

Teaching the 4:3:3

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The best teams are able to adjust their system of play to meet the demands of a game, opponent or weather condition. However, before adjusting between systems becomes a possibility, players must become experts in the basics of each system and their roles within it.

The 4:3:3 is an ideal system to learn because of its tactical flexibility. Minor adjustments in positioning and mentality easily allow the system to become a more defensive 4:5:1, or a more attacking 4:2:4. These adjustments are easier to make in the 4:3:3, especially for younger players, than in most other systems. The next several pages detail some of the specifics of the 4:3:3 system in both attack and defense.


Showing players the patterns of movement in a 4:3:3 on paper enhances their understanding of the system, and allows for quicker learning on the training field in functional training. It also provides a guide and reference for players to return to after the training for continued learning. Players that are familiar with the basic concepts of every line in the system, both in attack and defense, will be smarter and better prepared to make quick decisions on game day.

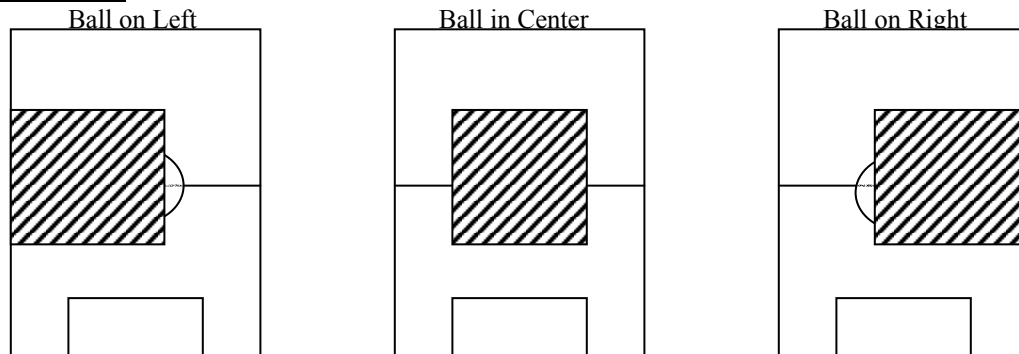
General Defensive Concepts:

The general defensive concepts of the game are the same in any system, but they deserve to be repeated whenever teaching a new system.

- ◆ **Pressure must be applied to the ball before defense can begin.** Until there is pressure on the ball the team must drop towards their own goal. When pressure is applied the team then can step and compress space.
 - Pressure must be immediate.
 - Pressure must force that attacker's vision down.
 - Pressure must make play predictable.
 - Pressure must prevent passing penetration.
- ◆ **Pressure must be accompanied by immediate cover.** Covering players are responsible for filling space behind the pressure to eliminate the threat of dribble penetration. Quality defending requires a team to get numbers up around the ball everywhere on the field!
- ◆ **The team defends together.** When pressure is applied, the entire team must step together to stay compact. Space can not exist between lines on the field, or between pressuring players and the rest of the team. The team must also shift across the field together as the ball moves. In general, the team must move as one unified block whenever the ball moves. This puts high demands on work rate and coordination.
- ◆ **The team must step and compress space every time the ball moves backwards.** On both their own clearances and on any backpasses played by the opposition the team must step to recover space and to eliminate time the opposition has to make decisions.

The following pages go through the team defensive movement, line by line, as the ball moves across the field. In general, the entire team must shift into the quarter of the field around the ball, as illustrated below.

Graphic Illustrations:  = Concentration of Defenders



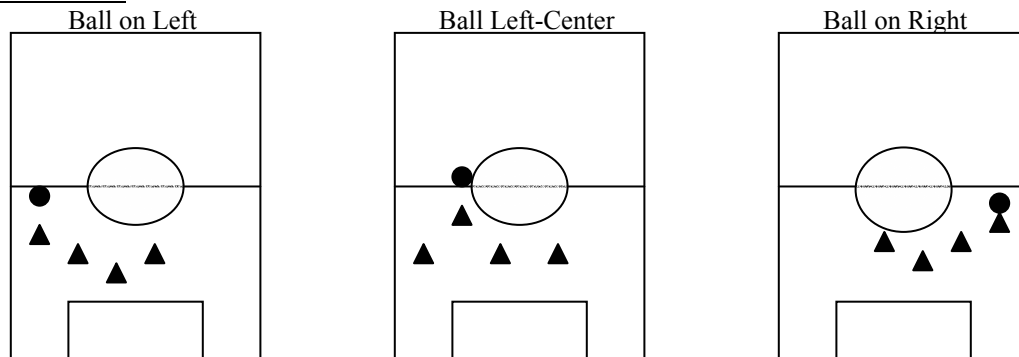
Defense Play of the Back Four: Combination Man/Zone

Defending in a 4:3:3 should be done primarily with zonal defending. In a zonal system, players are not solely responsible for marking an individual opponent but instead are responsible for filling areas of space and marking any opponents in those spaces. Zonal defending allows the team to keep a better defensive shape, and reduces some of the physical demands of man-marking.

Because the 4:3:3 does not have outside midfielders, the back four must not play with a sweeper-stopper system. Instead, the two center backs are always staggered depending on where the ball is. If the ball is on the left, the right center back is deeper than the left center back, and vice versa. Playing with 2 centerbacks will allow the outside backs to step into wide spaces more effectively defensively—addressing an inherent weakness within the system. (More on this later.)

Inside the penalty box, the system switches to purely man-to-man marking. Proximity to the goal does not allow for space to zone.

Graphic Illustrations:



Defensive Play of the Midfield Three:

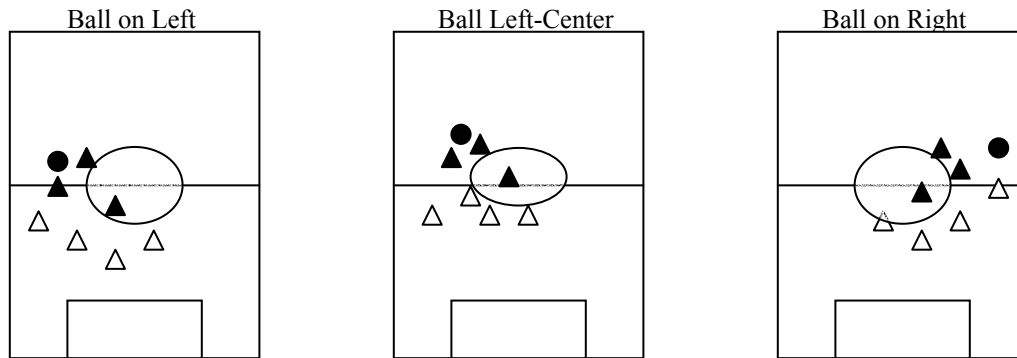
The midfield three will also function under zonal principles. However, this group must be much more aggressive and attack the ball on defense. Because there are only three midfielders, the work rate of these three players is going to be of utmost importance. These three players are primarily responsible for the middle vertical third of the field—the area between the sides of the penalty boxes. Wide space must normally be covered by outside backs and wingers.

The outside midfielders will be pinched in, so that the midfield works as a tight triangle wherever they go on the field. If the outside midfielders get stretched too wide, the team will get beaten up that middle, as the central midfielder will constantly be numbers down defensively.

In the attacking and midfield thirds of the field, this group should force the ball centrally, where the team will have numbers up most of the time. Forcing the ball inside will reduce space for attackers to play in, and is uncomfortable for most outside backs. Also, turnovers in this area create natural counter-attack opportunities.

One player must always be in the “hole” in front of the center backs. This player is most important to prevent counters up the middle of the field, and to “protect” the center backs. This player acts partially as a screen, preventing balls in to the feet of center forwards.

Graphic Illustrations:



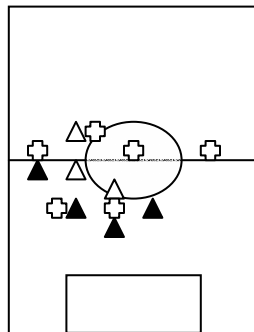
Coordination between the Backs and Midfield:

The inherent defensive weakness in the 4:3:3 is the lack of outside midfielders. If this outside midfield space is not defending appropriately, the team will have major difficulties.

Because, the midfield three are centrally organized, the **outside backs must be prepared to step forward into wide midfield spaces** and mark the opponent's outside midfielders when appropriate. The outside backs should anticipate these passes to maximize opportunities to intercept them, but must never be too high on the field before the ball is delivered! Arriving too early invites passes behind the backs. This is a difficult judgment decision, and requires outside backs that are both quick and read the game well.

At times a winger, or an outside back, or even a central midfielder may mark the opponent's outside midfielders. The situation will dictate each decision—whoever can provide the pressure quickest should do so. However, if central midfielders get pulled wide too often, the team will be beaten up the middle of the field.

Shape When the Outside Left Back Steps To the Opponents Wide Midfielder
(Ball on the Left Side)



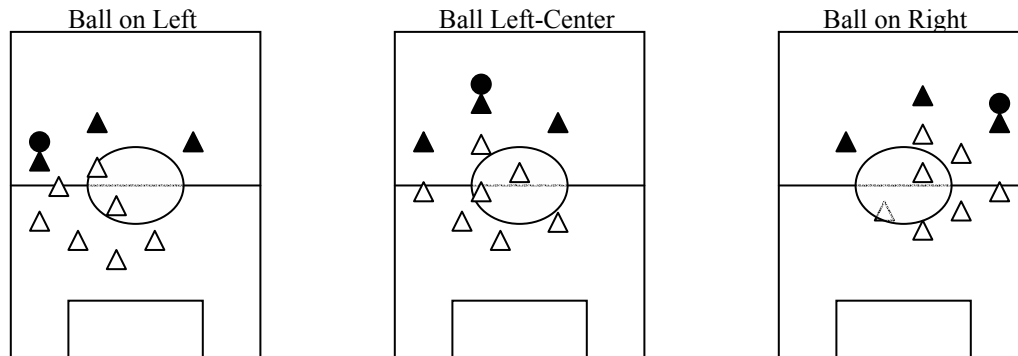
Defensive Play of the Front Three: High Pressure

The defensive responsibilities of the front three will be first and foremost to **pressure the opposition as far forward on the field as possible**—team defense will begin with these three players.

If these players can not keep the ball in front of them, then **they must channel it in an obvious direction**. Ideally, they should **force the ball into the middle of the field**, preventing a long serve down the sideline.

Once the ball is played past the forwards, the forwards should look to double back on the ball. It is especially important that the ball-side winger tracks back defensively to help defend the outside midfield space. The center forward may have fewer defending responsibilities in order to be an outlet for counter-attacks.

Graphic Illustrations:



Defensive Summary:

In all of these illustrations, you can see that **coordination of movement is essential**. The team as a whole, and each line as a group must adjust and move with the ball across the field. You should also see the **high concentration of players in the center of the field**. The team will be leaving space on the far side of the field open, relying on quality pressure to prevent long dangerous switches of play into these spaces. This will allow the team to keep numbers up around the ball.

General Attacking Concepts:

Attacking width will come from the 3 forwards and the 4 backs. The midfield triangle will primarily remain in the center of the field to penetrate centrally, to distribute wide, and to prevent counter attacks.

The outside backs must be technically competent to attack space on the flanks, and must be tactically aware of when and how to overlap into attack. These players should be considered credible weapons in build-up and in penetration.

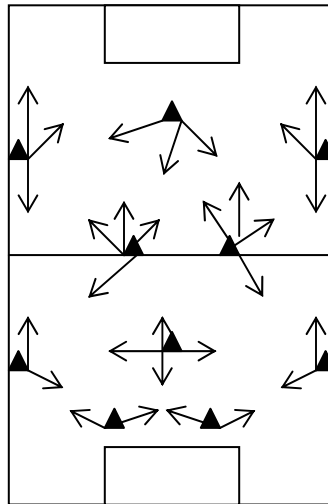
The midfield must play quickly wide or forward to relieve pressure. One attacking midfielder will be responsible for late runs into the box on wide services, while the deeper midfielders will be responsible for sealing space behind the ball.

The center forward will always be responsible for attacking the near post on crosses. The weak side winger will be responsible for far post runs. Players coming from deeper on the field will fill all other spaces.

The first option upon winning possession is always to one of the forward players—either a penetrating ball into space, or a ball forward to feet. The forward three should always be pushing the restraining line as far back as possible.

Graphic Illustrations:

Starting positions, and typical movement patterns.



Starting Positions of the Forward Three:

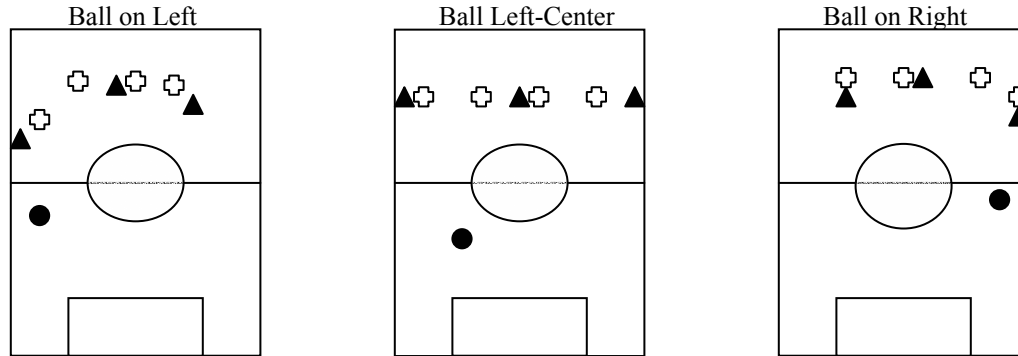
When the ball is on the side:

The ball side winger should always stretch the field as wide as possible. The center forward should stretch the field as high as possible. The weak side winger will pinch in 15 – 25 yards in order to create another threat behind the defense, and to give the center forward a teammate to play in combination with.

When the ball is central:

All forwards should push as high as possible, and the wingers should be as wide as possible. All players should look to make runs back to receive the ball at their feet, or diagonally to be played in behind.

Graphic Illustrations:

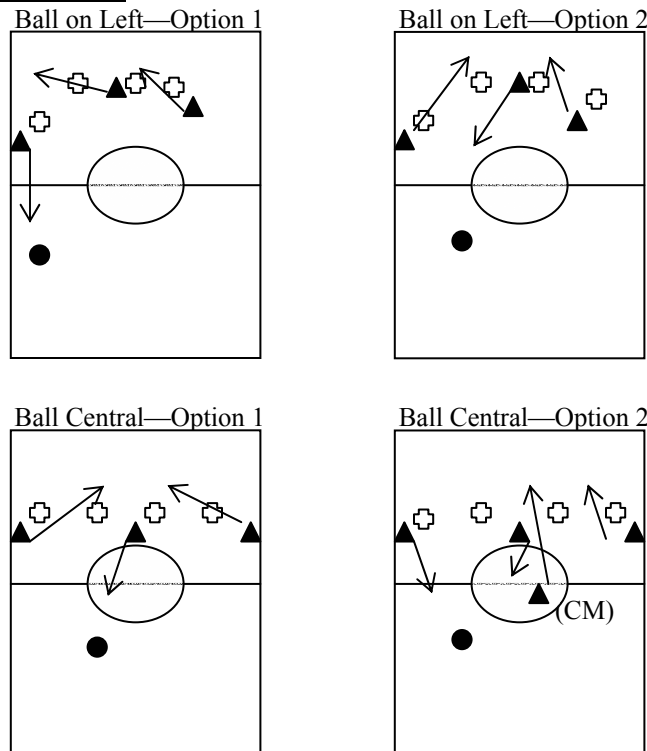


Movement Options of the Front Three:

There should always be at least one run checking back to the ball. This run can come from the ball side winger, the center forward, or both players. Other runs should occur in coordination with this run to use space created by defenders pulled out of position. A particularly dangerous run comes from the center midfielder recreating length by moving past the center forward when the center forward checks back to the ball.

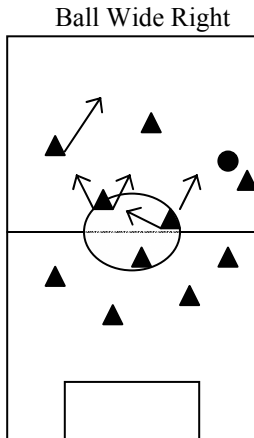
The most dangerous ball is always one played behind the defense, so one run should always look to attack or exploit this space.

Graphic Illustrations:



When the wingers receive the ball wide:

When a winger receives a ball in a wide position, they must look to **attack their defender with speed when possible**. Several options will be available to combine with other forwards or to play through balls behind the defense. In the attacking third, she should be especially confident to beat her mark 1 vs. 1.



- Option 1: Attack 1 vs. 1 down the side line
- Option 2: Cut in across the field
- Option 3: Wall pass with the central forward or attacking CM
- Option 4: Serve diagonally behind the defense for a weak side runner
- Option 5: Play to any CM running through or square
- Option 6: Relieve pressure by playing to the backs