

## **SELECTING A FORMATION**

- **The 4-3-3**
- **The 3-4-3**
- **The 4-4-2**
- **The 3-5-2**

## Systems of Play

Debates abound regarding the perfect tactical formation for a soccer team. Many are a result of a new system that has proven effective at a major tournament such as a world cup or a European championship and has therefore received much media attention. It should be remembered, however, in these situations we are talking about the very top-level players with high levels of fitness and great technical and tactical skills. They also spend a lot of time perfecting a system of play with their coaches in training camps prior to the tournaments. The numbers ascribed to a particular *formation* can be very misleading, as the formation will often change depending on whether the team is on offense or defense. The *basic formation* is developed into a *system of play* which is very fluid with full backs moving into midfield, midfielders dropping into defense and wingers stepping inside to create space etc. The system is more important than the formation.

Youth players do not spend this amount of time with their coaches and do not possess the fitness and technical-tactical expertise. It is therefore important to select a system that will be relatively simple to understand in terms of team shape and individual roles within that shape. For the youth coach the most appropriate question should be do you adopt a system to suit the players or do you adapt the players to play the system?

### Points to consider:

Age of players  
Technical ability of players  
Physical attributes of the players  
Vision and transitional qualities  
Expectation of the group  
The playing environment e.g. Is it an academy team?

The answer is based around the philosophy of the soccer club or the coach. Some clubs have a preferred formation which they require all their academy teams to adhere to. The best known for this is probably the Dutch clubs such as Ajax which invariably use a 4.3.3.

The majority of local youth clubs around the world, however, will allow their coaches to make independent decisions. The coach should bear in mind the following factors:

- Players at the youth level should be familiar with all the positions on the field whilst still having favorable or specialized roles
- Good players should be flexible and can play in many positions
- Players natural strengths should be incorporated
- Players have limited tactical understanding at all youth age groups and therefore the individual roles should be clear for each player

At times the coach may change the formation of a team during the game to ensure a certain result. This may include adding another forward to score a goal or withdrawing a midfield player to shore up the defense. If the coach is likely to change the formation during a game or for different games then the players need to be coached in the alternative formation. This should not be a random event and the players should not be expected to understand the nuances of a new formation just because the coach explained it on the day of a game.

Whilst one could write reams on the relative benefits of the formations I will include the potential strengths and potential weaknesses inherent within each. The potential being realized depends on the ability of the players and the organization of the coach. Put simply, we as coaches are attempting to ensure that we have more players (when on defense and when on offense) around the ball at any given time than the opposition. To some coaches the emphasis will be more heavily weighted towards numbers up on defense whilst others, who are more attack oriented, will emphasize numbers up in offensive areas. The ideal is to implement a fluid system, with a team well organized in transition that can achieve defensive and offensive dominance.

# Formations

## 4-3-3

Implement a flat or diamond back four

### *Positives*

Easily creates triangles for support all over the field

There are greater numbers in the defensive third making it harder for the opposition to break it down

Three forwards afford the opportunity to play a long early pass as they cover a wide target area

Three forwards can apply very high pressure on the opposition defenders when in possession

Playing three forwards can force the opposition to adjust their formation in their back third

### *Negatives*

The back four need to have a clear system for marking two forwards

A three-man midfield will most often be outnumbered by the opposition midfield

The role of the central midfielder can be difficult, especially if the other two midfielders get pulled wide

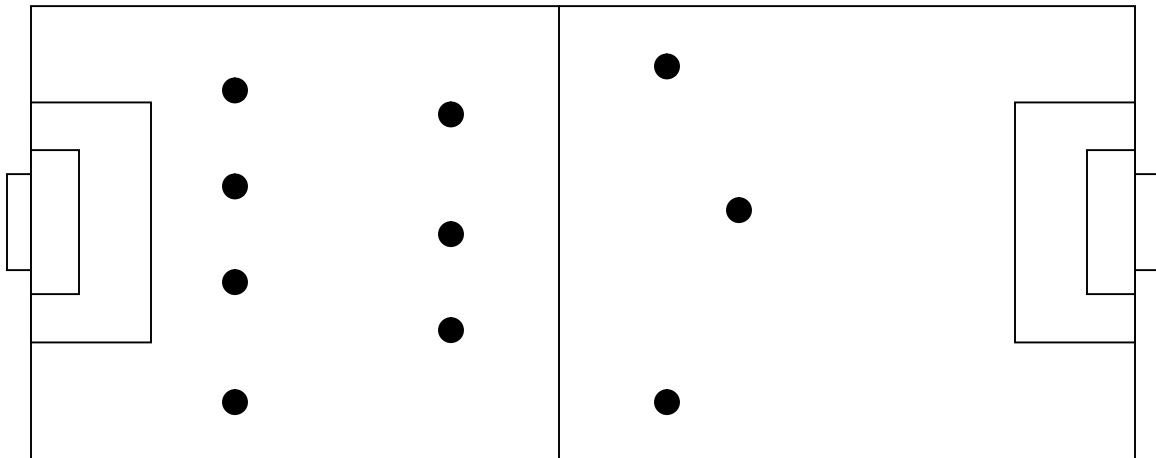
Three forwards can limit the space for other team-mates to join the attack

The three forwards can be played out of the game with one forward pass

### **Development From The 8-a side game**

The 4-3-3 is a natural development from the 3-2-2 formation. The potential strengths and weaknesses are very similar, however to achieve a smooth transition certain aspects of the formation should be focused on in training:

- Coach the back four to operate with a sweeper and marking backs, or as a flat back four
- Encourage a direct style of play
- Coach the fullbacks to step into the midfield on the weak side of the field thus creating a four player midfield and enabling a switch of play when their team is in possession
- Coach the three central midfielders to cover the field zonally by sliding together so as not to isolate the central player of the three. Give clear transitional roles to these players when the ball has been played into the strikers.
- Coach the front three to play together. The simplest form would be to have two wide wingers and one central striker but other variations are possible.



### 3-4-3

Implement a flat or diamond midfield

#### *Positives*

Easily creates triangles for support all over the field  
Equal numbers in midfield (against the majority of teams!)  
Greater overall numbers committed to attack  
Same advantages as the three attackers in the 4-3-3

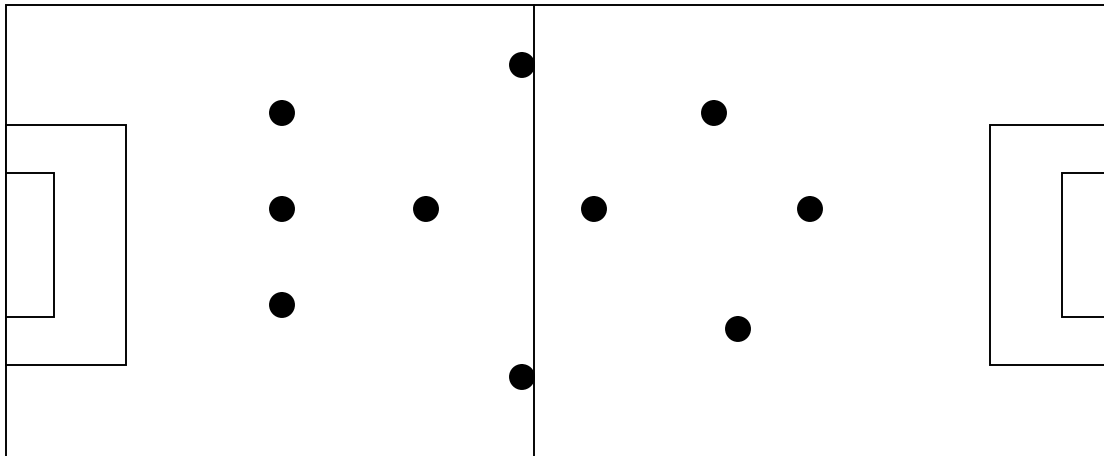
#### *Negatives*

Three at the back can expose slow/weak outside full backs  
Vulnerable to diagonal balls  
How to cope with three opposition forwards  
Attacking two thirds of the field can get crowded

#### **Development From The 8-a side game**

The 3-4-3 is a natural development from the 2-3-2 formation. The potential strengths and weaknesses are very similar, however to achieve a smooth transition certain aspects of the formation should be focused on in training:

- The defensive three can play as a flat three or with marking defenders and a sweeper. It is important that they are clear about their responsibilities
- Coach the two central midfield players to work and communicate together playing side to side or with one playing an attacking role and one playing a defensive role
- The wide midfield players should be clear about offensive and especially defensive roles with the weak side midfielder tracking back to join the defense
- Coach the front three to play together. The simplest form would be to have two wide wingers and one central striker but other variations are possible.



## 4-4-2

Flat or diamond defense

### *Positives*

Very symmetrical so difficult to unbalance  
Easily creates diamonds all over the field for support  
Eight defenders committed to defense when losing possession  
Full backs can join the attack without sacrificing the integrity of the defensive unit  
Provides width so easy to change the point of attack  
Two forwards have space to move in

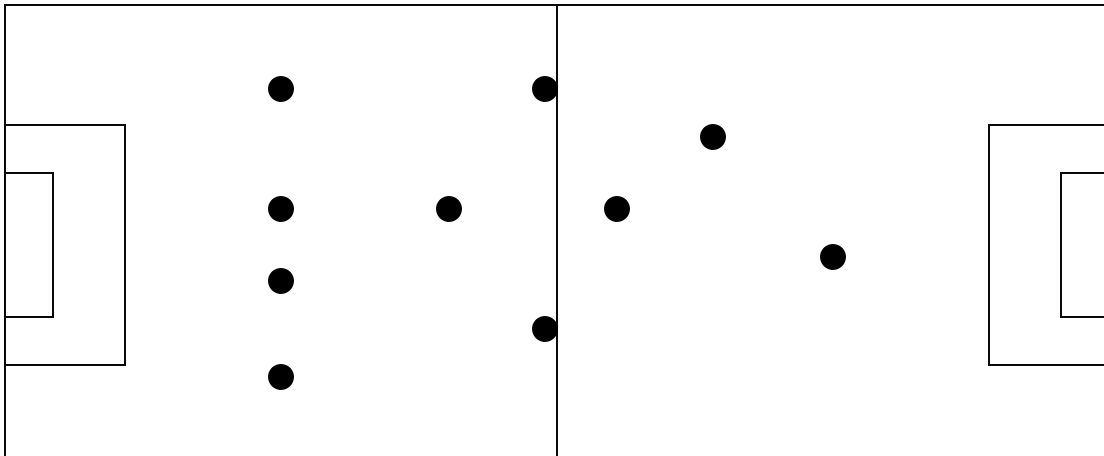
### *Negatives*

Fewer players committed to attack  
The back four need to have a clear system for marking two forwards  
Outside midfield players need to support attack and cover defense  
Team can be exposed if both central midfielders attack at the same time  
Difficult for two attackers when marked by four defenders, especially if they lack speed

### **Development From The 8-a side game**

The 4-4-2 is a natural development from the 3-3-1 formation in the 8 a side game. The potential strengths and weaknesses are very similar, however, to achieve a smooth transition certain aspects of the formation should be focused on in training:

- Coach the four defenders to play as a zonal flat four or with a sweeper plus marking backs
- Coach the two central midfield players to work and communicate together playing side to side or with one playing an attacking role and one playing a defensive role
- Coach the front two to work together, probably with the first as a high target player and the second either foraging beneath or making runs into the wide channels



### 3-5-2

Combines the principles of three defenders and two attackers described above

#### *Positive*

Five in midfield will outnumber the opposition in that area

Flexibility that three central midfielders can provide offensively and defensively

Possible combinations in center midfield are:

Two defensive and one attacking midfield

Two attacking and one defensive midfield

One attacking, one defensive and one 'free' playing midfield

#### *Negatives*

*The three in the central midfield area may condense their own space in possession if they are unable to stick to their roles and remain flexible at the same time*

#### **Development From The 8-a side game**

The 3-5-2 does not have a direct equivalent in the 8 a side game but is most closely related to the 2-3-2. The focus should initially be focused on:

- The defensive three can play as a flat three or with marking defenders and a sweeper. It is important that they are clear about their responsibilities
- Coaching the responsibilities within the 5-man midfield is key to the success of this formation. The central three must be particularly clear about their roles otherwise they will impede each other's effectiveness. With only two forwards and three defenders the wide midfielders must be quick to transition forwards and backwards.
- Coach the front two to work together, probably with the first as a high target player and the second either foraging beneath or making runs into the wide channels

