Playing the 4-3-3

Potential Advantages of the 4-3-3

1. Playing with 3 Forwards
   - Applies intense pressure on the opposition defenders which forces mistakes
   - Provides our team with automatic width in attack
   - Provides our defenders with the opportunity to play a long early pass as we already have three players high up the field. Great for counterattacking!!
   - Stretches the opposition defense across the field creating spaces for the midfielders to penetrate

2. Playing with 3 Central Midfielders
   - Can outnumber two central midfielders in a 4-4-2 and a 3-4-3
   - Condenses space in the centre of the field when on defense
   - Provides close support for players on the ball

3. Playing with 4 Defenders
   - Outnumbers the opposition offense
   - When spread across the field ensures very few spaces for passing lanes
   - Provides the opportunity for switching the play across the back and for fullbacks to join the attack (without worrying about defensive numbers)
   - If playing a flat back four then GK acts as a sweeper

Potential Disadvantages of the 4-3-3

1. Playing with 3 Forwards
   - One pass from an opposition defender can play three players out of the game
   - Fewer players on defense (7 + GK). Note that in the Breakaways 4-3-3 we expect the wingers to track back, esp. on the weakside. It depends on the strength of the opposition!

2. Playing with 3 Central Midfielders
   - Can be outnumbered by four midfielders in the 4-4-2 or five midfielders in the 3-5-2
   - Marking can be a problem if the players do not communicate
   - Can be stretched if the wide fullbacks do not step up into the midfield line

3. Playing with 4 Defenders
   - Can become confusing when marking two attackers, esp. if communication is weak
   - Our team can be outnumbered elsewhere in the field if fullbacks do not join attack
Examples of the 4-3-3 Formation

This is the formation discussed in this article, and most of the content will relate to playing against and counteracting a 4-4-2 formation.
Attacking in the 4-3-3

The 4-3-3 with a flat back four is a perfect shape in which to launch attacks from defense. There is width across the field which allows the ball to be circulated through to the opposite side without too much risk. In the situation below X3 is in possession of the ball and because of the pressure from O7 drops the ball to X4 who looks to switch the play across the back. X5 and X2 must quickly assume positions from which they can attack. They must be physically and mentally active behind the ball!

In this situation the back line of four must be prepared to move the ball very quickly across the back to take full advantage of the space on the weak side where X2 can penetrate. At times this might involve X4 playing the ball directly to X2 and missing out X5. Care must be taken, however, as the longer ball is a riskier ball and may be cut out by O11. The central defenders must look at the option carefully before playing it (no blind passes here!).

Figure 4: The play is switched to the far side by circulating the ball through the four defenders

If the opposition drifts quickly across the field (as seen below) then the central defenders must be aware of this and should not switch the play blindly to X2. If the opposition slides then there will most likely be gaps to play through into the midfield. In the situation below X5 receives the ball and decides to play a split ball into X6 who has found the space to receive the ball. If X6 is not under immediate pressure then X2 can continue the run and receive the ball from X6.

Figure 5: The central defenders are aware that O11 has drifted across the field and choose to penetrate centrally
If the opponents (O’s) are applying high pressure as a team and there is little space to play a short pass into someone’s feet then the central defenders may look to play a direct pass into one of the three forwards. This is a more difficult pass to play but carries less risk. It also makes play less predictable!

The midfield shape will vary from team to team and depending on the situation in the game. In the system we are discussing here the central three midfielders play as an inverted triangle with one holding player (X6) and two attacking players (X8 and X10).

X6 will be constantly looking to receive passes from the back 4. This player must be intelligent in finding space and getting away from his/her mark. X6 will be looking for opportunities to switch the play thus involving the weak side full back in the attacking phase. X8 and X10 are also looking for opportunities to receive the ball from the defensive line but typically a little higher up the field. In most cases the opposition (in a 4-4-2) will be playing with two central midfielders (O8 and O6) so one of the three X midfield players should be able to find a passing lane.

**Figure 6: X6 is constantly moving to provide options for the four defenders**

If X6 is marked tightly then our defensive players can consider other options (our defenders behind the ball should also be very open to switching the ball across the back!).

a) One option might be for X6 to move away thus leaving the space for another player to move into. The diagram below shows X6 moving away and taking O8 with her/him and X4 stepping up into midfield and switching play out to X3. X4 must be very careful not to give away possession here!!

**Figure 7: Central midfielder X6 checks away leaving space for central defender (X4) to penetrate**
b) X6 can check away and X8 can check back into the space

![Figure 8: X6 is marked tightly so checks out of the space to allow X8 to check in](image)

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c) X10 drops short for a pass from X2 (bringing in O6) whilst X6 moves into the space behind O6 for the pass

![Figure 9: X10 checks short for a pass leaving space for central midfielder (X6) to penetrate](image)

Figure 9: X10 checks short for a pass leaving space for central midfielder (X6) to penetrate

d) X2 can play the ball directly into a forward (X9) with X10 and X8 looking to receive the second pass

![Figure 10: Wide fullback (X2) passes directly into central forward (X9) and X10 receives the second pass](image)

Figure 10: Wide fullback (X2) passes directly into central forward (X9) and X10 receives the second pass
The flexibility of movement of the central three midfielders is very important in creating space and in maintaining a secure shape. One player must always provide depth in midfield! They need to be aware of the ball, the opposition, the space and the movement of each other. This requires a great deal of practice where different attacking schemes are considered and practiced. They are not, however, set plays and the players must be given the freedom to make their own choices based on what they see.

In this system it is essential that the wide full backs are getting forward to support the attack and to provide width in midfield. These players must be alert to every opportunity to penetrate. Only one should attack at any one time, however!!

In the diagram below the left full back (X3) penetrates and the other players in the back four rotate towards the left side to condense central space in case possession is lost. X6 will also maintain depth in the midfield here providing protection for the central defenders and a passing option behind the ball.

Figure 11: Left full back (X3) penetrates so the right full back (X2) rotates towards the central area of the defense

On seeing the attacking run of X3, X8 may move forward and inside to create more space for X3 to run into (see above).

In a similar way our wide forward (X11) can move inside to create space for X3 to move into (see below). X6 can pass to X11 in his/her new position or to X3 out wide. This rotation of positions can be very confusing for the opposition to deal with, especially if it is timed perfectly!! Speed and awareness is key! It is like a dance where every move must be synchronized!!

Figure 12: The left forward (X11) moves infield to create space for the full back X3 to move into
In the diagram below it is X8 who moves out wide when X11 moves in field. Again the success of the movement relies on speed, awareness and timing.

![Diagram](image1.png)

**Figure 13:** The left forward (X11) moves in field to create space for the midfielder X8 to move into

The 4-3-3 system we are discussing here operates predominantly with two wide forwards (X7 and X11) and one central forward (X9). The idea here is to stretch the opposition defense across the field thus creating spaces down the middle for penetrating diagonal passes. The timing of the wide run is important and may involve initially checking towards the ball to bring the defender in before checking away!

![Diagram](image2.png)

**Figure 14:** X11 and X7 play mainly wide creating space for X8 and X10 to move into

If the midfield player (e.g. X10) is under pressure (see diagram below) then the wide forward (X7) may need to come short for a pass. This would involve checking away first (to move the defender away) and then checking towards the ball.
Another advantage of having two wide players is to create spaces for the midfielders X10 and X8 to ‘punch into’ with or without the ball. This is how the Dutch typically play!

If O2 and O3 do not mark tightly but instead play more centrally then the attacking space can be exploited out wide by playing into the wingers’ (X7 and X11) feet. Here X8 plays into X11 who can go 1 v 1 with O2.

A key element of this system is the ability of the central striker (X9) to show for the ball to feet and to then be able to hold it up whilst support arrives from the midfield. This player will often be marked by a central defender and sweeper so the ability to possess as an individual is essential.
Other teams will play with three forwards (X7, X9, X10) who play more centrally. The idea in that system is to provide more immediate and close support for each other, as opposed to isolating the central forward (X9). In this system the width can be provided by different players pulling out to the flanks when the time is right, in addition to penetration from the wide full backs.

**Figure 17: The 4-3-3 with 3 central strikers**

In reality the coach can combine elements of both systems but will base the majority of his/her attacking schemes around one.

In the system that we have been discussing the wide forward on the weak side (X7) should slide inwards towards the middle when the ball is on the far side of the field and there is not much central support from the midfield. This might happen on a quick counterattack. In this situation X7 is providing support for X9 and X11. X7 can always pull wide again OR X10 can fill in the wide space vacated by X7.

**Figure 18: On a quick counterattack X7 moves infield to provide support for X9 and X7**

In the same way, if the ball is passed long or punted centrally into X9 (under pressure!) and there is little support from the midfield then the 2 wide forwards (X7 and X11) make diagonal runs towards the central forward to provide support. If it is a long central punt then at least one of the wide forwards should make the early run beyond the central forward for the flick on.
Figure 19: X6 plays a long ball into X9 (under pressure!). X7 and X11 make diagonal runs to support.

In this 4-3-3 system the aim is to always have at least 3 defenders behind the ball when attacking, in addition to one of the midfield players (normally X6). One of the wide full backs should be looking to attack at every possible opportunity without fear of loss of possession. The other players have license to take every attacking opportunity they see.
Defending in the 4-3-3

One of the potential defensive weaknesses within this system is the fact that there are three midfield players who are often playing against four or five opponents. This is overcome by the dynamic movement of the wide full backs and wing forwards to provide defensive cover on the flanks.

In our introduction to this system we looked at some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of a front three. One advantage is that the three forwards can put enormous pressure on the opposition back line when they are in possession. This is especially effective against teams who cannot play a long ball out of the back or who struggle to possess out of defense. Against these teams the objective is to win the ball as high up the field as possible.

If possession is already secured by the opposition and they are comfortable in possession then our front three will direct the ball into ‘pockets of pressure’. In the situation below our opponent O4 plays the ball into O2 who is looking to pass the ball down the line. X11 curves his/her run to force O2 to play a ball inside towards an area of defensive strength i.e. 3 midfield players (X8, X6, X10). X9 slides across to discourage a switch across the back. X7 slides across to provide closer support to X9.

Figure 20: Defensive shape of the 3 forwards when O2 is in possession

If O2 is under more intense pressure and is likely to pass backwards to O4 then X9 will push higher and will either mark O4 to prevent a ‘drop’ or will double team O2. In this situation the whole team (X’s) will ‘squeeze’ higher and tighter thus condensing space. The diagram below highlights the difficulty for O2 with no real passing outlets.

Figure 21: Defensive shape of the three forwards when O2 is under intense pressure
When the central defenders are in possession the idea is much the same i.e. preferably win the ball immediately. If this cannot be done then we will again instruct our forwards to ‘channel’ the opponent towards the centre of the field where we have defensive strength. In the diagram below X9 and X7 angle their movement so that O5 can only pass centrally towards O6 and O8 and NOT to O4.

Our three midfielders are not stretched out across the field but instead play as a central three with one (X6) sweeping in behind the other two. Against a 4-4-2 we will often outnumber the opponent in the centre of the field if our three midfielders stay compact.

![Diagram showing X9 and X7 channeling a central defender towards central midfield](image)

**Figure 23: X9 and X7 channel the central defender O5 towards central midfield**

In the diagram below the ball is played into O6 or O8. In this situation X9 can drop to double team or at least get closer to a possible breakdown.

![Diagram showing X9 double teaming after the ball is played into midfield](image)

**Figure 24: Centre forward X9 double teams after ball is played into midfield**
In the example below X9 approaches O5 at an **incorrect** angle and allows O5 to pass to O4 who then has space to attack.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 25: X9 approaches O5 at an incorrect angle thus allowing the pass to O4**

If this does occur then O4 can be pressurized (in anticipation!) by X11 coming off the wing on O4’s blindside or by one of the midfield players (e.g. X8) depending on distances.

In a game situation our team will not always be able to apply immediately pressure on the ball so the shape of our defense will be somewhat different. In the example below the central defender (O5) has the ball, is under no initial pressure and can see the opportunity to play a long switch to O7. In this situation the weak side winger (X11) drops into midfield to discourage and/or prevent the quick switch, thus slowing down the attack.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 26: There is no pressure on O5 so winger X11 drops into midfield to prevent switch**

At this point we will introduce the two wide midfield players in the opponent’s 4-4-2 system and look at how we can counteract that threat. It is obviously difficult for our central midfielders to defend the full width of the field. They will certainly be sliding to defend zonally but will not be able to effectively defend the flanks. It is, therefore the responsibility of the wide full backs (X2, X3) to rotate into midfield quickly in order to apply defensive pressure. This pressure must arrive as the ball arrives in that area!! If the fullback arrives late then the opposition wide players can easily play him/her out of the game.

In the diagram below the ball has been played wide to the right midfielder (O7). Wide fullback X3 has anticipated the pass and has moved up quickly into midfield to win the ball or apply pressure to O7. If the ball cannot be won immediately then X3 channels O7 inside towards support. In
the diagram below we still have 'numbers up' in the defensive area with three defenders marking two attackers. Our 'defensive' midfielder (X6) also drops to bolster the defense (but ball side of the strikers) and X11 can double team O7 if in the central third of the field (again this depends on the coach's philosophy.

Figure 27: X3 steps into midfield to apply pressure on O7

The wide full back (X3) may become confused in this role if he/she is already marking one of the forwards who has pulled wide (O9). The situation below still requires that X3 rotates into midfield but also requires a very quick shift of the backline so that O9 is now marked by X4. If X3 does not step up then O7 has a free 'cross' into the penalty area.

Figure 28: X3 steps up to pressurize O7 and X4 slides to mark O9

If O7 is under pressure from X3, then X8 can remain ahead of the ball to prevent the switch across the midfield (to O6) and to be in a good to position to transition to attack. It is not necessary to have all three midfielders behind the ball at this point unless the coach has specifically asked for it. However, if O7 delays on the ball then X8 may move in to 'double team'.

The diagram below illustrates the movement of the weakside winger (X7) who has come inside and tracked back to the midfield area when the opposition is attacking down the opposite wing. It should not be necessary for X7 to track all the way back to the defensive area unless the team is outnumbered at the back or if the opposition left full back (O3) makes an attacking run.
it is likely that a team playing with two wide midfielders will try to use them at every opportunity. With this in mind every attempt is made to channel play centrally (unless in the final defensive third!) thus cutting off the wide pass. The diagram below highlights this intent with the midfielders (X8 and X10) forcing play centrally. Again the angle of approach is key to cutting out the pass from O6 to O7. At the same time midfielder, X6, aims to cut out any passes into the feet of O9 and O10 by sweeping in front of the back four. If the ball is played into O9 or O10 then X6 will drop quickly to double team this giving the forwards no space.

This system utilizes a semi flat back four who mark zonally across the field. This defense is essentially a ball oriented and highly mobile unit. It slides across the field in order to compress space horizontally and presses up the field in order to compact space vertically. The distances depend on how much pressure there is on the ball at any given time and in which direction the ball is traveling. It should be said at this point that ‘flat back four’ can be a misleading term as it is never a completely flat back line. When defending there must be a degree of depth. This will be provided by the goalkeeper who plays almost as a sweeper when the ball is out of shooting range. It is also provided by the central defenders who are ready to drop at any given moment to cover a through ball! This is especially the case if we do not have pressure on the ball. The offside trap is obviously a ploy that can be used here but this is a risky strategy at the youth level. It is also better to spend time with younger players working on skills!
The diagram below illustrates the shape across the back when the ball is in a central area (O8). At present, there is no pressure on the opponent (O8) so we must be prepared to defend a long penetrating pass. One can see a compact back four, the GK in a ‘high’ position to sweep up any long through balls and the central defenders ready to drop. If the coach is playing a sweeper system then he/she will have 3 marking backs and a sweeper playing behind them.

![Diagram](image1)

**Figure 31: Defending a long central pass**

When the ball is in a wider position (O7) then the defense slides across to that side to, again, condense the space through which to attack. X2 slides with the defense (as if connected by a piece of string!) and keeps his/her body open to see ‘blindside’ runners (e.g. O11)!

![Diagram](image2)

**Figure 32: Play is switched to O7 and the back four slides quickly to condense space**