

4-4-2

A BALANCED ATTACK

System gives a mirror image from left to right side of the field

By Schellas Hyndman

The 1982 World Cup in Spain gave birth to the 4-4-2 system, which was introduced by the Germans. It was developed because the attackers realized that the defenders were too strong. Thus, one attacker retreated to reinforce the midfield. The strikers get help from the midfield players when their team is in possession of the ball.

The 4-4-2 system has four defenders and four midfielders who are capable of covering the width of the field in both attacking and defending play, while the two strikers have space to play in the attack. This system offers a balanced attack, with a mirror image from the left to the right side of the field. Patterns are easily understood by all.

The 4-4-2 system can be played in many different manners — this is only one way. Up top, play is with two in the attack (Nos. 9 and 10). A diamond shape is shown by the four midfielders, with No. 8 as attacking midfielder and No. 6 as defending midfielder. Nos. 7 and 11 are wide midfielders. The wide defenders are Nos. 2 and 3, while No. 4 is the center back and No. 5 plays deep as the sweeper (see Diagram 1).

Attack

The forwards are Nos. 9 and 10. The two forwards always create opportunities for each other by interplay or by opening space for each other. Checking back to the ball on angles is very important to the forwards. They also make

First in a series

This overview of the 4-4-2 system of play is from notes made from Schellas Hyndman's lecture at the NSCAA Academy's Premier Course in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in January. It is the first of a three-part series: in the July-August issue, Mike Noonan will outline a practice which covers collective defending in the 4-4-2; in September-October, Hyndman will outline a practice session focusing on attacking with the 4-4-2.

diagonal runs to the flanks to receive the ball on the move from the back. They will go wide to create 2 v. 1 situations with the wing midfielders on the flanks. The timing of runs to the near and far posts is extremely important. The forwards need to complement each other in terms of playing characteristics — No. 9 might play higher and be the target player, while No. 10 might be better at showing back to collect balls from the midfield and defense.

The attacking midfielder (No. 8) is very important in this system. This player must possess excellent penetrating ability with the dribble, as well as very good passing technique to penetrate the opponent's defense with well-timed, accurate balls. This player can unbalance the defense with his creativity and has the ability to combine with the forwards. Usually playing in the center

of the field, the attacking midfielder should possess a powerful shot. This player also can be classified as a withdrawn forward.

The defending midfielder (No. 6) is a pivotal player in this system. This player gets the majority of balls from the defense. His primary role is to move the ball from one flank to the other as quickly as possible. He should always make himself available for touches. The defending midfielder usually will stay in the center of the field while checking back on angles and maintaining good body position to switch the ball to the opposite flank. The defending center midfielder must be tactically sound to make good decisions, such as whether

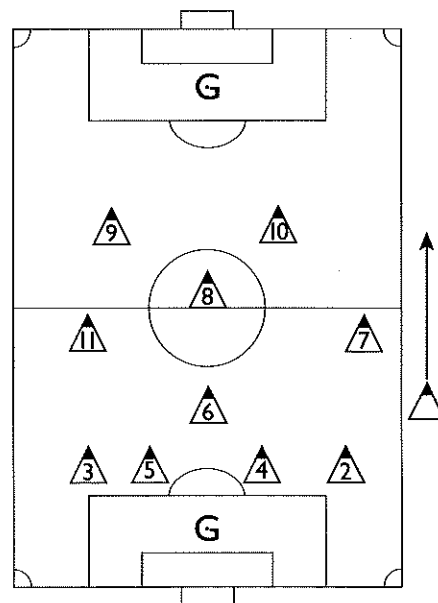


Diagram 1 — Shape in 4-4-2



Good 1 v. 1 defensive skills are vital to backs and midfielders in the 4-4-2. Here Creighton's Corey Fox spoils Sam Forko's breakaway for UConn in the College Cup Final.

to play the ball wide or to start the counterattack in a more central fashion.

The two central midfielders must understand the functions of the positions. No. 8 has to view his position as 70 percent attacking versus 30 percent defensive responsibilities. Meanwhile, No. 6 has the opposite percentages of responsibility. They must understand

each other's role and offer balance in the midfield — both cannot attack at the same time. They must work to give support to strikers and one (hopefully No. 8) must support them if at all possible.

The wing midfielders, Nos. 7 and 11, play wide on the field. They must have good speed and constantly make runs behind the defense. The wing midfielders should have good dribbling ability and good tactical sense, such as knowing when to take an opponent on, either individually or combining with a teammate. This player must be able to cross a quality ball while under pressure.

The job of the wing midfielders is to get behind the defenders, either by individual penetration or by playing balls into the valuable space behind the defense. They look to create 2 v. 1 situations on the outside of the field. Defensively they must be able to pressure the ball.

The wing fullbacks (Nos. 2 and 3) attack from the back. Both should possess pure speed and good passing ability on both short and long passes. They should have good tactical sense in terms of supporting the ball, as well as knowing when to go forward on overlapping runs.

The wing fullbacks must have a high work rate since they have to be able to

move up and down the perimeter of the field. They must possess good 1 v. 1 defending skills. Technically they must be able to deliver good crossing balls as well as bend balls to players. A player such as Maldini has the ability to play a long diagonal ball and penalize a team if it doesn't have depth in its defense. Such a player also can help a team penetrate centrally by playing a ball to a striker's diagonal run behind a drawn-up defense.

The center back must be able to defend 1 v. 1 and be a good header of the ball. The ability to play with both feet also is a plus for this player. The center back (No. 4) usually is a supporting player who plays simply and primarily stays in the middle of the field.

The sweeper (No. 5) is very important in this system. This player must have good soccer sense; he is the playmaker with the wing fullbacks and can switch the ball from one flank to the other. The sweeper should have very good passing skills, including the ability to hit 40-yard passes behind the defense. The sweeper also can carry the ball from the defending third into the middle third.

Examples of changing the point of attack through the midfield (Diagram 2) and developing attacking play out of the back (Diagram 3) in the 4-4-2 are illustrated.

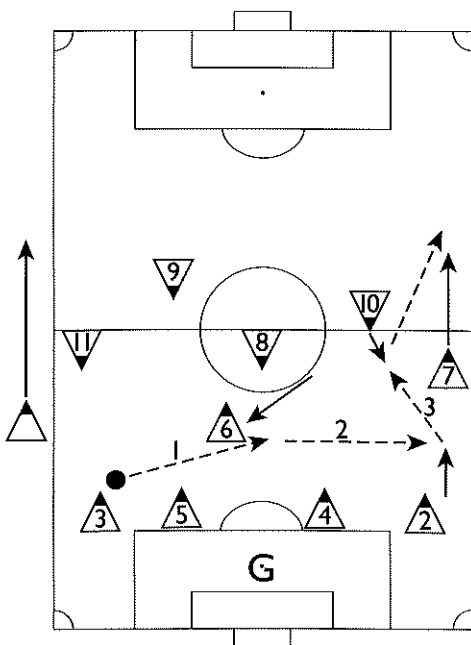


Diagram 2 — Changing point of attack — 4-4-2

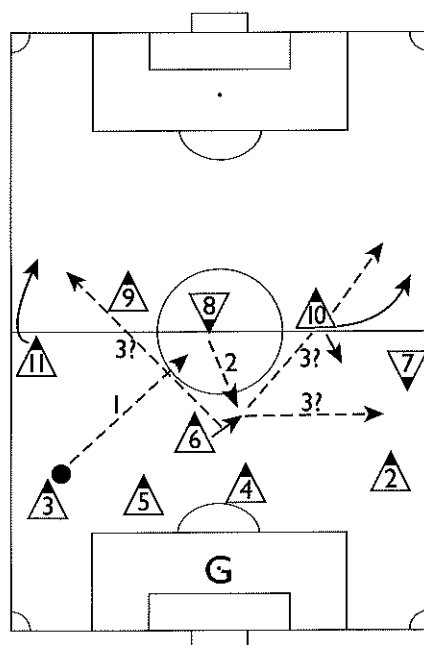


Diagram 3 — Playing out of back — 4-4-2

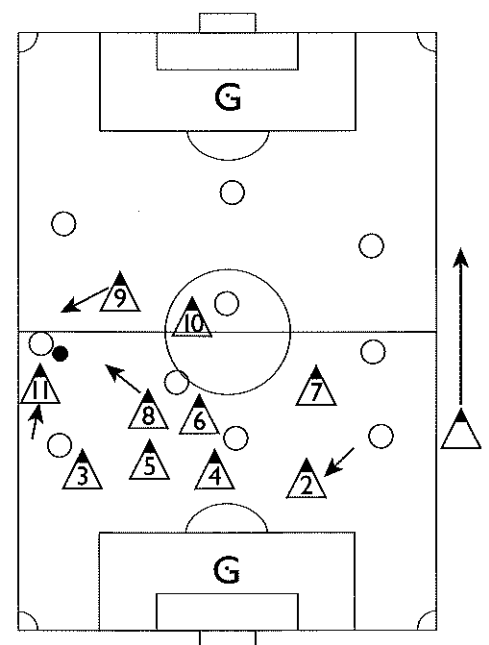


Diagram 4 — Low pressure — 4-4-2

Defense

Defenders wear Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5. Nos. 2 and 3 are fullbacks, No. 4 is the center back and No. 5 is the sweeper.

The first priority of the fullbacks (Nos. 2 and 3) is to play in a disciplined manner. They must have good speed to mark players. The fullbacks must have good tactical awareness to know when and where to give coverage, usually with the third defender giving balance to the defense.

The center back (No. 4) has the special responsibility to be the man-marker (he marks the opponent's best attacker out of the game). This player must possess good athletic ability, speed, quickness, jumping ability for heading and the determination to win every 50/50 ball. The center back is the physical strength of the defense.

The sweeper (No. 5) is the defensive leader. He must be sound tactically in order to make good decisions on the field. The ability to communicate and give directions to the other players is extremely important. The sweeper must have the speed to give immediate coverage to teammates as well as to cover runners coming through with or without the ball. The sweeper must be a sure tackler, since the position generally is the last line of defense before the goalkeeper.

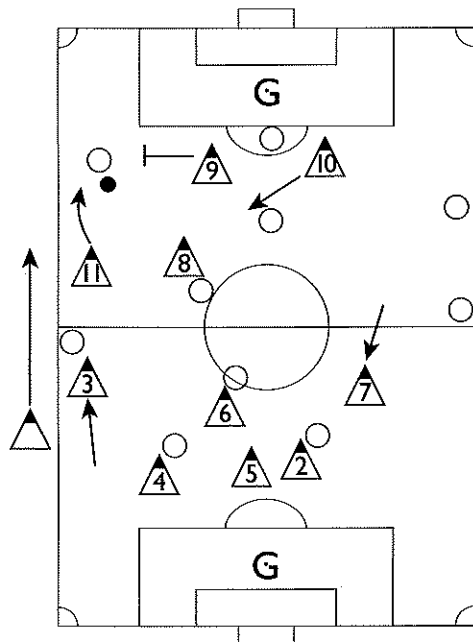


Diagram 5 — High pressure — 4-4-2

The defensive strength in a 4-4-2 system is in the midfield. The two wing midfielders (Nos. 7 and 11) have a great responsibility of channeling opponents into more pressurized situations. The wing midfielders work extremely hard throughout the game. Both players must be tactically sound and disciplined and play within the team's structure. The ball side midfielder can put immediate pressure on the fullback or mark the opponent's wing midfielder. The weak side midfielder will come into the center to condense the opponent's space, but still must be aware of the long diagonal ball by opponents as they attempt to switch the point of attack.

The defending midfielder (No. 6) must mark man-to-man any opponent who attacks through the center of the midfield. This player must be tactically sound, knowing when to go with runners and when to give coverage. It is helpful if No. 6 has the ability to win air balls from goal kicks or goalkeeper punts.

The attacking midfielder (No. 8) must be able to give direction to the two strikers in addition to being positioned well in the passing lanes. No. 8's defensive role is to prevent the opponents from penetrating the center of the field or switching the ball to the opposite flank.

The two forwards (Nos. 9 and 10) must work together to force opponents to the flanks. The forwards' role is not to win the ball on tackles, but to make play predictable and force opponents to play into pressure. They should not let opponents play back to switch the ball from one flank to the other.

The 4-4-2 allows for high pressure defending. If opponents are playing the ball successfully down the flank, the 4-4-2 can be adjusted with the outside midfielder pushing up and combining with the striker to double-team the player of the penetrating ball. The players closest to the ball on that side of the field tighten up on potential receivers while the balancing players provide zonal coverage away from ball. It also can be structured to allow for low pressure defending (see Diagrams 4 and 5).

Playing a 4-4-2 against a 3-5-2 would have an outside back push up,

while the third central midfielder would play the fifth opposition midfielder or zone in back or forward of the midfield line (see Diagram 6).

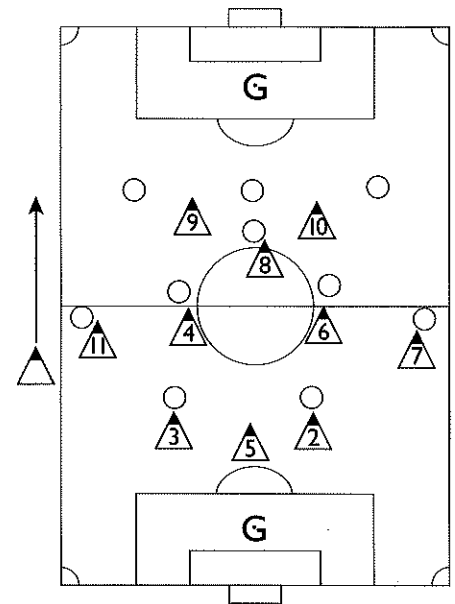


Diagram 6 — 4-4-2 v. 3-5-2

The defense can push together with all four no more than 40 yards across the field. This allows for pressure on the ball in the final third, with the balancing defender offering wide space that should be able to be covered.

Defensively, the team shape should emphasize compactness, with the ideal being about 12 to 15 yards of distance between the three lines. In this way, the group should be able to surround the ball. Such compactness also favors the use of the offside trap as a means of squeezing a team's space. A central back can dictate this if there is pressure on the ball and the line is held.

In terms of combating the offside trap, an exchange of position between a central midfielder and striker with service from an unpressured wing midfielder is the ideal manner of beating the offside trap. ⚽

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