

# A NEW ERA

*In the eternal balance between moves and countermoves, tactical innovations and consequent attempts to restrict them, a new age of 'relational football' seems to have started, stemming from the principles of 'positional football'* ■

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**M**ore than a year ago, people began to talk about the evolution of football in Italy and Europe and the rise of a different playing style: non-positional, functional, relational football.

Starting from that point, together with Francesco Bordin we tried to investigate this evolution and how and why many different game styles are emerging, at the same time heritage of positional football.<sup>1</sup>

Sport, for centuries, has thrilled and entertained crowds; there is something fascinating and mystical about the endless desire to succeed which leads us to fill stadiums or to get excited in front of a screen whilst savoring the high and lows of our heroes.

Team sports in particular are shaped by this spasmodic quest to improve performance, often clashing with the most important variable within these games: the space.

In decades of evolution, these sports have been revolutionized by ideas, changes and innovations that have cyclically left a legacy, defining distinctive eras.

These revolutions, however, did not just redefine the boundaries and the examples of each era but, overtime, triggered more reactions and adjustments to overcome the dominant system, limiting its benefits, exposing its imperfections and giving birth to counter-revolutions that, in turn, ended up defining other eras. This created a virtuous circle where each change brought innovations to the system itself.

<sup>1</sup> Most of these concepts are summarized in this piece, written by Antonio Gagliardi and published in the online journal *Ultimo Uomo*  
<https://www.ultimouomo.com/gioco-di-posizione-finita-era-funzioni-relazioni-guardiola/>

## ■ THE BACKGROUND

Without going too far back in time, one of the greatest football innovations – especially from a defensive point of view – was the Sacchi revolution in the late 80s.

At a time when man-marking was dominant, the ability of the Sacchi's teams to move collectively and defend space, instead of man-to-man marking, changed football.

At first, Sacchi was perceived other-worldly. He hadn't been a great player and had not won or coached great teams before AC Milan; the football world was very skeptical about him.

Yet, to have built one of the strongest teams of all time, off the back of the signings of great champions, has made Sacchi the mastermind who inspired many, if not everyone.

First, there were only a few disciples who began to play with a zonal system and defend the space, but, as time passed by, all the Italian and European teams – if not worldwide – started to adopt this collective, defensive approach.

There was the explosion of the 4-4-2 system, but the zonal principles overcame the idea of rigid formations: even the teams that defended with five men put in this order, the teammates, the ball and the goal as the main references on the pitch, whilst defending space.

A striking and unique figure in the history of football of that time is the number of offside blown against Real Madrid of La Quinta del Buitre<sup>2</sup>, at the Bernabeu, in the match versus Sacchi's AC Milan, in November 1989: twenty-three (23!).

At the top of the Sacchi Revolution, in the Italy '90 World Cup, there was an average of eighteen offside per game; nowadays the average is four.

Attacks struggled a lot to adapt, however, different coaches began to analyze and understand the pockets of space most exposed by the zonal-marking system.

If you defend space, you are somehow going to be figured out. A skill-

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<sup>2</sup> Journalist Julio César Iglesias called 'La Quinta del Buitre' the generation of some Spanish footballers, who grew up in Real Madrid's youth sector and after making their debut in the first team, achieved important success in the 80s and 90s.

The name refers to the nickname of the most well-known and charismatic player of that time, Emilio Butragueño, known as 'el Buitre'. The other four were Miguel Pardeza, Manolo Sanchis, Michel and Martin Vázquez.

led coach can analyze the defensive positional structure and understand which parts of the pitch a team defend successfully and which ones are left uncovered (the pitch is too large to be fully covered).

The search for a countermove to this defensive style came with positional football, sublimated by Guardiola at Barcelona in 2008. Heir to Michels' total football at Ajax and Cruyff's at Barcelona, and still inspired by Van Gaal's Ajax, Guardiola's positional football reworks in an almost scientific way the Dutch principles and theorizes, among other things, the five offensive channels and the occupation of the 'half spaces'.

The 'half spaces' will act as the kryptonite of the zonal 4-4-2, as it caused troubles to both the opposing centre-backs, uncertain whether to press out on the attacking midfielder leaving the space behind, or onto the opposing full-backs, who found themselves in a constant two-on-one, with the same attacking midfielder and winger.

Positional football - and more generally the positional approach - has thus dominated the football world for about ten years, practiced by different teams with some of the greatest coaches and players in the world. Yet, the several benefits brought by these positioning - taking advantage of the space between the lines whilst also bulding up from the back, creating the space behind the opposing midfielders to receive the ball through key passes, and the use of width, to isolate one-vs-ones with quick side-to-side switches of the ball - have also in this case stimulated the study of effective countermeasures. Over time, the defensive approach has been more man-oriented than considered as a department on its own, thus proposing a more aggressive and physical style of football, modifying distances according to the opponents' disposition on the pitch as well as decreasing time and space to play the ball for the opposition. All that, removing those rigid schemes that led positional football to be so effective.

We find this aggressive style not only among man-marking oriented teams, from Bielsa's Leeds to the extraordinary results obtained by Gasperini's Atalanta, but also in the German school, with coaches such as Rangnick, Klopp, Nagelsmann and Tuchel who have adopted aggressive defensive principles, putting strong pressure on the ball, defending higher up the pitch, thus focusing first on the ball and the opponent rather than lines and departments.

If one of the great upsides of positional play was to occupy key areas, with pre-determined spaces in which to create advantages for the team and trouble the opponent's defensive system, the natural counter-move was then to modify or even redefine those same spaces. As Luciano Spalletti, current Head Coach of the Italian National Team, once said, "There is no longer space between the lines, but, instead, between individual players".

Defenses nowadays prefer to stay tight on opposition; not just the man-to-man pressing, but also forming compact lines (especially in midfield) whose objective is to keep the shape while tracking down opponents. The surge of match analysis, with particular reference to pre-match opposition analysis has accelerated this process: today, positional styles often make the job of the next opponents staff easier, especially if their strategy is a reactive rather than proactive style of football, thus interlocking very well with what happens on the pitch.

These defensive changes are leading to further attacking changes: to minimise the effectiveness of this defensive style, it is necessary to trigger more movement, therefore adopting more fluid and less symmetrical structures.

And so that continuous tension between defense and attack leads to further evolution. Teams and coaches study each other and more interesting and comprehensive playing styles develop. If Sacchi's zonal system stimulated the transition to positional football, which, in turn, put the foundation for the return of man-to-man defense, new offensive styles are now developing successfully in world football. And so on, in a cyclical succession of evolution and adaptation... Because football, 'the beautiful game', is a magnificent yet complex sport, always evolving as this intriguing tension continues to rise.

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THERE IS NO LONGER SPACE  
BETWEEN THE LINES,  
BUT, INSTEAD,  
BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL PLAYERS

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*Luciano Spalletti*



## ■ BETWEEN POSITIONAL AND RELATIONAL FOOTBALL: THE EVOLUTION

This brings us to the explosion of new game models that do not include rigid positional structures, but dynamic and fluid, characterized by asymmetrical formations and overload in the ball area. The teams that epitomize this idea the most are Diniz's Fluminense in South America and Rydstrom's Malmö in Europe. Even Scaloni's Argentina at the 2022 World Cup was a great example of this.

We can name this new playing model as 'relational', because it is focused first and foremost on player relationships. Let it be clear, the whole game of football is full of relationships, and any game model includes relationships within it. However, **the big difference lies on the fact that, in positional football, potential relationships develop from positions, whereas, in relational football, potential positions develop starting from relationships.** It seems like a philosophical difference, but it is not. Quite simply, in positional football the most important element is the position of the players. The defensive structure of a team is planned before (ie. the positioning) and, in general, the same can be said for the offensive structure. So the focus in positional football remain on the positions; from here, movement and relationships develop.

But as we have seen, countermoves are becoming more and more frequent, therefore setting up a more fluid and dynamic team, with greater freedom for players and greater focus on individuals, is giving and will give better outcomes.

In relational football, the focus shifts to the characteristics of the players and their relationships between each other. This paves the way for new positions taken by the players on the pitch. The difference is not theoretical, but substantial.

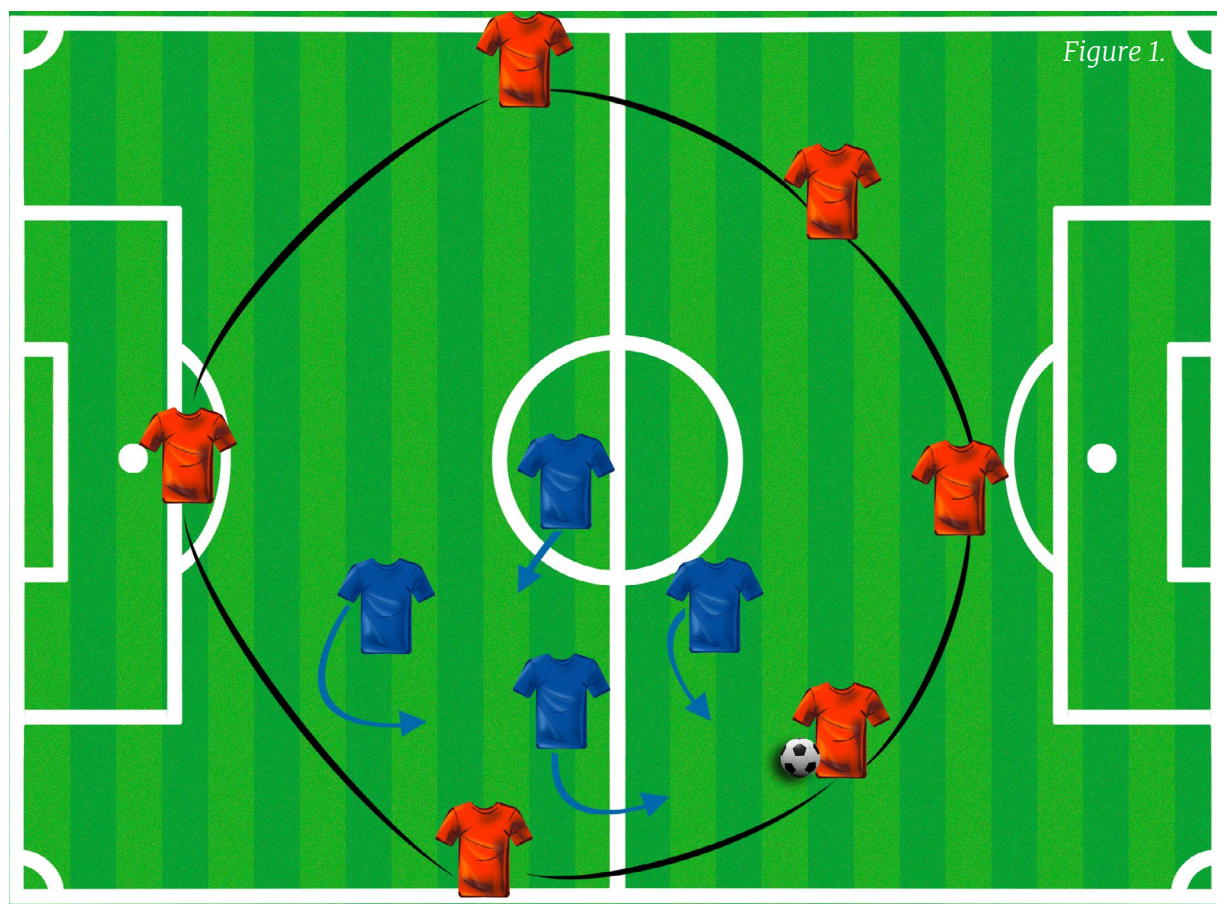
Above, we mentioned Fluminense and Scaloni's Argentina, but we also had very good examples in Europe that, to varying degrees, tried to delve from these principles: from Wenger's Arsenal to Ten Haag's Ajax, from the various versions of Ancelotti's Real Madrid toget to Spalletti's Napoli.

The two school of thoughts (positional and relational/functional), so distant from each other in terms of vision and interpretation, have merged into each other successfully in certain cases.

This season, we have in fact experienced how elements of relational football have integrated into teams that started from a more positional structure.

Among others: in Italy, Inzaghi's Inter and Thiago Motta's Bologna; in Europe, Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen, Amorim's Sporting Lisbon and Schmidt's Benfica. In Asia, Jorge Jesus' Al Hilal are also playing great football with excellent results.

This combination consists in adding, dynamism, fluidity and greater freedom in more rigid systems, while respecting the different attributes of the players available.



We see more and more structures mixed with both positional and relational players.

Let's imagine, for example, a classic 3-5-2 in-possession lineup, such as the *Figure 1* above.

Some players are fixed and positional interpreters, and we could define them as '**perimetral**', borrowing the term from basketball. Let's focus on the positional players: the three centre-backs, the two wingers and one centre-forward, for a total of six out of ten outfield players (*these are the red players in Figure 1*). The red and perimetral players, ensuring width and depth, define the structure as well as the shape, enlarging and shrinking it, dilating and defining the space where to 'disorganize' and block the opposition.

In fact, the structure is key to progress the ball, control the game and win the ball back quickly. Progressing the ball from the centre, with a constant focus on attacking the space in behind while having the possibility to hug the touchline with wide players would attract opponents in those areas and players would be allowed to move autonomously within the perimeter.

Consequently, shaping up this perimeter on the pitch is a priority which must not become limitative. In fact, as well as the ability to switch play to the far side (especially in the last third), a team can expand the infield area where to progress the ball as well as the movement range of individual players. The relational players can then enjoy freedom of movement inside this determined space.

Usually, these are the three midfielders plus the second striker or the central attacking midfielder (*in blue in Figure 1*). These **free-roaming, relational** players are free to move, to associate between each other and, finally, to create numerical superiority overloading the ball area, especially creating asymmetrical shapes. This freedom allows players to improve, giving them more responsibility and deployability, according to their characteristics.

The blue players are in fact free-roaming players, thus incentivized to overload the ball side to create playing patterns and mess up the opposition plan. It is up to them to read, interpret and manipulate the available space, thus creating superiority around the ball, removing fixed positions and upsetting the opposite defensive structure.

A dimensional player can also extend the perimeter with wide/deep movement of his own.

Of course, this is just an example; depending on the team, the characteristics of the players and the level reached, there will be structures with a higher or lower number of **perimetral** players and **spatial** players.

The more spatial players are part of the same team, the more dynamic and fluid the system will become. This is a great response to man-marking strategies which can often struggle against the fluid movement of players creating these asymmetrical areas of numerical superiority: obviously, these man-marking structures would be totally disrupted if their objective is to continue to track down individual players.

The characteristics of the perimetral and spatial players are different. For example, the latter are much more associative players, good in tight space and usually technically skilled.

We focused on outfield players for interpretation and disclosure purposes; obviously, when in possession of the ball, the goalkeeper represents a key element: a perimetral player who actively participates in the making of the playing structure.



In this case, a good head coach is catalyst for relationships and movement, no longer just an orchestra director who commands and controls everything.

And here comes one of the greatest challenges brought by this evolution: to delegate and to accept the players making apparently random movement and positions.

Realistically, even in positional football, choices and movements are almost always decided by the players on the pitch (fortunately, we would say), but there is still the illusion of control. Precisely, an illusion: because then, in a situational sport like football, the random element is an absolutely influential factor.

We find examples of these decisions in two of the teams that have most positively impressed in the current season, Thiago Motta's Bologna and Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen.



Firstly, Bologna, starting from a 4-3-3 / 4-2-3-1 shape (see the Figure 2 below), produce an innovative game, made up of connections and infield movement. The innovations in this sense are numerous; the two centre-backs (Calafiori and Beukema or Lukumi) who usually move further up the pitch as well as the midfield rotations, the runs inside of the side midfielders (Ferguson or Fabbian), the movement towards of the ball of the centre-forward (Zirkzee). All this features are performed while keeping a wide shape thanks to the positions of both wingers (Orsolini and Saelemaekers) and, at the same time, the full-backs offering further options in buildup and ball progression (Bologna are indeed bottom for cross completed in Serie A). This patterns are intentionally made to allow intricate overloads to take place inside larger portions of space near the ball, thus creating new lines of play and messing up the opposition setup.

Joshua Zirkzee is the only player who can also sometimes decide to move towards the ball and overload, despite having a perimetral function. This is because, as the space vacated by the centre-forward is an essential element, that space can be covered by another player and, at certain times, the space itself ‘becomes’ the terminal point of the system. A perfect - and successful - example of a mix between positional and relational football.

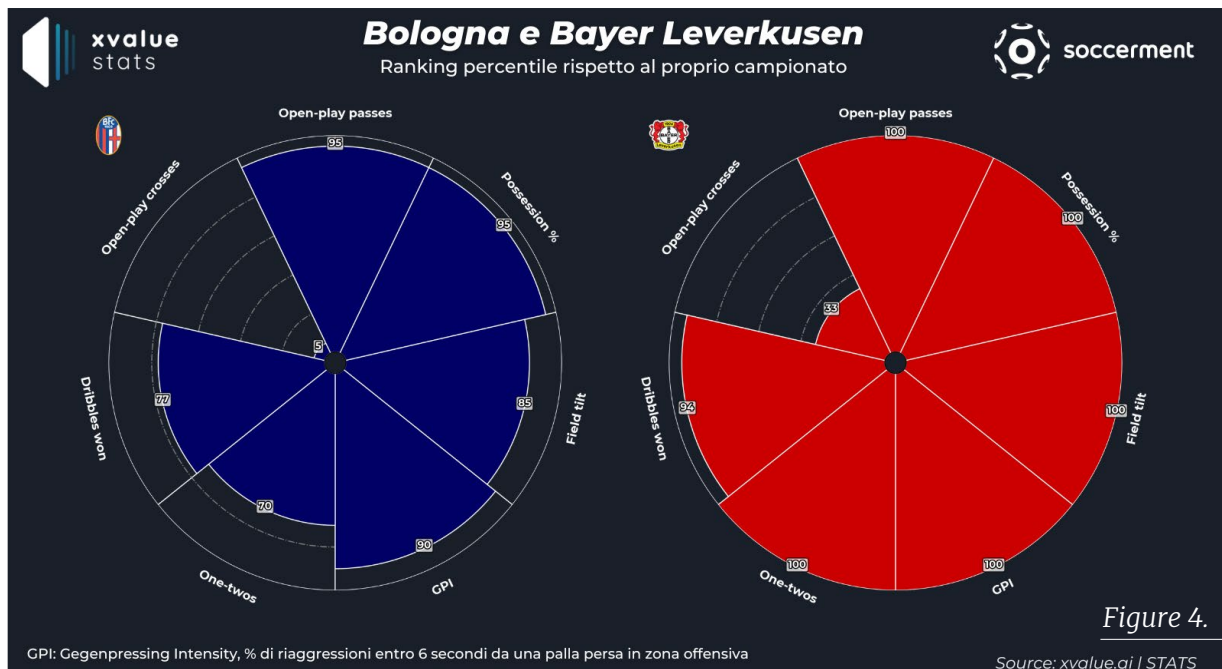


Bayer Leverkusen (Figure 3), on the other hand, start with a 3-4-2-1 formation with Grimaldo and Frimpong to guarantee width, the centre-backs building up from the back, broadening the space and attracting opponents, and the four inside players (Palacios, Xhaka, Hofmann and Wirtz) move freely, reading and interpreting the space, creating overload near the ball to evade pressure.

Even in this case, we have a perimetral player, such as the centre-back Kossounou, who often move to the midfield line, taking up relational and spatial functions. In both systems, the wide space is used not only to expand the area where to move players and create overload near the ball, but also to offer the chance to switch the ball to the far side (especially in the last third) and to isolate one-on-one situations next to the opposition penalty box (Bologna are second only to Inter in Serie A for key passes featuring a switch of play).

The different functions and tasks performed by the spatial and perimetral players of these teams are clearly visible.

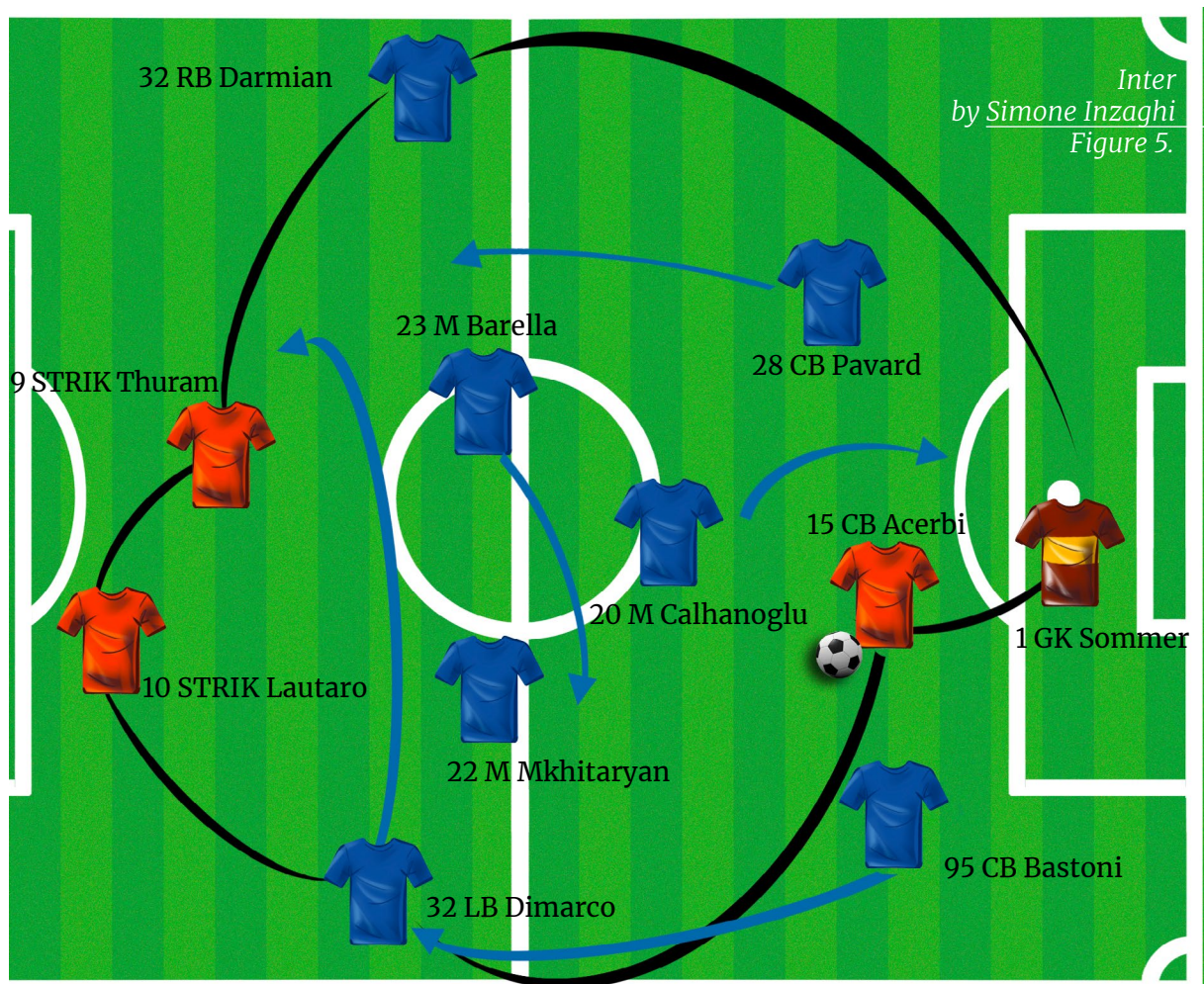




Analysing relevant data, (Figure 4 above<sup>3</sup>) we also find many similarities between these two teams. In fact, they both rank among the top three of their respective leagues for ball possession, number of total passes and field tilt (the degree of control of the opponent's defensive third); also, Bologna and Bayer Leverkusen have very high values in counter-pressing related metrics, which is clearly determined by the number of men near the ball, in pressing situations. They both attack the opposition defensive line with quick and short combinations (both first for completed one-tuos), or isolating one-on-ones (both in the top 5 for successful dribbles), performing a low number of crosses inside (Bayer are fifth-bottom whereas Bologna are the lowest).

The other extremely interesting team to watch this season have been Inzaghi's Inter (Figure 5 on the opposite page), an excellent example of this evolution. There are only a few perimetral players in the Nerazzurri's eleven, perhaps only the centre-back (Acerbi) and the two centre-forwards (Lautaro Martínez and Thuram). We can, in fact, define the remaining players as spatial. Definitely, some of them also have positional functions (such as wingers and centre-backs), but they often leave them to create interesting rotations. Bastoni, for example, sometimes moves up and takes an extremely wide position, thus allowing Di Marco to come inside and attack the opposition line even from the opposite right side. In midfield, fluidity and functions are taken to an extreme: Calhanoglu, Barella and Mkhitarjan swap positions and roles, taking turns in the buildup or in moving upfield and running in behind; the three of them move near the ball, creating large overloads. However, they can also move the other way around by springing back to such a degree that the defenders can, in turn, advance to the middle of the pitch.

3 Graphics by Soccerment (<https://soccerment.com>)



These moves are the answer to the questions posed at the beginning of this article: to offer greater freedom to the players, adhering to and enhancing their skills, and, above all, finding a countermeasure to man-to-man defensive setups.

We believe that these examples will be increasingly replicated on the pitch, as they represent the natural response to the 'new' defensive setups that can now be seen in European football. If this style of play spreads and establish itself, it will become the new dominant offensive model as positional football is on these days (as an example, almost all the teams qualified for the current Champions League quarter-finals applied the now famous 3-2-5 shape, featuring the classic principles of positional football).

The diffusion of this model will stimulate new changes in defensive structures that, in time and through an accurate analysis of each pros and cons, will eventually work out appropriate adjustments and counter-moves, keeping that wonderful tension alive and giving life to more incredible evolutions.

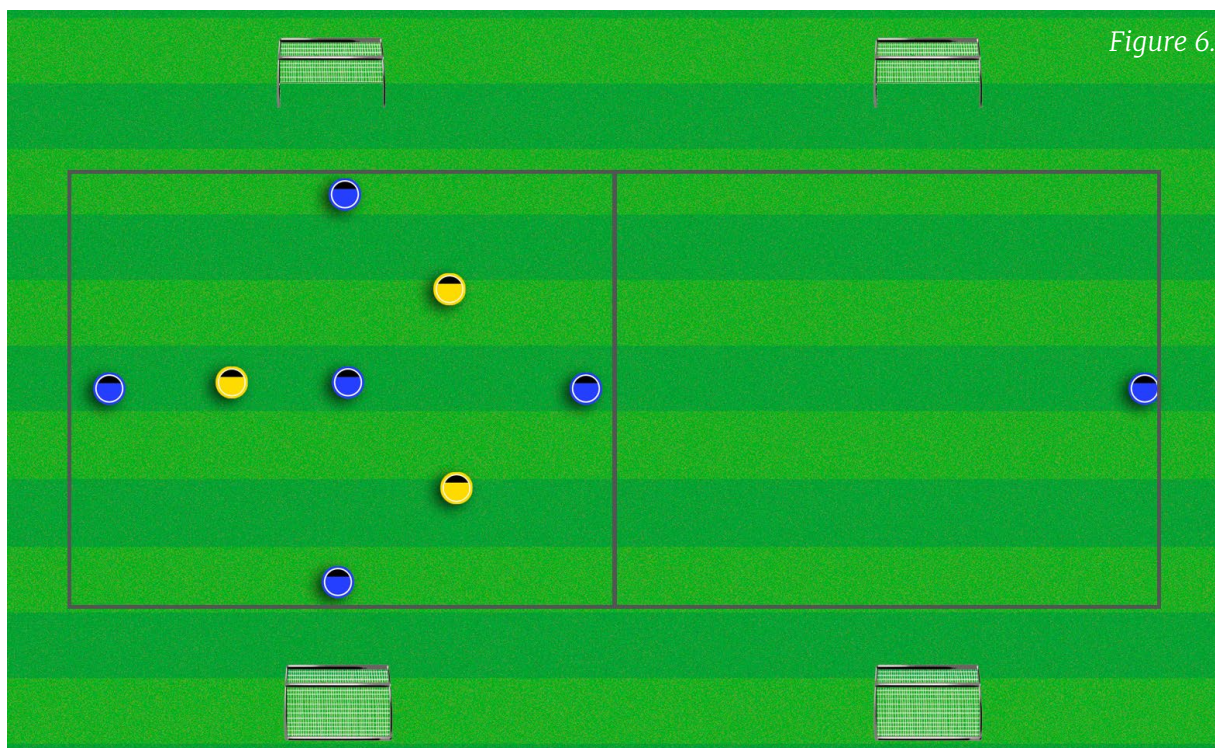
## ■ THE METHODOLOGY

To place space and relationships between players to the heart of the game, it is necessary to build a methodology that allows these links to develop and encourage the athletes to read these newly found spaces effectively.

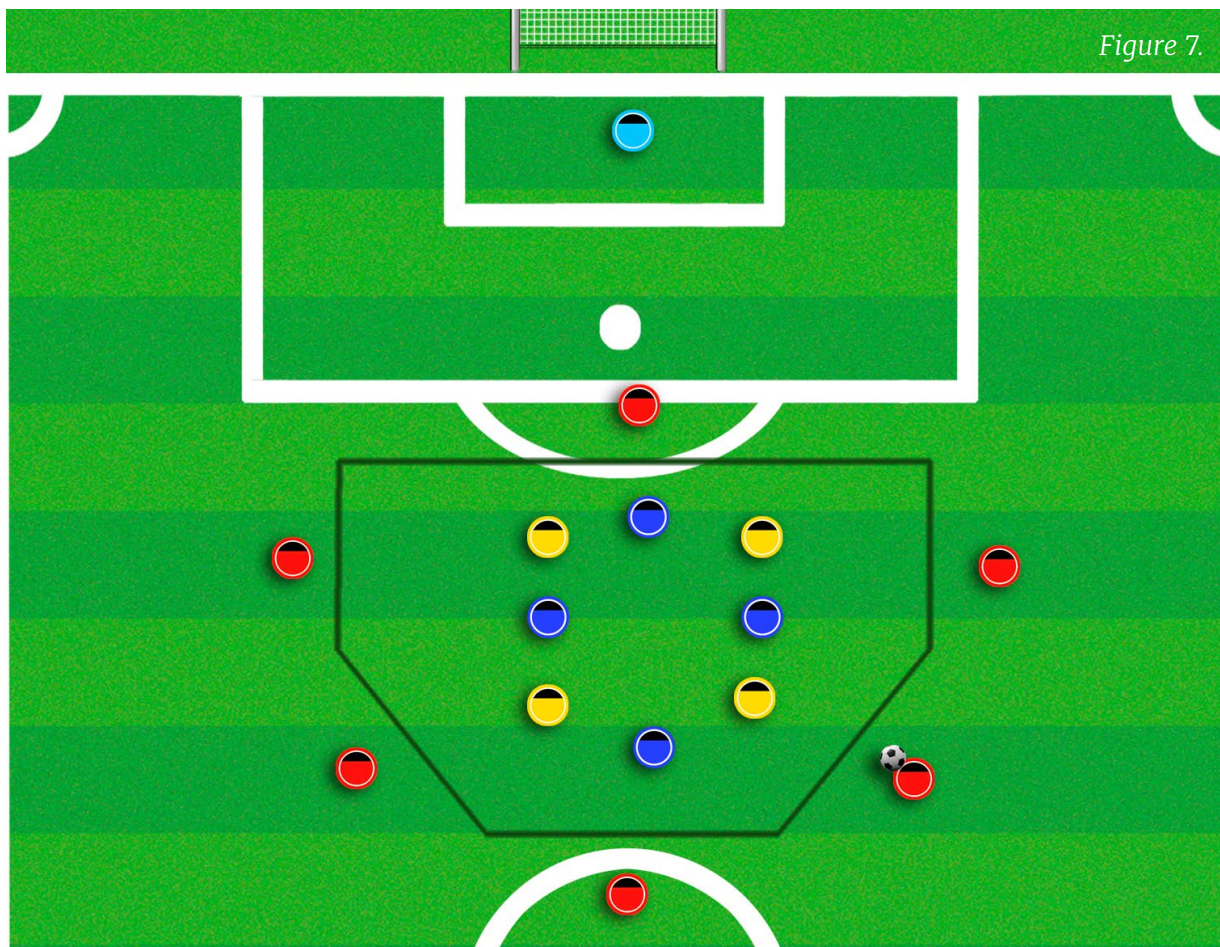
We will therefore shift the focus from positional possession drills, which keep individual player positioning fixed, to drills that foster the aforementioned connections.

In *Figure 6* we present the so-called ‘switch’ rondo; in this exercise we develop a 5vs3 (with free positions) in a sector, allowing the opportunity to find the player in the free sector after five successful passes; once the ball is passed to this player, all players (except for one, which will be the new ‘target’) will move to the other sector recreating overload and numerical superiority on the other side, giving continuity to the 5vs3 situation. At the same time, the four ‘mini-goals’ give a further incentive to win the ball back immediately; the yellow players, in fact, once recovered the ball, after at least one pass between themselves, will have the chance to score a point inside any of them.

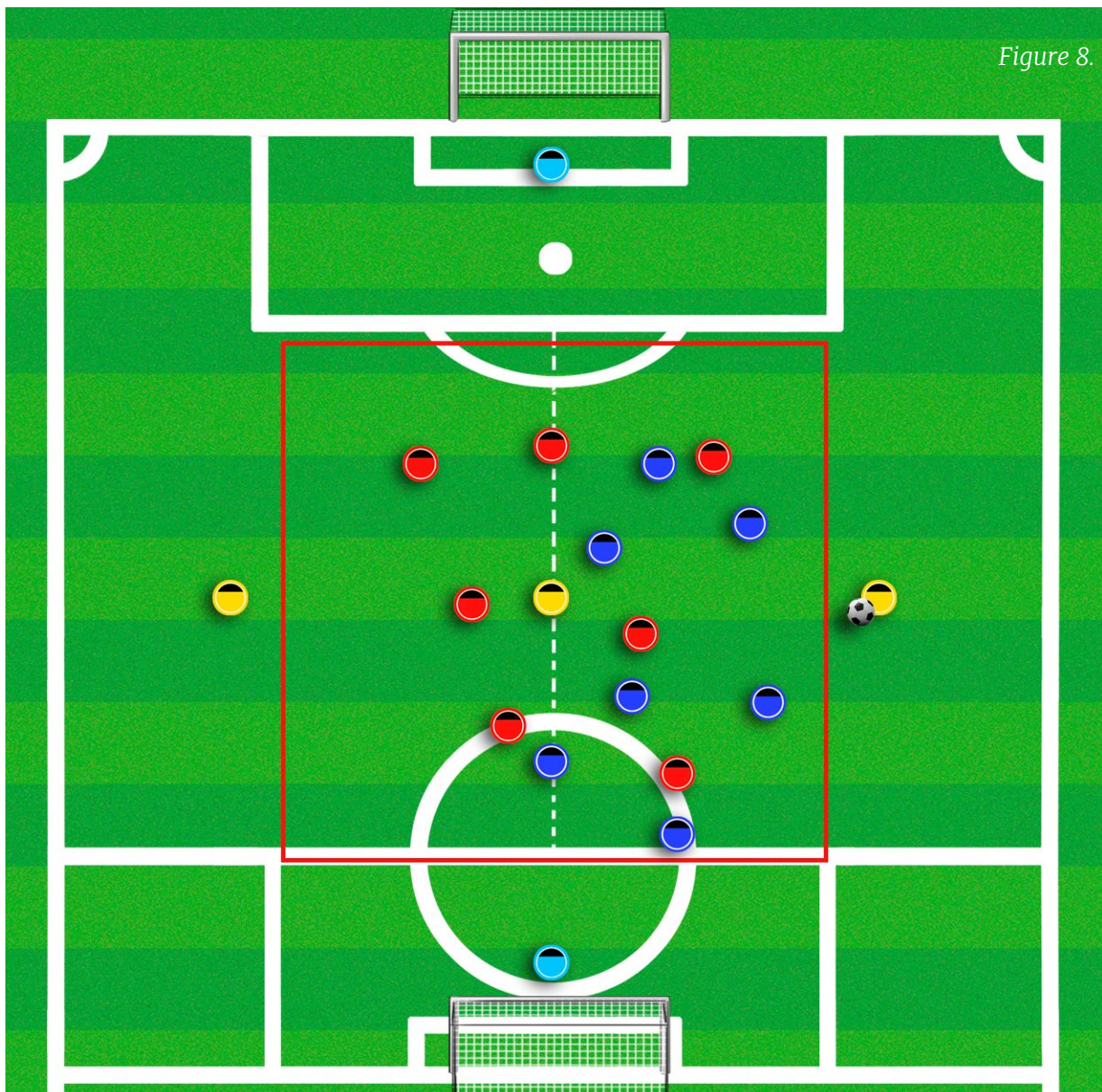
The objective of this drill is to create passing lines, thus progressing up the pitch and creating continuous overloads on ball side, which also leads up to immediate ball recovery once lost.



In *Figure 7*, we present a drill called ‘rondo structure’. The definition of the perimeter and the players occupying the space inside will be decided according to the number of spatial players and perimetral players making our real formation; in this specific case, we are inspired by Xabi Alonso’s Bayer Leverkusen and, starting from a 3-4-2-1 shape, we set the positions for the centre-forward, the two wing-backs, the two centre-backs as all-round perimetral players (the red players), while putting the four remaining spatial and relational players (the two central midfielders and the two attacking midfielders) able to freely move inside, overload space and create connections. The all-rounders (jolly as used in the Italian terminology) will allow the inside players to play the ball to them, both wide and deep, relatively to the teammates. So we have a 4vs4 + 6 all-rounders. To ensure continuity in the development of these relationships we could increase the number of passes (6/8) to complete before leaving the perimeter and attempting to score a point. A variation could be to remove the number of passes and therefore to force a give and go between an inside player and a perimetral player as a condition to complete the rondo before hitting the target.



In *Figure 8*, on the other hand, we move into a 7vs7 small side game + 3 all-round players that takes place between the penalty box and the half-way line. The playing area is divided vertically: an infield all-rounder ensures and emphasizes numerical superiority next to the ball and two side all-rounders occupy the wide space. The players in possession of the ball must move to the sector with the ball to create overload and mess up the opposition setup, and only after five completed passes will they have the chance to enter that area (even by moving ball possession to the opposite all-rounder) where they are obliged to only play one-touch passes and with a total of two passes allowed for the team. The opposing team, not being allowed to defend inside their own defensive half, must try to stay aggressive and next to the ball as much as possible.





## ■ CONCLUSIONS

Going back to the conclusions made in the piece published last year , it is hard not to argue that the greatest example of relational football undoubtedly was - together with the legendary Brazil in the 1982 World Cup, led by Tele Santana – Holland in the 70s, led by Michels, Crujff and Neeskens. That team is considered the trailblazer of positional football; at the same time, the harmony and empathy expressed by the Dutch on the pitch, always exchanging roles and functions, still stand at a level, arguably, never reached again.

Never mind they missed the chance to add the World Cup to their cabinet; the feelings and the concepts passed on will be eternal.

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*AN HORIZON FOLLOWS ANOTHER HORIZON,  
A HIGHWAY WILL LEAD TO AN OTHER;  
SPACE EXISTS TO GO FURTHER.  
IF YOU WANT,  
THIS IS WHERE  
YOU CAN FIND YOUR FREEDOM*

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*La tua libertà, 1971  
song by Francesco Guccini*



Simone Inzaghi