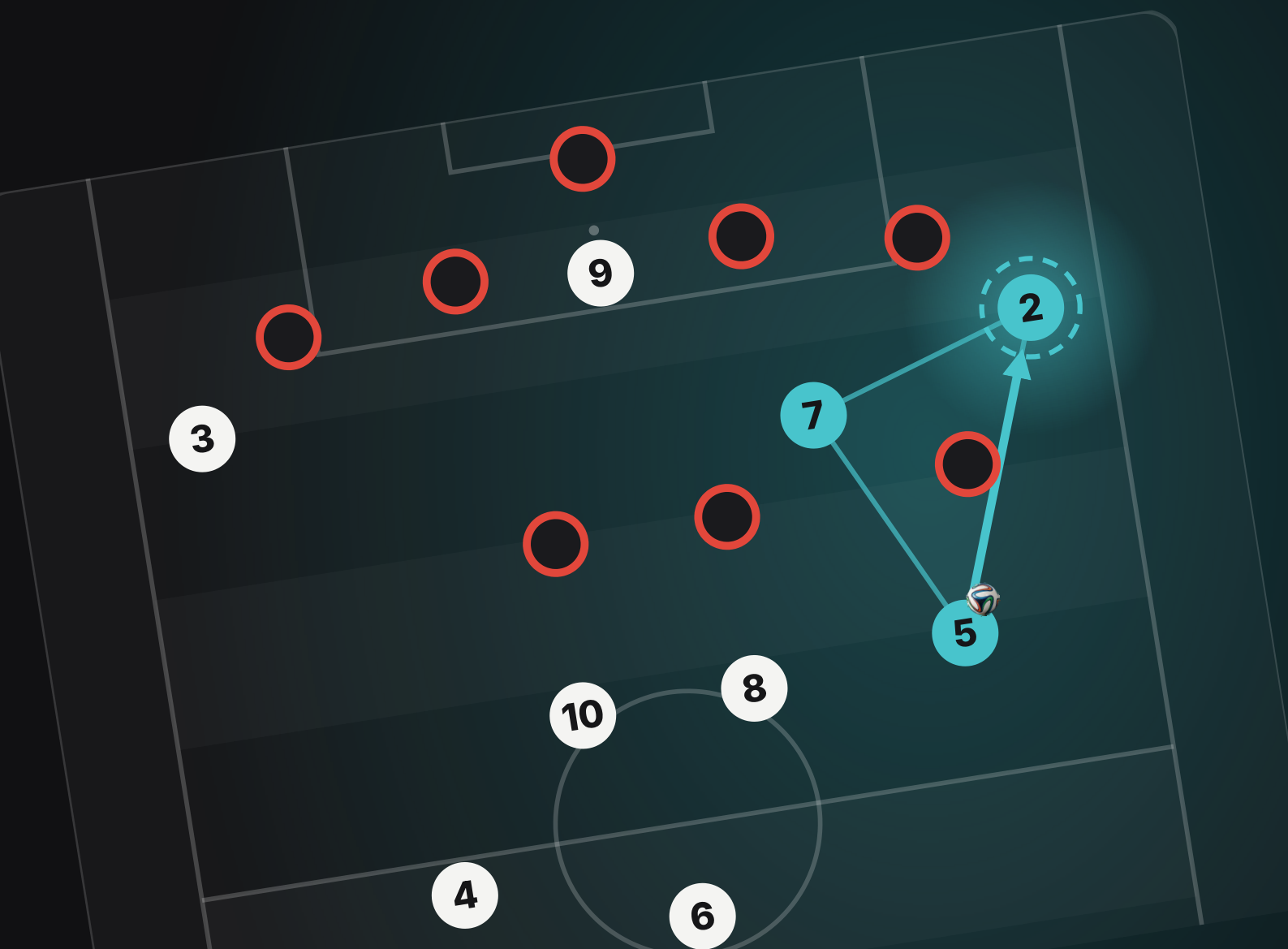




The Back-Three Playbook

The 3-4-3, the 3-4-2-1 and the 3-5-2, with and without the ball.



The Back-Three Playbook

The 3-4-3, the 3-4-2-1 and the 3-5-2, with and without the ball.

By the Total Football Studio coaching team



Total Football Studio

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The Playbook Series, No. 06

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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.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A field guide to the back three, written for the people who coach it.

A back three changes shape more than any other system: a five without the ball, a three plus two to build, a five across the front in their half. This book takes it apart job by job, 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 formation data, UEFA, the Bundesliga, FIFA and the Laws of the Game. Distances we recommend, such as the spacing of the three, 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 6 build the shape job by job. Read them in order once.

2 • Prepare for Saturday

Find the opponent's shape in [chapter 11](#) and the press that beats their build-up in [chapter 10](#).

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 three at the back to the training ground.

6

Steps in the spine: Hold, Step, Width, Link, Overload and Shift.

20

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

14

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 white 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.

6

Our player and role number



Opponent



Where a player started



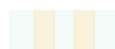
Pass along the ground



Run without the ball



A press or a step out



The five lanes: gold are the half-spaces



Cones and mini-goals (sessions)

5

The key players in the pattern



Their goalkeeper



The free man



Lofted pass or cross



Carry with the ball



Man-to-man: a marker and his man



The space at risk

Role numbers

Our numbers name a role, not a shirt, and stay the same in every chapter: **1** keeper; **4**, **6** and **5** the left, middle and right centre-backs; **3** and **2** the left and right wing-backs; **10** and **8** the left and right central midfielders; **11** and **7** the left and right inside forwards; **9** the striker. In the 3-5-2, **8** is the holding midfielder, **10** and **7** the two shuttlers, **9** and **11** the strikers.

Words we use

Half-space: the lane between the wide lane and the centre. **Step:** a centre-back leaving the line to meet a man. **Jump:** a wing-back leaving the line to press. **Rest defence:** who stays behind the ball when we attack. 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 back three the same way, one phase at a time.

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INTRODUCTION

Three at the back, five across the front.

A back three is the most misunderstood shape in football. Call it defensive and you miss the five players across the front. Call it attacking and you miss the five across the back. It is both, and it changes between them every time the ball changes hands.

In 2023/24 Bayer Leverkusen became the first team to finish a whole Bundesliga season unbeaten, with 28 wins and 6 draws.⁷ Their usual system was a 3-4-2-1.⁸ Seven seasons earlier, Chelsea had moved to a back three after a 3-0 defeat at Arsenal and won the next 13 league games in a row.⁴

Yet by 2023/24 only about one Premier League starting line-up in five had a back three, down from 30% in 2020/21.¹ Most teams use it as a plan B, and most opponents rarely train against it. That makes it 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.

Hold the centre. Step out with cover. Give the width to the wing-backs. Link through the middle. Overload the last line. Shift as five.

THE WHOLE BOOK IN ONE LINE

21.7%

Of Premier League starting line-ups in 2023/24 had a back three, down from 30.0% in 2020/21.

PREMIER LEAGUE

THE SPINE: SIX STEPS, IN ORDER

STEP 1

Hold

Three centre-backs who move as one, with a spare man and one voice.

STEP 2

Step

An outside centre-back who steps out, or steps into midfield, with cover behind him.

STEP 3

Width

Wing-backs who give all the width, in the back line and in the front line.

STEP 4

Link

A midfield and two 10s who connect the back three to the five in front.

STEP 5

Overload

Five across the front, one in each lane, against a back four.

STEP 6

Shift

A back five that slides together, and a press that knows who jumps.

Why three at the back

A back three is not one more defender. It is a shape that becomes a back five without the ball and puts five players across the front with it. This chapter shows what it gives you, what it costs and who has won with it.



Our 3-4-2-1 with the ball in their half: three at the back, two in midfield and five across the front, one in each lane.

IN THIS CHAPTER

01 What three gives you, and what it costs

02 A short history, from 1925 to Leverkusen

03 How often the top teams use it

04 When to choose it

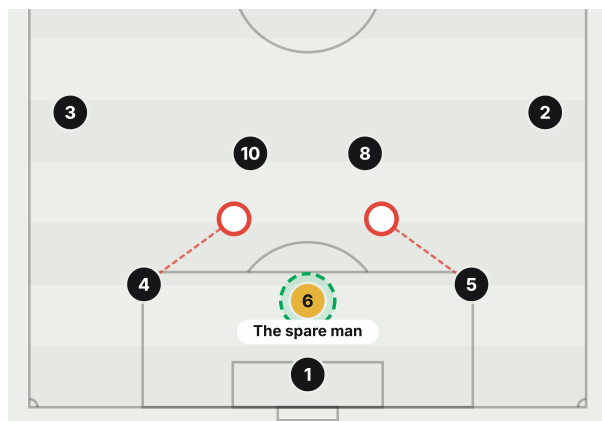
THE IDEA

What three gives you, and what it costs

Every shape is a trade. A back three buys a spare man at the back and width everywhere, and pays for it in midfield and on the flanks.

The gift

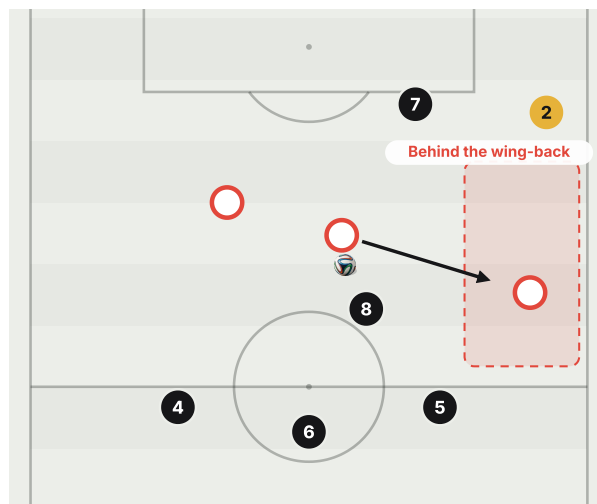
AGAINST TWO STRIKERS



Two strikers, three centre-backs. The 4 and the 5 take one each, and the 6 is free to cover, to talk and to start the attack.

The bill

WHEN WE LOSE THE BALL



The 2 is high in their half. One pass puts their winger into the space he left, beside our 5.

What it gives

- **A spare centre-back** against one or two strikers, without taking a player out of midfield.
- **Width from the wing-backs**, so the forwards can play inside.
- **Three plus two** to play out from the back: two midfielders in front of three centre-backs.
- **Five across the front** in their half, one in each lane.
- **A back five** without the ball, with the full width of the pitch covered.

What it costs

- **One player fewer in midfield or attack** than a 4-3-3, unless the wing-backs get forward.
- **The wing-backs run a whole touchline**, in both directions, all game.
- **The space behind the wing-back** when we lose the ball high.
- **A wasted man** against a lone striker, unless an outside centre-back steps into midfield.

THE POINT

A back three works when the men in it do two jobs: the outside centre-backs defend and build, the wing-backs defend and attack. Chapters 3 to 5 teach those jobs.

HISTORY

A short history, from 1925 to Leverkusen

Three at the back goes back almost a century. These are the moments the record is sure of.

WHY

WHEN	WHO	WHAT HAPPENED
1925	The Laws	The offside law changed: an attacker now needed two opponents, not three, between him and the goal line. Football League goals rose from 4,700 in 1924/25 to 6,373 in 1925/26 from the same 1,848 games, and the change led to the W-M, with three men at the back. ¹³
1986	Argentina	Won the World Cup final 3-2 against West Germany at the Azteca with three centre-backs, Brown, Cuciuffo and Ruggeri. The coach was Carlos Bilardo. ¹²
2011/12	Juventus	The first unbeaten Serie A season of 38 games: 23 wins, 15 draws, 20 goals conceded. Antonio Conte had spent the pre-season on a 4-4-2, then moved to three: Barzagli right, Bonucci centre, Chiellini left. ^{10, 11}
2014	Netherlands	Beat Spain 5-1 at the World Cup with a 5-3-2 that became a back three with the ball. Louis van Gaal: "I believe that we are not good enough to beat Spain with our normal 4-3-3 formation." ⁹
2016/17	Chelsea	Changed to a back three after losing 3-0 at Arsenal on 24 September, won 13 league games in a row and the title, with 30 wins and 93 points. ^{4, 5, 6}
2023/24	Leverkusen	The first team to finish a whole Bundesliga season unbeaten: 28 wins and 6 draws, with a 3-4-2-1 as the usual system, and 51 games unbeaten in all competitions. ^{7, 8}

The same reason, three times

Three of these stories come with the coach's own words, and they say the same thing: the shape was picked to fit the players. Conte moved Juventus to three in a season that had started with Bonucci on the bench.¹¹ Van Gaal chose a five because he did not think his 4-3-3 could beat Spain.⁹ At Chelsea, Conte said he found "a new fit for the players".⁴

It was the key moment for us because every single player found in the system their best.

ANTONIO CONTE, ON THE SWITCH TO A BACK THREE AT CHELSEA, MAY 2017

WHAT THIS TABLE LEAVES OUT

Formation history is full of inventors: the coach who "invented" the W-M, the coach who "invented" the 3-5-2. Those claims are disputed, so this book prints only what a match report, a league or the Laws themselves record. The line-ups, the results and the coaches' own words are enough to make the point.

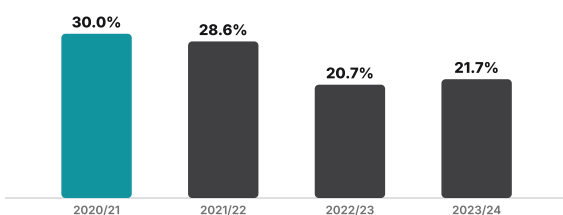
THE DATA

How often the top teams use it

In the Premier League, back threes fell from 30% of starting line-ups in 2020/21 to about one in five in 2023/24. That is part of the advantage: fewer teams practise against one.

Starting line-ups with a back three

PREMIER LEAGUE



Share of all starting formations: 228 of 760 in 2020/21, 165 of 760 in 2023/24.¹

15

 of 20

Premier League clubs started at least one match with a back three in 2023/24.

PREMIER LEAGUE

117

Starts in a 3-4-2-1 in 2024/25, up from 71: the biggest climber of any formation that season.

PREMIER LEAGUE

A plan B for most, a plan A for a few

Most clubs use a back three some of the time. After 12 rounds of 2023/24, 11 of the 20 managers had used one, but only two, at Luton and Sheffield United, as their first choice.² In 2024/25 the 3-4-2-1 grew fastest, a favourite of Oliver Glasner at Crystal Palace and also used by Ruben Amorim and Vitor Pereira.³

Three at the back, from a back four

The numbers count starting line-ups only. Many back-four teams now build in a three with the ball, by moving a full-back inside or dropping a midfielder; the Premier League's own trend piece in 2023 was titled "Inverted full-backs providing tactical flexibility".² Chapter 11 shows how to switch between the two.

PREMIER LEAGUE

BACK THREE

BACK FOUR

ALL STARTS

2020/21	228	532	760
2021/22	217	543	760
2022/23	157	603	760
2023/24	165	595	760

Starting formations, counted by the Premier League.¹ For scale: in 2024/25 the 4-2-3-1 alone had 408 starts and was the main shape of 13 of the 20 clubs.³

WHY RARE IS GOOD

A team that meets a back three only a few times a season rarely trains against one. Chapter 11 shows the questions a back three asks a 4-3-3, a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-4-2, and why they are hard to answer in one week.

SESSION 1 · HOLD

Slide together

The back five and the keeper move as one: every pass along their line moves all five, the near men out, the far men in.

BACK FIVE + KEEPER V 4

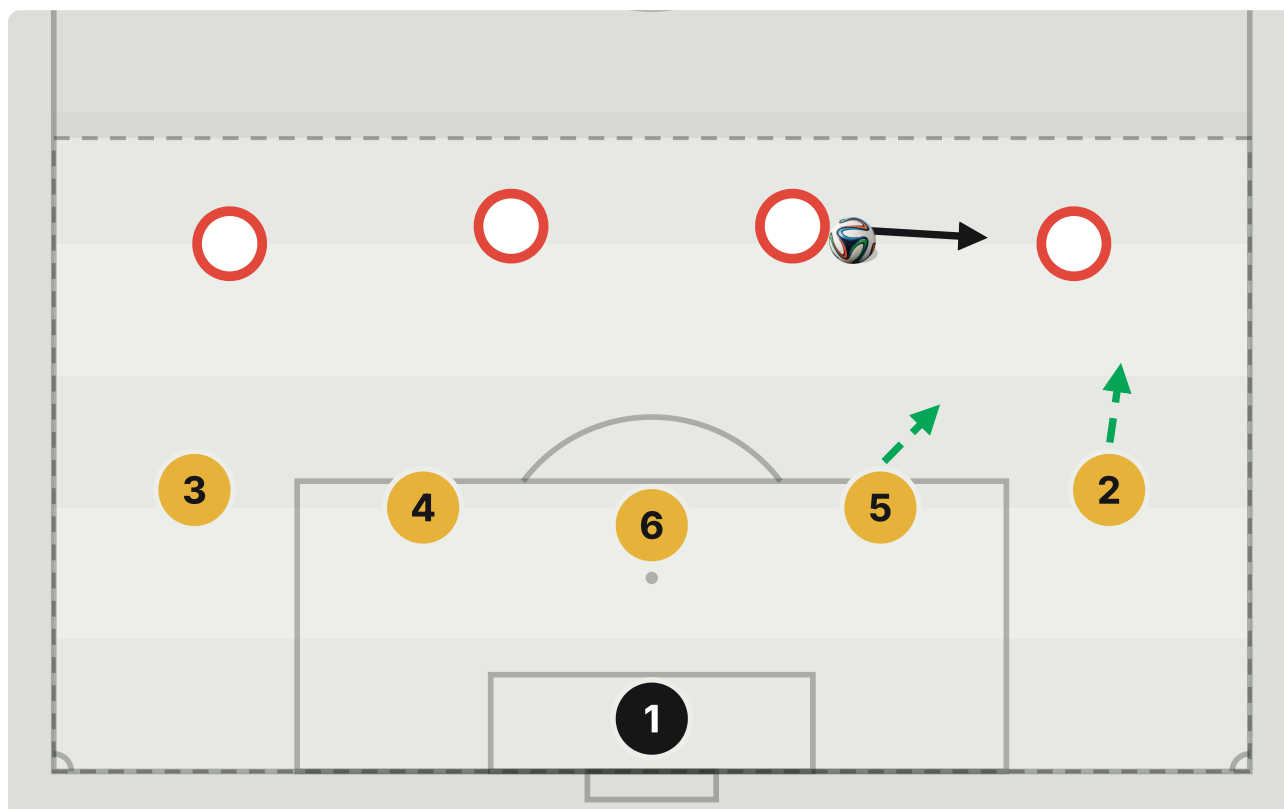
68 x 36 M

4 x 3 MIN

MEDIUM

Setup

68 x 36 M



Their four pass along the far end of the area. As the ball goes to our right, the 5 and the 2 step towards it and the rest of the line slides across.

HOW IT RUNS

- 1 Their four pass along the far end of the area.
- 2 Every pass moves the five: the nearest man steps, the others slide and close up.
- 3 After every fourth pass, one of their four may dribble in and shoot.

RULES

- A shot on target scores 1 for them, a goal 3.
- A gap the coach can walk through when the ball arrives: 1 to them.
- A ball we win and pass to the keeper scores 2 for us.

COACHING POINTS

- 1 Move while the ball travels, not when it arrives.
- 2 The nearest man steps, the next one covers, the far wing-back tucks in.
- 3 Stay 12 to 13 m from your neighbour.

PROGRESS

Add a fifth attacker who runs in behind.

REGRESS

Walk it first: the coach carries the ball by hand and the five slide.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

The five arrive with the ball, and the gaps between them are the same after the slide as before it.

"Slide!"

"Tuck!"



Three centre-backs. Five across the front. One shape that changes with the ball.

A back three is not one more defender. It is a shape that turns into a five without the ball and a five across the front with it. This playbook shows every job in it: the middle centre-back who runs the line, the outside centre-back who steps out, the wing-back who covers a whole touchline, the midfield and the two 10s, playing out, the final third, defending as a five and pressing. Every board is drawn to scale and checked.

INSIDE

- 01** What a back three gives you and what it costs, with the history and the data
- 02** The 3-4-3, 3-4-2-1 and 3-5-2, the five lanes and the shape in every phase
- 03** The back three: the middle centre-back, spacing, cover and the line
- 04** The outside centre-back and the wing-back: stepping, width and the two-sided job
- 05** The midfield and the two 10s, and playing out against any press
- 06** The final third: five across, the half-space triangle and the far post
- 07** Defending as a five, pressing from a back three, matchups and rest defence
- 08** 20 sessions, from the back three to 11 v 11

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

