



# 4-3-3 Formation – The Ultimate Coaching Guide

Hard work and discipline coupled with the right personnel can make any formation a success regardless of how you choose to line up.

Each formation has its own strengths that the team must make the most of while mitigating its weaknesses through tactical awareness and a good understanding of how the opposition may attempt to exploit their game plan.

With the 4-3-3 formation, you are guaranteed an attacking outlook right from the start.

By controlling the midfield and taking advantage of the flexibility that the line up gives the team's forwards, the 4-3-3 can overwhelm, confuse, and force the opposition back towards their goal.

With the pace and movement of the attackers, the supporting fullbacks, and offensive midfielders, a flood of interchanging players can overload the opponent's defence to great effect.

This formation can be a massive success if you have the right players to play to its strengths.

Tactically flexible, the formation allows for coaches to manage the game to great effect by tweaking it to deal with a number of situations.

You can sit back in an almost 4-5-1 formation and hit the opposition on the counter-attack or push the fullbacks forward and drop the holding midfielder between the centre-backs to form a 3-4-3 formation.

Everything depends on the players you have available.

Designed to be offensive, the 4-3-3 will certainly have your players threatening the opposition and creating goal scoring opportunities.

Through the high intensity and off the ball movement that the formation requires, you can force the opposition back by making the most of this aggressive line up.

## 4-3-3 Formation Team Requirements:



- Energy!

- Central midfielders who are disciplined and work together well as a trio by controlling possession, supporting the attack, and helping out in defence.
- Athletic fullbacks who support the wide forwards in front of them and don't neglect their defensive duties. They also need to provide passing options out wide for the central midfielders.
- Good game management of the transitions between defence and attack.
- Good off the ball movement from the team's forwards.
- Disciplined wide forwards who support the midfield and fullbacks when the opposition are attacking.
- A specialised defensive or holding midfielder who sniffs out danger, covers gaps left by the fullbacks, and helps the team to keep its shape.
- Wide players and forwards who create width and depth to give the central midfielders enough space to influence the game.

## Strengths of the 4-3-3 Formation:



1. **Strength through the middle** – With three central midfielders you can protect the defence, control the centre of the pitch, and force the opposition to play out wide.
2. **Control possession** – The formation works best with technically competent players who pass, move, and recycle the ball around the team. Due to the

passing angles it creates, this in turn limits the opposition from retrieving the ball.

3. **Attacking options up front** – With three forwards up front, there will always be attacking options for the team to exploit. Coupled with the fullbacks and midfielders pushing forward, this makes for a potent attacking force.
4. **Lots of passing options and angles for the player on the ball** – Due to the focus on movement and space, the player on the ball should always have a number of options available to them and this in turn helps the team to dominate possession.
5. **Pressure the opposition into mistakes** – Due to the high energy nature of the formation and the number of players pushing up the field, it is possible to force the opponents into mistakes by limiting their time on the ball and the space that they receive it in.
6. **Off-ball movement confuses the opposition** – The flexible nature of 4-3-3 formation means that the interchanging forward line up and the different runs that the players make can create havoc amongst the opposition who are then unsure of who to mark.
7. **Overwhelm the opposition** – With a potential seven players rushing forward, the 4-3-3 can be mayhem for the defending team as a stream of people push up the field towards them.
8. **Disciplined players limit the formation's weaknesses** – If well-drilled and tactically competent, the team can stop the opponent from taking advantage of the 4-3-3 line up by tracking back and supporting their team mates with the defensive work.
9. **A specialised holding player acts as an insurance at the back** – With one of the central midfielders usually dedicated to defensive play, the fullbacks can attack without worrying so much about the gaps they leave behind them.
10. **Tactical flexibility to change to other formations** – From 4-3-3 formation, the coach can manage the game and counteract the opposition by changing the shape of the team relatively easily.

## Weaknesses of the 4-3-3 Formation:



1. **Opposition can take advantage of the space on the wings** – In the 4-3-3 formation, the team can be overloaded out wide if one of the central midfielders or wide forwards doesn't help out the fullback.
2. **The team can be dragged out of shape** – With the midfielders and wide forwards having to cover the various gaps that the 4-3-3 leaves, they have to shift as a team and essentially work as one unit. This can lead to players running out of position to cover the dangerous spaces.
3. **Vulnerable to cross field passes** – As the midfielders shift as a unit to close down danger on one side of the pitch, the opposition can play a cross field ball and start building up play on the opposite flank. That means the team needs to once again shift across and protect the opposite side. Quick changes in play can therefore be very dangerous.
4. **Requires a team with elite fitness** – The most effective teams that use the 4-3-3 formation are very fit and have no problem covering spaces that the opposition aim to exploit. The relentless pressure they place on the opposition can get tiring and that is when mistakes occur for the opponent to exploit.
5. **The formation risks being too narrow** – The fullbacks and wide forwards need to help out on the wing to ensure that they stretch the opposition and create space and options for the central midfielders.



6. **Fullbacks need to speedy, fit, and disciplined** – They need to bomb up and down the flank, contribute to the teams attack as well as remain defensively solid.
7. **Vulnerable to the counterattack** – When the team pushes up to the halfway line, there is a lot of space left behind the defence. This leaves the team open to the counterattack and the keeper must act as a sweeper to minimise the risk.
8. **The midfielders can get in each other's way** – With three players playing centrally, there is a risk that the midfielders occupy the same space and get in each other's way.
9. **A lack of midfield cohesion and discipline risks the formation being a failure** – If the holding midfielder does not cover the fullbacks well enough or is not quick enough to get over effectively, spaces arise which the opposition can take advantage of. If the other two midfielders neglect their defensive duties then the sole holding player risks being overwhelmed and passed around by the opponents.
10. **A lack of options in the box** – Ironically for a formation that is so attack-minded, the 4-3-3 can leave the team with only the central striker attacking crosses into the box. The opposite forward needs to make a run into the box as does a midfielder or two.
11. **Disciplined wide forwards** – These players need to contribute offensively while not neglecting to support the fullback behind them. Otherwise the fullback risks being overloaded by the opposition.

## 4-3-3 Formation Setup:



Teams usually play a standard back four with the two **centre-backs** being the main defensive specialists in the team.

It is their job to protect the **goalkeeper** behind them and do anything to keep a clean sheet.

Physically imposing, strong in the air, and ferocious tacklers, they are the bedrock of the team.

In years gone by, the **fullbacks** were only expected to contribute defensively. Now they are becoming increasingly influential in attack as is evidenced by the astronomical fees paid for fullbacks over the last couple of years.

They provide the team with width and passing options out wide and need to be very fit to patrol their side of the pitch.

The 4-3-3 enables managers to line up the **central midfielders** in a number of ways...

There is usually one holding midfielder included in the formation, if not two, as this then gives the attacking formation more stability and safety as they can then drop in and cover the fullbacks when they attacking.



The three midfielders are usually all comfortable on the ball and need to have good positioning to limit the opposition's attacking capabilities and initiate their own attacks.

Depending on the opposition and how the manager likes to play, one or two of the midfielders is usually offensive-minded and is responsible for a lot of the team's creativity through the middle.

In any case, all three of them need to be very fit as they have to cover a lot of ground throughout the match.

The formation again gives the coach a number of ways to organise the front three...

The two **wide forwards** are ideally tricky, speedy players who are comfortable dribbling, attacking the opposition's fullbacks, and supporting the central striker in scoring the main chunk of the team's goals.



They need to create goal scoring opportunities for their teammates, open up passing options with their movement, and work well with the fullback behind them to overload the opposition's defence.

Depending on how the team likes to play, the team's **central striker** is either a big target man, a quick and mobile striker, or a diminutive, creative false 9 type of player who brings others into play around them.

Each type of player obviously brings very different playing options to the team.

Positioning and discipline are key to the 4-3-3 formation which can otherwise leave large gaps on the pitch for the opposition to exploit if any player neglects their responsibilities.

Although attacking in nature, a well-trained team will naturally limit their opponent's game with their energy and understanding of how the team functions as a whole.

Let us now look at what is expected from each player in their position on the pitch.

## Player Roles and Responsibilities:



## **Goalkeeper:**

With four at the back, the keeper is in theory very well protected.

Add in a holding defensive midfielder and it is easy to see how the 4-3-3 formation does not expose itself despite the plethora of attacking players on the pitch.

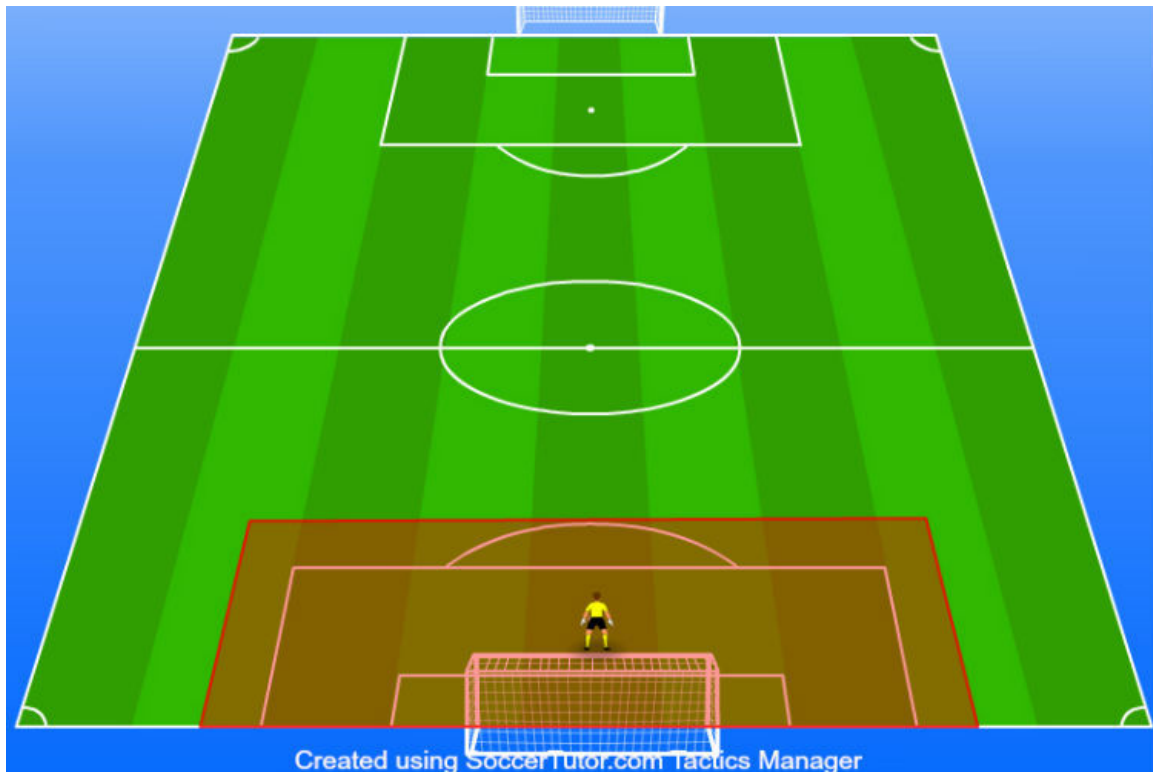
With the fullbacks pushing forwards, however, gaps can appear and the keeper must have good communication skills to highlight danger as it arises and direct the players in front of him to counteract the opposition's attack.

He needs to be constantly talking to his defenders and work well with them as a unit.

Obviously, the main role of the keeper is to keep a clean sheet and they must therefore do anything possible to prevent the opposition from scoring.

In the past, the goalkeeper, like the fullback, was only responsible for defending the goal with their lives.

But in today's game, goalkeepers are increasingly expected to have good footwork so that they keep possession within the team and play accurate long balls forward to instigate attacks.



Due to the attacking nature of the formation, the goalkeeper must also advance up the pitch when the defence pushes forwards.

They need to act almost as a sweeper and need to be ready to sprint forward to clear any ball that the opposition plays over the defenders standing on the halfway line.

In this way, the keeper can stop counterattacks before they even begin.

As the 4-3-3 formation traps the opposition in the opposite half of the pitch, the goalkeeper needs to keep their concentration as they will not see the ball for large parts of the game.

A good keeper can always be the difference between victory and defeat.

## **Central Defenders:**

In the attack-minded 4-3-3 formation, the centre-backs are the sole true defenders of the team.

They need to clearly convey any danger to the rest of the players on the team to ensure they fulfil their defensive duties.

They must work well as a unit with the two fullbacks and the defensive holding player in front of them to plug any gaps that the attacking players leave behind them.

Strong in the tackle with a good sense of positioning, the centre-backs job is to arrive at the ball before the opposition's strikers and either pass it to a team mate or clear it away.

If second to the ball, they need to hold off the striker, stop them from getting past, and give the rest of the team enough time to get back in position.

In the air, they should aim to win most of their headers and stop the opposition's striker from controlling the ball and bringing their team mates into play.



They need to not dive in to tackles and make sure they are aware of any space that the striker may try to run into.

With balls played into the channel behind the team's fullbacks, the centre-back needs to come across and stop the opponent's striker from driving at the defence.

The other centre-back then either comes across to cover them or the defensive midfielder drops in and takes up the position.

The centre-backs always need to be aware of the movement of the opposition's forwards and attempt to intercept any passes that are aimed at the space behind them.

When playing the offside trap they need to communicate together to know when to step up and when to drop off.

In the 4-3-3 formation, there is less of an onus on the centre-backs to be good with the ball at their feet as more of the play will go through other players on the team.

Ideally, they're comfortable on the ball, but their main priority is to put their bodies on the line and limit the opposition's goal scoring chances.

## **Left and Right Fullback:**

Although their priority is to defend, offensive fullbacks who are confident on the ball and can deliver a good cross are very important to the 4-3-3 formation.

They are responsible for providing the team with width and they also provide the central midfielders with more space within which to operate. They're also another passing option out on the flank.

Without a wide midfielder, it is even more crucial they get forward and support the wide forward in attacking the opposition's fullback.

With the fullback overlapping and running in behind the defence, the wide forward is afforded a lot more space and time to choose what option they think is best.



If the ball reaches them behind the opponent's defence, the fullback should attempt to put in a good cross for the central striker.

If the pass does not come, then their decoy run has helped drag the opposition's defenders out of position.



With all this running up and down the pitch, they need to be very fit and have an exceptional sense of timing to know exactly when to go forward and when to stay back.

The holding midfielder helps in this respect as they can cover the space the fullbacks leave when contributing offensively to the team's play.

The fullback, though, should always attempt to remain goal-side of the opposition's winger and it is their job to stop crosses into the box and put tackles in to stop the winger from dancing past them.

When playing the offside trap alongside the centre-backs, the fullbacks need to communicate well with their team mates and understand exactly when to play it and when to drop off.

They also need to make sure that they call the wide forward in front of them back to help out when the opposition are attacking down their wing.

If isolated against two players, the fullback must make the best of the situation and slow them down so that one of their team mates can come across and help out.

As they are involved further up the field, the fullbacks should be good on the ball and confidently keep the ball in the team's possession.

Their movement is very important in creating passing angles and the triangles that are so prevalent in the 4-3-3 formation.

## **Central Midfielders:**

In a 4-3-3 formation, there are a number of ways that a coach may decide to line up the midfield depending on the opposition they are facing, the personnel available, and the game plan they wish to follow.

One of the trio is usually a specialised holding player and this is integral to the success of the formation due to the balance and security they can provide their team mates with.

The holding midfielder is crucial due to the attacking nature of the formation.

They must cover the gaps and spaces left by the rest of the team. It is their job to sniff out danger, drop into the fullback positions, and slow down the opposition's strikers if they are streaming forward.

As with all midfielders, they need to be good on the ball, calm in possession and as the deepest midfielder, it is up to them to pick up the ball off of the centre-backs and move it forward.



The other two midfield slots can be filled in a variety of ways...

Either by another defensive-minded midfielder to further protect the team, a ball-carrying centre mid, or by an offensive-minded attacking midfielder.

All of the midfielders, though, should be good on the ball, tactically disciplined, and contribute both offensively and defensively to the team's shape.

It is up to the coach to decide on the combination in midfield and what type of game plan they want to bring to the opposition.

The ball-carrying midfielder should be energetic, constantly searching for the ball, and comfortable dribbling and passing forwards.

They can act as a carrier between the lines and push up the field by gliding between the opposition's players.

If they break through the opponent's midfield, then they can be particularly dangerous running at their defence. Either taking them on or releasing a pass through to the central striker.

They should also look to run past the central striker of the team and help drag the opposition's team out of shape with their movement.

The attacking midfielder has more creative responsibility than the others and should have a high level of technical skills as well as good close ball control as they often operate in small spaces which requires quick decision-making.

The attacking midfielder helps to alleviate the creative responsibility of the team's wide forwards and fullbacks by contributing to attacking play through the centre.

They also need to contribute to the team's goal scoring and create chances for their team mates.

When the ball is delivered from out wide, they should be pushing forward to meet it on the edge of the box. And by making runs forward, they also contribute to opening up space for the rest of the team to play in.

The central three midfielders need to communicate well and make sure they do not close down each other's space.

They must not leave too much space behind them and should all be disciplined enough to contribute defensively.

With the team often playing in the opposition's half, they should dominate possession with the defenders effectively trapping the opposition and stopping them from playing out.

A well-balanced midfield is essential to the 4-3-3 formation's success and they must work well together to ensure they fulfil all their responsibilities.

## **Forwards:**

There are a number of ways that a manager may decide to organise the team's front three...

Depending on the personnel available to them, they may decide on a flat three, two up front and one behind, a false 9, or one central striker with two number 10s behind them.

Such is the beauty of football that an inexhaustible variety of ways to play exist!

An attacking formation at heart, the 4-3-3 formation relies on the forwards buzzing around the opposition's defence and putting pressure on them in the hopes that they make a mistake.

Their energy carries the game to the opponent and ensures that they can never relax when in possession. This helps limit their ability to play out from the back.

If indeed they do make a mistake, the team's forwards are now a lot closer to the goal with the majority of the opposition's team members already behind them.

With the three in midfield stopping the opposition's defenders from passing into their midfielders, the wide forwards coupled with the fullbacks pushing up can effectively completely strangle the opposition and force them to go long.

Attack really can be the best form of defence.





In this formation, the wide forwards (if this is indeed how the team plays) must be fearless with their creativity and constantly attempting to create goal scoring opportunities for the central striker.

They can do this by overloading the wing alongside the fullback and getting crosses into the box or by using the decoy outside to drive at the opposition's defence.

They can then either get a shot off or attempt to slip someone through behind the opposition's central defenders.

This requires that they're good at dribbling and have a good shot on them.

Defensively, it is important that they track back and support their fullback when the opposition are attacking.

The central striker in the 4-3-3 formation can have a variety of strengths though hopefully they would be able to contribute in various ways to the team's play.

As the team's main goalscorer, they must be a good finisher, have great movement, and be able to anticipate and take any chances that come their way.

The opposition's central defenders will try to stop them in any way possible so it is important for the striker to be tough and make sure they keep the ball despite the defenders' best efforts.

By holding up the ball, they can bring their team mates into play and help the team move up the pitch.

As a team playing 4-3-3 will often dominate possession and be playing in the opposition's half of the pitch, the striker will be surrounded by the opponent's players and consequently have little time or space in which to operate.

Therefore, their one touch passing must be accurate and their runs in behind the defence are crucial for increasing the space that their team mates can play in.

Unlike in other formations where the central striker has few defensive responsibilities, in a 4-3-3, their job is to put the defenders under pressure and stop them playing out from the back.

## Attacking in the 4-3-3 Formation:



By defending far up the pitch, your team will force the opposition back, compress their space, and limit their passing options.

This 'defensive' move is actually very aggressive and sets up the team to attack perfectly if done correctly.

With the defence lined up along the halfway line, you trap the opposition and can force them into mistakes or win the ball back higher up the pitch.

This wall of players means that you effectively have seven players committed to attacking the opposition.

This affords a number of options to take advantage of your opponent and create goalscoring opportunities.

On the wing, the wide forward and fullback assisted by an attacking midfielder can overload the opposition's fullback and either get to the by-line to put in a cross or drive at the defence to create a chance.

This stretches the opposition's defence, forcing them to move over to deal with the threat to their flank and this creates spaces and gaps for the midfielders to move into.



Movement is key to attacking play and the players must be constantly on the move, switching positions, and dropping into space. This confuses the opposition who then no longer know who is picking up who.

The movement of the players allows for passing angles and triangles to arise all over the pitch and this helps the team to dominate possession.

When crosses come into the box, the central striker should be supported by an attacking midfielder or two and the opposite wide forward. This obviously makes defending the cross that much harder for the opposition.

The central midfielders should also look to push on past the central striker from deep when possible and they too are expected to contribute to the team's goal scoring abilities.

By pushing the wide forwards up and wide, it stretches the team, allows space for the midfielders to play or drive into, and creates gaps between the opposition's defenders for the team to take advantage of.

Balls in behind the defence will create confusion and danger and pull the defence out of position.

With so many players running forward and so many passing options, chances will inevitably come as the opposition fails to deal with all the space and attacking flexibility that the 4-3-3 formation gives the team.

## Defending in the 4-3-3 Formation:



In the 4-3-3 formation, attack really is the best form of defence.

Energetic and speedy forwards can quickly close down the opposition and stop them from playing out from the back.

With the midfielders pushing up on the opponent's midfielders and the fullbacks marking their wingers, it is nearly impossible for them to safely pass out of their half.



This helps the team to win back possession further up the field and drastically reduces the number of goal scoring opportunities that the opposition have throughout the match.

By pushing up to the halfway line, the team traps the opposition in their own half.

The concern here is that they can play balls over the top and into the space behind in an attempt to hit the team on the counterattack.

The defenders and defensive midfielder need to be aware of this as does the keeper who must act as a sweeper in this situation and rush out to clear the ball.

Relentless pressure up front forces the opponent back deeper and deeper.



The team must cover each other and drop into any gaps that arise to limit the opposition's playing time and space. By compressing the space, they can win the ball back quicker and easier.

Controlling the ball then allows them to play at their speed and force the opposition to chase instead.

Consequently, the team needs to operate as a unit and move around the pitch together. One player sprinting around is ineffective while pressing all together can be deadly.

The holding midfielder is key to the success of the formation as they must plug any holes that arise behind the fullbacks.

They also occupy the hole just before the defence which solidifies the centre and impedes the opposition's striker from finding any time or space within which to play.

The centre-backs, too, must be ready to come across and engage any striker that makes it beyond the press.

Vulnerable to play down the flanks, the wide forwards can drop deeper if necessary to effectively form a 4-5-1 formation if the team is under sustained pressure.

By doing this, they protect their fullback and force the opposition to attempt to play through the centre which is already filled with the three midfielders patrolling the space.

In any case, the wide forward must work hard defensively to limit the opposition's play out wide.

This is important as the central midfielders otherwise risk getting pulled out of position when covering the flank which subsequently leaves space inside for the opponents to attack through.

If the opposition do succeed in intercepting the ball, the 4-3-3 formation is also vulnerable to them breaking through the lines and pushing past the central

midfielders. The team must be wary of this occurring and stream back into their positions.

Hard work, discipline and coordination are the key to a successful defence in the 4-3-3 formation.

## Variations of the 4-3-3 Formation:



As mentioned above, the 4-3-3 formation is very flexible depending on the personnel available to the coach.

While the defence largely lines up in the same way with only the instructions to the fullbacks varying depending on how comfortable they are attacking, it is the players in front of them that provide the most variation to the formation.

If facing an offensive team, the coach may include two defensive-minded players in the line up.



If up against a weak opponent, more attacking-minded midfielders can be used.

This is the beauty of the formation as the players themselves influence and drastically change its strong points depending on their capabilities.

With all the possible midfield line ups, the players still need to know how to work together and coordinate their play. This will always be the key.

Up front, the forwards again offer a number of different playing options depending on the players available...

If there is a target man up front, then the team will aim to play more into their feet for them to hold it up and will play higher crosses into the box to take advantage of their aerial prowess.

A speedier but smaller striker will instead make more runs in behind the defence and prefer to be on the end of lower crosses.

A creative false 9 will aim to influence the play with their dribbling ability and play-making skills by creating goalscoring opportunities out of seemingly nothing.

While a formation provides a team with structure, it is the players themselves who impact the result of the game through their individual playing styles and how they fit in and work with the rest of their team mates.

Teams must change their approach within the formation to get the best out of the players.

It would make no sense, for example, to keep playing balls in behind the defence if the striker was slow and not very mobile.

The great thing about 4-3-3 formation is that you can quickly change the attacking and defending outlook of the team with just one quick substitution.

For instance, a target man subbed for a speedy striker suddenly changes the whole game plan and forces the opposition to rethink their defensive strategy.

Source : <https://www.soccercoachingpro.com/4-3-3-formation/>