

# Historical, tactical and structural analysis of the 4:2 defensive play system in handball


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## ABSTRACT

Espina JJ. Historical, tactical and structural analysis of the 4:2 defensive play system in handball. *J. Hum. Sport Exerc.* Vol.8, No. Proc3, pp. S578-S590, 2013. This study aims to show how the 4-2 Defensive Play System in Handball has developed both tactically and structurally over time. Logically, since its first appearance in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s, there have been certain physical, technical and tactical changes. The System has also evolved to be used both in Grassroots Sport (from Junior to Youth) and in situations of numerical superiority. The study begins with a number of diagrams that make it easier to understand the most significant tactical aspects involved. **Key words:** HANDBALL, DEFENSIVE PLAY SYSTEM, DEVELOPMENT, TACTICS.

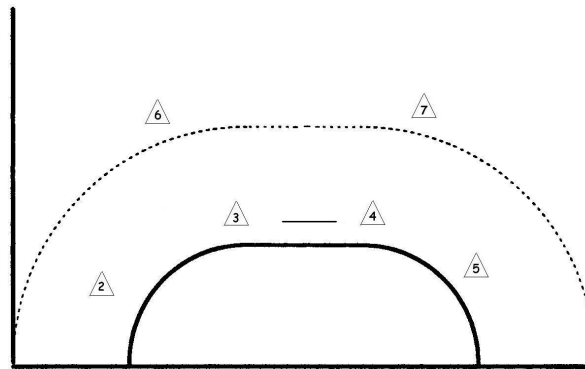
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## BASIC STRUCTURE

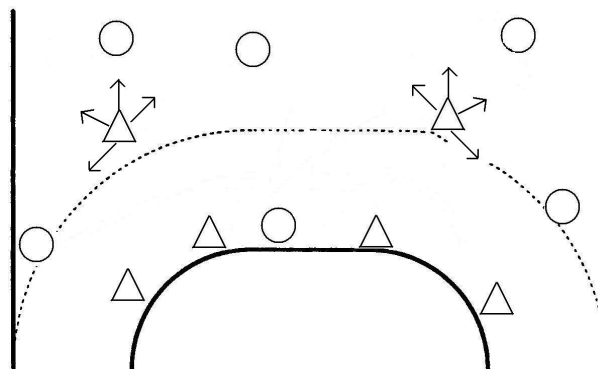
Any study of the 4-2 defensive System is tremendously interesting, both because of the difficulty involved in implementing it correctly and because of the variations that have appeared throughout recent history.

As its name suggests, it basically consists of placing 4 defenders in the front line and two in the second.



**Figure 1.** 4 defenders in the front line and two in the second

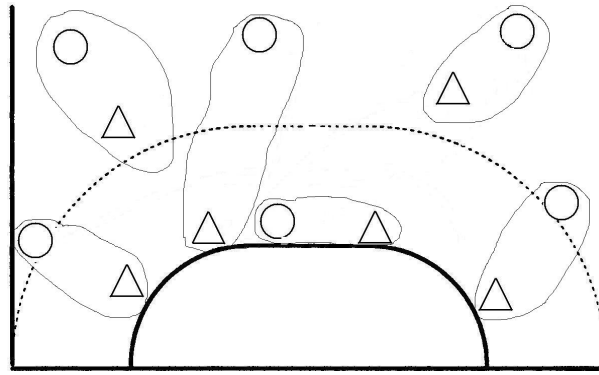
In principle, it is a Zone System, which provides the whole structure with symmetrical depth and makes it very solid. Notwithstanding the variables that we will analyse in the following sections, what we have is a zonal construction designed to provide the depth required by the wing and centre zones (through the two forward players), thus making it easier to mark their attacking counterparts.



**Figure 2.** Two forward players

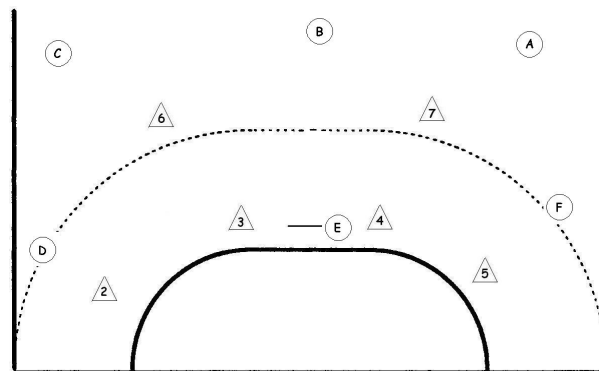
The main task of these forward players is to prevent long-distance shots from the 1st offensive line and hinder the circulation of the ball.

However, its initial focus on zone defence individualises the tasks of all the defenders, due to both the relative distance produced between them and the difficulty involved in both sliding and switching opponents.



**Figure 3.** Prevent long-distance shots from the 1st offensive line

The basic division of responsibilities is as follows<sup>2</sup>:



**Figure 4.** 2-D; 3-B; 4-E; 5-F; 6-C; 7-A

### Origins

Generally speaking, the 4-2 System originated and developed within a specific area. The defensive variant arose in the old Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s as an initial response to the “flat” 6-0 defences used at that time (Román, 1972). In this sense, it took another step (compared to the different 5-1 systems) forward as regards the concept of defence in depth and it initially reaped significant international success, leading the 4-2 System to be recognised throughout the world. Indeed, the system was first seen in 1964 during the 5th World Men’s Handball Championship held in Czechoslovakia (Constantini, 2001). The host team was already a world handball power and obtained excellent results (only losing to Romania, who won the championship, in a close-fought match that ended up 16-15), winning the Bronze Medal by beating the Federal Republic of Germany by 22-15, as well as ending the tournament as the team with least goals against. Here, we should point out that the team let in 81 goals in six matches, giving an average of 13.5 goals against in each match.

<sup>2</sup> The pivot can be marked in three ways, depending on the different Czechoslovakian writers and trainers who carried out its initial development. Some considered that the central defender closest to the circulation of the ball should mark the pivot, while others felt that he should be marked by the both centres in a zone system, according to the position he takes up. Finally others believe that anticipation and change of opponents should be the basis of the marking.

This was all building up to the 1967 Championship in Sweden, where the Czechs played faultlessly to win the Gold Medal, as well as letting in the least goals of all the teams, even less than in the previous Championship with 73 goals in six matches, giving an average of 12.1 goals per match. The results were as follows:

#### Preliminary Stage

Czechoslovakia 25 - France 10.

Czechoslovakia 23 - Tunisia 10.

Czechoslovakia 20 - Denmark 14.

#### Final stage

Quarter Finals:..... Czechoslovakia 18- Sweden 11.

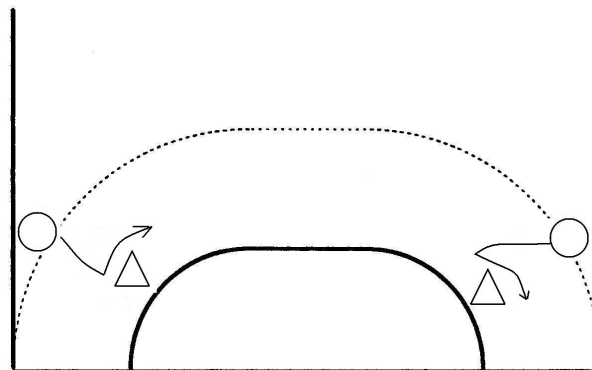
Semi-final:..... Czechoslovakia 19- Romania 17.

Final:..... Czechoslovakia 14- Denmark 11.

During the whole Championship, they were obviously very successful alternating the closed 6-0 with the 4-2 positional systems. This overall approach was similar to that used by the women's teams, so that in the 3rd World Women's Handball Championship held in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1965 the Czech women's team used similar approach to defence as the men (alternating the 6-0 and the 4-2 positional Defensive Systems) and came fourth. However, it is true that, despite the fact that the 4-2 System was new, this result was a step backwards for a team that had won the Gold medal in 1957 (1st World Women's Handball Championship), and the Bronze in 1962 (2nd World Women's Handball Championship). In any case, the decision had been made and, as we have already mentioned, from the late 1960s onwards this defensive system was universally accepted and began to evolve in multiple ways. (Falkowski & Enríquez, 1988). Appendix 1 (taken from the original notes made by Czechoslovakian coaches at the time) highlights the tactical and systematic nature of this approach<sup>3</sup>. They had created what their predecessors called the "Perfect parallelepiped system".

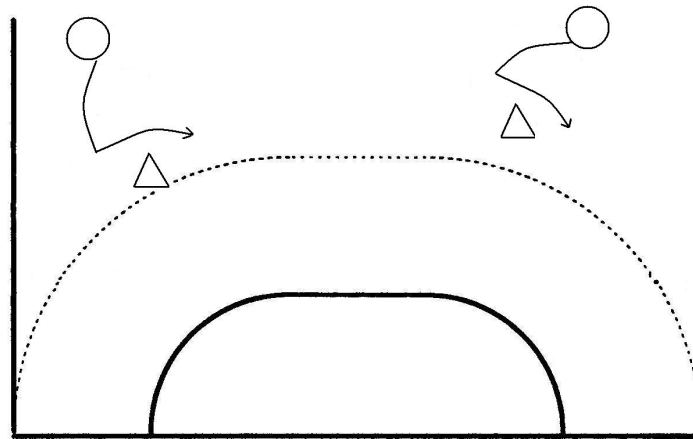
#### *Development of the System*

On the basis of that described in the above section, we first saw the appearance of antidotes or offensive tactical situations designed to attack the 4-2 Defensive System as well as possible. These basically consisted of:

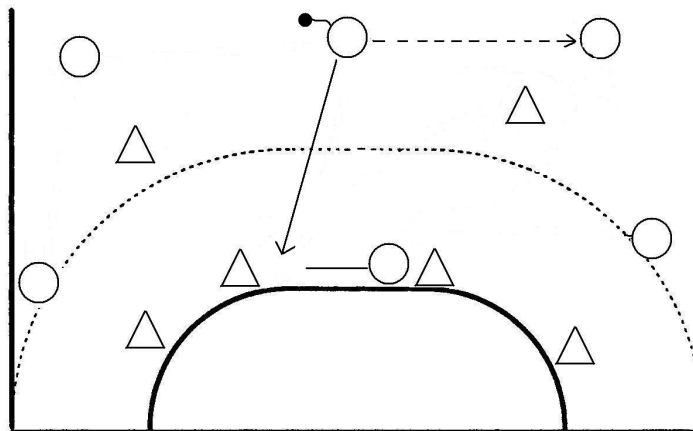


**Figure 5.** The search for 1-1 situations with forwards and wings A

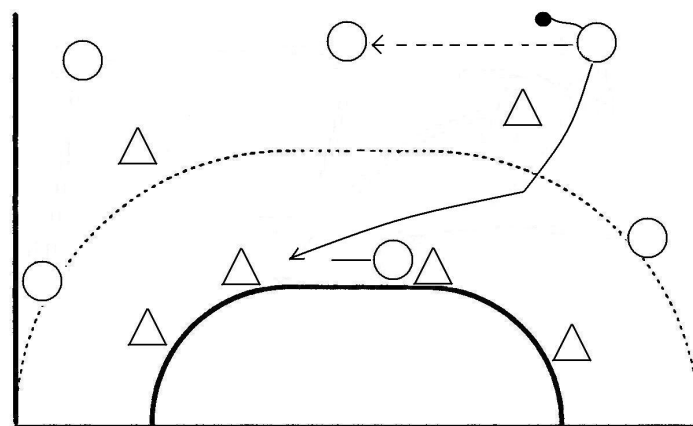
<sup>3</sup> They were published in Spain in Technical Communication N° 16 of the Spanish Handball Federation and dealt with the conference given in August 1970 on the 4-2 Defensive System by the coach Bernd Kuchenbecker at the international Course in Sweden.



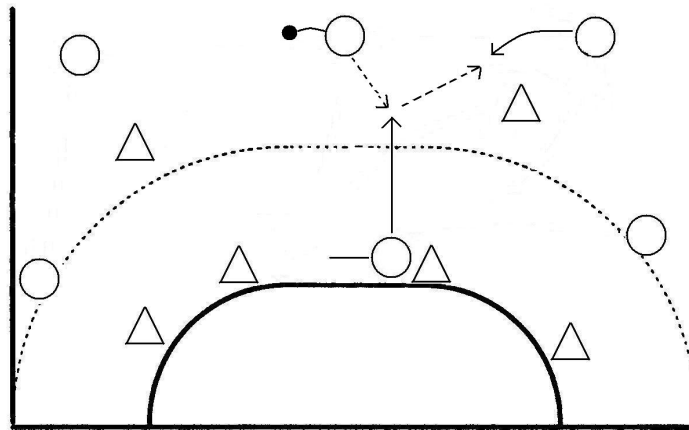
**Figure 6.** The search for 1-1 situations with forwards and wings B



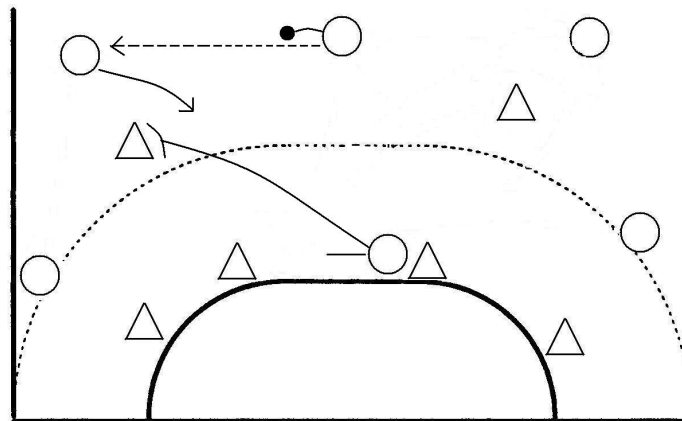
**Figure 7.** The switching of a player from the 1st offensive line to pivot A



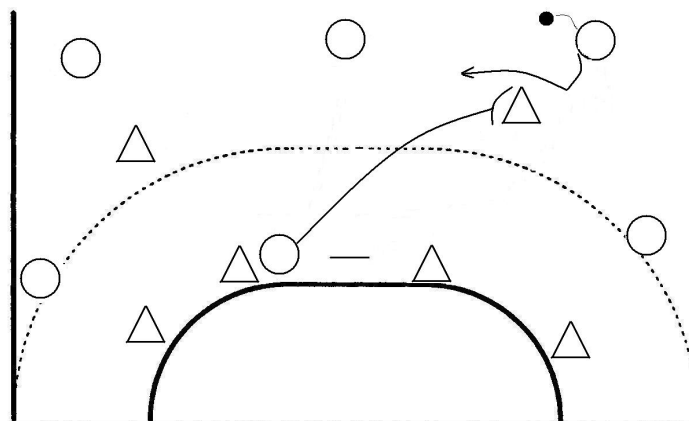
**Figure 8.** The switching of a player from the 1st offensive line to pivot B



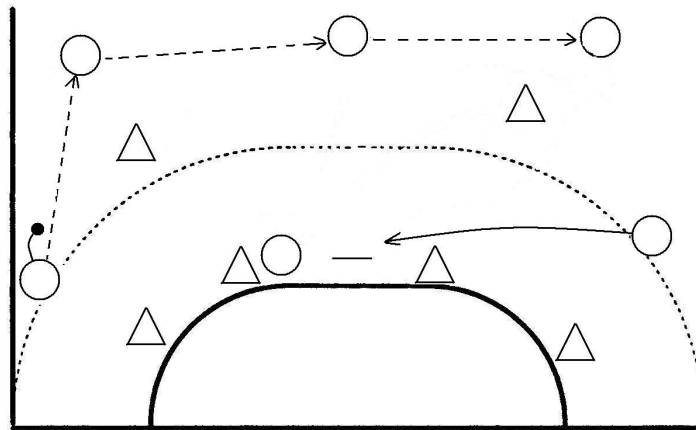
**Figure 9.** The pivot playing between the lines



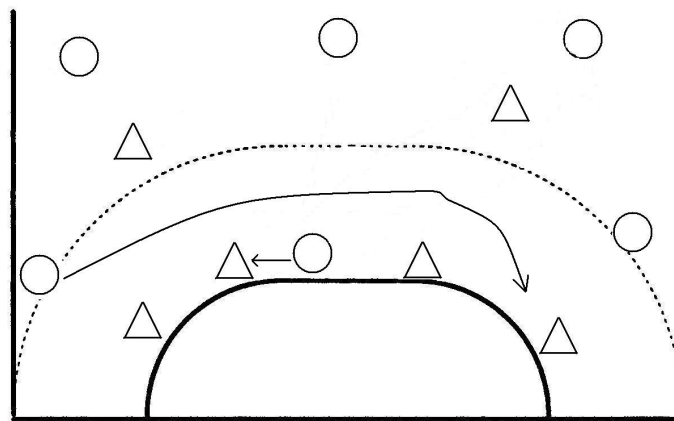
**Figure 10.** Pivot blocking the forward players A



**Figure 11.** Pivot blocking the forward players B

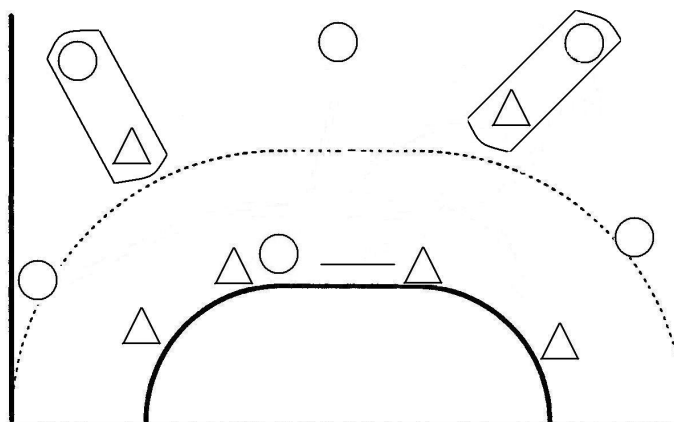


**Figure 12.** Circulation of the wings A



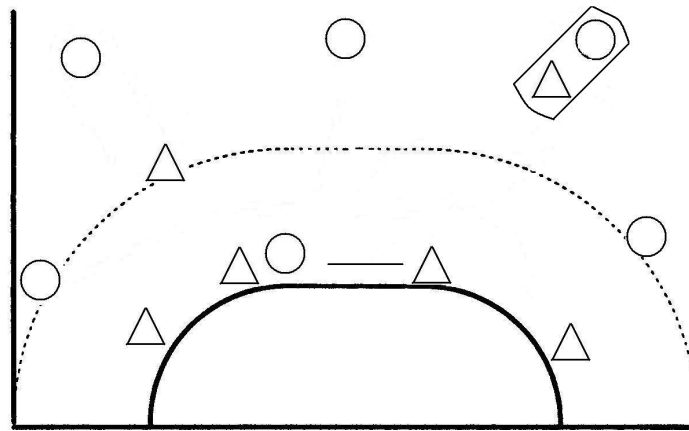
**Figure 13.** Circulation of the wings B

As well as all of the above, the early 1970s saw the cautious introduction of different variants of the zonal 4-2 Defensive System throughout the world. These were as follows:

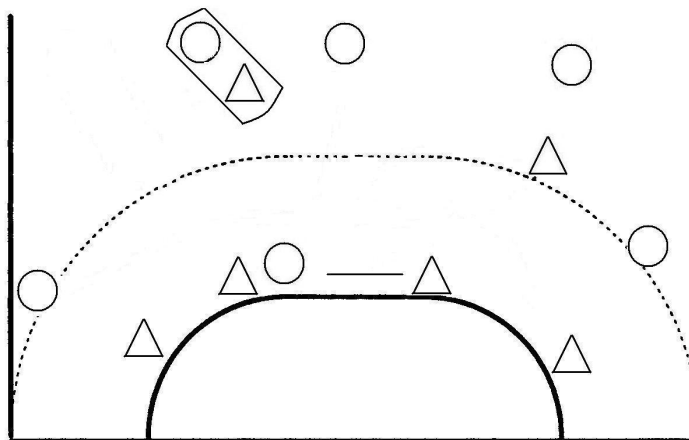


**Figure14.** 4-2 Defensive System – total mixed

This clearly shows that the forward players mark Man-to-Man.



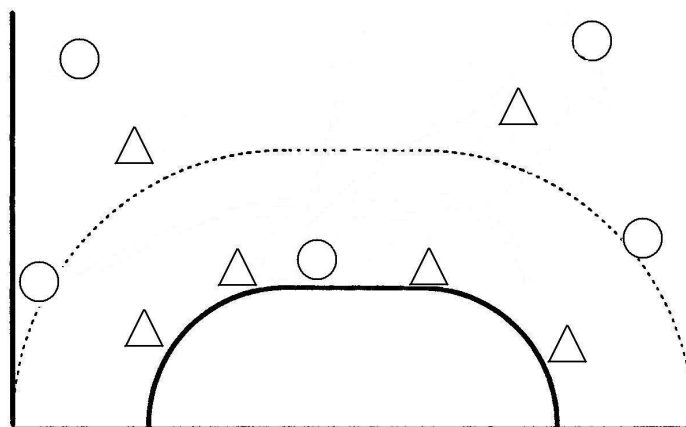
**Figure 15.** 4-2 Defensive System – partial mixed A



**Figure 16.** 4-2 Defensive System – partial mixed B

It consists of one of the players furthest forward marking his immediate opponent Man-to-Man, while the other does so by zone.

The three methods described (4-2 zonal, 4-2 total mixed and 4-2 partial mixed) have been alternated up to our days, not only in the old Czechoslovakia, but all over the world (Gutierrez, 1998; Espina, 2005), and are applied to suit the characteristics and approach of each team. However, we should admit that, in general, they are more accepted in their country of origin than elsewhere, where they are less popular, or rather only used on specific occasions in situations of numerical superiority involving 6 against 5 (Figure 17) or situations when a result is needed quickly etc.



**Figure 17.** 6 against 5

From a geo-handball point of view, it is interesting to see how the 4-2 System developed after 1993 (Späte, 2005), when Czechoslovakia broke up into the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Espina, 1996; García, 2005). Since then, the 4-2 system has been much more widely used in the former, while it has become less popular in the latter. (Román, 2000). We would also like to underline the fact that the System is widely used by teams in Grassroots Sport (from Junior to youth), as it helps them to learn the basic concepts of individual and collective defence tactics, as well as creating (especially at these levels, where it is sometimes difficult to attack with any certainty of success) problems for the opponents (Bayer, 1983; Ávila, 2005).

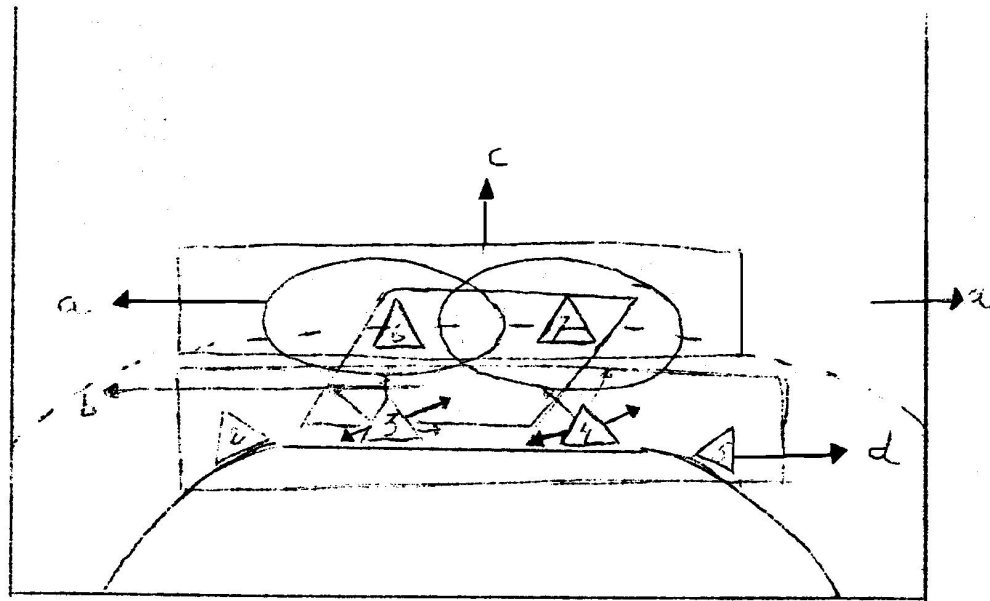
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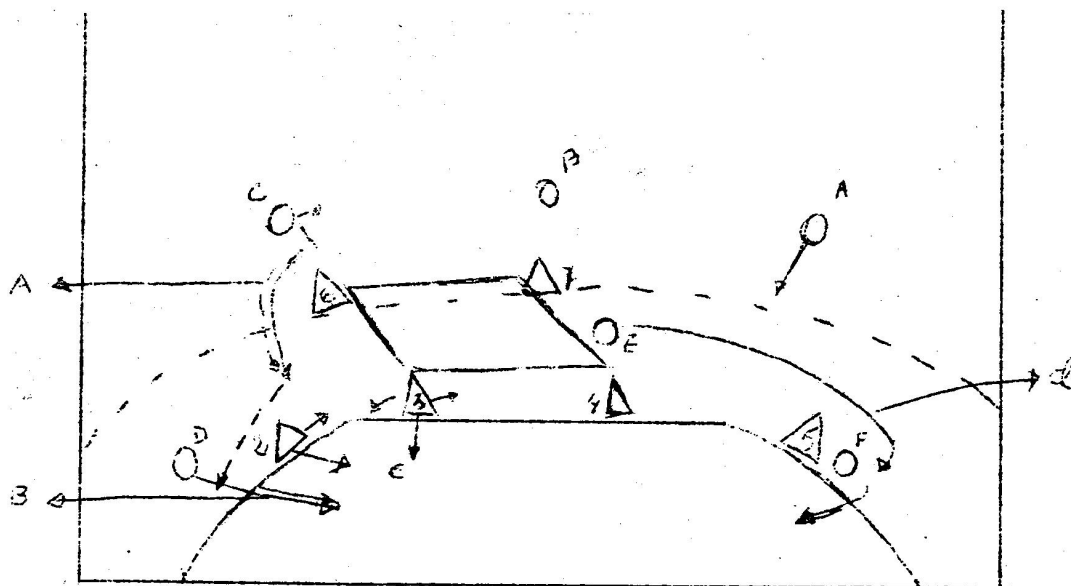
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## APPENDIX 1

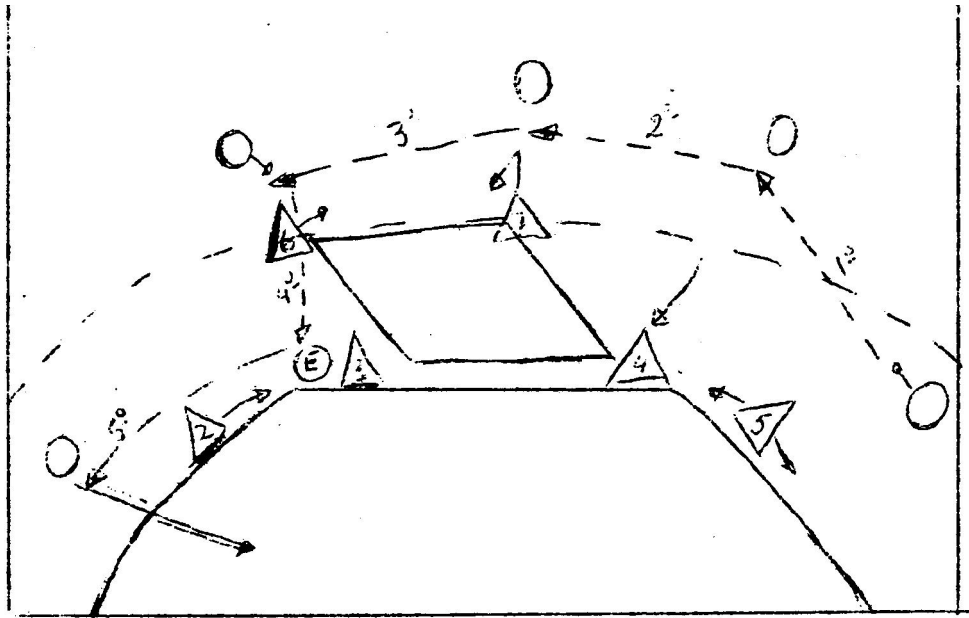
### 4:2 defensive play system



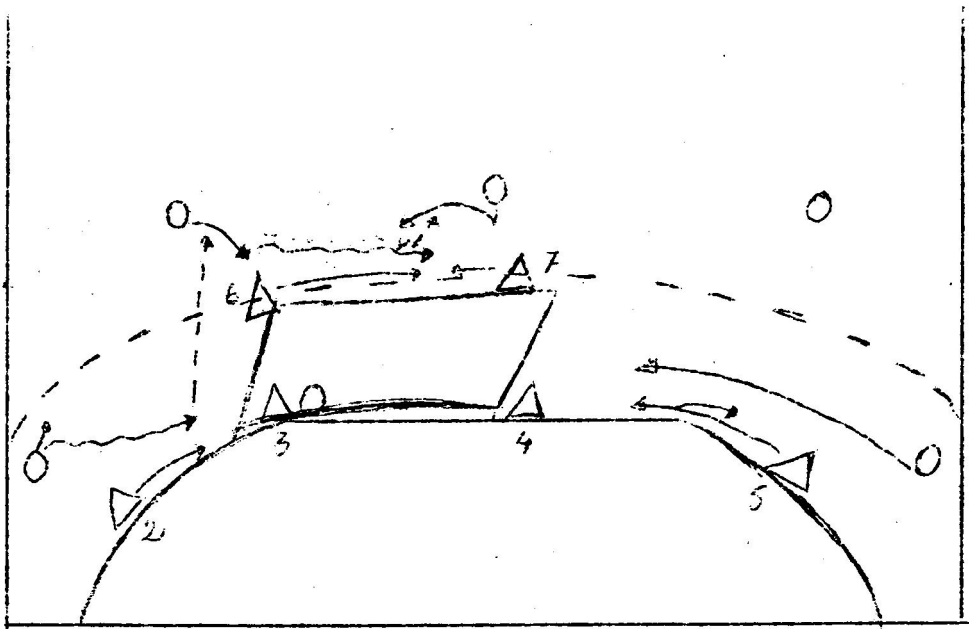
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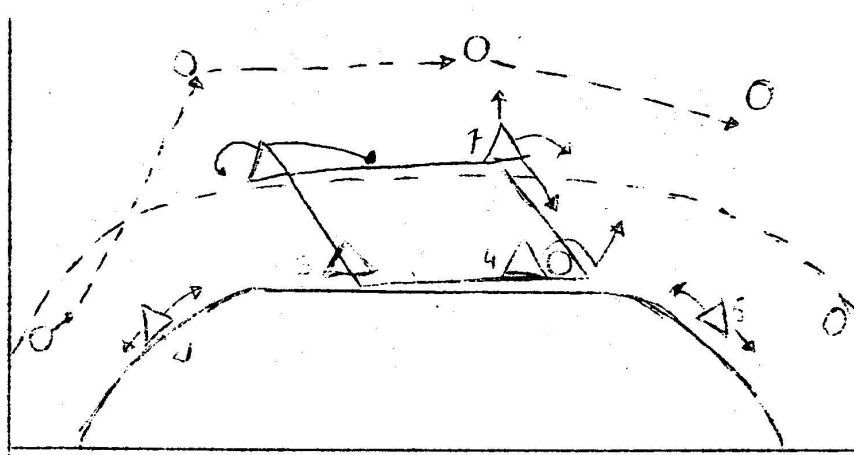
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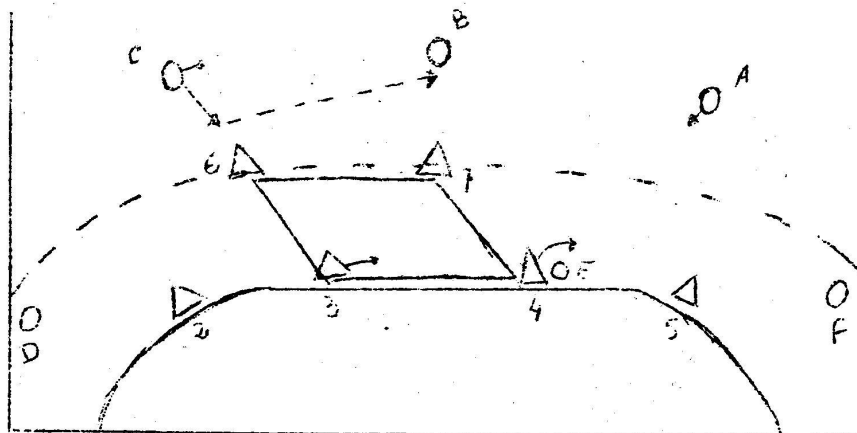
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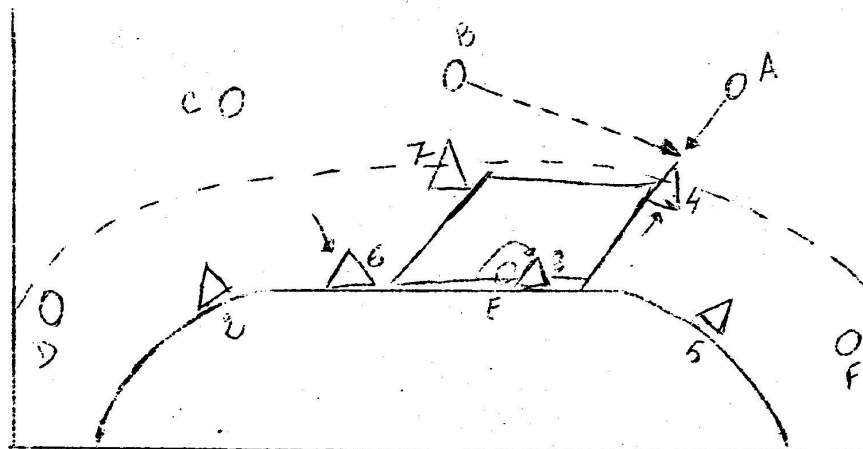
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GR N° 6



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