, then passing to E2.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2024

Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen: Build Up Play Tactics



Tactical Flexibility

“Football is a constantly evolving game. A good coach must be adaptable and ready to change tactics to suit the strengths of the team and counter the opponents.”

Xabi Alonso



Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen 4-2-4 Build Up Play Shape from Goal Kicks



In this tactical example, Bayer Leverkusen are playing against the 4-3-3 formation, and adopt a 4-2-4 build-up shape to build up play from their goal kick.

The left wing back (**LWB**) is deep as part of the back 4 and the right wing back (**RWB**) is pushed high to pin back the opposition and create space for the build up phase.

This approach is **similar to tactics used by Roberto De Zerbi**. It involves 6 players plus the goalkeeper to create a 6 (+GK) v 5 numerical advantage.

When building up from goal kicks, the focus is often on overloading the right side of the pitch, which helps Xabi Alonso's team to break through the press and advance the ball, while dictating the rhythm, speed, and control of the game from the back.

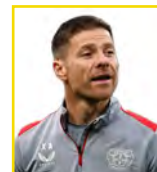
As the **opposing team shifts across to counter this overload, space opens on the left side**, ideal for a long switch of play to the left wing back (**LWB**).

Positional Build Up Play Combinations



Direct from
Xabi Alonso's
Training Sessions

5. Build Up Combinations, Switch Play, and Give & Go to Break Midfield Line Passing Circuit



Practice Description

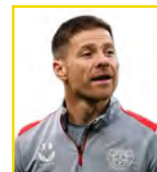
The sequence starts simultaneously with 2 balls (one at each end with LCB).

- 1-2. **LCB** passes to **DM**, who passes across to **CB**. The coach applies pressure.
- 3-4. **CB** passes forward to **AM** and another coach applies pressure from behind. **AM** sets the ball back for **DM** to move onto.
5. **DM** switches play with a pass to **RWB** in front of the mannequin.

- 6-7. **RWB** plays a give & go with **AM** (who shifts across) and receives back after moving around the mannequin.
8. **RWB** passes to Position LCB at the opposite end to complete the sequence.
 - The players rotate their positions: **LCB** → **DM** → **CB** → **AM** → **RWB** → **LCB**.
 - The same sequence is repeated as the next players go.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen preseason training session in Donaueschingen, Germany - 29th July 2024

13. Positional Build Up / Combinations Through Blocked Lanes Passing Circuit (Variation 6)



The **Positional Roles** are 3 centre backs (LCB, CB, & RCB), 1 defensive midfielder (DM), 2 attacking midfielders (AM), and the centre forward (CF) from Bayer's 3-4-2-1.

Practice Description

- 1-2.** The coach is blocking the pass to **AM1**. **CB** passes to **RCB**, who then passes inside to **DM** as the coach approaches.
- 3-5.** **DM** then has the space to play a 3 pass combination with **AM1**, as shown.

- 6.** With the pass across to **AM2** blocked by 2 coaches, **AM1** passes to **CF**.
 - 7-9.** **CF** plays a one-two with **AM2** and then passes to **LCB**.
 - 10-11.** **LCB** sets the ball for **AM2's** movement and he passes to the next player waiting at Position CB.
- The same sequence is repeated as the players rotate their positions: **CB** → **RCB** → **DM** → **AM1** → **CF** → **AM2** → **LCB** → **CB**.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2nd Dec 2022

Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen: Possession and Midfield Control Tactics



Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen Midfield Control (3-2-5)



In this example, **Bayer Leverkusen create a 7v6 overload in the central area** against a 4-2-3-1 formation. They use short passes to draw opponents in and open gaps for advancing the play.

The right wing back (**RWB**) remains high and wide to help pin back the opposition's defence and leave space in the centre.

Central areas are key for Xabi Alonso's possession phase tactics, **focusing on quick passes that draw the opposition into pressing**. As defenders commit, gaps are

created which enable Bayer Leverkusen to thread passes to **progress the ball and create advantageous attacking situations**, like this 4v4 attack situation created here.

This possession strategy is about quick, short passes that draw the opposition in, which open up spaces to exploit.

Note: Use of correct body shape ensures safer passes and encourages further pressing from opponents, creating more opportunities to exploit.

Positional Possession Games



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Training Sessions

Possession

“Possession football is not about keeping the ball for the sake of it. It's about patience, precision, and creating the right opportunities to break down the opposition.”

Xabi Alonso



10. Build Up in 3-2 Shape and Play Through the Lines 8v8 (+4) Positional Possession Game



Practice Description

- There are 8 reds vs 8 blues + 4 yellow Jokers (1 at each end + 2 in middle zone). **Alonso** passes a ball in to start.
- The reds aim to keep possession at one end, build up through pressure for either of the **DMs** to receive, progress the ball to the middle zone Jokers, and then play to the opposite end.
- Most of the players are limited to 2 touches, but the end Jokers (**CB**) have 3.

- The 2 middle Jokers stay within their zone but can be pressed.
- If the blues win the ball, they switch roles with the reds.

Positional Play

- The 3 centre backs (**RCB**, **CB** & **LCB**) and 2 defensive midfielders (**DM**) form the 3-2 back and middle line structure from Bayer Leverkusen's 3-2-5 build up shape (see pages 60-62).

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2024

10.1. Xabi Alonso Coaching Points for Opening Up Wide



Xabi Alonso Coaching Points (9.1)

- This diagram follows on from the practice on the previous page: **Build Up in 3-2 Shape and Play Through the Lines 8v8 (+4) Positional Possession Game**.
- Here we show what happened when **Xabi Alonso** paused his training session to explain some key points to his players.
- He describes the positional roles within the 3-2-5 build up shape, in which we have the 3-2-2 here with the 3 centre backs (**LCB, CB & RCB**), 2 defensive midfielders (**DM**), and 2 middle zone Jokers.
- Alonso stresses the importance of the **LCB** and **RCB** to open up in the corner of the area to maximise the width to provide support and create space to then play through pressure.
- This is also the focus of the practice on page 101: **Open Up and Spread Out to Maximise Space and Play Through Pressure 7v7 (+3) Positional Possession Game**.
- The aim is to draw in opponents to press, move the ball to the **DMs** behind the first line of pressure, then play to the middle zone Jokers to progress the play to the other side.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2024

10.2. Xabi Alonso Coaching Points for Decision Making

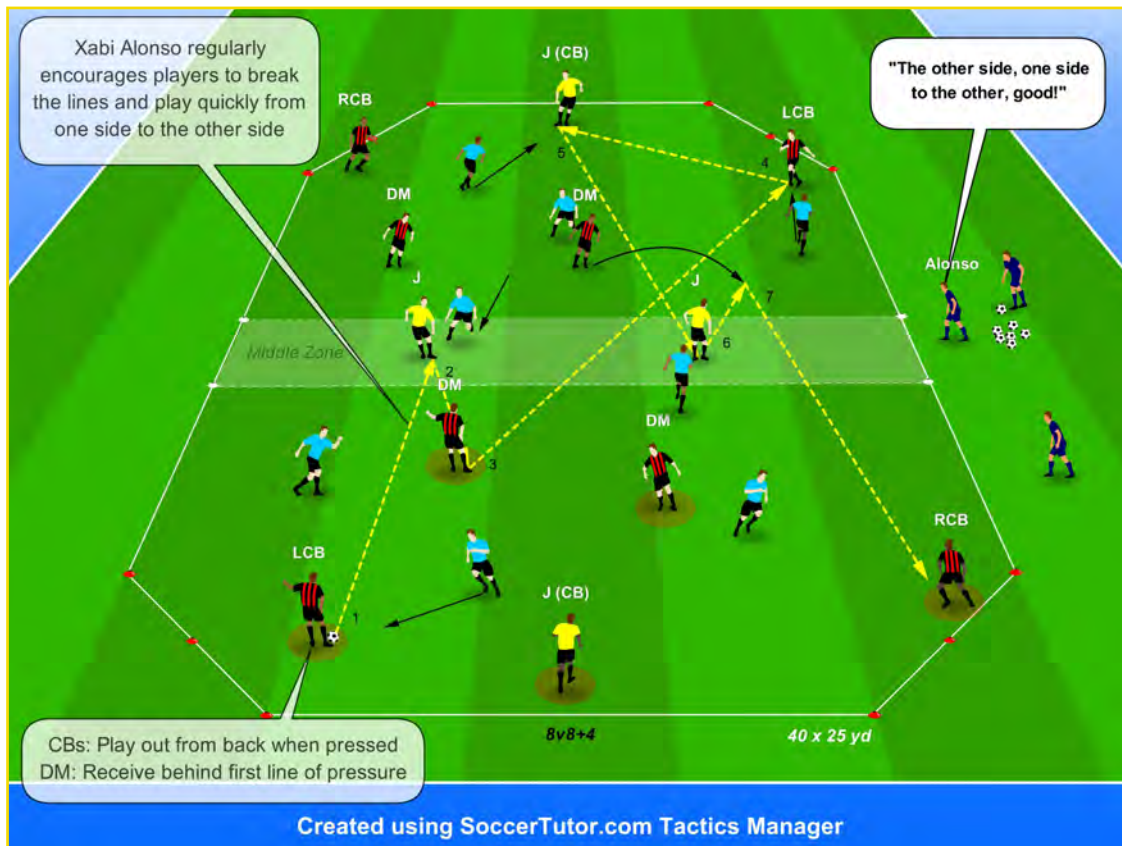


Xabi Alonso Coaching Points (9.2)

- This diagram follows on from the positional possession game described on the previous 2 pages: **Build Up in 3-2 Shape and Play Through the Lines 8v8 (+4) Positional Possession Game.**
- Here we show what happened when **Xabi Alonso** paused his training session to explain some key points to his players.
- Alonso speaks to his players about their decision making when playing in their 3-2 shape, which forms part of Bayer Leverkusen's **3-2-5 build up shape shown on pages 60-62.**
- Alonso stresses the **importance of the LCB and RCB to provide support and receive in an open wide position** and try to attract an opponent to press.
- **If an opponent is drawn in to press, then the defender should play out.** If not, they can simply recycle possession of the ball (to reset).
- In addition, **Alonso stresses the importance of positional discipline.** This is not a normal possession game; it is a **positional possession game** with the focus on progressing the play in a structured shape.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2024

10.3. Xabi Alonso Coaching Points for Quickly Breaking Lines



Xabi Alonso Coaching Points (9.3)

- This diagram follows on from the positional possession game described on the previous 3 pages: **Build Up in 3-2 Shape and Play Through the Lines 8v8 (+4) Positional Possession Game.**
- Here we illustrate the encouragement and coaching points **Xabi Alonso** shared with his players during the practice.
- The players were heavily encouraged to move the ball with a high speed of play and intensity, so that they could quickly break the lines and play to the other side, as shown in the diagram example.
- The key components are in place within this positional possession game; **playing out from the back within the 3-2 structure** from Bayer Leverkusen's 3-2-5 build up shape, **moving the ball to DMs behind the first line of pressure**, and moving the **ball to the AMs to progress the attack.**
- This way the players are **constantly practicing their positional roles within the team shape**, enabling them to progress the ball up the pitch quickly and decisively to play through their opponents.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2024

Xabi Alonso's Coaching During Positional Possession Games



1. **Xabi Alonso actively leads Bayer Leverkusen's training**, especially during the positional possession games in this section.
2. Alonso often pauses the session to highlight key points, ensuring a **high attention to detail**.
3. The coaching staff and players maintain a strong focus, with **Alonso consistently praising and encouraging the players**, creating a positive atmosphere.
4. Prepared with his notes, **Alonso's training is highly structured**, with every detail preplanned for maximum effectiveness.
5. In positional possession practices, **players are assigned specific positions for targeted coaching, refining their understanding and execution of tactical roles**. He ensures each player's positioning and decision making align with the team's tactical plan.

Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen: Attacking in the Final Third Tactics



Tactical and Positional Fluidity in Attack: Left Wing Back Grimaldo

1. High and Wide Position in Attacking Phase (3-2-5)



The left wing back Grimaldo's presence on the left wing poses a constant challenge for opponents, even when he's off the ball. His mere potential as a threat forces defenders to stay close, creating valuable space in the centre for Bayer Leverkusen's other players to exploit.

During Bayer record-breaking 2023/2024 season, **Grimaldo (LWB) made significant contributions with both assists and goals.**

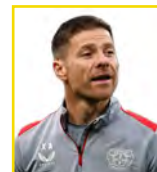
This example shows Bayer's 3-2-5 attacking formation, where **Grimaldo (LWB)** typically starts in a deeper position compared to **Frimpong (RWB)** on the opposite side. As the play progresses, **Grimaldo (LWB)** moves into a more advanced position later in the phase, often receiving the ball as a free player from an attacking midfielder (AM). From there, he advances forward, and **creates opportunities to either cross or shoot.**

Attacking Positional Patterns of Play



Direct from
Xabi Alonso's
Training Sessions

1. Draw in Press to Play Out, Switch, and Attacking Midfielder's Through Pass to Wing Back from the Half Space



2 coaches use passive pressing for the build up and the other 2 use passive defending in the box. Blue circles = starting positions.

Practice Description

- 1-2. **Alonso** passes wide to the left centre back (**LCB**), who passes back to the centre back (**CB**).
3. Their 4v2 advantage enables **CB** to pass to the right centre back (**RCB**), who can move forward to progress the play.
4. **RCB** receives and moves forward with the ball and plays a switch pass to the left attacking midfielder (**LAM**) high up the pitch within the half space.
5. **LAM** plays a through pass for the left wing back's (**LWB**) inside run off the flank in behind and into the box.
- 6-7. **LWB** passes the ball across the box for the centre forward (**CF**) to score. **LAM**, **RAM**, and **RWB** also make runs into the box to provide options.

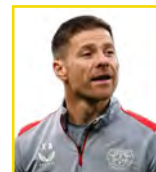
Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2024

Positional Training Games



Direct from
Xabi Alonso's
Training Sessions

6. Build Up and Creating Opportunities to Score 9v9 (+2) 6-Goal Game with Changing Conditions



Practice Description

- In this 9v9 (+2 Jokers) game, the aim is to **break the lines of pressure and create space to score a goal** through effective combination play. The reds start with possession after the coach's pass.
- The **zones have rules which change so the players can work on different tactics**.
- To start, no defending team players are allowed in the *Build Up Zone*. Later, they are encouraged to high press in there.
- To start, players must score from within the *End Zone*. Later, they must score from outside the *End Zone*.
- **Alonso adjusts the team shapes during play**, starting with a 4-2-3 from Bayer's 4-2-4 build up shape (*see this diagram + pages 64-65*). He is also seen changing the size of the *Build Up Zone*.
- If the blues win the ball, they try to score. If the ball goes out of play, a coach plays a new ball in immediately.

Source: Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen training session at Bayer 04 Leverkusen Training Ground - 2023



Xabi Alonso

82 Passing, Positional Possession, Games, Patterns and Attacking Practices Direct from Bayer Leverkusen Training Sessions

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