

Choosing Systems

Since each system has its pros and cons, it is impossible to generally recommend one over another. The choice of system depends on criteria including the types of players available, the formation used by the opponent, the tactical approach to a game, and the field conditions. What is most important is to use a system that fits the strengths of the players. A coach should get the best 11 players on the field, then find a system that meets their needs. Sometimes this requires moving a player to another position, and certain positions are easy to adapt to. For instance, most forwards can be taught fairly easily to play on the wing, and a midfield player can typically serve as a defender.

Next, the coach must consider team style. To play direct soccer and get the ball forward quickly with longer passes, it may be best to use more forwards. To focus on shorter passing through midfield, the coach might want an extra midfield player. To defend well, an extra defender might be the key. Whatever the case, the coach should play to the team's strengths, not to her own preference or comfort zone.

A coach may also consider changing a system to match up effectively with a particular opponent, but care must be taken in doing so, since teams should not regularly change how they play the game. The coach should be more concerned about preparing his own team to play to its strengths than about reacting to those of the opposition. Nevertheless, some consideration does have to be given to the opposition.

If pressed, I would say that the best system to use is generally the 4-4-2. Many coaches would disagree, but it's probably fair to say that this system places players across the field more evenly and covers the field better than any other. We have talked about team shape and its importance, and the 4-4-2 system is better suited than most to maintaining good shape.

Once a system has been chosen, there are many other considerations about how to play *within* that system. The following diagrams show some possibilities. In both the 4-4-2 and the 3-5-2 systems, the shape of the back unit is much the same. In both cases, defenders have to support each other, and the diagrams show how this is done. In the middle units, whether using four or five players, there are more options for team shape—again, as shown in the diagrams—and as with the back four unit, they still require depth in their shape.

Figure 5.1 on page 98 shows the Os lining up for the kickoff in a 4-4-2 formation, with the Xs in a 3-5-2. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 show that the 4-4-2 formation is used in two ways. Once play has begun, the formations change. Figure 5.2 on page 98 shows that the middle four players basically mirror the shape of the back four defenders when right back O has the ball. This is very much a zonal formation for both the middle four players and the back four. In figure 5.3 on page 99, the shape of the back four remains the same, but the middle four are different,

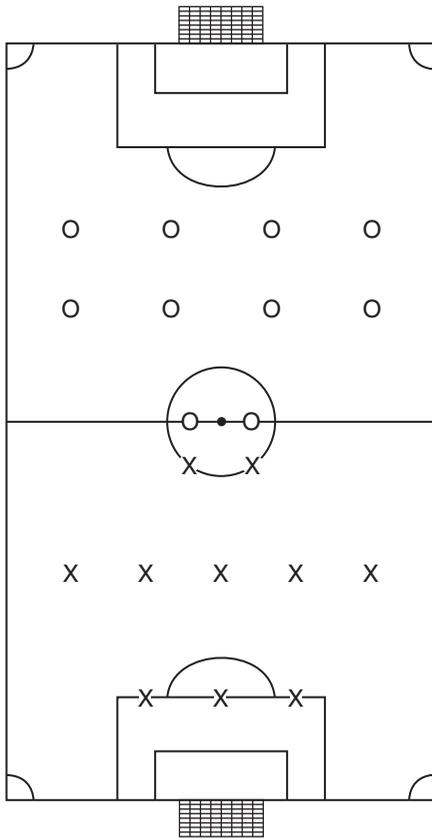


Figure 5.1 4-4-2 (Os) line up against 3-5-2 (Xs).

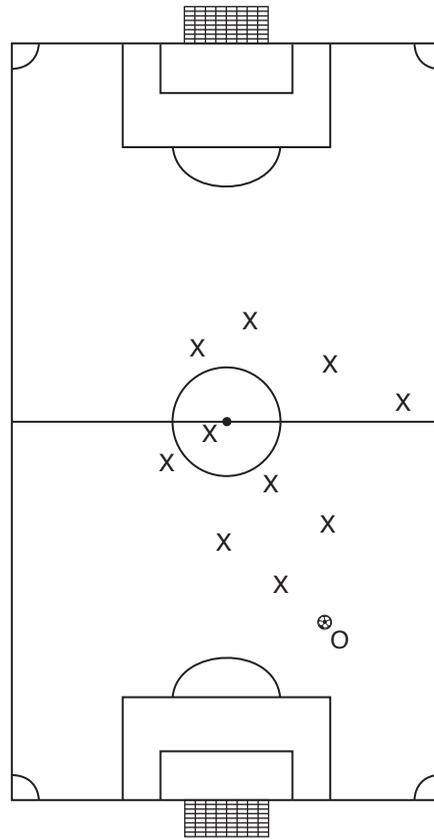


Figure 5.2 The defensive four and middle four both have an "L" shape.

giving the look of a diamond. This can make both defending and attacking a little simpler for the middle four. Players X7 and X11 are designated as the two wide players (wingers), with X8 being an attacking midfielder and X4 being a defensive or holding midfielder. Each player can mark and defend against his opposite number. This will only become a problem if the opposition is using three central midfield players, creating a numerical disadvantage, three against two. In this case teams may have to adapt by adding an extra midfield player.

Figure 5.4 shows a different look with a team defending in the 3-5-2 formation. X6 at the back is the sweeper or covering player, who normally has no direct marking responsibilities. X5 and X4 are man-marking the two forwards. The five defending midfielders could use many different looks, but in this case X8 has been given a holding or defending role, making the defensive unit at the back look like a diamond, with the remaining four midfielders playing in front and either man-marking their opponents or playing zone.

Regardless of the system used, the coach must consider how to defend and attack within that system. He can begin with defending and address the back four

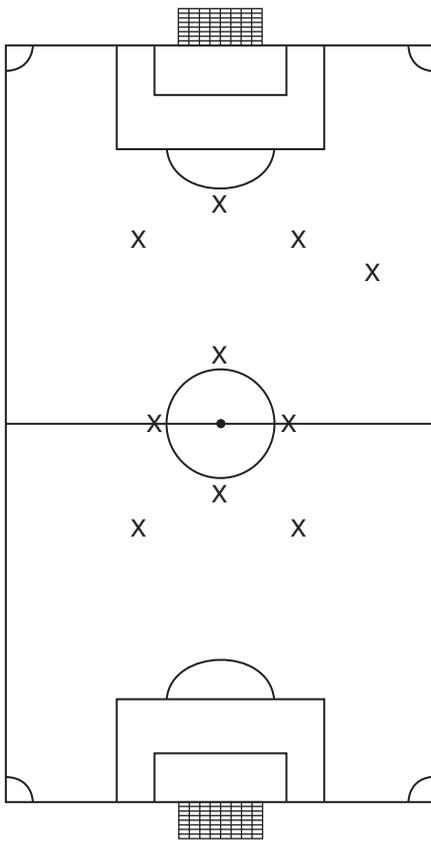


Figure 5.3 The back four have an “L” shape formation, while the middle four make a diamond.

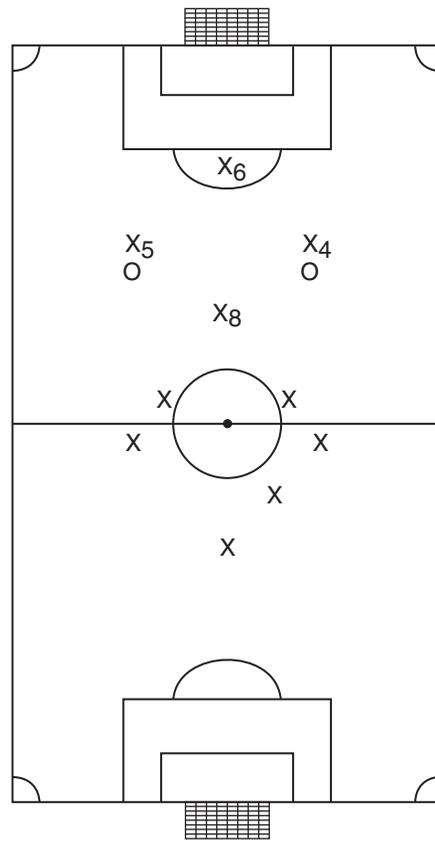


Figure 5.4 A 3-5-2 formation with a diamond shape at the back.

only, working on shape, compactness, and defensive cover, both with and without attacking players working against them. He can then move to the midfield players, and finally the forwards. When satisfied with the defending of each unit by itself, the coach can put it all together, coordinating the three units to defend with all 11 players. The same process can be used for attacking—starting with concepts, then working in the three separate units before putting it all together. This part-to-whole method helps enormously in the early stages of system play.

Systems of play can be distracting, time consuming, and often frustrating. It is absolutely necessary to develop a system, but not at the expense of working on fundamentals of the game. The coach’s time is well spent on teaching players to “sit” in the right part of the field at the right time and to recognize what is happening on the field—that is, to read the game and understand it. These points takes precedence over learning a system, as a smart soccer player will do well even when not taught a system.