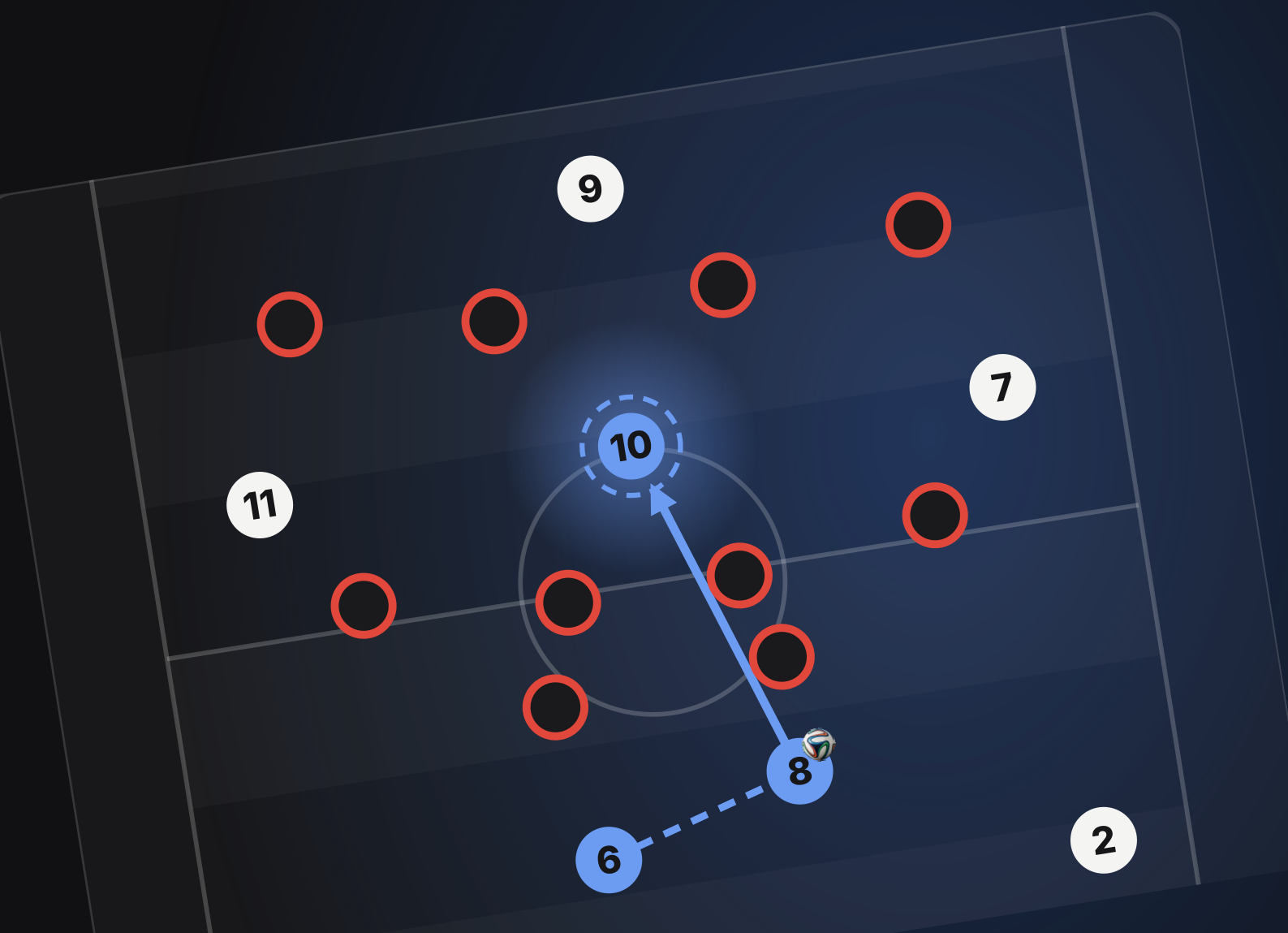




The 4-2-3-1 Playbook

One shape, many systems: how football's most-used formation builds, creates, presses and protects.



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By the Total Football Studio coaching team



Total Football Studio
totalfootballstudio.com

The 4-2-3-1 Playbook

One shape, many systems: how football's most-used formation builds, creates, presses and protects.

The Playbook Series, No. 03

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The numbers. Every statistic is quoted from the public sources listed at the back, as published at the time of writing. Distances on the boards are measured at real scale on a 105 × 68 m pitch.

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Corrections. Found a mistake? Write to totalfootball@naurra.ai and we will fix it in the next version.

Written and designed by the Total Football Studio coaching team. Diagrams drawn with the Total Football Studio board engine. Set in Inter.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A field guide to the shape most teams start in, written for the people who coach it.

Thirteen of the twenty Premier League teams used the 4-2-3-1 as their main shape in 2024/25. Almost none of them played it the same way. This book shows you why, and how to turn the same eleven starting positions into the system your team needs.

Who it is for

Head coaches, assistants, analysts and academy staff. It assumes you know the game and want one language for the shape that your whole staff can use, from the first pass to the last line of the press.

How every chapter works

Problem, principle, picture, session, cost. Each idea is drawn on a real-scale pitch, each pattern links to a session in [chapter 12](#), and each variation ends with what it costs you when it breaks.

About the numbers

Every figure in this book comes from a named public source: Opta via the Premier League and The Analyst, UEFA, the Bundesliga, and a 2026 peer-reviewed study of six European leagues. The source list is at the back. Distances on the boards are real metres on a 105 × 68 m pitch, measured by our board check, not estimated.

THREE WAYS TO USE IT**1 · Read it front to back**

The six steps build on each other. Shape before Pivot, Pivot before Build.

2 · Prepare for Saturday

Find your opponent's shape in the matrix ([chapter 10](#)). It tells you where your spare player is, and how to press them.

3 · Plan the week

Use the session finder in [chapter 12](#). Every session trains one step and names the problem it solves.

THUMB TABS

The coloured tabs on the right edge of every page match the six steps. Flip to a colour to find a step.



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BEFORE YOU START

Reading the boards

Every board is drawn to scale on a 105 × 68 m pitch. We always attack up the page, so our goal is at the bottom. Opponents are the white chips with a red ring.

6

Our player and role number



Opponent



The free player



Pass



Run without the ball



Pressing run



Space to use

[4

A line of the shape, and how many are in it

10

The key players in the move



Joker / neutral (sessions)



Where a player started



Long or lofted ball



Carry (dribble)



Cover shadow: the lane a presser blocks



Danger or trap



Cones and mini-goals (sessions)

Role numbers

The numbers stay the same in every chapter, so a pattern reads the same wherever you meet it: **1** keeper, **2** right-back, **3** left-back, **4** left centre-back, **5** right centre-back, **6** and **8** the double pivot (the 6 usually the deeper of the two), **10** the attacking midfielder, **11** the left-sided and **7** the right-sided attacker, **9** the striker.

Words we use

Double pivot: the two holding midfielders. **The pocket:** the space between the opponent's midfield and defence. **Base:** our shape when we start an attack. **Rest defence:** who stays behind the ball. Full glossary at the back.



Drawn in Total Football Studio

Every board in this book was built in our tactics board, at real scale. Open it and pose your own 4-2-3-1 the same way.

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INTRODUCTION

A starting position, not a system.

In 2024/25 Premier League teams started in a 4-2-3-1 408 times, up from 296 the season before. Thirteen of the twenty clubs used it as their main shape.¹ Across six European leagues in 2023/24 it was the most-used formation of all.²

So why does the same shape look so different from one team to the next? Liverpool won the 2024/25 title in it with two holding midfielders who held their positions in front of the defence. Chelsea used it in all 38 league games and attacked in a 3-2-4-1, with a full-back stepping into midfield. Bournemouth also used it in all 38 and won the ball back more often than anyone, with a press that turned man-to-man once the ball went wide.^{1, 5, 6, 16}

The answer is that a formation is where players stand at kick-off. A system is what they do once the ball moves. The 4-2-3-1 is popular because it changes shape so easily: one step from a 4-4-2 out of possession, one step from a back three in possession, and it always keeps two players in the middle in front of the defence.

This book is built on six steps. We call it the spine. Every chapter answers one of them, every pattern belongs to one of them, and every session trains one of them.

Learn the shape. Pair the pivot. Build past the first line. Free the 10. Press as a 4-4-2. Keep two behind the ball.

THE WHOLE BOOK IN ONE LINE

29.06%

Share of all formations used in six top European leagues in 2023/24: 1,211 of 4,038 observed.

TOKUL ET AL., 2026

THE SPINE: SIX STEPS, IN ORDER

STEP 1

Shape

Know the eleven roles and what each one owes the team.

STEP 2

Pivot

Pair the two holding players so one always covers the other.

STEP 3

Build

Pick the base that beats their first line.

STEP 4

Create

Free the 10 and the wide men between their lines.

STEP 5

Press

Turn into a 4-4-2 and choose where to win it.

STEP 6

Protect

Keep the door shut behind every attack.

Why the 4-2-3-1

In two seasons the 4-2-3-1 went from 261 to 408 Premier League starts. This chapter shows how far it has spread, what the data can and cannot tell you, and why so many coaches choose it.



The resting 4-2-3-1 used throughout this book.

IN THIS CHAPTER

01 The most-used shape in football

02 Popular is not the same as best

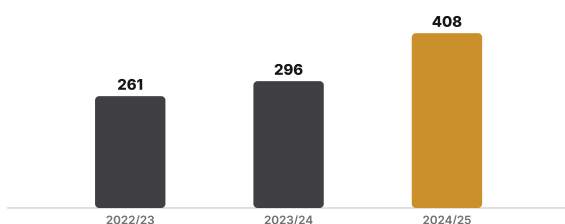
03 Why coaches choose it

THE DATA

The most-used shape in football

Opta records the formation every team starts each match in. In the Premier League one shape has pulled away from the rest.¹

Premier League starts in a 4-2-3-1 PER SEASON



408 of the 760 starting line-ups in 2024/25, more than half. Up 37.8% on 2023/24.¹

Where the starts came from 2023/24 → 2024/25

FORMATION	2023/24	2024/25	CHANGE
4-2-3-1	296	408	+112
3-4-2-1	71	117	+46
4-3-3	172	114	-58
4-4-2	54	20	-34

The 4-3-3 lost a third of its starts even though Arsenal, Newcastle and Tottenham still used it.¹

13/20

Premier League teams that used the 4-2-3-1 as their main shape in 2024/25.

PREMIER LEAGUE · OPTA

38/38

Games in a 4-2-3-1 for Iraola's Bournemouth and Maresca's Chelsea, the only coaches who never changed shape.

PREMIER LEAGUE · OPTA

1st

Liverpool won the title in their first season in it, after Slot replaced Klopp's 4-3-3.

PREMIER LEAGUE · OPTA

Not one way of playing

Those 408 starts hide very different football. Liverpool controlled games and broke fast. Chelsea built up with a full-back in midfield. Bournemouth pressed higher and harder than almost anyone. The number on the team sheet was the same. The systems were not.^{1, 5, 6}

Why that matters to you

If most opponents start in a 4-2-3-1, you need to read which 4-2-3-1 is coming. And if you play it yourself, you need to decide which version you are. [Chapter 4](#) shows the main versions. [Chapter 10](#) shows how to play against each of them.

READING THE DATA

Popular is not the same as best

A 2026 study counted the formations of every team across six European leagues in 2023/24, and set them against the points they won.²

THE STUDY

Leagues	Premier League, Bundesliga, LaLiga, Ligue 1, Serie A, Turkish Super Lig
Season	2023/24
Matches	2,132
Formations observed	4,038
4-2-3-1	1,211, or 29.06%: the most used
In Turkey	46.32% of all formations

1.41

Points per match for the 4-2-3-1.

TOKUL ET AL., 2026

1.81

Points per match for the 3-4-3, the highest of any shape.

TOKUL ET AL., 2026

What the table cannot tell you

Formation tables mix up cause and effect. A strong team picks the shape that suits its players; a weak team picks the shape that keeps the score down. The points follow the players at least as much as the shape. The authors say so themselves:

The effectiveness of tactical formations is not solely determined by their structural advantages but also by their alignment with league culture, player profiles, and managerial strategies.

TOKUL ET AL., BMC SPORTS SCIENCE, MEDICINE AND REHABILITATION, 2026

That is the argument of this book. The 4-2-3-1 does not win games. A 4-2-3-1 that fits your players, and that changes shape on purpose, gives you a better chance.

Why coaches choose it

Two in front of the defence

The double pivot protects the centre when the ball is lost, so both full-backs can attack at the same time.⁴

A player between the lines

The 10 starts in the pocket between the opponent's midfield and defence, where a flat four in midfield finds it hardest to defend.

One step from a 4-4-2

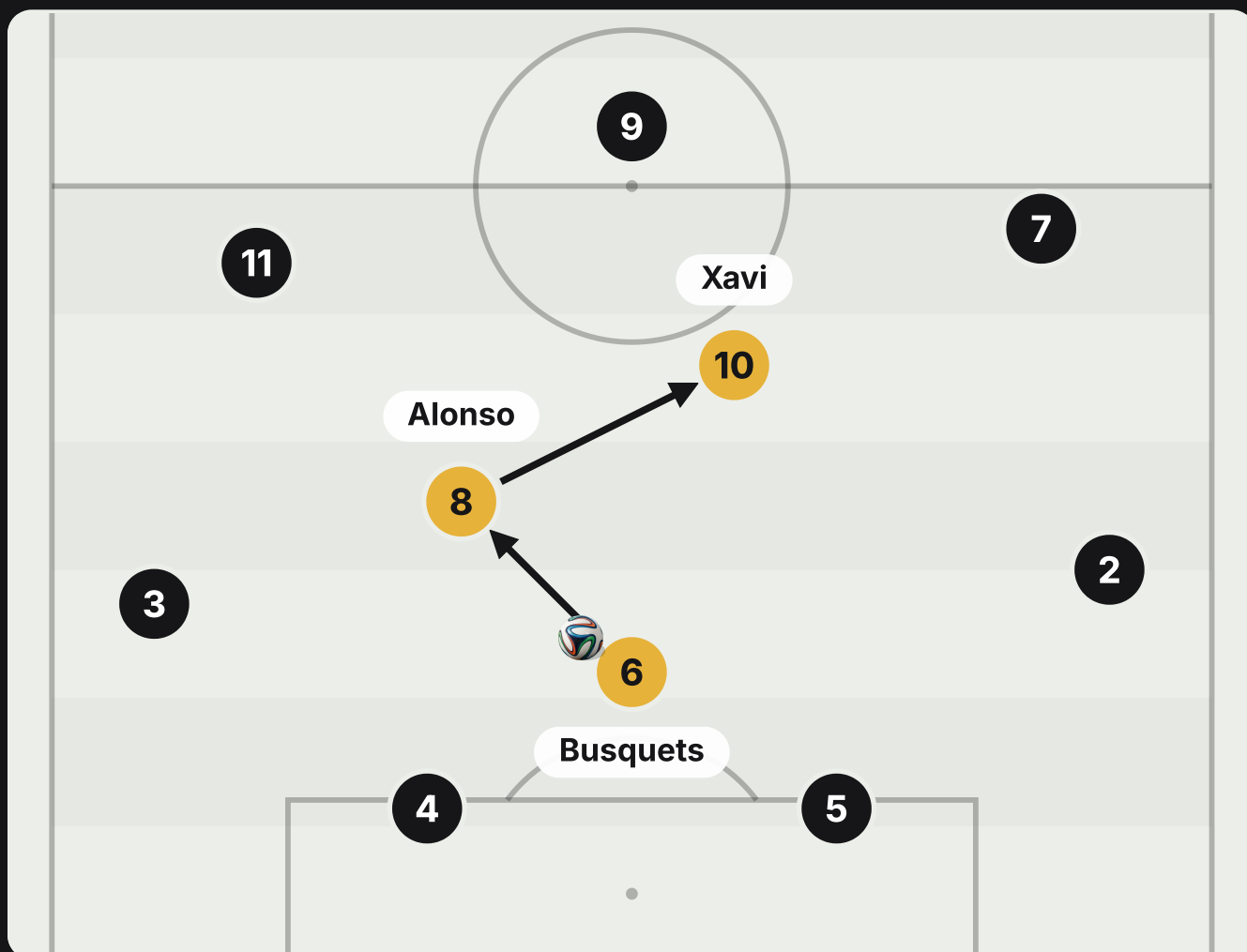
Without the ball the 10 steps up beside the 9 and the wide men drop into midfield. Every player defends close to where they attack.

THE 2025/26 PICTURE

The Premier League got more direct in 2025/26: 99.7 long balls per game, up from 93.4, and 849.1 passes per game, the lowest for fifteen years.¹⁹ A 9 and a 10 who stand close together are a natural pair for a long ball and the second ball. Chapter 6 shows how.

Where it came from

The 4-2-3-1 is usually traced to Spain in the 1990s, where it began as a pressing shape. It went on to win a World Cup through possession, break records on the counter-attack and win the 2024/25 Premier League through control.



Spain, 2010: Busquets and Alonso as the double pivot, Xavi as the hub.

IN THIS CHAPTER

01 The 1990s: a second holder

02 2008 to 2014: the golden years

03 The modern 4-2-3-1

04 Eight great 4-2-3-1s

SESSION 1 · PIVOT

The pivot box

The double pivot's first habits: stand on different lines, show on an angle, and play the diagonal between the two holders.

4 + 2 V 2

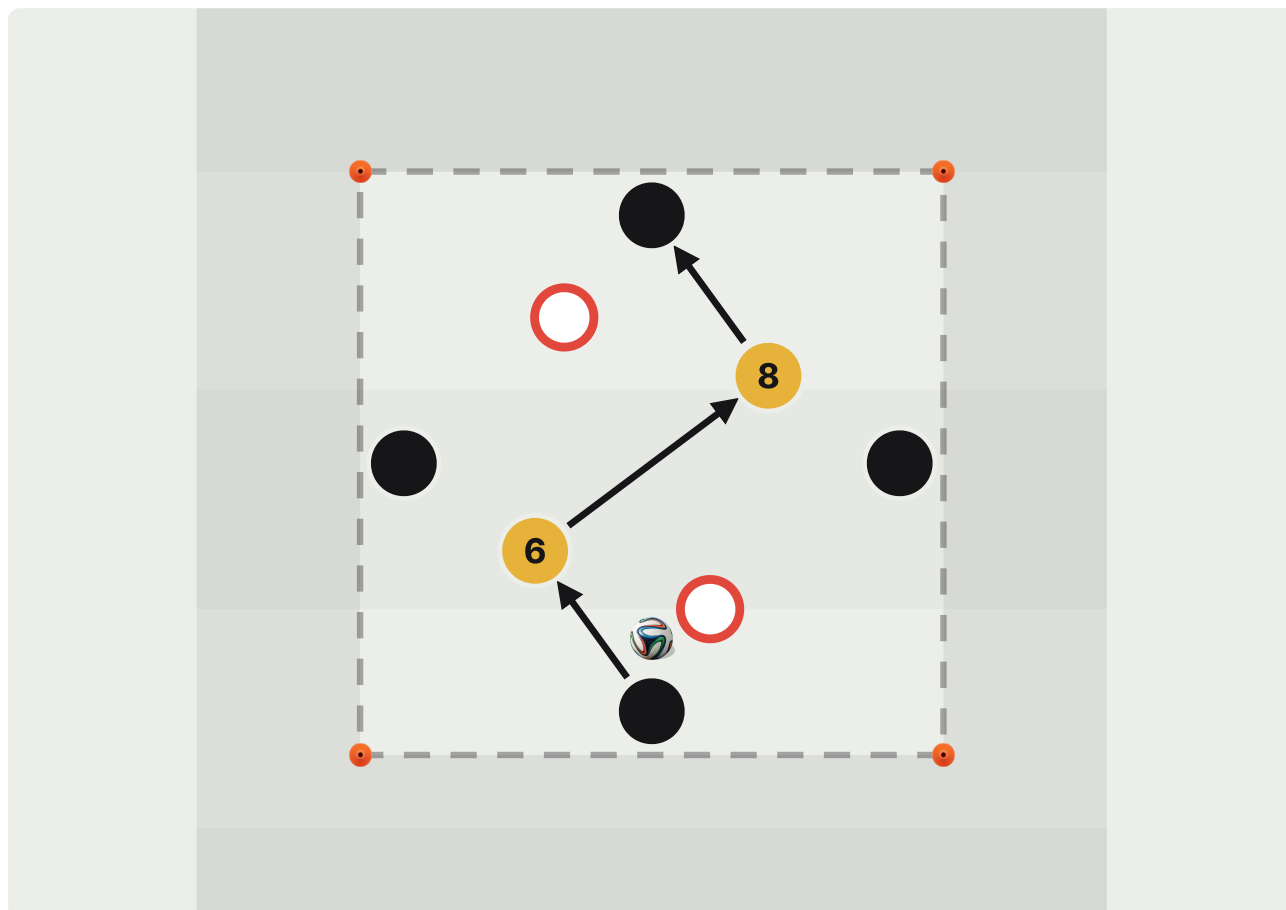
20 × 20 M

5 × 3 MIN

WARM-UP

Setup

20 × 20 M



Four outside, two holders inside, two defenders. A pass between the holders that ends on the far side scores.

HOW IT RUNS

- 1 Four players on the sides of the square, two holders and two defenders inside.
- 2 Keep the ball; two touches.
- 3 A defender who wins it swaps with the player who lost it.

RULES

- Outside to holder, holder to holder, holder to the far side scores 2.
- The two holders may not stand level.
- Ten passes in a row scores 1.

COACHING POINTS

- 1 When one holder comes short, the other goes higher.
- 2 Open the body to the far side before the ball arrives.
- 3 Diagonal, not square: break the line of the two defenders.

PROGRESS

One touch for the holders, or a 20 × 15 m area.

REGRESS

Three touches, or one defender.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

The holders are never level, and the diagonal between them is played without looking down.

"Split!"

"Up and down!"



Thirteen Premier League teams started in it. Almost none played it the same way.

The 4-2-3-1 is where your players stand at kick-off, not what they do once the ball moves. This playbook shows how the same eleven starting positions become a 3-2-4-1, a 4-3-3 or a 2-3-5 with the ball and a 4-4-2 without it, with every idea drawn to scale and every pattern tied to a session.

INSIDE

- | | |
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| 02 Four double-pivot pairings and the stagger | 06 An opponent matrix for six shapes |
| 03 Four build-up bases against every first line | 07 20 sessions, from rondo to 11 v 11 |
| 04 The final third: freeing the 10 and the wide men | 08 A one-page game plan and a match-day checklist |



Three books, one way of drawing the game. The Playbook Series from Total Football Studio.