

# 4-2-3-1

## ATTACKING



**FORMATION  
SERIES**

# 4 – 2 – 3 – 1

# Attacking

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## Introduction

The 1-4-2-3-1 system of play offers a wide range of different game plans, as the players shape 4 starting lines on the field and the four attacking positions in front of the two center midfielders there ensure many options for possession and attacking phases, providing numerous passing angles to exploit, creating different patterns of play (everything depends on the creativity of the attacking players on and off the ball). It can be considered as an evolution or a development of the 1-4-3-3, making the holding midfielder an advanced pivot (advanced midfielder or second striker) and asking the outer midfielders to be positioned more centrally...



...or a development of the 1-4-4-2, as 1 forward is positioned behind the striker, and the wingers play in a more attacking minded way



The wide range of potential different styles which are linked to this system of play and the



variations within a single match, depending on the phase in which the team is involved in, are the reasons why the 1-4-2-3-1 formation has been so popular during recent years. As instance, during the attacking phases it can be shaped as:

- A 1-4-2-1-3 during building up/possession phases...



- ...A 1-3-3-1-3 during the attacking phases...



- ...Or a 1-4-4-1-1 during defense phases



The 4-2-3-1 can be hard to face because usually a player or 2 are easily positioned in every part of the field by the possession team, mainly in the center and throughout the middle third; the starting 5 players in that area create 2 lines or positional triangles around the ball that usually ensure numerical advantage, defense balance thanks to the center midfielders and many attacking solutions thanks to the 3 advanced midfielders.



The positional play organization is made easy by the starting positioning of the players, who are not forced to make too deep or too wide movements to create options for the teammate with possession, just staying in their positions.



Looking at the developments of the possession and attacking phases, other combinations of triangular positional play become very clear:

- When building up...



1. Goalkeeper + center back and fullback (black cycles).
2. Center back + fullback and outer midfielder (white cycles).
3. Midfield trio (yellow cycle).
4. Advanced midfielder + winger and center forward (blue cycles).



- ...When attacking.



1. Goalkeeper + center backs, or goalkeeper + center back and one wide fullback (black cycles).
2. Center backs + inverted fullback and holding midfielder or center back + wide fullback + holding midfielder and outer midfielder (white cycles).
3. 3 players in the midfield and the advanced midfielder (yellow cycles).
4. Advanced midfielder + winger and center forward (blue cycles).

A decisive characteristic is to give the team many chances to overload the half spaces, inside the defending half with inverted fullback + dropping back midfielder...



...or through inverted fullback + dropping back midfielder + opposite midfielder who shifts across and the advanced midfielder just on the other side of the middle line.



The same advantage can be created inside the attacking half with the winger who runs inside, the outer midfielder who runs forward and the advanced midfielder who shifts across...



...or with the winger who runs inside, the outer midfielder who runs forward, the center forward who drops back and the advanced midfielder who runs forward to replace the CF position.

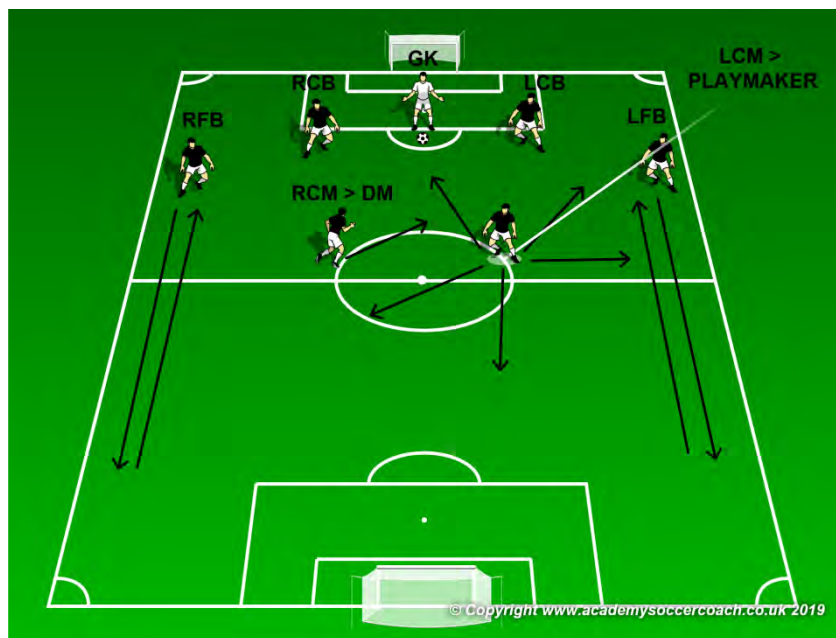


On paper, 1-4-2-3-1 formation is shaped along 4 lines as follow:

- 2 center backs line in front of the goalkeeper and 2 fullbacks who are expected to help the team's attacking phase, while also remaining solid at the back.

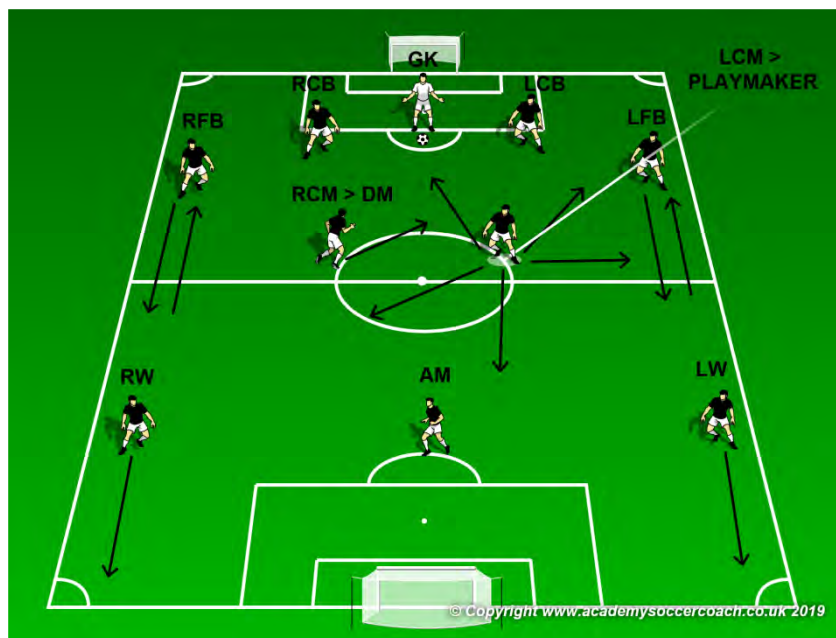


- 2 central midfielders start in front of the defenders. Their positions and style of play can vary, depending on the players available and the opposition they are facing; one deep-lying holding midfielder, who provides balance, and one play maker is the classic shape of the midfield duo.



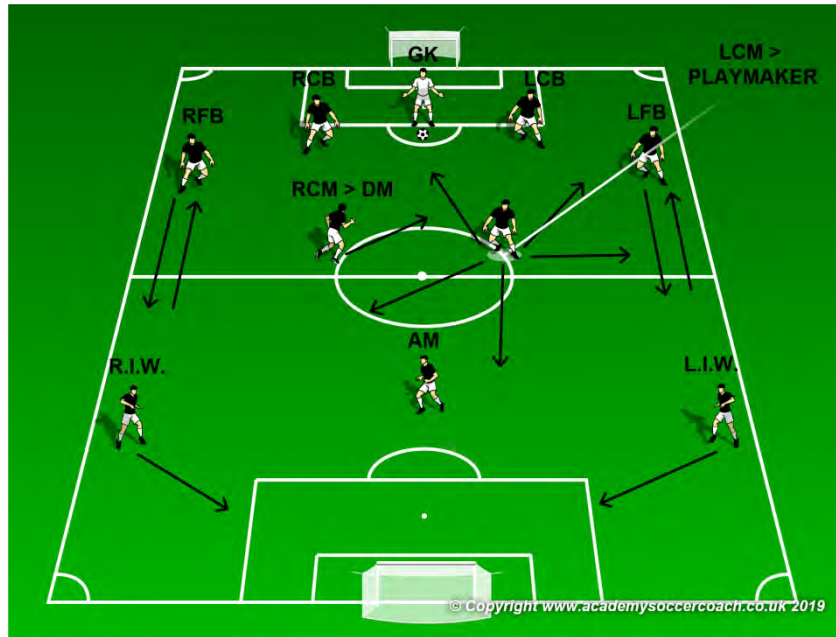
- 3 advanced midfielders are positioned in front of them up on the pitch, allowing the team to have flexibility. A mix of players with different skills can be included in the 11 starting squad in these positions, as well as substitutes, and that is the main reason why 1-4-2-3-1 is so flexible. The main difference can be found along the flanks, where wingers can play:

1. With the right foot along the sideline...

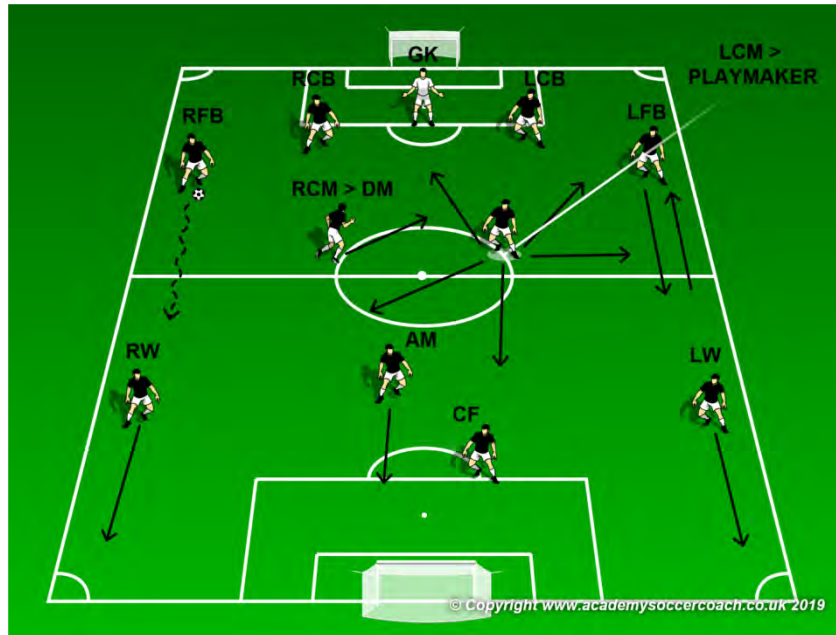


2. ...Or as inverted wingers (Bayern Munich's former wingers Franck Ribéry and Arjen Robben are maybe the most famous examples in these inverted roles).



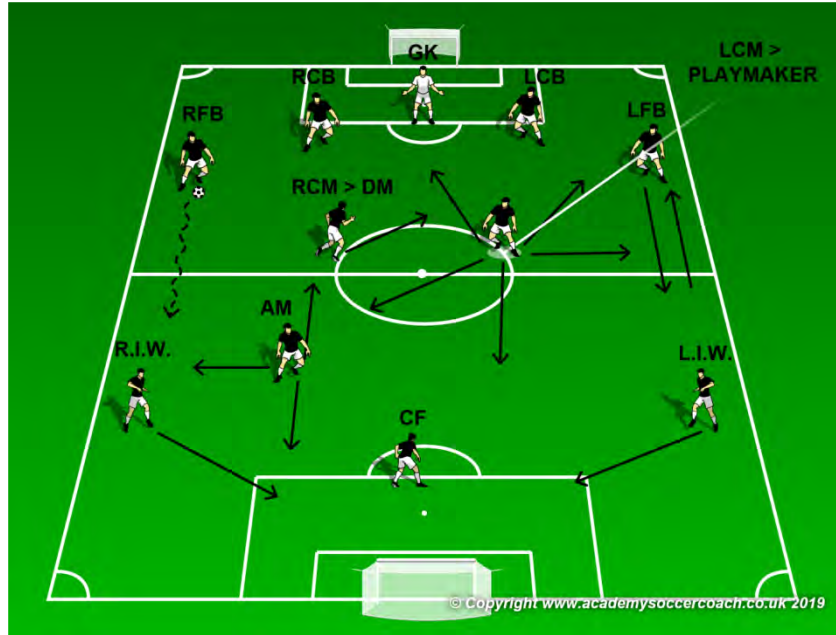


- The center advanced midfielder could be considered:
  1. As second striker behind the center one, mainly taking part to the finishing stages of the attacking moves and shaping a type of 1-4-2-4 while attacking...



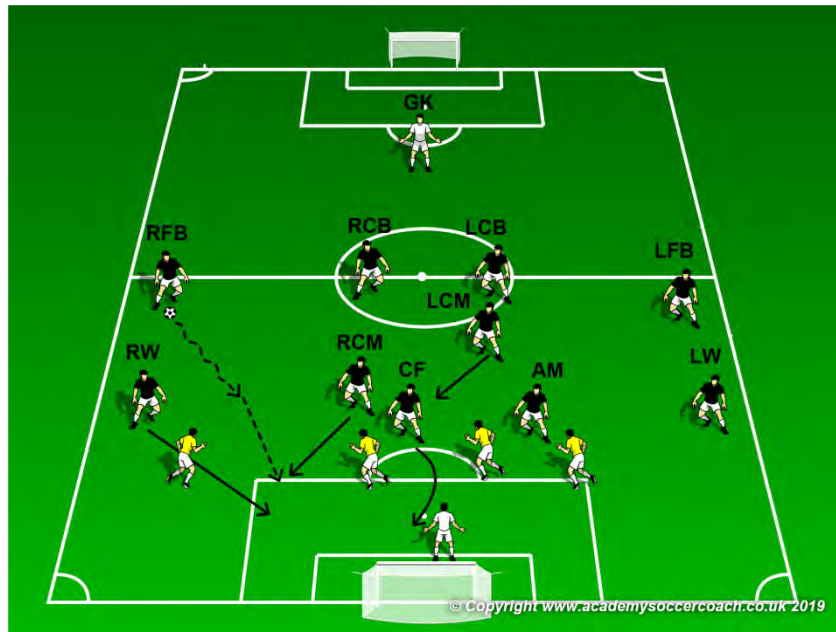


2. ...or as a second advanced play maker, if the wingers are inverted, leaving space for them in the center to dribble to or to run to shaping a midfield trio on different lines.



- The center striker either can be:

1. A quick attacker who can run in behind the opposition's defense...



2. ...A target teammate being focused on maintaining the possession to allow the other teammates to run in behind, wide or as back support...

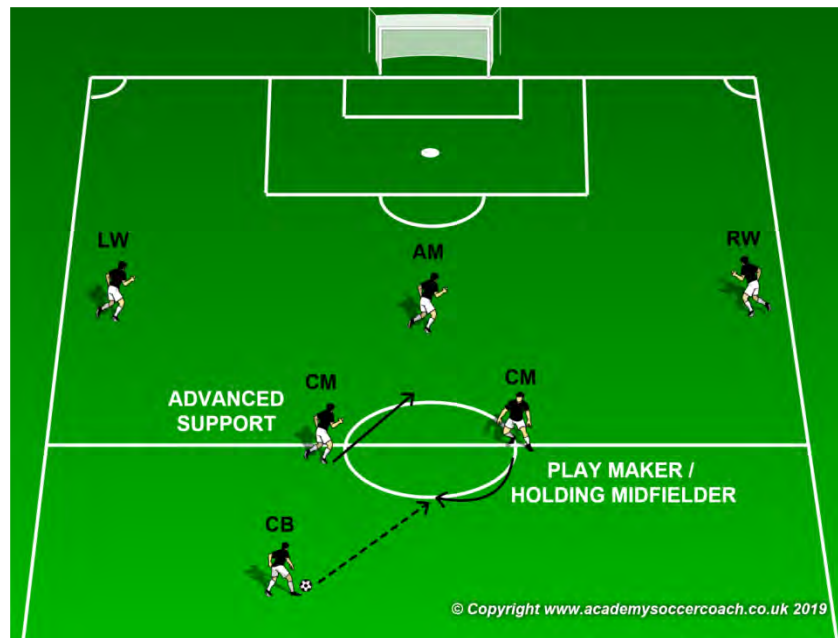


3. ...A false number 9 creating space behind for wingers or any wide teammate to run into



## Basic principles of play with the ball

1. **MOBILITY:** players run into different areas of the field while being on and off the ball in order 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 1-4-2-3-1 mobility is the key principle of play for the 5 middle third players and for the fullbacks. The center midfielders are asked to rotate to receive and to take on different tasks during possession phases.
  - One center midfielder becomes play maker, receiving a pass after a dropping back run, and holding midfielder once he has passed the ball to protect the teammates at the back, and the second one becomes an advanced support to be an option to overcome the eventual opposition pressure:



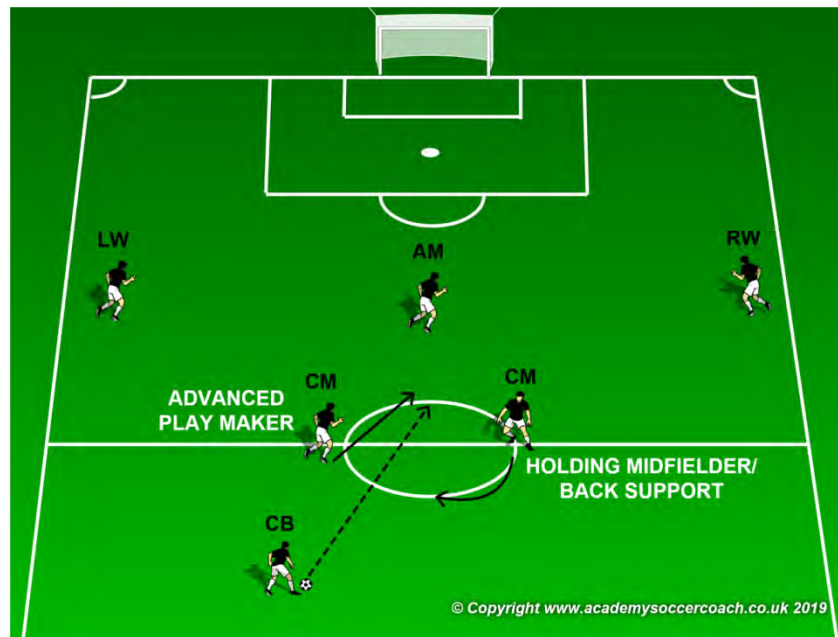
Here's an example of lower play maker with possession (Milner)...



...and of a second center midfielder who receives behind an opposition pressure line of 2 players



- If a forward penetrative pass that overcome a line of pressure is possible, the receiver becomes play maker, and the second one acts as holding midfielder to protect the teammates at the back and to be a back option to save the possession if the teammate is under pressure:

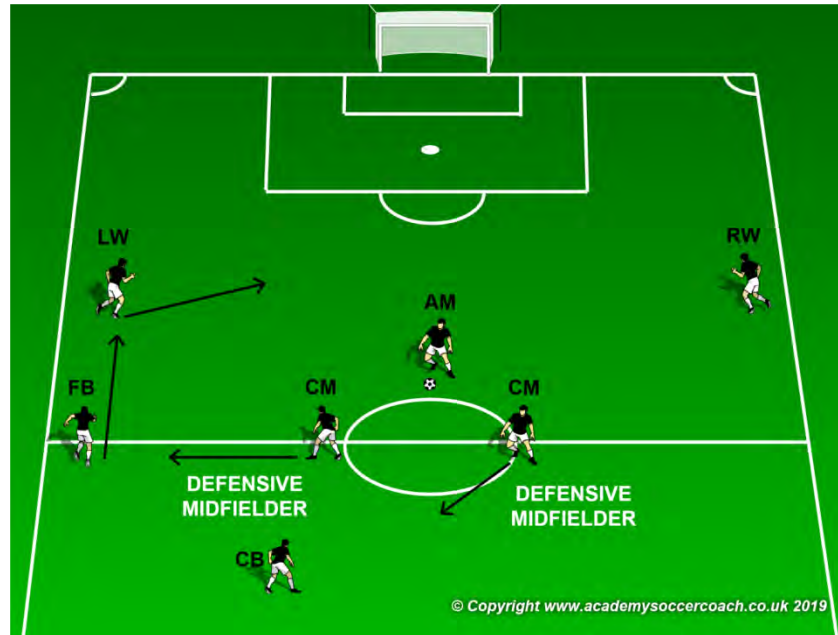


- If both midfielders have defensive tasks or skills and the advanced midfielder becomes the play maker, they must open up the space to allow the AM to receive:

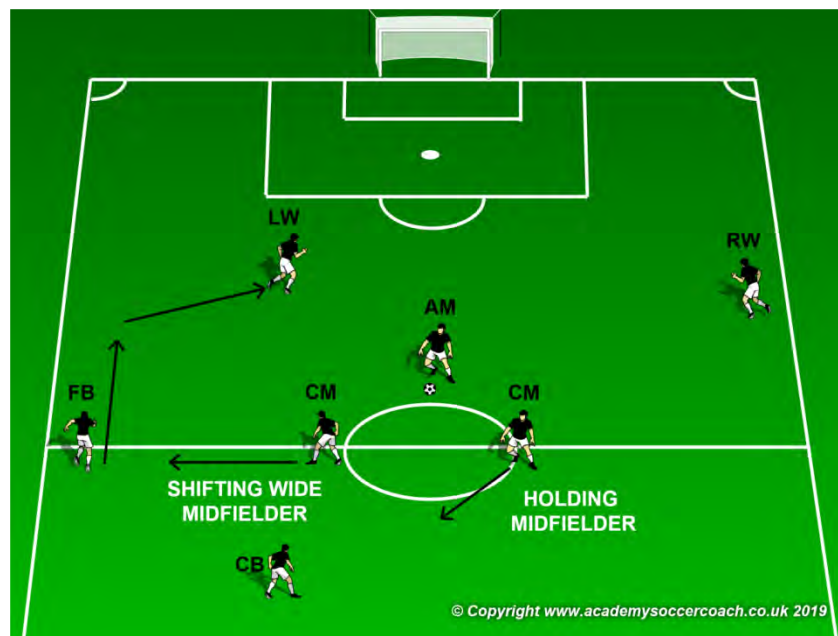




- When the advanced midfielder has the possession, after a dropping back run, a center space for the winger to move inside is supposed to be open, as well as space along the flank for the fullback.



At this point the nearest center midfielder to the fullback who pushed up should shift wider to cover the space along the flank and to be a wide passing option for the ball carrier. The further midfielder should become the holding one to save the back line and to be a back passing option for the teammate with possession.



The most explicative example of these attacking movements can be taken from Jürgen Klopp's Liverpool; despite the usual system of play for the Reds is the 1-4-3-3, the 1-4-2-3-1 is anyway a recurrent solution for Anfield's team. These movements are anyway not strictly connected to the system of play.

In this first example, the center back Van Dijk has the possession and he is looking for an option to play forward, Milner is positioned as left fullback, giving Robertson the chance to push up the field along the flank



In this second example, the left center back Milner has received wide on the left, Robertson is placed higher on the field, from the other side of the ball line and the left winger Manè is moving inside, trying to open up spaces for the fullback.

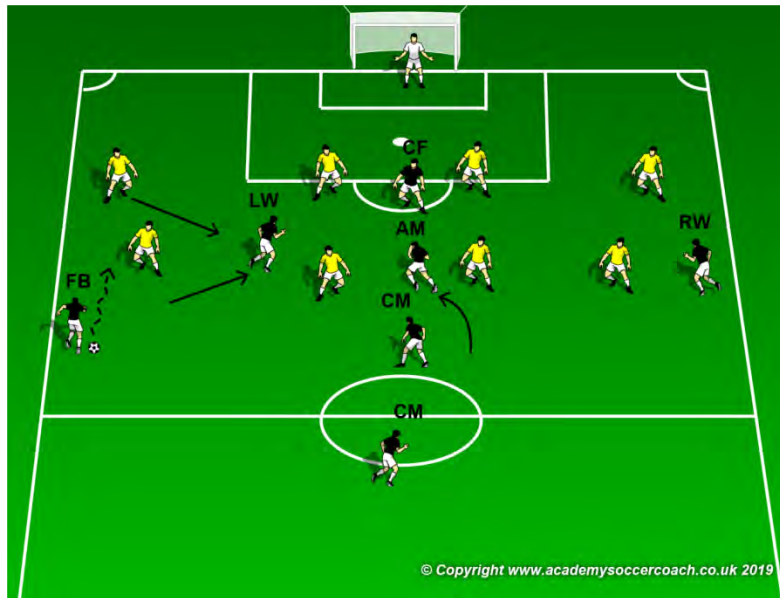


Despite the opposition has the numerical advantage near the ball, Milner can act as safe player along the flank, as well as holding midfielder, covering the center spaces by shifting across the center.

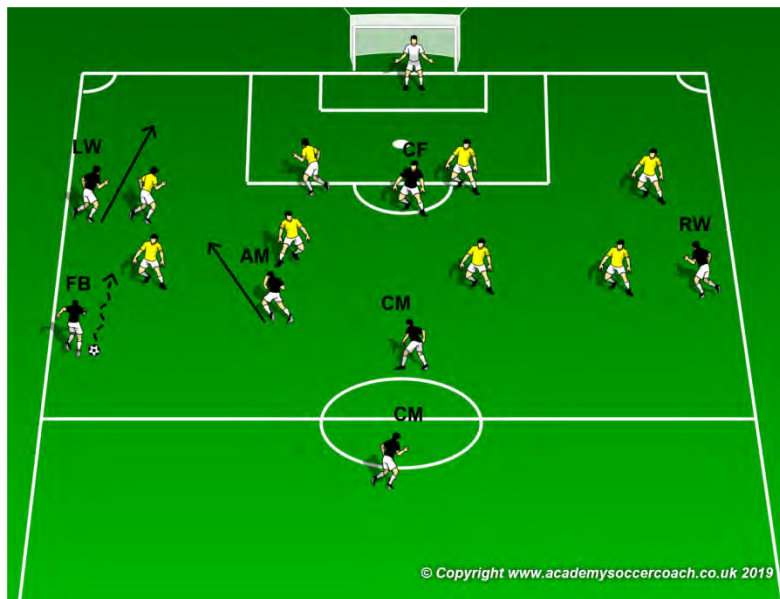
In this third one, Liverpool has just lost the possession on the right side of the middle third, and Wijnaldum is ready to cover the space as right fullback, as Alexander-Arnold has been found high on the field during the transition to defend phase



- The advanced midfielder is the “freest player” of the system from the mobility point of view, as he mainly has possession saving (as we already analyzed) and attacking tasks throughout the opposition half. The first and most important role is to play between the opposition lines to invite the last defenders out of position:

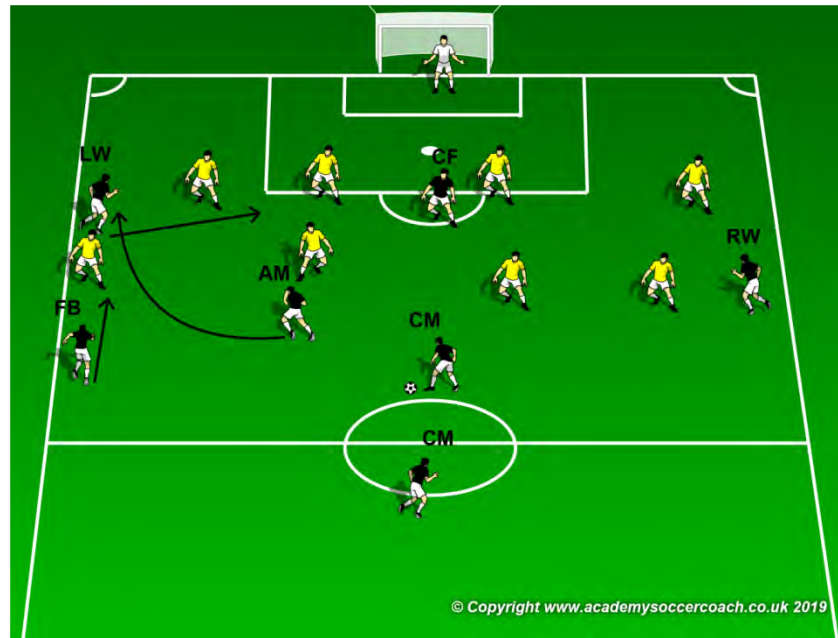


In this example, the left fullback is dribbling the ball up against a low defensive block of the opposition that is made of 2 lines of 4 players. The left winger runs inside to try to open spaces wide and free the ball carrier in a 1 v 1 duel and the advanced midfielder runs up between the lines to create a 2 v 2 duel together with the center forward, against the center backs and past the opposition center midfielder.

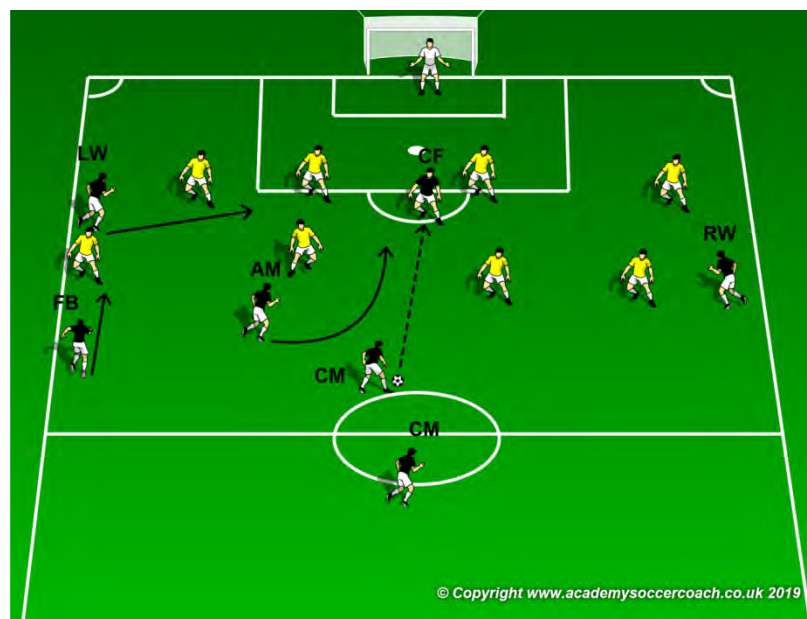


In this further example, the left fullback is again dribbling the ball up against a low defensive block of the opposition that is made of 2 lines of 4 players.

The left winger run deep along the flank to try to stretch the back 4 line and free space for the advance midfielder who moves between the lines, creating a 3 v 2 near the ball, against the opposition right winger and right fullback.



The upper center midfielder has the possession in this situation against a low defensive block of the opposition that is made of 2 lines of 4 players. The left winger run cuts inside and the advanced midfielder overlaps; this way the opposition right fullback must decide if to follow the winger or to block the overlap movement of the advance midfielder. The opposition center backs have the same issue; to double mark the center forward, when to move to close the winger.



Again, the upper center midfielder has the possession in this situation against a low defensive block of the opposition that is made of 2 lines of 4 players. The left winger cuts



inside toward the center back, opening spaces along the flank for the fullback to push up and the advanced midfielder moves between the lines to be a back support for the center forward, who is acting as target player, while receiving from the center midfielder. This way the opposition right fullback must decide if to follow the winger or to block the pushing up movement of the fullback. The opposition center backs could be found outnumbered against the center forward, the advanced midfielder and the left winger; at least one midfielder should drop deep to equalize the duel.

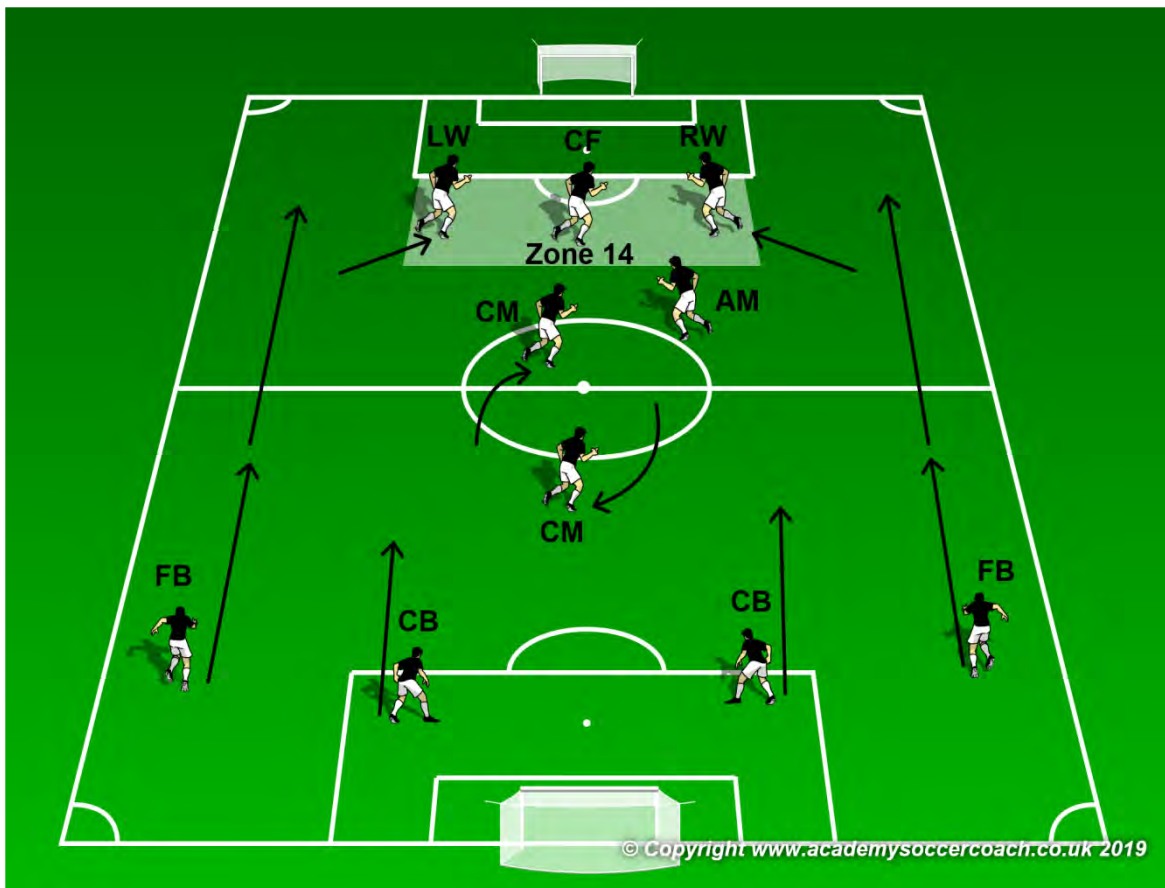
2. **WIDTH:** the team attempts to stretch the opponent's defensive shape, making the field as big as possible to create space, inviting the defenders out of their compact shape they have created to cover the dangerous areas in front of goal.

The team in possession moves the ball to change the point of attack 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 (Liverpool fullbacks are an interesting example of this connections). Width is crucial in stretching 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.
- If the defense block create strong wide areas near the ball down one wing, a weak side will be probably opened along the opposite side that could be exploited with a quick switch of side
- If the defense spreads out to counter the attacking team, then passing lanes are created, allowing penetration.

This is an example of team wide spaces creation, while the team is moving up the field, with simple principles of play that are very recurrent for Klopp's Liverpool, whatever is the system of play (1-4-2-3-1 or 1-4-3-3).

- The fullbacks push up along the flanks toward the middle third during building up and possession phases and toward the final third to help the finishing stage of the moves
- One center midfielder drops back to act as play maker and holding midfielder; the second one become an advanced support player to penetrate the opposition midfielders line and to support the advanced midfielder.
- The wingers move inside the zone 14 to support the center forward, to increase the chances of center penetration of the last defense line and to open wide spaces, to allow fullback to penetrate down the flanks.



From this point of view, Bielsa with his Copa del Rey and Europa League runner up Athletic Bilbao and Guardiola as former Bayern Munich head coach were very revolutionary thinking about creation of wide spaces.

They asked their team to overload the center middle third with the inverted fullbacks, to place 2 midfielders up, touching the white side lines in the final third, creating width. One of the center midfielder usually dropped back between the center defenders, who were shifting wider, to provide balance at the back.

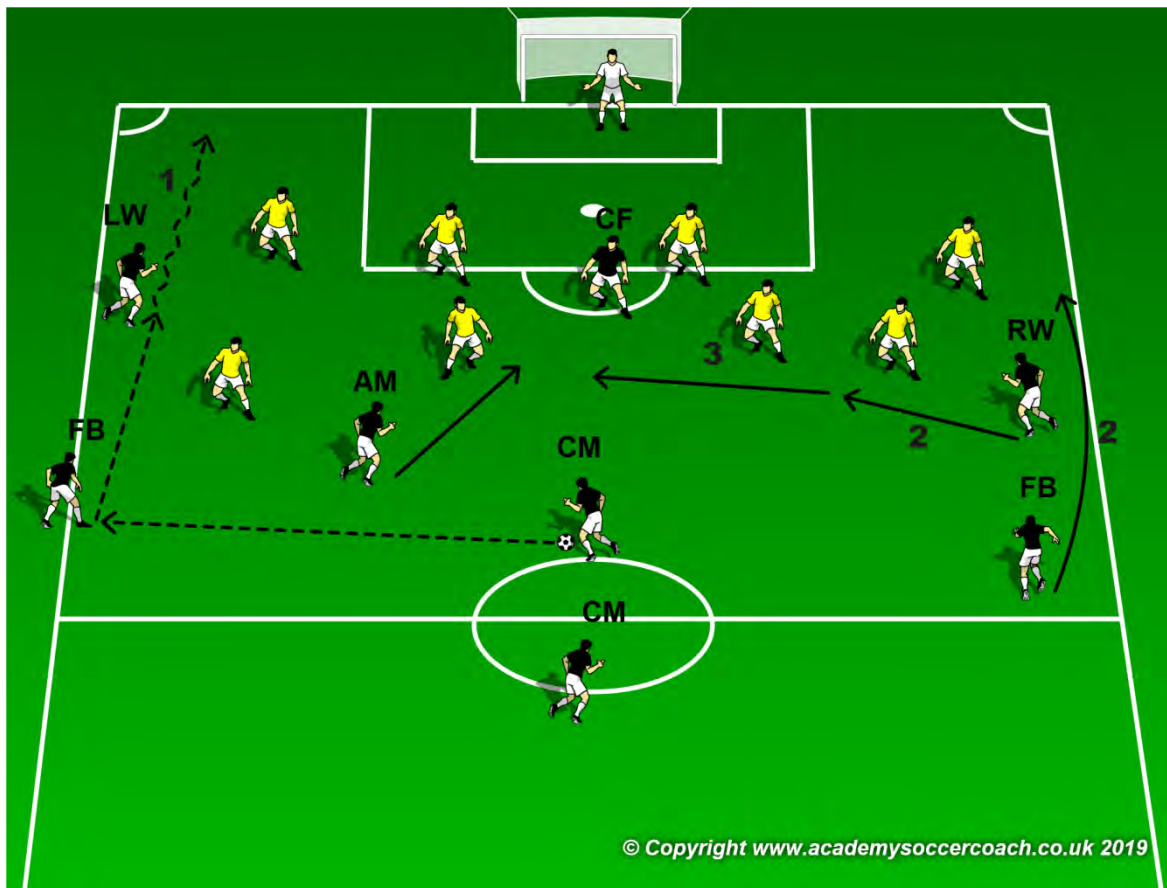
The attacking shape result was a 1-3-3-3-1 from a starting 1-4-2-3-1



Bayern Munich tactical solution was to condense also the center final third through the inverted wingers, who started from the white sidelines when off the ball, and aiming to play in the center and near the goal, dribbling inside or moving between the lines.



3. **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 1-4-2-3-1 involve all the team but goalkeeper and center backs, usually. Wingers, advanced midfielder and center forward usually provide depth in the 1-4-2-3-1, basically in 6 ways:
  1. Combining along and down the flank penetrating the opposition defense sideways to play cross passes toward the box.
  2. The winger cut inside from the flank, inviting the marker out of position and creating a 1 v 1 chance for the fullback who is overlapping.
  3. The winger can become a back support for the center forward, creating a front 3, being placed inside zone 14 or attacking the opposition goal.







4. **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. 1-4-2-3-1 is very useful from this point of view, creating easy support combinations throughout the field. If we except the goalkeeper, who usually can have only forward and side supports, when in possession, the main attacking shapes of the 1-4-2-3-1 (1-3-3-3-1 or 1-3-3-3) ensure the players all the potential solutions:



When CB has the possession, he can play with the GK as back support, with the FB as side option and the holding CM as forward pass; if the holding CM is placed between the CB, these are his side solutions and the second CM, the AM are usually the front options, as well as the FB is the side support.

As the first player in front of the back line has the possession (holding CM or CM), he has 3 options at the back (CB is indicated as example), FB as side support and all the front teammates (AM is indicated as example).

AM is the target player in the picture, and he can pass back to the midfield line (to second CM, as instance), to the W sideways and to the other front teammates (to CF, in the picture).

If the CF is the target player, he usually has back and sideways options (Ws in the example); if he plays as a false 9, Ws and AM become his front options, FBs sideways supports and the midfield line the back safe passes.

5. **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 risk of the 1-4-2-3-1 system of play is to demand creativity to the advanced center midfielder behind the forward and to consider him as the only possible No.10 of the team, asking the wingers to push up along the flanks and to cut inside if they are inverted wingers. This is more true if we consider the 1-3-3-3-1 and the 1-3-3-1-3 as the only possible tactical developments during possession phases.

Looking back to some of the most important teams that were shaped with the 1-4-2-3-1 on the field, it is possible to understand how creativity can be found in all the players and in all the sectors of the 1-4-2-3-1 and of its offensive developments.

Guardiola's Bayern Munich was creative through the inverted fullbacks in the middle third and through the inverted winger, while the advanced player of the front 3 was usually a second center forward (Muller or Götze together with Lewandowski). The inverted fullbacks and the numerical advantage in the half spaces were themselves creativity and the keys for surprise.



The European Champion Liverpool demands creativity to the fullbacks while pushing up and down, as there's no a real No.10 in the squad after the Coutinho's depart in 2017. Firmino may be considered as the creative player for Reds, and he is really like that from a finishing point of view, but he becomes a target player to save the possession dropping back from the opposition defense line, while Liverpool has the possession. The midfielders are very skilled in distribution, but they are not decisive in providing assists to the teammates. The proof is that Trent Alexander-Arnold and Robertson are the first two assists men of the entire squad.



The wingers in Liverpool's 1-4-2-3-1 are inverted to condense the center final third and the zone 14, leaving spaces along the flanks to push up; neither Manè (10) nor Shaqiri (23) are No.10 players and Firmino (9) skills make him a second forward, not a real No.10s.

Klopp's Borussia Dortmund, 2013 Champions League final runner up was a creative team thanks to counter-pressing in defensive transitions, quick ball recovery and fast counter attacks through open spaces.



Calling back in mind the style of play of Klopp's Borussia Dortmund, only Götze and Lewandowski were not pressing players and Gundogan was often the first player to receive a pass after a transition to attack; all the others were all field pressing player to create surprise in the opposition just after loss of possession.

Klopp was used to say that counter-pressing allows to win the ball back just 1 pass away from the opposition goal and that the spaces is the better play maker possible; these were the creativity keys of that Borussia Dortmund.

Searching for 1-4-2-3-1 team with a proper No.10, we may consider the last Wenger's Arsenal, where Ozil was the main assist man behind Aubameyang and between Walcott and Sanchez or the 2010 Champions League winners Internazionale Milan, where Snijder was most creative players of defensive minded 1-4-2-3-1.

1-4-2-3-1 allows to find chances of creativity all over the field; it's up the coach and the players' skills, without demanding it to a precise player or role.



## Possession, key attacking principles, movements and variations of run without the ball

The worst mistake we can make while setting the team up with the 1-4-2-3-1 is to consider as simple 1-4-2-1-3 while building up, with the winger who pushes up on the center forward line...



...and a 1-3-3-1-3 as attacking shape, with 1 fullback on the same line of the midfielders.



Guardiola and Manchester City analysis can help us to better understand how movements on and off the ball, key attacking principles are many more than we could think about; and 1-4-2-3-1 starting shape of the team helps all these variations.

This 1-4-2-3-1 is the team shape of the last Premier League match against Tottenham (17/08/2019):



A four back line in front of Ederson (31): Walker (2) RFB, Otamendi (30) RCB, Laporte (14) LFB and Zichenko (11) LFB.

2 center midfielders: Rodri (16) and Gundogan (8).

3 advanced players: Sterling (7) LW, De Bruyne (17) ACM and Bernardo Silva (20) RW.

Aguero (10) as only CF.

Subs: Gabriel Jesus (9) as CF, Mahrez (26) RW and David Silva (21) ACM.

This is the team shape of the very first official match of this season against Liverpool (Community Shield, 04/08/2019)



A four back line in front of Bravo (1): Walker (2) RFB, Otamendi (30) RCB, Laporte (14) LFB and Zichenko (11) LFB.

2 center midfielders: Rodri (16) and De Bruyne (17).

3 advanced players: Sanè (19) LW, David Silva (21) ACM and Bernardo Silva (20) RW.

Sterling (7) as only CF.

Subs: Gabriel Jesus (9) as CF, Gundogan (8) CM and Phil Foden (47) ACM.

Let's now have a look at how many shape and possession and attacking developments City was able to carry out on the field during those matches, with a deeper focus on Premier League match against Tottenham, after a first example of the team positioning on the field to build up from the goalkeeper with the new rule, that allow possession players being inside the 18 y box and force the opponents to start out of the penalty box until the first pass is clearly played.

Building up from the back:



The first CB is placed very close to the goalkeeper, who is starting the move with a goal kick; the second CB is just out of the penalty area, from this side of the opposition pressure line; it's quite clear how Liverpool aim is not to pressurize immediately the ball carriers, as the play is resumed.

One CM is played over the opposition pressure line as advanced target player.

Liverpool forwards try to overshadow the wide passing options and the CB, having the chance to put pressure against the 2<sup>nd</sup> CB out of the penalty area, who is turned toward the goalkeeper.



As the first CB receives, the goalkeeper acts as nearest and easiest option, to invite the opposition pressure. Only 1 opponent runs inside the penalty area, after the first pass.

Together with the RFB and LFB, a 2 (GK + 1<sup>st</sup> CB) + 1 (2<sup>nd</sup> CB) + 3 (RFB + 1<sup>st</sup> CM + LFB) v 3 situation is created

The GK receives the back pass, a second opposition forward runs inside the 18 y box and the nearest passing option can be easily countered...



...The numerical advantage allows the CM to receive a pass that overcome the first line of pressure and to be able to turn and dribble the ball up the field



This is the main difference in CM's role; before this new rule take effect, the holding midfielder was usually placed between the CBs out of the penalty area, too ensure numerical advantage together with the goalkeeper against opposition defensive pressure (usually a 3+gk v 2 or 3+gk v 2 duels were created).

As now it's possible to create numerical advantage inside the penalty area and the first receiver is not immediately under pressure, the CM can help the team in overcoming the first pressure line and he allow the second CM to push up the field.

A 2-4 shape is created to build up from the back then; 1<sup>st</sup> CB drops back inside the penalty area, the 2<sup>nd</sup> move forward out of the penalty area to invite the opposition pressure toward him, FBs can move up and wide, and the 1<sup>st</sup> CM is free to move at the back of the pressure line.

The 1-4-2 has become a 2-4 to build up from the back.



If the first line of pressure is neutralized and the opposition shape is not properly narrow to allow the midfielders to counter the playing out phase of possession, then the defense line can be attacked with 5 players.

The LFB has the possession, the 2<sup>nd</sup> CM can push up and play on the same line of the 3 advanced teammates and the CAM can move toward the ball position to create numerical advantage against the opposition FB and outer CM, inviting the CB out of position.



A 4-1 attacking line is then created in the middle third, where all the players can face the opposition goal.

From a 1-4-2-3-1 on paper, with 4 passes, a 2-4-4-1 is shaped to build up and to play out.

Playing out being already under pressure and forced to play backward:



When the opposition try to press the possession phase and it must built up again from the back, it's important to create numerical advantage on the ball; the 1-4-2-3-1 allow to shape it easily on the field.

The CBs can help the goalkeeper easily (3 v 1) and the FBs can stay positioned on the same line of the CMs to shape a lower midfield line of 4.

If the opposition create numerical advantage in the center (2 v 3), the FBs must be positioned wide and the CMs between the opponents to prevent them from overshadowing them.



The easiest solution that 1-4-2-3-1 allows is to create a rhombus around the pressing opponents, when the opposition send two forward inside the penalty area (in these situations, 1-4-2-3-1 is very similar to 1-4-3-3):

- GK as lower vertex
- CBs as side passing options
- CM (the player who acts as holding midfielder) as upper vertex or target player



When the opposition looks to equalize the duels against the potential receivers (we can recognize a sort of 3 v 3 against the nearest passing options for the goalkeeper in possession, long passes can be played toward the FBs or wingers, who are usually placed wide and often up the field.



Two of three players in front of the goalkeeper are man marked (the holding midfielder) or easily under pressure, the LCB.

The RCB could receive and play out on the right, but it would be the only possible solution; this way the third pressing player would already know where to direct the pressure action against the outer opponent.

For these reasons a long passes toward the wide wingers inside the opposition half or in the middle third are the best solutions; wide wingers can be positioned so high on the field, thanks to the overloading actions of the center first and middle thirds that force the opposition to maintain narrow distances among the players.

This situation, which led to a clear chance for Manchester City against Tottenham, is very explicative from this point of view:

- The opponents equalized the duel inside the defensive first third of City with goalkeeper in possession and all the three nearest passing options were marked and potentially under strong pressure. The 1-3 formation can't be effective for possession team.



- Four advanced pressing players mean to be high on the pitch with all the team lines; but it's not like that here, as the wide right winger headers for the blind run of the RFB and of the RAM shows; a 3 v 2 duel was created, to progress the move up the field. Two opponents tried to retreat their positions, but too much late to counter the goalkeeper pass receiver and the FB went out of position, opening a space behind him, where City FB could run onto.



Overcoming the opposition pressure that aimed to counter the 1-3 City formation at the back, has allowed a 5-2 attacking shape for city, equalizing the duel inside the offensive half if we include the opposition goalkeeper and numerical advantage 7 v 6 if we do not include him. A 1-3-2-5 formation was shaped, with the fifth wide player (the RW) opened a space for the third right teammate.

- Looking at the final third more in more detail, 4 players were attacking 3 defenders and the goalkeeper; 1 v 1 duel on the ball, 2 v 2 duel in the middle, as the defenders were tracking City forwards and a back support for the team in possession.



- The same situation could be found inside the opposition goal area with defenders who were not marking the opponents while the ball carrier was turning inside to play a cross pass.



The opposite winger cut inside from the left side to attack the goal, the RAM ran forward to support the move, and the center forward was positioned inside zone 14, before RFB turned to receive a potential cut back pass.

The opposition defense was on late and stretched, despite being able to create numerical advantage inside the box; the opposite winger, who cut inside, could score quite easily.



The 1-3-2-5 formation is clear in this following image; the line of 5 was made by the FB who ran up from the midfield line of 3.



- From a 1-4-2-3-1 on paper, the RFB pushed up into the midfield line first, wingers and AM pushed up as well on the same line of the CF, creating a 1-3-3-4..
- The RFB ran forward and deeper without the ball to receive at the back of the opposition midfield line, shaping a line of 5 that attacked the opposition goal.



This is a similar situation that led Manchester City to score the first goal of the match.

The first 3 v 1 duel (GK + CBs) won the first 3 v 1 duel easily while building up from the back. Both FBs pushed up on the same line of the CMs, shaping a 1-2-4 formation.

Two pressing opponents were screening in front and covering at the back both center passing options; playing out on the left side was not possible as the LFB was man marked. The RFB could be soon under pressure while receiving, in case of being selected as target player of the playing out phase.

A 4 v 4 duel can be recognized in along the middle third line; this means that opposition had 5 advanced players inside the opposition half.



Long pass toward the wide winger was the best solution possible



As the inverted right winger dribbled toward the opposition LFB, the LCM reached the advanced teammates line, shaping a 5 players attacking phase; all them were looking at the opposition goal, forcing the opponents to defend deeper.

A 1-2-3-5 formation was shaped on the field

The nearest players to the ball stayed placed behind the ball line, taking advantage of the depth defense of the opposition without pressure near the ball.

Despite a huge numerical advantage inside the box for the opposition, 3 defenders were positioned on the corner of the 18 y box, a fourth one on the first post and a 3 v 2 duel can be recognized on the second post of the goal, with 2 attacker completely free.

The back support player, who was unmarked inside the right half space was able to receive and send a cross pass behind the defense line toward the second post of the goal.



The opposite LW could receive unmarked and beat the goalkeeper easily.



The last two situations of play show how 1-4-2-3-1 provides many attacking solution with few and short players' movements

- FBs pushing up to shape a 4 player middle third line
- Wingers pushing up and wide to receive freely as the center was overload by the advanced players and then made even more condensed by the CMs
- Opposite winger who can play as CF inside the box to finish.

As we analyzed in the first part of this book, the main advantage of this system of play is that it allows the creation of numerical advantage along the half spaces and near the ball with few movements off the ball.

This situation is very explicative to understand how many possible solutions the 1-4-2-3-1 can provide to the team:



- The GK has the possession, the CBs are free to receive, but two opposition forwards are screening the passing lanes to the CM (the left one is an inverted fullback).
- The LFB has moved toward the center beside the RCM.
- The LCM has pushed forward.
- The RFB is placed wide.
- Four opposition midfielders are positioned narrow in the middle third are forced to cover the passing lanes toward the four advanced players; if just one of them would cover a wide passing lane, a paths toward the final third would be opened.
- The final third can be reached easily anyway, thanks to a long pass to the wide wingers; the four advanced attackers would have the support of a fifth teammate (the 2<sup>nd</sup> CB).



- The GK has the possession, the CBs are free to receive, but two opposition forwards are screening the passing lanes to the holding midfielder and man-marking him also.
- The FBs have moved wide on the left and on the right sides.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> CM has moved forward to create a line of 5 attacking players along the last defense line (winger as wide as possible, as usual).
- Four opposition midfielders are again positioned narrow in the middle third and they are forced to cover the passing lanes toward five advanced opponents, who have the numerical advantage; if just one of them would cover a wide passing lane, a paths toward the final third would be opened.
- The final third could be reached easily anyway, thanks to a long ground pass to the FBs or a high areal pass to the wide wingers; the four advanced attackers would have the support of a fifth teammate (the 2<sup>nd</sup> CB).

In this last example, the RCB has the possession in the middle third and seven players are positioned throughout the attacking half



- The RFB complete the line of 3 at the back
- The LFB is positioned wide on the left side and the LW in front of him
- The holding midfielder is being overshadow, but again, five attacking players shape a 2 (CM + AM) +3 (LW + CF + RW) advanced formation.

A 1-3-2-2-3 formation is shaped.



The 2 main principles of play inside the final third of Guardiola's 1-4-2-3-1 are:

1. Condense the center to open up spaces down the flanks (left side in this example); as the left fullback is pushing up along the flank, the advanced midfielders play very narrow (one is dribbling the ball up, the second one takes place along the forwards' line, forcing the opponents to create a strong area around them looking for numerical advantage (3 v 2) and opening a space along the left flank.

Meanwhile, the wingers move inside the center of the final third just inside the box, forcing the opposition back four to get narrow to ensure numerical advantage again (4 v 3), opening a potential space along the right flank also. The opposite right fullback acts as inverted fullback to provide balance behind the ball area.



2. Overload one side to create a strong area around the ball and a weak side in the final third. In this situation, the left fullback is dribbling the ball up along the left flank, and the advanced midfielders are positioned up to him, as well as the holding midfielder has shifted across toward the ball area; a 4 v 4 duel is created around the ball. The inverted right fullback provides balance again in the center.

The opposition back four are very narrow to save the box against the forwards (the left winger is positioned inside zone 14 to create a space along the flank that one midfielder can exploit to overcome the opposition pressure against the ball carrier and to win the 4 v 4 duel) and two midfielders are also screening them.

This way, the left attacking flank and side is overloaded by the opposition and the right attacking flank maybe exploited to switch the side of play.



We can take a look to Guardiola's Manchester City to have a 1-4-2-3-1 positional play example, analyzing the movements of the players to create an attacking move.

1. The left center back is dribbling the ball up along the left side of the middle third and the left fullback has pushed up off the ball to create space for the teammate in possession; the second center back and the opposite right fullback together with the holding midfielder create the balance triangle at the back.

The advanced midfielders are positioned as back support options for the forwards; a line of for attacking players is shaped along the opposition back line that is forced to look at the right defense side, freeing the right attacking winger.



2. As the left fullback receives, a 3 v 3 duel is created as the opponents try to avoid any forward passing combination; 1 v 1 on the ball, the center back is tracked while he is trying to underlap along the flank and the support midfielder would be potentially under pressure quickly if he should have to receive a pass.



To summarize the main movements of this first two points, we may say that:

- The left center back is dribbling the ball up the left flank
- The left fullback is moving forward off the ball to create space
- The opposite fullback shifts across the center to create a balance triangle at the back
- One advanced midfielder moves toward the ball to be an option and ensure at least numerical equality near the ball
- The second advanced midfielder move up toward the forwards' line
- The opposite right inverted winger provide width along the opposition weak side

3. The support midfielder from the center receive and he is under immediate pressure; the upper midfielder understands it as well as the left fullback, who moves back to provide a safe passing option; the movement of his direct marker toward the ball allows him to be free at the back.



4. The ball carrier has two options to play out from the pressure area and he chooses to play forward to the advanced teammate who turned his body position toward him to receive; again the left fullback moves at the back of his prior direct marker, who is looking at the ball again.



These are the main points to pay attention to:

- The opposition is able to prevent the possession players from moving the ball forward, but through positional play they were able to play out from the pressure area.
- Moving and passing combination have created a strong area on the ball, and forced the defenders' body positioning toward the ball and the left flank (defense right side); this way the attacking right winger is completely free along the right side.
- The left winger and the right advanced midfielder force the opposition back line to get narrow in the center.

5. A back pass out of the defense triangle is enough to play out from the pressure area. It is very important to notice that the moving/passing combination has forced the opposition to shift across the ball area, creating a weak side along the opposite attacking right flank.



6. At this point it is very simple to allow the holding midfielder to receive and switch the side toward the attacking right flank; the 5 – 4 opposition defense shape is very narrow throughout the center right side and the weak area must be covered as quickly as possible to prevent the opposition inverted right winger from receiving and dribbling toward the box. The attacking line of four players make the defense of the weak side risky, as a potential 4 v 4 duel maybe created inside the box.



These are the main points to pay attention to:

- The left fullback drops back to be a safe passing option first and then toward the center to replace the position of the advanced left midfielder who is now positioned as left winger.
- The holding midfielder get closer to the ball position to be a passing option to play out from the pressure area and to switch the side of play
- The midfield line is now shaped by holding midfielder and the fullbacks
- The right advanced midfielder pushes up along the attackers' line in the center, creating a potential 4 v 4 duel if the right winger receive and the fifth opponent is forced to run out to close him
- The center back drops deep to be positioned properly, shaping a 2 + 3 back formation, as five attacking players are positioned along the opposition back line



## Players' roles and responsibilities

Goalkeeperperper:

- He is more responsible for making saves and keeping the ball out of the net than in other formations (example 1-4-3-3), as the center backs and the midfielders can be considered as the heart of the building up phase; the most important thing is to be a safe back passing option during building up phases.



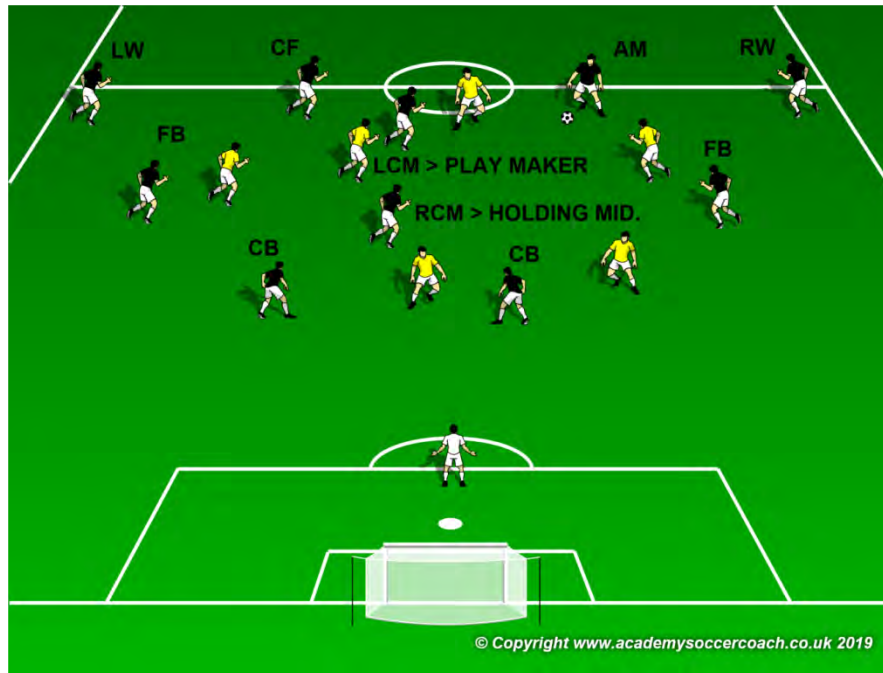
- As the team is supposed to be solid in the center due to the center backs and center midfielders, the majority of the opposition's attacks are likely to come from the flanks; for this reason, the he must be confident to save crosses or cut back passes from box's sides. If we take as example Manchester City attacking shape, the spaces at the back of the inverted fullbacks and beside the center backs are the more risky for a 1-2-3-5 development of the 1-4-2-3-1 formation.



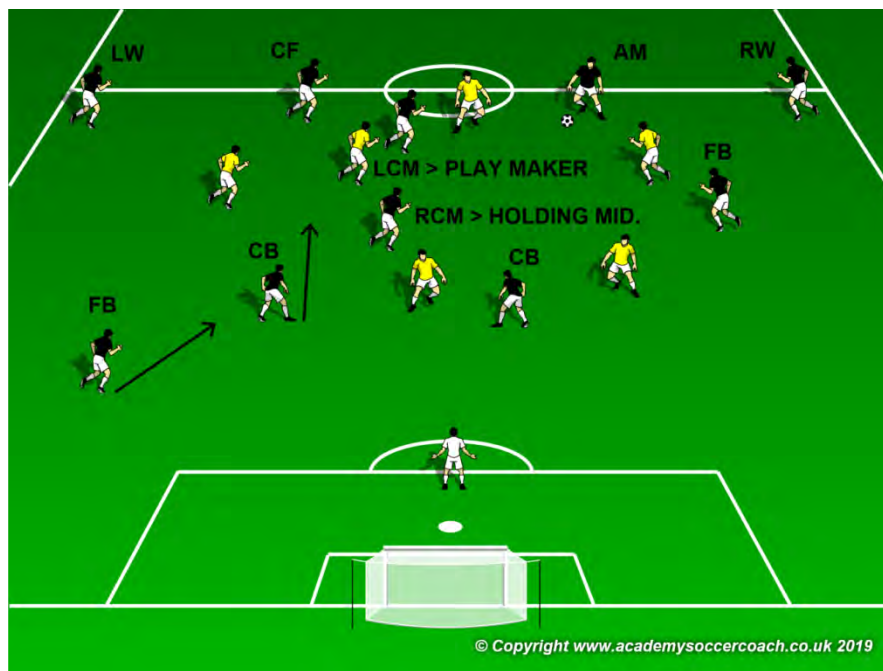


Center backs:

- Decision making and positioning to start the moves and to help the midfielders as back support.



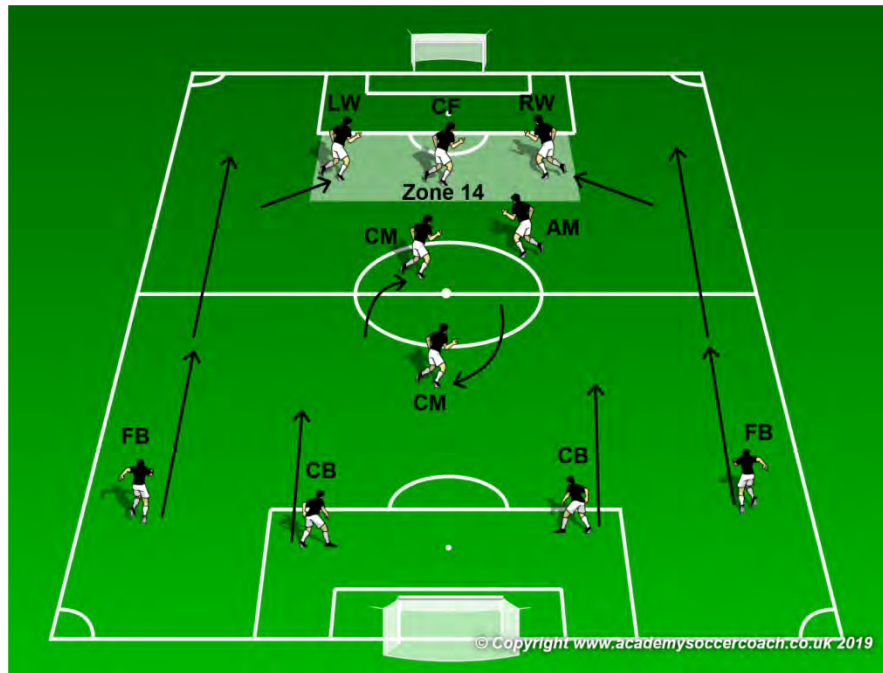
- Be able to move forward to shape the midfield trio as third man, if the inverted fullback or the advanced midfielder can't.



- Provide balance at the back of the ball position in the first third, helping the positive transition phases.

## Fullbacks:

- They must be ready to support the building up phases and to push up to support the maintenance and attacking phase.

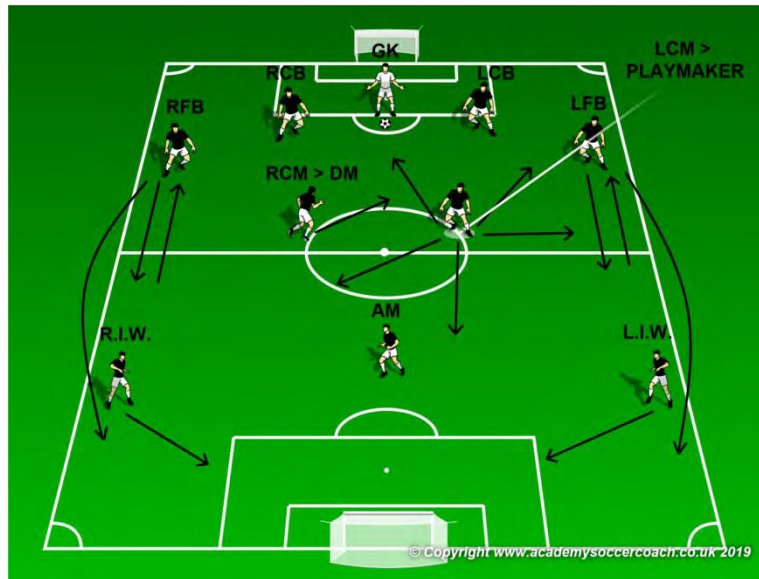


- They must be able to play as inverted fullbacks to help the center midfielders, condensing the middle third and opening up spaces wide that could be exploited in the finishing stages of the moves.

In the following picture, the situation of play that we already analyzed, is very explicative from this point of view; Manchester City left fullback Zichenko and right fullback Walker complete the holding midfield trio as the second center midfielder is positioned along the left side and the center advanced midfielder has pushed up along the forwards' line.



- They must be side support for the center midfielders, back support for the wingers as well as overlapping player down the flanks; moving on and off the ball are crucial to create situations with numerical advantage.



Center midfielders (the success of the 1-4-2-3-1 system of play largely depends from these two players, both from attacking and defending points of view):

- They should not drop too deep nor remain too high up the pitch.
- Positioning and basic technical skills are always very important.
- One of them should be a holding midfielder with defensive tasks; the other is usually asked to be more attacking-minded with play making skills (double playmakers or box-to-box midfielders are usual alternatives).



- To pick the ball up from the defenders and aim to move it forward are anyway required task, whatever the players' skills are.
- They must be to overload the ball area and the half spaces



In this first example, both the center midfielders drop back to overload the right lower half space, creating a four players' area that could be useful to invite the opposition pressure toward a specific area, to free a farther one to switch the side of play.



In this second example, the right center midfielder moves forward to overload the attacking right half space to invite the opposition pressure toward the ball area, where the fullback is dribbling the up, and to free the opposite flank for the wing to run along.

The second midfielder shifts across the center, to provide balance and to cover the space toward the center backs.

- Creativity seems to be no the first skills for them, due to the three attacking midfielders in front of them but it is obviously useful; it's more important to cooperate with the front 3 to create angles and passing options for each other while moving on and off the ball, as well as spacing for each other. Blind runs skills are very important also.



1-4-2-3-1 is the best system of play to create possession triangles and passing angles in the middle third; only on paper, there are already three main triangles that can be exploited; the most important task for the center midfielder is to be able to reshape these triangle, following the developments of the possession situations and the movements on and off the ball of the front three.

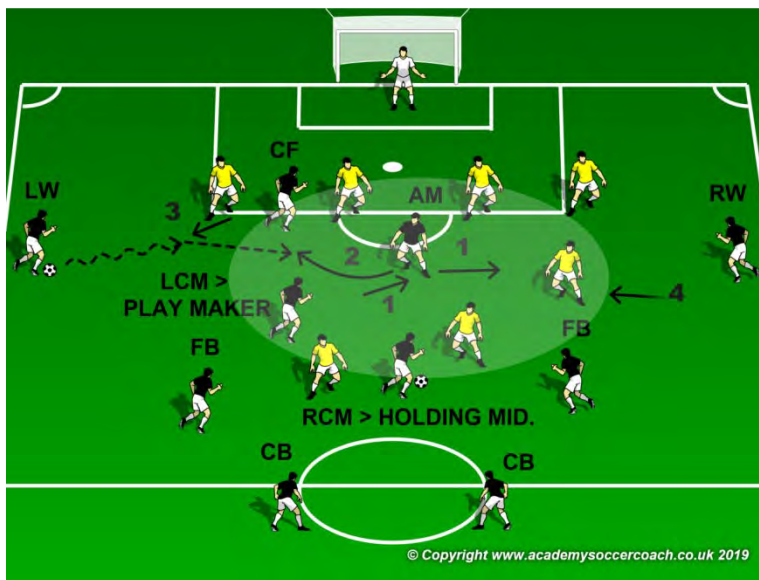


## Advanced midfielder

- The advanced midfielder behind the striker is usually asked to be the most creative of all the squad; for this reason, he is not often charged of defensive tasks. He can also act as additional advanced playmaker
- He must create numerical advantage near the ball, overloading the half spaces, as the center midfielders



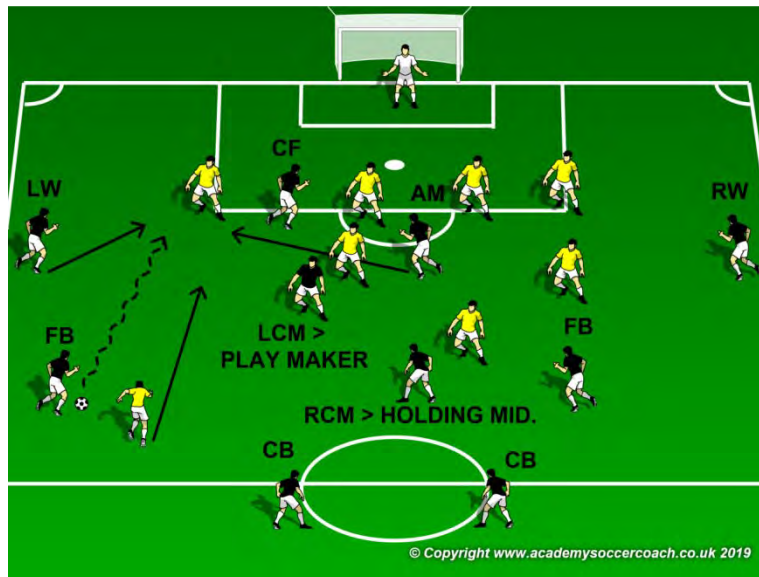
- He is asked to be good at moving off the ball:
  1. To be a forward option for the midfielders and to create space for them...
  2. ...back support for the center forward...
  3. ...inside option for the wingers...
  4. ...and to be ready to play between the opposition lines.



- He must be able to interchange the positions with the center forward, the wingers and the center midfielders

Wingers:

- They must play with high rhythm out wide to attack quickly along the flanks.
- They are asked to combine with the fullbacks to create 2 v 1 duels against the opposition's fullbacks (advanced midfielder should shift wide to create a bigger numerical advantage situations if the opposition winger is able to help the fullback)

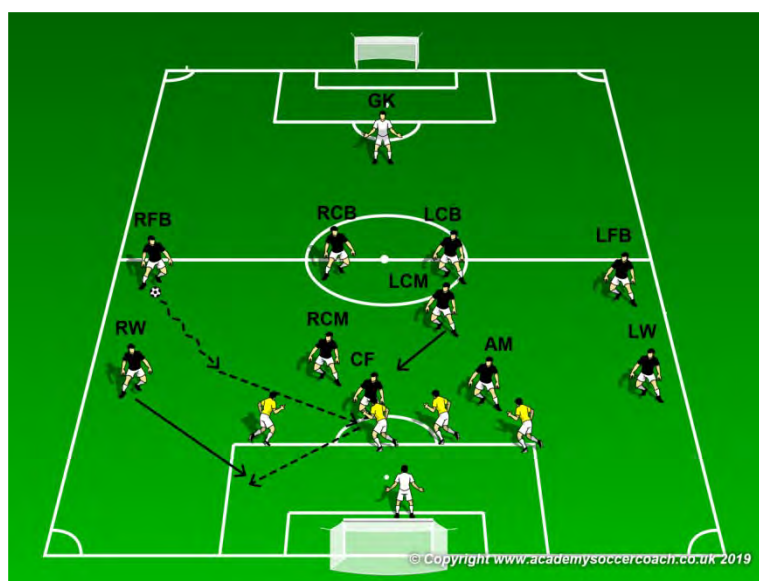


- They must be able to come inside and to drop into the gaps between the opposition's defense and midfield lines to combine with the center advanced midfielder
- They are asked to be able to make blind runs over the last defense line to receive and finish

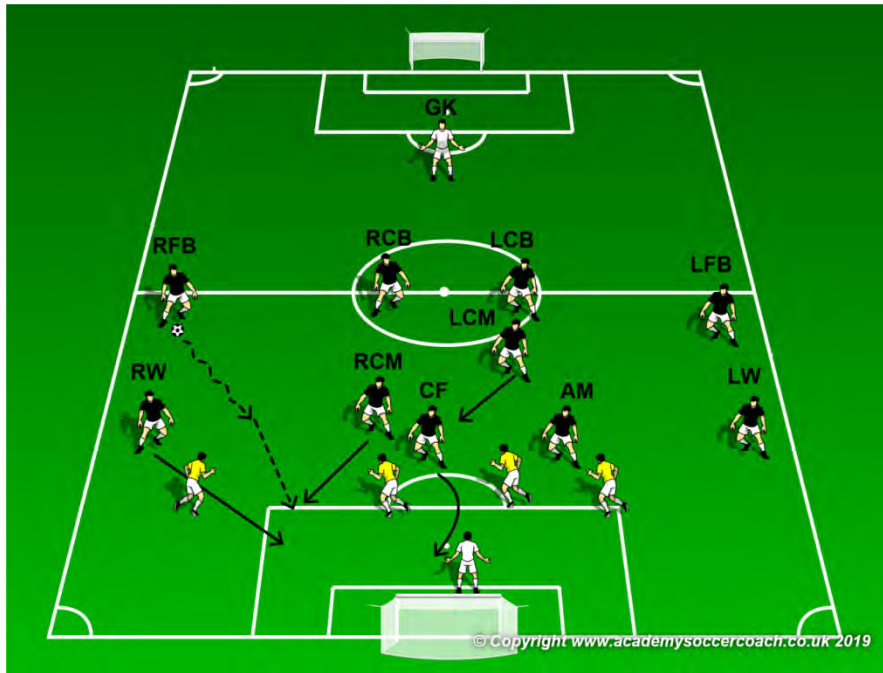
Center Forward:

As already briefly analyzed, the center forward can be:

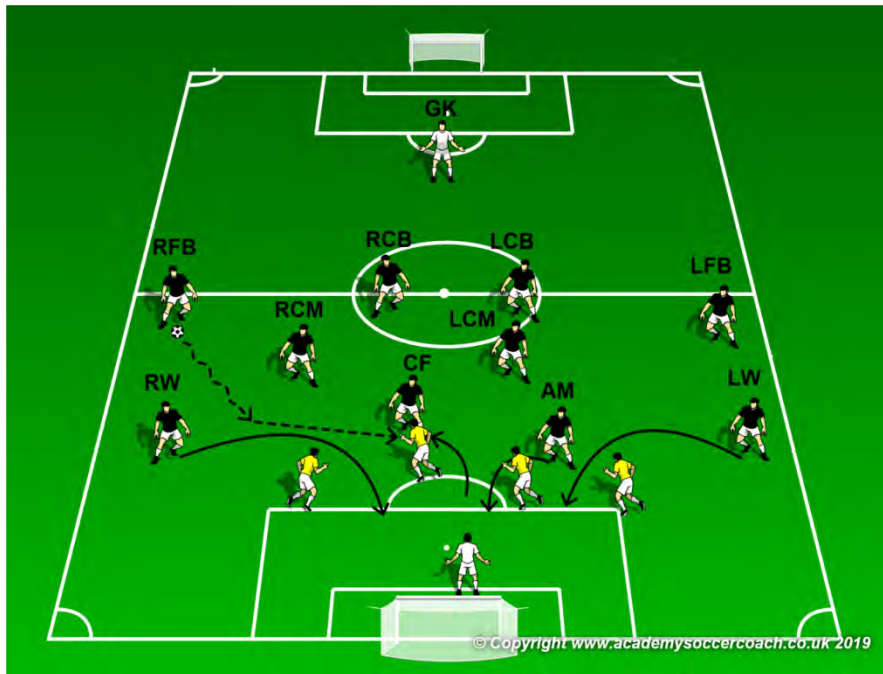
1. An upper pivot or target player, holding the ball to allow the team pushing up the field



2. A player who is good at playing along the opposition defense line



3. A false 9, if the wingers are inverted foot players, if they play inside the field and if the advanced midfielder is able to play as second center forward



Despite all these potential skills, his goal scoring skills should at the best level possible.

### 1-4-2-3-1: history, lines up and applications

Juan Manuel Lillo is not only the inventor of the "Juego de Posicion" (Positional Play), but he is also the first ever coach to shape his team with the 1-4-2-3-1 during the early '90s as Cultural Leonesa (1991-1992) and UD Salamanca (1992-1996) coach.

Which were the objectives? To reach the same ones of his soccer philosophy: to ensure high pressure, thanks to 4 advanced players and to regain the ball as soon as possible in case of loss of possession, providing center defensive cover thanks to the 2 holding midfielders (double pivot) and being safe at the back because of 5 players, even if one of the full backs has pushed forward.

This is what Lillo was used to say, while coaching Leonesa:

"It was the most symmetrical way I could find of playing with four forwards. One of the great advantages is that having the forwards high allows you to play the midfield high and the defense high, so everybody benefits. But you have to have the right players. They have to be very, very mobile and they have to be able to play when they get the ball. You have to remember that they're pressuring to play, not playing to pressure".

From this point of view, we may say that 1-4-2-3-1 can be considered as a late '80s Sacchi's Ac Milan evolution; even is that unforgettable team was based on the 1-4-4-2, the ideas of possession and of mobility of the whole team were the same.

The very successful team to be shaped with this system of play was France at 2000 Europe Nations Cup:



The center backs and the Vieira were positional defensive players, Thuram and Lizarazu attacking minded fullbacks. Zidane worked in a pivotal role, to receive the ball and distribute; Deschamps was a second play maker, a second and safe passing options, as Zidane played in a more direct way. Dugarry, Djorkaeff and Henry were the real attackers of the team.

Another important formation who had a great success with the 1-4-2-3-1 was Spain at the 2010



World Cup winning campaign:



Despite the Spanish tiki-taka possession style, the starting formation was like a 1-4-2-3-1, with continuing and grueling exchanges of positions among the four advanced players and Busquets as holding midfielder in front of Pujol and Piquet.

To close the National teams' chapter, Germany 2014 World Champion must be included:



Klose played as advanced target player, Muller as second striker on the right flank and Ozil was free to move all around the middle third. Kross was an advanced playmaker, with the center midfielders in a balancing role. We should not forgive that 2013/2014 was the first season of Guardiola in charge as Bayern Munich head coach.

Despite being an attacking oriented system of play, the 1-4-2-3-1 of Mourinho's Internazionale Milan 2010 Treble was a defensive and transition minded team...





Samuel and Lucio were blocked at the back, Cambiasso had defensive tasks and Thiago Motta played as lower play maker, without moving too much further than the half line. Maicon and Zanetti were attacking minded fullbacks but Pandev and Eto'o were always ready to cover their positions. The keys of that teams were Sneijder, who were so good at receiving the first passes of the transition to attack phases and to transform those balls in attacking phases and Milito, who scored goals from anywhere and in any way.



The biggest difference between Mourinho's Internazionale Milan and the following experience as Real Madrid's Head Coach was the role of the striker, as Benzema played as space creator for Ronaldo, Di Maria and Bale whose arrival transformed Real in a 1-4-3-3 team the season after.