

Common formations from 4-4-2 to 4-3-3 and what they give you.

A formation is just a starting shape - where players line up before the game flows. There is no 'best' formation; the right one fits your players and how you want to play. This guide shows the most common shapes for 11-a-side, with the strengths and trade-offs of each, plus a note on small-sided shapes. Numbers are read from defence to attack (e.g. 4-4-2 = four defenders, four midfielders, two forwards).

4-4-2 - The classic, easy-to-organise shape



The classic, easy-to-organise shape. Two banks of four make it compact and simple to defend.

- **Strengths:** Balanced; clear roles; two strikers to support each other; solid defensively.
- **Watch out:** Can be outnumbered in central midfield against a three.

4-3-3 - An attacking shape with width from the wingers and a midfield triangle for control



An attacking shape with width from the wingers and a midfield triangle for control.

- **Strengths:** Great width and pressing; controls midfield; lots of forward options.
- **Watch out:** Wingers must track back or the full-backs get exposed.

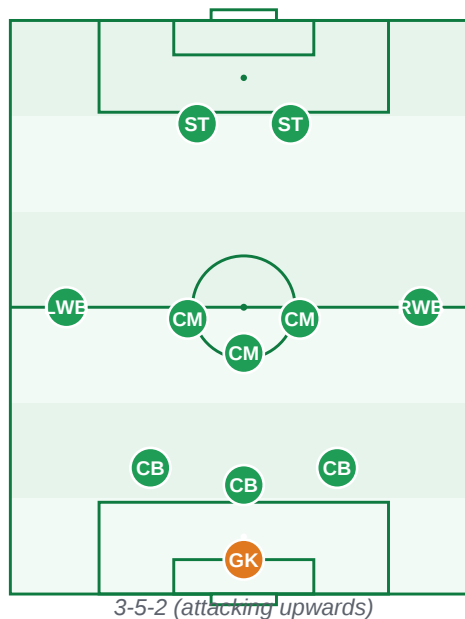
4-2-3-1 - Two holding midfielders shield the back four, with a creative 'ten' behind a lone striker



Two holding midfielders shield the back four, with a creative 'ten' behind a lone striker.

- **Strengths:** Very solid base; a creative hub; flexible in and out of possession.
- **Watch out:** The lone striker can get isolated without runners.

3-5-2 - Three centre-backs with wing-backs providing all the width; strong through the middle



Three centre-backs with wing-backs providing all the width; strong through the middle.

- **Strengths:** Midfield overloads; two strikers; width from energetic wing-backs.
- **Watch out:** Demands very fit wing-backs; vulnerable if they are caught high.

Small-sided shapes

In 5v5 keep it simple with a 1-2-1 (diamond). In 7v7 a 2-3-1 or 3-2-1 keeps a spare defender and someone up top. In 9v9 a 3-2-3 or 3-3-2 bridges nicely towards 11-a-side. Whatever the format, encourage a triangle-rich shape so there is always support around the ball.