



# System of play: Keep it flexible

Teach your team to adapt to ever-changing tactical situations  
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Tactical flexibility is required for each positional group (defense, midfield and attack) and also for the team as a whole. Therefore tactical flexibility is a crucial aspect of training, and using a modern 4-2-3-1 shape as a basic attacking and defending structure provides a great deal of flexibility.

## Tactical flexibility in the 4-2-3-1 system

The 4-2-3-1 system allows a team to change its playing style quickly:

- For a stronger defense, switch from 4-2-3-1 to 4-4-2 or 4-5-1. This provides broader coverage in the midfield and also allows the team to develop a defending box with the two center backs and the two defensive midfielders. This tactical innovation is based on the concept of defending the place from which most goals are scored.

- For a stronger attack, switch from 4-2-3-1 to 4-3-3. This reinforces the attackers with two extra forwards in the outside positions. A wing attack is the best way to beat a compact, ball-oriented defense formation.

In the 4-2-3-1 shape the three midfielders function as both midfielders and forwards, based on their starting positions. Of the three, the two wide players have the hardest job because of the space they have to cover. These players must be able to cope with the demands of playing midfield and wide simultaneously. The central midfielder (and/or second forward) operates between the defending team's back and midfield lines and supports the lone forward in advance of the ball. The tactical problem for the opposition is how these players choose to deal with their marking responsibilities. From a defending perspective, the 4-2-3-1 shape adds another layer to the team, which helps to provide more depth, in turn covering more space and making it much harder to play through. In all cases the team playing this shape should have defending blocks of at least four to six players behind the ball to deal with the transitional aspect of the game.

## Roles in the 4-2-3-1 system

The four phases of the game (opposition in possession, winning the ball, possession and losing the ball) all entail different roles for each player in a 4-2-3-1 system:

## Opposition in possession

Defensive play (ball-oriented defense):

- Defenders 2, 4, 5 and 3 form a single line and play ball-oriented defense.

- Defensive midfielders 6 and 8 create a compact formation directly in front of their goal, together with inside defenders 4 and 5. The four of them keep opponents from dribbling or passing into this space.

- Outside midfielders 7 and 11 drop back behind the ball and support the defensive midfielders.

- Central midfielder 10 covers the space in front of the middle and uses positional play to deflect the opposition's attack outward.

- Forward 9 is the first defender, disrupting the opposition's attack in its earliest stages. The forward should use running plays to close down passing lanes in the middle of the field and force the opposition's attack onto one wing or the other (creating a strong side in order to use pressing).

## Winning the ball

Transition (get lots of players ahead of the ball and use through passes):

- First, defenders 2, 4, 5 and 3 secure possession with safe diagonal (wide) passes. They only use through passes if there is no risk of losing the ball. If there is too much opposition pressure on the defender who has the ball, that player should play a long, high pass forward.

- Defensive midfielders 6 and 8 should also play safely and avoid losing the ball. Like the defenders, they should only play through passes if there is no chance for opponents to reach the ball. Otherwise, they keep it safe with wide combinations and back passes.

- Outside midfielders 7 and 11 get ahead of the ball and show for passes; they receive and control it directly while moving forward, in order to put pressure on the opposition. They should play through passes to 9 and 10 immediately, in hopes of outnumbering and beating an unassigned opponent.

- Central midfielder 10 also gets ahead of the ball, shows for passes, and takes advantage of every opportunity to play

through passes forward. This player can more freely risk losing the ball.  
 ● Forward 9 shows for passes and then tries to finish as quickly as possible.

**Possession**

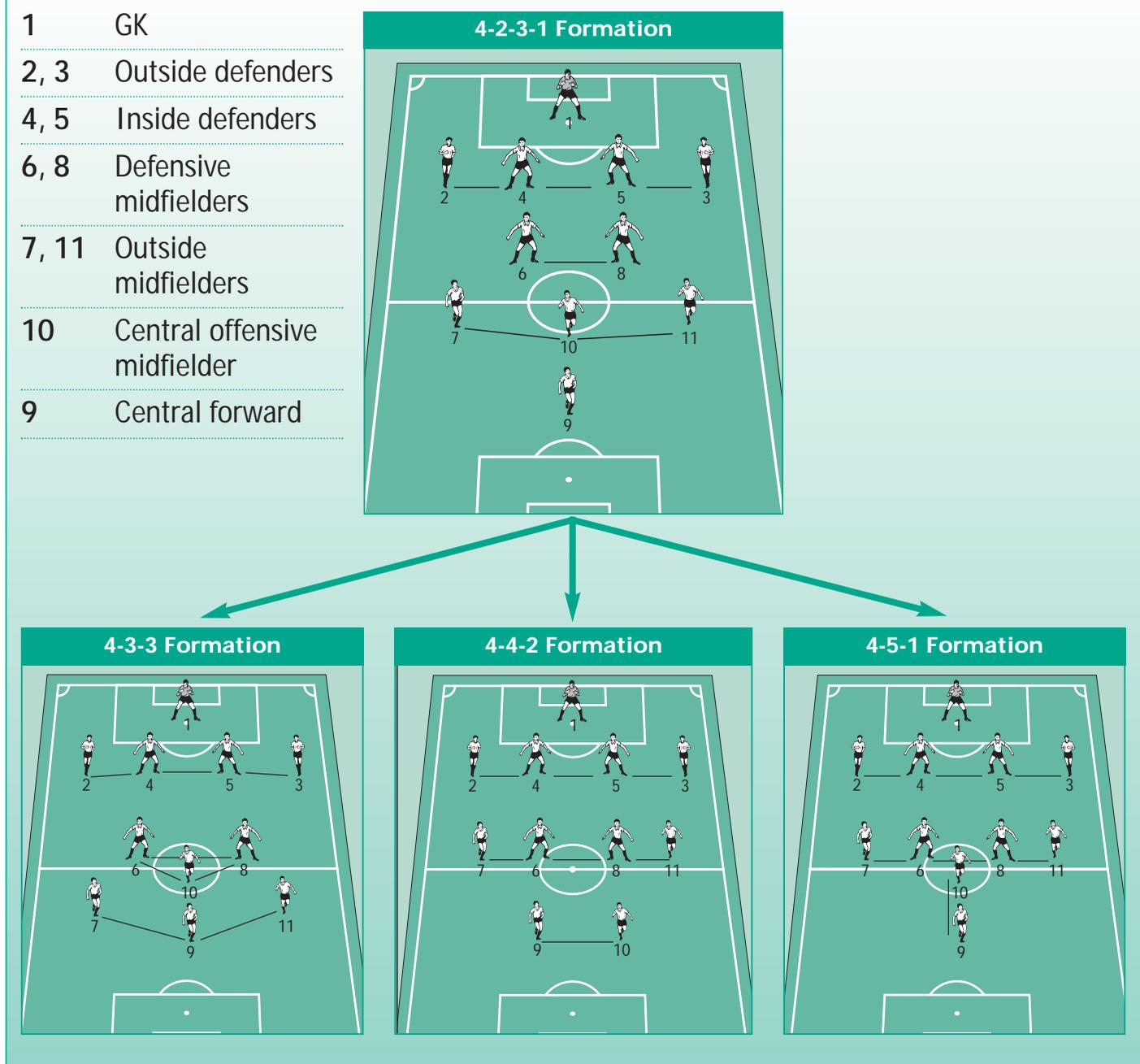
Attacking combination play with increased risk:  
 ● Outside defenders 2 and 3 move forward in order to create passing stations on the wings. Inside defenders 4 and 5 take staggered positions; this allows them to play safe diagonal passes and quickly shift the point of attack.

- Defensive midfielders 6 and 8 take staggered positions in the middle but mostly play wide passes.
- Outside midfielders 7 and 11 move diagonally ahead of the ball and show for passes, maintaining their positions on the wings.
- Central midfielder 10 moves into gaps or creates triangle formations. This player mostly plays through passes but can also try to score with long-range shots or solo runs.
- Forward 9 makes diagonal runs to show for passes, then looks for the most direct path to the goal and finishes.

**Losing the ball**

- Transition (get lots of players behind the ball and prevent through passes):
- Defenders 2, 4, 5 and 3 immediately return to their starting positions and orient themselves behind the ball.
  - Defensive midfielders 6 and 8 immediately return to their starting positions behind the ball as well.
  - Outside midfielders 7 and 11 drop back and move inward in order to close down the middle.
  - Central midfielder 10 supports the forward

**Illustr. 1** Attacking play: Combination play through the middle



and tries to keep the opposition's attack from moving into the middle.

- Forward 9 "hunts" the ball and forces the opposition's attack onto the wings.

## Attacking play: Combination play through the middle (Exercise 1)

One option for the attack is to play short pass combinations through the middle of the field. The following aspects are important:

- Players must learn correct starting positions (never line up directly; always take staggered positions and cover each other).
- Passing game should be versatile: accuracy, timing, pace and angle on all passes and layoffs.
- Angles of support, timing and speed of runs are all critical when getting open and showing for passes.
- Players should play with determination and finish each attacking play with a shot or cross.
- Straight runs demand diagonal passes, and diagonal runs demand straight passes.
- Players must make proper runs off the ball: either on the outside of the defender (blind side runs) or on the inside of the defender, depending on the situation.

## Attacking play: Attack on the wings (Exercise 2)

Another option for the attack is to attack on the wings. The following aspects are important:

- Outside players have multiple tactical options (in this order):
  1. Look for a direct path to the goal (diagonal runs into the penalty box) and finish with confidence.
  2. Move up to the endline or the edge of the penalty box and play a pass behind the opposition's defenders.
  3. Get into the area between the penalty box and the sideline and then either play a hard pass on the ground into the penalty box, or a hard cross (with spin) away from the goal.
- Outside players must be fast and possess strong dribbling skills in order to win 1 v. 1s. They must also be able to shoot and cross accurately.
- Most crosses in front of the goal are played from the penalty box sideline. Give players an opportunity to get familiar with this position during practice.
- If the attack is moving up one wing, the outside player from the opposite wing should also move in front of the goal (facing away from the goal) in order to help the players in the middle finish.
- Attackers should occupy all the spaces in front of the opposition's goal (near post, middle and far post).

## Defensive play (Exercise 3)

On defense, the following aspects are important:

- Players should return to their starting positions in the 4–2–3–1 system as soon as the opposition wins the ball.
- Starting positions for the six defensive players are based on the starting position of the lone forward, who should drop into the edge of the defending and midfield third. This will help the six to incorporate midfield pressing.
- The forward's first responsibility is to force the game wide from the center of the field. This is important because it helps to cut the field in half, makes play more predictable and helps the other players establish good starting positions. These positions should help defending players intercept the ball. Once the ball has been played wide, the forward must work very hard to keep the ball on that side of the field by cutting out potential back passes to the center full backs.
- Then defending players should force the game back inside: As the ball is being played out wide to the right outside fullback, the near-side wide player must move at speed to close down the right outside fullback, in order to shut off the passing lane and force the next pass inside. This tactic prevents one pass from beating the whole team and improves the chances for a counterattack.
- As the ball is being played from the outside to the inside, defenders move as a unit across the field toward the ball to keep the game tight.
- If the pressure is broken, then defending players must work to keep the ball in front of them. If the ball is played out to the other fullback, the wide midfielder should shut off the passing lane by forcing the game inside as above. If the ball is switched and played over the right outside midfielder, then the rule is to keep the attacking player and ball on the touchline and prevent him from making visual or actual connection with his teammates.

## About the exercises

The exercises below correspond to the following tactical areas:

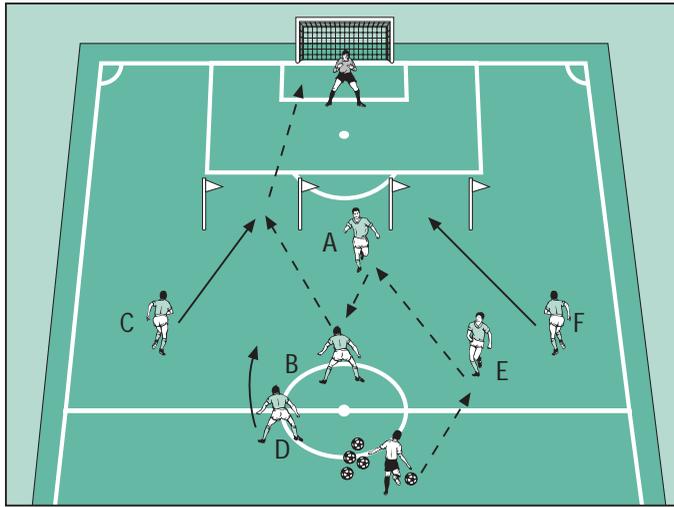
- Exercise 1: Attacking play (combination play through the middle)
- Exercise 2: Attacking play (attack on the wings)
- Exercise 3: Defensive play
- Exercise 4: Using attack and defense tactics (countering)
- Exercise 5: Using attack and defense tactics (countering)



**BREAKING THE BACK FOUR**

**1 SETUP**

- 6 v. 0 + goalkeeper
- The team of six includes one lone forward on top (A), one central attacking midfielder (B), two central defensive midfielders (D + E), and two wide midfielders (C + F).
- Use flags (1–4) to represent the “back four.”



**SEQUENCE**

Two-player movement: The player with the ball looks up, makes eye contact with the receiving player (who shows for the ball) and then passes. One typical two-player movement is the wall pass. Another is the double pass:

- The coach passes to player E, who passes to A (highest player), who drops the ball back to B.
- B now passes into space so that C can run onto the ball and shoot.

**COACHING POINTS**

- The point of this exercise is to develop a pattern and rhythm for breaking a back four through combination play between two and three players and to avoid offsides.
- In a two-player movement the coach must be aware of the passing sequence.
- Work on developing rhythm and coordination, and on practicing tactical repetitions.

**VARIATION: THREE-PLAYER MOVEMENT**

- ▶ D passes to A, who passes back to B, who passes the ball into the channel between flags 1 and 2 for D to run onto and shoot.
- ▶ D passes to A, who passes the ball into the channel between flags 1

and 2 for C to run onto and shoot.

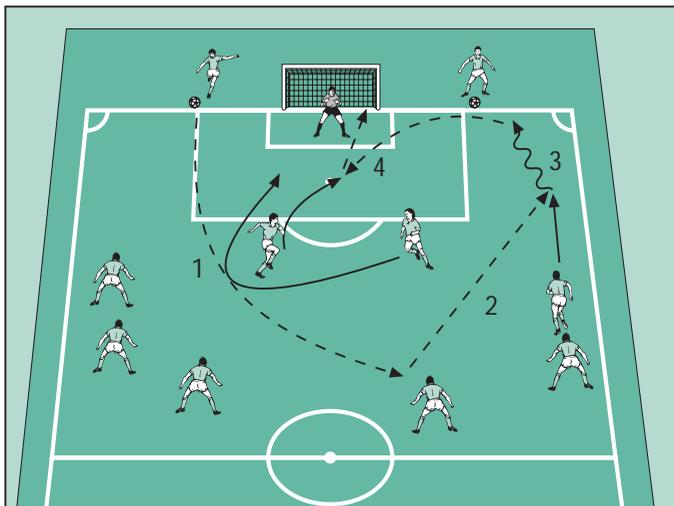
- ▶ B passes wide to F, who passes the ball directly (one touch) in behind flag 3 for A to run onto and shoot.



**8 + 2 SERVERS V. GOALKEEPER**

**2 SETUP AND SEQUENCE**

- Two servers stand at the endline (usually two center backs who can practice sending long diagonal balls).
- Two defensive midfielders, two forwards, two wide midfielders and two outside backs take positions on the field.



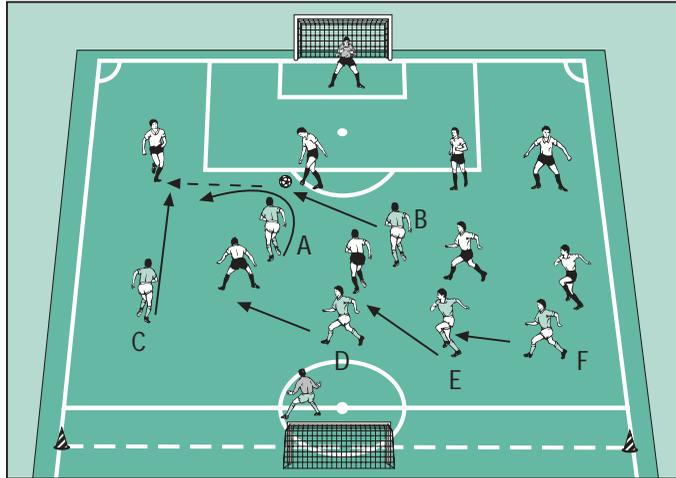
- The servers play the ball out to one of the defensive midfielders, who controls the ball and plays it to a wide player to set up a cross.
- The forwards react to each other and coordinate their runs to the goal. For example, if the near forward goes to the far post, then the far forward moves to the near post. Once the ball is played out wide, the other defensive midfielder tries to get forward, looking for chances, and the opposite wide player comes into the box at the far post.



## THE TOP SIX

### 3 SETUP AND SEQUENCE

- On a three-quarters of a field, six defenders (A–F) play against eight attackers.



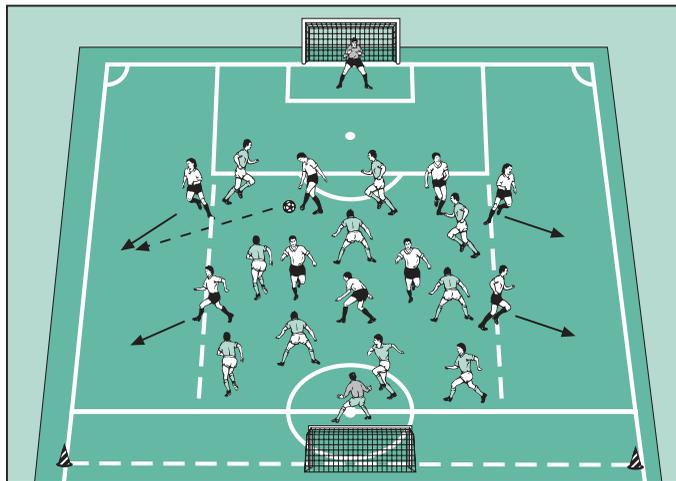
- Defenders try to keep attackers from scoring a goal. If they win the ball, they start a counterattack by securing the ball, spreading the area of play (if necessary) and trying to score.
- The midfield line acts as an offside line for this exercise (this helps to keep the training session compact).



## 10 V. 11

### 4 SETUP AND SEQUENCE

- Players form one team of 10 (Team A) and one of 11 (Team B).
- Teams play 10 v. 11 On a three-quarters of a field with a large box marked from the centerline to the top of the penalty box.



- Team A has the ball and must attack through the box to try to score a goal.
- Team B applies countermeasures to win the ball. Once they secure the ball, they can break out of the box and use the whole width of the field. Their objective is to carry the ball in possession across the centerline. If the attacking team succeeds in crossing the restraining line, the player with the ball goes 1 v. 1 against the goal-keeper.

#### COACHING POINTS

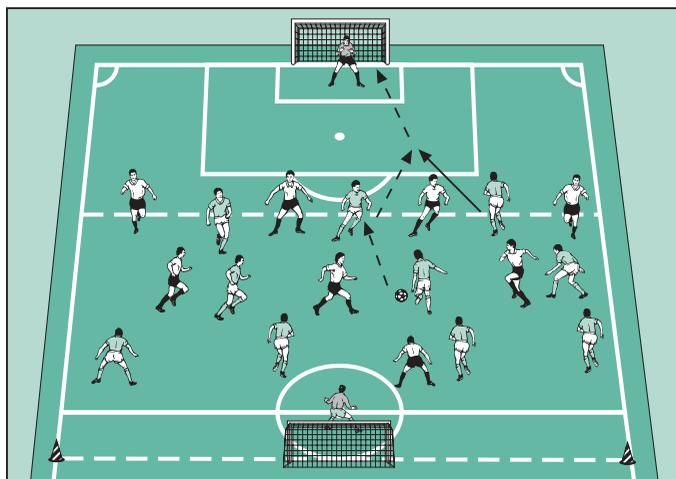
- Team B should focus on team shape, supporting angles and distances once it wins the ball.
- Timing of passes and runs is crucial.



## 11 V. 9

### 5 SETUP AND SEQUENCE

- Players form one team of 11 (Team A) and one of 9 (Team B).
- Teams play 11 v. 9 On a three-quarters of a field with a restraining line about 25 yards from the goal.



- Team A works on all of the attacking elements of the previous exercise.
- Team B tries to win the ball and score.