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100th EDITION

WELCOME TO THE 100TH TOTAL FOOTBALL ANALYSIS MAGAZINE

- just saying that feels mad, to be honest.

Let me tell you a bit of a story...

In April 2018, I started Ronnie Dog Media - a good friend of mine, a good friend of his and myself all put money in and Total Football Analysis was born.

In the likes of Lee Scott (now a scout for Southampton and Sport Republic) and David Selini (assistant coach to Kim Hellberg at Varnano in Sweden), I felt we had something that was a bit different and we might be able to fill that gap for people who wanted a little bit more than just a match report.

And that was the original aim - match analysis, trying to explain what was happening on the pitch to people who wanted to understand tactics a bit better. Player analysis and scout reports on players we felt people might want to know more about. Data-driven pieces to show how numbers in football can help tell stories.

The first six months were cool - though, when I look back at what our pieces looked like visually compared to now they are chalk and cheese as you would expect - cool, but making zero money whatsoever and that initial stake we'd put in was starting to run very, very close to empty.

Come my 40th birthday in the October of that year, I was on the verge of a breakdown. I was getting properly ill. I could not see a way past early January for us - the money was going to run dry unless we started turning some of this stuff into revenue and I could not see how that would work. I watched "The Greatest Showman" (as you do when you have just turned 40) and I remembered an idea Lee and I had thrown around about doing a digital magazine.

I don't know how or why Hugh Jackman managed to get me to recall it, but he did.

Three weeks later, issue #1 was on sale and, incredibly, people were buying not just that issue but committing to us for an annual membership.

I also hammered it out to every single email address I could find for someone inside a football club who might be interested in this kind of thing - we had emails back from Man United and Arsenal within an hour of it landing telling us that they liked it and we must continue. I'll always be grateful for that confidence boost.

There was a chink of light. I might be able to turn this around.

In February 2019, we moved the daily content behind a paywall - we risked alienating people that wanted to read things for free (which was still very much the norm four years ago) but people still backed us and the membership was growing, slowly.

It was around this time that people were getting in touch with us asking for help. Our first paid consultancy gig was actually with Adidas, randomly - helping their futures team with a couple of bespoke reports.

Soon after that, clubs and agencies were asking us to help with various things. We had to build a small, boutique consultancy business.

Fast forward to December 2023 and we are still here - pushing out our 100th digital magazine, the asset that gave us a chance to stay in business.

I've been incredibly fortunate with the people who have passed through the TFA doors over the years - many of which who have gone to get full-time jobs in the professional game at various levels or started their own business or even ended up working in the media writing about this kind of thing. The amount of books written by the TFA alumni (as well as many of the existing squad) makes me incredibly proud. Without them, none of this would have been possible as we wouldn't have been able to grow a strong base of members.

I'm not going to call out particular writers as we'll be here all day - so many of the best we've had and still have are included in this special issue. But, one person does deserve a mention because his work often goes unnoticed. Twice a month, Jamie Brackpool puts designs the latest issue and turns it into something that we hope you all enjoy. The covers are all his own work and, personally, are a cool feature.

Jamie took this role on from Sylvie Devaney some time ago and again, without Sylive, we'd have not got this far.

And of course, Lee Scott - I met Lee when we were both messing about writing about Football Manager. Without his actual ability in this area, we'd have got nowhere. I like to think of us like Brian Clough and Peter Taylor. Lee has the best football eye I have come across (Taylor) and I am more of the front man (Clough) who gets things done. But without Lee, we'd have never been able to keep a standard of content that was credible - where I am weak he is strong and, possibly, vice-versa.

So, the 100th issue - what is it?

I asked a special squad to go through all the pieces we've run in all 99 magazines to date and pull out the very best ones. So this 100th edition is what we feel are the best 18 pieces we've ever published.

We hope you enjoy them - and thank you to every single person who has supported us over the first 100. To quote Graham Gooch, the former England cricket captain, we want to turn this into a daddy hundred which means, hopefully, we'll be around for a lot more.

Chris Beaumont // Founder // Total Football Analysis

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JUDE BELLINGHAM



BIRMINGHAM'S
PRODIGY

DOMAGOJ KOSTANJŠAK // @DKOSTANJSAK

Nowadays the influx of home-grown players on the very biggest stages in Europe has somewhat dipped when compared to the years gone by. This is the result of big clubs getting richer and therefore resorting to buying talent instead of necessarily grooming it. Similarly, it's the reason why smaller clubs can't really afford to keep their prodigies for a longer period of time since sooner rather than later, they will receive an offer they simply cannot refuse which will see their youngsters snatched away.

But so far, Birmingham City, a club playing in the second tier of English football or in the Championship, are grooming a very special player – Jude Bellingham. But as expected, his extraordinary talent has already attracted some of the big European fish and the likes of Manchester United and Chelsea have reportedly even sent bids his way.

This tactical analysis will be a scout report that will aim to dissect Jude Bellingham's best traits and abilities, giving you a comprehensive analysis of his player profile and the tactics he's used in over at Birmingham.

PLAYER OVERVIEW

Despite being just 16 years of age, Bellingham can already boast a plethora of different abilities and skills. He could probably be best described as a box-to-box midfielder that offers a similar output in both attack and defence, relying on his technical prowess, excellent first touch and tackling abilities to aid Birmingham and their tactics.

He's also quite a good passer of the ball and possesses a dose of strength and aggressiveness that comes in handy both on and off the ball. With such a versatile skill set, Bellingham has already been used in various different positions across the middle of the park as well as out wide in the forward line.

With that being said, he is still far from a finished product and will have to improve his finishing and creative solutions in and around the opposition's box. Naturally, at such a young age, he has not yet acquired that leadership mentality nor is his decision-making when on the ball completely ironed out.

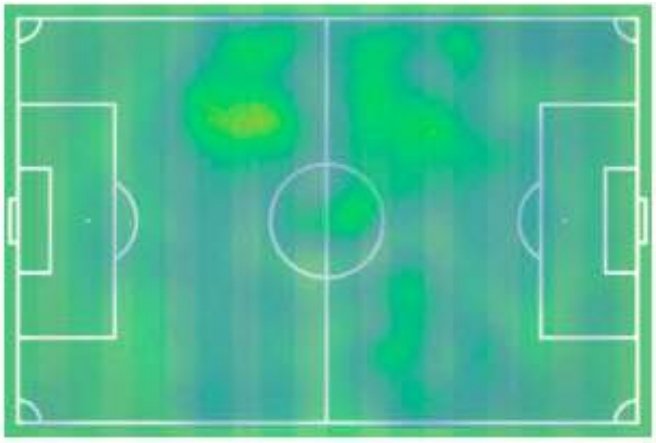
But we have to keep in mind that at 16, it would really be too much to ask of a young man. So without further ado, this tactical analysis scout report will now turn to Bellingham's tactics and will go into his most prominent traits in more detail.

TECHNICAL PROWESS AND POSITIONING

Even though we described Bellingham as a player who can contribute to both sides of the coin – assisting the attack and the defence respectively – a large portion of his player profile is dominated by his excellent technical prowess.

Bellingham has a great first touch and the skills to control the ball in tight areas and create space by eliminating the opposition markers either in a clear-cut 1v1 situations or even when he's collapsed upon by multiple players.

Usually, in a more advanced state of play when Birmingham are on the attack and have the opposition either pinned down or they're already progressing towards the final third, Bellingham will position himself in between the lines or out wide. But being a box to box type of midfielder, it doesn't really come as a surprise to see him across all of the pitch.



We can see this trend in the heatmap above. He tends to either drop deeper to assist the build-up by providing his teammates with additional passing channels and recycling possession or surge forward and look to exploit the space in between the opposition's lines to advance the play on a higher platform and ultimately closer to the goal.

Generally speaking, we won't really see him surge into space and behind the defensive line, as he averages only 1.2 progressive runs in the ongoing campaign and across all competitions, but his movement can often disrupt the defensive shape of the opposing team and ultimately create space to exploit.

We can see an example of that below as Bellingham first drifts into his respective half-space, as we've mentioned he likes to do, immediately gets the attention of the opposition's defender and once he is successfully pulled out of the defensive line, the youngster uses his pace to run straight into that pocket of space.



Still, even though this specific type of movement doesn't really happen at all times, it clearly depicts that the 16-year-old is already thinking a lot when moving across the pitch and recognises what a certain situation demands of him.

This is definitely one of his strengths as his decision-making off the ball seems highly developed despite his young age. For instance, let's take a look at the following example where Birmingham are in the middle of a transitional attack and Bellingham is already bursting forward along with his teammates.

But he quickly recognises that it will be difficult to progress the ball safely from the position it's currently at and despite everyone else moving forward, he stops and drops deeper to open an additional outlet for his teammate and enables the ball to be moved into an unmarked area.



From there, after receiving the ball, he can continue running at the defence with pace and intent, fully utilising what's probably the best attribute of his already vast arsenal – his dribbling abilities.

Bellingham is really dangerous when isolated with his opposition and will often, as we've mentioned earlier in this tactical analysis scout report, beat his marker in a straight-up duel. This is why, as part of his coach's (Pep Clotet) tactics, he will often be sent out wide where he can create a dangerous opportunity.

He's averaging 4.04 dribbles in the ongoing campaign with a fairly impressive success rate of 58.2%, meaning that he completes more than two dribbles per game. And taking into consideration that Wyscout only registers 1v1 duels and not when the player is beating

multiple opponents, this figure hardly does him proper justice.

When starting out wide, Bellingham has the ability to avoid pressure from the opposition and set himself up for success when running into the final third or into the box. You can see a clear example below where the youngster beats two opponents at the same time and proceeds to run near the box before deploying a cross to his teammates.



And this is no isolated case either, as the stats have already shown. But even more impressively, he seems to be able to do it on both flanks with great success. We can see him do exactly the same thing on the opposite side of the pitch.

But it's important to note that this move or rather tendency is slowly turning into a trademark move of sorts. He receives the ball either in the half-space or by the touchline and then proceeds to run at the opposition, dribbling his way through, beating the marker and then sending a (usually) low cross into the area.



Once his final ball improves enough to consistently impact the game and alter the result, Bellingham can truly become a genuine threat every time he's in possession and charging the opposition. At the moment, he's already successfully finishing 55.3% of his actions with an average of 72.32 but that figure is bound to go up with time.

DEFENSIVE STYLE OF PLAY

It would be impossible to talk about Bellingham and not mention the defensive aspect of his player profile. While he is a great dribbler of the ball and can be an asset in attack, it's his defensive contribution that makes him such a well-rounded player at the tender age of just 16.

Currently, he is averaging 9.56 defensive duels with 63.1% success rate, which is a decent figure and already makes him a formidable defender to face. However, his defensive style of play, that is also a big part of Birmingham's overall tactics, can be best described as extremely aggressive.

Bellingham can often be seen charging the opposition in an attempt to quickly snatch the ball away, pressing relentlessly even deep into the enemy territory and trying to turn defence into attack as quickly as possible.

This brings us to an important part of his skill set – recoveries. Currently, he's averaging 6.39 with 55.2% happening in the opposition's half, which is just another indication of his aggressive player profile. Mostly, he won't shy away from a high-risk, high-reward sliding tackle to muscle the other player off the ball and create a turnaround in play.



You can see a clear example of that in the image above. Bellingham breaks Birmingham's defensive shape in order to engage the player on the ball, slides into the challenge and then proceeds to run forward once possession has been restored for his team.

On average, he makes 1.28 sliding tackles with 60% success rate, meaning that more often than not, he will succeed. But this is not only visible in his own half, as we've already mentioned, and his aggressive nature can be seen further up the pitch as well, as shown by the following example.

Bellingham goes into a risky slide from behind but still not only takes the ball away but gets up, shields it effectively and recycles possession to his teammate once the opposition player has been shaken off.



And this is actually what describes him best – bold, aggressive and a risk-taker in all aspects of his player profile. This tendency to engage is visible in all stages of play, regardless of whether Birmingham have just lost possession in the opposition's half or are camped in their own.

The following example illustrates how he once again moves out of the organised defensive shape in order to aggressively press the ball-carrier. Even though this doesn't always guarantee the ball is intercepted and can be risky, it's clearly a part of his profile and the tactics of his coach.



On a similar note, the final example shows him chasing the ball and tackling two opposition players until he can finally snatch it away. His relentlessness to regain possession for his team is evident.

After engaging and forcing the first player off the ball, he continues his run to do the same to the second player, this time exiting the duel with possession and playing it in his teammate's path to continue the attack.



Passing

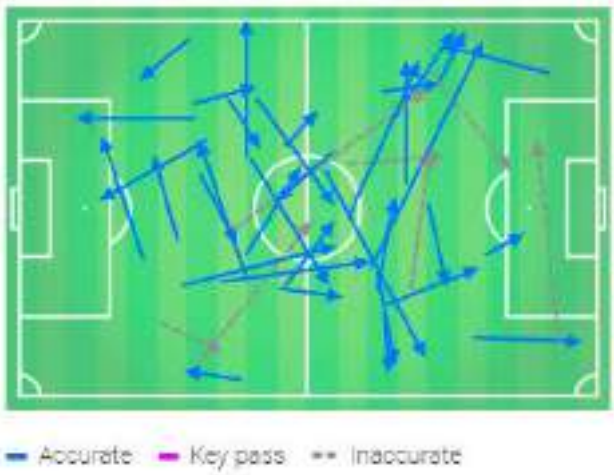
The final part of this tactical analysis scout report will focus on Bellingham's passing abilities which are probably the least exciting part of his impressive player profile. Generally speaking, his passing can be described as decent and still developing and for that reason, not nearly as impressive as the rest of his repertoire.

But still, even with that being said, he will often be involved in both the build-up and the progression of the ball, which we can see in the following passing graphs from games where he had a bigger role throughout the clash.



The first image shows us Bellingham at the very centre of everything that's happening on the pitch and more importantly, we can see that some of his strongest passing links come with players on higher platforms as he sprays the ball wide and diagonally forward but mostly in an attempt to progress it further up the pitch.

On average, he sends out 10.07 forward passes with 58.9% accuracy and 5.26 backwards passes with 93.2% accuracy. The tendency to move the ball forward is already visible and the same can be confirmed by one of his passmaps from the ongoing season.



While he doesn't complete an absurd number of passes nor is he the most accurate of passers out there – with 77% average accuracy – that could have something to do with that willingness to take risks and try and penetrate the lines when in deeper areas.

He also sends 4.6 passes into the final third with 60% accuracy and 1.99 into the box with 38.5% accuracy. And this is exactly where the problems start to arise. Bellingham seems to still lack the creativity and decision-making in the final third and in and around the opposition box.

This is emphasised even further by his 0.2 through balls with 50% accuracy and 2.91 long balls with 43.9% accuracy. When he's presented with an option to send his teammate into space via an accurate threaded ball when he's high up the pitch, he either opts against it or can't execute it properly.

We can see an example of that below. Bellingham is in possession out wide and while he has the vision to identify his target and see the channel through which to send the ball, he still puts too much power on it and sends it into a goal-kick.



But in most situations, as the data proves to us, he won't even attempt such passes but will rather recycle possession. However, it's not that his passing is bad, but rather still in development and can be effectively used when combined with his other traits.

For example, the following image shows a great sequence of action from Bellingham and puts all his strengths on display. Firstly, he receives the ball out wide and in an advanced position on the pitch, just as we've already highlighted in this tactical analysis scout report, and then uses his dribbling to beat his marker and progress the ball.

Once that has been done, he can thread it behind the opposition's backline and into the path of his teammate who's surging into the newfound space since both markers are fixated on Bellingham.



Unfortunately, just like with most of his great passing actions, this doesn't really happen nearly as often enough to be categorised as a standard part of his arsenal.

CONCLUSION

The main advantage Bellingham has over other wunderkids of the world is the fact that he's already tallying a lot of first-team action over at Birmingham City. While game time would often come scarcely for almost any other 16-year-old youngster, he is already having the chance to play week in week out in a relatively competitive environment that is the English Championship.

His technicality on the ball and fantastic defensive skills make him a well-rounded player that could be appealing to most top-tier teams across Europe and the mounting interest at such an early stage of his career is not at all surprising.

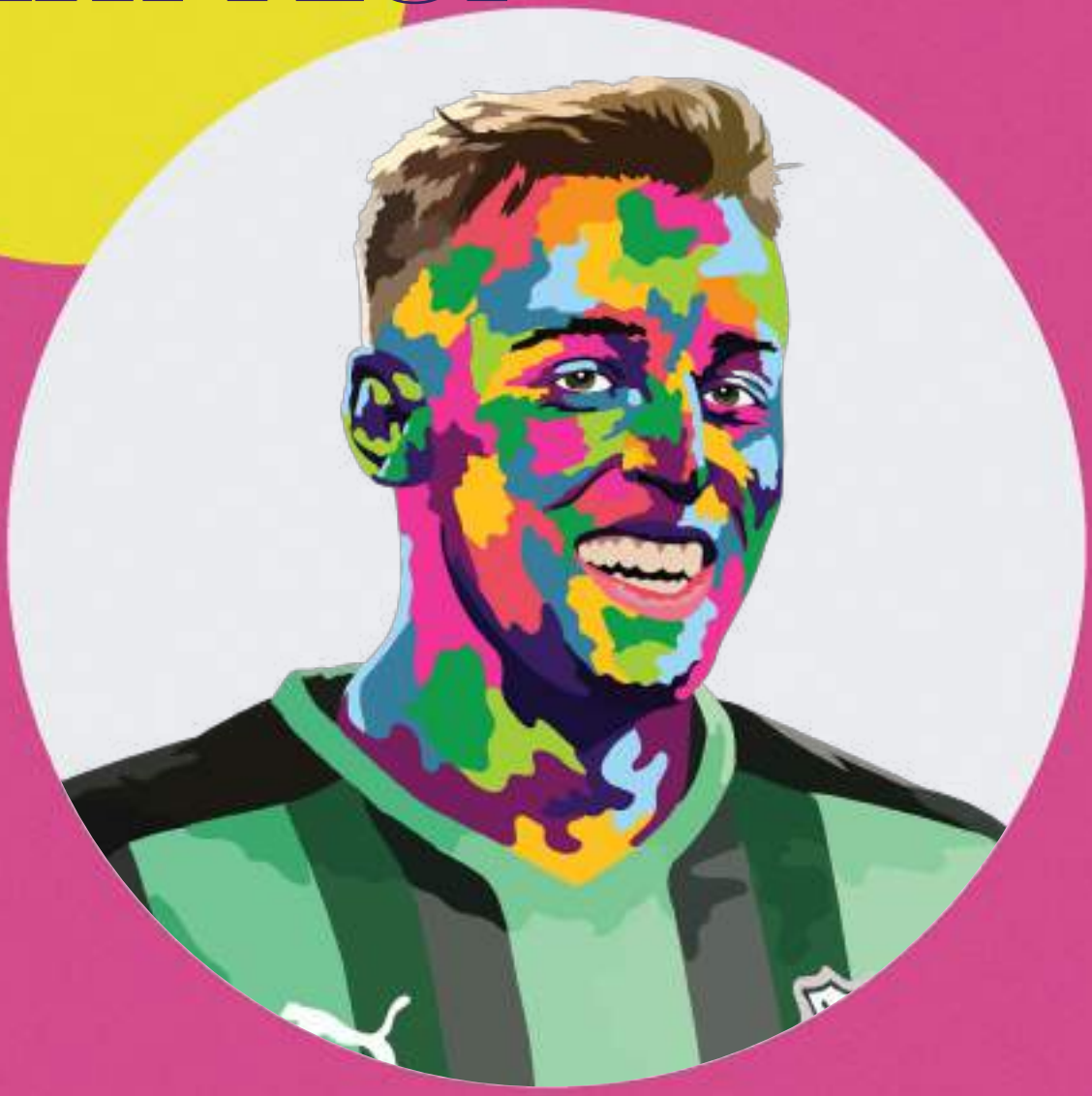
Once he polishes his passing abilities; becomes more comfortable and decisive when in possession, he can finally utilise his skills to their fullest potential. Bellingham may very well transform into a superstar of the future.

And then it's just a matter of who manages to snatch him up the quickest.



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DAVIDE FRATTESI



HOW CLOSE TO A PERFECT BOX-TO-BOX MIDFIELDER IS HE?

ADAM SCULLY // @ASCULLY24

Italy are entering a new era on the international stage; one of transition, patience and compromise. The old guard is being replaced by a fresher generation of raw talents doused in ambiguity.

Former Man City and Internazionale boss Roberto Mancini is overseeing this changeover of cohorts, but the future of Gli Azzurri looks impeccably uncertain right now as it's yet to be seen whether this new breed of players can maintain the same standards as those who have reached the end of their road on the international stage.

One player that is part of this new generation of exciting young talents in Italian football is Sassuolo's Davide Frattesi who has made three appearances for the national side already.

The young midfielder had a wonderful campaign with the Neroverdi, individually, despite the team's struggles to crack on after Roberto De Zerbi and Manuel Locatelli parted ways with the club last summer.

Being a skilled technician in the middle of the park with a bright future ahead at club and international level, we have decided to write a scout report on the 22-year-old using tactical analysis.

It will be an analysis of his style of play, strengths and weaknesses, as well as looking at where the former AS Roma youth product fits into his teams' tactics.

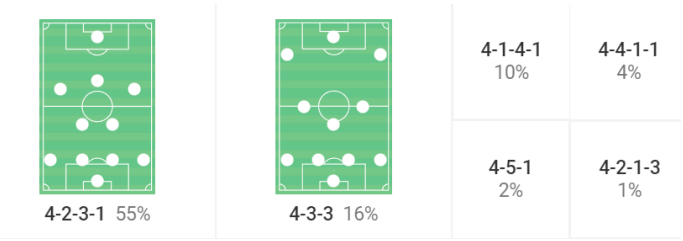
PLAYER PROFILE

Last summer, after an impressive 2020/21 season with Sassuolo in midfield and playing a part in helping Italy lift Euro 2020, Locatelli was moved on to Serie A giants Juventus for a fee in the region of €37.5 million.

During that same campaign, Frattesi was on loan with Monza where the youngster was excellent, bagging eight goals in total and registering two assists in Serie B. It was obvious that he would be Locatelli's replacement at the Mapei Stadium.

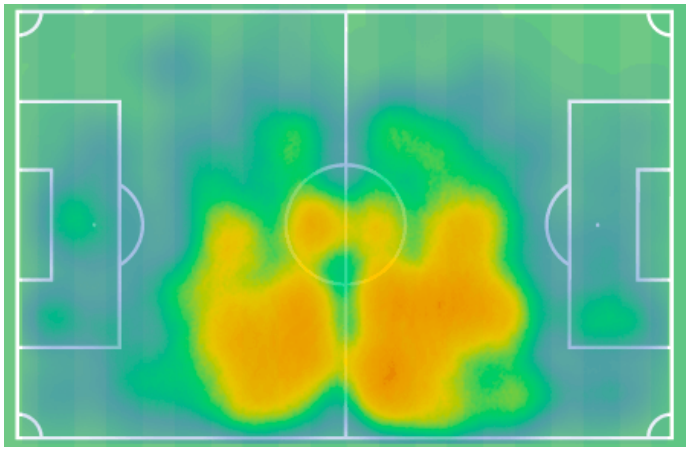
Of course, the two players are very different in terms of their styles of play. Locatelli sits deeper and dictates the play just in front of the backline, while Frattesi advances further up the pitch and is far more active in the final third.

Sassuolo's tactical set-up under Alessandro Dionisi allows Frattesi to use his strengths well. The Italian minnows mainly deployed a 4-2-3-1 over the past year.



However, regardless of whether Sassuolo use a 4-2-3-1 or the slightly more attacking 4-3-3, the shape always resembles the latter during the possession phases.

In the 4-2-3-1, Frattesi plays as the right-sided player in the double-pivot, while he operates as a right central midfielder in a 4-3-3. Regardless of the structure, Frattesi drifts towards the wide areas and halfspaces which can be seen from his heatmap:



As will be analysed later, Frattesi is often positioned between the lines in pockets of

space. At 5'10 (178cm) and 163lbs (74kg), one may get the impression that the midfielder is a bit too clunky to be used in these tight areas, but this couldn't be further from the truth.

Frattesi is truly scintillating with the ball at his feet, capable of taking it on the half-turn in these areas and the 22-year-old even drives out of pressure with his dribbling quite often.

One of the star's most impressive traits is his lack of injuries. The best ability is availability, and Frattesi is almost always fit to play, having featured a total of 36 times in the 2021/22 league campaign for Sassuolo and 38 overall, accumulating a total of 3,016 minutes.

POSITIONAL SENSIBILITY

In the modern game, a midfielder without a sense of positional awareness on the football pitch is just as useless as a car without wheels, even if the engine is made by Ferrari. They can have all the technical skills in the world but remain a liability without the knowledge of how to move into the correct spaces.

Fortunately, Frattesi doesn't have this problem. The Italian international is always moving into the correct spaces to receive the ball or sometimes to merely pin two opponents down.

When Sassuolo have the ball in the middle corridors of the field, Frattesi pushes up into the right halfspace which is his preferred area to occupy. Speaking generally, this would normally be the space between the opponent's left winger and central midfielder.



Having Frattesi in this area of the opposition's defensive block is smart for two reasons. Firstly, the 22-year-old is excellent at receiving the ball with his back to goal and has great body orientation. This allows him to know when the right moments are to take the ball on the half-turn and drive forward.

Being positioned between the lines, solid body posture is a must. If there is enough space, Sassuolo are able to quickly play to his feet in this area, giving Frattesi the chance to open his body up and turn on the ball, allowing him to face forward towards the goal.



Here, for instance, Frattesi is positioned in the right halfspace between the opposition's midfield and backline. But what's more important is the positioning of his body. Being right-footed, Frattesi opens his body up to receive on his strong backfoot which would put him facing toward the goal.

Unfortunately, the touch let him down in this instance but it's a great example of how dangerous Frattesi can be in these areas. Overall, the midfielder is in the 82nd percentile for Serie A midfielders for progressive passes received.

Furthermore, Frattesi is very reliable in these areas. The player was in just the 15th percentile for miscontrols last season, meaning his touch is excellent for the most part.

Also, often when the Italian is positioned in these higher spaces inside the opponent's block, it pins the opponent's winger and central midfielder, allowing the wide player on his team to receive the ball unscathed.



In this example, Frattesi's positioning has pinned the opponent's two midfielders back. Once the ball has been played out to Sassuolo's high fullback, these pair cannot step across because of Frattesi's pinning.

Instead, Lazio's left-back comes across, opening a gap between himself and the left centre-back. Once the Sassuolo player receives the ball, Frattesi quickly makes his run into the gap which has been created.

Without even touching the ball, Frattesi has simply caused a ripple in the opposition's structure merely through his excellent positioning.

FINAL THIRD PLAY

Following on from the previous section, Frattesi's play in the final third makes him stand out amongst the crowd. For someone who starts games in a double-pivot in the 4-2-3-1 base formation, he is often one of the most attacking players on the pitch. Sassuolo's expansive style of play under Dionisi facilitates this greatly.

Frattesi is constantly attacking the depth behind the opposition's backline, causing trouble with his runs from deep and stretching the defence vertically.



Frattesi is quite a well-rounded midfielder in terms of his style of play and abilities, but he also possesses the attacking instincts of a ghosting number '10' such as Dele Alli or Donny van de Beek.

In this example, England failed to plug the gap between their left-back and centre-back. Frattesi spots this and instantly makes a run from deep into the exploitative space to get in behind the backline.

Overall, Frattesi touched the ball 3.03 times in the penalty area per 90 last season, putting him in the 94th percentile for this metric, which is highly impressive.

A lot of the time, Frattesi wouldn't need the ball to be played into space in order to get into the penalty area. The midfielder ranked in the 91st percentile for carries into the box per 90 with 0.47 as well as in the 83rd percentile for carries into the final third per 90. What helped this is his wonderfully powerful dribbling ability.

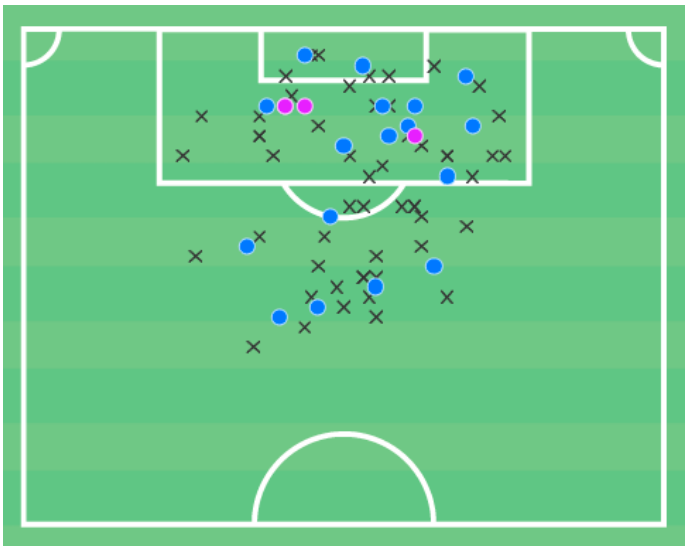


Frattesi carries the ball well, of course, which is an easy conclusion to draw from the previously mentioned metrics.

However, he has very powerful bursts of pace on the ball and uses this to bypass opposition pressure often, such as in the last image. Two Juventus players closed together to gang up on Frattesi with a 2v1 situation. Instead of releasing the ball, Frattesi pushed it ahead of both and burst into space.

The 22-year-old is quite fast as well which certainly helps in these situations to get out of danger with his explosive mini-dribbles. Over the course of the previous Serie A campaign, Frattesi attempted 1.80 dribbles per 90, placing him in the 78th percentile in comparison to the league's other midfielders. Furthermore, he had a success rate of 59.6% which is really solid.

A master of getting into the box from deep, Frattesi also likes to help out in the final third, trying to chip in with a few goals. At Monza in Serie B in the 2020/21 campaign, the Sassuolo youngster bagged eight goals in total which is a great output for a midfielder. This was cut in half once he began receiving minutes with the Neroverdi in a much tougher league.



This data viz plots all of Frattesi's previous 75 shots in all competitions. While there was quite a high volume of strikes taken from outside the penalty area, the Italian also commonly shot inside the box, which is intriguing.

The visual resembles that of a number '10' which is all the more interesting when you realise that Frattesi started in a double-pivot in almost every game last season.

What's even more impressive is his offensive statistics, notably regarding expected goals. Frattesi averaged an xG of 0.21 per 90 in the 2021/22 campaign, placing him in the 95th percentile for midfielders. He also averaged 2.08 shots per 90, getting 0.6 of these shots on target, ranking him in the 96th and 95th percentiles, respectively.

Frattesi's accuracy is definitely something that still needs work though. The midfielder bagged 0.13 goals per 90 for Sassuolo which is an underperformance of his xG by 0.08 per 90.

DEFENSIVE IMPROVEMENTS

From a defensive standpoint, where Frattesi impresses the most is in his reading of the game. The 22-year-old has a wonderful knack for plugging gaps in the backline, especially when there has been a separation as the opponent are in the final third.



Look at this example. The Sassuolo centre-back was struggling to get back into his position. Instead, noticing the lapse in structure at the

back, Frattesi sat in as a temporary right central defender to plug the gap.

The ball was played across by Juventus and Frattesi was there to block the strike from Paulo Dybala. Had he not slotted into the vacated space, the new Roma star would have had an easy tap-in to open the scoring.



Again, Frattesi's positional awareness is excellent on and off the ball, during the attacking and defensive phases.

His style of play is undoubtedly that of a box-to-box midfielder. This can be seen from his number of touches in the opposition's box as well as his own penalty area. As stated earlier in this scout report, Frattesi is in the 94th percentile for touches in the opponent's penalty box.

Meanwhile, he is also in the 83rd percentile for touches in his own box, averaging 3.53 per 90 last season. Only a true box-to-box midfielder would accumulate such numbers.

However, the midfielder still needs to do a lot of improvement in his defensive work. While Frattesi is a very tenacious tackler and is certainly not afraid to get stuck in, he's not great at applying pressure to the opposition. Last season, Frattesi applied pressure to the ball-carrier 16.27 times per 90 for Sassuolo but was only successful in 4.51 pressures per 90, ranking him in the 19th percentile. This was a 27.7% success rate.

Furthermore, Frattesi was dribbled past 0.91 times per 90, putting him in the 81st percentile for Serie A midfielders in the previous campaign.

While he is a wonderfully useful asset in the middle and final third when attacking, Frattesi needs to improve his defensive play desperately.

CONCLUSION

Like his predecessor Locatelli, Sassuolo will probably struggle to hold onto such a gem, but he is at the right level at this moment in time that his current ability allows.

Frattesi plays a lot like Chelsea's Conor Gallagher in the attacking phases — a constant threat in the box and loves attacking the right-hand channels — while he is very reminiscent of Leicester City midfielder Youri Tielemans in the defensive phases — a good reader of the game but can be played around quite easily.

Still incredibly rough around the edges, Frattesi is a wonderfully exciting prospect for the future of Italian football.

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JAMES WARD-PROWSE



MORE THAN JUST
A FREE-KICK SPECIALIST

JACK MANSHIP // @JMANSHIP19

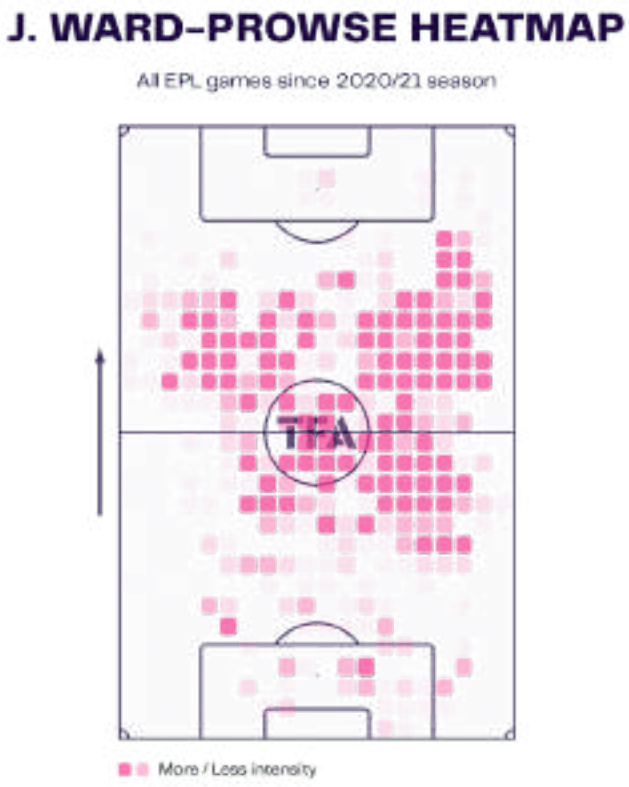
In recent years in the Premier League, there have been very few who can match James Ward-Prowse when it comes to free-kicks. The Southampton skipper has an astonishing 17 free-kick goals to his name currently, just one short of David Beckham's Premier League record. At 28 years of age, the midfielder is in his prime years as a footballer at the top level, but a move away from Saint Mary's has never materialised — be that due to a lack of interest from other clubs or a desire to stay at his boyhood club.

There is, however, the potential for that to change this summer for a number of reasons. The primary reason depends on how Southampton close out their season. They are in danger of being relegated to the Championship for the first time since 2011-12, and if they suffer that fate this season, it may be the catalyst for Ward-Prowse's departure.

This scout report will provide a tactical analysis of Ward-Prowse's ability and the role he plays in Southampton's tactics. There will also be a discussion about how he benefits Southampton and the attributes that make him an important player, in their build-up play for example. Finally, there will be an analysis of which clubs Ward-Prowse could join, based on playing style and club needs, and we will also highlight some possible replacements should he leave the club, using our in-house player similarity tool, xGold. While James Ward-Prowse has been a member of the first team since 2012/13, we will be using his data since 2021/22 to paint a more current picture of his role.

PLAYER PROFILE & SOUTHAMPTON ROLE

James Ward-Prowse, now 28 years old, got his first taste of first-team football back in the 2011/12 season, making appearances in the FA Cup and League Cup — one in each to be exact. The following season was Southampton's first back in the top flight, and that is when we started seeing Ward-Prowse on a more regular basis. As the years have gone by, Ward-Prowse has cemented himself in Premier League folklore thanks to his tremendous free-kick ability, and he has played a vital role in Southampton's midfield. At the time of writing, JWP has a total of 11 caps for England, scoring twice His heatmap below gives us an idea of his position & role in a Southampton shirt.



While he has experience playing on the right flank in the past, Ward-Prowse has become a consistent figure in a central creative role. As we can see from his heatmap, he doesn't have a huge defensive presence in terms of playing deeper, and he rarely gets involved in the box when it comes to attacking. In terms of categorising his position, he tends to play on the right side of the two central midfielders in a 4-4-2 or on the right side of the two deeper central midfielders in a 4-2-3-1. As we will see, these positions also allow him to drift into the right flank to contribute to build up play. He also likes to roam from left to right when his side has

possession as he is often the link moving the ball from one third to the next.



A look at Ward-Prowse's position when his team have high possession.

The image above shows where you should expect to see Ward-Prowse when his team have possession in the opponent's half. His role, in a nutshell, is to play as a deep-lying playmaker, meaning he will always be close to the ball when it is in the midfield/defensive third as he looks to move play forward early in the move, but it also means that you will rarely see him drift forward to contribute later in the attack. For example, you would see a more attacking midfielder move into the yellow zone as it is closer to the final third and unmarked by the opposition, but JWP remains deeper.



Another perspective of Ward-Prowse's positioning in a Southampton attack.

Here is another example of his positioning in possession: as the Saints break quickly down the right flank, Ward-Prowse remains deeper in midfield, not bursting forward to join the frontline — which is what you would expect of an attacking midfielder; you might even expect them to be closer to the halfway line. Ward-Prowse's position in these moments also provides defensive cover for those who have rushed forward.



Analysing an alternative role for JWP in the Southampton midfield.

Occasionally, Southampton will shake things up and deploy the set-piece specialist into a more advanced midfield role; this seems to happen more often in games where Southampton anticipate themselves having more possession higher up the pitch/games where they feel there will be more of a battle in that area of the pitch, so Ward-Prowse can collect the ball higher up and punish teams more directly in attack than he could in his deeper role.



A view of Ward-Prowse's defensive role.

The term "defensive midfielder" probably doesn't spring to mind when you hear the name James Ward-Prowse, but when he is operating in the deeper midfield role in a three, or part of the two in a 4-4-2, he certainly has a lot of defensive responsibilities. We will dive into some of the data behind his defensive contributions later on,

but in terms of positioning, the image above mirrors what you would often see when the Saints are defending. Not necessarily in terms of depth as this is dependent on a number of factors like the opponent in question, the match situation i.e scoreline, the opposition's momentum and attacking position, for example. However, in terms of being close to his midfield partner, that is consistent, as this adds cover and protection in central areas for the back four.

WHAT HE HAS TO OFFER

Ward-Prowse's biggest quality is obviously his ability to score free-kicks more regularly than any other current Premier League player, but there isn't really a great deal of in-depth analysis to be done there — you'd be better off simply watching a compilation of his free-kick goals to see his ability! However, there are other areas of his game that are an essential part of Southampton's tactics. His passing range is arguably his second-best attribute and below is an analysis of how JWP uses his vision and technical ability to aid the Saints in possession. Following that, we will look at other areas of his game, while analysing some potential limitations in his arsenal.



Looking closely at JWP in utilising his movement in his own half.

If you ever watch Ward-Prowse over the course of multiple fixtures, you will notice that he has a real talent for making sudden and slight movements to make himself a better passing option for his teammates. Scanning the surrounding area seems to be second nature to him, and that scanning informs those slight movements into space.

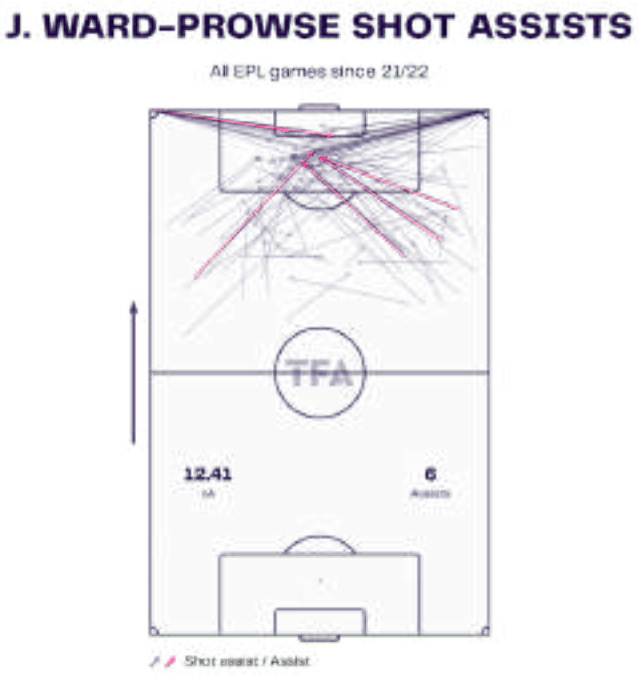
The image above shows his ability to incorporate his clever movement into Southampton's possession, playing an intricate one-two combination with his teammate down the right flank. However, the return pass from JWP wasn't as easy as you may think — it wasn't a simple ground pass as the opposition had that line blocked. Ward-Prowse knew he couldn't take the ball and turn inside as that would be turning into danger, so completing the one-two combination was really the only solution, and this is where we see moments of innovation from the England international. He scooped the ball over the two Manchester United players in his way, lofting the ball into his teammate's path. Not many players would even think of attempting that pass in a potentially dangerous area here.



How JWP sets himself up to progress the Saints' attacking possession.

This analysis gives us another example of Ward-Prowse using good spacial awareness to inform his next move, but this time in the opposition half with the majority of the opponent's team behind the ball. Ward-Prowse plays the pass inside to his midfield teammate and is likely already expecting the pass to be returned.

What we see next is quick thinking with quick reactions to that thinking. Ward-Prowse signals to his teammate to hold the ball for another moment before returning the ball and the Saints skipper shifts a few yards away from his initial position to make himself more open — he was able to receive the ball with much less pressure on him. What followed upon the ball being returned to JWP was a crisp cross-field pass into a dangerous area on the left flank, an action that Ward-Prowse would not have been able to execute without that previous movement into space.



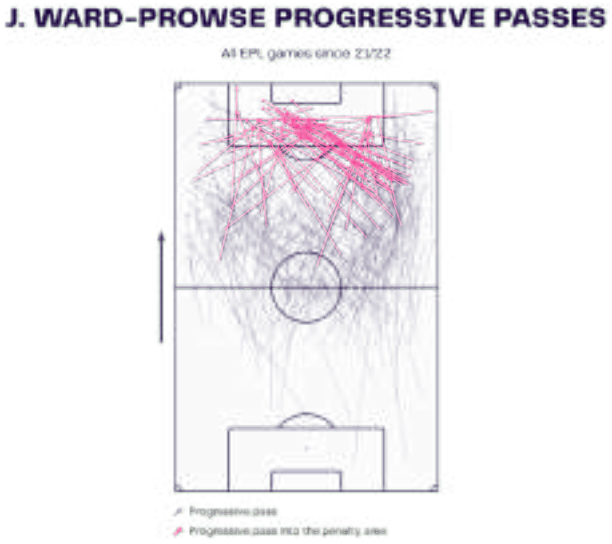
This is the stat that could cause debate: his assists. Since the beginning of last season, Ward-Prowse has registered six assists in the Premier League — two of them have occurred this season. Now, it would be easy to jump right in and criticise these numbers and say that Ward-Prowse needs more assists on his record. While he would probably like the number to be higher than six, and while that would likely boost his reputation, there are factors to consider here. Firstly, his role — which, as we saw earlier, is often deeper in midfield — means he contributes more to the early phases in Southampton attacks rather than later on, especially this season when the Saints are fighting for survival and have had less possession.

We must also consider what the image above is showing us. He does provide chances in the final third, and his xA is over double the number of assists at 12.41. This suggests to us that the quality within Southampton's ranks is impacting JWP's numbers, but he essentially has the ability to create chances, often either from corners or when crossing from deep on either flank.



A look at JWP's passing range.

Ward-Prowse's passing range is something that Southampton will certainly miss should the midfielder depart this summer. His fast thinking goes hand in hand with this attribute as he is able to control the ball and know instantly where his next pass will go. The quickness in his execution can also hurt the opposition as they have to react quicker, which can be difficult when the ball shifts quickly from one third to another.



Making important passes that shift the ball over a large distance quickly is something that Ward-Prowse loves to do. A lot of the time, this does benefit his side, but there are times, particularly in deeper areas after a duel has occurred, he will rush a long or progressive pass, which can hurt the Saints' possession. On a positive note, though, he has the consistency to provide accurate progressive passes into the penalty area, which is key for a team like Southampton who are unlikely to play their way through a team the way Manchester City might.

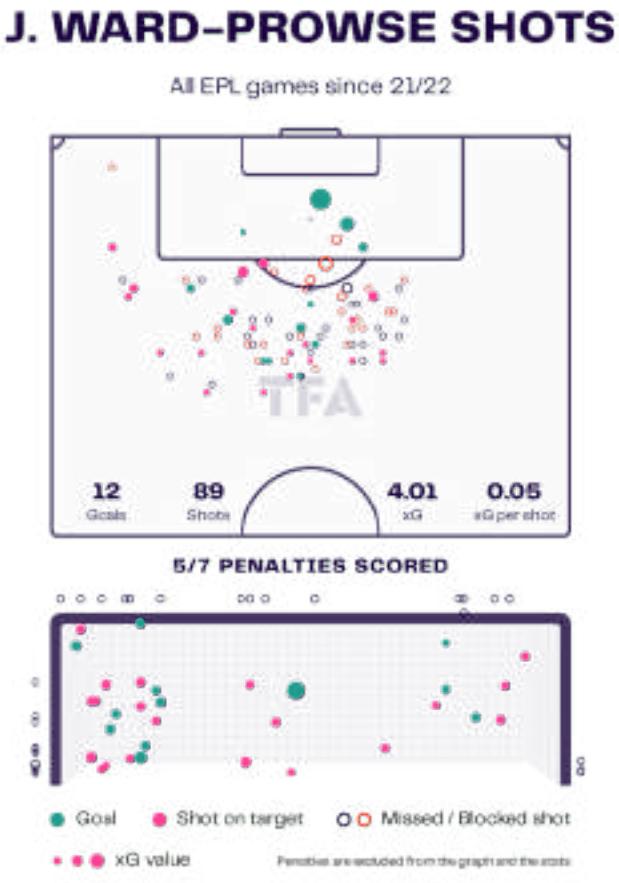
In terms of his numbers when it comes to passing range, Ward-Prowse averages 7.23 passes to the final third per 90, with an accuracy rate of 76.8%. A good number of those passes will look similar to the one above, especially in terms of distance — he averages 3.11 long passes per 90: 42.5% of them being accurate.



Ward-Prowse has a talent for long-range shots.

Ward-Prowse's deeper role in midfield sometimes means that he joins attacks late on, adding another passing option to a Southampton attack. While a good number of his goals have come from free-kicks over the years, he does have a mean long shot in the locker, which comes in most useful in situations where he does join an attack late.

Take the image above, for example. He joins late, with Brighton's defence forced into their own box and with very little midfield presence and organisation. He receives the ball in the form of a lay-off via a backheel from his teammate — a ball like something out of a centre midfielder's dream. In moments like this, the majority of central midfielders are going to approach the ball and strike it first time, rather than trying to work the ball into the box through a series of extra passes. And why wouldn't you if you have the striking ability of JWP?



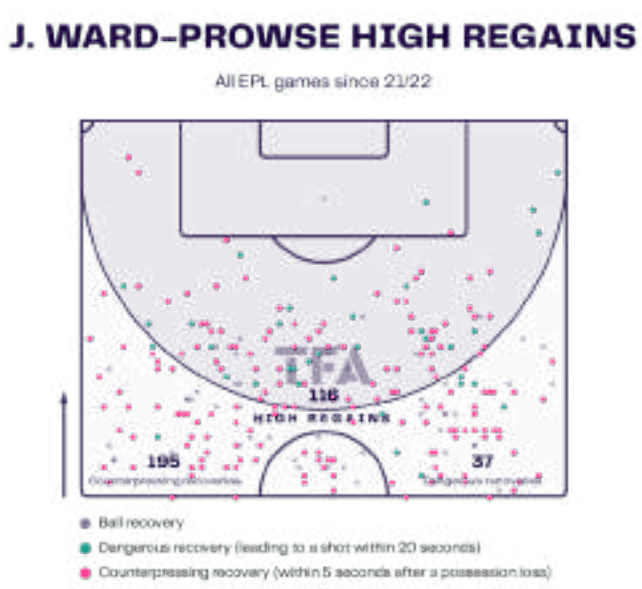
Since the start of last season, Ward-Prowse has scored 12 non-penalty goals (including free-kicks), a decent return for a player in a side in the bottom half of the league. His shot map from inside the box confirms our previous point about him rarely spearheading attacks from the start, but four goals from five shots inside the box is a clinical return. As the map shows us, he is not scared to take a shot outside the box. While this is one of the key factors of his game, moving to a team higher up the table to attack with a more structured system based on possession might see the number of long shots drop off.



Looking at Ward-Prowse's defensive efforts.

As we mentioned earlier, Ward-Prowse isn't the first name you might think of when discussing defensive midfielders, but he is an important figure in the Saints' engine room. He possesses good overall fitness qualities, meaning he can contribute off the ball for the full 90 minutes, but it also means the has the capacity to chase down the opponent and make a positive impact in wider areas as well as central areas.

This is what we see above. Arsenal move the ball down the left flank, with poor defensive reactions from Southampton leaving JWP outnumbered in that area. Instinctively, he starts to close down the man on the ball but quickly realises the danger down the flank and begins to retract that press. He doesn't possess natural raw pace, but he does possess immense fight and determination to get back and put in a successful challenge on the Arsenal man on the flank before he gets into the box.



He isn't limited to defending in his own defensive third. As you know, games sometimes unfold in a way that sees certain tactical and positional aspects of a team's approach either alter or simply become less present.

As a result of this notion, combined with the occasional more advanced role JWP plays, we see him applying his defensive traits higher up the pitch. Let's not get things twisted, we aren't suggesting that Ward-Prowse is one of the top defensive midfielders in the league, nor are we suggesting that he is a pressing machine, but he has displayed defensive qualities in various areas of the pitch.

Since the start of last season, he has made 116 high regains, which shows a steady consistency in terms of getting involved in duels higher up the pitch — a good amount of this total resulted in a Saints show within 20 seconds. He does have an excellent return in terms of counterpressing recoveries, particularly in wide areas and the fact that he can achieve this over both flanks and in central areas is a credit to his work rate.

Finally, it is worth noting that Ward-Prowse isn't one for dribbling all that often. This season, he has averaged 0.56 dribblers per 90 (47.4% successful) so it is clearly not one of his strengths — or at least something that he doesn't rely on. His passing, and the ability to bring teammates into play, is where his focus lies.

HIS FUTURE & REPLACEMENT

So, who would Ward-Prowse join if he was to leave Southampton this summer? There are certain factors to consider from both parties (JWP and the potential club). Currently, his market value is listed at £34m, but whether or not the Saints command that fee is dependent on their future. Should they go down, expect that fee to drop, but if they stay up, don't be surprised to see it rise.

In honesty, it is unlikely that we see him join a Liverpool or Manchester City — but the top four might not be completely out of bounds. He has been linked with Arsenal in the past and his qualities in possession may still be of interest to Mikel Arteta if they are in search of a central midfielder. Additionally, a side like Brighton may suit Ward-Prowse's skill set, but they are very particular and thorough when it comes to player recruitment, so they may believe they can find a similar player elsewhere for a lower fee.

Tottenham and Manchester United have both been linked to the midfielder before, and both could still be viable options. Both sides could have a case for bringing a player like JWP in.

He could be the link between Casemiro and Bruno Fernandes for United, with his rounded skillset allowing the Portugal international to have more focus on his attacking game.

Spurs, meanwhile, could find a place for him in their midfield. They have a high number of attacking midfielders and wingers, but Ward-Prowse could be a useful addition in the deeper regions of midfield, as although they do already have a good presence with Yves Bissouma and

Pierre-Emile Höjbjerg but lack strength in depth — something that Ward-Prowse could provide.

If he leaves, Southampton will be desperate to replace him, but it is unlikely that they splash the cash in doing so, especially if they are relegated this season. With that in mind, we believe that they could look for solutions in the EFL Championship, and with that in mind, we have used xGold to highlight some players who are like Ward-Prowse from that division. While it is possible that they could look in other leagues for a replacement, this league is likely going to be of interest to the decision-makers at the club as the fee would not be so high. The top three players from the Championship in terms of similarity rating by xGold are listed below:

Lewis Baker: 27-year-old midfielder who currently plays for Stoke City. Has been a vital part of their team this season, playing 42 times so far. In that time, he has scored seven goals and registered five assists, highlighting a real attacking quality from midfield. The Chelsea academy graduate joined Stoke in January 2022 after a cluster of loan spells that included stints at Leeds, Reading, and Trabzonspor to name a few. His current market value stands at £2.7m. While he may not possess the star quality or reputation that Ward-Prowse could, Baker could be a solid addition to the Southampton lineup due to his rounded skill set — especially if they are a Championship club next season.

Tommy Doyle: 21-year-old who has enjoyed mixed fortunes on loan at Sheffield United this season. the Manchester City loanee has featured 29 times in the league, bagging three goals. Prior to this loan move, Doyle has enjoyed loan spells at fellow Championship club Cardiff City and German club Hamburg. There is a bigger risk factor to this move due to his limited game time this season. He may be a loan option if Southampton go down: his market value currently sits at £4.5m. He is also a former Englanf U21 international.

Imran Louza: 23-year-old Moroccan midfielder who plays for Watford. He has featured 19 times this season, scoring four goals and grabbing two assists. He has versatility in his locker as he is able to play in either a deeper or more advanced role, something that may interest the Saints. He joined Watford in 2021 for £8.9 from French club Nantes, and his current market value stands at £8m. Southampton may look to see if he plays a bigger part in Watford's team next season before making a move due to his limited appearances, but he certainly does share some similarities with JWP.

Obviously, there are plenty of other options for Southampton to explore across multiple leagues, these three are just the top three from the Championship in terms of similarity to Ward-Prowse according to xGold. They may look to make a marquee signing in replacing JWP, investing a large chunk of their transfer budget into one player, or they may look to spread the budget over several players and look to bring in a cheaper replacement, or even a loan from one of the big Premier League clubs.

CONCLUSION

James Ward-Prowse undoubtedly has the skill set to compete at a club in the top half of the Premier League, but his love for the Saints may overrule the desire to play at that level. At 28, he has to consider in which direction he wants his career to go — he may just be happy to see his career out with his boyhood club. It would be refreshing to see a player choose the love of a club over money or club status as we don't get many one-club players at the top level these days. Expect interest in him from other clubs to increase in the event of Southampton's relegation, but don't be shocked if he opts to explore other options even if the Saints stay up.

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JOŠKO GVARDIOL



GNK DINAMO ZAGREB
(ON LOAN FROM RB LEIPZIG)

TONI BILANDŽIĆ // @TONIBILA17

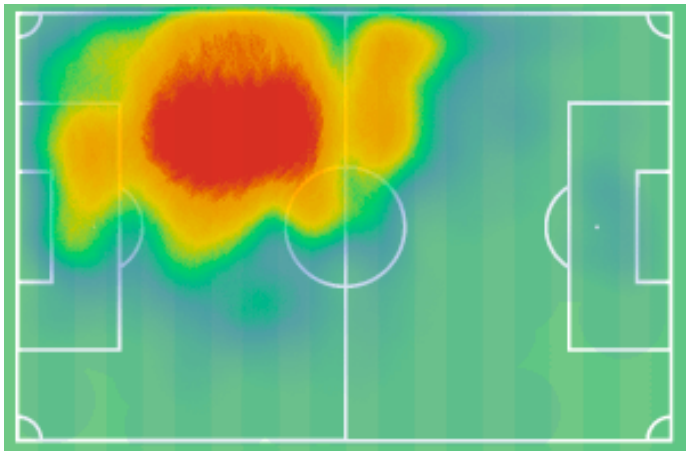
When a teenager who has played fewer than 20 senior matches gets a lot of attention from top clubs and coaches, it is undoubtedly an indicator that he is an extraordinary player. Two coaches who play modern pressing football had been fighting for his signature in the summer, and in the end, Julian Nagelsmann won the battle against Marcelo Bielsa for the talented defender. RB Leipzig paid 16 million euros plus bonuses for the youngster and he became the biggest outgoing transfer for a defender from 1. HNL. Of course, he stayed on loan at Dinamo Zagreb because both RB Leipzig and Joško Gvardiol himself are aware that he needs more experience in senior football before stepping on the Bundesliga pitches each week.

In this scout report, we will try to present what Gvardiol has to offer and why he was in such demand in the summer. This season he is a crucial first-team player and he has started in all eight matches in the European competitions for Dinamo Zagreb. We will also mention how he would fit into RB Leipzig's tactics in the future and areas where he could potentially improve.

We will start this tactical analysis with the player overview section.

PLAYER OVERVIEW

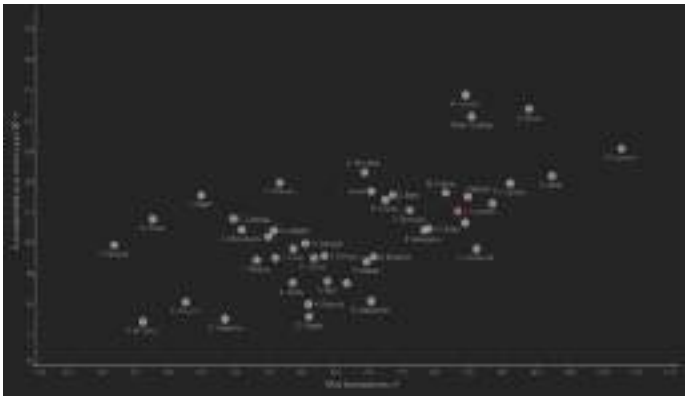
Gvardiol is an 18-year-old defender who is 185 cm tall. He is left-footed and his natural position is centre-back. However, the young defender is also capable of slotting in the left-back position and that's where he spent most of the current season because Dinamo's main option Marin Leovac had issues with injuries and fitness. We can see on his heatmap where he mostly performed his actions.



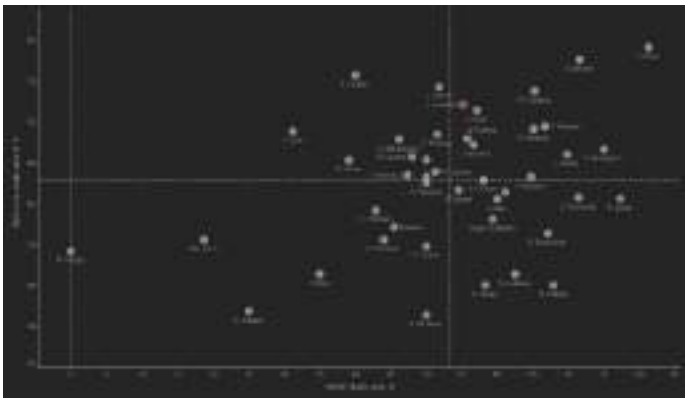
Even though he mostly played as a left-back we can see a lot of his actions in the half-space position from where he often makes progress towards the opponent's goal. Knowing that RB Leipzig play with a three-man defence, it is natural to expect Gvardiol competing for the left centre-back position which is where he feels most comfortable. He is already on a high physical level, showing both strength and pace with good aerial ability. If we add that he has a high level of aggression and reads the game well, he is ideal for high pressing systems.

GVARDIOL COMPARED TO U21 DEFENDERS IN TOP FIVE LEAGUES

In this section we will compare Gvardiol to the U21 defenders from top five leagues with at least 400 minutes played this season. We used both centre-backs and full-backs for this comparison because Gvardiol played both positions this season. In the scatter graph below we can see defenders compared through two metrics: successful defensive actions per 90 and PAdj interceptions.

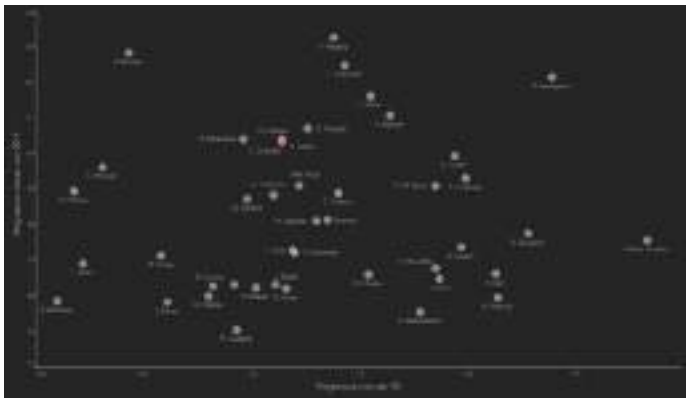


Gvardiol is marked with the red dot and he looks really good in both metrics. He is similar to Wesley Fofana who made a good start in the Premier League at his new club Leicester City. There is of course the difference between the quality of the leagues, but the data accounts for European competitions as well where Gvardiol played most of his games this season. He made 11.04 successful defensive actions per 90 and averaged 8.33 PAdj interceptions. These numbers show that he is active in the defensive phase and that he reads the game well. In the next graph, we will take a look at his aerial and defensive duels success rate to determine how he copes with opposition players.



As we can see Gvardiol is above average in both metrics. His aggression and timing are the qualities which allow him to have 72.13% success rate in defensive duels, which also ranks him 6th compared to the other U21 defenders. Gvardiol wins 55.17% of his aerial duels which is just above the average and even though we will mention that he has quality heading, his positioning before aerial duels is something he could work on to be even better in the air.

The last scatter graph we will evaluate before going to the pure tactical analysis consists of progression data. With progressive runs and progressive passes per 90, we will see how big of an impact he has in the team's build-up play.



Gvardiol is positioned very high in progressive passes, attempting 10.32 per 90 with an accuracy of 73.87%. His ball-playing skills are surely something that got the attention from top clubs' scouts. He makes 1.14 progressive runs per 90, which we predict will rise over time. He overlaps on this graph with Reece James and Maxence Lacroix who are both playing an important part in their teams' build-up.

Because ball progressing is something that is needed from a modern centre-back, next we will evaluate Gvardiol's impact in that area.

A BALL-PLAYING DEFENDER

Gvardiol possesses great vision and plays firm, precise passes. These qualities are in demand especially if you are a left-footed centre-back. Not only does he make the build-up faster, but also his teammates know that when he has the ball they can make runs behind the defence because he has the ability to find them in those positions. Below is one example where he attempts a chipped ball over the defence.



Gvardiol received the ball in the middle third and made a short run forward. At the same time, his teammate made a run towards the defence to signalise that he wants the ball behind the backline. Gvardiol saw his teammate's run and has enough confidence in his passing ability to attempt that pass rather than playing wide in this situation.

Speaking of his great self-confidence when in possession of the ball, the young defender is press resistant and showing calmness at such a tender age. We will rarely see him clearing the ball blindly when he has possession because he always looks for an open teammate. The example below shows how he thinks under pressure in most situations.



Above, Gvardiol had made a run from the left side towards the middle, getting around one player and shortly after that, a second opposition player arrived to close him down. We can see that behind him is the player he bypassed but he is still trying to recover and push Gvardiol. Even though he is pressed by two players, he keeps his composure and attempts a successful progressive pass towards his centre-forward. What is important here is that he is aware that if he played to the left or to Lovro Majer (the number 10 in front of him), he wouldn't make such an impact with this action. However, making a pass towards the centre-forward takes out five opposition players and shows that he made a quality decision.

We already said that his teammates know that they can expect quality passes from him and below is another situation which will support that. In this situation, Gvardiol's long-range passing is on point.



As we can see, the opposition defensive line stands high even though they don't apply pressure on Gvardiol who has the ball. It is a big mistake by the opponent because Gvardiol has the ability to play the ball over the defence and into the space behind. Lirim Kastrati makes a diagonal run into the open space and Gvardiol successfully finds him behind. Even though an opponent in this situation doesn't apply pressure on him, given his composure on the ball, he could be the option to avoid high pressing by the opponent and start a dangerous attack with a direct ball over the high defensive line.

The last situation in this section is also connected with his defensive work, and it is about his aerial ability. With experience and better positioning, he will win more aerial duels but what matters now is how he performs them at this moment.



What Gvardiol does impressively is finding his teammates after his defensive aerial duels. For teams that tend to attack and control the game, this trait is important. Most of the defenders only look to win aerial duels without looking where to attempt a header, which could lead to dangerous attacks if the opponent collects the rebound. In this particular situation, Gvardiol makes a header towards Kristijan Jakić who is open as their deepest midfielder in most of the situations, and he often plays those headers towards him. That way his team can start a counter-attack catching the opponent on the wrong foot. If he played a pass towards a player marked in red, it would be dangerous because that player is under pressure immediately from his marker who is close to him.

OUT OF POSSESSION – DEFENSIVE ABILITY

After going through his passing qualities, we will now take a look at his defensive abilities. In the example below, we will see how he anticipates the opponent's move.



Wolfsberger number 16 is the ball-carrier and looks to play the pass forward. We can see that in the area close to Gvardiol there are two players who offer to receive the pass. What Gvardiol does smartly in this situation is that he doesn't engage any player aggressively, positioning himself closer towards the opponent who is closer to the goal and waits for the move by the ball-carrier.



At the moment of the pass, Gvardiol accelerates, quickly putting pressure on the receiver and successfully tips the ball with his foot to dispossess him. Aggression and quality reading of the game help him react at the right time.

In the example below is the situation where Gvardiol does a great job to prevent a goal-scoring chance from a counter-attack.



In the image, it is clear that Dinamo don't have any players in their half and the opposition is counter-attacking as the CSKA Moscow player plays the ball behind their defence. We can see that Chidera Ejuke has an advantage over Gvardiol, especially because he had already reached his maximum pace at that moment.



Ejuke is a very fast winger, but we can see that Gvardiol manages to catch him and makes a perfect tackle to dispossess him. Gvardiol can cope with fast forwards which will help him adapt to the Bundesliga and Champions League football in the future.

The last situation we will evaluate in this section is how Gvardiol looks in 2v1 scenarios.



In this situation opponents got into a 2v1 situation with Gvardiol after the left-back is left behind. What Gvardiol does is turn towards the overlapping player and runs into his path to prevent him from getting to the ball first if the ball-carrier passes into the space behind. That is exactly what happens and Gvardiol makes a sliding tackle to stop the attack. A possible mistake by Gvardiol is that he turned his back to the ball-carrier which could result in another way for the ball-carrier to have a clear advantage to run towards the goal with the ball. His teammate with number 24 prevents that from happening in this situation. Gvardiol should position his body differently to be able to act if the ball-carrier decides to run towards the goal with the ball.

FINAL REMARKS AND PREDICTION FOR THE FUTURE

Gvardiol possesses everything he needs to become a star, but only if he keeps his focus and determination. His defensive qualities can improve, but most of the improvement will come through experience. On the other end, his contribution in the build-up and composure on the ball are a rare sight amongst the young defenders. Gvardiol's physical attributes are already on a high level, showing both quickness and strength which makes him suitable for any league.

Going through this analysis which consists of data analysis and tactical analysis we can definitely conclude that Gvardiol has a bright future. There is already talk that RB Leipzig could bring him back from loan in January which would be massive for him as they want to add depth since they had qualified for the Champions League knockout phase while also competing for the top places in the Bundesliga. It wouldn't be surprising if he gets a call for the Croatian national team for the European Championship, but he will also participate in the U21 European Championship for their U21 team.

A lot of people doubted Gvardiol but there will be plenty of chances for him in 2021 to prove them all wrong. However, for us, there is no doubt he is a top talent and that he is destined for top-level football.

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VALENTÍN CASTELLANOS



ANALYSING HIS SUCCESSFUL SEASON AT NEW YORK CITY FC

SATHISH PRASAD // @SATHISHPRASADVT

South America has been the go-to place for scouts to look for attacking players, especially strikers. One such South American talent who is shining at New York City FC is Valentín Castellanos. The 23-year-old striker has so far been involved in 20 goals this season in his 26 appearances and almost contributed to 45% of his team's total goals this season.

In this tactical analysis, in the form of a scout report, we will be performing an analysis on the Argentinian, looking at the key tactics that make him a standout among the other strikers in the MLS.

PLAYER OVERVIEW

Castellanos started his career in 2015, playing for an under 19 Chilean club before being loaned out to CA Torque — an Uruguayan club that bought him in 2018. He was then loaned to New York City before being bought by them in 2019.

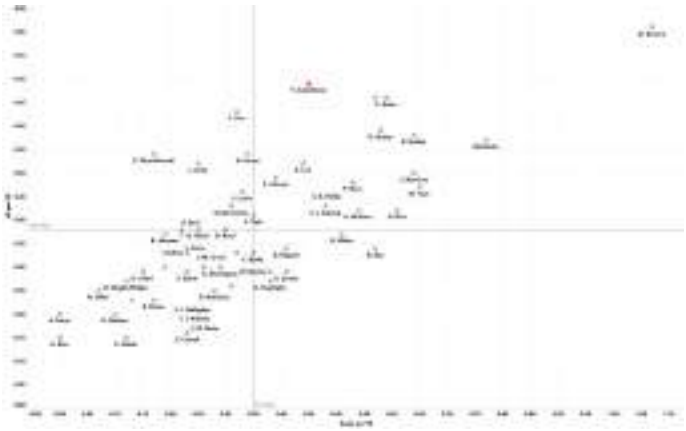


The 179cm tall striker who weighs 69kg is physically imposing and loves to play within the box. One can see that he attempts as much as 19.57 passes per 90 but makes sure to create opportunities with the limited passes that he makes. From the player profile, we can also see that the player is active in the defensive phase of the game — especially excelling in aerial duels.

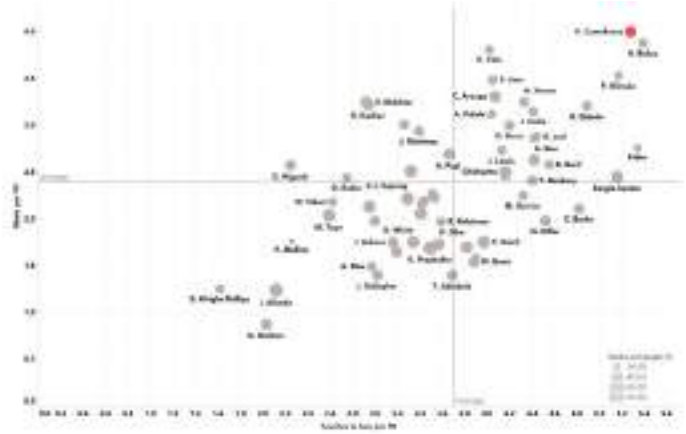
He averages a goal every 173 minutes, which is really good given his age and how he still has a long way to go. His ability to attack and occupy space is his strongest asset and something we will analyse further in the upcoming sections of this scout report.

RELIABLE UPFRONT

First and foremost, we will be analysing what Castellanos is best at — scoring goals. This season, as mentioned earlier, he has found the back of the net 13 times and assisted seven times, hence, he's been involved in 45% of the team's goals.



He averages an xG per 90 of 0.69, pretty much indicating the number of goalscoring situations he puts himself in. Meanwhile, he has a goal per 90 average of 0.45. He's underperforming his expected goals and the variance is because of the number of attempts that he takes and the number of goalscoring opportunities he creates for himself. He sometimes tries to convert opportunities that aren't even realistic. But in the scatter, we can notice that he is comfortably situated above average in both the metrics taken into comparison.



To support our statement that he creates many opportunities for himself, we now try to analyse his shots per 90 along with their accuracy and his number of touches in the penalty box per 90. It's pretty evident that he likes to lurk inside the opponent's penalty area as we can see that he has the third-most touches in the opponent's penalty area per 90, standing at an average of 5.28. In terms of shots per 90, he has the highest (4) among all strikers in the entire MLS with a very good accuracy of 47.66%.

One factor influencing his numbers is his ability to finish well. He can comfortably finish with both feet and is also a wonderful header of the ball. Apart from this, his link-up plays are very good and so are his off-the-ball movements.

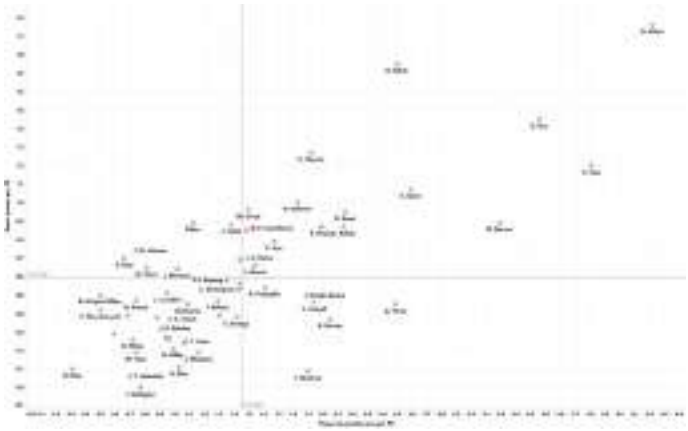
PROGRESSION AND LINK-UP PLAYS

New York City FC plays in a 4-2-3-1 where Castellanos operates as the sole striker. His role, apart from being inside the box as a poacher, is that he often acts as a false 9 and drops back, attracting the defenders to create space for the left and right attacking midfielder. Since his role involves such a tactic, he has been really good at linking up with the other players and mostly prefers to play with his first touch.

He also adds in the creativity near the penalty area, looks to play one-touch football and acknowledges every pass by his teammates.



In the match situation in the picture, we can see that he quickly tries to play the ball into the space left open by the defenders as his teammate is sprinting into the space. It was pretty much a wall pass situation, indicating his ability to make quick decisions and how solid his link-up plays are.



We take this scatter to look at the number of passes he makes to the penalty area per 90 and also the number of smart passes he attempts per 90. Given the role that he plays, his numbers are really impressive and are also above average. He averages 0.86 smart passes per 90 and 1.53 passes into the penalty area per 90.

Despite the penalty area being his favourite spot to operate, we should not forget that he often drops very deep to create space for other players.



One can see how deep he drops to receive, progress the ball and attract defenders. Now, the players on the wings look to cut inside and exploit the spaces left behind. Castellanos, having an excellent vision, is able to find the right teammate to pass to and plays the ball exactly into the right space for the team to have an advantage over that situation.

His off-the-ball movements in the attacking third are very deceptive. He's always looking to either create space for himself or the ball possessor.

OFF-THE-BALL MOVEMENTS

His off-the-ball movements really put defenders in a dilemma. The diagonal run to cut in front of the centre-back is a top-quality move that any striker should know.



The diagonal runs off-the-ball in front of the centre backs put immense pressure on the defenders. In the match image, we can see a player carrying the ball towards the defender while Castellanos has just made a diagonal run in front of the defender. In such a situation, the defender is confused about whether or not he has to run behind Castellanos to mark him as he's running into open space but at the same time, him moving away would result in the ball possessor having enough space to carry right through the middle. These kinds of runs are very effective and are frequently made by Castellanos in the attacking third.



Another example of his off-the-ball movement adding value is when he creates space for his teammates. In the match situation represented in the picture, we can see the ball possessor closed down on the flank. Now, Castellanos makes a run into the box and drags a defender along with him. This now makes him a passing option for the possessor and he also now has space to dribble the ball through the middle, as the space was created by Castellanos' run.

He still has a lot of qualities that help him to perform to the highest standards. The qualities mentioned above are among his best assets. It's impressive that the player has nourished all these qualities at such a young age.

CONCLUSION

It's only a matter of time before the European giants take note of Castellanos and his move to Europe is inevitable if he continues to perform consistently in the upcoming seasons. His contract comes to an end in three years but we may see him move to Europe before his contract expires. There are chances that he gets to sign to another CFG group clubs such as Manchester City, Mumbai City etc. Castellanos is one of those players who give 100% every time they're on the pitch. He has a strong mentality and nature to fight on the pitch. With the right attitude and constant learning, his career from hereon will only see exponential growth.

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DOMINIK SZOBOSZLAI



IS HE READY FOR
THE NEXT BIG MOVE?

FELIX PICHLER // @FELIXPICHLER3

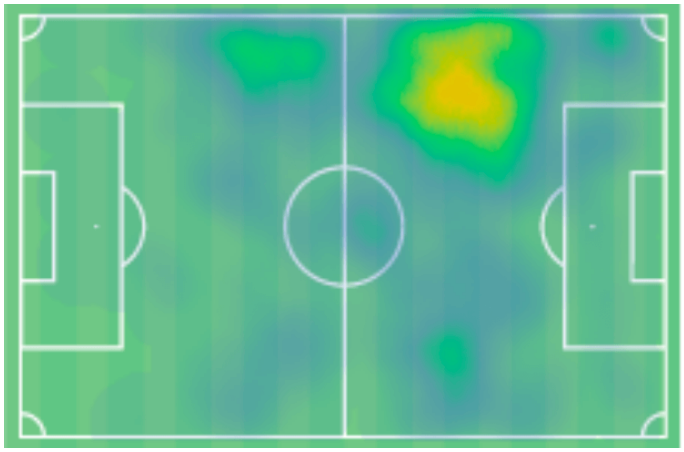
Dominik Szoboszlai is currently the most valuable player in the Austrian Bundesliga with a market value of £13.5million at the age of 19. The Hungarian was one of the great stars of the 2018/19 season, while in this season he doesn't play that often under the new coach Jesse Marsch. In the opening 20 league games of this campaign, he was part of the starting eleven just seven times.

Of course, he's still one of the best RB Salzburg and Austrian Bundesliga players, and due to that, he's already for some time a target of several big clubs in Europe. The big question is, if he is ready for the next big step in his career to join a bigger club outside of Austria. In this tactical analysis in the form of a scout report, we'll take a closer look at his abilities and tactics to additionally discuss if he is ready to leave Salzburg in the summer of 2020.

POSITIONING AND MOVEMENT

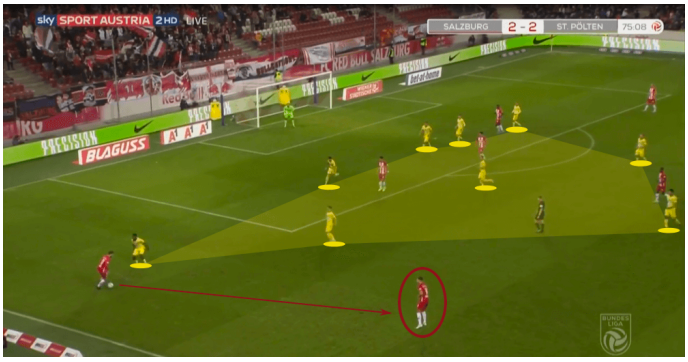
Marsch mainly used either a 3-4-1-2/3-1-4-2 or a 4-4-2 this season. In which the two wingers cut inside and occupy the half-spaces. Szoboszlai can play as a winger, but also as an offensive midfielder. Due to that, he is either in the centre behind the strikers when they used a formation with a back three or played as a winger when the American coach lined his team up in a 4-4-2. Since then the wingers cut in to play more centrally, Szoboszlai is mostly in the half-spaces when his team is in possession of the ball.

The young Hungarian usually is permanently looking for free spaces in the left half-space to then provide vertical passing options for his teammates. This can also be seen in the heatmap for his appearances in the Austrian Bundesliga during the season 2019/20 which is shown below.



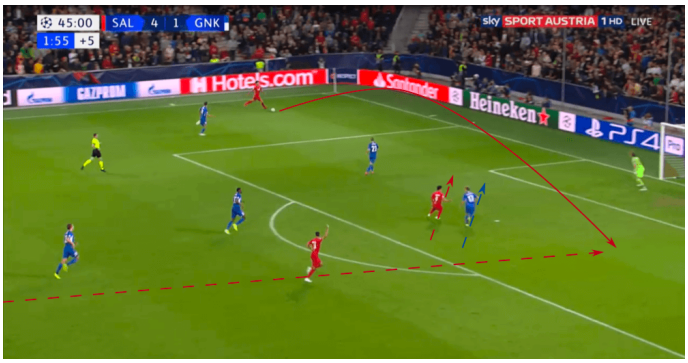
Salzburg dominate their opponents in almost every single game in the Austrian Bundesliga and have more possession while the opponents sit back and defend in a low block. As soon as Marsch's team get near the zone 14, they try to use the combination of short passes with deep runs and through passes to get in the space behind the last line of the opposing defence. In these situations, Szoboszlai is important for his team as he is already mostly positioned in the half-space and additionally, his technique is outstanding as we will see later in this tactical analysis.

The 19-years-old Hungarian understands that it's sometimes not useful to position inside the oppositions block, as there he can't receive many passes and rarely gets on the ball. Due to that, one of his typical positions is outside of the formation of the opposition on the left side, as we can see in the shot below. In these situations, he creates space for himself to pick up speed as soon as he receives the ball. Also, it has to be mentioned that Szoboszlai is a young player who loves to have the ball at his feet and gets frustrated when he rarely is on the ball. Due to that, he loves to drop a bit deeper on such occasions, since then he is an easier option for his teammates and receives the ball more frequently.



As we will see in the next paragraph of this tactical analysis, Szoboszlai has a great vision, which is usual for an offensive midfielder. However, he doesn't just make use of that quality when he is on the ball, but exploits his abilities during his off-ball movements. The 19-year-old has a good feeling for when he has to start a sprint to get into a free space and when he should stop his movement.

In the example below, Salzburg are currently on a counter-attack. During the first stage of it, Szoboszlai doesn't sprint at full speed to avoid his opponents tracking his run, but he was still fast enough to keep up with the player on the ball. As Takumi Minamino was almost in the position for a cross, Szoboszlai starts his sprint to get in the right position, receives a great cross and scores the goal with a volley with his first touch.



VISION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE GAME

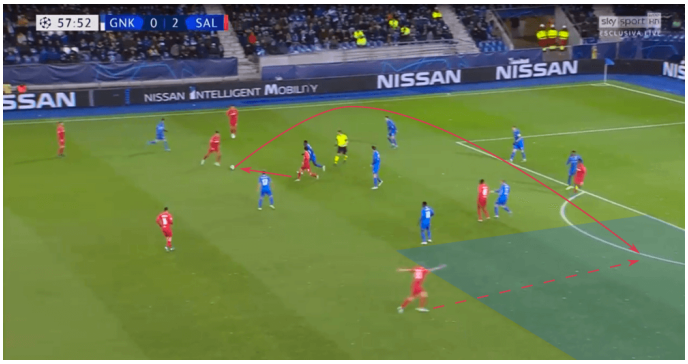
Vision and a feeling when to play which pass are probably two of the most underrated abilities in football. Even though Szoboszlai's decision-making is sometimes not the best as we will see later on, in other moments he sees a passing lane which probably nobody else saw at this moment. In some situations, you wonder how he was able to track the movement of his teammate and play the pass in such short time while just a few moments later you wonder why he hasn't played that logical pass, but we'll get at this when we talk about his weaknesses.

In general, the Hungarian's vision and creativity are surely two of the biggest reasons why reportedly Arsenal and Serie A champions Juventus wanted to sign him during the summer transfer window of 2019.

In his usual position at which we already looked earlier, Szoboszlai has several passing options as he can go short with a pass to the left wide-area which is usually occupied by Andreas Ulmer or can try to find a teammate in the centre with a vertical or diagonal pass. The third option which the 19-years-old chooses quite regularly is the long ball to the other wing as there is mostly a lot of free space since the opponents want to stay horizontally compact against Salzburg. So, they shift over as a team so as to not give away any space in the centre, but this creates space on the far side which Szoboszlai looks to exploit with a long ball.

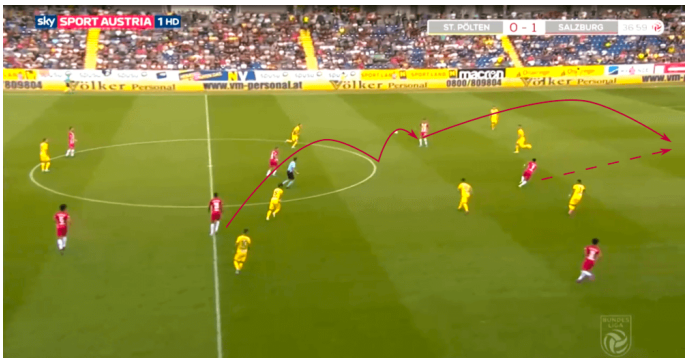
In the image below, we see such a typical example as he receives a short pass and switches the side with his first contact. He's able to do so as he

scanned the pitch before he has received the ball and tracked the deep run of his teammate Rasmus Kristensen.



RB Salzburg are a team which has enormous strength in the moments of transition (offensive and defensive). As they have fast players who are perfect for utilising the free space during a counter-attack or the unorganised formation of the opposition after successful counter-pressing. However, you don't only need players in your squad who are fast enough but also ones who can play the necessary passes to make use of their pace.

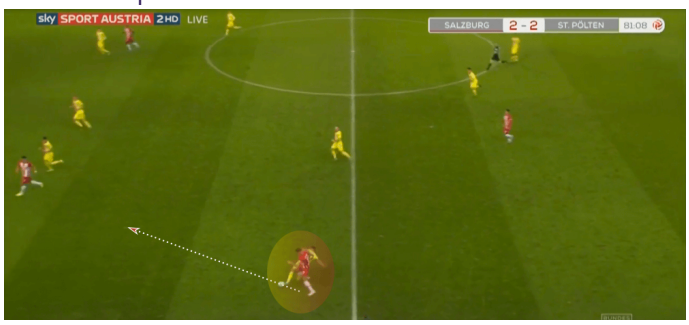
Szoboszlai is exactly such a player as he identifies free spaces, movements of the opponents, and runs of teammates to then select the correct pass. In the image below, Salzburg have just won back the ball with a counter-pressing and the ball went to the 19-years-old. As St. Pölten won the ball just moments before, they weren't in their usual defensive shape and Szoboszlai, as well as Hee-chan Hwang, are completely free. The Hungarian finds his South-Korean teammate with a first time through pass over the top of the defenders. In this situation, he once more demonstrated his vision and understanding of the game.



ABILITIES ON THE BALL

Now, we'll look at the moments in the game in which the Hungarian is probably the most dangerous: when he is on the ball. The young offensive midfielder loves to be on the ball to then create something dangerous. Of course, his vision and understanding of the game are great and help him to get in the moments where he can utilise his technical abilities, but the important aspect about his style of play is how strong he is on the ball.

Szoboszlai stands at 185 cm which is quite tall for an offensive midfielder and winger. Even though he's not a player with outstanding physical strength, he still knows when and how to make use of his body to protect the ball and get himself between the opponent and the ball. As we can see in the example below, he shields his opponent off to stay on the ball and get into the free space ahead of him.



The following aspect of his game is probably the one which stands out the most when you watch a game in which the Hungarian plays as he often shows tricks to get past his opponents. If there is the chance to get into a one-on-one situation, then Szoboszlai tries to take on his opponent and get past him with a dribble.

Sometimes, this can be a bit dangerous as he often also wants to do is in his own half, but in general, his technique is so good that he can take on any opponent to dribble past him, but we'll see in the next section of this tactical analysis that this can sometimes cause problems.



The 19-years-old is already quite important for the build-up and creation of goalscoring chances during Salzburg's periods of possession as he plays on average 46.84 passes per game. Of which 6.02 are to the final third.

As we already saw earlier in this scout report, the Hungarian has decent vision to detect the movements of his teammates to then find them with good through balls or to switch the side. All this mental and technical abilities combined make him a modern offensive-minded player who can create dangerous situations against almost every defence in the world, even against the best one as we can see below. In the UEFA Champions League group stage fixture against Liverpool who were then in outstanding form, Szoboszlai still managed to put his teammates in good positions with through passes as we can see in the following example .



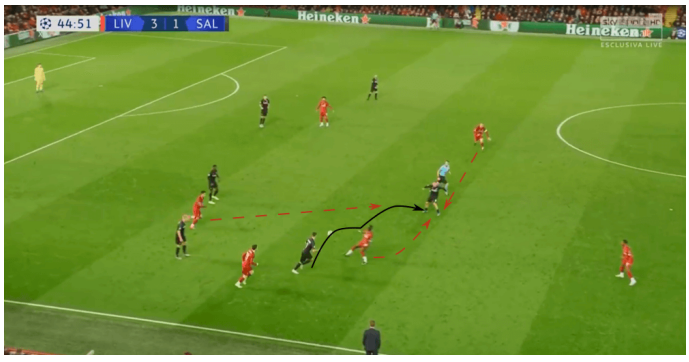
WEAKNESSES

When you consider all these aspects above and note that the Hungarian is still just 19 years old, but already showed great performances in the UEFA Champions League and the UEFA Europa League, then you could easily answer the question in the headline by yourself: Yes, Szoboszlai is ready for the next big move to join a club outside of Austria.

However, there is still another side of the coin as Szoboszlai is not always able to show off his talent and performs in this season pretty weak in some games. That's totally understandable since it's almost impossible for a player at his age to perform every single game on the same high level. Let's take a look at two of his biggest weaknesses.

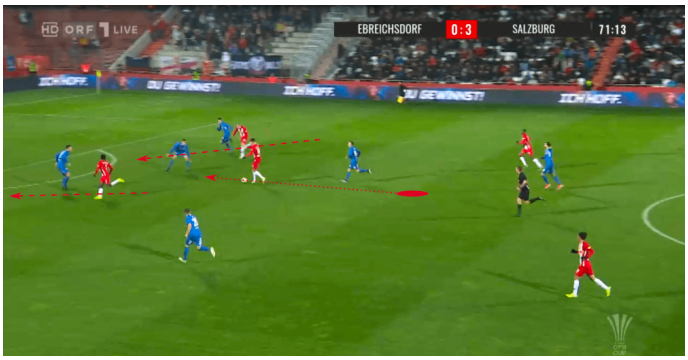
First of all, he needs to work on his sloppiness which brings him and his team sometimes in bad situations, as it easily allows the opposition to get into possession. We can watch in several situations how it seems as the young Hungarian would care more about his style of play and how his actions look like instead of their efficiency.

We can see this in an example below as he plays a lobbed short ball to his teammate Zlatko Junuzović who instantly is surrounded by several Liverpool players who can start the counter-pressing since just moments ago Soboszlai won back the ball for RB Salzburg. As the pass is lobbed, and not that clean and easy to control it, Junuzović has problems with it and Jürgen Klopp's team can retain possession. In this situation, the lobbed ball isn't necessary at all and brings his teammate in an extremely difficult situation.



His second big problem is that he often misses the right moment release the ball. Of course, he is a great dribbler and extremely strong on the ball, but in some situations, it would be more

effective to play the ball to a teammate. Instead, he stays on the ball to take on several opponents and loses it or can't continue the attack with the same pace. This is also the main reason why his success rate for dribbles is 49.1% which is okay but could be much better if he wouldn't stay that long on the ball in several situations, as in the example below. In this situation, Erling Haaland and Sékou Koïta support him and provide him options for passes, but Szoboszlai stays on the ball to then be alone against four opponents and has to pass the ball back.





CONCLUSION

Considering all the aspects which were described in this tactical analysis, Szoboszlai is definitely ready for the next step in his promising career and should join a bigger club. However, he clearly needs to work on his sloppiness and decision-making as he often stays too long on the ball. However, he's one of the most promising players in the Salzburg squad and already has got the attention of bigger clubs in Europe.

The Hungarian has the potential to be one of the best players his country has seen in the last few years, but must continue to improve his mental and technical qualities. As he's ready for a transfer in the summer, it will be interesting to see where he will go and how he'll perform at his new club (if Salzburg lets him go).

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OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS FÉMININ



THE DEFENSIVE PHILOSOPHY

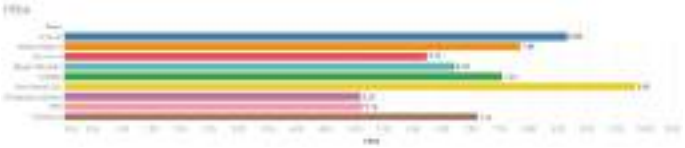
ABDULLAH ABDULLAH // @KUNABD

The perennial winners of the Champions League and Division 1 Feminine are known for their attacking flair and offensive efficiency. However, their defensive work has been overlooked, despite the team using some interesting tactics to shut out the opposition. This is a first in a series of analysis articles that will look into the offensive and defensive philosophy and structure of Olympique Lyonnais Féminin. The team houses four of the world's best defenders and two world-class defensive midfielders, making it interesting to see how they integrate them, and the tactical adjustments Jean-Luc Vasseur has made since he took over from Reynold Pedros. I did an analysis on Lyon in our Total Football Analysis June 2019 Magazine edition and I thought it was time for a refresh, especially given the changes.

The first part will cover their defensive ideologies and how they use different tactical techniques through tactical analysis. I will analyse their strengths and identify the key areas that make them defensively strong. Data has become an important addition to tactical analysis and scout reports, making data analysis a necessity to analyse their defensive performances. We will rank Lyon against other top European sides and see where they stand. This will enable us to better understand their tactical setup.

DATA ANALYSIS

For this analysis, we will be using data across the domestic and European competition the teams have participated in. Due to the data available, I have used data from this season's Champions League only to measure challenge intensity, except for Chelsea, whose figures have been taken from their domestic campaign.

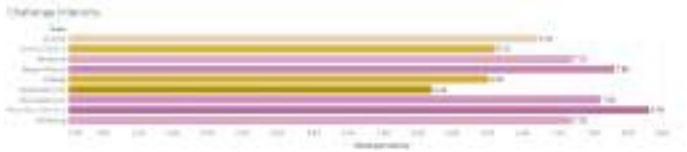


When analysing any defensive metrics, it's important to understand the pressing nature of a side, and to do this we will analyse Lyon's PPDA (passes per defensive action) against top European sides. This will help us distinguish between heavy, energetic, pressing sides against the ones that prefer to sit back and defend. The higher the value, the less a team presses.

This could also give us an insight into Lyon's defensive style and why it's been so effective. This first graph includes teams from across the top four leagues in Europe including Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Wolfsburg, Bayern Munich, Barcelona, Atletico Madrid, and Paris Saint-Germain. Comparing Lyon against arguably the best teams in women's football is a strong comparison and the results speak for themselves. Lyon have the lowest PPDA at 5.10 and close behind is PSG with 5.14. It's staggering to see both French sides possess the lowest PPDA of these European sides.

What does this mean? It means Lyon seem to adopt a high-intensity pressing strategy to regain possession from opposing teams. With other teams seemingly taking a bit more time to initiate a defensive action to retain possession, Lyon are much quicker. This could suggest a high press, however, there are many factors that could point towards this high PPDA which we'll discuss further in the analysis.

We also want to look at challenge intensity to understand and quantify Lyon's defensive actions. Challenge intensity will tell us how many defensive actions a team engages in per minute of opposition possession. This should give us a clearer image of Lyon's intensity and will to actively win the ball back. The higher the value, the more intense a team is in their challenges.



The graph gives us some interesting results. While the results of the PPDA were conclusive given that the two French sides had the best record, the challenge intensity results are closer. PSG are clear winners with a rating of 8.30, meaning they are a very aggressive side off the ball and want to win back possession very quickly. Lyon sit third in this category with 7.60, behind Bayern Munich who have a rating of 7.80. What this translates to is that Lyon aren't as intense in their challenges as PSG and Bayern Munich when it comes to putting in a challenge.

Just analysing these results alone is not an indicator of a team's style, but rather requires quantifiable analysis to bring context to these numbers. There are reasons behind a low PPDA and slightly higher challenge intensity score, however, what this does do is give us a basis to understand the team's defensive style and intensity when looking at the footage to further analyse their defensive philosophy and structure.

DEFENSIVE SHAPES

Lyon have been pretty faithful to their 4-2-3-1 formation since Vasseur's arrival. They've used this system for 77% of the season, rarely opting for another formation. They've used a 4-1-4-1 and a 4-4-2 on occasion, but rarely does that ever come into play. They rely on their superiority in possession to ensure they keep the opposition as far away from their goal as possible.

The 4-2-3-1 comprises of two ball-playing centre-backs, two flying full-backs, two all-action defensive midfielders, a creative attacking number 10, two energetic wingers, and one striker. The most important position is that of the two defensive midfielders who are tasked with keeping the balance and shape of the team, regardless of how it changes. However, each position plays a vital role in the overall balance and working of the system. Understanding the out-of-possession defending shape gives us the foundation to Lyon's defensive structure. I will explain the two out-of-possession shapes Lyon utilise in the defensive phase that occur under different circumstances.

The first involves Lyon setting up in a 4-4-2, which is triggered once the opposition starts playing out from the back. The attacking midfielder often joins the striker to create the two up front, probing the opposition defenders into trying to play around them and force long balls where the aerially proficient Wendie Renard can battle for possession. The main objective is to ensure Lyon maintain horizontal compactness in the central areas. The two wide players sit slightly narrower to ensure the central compactness. The team rotates together towards the side the ball is on, prompting the wingers and full-backs to press if the ball goes down the flanks. This ensures that wherever the opposition decides to build out from, Lyon are covered. The front two will not engage in a heavy press but rather remain close enough to make their presence felt. The hard graft is done by those further back in midfield. If the forwards feel as though the opposition are lingering on the ball too much, they then begin to press to force the tempo. Lyon want to dictate the tempo of the game with or without the ball.



The image above shows Lyon's shape out of possession that was explained above. Notice the shorter gaps between each bank of four, where they do not want to give Paris Saint-Germain's three forwards time and space to operate in. PSG's main striker and right wide forward are central players so, in this situation, they would

be negated by Lyon's narrow back four. While the two PSG full-backs are free, both Alex Greenwood/Selma Bacha and Lucy Bronze will be able to press the wide areas while support arrives in the form of the wingers or midfielders.

When playing passes through midfield, Lyon create superiority in the midfield and defence by morphing into a 3-4-1-2 / 3-4-3 shape. The team do not want to be in a situation where they become overrun in either third, thus they create horizontal compactness through positional rotations. While the main objective remains the same, this shape aids their pressing strategy. The 4-4-2 is used to hold shape and dictate the opposition's movement, the 3-4-1-2 allows Lyon to press intensely in midfield through their midfielders and full-backs. Alternatively, the 3-4-1-2 shape also caters to counter-attacking and creating passing lanes, but it also allows them to utilise the pace from the full-backs to cover for Renard's lack of pace whether they move wide or centrally, due to the high line they hold.

The full-backs have a tactical role in the side, with each one tasked with their own individual roles. By default, one full-back will play slightly higher and wider whilst the other tucks into a narrower position. Bronze, the right-back, is usually the one who plays a more defensive role acting as a third midfielder/central defender, mirroring Kyle Walker's role at Manchester City. From here, Bronze can drive inside to press the interior ball carrier or move outside to pressure the opposition winger along with Lyon's winger.

As the graphic below illustrates, Lyon are able to keep the central areas compact and shift towards the side of the ball. If the ball shifts into the highlighted central area, then up to three players will move in to help press and close the player down. There is a constant movement with the #6 moving across to cover for the #8 while the attacking midfielder (#10) drops into cover #6's movement. This illustration also depicts Lyon's desire for compactness and overloads in midfield and defence. If teams succeed in bypassing the press, it gives Lyon enough time to move into position to defend against crosses if it comes to it.



POSITIONAL ROTATIONS

One of the key themes under Vasseur has been the use of positional rotations to ensure there is enough defensive cover. Lyon's entire structure and the system is predicated on the use of positional rotations and players understanding the system inside and out. The concept is simple – players interchanging positions to gain superiority in certain areas of the field to ensure there are no gaps left around the pitch. Under their predecessor Pedros, the concept was very much a key component to his style of play, and has continued under Vasseur.

So how does this integrate into Lyon's defensive strategy? The core fundamental philosophy mainly comes down to the two defensive midfielders and full-backs. These players are critical to the way Lyon position and move across the pitch to ensure they gain superiority.

Starting with the two midfielders, they position themselves in such a way that they are in parallel to each other at all times regardless of their position. On the ball, one player will remain in a more advanced position while the other will take up a more defensive stance. This allows the midfielder to fill in at full-back or centre-back

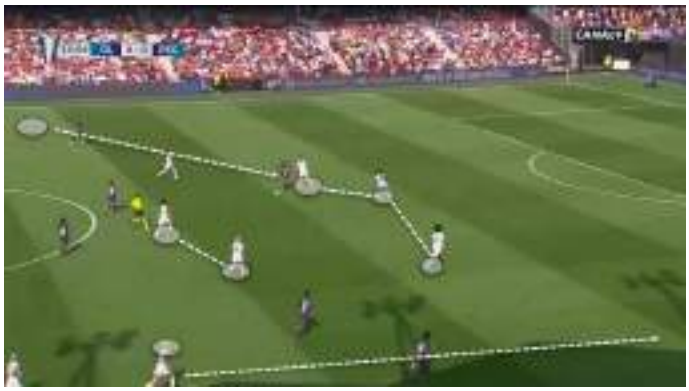
when either player vacates their position (in the case of the full-back moving up to press or hold a higher position). The defensive midfielders require superior positional intelligence and understanding to play the role. One example revolves around defensive awareness. When the opposition move closer to the 18-yard box, one of the midfielders will slot in between the centre-backs to create an extra body at the back while the full-backs take up their customary wide positions. This is where Lyon have enough bodies in the box to contend with any crosses into the area. Other times, the midfielders will observe and react to positions that are vacant and slot in to provide cover.

The full-backs are equally as important in this system and shades of Pep Guardiola's influence can be seen here too. Both Bronze and Greenwood/Bacha are tasked with their own instructions to be part of these positional rotations to aid in the defensive strategy. One full-back is a lot more aggressive and plays an attacking role by being positioned slightly higher, often the left-back. The right-back will join in attacks if play progresses down the right, however, more often than not, the player will remain in a more defensive position playing as a faux centre-back and midfielder.

Part of Lyon's philosophy is to gain numerical superiority in every third when defending, making the player's movement between midfield and defence vital. Bronze is an excellent defender with an even better tactical mind, and her ability to seamlessly move between the thirds adapting to the situation is what makes the role work well.



In this image, we can see Lyon recycle possession after recovering the ball in midfield. While this isn't a defensive situation, we can see Amandine Henry situated in the left-back slot as Greenwood sits further forward. When Renard releases the ball forward, the three players will tuck in slightly to create a base. Simultaneously, Saki Kumagai will move into the vacant space to create a passing option and move closer to Henry's position to rotate or fill in as an extra defender in case PSG counter-attack.



In the same phase of play, Renard's pass is intercepted, which puts PSG in a favourable attacking situation. This triggers Lyon into packing numbers around the ball carrier and receiver, but what is also prevalent is the positional rotations occurring again. Henry had quickly moved back into midfield with Kumagai dropping alongside her. Greenwood is sprinting back to cover at left-back, while Bronze makes her way back from a higher position on the right to become the third centre-back and disrupt Marie Antoinette Katoto from receiving the ball.



In the first image, PSG were in a favourable counter-attacking situation but by this point, Lyon have been able to gain defensive superiority. Renard pushes out to press Kadidiatou Diani

with Henry filling in at centre-back. Amel Majri (red) has dropped in to take up Bronze's position who, in turn, has moved in to become a centre-back. They have now closed all obvious passing routes for PSG, with a good chance to retain possession. This example has shown how the full-backs and defensive midfielders seamlessly interchange positions in moments to prevent a dangerous attacking situation. This now transitions us into Lyon's pressing strategy and how they aim to win back possession in these situations and more.

PRESSING STRUCTURE

Earlier in this analysis, we looked at PPDA and how that signified a team's pressing strategy. We understood that Lyon have the lowest PPDA of the top European teams, and that suggests they have a high pressing strategy. There are a couple of factors that can be attributed to this. Lyon's out-of-possession 4-4-2 shape is the primary reason for their ability to establish a low PPDA. Holding a firm shape gives the opposition a very limited number of passing options, which forces them to play long or direct into midfield. In doing so, Lyon are able to quickly activate their press once possession moves into midfield, leveraging their advantage of numbers in the area. Opponents average 16.57% long passes when playing against Lyon. Secondly, teams that play against Lyon average 2.41 passes per possession, which means for every moment they have possession, they make up to two passes. This suggests Lyon have a very aggressive style of play.

Tying this in with their challenge intensity rating, this metric can also be attributed to the fact that teams are moving the ball from defence to attack in a more direct manner into a place where Lyon are most comfortable winning back possession.

Now diving into the tactics, Lyon's pressing strategy revolves around a midfield press. The team isn't too concerned with pressing from the front because teams will not always play out from the back, but rather play a couple of passes before playing direct. The only time the forwards get involved in a high press is when the opposition wins back the ball around their own box and passes it back to the goalkeeper.

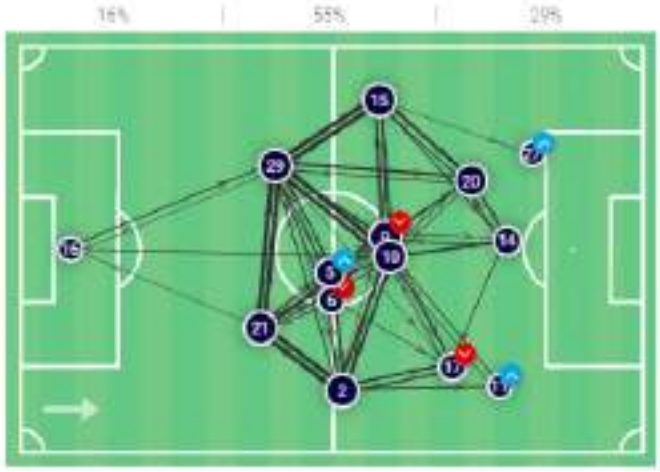


Montpellier win the ball back near their box and we can see how Dzsenifer Marozsán immediately starts pressing the ball-carrier. It's interesting to see how many Lyon players were committed to the attack and one advantage of this is if Lyon do lose possession, they once again have numbers in that third to contribute to the press. Marozsán continues to press even when the ball is played back to the goalkeeper who then launches the ball into midfield where Lyon's central midfielders pounce. This sequence has already shown us how Montpellier have played a minimal number of passes before it's given Lyon an opportunity to win it back on their terms in a packed midfield.

Revisiting the overloads in midfield, the reason for having one full-back tucked in and the other high and wide is to allow Lyon the ability to adapt to the ball's position when it transitions from the opposition's defensive to middle third. The right-back, Bronze, is usually the one positioned narrow to provide the extra defensive assuredness. As we've mentioned earlier, when play reaches midfield, this triggers Lyon's midfield to start pressing first through the closest player, often Henry or Kumagai. On

occasion, Marozsán, Majri, or Bronze will be present to start the press in midfield.

There are usually two to three players in the vicinity of the ball-carrier to engage in a heavily pressured pressing system. The idea is to force the opposition into a misplaced pass or win back possession through a tackle or interception. The two defensive midfielders are vital to the way Lyon operate both on and off the ball.



Looking at the average positions on the map above, we can see how Lyon are shaped. The defensive midfielders are in close proximity to be able to protect the back line or forwards. The right full-back Bronze (#2), situated slightly narrower with Kumagai (#5) or Henry (#6), is able to drop in between the centre-backs to ensure that there is cover on all sides. The left-back, Greenwood (#15) provides width and would aid in pressing higher up her side.

We see this in practice below where Montpellier are looking to build an attack through the middle. Note the positioning of the players in the first image: Renard, Griedge Mbock, Kumagai, and Greenwood (out of frame) make up a back four, with Majri, Henry, Bronze, and Delphine Cascarino in midfield. Bronze (circled) cuts inside and is the first to start pressing the midfielder. The positioning of the pivot (Henry) will aid the press if the ball carrier manages to move into her zone. Each player in the first image is either man-marking or is able to cover an area.



Continuing the same move, the ball is circulated to the other midfielder, prompting Majri to start pressing and attempt to retain possession higher up. Henry continues to patrol her area by following the run to both cover the run of the midfielder and to attempt to intercept a possible pass.



To complete the move, the pass from the ball carrier in the previous image was intended for the runner, which prompts Renard to step forward and intercept the pass. Renard is able to move out of position because of her centre-back partner Mbock following her marker across and Henry is able to move into the space left behind.



Ultimately, Lyon do have an aggressive pressing system when teams enter the midfield area. We've seen Paris Saint-Germain try to bypass this in their games against Lyon this season. The pass map comparison below is from a league game

that saw Paris switch to a back five with the full-backs as the primary outlet, chiefly Hanna Glas (#2). Lyon reacted with slightly deeper full-backs and one defensive midfielder sitting close to the centre-halves to negate the barrage of crosses.



However, due to Lyon's ability to rotate and positionally rotate, they were able to intercept many of PSG's passes and crosses in the half-spaces as the interceptions plot suggests. Bronze, in particular, made 13 while Henry and Kumagai contributed 8 each. For a deeper understanding of the roles of full-backs in different systems, I have written an analysis in our March magazine, which included Bronze and Glas as two main case studies.



CONCLUSION

Lyon's defensive work has not received the same amount of plaudits so far, with much of the attention given to their electrifying attack. Having only conceded four goals this season, their defensive work deserves much more credit than has been given. While they boast world-class defenders such as Renard, Bronze, Mbock, their effective and seamless integration into Vasseur's tactics has been excellent. The tactical flexibility of Bronze is a particular highlight – being able to interchange from attacking right-back to a third central defender in a back three in a matter of moments.

When analysing the defensive structure of any team, it's easy to focus on the defenders, however, Lyon's two central midfielders have proven to be extremely important to the overall system and allow the team to function efficiently and effectively in both an offensive and defensive capacity. We saw examples of their importance through positional rotations and pressing by being at the right place to cover the possible space the ball carrier will move into.

Top teams often press high to win back possession and pressure opposition defences but as we've seen through this analysis, Lyon are most effective when play moves into midfield where their intensity and work rate increase close to the PPDA and challenge intensity statistics we discussed earlier.

The return of the Champions League will be a great test for the team and their defensive resolve against a stubborn Bayern Munich side. If we take their previous Champions League wins into account, then they should be likely winners for this season's crown too.

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MAMELODI SUNDOWNS



SOUTH AFRICA'S MOST DOMINANT TEAM

FINTAN O'REILLY // @FINTANFOOTBALL

Mamelodi Sundowns have built a reputation as one of the best football sides the continent of Africa has to offer. With their unique and attractive style of play, coined: 'Shoeshine and piano' — a style of play not too dissimilar in certain aspects or others to the distinct styles you might see on offer at some of Europe's most attractive clubs, such as EPL side Manchester City, Ligue 1's Marseille or LaLiga's Barcelona, that will only grow in admiration the more it gets promoted — they have won each of the last four South African Premier Soccer League titles, boosting their grand total of PSL titles to 11, the most of any side in PSL history.

Furthermore, 'The Brazilians', as they're affectionately known, currently sit top of the table for the 2021/22 campaign by some distance and look like adding a 12th PSL title to their impressive record. Sundowns are also one of just two South African teams to have won the CAF Champions League, along with Orlando Pirates who won the competition in 1995, doing so more recently than their compatriots, in 2016 under the elite leadership of coach Pitso Mosimane, who enjoyed a successful eight-year reign in charge of Sundowns and is now a three-time CAF Champions League winner, having guided the most successful club in world football in terms of trophies won, Egypt's Al Ahly, to the last two CAF Champions League titles.

Following Mosimane's departure in 2020, Sundowns opted for a unique approach to replacing the highly successful manager, making Steve Komphela the first-team senior coach, with Manqoba Mngqithi and Rulani Mokwena assuming joint-head coach duties for the Pretoria-based club. The high-quality, experience-packed coaching setup successfully guided The Brazilians to a fourth-straight PSL title last season and look on course to achieve the same league finish this term, with CAF glory also no doubt one of Sundowns' ambitions.

In this tactical analysis and team-focused scout report, I'll aim to provide some analysis of how Sundowns' coaching setup has got the team playing this season, analysing the latest iteration of The Brazilians' Shoeshine and piano playing philosophy by exploring some key talking points regarding the PSL leaders' strategy and tactics in 2021/22 thus far. I hope that this tactical analysis gives readers a clear idea of Sundowns' entertaining and efficient playing style, while hopefully convincing some to turn their eye to one or two of the South African side's games this season to take in what is surely one of world football's most stylistically exciting sides to watch at present.

BUILD-UP PLAY

To kick off this tactical analysis, I'll be taking a look at how the current Sundowns side is set up during the build-up phase of play. Firstly, while they were mainly deployed in a 4-3-3 shape last season, Sundowns have mostly played in a 4-4-2/4-2-3-1 shape this term. Without possession, their shape typically looks like a 4-4-2 but with possession, Sundowns often line up in more of a 4-2-2-2 shape, with the wingers tucking in just behind the strikers and in front of the holding midfield duo.

The Brazilians are a heavily possession-based side, having kept the highest amount of possession (62%) in South Africa's top-flight in 2021/22. The second-most possession-based side has kept just under 8% less of the ball than Sundowns this season, highlighting just how dominant The Brazilians are in terms of how they keep the ball. Part of this is due to their tactics with the ball, while part of it is naturally a result of their tactics without the ball too, as we'll go on to discuss later in this tactical analysis. For now, though, we'll focus solely on Sundowns' approach with the ball, in particular looking at what they aim to do in the first phase

of possession — the build-up phase — in this section of analysis.



As depicted in figure 1, Sundowns' centre-backs tend to split quite wide in the build-up phase, while the full-backs push themselves high, situating themselves on the next line, on either side of the holding-midfield duo. The holding midfielders generally try to take up staggered positions, essentially meaning that they look to avoid standing right next to each other, which creates more passing angles for the goalkeeper and centre-backs in the first line and makes themselves harder for the opposition to mark and prevent Sundowns from progressing through them than they would be if just standing next to each other to create a flat four-man line in front of the two centre-backs and 'keeper, who, as seen in figure 1, is given licence to advance into the space between the centre-backs if necessary to create a +1 advantage over the opposition's forwards if they're pressing with a two-man frontline. This +1 advantage helps Sundowns to break the opposition's first line of pressure and progress into midfield, as does the staggered midfielders and the high positioning from the full-backs.

Everything about Sundowns' play, at this point, is geared towards breaking the first line of pressure and getting the ball into central midfield. In general, The Brazilians are a patient team that likes to draw pressure from opposition players in deep areas by playing short passes between players in the first and second lines until a clear opportunity for progression presents itself. Along with their general ball-dominant nature, this is one of the key tactical factors that's led to Sundowns making the most passes (461.49 per 90) of any PSL side this term, along with maintaining the best pass success rate (86.1%) in the process. They're careful and patient in the build-up as they search for a clear opportunity for progression while deploying players of good technical prowess to execute the coaches' instructions to a high standard. Ideally, they'll create an opening to get the ball from the first line into one of the two holding midfielders who'll then look to turn and send the ball forward once again, this time to one of the four-man '2-2' shaped forward line, some of whom will be looking to exploit space between the lines and some of whom will be aiming to exploit space behind the opposition backline.

Good movement and spatial awareness is, then, key from the wingers and forwards ahead of the holding midfielders. It's common to see forwards dropping deeper and wingers advancing into higher areas to exploit space that subsequently opens as a result of the forwards' movements as Sundowns aim to progress into the final third. This movement is important for pulling opposition defenders out of position and creating space that can be exploited as their team looks to enter the final third. A combination of the attackers' movement, along with the midfielders' vision and technical passing quality, are then crucial for Sundowns as they look to exploit space, progress upfield and enter the final third.



If unable to progress into midfield via one of the centre-backs/goalkeeper, we may see Sundowns look to break into central midfield via the wide, high full-backs. This was the case in the passage

of play shown in figure 2. It's worth noting that in possession, Sundowns generally try to retain quite a narrow shape. The 4-2-2-2 facilitates this as it is, by nature, quite narrow but in figure 2, we also see how the spacing between players, such as the left-back and left centre-back, is kept pretty tight. When the ball is positioned on the right flank in the build-up, the entire team shape will move over towards the right, with only the left-back positioned on the left half of the pitch in figure 2 — and just about, at that. The ball-far full-back doesn't position himself wide, hugging the touchline at all times as many full-backs/ wing-backs do. Instead, he'll come inside to keep the overall shape narrow, creating another potential short passing option in the centre to help Sundowns achieve their primary goal in this stage of play: to find a clear path of progression through the centre of the pitch.

The benefit of this doesn't just lie in achieving their goal of central progression, however — it's two-fold, in fact, as the ball-far full-back's narrow positioning to retain a narrow, compact shape helps Sundowns to guard against the potentially harmful impact of a deep turnover. As a result of the team's narrow, compact shape, they make life more difficult for the opposition should a turnover occur when playing their short passing game in the build-up and increase their chances of regaining possession quickly by counter-pressing after a turnover. This is another important element of The Brazilians' tactics that helps them to perform formidably in transition to defence and be a tougher side to break down, in general. That said, their quality on the ball and narrow shape to create lots of short passing options helps them to keep the ball better and prevent many deep turnovers from occurring in the first place anyway. This narrow, compact shape is a great precaution in case of a turnover as well, however.

While Sundowns are the most pass-heavy side in PSL, they're also the team to have played the fewest long balls (36.65 per 90) in the league this term. They don't aim to play very many long balls, which is why they don't place ball-far wingers and full-backs far away on the opposite sideline in the build-up phase. They prefer to have more short passing options by positioning more players close by in central positions, as figure 2 shows.

ENTERING THE FINAL THIRD

The full-backs' roles are, once again, worth noting as Sundowns move from the build-up to the progression phase and chance creation phase. Again, right at the beginning of the build-up, we see the full-backs push high to either side of the two holding midfielders as seen in figure 1. As The Brazilians enter midfield via the centre-backs or goalkeeper, the midfielders are typically required, where possible, to take the ball on the half-turn and pick out a teammate in the next line ahead. In this regard, Sundowns are a very aggressive team in terms of ball progression after passing the opposition's first line of pressure and like to move vertically through the lines as efficiently as possible while picking out clear short passing options and adhering to their philosophy of playing shorter passes rather than less controlled long balls.



Just before figure 3, we saw Sundowns' holding midfielder receive a pass from a centre-back behind the opposition's first line of pressure. On receiving, and having scanned profusely at

the correct times before getting on the ball, the midfielder turned, spotted the right-winger moving out of the opposition midfielder's cover shadow in the right half-space and sent the ball forward, finding the playmaker between the lines. This passage of play provides an excellent example of Sundowns' vertical yet careful progressive passing philosophy in action, with the holding midfielder required to quickly display excellent technical and mental ability on the ball to receive, turn, pick a pass and execute with enough quality to get beyond the opposition's next line and into a teammate's feet, which he achieves here.

This is the kind of action we see Sundowns' midfielders constantly pulling off in-game, which is a testament to their quality and the Sundowns coaching team's ability on the training ground to adequately prepare the players to execute their plans to a high standard — this is on display in figure 3 both from the deep-lying midfielder and the winger who demonstrated excellent vision and movement to find space behind the opposition's midfield and receive the deep midfielder's progressive pass.



As play moves on into figure 4, we see how the winger acted similarly to the holding midfielder, again demonstrating an excellent example of the kind of action Sundowns' coaches love to see their players making — receive on the half-turn, pick out a player running into space on the next line and execute with enough technical quality to turn the vision into reality. On this occasion, we see the right-winger playing a well-weighted through ball into the running path of the overlapping right-back who progressed upfield after the centre-back initially found the holding midfielder. From here, we see the full-back carry the ball into the final third and put a threatening cross into the penalty area — another key aspect of the full-backs' role within this system.

As we move on in this tactical analysis piece, we see more and more how the full-backs' roles are crucial in various phases of play. In terms of ball progression, they must provide the width for their side in the final third as the wingers remain narrow, creating the four-man 2-2 offensive shape in front of the holding midfielders. Then, as they get on the ball in the wide areas and enter the final third, they're required to play the role of the creator. It's common to see Sundowns' full-backs playing the vast majority of their teams' crosses as a result of this role in the chance creation phase.



We see another example of the aggressive attacking role that Sundowns' full-backs play in figures 5-6. Here in figure 5, we see Sundowns in the progression phase with the right centre-back on the ball looking to carry the ball beyond the first line of pressure. As the right central midfielder drops to provide the centre-back with a central passing option, attracting pressure from the opposition's midfielders in the process, the right-back intelligently bursts forward to exploit space behind the midfield which opens up more and more as the central midfielder drops and attracts pressure in the deeper area. Sundowns exploit this space with the centre-back sending a lofted through ball into the right-back's path, setting the overlapping wide man off into space

behind the opposition's midfield and outside their backline.



Then, moving on into figure 6, we see how, as a result of this simple bit of movement, vision, and a well-executed pass, the right-back was able to drive all the way into the opposition's box, getting towards the byline and pulling a cutback cross into a dangerous position inside the opposition's penalty area. If Sundowns' full-backs get into these positions and play such threatening passes into the danger zone, it will inevitably result in very high-quality goalscoring chances and this is the kind of position Sundowns like to try and get their aggressive width-providers into often, with the wide men looking to create opportunities off the cutback cross, as we see in this example.



While the aggressive full-backs have a heavy presence in the final third and generally act as the primary crossers in the side, Sundowns' wingers are typically the primary overall playmaking forces in the side, with the brilliant Themba Zwane, in particular, acting as an elite creator for the South African champions. Figure 7 shows an example of Zwane drifting into space behind the opposition's midfield line while providing the deeper midfielder with a progressive, line-splitting pass option. Zwane's ability to find space and make himself available for such passes is a quality that can't be underrated for a side like Sundowns that looks to progress quickly and efficiently via vertical short passes. While the holding midfielders' vision and passing quality are important for achieving successful progression, they only play half of the role. They also need good movement ahead of them to make the progress happen and there's nobody better than Zwane to provide options.



In this example, as we move on into figure 8, we see that Zwane received the ball well in behind the opposition's midfield, carried it a couple of steps into a more threatening central area and then sent a defence-splitting through ball into the path of the right centre-forward, who's managed to get beyond the opposition's backline with a well-timed run to take advantage of Zwane's well-weighted, defence-splitting through pass. Again, the passer plays half the role here, as good movement from the strikers is also crucial for making the final third entry happen. Here, as Zwane and the striker combine, Sundowns create a top-quality goalscoring opportunity, highlighting Zwane's ability as a creator, as well as some great movement from the forwards ahead of him.

In terms of creative passing behind the forward line, comfortability with operating in tight spaces both as a pass receiver, dribbler, passer, and as a ball-carrier, Zwane is very much a key figure in this possession-heavy and technically-proficient Sundowns side; he's excellent at creating chances via off-the-ball movement, passes and dribbles.

COUNTER-PRESSING

As I touched on previously, by keeping a narrow shape with bodies close together when building up and when attacking, Sundowns also naturally have a compact shape with lots of bodies around the opposition ball-carrier ready to press after they've dispossessed a Sundowns player. Counter-pressing is an important part of The Brazilians' game both in terms of keeping goals out at their end and also in an attacking sense. It helps them to shut down opposition counter-attacks quickly, before they really get going, and also create great goalscoring opportunities by launching a counter-attack of their own from an advanced position versus a more disorganised opposition defence than they'd be facing in a typical attack.



Take figures 9-11, for example. Just before figure 9 here, the Sundowns player circled in the left half-space was dispossessed and after taking the ball back from the Sundowns dribbler, the opposition started trying to build a counter-attack of their own, immediately sending the ball into midfield.

Right away, as the opposition play the ball into the midfielder, a Sundowns player is in close enough proximity to be closing him down aggressively from behind while the man who was just dispossessed immediately turns his attention to winning the ball back for his side too, closing down the pass receiver from the other direction while keeping a couple of deep passing options in his cover shadow. We can see in this image how Sundowns' more advanced forwards also start tracking back at this moment, getting tight to some other more central deep passing options which makes them risky and unattractive for the pass receiver here, and in the meantime, The Brazilians' left-back starts to access the opposition's right-winger, again making this passing option less attractive.

We can see the opposition right-back drifting out to the wing and out of the winger's cover shadow in figure 9, making himself a viable passing option for the midfielder — and the option that the receiver here eventually takes, while under pressure from a couple of Sundowns players. The right-back receives in more space than the other potential passing options that the midfielder had here, but in a low-value area deep and close to the sideline which makes him a prime pressing target for Sundowns to get more aggressive with their defending.



As play moves on into figure 10, we see how Sundowns' left-winger, who was initially dispossessed which led to this passage of play, turned and charged down the right-back on receiving the ball while keeping the midfielder who passed to him in his cover shadow. The left-back has gotten tighter to the opposition's right-winger and Sundowns' holding midfield duo have also come over to this side of the pitch to congest space and cut off all potential passing options.

Sundowns' left centre-back — the deepest yellow shirt in figure 10 — has also advanced to

get access to the opposition attacker dropping into their inside right channel, highlighting an important aspect of The Brazilians' counter-press, which is that the ball-near centre-back retains the freedom to advance into the opposition's half to get tight to a potential progressive passing option if one appears to be available. In this regard, the centre-backs are often extremely aggressive in this counter-pressing system, with Sundowns aiming to prevent the man on the ball from enjoying any time or space on the ball, as well as cut off all viable short passing options. By cutting off the potential shot passing options and aggressively pursuing the ball-carrier, Sundowns aim to stifle the ball progression via short passes while also making it too difficult for the ball-carrier to play a good long ball into the vacant space behind Sundowns' backline which could be exploited as a result of the aggressive centre-back.

Lastly, it's worth noting that as the opposition's right central midfielder goes out towards the under pressure right-back to try and relieve some of the pressure by giving him a viable short passing option, a Sundowns forward follows him. This is the passing option that the opposition right-back ultimately takes and we see the result of playing this pass to a midfielder under aggressive pressure from behind as play moves on into figure 11.



As figure 11 shows, after the pass was played, by the time the ball reached the right central midfielder, the pressing Sundowns man was right on his tail, preventing him from turning and forcing him into a rushed, poor decision. The midfielder was pressed into passing the ball back to one of the centre-backs but the rushed pass was executed poorly, which allowed Sundowns' right-winger — occupying a more traditional 'number 10' position here while marking the opposition's left central midfielder — to pounce onto the loose ball, carry it beyond the opposition defence and progress into a very threatening goalscoring position.

So, this passage of play highlights the key points of note with regard to Sundowns' counter-pressing tactics, as well as providing an example both of how their counter-pressing can successfully prevent the opposition from counter-attacking them, as well as how it can create high-quality goalscoring opportunities for Sundowns in the process by pressing opposition players into poor passes or heavy touches that can then be capitalised on by the hounds leading The Brazilians' aggressive press from the front.

HIGH PRESS

My fourth and final section of analysis within this tactical analysis piece on South Africa's most dominant team focuses on their high press — another key aspect of their defensive solidity. Sundowns are generally very aggressive in pressing from the front, during the high-block phase. This high press combined with their aggressive and well-organised counter-press has seen them generate the lowest PPDA (7.42) of any PSL side in 2021/22 thus far. This is essentially indicating that Sundowns have had the most aggressive press in South Africa's top-flight this term — a further testament to how important aggressive defending is to them and their success.



While Sundowns' shape becomes more of a 4-2-2-2 when in possession, they tend to shape up in more of a traditional 4-4-2 without the ball, as figure 12 indicates. Here, we see Sundowns defending as they typically do initially during the high-block phase, with both strikers remaining relatively close to the opposition's deepest midfielder(s), while ensuring they block the passing lanes into this player from the centre-backs. By positioning themselves like this, they guard against the ball being played into this midfielder from either the goalkeeper or the centre-backs. Meanwhile, The Brazilians' midfield line behind the two strikers generally gets very horizontally compact, allowing little space to form between the midfielders, as we also see in figure 12. The goal of Sundowns' defensive tactics here is to prevent the opposition from finding any way through the centre of the pitch, thus forcing them into a wider area, which they'll use as a pressing trigger — meaning the intensity of their press increases as the ball is played out wide.

Here, we see how Sundowns' players react to the ball being played out wide to the left centre-back from the goalkeeper. The ball-near forward closes down the receiver while keeping the holding midfielder in his cover shadow. At the same time, the ball-far forward moves over to get tighter to the holding midfielder from behind while also closing the distance between him and the goalkeeper should the opposition centre-back look to send the ball straight back to him. The ball-near winger gets higher and wider while the rest of the midfield quartet also shifts over to retain a compact shape with little distance between the players and ensure the centre remains protected.

Similar to when counter-pressing, Sundowns' press here focuses on congesting space around the ball and making it difficult for the man on the ball to 1. Find short passing options and 2. Create enough space to play a longer pass that could exploit, for instance, the evident space now opening on the opposite wing. This would be a weakness in Sundowns' defence but thanks to the organisation and aggressiveness of their press, they're generally good at preventing the switch from happening.



As play moves on into figure 13 and the opposition's left centre-back begins carrying the ball forward, we see a clearer image of how Sundowns' shape has shifted to a heavy focus on the cramming all the space around and in front of the ball-carrier on this wing while still retaining an overload in midfield at the expense of offering any coverage at all on the ball-far wing. The ball-near full-back pushes up to keep a close link between him and the aggressive ball-near winger, similarly to how the ball-near central midfielder operates here.

As the opposition ball-carrier begins to move forward, the ball-near winger pushes out to close him down while blocking the passing lane into the left-back who we see providing the width for his side on their left wing. As a result of this movement, the ball-near central midfielder must take up marking duty on the opposition's ball-near central midfielder — a role

he performs well and seamlessly thanks to his close proximity to the winger. So, we see from this little example how the compact nature of Sundowns' aggressive high press helps them to adequately cover the opposition's short passing options.

Additionally, in figure 13, we see how the ball-far centre-forward has now assumed marking duty on the holding midfielder, with the ball-near forward now aggressively pursuing the ball-carrier.



By making all potential passing options unattractive yet again while applying increased pressure on the ball-carrier, Sundowns once again forced the ball-carrier into a rushed move and as play progresses into figure 14, we see that the left centre-back was ultimately pushed into playing the backwards pass to the goalkeeper that the ball-far centre-forward had been patiently biding his time and waiting for. As the backwards pass is played, the right striker continues marking the left centre-back while Sundowns' left striker begins closing down the 'keeper, of course, while bending his run intelligently to keep the holding midfielder in his cover shadow and guard against the possibility of the 'keeper shifting the ball onto his right side and pulling off a potentially devastating switch of play.

The right striker's press was executed perfectly, while also being aggressive in closing down the goalkeeper. This led to the 'keeper being rushed into a decision and he opts for safety-first on this occasion, simply booting the ball out of play to relinquish possession, and a throw-in, to Sundowns in what is an advanced and potentially threatening area of the pitch for the Pretoria-based side.

Even though the shape is different, many of the principles that were evident in Sundowns' aggressive and successful counter-pressing are also evident in their performance in the high-block here, in terms of focusing on keeping a horizontally compact shape, congesting space around the ball-carrier, preventing short passes, packing the centre and forcing the ball into wide areas from where an aggressive press will be deployed.



As with the ball being played out into wide areas, it's common to see Sundowns' press increase in intensity as the ball is played backwards, which we also saw a glimpse of in figure 14. We see this again in figure 15. Here, with short passing options again cut off and aggressive pressure being applied by The Brazilians' right-winger, the opposition's left-back was forced into sending the ball back to the left centre-back. Again, thanks to Sundowns' organised, compact shape and focus on cutting off the near passing options while congesting space around the ball-carrier, the left centre-back was forced backwards, with the pressure coming from Sundowns' right striker this time.

Again, the pressing angle is so important here. If Sundowns' forward just presses mindlessly without cutting off the passing lane into midfield, then this opens a clear opportunity for the opposition to play into their press and progress

through midfield. However, the forward gets his pressing angle spot on and succeeds in cutting off the passing lane while closing down the ball carrier to force him backwards.



As we move on into figure 16, we see how after the ball is played back to the goalkeeper, the pressure now comes from Sundowns' left striker, who again gets the angle of his press perfect while aggressively closing down the 'keeper. With the near passing options also under plenty of pressure and the 'keeper not afforded enough space to launch a long ball forward, again we see Sundowns end the opposition's attack here with the goalkeeper opting to send the ball out for a throw-in. These examples show how aggressiveness, organisation, a compact shape and intelligent pressing are key to Sundowns' defensive tactics and the successful realisation of Sundowns' playing principles.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this tactical analysis, Sundowns tick a lot of the boxes that football fans would look for in a conventionally attractive modern football team in terms of how they approach the game with the ball and how they approach the game without the ball. They are possession-based, yet vertical and aggressive when they've forged openings to play through the lines and excellent at getting exciting creators into space between the lines, which leads to plenty of high-quality chances being created and, ultimately, plenty of goals.

Meanwhile, without the ball, Sundowns are extremely aggressive, both in terms of their counter-press and their high pressing tactics. They focus on congesting space around the opposition ball-carrier, maintaining a horizontally compact shape, protecting the centre and ensuring links between players aren't broken when the more advanced player opts to move more aggressively. As we've analysed, this helps them to successfully kill opposition attacks before they really get going on occasion thanks to their players' intelligent and extremely aggressive pressing. There's a lot to like about this Sundowns team as a neutral and it's well worth catching some of their games in 2021/22, if not already planning to do so.

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ARNE SLOT



2020 SCOUT REPORT

DAVID SELINI // @DAVESELINI

Arne Slot is the latest star in the Dutch managerial sky after impressing greatly at AZ Alkmaar since taking charge in July 2019. Under his leadership, AZ are second in the Eredivisie and also progressed to the last-32 of the Europa League by finishing second to Manchester United in their group. These results, and particularly the performances that brought them, are extremely impressive given that this is Slot's first job as head coach, having previously worked in PEC Zwolle's academy and as an assistant coach at Cambuur and AZ. This tactical analysis will focus on the tactical philosophy Slot has implemented thus far at AZ, particularly the fluid movement, full-back rotations and pressing.

SLOT'S TACTICAL SETUP

Slot prefers a 4-2-3-1 shape as the base of his team, with the team defending in a 4-4-2 out of possession. However, the attacking shape of the team is very fluid and depends on the movements of the players which creates an ever-changing attacking structure that is difficult to describe. As we will see below, this structure is constantly changing as players move and react to the movements of their teammates. Slot's team is quite possession-heavy and his style is very dominant, which has led to AZ averaging more than 60% possession in the Eredivisie and the Europa League this term. Additionally, AZ average an xG of 2.02 and an xGA of 0.87, further indicating how they have dominated teams this season. The 41-year-old coach has been quick to stamp his authority on the playing style of AZ and he has been very successful in implementing the game model quickly. Now, let us look at how they actually play.

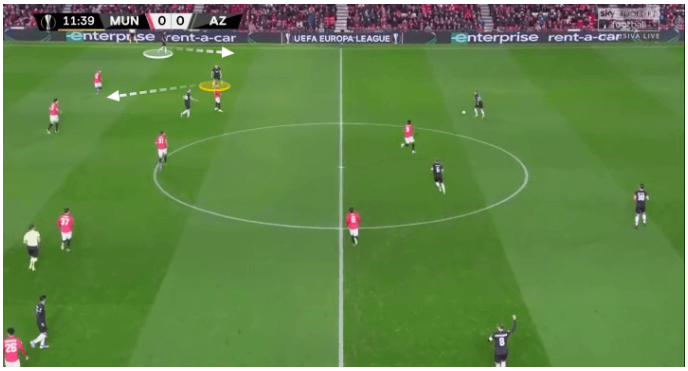
UNCONVENTIONAL FULL-BACK MOVEMENTS

Ever since Pep Guardiola introduced the roles for Philipp Lahm and David Alaba at Bayern Munich, the concept of inverted full-backs has been something only the most innovative coaches have implemented on a consistent basis. Basically, the role means that the full-back will move into midfield, often alongside the midfield pivot, to create an additional central passing option. This provides a better setup against counter-attacks, and looks to open straightforward passing lanes from centre-back to winger.

For Slot, it seems to be the last point that is most important in his use of inverted full-backs. Slot often has his right-back Jonas Svensson, in particular, move into midfield while the right-winger, often Yukinara Sugawara maintains width. We can see this movement in the image below with Svensson (yellow) inside and Sugawara (white) wide.

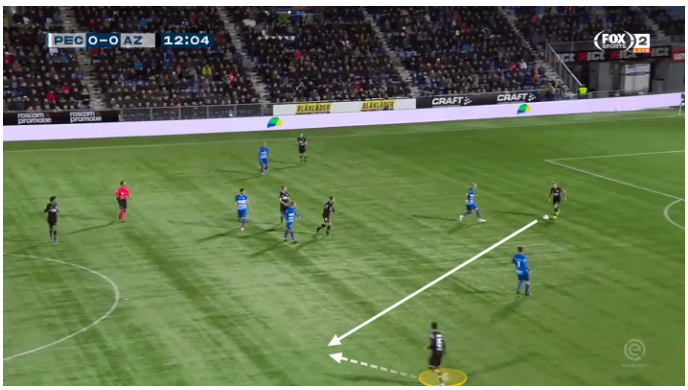


And then the image below highlights how it can look higher up the pitch with Svensson (yellow) again centred while Sugawara (white) maintains width.



As we can see in both images above, Svensson's movement opens up a direct passing lane from the centre-backs out to Sugawara. This allows Slot's team to move the ball their quicker and more easily given that Svensson will often take the opposition's left-winger inside with him. Also, in the second image especially, we can see that Svensson moves into space between the lines of Manchester United, much higher than where Guardiola would position Lahm and Alaba.

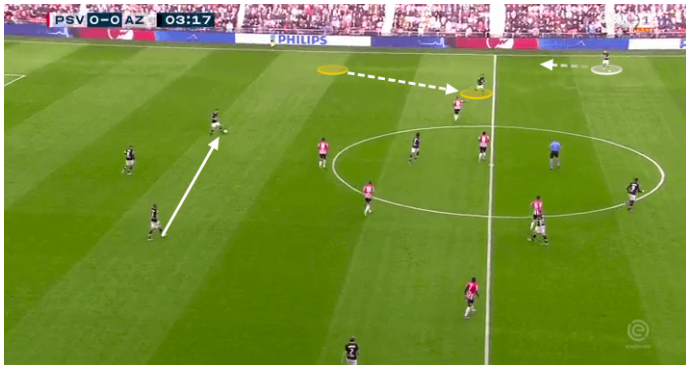
The role played by the left-back, often Owen Wijndal, is similar yet not identical. Wijndal often plays a more traditional full-back role but he still often moves inside for similar reasons as Svensson. Firstly, Slot often uses Wijndal to move into the space behind the opposition's first pressing line, as seen below, to help AZ play through pressure.



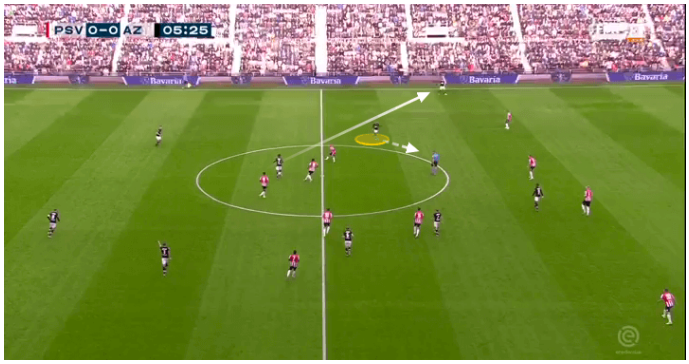
The main reason for Wijndal's inverted movements, though, is the presence of the out-and-out winger Oussama Idrissi on the left of Slot's attack. Idrissi always starts wide and then attacks full-backs at pace. In the final third, Wijndal will often overlap as soon as Idrissi has isolated the full-back and thus overload that area. We can see this in the image below.



However, before the ball reaches Idrissi in the first place, Wijndal often moves inside, as highlighted below (Wijndal in yellow), to open up a passing lane to Idrissi. As soon as the ball is moved towards the left side of the pitch, Wijndal will move inside while Idrissi (white) maintains width.



Below is another example, as Wijndal, similar to Svensson above, moves into the space between the lines of PSV's midfield and defence while opening up a simple passing lane for Calvin Stengs to isolate Idrissi with the right-back.

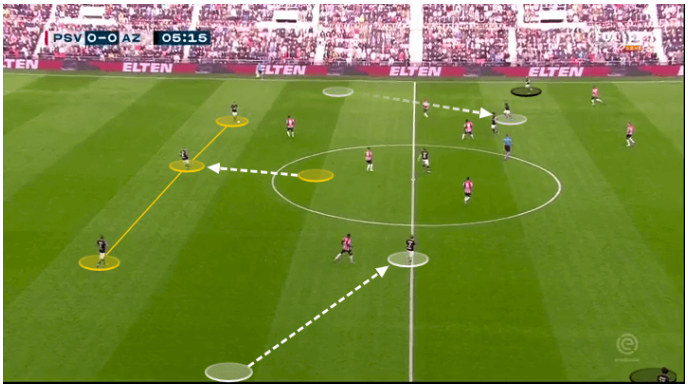


These movements are crucial as to understand Slot's attacking setup. He seems to want his players to constantly move, but also to balance each other's movements. We will see more of this in the following section.

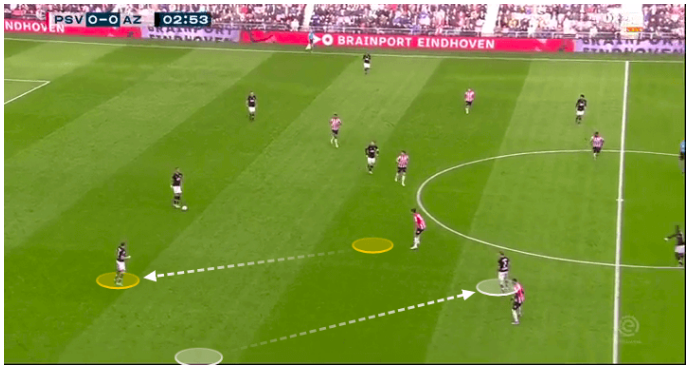
FLUID MOVEMENT WITHIN ATTACKING SHAPE

As mentioned, Slot seemingly wants a very fluid and flexible team where players interchange positions to cause confusion among the opposition. This is a very clear aspect of his attacking setup. In the image below, we can see some of the rotations that take place when Slot's AZ look to build from the back.

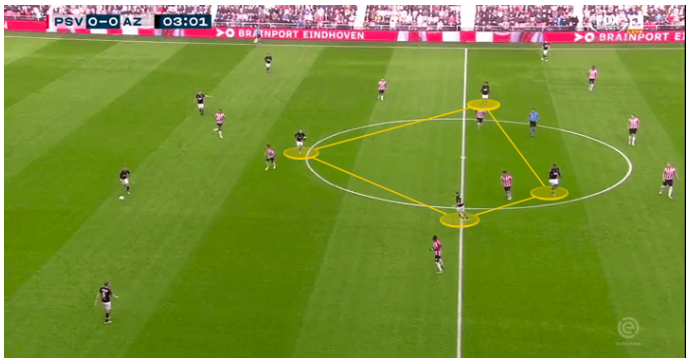
Firstly, one of the central midfielders (yellow) has dropped in between the two centre-backs to create a situational back-three. Secondly, the two full-backs (white) have moved into central positions while the two wingers (one of them Idrissi, black circle) maintain width. Furthermore, we can see the number 10 Stengs having moved across into space in the left-sided half-space next to the inverted left-back. These movements have created an altogether different shape which is difficult to keep up with, especially for a man-orientated defensive team.



In the below scene, Svensson has moved inside while the central midfielder has dropped into the right-back slot.



With the movements highlighted above, and those of Stengs into the left-sided half-space and the dropping movement of striker Myron Boadu, Slot's team now set up in a situational diamond without an out-and-out striker but with a 4 vs 2 advantage in central midfield while keeping maximum width.



In the image below, Stengs (yellow), this time appearing as the striker, has dropped deep while Sugawara (white) has moved in centrally to attack the space behind Harry Maguire. As a result, Svensson now appears in a more traditional right-back role by pushing very high down the wing to replace the width lost when Sugawara moved inside.



The movements in the image above highlight how well Slot's team create presences in all the important spaces in attack; wide channels, half-spaces, in depth and between the lines. Additionally, it shows how they balance each

other's movements, such as Sugawara replacing Stengs centrally and Svensson replacing Sugawara wide. This suggests strong work on the training pitch by Slot.

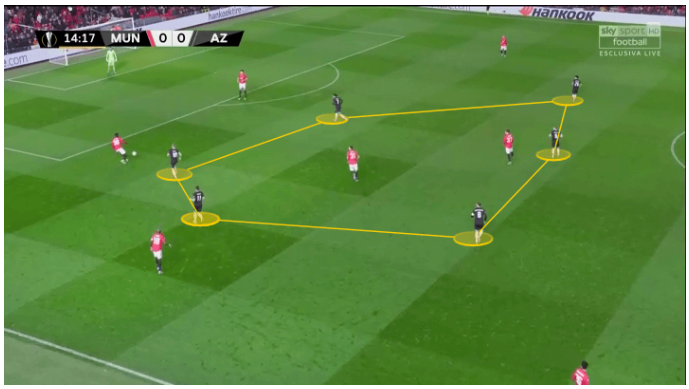
Again, the image below highlights these balancing movements. As Stengs (yellow) drops off the front, Dani De Wit (white) attacks the space in behind, dragging United's right-back Ashley Young with him and thus opening space for the crossfield pass to Idrissi.



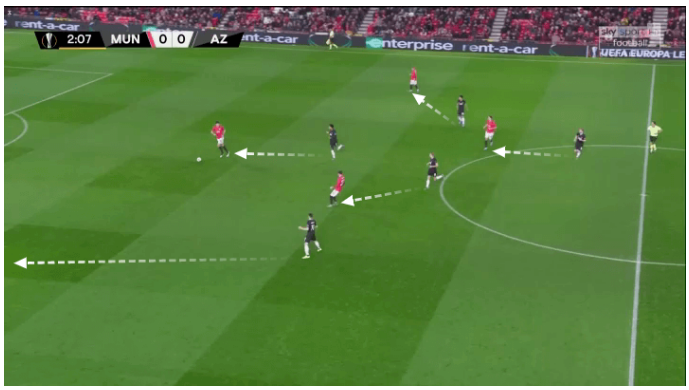
Slot's attacking philosophy seems to be to progress the ball swiftly using third-man combinations in central areas and quick switches of play to release his wingers in 1vs1- battles. His implementation of these fluid positional interchanges helps in this regard since opponents will be confused as to who they should be picking up as a right-back can suddenly appear as a number 10 while the striker is acting as a playmaker deep in midfield. It is a very complex structure to implement, but Slot is undeniably doing it well right now.

PRESSING AND COMPACT DEFENDING

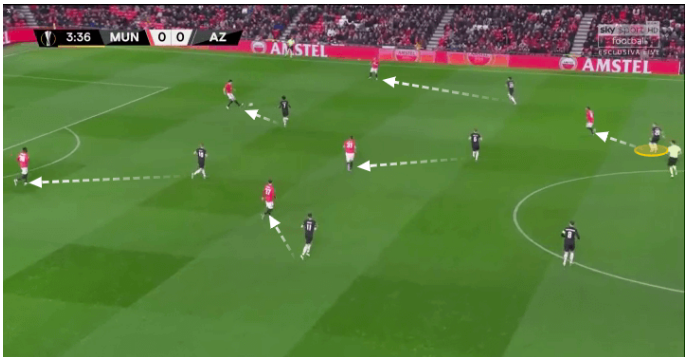
Defensively, Slot is very aggressive and implements a defensive game that involves winning the ball back quickly. This was especially evident in the game away at Manchester United when AZ really went for it and pressed United all over the pitch. The pressing schemes Slot implements are normally man-orientated, while the overall defensive setup from the middle third and back is more positionally-orientated. In particular, the front four are man-orientated in their pressing actions. As we can see in the image below, Slot commits many players to press the opponent high up the pitch in a shape that often resembles a 4-4-2 or 4-2-2-2.



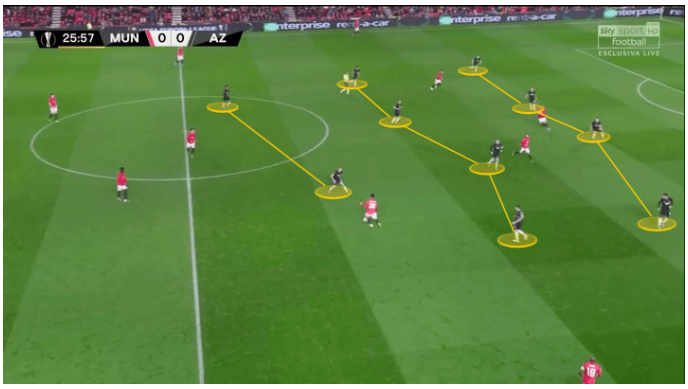
As mentioned above, the pressing is largely man-orientated as Slot wants his players to remove simple passing options for the opposition. As we can see in the image below, each AZ player has a direct opponent to whom they are orientated.



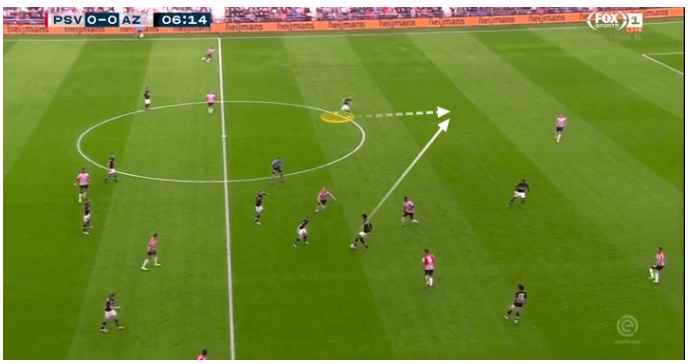
The aggressiveness of Slot's pressing is very evident in the image below. As you can see, AZ's forwards and midfielders (except for no 8, Teun Koopmeiners) are marking a United player each. However, Juan Mata drops deep to provide a passing option and AZ's centre- back Jordy Clasie then follows the Spaniard deep into United's half. This highlights the man-orientated nature of Slot's pressing as he looks to remove passing options in central areas.



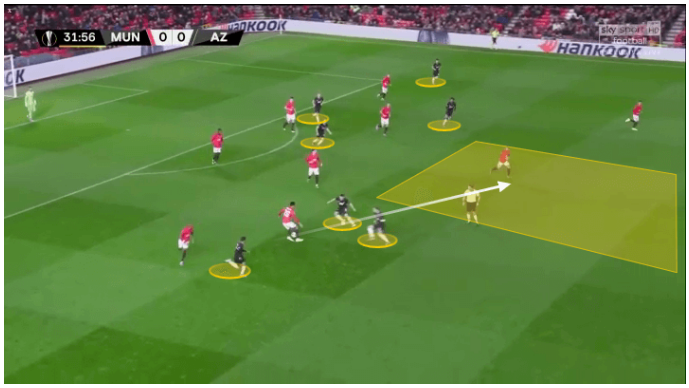
When defending inside their own half, Slot organises his team in a 4-4-2 which keeps as short distances between the lines as possible, as you can see in the image below. The defenders are constantly pushing or withdrawing the defensive line based on how the ball is moved.



There is also a priority to push the opponent into the wide areas which means that both wingers defend in narrow positions to create a more compact team. This has the upside of providing great counter-attacking positions when the ball is won. We can see one such example below as Stengs has just won the ball and immediately releases Idrissi who can attack towards goal straight away due to his narrow starting position out of possession.



Overall, Slot's game model seems well-suited for a long career among clubs in the upper sections of leagues. However, one weakness to have appeared is an issue with defending against counter-attacks. This suggests improvements must be made in how the team is structured to prevent counter-attacks when the ball is lost. We can see this in the image below as Mason Greenwood exposes poor defensive spacing in midfield by releasing Mata in tremendous amounts of space in midfield, catching out seven AZ players in the process.



It is true that Slot commits a lot of men forward but this defensive weakness that has propped up can eventually be what makes or breaks a title race or a cup final so this part of his philosophy is something that still needs work. The stats back this up too, with AZ facing 3.43 shots per game from counter-attacks on average.

CONCLUSION

Finally, as this scout report and analysis of his tactics has shown, Arne Slot seems to be a bright coaching prospect but it is still very early in his coaching career. If he continues to impress at AZ though, there is no stopping him getting a job at Ajax or a German club in the not too distant future. His style is attractive with dominant football and aggressive pressing which make him seem ideal to coach at clubs looking to dominate games and win titles. Therefore, Slot is definitely someone to keep an eye on in 2020.

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OUR COVERS THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

While Total Football Analysis has always been about the written content within the magazine, it has been my job over the last few years to try and make this magazine look as pretty as possible.

Looking back at the first magazine I ever designed and comparing it to the stuff we have been putting out lately fills me with pride.

This magazine has been a place for young analysts to express themselves through analysis and hone their craft. For me, it has been an open canvas to develop as a designer.

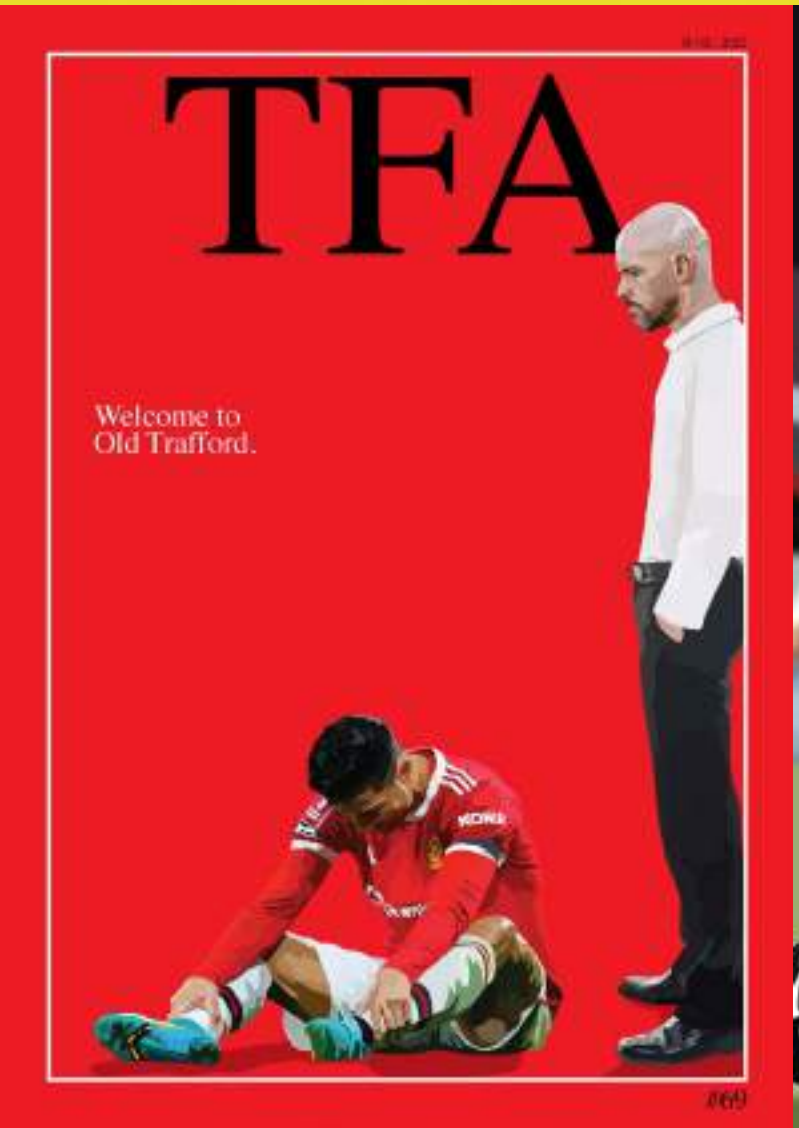
I was lucky enough that Chris trusted me with this job all those years ago with minimal experience under my belt, and throughout that time Chris has encouraged me to keep the magazine fresh with new designs.

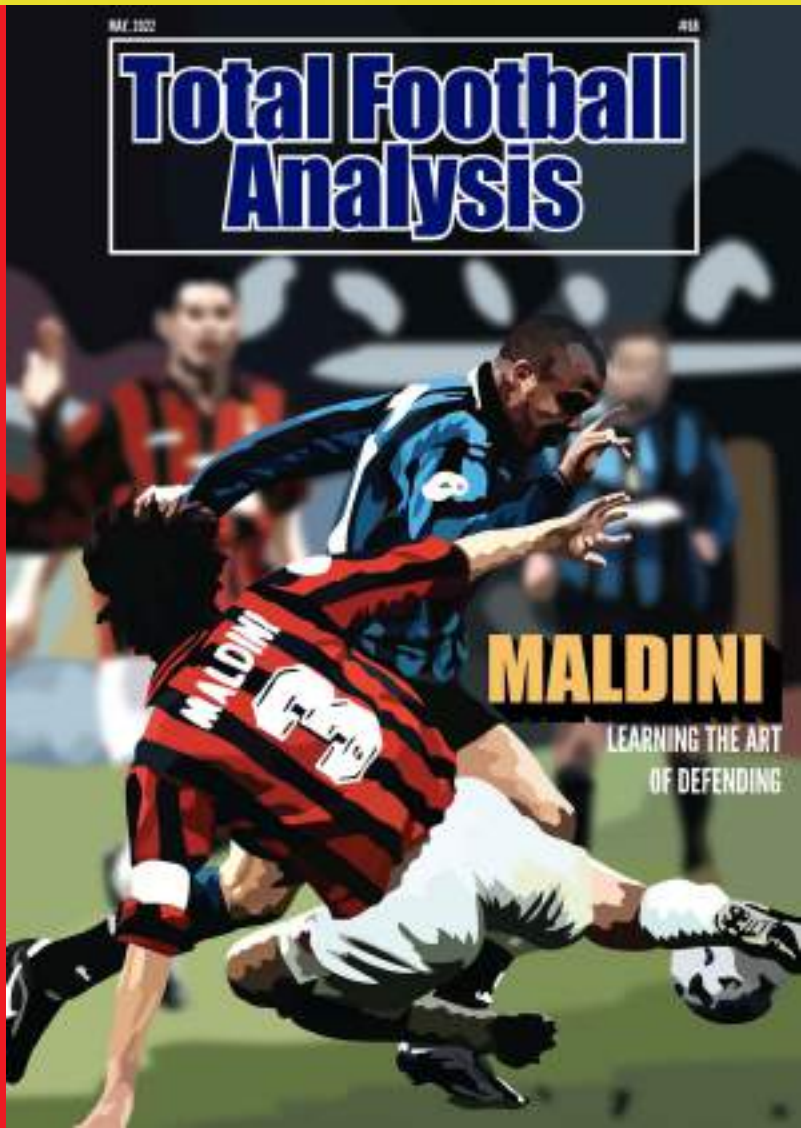
My favourite part of the magazine design process is easily constructing the cover. In the beginning, the magazine covers were very cookie-cutter and didn't involve much creativity on my end. However, as I became more comfortable with the design platforms, Chris pushed me to take the covers in a different direction.

I quite clearly remember a conversation we had in late 2021 when Chris and I decided that I should try to base all of our covers for the upcoming year on some of history's most iconic magazine covers. This process helped me take inspiration from some of the world's most established publications and learn what makes a great cover.

In 2023 I focused on making fresh and unique designs on my own, from scratch. The following pages will highlight some of the designs (some old - some new) that I am most proud of.

Jamie Brackpool // Magazine Design // Total Football Analysis





MOHAMMED KUDUS: AJAX'S NEWEST PROLIFIC GOALSCORER

UDINESE: ENJOYING THEIR ROARING START TO SERIE A

ROBERTO DE ZERBI: WHAT HE WILL BRING TO BRIGHTON

TFA Magazine





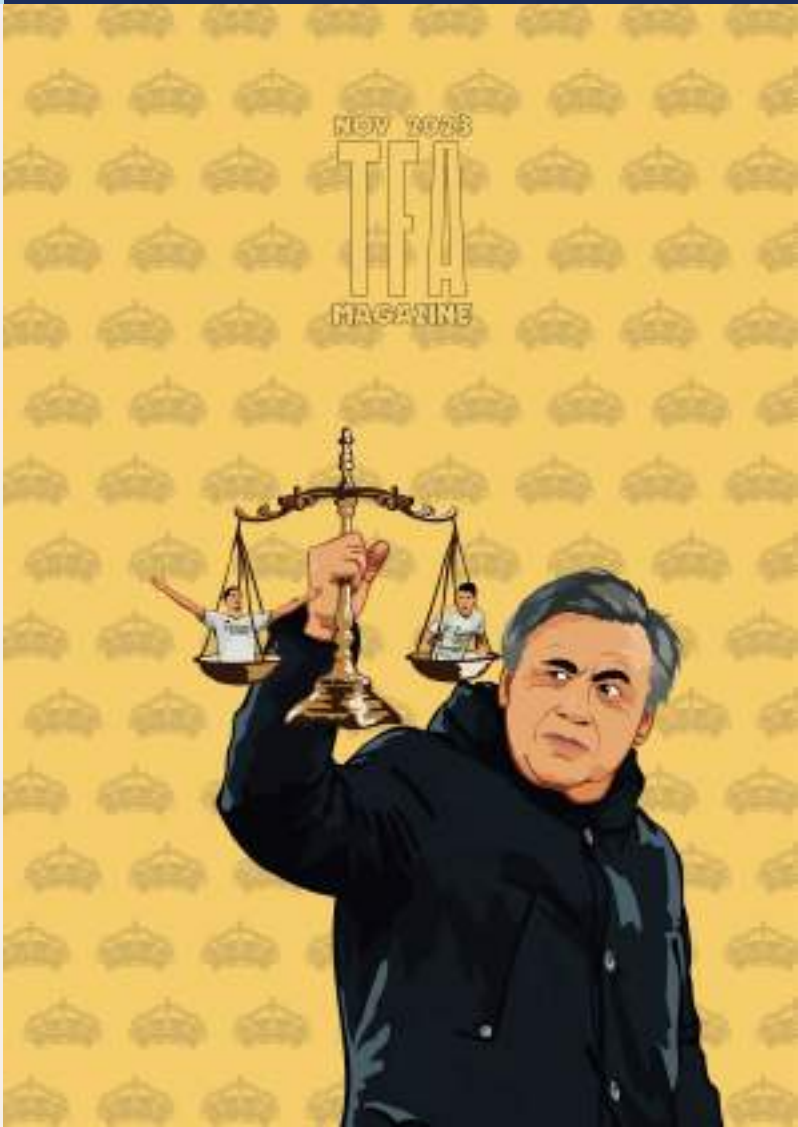





FIFA WORLD CUP 2022
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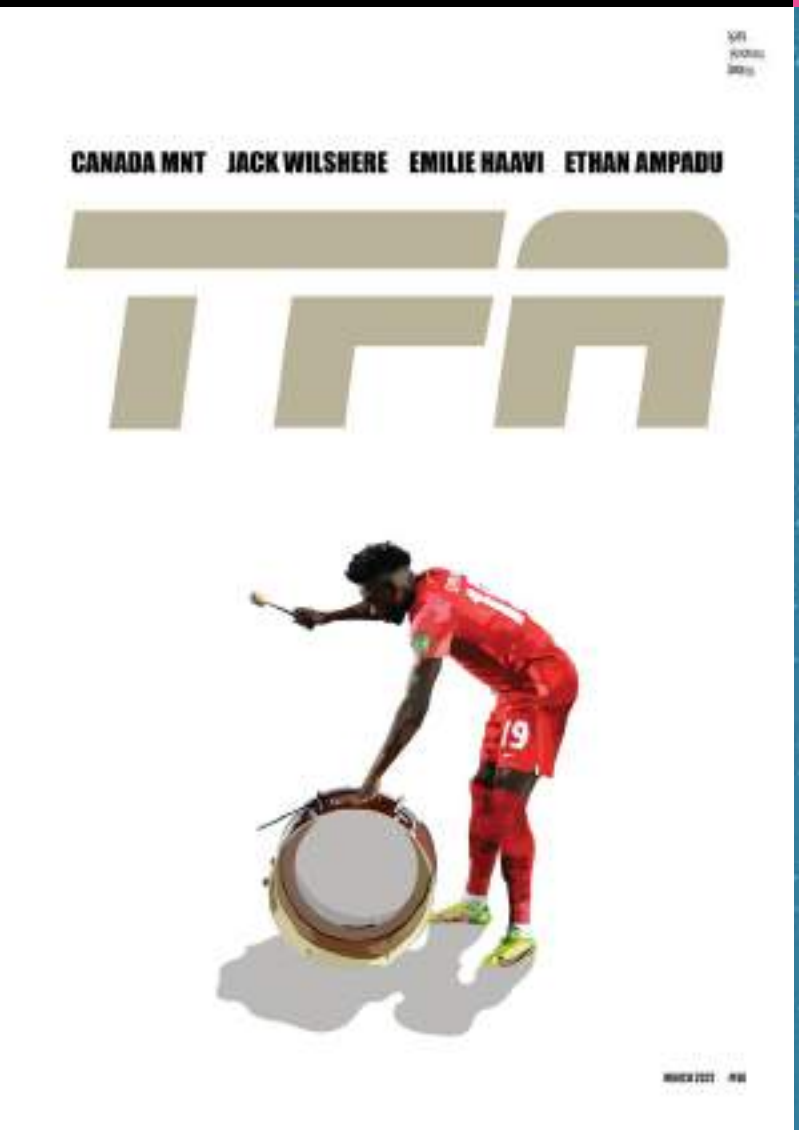

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ROBERTO DE ZERBI



SASSUOLO

LORIHANNA BALABANOVA // @LORIHANNASH

If you follow Italian football and always seek young innovative coaches in football with distinguished vision, the name of Roberto De Zerbi probably comes quite high on the list. The 41-year-old coach is currently in charge of Sassuolo in Serie A and breaks all the rules in modern-day football ruled by money and extreme transfer policies.

While he had some unsuccessful spells with Palermo and Benevento, his interesting tactical approach has earned him the place at Sassuolo where he managed to transform the team that have previously wandered in the lower leagues into a Serie A title contender in the 2020/21 season. The team are moving around the top along with Milan, Inter, Napoli and Juventus.

The Neroverdi are one of the most exciting teams to watch in the last couple of years since De Zerbi's arrival in 2018. Most of their games end up being spectacular with a lot of turnovers and goalscoring opportunities. The Italian's clear tactical vision has drawn the interest of many coaches who have praised him for his work, with Pep Guardiola giving his nod of approval on his team's contemporary attacking style of play.

We will use tactical analysis to examine De Zerbi's tasteful tactical decisions and give an insight into his vision and Sassuolo's style of play. The analysis will give an in-depth look into the team's tactics in each phase.

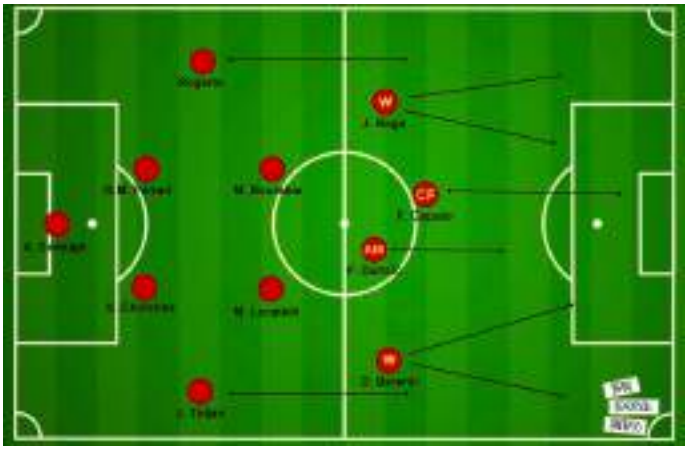
MAIN TRAITS OF DE ZERBI'S COACHING STYLE

As mentioned, the Italian is very particular in his requirements and wants to see his teams play in a certain way and nothing less. He always tries to adjust his players' abilities to his strategy and get the most out of both, but wouldn't change his principles for the sake of putting certain players under the spotlight. Despite the high reliance on Ciccio Caputo in attack, De Zerbi stays away from creating one-man teams and focuses on creating a connection that will be followed by fluidity and successful actions.

He aims to build a dominant team who display possession football and control the game mostly in the opposition half. Relying on a lot of movement and short passing his teams always focus on building up from the back and smooth ball progression towards the overcrowded advanced areas where he has deployed as many players as possible. He wants his team to have control on and off the ball.

He might adjust the starting XI according to the opposition, but he never stays away from his style of play and always relies on his usual tactical approach in aim to expose the opponents.

Currently, his favoured formation is 4-2-3-1 which is used in efforts for better coverage and width. One of the full-backs of the four-men defensive line would always help with ball progression, while the advanced wide players would be used as inverted wingers. That is one of the most important traits of his team since he both achieves width but also has players who constantly occupy the penalty area and act as a direct threat. While he wants to have coverage out wide, Sassuolo rarely rely on crossing in their attacking actions. Instead, they use the width for their build-up and then focus their actions in the central areas from where they create most of their opportunities.



The most regular starters for Sassuolo on each position in a 4-2-3-1

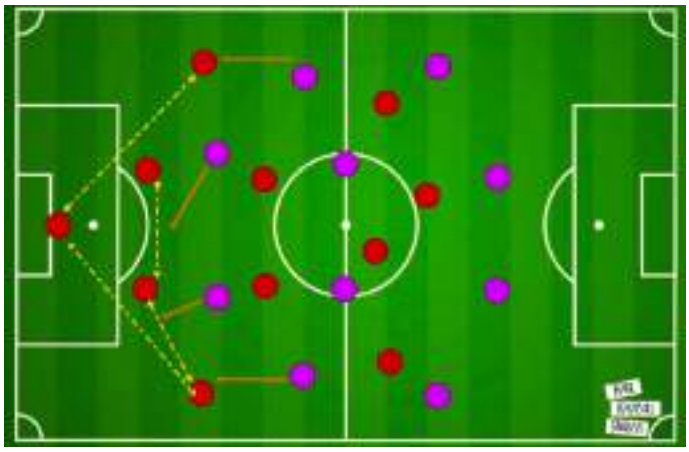
Even more impressive trait of his coaching style is the way he unlocks the players' potential. The level of improvement many players have achieved under his guidance is extraordinary, and that is why he is a difference-maker. Managing to perform at that level with Sassuolo's limited involvement in the transfer market is what makes him one of the most exciting coaches of this generation.

DOMINANCE AND MOVEMENT IN BALL PROGRESSION

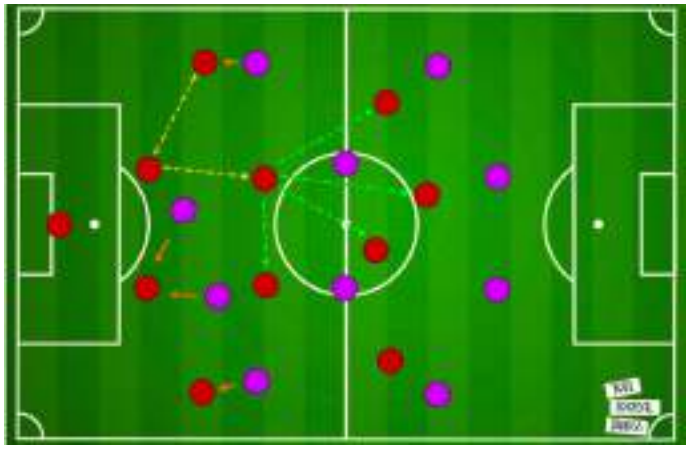
Sassuolo are a team that highly rely on possession and passing in aim to control the game and allow the opposition less time on the ball. They prefer circulating the ball using short passes and very rarely rely on long balls and direct play in order to advance the ball. The team are third in Serie A when it comes to pass frequency but what is more impressive is their confidence on the ball and the fluidity they achieve. They are the team with the highest pass accuracy (90%) in the league, which is one of the reasons for their efficiency.

They always aim to build-up from the back by circulating the ball between the four men in defence and the double pivot in midfield and then smoothly transition using short pass combinations and a lot of movement for advancing the ball. Manuel Locatelli would often be the key man in ball progression, averaging 77.83 passes per 90 with 90% accuracy in aim to support his team's attacking actions and deliver the ball to the advanced areas.

Not only does he help in bypassing the opposition's pressing systems early on, but he's also key for delivering the ball to the advanced areas, where he contributes with 14.65 passes to the final third. Only Arturo Vidal and Marcelo Brozovic from Inter have better records in that indicator.



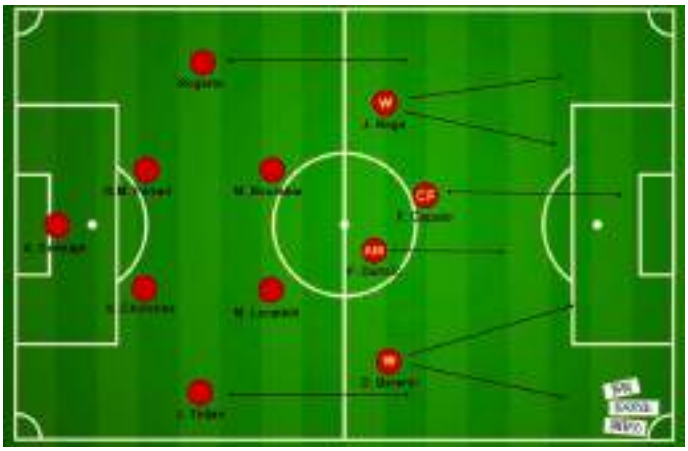
The team's ball circulation when building up from the back engaging defenders.



That's done in order to open space for the double pivot to receive and progress the ball.

What makes him that important in De Zerbi's set-up is his unusual use of the 4-2-3-1 scheme. While the teams using that formation often rely on the full-backs' support upfront, the Italian

has transformed that set-up. While helping with retaining possession and with ball progression, Sassuolo's full-backs wouldn't go too high up and would help better with ball progression rather than actual attacking actions. That leaves the wingers with the responsibility to provide width in the advanced areas.



Most of the time the full-backs' movement limits to the edge of the final third. The width is provided by the wingers who stretch out defences but then often cut inside to help to overload the central areas.

That's where the double pivot in midfield comes into action. Their positioning is usually very important for breaking through the opposition's press, meaning they always aim to move between the lines and stay behind their opponents' first line of defence. This way, they have a better chance to open the passing lanes and help with ball progression. That opportunity comes from the team's strategy of inviting pressure in their own half and engaging the opposite players, which often results in gaps in midfield that they could exploit. That also gives them the opportunity to create a numerical advantage in the advanced areas.



The double-pivot would often be positioned behind the opposition's first line of defence.

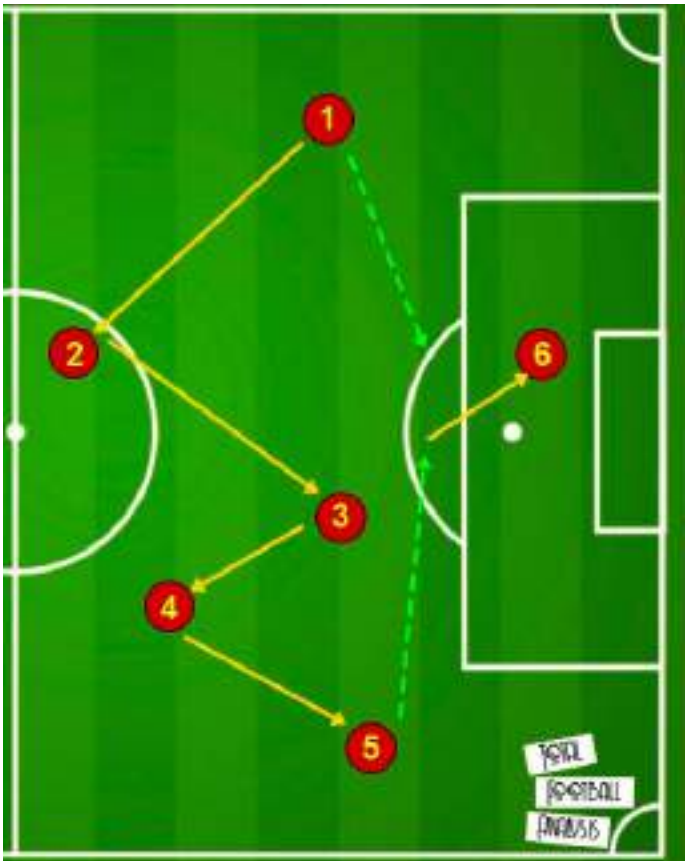
The midfielders would constantly combine with the centre-backs using one-touch pass combinations in efforts to break the lines. They aim to drag players out of position and find pockets that they can use to advance the ball. Then, the attacking players would get the chance to use their skills and penetrate.

FINAL THIRD ACTIONS AND THE INVERTED WINGERS USE

Sassuolo's usual set-up consists of a striker supported by an attacking midfielder from behind and two wide players who would most frequently act as inverted wingers. De Zerbi believes in putting the most effort into the attacking actions and often employs as many players to the opposition half as possible. Sassuolo are among the teams with the most completed passes to the final third, which allows them to create a lot of opportunities throughout the games.

The team only use the width provided by the wingers to initiate a lot of movement and combinations in the final third rather than for crossing. That is also underlined by their last position in Serie A in terms of crossing frequency. De Zerbi relies on the wingers for cutting inside

and helping with creating movement in the penalty area. That brings more options in front of the goal and allows them both to create a direct threat or act as a passing outlet.



Their attacking strategy involves a lot of movement and one-touch combinations.

The team rely on dribbling attempts too in effort to hold on to the ball and break through defences. The main ones responsible for that are the wide players Domenico Berardi and Jeremie Boga, who bring more explosiveness with their ball control and help the team in being more efficient in the final third.



The wingers' tendency to cut inside.

Sassuolo have been overperforming their xG of 11.51, with scoring 18 goals so far in their league journey. What makes their attacking actions that successful is the high number of shooting efforts (13.74 per 90) which come both from outside the box and from a close distance. That increases their versatility in the advanced areas and helps them in breaking through different defensive structures.

The main player responsible for the actions in front of the goal is Ciccio Caputo who has turned as one of the most consistent strikers in Italy in the last few years. Caputo's intelligent movement in the penalty area has made him a crucial part of De Zerbi's successful attacking strategy. The 33-year-old smartly anticipates both his teammates' and the oppositions' movement, which makes him very efficient in front of the goal.



Caputo's positioning in the box. He anticipated the opposite players' movement and escaped his marker to score.

SET-PLAY ROUTINES

Sassuolo have been successful in their attacking set-pieces so far, scoring three goals and constantly creating threats by focusing on head shots. While there's nothing too Sassuolo have been successful in their attacking set-pieces so far, scoring three goals and constantly creating threat by focusing on headshots. While there's nothing too distinguished about their free-kick routines, they do have two main strategies in terms of attacking corners.

They either played it short while committing four/five players to the box, or they did play it directly to the penalty area and rely on strong positioning and overcrowding the danger areas. What doesn't change no matter which routine they use is the two-men coverage outside the box. They do always have two players outside the penalty area for covering both second balls and also protect the team in case a counter-attack occurs.



The team spread out back to the corner taker Berardi in order to release pressure and retain possession.

However, they usually rely on aerial dominance in the box, and if their plans fail, they still try to keep the possession by spreading back out to the corner taker, dragging players out of position and exploiting the gaps afterwards.

DEFENSIVE TRANSITIONS AND PRESSING EFFORTS

As it happens with most of the attack-minded teams, their overcommitment to the advanced areas often comes at the expense of their defensive performance. Focusing on the attacking actions and occupying the opposition's half often results in easily being exposed on a counter. It often leaves empty spaces and causes defensive disorganisation, making it harder for the teams to employ their marking strategy and defensive structure.

Sassuolo are no strangers to these issues, although De Zerbi has clearly shown that he relies on scoring more than the opposition. That wouldn't always work, but it keeps his team on the front foot and keeps their enthusiasm to keep on scoring.



Sassuolo's movement on a counter. One long ball was enough to break the defence. They are being exposed due to their over-commitment to the attack.

Whenever they need to trouble their opponents' build-up, they do try to press in the advanced areas but don't get carried away in pressing too high. Berardi, Locatelli and Filip Đuričić are the players that put effort into recovering the ball on the edge of the final third most frequently.

They also aim to intercept the ball occasionally, trying to keep the ball out of their defensive third. While their movement back when caught on a counter isn't that well measured, they are pretty successful in their physical challenges and win a high percentage of their defensive duels. What's even more impressive is the low number of committed fouls. That helps them in stealing the ball from the opposition and transitioning in attack as quickly as possible.

Their pressing strategy is quite intense, and they don't allow a lot of time on the ball to their opponents. That is confirmed by their PPDA of 8.88, meaning they almost immediately rely on defensive actions and don't allow a lot of space for movement to their opponents before they try to gain back possession. They are fifth in

Serie A in terms of high press intensity, with the champions Juventus staying right behind them with a much higher PPDA of 11.07.

That's another proof of De Zerbi's aggressive attacking approach and possession football, which is often the reason for their high average possession percentage of 60.4%. After Inter, Sassuolo are the team that hold on to the ball for the longest time per possession on average (19.2 seconds).

As mentioned, Sassuolo are defensively vulnerable, but that comes mostly from their advanced positioning rather than their actions in their own half. Many of their opponents are being pressured to switch to direct play which isn't beneficial for Sassuolo's defensive actions since their high positioning leaves gaps between the lines which the oppositions' attackers could exploit.



The space between the lines turns out crucial as there's no support to the backline and no one to cover depth.

Due to the time needed for the backline to organise during defensive transitions, the midfielders are often forced to dive into challenges midway to stop their opponents from creating chances. That's the reason why Locatelli averages 1.44 sliding tackles per game.

DEFENSIVE THIRD AND PENALTY AREA ACTIONS

Sassuolo's struggles in their defensive third most frequently come from gaps occurring on the flanks. While the full-backs wouldn't go as high up as usual with his formation, they do often go past the central line which affects their defensive performance immensely since they occasionally fail to drop back in a timely manner and also there's rarely someone to cover depth

That exposes them to conceding crossing attempts and increasing the danger in the box, where luckily they have better success in their positioning and challenges. They rarely lose the ball in the penalty area which has helped them in conceding only nine goals since the start of the season.

They put efforts in their aerial presence when defending in the box, but that's something they could improve on since they often fail in their attempts which increases the risk of conceding. Their overall success rate in aerial duels is higher than the average in the league but their efficiency decreases under pressure.



Their narrow defensive positioning allowed the opposition to spread out wide, stretch the defence and then use Martinez exploit the gaps and score.

CONCLUSION

Roberto De Zerbi undoubtedly is one of the most promising coaches in modern football and his philosophy is transforming Sassuolo into opponents that no one should underestimate.

The team have the advantage of focusing only on their Serie A actions which could be crucial in the Serie A title race since they only have to commit to one game per week, while some of the other contenders have to focus on their European contributions too.



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SARINA WIEGMAN



WHAT WILL HER ENGLAND SETUP LOOK LIKE?

DAVID ASTILL // @DAVIDPASTILL21

The England women's football team is currently under the interim leadership of Norway legend Hege Riise, who replaced former boss Phil Neville earlier this year, and who has led the team to a convincing win against Northern Ireland and losses to France and Canada. However, following the conclusion of this year's Olympics, current Netherlands boss Sarina Wiegman will take over the Lionesses.

The question fans are asking is what to expect from her? Having built the Dutch national side into one of the best teams in the women's game, Wiegman's reputation precedes her, and many are expecting her philosophy of attacking football to excite fans and bring in a new era for English women's football. In this tactical analysis, we will examine Wiegman's preferred tactics in closer detail, as well as comparing the statistics of the Netherlands and England from this year, seeing where Wiegman can improve the team.

ATTACKING PLAY

Under Sarina Wiegman, the Netherlands have played an attacking style of football, always looking to get players into dangerous areas of the pitch and ask questions of opposing defenders. The first aspect of this is their use of the wings to help move the ball up the pitch.



This is a regular feature of their play, and ensures they always have options to move the ball to when the central areas have been closed off. It also forces the opposing defenders to stretch out, meaning they will leave gaps open between themselves, as Norway have in this image. The defensive line is set up to occupy the central spaces, but the Dutch attack has given them a difficult choice; either allow them to dominate the wide channels, or get out to them and give the central attackers the opportunity to break through the middle of them. The indecision this creates is the reason that teams always look to have width in attack, and Wiegman is yet another coach who encourages her team to play this way.



When the Netherlands do find spaces out wide, they look to transfer it into dangerous areas as quickly as possible, ensuring they make the most of the space they have created. However, they don't tend to cross the ball into the box, as this risks their opponents winning and clearing it. Instead, the midfielders get into the half-spaces, as former Arsenal Women midfielder Jill Roord has done in this image. By positioning herself here, Roord, who has joined Frauen Bundesliga giants Wolfsburg this summer, can receive the ball when it is pulled back to her and have a shot, and this move leads to a goal for the team. Therefore, we can see clearly how effective this tactic is for them.

The reason Roord is in so much open space is because the defenders naturally move towards the ball, and this instinctiveness is what the Netherlands play on. They know that, by running towards the goal line here, they will draw Norway's defenders out of position, creating the space for Roord to run into. This type of attacking play relies on teamwork, with everyone knowing where to be at every moment, and Wiegman

is likely to bring this type of play to England. Therefore, we can expect the Lionesses to get more players into the half-spaces, creating problems for opposing defences and making them a more potent side in attack.



Another notable aspect of the Netherlands' play is that they rarely pass backwards. This image shows how they are a reasonable distance away from Norway's goal area, but their focus is always on playing forwards and setting up attacking opportunities. Here, the red arrow shows how they get their heads up and play through the gap, transferring the ball behind the Norwegian line and allowing the forwards to set up a goalscoring opportunity. Again, we can see the width they have in attack, but also how the forwards play on the shoulder of the defensive line. This means that, when the ball comes through the defensive gap, an attacker is ready to receive it, decreasing the chance of a defender reaching it first.

This is already something that England do in the final third, with Manchester City Women striker Ellen White, who is normally England's first choice striker, constantly playing in and around the opposing defenders, giving her team a passing option behind the line. Manchester United Women's versatile forward Ella Toone was the creative heart of her domestic team's attacking play last season, and brought that to the national team when she made her debut against Northern Ireland earlier this year. Therefore, Wiegman already has the raw ingredients, and simply needs to fuse them together in her own way.

CREATING OPTIONS

Sarina Wiegman likes her Netherlands team to keep the ball on the ground when transitioning from defence to attack, and has a clear emphasis on creating passing options around the pitch.



Here, you can see how they have the ball in their own half of the pitch, with three players circled, all offering passing options. Whilst the defender and winger are normal options to have, the player in the middle has dropped back to provide a link between the defence and midfield, helping the team to move the ball through the middle and into the forwards. There is a gap between the two Norwegian attackers, which that player has seen, and this demonstrates how the Dutch players are expected to have excellent spatial awareness during games. The speed at which these options are created means that individual players never need to hold onto the ball for longer than is necessary, decreasing the risk of them being closed down and losing the ball in a dangerous part of the pitch.



We can develop this further with this image, which shows the ball in the central channel, being passed forwards to a Dutch attacker who has run ahead to offer the passing option. Once the ball reaches that player, they get their head up and look to move it into a teammate; a third player, in the blue circle, has made a run on the other side of the defence, giving her that option.

Norway's defenders are all positioned centrally here, trying to make it difficult for the Dutch attackers to use their free-flowing tactics. However, the Netherlands' ability to constantly offer passing options for each other allows them to beat this trap. With Wiegman preferring to use a 4-2-3-1 formation during games (as she has 98% of the time in 2021), the midfielders are expected to work with the forwards to make the most of their attacking opportunities, and this is something we are likely to see a lot of from England once Wiegman takes control later this year.



We mentioned how having width is a major part of the Dutch attacks, but that doesn't just refer to the wingers operating in those areas. The two full-backs are constantly encouraged to advance up the pitch and support their teammates when the team has possession, and we can see here how Atletico Madrid Femenino left-back Merel van Dongen, in the yellow circle, has advanced up the pitch to do just that. Her movement allows the winger to stay further inside, meaning she can pass into van Dongen or cut inside and create a goalscoring opportunity. Australia's defence is spread out evenly across the pitch, so the more players the Netherlands can get in the central areas and half-spaces, the better their chances of getting through the gaps between the players. However, if the defence closed up, then van Dongen's positioning became even more important, as she would provide an alternative way for them to get the ball into the space behind.

The Netherlands' wide attacking players include Arsenal's Danielle van de Donk and Barcelona Femeni's Lieke Martens, with both looking to cut inside and shoot at goal as often as possible. Therefore, the full-backs' advances up the pitch help them to play to their strengths, as they don't need to remain tight to the wings. England's full-backs are already good at getting up the pitch and supporting attacks, particularly Manchester City duo Lucy Bronze and Alex Greenwood, so this is a tactic Wiegman can deploy from the first day she takes charge of the Lionesses.

DEFENSIVE TACTICS

With the Netherlands playing such an attacking brand of football, defending is not their strength. That is not to say that they are poor at it, as they have good structures when their opponents have possession, but it is not something they focus on as much as they do their attack.



As we have already mentioned, Sarina Wiegman likes to play a 4-2-3-1 formation, with a basic four-player back line. However, as this image shows, only three stay back all the time, with one of the full-backs getting forward to support the

attacks, as we have already discussed. The role of the full-back left behind is to ensure that the centre-backs don't become isolated and to stop the attackers playing around them. Once the Netherlands lose possession, as they have here against Italy, the full-back who went forward drops back into the line, filling the space they left, and this changing defensive shape again requires good spatial awareness; two qualities we know Wiegman demands her players have.



It might appear that the defenders sit back and wait for their opponents to run at them with the ball, but they actually look to close down attackers whenever they have an opportunity to do so. Here, Germany have the ball on the nearside wing, with one Dutch player running from the box to put pressure on her, taking time away and forcing the attacker to make a quicker decision than they would have liked. This increases the chance of a mistake being made, so the Netherlands maintain control of their own area when they aren't in possession, which is important. The angle of the defender's run also means that the ball has a narrow corridor through which it can travel into the box, so, again, the Dutch players' ability to close the ball down decreases their opponents' options.



However, as mentioned, defending is not where Wiegman chooses to focus her efforts, and this image shows one time that they let Germany break through them too easily. The German attackers have the ball on the edge of the box here, with space and time to move it into the box for Eintracht Frankfurt forward Laura Freigang to score. We can see the gap in the Dutch line that Freigang, in the blue circle, was able to move through, with the Netherlands losing track of her and allowing her to move into the space behind them to score.

Therefore, under Wiegman, we may see England try to outscore their opponents, rather than sitting back and trying to be tough to beat at the back. That is not to say that England will be porous in their own half, but we can perhaps expect them to concede some easy goals at times, as some players are encouraged to get forward more than we are perhaps used to seeing them do currently.

DATA COMPARISON

The most accurate way to assess what Sarina Wiegman will bring to England is to compare their statistics with those of the Netherlands from 2021.

Statistic	Netherlands	England
Goals	2.8	2.33
Expected goals (xG)	1.98	2.57
Shots on target (%)	46.70%	41.50%
Passing accuracy	82%	85.90%
Possession per game	54.20%	57.60%
Crossing accuracy	21.50%	37%
Goals conceded	0.6	1.67
Defensive duels won (%)	67.10%	62.30%
Aerial duels won (%)	42.10%	46.20%
Accuracy of passes to final third	66.10%	69.90%

These statistics provide us with some interesting discussion points. Firstly, England have higher values for most statistics, notably in passing accuracy, average possession per game and the accuracy of their passes to the final third. This implies that, as far as their transitional play is

concerned, Wiegman won't need to change too much to improve the team's fortunes, instead simply finetuning it with her own tactical touches, such as ensuring that players always have plenty of options available to them when they have the ball.

Regarding goals and expected goals (xG) per game, England have a higher xG, but the Netherlands are more clinical and have already outscored their own xG. Therefore, once England have become acquainted with Wiegman's style of play, the number of goals they score per game is likely to increase, potentially helping them to win more games.

We have already noted that Wiegman prefers to keep the ball on the ground, rather than risking crosses, and this explains why England's crossing accuracy is higher than the Netherlands' for this statistic. However, this is likely to be one area that Wiegman will change after her arrival, which will require players who are good with the ball at their feet and able to weight passes perfectly; creative players in particular will thrive under this way of playing.

We noted that defending is not the Netherlands' strong point, but they still concede less goals per game than England. Therefore, Wiegman will need to improve their defensive record, making them harder to score against. This analysis has looked at two different ways that she could do this, with her tactic of keeping three players at the back something that could work for the Lionesses, so the defence is worth keeping an eye on as the team develops under Wiegman's leadership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has detailed several aspects of Sarina Wiegman's tactics with the Netherlands national team, picking out the things she could bring to the England national team in September and how she could improve them. The question this article asked was what their setup under her will be, and the answer is that they will have a greater focus on attacking and playing through the thirds, leading to more chances being created and more goals potentially being scored. England have so far preferred to use either a 4-4-2 or a 4-2-3-1 formation this year (both have been used 33% of the time), so they are trying different ways of playing under Hege Riise, and Wiegman will not need to make massive changes in this regard, as she also prefers a 4-2-3-1. However, it will be the little details here and there that will be interesting to watch, as well as how far she can take England in the future.

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ABEL FERREIRA



THE TACTICS BEHIND BACK-TO-BACK COPA LIBERTADORES

FINTAN O'REILLY // @FINTANFOOTBALL

The shortlist for the FIFA's best men's coach award is routinely dominated by Europe-based coaches, with this year's final three being comprised of Premier League duo Pep Guardiola of Manchester City and the winner Thomas Tuchel of Chelsea, along with European Championship-winning Italy boss Roberto Mancini. Meanwhile, Liverpool mastermind Jürgen Klopp came away with the award in both of the two years preceding this one.

These coaches are undoubtedly some of the best in world football today and, as such, are well deserving of their accolades. However, while the pinnacle of world football is clearly the top of the European game in 2022, excessive eurocentrism shouldn't prevent outstanding coaches plying their trade in other parts of the world from receiving the global recognition they too have earned for their current coaching performances from FIFA — a global organisation.

Take Al Ahly boss Pitso Mosimane, for example. He's guided his team to two straight CAF Champions League titles and an impressive third-place finish in the 2021 FIFA World Club World Cup — earning a medal at this competition for the continent for the first time since 2013. Despite this, the South African remains somewhat out of the spotlight as far as FIFA's top showcases are concerned, with the 57-year-old himself recently explaining his view on the matter as: "It is not only Africa [that's overlooked]. It is as though it does not mean as much when you win in the competitions that do not generate the most money, that do not have the biggest audiences", via The New York Times.

To read more about Al Ahly's exceptional coach, Pitso Mosimane, I've written about the South African here for Total Football Analysis: Mastermind Mosimane: Four fundamental tactical features fueling Egypt's relentless Red Devils – tactical analysis.

Another non-Europe-based coach who's delivered on an exceptional level of late is Palmeiras boss, Abel Ferreira. Indeed, the Portuguese coach has worked in Europe in the past, having previously led Braga and PAOK — and done a pretty impressive job with both clubs. However, his greatest success so far has come at Brazilian side Palmeiras, as Ferreira has managed to lead his side to one Copa do Brasil (2020) and, most impressively, back-to-back Copa Libertadores' (2020 and 2021).

In this tactical analysis piece, I aim to provide some insight into Ferreira's preferred style of play, strategy and tactics via analysis of his glorious Palmeiras side. I hope that this analysis shines a light on how the 43-year-old masterminded two straight Copa Libertadores titles, helping Palmeiras to become the first team to achieve this difficult feat since Boca Juniors did so in 2000 and 2001 under Carlos Bianchi — Copa Libertadores' most successful ever coach.

DEFENDING HIGHER UPFIELD

Under Ferreira, Palmeiras haven't been an extremely aggressive side without the ball. They ended the 2021 Brasileirão Série A with a relatively average PPDA of 10.71, indicating they press with relatively average intensity, a below-average number of defensive duels (63.02 per 90 — they do, however, have an above-average success rate of 58.2%) and a fairly low number of interceptions (34.12 per 90). In Copa Libertadores last season, Palmeiras had a PPDA of 16.06 — which ranked quite high among Copa Libertadores sides, indicating that they pressed with relatively low intensity in that competition.

These numbers probably won't come as much of a surprise if you've been watching Palmeiras, as

they don't tend to try and win the ball back right from opposition goal-kicks, in general. They tend to be more passive at the beginning of an opposition move, with their line of engagement typically sitting around the halfway line. Up until the opposition reaches that point, Ferreira is seemingly happy for his players to drop off and ultimately end up in a compact mid-block. Then, from this point, it's common to see Palmeiras perhaps start to defend with a bit more urgency.

Ferreira primarily used two main shapes in 2021 — the 5-4-1/5-2-3 and the 4-2-3-1. Regardless of which shape they played with, their defensive strategy and tactics largely remained consistent, so most of what I'll discuss here remains true regardless of shape. However, I will show examples of the team lined up in both a 5-4-1/5-2-3 and a 4-2-3-1.



Firstly, the passage of play shown in figures 1-3 provides an example of Palmeiras playing in the 5-2-3/5-4-1 shape. The placement of the wingers changes depending on how far the opposition has progressed upfield, which is where the difference between 5-2-3 and 5-4-1 becomes apparent. Further upfield, as we see Palmeiras in figure 1, their wingers sit higher and the shape is more of a 5-2-3 but in deeper areas, the wingers drop deeper to turn this shape into more of a 5-4-1.

Palmeiras operate with a zonal marking system that's position-oriented and generally quite organised. The aim here is almost to create something of a fortress around the centre of the pitch, covering all passing angles into midfield and keeping the opposition out of this area. This is clearly illustrated in figure 1, where the two central midfielders provide a base to the structure just in front of the halfway line, while the three players further upfield cut the passing lanes into midfield from the opposition backline.

In figure 1, we also see how Palmeiras react as the opposition send the ball out to the right-back from the right centre-back. The ball-near winger closes the receiver down while still remaining in the passing lane between the receiver and the nearest midfielder, the ball-far winger comes narrower to basically add extra protection to midfield and cover the ball-far midfielder while still retaining access to the ball-far wing in case the switch is played, and the centre-forward begins to close down the ball-near centre-back on seeing that with his forward passing options cut off, the right-back is set to send the ball back to this centre-back — which is what we see as play moves on.

The one occasion on which Palmeiras' press noticeably increases in intensity in higher areas like this is on a backwards pass. Ferreira likes his side to react to backwards passes and increase the pressure on the opposition's backline when they happen. Opposition backwards passes provide a good opportunity for a team to gain some ground and congest the opposition's field of play with a lower risk of being played through. This is a common pressing trigger and Palmeiras like to use it to continue forcing the opposition backwards to ultimately force a riskier pass, including a long ball upfield into a position where Palmeiras can contest an aerial duel and win the second ball.



We see how this tactic plays out in figure 2, where after the backwards pass to the centre-back was played, Palmeiras' front three, and the two central midfielders backing them up, push upfield while remaining compact and preventing gaps that could be played through from opening up. As a result, they continue forcing the opposition back to the goalkeeper, as we see here. With the 'keeper's near passing options all now under pressure thanks to Palmeiras' pressing and no more space behind to play into, Ferreira's side successfully force the 'keeper into a rushed long ball upfield.



In figure 3, we see the result of this long ball, with Palmeiras' right wing-back pushing out to contest the aerial duel. Palmeiras have far more bodies positioned around the drop zone here to win the second ball — including the back three and the two central midfielders who remained tight to the front three but always behind the opposition's midfielders. As a result, possession is regained for Ferreira's side as a result of his organised pressure following the clear trigger they'd prepared for.

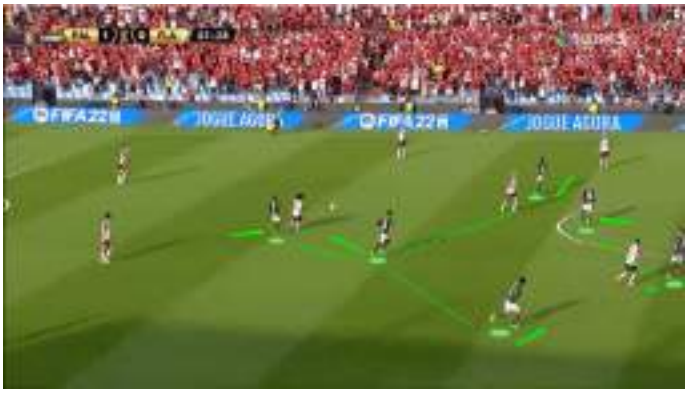
Again, though, Palmeiras are generally a more passive side and only really press high on the backwards pass. More often, we see them remain passive and compact in midfield focusing purely on preventing progression through the centre of the pitch via the positioning we saw in figure 1. This positioning aims to either force a backwards pass, as was the case here, or force a riskier pass, either drawing the opposition into passing centrally and creating an opportunity for an interception, playing the ball out wide to where the wing-back typically jumps into action and closes the receiver down while using the limited space afforded in the wide areas to his defensive advantage or forcing them to play the ball long earlier.



Figure 4 shows an example of Palmeiras as they start to drop into their 5-4-1, with the opposition having progressed to a slightly more advanced stage of their attack in this image than they had in the previous one. Still, they are yet to reach the halfway line here, so Palmeiras remain patient and focus on protecting the centre without pressing the ball carrier aggressively.

Here, we see an opposition full-back dropping deep to give the ball carrier an option for progression out wide and as he drops, Palmeiras' wing-back follows him closely. This is a very common sight which further shows Palmeiras' intent to protect the centre calmly and passively and force the opposition to play into a wide area, where the wing-back can then defend aggressively. This image shows the wing-back preparing for this potential result. If the ball is played to the full-back here, it does enter Palmeiras' half which leads to pressure increasing anyway. The Palmeiras wing-back is

just readying himself for that possible move and aiming to get in the best possible position to access the wide man on receiving the ball and successfully prevent continued progression.



In figure 5, we see an example of Palmeiras operating similarly during an early phase of the opposition's attack, except this time we see Verdão in the 4-2-3-1. This shape gives Palmeiras even more presence centrally in higher areas, as another body joins the line just behind the centre-forward. This can help to guard against a particularly dangerous opposition deep-lying playmaker, if one is there, as figure 5 shows with the centre-forward and the '10' essentially doubling up on the opposition's holding midfielder here, preventing him from enjoying enough time and space to play a more dangerous pass. Instead, the deep midfielder is forced to play the ball out wide, still in his own half — a very non-threatening position. The rest of Palmeiras' tactics as discussed before are also on show here — a narrow, compact, position-oriented shape focused on protecting the centre and remaining quite passive until about the point that the halfway line is crossed.

DEFENDING DEEPER

The previous section helps us to get an idea of why Palmeiras made a relatively low number of interceptions/engaged in a relatively low number of defensive duels in 2021 — they are a more passive team defensively, especially in the early portion of an opposition attack, and as such find themselves performing defensive actions less often. They do need to engage attackers eventually, however, and as we mentioned before, they tend to become more aggressive on the opposition crossing the halfway line. This next section of analysis will focus on Palmeiras' defending in deeper areas, to discuss how they tend to operate when this happens.

Firstly, as mentioned previously, Palmeiras' players will generally drop off at the beginning of opposition attacks and not engage the ball carrier aggressively until they reach the halfway line. At that point, while the more central players, like the centre-backs and central midfielders, typically hold their position, it's common to see a ball-near wide man, like the wingers or wing-backs close down the ball carrier if they're nearby.



An example of how the wider Palmeiras players operate when defending in deeper areas is shown in figure 6. Here, as the opposition play the ball out to the widest player on the left, that receiver is immediately closed down from the centre by the ball-near winger — who continues to protect the centre and the passing lanes into midfield — and the ball-near wing-back, who also acts aggressively as this wide man receives the ball to prevent him from enjoying too much time and space to make his next move.

At the same time, Palmeiras' ball-far winger and wing-back move across to an extent with the central players to continue controlling the centre and prevent too much space from opening up between the ball-near pressing players and the rest of the defensive block. If the pressing players

aren't backed up like this, then it can become too easy for the opposition to cut through them via runs and passes through the gaps that will inevitably open up in Palmeiras' system.

If Palmeiras' ball-far players come too far over, however, then it can result in too much space becoming open on the opposite wing and a weakness to switches of play appearing. It's worth noting that Palmeiras do still defend in a position-oriented manner and while they focus on remaining compact, they don't do so very much to the detriment of space on the opposite wing and the ball-far players generally ensure that they retain access to the opposition's ball-far players.



As play progresses into figure 7, we see how the opposition attempted to exploit space they'd hoped would open up behind the pressing players via passing and movement. However, as already mentioned, Palmeiras' deeper, more central players remain central and alert to movement in this space behind the ball-near pressing players. As the pass was played into the space behind Palmeiras' wing-back and winger, their right centre-back jumped out of the backline to close down the intended receiver and crucially regained possession for his side in a sensitive area.

This highlights how important it is that this space behind the more aggressive wide players in Palmeiras' defensive system is protected vigilantly by the alert and disciplined more central players. It's common to see the wide centre-backs and holding midfielders dragged into defensive duels like this one, which makes their alertness and technical defensive ability very important. They know that an important part of their role in this system is to protect space behind the aggressive wide players and sweep up any balls that get played into this space, should the winger/wing-back be unable to force the opposition backwards or win possession themselves via their aggressive pressure.

It's paramount that Palmeiras' winger/wing-back act aggressively and close the ball carrier down quickly as they receive the ball out wide, which we've now seen some example of in figures 4, 6 and 7, to prevent these players from enjoying too much time and space on the ball. Even if they fail to win the ball themselves, as was the case in figures 6 and 7, their aggressive pressure can force the opposition into a rushed decision by limiting their decision-making time and then damaging their technical quality as a result.



An example of what can happen if Palmeiras' wide men don't apply enough pressure to the receivers in these wide areas as the opposition attempt to progress through them can be seen in figures 8-9. Firstly, just before figure 8, the opposition's left-sided wide man received the ball from a centre-back. However, neither the Palmeiras full-back nor winger were very tight to the player at this stage, unlike what we've seen in previous examples, leading to this receiver being given enough time to turn on the ball and face Palmeiras' goal.

This is a situation Ferreira will want his team to avoid at all costs — he doesn't want the

advanced receivers to be given enough time to turn and face his goal, he wants them to be under immediate pressure and either forced backwards, dispossessed or at least forced into a rushed decision. That wasn't the case here and as we can see, now the wide man is facing Palmeiras' goal with plenty of space to get his head up, decide on his next move and even execute it.



As play moves on into figure 9, we see that thanks to the time afforded him by Palmeiras on the wing, the wide man was able to pick out some movement from an attacker ahead of him and behind Palmeiras' midfield line, find him with a line-splitting pass, and progress to the edge of the box. Again, this receiver wasn't put under pressure and was given the time and space to turn and make his next move — a return pass through to the wide man who was then able to get his team into Palmeiras' box.

All of this came from the initial lack of pressure on the opposition's wide man and I hope this passage of play highlights why the constant, immediate pressure on opposition wide men when the ball is played out to them is such an important part of Ferreira's defensive strategy and tactics. Palmeiras understandably place most of their focus on protecting the centre — a more valuable area of the pitch — however, if the opposition is given too much space when the ball is played out wide, it can nullify their efforts at protecting the centre because players at this level will be able to exploit space between the lines regardless if they're allowed to receive, turn and get their head up to assess their options. This is where aggressiveness is crucial in Palmeiras' system, even if, overall, they're quite a passive side. They need to remain aggressive in the right circumstances.

BUILD-UP PLAY

Palmeiras are not a heavily possession-based team under Ferreira. In 2021, they kept a quite average 50.5% possession in Brazil's top-flight, while they kept a relatively low 44.2% of the ball in Copa Libertadores last season, indicative of the fact they're happy to spend larger periods without the ball than many top teams might be and as a result, in Copa Libertadores where they'll come up against some of South America's best teams, they'll experience longer spells without the ball.

This is, in part, because of their relatively passive defensive strategy and tactics. However, when they do have the ball, their performance doesn't lend itself to sustained periods of possession either. They don't tend to play a lot of passes but do play plenty of long passes — an average of 42.07 per 90 in the league last season, the third most in Brasileirão Série A. This is typical of their rather direct playing style; Ferreira's team likes to get the ball forward into the final third as quickly as possible, and their effectiveness at doing this has been key to their attacking play and overall success under the Portuguese coach.



Firstly, from goal-kicks, it's common to see Ferreira's goalkeeper go long. In figure 10, we see Palmeiras' left-winger preparing to contest

an aerial duel with an opposition defender while positioned quite centrally and actually more towards the right side of the pitch than the left, where he would be positioned in defensive phases. It's very common to see Palmeiras' wingers come narrow during possession phases, getting closer to their centre-forward and freeing up space on the wing for the wing-backs to move forward into. It's especially common to see the wingers and centre-forward congregate in an area when contesting an aerial duel from the goal-kick, to help with winning the second ball.

Furthermore, as this image shows, it's common to see Palmeiras' central midfielders stagger during possession phases. In this example, we see the left central midfielder has pushed higher while the right central midfielder remains deeper, in front of the backline. This more advanced central midfielder can also help with winning the second ball following the aerial duel, while this stagger in midfield is also important for creating passing angles for their teammates when the ball is on the ground while making it more difficult for the opposition to mark them.

This is a very common shape to see Palmeiras take up when contesting an aerial duel from the goal-kick while playing with a back-five, and their shape in such situations when playing a 4-2-3-1 is quite similar. The focus is always on getting lots of bodies around the drop zone to win the second ball, keeping a stagger in midfield and keeping the wingers narrow to make space for the wing-backs to provide the width. Meanwhile, the centre-forward remains highest, leading the line, but retains the freedom to move wider if necessary. He'll generally be looking to provide depth, but his exact position may change as he reacts to movement both from his teammates and the opposition, and how that influences space.



When playing out from the back shorter, which does happen at times as well, we also see a lot of what we mentioned previously — narrow wingers, wing-backs sitting high to provide the width and a staggered midfield duo — however, it's also very common to see Palmeiras' wide centre-backs position themselves very very wide and drop very deep during the build-up. In figure 11, we see that Palmeiras' left centre-back has just passed the ball back to the goalkeeper here under pressure from the opposition. As the 'keeper prepares to receive the ball, Palmeiras' right centre-back is dropping deep to get into his deep, wide position.



The right centre-back then receives the ball from the 'keeper in his deep wide position; the pass must be played to the opposition's goal-side of the centre-back to make it easier for him to turn and progress Palmeiras upfield. Otherwise, this would create a difficult situation for Palmeiras and a very good pressing opportunity for the opposition. Here, the pass was played well from the 'keeper and figure 12 shows the results — Palmeiras' right centre-back, in possession, facing the opposition half, assessing his forward passing options.

The purpose of this deep, wide positioning is that 1. By coming so deep and wide it creates more of an angle for the 'keeper and makes it more difficult for the opposition to cover all of the goalkeeper's forward passing options and 2. Sitting deep like this draws opposition players upfield and creates more space behind them for Palmeiras to target.

Figure 12 shows that the right centre-back was able to receive this pass as the opposition was unable to guard against him following his deep, wide movement while still marking Palmeiras' other players, such as the deep-lying midfielder and the central centre-back. Now, with the right centre-back attracting a lot of pressure from the opposition, a pass into the central centre-back is a decent option, as the opposition players struggle with covering everyone more thanks to the angles that have been created.

However, the right centre-back doesn't take that option here, as an even more advanced pass is also on and Ferreira likes his side to get the ball upfield as quickly as possible quite early, so likely encourages playing the furthest forward available pass and some quite risky passing play. This is part of why Palmeiras played the third-most long balls of any Brazilian top-flight side last season. As the opposition are drawn upfield towards the deep centre-back, a pass into the right central midfielder becomes available, with that midfielder enjoying plenty of space behind the opposition's now-advanced midfield line. The right centre-back spots this by getting his head up and can execute the forward pass well, setting Palmeiras off on an attack. From here, the receiver has the time and space to take the ball on the half-turn and continue this vertical play, progressing Palmeiras into the opposition's half.

This is a typical example of Palmeiras' shorter build-up play, which also generally sees Verdão making it out of their half in relatively few passes and playing quite vertically. The tactics on display above are very common elements of their build-up play that have proven effective under Ferreira.



Another example of Palmeiras' centre-backs dropping deep and wide is shown in figures 13-14, with a slightly different result. Firstly, figure 13 shows Palmeiras' right centre-back on the ball while the opposition is pressing high. With no good forward passing options available, the centre-back opts to send the ball back to the 'keeper and drop deep and wide, just like we saw in figures 11-12.



As play moves on into figure 14, we again see how this draws opposition bodies further upfield and creates more space to attack behind the midfield line. However, the result of this particular example is different to the previous one and shows another big benefit of this tactic.

As mentioned before, this movement from the centre-backs makes it more difficult for the opposition to mark all of Palmeiras' passing options and on this occasion, the opposition's centre-forward remains close to the passing lane between the 'keeper and the right centre-back. However, by dropping deeper and wider, and

drawing the opposition's centre-forward with him, the right centre-back opens the passing lane between the 'keeper and Palmeiras' deep central midfielder who we see dropping at this moment. As play moves on from here, we see the 'keeper send the ball forward, into midfield and the feet of this dropping midfielder, who again, can turn from here and continue Palmeiras' progress. So, it's clear how this movement has plenty of benefits for Ferreira's side that they've used to progress past the opposition's first line in different ways.

THE FINAL THIRD

Moving further upfield and into their play inside the final third, it's common to see Palmeiras' wingers in the half-spaces while the wing-backs provide width outside and the centre-forward stays centrally, forming a front five that can overload the opposition's backline. Furthermore, it's fairly common to see one of Palmeiras' central midfielders push forward to provide some additional support either as another crossing option or by making a late run into the box to hopefully arrive unmarked.

The wingers, centre-forward and wing-backs enjoy enough freedom to interchange their positions, which can make them more difficult to mark and free up a man, while also moving the opposition defenders around to create space between them. It's very common to see a lot of movement in the wider areas, with Palmeiras typically focusing a lot of their play in the final third on the wings, where they can, for example, overload opposition full-backs and/or pull them away from the rest of the backline to exploit space that appears between them and the nearest centre-back.

Ferreira's direct side ended 2021 as the third-highest scorers in Brasileirão Série A (58 goals), while they also had the third-highest xG in the league (55.18 — indicating some overperformance but not to a crazily unsustainable level). Interestingly, Palmeiras also ended last season with the most headed goals (12) of any Brazilian top-flight side, which is a direct result of their focus on wing play in the final third and the crossing opportunities they successfully created.



An example of Palmeiras' front five and final third wing play to overload an opposition full-back is seen in figure 15. Here, their right wing-back is holding the width, having just created some space between that player and the nearest centre-back by dragging them wider. Meanwhile, Palmeiras' right-winger is attacking that space after receiving a well-weighted and well-timed through pass from the wing-back to send him into the space between the opposition defenders.

As the right-winger carries the ball into the box, he has one option at the far post (the left wing-back making a run on the opposition right-back's blind side), one option centrally (the ball-far winger) and one option at the near post (the centre-forward) to aim for, with those three players also now enjoying a 3v2 overload in the centre of the box, as the right-winger has bypassed the opposition left-back and is now drawing the left centre-back towards him.

This is an excellent example of how Palmeiras' front five can create such dangerous situations inside the final third, initially with an overload on the opposition's full-back out wide, and then inside the box after removing at least one

defender from the occasion before approaching the box. Their success at creating good crossing opportunities from this kind of attacking play in the final third has played a big part in their success with scoring so many headed goals under Ferreira. The players' movement and decision-making is crucial in such situations, as is the offensive structure that's been created for them to work within.



Under Ferreira, Palmeiras have been a dominant team in offensive transitions; they love counter-attacks and are good at getting the ball upfield quickly to exploit space that's opened up in the opposition's half due to their previous attack. Figure 16 highlights one example of what they do in transition, and this particular example focuses on their centre-forward's movement.

As previously mentioned, Palmeiras' centre-forward always focuses on providing the offensive depth for Verdão but retains the freedom to move about laterally to exploit space where possible. In this example, the opposition have just been dispossessed deep inside Palmeiras' half, following an attack in which their full-backs got forward. It's quite common to see teams committing their full-backs forward in attack while their centre-backs stay deep to protect the area right in front of goal. As a result, it can be common to see Palmeiras' centre-forward vacating the centre and moving out to the wing when the ball is won deep to provide an immediate, dangerous out-ball for the deeper teammates.

With lots of space to attack, this player can then chase the long ball from the back to drive the team forward in transition.

Even if the ball isn't immediately launched into space like we see in figure 16, it's important for a Palmeiras attacker — mainly the centre-forward — to find space in which they can receive a long ball in transition, holding up the play while the other attacking teammates burst forward. It's also, then, important for the other attacking players — the wingers and wing-backs in particular — to be quick and hard-working immediately as the ball is turned over to ensure the ball carrier has plenty of options to play through behind the opposition's backline as they quickly break into the final third.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this tactical analysis, I hope it's clear how a rather passive, yet organised and aggressive in the correct, limited circumstances defensive system has played a major role in Palmeiras' success under Ferreira.

On the other side of things, then, Palmeiras' five-man frontline in attack — consisting of their centre-forward, wingers and wing-backs, is key to their attacking play with doubling-up on the opposition full-backs and overloading the backline, particularly in wide areas. Meanwhile, their quick, direct transitions have also been very important contributors to their impressive goalscoring record of late, all a result of Ferreira's vision and framework.

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TOTAL FOOTBALL ANALYSIS

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SCOUT REPORTS



HOW TO EFFECTIVELY
SCOUT YOUR OPPOSITION

SCOTT MARTIN // @COACHSCOTTCOPY

Depending on your sources, you've likely heard that football is 50% luck. Others, most often former players or coaches, will offer a range of 0 to 20% luck in any outcome.

Luck surely factors into any match, but that doesn't minimise the significance of an opposition scouting report. In fact, you could argue that we make our own luck. In any seemingly lucky event, actions from the beneficiary nearly always impact the sequence. Thorough knowledge of the opposition minimises the luck factor, preparing a squad to recognise patterns and respond appropriately.

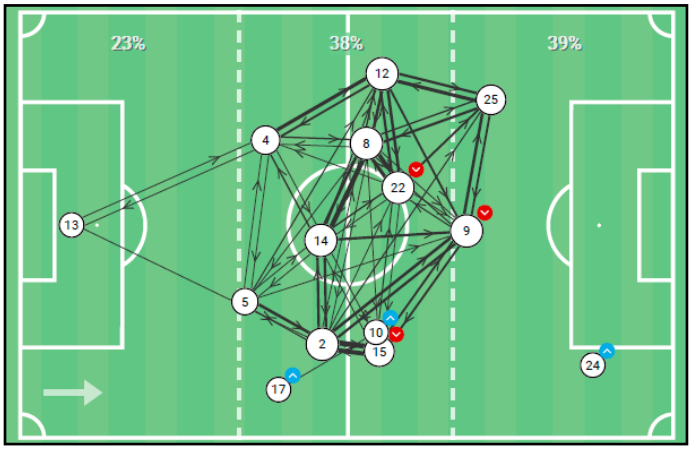
Detail is king. During his time as José Mourinho's Chief Opposition Scout, André Villas-Boas said the following about his head coach and scouting expectations: "Jose is obsessed with detail – He will leave nothing to chance, even if his team are playing the worst side in the league. My work enables Jose to know exactly when a player from the opposition is likely to be at his best or his weakest."

This article offers an extensive approach to constructing opposition scout reports. Data-driven research, tactical analysis, important questions and suggestions for studying the opposition offer a guide for a comprehensive report. With the research on hand, attention turns to red teaming and presentations. No stone is left unturned in this report.

BEFORE YOU WATCH MATCHES

Before your opposition analysis team starts pouring over the opposition's match footage, data analysis can help your side determine a tactical profile, identify key players and discover patterns of play. A proficient data visualisation team can greatly expedite your opposition analysis and coaching staff's learning curve. Quantitative team profiles of your opponents, your own team and league will help you classify the opposition, grouping comparable levels of talent and similarities in playing styles.

With a data-driven team profile in hand, studying the right matches is the next step. Using a combination of recent matches, starting XI, and opponents with similar style and ability to your own team will help you narrow down the best matches to study. Going back to the team profiles, if you know which teams show the greatest degree of similarity to your own, you can then watch match footage of that club versus your next opponent. You'll want to identify what worked, what didn't and necessary adjustments from a hindsight perspective. The starting XIs in those games are likely to shed light on the side you'll encounter.



In addition to squads with similar playing styles, the two or three most recent matches will give you insights into the most recent patterns and trends. Maps of player and team activity, like the Real Madrid's pass map, offer insight into key connections. Notes regarding recent form and tactics will help your staff construct the best approach, as well as offer insights into the mentality of the squad. Finally, knowing the opposition's injury status will help you narrow down the possible variations in the starting XI.

ATTACKING STRUCTURE

A team's formation offers a basic idea of where to find pockets of space and where the opposition are most likely to funnel their attack. Further, with a knowledge of the opposition's players, an opposition analyst or coaching staff will know how the expected starting XI and formation fit into the opponent's general tactics.

This is macro-level, which you must know, but certainly doesn't tell the whole story. Digging into the micro-levels reveals much greater clarity of tactics and helps you pinpoint specific threats and patterns.

For example, say you were coaching against Barcelona and I told you they play a 4-3-3 and that they like to build out of the back. While that's good to know, I haven't given you any information beyond what a common fan of the game would know. Knowing they like to play out of the back, I can then look for patterns of build-up and phases specific objectives. Detailing this information is of far more value than the surface level remarks.

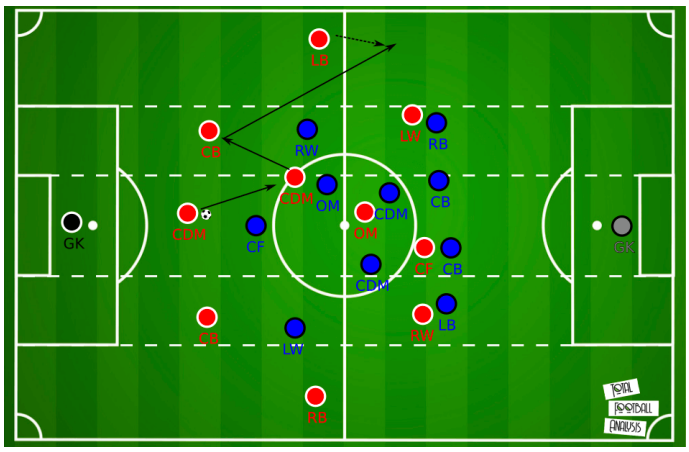
When examining an opponent's attacking structure, your scout reports should flow through the four phases of attack: 1) playing from the back, 2) connecting the lines, 3) the final pass and 4) finishing. If you prefer a three-phase model (preparing to attack the opponents, attacking the opponents and attacking the goal), that's fine too. It's basically a consolidated version of the four-phase model. Regardless of your preference, the objective is to discover the opponent's tactical intent in each phase. Accounting for the who, what, when, where, why and how paints the bigger picture with attention to the finer details.

PLAYING FROM THE BACK

Starting in the first phase, we want to identify whether the opposition will tend to play direct or indirect. Long passes per 90 is a strong statistical category to analyse, as is a look at the distribution tendencies of the goalkeeper and centre-backs. If the side features a target forward or and less technical centre-backs, the odds of a more direct approach are likely.

Then, once we have a general understanding of their phase one tendencies, it's time to investigate the side's attacking shape and the patterns of play that emerge.

If the opponent's attacking shape is habitually narrow in the build-up, expect a low-risk approach to possession. Instead of a true build-up, expect them to skip lines early in an attempt to limit your opportunities for a high recovery. In this setup, you need to identify the high targets or clusters of attackers. Are they looking to set back or flick on? Are they more likely to target one area of the pitch above others? Who sends the long ball and what cues does he need to see before playing forward?



With a team that prefers, maybe even insists, to build out of the back, greater scrutiny is necessary. Identifying patterns of play and how the attacking shape evolves over the course of

the build-out is a necessity. You need to identify who drops in, like the #6 in the image above, which players shift higher up the pitch and where the opponent wants to unbalance your side. Additionally, studying the movement higher up the pitch is critical. What cues signal progression from the deeper players? Who are they likely to target once you're unbalanced? Does there build-up exhibit any weakness we can exploit? Knowing the answers to those questions will help you fit this portion of the opponent's attacking tactics into the big picture.

CONNECTING THE LINES

Connecting the lines follows from building out of the back. To an extent, they are connected. If the opposition has the ball in their own half of the pitch, the odds of progressing to connecting the lines are highly likely.

When the opponent recycles play in your half, you'll want to determine common patterns of ball and player movement. If it's a cross heavy team, will they attempt to possess centrally to open up a wing for the outside-back? Are they a side that uses a full switch of play to get into the half spaces? How proficient are they at central penetration? If they excel in that area, which players will they target? How does that player navigate space and numbers through his relationships with teammates?

THE FINAL PASS

At first glance, the final pass seems rather simple. Your first step is likely to determine if the team leans heavily on crosses, through balls, central combinations or a more balanced approach. However, much like the progression from the build-out to connecting the lines, certain cues higher up the pitch will dictate action from deeper areas.



If the team relies heavily on crosses, you'll want to determine the step preceding the cross, as well as when they send it. Some players and teams have a preference for early crosses, forcing opponents to retreat to goal, typically against quick opponents. Others might have dominant aerial threats and invite you to retreat back to the 6-yard-box, losing your marker in the process, before sending a cross. More efficient sides will also wait for adequate numbers or a qualitative advantage before sending the cross, meaning ball circulation attempts to free those higher attackers, giving them direct routes to the box in numbers. The image above replicates this situation with Juventus connecting on the left before switching play to the right. That allowed Cristiano Ronaldo and Gonzalo Higuaín to move from their left-sided starting points to a more central partnership.

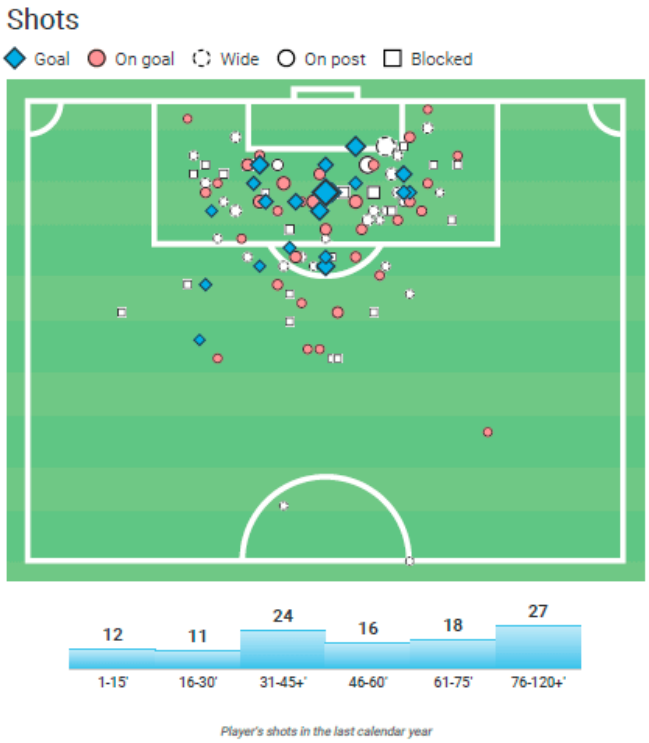
If the side sends a significant number of through balls, identifying the defensive errors leading up to the pass is key. When your opponent was successful in previous matches, did they target a specific vertical channel, such as the half space? Did a #9 pull a centre-back out of the backline's structure? Discovering how they created the passing lane and who the most likely runners are is vital to your tactics.

Finally, with central combinations, teams often target a player between the lines. Some will ask the forwards to make runs in behind, creating a gap in the midfield. Others will utilise the

defenders, encouraging the opposition to move high up the pitch, resulting in more space between the lines. Regardless of the entry, identifying the target areas and players who generally receive in that space will direct your attention to the movement and ball circulation patterns that precede the pass. Then, once the pass is made, which combinations does the opposition use to complete the final pass and how can your side adjust to eliminate the threat.

FINISHING

Wrapping up attacking structures is everyone's favourite category, finishing. This is deeply connected to the final pass. As such, brevity is preferred. How does a side get their goals? Where are their best and worst xG ratings? Is there any one player who excels in front of the net? If so, what types of finishes does he utilise? Also, is there a specific area where shot volume is higher than others?



Player's shots in the last calendar year

Relating to basketball, many players have "their spot" on the floor. If you discover an opponent likes to shoot from specific areas of the pitch, your tactics should include denying entry into that area, unless, of course, he's a terrible finisher from that spot. Shot maps, like the one above for Luís Suárez of Barcelona, offer insights into shot selection.

DEFENSIVE STRUCTURE

When evaluating a team's defensive structure, a number of items must come into consideration. For instance, what type of block are they most likely to use? Are they an aggressive counterpressing club? You'll also want to determine which spaces they prioritise and which are more accessible. Beneath the tactics, figuring out where and how the defence wants you to play will play into your match tactics.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

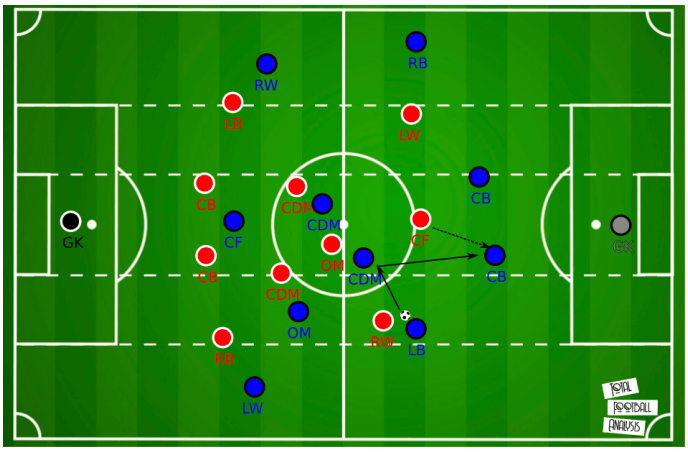
Some teams are consistent with their approach to defensive blocks, others will add slight variations specific to the match up. Determining your opponent's press approach is the starting place. If the side consistently uses a high block, plan on it, but also watch sequences in which they're driven back to their defensive third. If the high press is broken, how does the defence adapt? Do they move into a middle block, does the length of the recovery force them deep into a low block? You'll want to know how they recover and where to exploit their lack of structure.

If the opponent plays in a middle or low block, watch the width of their shape, as well as the amount of space they concede behind the lines.

PRESSURE CUES

A team's press is their basic defensive structure. Within that structure, they're

looking for cues that signal it's time to get to the first attacker/ball carrier and pressure. Pressing traps could be universal, such as a poor first touch, bad body orientation or a negative pass (as in the image below), but they can also relate to players or zones of the pitch.



A common pressing scheme in a 4-3-3 is using the forwards to funnel play to the inside, then overwhelming the opponent in the central channel. Other systems want to keep you out of the middle, forcing your team into the wings, then condensing the field horizontally. Identifying the pressure cues will help your team avoid traps and, if you plan just right, lull the opponent into a trap of your own.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

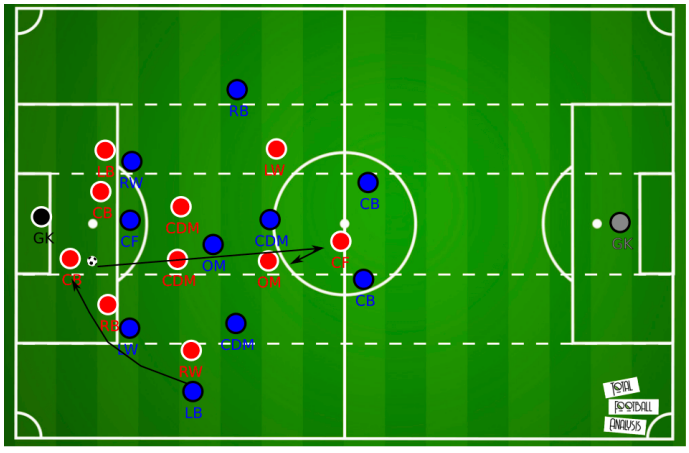
As you watch the opponent defend, look closely for strengths and weaknesses. At times, a player or area of the formation is weak defensively. Other weaknesses can include spacing between the lines, vertically and horizontally. Maybe the opposition doesn't move well as a unit or gaps emerge in certain sequences or phases of the attack. You might also find that they are too aggressive in the tackle, even when in the defensive third. The weaknesses you uncover should lead to an advantage for your side.

Conversely, knowing the strengths of the opponent allows you to find other routes to goal. Instead of ramming your heads into a brick wall, an understanding of the opposition's defensive strengths and advantages will allow you to focus your attacking energy elsewhere.

TRANSITIONAL PLAY

ATTACKING TRANSITIONS

When evaluating the opponent's attacking transitions, knowing whether or not they're more inclined to sit back and counterattack is vital. If so, coaching your rest defence will be key in training sessions, so you'll want to address the topic in your scout reports. Items of note are the prominent high targets, quick patterns to break the first spell of pressure and players likely to progress the ball up the pitch, either through passing range or pacey dribbling. That knowledge will help your staff shape the team's rest defence, minimising the threat of the opposition.



Even if the opponent does not rely heavily on attacking transitions, all good teams will take it when it's available. Statistically speaking, a team is more likely to score with limited passes and time in goal-scoring actions than through brilliant sequences of play. There's a reason the latter dominate the highlight reels and social media.

They're really difficult to achieve. Knowing that any opponent will take space as you offer it, attention to detail, knowing the key players and patterns in the counterattack, will help your side take away, or at least limit, quick breaks in favour of the opposition.

DEFENSIVE TRANSITIONS

Determining the counterpressing abilities of the opponent is vital to your team's attacking transitions. Identifying the speed of transition will give you an idea of your side's likelihood of success as you recover the ball. PPDA (passes per defensive action) is a great stat to gauge the counterpressing of the other team. If they have an expansive attack, but are slow to counterpress, punish them in transition. On the flip side, if they're a strong counterpressing side, your objective is to find outlets to secure possession, either by a progressive pass or retention through short and intermediate-range combinations.

One of the key things to look for is the attacking shape of the opposition. What does their team shape look like in the middle third and how much more aggressively do they push forward in the attacking third? Do they look to assume an expansive shape early in possession or are they more likely to secure the ball and gradually increase their width and verticality? Which players push high up the pitch? Answering these questions will help you identify spaces to attack. As players move higher up the pitch, gaps emerge, especially in the wings and half spaces.

SET PIECES

ATTACKING SET PIECES

With regards to attacking set pieces, offering the players visuals and training against direct kicks, indirect kicks and corners will naturally fit into your opposition scout reports and subsequent training. Set piece preparation doesn't end there. Throw-in and kickoff patterns should also factor into your report. These latter two areas will need less coverage than the first three mentioned, but, nonetheless, they fit into the report, even for a brief reference. Long throws should receive comparable attention to free kicks from the wings.

Turning to the specifics, diagramming reoccurring routines, highlighting dangerous players and accounting for movements and picks give your players an idea of what's ahead. While some sides have balanced routines, others tend to focus on deliveries into a certain area or to specific players. If you have the capacity to compile a highly detailed report, knowing which plays or targets a specific kick taker will target helps massively.

DEFENSIVE SET PIECES

Does the opponent use zonal, semi-zonal or man-oriented marking? How does the opponent assign players for marking, by height, quality or possibly another method? For corners, do they place players on the posts? Do players in the wall jump? Which players feature in the wall, which marking? Does the side cover

the goalkeeper when a shot is taken or can we take advantage of rebounds? Is the goalkeeper aggressive in collecting or punching deliveries into the box or is he more likely to stay on his line?



Lots of questions, sure, but answering them is generally a rather quick process. This, again, is a case where knowing the opponent gives you work through advantages and threats, then present those ideas to the squad in a concise manner.

PLAYER PROFILES

This is an opportunity to inform the squad of the individuals they'll encounter on the pitch. As a staff of analysts or coaches, this is the place to succinctly list any strengths or weaknesses in the opposition's players. Since your entire team should read this section, the information should offer just the highlights. Keep it short, keep the players' attention.

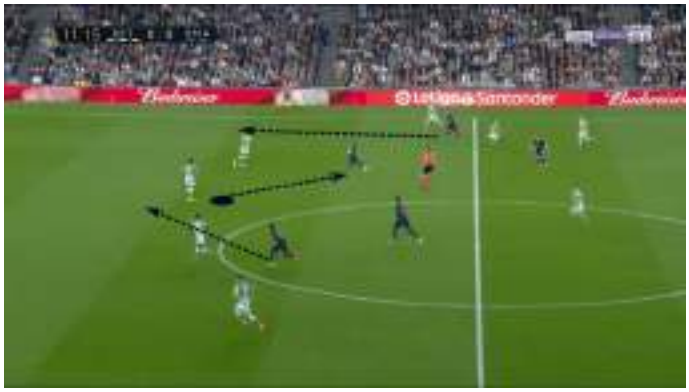
Say your side is preparing to face Juventus. You'll want to create a profile for any player who has a reasonable shot of featuring in the side. Here's an example of a player profile for Ronaldo:

"Excellent movement in and around the box. Must track him. Drops to help with build-up, but always present as Juventus attacks the box. If the ball's on his side, look for switch and CR7's entry into the box. Dangerous in the air. We can exploit his defensive presence."

Player profiles point to key personal characteristics. They can also, though briefly, present key data points. Since we have already covered the tactical system, these profiles aim to explain how the individual's key characteristics are utilised within the greater framework. A few sentences or bullet points will generally do the job.

PATTERN PLAY

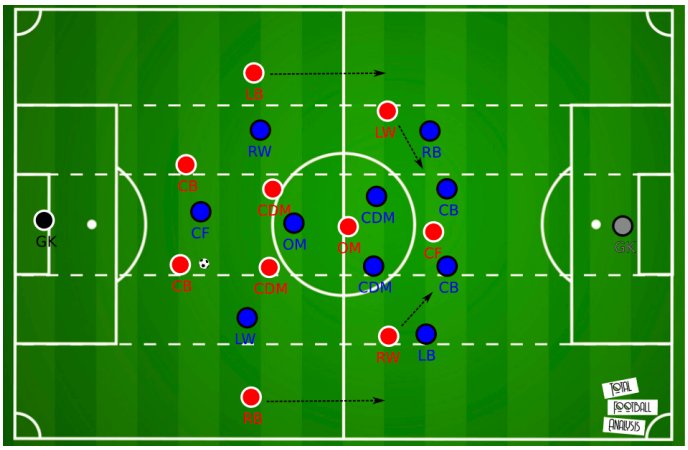
Since you've already detailed the phase-specific tactics early in your research, this is where you can create images for some of the more prominent patterns. Each pattern will consist of phase-specific implications, something the staff should note when titling the visual. Some patterns will be more general to a phase, others will go a step further, highlighting specific objectives and patterns that are tailored for zone or player specific combinations. Some groups of players, such as wing or forward pairings, may even have go-to combinations or movement patterns that they actively seek.



The more general patterns should go to the whole team, whereas zone or player specific patterns are more valuable to the players who have to deal with those threats. If playing against Real Madrid, showing Karim Benzema's deep drops in the midfield, opening space for his #7 or #11 to run into won't appeal to your #9. A targeted approach, feeding players only the amount of information they can handle, is critical. Information overload can only hamper performance.

SITUATIONAL ADJUSTMENTS

Depending on the point of the season or recent changes to the squad or coaching staff, you might have limited data in this area. However, it's best to have an understanding of how the opposition will respond in certain situations. If information is limited, knowledge of the coach will likely provide insight into how he adapts as the match progresses. He has tendencies. Uncover them and you can plan against his adjustments.



Since most of the preceding work covers the general playing philosophy and patterns, this section is an opportunity to show how the opponent adjusts within certain parameters. Scaling the scoreline from +3 to -3 (+2 to -2 at the very least), showing substitution patterns and tactical adjustments and accounting for the opponent's desired result factor in here. If you're a top side drawing against a mid-table team in the 70th minute, you're likely to see them park the bus and play opportunistically. From their perspective, a point is better than nothing.

If your team already knows which tactical and personnel changes the opposition will make, correlating them with specific match situations, you can create conditional plans ahead of time.

RED TEAMING

Red teaming came to my attention when Bryce G. Hoffman was interviewed on one of my favourite podcasts. His book, "Red Teaming: How Your Business Can Conquer the Competition by Challenging Everything", expands on a tactic with military origins. In a sense, red teaming is a laicised version of wargaming. Major corporations, such as Microsoft, and federal governments engage in red teaming to identify threats and adapt their tactics before any damage is done.

As your staff completes the opposition scout reports, uncovering every detail in the opposition's tactics and personnel, assigning a red team within your staff adds a necessary dynamic to your preparations. Your red team must engage your tactics from the opponent's point of view. They must use their newfound knowledge of the opponent to determine how he, as the opposition coach, would set up his tactics against your side. Since you should already have a well-developed idea of the opposition's tactics, the red team's job is to find the holes in your tactics.

Challenging the staff's approach carries a number of benefits. First, if there is a hole in your side's tactics, it's the red team's job to find it before the opponent does. Second, red teaming challenges assumptions, forcing the club to fully account for potential threats and breakdowns. Third, the red team can bring up alternative tactics, pointing to unforeseen weaknesses within the side that the opposition are likely to attack. As an example, think back to the UEFA Champions League fixture between Real Madrid and Manchester City. Pep Guardiola's use of a 4-4-2 in defence while shifting Gabriel Jesus to the left-wing caught the Spanish side by surprise. Though this was a drastic move, one

that any analyst and coaching staff would find difficult to predict, red teaming's job is to leave no stone unturned. Knowing how you would set up the opposition to counter your own tactics does just that.

DELIVERY

If your delivery is as drawn out as this article, toss it and head back to the drawing board. Know what your group can handle, both collectively and individually. Attention spans are always hindered in group settings, so finding the right balance between information inundation and scarcity is key.

Video sessions delivering the concepts and preparing the players for the training session are essential. If the information for the group is pragmatic and transitions well to your training ground activities, you're more likely to keep their attention. Short clips highlighting phases of play and the opposition's patterns will prepare your players to apply the information on the field, increasing the odds that they'll remember the key points.

Footage on key individual players is also helpful, but only if the highlighted players are so central to the opposition's tactics that film study is necessary. If no one player fits the bill, individual video study is preferable.

With regards to individual film studying, this is another area that requires flexibility. For top-level professional teams, each player would benefit from a brief video highlighting the key opponents and opposition patterns he's most likely to see. If the player collects the footage himself, even better. If they annotate the footage, sharing their tactical connections, you're well on your way to a tactics masterclass. Taking ownership enhances a player's understanding, allows for better recall and encourages them to identify their opponent's tells.

Ultimately, remember that your tactical planning means nothing if the players don't understand or remember the information. Short and sweet is preferable, direct application is necessary and encouraging the players to take ownership of their performance are keys to success.

CONCLUSION

In the spirit of Mourinho and Villas-Boas' penchant for tactical detail, this article on creating an opposition scout reports offers an ideal, comprehensive level of detail. Not all clubs have the large scouting budgets of the world's elite. Nor do they have over a hundred analysts on staff as we do at Total Football Analysis. Whereas elite teams and Total Football Analysis can create comprehensive reports within a 48-hour window, most clubs aren't that lucky.

Scaling the level of detail for your staff is an important first step. If this is too great a burden, third party analysis companies, like our company, offer programs to efficiently allocate resources and secure results.

The level of detail is totally up to each club's staff, primarily centring on capabilities and resources. It's possible to reduce some aspects of this report, but the greater your knowledge of the opposition, the greater your chance of getting a result. Knowing the opposition and effectively communicating the details to your team is vital to a team's success. Preparation is key, detail is king.

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TACTICAL ANALYSIS



COACHING BREAKING LINES

DAVID SEYMOUR // @DAVIDSEYMOUR_

When in possession and looking to play forward, breaking the lines of an opposition's defensive shape can be the most difficult process. It can often lead to turnovers of possession, and teams will frequently look to attempt to do so when there isn't the space or opportunity to play these passes.

Forcing these passes often leads to unsuccessful attempts to break lines. However, we don't just have to wait for the right moment to play forward — we have to use our possession to manipulate the opponents' shape and create the space for us to play forward.

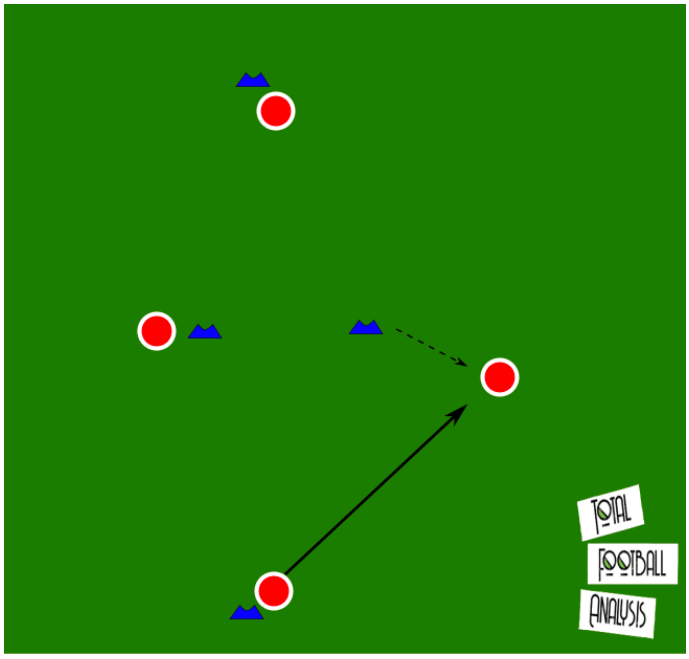
Second to this, once we have successfully broken a line with a forward pass, we need to ensure there is support around the ball in order to secure possession and not leave the receiver isolated. We also need to ensure there are also forward pass options once more, giving us an outlet and not forcing us to hold onto the ball in a pressured area.

The set of practices suggested in this coaching tactical analysis looks to provide a framework to explore breaking lines with forward passes, providing opportunities for players to recognise passing patterns as well as understand how movement and a change of tempo in their possession play can create chances to break lines. This training analysis suggests these practices would support a team whose tactics look to carve teams open through the central channel, but in general, learning how to break lines is something that all players can benefit from.

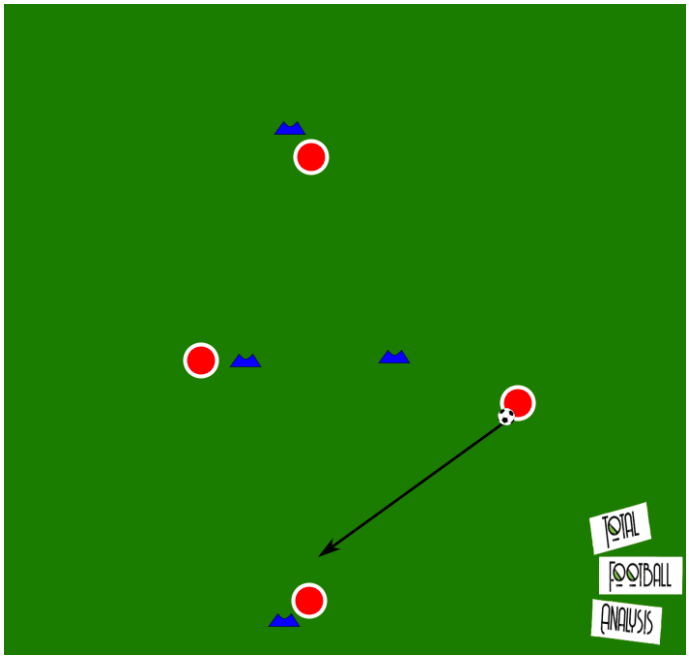
PART 1

The first practice is a simple pattern of play that should introduce the basic principles of creating space to break lines whilst allowing the players to get into a pattern for automation when it comes to recognising the opportunity to break a line with a pass.

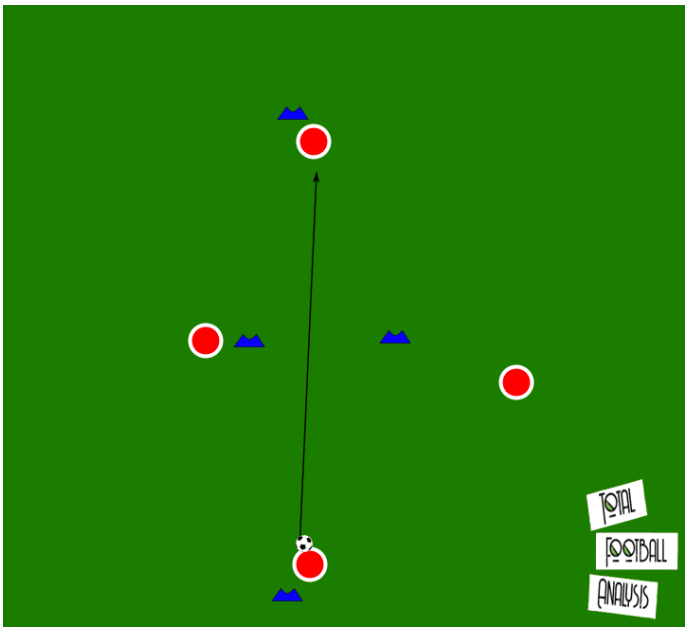
Starting with a diamond pattern, the players are asked to play to the right. The central player receiving needs to recognise that the space is too narrow centrally to play directly end to end right now, so instead they drop wide at an angle to initially receive the ball.



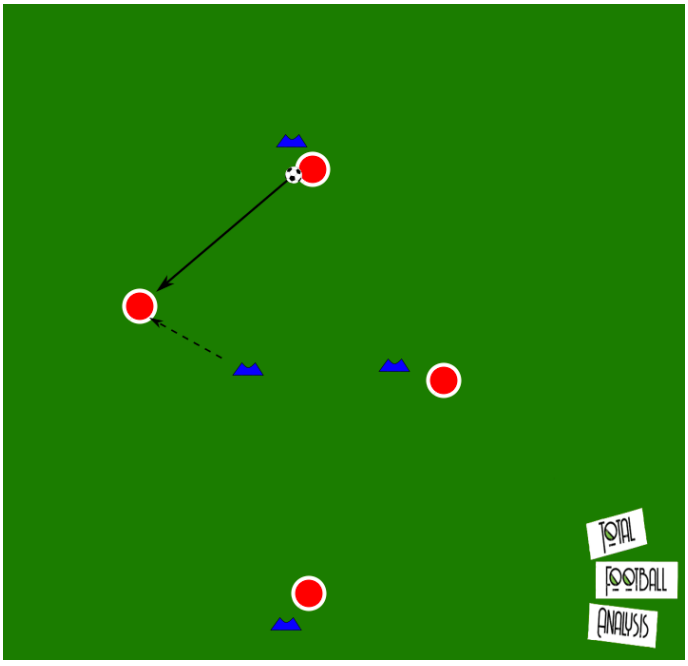
Now they are in a position where, once in possession, they would draw a defender out wide with them and can lay the ball back to the original player. It is important this player doesn't step too far forward to receive the wall-pass for they reduce their own space by doing so.



Once the wall pass has been completed, and the central space has now been created, this line breaking pass is able to be played. We can see this occurring in the following image.



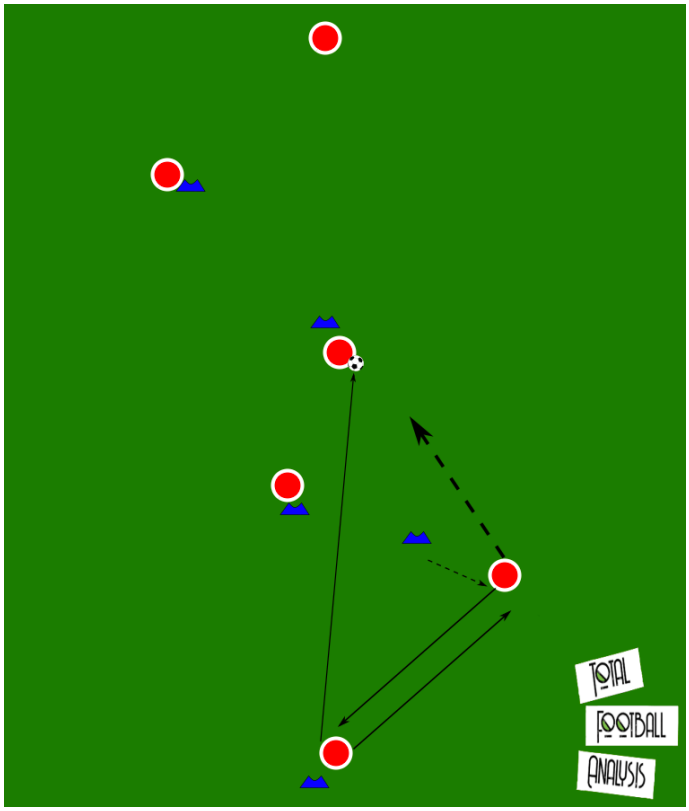
This is a really basic pattern and players should be able to pick this up quickly, to instantly begin moving the ball at free will. Of course, once the ball has been played to the far end, the pattern continues, still with the player passing to their right — now the pattern comes back on itself.



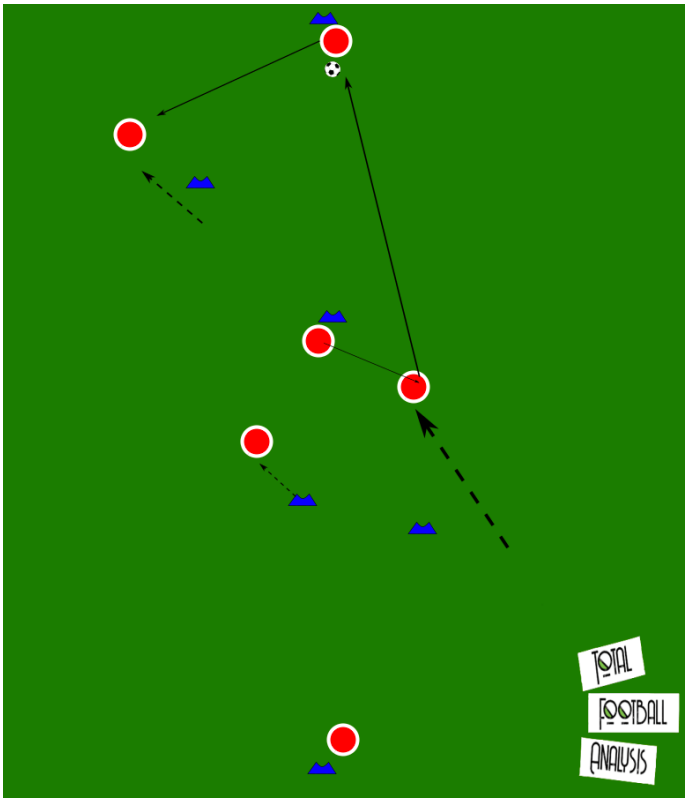
These patterns need a minimum of five players to run, with the passer also rotating to their right once they have played the pass. Of course, it can be reversed with passes to the left as well.

Building on this pattern we can now further introduce the idea of continuing to support the line-breaking pass and look for a forward pass option once more. For more developed teams, this topic can link with varying the tempo of play based on the ball's location, e.g speeding up play once the ball gets into the midfield.

The pattern begins the same with the same initial movement from the wide player, then the line-breaking pass. We can see this in the following image. However, the wide player then moves forward to support the line breaking pass.



They now get on the ball and look to immediately play forward into the far player, before the pattern repeats itself coming the other way. These passes should all be played first-time, but if not possible, at the very least, the two players combining to play the last forward pass should seek to play first time, for they represent midfielders in this situation who will most definitely be under pressure.

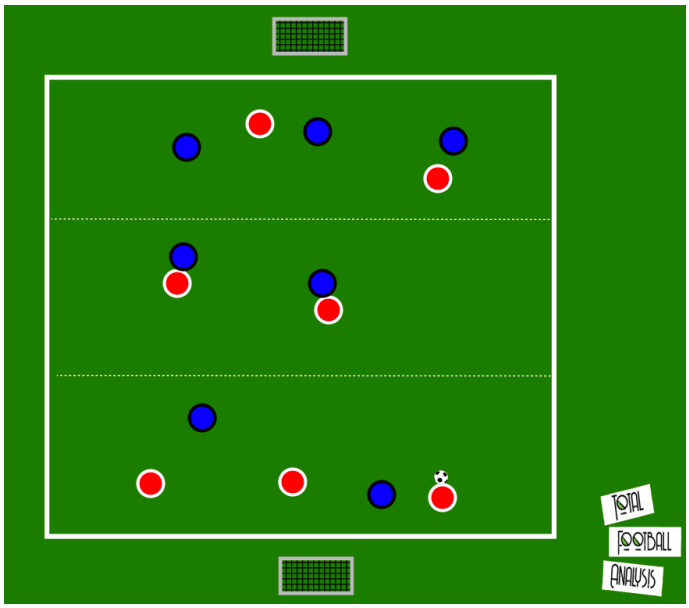


Players should be encouraged to play game-realistic, firm passes, and use the cones as prompts rather than strict places for them to stand in. All players should really be on the move before receiving the pass, as they would in a game situation.

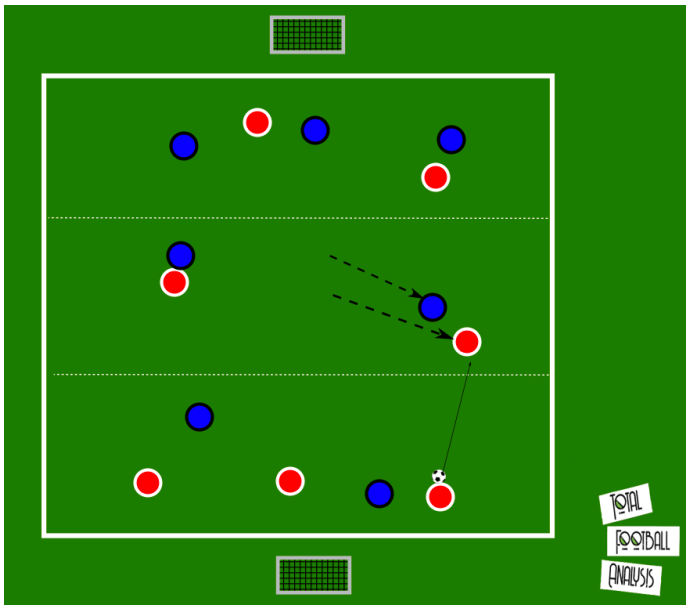
PART 2

Following on from this pass pattern, we will look to get the players into a contested situation where they can have the freedom to explore line-breaking passes. In this example, a goal is at either end, but a coach could place more goals at either end if they want to increase success. These goals should be placed five yards away from the end lines to ensure defenders can't simply stand in front of the goals and block them.

This practice has an overload in the defensive third for the in-possession team, an even pairing in the central third, and an underload in the attacking third. Thus this allows the possession team time to combine and build play in their defensive third, waiting for the right opportunity to play forward. Without overloads in the central third and final third, they, of course, need to recognise they must play quicker. Incentives for line breaking passes can be put in. For example, should a player in the defensive third play straight into the final third with a pass and the team score, this can be worth double.

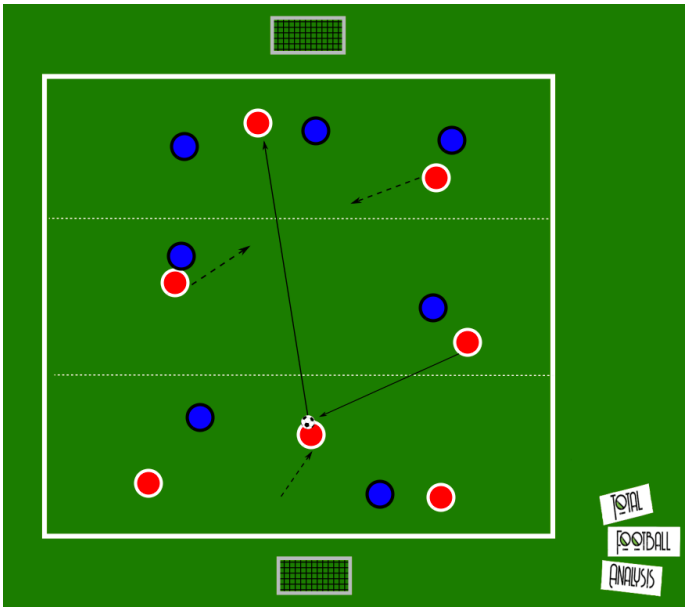


We are initially looking for the midfielders to recognise the opportunity to use the previous pass pattern. Can they give an angle, drawing their marker out wide?



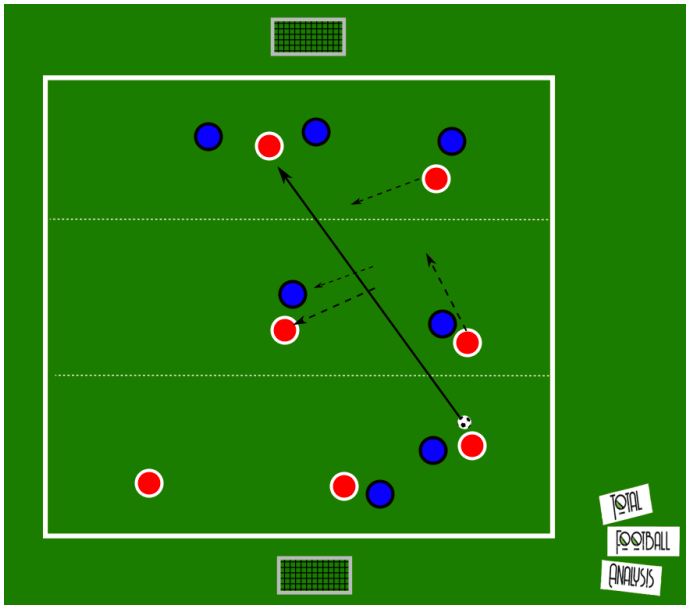
They can play a simple one-two pass and lay the ball back, or even better they may look for the third-man pass, providing the space for their team to play through the space in the midfield that they have created.

As soon as this pass occurs, we want to ensure there is attacking support around the ball. The other attacker in the final third might look to drop short, but also might run in behind, depending on the location of their partner, whilst the other midfielder should absolutely look to support this pass by offering a short pass option just south of the receiving forward.



However, the midfielders may look to explore their movement and may recognise that there are times when they don't even need to touch the ball, but their movement into a different space can be enough to create the room for a line-breaking pass.

We can see this pattern occurring in the following image, again with players immediately supporting the pass. As a coach, we should be looking for this to occur naturally where possible, before then highlighting this to the group, showing them their success through this approach as well.



Of course, the game runs both ways, with the blues attacking the other end once in possession themselves. Again, the thirds can be used more as guidelines for team shape, but without offsides, teams should naturally keep this 3-2-2 shape.

PART 3

Finally, we can look to move this set of practices into a situation that is the most game-realistic of the three. This practice can still be done with the 8v8 but now with a GK on either side. However, it can easily be adjusted should the number of players at the session be different.

This practice is played on a half-pitch and with either wing cut off, to promote the players looking to play inside and through the centre of the pitch where possible.

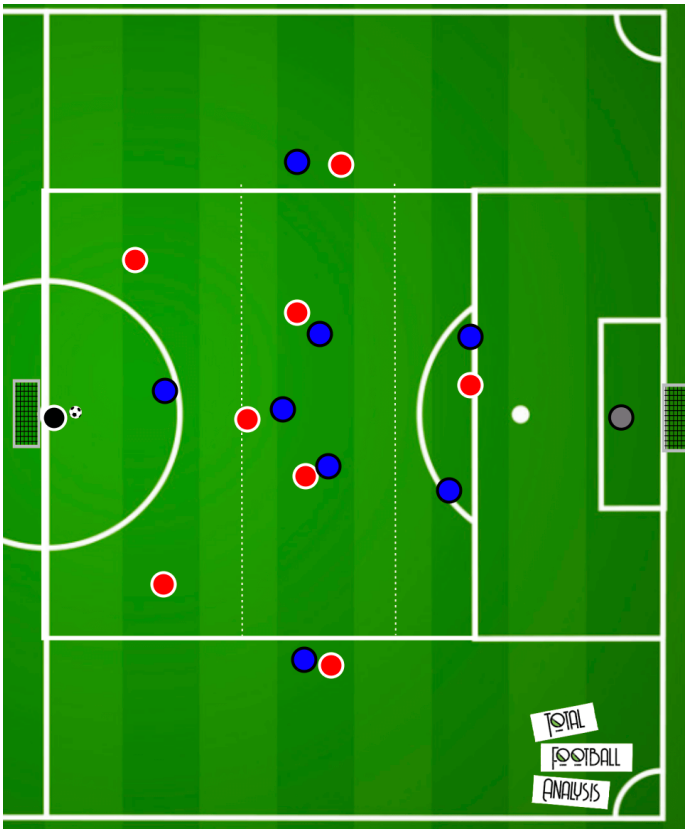
Similar to the previous practice there is an overload in a team's defensive third, then there is an even match in the central third, and an underload in the final third.

This practice can be end to end, or there could be a focus team, in which case (if it were the red), the blue team could have a time limit in which to score once in possession e.g 10 seconds.

The picture of this practice shows that the thirds aren't evenly divided with the final third much bigger than the other two — and with the central third, the smallest.

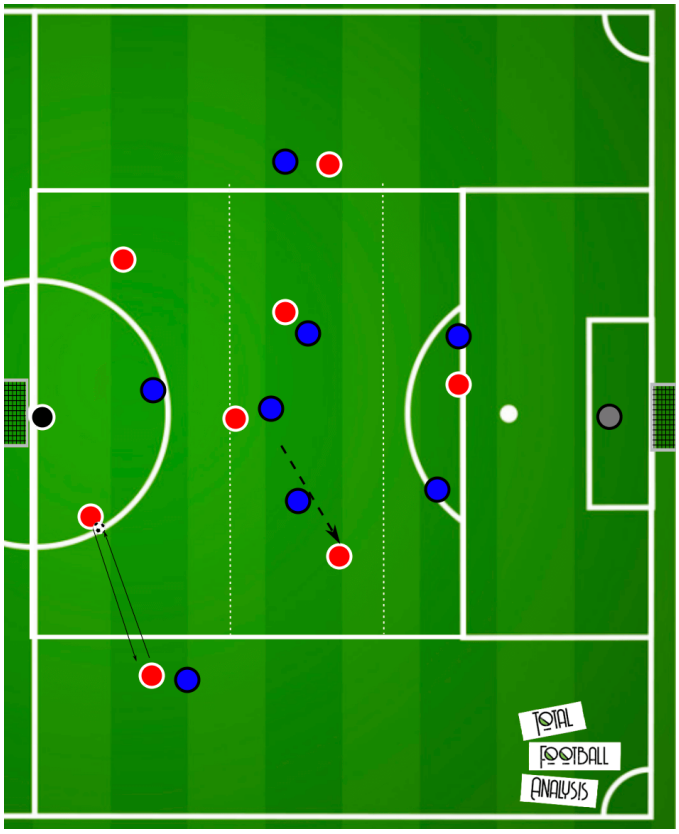
Having the final third bigger gives more space to pick out through passes in behind, and the edge of the 18 yard-box can be an offside line, forcing the blue defenders to keep height.

The central third being the smallest of them all ensures play must be played quickly once in the central third. Whilst this forces our midfielders to play off of limited touches, it may also encourage our defenders to be braver in playing through immediately into the final third.



There are wide players too and they are operating in a 1v1 on either flank. Having this as a contested duel forces these players to either play bounce passes and help their team create different passing angles as well as provide a relief option should there be no passing opportunities. However, it also prevents them from getting on the ball, dribbling down the line, and crossing. This isn't to say they can't do this, but it's difficult for them, and, hopefully, given the focus of the session, they will be more committed to playing one-touch passes, on top of making runs in behind (which will be addressed in more detail later on).

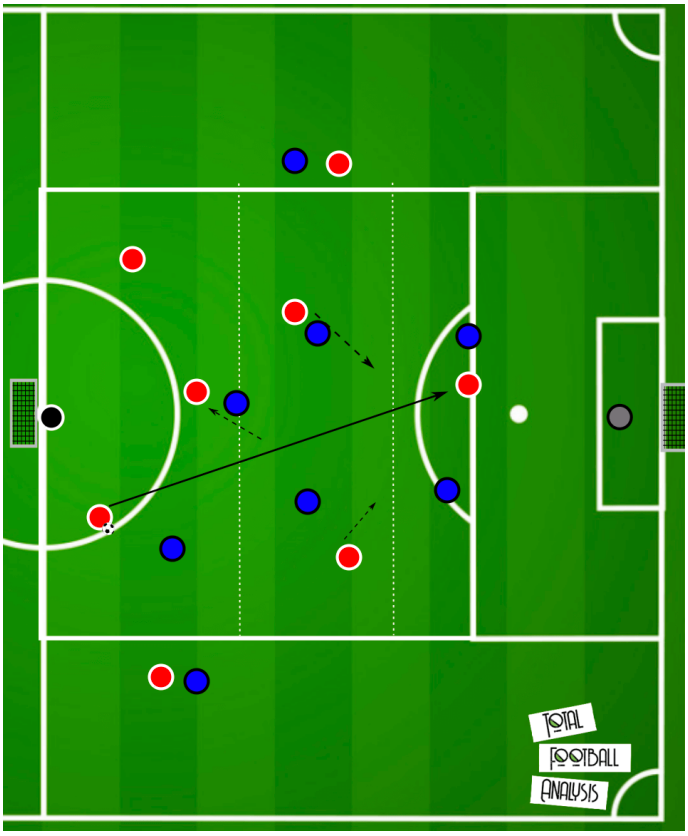
The following image shows an example of the team in possession using a quick one-two, providing time for their midfield to make a run, but also having a midfielder drop into a space closer to the wing; in a game, space would now have been vacated.



The third aren't strict, and one player from either side can rotate into another third as they see fit. This promotes rotation but also allows players to explore the space they can either create for themselves or for others by changing horizontal lines.

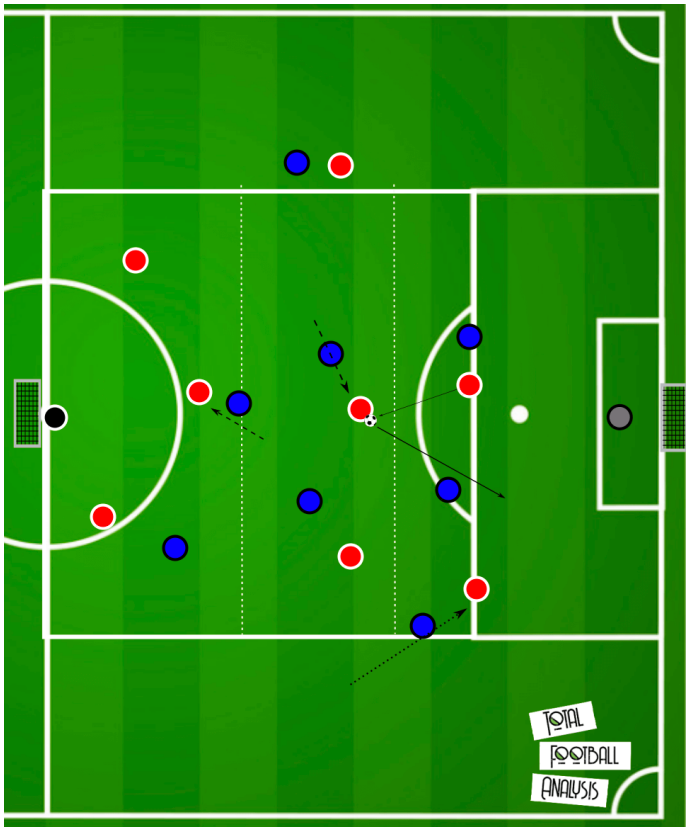
This could be the centre-forward dropping into the middle third to receive a line-breaking pass, or, as the next image shows, a midfielder dropping into the defensive third, providing them with the back three we had in the previous practice, creating greater ball security in build-up play, but also creating space for the through pass in behind.

We can see the other two midfielders reacting to this pass by quickly supporting the pass, with runs close to the centre-forward.



Finally, as alluded to earlier, the wingers can support attacks in other ways than just being a simple option to bounce the ball to when necessary.

If they see the opportunity, they can angle a run in behind. Of course, when breaking lines into a centre-forward, then with a central-midfielder supporting this pass and getting on the ball within 25 yards of goal, if they want to shoot they can do so. However, should they be more patient, they may have the opportunity to slide in one of their wingers making this angled run into the space behind the opposition defence. Again, the winger will need to stay onside, and they can be tracked. However, this pass option forces the central midfielders to once more play quickly in what would be a heavily congested area of the pitch.



CONCLUSION

These following practices look to suggest a framework that could allow a team to start from a simple, unopposed passing pattern before advancing all the way into a game-realistic situation played on half of the pitch.

Players should be encouraged and rewarded to be brave in playing forward, preferably breaking lines by playing through their midfield. However, we want them to pick the right opportunity to do this and not force it. Patient ball-circulation and bounce passes with forward or wide players can stretch the opposition midfield's shape and present forward passing lines.

Passes need to be punched at a strong weight, and the passer needs to look at whether their intended recipient is isolated or has options around him that can support the pass.

Players close to the receiver need to be switched on and ready to support the forward pass. They need to understand that if the ball is offloaded

to them, likely in the centre of the pitch, then this is a busy area and they will need to play quickly themselves once in possession. They should look for the shot or a through pass in behind for a player to run onto.

To create these forward pass options, midfielders can use their movement to draw their markers wide or into positions that open up passing lines, whilst midfielders and attackers can explore rotation, dropping into different areas of the pitch that could once more draw the defence out of shape, but also potentially find them space to receive too.



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SET-PIECE ANALYSIS



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO ZONAL MARKING FROM CORNERS

CAM MEIGHAN // @CAM_MEIGHAN

Defending from set-pieces is still a topic that invokes much debate in the footballing community, with the debate of man-to-man vs zonal marking still one which splits opinion. Anyone who has played football in their life is likely to have used man to man marking from set-pieces, simply because its simplicity leads to less time needed coaching it, which obviously lends itself well to grassroots or youth football.

Zonal marking is seen as the more modern, complex approach to defending corners, and because of its increased complexity, it requires more coaching and so is not a system many average football fans or grassroots players are used to. While it has certainly gained popularity in more recent years, like most things in football it isn't a brand-new concept, with Alan Hansen stating that the Liverpool teams he played in always used zonal marking. Most teams now use a mix of both systems, and so when we refer to zonal marking it is often a mix of the systems which contains more zonal duties. Purely zonal marking is rare at the top level.

This tactical analysis will not focus on which of the systems is more effective, but will instead give a comprehensive guide to zonal marking, as this is an area of football which is still often misunderstood by coaches, players and fans.

WHAT IS ZONAL MARKING?

Zonal marking, as in open play, is when players cover space on the pitch rather than players. The basic theory behind this is that you do not react to the opposition's movement, and so key spaces should always be covered and the opposition should not be able to find a free pocket of space. Players are allocated a specific space/zone and it is their job to clear the ball if it enters their zone.

We can see an example below of a zonal setup here, with RB Leipzig here using a five player zonal system with the opposition threatening a short corner. Each player in the first line can cover a zone, with the near post (one player), centre (three players) and back post all covered in Leipzig's structure here. Each zonal player has a realistic area they can/need to cover within their zone, and the size/shape of this depends on the height of their positioning, spacing between teammates and body positioning. For example, if we look at the back post, because the Leipzig player sits deeper at the back post there is decreased coverage of the higher back post zone. The second line consists of three players who act as blockers for deeper runners, something I'll detail later.

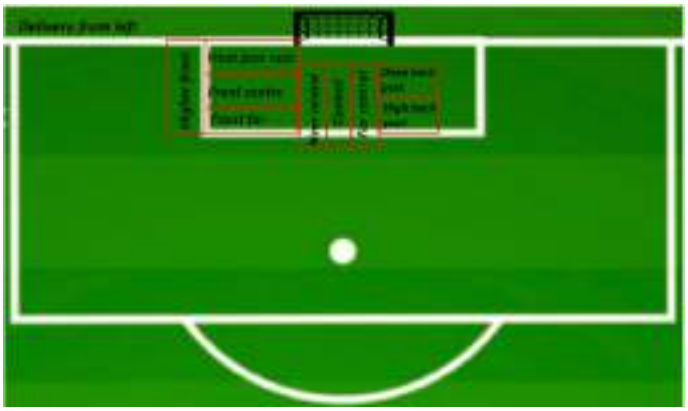


FIRST LINE STRUCTURES

Zonal structures in the first line change depending on the number of players and the spacing and staggering between players (e.g the height and width of their positioning). For this section looking at first line structures, we'll assume the team defending is using man to man marking in the second line and that an inswinger is being defended just for simplicity.

When looking at zonal defending, there are nine positional zones that individuals can take up, with the names and positions of each highlighted in this diagram. The near post can be defended higher, so just near the edge or

outside of the six-yard box towards the corner, or it can be occupied near to the goal, centrally, or the further away from the goal (front post far). The central area can be split into three horizontally and you can't really fit anymore than three players into this area without them just getting in each other's way. Naturally, if they are more towards the near post they are 'near (side) central' or if they are closer to the back post they are far central. The back post is simply split into deep and high back post. This is just to make it easier for me to highlight which zones I am talking about and gives a bit of clarity when saying something like "more centrally towards the back post" for example.



Those zones aren't and should not all be covered by one defending team, as some zones are too close together to really be occupied usefully and they only deal with the first line. Instead this just gives a guide into where a zonal player can position themselves.

TWO PLAYER ZONAL STRUCTURE

To look at structures, we'll start with a two-player zonal system in the first line, which is a fairly common structure in football and is more man oriented. I should add that these systems can differ based on subtleties in which zones players occupy, but these examples show the most generic structures.

Here we see Colorado Rapids using a two-player zonal structure with six-man markers, and I have labelled the general space in which each zonal marker can cover. The near post player covers the front post central area, and so can generally cover more space than would be allowed if he was on the near or far side of this area. They also have a central zonal marker who sits in front of the goalkeeper just inside the six-yard box. If the ball comes into either of these areas highlighted, the respective zonal marker should win the ball.



Because this is a mainly man-oriented system, there are only two zonal markers. Obviously then, the amount of zonal coverage is fairly low, and so when planning routines around zonal markers, you naturally look for where they can't cover. The back post is an obvious weakness for this system here, as is the far front post area.

A common weakness in this two-player system though is that because there are only two players working to cover these spaces, these two players have to stretch to do as much as they can to cover their zones. Therefore, the space between both zonal markers can also be a weakness, and so you rely on the man to man marking in the second line to stop the first contact in here. If they don't then that's a pretty good chance at a goal. Zonal marking then is all about spacing. As an individual you want to be in an optimal position as far away but at the same time as close to your nearest teammates as possible. In a two-player system, this means a compromise of the back post or front post area if you are going to protect the gap in the middle. We can see this here with the central zonal player moving towards the near post now, which

opens the back post further. You'll notice zonal coverage is still poor here, and that's because this is a mainly man to man system, however it is useful in explaining the concept of zones.



THREE PLAYER ZONAL STRUCTURE

Three player zonal structures have a greater degree of variation, simply because you can add a player at the front or back post depending on your preference. Adding an extra player naturally increases the amount of space you can cover across the box, and we can see how Newcastle United space their three-player zonal structure in the first line below. Newcastle favour occupation of the near post, and so place a near front post marker and a central front post marker in this area. The central player is also quite far over here, and so you will notice some overlap in their coverage. The near front post player covers very little space, but they cut off the danger of the ball going directly towards the goalkeeper.

They also position five-man markers in the box (who mark well against the Palace train here), as well as two players towards the edge of the box, so their formation resembles a 3-5-2 if you want to think of it as that.



The main weaknesses again then are obviously the places without zonal coverage, and so the back post and higher near post areas are vulnerable. Southampton looked to take advantage of the lack of back post coverage recently by overloading the near post with man markers in order to isolate Jannik Vestergaard 1v1 at the back post. Vestergaard won first contact twice at the back post in the game with one being a shot on target, and especially at the back post it can be very difficult for a man marker to stop the header. I wrote all about the back post in an analysis linked here. This system is again therefore somewhat dependent on a defender tracking his marker, and contrary to popular belief if an attacker or team knows what they are doing, this can become quite difficult.



You could also space the structure in this way, so you now have two players in the central area and one player occupying the near post, however this naturally reduces coverage of the near post. Having only two players stretched across the centre can also cause issues if they become too far apart, which is something teams can try to manipulate using their attackers. In a 3-5-1 structure here, all deeper runners can be marked and some key spaces can be covered.



FOUR PLAYER ZONAL STRUCTURE

When teams get to four player zonal structures you would probably refer to them as using zonal marking, as there is now a clearer emphasis on covering space. Real Salt Lake used a conventional 4-5-1 structure last season, with four zonal markers in the first line spaced as seen here. The front post is covered by a near side front post zonal marker hugging the line, while three central players are spaced across the three central zones. If you space well as they do here, you can eat into the back post and front post coverage while still maintaining good coverage in the centre. Like in open play, if there's three of you, you can simply spread out more. The sacrifice to this, particularly when the opponents threaten a short corner, is that not all deep runners can always be marked, and so a free run at the back post is allowed, as well as poor coverage of the edge of the box. One thing I haven't touched on is the increased space the goalkeeper can get with zonal defences, and so they themselves can act almost as a zonal marker, with their coverage increased by the space and run up they are allowed, as well as because they can obviously reach with their hands.



Arsenal use a four-man zonal system which is spaced slightly differently, with a front post far marker used while a deeper front post near side marker is also used. When this is combined with two central players, it covers the near post well other than a small gap between the far side near post player and central player. They have coverage either side of this space though, and so actually delivering into here is difficult.



I suppose Burnley also use a four-player zonal system due to their use of players on both posts no matter the delivery. We can see this structure here, where although they have four players in the first zonal line, because two of them are so deep on either post, central occupation becomes stretched and a space between the two opens up. They move into a 4-6 structure to mark all deep runners, with one man marker near the goalkeeper.



Because of this spacing problem, a good delivery finds the space between the two central markers, and Villa are able to win the first contact for a decent opportunity they cannot take. If they do get an accurate header here, I don't think the players on the posts are doing anything, and by having them there we see central occupation as well as occupation of the edge of the box is reduced. This is why using players on the posts is somewhat of an outdated concept.



FIVE PLAYER ZONAL STRUCTURE

Many teams use the five-player zonal structure, and it has been favoured this season by Manchester City. We can see their structure here, with a 5-4-1 formation used. The five player zonal system staggers very well, and consists of a front post central player, three players in each central zone, and one player in a deeper back post role. Their line of four-man marks who they can, and players in and around the zonal structure are left alone. Villa look to block Ederson a bit here to reduce his coverage.



I mentioned earlier that spacing and staggering are key to any zonal system, and I've illustrated why City's staggering of their zonal markers is very good in this diagram. We can see here that each player's zonal coverage is shown, with virtually all of the six-yard box covered except one very small space left by the deeper central City defender. When players stagger well, the overall area that the zonal structure covers is increased, as players are allowed to push higher due to having cover in behind. The zonal coverage of the two players next to the deeper central player increases because he sits deep, as he can then cover the space behind them. If you look at the first example in this analysis from RB Leipzig and also here, you'll notice they are spaced one behind, one in front, one behind, one in front, one behind again. If you just use common sense and pretend you are trying to stop something running towards the goal while making contact with you, you wouldn't just stand in a flat line, as if they get through that's it. Staggering increases the overall area you cover, so it is harder to find space to break through.



As a result, when the ball gets played into a deeper area, the far central zonal defender does a good job of pushing out, and wins the header against Tyrone Mings who is slowed down by the man marking used on him. So much for easily outjumping zonal defenders…



Staggering has to be done well though and is almost a matter of inches forward or back. We can see in this example here Jonny Evans drops really quite deep within Leicester's structure, and so the space in front of him is conceded. Leeds play a good delivery into this area and score, as Jonny Evans can't push out enough to win/challenge the first contact, and Leicester don't block players off well in their six-player zonal structure.



SIX PLAYER ZONAL STRUCTURE

Liverpool have used a six-player zonal structure for a few years now, and space the near post with a player on the higher near post area, a player in the near front post area, and a near post central player. This triangle of players makes it extremely difficult to head the ball at the near post. They then have two other players spaced in the two central areas, and a player higher on the back post. They use a 6-2-2 formation here, and so they cannot mark all players in the centre, but they do their best to block them, as I'll discuss shortly. Liverpool place their best headers in the central near post and central far post zone, as height at the near post helps to deal with fast inswingers, while a tall powerful centre back (e.g. Van Dijk) can track the ball and push out well from the central far post zone, and can also challenge against players who might have a run up. The other near post players don't need to be too tall, as deliveries to the near post usually rely on getting to the ball first more than anything due to the pace on the ball, so you need brave players here.



Everton also used a six-player zonal system last season, but with different spacing and staggering, Everton used a higher near post zonal player along with two other plays at the near post, with then two central players and a back post player. This is a subtle difference in staggering around the near post which increases higher near post occupation, but Liverpool's probably has slightly better central occupation.



More recently Everton have used a seven-player zonal structure and so set up with a 7-2-1 shape. This includes three near post players, one higher, one closer to the post and one higher. It also includes a central zonal player in each central zone, as well as a deeper back post player. As a result, there are no real weak points or spacing issues due to the number of players committed back, and so if you want to create a spacing issue you have to make one or aim deliveries deeper, which keeps the ball further from Everton's goal. The downside is of course the lack of man-to-man occupation, although two players block to slow the opposition.



THE SECOND DEFENSIVE LINE

For the second line, teams have three options of what they can use: Blockers, player markers, or zonal players. Using man to man marking in the second line is a basic concept, but if the zonal line consists of lots of players, it is impossible to mark all of them from deep as we have discussed. As a result, runners can get free and have a free run at a zonal defender if

you can't mark everyone. Chelsea struggled with this last year within their zonal system, as players could just get a free run at the zonal line and head the ball. We can see here Victor Osimhen isn't marked between the lines and so can score.



When players act as blockers they can be somewhat zonal too, as they look to keep players away from a certain space, although blockers can also be man oriented. The difference between this and strict man marking is that they do not follow players tightly, and so if players start deep they aren't pulled right the way out. We can see an example of blockers in the second line with Leipzig here, with the player circled doing a good job of slowing his player down and preventing him from getting a run. The central most blocker switches off and allows a run from deep without covering the man or the space, and so Schalke are able to win the first contact. If we compare this scene and the previous Chelsea scene, we can see though that the space between the first and second line is decreased when using blockers, and this helps to defend against deeper outswinging deliveries.



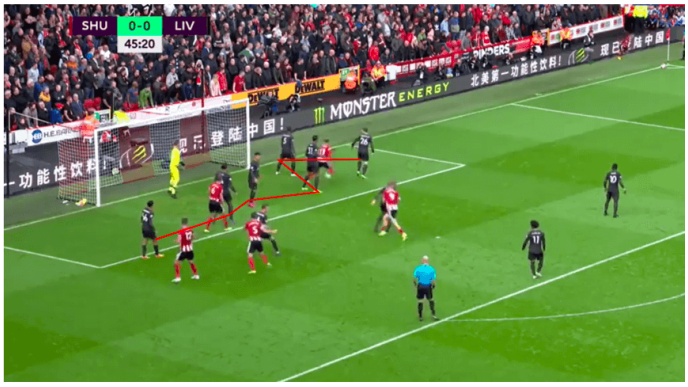
Purely zonal marking sees a second line being formed ahead of the first. Roma used this last season with the aim being to help launch counter attacks and to increase coverage around the edge of the box, however their second line is far too high here and Juventus just get a large space to use. Juventus also use two players over the corner to confuse the height of both lines.



INSWINGER VS OUTSWINGER

A common question people asked around zonal marking was 'what changes between inswinging and outswinging deliveries?'. The answer is quite simple in that it simply affects the height of the zonal structure as a result of the flight of the ball. Here we can see an example of Liverpool defending against an outswinger (top) and inswinger (bottom). Outswingers obviously swing away from goal, and so the shape of the zonal structure now mirrors this in that it gets further from goal the longer it gets. The front post near zone along the line doesn't need to be occupied, as an outswinging delivery cannot access this area well at all without going out. The inswinging delivery can, and so this zone is now occupied. The shape naturally pushes higher also, as outswingers send the ball deeper and so zonal players have to push outside the six-yard box to be effective. This is a common downfall for some zonal marking teams, as they can often get their height wrong which leads to goals being conceded. These examples also show us Liverpool's more man-oriented blocking approach in the second line, as well as showing how Liverpool's high line from outswingers allows them to catch most flick ons offside, as they do here with Son at the back post.





SECOND PHASES AND SHORT CORNERS

A general advantage to zonal structures is their ability to deal with second phase attacks, in that the structure remains organised regardless of the opposition's movements. If executed properly, the structure in the first phase should be roughly the same in the second phase, and so key zones should be covered and attackers can't become isolated. With man marking, players can move around anywhere the opposition takes them, and so your second phase structure is somewhat random. We can see an example here where Liverpool's second phase structure remains organised in regimented lines during the second phase, and so players can organise pushing out quickly and maintaining spacing well. The spaces that can be exploited are generally the same ones that can be exploited from the first phase, and so it is possible to still score of course, but it makes second phases less chaotic.



Short corners can be reacted to in different ways by zonal systems, and the usual question I ask when analysing an opposition team is how their zonal structure reacts when a corner is played short. Some teams will commit their near post zonal player short and force the rest of the zonal line to shift across, and this of course reduces the overall coverage of the zonal system. Other teams don't adjust their zonal structure, and instead send a player from the edge of the box or a man marker to press across. Liverpool only send one player across from the edge of the box, and almost use their zonal line pushing out as an extra defender. We see they execute this against Manchester City, where they don't stop the cross but still have a compact structure to defend. They are also able to push very high up quickly due to the organised structure, and so this eliminates the 2v1. The largest space is seen between Alexander Arnold and the far central player, but this is difficult to access and Virgil Van Dijk is nearby.



Attackers will often commit short by making runs from inside the box, and these can also be used as decoy runs against structures that use zonal players to react to short corners. We can see a very good example of this below from Manchester City Women. They commit a player short from inside the box and West Ham react by moving the far front post marker with the short player. This space is therefore vacated.



City don't play the short corner, and instead then make a run into that space vacated by the zonal marker. Zonal coverage is reduced, and so they can win the first contact and score. This is the main weakness behind using zonal players to defend against short corners.



Attackers also often move higher to get in amongst zonal structures, and teams are left with the choice of do they mark them or not? Marking these players reduces coverage of deeper runners, however it does help to try and prevent blindside runs ahead of a zonal marker being made, which is also often another cause of goals conceded by a zonal system.

KEY COACHING POINTS

I have covered some of the key coaching points already while outlining systems, but here is a bullet pointed list of key ideas when zonal marking:

- Maintain optimal spacing between zonal players
- Stagger at the correct height depending on the delivery
- Read the flight of the ball and move out bravely if the ball is in your zone
- Do not react to the ball unless it is in your zone
- Be on your toes and prepared to jump or run outwards
- Don't allow free runs onto zonal players
- Cover space further out and on the edge of the box to prevent being exploited

The main coaching point within that which I'll explain here is the idea of not reacting unless the ball is in your zone, as this is a common mistake by players within zonal systems. Players have to become very good at reading the flight of the ball and reacting or not reacting to it. If players move out of their zone and don't win the ball, not only do they get in the way of their teammates trying to win the ball, but they also allow for flick ons elsewhere. Again we look at Chelsea from last season, where we see the ball is played deeper towards the near post area. Chelsea's central zonal players both move towards the ball and don't get anywhere near it, and so they leave a large central space for the ball to be flicked down into Aubameyang. It is the same concept as in open play where if you operate in a closed block and move out to 'press', make sure either everyone goes so you play offside or go and win the ball.



Some teams look to try and stretch zonal coverage using overloads or underloads, and the key for defending against this is that if one player shifts across, everyone else should too. The zonal system should not be dependent on the opponent, but slight shifts towards either post can occur depending on the opposition. Tottenham exploited this well against Liverpool, where they used an outswinger and overloaded the back post. Liverpool's two zonal markers closest to the back post shifted across quite far in reaction to this, and so Tottenham created space between the two that they could run through. Harry Kane makes his way through the blockers and gets a free header just on the edge of the six yard box. If players get headers between zones, your zonal marking has failed, and so you have to keep optimal spacing between each defender. Either everyone shifts slightly, or no one does.





The main skills involved in zonal marking are maintaining your spacing between teammates, moving out quickly and far enough to win the header, and knowing when to move out by reading the flight of the ball. Teams who don't get the hang of this usually concede goals, and so like any system, if you perform it badly it isn't very useful.

THREE COMMON PHRASES

To end, I thought I'd debunk the three phrases the average football fan would say about zonal marking.

Number one: "Zonal marking lets you get a run on a player."

Yes, zonal marking can let attackers get a run on static defenders, but only if blockers or markers don't do their job. The aim is to slow these attackers down to allow zonal players to clear, and if teams are coached properly they can man mark specific threats who can outjump zonal markers, as not every player can.

Number two: "It's simple, stick with your player they are your responsibility". Man marking is simple, however it is also very simple to overcome and as an individual it is not hard to create enough separation to win the header. I have done lots of work on individual movement to dismark from set-pieces, looking at wide receivers in the NFL, and am confident that if you coach players properly they can lose their marker no matter how 'committed' they are. In short, it can actually be quite hard to track your runner if the attacker knows what they are doing.

Number three: "I've never seen a zone score a goal.". Zones also don't score goals in open play, but most of us don't run around chasing a specific opponent for 90 minutes, as it leaves spaces wide open and leads to massive problems

if one player becomes free. The same applies for set-pieces, in that football as an invasion game is also about covering space to prevent opponents moving through it, and so protecting key areas from set-pieces is useful in this regard when done properly.

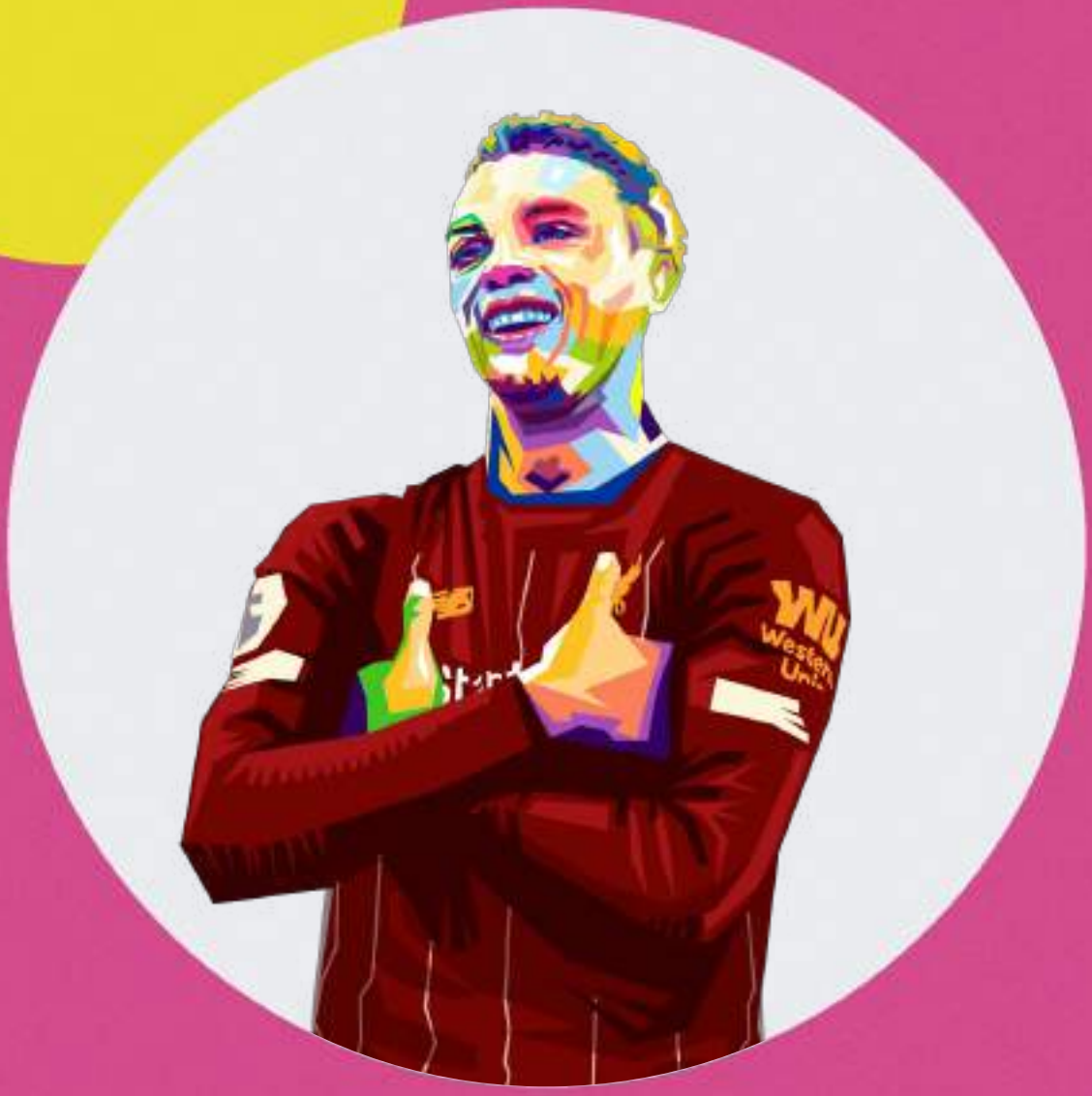
CONCLUSION

Hopefully that has given you a detailed guide to zonal marking and the tactics around it. Naturally it does not include everything as I could probably write another 15,000 words if I had to, but this gives the basics of zonal marking and the theory behind them. The piece hasn't sought to compare the advantages and disadvantages of man-to-man vs zonal structures, however if you want to explore this I have done webinars and articles on the subject too. I also work as a set-piece consultant with professional clubs including a team in the Women's Super League, and so if you want to improve your team's set-pieces or even just have a discussion feel free to contact me!



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THEORY



USING INVERTED FULLBACKS
TO CONTROL THE CENTRE

LEE SCOTT // @FMANALYSIS

When Pep Guardiola moved to Germany to join Bayern Munich in 2013 there was a sense that the Spaniard would favour consistency rather than revolution. This was afterall the coach who had created one of the most incredible sides in living memory as his Barcelona side passed and probed all opponents into oblivion.

Guardiola is a coach with a clear sense of self and it was apparent early on that the plan was to move the tactical game model lock stock and barrel from Catalonia to Bavaria. This plan was further suggested by the recruitment at the German side prior to Guardiola's first season as the coach was intent on signing the young Spanish midfielder Thiago from his previous side. Thiago was seen as the heir apparent to Xavi as the engine of the Barcelona side and his departure for Bayern felt like a changing of momentum at the Spanish side.

Gradually, however, Guardiola found that the German culture of counter-pressing when out of possession was prevalent throughout the whole league. This meant that the passing angles that Barcelona had used to progress the ball through the opposition defensive structure was no longer as clean as it needed to be. Indeed, even the smallest sides in the league were willing to face off against Bayern and press then incessantly as a means to defend as far from their own goal as possible.

This point is, for me, the key in Guardiola's coaching career as we saw for the first time that the Spanish coach had the courage and ability to adapt his game model. The heart of the matter was that Bayern needed a way to assert more control over the game in order to prevent the opposition from pressing to win the ball back and then launching quick transitions in order to overload the Bayern defensive block. In order to do this Guardiola came across an interesting tactical tweak that needed the support of two of the most tactically intelligent players in the Bayern squad, it just so happens that these players were both fullbacks.

Guardiola began to ask Phillip Lahm, the right-back, and David Alaba, the left-back, to move inside into the half-spaces when Bayern were in possession. They often saw themselves flanking the '6' at the base of the midfield in the 4-3-3 system that Guardiola continued to prefer. This inverted movement saw Bayern able to progress the ball through pressure much more cleanly and they created a platform from which the rest of the team could launch attacking movements. From the moment that the concept of inverted fullbacks became so integral in the Bayern game model we saw Bayern begin to fully dominate under Guardiola.

In this article we will look at different situations in which using inverted fullbacks can allow your team to control and dominate the centre of the pitch. This will show how these players can aid and support the ball progression as well as how they can be used to disrupt the defensive line of the opposition.



First of all we will see one of the most prevalent examples of a fullback moving into an inverted position across the 2019/20 season. This was, of course, the movement of the Liverpool right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold (TAA) into the half-

space. In a sense this is a movement that has its roots firmly in the decision of Guardiola to ask his Bayern fullbacks to make a similar movement.

The Liverpool coach, Jurgen Klopp, also decided to prioritise this movement from TAA because he wanted to give his Liverpool side more control of game situations in which the opposition were unlikely to force the issue and were happy to sit in a deeper defensive block.

In an interesting twist, Klopp was, of course, coaching in the Bundesliga when Guardiola arrived in Germany and Klopp's Borussia Dortmund side were one of the foremost proponents of counter-pressing in the German game.

TAA is a fantastic ball player and great progressor of the ball and as such Klopp wanted him to see more of the ball in the attacking phase. In order to successfully utilise this movement, however, Liverpool would need to ensure that they still maintained width on the right-hand side. Otherwise the opposition would drop into a narrow defensive block on that side and any advantage they had gained in moving TAA into the half-space would be lost. Normally, this would result in the wide attacker staying wide to provide width. Liverpool though have Mohamed Salah in that position and the Egyptian has a clear preference to attack inside. Instead, Klopp asked Jordan Henderson, who was playing as the right-sided '8', to sacrifice himself in making runs outside to provide width in the attacking phase.



We see the effect these movements have above as TAA is able to take possession in the half-space against a Crystal Palace side who are looking to sit in a deeper defensive block. The young England international is then able to use his passing range to play a long diagonal pass that accesses the space at the far side of the defensive block.



We are still seeing similar patterns from Pep Guardiola, now of course the coach of Manchester City, and here we see their right-back, Kyle Walker, receiving a pass in the half-space before looking to play the same diagonal pass to exploit space that we saw above from TAA. Indeed, under Guardiola it is fair to say that Walker has developed his game to the point that he is barely recognisable from the player who moved to Manchester City from Tottenham Hotspur. At that point Walker was a strong if one-dimensional right-back who relied on pace to get around the outside. Now he is a more tactically nuanced player altogether.



Indeed, when receiving the ball in an inverted position we see Walker pose a dual threat. He can play the diagonal switches that we saw above but he can also control the centre by driving in possession through a group of opposition

players. We see an example of this above from Manchester City's Champions League knockout match at home to Real Madrid. As Walker received possession he drove through a group of three midfield players. This puts City in a position of real positional superiority and helps them to control the centre and therefore the game.



There are other times in which a fullback making an inverted movement can help with ball progression without the ball being switched into space as they provide opportunities to create numerical or positional superiorities over the opposition. We saw one such example in a recent Premier League match as Leeds, under Marcelo Bielsa, used Stuart Dallas as an auxiliary midfielder in possession of the ball against a difficult to break down Sheffield United side.

Bielsa is, of course, one of the most innovative coaches in football and he is known to favour rotations of this type in order to create opportunities for his side to progress the ball cleanly into the final third of the pitch. In this example Dallas played constantly in the central areas as Leeds were looking to attack while Luke Ayling, normally a right-back, also moved into the half space to form a back three at the base of the Leeds attacking structure.



We see an example of this movement and how it aids the ball progression above. Leeds are building out and Sheffield United are not pressing aggressively and have adopted a low to medium block. This means that Leeds need to create a base from which they can attack into the final third.

The ball is initially with Ayling on the right and he passes the ball centrally before dropping back into a deeper position as a part of a back three. The ball is then rotated across and eventually finds Dallas who has made a movement from the left-hand side to occupy the half-space. This movement means that the ball can be effectively played around the midfield line of the defensive block and Leeds are able to progress the ball cleanly into the final third. There is also, however, another consequence of the movement into central positions from Dallas as Jack Harrison, the left-winger, was left isolated 1v1 in the wide space.



Finally we will consider the attacking potential that fullbacks can offer when moving through the half-space and breaking through the opposition defensive line unexpectedly. The above image was taken from the match at the start of the 2019/20 season between Fulham and Arsenal in the Premier League. Under Mikel Arteta we have seen Arsenal implement several tactical concepts that he saw used when working as an assistant to Pep Guardiola and Manchester City. It should come as no surprise then that the use of inverted fullbacks has been one of these.

In this instance the fullback was actually used in the half-space as a vertical weapon to break through the centre of the opposition defensive line and to create chaos and uncertainty.



We see it in action here as William is initially in possession of the ball for Arsenal in central areas. Arsenal are attacking in transition and as such the Fulham defensive block is not set. The pass out to the wide position finds Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and the Gabonese forward is initially in space as he receives the ball. There is an inverted run from Aisnley Maitland-Niles (AMN) from the left-back position and he makes a third man run that penetrates beyond the Fulham defensive line. This run gives Aubameyang an opportunity to isolate 1v1 against an opposition defender but it also drags one of the Fulham central defenders across and this creates space for Alexandre Lacazette to attack diagonally into the opposition penalty area.

There is no mistake in that the examples used have all come from coaches with a similar view on controlling the match in the modern game. Pep Guardiola, Jurgen Klopp, Marcelo Bielsa and Mikel Arteta are all deep thinkers who understand how to use space on the pitch to their advantage. There are, of course, other examples of coaches who are looking to emulate this use of inverted wingbacks but none of these quite get the execution right.

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LA PAUSA



WHY THIS SPANISH PASSING STYLE IS SO EFFECTIVE

BETH LIMB // @BETHLIMB

This tactical analysis scout report will focus on 'La Pausa' – a technique that is becoming utilised more often in European football. This analysis will explain what La Pausa is and demonstrate how it is used throughout in-game scenarios and tactics. Finally, this tactical analysis will showcase the players who have perfected this skill which requires great vision and technical and tactical awareness.

WHAT IS LA PAUSA?

La Pausa is a term commonly used in football, it literally means 'The Pause', it is used to describe a player's ability to slow down the game's pace, take control of the ball, and assess the situation around them. It is a technique used by midfielders and playmakers to create space, read the game, and make effective decisions on the field. This technique is widely associated with Spanish and South American players.

In essence, La Pausa is a player's ability to pause the game, take a breath, and make an informed decision. It requires a high level of technical ability, tactical awareness, and mental strength. The technique is used to manipulate the opposition by slowing down the tempo of the game or speeding it up when necessary. It is often used to give teammates time to get into better positions, or to draw defenders out of position to create space for other players.

La Pausa is often attributed to players who are known for their vision, creativity, and ability to control the tempo of the game. Players like David Silva, Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta, and Lionel Messi are often cited as examples of players who excel at this skill. These players have the ability to control the ball, read the game, and make split-second decisions that can change the outcome of a match.

The technique of La Pausa is not only about slowing down the game, but it is also about controlling it. This requires a player to be patient, calm and composed while under pressure. By taking control of the ball, a player can change the momentum and give their team a chance to control the flow of the game. Players who use La Pausa to great effect are often considered to be among the best in the world, and their ability to slow down the game and make informed decisions is a key factor in their success.

THE ORIGINS OF LA PAUSA

The origins of La Pausa stem from South America, let me tell you about Ricardo Bochini, the legendary Argentine midfielder who is regarded as one of the greatest players in the history of the game. Bochini was THE master of La Pausa, the art of slowing down the game and controlling the pace of play — but his impact on the game goes far beyond that.

Bochini spent his entire career with Independiente, one of the most successful clubs in Argentine football history. He joined the team as a teenager in 1972 and quickly became a key player, helping the team win multiple domestic and international titles. But it wasn't until the 1980s that Bochini really hit his stride.

During that decade, Bochini was the heart and soul of Independiente's team, leading them to four Copa Libertadores titles and two Intercontinental Cups. His skill on the ball was unmatched, and he had a remarkable ability to create chances for his teammates and score goals himself.

What really set Bochini apart was his mastery of La Pausa. He had a way of slowing down the game and dictating the pace of play that

was truly unique. He would hold onto the ball, wait for the right moment, and then unleash a perfectly timed pass or shot. It was a skill that few players possessed at the time, and it made Bochini a true innovator.

Bochini's impact on the game of football cannot be overstated. He was a trailblazer, a player who created new ways of thinking about the sport and inspired generations of players to come. His legacy lives on today in the countless players who have tried to emulate his skill and style. If you want to understand the true beauty of football, you need look no further than Ricardo Bochini.

PLAYERS WHO HAVE MASTERED THE ART OF LA PAUSA

LIONEL MESSI

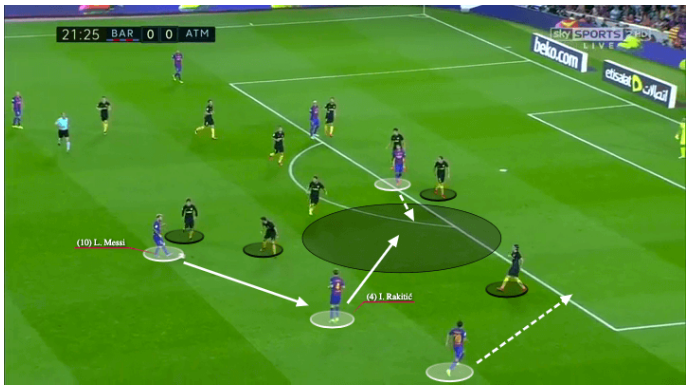
Who else could we begin with? I mean, where do I even start when it comes to Lionel Messi and La Pausa? This man has taken the art of slowing down the game to a whole new level, and it's nothing short of mesmerising. Messi has perfected this skill to an almost supernatural level.

Watching Messi play is like watching a masterclass in football strategy. He seems to have this innate sense of exactly when to pause and when to strike. It's like he's reading the game three steps ahead of everyone else. And when he does decide to make his move, it's so smooth and appears so easy that you almost forget how much thought and calculation went into it.

I think one of the things that makes Messi so great at La Pausa is his incredible vision. He can see things on the field that most players wouldn't even notice. As he's so patient and deliberate, he has the time to make the most of those opportunities. He's not just reacting to what's happening in front of him; he's actively shaping the game.

The images below depict Messi, in his Barcelona days, actively scanning the pitch, assessing viable passing options. He pauses for two seconds and in that time, two Atlético Madrid defenders move closer to him which means there is a pass on to Rakitic. The Croatian midfielder then has plenty of space to execute a short pass to the forward who can move across the defender.





The forward then has the opportunity to play a round-the-corner pass to the marauding full-back, who can play a ball across the face of goal to Neymar. This move sounds simple but requires incredibly intricate passes, timed to perfection and it all starts with Messi executing La Pausa.

What sets Messi apart is the way he combines La Pausa with his other skills. He's not just a master of slowing down the game; he's also one of the most skilled dribblers, passers, and finishers

in the world. When you put all those things together, you get a truly unstoppable player. In short, Lionel Messi and La Pausa are a match made in football heaven.

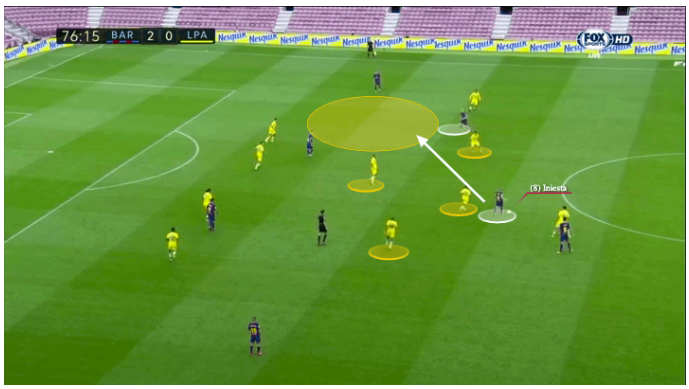
ANDRÉS INIESTA

It's impossible to talk about La Pausa without mentioning the trio of Barcelona legends: Andrés Iniesta, Sergio Busquets, and Xavi Hernández. These players are undeniable masters of the technique. Honestly, I could have written about any of the three for this article, I've opted for Iniesta purely out of personal preference. The Barcelona legend was one of my favourite players when I was younger so I'll never say no to any opportunity to wax lyrical about his abilities. Throughout his illustrious career, Iniesta's use of La Pausa has been wonderful to witness.

I selected the example below to demonstrate Iniesta's use of La Pausa because it is a little different to the one used to showcase Messi's usage. The technique of La Pausa isn't just about standing still, it's about slowing the game down to entice opponents to seek to try and win the ball, therefore space is available for teammates to exploit.

In this game against Las Palmas, Iniesta receives the ball and simply slows the game down to a walking pace. The result of this is four Las Palmas players following him, leaving space on the Barcelona left flank which could be used for a switch. In this case, a gap opens up for a pass to a teammate who has made a forward run, thus the attack can be resumed at pace.





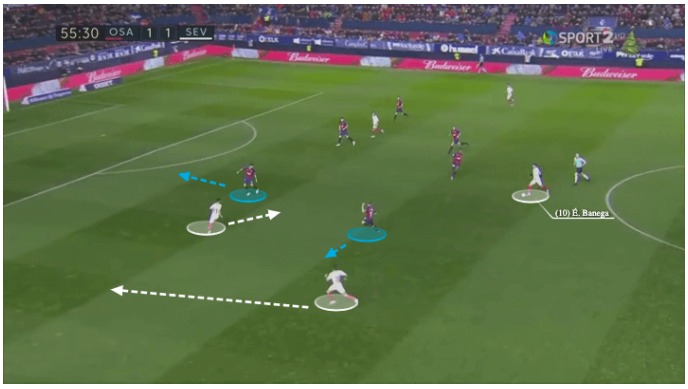
EVER BANEGA

Ever Banega is one of La Pausa's greatest exponents — he has used it to great effect throughout his career. Banega's success with La Pausa can be attributed to his exceptional vision and technique. He has incredible ball control and can keep the ball close to his feet while assessing the situation around him. This allows him to make quick decisions and execute precise passes.

There is a two-second 'pause' between the two images below, I've specifically selected this passage of play as it shows how La Pausa can influence opposition defenders. Banega's usage of La Pausa lures the opposition defensive line to take a step back which creates space for his teammate to attack and receive his pass.

Other players in this situation may have opted to run at the defence and end up losing possession, or they would play the pass too early meaning it could be intercepted. It is Benega's decision to use La Pausa that results in Sevilla retaining

possession and being presented with an attacking opportunity.





Banega's use of La Pausa is not just limited to attacking situations. He also has mastered how to use the technique to control the game defensively. By slowing down the pace of the game, he can give his team a breather and help them regain their shape.

Banega's use of La Pausa is a testament to his skill and intelligence as a footballer. He has mastered this technique and made it a key part of his playstyle, allowing him to control the game and create opportunities for himself and his team.

KEIRA WALSH

Keira Walsh is brilliant, she grew up watching the iconic Barcelona midfield of the aforementioned Iniesta, Xavi and Busquets. The Barcelona influence is coursing through the veins of her style of play.

She is the key component in Sarina Wiegman's England team, this has never been more evident than in the Euro 2022 tournament that saw England crowned European Champions.

The images below are from the final against Germany, where Walsh used La Pausa to provide Ella Toone with the opportunity to make a run between the two German central defenders and score a delightful chip over the keeper to make it 1-0.



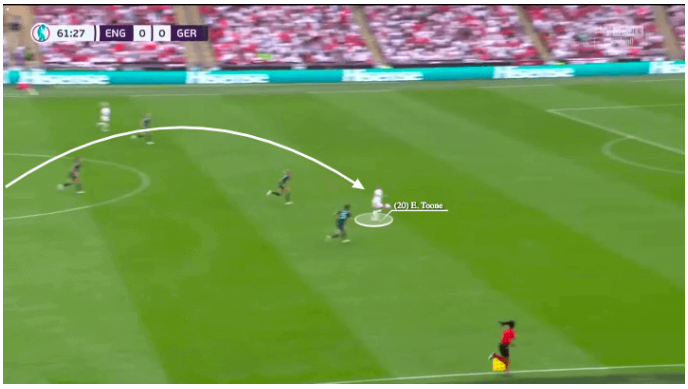


There are five seconds between Walsh receiving the ball and her inch-perfect pass landing at the feet of Ella Toone. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that there is poor defending from the Germans who failed to close down Keira Walsh, but nevertheless, the artfulness of the pass is exquisite.

The calmness and composure required to use La Pausa so eloquently in such a big game is something to be admired. Lesser players may have looked to move the ball on quickly or the nerves of the situation could have prevented them from executing the pass so well.

Instead, Keira Walsh took the time she needed to allow Ella Toone to run through the defence and then had the ability and confidence to play an incredible pass to her. This is a prime

example of a technically gifted player using La Pausa to influence a huge game and as a result, a fantastic goal is scored.



PEDRI

Pedri is without a doubt one of the most exciting young players in world football right now, and his mastery of La Pausa is a big reason why. At just 20 years old, he's already made a huge impact for both Barcelona and the Spanish national team, and many experts believe that he's on his way to becoming a future legend of the game.

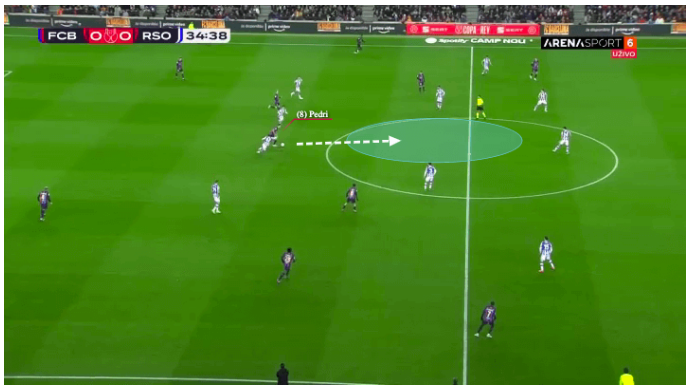
What sets Pedri apart is his incredible ability to slow down the game and make the right decisions in high-pressure situations. Whether he's dribbling past defenders, picking out a perfect pass, or creating space for himself, Pedri always seems to have an extra second to make his move. He is already a master of La Pausa.

What's remarkable about Pedri's use of La Pausa is how natural it seems to him. It's as if he was born with the ability to control the pace of play and make the right decisions at the right time. His vision, composure, and technical ability are all on display whenever he's on the ball, and it's clear that he's a special talent with a bright future ahead of him.

Below is one of my personal favourite uses of La Pausa and a demonstration of Pedri's footballing intelligence. He receives the ball and stops. Quite literally, he stands still. Just for a second, but it is more than effective.

The Sociedad midfielder steps towards Pedri, thinking he has a chance to win the ball back. Pedri beautifully flicks the ball past him and is able to carry the ball forward into the space that has opened up in front of him.





When you watch Pedri play, you can't help but get excited about his potential. He's already shown that he can compete at the highest level, and he's only going to get better as he gains more experience and develops his game even further. If he continues on this path, there's no doubt that he'll go down in history as one of the all-time greats of the sport.

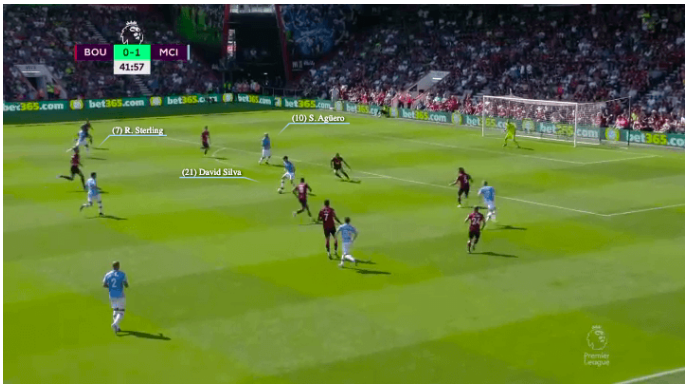
Pedri's mastery of La Pausa is just one aspect of his incredible talent, but it's a skill that sets him apart from his peers and makes him a joy to watch. He's a player who can change the course of a game with a single moment of brilliance, and that's what makes him a future legend of the game.

DAVID SILVA

Any article on La Pausa would be incomplete without mentioning the magician that is David Silva. The Spaniard, one of the greatest players to ever grace the Premier League stage, wowed fans on a weekly basis with his intricate passing ability and eye for a pass. He is able to read the game and anticipate the movements of his teammates and opponents, allowing him to create space and make the right decisions in a split second.

Below is a wonderful example of David Silva executing La Pausa, he receives the ball in a tight space. As the first image shows, the most obvious pass would be to Sergio Aguero who is hovering in zone 14. Instead, Silva opts to linger, just for a second, which draws the Bournemouth defender over to Aguero as that's who he anticipates will be on the receiving end of Silva's pass.

David Silva then lays a simple pass into the path of Raheem Sterling who has made a run forward. This is what truly makes Silva a master of La Pausa — his ability to execute the technique with such precision and elegance. He is able to influence the opponent to create space with such ease and grace, that it almost seems effortless. This mastery of the technique is what makes him such a joy to watch on the pitch.



CONCLUSION

La Pausa has been used in football for many years, but it's becoming much more frequently used in European football in recent times for a few different reasons.

Firstly, the speed of the game has increased significantly over the years, and as a result, players are constantly under pressure to make quick decisions on the ball. By using La Pausa, players are able to slow the game down and assess their options before making a decision. This can help them to make better decisions and reduce the risk of making mistakes, which is particularly important in high-pressure situations.

Secondly, the modern game places a lot of emphasis on possession and controlling the tempo of the game. La Pausa is a technique that can help players to do just that, as it allows them to hold on to the ball and dictate the pace of play. This can be particularly effective against teams that like to press high up the pitch, as it can help to break their defensive structure and create opportunities to attack.

Finally, many of the best players in the world are now using La Pausa as part of their game. Players like Lionel Messi, Andrés Iniesta, and now Pedri, have all mastered the art, and their success has inspired other players to adopt the technique. As a result, we're seeing more and more players using the technique, as they look to emulate the success of these great players.

Overall, La Pausa is becoming more popular in European football because it's a technique that can help players to make better decisions, control the tempo of the game, and break down tough defences. With more and more players adopting the technique, we can expect to see it continue to be a key part of the game for years to come.

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BRUK-BET TERMALICA NIECIECZA



THEIR EVER-CHANGING
SET PLAYS

MARCEL SEIFEDDINE // @_MARCEL_23

Bruk-Bet Termalica Nieciecza are located in a village where only 750 people or so live, yet that has not stopped them from taking the competition to the big teams. In the past ten years, they have spent their time exclusively either competing in the Ekstraklasa or battling for promotion back to the top tier, where in that time, ex-Poland boss Czesław Michniewicz was in charge for a while before later moving to manage Poland at the World Cup.

Interestingly, current Polish manager Michał Probierz also had a very brief stay at the club, where two days into the job, he decided to walk and has now moved on to coaching the likes of Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski, Napoli's Piotr Zielinski and Juventus keeper Wojciech Szczesny.

Termalica have the eye this season through the constant tweaking of their set plays so far. From game to game, the starting position, movements and type of delivery have changed, and it's clear to see that work has been done to ensure they gain an edge in this game of fine margins.

In this tactical analysis, we will look into the tactics behind Termalica's offensive corners, with an in-depth analysis of why the corners changed each game. This set-piece analysis will examine why these routines have had some bright signs, where they could be improved, and why opponents are struggling with these changes.

SOLUTIONS TO ZONAL DEFENDING

Many of Termalica's opponents have used heavy zonal defending strategies, opting to allow the attackers to have space, but only from a farther distance from goal, where the likelihood of a shot beating the keeper significantly decreases. Termalica have displayed a variety of ways in which they have been able to combat each zonal setup successfully.

Coming up against a seven-man zonal setup, we can see that the defensive side focuses on securing the central area near the six-yard box. Two blockers are positioned around the penalty spot and aim to prevent attackers from entering the six-yard box with any sort of momentum. Any ball that lands inside the white area will then be in the defending team's favour due to the close distances of every defender.



Termalica's first and most straightforward solution to overcoming this defence is attacking the available space. With so many defenders protecting the nearest 12 yards to goal, there is a lack of protection in the rest of the penalty area, meaning that Termalica's attackers have lots of space to lose a marker and attack the ball.

As seen in the example below, no defenders are tracking players in the orange zone, so it is easy for Termalica to access that area of the box. However, the headed effort is harder to finish.



While the area inside the above white zone is controlled by the defensive side, it is possible to create space inside the defending team's zone

of control. Bruk-Bet Termalica have shown this to be achievable through the use of screens.

The black circle indicates the space created just outside the six-yard box with two screens: one on the near-side zonal defender and one on the defender in the middle of the six-yard line.

Blocking off the two nearest possible defenders who will engage with the ball means that when the attacker enters the target area, he will be free to attack the ball with more time and space than what would usually be available and will likely contest for the ball unopposed.



It is interesting to note that the defender engaging in the aerial duel for the ball has a much deeper starting position near the front post. The defender's deep position means that he can run up towards where the ball is aimed at, so that he can use his momentum to reach a bigger height when jumping for the ball.

This is commonly used by attacking sides when up against a static zonal block, but the reversal of the roles is interesting. However, it must be noted that giving the attackers added space means they will likely have even more space away from goal, and space will be too big to recover if the corner is aimed directly at the attacker rather than a cross into their path.



Against zonal defences that tilt towards the front half of the six-yard box, Termalica have used decoy runs to move the opposition. The example below shows most players from both sides at the front half of the six-yard box, where the attackers purposefully make runs away from the six-yard box. These decoy runs help to drag the defenders away from the six-yard box whilst also moving the goalkeeper away from the centre of his goal.



By moving the goalkeeper towards the near post, the cross to the back post has a higher chance of success. At the back post, the attacker has a large amount of space to compete for the aerial duel, although he is outnumbered.

The club from Nieciecza could make life easier for the target player by making each duel a 1v1 or providing the advantage for the attacker by increasing the length of the run-up towards the ball to increase the probability of him winning the aerial duel.



Each game provides different challenges for the club. Against Arka Gdynia, we can see that the team set up with nine zonal defenders, yet what was evident with the defending side is that each defender had a minimal zone they were responsible for.

In large numbers, each defender feels someone else will deal with the ball if it doesn't go directly towards them, yet that naivety is what Termalica looked to exploit on this occasion. As seen below, there is an open area which no defender is responsible for, and with a well-timed run and accurate cross, that area can be entered and attacked very easily.



A slight alternative to the direct back post cross is to use a shorter corner to the near post before flicking it to the back post. Termalica show yet another way to break down a zonal defence, where flick-ons causing the second phase are used to disorganise the busy defence.

The attackers are already ball-side of their marker, so when they make a move towards the ball, they will almost definitely have the separation to make the first contact and flick it further.



As the ball is crossed to towards the near post, all players begin moving towards the ball inside the box. This includes the players at the back post, who move towards the ball to collect loose balls, but in turn, they leave their markers free at the back post, as seen in the image below.



One way in which Termalica have made their approach more effective has been by changing the runs of certain attackers. When aiming for the near side of the box, Termalica use three attackers, at varying distances away from goal, to make sure that one can make the first contact.

Each attacker is responsible for a horizontal panel of space, with the three attackers at three different vertical levels. That way, even if a cross is slightly mishit, someone will make the first contact. Because the location of the second contact is so close to the goal, only one or two attackers are required at the back post, so Termalica can afford to use extra numbers to ensure the first contact is made.



USE OF SHORT CORNERS

Bruk-Bet Termalica have displayed cunning intelligence in adjusting their routines depending on the opposition. Facing a zonal defence and knowing that this is a team which will step up immediately to close down the ball and increase the height of the offside line, Termalica are prepared for what is to come if they make a short pass.

They can use that to their advantage, as they are prepared for the movement of the defensive line away from the goal. This movement creates space between the goalkeeper and defence, which Termalica expect, and cross the ball for first time.



The ball can easily enter the six-yard box, and with all defenders stepping up, it becomes easier for every attacker to move in the opposite direction, towards goal, and find space. As a result, this opportunity with four attackers queueing up for the ball occurs.



Against a different opponent, we can see Termalica change their approach yet again. This time, the defending team isn't as intense in their efforts to move the defensive line up and are happy to sit and protect the box.

As a result, there is more time and space for the players outside the box, who can afford to slow down, compose themselves and pick out a pass or cross into the penalty area. With that time, they can carefully execute their actions to the best of their abilities.

The player inside the box is then able to turn and face the defender, where he has the option of taking the defender on or crossing it, with lots of attackers still in the box.



CONCLUSION

This tactical analysis has detailed the different ways Bruk-Bet Termalica Nieciecza adapt their corner routines to the different opposition they are coming up against. Keeping a close eye on the weak points, Termalica are able to exploit those, and this novelty has allowed them to remain unpredictable from corners.

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