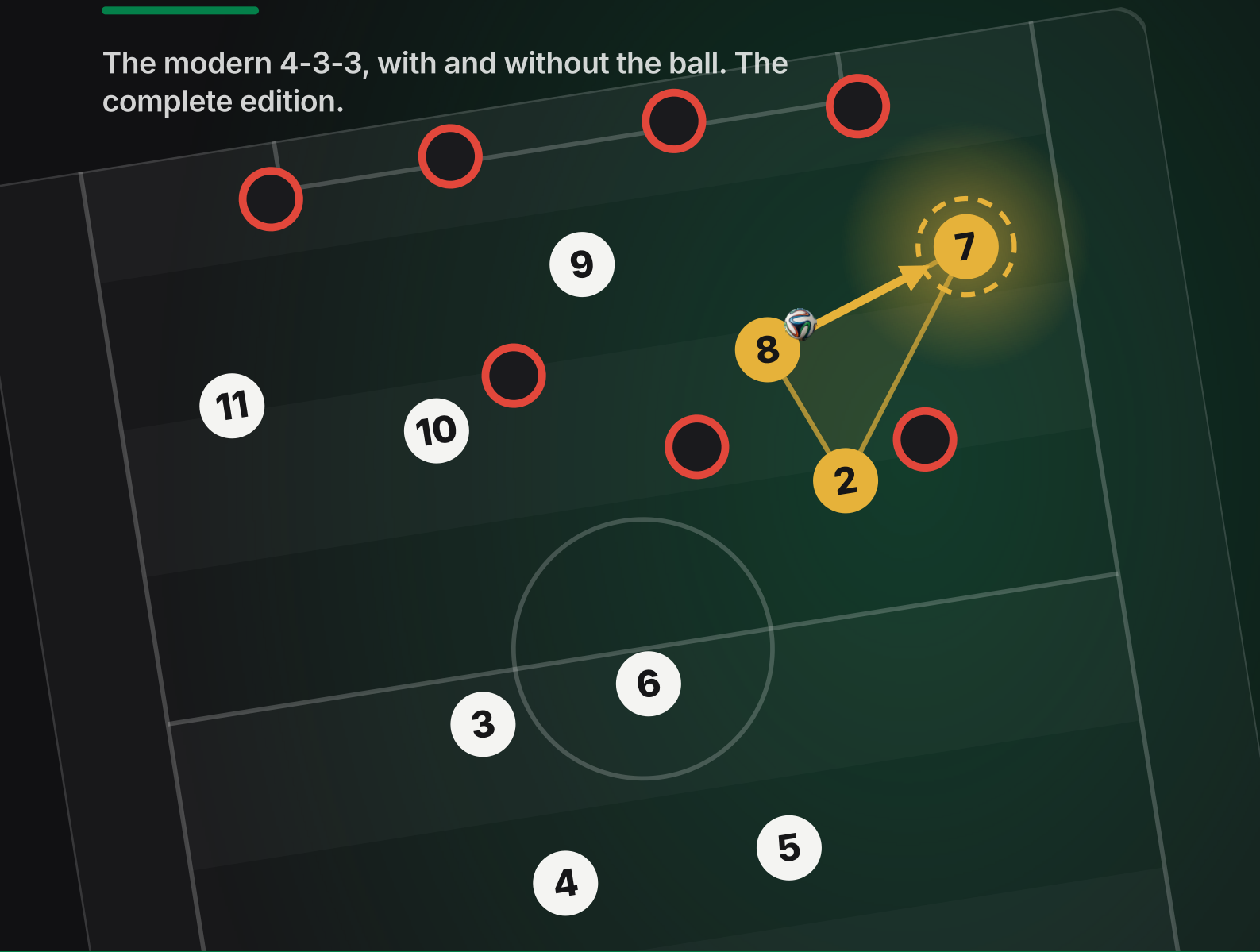
Total Football Studio

THE PLAYBOOK SERIES
No. 01 Deluxe

The 4-3-3 Playbook Deluxe

The modern 4-3-3, with and without the ball. The complete edition.



By the Total Football Studio coaching team

144 pages • **135** boards • **30** sessions

COACHES' EDITION

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The 4-3-3 Playbook: Deluxe Edition
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The Playbook Series, No. 01 Deluxe

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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.

Training safety. The sessions are guidance for qualified coaches. Adapt the area, the load and the contact to the age, fitness and ability of your players, check the surface and the equipment, and follow your club's and your federation's safeguarding rules. The publisher accepts no liability for injury or loss arising from the use of this material.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

The complete field guide to the 4-3-3, written for the people who coach it.

The 4-3-3 is the shape most coaches name first and the one that changes most once the ball moves. This edition takes it apart phase by phase and role by role, then gives you the sessions and the weeks to put it back together with your own players.

Who it is for

Head coaches, assistants, analysts and academy staff, at any level of the 11-a-side game. Professional examples explain why a pattern works; every pattern also says what to change for an amateur side.

How every chapter works

Problem, principle, picture, session, cost. Every pattern is drawn on a real-scale pitch, every job points to a session in chapter 13, and every choice ends with what it costs you when it goes wrong.

About the numbers

Every figure comes from a named public source, listed at the back: among them the Premier League, UEFA, FIFA, Opta, StatsBomb, the clubs and peer-reviewed research. Distances we recommend, such as the space between the 6 and the centre-backs, are labelled as our coaching guide, drawn to scale and measured on the board.

THREE WAYS TO USE IT

1 · Install the system

Follow the six-week plan in chapter 14. Each week names its chapters and its sessions.

2 · Prepare for Saturday

Find the opponent's shape in chapter 11 and the build-up that beats their press in chapter 4.

3 · Coach one player

Hand him his page from chapter 12: his job in every phase, the profile and the checklist.

THUMB TABS

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

14
Chapters, from why the 4-3-3 to the six-week install.

11
Role pages, one for every position in the system.

30
Sessions, one page each, every area drawn at real scale.

23
Public sources behind every figure, listed at the back.

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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 and theirs at the top. Opponents are the chips with a red ring. Every board is measured by a check: no player hidden under another, every shape with the right number of men, every quoted distance true to the drawing.



Role numbers

Our numbers name a role, not a shirt, and stay the same in every chapter: **1** keeper; **3** left back, **4** left centre-back, **5** right centre-back, **2** right back; **6** the holding midfielder, **10** the left 8, **8** the right 8; **11** left winger, **9** centre-forward, **7** right winger.

Words we use

The 6: the holding midfielder. **The 8s**: the two midfielders beside and ahead of him. **Half-space**: the lane between the centre and the flank. **Rest defence**: the men who stay behind the ball while we attack. **Counter-press**: pressing the moment we lose it. 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 draw your own 4-3-3 the same way, one phase at a time.

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INTRODUCTION

Three in midfield, three up front.

On the team sheet a 4-3-3 is four defenders, three midfielders and three forwards. On the pitch it is almost never that: a 2-3-5 when it attacks, a 3-2-5 when it builds, a 4-1-4-1 or a 4-4-2 when it defends. Coaching it means coaching every one of those shapes, and the moments between them.

Ajax won three European Cups in a row from 1971 to 1973 in what UEFA describes as a 4-3-3 with attackers on the wings.[2] Half a century later Spain won EURO 2024 with a record 15 goals and two wingers, Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams, who in the words of UEFA's observers "provided genuine width".[10][11]

On Premier League team sheets the label is falling: 172 starts in a 4-3-3 in 2023/24, 114 a season later.[1] Its ideas are everywhere. The full-back who steps into midfield, the 8 who arrives in the box, the front three who press the back four: all of them live in this shape, and this book teaches them through it.

This book teaches it whole. It 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. Then chapter 12 gives each player his own page, and chapter 14 gives you six weeks to install it.

Hold the triangle. Build with a spare man. Break a line. Stretch the width. Press on the trigger. Rest before you lose it.

THE WHOLE BOOK IN ONE LINE

3

European Cups in a row for Ajax, 1971 to 1973, in a 4-3-3 with attackers on the wings.

UEFA

THE SPINE: SIX STEPS, IN ORDER

STEP 1
Pivot
The 6 and the two 8s: triangles, angles and a man always free in the middle.

STEP 2
Build
Four becomes three, the keeper joins, and the spare man carries it out.

STEP 3
Break
Through the lines: between them, round them, or with the third man.

STEP 4
Wide
A winger and a full-back on each side: one wide, one inside, never both.

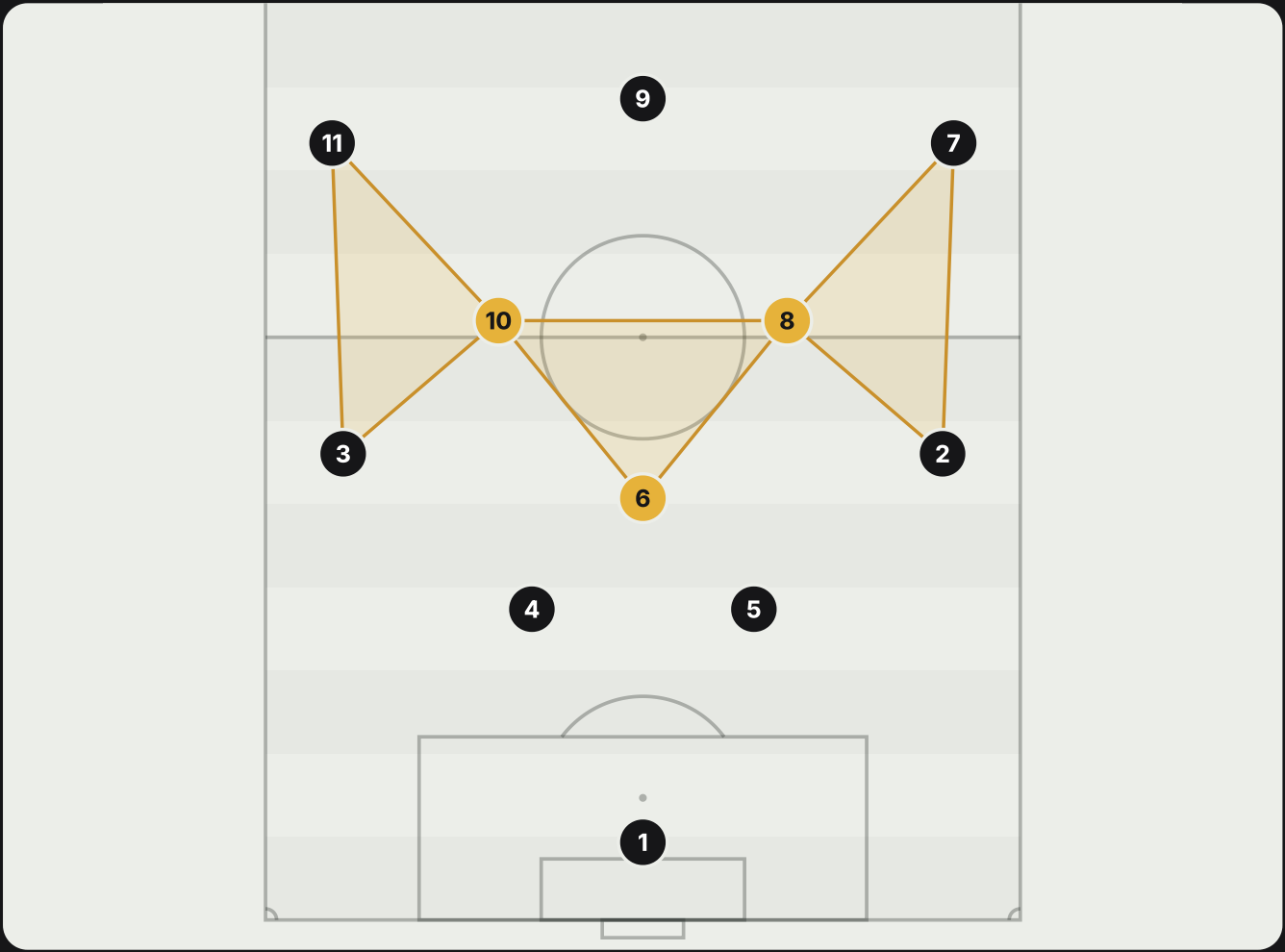
STEP 5
Press
An 8 jumps, the winger curves, and the trap shuts on the touchline.

STEP 6
Rest
Men behind the ball before it is lost, and five seconds to win it back.

CHAPTER

Why the 4-3-3

Four defenders, three midfielders, three forwards. The 4-3-3 is the shape most coaches name first, and the one that changes most once the ball moves. This chapter shows what it gives you, what it costs and who has won with it.



Our 4-3-3 on the ball. Gold: the midfield three. Shaded: the three triangles, full-back, 8 and winger on each side and the three in the middle.

IN THIS CHAPTER

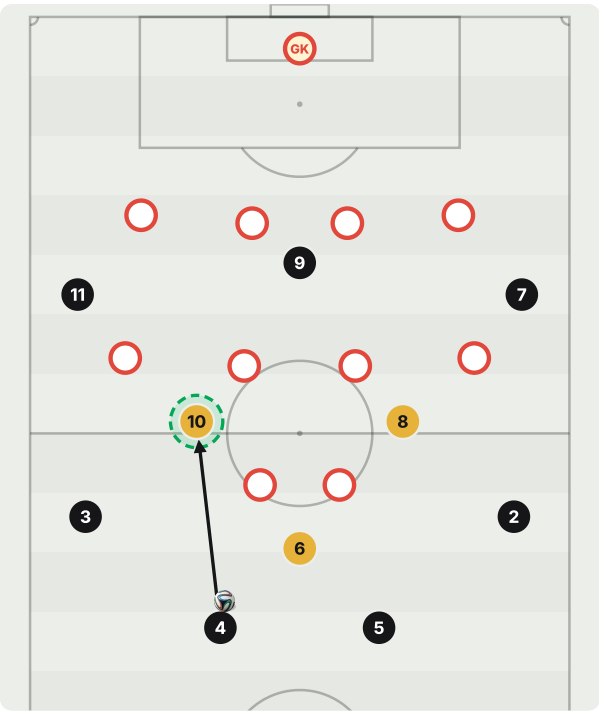
01 What three in midfield and three up front give you
02 What it costs: the space beside the 6
03 The record, from Ajax to Paris
04 What the numbers say
05 When to choose it

THE IDEA

What three in midfield and three up front give you

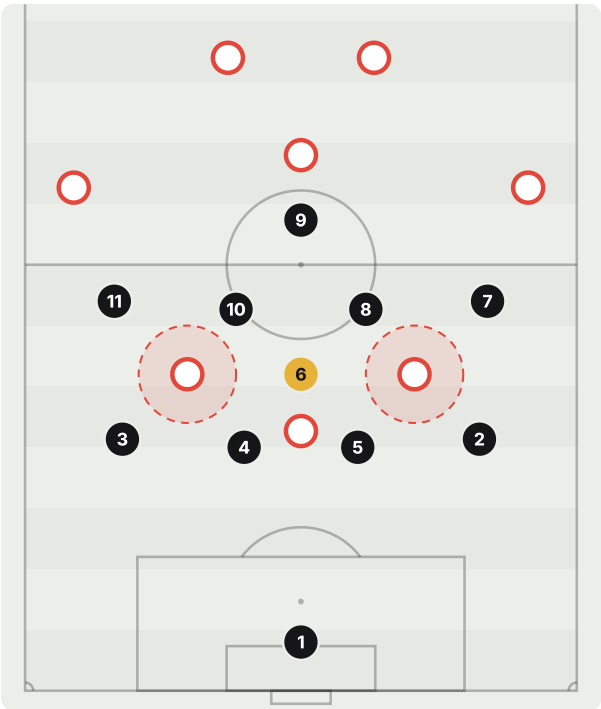
Every shape is a trade. The 4-3-3 buys a spare man in the middle and width at the front, and pays for it beside its one holding midfielder.

The gift — THREE AGAINST TWO



Against a 4-4-2 their two central midfielders cannot cover our three. The left 8 (10) is free, and the 4 finds him.

The bill — THE POCKETS BESIDE THE 6



One 6 cannot guard both sides of himself. An opponent with a man in each pocket makes him choose, and the 8s must drop to help.

What it gives

- **A free man in midfield** against any shape with two central midfielders: three against two.
- **Triangles on both sides**: full-back, 8 and winger make a passing triangle on each flank.
- **Width and depth from the front three**: two wingers stretch the back four, the 9 pins the centre-backs.
- **A press with three up front** against a back four, and an 8 ready to jump.
- **Shapes to change into**: the same eleven become a 2-3-5, a 3-2-5, a 4-1-4-1 or a 4-4-2 (chapter 2).

What it costs

- **The space beside the 6**, the pockets where a 10 or a second striker receives.
- **One holder**: lose the ball with both 8s high and the 6 is alone in front of the back four.
- **Running for the wingers**: stay high and the full-back faces two; track back and they start far from goal.
- **A lone 9** against two centre-backs.

THE POINT

A 4-3-3 works when the triangles hold and someone always stays behind the ball. Chapters 3 to 9 teach both.

HISTORY

The record, from Ajax to Paris

Three midfielders and a front three have won almost everything in the European game. These are the moments the record is sure of. Where a source names the shape we print it; where it names the roles, we print those.

WHEN	WHO	WHAT HAPPENED
1971 to 1973	Ajax	Three European Cups in a row: 2-0 against Panathinaikos under Rinus Michels, then 2-0 against Internazionale (Cruyff scored both) and 1-0 against Juventus under Stefán Kovács. UEFA describes a 4-3-3 with attackers on the wings, attacks that began with the goalkeeper, heavy pressing and a disciplined offside trap.[2]
1995	Ajax	Louis van Gaal's side beat Milan 1-0 in the Champions League final in Vienna. Patrick Kluivert came off the bench and scored in the 85th minute, at 18 years and 327 days the youngest scorer in a final.[3]
2009	Barcelona	At the Bernabéu Guardiola played Messi centrally as a false nine for the first time, with Henry and Eto'o running in behind from the flanks: Real Madrid 2, Barcelona 6.[4][5] Later that month they beat Manchester United 2-0 in the final in Rome to complete a treble in Guardiola's first season.[6]
2017/18	Manchester City	Guardiola's City finished with 100 points, 106 goals and 32 wins, all Premier League records, 19 points clear.[7]
2018 to 2020	Liverpool	Full-backs as creators: Trent Alexander-Arnold made 12 Premier League assists in 2018/19, a record for a defender, and Andy Robertson 11.[8] Liverpool won the 2019 Champions League final 2-0 against Tottenham, then the 2019/20 title with 99 points.[9]
2022/23	Manchester City	John Stones moved between centre-back and midfield: a 4-3-3 on some team sheets, a 3-2-4-1 with the ball. After the switch City scored 3.2 goals a game instead of 2.3 and conceded 0.5 instead of 0.9.[13]
2024	Spain	Champions of Europe with 15 goals, a EURO record. Where Silva and Iniesta were inside-forwards in 2012, UEFA's observers saw Yamal and Williams provide "genuine width".[10][11]
2025 and 2026	Paris Saint-Germain	Luis Enrique's Paris beat Inter 5-0 in the 2025 final, a record margin, with Vitinha as the nominal holding midfielder and Dembélé leading the press.[16] A year later they beat Arsenal on penalties in Budapest.[17]

They can be a ten, they can be an eight, they can be a six.

GARETH SOUTHGATE, UEFA OBSERVER, ON THE PARIS MIDFIELD IN THE 2025 FINAL[16]

READ IT WITH CHAPTER 2

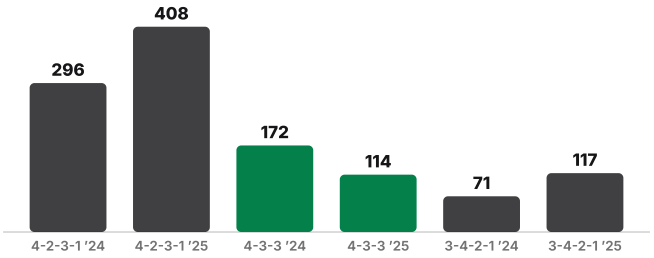
A team sheet records the shape at kick-off. Barcelona dropped their 9; City moved a centre-back into midfield. The label stays, the shape moves: chapter 2 draws where.

THE NUMBERS

What the numbers say

The 4-3-3 is rarer on Premier League team sheets than it was. Its ideas are not.

PREMIER LEAGUE STARTS BY FORMATION, 2023/24 AND 2024/25[1]



Starts in a 4-3-3 fell from 172 to 114 in one season while the 4-2-3-1 rose from 296 to 408.[1] The two are close relatives: push one 8 up, drop the other beside the 6, and a 4-3-3 is a 4-2-3-1. A team sheet records the shape at kick-off. Chapter 2 draws the shapes a 4-3-3 becomes after it.

A review of 13 studies of professional matches found every team bigger with the ball than without it: 31 to 46 m long and 35 to 48 m wide.[22] A 4-3-3 lives on that rhythm: five across the front with the ball, narrow and short without it.

~30%

More high-intensity running by attackers in a 4-3-3 than by attackers in a 4-4-2 or a 4-5-1, across 20 Premier League matches.

BRADLEY ET AL., 2011

The same study found formation changed little else about how much players ran.[21] In a 4-3-3 the front three pay the bill.

WITH AN AMATEUR SIDE

Your wingers will not run that much more for ninety minutes. Pick the half they save their legs for: attack, and they stay high while the 8s and full-backs defend the flank; or defence, and they track the full-backs while you counter through the 9.

WHAT THE BILL MEANS FOR YOUR SQUAD

Pick for it

Choose wingers who can repeat sprints, not only beat a man. The second run back matters as much as the first run forward.

Rotate it

In a week with two games, the front three are the first place to rotate. Keep the 6 and the centre-backs; change the runners.

Share it

A 9 who presses the centre-backs and an 8 who jumps on the trigger save the wingers a run. Chapter 8 shares out the press.

SESSION 1 · PIVOT

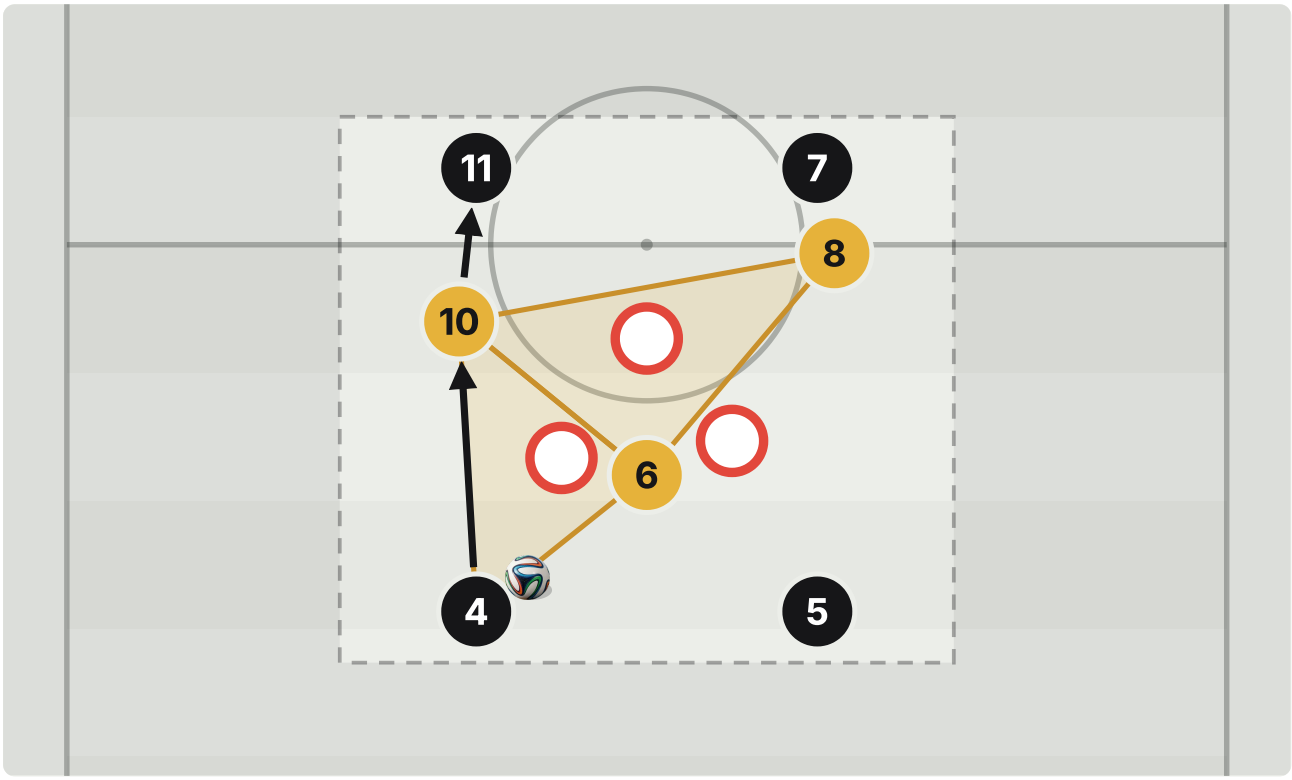
The triangle rondo

The 6 and the two 8s keep three heights, so the centre-backs can always find one of them past two forwards and a midfielder.

7 V 3 | 36 × 32 M | 5 × 3 MIN | MEDIUM

Setup

36 × 32 M



Two centre-backs at one end, two forwards at the other, the 6 and the 8s inside against three. The 4 finds the 10 past the first line.

HOW IT RUNS

1. The 4 and the 5 start at one end, the 11 and the 7 at the other; the 6, the 10 and the 8 play inside.
2. Our seven move the ball from one end to the other through at least one of the three inside.
3. Their three win it and dribble over either end line.

RULES

- End to end through an inside man: 1 point.
- End to end through all three: 3 points.
- Three inside on one line when the ball is played: the coach stops play, ball to them.

COACHING POINTS

1. Three heights: the 6 deepest, the 8s at two different heights.
2. Check both shoulders before the ball arrives.
3. Receive half-turned; the first touch goes forward.

PROGRESS

Two touches inside; a fourth defender.

REGRESS

Free touches; their three walk.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

The three never stand level, and the ball crosses the area through the middle more than round it.

"Turn!" "Man on!"

SESSIONS

Total Football Studio

THE PLAYBOOK SERIES

No. 01 Deluxe

Three in midfield. Three up front. Every shape it becomes.

The 4-3-3 changes shape more than any system in football: a 2-3-5 with the ball, a 4-1-4-1 or a 4-4-2 without it. This edition shows every job in it: the 6 and the two 8s, playing out, breaking lines, the wingers and full-backs, the box, the press, rest defence and the low block, then a page for each of the eleven roles, 30 sessions and a six-week plan to install it. Every board is drawn to scale and checked.

INSIDE

01 What a 4-3-3 gives you and what it costs, with the history and the data

02 One 6 or two, the false 9, the 2-3-5, the 3-2-5 and the 4-1-4-1

03 The 6 and the two 8s, playing out and breaking the lines

04 Wingers and full-backs, the final third and the box

05 The press, rest defence, the counter-press, the mid and low block

06 Matchups and changing shape during a game

07 The eleven roles, one page each

08 30 sessions and a six-week install plan

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



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