The 4:4:2 is perhaps the most commonly used system of play in the world. The majority of teams in the English Premier League play in some variant of the 4:4:2, and most national teams, including the United States Men’s National Team and most notably the Brazilian Men’s National Team, play out of a 4:4:2. While it is easy to develop a lengthy list of professional and national teams that play out of a 4:4:2, this “broad” categorization is misleading as to the many unique variations possible within this system.

This article is the first in a three part series discussing various aspects of the 4:4:2 system of play. This article will focus on the general shape of the midfield, the roles of the different midfield positions and the characteristics of those players who play them best, and some guidelines for selecting between the various midfield shapes.

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Basic Functional Organization:
While there are many variations of midfield organization in a 4:4:2, at the broadest level, the midfield in a 4:4:2 is organized in one of two basic ways: (i) in a diamond, or (ii) in a line.

Line of Four

Diamond

Most other variations of midfield organization in a 4:4:2 are derivations of these two basic shapes; for example, the 3-1 shape and the 2-2 shape are both derivations of the diamond shape, while the 1-3 shape can be a variant of either, depending on the width of the 3 attacking midfield players.

3-1 Organization

2-2 Organization

1-3 Organization
At a basic level, different midfield shapes can emphasize a slightly more offensive or defensive team strategy. More importantly, different midfield shapes will cater to the individual strengths of specific players, allowing certain players more freedom and liberty, while requiring more specifically defined roles for others. Finally, different midfield shapes will significantly change the roles of players in the other functional lines (defense and forward) in the 4:4:2. For these reasons, understanding the differences between various midfield shapes is critical to allow the selection of a shape that maximizes the individual talents of your players. The specific talents and characteristics of individual players should dictate the choice of both the system itself and the shape and organization within it.

Basic Principles of Midfield Play:
Before discussing the 4:4:2 in any detail, a very basic and precautionary statement should be made: regardless of the system of play selected, the principles of the game, both offensively and defensively, remain the same. No system will allow a team to have attacking success without utilizing the principles of width and mobility, and no system will allow a team to have defending success without utilizing the principles of compactness and immediate pressure. The selection of a system, or of various shapes within a system, will only vary the ways in which these principles are expressed and the specific manner in which they are accomplished.

Defensive Principles:
The defensive principles of play are the same in any system: (i) put immediate pressure on the ball, (ii) provide defensive cover and balance, and (iii) maintain a compact defensive shape. In midfield, these principles can be summed up in the following specific objectives: deny space to the opposition, prevent easy penetration, and prevent switches of play. At the highest professional levels, it is not unusual for the distance between the right side midfielder and the left side midfielder to be 20-30 yards, and for the distance between the deepest and the most forward midfielder to be 10-15 yards. Compactness of this degree requires a tremendous work rate by the midfield players, as well as exceptional tactical awareness. Failure to accomplish these objectives will allow the opposition to create numbers up situations and to launch dangerous counter-attacks from anywhere in midfield.

Offensive Principles:
The offensive principles of play are also the same in any system: (i) provide width, length, and depth, (ii) provide immediate support for the ball, and (iii) provide creativity and mobility. However, the shape of the midfield in a 4:4:2 will significantly impact the way in which a team playing in a 4:4:2 creates attacking width. With a diamond shape in midfield, attacking width will be provided as often or more often by outside backs (or forwards) than outside midfield players; in contrast, with a line of four in midfield, width will be provided far more often by outside midfielders than players in any other position. The shape of the midfield can also slightly change how length and penetration are created in a 4:4:2. With a more compact diamond shape in midfield, the midfield will be able to provide excellent support to the forwards while also providing late runners from these central positions to penetrate beyond the forwards. With a line of four in midfield, the natural width of the outside midfielders will allow them to more easily get into advanced positions and attack outside backs and the spaces behind them.

Functional Roles in Midfield:
In any midfield shape, the clearest differentiation of roles and responsibilities is between “central” midfielders and “wide"
midfielders. The selection of the midfield shape will change the number of players that are categorized as “central” or “wide”, and therefore the manner in which each player contributes to accomplishing the above principles of play.

Central Midfielders:
Defensively, the central midfielders function as a screen for the centerbacks and a strong defensive block in the middle of the field. Depending on the individual qualities of the players, either one, two, or three players can be used to provide this screen and defensive block. In a diamond shape, one player is assigned this task; Gennaro Gattuso, Claude Makelele, and Andrea Pirlo are the best examples of the type of player that can fulfill this role individually. If a team does not have one player that combines that speed, tactical awareness and toughness necessary to fulfill this role, more players can be used to “kill” this space. In a line of four shape, while it may appear graphically that the two central midfielders are playing side-by-side, this is misleading. In reality, no two central midfielders should ever be on the same “horizontal line” on the field. Usually, even in a line of four, one of the central midfielders acts as the more defensive screen while the other defends higher on the field. While it is not completely unheard of for these players to interchange occasionally throughout a game, neither is it commonplace. Currently, the Arsenal combination of Cesc Fabregas and Matthieu Flamini best illustrate this relationship of two central midfielders that occasionally interchange roles.

Offensively, central midfielders act as a link between the backs and the forwards, and the right side of the field and the left side of the field. These players should rarely ever be on a line with each other (either vertically or horizontally) in order to maximize the creation of passing lanes and options. One central midfielder should almost always be supporting the ball from behind, while the other should almost always be supporting the ball from a forward position. This balance provides more passing options for the player with the ball, and is also crucial in preventing counter-attacks. The speed at which these players change and adjust their angles of support is the key determinant in the team’s ability to maintain possession in midfield.

Characteristics of the Central Midfielders:
When constructing a team to play in a 4:4:2 it is most useful to look at the central midfielders as two complimentary players, each with different strengths and characteristics. It is rare that pairing two central midfielders with the same abilities and talents will be effective. (The awkward combination of Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard for England is the best illustration of this concept.) The following characteristics should all be found in at least one of the central midfield players:

- **Strength Winning Airballs:** At least one of the central midfielders must be strong in the air, as this player will be primarily responsible for winning punts, goal-kicks, serves and other airballs in the middle of the field. This characteristic is typically more valuable in a more defensive center midfield player.

- **Defending Range and Speed:** At least one of the central midfielders must be very quick and feisty on defense and will serve as the primary ball-winner on the team. Gennaro Gattuso is a prime example of a central midfield player that functions primarily as a ball-winner and simple possession player. This characteristic is typically more valuable in the more defensive center midfield player.

- **Attacking Vision and Creativity:** One of the central midfielders must be the primary playmaker on the team – the player that establishes the rhythm of the team and has the ability to either break opponents down individually or break defenses down with telling penetrating passes. This player can play from either an attacking or defending role, depending on the main strength of the player and how the team typically builds its attacks. For example, if vision for longer penetrating passes is the main strength of this player, he/she can play as a more defensive midfield player; if attacking off of the dribble and in small quick combinations is the main strength of this player, he/she should play as a more attacking midfield player.

- **Threat to Score:** One of the central midfielders should be a threat to score from distance. This characteristic is clearly more valuable in an attacking center midfield role. This “threat” can be expressed either through shooting or ability or a great sense of timing in arriving in the penalty box.
Principles in Guiding the Functional Organization Decision:
The above descriptions of the strengths of the various midfield shapes and the characteristics of the players necessary to play in various roles within them should help guide the decision regarding midfield organization in a 4:4:2. However, it is important to remember that it is the players' individual talents that should determine the tactical decisions of a coach – not blind adherence to a systemic philosophy. There are several guidelines, each based upon the individual characteristics of the players available, that will help resolve the decision of whether to play in a diamond (or variation of a diamond) or a line of 4:

- When the team has several very technical players with average or below-average speed, a diamond shape in midfield should be considered. This tighter shape will help hide the defensive weaknesses of these players, (as they will be in a smaller space and less vulnerable defensively individually and in transition), while also capitalizing on their technical ability to combine out of small spaces.

- When the team has a dominant winger, a line of four or an unbalanced midfield shape should be considered. This shape allows the winger to play in spaces where he/she will be able to express his/her special talents.

- When a team plays directly, or has significantly greater athleticism than their opponents, a line of four should be considered. This shape allows the wide players to play in larger spaces and to frequently threaten to get behind the opponent.

- When a team plays with attacking outside backs, a diamond shape or an unbalanced midfield should be considered. This shape will create space for the outside backs to get forward and contribute to the attack. Conversely, if the outside backs do not go forward, then a line of four should be considered; the line of four will provide natural width to compensate for the lack of attacking width created by the backs.

- When the team has a dominant attacking midfield personality great in combination with others, or a very defensively oriented midfield ball-winner, a diamond shape should be considered, as the roles and responsibilities of the central midfielders will be more clearly defined between these players in a diamond than in a line.

- When significantly outclassed by the opposition, a diamond shape should be considered, as the compact nature of this shape will make it very difficult to break down centrally. Conversely, when needing to push forward to score, a line of four should be considered, as the outside midfielders can push high and wide as the third or fourth forward and create natural attacking width on both sides.

Each of these examples are based either on (i) the talents of individual players, or (ii) a situation in the game. These factors should be the dominating criteria in selecting any team shape.