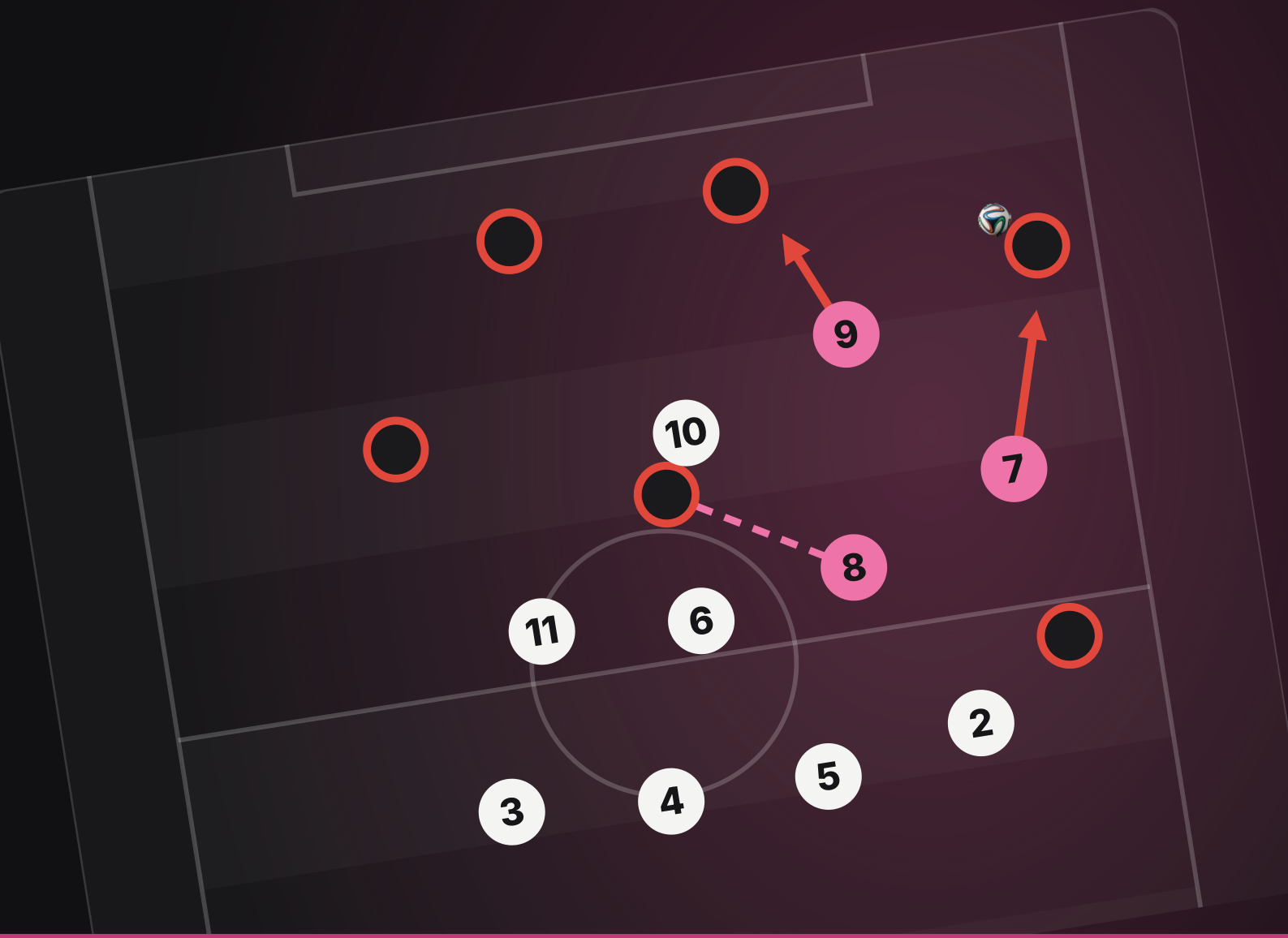
Total Football Studio

THE PLAYBOOK SERIES
No. 07

The 4-4-2 Playbook

Two banks of four and two up front, with and without the ball.



By the Total Football Studio coaching team

95 pages • **80** boards • **20** sessions

COACHES' EDITION

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First edition, version 1.0, November 2026.

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

Published by Total Football Studio, a product of NAURRA AI LTD, 10 Kyriakou Matsi, Nicosia 1082, Cyprus.
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A field guide to the 4-4-2, written for the people who coach it.

The 4-4-2 is the shape most coaches learned first and the one many teams still defend in. This book takes it apart pair by pair, then puts it back together against every common opponent.

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 links to a session in chapter 12, 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's own data, UEFA, FIFA, LaLiga, The FA, Opta and a peer-reviewed review of team shape. Distances we recommend, such as the gap between the lines, are labelled as our coaching guide, drawn to scale and measured on the board.

THREE WAYS TO USE IT

1 · Install the shape

Chapters 2 to 5 build the block, the slide and the press. Read them in order once.

2 · Prepare for Saturday

Find the opponent's shape in chapter 11 and the build-up that beats their press in chapter 8.

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.

12
Chapters, from why the 4-4-2 to the training ground.

6
Steps in the spine: Block, Shift, Press, Pair, Wide and Break.

20
Sessions, one page each, every area drawn at real scale.

17
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; **11** left midfielder, **6** left central midfielder, **8** right central midfielder, **7** right midfielder; **10** the striker who comes short, **9** the striker who runs in behind.

Words we use

Block: the team's shape without the ball. **Bank**: one line of four. **Slide**: the block moving across to the ball. **Squeeze**: the block stepping up together. **Trigger**: the moment the team presses. 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 4-4-2 the same way, one phase at a time.

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INTRODUCTION

Two banks of four, two up front.

The 4-4-2 is the shape every coach can draw and few teams play well. Call it old-fashioned and you miss the champions who defend in it. Call it simple and you miss the pairs that make it work: who goes and who stays, who comes short and who runs long.

In 2015/16 Leicester City won the Premier League with a 4-4-2 in 35 of their 38 games and 42.43% of the ball, the least possession of any champion since 2003/04.[2] Eight years later Real Madrid won the Champions League defending in a 4-4-2 shape, 21.8 m deep from their highest player to their back line in UEFA's example.[13]

Yet as a starting line-up the classic 4-4-2 is rare: 20 Premier League starts in 2024/25, down from 54.[1] It lives on as the way many teams defend, and as a weapon for the coach who teaches it properly.

This book teaches it properly. 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.

Stay short. Slide together. Press on the trigger. Work in pairs. Win the flanks. Break at once.

THE WHOLE BOOK IN ONE LINE

25 m

Sacchi's limit from his defenders to his forwards. His Milan won the 1989 European Cup final 4-0.

FIFA, UEFA

THE SPINE: SIX STEPS, IN ORDER

STEP 1
Block
Two banks of four, short and narrow, at the height you choose.

STEP 2
Shift
A block that slides to the ball, every man at once, and guards the far side.

STEP 3
Press
Two strikers who curve, a trigger every-one sees, and a trap on the touchline.

STEP 4
Pair
Two in midfield and two up front: one goes, one stays; one short, one long.

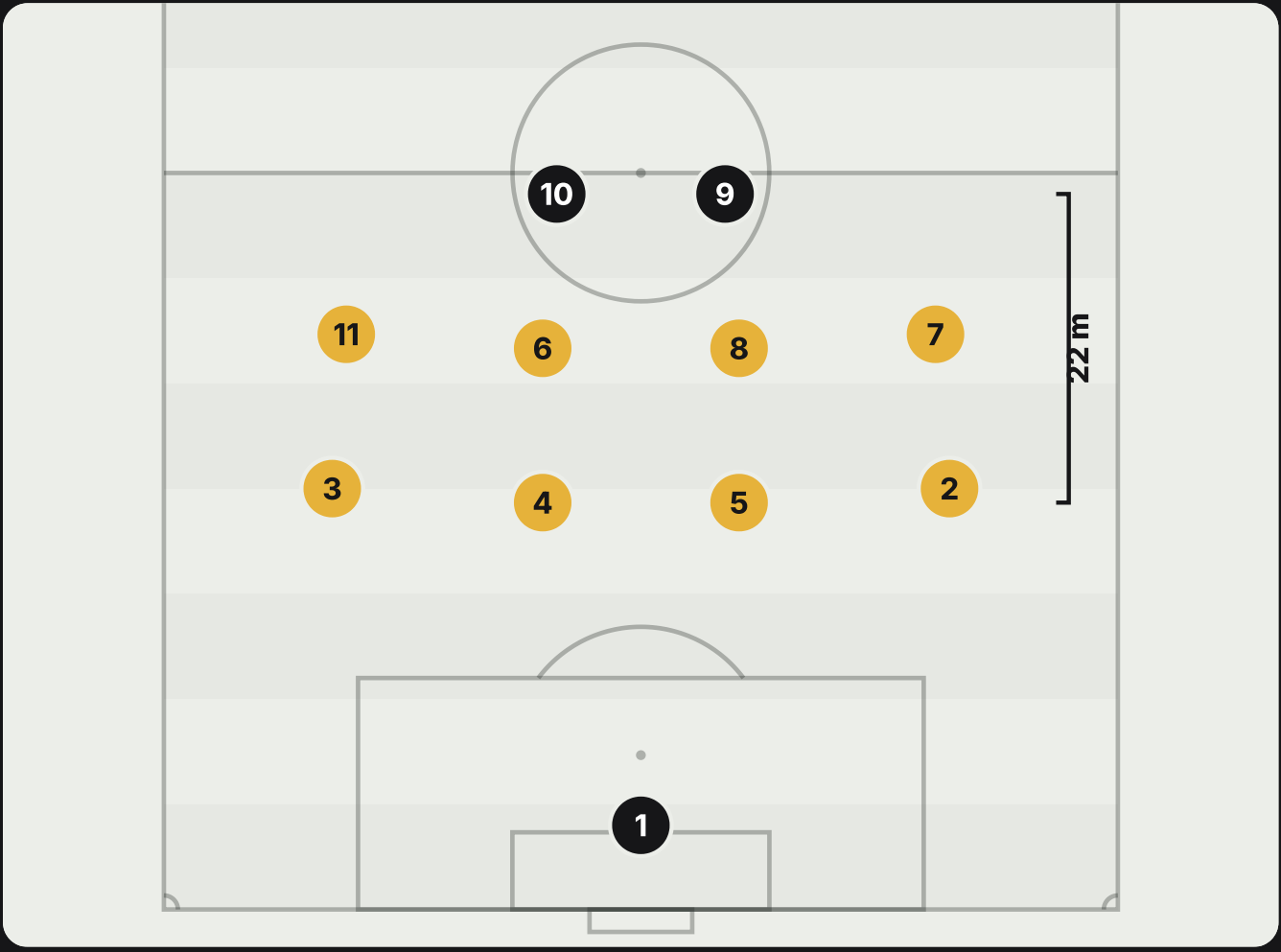
STEP 5
Wide
A full-back and a wide midfielder on each flank: two against one, and the cross.

STEP 6
Break
Win it and go: forward at once, with runners already on their way.

CHAPTER

Why the 4-4-2

Four defenders, four midfielders, two strikers. The 4-4-2 is the simplest shape in football to draw and one of the hardest to play well. This chapter shows what it gives you, what it costs and who has won with it.



Our 4-4-2 in a mid-block. Gold: the two banks of four. From the back line to the front two: 22 m.

IN THIS CHAPTER

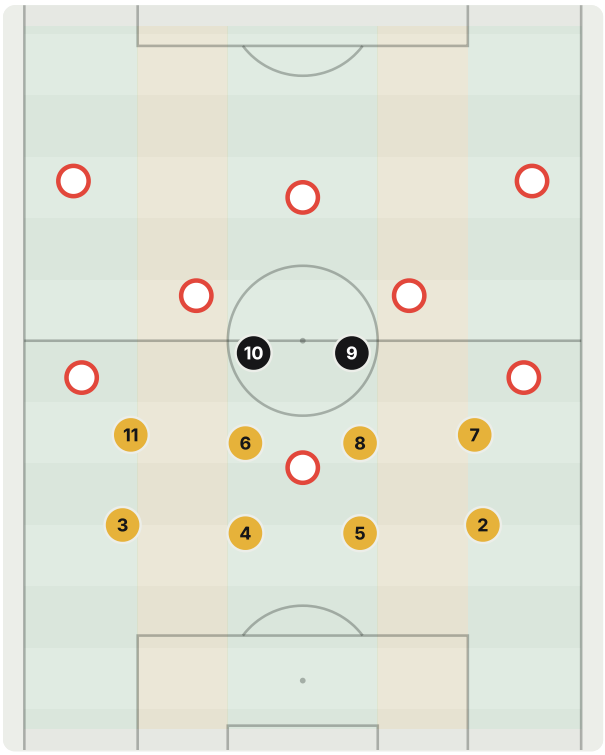
01 What two banks of four give you, and what they cost
02 A short history, from Sacchi to Real Madrid
03 What the numbers say
04 When to choose it

THE IDEA

What two banks of four give you

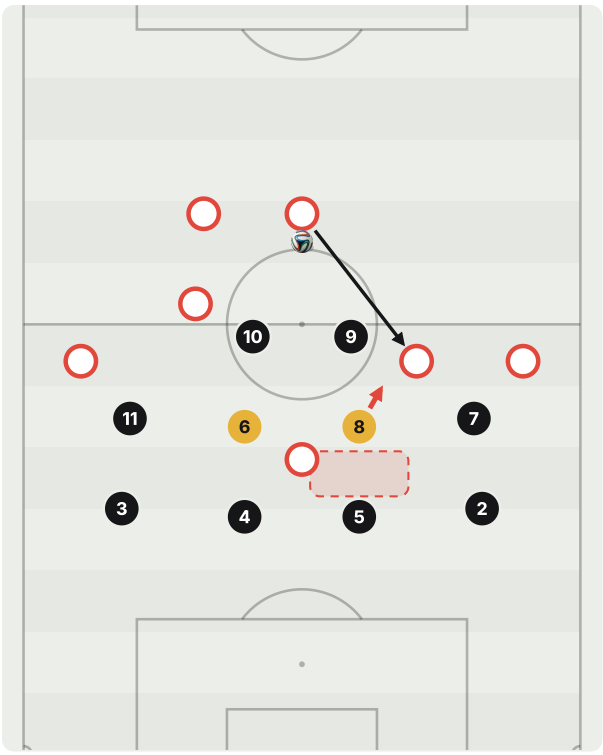
Every shape is a trade. The 4-4-2 buys width and a clear job for every player, and pays for it in the middle of the pitch.

The gift — EVERY LANE COVERED



Two lines of four across the five lanes, two men in front. Wherever their attack goes, two of ours are already in that lane.

The bill — TWO AGAINST THREE



Against a midfield three, their 6 finds an 8 between our lines. Our 8 must leave the bank to meet him, and the space behind him opens.

What it gives

- **Width without running**: four across in each line, so the flanks are covered before the ball gets there.
- **A simple job for everyone**: a line, a lane and a partner.
- **Two strikers** to press two centre-backs, and to share the work in the box.
- **Pairs everywhere**: two centre-backs, two central midfielders, two strikers, and a full-back with a wide midfielder on each side.
- **A fast counter**: two up front and two wide midfielders ready to sprint.

What it costs

- **Two against three in midfield**, against any shape with a midfield three.
- **The space between the lines**, where a 10 can receive and turn.
- **Building from the back** against three pressers: two centre-backs and two midfielders can be marked.
- **Straight lines**: players in rows make fewer passing angles than players in triangles.

> **THE POINT**
> A 4-4-2 works when the pairs work: each player knows who goes and who stays. Chapters 3 to 10 teach the pairs.

HISTORY

A short history, from Sacchi to Real Madrid

The 4-4-2 has won almost everything there is to win. These are the moments the record is sure of.

WHEN	WHO	WHAT HAPPENED
1987/88	Milan	Arrigo Sacchi's first season: Serie A champions with 17 wins, 11 draws, 2 defeats and 14 goals conceded in 30 games, the fewest in the league.[7] Sacchi favoured the 4-4-2, zonal defending and a short team, no more than 25 metres from the defenders to the forwards.[4]
1989	Milan	Beat Real Madrid 5-0 at San Siro in the European Cup semi-final and Steaua Bucureşti 4-0 in the final at the Camp Nou.[8]
1998/99	Manchester United	Won the Premier League by a point, the FA Cup and the Champions League, with two goals in injury time against Bayern Munich in the final.[9] Up front, Dwight Yorke and Andy Cole scored 53 goals between them.[10]
2013/14	Atlético Madrid	Diego Simeone's side won La Liga with 90 points and the best defence in the league, 26 goals conceded, and took points from all but 4 of their 38 matches.[11] His preferred formation is the 4-4-2.[12]
2015/16	Leicester City	Premier League champions with a 4-4-2 in 35 of their 38 games: 81 points, 10 clear of Arsenal, with 42.43% possession, the lowest of any champion since 2003/04.[2]
2023/24	Real Madrid	Won the Champions League defending in a 4-4-2 shape. At Bayern in the semi-final, they spent 38% of their time without the ball in a mid-block.[13]

Two ideas that never left

Sacchi's Milan pressed as one unit: "With Arrigo, we started to press in their half," said his forward Graziano Mannari. "At the time, nobody did it."[6] Thirty-five years later UEFA's analysts described Real Madrid's 4-4-2 the same way: "the whole team shifts across zonally before squeezing up the pitch."[13] Short distances and one block that moves together: that is the 4-4-2.

> **Five well organised players can beat ten disorganised ones.**
>
> ARRIGO SACCHI, TO HIS MILAN PLAYERS[4]

WHAT THIS TABLE LEAVES OUT

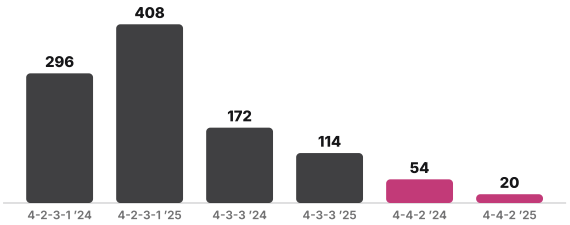
The 4-4-2 has many claimed inventors. Those claims are disputed, so this book prints only what a league table, a match report or a governing body records. The results and the coaches' own words make the point on their own.

THE DATA

What the numbers say

As a starting line-up, the classic 4-4-2 is rare in the Premier League today. As a way to defend, it is everywhere.

Premier League starts by formation 2023/24 AND 2024/25



Starting formations counted by the Premier League. The classic 4-4-2 fell from 54 starts to 20; in 2023/24 the 4-4-1-1 had another 41.[1]

42.43%

Leicester's possession in 2015/16, the lowest of any Premier League champion since 2003/04.

PREMIER LEAGUE

21.8 m

From Real Madrid's highest player to Rüdiger at the back in UEFA's mid-block example at Bayern.

UEFA, 2024

Start in one shape, defend in another

Line-up counts measure where players stand at kick-off. Leicester's 4-4-2 became a 4-4-1-1 without the ball,[2] and Real Madrid's Champions League winners defended in a 4-4-2 shape.[13] Many teams that start in a 4-2-3-1 defend the same way: the 10 steps up beside the 9 and two banks of four form behind them. This book teaches that defending shape to everyone who uses it.

Short when it defends, long when it attacks

A review of 13 studies of professional matches put team length at 31 to 46 m and width at 35 to 48 m, and every study found the team bigger with the ball than without it.[16] The 4-4-2 is built on that rhythm: tight and short without the ball, wide and long with it.

LEAST POSSESSION FOR A PREMIER LEAGUE CHAMPION	POSSESSION
Leicester City, 2015/16	42.43%
Chelsea, 2016/17	54.75%
Chelsea, 2004/05	55.37%
Chelsea, 2014/15	55.78%
Manchester United, 2010/11	56.11%

Since data collection began in 2003/04. Premier League.[2]

SESSION 1 · BLOCK

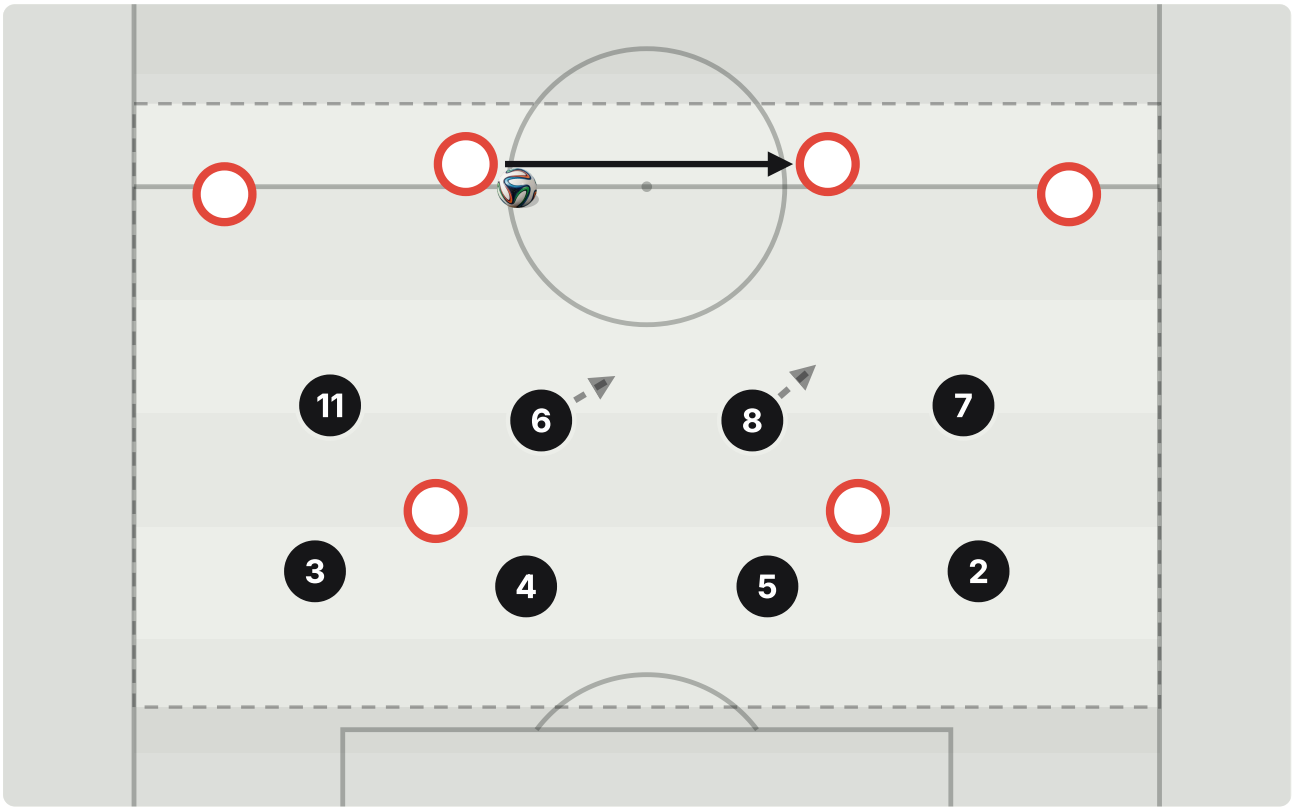
Two banks of four

The back four and the midfield four move as two lines that stay 11 m apart, so their six can never pass through the block.

8 V 6 | 68 × 40 M | 4 × 4 MIN | MEDIUM

Setup

68 × 40 M



Their four pass along the far end; two more wait between our lines. As the ball moves across, both banks slide with it.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Their four pass along the far end of the area; their other two move between our lines.
2. They score by passing to a man between the lines who turns, or by dribbling over our end line.
3. We score by winning the ball and passing it over their end line.

RULES

- A pass to a man between the lines who turns: 1 to them.
- A dribble over our end line: 2 to them.
- A ball won and played over their end line: 2 to us.

COACHING POINTS

1. Both banks move while the ball travels.
2. Keep 11 m between the lines: one step forward, one step back together.
3. The nearest midfielder presses; the man behind him covers.

PROGRESS

Their two inside men may also run in behind.

REGRESS

Their four pass by hand; our eight walk the slide.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

The gaps are the same after every pass, and no pass goes through the middle.

"Slide!" "Squeeze!"

SESSIONS

Total Football Studio

THE PLAYBOOK SERIES
No. 07

Two banks of four. Two up front. The shape that never went away.

The 4-4-2 is the simplest shape in football to draw and one of the hardest to play well. This playbook shows every job in it: the block and its distances, the slide, the press from the front two, the midfield pair, the strike partnership, playing out, the full-back and the wide midfielder, and the counter-attack. Every board is drawn to scale and checked.

INSIDE

01 What a 4-4-2 gives you and what it costs, with the history and the data

02 The flat 4-4-2, the 4-4-1-1 and the 4-2-2-2, and the shape in every phase

03 Two banks of four: the distances, the three heights and the back four

04 Sliding, defending the flank and the box, and pressing from the front two

05 The midfield two and the strike partnership

06 Playing out, the full-back and the wide midfielder, and the counter-attack

07 Matchups, rest defence and changing shape during a game

08 20 sessions, from two banks of four to 11 v 11

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



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