Debates abound regarding the perfect tactical formation for a soccer team. Many are a result of a new system that has proven effective at a major tournament such as a World Cup or a European Championship and has therefore received much media attention. It should be remembered, however, in these situations we are talking about the very top-level players with high levels of fitness and great technical and tactical skills. They also spend a lot of time perfecting a system of play with their coaches in training camps prior to the tournaments.

The numbers ascribed to a particular formation can be very misleading, as the formation will often change depending on whether the team is on offense or defense. The basic formation is developed into a system of play which is very fluid with full backs moving into midfield, midfielders dropping into defense and wingers stepping inside to create space etc. The system is more important than the formation.

Youth players do not spend this amount of time with their coaches and do not possess the fitness and technical-tactical expertise. It is therefore important to select a system that will be relatively simple to understand in terms of team shape and individual roles within that shape. For the youth coach the most appropriate question should be do you adopt a system to suit the players or do you adapt the players to play the system?

**Points to consider:**

- Age of players
- Technical ability of players
- Physical attributes of the players
- Vision and transitional qualities

The answer is based around the philosophy of the soccer club or the coach. Some clubs have a preferred formation which they require all their academy teams to adhere to. The best known for this is probably the Dutch clubs such as Ajax which invariably use a 4.3.3. at 11 a-side

The majority of local youth clubs around the world, however, will allow their coaches to make independent decisions. This is fine if the decision is educated and based around sound knowledge of the game. Often, it is not! It should also be concerned with the overall development of the players and team. The coach should bear in mind the following factors:

- Players at the youth level should be familiar with all the positions on the field whilst still having favorable or specialized roles
- Good players should be flexible and can play in many positions
- Players natural strengths should be incorporated
- Players have limited tactical understanding at all youth age groups and therefore the individual roles should be clear for each player

In considering our formation we as coaches are attempting to ensure that we have more players (when on defense and when on offense) around the ball at any given time than the opposition. To some coaches the emphasis will be more heavily weighted towards numbers up on defense whilst others, who are more attack oriented, will emphasize numbers up in offensive areas. The ideal is to implement a fluid system, with a team well organized in transition that can achieve defensive and offensive dominance.

Whilst it is important to incorporate a suitable formation and system, it is essential that the majority of the sessions at the youth level are focused on the technical development of the players. Players want to play!! They do not wish to stand around for great lengths of time listening to complex and rigid tactical instruction. This is guaranteed to impede their enjoyment of the game and will ultimately discourage them from remaining with the sport.
Examples of 8 a side Formations

Diagram 1: 3-3-1 (with sweeper)

Diagram 2: 2-3-2

Diagram 3: 3-2-2 (with withdrawn striker)
The 2-3-2 Formation

Potential Advantages:

1. Easily creates triangles for support all over the field
2. Provides width for team to attack with midfielders joining the front line
3. Greater overall numbers committed to attack
4. The two forwards can apply high pressure on the opposition defenders when in possession
5. Two forwards afford the opportunity to play a long pass early as they cover a wider area than one forward

Potential Disadvantages:

1. Two at the back can expose slow/weak outside full backs
2. Vulnerable to diagonal balls
3. How to cope with two opposition forwards

Attacking in the 2-3-2

The great advantage that this system can provide is the numbers committed to attack and therefore the options. Firstly, there is the opportunity to attack quickly by playing the ball early to the two forwards (X7 and X8) who may well be in a 2 v 2 situation on goal. If this is not possible then we can attack through the wide midfielders (X6 and X7) who pull wide to provide passing options for the defenders (X2 and X3) and central midfielder (X4).

The decision to attack centrally or out wide is governed to a large degree by the opposition defensive pressure. If the opponents are ‘stretched defensively then we can attack through the center. If the opponents ‘condense’ the central area then we will attack out wide.
If the defensive cover on the centre forwards is ‘loose’ then X4 can play into the feet of either X7 or X8 (see diagram 6). If the central defensive cover is ‘tight’ then, if possible, the ball should be played into the space behind (see diagram 7).

The two centre forwards will continuously slide across the field together depending on the position of the ball. Although they may occasionally make runs into wide areas they should not be considered as wide players. The ideal is that they are playing no more than twenty feet apart and therefore are always providing support for each other.

If we decide to attack out wide then we also need to ‘read’ the pressure. If the wide midfield defensive cover is ‘loose’ then the ball can be played into the feet of either X5 or X6. (see diagram 8). If the cover is ‘tight’ then the ball can be played into the space behind (see diagram 9).

New solutions must be considered when attacking against a deep lying ‘sweeper’ where the attacking pass into space will often be cut out. This is especially the case if the balls are played straight down the middle of the field. One option to counter this is to push one of the centre forwards onto the sweeper whereby the sweeper is forced to mark. This restricts his/her movement and adds a lot more pressure. It also provides another target for the midfield to pass to. The other response is to attack with diagonal balls for wide midfielders (see diagram 11) in order to pull the sweeper out of position.
An important factor in the attacking shape is that the team moves forward as a unit. Whether we are attacking centrally or out wide our central midfielder (X4) moves forward to support, but behind the ball and the four advanced players (X5, X6, X7, X8). The central midfielder (X5) ‘holds’ in this area providing depth in case the ball is lost (see diagram 11). If this player moves ahead of, or in line with the wide midfielders then a large space will exist in the central area which can be exploited (diagram 12) in transition.

Diagram 9: Correct Spacing in Midfield  Diagram 10: Incorrect Spacing in Midfield

The aim of attacking play is simply to score thus there must be a focus on the end product. With this in mind if we are attacking wide it is important that there is a quality delivery (or shot!) into the penalty area and that the players position themselves in the most ‘dangerous’ positions possible. One of the keys here is that the weak side midfielder (X5) moves infield to attack the far post (rather than ‘hanging out’ on the wing!). In this system we can have three players attacking crosses i.e. front post, centre goal and far post.

Diagram 11: Framing The Goal

In addition, to their attacking role the wide midfielders have clear defensive responsibilities. It is important that they realize that they are not forwards and hence recover defensively when the ball is lost. These players will ideally be quick, fit and hard working. This is a demanding position and the coach will need to teach the players to take a regular break during the flow of the game.
Defending In The 2-3-2

The challenge in defending with this formation is only having two dedicated defenders (X2 and X3). As mentioned earlier it is very important that the central midfielder (X4) does not push too far forward, otherwise the team will be exposed at the back. In terms of defending with depth it is important that the 2 defenders are prepared for the ball ‘over the top’ (a favored pass at this age!). As the team is not playing with a sweeper the opposition may look to play a straight ball through for their front runners to chase. To counteract this the GK should play high (on the edge of the penalty area) and the two defenders must react quickly to visual cues.

![Diagram 9: Defending The Through Ball](image)

The two defenders in this formation should not play too wide in defense otherwise a large gap is left through the middle which can be exposed. The defenders should play more centrally and slide across the field depending on the position of the ball. In the above example (diagram 13) X2 is playing too far wide and has allowed O8 to run through the gap.

The two fullbacks can be designated to cover the left and right central areas of the field (see diagram 14). This is the danger area in front of the goal. However, when the ball is played to one side of the field and our wide midfielder is beaten then the two defenders (X3 and X2) must consider sliding across to that side, so long as they are not leaving players free in the centre (danger area!!). If the defenders do slide across then the area now exposed is the weak side. To cover this area the weak side midfielder (X5) ‘drops back’ and ‘cuts in’ towards the centre. (see Diagram 15).

![Diagram 10: Defending With Two Markers](image)

![Diagram 11: Defending The Wide Ball](image)

General play can be rather chaotic at the U8 to U11 age with a lot of transition. However, when the opportunity to organize defensively behind the ball arises then the midfield three (X5, X6, X7) should ideally slide across the field as a unit so that the shape is horizontally compact (diagram 16). Of course O6 is in a lot of space but will not receive the ball quickly from players on the other side of the field. It’s too long a pass for this age so at this present moment he/she is out of the game. This is not always an easy concept for young players to understand.
More common at this age is constant transition and ‘turn overs’. With this in mind the wide midfielders (X6, X7) must realize their defensive duties and on losing the ball ‘track back’ into the midfield area. If they do not ‘track back’ then the team will have a maximum of one in midfield (X5) and the back two may well be exposed. In the diagram below X6 on our team has crossed inaccurately into the GK who has released the opposition wide midfielder (O6). X5 tracks back to challenge O6.

If the midfield players transition correctly then the team should have 5 outfield players actively defending. Depending on the team that you are playing against you may also ask one of your central forwards to ‘track back’ into the midfield area to provide additional support. If both forwards track all the way back then there is no attacking outlet.