

# 3-5-2: Examining the System

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With tactical flexibility, numbers in the central corridor can be reinforced

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Following is the first of a two-part analysis of the 3-5-2 system of play made by Chris Petrucelli at the NSCAA Premier Course in January in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. This article covers an overview of the system, while the second part, "3-5-2: Building Blocks" elsewhere on NSCAA.com details his practical field session that followed the classroom discussion.

## **Structure and shape**

Re-enforcement of numbers in the midfield;

Only one player on each flank;

Three defenders in back.

Note the re-enforcement of numbers in central corridor and concomitant open space on flanks and in the back. Tactical flexibility is necessary to supply numbers in these open areas in attack and defense.

## **Tactical arrangements and player functions**

### **A. Defending block**

#### **1. Can utilize man-to-man markers and sweeper playing behind markers.**

Markers must be athletic. Speed and anaerobic capacity are critical in order to track opposing forwards;

Markers must be aggressive, yet under control in 1 v. 1 duels as attackers have a lot of space to play in;

Markers usually paired vs. attackers (i.e., a fast marker vs. a fast forward, or a disciplined tactical marker vs. a very technical forward or a good header vs. a tall forward);

Preferable for the sweeper to be athletic, but critical that he/she is a superb tactician. Must be able to advise and support markers and be capable of anticipating future points of attack as man-to-man marking allows defensive shape to be pulled apart;

Sweeper needs to be a good header of the ball as quick, agile markers are often not tall. Must also be able to mark free players as well as cover space. Should be able to start the counterattack. Coaches may want to use the sweeper in other places on the field in order to develop that individual as a well-rounded player.

#### **2. Back three zonally (space) marking.**

Athleticism preferable, as there is a lot of ground to cover laterally by three players;

Zonal marking, however, can cover up for some deficiencies in athleticism;

As in all zonal marking, communication and tactical awareness are critical;

The central player should be a dominant personality with strong leadership qualities.

Need dominant players in the air among three players; this may be a tough system for women to play;

The central player should be a dominant header of the ball. He or she is almost always in a control area and called upon to head a flighted ball into the central corridor.

#### **3. Playing with only three in the back can limit attacking options.**

The three in back are asked to achieve penetration by passing only. Bringing the ball out of the back is limited. You do not want to lose it on the flank, as it places the group in a poor shape to win the ball back.

Generally, try to penetrate through the middle with the five midfielders. If elect to work ball out of the

back, use the weakside midfielder to create a fourth back. Holland brings a central midfield player back;

If a back three player penetrates through dribbling or moving forward into open spaces, a midfield player must assume the penetrating player's defensive responsibility;

### **B. Forward block**

1. Two forwards, side-by-side, each responsible for his or her side of field;

2. One forward always stays high and serves as a target player (to occupy two defenders and ready to get on the end of counterattacks). The other forward forges underneath to narrow opponent defending shape and can serve as a wall for midfield players coming from behind. With this positioning, the player also can create a numerical advantage in the midfield third;

3. Tactically, the two forwards always stay 12-15 yards apart. They might stay central to concentrate the opponents' central covering system. They may go to a flank to pull apart the central covering system and make room for central attacks from the midfield. Usually needs two very technical players who constantly move and switch their positions. These players need to utilize quick flicks and 1-2 movements and usually exhibit a superb mutual understanding;

4. Two forwards can be selected based on special talents. Players with special gifts (i.e., exceptional speed, heading ability) and technique may be paired in order to emphasize and take advantage of these gifts.

### **C. Midfield block**

1. Flank midfield players are responsible to defend flank, with the usual defensive task to "take first one down" (the first and/or most advanced attacker on that flank is tracked by the flank midfield player). Usually asked to mark zonally when opponent flank player runs towards middle, he or she is passed on to players in the central zones;

May be detailed to only mark opposing flank player and not go in advance of that player when the ball is won.

2. Flank midfield player is responsible to attack from his or her flank.

Player may be asked to achieve penetration up and down entire flank by passing, dribbling, and combining with forwards;

Player may be detailed to "anchor" his or her flank and only penetrate through passing vertically to forwards and central midfield players using space on flank in final third.

3. Often a team "balances" the flanks by asking one side to anchor and the other to penetrate. Physical, technical and tactical qualities of players are taken into consideration if this tactic is invoked.

4. Flank players should be very athletic. Speed and anaerobic capacity are a necessary physical criteria as there is only one player to attack and defend the flank.

5. The three central midfield players are the essence of the 3-5-2 system. The rhythm, style and soccer mentality of the team are determined by the personality and playing characteristics of the three.

6. There are three standard tactical arrangements of the three central midfield players. The athlete's playing characteristics, the coach's conception of the game and his or her perception of the team are major factors in determining which arrangement is selected.

One defensive midfielder (a holding midfielder) and two attacking midfielders. Here the two attacking midfielders must be good playmakers, be able to shoot from a distance and beat players both individually and collectively (1 v. 1 and 2 v. 1)

Two defensive midfielders and one attacking midfielder. The lone midfielder is sometimes hard to defend against as he or she can play in the seams of the other team's alignments.

One attacking midfielder, one organizing midfielder and one defensive midfield player.

The defensive midfielder is used to mark an opponent's attacking midfield player, screen the space in front of the markers (prevent the first ball out), or push up and complete a block of five zonal markers in the midfield. The strictest interpretation of the defensive midfield players' attacking function is that they only penetrate "with the ball."

If an organizing central midfield player is used, the player is usually a "special player" whose technical ability and vision allow him/her to dictate a team's rhythm. The individual can come back and get the ball from defenders and open the game with long passing, play short for possession or run with the ball at the opponents' defense.

The attacking midfielder is usually a special player as well. Whether with powerful running to the back of the opponent's defense, elusive dribbling and shooting from distance or combining with forwards, a team's style and methods are often dictated by this player.

It is up to the "genius of the coach" to organize and implement this engine room of the team. Often the coach will be specific regarding the central midfield player's function in the collective defending action while giving free rein to the group to express their individuality and special abilities.

### **D. Strengths of the 3-5-2**

1. Inherent strength is its flexibility. Because of large numbers of players in the central corridor of the team, players can quickly move to support the attack, reinforce the defense and quickly attack from one flank or the other. Implicit in this statement is the need to have versatile players. They must be tactically flexible, not only possessing the ability to flow from attack to defense and vice versa, but also flexible in positional

interchange. All players must be conversant with principles of play and exhibit a creative, mobile mentality. Most players in this system will play box-to-box and touchline-to-touchline.

2. Specific strengths which a team may exploit: Possibilities that may exist because of the structure and shape of a system are exploitable only to the extent that players can execute and press these variables to their advantage.

Outnumber opponents in the midfield area. Against other predominant systems, 4-4-2 and 3-4-3, the 3-5-2 has an extra player in the middle of the midfield. This system can be effective in the women's game versus a team such as North Carolina, which utilizes a 3-4-3 and tries to make the game in the opponents' defensive third. If they want to "press" an opponent in this manner, they can elect to bring a player forward from the midfield to create the third person to defend other team's backs;

Tactical advantage on flank. Because of an extra central midfield player, the opponent may pull a player in from their flank, thus exposing their remaining flank player to a 1 v. 1 duel, which may be to the advantage of the 3-5-2 team;

"Numbers up" in the central midfield area allows constant vertical running through and beyond the opponents' defending block. Central midfield players can alternate or, if one player has great anaerobic capacity, he or she may make constant runs forward. This will have immediate impact against teams which play flat in the back;

It is easy for the central midfield group to combine with the forwards.

The proximity of three central midfield players allows constant and close support for forwards as they may show for the ball;

The one or two attacking midfield players can have total freedom to attack as the central corridor still has depth provided by the defensive central midfield player.

#### **E. Weakness of 3-5-2**

1. While flexibility may be a strength of the 3-5-2 system, the lack of flexibility may be a weakness. Players who lack the ability or mentality to easily flow from attack to defense or who are uncomfortable with positional interchanges will make the imposition of this system a liability.

2. Specific weaknesses which an opponent may exploit.

Only three defenders compose the defending block;

The three defenders leave exposed large spaces on the flanks behind the flank midfielders;

Space can be created anywhere, if the defending block is man-marking. Active forwards will pull the defending shape apart at will;

Only one defender on each flank. Lack of athleticism or tactical naivete may be exploited in individual duels or by combining and outnumbering on a flank. The team that is slow to push across or prepare for these situations may tactically have their flanks exposed to penetration by the opponent.

#### **F. Possible tactical adjustments within the 3-5-2**

All systems can be adjusted by the coach to meet the physical and/or technical tactical qualities of the players. Also, the tactical needs for a particular game may dictate a system permutation. The following are two examples of how the 3-5-2 can allow for this:

Team O is playing with a 4-4-2 and the right flank player in an area on the flank, but near the defending block. The left side forward for Team O is a special player with exceptional speed and his or her preferred style of play is sharp diagonal runs to the left flank. The coach of the 3-5-2 team has decided that his or her man-to-man marker needs help with the special forward, so he or she details the right flank player to play deep on the right flank and "kill" the space that the forward wants to use. The right flank player holds a deep position and achieves penetration through vertical passing.

Team O plays with two attacking midfield players. The attacking central midfield player on the left side is an elusive dribbler and very effective at pushing out to the left and getting around the flank to serve. The coach of the 3-5-2 team asks the left flank player to accept a role of half a left back and half a left midfield player. The left flank in the attacking third is exploited by a 3-5-2 team's forwards and in particular the left central midfield player. The left flank player becomes a "distributor" from the flank as opposed to a penetrator.

Chris Petrucelli is the women's coach at the University of Texas and a senior member of the NSCAA National Academy staff. This article can be found on the National Soccer Coaches Association of America website and we know you will find it extremely informative. For more coaching tips and articles please make sure you visit <http://www.nscAA.com/>