

The Foundations of the 4-2-3-1

The 4-2-3-1 is probably one of the most widely used formations in professional soccer. As opposed to the 4-4-2 with the "Flat Four", the "second" back four is completely resolved with the 4-2-3-1 formation. With the usage of four player rows, the development of complex soccer formations and systems of play was also incorporated into this designation.

The 4-2-3-1 is thus a 4-5-1 and this points to a strongly positioned midfield. The "trisection" of the system may sound easier, but often leads to misunderstandings. The 4-2-3-1 explains the tactical concept far more clearly. Furthermore, there are additional 4-5-1 systems, like for example the 4-1-4-1.

By comparing the 4-2-3-1 with the diamond formation of the 4-4-2, we may recognize the structures of the 4-2-3-1 more clearly. This can be seen in the following illustration: In the basic formation, we move number 8 back from the diamond to the position next to number 6. In the actual midfield, three players are playing in a single row as part of the 4-2-3-1. As opposed to the diamond, only one player remains in the front of the 4-2-3-1. In most cases, this is also a classic center forward.



The 4-2-3-1 looks like a very defensive formation in the graphic illustration, but this is dependent on the distances between the individual rows. When in possession of the ball, it is possible to rapidly "switch" and create overloads. If one of them joins the attacking play, the pressure on the opposing defense is even more increased.



The 1 (Goalie)

The goalie plays along with the rest of the team in this formation. He's not just a goalie and should build to become integrated into the passing game more and more.

The first 4 (Defenders)

In front of the goalie, there is a "flat" line of defenders. Players 2 and 3 are the right and left fullbacks and players 4 and 5 are the center backs. Today's wing-backs are fast, agile, confident with the ball and often join the attacking play. In this system, the wing-backs are often faced with the difficult problem that they cannot be immediately supported by their fellow team mates; running paths are often very long for defensive players. For this reason, the wing-backs have to be strong tacklers that are capable of delaying the opponent's attack.

The 2 (Defensive Midfield)

The defensive midfielders are often interpreted in the following way as part of this system of play: one of the "sixes" is more offensively oriented, is often unmarked in the midfield and thus can be passed to, additionally takes care of the playmaking and secures the rear space behind number 10 if his team is in possession of the ball. The second "six" is mostly responsible for defensive tasks. Ideally, the two players swap their roles in the system of play time and time again, in order to become less predictable.

In the defensive, the players may easily form triangles with the defense and are able to attack the opposing player in possession of the ball. Gaps for possible passing routes are automatically closed in the process and if possession of the ball is won, it is easy to find access to the wing players in the midfield. However, the running paths are often very long as described above and it is often hard to support the wing-backs.

The 3 - (the midfield)

The midfield of the 4-2-3-1 formation is very flexible. Number 10 constitutes a real "playmaker" and the two wing players are nearly equal to real wing attackers or wingers. Constant advances of the defensive midfielders can cause problems and confusion for the opposing defense.

Due to this, a 4-3-3 often automatically results when in possession of the ball.

Requirements concerning the willingness to run and tactical discipline are very high but mandatory in order to successfully play these frequent system changes.

The 1 (Striker)

One player in the offense sounds like a typical center forward who not only has to be tall and good at heading but also capable of achieving successful tackles. But times are slowly changing for the 4-2-3-1 formation as well and a "false nine", a flexible attacker, can often be found in this position.