

Modern 4-4-2 Formation Theory

By Human Afazeli

Background

During the dominance of 3-5-2 formation in the football arena, 4-4-2 was its only rival. Arrigo Sacchi of Milan brought new a version of 4-4-2 to the world of football on the late 80s. The early shift from the 3-5-2 to 4-4-2 started after Euro 92. Many teams in Serie A of Italy started using the modern 4-4-2 system as the Italian National Team was using it at the same time.

After WC 94, the modern 4-4-2 became the world wide dominant formation. Different versions of it have been utilized up to present times according to team's strategies and players.

Different Parts of Field

Before going through theoretical aspects of the 4-4-2, let's turn our attention to a basic feature of football, i.e. field divisions.

As illustrated in figure 1 part a, a football field is divided into 3 parts in width, and 3 different parts in length in part b.

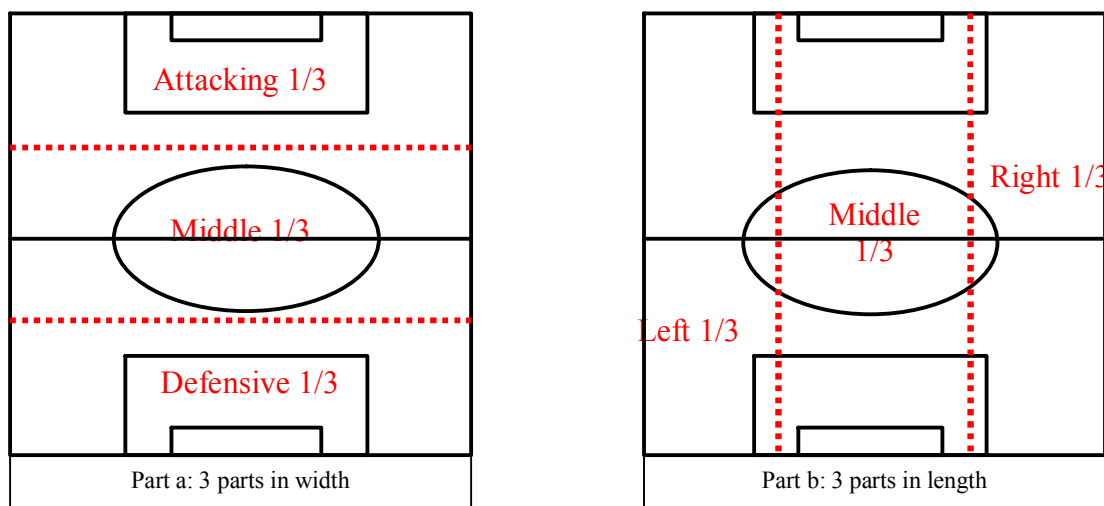


Figure 1

In part a, the defensive 1/3 is the most important part in defense. All of the defensive principals must be committed in this area. The middle 1/3 is the area the cornerstones of attacking are established. Here the midfielders must provide aggressive coverage for the defending lines. The attacking 1/3 is the part in which a team may particularly commit to offensive principals.

In figure 3, one extra area of support can be seen from the back for wingers in 4-4-2 (i.e. 4 areas) while 3-5-2 provides 3 areas as supports.

The details have been fully expressed in the following table.

Formation	Total covered zones	Total players on lateral 1/3s	Total players on lengthy mid 1/3	Total players on defending 1/3	Total players on wide mid 1/3	Total players on attacking 1/3
3-5-2	5	2	8	3	5	2
4-4-2	7	4	6	4	4	2

Line By Line Analysis

In this part, Line by line analysis, general ideas of formation, players' roles in defense and offense will be briefly described. It is also clear that player's roles should be determined by the coach due to opponent's systems and different variations of the formation.

Let's turn our attention to the standard 4-4-2. As it can be seen in figure 3, three lines can be distinguished in the formation. Each line's duties are of two kinds, defending and attacking.

Defenders

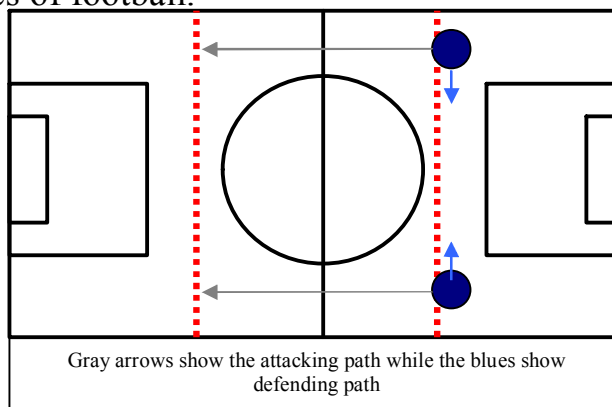
They are of two kinds. Laterals and centrals

Laterals:

Attacking duties: As it has shown in figure 4, lateral defenders are free to move forward up to attacking 1/3 of rival.

Defending duties: They should recover to their proper places due to the concentration principles of football.

Figure 4

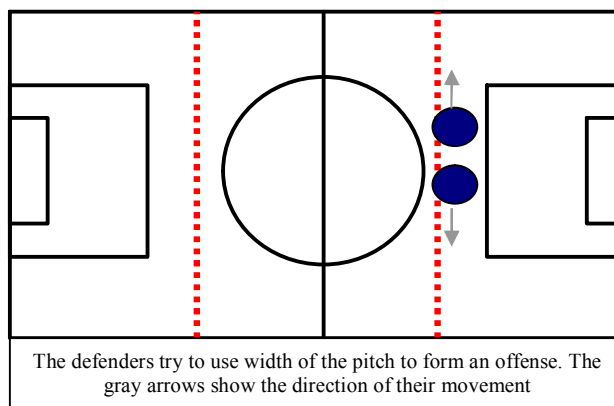


Centrals:

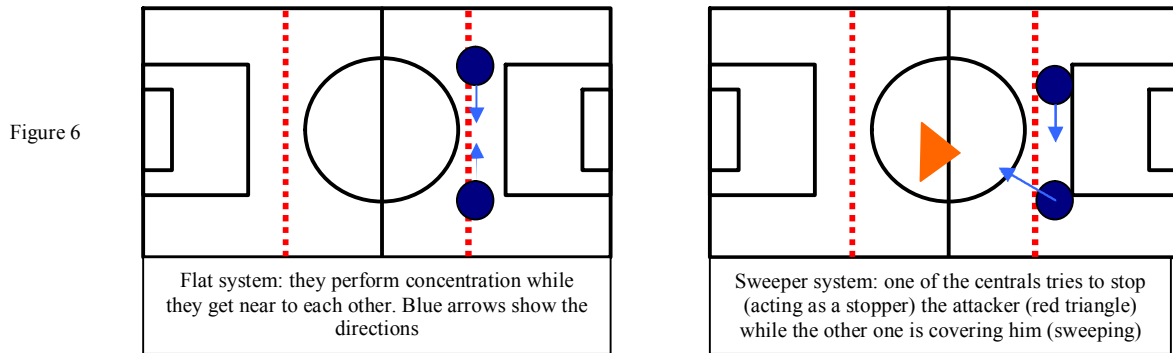
Attacking duties: The central defenders are the first attacking element of a team. Previously, the most important attacking players were among the midfielders where they created any offensive movement. At the moment, due to lack of space and time in the midfield, defenders are considered as a big asset in creating offenses.

Among defenders, centrals have more important roles during the action as the creators, than laterals who are just participants. Centrals define the direction of the offense.

Figure 5



Defending duties: Their defending duties vary regarding the defending system. The moving path can be seen in figure 6, for a flat system and a sweeper system.

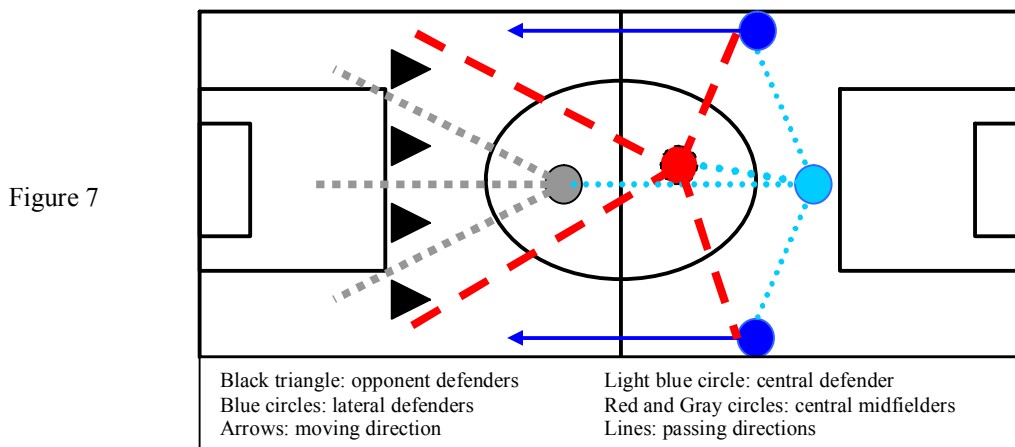


□ Midfielders:

The midfielders are of two kinds, as are the defenders (i.e. laterals and centrals).

Centrals:

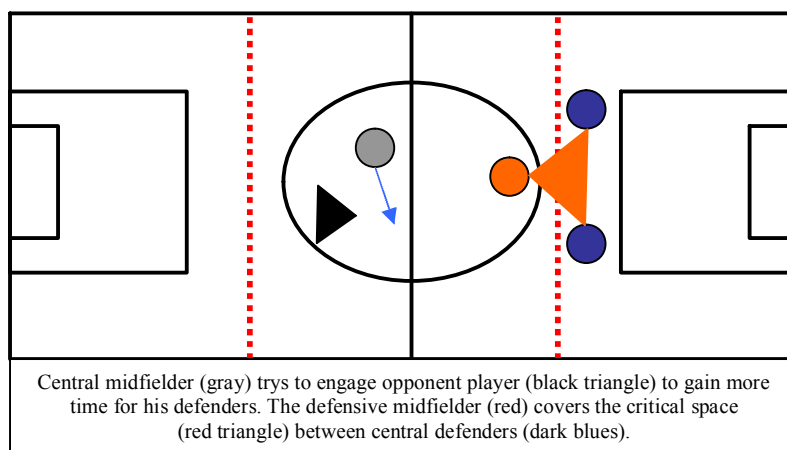
Attacking duties: Usually, one of the central midfielders is the architect of aggressions on the pitch while the other one supports him. As it can be seen in figure 7, these two players should supplement each other's actions.



As it has been illustrated in figure 7, the central defender (light blue) defines the direction of movement by passing the ball for lateral defenders (dark blues) or central midfielders. Central midfielders (i.e. red and gray) have different duties. The red is responsible for wide or long wide balls to the wings (usually 40 or 50 meters passes), while the gray one's responsibility is passing ball through the gaps between the defenders of the opponent (usually by 20 or 30 meter passes).

Defending duties: The defending duties have been shown in figure 8. One of them should engage the opposing player who carries the ball, to achieve enough time for his defenders to get into their positions (delay principle in defense). The other one should cover the critical space between the central defenders as you can see in figure 8.

Figure 8



Laterals:

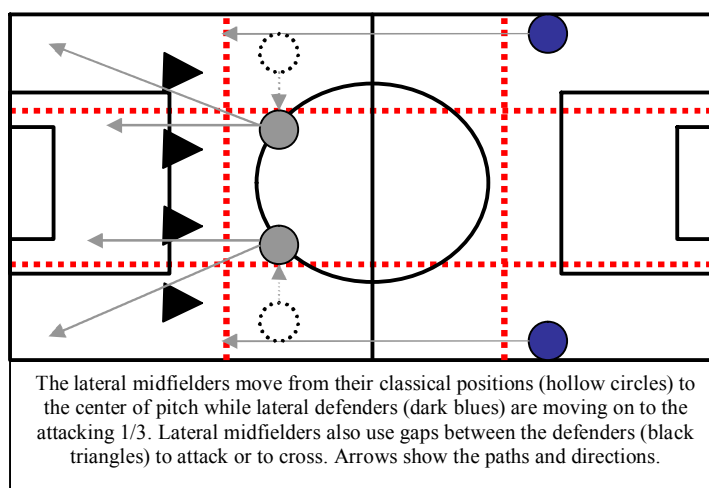
Lateral midfielders in 4-4-2 should try to assist both central midfielders and lateral defenders.

Attacking duties: As it can be seen in figure 9, lateral midfielders tend to move over into central 1/3 of the pitch creating, enough room for lateral defenders to move on.

They also help central midfielders by supporting them or moving into the opposing defenders' gaps. In this case they are also assisting strikers.

In some teams they are responsible for crossing the ball into the box. In others they should act as a striker when one of the strikers is in a crossing situation. This situation will be discussed in attacking duties of strikers.

Figure 9

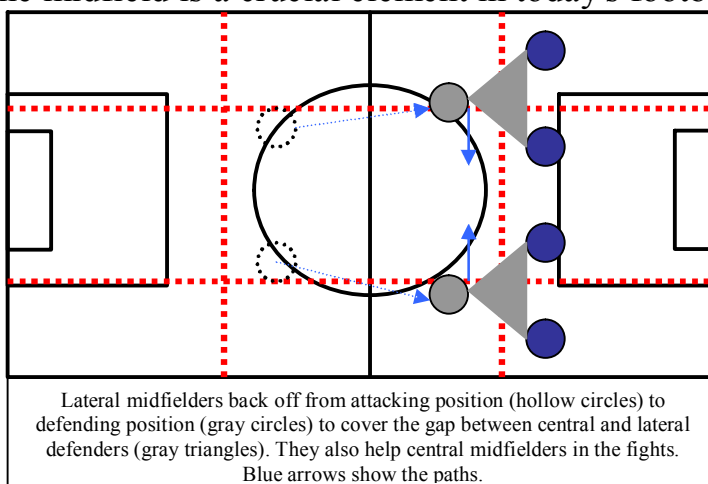


Defending duties: The most important responsibility of lateral midfielders is to cover the lateral 1/3 part of the pitch. Here they help lateral defenders by covering

the space between the central and lateral defenders. The situation is shown in figure 10.

They also provide coverage to the central midfielders. As it was mentioned before, more fighting in the midfield is a crucial element in today's football.

Figure 10



□ Strikers

Possible formations for strikers have been described in the [3-5-2 formation](#) article. In this part we try to study the situation in which two strikers are arranged as central forwards. This formation is the most common for attackers.

Attacking duties: Attacking duties of strikers vary due to the coach's ideas. Normally, strikers should use the gaps between defenders' for positioning. In some teams, they are responsible for using the crossing area in order to cross. In this case, the lateral midfielder acts as a striker to score. The situation has been shown in figure 11, part c.

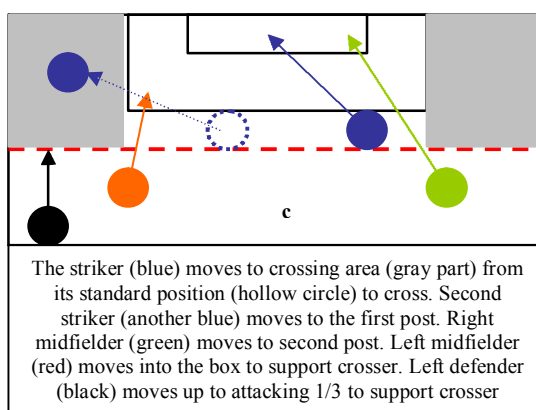
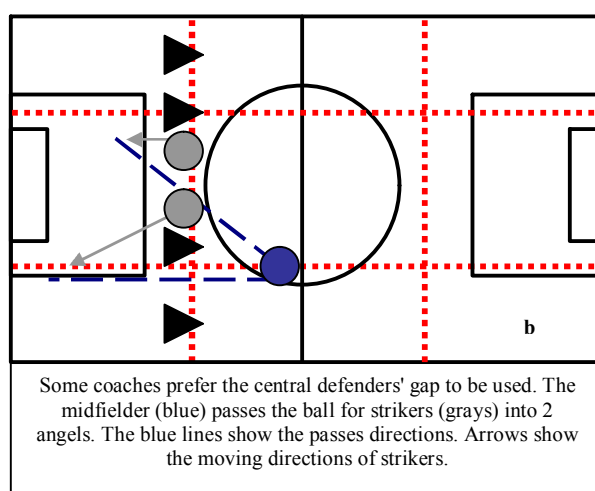
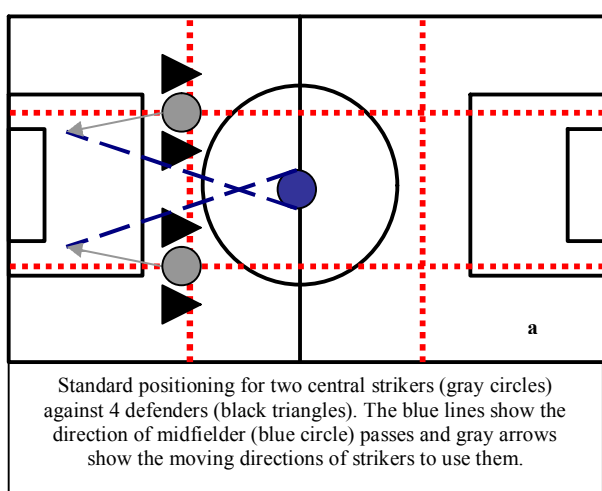


Figure 11

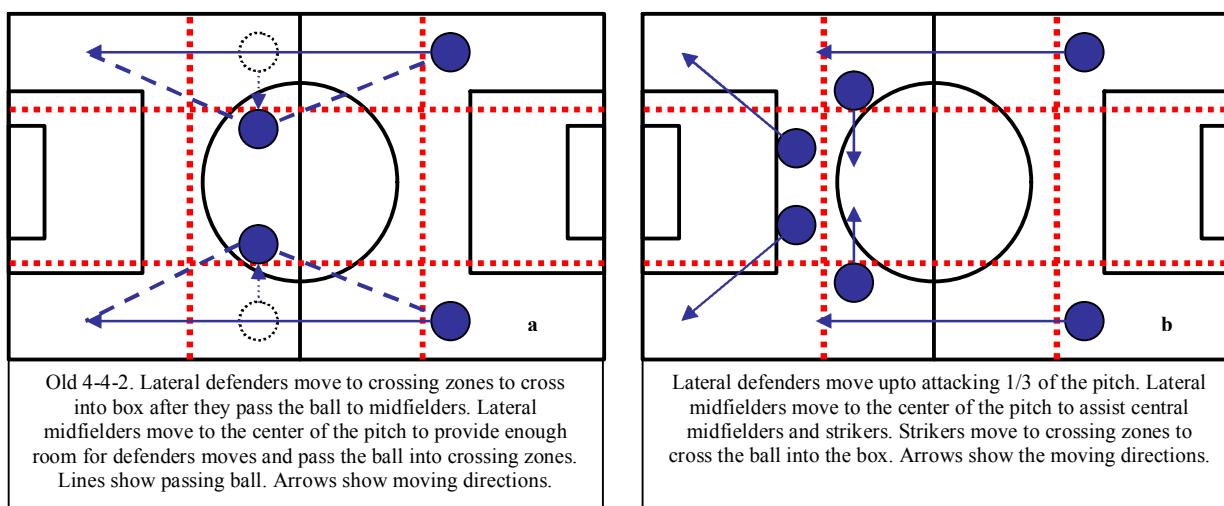
It is easy to find the importance of getting advantages in gaps among the defenders during the offense, and covering them in defense.

Defending duties: As mentioned before, defenders are first attackers when they capture the ball. By the same token, strikers are first defenders when the ball is lost. They should engage the opponents to buy enough time for teammates to re-position. Most of the famous strikers (Marco Van Basten or Jurgen Klinsmann) have been of a great help in buying their defenses time.

- **The difference between Modern and Old 4-4-2**

The 4-4-2 has been modified during the dominance of 3-5-2. Theorists tried to cover the weakpoints of 4-4-2 in order to use the advantages of it as they faced disadvantages of 3-5-2. In this part the differences of modern and old 4-4-2's have been briefly discussed.

The main idea of the standard form of old the 4-4-2 has been based on overlaps on lateral sides. During this time, there was one or two prepared patterns being developed, in order to score in the center. In the old 4-4-2, lateral defenders were responsible for crossing the ball into the box after overlaps. In the modern 4-4-2, just the opposite happens, as the crosses are made by strikers or lateral midfielders. The differences have been illustrated in figure 12.



Previous parts of this article have dealt with the theoretical basis of the new 4-4-2. As pointed out, many other variations are possible for each part.

Human Afazeli is working for the Iran Soccer Federation Educational Department as the head of a project to improve the tactical knowledge of coaches in the Azadegan League (Professional). He will be writing some future articles which will posted on the OSYSA web site when available.