

3-5-2 Formation – The Ultimate Coaching Guide



Attacking penetration, defensively strong, *and* control of possession...

For the right team with the right players, the 3-5-2 formation can prove to be a deadly formation against any opponent.

For the formation to work, the team must have two incredibly fit wingbacks who pace up and down the flanks for the whole duration of the match.

These two individuals are the key to the formation and without the right players it would be a challenge to effectively play the 3-5-2.

The midfield can be adapted to fit the opposition and offers a great

deal of flexibility as coaches may chop and change the personnel to go either more offensive or defensive.

With five across the midfield, the team should dominate possession which will alleviate a lot of pressure from the back three.

As the 3-5-2 can quickly revert to a 5-3-2 formation, the team is both solid at the back and a potent threat up front.

This though does depends on the tactical discipline of the players at your disposal.

Without tactical discipline and clear communication, it can quickly turn into a liability as the opposition overload the spaces that the formation leaves at the back.

This formation can be the best of both worlds as its attacking nature provides the best form of defence by forcing the opposition back towards their goal.

As with all lines up however, it is the team's chemistry and cohesion that ultimately determine the success of the 3-5-2 formation.

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3-5-2 Formation Team Requirements:



- Chemistry! The midfield can get congested so the players must know how to pass and move into space to avoid getting in each other's way.
- Tactical awareness from the players who must know their roles inside-out.
- Clear communication to ensure the team attacks and defends as a team.
- Supremely fit wingbacks that are confident on the ball, tactically disciplined, and can put in a decent cross.
- A defensive three that work well together, know when to attack the ball, and when to drop off and provide cover for their teammates.
- Midfielders who are confident on the ball as the aim is to stifle the opposition's game plan by dominating possession.
- A disciplined holding midfielder who supports the defence and covers the wingbacks.

- Energetic and mobile strikers who have a good understanding and can stretch the play and open up space for the midfielders.

Strengths of the 3-5-2 formation:



1. **Control of the ball** – With five across the midfield, the team should dominate possession which will limit the opposition's goal scoring potential while increasing their own.
2. **Stop the opposition from building up from the back** – The two strikers should harry the opponent's defenders while the midfielders push up and limit their passing options forward.
3. **A range of attacking options** – A wave of players can move towards the opposition's goal creating confusion and a number of goal scoring opportunities.
4. **Passing triangles and angles** – The 3-5-2 line up means that players should always have a number of passing options open to them whenever and wherever they are on the ball.

5. **You can force the opposition into mistakes** – The sheer number of players in the opposition's half enhances your chances of winning the ball back further up the field.
6. **Defensive solidity** – The three at the back protect the box while the holding midfielder can add strength in numbers and help cover the vacated wingback positions when they push forward.
7. **Simple to vary the game plan** – The coach can easily go more attacking or defensive simply by instructing his midfielders and wingbacks to either drop deeper or advance further up the pitch.
8. **Width from the wingbacks creates space for the midfielders** – By marauding up and down the flanks, the wingbacks provide crucial width by stretching the play.
9. **Two up front** – While some formations sacrifice a striker for control of the midfield, with 3-5-2 it is a defender that makes way which increases the attacking options.

Weaknesses of the 3-5-2 Formation:



1. **You need the right wingbacks** – The most important position on the pitch, it is up to the wingbacks to bomb up and down the pitch, attacking, defending, and creating space for the others. If they are not fit or fast enough, the formation risks being a failure as the midfield is then constricted without enough movement and passing options on the wings.
2. **The defence relies on speedy wide centrebacks** – As there is a lot of space left behind the wingbacks when they attack, the centrebacks need to be quick enough to cover the space.
3. **The opposition can attack the space behind the wingbacks** – The team is most vulnerable to the space in behind the wingbacks and these gaps are the weak point of the formation.
4. **A disciplined holding midfielder is crucial** – If they're unable to consistently have good positioning then the team loses a lot of its defensive stability.
5. **The team must communicate well to succeed** – As the 3-5-2

formation has so many midfielders, it is up to them to clearly communicate with each other so as to know where to position themselves in relation to the others.

6. **A centreback becomes redundant if the opposition play one up front** – With only one player to mark and three centrebacks hanging around, it can be confusing as to who should follow and mark the striker.
7. **The central midfielders must all be comfortable on the ball** – The three in the centre control the ball which is funnelled by them out to the wings or up front. If they are not comfortable on the ball they risk losing it which can then allow the opposition to break through the midfield.
8. **Must constantly be moving to create space and opportunities** – While this can get tiring, players can get in each other's way and the attack can fall apart.
9. **Possibility of being overrun at the back** – If players do not track back and fulfil their defensive duties then the team risks being overloaded at the back.

3-5-2 Formation Setup:



In a 3-5-2 formation the last line of defence is the **goalkeeper** who needs to constantly be on their toes and alert to any danger.

As teams playing this formation often dominates possession, they need to keep their concentration so that they don't get caught out on the rare occasions that the goal is threatened.

In front of them are the three **centrebacks** who are the main defenders of the team. It is their job to put their bodies on the line and limit the goal scoring opportunities of their opponents.

Depending on a range of factors, there are a number of ways that teams can decide to line up the midfield five.



In the most common formation, there are two **wingbacks** on the flanks that are responsible for giving the team width and passing options on the wings.

They need to push forward with their team mates as well as drop back and help out the defence.

The **central midfield** three offer the coach a great deal of tactical flexibility.

Usually there is one defensive-minded or holding player who supports the defence and drops deep to pick up the ball and pass it forward.

It is then up to the two in front of them to offer support to the team's attackers. They must be comfortable on the ball and also pose a goal

threat while creating chances for the strikers.

The two **strikers** are the main goal scorers in the team.

It is their movement that creates havoc and opens up space for the midfielders to push up into. They should have a good understanding of each other and work well together up front.

Keep in mind that while the team will likely dominate possession in a 3-5-2, the team must not neglect their defensive duties.

There is a reliance on the team to be energetic and constantly on the move to make as many attacking options as possible. Without runs off the ball, space is closed down and the player on the ball is limited in what they can do.

The whole team needs to move as one up and down the pitch to make the best out of the formation.

With the options in midfield and up front being the main variables in how teams line up, let us now have a look at what is expected from the players in each position...

Player Roles and Responsibilities:



Goalkeeper:

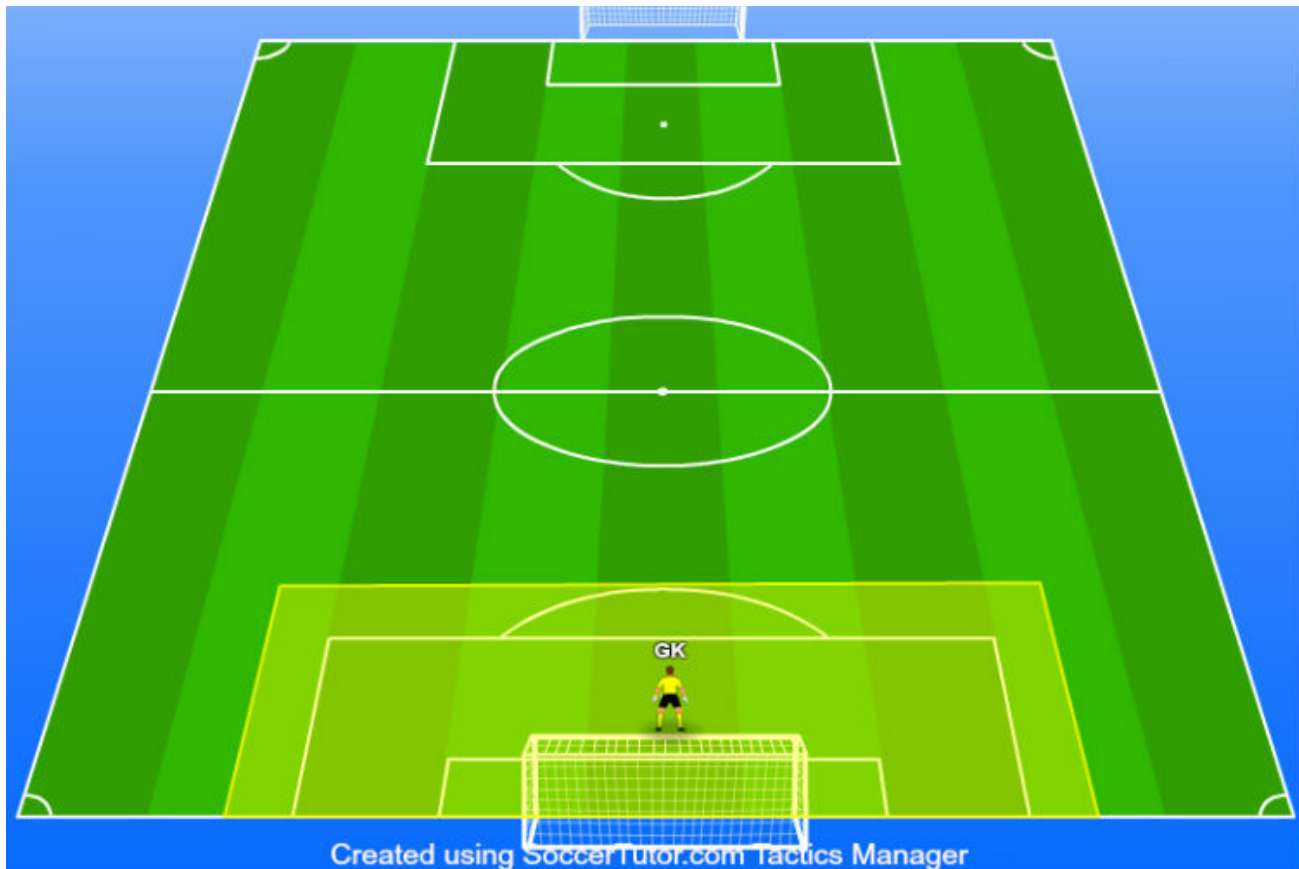
Whenever a team plays three at the back, the goalkeeper has more passing responsibilities than in other formations.

A 3-5-2 or 3-4-3 usually indicates that the team prefers to dominate possession rather than sit back and defend. This means the keeper must have good ball skills to help the team retain possession.

As the team is likely to control possession, the keeper must retain their concentration for the times when the opposition breaks through and threatens the goal.

When called into action, they must respond confidently and deal with any crosses into the box or stop any shots on target.

They must command and dominate their box.



If unable to catch the ball, they should punch the ball away or parry it to either side of the goal and away from danger.

To minimise shots on goal, they must communicate well with the defence in front of them and help organise and direct the players to close down any danger.

With all the play happening in front of them, they can clearly see where the opposition are threatening and consequently communicate this to the defenders.

Organisation, shot-stopping, and good feet are the key attributes of the modern goalkeeper.

Defenders:

In the 3-5-2 formation, it is the three centrebacks who are primarily responsible for protecting the goalkeeper and defending the goal.

They must do everything possible to prevent the opposition from scoring.



While tackling and marking players is a big part of their game, closing down space and communicating clearly with each other, the goalkeeper, and holding midfielder is just as important.

Together they must form an impenetrable unit.

When the opposition do make it through the midfield, a centreback must engage the player with the ball while another covers them. The third centreback should occupy any of their other attacking players.

Together they should stop the opposition from having a shot on goal and aim to slow them down so that reinforcements may arrive.

The space behind the wingbacks down the flanks is where the 3-5-2 formation is most vulnerable...

Balls played into these channels can be problematic as a centreback needs to come out wide to cover the area and engage the opposition's player.

This can drag the centrebacks out of position and they must communicate clearly to ensure gaps do not open up for the opponents to exploit.

A holding midfielder should be on call to drop into the channels or fill in for one of the centrebacks.

While the [4-4-2 formation](#) has clear positions that each defender must take up, the 3-5-2 can be confusing in this respect and the players must often mark spaces rather than players.

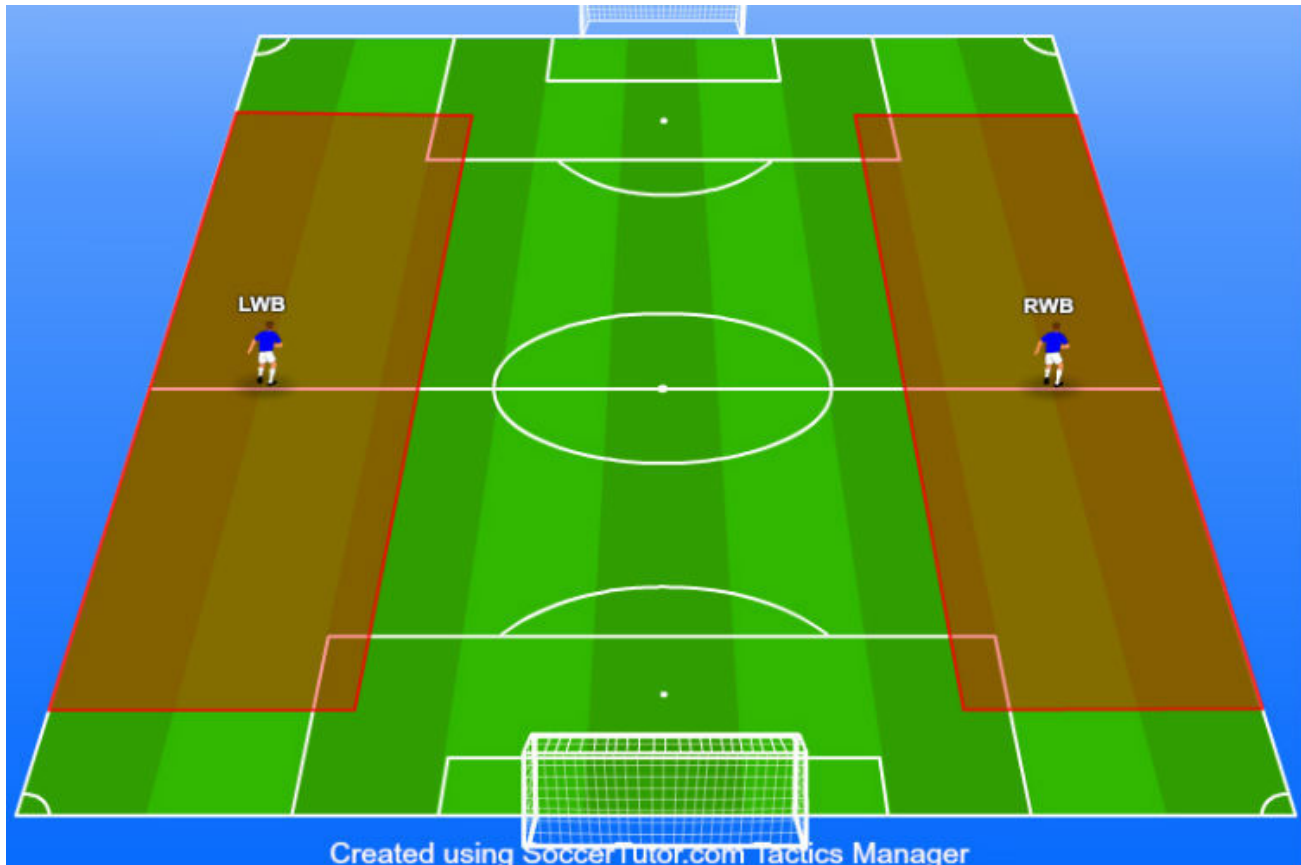
In the modern game defenders are not just required to defend - they must also be comfortable on the ball and help the team to retain possession. Although there is less responsibility on them to instigate play from the back like in the 3-4-3 formation, they are still expected to be calm on the ball and technically capable.

The best defences are built on good positioning, communication, and teamwork.

Wingbacks:

This is the most crucial position in the formation and without the right personnel the 3-5-2 is unlikely to succeed.

The strengths of the 3-5-2 formation (possession, attacking options, and defensive stability) all derive from the wingback position.



The ideal wingback would be very fit, speedy, and a good dribbler with a decent delivery! On top of that, they need to be tactically disciplined to help out in both attack and defence when required.

A lot is asked of them so it is becoming an increasingly specialised position that is perfect for an all-rounder.

Although they still have defensive duties, the wingbacks are primarily responsible for providing the team with width. Without it, the strengths

of the formation crumbles as the central midfield area becomes cluttered with players.

They must constantly be up and down the pitch, providing passing angles and options to the central midfielders.

Their movement is what gives the midfielders space and time to operate in the centre.

In attack, they should look to combine with the central midfielders and get in behind the opposition's defence to put crosses into the box.

By making runs out wide they can drag the opponent's fullbacks out of position and open up gaps in the middle for the strikers or midfielders to exploit.

While the holding midfielder somewhat alleviates the amount of defensive work they need to do, it is still crucial that they return to help out and shore up the spaces behind them.

If they are ill-disciplined and constantly stay forward, the opposition may overload and overrun the areas behind them.

This means the wingbacks must also be strong in the tackle and have good positioning to limit the opponent's threats from out wide.

The best teams that play 3-5-2 all have strong athletic wingbacks who are confident on the ball and offer a threat going forward while not neglecting their defensive work.

Midfielders:

As mentioned earlier, it is in the centre midfield of the 3-5-2 formation that the coach can really stamp their identity and game plan on the team.

While the centrebacks stubbornly defend the goal and the superhuman wingbacks provide width and movement, it is the midfielders who dictate and control the game.



The tactical set up and personnel involved depend on a number of factors such as the opposition, the coach's philosophy, and what performance they want from their team.

While a midfield four does not always afford the luxury of a holding player, a central three nearly always does.

This more defensive-minded holding player offers safety and stability at the back which is even more important when playing a back three.

The holding player must sniff out danger and drop into defence when gaps appear. They must have great positional sense and be constantly be on the move, closing down, and marking the opposition's players who are running into space.

Although the three centrebacks are the rock at the back, it is this holding player who makes the 3-5-2 such an attractive option for attack-minded coaches who do not want to sacrifice defence.

This holding midfielder often drops deep to pick up the ball from the centrebacks and pass it on to the teammates in front of them.

At the base of the midfield, it is important that they communicate clearly and effectively with the players in front of them. They must also be careful in possession for if they or one of the other midfielders are tackled, the opposition then has a free run at the defence.

While some coaches prefer to play two deep holding players, many others opt for more offensive options in the centre of the park.

Regardless of the type of player selected, all of the central midfielders must be comfortable on the ball, have good ball control, and be able to pick out a pass.

In a central three, coaches often like to play a holding midfielder alongside a box-to-box player and an attacking midfielder.

The box-to-box player needs to be energetic, good at tackling, and be

willing to run all day.

They help out the team in attack and defence and constantly provide support to the players on the wings by increasing passing options for them in the centre.

Their energy helps press the opposition's midfield and prevent them from settling into their passing game. They also have license to get forward and support the strikers in the box.

Out of the trio, the attacking midfielder has less defensive responsibilities than the other two. This allows them to take up dangerous positions in front of the opposition's defence.

If not properly marked, they can create havoc by running at the defence or slipping a through-ball to the strikers.

Along with the wingbacks, it is up to them to create goalscoring opportunities for the team's strikers. This player is also expected to chip in with goals so they should have a good shot on them.

Their movement in between the opposition's defence and midfield can drag the opponent's players out of position and open up space for the strikers to dart into.

Operating in small pockets of space, they must have great technical skills and vision to bring others into play.

When the wingbacks cross the ball into the box, they should either be waiting on the edge to pick up any loose balls or piling into the box to overwhelm the opposition's central defenders.

This central trio have a lot of responsibility in the team and must work well together to create the attacking options that a well-functioning 3-5-2 formation can provide.

Strikers:

The saying goes that strikers are judged by the number of goals they score and, while this is true to a certain degree, strikers must nowadays contribute a lot more than just goals.

In a 3-5-2 formation the strikers are the first line of defence and it is their energy and pressing that set the tone for the team's performance.



Along with the midfielders behind them, they can force the opposition

to play the ball long which the team's centrebacks should deal with comfortably.

With their pressing, the strikers should shut down the defenders' passing options out wide and channel them through the centre. This should help the three central midfielders to quickly win the ball back.

In other formations, coaches often choose to play a big target man who can win headers, hold up the ball, and bring others into play.

With the 3-5-2 however, the team will have most of the ball and will often be camped in the opposition's half. This reduces the need to go long and therefore the priority is to have quick, mobile strikers with good movement.

It is their quick sprints and dashes out of position that open up space for the rest of the team and help create goalscoring opportunities.

By dragging the opponent's defenders out of position, they disrupt their defensive structure and leave gaps for the team's midfielders or wingbacks to exploit.

Operating as a duo up front, the strikers must work in tandem and have a good understanding so that they don't get in each other's way.

If they make similar runs or occupy each other's space, they limit their teammates' options and the attacking dynamic of the team.

Ideally, they should work well with the attacking midfielder who can then release through-balls in behind the defence for them to run onto.

With two up front, the team should be a constant threat in the

opposition's box.

While it is the wingbacks that give the team width, it is the strikers who give it depth. Both are crucial for the midfielders to have enough space to play in.

If the strikers drop too deep, they convolute the midfield and lessen the effectiveness of having three in the centre of the park.

As the main goalscorers in the team, the responsibility is on them to do everything possible to score.

They should have a good shot, be able to head the ball well, and be comfortable playing one touch passes. This is because the centrebacks will be putting them under a lot of pressure.

Attacking in the 3-5-2 Formation:



The great thing about the 3-5-2 formation is that by defending from the front, you actually gain an offensive advantage.

With the two strikers putting pressure on the opposition's centrebacks and limiting their passing options, the midfielders can win the ball back and quickly push up the field with the opponents in disarray.

This means there are fewer opponents in front of you closing you down.



A lot of the attacking potency of the 3-5-2 formation relies on movement.

The strikers should be constantly darting around, creating confusion amongst the opposition's defenders, and stretching the space for the

midfielders to advance into.

This movement opens up gaps between the lines and gives the midfielders more time to pick their pass through to the strikers or wingbacks out wide.

By attempting to get in behind the defence, the strikers allow the attacking midfielder to exploit the space that they vacate.

This can be a nightmare for the opposition as the midfield and defence need to communicate perfectly to make sure that no one is unmarked.

The wingbacks should also be bombing forwards to draw the opposition's fullbacks out wide. This then essentially means that the opponent's centrebacks are one on one versus the two strikers in the centre.

With a midfielder or two pushing from deep, the opposition must be very disciplined to make sure they are not overwhelmed and overrun at the back.

With four players running forwards, the three midfielders then have a number of options that they can exploit. One can always come across outside and support the wingback in providing the team with attacking options out wide.

Together they can overload the opponent's fullback, get in behind the defence, and deliver crosses into the box.

With the wingbacks making runs out wide, this also creates space for the midfielder inside to drive at the team's defence should they so

wish.

The shape of the 3-5-2 formation creates a number of triangles and angles around the pitch which helps the team to keep the ball.

As they should dominate possession, their opponents need to be very disciplined and extremely fit to not tire and give away more goalscoring opportunities as the match progresses.

Defending in the 3-5-2 Formation:



As mentioned earlier in the article, the strikers play a key role in the defensive work of the team.

Their pressing and energetic display helps stop the opposition from building up from the back and gaining a foothold in the match.

This pressure also forces the opposition to play quicker and

consequently they are more likely to make mistakes and lose the ball.



With the two strikers buzzing around up front, the opposition's defenders are often forced to play the ball long.

As there is a wall of five players across the midfield, it is very dangerous for them to pass the ball to the midfielders in front of them.

The wingbacks are important in this respect as they should be pushing up and putting pressure on the opposition's wingers. This stops them from having time on the ball and being able to turn and run at the wingback.

It is the space that the wingbacks vacate that is most dangerous for teams utilizing the 3-5-2 formation.

While the holding midfielder does provide insurance at the back, the team should drop as a team to protect the defence and compress the space.

If the opposition do manage to get in behind the wingback, then a centreback or defensive midfielder needs to immediately come out wide and engage the player.

By slowing them down and forcing them further out wide, they allow the team more time to get back in position.

Gaps can occur with three at the back so the team must communicate well and be disciplined in the positions they take up.

As the centrebacks often need to mark a player and a space as well, the unit needs to function perfectly to prevent any goal scoring opportunities from arising.

The holding player is crucial in this respect and by playing deeper than the rest of the midfielders they stop opponents from exploiting the space in between the defence and midfield.

Communication, as always, is key otherwise you can find two or three players marking the same player.

By dropping back, the wingbacks can effectively make it a 5-3-2 and with three central midfielders, the formation can be very hard to penetrate.

While playing three at the back can sacrifice defensive stability for more attacking options, the 3-5-2 alleviates most of the danger

through the holding midfielder.

By controlling possession and putting pressure on the opponents further up the field, the team's hard work should effectively limit the opposition's attacking capabilities.

Tactical variations of the 3-5-2 variation:



While the three at the back remain constant in terms of what is expected of them, it is the midfield and up front that provide the most variables to the team's line up.

The midfield depends a lot on how the manager wants to play, the personnel available, and what they expect from the opposition.

This gives coaches the ability to make the team more or less attacking depending on what they are hoping to achieve.

As already demonstrated, the central trio of the three already offer up a lot of variables.

Coaches may decide to go more attacking by putting in two attacking midfielders or overwhelm teams in the centre by lining up with very energetic box-to-box players.

3-2-3-2 Formation:

A tactical variation of the 3-5-2 is to play with two defensive midfielders with three attacking midfielders in front of them.

This would mean that the team would line up as a 3-2-3-2.



The two holding players would solidify the centre and protect the

centrebacks by covering the wings on either side of them.

They would move across wherever they saw danger and stop the opponents from having too much time on the ball in front of the defence.

By playing with two defensive-minded midfielders, the attacking midfielders' defensive duties are considerably lessened.

This leaves them free to create more goalscoring opportunities for the strikers up top.

A great deal of the attacking potential of this formation relies on their movement and exploitation of gaps in between the opposition's defence and midfield.

A lot of 2-on-1 situations can arise due to the small triangles and passing angles that the line up creates.

The wide players of the attacking three are narrower and do not stay out wide like the wingbacks are expected to. This means that this variation of 3-5-2 formation can sometimes end up too narrow.

The players must be very creative and work well in small spaces to make the most of this line up.

When one of the players does move out wide, another midfielder or a striker should support them so they are not isolated on the flank.

As always, it is the chemistry and understanding between the players that make it a success.

3-3-2-2 Formation:

Another variation for the midfield is to line up as a 3-3-2-2.

In this formation there are three central midfielders who control the midfield while the two in front of them have a lot of creative freedom to take up dangerous spaces in the attacking third of the pitch.

The central three must be very energetic and close down the opposition when they attack down the wings.

They can be more defensive or offensive depending on how the match is going. This flexibility is one of the strengths of this line up.

Again though, it does lack width and it is up to the two attacking midfielders to take up dangerous spaces out wide and combine with a central midfielder to attack the opposition's fullback.

Up front, coaches can vary the team's attacking potential depending on the personnel they select. A big target man, for instance, can help give the team an extra attacking dimension with their height and aerial abilities.

This can be particularly useful if the opposition are pinned back and too deep for the strikers' movement to have any effect in behind the defence.

They may also want to play with a creative number ten in behind the main striker.

Depending on how the midfield lines up, this can at times create confusion between the attacking midfielder and the number ten as

they take up the same positions and get in each other's way.

Conclusion:

The 3-5-2 formation has a number of strengths that make it a very attractive option for any coach looking to play attacking football.

While other teams that play three at the back can be overwhelmed or overrun on the flanks, by playing five in midfield the formation largely mitigates these risks.

A specialised holding player contributes to the team's solidity and strength at the back.

This formation allows for a great deal of flexibility in terms of how the team lines up, with all of the variations focused on keeping the ball and dominating possession.

This is largely dependent on the wingbacks and strikers moving off the ball to stretch the play and increase the space inside for the midfielders.

The 3-5-2 formation relies on teamwork, communication, and discipline for the team to get the best out of the formation.