

# A Look at the 3-5-2 Formation in Football:

## Advantages and Disadvantages

By Human Afazeli

### Background:

Already, as early as 1982, it was apparent that the existing formations in football needed to undergo changes. Therefore, following the 1982 World Cup in Spain, FIFA conducted a multipurpose study to establish the necessary background for statistical analysis of this issue. That study concluded that teams with more physical fighting ability in midfield often enjoy an advantage over their opponents. The West Germany v. France match in the semi-final of WC 82 was taken as a classic example in this regard. Further research, including during Euro 84, proved the accuracy of this assumption, and later on emphasis on physical prowess and fighting ability in midfield turned to be one of the theorems in contemporary football.

The FIFA studies signaled the beginning of change. Coaches formed training systems on more physical power, stamina and fitness. Some coaches pioneered theoretical aspects of defense and offense on the basis of heavy fighting in midfield.

In 1986, Carlos Billardo of Argentina and Franz Beckenbauer of West Germany came up with a new formation, namely 3-5-2, which was quickly accepted by most experts all around the world. Using the advantages of the system, they led their teams to the final matches of WIC 86 and WIC 90 respectively.

The idea of fighting in the midfield made football what it is now. It made football a more physical game than an artistic one compared to before. The fitness revolution in the 1990s was directly due to these changes. Many laboratories, especially in Germany, worked on developing new training systems. The mutation of fitness was explicitly noticeable during WIC 90.

### Strategy, formation and tactics:

It would be useful to first begin with a review of the basic concepts in football, before dwelling in detail in a discussion of football strategy and tactics.

As might be expected, most coaches have an idea about their team's capability. This capability is estimated according to physical-technical tests, the coach's experience with the team, or a combination of the two.

Forming an idea about the team's capability, a coach then defines the appropriate strategy.

To formulate a strategy, a coach must answer these questions:

- Is our team an offensive team or defensive?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of our team in defense?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of our team in offense?

The strategy can be set for a particular period, or be set relative to the weaknesses and strengths of a particular opponent. Or it might be of a more enduring nature, defining the team's general approach to the game. But overall, strategy is defined by a coach's estimation of his team's capabilities, and refers to the broad range of issues decided to maximize those capabilities to produce desired results.

Formation refers to the arrangement of players and their numbers in different layers and lines of a team.

Formation is decided according to the strategy and capability of team. What we discuss in this article is the 3-5-2 formation, which means 3 defenders, 5 midfielders and 2 strikers.

Tactics in general meaning is the way you achieve and use the ball in different zones of the field. Tactics define the way players cooperate in the various parts of the field.

## Theoretical and notional basis:

As mentioned above, the 3-5-2 formation was established after Euro 84. The motivation was to add fighting forces in midfield. Before discussing the steps that led to the adoption of the 3-5-2 formation, it would be useful to review the formations used at the time.

After WC 74, the 4-3-3 formation gradually transformed into 4-4-2. One of the reasons for this transformation was to allow for the use of 2 players as central strikers. Another reason was to create an easier situation for the leading players on a team, players like Platini or Maradona, who had a high command of passing. They could now save their energy for attacking purposes, since one of the central midfielders in a 4-4-2 formation would be acting mostly in a defensive capacity.

It was during the dominance of the 4-4-2 formation that the studies we noted earlier were conducted and the midfield-fighting rule was adopted. Accepting the rule, football theorists studied the dominant formation (i.e. 4-4-2) to modify it in a way that would take advantage of the lessons taught by it. What these theorists and coaches did was to change the defending system by moving one of the defenders to midfield.

The change to 3-5-2 took into consideration the “balance principal” in football, which states: “the number of defenders must be the same as attackers plus one”. This principal means that defenders should always have the dominance as far as number of players is concerned. With the 4-4-2 formation adopted by most teams, these theorists concluded that with only 2 strikers to guard, it was possible to decrease the number of defenders. This change brought the new formation in football that was 3-5-2.

## Players’ features:

Players are the most important factor in a team’s performance. Because of players’ different features, formations, tactics and strategies may change.

The cliché in football is that player selections follow one of two patterns:

1. Having an ideal formation and strategy in mind, a manager finds his appropriate players, or
2. Having an idea of who are his best players, a manager works to develop the appropriate formation and strategy for them.

In practice, most coaches and manager use a combination of two methods depending of their situation. National managers usually use the second method while they have to compensate for their team’s weak points by calling some players by relying on the first method. Club managers, on the other hand, have more chance to manifest what they have in their mind. They usually use first choice while they employ high-ranking players from time to time when enough money is available.

Lets turn our attention to some general features of players in a 3-5-2 formation.

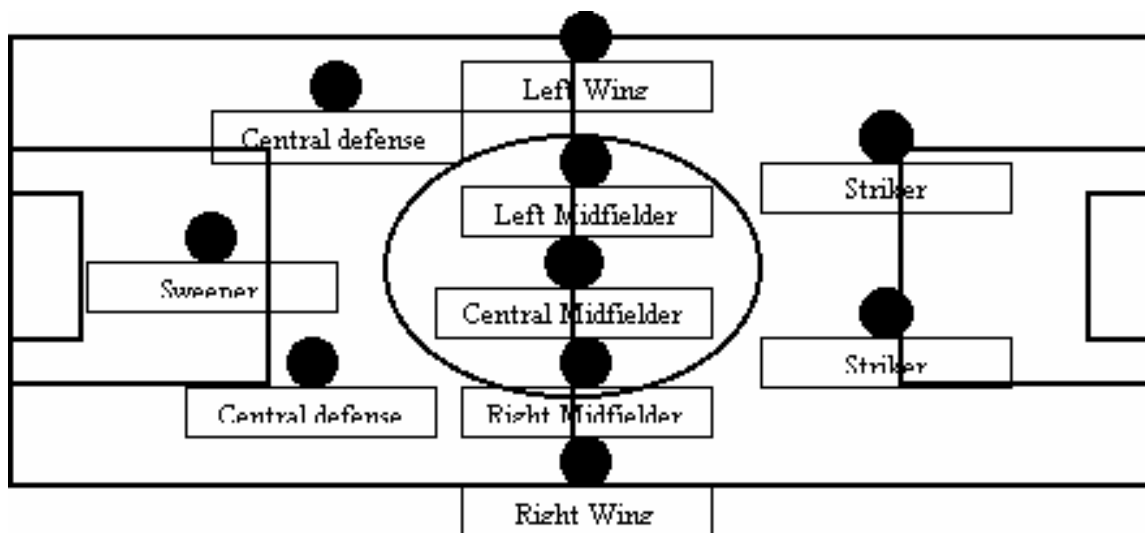


Figure 1

We go through this in a line by line analysis. In figure 1, you can see 3 different lines:

### Defenders:

In defense, players are of two kinds:

1. Sweeper: who must cover (or sweep) any mistakes of central defenders

2. Central Defenders (Stoppers): who must control the rival strikers due to man marking or zonal system

A sweeper must be experienced, self-confident, with a strong sense of the game and the ability to read and predict events unfolding in a match. As far as physical aspect, they must be good at pace and not too short or tall (usually between 170 and 180 cm). As far as skills, he must be master of ball distribution, ball control, covering and tackling.

Central Defenders must be able to predict the next movement of a striker. Physically they must be strong with good pace. As far as skills, they must be able to pass long and short balls precisely, master ball blocking, tackling and headers.

### Midfielders:

Midfielders are of two kinds:

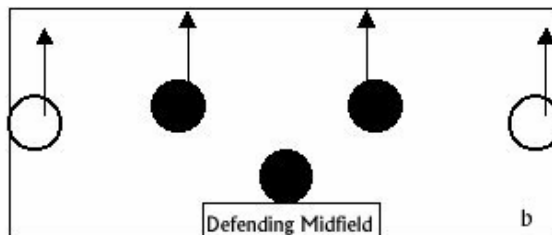
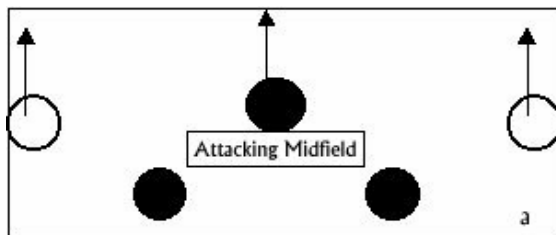
1. Wingers: who must move over the lateral lines of the fields

2. Centrals: including left, right and central midfielders who must design the attacking and defending methods

Wingers must be fast with high level of capability in pace, stamina and acceleration. They are usually short (between 165 and 172). As far as technique, they must be able to cross the ball in the best way either for the first post or second. They are usually good at ball control.

**Central Midfielders:** they are the hearts of a team. Their role differs depending on the tactics and formation used. The following illustrate the two most common variances:

Figure 2



In figure 2(a), the 3 bold central midfielders are arranged in a way that two of them cover

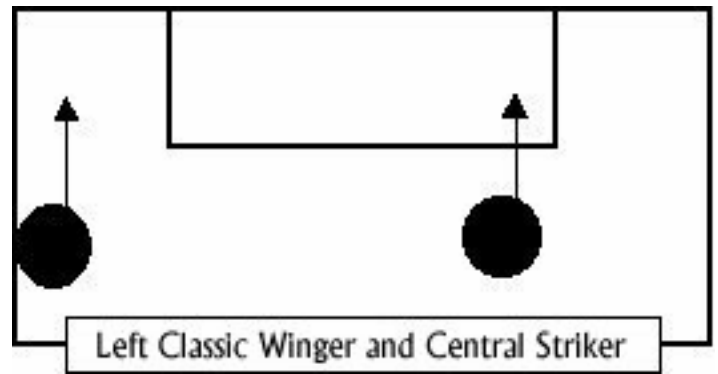
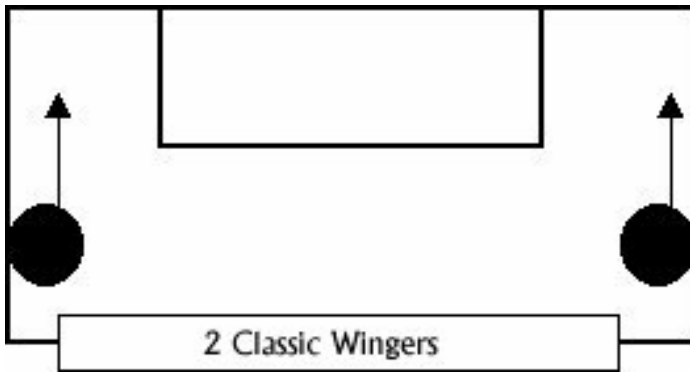
attacking midfielders during defensive play. This system uses by Perspolis in Iran.

In figure 2(b), the most common scheme used in Iran has been illustrated. Most of Iranian teams use this method. In this way, one defensive midfielder covers two others during defense.

### Strikers:

They must be self-confident (sometimes even selfish) with excellent judgements of ball landing points and clear risk-takers. As far as the physical aspect is concerned, they must be fast but other aspects can not be stated clearly.

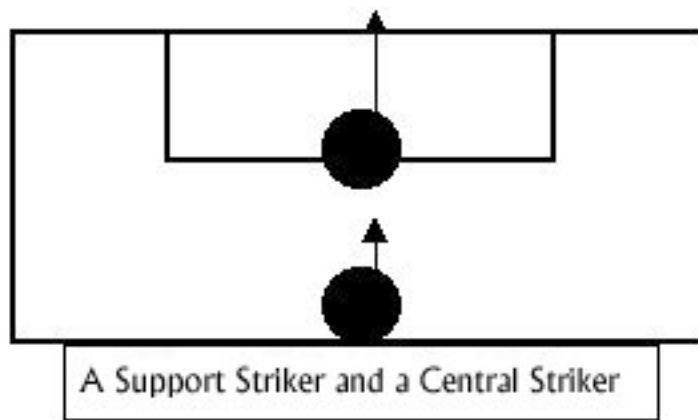
Two strikers can be formed in 5 different ways as it has been illustrated in figure 3:



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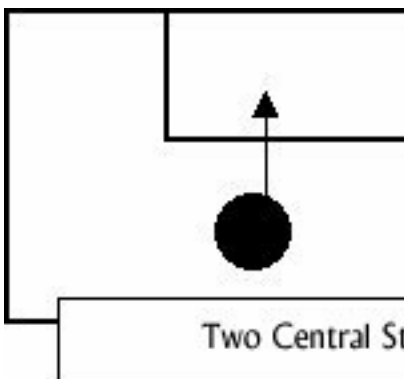
**Notional - functional**

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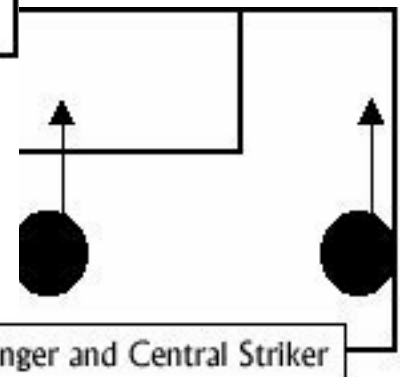
out in this part are the should be considered in every general rule as natural courses.

**weak points**  
explanations on the 3-5-



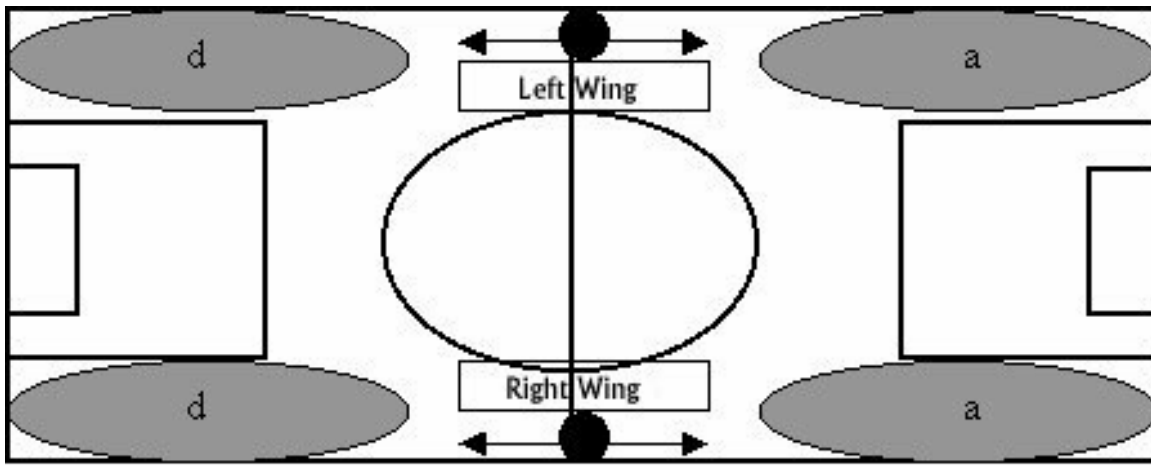
**Figure 3**

All possible variance for two strikers have been illustrated



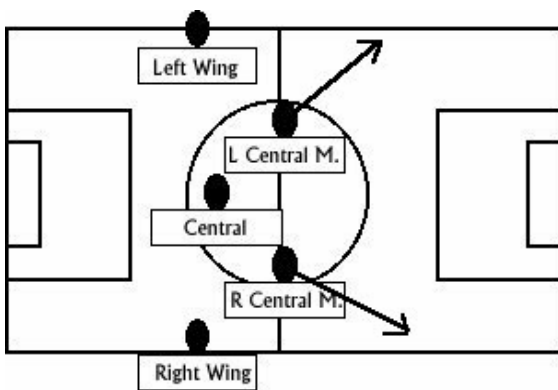
its weak points will be described.

Like every other phenomenon, the 3-5-2 has some weak points. In figure 4, four areas have been illustrated in gray, which are claimed as weak points in the formation. Since wingers must cover these areas, the pressure over those wingers can be predicted.

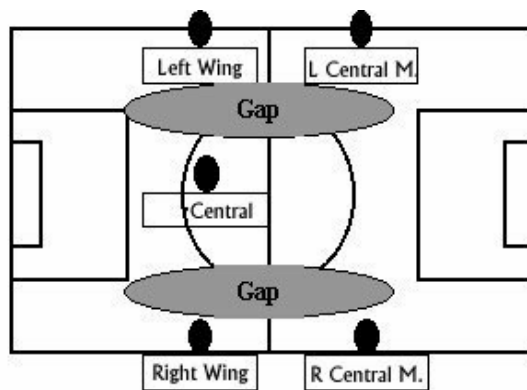


Moving from **D** to **A** and vice versa is too hard to be

repeated during 90 minutes by wingers. In order to solve the problem, some teams use wingers in **D** zones to prevent opponent utilization of those gaps between midfield and defense. The solution makes 5-3-2 out of 3-5-2 that brings lack of attacking power to the team. On the other hand, moving wingers to **A** areas and into attacking position cause lack of enough defending powers. Another way, which has been done by some coaches to solve the problem, is using central midfielders for attacking purposes. This position has been shown in figure 5, part **A**. This solution provides a gap in the midfield, which is more critical than any other area. The gaps have been shown in figure 5, part **B**.



Part a  
Central midfielders move to assist wingers



Part b  
The gaps have been shown after moving

**3-5-2 as  
cornerstone of  
modern**

**formations:**

The world has been created according to some general rules. One of them is “every school is affected by its previous one”. By the same token, new formations that are called modern 4-4-2 and 3-4-3 have been affected by the 3-5-2. Furthermore, many branches of 3-5-2 have been developed which are new formations now. These modern systems (such as 1-2-1-4-1-2 or 2-1-2-2-1-2) are very common.

In fact, most of theorists in football do agree that we have experienced with all the conceivable formations within the existing theoretical structures. What we need now, is a revolution.