

# U11/U12 Systems of Play

(9v9)



4-3-1

# Basic Tactical Breakdown

The 4-3-1 is a very popular formation used at the U11/U12 age level. It provides a solid defensive base and plenty of natural passing triangles and diamonds occur within the formation. It also creates an easy transition to the 4-3-3 formation when teams move up to 11v11.

## Positions:

- 1 Goal Keeper
- 4 Defenders (2 Center Backs, 1 Left Back, & 1 Right Back)
- 3 Midfielders (1 Central Defensive Mid & 2 Central Attacking Mids)
- 1 Striker

**Defending:** The 4 defenders in the backline should shift left and right as a unit. They should also receive good cover from the central defensive midfielder (CDM). The central attacking midfielders (CAMs) dropping back to provide some defensive cover and passing outlets when the ball is won back or simply cleared from the defensive third. It's important to make the formation compact in front of goal. This will make it harder for opposing teams to play through and allows players to support one another. While the team is defending, the striker should remain higher up, near midfield, providing an outlet when the defense wins the ball back.

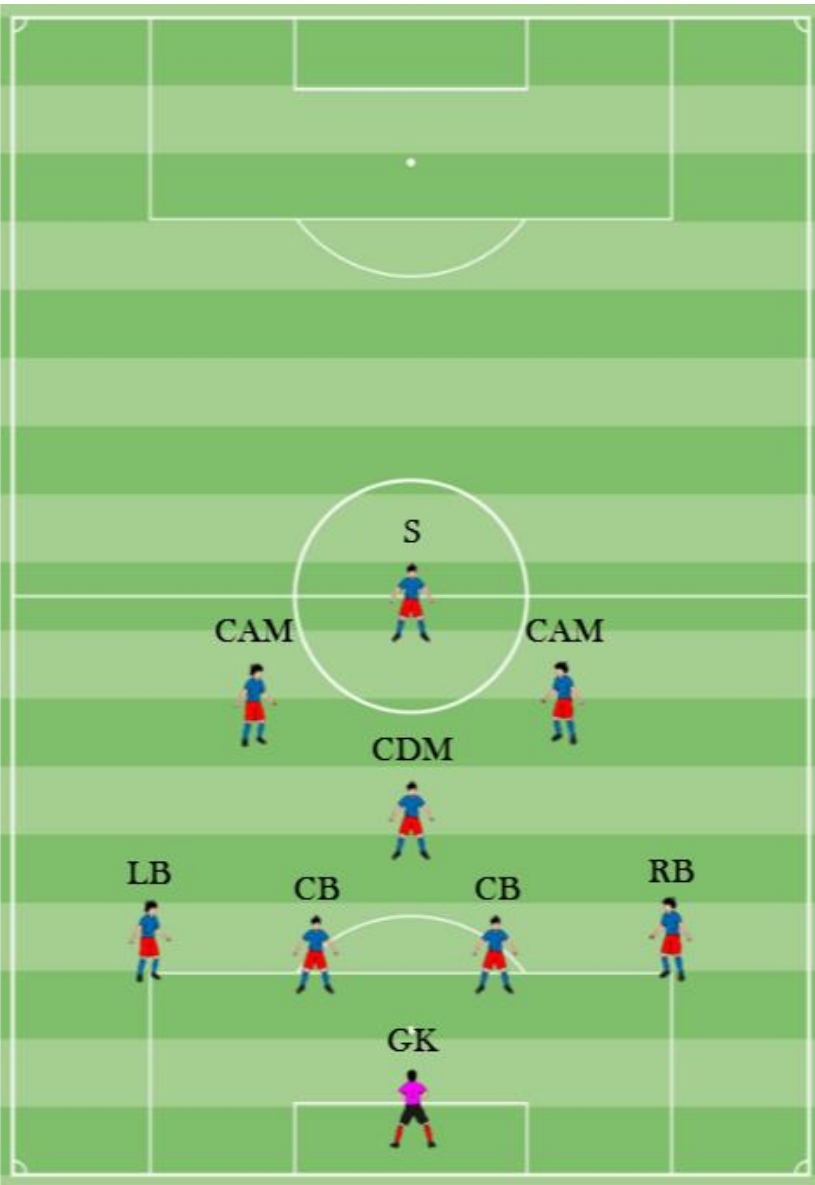
**Attacking:** The striker will need to hold up the ball while the team transitions to attack and will need plenty of support from the midfield. The CAMs can spread play some but should remain generally central, combining with the striker. To create width, have the left and right backs push up to join the attack. While attacking in the opponent's half, the CDM should push up but only far enough to connect the formation. The CBs should move up to midfield and work to provide back-passing options and prevent the other team from breaking out.

**Transition:** The transition phase occurs every time the ball changes possession and is critical to all teams. Players must always be prepared to transition from attack to defense or vice versa and know their roles and areas of responsibility. It's important to maintain balance in your formation. Going too heavy in the attack will make you vulnerable to counter-attacks but sitting too heavy in defense will stifle your ability to attack the other team's goal.

**Shape:** It's important for the team to maintain the general shape of its formation as much as possible throughout games. While it will be necessary to shift some with the ball, becoming too stretched can make it hard for players to support one another and opens spaces for opponents to attack. On the other hand, bunching up will allow opponents to play wide around you. Instead, players should work to find supporting positions to provide cover in defense and passing options in attack.



# Basic Starting Positions



**Goal Keeper (1)** - The Goal Keeper must protect the goal and help organize the defense in-game. They should trust their teammates and only come out of their goal when attackers have penetrated the defense or they are sure they can get the ball. If possible, they should also present an additional passing option to the team and be capable of using their feet to distribute the ball.

**Defenders (4)** - The core of the defensive backline is its pair of Center Backs (CB). In all phases of play, they will remain back behind the team to protect the goal. Their movements must be tightly coordinated and they need to be aggressively pessimistic, reading the build-up of the opponent's attacks and never letting their guard down. On either side are the Left and Right (wing) Backs (LB/RB). These players function as defenders first but will be counted on to move high up the field, providing width to the attack. They may find themselves in the opponent's attacking third but will always be counted on to recover and defend when possession is lost.

**Midfielders (3)** - The midfield is broken into 2 zones essentially: Central Defensive (CDM) and Central Attacking (CAM) Midfielders. The CDM sits in front of the CBs, providing an extra layer of defensive cover. The CDM is instrumental in breaking up attacks and preventing opponents from building out of their own end in transition. It is important for them to remain back and not commit high up the field in the attack or the team can become unbalanced and vulnerable. The CAMs will do some work to help defend but are primarily attackers, linking with the Striker to create and score goals. Midfielders' play should be mostly between the edges of the 18-yard boxes.

**Striker (1)** - The striker (S) position is purely dedicated to attacking. When the team is defending deep, the S should remain high up field and ready to attack. The S should be empowered to combine with teammates, take defenders on, and take shots in their mission to create and score goals.



# Center Back (CB)

**Team Role:** Protect the goal; win the ball back; get the ball to their own team's attackers whenever possible; last line of defense

**Description:** The Center Backs are a pair of defenders whose only mission is to protect their team's goal. Working together, the CBs form a shield in front of the goal at the heart of the defense. They must move as a unit, shifting left, right, forward and back together. At all times, CBs must read the flow of the game and position themselves to break up attacks as they are forming. They have to trust their teammates but always expect the worst and position themselves to stop it. Although their primary purpose is to defend the goal, they should also be encouraged to support possession of the ball. This means that, whenever possible, they should return the ball to their own attackers after winning possession back from the other team. (That being said, the best option may at times be to simply kick the ball clear of danger.)

**Key Attributes:** CBs must be comfortable using their bodies to gain control of the ball. Strong, effective tackling is a must and often requires a willingness to get into opponents' personal space and make tough physical challenges.

## Defending Games/Drills:

- **Football Training: Cruise – Tackle Training – Tactics**

[https://youtu.be/omQCZHfdLxA?list=PLuo\\_yiegZQdUp-brOazCy6UFY\\_1JsZsW](https://youtu.be/omQCZHfdLxA?list=PLuo_yiegZQdUp-brOazCy6UFY_1JsZsW)

- **1 v 1 to Small Goals**

<https://youtu.be/tDnmylaDd9U?list=PLJ3bjBzxMy9oqadwXNXCvU4D0Gwvh4JsP>

- **Defensive Shape Game**

<https://youtu.be/0yGqO8yBaF4?list=PLJ3bjBzxMy9oqadwXNXCvU4D0Gwvh4JsP>



# Right Back (RB)

**Team Role:** Protect the goal; slow down the attack; win the ball back; get the ball to their own team's attackers whenever possible; provide additional width in the attack; create scoring opportunities with crosses from wide positions

**Description:** A defender's top priority is to protect the goal. They must be aggressive and energetic, always fighting to win the ball back. Ideally, defenders will get the ball back to their own team's attackers but, sometimes, they might need to just kick it clear of danger. (Controlling the ball is the best way to protect the goal if possible.) While the team is attacking in the opponent's half, the **RB** should be pushed up at least to midfield. In the attack, the **RB** should look for opportunities to press forward and provide passing options out wide. This width is a critical element of attack that supports possession, spreads the defense out, and creates scoring opportunities off the cross. In this regard, they can play like wingers, taking opponents on and contributing to the attack. However, the **RB** must always recover to assist the defense when possession is lost.

**Key Attributes:** Defenders must be comfortable using their bodies to gain control of the ball. Tackling effectively often requires a willingness to get into opponents' personal space and make strong, physical challenges. To balance attacking runs with defensive responsibility, they must be able to read the game and recognize when to attack and when to sit back.

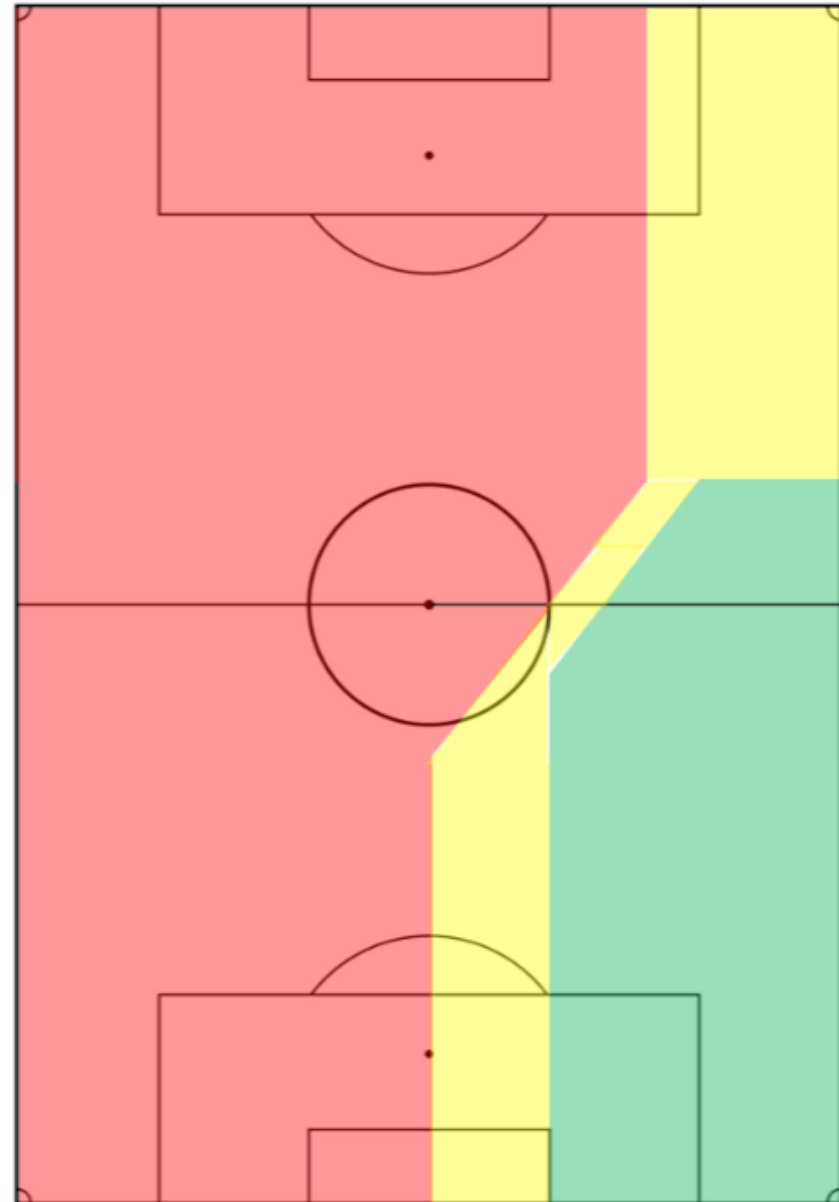
## Defending Games/Drills:

### - Defending Dribbling Drill

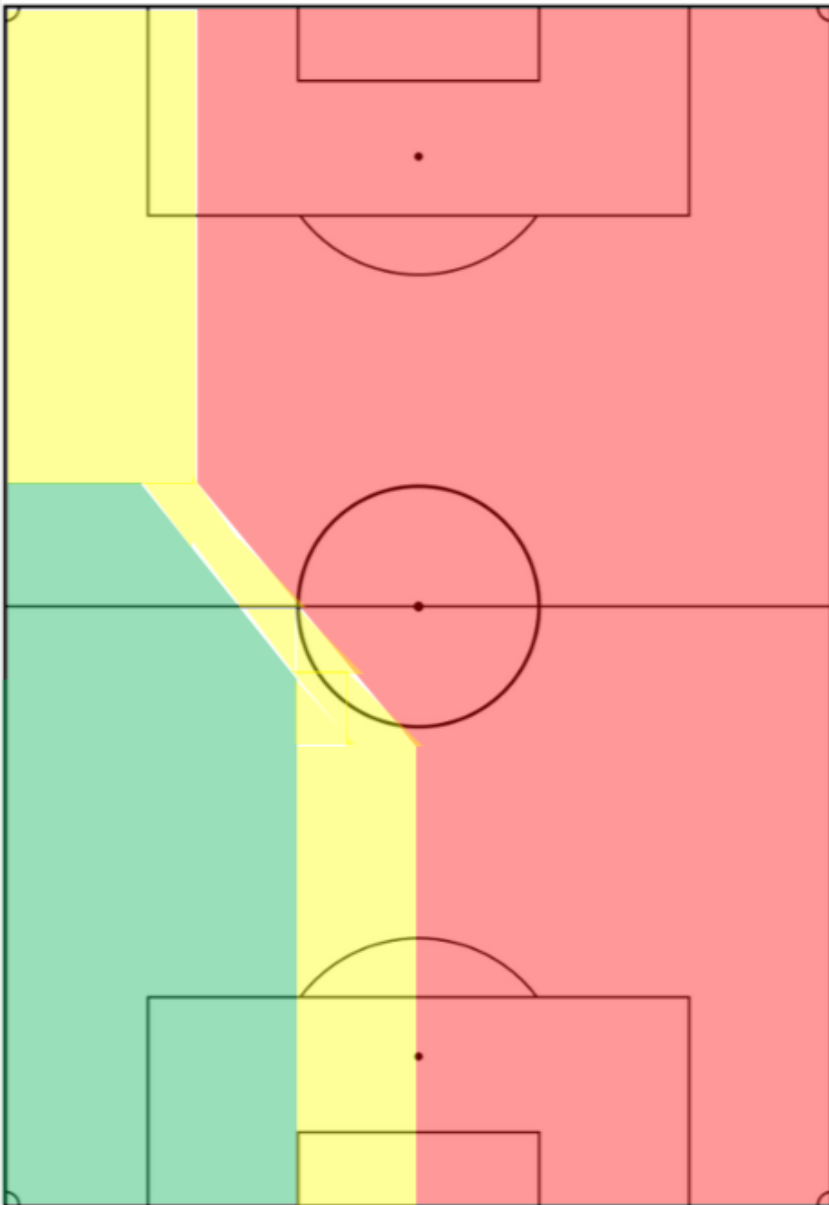
[https://youtu.be/kLHIH9k52fg?list=PLvXXUyu7VWlg5zP8b\\_bgrHGP02SRz9j9](https://youtu.be/kLHIH9k52fg?list=PLvXXUyu7VWlg5zP8b_bgrHGP02SRz9j9)

### - Best Crossing and Finishing Soccer Drill

<https://youtu.be/ztrebQOGh8Q>



# Left Back (LB/Defender)



**Team Role:** Protect the goal; slow down the attack; win the ball back; get the ball to their own team's attackers whenever possible; provide additional width in the attack; create scoring opportunities with crosses from wide positions

**Description:** A defender's top priority is to protect the goal. They must be aggressive and energetic, always fighting to win the ball back. Ideally, defenders will get the ball back to their own team's attackers but, sometimes, they might need to just kick it clear of danger. (Controlling the ball is the best way to protect the goal if possible.) While the team is attacking in the opponent's half, the RB should be pushed up at least to midfield. In the attack, the RB should look for opportunities to press forward and provide passing options out wide. This width is a critical element of attack that supports possession, spreads the defense out, and creates scoring opportunities off the cross. In this regard, they can play like wingers, taking opponents on and contributing to the attack. However, the RB must always recover to assist the defense when possession is lost.

**Key Attributes:** Defenders must be comfortable using their bodies to gain control of the ball. Tackling effectively often requires a willingness to get into opponents' personal space and make strong, physical challenges. To balance attacking runs with defensive responsibility, they must be able to read the game and recognize when to attack and when to sit back.

## Defending Games/Drills:

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# Center Defensive Midfielder (CDM)

**Team Role:** Control the middle of the field; provide a shield for the defensive backline; provide passing options behind the attack to support possession; distribute the ball; axis of the team

**Description:** The CDM is the heart of the team. In defense, the CDM drops in to help protect the goal, shielding the back line, controlling the middle, and breaking up opponents' attacks. On offense, the CDM should stay behind the attackers, providing passing options to maintain possession and preventing opponents from building out of their own half. The CDM is key to all phases of play, providing support on offense and defense and delaying opponents in transition. This position is the axis around which the whole team revolves.

**Key Attributes:** The CDM must have the will and grit to take charge of the middle and should be comfortable playing in close quarters with opponents. Their play will set the tone for the whole team. They should also be comfortable passing the ball to either side of the field and have good positional discipline.

## Midfield Games/Drills:

### - Triangle Game

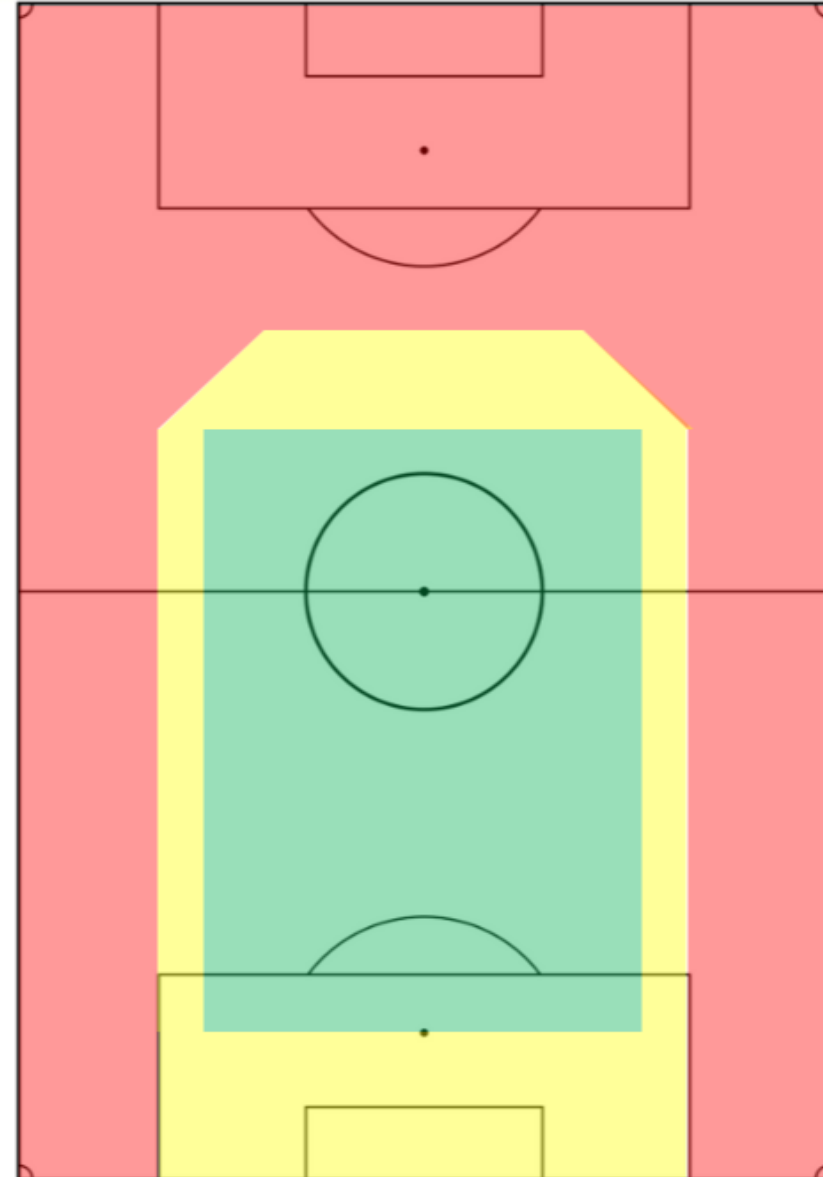
[https://youtu.be/9NUejg9r\\_WI](https://youtu.be/9NUejg9r_WI)

### - Reacting Fast To Defend

<https://youtu.be/vYtnd8IVHIM>

### - Speed of Play

[https://youtu.be/9stAFAHLFds?list=PLuo\\_y\\_iegZQc5-wteUHSAXKgDLC2VjzGO](https://youtu.be/9stAFAHLFds?list=PLuo_y_iegZQc5-wteUHSAXKgDLC2VjzGO)



# Central Attacking Midfielder (CAM, Right)

**Team Role:** Provide attacking support; help create and score goals; offer defensive support within their area of influence

**Description:** The CAM position is dedicated primarily to attacking in the central area of the field. With no pure wingers in the formation, they may provide some width on either side of the Striker but must avoid getting lost in the wide areas of the field. Their role is to provide options for the attack in the center of the field. Vacating this space will allow opponents to control the middle and could leave your Striker on an island with no support. While CAMs will rarely track back into the own defensive third, they should provide defensive support any time the ball is in their area of influence. While the team is in possession, they should be encouraged to maintain possession but also have the freedom to try things. The CAM role is meant to provide a creative attacking spark.

**Key Attributes:** CAMs have to be opportunistic and optimistic. They must see opportunities developing and have the courage and freedom to attack those chances, repeatedly. They'll need to be comfortable receiving the ball, dribbling, and passing in tight spaces. They should also be comfortable shooting from outside of the opponent's penalty box.

## Midfield Games/Drills:

- One Touch Combination Play

<https://youtu.be/rT3zjPABVls>

- Passing Two Direction Game

[https://youtu.be/jCc6Uco6DHs?list=PLuo\\_y\\_iegZQc5-wteUHSAXKgDLC2VjzGO](https://youtu.be/jCc6Uco6DHs?list=PLuo_y_iegZQc5-wteUHSAXKgDLC2VjzGO)





# Central Attacking Midfielder (CAM, Left)

**Team Role:** Provide attacking support; help create and score goals; offer defensive support within their area of influence

**Description:** The CAM position is dedicated primarily to attacking in the central area of the field. With no pure wingers in the formation, they may provide some width on either side of the Striker but must avoid getting lost in the wide areas of the field. Their role is to provide options for the attack in the center of the field. Vacating this space will allow opponents to control the middle and could leave your Striker on an island with no support. While CAMs will rarely track back into the own defensive third, they should provide defensive support any time the ball is in their area of influence. While the team is in possession, they should be encouraged to maintain possession but also have the freedom to try things. The CAM role is meant to provide a creative attacking spark.

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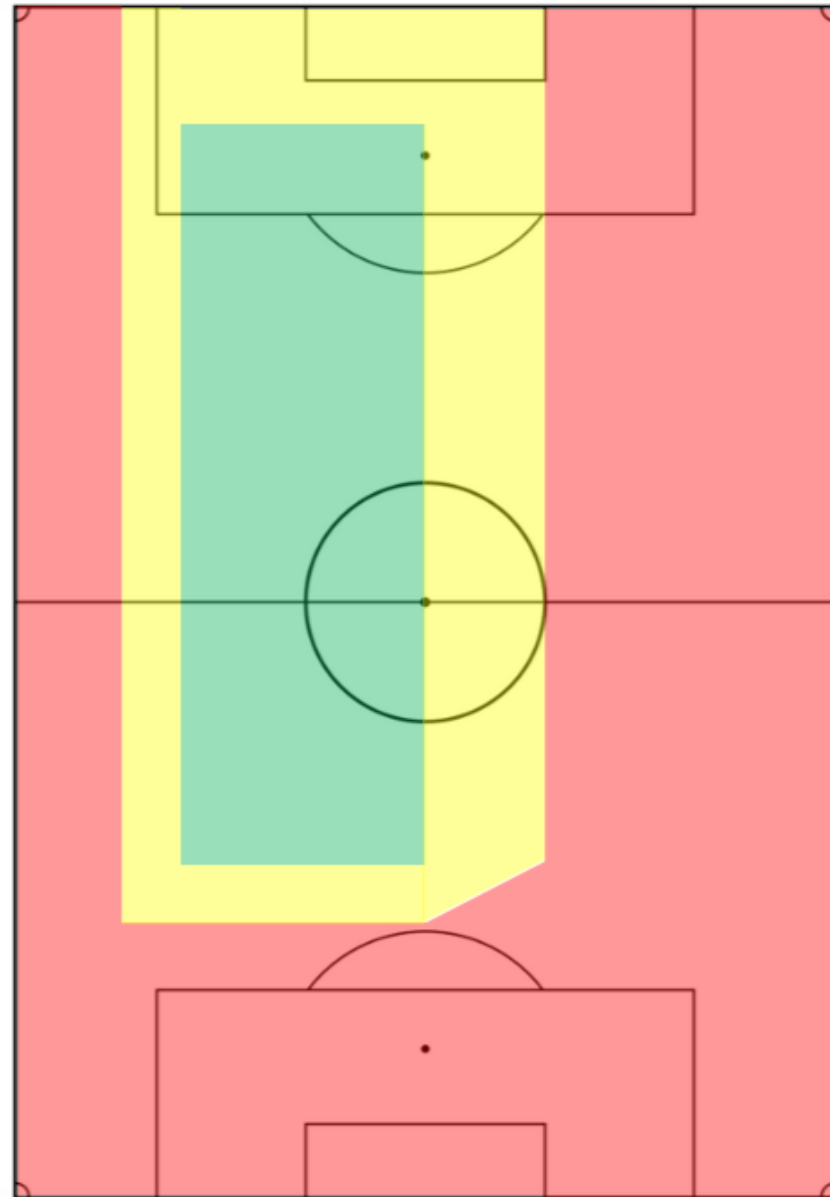
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# Striker (S)

**Team Role:** Support the attack; create & score goals; pressure the opponent in their own half

**Description:** The Striker lives to attack. When the team is defending in its own half, the Striker should stay close to midfield, ready to attack once the team wins the ball back. When the team is attacking in the opponent's half, the Striker should typically be the most advanced player and work with the team to create and score goals. It is important for them to score goals but they should also try to create goal scoring opportunities for teammates. When the ball is lost, the Striker can also help win it back and should apply pressure whenever opponents possess the ball in their own half. Overall, this position has very little defensive responsibility and should focus on attacking.

**Key Attributes:** Strikers should be empowered to take defenders on and go for goal. Constant movement with and without the ball is a must. They should (ideally) be capable of shooting comfortably and with decent power from anywhere in the opponent's penalty area.

**Striker Games/Drills:**

- USA 2v1 Shooting Drill

<https://youtu.be/DoaZAnPX54Y?list=PLJ3bjBzxMy9oTpkMD24xd-c2IzJhMitX>

- 1v1 Shooting

<https://youtu.be/NZRaiOsGOG4?list=PLJ3bjBzxMy9oTpkMD24xd-c2IzJhMitX>



# Positioning Scenario: Attacking

## Attacking Wide - RB in the Action

**Spread the Defense** - In this image, the right CAM has drawn the opponent's LB out and played the ball out wide for their own RB. By penetrating the defensive backline, you'll force other players to come out of position to deal with the threat. This will create openings and mistakes in the defense. The RB can cut in toward goal and pass to a teammate for a shot on goal while the defense tries to adjust.

## Positioning Off the Ball

- **Striker**: Make runs into spaces between defenders or behind them. Be prepared for crosses and loose balls.
- **CAMs**: The right CAM should continue to move and present passing options. They may get a chance to shoot or play a cross into the area. The left CAM should find space on the far side of the goal to stretch the defense. Be prepared for crosses and loose balls.
- **CDM**: Remain in space behind the attack, mostly central, to provide passing options. If possession is lost, attempt to delay the opponent and win the ball back before they can break out if possible.
- **LB** - Press slightly into opponent's half to spread the defense but do not charge forward to attack while RB is up field. Prevent opponents from breaking out too quickly if the ball is turned over.
- **CBs** - The CBs should shift slightly with the position of the ball and spread out to provide cover for the RB while they attack. Hold at midfield
- **Goal Keeper**: Move up to the top of the penalty area and remain focused on the game. The GK may be needed at any time to step forward and clear a long ball through or drop back and defend a counter.



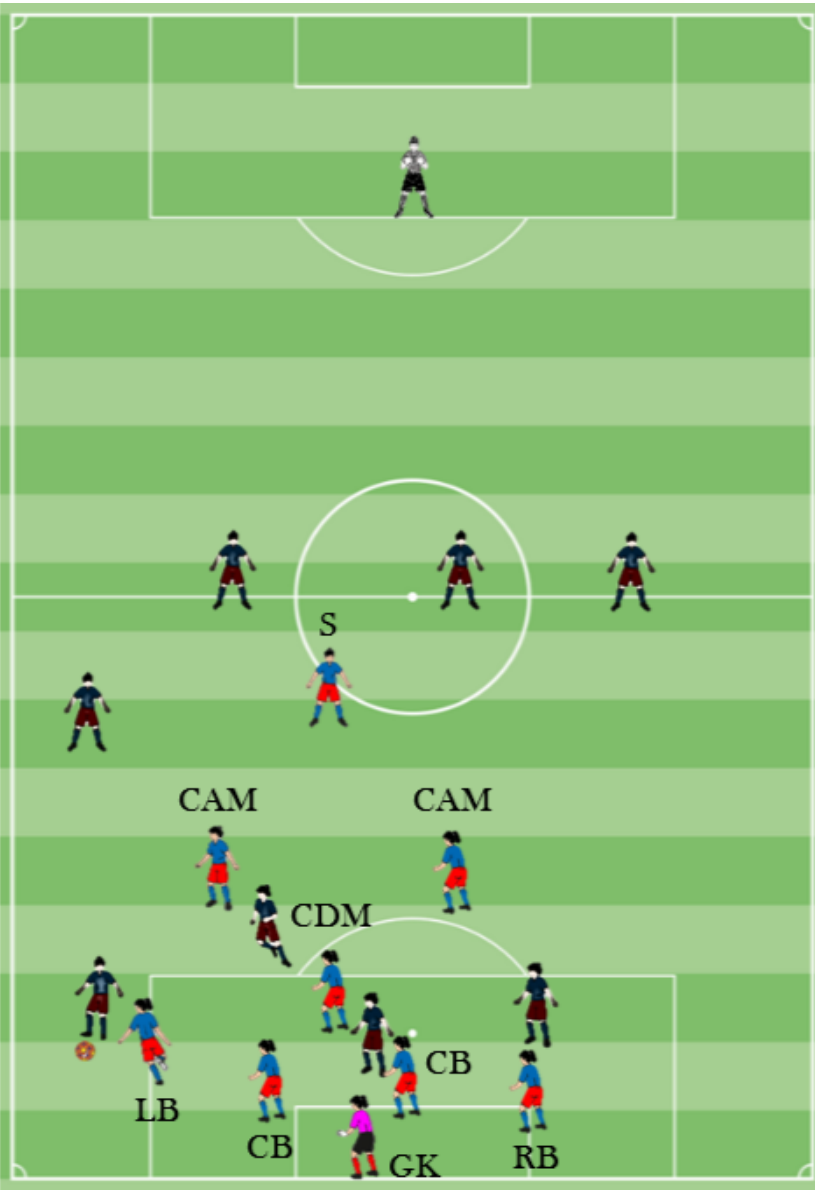
# Positioning Scenario: Defending

## Defending as a Unit

**Contain the Attack** – When opponents force you defend deep in your own half, try to force attacks wide – away from the goal. Here, the LB is in position to defend the attacker on the wing. They should tackle the opponent when they're able but should be patient. Diving in can allow the attacker to break through and create chaos in your defense.

## Positioning Off the Ball

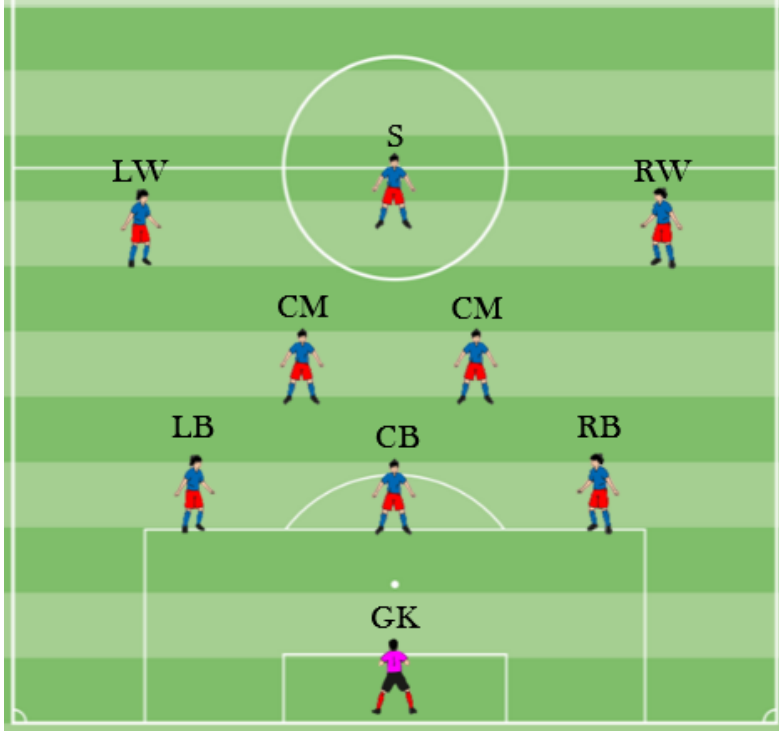
- **Striker**: Remain high, find space, and offer passing options as an outlet for the team once possession is regained. Without them here, the opposing defenders will push cleared balls back into your defensive third repeatedly.
- **CAMs**: Shift across the field, taking up positions supporting the defense but generally should not go too deep in defense. They should harass opposing attackers when the ball is in their area and/or offer an outlet when the possession is regained.
- **CDM**: Remain generally central, harassing opposing attackers all across the top of the penalty area. They can move to the wide areas of the penalty box or drop all the way to the goal line to break up plays if needed. Have them stand goal-side when marking attackers.
- **CBs**: The CBs should shift toward the ball and be in position to support teammates but generally remain close to one another. At least one of your CBs should be in front of the goal at all times. They should always be goal-side of attackers in their area.
- **RB**: Shift with the CBs, keeping a tight formation covering the mouth of the goal. Always stand goal-side of attackers.



# Alternative Formations

## 3-2-3

The 3-2-3 is an attack oriented formation. Maintaining balance in the midfield will be key to giving support in attacking and defending situations. Although both CMs will be counted on to defend, it may be beneficial to designate a CAM and CDM in the pair. With triangles occurring throughout, this formation will naturally provide good passing options to help your team possess and move the ball.



## 3-4-1

The 3-4-1 is a solid defensive shape that packs the midfield, creating a strong shield ahead of the back 3. It will be important to the midfield – Wingers especially – to come up and support the Striker or else attacks will be difficult to build and sustain. These players should have a good engine and desire to be involved often as they will need to do lots of running.



Watch this video for more information: <https://youtu.be/L9qYdMMoGfI>

# Additional Information

## Position-specific Slides

On the slides dedicated to individual positions, you may be viewing the color scheme (green, yellow, and red) in a manner similar to how we read traffic lights. While this is generally correct, be careful not to let it trap your players in the green areas. The borders of these zones are guidelines, not prison walls.

- **Green**: This is the position's primary area of responsibility. Players should always consider this area their top priority. Their teammates will count on them most in these areas.
- **Yellow**: This is the secondary area of responsibility. Players will be called upon to action in these areas several times in each game and should not be afraid to cross into them. It's important for each player to recover to their green zones quickly once they've completed these actions but encourage them to take action in the yellow zones when the run of play calls for it.
- **Red**: Red zones are areas that players at a given position will rarely have a reason to go. It's important that players avoid going to these zones; however, there may be instances in which they will need to. Instruct your players to recover quickly and/or cover for one another when this happens but ask them to avoid it as often as possible and trust their teammates.

## Practice Activities

Many of the videos linked in this guide involve long intro speeches by coaches. There's a lot of good coaching in the speeches but don't get stuck trying to recreate those moments with your teams. While it may be necessary to say more in the process of introducing new games, remember that our aim is to keep kids playing as much as possible. Instead of delivering all of the information up front, give them enough to get going and understand the focus of the exercise. From there, you can pull players aside or freeze the group at key moments to illustrate your coaching points. Just remember that too much talking and/or waiting in lines will drag your tempo down and players will begin to check out on you.

Small-sided games are an excellent way to keep kids playing throughout practice. Minor adjustments to the rules will allow you highlight different aspects of the game for development while requiring little set-up or explanation. See the following examples:

- **Limit Touches**: Only allow players 1, 2, or 3 touches. This is a great way to work on ball control and speed of thought/play.
- **Require a Skill**: Require players to make all of their turns using a skill move. (ex. drag-back, chop, or hook) If a player goes around the ball to turn instead of using a skill, everyone on the field must drop for 5 push-ups before they continue playing (possession is up for grabs!). This creates an emphasis on your chosen skill.
- **Add a Shot Clock**: Give Team One 7-10 seconds to take a shot. If they fail to get a shot off, they must give the ball back to Team Two. This will help you work on transition and tempo. When possession times out on Team One, send the ball back to Team Two's GK and work on building out from the back with possession.





# Closing Comments/Notes

## Age Specific Expectations

Players at this level are generally 10 and 11 years old and are ready to work as part of a team but physical development is still somewhat varied. Ball mastery remains a key focal point of their development and it is too soon to begin specializing them in any particular position. Above all, be patient and praise their efforts constantly.

## Teaching Formations, Positions, and Teamwork

The position-specific slides in this guide are designed so that they can be printed and given to players. Plan which position each player will take at the start of each week and encourage them to look over this information as a supplement to practices. Make sure they know that a position is not a single point on the field but, rather, an area and set of responsibilities supporting the team.

At practice, it may be beneficial to walk them through scenarios like the offensive and defensive scenarios on pages 11-12. Line them up in your chosen formation, walk the ball to different points on the field, and have the team shift as they would in the game. At each point, ask them why they've shifted to the place they have and provide feedback and/or instruction. This will allow you to develop their understanding and clarify each player's role. Player understanding is key to any system but be careful not to overdo this! Limit yourself to 5-10 minutes of this activity at a time to prevent losing your players' attention.

## Plan Ahead

This is easy to say but, as any volunteer can tell you, may not always be as easy to do. Without a plan, coaching can become stressful. Don't let it fool you, though, it doesn't have to be art to keep your team moving and your blood pressure down. Planning your practices, line-ups, and substitutions will make your work on the field 100 times more enjoyable and effective.

## Team Culture

You're team will play like it practices. Although you will at times need to be patient and work on some skills more slowly, look for ways to keep a high tempo and emphasize the need to keep a steady, high work rate (without rushing).

Kids want to win naturally. As coaches, we don't have to create that drive, we just need to support it. Empower your team to try things and take risks (within reason). Challenge them with attainable objectives and praise every effort. When they make mistakes, pick them up and push them to keep trying. Your feedback will either fuel their growth or weigh them down. Keep it simple and have fun above all else.

\*Contact club Technical Director Sean Yohe ([sean@ogdensoccer.com](mailto:sean@ogdensoccer.com)) for coaching questions and guidance.

