



4-5-1 Formation – The Ultimate Coaching Guide

Although the 4-5-1 formation is often considered to be very defensive, it can be quite attack-minded with a few small and simple tweaks.

It all depends on how you set your team up and which playing personnel you have available.

With a midfield five in front of a flat-back four, it does offer your team defensive stability. The three players occupying the space in front of the centrebacks should make it very tough for opposing teams to create many goal-scoring opportunities.

In addition to this, the formation also offers your fullbacks protection as the two wingers or wide midfielders are expected to support them and drop back when necessary.

One problem with the formation is that your lone striker can quickly become very isolated.

To prevent this, you must encourage wingers and midfielders to help out up front and make runs off of the ball to increase the space in which your team has to play.

This is why many teams transition to a [4-3-3 formation](#) when attacking and revert back to a 4-5-1 formation when defending.

While the 4-5-1 will undoubtedly offer you defensive stability and can help protect a leaky defence, getting the attacking aspect right is much tougher.

The formation relies on you having a tough, combative, and hopefully pacy, player up front.

Let's take a look at the requirements to play the formation, its strengths and weaknesses, and then we'll discuss what's expected from each position.

4-5-1 Formation Requirements:

- Commanding centrebacks that communicate well, organise the defence, and encourage the central midfielders to push up and not drop too deep.
- Hard-working central midfielders who understand their roles, don't get in each other's way, and help with both the attacking and defensive side of things.
- Disciplined wingers or wide midfielders who offer an attacking threat, but also don't mind tracking back and getting stuck in.
- A selfless striker who is willing to run and battle all day for the team, hold up the ball, and bring others into play while also getting their fair share of goals.
- A fit team that is battle-hardened, mentally strong, and willing to do anything to stop the ball going in the back of the net.
- Tactical understanding that the team won't create much in the way of chances, so enough players need to get forward when the opportunity arises.

Strengths of the 4-5-1 Formation:

Defensive Solidity – With five midfielders sitting in front of a flat-back four, it's difficult for opponents to fashion any goal-scoring opportunities.

Easy to Understand - With everyone dropping deep and engaging their opponent when they enter into their area, it's very simple for players to understand what is required of them when it comes to their defensive duties.

Limits Space – As the formation is quite spread out in nature, your opponents will rarely have much time or space on the ball in which to create an opportunity or overwhelm you numerically.

Underrated Attacking Potential - Depending on what personnel you use, the 4-5-1 can be quite an attacking formation if you pack the middle with goal-scoring midfielders and tricky wingers.

Tactical Flexibility – When attacking the opposition or chasing a goal, the formation can easily change into a [4-3-3](#) as the two wide midfielders stay forward, and can quickly revert into a 4-5-1 when you lose the ball or need to sit back and defend.

Weaknesses of the 4-5-1 Formation:

Hard to Create Opportunities – As the team is set up to be strong defensively, it can be hard to get enough players forward to threaten your opponent's goal.

Trapped Without an Outlet – If the striker doesn't do a good job at holding up the ball and bringing others into play, the team may find it hard to get out of their half as the area which they have to play in is compressed by the opposition and their own formation.

Limited Space Between Midfield and Defence - While this does help prevent the opposition from fashioning goal-scoring opportunities, it can also hinder the team from playing out from the back and keeping possession if the midfield drops too deep.

Relies on Wingers and Midfielders Pushing Forward – It can be hard to change your mindset to an attacking one when you're set up so defensively, and it really relies on other players pushing forward to help the solitary striker out.

Chaos for the Central Midfielders - With three central midfielders occupying the space in front of the centrebacks, there can be a lot of players in a small area. They need to be careful not to close down each other's space.

Relies Heavily on the Striker - Due to the fact that the team is unlikely to create too many chances, the striker has to be extra clinical if the team is to put the ball in the back of the net.

Must be Disciplined – Whether it is the wingers out on the flank or midfielders in the centre, all players need to be very disciplined and track back after a failed attack.

Need a Selfless and Hard-Working Striker – As it's up to the striker to hold up the ball and bring others into play, the role is absolutely crucial to the team's success. You need a player who is willing to run themselves into the ground and never complain about the hard work they're expected to do.

4-5-1 Formation Setup:

While the 4-5-1 formation is primarily used when a team wants to be compact and hard to beat, it can also offer up an attacking threat.

It depends on how you set up your team, what personnel you use, and what instructions you give the players to carry out.

At the back, the team lines up with a standard back four in front of the **goalkeeper**.

The **centrebacks** are expected to repel every attack while the **fullbacks** protect the flank and push forward when they see the chance.

It's in the midfield where the most variations arise, and your team's playing style will depend on what combination of players you select.

For the **central midfielders**, you can either select one or two defensive mids, one or two attacking mids, or even a couple of box-to-box midfielders.

Who you select will depend on who you're playing and what you want from the players.

On the flanks, some coaches select two **wide midfielders** while others opt for more attack-minded yet disciplined **wingers** to help the striker out up front. Many go for a combination of the two with one winger expected to contribute more going forward and the other staying back a bit to help out with the defensive side of things.

The **striker** in a 4-5-1 formation is crucial to its success.

In an ideal scenario, they would act as both a target man who can hold up the ball and a pacy mobile striker who can get in behind defences and stretch the opposition.

Whichever one they are, the other players on the team need to adapt to their playing style.

The other players on the team can't simply lump the ball forward and hope that a slow striker will get to the ball before their defender.

Let's take a more in-depth look at what is expected from each position in the formation.

Player Roles and Responsibilities:

Goalkeeper:

Some formations demand a lot from the goalkeeper when it comes to their passing abilities and the speed at which they come off of their line...

But in the 4-5-1 formation, the most important things for the keeper is to concentrate and focus.

A full 90 minutes of focus is vital because they're unlikely to see much action since the team's formation is set up to protect the goal.

But when the ball does come their way, the keeper must use their quick reactions and agility to keep the ball out of the net.

Since there isn't much space in or around the box for the opposition to operate, the keeper will probably deal with more long-distance shots than usual.

The team's elite defence will force the opposition to resort to peppering the box with crosses from deep, hoping something falls their way.

Consequently, the keeper needs to have excellent handling abilities, be brave coming to claim crosses, and have a strong punch on them.

The goalkeeper in the 4-5-1 formation needs to stay in constant communication with the defenders in front of them, ordering them to push up if they drop back too deep.

Central Defenders:

The centrebacks in a 4-5-1 are not asked to do anything particularly out of the ordinary, and there is less onus on them to play out from the back than with other formations.

Since the formation is defensive in nature, the centrebacks shouldn't have to deal with many balls played in behind the defence.

This is great because it's unlikely they'll be drawn out of position, which allows them to focus on the staples of defending such as putting in tackles, blocks, and winning headers.

While they don't need to focus on their positional play as much as in other formations, the centrebacks do need to keep the line and make sure that they follow any of the nippy strikers looking to wriggle into the box and get a shot off.

As the three central midfielders in front of them should cut off most of the supply to the opposition's strikers, the centrebacks should be wary of any long shots.

Try to make blocks where appropriate while remaining vigilant to any striker looking to get in behind them when they do.

Excellent communication skills are an essential part of their role, too.

The central defenders need to marshal the fullbacks on either side and the midfielders in front, pointing out danger when it arises and helping out where necessary.

They also need to encourage the midfielders to push forward if they're dropping too deep and call them back when spaces start to open up at the back.

As the opposition is unlikely to have much joy in the centre of the pitch, they may resort to attacking down the wings which they will find challenging.

But the 4-5-1 formation protects this area of the pitch with a fullback, winger, and central midfielders helping out.

As a last resort, they may start to bombard the box with deep crosses. The centrebacks need to make sure they get their head first to every ball that comes into the box.

While the central defenders are unlikely to do much one-on-one defending due to the defensive set up, they must avoid giving away silly fouls or going through the back of the opposition striker on a challenge.

Left and Right Fullback:

In the 4-5-1 formation, the primary objective of the two fullbacks is to defend for their lives and help the team to keep a clean sheet.

Most modern-day teams rely heavily on the fullbacks to provide an attacking outlet, but in this formation, their priority is to defend.

They must focus on preventing the opposition's wingers and fullbacks from getting in behind or getting crosses into the box.

However, this does depend on how the coach sets up the team. In some cases, the fullbacks are given a bit more attacking responsibility.

In general, though, the fullbacks can advance up to the halfway line. But they're unlikely to be asked to get beyond the winger or wide midfielder and get crosses in the box.

The team is unlikely to have many players in the box, so a marauding fullback will be more of a liability than an asset since it leaves a gap behind them.

Most of their focus should be on retaining their position and winning their battle with the player they're up against.

While many fullbacks in other formations are left isolated against both a winger and a fullback, in this setup, they should have ample help with the supporting central midfielder and winger.

Very little should get past them on the flank.

Due to the constricted space and time the opposition's winger has, it should be easier to stick closer to them, get tackles in, and prevent crosses into the box.

While the opposition is unlikely to have much luck down the flanks, the fullbacks still need to remain vigilant and watch out for their opponent hoping to spin in behind them.

Although they don't need to cover as much ground as a wingback, fullbacks still need to be fit and keep their focus throughout the whole match to make sure the opposition doesn't sniff out a chance.

While many fullbacks push wide to increase space, in the 4-5-1, they generally stay narrower and nearer to the centrebacks to protect the box with the wingers dropping deeper to cover the flanks.

Central Midfielders:

It's in the midfield of the 4-5-1 formation that a coach can lay out their game plan, and a lot depends on the personnel they select and how they set up the team.

The three central midfielders are one of the main reasons why the formation is considered to be so compact and solid. If these players do their job correctly, nothing should come through the centre of the pitch.

The midfield must work well together and understand each other's roles if the game plan is to succeed, and communication between the three of them is absolutely crucial.

How much possession the team has relies on these three players.

Which means they all must be comfortable on the ball as it's unlikely they will have much space and time in which to operate.

They all need to be good passers, have excellent positioning skills, and be confident working in a small space and connecting the team.

As the formation is very defensive-minded, it can be easy for a central midfielder to keep dropping back until the edge of the box.

They need to avoid this temptation, as the team's line and positioning depend on the positions these three players take up.

While they can drop off, manage the space, and cut off the opposition's supply lines to their strikers...

The midfielders also need to be prepared to put in tackles, press their opponents, and throw themselves in the way of any long shots.

They also must be very fit since one or two of them must push forward during every attack to support the lone striker up front. It's the midfielders' responsibility to chip in with goals and get on the end of rare crosses into the box.

Although these players are expected to help out up front, they are immediately expected to drop back once the team loses possession.

The midfielders selected to carry out the coach's game plan in a 4-5-1 can change from game-to-game depending on who the team is playing and whether they want to be more attacking or defensive-minded.

If it's the latter, then two defensive midfielders may be selected with an attacking midfielder or a box-to-box midfielder alongside them. If the coach wants them to be more attacking, then two attacking midfielders may be chosen instead.

It's in the heart of the midfield and out on the flanks that the 4-5-1 can be transformed into a more attacking formation.

Wide Midfielders or Wingers:

Out on the flanks is another part of the pitch where the coach can enact their game plan, instructing the players to be more defensive-minded or attacking as they see fit.

While the whole point of the 4-5-1 formation is to remain defensively compact, it can be more attacking if you select natural wingers rather than wide midfielders on the flanks.

Whichever one is selected, both types of players are expected to help out with the defensive side of things and protect their fullback behind them.

Discipline and teamwork are the names of the game.

If the team is to stand any chance of success, they have to track back and work alongside their fullback to stop the opposition from creating goal-scoring opportunities.

They're expected to put in a lot more tackles than wide players in other formations, and they must be in peak physical condition to constantly hare up and down the pitch.

On the attacking end, the wide midfielders or wingers need to make sure every delivery into the box counts by ensuring their crosses are very accurate and well-timed.

One of the great things about the 4-5-1 formation is that it can quickly transform into a 4-3-3 if you need to grab a goal or go more attacking. This is when it pays to select natural wingers who are also happy to track back and help with the defensive side.

What many coaches do is to select one more defensive-minded wide midfielder and one more attacking and outgoing winger.

Doing so gives the team a bit more cutting edge in attack, without losing too much of the team's defensive solidity.

As the fullback behind them is not expected to push forward and help out with the attack, it's up to the winger or wide midfielder to work in tandem with the striker and the midfielders around them.

This is crucial for the team to open up the opposition and create goal-scoring opportunities.

Striker:

Playing just one striker up front can make it very difficult for a team to score goals.

The formation only works if you have a striker willing to lead the line by themselves, battle selflessly for the ball, and take on the burden of scoring most of the team's goals.

In an ideal world, this striker would be a mix between a target man who can hold up the ball and bring others into play, and a pacy / mobile striker who can stretch the opposition and get in behind their defence.

Both of these attributes are important as this helps the team to move up the field and offers the defenders and midfielders an out ball when things get crowded in their half.

As they are alone up front, this striker needs to have an eye for a goal and put the ball in the back of the net more often than not when opportunities arise.

They should have excellent anticipation skills, a good shot, and be very brave when it comes to attacking the ball and shielding it from burly defenders.

It doesn't matter whether the striker is a target man or speed merchant; what matters is that the ball sticks when it comes to them.

This then enables the team to push up around the striker and start playing further up the field in the opposition's half.

While the passes the team plays to the striker change depending on their particular attributes, it is still up to them to fight, almost alone, against the rest of the defenders and midfielders around them, and wait for their teammates to come to their support.

The striker position is one of the most important roles in the formation.

Attacking in the 4-5-1 Formation:

As we've just seen, attacking in the 4-5-1 formation can pose a challenge as the striker can quickly become isolated as the rest of the team focuses on defending their box.

As such, some of the central midfielders, wide midfielders, and wingers must push forward to help out and share the goal-scoring burden.

Just how attacking the formation is will depend on the personnel that the coach selects and how the team is set up, whether that's with one or two defensive midfielders and one or two wingers.

A lot of the goal-scoring burden understandably falls on the lone striker.

They're expected to score more shots than they miss, and they need to be ready to capitalise on any half-chance that comes their way.

Due to the nature of the formation, it can be a lot more attack-minded than it seems, particularly if the coach selects two out-and-out yet defensively disciplined wingers.

They can then push forward and turn the 4-5-1 into a 4-3-3 when the team is attacking and drop back again when the team loses the ball.

As teams playing in a 4-5-1 formation generally fashion out fewer chances than teams using other formations, the players need to make sure that every shot counts.

Defending in the 4-5-1 Formation:

The 4-5-1 is a fantastic formation to go for if you want your team to remain solid, compact, and hard to beat. Your opponents will undoubtedly find goals tough to come by.

With five midfielders sitting in front of the four defenders, there isn't much space for the opposition to operate.

They'll find it almost impossible to play through the lines and create one-on-one chances against the keeper.

While the centre of the pitch is locked down with three central midfielders protecting the two centrebacks, the flanks are equally challenging to penetrate.

The fullbacks and wingers work in tandem to block crosses into the box and prevent tricky wingers from getting past them and in behind the defence.

It's a unique formation which lends itself perfectly to protecting a lead or shutting up shop against a stronger opponent.

The formation can be even more defensive depending on the coach's instructions, especially if they select two defensive-minded midfielders.

The opposition is forced to play riskier and riskier passes to get the ball to their attacking players through the wall of five defenders.

This gives your team more opportunities to win the ball further up the pitch.

The 4-5-1 also means that there should never be a time when the opposition player has much time or space on the ball without being closed down by a defender.

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