Part One: Defensive Principles and Organization of the Back 4

Teaching the 4:2:3:1 (4:3:3)

The best teams are able to adjust their system of play to meet the demands of a game, opponent or weather condition. However, before adjusting between systems becomes a possibility, players must become experts in the basics of each system and their roles within it.

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The 4:2:3:1 is an ideal system to learn because of its tactical flexibility. Minor adjustments in positioning and mentality easily allow the system to become a more defensive 4:5:1, or a more attacking 4:2:4. These adjustments are easier to make in the 4:2:3:1, especially for younger players, than in most other systems. This article, which focuses on defensive concepts and shape of the back four, is the first of several which will explain in detail some of the specifics of the 4:2:3:1 system in both attack and defense. Though labeling the system as a 4:2:3:1 may provide more accurate illustration of the lines on the field, for simplicity’s sake, the system will be referred to simply as the 4:3:3 for the rest of the article.

Showing players the patterns of movement and shape in a 4:3:3 on paper enhances their understanding of the system, and allows for quicker learning on the training field during functional training. It also provides a guide and reference for players to return to after training for continued learning. Players that are familiar with the basic concepts of each line in the system, both in attack and defense, will be smarter and better prepared to make quick decisions on game day.

General Defensive Concepts:
The general defensive concepts of the game are the same in any system, but they deserve to be repeated whenever teaching a new system.

Pressure must be applied to the ball before defense can begin.
Until there is pressure on the ball the team must drop towards their own goal. When pressure is applied the team then can step and compress space.

- Pressure must be immediate.
- Pressure must force that attacker’s vision down.
- Pressure must make play predictable.
- Pressure must prevent passing penetration.

Pressure must be accompanied by immediate cover.
Covering players are responsible for filling space behind the pressure to eliminate the threat of dribble penetration. Quality defending requires a team to get numbers up around the ball everywhere on the field!

The team defends together.
When pressure is applied, the entire team must step together to stay compact, and when pressure breaks down the team must drop together. Space can not exist between lines on the
field, or between pressuring players and the rest of the team. The team must also shift across the field together as the ball moves. In general, the team must move as one unified block whenever the ball moves. This puts high demands on work rate and coordination.

**The team must step and compress space every time the ball moves back-wards.**

On defensive clearances and on any backpasses played by the opposition the team must step to recover space and to eliminate the opposition has to make decisions.

The following pages go through the team defensive movement, line by line, as the ball moves across the field. In general, the entire team must shift into the quarter of the field around the ball, as illustrated below.

**General Defensive Play of the Back Four:**

**Combination Man/Zone**

Defending in a 4:3:3 should be done primarily with zonal defending. In a zonal system, players are not solely responsible for marking an individual opponent but instead are responsible for filling areas of space and marking any opponents in those spaces. Zonal defending allows the team to keep better defensive shape, while also reducing some of the physical demands of man marking.

“Players must become experts in the basics of each system”
Inside the penalty box, the system switches to purely man-to-man marking.

The proximity of the ball and the attackers to the goal will not allow for space or time to zone and pass runners between defenders.

Specific Tactical Cues for the Back Four:

When playing with a zonal four in the back, the speed of thought of each defender, and coordinated movement as a line of four are of primary importance. There are several general tactical cues that aid in general understanding of this movement, and in increasing a defenders tactical speed:

1. **Priority One:** Protect the space behind the back line
   When pressure breaks down in midfield, all four backs should drop back and central as a group to protect the space behind them. Ideally, the backs will drop so that they could head away any vertical ball. At a minimum, the backs must be able to beat any attackers to a vertical ball played behind them centrally. The backs must continue to drop until pressure is re-established and the threat of the vertical ball is eliminated, or until the space behind them is small enough that the goal-keeper can intercept vertical passes.

2. **Priority Two:** Intercept balls to feet or deny the turn
   The best backs will be able to position themselves to eliminate the danger of balls played behind them, but also such that they can step forward to intercept passes to the feet of forwards or attempted passes into the gaps between the back four. Defenders will increase their chance of intercepting passes by positioning themselves ball-side and goal-side of attackers within their zone. If it is impossible to intercept the pass, then the backs must be quick enough to close space and deny attackers the opportunity to turn and run at the back line.

3. **General Guideline:** Never cross in front of each other
   When the ball is in front of a specific back, only that back should step to pressure the ball. The remaining three backs must drop into covering or balancing positions. One back should never cross in front of another back to pressure the ball, and to “do another back’s job”. When backs cross in front of each other, gaps are left in the field which attackers will exploit.

4. **General Guideline:** Be patient with if the attackers have good width
   If there is an attacker wider than the attacker in possession, the outside back can never apply pressure on the ball. In this situation, pressure must come from the center of the field, and the outside back must drop to keep the widest attacker in front of them. If the outside back tries to apply pressure and leave the wide attacker, the back will get caught in the middle and concede space and balls behind.
The inherent defensive weakness in the 4:3:3 is the lack of outside midfielders. If this outside midfield space is not defended appropriately, the team will have major difficulties because the opponent’s wide midfielders will have space and time to attack the outside backs 1 vs. 1.

Because the midfield three are centrally organized, the outside backs must be prepared to step forward into wide midfield spaces and mark the opponent’s outside midfielders when appropriate. The outside backs should anticipate these passes to maximize opportunities to intercept them, but must never be too early to step to these players before the ball is delivered. A back that arrives too early, or before the ball is played to the opponent’s outside midfielder, will invite penetrating passes behind himself. Decisions about when and how to step into this space are difficult and require outside backs that are both quick and read the game well.

Though the outside backs and wingers are primarily responsible for the wide spaces, occasionally a central midfielder may mark the opponent’s outside midfielders. The situation will dictate each decision—whoever can provide the pressure quickest should do so. However, if central midfielders get pulled wide too often, the team will be beaten up the middle of the field.

Shaping the Pressure: Prevent the “Easy” Choice
When the outside back steps into wide midfield spaces to pressure the ball, whenever possible the pressure should be angled to prevent balls played down the sideline, and to force the attacker to play back inside the field. If the back allows the attacker to run down the sideline or to serve a long ball down the sideline, the back is inviting a foot race, and at best will end up defending much deeper in their own end of the field. When the back eliminates this option, the attacker is forced to play more centrally, where the defense has a higher concentration of players, and has eliminated much of the space.

Defensive Summary:
In all of these illustrations, you can see that coordination of movement is essential. The team as a whole, and each line as a group must adjust and move with the ball across the field. You should also see the high concentration of players in the center of the field. The team will be leaving space on the far side of the field open, relying on quality pressure to prevent long dangerous switches of play into these spaces. This will allow the team to keep numbers up around the ball.
**Objective:**
Training defenders in 1 vs. 1 situations. Training defenders to recognize when to drop back into space to prevent penetration and when to step to the ball to intercept or deny turns.

**Organization:**
1 vs. 1 to endline targets

**Set-up:**
- Attacker (A) attempts to receive the ball from one target (T), turn and play to the other target. If he does so successfully he receives a point.
- Targets can play to the attacker in two touches. Targets can play across to each other but in 1 touch only. If they do so, the attacker gets a point.
- If the defender (D) wins the ball, he becomes the attacker.

**Training:**
- The defender must recognize when to step and pressure the attacker to intercept the pass or to prevent the turn, and also must recognize when to drop off the attacker to defend the penetrating pass from the target. This game trains recognition of when defenders can step to close space and when they must drop off because there is no pressure on the ball.
- Progression: This game can progress to 2 vs. 2 in the middle, thus shifting the focus to defending as a pair.
**Functional Training for Center Backs**

**Objective:**
Training center backs functionally to defend against center forwards.

**Organization:**
2 vs. 2 to goal playing inside the width of the 6-yard box.

**Set-up:**
- Attacker 1 (A1) plays a ball into forward A2, who is checking back to the ball. D1 defends A2 and D2 provides cover. A2 can either turn and go to goal, or lay the ball off for A1 to join the attack to goal.
- If the defenders win the ball, they score by serving the ball through wide gates at midfield.

**Training:**
- Defenders must communicate and organize to pass the attacker to each other as he moves laterally before receiving the ball.
- Defense must organize who will step to pressure the attacker to possibly intercept the entry pass, or to at least to deny the turn.
- The covering defender must be in a good covering position.
- When the ball is laid back, the defense must re-organize to confront the new attacker and also to mark the initial attacker. Use of off-sides space will be important.

**Progression:** You can add another attacking forward, so that the game becomes 3 attackers vs. 2 defenders.

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**Training the Back Four as a Group**

**Objective:**
Training the back four functionally.

**Organization:**
6 vs. 4 to goal playing inside the width of the 6-yard box.

**Set-up:**
- 6 Attackers (4 midfielders and 2 forwards) attack the large goal. The back four and a GK defend the large goal and counter to wide gates at midfield.
- Attackers get 1 point for a goal. Defenders get 1 point for every 3 clearances through a wide gate.

**Training:**
- Defenders must organize to prevent penetration behind them, establishing good pressure and covering shape as the ball moves.
- The defense must shift, step and drop together, so that the backs do not get pulled apart. The backs should always be within 6 – 10 yards of the back next to them.
- The defense must hold the line when possible to use off-sides to limit attacking runs behind them.

**Progression:** You can add a defensive midfielder and another attacking player to increase complexity in a 7 vs. 5.
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