

Welcome to the BSC Shadow Play



Forward

Former Liverpool coach Ronnie Moran, once said, with a twinkle in his eye: "They spoiled the game of soccer when they introduced opposition. Until then it was easy."

No doubt about it. Opponents have a nasty habit of upsetting the game plan.

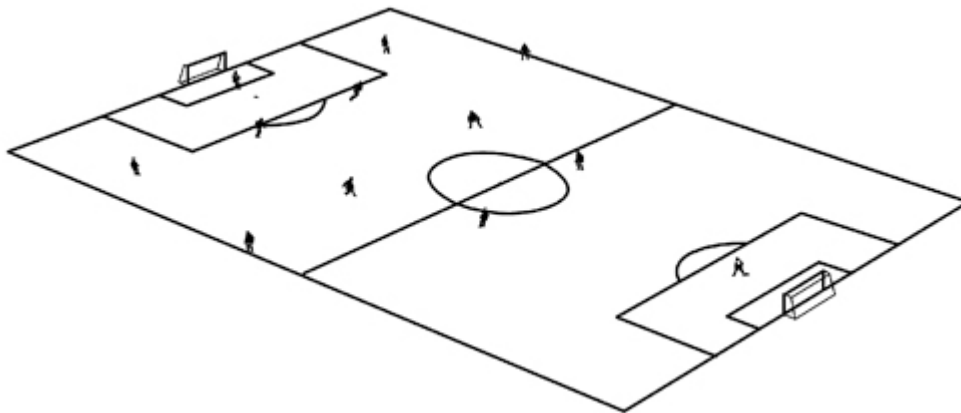
Although opponents are a necessary fact of life in soccer, there is still a good case for practicing patterns of team play **WITHOUT OPPOSITION**. The practice method is known as **SHADOW PLAY**.

Shadow Play is 11 vs. 1. The "1" is the opposing goalkeeper. Patterns of play are developed on the field so that players can begin to appreciate the types of passes to make, the positions to take up and the timing of runs to coincide with the passes (and cross balls) in order to produce a successful attack.

The absence of opposition allows the practice to flow and the patterns of play to become understood and established. Great care must be taken to avoid unrealistic plays which would break down in an opponent's presence. Bad habits established in practice will be punished later in 11 vs. 11 play. The players – and in particular the coach – must use their imaginations to appreciate what will work in a true game circumstance, and what will not.

Part 2: ORGANIZATION OF SHADOW PLAY

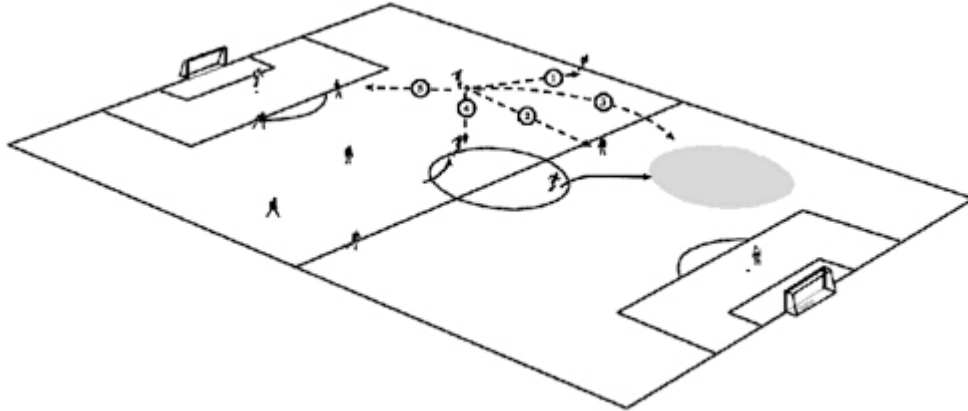
Let us first look at the illustrations to see how SHADOW PLAY is organized and how it operates.



STARTING ORGANIZATION

- Two goalkeepers are in opposite goals with a supply of balls in each goal net.
- The goalkeeper of the 11-a-side team starts with a ball in his hand.
- The field players deploy themselves for a kick or throw from the goalkeeper.

- The coach can direct the goalkeeper to kick or to throw. For practice purposes it is better to throw more often than kick.



Play has begun with a throw from the goalkeeper to the left side defender.

The player with the ball, as depicted in the illustration above, has several options:

Play with the ball wide to the flank player – 1

Play the ball forward into the feet of the first front striker – 2

Play a lofted ball over the top of the opposition into the attacking space for a second striker making a run from a center field position – 3

Play a pass inside to the supporting midfielder player – who can then set up a pass to either the wide player or the front players – 4

On the instruction of the coach, the ball can be played backwards or returned to the goalkeeper – as it might be in a game if the other options are closed off – for the back player or goalkeeper to start again – with a pass to the opposite side – 5

Play continues in a realistic way until a strike on goal ends with a goal, or the ball goes out of play – or the opposing goalkeeper secures the ball.

Sometimes the ball goes over the sidelines through a misplaced pass. Play should be re-started with a throw-in.

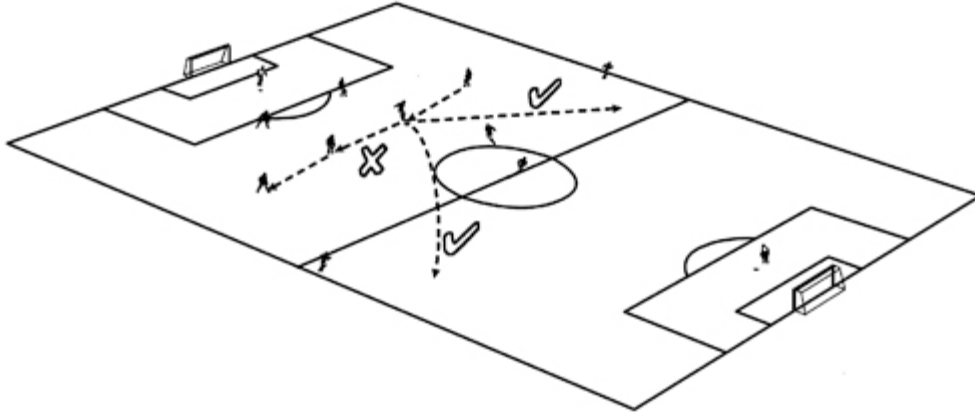
This is the basic method of **SHADOW PLAY**. However, there are many developments which will add interest and life to this practice method. We will come to these shortly. Before that, let's look at how to introduce Shadow Play for the first time.

Part 3: INTRODUCING SHADOW PLAY TO THE TEAM

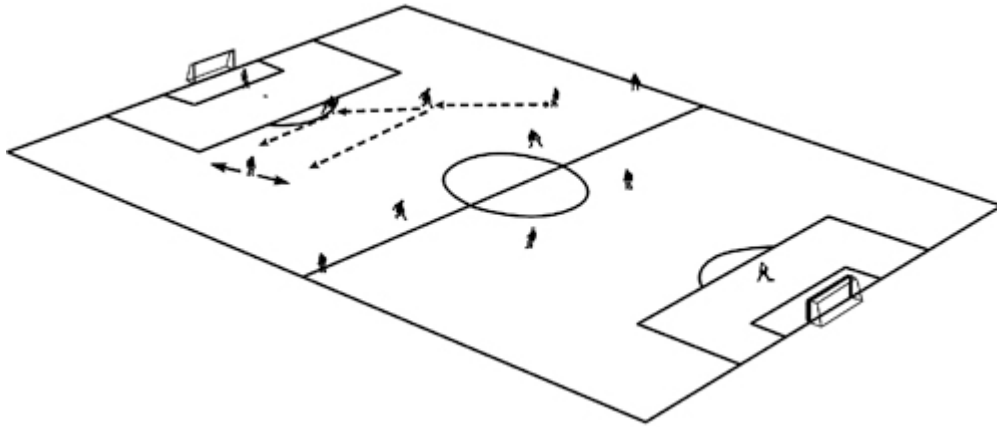
- Don't set your expectations too high first time out.
- Describe Shadow Play as a practical team talk. Initially "walk through" the routine — perhaps using the penalty area as the "field" — while talking about "team shape" and the positions players should take up as the ball is moved.
- Also, it could be beneficial to show the concept of Shadow Play with the aid of a Tactical Chart or Chalk Board for 3 to 5 minutes before moving to the field.
- As they gain an understanding of the concept of Shadow Play, move from "walking" to "jogging through" the sequence.
- Don't spend too long in the first session — 10 to 15 minutes will be ample.
- Consider moving from the penalty area to a mini-soccer field for the first session (i.e., across half a full field with two improvised goals), so that you can maintain easy contact with the players and they with one another. This way the concept can be easily explained and understood.
- It will take a little while for the player to begin to understand the practice system.
- If everything does not go smoothly the first time out, don't be discouraged. The dividends gained from Shadow Play in team play will be great — even though initially you may feel disappointed or you experience some "player resistance."
- Spend some time limiting each player to a maximum of two touches each contact. This requires players to support in realistic positions.

As the Shadow Play gains momentum, a few **DON'TS**:

1. **DON'T** allow too many square passes, or too many ground cross-field passes through the midfield. Most times these will not work in the game.
2. **DON'T** let the play persist in the same direction if the players have indulged themselves in several "tippy-tappy" short passes. In the real game, too many passes in one area will draw in the opposition, and so the play should be "switched" to the opposite side — either by players passing back and across the back line to the other side, or by a direct cross-field pass over the top of the midfield area to the opposite flank — a much-used ball in the modern game aided by the high-tech soccer balls of today.
3. **DON'T** forget that offside will apply in real game situations — so **DON'T** allow the strikers to run too far forward into unrealistic advanced positions.
4. **DON'T** allow more than one-touch in attacking penalty area — otherwise players will be dribbling around the goalkeeper in an unrealistic way.



Successive square passes across midfield are unrealistic.



Most long cross-field passes should be above head height to avoid interception in match play.

Playing backwards and across the back line to go out the other side.

Note that the defenders “drop off” to give good supporting angles.

The Keeper should also consider replacing the Sweeper as the outlet at the back.

The coach, in implementing Shadow Play, will need to direct the play and "fire" the imagination of the players with "play-by-play" instructions. Later, the players will perform with a minimum of help from the coach — where the players themselves can show leadership, directing the flow of the practice and changing the direction and play.

Part 4: SHADOW PLAY METHODOLOGY

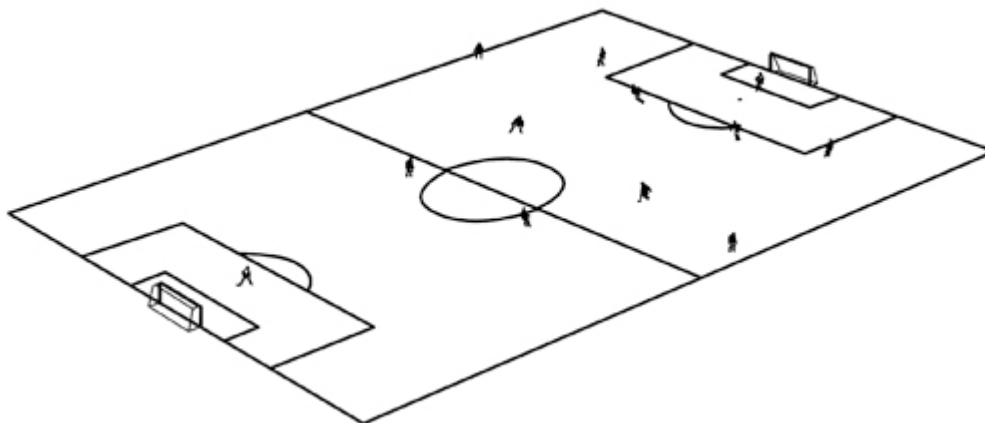
After the completion of the first attack, the majority of players will be in the attacking half of the field. The goalkeeper will have either retrieved the ball out of his goal, made a save or have watched a shot go harmlessly by the goal.

Whatever, the goalkeeper starts the next phase with the ball in hand. With numbers of 12 as we have here (we will cover a larger player number later), there are three main methods of returning the ball to the other goalkeeper to start over again.

1. Ball is punted as far down the field as possible. This gives the goalkeeper kicking practice. The ball is then allowed to run through to the other goalkeeper or, if necessary, is helped back to the goalkeeper by the recovering defenders. While this takes place, the players fall back into the basic team shape, ready for the starting goalkeeper to begin another attack.
2. An alternative method is for the ball to be thrown by the goalkeeper to the coach, who dribbles the ball downfield with the rule that no one can tackle the coach. The team falls into its defensive shape relative to the ball. The coach can look at the covering position while moving forward. And, as the coach dribbles the ball forward, instructions can be given to certain players to allow the coach to take the ball past them. These players are then on the "wrong side" of the ball, and are not required in this phase of practice to "recover" back into good defending positions, as they would in a game. The coach can then stop play to see how the defenders on the "goal-side" have adjusted their positions and to see the defensive shape. Finally, the coach plays the ball back to the goalkeeper or behind the defenders for them to recover the ball and begin their next attack downfield. This is another good method of introducing Zonal Defending.
3. This final method is the most interesting and entertaining one. After the initial attack, the ball is played out in the reverse direction in the same way. Now the players find themselves operating in positions opposite their customary roles.

Thus the striker becomes a defender; a right winger, a left full back; and so on. Only the central midfield players are spared a complete contrast. This is not only good fun — but good practice.

- Right-footed players are encouraged to use their left — and vice versa.
- Back players begin to understand how they can help front players — particularly with the quality of their passes.
- Front players begin to understand how important it is to "show" themselves to back players in order to help their accuracy and quality of passing — and in particular to be a "target."



Reversal of direction — reversal of roles — for the return journey.

Part 5: SHADOW PLAY WITH LARGER NUMBERS

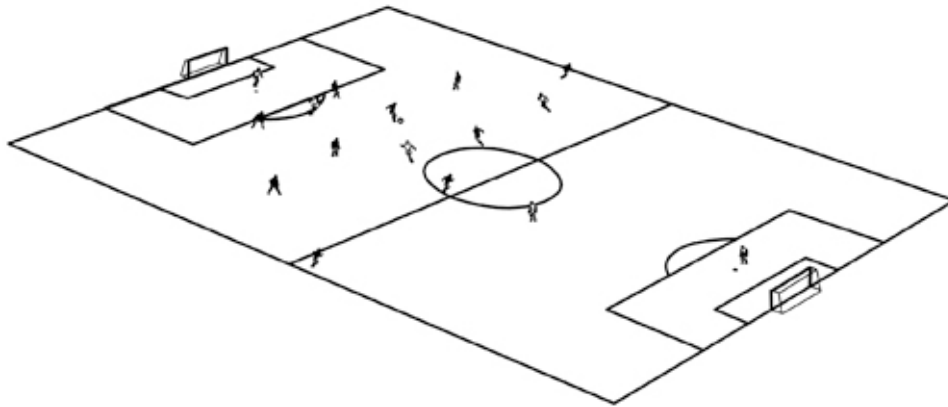
More often than not, player numbers are greater than 12; team sizes are usually around 15 or 16, sometimes as great as 18. With college and high school teams you may have enough for two full teams (22).

Initially it may be necessary to work only with 12 players to establish a clear understanding of the Shadow Play concept. This does not prevent the coach from "subbing" players in and out. There is also an advantage to starting on a "mini" soccer field, such that the "walk-through" and "run-through" are accomplished with the players (and the coach) maintaining reasonably close contact.

Once the concept of Shadow Play has been established, it is a simple task to involve the extra players.

With 16 players: go 11 vs. 5

With 18 players: go 11 vs. 7



Additional players act as "opponents."

The inclusion of opposition will make it more difficult but, with numerical superiority, the team of 11 will still have less pressure and more space than in the 11 vs. 11 game.

It is important that players are rotated in and out of the team of 11, so that 5 (or 7) "opponents" are not made to feel like second-class players. They will also experience and begin to understand the different roles they may be asked to play if they are bench players.

With 5 or more opponents, the coach can work on additional parts of the team strategy during Shadow Play. For example:

1. A complete back line of opposing defenders.
2. Certain "opponents" could be assigned man-marking roles on midfield players, for example.
3. Attacking and defending corners / free kicks practices — with "opponents" taking up specific positions, even forming a "wall."

Shadow Play, with 16-18 players, is an excellent way of developing "re-start strategy" (kick-offs, corners, throw-ins, free kicks). It can be organized in a "natural" way so that 3-6 minutes of "set play" practice is followed by 5 minutes of fluid Shadow Play, and so on. The boredom of standing around for long periods at set play situations is therefore avoided.

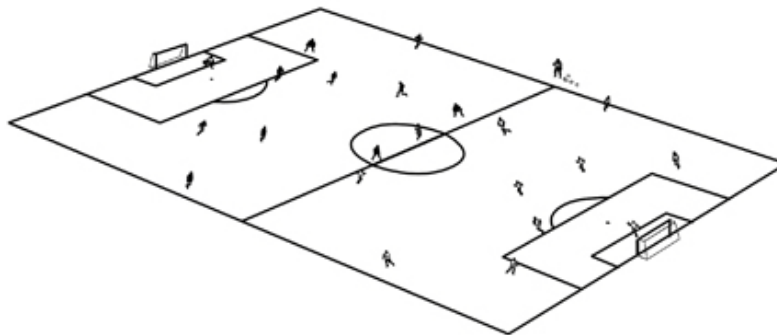
Applicability Of Shadow Play	
6, 7 & 8's	X
9, 10 & 11's	X
12 – 15's	✓
16 +	✓

Part 6: KEEP "OPPOSITION" INTERESTED

- With 5-7 "opponents," there is a further opportunity to change the system of returning the ball back to the normal starting position. This is achieved by allowing the small squad of "opponents" to interpass down the field, finishing with a shot on the goal. While they are doing this, the 11-a-side team offers no opposition, but jogs back into position ready, for the next team attack.
- During an attack by the 11-a-side team, if the "opposition" players win the ball or intercept a misplaced pass, their objective is to keep the ball for three consecutive passes as the 11-a-side team strives to regain possession. If they do, they score a goal (six passes gives them two goals). Thus a game can be established with the "opposition" trying to outscore the authentic goals of the 11-a-side team.

Part 7: TWO TEAM SHADOW PLAY

With large numbers of players — many high school, college and pro clubs will have as many as 22 — two teams can play "Shadow" at the same time, on the same field, but with two soccer balls.



The coach must insist on synchronizing the start of each attack. Neither team can start an attack in the reverse direction before receiving a signal from the coach.

As with the "12-Man Shadow," the teams can reverse their positions for the return attack. This method can work even with squads of 18, supplementing the squad by recruiting an assistant coach or two, even a fit and enthusiastic parent. Thus, two squads of 11 can be established. At the pro level I've sometimes pressed into service the trainer, the equipment manager — even myself! — to make up the two teams.

Part 8: FURTHER OPTIONS ON SHADOW PLAY

1. Condition the Shadow Play at times to "One Touch" per player. This game "condition" encourages good support, accurate passing, and develops the "first touch." It also forces the team to develop its "shape".
2. Use Shadow Play as part of the warm-up:
 - a. Begin with "walking" soccer — "Two touches" maximum — perhaps within the Penalty Area and then half-field.
 - b. Move onto the full field with no passes over 15 yards. Side-foot shots only. After two or three minutes, move into a slow jog (five minutes).
 - c. Increase to a faster jog and allow longer passes (25 yards), but no sprinting (five minutes).
 - d. Stretching — three minutes.
 - e. "All-Out" Shadow Play — sprinting, crossing, long passing, shooting, etc.
 - f. Total time of 20 minutes.
3. With "Two-Team Shadow" it is simple to move into 11 vs. 11 "Set Play" practice (corner/free kicks, etc.);

- or put the patterns established in "Shadow" into normal 11 vs. 11 play. Just take out one ball!
4. Use "Walk-Through Shadow" as a practical team talk — to give the players a better idea of the team plan.
 5. Don't use "Shadow Play" for too long — maximum 20-25 minutes — normally 10-15 minutes.

Part 9: FINAL WORDS

Other than playing 11 vs. 11 practice games, without some form of Shadow Play, it is extremely difficult for a team to get a realistic appreciation of team play — the combination plays; the different "runs"; the quality of the passes and crosses and the distances involved in passing and supporting. In the heat of the game, and with the spoiling tactics of the opposition, the strategy you are seeking to implement has less of an opportunity of being "patterned." Time and experience — trial and error over an extended period of time — may help establish a team pattern. But how many coaches (and players) can wait 10 years?