

The 4-3-3 or 4-5-1 formation

This formation is becoming a popular system in the professional game, especially when playing away from home, as it provides a very compact midfield that is hard to break down and, at the same time, is a great system to counter-attack with.

You will often find teams at grassroots level adopting this system, but for very different reasons. Due to the nature of football at grassroots level you will find the ball going long a lot of the time with the midfield less involved, so the three forwards prove useful when looking to pressure and challenge the back four with a solid three in midfield looking for the second ball.

4-3-3 or 4-5-1 attacking

- The flexible nature of this formation makes it popular as there are many variations to the layout of your players within this system.
- When attacking it is essential that your wide attackers provide the width while your three central midfielders provide depth and angles for the back four to utilise.
- With an extra player in the centre of midfield when playing against a 4-4-2, it is important that you feel comfortable passing into the midfield. Therefore, you should play three people who are comfortable on the ball in the midfield positions.
- The lone striker has to be good at holding the ball up as this will be necessary when building any attacks. It will give the team time to support the play, especially if it has been played up to the front player with a long ball.
- The midfield shape should consist of one of the midfielders coming short to offer an option while the other two stretch the opposition's midfield by taking up advanced positions, preferably behind their midfield.
- This causes problems for the opposition as someone will have to shut down the deep lying midfielder if the defender decides to pass it to him/her. If the deep midfielder is shut down, this should leave one of your other midfielders free.
- When the deep midfielder is shut down effectively, the ball can simply be played back to the defender for him/her to try to find the spare midfielder. This is the basis of drawing the opposition in to create spaces behind them.
- When the deep lying midfielder is not shut down then he/she can simply turn and face the play and look to attract a player to him/her before passing it off to a teammate.
- Both full backs should provide width when the team is attacking and they should make themselves available whenever the ball is played into midfield.
- The more options the midfield players have the more confidence they will have to receive the ball.
- The front player must always be looking to face up and provide a link for the midfield to play off, unless the ball has been worked well through the middle and the midfielder is running at the back four. In this instance, the forward must look for a ball in behind so that the midfielder can slide him/her in for a shooting opportunity.

4-3-3 or 4-5-1 defending

- When defending in this formation you have two options - to press and shut down the opposition or simply sit back and let them try to break your shape down.
- Both of these options are effective, depending on your situation in the game. If you are looking to chase the game when behind then the aggressive pressing tactic is suitable. If you are defending a lead then sitting back and keeping a solid shape could prove more beneficial.
- To shut down aggressively your two wide forwards should press the opposition full backs and preferably show them inside towards the bodies in midfield.
- For this to be effective you will need your full backs to be fit and brave by backing up the wide players and pushing up within tackling distance of the opposition's wide midfielders.
- Your three central midfielders will mark man-for-man in the middle, with the spare midfielder pushing forward to support the wide forwards in their pressing.
- Your centre forward will be marking one of the centre backs. This will leave the opposition with few options to pass to and, hopefully, you will regain possession once the ball has been hit long.
- To sit back and keep your shape, you will do the opposite from the aggressive pressing game.
- The two wide forwards will sit back and pick up the opposition's two wide players, allowing their full backs to have the ball.
- If the full backs advance to the halfway line, this would be a good time to start to engage the defender.
- Once the wide forwards have pushed onto their full backs, this is the cue for your full backs to push onto the opposition's wide midfielders.
- In central midfield you will be man-for-man, with a deep lying midfielder not marking anyone but screening the back four by playing roughly 10-15 yards in front of them. Any ball played into the opposition's front men can then be challenged by this player.
- Your back four will have to play reasonably deep, but not too deep, as there will be no pressure on the ball when the opposition full backs have it, so they cannot afford to play too high as these players will have time to pick a pass.
- Your centre backs should be ready for any ball played in the air or any ball played in behind.
- Your centre forward will be dropping off so that any opposing midfielder that wants to come short for the ball will be challenged by this player.
- All in all, this will be a hard formation to break down when sitting back and defending solidly.
- Individual errors cannot be accounted for, but it will take a well-drilled side to break down this formation if applied correctly.