Systems of Play

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 3-3-1 Formation

The 8 a side Formation recommended by U.K. Elite Soccer for 8 a side play is the 3-3-1. This formation is easy to understand and provides naturally for width, length and depth in offense and defense.

Potential Advantages:

1. Symmetry of shape is easy for players to understand and difficult to unbalance
2. Provides width for team to attack with midfielders joining the front line
3. Six defenders committed to defense when possession is lost
4. The strong side full back can join the attack without sacrificing too much space at the back
5. Three defenders cover the width of the field

Potential Disadvantages:

1. One forward will have to play against two or three defenders
2. Only one target for midfield to aim at.
3. Difficult for young wide midfielders to get up and back

Attacking in the 3-3-1

The great advantage that this system can provide is the width in attack. This is provided by the wide midfielders (X6 and X7) who pull wide to provide options for the defenders and central midfielder (X5). The aim of the team is to get the ball wide quickly. The ball can also be played wide to the fullbacks (X2 and X3) who can penetrate with the ball.

Diagram 1: Playing With Width

If the defensive cover on the wide midfielders is 'tight' then the ball should be played into space behind (to X7 in diagram). If not, the ball is played into feet (to X6). At this age there will often be space out wide to exploit, especially if you are playing against a 3-2-2 or 2-3-2 formation.

Diagram 2: Selecting The Pass

Diagram 3: Transition of Wide Midfielders
If the ball is played forward centrally (to X8) then the wide midfielders transition forward quickly to give support. This is important, otherwise X8 can be overwhelmed by superior numbers. X5 moves forward to support, but behind the ball and the 3 advanced players (X6, X7, X8). Having played the ball wide it is important that there is a quality delivery (or shot!) into the penalty area and that the weak side midfielder (X7) moves infield to attack the goal (rather than hanging out on the far side!).

Diagram 4: Framing The Goal

The advantage of playing the wide players in this way is that they perceive themselves to be midfielders (not forwards) and hence recover to that area 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.

An important factor in the attacking shape is that the team moves forward as a unit. The central midfielder (X5) ‘holds’ in the midfield area providing depth in case the ball is lost. 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 5: Correct Spacing in Midfield  Diagram 6: Incorrect Spacing in Midfield
Defending In The 3-3-1 (with a sweeper)

In the same way the sweeper (X4) will provide some depth in defense in case of an opposition breakaway.

Breakaways at this level are often direct and are a consequence of straight driven balls down the centre (from O5) which the sweeper (X4) should be able to deal with (see diagram 10). Ideally the GK will also play ‘high’ on the edge of the area as ‘double cover’ and is prepared to come out of the area to play the ball with his/her feet.

The main advantage of defending with a 3-3-1 is that there is width (and balance) in defense. Defending with a 2 man defense can be quite difficult unless the weak side midfielder tracks back to cover that space.

An important factor in defending within this formation is that the wide midfielders (X6, X7) realize their defensive duties and on losing the ball ‘track back’ into the midfield area. If they do not ‘track back’ then they will have a maximum of 1 in midfield (X5) and the back 3 may be exposed. In the diagram below X6 has crossed inaccurately to the GK who has released his wide midfielder (O6). X7 tracks back to challenge O6.
If the midfield players transition correctly then the team should have 6 players actively defending. X8 will have a lot of work as a lone striker and should not be ‘pulled’ back into defensive areas.

The midfield three (X5, X6, X7) should ideally slide across the field as a unit so that the shape is horizontally compact. 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. At this moment he/she is out of the game. This is not always an easy concept for young players to understand.

Diagram 9: Horizontal Shift in Midfield When on Defense

The final aspect of defending in the 3-3-1 involves the roles of the 3 defenders. The 2 fullbacks can be designated to mark the oppositions’ 2 forward players with a central sweeper dropping deep and generally ‘free’ of marking. The sweeper will generally position him/herself on a line between the ball and the center of the goal. Of course there will be times when the sweeper is involved in 1 v 1 confrontations, normally when the ball is played through into the space behind the defense or when a player has ‘broken through’.

Diagram 10: Defending With Two Markers and The Sweeper

When the 2 forwards (O7, O8) play more centrally then the fullbacks (X2, X3) can defend more centrally with the sweeper moving around and behind them. The areas of concern in this system are the wide areas where opposition midfielders (O6) may penetrate. The sweeper and wide midfielders should cover this space.