



Back Three vs. Back Four

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How many defenders do you play with? Is it enough? Too many? Or just right?

This article will deal with the different responsibilities of having either three or four “game-savers” along with some of the advantages and disadvantages of each. It is your job to effectively assess your personnel and make the right decision!

Both systems require a high level of tactical versatility and flexibility; let’s take a look...

Back Three ***Defensively***

- Efficient communication and cooperation between your midfield and three defenders is *very* crucial as responsibilities are situation-specific.

Back Three ***Attacking***

- Can drastically improve your game as passing triangles appear all over the field.

Back Three ***Advantages***

- Can be very effective in dealing with the central area when using one or two defensive holding players (“screens”) in front.
- You can employ two marking defenders (either man-marking or zonal) and opt for a sweeper behind them.
- Less players, therefore easier for players to identify their responsibilities.
- Easier to control the offside space and less room for error when playing the offside trap.
- Rarely will a defender roam forward when attacking so if you are counter-attacked, there should always be three players at the back.



Back Three

Disadvantages

- Three vs. three at the back if they play with three strikers – or you may have to change your system to deal with them.
 - Three defenders simply cannot cover the entire width of the field so there is lots of space in the channels that will be exploited against a good team. This often results in the outside midfielders dropping in creating a back five, not ideal.
 - If you use two marking defenders and a sweeper, the sweeper may drift and play too deep, resulting in their attackers pushing up into the gaps.
 - Extremely vulnerable to diagonal balls on the weakside if the outside midfielder is caught napping!
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Back Four

Defensively

- This system, with a flat midfield in front creates the most compact and concentrated formation when defending thanks to its symmetrical arrangement.

Back Four

Attacking

- With four midfielders also, its symmetry allows quick transitions into attack.

Back Four

Advantages

- Four players can zonally cover the width of the field relatively easy.
- Allows your full-backs to join in the attack frequently.
- Easier to pass on runners.
- Running paths are shorter.
- Easier to coach than having a back three.



Back Four

Disadvantages

- You are a player down somewhere else on the field.
- Do you need four defenders to deal with two attackers?
- When your full-backs join the attack, you can be susceptible to counter-attacks in the channels if your center midfielders are not disciplined.

What determines the number of defenders you should use?

- Player attributes – do you have more attacking, or defensively minded players? How do you want to structure them? Are your defenders quick, can they cover ground well? Do they communicate well?
- How many you feel comfortable with in midfield? Five midfielders can protect and assist a “back 3” very effectively. Three midfielders would not however!
- The number of truly effective defenders that you have – perhaps only three?! Do you have time to train a fourth?
- The number of quality forwards that you have – if you have three and you want them on the field at the same time, and you only feel stable with 4 midfielders, then you must play three at the back!
- Your opposition – do they have good wingers that would cause you problems with three at the back? What system do they play? Have you scouted the opposition?
- The score – with a one-goal lead and five minutes remaining, how many defenders do you want?
- The environment – wet surface? Away from home? Hot weather? Long grass?
- Linesmen – are there any? Are they good? Do you want to chance offside errors or have recovery options?

Choosing a system of play, or formation, is like a “poor man’s blanket” – when you want it to cover your feet it exposes your head, when you want it around your shoulders, your feet are exposed!

You will never have the perfect system as you can only have 10 outfield players, but as a final thought, perhaps you should consider where you *wouldn't* want to be numbers down!!! ***Best of luck!***