



4-2-3-1 Formation – The Ultimate Coaching Guide

The 4-2-3-1 formation is a great option for any team to consider implementing.

The defensive solidity it offers through the middle coupled with flexibility up front means that teams can attack knowing they are not leaving themselves open at the back.

The versatility it offers up front means that teams using the same formation will often be executing completely different game plans.

With four attacking positions in front of the two central midfielders, coaches have a lot of different options when deciding how they want to attack.

Around the pitch, the 4-2-3-1 formation provides teams with numerous passing angles to exploit and ensures the opposition will never have too much time on the ball.

Sounds perfect, right?

While teams can effectively use the 4-2-3-1, it is dependent on a number of creative attacking players working well together both on and off the ball.

As always, tactical discipline will win the day and is a must for any successful team.

4-2-3-1 Formation Team Requirements:



- Disciplined central midfielders who can drop in and cover the fullbacks and won't get caught too far up the pitch.
- Fit and speedy fullbacks who can get forward and support the attack while also winning their personal battle against the opposition's winger.
- An effective striker up front who converts any opportunities that fall their way.
- Interchanging movement from the players behind the striker. The team's creativity going forward stems primarily from these three players.
- Disciplined attacking players who track back and do not neglect their defensive duties.
- Chemistry up front from the attacking players.

Strengths of the 4-2-3-1 formation:



- **A solid spine to the team** – The two central defenders with the two midfielders in front of them are the backbone of the team. When they work well together, they can limit the opposition's attacking outlets.
- **Passing angles and triangles** – The spread out nature of the formation allows for a number of triangles to develop around the pitch. This greatly increases the number of passing options that the player on the ball has.
- **Central midfielders help relieve the attacking players of their defensive duties** – By sitting back and covering the forward players, the two central midfielders help the team to attack.
- **Attacking flexibility up front** – With four attack-minded players in the formation, there is a great deal of flexibility in terms of how the team decides to attack.
- **Spaces open up in front of the opposition's defence** – Given license to roam, the three attacking midfielders are free to drop into spaces and gaps in front of the opponent's defence. This makes it hard for their defenders to know who they should pick up.

- **Balance** – The way the formation is set up means that the team can be both a potent force going forward and a solid unit at the back. The formation can easily revert to a 4-5-1 to be more defensive.
- **Teams can line up in a variety of ways** – Inverted winger or a player that hugs the touchline? A big man up front or a pacy forward? The coach can easily change the game plan of the team by chopping and changing the personnel available to them.
- **Gain the numerical advantage in dangerous areas** – As the front players have quite a lot of flexibility in terms of where they end up, they can easily overload the opposition's defence in different areas.
- **Runs and off-ball movement can create havoc** – With the fullbacks, the striker up top, and the three attacking midfielders all making runs with and off the ball, the 4-2-3-1 can be horrible to defend against.

Weaknesses of the 4-2-3-1 formation:



- **Pressure on the fullbacks** – As the team is solid through the centre, the majority of the opposition's attacks will come down the wings. If the team's

winger does not track back, then the fullback is often left 1-v-1s versus the opponent's winger.

- **Crosses into the box** – Should the fullback fail to prevent the opposition's winger from putting in a cross or getting past them, the centrebacks are left in a dangerous position.
- **Space between the midfield and defence** – The central midfielders need to be very careful and make sure that they do not leave too much space behind them.
- **The team's forwards need to be creative** – A lot of the attacking play and creativity rests on the three players behind the striker. They need to drift and interchange positions to create goalscoring chances.
- **The forwards must be on the same page** – One of the best things about the formation is the freedom it leaves the forwards. If they close down each other's space, however, this freedom can be a problem.
- **Players need to track back** – The midfielders all need to drop when they don't have the ball. This reduces the opposition's space and prevents them from overloading different areas.
- **If the team is forced back the striker can become isolated** – When the opposition have managed to pin the team back, the player up front can be cut adrift amongst a sea of the opponent's players.
- **The team needs a clinical striker** – As they should always be in or around the box when the team attacks, this player is crucial for the formation to be a success.

4-2-3-1 Formation Setup:



This formation caters to a wide range of different playing styles which is one of the reasons why the 4-2-3-1 formation has been so popular in recent years.

The two **centrebacks** line up in front of the **goalkeeper**.

On either side of them are the **fullbacks** who are expected to contribute to the team's attacking play while also remaining solid at the back.

In front of these four defenders are two **central midfielders**. The coach can vary how they play depending on the players available and the opposition they are facing.

Normally, however, there is at least one deep-lying holding midfielder who helps to give the team balance.

The three **forwards** in front of them give the coach a lot of tactical flexibility.

Usually there is a mix of players in these positions and that is one reason why the formation can be so dangerous.

The **striker** at the front of a 4-2-3-1 is either a quick attacker who can run in behind the opposition's defence or a big target man.

Both types of players change the way the whole team plays as the objective is always to get the striker scoring as regularly as possible.



Each player on the team has a number of responsibilities that are expected of them.

Their role depends on their position, the playing style of the team, and what's going on in the match at any one time.

Let's look at each individual position...

Player Roles and Responsibilities:



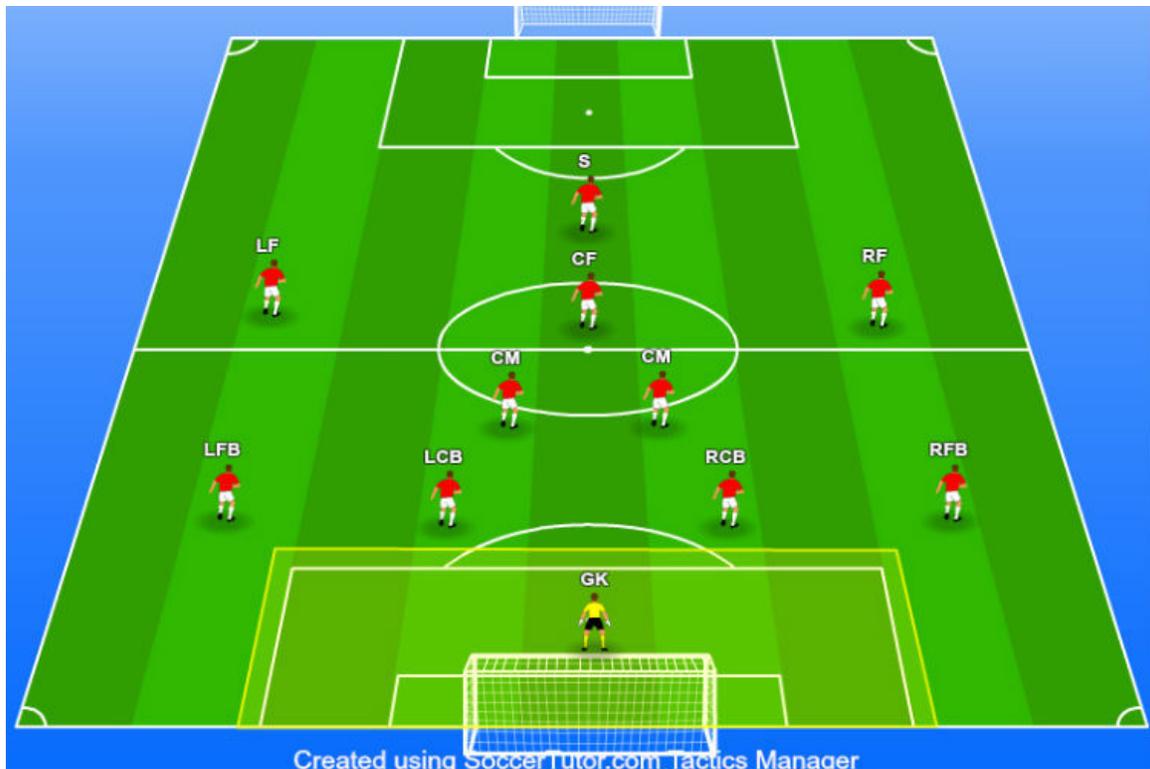
Goalkeeper:

A good goalkeeper should have lightning quick reactions, be agile, and communicate constantly with their defence. It is up to the goalkeeper and defenders to preserve the team's clean sheet.

While some formations place more of a responsibility on the goalkeeper's passing abilities, in a 4-2-3-1 formation they are mainly responsible for making saves and keeping the ball out of the net.

As the team should be solid in the centre due to the centrebacks and central midfielders, the majority of the opposition's attacks are likely to come from the flanks.

Therefore, the goalkeeper must be confident coming to claim crosses and have good handling skills to ensure they catch the ball or punch it away.



Shots from distance should not normally be a problem but the goalkeeper should nevertheless remain focused to prevent any hopeful strikes that come their way.

As the team should have quite a lot of the possession, it is important that the keeper does not switch off and lose focus. It only takes one small error for the other team to score.

If the defence pushes up to the halfway line, the keeper should hover around the edge of their penalty area ready to clear any long balls that get played into the dangerous space in front of them.

By remaining in constant communication with the defenders, the goalkeeper can help them to close down danger and stop gaps and spaces from appearing that the opposition may exploit.

Central Defenders:

As with the keeper, it is the crosses into the box that will most trouble the centrebacks.

They need to be alert to the movement of the opposition's players while keeping an eye on the ball and attempting to head or kick it clear.

As the ball can come in at head height or along the floor, the centrebacks need to anticipate and stay ready for any scenario and deal with it accordingly.

As if this wasn't enough, they also need to be alert to the opposition's winger skipping past their fullback and driving into the box.

Overall, their decision making and positioning needs to be fantastic to help the team protect a clean sheet.



For example, they need to understand when to engage the opposition's winger while narrowing the angle they have of the goal and stopping any pass they have to a striker lurking behind them.

It is a lot to do in the space of a few seconds!

If they do engage and move to the winger, they also need to communicate this to the rest of the team and pass their striker on to a midfielder for them to mark.

This shows that the defence needs to work well together as a unit and communicate effectively to limit the opposition's goalscoring opportunities.

If the fullback is out of position and a central midfielder has not dropped in to provide cover, the centreback then needs to move across and defend the space if a searching ball is played into it.

When this happens, the other centreback and a holding midfielder should move across and cover the position they vacated.

The defence needs to work as one, communicating and moving together to shut down spaces, engage players, and provide each other with cover and support.

In the 4-2-3-1 formation the centrebacks should be well-protected by the midfielders in front of them. However, they need to make sure that the midfielders do not drop too deep or push too far forward.

As with all areas of the football pitch, it is a fine balancing act that the team needs to get right if they are to succeed.

Left and Right Fullback:

In most teams nowadays, the poor fullbacks have their hands full for the whole duration of the match.

This is especially true when playing the 4-2-3-1 formation.

They have a number of responsibilities and roles that they need to fulfil for the team to make the most of their attacks while remaining solid at the back.

As mentioned earlier in the article, it is generally down the flanks that the 4-2-3-1 is weakest.

Which is why it's incredibly important that the fullbacks win their 1-on-1s versus the opposition's winger and prevent them from putting dangerous cross into the box.

Some wingers cross from deep, some use their dribbling skills, and yet others look to use their pace and drive in behind the defence.

The fullback needs to be aware of all these and prepared to face them.

If it is the winger on the opposite side who is crossing the ball, the fullback needs to drop into the box and head the ball away if it comes to their side.

It is important that they remain alert and have good positioning skills.



Going forward, the fullbacks act almost as wingbacks as they are relieved somewhat of their duties at the back by the defensive-minded midfielder in the team.

They should be good on the ball, decent dribblers, and be able to deliver a dangerous ball into the box.

It is their movement both on and off the ball that provides the forwards on their side of the pitch with space within which to play.

By stretching the play and hugging the touchline, the fullback allows the forward to either drive at the defence or attempt to play the ball in behind for them to get on the end of.

While they have license to bomb forward and attack, the fullbacks need to very disciplined and fit as they are also expected to defend.

Transitions from attack to defence are crucial in the 4-2-3-1. Losing the ball when attacking makes the formation vulnerable as the players are out of position.

The fullbacks need to call the wide forward back to help out with the defending. If they do not, the fullbacks risk being isolated and overloaded on the wing.

By remaining out wide throughout the match, the fullbacks also help create space inside for the midfielders and forwards to play.

Central Midfielders:

The two central midfielders in front of the defence are one of the main reasons why the 4-2-3-1 formation can attack effectively while remaining solid in defense.

With the centrebacks behind them, the four players limit the space in front of goal. By compressing the space and engaging anyone who enters that zone, they can force the opposition to play down the wings.

It's important that the midfielders don't drop too deep nor remain too high up the pitch.

They need to remain alert to passes in behind them and aim to intercept and cut out passes to the strikers.

As mentioned earlier, it is these two midfielders that act as an insurance for the marauding fullbacks pushing forward.

Their positioning and awareness should mean that they drop into the spaces that the fullbacks leave and occupy any dangerous gaps or spaces that arise.



This requires that they are good at tackling and have good timing and decision making to know if and when they should confront the opposition's players.

The two central midfielders selected will vary in their abilities depending on how the coach likes to line up.

One of them will nearly always be a specialised holding defensive midfielder. If playing an attack-minded team, the other one may also be a defensive player.

Alternatively, the coach could play a deep-lying playmaker or box-to-box athletic player.

Both of them should be able to pick the ball up from the defenders and aim to move it forward.

Regardless of their individual attributes, the two of them should be disciplined, have good positioning skills, and be confident on the ball.

These central midfielders move across the pitch, ferrying the ball to and fro while helping to overload the opposition in different areas.

The three forwards in front of them are the more attacking midfielders who carry the creative burden of the team upon their shoulders.

The five of them need to work well together to create angles and passing options for each other while moving on and off the ball to create space for each other.

The two central midfielders need to call these three more attack-minded midfielders (or forwards) back to help out in defence when necessary.

Whether the 4-2-3-1 formation is successful will depend a lot on how well the central midfielders are able to work and communicate with the players around them.

Forwards:

The forwards behind the striker give the team a great deal of tactical variations.

The coach can decide to line up in a number of ways depending on the personnel available to them and how they would like to set up their team.

They can choose between:

Pacy forwards who stay out wide and attack quickly.

Creative players who dart into space inside and move between the lines.

A combination of players who give the team a variety of ways in which to attack.

It is these forwards who create the majority of the team's goalscoring chances and are themselves expected to contribute to the goals that the team scores.

They can do this in a number of ways depending on their individual attributes.

Out wide, the forwards can combine with the fullbacks to overload the opposition's wide defenders, get in behind them, and put in a dangerous cross.

They can also use the fullback as a distraction and drive at the defence, play them in behind, or put in a cross themselves.

Their freedom to move about and attack where the opposition is weakest is one of the great strengths of 4-2-3-1.



By creating 2-on-1s around the pitch, the forwards can pass past the opposition and hope to create goalscoring opportunities.

Alternatively, the two forwards lining up out wide may decide to come inside and drop into the small gaps between the opposition's defence and midfield. They can then look to pass into the striker's feet or feed a pass in behind the defence.

With the fullback pushing up out wide, there should always be offensive options on for the forwards to exploit.

Interchanging positions and intelligent off-the-ball movement are keys to the 4-2-3-1 formation and the three forwards need to have good chemistry for it to work.

The central attacking midfielder is often the playmaker of the team and, as well as creating chances, needs to offer a potent attacking threat in the opposition's box.

Like the other forwards, they are at times expected to push on past the striker and use their movement and skills to create space and opportunities for their teammates to exploit.

Depending on the coach's instructions, these three attacking midfielders can either play a high pressure game to try and win the ball back high up the field or tuck in to make five across the midfield.

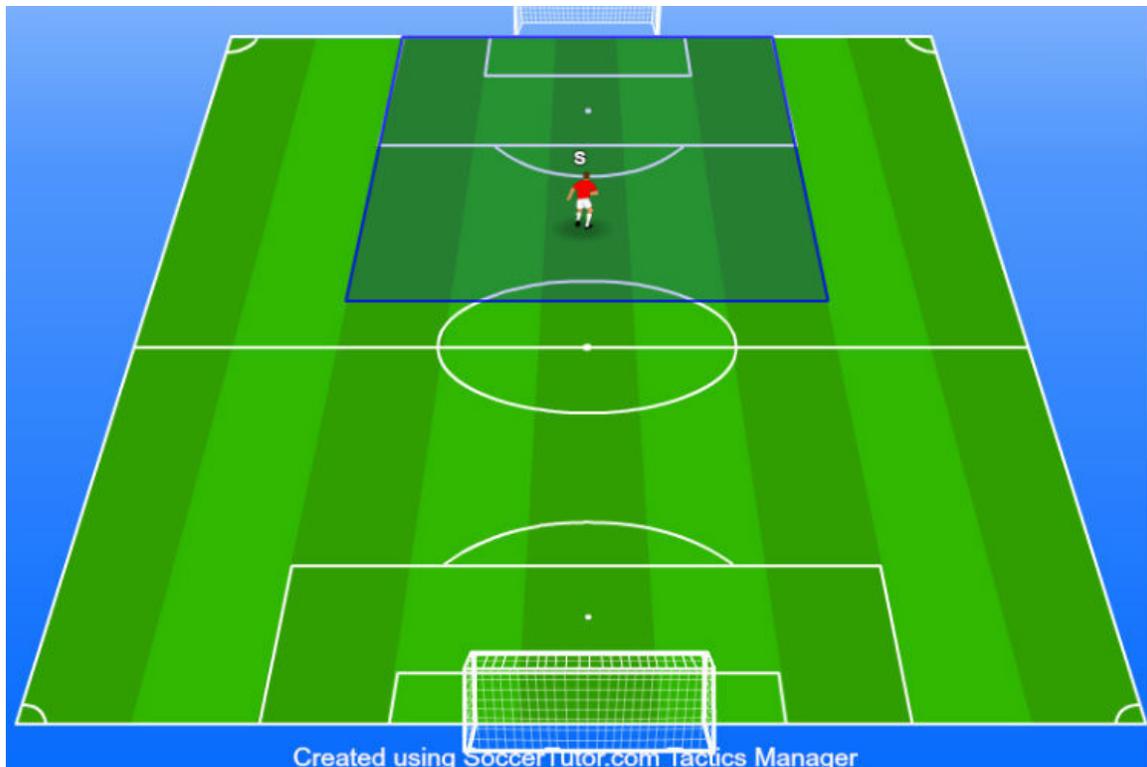
The second option allows the opposition to keep the ball but only circle it around their defence as they look for an opening forward.

Striker:

The striker's goalscoring abilities are crucial to the success of the team.

This player is the main goalscorer and they need to do anything and everything possible to put the ball in the back of the net.

They must have good movement and anticipation to remain one step ahead of the defenders when attacking the ball.



Like the forwards behind them, the coach has quite a lot of flexibility when deciding on what type of player should lead the line.

Depending on the game plan, the coach's footballing philosophy, and the opponent they are facing, they may decide to play a big target man or a more mobile pacy striker.

With a big target man up front, the forwards can play into their feet and expect them to hold the ball up and bring others into play.

With an imposing player to aim for, the forwards out wide should put in crosses at head height and hope to take advantage of their aerial prowess.

By winning aerial duels and shielding the ball from the defenders, the striker can help the team to drive up the pitch.

If a mobile striker is selected, the team's attacking dynamic changes completely.

This type of striker should aim to use their pace and movement to drag the opposition's defenders out of position and run in behind them.

Whereas the team plays into the feet of the big target man, with the mobile striker they aim to play passes into space for them to run onto.

It is their movement and interchanging of positions with the forwards behind them that can cause havoc to the opposition if executed correctly.

Also, the mobile striker can help defend from the front by putting pressure on the opposition's defenders and by closing off any passing options forward that they may have.

Regardless of which type of player is selected, the striker must have a great shot, be very accurate, and be able to put away any opportunities.

Attacking in the 4-2-3-1 Formation:



With four specialised attacking players in the formation, the 4-2-3-1 formation can be deadly against any opponent.

Although a lot will depend on the offensive-minded players combining well together to create goalscoring opportunities for each other.

The formation itself allows for a great deal of flexibility in how the team attacks.

Out wide the fullbacks can bomb forward overload the opposition's fullback.

They can then put in crosses or get in the box and cut it back for a midfielder to attack.



With the fullback pushing forward, the forward on their flank can either support them outside or dart inside and push at the opposition's defence.

They can take the defender on, put in a cross, or attempt a shot themselves.

The front three behind the striker are crucial to the team's attack as it is their off the ball movement and swapping of positions that helps confuse the opposition's defenders and open up gaps to exploit.

The striker, too, is a key piece of the puzzle and it is largely up to them to stick the ball in the back of the net. It is their anticipation and movement that can give them a half-second head start that gets them in front of their marker to score the decisive goal.

The whole success of the attacking play depends on the team creating 2-on-1s around the pitch and finding pockets of space in between the opponent's midfield and defence.

With a combination of players up front, the team can use pace, strength, movement, and vision to create goalscoring opportunities and dominate the opposition's defence.

Defending in the 4-2-3-1 Formation:



With fast forwards up front, the team may decide to press deep in the opposition's half in an attempt to win the ball back further up the pitch.

By swarming quickly they can force the opponent's defence into mistakes which they can then capitalise on. They can also stop them from building up from the back and initiating their passing game.

Alternatively, the three forwards may drop off and form a five across the midfield.

This then means that the formation reverts to a 4-5-1 which is both solid in the centre and out wide. The wall of players across the pitch forces the opposition to attempt optimistic passes to try and break through the midfield line.



One of the benefits of the 4-2-3-1 formation is that as the players are spread across the pitch, they should never be too far away from an opposition player.

This means that they can easily close down and limit the opponent's space.

This requires discipline from the forward players to follow the opposition and track back.

As they are nearly always more attack-minded than defensive, the forwards hold the key to the team's solidity. Their work rate is crucial in both attack and defence.

As said earlier, team is weakest down the flanks if the forwards do not track back.

The centre is relatively strong with the two centrebacks and central midfielders in front of the goal.

As always, defense will depend on how well the players are willing to work together as a unit. They should always communicate well and let each other know who is marking who.

Tactical Variations of the 4-2-3-1 Formation:



As we have seen above, the forward four positions offer up a great deal of flexibility in terms of how the team sets up.

The players selected for these roles can completely change the dynamic of the 4-2-3-1 and make it either more attack-minded or defensive depending on the team's game plan.

The 4-2-3-1 formation can easily swap to a 4-5-1, [4-4-2](#), or [4-3-3](#) depending on how the game is going.

The beauty of the formation is that it is so easy to adapt to different scenarios that arise on the pitch. Although it does depend on the players you have available.

When defending, the forwards up front can all drop back to make a midfield five.

The formation therefore becomes a 4-5-1 which helps firm up the flanks and limits the opposition's space and time.



When attacking, it can quickly change to a 4-3-3 formation.

In this scenario, the two wide forwards push up on either side of the striker to form a front three. The central attacking midfielder then forms a central trio with the other two midfielders.

Another alternative is to revert to a 4-4-2 formation.

This situation could arise if the team realises that they are being pushed back too deep.

The can then push an attacking midfielder up front to support the striker and attempt to force the play back up the field.

It is an amazingly flexible formation that can give any team a great deal of variety in terms of how they set the team up and react to certain scenarios during the game.

Source : <https://www.soccercoachingpro.com/4-2-3-1-formation/>