

4-4-2

ATTACKING



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Attacking

By

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Introduction

A former Italian coach was used to say: "Technique is the riches' bread, the tactic is the poor people's one."

What did he want to say? When players are not top class ones from a technical point of view, the team organization, movements' coordination, and precise tactical tasks for each player are the remedies to technical lacks.

Which is the system of play of all that represents these tactical needs? The 1-4-4-2. Players don't need to be specialized, the primary team shape is very clear, and even those with weaker technical skills can be essential characters with training and hard work. It is not a coincidence that teams fighting for relegation often adopt 1-4-4-2.

However, this system of play doesn't deserve to be underrated.

The team can play attacking and defending phases with safety, remaining balanced through the thirds; the three lines disposition requires the defense and midfield sectors to be always very narrow along with the depth of the field.

The following pictures are footage from 2015/2016 Claudio Ranieri's Leicester, which has been a masterclass example of compact 1-4-4-2 both during defense and attacking phases; the high level team organization made possible what it had seemed impossible until then.



The first aim of Leicester was to defend the depth and the goal space when the team was out of possession; two lines of four were always shaped as the opposition entered inside its attacking half; the receivers of the the ball distribution were the pressed one by one, without losing the double line defending shape. This first example shows the back 4 line players standing very narrow in the center and the midfield line while shifting across to close down the opposition receivers.

This next example is very indicative to understand how 1-4-4-2 can be flexible and the players can be interchangeable thanks to coordinate movements.



The opposition right attacking midfielder is trying to dribble the ball inside and forward and the right fullback has just overlapped along the right flank. Leicester's left winger Albrighton presses the ball carrier and tries to prevent him from moving the ball up the field. The left fullback Fuchs close down the movement of the opposition's right fullback preventively and he stretches the back line of four.

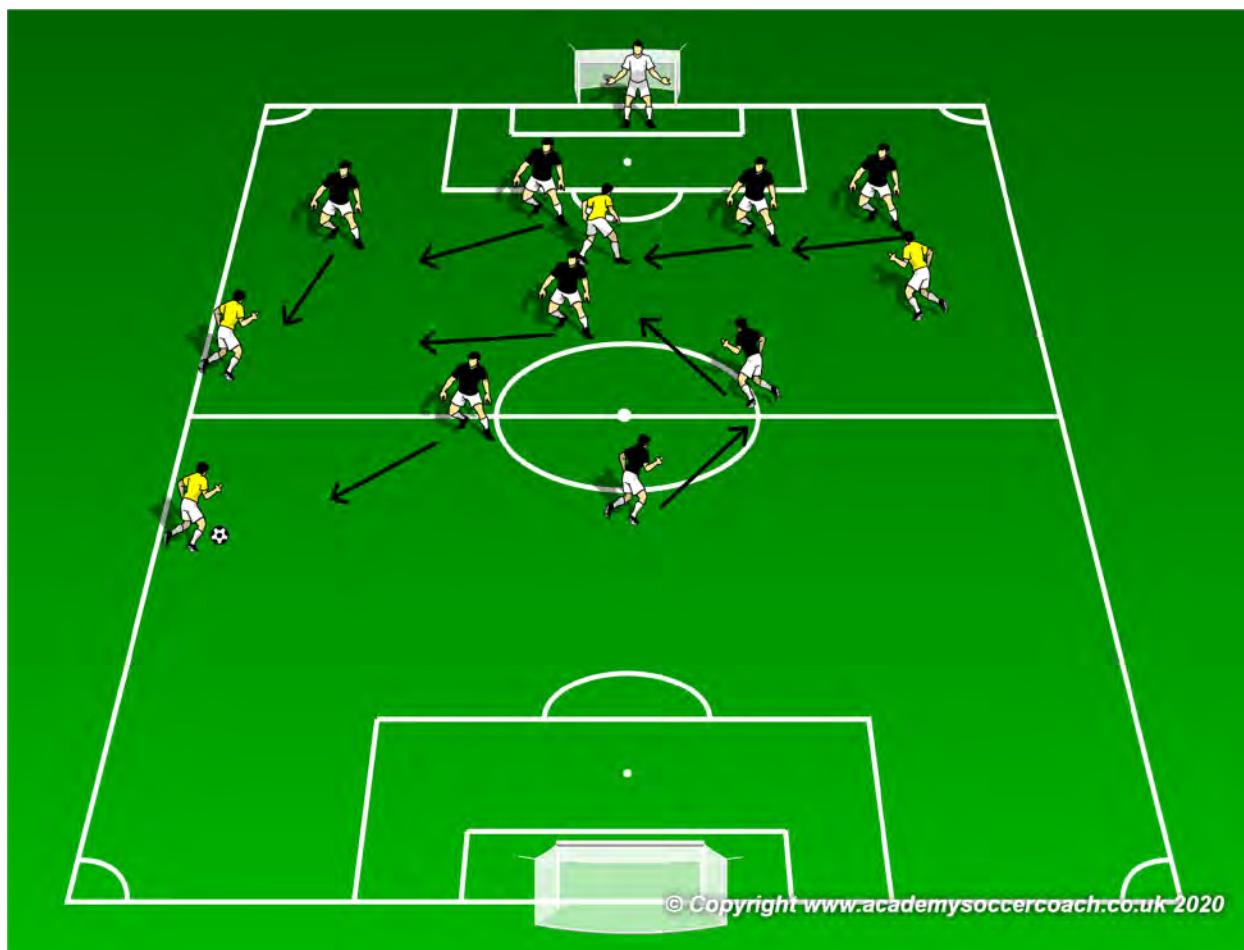
The second forward drops back to counter the opposition center midfielder, allowing one of the center midfielders (Drinkwater) to provide cover and balance between the midfield line and the back.

The other center midfielder Kante can drop deeper and close to the 3 teammates of the defense line, being ready to stand between the right center back and the right fullback.

Width is well-covered thanks to two players along each flank (flat 1-4-4-2) who can stretch the opposition and provide cover down the same flanks in case of loss of possession.

The fullbacks and the wingers can be interchangeable.

When the coach shapes a diamond midfield sector, with a holding midfielder, an advanced player, and two outer ones, shifting movements become crucial to cover the width of the field. To create a strong area around the ball out wide and a weak one on the opposite side is crucial; this way, pressure when the team is out of possession and short passing options when the team has the possession are the usual tactical solutions.



What 1-4-4-2 also allows the teams to do is to shape two lines of four wherever the coach feels it can be useful for the team. This next picture shows, the best and most useful application when the team is out of possession: two lines of four in front of the penalty area, to save the final third.



The attacking phase of a team, whatever is the system of play the coach decides to adopt, is a disrupting phase of play, that brake the shape the numbers want to represent. 1-4-4-2 is maybe the best system of play, where this broken shape while attacking can be re-built up quickly with simple and effective movement; the opposite is also true. From an attacking point of view, it allows the team in possession to distribute high up the field, staying compact at the back and it allows the team to change the shape with simple and effective movements, just like for the transitions to defend.

Furthermore, the opponents risk to stand forcibly inside the defensive half and to look for forced quick passing combinations to play out.



When the opponents can overcome a defensive line, space can be recovered merely retreating as a unit, and the rhythm can be decreased thanks to the second line behind the one that opponents have just overcome.

This example is very explicative to look at how the possession phase of a 3 lines system of play that can look so simple at a first sight, it is so disruptive, but at the same time so safe at the back.



The inverted right winger is trying to play a cross pass into the box, after a short free kick (the center backs Morgan and Huth are high up the field, the right fullback Simpson has just overlapped) and only three players are standing behind the ball line.

The nearest center midfielder to the ball, Drinkwater, headers an opposition clearance, meanwhile the second midfielder is retreating to cover the center backs, who are out of position.



The left fullback Fuchs has shifted across the center to protect the first third and to cover the position of the midfielder (Kante), who is retreating.

The opposition wins the ball back again, but Leicester is safe at the back



The opponents try to play a through pass, exploiting an unbalanced situation in the middle third.

Leicester chooses to protect the center middle third, delay the opposition counter-attacking action and the midfielder retreat to counter the ball carrier, who loses the possession.



Two strikers are vital in a flat 1-4-4-2, as the attacking phases are often built up along the flanks (or the decisive pass comes from the flanks); they help the defense and midfield sectors to keep the possession, waiting for the teammates pushing up the field to attack; they ensure presence and shooting options inside the opposition box also.



The forwards can also help to manage the opposition counter-pressing actions when the possession is recovered.



These players can be positioned as a No.10 behind the center striker also, and he becomes interchangeable with the advanced midfielder in a diamond midfield shaped team.



Players' tasks from possession and attacking points of view

Goalkeepers: the role has evolved a lot over the years, due to new rules and to the way to play offensive football. The building up phase always begins from the goalkeeper and the specific characteristics of the goalkeeper has developed, following new requirements:

- They must help the team controlling possession being able to receive and pass with a precise aim any balls played back to them.
- They need to be technically skills enough with both feet.
- Pass wide to fullback or to wingers.
- Cut an opposition pressure line passing forward to the holding midfielders.
- Recognize when the team needs to push up to the half line, passing directly to the center forwards.
- Speed and precision with hand passing.

Centerbacks

- They must be technically skilled enough to start the building up phase, to play out from opposition pressure and to ensure the team quick switches of sides, when they are positioned around the half line
- Center backs only real attacking tasks are to try to use their height and aerial skills to score headers.
- At least one of the two defenders must be a leader, who guide the defense through the tactical situations.

Fullbacks

- They need to be very fit and speedy along the flanks in short and bigger spaces.
- They provide width to the other defenders and passing options for midfielders
- Fullbacks must push up the pitch to overlap with right timings and to support the wingers, paying attention to not over-extend during a counterattack, as that leaves the entire backline exposed.
- They must able to play as midfielders, inverting their runs toward the center, to allow the midfielders to help the forwards up the field
- They should ideally have good crossing skills when they arrive into the wide spaces of the opposition final third.
- 1 v 1 skills are other crucial characteristics for the fullbacks.

Center midfielders

- They are the keys of possession and attacking moves rhythms; they must understand when to increase the pace and when to calm it down.
- In a flat 1-4-4-2, one holding central midfielder who is positioned between the defense and the midfield line and another one more creative midfielder who builds up (this an important theme we are going to analyze later in this chapter.
- They must have positional skills all over the field to create options and to be safe back chance to save possession when the attacking teammates are under pressure.
- They are the link players between defenders and wingers and between defenders and forwards, showing for the ball and keep it moving to the strikers on their feet, with through balls or long passes in behind.
- Center midfielders must be good at finishing, shooting on goal or through blind runs in behind.

Wingers

- In a 4-4-2 formation, they have creative responsibilities
- Fast wide players to carry the ball from one end of the pitch in a counterattack, to play cross passes for the attackers and to track back to help the fullbacks, as soon as possession is lost.
- They must attempt 1 v 1 duels against opposition's fullbacks as much as possible to create scoring opportunities
- They must be able to open up space wide by running inside both if they play as inverted wingers or not.
- They should attack the space off the ball with the right time
- Their relationship with their fullback is very important to create 2 v 1 duels against opposition fullbacks.
- Wingers must be technically skilled enough to play cross passes into the box and to dribble the ball inside to finish with their weak feet.
- Inverted wingers must be able to understand when to move inside off the ball to receive in between the lines or to dribble inside to finish, contributing to team total amount scored goals
- They should guarantee a good amount of scored goals to the team.

Forwards:

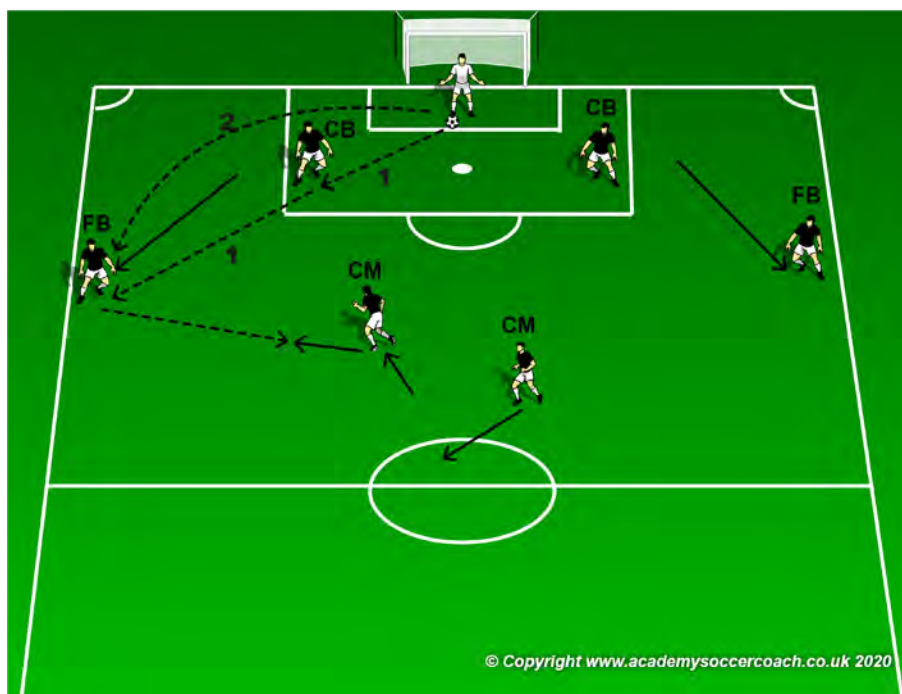
- Usually they are divided into two roles; a center forward who acts as a No.10 and a second one who act as a striker. Both them must be good goal scorers (inside and out of the box with 1 touch or headers).
- Ideally, they have different physical characteristics: one must have strength, excellent elevation and good acrobatic skills and the right body shape to protect the ball. The other one must have stamina, excellent skills to attack the depth spaces and high level 1 v 1 skills to beat the defenders and the goalkeeper.
- A center striker who is able to receive the ball, holds it, and brings his teammates into play.
- A forward who is willing to play killer passes, to make runs behind the last defender and to finish, receiving cross passes.
- Their positional and movement skills are the keys to make a 1-4-4-2 formation finishing phase successful.
- Forwards must be able to play as target players, as false nines and to make blind runs in behind the opposition defense line

Basic attacking principles of play

MOBILITY AND POSITIONING: players run into different areas of the field, while being on and off the ball, to invite defenders out of their positions, creating space and options for the ball carrier or where to dribble the ball through by creating gaps between the defense lines or among the players near the ball. In the 1-4-4-2 system of play the concept of mobility is a very various, because of the flat shape (or the rhombus shapes, which is a variation but not the real basic organization) as this team shape doesn't correspond to a precise style of play, if we want to analyze it deeper and to go a step over the usual defensive and counter-attacking points of view. Positioning becomes crucial to ensure attacking options for the team with possession. Timing of pass and movements off the ball are vital to re-shape a "flat" team from the building up phase to the finishing stage.

Building up with short passing combinations: the main sub-principles of play in this phase, as the players must create the line due to the flat nature of the system of play are:

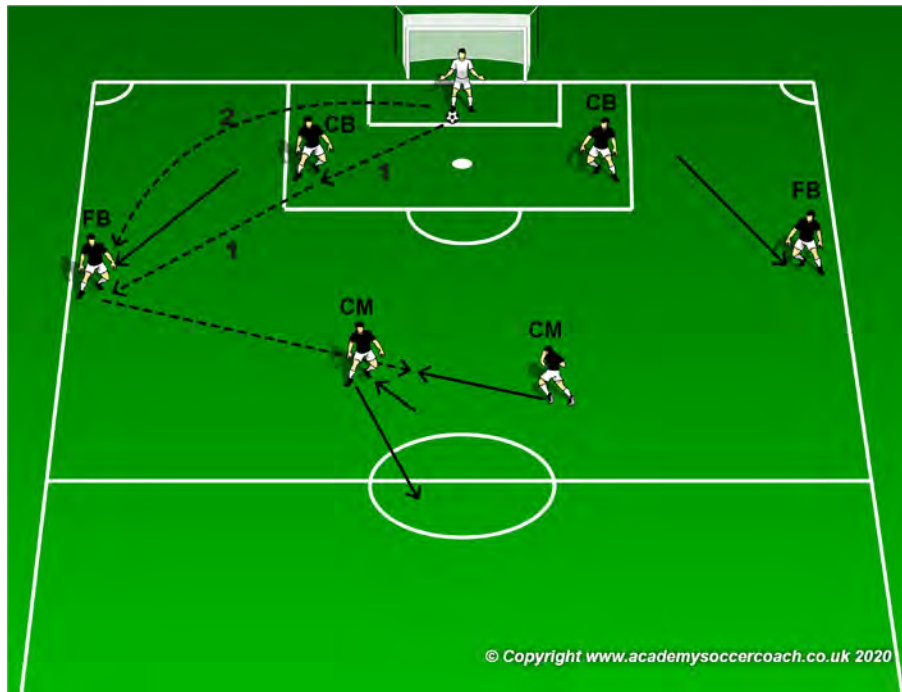
- Play where the ball carrier can look at and then move.
- Find the right passing angle.
- The nearer player to the ball is always the first one who must move off the ball to receive.



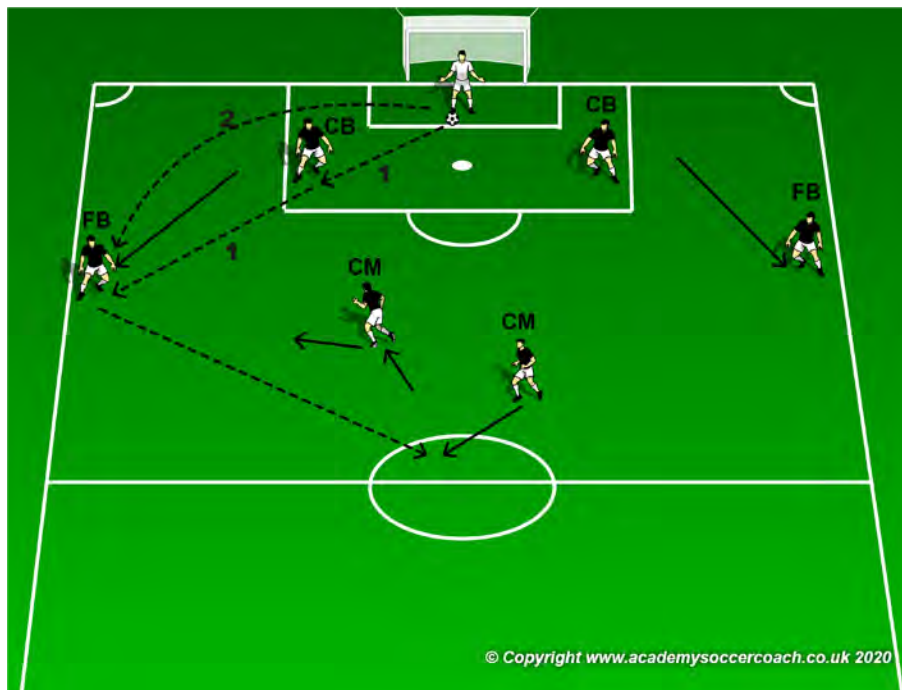
- The GK passes to the CB, who receives and passes out wide to the FB (1)
- The GK passes out wide to the FB (the CB can play the same way if there is space available)

Center midfielders rotation:

- The nearest CM to the ball position drops back to receive and the further one runs up as advanced vertex
- The FB passes short to the dropping back CM.



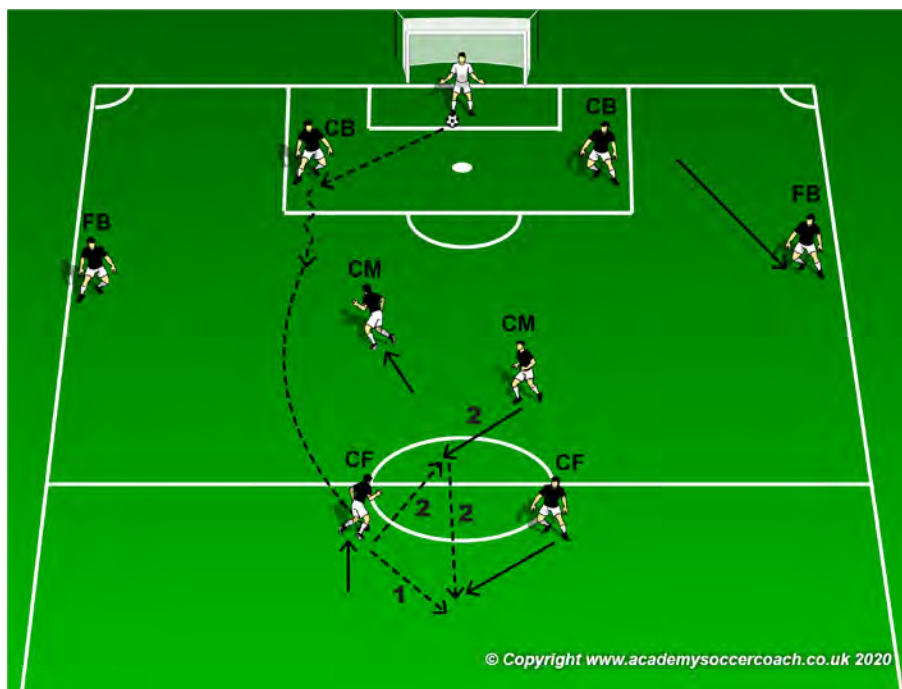
- The nearest CM to the ball position drops back as he should receive and then moves away up the field to become the advanced vertex; the further CM drops back diagonally to receive.
- The FB passes longer to the dropping back CM.



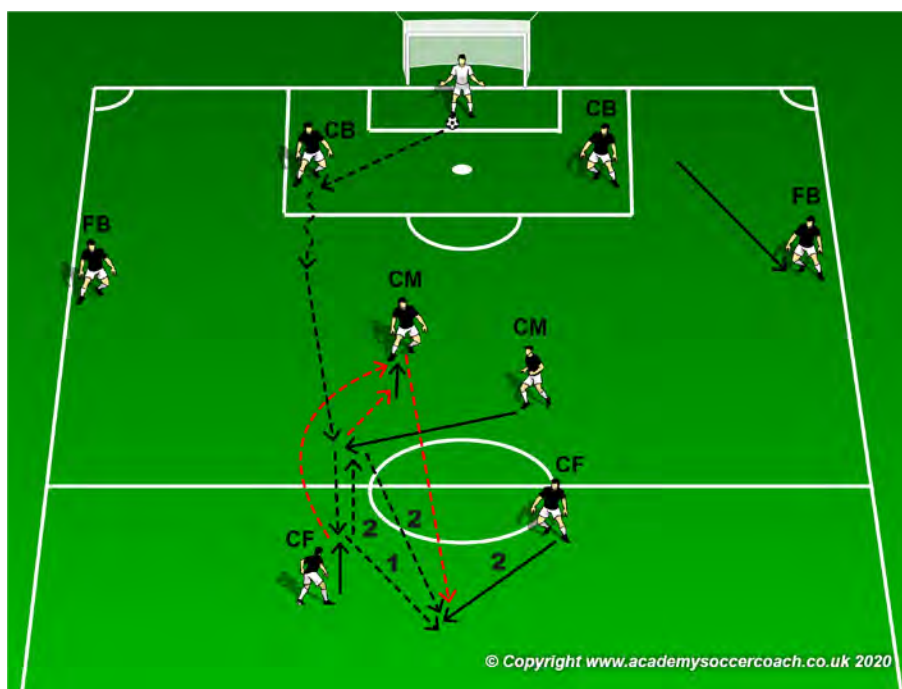
- The nearest CM to the ball position drops back as he should receive and then moves even deeper to act as the bottom vertex of the midfield; the further CM moves forward diagonally to receive.
- The FB passes longer to the further CM.

Building up with medium distance passes (direct attacking play):

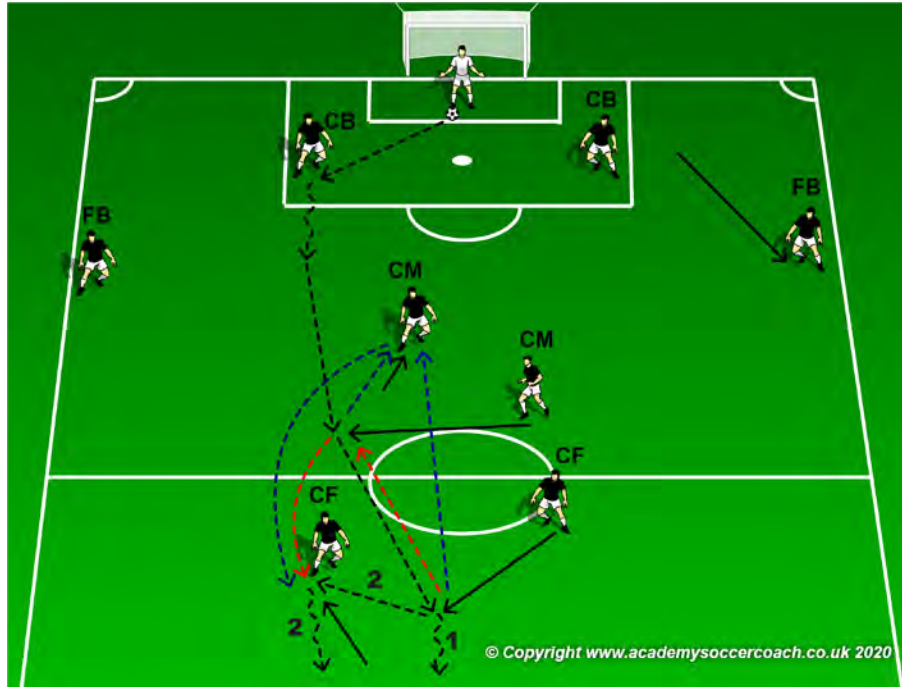
The CB has time and space to dribble the up the field and he can play toward the CFs, who combine with the CMs.



- The GK passes to the CB, who can dribble the ball up and play a longer pass to the dropping back CF; the second one moves up the field behind him. The nearest CM drops back as he should receive and the further one moves up the field.
- 1 - If the CF who receives is free from marking, he can play on the teammate's run (CF).
- 2 - If the CF is under pressure, he lays the ball back to the CM who is running toward him. The receiver send a through pass to the CF who is moving forward.



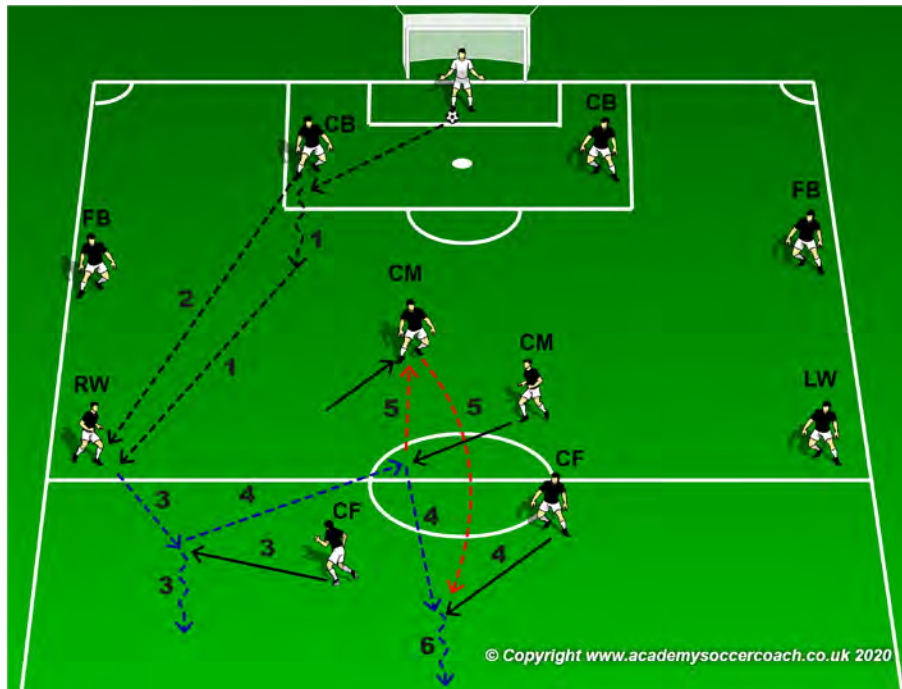
- The GK passes to the CB, who can dribble the ball up and plays a longer pass to the further CM, who is shifting across the center. The nearest CM drops back as he should receive a lay-off pass.
- If the CM who receives is free from marking, he can play toward the dropping back CF.
- If the CF who receives is free from marking, he can pass up the field on the run of the second CF (1).
- If the CF who receives from the CM is under pressure, he lays the ball back to the teammate; the CM receives and he passes up the field on the run of the second CF (2).
- If the first CM or the first CF, who receives the passes are under pressure or man on marked, they lay the ball back to the lower CM (follow the red arrows).
- The CM passes on the run of the further CF.



- The GK passes to the CB, who can dribble the ball up and play a longer pass to the further CM, who is shifting across the center. The nearest CM drops back as he should receive a lay-off pass.
- If the CM who receives is free from marking, he can play toward on the run of the further CF.
- If the CF who receives is free from marking, he can dribble the up the field (1)
- If the CF who receives from the CM is under pressure, he must lay the ball back to a teammate; he can be the second CF, who drops back to support him along the same line to receive and to dribble the ball up (2). Otherwise, the first CF who receives lays the ball back again to the CM, who plays forward to the second CF (red arrows)
- If the first CM or the first CF, who receives the passes are under pressure or man on marked, they lay the ball back to the lower CM (follow the blue arrows).
- The CM passes on the run of the second CF.

The FB can play the same passes from the flank, if the CB is forced to play out wide due to opposition pressure.

Width is useful in these situations to move the opposition toward one side while retreating to cover the spaces behind the pressure lines and to prevent the possession team from carrying out the patterns of play to move the ball higher up the field.



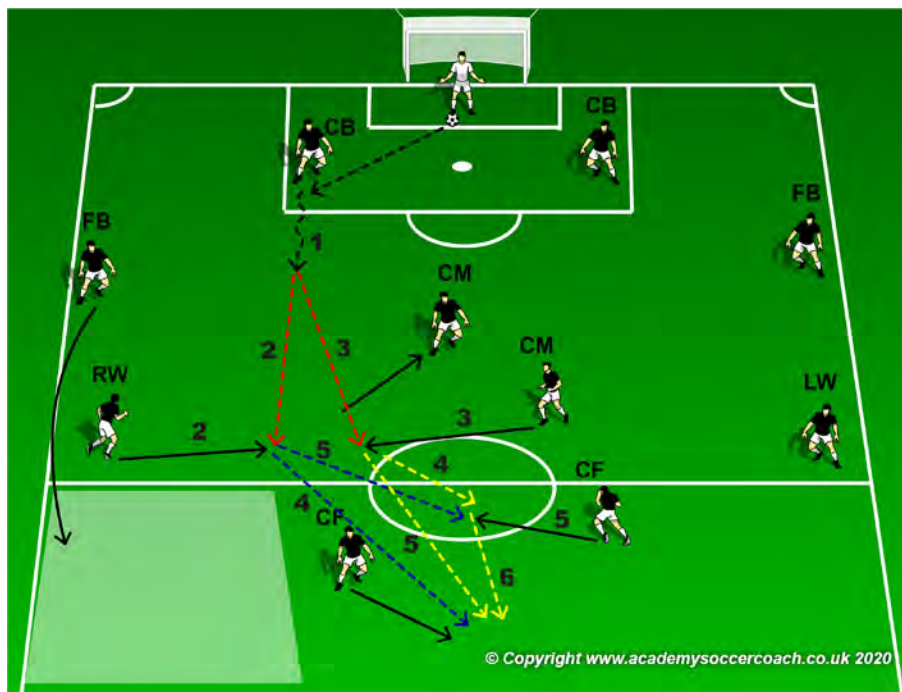
- The GK passes to the CB, who can dribble the ball up and play a longer pass out wide to the RW, who receives (1). If the CB is under pressure, but the passing line is still available, he passes the ball to the RW before the opponent can counter him (2).
- When the RW receives, the further CM shifts across and the nearest CF drops back diagonally to receive; if no defender is tracking him, he can receive and dribble the ball up the field (3).
- If the CF is under pressure, the best choice is to pass to the further midfielder, who shifts across, receives on the feet and he tries to play forward on the run of the second forward (4).
- If an opponent counters the CM, he passes back to the first one (5), who drops a bit deeper to act as support and to watch at the field in front of him. When he receives, he can try to play a longer pass to the second CF.
- When the second CF receives, he must try to dribble the ball up the field.

The possession team can play the same kind of pattern of play, when a fullback pushes up the flank, exploiting the potential winger's inside run off the ball.

When a team that is shaped with the 1-4-4-2 is facing a 3 v 2 situation in the center (2 CMs against the 3 center midfielders of a 1-4-3-3 formation), usually one winger shifts across the center to equalize the duel. In these situations the fullback may receive out wide and deeper to play a long pass to the same target players (the first CF and the further CM and the winger become a support player at the back of the receiver).

Meanwhile space along the flank for the fullback should be available.

This is a similar tactical situation to the previous one that has been just describe. Both the FB and the RW can't receive out wide (as for instance, the opposition outer forward is man-marking the FB and he is screening the longer pass to the RW). The winger shifts across the center to receive, at the back of the opposition pressure line and he equalizes the number of players in the center, to fix the issue, the; this way the FB can exploit available space along the same flank that the RW left free.

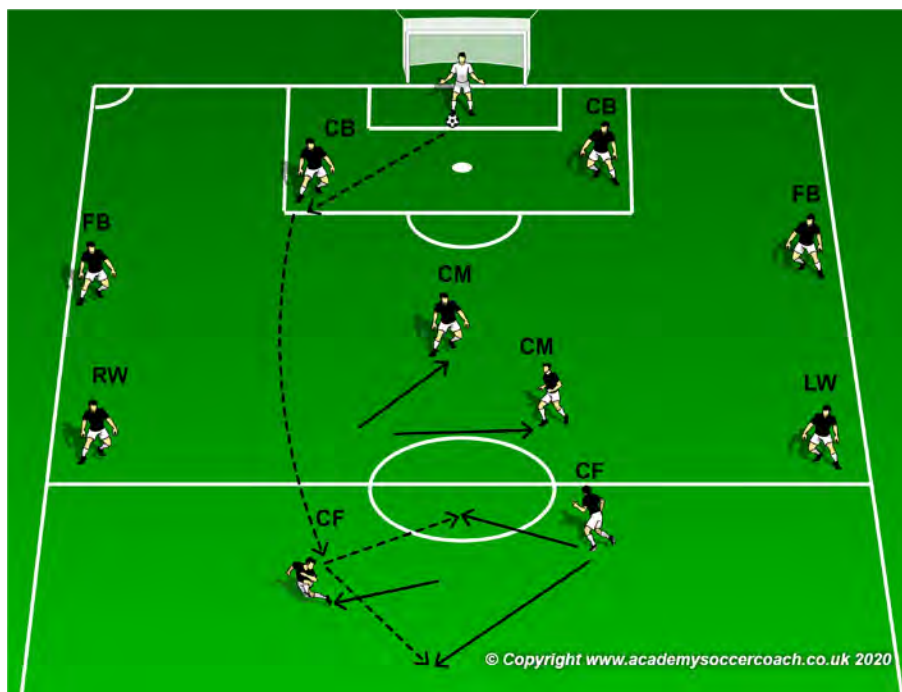


- The GK passes to the CB, who can dribble the ball up and play a longer pass (1), meeting the RW's run (2); the winger receives and he must try to play forward as soon as possible to not lose the chance of a direct attack. If the CB is under pressure, but the passing line is still available, he passes the ball to the RW before the opponent can counter him (2).
 - The RW has a direct forward passing option > he passes on the run of the most advanced CF (4 – blue arrow).
 - The RW can't play a direct pass > he passes to the further CF (5), who is shifting across the center and dropping a bit deeper and who try to pass forward as quickly as possible (6).
- If the winger is not unmarked, the best choice for the CB to play a direct pass is to drive the ball toward the further CM, who shifts across, allowing the other CM to drop back too be a support passing option (3).
 - The CM receives and he a direct passing option > he passes on the run of the most advanced CF (5 – yellow arrow).
 - The can't play a direct pass > he passes to the further CF (4 – yellow arrow), who is shifting across the center and dropping a bit deeper and who try to pass forward as quickly as possible (6).
- The CM who shifted across at the beginning of the sequence represents a safe back passing option for all the receivers off the previous patterns of play, when the opponent can counter them and close the available forward passing lanes .

Meanwhile space along the flank for the fullback should be available, thanks to the inside wingers' movement

Building up with long passes to the forwards:

When the opposition is pressing high on the field and to build up play from the back may represent a risky situation for the possession team, long passes are a good solutions that the 1-4-4-2 give the team. When the two center forwards move closer to each other, they have good chances to win aerial ball, and they condense two or three player around them, hopefully opening gaps along the center.

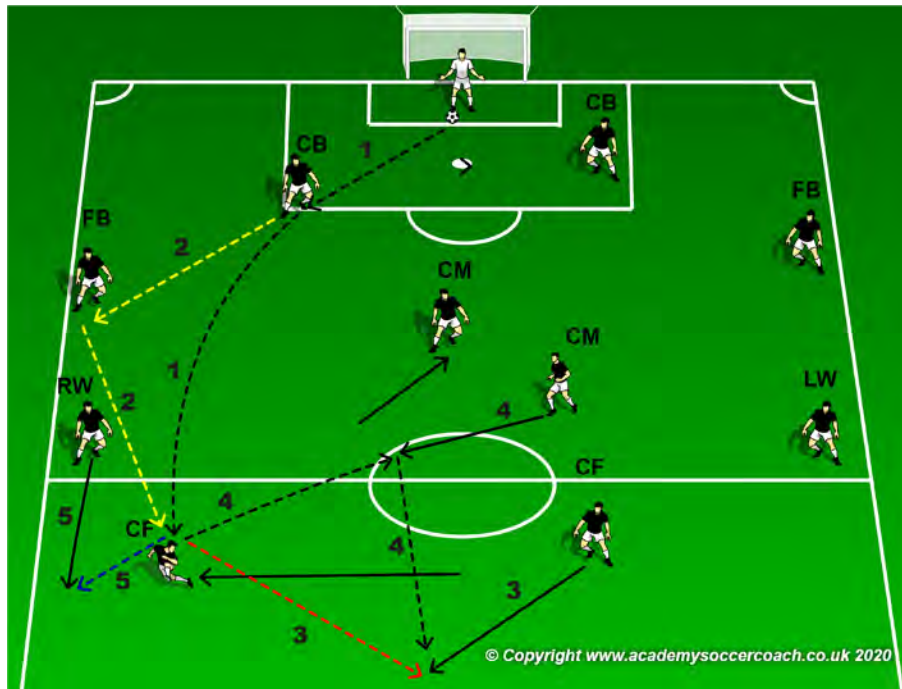


- The GK passes to the CB, who plays a quick aerial pass to the first CF, who shifts slightly wider to header the ball.
- The second one must be aware of the opposition defense movement:
 - If he drops back, the receiver must lay the ball off for him
 - If he can run in behind the defense line, the receiver must try to header to meet his run

When the CB decides to play a long pass, the CMs must position themselves to ensure the team to win the potential second times of the ball, moving at the back of the header's receiver and to provide cover, dropping back in front of the back four or three (it depends if one fullback pushes up the field or not).

This second example, the CB plays a long pass for the CF, who receives out wide. The same situation appears when CB can't pass immediately and he must play out wide to maintain the

possession. The fullback receives and he plays the long pass toward the CF. The direct attacking move is now played along one flank with the same objective of the previous situation: to pass toward one of the CFs in behind the defense line.



- The GK passes to the CB (1), who receives.
- The CB can play a long pass to the CF, who shifts wide to header along the flank (1).
- The CB can't play the long pass immediately and he passes out wide to the FB (2 – yellow arrow), who receives and passes quickly to the forward.

The CMs must position themselves to ensure the team to win the potential second times of the ball, moving at the back of the header's receiver and to provide cover, dropping back in front of the back four or three (it depends if one fullback pushes up the field or not).

- The CB plays an aerial pass to the CF > the CF headers the ball directly to the second CF, who can run in behind and receives on the run (3 – red arrow).
- The CF must header the ball back to the CM, who shifts across the center to play as link player. The CM controls the ball and he tries to pass forward in behind to the second CF (4 – black arrows).
- If the FB passes to the CF (aerial or ground pass – 2 yellow arrow), to carry out a passing pattern to free the RW along the flank is the best solution for the possession phase; the RW runs up the field off the ball before the CF headers the ball on his run, trying to overcome an opposition pressure's line. Once the winger has the ball at his feet, he can try to cut the ball inside for the further CF, who moves up the field off the ball toward the opposition goal.

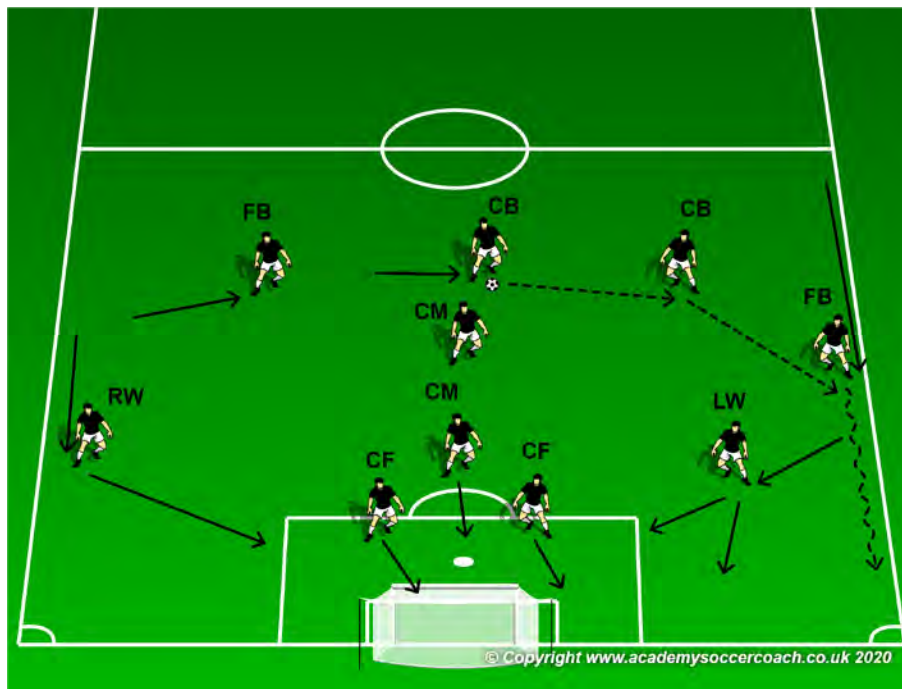
Fundamental possession and finishing phases mobility movements for coordinated pattern of play

Once the team is positioned inside the attacking half, 1-4-4-2 allow to attack the opposition goal quickly in two ways, if the opponents are not able to cover the spaces:

1. Playing out wide and along the flanks to send cross passes into the box, where the CFs must run onto.
2. Playing through passes in behind the defense line for the CFs and the Wingers, if they cut inside off the ball before.

The CMs couple ensure:

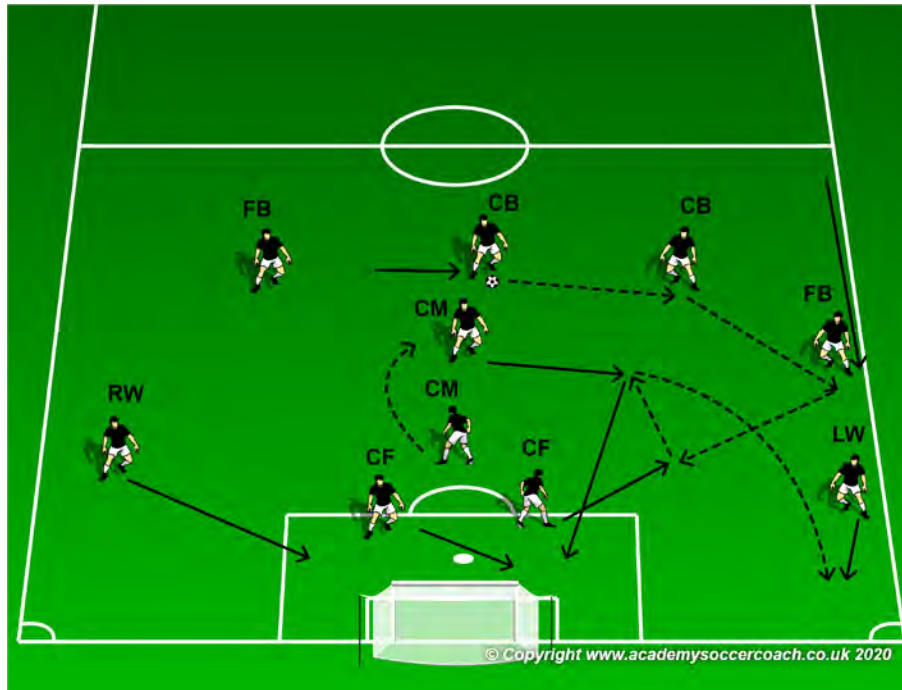
- Support to the attacking move: the advance CM can stand behind the CFs' line to win the second times of the ball, to help the distribution phase as high the field as possible, as well as run in behind the defense line off the ball.
- Cover for defenders line: usually at least three players stand at the back, despite their possible high placement along the half line or even further. The CM who becomes the holding player must try to prevent any opposition run off the ball in behind the defense, he must stay a little in front of the defense line to try to win the defensive second times of the ball, when it is forced to drop deep to cover the long balls and he must run into the line if it's needed.



This is a classic situation of the 1-4-4-2 possession phase:

- The distribution sequence takes the LFB to receive high the field.
- The LW cuts inside from the flank to open spaces for the FB to dribble into.
- The CF must attack the goal space to receive a possible cross pass.
- The opposite RW cuts toward the goal to overload the 18y box.
- The LW can decide to act as inside support for the fullback to run toward the goal.
- The roles of the CMs is very important, as we just described before.

This situation shows how crucial the CMs' rotation is in the 1-4-4-2, to create space, to move the opposition, keeping the formation balanced.

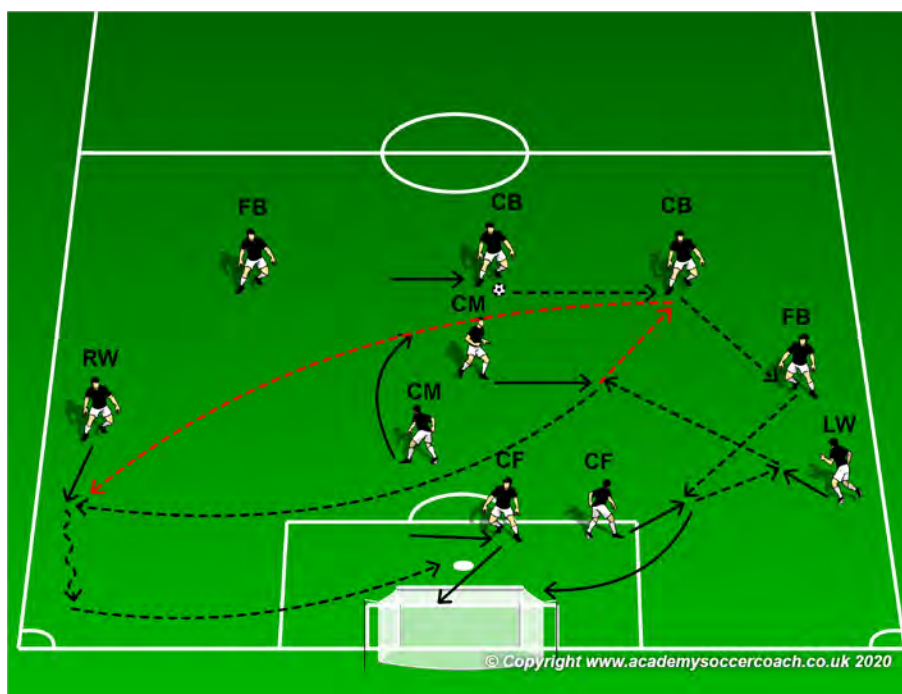


This is another classic situation of the 1-4-4-2 possession phase:

- The distribution sequence takes the LW to receive high the field.
- The CF drops slightly back with a diagonal movement to receive from the FB; the LW stands out wide to be a passing option in behind.
- If the CF decides to lay the ball back, the CMs must be aware and very quick; if the upper CM shifts across to receive, he would be probably turned toward his own goal and the attacking move could turn into another distribution phase.
- The lower CM can start from a better position, as he can see the ball carrier, the field and the potential passing options; he then shifts wide and receives from the CF.
- The LW moves forward along the flank to receive from the CM.
- The opposite CF and RW must attack the goal space to receive a possible cross pass.
- The CM who played for the LW must decide if to shape an ultra-offensive team, running off the ball toward the opposition penalty area, or if to give the team a more balance structure, standing behind the edge of the 18y box.
- The prior advanced CM, must stand in front of the back three to provide cover and balance, as we analyzed.

The 1-4-4-2 system of play allows the team to shape strong area around the ball easily, simply by shifting across or wide, depending on the ball position; as the system of play positions two players along the flanks, when a center midfielder shifts wide and a forward drops back a wide to, then four players can stand near the ball, thanks to two simple movements off the ball. The third back player who stands along the defensive line, when a fullback pushes up, can help the creation of this strong area around the ball.

The opposition is then supposed to overload the same area, opening up space along the opposite weak side, where the winger may receive having time and space on the ball and where there could be a 2 v 1 numerical advantage, if the fullback pushes up too in a ultra-offensive attacking shape (2 + 1 at the back and seven possession/attacking oriented players).

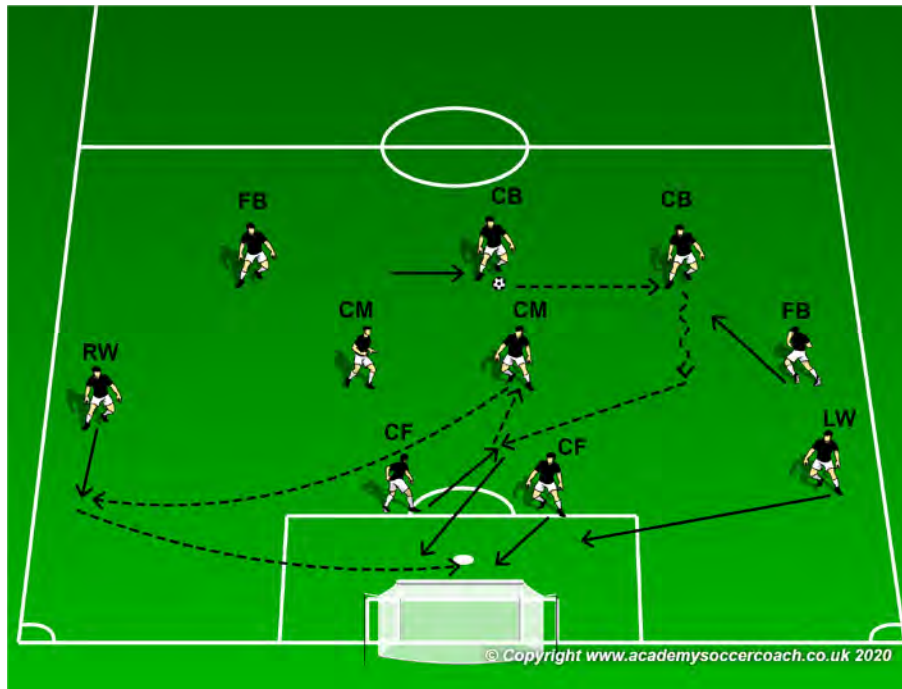


This is another classic situation of the 1-4-4-2 possession phase:

- The distribution sequence takes the LFB to receive high the field.
- The CF drops slightly back with a diagonal movement to receive from the FB; if the LW moves toward the ball, the area around it is then condensed.
- If the CF decides to lay the ball off for the LW, it is very hard or the receiver to turn and dribble along the flank, because his body is not turned toward the opposition's goal; the CMs must be aware and very quick to play as support to the attacking move.
- If the upper CM shifts across to receive, he would be probably turned toward his own goal, like the LW, and the attacking move could turn into another distribution phase.
- The lower CM can start from a better position, as he can see the ball carrier, the field and the potential passing options; he then shifts wide and receives from the LW.
- If the CM who receives has time and space on the ball, he can switch the side toward the opposite RW, who can control the pass on the run, dribble forward and play a cross pass into the box.
- If the CM who receives is under pressure, the overload area around the allows him to find a back support to lay the ball back (the CB, in this example – red arrows).
- The CB can switch the side of play toward the RW
- The CFs must move toward the box quickly to finish after receiving the cross pass.

- The prior advanced CM, must stand in front of the back three to provide cover and balance, as we analyzed.

This next sequence shows how the team can open up spaces along the flanks thanks to the zone 14 (in front of the box) overload; the CMs stand up the field, they don't drop back to receive from the CBs and they act as back supports for the CFs and they give the team an ultra-offensive shape in the final third. The CB with possession must then dribble the ball up, if the team aims to play a direct attacking pattern of play; the fullback retreats to cover the CB's position.

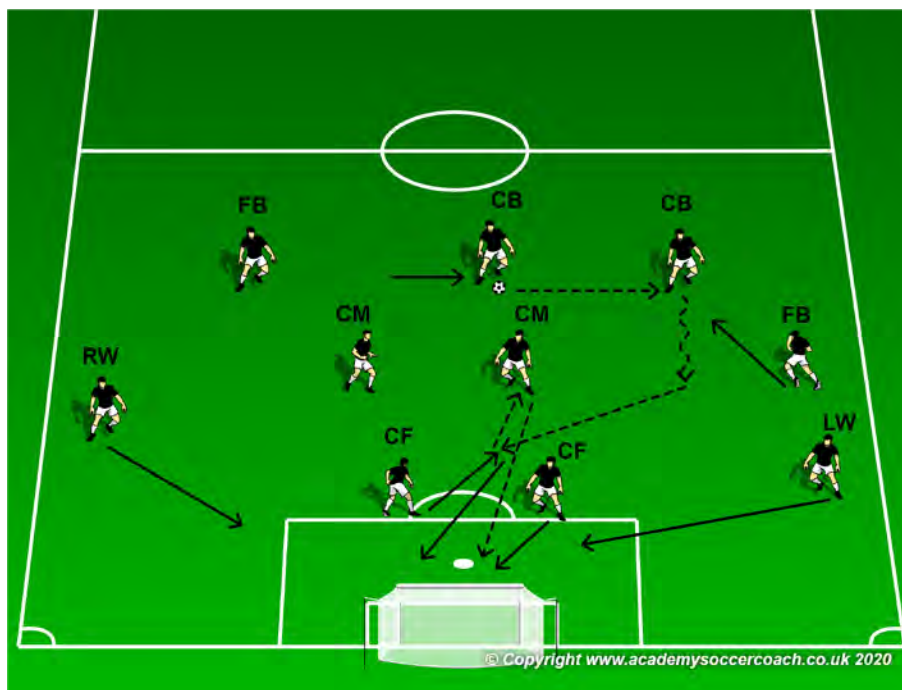


- The left CB dribbles the ball high up the field; meanwhile the LW, who is standing along the same flank decides move inside toward the goal, overloading the opposition's box.
- As the opposition is supposed to condense the center to defend the goal, spaces are opened up along the flank, but the only winger who can receive is standing on the opposite side.
- Quick passing combination in the center can be useful to invite the defenders out of their positions and to invite the opposition midfielders toward the center too, giving time and space for the wide attackers.
- One of the CF drops back and checks away from the defense line to receive from the CB and lays the ball back to one of the CM, who is positioned very high on the field.
- The CM receives and switches side of play quickly toward the RW, who is supposed to have time and space on the ball; if can't dribble the ball up along the flank, he should be able to play a cross pass toward the box, where the CFs and the LW can finish.

The CMs must win necessarily the second times of the balls, as the back three don't have any protection in front of them.

These next two sequences show others usual attacking and finishing solutions in the 1-4-4-2: the CFs' or CMs' runs off the and in behind the opposition's defense line when the team overloads the zone 14, in front of the 18 y box.

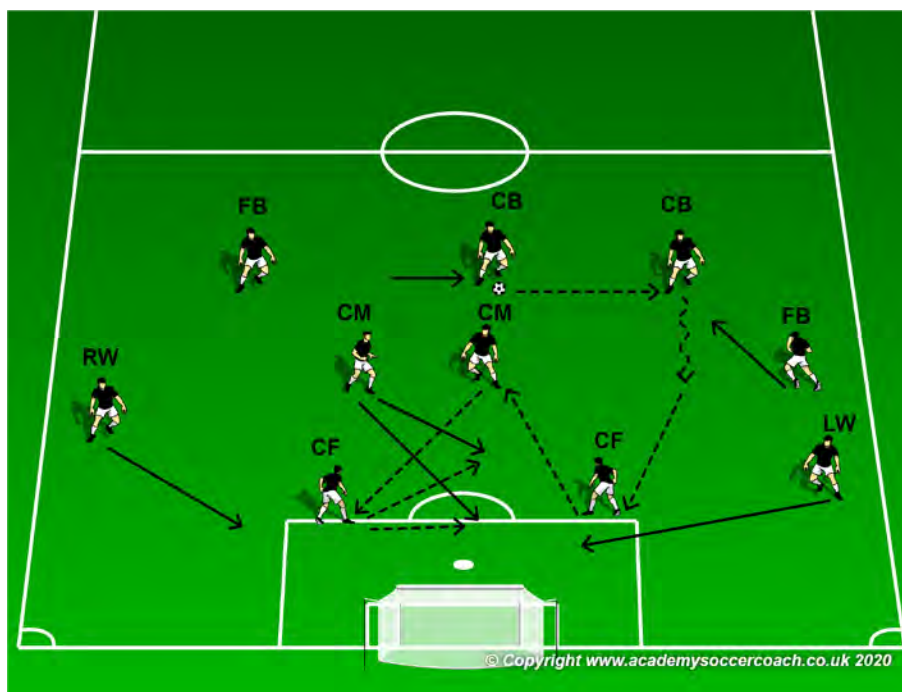
This first sequence is about the classic combination of movement between the forwards; the first one drops back to combine, the second one runs in behind the defense line to receive a through pass from a midfielder, a winger or even from the first forward. The CMs stand up the field, they don't drop back to receive from the CBs and they act as back supports for the CFs and they give the team an ultra-offensive shape in the final third. The CB with possession must then dribble the ball up, if the team aims to play a direct attacking pattern of play; the fullback retreats to cover the CB's position and both the wingers attack the opposition penalty area.



- The left CB dribbles the ball high up the field; meanwhile the LW, who is standing along the same flank decides move inside toward the goal, overloading the opposition's box.
- As the opposition is supposed to condense the center to defend the goal, spaces are opened up along the flank, but the only winger who can receive is standing on the opposite side.
- Quick passing combination in the center can be useful to invite the defenders out of their positions and to invite the opposition midfielders toward the center too, giving time and space for the wide attackers.
- One of the CF drops back and checks away from the defense line to receive from the CB and lays the ball back to one of the CM, who is positioned very high on the field.
- The second CF moves to receive on the run and inside the penalty area.
- Both the wingers overload the area around the ball to control potential rebounds.

The CMs must win necessarily the second times of the balls, as the back three don't have any protection in front of them.

This second sequence is about the passing combinations among the forwards and the center midfielders to allow these last to run and receive in behind the opposition defense line or to shot on goal just out of the penalty area; the finishing stage depends from the compactness of the last opposition line. The CMs stand up the field, they don't drop back to receive from the CBs and one of them acts as back support for the CFs, the second one moves towards the defenders' line and they give the team an ultra-offensive shape in the final third. The CB with possession must then dribble the ball up, if the team aims to play a direct attacking pattern of play; the fullback retreats to cover the CB's position and both the wingers attack the opposition penalty area.



- The left CB dribbles the ball high up the field; meanwhile the LW, who is standing along the same flank decides move inside toward the goal, overloading the opposition's box.
- As the opposition is supposed to condense the center to defend the goal, spaces are opened up along the flank, but the only winger who can receive is standing on the opposite side.
- Quick passing combination in the center can be useful to invite the defenders out of their positions and to invite the opposition midfielders toward the center too, giving time and space for the wide attackers.
- When one of the CFs receives from the CB, he lays the ball back to the nearer CM, who plays forward again to the second CF.
- This pass is the trigger for the second CM to run forward and receive:
- A lay off pass to shot on goal, if the defenders' line is pressing aggressively and it's compact in the center
- To run in behind the defenders' line, receiving in behind the line, if there is a gap along the last opposition line.
- Both the wingers overload the area around the ball to control potential rebounds.

The CM who doesn't run up must win necessarily the second times of the balls, as the back three don't have any protection in front of them.

WIDTH: the team attempts to stretch the opponent's defensive shape, making the field as big as possible to create space, inviting the defenders out of their compact shape they have created to cover the dangerous areas in front of goal. The team in possession moves the ball to change the point of attack and to create gaps between or behind the defense. Width is strictly connected to mobility in terms of sideways support for the ball carrier and with depth, if we think about up and down runs of the fullbacks and wingers and it is crucial to stretch the opponent's defensive compactness:

- If the defense remains compact in center area of the field, then there will be more opportunity to attack down the wings.

Opposition is compact and is pressing in the center of the final and middle third; there is space along the flanks to play out through quick patterns of play.



When the opposition forwards create numerical advantage against the CBs (3 v 2 in the final third), the fullbacks should have space and time on the ball to receive. The wingers should have the same freedom, if the opponents try to create numerical advantage against the CMs (3 v 2 in the middle third).

- If a fullback receives with the right body shape and he is turned toward the flank and the winger in front of him, a direct pass is possible (black arrows).

When the opposition forwards create numerical advantage against the CBs (3 v 2 in the final third), the fullbacks should space and time on the ball to receive. The wingers don't have the same freedom, if the one opponent tries to close the direct passing lane along the flank; in this situation a 2 v 2 duel in the center allow more freedom for the CMs, who can drop back and move forward to stretch the defensive shape of the opposition midfielder.

- If the further CM drops back with the right timing, he can look at the space at his side, receive from the FB, even if a marker is tracking him, and he can play a pass on the winger's path, exploiting the space that the first pressing opponent has left free at his back; if the opposition fullback is not well positioned to counter the winger, the receiver can dribble the ball up the field.

Opposition defends with a compact shape in the first third.



When the defense line stands along the edge of the 18 y box together with the holding midfielder and the three other players are closing the passing lanes toward the center, screening the passing options for the ball carrier.

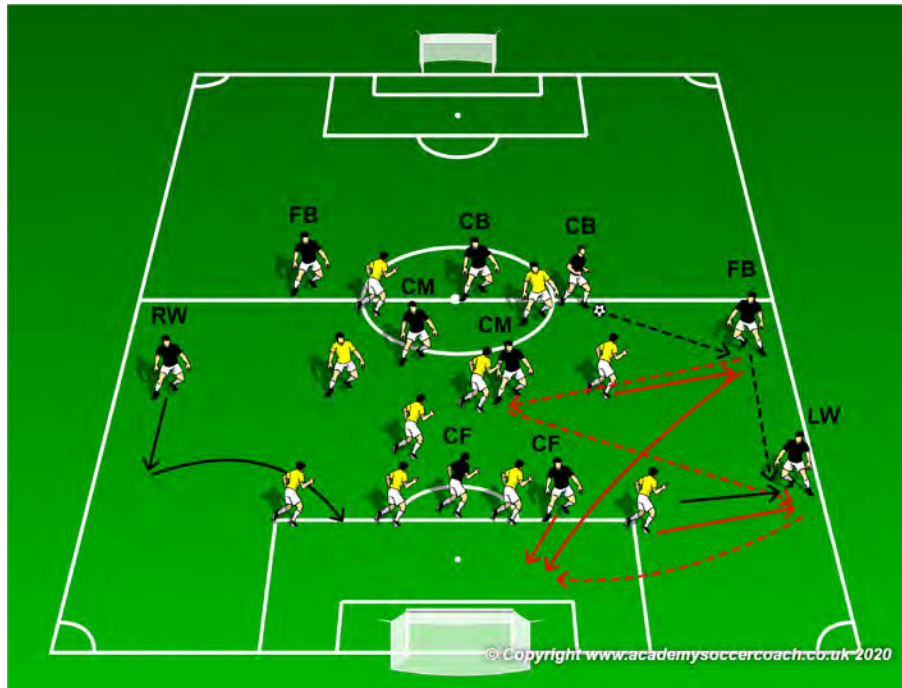
- If a fullback receives with the right body shape and he is turned toward the flank and the winger in front of him, a direct pass is possible (black arrows); the winger can receive and dribble the ball higher up the field. The opposite winger can cut inside and support the CFs to finish inside the penalty area.

When the defense line stands along the edge of the 18 y box together with the holding midfielder and the three other players are closing the passing lanes toward the center, screening the passing options for the ball carrier when the CB has the ball, at the beginning. Still, one player moves out of position to press the fullback, a center passing option toward the center to the CM should be available.

- If a fullback receives with the right body shape and he is turned toward the flank and the winger in front of him, but the opposition outer midfielder is pressing him while receiving and he is closing the forward direct passing lane, the winger can receive from the CM, who shifts wide to be a passing option for the fullback, acting as a link player (red arrows).
 - If the opposition fullback stands along the defense line, maintaining the distance from the nearest center back, the LW has time and space to dribble the ball higher up the field (black arrow).
 - If the opposition fullback brakes the line and moves out to try to close the winger, the FB can create a 2 v 1 duel, overlapping at speed along the flank to receive from the LW. The opposition's center back must now decide if to move out to close the FB, creating another gap in the defense line, or if to defend the 6 y box, allowing the FB to play a cross pass.

The same kind of action is possible with an underlap run of the FB; the opponent must decide if to press the ball carrier (LW), allowing the FB to move behind him or if to cover the space in front of the FB, leaving time and space on the ball for the LF. The opposition CB finds the same

issue, when he must counter the FB or the LW, as he must decide if to brake or not the defense line.



When the defense line stands along the edge of the 18 y box together with the holding midfielder and the three other players are closing the passing lanes toward the center, screening the passing options for the ball carrier when the CB has the ball, at the beginning. Still, one player moves out of position to press the fullback, a center passing option toward the center to the CM should be available.

- If a FB receives with the right body shape and he is turned toward the flank and the winger in front of him, but the opposition outer midfielder is pressing him while receiving, closing the forward direct passing lane, the winger can receive from the CM, who acts as a link player (red arrows). The winger has shifted wide previously, while the ball was traveling front the FB to the CM.
- If the opposition fullback brakes the line and moves out to try to close the winger, the FB can create a 2 v 1 duel, underlapping at speed to receive from the LW. The opposition's center back must now decide if to move out to close the FB, creating another gap in the defense line that the CF can exploit, or if to defend the 6 y box, countering the FB inside the box and allowing the LW to play a cross pass.

- If the defense block create a strong area near the ball down one flank, a weak area should appear along the opposite one that could be exploited with a quick switch of play.



The opposition tries to create a duel with numerical advantage around the ball, in this example: the center forward counters the CB with possession, the right forward is marking the FB, the center holding midfielder is closing the forward passing lanes toward the center and the left midfielder has shifted across the center to counter the advanced CM. The opposition defense line stands along the edge of the penalty box and the right midfielder has dropped back to counter the LW.

The opposition creates a 3 v 2 and a 4 v 3 duels along the defensive right flank.

The possession team can progress the attacking move, playing at the back of the condensed area with antithetical combination of runs off the ball performed by the players who stands just out of the ball zone.

1. As the FB receives under pressure from the CB, the LW drops back arching his run toward the center of the field and behind the condensed area.
2. The LW receives and one CM runs forward off the ball to receive, cutting off the pressing opponents; if the opposition is not compact and it leaves space between the lines, the CM can dribble the ball toward the opposition goal.
3. If the CM is under pressure, he can exploit the space that should appear along the opposition weak side, passing the ball to the opposite winger, who has time and space on the ball to dribble it higher up the field.

- If the defense block put pressure through 1 v 1 duels along the flanks and stay compact in front of the penalty area, short passing combinations through the center should concentrate the center backs around the ball area; they may open gaps between them and the nearest FB that the winger could exploit.

The opposition tries to create 1 v 1 duels with numerical advantage around the ball out wide, in this example: the center forward counters the CB with possession, the right forward is marking the FB, and a double line 4 + 3 stay narrow in front of the penalty area.

The opposition creates a 3 v 2 and a 4 v 3 duels along the defensive right flank.

The possession team can progress the attacking phase, moving the opposition lines with quick up and down passing combinations among the CMs and the CFs, to switch the point of attack.

1. As the FB receives under pressure from the CB, the LW drops back arching his run toward the center of the field and behind the duels' area.
 2. The LW receives and one CM runs forward off the ball to receive between the two nearer opponents near the ball; he receives the lay back pass from the first CF, who the LW played toward before. This first up/down combination should force the defenders and the midfielders to step forward and retreat following the ball position, creating gaps among them.
 3. The first CM and the second CF repeat the sequence again to play to the second CM who runs forward off the ball, to try to overcome the first defensive line.
- If gaps appear between the defenders, the opposite wingers can run in behind and off the ball to receive at the back of the defenders. In this example, the RW runs up the flank and then cut inside between the opposition center back and fullback, receiving from the CM.



The CMs must win necessarily the second times of the balls, as the back three don't have any protection in front of them.

- If the defense spreads out to counter the attacking team, then passing lanes are created, allowing penetration.



In this example, the opposition's left winger closes down the path toward the defensive line to the RW; the CM can try to beat on timing the opposition's CB and FB, playing a through pass for the RW, who cuts inside from the blind side of the fullback, who is supposed to look at the ball to counter then passing combinations sequence.



If the gap between the FB and the CB doesn't allow any through pass, the opposite RW can play as wide support for the CM who receives. The opposition defenders must decide quickly how to react; and each reaction opens a gap, if the possession players are quick enough to exploit it:

1. If the FB stands still to cover the CM's run, the RW can dribble the ball toward the penalty area.
2. If the FB runs out to counter the RW when he receives, he creates a gap between him and the CB that the CM can exploit to overcome the defensive line off the ball and to receive a diagonal pass from the RW.
3. If the opposition center backs don't shift across with the right timing, when they try to cover the CM and to maintain the distance between them, the CFs can exploit the gaps that may appear along the defenders' line.

PENETRATION and **DEPTH** are the act of breaking through the defense lines to move the ball forward by dribbling, passing, combining between the lines with killer passes, shooting. The players are asked to be technically skilled and quick in decision-making. Depth movements in the 1-4-4-2 usually involve the center forwards, at least one center midfielder and the one or both the wingers. These are the main patterns of play we may watch a team carrying out:

1. Combining along the flank to penetrate the opposition defense sideways to play cross passes toward the box.



4. A center midfielder runs off the ball to receive in behind the defense line from a center forward or a center midfielder.



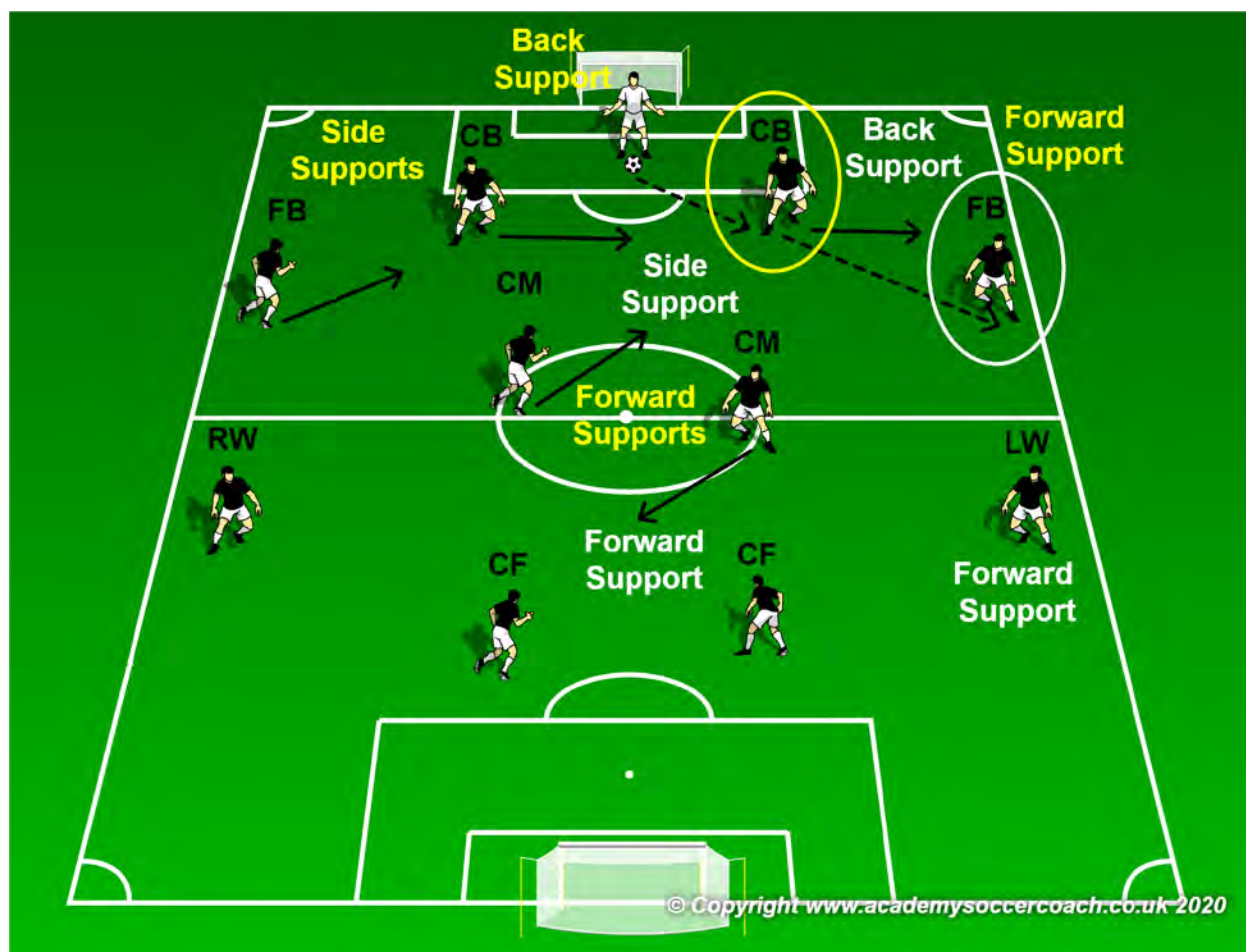
SUPPORT: all the ball carriers, in any situation of play need help to maintain possession or to progress the attacking move, creating space, options and passing angles forward, at the back or sideways the player in possession. 1-4-4-2 asks the players to move with right timing and coordination to create support passing options throughout the field. If these movements are made in the right way, the system of play shows all his points of strength:

- Balance: the team can control the space at any time of the game both with and without the ball. The team can make the field big thanks to the couple of players along the flank and deep, thanks to the center forwards when in possession. The players can get narrower quickly when they lose possession.
- Elasticity: the starting flat nature ensure the team the chance to adapt the shapes on the field to any opponent, both during possession and defending phases.
- Rationality: the characteristics of the players available are very important for the possession phase, but 1-4-4-2 requires basic movements to organize an efficient non possession phase. The players can constantly attack the opponents, occupying the spaces well at the back, many passing lanes can be created out wide. The team with possession can create width and depth quickly and with few movements, even just after the recovery of the ball.

Support play is the principles of play that best shows the rationality of the 1-4-4-2; every players with the ball has usually a back and side safe passing options, thanks to the disposition and the specific rotations; again, the players don't need complicated movements to ensure support, but just well-coordinated runs in relation to the ball position that can guarantee passing and attacking options and balance and cover at the back.

From this point of view, 1-4-4-2 is much more than placing two defensive line behind the ball line and counter-attacking after the ball recovery.

Support positioning in the building up phase:



Player with the ball	Back Support/s	Side support/s	Forward Support/s
Center back	Goalkeeper	2 nd center back Opposite fullback	Nearest fullback Center midfielders
Fullback	Nearest center back	Holding center midfielder	Advanced midfielder

Support positioning in the possession phase:



Player with the ball	Back Support/s	Side support/s	Forward Support/s
Holding center midfielder	Goalkeeper and 3 defenders at the back	Advanced fullback Opposite winger (if drops back)	Advanced midfielder Wingers
Winger	Fullback Holding center midfielder	Advanced midfielder center midfielder	Center forwards

Support positioning in the finishing phase:

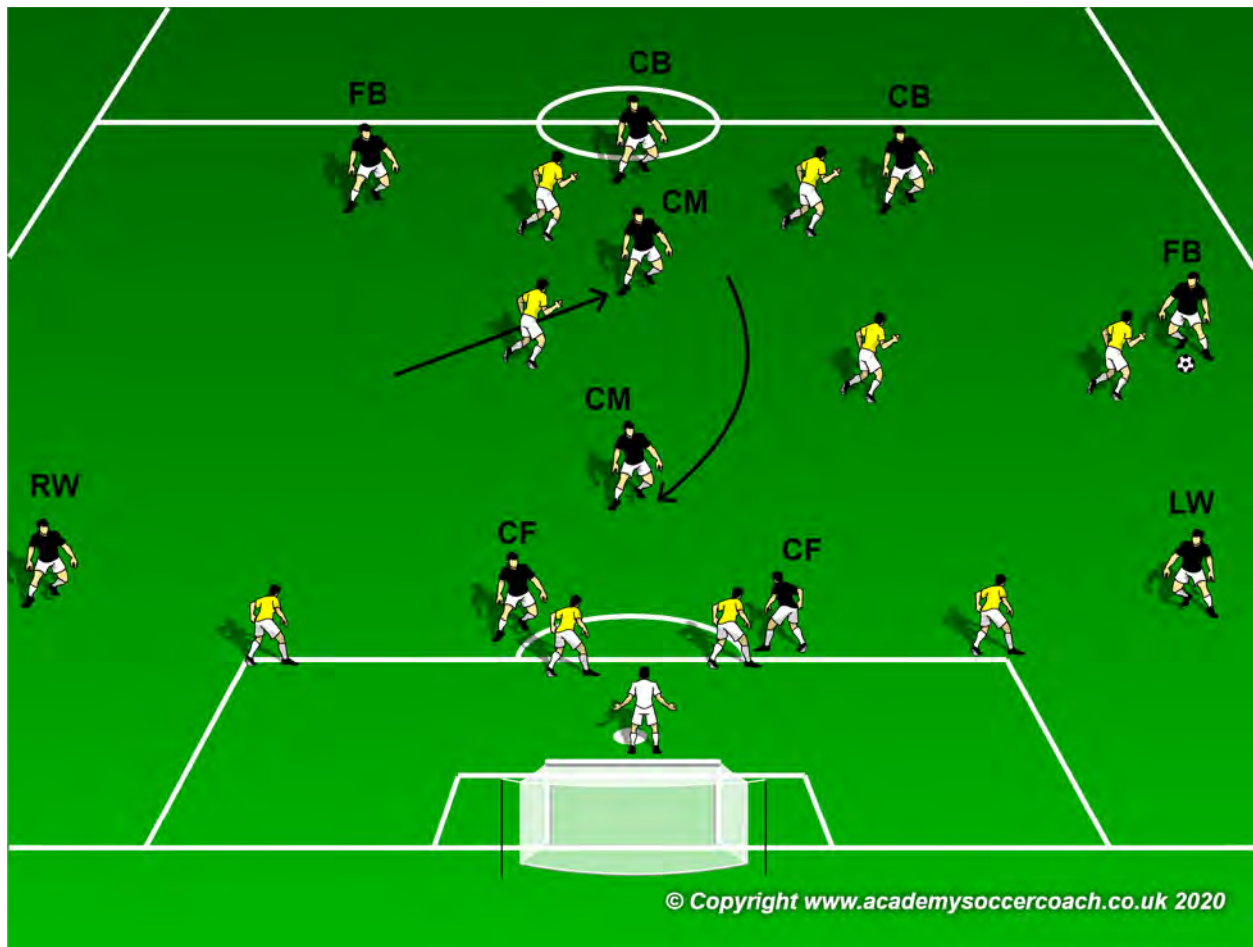


Player with the ball	Back Support/s	Side support/s	Forward Support/s
Advanced center midfielder	Back 4 Center holding midfielder	Wingers (if stand along the same line) Center holding midfielder (if pushes up)	Center forwards Wingers (if they push up)
Center forwards	Advanced midfielder Wingers	The other forward Wingers	Wingers (if they push up)

CREATIVITY: attackers try to break down defenses through surprise, individual actions or passing combination among advanced players in the attacking third of the field. The main weakness point that 1-4-4-2 seems to show during attacking phases of play is the lack of proper No.10 in the lineup, who can play as connection between the midfield and the forwards and who can play between the opposition's defensive line and who can be free from defensive tasks.

Basically, there are three ways to fix this issue:

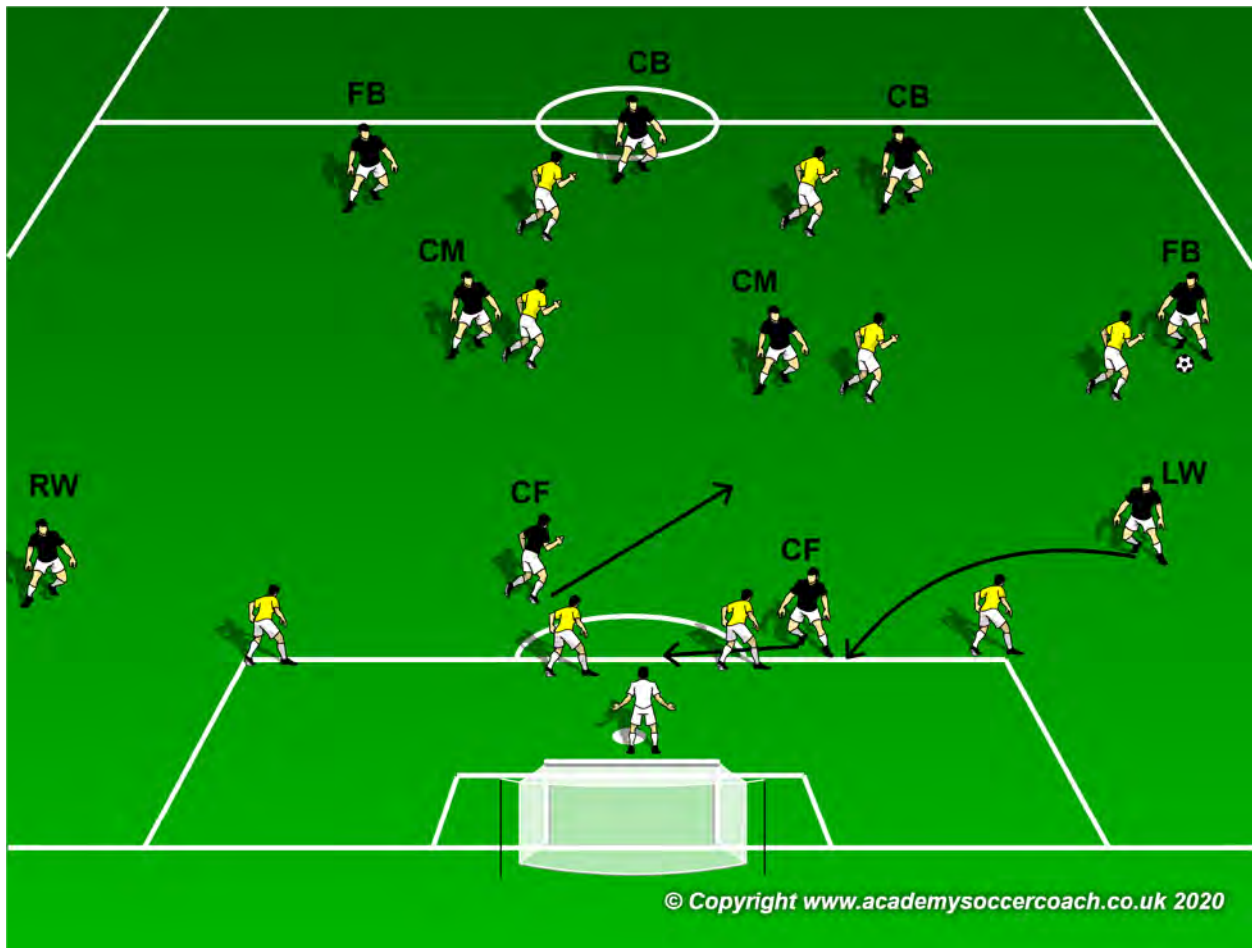
- 1) Center midfielders' rotation inside the attacking half.



As the opposition defense is organized inside the first third, the center midfielders rotate to position themselves as a lower holding midfielder and an advanced No.10

The wingers stand out wide, if the center midfielders rotate, to be passing options for the teammate in between the lines.

2) One dropping back forward between the lines.



As the opposition defense is organized inside the first third, one of the center forwards to position himself as a No.10.

The second center forward shift slightly wider, toward the side of the wide winger to create space for the incoming teammate.

The nearer winger to the ball runs inside off the ball to act as second forwards; the opposite one stands out wide to play as target player of a potential switch of side.

3) Attacking Organization: all the next pages analyze all the possible team shapes to fix the issue of a proper No.10, looking at all the potential coordinated movements of the players that make the 1-4-4-2 so flexible.

Players' rotations to create attacking options: from 1-4-4-2 to other systems of play and formations' shapes

Counter-attacks are one of the landmarks of the 1-4-4-2 teams; it is built up for counter-attacks and speed of play, but they are not the only ones. This system of play opens many attacking options when a coach is willing to study it more in-depth than it's commonly done and if there is the desire and the patience to work on players' rotations and exchanges of positions. The second and third crucial factors are the balanced possession and attacking phases and the variety of possible attacking shapes that give the ball carriers many wide and deep passing options.

During the last ten years, after Guardiola's tactical revolution, the 1-4-4-2 seems to be a replacement, a lifeline when another system of play doesn't work well, and it doesn't bring results. Coaches seem to think, "Let's go back to 1-4-4-2, as it is basic and easy to understand." It could be considered as a safe system of play, as the formation requires and develops clear principles and each player has specific tasks

As we analyzed in the 1-4-4-2 defending volume, only Leicester City (2015/2016 English Premier League Champion with 81 pts., after the 2014/2015 season 14th place in the table, with 41 pts.) and Atletico Madrid (2013/2014 - 2015/2016 Champions League finals' runner up, 2013/2014 La Liga winner and 2011/2012 and 2017/2018 Europa League winner), adopted and improved this system of play with success. Aggressive and deep defense phase and counter-attacks are the landmarks of both these teams.

Coaches look at 1-4-4-2 as on old and even ineffective system of play to attack the opposition; but it is not entirely true, or it is not true at all, because of its flexibility. On the other side, 1-4-4-2 is easy to understand and implement to attack and to be dangerous for the opposition despite sophisticated passing lanes and angles are hard to find without well-coordinated players' movements off the ball, which are, instead, offered by more modern and attacking minded systems.

From flat 1-4-4-2...



...To diamond 1-4-4-2 (1-4-3-1-2) while building up; one center midfielder becomes an holding player in front of the back four, and the other one becomes an advanced midfielder (he can be a No.10, as role). The wingers usually have to stay close to center in narrower positions...



...To 1-4-1-3-2 (or 1-3-1-3-3) to finish: from the previous formation, the wingers or the wide midfielders move up the field along the flank to provide width and cross passes for the forwards and 4 players stand at the back to provide defensive cover together with the holding midfielder (one fullback can stand along the holding midfielder shaping a 1-3-2 at the back).

If one fullback moves up the field until the final third and a winger runs inside along the forwards' line, the attacking shape becomes a 1-3-1-3-3.



From 1-4-3-1-2 to 1-4-3-2-1 while building up: the midfield sector becomes a classic 3 man shape, with an holding player in front of the back four and two wider teammates. The team now plays with two advanced midfielders, who can play as forwards also, together with the center one, behind him or beside him.

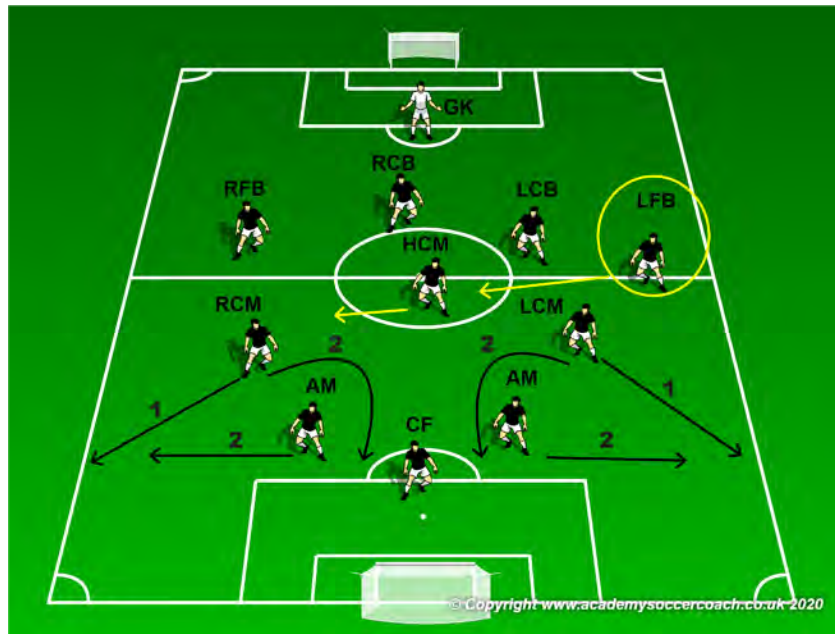


...To 1-4-1-4-1 to finish: from the previous formation, the center final third is condensed, but there are few chances to play out wide. A line of 4 four players can be shaped behind the center forward:

- The right and left midfielders shifts wide beside the attacking midfielders
- The advanced midfielders move out wide and the right and left midfielder moves up toward the center and along the same line of the other two teammates.



...Or to 1-3-2-4-1 to finish: a fullback can act as defensive inverted fullback, moving toward the center to help the holding midfielder, who shifts slightly wider to shape a 2 players middle third line. This way the center first third is better protected.



From 1-4-3-1-2 to 1-4-3-3 to build up (a); both the forwards shift wide to play as wide attackers beside the advanced midfielder who runs up the field as center forward; they shape an advanced line of three.



The wingers are positioned in the center in front of the holding midfielder and they act as balance midfielders, during possession phases.

From 1-4-3-1-2 to 1-4-3-3 to build up (b): the advanced midfielder and the second forward shift wide, shaping a line of three with the center forward.



From 1-4-3-3 to 1-3-2-2-3 to finish: whatever the movements off the ball to shape the attacking formations are, the 1-4-3-3 during possession phase can become a 1-3-2-2-3 to finish the moves, maintaining the team compact and balanced, despite being very offensive. A fullback can act as defensive inverted fullback, moving toward the center to help the holding midfielder, who shifts slightly wider to shape a 2 players middle third line. This way the center first third is better protected and the outer midfielders can move up the field at the back of the 3 forwards to shape a 2-3 attacking sector.



A 2 - 2 square shapes the middle third in these situations which is useful to invite the opponents toward the ball area in this zone of the field, opening spaces out wide for the players who are acting as wingers and who can receive free from markers at least for a while.

From 1-4-3-2-1 to 1-4-2-3-1 to build-up:

1. The midfielder sector loses the unique holding midfielder, who becomes an advanced center player and the other attacking midfielders shift wide to become wide attackers. The outer midfielders become center players in front of the back four.
2. One of the outer midfielders becomes an advanced center player, and the holding midfielder takes his place, shaping a two center players line in front of the back four.



From 1-4-2-3-1 to 1-3-1-4-2 to finish: when one fullback supports the finishing stage of the moves, the wide forward along that side moves toward the center beside the center forward to create space for the teammate. Three players at the back shift wide to maintain a line of three at the back and to cover the space that is left free by the fullback. One of the center midfielders can support the attacking move, pushing up off the ball along the second three players line, shaping a four players lines back to the forwards. The attacking formation is very offensive, but it remains balanced.



From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-5 (1-4) -2 to build up: when a fullback pushes up the flank, three players at the back shift across to shape a last 3 men defense line. The winger of the side where the fullback is pushing up, usually shift across the center, creating space for the fullback and allowing the nearest center midfielder to drop back in front of the three defenders in the center.



From 1-3-5 (1-4) -2 to build up to:

1-3-1-2-4 (1 - finishing phase): one fullback runs inside as defensive inverted fullback along the same line of the other outer midfielder and the advanced midfielder moves up along the forwards' line.

1-3-1-3-3 (2 - finishing phase): the fullback moves up off the ball along the same line of the opposite outer midfielder and of the advanced one, who stands at the back of the three forwards.



The three players at the back and the holding midfielder stand still in their position in both cases.

From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-4-3: when a fullback pushes up the flank, three players at the back shift across to shape a last 3 men defense line. The winger of the side where the fullback is pushing up can play further up the field if the fullback stops his run in the middle third (1), or the winger shifts across the center to create space for the teammate if he run toward the final third. One forward (the opposite one) shifts wide to try to stretch the opposition defensive line.



From 1-3-4-3 to build up to 1-3-1-2-4 to finish: both wingers support the center forwards (or one fullback along one flank together with the opposite winger, if the along the fullback's flank moves inside toward the center) and a line of four attackers is placed along the opposition defense, with two support players at the back, shaping a 6 six players' disposition to attack the oppositions' first third.



The three players at the back and the holding midfielder stand still in their position in both cases.

From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-1-3-3: when a fullback runs inside as inverted fullback, the winger of the same side can push along the forwards' line and one of the forwards (the opposite one) shift wide

to try to stretch the opposition defensive line. The center midfielder of the inverted fullback's side becomes a holding player; the opposite winger stands along the midfield line.



From 1-3-1-3-3 to build up to 1-2-3-5 to finish; as a fullback becomes a defensive inverted fullback, moving off the ball toward the center, one midfielder can push up along the attacking line, as the wingers do. These movements require the center forward to move a little wider (or at least one of them) to open up spaces in the center area of the opposition for the incoming midfielder. The second center midfielder stands still in position after shifting wide slightly to cover the space the sector's teammate has left free.



From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-3-4 to build up: when a fullback runs inside as inverted fullback, the winger of the same side can push along the forwards' line and one of the forwards (the opposite one) shift wide to try to stretch the opposition defensive line. The center midfielder of the inverted fullback's side becomes a holding player; the opposite winger pushes up to stand along the attackers' line.



From 1-3-3-4 to 1-3-2-5 to finish: the fullback helps the building up phase first and the wingers are allowed to push up and wide and when three team is ready to try to finish, the inverted fullback pushes up again along the front four line. The center midfielder shift across the center to shape a two player balance line in front of the back three who stand in their positions after the shifting across movement at the beginning.



One center midfielder may push up, instead the fullback to shape the same line of five; in this situation the fullback remains in the center as balance player together with the other center midfielder.