

# TOTAL FOOTBALL ANALYSIS

#107 // APRIL 2024

THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE IS JAM PACKED WITH TONS OF IN-DEPTH, DATA-FILLED CONTENT! WHO ARE THE TOP CHANCE CREATORS AND WING-BACKS IN EUROPE? WHAT ARE THE TACTICS CONTRIBUTING TO THE NOTE-WORTHY SEASONS OF ARDUCA, CHESTERFIELD, HNK RIJEKA AND SPARTA PRAHA? WE SCOUT THE J1 LEAGUE OF THE EAST AND THE MLS OF THE WEST TO FIND THE TOP STARS FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD. FIND OUT HOW LA MASIA IS SAIVING XAVI'S SEASON, PLAYER PROFILES FROM TWO OF THE WORLD'S BEST PLAYERS, JUDE BELLINGHAM AND BARBRA BANDA! ALL THIS, PLUS SOME INCREDIBLE IN-DEPTH SET-PIECE ANALYSES... DON'T MISS IT!

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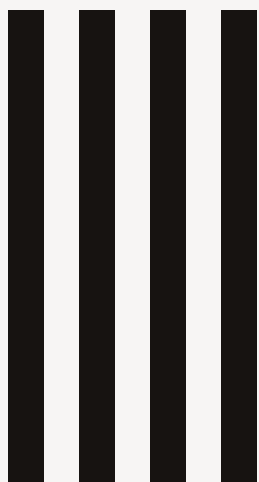
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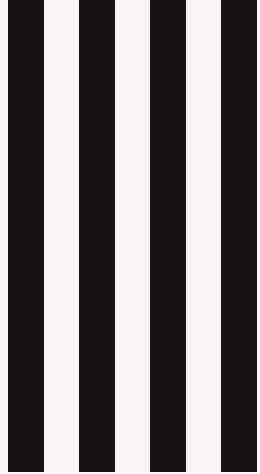
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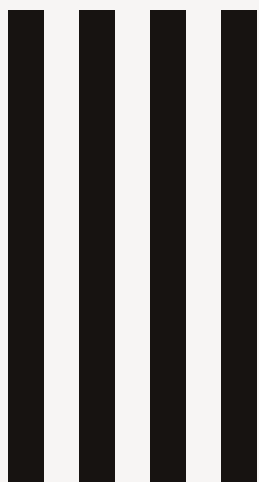
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# THE ONLY TOOL BUILT BY AGENTS FOR AGENTS

"The only platform that enables football agents to effortlessly manage the transfer window chaos. Efficient, objective, holistic, smart. A modern day football stakeholder."

In the intricate world of football, agents play a pivotal role in shaping the careers of players, facilitating transfers, and negotiating deals. As the digital age unfolds, so do new opportunities for agents to enhance their abilities and streamline their operations. The EnskAI platform is at the forefront of this revolution, providing football agents with a comprehensive set of tools designed to simplify and optimize their daily tasks. EnskAI introduces a suite of features meticulously crafted to empower football agents. Imagine having a 360-degree data-driven toolkit at your disposal, complete with advanced machine learning and artificial intelligence algorithms that seamlessly collect, connect, and analyze a wealth of data.

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*The one and only digital solution to every aspect of the player management pipeline.*

# DATA VIZ

## PREMIER LEAGUE 2023/24

### TRACKING EACH TEAM'S PLAYER UTILIZATION

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

The 2023/24 Premier League season has seen players from different teams suffer from injury setbacks over the course of the season. The number of players getting injured seems to have gone higher in hindsight, but only data will tell if that is true — and that analysis is for another time.

However, because of all these injuries, teams have been forced to change their combinations and fully utilise their depth. The visualisation below shows the number of players used by all 20 teams throughout 2023/24.

Sheffield United, who sit rock bottom of the Premier League, have used the most players (34) at the time of writing. With a change of manager in between, the Blades have struggled for consistency in performances this season, which has led them to chop and change players quite frequently. Newcastle United, who have had several injury setbacks to their players, rank second after using 33 players so far this season. Burnley, another team that is most likely to go down along with the Blades, have used the league's third-most number of players (32).

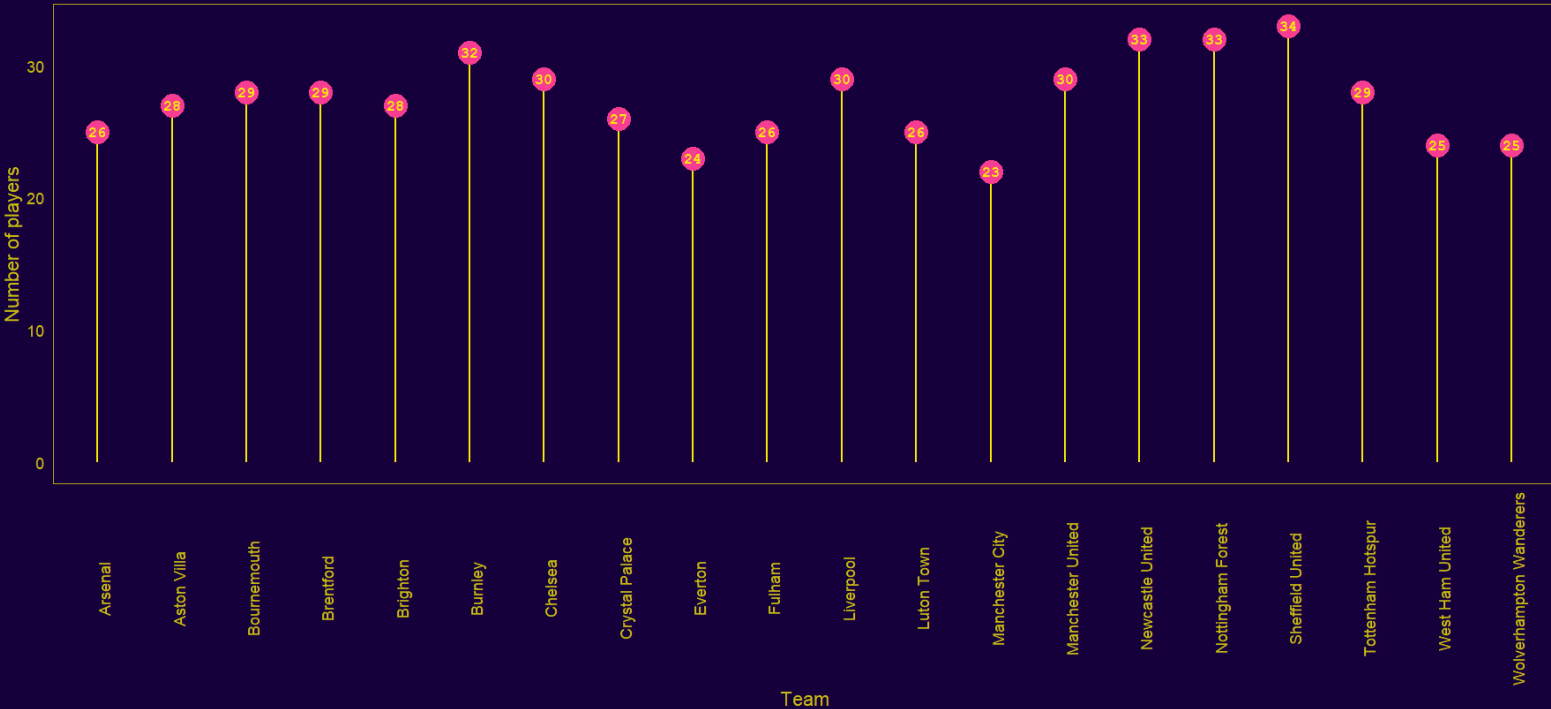
Manchester City have used the fewest players in the league (23), which explains why they are so good consistently. Their legendary manager has primarily stuck to a set group of players and seen a few injuries in his team to avoid having to change quite often. Everton, West Ham United and Wolves are just behind Manchester City regarding the number of players, with the former using 24 and the latter two teams using 25 in the league so far.

Arsenal (26), Fulham (26), and Luton Town (26) have also frequently used the same combinations.

Meanwhile, Chelsea, which has one of the biggest squads in the league, has used 30 players—the same as Liverpool and Manchester United.

# Premier League 2023/24 - Number of players used in the league

(Players who have been on the field for at least a minute)



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyReddevil



# **BARBRA** BANDA

BARBRA BANDA



ORLANDO PRIDE

**WHAT WILL THE SECOND  
MOST EXPENSIVE PLAYER IN  
THE WORLD BRING  
TO ORLANDO?**

**B**arbra Banda's transfer from the Chinese Super League's Shanghai Shengli to Orlando Pride has been creating a lot of buzz in women's football media, generating increasing interest in Banda's profile and what the Zambian international can add to the NWSL in general — Orlando Pride, in particular. The reason for this attention to Banda comes mainly but not exclusively from the fact that this was the second most expensive transfer in the history of women's football. Orlando Pride paid Shanghai Shengli \$740,000 to acquire Banda's services on a four-year deal.

With a few hat-tricks scored against numerous big teams, outstanding 2023 World Cup participation, and an enriching experience in the Chinese Super League, the 23-year-old striker is set to have a bigger opportunity on a more viewed stage to showcase her talent and help Orlando Pride reach their short—and long-term goals.

In this tactical analysis and scout report on Banda, we will analyse her profile as a striker and explore what makes her special to Zambia, Shanghai Shengli, and potentially Orlando Pride's tactics. The analysis will also cover her general traits, possible roles on the pitch, and how head coach Seb Hines can utilise her in the best possible way.

Before delving into the sections of the article, it should be noted that although Banda is the captain of Zambia, she has not had the chance to play in some of the big European teams yet. This Orlando Pride represents her first “big move” offer. She started her footballing career in 2016 with the Green Buffaloes in Zambia before moving to Logroño, who offered her the chance to play against Spanish giants like Barcelona, Real Madrid, Levante and Atlético Madrid from 2018 to 2020. Afterwards, Banda got a special opportunity to play in the Chinese Super League with Shanghai Shengli.

What was impressive with Banda is that she was always capable of getting excellent numbers per season in terms of goals. For instance, she was able to score 18 goals in 13 games during her first season with Shanghai Shengli, emerging as the 2020 Chinese Women's Super League Golden Boot winner for most goals scored in the league.

In addition to that, she was also capable of scoring plenty of important goals for Logroño and especially for Zambia, leading them to achieve unprecedented results whether during the 2023 World Cup or during their first 2022 COSAFA Women's Cup, the competition during which Banda led Zambia to win while contributing ten goals to earn the Golden Ball Award.

## **GENERAL TRAITS**

**B**anda is a unique striker in women's football, with special characteristics and natural strength combined with hard work.

She wins 44% of duels and can be considered a very good passer, as her passing accuracy equals 65.2%, and she provides 0.15 assists per game. Banda has proven on numerous occasions that she plays for the team and does not really want to shoot on goal on every occasion she gets; she prefers to serve her teammates whenever she notices a better-positioned player.

Perhaps one of the most notable examples of Banda's unselfishness is her assist against Costa Rica during the 2023 World Cup. She had the ball inside the final third, dribbled past two players, and was capable of shooting, but she preferred to opt for the assist to a “freer” teammate.



In addition to this type of assist, Banda is used to serving her teammates from both wings, as she played in these two positions on some occasions. Plus, she moves a lot towards the wings even when she plays as a striker, which gives her more room for creativity and changing roles with her teammates during the game.

This picture shows how accurate her assists can be as it showcases her excellent decision-making in terms of passing since she picked the most suitable player in terms of position to receive the ball and be able to shoot on target. Therefore, Banda can participate a lot in the playmaking process as she can often retreat or move to the wings to receive the ball and either try to penetrate the box or serve a teammate.



In addition to her generosity in passing despite being a striker, Banda is characterised by her acceleration and very explosive runs even when she seems in disadvantageous situations, like in the following example. These accelerations can greatly help Orlando Pride and Banda during counterattacks and even when finding gaps within the opposing defences. More importantly, such speed paves the way for midfielders and defenders to serve Banda with through passes

into space while knowing that the chances of Banda getting first to the ball will be very high.

This example shows a glimpse of how quick Banda can be and how dangerous she can become in such situations. Knowing that she was way behind the defensive line when the ball crossed at the back of the defensive bloc, Banda could still reach the ball first and protect it with her body while running and resisting the defender's disturbance.



## HOW SHE CAN FIT INTO ORLANDO PRIDE'S TACTICS

**B**anda has already played with different teams and according to various formations while interpreting diverse positions. What is certain is that she occupies most, if not all, attacking positions well and can be dangerous when playing in any attacking position. This being said the ideal position for Banda is the striker role since that's the position that allows her to win duels against defenders and battle with them on the ball recurrently while exploiting her goalscoring potential in the best of ways and in various manners.

At Orlando Pride, Banda can be instrumental in counterattacks as she is quick enough with or without the ball. Moreover, she will be of great use during crosses and set pieces as she proved numerous times that she can battle defenders well in the air to win aerial duels.

Banda will surely be competing with Adriana and Julie Doyle for a regular spot at Orlando Pride. Alternatively, Seb Hines can also opt for a change of formation at times to use two strikers simultaneously since Banda and Adriana, for example, can form a powerful attacking duo, especially with someone like Marta being the advanced playmaker just behind them.

This being said, Seb Hines will probably keep using his usual 4-2-3-1 formation with Marta as a playmaker and one of Adriana or Banda as a striker. As you can see below in this heatmap, Banda not only can play as a second striker but can also be used on the wings if necessary, especially if the team urgently needs a winger.

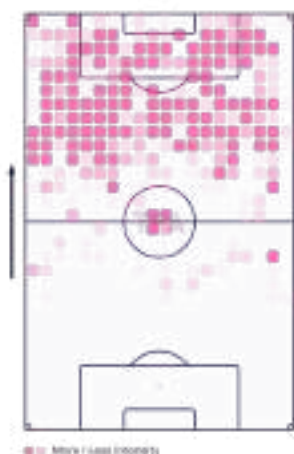
Since Hines already used Doyle as a right winger at the start of this 2024 NWSL season, he will probably opt for an attacking three consisting of Banda as a left winger, Adriana as a striker, and Doyle as a right winger. Angelina is a solid left-winger alternative, and Marta plays behind Adriana.

to consider this fact and change their tactics to mark such a dangerous attacking player better. With an average of 0.78 goals per game and a high average of 4.57 shots per match, Banda is considered one of the most dangerous strikers on the footballing scene and has the potential to become even more clinical in the coming seasons if she keeps on working hard to further improve her numbers.

The following goal example shows how dangerous Banda can be when starting the action from the left wing, quickly dribbling past her direct marker and finishing with great technique. Succeeding to do all of this quickly while guaranteeing the quality needed in dribbling, acceleration, and finishing might look easy from the stands, but it is very complicated to apply on the pitch without errors. Since Banda has been doing this many times already, it is fair to consider her one of the most dangerous strikers nowadays. Yet, it is up to her to confirm these traits or not during her upcoming performances at Orlando Pride.

### B. BANDA HEATMAP

All games from Championship Cup 2024, FIFA Women's World Cup 2023, Australia/New Zealand Women's Olympic Qualifying CAF 2024, Super League Women 2023, Turkish Womens Cup 2023, Championship Cup 2023, Olympics Women 2020 Tokyo, Liga F 2019/2020, Liga F 2018/2019



Mastering the way she deals with long passes and succeeds in finishing when receiving such passes despite being tightly marked is something that not all strikers can do with efficiency. However, Banda proved on numerous occasions that she is physically strong enough to resist the tight marking of defenders and still needs to find the necessary timing, body coordination, and endurance to execute volleys and half-volleys, which are never easy to execute successfully.

This example highlights one remarkable action by Banda during which she received the ball.

## GOALSCORING AND SHOOTING ABILITIES

We can say that Orlando Pride will have a goal machine within their team in the form of Banda. This will oblige their opponents

At the same time, she was marked but was still able to let the ball bounce, prepare herself for the half-volley while protecting the ball and then shoot towards the net, scoring a stunning goal.



Apart from pacy runs and volleys/half-volleys, Banda can also score headers regularly as she usually frees herself inside the box and does what is necessary to touch the ball when receiving crosses. Moreover, it is essential to stress how unique Banda's accelerations were.

This example looks unbelievable: Banda retreats to get the ball, passes it to a teammate, then runs to surpass everyone, catches her teammate's pass at the back of the defensive line, and scores.



The question that needs to be answered is whether Banda would succeed in repeating such accelerations and getting to the ball first when playing against NWSL defenders. The answer is most probably yes, but with less ease since NWSL defenders can be quicker than those of the Chinese Super League.

## CONCLUSION

**B**arbra Banda will represent a massive addition to Orlando Pride in the short and long term. She will add a much-needed attacking depth to a squad that needs more confidence and quality players like Banda to excel. If she adapts well and quickly to NWSL's playing style, Banda will surely be pivotal to Orlando Pride's tactics this season, whether in terms of finishing, playmaking, or moving between the lines with and without the ball.

# SCOUTING JAPAN

KURYU MATSUKI



FC TOKYO

**TOP FIVE J1 LEAGUE  
PLAYERS SMART CLUBS  
WILL BE AWARE OF**

LUIS KIRCHER // @LUISKIRCHER

As the J-League kicks off its 2024 season, anticipation is high as fans eagerly await the performances of the league's top talents. With a blend of seasoned veterans and emerging stars, the J-League promises to deliver exciting football action throughout the campaign. In this scout report, we'll take a closer look at five players who are poised to make a significant impact on the upcoming season. From prolific goalscorers to creative playmakers, these individuals possess the skill and talent to capture the spotlight and leave a lasting impression on Japanese football.

The export of Japanese football talent to European leagues has been steadily growing in recent years, with the Japanese market gaining more traction and recognition on the global stage. While still undervalued compared to some other regions, the Japanese football landscape is producing players of increasing quality and appeal.

Among the European target markets for player exports from Japan, Belgium stands out, with 16 players playing their trade in the top-flight leagues. Germany follows closely behind, with nine Japanese players making their mark in the Bundesliga—additionally, Scotland, Portugal, and the Netherlands each host seven Japanese players in their top-flight competitions.

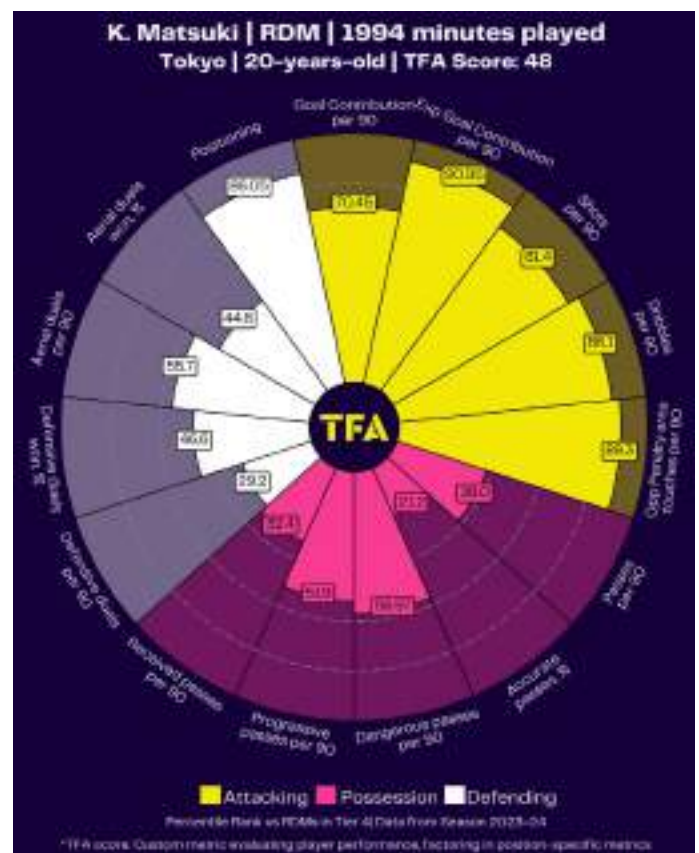
Other countries such as Montenegro, England, the United States, and Poland have also become destinations for Japanese footballers, with three to four players representing Japan in each of these leagues. Furthermore, Switzerland and France accommodate two Japanese players each, while Spain, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, and Denmark host one Japanese player each in their top-flight leagues.

As Japanese players continue to showcase their skills and adaptability on the European stage, the demand for talent in these target markets is expected to rise, further solidifying Japan's

position as a valuable contributor to the global football industry. Let's delve into the profiles of these players and explore what makes them stand out in the competitive J-League.

## KURUYU MATSUKI

Kuryu Matsuki, born on April 30, 2003, in Muroran, Hokkaido, is a dynamic and versatile midfielder known for his relentless work rate and tireless running on the pitch. Standing at 1.80 meters tall, Matsuki possesses the attributes of a true box-to-box midfielder, capable of impacting the game at both ends of the field.



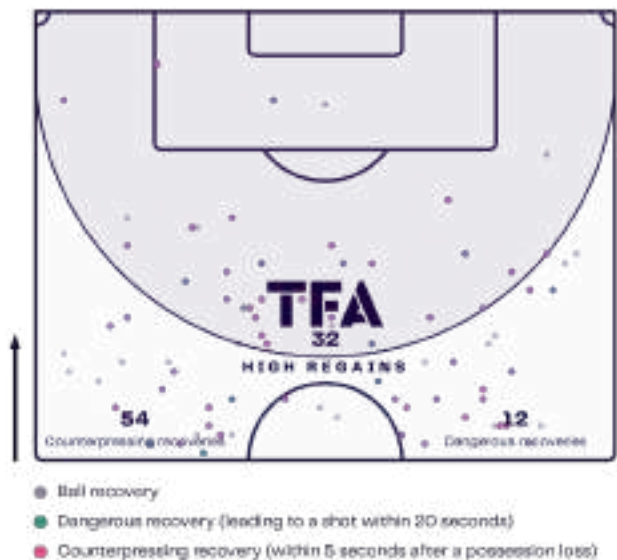
One of Matsuki's key strengths lies in his ability to fulfil various roles in midfield, thanks to his adaptability and all-around skill set. Whether initiating attacks with progressive runs and passes or breaking up opposition plays with well-timed interceptions and challenges, Matsuki consistently imposes himself on the game.

A perfect fit for high-intensity and pressing systems, Matsuki excels in an active style of defending, often pressing opponents aggressively and disrupting their rhythm. His

high stamina and energy levels enable him to cover a lot of ground, making him a constant presence in midfield battles.

### K. MATSUKI HIGH REGAINS

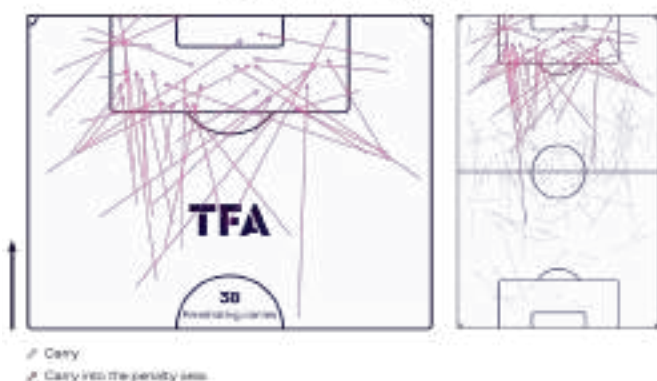
All games from J1 League 2023



Offensively, Matsuki adds value with his ability to make dangerous runs into the penalty box, where he can exploit his shooting skills from mid-range and long-range positions. His penchant for making late runs into the box adds an additional dimension to his team's attacking play.

### K. MATSUKI PENETRATING CARRIES

All games from J1 League 2023

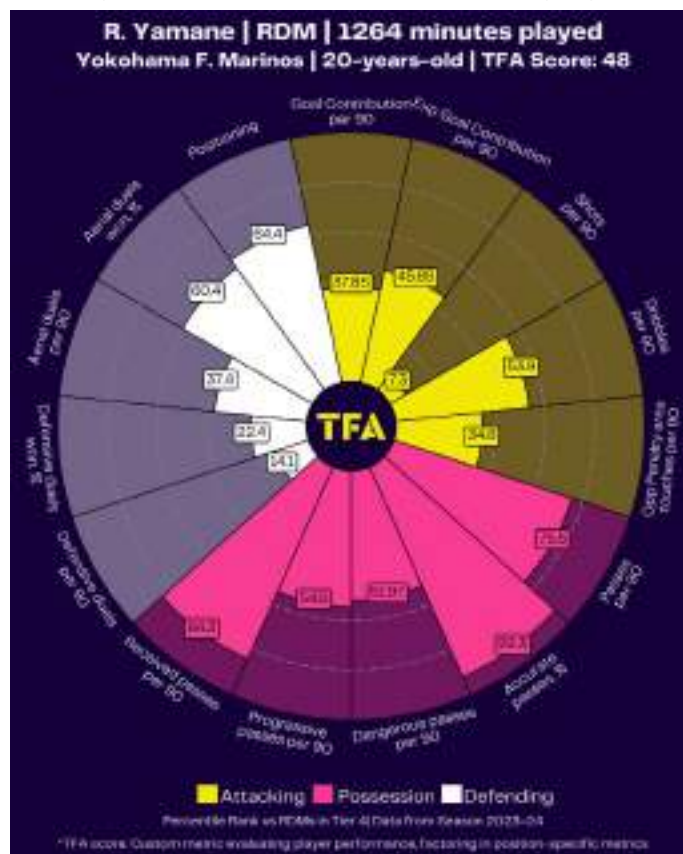


Despite his strengths, Matsuki still has areas to improve, particularly in his physicality to withstand challenges from stronger opponents. However, his consistent performances, aggression, determination, and tenacity make him a valuable asset for any team looking to bolster its midfield presence.

Matsuki's combination of athleticism, technical ability, and work ethic make him one of the top players to watch out for in the Japanese J-League 2024 season. As he continues to develop and refine his skills, Matsuki is poised to make a significant impact on the league with his all-action style of play.

## RIKU YAMANE

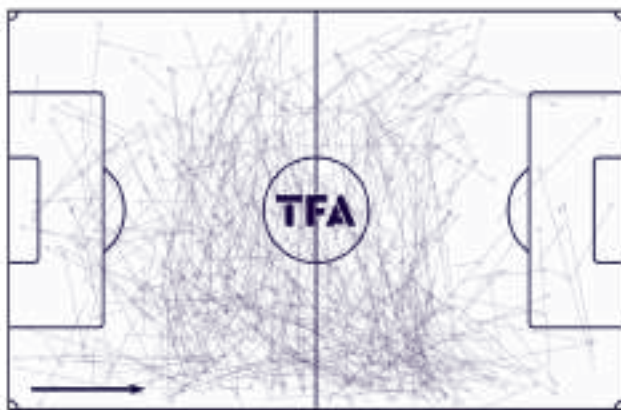
Riku Yamane, born on August 17, 2003, in Kanagawa, is a prodigious talent in Japanese football, particularly known for his exceptional technical ability and tactical intelligence. Standing at 1.73 meters tall, Yamane possesses qualities reminiscent of legendary midfielder Andrea Pirlo, making him a standout player in his age group.



Operating at the heart of midfield, Yamane serves as the orchestrator of the game, dictating the tempo and direction of play with his precise passing and vision. What sets Yamane apart is his ability to deliver calculated passes that consistently find their intended targets, showcasing his advanced understanding of the game.

## R. YAMANE PASS MAP

All games from J1 League 2023

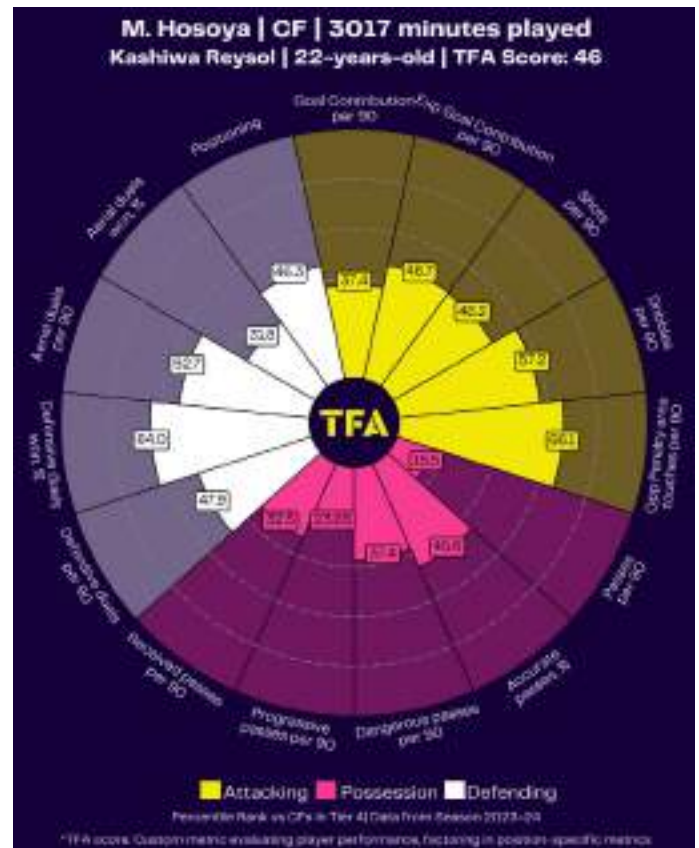


Yamane thrives in a double-pivot midfield setup, a role he often fulfils during his appearances for the national youth team. Despite his young age, Yamane has already assumed leadership responsibilities, serving as the captain of his nation since the age of 15, a testament to his maturity and footballing acumen.

Yamane's talent and potential are undeniable, and with continued opportunities and development, he is poised to make a significant impact on Japanese football in the years to come. At just 20 years old, Yamane's journey is only beginning, and his future shines bright with promise.

## MAO HOSOYA

Mao Hosoya, born on September 7, 2001, in Ibaraki, Japan, stands out as a remarkable talent in the world of football. Standing at 1.78 meters tall, Hosoya possesses an array of strengths.

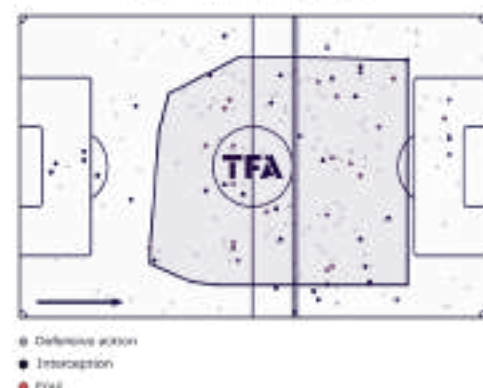


One of Hosoya's standout attributes is his immaculate off-the-ball movement. With excellent striker instinct, he effortlessly finds open spaces, often outmanoeuvring defenders with his anticipation and quick reactions. His exceptional pace sets him apart, allowing him to burst past opponents and create scoring opportunities with ease.

In addition to his offensive prowess, Hosoya is known for his high work rate in both defence and offence. He is not afraid to engage in physical battles and consistently applies pressure on opponents, making him a constant threat on the field.

## M. HOSOYA DEFENSIVE TERRITORY

All games from J1 League 2023



Hosoya's footballing IQ and creativity shine through in his ability to link up with teammates and provide assists. He excels in controlling the ball and dominating possession, using his technical skills and dribbling ability to evade defenders effortlessly.

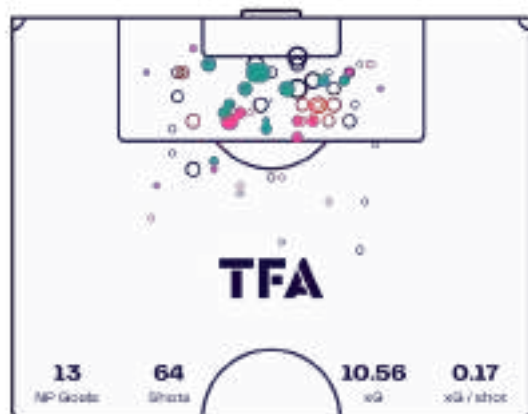
While he possesses many strengths, there are areas where Hosoya can continue to improve. Although he boasts decent finishing ability, refining his accuracy could lead to even greater goal-scoring success. Additionally, improving his first touch and usage of his left foot would further enhance his overall game.

## SOTA KITANO

Sota Kitano, born on August 13, 2004, in Wakayama, Japan, emerges as a promising talent in the world of football. Standing at 1.72 meters tall, one of Kitano's standout attributes is his exceptional pace. This allows him to outpace defenders and create scoring opportunities with ease. Coupled with his superb passing ability and vision, he excels as an advanced playmaker, orchestrating attacks and unlocking defences with precision passes.

### M. HOSOYA SHOTS

All games from J1 League 2023

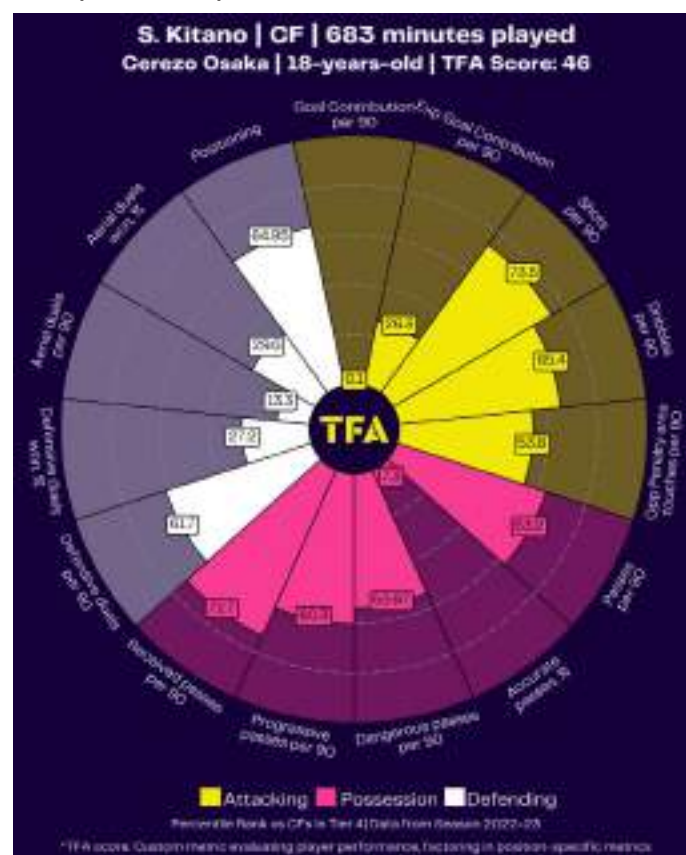


1/1 PENALTIES SCORED



● Goal ● Shot on target ○ Missed / Blocked shot  
● xG value Penalties and own goals are excluded from this graph

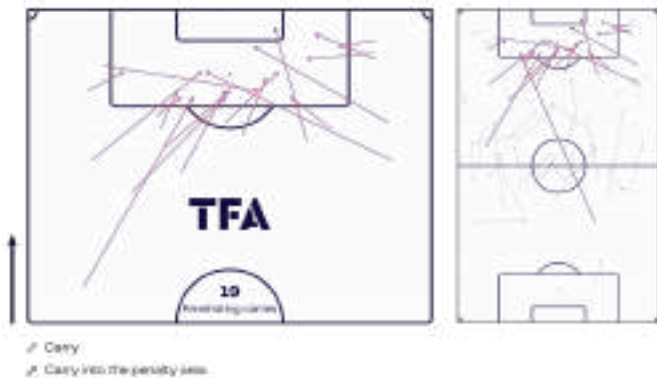
Style-wise, Hosoya operates as a false nine type of striker, often dropping back to win balls and create chances. He utilises his speed and agility to pose a significant threat on the counterattack while also excelling in link-up play with his teammates. Hosoya is a dynamic and versatile player who brings a multitude of qualities to the field. With his exceptional talent and determination, he is poised to make a significant impact on the world of football for years to come.



Kitano's technical proficiency and ball control further enhance his effectiveness on the field. He possesses excellent dribbling skills and creativity, often using his agility and flair to manoeuvre past opponents and create space for himself and his teammates.

## S. KITANO PENETRATING CARRIES

All games from J1 League 2023



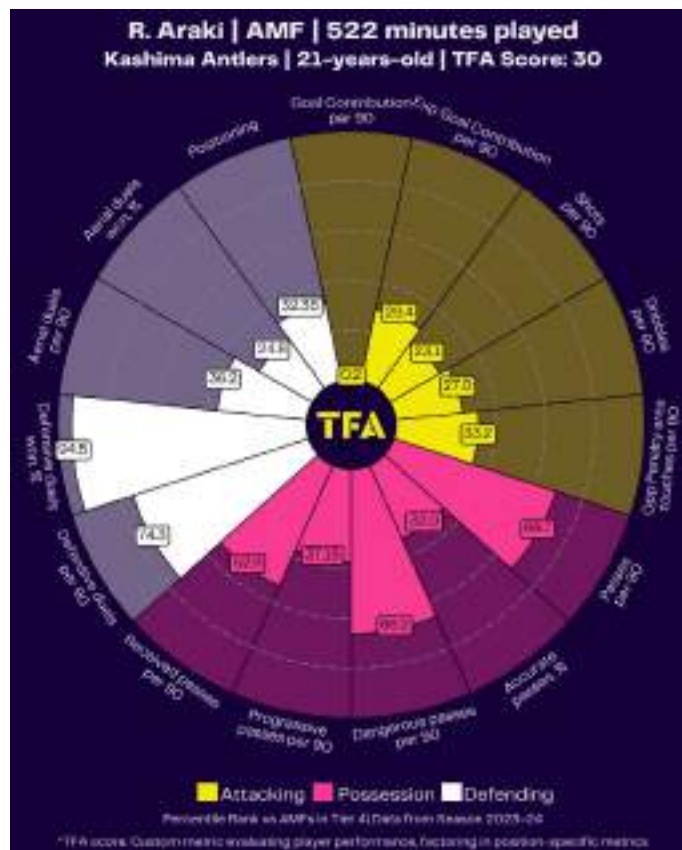
Despite his strengths, there are areas where Kitano can continue to improve. In the final third, he could work on his composure to become even more prolific in front of goal. Additionally, while he is active in pressing and out of possession, his efficiency in defensive duels could be further developed.

Style-wise, Kitano thrives in a free role as an attacking midfielder, where he is given the freedom to roam the pitch and dictate play. He excels at finding space to receive the ball and pushing his team forward with his vertical passing game.

Kitano's versatility allows him to attack from various positions, but he particularly favours the left wing and half-spaces, where he can cut inside and unleash his potent shooting or passing abilities. He is adept at making late runs into the box, capitalising on scoring opportunities with his sharpshooting skills.

## RYOTARO ARAKI

Ryotaro Araki, born on January 29, 2002, in Kumamoto, Japan, emerges as an up-and-coming talent in the world of football. Standing at 1.70 meters tall, Araki possesses a unique skill set that sets him apart on the field.



Primarily deployed as a mobile striker, Araki showcases versatility by also excelling in the role of an advanced playmaker. Despite his relatively diminutive stature and low height, he compensates with exceptional athleticism, coordination, and agility. Araki's physical structure, characterised by thinness and short limbs, belies his impressive mobility and dynamic movements on the pitch. Moreover, he demonstrates proficiency with both feet, adding another dimension to his attacking prowess.

Araki's standout quality lies in his impeccable technique and dribbling ability. With the ball at his feet, he exhibits remarkable control and finesse, capable of manoeuvring past defenders with ease.

## R. ARAKI PENETRATING CARRIES

All games from J1 League 2023



His mastery of the ball has translated into impressive statistics, boasting 34 goal involvements in 112 appearances in Japan's top flight. At just 20 years old, Araki epitomises the potential for European stardom with already four goals in the first few matches in the 2024 season.

## R. ARAKI SHOTS

All games from J1 League 2024



Araki offers directness and explosive bursts past defenders, making him a formidable threat in the attacking third. His ability to play across the front line and operate as a number 10 underscores his versatility and tactical acumen.

Ryotaro Araki emerges as the brightest prospect in Asia, poised to make a significant impact on the global stage. With his exceptional skill set and potential for growth, Araki is destined for greatness in the world of football.

## CONCLUSION

The Japanese J-League in 2024 promises an exciting showcase of talent, with several standout players capturing attention on the field.

From the dynamic versatility of Ryotaro Araki to the creative flair of Riku Yamane, each player brings a unique set of skills and attributes to their respective teams. Sota Kitano's pace and goalscoring prowess, coupled with Mao Hosoya's off-the-ball movement and attacking threat, add further depth to the league's talent pool. Additionally, Kuryu Matsuki's relentless work rate and midfield presence underscore the competitive nature of Japanese football.

As the season unfolds, these top 5 players are poised to make significant contributions to their clubs' success while also garnering interest from scouts and enthusiasts worldwide. With their exceptional abilities and potential for growth, they represent the pinnacle of talent in the Japanese J-League and are certainly ones to watch in the 2024 season.

# DATA VIZ

## LA LIGA 2023/24

# THE GOAL DIFFERENCE LANDSCAPE

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

The 2023/24 La Liga season is approaching its business end, and Real Madrid look set to claim the title back from rivals Barcelona, who have endured a disappointing season but can still finish second.

After the completion of the Real Sociedad vs Cádiz game, which was the first of Matchweek 29, leaders Real Madrid have scored the most goals (six), and Cádiz have scored the fewest (20).

The leaders also have the best defensive record, conceding just 18 times, while Granada and Almería have conceded the most with 57. The below visualisation shows the state of play in terms of goal difference, highlighting which teams have a positive goal difference and which are in negative numbers.

Only eight sides have a positive goal difference — the highest among those being Real Madrid on +42 and the lowest being Valencia on +1. No team in the top eight has a negative goal difference.

Barcelona's sit on +23, which is lower than Girona's +26. Atlético Madrid and Athletic Bilbao are the other two teams with a goal difference greater than +20.

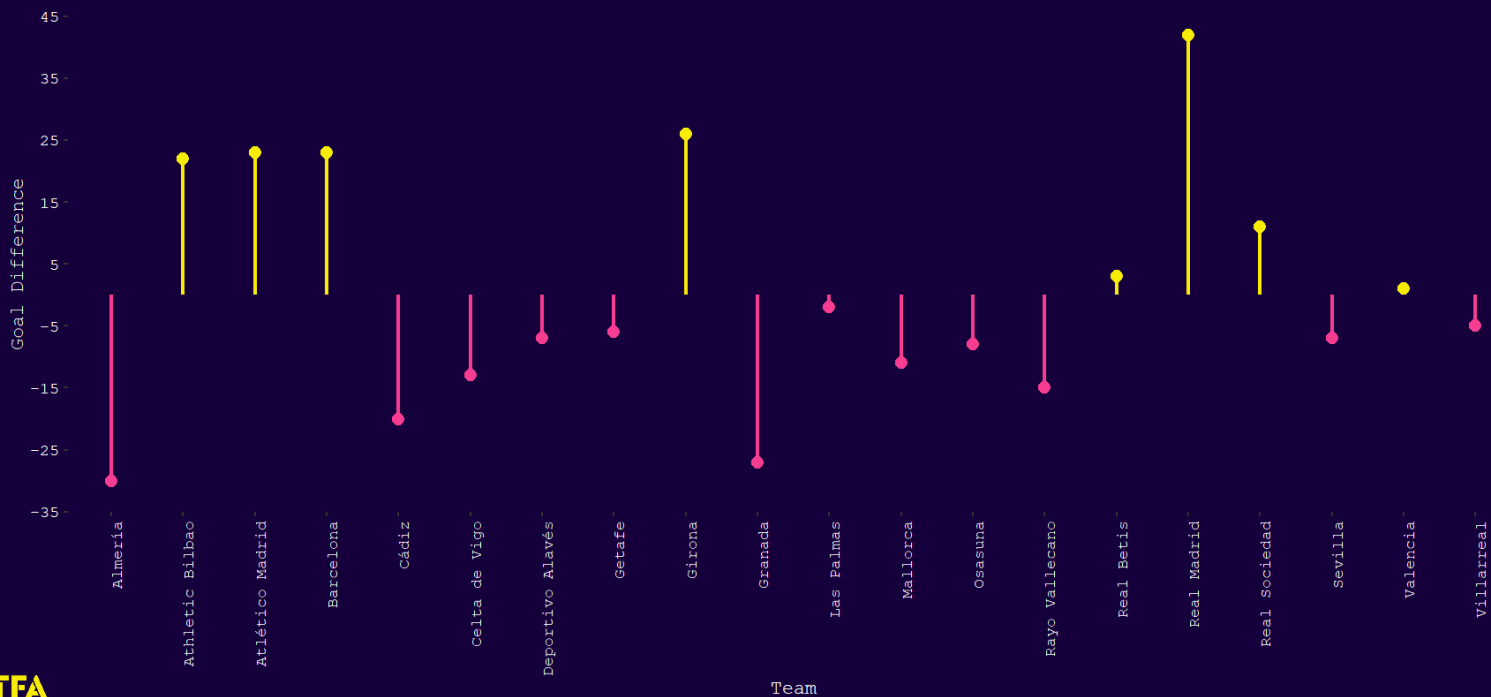
Las Palmas, with a goal difference of -2, and Osasuna, on -8, are the only teams in the top half with a negative goal difference.

Almería, who are yet to win a game this season at the time of writing, have the worst goal difference in the league at -30, followed by Granada, who are also favourites to go down, with a goal difference of -27.

Other teams with a negative goal difference include Villarreal (-5), Getafe (-6), Celta Vigo (-13), and Sevilla (-7).

# La Liga 23/24 | Goal Difference | State of Play

Visual by @VenkyReddevil | Data as on 16th March 2024 | After the completion of Real Sociedad vs Cádiz



TFA



# UNIFIED CLUB ETHOS

JOHAN LANGE



TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

**HOW CLUBS CAN IMPLEMENT  
A SINGULAR PLAYING STYLE  
ACROSS BOTH MEN'S AND  
WOMEN'S TEAMS**

DAVID ASTILL // @DAVIDPASTILL21

With an estimated 250 million active players at all levels of the game, there is no doubt that association football is the world's most popular sport, and some of the most-watched tournaments globally include the World Cup and the English Premier League.

However, in the modern day, there is an appetite for both the men's game and the women's game. The latter's popularity is escalating, and it has become increasingly difficult for those in charge of the former to ignore it.

At club level, that increased demand has led to more clubs bringing their women's teams in-house and giving them the same support as they have afforded their men's teams over the years, both in terms of funding and shared tactical ideas. Arsenal and Barcelona immediately come to mind as fitting into that category, with noticeable tactical similarities in how both of their senior teams play.

This tactical analysis will look at three other clubs that are either new to this idea or who have perhaps gone under the radar in their efforts to make it a reality. We will highlight the tactics that both of their teams play with and provide an analysis of why creating a shared brand is helping them achieve their combined aims.

## TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

The first case study that this tactical theory piece will focus on is Tottenham Hotspur, who have not historically bought into the idea of having their men's and women's teams sharing a style but who spent last summer implementing a tactical rebrand of all areas of the club. This season has seen a concerted effort to align their two senior teams and their academy sides in a bid to help each achieve success.



Their belief in the benefits that this could bring, particularly for their two senior teams, has been demonstrated by their desire to find coaches for each who matched the aggressive, exciting brand of football that they wanted to see implemented. There is no doubt that watching the way that both Ange Postecoglou and Robert Vilahamn have set their teams up, they have really fitted that bill.

Both share a preference for quick and well-executed transitions whenever their teams have regained the ball. This is a crucial aspect of their game plans at Celtic and BK Häcken Dam, respectively, and a major reason that both have been rated so highly as coaches in the men's and women's games, respectively.

Out of the two, the men's team is the one that has needed to work harder to make it a success, with them previously being coached by José Mourinho and Antonio Conte, both of whom tended to prioritise defending over attacking, so it was more common to see the team sitting back and playing less exciting football. Postecoglou has, in many ways, reversed that mentality, with a strong emphasis on getting on the front foot and winning the ball as high up the pitch as possible, just as Yves Bissouma has done here.

Once possession has been regained, attention has turned towards making quick passes up the pitch in the manner that Bissouma, James Maddison, and Emerson Royal do here. The last of those eventually feeds the ball into the path of Dejan Kulusevski ahead of him, and the speed of that sequence really catches Crystal Palace out.

When looking at how they have constructed phases of play like this, it is not hard to see why they have registered an 86.9% passing accuracy for the season and have averaged 59.22% possession per game (up from 50.9% in 2022/23), with it clear to see how they have increased their overall threat and have worked hard on making themselves a much tougher team to contain.

The women's team, conversely, have actually been demonstrating elements of this style of play for a while longer, with the arrival of Eveliina Summanen from Kristianstads Damer in January 2022 indicating a desire to move the ball through the thirds and to play an attractive style of football. Summanen has been a key player in making that possible since then, with her main qualities being her box-to-box and ball-playing abilities. It has been common to see her finding pockets of space like the one she has positioned herself in here against Bristol City Women in a bid to involve herself in these sequences of play.

The danger in allowing her to take up these positions is that she can now move the ball around and either take a shot on goal herself or set up an opportunity for a teammate. Her decision to do the latter here allowed her Finland international teammate Olga Ahtinen to fire past goalkeeper Kaylan Marckese.

Therefore, when looking at what was already available to him, it is clear that Vilahamn has not had to adjust too much since his arrival, but he has tidied things up, and the fact that they have registered an 83.5% passing accuracy and have

averaged 50.24% possession per outing shows that they, like their male counterparts, are on the right track when it comes to controlling the flow of their matches.



There are other noticeable similarities to their play when it comes to the way that they use their forward lines, most notably in their shared preference for wide attackers who have pace and who can offer outlets at the top of the pitch.

For the men's team, the player to look at in this regard is Timo Werner, who joined on loan from RB Leipzig in January. The Germany striker has had an inconsistent career so far, with him impressing in some teams but struggling in others, and yet what Postecoglou has seen in him is a player who doesn't necessarily score goals but who makes the right runs and who can therefore be used in alternative ways.

In this case, his role is to make an inside run and to create the space for left-back Destiny Udogie to carry the ball up the field. That inverted run leads to another point about how the wide forwards and full-backs interact with each other around the pitch to create additional numbers inside the final third. It is that that has led to the men's team averaging 2.03 goals per game so far.

Vilahamn also likes players in the wide areas who don't necessarily score but who can make intelligent runs both inside to create central overloads and who can stay wide to retain width, with newly capped England midfielder Grace Clinton impressing in that role during her season-long loan from Manchester United Women and playing her role in the team scoring 1.82 times per game.

However, others have really taken to the demands of that role, including Celin Bizet Ildhusøy, who is shown here engaging in a 1-v-1 duel with Manchester United captain Katie Zelem in a bid to get beyond her and into a position from which she can either deliver a cross or dribble it inside, herself.

When looking at the makeup of the women's team, it is clear that they have several players who can thrive in these wide attacking roles and who have the same pace as Werner. Jessica Naz is an excellent example of someone who can cause constant damage to opposing defensive lines. Once again, Postecoglou and Vilahamn agree tactically, and the club's dream of creating a joint brand is quickly becoming a reality.



A third thing that both coaches are known for is their desire to see the centre-backs act as additional ball-playing midfielders. For the men's team, this required them to invest in the squad by purchasing Micky van de Ven from Wolfsburg, who has quickly established himself as a key player when it comes to playing out from the back and finding teammates ahead of him. He has arguably been one of Tottenham's most important players in their bid to be more aggressive around the field and to find new ways to test their opponents.

It was clear from his first league outing for the club, against Brentford, that he had this quality, and this was why the club pushed to sign him. He was partnered with Davinson Sánchez (who moved to Galatasaray not long after this game) and acted almost as another midfielder in Tottenham's bid to break Thomas Frank's side down.

When it comes to the women's team, they already had a player in the squad capable of matching van de Ven's profile, and it was simply a case of unlocking the potential of Molly Bartrip and finding a way to afford her the freedom to make the same runs up the field.

Tottenham did that by signing former Hoffenheim Frauen captain Luana Bühler. The Switzerland defender is a versatile operator but has a reputation for sitting back and protecting her goal while in the Frauen-Bundesliga. Her presence has led to Bartrip getting up the field in the manner that she did here, when she closed Manchester United striker Geyse down before playing the ball forward to instigate another sequence of passes up the field.



It has been mentioned that both Postecoglou and Vilahamn want their teams to be aggressive out of possession and as proactive as possible. This graphic illustrates the average defensive territory that both sides have covered in all competitions this season.

On the left is the men's team's graphic, and it is clear that they have tended to push higher up the field than the women's team has, perhaps due to the latter needing to sit further back in games against some of their WSL opponents (with clear evidence in some of their outings that not doing so has led to them being opened up too easily).

However, the same basic ideas are still apparent, and Tottenham, while still new to the idea of creating a joint brand and sharing tactical ideas between their two senior sides, is going about it in the right way.

## AJAX

**A**nother club that has recently warmed to the idea of bringing their men's and women's teams closer together is Ajax. Those involved in running the latter stated this season that there has been an increased effort to bring them more in line with the men's, at least from a tactical point of view, as they seek to keep growing and fighting for bigger and better things.

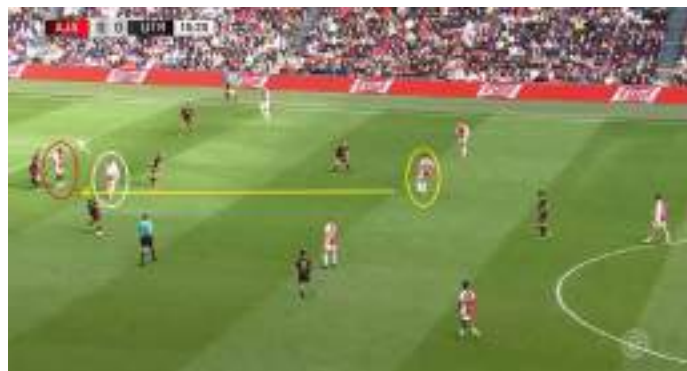
As a club, Ajax have always had a distinct way of playing. Their focus has been on pressing high to win the ball in the midfield or forward areas and playing through the thirds to create as many promising situations as possible. The men's team has always adhered to those ideas as the years have gone by, and despite the overall disappointment of the way that things have gone, this season has been no different.

In this case, their desire to win the ball as early as possible is clearly indicated, with Vitesse Arnhem looking to build from the back and Mathijs Tielemans trying to find a teammate ahead of him. However, Ajax's Kristian Hlynsson has recognised his intention, and the Iceland midfielder has looked to get tight to Tielemans in a bid to dislodge the ball and keep the pressure on Vitesse.

In short, there is a clear desire to play on the front foot regardless of how successful they are, and that mentality has led to them averaging 2.03 goals per game and seeing 50.8% of their counterattacks lead to shots on goal.

When it comes to the women's team, the similarities are very apparent, with them coming up against PSG Féminine here at the Johan Cruff Arena and seeing Laurina Fazer pass to Ramona Bachmann as they look to move the ball into space and to try and fashion a goalscoring opportunity. However, the Switzerland forward is unable to make any more ground here due to Danique Noordman reading PSG's intentions and closing her down, just as Hlynsson did for the men's team.

This is not the only time that Ajax have used this tactic in their matches, with them seeing 67% of their counterattacks lead to shots on goal and average 1.17 goals per game. This desire to adopt the same principles as the men's team helped Ajax not only qualify for the Champions League group stages for the first time but also reach the knockout rounds. Therefore, there are clear signs that Ajax's ability to lend their women's team more support has helped them to grow on the field.



When both teams regain the ball, there is a clear desire to make the same line-splitting passes from the midfield to the forward line, and these situations highlight how both have used their strikers in the same way to make that possible.

For the men, it is Brian Brobbey who has tended to operate at the top of the pitch as an outlet, with him here receiving a pass from former Liverpool men's captain Jordan Henderson and instantly laying the ball off for Kenneth Taylor to run across him and to send towards the Utrecht goal. It has been a common sight in Ajax's matches to see them play a combination of long and short passes into Brobbey and then make runs off him on either side as they aim to utilise the wide areas in their build-up play. The fact that 87.2% of their passes have found their intended target shows how it has been another strength in their overall play.

The women's team have shown virtually a carbon copy of that, with a 78.3% passing accuracy and a main striker who acts as a target player in Romée Leuchter. She too receives a pass up the field here before laying the ball off for a teammate to shoot at goal.

In this case, she is looking to hold Bayern Munich Frauen's Glódís Viggósdóttir off whilst receiving the pass up the pitch from Chasity Grant before then laying the ball back off for Grant to get back on the end of. Once Grant receives the return pass, she sets up right-back Milicia Keijzer here to fire at goal, but the key point here is the way that Brobbey and Leuchter offer the same presence and have the same role description.



Building on that, another fundamental principle of both the men's and women's teams' play has

been their reliance on the wide channels when building attacks, with each having a tendency to feed the ball into those areas as they look to break their opponents down.

As the graphic shows, Ajax's men's team (on the left) have tended to attempt more crosses than the women's, whilst the women's team have looked to dribble more, and that fits with what has already been shown in this section of the tactical theory piece in that Grant passed the ball before running forward here. She and Tiny Hoekstra have tended to be a lot more mobile than the men's team's wide attackers, with Steven Bergwijn, in particular, tending to either cross the ball into the middle or to cut back and attempt to curl a shot in towards goal himself but not dropping back as much as Grant and Hoekstra do.



There are apparent similarities when it comes to both teams' defensive setups, too, with them both adopting shapes that prioritise keeping as much space between the ball and their goal as possible, and that is shown in both cases here as the opposing sides have found their way into the wide space but have each been faced by an Ajax defender (for the men, Devyne Rensch has

closed down Sparta Rotterdam's Djevendio van der Kust, whilst the women's team have seen Isa Kardinaal get tight to PSG's Sandy Baltimore).

The other thing to point out is that both have two lines in front of goal, something else that they have each looked to implement whenever they are afforded the time to do so. For the women's team, in particular, this has proven to be especially useful in keeping their opponents at bay during their maiden Champions League group stage campaign, with them winning 59.9% of their defensive duels.

However, it has undoubtedly benefitted the men's team, too, with them winning 62.9% of their own defensive duels. This solidity, coupled with their desire to win the ball high up the pitch and implement other aspects of the traditional Ajax brand that both they and the women's team now operate with, has allowed them to show some signs of recovery in what has ultimately been a campaign to forget.

## MAMELODI SUNDOWNS

Whilst both case studies in this analysis so far have come from Europe, it is essential to point out that internal cooperation like this happens all over the world, and one team who have been doing it for a while is South African side, Mamelodi Sundowns. Their men's team have become famed for the blend of European tactics that makes up their game plan, colloquially known as "Shoe Shine and Piano", but what is not as well known is that their women's team have been playing in just the same way, with it clear that the club wants to ensure that the Sundowns brand really stands for something in the African men's and women's games.



As it turned out, that tactic paid off, as the press was eventually tested, and Rivaldo Coetzee was able to send a long ground pass towards Marcelo Allende here, allowing the Chile international to use his pace and set up a shot on the Pyramids goal.



In the women's team's case, the same principle has been present in their games, with it common to see them form the same structures inside their own half and wait for the chance to shift the ball behind their opponents. Against JKT Queens (a Tanzanian club based in the country's capital of Dar es Salaam), that came here once midfielder Joyce Lema had moved forward in a bid to get tight to Lesotho captain Boitumelo Rabale, with the latter passing the ball into Oratile Mokwena to then send through the gap and into the path of South Africa right-back Lebohang Ramalepe.

What becomes really interesting about their style of play when breaking it down as the way that Sundowns' men's and women's teams can adjust the speed of their play depending on what their opponents are doing, and that really forms the basis of their tactical brand, with both sharing a desire to draw their opponents in before hitting them on the break. What has aided this is that both have shown a very high level of accuracy when moving the ball into spaces, with the men's and women's teams seeing 87.8% and 82.1% of their passes, respectively, find their intended targets during their current or most recent CAF Champions League campaigns.

It only took two passes, but that is the devastating nature of Sundowns' play and the fact that their men's and women's teams are capable of opening their teams up in the same way and of controlling possession (the men have averaged 63.88% per game in their Champions League campaign whilst the women averaged 63.3% per game in theirs) shows again how the club have worked hard to ensure that their joint brand forms the basis of both of their senior teams' tactics.

In the men's case, this ability to show patience and wait for the right opportunity to launch their attack was crucial in allowing them to secure a win against Egyptian club Pyramids. The Cairo-based club tends to sit back in a bid to make it as difficult as possible for the South African side to break them down.



With that in mind, Sundowns looked to keep the ball inside their own half and move it around between themselves, knowing that the temptation would become too much for Pyramids to ignore.



It was hinted at in the way that Ramalepe pushed up the pitch to play as an additional winger in that last situation, but another critical aspect of Sundowns' tactics is that the full-backs play a crucial role in supporting attacks and are constantly seen pushing up the pitch during games.

In the men's team's case here, that has created a structural imbalance, with Terrence Mashego pushing up the pitch and positioning himself alongside the forward line, taking advantage of the space Mauritanian side Nouadhibou have left open for him to access. However, this is not a mistake and is always what Sundowns look to do whenever they have the ball, with it allowing the wingers to cut inside and to play more centrally, forming the narrow setup that is another key aspect of the "Shoe Shine and Piano" brand whilst also giving them an outlet on the wing that they can switch the ball to at the right moment.

In this case, that long diagonal pass didn't come too soon after Mashego had got into this position. Centre-back Rushine De Reuck found him and allowed him to combine with Lucas Ribeiro Costa at the top of the pitch to fashion another goalscoring opportunity. The fact that they have seen 70.8% of their passes to the final third find their targets shows how this is not a one-off either.

It has been much the same story on the women's side, with their full-backs also seen in the same advanced positions. This has allowed them to register a 78.6% accuracy for passes to the final third.

However, where there is a slight difference in the way that both teams set up is that the women's team favour the use of wing-backs rather than full-backs, with their main formation during their Champions League matches in 2023 being a 3-5-2 (used in 50% of their games), whilst the men's is a 4-3-3, which they have utilised in 49% of their outings. The likes of Ramalepe find it even easier to push up the field and to offer these passing options than the men's team's full-backs perhaps do.

Here, that has led to the ball reaching her inside the final third before she pulls it back for Rabale to try her luck in front of the AS FAR Women goal. Even though the effort misses the target, there is still an apparent similarity between how the men's and women's teams use the wings to create opportunities, and it shows once again how both are fully invested in the "Shoe Shine and Piano" ideas.



Another way the men's and women's teams share the same on-field principles is by pressing high up the pitch and looking to win the ball back as early as possible.

Again, this is another crucial idea in the club's tactical brand. The fact that both of their senior teams have incorporated it into their play shows how the club has worked hard to ensure that both have the best chances to succeed on the pitch. The fact that the men have only conceded 0.17 times per game. The women didn't concede at all on their way to becoming continental champions last year, which shows how it has helped them to become formidable opponents on the domestic and continental stages.

There are also similarities in the way that both teams initiate their press, with the men's team sending two players forward to apply pressure inside the Pyramids goal area and the women's team also using a combination of Nonhlanhla Mthandi and Botswana striker Refilwe Tholakele to close down AS FAR's Morocco duo Fatima Tagnaout and Ghizlane Chhiri.

However, whereas their attempt to win the ball led to their opponents hesitating and not trying to gain any ground, the men's team had to include a third step in their bid to regain possession, with Pyramids goalkeeper Ahmed Mayhoub clearing the initial danger towards Mohamed Chibi, but then seeing his teammate closed down by Mashego. Nevertheless, the same ideas are clear to see, and that once more highlights the tactical unity that Sundowns have implemented over the years between their senior teams.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this tactical analysis has sought to highlight how clubs in the modern game are looking to bring their men's and women's teams together and to introduce one brand that both can deploy. What has become clear is that it is something that so many are buying into around the world as they try to ensure that they embrace the women's game at a time when it is growing in popularity and recognition and when those who don't share the same views risk being left behind.

Whilst examining the case studies, what has become most evident though is that, despite them sharing the same ideas, there are still some subtle nuances between the way that men's and women's teams at the same club play, with each having the same basic blueprint but finding little differences here and there in the way that they either set up or use what is available to them. That is important as the vital thing about the men's and women's games is that they are not the same, with so many who follow or who work in the latter constantly pointing that fact out and reminding people that it is its own product and needs to be treated as such.

However, for those who want to see women's teams gain better support and backing and a greater share of the money currently circulating around the global game, there is certainly a lot to like about where it is going. This analysis highlights clearly that, whilst there is a lot more to be done, the signs regarding how the men's and women's games are being given equal attention by clubs around the world are positive.

# CHRISTIAN WÜCK

CHRISTIAN WÜCK



GERMAN WOMEN'S NATIONAL TEAM

## HOW HE MIGHT RESHAPE THE GERMAN WNT

JAMIE STEENBERG // @STEENIE311

On the 23rd of March, it was announced that after just under a decade of working with the German men's U15-U17 sides, Christian Wück would be given the German WNT role following the 2024 Olympics.

His German U17 side completed an impressive Euro and World Cup double this summer, defeating France in both finals. They won the World Cup for the first time in their history and their first European championship since 2009, when 16-year-old Mario Götze was playing.

The German WNT has consistently been at the forefront of women's football for the past decade, reaching the quarter-final at seven of the past eight major international competitions and the final of the 2022 Euros against England. However, after a disappointing 2023 World Cup—where they failed to get out of a group containing Columbia, Morocco, and South Korea—they chose to move in a new direction with Wück.

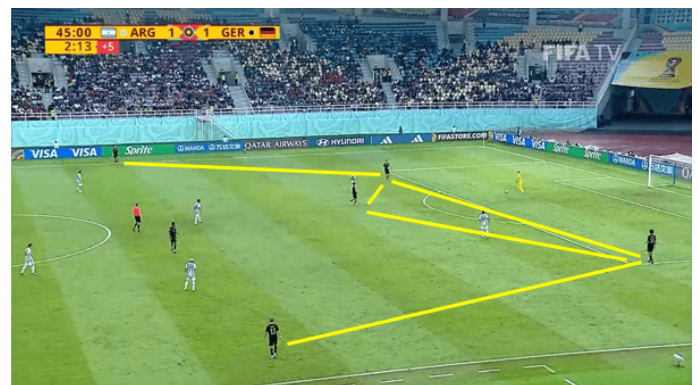
In this tactical analysis, we will examine how Wück's U17 side has played throughout its successful international campaigns. We will break down the tactics involved, both in possession and out, as well as the strengths and weaknesses within those. We will then also examine how Wück's style of play might translate to the German WNT.

## IN POSSESSION

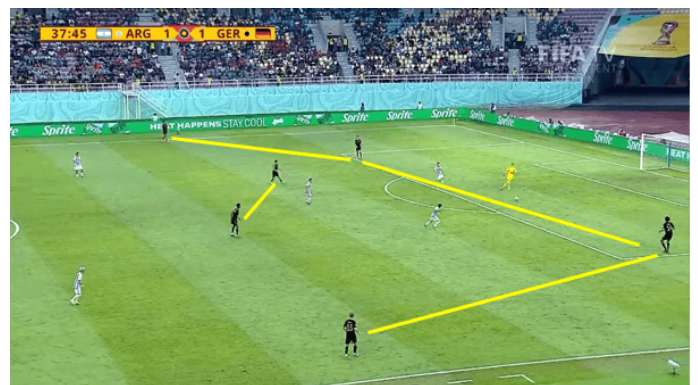
With the ball, Wück's side demonstrated the flexibility to play in a number of formations and adapt. One interesting aspect of Wück's U17 side is that they were generally poor at sustaining possession for long periods, averaging 46.4% at the World Cup in Indonesia and 49.6% at the Euros in Hungary. It's not necessarily what you would expect from the best side in both competitions. They had a passing rate of 10.5 passes per minute at the World Cup, second-worst only better than New Caledonia and at the

Euros, they had the lowest passing rate of 9.8 passes per minute.

However, the team showed some ability and intention to play out from the back. The team often built up in a typical 4-3-3 shape, with Fayssal Harchaoui playing as the deep pivot. In this 4-3-3, the full-backs would create the angle and be the primary target as Germany looked to play around the opposition's press. One problem that developed with this was the lack of penetration, which was reliant on players winning one-on-one and driving forwards. The central defenders did demonstrate the comfort of doing this. Still, midfielders Darvich and Osawe provided limited options to receive the ball between the lines, often forcing Germany to play long against the better teams.

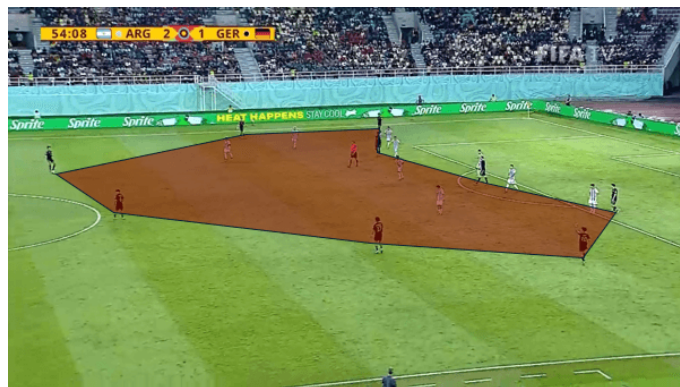


In this example, you have a single pivot of Harchaoui with the full-backs spread wide. The primary outlets for the defenders and goalkeeper are balls towards the full-backs.



In this example, Germany operates with two pivots, with the two full-backs spread wide. Argentina tried to press in a narrow shape, forcing Germany to play around the press towards the full-backs. Germany had limited success with this.

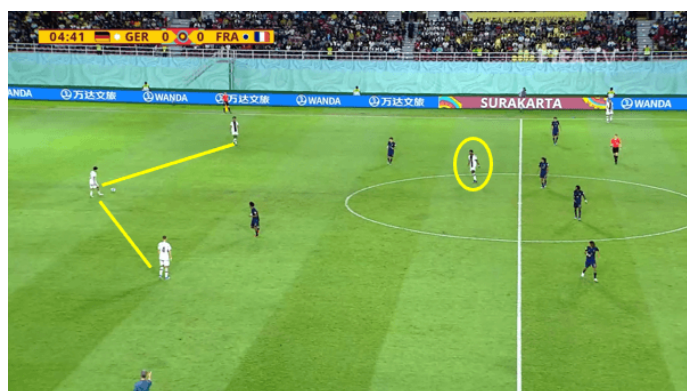
Alternatively, for example, against France in the World Cup final, they started with a back three, with Harchaoui dropping deeper to pick up the ball so he could drive forwards with the ball. A major problem with building up in the back three was the disconnect that was created in the midfield, with Winners Osawe being left isolated in the midfield area. As a team, Germany identified this problem, and initially, Noah Darvich, who was typically playing as the number ten, dropped deeper to act as that bridge; however, after a while, they switched things up entirely, creating a double pivot system with Osawe alongside Harchaoui.



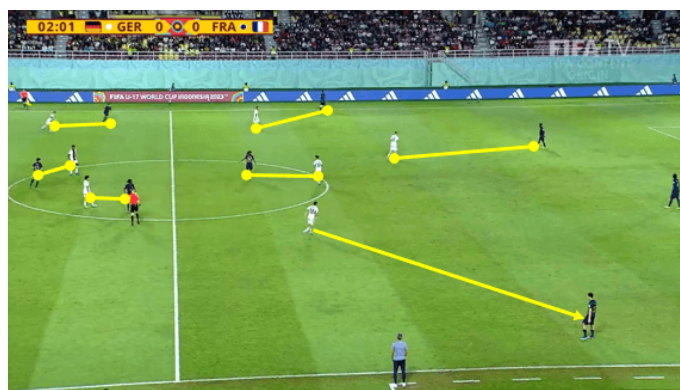
Here, you can see the box shape with a front four created and then a full-back-winger partnership on both wings. You can see the big gap in the middle, though, which forces switches of play to go all the way to the backline.

## OUT OF POSSESSION

Last summer, in relentlessly humid conditions in Thailand, Germany established itself as a pressing side. Operating a player-to-player system in the midfield, which afforded opponents no team and space, they were able to make regular high regains, which enabled them to launch dangerous counterattacks.



Above, you can see Germany building out the back using a back three shape, with Harchaoui becoming a third centre back. You will notice how isolated Osawe is in the midfield, playing against four French players. This limited Germany's ability to play penetrating passes through the opposition's shape.



Here, you can see the player-marking pressing system utilised by Wück's side. The midfielders all tightly mark their opponents, while the wingers are engaged by their opponents but remain narrow to prevent the opposition from playing through the middle and force them wide.

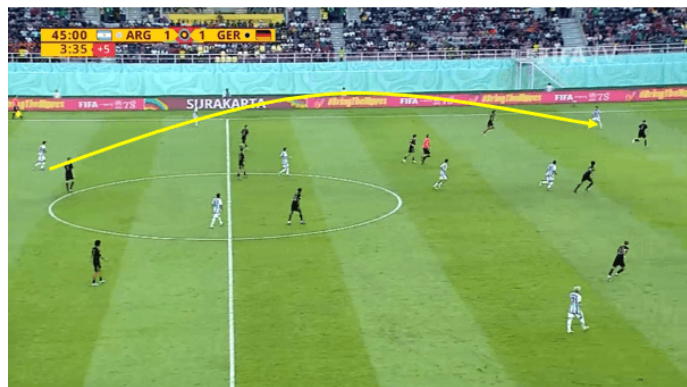
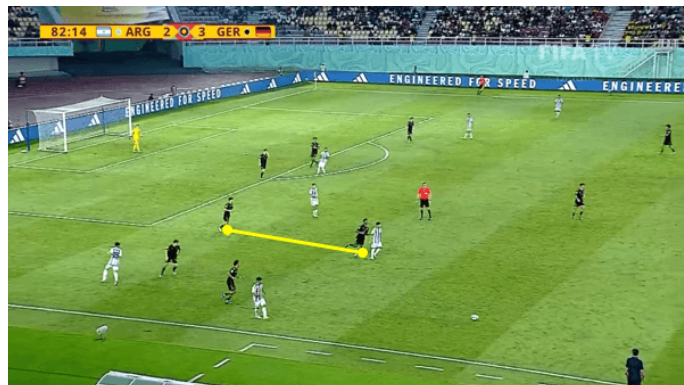
In the final third, Germany looked to play around the opposition shape and get balls into the box so Max Moerstadt could head in the box. He used his size and strength to win the ball, averaging 4.09 successful aerial duels per 90. However, one limitation to the side was the lack of midfield, which meant that if they wanted to switch the point of attack, they would have to play all the way back to the defence. They created a wide box shape in the final third with a big gap in the middle.

As a team, they averaged a PPDA of 9.73 at the World Cup and 6.93 at the Euros, which puts them thirteenth in the competition, so they are around the middle of the pack. However, the humid conditions likely played a factor in this,

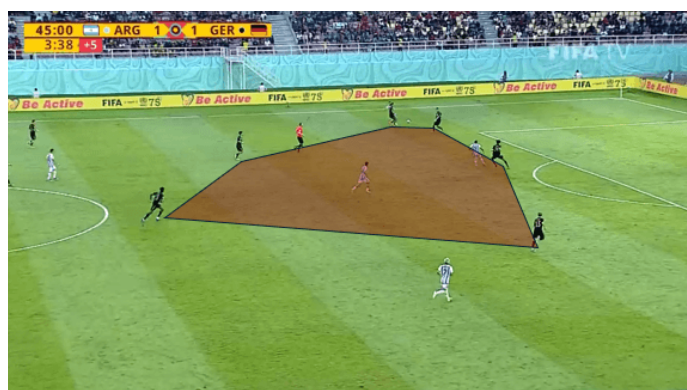
and the adjustment to playing a less intense brand of football enabled them to have success.

There are flaws in a player-to-player system, and this often came down to the wide channels. When full-backs stepped up to be aggressive, they left space behind them to attack. Opposition attackers were able to find these spaces regularly, and players like Echeverri, who recently signed for Manchester City, were able to make them pay.

being pulled out of position, with midfielders being pulled narrow. This could leave gaps that could potentially be exploited.



Here, you can see the midfield playing in a straight line, which leaves space in the midfield, which, for example, a Spain side with lots of intelligent technical midfielders such as Aitani Bonmati and Jenni Hermoso could exploit.



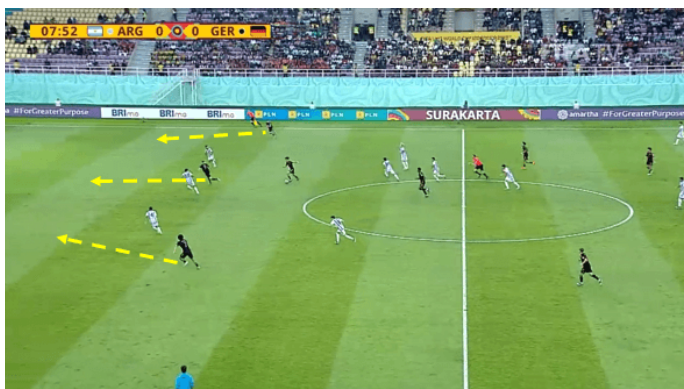
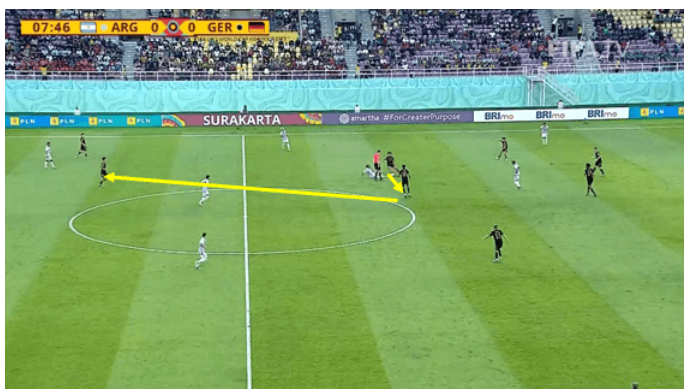
## TRANSITIONS

Here, you can see one of the problems with this idea: Echeverri getting in behind right-back Eric da Silva Moreira. Then, what you also see is the disconnect this can cause in the defensive shape. The space opening up in the midfield enables Valentino Acuña to find space, isolate the German defender two against one, and create the goal, which puts Argentina 2-1 up in the game.

Transitions were vital to the German U17's success over the past year. With the side operating a high and aggressive pressing shape, they were able to win the ball back regularly. After winning the ball back, they looked to drive forward at pace with four attackers, often the two wingers, Paris Brunner on the left and either Charles Hermann or Bilal Yalcinkaya on the right flank. Max Moerstedt then supported the two wingers through the middle and Darvich.

In deep shape, they operated a similar player-to-player idea, with the mobile midfielder Osawe vital to the side's ability to regain the ball with regularity. At 11.46, Osawe completed the third most defensive duels per 90 of anybody in the World Cup. The issue again lay with the side

This created a front four that would create numerical superiority on the counter as the opposition was caught out of shape. In addition to this, all four players are goal-scoring threats and demonstrate the intelligence to move and rotate to best exploit the space. Another key player in transition was Osawe, whose ability to regain the ball and drive forwards enabled the team to consistently develop counterattacks.



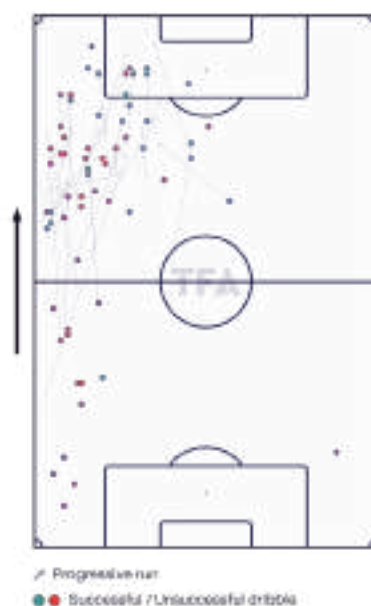
Here, you can see Harchaoui winning the ball back in the midfield. The ball falls to Osawe, who plays a positive ball towards Darvich, who is able to drive forward on the ball. What you can see is the four against three they are able to create. The wingers play outside the opposition's shape to keep them spread out. Darvich executes a pass to Brunner, who is able to win his one-on-one and score the opening goal of the game.

The German side then had several excellent ball carriers to support its ability to regain the ball high up the field. The German side completed the second most progressive runs per 90 in both competitions (World Cup and Euros), with 21.13 and 21.49, only behind England and the Netherlands, respectively.

A large part of this success was down to the quality of Paris Brunner, who not only finished as the World Cup's second-top scorer but also completed the second-highest progressive runs, with 32, only behind England's Joel Ndala. This enabled Germany to swiftly progress the ball in transition, particularly as Brunner was supported by Darvich and Hennig, who were also leaders in progressive runs.

## P. BRUNNER BALL PROGRESSION

All games from FIFA U27 World Cup 2023 Indonesia



## HOW THE GERMAN WNT COULD LOOK?

The current German WNT, currently under interim head coach Horst Hrubesch, qualified for the Nations League semi-finals, eventually falling to Spain and finishing in third. Under Hrubesch, they have looked to play with a 4-2-3-1 shape, with the side looking to continue in a similar format to under previous manager Martina Voss-Tecklenburg.

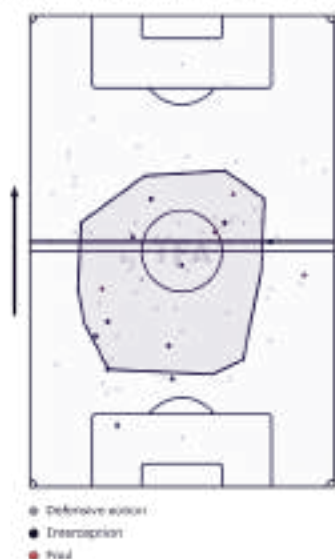
At the most recent Nations League, Germany had the second-best PPDA and the second-highest challenge intensity (Duels, tackles and interceptions per minute of opponent possession) in the competition, only behind eventual winners Spain. This shows how the team can be a high-

intensity pressing side which would support Wüick's principles demonstrated in his U17 side. With Wüick, they could look to play more player-to-player in midfield with a player like Oberdorf, whose ability to read the game and prevent danger from developing is vital to their success in a more player-oriented system.

Although her defensive statistics averaged 8.64 possession-adjusted interceptions per 90 in the Nations League this term, which puts her in the top twenty, it's her ability to prevent danger from occurring and divert opposition attacks with good pressing angles that makes her such an important player.

### L. OBERDORF DEFENSIVE TERRITORY

All games from UEFA Women's Nations League - League A 2023/2024



Perhaps the bigger question is who Wüick would pair alongside Oberdorf. With the German U17 side, they partnered the mobile, rangy ball recovery specialist in Osawe with the more technical Harchaoui. However, although they would need to be technical, they would need to be adept at ball recoveries, particularly if Wüick decides to stick with his player-marking system in midfield.

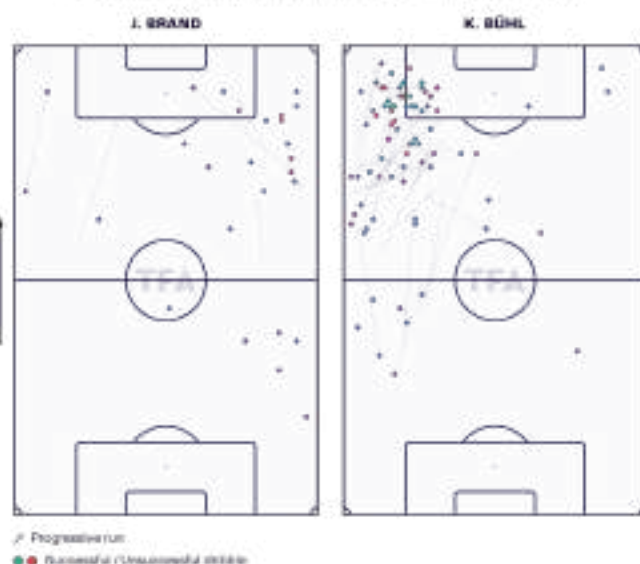
Potentially somebody like Dzsenerfer Marozsán, who is a more experienced option but remains a top ten midfielder in the French Feminine Division 1 in terms of possession adjusted(PAdj)

interceptions at 7.57. Alternatively, a player who could be additionally well suited to this high-intensity role is Sjoeke Nüsken, currently playing for Chelsea, who has averaged 7.1 PAdj interceptions per 90 and 5.9 defensive duels per 90, which puts her amongst the top midfielder performers in the WSL this season. In addition, Nüsken finished second in the Frauen Bundesliga last season for progressive passes per 90 with 11.85, which could complement Oberdorf nicely.

Then another critical area to look at would be who that front four for Germany could become, with the German U17 side deploying an excellent ball carrier in Brunner. German WNT could use high-end ball carriers Jule Brand and Klara Bühl, who have already played several minutes for the German national team. Brand averaged 5.03 progressive runs per 90 and 12.14 completed dribbles per 90 this season, while Bühl averaged 5.68 progressive runs and 12.13 dribbles per 90 in the past Nations League campaign. These two players could be integral assets moving forward for the German WNT.

### BALL PROGRESSION

All games from UEFA Women's Nations League - League A 2023/2024



The other key aspect to their success was the role of the number ten Darvich and his ability to link the midfield to the attack as well as create chances for her side. A player who could do this effectively is Svenja Huth who, although

is ageing at 33 and is likely on her last cycle, she can play this role effectively having made a recent transition to a more central role for her club side Wolfsburg from the right wing, which she has played for the majority of her career. Huth has always been a high-end dribbler, and she still averages 3.15 progressive runs per 90 despite this recent position switch. Combining this with her ability to create chances, averaging 0.56 xA per 90, from central positions, she could play an essential role in the number ten role.

Some potential future options in the number ten role are Frankfurt's Laura Freigang and Sydney Lohmann. Lohmann averaged 3.04 progressive runs and 5.14 dribbles per 90 throughout Bayern's 2023/24 UWCL campaign, while Freigang only managed 0.56 progressive runs and 1.88 dribbles per 90. In part, this was down to different roles within their sides. However, it may also suggest that Lohmann would be a better fit for Wück stylistically. However, despite being a better runner, Lohmann only created 0.19 combined xG and xA per 90, while Freigang created 0.42 xG and xA per 90, so potentially Freigang could be a more dangerous threat in terms of chance creations for her side.

## CONCLUSION

This is an exciting time for the German WNT, with Wück taking over from Hrubesch after the Olympic games. Having led the German U17 to success at both the Euros and World Cup, he has demonstrated the ability to create a team that can succeed internationally.

With such an exciting young German side, several players just entering their peak, Wück could be precisely what they need to take them to the next level and achieve international success.



# DATA VIZ

## LIGUE 1 2023/24

# PSG'S ATTACKING DEPTH BEYOND MBAPPE'S BRILLIANCE

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

**P**SG are preparing for life without Mbappé — this time, for real — after it was announced that the world champion would be leaving the French giants at the end of the season.

So, what would the team look like, especially in the forward line, without him? Do they already have players to replace the Frenchmen's quality and output in their ranks? The visualisation below shows the numbers of PSG's attackers from this season. Kylian Mbappé has scored nearly 40% of PSG's goals in Ligue 1 this season. Surely, that kind of number is going to be hard to replace, at least right away.

However, PSG's transfer business in 2023 means that the French champions already have some brilliant talent in-house from where those goals could come. The club spent big, especially on attacking depth, last summer. One of those signings was the 21-year-old talent Bradley Barcola from Lyon.

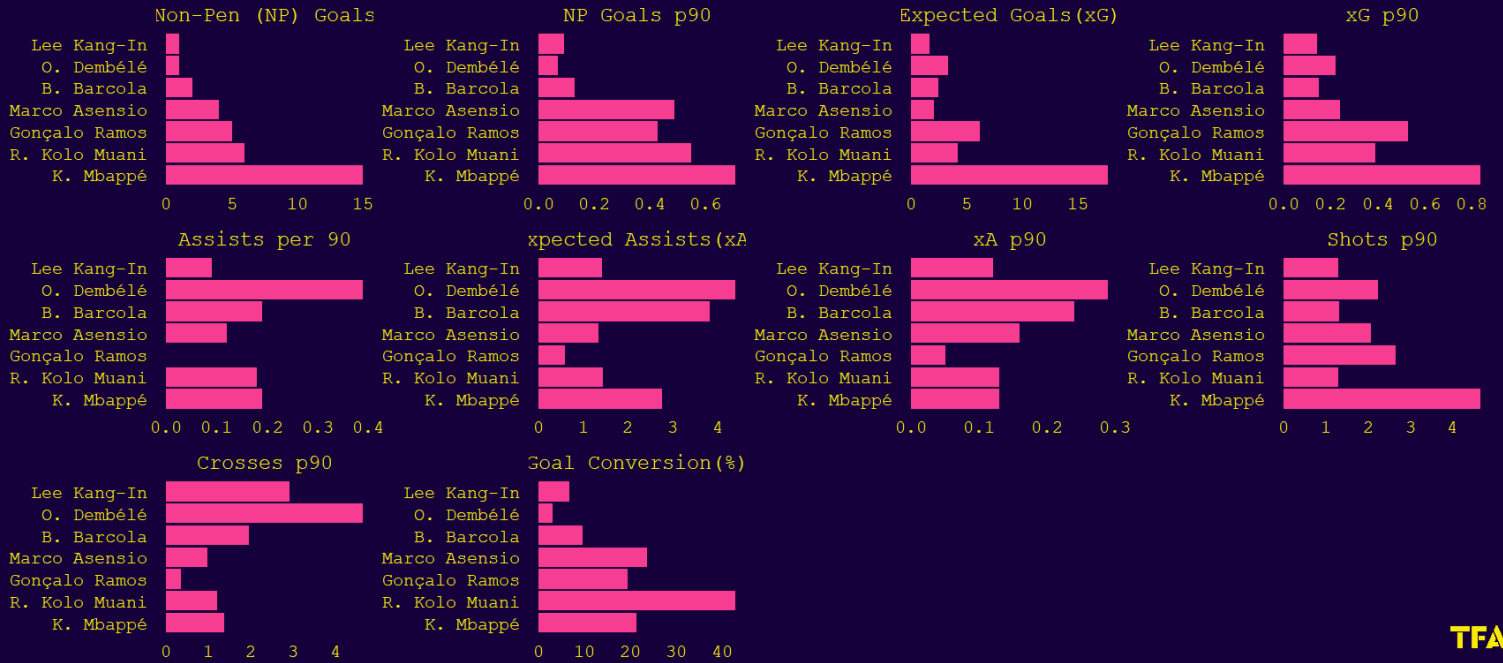
The French U21 international has played the most minutes next to Mbappé and can play on either side of the attack. With four assists and two non-penalty goals to his name, Barcola looks set to have an interesting and long future ahead of him. His numbers from his first season at PSG look promising and could make him one of the first names in the starting XI after Mbappé's departure.

After a long saga, Ousmane Dembélé signed for Les Parisiens last summer. The winger has struggled for goals but has the most assists (seven) in the PSG squad. At Barcelona, the Frenchman's tenure was dominated by injuries, but he seems to have a bit more luck at PSG, featuring regularly for the French champions. Still only 26 years old, he could be an important player for Luis Enrique in the post-Mbappé era.

Mbappé's goal contributions could be replaced by Kolo Muani, who was signed in the summer from Eintracht Frankfurt, and Gonçalo Ramos, who was signed from Benfica. Both Muani and Ramos are centre-forwards, predominantly, and even though they don't have the pace of Mbappé, they are good strikers and box-players with excellent finishing ability. Both have six goals to their names from a similar xG, too. Ramos has played slightly more minutes than Muani this season but it will be interesting how the minutes are split among these two next year.

Asensio and Kang-in Lee are the other two players who have featured in different positions across the front three. Asensio, who has played the fewest minutes among the attackers, could see a repeat of the same next season, too.

### Attacking Depth of PSG | 23/24 | Are they are ready for life without Mbappé?



TFA

Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyReddevil



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# DERBY COUNTY

PAUL WARNE



DERBY COUNTY

**EXPLAINING WHY THEY  
ARE EFL LEAGUE ONE'S  
SET-PIECE TOP-SCORERS**

KARIM EL-SHESHEINY // @ELSHESHEINY

At the time of writing, Derby County occupy the second position in EFL League One with 78 points after 39 matches, trailing behind Portsmouth who hold the top spot with 83 points. Paul Warne's side has demonstrated a balanced performance both defensively and offensively. Defensively, Derby County rank third in terms of defensive solidity in EFL League One, conceding 34 goals, trailing Portsmouth with 32 goals against and Lincoln City on 33.

On the offensive front, they rank as the fourth most prolific attacking unit, having scored 69 goals. This places them behind Peterborough United, Bolton Wanderers and Barnsley, who have scored 74, 71, and 70 goals respectively.

What is intriguing is that they are the leading team in terms of goals scored from set pieces in EFL League One, with a tally of 20 goals, a margin of three more than second-placed Stevenage. This accounts for a proportion approaching 29% of their overall goal tally.

It is noteworthy that they exhibit diversity in their set-piece executions and are capable of posing a threat in various situations. From corner kicks, they rank as the second most proficient team in EFL League One, having scored 11 from this set-piece, on par with Shrewsbury Town and trailing Bolton Wanderers, who are a single goal ahead. However, their proficiency extends beyond corner kicks, as they have managed to score numerous goals and create dangerous opportunities from direct free kicks, indirect free kicks, and even throw-ins.

In this tactical analysis, we will focus on elucidating and clarifying their various tactics at corner kicks and indirect free kicks, highlighting their diversity, effectiveness, and execution quality.

## CORNERS

We will start with their effective attacking corner routines, the most well-organised of which not only depend on a single idea but also combine ideas at particular timings.

In the case below, the opponent defends with three zonal defenders and a rebound defender, while the rest are man markers. They aim to target the area between the first and second zonal defenders, shown in a yellow circle.

You may ask about the reason for putting an attacker, with his marker, at the targeted area at first—this is a principle of underloading to reassure the opponent that a defender is with the attacker there. So, the second zonal defender may shift a little towards the far post, where most of the attackers stand. Thereafter, the attacker moves away from the targeted area, dragging the marker with him for another attacker to target it.



In the two following photos, when the taker raises his hand, the switch we talk about begins while the white spotlighted player is the targeted one.

It isn't a coincidence that a teammate stands very close to him because this player will turn around to block the targeted player's marker, which is called a screen, to make him free to attack the targeted area with all of his momentum. Thanks to his movement, he can jump higher than defenders who try to leap from a static position, a dynamic mismatch — this is another major benefit.



You will find three players who can chase the ball at the targeted area — the first and second zonal players, as well as the goalkeeper, who may go out to claim the ball in the air. That's why the three red-highlighted players are asked to do blocks.

We should mention that it looks easy, theoretically, but it is difficult to find players to perform blocks in this manner without committing fouls and against two defenders, the zonal one and his marker.



To be realistic, a player can't still block two defenders all the time, but he is only asked to delay them even for a moment to give the targeted player a small advantage in timing. These blocks also make defenders unable to jump with all of their power.

It should be mentioned that the priority is to block the zonal defender because the man marker's priority is to mark the blocker himself — not the targeted zone.

Finally, the targeted player can brilliantly outperform all of these delayed defenders and score.



The second idea we will talk about is that they target a player starting after the far post, nearly on the line, a lot.

This gives them many advantages, as we will explain; in the photo below, the opponent follows a hybrid defending system with four zonal defenders, four man markers, a rebound defender and a short-option defender.



Let's focus now on the targeted player standing on the far post nearly on the line, which causes a problem of orientation for the defender who struggles to keep track of the ball and the attacker at the same time because of the difficult body shape he is forced to stand at. If he stood with an open, inclined body shape facing the defender and the ball at the same time, he would find himself standing out of the goalmouth, leaving the attacker's path to goal open.

This attacker will exploit this orientation problem to take the arched path, shown below, but the red attacker's role is essential to block the last zonal defender from stepping back, preventing him from getting the ball.

The other important role is using a player to block the goalkeeper, thus stopping him from claiming the ball or just delaying his reaction without committing a foul.



In the photo below, the block and orientation problem are clear.



Getting the first touch there is good, but it is still difficult to score from the first touch, so they need a second part of the plan, which is asking four attackers to frame the goal and be ready to receive the headed pass.

Framing the goal is an easy yet effective way to increase the probability of completing the headed pass. In the end, the cross was a little low, so the first targeted player couldn't control the ball, so it hit the marker.



In the case below, they use the same general idea of placing a player on the far post, but in a different way. Let's analyse this in detail.

In the first photo below, the opponent uses only three zonal defenders, leaving the far post without zonal defenders, so Derby County ask a player to block the goalkeeper, as usual.

In this case, they use another player, in blue, starting on the penalty spot to run behind the first player they usually target; they have no problem freeing him up using his teammate's screen, in white, as usual, as shown in the second and third photos.

With this trick, they have two players who can target the far post; the first one goes inside while the second comes behind him. In the fourth photo, the big chance for the first player is clear, while the second one is available behind him.



The ball passes the first targeted player; unfortunately, the second player can't control it.



Defences that neglect the far attacker, giving priority to the attackers at the middle and the near post, could find it more difficult. At the far post, attackers enjoy a 2v1 situation, as in the case below, where the targeted player is out of shot.

What makes it more difficult is asking the last zonal defender, in green, to step more toward

the middle, as most teams do, and that is reasonable, but Derby County ask two attackers to block the last zonal defender, in green, and the goalkeeper, as done in the second photo below.

In the third photo, the two attackers go inside to target the ball, one in front of the marker and one behind. The second one succeeds in getting the ball because of the orientation problem, as shown in the fourth photo — the result is a goal.



The third idea we will talk about at corners is asking many attackers to start out of the box, as shown in the first photo below, where five runners face three man markers. These movements along this long distance confuse the man markers, allowing attackers to easily escape them because they aren't sticking to the attackers and are forced to track them all this distance. Besides the orientation problems they may face, it also becomes difficult to track the ball.

In the second photo below, the plan is for three attackers to run toward the near post, aiming to drag as many attackers as they can while asking the highlighted player to target the far post with the help of his teammate, who blocks any marker trying to go to him, in the green arrow.

In the third photo, the last zonal defender is forced to go to the targeted player, but the targeted player outperforms him because he comes all of this distance free, so he can jump higher from movement, a dynamic mismatch, as shown in the fourth photo below.



The plan works, but the goalkeeper saves the ball, as shown below.



In the case below, they use a similar strategy by asking the targeted player to stand out of the box, so the area between him and the six-yard box is empty except for his awaited marker beside the short and rebound defenders who won't bother him, as shown in the first photo below. What helps to achieve that uncrowded area is asking the attackers to stand behind the four zonal defenders, thus dragging their markers with them.

In the third photo, the routine begins to target the area between the third and fourth zonal defender, shown in a circle. At first, two players move away to the near post, dragging their markers with them (red arrows).

Secondly, the targeted player can easily escape from his marker along this distance with the same orientation problem by moving to the far post, forcing him to focus on the player without tracking the ball; then, drifting right at the moment that marker focuses on the ball, as shown in the fourth photo.

But now they have the same three problems: The third and fourth zonal defenders beside the goalkeeper, the two players going to block the goalkeeper and the last zonal defender, as shown in the fourth photo.



This time, they left the third zonal defender free, so he troubled the targeted player while heading the ball, so the ball went high.



get onside with two triggers — the first being the blue attacker’s movement when the taker starts to run. At the same time, the second is the two offside players, highlighted in the second photo, who act as if they are the targeted players trying to drag the defenders to drop earlier. In general, this strategy becomes more efficient when using your best players at heading the ball in this role.

The result is shown in the third photo when the targeted player is onside, giving the defender a small push from the back. The plan works, and the result is a goal.



In the first photo below, the same strategy is used to score another goal, but the trigger is different. This time, the trigger of the early drop comes from one of their best headers starting deep and running to the far post. The defender is afraid not to catch him and decides to drop back earlier than the line. As a result, the two green targeted players are onside, as shown in the second and third photos. The plan works; the result is a goal.



## FREE-KICKS

Regarding free-kicks, we should mention that Derby often use simple yet effective ideas by targeting initial offside players trying to get onside via fake deceptive runs. Let’s go into detail!

In the first photo below, the targeted player stands in an offside position, making the second defender assured that he is offside. Still, he can

We should mention that this method is risky because there is a chance of still being offside, but when it succeeds, it becomes dangerous.

## CONCLUSION

In this analysis, we have demonstrated how Derby County have become the most prolific team in scoring goals from set-pieces in EFL League One. We have also highlighted their diversity in exploiting corner kicks through well-executed routines. These routines incorporate various strategies, such as utilising screens, targeting the far post, or instructing multiple players to initiate runs outside the penalty area to disrupt a dynamic mismatch over defenders.

In our set-piece analysis, we have also elucidated how they use offside players before the free kick is taken. However, by employing deceptive movements and runs, they avoid being caught offside and become available to receive the cross easily.



PW

# **PRESSING** **IN PRAHA**

**BRIAN PRISKE**



**SPARTA PRAHA**

## **PRISKE'S METHODS AT SPARTA REVEALED**

MAK PAKHEI // @MAKPAKHEI

For almost a decade, Sparta Praha had not won the Fortuna Liga. That was until last season when Brian Priske took charge of the team and led them back to the very top of Czech football.

This year, they've made another step while leading the league over rivals Slavia Praha, qualifying for the UEFA Europa League knockout stage from a tricky group containing Real Betis, Rangers and Aris Limassol.

When watching Sparta Praha's games, the most impressive part of their performance has to be their pressing. They are a very disciplined team that controls the opponent out of possession. This tactical analysis will go into some detail about how they set up their press, how they use the press to create chances and how their opponents in Europe have dealt with it.

## ZONAL MAN-MAN PRESS

The Czech champions have utilised a 3-4-3 formation under Brian Priske; one reason might be that the Danish coach has always found this a good way to press the opponents with a clear division of responsibilities on the pitch. It allows them to go with a zonal man-man scheme, locking each individual down and not letting the opponent find a free player easily in the build-up. At the same time, the last line would be more organised to defend zonally rather than following their man all the way.

### SPARTA PRAHA DEFENSIVE TERRITORY



There are interesting observations in the Sparta Praha defensive territory graph. They usually intercept the ball in the half-spaces or wide spaces in the opposition half, and not many of these events occurred centrally. Then, there's an even clearer trend if we look at the locations of fouls, also scattering on the sides, and there were barely any red dots in the centre. Then, defensive actions are almost empty in front of the opposition penalty box, but the grey dots are condensed nearer the sidelines.



Here, we'll use some game examples to explain how Sparta Praha shape their press; they have been largely able to control most opponents, including Liverpool. Although the Reds beat them 11-2 over two legs, a huge part of the goals conceded were attributed to Sparta Praha's build-up mistakes rather than the press being outplayed.

In a 3-4-3, the front three were rarely on the same line; it would be more of a 1-2 shape, but the shape is not as important as who the mark is. The shape was merely an outcome of the striker, Jan Kutcha, marking the opposition midfielder (Wataru Endo), while the wingers - Veljko Birmančević and Lukáš Haraslín were going for their centre-backs in a back four. Then, the other two Sparta Praha midfielders should also lock the Liverpool midfielders to match it a man-man in midfield, as shown here where we see Kaan Kairinen marking Alexis Mac Allister, leaving the opposition full-backs initially unmarked as bait.

Then, it was about angling the press and seeing the pressing trigger. If Jarrell Quansah passes

to his partner, Ibrahima Konaté, then Haraslín should jump on the receiver with speed.



But it wasn't the case, as Quansah gave the ball to the 'keeper instead of his partner. Then the press of Haraslín has to be different if he wants to press Konaté — the Slovakian winger should curve his run a little bit to cover the centre more and push Liverpool to one side (at the expense of giving up some speed to access his mark.)



Liverpool, of course, were clever to anticipate the nearest potential danger so the 'keeper avoided the pass to Konaté, as he thought Joe Gomez would be a better option out wide without a marker near to him at first.

However, this was a pressing trap!

The chipped ball was more difficult to control and required more time to travel to the receiver, so it became another clear pressing trigger for Jaroslav Zelený to jump on his mark — wing-back on full-back.

Then, Liverpool could not keep the ball and conceded a throw-in.



Here, we have another example of Sparta Praha pressing their league opponent, FC Zlín. The latter played in a back three but pushed the central centre-back higher in the build-up phase.

Kutcha's mark changed from marking the midfielder to tracking this centre-back so that they kept a 3v3 and allowed the midfielders (Kairinen and Lukáš Sadílek) to mark the opposition midfielders. Then, the wingers easily identified the wide centre-backs as their mark.



Sparta's wingers led the press in the example versus Liverpool, but this time was different, as the striker could take that role. Here, when Kutcha's mark played a back pass to the 'keeper, it was clear that he should chase the pass down and put pressure on the goalkeeper from the centre instead of a winger showing direction from the side.

They were a very disciplined side in the press — except for Kutcha, who jumped on the goalkeeper, the rest were all staying on their mark.



Again, the press on the goalkeeper was not only straight but intent on guiding the play direction to one side by curving the runs. Kutcha did that when going out. Then, the question was, how to keep the player who made the back pass under control?

This was how the zonal man-man worked. To compensate, Birmančević had to stay inside a bit longer to control that space and make sure he could run towards that mark if the 'keeper played central while leaving the wide centre-back as bait. Then, the 'keeper was tempted to play wider so Birmančević could curve his run to push the play outside.



Now, FC Zlín were in the pressing trap. Birmančević went towards the receiver with speed, who was trapped on the side, while Kutcha ran back to take his mark; there was no option on the same side as well, as Tomáš Wiesner was going tight on the opposition wing-back.

And look at the broader picture — see how disciplined the press was — the Sparta Praha far-side winger and midfielder stayed on their mark instead of chasing the ball.

Despite pressing on a zonal man-man basis, Sparta Praha's front three's defensive roles were also similar to prime Liverpool with Sadio Mané, Mohammed Salah, and Roberto Firmino in the team. The Brazilian striker would usually mark the opposition midfielders and allow his wingers to shape their runs towards the ball holder. It was a decent tactic when the players had the legs and intensity to make the effort.

## USING THE PRESS TO CREATE CHANCES

The best part of this press was not only its usefulness in trapping opposition on one side; Priske's side could also use it to create goalscoring chances because their wingers were usually disciplined and good at closing the passing lanes.



We took the situation of Sparta Praha-Aris Limassol to illustrate. The zonal man-man was clear: Sparta Praha had a front three marking their respective mark, Kutcha inclining to the right side this time, plus midfielder Qazim Laçi (midfielder) on the opposition midfielder. Then Angelo Preciado (RWB) was on the Aris Limassol wide defender, so the opponent went back to the 'keeper.



When the ball went back to the 'keeper, Victor Olatunji left his mark (Franz Brorsson) and jumped centrally to force the opposition to play. And look at Haraslín's defensive position. Although he was marking the centre-back, he did not completely get tight, but more staying in between the Aris Limassol midfielder and his mark. This was crucial because it gave him the chance to intercept the pass if the 'keeper went central while keeping the possibility to run towards the mark with speed if the central defender received.



Here, we can see Sparta Praha setting up a similar zonal man-man press in Turkey, with the right-winger, Adam Karabec, pressing the goalkeeper from one side to shape the play angle. However, as Karabec left his mark, Davinson Sánchez became the free player to receive. Sparta Praha could not block the central pass as Kerem Demirbay was receiving in front of his marker, and this was a good pass from Fernando Muslera.



Because of Haraslín's good defensive position, Sparta Praha intercepted the ball high and also looked at the condition to counterattack. They regained in front of the opposition penalty box, with two players ahead as the passing options to finish. Olatunji was clearly offside in this case, but the other attacker, Kutcha, was in a good central position and ready to finish.



As Demirbay was able to control in front of Kairinen, he identified the former Tottenham player as a free option to receive, as we explained above. Then, Sparta Praha was also exposed centrally as they did not protect the space if the midfielders were taken out by the opposition's movement. There was a big space in there and a big distance between Kairinen and Laçi. Karabec was too far away to run back and close down Sánchez.

## HOW TO SOLVE THEIR PRESS

Despite our mention of Sparta Praha's good pressing and how they used it to create chances, we must bear in mind that footballers are not robots. They have weaknesses that opponents can exploit. Galatasaray solved the defence by playing out from the back a few times in their matches.

Meanwhile, former Arsenal player Lucas Torreira saw the opportunity of moving forward.



The problem was that Kutcha had lost the mark and got caught ball-watching in the sequence, so Torreira became totally free to receive without a Sparta Praha player next to him.



Good European teams could change the speed of their attack and build on that when they broke the first wave of pressure. Here, we saw Mauro Icardi react very fast and check back from an offside position to make another run to exploit the last line of Sparta Praha, resulting in a 1v1 chance against the goalkeeper.

## CONCLUSION

As explained in this analysis, Sparta Praha are a very good pressing team under the leadership of Priske. They managed to turn the tie around against Galatasaray from a 2-3 deficit in the first leg by winning a 4-1 on their home soil. They also beat Real Betis in the UEFA Europa League group stage — all with the help of an intelligent, effective press. It would be interesting to see if they can carry on to win the league title again this season, cementing Priske's era in charge as one of sustained success.



# DATA VIZ

## SERIE A 2023/24

# ANALYZING SASSUOLO'S SURVIVAL SAGA

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

Sassuolo are the surprising favourites to go down this season from the Serie A. Currently sitting 19th in the table at the time of writing and having a game in hand over their relegation rivals, Sassuolo have 23 points and are five points below 13th-placed Lecce in a really tight relegation battle.

The visualisation below shows the numbers from Sassuolo's season so far.

Goalscoring has not been a problem for Sassuolo when compared with their rivals. They have 33 goals so far, which is almost on par with their xG of 35.37, and rank 11th for that metric.

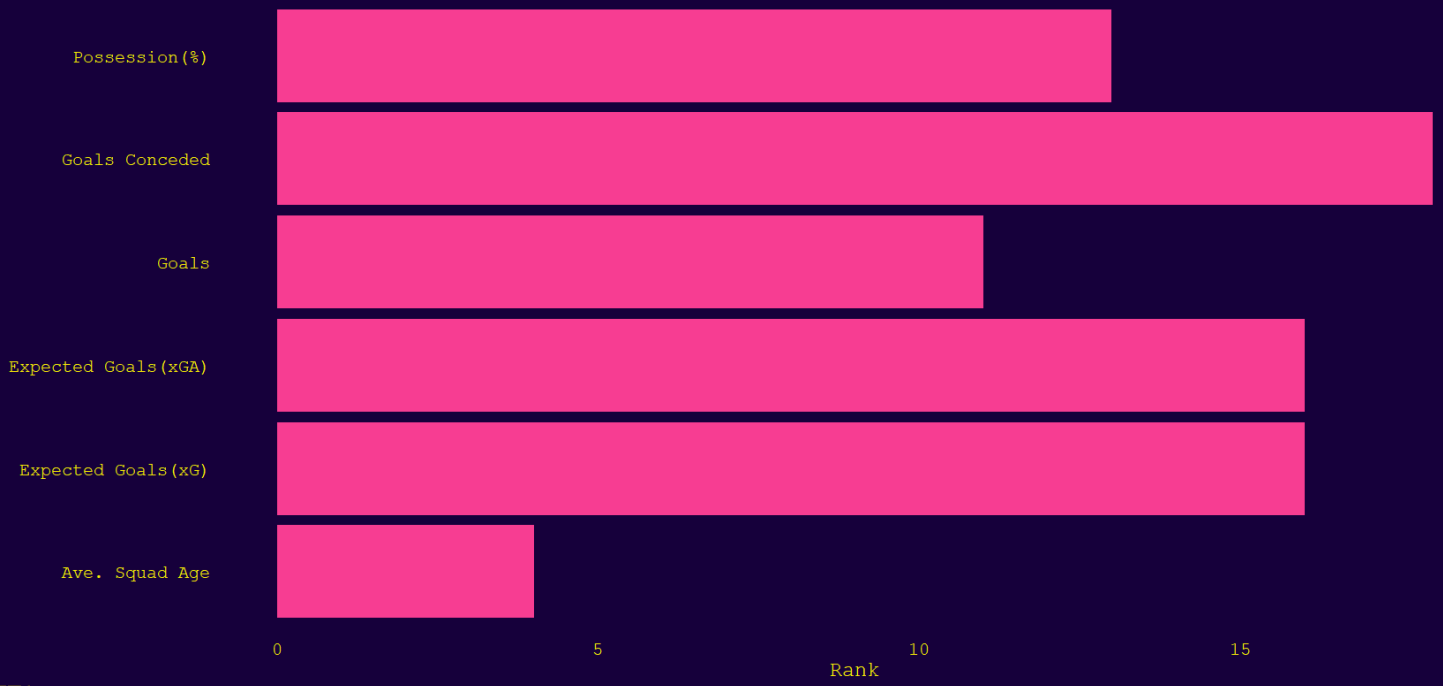
Their defence has been a problem, conceding 55 goals. Only two other teams—fellow relegation contenders Frosinone (60) and Salernitana (59)—have conceded more.

However, their xGA stands at only 47.81. With an average possession of 45.5%, Sassuolo quite often do not dictate games and are left to chase the game. One thing that Sassuolo can boast a lot about from their season is the average squad age, which is one of the youngest in the league at 25.8 years — that number is lower than the league average of 26.68.

Sassuolo also rank worse for their pressing intensity, allowing an average of approximately 15 passes before they win the ball back. Only Salernitana have a higher PPDA value.

It is not over yet for Sassuolo, who finally won last week against Frosinone after an eight-game winless streak. A very tight race for relegation means Sassuolo cannot blink now and need to get the maximum out of every single game going forward if they are to stay in Serie A next season.

## Sassuolo | Rank for Various Metrics | Serie A 23/24



# DANIEL SOUSA

DANIEL SOUSA



FC AROUCA

## HOW HE SALVAGED AROUCA'S SEASON

BETH LIMB // @BETHLIMB

**F**C Arouca spent the first five decades of its existence in the lower leagues of Portuguese football. In 2013, after four promotions in seven years, the club reached the Primeira Liga for the first time.

Following four years in the top flight, the club suffered relegation back to the second tier in 2019 but bounced back within two seasons. Since returning to the Primeira Liga in 2021, Arouca finished 15th in their first season, followed by an impressive fifth-place finish in 2022/23 with Armando Evangelista at the helm.

Evangelista declined a contract renewal, so Daniel Ramos was appointed manager for the 2023/24 campaign. After one victory in 11 league games, Ramos was dismissed in November.

To turn around their dreadful start to the season, Arouca turned to Daniel Sousa, who had only one previous managerial role to his name. Sousa agreed and took charge at Estádio Municipal.

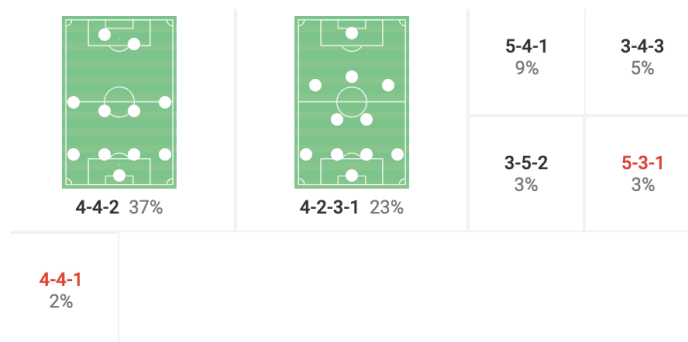
The 39-year-old recently started working as a manager in his own right after acting firstly as a match analyst and then as the long-term assistant manager to André Villas-Boas.

Sousa gained plenty of experience working alongside Villas-Boas at Premier League clubs, such as Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur. Additionally, he followed the former Porto manager further afield to Zenit and Shanghai Port.

When Daniel Sousa took charge of Arouca on November 15, they were bottom of the table, having scored just nine goals in 11 league games. Sousa has initiated something of a minor miracle. Since then, Arouquenses have climbed to seventh in the table, becoming a goal-scoring machine in the process and picking up some impressive results, including a 3-2 victory against Porto.

In this tactical analysis, we will investigate the tactics used by Sousa to turn Arouca's season around. We will assess the changes he has made since being appointed as manager and the impact these have had on the on-field performances.

## FORMATIONS

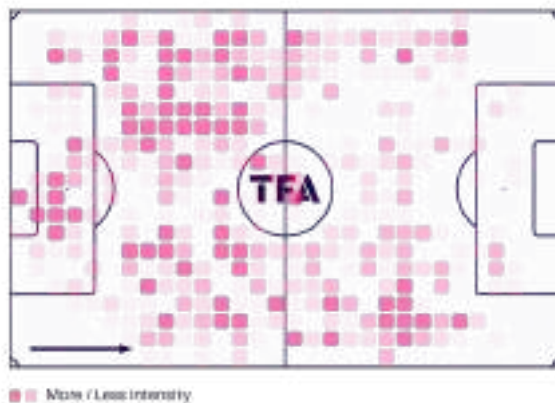


**U**nder Ramos, Arouca primarily played a 4-4-2 or a 3-4-3 system, depending on the opponent. Since Sousa's arrival, he has stuck with the 4-4-2 system as his go-to tactical setup, occasionally slipping into a 4-2-3-1 as it's so easy to manoeuvre between the two.

Both systems offer a balanced structure and defensive solidity. The midfielders work together to control the centre of the pitch, with two wide players providing width and support in both the attacking and defensive phases of play.

## AROUCA HEATMAP

Since Sousa's appointment



The heatmap shows us where Arouca are most active on the pitch since Sousa's appointment as manager. We can see they are most active inside

their own half and down the flanks. Averaging 51.02% possession per 90, Arouca are not concerned with dominating possession. Instead, they look to be effective in transitions and exploit the spaces left open by the opposition.

Arouca's heavy focus on a solid and compact midfield and defensive structure makes them well-suited to regaining possession in the middle of the park, and rapid transitions initiate counterattacking play.

## FLUIDITY IN ATTACK LEADING TO GOALS

We will now use the rest of this section of the analysis to investigate how Arouca are able to carve out these goalscoring opportunities. To begin, let's take a look at how they build up.



Fluid off-the-ball movement is critical to Arouca's build-up play. The image above showcases this movement in the game against Estrela Amador, approximately six weeks after Daniel Sousa was hired as manager.

The fullbacks (highlighted in pink) will often stay wide and push up as high as possible, meaning they become the primary outlet during build-up play. To accommodate this, the wingers (highlighted in red) move into more central areas.

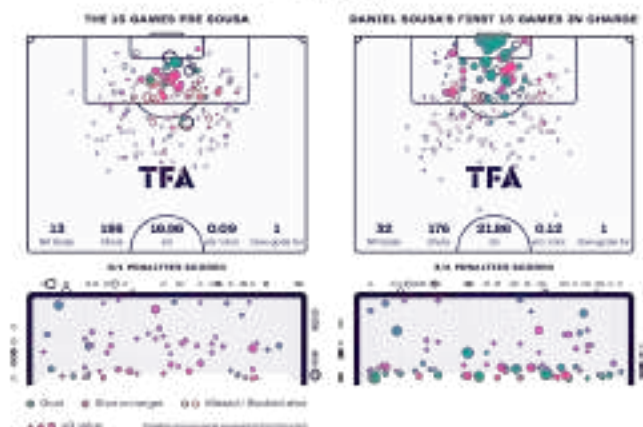
In this example, Sylla, the left-winger, tucks into a central midfield area, while Jason, the right-winger, joins up with Cristo González and Rafa Mújica (yellow) to form a front three.

As we can see, this lends itself to a 2-1-4-3 shape, with Sylla forming a midfield trio with the two central midfielders (green), which enables Arouca to ensure they do not get overrun in central areas should they lose possession.

Such movement unsettles defenders and disrupts their defensive shape. When Arouca's attackers make intelligent runs, the opposition defenders must constantly adjust their positions. This movement can lead to defensive confusion, leaving gaps for attackers to exploit.

Furthermore, this also provides passing options for the player in possession of the ball. By

### AROUCA SHOTS - ALL COMPETITIONS 2023/24



The most immediate change in Arouca's fortunes since Sousa's arrival has definitely been the upturn in the number of goals scored. We can see from the data viz that in the 15 games in all competitions prior to Sousa's appointment, Arouca only found the back of the net on 13 occasions from an xG of 16.96. Furthermore, we can see that the team took 186 shots during this period, suggesting they were rather wasteful with their shooting.

In the first 15 games of Sousa's reign, Arouca scored 32 non-penalty goals from an xG of 21.86. This represents a huge turnaround in the team's performance in front of goal. Moreover, during this period, Arouca took 176 shots, suggesting that the chances they are now creating are much higher quality than before.

constantly moving into open spaces and showing for the ball, teammates offer themselves as passing targets, allowing for quick ball circulation and progression up the field. This not only maintains possession but also prevents the opposition from easily pressuring the ball carrier.



If we look at the same situation from the opposition's point of view, we can understand how Arouca's movement leads to spaces being created. With Estrela looking to remain compact, it just allows the two fullbacks to push forward with acres of space available on both sides. Sylla's movement centrally also pins the Estrela wing back infield, allowing even more space for Montero's long pass to find Tiago Esgaio.



This sequence plays out quickly, which is a crucial element to Arouca's attacking style - don't hang around. Averaging 3.96 passes per possession per 90, Daniel Sousa has implemented a rapid attacking system designed to catch their opponents off guard. Here, the ball is played down Arouca's left flank, and then stand-in left-back Tiago Esgaio plays the ball into Rafa Mújica, who promptly turns it home.

By quickly shifting the ball from one area of the pitch to another, Arouca can stretch the

opposition's defence and create space in dangerous areas. This allows the attackers to make penetrating runs and receive through passes in these areas.

In addition, this enhances Arouca's ability to maintain possession and control the tempo of the game. Sousa's preference to keep the ball moving at a high pace means they can dictate play and force the opposition to chase the ball, again creating openings which can be exploited via quick and intricate passes.



Moreover, Arouca looks to attack from the off. Here, we can see them build an attack straight from kick-off. Sylla has drifted from the left wing right over to the right side of the pitch. With Porto looking to press right from kick-off, huge spaces have opened up for the home team to exploit.

The team then execute a quick interchange of passes and works the ball out to Cristo González, who positions himself on the right wing. He carries the ball forward and whips in a cross, which is met by Rafa Mújica's diving header into the far corner.

## THE SPANISH TRIUMVIRATE

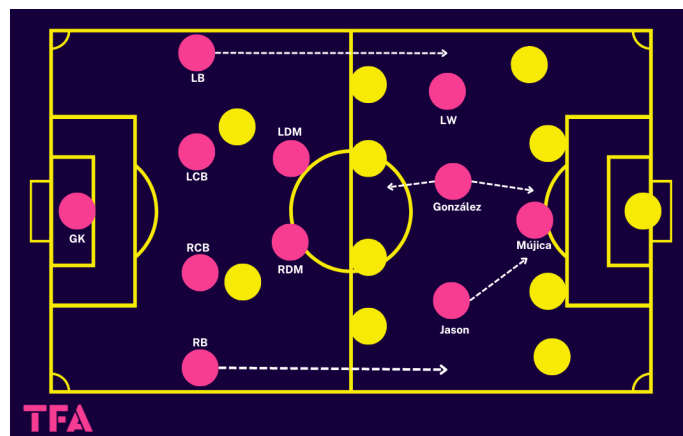
At the heart of Arouca's attack are three Spanish players: Jason, Cristo González and Rafa Mújica. The three consistently demonstrate some impressive link-up play and work together almost effortlessly in Sousa's fluid system.

Mújica is the primary striker and has stepped his game up a level this season, having netted 18 goals so far this season (at the time of this report being written), 13 after Daniel Sousa became manager.

Mújica's goals so far this season have come from an xG of 13.51, indicating he is capable of scoring lower-percentage chances, such as long shots, which is why he has been in such lethal form this season. Additionally, Cristo González, who plays either as Mújica's strike partner or a little further back as a number ten, has also chipped in with 14 goals and eight assists to date.

Now, let's break down some of the key stats for each player to understand how they perform on a per-90 basis. Rafa Mújica's goal-scoring form equates to 0.58 goals per 90 from an xG per 90 of 0.43. Additionally, Cristo González acts as a link-up man, averaging 0.64 key passes per 90, which indicates he is a creative player who carves out shooting opportunities for others.

Right-winger Jason averages 3.56 dribbles per 90, indicating that Arouca looks to him to carry the ball forward when attacking down the right side. Plus, his 5.35 progressive passes per 90 show he has the ability to play line-breaking passes to advance the ball into the opposition half or the attacking third.



The three players' movement is crucial to Sousa's attacking style. This visual shows how the trio instinctively move with each other on the pitch. Typically, Mújica is the central striker and will remain as such. He does look to drop deeper to create space for Cristo González or Jason, or they step forward to create space for the Spanish talisman to operate in.

As we already know, Jason looks to cut inside, allowing for the overlapping run from the fullback. He will try to make runs in behind the opposition's defensive line to push them back, creating the space for Cristo González to operate effectively as a number ten.



In this instance, we can see the trio alternating their positions as Arouca looks to build an attack.

## DEFENSIVE IDEAS AND FRAILTIES

Jason is making a run in behind the defensive line, which creates the space for Mújica and Cristo. Jason forces the defensive line back, allowing his teammates to adopt optimal goalscoring positions.

On this occasion, there is a clear pass in behind to Jason, which is how this sequence plays out. The pass in behind the defence gets knocked back to Mújica, who has plenty of space. Additionally, we can see the space Cristo also has available to him. Mújica opts to execute a powerful shot from the edge of the area into the bottom corner, beating the goalkeeper with its sheer power.



Here, we can see another example of how the trio link up when Arouca are building an attack. The central defender plays the ball into Cristo's path, he controls the ball and plays a quick one-two with Sylla.

Cristo then plays the ball into Jason's path, making one of his trademark runs behind the opposition's defence in the wide right area. The winger carries the ball into the box and plays it to Mújica, who calmly turns it into the net - a goal scored in Portugal but made in Spain.

This is a wonderful demonstration of how the three players look to consistently bring each other into play and link up throughout the game.

Under Daniel Sousa's leadership, Arouca are not a relentlessly high-pressing team; instead, they are strategic with it and seek to press their opponents at different points throughout the game — most notably, at the beginning of each half.

You may have noticed in the earlier examples (against Estrela and Porto) that Arouca scored just one minute into the second and first halves. Scoring early in the first or second half is another aspect of Sousa's tactical style. He prefers his team to be in control of games. Hitting their opponent early in the half is designed to knock the wind out of their sails, so to speak.

This means the opposition must take more risks and push forward in search of goals; consequently, spaces are left for Arouca to exploit through their rapid transitions and quick build-up play.



This example demonstrates Arouca regaining possession high up the pitch. As we can see, they close off passing lanes and force the

Boavista defender to misplace his pass. Cristo intercepts the pass and carries the ball forward before hitting a low drive beyond the goalkeeper from the edge of the area.

Putting the opposition under pressure early in each half disrupts their rhythm and prevents them from settling into their game plan. This means Daniel Sousa's team can force hurried passes — as we just saw — turnovers and defensive mistakes.

This creates goal-scoring opportunities and puts the opposing defence under immediate pressure, increasing the chances of Arouca scoring an early goal and gaining momentum in the match.



As the game goes on, Arouca looks to sit in a 4-4-2 defensive shape, often adopting a mid-block, as we can see in the image above. Sousa's team averages 82.06 recoveries per 90, with the majority of them occurring in the middle third.

This invites the opposition to push forward in an attempt to build an attack; when they enter the Arouca half, Sousa's team springs into a press and attempts to force a turnover.



Here we can see that Sylla presses his opponent and forces him back. From here, Arouca will often look to engage in a short, intense press looking to force turnovers. This strategic pressing means the opposition are never quite sure what Arouca are going to do next.

In this scenario, Boavista cannot completely commit players forward as they need to ensure there are players on hand to recycle possession should Arouca initiate a press. This unpredictability is a wonderful asset in Arouca's defensive armour.

However, Arouca do maintain quite a high line which can lead to problems. The Primeira Liga team have struggled for clean sheets, conceding 1.45 goals per 90 on average this season.



This example demonstrates just how easy it is to bypass the Arouca defence. Famalicão's central defender hits a long pass forward, over the top of the defensive line, into the path of Gustavo Sá. As we can see, the young forward has a direct run and goal, which he exploits, carrying the ball into the box and placing a shot into the far corner, beyond the goalkeeper.

Opponents will often attempt to bypass the defensive line by playing precise through balls or lofted passes into space behind the Arouca defenders, aiming to release their forwards or wingers into one-on-one situations with the goalkeeper. Arouca's defenders don't always track the opposition movements, which means they find these passes difficult to defend against and lead to dangerous scoring opportunities for the opponent.

This is something that Daniel Sousa will undoubtedly be looking to change next season as Arouca's current 'we'll score more than you' style of play may not be sustainable throughout an entire season.

## CONCLUSION

In this analysis, we have delved into Daniel Sousa's tactics since he took charge of Arouca. We have seen how he has created a free-flowing, rapid-fire attack that can create chances out of nowhere.

Additionally, we have highlighted the Spanish trio, who are at the heart of everything Arouca do, and shown how their outstanding link-up play leads to some wonderful chances.

Finally, we have studied Sousa's out-of-possession ideas and identified the problem areas within Arouca's defence, which will need to be fixed if they are going to step up next season.

Although far from perfect, to take a team from rock bottom of the league to seventh place in just four months is pretty impressive. 39-year-old Daniel Sousa is certainly cutting his teeth as a manager.



# **CHANCE** CREATORS

JOHAN CRUYFF



JOHAN CRUYFF

**SCOUTING THE MOST  
CREATIVE TALENTS ACROSS  
EUROPE'S TOP FIVE LEAGUES**



So far this season, Tillman has played 20 matches for PSV in the Eredivisie and scored six goals with six assists. As ever, we need to drill down into the underlying data in order to start identifying key factors that would make him of interest to a club come the summer.

First of all, we would say that he is not at the quality, right now at least, to make him of interest to Bayern as a first-team player for next season, but there will be several teams in the top-five leagues who are closely monitoring his progress.

For the most part, this season, we have seen Tillman used as an '8' or an '8/10' for PSV, although he has also spent some time in the wide areas.

His pizza chart, based on his performances so far this season, is extremely impressive across all parts of the game.

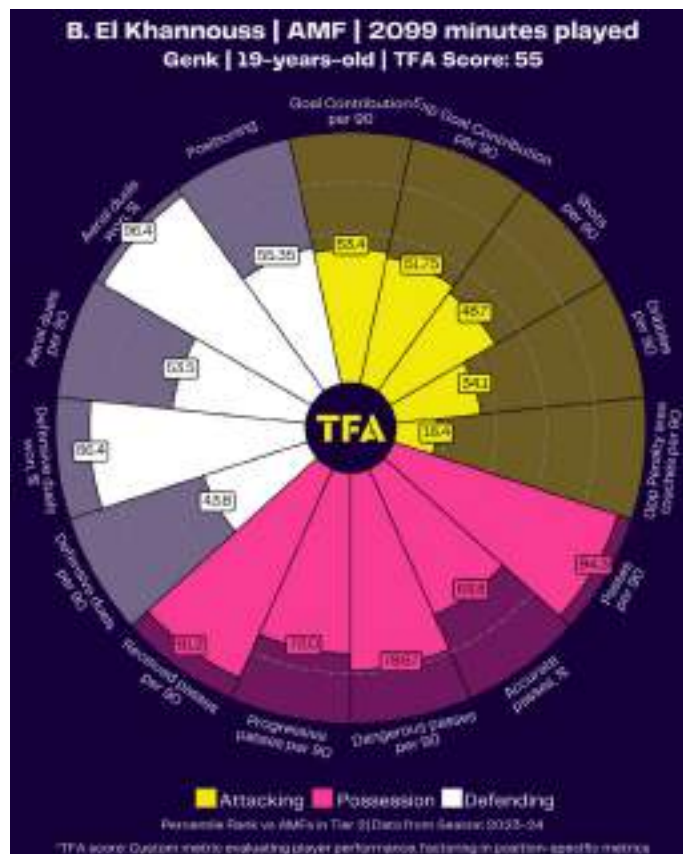
As you can see, he is in the 98th percentile for goal contributions, which combines goals and assists, and the 94th percentile for expected goal contributions, which combines expected goals and expected assists. Expected assists is one of the most relevant data points when we are considering a player's creative threat, but this can also be combined with dangerous passes, from the passing section where Tillman is in the 78th percentile, which shows passes to the final third and the penalty area. Now, we have a player in Tillman who moves the ball into dangerous areas and creates a threat when doing so.

Looking at Tillman's penetrating carries from central areas can also be instructive. As you can see from the larger pitch on the right-hand side, he tends to carry the ball in all different areas and showcases the ability to receive and break the line of opposition pressure either with a pass or a dribble. In the final third, he is also dangerous with his ability to dribble around the penalty area and penetrate into the opposition areas when dribbling in central spaces.

Tillman is a midfielder who can create either through his vision and passing or through his ability to carry the ball and run at opposition defences.

We do not think that he will be at Bayern next season, although teams in the Bundesliga and Premier League are likely to be closely monitoring his progress.

## BILAL EL KHANNOUSS 19 YEARS OLD MIDFIELDER GENK AND MOROCCO



### M. TILLMAN PENETRATING CARRIES

All games from Eredivisie 2023/2024



Our next player is the 19-year-old Moroccan international attacking midfielder Bilal El

Khannouss of Genk. He moved initially, at a young age, within Belgium from Anderlecht to Genk. Since then, he has come through the prodigious youth system at Genk and is now a regular first-team player at the club. He is similar to Tillman in that he played for the Belgian national team throughout his youth international career before then switching and choosing to represent Morocco at full international level. He currently has 11 full international caps for Morocco.

As you can see from his pizza chart above, he is having a less well-rounded season so far than we saw from Tillman in the previous selection. His contributions for direct goal contributions and expected goal contributions are lower than we saw from Tillman, as he is in the 53rd percentile and the 51st percentile, respectively.

However, he still has an interesting creative profile, given the volume of passes that he plays and his tendency to access dangerous positions with these passes. Indeed, he is in the 94th percentile for passes per 90 and the 91st percentile for received passes per 90.

Often, when we are discussing creative players of this type, we see lower passing volume, but El Khannouss gets on the ball on a regular basis. He is also in the 78th percentile for dangerous passes per 90.

**B. EL KHANNOUSS PENETRATING CARRIES**



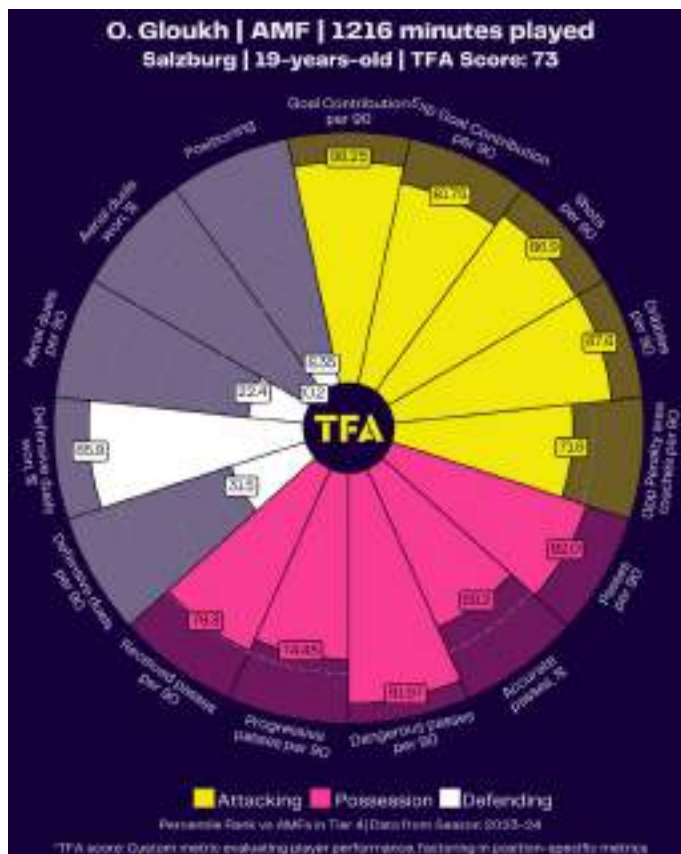
Once again, we can examine the player more in-depth using a penetrating carries map, and if anything, El Khannouss is more dangerous in this regard than Tillman was. The Moroccan international plays primarily this season for Genk

as a '10', although he can also play as an '8' or a '7'. At the time of writing, he has three goals and six assists this season.

In possession, he is extremely dangerous in the final third and around the opposition penalty area. In these situations, he can carry the ball into the opposition area, beat a man, and then find the angle to thread a pass through and into the area.

It is incredibly unlikely that El Khannouss will still be in the Belgian Pro League at the start of next season, although he is likely to be expensive. He has the ability and potential to play in a top-five league for a side that will contend for regular qualification for UEFA Champions League football.

**OSCAR GLOUKH  
19 YEARS OLD  
MIDFIELDER  
RB SALZBURG AND  
ISRAEL**



The final player that we will discuss in this article looking at creative players around

Europe is the 19-year-old Israeli international attacking midfielder Oscar Gloukh. Gloukh really came to prominence in the European U19 Championships in 2022 as part of a talented Israeli team and then again in the European U21 Championships last year when he impressed once more.

His performances in the U19s, however, were vital in earning him a move from Maccabi Tel Aviv, where he had developed as a young player, to Austria, where he joined Red Bull Salzburg for a reported £7m in 2023. He has quickly impressed and became a part of the first-team setup at the Austrian side where he plays primarily as a '10'.

As you can see from his pizza chart, he is another midfielder who impresses with his outputs across all phases of the game. He is in the 88th percentile for goal contributions and the 81st percentile for expected goal contributions, and he is in the 87th percentile for dribbles per 90.

At the time of writing, he has six goals and seven assists in the Austrian Bundesliga. Interestingly, he also generates a high volume of passing as he is in the 82nd percentile for passes per 90 and the 91st percentile for dangerous passes per 90.

#### O. GLOUKH PENETRATING CARRIES

All games from Bundesliga 2023/2024



He has a clear preference for picking up possession of the ball in the left-sided half-space—and, once again, he provides a significant threat not only through his passing profile and volume but also through the way that he drives in possession to break lines and force opposition defences to adapt and move to defend him, thus creating space centrally for teammates.

Going forward, it is extremely unlikely that Gloukh will be in Austria for long as there is already significant interest in securing his services from teams in the Bundesliga, the Premier League and in Serie A. It seems a matter of when and not if the player will move on from Salzburg and into a regular Champions League team.

## CONCLUSION

The second tier of European leagues has always been a hotbed for recruiting players ready to move to a top-five league. This remains the case now, and thanks to the use of data in the recruitment process, teams are better placed than ever to identify these players early.

# SCOUTING THE MLS

EMIL FORSBERG



NEW YORK RED BULLS

**SCOUTING THE MOST  
CREATIVE TALENTS ACROSS  
EUROPE'S TOP FIVE LEAGUES**

BRANDON LISS // @BRANDTHEBEAST

While the primary transfer window in MLS does not close until April 23rd, plenty of high-profile and high-quality signings have come into the league since the window opened on January 31st. Each club has looked to improve, with signings ranging from experienced internationals to young, up-and-coming talent from all over the world.

This tactical analysis will look at five of these higher-profile signings who we believe have the potential to make the most impact at their new clubs. These player profiles will be scout reports, where we will do a quick analysis of each player's strengths and weaknesses and how they fit into their new side.

## EMIL FORSBERG - NEW YORK RED BULLS

The first player we will analyse in more detail is Emil Forsberg, with the 32-year-old Swedish international midfielder joining New York Red Bulls from sister club RB Leipzig of the Bundesliga before the start of the 2024 MLS season. Forsberg joined the MLS side after a prolific eight years in Saxony, with the Swede joining an RBNY group going through a change in leadership, with German tactician Sandro Schwarz being named the club's new head coach in the offseason.

The early returns have looked promising for Forsberg, with RBNY having gained 7 points from their opening three matches in the 2024 MLS season, with Forsberg scoring his first goal for the club from the penalty spot in their recent 2-1 win against FC Dallas. In regards to formational fit, Schwarz started the season opting to play a 4-4-2 shape, with Forsberg tending to start more off the left side than playing in his more preferred central position. However, in their last match against FC Dallas, the German coach opted for more of a 4-2-3-1, allowing Forsberg to be at his very best playing in a central #10 position and

having the freedom and flexibility to roam around the pitch.



The image above shows an example of what Emil Forsberg is capable of, which will make RBNY and MLS fans very excited. Chance creation is one of the main strengths that the 32-year-old brings to the Red Bulls, with Forsberg contributing 71 goals and 68 assists in all competitions during his time with RB Leipzig. The Swedish international is capable of being exceptional on the ball, making passes that sometimes seem impossible, using his vision and range of passing to pick out teammates all over the pitch.

Forsberg demonstrated what he will bring to his new side in this phase of play above from RBNY's match against the Dynamo. As the ball is circulated to this nearside after a cross from the opposition flank, the ball falls to Red Bulls forward Elias Manoel just inside the penalty area. He is closed down by the three Dynamo defenders closest to him, with all of them getting sucked towards the ball. Forsberg is able to display his off-the-ball intelligence by backtracking away from the defenders and into the more favourable position he is currently occupying. He is able to receive the ball from Manoel, with the Swede playing a first-time chipped ball outside of his right foot behind the defence and into the forward's path. Unfortunately, Manoel whiffs on his shot, with a Dynamo centre-back able to get a touch and send the ball out for a corner.



out include dangerous passes per 90, opposition penalty area touches per 90, goal contributions per 90, and expected goal contributions per 90. This illustrates the high level that Abada displays when it comes to chance creation and getting the ball from his teammates in dangerous areas often, strengths that will instantly make the Israeli winger one of the most dynamic wide players in MLS.



Another trait that Liel Abada will bring to Dean Smith's Charlotte side is his dribbling. The 22-year-old winger averaged 5.25 dribbles per 90 minutes, with a success rate of 59% during his time in Scotland. Abada also possessed a career 5.64 touches in the penalty area per 90 minutes during his time with Celtic, with Abada looking to drive past opposition defenders and into dangerous chance-creation areas inside the 18-yard box.



Liel Abada is a winger who likes to stay forward, sitting off the back shoulder of the last defender, looking to stay wide to take opposition full-backs on 1v1. As the pie chart graphic showed, Abada is not the most impactful in defensive phases of play, which helps to explain his constant forward positioning. One of the most impactful attributes of Abada's game is his crossing, with the 22-year-old a constant threat in possession from wide areas. In his career at Celtic, across all competitions, Abada averaged 4.59 crosses per 90 minutes, and while a 26.8% success rate is not the best, the sheer number of crosses he puts in makes him such a threat in these positions.

In this phase of play above, Abada is again positioned in the wide channel, essentially hugging this near touchline. The opposition full-back detaches from the backline as he receives possession, looking to engage Abada and win possession back. However, the Israeli international winger is able to use his close control and dribbling to get past the defender and move into the vacant space behind the backline. As a result, Abada is able to drive into the penalty area before sending a cross towards the back post, resulting in a goalscoring chance for the Scottish side.

In the phase of play pictured above, Abada is played in behind the opposition defence. The Israeli international deliberately stays in the wide channel, and the full-back does not step out to engage, giving Abada plenty of space to send a first-time cross back across goal for his teammate to score.

While he has yet to make his debut for Charlotte since his signing was announced, Abada is likely to be an instant starter for Dean Smith. Once He makes his debut and begins to play a run of games in the squad, he will be hard to displace. He will likely be one of the most entertaining wingers in MLS this season and beyond.

# FEDERICO REDONDO - INTER MIAMI

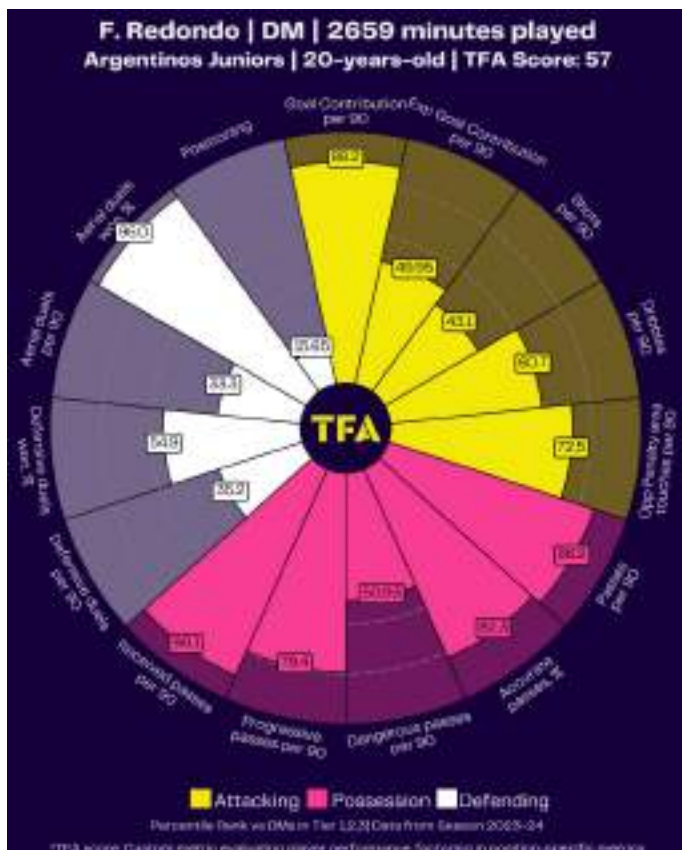
When fans of MLS and football think of Inter Miami's most watchable players, most people instantly say Lionel Messi, as well as his other former Barcelona teammates now at the club. However, one player that people should keep an eye on this season is 21-year-old Argentine defensive midfielder Federico Redondo.

Redondo is one of the most highly touted young players to come out of South American football recently, with Inter Miami paying a reported fee of around \$8 million to secure the Argentina U23 international's services from Argentinos Juniors. Redondo is the likely heir in the #6 position at Inter Miami for Sergio Busquets, but the 21-year-old has also played alongside the Spaniard since his arrival in South Florida. His defensive prowess and ball distribution capabilities make him highly rated, with the 21-year-old extremely polished for his age. Let us take a closer look at Redondo's player profile to examine his style of play in more detail.

The image above shows how Federico Redondo ranks compared to other defensive midfielders in the above metrics. As we can see, the defensive midfielder is an excellent possession-focused midfielder, with the majority of his passing metrics above the average of players in his position in similar-quality leagues. While his defensive metrics rank relatively low compared to other players, it is still one of the stronger attributes in the young Argentine's locker. Redondo averaged 7.56 defensive duels per 90 minutes during his time with Argentinos Juniors, with a success rate of 64.4%.



One of the biggest strengths of Federico Redondo that has been mentioned is the 21-year-old's ability in possession — specifically, his range of passing and vision. Throughout his career with Argentinos Juniors, Redondo averaged just under 56 passes per 90 minutes, with a pass completion rate of 88.2%. This was all with the Argentine youth international operating from a deeper position, with Redondo normally playing just in front of the defence during his time in Argentina.



The image above shows an example of Redondo's passing range. In this phase of play above, Redondo receives possession from one of his defenders, with the Argentine given the time and space to turn and drive to just about the opposition's half. Redondo is able to spot the run of the winger on the far side, with the midfielder able to play a pass over the top of the opposition defence and into the space for his teammate to run onto, resulting in a goalscoring chance. This is a good example of Redondo's deep-lying

playmaking ability, which he will bring to Inter Miami, where he will be able to play passes like this into the feet of Lionel Messi.



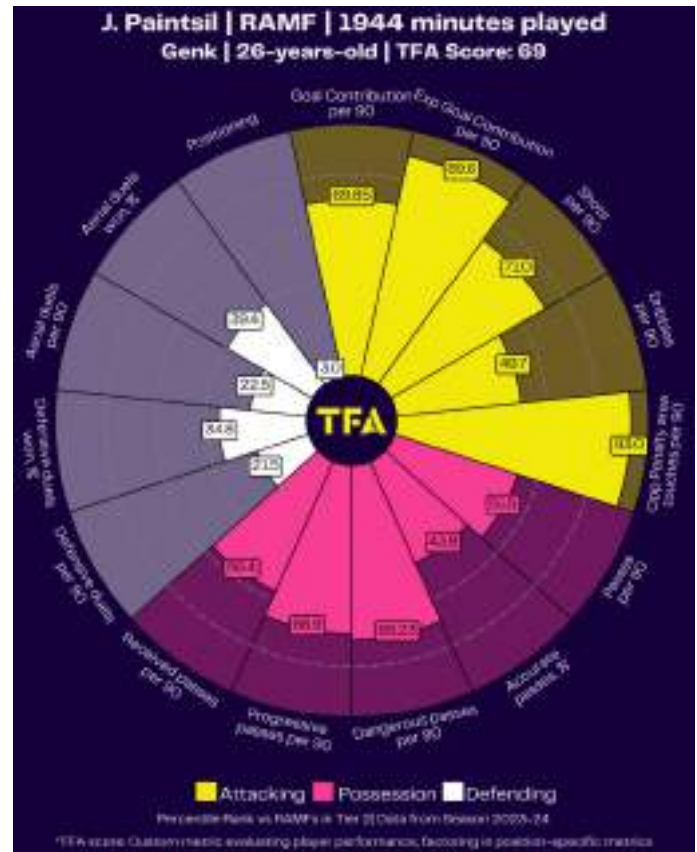
The image above shows an example of the quality Federico Redondo displays in defensive duels. While it is still an area he could use some improvement on, he has shown glimpses of his potential as the long-term replacement for Sergio Busquets in his early matches so far in Miami. In the phase of play above from the Concacaf Champions Cup match against Nashville SC, Redondo gets tight to the Nashville player as he receives possession, preventing the attacker from being able to turn him to the inside and drive forward into the vacant space towards the Inter Miami backline.

As a result, Redondo is able to dispossess the attacker, winning possession and able to play a pass back to his defensive line, allowing Inter Miami to start an attacking build and relieve the pressure on the Inter Miami midfield. Federico Redondo is another new signing in MLS that fans should keep an eye on, with the 21-year-old the likely long-term successor to Spanish legend Sergio Busquets in the Inter Miami midfield, as well as likely getting his first cap with the senior Argentina national team in the very near future.

## JOSEPH PAINTSIL - LA GALAXY

The last new MLS signing that could make the biggest impact that we will look at is Joseph Paintsil, with the Ghanaian winger joining from Belgian Pro League side Genk for a fee of close

to \$9 million. The speedy winger was brought in to bring a different dimension to the LA Galaxy attack, with head coach Greg Vanney looking to add pace to the wide positions and offer more dynamic options out wide to support striker Dejan Joveljić and Spanish designated player midfielder Riqui Puig. The 26-year-old has had an instant impact with the Galaxy, with Paintsil being an undisputed starter for Vanney since his arrival and one goal already to his name in his first three matches with the club.



As the pie chart graphic above illustrates, Paintsil tends to excel most in the attacking side of the game while also being above average in the more chance creation-based possession metrics. The 26-year-old Ghana international is not the best from a defensive perspective, though he has the potential to track back and support in defensive phases of play if that is what the current situation calls for.



The image above displays one of the key attributes and strengths that Joseph Paintsil possesses: his dribbling ability and ability to take opposition defenders on 1v1. In the phase of play above from a Belgian league match against Leuven earlier in this season, the 26-year-old receives possession in a wider position outside of the penalty box, with Paintsil able to get faced up and take the opposition defender on.

As the Ghanaian drives into the penalty box, he looks to go to the inside, forcing the defender to go with him and getting him off balance before quickly changing directions and proceeding to drive past the defender on the outside and into the six-yard box. Unfortunately, Paintsil ends up skying his effort on goal. However, this example still demonstrates the dribbling ability that the 26-year-old winger possesses in tighter spaces, as well as his strength to take opposition defenders on 1v1 and get past them.



As mentioned at the beginning of this section, probably one of the most dangerous attributes that Paintsil brings to this LA Galaxy side is his rapid pace and acceleration. Once he is able to get going into space, the 26-year-old will be hard to catch up to. The image above shows a good

example of the pace and acceleration that the Ghana international is going to bring to MLS.

The phase of play above shows the danger that Paintsil possesses, specifically on counterattacking moves, with this resulting from the opposition turning possession over in an advanced area with all of their numbers forward. As the ball is turned over, the Genk player who wins possession is able to find Paintsil, with the Ghanaian winger able to take a heavy touch into the space and get past the opposition midfielder with ease, allowing him to accelerate away into the attacking half. Paintsil ends up being able to progress the ball well into the opponent's final third before creating a chance with the onrushing runs of his teammates from deeper positions.

All in all, Joseph Paintsil will be able to bring a different dynamic to an LA Galaxy attack that lacked pace and acceleration, as well as dynamic playmaking abilities, in the wide areas last season. The early returns are promising, with the 26-year-old already causing opposition sides plenty of danger when allowed to run at opposition defences and be one of the main outlets in counter-attacking sequences.

## CONCLUSION

As this tactical analysis and scout report piece has been able to illustrate, there have been plenty of new signings that have come into MLS in this primary transfer window period, and while plenty of more signings will likely make a significant impact with their new side, these four signings are the ones we believe have the capability to make the biggest difference for their respective MLS side.

## BUNDESLIGA 2023/24

# A 10-YEAR COMPARISON OF HARRY KANE'S GOALS

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

**H**arry Kane might not win any trophy at Bayern Munich this season. This is not a statement that many people, including the 30-year-old himself, expected to make, but it is what it is.

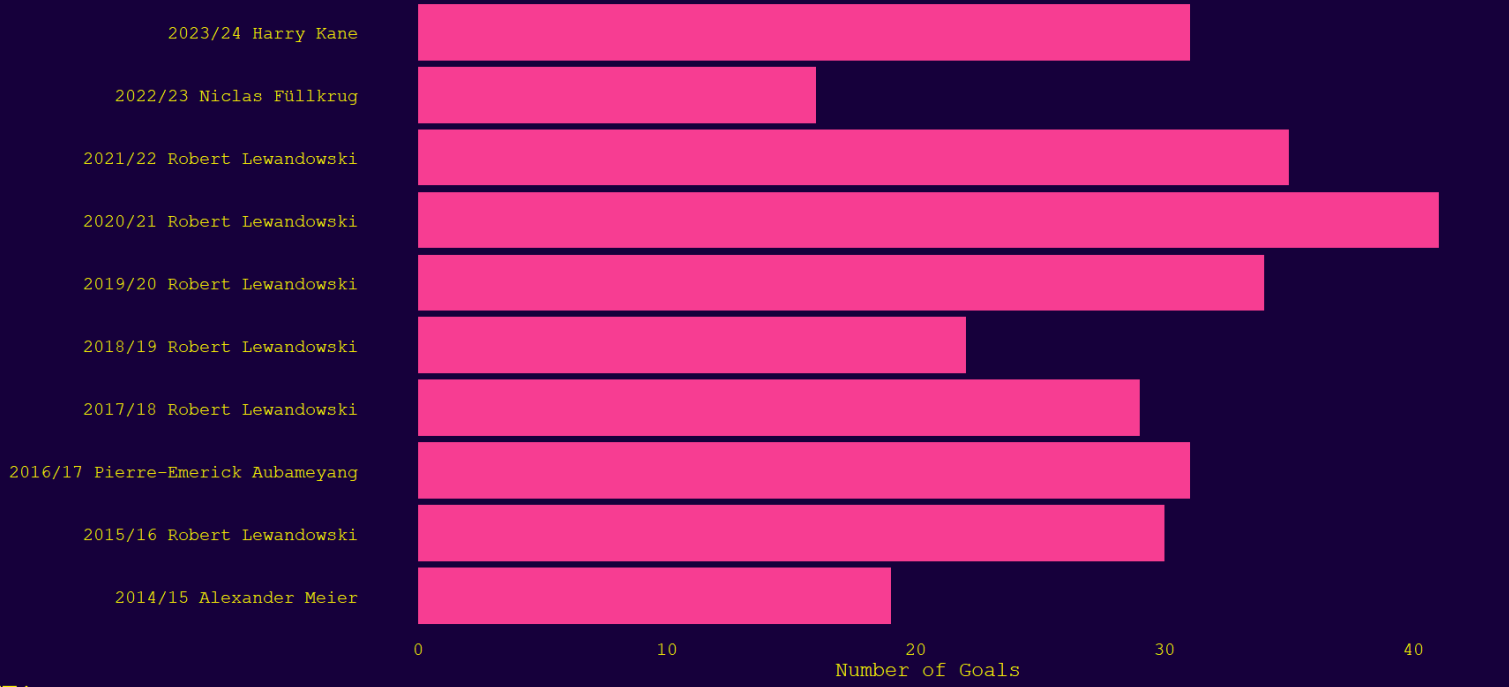
The German champions are seven points behind leaders Bayer Leverkusen, who remain unbeaten throughout the season at the time of writing. The Germans are already out of the other cup competitions but remain in the Champions League. For Kane, however, in terms of individual performances and records broken, this season will already be one to remember.

The visualisation below shows the top scorer along with the number of goals they scored in the last 10 Bundesliga seasons. It was written after the completion of Hoffenheim vs Stuttgart in Matchweek 26.

Harry Kane, with 31 goals in his first season in the Bundesliga, looks well on course to break Robert Lewandowski's record of 41 goals in a season. Lewandowski, now playing for Barcelona, achieved that feat during the 2020/21 season and before he moved to the Catalan giants, the Polish striker had finished as the top scorer of Germany's top flight for five straight campaigns from 2017/18 to 2021/22. During this period, he scored 29 goals in 2017/18, 22 in 2018/19, 34 in 2019/20, and 35 in 2021/22.

Niclas Füllkrug's tally of 16 goals last season at Werder Bremen was the lowest total from a top scorer in the last 10 seasons, while Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang finished as the top scorer of 2016/17 with 31 goals—one more than Robert Lewandowski, who was the top scorer with 30 in 2015/16. With 19 goals, Alexander Meier finished as the top scorer in 2014/15.

## Bundesliga Top scorers | The story of last 10 years



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyReddevil

TFA



# ZELJKO SOPIC

ZELJKO SOPIC



HNK RIJEKA

**HOW HE HAS HNK RIJEKA  
SITTING AT THE TOP OF THE  
CROATIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE**

At the moment of writing, HNK Rijeka, led by their new manager, Zeljko Sopic, are at the top of 1. HNL, Croatia's first division league. After a total of 26 games, they've accumulated 56 points, one more than the second-placed Hajduk Split and five more than Dinamo Zagreb, who currently sit in third. Things may change by the end of the season, but with the introduction of Sopic as their new manager, Rijeka have made leaps in the chase of their second-ever league trophy and their first since the triumph in 2016/17.

And for a Croatian league that has historically been dominated by a single club from the capital, which is not too dissimilar to the Bayern Munich situation in the Bundesliga, this is a huge achievement. So, in this tactical analysis, we'll look at Željko Sopic, his philosophy and tactics and do a full analysis of his team to see the secret to their recent success.

## MANAGER PROFILE

Sopic has been in management for a number of years now; his early career was spent as assistant manager at both NK Lokomotiva Zagreb and NK Rudeš, where he eventually took over as the first-team coach in 2014. Following that stint, he even spent some time at Dinamo Zagreb, performing several roles from a youth academy coach to assistant manager and eventually caretaker manager for the senior team in 2016. His next couple of jobs took him abroad to Al-Ain FC and Sabah FK in the UAE and Azerbaijan before he settled back in Croatia in 2022/23 as HNK Gorica's first-team coach and then, in August 2023, he took over HNK Rijeka for the 2023/24 season.

Currently, he's leading the second-youngest squad in the league with an average age of 24.5 and doing so extremely well. Rijeka are a part of the big three teams in Croatia and are playing some of the most entertaining and effective

football in 1. HNL, despite the league's overall drop in quality this season. In 2023/24, Sopic has already led his team in a total of 30 games at the moment of writing, registering 18 victories, eight draws and only four defeats. In 2024 alone, Rijeka has so far won seven out of eight games in total, losing only one to their direct rivals for the title, Dinamo.

But the 49-year-old coach is a great manager, too; he's created a team that follows him and trusts his judgement and fiery personality, which is definitely a big part of their recent success. The other side of the coin, however, are the tactics. So, let's dive into the analysis next.

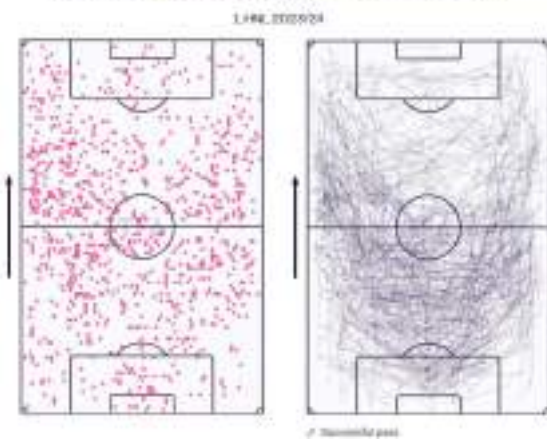
## IN-POSSESSION TACTICAL ANALYSIS

### BUILD-UP PHASE TACTICS

In 2023/24 so far, Rijeka have mostly relied on the balanced approach of the 4-1-4-1 structure (56% of the games in 1. HNL), with Sopic occasionally opting for a 4-2-3-1 in specific situations. The former formation, however, is somewhat of a staple of the new coach, and Rijeka will generally field a single defensive midfielder with interiors around and just above him. They are also a team that doesn't depend, nor do they insist on long spells of possession, ranking fourth in the league among the best possession sides with an average of 51.1%.

They are also the team with the fourth-most passes (6th per 90). They will generally like to be the protagonists and the aggressor, but not necessarily through extended periods in possession of the ball. Instead, we'll see them use their dynamism and rotations to gain access to the wide areas to progress the play and attack the box.

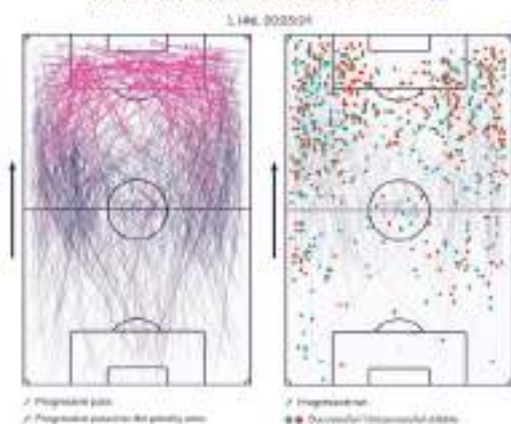
### RIJEKA TOUCH MAP & PASS MAP



Looking at their touch and pass maps for 2023/24, we can see that wide focus quite clearly; Rijeka will recycle the ball if needed in the first phase, but they will also be fairly quick to verticalise the play once there's an avenue to do so, as indicated by the medium-to-long-pass sequences into the full-back and winger zones from the defence and midfield respectively. This doesn't come as a big surprise since Rijeka have the third-lowest passing rate with 13.1 passes per minute of ball possession and the fourth-most long passes (most among the big three) in the league.

The vertical approach seems to work, however, largely because the team's main profiles benefit immensely from it—more on that in the later parts of this tactical analysis. Staying in the build-up phase, however, their progression graph, which we will see next, adds more proof to our initial wide-area-focused thesis.

### RIJEKA BALL PROGRESSION



Once again, most of Rijeka's progression is indeed centred around accessing their wide

zones as quickly and efficiently as possible. If progression is happening from the first phase, it will generally be a long switch or a ball over the top. Alternatively, they will use progressive carries from the half-spaces to bypass the opposition's first line of press and link up with the dropping midfielders or inverting full-backs.

They do rank fifth in progressive passes in the league but third in progressive runs, which tells us they do have a preference in that regard. Of course, since they pass less and put less focus on possession than the other two members of the big three, their progressive numbers are also subsequently lower. Nonetheless, Sopić has managed to introduce some clear tactics in the first phase to ensure smooth progression even in the face of a press.

The following sequences (A – B, 1 – 2) show us a distinct approach in the build-up phase Rijeka utilise to break the opposition's first line of defence.

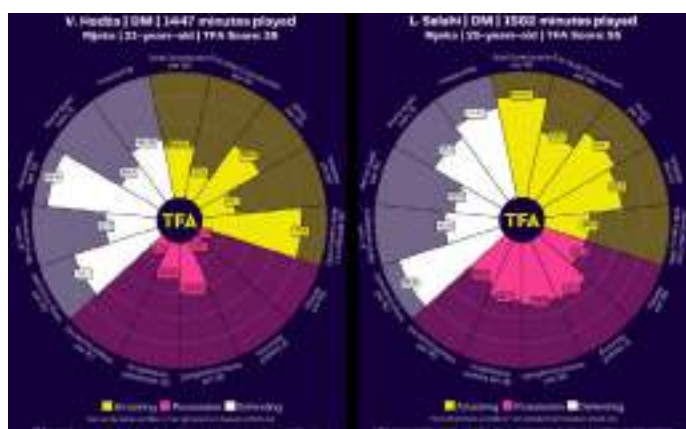


Their centre-backs aren't necessarily the best ball players in the league, but the system will often position them very wide and will be set up in such a way that one of them (largely the RCB) can be ejected into midfield for a progressive run from the first line, as seen in both sequenced pictured.

The idea is relatively simple: either ensure positional or numerical superiority so the centre-backs can run with the ball and then link up with either the high interiors, the inverting full-back or the near-side winger. Since Rijeka do a lot of

wide rotations, which we'll touch upon shortly in the following sections of this tactical analysis, the centre-back will often have a different target in various different situations. That said, the onus on the wide zones remains here as well.

If the centre-backs can't find the space to run into on their own, one of the full-backs can drop into the backline to create a back-three and force an overload or simply drag players from the opposition's second line to create more space there for their own midfielders. Speaking of midfielders, two players that stand out in the first two phases are Veldin Hodža and Lindon Selahi.



Both of them profile as defensive midfielders, but the former is often more of an interior who gets the licence to roam higher up, as seen in his latest venture when he scored a hat trick in a derby game against NK Osijek. The numbers suggest Selahi is the most dangerous one in possession, but it's Hodža who registers a lot of touches in the opposition's penalty area per 90 for a midfielder who profiles as a defensive one.

Still, these two players have a lot of influence on getting the ball into the right areas and ensuring Rijeka's play is ticking smoothly. This is especially true for someone like Selahi, whose presence is that of a utility player and a glue for the rest of the squad in that pivotal position in the central areas. Again, the pure numbers don't necessarily top many categories in a league-wide context, but that is more due to the distinct style the team prefers than an indication of a lower-quality player.

## FINAL THIRD TACTICS

Rijeka, under Sopić, are a deadly team to face. In 2023/24, they've scored the most goals in the league with 52 from 47.19 xG and have done so with the most total and per 90 shots, even eclipsing the likes of Dinamo Zagreb and Hajduk Split. They are a team that will outscore most if not all, other teams in 1. HNL regularly. And this is where we come back to the wide area focus.

Rijeka arguably have some of the best isolation wingers in the league so it's only natural their tactics aim to exploit their best qualities. As a team, they rank third in most 1v1s and dribbles (second if we look at per 90 stats), which is an indicator of the emphasis they put on such an approach. Their deadliest combinations and sequences are usually born from a wide ejection or a 1v1 isolation for one of the wingers who can attack space.



This last example shows a relatively generic couple of sequences that show Rijeka's intent to create such scenarios as much as possible. This can be done in a more stable phase of open play possession or in transitional moments, as shown in the images. Generally, if Rijeka can access

their wide men in open space, it's curtains for the opposition. But actually creating those situations can be easier said than done when the other team knows the focus will be put there. Precisely for that reason, Sopić has implemented several tactics to outmanoeuvre the opponent and gain an advantage.

The fundamental principle is that of rotation since the focus is indeed on the wide areas. Naturally, the full-backs and wingers need to have a good relationship and understanding of their respective roles. Sometimes, that will mean the winger will invert to drag the marker away and open acres of space for the full-back to exploit. Other times, the full-back will invert to overload the opposition's full-back who now suddenly has to make a choice between two players occupying his zone. Or the two will simply move in opposite directions to create more dilemmas for the defenders.

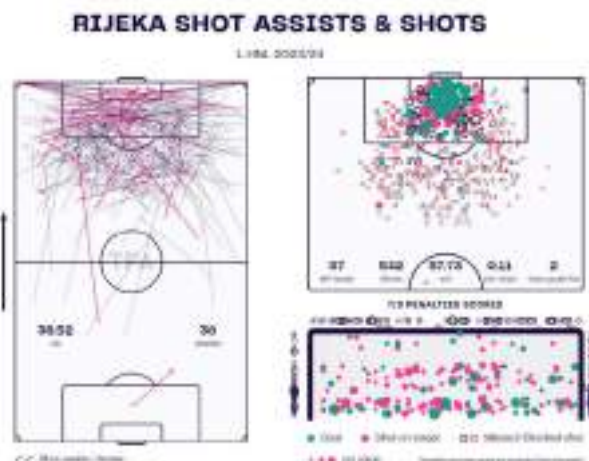


Again, the rotations are pretty simple but also effective precisely because of the decisional dilemmas they put on the defenders: do they follow their markers blindly and risk exposing space behind them? Do they maintain their positions not to compromise their zones but then risk having the attackers accessible in advantageous areas of the pitch? Rijeka do this exceptionally well and always with a single goal in mind: isolation.

The sequences in the previous image all created isolations or opened up space for the wide players to exploit. When you have enough quality in those areas and in those specific positions, such a system can only amplify their value. Looking

at their attacking proficiency, it does seem to be working for now.

Rijeka are scoring in line with their expected goals value and are scoring from high-value positions in the box. Similarly, they are a team that can create from open play and set pieces, as well as get goal-scoring contributions from several different players, each of whom can produce moments of magic when the other is not having the best of days.



In that sense, Rijeka can win games against all sorts of opponents even when they're not necessarily performing at an exceptionally high level; they simply have many difference-makers who flip a game on its head and contribute with something out of nothing. If someone like Toni Fruk doesn't produce a goal when it's a do-or-die situation, maybe Marko Pjaca will. If not Pjaca, then maybe Marco Pašalić will. And if not him, perhaps it will be Jorge Obregon or Franjo Ivanović. You get the point; none of them are necessarily consistent game-breakers, but they don't have to be because someone will always come up with something at some point. That's Rijeka's secret.

They can succeed with players who won't all win you games every week, but at least one will always shine with a 'something out of nothing' moment. Interestingly, however, for a team with such a clear focus on the wide areas, Rijeka are surprisingly bad at crossing the ball and hitting the right places.

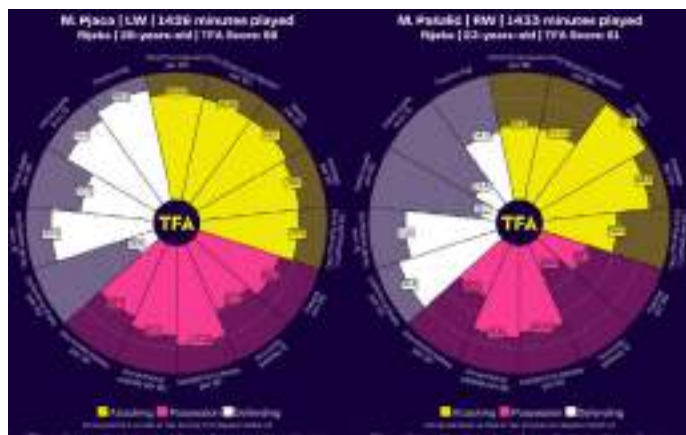
## RIJEKA CROSSING ZONES

1. HNL 2023/24



They rank sixth in the league for most crosses but have the second-worst accuracy with 28.9%. Similarly, very few of their crosses actually find their targets in the six-yard box, and they are once again the team with the second-worst success rate in the league. For a team with title aspirations and a clear preference for wide isolations, this could pose a problem.

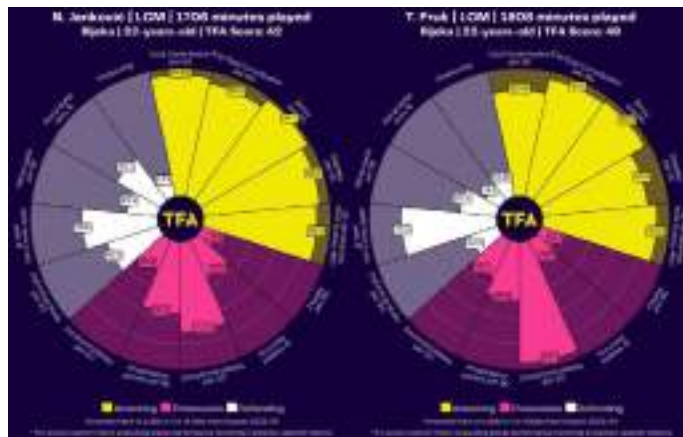
That said, they still have enough firepower from both a creative and goal-scoring standpoint when it comes to wingers, and they've managed to thrive in spite of their crossing inefficiency. At the moment, both Pjaca and Pašalić seem to have differential quality on the flanks, and they come with slightly different skills.



Both, however, have a high influence on Rijeka's goal-scoring proficiency and seem to be key cogs in Sopić's machine. But they are hardly the only ones. In fact, arguably the most firepower the current 1. HNL leaders have is found in the middle of the pitch and from attacking midfielders

or interiors like Fruk and Niko Janković, the latter also occupying the wide areas at times.

When it comes to creating chances, goals, and shots, whether from passing or shooting, no one on the team is as effective as these two players. Even more impressive is that we're talking about 23-year-olds and 22-year-olds, respectively. A quick glance at their statistical profiles says enough, as they top almost every single attacking metric in our database.



Interestingly, however, it's also what Rijeka do out of possession that often contributes to their in-possession prowess. Let's explore that next.

## OUT-OF-POSSESSION TACTICAL ANALYSIS

At the moment of writing, HNK Rijeka have the second-best defensive record in 1. HNL with 20 goals conceded, only worse than Hajduk Split's 14. Similarly, their opponents have only managed to accumulate a total of 27.7 xGA, meaning they've so far managed to concede less than what you'd expect from the quality of the opposition's chances in front of their goal. But if we look a bit deeper into the statistical analysis, we can see that Rijeka are exceptional at keeping the opposition at bay.

Not only do they have the third-most shots blocked in the league, but have also allowed the second-least shots to the opposition, solidifying themselves as one of the most defensively secure teams in the Croatian first division.

### RIJEKA SHOTS FACED & BLOCKED



We can see such an example here. Immediately upon recovering the ball in the middle third, Rijeka activate several runners who attack space and ultimately penetrate the box. This is another aspect of this highly vertical play that seems to be yielding good results: always having enough bodies inside the opposition's penalty area. While not foolproof, this principle can mask the flaw they have with hitting targets in the six-yard box, as there are always more than just one to aim for, and the chances of converting are higher.

Finally, if we examine Rijeka's defensive territory and high regains through a statistical lens, we can see the numbers confirm our initial thesis of them being a more mid-block-oriented team than necessarily an aggressively high-press one. As previously mentioned, the intensity comes in collapsing in the middle third, even though Rijeka is no stranger to turnovers in possession and creating or even scoring directly through them.

### RIJEKA DEFENSIVE TERRITORY & HIGH REGAINS



According to our database, they rank sixth in challenge intensity (rate of defensive actions) and have the fifth-highest PPDA number of all teams in the league, putting them right down the middle. In other words, they are not the most

It's quite interesting to note that they have prevented around 9.75 goals just through their blocks and goalkeeper intervention. Regarding defending in zones, Rijeka seem equally proficient at both the left and the right, but low-driven shots to the goalkeeper's right side pose a significant problem to the current 1. HNL leaders. That being said, most of those goals did come from higher xG situations, making them more clear-cut than others. While this might simply mean Rijeka have allowed the opposition to get into an excellent chance to score those low-driven shots, it's also unlikely this is purely a coincidence either.

Still, even with that taken into account, they do seem like solid box defenders, both individually and collectively, and know how to defend in a low-to-mid block. Generally speaking, Sopic doesn't have them pressing high relentlessly and will instead emphasise intensity in the middle third of the pitch, focusing on collapsing and then verticalising very quickly.

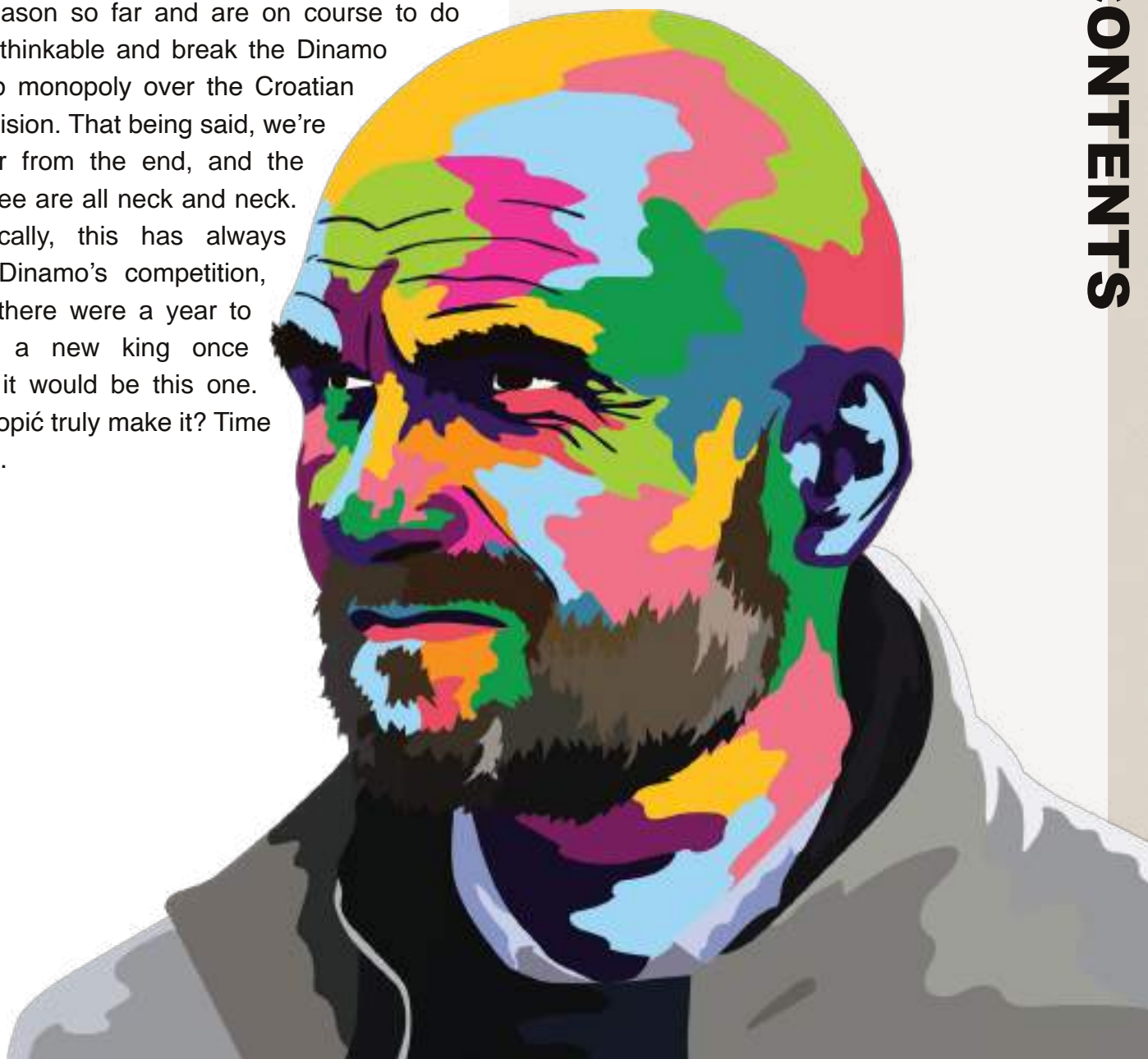


intense but are also far from being fully passive in their approach. Interestingly, too, they rank sixth and seventh in total defensive duels and interceptions, respectively, but they have the most among the Croatian big three.

One final thing to note here is the number of substitutions made, as Rijeka top this category and is the team that makes the most changes in games under Sopić this season. They are young and hungry, but they also still need to prove themselves worthy of being title contenders. Perhaps that's also why the new coach keeps shuffling the cards to keep the team as fresh and as motivated as possible.

## CONCLUSION

**H**NK Rijeka have had an incredible 2023/24 season so far and are on course to do the unthinkable and break the Dinamo Zagreb monopoly over the Croatian top division. That being said, we're still far from the end, and the big three are all neck and neck. Historically, this has always been Dinamo's competition, but if there were a year to crown a new king once more, it would be this one. Can Sopić truly make it? Time will tell.



# FLYING HIGH

XABI ALONSO



BAYER LEVERKUSEN

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WING-BACKS IN EUROPE'S WINNING TEAMS

FINTAN O'REILLY // @FINTANFOOTBALL

Throughout the history of football tactics, certain coaches are synonymous with back-three systems. Helenio Herrera famously deployed a 5-3-2 system during the 1960s with great success at Inter, winning three Serie A titles and two European Cups during those glory years.

Carlos Billardo was famed for using a 3-5-2 with Argentina during the 1980s, overseeing a FIFA World Cup-winning side that had Diego Maradona in a starring role.

In more recent years, we've seen the likes of Antonio Conte fly the back-three flag into battle, maintaining these systems' popularity with the success he's been able to deliver at Juventus, Chelsea and Inter.

The use of back-threes and wing-backs has been common among some of Europe's most successful teams during the 2023/24 season, and this tactical analysis piece is going to provide an in-depth comparative analysis of how three of Europe's most dominant sides have utilised wing-backs — the wide defenders just outside the back-three — throughout the current campaign in highly influential roles.

Our tactical theory is going to focus on Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen under Xabi Alonso, Serie A leaders Inter under Simone Inzaghi and Primeira Liga leaders Sporting CP under Rúben Amorim.

Let's get straight into it over in North Rhine-Westphalia.

## XABI ALONSO'S BAYER LEVERKUSEN

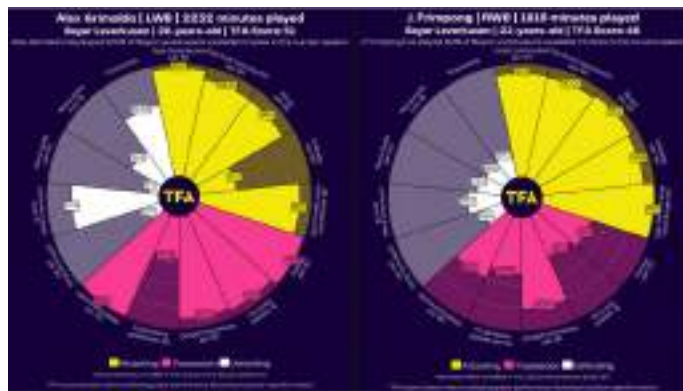
Xabi Alonso has been the talk of the town when it comes to coaches of late, with Jürgen Klopp set to depart the ex-Spain midfielder's former club, Liverpool, at the end of the season

and another ex-club of Alonso's, FC Bayern, experiencing a miserable campaign by their lofty standards that will also see Thomas Tuchel depart and a new mastermind enter the Bavarian giants' dugout this summer.

The 42-year-old who began his coaching career in the academy at Real Sociedad before quickly garnering attention and propelling himself directly into a top job in one of Europe's biggest leagues, the German Bundesliga

At present, the Spaniard is on course to become the first coach to earn a Bundesliga winners' medal with a club other than Bayern since current LFC boss Klopp achieved that feat with Borussia Dortmund in 2011/12.

Alonso has relied mostly on a 3-4-3/3-4-2-1 system throughout 2023/24, which has seen summer 2023 signing Alejandro Grimaldo and Jeremie Frimpong star at left and right wing-back, respectively.



Regarding their in-possession roles, Grimaldo and Frimpong have both been utilised in a highly aggressive, attacking manner, featuring very little in the first two phases of possession play, coming to life almost exclusively in the final third.

Their primary contributions to Leverkusen come in regard to chance creation — this is demonstrated by the fact they both have fairly low percentile ranks in progressive passes per 90 on the 2023/24 pizza charts above in figure 1 but boast highly impressive numbers in the dangerous passes department, along with goal

contributions, expected goal contributions and shots.

This inversion in the final third is partly displayed by the two players' shot assist maps in figure 3, where we can see plenty of Grimaldo's shot assists coming from that half-space area just outside the box and a decent amount of Frimpong's shot assists being delivered from the edge of the box or just inside the box — the Dutch right wing-back loves to perform a cutback cross into the danger zone as depicted by the image above.



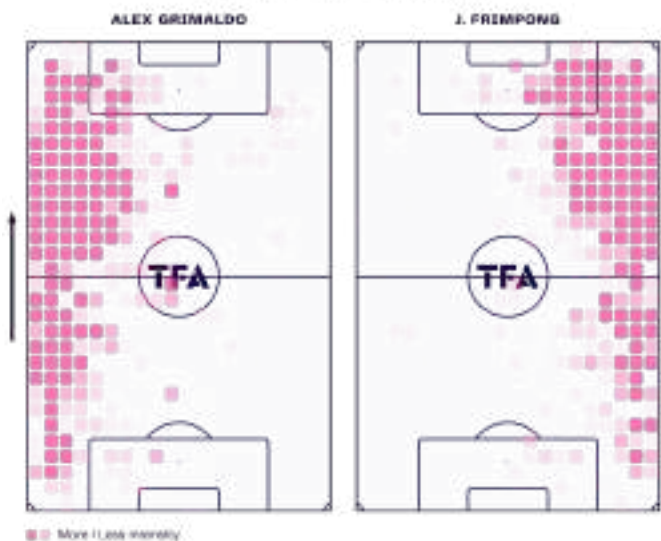
The out-to-in runs of Grimaldo and Frimpong also help them end up in good shooting positions quite often, which is why both men have contributed a significant amount of goals, as well as goal assists, this term.

Grimaldo has generated the fifth-highest xG (4.01) and scored the second-most goals (nine) of any Bayer Leverkusen player in the Bundesliga this season. Underlapping runs like the one we see following some link-up play outside the box in figure 4 above have played a vital role in his goal contributions, as the opposition defence simply doesn't prepare for the left wing-back to be arriving in such an advanced position; as a result, Grimaldo often finds himself in space with time to shoot from a dangerous position as was the case for the goal above.

Aggressive overlapping runs from left centre-back Piero Hincapié are critical to the success of Grimaldo's underlapping runs often. This ensures the opposition remains stretched often, creating more space for the inverting wing-back to exploit.

### HEATMAP

All games from Bundesliga 2023/2024



The duo's respective heatmaps for the 2023/24 campaign further illustrate their advanced roles within Alonso's system. Grimaldo is slightly more involved in deeper areas than Frimpong, who almost exclusively operates inside the opposition's half, but both players still clearly engage far more in advanced areas than deeper ones.

It's worth noting, also, how these two don't just hug the sidelines and provide width for their team in the final third; they also get involved in slightly more central areas — Grimaldo in the half-space just outside the penalty area and Frimpong inside the box.

### SHOT ASSISTS

All games from Bundesliga 2023/2024





We find another example of this in figure 5 above, where the Spanish wing-back pulls away off the opposition full-back's shoulder, losing his marker while he picks up a nice shooting position inside the box, between several defenders but not very near any of them.

This is unexpected movement for a wing-back; his marker out wide doesn't follow him as it's too narrow, but none of the central defenders pick him up either, with other threats already clocked in more traditional attacking positions.

The result, again, is that Grimaldo gets a free shot from a dangerous area — and the 28-year-old has shown throughout the 2023/24 campaign that he doesn't to be asked too many times to convert his opportunities.



Alonso has also used Frimpong in a very aggressive manner but somewhat differently to the way in which he's utilised Grimaldo.

Leverkusen love to build their chance creation on the left — doing so a great deal more than they do on the right. When this is the case, Frimpong doesn't typically hold the width out on the right. Instead, he moves inside, attacking the box

and offering a crossing option for his left-sided counterpart.

The 23-year-old Dutchman has generated the second-highest xG (7.37) and scored the third-most goals (eight) of any member of Alonso's squad this term — and a lot of his chances have come as a result of him drifting into an excellent goalscoring position inside the box, evading a marker and finding some space to get a nice shot off and convert, as we see in figure 6 above.

Again, the opposition defence isn't always prepared for this aggressive movement into central areas from the wing-back, which can allow the player to evade detection until it's too late. Frimpong's runs from out-to-in at the back post have been highly effective at helping his team generate a plethora of goalscoring opportunities this term.

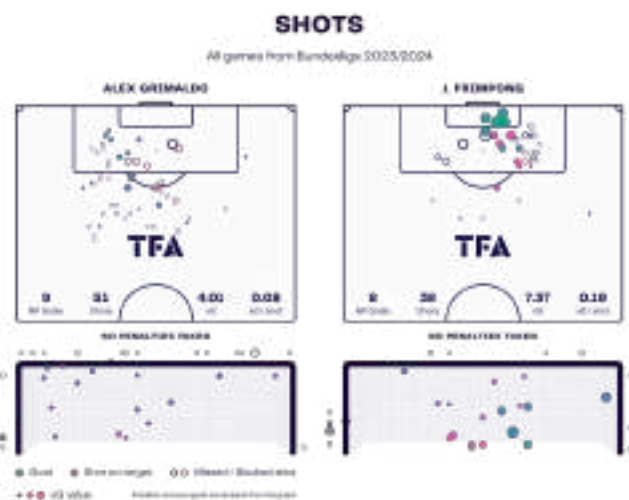
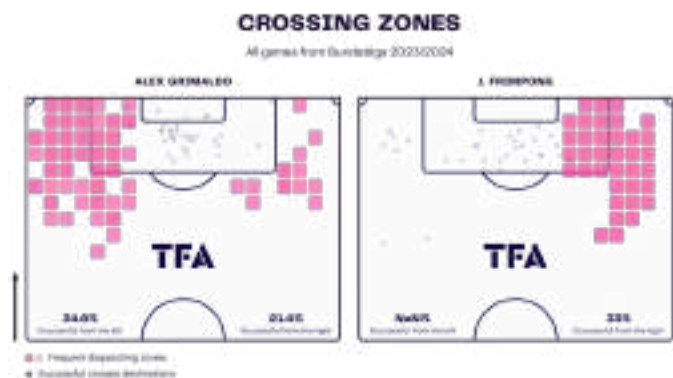


Figure 7 illustrates the two wingbacks' differing goalscoring roles. Grimaldo (51) has taken more shots than Frimpong (38), but those shots have typically come from slightly worse positions (0.08 xG per shot). Still, he's outperformed his xG and converted a nice amount (nine)—a result of some excellent finishing on his behalf this term.

Meanwhile, Frimpong has demonstrated positioning and movement that a striker would envy, generating 0.19 xG per shot this season. Together, they've proven a lethal force, contributing over a quarter of their team's goals

between them — and that’s before mentioning their combined total of 15 assists.

in Europe’s top-five leagues among right wing-backs this season.

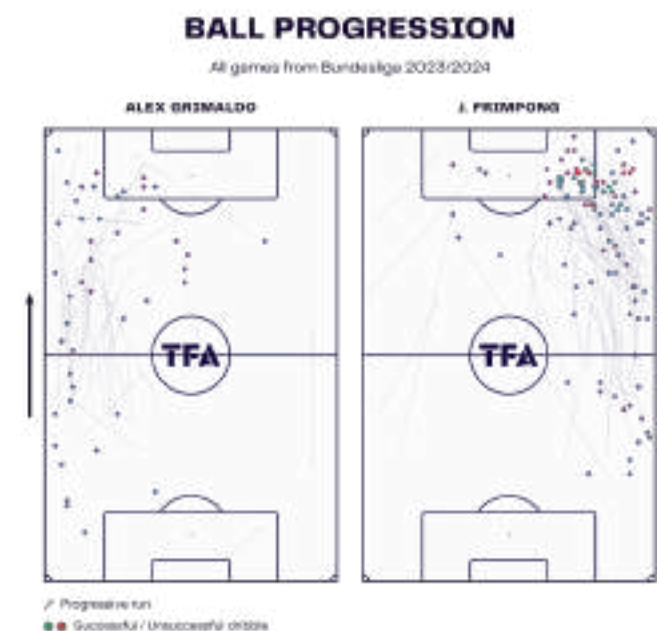


Grimaldo’s crossing has been pinpoint throughout the 2023/24 campaign, proving crucial to his accumulation of 8.16 expected assists and 10 actual assists — both the most of any Leverkusen player.

On the other hand, dribbling is not a major aspect of Grimaldo’s game, with the Spaniard falling in the 33.7 percentile for dribbles per 90 among left wing-backs from Europe’s top-five leagues in 2023/24.

Frimpong’s crossing, meanwhile, has been a little less consistent, but the 23-year-old has still made five assists — the fifth-most of any Leverkusen player — and generated the fourth-most expected assists (3.99) in the team.

When it comes to entering the final third, it’s far more common to see Grimaldo engaging in intricate link play and utilise intelligent off-the-ball movement to enter dangerous areas than Frimpong, while Leverkusen’s right wing-back is more likely to take opposition defenders on in 1v1s and rely a lot on his technical capability with the ball at his feet as well as his pace.



With regard to progressive passing, you’re not likely to see either of these two heavily involved in deeper areas from where these types of balls are more likely to be played as a result of their respective roles within Alonso’s team, as already described. However, Grimaldo does play some line-splitting balls towards the box from the edge of the final third at times, which can prove effective at getting the likes of attacking midfielder Florian Wirtz — another creative force in this team — involved in the game.

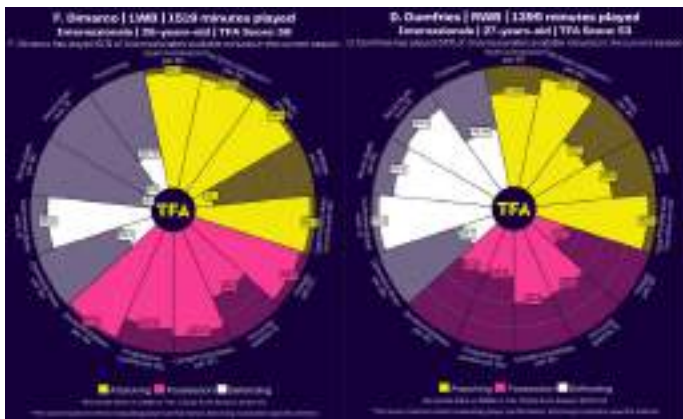
With regards to ball progression, the viz above in figure 9 highlights this duo’s dribbling activity from 2023/24.

Still, it’s worth bearing in mind that Alonso uses these two primarily as chance creators and goalscoring threats inside the final third, with little involvement in possession phases outside of that.

Frimpong is a high-volume dribbler, which is a significant part of his game, especially in the final third, as figure 9 displays. The Dutchman ranks in the 90.9 percentile for dribbles per 90

## SIMONE INZAGHI’S INTER

So, how does Alonso’s use of wing-backs at Bayer Leverkusen compare with that of his counterparts in a couple of Europe’s other strongest leagues who are also dominating their domestic competition this term?



Inzaghi tends to deploy his wing-backs in a slightly more traditional manner than Alonso when it comes to their positioning, with Dimarco and Denzel Dumfries hugging the touchline a lot more than Grimaldo and Frimpong do with Leverkusen.

The Inter duo's respective heatmaps show that they tend to stay much wider than Leverkusen's wing-backs, making out-to-in runs a lot less frequently.

This sees them perform more exclusively as width providers in the final third, allowing the striking duo and attacking midfielder(s) to perform the central attacking roles.

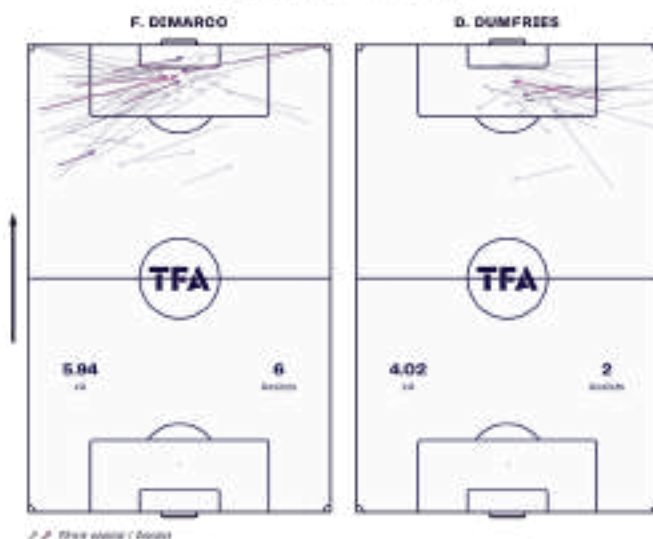
Firstly, let's head over to Italy, where Simone Inzaghi has primarily utilised a 3-5-2 system with Inter this term. At the time of writing, I Nerazzurri lead city rivals AC Milan by 14 points with nine games left to be played in Italy's top-flight this term.

The role of Federico Dimarco at left wing-back has been of particular interest in this Inter setup, with the 26-year-old playing a pivotal role in chance creation, similar to Leverkusen's Grimaldo.

Dimarco has generated the most expected assists (5.94) and made the highest number of assists (six) of any Inter player during the current campaign. At the same time, he's also taken a decent number of shots for a left wing-back but doesn't come close to Grimaldo's numbers in that particular department.

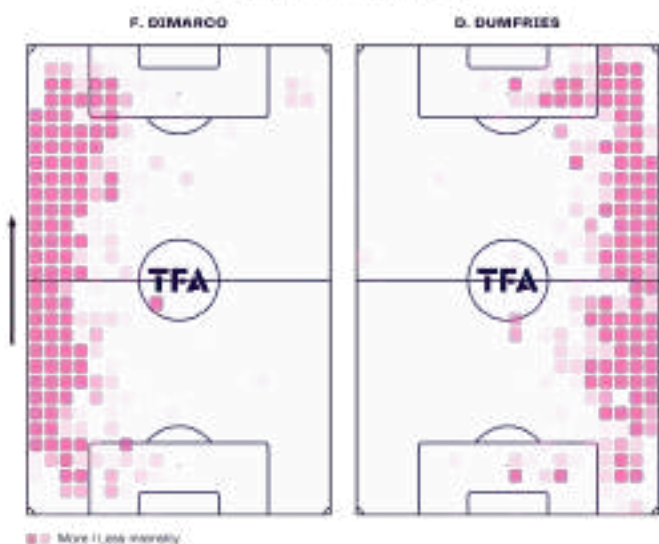
### SHOT ASSISTS

All games from Serie A 2023/2024



### HEATMAP

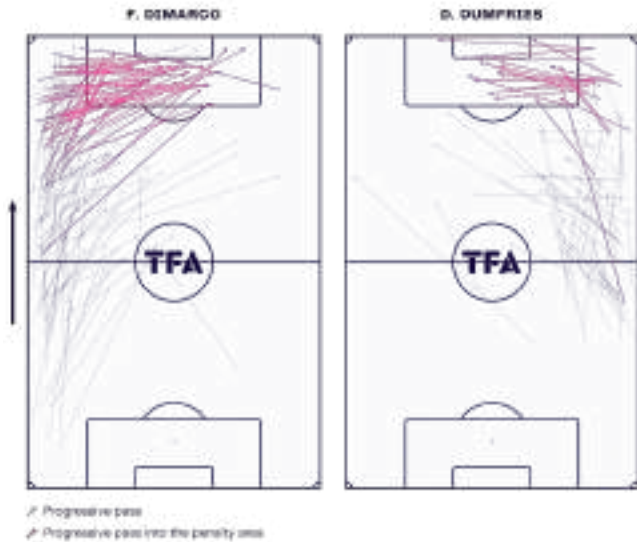
All games from Serie A 2023/2024



Similarly, Dimarco's shot assist map in figure 12 differs from that of Grimaldo in that, as you might surmise from the analysis above, there's far less chance creation coming from the half-space; instead, the 26-year-old's shot assists all pretty much come from the wing — as is the case with Dumfries on the right.

## PROGRESSIVE PASSES

All games from Serie A 2023/2024



In the build-up, Inzaghi's two wide centre-backs tend to sit on the sidelines while the central centre-back and one central midfielder will split wide of the goalkeeper, forming something of a back-four. Dimarco and Dumfries then advance, picking up positions on either side of the remaining two midfielders behind the striking duo, so they essentially create a 4-4-2 structure with Dimarco and Dumfries playing as the wingers.

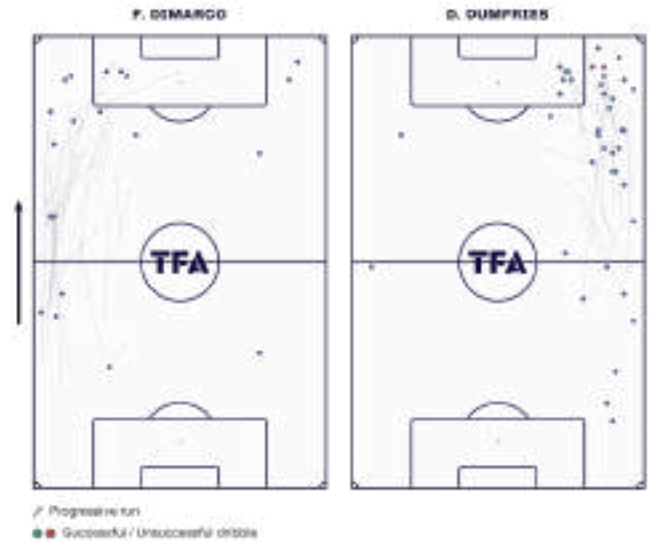
Dumfries tends to remain higher, becoming an option for his deeper players as they play out from the back on occasion, but rarely offering much in terms of ball progression from deep outside of sometimes receiving if needed.

Dimarco, on the other hand, offers much more as a progressor, falling in the 80.15 percentile for progressive passes per 90 this term compared to 38.3 for Dumfries when ranked among players in their position from Europe's top-five leagues.

Of the four wing-backs we've analysed so far in this piece, Dimarco is the one most likely to receive with a good body shape inside his own half and pick out a runner in a more advanced position, moving his team upfield in this manner.

## BALL PROGRESSION

All games from Serie A 2023/2024



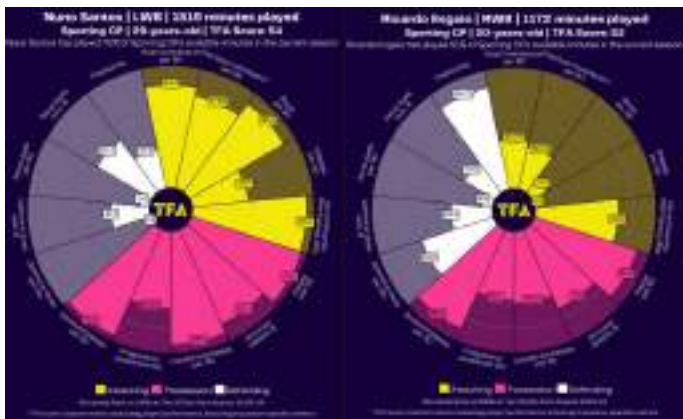
However, like Grimaldo but perhaps an even more extreme version, Dimarco doesn't dribble much at all, preferring to do his progression via passing, off-the-ball movement and intricate link play.

Dumfries, on the other hand, likes to take opposition defenders on in the final third a decent amount but doesn't come near the dribble volume of his compatriot Frimpong, all the same. Still, I'd class dribbling as a strength in the 27-year-old Dutchman's game — he's capable of beating his man and carrying into a decent position for chance creation.

All in all, in Inzaghi's side, the wing-backs again prove crucial when it comes to chance creation, but this time, there's a clear standout in Dimarco on the left compared with Dumfries on the right.

## RÚBEN AMORIM'S SPORTING CP

Lastly, let's head to Lisbon, where Rúben Amorim is on course to guide Sporting CP to their 20th Portuguese top-flight title and what would be only their fourth since the turn of the millennium this season. Sporting currently sit just one point ahead of Benfica at the time of writing this piece, though they do also have a game in hand.



amount to his team's chance creation this term, generating the fourth-most expected assists (4.39) and providing the second-most assists (six) in the team.

Like Dimarco, his shot assists mainly tend to come from wider positions as opposed to the half-space like Grimaldo, but Santos makes a lot more shorter crosses. In contrast, Dimarco would typically cross the ball from wider positions.

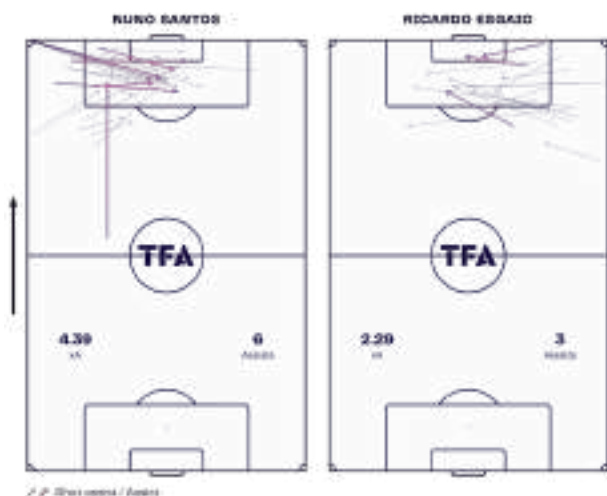
Esgaio, meanwhile, has generated the seventh-highest xA (2.29) and joint-fifth-highest assists tally (three) of any Sporting player in the 2023/24 campaign, which is still notable but does ultimately leave him with quite unimpressive numbers for goal contributions and expected goal contributions on the pizza chart above in figure 15, indicative of how this compares with his positional peers in the world's 'Tier 2' leagues (the Portuguese Primeira Liga, Russian Premier League, EFL Championship, Turkish Süper Lig, Argentinian top-flight, Brazilian top-flight, Belgian Pro League and Dutch Eredivisie).

Esgaio's chance creation primarily comes from underlapping runs through the half-space, between defenders and into the penalty box, where he'll aim to receive a through ball before playing a cutback pass towards a high-percentage shooting position.

Nuno Santos (left) and Ricardo Esgaio (right) have been Amorim's primary wing-back duo at Estádio José Alvalade this term, with Amorim mostly utilising a 3-4-3 shape similar to Xabi Alonso. However, Amorim's use of wing-backs is significantly different to that of the Bayer Leverkusen boss, with the 39-year-old Sporting boss having less creative flair on the wings than either Alonso or Inzaghi.

### SHOT ASSISTS

All games from Primeira Liga 2023/2024

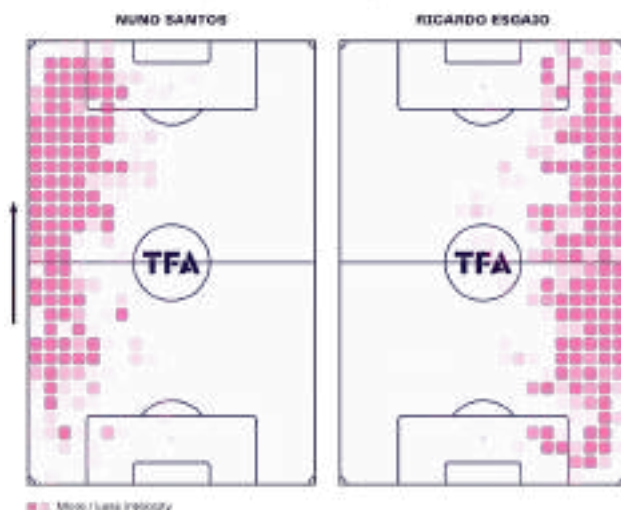


At Leverkusen (Grimaldo) and Inter (Dimarco), the primary creator for the 2023/24 season has been a wing-back — the left wing-back on both occasions. However, that's not the case at Sporting, where 25-year-old winger and attacking midfielder Pedro Gonçalves has both generated the most expected assists (7.02) and provided the most assists (nine) for Leões in the league this season.

Nevertheless, Sporting's main left wing-back, Nuno Santos, has also contributed a decent

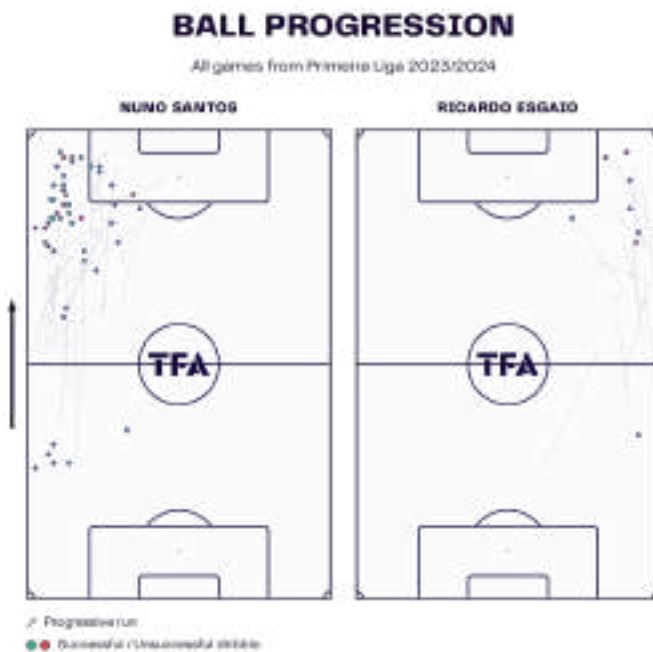
### HEATMAP

All games from Primeira Liga 2023/2024



Esgaio is probably the most active wing-back in deep areas of the six included in this analysis, with Santos also getting involved in deeper areas a fair amount, dropping off and making himself available as a passing option as his team builds out from the back.

This also makes Santos and Esgaio the only wing-back duo to both have a high percentile rank in passes per 90, as indicated in figure 15 above of the three pairings analysed in this piece.



Don't expect to see Esgaio or Santos making a tonne of dribbles; again, these types of actions are more common in other parts of this Sporting side, though Santos will perform more than Esgaio, the latter of whom primarily progresses into creative positions via his link play and off-the-ball runs.

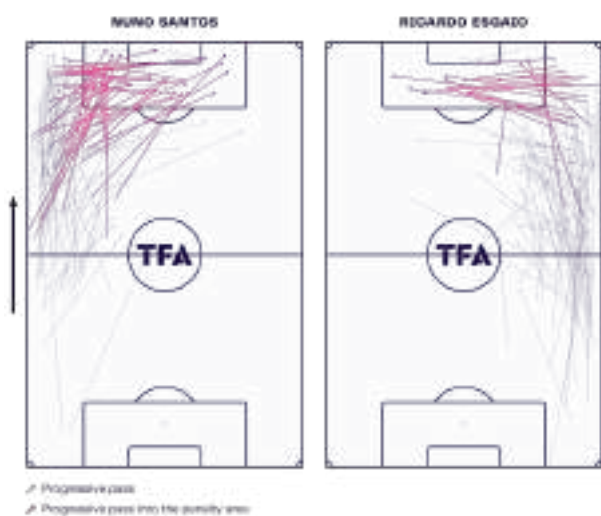
Neither of these players are volume dribblers by any stretch of the imagination, with Santos being more likely to receive a long pass after making a run forward into space and crossing into the danger zone than he is to try and take players on 1v1 and drive into valuable positions with the use of his dribbling technique.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it's safe to say Xabi Alonso has exhibited some of the most innovative, creative and, ultimately, effective usage of wing-backs in Europe this season with his inverted, aggressive wing-back pairing at Bayer Leverkusen. This usage does come with risks, especially in transition to defence, but Leverkusen have got to reap the rewards a lot more than they've had to suffer the consequences of such daring play this season.

## PROGRESSIVE PASSES

All games from Primeira Liga 2023/2024



Both Esgaio and Santos also play a decent number of progressive passes too, also unique among the wing-back pairings analysed in this piece. As mentioned, Amorim's wing-backs are not of the creative standard that Alonso and Inzaghi have at their disposal. However, the Sporting boss does boast plenty of creative quality in other parts of his team — particularly in midfield.

So, Amorim designs his team differently to Inzaghi and Alonso, utilising the wing-backs more as vessels for ball progression and less as creative outlets, though both still get forward, provide the width for their side and generate plenty of chances as teams focus on cutting off Sporting's access to the box via the central positions, knowing the threat that exists there.

Inzaghi at Inter and Amorim at Sporting have also succeeded with systems that have deployed wing-backs in key tactical roles this term, both in different ways to each other and Alonso. Inzaghi has used his wing-backs in crucial creative roles like Alonso but wider and in a more traditional manner, while Amorim has relied on his wing-backs for creativity too but more as ball progressors, with the creative burden more heavily shouldered by central players at Sporting.



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## EFL CHAMPIONSHIP 2023/24

# HIGHLIGHTING THE LEAGUE'S BEST COUNTERATTACKING TEAMS

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

The 2023/24 EFL Championship season has seen some teams play exciting football. Several managers are young, emerging and not far away from managing at the highest levels of European football.

The visualisation below looks at each team's average possession in the championship so far and the number of counterattacks that ended up as a shot for their team. This gives a picture of which teams like to retain possession, staying patient in the buildup, and which teams are not hesitant to see less of the ball but attack with speed when there is an opportunity.

Ipswich Town have been the team of the season so far in the Championship. Currently third in the table and only one point behind Leeds United and Leicester City (who have a game in hand), Kieran McKenna's style involves having a lot of the ball — ranking sixth for average possession (53.8%) and fourth for counterattacks with shots.

When Southampton hired Russell Martin, the reason for hiring him was that he suited their vision for their style of play, which is to be a possession-heavy team, patient in the build-up, and creating opportunities.

The Saints' owners can brag about being right in their choice, as Southampton rank number one for average possession (65.3%). Only five other teams — including relegation-threatened Sheffield Wednesday (1.16) and Rotherham United (1.03) have completed fewer counterattacks leading to shots per game than Southampton (1.19).

Enzo Maresca's Leicester City, who could go to the top of the table if they win their game in hand, have brought a mix of possession (53.8%) and counterattacking to the championship, with the Foxes ranking high for both these metrics. In fact, they've completed more counterattacks leading to shots than any other team in the league (2.54). The same is true for Daniel Farke's Leeds United, whose average possession this season is 57.9%, with 2.16 counterattacks that lead to shots.

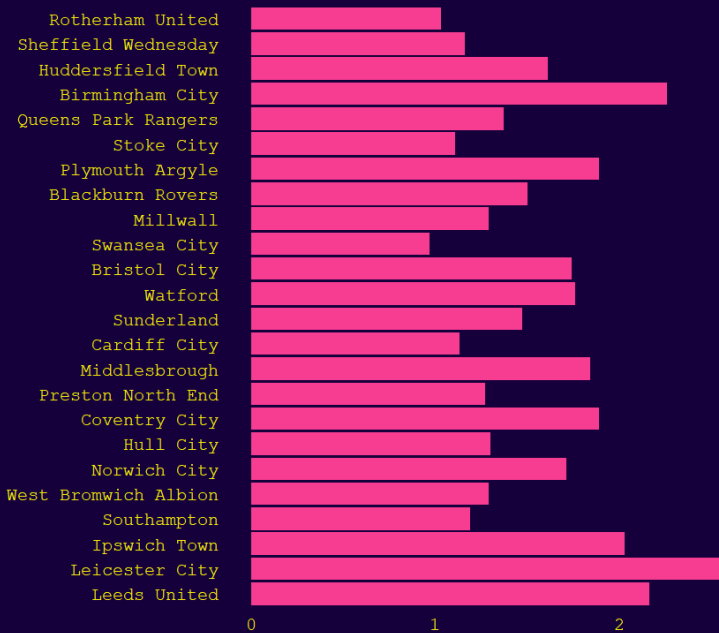
Swansea City, another side that likes to keep a lot of the ball (52.4%), are the only team to have fewer than one counterattack with a shot per game.

Coventry City, Cardiff City and Preston North End are the only three teams in the top of the table who quite often have less of the ball than their opponents.

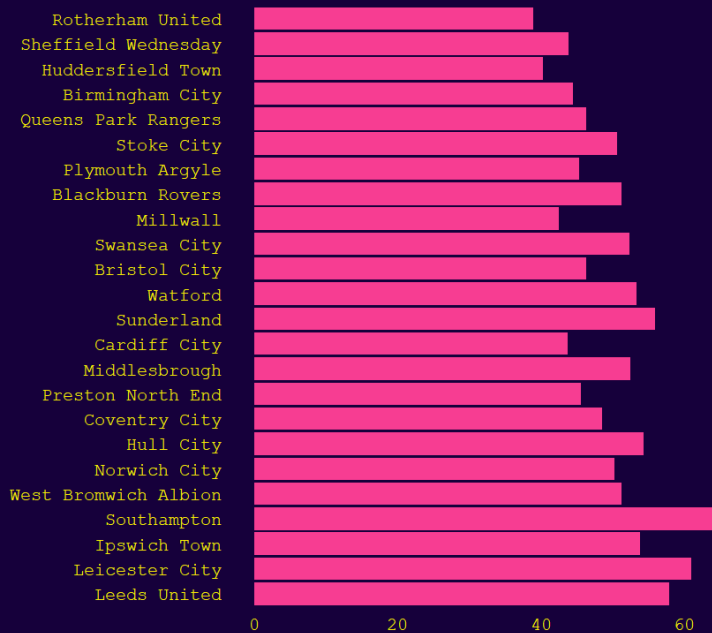
Watford, Swansea City, Stoke City, and Blackburn Rovers are teams in the bottom half of the table who have more of the ball than their opponents quite frequently. Rotherham United are the side with the lowest average possession (38.9%).

### EFL Championship 23/24 | Assessing Team's Style of Play

Counterattacks with Shots



Possession(%)



TFA

Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyReddevil



# **JUDE** BELLINGHAM

JUDE BELLINGHAM



REAL MADRID

## **INVESTIGATING HIS GOAL PROBABILITY**

ALEXANDRA HUNT

# DATA AND METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

When Real Madrid sealed a reported £88 million deal for midfielder Jude Bellingham, the Galácticos were the envy of many. Regarded as one of the best young talents in football, the acquisition of the England midfielder was a coup.

In addition to the overall quality that Bellingham possesses, his goal tally this season has been conceived as an added bonus. Although the youngster always had a goal in his locker, he wasn't as prolific in the Bundesliga as he has proven to be in La Liga this campaign.

At the time of writing, Bellingham tops the goalscoring charts in Spain's top division with 16 goals to his name. Moreover, the Englishman has dispatched 29% of his efforts on goal, placing him second in the division for efficiency in front of goal.

But how is Bellingham scoring all these goals? Is there a greater probability that he scores from set pieces or in open play? Do location and angle play a part in determining the likelihood of his goal? This data analysis will use statistical models to answer these questions.

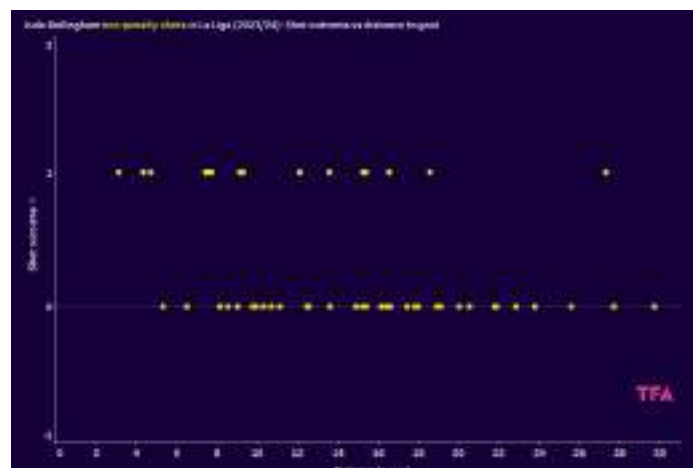
Furthermore, we will provide an analysis of the results to determine how Bellingham fits into Real Madrid's tactics and, with this knowledge, how teams could go about preventing Bellingham's attacking threat.

To assess Bellingham's goalscoring probability we have used the midfielder's non-penalty shot data from La Liga this season. We have sifted through the data and identified particular variables of interest for our analysis:

- **Shot outcome:** determines whether the shot resulted in a goal
- **Situation:** determines whether the shot was within open play or a result of a set piece
- **Shot type:** describes how the goal was scored, such as left foot, right foot, or header
- **XG:** the expected goal value of each shot
- **Distance:** how far was Bellingham from the goal when the shot was taken
- **X and Y coordinates:** used to pinpoint the location where Bellingham took each shot
- **Angle:** calculated from the coordinates to determine the angle of the shot to the goal.

We have filtered through the data in an exploratory manner as well as derived various logistic regression models. From here, we could then determine the odds ratio and the probability that Bellingham scores given a certain scenario.

To showcase why we have chosen logistic regression, consider the graph below, which plots the distance of each of Bellingham's La Liga shots with the corresponding shot outcome.



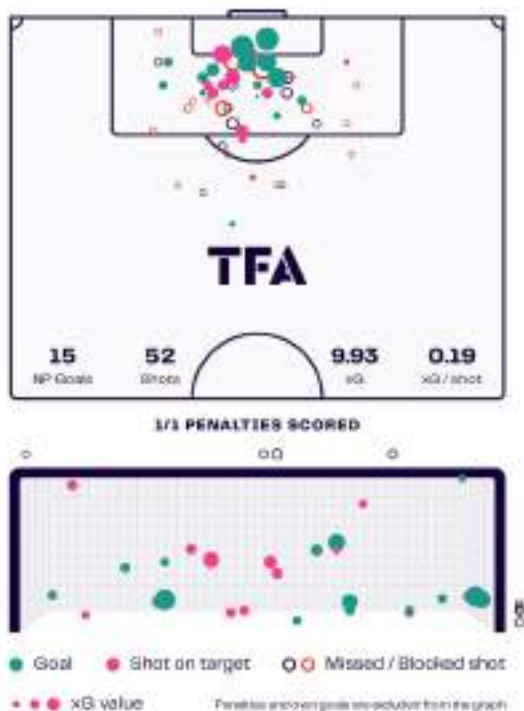
The shot outcome—the response variable—is binary, so either takes the value one if the shot resulted in a goal or zero otherwise. Logistic regression facilitates investigating the relationship between variables and such a response variable and is an ideal choice for this analysis.

## THE ART OF POSITIONING

Before we constructed any models, we delved into the data by plotting each of Bellingham's La Liga non-penalty shots.

### J. BELLINGHAM SHOTS

All games from LaLiga 2023/2024



It is noticeable from the above that Bellingham isn't taking too many shots from long range, where the goal expectancy value is generally lower. The England midfielder has often found himself in strong shooting positions as he is often central to the goal from close range when trying his luck at goal.

Moreover, the graphic shows that Bellingham has been quite potent from within the left side of the penalty area as opposed to the right.

Our initial models focused on investigating the midfielder's goal probability based solely on the expected goal value and then only the distance to the goal the shot was taken. The results showed that the higher the goal value, the more likely Bellingham would score.

When it comes to distance, the closer Bellingham is to goal, the more likely he is to score. However, these findings weren't particularly insightful – the findings were merely logical and what would be expected regardless of the quality of the player.

We, therefore, decided to consider the angle to goal and found that the larger the angle, the greater the probability that Bellingham scores. Take, for example, Bellingham's effort against Atlético Madrid, where the angle to goal was 18 degrees.



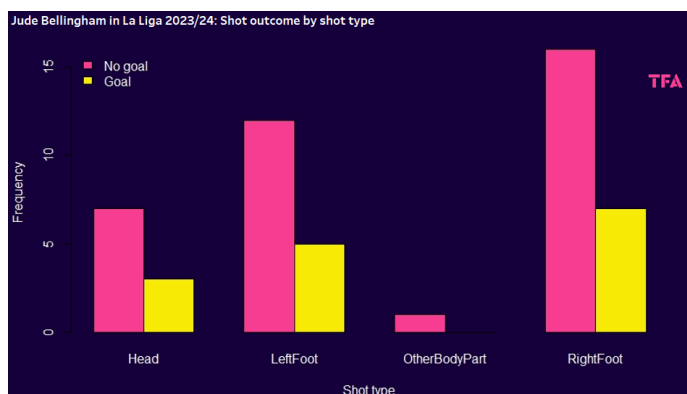
This particular effort was blocked by the opposition but based on our model investigating angle and goal probability, Bellingham had a 20% chance of dispatching this opportunity. In contrast, consider Bellingham's goal shown below against Celta Vigo where the angle was 80 degrees.



With an 80-degree angle at the goal, Bellingham has a 72% chance of scoring. This shows that the greater the angle, the greater the goal probability which again is logical because it highlights the more the goal a player can see, the more likely they are to find the back of the net.

Something that stands out between these two shots though is that the first was attempted with the left foot, whereas the second was a header. But could Bellingham’s shot type, in addition to shot goal angle, be significant?

The following graph shows the frequency of Bellingham’s shot types with respect to shot outcome.



The plot shows that Bellingham tends to make more efforts with his right foot; our exploratory analysis determined that with each shot type, the Englishman dispatched 30% of his efforts. Given this finding, it wasn’t surprising to find that shot type alone was not significant in determining goal probability. However, including angle to goal with shot type did provide some insight.

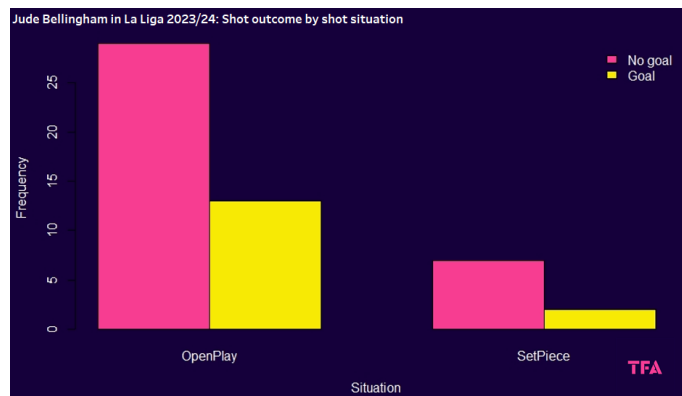
The table below demonstrates different shot-type scenarios based on an angle of 25 degrees compared to 75 degrees.

Jude Bellingham La Liga 2023/24: Goal probability based on shot angle and shot type

Scenario	Goal probability
Header (25 degrees)	0.19
Left foot (25 degrees)	0.28
Right foot (25 degrees)	0.27
Header (75 degrees)	0.63
Left foot (75 degrees)	0.74
Right foot (75 degrees)	0.73

The table shows that whilst not much separates the goal probability depending on whether a shot was taken with the left or right foot, it is shown that the goal probability is smaller when Bellingham heads his efforts toward the goal when also factoring in the angle to the goal.

To extend this analysis, we also considered the situation in which Bellingham is shooting.



The bar plot shows that most of Bellingham’s shots in Spain’s first tier have come in open play, implying he is less dangerous from set pieces. When considering a model that only investigates the shot situation with respect to the shot outcome, open-play situations were deemed significant. Bellingham’s shots from open play have a 31% probability of resulting in a goal, compared to a 22% probability when his efforts come from set pieces.

We added the shot situation to our previous model to investigate this in addition to the shot angle and shot type.

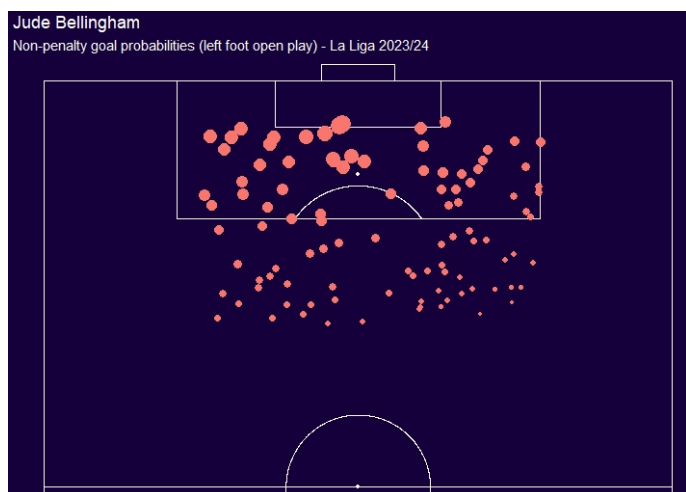
Jude Bellingham La Liga 2023/24: Goal probability based on shot angle, shot type and situation

Scenario	Goal probability
Open play header (25 degrees)	0.22
Open play left foot (25 degrees)	0.29
Open play right foot (25 degrees)	0.28
Set piece header (25 degrees)	0.14
Set piece left foot (25 degrees)	0.19
Set piece right foot (25 degrees)	0.19
Open play header (75 degrees)	0.68
Open play left foot (75 degrees)	0.75
Open play right foot (75 degrees)	0.74
Set piece header (75 degrees)	0.55
Set piece left foot (75 degrees)	0.64
Set piece right foot (75 degrees)	0.63

The table once again shows how a wider angle increases goal probability, and Bellingham is likely to be more dangerous during open play. He is also likely to be less potent with his head.

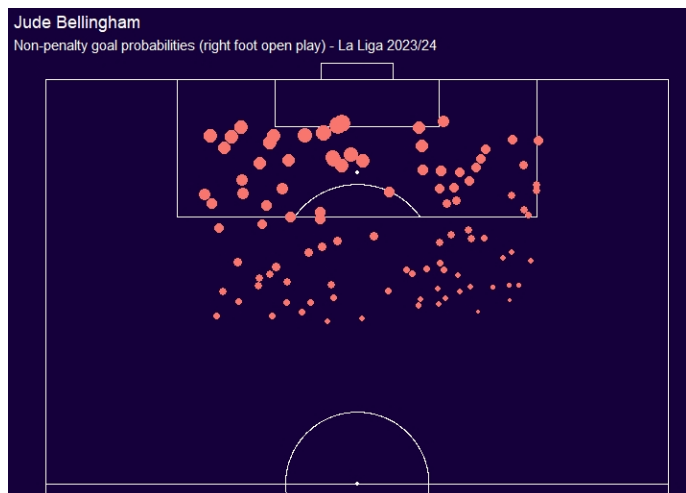
We also included the pitch x and y coordinates to expand our model further.

From this model, we were able to use Bellingham's shot coordinates to investigate specific shot locations. The graphic below takes a random sample of coordinates to show the different probabilities of Bellingham scoring given a situation in open play and shooting with his left foot.



The larger the circle on the plot above, the larger Bellingham's goal probability. It shows that Bellingham is more potent with his left foot in open play to the left of the six-yard box compared to outside the area and, in some cases, the more central areas of the box.

We also used the model and random sample to determine the probability of Bellingham scores in the same scenario but with his right foot, as shown below.



As we can see from the above, the difference between whether Bellingham scores with his left

or right foot is minuscule. What the two plots do show, though, is that Bellingham is more likely to score on the left side of the penalty area or centrally as opposed to the right side of the box. He also has a higher probability of scoring within the area as opposed to outside the area.

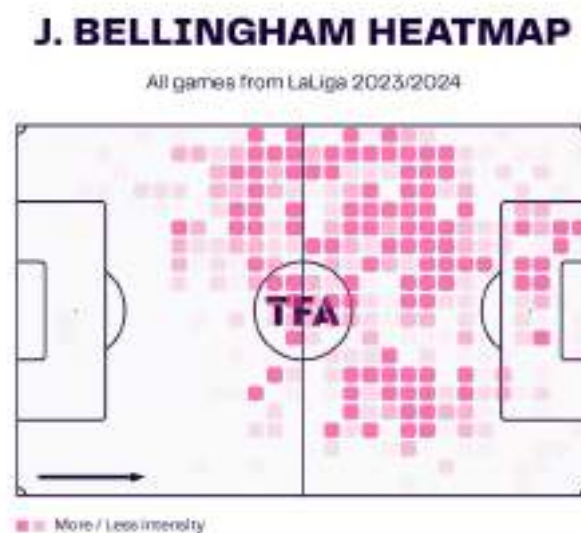
But considering the midfielder's role in the Real Madrid line-up, how can this information be used by opponents?

## INSIGHTS GAINED

With an abundance of talent in the Real Madrid midfield, there were initial question marks on how Carlo Ancelotti would be able to accommodate the quality he had at his disposal. At the beginning of the campaign, Ancelotti utilised a midfield diamond with Bellingham at the tip in support of the strikers.

However, the Galácticos have not been rigid in sticking with this philosophy throughout the season and have fluctuated between different formations, opting for the 4-4-2 mostly. There is a great deal of flexibility with how Madrid operates, and freedom is often given to the players, given their collective technical ability.

In the case of Bellingham, he tends to occupy the left of the midfield, as shown in the heatmap below.



Bellingham often looks to exploit spaces in the left half-spaces and as indicated in the graphic, looks to make entries into the left side of the penalty area. This analysis has shown that when he can get into such areas, he is more potent. Take the example below where Madrid is counterattacking, and Bellingham eventually scores.



As Madrid has possession on the left flank, seemingly posing little attacking threat, Bellingham has other ideas and has already started a run to expose the gap in the Girona backline. His closest marker at this point doesn't even have sight of the Englishman.



With the knowledge that Bellingham would look to make a run on the left side, Cadiz needed to be quicker in closing down both Bellingham's run and Rodrygo, who had possession. The lack of closing down ensured that by the time Bellingham had seen the goal, he only had the keeper to beat, which was a more favourable angle.

Had the defender been quicker in closing the midfielder down, the Englishman would have had a reduced angle to goal and, as we've seen from this analysis, a reduced goal probability.

Bellingham is a crucial figure in attacking transitions due to his intelligence in being able to read the game and astute tactical awareness. He always looks to play on the front foot and is ready to make attacking runs, as he often sees opportunities quicker than the opposition notice such danger.



The pass itself from Vinicius Júnior is quality, but the goal itself is more a product of Bellingham's initial off-the-ball movement. He already had the advantage of a head start in the attack compared to the defenders, but this, coupled with his athleticism, ensured he was first to the pass and subsequently rounded the keeper to score.

Bellingham has an ability to find pockets of space, and with this in mind, it poses the question of whether man marking him may be the solution to decrease his attacking threat. If an opponent has eyes on the midfielder at all times, he may be less likely to be able to expose gaps going forward.

Moreover, if an opponent was to frustrate Bellingham, he may be tempted to take up spaces on the right side of the final third. As this analysis has shown, Bellingham has a lower goal probability from such areas — so a potentially rewarding tactic for the opposition.

Even if the opposition does not go down the man-marking route, a critical consideration that the statistical models showed is the importance of closing Bellingham's angle to goal, particularly on his favoured left side.



In almost identical circumstances to the Girona goal, Bellingham is played through having run through the half-space of the Valencia defensive line. However, Valencia is quicker to close down, and as a consequence, Bellingham is forced onto his right in a less advantageous shooting position.

The midfielder opts to play a cross into the area instead, which is cleared. It goes to show the importance of the angle when shooting and the impact it can have on goal probabilities.

## CONCLUSION

If we refer back to our initial questions at the start of this piece, we can conclude that Bellingham is more of a threat from open play than set pieces. Furthermore, the angle of the shot plays particular importance, especially coupled with how he strikes the ball as he is less dangerous with his headers from smaller angles.

This data analysis has further shown that the positioning of Bellingham's shots is key. Opponents would be wise to watch out for his movements in the left half-spaces as well as entries into the more central areas of the box.

We have shown how useful logistic regression can be in the context of goal probabilities. Whilst it is recognised that further considerations such as the positioning of the goalkeeper could also be taken into account, we have demonstrated that such a statistical model can serve as a good starting point to provide valuable insight not just for the player but also for the opposition.

# SET-PIECE ROUNDTABLE

WILLIAM SALIBA



ARSENAL

## DISSECTING THE MOST EFFECTIVE SET-PLAYS IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE

MARCEL SEIFEDDINE // @\_MARCEL\_23

Welcome to the set-piece roundtable! Each month, we will travel to new leagues and nations across the world to bring to the limelight the most interesting and innovative tactical set-piece tweaks/ideas or any routines which stand out. These ideas will range from extremely effective to ineffective, but we will inform you of the thought processes behind these routines to determine if there is room for these set plays to be repeated in the future.

This time, we head to the Premier League to find the most creative set-piece solutions that England has to offer. Many teams in the league employ set-piece coaches and analysts to gain an edge over one another, and this analysis will show which teams have been able to create the most innovative solutions so far. There has been much discussion on Arsenal's high-scoring set plays and different trends to do with Premier League free kicks and starting from an offside position. However, here we will look into the routines and tactical decisions that have gone under the radar yet have still had equally decisive impacts on the set play success of Premier League sides.

In this tactical analysis, we will look into the tactics behind the Premier League's most interesting set pieces, with an in-depth analysis of why each routine is used. This set-piece analysis will examine why each routine has been innovative, with details on how and when the different routines are most efficient.

## **10) USING ATTACKERS TO DEFEND ZONALLY**

### **CHELSEA – DEFENDING CORNER KICKS**

Chelsea have struggled from set-pieces in both boxes this season, leading them to sign Brentford's set-piece coach, Bernardo Cueva, in an effort to strengthen their ability during dead balls. Their poor record was highlighted during

the recent loss to Liverpool in the Carabao Cup final, where Mudryk was unable to clear a corner that was headed in by Virgil van Dijk.

Now, the structure changes often, especially with the changes in the line-up with different physical profiles of players replacing each other from game to game. However, a consistent theme surrounding Chelsea has been to use attacking players to defend zonally in the six-yard box while the bigger defenders step out to man-mark attackers arriving from deep.

This led to Mudryk being the one responsible for clearing a cross into a dangerous area during a cup final. At the same time, Cole Palmer also failed to clear a corner scored by Luton at the near post on many other occasions, where the more dominant aerial defenders are nowhere near the ball. In these situations, the likes of Disasi and Colwill can be seen man-marking around the penalty spot, but it is harder for them to keep up with attackers in the congested areas due to their lower levels of agility and acceleration.

Overall, this leads to issues with defenders' ability to track attackers individually and problems with dominating the important zones around the six-yard box aerially.

Furthermore, issues come to light during the second phase. Deeper attackers must step forward during the second phase of corners or after short corners are played. When these attack-minded players move away from their goal, their awareness of danger and general positioning during box defending is at a lower level than that of a natural defender. This leads to problems in the basics of box defending, where there is a failure to cover the gaps in the defensive unit.

As we can see in the image below, Gallagher's role is not to man-mark anyone originally but to defend the six-yard box. When the pass is

played short, Gallagher is the deepest defender and must step up. He vacates the six-yard box, and as the deepest player who can see the full picture, he should be able to spot Akanji, who is making a run towards an unmarked part of the six-yard box. He fails to spot the gap in the defensive block, leaving Akanji with a clear gap to attack. With the quality of Man City, the cross will arrive in the space left open.



If the deepest player was a natural defender, they would be much more likely to identify the open space, cover that space and clear the cross — or, at least, disrupt Akanji from heading the ball freely.

These consistent issues in defending set-pieces cause Chelsea issues game to game, where close games can be decided by how well they can defend a corner kick.

## 9) GOAL KICK LEADS TO A GOAL

### BRENTFORD VS MANCHESTER CITY – ATTACKING GOAL KICK

This next set play is much more unique and makes the most of the different rules of not being offside from a goal kick. From the goal kick, the front two of Brentford, Toney, and Maupay, both stand in offside positions, out of the defender’s eyesight. The deep positions of the defensive unit of Brentford lure the Man City side to think the goal kick will be played short

and push further up the pitch.

When the kick is taken long, Toney is able to arrive in front of the defender who is about to challenge for the ball. Arriving from the blindside surprises the defender, who usually doesn’t have to worry about a player coming from an offside position. This late movement makes Toney’s screen more likely to succeed, allowing the ball to pass through the defensive line, where Maupay is waiting to receive the ball. Yet again, with Maupay hanging around offside, defenders naturally are happy to let him stay behind them, even though, in this exception, he is onside.



## 8) EARLY RUNS INFLUENCING THE OFFSIDE LINE

### LUTON VS NOTTINGHAM FOREST – ATTACKING FREE KICK

Free kicks have recently been influenced by players standing in offside positions, where they can create instant separation or block defenders from getting back in their supposed position. Teams have also used fake runs from free-kick takers to bait defensive players to drop deep early. However, there is an issue of players who start in offside positions and actively attempt to attack the ball, where they are directly influencing the game and being called as offside.

In an effort to make defensive lines drop deep as efficiently as possible and not directly impact play from an offside position, Forest sacrifice

one player who makes the attacking run before the kick is taken. This baits the defender into following the runner into the box while the rest of the team is still holding their position further up. He makes the move on the outside of the defensive unit, giving the central players the opportunity to gain those advantages while being in higher-valued goal-scoring situations.

As seen in the example below, the movements allow the rest of the attacking unit to move goalside of their markers while still being inside due to the one defender who is deeper in his box.



## 7) SCREENS CREATING TARGETED SPACE

### MANCHESTER UNITED VS WEST HAM UNITED – ATTACKING CORNER KICK

West Ham have had a high number of set-piece goals this season due to the dead-ball precision of Ward-Prowse and the commanding aerial ability of their players. Usually, they resort to inswinging corners, with the attacking unit crowding the goalkeeper, and have the certainty that the cross will drop right on him. All that is needed is one slight touch to redirect the ball into the back of the net when they are within a couple of yards from the goal.

However, when outswingers are used, new solutions are required. One method they have used to create additional space has been through

the introduction of screens. In the example below, we can see two attackers quickly moving in front of the zonal defenders, setting screens to create space in the highlighted area.



While the thought process is positive and well executed, they forget to work on a crucial part of a successful corner kick, creating separation for the attacker. Each of the attackers who attempt to attack the ball are closely marked, meaning that when they attempt to attack the ball, they cannot do so cleanly without anyone disrupting them. Even though they are able to deliver the ball into a good area that is made open, they are unable to successfully clear the path for a player to arrive at the ball, making this sort of routine much less effective than it could be.

## 6) ATTEMPTING TO DISRUPT ROUTINES

### ARSENAL – DEFENDING CORNER KICKS

Arsenal have massively improved in both boxes in terms of set plays this season. Looking purely at the defensive aspect of their set pieces, it's clear that certain players have been given extremely specific instructions on how to stop teams from scoring from corners.

Martin Odegaard has been used as a disruptor. His role is usually to prevent attackers from reaching the near side of the six-yard box, stopping teams from making shots at the near post or from flicking the ball on to create second-contact opportunities. The image below shows

just how engaged in the physical battle Odegaard is. He has no interest in actually clearing the ball, which is left to zonal markers.



This role can be effective, as it has been on many occasions this season. Some previous examples include successful disruptions of runs against both Aston Villa and Liverpool, but it also has its flaws. As the example below shows, Odegaard is attempting to stand in the attacker's path, preventing him from reaching the six-yard box. However, the cross isn't aimed towards the six-yard box on this occasion. It is aimed at the deeper area highlighted, which Palhinha is able to enter. Meanwhile, Odegaard is only interested in the player, meaning he has no clue where the ball is, and even though it goes just past his head and could have been cleared, it travels past him. It allows Fulham to generate a high-quality chance of scoring a goal.



One other adaptation Arsenal have used is to plant Saliba on aerial threats. Usually, his role is to guard the far side of the six-yard box, but in the instances where the ball is expected to land elsewhere, like with outswingers where the ball would be claimed by the keeper before Saliba even got a chance to battle for it, Saliba has been able to vacate his role, to move somewhere

where he is likely to be involved in the aerial battles.

For example, Liverpool's main aim is to cross the ball far from the goal, where Van Dijk is able to use his strong heading abilities to take shots at goal from the penalty spot, where he is usually marked by smaller players, whose role is to prevent him from reaching the six-yard box. In an effort to counter this, Saliba is tasked with marking Van Dijk, which makes the aerial duel a 50/50. Having to battle for the cross, rather than easily winning it like he usually does, means that he is unable to put as much focus into the actual headed effort, which needs to be well executed considering the distance from the goal.



## 5) DEEP RUN EXPLOITING A HIGH LINE

### SHEFFIELD UNITED VS ASTON VILLA – ATTACKING FREE KICK

A recent article discussed the importance of deep runs being used to exploit the space behind the defensive unit from free kicks. Sheffield United expertly showed how to execute this idea with their routine against Aston Villa, which ends up being marginally offside but can be fixed with better timing of the runs.

In the defensive unit, we can see defenders ready to cover the space behind them, but it is impossible to be in a position where you are

prepared to track back and see what is happening on both the left and right. As a result, the furthest player, on the outside of the defensive line, can lurk in the blind spot, where no defender can see the run. Furthermore, screens are used on the widest defender, to prevent the nearest potential defender from being able to cover the ball being played in behind.



The attackers situated behind the wall can then arrive in dangerous positions inside the box. From the free kick, it's unlikely they will receive the pass and are able to be unmarked, which gives them the opportunity to time their arrival in the box as the header is played back across goal.



#### **4) USING SCREENS TO FREEZE THE OFFSIDE LINE**

### **EVERTON VS ASTON VILLA – ATTACKING CORNER KICK**

Aston Villa have used numerous uniquely creative ideas from set plays to gain an advantage over their opponents. There have

been many attempts to reduce the potential of an offside from corner kicks through players receiving the ball at the by-line, where the opposition team are then unable to step out of their box and reduce the space available.

Another way in which Villa tried to force the offside line to be deeper was by pinning the deepest defender in their place to keep the offside line at the goal line. We can see in the image below how the block forces the defender to stay deep whilst everyone else attempts to step up. This creates space in the narrow channel between the goal and defensive unit, where we can see players able to receive the ball in positions which they usually are offside from.



This particular routine resulted in a foul during the block, which probably deterred Villa from trying it again, but at the point in the example above, no foul has been made while the pass to a player in space is on. Of course, it can be difficult to keep defenders pinned for more than a couple of seconds, but if Villa can move the ball quickly enough in the initial couple of seconds when the deepest defender is pinned and attempting to evade the block, they can exploit the space created between the pinned defender and defensive unit which has stepped up, in future games.

### **3) GHOSTING TO THE BACK POST FOLLOWING A SHORT CORNER**

#### **NOTTINGHAM FOREST VS NEWCASTLE - ATTACKING CORNER KICK**

Similarly to Sheffield United's routine, being able to set screens on the widest defender in the block creates the potential to attack the space on the outside. It is quite simple to go around the defensive shape and arrive at the back post following a cross, which requires less precision than those that target gaps between defenders.

The use of a short corner baits the defensive block to step up and drags the attention to the ball. As a result, Bruno Guimaraes is able to make his run towards the space at the back post, with every defender being more concerned about the ball and not noticing his movement, which begins after the defensive block's attention is diverted. In this particular example, the box defending of Forest is quite narrow, giving Newcastle plenty of space to attack the box, around the defenders.



### **2) ATTACKING SPACE BETWEEN ZONAL DEFENDERS AND THE GOAL**

#### **LIVERPOOL VS MANCHESTER CITY - ATTACKING CORNER KICK**

Manchester City have shown their superb ability to adapt routines, to target the spaces that opposition blocks leave open. In their fixture against Liverpool, it is clear that Liverpool use a heavy zonal presence around the six-yard line. Five zonal defenders are used, with only one protecting the passage into the six-yard box, whilst the goalkeeper also has a high starting position, intending to cut out any crosses arriving within the penalty spot.



The use of an out-swinging delivery further encourages Liverpool's defenders to step further up the pitch away from their goal. The assumption that one zonal defender and goalkeeper can protect the six-yard box is something that has allowed Liverpool to be effective at clearing deliveries arriving outside of the six-yard box by increasing the zonal presence. Still, fewer man markers have left them vulnerable to different screens and blocks.

In the example below, Ake moves goalside of the only zonal defender inside the six-yard box. His arrival from behind Mac Allister's back gives him the element of surprise, with the Argentinian

not anticipating a physical confrontation. The element of surprise gives Ake the chance to shift MacAllister away from goal, which creates a safe passage into the near side of the six-yard box through a masterful delivery from De Bruyne. Stones is able to arrive in the space to put the ball in the back of the net, whilst none of the zonal defenders take responsibility to mark the attacker nearest to the goal. John Stones' late movement after the kick is taken, gives Nunez almost no time to get in the correct position to stop Stones from being able to have an easy chance on goal.



## 1) VOLLEY EFFORTS FROM THE PENALTY SPOT

### FULHAM – ATTACKING CORNER KICKS

Fulham's method of generating volleys on goal from slightly deeper is the most interesting tactical innovation we have seen in the Premier League. Volleys are much harder to deal with than headers due to the potential power you can generate with your leg. Even though these volleys are executed further away from the goal than you'd have a header from, the power of the shot actually gives goalkeepers less time to react than they have against most headers.

The thing that separates Fulham's routine from the majority of the other routines analysed is the fact that they have been using and scoring/creating chances from this specific method all

season long. The well-planned movements and execution mean that this can be repeated over and over again, giving Fulham the opportunity to remain dangerous from corners, no matter who the opposition is.

The deeper areas of the box around the penalty spot are never marked zonally, although the zonal defenders around the six-yard line have time to step out and clear the ball. In order for the ball to easily access these areas, Fulham consistently set screens on those zonal defenders who could clear the ball. This gives Fulham the security that most corners that hit the area highlighted can freely enter without being cleared.



All that is left is to ensure one player can arrive in the space to generate a volley on goal. There are several ways in which this is possible. In the prior example, Fulham's overload in the attacking unit against Liverpool's low number of man-markers means that a player can start unmarked without any work necessary to create separation. Against big groups of man-markers, packs can be used to create heavy congestions, where one player is able to attempt to move around the cluster and arrive in space.

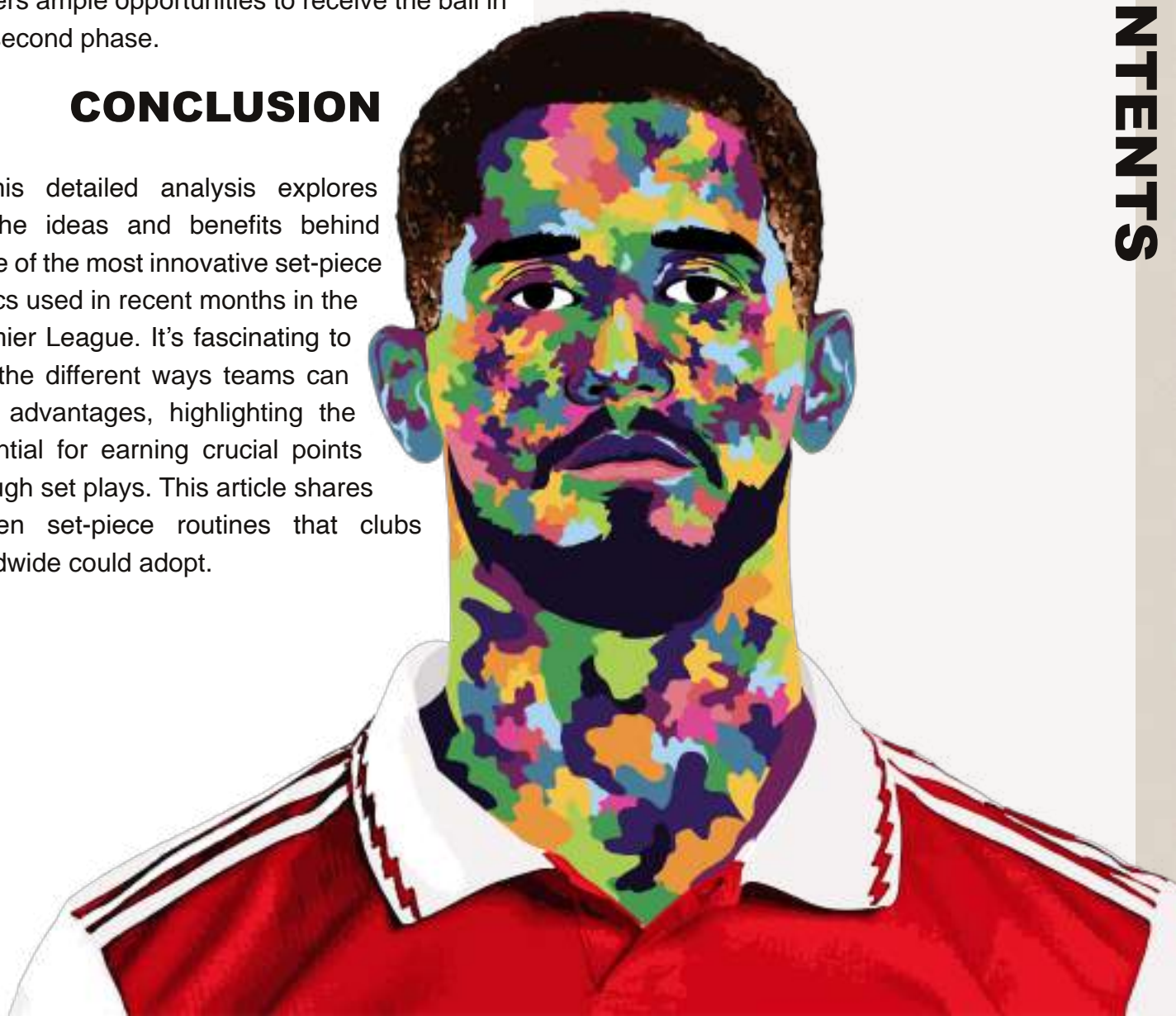
When the man-markers are individually marking Fulham's attackers, like in the image below, a screen is set for the designated attacker to give him that yard of separation to arrive in the target area unmarked, of course, for this to be effective; Fulham execute the screens and runs at the last moment possible, not giving opposition sides time to react to the screens which are only set as the ball is crossed in.



Fulham have also been able to add extra goals following second-phase opportunities of this method through Bobby Reid's role as a six-yard line scavenger. His positioning between the target area and the goal gives him the opportunity to block the goalkeeper's view of the shot coming in and also allows him to be close to goal, to attack rebounds or loose balls. With volleys being harder for goalkeepers to get a hold of, the number of rebounds increases when using this method, giving Reid and other Fulham players ample opportunities to receive the ball in the second phase.

## CONCLUSION

This detailed analysis explores the ideas and benefits behind some of the most innovative set-piece tactics used in recent months in the Premier League. It's fascinating to see the different ways teams can gain advantages, highlighting the potential for earning crucial points through set plays. This article shares proven set-piece routines that clubs worldwide could adopt.



## EFL LEAGUE ONE 2023/24

# VISUALIZING PORTSMOUTH'S PROMOTION PURSUIT

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

Portsmouth top the EFL League One table at the time of writing with 80 points on the board and only eight games to go. They were relegated to the third division of English football in 2012 and have since been relegated to the fourth tier before bouncing back and coming close to promotion to the Championship on numerous occasions, especially in recent years.

The visualisation below shows the club's final points tally and the minimum points required for automatic promotion since their relegation to League One.

Last season, Portsmouth finished eighth with 70 points — seven behind the last play-off place and 28 behind second-placed Ipswich Town, who were automatically promoted that term. In 2021/22, Portsmouth finished 10th, with three more points than last season, but that was still 17 away from the automatic promotion places — occupied by Wigan in first and Rotherham United in second.

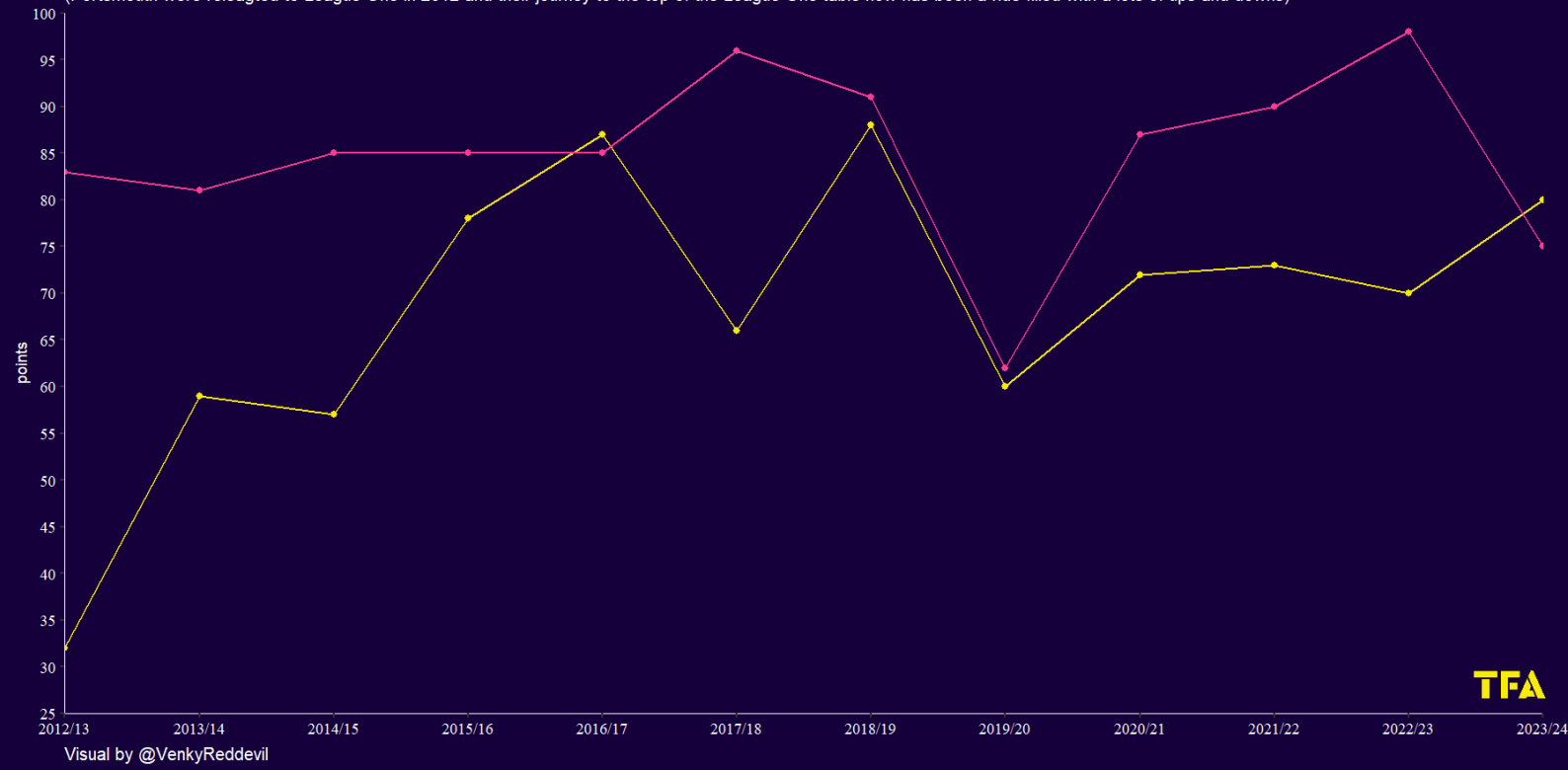
In the pandemic-affected 2020/21 season, Pompey finished with 72 points — just outside the playoff places and 15 behind the second-placed Peterborough United. During the 2019/20 and 2018/19 seasons, when Portsmouth lost in the playoffs to Oxford United and Sunderland, respectively, Pompey finished just two and three points, respectively, behind second place.

In 2017/18, the season Portsmouth returned to League One after getting relegated to League Two in 2012/13, Portsmouth (66 points) finished 30 points behind second-place Blackburn Rovers (96 points). That difference was the biggest, as they finished behind the team in the last automatic promotion place.

From 2013/14 to 2016/17, Pompey were in the fourth division of English football, League Two. In 2013/14, Portsmouth finished on 59 points — 13th on the table. In 2014/15, they finished 28 points behind the final automatic promotion place of third, occupied by Bury. Pompey finished seven points behind third and missed out on promotion to League One through the playoffs after defeat to Plymouth Argyle, and in 2016/17, they were finally promoted back to League One — moving in the right direction ever since. With 80 points and a five-point lead over second-placed Derby, Portsmouth might finally be back to the Championship for the first time since 2012 next season.

## Portsmouth Points in League One & League Two vs Minimum points for Automatic Promotion | 2012/13 to 2023/24

(Portsmouth were relegated to League One in 2012 and their journey to the top of the League One table now has been a ride filled with a lots of ups and downs)



# RISING STARS

XAVI HERNÁNDEZ



BARCELONA

## LA MASIA GRADUATES SAVING XAVI'S FAREWELL SEASON

JACK CHIPPENDALE // @JACKCHIPPY6

The La Masia footballing academy has developed an elite reputation across world football- and rightly so. Their development of some of the greatest talents in world football has allowed the Catalan giants to harness the most vibrant young footballing stars and help them grow into European and world champions, donning the FC Barcelona badge with pride. The institution has become synonymous with success, having matured the likes of Lionel Messi, Alexia Putellas and Andrés Iniesta into footballing legends.

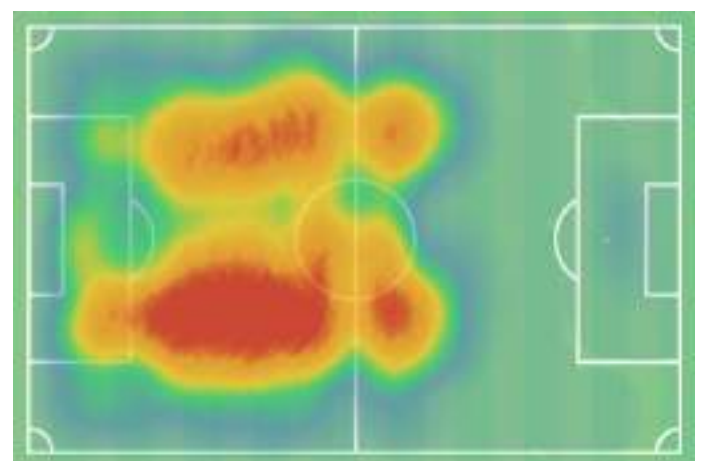
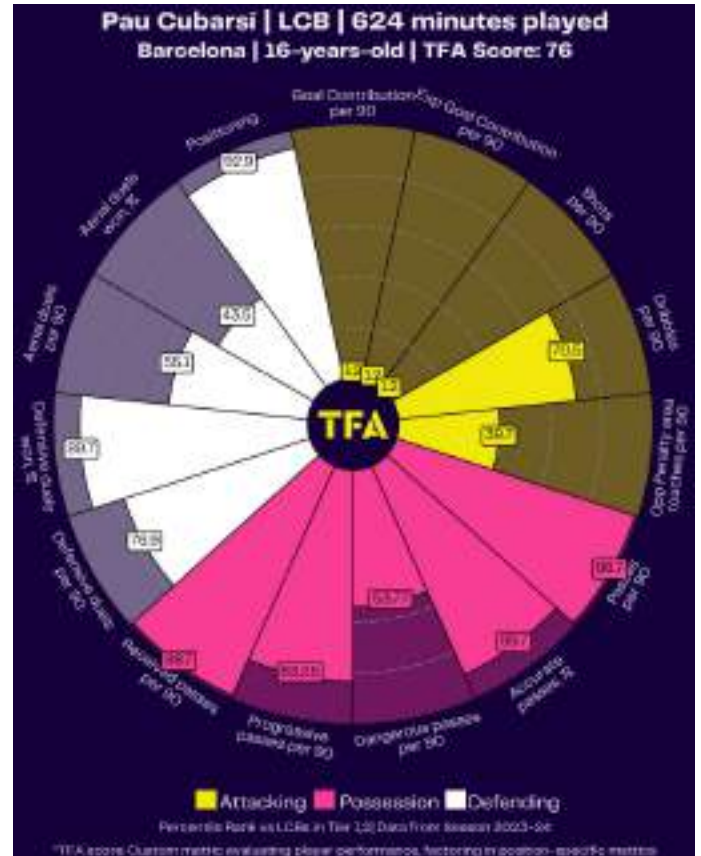
With this in mind, a man who epitomises Barcelona’s intrinsic values and footballing development would be current men’s head coach Xavi Hernández. Having granted first-team debuts to no less than 16 La Masia graduates throughout his tenure as Barcelona manager, Xavi has entrusted the next generation of talent with guiding his side towards domestic and continental triumph.

This scout report will begin to highlight several La Masia graduates who have flourished this season, taking on first-team opportunities and exemplifying the developmental process on the biggest stage of their careers. Despite the lack of experience and perceived maturity, these players have proved incredibly impactful in such a short space of time- propelling Barcelona towards a Champions League quarter-final and an outside shot at a back-to-back LaLiga title.

## PAU CUBARSÍ 17 YEARS OLD CENTRAL DEFENDER

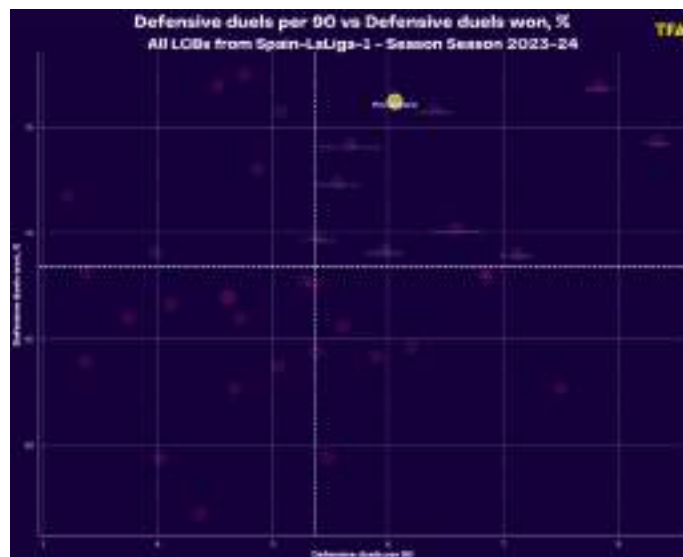
One of the key players aiming to solidify Barcelona’s shaky defensive line this season would be 17-year-old central defender Pau Cubarsí. Having made his LaLiga debut just a day before his 17th birthday in a 4-2 victory against Real Betis, Cubarsí has gone from strength to strength, cementing his place

in the starting eleven alongside Uruguayan Ronald Araujo. Having already been likened to the accomplished defensive figure of Barcelona favourite Gerard Pique, Cubarsí possesses the natural ball-playing composure and defensive awareness critical for modern central defenders to excel in Spain’s top flight.

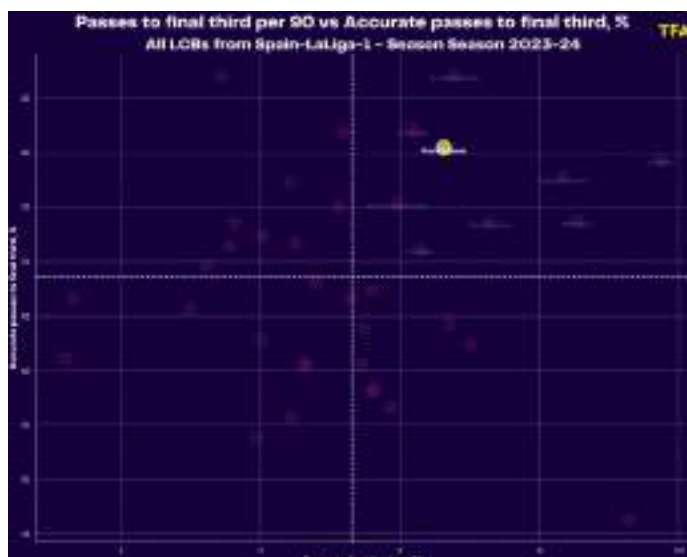


One of the hallmarks of a player graduating from Barcelona’s illustrious academy would be their proficiency whilst in possession, maintaining excellent levels of passing technique in order to build out from defence. While his senior appearances have been somewhat limited, Cubarsí has showcased his talents in splitting the opponents’ pressing lines with impressive

passing accuracy. Cubarsí has shone in particular when we observe his medium-range passing qualities, recording a successful pass accuracy of 96.1% in LaLiga, which places him in the 97th percentile of all central defenders. His ability to move the ball around the pitch and generate attacking opportunities for his side is implied through his figure of 4.30 final third passes per 90.



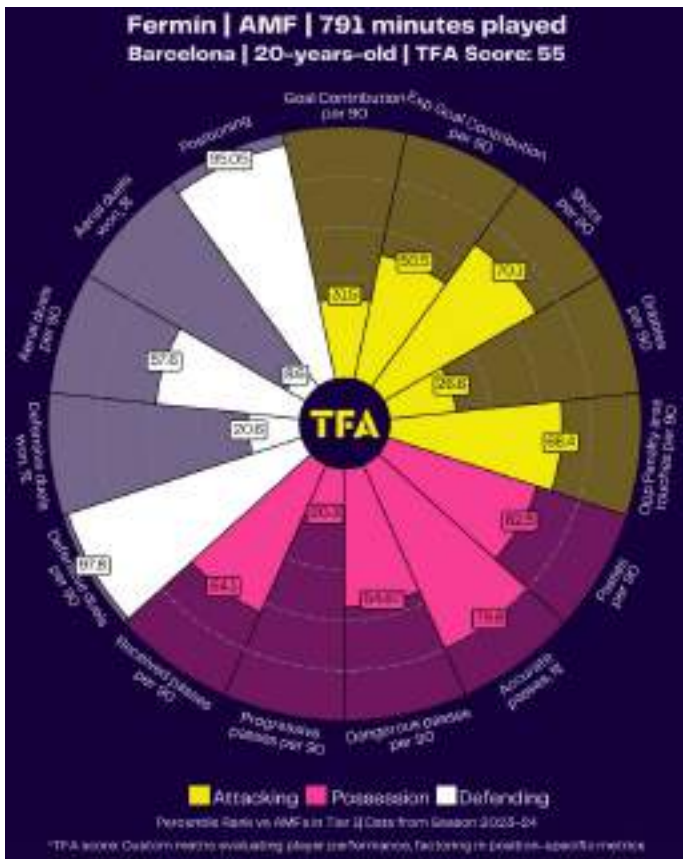
His most impressive performance was arguably in the UEFA Champions League round of sixteen tie against Napoli, breaking longstanding club records on the way to a man-of-the-match performance. Despite being the youngest player to debut in the Champions League knockout rounds, Cubarsí was the first player to complete 50+ passes (61 of 68), achieve a 100% interception rate and make five or more clearances- a record which had stood since 2003/04! With Spain head coach Luis de la Fuente granting the young star his first international call-up, Cubarsí's performances are certainly causing a selection headache ahead of a huge summer for Spain at Euro 2024.



Another crucial feature of Cubarsí's play would be his ability to remain composed when needed but also to raise the tempo and be decisive when defending. Lauded by one of his youth coaches as a player who 'plays with pure serenity', one of the reasons why Xavi has stuck by him would have to be his huge personality and incredible defensive leadership despite his age. Cubarsí has been able to successfully challenge 90% of dribblers this season, committing 2.09 tackles in the process. Although these stats appear to be inflated having only played 732 league minutes this campaign, his talent is undeniable, attracting the attention of those outside of Catalonia as well.

## FERMÍN LÓPEZ 20 YEARS OLD CENTRAL MIDFIELDER

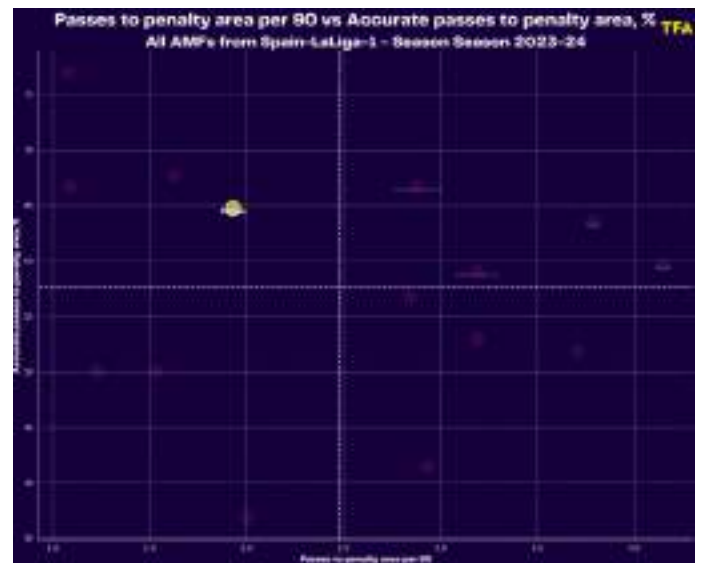
Whilst we have grown to learn and appreciate the talents of existing La Masia midfield technicians Gavi and Pedri, their injuries this campaign have left fans of La Blaugrana searching for the next young star to excite the fans and keep the team ticking. 20-year-old Fermín López has stepped up to the challenge this season, deputising for Barcelona's midfield stars and flashing his attacking brilliance and relentless defensive work rate.



providing the killer pass or being the one on the end of them.

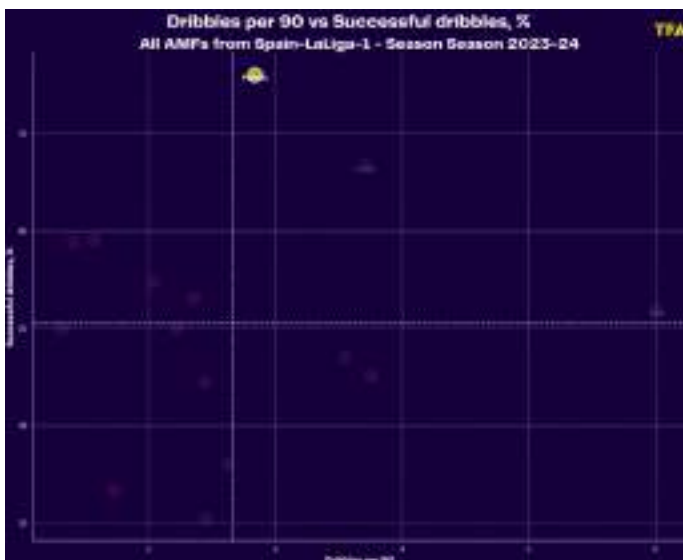


Despite boasting a similar personality and physical build to Barcelona's golden boy Pedri, he offers a refreshing, excitable playstyle, much more focused upon explosive movement and using his speed and ball-striking to trouble defences. His line-breaking running can often lead to attacking opportunities in which he drives beyond the striker into space, freed up by the wider positioning of the Barcelona wingers stretching the width of the defensive line.



López stands out as an incredibly versatile player, having been deployed in his preferred role as an advanced number eight, but also displaying the qualities to work the ball inside from the wings and drive into space. López uses his creative nature to link play and progress his side forward into the final third by playing in a side with attacking threat in abundance. At this point, you may be beginning to find a pattern emerging amongst the La Masia graduates, as López has boasted his adept passing this season- something his manager identified had been a weakness of the team in previous years. His 4.61 progressive passes and 0.41 npxG per 90 indicate just how impactful he can be, both

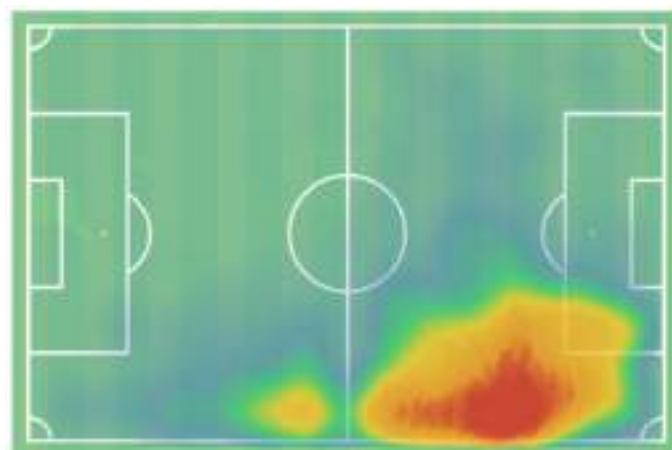
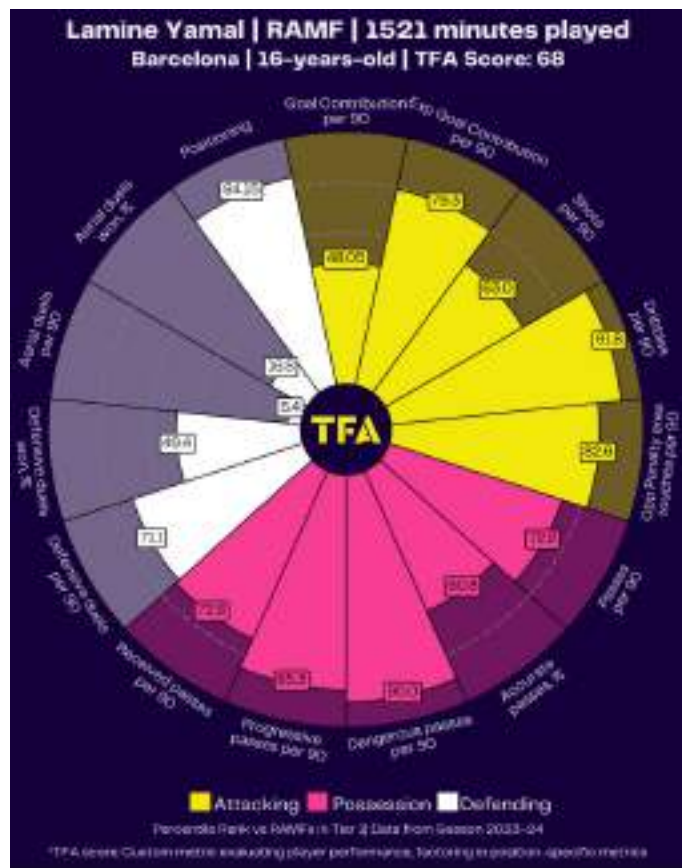
Undeterred by his weaker physical presence, standing at 5'9", López displays an incredible work rate when out of possession. His defensive engine has allowed him to record 2.93 tackles and interceptions per 90 this season, highlighting how he can be useful on either side of the ball. Even though the defensive aspects of his game are not on the same impressive level as his attacking tendencies, López is certainly not a liability when it comes to protecting his side from danger.



Coming from humble beginnings, López has had to battle to find his way into the Barcelona first team- and he is certainly taking his opportunities to impress in 2024. His impressive blend of integrated La Masia values and unique expressive playstyle bodes well for his chances of locking down a starting role for years to come.

## LAMINE YAMAL 16 YEARS OLD RIGHT WINGER

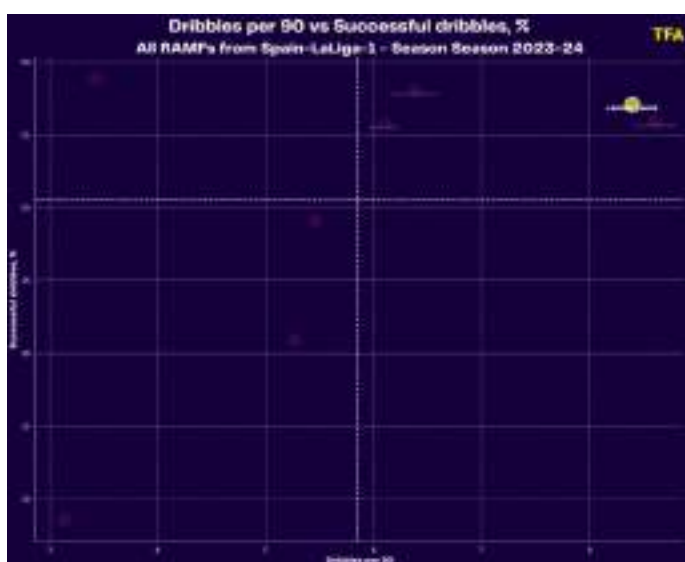
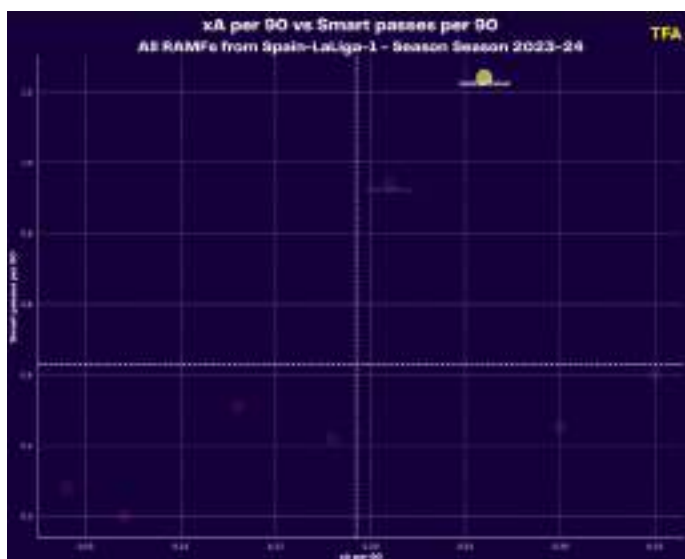
Despite him being the youngest La Masia graduate on our list, Lamine Yamal represents a footballing starlet tipped for greatness while only 16 years old. Since becoming the youngest starter in Barcelona history when he took the field aged just 16 years and 38 days against Cadiz in August 2023, Yamal has flaunted his technical prowess and consistent terrorisation of opposing fullbacks. With summer departures for both Ansu Fati and Ousmane Dembele, it was clear that Xavi needed Yamal to enhance his output and take the opportunity to stand out as the youthful, exciting winger in Barcelona’s 4-3-3 system. He has been incredible viewing so far this season, assuming the role of an offensive conductor in a Barcelona side littered with star power.



Yamal can often be seen deployed on the right-hand side of Barcelona’s forward line, enjoying the freedom to both maintain width or drive inside the pitch on his favoured left foot. His wider positioning allows the advanced eights to have increased area to operate in the half spaces, whilst his ability to invert allows him to showcase his exceptional creative skills and ball-striking from a distance. Yamal thrives upon being isolated one-on-one against his opposing full-backs, employing his talented footwork to navigate tight spaces and demonstrate his impressive passing range with crosses.



This league season, Yamal has successfully recorded 2.19 carries into the penalty area per 90, along with 4.63 shot-creating actions on average each match- indicative of his desire to drive towards the box and create goal-scoring opportunities.



One of the critical areas in which Yamal has appeared to be deficient would be his physicality off the ball and overall defensive contributions. As a result of his weaker frame, Yamal can struggle at times against the more physical full-backs, being unable to efficiently ride challenges

and maintain possession despite his impressive ball-carrying abilities. Fans of Barcelona needn't worry about this, as Yamal will only benefit from increased experience in Spanish and European competitions, working hard to add another element of physicality to his game. Much like his La Masia counterpart, Fermín López, Yamal shows incredible desire and work rate when out of possession. Whilst his defensive contributions can appear quite raw and erratic, Yamal certainly has the talent to develop on both sides of the ball under the next head coach of Barcelona.

Even football fans outside of Barcelona would be hard-pressed to deny that Lamine Yamal has been a revelation this season, developing incredibly quickly into such an essential role for Xavi's side. With questions regarding his increased usage at such a young age, Barcelona will look to intelligently manage his game time to protect the young winger from long-term injury without hampering his natural footballing growth. Yamal's comparisons with a young Lionel Messi are not entirely ridiculous in nature, and with both Barcelona and the Spanish national team already placing such significant expectations on his shoulders, it will be seriously intriguing as to how Yamal interprets his praise and looks to evolve into a world-class player.

## CONCLUSION

These La Masia graduates have certainly excelled when called upon this season, but this is not something out of the ordinary. Since its inception in 1979, Barcelona have reigned supreme across world football when the spine of their side has been forged by La Masia graduates, having the perfect surroundings to learn at the highest level and emulate some of the best footballers in the history of the sport. Even though the present players still have plenty of room to grow, they are indicative of Barcelona's incredibly successful academic institution, which oozes class and leaves rivals scratching their heads.

# CHESTERFIELD

WILL GRIGG



CHESTERFIELD

**THE TACTICS BEHIND  
THEIR FANTASTIC  
SEASON TO DATE**

JACK MANSHIP // @JMANSHIP19

Last season, fans of the Vanarama National League were treated to a title race for the ages as Notts County and Wrexham battled it out for the title, with the latter triumphing as Champions. We haven't been blessed with a title race this season in the same manner, and Chesterfield are responsible for that. The Spireites have blown the competition away, amassing an awe-inspiring 91 points from 38 games at the time of writing, putting them 23 points clear of second-place Barnet. Below the league leaders, the league is close, with just five points separating second and fifth.

Manager Paul Cook has guided this Chesterfield team to a (so far) successful campaign, building on the club's third-place finish last season. The National League has been Chesterfield's home since their relegation from League Two in 2017/18, and it looks like Cook and his team will etch their names into the club's history by securing an EFL return. This scout report will provide a tactical analysis of the critical elements of Chesterfield's tactics, in and out of possession. At the same time, we also look ahead to next season and how they may look to improve to handle League Two opposition.

## VERSATILITY IN ATTACK

The Spireites have garnered a reputation for deploying a possession-based system, but they also deserve credit for playing that way while still maintaining a good level of pace and intensity. Another interesting element of their tactics is their versatility, which allows them to utilise different methods of attack to hurt the opponent.



4-2-3-1 75%

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

For the most part, Paul Cook prefers a 4-2-3-1 shape, which allows for versatility in terms of attacking the flanks. At times, the three attacking midfielders will operate narrower, opening up the wide space for the full-backs to work in. This method goes hand-in-hand with Chesterfield's possession-dominant tactics, allowing them to dominate more areas of the pitch and force the opposition into a more defensive state. It's no wonder Cook has trusted the 4-2-3-1 most weeks – he wants attacking versatility, but he also wants to control possession, and Chesterfield average 60.4% possession per game (second-highest in NL).



Presence in central areas provides Chesterfield with two main attacking options. One is the execution of through passes, which we will cover in more detail further into this analysis – the other is to exploit the space that opens up in wide areas, where either the wingers or full-backs play an important role. Making a lofted pass from central midfield into those wide spots is something we see quite regularly from the Spireites and gives them the chance to increase the speed of their attacking phase.



taken down nicely, and this is where Chesterfield do well – maintaining the pace in key moments, as the winger took one touch before firing a dangerous low delivery across the face of goal, with the ball ending up in the back of the net.

Progressive passes have been another important part of the tactics used by Chesterfield this season – moving the ball close to goal with one pass. They have the second-highest engagement in the league regarding progressive passes, making 76.82 per 90. Their accuracy rate of 77% is the best in the National League, so the Spireites are clearly extremely dangerous in this area. The cross at the end of this move is no fluke either – crossing is yet another crucial part of Cook’s tactics, with his side averaging 16.06 crosses per 90, the fourth-highest average in the division.

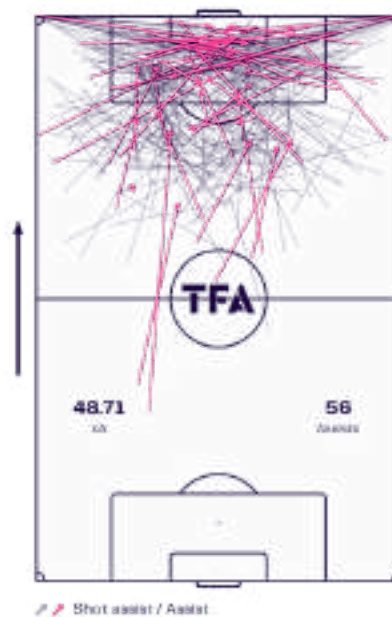
As mentioned, through balls are an essential part of Chesterfield’s tactics. At the time of writing, they average 6.18 through passes per 90, the fourth-highest in the National League. Clearly, it is a tactical focus for Cook, and it is also clear that the squad has the technical ability to succeed in this area as they have the division’s highest accuracy rate for through passes (38.9%). Many of these through passes come from central midfield – a reoccurring theme for Chesterfield is attacking with dangerous passing from central areas.



While Chesterfield have the ability to control possession and dictate tempo, they also show quality in injecting pace into the attack and moving the ball into dangerous attacking areas in a more direct fashion, just as you see in the example above. A nicely timed run is met by a well-executed lofted pass down the flank was

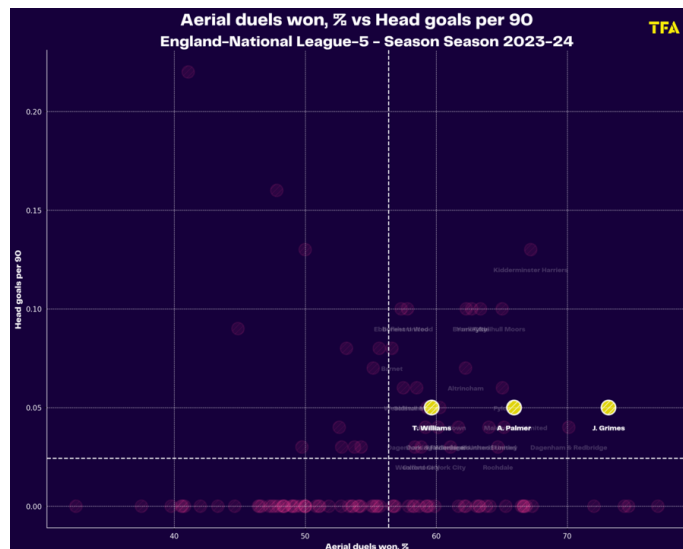
### CHESTERFIELD SHOT ASSISTS

From 4 August 2023 to 15 March 2024



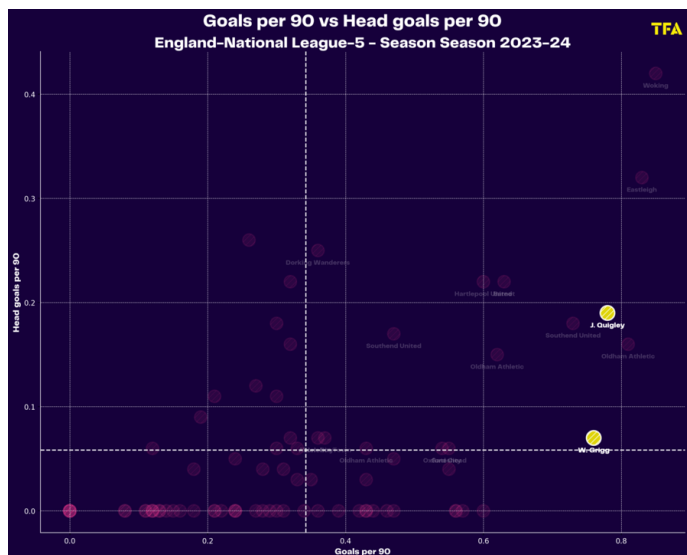
Chesterfield have been sensational in front of goal this season, scoring a whopping 93 goals in 38 National League fixtures from an xG of 77.39. Their average of 2.19 goals per 90 tells you how clinical they can be from game to game, and nobody has matched them in front of goal yet this season.

The map above gives you an idea of how capable they are at producing opportunities from a variety of areas. 3.89 key passes per 90 tells you about their consistency when it comes to chance creation. You may notice that they have a fair few assists from corners—Chesterfield have scored a phenomenal 18 goals from corners, by far the best in the division, an insight into their aerial threat in the box.



The centre-backs also contribute to aerial dominance and corner success, as demonstrated by the graph above. Jamie Grimes, Tyrone Williams, and Ash Palmer all rank above average in both aerial duels win % and headed goals per 90, showing tremendous consistency that, thanks to the aerial duels win % metric, extends beyond an attacking sense.

## OFF-THE-BALL AGGRESSION



We just touched on Chesterfield’s aerial threat in attack, and here, we can dive into that a bit deeper. The Spireites are lethal in the air, having scored 20 headed goals in the National League in 2023/24. You guessed it, that’s the highest total in the division, proving their attacking versatility.

As you can see from the graph above, Will Grigg and Joe Quigley are more than effective in the air and in front of goal generally, demonstrating why Paul Cook puts so much trust in the duo. Focusing on their headed goals per 90, both forwards rank above average, but it’s Quigley who poses the more significant aerial threat when it comes to headed goals.

Chesterfield aim to carry their intensity and aggression into their out-of-possession tactics, and they’ve done so very successfully to date. Using pressing-related data while analysing match examples, we look at their approach in the press and why they’ve been successful.

## CHESTERFIELD HIGH REGAINS



This graph shows us where Chesterfield like to be active in a press/counterpress and how they like to capitalise after winning the ball high up the pitch. As you can see, not only do they make a high number of recoveries in the final third, but they also make plenty of dangerous recoveries, displaying the ability to be dangerous in transitions and make them count.

The raw data also proves Chesterfield's intensity off the ball. Their PPDA of 9.81 is the fifth-lowest in the division, meaning that only four teams allow more passes per defensive action. Their challenge intensity of 6.5 is the fifth-highest. These metrics together show us that Chesterfield is constantly looking to be active out of possession.



This example shows us how the Spireites like to press the opposition backline, particularly when a pressing trigger has been seen — a backward or lateral pass, a low-quality pass or first touch, or hesitation from the opposition on the ball.

These factors flip the switch for Chesterfield in terms of their intensity in the press as they go from being positioned in a high press to being active within that press. Not only do the front two look to disturb the opposition backline, but the midfield three behind them aim to block any forward passes into midfield, adding to the mounting pressure.

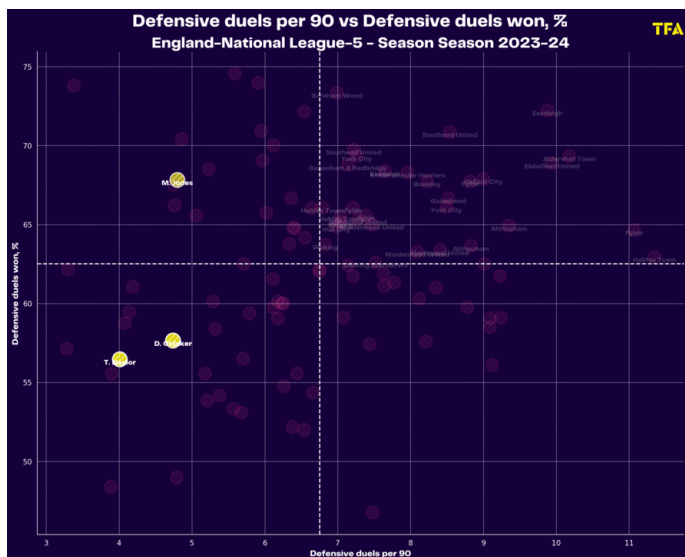


In midfield, however, we see a slightly more reserved approach at times, as the midfield unit is cautious not to leave space exposed in front of the back four. That isn't to say they never press — they do; it's just a bigger case of pressing as a unit rather than individually and picking the moment carefully. Additionally, the back four like to be high up, giving the opposition little chance of building possession in the midfield third and almost forcing them into chancing a ball over the top/into the channel.

## **PREPARING FOR LIFE BACK IN THE EFL**

Given their dominance and consistency in the National League this season, it would be fair to imagine that Chesterfield would adapt nicely to the higher standard of League Two and avoid an immediate relegation battle. Of course, nothing is certain, but you have to think that those within the club would be confident of staying away from the drop zone entirely. With that in mind, let's look at a couple of areas where the Spireites may look to improve over the summer.

One thing they may look to focus on is improving the defensive ability in midfield. This season, Chesterfield haven't had to be as defensively engaged due to their ability to dominate large parts of possession, but they probably won't get that luxury as often in a higher division, meaning they'll need to be prepared, particularly in midfield.



While we aren't saying that the current crop of Spireites midfielders aren't defensively capable, the data above gives a hint that they lack a defensive specialist in that area. The three in the graph (Darren Oldaker, Mike Jones, and Tom Naylor) are experienced in defensive roles, but Oldaker and Naylor rank lower than many CM & DMs in the National League in terms of winning defensive duels. Bringing a solid defensive presence in there could be a good move for Chesterfield.

Of course, they'll look to strengthen in other areas to prepare for higher-quality opponents, and it'll be interesting to see where they focus on. We may see them inject some youth into the side to add more pace – this season, Chesterfield's average age in the squad is 27.8 years, making them the fifth oldest side in that league. They may look to bring a youthful and energetic presence in via loans from Championship/League One clubs as well as exploring the free agent market. Keeping a strong level of squad depth is something that Cook will be keen to do. It has been an important part of their success this season – they've been able to freshen things up quite regularly, making 112 subs this season: only three teams in NL have made more.

Another key area to focus on, whether it's via tactical tweaks, new signings, or a combination of the two, is their overall defensive record. This

season, they've conceded 49 goals, and as we've seen from many sides who have been promoted into League Two in recent years, adapting to the higher level, especially in a defensive capacity, can be a challenge—Notts County this season are a prime example of that.

## CONCLUSION

Barring an absolute freak set of results between now and the final day of the season, Chesterfield will be crowned National League champions and will be facing League Two opposition in the 2024/25 season. Their possession-dominant tactics have been consistently effective, but they've operated in a different manner than you would typically expect a possession-based team to, which is a credit to Paul Cook and his staff.

## EFL LEAGUE TWO 2023/24

### DISCOVERING THE TOP FIVE GOAL-CONTRIBUTING DEFENDERS

VENKATANARAYANAN VENKATESAN // @VENKYREDDEVIL

The 2023/24 League Two season has been a joyous ride for everyone following. The division has seen some amazing goals, high-scoring thrillers, and brilliant young talent rise to the challenge.

Of the talent to emerge this season are some of the full-backs who have regularly upped their attacking game to feature among the best for offensive contributions. The visualisation below highlights the full-backs with the most goal contributions this term.

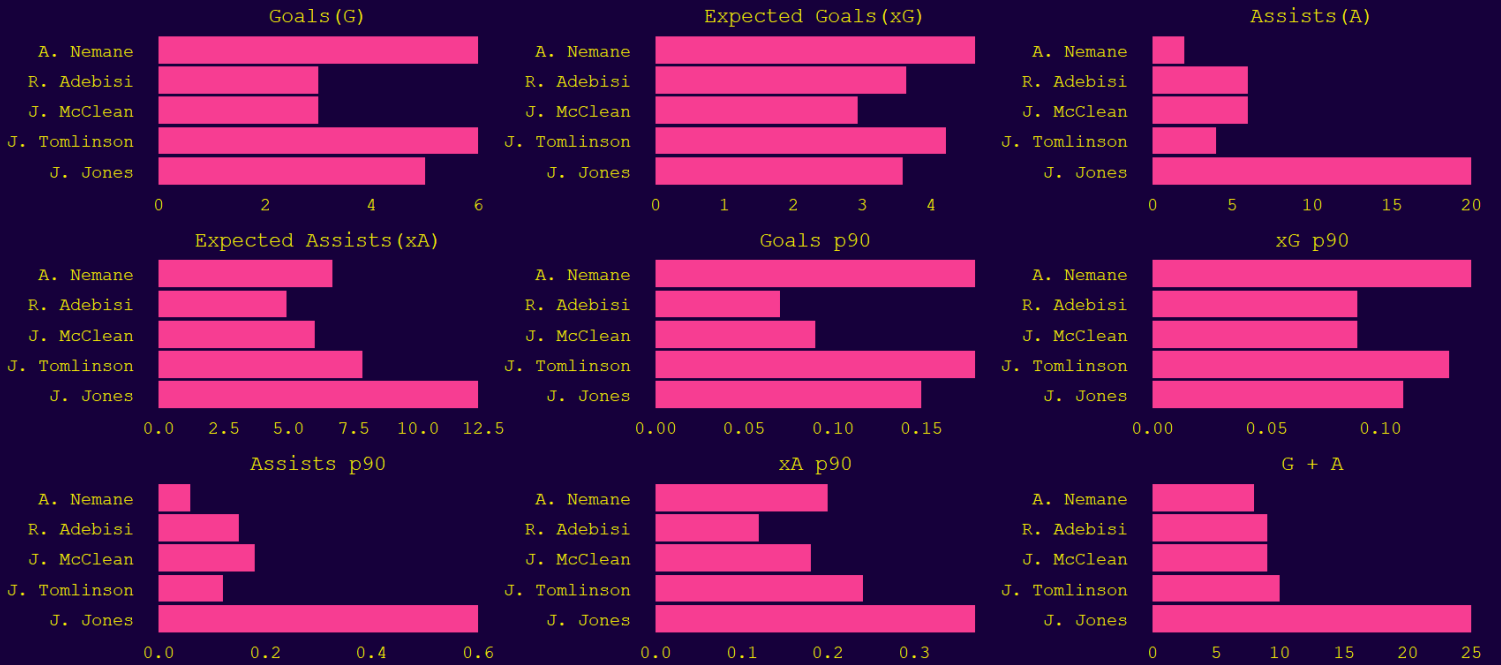
Notts County are at the wrong end of the table, 17th, despite their summer signing Jodi Jones having a stellar campaign thus far. The right-footed left-back/left wing-back has the most assists (20) in the division. Jones also has five goals to his name in addition to this. The defender, however, should be thanking his teammates for their excellent finishing because his 20 assists have come from an xA of just 12.31.

Following Jones in the table for most goal contributions among full-backs is Joe Tomlinson of MK Dons. With 10 goal contributions — six goals and four assists — Tomlinson is the only other full-back to touch double digits for goal contributions in League Two. Contrary to Jones, Tomlinson should have had more assists than he has provided, as his expected assists value is 7.84.

Next up are James McClean of Wrexham and Rio Adebisi of Crewe Alexandra, who are tied with nine goal contributions and have the same number of goals and assists. The only player in the top five full-backs with the most goal contributions who predominantly plays on the right is Aaron Nemanie of Notts County. The defender with the highest xG in the league among full-backs, he has scored six—the joint-most—and two assists to his name as well.

Shoutouts also go to Gillingham's Remeao Hutton, who has the highest xA of 12.63 but has only got four actual assists to his name. Shane McLoughlin of Newport County, Will Wright and Nicholas Tsaroulla — both of Crawley Town — all have eight goal contributions to their names but lose out on featuring in the top five due to their respective goals scored tallies.

EFL League Two Fullbacks | 23/24 | Most Goal Contributions ( Goals + Assists )



Data: Wyscout | Visual by @VenkyReddevil



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# 24/7

**MATCH ANALYSIS  
TRAINING ANALYSIS  
DATA ANALYSIS  
SCOUT REPORTS  
TACTICAL THEORY  
VIDEO ANALYSIS**



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