

Formations in Football

Written by Paul Bright

A puzzle with no solution?

Formations have always existed in the game Football. But, why? Why do coaches, managers, players and fans obsess over formations? How does something that seems so simple, in principle, create so much discussion and debate? In The Coaching Manual office, we are no different.

Therefore, in these formations articles, we will demystify this aspect of football strategy. By doing so, we also hope to empower our members with knowledge that will help them to get a better understanding of the intricacies of formations and consequently of game strategy itself.

Let's go back to the start.

If your football coaching career starts with 5, 6 or 7 years old, it is likely that you will play with 4v4 outfield players (5v5 if you have a keeper). In these guides we will discuss how the ideas behind the 4v4 formation are still valid when a player makes their first foray into an 11 a-side match or even - for the chosen few - their first appearance in the professional game.

The purpose of a playing formation is to create order for your your team, to give roles and responsibilities to individuals and to create a structure which gives your team the best chance of winning the game. Without formations, football would be chaotic, unruly and amorphous. It surely wouldn't be the beautiful game we love today.

Formations have to exist in football for three reasons:

1. The laws of the game and the geometry of the pitch demand order.
2. The physical exertion of the game demands that players must take individual responsibility in order for the team to benefit.
3. The core principles of attack and defence demand structure.

150 years of tinkering

Since the laws of the modern game were first codified more than 150 years ago, formations have slowly taken their place at the centre of how we think about the game. After an admittedly slow start, the idea of formations started to gain traction towards the end of the nineteenth century.

In the excellent book on football tactics "Inverting The Pyramid", Jonathan Wilson covers the history of football tactics in the 11 a-side game in great depth. He investigates the strategic decisions that some of the greatest minds in the game have made in the pursuit of victory at the highest level of professional football. But how can grass roots coaches use these strategies themselves?

The coaches perspective

We are going to look at how formations can shape the development of players from the earliest ages through small sided games (4v4, 7v7 and 9v9 etc.) right up to when young players first start playing 11v11. We will break down formations and we will look at how we can coach our players to be able to play these formations as well as learning when and how to deploy them as a manager.

