

## Systems of Play with a Focus on the 4-4-2 and 4-3-3

Before choosing a system of play, the coach **must** establish a vision of how he/she wants the team to play and what he/she hopes the team will accomplish. *If the coach doesn't have a vision for how the team should play, how will the players know what's expected of them?* The coaches' vision will shape the way he/she answers the following questions. It is crucial that a coach understands that the answers to the questions are ever changing. You can't say I handled the team this way last week, so that's the way I'll handle it now.

### When Choosing a System:

When deciding how he/she wants the team to play, he/she must consider several things:

#### **How do we play when we have the ball?**

- What spaces do we want to attack?
- How many people do we want to commit forward?
- Do we attack with the dribble, pass, shot?

#### **How do we play when our opponent is in possession?**

- What spaces are we willing to concede?
- Where do we want to confront our opponent?
- How many players do we ask to remain behind the ball?
- How compact are we vertically and horizontally?

#### **When we lose possession, how do we react?**

- Do we send players to pressure the ball immediately?
- Do we step up and compact the space?
- Do we fall off and play closer to our goal?
- Do we react differently depending on the area we lost possession?

Do you choose your system based on the players you have? Or do you choose your players based on your preferred system? **LUSC coaches should by and large cater their system to the talent of their players since you don't handpick your team.**

*Try to select a system that maximizes your strengths while minimizing your weaknesses.* Your players must have the technical qualities to thrive in the system you ask them to play. Asking players to do something they are incapable of doing doesn't make them better players, it makes you a poor coach.

Remember that there is no correct system. As long as the players know their roles and what is expected of them in the various positions on the field, the system will be of little importance. However, it is very important that the coach is clear on what he expects from each player within his her/particular system. **A coach can never be clear enough.**

Once a coach has decided upon what his/her best line-up and system are, he shouldn't tinker with it just because of a poor result or two. Have faith in your decisions and don't panic. Remember systems do not score goals, players do! It all comes down to the quality of players you're coaching.

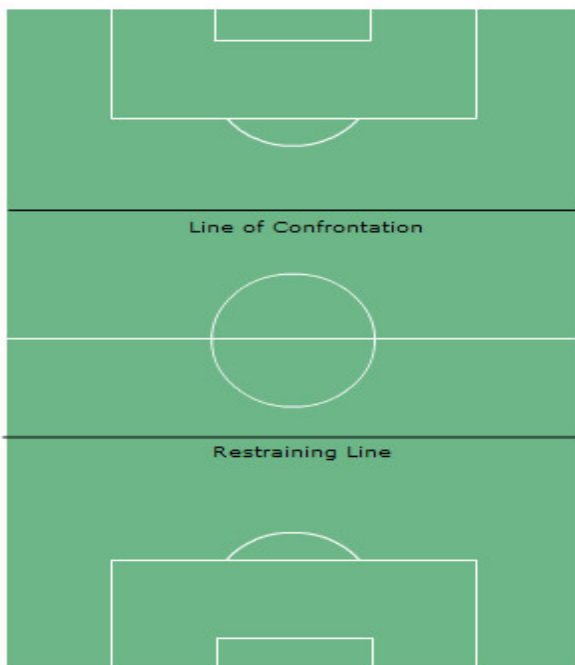
**Tactics cannot be viewed independently from technique when choosing a system!**

**Important Tactical considerations all teams should agree upon regardless of the system of play.**

**Line of Confrontation:** a predetermined spot on the field where the team begins to confront the opposition. This will determine the level of pressure you hope to apply on the opposition. Several factors should be considered when deciding this line.

- Speed of your strikers
- Speed of the oppositions strikers
- Technical ability of opponent
- Team's fitness level
- Ability of your goal keeper to control space behind the defense.
- Method of attack you plan to use.

**Restraining Line:** the spot on the field where you ask your defenders "to hold a line" and not to drop closer to their own goal. This line is in direct correlation to the line of confrontation. The restraining line should be no deeper than 35 yards from the line of confrontation. This will ensure the team remains compact vertically and limits the space the opposition can play through.

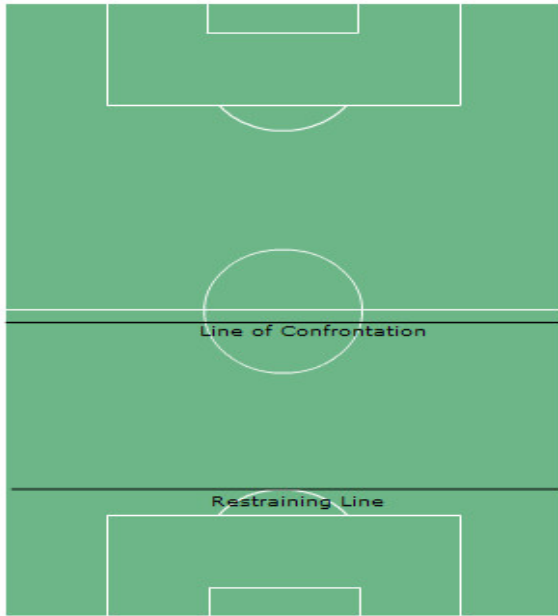


### **High Pressure or Low Pressure?**

The qualities of the players within your team and that of the opposition should determine how you chose to apply pressure. **Please note: High or Low pressure is based on where you confront the opposition.** Once the opposition moves into the area you've determined to defend, all players must move quickly and with determination to win the ball back and close down space. The team must defend as a unit to maximize the amount of pressure being exerted on the 1<sup>st</sup> attacker and his/her teammates in close support.

When confronting the opposition early, applying high pressure, (pictured above) you'll notice that the restraining line is far from your goal. This will leave a larger amount of space between your backline and goal keeper to deal with as a group. The ability for the goalie to play as a sweeper type figure and be quick off his line needs to be considered when applying high pressure or establishing an early line of confrontation.

**A few considerations when determining the type of pressure you wish to exert (several already listed in determining line of confrontation):**



- Climate, field size, and field condition
- Time of Game
- Score of Game
- # of players per team (red card)
- # of games on your schedule
- Teams mentality

**Low Pressure:** (Pictured left) Holding a line of confrontation closer to your own goal reduces the space for the opposition to play through in their attacking half of the field. It can also be used as a tactic to lure the opponent up the field to open up space behind them. Teams that prefer a counter-attacking style will generally play in a low

pressure manner.

*A good manager has to have convictions, but those convictions must not be certainties. What's the difference? A certainty is immutable, it's a dogma. A conviction is a belief that, based on the circumstances, may or may not change. It's something on which you can build. As you grow as a manager, you learn and better yourself and re-evaluate your convictions. What may have been true before may no longer be true now. And so, because you have convictions and not certainties, you are ready to change your system. It may be because your opponents have started playing in a certain way or because you have a different set of players or maybe the weather conditions. Whatever it is, being able to change your convictions is a sign of intelligence. I know it's a cliché, but, ultimately, the great coach is the one whose formation maximizes the strengths of his players.*

- Marcello Lippi

With the above quote in mind, let's explore two major systems of play, the 4-4-2 and the 4-3-3. **Note:** There are multiple systems of play and these systems will continue to evolve over time. For the sake of brevity, I've chosen two of the most commonly used systems. We'll begin by looking at the 4-4-2, but before doing so, we as coaches should understand that there are many variations to how a team would play the 4-4-2 system (this holds true for all systems). I won't go into great detail on the 4-4-2 since it is the system most LUSC coaches currently use. After looking into the 4-4-2 system, we'll take a closer look at the 4-3-3. I'll present a few attacking options/patterns that the 4-3-3 system provides. There are several other options, but these should give you an idea of the benefits of attacking out of this system. After considering the attack, we'll conclude with a look at defensive shape and how to apply pressure from the 4-3-3 system.

#### 4-4-2 Flat back, Flat midfield



One of the major advantages to this system is that you have a perfect balance of players on both the right and left side of the pitch. It is an excellent system for the overlapping outside back. Many teams that play this system have one of the forwards serve as a “target player” while the other striker sits “in the hole” between the target forward and midfield. This can be viewed as a 4-4-1-1 system.

To play this system successfully, it's important to have wide midfielders that have enough pace to get up and down the line and deliver accurate crosses. The vast majority of your goals will come from your two forwards. If they are struggling to finish, you may need to alter the

system.

#### 4-4-2 Flat back, Diamond midfield



When you play in a 4-4-2 with a flat back four and a diamond midfield, you could have your midfield cover the full width of the field (not pictured) or remain a bit more central (pictured). It is my preference to keep a tighter midfield that allows the outside backs to attack the open space in front of them.

This 4-4-2 system has designated attacking and defensive central midfielders. The diamond midfield system can be a bit more predictable than the flat midfield, but it does allow the coach to define players' roles more clearly. By playing the midfield in a more compact manner you may sacrifice a bit of flank play in an effort to

control the spine of the field. In this 4-4-2 system your outside backs need to possess a great work rate and ability to provide service. Your midfield should be technically strong

in tight spaces and have the mobility to move as a unit to press the ball. The “attacking midfielder” should be instrumental in either scoring goals or making the final pass that leads to the goal.

#### 4-4-2 Diamond back, Diamond Midfield



If you watched youth soccer games 15 years ago this would be the way 90% of teams lined up to play, but when the restriction on passing back to the goalkeeper (keeper can no longer use his hands) came into effect the game changed. The keeper began to assume many of the roles that the sweeper formerly was to be responsible for and defenses became “flatter” or more zonal.

This system has many weaknesses. If you look at the distance from the top of the team to the back of the team, it is too much ground to cover vertically. This will make it difficult to prevent gaps from opening up between the different lines (Fwd/Mid/Def) in the

team. Also, by playing a stopper/sweeper system, the outside backs need to pinch a bit more central to deny penetrating passes. This in turn, limits the outside backs ability to assist in the build-up phase when on the attack. Teams that generally choose to play in this fashion will have a tendency to “mark” players and not trade people off when they come into a particular zone. This can be problematic in that you spend a great deal chasing players and when you gain possession the shape of the team can be disjointed.

If your preference is to play in the 4-4-2 system, I would recommend not having both your midfield and backline in a diamond formation. Some teams may feel more comfortable with a sweeper at the back, this is understandable, but I would encourage these teams to choose to align the midfield in a manner that they can cover the entire width of the field. When you play with a “stopper” at the back you may not need to have one designated “holding/defensive” midfielder. This should allow the midfield to flatten out and provide a better overall team shape.

## The 4-3-3 system: Inverted Triangle in the Midfield



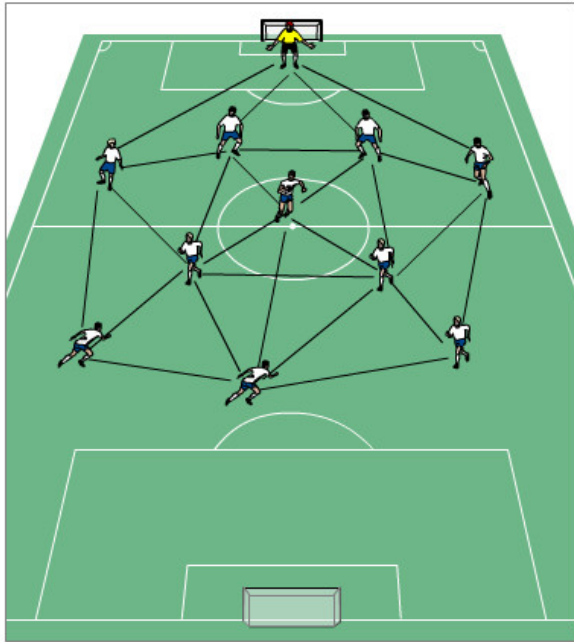
My preferred system to play in is the 4-3-3 (as pictured). In any system I choose I like to have a four players at the back to keep the team protected when the opposition is in possession. When in possession four at the back also allows any one of the four defenders step up to support the attack while still having three players remain in defensive roles to protect against the counter attack on loss of possession. Although many teams like to play with four midfield players, it is my preference to have three central midfielders that move in a triangular formation in an effort to outnumber a four person midfield at the point of attack (wherever the ball is). To do so, the team must be disciplined and the midfield players must possess mobility and a good tactical sense. It is important that all three midfield players have a solid understanding of each others movements and possess the technical ability to play in tight spaces while also having the ability to serve the ball over distance to change the point of attack. Another benefit of the 4-3-3 system is having three players playing up front. Having three players in forward positions allows your team to disrupt the oppositions' ability to build up from the back while at the same time giving your defenders and midfielders more forward options to play into when they are in possession.



If you break the 4-3-3, with the inverted triangle in the midfield, into two blocks of five, you'll notice that the system provides you with a balance of players in attacking and defensive positions. One of the key players, arguably THE key player, in this system of play is the defensive central midfielder or "holding midfielder". This player must remain central and deny penetrating passes into the oppositions central forwards. He is the person most responsible for protecting the team against a quick counter-attack.

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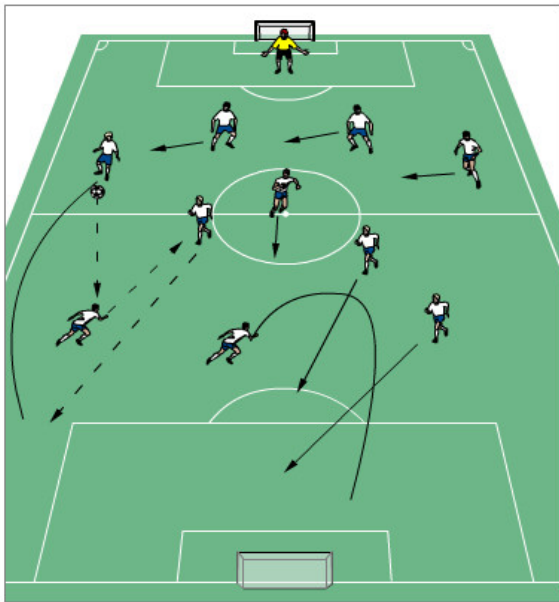
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The 4-3-3 provides numerous triangles for your players to play in. It is much simpler for players at all levels to see the game in small group situations instead of viewing the larger 11 vs. 11 game which can be overwhelming. By placing players in triangles they have opportunities to play both forward and backward. You also lessen the amount of lateral play that you often see in the 4-4-2 system. Lateral play often provides a greater amount of possession, but can lead to too many square balls. Square passes are often the most dangerous passes to make since if they are intercepted both the passer and intended receiver is easily

eliminated as defending options. The 4-3-3 generally provides more penetration of the opposition since you are playing more players in forward positions.

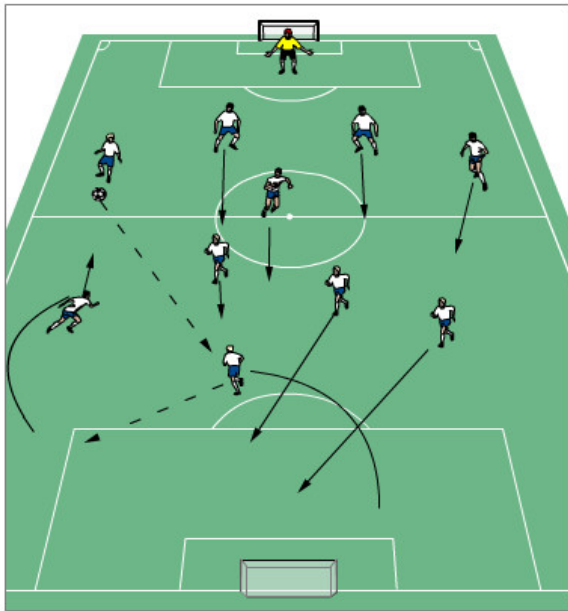
### Attacking Option #1 Strong Side Overlap



**The Near Side Overlap:** (left) When the outside back has the ball his first option should be to play forward (this is an important habit for players to learn). In this system, 4-3-3, he'll have 2 to 3 forward options at all times. In the picture left, the outside back plays into the wing player and continues his run forward. The wing forward should "play the way he's facing" into the right central midfielder. The central midfielder can now play the outside back into the space the wing player had vacated or created for the back to run into. Notice how the central forward drifts away from the ball while the opposite wing makes a diagonal run into the

box. This movement will make it much more difficult for opposing teams to "pick up the runners".

## Attacking Option #2 Center Forward Entry



midfield player (play the way your facing) who can “see the field”. The central midfielder now plays the ball into the space for the wing player to run onto. **Note:** The diagonal run from the opposite wing and how the central forward should “spin away” and make a far post run.

**Center Forward Entry:** (left) The outside back begins the attack with an entry into the center forward. A couple of reasons (or visual cues) for choosing to do this would be that the wing player has a defender “tight” to him when he “checks to the ball”. If we can enter the ball centrally into our forward the opposition generally becomes more “compact” which will open up the space along the wing. In this instance the wing player who checked to the ball should curl his run and attack the space that the defender vacated. The central forward has a couple of options. He could play the ball wide himself (pictured) or he could drop the ball to the supporting

## Attacking Option #3 Changing the Point of Attack



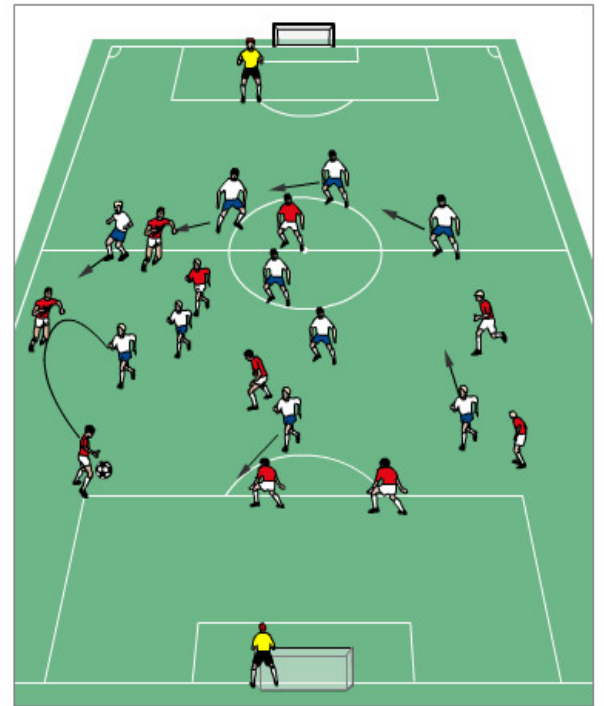
**Up Back and through “Switch Fields”:** (left) The movement would be the same as above, but now when the ball is dropped into the central midfielder. He “switches the field” or “changes the point of attack” by playing a diagonal ball forward into the path of the opposite wing. **Note:** As players become more experienced they’ll be able to “read the game” better. In this case, if the opposition “drops off” or picks up the diagonal runner, the central midfielder can now switch the field by playing laterally into the path of the outside back who is stepping into the space.

## Defensive Considerations



As stated previously, all systems have their strengths and weaknesses, but a good coach will choose a system that will maximize his/her teams' strength and minimize its' weaknesses. In this system the area that you are choosing to concede is along the flank behind the wing forward and in front of the outside back. Knowing this is an area that the opposition may attempt to exploit, we need to decide how we plan to minimize this danger and how to devise a strategy to keep the ball in areas of the field we prefer to defend.

**Defensive movement when the ball is with the oppositions outside back:** (right) The near side wing player should try to take away the forward pass down the line and "steer the attack central". The center forward shouldn't chase the ball out wide, but instead take away the pass back to the central defender (he'll be in a great "target position if we regain possession). The white players closest to the ball should tighten up their marking and shift to the ball side of the field. This will ensure we remain "compact". The opposite wing player should drop back to keep the team balanced and position himself in a manner that he can "recover" or track back if the opposition breaks through the whites' pressure. The space we are conceding is now on the opposite flank. To exploit this space the red defender must have the ability, and confidence, to serve the ball over distance since he'll need to play the ball through or over several white defenders. The risk reward of this pass favors, in my opinion, the defensive team.





### **Ball Central, Defending in own half of the field: (left)**

Notice how the 4-3-3 system can almost become the 4-5-1 system as we get closer to our goal. The key is to remain compact as a group and discourage the opposition to play down the middle of the field. Once the ball is played wide, we should resume the movement that we applied when the ball was on the wing (previously explained). The further up the field the opposition has the ball, the more space will open up behind them for white to attack. If you have forwards with excellent pace, encouraging the opposition to come forward by defending closer to your own goal can be a tactic that works to your

advantage. **Note:** All of the attacking movements we've previously viewed will be applicable to take advantage of that space when we regain possession.

**Final Thoughts:** *Remember there is no correct system of play! No system can make up for a lack of technical ability. If we don't continue to reinforce proper technique throughout our training, players will be limited no matter what system a coach chooses.*

Before deciding on "What system to play", consider that offensively it is easier for young players to find space on the flanks. The advantage of playing along the wing isn't limited to young teams. At the older and higher levels it is safer to build your attack along the flanks as well. The reason being is that when you lose the ball out wide, you are in less danger to be immediately counter-attacked. Acknowledging and appreciating the benefits of learning to play in the wide areas of the field, it is our responsibility as coaches to encourage flank play during practice. However the game is about scoring goals and it is equally as important that we teach players to play forward when "it's on". One of the primary reasons I prefer the 4-3-3 system is to keep a few numbers "ahead of the ball". In doing so, we will have more opportunities to play direct attacking soccer without conceding possession. The exercises a coach chooses for training should allow the players to "discover" the answers for themselves without constant instruction from the coach. This holds true no matter what system you choose.

Comments and feedback are always welcome at [bdonahue@lexingtonsoccer.org](mailto:bdonahue@lexingtonsoccer.org)

All the Best,  
Brendan