

Developing the Various Components of Agility Using Ball-Oriented Exercises

By Justin Cresser

One of the first names that come to mind when you mention soccer is Barcelona's and Argentina's Lionel Messi. He is arguably the best player in the world and one of his most notable talents is his *Agility* – the ability to rapidly change direction while maintaining control. How often have we seen him evade challenge after challenge by quickly shifting from left to right while keeping the ball at his feet? Agility is also apparent when you see other central midfielders and forwards use fakes and cuts in order to create space between themselves and their marker.

Agility is one of the most important components of soccer fitness and is also one of the most complex, as it is the combination of several factors that include: *stop-and-go ability*, *body posture*, *balance*, *coordination*, *speed of reaction*, and *foot work*. In order to appropriately develop agility in our players, we have to include exercises that address all the different components that it is made up of. The following are two simple exercises that address the various elements of agility and also incorporate soccer-specific movements. Because both exercises use groups of two, they can be used in a team setting as well as for groups with small numbers of players who are looking to do some additional fitness training outside of regular practice sessions.

Agility Exercise 1

Instructions: Place two cones 6 yards apart so that they form a horizontal line. Have a player stand midway between the two cones facing a second player (with a ball) standing 15 yards in front of them (Figure 1a).

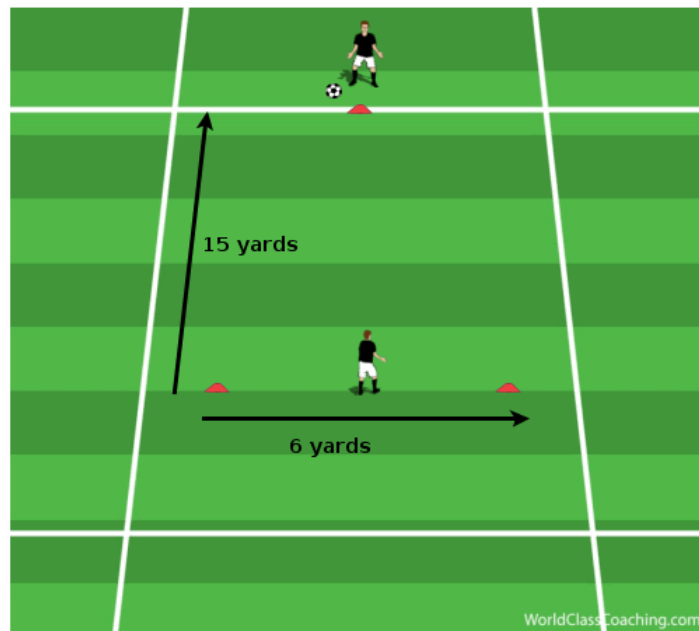


Figure 1a

When ready, have the player between the cones side shuffle (as quickly as possible) and touch the cone to their right (Figure 1b).

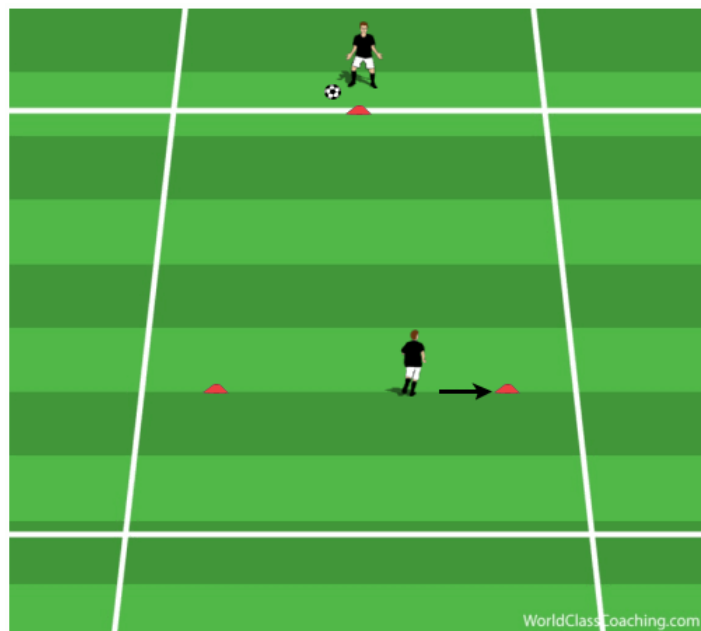


Figure 1b

They must then immediately side shuffle and touch the cone 6 yards to their left (Figure 1c).

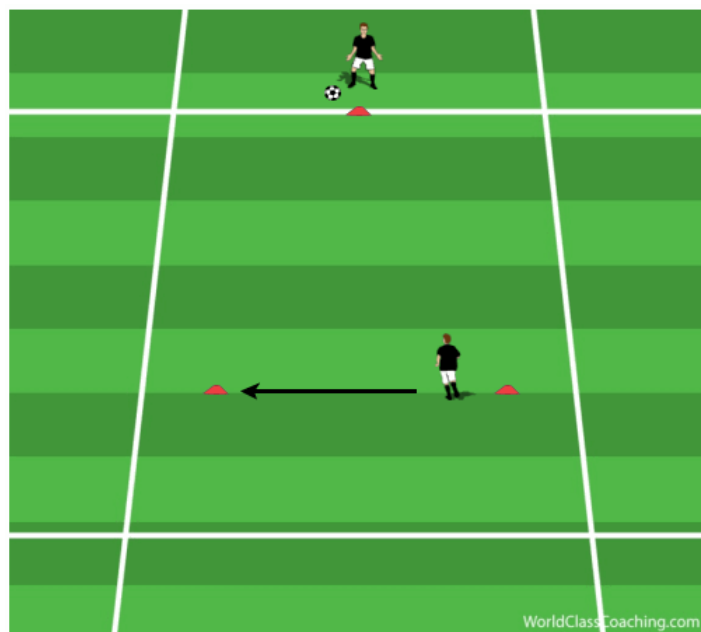


Figure 1c

As soon as they touch this cone, they must shuffle back to the middle and then immediately sprint forwards towards their partner. As they approach, the player with the ball will play a pass to their feet that they must return using one or two touches (Figure 1d).

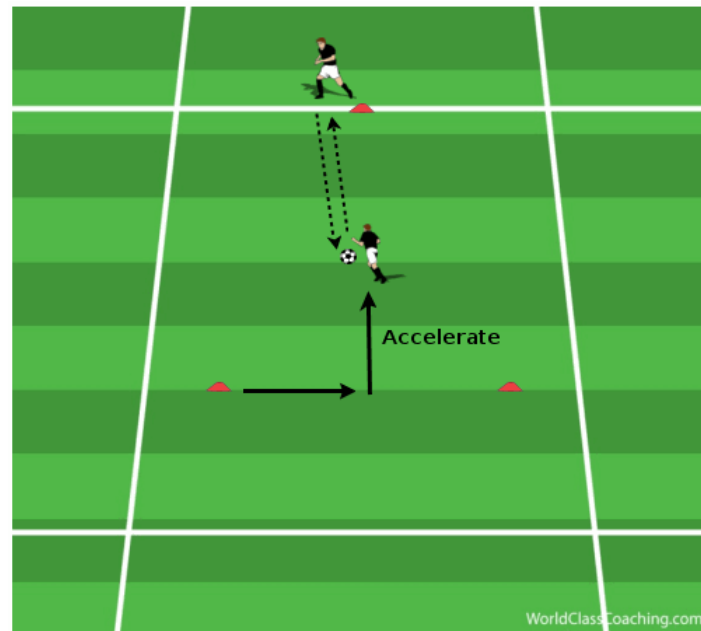


Figure 1d

After they return the pass, have the player return to their starting position by quickly backpedaling, and then have the player repeat the process after 20 seconds of rest. Have this player perform a total of 8 repetitions and then have the two players switch roles. Ensure both players perform a total of 2 to 3 sets.

Variation: You can vary this exercise by changing the type of pass (bounce, lobbed) to the working player. This will allow them to develop receiving with various body parts. You can also change the technical component of the exercise. For example, instead of playing a pass along the ground, the player can perform a jumping header or a side-footed volley.

Progression: You can progress this exercise by limiting the working player to one touch.

Coaching Points:

- The player should maintain a low center of gravity and take small quick steps when shuffling. The legs should not cross (Figures 1e and 1f).



Figure 1e



Figure 1f

- When transitioning from shuffling to sprinting forwards, the player should initiate the deceleration process with the right leg and then use this same leg to propel the body forwards.
- When sprinting forwards, the player must take a powerful first step and short, powerful steps while accelerating.
- Coach the **weight** and **accuracy** of the pass. When passing, the player should be compact over the ball with the supporting leg placed beside the ball. They must also adjust their body as they are about to make contact with the ball so that their hips are facing the target.

Agility Exercise 2

Instructions: Have two players stand 15 yards apart facing each other; one of them should have a ball at their feet. Place a cone on the left and right sides of the player without the ball so that each cone is 5 yards up and to side of the player (Figure 2a).

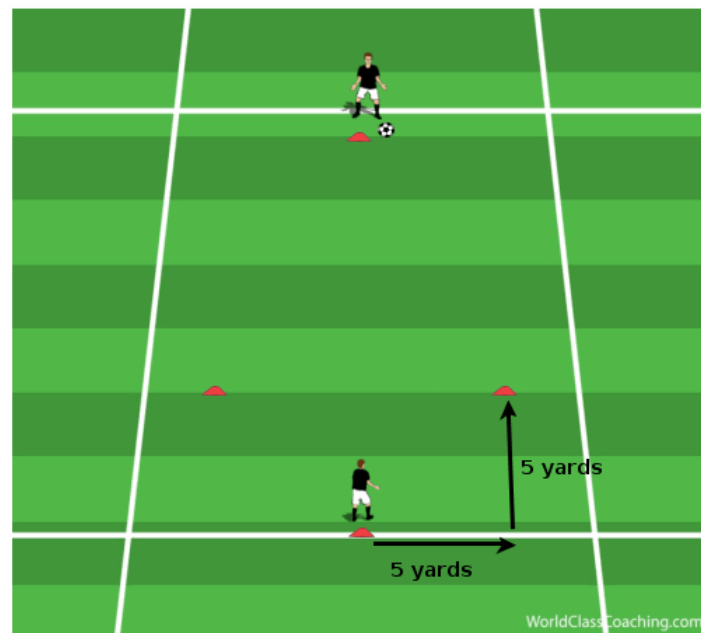


Figure 2a

When ready have the player without the ball *sprint* towards the cone to the left or right (right in Figure 2b below).

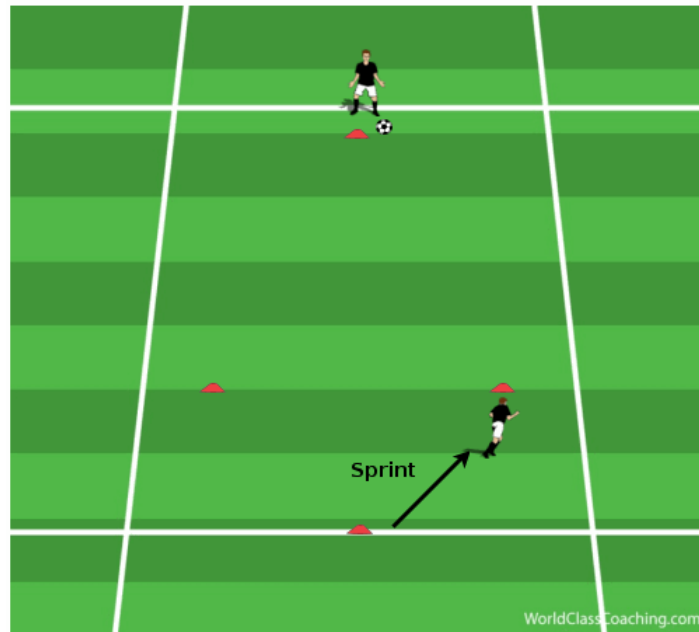


Figure 2b

As they just about reach the cone, have them decelerate slightly, perform a cut, and then accelerate towards the player with the ball. As soon as they perform the cut, their partner will pass the ball towards them, which they should return using one or two touches (Figure 2c).

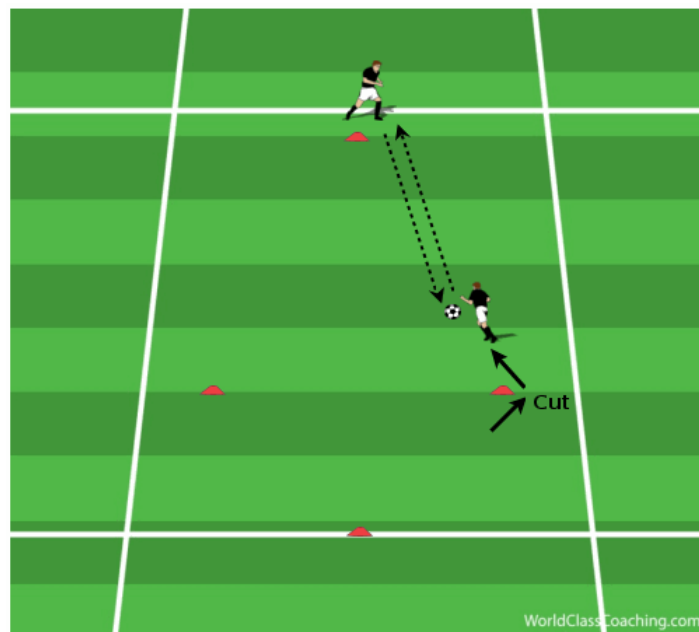


Figure 2c

As soon as they return they return the pass, have the player quickly backpedal towards their starting position and then instruct them to repeat the process; this time however, the player should start by sprinting towards the cone to their left.

Repeat this process until the player has performed a total of 8 repetitions (4 sprints to the left, 4 sprints to the right) and then have the players switch roles. Have both players do a total of 2 to 3 sets.

Variation: As in Exercise 1, you can vary this exercise by changing the type of pass (bounce, lobbed) to the working player or by switching the technical component to headers or side-footed volleys.

Progression: You can progress this exercise by adding a '*speed of reaction*' component. Incorporating this component is important, as how quickly a player responds to certain cues within the game will play a significant impact on their performance.

Instead of the player without the ball deciding what direction they will sprint in, have their partner shout either left or right. They must then react to their partner's call and immediately sprint in the desired direction (Figure 2d).

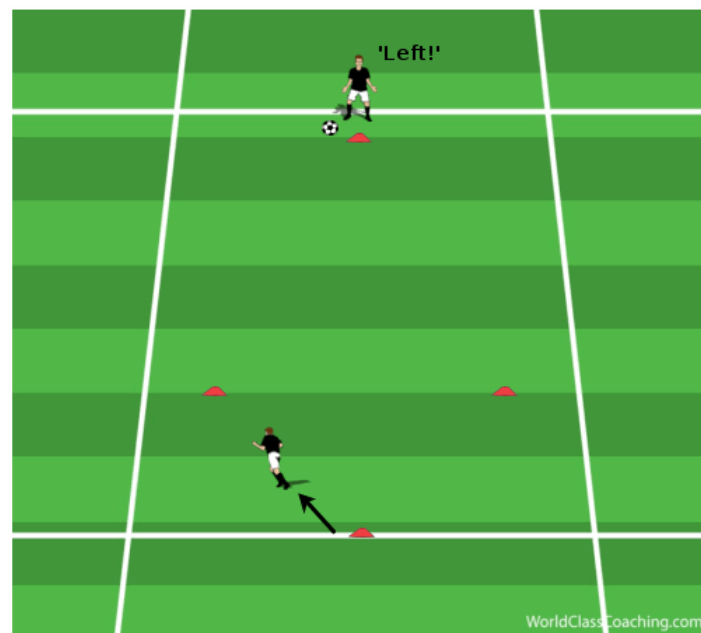


Figure 2d

Coaching Points:

- Good posture and a low centre of gravity must be maintained at all times.
- When sprinting towards the cone and the ball, the player must maintain good posture (slight forward lean) and use small, powerful steps.
- You must emphasize good cutting technique. Cutting involves rapid deceleration, shifting the body's centre of gravity, and then explosively accelerating into a different direction. When cutting to the left for example, the player must use the left leg to help slow themselves and then

plant the right foot wide and parallel to the body so that it lands outside of the knee (Figure 2e). This foot (right) then forcefully drives the body in the intended direction.



Figure 2e

- As before, you should also coach the **weight** and **accuracy** of the pass.

Justin Cresser – Has coached soccer at various levels both in North America and abroad (Hong Kong and Africa). His most recent position was as the Assistant Technical Director at the Soccer Club of Toronto. He has his National Diploma from the NSCAA and is also a certified strength and conditioning coach.

Using Pattern Play to Develop Anaerobic Capacity

By Justin Cresser

Pattern play involves rehearsing specific patterns to simulate situations that are likely to occur during the game. It does not usually incorporate opposition and can be integrated into phase of play training for a specific element of the game such as wing play or counter attacking. In addition to developing position-specific skills and role awareness, pattern play can also be used for conditioning.

Consider the following pattern play exercise to improve the *anaerobic capacity* of your central striker (number 9), the right or left wingers (numbers 7 and 11) as well as the central playmaker (number 10).

The starting positions are shown in **Figure 1**. Play is initiated by the number 10 who dribbles at speed for a few yards and then plays a pass into the feet of the number 9 who has faked a forward run, turned sharply and checked back diagonally into space.



Figure 1

The number 9 plays a 1-touch pass back to the number 10 who then plays a ball into the path of the number 7 who is running at full speed (**Figure 2**).

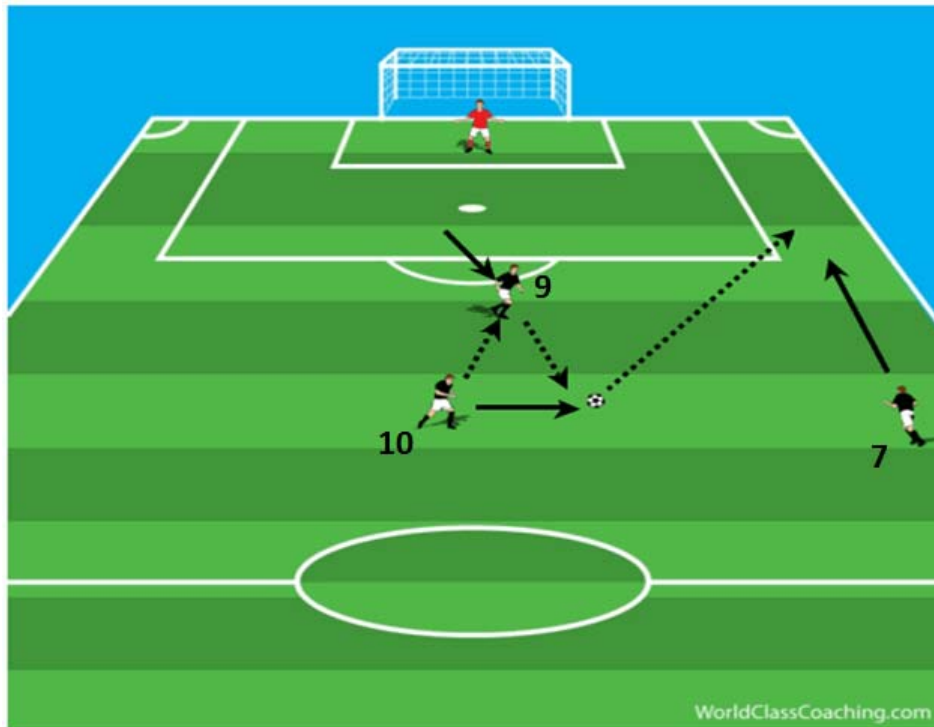


Figure 2

The winger is only allowed 1 touch before playing a cross into the box for either 9 or 10 to finish who have made near- and far-post runs respectively (**Figure 3**). (The runs from the #9 and #10 should be at full speed!)

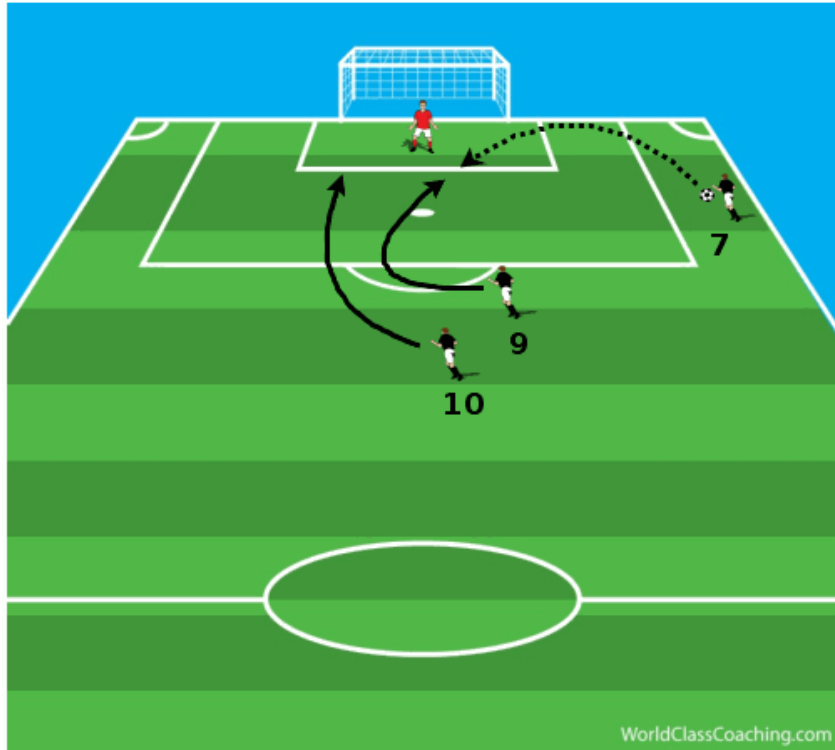


Figure 3

Coaching Points:

Encourage the winger to deliver balls to both the near and far post, and ensure the entire play is done at game speed. Although the runs are at full speed, the #9 and #10 need to time these runs. After each attempt, have the players jog back to the starting position and then repeat the play for a total of 7 to 10 repetitions. Switch wings every few plays.

The play should last approximately 7 seconds and jogging back into place should take no more than 35 seconds. This gives a work-to-rest ratio of 1:5. This exercise should elevate your heart rate to about 90% of its maximum value.

This exercise emphasizes finishing (#9 and #10) and crossing (#7 and #11) ability as well as position-specific movement and first touch from all positions.

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