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Best Formations for 9v9

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9v9 is one of the most exciting stages in the development of young players as it's the first time they are truly able to understand positioning, formations and how to play to the strengths of their teammates. In *The Mastermind's* hometown province of Ontario, 9v9 starts at the U11 stage and ends at U13, when players move up to the 11v11 game for the rest of their lives. With so much analysis on the best formations for 11v11, it's amazing how the 9v9 game often gets overlooked. By studying the best formations in 9v9 a lot can be learned and translated over to the 11v11 game and so it's a mystery why this level of play is not often studied. So with that, *The Mastermind Site* has compiled a list of the best formations and the tactics and requirements associated with each. If you'd prefer, you can also [listen to the audio podcast version of this article](#).

These are some of the most common and very best formations to play in the highly intriguing 9v9 game. Enjoy.

3-2-3

The 3-2-3 is one of the most popular 9v9 formations. You can just picture Barcelona's U12's running circles around their opposition and dominating possession using this formation. 3-2-3 is excellent for creating triangles in possession of the ball and provides any team with great balance and symmetry.

ADAPTABLE FORMATIONS FOR 11v11

- 4-3-3
- 3-4-3
- 4-2-3-1

PLAYERS REQUIRED

- Wingers who like to stay wide and don't get drawn to the middle, BUT can also do defensive work for the team.
- A centre forward who can hold the line all on their own.
- Midfielders who are good in possession and can run from left to right.
- Defenders who understand they need to be more than just defenders.

PROS

- Attack-minded and possession oriented.
- Provides loads of width but still a good base in midfield, creating excellent balance in the team.
- Easily adaptable into a 3-4-1 in defense if wingers track back.

- Provides a solid defensive 3 as a base with central midfielders easily able to learn the art of dropping in and covering for defenders when they go on runs.

CONS

- Wingers can get drawn too wide, leaving the centre forward all alone and outnumbered.
- If central midfielders are not tactically sound and positionally aware, it can become very easy for them to get outnumbered due to the wingers playing so high.
- Requires wingers to track back and defend or central midfielders to cover in wide areas, otherwise there's a massive gap in between them and the fullbacks.
- Defenders can often be reluctant to join the attack.

For more on the 3-2-3, see [Coaching the 3-2-3 \(9v9\)](#).

2-3-2-1 / 2-3-3

With practically a perfect balance of players in both attack and defense, the 2-3-2-1/2-3-3 is one of the most popular 9v9 formations out there and is used by Barcelona and Ajax's famed academies. It allows players to easily learn defensive and attacking roles and gives them the freedom and autonomy to play however they want to play. The formation suits teams looking to play on the counter attack just like it works for teams who like to keep possession, play wide, play through the middle or even the often-criticized long-ball game. It's also easily able to accommodate nearly every type of player

and allows teams with a lack of natural defenders to still have a strong defensive base if the the three in front of them do their defensive work.

ADAPTABLE FORMATIONS FOR 11v11

- 3-4-2-1 (3-4-3)
- 4-3-2-1 (4-3-3)

PLAYERS REQUIRED

- Right and left midfielders who can get up and down the line and understand that although they are not defenders, they have a crucial defensive role. As a coach you can also call these positions wing-backs to really cement that notion in their minds.
- Either wingers or attacking midfielders who can play inverted and not get caught too far wide.
- A centre forward who can hold up play and is talented on and off the ball. Support will come from the two in behind but because they are playing as ‘midfielders’ if the striker can never hang onto the ball the formation won’t work effectively.
- Industrious, hard-working players all around the pitch.

PROS

- Suits all styles of the game, most notably a game that relies on crossing and playing wide.
- Offers perfect symmetry and stability within a team and is neither overly defensive or overly attack-minded.
- Easily adjustable and can become a 4-1-2-1 in defense if wing-backs tuck in or a 2-1-4-1 in attack if wing-backs can get forward. Also easily adjusted into a 2-3-1-2 and 2-4-2 without disrupting the balance.
- Arguably the best way to get players familiar with a 3-4-3 system in 11v11.
- Creates loads of triangles necessary for both attack and defense.

CONS

- Defenders must be fast as any slip-ups from right/left midfielder will leave the team easily exposed.
- Midfield can get too open if defensive midfielder plays too low and attacking midfielders play too high. Similarly if defensive midfielder plays too high, a massive gap will again be created and right/left midfielders may be forced inside.
- Defenders and defensive midfielder need to be in constant communication about who is marking who as most 9v9 teams play with 3 forward players.
- Works best if defensive midfielder is more of a ball-winner than ball-player. As such it’s not always the best formation for teams who like to keep possession and much more suited to hard-working counter-attacking teams.

3-1-3-1

Based around the newly revolutionized 4-1-4-1 from Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola, the 3-1-3-1 provides loads of attacking flair for teams good in possession of the ball.

ADAPTABLE FORMATIONS FOR 11v11

- 4-1-4-1
- 4-2-3-1

PLAYERS REQUIRED

- Left and right defenders who are good ball players and strong in possession/not afraid to carry the ball up.
- Wingers who stay wide but also do a job in defense.
- A defensive midfielder who is simultaneously a ball-winner and also able to dictate control of the game through their distribution.

PROS

- Provides great width and allows teams to play a possession styled game effectively.
- Provides a solid defensive 3 as a base with one defensive midfielder as cover.
- Creates symmetry and balance within a team.

CONS

- Virtually impossible to play without being good in possession as wingers and attacking midfielder won't want to defend and will get caught too high up the field when possession is lost.
- The front four might all want to play like strikers.
- Defensive midfielder will become overworked if the wingers and AM don't help out in defense.
- Like the 3-2-3, there's a massive gap in between the right/left defenders and the right/left wingers that can easily be exploited by a variety of different formations.
- Only one defensive midfielder does not provide enough defensive coverage in midfield areas. While, defenders cannot afford to play inverted/higher up the field to make up for that.

3-3-2



This must be one of the most common 9v9 formations in existence and it's primarily down to the good practice it provides for playing the world's most standardized 11v11 formation: 4-4-2. 3-3-2 has several more issues in eliminating space around the field than it's natural successor in 4-4-2, but is still a simple, effective approach to winning games in 9v9 for managers and coaches who don't want to over-complicate things.

ADAPTABLE FORMATIONS FOR 11v11

- 4-4-2
- 3-5-2

PLAYERS REQUIRED

- Wide midfielders who have attacking flair and talent.
- Strikers who have the ability to work in a pair and be unselfish.
- Good passers around the field. Either defenders or midfielders can effectively control the game with their distribution.

PROS

- Simplistic and naturally effective for a possession styled game.
- In theory, it does not overload any given area on the field.
- Allows an attacking duo to develop together and learn how to play effectively with 2 up top.
- Players don't need to be particularly fast or talented on the ball as necessary coverage should always be near to win the ball back.

CONS

- Lack of clearly defined roles for midfielders. Are they supposed to be more attack-minded or defensive-minded?
- Easily outnumbered in central areas by most other formations. This can become less of an issue if one central midfielder can completely control the game.
- 2 strikers up top can become incredibly isolated, especially if midfielders play right on top of the defenders.
- Restricts players to very specific roles as if they abandon their roles even momentarily, the entire balance of the team is lost and not easily recoverable.

2-4-2

The 2-4-2 is fantastic for keeping possession of the ball, while also prepares players for a variety of different 11-a-side formations including 4-4-2, 3-4-3 and 3-5-2. It's also easily adjustable into a 2-3-1-2 and fantastic for teaching young central defenders, central midfielders and strikers alike how to work effectively in pairs.

ADAPTABLE FORMATIONS FOR 11v11

- 4-4-2
- 3-5-2
- 3-4-3

PLAYERS REQUIRED

- Wide midfielders who have attacking flair and talent.
- Strikers who have the ability to work in a pair and be unselfish.
- Good passers around the field. Either defenders or midfielders can effectively control the game with their distribution.

PROS

- Overloads the midfield, allowing teams to control possession and manipulate the ball effectively.
- Central midfielders can move interchangeably and have a level of freedom not present in formations that restrict them to either a defensive or attacking role.
- Develops players to learn how to effectively work in pairs.

- Although better suited for a possession-styled game, it still works for a counter attacking game if wingers are fast and can get up and down the line.

CONS

- Defenders must be fast as any slip-ups from right/left midfielder will leave the team easily exposed.
- Requires midfielders to be tactically aware of when to join attack vs. defense as their roles are loosely defined.
- The two defenders need to be vocal and strong leaders, otherwise marking may be a massive issue. Most teams will play with a front three, requiring defenders and midfielders constantly to be in communication over who has the opposition's wide players.
- If a defender gets drawn too far wide due to lack of necessary cover, a massive gap in the middle might be exploited by the other team.

4-3-1

The 4-3-1 is one of the best formations to get team used to playing 11v11 football. The standardized way of playing 11-a-side around the world is with a back four; despite the attempted innovations of managers like Roberto Martinez and Pep Guardiola. 9v9 might just be the best time to introduce the arc of the back-four and get teams thinking about the notion that defense is the best form of attack. Although it can look a bit defensive on

paper and requires your team to have the necessary defensive personnel, a fantastic balance can still be achieved.

ADAPTABLE FORMATIONS FOR 11v11

- 4-2-3-1
- 4-3-3
- 5-3-2

PLAYERS REQUIRED

- At least four strong defenders in the squad, otherwise you're better off playing with a three or two.
- Outside defenders and wide midfielders who are fast and can carry the ball up the field.
- Central midfielder who can support attack and not play right on top of the defense.
- A striker who knows how to get into a game even when they get isolated. Striker must also be quick and able to chase down the opposition defenders.

PROS

- Effective for wing play.
- Right/left defenders can push high and take the ball up the field without apprehension about who might cover them.
- If outside defenders can mark opposition wingers and inside defenders can mark opposition strikers/attacking midfielders, the other team's attack is completely shut down.
- Teaches players how to play in a 4-defense system very early in their development.
- Effective for keeping clean sheets.

CONS

- Midfielders need to quickly learn that they have an integral role in supporting the striker in attack. If there's no support, the striker will become extremely isolated.
- Can become overly defensive if outside defenders or central midfielder show no attacking prowess or become static.
- Limits striker to play within a specific, 'chaser' like style.
- With an extra player in defense, you always have at least one less player joining attacks.

Before continuing....check out

BEST FORMATIONS FOR 9V9 (PART 2)

OTHER TIPS

1. PLAY TO YOUR PLAYERS' STRENGTHS

Any formation should always come secondary to the players that you have in your lineup. You cannot play 3-2-3 if you have no wingers, just like you can't play 4-3-1 if you have no defenders. Forcing players into positions that they are uncomfortable with will only stunt their development and cause them to lose confidence in their abilities. You might start off the season thinking you want to play 3-1-3-1 and then lose 8-0 in your first ever 9v9 game and realize 2-3-2-1 is the much better approach based on the players at your disposal. Oh well! At least you learned. But point is, no matter how tactically brilliant your formation may be, if it doesn't suit the players, it will be rendered useless.

2. THINK ABOUT WHAT FORMATION YOU WANT TO PLAY IN 11V11

One of the best tips in deciding on a 9v9 formation is to think about what formation you would want to play if the game were 11v11/what 11v11 formation would best suit your personnel. Once you have that formation figured out, all you have to do is take away two players. That's why many who want to play a standard 4-4-2 play 3-3-2 in 9v9 football. It's also why 3-2-3 is so popular with managers who want to play 4-3-3. Think about

what 11v11 formation would best suit your players and then take away two. For me that's a highly unorthodox 3-4-2-1 being adapted into a 2-3-2-1. There will always be a 9v9 formation tailor-made for whatever kind of crazy, revolutionary 11v11 formation you want to introduce, so get out there and experiment.

3. ENSURE A BALANCE IS MET

Some formations sound better on paper than they work on the field if the wrong tactics are deployed. That is especially the case for lineups that have an influx number of either attackers or defenders. If you do not tactically adjust to play 4-3-1 correctly, your team will lack the necessary attacking verve needed to have a go at the opposition. Instead, they'll spend the entire game with the ball in their own half. The same can easily happen in a 3-3-2 if your midfielders sit too low as the strikers become extremely isolated. Many 9v9 formations like the 3-1-3-1 or 3-2-3 roll off the tongue with perfect symmetry in ways that 11v11 formations could never dream of achieving, but that doesn't mean they are suitable for all teams. Finding that balance will help your team to succeed game in and game out.

4. ROTATE YOUR PLAYERS

You might think you've found the best position for a player, but that doesn't mean they should be restricted to playing there all season long. Even defenders, a position that so few young players actually want to play, should be rotated around even if it's just across all three positions in a back three. If you have a player who you think would make for an excellent striker but can't ever score goals, why not try them in central midfield? Understand that many of the elements that make a good defender, also help to make a good midfielder or a good striker. Very few players play the same position their entire lives and equally few at the 11v11 game play the position they started with in the early days of their playing careers. Manchester City goalkeeper Ederson Moraes was a midfielder just years before going pro with Benfica, Eric Dier was a left-back for Sporting CP before finding his calling as a defensive midfielder at Spurs and Arsenal centre back Calum Chambers was a right winger just two seasons prior to making his move to the Gunners from Southampton. These are just a few examples of why players should never be restricted to just one position and should learn the effective ways to play the game in as many different positions as possible.

CONCLUSION

So there it is, *The Mastermind*'s introduction to formations suited to the 9v9 game. Although a team's personnel should always be taken into consideration before choosing a formation, these six 9v9 formations should allow teams with a lot of different options to play effective football all season long and chop and change their team depending on the situation, opposition or circumstance. For more 9v9 formations, be sure to check out [Best 9v9 Formations Part 2!](#)

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