



FORMATIONS & STRATEGY

4-4-2: flat back four; diamond midfield; zonal system

OVERVIEW

This system has become popular with professional teams in the late 90s. It relies on two midfield specialists: a defensive midfielder sweeping behind the midfield, and an offensive playmaking midfielder. The diamond midfield provides attacking flexibility down the sides and through the middle. The defense is strengthened by the defensive midfielder. At the same time, it is a more predictable system to defend against due to the more static positional play of the central midfielders. The vulnerability of the 4-4-2 lies in its flat back defense which can be torn apart by diagonal runs through its center.

TEAM REQUIREMENTS

The diamond midfield requires two specialists. The defensive midfielder needs to have vision and be a two-way player due to responsibility to defend and start transition from defense to attack. The offensive midfielder needs to anticipate play to get into position to receive the ball from the back and then have the 1v1 and passing skill to put forwards and overlapping players into positive action. They need to support forwards and wingers in possession and have goal scoring ability.

Outside defenders and midfielders must be in exceptional aerobic shape as they will both make deep runs to attack and then need to chase back in the team's transition to defense.

The zone defense requires a high degree of verbal and visual communication to ensure that opposing attackers are challenged and covered. This system relies on the off-side trap and defenders need to ensure they step up just before the ball is played in behind them. This requires almost automatic mechanisms because there is little time to provide each other with instructions. When attacking, the outside players as well as the forwards all need to be able to play 1v1 and place accurate crosses into the penalty area.

COACHING REQUIREMENTS

The key to this system is to have central midfielders of adequate skill. The coaching challenge is to develop a strategy of how to defend in central midfield when outnumbered. The options are to require the attacking midfielder to come back or a central defender to step up. That could leave the defense exposed if the opponent successfully overlapped your own outside midfielder and the outside defender needed to step up as well. Lots of time before the season starts is required to get this system tuned.

Emphasis needs to be on training zone defense and off-side trap mechanisms.

Aerobic conditioning and speed training are a requirement, particularly for the outside players.

STRATEGY

This system works very well against similar diamond midfields and particularly against a 4-3-3. Against a strong zonal 4-4-2 the central midfielders might need to collapse to a flat zone as well.

The weakness of this 4-4-2 lies in defense, particularly against a 3-5-2 system which can outnumber it in central midfield 3v1, thus pulling out a central defender, still being outnumbered and causing difficulty with the integrity of the flat back zone.

A 3-4-3 system can also cause difficulties, particularly if a central defender needs to step into midfield causing a 3v3 situation at the back.

Ultimately, the strength of your own team will determine if the opponent is forced to make an adjustment to their system during the game or if you need to adjust because the opponent's system is dominating. This 4-4-2 is a very attractive, attacking system with risks in central midfield during transition to defense.