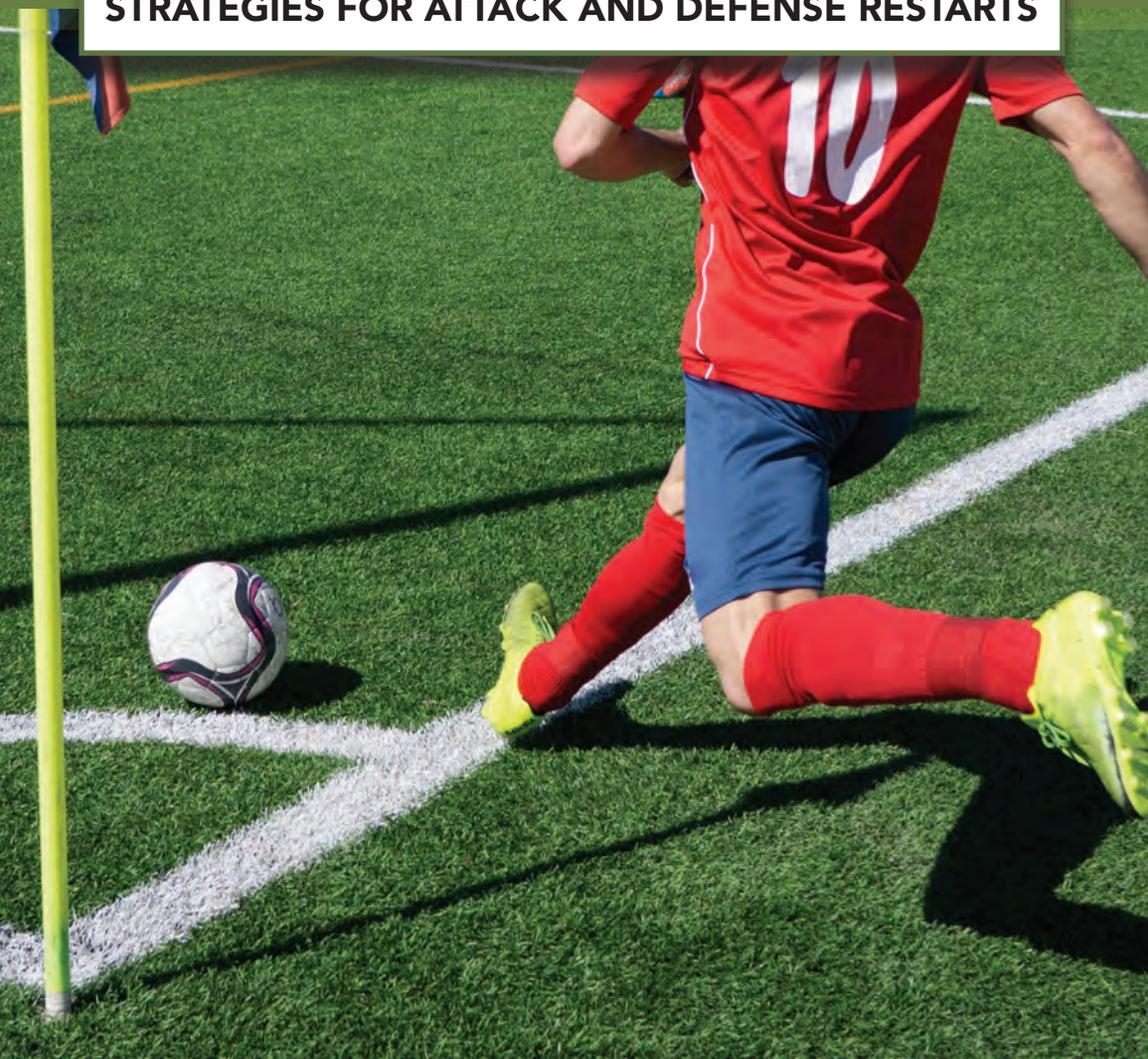


THE ULTIMATE BOOK OF SOCCER SET-PIECES

STRATEGIES FOR ATTACK AND DEFENSE RESTARTS



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CORNER KICKS

Corner kicks, and the defending of corner kicks, are among the most debated aspects of soccer tactics. Pep Guardiola's dominant FC Barcelona teams often opted to forgo any effort at goal and ran short corner kicks to restart their suffocating possession game. United States national teams, men and women, developed a reputation for being highly effective at scoring from corner kicks in particular in the decade after the turn of the century by making use of their height and athleticism to overwhelm teams in front of goal. Some teams develop specific tactics (e.g., taking their attacks to their opponent's end line and, if no cross is possible, simply knocking the ball off of their opponent to set up a corner kick) designed to earn their teams more corner kicks, knowing their proficiency in finishing these opportunities will increase their chance of winning more matches. On the defensive side of the ball, debate rages over one-on-one vs. zonal marking and whether or not teams should place players on the post(s) as part of their scheme.

Whatever the coaching and tactical philosophy of a given team, failure to prepare to execute and defend against corner kicks will certainly limit a team's chance of success over the course of a season. On the other hand, a well-prepared team will enjoy scoring goals from corner kicks and frustrating their opponents as well. This section examines attacking and defending considerations and numerous corner kick plays designed to give a team a multitude of ways to score from corner kicks.

ATTACKING CONSIDERATIONS

- What types of and how many corner kick plays will the team rehearse?
- Which areas around the goal does the team want to attack? Recent research suggests that near-post options (both in close proximity to the goal and further away [e.g., 6-9 yards out]) are the services that draw the most aggressive, successful responses from defending teams. Similarly, serves into the heart of the goal area, near the goalkeeper, are difficult to convert. On the other hand, central serves near the top of the 6-yard box

and back post serves hold more promise for both creating shots and goal and potential conversion.^{vii}

- How will the plays be called? Most teams utilize verbal or hand signals to indicate which play they will execute.
- Does the team want to utilize a short corner option? A 2019 study noted that in the English Premier League, teams are getting more efficient at corner kick conversion, with scoring rates increasing by more than a percentage point over the previous campaign. The study attributed part of the success to increased variation through the use of short corners kick plays.^{viii}
- For a short kick option, what will the team do if the opponent sends one defender? Two?
- Will the team deploy its center backs or other back line players forward?
- For advanced teams, does the team want to consider a near post flick option? Research suggests that flicked corners, because they tend to focus defenders at the point of first contact, and not the finish, have an increased chance of producing a goal.^{ix}
- Similarly, how important is the consideration of a second ball? A recent study determined that goals are scored more often on corner kicks from balls won and then finished in the area (i.e., second ball) than from original serves.^x This suggests that getting the ball knocked down in the area and then pouncing on it to finish is as important as crafty, original runs to get on the end of the serve.
- How many players will the team leave near midfield to discourage and defeat counter attacks if the ball is lost off of the kick? Standard practice is to leave one more player to defend than the opponent leaves forward (e.g., two players to defend against one forward).
- Will all plays include placing a player in front of the opposing goalkeeper (recommended) to create traffic in the goal area?
- Which players will serve the kicks?

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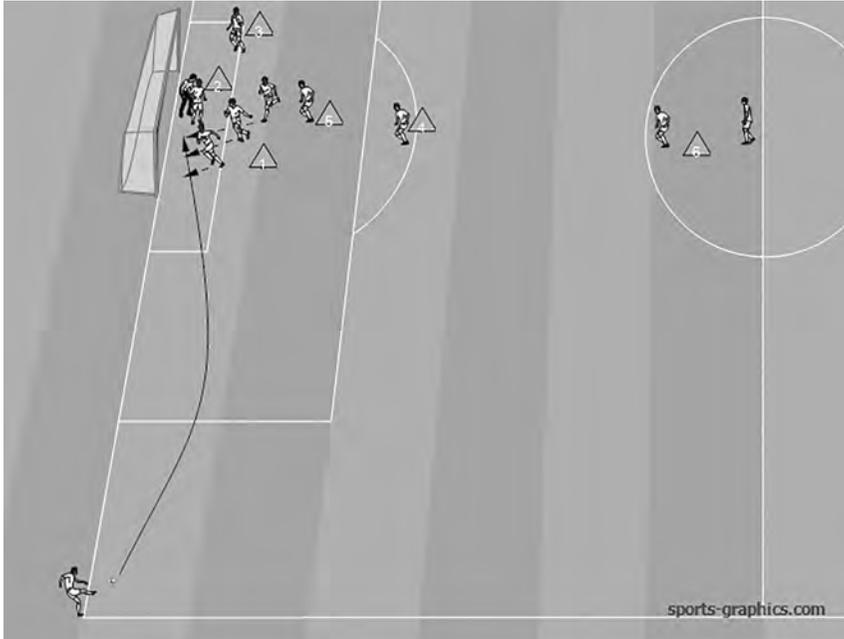
- Is there an in-swinging or out-swinging option on either side? Research confirms that in-swinging corner kicks have a higher chance of producing a goal.^{xi}
- For younger youth teams, is there the possibility of scoring directly from the arc with an in-swinging kick?
- If known, what are the abilities and tendencies of the opposing goalkeeper? If that player controls the area well, a short option or more traffic may be necessary. If, however, that player is more inclined to stay near their line, it may be possible to serve the ball very near the goal.
- Similarly, what type of defending does the opponent feature? If the opponent is committed to marking all targets one-on-one, a strategy to defeat one-on-one marking may create good opportunities. If, conversely, the opponent is more zone-oriented in their defense, then there are likely areas within that zone that can be attacked.



Leipzig's Emil Forsberg getting ready to take a corner kick during the Champions League soccer match between FC Porto and RB Leipzig in 2017.

ATTACKING PLAYS

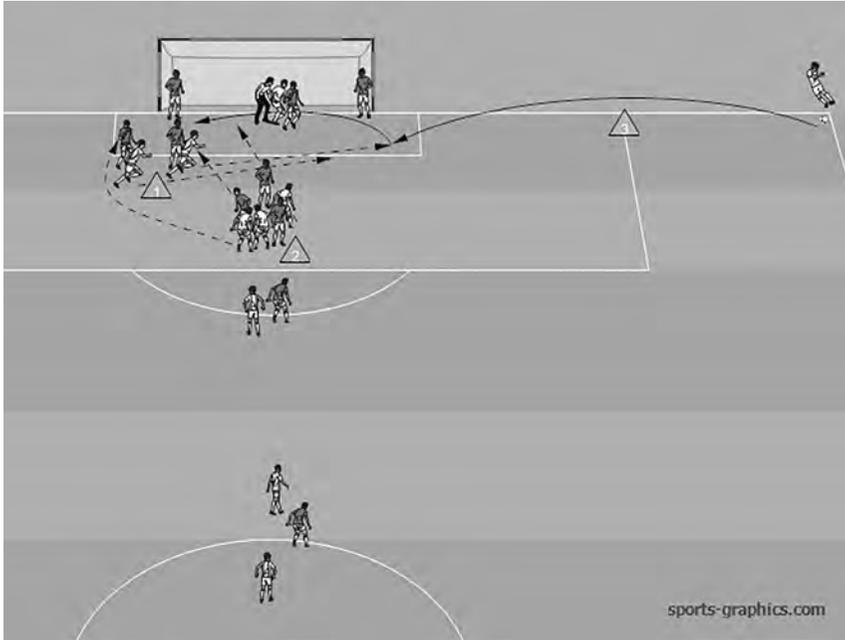
Attacking Corner Kick: Wave



This is the most common corner kick play. Four runners are arrayed near the penalty kick spot. Three runners close on the near post in staggered fashion. One player (2) marks the goalkeeper. Another player serves as the framer, assuring the ball does not get past the back post (3). Yet another player stays near the top of the D to control and hit any ball that comes out of the area. The last runner (5) also stays in place, providing further coverage of muffed finishes or clearances. Finally, two players (6) are staggered near mid field in case the opponent looks to counter.

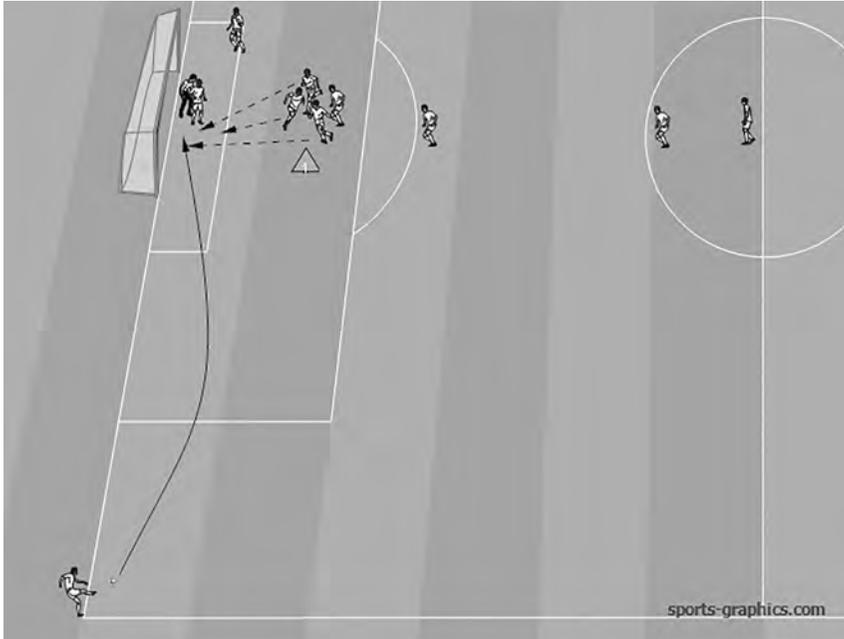
The timing of the runs is very important. The players need to arrive with the ball to be effective and be very aggressive, trying to swamp the defenders at the near post, and smash the ball home. The staggering of the runs allows for some variation in the timing and location.

Attacking Corner Kick: Flick



For advanced teams that can serve and set flicks in a consistent manner, this is an effective option against both zone and especially one-on-one marking. Two flickers make staggered runs across the top of the six-yard box (1). A group of 3 runners (2) lose their one-on-one markers through mixing up near the penalty spot and then they break for the far post area, arraying their runs to be able to frame and finish the flicked ball. The player taking the kick serves a shoulder-high, driven ball to the top of the six-yard box at the near post, where it is flicked on for the runners to finish. Note the safety players near the midfield stripe.

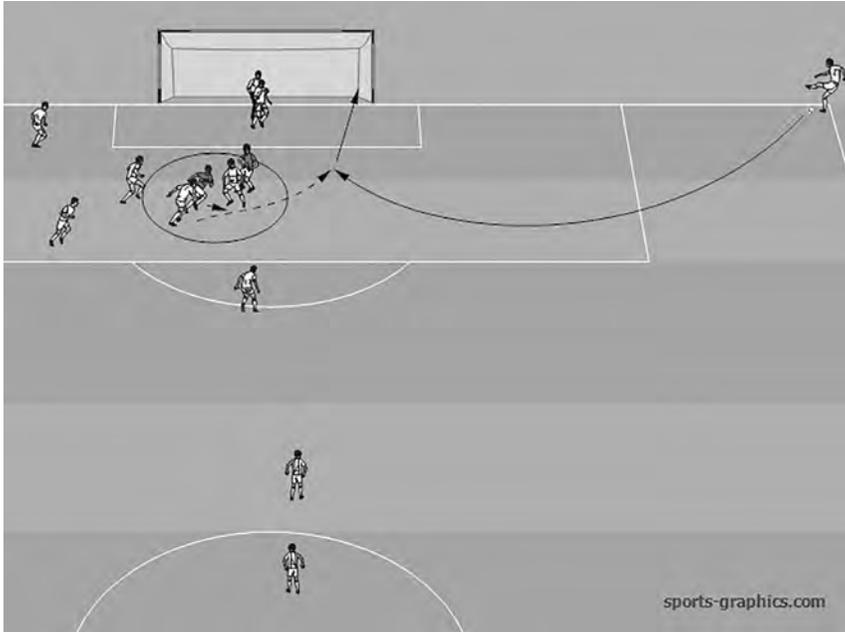
Attacking Corner Kick: Mix



This is virtually the same set-up as the previous play, with runners near the penalty spot, a framing player at the back corner of the six-yard box, a player to return balls at the top of the D and two safety players near the midfield stripe. However, rather than straight runs used in the wave concept, this scheme uses a mix, with runners intermingling, then breaking for the near post just before the kick is taken. This arrangement confounds one-on-one marking, and can be used very effectively against teams employing a predominantly one-on-one marking defense. Inevitably, somebody gets lost in the mix and there are open targets near the goal.

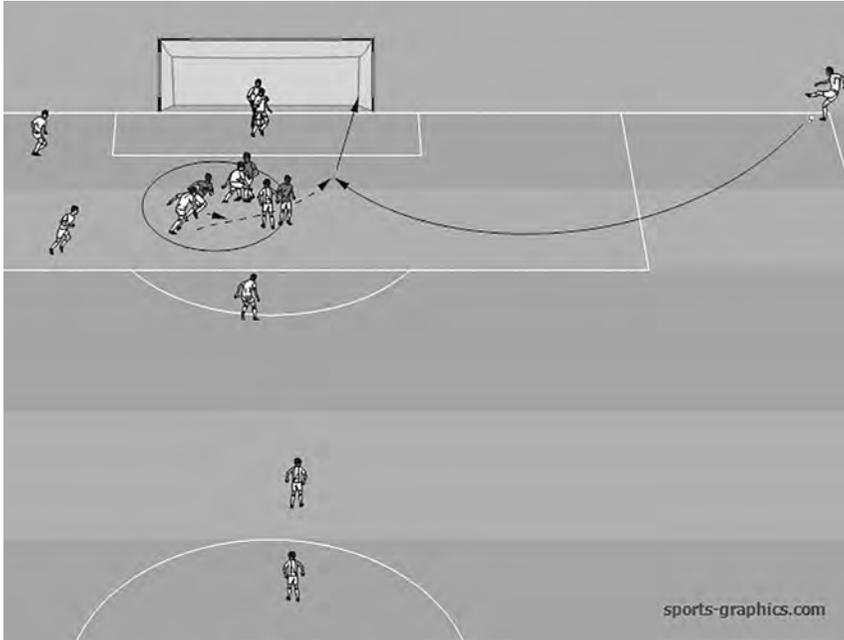
The critical factor here, again, is timing. If the ball is launched too early, the players will not be able to get to their finishing areas (note the staggered runs again). If, conversely, the ball is launched too late, then the players will arrive too soon and have to stop, losing their momentum and giving the defense an opportunity to sort out their marking and fight for the ball.

Attacking Corner Kick: Simple Screen Near-Post Serve



Among the most controversial tactics on corner kicks is the use of picks to free up target runners. The difficult part of any coaching discussion on this subject is that coaches generally—and genuinely—want to play within the rules, but in this case there is considerable gray area. In the diagram above, the target runner sprints past his teammate, who is not moving but whose position makes it impossible for the defender tracking the runner to maintain his/her tight marking. Referees typically call a foul if the screening player's movement is clearly for the purpose of inhibiting the pursuit of the defender, but if the screening player's movement or placement brings the defender to contact with the screening player (rather than vice-versa), the general conception is that the screening player has the right to stand or move in the area. Many coaches find the risk of a foul call worthwhile given that if a foul is not given, the target player will likely be wide open to finish.

Attacking Corner Kick: Double Screen Near Post



This is the same set-up as the previous play, except that this diagram shows the potential chaos for marking players caused by a double screen. The two players setting the screen set up with just enough space between them for the target runner to get through, and after that player sprints past, they can lean in the direction of tightening the space and slowing any tracking defender. Again, there is a risk of committing a foul here and players should rehearse their roles, with the coach emphasizing the subtleties involved in making tracking difficult without interfering with the defender to the point of fouling.