



Systems Hockey:
**Variations, Styles & the Australian
Perspective**
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DISCUSSION TOPIC

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and the Australian Perspective**

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. SYSTEMS IN GENERAL
3. EXAMPLES OF SYSTEMS AND VARIATIONS
4. TYPES OF SYSTEMS
5. THE AUSTRALIAN MENTALITY
6. CHANGING THE CURRENT PERSPECTIVE: THE COACH'S CONTRIBUTION
7. CONCLUSION

Systems Hockey: Variations, Styles and the Australian Perspective By Tracey Belbin

Introduction

Systems hockey has always had a certain amount of stigma within the Australian hockey fraternity. When a team is asked to play a "system" different to the traditional pyramid 1-2-3-5 style of Australia, players often approach the task in an entirely different manner to that which they would normally be accustomed to and subsequently performing skills that are not their forte, whilst others see it as a new challenge, as a chance to be more involved than they normally would when playing in an orthodox formation.

It is obvious however, regardless of how individuals perceive the concept, that the stigma remains; particularly within Australia. That attitude fortunately, is changing, which can only benefit Australia's position on the international scene.

Even within coaching circles confusion exists about systems, most probably through a lack of education on the subject. How many systems are there? Are they called systems or formations? When you number a system is it from the back forward or vice-versa? Can my team play a different system each week? Can I change my system to another during a game?

To an elite coach the answers to these questions may be simply answered, however it is vitally important to remember, that the good coaches and players are only products from grass root beginnings and how the "lower rungs of the ladder" develop will consequently have a large impact on how hockey develops at an elite level in the future.

Keeping this in mind that the development of Australian hockey at all levels is important, this paper is aimed at creating discussion on the effects of systems hockey, the current psychological approach of Australian players to it, and to briefly overview some very effective systems existing today. For the purpose of this paper, the words "system" and formation" will be interchangeable and when numbers are provided for a specific formation, they will indicate the number of players from the back forward. The term "orthodox" system will refer to the traditional pyramid style of 1-2-3-5.

Systems in General

When asked to play a system many players in Australia often believe they have been asked to do something that is entirely different to what they are used to. Thus it is of the utmost importance to emphasise that systems are basically just numbers designating how many people on a particular team play their basic roles as forwards, midfielders, or backs. As George Beirn (1977) writes "It is the players on a team that make a system work effectively, and it has always been the players, not the system that have made a particular team successful".

Systems are to a great extent designed to outline specifically the duties of particular players, however, regardless of what system of play has been designed for them, if players disregard the basic principles of play in attack and defence, they will not succeed. (Beirn 1977). Due to the unpredictability of individuals within a team sport, spectators will often not be able to determine the system a team is playing, as well, there is an immense number of variations that can be adapted to systems to keep both spectators and opponents guessing as to the formation being played.

One of the major principles of systems hockey, is that coaches should remember to fit the system to the players. A coach should determine the strengths and weaknesses of his/her players and then devise a system that is best suited to them. In the past many legendary soccer teams have done just that Brazil for example were successful in the 1958 World Cup with a 4-2-4 system because they had two outstanding midfielders Zito and Didi, as well as Pele. England in 1966 in the World Cup in Wembley won over West Germany with a 4-4-2 formation, and played that way because coach Alf Ramsey did not believe there were any legitimate wingers available. Subsequently, throughout history, it has been great players who have enabled coaches to utilise particular systems, but there has never been a system of play that has made a player great.

Examples of Systems and Variations

Many of the systems currently used by different countries have definite soccer origins. As would be expected different countries have different names for their own formations, as well as variations to these formations. In the following examples, I have chosen to stay with the names given the systems by the soccer world. What is important though is not the title, but the actual numerical set up, the system exhibits.

These examples are given because either they, or variations of them are currently being used by international sides, or because they provide some interesting insight into the numerous systematic combinations available to coaches in the contemporary world of hockey.

(For a more detailed view, it may be useful to look at the paper recently written by Peter Freitag on Systems Hockey).

a. The Pyramid or 2-3-5 (see [Diagram 1](#))

As mentioned earlier, this particular formation has been traditional for many national sides, and to a large extent is still common within Australia. For many years this style was successful for countries such as Pakistan and India and gave advent to fast and open games. Pakistan's success with this style was due to numerical superiority in attack. Often along with their 5 forwards, there was usually the support of at least 2 midfielders. As Gursharan Singh Lall from Kenya, recently wrote in his 1990 FIH discussion paper, these countries also relied on sheer individual brilliance for their attacking momentum. A Hassan Saddar for example could change the whole course of the game, and was greatly relied upon for their success.

Overlapping defenders is an added bonus to this style. India, for example encourages their fullbacks such as Pargat Singh to overlap to create very effective attacking opportunities. Pakistan however, seem more conservative in this area, perhaps because of the inability of their deep defender to recover in time were he dispossessed.

In an FIH discussion paper by Avtar Singh Sohal (1990), weaknesses of this formation are outlined in the way the two fullbacks operate when the centre half is on the attack. He suggests that the counter attack can be dangerous if the inside forwards are out of position and cannot come to rescue the defence. A parallel defence is also considered dangerous as an opponent can use through passes to his/her advantage.

a. The W-M or 3-4-3 (see [Diagram 2](#))

In this formation the two outside fullbacks responsibility was to mark the opposing wingers, whilst the wing halves marked the opposing inside-forwards. The centre-half was actually pulled

back to create a third fullback position. The attacking centre-half mentality was changed and this new position was responsible for man to man coverage of the opposing centre forward. This system obviously was based on reinforcing the defence but no means was it meant to negate the attack. Controlling the midfield was essential to building the attack, and it was believed that for the system to be successful players needed strictly defined responsibilities.

a. The Swiss Bolt or Verrou or 3-3-4 (see [Diagram 3 & 4](#))

This system was the forerunner of the European sweeper and provided the team with a number of defenders equal to the opponent's attackers. It also provided the defenders an extra back or bolt to provide the necessary cover in defence and to protect the open space in front of the goal. It was believed that if a team was weaker than its opponent it had to concentrate on defence, and even a strong team could benefit from an extra back.

Moving forward, the centre-half was still attacking, but in defence, all ten players retreated. The function of the four forwards was to harass their opponents, to slow down their attack whilst the other 6 players rushed back to assume their positions. The attacking centre half became the centre back and the centre back dropped back to an ultra deep position behind everyone else. Here, he/she could move laterally across the field covering the other three backs.

a. The 4-2-4 (see [Diagram 5](#))

This system was found to be far from defensive as the two outside fullbacks were encouraged to move upfield to produce a 2-4-4 alignment which gave as many as eight players involvement in offensive moves. This new role called for the fullbacks to be considerably more mobile and to possess some of the forward's skills, namely the ability to exchange short passes and to shoot. This style is somewhat typical of the Korean women's national side. This team often proves very effective by having more numbers higher with the deep defenders being very capable at coming through the lines. They seem to constantly attack in waves, and many defences find themselves continually overloaded.

Defensively, a variation to this formation is the 4-3-3. In this system only one winger exists and when the team is sustaining pressure, the other floating player continually drifts back through the lines to assist the defence.

a. Catenaccio or 1-3-3-3 (see [Diagram 6](#))

This particular system is typical of many European countries, and is considered quite a defensive approach. The actual defence may also vary depending on the formation the opposing team is playing. For example, when an opposition team is playing a 4-2-4 the catenaccio formation is 1-4-2-3. When an opposing side is playing a 4-3-3, the catenaccio formation is 1-3-3-3. The attacking philosophy of this system is to get the ball out of the defence as quickly as possible and to the strikers, and then counter quickly against the opponent. With the defence, the amount of time the opponent has the ball becomes far less important since it is difficult for the opposition to score. Subsequently, it is not uncommon for the opponent to become complacent because he/she has the ball so long in attack and his/her defenders tend to overcommit themselves. This leaves them very vulnerable to quick counterattacks. In past years teams such as England, Germany and Spain have used this system. Over the last decade, the level of success for women national sides using this system has been varied. It has only been with the advent of more industrious and skilled players up front in these sides that has made a difference in recent years.

The Dutch are another side that pertain to the 1-3-3-3 system, and are a very successful hockey nation. They seem however, to have more players in deep defence that are very capable of overlapping into attack.

Spain in particular have adapted significant variations. They tend to concentrate on defence, and try to get as many players back in defence as possible. Sometimes the whole team can be found in their own defensive 25. However, as mentioned above, their main form of attack is the counter attack, and this style proved successful enough to win them the gold medal in the 1992 Olympic Games.

Added to these 5, I have included a brief overview of specific types of systems as taken from a recent paper presented by Peter Freitag.

1. Link Systems

i. 2-5-33

- - defensive
- - used against a strong midfield, or strong inside forwards

ii. 1-2-4-4

- more attacking
- mid field control

ii. 4-2-4

- combination of (i) and (ii)
- 4 backs man to man
- links cover centre forward
- similar to traditional style except for one inside as a withdrawn centre half

(2) Sweeper Systems

i. 1-2-3-4

- playing extra fullback
- very defensive and hard to penetrate
- sweeper acts as cover defender

i. 1-3-3-3

- once again defensive
- six defenders are important
- marking is important

And finally.

a. The Whirl

Perhaps not a system, the Whirl can be better regarded as a concept and is probably the most exciting and adventurous of all it encourages a new breed of players who are fit enough and skilled enough to play any position on the field, and intelligent enough to know exactly when to switch roles. When the ability and mutual understanding of players is adequate, it is not necessary to work out complicated systems of play.

The journalist Willy Meisi captures the essence of the concept in the following.

"In my opinion the future belongs to the Whirl. It must rotate on individuality rooted in all round capacity... A full back seeing an opportunity in front must seize his chance without hesitation. A

wing half or winger will fall back if necessary, and being an all rounder, will not feel uncomfortable or out of place. The consciousness that he also is a capable forward will give the back's thrust weight and impetus. The knowledge that whoever has taken over from him will make a good job of it should the occasion arise, will enable him to carry on with his action without undue hurry or nervousness. He must and will be perfectly sure that he has left no exposed flank behind himself." (Beirn, 1977)

Imagine a team of constantly overlapping defenders, of interchanging forwards and defenders all equally as fit and capable to play any position that they might find themselves in. Is it an idealistic concept? Is it possible to develop a team with that much hockey intelligence, and mutual understanding? And how do you change the mental approach of players and coaches alike, to accommodate this way of thinking?

The Australian Mentality

Why do the majority of Australian hockey players find it so daunting when approached with systems hockey. Personally, I believe the problem lies within the very foundations of the game. Think back to when you, yourself first picked up a stick. In most instances players were given a position and taught to stay in that spot. In my experiences, I have even seen the 'railway tracks' drawn on grass fields, designating the exact lines that players should be moving in. Individuality and adaptation to new positions are certainly not encouraged. It is common that elite hockey players in their whole careers have only ever played one or two positions, and more common that they lack an exact understanding of anyone else's function except their own. Consider the approach of the Dutch womens team in comparison. One of their best players over the last 5 years, Lejeunne, plays a very effective centre forward role for her club side, and an even more effective sweeper role for her country. An adaptation of that magnitude is almost unheard of in Australian circles.

It is important to mention here that Australia is definitely not stagnating in this area. Many elite sides are attempting to incorporate an understanding of systems hockey into their regime. The Australian senior men's and women's sides, for example, have been experimenting with new formations and styles which is obviously useful when coming up against the unorthodox systems from other countries. There are so many options available, keeping in mind that the basis of the system is to suit the players.

If things are to be changed however, where does one start the transition? Is it too late to try and change attitudes and perspectives of players once they have reached an elite level or is it the stoic mentality of the pyramid system too firmly ingrained for a new system to be really effective at this level? If change is to be implemented, at what level does one start, and is educating the coaches a primary concern? Should children learning the basics of hockey be taught every skill, and have a knowledge of every position, so that they are accomplished in every facet of the game, and adapting to a new concept such as The Whirl becomes only a minor change? Most importantly however, from an Australian perspective, it is necessary to detach ourselves from the evolution of systems hockey and ask is a change really necessary. Australia is a very successful hockey nation, and over the years the pyramid formation has been highly effective on an international level. Australians love to watch and play the traditional game that is exciting and played at a fast and furious pace. Perhaps we don't adapt well to alternative systems because our whole society is not based on fastidious discipline or a regimented lifestyle. Instead of a complete makeover, it may be that Australian hockey need only refine its current approach, and style of game.

Changing the current Perspective the coach's contribution

One would imagine, from the way our culture exists that Australian hockey players would be more inclined to lose the traditional constraints of positional hockey and partake readily in games that were even more free flowing and exciting, as the theoretical Whirl exemplifies. In my experience however, that is not so. Once the name 'system' is coupled with any formation other than that of the pyramid, players often believe that they are required to do something out of the ordinary. How does one then, teach a Lianne Tooth to feel comfortable at overlapping into the forward line at any stage of the game, or how does one give Jackie Periera the confidence to slot into a left fullback position if required?

Possessing a team capable of these interchanges can only increase its potential immeasurably. The following are suggestions to modify Australia's current perspective:

1. Breaking down the barriers at an early age would be a positive step towards changing attitudes within Australian hockey today. By teaching youngsters specific roles instead of specific positions, they may in future be more inclined to play out of regimented formations.
2. Giving these youngsters the tools for later development is also important. If children have a good basic knowledge of every position, as well as a repertoire of skills for each position they will become extremely more adaptable.
3. Encourage coaches to try new and innovative ideas. This can be achieved by giving them access to more information on systems, and how they can adapt them to their own team.
4. When presenting a team with a new style of play. It would be important not to give it the stigma that a new 'system' tends to. In other words, don't necessarily call it a system but present the players with specific roles instead of specific positions. Emphasise that a 'system' is merely designating numbers to positions.
5. At training, create scenarios that will occur in games, and that will develop over a period of time. For example, give the fullback opportunities to continually overlap. Eventually, they will have a mental imprint of available options which can be incorporated into their game.
6. Use drills at training that put people in situations and positions they are not familiar with. For example a sweeper in the centre forward role, or a right half in the left wing position.
7. Eventually, those players will become familiar with what is required of them in different roles and subsequently gain confidence in other people to take over their own role.
8. Encourage communication. A team that possesses mutual understanding between players will more easily accommodate role changes.
9. Encourage players to watch videos of similar systems, as well as alternate systems. Finding role models within this framework may also contribute to changing perspectives on the game.
10. Encourage players to have flair, and confidence in their own ability of their team mates.

Conclusion

This discussion paper has been designed to stimulate thought on systems hockey and in particular Australia's current mental approach to the game.

I am of the opinion that some changes need to be made in Australian hockey for it to continue as one of the world's best nations. Systems are designed in many instances to thwart an opponents attack and unless a side is adaptable to change, they may become predictable and easily nullified. To me, the concept of the Whirl is very exciting, but to some extent quite idealistic. Many national teams have the athletes that are capable to work in such a system, but

often lack the intelligence also required to be truly effective. It seems however, the newest trend is to endeavour to find both attributes within the individual and perhaps more emphasis should be placed on coaches to develop hockey intelligence amongst younger athletes. There arises another controversial point however, and that is – is hockey intelligence teachable?

That aside I think the biggest project for Australian hockey is not necessarily introducing more players and coaches to types of systems, but changing their mentality with regard to how the game is played. If that can be achieved, then hopefully the stigma attached to systems hockey can be discarded along the way. This can be attained by educating players and coaches alike on the fundamentals of systems, and to encourage them to try new stimulating ideas. By being aware of the numerous combinations that can be played, individuals and coaches will be more ready to adapt if the opportunity arises. A team would be extremely difficult to beat if it could change from one system to another during a game or even from match to match, or as per the Whirl, individuals were less inhibited to inject themselves into other positions besides their own. The more unpredictable a team is, the more formidable it must seem to its opponents.

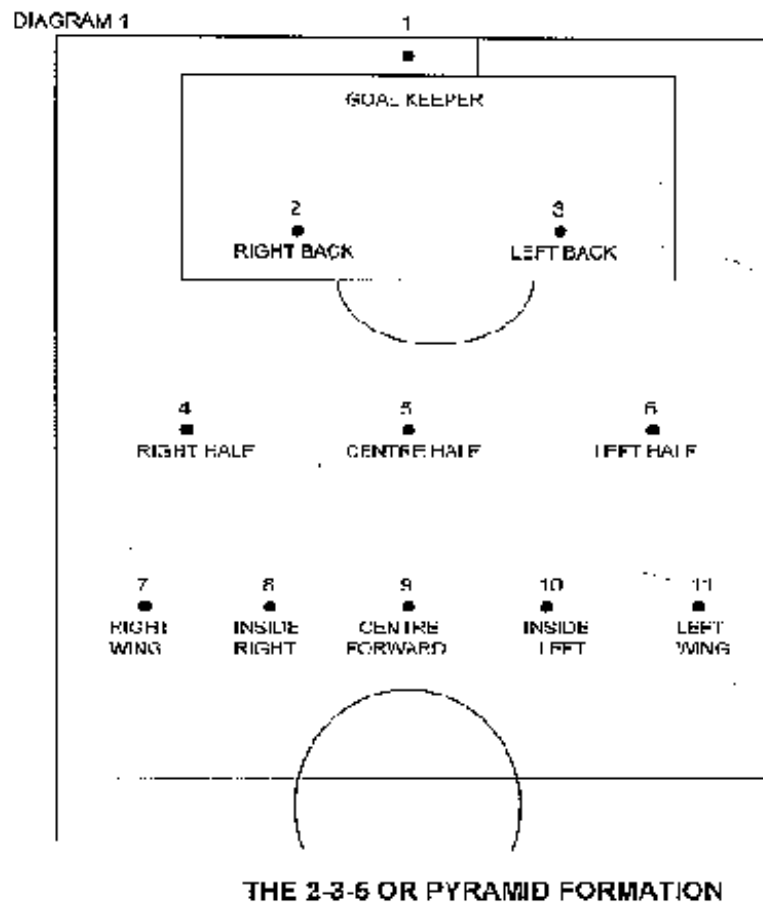
If it were possible to ever have 16 players of the calibre required. The Whirl would be a very difficult style to combat. However, today in Australia, I think that minor adjustments need only be made to our current style instead of major changes. If the mentality of Australian hockey players and coaches at all levels could be adjusted, steps were taken to provide more access to information on various styles; and players and coaches were encouraged to participate in new formations, then adapting to a new system if required would be a smooth transition at any level. It is important to keep in mind, that a system is merely numbers designating how many people on a particular team play their roles, it should not be viewed as something completely foreign to what players and coaches are accustomed to. Ultimately a system should be designed to suit the players one has access to, for it is they who dictate success or failure.

As we know, what happens at a 'grass roots' level will eventually affect what occurs on the elite level. By implementing some minor changes in the way all Australian hockey players and coaches perceive the game may in fact have a major effect on Australian hockey in the future.

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DIAGRAM 1



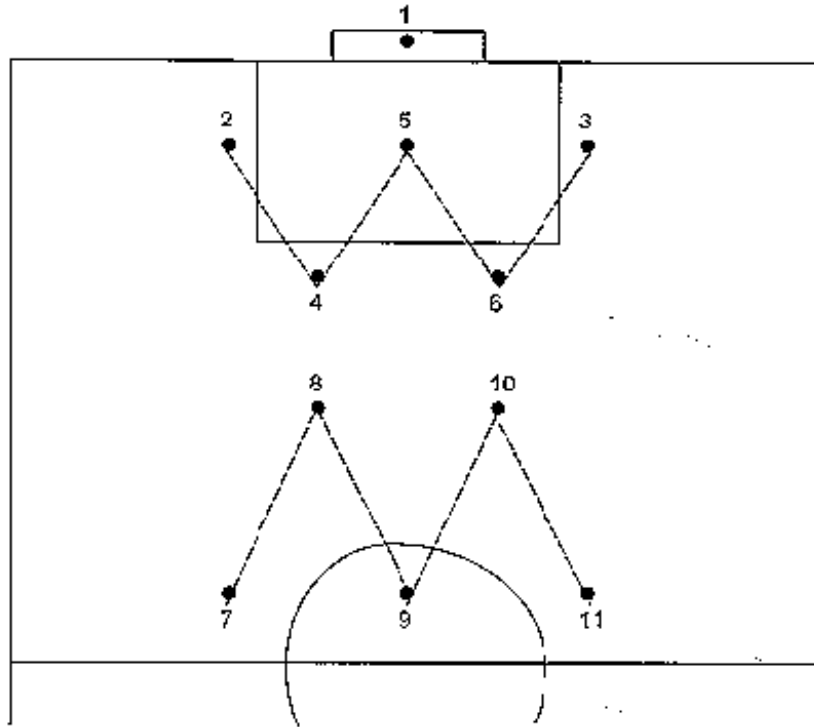
THE 2-3-5 OR PYRAMID FORMATION

"Wing half" was a term applied to either the right or the left half. The right wing and the left wing are known alternatively as the outside right and the outside left, or as the right winger and the left winger.

DIAGRAM 2

THE W-M FORMATION

DIAGRAM 2

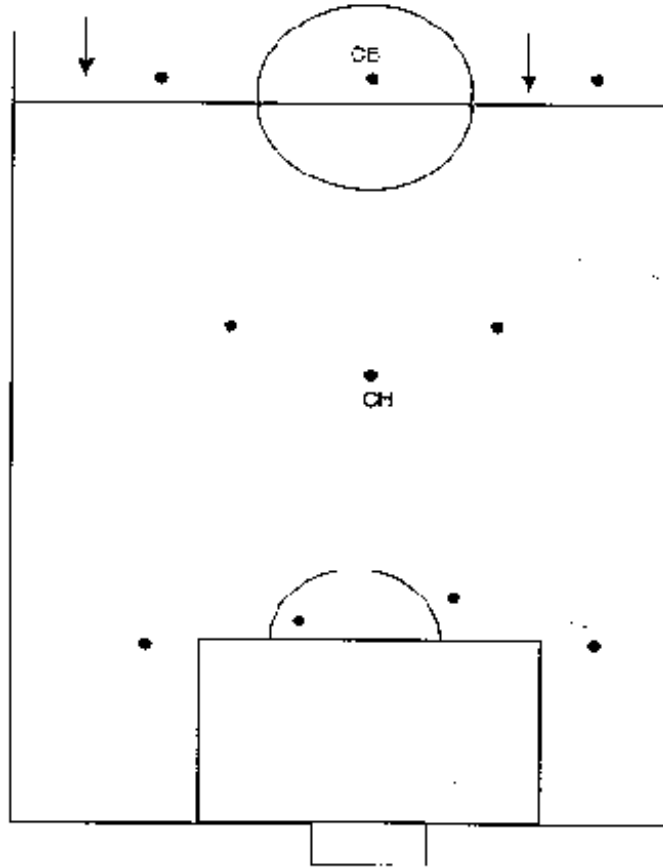


THE W-M FORMATION

The numbers are inserted to show the relationship between this formation and the 2-3-5. Thus the centre half of the 2-3-5 system, No.5, has been withdrawn to become a third fullback. His correct title is centre back, but he continued to be known as the centre half.

DIAGRAM 3

DIAGRAM 3



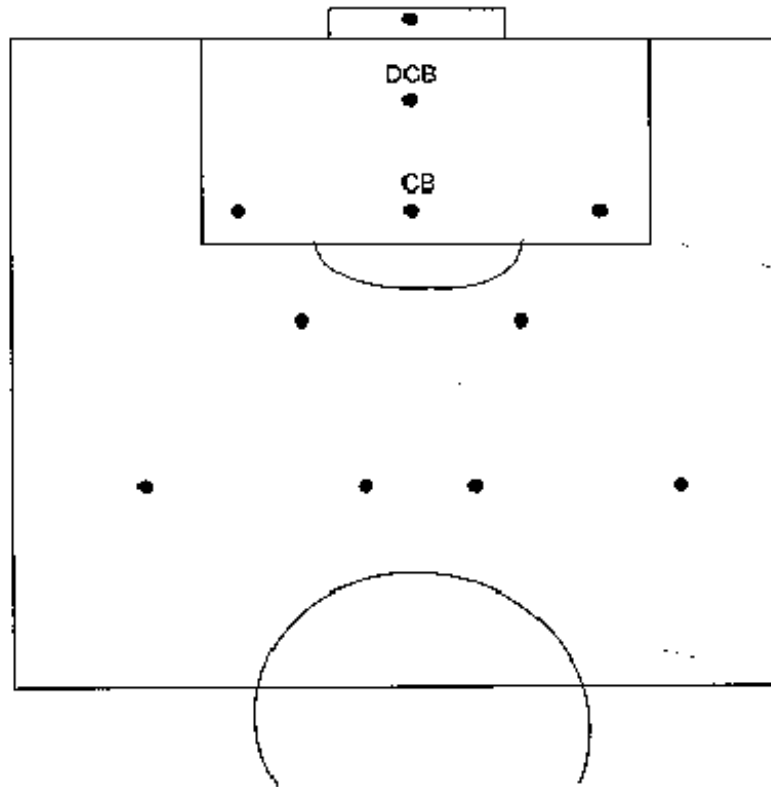
VERROU: ATTACKING FORMATION

VERROU: ATTACKING FORMATION

(The *verrou* is also called the Swiss bolt formation.)
A 3-3-4 formation, with the centre half (CH) playing an attacking role.

DIAGRAM 4

DIAGRAM 4



VERROU: DEFENSIVE FORMATION

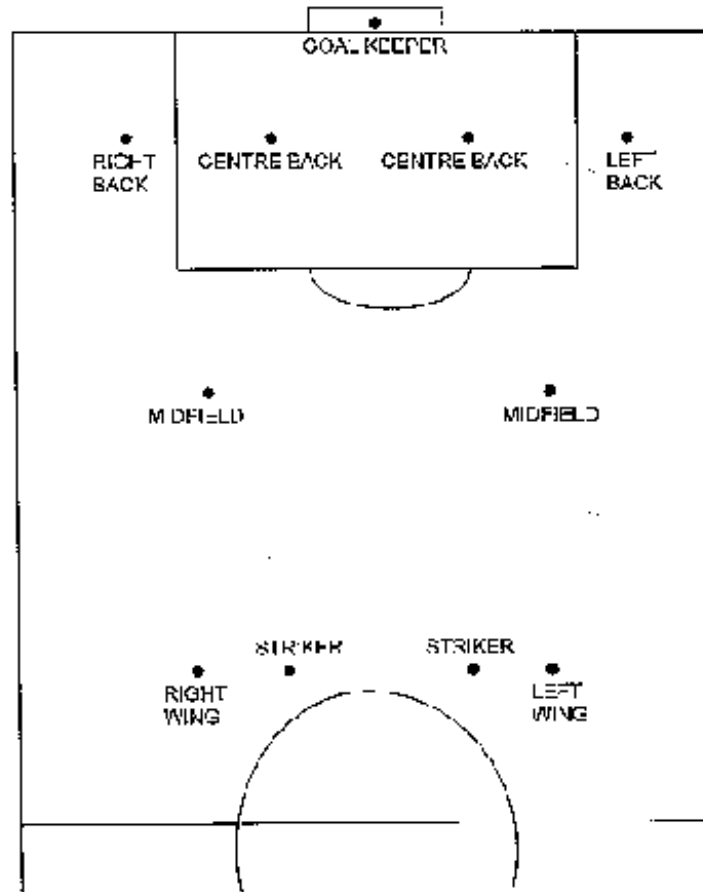
VERROU: DEFENSIVE FORMATION

(The *verrou* is called the Swiss bolt formation.)

All eleven players are now deep in their own half. The centre back of the attacking formation has retreated deepest of all, to the position marked DCB. The centre half of the attacking formation (CH) becomes the centre back (CB) of the defensive formation.

DIAGRAM 5

DIAGRAM 6



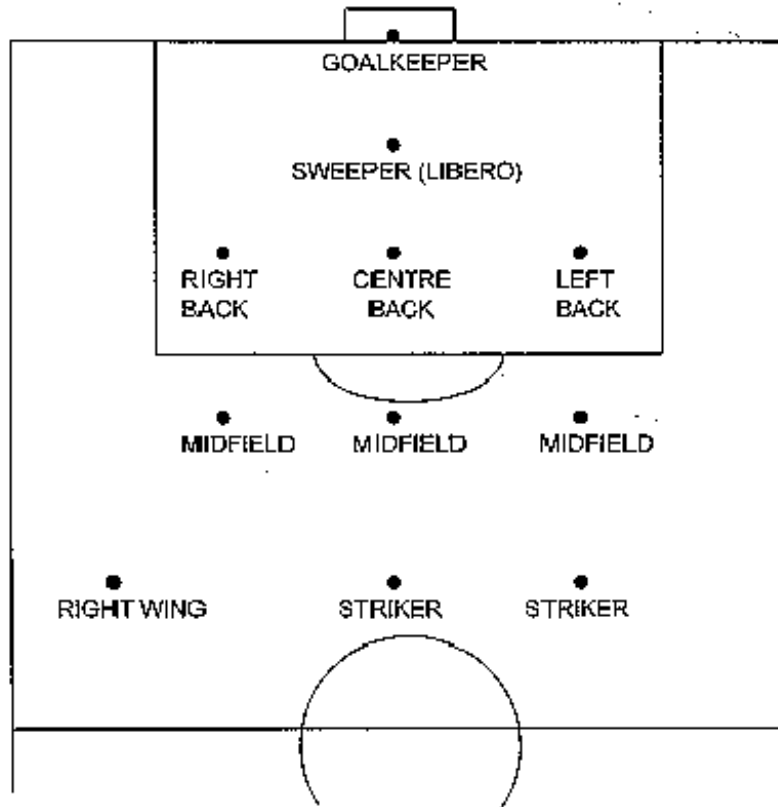
THE 4-2-4 FORMATION

THE 4-2-4 FORMATION

Used by the Brazilians in the 1958 World Cup. The right and left backs were expected to play an adventurous role, even to the extent of joining in attacking moves. The left wing was frequently pulled back to operate as a third midfielder.

DIAGRAM 6

DIAGRAM 6



CATENACCIO

CATENACCIO

In its ultra-defensive forms, *catenaccio* features a sweeper playing behind a line of four fullbacks (with an extra centre back), 3 midfielders, and only two strikers up front – or even 4 midfielders, with only one striker.