

The "4-3-3" formation is not completely defined since it is not used very often. The roles of the three forwards, however, are very clear: two should be making runs to the outsides and one either dropping back or waiting for the cross. The midfielders adapt their runs and running paths to those of the forwards. The defense can't count on much support from the midfield.

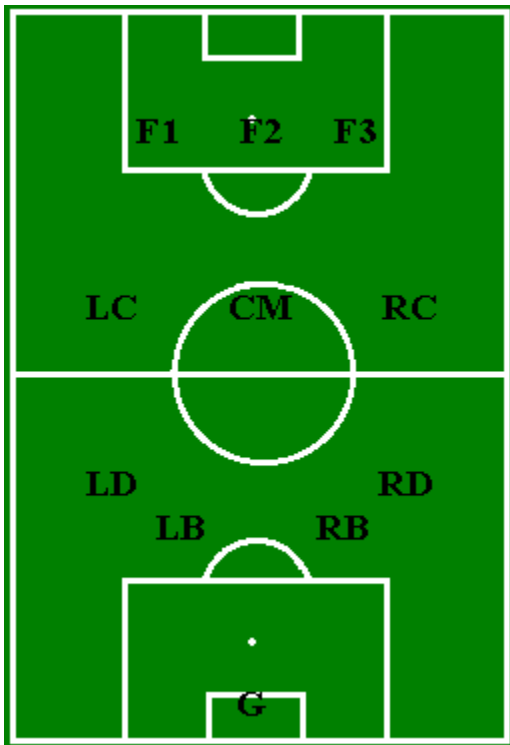
Here are some details about the positions:

**Left/Right Backs (LB/RB)** They are the only real defenders. These players have to be dependable and willing to give up any kind of offensive play.

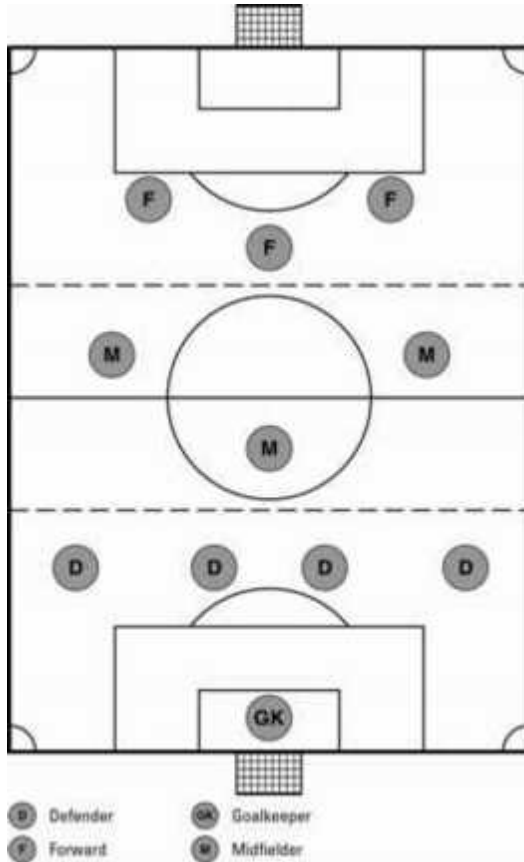
**Left/Right Defenders (LD/RD)** They mark the opponent's forwards. These players can be used to carry the ball up the outside with the midfielders, allowing more effective crossing. They also can be sacrificed for a defense with more depth

**Center midfielders (LC/CM/RC)** distribute the ball among the offenders and try to stop or slow down opposing plays before they get to the defensive line. Also, the offense depends on occasional crosses and long balls down the lines, since the **3** midfielders cannot work the ball forward. These players have to concentrate on holding possession.

**Forwards (F1/F2/F3)** Runs to the corners feed the offense, and dropping back is usually the only way of getting the ball, due to just **3** midfielders.



Many North American Soccer League teams used the 4-3-3 formation (see Figure 2) in the 1970s, moving one midfielder up to the forward position. Everything is relative. This formation, which utilized a sweeper (free safety), was considered more defensive than the 4-2-4. But compared to today's more cautious approach, the 4-3-3 would be considered an attacking formation in some quarters.



### Key Differences between 4-3-3 and 4-4-2

- **There is little difference at the back in defending**, except that in a 4-4-2, one of the center midfielders can drop back into the space outside the D to pressure the ball and to help stop outside shooting, and still leave a center midfielder free as a target to receive the ball when possession is regained.
- **Playing the ball out of the back** is slightly different in several ways from a 4-3-3 because there is an extra center midfielder, making it possible for one center midfielder to check back to the ball coming up from the central defender and still leave a center midfielder at home. Alternatively, it is possible for both center midfielders to make check runs toward the ball, at different angles, or for one to check to the ball and one to provide support for the outside midfielder.

In a 4-4-2, a defender can still play a ball forward to a wide wing midfielder as in a 4-3-3. After turning, the wing midfielder in a 4-3-3 sees a forward straight ahead along the wing, one in the center working back from the penalty spot, and a forward wide on the other side of the field. However, when the 4-4-2 wing mid (outside midfielder) turns, the mid will see two strikers working out of the penalty area and a center midfielder close by available for combination play. The support and passing angles are very different.

In the 4-4-2, a wall pass with the center midfielder, or a ping off one of the two strikers checking back from the penalty area, both can be used to play the wing midfielder into space in front of the 18 a little more easily than with a 4-3-3. In the 4-3-3, the nearest forward to the wing midfielder (on the same side), needs to make a run to either hold the defender on the wing midfielder's side back near the 18, or to pull that defender out of the space.

- **Midfielder to Striker Play works differently in a 4-4-2.** From center midfield, two strikers checking back from the penalty area, back to goal, looks a lot different than three forwards running hips to goal. The 4-4-2 is a little more inviting in terms of bringing an attacking midfielder into the final third than a 4-3-3 in the sense that a ping off the striker checking back starts a very nice three player combination with the second striker being available and the "pinged" striker spinning out, opening hips, and getting back into the attack immediately after dropping the ball. With a 4-3-3, a ping off the center forward really creates just a 2v1 off the drop pass from the ping, provided the center forward spins out and turns hips either to goal or open to the ball.

The 4-4-2 also invites the diagonal ball to a wing midfielder moving forward after an initial ping off a striker. In the 4-3-3, the forward nearest the ball played in will have to make a run to create space and to get rid of the nearest marking back, who might otherwise step up to win the ball played in for the wing midfielder.

- **Strikers work together a different way in a 4-4-2.** Many coaches teach 4-3-3 play with the front players as "forwards", playing mostly hips to goal. Crosses in a 4-3-3 usually come not from a wing midfielder coming forward, as in a 4-4-2, but from an outside forward. With three strikers, stretching the defenders to create 3 separate 1v1 situations is a usual tactic, and is accomplished by keeping distance between strikers in attack. In a 4-4-2, the strikers play more back to goal, work together to alternate check runs back to the ball, and generally stay within 10-15 yards (combination play range). They attack together in a 4-4-2.

Note that strikers in a 4-4-2 separate to cover throw-ins and to defend corner kicks. In each case, at least one striker stays up as far as possible, either to the last defender or half-way line, to hold a marking back and central defender out of our defending half, and to give us a target up front to whom we can pass when possession is regained.

### **4-3-3 TEAM**

Team Formations: 4-3-3

The 4-3-3 consists of four defenders, three midfielders, three forwards and a goalie (goalies are not counted for in the 4-3-3 equation). At one time this formation was the dominant style of play for teams at all levels. Currently it is a formation that is being used for younger groups of athletes just starting to play the game. It is the easiest and least complex formation to learn, understand and play within. Lately, due to the lack of scoring in American soccer this formation is making a slight come back in higher ranks, yet still plays second fiddle to the very popular 4-4-2, which will be explained later.

DEFENDERS of the 4-3-3 formation consists of four athletes. The defensive positions consist of a left and right fullback, a sweeper and a stopper. The left and right fullbacks play in front of the goalie and behind the midfielders on their respective sides of the field. The sweeper plays in the

middle of the field and is the very last defender. The only player behind him is the goalie, so this player needs to be very reliable. The stopper also plays in the middle of the field. He/she is positioned approximately 10 yds. in front of the sweeper. Set up correctly these four players should form a diamond shape.

**Left and Right Fullback Responsibilities-** These two positions are probably the most varied positions in the game when it comes to skill level. What I mean by that is, at young ages (5-12) these players should focus mainly on defending their side of the field, and clearing the ball when necessary. They are responsible for sending balls long into space for the forwards to run onto as well as looking to play the ball into the feet of open midfielders. Speed is not all that essential for outside fullbacks at a young age. Now as the level of play increases (ages 13 through college) the outside fullbacks become much more than just defensive players. These outside fullbacks become essential members of the offense making runs up the sideline, at appropriate times, and looking for crossed balls for scoring opportunities. They can also carry the ball down the sideline and look to get crosses in themselves. In this case it is very important to have speedy outside fullbacks. They must be able to get up and down the field very quickly in case of a counter attack. It is very important that outside fullbacks do not get carried away with the amount of offensive runs. They must judge the opportunity and only go on the occasions they feel will actually result in them touching the ball or taking a shot. If an outside fullback makes too many unproductive runs, they run the chance of getting tired and not being able to get back and defend their goal, like their job description indicates.

**Sweeper Responsibilities -** The sweeper position is one of the most crucial positions on the field and should be manned accordingly. A sweeper needs to be smart, fast, skilled and very comfortable with his/her ability. Because they are the last line of defense they very rarely make offensive type runs. Their job is to control the back. They are the leader of the other three defenders and it is their job to back the other three up at all times. If the opposing team is coming down the right side of the field the sweeper needs to be ready and able to back up his right fullback if he/she gets beat. The sweeper needs to do it all. He/she must be able to clear the ball, send the ball to open space for the forwards (generally aiming for the corner flags), clear balls out with his/her head, control the other defenders, stop breakaways from happening as well as work with the goalie in setting up defensive situations such as corner kicks, free kicks etc. The sweeper is an extremely important player.

**Stopper Responsibilities-** The stopper is generally a bigger player. Speed is not a must here but one thing that is a must is consistency. This player must do things the same way constantly and not be sporadic. I say this because if he/she gets beat in an unexpected manner, his/her only safety net is the sweeper who will most likely be so caught off guard by the mistake that they too will miss the ball and then a breakaway occurs. This player's role is to simply stop attacks from happening. He/She is to strip the opposing team of the ball and distribute. The stopper is not a play maker or a showboat. He/she is the simplest player on the field. Win possession of the ball and get it to another player on your team. Although his/her tasks are limited, the stopper is still an extremely important player.

**MIDFIELDERS** of the 4-3-3 consist of three players. A right midfielder, left midfielder and a center midfielder. These three players are generally the nucleus of your team. They are always in the middle of things and more often than not create most of a team's scoring opportunities. Midfielders must be able to play great defense as well as offense. These players must be versatile and very athletic.

**Outside Midfielders Responsibilities-** The left and right midfielders should be the most fit players on the team. They will be asked to do an awesome amount of running during the course of a game. They must support the forward in front of them and compliment the defender behind them to be successful. These two players are often the ones who cross the ball in and around the goal. They must have strong legs and be very unselfish when it comes to scoring. They should not be shooting too much from their corners of the field. If they do wander into the middle of the field then

they should be ready to shoot, but in most cases they will be running up and down the sideline hitting crosses in for the forwards to convert into goals.

**Center Midfielder Responsibilities-** The center midfielder should be the most talented player on the field as well as the athlete with the hardest work ethic. Everything should essentially work through him and his presence must be known by all. He is responsible for switching the field of play from side to side, setting up forwards for shots, winning all 50/50 balls, playing great defense, shooting from distance and basically playing the role of “player coach” while on the field. He/she must be a very vocal leader and instructor. The center midfielder has an advantage over every other player on his team, that being he is closer to every other player than anyone else. He/she can turn 360 degrees and should always have someone within 10 -15 yards away to pass to. They also have the opportunity to play the long ball into space for on-running forwards. This position is the most crucial and should be looked upon as so.

**FORWARDS** for a 4-3-3 formation consist of 3 athletes. They are very similar to the midfielders in that they play straight across the field in a right forward, center forward, left forward fashion. There is a grave misconception about the forward position. Many believe that you are only an effective forward if you can score goals. Scoring goals is obviously an incredible attribute but a forward who sets goals up and collects assists is also very valuable. Some of the greatest forwards in the world are the ones who set big time goal scores up for all of their goals. That behind the scenes forward is important.

**Outside Forwards Responsibilities-** These two forwards should always be looking to score. Their first thought should be shot, but their second thought should always be, is there a better way. These forwards are often the ones setting plays up. Often times the angles on goal that these players run into don't equate into quality shots. Because of this they simply pass the ball towards the middle and allow the center forward to finish the job. These players should be good dribblers, and have at least one solid move that they can use to beat defenders. Speed is a nice attribute to a outside forward, but good skills can replace speed sometimes.

**Center Forward Responsibilities-** This player should be the teams best shooter. The center forward will be, or at least in theory, should be shooting the ball more times than anyone else on the team. This player should be fast and crafty with the ball. His/Her small ball skills should be excellent. They should be able to dribble and control the ball very close to their bodies and work well in tight places. More often than not, when coaching a team you will notice a player who just seems to have a knack for the goal. That is the player you want to play at center forward. He/She should be the most selfish player on the field. This doesn't mean that they never pass the ball, but it does mean, when they have a mediocre shot, they take it. All other players should (most of the time) pass off mediocre shots but the center forward should always take the chance and use his/her abilities to the fullest.

Submitted by: Coach Clay