

Why no high level teams playing a 4-2 system?

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It's another trip to the (e)mail bag for this post. The coach of a boys' junior varsity team has a question about running an international 4-2.

As a JV coach ... I've found that the learning curve (especially for the boys) is so steep, that simplicity is often the best strategy. This is why I've moved to an international 4-2 system (with no back row switches). After 2 seasons of experimentation (with both the girls and the boys JV teams), I think I've stumbled onto something that really works.

Several refs and coaches have asked me about it. Most raise a scoffing eyebrow as if it were too simple. But the scoreboard doesn't lie. Simple works. Defense (with no penetrating setter) works. And since JVs so often overpass, the front row setter jump-and-dump turns that negative into a positive almost every time.

I know we're not supposed to make the players fit the system, but rather the other way around. However, there is virtually no combination of players that does not fit into my 4-2. Plus, my kids can run slides in six rotations, which is about the only jumping technique (i.e., the lay-up) that they come in knowing already, and which virtually no other JV team in our area ever sees coming at them.

Because we had so much success with it at the JV level, our girls varsity is probably going to run it next season.

Is there a question in all of this? Yes.

Why don't we see the 4-2 more often at higher levels? Is it really too simple? Has anyone ever won championships using the international 4-2? I mean, sure, there are only 2 hitters. But a 5-1 is a 4-2 half of the time. And in high school, unless you have a lefty who can hit, how many points does your opposite really account for? (Not much, in my experience). And at the higher levels, it isn't difficult to find a reliable back row attack. Plus, the gains you get in having 3 solid defenders the entire time, without the setter having to worry about vacating right back too early is, well, hard to quantify. But I think they're real. I think that's why we usually win, even with kids who don't come in with club experience and only so-so athleticism.

First of all, sometimes winding back the clock and making use of old systems and strategies is exactly what's called for in a given situation.

Second, the 4-2 system (usually the international version) is very frequently employed in developmental situations. For example, I know from seminars that Volleyball England used it at the national level when I was over there in 2012-15. I think they employed it up to U15s (4-2 first, then moved to 6-2). They didn't go to a single setter system until U17s.

I've heard of others who follow a similar pattern. The VE idea was to use the 2-setter system to develop a greater number of setters in the pipeline. I've seen the same idea elsewhere too. That is definitely worth thinking about in a high school JV situation.

Why not at higher levels?

Now, the question is why you don't see the 4-2 in use at higher levels of play.

As you move up the levels of play, you quickly reach the point where transitions from the back row are not a major issue. This is especially true in the men's game where they can so easily cover the ground. Yes, you'd probably get better defense in Zone 1 if you always had a dedicated defender there. Certainly, that's better than someone who tends to cheat and bail out regularly. It's a trade-off, though.

I'd venture to say that most coaches would favor a single setter system if asked the question. The consistency of set location and tempo, of play-calling and decision-making, and of leadership on the court having just one setter are generally seen as superior to a 2-setter system. In the US women's collegiate game you do see some teams using a substitution-based 6-2 (setters only play back row). They want to always have three hitters at the net and/or to have a bigger block. I wrote more about the 6-2 vs 5-1 decision [here](#).

And, of course, in both the upper level men's college game and in all international play (FIVB rules) you don't have the subs to use that kind of approach. You'd have to have both setters also be hitters to be able to run a 6-2. And there just aren't all that many players who are both good setters and good hitters.

Further, since good setters tend not to be as big as the hitters, having them in the front row all the time in a 4-2 system means always having a somewhat smaller block. It also means they probably aren't as effective as hitters out of the back row as a more traditional Opposite. Of course there are always exceptions.

The right focus?

I think the bigger question in all this for me is why the focus on winning for a JV team?

Simple can be very good. It can also be detrimental. You put a bunch of new 12s players on the court in a game and they quickly realize that the best way to win is to put the first ball over the net every time. That gives the other team the opportunity to make the mistakes. Very simple. But not really what we want them doing, right?

To my mind, the purpose of a JV squad is to prepare players to play in the varsity team. If we win, but do not serve the greater purpose, what's the point? With that in mind, I would want to know how well an international 4-2 with no back row switching does that.

I'm not saying it doesn't. Far from it!

I can see a number of developmental advantages to the system. That's why you see it at the national level in places. But by the time players are high school aged they run a 6-2 with setter/hitters. The 4-2 up through U14s prepares players to play a 6-2, which then prepares them to play 5-1 at what is effectively high school varsity age.

So, bottom line in all this is how well the 4-2 approach prepares players for whatever system or style of play is used at the varsity level. If it does the job well, great! If not, then a rethink is in order.

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Do you train a specific error or failure recovery system with your teams? If not, it's worth thinking about, and here's one you could use.

Here's a simple drill that can work well on MB developing good eye work in their block - and also for Setters going against them.

Here's a variation on the butterfly drill based around downballs that could be a useful warm-up for teams with ball control.

Here is a Volley Tennis (vallis) variation involving 3 players per side and 2 balls in action incorporating both 1-touch and 3-touch play.

Here's a video with some interesting elements around training the spike approach, though I definitely don't like the ending.

