



Turn Free-Kicks Into Goals

Free-kicks around the box present a golden scoring opportunity for an attacking team, but there's more to a good free-kick than simply blasting the ball as hard as possible

Free-kicks are important: fact. So important that between 40 and 50 per cent of all goals scored originate from set-pieces. And whether you want to bend it like Bale or blast it like Baines, it's clear from the pros that practice makes perfect.

"I practise my free-kicks after every session, for between half an hour and an hour," says Gareth Bale, who has scored free-kicks for both club and country this season. Baines, meanwhile, has taken the most memorable free-kick of the season so far, his pile driver against Newcastle proving he can go for power as well as his trademark swerve.

But with so many goalscoring

opportunities on offer from dead-ball situations, it's important your players are well-drilled for all attacking free-kick scenarios – not just the glory-grabbing attempts.

"Practice is crucial," says Sunderland set-piece specialist, Seb Larsson, who is as well known for his free-kick crosses as he is for his shots. "It's not just about mastering technique; it gives you confidence. You've practised it so many times you know you can take a good free-kick when it matters."

And the secret to those deadly dead-ball deliveries from out wide? "I hit my free-kicks with the inside of my foot, connecting at a low point on the ball, bringing my foot over

the top," says the Swedish midfielder. "This creates topspin and dip."

What if you're not the tallest team? Crosses, or even chips from central areas into the box are of little benefit. But by being switched on, your players can still make the most of attacking free-kicks. Look at Barcelona: always first to the ball, always in position, looking to thread a quickly taken free-kick to a team-mate in a dangerous position.

As with shooting, preparation and practice are key to turning free-kicks into goals. The following drills should help you with both: one on beating a defensive wall, the other on taking a quick free-kick, Barça-style.

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5 GREAT FREE-KICK ARTISTS



Juninho Pernambucano

The Brazil star has pioneered 'knuckle-balling',

where a straight run-up to strike the ball on the valve results in a late dip.



Cristiano Ronaldo

Perfected the knuckle ball by adding power

to Juninho's dip to score many memorable goals for Real and United.



David Beckham

Equally adept shooting or crossing from

free-kicks. An unusually wide run-up helps create his trademark bend.



Leighton Baines

Receiving rave reviews for his dead-ball

pro prowess at Everton. He can blast it, bend it, or cross it to deadly effect.



Andrea Pirlo

The Juve star is a dead-ball specialist, even inspiring Messi

to score a free-kick by shooting under a jumping defensive wall.

Unstoppable

Every team needs to be able to score from a dead-ball situation, so get your players to try this game to develop the perfect free-kick

WHY USE IT

Every game seems to involve a goal scored from a set piece. This shows how important free-kicks are to the final outcome of matches. Therefore it's vital that your players spend adequate time developing an unstoppable free-kick in their training sessions.

SET UP

Mark out an area 40x30 yards with a goal at each end. Select two even teams. You need balls, bibs, cones and goals.

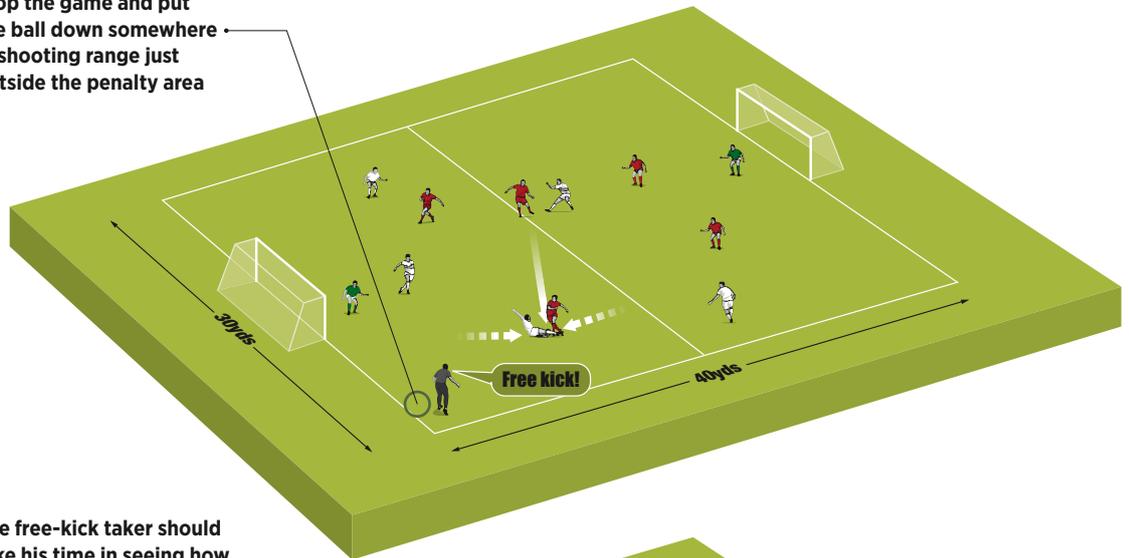
HOW TO PLAY

Play a small-sided game. While the game is being played you should carry a second ball under your arm. On your call place the ball and award a free-kick to a team of your choice. Immediately the players must react to this situation. You can place the ball in different areas for players to practice angled kicks and straight ones.

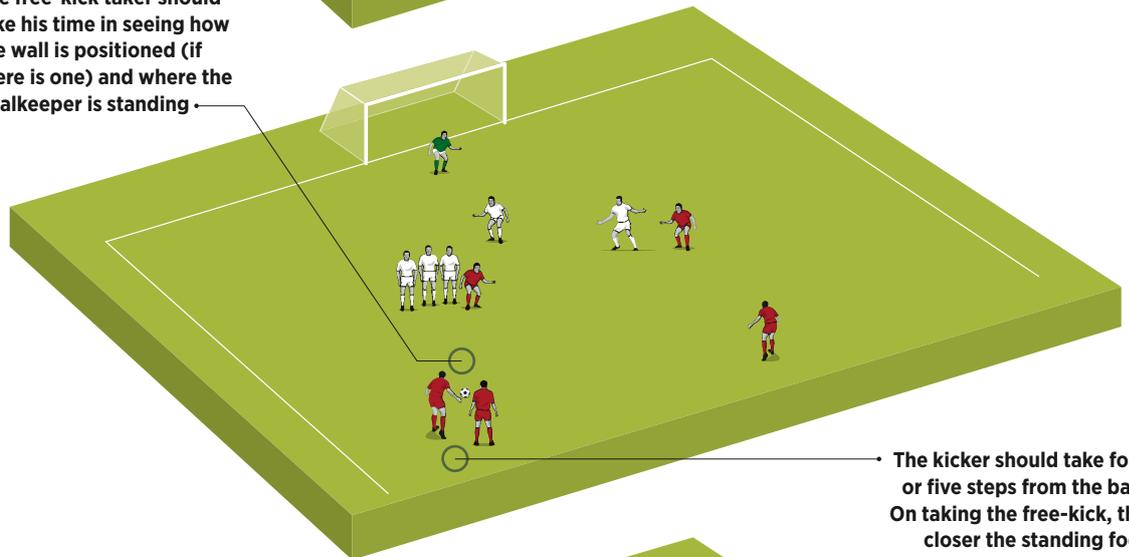
TECHNIQUE

Practice is crucial. It's not just about mastering technique; it gives you confidence. This session gives plenty of realistic match situations for practising free-kicks around the penalty area. Players should also be practising at home.

Stop the game and put the ball down somewhere in shooting range just outside the penalty area

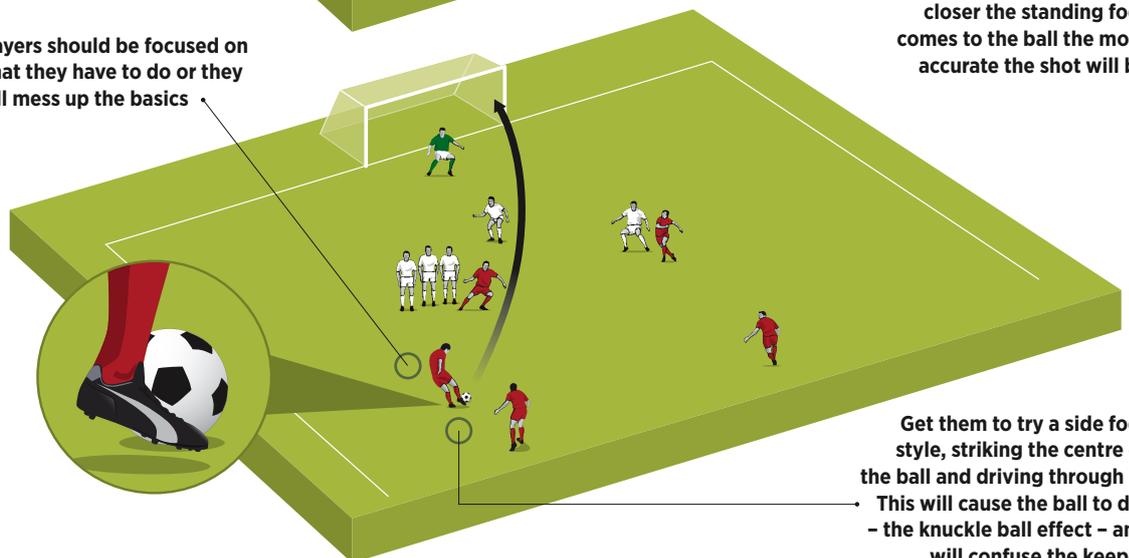


The free-kick taker should take his time in seeing how the wall is positioned (if there is one) and where the goalkeeper is standing



The kicker should take four or five steps from the ball. On taking the free-kick, the closer the standing foot comes to the ball the more accurate the shot will be

Players should be focused on what they have to do or they will mess up the basics



Get them to try a side foot style, striking the centre of the ball and driving through it. This will cause the ball to dip - the knuckle ball effect - and will confuse the keeper

Player movement

Ball movement

Run with ball

Shot

Fast & Furious

If you want to catch your opponents off guard, this frenetic game will have your players taking free-kicks quicker than they can shout 'Usain Bolt'

WHY USE IT

This quick free-kick is designed to catch opponents on the back foot. Without time to organise, they will be caught out not only by the speed of play but the switch of play. As they follow the ball, one or two attackers can sneak around the back of the defence into great positions for a shot at goal.

SET UP

Use your pitch from just inside the opposition half. You need balls, bibs, cones and two teams.

HOW TO PLAY

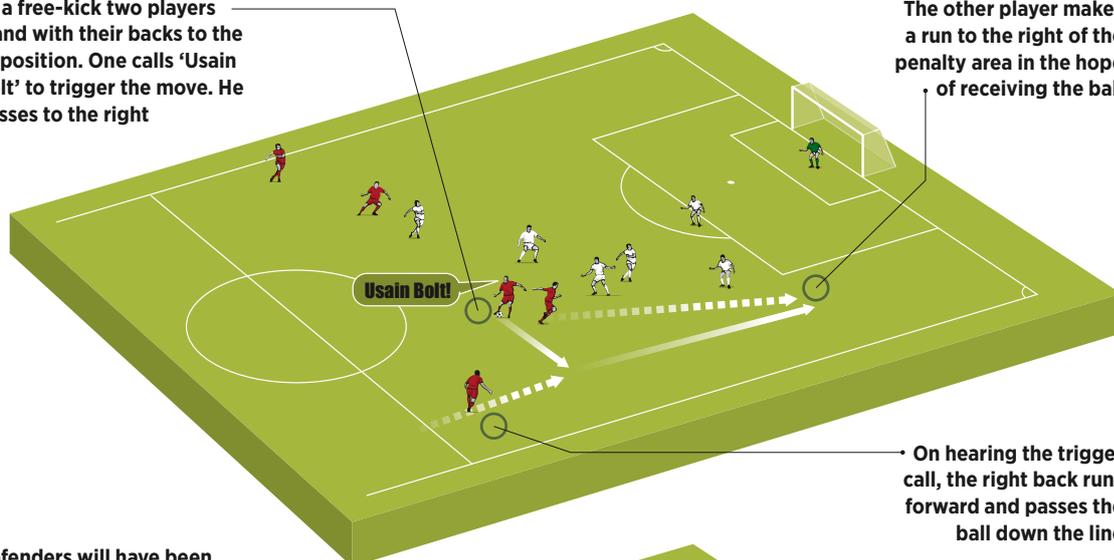
Every player needs to be alert during this game. It is a good idea to give the free-kick a name that can be called out so everyone moves. The kicker could shout 'Usain Bolt' so your players know it's a quick free-kick.

TECHNIQUE

The element of surprise will give your team a big advantage, especially if the free-kick is near the halfway line with players unaware of the danger. Fast movement and a switch of play should be enough to create a chance for your players to score but if one of your players fails to move quickly, the exercise will break down.

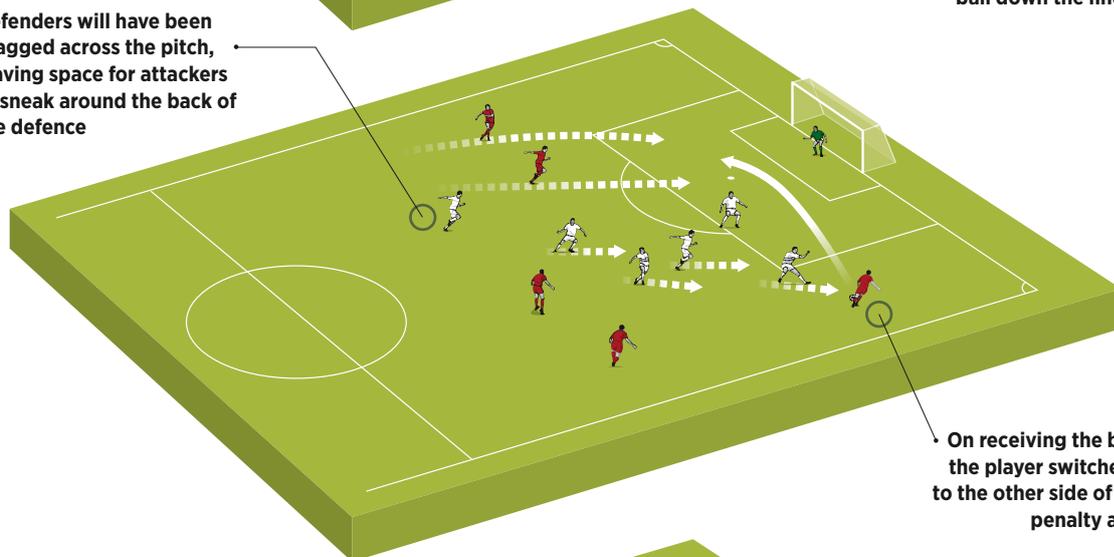
At a free-kick two players stand with their backs to the opposition. One calls 'Usain Bolt' to trigger the move. He passes to the right

The other player makes a run to the right of the penalty area in the hope of receiving the ball



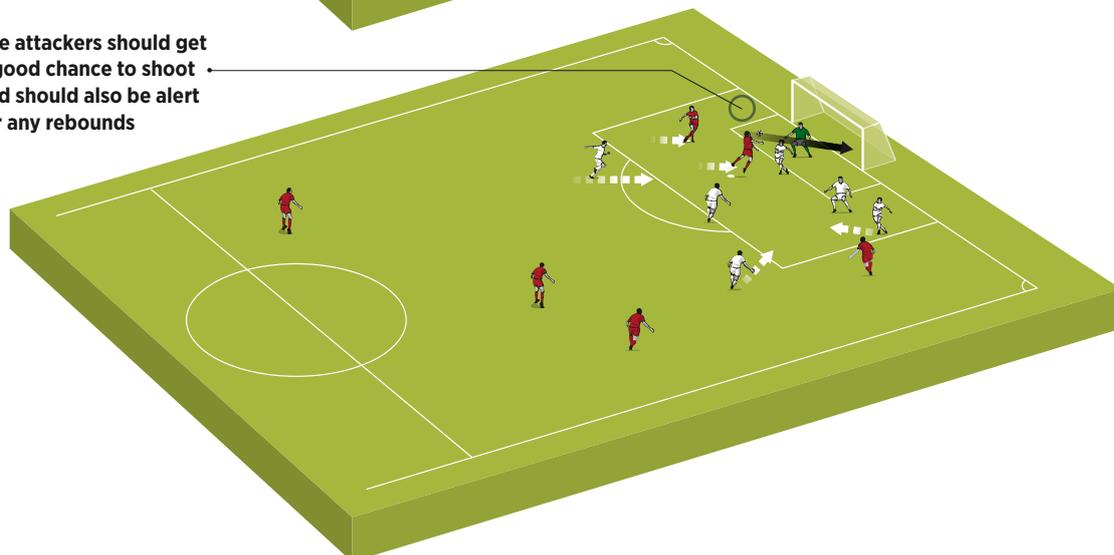
On hearing the trigger call, the right back runs forward and passes the ball down the line

Defenders will have been dragged across the pitch, leaving space for attackers to sneak around the back of the defence



On receiving the ball, the player switches it to the other side of the penalty area

The attackers should get a good chance to shoot and should also be alert for any rebounds



Player movement

Ball movement

Run with ball

Header