

Italian Football Federation Technical Sector Season 2023/2024



UEFA Pro Course

Occupying spaces and positional fluidity:
From positional play to associative-relational play

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“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams”
Eleanor Roosevelt

*To my father who never let me lack anything,
not even the magic of entering San Siro as a child, where,
after so much concrete, the bright green of the football field
emerges, it was at that moment that my passion and my dream
began.*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to describe and analyze two fundamental key factors in modern football: **the occupation of spaces** and **positional fluidity**.

In the modern football era, we find more and more teams of any level building from the back and having a **higher percentage of ball possession**. These trends have undoubtedly contributed to creating new solutions such as the defined occupation of spaces and the movement of multiple players outside their initial positions or their traditional “roles”.

Another aspect that has led more teams to move more players around the field is certainly the response to the defensive attitude of various teams that in recent years are increasingly seeking **man-to-man marking**, defending more with the principle of marking the man rather than covering space.

Moreover, **regulatory changes** such as the 1992 ban on the goalkeeper from handling back passes from teammates or the more recent 2019 rule change on goal kicks, where players from the team in possession can enter the penalty area and receive the ball within it, have significantly modified the game, favoring more constructed football.

After an introduction on the aspects of space occupation and positional fluidity, the first chapter focuses on the fundamental concept of **space** present in all team sports and obviously in football. Subsequently, in the second chapter, what is meant by **positional football** is defined, and examples from the past are reported, such as the total football of the 1974 Netherlands team coached by Rinus Michels to more modern teams like Barcelona and Manchester City of Pep Guardiola. In this chapter, some characteristics that modern players must have for the perception and interpretation of space, such as *scanning*, are also discussed.

In the third chapter, reference is made to the concept of **relationships between players**, another new frontier for space occupation.

In the fourth chapter, what is meant by **positional mobility** and **associative-relational** football is defined, and modern teams in today's football are described, such as the Brazilian team Fluminense coached by Fernando Diniz, Malmö by Henrik Rydström, or the Argentine national team coached by Lionel Scaloni.

In the fifth chapter, the core of this thesis, some examples of space occupation and positional exchanges in the **offensive phase** are reported, analyzing various tactical situations such as the playmaker goalkeeper, false full-backs, false centrals, and the false nine.

Finally, before the final conclusions, some **methodological proposals** are shown on how to functionally train the occupation of spaces and how to train players to improve their ability to interchange positions within the field. In this last chapter, there is also a focus on exercises taken from *futsal* but adapted to 11-a-side football.



Since this is a tactical thesis, for a more complete and effective reading, a play symbol has been inserted above the figures, at the bottom right. In the digital format, if this symbol is selected, a link will open to view the video clip related to the reference image, making the contents multimedia.

INTRODUCTION

Presenting the thesis for the UEFA Pro Master and becoming a professional coach is the fulfillment of a childhood dream . This paper represents the end of a formative path that lasted several years, which allowed me to confront, grow, and learn a variety of different aspects thanks to all of my professors and course mates.

The beauty of training is precisely the possibility of listening to other people's ideas and theories and then deciding which ones to make your own; every lesson becomes an experience with a cultural expansion of your knowledge and a continuous choice of which concepts to integrate into your idea of football.

Finishing a course of study, however, does not mean stopping wanting to improve, apply oneself, and study, but on the contrary, it should represent a starting point to grow further, always continuing to update one's ideas. Updating and studying are necessary elements in a dynamic and ever-evolving sport like football, where what is happening today will already be outdated tomorrow, and in some cases, what was considered past can reappear as innovation.

“Football is never the same. It constantly evolves, and what works today may not work tomorrow”
Pep Guardiola

This thesis, titled **“occupying spaces and positional fluidity”**, aims to highlight tactical themes from the past that may be useful today and other aspects that are considered innovative nowadays but may already be outdated and considered archaic tomorrow. Tactical evolution is not a straight line, but resembles a circle; past solutions are continuously reused, but modified with a modern edge.

The choice of the thesis topic was a consequence of working in the role of **Match Analyst/Tactical Assistant** over recent years. My role led me to analyze numerous matches and teams meticulously in all their phases of play, trying to extract the most

synthetic information possible from a video to define the strategy and game plan to adopt for the match.

It is precisely this analysis process that increasingly focused my attention on the space occupation of the teams we were going to face in the different phases of the game. Often in football, it is said “the blanket is always short” because defending all spaces is practically impossible; you always have to concede something to the opponent, and in the possession phase, it is not possible to attack all spaces while maintaining a defensive balance.

Therefore, analyzing opposing teams, I often found myself focusing on which **spaces they conceded** in the defensive phase and which **spaces they mostly occupied** when they had the ball. From this type of analysis, the strategy was born on how to exploit their weaknesses and counter their strengths.

The concept of space has always been present since the remote origins of football. Traditional football derives from various sports practiced in the past. In the 3rd century BC in **China**, *tsu' chu or cuju* (literally “ball pushed with the foot”) was practiced, a military training in which a ball filled with feathers and female hair had to be kicked between two bamboo canes: the goal did not exceed 30-40 cm in width.

Around 600 years later in **Japan**, *kemari* (still practiced today) was played, in which the objective of the



Figure 1 – Initial lineup of a Calcio Fiorentino match in Piazza Santa Croce in 1688.

players arranged in a circle was to avoid letting the ball touch the ground.

In 4th century BC **Greece**, *episkyros* was played, the precursor of what in Roman times was called *harpastum* (from Latin “snatched away by force”): two teams had to forcefully carry a ball beyond the opponent’s goal line. In the Middle Ages in France, they played to carry a spherical object into the neighboring village square, but it was in Renaissance **Florence**, already in 1410, that a very popular form of entertainment

emerged, expressly called “**calcio**” (football). The rules stated that two opposing teams could be composed of a varied number of players: 20, 30, or 40 depending on the size of the field. The standard formation consisted of 27 players. The ball could be hit with the feet or grabbed with the hands, but it was not allowed to be thrown. The objective of both teams was to shoot the ball into a goal guarded by one of the defenders, the only one allowed to use hands like the current goalkeeper. These were real battles of great violence that lasted all day¹.

So, from the origins, proto-football has always been a matter of ball control, the necessity of scoring one more goal, and **conquering space**.

Space becomes even more important with the introduction of **tactics**, understood as minimal collective organization, by the Scots who were the first to adopt the 2-2-6 system based on a series of passes. For decades now, football has discussed systems of play, which are the distribution of players on the field (thus the occupation of spaces). Systems of play are, in fact, the perfect numerical demonstration of how players position themselves on the football field. We talk about a **system of play** by defining it as the position players take on the field in a static situation. However, modern football's evolution has increasingly led to discussions about the **module of play**, which is the dynamic implementation of the system with the related tasks and functions that the player must perform.



Figure 2 – Italy's offensive structure vs England - European Final 2021

The use of numbers to identify positional arrangements is often used to simplify the coding of certain situations, but today it is becoming less and less useful because almost all teams now use different structures when they have possession of the ball and when they have to defend, and they almost always modify positions based on the zone of the field.

¹ www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/calcio-la-storia-del-calcio_%28Enciclopedia-dello-Sport%29

A team's identity is increasingly moving away from the module and closer to the **principles of play**.

One example of a modern team that has adopted **different** offensive and defensive **structures** is the 2021 European champions Italy, coached by Roberto Mancini, with whom I have worked for several years. They started from a basic **4-3-3** system and then, through some rotations, occupied spaces with an offensive structure of **3-2-5**, covering the 5 offensive channels.



Figure 3 – Italy's defensive structure vs England - European Final 2021

In the non-possession phase, the defensive structure was defined in a **4-5-1** with the retreat of the two wingers (Insigne and Chiesa).

Other examples of teams that apply a **different defensive structure for different areas of the field** are Xavi's Barcelona in the 2021/22 season (see the Europa League

match against Spalletti's Napoli) and the Spain Under-15 team. Both starting from a basic **4-3-3** system, in the high-pressure phase in zone 3 (the highest area of the field where the opponent's build-up is pressed), they position themselves with a **4-1-3-2** (midfield diamond), pushing the left midfielder up alongside the striker, bringing the other right midfielder onto the opponent's playmaker, and pulling back the two wingers.



Figure 4 – Barcelona's 2021/22 pressing from 4-3-3 to 4-1-3-2



Figure 5 – Barcelona's 2021/22 pressing 4-1-3-2

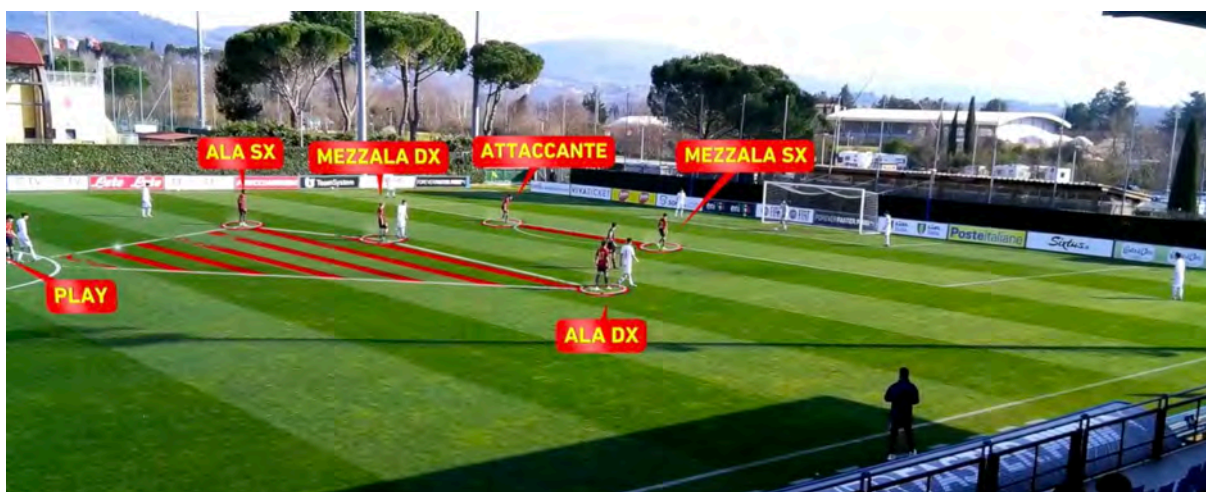


Figure 6 – Spain U15's pressing from 4-3-3 to 4-1-3-2

In zones 1 and 2 (situations of holding line and compact block), both teams position themselves with the "classic" 4-1-4-1 or 4-5-1.



Figure 7 – Barcelona's 2021/22 4-1-4-1 holding line

As mentioned, numbers can help us define some situations, but modern football is increasingly transforming, and numbers are no longer sufficient to describe and explain it. Giampiero Gasperini, Atalanta's coach, stated in a press conference this season: *"Football is continuously evolving and is never static. It's not just a matter of numbers but a matter of evolutions and adjustments that change and modify the characteristics of teams"*

🎥 As Gasperini said, besides the different game structures for the different phases, as I described earlier, many modern teams implement an **adaptation process according to the spaces** the opponent concedes, changing tactical aspects dynamically within the different moments of the same match. The ability of defenses to find countermeasures to more positional and static football is creating an increasingly present trend of teams seeking **continuous mobility** and **interchange** between players in relation to each other. As the French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre observed, "in football, everything is complicated by the presence of the opposing team". Thus, a cultural opposition is being created between the concept of **positional** football and **fluid associative-relational** football, leading to a diametrically opposite ideology. If I were to associate adjectives with these two different ways of interpreting football, without giving negative connotations, I would give the following:

POSITIONAL FOOTBALL	FLUID ASSOCIATIVE-RELATIONAL FOOTBALL
Order	Disorder
Precision	Chaos
Lines	Circles
Angles	Curves
Reasoned	Unconscious
Controlled	Spontaneous
Rational	Instinctive
Mechanical	Creative
Geometric	Confused
Occupation	Movement
The ball goes to positions	Positions go to the ball

Figure 8 – Adjectives associated with positional football and fluid associative-relational football

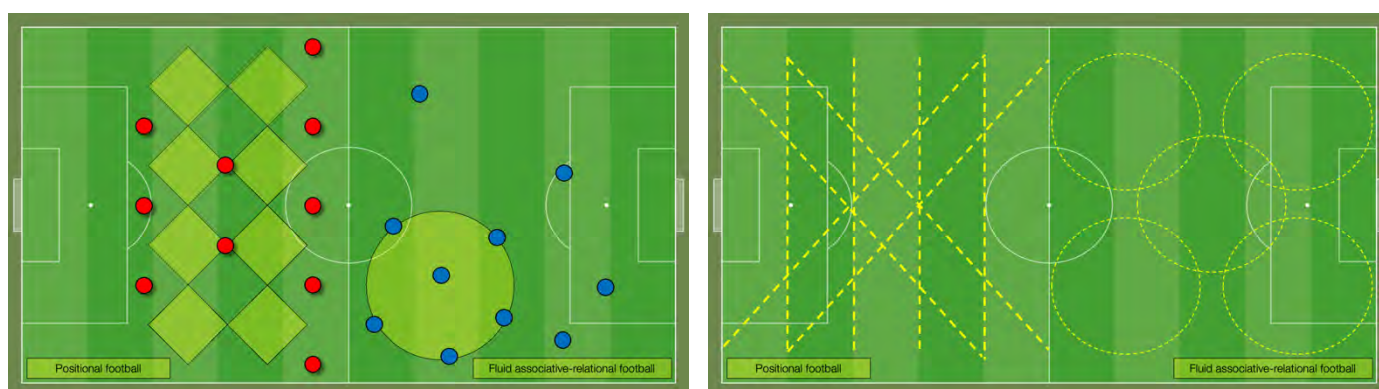


Figure 9 – The difference between positional football and fluid associative-relational football. Lines and angles vs. circles. Source Marco Scarpa

Positional football, therefore, figuratively speaking, can be connected to the game of **chess**: its strategy is to use players to "block" the opponent and "open spaces in other parts of the board." Coaches move the pieces (players with their different functions) on the chessboard (the field) with the goal of gradually improving their position by invading enemy territory to gain a spatial advantage and reducing the opponent's opportunities.

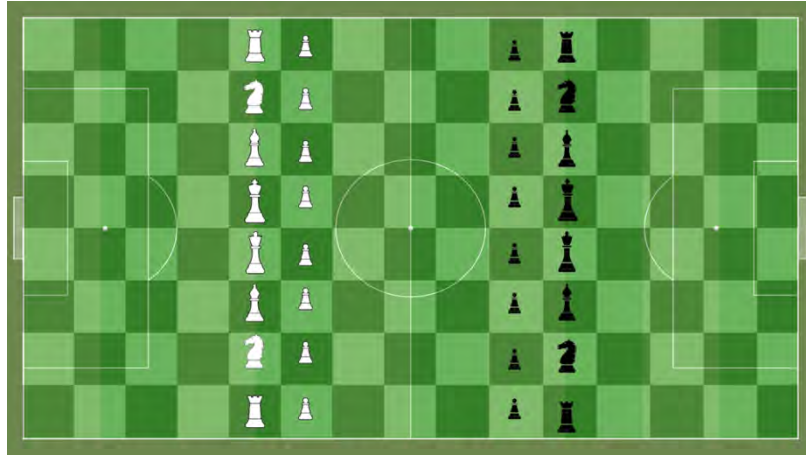


Figure 10 – Positional football related to chess

Fluid associative-relational football, on the other hand, can be associated with the game of **backgammon**, which aims to bring all pieces into one's home and subsequently bear them off, creating a relationship between them and the concept of progression.

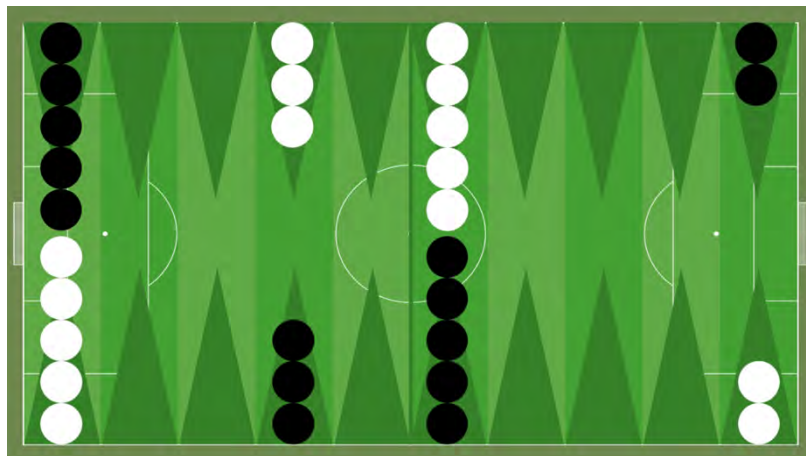


Figure 11 – Fluid associative-relational football related to backgammon

The intent of this paper and the following chapters is to analyze and explain these two football philosophies, how they were born, how they developed, and how they are implemented on the field.

CHAPTER 1 – SPACE

In addition to football, **space** is a fundamental element in many other team sports such as volleyball, American football, and basketball.

To understand the importance of the **spatial concept**, I prefer to start with a non-football example and recount the play that marked the beginning of **Michael Jordan's** career, the greatest basketball player of all time and one of the most well-known athletes in the world.

In 1982, a very young Michael Jordan was playing for the University of North Carolina. In the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Championship final against Georgetown, led by Patrick Ewing, played at the Superdome in New Orleans in front of 61,612 spectators (plus 17 million TV viewers), with a score of 62 to 61 in favor of the opponents, Jordan scored the decisive three-point shot with 15 seconds left in the game, contributing to the title victory. Subsequently, Jordan was selected third in the 1984 NBA Draft by the Chicago Bulls and quickly became one of the league's stars, helping to popularize basketball and the NBA worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s. The action of the shot begins with Jordan deciding to exchange the ball with a teammate, then making a pass to the right side of the court and positioning himself on the left, seeking the **empty space**, evading the defensive pressure, to take the three-point shot.

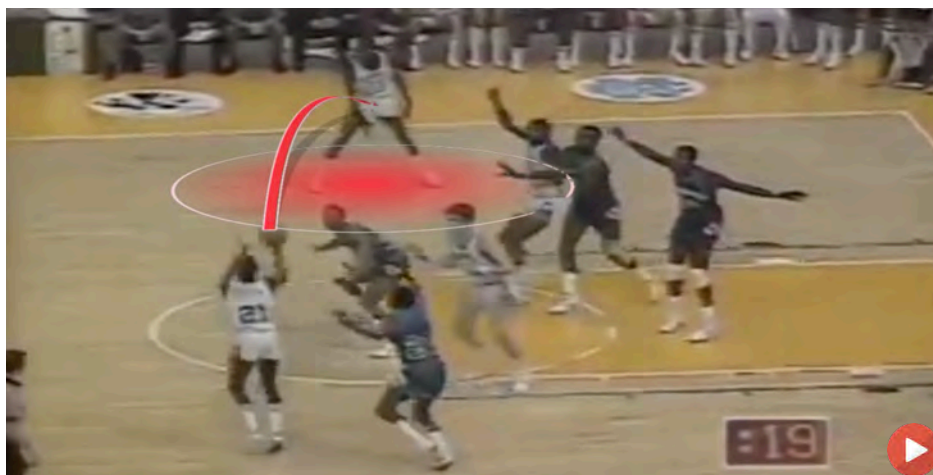


Figure 12 – Michael Jordan's decisive shot in the 1982 NCAA Championship final

I used the basketball example to emphasize the importance of space in a sport played 5 against 5 on a court with dimensions of 28 meters in length and 15 meters in width. However, according to the rules, the game is played only on one half of the court, meaning an area of 14 meters by 15 meters, which equals 210 square meters divided among 10 players (about **21 square meters per player**, roughly a 5x5 meter square). Basketball is therefore a sport where the "free" space to occupy is limited (little space, high player density). But as in the example of the action just mentioned, we can assert that finding the open player (who thus occupies a free space) and having the time to take a shot is the strategy for winning. If this concept applies to basketball, it certainly applies to football as well, where the spaces are much larger compared to basketball.

According to the regulations, the dimensions of an international football field must have a **length** (sideline) ranging from a minimum of 100 meters to a maximum of 110 meters and a **width** (goal line) ranging from a minimum of 64 meters to a maximum of 75 meters. We can consider the average standard size to be **105x68 meters**. This means that the 22 players on the field are moving in a space of 7140 square meters. Each player has about **325** square meters available (a square roughly 18x18 meters). If we consider only the 20 outfield players, this space increases to about 357 square meters.

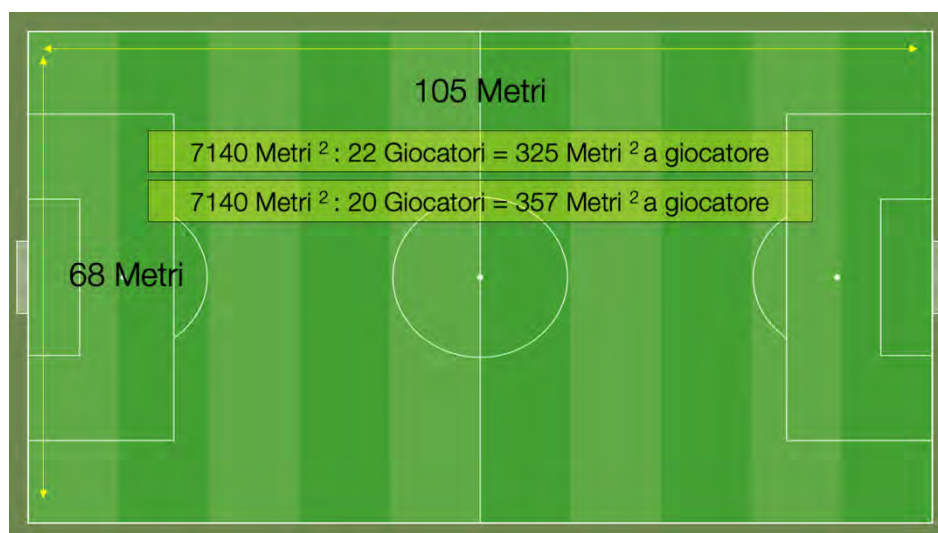


Figure 13 – Football field dimensions and space for each player

However, if we calculate the average centroid of the teams, we find that they play in a space of 45x50 meters, which is 2250 square meters. This means that considering only the 20 outfield players, the space available for each player decreases to **112.5 square meters**, which is equivalent to a **square** of approximately **11x11 meters**.



Figure 14 – Space where the game is currently played in modern football with the 20 outfield players

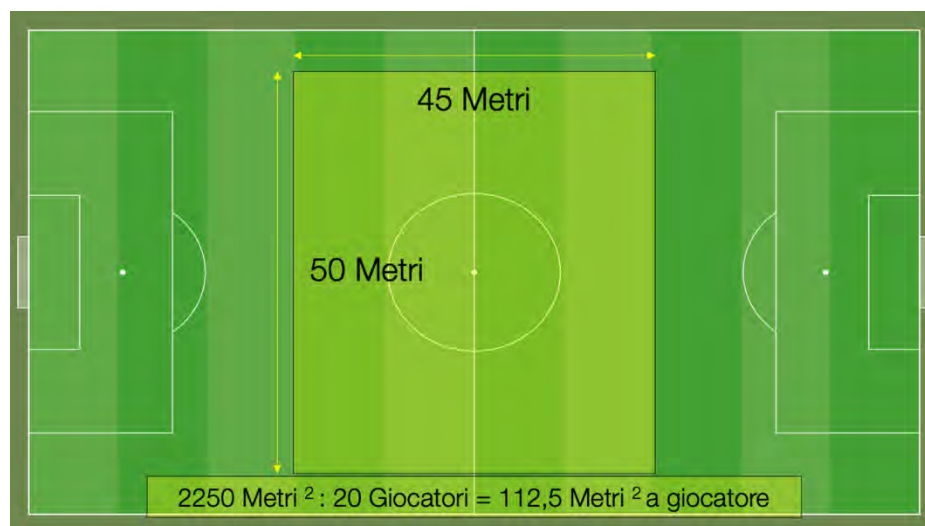


Figure 15 – Effective space for each player

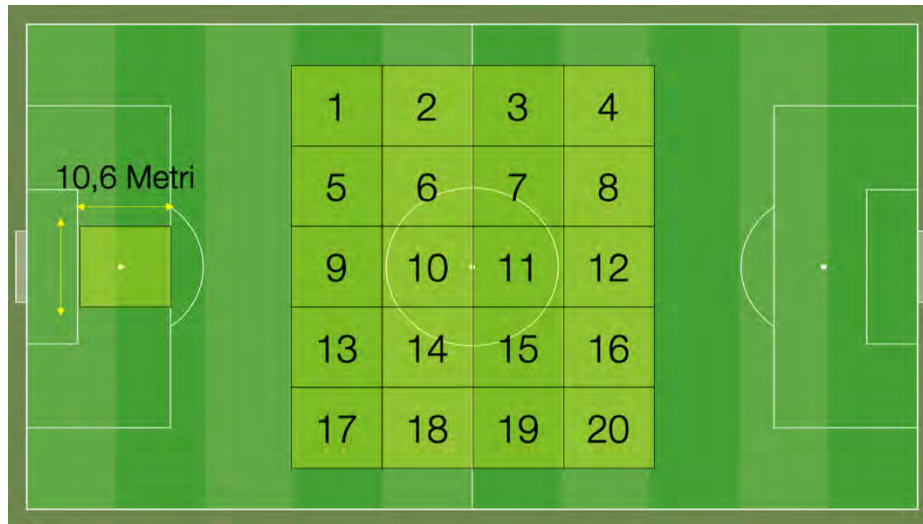


Figure 16 – Space available for each player, equivalent to a square of approximately 11x11 meters

Therefore, the space available for a football player is practically double that of a basketball player, with the difference being that in basketball, a player has **full possession** of the ball by having it in their hands, whereas in football, it is said that there is ball **availability** when the player has the ball at their feet.

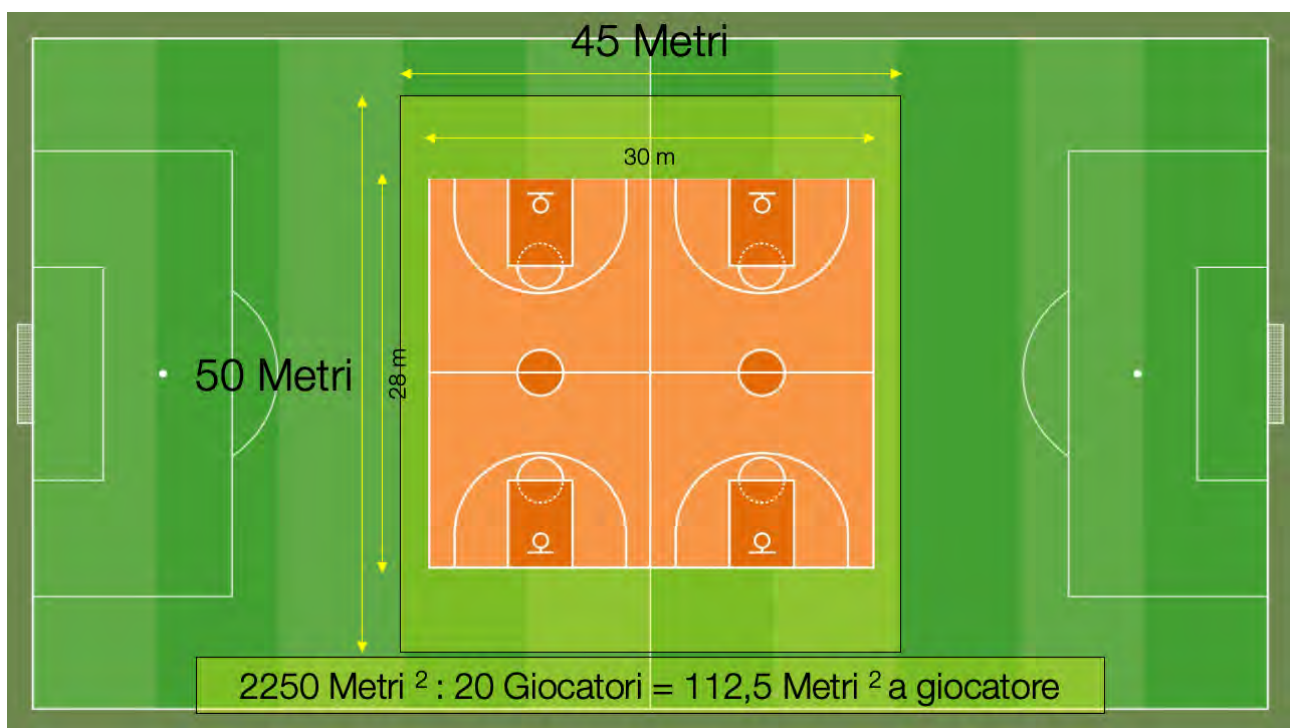


Figure 17 – Comparison between two basketball courts and the effective area of a football field

The ability to find **free space** is, therefore, an essential element in any sport, especially in those defined as **open skills**, like football, which is characterized by a highly changeable and unpredictable environment where the context of action changes within

seconds, and each situation differs from the previous one, as seen in sports like basketball or hockey.

Furthermore, football is a **situational** sport in which two systems (teams) compete; it is “**complex**” because it consists of multiple parts that interact and cooperate, with **uncertainty** dominating the game.

Paco Seirul-lo, the methodological director of F.C. Barcelona and one of the most influential thinkers of the game and training in our time, described football with these words²:

“Our game is not made up of a succession of plays but of a stochastic succession of phase spaces”
Paco Seirul-lo

Additionally, Paco Seirul-lo described the concept of **phase spaces**, which became well-known through a publication by Marti Perarnau following a conversation with the director of *La Masia*.

At every moment of a match, one can distinguish a space near the ball, occupied by relatively few players, teammates, and opponents, called the **center of the game**, and a space to occupy outside this zone, called the **phase space**. The awareness of being part of the center of the game (**chaotic**) or the phase space (**orderly**) leads the player to different behaviors dictated by shared principles.

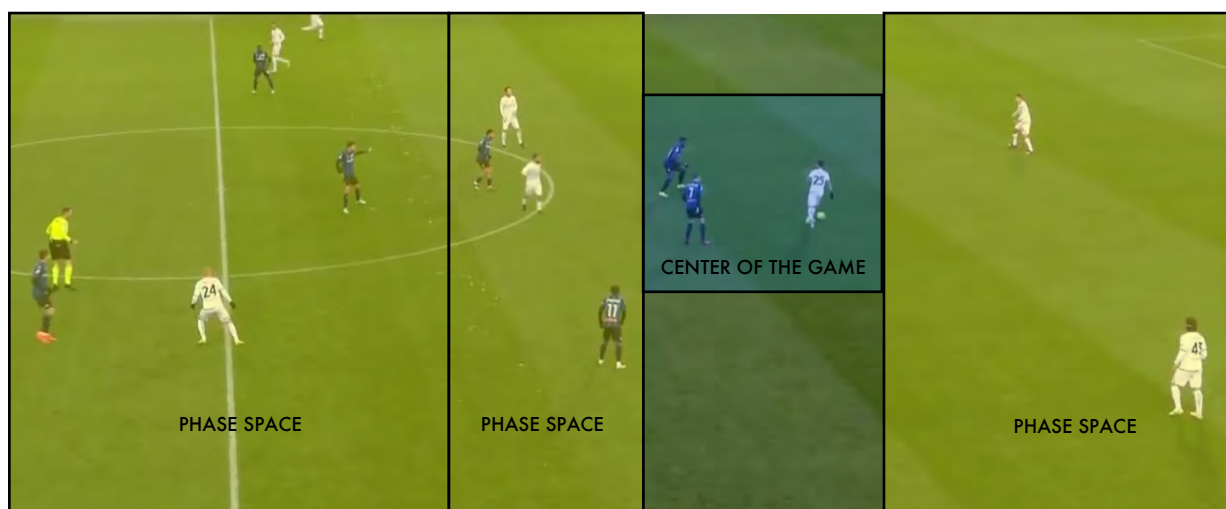


Figure 18 – Center of the game and phase space – Paco Seirul-lo

² Marco Ferri – Gli spazi di fase – www.areacoach.it/2022/03/08/gli-spazi-di-fase/

In the game, three different types of spaces are identified according to phase space theory. The first type of space is called the **active zone** or “**intervention space**”. This corresponds to the area where the ball is located and includes all the players positioned in the vicinity of the ball who have a tangible opportunity to interact with it.



Figure 19 – Active zone or “intervention space”

The second space, **cercanos** or “**mutual help**” space, is the area where players are close to the intervention space but at a distance that prevents them from immediately interacting with the ball. However, due to their proximity to the ball, they can potentially intervene within a few moments.

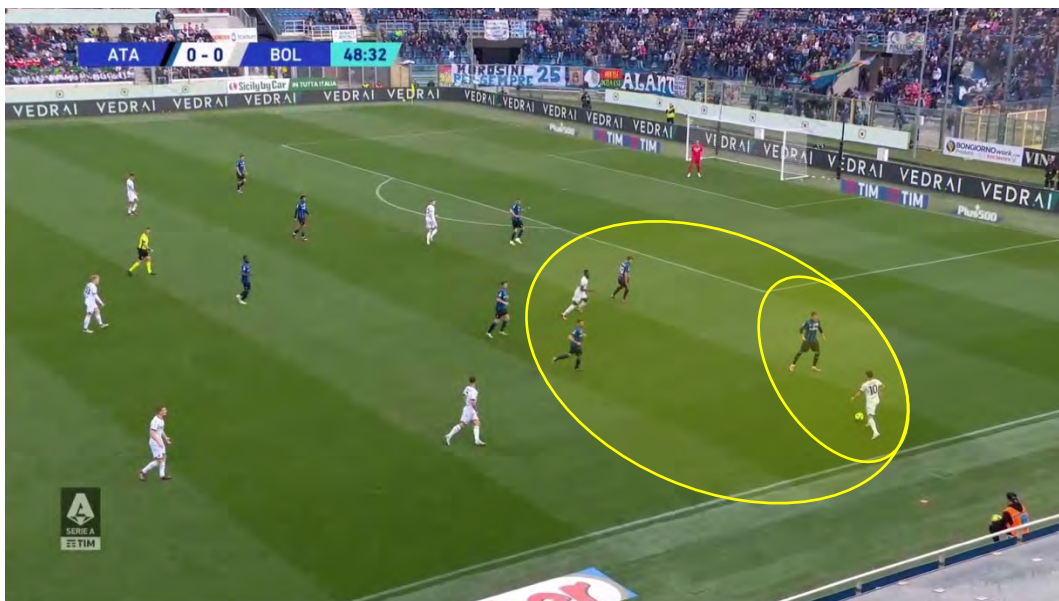


Figure 20 – Cercanos space or “mutual help” space

The third space is *alejados* or “cooperation space”, which refers to areas of the game where the players present have a more indirect connection with the ball.

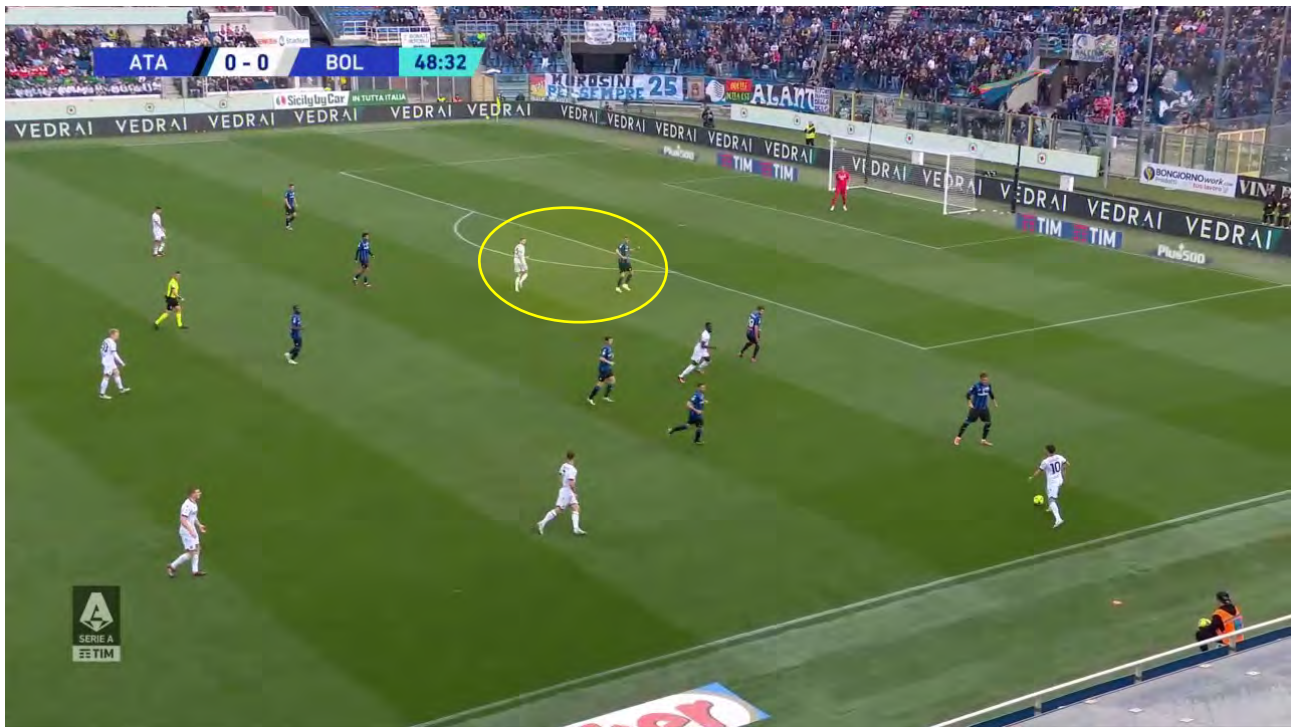


Figure 21 – *Alejados* space or “cooperation” space

As we will see in Chapter 6, when constructing training exercises, the coach cannot underestimate this concept because the spaces and the number of participants generate situations where the sub-principles of the center of the game will predominate.

“The purpose of all technical and tactical principles in football is to identify and create space to increase the time we attack, and conversely, to identify and deny space to reduce the time we defend”

Xavi Hernandez

Xavi Hernandez, one of the greatest midfielders in history and former Barcelona coach, explains how creating space is fundamental to **increasing attacking time**, while conversely, not conceding space **reduces defensive time**. Analyzing any team in the world, at any level, era, or category, you can observe how each coach, according to their playing principles, chooses to occupy certain spaces when their team has the ball and seeks to deny certain spaces to opponents when their team does not have the ball.

Luis Enrique, current coach of Paris Saint-Germain, stated in a press conference this season: *“We (myself and my staff) love occupying spaces and playing in relation to teammates, which gives us the opportunity to attack so that the opponent cannot defend all the space. It is the opponent who dictates which spaces you will attack based on the spaces they cover, and the player must make the best decision. No two opponents are the same, even if they may defend in a similar manner, because there are always different choices.”* 

In football, the defending team determines the mode of the defensive phase by choosing to **defend certain spaces** and **conceding others**. To better explain this concept, concrete examples are necessary. Against a high defensive line, there will be less space between the lines, and the space conceded will be related to **depth**.



Figure 22 – Spain's high defensive line at Euro 2021 conceding space in depth

Against a team that plays with a zonal defensive line, where the reference is the ball, you often find more **spaces between the lines**, particularly in the final third.

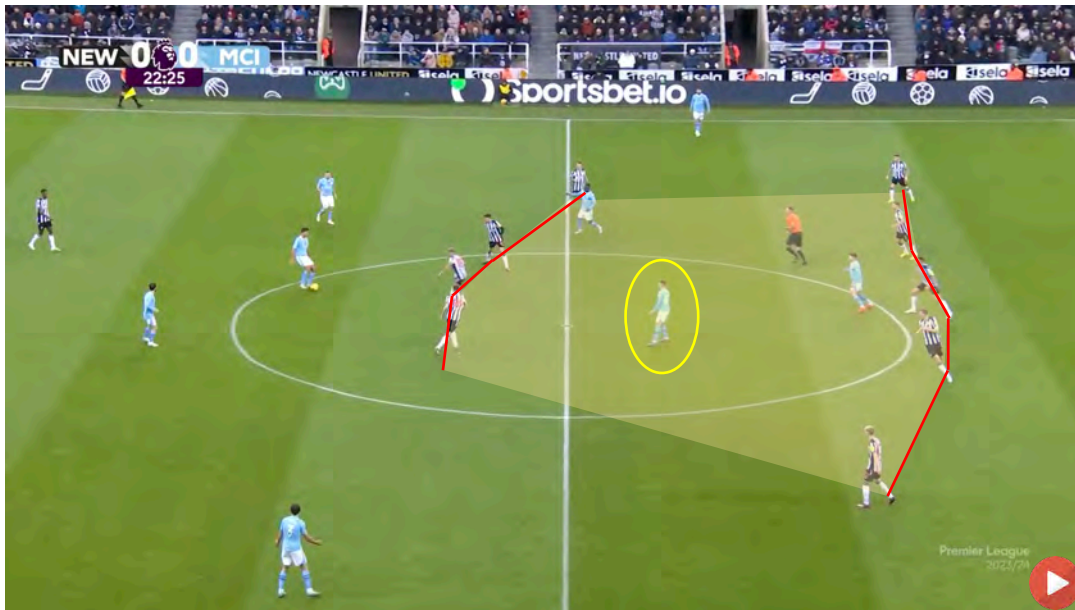


Figure 23 – Foden in the free space between the lines for Manchester City 2023/24

In recent years, many teams have sought **man-to-man marking** in defense, following the ‘man-marking’ principle. This has changed the available spaces, often requiring **positional exchanges**, rotations, and runs from behind.

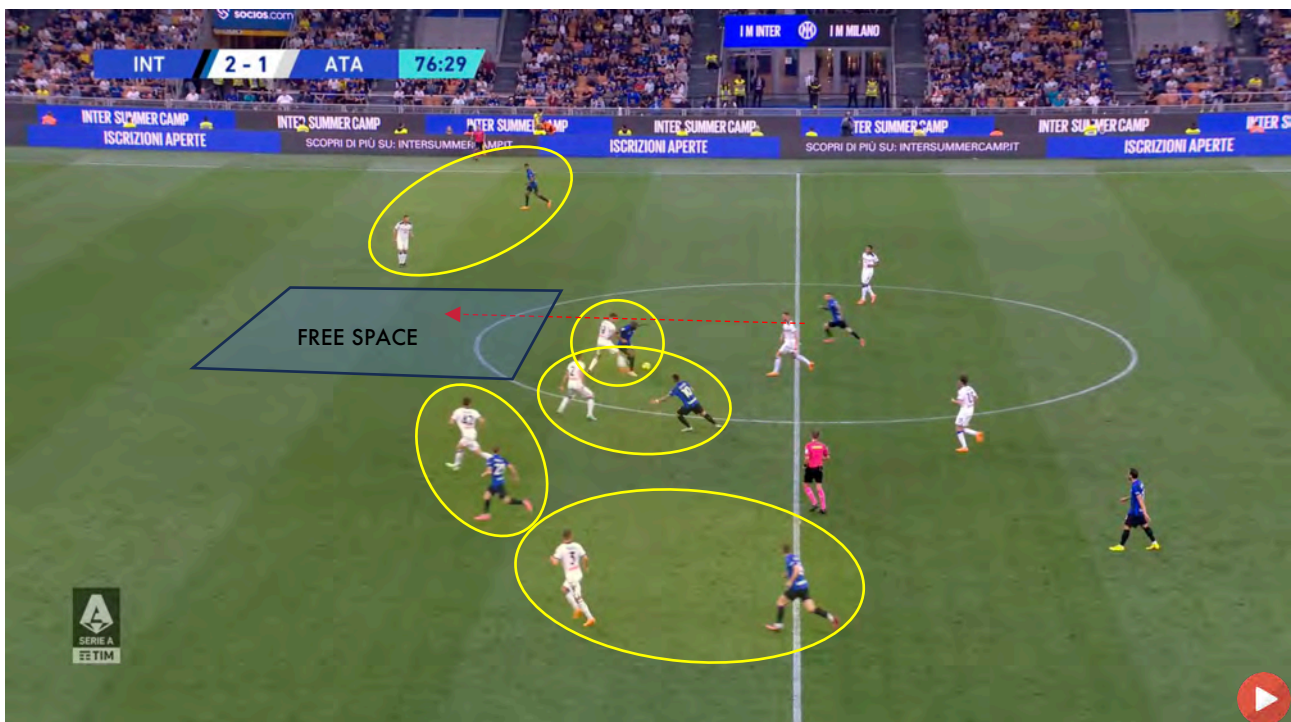



Figure 24 – Atalanta’s man-to-man marking against Inter and Brozovic’s run from behind. Season 2022/23

Luciano Spalletti, who led Napoli to the Serie A title in the 2022/23 season, commented on the issue of space in an interview³ after the match Napoli vs Ajax, which ended 4-2 and allowed the Neapolitan team to advance to the knockout stages of the Champions League. He said: *“Modern football needs to be interpreted. You have to get closer to the opponent, there are more 1v1 situations, and the spaces are wider. Tactics no longer exist in football; **spaces** are no longer between the lines but **between the opposing players**. Spaces are created by the opponents, and you need to be able to interpret, see, and use them. It becomes essential to recognize them at the right times, with the courage to always start the actions”*. 

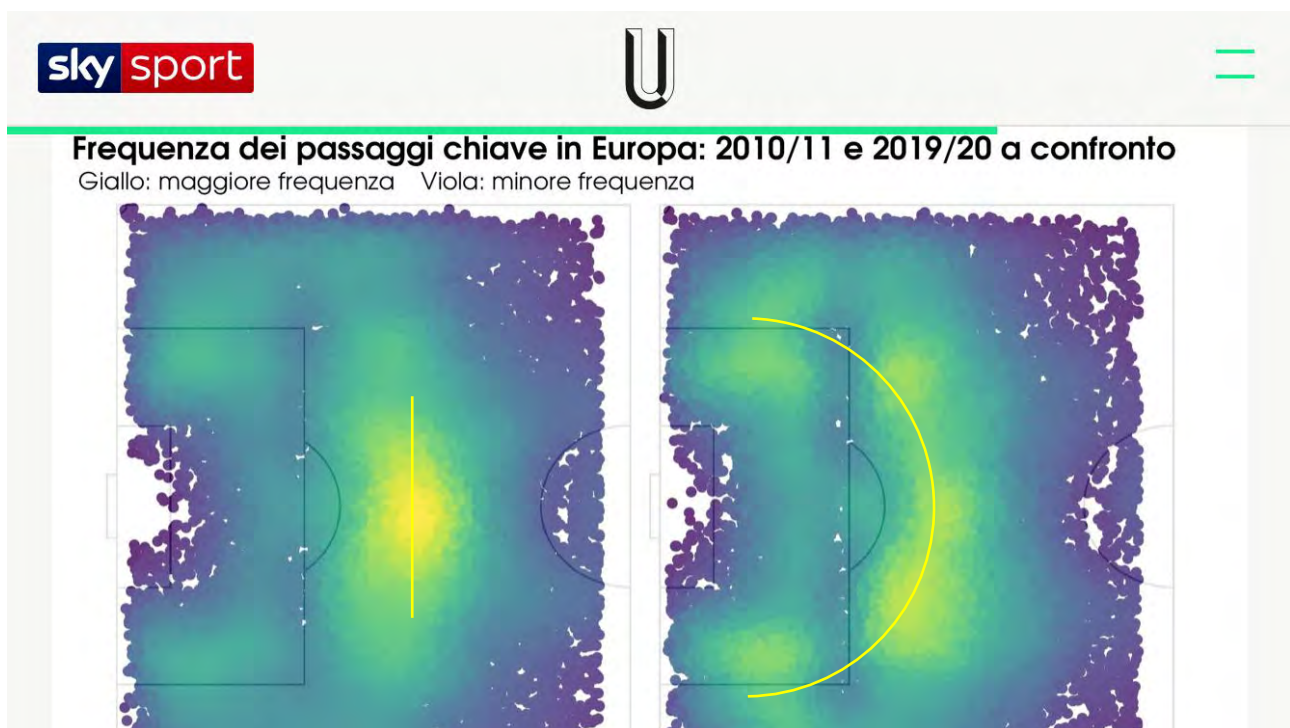


Figure 25 – Variation in the final third between 2010/11 and 2019/20. Source: Ultimo Uomo / Sky Sport

Occupying space refers to the position of players on the field and their **ability to take up positions that create playing opportunities**. Players must be able to move and adapt quickly to evolving situations, creating open spaces that can be exploited by other players. This tactical flexibility requires a deep understanding and reading of the game, as well as high levels of **communication** and **collaboration** among teammates.

³ www.eurosport.it/calcio/champions-league/2022-2023/spalletti-dopo-napoli-ajax-4-2-e-la-qualificazione-agli-ottavi-abbiamo-fatto-qualcosa-di-immenso_sto9182207/story.shtml

It is crucial to highlight the difference between **occupying an open space** and **creating one**. To occupy an open space, there must first be a movement made to free that space. Coach Tim Less Bury, current assistant manager of Bury Football Club, writes that Premier League players receive the ball, on average, once every seven movements⁴.

Players who know how to move with specific patterns become essential in creating space. Movements to **create space can be made for oneself**, such as off-the-line movements, in-the-line movements, long-short movements to receive the ball toward oneself, or short-long movements to receive the ball in depth.

An example of a self-creating movement is shown below, where Foden first makes a long movement to attack the depth, then cuts back to play short and receive the ball between the lines in the space created for himself.



Figure 26 – Foden's long-short off-the-ball movement for Manchester City

Movements can be made to **create space for a teammate**, such as an opening movement. An example is the movement made by central defender Lucumí, who opens up to draw away the opponent and create a corridor for the goalkeeper's through pass to the forward Zirkzee, who moves in to receive the ball.

⁴ Tim Lees – www.x.com/TimLees10/status/1660647909925289987

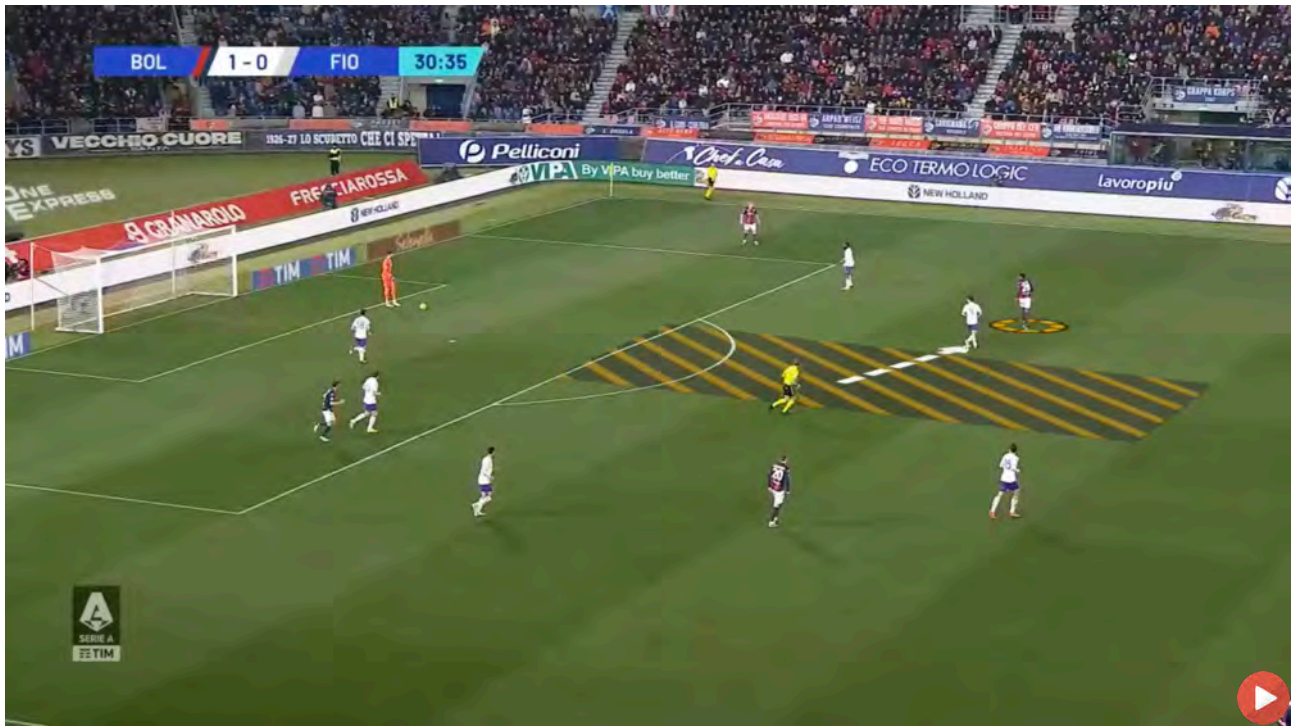


Figure 27 – Central defender Lucumí of Bologna making an opening movement

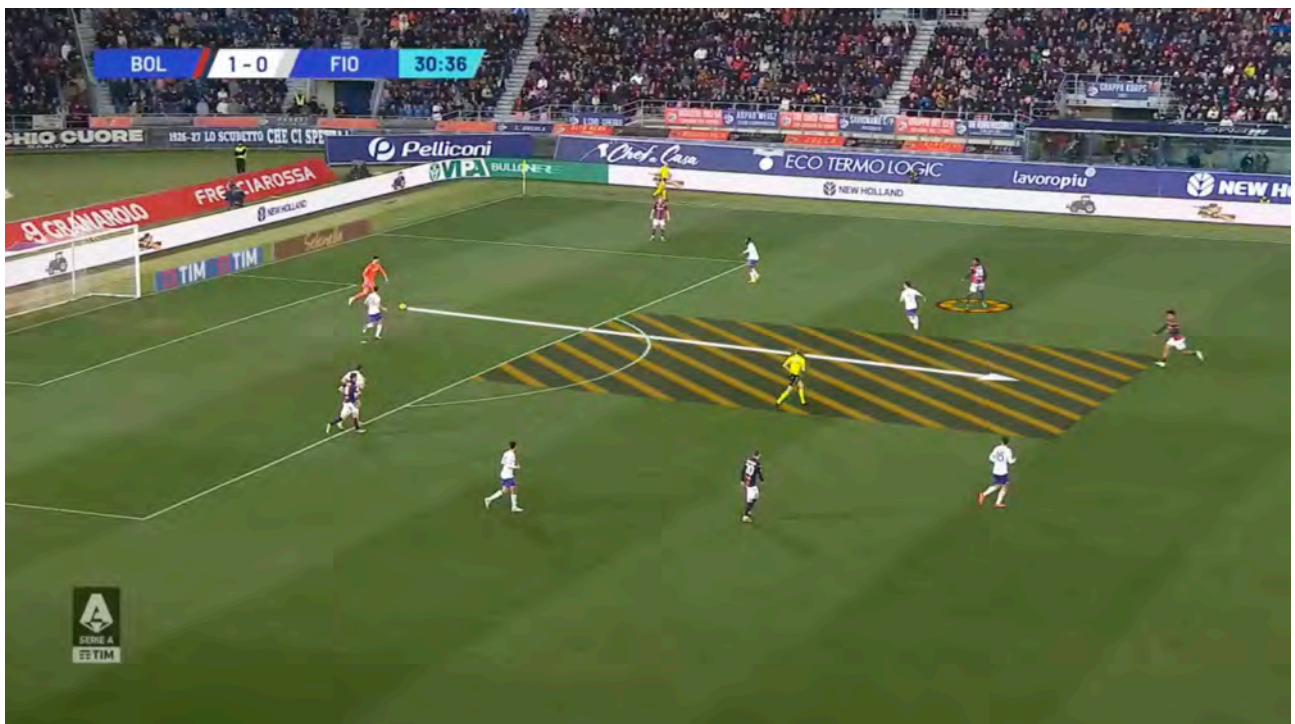


Figure 28 – Lucumí's opening movement creates space for Zirkzee to receive the ball



Figure 29 – Zirkzee subsequently finds Lucumí free as the third man

It becomes crucial for players to communicate their intentions. If teammates can read **body language**, they will understand which movements to make in response.

CHAPTER 2 – POSITIONAL FOOTBALL

The idea of the **passing game** developed in Scotland and later in England at the beginning of the last century. Looking back to the early days of football, in 1872, when Scotland played England for the first time, the strategy of both teams was to push as many players forward as possible (using a **1-1-8** formation) and to kick the ball forward with the aim of winning scrums in a sport almost similar to rugby. A few years later, the Scots transitioned from the 1-1-8 system to a more defensive **2-2-6** formation, with attempts to **control the ball** through dense and conservative passing.

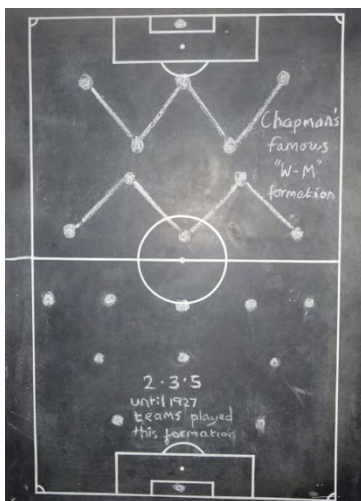


Figure 15 – System WM of Chapman

Subsequently, football underwent regulatory changes, including the offside rule, which transformed team playing styles. In 1866, the offside rule changed from **four** to **three** players, and by 1907, this infraction began to be penalized only if the player was in the opponent's half of the field. In 1924, the concept of passive offside was introduced ("a player is not offside if they do not interfere with an opponent or the game"), thus clearing an attacker who was effectively "disinterested" in the outcome of the play or far from the ball. However, the most influential change in football history was in 1926, when the offside rule was changed from **three** players to **two**. This made triggering offside more risky. At that time, all teams played with a 2-3-5 formation, which was insufficient to defend effectively under the new rule. **Herbert Chapman**, the Huddersfield coach, invented the **WM** system, a sort of **3-2-2-3** formation. Chapman was Arsenal's manager for nine

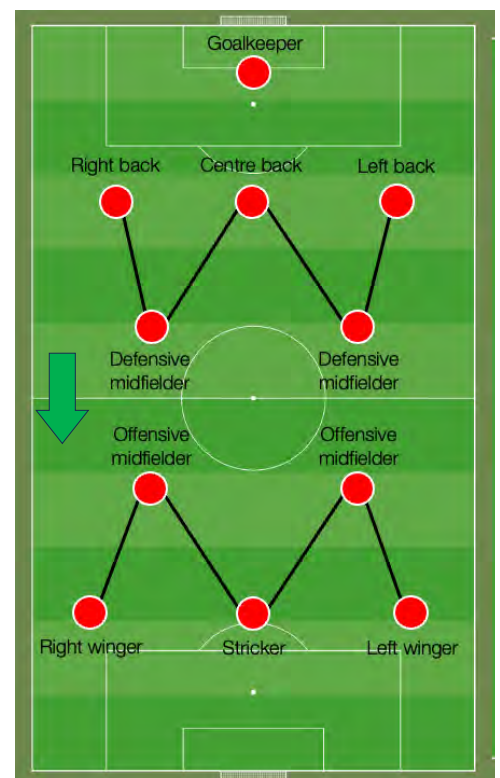


Figure 14 – Roles in the system WM of Chapman

years (from 1924 to 1934, the year of his death), winning two English titles and one national cup.

Football continued to evolve through various systems, transitioning from **Vittorio Pozzo's MM** method (2-3-2-3), with which he won two World Cups with Italy in 1934 and 1938, to the great Hungary side of **Gustav Sebes** with the *false nine*, and then to Brazil's 1958 team under **Vicente Feola** with the 4-2-4 formation.

However, two Englishmen who managed Ajax between 1940 and 1960 were pioneers of **positional football**: **Vic Buckingham**, who gave a debut to the seventeen-year-old Johan Crujff in 1964, and particularly **Jack Reynolds**, a Mancunian who, after a stint in Switzerland, moved to the Netherlands where he won eight domestic titles with Ajax between the years of 1915 to 1947. These two innovators laid the groundwork for what would become **total football**. Reynolds completely changed Ajax's philosophy, following well-defined principles: offensive play based on width to create passing corridors, with wingers always positioned very wide. His famous phrase, "the best defense is attack," is well known. The *totaalvoetbal* (total football) of his Dutch successor **Rinus Michels**, a former player of Reynolds, would be the culmination of the football philosophy initiated by Reynolds. Its movement to Catalonia would lead to the development of a distinctive playing style adapted to the local football reality: **positional play**.

The origin of the name dates back to the 1950s when Ivan Sharpe, a former player and journalist, wrote in 1952, referring particularly to Hungary: *"Foreign teams have surpassed us in style of play. The trade secrets and Scottish passing game have moved abroad... The tense atmosphere in English stadiums and the constant ups and downs in play have made our football confused and disorganized. But frenzy is not football, and other nations have developed a more scientific approach to the game. Positional play is a much more developed style as it accumulates combinations"*⁵.

⁵ Emiliano Battazzi – Il gioco di posizione – www.ultimouomo.com/dizionario-tattico-il-gioco-di-posizione

The name of positional play is due to the importance placed on **occupying the correct positions** within a **predefined organizational structure**: specifically, the positions depend on where the ball is, and it's not the players who go to the ball, but the ball that goes to the players' positions. The position of each individual player is crucial for the development of the game, but it is merely a tool to achieve the goal. **Juanma Manuel Lillo** (Spanish coach, collaborator of Sampaoli and Guardiola) has suggested the term *juego de ubicación* (as described in Martí Perarnau's book *Metamorphosis*) as another way to define positional play, as it encompasses not only the location of the player but also their **body orientation, posture, and direction**.

Positional play is like a **recipe passed down through generations**, with each adding a small ingredient to make it increasingly effective and up-to-date. As previously described, the invention of the original recipe is attributed to **Rinus Michels**, considered by French Football to be the greatest coach in football history. Michels was a player for Ajax from 1946 to 1958, making over 250 appearances and scoring 122 goals, winning two championships and also representing the Dutch national team on five occasions. His playing career ended in 1958, at just thirty years old, due to a back injury. At 37, he was appointed as **Ajax's** coach, and from that moment, he changed football history forever. He led the club to win four Dutch championships between 1966 and 1970 (with Feyenoord winning in 1969, the future European champions) and to a triple triumph in the KNVB Cup. Ajax reached their first European Cup final in 1969, facing Milan in Madrid and losing 4-0 with three goals from Piero Prati and one from Sormani. Michels' Ajax side reached the final again two years later against Panathinaikos, coached by Ferenc Puskas, and this time, at Wembley, they managed to lift the trophy, winning 2-0.

After winning the cup, Michels decided to leave Ajax, which was then entrusted to **Stefan Kovacs**, a former coach of Steaua Bucharest who continued the total football philosophy, winning two more European Cups (1972 and 1973), one Intercontinental Cup (1972), and the first European Super Cup (1972).

Michels moved to **Barcelona** in 1971, bringing his style of football to Catalonia, and the results were evident over time.

On the eve of the 1974 World Cup in Germany, the Dutch Federation chose him in March of that year as coach, with qualification already secured. Michels reached the final, which was lost 2-1 to West Germany, taking his total football to the highest level. Following the defeat, Michels left the national team but returned ten years later, in 1984, for just one year, and then for a two-year term between 1986 and 1988, the year that brought Michels his first and only success with the Netherlands, winning the European Championship in Germany. It was no longer total football, but the team he could rely on was exceptional, with the Dutch trio of Milan (**Gullit**, **Van Basten**, and **Rijkaard**) forming the core of the squad, completed by excellent players such as **Ronald Koeman**, **Wouters**, and **Van't Schip**.

Michels left again but regained control of the national team in 1990 after the World Cup, leading the team to the European Championship in Sweden in 1992. The Dutch exited in the semifinals against Denmark, and Michels retired⁶.

Revisiting the excellent infographic from the 2017 article titled “Totaalvoetbal” by Antonio Gagliardi and Roberto Pizzato⁷, I present the connections and links between the various protagonists of positional play. Michels left a legacy, which was subsequently picked up by Reynolds, a system of play and principles that would be adopted by the world's top coaches. If **Crujff** is Michels' “son”, **Guardiola** is his “grandson”.

These connections stem from the wonderful schools of the Netherlands, Ajax, and Barcelona, reaching countries like Spain, Italy, and Germany.

There is a common thread linking positional football coaches. Often, future and young coaches have been previously trained by or have collaborated with the great coaches within their staff. This thread connects **Reynolds** to **Michels**, **Crujff** to **Guardiola**, passing through **Sacchi** and **Van Gaal**, and now the new generation of coaches emerging from Guardiola's football, such as **Luis Enrique**, **Xavi**, **Arteta**, and **De Zerbi**.

⁶ Michels Rinus: il padre del Calcio Totale – www.storiedicalcio.altervista.org

⁷ Antonio Gagliardi e Roberto Pizzato – Totaalvoetbal – www.ultimouomo.com/totaal-voetbal

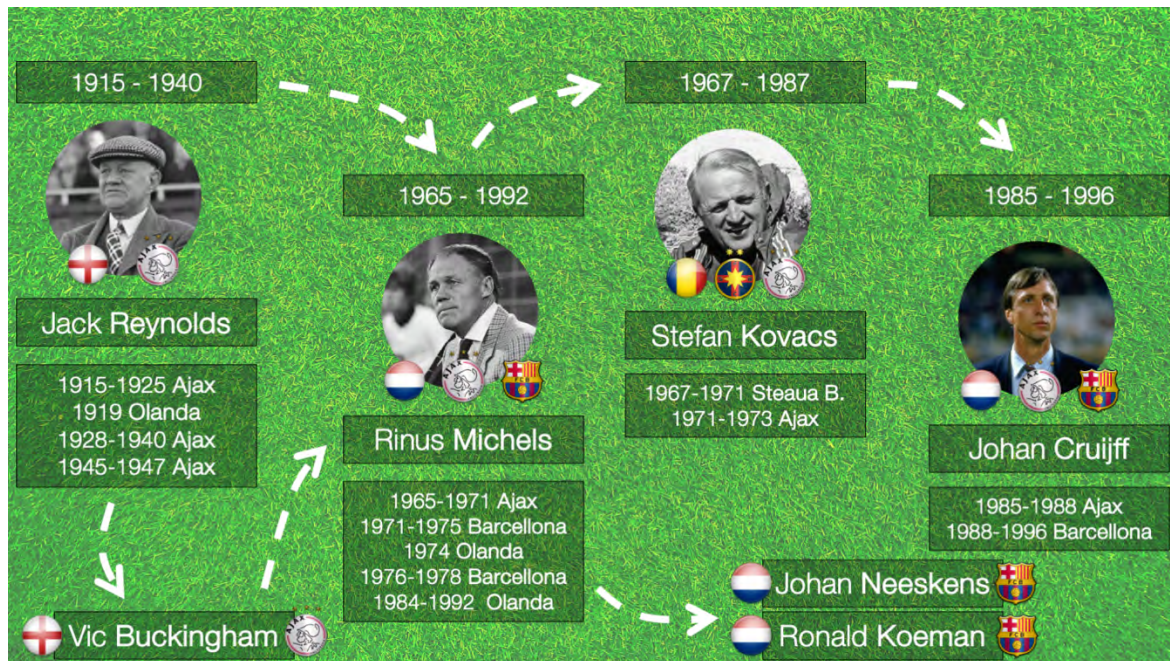


Figure 16 – Positional football coaches 2

Starting from the 2024/25 season, Bayern Munich and Chelsea have decided to appoint **Kompany** and **Maresca** as their managers. The Belgian, a former player under Guardiola at Manchester City, and the Italian, who was a technical collaborator of the Spanish coach, are choices that continue to extend the thread of positional football, further connecting the past to modern football.



Figure 17 – Positional football coaches 2

Now the origins of positional play have been described, it is necessary to define its main characteristics.

An initial and important point is that **positional play** is a style of play based on **ball possession** and **game control**: if you want to play this way, you cannot leave the initiative to the opponents. However, this football philosophy should not be confused, as it often is, with *tiki-taka*, which is negatively associated with sterile ball possession for its own sake. As Guardiola points out, ball possession itself is not an intrinsic value of this style of play, which is referred to as *posicion* rather than *posesion*. Juanma Lillo's statement, "*Do not pass the ball sideways if it does not generate anything*", is in complete contrast to tiki-taka. Therefore, passing the ball just for the sake of it is the natural antithesis of positional play.

Positional play is a model aimed at **seeking superiority** through ball control. The fundamental rule of this philosophy, from which it takes its name, involves a shift in perspective regarding the ball: it is **the ball that moves towards a position**, not the player moving towards the ball.

However, these **positions** are **not fixed**; they depend on various factors such as the opponent's organization, the location of the ball on the field, or who holds the ball. Johan Crujff famously said: "*If you have the ball, you must make the field as big as possible, and if you do not have the ball, you must make it as small as possible*". Therefore, this model of play requires players to have not only **great football intelligence** but also exceptional technical skills.

"Positional play involves generating superiority from the defensive line against pressing opponents. Everything becomes much easier when the initial progression of the ball is clean"

Juan Manuel Lillo

Thus, the **two key concepts** of positional play are the use of the **free space** granted by the opponents and the **fluidity of positions** to achieve the goal, which is to seek superiority through ball control. The objective of positional play is to generate superiority, specifically four types of **superiority**: numerical, positional/dynamic, qualitative, and socio-affective.

Numerical superiority refers to having a greater presence of players compared to the opponents at a specific point in a given phase of play.

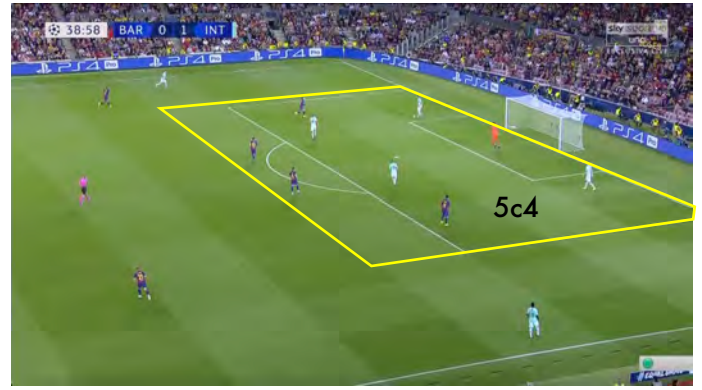
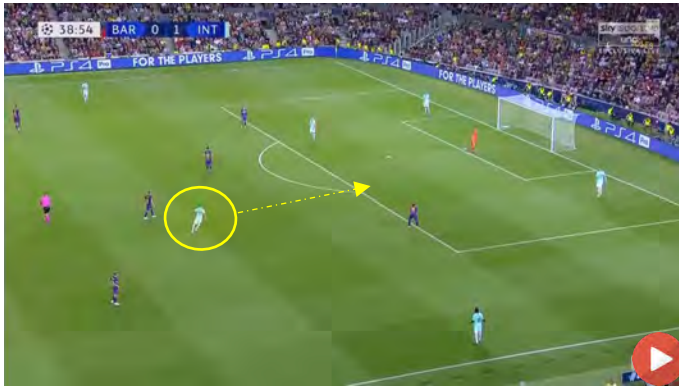


Figure 18 – Numerical Superiority of Inter vs Barcelona 5v4

Positional Superiority occurs when a player gains an advantage through their positioning and posture in relation to the positioning of the opponents.



Figure 19 – Positional Superiority of Sassuolo vs Spezia

Qualitative Superiority refers to the advantage based on a player's own characteristics that allow them to prevail over one or more direct opponents.



Figure 20 – Beginning frames of the goals of Maradona vs England 1986 and Messi vs Getafe 2007

Dynamic Superiority refers to the trajectory and speed of movement of one of its players.



Figure 21 – Dynamic superiority. Mbappé takes advantage of his speed in a counter-attack from a corner

Socio-affective superiority refers to players who have enhanced their performance and effectiveness through the connection and synchronization found with a teammate. Examples include Raul and Morientes, Cole and Yorke, Aguero and Forlan, and especially **Vialli and Mancini**. It also applies to players from different positions, such as Messi and Dani Alves, or defensive pairs like Baresi and Costacurta or Thuram and Cannavaro.



Figure 22 – The couple Vialli and Mancini, on the pitch with Sampdoria and on the bench with Italy

In addition, the philosophy of positional play involves several fundamental principles:

- Create continuous free **passing lanes** through the **formation of predefined geometric shapes** such as triangles, diamonds, squares, and pentagons. It is crucial to consistently provide the ball carrier with **multiple options**: at least one support player, two lateral options, and at least one vertex.

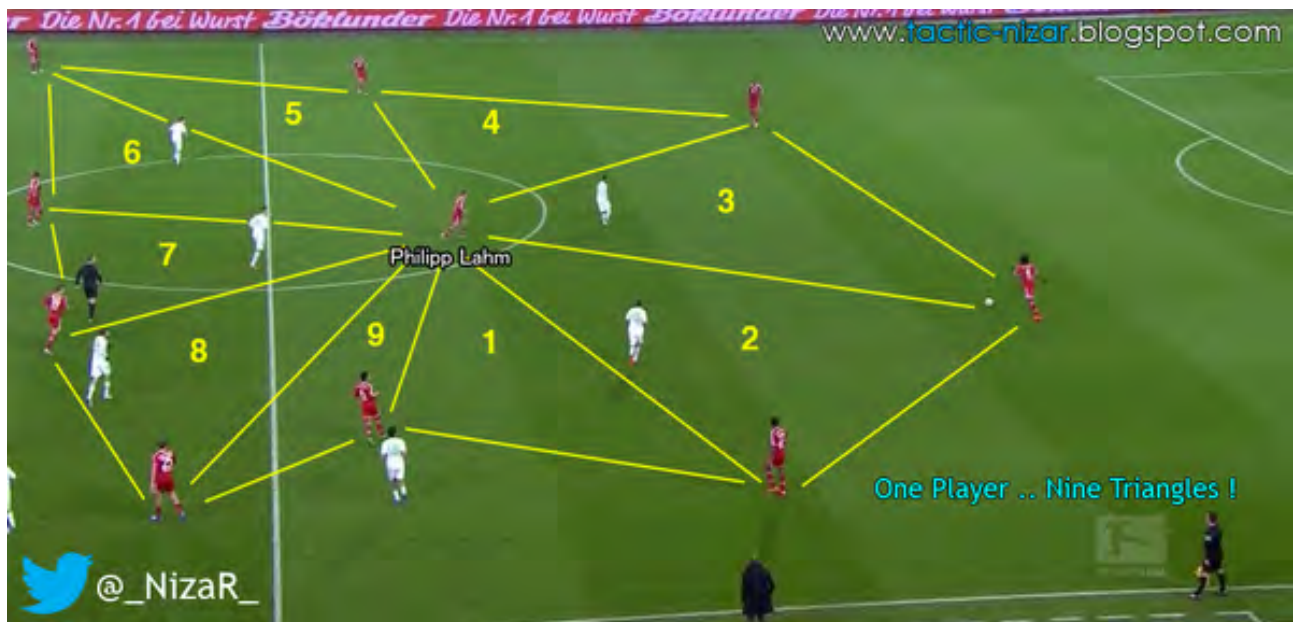


Figure 23 – Creation of 9 triangles between Lahm and his teammates

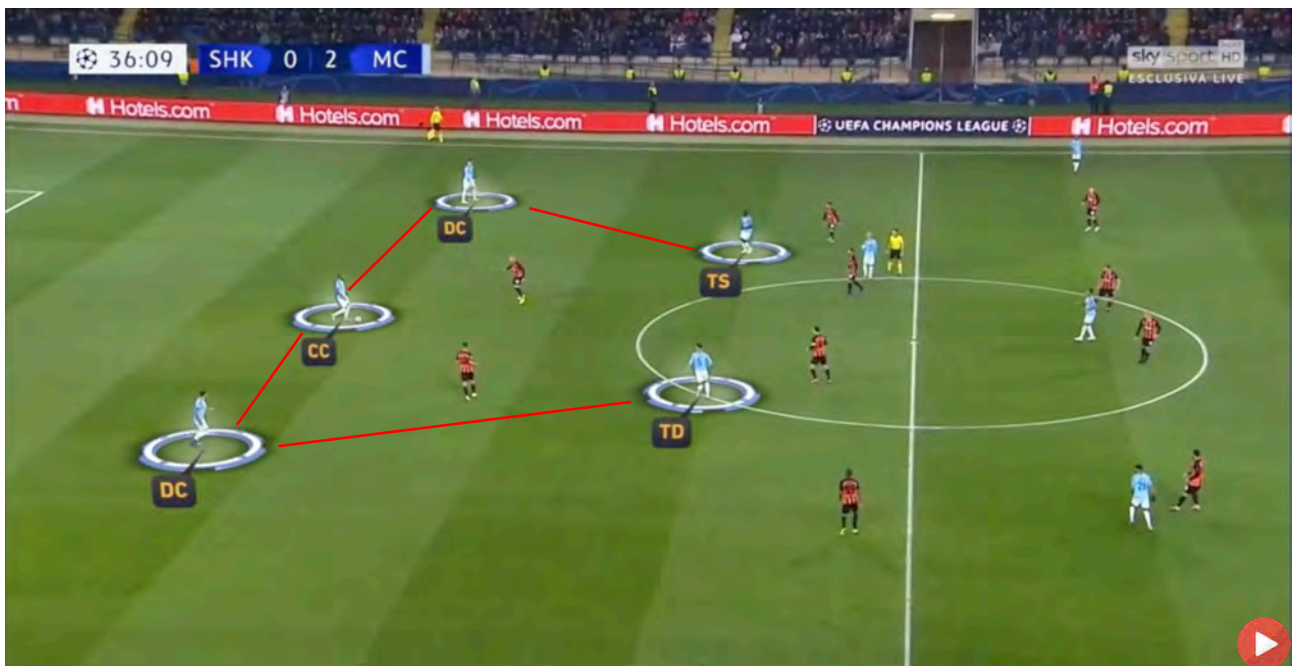


Figure 24 – Manchester City build up 3+2 pentagon

- **Width Occupation:** Always maintain width with one or two wide references opposite to the development zone. The goal is to keep two players high and wide to maximize the field's size. One common pattern is the switch of play, either directly or through an intermediary player. It is also essential to occupy the dynamic space between the opponent's midfield and defensive lines, particularly the **half-spaces**, with multiple players.



Figure 25 – Manchester City's five offensive channels with width occupied

- **Spacing:** Proper spacing is crucial; players should be positioned in different areas of the field to create more passing opportunities for the ball carrier. Having two or more players on the same line as the ball is not required.
- **Finding the Free Man:** As Roberto De Zerbi has frequently stated in his lecture at the Coverciano Master, the concept of finding the “**free man**” (in Spanish, *hombre libre*) is a key principle. Often, the free man can be found directly or through the **third man**, a combination involving three players where the first pass is made to a marked player (vertex) who then plays, often first-time, to the free support.
- Seeking to **dribble** into free space is a commonly used strategy to pull opponents out of position and create space behind them.
- In positional play, the ball, positions, players, and team move together⁸.

⁸ Giacomo Manini – La fine dei ruoli – www.rivistacontrasti.it/la-fine-dei-ruoli-cc

- In positional play, the way of attacking influences the way of defending, which in turn affects the opponent's attacking approach. Positional play is neither purely defensive nor purely offensive; it is both simultaneously. Defensive and offensive phases are microcosms of a unified system where attacking to defend and defending to attack are interconnected principles⁹.
- An essential defensive principle is the immediate search for **ball recovery**, preferably as high up the field as possible. Quickly regaining possession allows for attacking a more vulnerable team. Additionally, committing many players ahead of the ball into attacking positions makes **counter-pressing** an indispensable principle to prevent counter-attacks.
- Connected to the non-possession phase, **rest defense** is an essential factor and should be organized and codified.

Decisions are entirely based on **game references** (the ball, space, opponents, and teammates). These variables serve as starting points for decisions, emphasizing the importance of having these references in training environments. They implicitly instruct players on how to navigate the mental labyrinth of the game. Correct positional play decisions require learning to collectively read the “maps”.

The **initiation of the action** is very important because proper development cannot occur without immediately finding an initial superiority over the opponent's offensive pressure. The use of the *salida Lavolpiana* (a central midfielder dropping to build between the two central defenders) and **utilizing the goalkeeper** like an outfield player are methods to help teammates find the free man.

⁹ Marco Lai – Che cos'è il gioco di posizione – www.thegegenpress.it/che-cose-il-gioco-di-posizione



Figure 26 – Salida Lavolpiana by Busquets in Guardiola's Barcelona

“There cannot be proper development if one does not immediately establish an initial superiority over the opponent's offensive pressure” *Juan Manuel Lillo*

To create a successful build-up from the back, Guardiola stated what is necessary: **pressure from the opponent**. Juan Carlos Osorio, current manager of Atletico Nacional and former head coach of the Mexican national team, stated: *“High pressure or pressing from the opponent is an ally, not an enemy”*. In fact, when teams press high against a build-up, the team in possession will have more space and time forward. **Drawing and inviting pressure** is a fundamental principle of positional play to exploit the free spaces given by opponents. **Ball-driving** techniques are required to pull opponents out of position or to wait with the ball (De Zerbi requires using the sole) to encourage opponents to press. Furthermore, in positional play, being a possession-based philosophy, **passes** must always be strong, precise, and to the correct foot of the teammate. **Body shape** is also crucial because it allows them to adjust quicker to make the next pass without giving the opponent time to reposition into defensive positions.

Through the analogy of positional play in the kitchen, **Mikel Arteta**, former assistant coach to Guardiola at Manchester City and current coach of Arsenal, explains this concept: *"If I'm in the kitchen and I know the glasses are always in this cupboard, I get my glass of water faster"*. Just as an organized kitchen avoids wasted time looking for the right dishes, a football team organized with players repeatedly occupying the same spaces in the same situations will undoubtedly find themselves more efficient. In this explanation, everything is as **organized**, **convincing**, and **rational** as positional play itself.

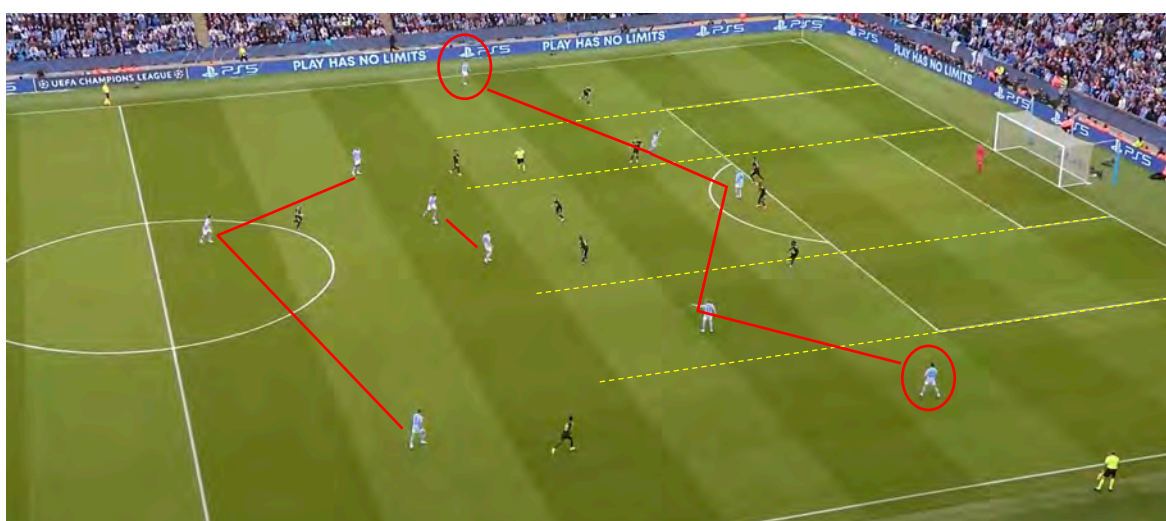


Figure 27 – Positional Football with a 2-3-5 Offensive Structure of Manchester City 2022/23

In positional football, the position of the **coach**, and consequently the staff, is at the center of the team system, and through tactical organization, they provide positional strategies and tasks to the players on the field. Of course, the players are the interpreters of the game with their ability to read situations and are the true protagonists in the decision-making process of each action they take on the field. However, since positional football is a collective philosophy, the coach's tactical plan has a significant impact on the team's performance and organization.



A common criticism of positional play is that it turns creators into executors, artists into soldiers, essentially trapping a player's creativity and intuition within a framework of repeated movements and technical actions. Not all "positional" coaches, of course, apply these principles with the same level of rigidity, but in their game plans, the associative abilities of players or their individual initiative are certainly not central.¹⁰

Figure 28 – Coach at the Center of the Team System in Positional Play

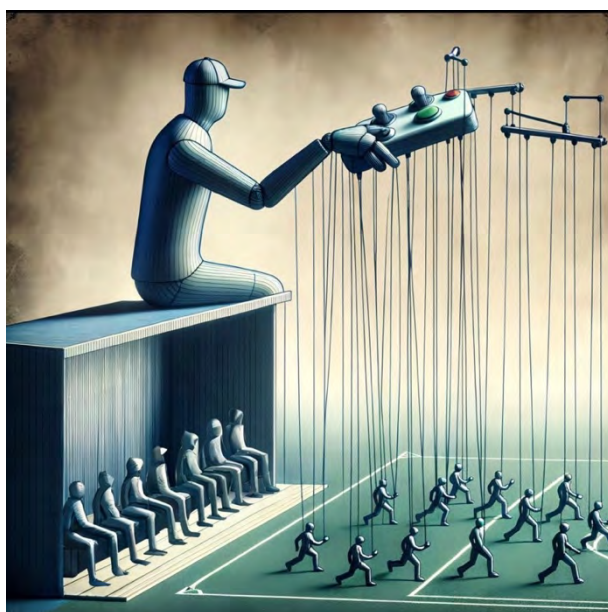


Figure 29 – The image critical of positional football, proposed by @JvanderB78 with the caption "*Who's game is it anyway?*"

¹⁰ Giuseppe Minervini – Calcio relazionale, il nuovo stile di gioco che arriva dal Brasile – www.catenaccioecontropiede.it/calcio-relazionale

THE SCANNING

In positional play, players need specific **individual tactical** skills. Key elements include **positioning** and the receiving player's **body shape**, but equally fundamental is the individual skill known as **scanning**. This term is defined by **Geir Jordet**, a professor at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences who conducts research and teaches psychology and elite soccer performance, as the head movement in which a player briefly turns their face away from the ball to **gather information** in preparation for their next interaction with the ball. When coaches ask their players to check their shoulders before receiving a pass, they are essentially telling them to “scan”.

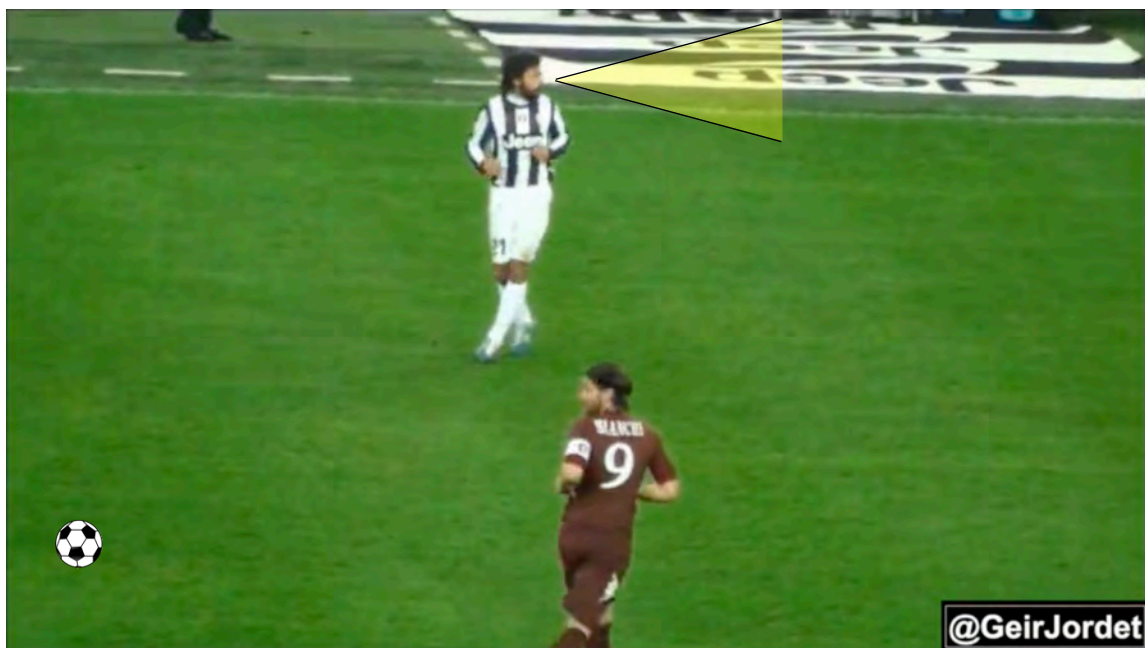


Figure 30 – Scanning by Andrea Pirlo vs Torino – Graphic by Geir Jordet

Jordet studied how many times a player looks away from the ball — known as scanning — in the 10 seconds before receiving it, analyzing hundreds of matches since the 1990s. In the last two decades, he has collected data on 250 professional players and 200 elite youth players. In his research, shared and presented by Sky Sport in the Football Analysis¹¹ segment led by Andrea Marinozzi and Paolo Ciarravano, he discovered that central midfielders perform **0,53** scans per second. This means that in the 10 seconds before receiving the ball, they look away from it as many as **5** times.

¹¹ www.sport.sky.it/calcio/premier-league/2022/10/21/haaland-scanning-cosa-e#03

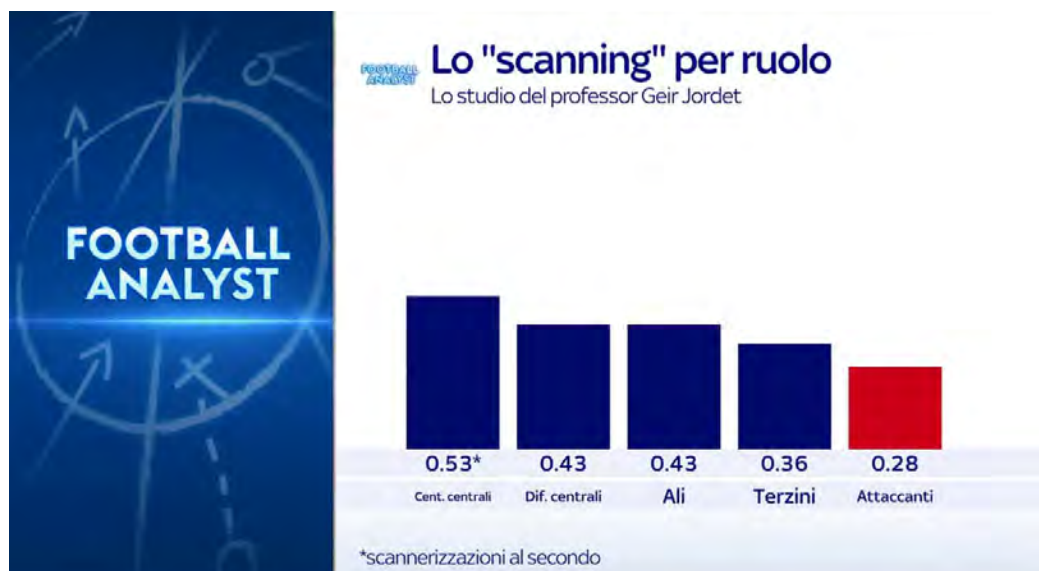


Figure 31 – Study by Professor Geir Jordet: scans per second by position. Graphic by Sky Sport's Football Analyst

Among the best players analyzed are **Xavi** (0,83 scans per second), **Cesc Fábregas** (0,76 scans per second), **Ilkay Gündoğan** (0,66 scans per second), and **Frank Lampard** (0,62 scans per second). These players, besides being top players, are also capable of performing well under pressure and are often found unmarked (positioned just far enough from their direct opponent to have more time to play).

However, scan frequency alone is not sufficient. It is absolutely necessary to pair it with scan **quality** so that the quantity does not become counterproductive. In fact, as shown in the image below¹², the **timing of information gathering** becomes very important. The player in red is observing the space behind him at the moment the ball is passed, which leads to his reception error, unlike the green player, who performs the scan while the ball is still at the passer's feet.

¹² Geir Jordet – Why scanning is about more than just frequency – www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4xixt4T8hE&t=162s

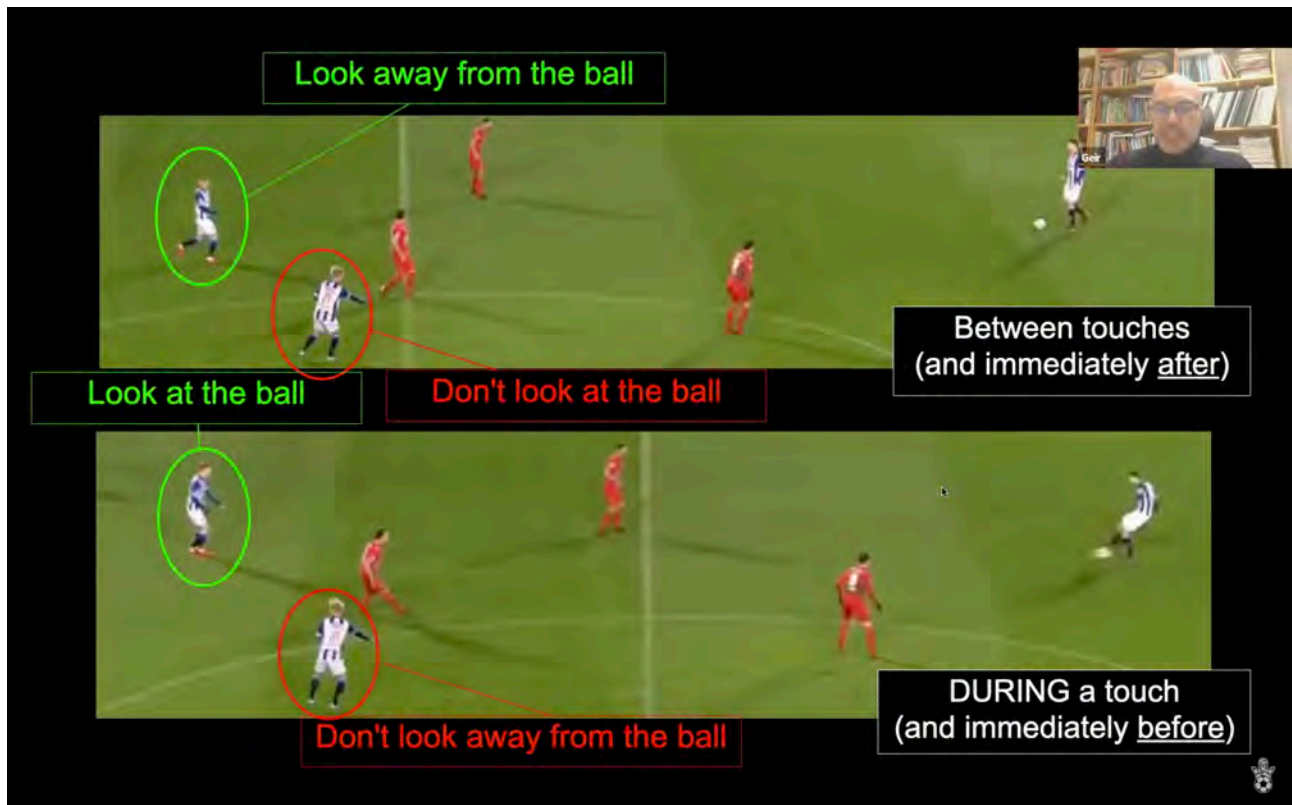


Figure 32 – Time to take a position. Taken from Geir Jordet's video: why scanning is about more than just frequency

Every time a teammate touches the ball, it's necessary to look at the ball; between touches, it becomes essential to look away from the ball and gather information about the surrounding space. The ability to gather information, in fact, involves the skill of seeing beyond and observing even what's happening behind us. In football, this translates to being able to perceive the entire field, including the **movements** of **teammates**, **opponents**, and especially **open spaces**.

Another expert on scanning is the coach and educator **Sławek Morawski**, who has been publishing various scanning videos of players for years on the Mindfootballness¹³ channel, analyzing players' scanning actions, as seen in Rodri's situation in the image below. Gathering information is also crucial for a defender, who needs to **perceive the space** between himself and the attacker he's marking.

¹³ Sławek Morawski – Mindfootballness – www.x.com/mfbrvideos



Figure 33 – Scanning by Rodri of Manchester City – Graphic by Sławek Morawski on the Mindfootballness channel.

As we previously saw in Jordet's study, forwards rank last in the scans-per-second statistic. The best among them is Manchester City's striker **Haaland**, who comes close to midfielders in this metric with around 0.50 scans per second. The Norwegian makes the most of this skill, allowing him to have perfect timing to **free himself** in the penalty area. In the image below, presented by Sky Sport, the fixture between Manchester City and Crystal Palace on August 27 2022 is analyzed, where Haaland scans five times in 6.80 seconds: essentially, before receiving the ball, he is aware of everything happening around him. In this same action, one image is particularly notable: 13 players are looking at the ball, but Haaland is not—he's focused on the space.

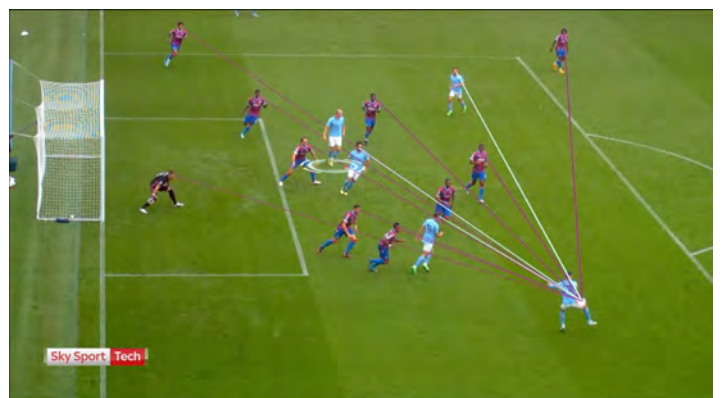


Figure 34 – Scanning by Haaland in the penalty area. Graphic by Sky Sport's Football Analyst

Scanning is also used by forwards to perceive the goalkeeper's position and the **distance from the goal**, giving them all the information needed to make the best possible shot. Thanks to scanning, Haaland is rarely caught offside, as shown by the graphic below.



Figure 35 – Offside number 2022/23 season. Graphic by Sky Sport's Football Analyst

In his extensive research, Professor Jordet divided players into two categories: low scanners, those who scan less, and high scanners, those who scan more. The results show that high scanners pass the ball better, with a higher success rate, and pass the ball forward with a higher success rate.¹⁴

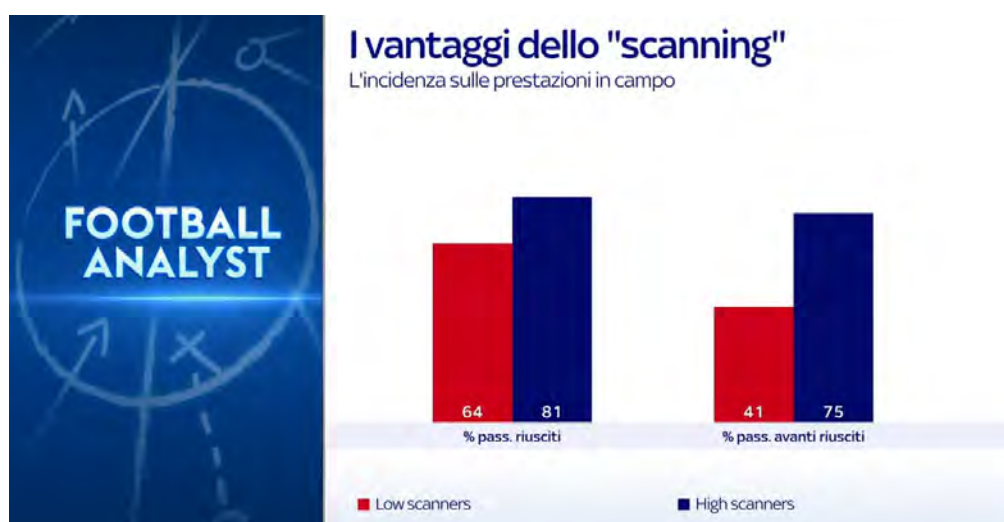


Figure 36 – Players who perform more scanning have a higher passing success rate. Graphic by Sky Sport's Football Analyst

¹⁴ www.sport.sky.it/calcio/premier-league/2022/10/21/haaland-scanning-cosa-e#11

Another special case is that of **Lionel Messi**. The Argentine superstar often, especially in the early minutes of a match, seems to isolate himself from the game, **walking** almost as if detached from the action. In the last World Cup in Qatar, according to data from BBC Sport, the Argentine No. 10 was one of the players who covered the most distance while walking.



Top World Cup Walkers		
Most distance covered at walking pace		
	Robert Lewandowski	v Saudi Arabia 5202m
	Lionel Messi	v Mexico 4998m
	Mohammed Salisu	v Uruguay 4833m
	Robert Lewandowski	v Argentina 4829m
	Lionel Messi	v Poland 4736m
	Aleksandar Mitrovic	v Switzerland 4716m
	Mohamed Kanno	v Poland 4700m
	Cristian Romero	v Poland 4669m
	Lionel Messi	v Saudi Arabia 4627m
	Ricardo Rodriguez	v Serbia 4621m

Figure 37 – Walking distance in the Fifa World Cup 2022. Source BBC Sport

According to many, Messi studies what is happening on the field. Guardiola talked about this attitude during an appearance in the Amazon Prime Video series "This is Football." The Spanish coach was not surprised by his protégé's "walks" during games: *"He's watching, he's walking. That's what I like the most. He's not out of the game, he's involved. He moves his head: right, left, left, right. He knows exactly what's going to happen. But his head is always like that. It's always moving"*¹⁵.

In another interview, he said: *"You have to be careful when Messi steps away. He spends moments of the game walking, always analyzing the situation. When he gets the ball, he already has a complete analysis in his head of space and time. He knows where every player is... and boom"*¹⁶.

The Argentine talent, in a recent interview on the Clank! podcast, explained why he walks when he doesn't have the ball: *"I'm always paying attention to the markers of the opponents and to the players who are unmarked. I try to move away from my marker*

¹⁵ Marco Beltrami – Perché Messi cammina in giro per il campo durante le partite – www.fanpage.it/sport/calcio/perche-messi-cammina-in-giro-per-il-campo-durante-le-partite-e-una-tattica-funziona-sempre

¹⁶ Oscar Cano – www.x.com/canofootball

and step out of the play so I can be well-positioned when we win the ball back and launch a counter-attack. I study how the opponent prepares to defend when we attack”¹⁷.

A tactical situation related to positional play and scanning is the **repeated pass**, which occurs when two players, often vertically aligned, exchange the ball multiple times. It’s a simple concept but often misunderstood by some, who label it as "irrelevant passes" in an attempt to downplay them¹⁸. Often, the importance of the repeated pass is underestimated because it can bring several advantages in building and developing the play. As seen in the image below, in figure A, there’s a pass between Ruben Dias and Gundogan. Then, in figure B, the pass is repeated, this time between Gundogan and Ruben Dias. Later, they make another pass, but in figure C, it’s noticeable that the German midfielder scans the space behind him. The Arsenal defender steps forward, drawn to the ball, and Gundogan occupies the space left open just enough to allow him to control the ball with his right foot and have an open pass behind the first line of pressure from the opponent.

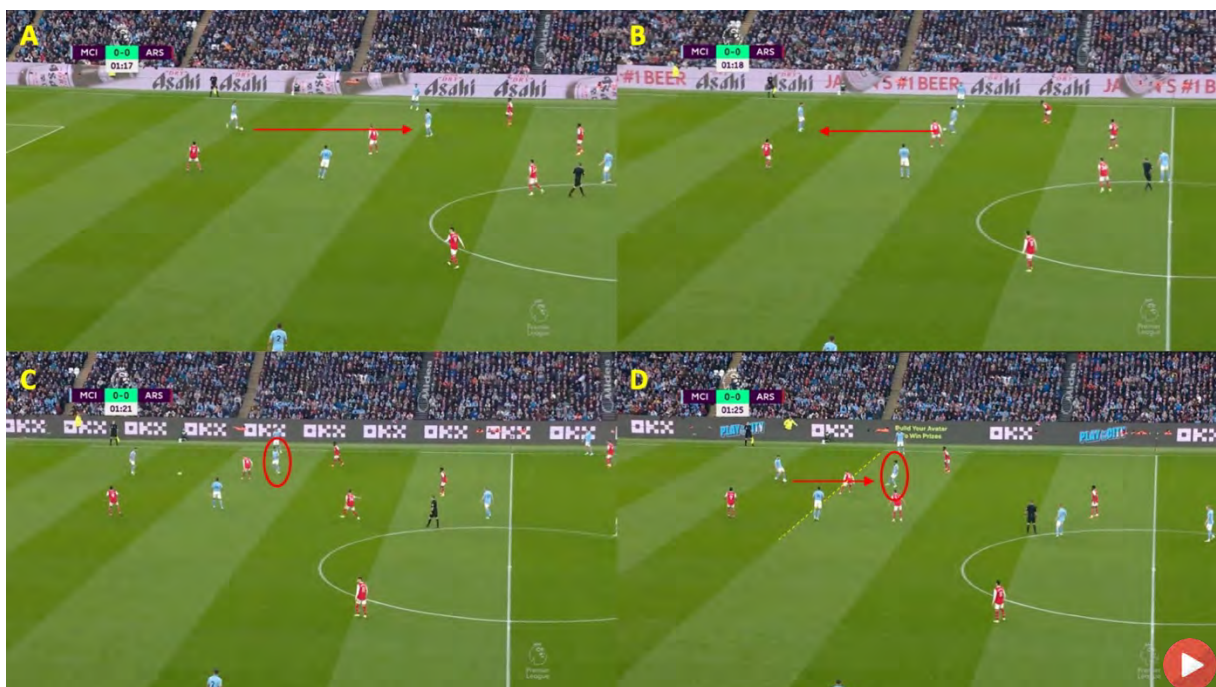


Figure 38 – Manchester City action showing the repeated pass between Ruben Dias and Gundogan

¹⁷ Cronache di spogliatoio – www.instagram.com/p/C8mo_LiIT26/?igsh=MWYwMnJpY3MwZnAzdQ%3D&img_index=2

¹⁸ Camillo Speranza – www.x.com/camilosperanza

Paco Seirul-lo, the methodological director of Barcelona, and Joan Vilà, a coach and methodology expert at Barcelona, explain the usefulness of the repeated pass:

- It helps **mobilize the opponents** because, while the ball is moving between Ruben Dias and Gundogan, time passes. During this time, the opponents are mobilized and drawn toward the ball. To occupy space at a given moment, opponents must necessarily free up other spaces.
- It provides a **360° view** because Ruben Dias's body orientation (player 1) allows him to see what is happening towards the Arsenal goal, while Gundogan's body orientation (player 2) lets him observe what's happening towards his own goal. However, through scanning, the German midfielder is able to expand his field of vision.

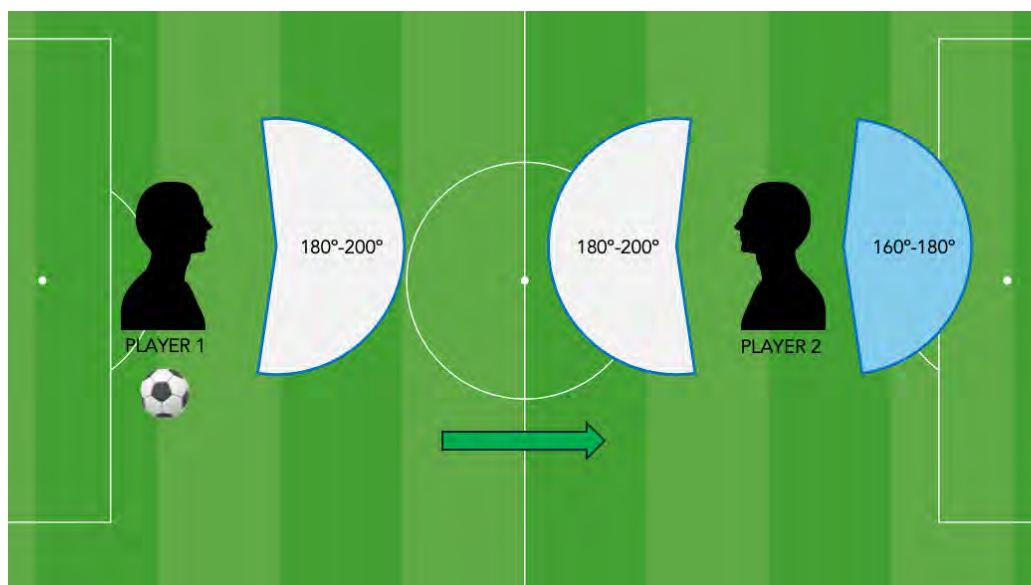


Figure 39 – Peripheral vision in the previous image between Ruben Dias (player 1) and Gundogan (player 2)

- Repeating the pass with a teammate **allows time to optimize the body orientation** and thus transfer the ball to the desired point.

Once the general overview of positional play has been established, in the following sections, I will analyze the teams of the three coaches **Rinus Michels**, **Johan Crujff**, and **Pep Guardiola**, who have most represented this football philosophy.

Rinus Michels was perhaps the most visionary coach in football history. In addition to contributing to the creation of **Total Football** (*Totaalvoetbal*) with his tactical ideas and principles of play, he permanently changed Dutch football when he became Ajax's coach in 1965, also in terms of organization.

In the book *De Generaal. La nascita del grande Ajax di Rinus* by Christopher Holter and Alec Cordolcini, it is

described how, upon taking over as coach of Ajax, Michels brought a **revolution** to the club.

Michels understood from the outset that discipline was essential and believed it was necessary to establish **precise rules** and create a distance that allowed him to make decisions related to "the field" without necessarily questioning personal **relationships**. His leadership position was meant to push the players to give their best during training. The General then focused on the **tools** and **objectives**. At that time, most players had another job to support themselves and only trained a maximum of three times a week. Michels, a physical education teacher, had only half a day off to dedicate to training, but it was clear that to carry out his project, those few hours wouldn't be enough¹⁹.

He then decided to leave his teaching job and dedicate himself full-time to his team. The coach proposed to the club's management to guarantee a salary for his players, so they could be motivated and freed from their main occupations, allowing them to **focus on training**. A couple of weeks before the start of the season, he gathered the team to announce that there would be five training sessions a day and that there would be no room for distractions, similar to a military training regimen.

Carriera da allenatore	
1953-1954	Asser Boys
1960-1964	JOS
1964-1965	AFC
1965-1971	Ajax
1971-1975	Barcellona
1974	Paesi Bassi
1975-1976	Ajax
1976-1978	Barcellona
1978-1980	L.A. Aztecs
1980-1984	Colonia
1984-1985	Paesi Bassi
1986-1988	Paesi Bassi
1988-1989	Bayer Leverkusen
1990-1992	Paesi Bassi

Figure 40 – The Career of Rinus Michels

¹⁹ Christopher Robert Holter – La nascita del grande Ajax di Rinus Michels – www.ultimouomo.com/nascita-grande-ajax-rinus-michels

Michels relied on **collaborators** who monitored the correct execution of all exercises, and over time, the training sessions became increasingly difficult. He didn't shy away from using an iron fist, training the team to become mentally stronger, as well as physically tougher. He wanted a team with excellent physical conditioning to apply constant pressure on the opponent. A fitness coach, **Cees Koppelaar**, was hired to follow the players constantly during training sessions and would become a key figure in the team's preparation and technical management. Michels also sought the support of **Jany van der Veen**, a former teammate, as well as a friend and advisor. Van der Veen was tasked with managing Ajax's youth academy and the scouting network, working patiently to develop the individual skills of players, identifying talent, and nurturing it in the best way possible.

Michels paid attention to every detail: he wanted to know about the players' diet, what they did in the evenings, and their lifestyle off the pitch. When he couldn't do this directly, he relied on trusted collaborators like **Salo Muller**, who became a vital link between the coach and the players. The young physiotherapist didn't just care for the players' muscles, but also became their friend, confidant, and a shoulder to cry on when the weight of frustrations and accumulated tension needed to be released.

To create the perfect mechanism for Ajax and the Netherlands, the Dutch coach had to start with **organizational aspects** before focusing on tactics. Aware that he was still in the early stages of his work, Michels asked the club to intervene in the transfer market to bring in key players to complement the squad. The coach was laying the groundwork for an **innovative and revolutionary style of play**, free from the concepts of fixed roles or man-marking. He set up the defense with four players always in a line, and ahead of them were the six midfield and attacking players who, by moving fluidly, transitioned rapidly from the historic 4-2-4 formation to a more modern **4-3-3** system.

The new coach introduced a strong **attacking mentality**, excellent physical condition, and a great team chemistry among the players.

At the core of his game was the search for as **many passing lines** as possible for the ball carrier. To achieve this, it was necessary for all players to perform specific movements to generate spaces for their teammates' plays. When out of possession, the principles were to **block passing lines**, **reduce spaces**, and maintain extraordinary **compactness** between the lines. The idea was to squeeze the opposing teams into their own half when in possession of the ball. The revolution came from the **anarchic approach to roles**, with positions being interchangeable, meaning every player had to be able to play in any area of the field, and the pursuit of attacking play was absolute. Defenders would become midfielders or wingers, while a forward like Crujff could play as a striker or a playmaker, a goalscorer or a provider. Michels introduced the principle of expanding and contracting space depending on the moment and situation of the game through a **short team** and **offensive pressing**, with players possessing quick thinking and the ability to move in coordinated ways to create and occupy space. Then there was the offside trap: a defensive strategy that shocked and surprised. A whole team running forward to leave the opponents behind²⁰.

Michels' first season as Ajax's manager ended with 24 wins, 4 draws, and only 2 defeats. After a five year drought and narrowly avoiding relegation, Ajax was mathematically crowned **Dutch champions** for the 11th time in its history.

After winning the league in his first season, 1965-66, Ajax faced Liverpool in the quarterfinals of the 1966-67 European Cup. The first leg at home ended 5-1 (with a 2-2 draw in the return leg), but the journey ended in the quarterfinals against Dukla Praha from Czechoslovakia. They would however go on to win the European Cup in the 1970/71 season and also in the following two seasons with Kovacs.

The great Ajax was built around key players such as **Neeskens**, who, alongside Crujff, represented Total Football. He started as a full-back before transitioning to a defensive midfielder but often took the space left open by Crujff. Neeskens became the first **attacking midfielder** capable of making runs into the opponent's penalty box and scored many goals (93 in his career).

²⁰ Michels Rinus: il padre del Calcio Totale – www.storiedicalcio.altervista.org/blog/rinus-michels.html

Another representative player of Ajax was **Ruud Krol**, the left-back, who initially played as a sweeper and later had an experience in Italy with Napoli.

The goalkeeper **Gert Bals**, whom Michels had coached during his time at JOS, was chosen for his good game vision and his ability **to build up play with his feet**.

The coach chose Bals because he firmly believed that the team should start building from the back, without necessarily relying on a long pass.

Arie Hann, a midfielder who played in front of the defense, was also known for his powerful long-range shots. Johnny Rep, an ambidextrous winger, was very strong in one-on-one situations.

Arnold Muhren, who played in Ajax's first European Cup final in 1969 at just 19 years old, is one of the few players in football history to have won everything at the club level. Finally, Cruyff, a versatile player, the son of a greengrocer and a cleaner at the Ajax stadium, is considered one of the greatest players in football history.



Figure 41 – Rinus Michels' Ajax of 1965-1971

After winning the European Cup, Michels moved to **Barcelona** in 1971, bringing his football philosophy to Catalonia. In his first year, he finished third in the league, and the following year, he placed second, behind Atlético Madrid. At the end of the 1972/1973 season, Cruyff, who was at odds with the Dutch management and the new Ajax coach

who succeeded Michels, decided to follow his former coach to Barcelona, thanks to a partial opening of the borders for foreign players. For the purchase of a second foreign player, Michels initially wanted to sign the Peruvian Teófilo Cubillas, but he ultimately opted for another Peruvian, Hugo **Sotil**, who was recommended by Johan.



Figure 42 – Rinus Michels' 1973/74 Barcelona

Michels' start at Barcelona was complicated, but from Cruyff's debut in October, the team achieved 10 consecutive victories, concluding in a 2-1 win against Atlético Madrid in December. The match featured a spectacular acrobatic backheel goal from Cruyff, earning him the nickname "The Flying Dutchman".



Figure 43 – Cruyff's acrobatic backheel goal against Atletico Madrid

The pinnacle of Michels' Barcelona came on February 17, 1974, against Real Madrid. Michels had learned from the *blancos'* tactical plan to mark Crujiff with a zonal defense, so he decided to position the Dutchman deeper on the field with three offensive players ahead of him. Additionally, he implemented strict man-marking tactics. Torres played as a static sweeper in front of Mora, while Costas marked Amancio and also supported the midfield. On the wings, Rifé and de la Cruz kept close tabs on Macanás and Aguilar, respectively. In midfield, Asensi played more as an attacking midfielder, pressing Netzer, than as a traditional central midfielder, with Juan Carlos and Marcial providing cover by marking the opposing midfielders, Velázquez and Pirri.

In conclusion, the 4-3-3 used by Michels already bears a strong resemblance to the 3-4-3 with concentric triangles that his pupil, Johan Crujiff, would later implement some 15 years later when he returned to Catalonia as a coach²¹.



Figure 44 – Barcellona vs Real Madrid 1974

Barcelona won 5-0, humiliating the Merengues, and a month later, Michels secured the long-awaited league title, which had eluded the club for 14 years. In Crujiff's autobiography *“My Revolution”*, he writes: *“That evening at the Bernabéu, everything worked out. The tactic that Michels had devised, never used before, worked perfectly. He had asked me not to stay in my attacking position, but rather to drop back frequently to help the midfielders make runs into the spaces that would open up”*.

²¹ 1974, Real Madrid-Barcellona 0-5: la Spagna cambia regime – www.guerinsportivo.it/news/il-cuoio/accadde-oggi/2024/02/17-7028099/1974_real_madrid-barcellona_0-5_la_spagna_cambia_regime

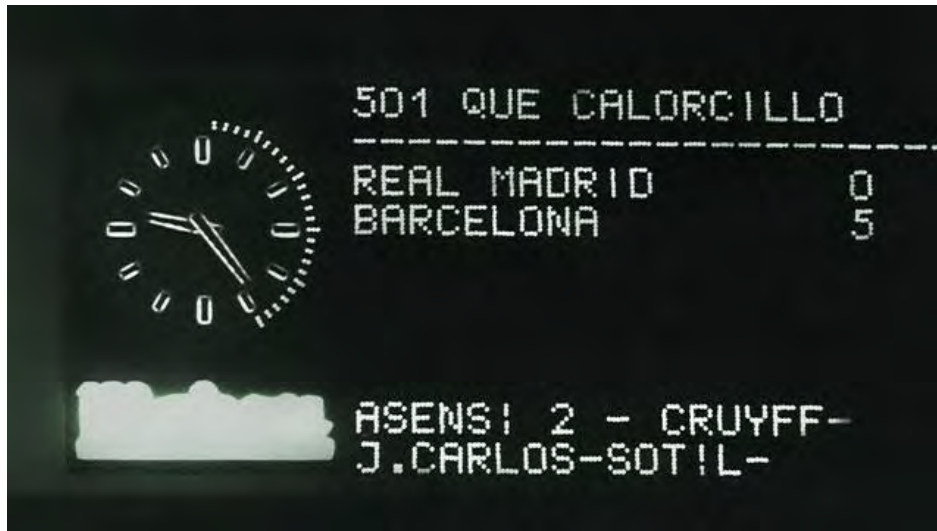


Figure 45 – The scoreboard of the match of 17 February 1973 between Real Madrid and Barcelona²²

The peak of **Total Football** came for Michels with the **Dutch national team**.

On the eve of the 1974 World Cup in Germany, the Dutch Football Federation hired him in March of that year, after qualification had already been secured. For the Netherlands, this was only their second World Cup participation, and they were not considered favorites. They progressed through the first group stage against Uruguay, Sweden, and then Bulgaria. The second group stage seemed like the place where their dreams would end, but the team led by the General first demolished Argentina 4-0, then defeated East Germany 2-0, and finally took down Brazil, the defending champions, with a style of play that was unimaginable for the Brazilian football culture and tradition. The Dutch style was the antithesis of the Brazilian game, which traditionally focused on slow, graceful ball movement and not much running. The Netherlands were now in the final. The Dutch, coached by Michels, reached the final against West Germany, on a triumphant journey. In the final, the Netherlands scored after just one minute with a penalty taken by Neeskens. The action was emblematic of Total Football: after fifteen passes, with Germany not touching the ball at all, Crujff came deep between the two central defenders, becoming the deepest player. He then made an incredible acceleration, which led to a foul being committed on him inside the penalty area.

²² Nicola Pucci – Real Madrid-Barcellona 0-5 – www.sport660.wordpress.com/2017/01/18/real-madrid-barcellona-0-5-quando-nel-1974-el-clasico-si-tinse-dei-colori-catalani

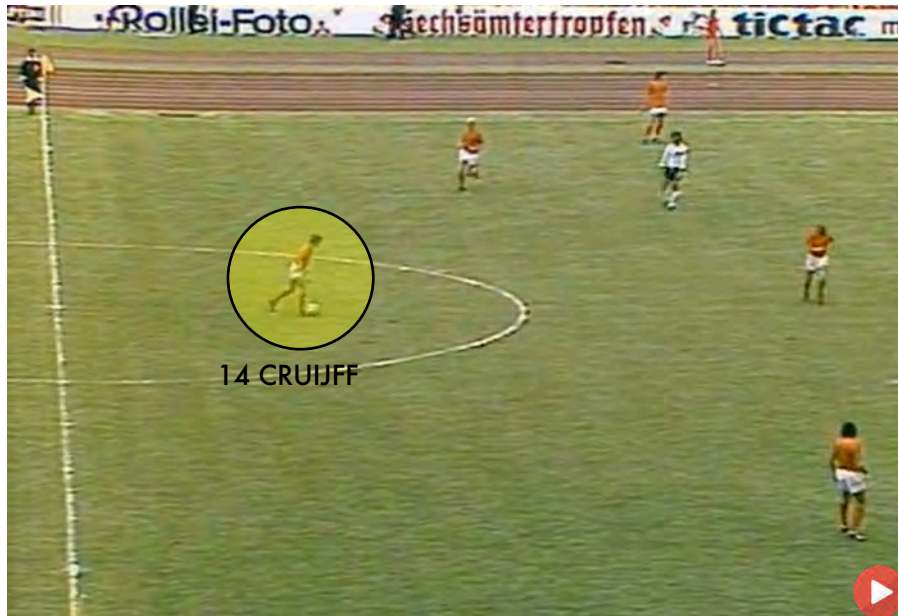


Figure 46 – Cruijff's backward position when receiving the ball before winning the opening penalty

After taking the lead, however, Cruijff's threat was greatly limited by the effective marking of Berti Vogts. Franz Beckenbauer, Uli Hoeneß, and Wolfgang Overath dominated the midfield, allowing West Germany to overturn the score and win the match 2-1.

The team was built in the image and likeness of the total Ajax system, with the same philosophy. It employed a very **flexible 4-3-3** formation, playing at a frantic pace, characterized by immense dynamism and based on the versatility of its players. World-class individuals such as **Cruijff**, **Neeskens**, and **Rep** were among the best players of the time, combining physical attributes with the technical skills necessary for the team's style of play.

Alongside the Ajax core, Michels incorporated some players from Feyenoord, the European champions of 1970, and the talented winger Rensenbrink from Anderlecht. In goal was Jan **Jongbloed** of FC Amsterdam. While not the best in terms of ball circulation, he was good with his feet and functional to Michels' sweeper keeper style of play. Before the tournament began, Michels lost his starting central defensive pair: Rinus Israel, the excellent Feyenoord defender, and the solid Barry Hulshoff from Ajax, an expert in Michels' tactics. Due to these injuries, the Dutch coach moved midfielder Arie **Haan** from Ajax into the defense and gave the young Wim **Rijsbergen** (from

Feyenoord) his chance. The Dutch coach changed the defensive setup: it would play much higher and more aggressively than usual, in order to avoid defending near the penalty area with inexperienced, makeshift central defenders. The full-backs, Wim **Suurbier** on the right and Ruud **Krol** on the left, both started as wingers. They were all players who could play well with both their feet and their heads, possessing excellent positional awareness and technical ability. In midfield, Johan **Neeskens**, who would soon leave Ajax to join Cruijff at Barcelona, started from a deep-lying position, partnered with the Feyenoord duo of Wim **Jansen** on the right and Willem **Van Hanegem** on the left. Up front, Johnny **Rep** (from Ajax) and Rob **Rensenbrink** played on the wings, alongside Cruijff, the center-forward with the freedom to roam as he pleased.

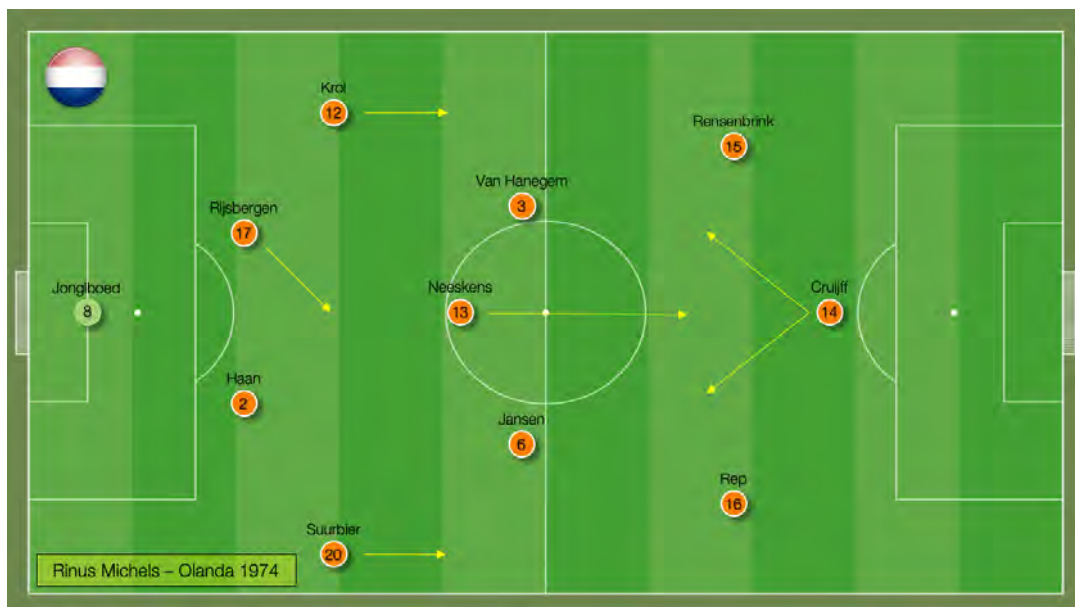


Figure 47 – Holland 1974 by Rinus Michels

Despite the result of the final, Michels' Netherlands, one of the strongest teams in the history of world football, revolutionized the game by showcasing some innovative principles on the field:

- **Play on the ground and possession-based football** – The Netherlands aimed for a build-up from the back with the goal of maintaining functional possession through short, quick passes. Often, a diamond shape would form in the build-up, with one of the central defenders pushing forward.

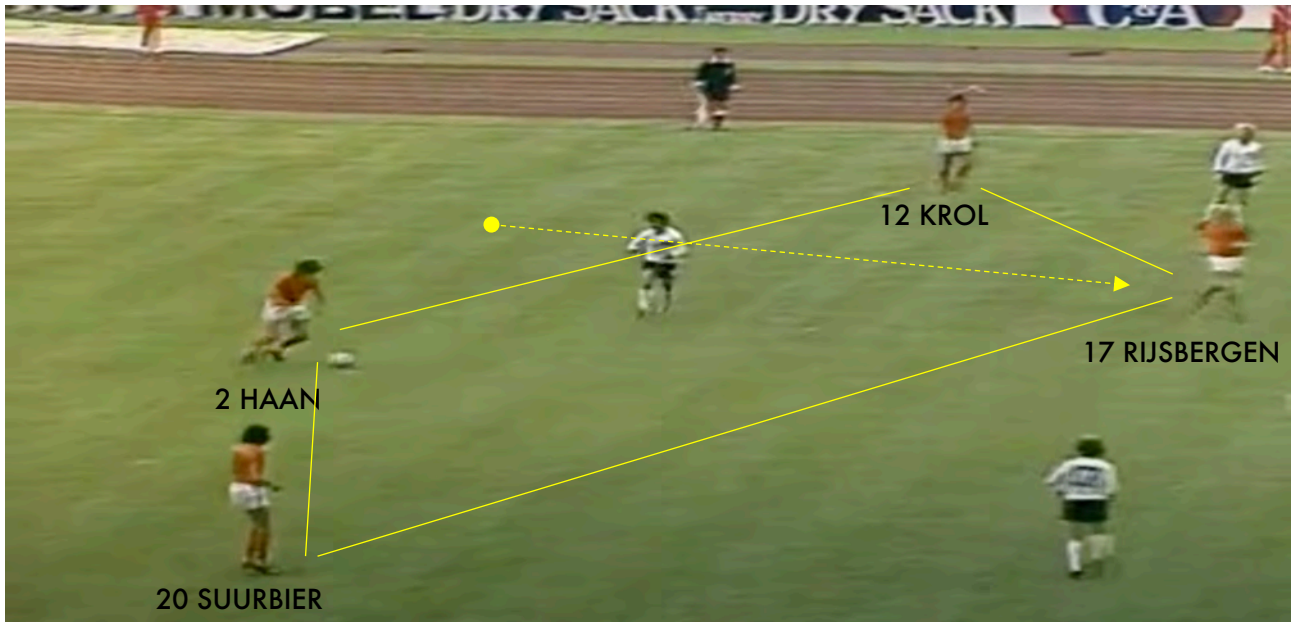


Figure 48 – Diamond in build up with central defender rising

- **Offensive mentality** – All players are encouraged to attack. The first attackers are the defenders themselves. The two central defenders, especially Haan, often carry the ball forward and make attacking runs into space.

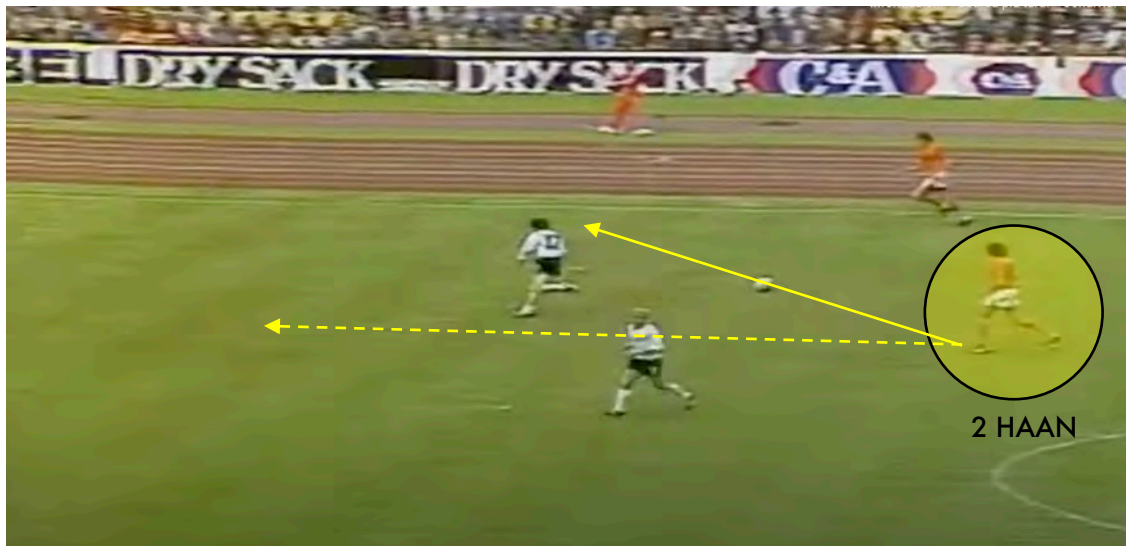


Figure 49 – Haan, central defender, who passes and moves forward

- **Interchangeability of roles** – There are no fixed positions; all players interchange their positions. Michels **eliminates the specialization of roles**, making each player versatile and capable of both attacking and defending. According to this style of play, no player is tied to their role, and anyone can operate as an attacker, midfielder, or defender. The

wingers play more centrally, leaving space for the full-backs to push forward. Midfielders make fluid movements in their positions with constant rotations, following the principle of “I play, I move”. Every player who moves from their position is replaced by a teammate, allowing the team to maintain its tactical shape.

- **Crujff’s mobility** – The Dutch talent starts as a central forward but never really plays in that position, instead making fluid, free movements across the field, often dropping deep to collect the ball near the two central defenders. His teammates adapt to his movements, regularly swapping positions so that all roles are covered, even if not by the same player. Crujff drops back and creates space, which is then filled by Neeskens, who essentially becomes the team's center forward, using his running technique and power. Neeskens arrives in the opponent's penalty area, playing from a deep position in a 4-3-3 formation – a movement that has never been seen again on a football field.

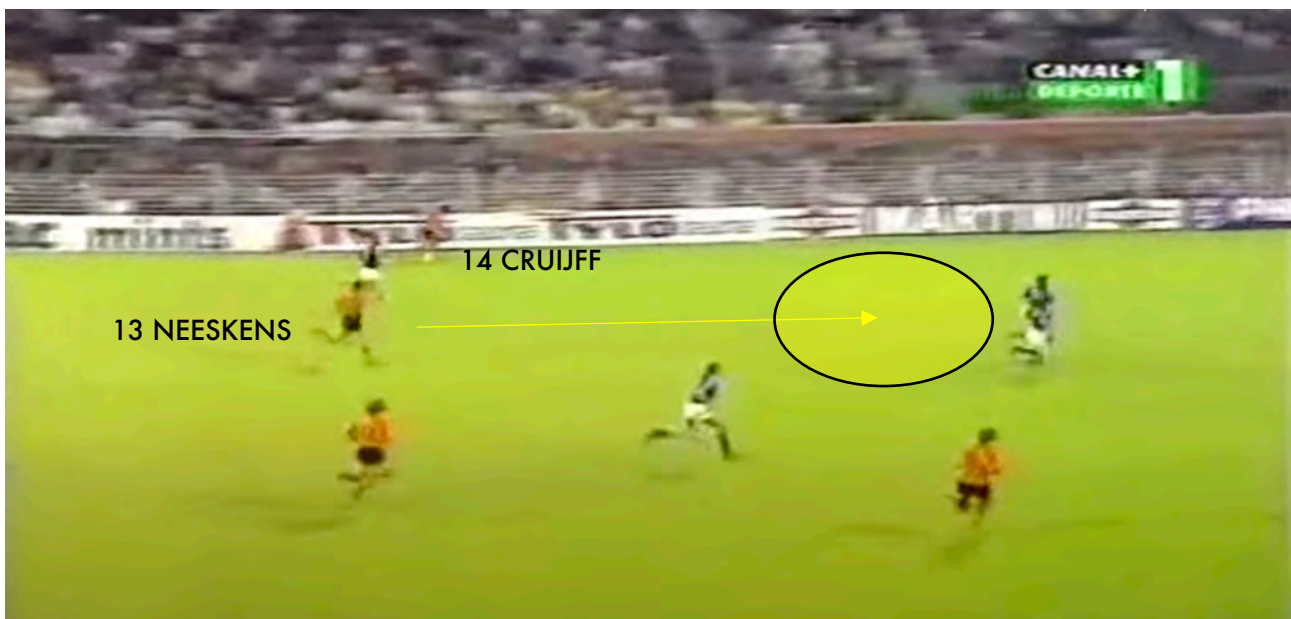


Figure 50 – Crujff goes wide and Neeskens who throws himself into space leaves the attacker free

- **Pressing and counter-pressing** – In defense, the Netherlands implemented high, offensive pressing, with Neeskens often joining Crujff in the attacking third, utilizing their athletic abilities. The team boasted exceptional physical fitness, which allowed them to maintain pressure up the field throughout the tournament. Another key characteristic

was their intense **counter-pressing** after losing possession, quickly recovering the ball and maintaining control of the game.



Figure 51 – Pressing with Neeskens ready to come out pressing

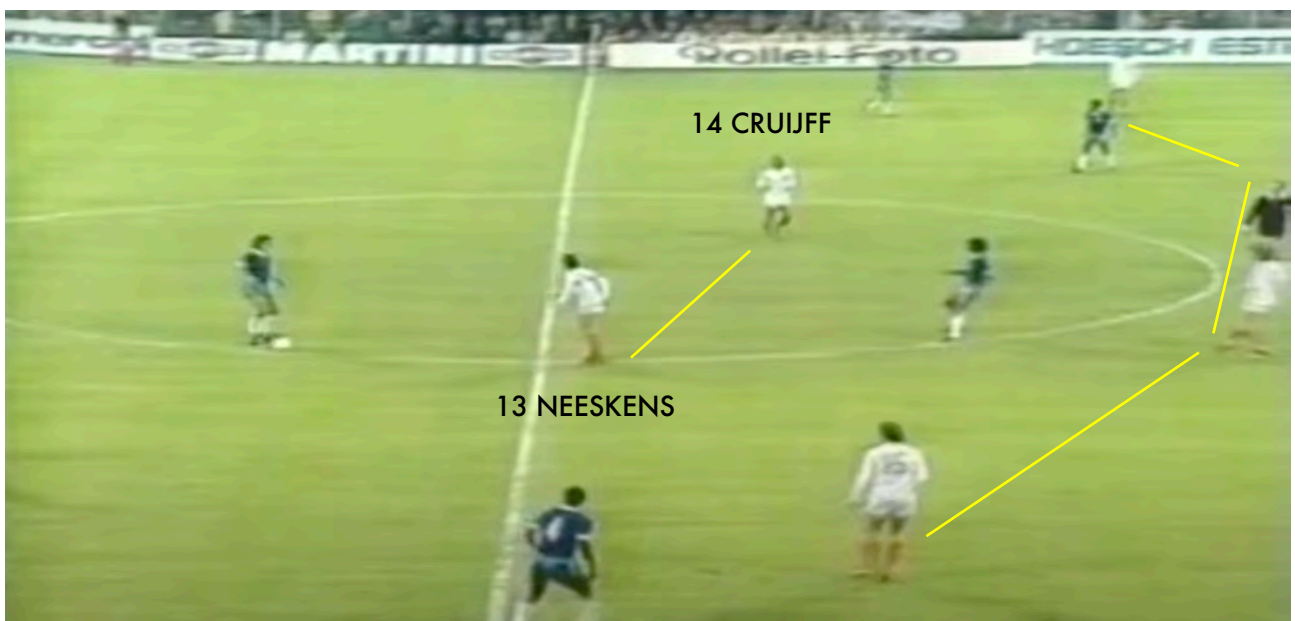


Figure 52 – Waiting line phase with a 4-4-2 with Neeskens alongside Crujff

High Defensive Line and Offside Trap – The defensive line played very high to keep the team compact and better able to press. Additionally, the offside trap was highly effective, with all players advancing forward simultaneously to leave opponents offside,

even in a somewhat disorganized manner. This aggressive defensive strategy helped suffocate the opposition and regain possession quickly.



Figure 53 – High defensive line with the two central defenders beyond the midfield

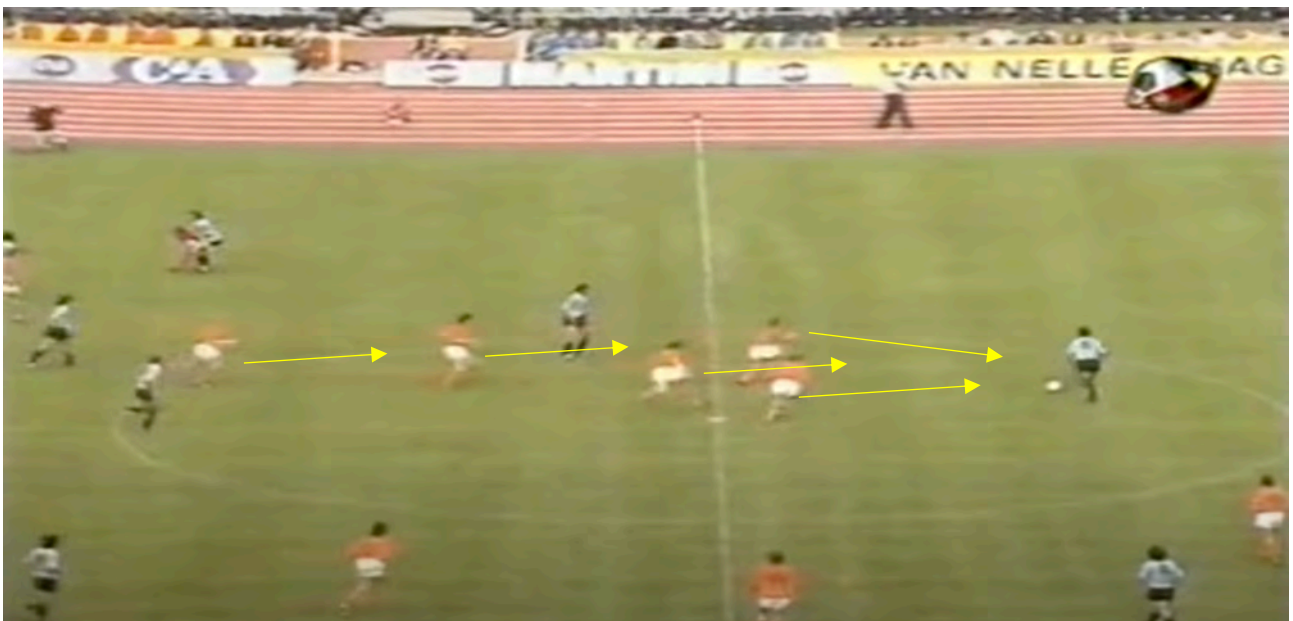


Figure 54 – Defensive line making the offside

After the 1974 World Cup, Michels left the Dutch national team but would return to coach them three more times. His first stint was in 1984, followed by another between 1986 and 1988, during which he led the Netherlands to victory in the 1988 **European Championship** in West Germany. His final tenure with the national team was from 1990

to 1992, after the 1990 World Cup, where he guided the team to the 1992 European Championship in Sweden.

Following his success with Ajax, Barcelona, and the 1974 Dutch national team, football in Europe was largely dominated by more traditional styles of play, particularly from English and German clubs, for at least the next decade. It wasn't until the 1985-86 season, at the beginning of Johan Crujff's managerial career, that **total football** began to resurface.

“Both as a player and as a coach there is no one who has taught me as much as him. I will miss Rinus Michels²³”

Johan Crujiff

At 33, while playing in the United States, Johan Crujiff returned to the Netherlands towards the end of 1980 during a break in the soccer tournament. Upon his

Carriera da allenatore	
1985-1988	 Ajax
1988-1996	 Barcellona

Figure 55 – Johan Crujiff's career

return to Amsterdam, Ajax gave him a temporary role as technical advisor. One Sunday afternoon in November, Johan went to the stadium to watch his old team's match. Ajax had taken the lead 1-0, but within five minutes, Twente scored three goals, overturning the score. The Amsterdam team tried to recover, ending the first half 2-3, but they were in great difficulty. At that point, Crujiff descends from the stands, gives some tactical instructions from the sidelines, and sits on the bench, continuing to issue orders. Almost immediately, the moves prove to be right: Ajax turns the game around and eventually wins, dominating 5-3. The message is clear, it weighs like a verdict. Crujiff **was not yet a coach, but he already knew how to do it**, better than anyone.²⁴.

No one changed football like he did, because no one has managed to be one of the greatest players of all time, alongside Pelé, Di Stefano, Maradona, and Messi, and also one of the best coaches ever, if not the best. Crujiff **was already a coach while he was playing**, and as a manager, he relied exclusively on his talent for interpreting the game, which he had refined on the field.

Two hundred days after his second and final retirement from playing, on June 6, 1985, Crujiff was called back by **Ajax** to replace Aad de Mos as head coach, despite not having a coaching license. On the bench of the Amsterdam club, he won two consecutive Dutch Cups in 1986 and 1987, as well as the Cup Winners' Cup won in

²³ www.theage.com.au/sport/soccer/father-of-dutch-soccer-dies-20050305-gdzpzg.html

²⁴ Alessandro de Calò – Crujiff, il signor Gesù che ha piantato il seme del calcio moderno – www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Estero/13-07-2020/crujiff-l-uomo-che-ha-cambiato-calcio-380353515772.shtml

Athens on May 13, 1987, against the East Germans of Lokomotive Leipzig, with a 1-0 goal from Marco van Basten. It had been fourteen years since Ajax had reached triumph in a European competition. On January 4, 1988, Crujff left his position. Ajax played with a forward-thinking **3-3-1-3** formation for the time, a tactical setup and principles of play that would influence the next decade. The symbolic players of that Ajax team were **Van Basten** and **Rijkaard**, alongside the not-so-young Arnold Mühren (Gerrie's younger brother), a bridge to the Ajax of fifteen years earlier.

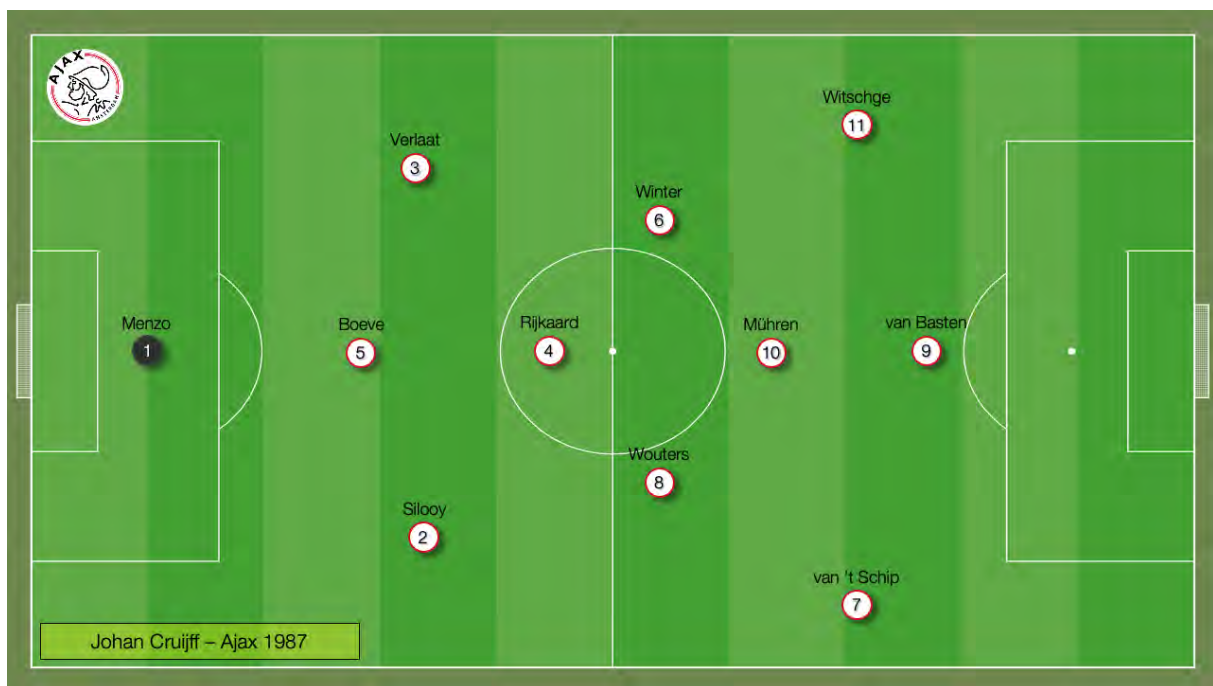


Figure 56 – Johan 's Ajax from 1987

Repeating the journey he had made as a player, Crujff left Ajax to sit on the bench of **Barcelona** on May 5, 1988, completing his path that had started as a Blaugrana player 20 years earlier. In his eight years at the helm of the Catalan club, Crujff built the foundation of the team around players like Josep **Guardiola**, José Mari **Bakero**, Txiki **Begiristain**, Guillermo **Amor**, Jon Andoni **Goikoetxea**, Ronald **Koeman**, Michael **Laudrup**, Hristo **Stoichkov** (who won the Ballon d'Or in 1994), and **Romario**. With Crujff, a technical and tactical revolution began that would shape both Barça's and world football's history.

Under his management, the Catalans achieved results never seen before in their history, winning the Liga four times in a row, as well as a Spanish Supercup, a Copa del Rey, a Cup Winners' Cup, three European Supercups, and clinching their first **European Cup** (Champions League) by defeating Sampdoria 1-0 at Wembley, thanks to a free kick by Ronald Koeman after 112 minutes. However, on May 18, 1994, in Athens, Crujff's team unexpectedly lost 4-0 to Fabio Capello's Milan, who were plagued by suspensions and injuries. Crujff was dismissed by the club on May 18, 1996.

In his first year, Crujff started rebuilding from the ground up, spending two billion pesetas to sign new players like José Mari **Bakero**, **Juan Carlos** Unzué, Jon Andoni **Goikoetxea**, **Eusebio** Sacristán, and Julio **Salinas**. The first season under Crujff was a period of adjustment to his new style of play. In La Liga, Barça finished second, five points behind Real Madrid, but they managed to win the Cup Winners' Cup in Bern, defeating Sampdoria in the final with goals from Julio Salinas and López Rekarte. The following summer, Michael **Laudrup** and Ronald **Koeman** arrived, and Barcelona won the Copa del Rey, although they finished 11 points behind Real Madrid in the league. Still, the foundation for the dream team was taking shape.

One of Crujff's revolutionary ideas was to create a **3-4-3** formation with a diamond midfield, a variation of the Dutch 4-3-3. It was a real back three, not a disguised five-man defense. Against teams often set up with a 4-4-2, the new formation gave Barcelona numerical advantages. *"If you have four defenders against two forwards, you're left with only six players against eight in the midfield. If opponents generally play with two strikers, I just need one extra defender at the back to cover and gain an extra man in midfield, two if we add the false center-forward"*, he later explained. Crujff, in his autobiography, recounts his ability to memorize phone numbers on the fly. Perhaps this explains his great aptitude for mental calculation and his focus on numbers on the field: how to exploit **numerical superiority** and how to make the best use of space.

In Crujff's 3-4-3 with a diamond midfield, the two defensive full-backs would engage in individual duels against the opponent's forwards, supported by the central defender

and a midfielder who could drop back to act as a second central defender, as Rijkaard had done at Ajax. Up front, there were two wide wingers providing width, with Bakero playing just behind the center-forward.

After starting with more traditional defenders like Aloisio, Nando, and Juan Carlos, Cruijff sought more **technical** and **proactive** players, ones who could maintain possession and, from his perspective, bring **more balance** to his style of play. The full-backs were strictly of **short stature**: not only did **Ferrer** become a fixture on the right, but later **Sergi**, even more offensive, was added.

The traditional idea of balance would suggest that in front of a somewhat vulnerable backline, there should be a gritty, fast player, or at least one with the build to act as an extra defender against crosses into the box. However, Cruijff chose **Guardiola**, a player who, in the lower categories of Barça, sometimes didn't play because he was too frail. In a team focused on possession and attack, it was better to add someone who understood football the same way rather than follow the "a priori" idea of balance and try to compensate with defensive specialists. For Cruijff, it was safer to have a player who wasn't purely defensive but who could help deliver the ball cleanly and securely to the attacking third, rather than a pure and speedy defender who might have caused the counterattacks with an imprecise pass at the start of the move.

For Cruijff, balance is simply a matter of **collective positioning**. But there's no need to run too much; football is played with the **brain**. You have to be in the right place at the right time, neither too early nor too late. And here we return to the primary importance of **technique** in passing and **controlling** the ball, because the ball is the tool that connects and disconnects the pieces of the puzzle. If you master passing and ball control, then "*you automatically control position*"²⁵ as well. The fundamental difference with Sacchi was that Cruijff **started with the mastery of the ball to then control the space**, while the Italian coach aimed to control **the space in order to get the ball**.

²⁵ Valentino Tola – Il futuro di Cruijff – www.ultimouomo.com/il-futuro-di-Cruijff

“Football is fundamentally made up of two things. The first: when you have the ball, you must be able to pass it correctly. The second: when the ball is passed to you, you must be able to control it. If you can't control it, you can't pass it either”

Johan Crujff

A pass can determine many **possible balances**: if it is short, it can bring two players closer together, and then, possibly, set them up for a ball recovery. However, if short passes do not force the opponent to run toward their own goal, they do not “turn” the defense, and they can attract the opponent's pressing. A long pass or a vertical ball can force the opponent to run back toward their own goal, but it can also stretch your own team if the player who passes and the player who receives the ball do not allow the rest of the team enough time to follow up.

For Crujff, if you control possession, you control the game. Possession was a way to **deconstruct** the opponent's system in order to gain depth. “*Always look for the most advanced teammate*” is the phrase that summarizes the possession phase of Crujff's Barcelona.

“Playing football is simple, but playing simple football is the hardest thing there is”

Johan Crujff

His obsession with possession led him to develop a model based on **triangles**: every player, regardless of their position on the field, had to position themselves to form that geometric shape. He considered this the ideal foundation from which his team could retain the ball, always offering the ball carrier at least two passing options²⁶.

²⁶ Tony Hodson – Johan Crujff: The Tactical Masters – www.coachesvoice.com/johan-Crujff-barcelona-coach-tactics-pep-guardiola

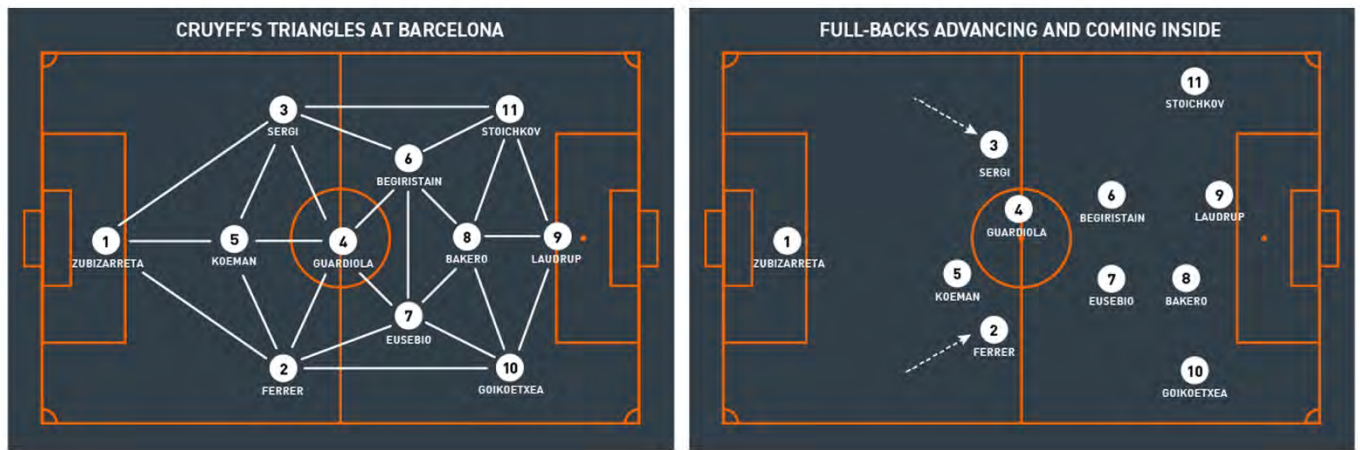


Figure 57 – The model based on triangles and the offensive structure of Cruijff's Barcelona

The principles of Cruijff's modern *juego de posición* are **build up**, invading the opponent's half with many players, **seeking positional superiority**, and **occupying width** and depth. This was an evolution from the Ajax of the 70s, more effective in defensive tactics thanks to better-organized pressing and offside traps.

Another great tactical innovation introduced by Cruijff, with the arrival of Laudrup, was playing with a false center-forward (*falso nueve*).

When explaining Laudrup's role as a false striker and his positional exchanges with Stoichkov, who would cut in from the left, Cruijff said: *"If the defenders didn't step up to mark Laudrup, who dropped deep, it left space for a long pass (usually from Koeman or Guardiola) to Stoichkov. But even then, there was always the short pass to Laudrup, who could do his thing"*. Laudrup did his thing. The talented player always did his thing.



Figure 58 – Cruijff's Barcelona in 1993

With **Romário**'s arrival in the summer of 1993 (while Laudrup would leave for Real Madrid a year later), the team adopted more traditional behaviors. The Brazilian striker significantly altered Cruijff's model by adding a lethal player in the penalty area but limiting some of the previous tactical dynamics.

At Ajax, meanwhile, following in Cruijff's footsteps, the phenomenon of Louis **van Gaal** emerged, a young coach who truly inherited Michels' approach to the bench and team discipline. Van Gaal won three championships and a UEFA Cup, and reached two consecutive European Cup finals, winning the first in 1995 against Milan. Dutch **Total Football** was once again the ruler of the world. On the field, still directing operations was Frank Rijkaard, a link between Cruijff's Ajax, Sacchi's Milan, and van Gaal's Ajax. Tactically, Van Gaal continued with the **3-4-3**, where the 'trequartista' played a key role: first **Bergkamp** and later **Litmanen**. These attacking midfielders were poised to transform into strikers, shadow strikers, 20 years after Neeskens, the maestro. Also, the role swaps between Rijkaard and Blind (midfielder and defender) in this Ajax echoed the ones from twenty years earlier.

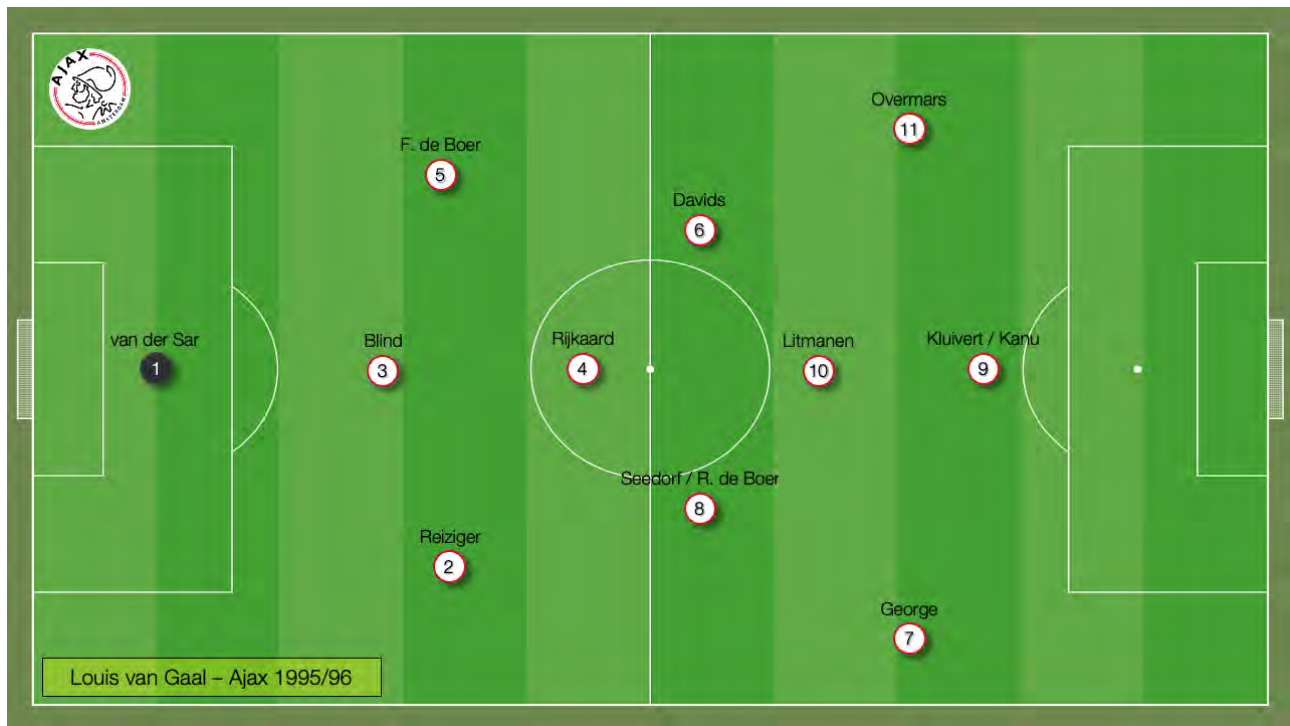


Figure 59 – Louis van Gaal's Ajax of 1995/96

In 1996, after the final in Rome where van Gaal's Ajax lost to Juventus, Total Football went back into hibernation. As often happens **after every tactical innovation**, the **defensive countermeasures** were the first to gain prominence and spread across the increasingly global football world. These were the years of rigid and linear 4-4-2 formations, high pressing, offside traps, and more physical and energetic players. The role of the 'trequartista' almost disappeared, only to be rediscovered with the explosion of the 4-2-3-1 system at the beginning of the 2000s.

In 2006, Barcelona once again becomes the city where total football is reborn: another Dutch coach, **Rijkaard**, arrives, with Neeskens as his assistant coach. They go on to win the 2006 Champions League against Arsenal, with Xavi orchestrating the game from the midfield. A few years later, **Guardiola** takes over as the new Barcelona coach.

In 2006, **Pep Guardiola** hung up his boots for good, with a trophy-laden career behind him. His managerial journey began the following year, on June 8, 2007, when he was appointed as the head coach of **Barcelona B**. From the very first matches, the team caught the attention of fans and experts across Spain. The squad was characterized by extremely high possession percentages and intricate passing networks, with opponents often forced to play as if they were inside a rondo drill during training. Guardiola led the team to win the play-offs of the *tercera división*, securing promotion to *segunda división B*.





Carriera da allenatore	
2007-2008	 Barcelona B
2008-2012	 Barcelona
2013-2016	 Bayern Monaco
2016-	 Manchester City

Figure 60 – Pep Guardiola's career

Exactly 11 months later, at the age of 37, Pep Guardiola was promoted to the role of **first-team** coach by Joan Laporta, succeeding **Frank Rijkaard**. He inherited a team at the end of a cycle, with the retirements of Lilian Thuram and the departures of Ronaldinho, Deco, Gianluca Zambrotta, and Edmilson. Guardiola seemed to be the perfect man to help develop many of the young players in the squad, such as Gerard **Piqué**, freshly signed from Manchester United, **Dani Alves** and Seydou **Keita**, who had arrived from Sevilla, and Sergio **Busquets**, a product of *La Masia* (the club's academy).



Figure 61 – Pep Guardiola's Barcelona in 2008

In his first year, Barcelona's dominance in La Liga was remarkable: the best attack with 105 goals scored and the best defense with only 35 goals conceded. It was a team of the highest quality, with a solid defense, a midfield orchestrated by the metronome **Xavi** and the genius of **Iniesta**, and a forward trio of **Henry**, **Eto'o**, and **Messi** that was hard to match. The victory in the Copa del Rey already gave Guardiola's debut year a historic dimension, but it wasn't enough. The ultimate confirmation came at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome, the venue for the Champions League final. Barcelona had narrowly beaten Chelsea in the semi-finals, but in the final, there was no contest, and with goals from Eto'o and Messi, they easily claimed victory against Manchester United, featuring Rooney and Ronaldo. Guardiola won the **treble** in his first season as Barcelona's coach with a new tactical philosophy, which the Spanish press inaccurately dubbed *tiki-taka*. "Receive the ball, pass, have the ball, pass, have the ball, pass, have the ball, pass", Xavi succinctly and clearly described *tiki-taka*.

During his first season as a coach, on May 2, 2009, against Real Madrid at the Bernabeu, Guardiola showcased Messi as a **false nine** for the first time, moving Eto'o to the right and ready, along with Henry on the left, to exploit the space left by the "false" Argentine center forward.

"My forward is space"

Pep Guardiola

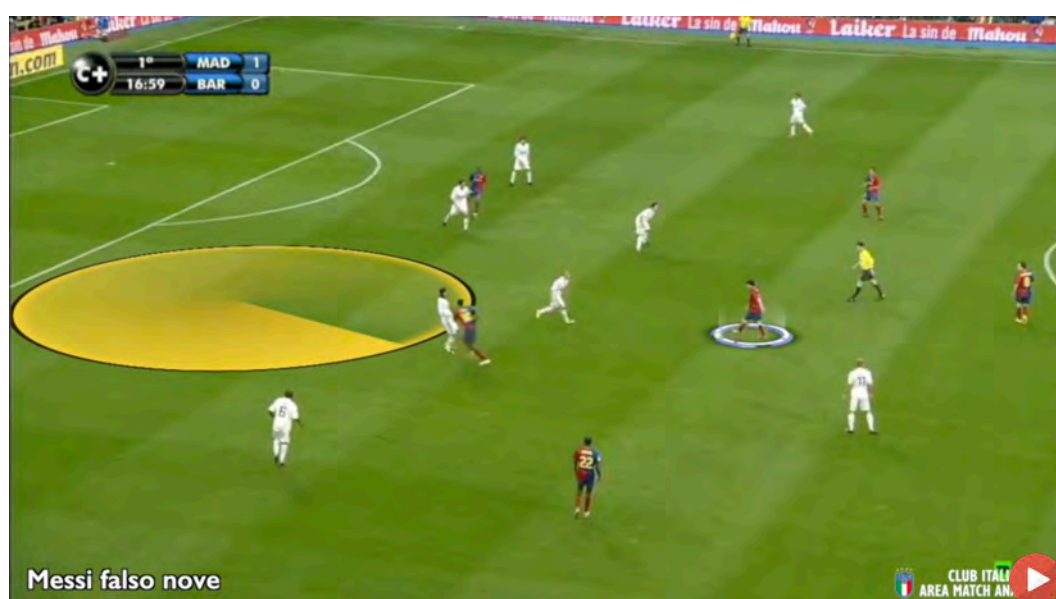


Figure 62 – Messi "false nine" which frees up space for the insertion of Henry

Guardiola's trophy cabinet filled up at an astonishing pace during his five years at Barcelona, making him the most successful coach in the club's history in a very short time. He won an impressive **14 titles**, including three La Liga titles, two Copa del Reys, two UEFA Champions League titles, and two FIFA Club World Cups, along with numerous national and international Super Cups.

In the summer of 2009, after Barcelona had already won everything, they made a surprising transfer move by signing Zlatan **Ibrahimović** from Inter Milan in exchange for Samuel Eto'o. However, in early January 2010, Barcelona were unexpectedly eliminated from the Copa del Rey by Sevilla. While La Liga was almost a formality, the real test came in the Champions League semifinals, where Barcelona faced Inter Milan. The decision to bring in a physical striker like Ibrahimović seemed to backfire, as Inter eliminated Barcelona and went on to win the treble. The relationship between Guardiola and Ibrahimović began to deteriorate throughout the season, and with Barcelona's Champions League elimination at the hands of Inter, both parties realized their paths were destined to separate.

The following summer, Ibrahimović was sold to AC Milan, and Guardiola returned to his original attacking style, focusing on a lighter, more fluid approach with the addition of **David Villa**. The forward, purchased from Valencia, seamlessly integrated into both the dressing room and the tactical setup. Furthermore, veteran Javier **Mascherano** strengthened the midfield. November 29, 2010, became a landmark date in football history. That evening, Guardiola's Barcelona delivered the symbolic match of their successful cycle, cementing their place as one of the greatest teams in football history by demolishing José Mourinho's Real Madrid 5-0. In the Champions League, Barcelona once again triumphed over Manchester United in the final at Wembley, winning 3-1 with goals from Pedro, Messi, and Villa.

Lionel Messi surpassed the 47 goals he scored the previous season by netting an incredible 55 goals across all competitions. Guardiola came within reach of his second treble in three years but fell short, losing the Copa del Rey final to Real Madrid 1-0.

The 2011/12 season was, in many ways, the “worst” for Guardiola at Barcelona, though it simultaneously marked the best year of Lionel Messi's career. The Argentine scored a staggering 73 goals across all competitions, reaching levels previously only touched by the likes of Diego Maradona and Pelé. Meanwhile, Barcelona added Cesc **Fàbregas** and Alexis **Sánchez** to their roster, further bolstering an already impressive squad. He wins the Spanish and European Supercup, the Club World Cup, and the Copa del Rey, but finishes second in the league, 9 points behind Real Madrid, and loses the Champions League semifinal against Di Matteo's Chelsea. This is Guardiola's last season as coach, departing with a record number of goals scored: 190, surpassing even the 158 of the 2008/09 season. On June 18, Tito **Vilanova**, Guardiola's assistant coach, is appointed as the new coach of Barcelona.

In his final year at Barcelona, Guardiola experimented on several occasions with a three-man defense and a midfield diamond, as in the Club World Cup final against Neymar and Ganso's Santos, and also tried the solution with two 'false forwards' featuring Messi and Fàbregas.



Figure 63 – Guardiola's Barcelona in 2011

The false nine concept, with Fabregas, was also reintroduced by the Spanish national team under **Vicente del Bosque** at the 2012 European Championship, where La Roja

won the tournament, triumphing 4-0 against Cesare Prandelli's Italy in the final. Spain played the final against Italy without a true forward, effectively using six midfielders.



Figure 64 – Del Bosque's Spain of 2012

Guardiola's football is based on a **spatial principle**: when a player has the ball, they advance with the ball as long as there is space. Since they are advancing freely, eventually an opponent will close in to challenge them. However, by leaving their position to press, this defender will inevitably leave one of the player's teammates **unmarked**, and so the cycle continues. If there is space, the player should continue **drive with the ball** as long as possible. The goal must be to transfer superiority to other areas of the field.



Figure 65 – Guardiola's Barcelona playing principles. Image taken from the Guardiola evolution video produced by myself, Antonio Gagliardi and Marco Mannucci

It's a sequence of superiorities, starting from the **goalkeeper**, who is asked to play as much as possible with his feet, and moving through each line, always finding the free player to advance the play.

For Guardiola, like for his mentor Crujff, the phases of the game (possession, non-possession, and transitions) are **inseparable**. **The possession phase influences the non-possession phase and vice versa**. Oscar Cano, a professional coach and expert on Guardiola's positional play, states: *“During the choices made in the possession phase, conditions are being generated for the future defensive phase, and vice versa”*²⁷.

One of Guardiola's fundamental principles is **maintaining possession** of the ball to **control the game**. César Luis **Menotti**, the coach who led the Argentine national team to its first World Cup title in 1978, declared, *“Having possession of the ball is not a strategy, it is a necessity”*. Whoever controls possession can control the **pace of the game**. After perhaps an extended effort, taking advantage of possession to consolidate it allows the team to recover physically.

Guardiola asks his players to make no more than two consecutive vertical passes. This is because the team, by forcing vertical passes, tends to stretch and become disjointed. It's necessary to **“travel” with the ball** to stay compact.

In the possession phase, it is crucial to **create numerical superiority** starting from the defense, which must also involve the goalkeeper—a key element in transitioning out of the first build-up zone.

Maximum width of the field is required when in possession, trying to stretch the space that the opposing team must cover. If the opponents are compact, it's preferable to play wide; if the opponents are spread out, it's better to play centrally.

“The goal is to move the opponent, not the ball”

Pep Guardiola

²⁷ Diego Franzoso – I Concetti Chiave nel Barcellona di Guardiola – www.ideacalcio.net/il-gioco-piu-bello/articoli-vari/i-concetti-chiave-del-barcellona-di-guardiola.html

When the ball is lost, the Spanish coach asks the nearest players to immediately “hunt” the ball; a quick **counter-pressing** after losing possession. It’s important to exploit numerical superiority near the ball to attempt an immediate recovery. Guardiola introduces the “**five-second rule**”, which is the time allowed to attempt an aggressive action to regain possession before retreating and reorganizing, should the ball not be recovered within that time.



Figure 66 – Barcelona's counter-pressing after a lost ball

On January 16, 2013, Guardiola was announced as the new coach of **Bayern Munich**, succeeding Jupp Heynckes, who would retire at the end of that season. He made his official debut by facing Borussia Dortmund in the German Supercup, which he lost. However, he won the UEFA Supercup against Chelsea.

On March 24, 2014, Bayern Munich were crowned German champions with seven matches to spare, securing the Bundesliga title. He also won the DFB-Pokal, but was eliminated in the Champions League semifinals by Real Madrid.

In the summer transfer window, Bayern strengthened their squad with the signings of Robert **Lewandowski** from Borussia Dortmund and **Xabi Alonso** from Real Madrid. Guardiola's second season with Bayern started poorly, with another defeat in the German Supercup, this time against Borussia Dortmund. However, he managed to win

his second consecutive Bundesliga title, though Bayern were eliminated in the semifinals of both the DFB-Pokal and the Champions League, losing to Borussia Dortmund and Barcelona, respectively.

At the start of his third season, Guardiola lost the German Supercup for the third year in a row, this time to Wolfsburg. In December, he announced that he would not renew his contract with the club, which was set to expire in June. He went on to win another Bundesliga title and the DFB-Pokal, but was once again eliminated in the semifinals of the Champions League by Atlético Madrid. At the end of the season, Guardiola's time at Bayern Munich came to an **end**.

Guardiola's first year at Bayern Munich was not easy because the team had been heavily shaped, first by **van Gaal** and then by **Heynckes**, to play with wing-back and **winger pairs** on each side (Lahm/Robben on the right and Alaba/Ribéry on the left). Guardiola, however, preferred **numerical superiority in the central areas** to provide more passing options and allow the team to maintain possession while advancing into the opponent's half²⁸. The team that Guardiola inherited was more accustomed to focusing much of their play on the wings, as Robben and Ribéry, by their nature, required more time on the ball

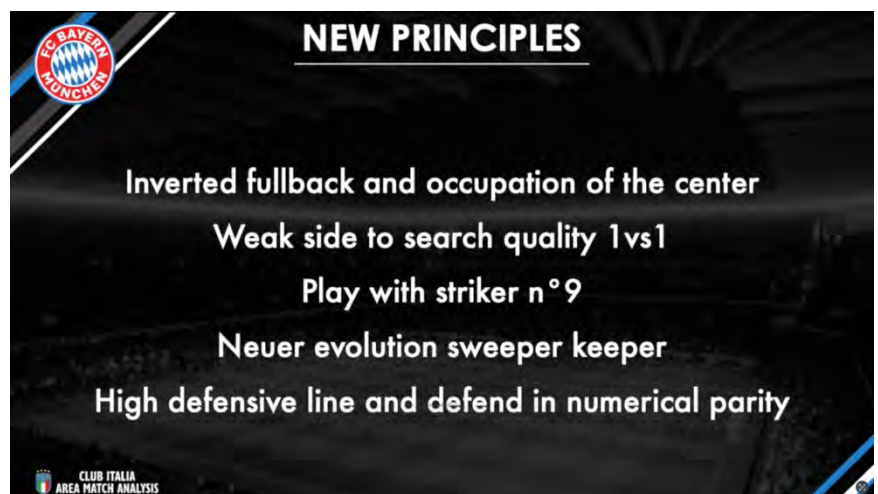


Figure 67 – Guardiola's Bayern Munich playing principles. Image taken from the Guardiola evolution video produced by myself, Antonio Gagliardi and Marco Mannucci

and space to operate, compared to the wide players (playing at maximum width) of Barcelona. Additionally, Guardiola could not implement his trademark “false nine” system because this tactical approach requires the wingers to operate primarily without

²⁸ Valentino Tola – Il caro, vecchio, nuovo Guardiola – www.ultimouomo.com/il-caro-vecchio-nuovo-guardiola

the ball, threatening space behind the opposing central defenders to prevent them from stepping out and marking the “false nine”.

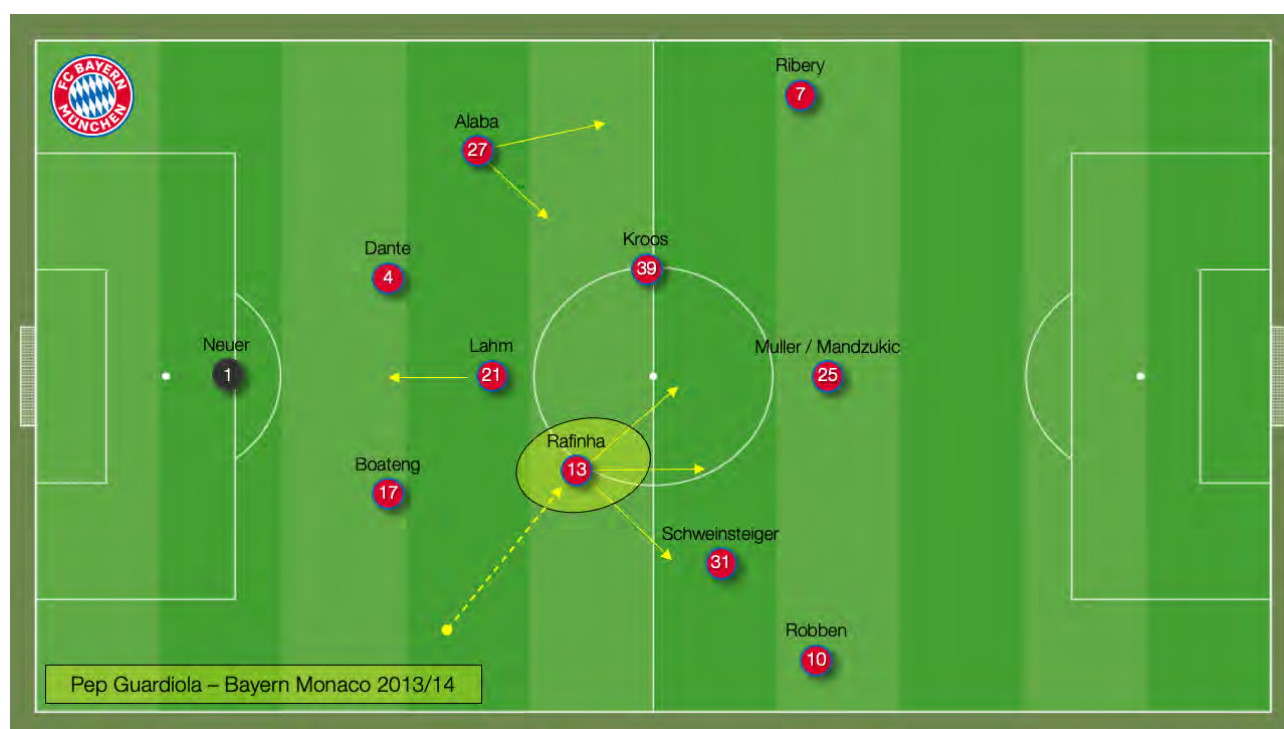


Figure 68 – Guardiola's Bayern Munich in 2013

Guardiola introduced a new tactical innovation to ensure central superiority, which we can call the system with “**inverted full-backs**”. At the beginning of the play, the full-backs Rafinha and Alaba position themselves much more towards the center of the field. This movement serves to compensate for Lahm’s positioning, who, when the opponents deploy two players up front, falls back between Boateng and Dante to ensure Bayern a **numerical advantage**. A mechanism (that of the playmaker dropping back to widen the center-backs) that is known in Spain as “*salida Lavolpiana*”, named after Ricardo La Volpe, the former head coach of Mexico, who inspired Guardiola with this move, already tested in his previous experience with Busquets among the center-backs at the beginning of the 2010-2011 season. Guardiola's Mexican background has been fundamental in learning this tactical key. Angel Iturriaga, a Spanish writer, historian, and professor at the *Universidad Internacional de La Rioja*, speaking about the build-up play, said: “*Guardiola has sublimated positional play. He has introduced variations in the ball-out from defense that La Volpe would never have even imagined*”²⁹.

²⁹ Giacomo Manini – La fine dei ruoli – www.rivistacontrasti.it/la-fine-dei-ruoli-cc

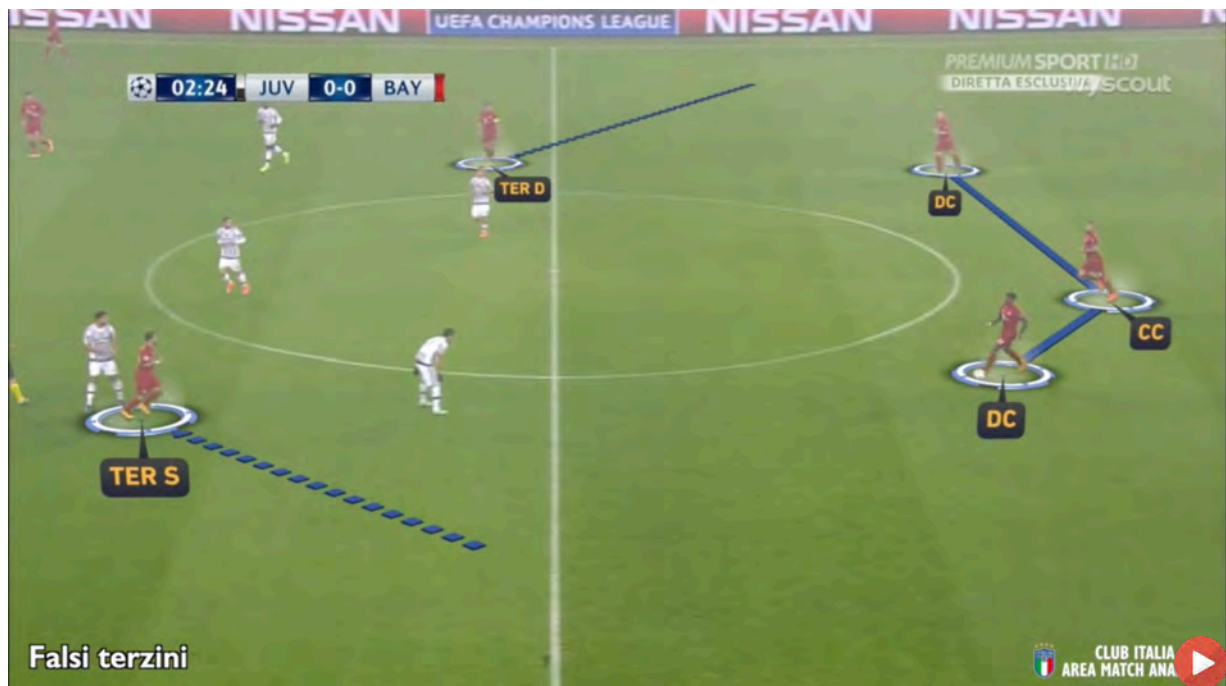


Figure 69 – The playmaker between the two central defenders and the full-backs inside the pitch

Furthermore, starting from the second season, with the arrival of Robert Lewandowski, Guardiola takes advantage of the **strong** and **physical center forward** by keeping Robben wide on the right and Ribéry on the left. The game strategy is to utilize the **quality** and **speed** of the two wingers in **one-on-one** situations and to play on the physical presence of the Polish striker in the penalty area.



Figure 70 – Robben on the right and Ribéry on the left at maximum width

In the defensive phase of Guardiola's Bayern Munich, the principles already seen at Barcelona, such as **high pressing** and fierce **counter-pressing**, are present. The Spanish coach proposes bolder and riskier ideas defensively, playing with a very high **defensive line** and opting to accept **numerical equality** at the back. This principle is exacerbated in the first leg of the Champions League semifinal in 2014/15 at Camp Nou against Barcelona, which Bayern lost 3-0. Guardiola decides to leave Boateng, Benatia, and Rafinha against Messi, Suarez, and Neymar. The concept associated with the high defensive line is the new role that **Neuer** takes on as a **sweeper-keeper**, ready to defend against potential deep attacks behind the defensive line.



Figure 71 – High defensive line that accepts numerical parity behind 3v3



Figure 72 – High defense line and Neuer acting as a Sweeper Keeper

In February 2016, Guardiola was announced as the new coach of **Manchester City**, succeeding Manuel Pellegrini, starting from the following season. Joining Guardiola are **Gabriel Jesus** from Palmeiras, John **Stones** from Everton, Leroy **Sané** from Schalke 04, and İlkay **Gündogan** from Borussia Dortmund. These four talents are complemented by the signings of **Nolito** from Celta de Vigo and **Claudio Bravo**, goalkeeper from Barcelona. Departing from Manchester are Stevan Jovetic, sold to Inter, and Edin Dzeko, sold to Roma. He finishes the first season **without winning titles**, with the team eliminated in the fourth round of the English League Cup by Manchester United, in the Champions League in the round of 16 by Monaco, and in the FA Cup in the semifinals by Arsenal, ultimately finishing third in the league and becoming the team with the **highest ball possession** in the Premier League (60.9% average possession)³⁰.

Guardiola's second season at the helm of the *citizens* proves to be much more satisfying than the previous one. Departing are Iheanacho heading to Leicester, the Argentinians Zabaleta and Caballero, the Spaniard Jesús Navas, and Nasri. Kolarov also leaves for Roma, Nolito goes to Sevilla, and Fernando to Galatasaray. In Manchester, under Guardiola's guidance, several players arrive, including defender **Laporte** from Athletic Bilbao, **Mendy** and **Bernardo Silva** from Monaco, **Walker** from Tottenham, **Danilo** from Real Madrid, and goalkeeper **Ederson** from Benfica. Young Zinčenko returns from a loan at PSV Eindhoven. He sets a new **record** for the English league with **18 consecutive victories** and achieves the best start to a season after 20 matches in the history of the five major European leagues, with 18 wins and 2 draws. In February, the Catalan coach wins his first trophy with Manchester City, the League Cup. A few months later, on April 15, the mathematical certainty of **winning the Premier League** arrives with a record **100 points** accumulated over 38 matches, with 32 victories (a record), 4 draws, and only 2 seasonal defeats. However, the journey of Manchester City in the Champions League is disappointing, ending in the quarter-finals, and in the FA Cup, with elimination in the fifth round.

³⁰ Giulio Conventi – L'effetto Pep – www.cronachedispogliatoio.it/leffetto-pep-come-e-cambiato-il-manchester-city-dallarrivo-di-guardiola

The big transfer for the *citizens* that summer is Riyad **Mahrez**, arriving from Leicester. Guardiola's third season at Manchester City opens with victory in the Community Shield. In the league, the year is marked by a tight battle with Liverpool, which concludes only on the final day in favor of the Manchester team, thus securing the title for the **second consecutive time**, a feat not achieved in the Premier League for ten years. In the English League Cup and the FA Cup, two more victories follow, making Guardiola the first manager in the history of English football to achieve a **domestic treble**. The transformation of Guardiola's City reaches its peak, its full realization. The victory in the national supercup makes Manchester City the first English team capable of winning all domestic trophies in a single season, while their journey in the Champions League ends at the quarter-finals.



Man City stats Premier League, 2018/19		
		PL rank
Home wins	18	1 st
Away wins	14	1 st
Goals	95	1 st
Shots	683	1 st
Passes	26,576	1 st
Possession	68.1%	1 st
Shots conceded	238	1 st
Tackles	518	20 th

Figure 73 – Seasonal statistics 2018/19 in the Premier League. Source Sky sport

The summer transfer window sees the arrival of **Cancelo** from Juventus and **Rodri** from Atlético Madrid, two players perfect for the mechanisms of the Spanish coach. Guardiola's fourth season at the helm of the *citizens* opens with victory in the Community Shield and continues with triumph in the League Cup, while in the Champions League there is a third consecutive elimination in the quarter-finals against Lyon, and the team finishes the league in second place, with the *reds* prevailing this time.

The summer signings include Nathan **Aké** from Bournemouth, **Ferran Torres** from Valencia, and **Rúben Dias** from Benfica. In the 2020-2021 season, Guardiola achieves his thirtieth trophy as a manager, leading Manchester City to victory in the League Cup for the fourth consecutive time, making him the first manager to achieve this streak of success in the competition. He reaches the Champions League final but loses to fellow countrymen Chelsea, while winning the English league again.

In the summer, Sergio Agüero leaves the team. In 2021-2022, he wins the English league on the final day, loses the Community Shield, and becomes the manager with the most wins (221) in the club's history, surpassing Les McDowall. The team is eliminated from the League Cup in the fourth round and exits in the semi-finals of both the FA Cup and the Champions League.

The summer sees a minor revolution, with symbolic Guardiola players leaving, such as Oleksandr Zinchenko heading to Arsenal, Fernandinho returning to Brazil, Gabriel Jesus sold to rivals Arsenal, and Raheem Sterling moving to Chelsea. Arriving under Guardiola are Manuel **Akanji** from Borussia Dortmund, Calvin **Phillips** from Leeds United, and most notably Erling **Haaland** from Borussia Dortmund. In the 2022-2023 season, he completes a treble with Manchester City, winning the league, FA Cup, and Champions League; this marks the club's first success in the top European competition. Guardiola becomes the first manager to achieve the treble twice, having done so with Barcelona in 2008-2009. Haaland, in his first season, scores 52 goals in 53 appearances, becoming the top scorer in both the Premier League and the Champions League.

In the latest transfer window, Guardiola signs Joško **Gvardiol** from Leipzig, Mateo **Kovačić** from Chelsea, and Jérémy **Doku** from Rennes, while parting ways with historic players like João Cancelo, İlkay Gündoğan, and Riyad Mahrez. In the 2023-2024 season, he leads the Citizens to victory in the UEFA Super Cup by beating Sevilla in a penalty shootout, in the FIFA Club World Cup by defeating Fluminense 4-0 in the final (thus becoming the most successful manager in this competition), and in the Premier League for the fourth consecutive time, setting a record for the English league.

Various **tactical innovations** have been presented by Guardiola during his 472 matches in charge (349 wins, 57 draws, and 66 losses) over nine seasons with Manchester City.

In his first year, Guardiola lays the foundations for what will be a triumphant path by instilling the principle of **maintaining possession** by fielding players with the highest technical quality.



Figure 74 – Guardiola's Manchester City of 2016

The first version of Guardiola's Manchester City is characterized by the constant presence of **Fernandinho** in front of the defense, serving as the pivot in build-up play behind the two central defenders during ball possession and acting as a positional intelligent player in defensive situations. Later, with the arrival of **Rodri**, the Brazilian is also used as a central defender to further utilize his ball-playing abilities. In the 2019/20 season against Crystal Palace, both Fernandinho and Rodri are deployed as central defenders. The playmakers are used to systematically seek out the **third man**, a move that all players on the field look for in every area of the pitch.

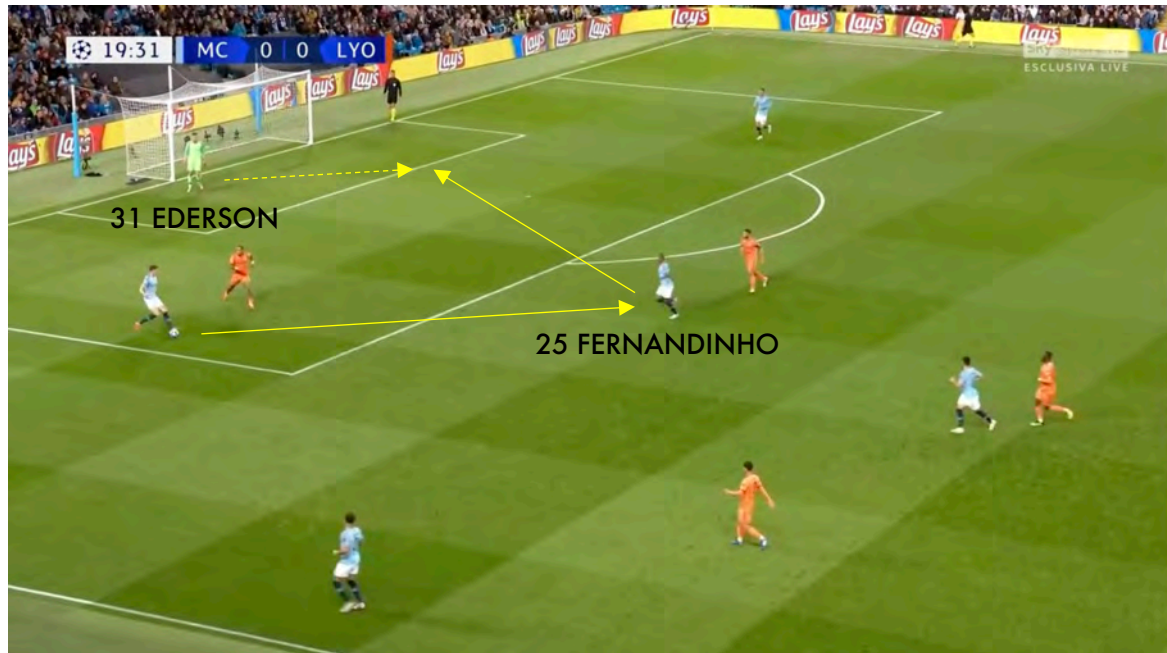


Figure 75 – Fernandinho makes a third man with goalkeeper Ederson



Figure 76 – Guardiola's Manchester City of 2019 with Fernandinho as central defender

Guardiola wants a team that engages in **high** and **offensive pressing**, and he demands that the **defensive line** remains very **high** to maintain a **short** and compact team during defensive phases. In his first year, they concede 39 goals in the Premier League, the worst statistic of his tenure at Manchester City.

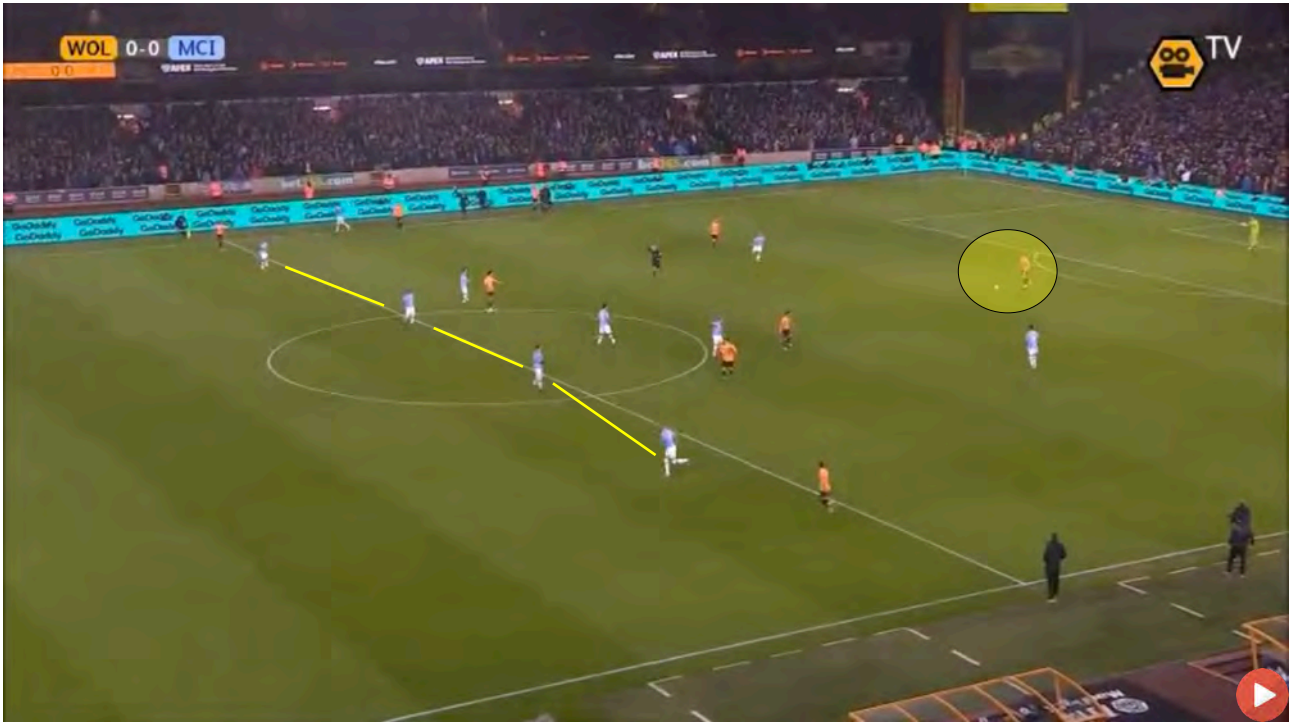


Figure 77 – Manchester City's high defensive line in an open ball situation

SEASON	GOALS SCORED IN PREMIER LEAGUE	GOALS CONCEDED IN PREMIER LEAGUE
2016/17	80	39
2017/18	106	27
2018/19	95	23
2019/20	102	35
2020/21	83	32
2021/22	99	26
2022/23	94	33
2023/24	96	34

Figure 78 – Goals scored and conceded in the Premier League by Guardiola's Manchester City

In the following seasons, Manchester City becomes increasingly like a perfect machine. The build-up play becomes fluid, with players **interchanging positions**. **Spaces** are always **occupied perfectly** and effectively, depending on the opposing team's defensive structure and how they engage in pressing.



Figure 79 – Build up with interchanges

In the offensive phase, the structure is almost always **3-2-5**, with a systematic occupation of the **five offensive channels**. Two players occupy the width, often wingers, two players occupy the half-spaces, and one player occupies the central channel, aiming to stretch the opposing team by attacking into depth.



Figure 80 – Occupation of Manchester City's 5 offensive channels

With this defensive structure, the deep runs of players occupying the half-spaces become very important for Guardiola's game. One play that is often sought after is the **run of De Bruyne**, who starts from the right half-space and makes a run between the full-back and the center-back, receiving the ball from the player positioned out wide on the right.

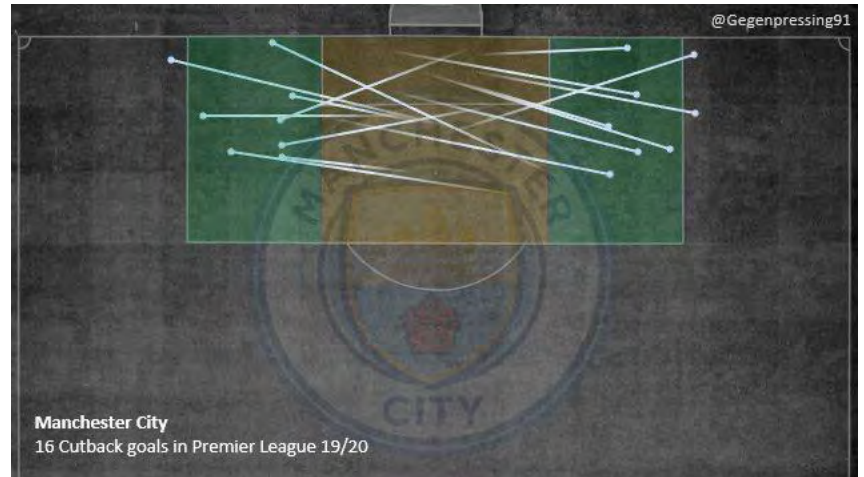


Figure 81 – Manchester City's cut back goals in 2019/20. Source @Gegenpressing91

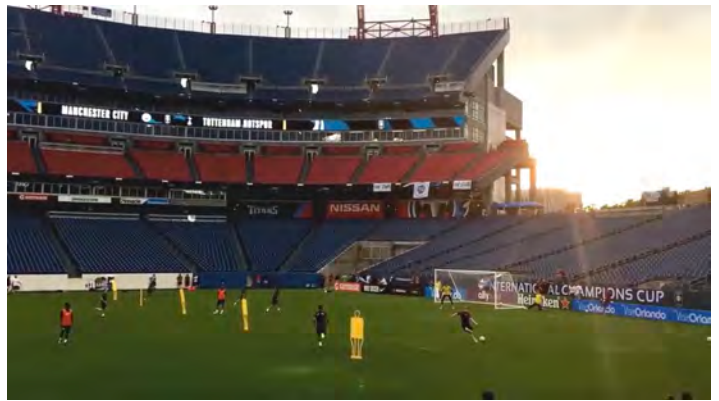


Figure 82 – Tactical training with the inclusion of De Bruyne between full-back and central defender. Source Enric Soriano

Once he receives the ball, the Belgian star is very skilled at looking for either **early crosses** (the ball played into the space between the defensive line and the goalkeeper) or **cut-backs**, providing passes pulled back for his teammates' late runs. In the 2019/20 Premier League season, Manchester City found the net 16 times using the cut-back play.

After using Agüero first and then Gabriel Jesus, Guardiola introduces a sort of **mobile center forward**, where De Bruyne and Foden interchange positions as attackers.

Another innovative concept, already seen at Bayern Munich, is the use of **inverted full-backs**, with **Walker**, **Cancelo**, and **Zinchenko** being masters at adopting this new tactical role. The structure shifts from 3-2-5 to **2-3-5**, becoming even more offensive.



Figure 83 – Guardiola's Manchester City of 2021

The arrival of Haaland from Borussia Dortmund in the 2022/23 season brings a true physical, structured, and **athletic center forward** back into Guardiola's game. However, the innovative tactical idea is the “**false center-back**” which involves the movement of central defender **Stones** alongside playmaker Rodri, always returning to the offensive structure of 3-2-5.

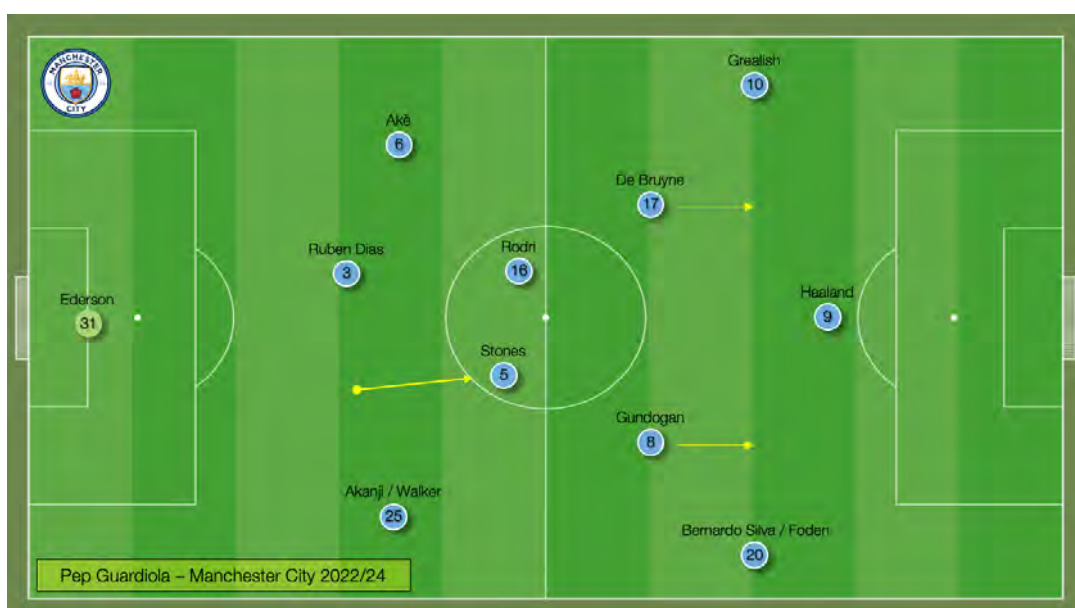


Figure 84 – Guardiola's Manchester City of 2023

With the inclusion of Haaland, the role of the goalkeeper also changes. At the beginning of Guardiola's tenure at Manchester City, goalkeepers, first **Bravo** and then **Ederson**, were asked to focus on building from the back, utilizing **short passes** and the **third man**, due to the absence of a physical player capable of receiving high balls.

With the arrival of the Norwegian forward, the goalkeeper's build-up can also be long and direct to the striker, especially against teams that accept numerical equality at the back.



Figure 85 – Gvardiol's heatmap in the 2023/24 PL



Figure 86 – Long return by Ederson on Haaland who plays 1v1 against Rudiger

In August 2023, Manchester City signs Josko **Gvardiol** from Leipzig, making him the most expensive defender in football history. After a challenging start, nine months later, Guardiola manages to transform Gvardiol into a defensive and goal-scoring machine (with 5 goals in the season), moving the Croatian player from central defender to left-back. In a press conference, Guardiola reiterates what he wants from his player: “He

*must not lose the ball... The most important thing for defenders is to be secure. **Playing simply** is the hardest thing in football. And then, if he scores, that's great, but that's not his job. His job is to defend and play securely".*

Manchester City transforms, moving to play with two midfielders as central defenders and two attacking full-backs, while this past season they played with **four central defenders**, as seen in the Champions League semifinal against Real Madrid.

Stones moves up alongside Rodri as he did in the previous season, and Gvardiol sometimes plays inside the field or advances as a wide player.

Kovacic, depending on Stones' movement and the positioning of the opponents, either drops back to play alongside Rodri and Stones or moves up into the right half-space.

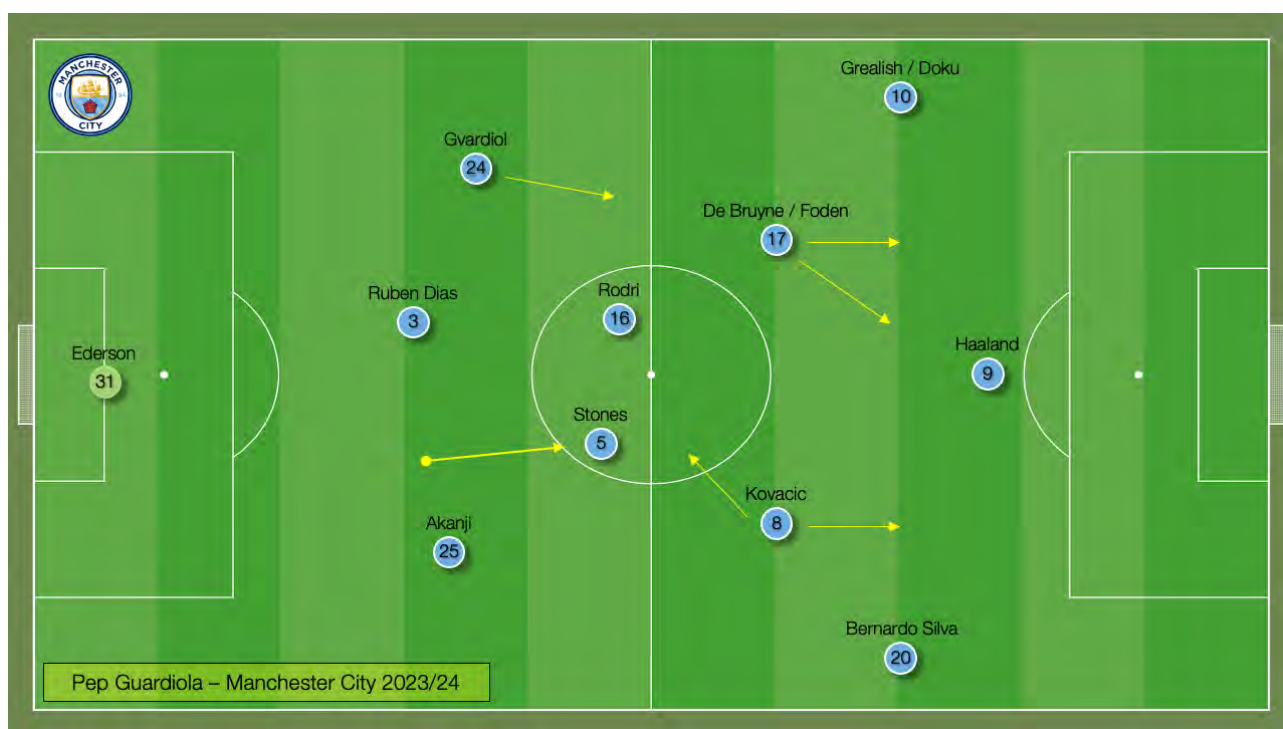



Figure 87 – Guardiola's Manchester City of 2024

The rule of the 3 P's: **Play**, **Possession**, and **Position**  has made Guardiola a hallmark of his positional play, characterized by the idea of controlling the ball, which is essentially a tool and not the goal itself: the aim is to control the ball because it allows

for **organizing the team, disorganizing the opponent**, and forcing them to **adhere to the game plan** without being able to implement their own strategy.

With Guardiola, as well as his predecessors, formations become “phone numbers”, serving only to snapshot a static moment within a flow; the various phases (offensive, defensive, and the two transitions) become parts of a single continuous moment, blending and intertwining with one another.

Pep Guardiola has brought into **modern football** an idea of the game already proposed by Michels and Crujff. Many other coaches are advancing **positional football**, among them two who have certainly drawn inspiration from the Spanish coach: **Luis Enrique**, coach of Paris Saint-Germain and formerly of Barcelona and Spain, his former assistant Mikel **Arteta**, who has contested the last two Premier League titles with Arsenal against Manchester City, and the Italian Roberto **De Zerbi**.

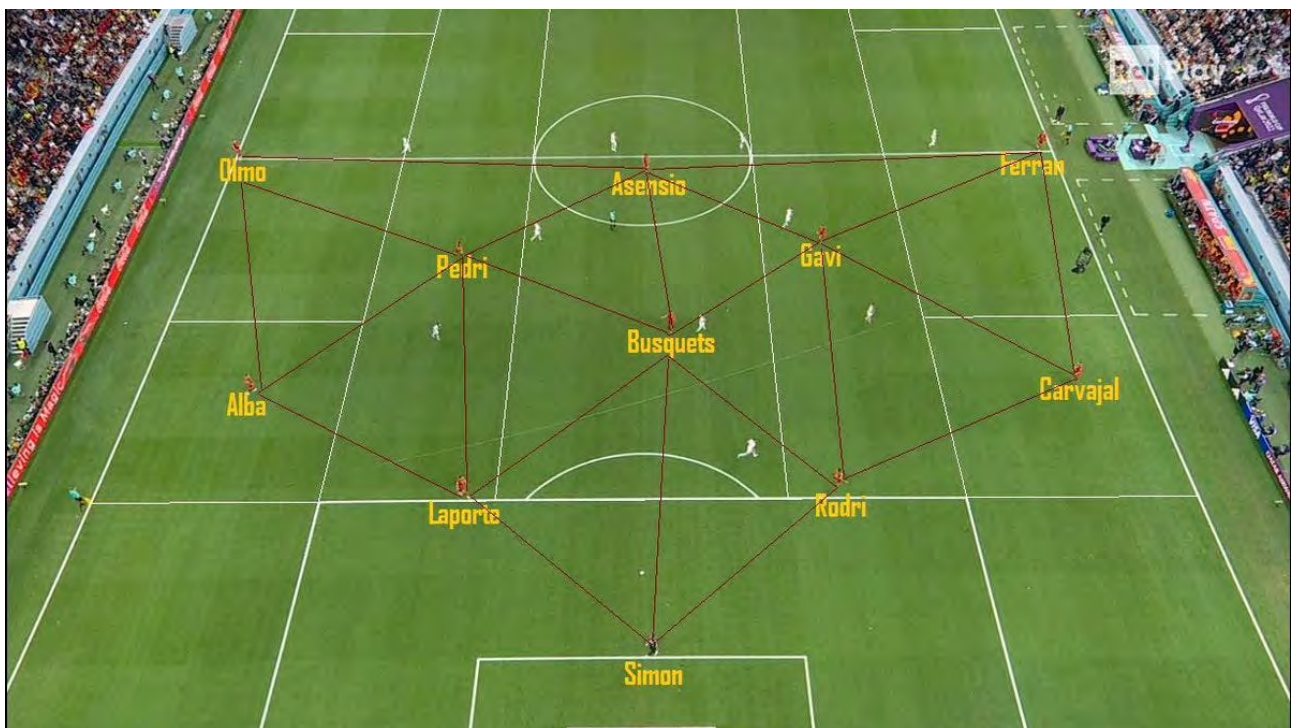


Figure 88 – Luis Enrique's *Juego de Posición* in the Spanish national team in the last World Cup in Qatar. Source Clarissa Barcala³¹

³¹ Clarissa Barcala – Not to say I didn't speak of the flowers: space, time, positionism and relationism – www.medium.com/@clarissabarcala/not-to-say-i-didnt-speak-of-the-flowers-space-time-positionism-and-relationism-eea83bf44540

One of the revelations of the 2022/23 Premier League season was Brighton under De Zerbi and his unique approach to **build up**. The Italian coach employs a very clear structure consisting of 7 build-up players (the goalkeeper, four defenders, and two midfielders), who are positioned very close to each other. They use their proximity to play short and quick passes to draw the opponent's pressure into specific areas, creating space ahead for the 4 offensive players, allowing them to attack in **large spaces** rather than small ones.

It will be interesting to see who Guardiola will pass the baton of positional football to in the coming years.

CHAPTER 3 – RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the concept of space, which forms the basis of positional play analyzed in previous chapters, another fundamental aspect in team sports and football is **relationships, connections, and associations** between players.

The etymology of the word “**relationship**” can be traced back to the latin *relatio*, derived from *relatus*, the past participle of *referre*, which means to refer, report, **establish a bond**, relationship, or connection. Depending on the context in which it is used, the term "relationship" takes on different nuances: in sociology, social relationships refer to the **processes of communication** and **sharing** within and between social groups.

Football is defined as a **complex sport** because it consists of tactical, technical, physical, and psychological components; these elements constitute a "whole." Such elements should be understood as a significant and inseparable unit. A complex system is one composed of a **multitude of elements** that can interact with one another. The more elements present, the **more relationships** will occur, and the greater the complexity of such systems.

The complexity of the game is constituted not only by a large number of components but, above all, by their relationships.

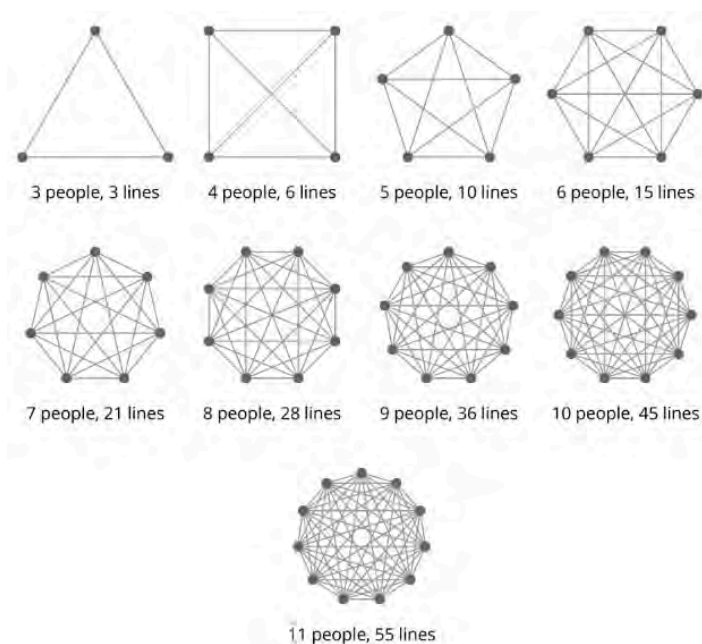


Figure 89 – Relational lines between different groups of people

The term “**complex**” derives from the latin *cum plexum*, meaning “with knots” or “intertwined”, and it is also associated with the verb *complector*, which has multiple inclusive meanings: to embrace, surround, wrap, and bind. This concept is quite different from the common meaning attributed to it. “Complex” is often opposed to “simple”, which functions as a synonym for “complicated”, with the Latin etymology being *cum plicum*, meaning “with folds”. Something complicated requires an “explanation” or decomposition to be understood. In contrast, something complex is made up of **various elements intertwined through relationships**. A complex system is a dynamic system that interacts with its environment, of which it is an integral part, adapting and changing through experience.

To illustrate the importance of **relationships in sports**, I like to start with the **Triple Post Offense** (or **Triangle Offense**) in basketball. The “developer” of the “triangle offense” was the legendary Morice Frederick **Winter**, known to all as Tex, the only assistant coach enshrined in the prestigious Basketball Hall of Fame (one of the highest honors in international basketball). Winter's name is eternally linked to what became the reference offensive model for the NBA champion Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers.

The “**triangle offense**” system, simplified, is an arrangement of **three players** on the strong side that delineate an imaginary triangle: one is positioned almost under the basket (in the low post), another in the corner of the court (as a forward), and one on the three-point line (as a guard). The other two players are spaced out on the weak side, forming additional triangles with the player in the forward position and the low post, which are the action's critical points that dictate the timing of the offense. From this initial setup, players must move the ball, cut, and screen to switch sides and form a new triangle on the strong side.

The idea is to continuously pass the ball to move the defense and exploit its weaknesses and errors while keeping on forming triangles if the ball ends up on the opposite side of the court, occupied by the two players excluded from the first triangle³².

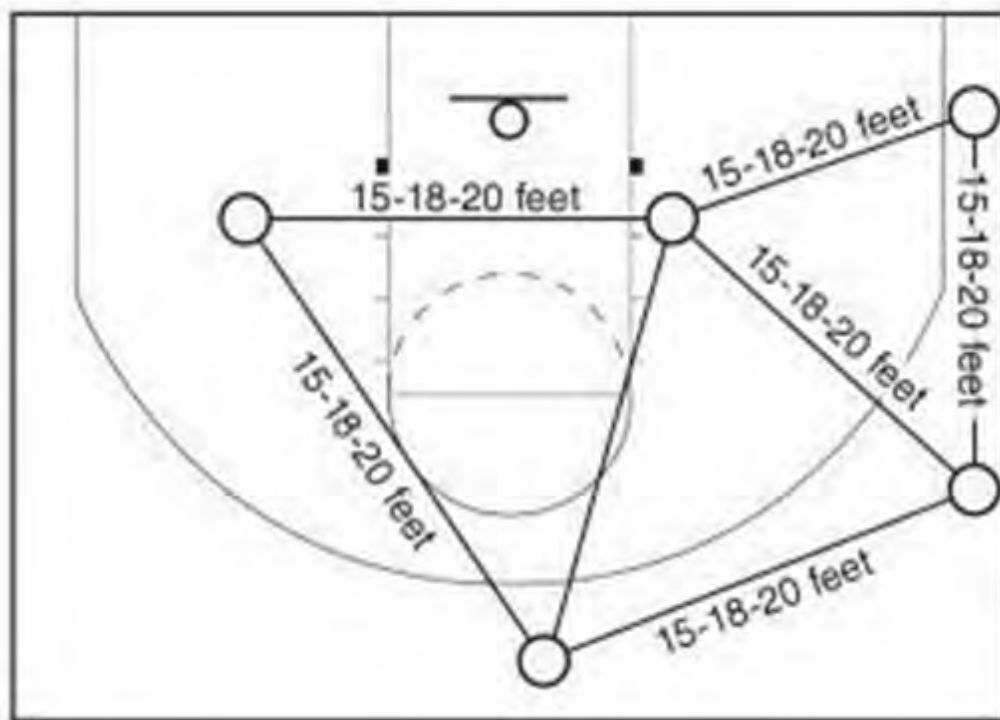


Figure 90 – The initial deployment of the Triple Post Offense with the three triangles forming, two on the strong side and 1 on the weak side

The challenging part of Winter's system lies in **reading the game**: each player must be adept at understanding how the defense is moving and respond by making the right choice quickly. It's important to clarify that this is not just a scheme but rather an **elaborate offensive system**—a philosophy of play that emphasizes **ball movement** and **teamwork**. Many have recalled Michael Jordan's definition of it as the “*equal opportunity offense*”, because all five players involved have the ability to be dangerous and find a good shot if they move harmoniously.

Phil Jackson, one of the greatest coaches in NBA history with eleven titles won (six with the Chicago Bulls, five with the Los Angeles Lakers), is the foremost expert on the “triangle offense” after Winter.

³² Il “triangolo offensivo”, un pezzo di storia della NBA che hanno capito in pochi – www.ilpost.it/2018/10/12/triangolo-offensivo-tex-winter-morto-basket-nba

Beyond the winning strategy, the “triangle offense” is more of a “philosophy” on which Jackson **aimed to build his team**: to involve all players simultaneously, develop the team's problem-solving ability, and assign each player a crucial role in the action. Playing the “triangle offense” is a **continuous improvisation**, much like jazz musicians who must listen to what others are playing to participate in the jam session and perform the same melody. In the triangle, there are no fixed roles; rather, there is the concept of the universal player who can pass, shoot, penetrate, and play facing or with their back to the basket³³.

Despite the geometric aspect of the triangle, which is very similar to positional play in football, the “triangle offense” creates technical-tactical **connections** and **relationships** between players, typical of associative-relational football.

This involvement of everyone, creating relationships and associations between players, is at the heart of the football philosophy

that has been developing in Brazil in recent years. It introduces a new idea of always dominating through ball possession while placing greater importance on **technique** and **dynamism** rather than rigid tactics and defined spaces. Within this new concept, players are at the center of the

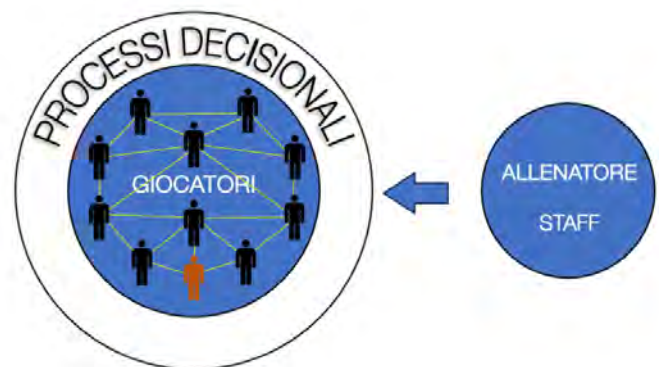



Figure 91 – In relational football the players are at the center of the game

decision-making processes. Carlo **Ancelotti**, the coach of Real Madrid, stated in a recent press conference, “*My philosophy is that the style of play should be adapted to the players' characteristics. I don't want my team to have a single style of play*”. 

³³ David Breschi – L'eredità dell'Attacco Triangolo nella storia del basket – www.ultimouomo.com/nba-attacco-triangolo-eredita-storia-basket-text-winter



Figure 92 – Image linked to relational football on the theme of freedom, improvisation and autonomy of the players

In the next chapter, I will analyze this approach known as associative-relational fluid football.

CHAPTER 4 – ASSOCIATIVE-RELATIONAL FLUID FOOTBALL

As we have seen, in the 1960s, two great minds at Ajax created a style of play that would dominate modern football. I discussed in previous chapters Rinus Michels and Johan Crujff, who brought about total football. Several additions have been made by Arrigo Sacchi and Valerij Lobanovskiy, but the key figure in the final refinement of this philosophy has been Pep Guardiola. Offensive strategies are often a response to the defensive behaviors that opponents exhibit. In fact, recently, coaches have developed tactics for out-of-possession play to confront and defend against this positional game. Many teams in recent years have followed the trend of defending while prioritizing the man-marking principle, increasingly focusing on man-to-man marking rather than space defense.

Recently, in Brazil, a small tactical revolution led by Fluminense's coach Fernando Diniz is gaining more traction: a new tactical approach used by some South American teams.

“Just when you think you know something, you need to look at it from another perspective”

L'attimo fuggente, 1989

A cultural revolt by Brazilians against European football colonialism has found concrete experimentation on the field in the search for an escape route, a claim to freedom, and is producing a **new interpretative trend** in modern football, which perhaps is nothing more than the rediscovery of a dormant past: **associative, relational football** (a term coined by Jamie Hamilton³⁴) or as it is called in Brazil, *jogo funcional* (functional play).

³⁴ Jamie Hamilton – What is relationism? – www.medium.com/@stirlingj1982/what-is-relationism-c98d6233d9c2

Associative-relational fluid football is a possible response aimed at increasingly disorganizing man-marking by fostering more relationships, collaborations, and connections among players in the ball area, in a game that is becoming more **dynamic** and oriented toward off-the-ball movement.

Associative-relational football refers to a system of play that emphasizes the rapid connection among multiple players of a team through ball possession, without focusing on fixed space occupation and positions, in order to create situations of numerical superiority in every area of the field. It is a style capable of highlighting the qualities, characteristics, and emotional moments of the players, particularly the more technical ones.

Relational play does not simply mean that players are close to each other, nor can it be reduced to mere friendship among them. Relational players move together while communicating through **technical signals**.

The fundamental difference between positional football and **appositional** football lies in understanding the focus of the two footballing philosophies: in the first, the focus is on space, with the aim of occupying a specific position to allow the freest player to receive the ball; in the second, the focus is on the **ball**, the center of the game and the thought of every single player. Paraphrasing **Juan Manuel Lillo**, in positional football, it is the ball that moves to the position, never the other way around, where by position we mean the figure of the player in a predefined space.

Fluid-associative football tries to do the exact opposite: it is the player, or rather, **the players who move toward the ball**.

Instead of having a **clear, geometric, and defined structure**, the players position themselves according to **fluid and unpredictable structures**, and instead of attacking spaces, they play by creating **qualitative density**, progressing with the ball through short passes.

In these claustrophobic situations, **dribbling**, the epitome of individual play, becomes a necessary and desired key compared to a teammate's off-the-ball movement to receive

between the lines. But most importantly, the element that gives its name to this school is the concept of "relationship" between players—the ability to **interact automatically among themselves** without having a preordained play in mind, inventing it with a glance, a word, or a gesture that arises and fades in an instant.

“When you can't dribble because you lack talent, you try to dribble through associative play.”

Marcelo Bielsa

In this chapter, we will analyze the characteristics and principles of play of coaches who implement this football philosophy, starting with **Fernando Diniz** of Fluminense, moving on to **Henrik Rydström** of Malmö and **Lionel Scaloni** with the current world champions Argentina.

FERNANDO DINIZ – FLUMINENSE

“The human relationships that are established in a team are much ahead of the tactical part. People are the heart of the game, not tactics”

Fernando Diniz

One of the most enjoyable and distinctive teams to watch play, which has been applying the philosophy of **associative-relational fluid football**, is undoubtedly Fluminense, a Serie A team from Rio de Janeiro, coached by **Fernando Diniz** from 2022 until June 2024. The Brazilian coach is currently one of the leading figures in **relational play**, also referred to as *juego de movilidad* (game of mobility). The football field, divided into precise zones, and the rational occupation of predetermined positions are replaced by **continuous mobility**, leading to the creation of ongoing proximity systems among players, thereby fostering associations and relationships between them. The area to occupy is the zone where the **ball** is located. That is where as many players as possible need to be present.

Diniz, a former Brazilian player born in 1974 (he also played *futsal*), and a midfielder by trade, was appointed interim head coach of the Brazilian national team in July 2023 (holding dual roles with Brazil and Fluminense). However, after just six matches with the national team and a sixth-place finish in the group for World Cup 2026 qualification (with 2 wins, 1 draw, and 3 losses), he was sacked.

After coaching in the lower leagues of Brazilian football, he took charge of Athletico Paranaense in Serie A in January 2018, and subsequently managed other prominent Brazilian clubs such as São Paulo, Santos, and Vasco da Gama.

He has been in charge of Fluminense since April 2022, winning the **Campeonato Carioca** (the state championship of Rio de Janeiro and one of the most prestigious competitions in Brazilian football). In the most recent season, he finished seventh in the Brazilian Serie A with 56 points, while the previous year, the club placed third with 70 points, behind Palmeiras and Internacional.

In November 2023, Diniz achieved a remarkable feat by winning the club's first **Copa Libertadores** against Boca Juniors, securing a 2-1 victory in extra time.

Diniz is now undoubtedly one of the **most studied coaches**, but his coaching career has not always been filled with remarkable results.

Just over a year ago, his coaching trajectory seemed to be on the decline. After playing for prestigious clubs like Palmeiras, Corinthians, Fluminense, Flamengo, Cruzeiro, and Santos, he regained national attention during the 2017 Campeonato Paulista by leading the modest **Grêmio Osasco Audax** to the final, which they lost to Santos.

In the following four years, marked by ups and downs, he amassed five dismissals: **Athletico Paranaense**, **Fluminense**, **São Paulo**, **Santos**, and **Vasco da Gama**. In 2020, he came close to winning the championship with São Paulo, but the team squandered a significant lead at the end of the season, winning only two of their last eleven matches.

Carriera da allenatore		
2009-2010	 Votoraty	
2011	 Paulista	
2011	 Botafogo-SP	
2012	 Atlético Sorocaba	
2013-2014	 Audax	
2014	 Guaratinguetá	
2015	 Audax	
2015	 Paraná	
2016	 Audax	
2016	 Oeste	
2017	 Audax	
2018	 Atlético Paranaense	
2019	 Fluminense	
2019-2021	 San Paolo	
2021	 Santos	
2021	 Vasco da Gama	
2022-2024	 Fluminense	
2023-2024	 Brasile	Interim

Figure 93 – The career of Fernando Diniz

At Santos, struggling with financial difficulties and a very young squad, he lasted just over three months. When he signed with Vasco just nine days after his dismissal, many remarked that he should have taken some time to rest and reflect on his recent experiences. A prestigious club that was mid-table in Serie B, facing enormous pressure from fans and management for immediate promotion, did not seem like the best choice for a fresh start. Indeed, that experience lasted only twelve matches. It is also worth noting that according to a CIES report, the Brazilian league is among the worst in the world for the average tenure of coaches – 120 days in the *brasileirão*, which is half that of Italy's Serie A. At this point, Diniz appeared to have objectively lost his way³⁵.

On April 30, 2022, unexpectedly, **Fluminense** decided to bring him back to replace Abel Braga, who resigned after the elimination from the Libertadores playoffs. In the very club where he had experienced the brightest moments of his playing career, Diniz managed to permanently change his reputation: he won the **Campeonato Carioca**, the first title of his career, gaining some popularity even beyond Brazil's borders as a flag-bearer of “functional play”.

In South America, and particularly in Brazil, there is a widespread thought viewing the spread of **positional play** as yet another expression of **cultural colonialism by Europe**. In the name of a supposed rational superiority, this style of play would stifle the **genius** and **creativity** of players, suppressing their talent to favour strict and invasive instructions regarding ideal zones to receive the ball, posture, timing, and methods of ball release, and so on. Moreover, the less favorable results of the previous head coach of the Brazilian national team, **Tite**, who leaned toward positional football, have intensified this controversy. The most frequently mentioned criticism of the Brazilian coach is his overly European approach, which stifles the **instinctive** and **unexpected solutions** of talents like Neymar, Vinícius, or Rodrygo.

³⁵ Matthias Galbiati – Il Fluminense di Fernando Diniz è una festa – www.sportellate.it/2023/05/03/fluminense-fernando-diniz-analisi-brasile



Figure 94 – On the left, Tite's positional Brazil 3-2-5 and on the right, Diniz's relational Brazil

This criticism has been further emphasized by the fact that, as Antonio Gagliardi writes in an article on relational football³⁶, the last World Cup in Qatar was won by arch-rivals Argentina under Scaloni, returning to play *“nuestra”*: the highly individualistic Argentine style idealized by Menotti in the 1970s. *“The center is the ball. They move in relation to the ball”*.

It's reminiscent of the 1982 World Cup when the pure expression of *futebol-arte* from Brazil, perhaps the strongest team of all time, faced off against the victorious *futebol-força* of Italy and the opportunism of Paolo Rossi.

As Jonathan Wilson recounts in his book *Football Revolutions*: *“...that was the day a certain naivety in football died: it was the day after which you could no longer simply choose the best players and let them flourish; it was the day the system won”*.

At that time, Diniz was eight years old, and the national team of **Telê Santana** profoundly shaped his football imagination: *“If we hadn't been such an impatient people, maintaining the foundations of that team that had enchanted the world, we could have easily won the cup in 1986”*.

“Our story is not about space, but about the player”

Gabriel Dudziak, brasilian football commentator

³⁶ www.ultimouomo.com/gioco-di-posizione-finita-era-funzioni-relazioni-guardiola

In this context, not only football principles are at play, but also philosophies and life perspectives. Diniz's philosophy emphasizes the importance of **how results are achieved** rather than the results themselves. In an interview with ESPN, Diniz stated, *"Football is this way because the world is this way; the world of capital tells you that if you have money, you're good; if you win, you're good, no matter how"*³⁷.

Diniz explained that his preference for granting more **freedom** to his players ultimately stems from his negative experiences as a player, where he felt he was "not seen as a person," but rather as someone who merely needed to produce within the system. This fundamental shift in perspective explains the Brazilian coach's rejection of treating players as **cogs** in a machine. Diniz has also added that, having struggled significantly with psychological pressure during his playing days, for him the primary task of a coach is to ensure that players feel **free to express** themselves and are **respected** for who they are, regardless of results. After retiring from playing, he earned a **degree in psychology** with a thesis focused on the importance of the coach's role in football.

Below is an excerpt from his thesis: *"For the coach, it is essential to: know people and their human nature; establish **interpersonal relationships** with good communication; provide command; motivate; and understand athletes and their needs"*.

The cultivation of relationships with and among players is fundamental to Diniz's idea of football. **Jamie Hamilton**, a Scottish coach and blogger who has helped raise awareness of the Brazilian coach globally, frames the issue in philosophical terms: on one side, there is football that follows the logics of **positionism**; on the other, one based on **relationalism**³⁸.

While **positionism** purists view **space** as a static entity to be rationally occupied so that the ball travels along the most efficient paths, **relationalism** empowers individual players, relying on their ability to interpret situations to generate unpredictable combinations and **dynamically occupy space**. The underlying idea is that, given the complexity of the variables at play, in recent years, the belief among coaches that they

³⁷ ESPN Brasil – www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8naZtslvd0

³⁸ Matthias Galbiati – Il Fluminense di Fernando Diniz è una festa – www.sportellate.it/2023/05/03/fluminense-fernando-diniz-analisi-brasile

were capable of eliminating chaos from a football match and freeing players from uncertainty has gone too far. According to relationalism, it is more useful to train players to find their own way out using their cognitive faculties.

The CBF, in an academic study from 2021, defined the style of play practiced by Diniz as “*jogo de mobilidade*”, or mobility play. However, despite the fascinating idea of returning to the ever-dreamed-of and never-documented football of **Telê Santana** or **Zagallo** (historic coaches of the Seleção), there is still a lack of interest in theorizing and teaching this type of football at the federal training centers. Recently, Diniz spoke on TV in Brazil: “*The way I see it now is almost a-positional. The players migrate from their positions. It’s a freer game; players come closer together in the same area of the field, and in these areas, they interchange positions. I believe this has a lot to do with our (Brazilian) culture*”.

Diniz has defined his style as “**anti-positional**” (or a-positional), and in some respects, what happens on the field is indeed the antithesis of Guardiola's rational space occupation. While Thierry Henry recounts how Guardiola substituted him for consistently coming inside from the left flank instead of staying wider to create space for his teammates, Fluminense’s left winger often finds himself completely on the right flank, coexisting with the right winger in the same area of space.

At this point, it may sound paradoxical that for years Diniz has been labeled the “**Brazilian Guardiola**”. When interviewed on the topic, he clarified the misunderstanding by noting that both teams prioritize ball possession. “*But (the analogy) ends there; his type of ball possession is almost the opposite of mine because, in positional play, players maintain their positions, and it is the ball that goes to them*”³⁹. Diniz then acknowledged that Guardiola himself has changed over time, as the Manchester City of 2022 has gained fluidity compared to 2018, but the dichotomy with Guardiola remains an interesting starting point for analyzing Fluminense's key principles.

³⁹ Ge – www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAwlt_jLrIU

Before delving into Diniz's ideas and examining in detail behaviors with and without the ball, it is very helpful to look at some statistical data from the 2022/23 season.

Fluminense ranks first in **ball possession** with **59.7%** and was also first last season with 60%. Related to possession is the average **number of passes**, which stands at **463** over 90 minutes, second only to Flamengo, with an accuracy of **88%**, the highest in the league. Additionally, Diniz's team leads in



Figure 95 – Average passage distance in metres. Fluminense first with 14,2

both the number of **short passes** **271** and the number of **passes per minute of ball possession**, averaging **15,4**. They also have the highest **average passing distance** in meters at **14,2**. Conversely, they are **last** this season (30,29) and last season (28,87) for the number of **long throws**. In terms of **offensive production**, they finished last season second with 67,30 xG (Expected Goals) and currently rank second again this season with 32,12 xG, behind Flamengo. They are first in 1vs1 situations and **dribbling**, averaging 31,25 per match. Regarding pressing indicators, they are second for **PPDA** (Passes Allowed Per Defensive Action) behind Red Bull Bragantino, with **7,21** passes allowed per possession. These metrics essentially demonstrate the principle of maintaining a high volume of passes while controlling the level of “risk”.

After reviewing these statistics, it becomes easier to analyze Fluminense, as it already emerges that Diniz's team is one that always seeks to **build from the back**, playing out from the back while maintaining **possession** to dominate the game. They make very few long throws, always favoring **short, quick**, and ground-based play.

While positional play and associative-fluid football share similar objectives, the means to achieve them are entirely different. The ultimate goal remains the same: whether it's finding the free player in the space between two defenders or creating space for a teammate through third-man combinations.

Positional play utilizes a system to provide players with these situations through spatial occupation on the field (“players stay in their positions; the ball comes to them”), whereas Diniz's playing model **emphasizes players** identifying and creating opportunities (“players go to the ball”).

“Take risks even if you lose the ball, be brave, do something different. Learning to live with risk and not fear it prepares you for great moments”

Fernando Diniz⁴⁰

is not possible to speak of a fixed **system of play** used by Fluminense, but if we understand it as a static snapshot at kick-off, we can refer to a **4-2-3-1** formation. However, this structure is never rigid; a symbol of this dynamism is **Ganso**, who is given the freedom by Diniz to support his teammates in any phase of the game. The **particular deconstruction** by the Brazilian coach occurs specifically when his team has the ball.



Figure 96 – Fernando Diniz's Fluminense of 2023

From the setup of the **goal kick**, the fundamental principle of relational play is immediately evident: **continuous rotations** and **dynamism** even in a stationary ball situation. With the ball at the goalkeeper's feet, who is always active in building from

⁴⁰ Roberto Parrottino – Fernando Diniz, l'allenatore che sceglie l'arte al Fluminense e si candida alla guida del Brasile – www.tiempoar.com.ar/deportes/diniz-fluminense-brasil

the back, players engage in a continuous rotation or interchange, almost chaotic, where roles become less important.



Figure 97 – On a goal kick the fluid movement of the players towards the ball begins

In fact, in the following images, we see in the first one the **beginning of the rotation** and, in the second one, the end of the rotation when the goalkeeper decides to play the ball.



Figure 98 – Fluminense 2022/23. Rotation on goal kick 1



Figure 99 – Fluminense 2022/23. Rotation on goal kick 2

In the last image, we see that next to the goalkeeper is the right winger and a central midfielder, with a central defender and a left-back positioned much higher than the midfielders.

Diniz, who has a playing background in Futsal, often employs this “rotation” during goal kicks, as noted by **Massimiliano Bellarte**, former coach of the Italian national Futsal team, in a Facebook post⁴¹. This movement is very common on *futsal* courts and is directly borrowed from there. It also resembles the rotations we can see on a basketball court.



Figure 100 – Italy Futsal rotation on goal kick. Image taken from Massimiliano Bellarte

⁴¹ Massimiliano Bellarte – [www.fb.watch/tqIzHFvjo-](https://www.facebook.com/watch/tqIzHFvjo-)

Rotations do not have to be perfectly symmetrical. In the process of rotating, Fluminense can slightly adjust its structure, for example, by moving an additional player into a particular area, thereby creating a numerical **overload** to take advantage of.



Figure 101 – Rotation on a goal kick that creates an overload on one side

Previously stated, the objective of this type of goal kick is the same as that of positional football: **to draw the opposing team's pressure** close to their own goal to uncover spaces going forward, but this method differs. Diniz prefers to attract pressure through short combinations and dribbling in a more **fluid** manner. Players are **free** to position themselves around the ball as they see fit, without rigid positional “rules”, thus creating a large number of players in proximity to the ball carrier.

However, the important aspect is not simply that players rotate positions, as this might not resolve any of the dynamic problems posed by pressure. An opposing countermeasure to this rotation could be to adapt to play more zonally and wait for the “merry-go-round” to stop spinning before pressing their new opponent in the same area. The advantage Fluminense gains, however, is not when the players arrive at their new positions, but rather during the **intermediate moments**. As players move and find themselves “in between” opposing players, a small moment is created where they can be free from a defender. This allows Fluminense to disrupt both zonal and man-marking pressing schemes, while also injecting **confusion into the opponents** with their new movements, often enabling them to find a free player to progress further.

The goal kick often begins with a **feint** rather than a direct pass. Naturally, to comply with the rules of the game, the goalkeeper must touch the ball forward by a few centimeters to initiate play, but there is always a player right next to him to **dribble** or **feint** immediately with the ball. More commonly, it is the midfielder André, but other midfielders are also free to drop back. This allows the first play to bypass the first line of opposing pressure, making it nearly impossible to continue the pressing action. Naturally, a player dribbling just a few meters from their own goal is one of the biggest possible press **provocations** and can be a risk.



Figure 102 – The midfielder André begins dribbling in the penalty area



Figure 103 – The midfielder André dribbles in the penalty area

In build-up phase, the **goalkeeper** also comes into play. His involvement is crucial as they constantly seek to create a **numerical superiority** in this phase. The double pivot is also important, as their support on both sides will create advantages in specific areas. Another idea in Diniz's build-up is to use the **full-backs as bait**. To provoke opposing pressure, they look to play on the low flanks, inviting classic pressing from the opponent, who is inclined to attack because the opposing full-back receives the ball in a disadvantaged position (due to pressure along the goal line).

Thanks to the **technical** nature of their full-backs and the fact that numerous players approach the ball carrier to provide support, Fluminense often manage to break free with quick combinations and dribbles. This is a typically Brazilian solution perfectly aligned with Diniz's philosophy based on **creativity** and **freedom of expression**, overcoming the opponent with skill as if they were playing on the beach of Copacabana rather than in a competitive football match.

The first and perhaps most important concept in the build-up is **proximity**. Players consistently seek to create fluid and dynamic diamonds in tight spaces. While positional play is based on static triangles or diamonds and the use of the third man, playing without a predefined structure means that **relationships** and **connections** constantly appear and disappear, making them more spontaneous and unpredictable. The battle is not for space but rather to **create optimal passing options** considering the player's body position, defensive organization, and the positioning of teammates.

For example, in the specific area of the field below, Fluminense create a 5v2 scenario by bringing the goalkeeper and both defensive midfielders closer together.

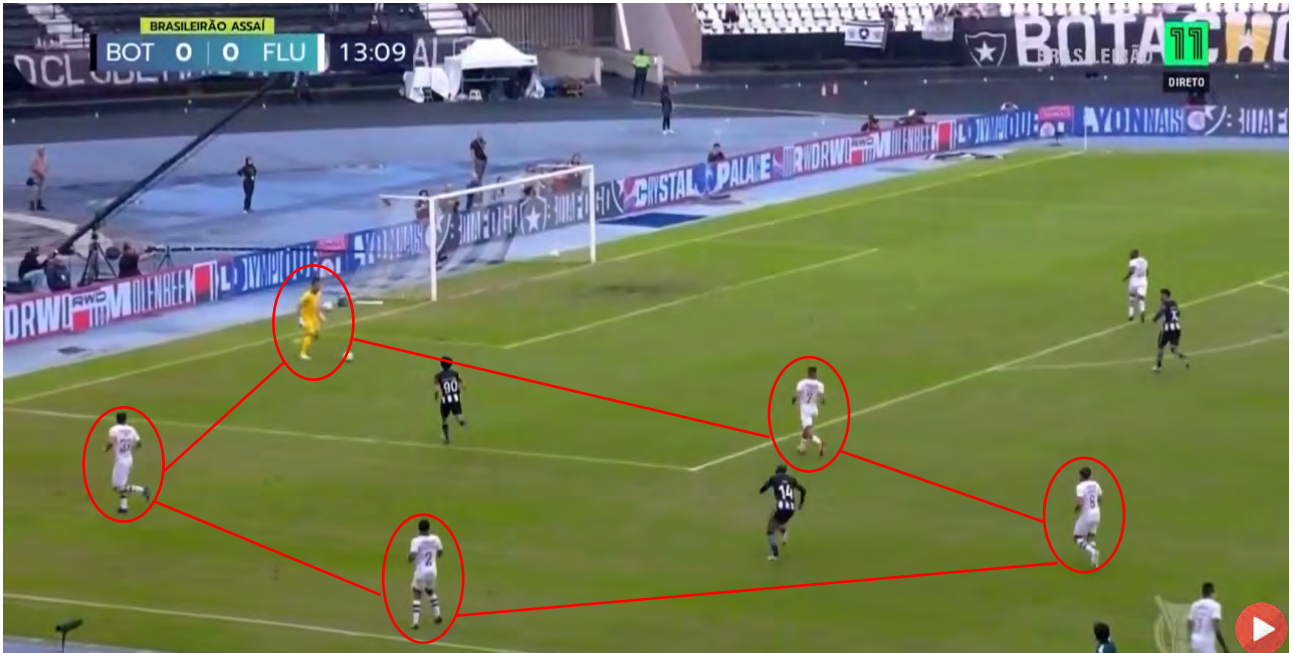


Figure 104 – Density of players on the ball side and a 5v2 is created with also the use of the goalkeeper

In the next image, it can be observed that as many as **eight players** are positioned on the right side of the field in the ball area. Diniz prefers his teams to build possession through a **controlled approach**. Essentially, this means collectively building from the back with **short passes**, advancing through areas with **absolute ball control**. Consequently, a significant part of their work with the ball involves **progressing** from the first third to the final third of the field in order to create scoring opportunities.

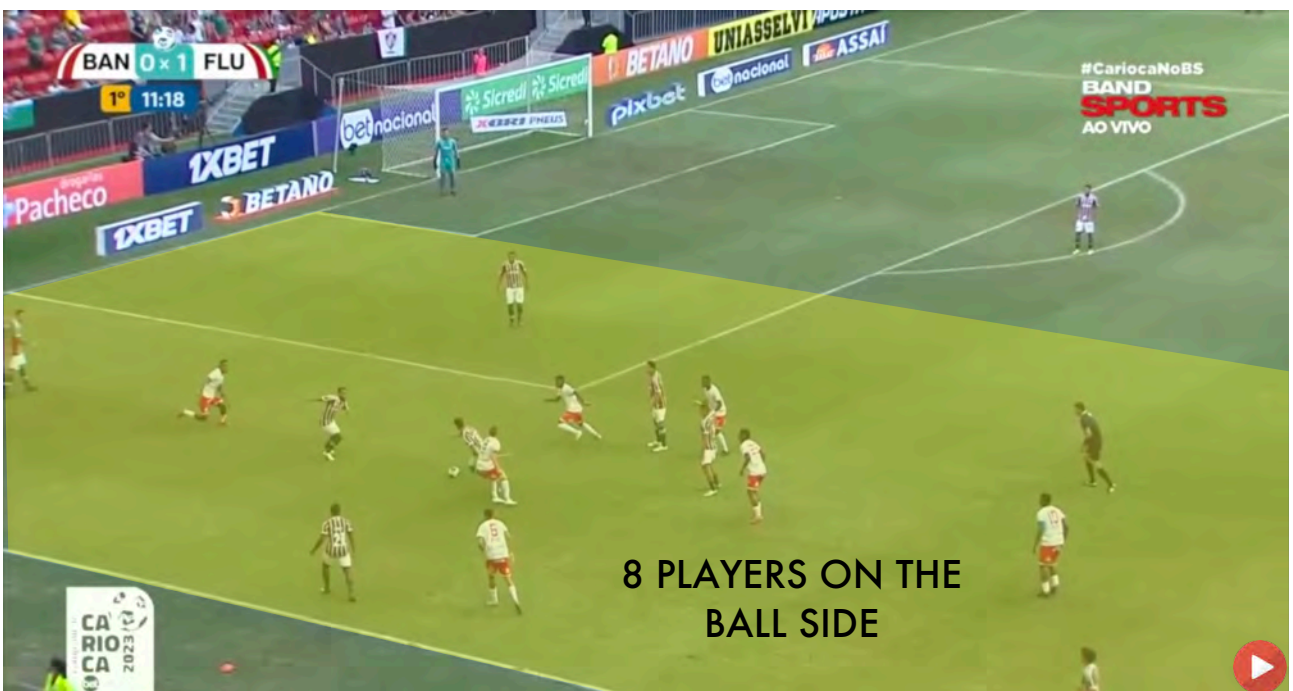


Figure 105 – Density of players on the ball side with as many as 8 players close together

Diniz places greater importance on having clearer **numerical overloads** to create safer passing options against high pressure. Naturally, this approach sacrifices (or some might say “wastes”) players who could provide width or depth away from the ball to block opponents, but this is less significant in Fluminense's playing model, as Diniz prioritizes the freedom of players to position themselves around the ball to create short passing options. The passing lines, **short** and **clean**, must safeguard the ball at all costs.

Diniz's idea in build-up, even with the ball in midfield, is to bring as many players as possible close to the ball. As seen in the image below, the priority is to occupy the central zone, highlighted in yellow, with as many solutions as possible, while **width**, in the red zone, **remains unoccupied**. Subsequently, the development will lead to choosing and identifying the strong side and where to bring density back into play.

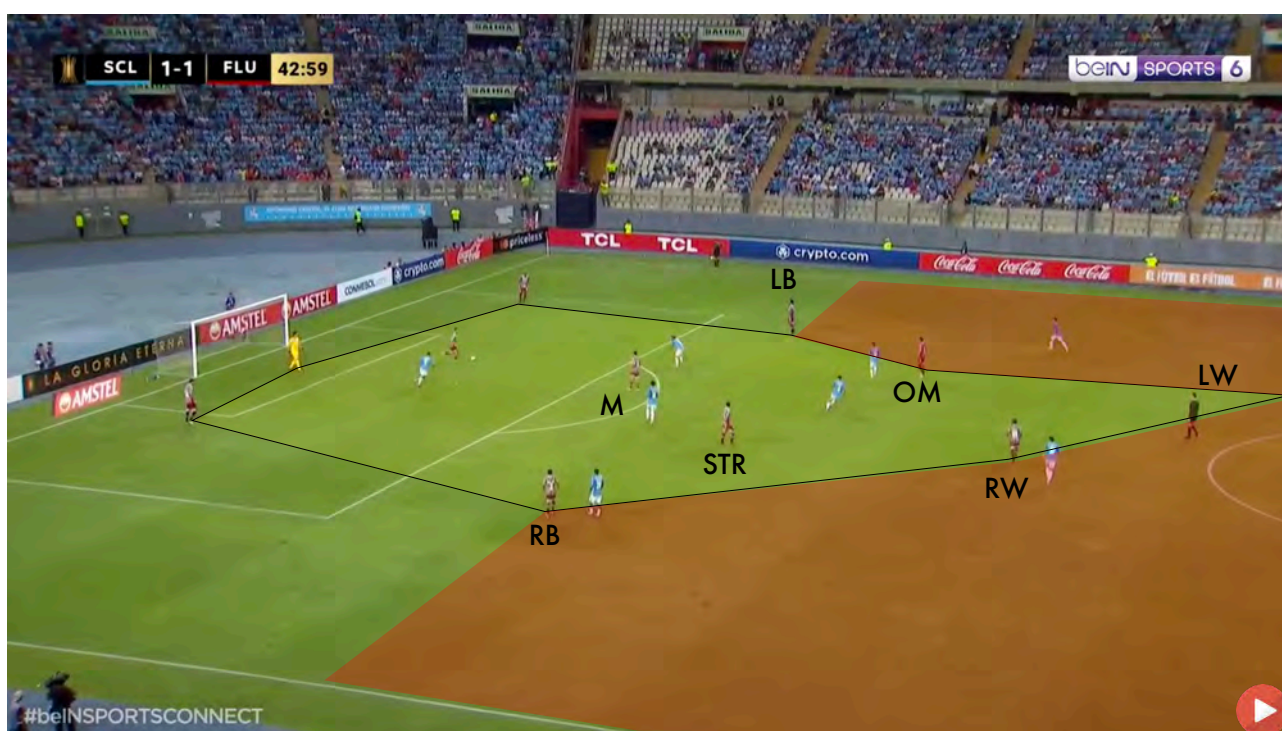


Figure 106 – Even with the central ball, density of the ball area, yellow zone, and width, red zone, unoccupied

Despite the freedom given to his players, the structure is not entirely random, and the players themselves must organize in such a way as to **effectively combine** and **progress the play**. At an individual level, players are always looking to find space behind two opponents, thus creating a **passing angle**. With multiple teammates moving in

support simultaneously, the idea is to create numerous passing options in all directions for the ball carrier.

Players are often **staggered diagonally** to create indecision both vertically and laterally, using their positioning to threaten multiple lines of opposing pressure.



Figure 107 – Ball area density and diagonal positioning of players to help the ball carrier

Often, when defensive support is sought after, Diniz's request is **to continue on the strong side** where there is **density of players**, in accordance with the concept of playing safely with short passes. This tactical concept is called **yo-yo** (named by tactical analyst Gorka Melchor). During the **tilting**, it is sometimes necessary to play towards the center of the field, away from the crowded ball zone. When the supporting player receives the ball, instead of opening their body to find a pass to the opposite side, they return to the **original tilting side**.

Once they return to the defensive support, the switch play solution is never available, as the opposite width is never occupied (the opposite winger plays, as mentioned, inside near the ball). The opposite full-back (shown in the image below) is never a viable option and is never in a disengaged position away from their opponent (in positional football, they are asked to “open up”, and the ball carrier is expected to switch play to

avoid intensifying pressure in the ball zone). Instead, they remain **tight** and in a **closed posture** (performing the defensive diagonal). It's almost as if they transform an 11vs11 into a **7vs7** on a separate field. The goal is not to exploit open spaces but to continue play in the **congested** and player-dense **area**.

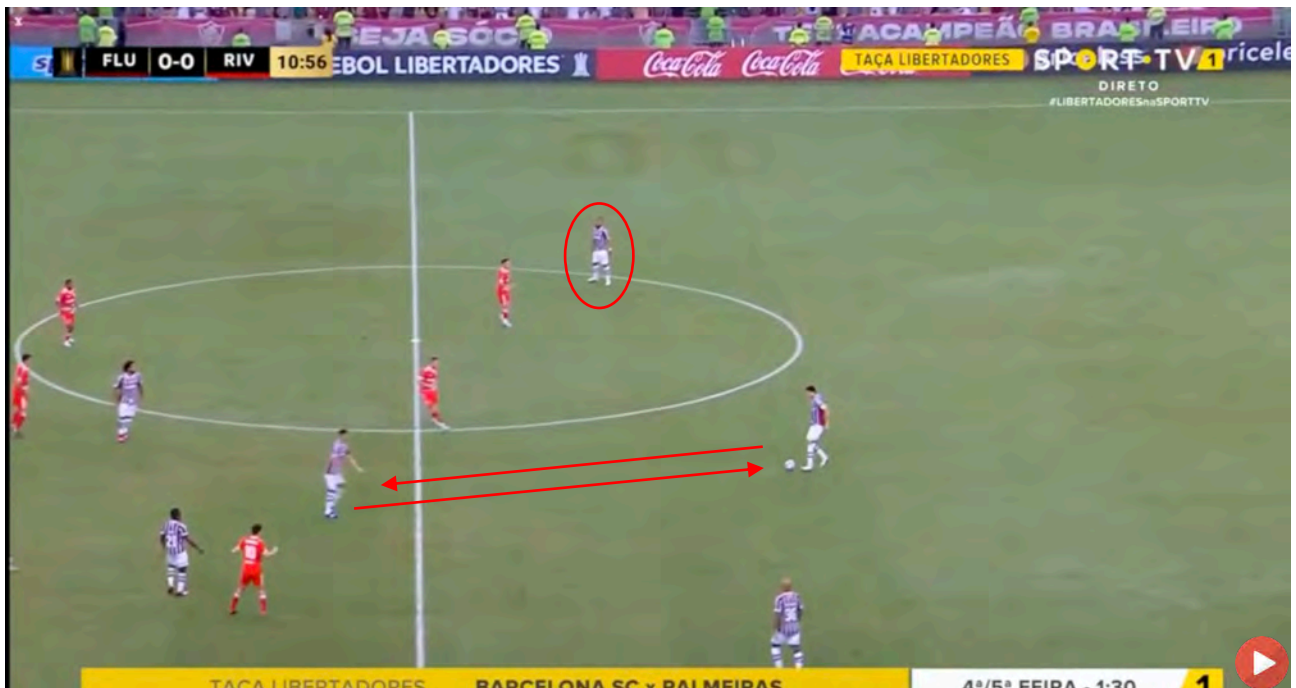


Figure 108 – The ball is played back to the support when the opposite full-back is not a solution

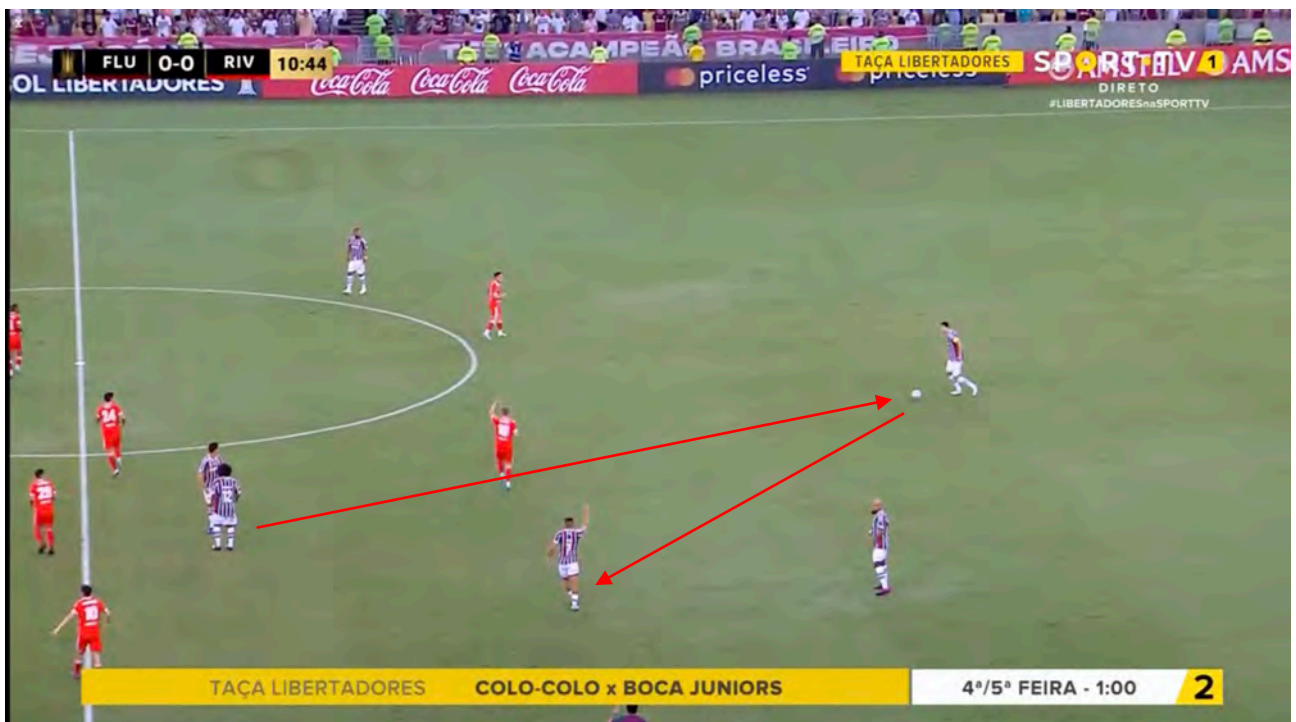


Figure 109 – When the ball is passed to the support, there is no ball turnover and the support returns to playing on the ball side

Taking the passing map from the match between Fluminense and Vasco da Gama in May 2023, which ended 1-1 (fourth round of the Serie A championship), it is clear how **tight** and **close** the players are to each other.

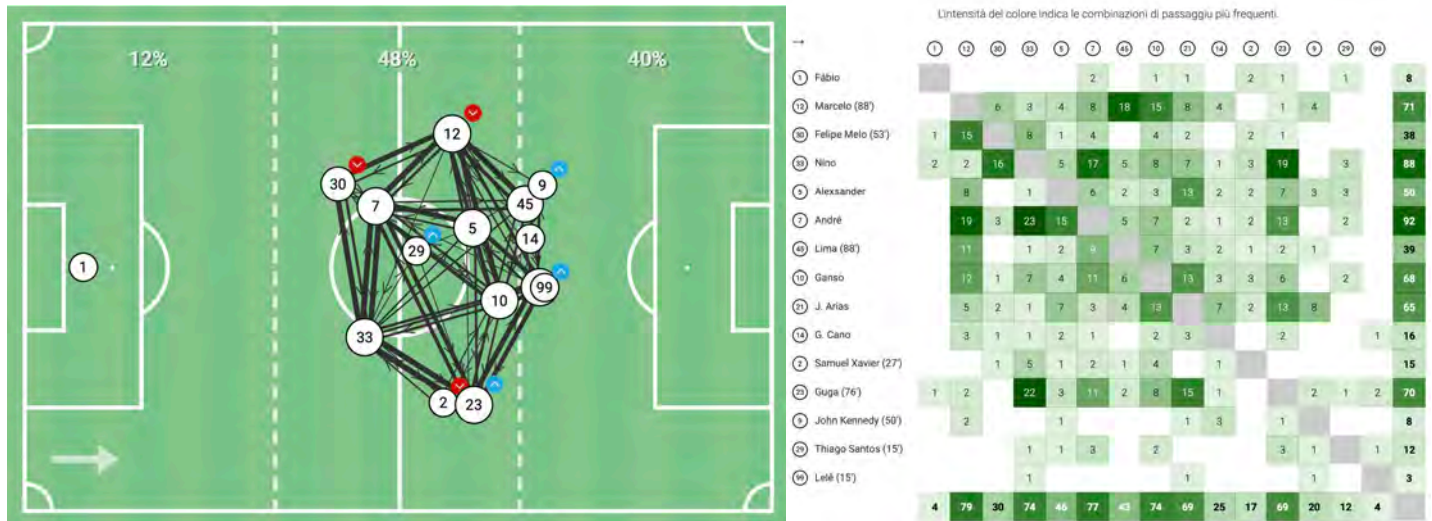


Figure 110 – Flows of passages of Fluminense – Source Wyscout

The image on the right is a map of the average positions from a Fluminense match. For some, it might appear **chaotic**, a snapshot of an unbalanced or unorganized team. The north star is the **ball**, and through it, the constant search for numerical superiority must be pursued: the opponent is surrounded, caught in what seem like huge *rondos* scattered across all areas of the field.



Figure 111 – Average positions of Fluminense – Source Sofascore

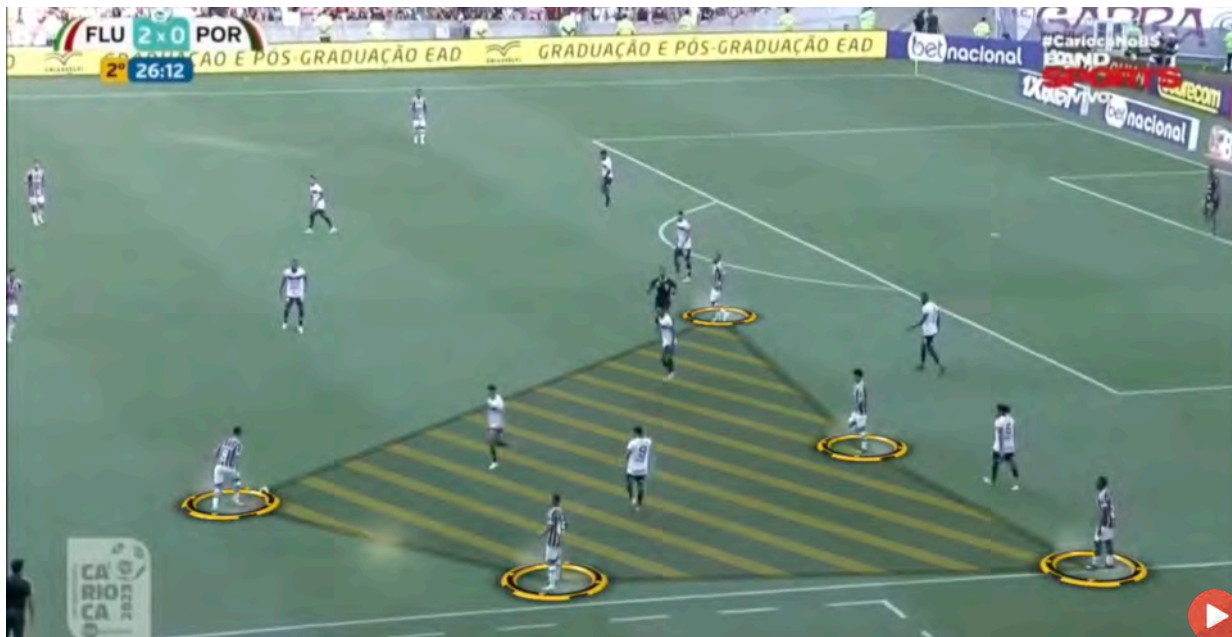


Figure 112 – Fluminense ball area density

The tool for disrupting the opposing team's defensive phase is **positional freedom**, and specifically, this tactic of moving both wingers to the same side of the field is a fundamental way for Fluminense to achieve this goal. In analyzing Diniz's Fluminense matches, we often find one of the two wingers on the “**wrong side**”. Since most zonal defenses are based on controlling the vertical space in front of the player, **horizontal movements** across multiple zones inherently capture the attention of more defenders and create uncertainty about their division of responsibilities, leaving each defender unsure whether to follow or let the opposition player go.



Figure 113 – The winger on the “wrong” side and its horizontal movement of escape

As Caio Miguel **Pontes** of Total Football Analysis pointed out: “*Diniz’s teams appear completely chaotic when viewed through the lens of positional play*”. In this style of football, you might find the right winger on the left, the attacking midfielder dropping back to retrieve the ball in their own box, the center-back overlapping down the flank, and so on.



Figure 114 – Ganso's position in build up



Figure 115 – Ganso's position near the corner flag

This positional freedom is not limited to the wingers; many players operate in “unfamiliar” areas of the field. **Ganso**, the number 10, can often be found playing as a central defender or full-back during specific moments of the game.

Diniz has entrusted the **key** to his play to his attacking midfielder. Ganso is the tactical reference in possession and essentially acts as the conductor, capable of organizing the attack and creating offensive actions with incredible **technical skill**. The Brazilian number 10 is the heart and soul of this playing style, utilizing his technical abilities and **sense of space**. He has the freedom to position himself wherever he wants; in fact, we can find him deep in build-up play, in a playmaker position, or wide on the right or left flanks. Diniz prefers players with more **instinct** who have the talent to interpret constantly varying situations.

In an article by Caio Miguel on Total Football Analysis⁴², he presents a **passing chart** showcasing the passes **Ganso** has made with his teammates, illustrating the relationships and connections he has created. The chart highlights a centrality (non-positional) in the Brazilian team’s progressive possession.

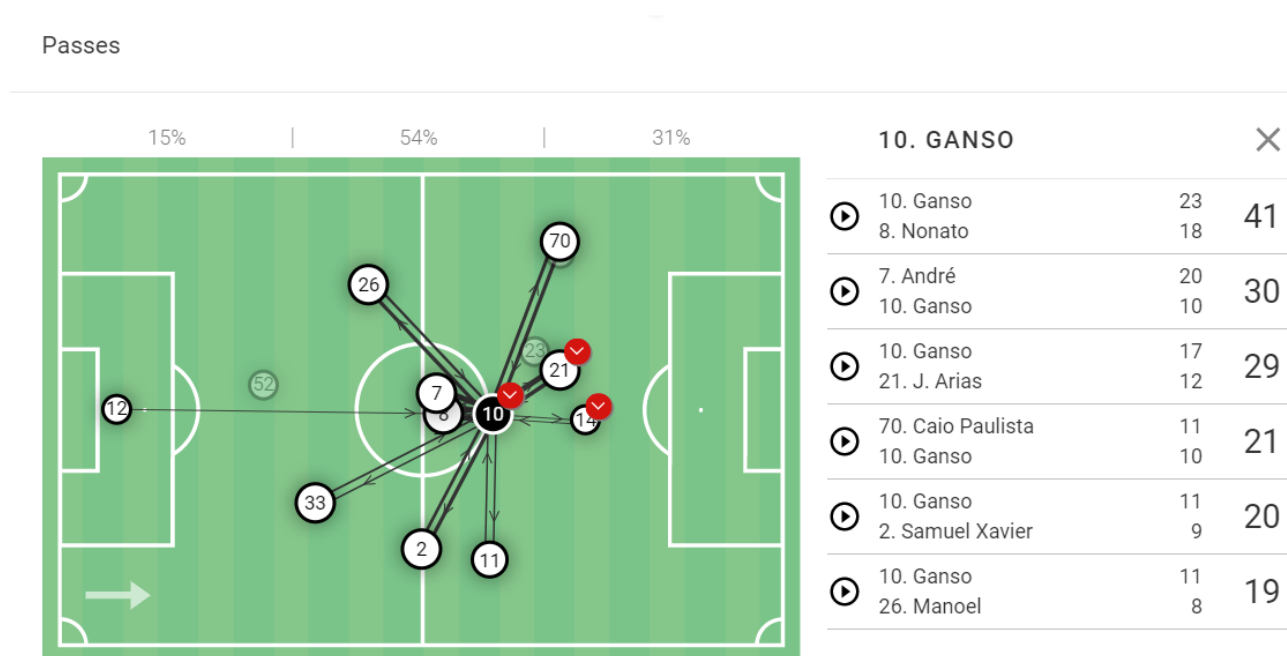


Figure 116 – Map of Ganso's passes with his teammates. Source Caio Miguel

⁴² Caio Miguel – How Fernando Diniz has turned Fluminense into the most entertaining team in Brazil – tactical analysis – www.totalfootballanalysis.com/head-coach-analysis/fernando-diniz-at-fluminense-2022-tactical-analysis-tactics

Once Fluminense manage to break the pressure, either by surpassing or penetrating the opposing defense, they immediately seek to burst through with **speed** and quickly slip behind the opponent's defense. The ideal objective for Fluminense is to find and utilize the space behind to attack in a “**counter-like**” situation where the opposing central defenders, perhaps disorganized, are exposed in a 50-meter space.

Analyzing Diniz's Fluminense in detail, certain situations and plays often recur, which have been cataloged and defined as **tactical patterns**.

Diniz's football is based on a core concept known as *toco y me voy* (play and go, translated loosely as “pass and move”). This principle is constantly sought in every area of the field: each player aims, once they have played the ball, to **move into the open space**, always in the ball area, to become a viable option for the ball carrier again. The “pass and move” principle is fundamental to Fluminense’s game and to teams that implement fluid positional play. The connections made possible by *toco y me voy* are neither symmetrical nor repeatable.

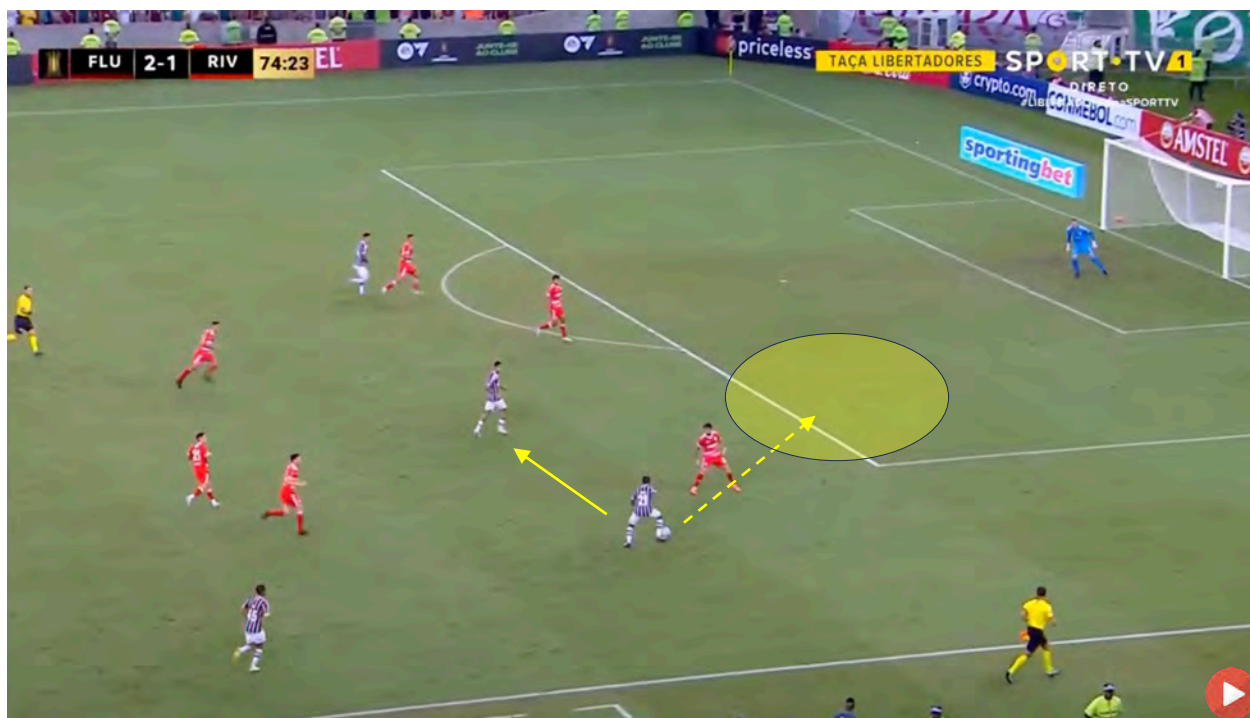


Figure 117 – Situation of *toco y me voy* in the last third zone of the field

Related to the concept of *toco y me voy*, there is another term that is more a technical-tactical combination than a principle of play. A solution constantly sought by Fluminense is the ***tabela***. The Portuguese term *tabela* means table, so with this term, we identify all the plays where a player plays the ball forward to a vertex/support, and this player returns the ball as if it were a table, producing a sort of vertical one-two. In Argentina, this combination is known as *tirar paredes*, which means “to throw down the walls”. Often in our football, in the final third, a *tabela* can be more effectively explained with the term “*entrada a muro*”.

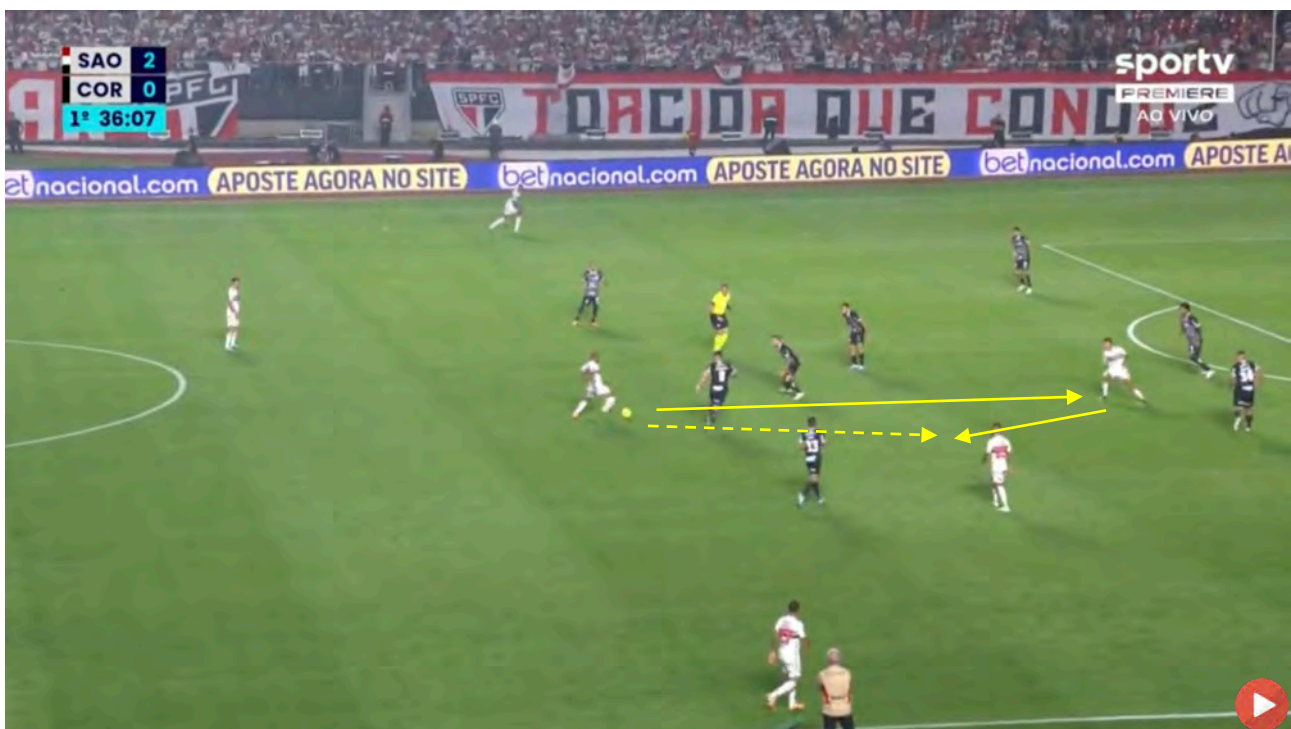


Figure 118 – Situation of *tabela*

Another very important principle/tactical pattern in Diniz's game is the concept of ***escadinha*** (translated as 'ladder' in Italian). The density of players in the ball area allows for the creation of a sort of diagonal line with **three players**, facilitating forward ball progression. In relational play, the concept of a diagonal structure with increasing length manifests through players working together, forming diagonal lines to facilitate the movement of the ball from one place to another. These diagonal lines are known as ***escadinhas***.

The *escadinha* is a relational method of ball progression. When these elegant structures emerge from the chaos of the game, they provide a fleeting moment of opportunity to advance the team in attack. In relational football, it is difficult for opponents to know where or when an *escadinha* will appear. It is an aberration to the rules of positional play, which state that there should never be more than two players aligned to avoid obstructing passing lines for the ball carrier. Instead, *escadinhas* are **typical mechanisms of the Brazilian tradition**, based on proximity and spontaneous associations among teammates.



Figure 119 – Creation of a ladder *escadinha*



Figure 120 – The *escadinhas* present in Brazil in 1950 and 1958. Source @Jozsef_Bozsik

Escadinhas are typically utilized through the midfielder who touches the ball up the “ladder” or by using “*corta luz*”, a direct translation of *corta luz* from Portuguese to English gives us “*cut light*”.

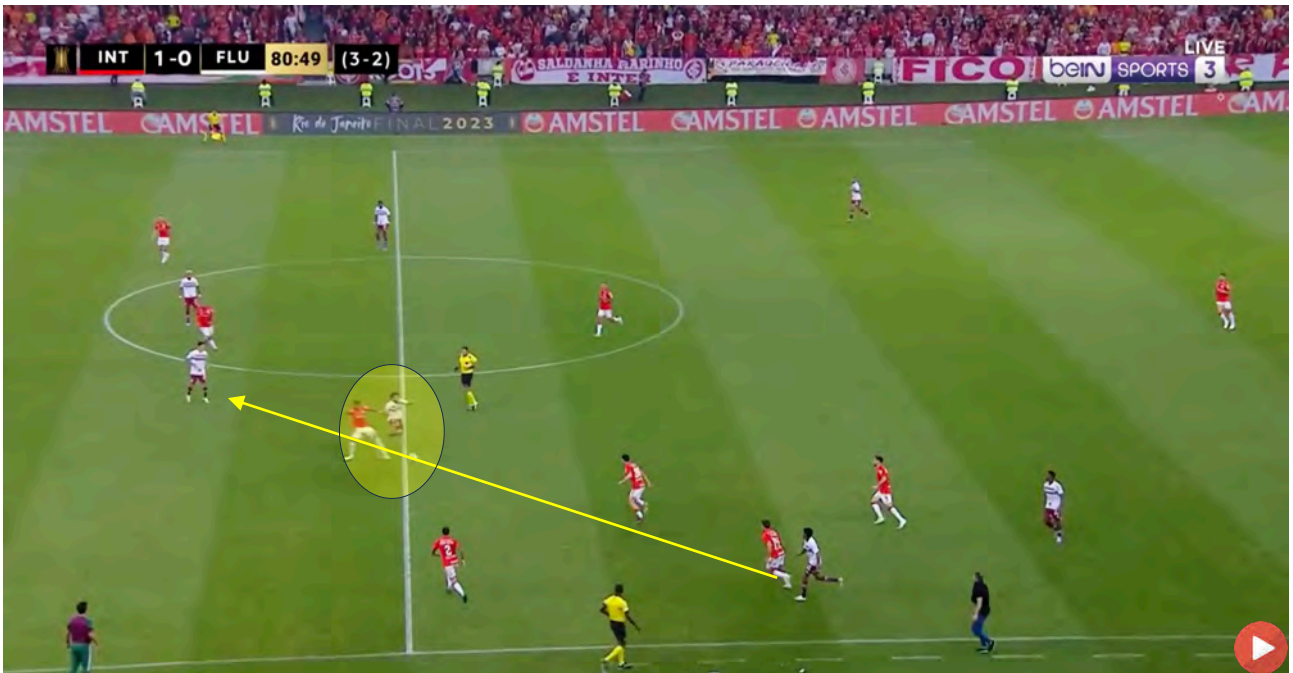


Figure 121 – Short play *corta luz*



Figure 122 – Short play *corta luz* by Brazil in the 2002 World Cup final

I extensively described the concept of players gathering closely around the ball carrier, which often happens on the side of the field. This lateral orientation can be referred to as **tilting**. The tilt embodies the **asymmetry** that is fundamental to the relational approach. It is about unsettling the opponent. The tilt resists the stagnating inertia of symmetrical rigidity and creates disharmony and ambiguity for the opponent's defensive structure.

As I have emphasized multiple times, maintaining absolute control of the ball is a priority. The goal is to reach the final third of the field with possession and a significant number of players in the ball area. However, this often leads to an **unbalanced** positioning in the event of a **loss of possession**. Typically, the overload of players occurs on the flanks, where the touchline becomes an ally in defensive transition: as soon as possession is lost, Fluminense finds itself with many players close together, allowing for an intense counter-pressing that “squeezes” the opponent toward the touchline and facilitates an immediate regain of possession. In fact, when possession is lost, it is easier for players in **counter-pressure** to access the ball, as the opponent has fewer escape angles.

Another important aspect of relational defense, and another byproduct of the tilt, is the **defensive diagonal**. In simple terms, the defensive diagonal is an inward movement executed by the **opposite full-back** to mark the opponent's winger or simply to close off the internal space.



Figure 123 – The opposite player squeezes into the field to make the defensive diagonal

Of course, the full-back executing the defensive diagonal can quickly be transformed into an offensive threat. The tilt of the attack draws the opposing defensive block to shift accordingly, often leaving **open space** on the opposite side for the full-back's attack. It was this dynamic that allowed for what is perhaps the most famous relational goal in history—the 4-0 score by **Carlos Alberto** in the 1970 World Cup final against Italy. The protagonist of the goal recalls: “*Pelé knew I was coming because we had talked about this type of possibility before the match, if Jairzinho made the movement toward the left side, drawing Giacinto Facchetti with him. That fourth goal is often discussed. Anyone can score a goal, but in that play, nine different players touched the ball before the finish. And I was lucky, because I was the one who scored*”.



Figure 124 – From defensive diagonal to attacking space
Source @Jozsef_Bozsik

While the tilt and its byproducts, the defensive diagonal and the yo-yo, are classic motifs of South American relational styles, European interpretations such as the Bavarian and Danube schools are more inclined to present **central overloads** and faster vertical combinations.

We have discussed Fluminense's possession phase extensively. In contrast, Diniz's defensive phase always follows the principle of courage by adopting an extremely **high** and **intense pressing** strategy. They aim to regain possession as quickly as possible, both defensively and during transitions. Not only do they press very intensely, but they also do so in an incredibly aggressive manner.

Diniz and his Fluminense have introduced an innovative idea of football to the world, overturning the principles of European positional play. It is a style where the field is not divided into precise zones predefined by their positional efficiency. It is **free**, **emotional**, **creative**, and **imaginative** football. This movement has arrived in Europe but struggles to be presented in its entirety, partly due to the constraints of the strong principles stemming from the ideology of past positional football. Only in Sweden, for the first time, is true associative-relational fluid football being proposed in Europe, thanks to Henrik Rydström, the coach of Malmö.

In Europe, as a proposal for the **relational** football model, there is **Malmö**, fresh from winning the Allsvenskan, the top Swedish league that runs from April to mid-November.

Swedish coach Henrik **Rydström** was a football player, a defensive midfielder, with over 500 matches played for Kalmar (a Swedish team).

Carriera da allenatore		
2014-2015	 Kalmar	Giovanili
2016	 Kalmar	Assistente
2016-2017	 Kalmar	Giovanili
2017-2018	 Kalmar	Assistente
2018	 Kalmar	Ad interim
2019-2020	 Sirius	
2021-2022	 Kalmar	
2023-	 Malmö FF	

Figure 125 – The career of Henrik Rydström

After hanging up his boots, Rydström was appointed to coach the Under-17 team of **Kalmar** in 2014, and the following year he took charge of the Under-19 team. He then started the 2016 season as an assistant to Peter Swärdh, but by November, he preferred to return to coaching the Under-19 selection. In June 2017, however, he returned to the first team, becoming an assistant to Nanne Bergstrand, who had been his coach for many years and had just been hired to replace the dismissed Swärdh. On July 30, 2018, a statement appeared on Kalmar's website announcing that Bergstrand would be absent indefinitely for health reasons. From that moment, Rydström took over as head coach of the team, alongside his assistant Jens Nilsson. At the end of the season, Kalmar did not retain him, but Rydström quickly moved to another Allsvenskan team, **Sirius**, a small club in Uppsala. In the 2019 and 2020 Allsvenskan seasons, the club finished 11th and 10th respectively, securing comfortable safety in both cases. After the 2020 season, Rydström expressed his desire to leave the position for personal reasons.

After two years of commuting between Kalmar (where his family continued to reside) and Uppsala, he returned to coach **Kalmar** starting from the 2021 season. The team, which had finished second to last in the previous two seasons, ended the 2021 Allsvenskan in sixth place and the 2022 season in fourth place under Rydström's guidance.

It was during his time leading the team where he had previously starred as a player that Rydström showcased the **relational model**, which not only attracted fans and journalists in Sweden but also began to gain recognition outside Swedish borders⁴³. Statistics from the Swiss institute CIES indicated that Kalmar completed an average of **658 passes per match** during the 2021 season, ranking tenth among all teams in Europe, right behind teams like Guardiola's Manchester City, Sarri's Lazio, and De Zerbi's Shakhtar Donetsk. As was the case with Diniz, Rydström's ideas began to be discussed even before they were crowned with victories.

They always call you crazy until your ideas work"

*Marcelo Bielsa*⁴⁴

Despite Kalmar's desire to keep him until the end of his contract, before the start of the 2023 season, Rydström became the new head coach of **Malmö**, with whom he won the last championship on the final day due to a better goal difference, as well as the Swedish Cup.

In an interesting interview with Michele Tossani, a journalist and match analyst, the Swedish coach explains how he began to introduce the model of associative-relational fluid football to his players: *"When I took over Kalmar in 2021, the players were coming from a style of play where, for a couple of years, they were used to kicking the ball as far as possible. So I started with an almost strictly positional model to have a foundation to build upon. It's like learning a language: you probably need to know the alphabet and grammar rules first, but once you've mastered those, you can break the established rules, almost creating your own words, phrases, and meanings. Of course, without a common ground, it becomes anarchy. But I like functionalism as a concept because it makes me think there's something beyond just the game plan"*.

⁴³ Michele Tossani – Il Malmö sta facendo una piccola rivoluzione – www.ultimouomo.com/rivoluzione-malmo-come-gioca-squadra-svedese-henrik-rydstrom-calcio-relazionale

⁴⁴ Giulio Di Feo – Rydstrom sta provando a rivoluzionare il calcio – www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Estero/17-11-2023/rydstrom-l-ex-modello-che-a-malmoe-rivoluziona-il-calcio.shtml

Just like Diniz, Rydström's thinking emphasizes the players and the importance of making them feel like true protagonists rather than puppets to be maneuvered, focusing on the concepts of sharing and relationships: *"As my captain Anders Christiansen said last spring, relationalism allows players to reduce their ego because it's not just about the individual player but the entire team. We play with each other, we share the ball with one another, just like sharing bread and wine with your neighbor"*.

And before it manifests on the field, his game is founded on several **assumptions**. The first: perfectionism is a plague; it creates sad soldiers, while Rydström wants his team to be like the **world he dreams** of—neither stifling nor conformist—where **making mistakes** is not only allowed but encouraged if it helps them become better, where an individual's weaknesses are supported by collective action. The second: those who play football must **enjoy** themselves as they did as children; only then can they bring all their technical and mental skills to a system where creativity is essential but doing the right thing is equally important. The third: **dare without fear of failure**, *"otherwise you go home with nothing, neither pleasure nor result"* ⁴⁵.

It starts with a basic 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3 formation, but the concept is fluid, and the roles have incredible flexibility.



Figure 126 – Henrik Rydström's Malmö of 2023

⁴⁵ Tom Cehlin Magnusson – Henrik Rydström i exklusiv intervju: "Jag har lärt mig taktik på Twitter" – www.cafe.se/henrik-rydstrom-intervju-malmo-ff

The principles are very similar to those of Diniz's Fluminense. Analyzing Rydström's Malmö, one can notice many similarities with the Brazilian team. Players are **fluid in their positions**, moving toward the ball, which is the center of the game.

"We are like a balloon, flexible, almost liquid."

Henrik Rydström

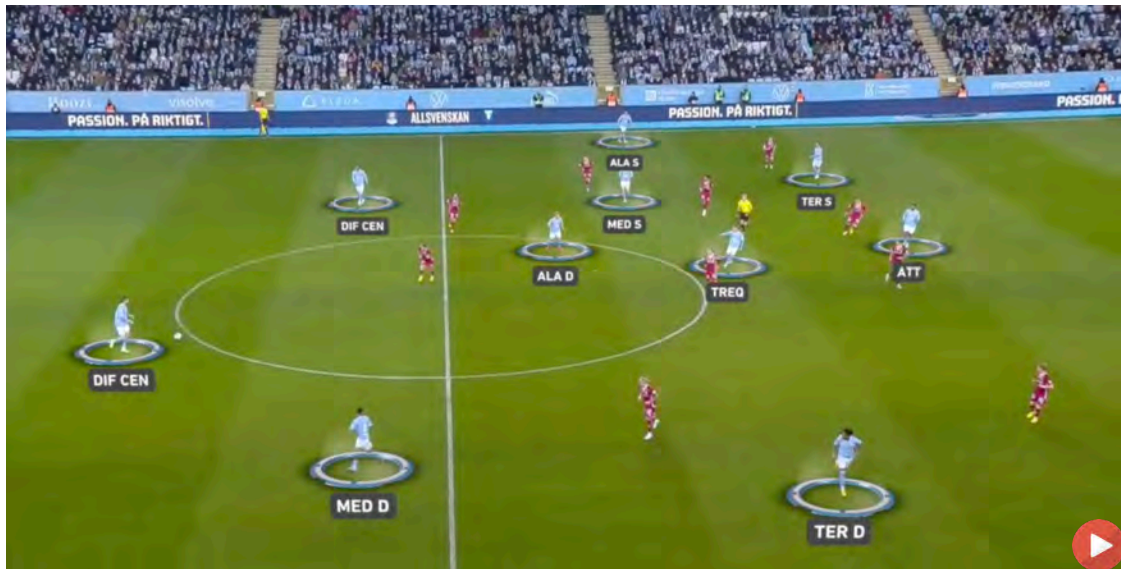


Figure 127 – Fluidity of Malmö's position

This is evident what is referred to in English as **tilting** (from tilt, meaning to lean), which involves overloading the ball side with many players. Below, you can observe a heatmap highlighting a strong density of players in the red zone, close to the ball⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ Jamie Hamilton – www.x.com/stirling_j/status/1778013206767710704?s=12

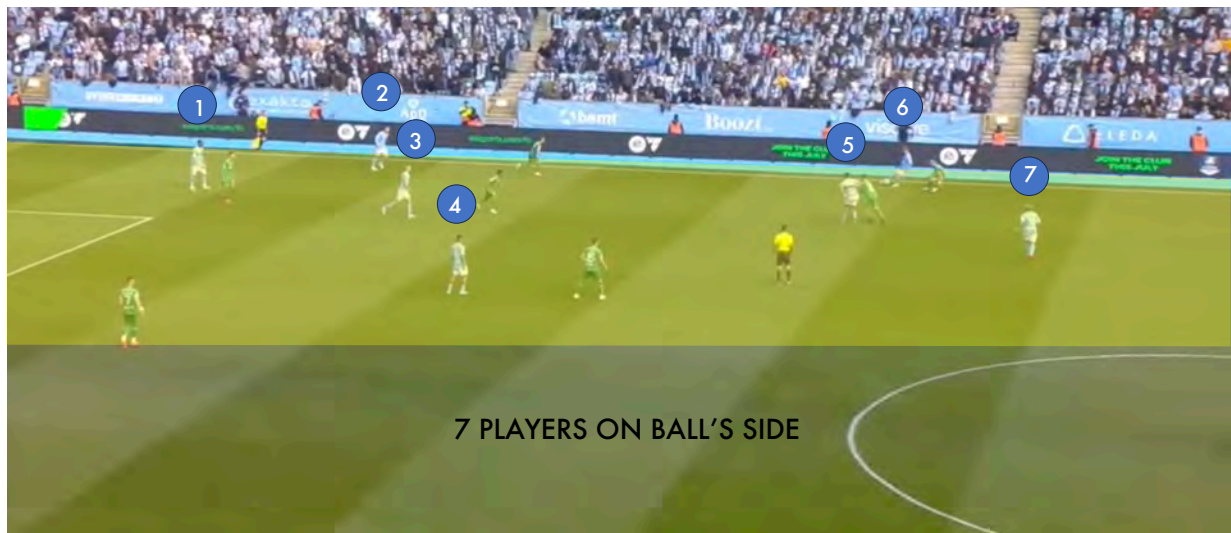


Figure 128 – 7 players on ball's side

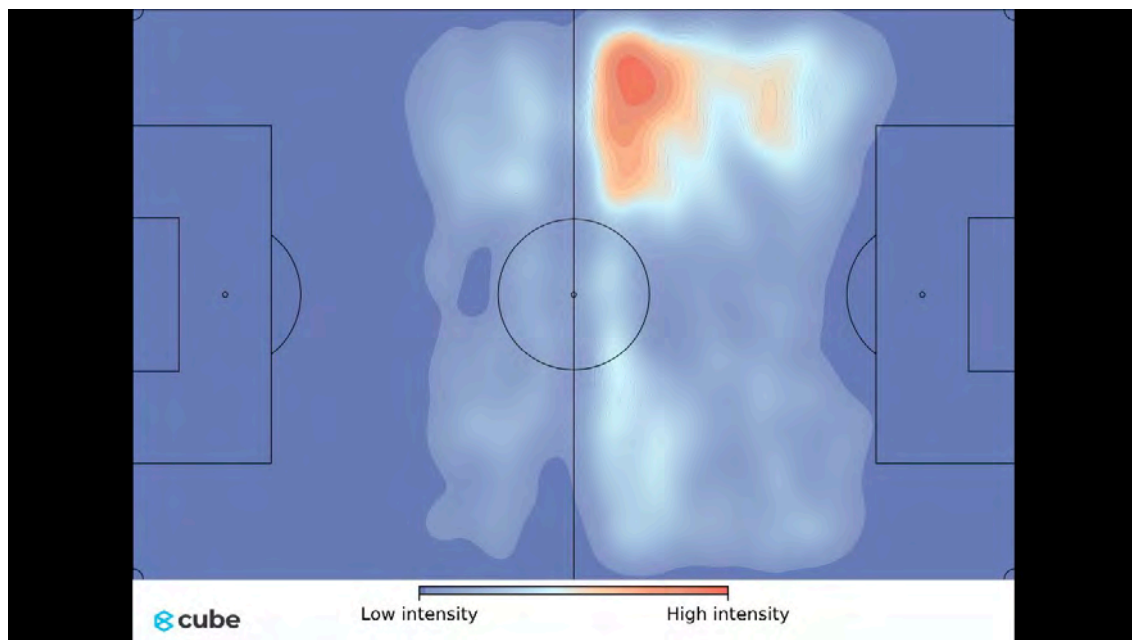


Figure 129 – Heat map of Malmö. Source Cube

In Rydström's football, one can observe the typical combinations of associative-relational football, such as *toco y me voy* and *tabela*.

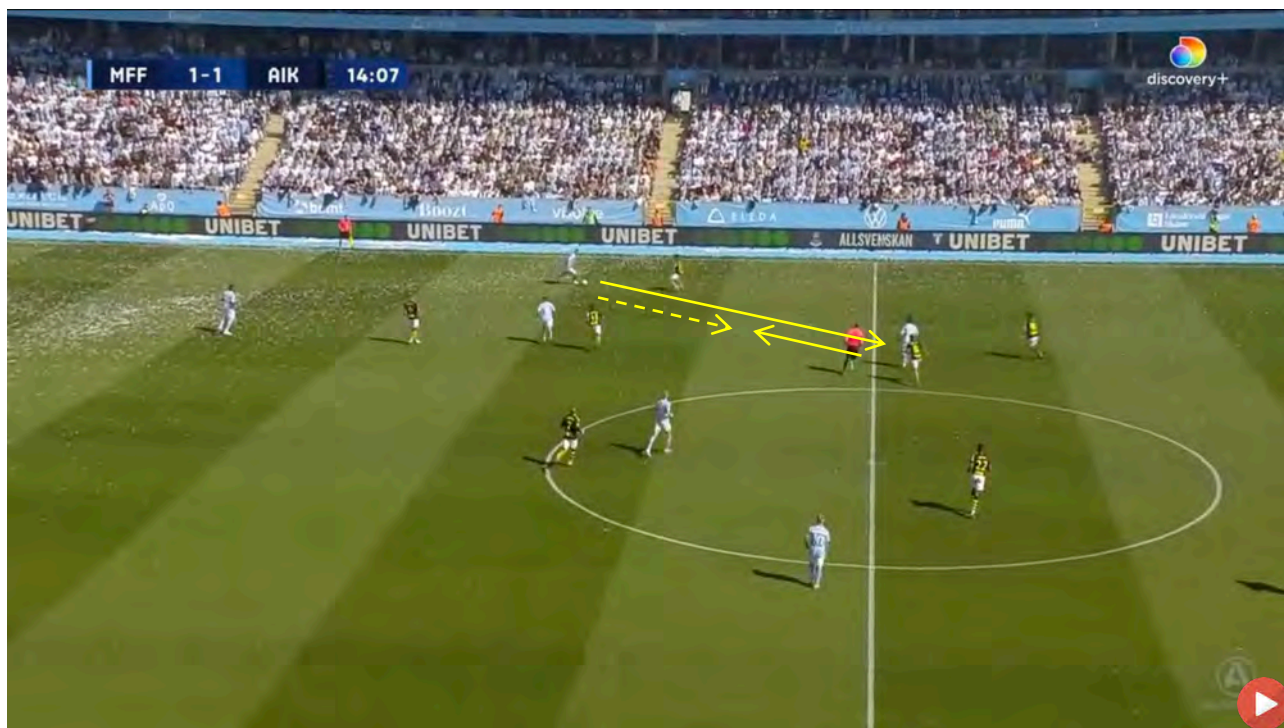


Figure 130 – Wall pass combination (*tabela*)

Creating density on the strong side, Malmö players generate continuous *escadinhas*.

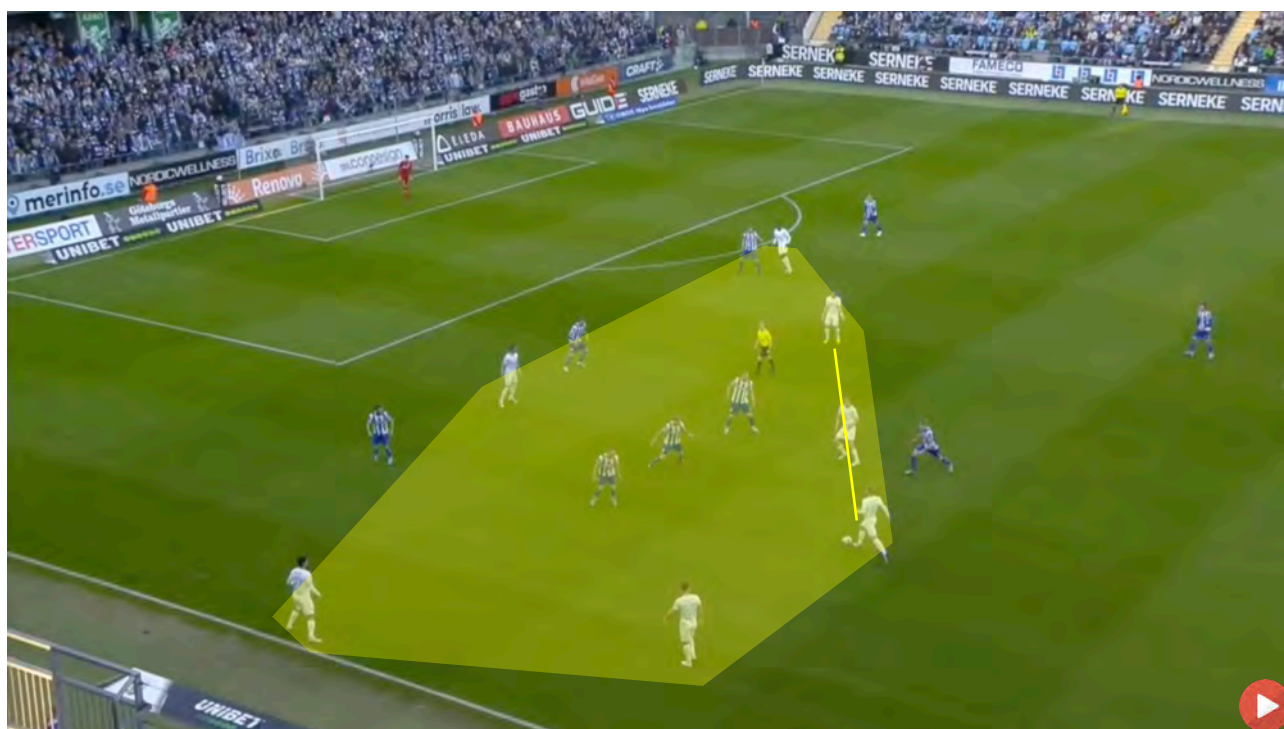


Figure 131 – Density around the ball and *escadinha*

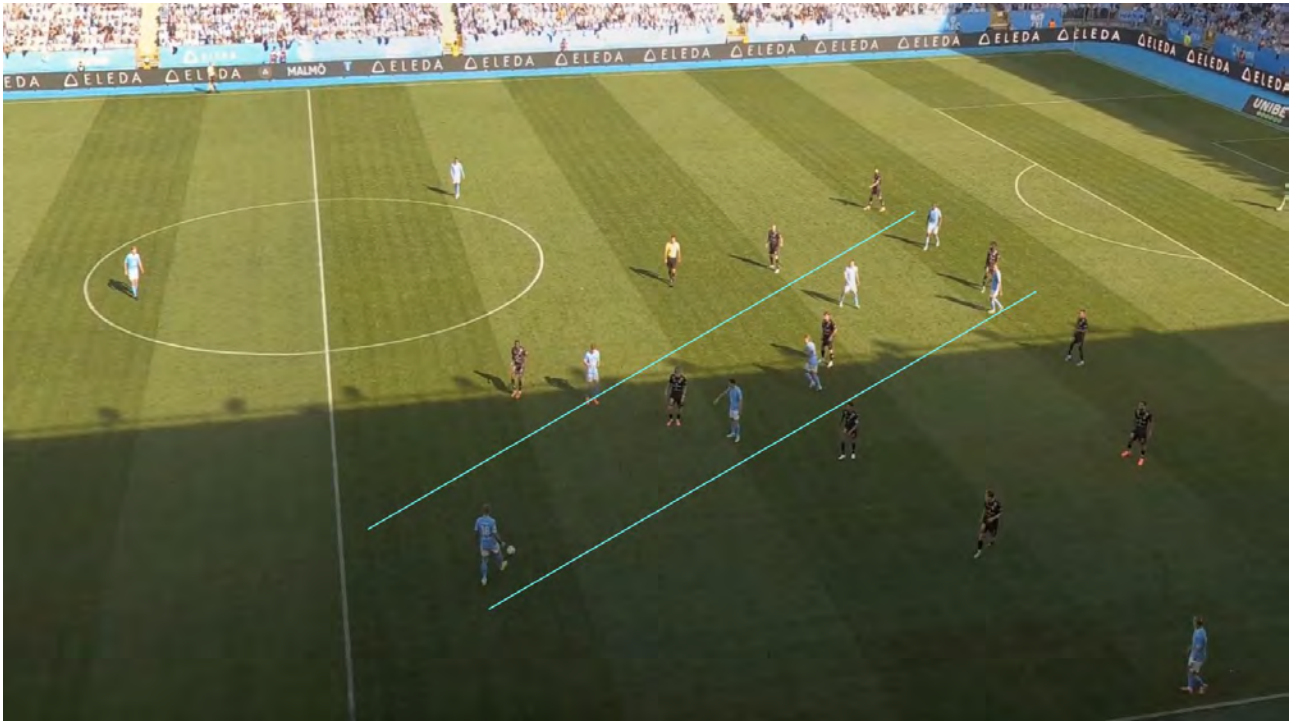
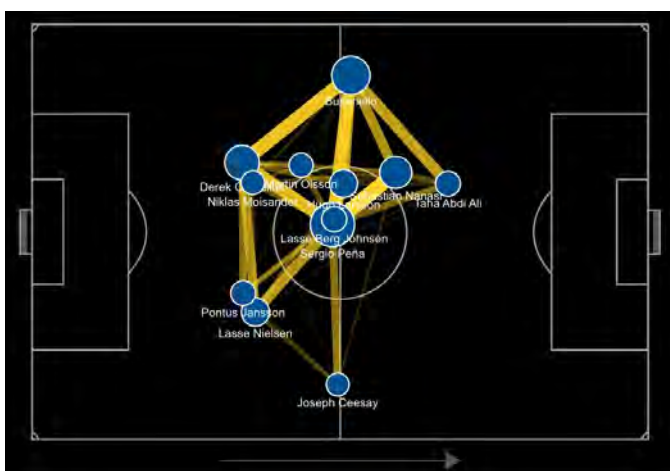


Figure 132 – Another *escadinha* situation often developed with tight combinations

Nordic football is different from Brazilian football, and Rydström's Swedish *escadinhas* arise with **fewer dribbles**, more players involved, and, if possible, even **shorter and tighter passes**. Some statistical data helps us understand how Malmö prioritizes short passing, as seen both in the passing flow map, with players closely connected to one another, and in the ranking for passes every 90 minutes, where the Swedish team is only behind Paris Saint-Germain, Bayer Leverkusen, and Manchester City.



		Per 90 mins.	
League average	16153.28	400.53	83.99
PSG	23018	620.99	90.1
Bayer Leverkusen	22701	613.54	89.6
Manchester City	25540	601.41	90.8
Malmö FF	9479	576.43	88.7
Bayern München	20615	568.78	89.5
Stuttgart	20583	543.41	88.5
Real Madrid	22592	537.95	90.4
Barcelona	22519	531.25	89.1
Brighton	22708	529.19	89.4
Liverpool	21840	506.86	86.9
Napoli	20783	499.59	88
Internazionale	20998	499.41	88.7
Bologna	20594	496.64	88.2

Figure 133 – Passing flows of Malmö. Source @fantomen and pass ranking per 90 minutes for the 2023/24 season. Source Wyscout

The approach is fluid even out of possession: the defensive structure adapts to the situation, and the type of **pressing** applied can vary (man-to-man or zonal) depending on the opponent. It's a pressing style very similar to **Klopp's**—very high and featuring systematic doubles—because it's better to **take risks than to concede space**. Notably, their physical conditioning is top-notch as a result of Rydström's tough training sessions.

Henrik Rydström has been described by Sky Sports as “**the most innovative coach in Europe**” and with his football based on the concept of relationalism, he has brought a new and different style to the continent compared to what has been seen in recent years. If he manages to advance through the Champions League playoffs, it will be interesting to see how the pioneer of associative-relational fluid football performs in the most prestigious tournament in the world.

LIONEL SCALONI – ARGENTINA

Lionel Scaloni, a former professional player who also played in Italy with Lazio and Atalanta, began his coaching career as an assistant at Sevilla under Jorge Sampaoli during the 2016/17 season. Less than a year later, on June 2, 2017, he chose to continue with Sampaoli as an assistant in his new role with the Argentine national team. After Sampaoli's dismissal in August 2018, Scaloni was selected to lead the Argentine national team as **interim head coach**.

“The first step was to build a shared path”

Lionel Scaloni

By the end of November, after four victories, one draw, and a loss to Brazil, he was confirmed as head coach of the national team for the 2019 Copa America, where Argentina reached the semifinals but was defeated by the host nation Brazil 2-0, settling for third place after overcoming Chile 2-1. On July 30 of that year, after nine victories,

two draws, and four losses, the Argentine federation confirmed his position until the 2022 World Cup.

In 2021, the *Selección* participated again in the Copa America, held once more in Brazil. After finishing first in their group, Argentina eliminated their opponents and eventually reached the final. On July 11, by defeating the hosts Brazil 1-0, Argentina won the Copa America for the fifteenth time, claiming a trophy after twenty-eight years.

After securing qualification for the World Cup in Qatar in November 2021 while keeping the team unbeaten, in June 2022, Scaloni added a second trophy under his leadership, winning the new FIFA Cup in the final match held at Wembley Stadium in London, defeating Italy 3-0.

Under Scaloni's management, the team recorded a streak of 36 consecutive matches without defeat (the second-best unbeaten streak by a national team, surpassed only by Italy's Mancini with 37), from the loss in the 2019 Copa America final to the defeat in their opening match at the 2022 World Cup against Saudi Arabia. Despite the opening defeat, Argentina continued their journey to the final of the tournament. After bringing Argentina back to the World Cup final after eight years, on December 18, by defeating France in a penalty shootout 4-2 following a 3-3 draw after extra time in a tightly contested match, Scaloni led La Albiceleste to their third world title, thirty-six years after their last success in the competition. The winning streak continued with the recent victory in the 2024 Copa America, won in extra time against Colombia.

His first decision was the most logical, even if no one had implemented it before him: a strong **generational change**, including a series of players born around the mid-1990s, if not later, who held relevance in their respective clubs but had not yet truly entered the *Selección*.



Figure 134 – Argentina under Lionel Scaloni in 2023

In goal, Scaloni relied on Emiliano “Dibu” Martínez, who proved to be a decisive and absolute protagonist in the Albiceleste's triumphs. The defense was anchored by the experience of Otamendi and Romero, with Molina as a right-back and a more defensive Tagliafico on the left. In midfield, he integrated the quality and quantity of Paredes, De Paul, and Lo Celso with the talent of younger players like Enzo Fernández and Mac Allister.

In attack, Scaloni placed his trust in Messi and Di María behind the alternating pair of Álvarez and Lautaro Martínez.

After the first Copa America, Scaloni explained to *La Nación* that he had shifted from the initial idea of playing vertical football to a more reasoned possession system, better suited to the **characteristics** of his players. *“Ancelotti mentioned that before winning the last Champions League, he communicated with his players to find the best solutions for attacking. When a player steps onto the field, they must be convinced of what they do. Authoritarianism, saying 'do this or nothing else,' doesn't appeal to me. I'm one of*

*those coaches who tries to have the player on their side, to know if they feel good and why”*⁴⁷.

In this new technical-tactical context, Messi found himself becoming an **emotional leader**, sometimes even fiery, and obviously a **technical** force almost without realizing it. No one before Scaloni had ever had such an individually decisive Messi, nor had they managed to create a system in which he and his supporting cast could empower and improve each other. The Argentine coach succeeded in what none of his predecessors had accomplished in the past two decades: giving the Selección an **identity** in terms of game style and group psychology, fostering a team spirit that had never been so unified in its recent history.

Argentina proved to be the perfect link between the “menottista” thought (from **Ciro Menotti**, the coach who led Argentina to its first World Cup in 1978) and the “bilardista” approach (from **Carlos Bilardo**, coach of Maradona's World Cup-winning team in 1986). While the former favored a **spectacle-oriented** game (the famous quest for “beautiful football”) in which all the individual qualities of the players served the **collective aesthetics**, the latter focused solely on results, achieving them by any means (the ends justify the means), relying exclusively on the technical qualities of a few players to seek the moments that could turn a match, defending fiercely to secure the final victory⁴⁸. This was confirmed by Scaloni himself in an interview with *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, where he stated, “*When we have the ball and play in attack, we can consider ourselves menottistas, while when we don't have it and we close down, we are bilardistas*”. The keyword is always the same: **balance**.

When we played against Argentina in June 2022 in the final organized by the respective winners of the European Championship and the Copa America, I had the pleasure of analyzing and studying this national team. A team that had just won the Copa America

⁴⁷ Federico Raso – Lionel Scaloni e l'arte di trovare gli equilibri – www.rivistaundici.com/2022/12/22/scaloni-come-gioca

⁴⁸ Emanuele Iorio – Lionel Scaloni, il segreto silenzioso dell'Argentina – www.rivistacontrasti.it/lionel-scaloni-argentina-qatar-2022-copa-america-mondiale-allenatore-equilibrio-menotti-bilardo

in the final against Brazil and was preparing to win the first winter **World Cup** in football history, in Qatar, and the second consecutive Copa America.

Analyzing the 2022 team, there was a strong tendency toward **relational football** due to two characteristics. The first was an **asymmetry** that often led to play on the right side: Molina, De Paul, Messi, Di María, and Lautaro tend to **associate with each other**. It was not an exaggerated tilt like those of Diniz and Rydström, but the Albiceleste, bringing in the left midfielder Lo Celso, did not occupy the left width and brought numerous players close to the ball side.



Figure 135 – The asymmetry towards the right side of Scaloni's Argentina team

This created a density of technical players, very close to each other, who engaged in continuous rotations while moving the ball with quick and rapid technical combinations.



Figure 136 – Asymmetry on the right side of Argentina under Scaloni

The second characteristic that identifies Scaloni's Argentina as an associative-relational football team is all the technical interactions expressed by the players in the ball area. One can find various *entrante a muro*, as well as the formation of different *escadinhas* with many **quick plays**, always following the principle of “I play and move in space”.



Figure 137 – Messi's wall pass (*tabela*)



Figure 138 – Quick play inside an *escadinha*

Scaloni's strength has been in creating a team of relationships, allowing a certain freedom to his talented players and turning it into the most successful team in Argentina's history, now widely known as ***Scaltoneta***, a nickname adopted by the team in reference to its coach. The precise origin of the term is said to be attributed to a famous local journalist, Rodolfo "Gringo" Cingolani, who claims to have coined it during a sports debate on the TyC Sports program.

Regardless of the name's origin, we know who to attribute the emergence of a team that will be remembered forever alongside Lionel Andrés Messi, the shining star of football for eternity.

Going back in time, the first great team to express a **fluid associative-relational** style of football was the **Golden Team** (in Hungarian, *aranycsapat*), the nickname for **Hungary's** national football team in the 1950s, coached by **Gusztáv Sebes** and composed of famous players, including Ferenc Puskás, Gyula Grosics, Nándor Hidegkuti, Zoltán Czibor, and Sándor Kocsis.

The backbone of the team, also known as the Magical Magyars, was built around the players from Budapest's Honvéd, who left both the club and the national team after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. They achieved significant victories: in 1953, the eleven led by Sebes defeated England 6-3 at Wembley, repeating the victory the following year at home with a resounding 7-1 (still the worst defeat ever for the English).

They won the **gold medal** at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki (Hungary vs. Yugoslavia 2-0). Between 1950 and 1956, in over 50 matches played, they lost only once, in the final of the 1954 World Cup against West Germany. The Hungarian team was named the best international football team of all time in the history of football by the BBC in 2016.

The formation was known as the “double M”, although it was very fluid. Sebes's revolutionary idea (influenced by Jimmy Hogan) was that every player should be able to **play in any position**. The Hungarian tactic of players constantly changing roles and positions greatly contributed to the team's success. The team included Grosics, the goalkeeper, who was sometimes referred to as the “fourth full-back”, as Sebes encouraged him to act almost like a sweeper, a particularly revolutionary idea that predated the concept of the sweeper-keeper. The three defenders were shielded by Zakariás, while the other midfielder Bozsik advanced in a playmaker role. The five attacking players included Hidegkuti, who started as a forward but played as a midfielder—almost like a false center-forward—along with the two wingers who fluidly operated across the attacking line, and the two forwards Kocsis and the formidable Puskás.

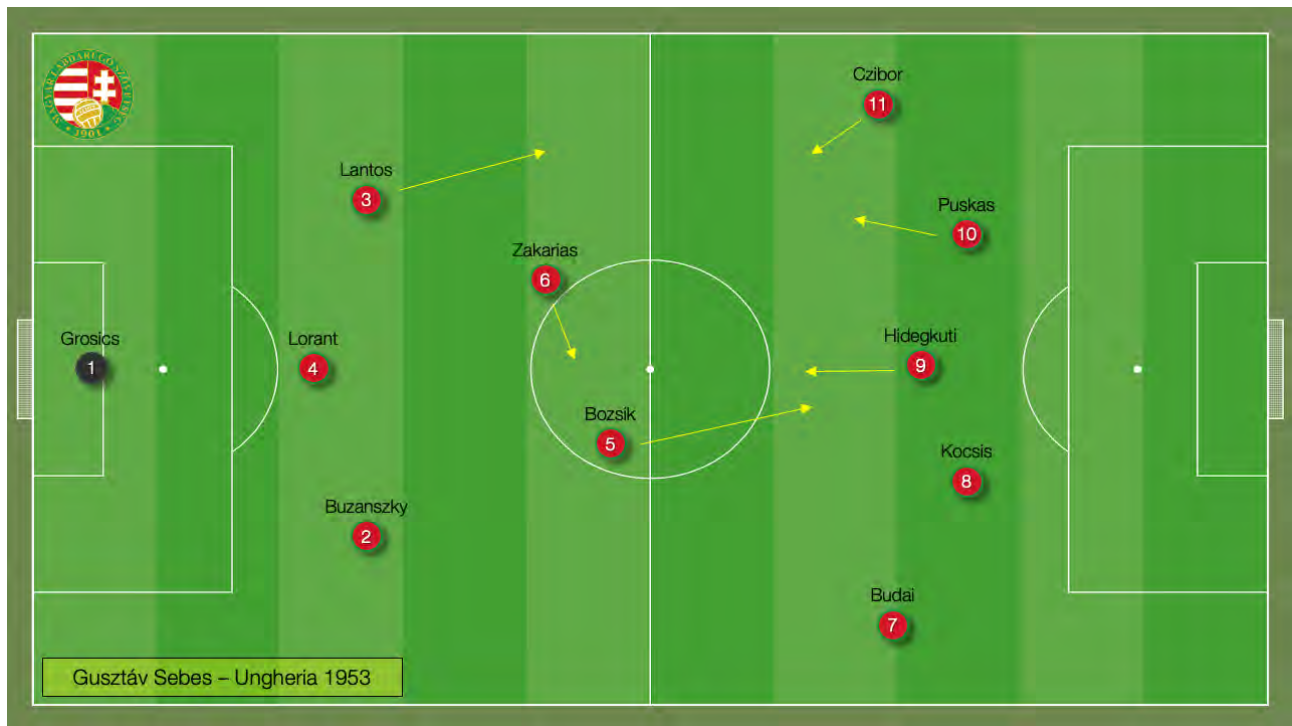


Figure 139 – The Hungary team of Gusztáv Sebes from 1953

In an interview for a documentary produced many years later, defender Jenő Buzánszky stated: *“When we attacked, everyone attacked. The midfielders advanced behind the forwards, and the defenders followed behind the midfield”*.

Two other teams that applied a relational style of football were the **Brazilian national** teams of **1970** and **1982**. The 1970 selection was coached by Mário Zagallo, the brain on the field of the victorious Seleção in 1958 and 1962, who continued the work of Saldanha, pushing even more for build-up play and the search for goals. He perfected that sublime football machine known as the **“Brazil of the 5 No. 10s”**: Pelé, Jairzinho, Rivellino, Gérson, and Tostão, all deployed simultaneously in a 4-2-4 formation, inheriting the tradition set twelve years earlier by Vicente Feola. The team played with short passes, seeking space, continuous movement, and the involvement of as many players as possible in the build-up.

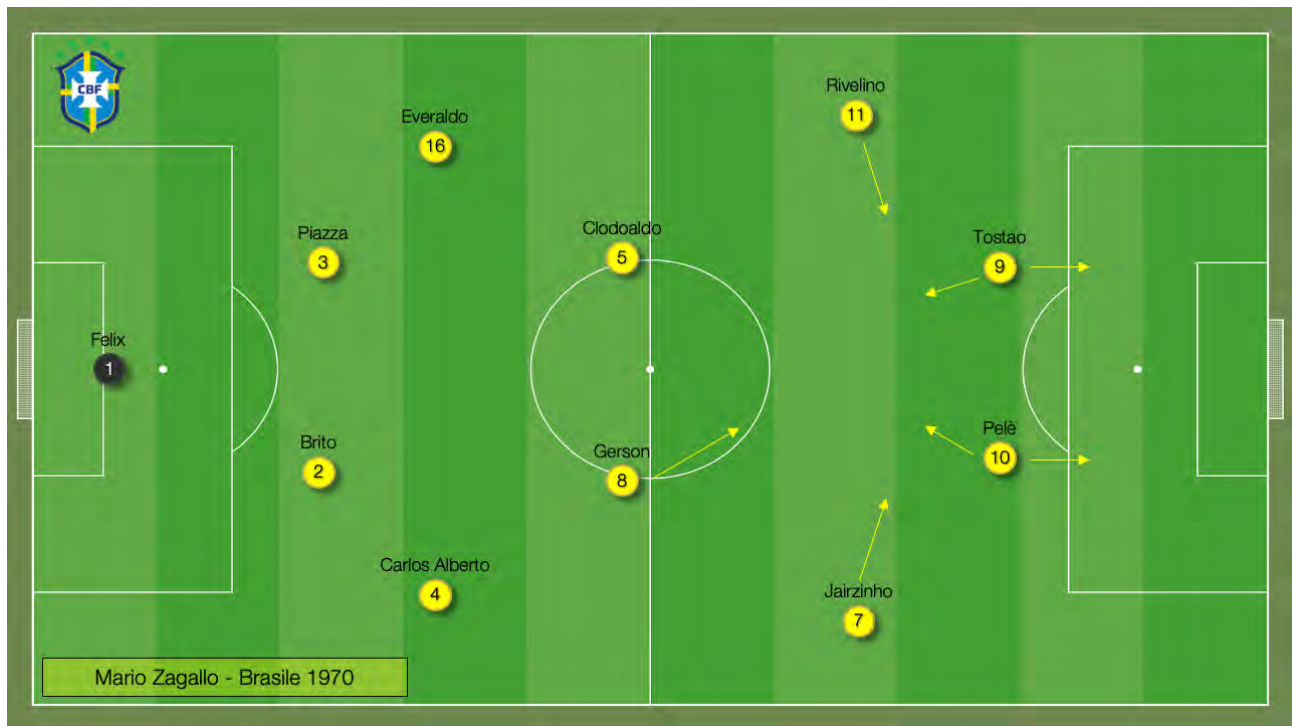


Figure 140 – The Brazil team of Mario Zagallo from 1970

In 1982 Brazil was coached by **Telê Santana**, the former coach of Palmeiras (and future coach of Flamengo and São Paulo), and he was certainly inspired by the fluid and aesthetic play of the national team that won the World Cup three times between 1958 and 1970.

Essentially, Telê Santana sought to bring Brazil back to practicing that *futebol bailado* that had been abandoned by the Seleção in the previous two World Cups⁴⁹.

It stemmed from Brazilian tradition, influenced by the “Danube football”. The play is flexible, fluid, and requires individual and positional freedom within a collaborative system. Players need to come close to each other, be creative, and use their intuition. The wingers drift away from the flanks, being inventive in their movements.

In defense, in front of goalkeeper Valdir Peres, the central pairing consisted of Oscar and Luizinho. In the build-up phase, their main role was to initiate possession, quickly facilitating passing lines toward midfield. Here lay the heartbeat of that team, formed by a pair of central midfielders, Falcão and Toninho Cerezo, alongside Zico and Sócrates. The “white Pelé”, voted South America's best player in 1981 and 1982, operated as a playmaker in a central position behind the striker Serginho. Sócrates, on the other hand,

⁴⁹ Michele Tossani – Come giocava il Brasile 82? – www.lagabbiaidiorrico.com/2020/03/27/come-giocava-il-brasile-82

primarily started on the center-right but would also occupy positions on the opposite side of the field. Éder played on the left. Both the Corinthians player and Éder predominantly occupied the central areas, allowing Brazil to fill the central corridors with all the talent available in Telê Santana's midfield.

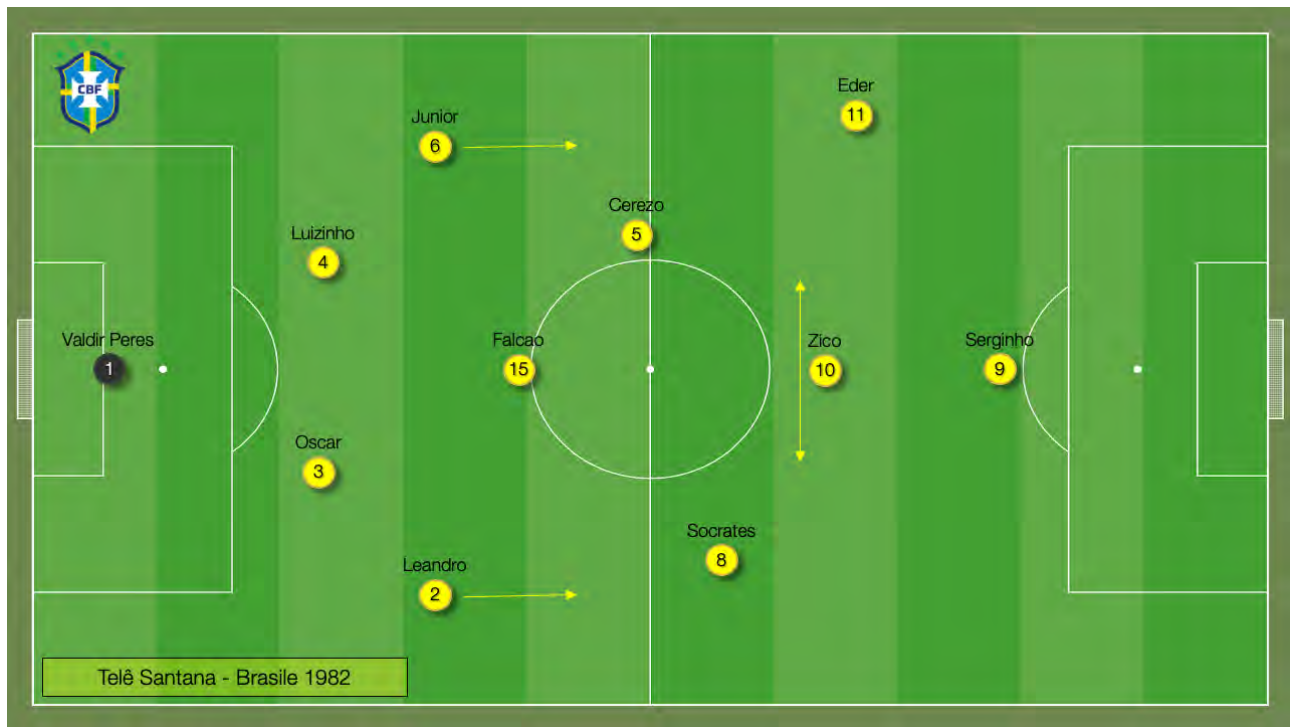


Figure 141 – The Brazil team of Tele Santana from 1982

The entire possession phase revolved around the idea of providing **support for the ball carrier** and promoting technical plays in threes and twos, where the technically gifted Brazilian players excelled.

The recent Hungarian national team, led by Italian **Mario Rossi**, a former player who played for Brescia and Sampdoria, is **closing the circle with the past** by reconnecting to the Hungary of the Golden Team mentioned earlier.

In an article written by analyst Istvan Beregi⁵⁰, he describes how Hungary has recently moved toward an **associative-relational approach**.

⁵⁰ Beregi István – A válogatott visszatért a hagyományokhoz – www.valogatott.mlsz.hu/ferfi-a-valogatott/hir/csapat/a-valogatott-visszatert-a-hagyományokhoz

In the 3-4-2-1 system, the two “tens” (attacking midfielders) Dominik Szoboszlai and Roland Sallai are playing more flexibly, starting from the same side and creating an asymmetry that leads to a numerical/structural advantage.

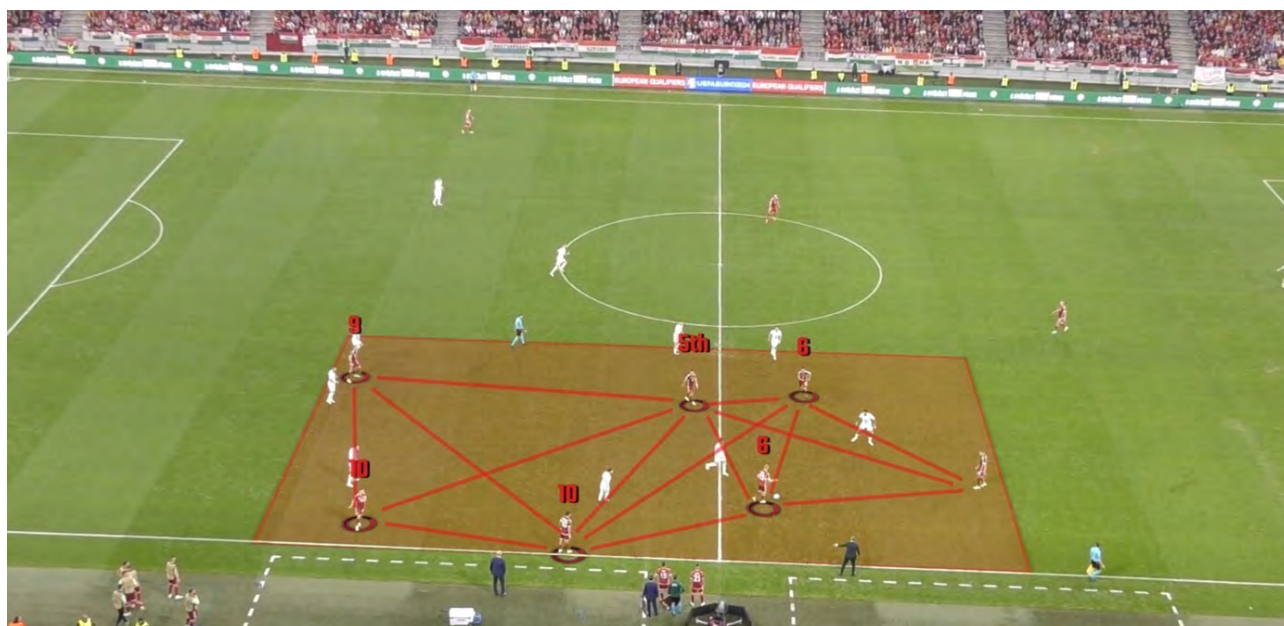


Figure 142 – Player density near the ball of Hungary under Rossi

After the match against Bulgaria in November 2023, Rossi said: *“Our plan was to always overload the opponent on one side. Whether on the right, on the left, or wherever they feel the opportunity on the field. In the first half, it happened on the right, in the second on the left, but the decision rests with the players, wherever they feel the possibility. Both Dominik Szoboszlai and Roland Sallai have the freedom to move where they want and have perfectly perceived these situations”*.

Rossi's relational football philosophy leads to shared organizational developments in the play, assigning them not only to specific constructs but also to offensive players. For this reason, number 10 Dominik Szoboszlai has many more touches per match. Last year, in the Nations League 2022 matches, he recorded an average of around 50 touches per game; in the matches played in 2023, he averaged 80-90 touches. In the match against Montenegro (November 2023), he had the highest number of touches on the team, with 122.

In the Hungarian team, *escadinhas* can also form centrally when the ball is in the center, not just laterally.

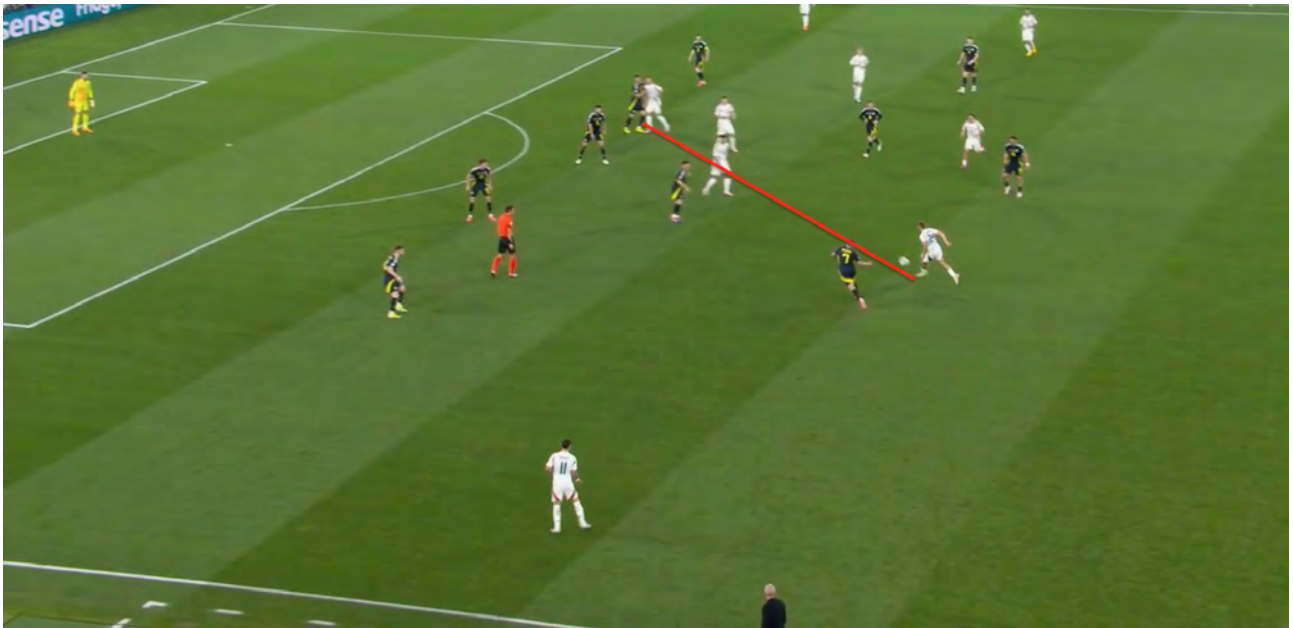


Figure 143 – Central density of players near the ball forming an *escadinha*

In the follow image is it possible what the positions of the players in the Hungary vs. Montenegro match. There is an asymmetry on the left side of the team with the formation of two diagonals: one between the central defender (number 2 Lang) and the attacking midfielder (number 10 Szoboszlai), and another from the left wing-back (number 18 Nagy) to the forward (number 9 Ádám).

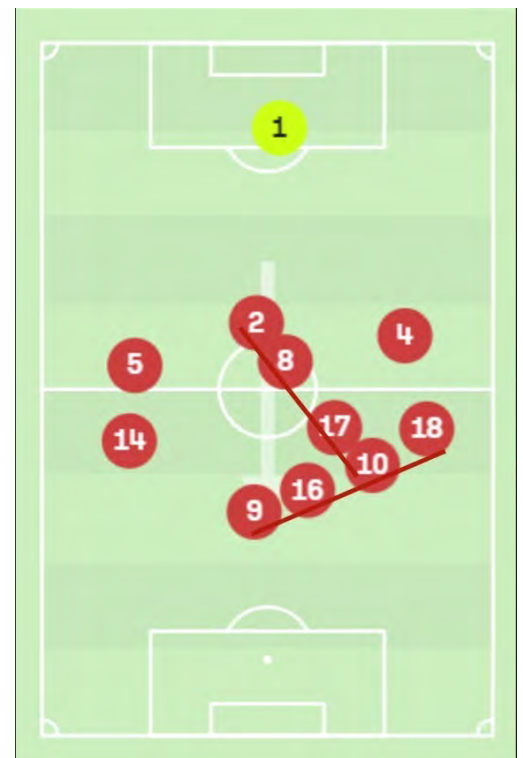


Figure 144 – Average positions of Hungary of Rossi

The players move closer to the ball carrier to offer the **kényszerítő** (the hungarian word meaning give-and-go). The term literally means 'to force,' with the figurative meaning of forcing the opponent into a decision to either follow the ball or the player into space.

Among the other teams that have embraced the principles of **associative-relational football**, I want to highlight **Carmine Nunziata's** U20 national team, which participated in the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Argentina and reached the final, ultimately losing to Uruguay 1-0. Starting with a 4-3-1-2 / 4-3-2-1 formation, with Pafundi and Baldanzi playing behind striker Pio Esposito, strong areas of ball density were created, allowing for numerous technical relationships among the young Italian talents. Partly due to the system of play, but especially because of the playing principles, the opposite width was not occupied.



Figure 145 – Overload situation on the right side with 5 players in the ball area of Italy U20 under Nunziata

This demonstrates that functional and relational football has also reached youth sectors.

CHAPTER 5 – THE OCCUPATION OF SPACE AND POSITIONAL FLUIDITY

I described the concepts of space and positional fluidity, defining what is meant by these concepts. Now, in this chapter, we will examine some of the main situations in offensive play regarding fluid **space occupation**.

We will analyze **tactical situations** from the modern era and how they have modified and brought innovative solutions compared to the past. For each solution, I have analyzed multiple teams and matches, including historical ones, seeking to provide objective data to explain the various tactical concepts.

The theme running through this chapter is the characteristic of **modern players** who increasingly perform tasks and functions rather than executing a specific role. Positional fluidity is the ability of a player **to adapt to the tactical needs** of the team at a given moment by moving into different areas of the field and contributing to the play in various ways.

Luciano Spalletti has expressed this concept, stating: *“Today, a number 10 no longer exists. Each of our players is a 10, because in that space, even the full-back and defender can play there, alongside the midfielder, central midfielder, or winger. If the full-back moves in to play, there might be a midfielder who goes outside in their place. It's about helping them understand what they can do when they find themselves playing in that space, both with the ball and when losing it and trying to regain it”*.

The recurring phrase “**the goalkeeper must know how to save**” is often heard in football. No one will dispute this statement, as according to the rules of the game, the **goalkeeper**, dressed differently from outfield players, is the only player allowed to touch the ball with their hands inside the penalty area without committing a foul. However, in recent years, changes in regulations have altered the way goalkeepers play, and in modern football, a goalkeeper must not only know how to save but also play like an outfield player.

In the summer of 1992, the **IFAB** (International Football Association Board) decided to change the **back-pass rule**, and at the time, almost no one realized that the game of football would change profoundly. With the regulation change, a goalkeeper was no longer allowed to pick up the ball from a back pass; instead, they were required to play it with their feet.

Two incidents prompted the IFAB to change the rule. The first dates back to the 1990 World Cup in Italy, where in the match of Group F between **Ireland** and **Egypt**, played in Palermo and ending in a 0-0 draw, both teams consistently stalled the game. Legendary were the **six total minutes** during which Irish goalkeeper **Pat Bonner** (a veteran with over 600 matches) held onto the ball.

The second incident was the final of the Euro 1992 between **Denmark** and **Germany** (finally reunited after the fall of the wall) when the Danes, after taking the lead with Jensen, devised an unorthodox method that effectively killed the opponent's rhythm: the ball would go to Peter **Schmeichel**, who would pick it up with his hands at the first sign of pressing. The second half was characterized by back passes and balls collected by Schmeichel. Vilfort's second goal ten minutes from the end solidified the remarkable European championship

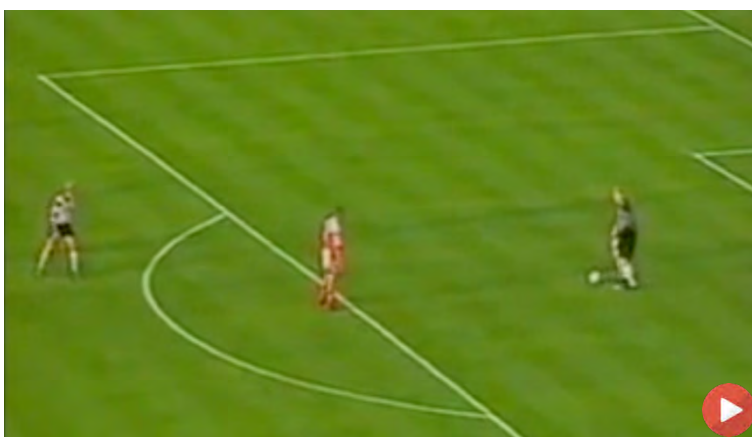


Figura 146 – Peter Schmeichel durante Danimarca vs Germania Europeo 1992

that the Danes rightfully won, but the match was so tedious that only a few hours after its conclusion, the rule change was hastily approved, and the new regulation was adopted starting from the Olympics in Barcelona scheduled for fifteen days later. Many consider this regulatory change a **watershed** moment in **modern football**.

With the regulation change, at first, goalkeepers faced enormous difficulties because every time a back pass was made, the concern was to dispose of the ball as quickly as possible. Defenders also encountered challenges, as they could no longer safely pass the ball to the goalkeeper and often found themselves having to clear the ball into touch or kick it as far as possible.

However, over the years, goalkeepers overcame these difficulties and showed increasingly evident improvements from a technical perspective, reaching a point where modern keepers such as **Alisson** (Liverpool), **Ederson** (Manchester City), **Neuer** (Bayern Munich), **Maignan** (Milan), **Ter Stegen** (Barcelona), and **Onana** (Manchester United), just to name a few, are as **technically** skilled as outfield players and can consistently initiate play from the back and even provide assists to forwards.

Another regulation change that further increased the need for goalkeepers to be able to play the ball with their feet is the more recent adjustment related to **regaining play after a goal kick**.

Since July 2019, the new regulation has been in effect: the ball becomes playable immediately after it is taken, without needing to wait for it to exit the penalty area, as required by the old rule. Players from the team taking the goal kick can, therefore, receive the ball inside the area. This change was designed to speed up the resumption of play, preventing the continuous interruptions allowed by the old rule, and also to facilitate the build-up from the back. Until recently, a goal kick had to be retaken every time a player entered the area to receive the ball, perhaps intentionally to escape the opponent's pressure. This modification allowed the receiving player to control the ball farther from defenders, providing more **space** and **time** for the play. Consequently, the main effect of the rule change has been **to facilitate a more controlled game** at the start of the action.

Thus, in just a few years, the goalkeeper has seen their role transformed from primarily stopping opposing shots to becoming a key player in the build-up. The **modern goalkeeper** therefore needs to possess essential technical-tactical characteristics necessary for today's football, which I will describe below.

- **Receive and pass with both feet – Play both short and long.**

A goalkeeper must now be capable of **playing well with both feet**. Opposing teams often organize themselves to try to direct the play toward the goalkeeper's weaker foot.

This strategy is carried out with targeted pressing runs by the attackers. In the image alongside, Donnarumma is seen in a pressing situation by the Czech Republic (friendly match in June 2021), where he is forced to play



Figure 147 – Donnarumma's long clearance for Immobile. Italy vs Czech Republic 2021

the ball with his left foot (his weaker foot) under the pressure of the attacker and decides to go for a long play to Immobile to exploit the numerical advantage against the three opposing defenders.

Choose between playing short or long has become a fundamental characteristic for today's goalkeeper. In pressing situations, often in numerical equality, if the goalkeeper is pressed, it means that a teammate has freed themselves. The goalkeeper must be able to read the situation and quickly understand what the most functional play is to find the free man, whether through a **short** pass, a **long** pass, or a **combined** play (seeking the third man).

- **Through balls – Direct play.**

A modern goalkeeper is expected not only to be able to pass the ball laterally to teammates but also to play vertically by making **through balls** or key passes (ball

transmissions that surpass an opponent's pressure line). The through ball is used, as seen in the following image, to find the player behind the first line of opposing pressure.



Figure 148 – Donnarumma's through ball. Bosnia vs Italy 2020

An important detail for the goalkeeper regarding the through pass to the marked player, aiming to subsequently find the free third man through a combination, is to **play the ball to the foot that is farthest from the marker**. In the following image, it is the blue number 9 who makes a pressing run toward the goalkeeper, making the white team's free man the number 6. In this situation, when executing the through ball, the goalkeeper should seek the right foot (the one farthest from the marking player number 10) of the playmaker, who, positioning himself with a semi-open posture, must try to make a first-touch pass, if possible, to the free man (number 6). Often, in the play involving the third man, the mistake is made by the number 6, who receives the ball too deep, allowing the blue attacker (number 9) to come back behind the ball line as a

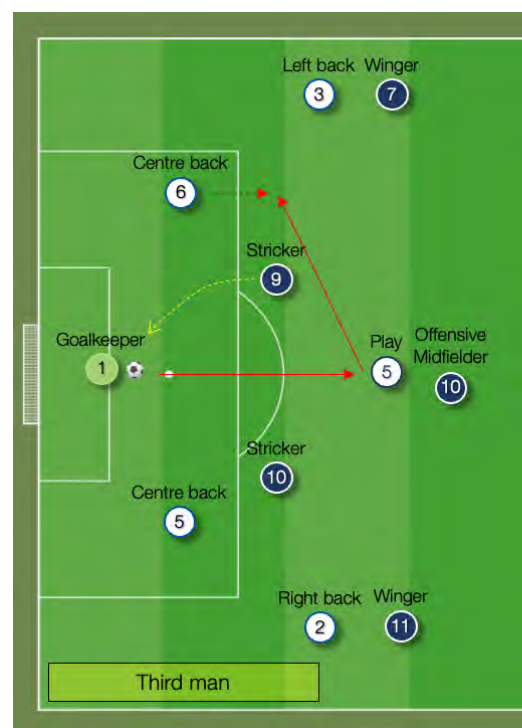


Figure 149 – Third man to unmark the defender

secondary response. Instead, if the white player number 6 interprets the reading of the open space well, he should move beyond the pressure line.

Another choice that the building goalkeeper can make during the build-up phase is to opt for a **direct play** seeking, with a long but soft pass, the forward who comes to meet the ball while **moving away** from the marking, as shown in the figure below.



Figure 150 – Donnarumma for Scamacca. England vs Italy 2022

Alternatively, one can seek the space behind the opposing line, especially if it is high, and deliver the ball directly into the path of a teammate, as shown in the next image. In this match, Barcelona's goalkeeper **Ter Stegen**, against a very high line from Real Sociedad, executed several direct attacks on the continuous deep runs of the Blaugrana forwards⁵¹.

⁵¹ Dario Saltari – Ter Stegen ormai è il libero del Barcellona – www.ultimouomo.com/ter-stegen-barcellona-libero

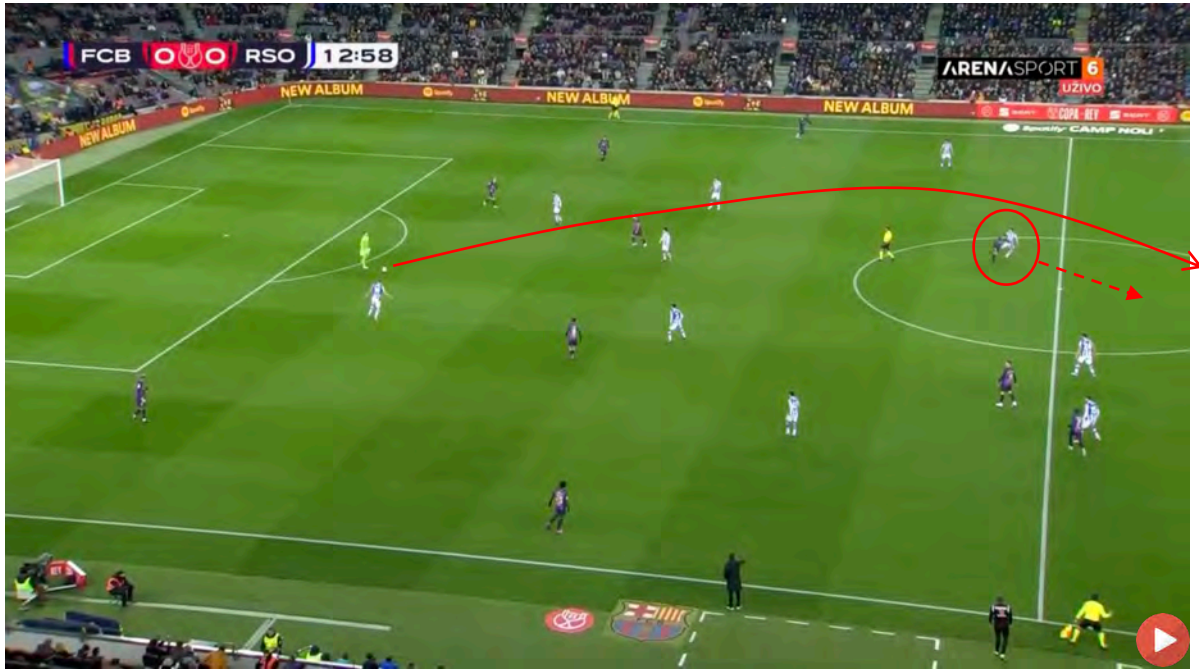


Figure 151 – Ter Stegen direct attack. Barcelona vs Real Sociedad 2022/23

In the match between Brighton and Brentford in April 2023, which ended 3-3, the team coached by De Zerbi equalized at 1-1 with an assist from English goalkeeper Steele for the beautiful off-the-ball movement of Mitoma.

This type of play is increasingly present in modern matches, and it's worth mentioning some goalkeepers who provide assists, such as Ederson, Alisson, and in Serie A, Maignan and Provedel. Often, this play resembles that of a **quarterback** in American football.



Figure 152 – Steele assist on a direct attack. Brighton vs Brentford 2023

This direct play is often even sought during **goal kicks**. With no offside rule, attackers can lower the opposing defensive line, stretching the team. Many modern goalkeepers have a very long throw, with Pickford from England being a prime example, who often put us in difficulty with his long goal kicks when we faced him with the Italian national team.



Figure 153 – Ederson assist on a direct attack. Liverpool vs Manchester City 2022

- **Off the ball support.**

The modern goalkeeper, as I mentioned, becomes an extra man in the build-up phase and must know how to **move off the line** to position themselves as a passing option for the teammate in possession of the ball. This approach is even more crucial if the ball carrier is forced to play with their back to the opponent's goal and has few passing options, as illustrated in the situation in the figure below.

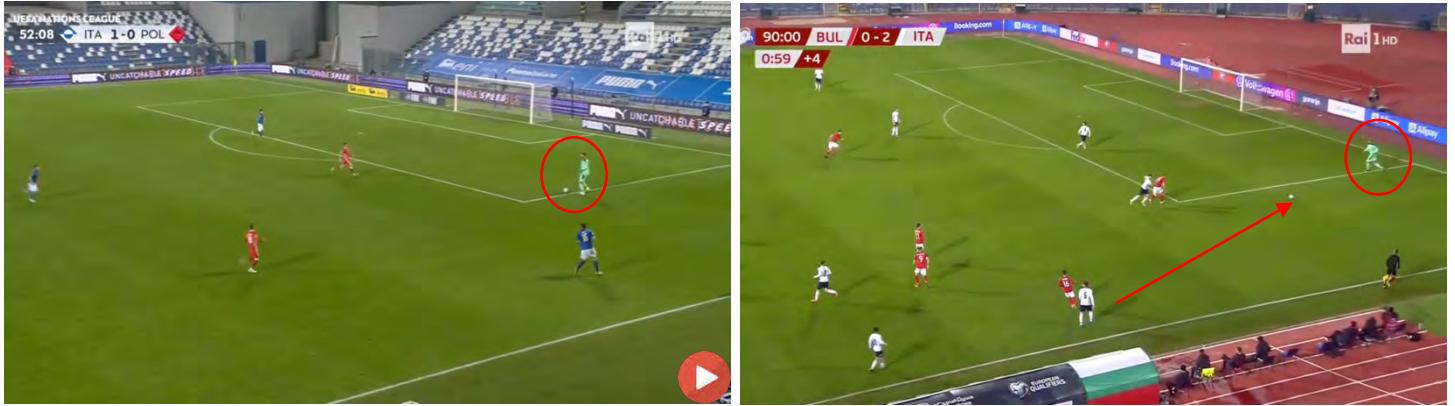


Figure 154 – Donnarumma in two situations of positioning off the goal

The goalkeeper must also be a solution to be the third man. In the following image, after a pass from the defender to the playmaker, it is the goalkeeper who becomes the free man and needs to position himself high ready to receive the ball.

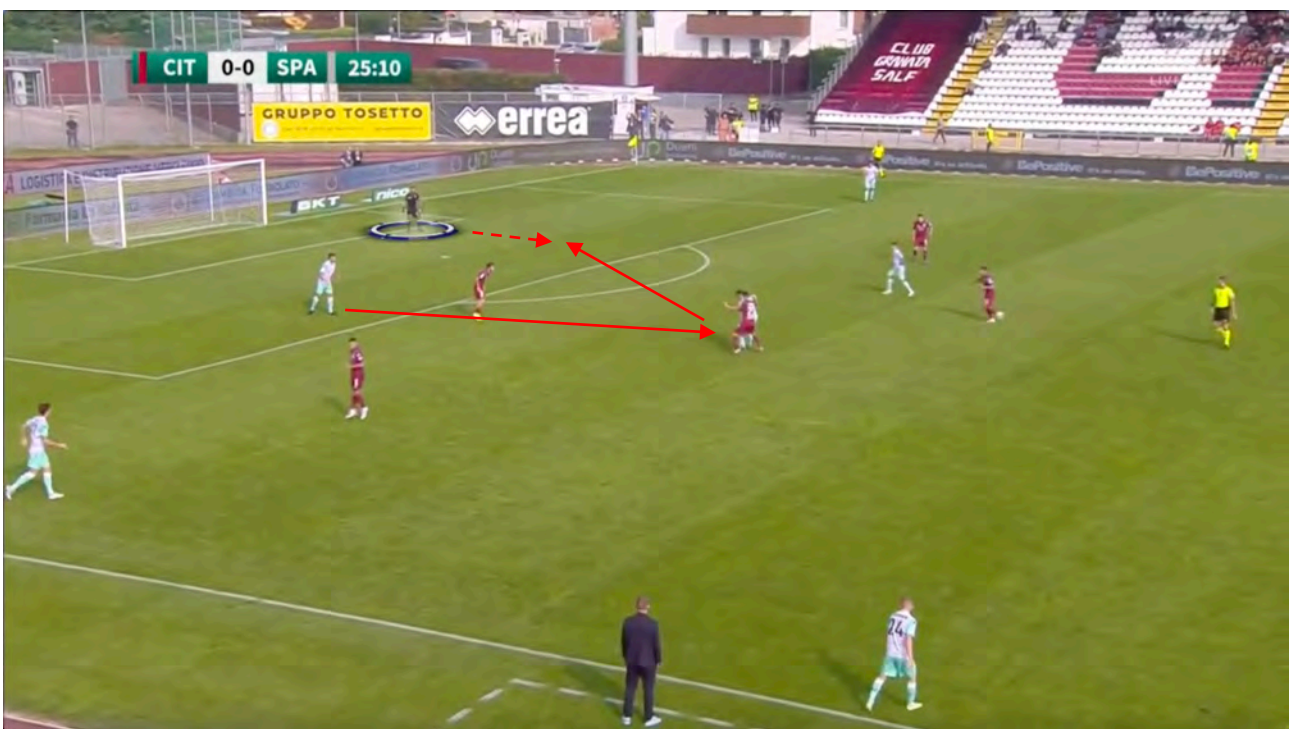


Figure 155 – Best goalkeeper movement to receive the ball as the third man. Cittadella vs Spal 2023

- **To build play outside the area.**

Beyond technical qualities for ball management, the modern goalkeeper must possess **playmaker** characteristics, as many teams now use their goalkeeper as a full-fledged builder, increasingly seeing him positioned between the two center-backs. The true **playmaker goalkeeper** knows how to position himself high, playing even 10 or 20

meters outside his penalty area. A goalkeeper very skilled in this role is undoubtedly the Cameroonian **Onana**, now at Manchester United. In the image below, during the 2018 World Cup match between Cameroon and Switzerland, the goalkeeper is seen in a position even higher than one of his teammates, in the classic space occupied by the team's playmaker.



Figure 156 – Onana in build-up play in a position higher than the center-backs. Switzerland vs Cameroon 2018

Onana in the 2023 Champions League final against Manchester City touched the ball 31 times, the same as left center-back Bastoni.

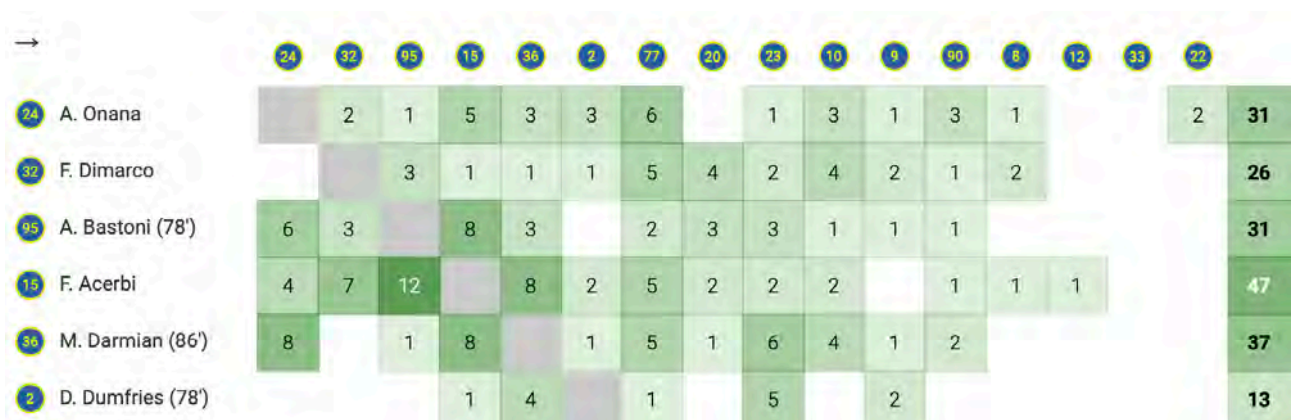


Figure 157 – Ball touches by Inter players in the 2023 Champions League final against Manchester City

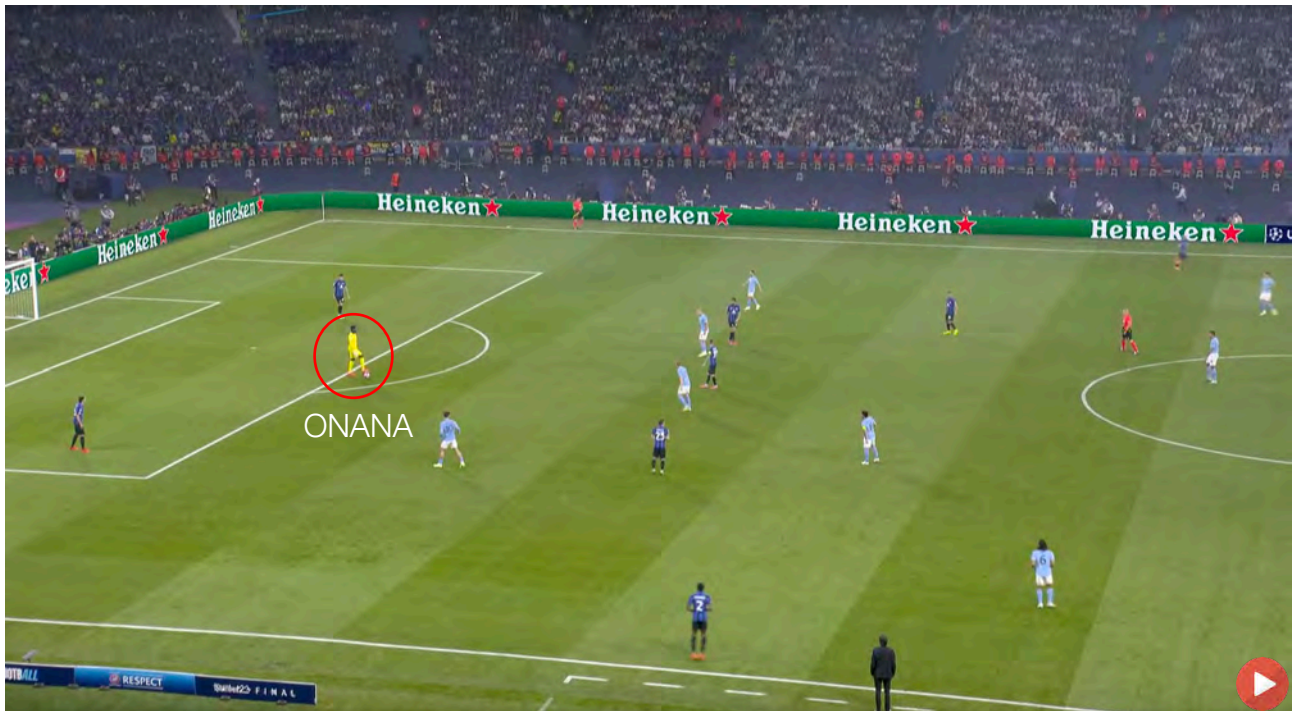


Figure 158 – Onana in build-up play. Manchester City vs Inter 2023

To develop a goalkeeper's technical confidence and courage to play high during the build-up phase, it is essential to start from a **young age**. One idea is to introduce the rule of **non-specificity of roles** at least until the age of 12, constantly rotating who is in goal, thereby encouraging more ball touches. In the image below, you can see the goalkeeper of the German U16 national team in action.



Figure 159 – Goalkeeper of the Germany U16 youth team

To confirm this incredible evolution of the goalkeeper's role, it is useful to reference an interview in *La Gazzetta dello Sport* dated November 15, 2018, where, in response to a journalist's question to **Giampiero Gasperini**, coach of Atalanta, regarding what a tactical innovation of the future would be, he replied: *"The goalkeeper stepping between the two center-backs to initiate play thus gains another player for construction. You will see, in the future, goalkeepers will be selected more for their feet than for their hands"*⁵².

The qualitative increase in goalkeepers' use of the ball with their feet is also demonstrated by statistical data. In 2017, journalist Matteo Pinci of *La Repubblica* wrote in his analysis⁵³ that in the last five years, **goalkeeper touches had increased by 20%**, noting the paradox that in the match between Verona and Atalanta, no teammate touched the ball more than Nicolas, who completed the match with 66 touches, accounting for almost 6% of the team's total possession. In a study I conducted with Vanni di Febo, data analyst for the national football team, it was observed that the percentage of passes made by goalkeepers had risen to 8,1% in the 2021/22 season, with an increase in short passes and a decrease in long passes.



Figure 160 – Study of goalkeeper passing percentages of the total in Serie A 2022/23. Study conducted with Vanni Di Febo

⁵² Luigi Garlando – *La Gazzetta dello Sport* – www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Serie-A/Atalanta/14-11-2018/atalanta-gasperini-champions-ci-provo-l-inter-buttera-giu-juve-310435628168.shtml

⁵³ Matteo Pinci – *Il portiere fa il regista* – www.repubblica.it/sport/2017/10/27/news/il_portiere_fa_il_regista_negli_ultimi_5_anni_il_20_di_tocchi_in_piu_-301061729

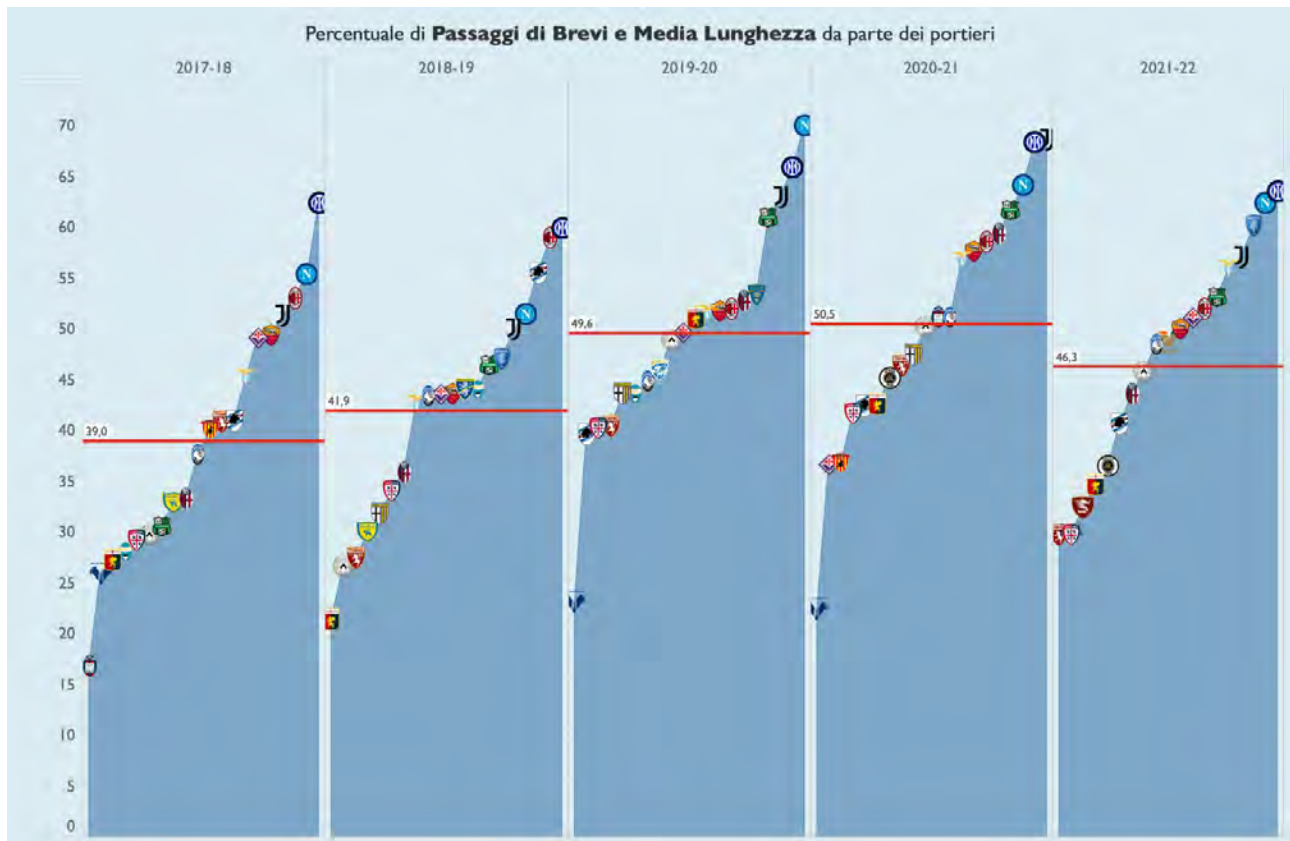


Figure 161 – Study of goalkeeper passing percentages by team in Serie A 2022/23. Study conducted with Vanni Di Febo

In addition to regulatory changes, new principles of football have also contributed to the evolution of the modern goalkeeper. The principle of building from the back with the aim of being pressed by opponents and then 'flushing them out' to create more space to attack behind them has been a fundamental factor in the emergence of the **playmaker goalkeeper**. Especially against man-to-man pressing actions, the goalkeeper has become the extra man in the build-up phase. For instance, if we look at the match between Atalanta and Inter from the 2021/22 season, which ended 0-1, Inter's goalkeeper Handanović maintained possession for over 4 minutes, with 69 touches (sixth on the team) and completed 56 passes, including 5 key passes (third player in the match).

In addition to the ball phase I mentioned earlier, the goalkeeper has also changed the way they defend and cover space.

With teams that play according to the principle of man-marking or with teams that favor a shorter setup characterized by a high defensive line, the goalkeeper becomes a crucial player for **covering the opponent's depth**. He is essentially an element that must work with the defensive line almost as if he were an **additional sweeper**.

One of the first **sweeper-keepers** in the history of football was **Gyula Grosics**, the goalkeeper of the great Hungary team of 1954, credited with the pioneering of the additional defender role due to his ability to venture outside his area and his ability with the ball at his feet.

Another sweeper-keeper was the Dutch **Jan Jongbloed**, goalkeeper for the Total Football team of

Rinus Michels. The goalkeeper, who wore the number 8 jersey (the numbers were assigned in strict alphabetical order except for Crujff's number 14), often touched the ball more with his feet and head than with his hands, and perhaps for this reason, he preferred not to wear gloves. He was the starting goalkeeper in both the 1974 and 1978 World Cups, the latter at the age of 38.⁵⁴



Figure 162 – Jan Jongbloed in the Netherlands team

One of the modern goalkeepers who, in recent years, has transformed the role of the goalkeeper, becoming the greatest sweeper-keeper in history, is the German **Manuel Neuer**. In the World Cup match of 2014 in Brazil during the round of 16, Germany faced Algeria, and the Bayern goalkeeper touched the **ball 19 times outside his penalty area**, often stopping opponents in open play (with his feet). Additionally, he launched the attack by completing 42 passes with an accuracy of 79%, covering a total distance of 5,5 kilometers on the field. That night, the man in gloves ceased to be an extension tied to the rest of the team and became, in every sense, **an outfield player**: a tactical surplus capable of maintaining the defense high at 40 meters from the goal and abandoning the area, not only to stop the opposing attacker and clear the ball, but also to recycle

⁵⁴ Roberto Scarcella – Jan Jongbloed il bastian contrario – www.ultimouomo.com/jan-jongbloed-portiere-biografia

possession and restart the play with numerical superiority. The next day, the German press celebrated with a witty headline: *“The best sweeper since Beckenbauer.”*

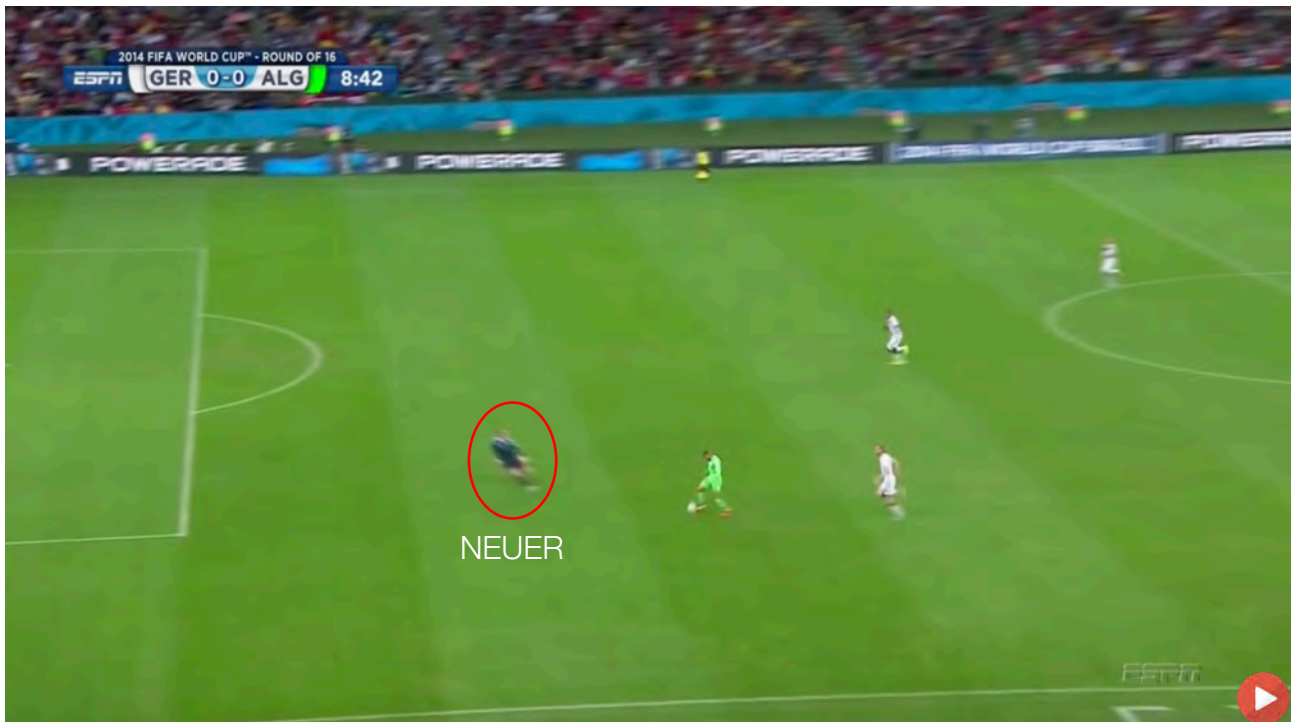


Figure 163 – Neuer covering the depth. Germany vs Algeria 2014

One of the most significant innovations introduced by Guardiola in the 2022/23 season, during which he triumphed with Manchester City by winning the “Treble” (Premier League, Champions League, and FA Cup), was the use of the “**false center-back**”. This involved deploying a central defender as a playmaker during the possession phase. Not an invention per se, but rather a product of extensive study, application, and a connection to his past. This mechanism was previously implemented by Crujff, who used midfielder Miquel Nadal—uncle of tennis player Rafa Nadal—to start from defense and push up to the playmaker's line. At that time, the playmaker was Guardiola himself⁵⁵.

Last season, despite changing some players in the squad, Guardiola maintained the tactical positional structure from the previous year, which included the use of "inverted full-backs" (to be analyzed in the next chapter), another of his tactical innovations dating back to his time at Bayern Munich.

Analyzing the early Premier League matches, we observe how the positional structure often led to a 2+3 build-up, with the two full-backs moving into midfield alongside the holding midfielder. This approach was adopted in the opening weeks of the league, where Guardiola frequently utilized Walker on the right and Joao Cancelo on the left as full-backs stepping into midfield.

In the Champions League match against Borussia Dortmund in mid-September, England international John **Stones** was deployed as a right-back instead of Walker. The 2+3 build-up consisted of Aké and Akanji forming a back two, with a line of three ahead made up of Cancelo (positioned slightly wider on the left), Rodri, and Stones.

⁵⁵ www.fcinternews.it/rassegna/i-corsera-i-manchester-city-inter-la-mossa-stones-e-quei-9-6-metri-che-possono-fare-la-differenza-927494

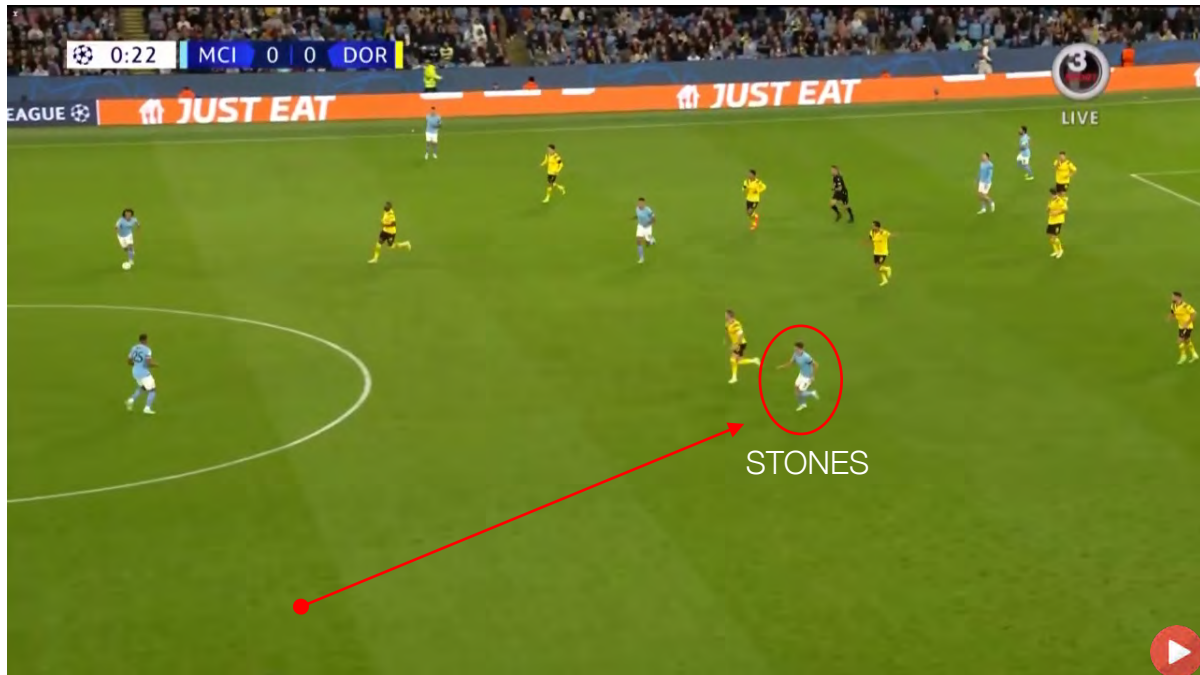


Figure 164 – Stones' positioning as an additional holding midfielder in Manchester City's 2+3 build-up

A little past the midway point of the season, in April, following the World Cup break, Guardiola—after frequently using Stones as a "false right-back"—experimented for the first time with the “falso centrale”. This was first seen against **Liverpool** in the Premier League and then against **Bayern Munich** in the first leg of the Champions League quarterfinals. Against the German side, during the defensive phase, the English player dropped into a back four as the **right-sided center-back** alongside Ruben Dias, with Akanji playing as the right-back and Aké as the left-back.

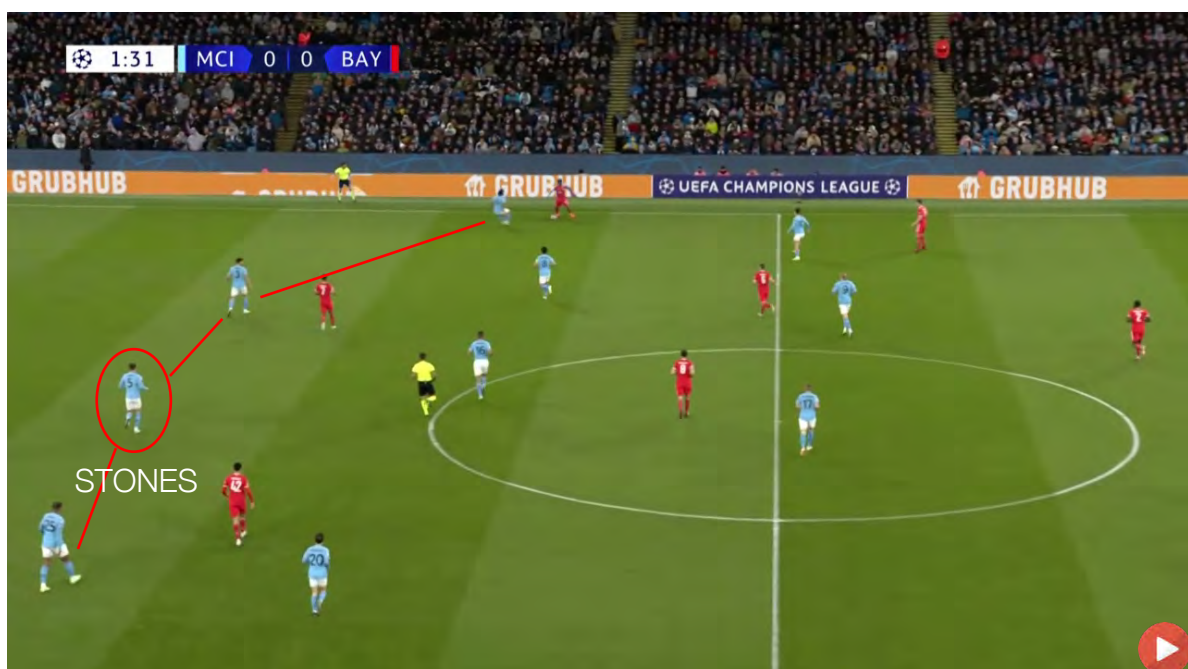


Figure 165 – Stones' position in the defensive phase within the defensive line as the right center-back

In the possession phase, the center-back moved up to play alongside Rodri and, in certain situations, even pushed higher up the field. This approach provided Manchester City with effective ball circulation, as Stones had significantly improved his playmaking abilities while operating as a “false full-back”. At the same time, this strategy ensured defensive balance when Bayern Munich had possession.

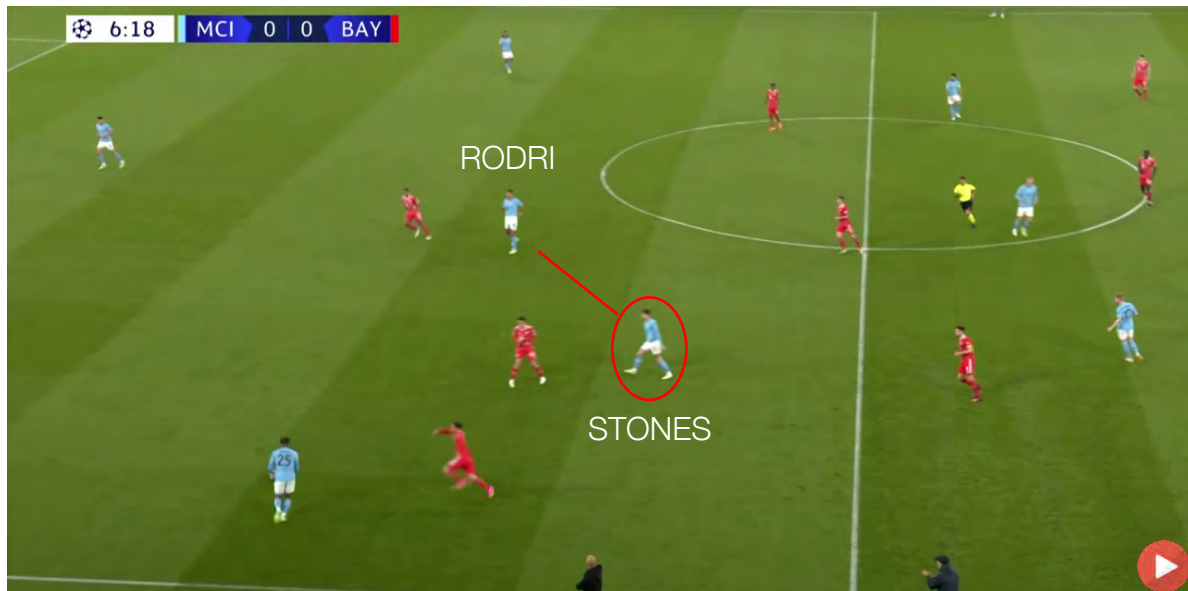


Figure 166 – Stones' position in the offensive phase as a holding midfielder in Manchester City's 2+3 build-up

To illustrate how difficult it was to define Manchester City's playing style using the numbers of a basic formation, some blogs described it as a 3-4-2-1, while others referred to it as a 4-2-3-1.

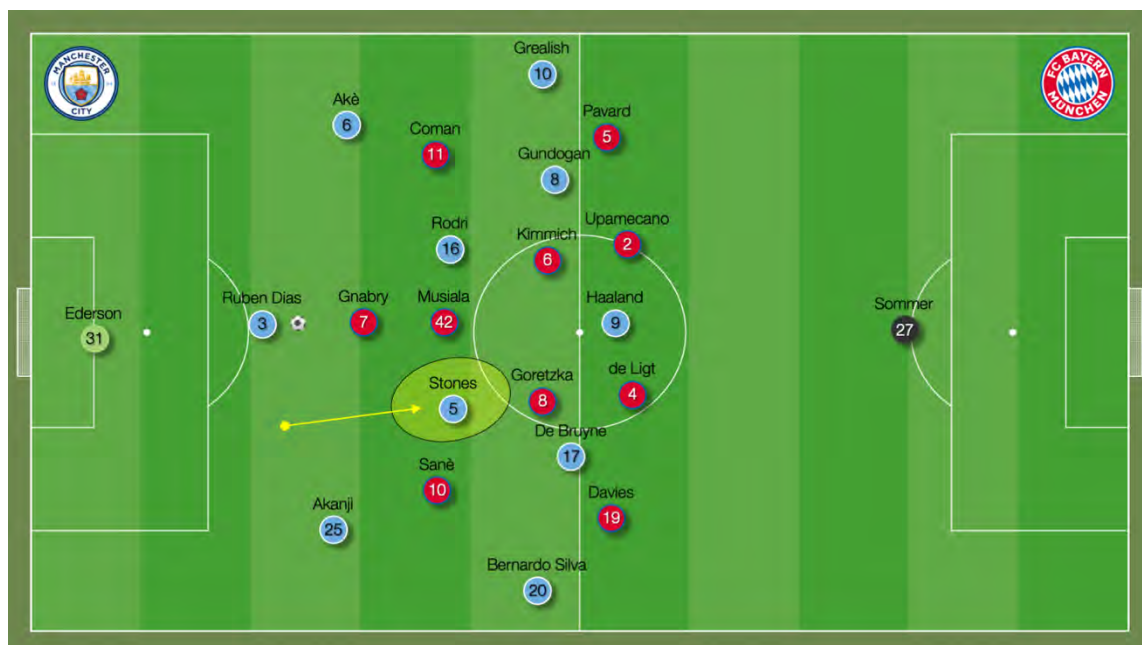


Figure 167 – Tactical situation with Stones' false center-back movement. Manchester City vs Bayern Munich 2023



Figure 168 – Average positioning in the defensive and offensive phases of Stones

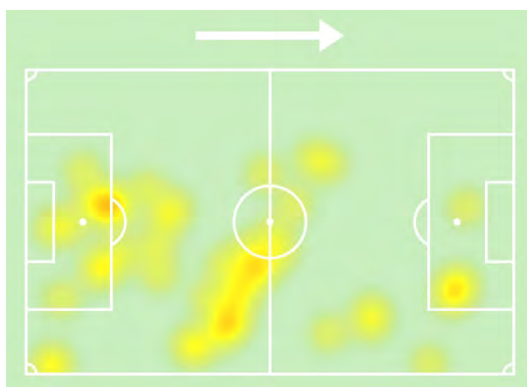


Figure 169 – Stones' heatmap vs Bayern Munich

In that match, Stones' dual role was evident even in his touch map, which showed activity both as a **central defender** and as a right-sided defensive midfielder. At the end of the game, he was awarded the Man of the Match by UEFA, which commented in a Twitter post, “*John Stones in the hybrid role*”.

At the end of the match, in his post-match interview with BT Sports, Stones said, “*In terms of positioning, it’s been a great learning curve for me. It’s not something that comes naturally; I’ve had to learn every movement*”. Thanks to players like John Stones, who are capable of maintaining **control over space** and opponents, we have come to understand the hyper-rationalistic spirit of Guardiola's teams.



Figure 170 – John Stones with the MVP award

As Sam Lee pointed out a few days ago in a detailed article on The Athletic, **29 of Stones' 67 passes** against Liverpool **were made first-time**, and according to data collected by Opta, he lost possession on just **6,7%** of his touches—the lowest percentage in the Premier League among players with at least 150 touches. The image alongside illustrates the average position of his touches in the period following the World Cup break, showcasing a role that blends defensive and midfield responsibilities.⁵⁶

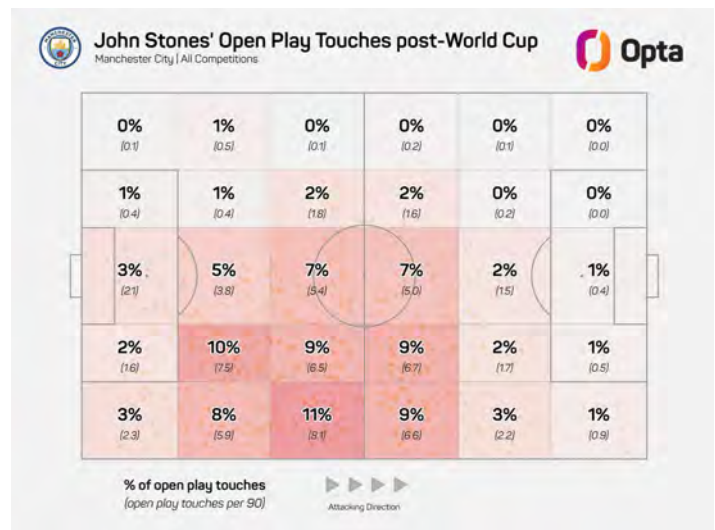


Figure 171 – Touches in play by Stones

The hybrid role of Stones is, after all, merely the latest of Guardiola's attempts to impose order on **chaos**. It is as much a tactical move as it is a philosophical and idealistic one: a choice aimed not just at altering reality or winning football matches, but at recreating the world itself under a **rational order**. Eliminating randomness, developing football like chess, governed by a rigorous swarm of preordained moves⁵⁷.

Stones' positioning in this role also enhances Manchester City's **balance** when they lose possession. The English player is highly intelligent tactically, often positioning himself correctly even without the ball, intercepting passing lanes of opponents. Notably, during the game against Bayern Munich, the "hybrid" Englishman focused on disrupting Bayern's attempts to build play through Musiala.

Stones' transformation is, however, one of the most memorable, effective, and perhaps divisive developments. Guardiola entrusted his system to the simultaneous presence of **four center-backs** skilled in individual duels, defensive transitions, and technical play capable of maintaining calm and composure on the ball. This approach significantly reduced the number of opposition counter-attacks, providing Manchester City with unprecedented control over the game.

⁵⁶ @OptaJoe – www.x.com/optajoe

⁵⁷ Michele Cecere – John Stones: il primo falso centrale – www.sportellate.it/2023/04/20/john-stones-il-primo-falso-centrale



Figure 172 – Stones' position in the defensive phase, ready to close down Musiala

The pinnacle of Guardiola's latest innovation was showcased in the 2023 Champions League final against Inter, where the Spanish coach fully trusted Stones' fluid ability to adapt to any position, role, or task on the pitch⁵⁸.

In the final, Manchester City lined up with **four center-backs** Akanji, Stones, Ruben Dias, and Aké from right to left. However, surprisingly, Stones' position during the possession phase was not alongside Rodri as a holding midfielder in the usual 3+2 build-up. Instead, the Englishman played as a right-sided Mezzala in a 3-diamond-3 structure, reminiscent of Bielsa's style.

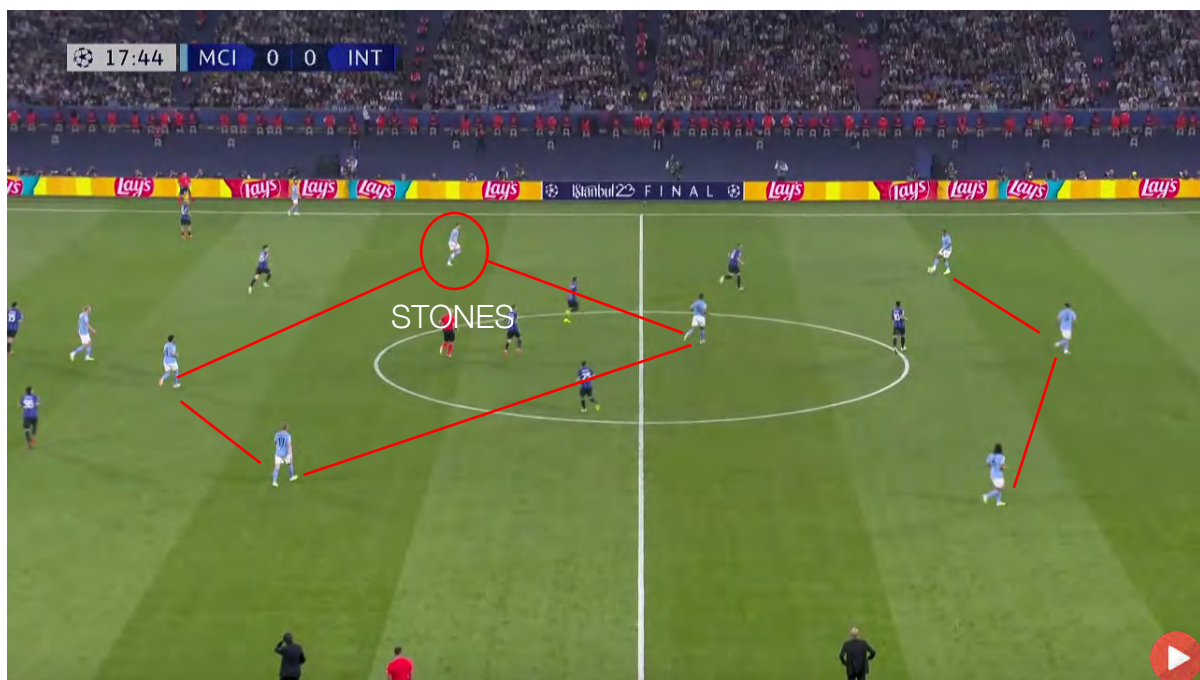


Figure 173 – Stones' positioning in the attacking phase as right midfielder. Manchester City vs Inter 2023

⁵⁸ Marco Lai – John Stones è diventato Beckenbauer? – www.ultimouomo.com/john-stones-manchester-city-come-guardiola-lo-ha-trasformato-in-centrocampista



Figure 174 – Tactical positioning of Stones in the attacking phase as right midfielder. Manchester City vs Inter 2023

The performance is of the highest level: 33 passes completed out of 37, but above all, the incredible stat of 6 **successful dribbles out of 6 attempted**, as reported by Opta. The last player to complete so many dribbles in a Champions League final was Lionel Messi in 2015 against Juventus. What impresses is precisely the ease with which he pulls off these moves, which should not be part of his usual repertoire.

Guardiola has managed to surprise once again with a tactical innovation that could be adopted by many clubs across Europe and the world in the coming years. His style of play is in constant evolution, thanks in part to his “overthinking”, a trait often attributed to him by the English press. He has gone from playing with a defensive line consisting of two central **midfielders** (Fernandinho and Rodri) and two attacking full-backs (Joao Cancelo and Mendy), as seen against Crystal Palace in the 2019/20 season, to a defensive line made up of four central defenders.



Figure 175 – Opta data of Stones vs Inter



Figure 176 – Defensive line with two midfielders as center-backs

The “false central defender” strategy has also been developed in Italy by Vincenzo Italiano, coach of Fiorentina, who in certain matches has introduced the central defender/playmaker role. In build-up play, **Igor** or **Martinez Quarta** move vertically forward, positioning themselves as midfielders, while the two full-backs tuck in, and the two “true” midfielders position themselves wider, closer to the wingers who occupy the width of the pitch.

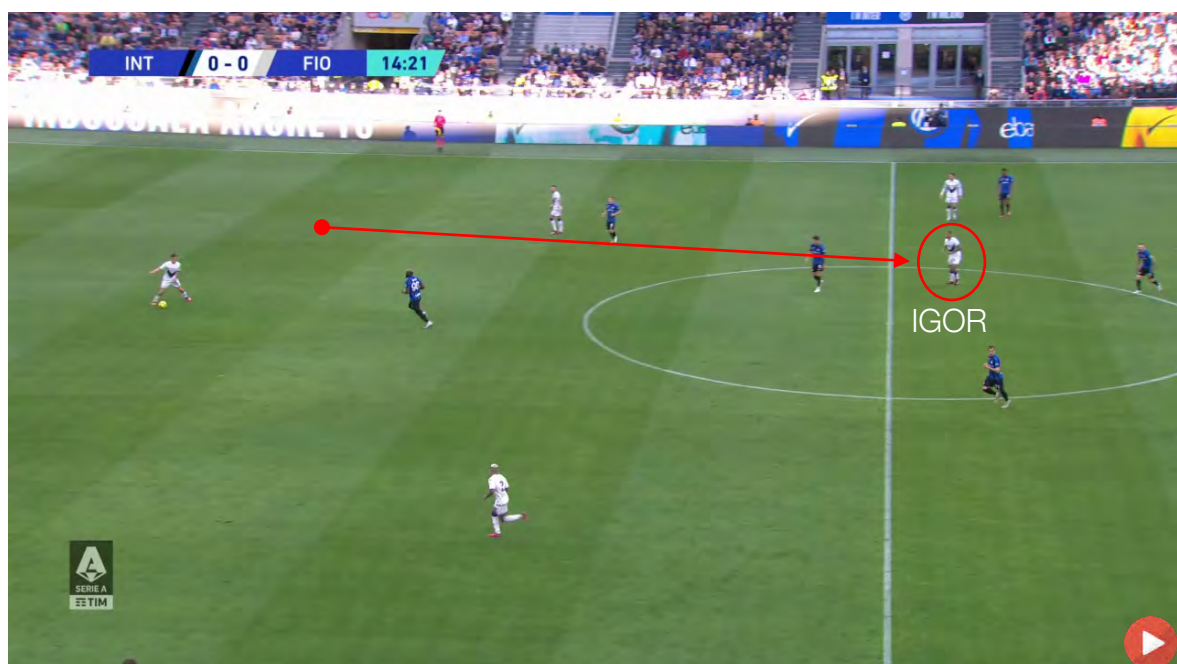


Figure 177 – Igor's “false center-back” movement

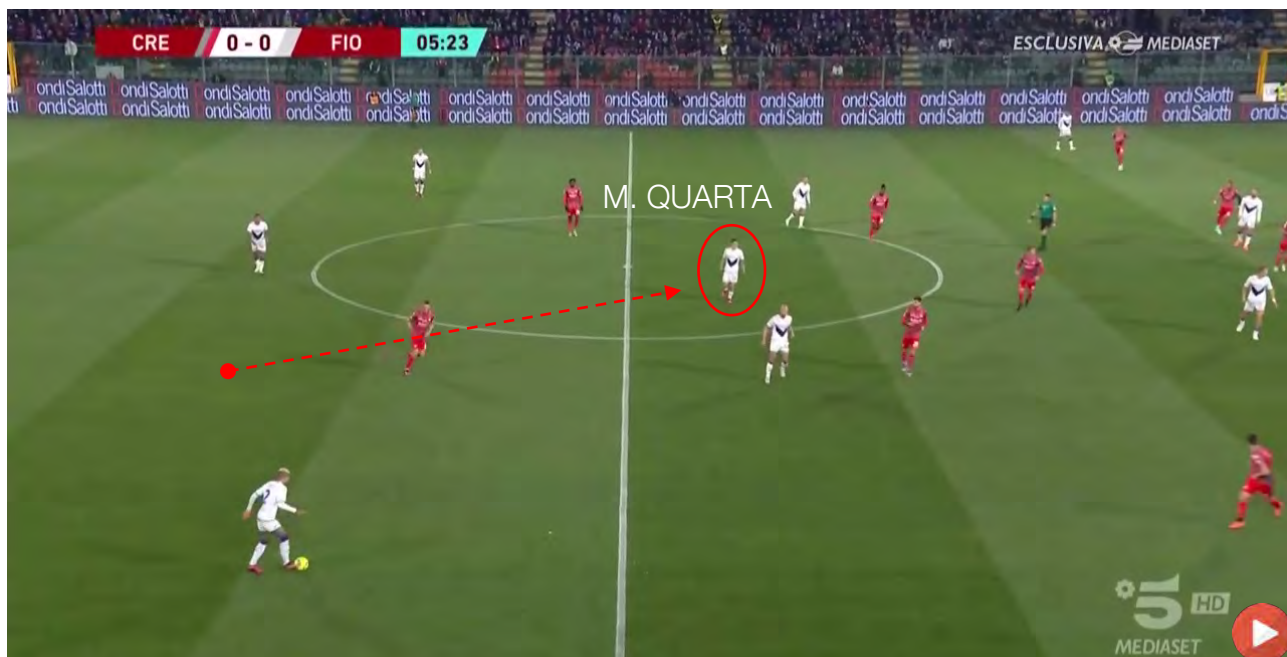


Figure 178 – Martínez Quarta's "false center-back" movement

In fact, Italiano explained the reasoning behind this solution in an interview, stating: “We try to create more *passing lanes in midfield* when our usual sources of play are blocked. The central defenders are capable of playing the ball, and when necessary, they can initiate the build-up”⁵⁹. Central defenders positioned as playmakers during possession are often used by **Simone Inzaghi**, coach of Inter, but this positioning is more aimed at disrupting the opponents' man-to-man pressing rather than utilizing the false central defenders in the build-up phase.

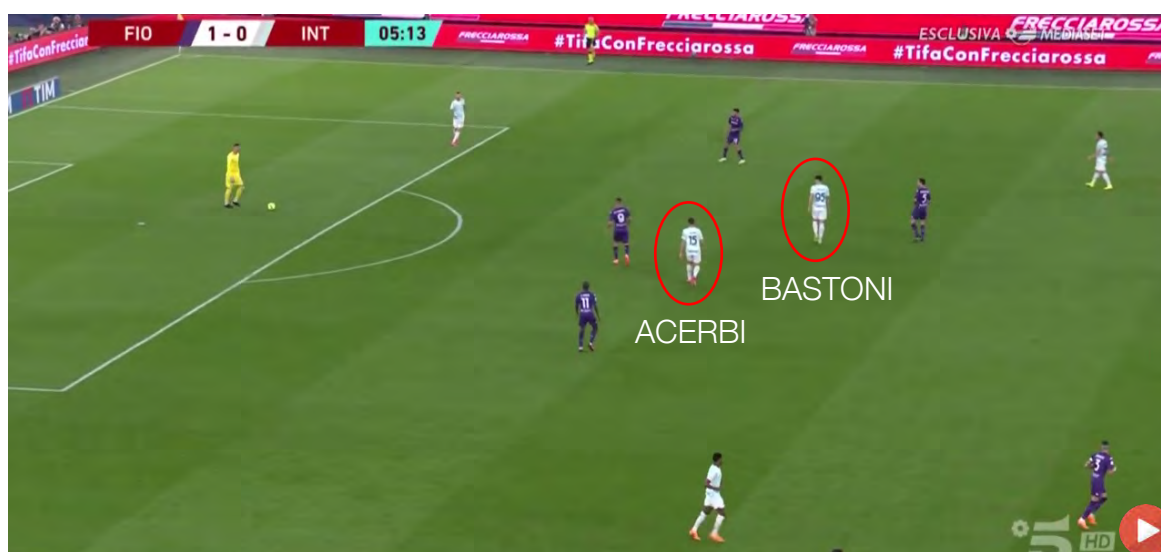


Figure 179 – Acerbi and Bastoni's high positioning to disrupt Fiorentina's man-to-man pressing

⁵⁹ www.labaroviola.com/italiano-i-centrali-possono-impostare-nzola-grandi-risultati-insieme-gli-voglio-bene/208174

Connected to the previous chapter on the "false central defender," it's important to discuss the evolution of **central defenders** or wide defenders (in three-man defenses), who are increasingly becoming more **mobile** and fluid in their positioning. In modern football, where **functions are prioritized over traditional roles**⁶⁰, we see more and more defenders acting like deep-lying playmakers. In the past, defensive midfielders, especially older ones, were often dropped a few meters back into the defensive line. Today, it's the defenders who are pushing forward, playing several meters higher up the pitch, and becoming true builders and **playmakers**.

Atalanta's coach, Gasperini, commenting on the tactical development of modern football, states: *"Football is in constant evolution, it's never static. It's not just a matter of numbers, but of evolutions and adjustments that change the characteristics of teams. What stands out this year is the greater participation of goalkeepers and **the involvement of all defenders in the build-up play**, often even pushing forward. I think the next moves will need to come from the attackers, who struggle to be as dynamic as the defenders are at the moment. Today, teams try to create **numerical superiority** in midfield with the inclusion of defenders, which will force attackers to move more".*



Football tactics began to take shape with the Cambridge Pyramid at the end of the 19th century, in the 2-3-5 system, where the two defenders had the sole task of kicking the **ball hard** and staying in position: "Kick and rush", **long ball and run**. Vittorio Pozzo's method and the system of the Grande Torino, which transformed football into a passing game, kept defenders focused solely on **defensive duties**. This continued even more in the 1950s with the introduction of the **sweeper** and "**catenaccio**", where defenders were expected to only defend. The modern era began in the 1960s when Mago Herrera unleashed the elegant stride of Giacinto **Facchetti** on the left, a full-back who scored

⁶⁰ Antonio Gagliardi

59 goals for Inter. In the 1974 World Cup-winning Germany, Franz **Beckenbauer** advanced centrally from defense to initiate the attack. During these years, many teams played **asymmetrically**, with the **attacking left-back** (Facchetti) and a **more defensive right-back** (Burginich). This was due to the fact that the direct opponent of the left-back was often an offensive winger (the number 11), a true touchline player, while the opponent of the right-back was a more central striker who, in defense, would leave space.

With Arrigo **Sacchi**, who was influenced by Dutch football, a small revolution took place, leading the right-back (Tassotti) to break free from purely defensive duties and explore more offensive zones. Over time, **asymmetries** between the two full-backs became common to maintain defensive balance and exploit the players' characteristics. Mourinho's Inter, which won the treble in 2010, played with Maicon on the right acting as a winger and Chivu on the left, who stayed more defensive to support Samuel and Lucio.

The recent trend of **high-intensity man-to-man pressing** has increased the need for defenders who are skilled with the ball to break free from opposition pressure. In the 2023/24 season, the surprising Bologna under Thiago Motta built play through Beukema and Calafiori, while Atalanta used Scalvini and Kolassinac in similar roles. At Inter, Simone Inzaghi replaced the marking defender Skriniar with Pavard, who is more involved in build-up play.

In recent years, with the rise of three-man defenses and increasingly attacking wing-backs, we have become accustomed to seeing goals scored **from one wing-back to another**, such as the link-up between Conti and Spinazzola at Atalanta, and later Hateboer and Gosens. However, it's Inter under Simone Inzaghi who, thanks to its **positional fluidity**, has been able to evolve. First, they showed a goal from one wing-back to another (Dumfries to Di Marco), then a goal from **a center-back to a wing-back** (Bastoni to Dumfries), and most recently, a goal from **one center-back to another** (Bastoni to Bisseck) in a match against Bologna.

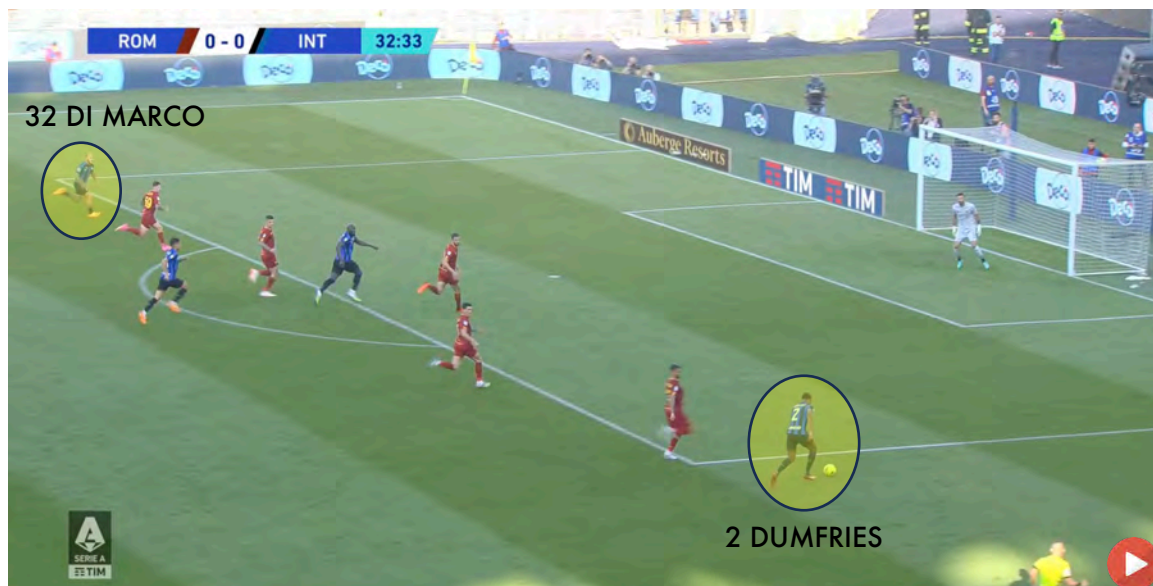


Figure 180 – Simone Inzaghi's Inter scoring from one full back to the other

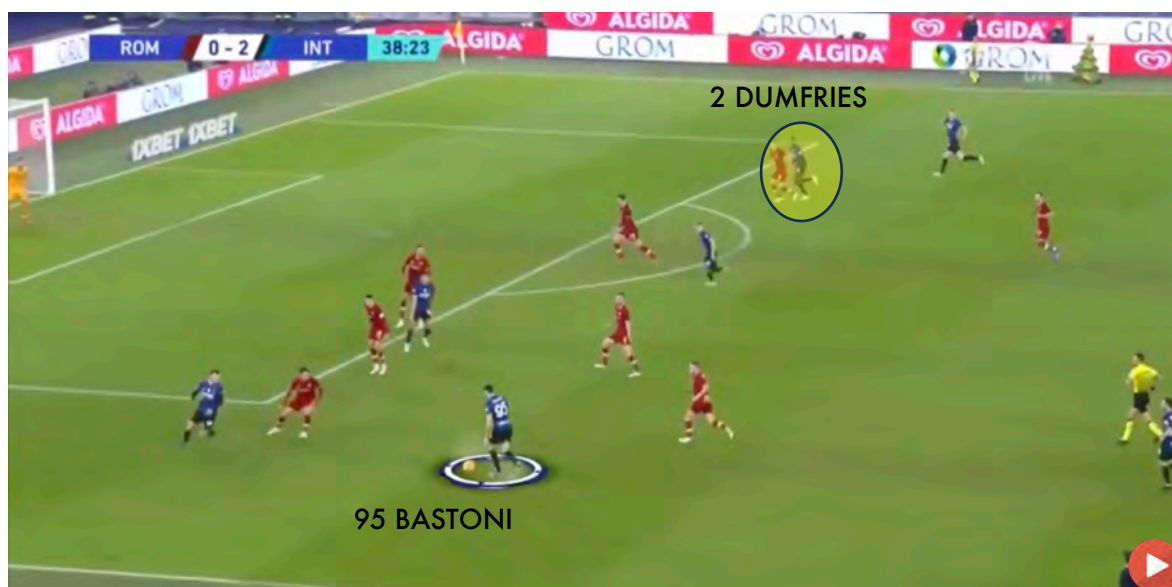


Figure 181 – Simone Inzaghi's Inter scoring from center back to full back



Figure 182 – Simone Inzaghi's Inter scoring from left center back to right center back

In an interview a few months before Bisseck's goal, there was an exchange between Parolo, former player of Inzaghi, and the Inter coach. The midfielder asked, "At Lazio, you offered a dinner for the first goal from wing-back to wing-back. At Inter, what are you planning to do, a goal from center-back to center-back for how offensive you're getting them to play?" Inzaghi replied, "I should offer more than one dinner to these guys. A goal from center-back to center-back is a bit tough, but from center-back to wing-back, that's possible. Bisseck's pass and Dimarco's goal, that can happen".

In this sense, the goal scored by the German player can be seen as a **symbol of the tactical evolution** in modern football. We have moved from the old-fashioned central defenders, rigid and focused more on marking the opponent than on playing the ball, to the modern playmakers of today.

Arrigo Sacchi acknowledges the core principles of Simone Inzaghi's Inter, stating: "Eleven players always active, connected by the red thread of play, with space and time available to all"⁶¹.

In December 2019, the *Gazzetta dello Sport* published an interesting article by journalist Alex Frosio titled "**Serie A all'olandese**" (Dutch-style Serie A), where various tactical situations of Serie A teams (Inter, Milan, Atalanta, and Empoli) were analyzed in relation to the positional fluidity characteristic of the Dutch school of Michels and Crujff. The article highlighted the increasing **mobility** and **offensive** contributions of **defenders**. One notable example discussed was Demiral's goal for Atalanta against Napoli, under Gasperini, but more importantly, the dynamism of the central defenders at Inter. The piece emphasized how Inzaghi had expanded on Conte's work (which was more focused on pre-defined, structured plays) by freeing up his players' **talents**.



Gli allenatori non ragionano più per schemi: è il calciatore a decidere la giocata e quali spazi occupare. E si segue la lezione di Bielsa: «Non c'è un solo motivo perché un giocatore stia fermo»

Figure 183 – Gazzetta dello Sport article

⁶¹ Luigi Garlando – Molto più che difensori – www.gazzetta.it/Calcio/Serie-A/Inter/11-03-2024/inter-bisseck-e-bastoni-e-i-segreti-della-difesa.shtml

A particularly insightful quote came from Inter's Dutch defender, De Vrij, who is passionate about art: "Conte's 3-5-2 is symmetrical like a **Mondrian** painting. Inzaghi's is more creative, like a **Van Gogh** painting: that's the difference between them".



Figure 184 – On the left, the painting by Mondrian 'Composition No. II' and on the right, the painting by Van Gogh 'The Starry Night

Inzaghi's Inter has found the mobility of its center-backs, particularly the wide defenders, to be a very important tool, especially against teams that press man-to-man. In the images that follow, against Juric's Torino, we initially see, in the figure on the left, the typical positioning of the three Inter defenders in their usual starting positions. As the play develops, the entire team undergoes a rotation, and these positional interchanges lead to De Vrij moving to the left, Skriniar taking up a more central defensive midfield role, and Bastoni pushing forward up to Torino's defensive line, effectively becoming an additional attacker. It is Bastoni, in fact, who will conclude the action with a shot on goal.



Figure 185 – On the left, the three center-backs of Inter, and on the right, the subsequent development of the play with positional fluidity

In addition to Bastoni, in the latest Serie A season, Bologna's defender Riccardo **Calafiori** also distinguished himself for his ability to break free from his role and take on

various functions as a **space invader**. Thiago Motta's team has certainly been one of the most interesting in Europe in terms of **positional fluidity**, particularly in the movement of central defenders. Calafiori began his career as a left-wing back, and during his time at Basel, he had also played as a left center-back in a three- or five-man defense. The former Roma defender discussed his transition from full-back to central defender in a four-man defense and how that idea had been present in Thiago Motta's mind from the very beginning. *"The switch from full-back to center-back happened out of necessity, but from day one in Bologna, I spoke with Thiago Motta, and he immediately told me he saw me also playing at the center of the defense"*. The defender continued, *"I told him I'd done it before, but in a three-man defense. He reassured me, saying that not much changed between a three-man and a four-man defense. I trusted him"* ⁶². Calafiori is a technical player, a skilled passer, capable of finding diagonal through balls as well as lifting the ball for switches of play. He can also be decisive in the **final third of the field**. The Bologna defender manages to play with composure even in advanced areas of the pitch. As a fullback, his options were limited by the sideline. From the center, however, he becomes harder for opponents to press and can more easily find channels to drive into. Moreover, the Bologna defender possesses two essential traits of the modern defender. The first is the ability to step into midfield and **get free**, playing as an additional midfielder, and above all, the ability to read and **occupy free spaces**. In the images below, one can see his initial movement to position himself behind Roma's attacking player, followed by his **functional occupation of the open space**.

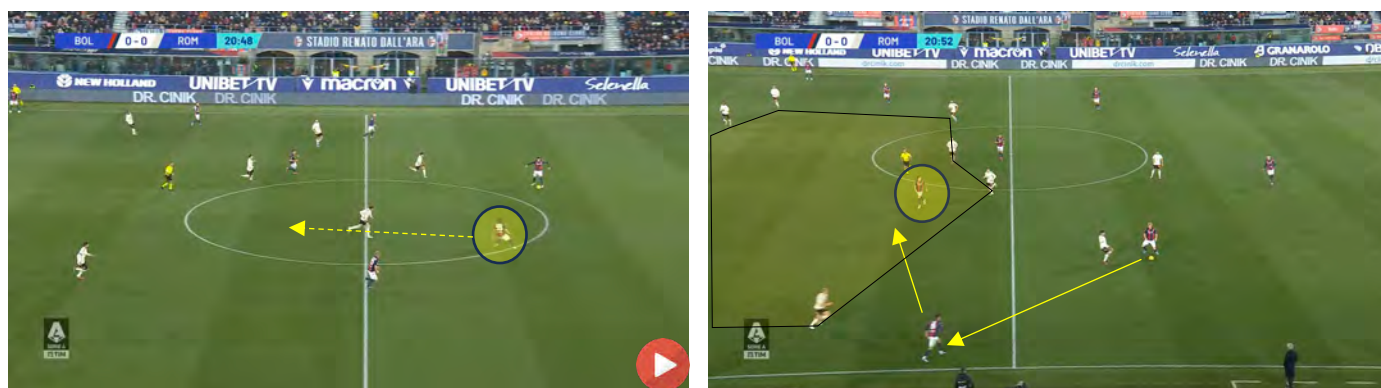



Figure 186 – Calafiori and his ability to read and occupy functional space

⁶² Emanuele Mongiardo – Calafiori ci ha ricordato cosa lo rende speciale – www.ultimouomo.com/riccardo-calafiori-prestazione-bologna-juventus-3-3

In reference to this aspect, Calafiori gave an interview to DAZN, stating: “*The constant that I have, and that we have as a team, is calmness and composure with the ball. In that moment, I felt **free** to move into that position, of course first **checking** where my **teammates** were and where the **open space** was. No one stopped me from doing it, and I saw that the space was there. It all starts from the fact that it doesn't matter who is the player occupying the position (or space), what matters is occupying it*”. 

The perception of space and its subsequent occupation is always preceded by a **scanning** of what is happening around him.



Figure 187 – Calafiori first scans what is happening on the field and then moves up to occupy the free space

The second ability is the ability to attack following the relational play principle of *toque y me voy* (pass and go), **playing and pushing forward**. In the equalizing goal for Italy, at the last minute, against Croatia in the recent European Championship last June, we saw the Bologna defender link up with Frattesi and move forward, looking for a give-and-go that eventually led him to provide the assist for Zaccagni.



Figure 188 – Action of the equalizing goal by Italy against Croatia in the latest 2024 European Championship

The statistical data from the latest season of Serie A confirm the trend of mobile central defenders. According to **xGBuildup**, a statistical program that assigns an xG value to all players who contribute to an action leading to a shot, Calafiori, among central defenders in a four-man defense in Serie A, ranks just behind N'Dicka, Rrahmani, and Ostigard⁶³. In the rankings for **progressive runs** and **touches in the box**, two statistics related to offensive mobility, defenders such as Lucumí, Pavard, Vázquez, Scalvini, and, of course, Bastoni and Calafiori, appear in the top positions.





































	Player	Progressive runs per 90		Player	Touches in box per 90
	 A. Bastoni	2.37		 B. Pavard	1.45
	 R. Rodríguez	2.04		 J. Vázquez	1.41
	 J. Lucumí	1.92		 F. Gatti	1.01
	 G. Mancini	1.81		 G. Zappa	1.01
	 R. Calafiori	1.73		 L. Martínez Quarta	0.97
	 E. Ndicka	1.57		 A. Bastoni	0.96
	 Mario Gila	1.39		 G. Scalvini	0.95
	 D. Calabria	1.36		 D. Calabria	0.91
	 F. Gatti	1.29		 R. Calafiori	0.88

Figure 189 – On the left, the ranking of defenders for progressive runs per 90 min, and on the right, for touches in the box per 90 min

Inter and Bologna have proven to be capable of interpreting spaces in a dynamic way. “*Llegar y no estar*” as Spanish speakers say, meaning **to move into open spaces** rather than occupying them statically. Calafiori, Bastoni, Pavard, and Lucumí are all key players in this paradigm, where central defenders are tasked with advancing to disrupt the opponent's defensive structure. It's a style of football in which they become, in fact, the first, if not the primary, source of **unpredictability**.

⁶³ Dario Saltari – È possibile spiegare la crescita di Calafiori? – www.ultimouomo.com/riccardo-calafiori-come-spiegare-crescita-bologna-thiago-motta-rivelazione-seriea

INVERTED FULL BACKS

In another excellent article by Alex Frosio, sports journalist for *Gazzetta dello Sport*, he recounts that it has been ten years since Pep Guardiola, while setting up his first true tactical laboratory at Bayern Munich, asked full-back Philipp Lahm to move into central areas to assist with build-up play from midfield. After the introduction of the false nine, Guardiola had created the concept of the **false full-back** (or inverted full-backs), a solution later refined to sublime levels at Manchester City, first with Fabian Delph, then with Oleksandr Zinchenko, and eventually with João Cancelo and Kyle Walker.⁶⁴



Figure 190 – Gazzetta dello Sport article

In the game of “non-roles” or **fluid formations**, full-backs have played and continue to play a leading role both offensively and defensively. Traditionally recognized as “wide” players, full-backs have undergone a transformation in both their tactical responsibilities and technical attributes in recent years. In the distant past of football history, full-backs

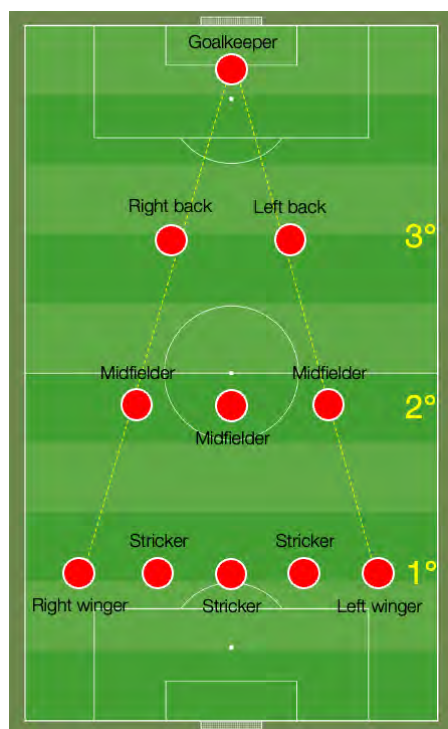


Figure 191 – The 2-3-5 pyramid system

were always seen as **pure defenders**, players tasked with marking opposing attackers.

To understand the origin of the full-back, we must go back to the early days of football history, where the Cambridge University team created the first real formation in football history, known as “the pyramid”, or more specifically, “the Cambridge pyramid”. This formation would today be identified as a 2-3-5. The definition of this formation also marked the first division of roles and positions.

The **forwards**, five in total, formed the first line. The **midfield** (half-backs), also called the second line, was

⁶⁴ Alex Frosio – I difensori mobili – La Gazzetta dello Sport 11 aprile 2023

made up of three players, who in Italy were known as “**median**” players. Finally, the defense (full-backs) formed the third line, where the two defenders in the pyramid system became known as “**terzini**” (full-backs) in Italian.

The great innovation in Italy came with **Helenio Herrera**, who, with the legendary Inter, managed to win two consecutive European Cups. Herrera deployed **Giacinto Facchetti** as a left full-back, utilizing his incredible athleticism even in offensive phases. Nominally playing as a left winger was Mariolino Corso, a player with exquisite technique but not very inclined to run and who tended to occupy more central areas of the pitch. This allowed Facchetti to exploit the space in front of him, as the opposing full-back would focus on marking Corso, often leaving Facchetti free to advance down the flank, where he could either shoot on goal or provide assists to his teammates.

Facchetti was the first defender to score more than ten goals in a season, and to describe his interpretation of the role, the term “**fluidifying full-back**” was coined. On the opposite side, as right-back, **Tarcisio Burgnich**, a classic man-marker, played—a complete contrast to the idea of the fluidifying full-back.



Figure 192 – Valcareggi's Italy of 1970

With the rise of Dutch Total Football in the 1970s, roles on the field began to evolve, with more fluidity between offensive and defensive phases. **Antonio Cabrini**, a player in the Italian national team that won the World Cup in 1982, was an example of this shift. As a left-back with both **technical** skill and physical **power**, he frequently contributed to attacking play, either delivering crosses or taking shots himself, playing a key role in Italy's success at the World Cup and Juventus' triumphs during that period.

With the tactical revolution brought by zonal marking and **Arrigo Sacchi**, the traditional fluid left-back (who was usually positioned on the left) disappeared in favor of a much more total interpretation of the full-back role, both on the left and the right. **Mauro Tassotti** on the right and **Paolo Maldini** on the left were free to push forward, often moving beyond the ball's position and supporting the attacking play of their teammates. As the new millennium progressed, the full-back role increasingly resembled that of an **additional winger**, especially in the case of South American players. The **Brazilian school** of football produced full-backs capable of single-handedly deciding matches, such as Roberto Carlos and Marcelo on the left, and Cafu, Dani Alves, and Maicon on the right.

While Pep Guardiola is the coach most associated with the inverted full-back role, **Johan Crujff** was using this tactic with Barcelona many years earlier. He often transformed the 4-3-3 into a 3-4-3, with one full-back moving into midfield. The only fixed point in this particular diamond-shaped midfield was Guardiola himself.

It was at **Bayern Munich** that Guardiola experimented with the idea of full-backs moving inside, effectively becoming two deep-lying midfielders during offensive play. **Philipp Lahm** was the key player in this tactical solution.

In the book *Herr Pep*, the author and journalist Martí Perarnau details Guardiola's first season at Bayern Munich and explains how the 2013/2014 season would be a turning point for the club. In a seemingly insignificant summer friendly against TSV Regen, Guardiola decided to play **Philipp Lahm** as a central *pivot*. Due to ongoing injuries to Toni Kroos and Javi Martinez, as well as the inexperience of young Hojberg, Guardiola decided to try the German captain in this crucial role within his system.

An article from June 30, 2013, on a football transfer website titled “*Bayern: Guardiola tests the 3-4-3, watch the market...*”⁶⁵ reads: “*About an hour ago, colleagues from Sport.es provided the latest updates on the new Bayern Munich. In the friendly match today against TSV Regen, which ended 9-1 in favor of Bayern, Pep Guardiola abandoned the 4-2-3-1 of the treble-winning team to experiment with his 3-4-3, which had been so successful at Barcelona. In reality, beyond the numbers, the principles of Guardiola's style require defending in a back four even when out of possession, and the Spanish outlet notes that Lahm today had a dual role as both a full-back and a midfielder*”.

This led to a **fluid** approach to build-up play:

- 4+1 with four defenders and the playmaker.
- 3+2 with one of the full-backs pushing forward and tucking in alongside the holding midfielder to form a double *pivot*.
- 2+3 with both full-backs positioned level with the playmaker if the opponent ceased pressuring.

The presence of full-backs inside the field allowed one or both of the central midfielders to push forward into advanced positions in the attacking third.



Figure 193 – Lahm as a false full-back in Guardiola's Bayern Munich

⁶⁵ www.alfredopedulla.com

In the images below, taken from a study by the match analysis department of the Figc, created by me, Gagliardi, and Manucci, titled *Guardiola Evolution*, you can see the two inverted full-backs inside the field.

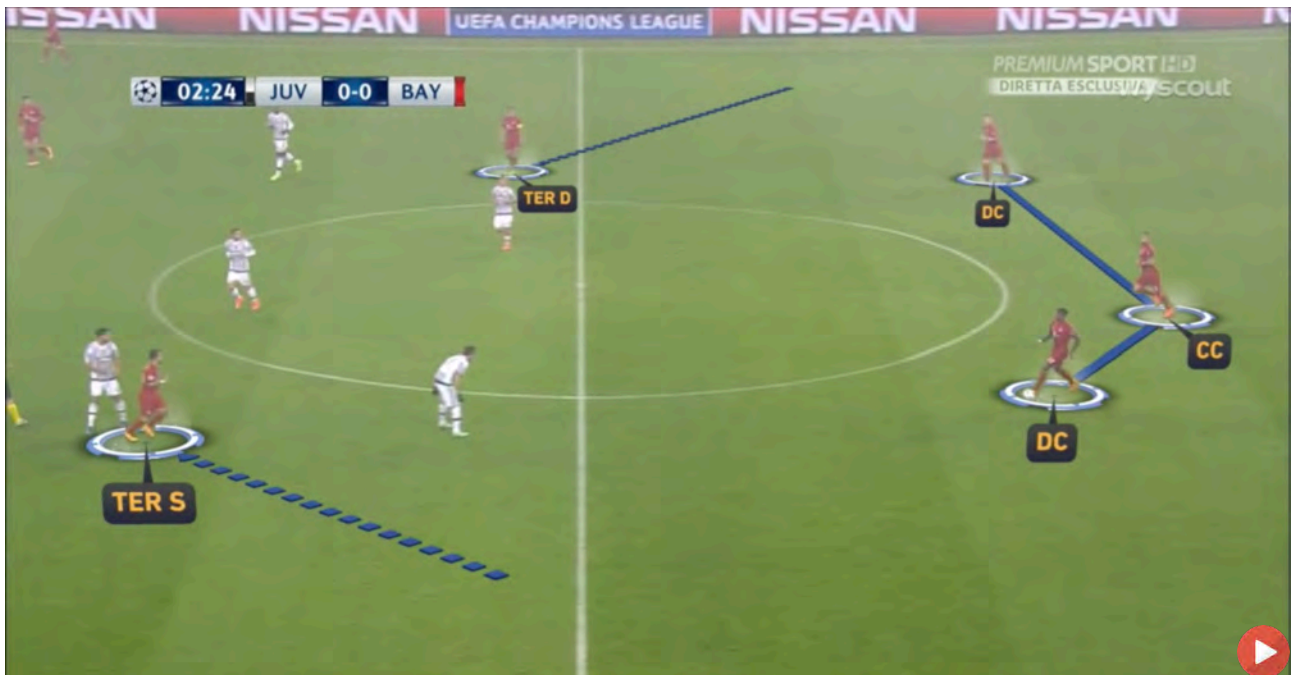


Figure 194 – The right-back and left-back play inside the field in a 3+2 construction

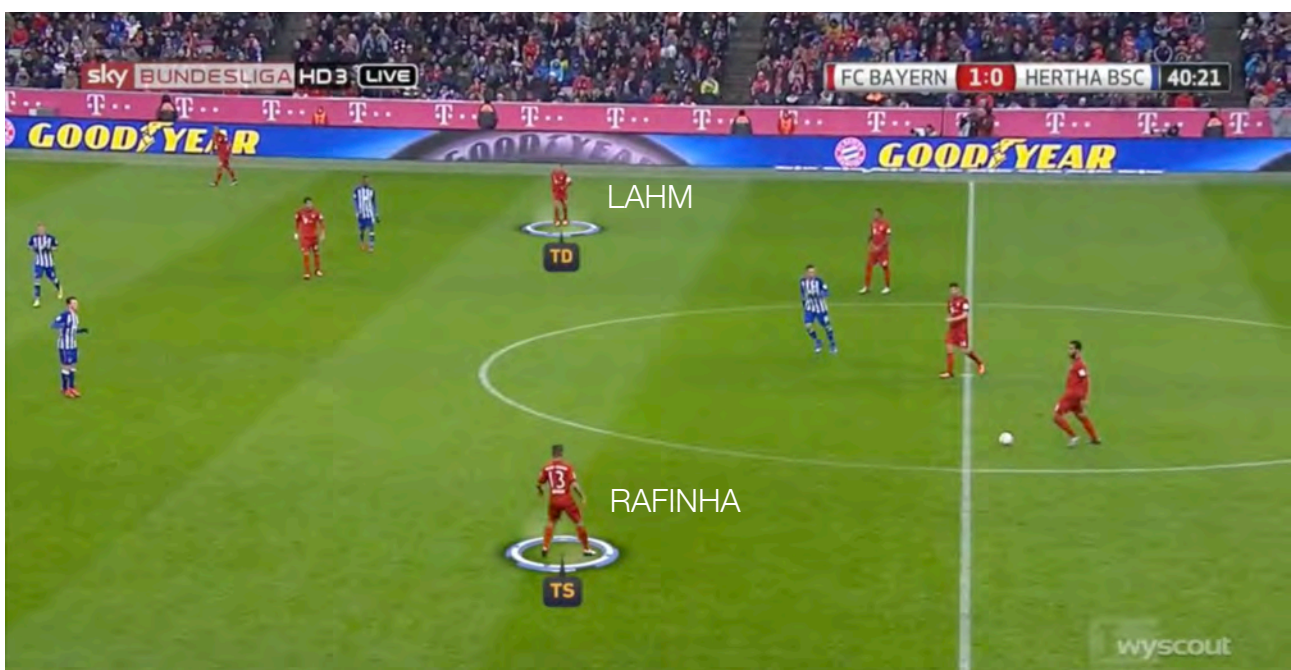


Figure 195 – Another situation with the two full-backs moving inside on Guardiola's Bayern Munich

In this system, the **false full-backs** assist Xabi Alonso both in supporting possession and in preventing the depth when losing the ball. The false full-backs also allow Lahm and Alaba to play in their preferred areas, where they can utilize their **passing ability** to the wings. Once the 1v1 on the flank is sought, if the winger is not able to beat his man immediately, the Spanish coach asks the full-back to support the ball carrier, allowing for a better outlet, then switch the play and attempt the same action on the opposite flank.

Lahm's 2013/2014 season is a manifesto of pure Guardiola style, embodied by a single player: **92%** pass accuracy with an average of at least **85** touches per game and **34** chances created. He was the key and the heart of Bayern's play, even after the arrival of an exceptional playmaker like Xabi Alonso.

Moreover, the role of the false full-back advanced the development of a true phenomenon like Alaba: the triangle on the left side between him, Thiago, and Ribery (or Douglas Costa or Coman) accounted for **35% of Bayern's total play volume**, making the left flank the most utilized area. In that zone, the team could control possession, accelerate, and change the rhythm of the game.

When Guardiola arrived in the Premier League at Manchester City, he requested two physical full-backs: Mendy from Monaco and Walker from Tottenham.

The introduction of the "false full-back" was driven by two factors: Mendy's cruciate ligament injury and the difficulties in midfield, where there were many physically strong players but not necessarily comfortable with ball possession. To solve this issue, Guardiola asked **Delph** to play as a left-back and, with the ball, to move inside to support Fernandinho. Walker formed a back three with Kompany (or Otamendi) and Stones. In this way, numerical superiority was created in midfield, leading to more rational transitions out of defense.

In the following seasons, the best exponents of the false full-back role were **Walker**, **Zinchenko**, and **Cancelo**. While in Guardiola's early seasons, the build-up was almost always **3+2** with the playmaker, often Fernandinho dropping between the two central

defenders (*salida Lavolpiana*), in the last two years, Manchester City adjusted its build-up based on the opponent's pressing, often building more with **2+3**.



Figure 196 – The 3+2 construction of Manchester City with the two full-backs moving inside the field

In the images below, we see the beginning of a build-up with the goalkeeper actively positioned between the two central defenders, playmaker Rodri, and the two false full-backs, Walker on the right and Cancelo on the left, positioned centrally on the field.



Figure 197 – Building from the back with the two full-backs moving inside in a 2+1+2 structure

A sort of **square** is created between the two central defenders and the two full-backs inside the field, with the playmaker positioned in the middle.



Figure 198 – 2+3 structure that creates sort of square-like shape with Rodri as the playmaker inside

In the heatmap of Walker and Cancelo from one of the early matches of the 2022/23 season against West Ham, it is clearly visible that their touches were predominantly made inside the field.

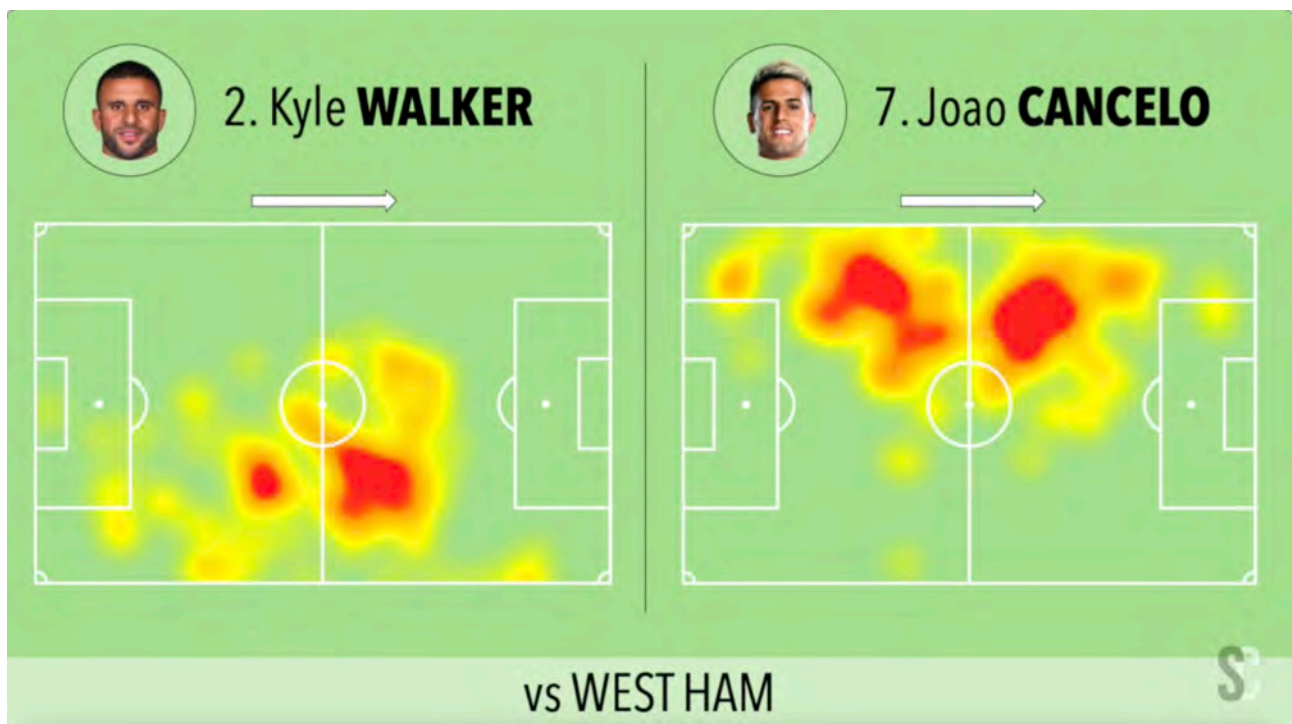


Figure 199 – Heatmap of Walker and Cancelo against West Ham with their respective positions on the field

In the same analyzed match, Cancelo was the player with the most completed passes for City, with **113** passes, while Walker ranked fifth, with a number very close to that of the playmaker Rodri.

vs WEST HAM

Player	#	Nation	Pos	Età	Min	Total					Brevi			Medi			Lunghi		
						Compl.	Tent.	% compl.	Dist. Tot.	Dist. Prog.	Compl.	Tent.	% compl.	Compl.	Tent.	% compl.	Compl.	Tent.	% compl.
João Cancelo	7	POR	LB	28-072	90	113	120	94,2	1968	516	60	61	98,4	40	42	95,2	12	15	80,0
Nathan Aké	6	NED	CB	27-170	90	99	104	95,2	1751	688	47	49	95,9	45	46	97,8	7	9	77,8
Rúben Dias	3	POR	CB	25-085	90	96	98	98,0	1876	674	36	36	100,0	48	48	100,0	12	12	100,0
Rodri	16	ESP	DM	26-046	88	93	99	93,9	1587	411	45	47	95,7	37	40	92,5	10	11	90,9
Kyle Walker	2	ENG	RB	32-071	90	87	96	90,6	1348	327	40	42	95,2	39	43	90,7	5	8	62,5
Jack Grealish	10	ENG	LW	26-331	90	60	69	87,0	891	211	40	42	95,2	16	20	80,0	4	7	57,1
İlkay Gündoğan	8	GER	CM	31-287	77	57	63	90,5	914	159	31	33	93,9	21	24	87,5	3	3	100,0
Kevin De Bruyne	17	BEL	CM	31-040	87	50	65	76,9	905	167	23	27	85,2	20	22	90,9	6	13	46,2
Phil Foden	47	ENG	RW	22-071	87	49	54	90,7	825	153	28	31	90,3	17	18	94,4	4	5	80,0
Ederson	31	BRA	GK	28-355	90	38	42	90,5	889	431	5	5	100,0	26	27	96,3	7	10	70,0
Erling Haaland	9	NOR	FW	22-017	77	21	24	87,5	301	46	11	13	84,6	6	6	100,0	2	2	100,0
Bernardo Silva	20	POR	CM	27-362	13	14	17	82,4	250	33	10	12	83,3	2	2	100,0	2	3	66,7
Julián Álvarez	19	ARG	FW	22-188	13	6	6	100,0	77	5	5	5	100,0	1	1	100,0	0	0	
Kalvin Phillips	4	ENG	DM	26-248	2	6	8	75,0	145	24	0	0		5	6	83,3	1	2	50,0
Riyad Mahrez	26	ALG	RW	31-167	3	3	3	100,0	90	29	0	0		2	2	100,0	1	1	100,0
Cole Palmer	80	ENG	CM	20-093	3	1	1	100,0	26	0	0	0		1	1	100,0	0	0	
16 giocatori					990	793	869	91,3	13843	3874	381	403	94,5	326	348	93,7	76	101	75,2

Figure 200 – Number of passes completed by the Manchester City players against West Ham

In an effective article published on *Outside of the Boot*, Patrick Mills summarized the utility of false full-backs in four points⁶⁶:

- Their presence allows **greater freedom for midfielders**.
- It provides more **solid protection** against opponent counter-attacks.
- It makes the **recovery of the ball** quicker and easier by central pressing.
- It creates more **one-on-one** situations in the opponent's half.

Regarding the last point, recently Zinchenko, the Ukrainian full-back who played under Guardiola and is now at Arsenal with Arteta, explained the role of a false full-back in an interview: *“If the right winger follows me inside the field, then my job is done. I leave the wingers (Martinelli, Son, Sterling, Saka) in one-on-one situations. I attract my direct opponent, create space for the winger, and I have to provide a good ball. If the right winger does not follow me and stays back to close spaces, I am free with the ball to*

⁶⁶ Simone Torricini – Centrocampisti, non più terzini – www.rivistaundici.com/2019/01/24/terzini-centrocampisti

search for a two-against-one". Therefore, if an opposing winger follows the inverted movements of the full-back inside the field, more space appears wide for teammates to attack. This can help create one-on-one dribbling opportunities for dangerous attackers⁶⁷.

In an interview with BT Sport after the Manchester City vs Borussia Monchengladbach match, the Catalan manager explained how and why the idea of having full-backs step into the midfield during possession play came about: *"My idea comes from Germany, where if you lost the ball, they would kill you on the counter-attack when our full-backs were wide. The main reason is to have **more people in the middle** to pass the ball, so when you lose it, you have more players: 4, 5, 6, making short passes, thus having more control. Not every full-back can do this. The concept is that **we defend with the ball**, we need to have the ball as much as possible, and be aggressive when we don't have it. With the ball, we have many passes and passes and passes. When trying to immediately create something, it may not go well, so we need many players in the middle to manage situations better"*⁶⁸.

False full-backs must have the **vision** and **technical ability** to play in crowded central areas, be able to **play forward** or **dribble** to break opponent pressure lines, and also be capable of **changing the play** to the opposite side of the field.

Even in Italy, some coaches have adopted the solution of bringing full-backs inside the field during construction. Last season (2022/23), the Spalletti-led champion Napoli utilized both **Di Lorenzo** on the right (often high) and **Mario Rui** on the left as false full-backs.

⁶⁷ The Coaches' Voice – Inverted full-backs: football tactics explained – www.coachesvoice.com/cv/inverted-full-backs-guardiola-cancelo-trent-alexander-arnold-lahm-football-tactics

⁶⁸ Marco Beltrami – Guardiola dà una lezione – www.fanpage.it/sport/calcio/guardiola-da-una-lezione-di-calcio-in-diretta-tv-spiegando-la-sua-tattica



Figure 201 – Di Lorenzo inside the field in the playmaking zone in Spalletti's Napoli

In the first Serie A match of the 2023/24 season, Pioli's Milan used **Calabria** and **Theo Hernandez** as false full-backs, bringing them inside the field.



Figure 202 – The two full-backs of Milan, Calabria and Theo Hernandez, inside the field

To explain a tactical innovation that defined Guardiola's Barcelona, arguably the best team of the new millennium and one of the best teams in football history, it's helpful to begin with an interview from Vidic, the Serbian player from Manchester United, given after the 2009 Champions League final in Rome against the goal-scoring machine of Barcelona. He said: *"The Champions League final in 2009 in Rome against Barcelona was the longest game of my career. They kept possession throughout the match, and **Messi played as a false nine**. He would invite you to step out of your zone, but by doing that, space would open up behind for the wingers. I kept asking myself throughout the game: Should I follow him or stay in my position? We really didn't know how to stop them"*⁶⁹.

This statement clearly illustrates the concept of the **false nine**, a role with highly defined movements and tasks. The false nine is a forward who significantly drops back to achieve several objectives⁷⁰:

- **Evade the marking** of an opposing central defender.
- **Draw** an opposing central defender **out of their position**.
- **Free up space** for the runs of teammates.
- Actively **collaborate** in organizing the attack.
- **Create** situations of **doubt** and uncertainty in the opponent's defensive organization.
- **Generate numerical**, positional, qualitative, or dynamic superiority for their team in the central areas of the field. All of this combines with the primary and fundamental mission of the forward: **scoring goals**.

"A false nine without goals is not a true false nine"

Pep Guardiola

⁶⁹ Da Instagram Cronache di spogliatoio – Tratto da Rio Ferdinand podcast

⁷⁰ Marco Ferri – Il falso nove nella storia e nella teoria – www.areacoach.it/2023/08/16/il-falso-nove-nella-storia-e-nella-teoria

To explain how the idea of Messi as a false nine originated, we need to reference a passage from the book *“Pep Guardiola: Un altro modo di vincere”* by journalist and author Guillem Balague⁷¹.

“Leo, it's Pep. Can you come here for a moment?”. The evening is the night before the game, and Guardiola calls Messi into his office to explain what he has just come up with and what the Argentine will need to do the following day. Guardiola had noticed how Real Madrid's midfielders tended to aggressively press the opposing central midfielders, and how the defenders tended to stay in line. This created a space in the middle: **Messi's zone**, the area where *la Pulga* would need to operate. As sports journalist Perarnau states, the false nine will be remembered as one of Guardiola's greatest innovations, not necessarily for inventing it, but for **redefining** it through an exceptional player like Messi.

In the same book, Guardiola explains that the idea of deploying the false nine came from his playing experience with his mentor, Crujff: *“I remember the early years at Barcelona with **Laudrup** playing as a center-forward, leaving the two center-backs unmarked to keep an extra player in the middle. If they decided to come and mark the striker at 40 meters, then you can attack them from behind. I learned this from Crujff. When I saw Messi, I thought it was perfect because, first, he touched more balls. On the wing, sometimes he would go 20 minutes without touching the ball, and I didn't like that because **the best player has to touch the ball a lot**. So, against Real Madrid, I decided to put him there”*.

Messi later recounted how that pre-match conversation with Guardiola went: *“I remember it was a surprise for me because he called me the day before the match, asked me to come to the training center, to his office. He said that he had watched many Real Madrid games, as he always did with all opponents, that he had spoken with Tito (Vilanova) and they had thought about having me play as a false nine. Eto'o and Henry would play wide, and I would play the false nine: to drop back with the midfielders. The idea was that the central defenders would follow me, leaving space for our fast*

⁷¹ Libreria dello Sport, 2013

wingers to attack behind them. In fact, there was a nice goal by Henry that came from this. It was a surprise for us and for Real Madrid. I remember in that game we had a lot of possession, **we were always one player more in the midfield**, and I, even though I had never played as a center-forward, knew that position already because it was about starting from behind and arriving in front without being a fixed striker. So, it wasn't a big change for me. I had also played on the wing for years, so I knew what to do in that position".

It's May 2, 2009, and the Bernabeu is, of course, sold out. In the first 5 minutes of that Clasico, Barcelona lines up in the classic **4-3-3** formation, with Eto'o as the central striker, and Messi and Henry wide, facing the Real Madrid 4-4-2/4-2-3-1 setup.



Figure 203 – The tactical setup in the first 5 minutes of the match between Real Madrid and Barcelona

After a few minutes, Messi moves into the central **striker** position, with Eto'o on the right and Henry very wide on the left. Barcelona's build-up is a **3+2** formation, with Abidal staying deep while Dani Alves pushes high and wide. Yaya Touré remains fixed in front of Puyol and Piqué, while Xavi and Iniesta continuously rotate, exchanging positions with each other.



Figure 204 – Messi's movement into the false nine position with Eto'o starting wide on the right

Guardiola's strategic plan, devised during the week, is executed perfectly. Messi plays as a false nine, **dropping deep**, while both Henry and Eto'o are ready to **attack the space**. The Real Madrid defense, particularly the two central defenders (Cannavaro and Metzelder), don't know how to react. They must decide whether to step up, breaking their defensive line to follow the Argentine, which would leave the wingers free to attack the full-backs 1v1, or stay in their positions and give Messi the space and time to play. The image below shows the action of the equalizing goal: the movement of the Argentine is not well read by the Madrid defenders. Cannavaro follows him but opens up space for Henry, who strikes decisively behind Ramos.

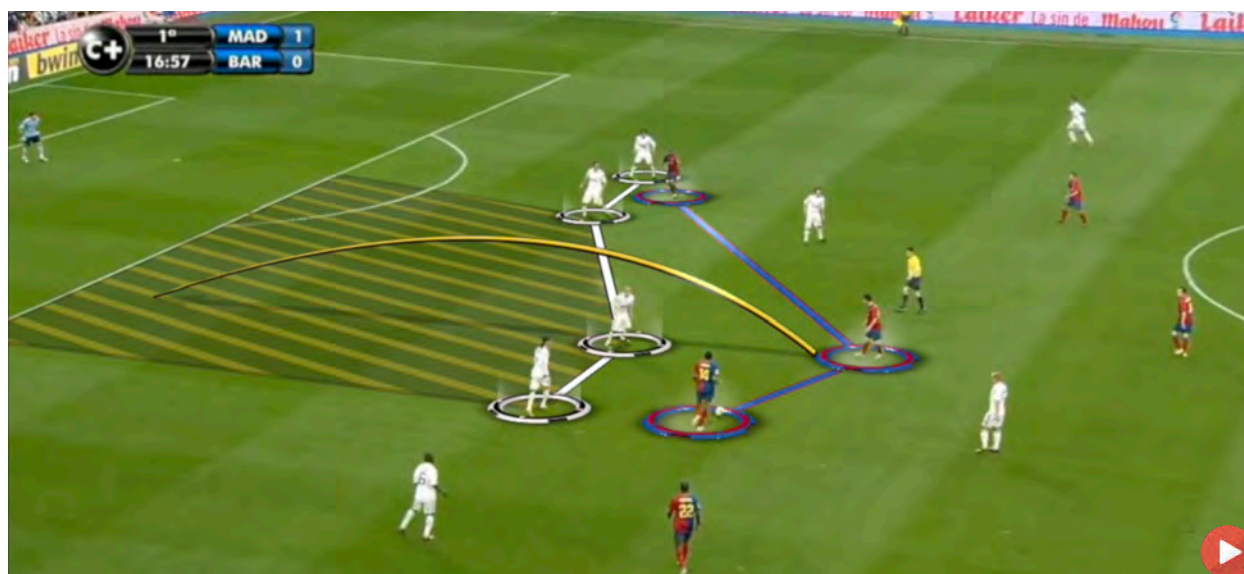


Figure 205 – Cannavaro follows Messi and gives space for Henry to attack, who scores the equalizer

In the offensive phase, Barcelona creates a sort of **diamond** formation with Messi at the tip, who is exceptional at positioning himself in the space behind the two central midfielders of Real Madrid (Gago and Diarra). In the middle of the field, Guardiola's team always finds itself with a numerical advantage, either 4v2 or 4v3, which remains constant.



Figure 206 – The dynamic diamond of Barcelona with Messi as the apex

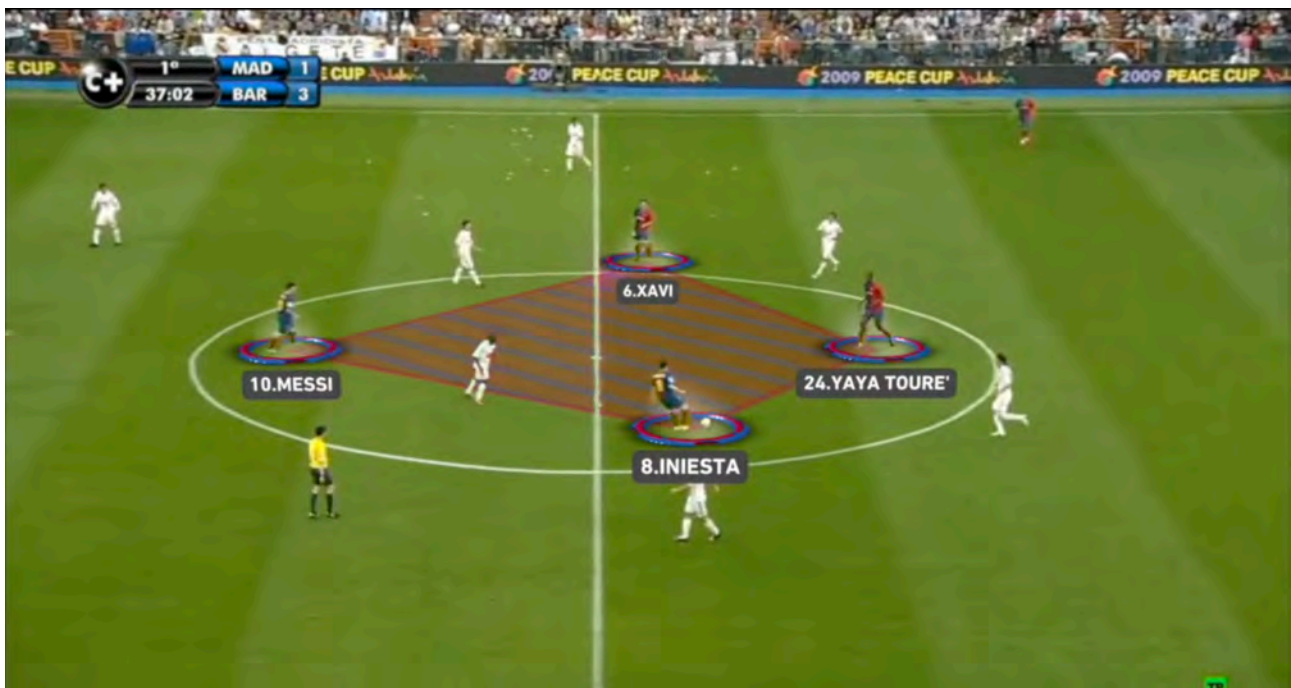


Figure 207 – The Barcelona diamond that created a central numerical superiority 4v2 or 4v3

The match ended 2-6 in favor of Barcelona, with Messi scoring twice and Henry also adding a brace, along with goals from central defenders Piqué and Puyol. Real Madrid, coached by Juande Ramos, were humiliated, and Pep Guardiola began the period in which we witnessed the best version of Messi ever.

After that match, Messi was never removed from that role, and later, **Cesc Fàbregas** joined Guardiola's side, often alternating with Messi as the false nine. Even more recently, the Spanish coach used **two false nines** with Manchester City in the first leg of the Champions League Round of 16 against Zidane's Real Madrid. Up front, **Bernardo Silva** and **De Bruyne** played centrally, dropping to the sides of Casemiro to escape the high pressing of the “*Blancos*”, while Gabriel Jesus on the left and Mahrez on the right were ready to attack the central space left open.⁷²

“Our center forward is the space”

Pep Guardiola

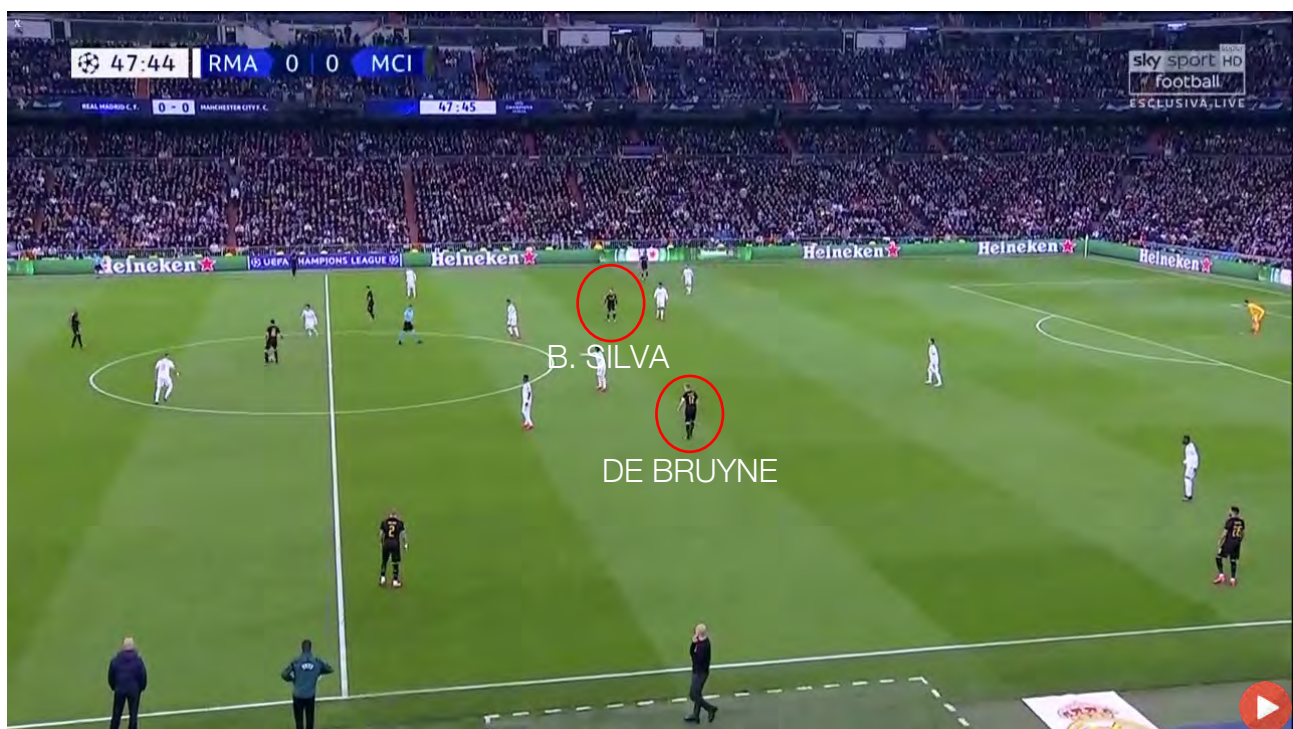


Figure 208 – The double false nine at Manchester City with Bernardo Silva and De Bruyne

⁷² Dario Pergolizzi – Come è arrivato il City a giocare con due falsi nove – www.ultimouomo.com/come-guardiola-manchester-city-giocare-due-falsi-nove

Of course, Guardiola's version of the false nine was not the first to appear on a football pitch. The history of tactics is somewhat **circular**, with certain solutions coming back into fashion simply because people forget how to counter them. Before Messi, many center forwards played the role in a unique way. Starting with the austrian **Matthias Sindelar**, one of the greatest figures produced by the “Danubian football” tradition, a classic example of the “Viennese football school”. He is considered the best Austrian player in history and one of the best in the world in the 1930s. His playing style was so fluid and physically distant from the typical center forward stereotype that he was nicknamed “tissue paper”⁷³. In the 1940s, Argentine Adolfo **Pedernera** had been used in the great River Plate team as the offensive orchestrator of the “Máquina” goal-scoring machine. However, many consider the true father of the false nine to be **Nándor Hidegkuti**, one of the stars of the great Hungary team coached by **Gustav Sebes**, which demolished England 3-6 at Wembley in November 1953. In fact, Hidegkuti had never been a true center forward, and he was only the number 9 for Hungary due to the specific choice of the Hungarian shirt numbering system. Nevertheless, the opponents were still confused: Hidegkuti, playing as an attacking midfielder, would draw out an opposing defender, allowing Puskás and Kocsis to exploit the spaces. Hidegkuti's marking caused major problems for England in that game, and he did even more in the rematch six months later in Budapest, where Hungary triumphed 7-1.

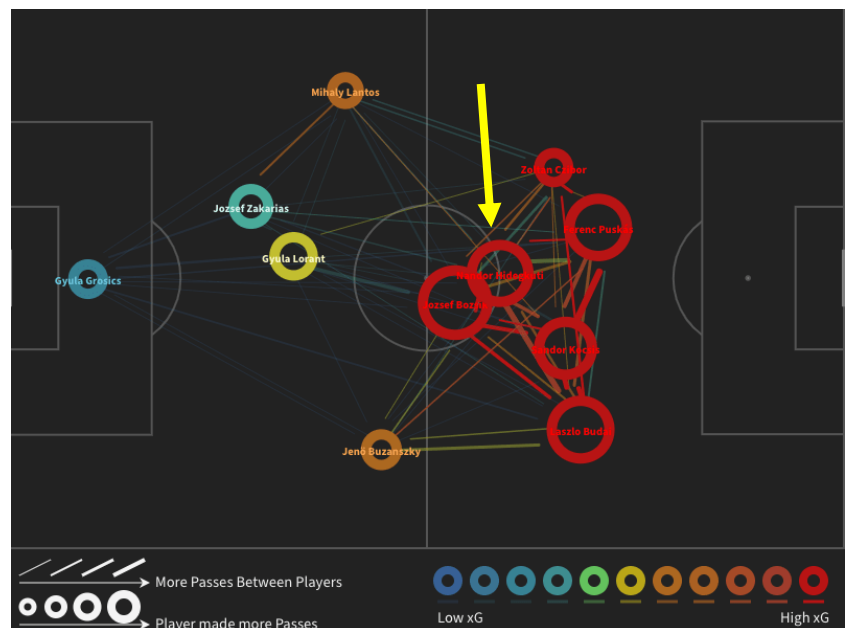


Figure 209 – Pass map of Hungary with Hidegkuti as a false center-forward

⁷³ Alfredo Giacobbe – Il falso nove – www.ultimouomo.com/dizionario-tattico-il-falso-nove

Looking at the positional and pass map developed by Nick Dorrington of StatsBomb, we can see that Hidegkuti's position was practically in midfield, with Puskás playing as the most advanced player, slightly shifted to the left. The words **Ferenc Puskás** used to describe his teammate Hidegkuti resonate with the phenomenology of the false nine: "He was very good at finding himself in space to receive the ball; pulling the central defender out of position; and then striking with a through pass or a run into space to score". Hidegkuti and Puskás' "Golden Team" was only stopped by West Germany, just short of winning the World Cup. When we talk about the false nine, I can't avoid mentioning one of the greatest football players in history, the spaniard **Alfredo Di Stefano**. The data from StatsBomb on the 1960 European Cup final, which ended 7-3 in favor of Real Madrid against Eintracht Frankfurt at Hampden Park in Glasgow, clearly shows the positions where Di Stefano received the ball, demonstrating the extent of his

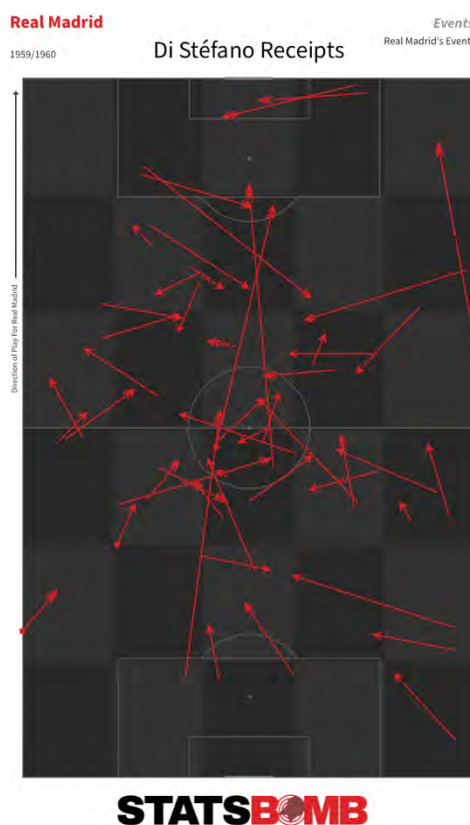


Figure 210 – Di Stéfano's reception map

involvement in the build-up play and his constant movements to meet the ball⁷⁴. The movements of the false nine from the past are very similar to those we see today.

Before Guardiola, it was **Luciano Spalletti** who was the first coach to use a **creative player** as a center forward. On December 18, 2005, without Montella, Cassano, and Nonda, Spalletti only had 16-year-old Okaka as a traditional center forward. So, Roma played against Sampdoria with a new 4-2-3-1 formation, with **Totti** as the sole forward. However, his interpretation of the role was very original: he was essentially a **false nine**, a forward who occupied the central position on paper but not in practice. Totti often dropped deep, either to

receive the ball behind the opponent's defensive lines, in the attacking midfield, or to drag an opposing defender out of position. This created space for the three attacking midfielders, particularly **Perrotta** in the center, who were fed with through balls from the

⁷⁴ Nick Dorrington – A Data History of the European Cup: 1960, Real Madrid 7-3 Eintracht Frankfurt – www.statsbomb.com/articles/soccer/a-data-history-of-the-european-cup-1960-real-madrid-7-3-eintracht-frankfurt

Roma captain. In this way, Spalletti built a dynamic, intense team with European-style football, leading Roma to a record of eleven consecutive Serie A wins (which was later surpassed by Inter).⁷⁵

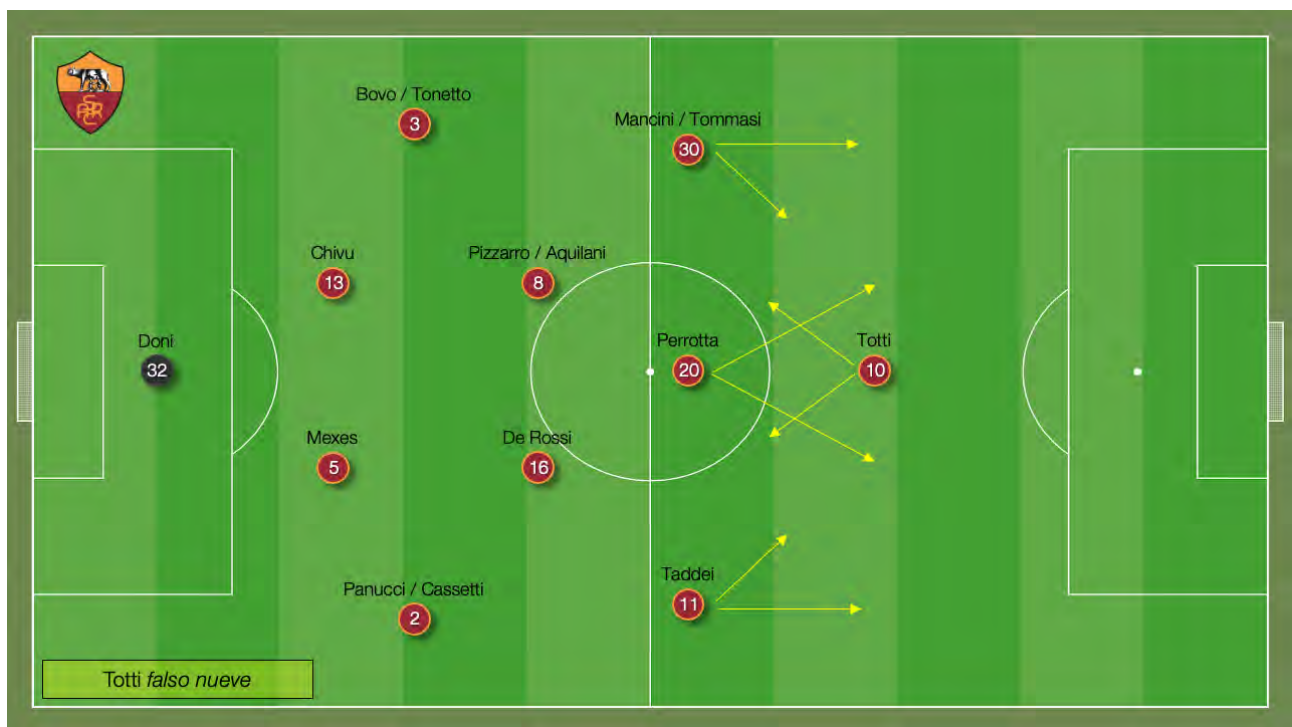


Figure 211 – Spalletti's 4-2-3-1 formation with Totti as a false nine

In my experience with the national team under **Roberto Mancini**, the false nine was used on a few occasions. The first time was in 2018 against Poland in Warsaw in the Nations League, where **Bernardeschi** played as the false nine, with Insigne on the left and Chiesa on the right. Even during the victorious European Championship, on several occasions, during the match, once Immobile was substituted, **Insigne** played as the false nine, both against Spain and England.

⁷⁵ Emiliano Battazzi – Calcio liquido, l'evoluzione tattica della serie A, 2021



Figure 212 – Situation in the second half of the Euro 2021 semifinal against Spain with Insigne as a false nine

In the same match, during the semifinal against Spain, **Luis Enrique** also opted to play **Dani Olmo** as a center forward in the first half. The deep, dropping movement of the Spanish false nine caused us problems in the first half, as it often created **a numerical disadvantage in midfield**.

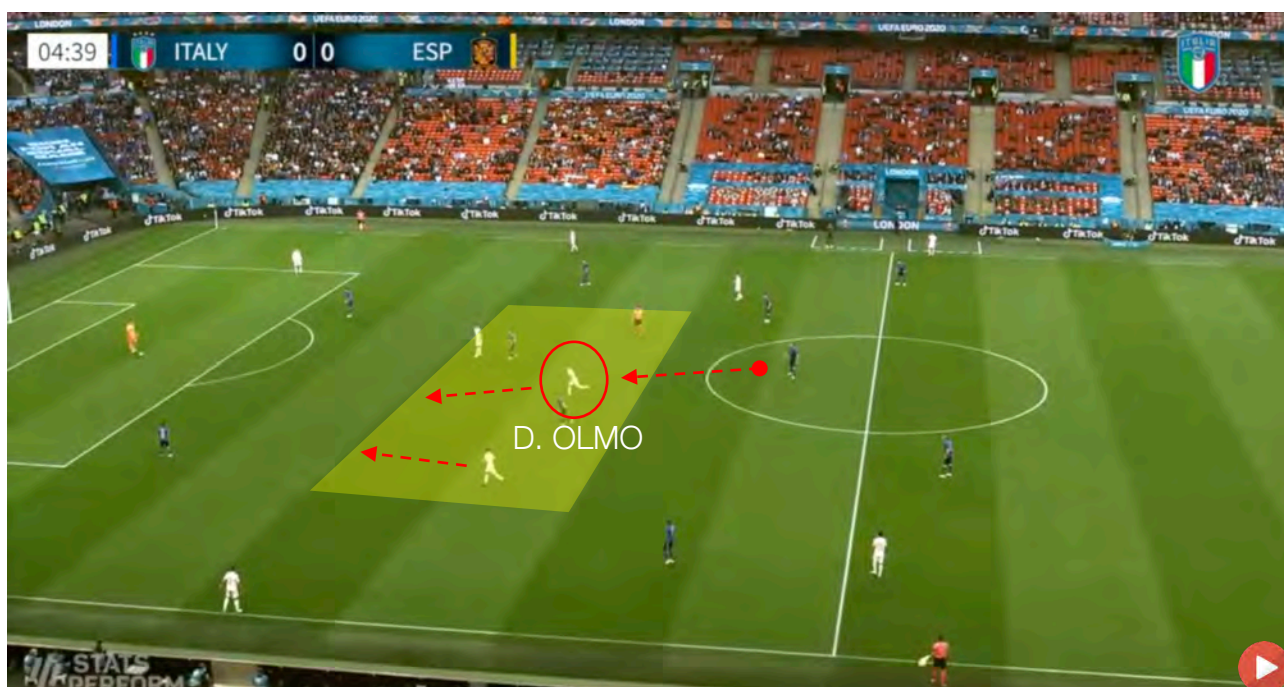


Figure 213 – Dani Olmo's movement as he leaves the center-forward position in Luis Enrique's Spain

Continuing to speak about Spain, the role of the false nine was perfectly interpreted by **Cesc Fàbregas** in the Spanish national team managed by **Vicente del Bosque**, which won both the World Cup and the European Championship between 2010 and 2012. The Spanish midfielder explained in an interview: *“I always positioned myself about 4-5 meters in front of the defensive line so that I didn’t have a marker close to me, and, most importantly, I could surprise them by making runs into the space behind them when the right moment came”*.

The term “false nine” has become quite overused today and is sometimes applied incorrectly. One cannot refer to a player as a false nine if they only drop deep to receive the ball and facilitate offensive plays while remaining aligned with the opponent’s defensive line. A more accurate term would be “**forward orchestrator**” or “**offensive playmaker**”, like Džeko, Kane, Firmino, or Mertens in Sarri's Napoli. The true false nine **plays deeper from the start**, seeking to draw defenders out of position and create space for wingers to make runs⁷⁶.

⁷⁶ Tobia Brunello – Falso Nueve: storia di un'evoluzione tattica – www.pokerstarsnews.it/calcio/falso-nueve-evoluzione-tattica/32078

CHAPTER 6 – THE METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapters, I described the opposition between positional football and fluid, associative-relational football, along with some of the solutions adopted in modern football during offensive phases. These principles of play must then be explained, trained, and developed in the **daily work** of training.

In this chapter, I will outline part of my **methodological proposal**, including exercises to train space occupation both in an ordered (positional) manner and in a fluid (relational) manner. Of course, I will divide this chapter into two parts: one related to positional football and one related to functional-relational football. However, before I describe my proposals, regardless of the tactical philosophy to be followed, there are certain characteristics of training that are **fundamental pillars** of the training process.


As the first basic principle, I believe that to train space occupation, **situational exercises** are necessary, where the ball and the opponents must always be present, sometimes even with numerical inferiority. Situations without opponents, such as 11v0 or against 11 mannequins, are not particularly effective for training.

“The problem in football is that players often learn to play in the wrong way, in reverse: first the execution, then the decision, and only lastly the perception”

Arsene Wenger

In a match, as I have tried to describe in this work, **space** is **constantly changing** depending on the arrangement of our team and, especially, the opposition. To stimulate a collective or individual player to make decisions, it is essential to continuously train them in those **decisions** (who to pass to, which space to occupy, and what posture to assume). To do this, situational drills that are as close to **real match scenarios** as possible are crucial. The weekly training sessions must be a continuous mental

challenge in terms of the **decision-making** level of the player, preparing them for the match itself.

Guardiola, in response to the question of what type of exercises improve a player's abilities, stated: *"By playing. I don't conceive of any other way to improve at playing football than by playing, because when you're playing, you must make decisions constantly in **real-time**. Not in video, where I stop and say, 'Look at this image,' that doesn't exist. Video only serves to give you an idea. The more games you play, the more decisions you have to make—whether to pass, when to pass with one touch, when to take seven touches, when to dribble. When do you do this? You do it in function, and that decision-making is what helps you learn to play football"*⁷⁷. 

Training should meet certain requirements, such as **high intensity** (with little pause and continuous stimulation), a strong **decision-making stimulus** (exercises that involve problem-solving), and **duration** (never exceeding a total of 100 minutes).

I also believe that a good training session should be organized in such a way that it **never wastes time** in preparing for the match across its four main components (technical, tactical, physical-athletic, and psychological). I'm not fond of exercises like large rondos in the middle of the field involving the whole team, technical drills without a tactical purpose, or passing drills (passing sequences) without opposition.

For this reason, I prefer **positional games** because within them, in addition to finding all the characteristics of ball possession, there is a specificity that more closely resembles the performance model, unlike traditional ball possession drills.

There should be room within the session for **playful exercises**, but always with the aim of developing the group.

⁷⁷ Massimiliano Bellarte – www.fb.watch/mz477GcZoR

“Football is centered around the space you occupy in relation to the ball and the reason why you occupy it. We cannot forget this key concept when planning an effective training session”


Xabi Alonso

I believe that training proposals and exercises should also be **complex**. Initially, there will be difficulties, but once the solutions are found, the team will gain the confidence of being able to execute even complex exercises. It is essential to manage the variables of **space**, **time**, and the **number of players**, adjusting them on a case-by-case basis, always following the principle of progression from simple to complex.

“If I perceive that the game of football is complex, the tool I use to train it must be complex, with varying degrees of complexity, but it must be complex”

Vitor Frade

Another important aspect is the management of the **touch limit** in each training exercise. The number of touches can vary depending on the player's function or the area of the field they are positioned in.

Juan Manuel Lillo, in a recent interview, expressed his discontent with how training methodologies have become standardized, without taking into account the culture or philosophy of the country or the place where one is coaching. Furthermore, the Spanish coach pointed out that training has increasingly focused on playing with two touches. Lillo rightly argues that players should play with two touches when the game requires two touches, with three touches when the game requires three touches, and so on. 

“Guardiola's era has caused a bit of confusion in football. Everyone wanted to play that way. Even children as young as 6 or 7 are already being told to play with two touches, quickly. But I believe that at that age, we shouldn't deprive them of their creativity, much like what happened to me”

Lionel Messi

Finally, it is important for a coach to manage the exercises, and to do so, it is necessary to observe the **space in its entirety**. To identify and analyze the overall distances, one must always be well positioned, often in elevated spots.



Figure 214 – Luis Enrique observes a drill from an elevated point

HOW TO COACH SPACE IN POSITIONAL FOOTBALL

To train players to occupy space in **positional football**, the first step is to define it. It is helpful **to mark the training fields** with the five offensive channels, as shown in the following image, and the three vertical zones.

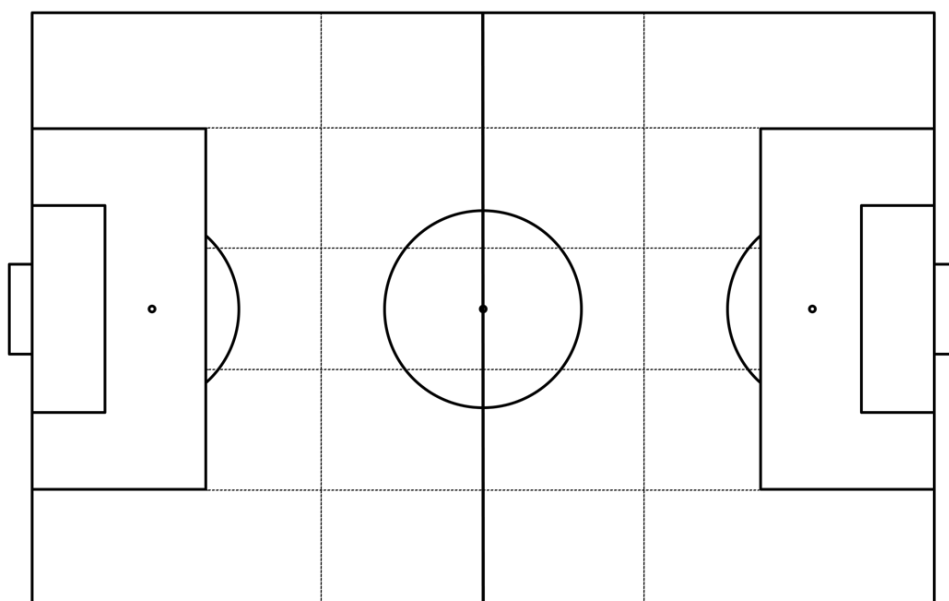


Figure 215 – Field tracking for zone-based training

The division involves splitting the field vertically into three zones (Zone 1 – Zone 2 – Zone 3) and horizontally into five channels.

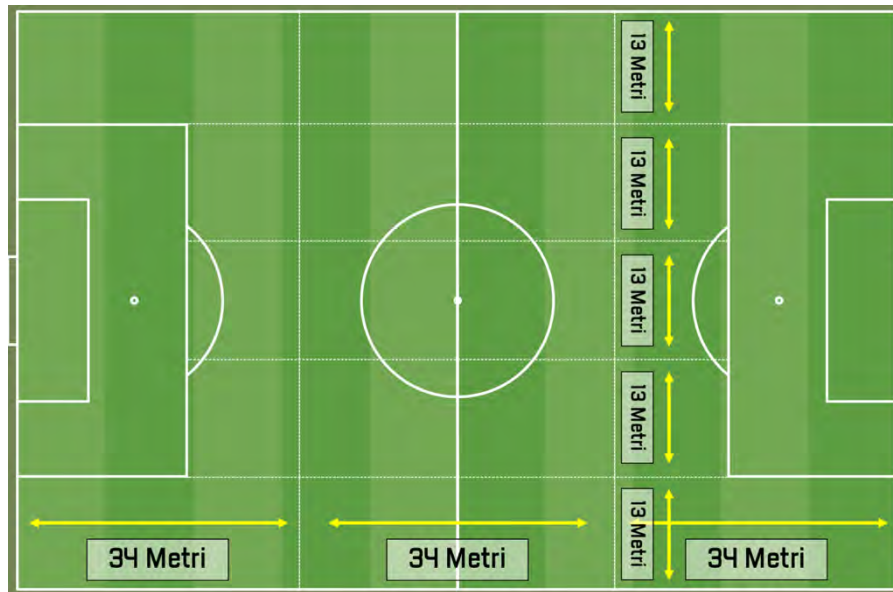
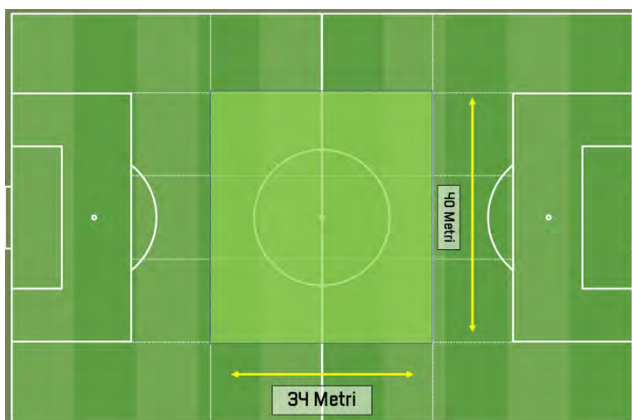


Figure 216. Dimensions of the zone division

In addition to providing positional **visual references**, marking the field offers the advantage of already having zones of different sizes for drills or small-sided games.



217. 34x40 meter rectangle

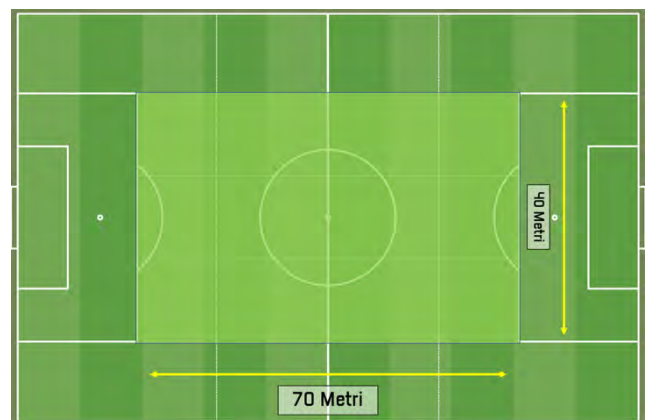


Figure 218. 70x40 meter rectangle



Figure 219. 70x65 meter rectangle

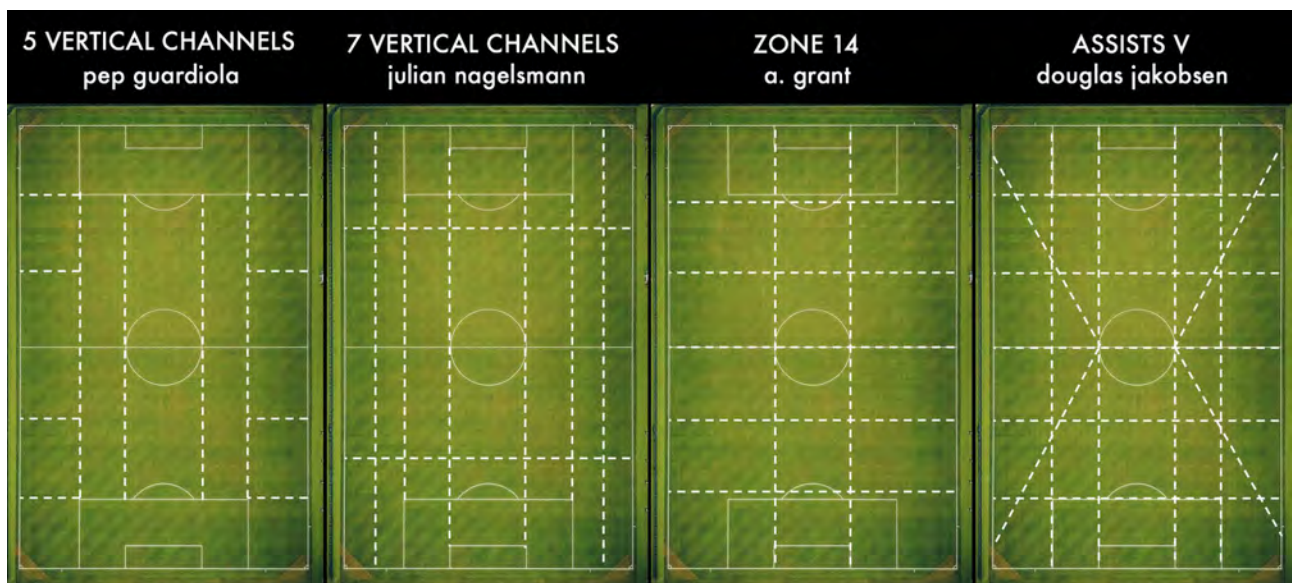


Figure 220 – Division of the field zones by the respective coaches

Johan Crujff states: *“Everything that happens in a match, except the shot, can be done in a rondo. The competitive aspect, the fight for space, what to do when you have possession and what to do when you don't, how to play one-touch football, how to deal with tight marking, and how to win the ball back”*.

With a simple **rondo**, several tactical tools can be trained: it is the true essence of positional play because it trains players to create, identify, and exploit superiority. Rondos are extremely useful and help train **real-game situations**. In positional football, possession is maintained to draw the opposing team in and find a free player, and this is exactly what happens in a rondo.

It starts with simple rondos, creating **3v1**, **5v2**, or **6v3** situations, always with a player in the center, who is, of course, rotated.



Figure 221 – 3 types of simple rondos

Then, progress to more complex rondos, such as the following, which becomes an **8v8** + 8 neutrals but divided into sectors. The reds, in possession of the ball, can play either with their teammates or with the yellows (neutrals) without leaving their designated area. This creates a sort of **4v2** + 2 neutrals.

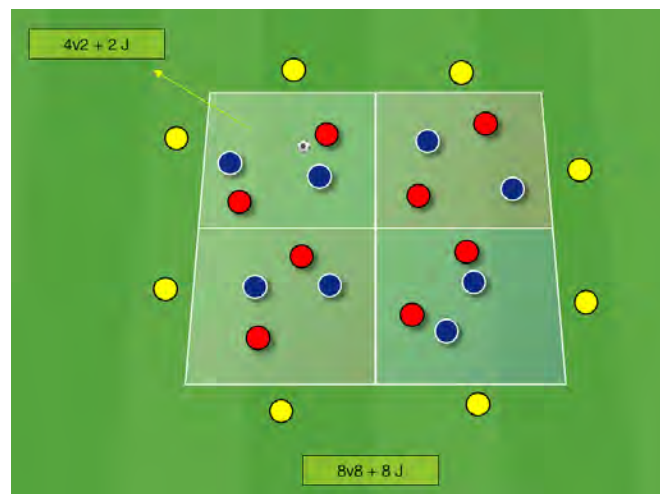


Figure 222 – Rondos 8v8 + 8 sector neutral players

Combined rondos can also train players in **scanning**. In the following drill, the blue players inside the square must constantly observe and monitor what is happening behind them to avoid creating 2v2 situations, as shown in the bottom-right box.

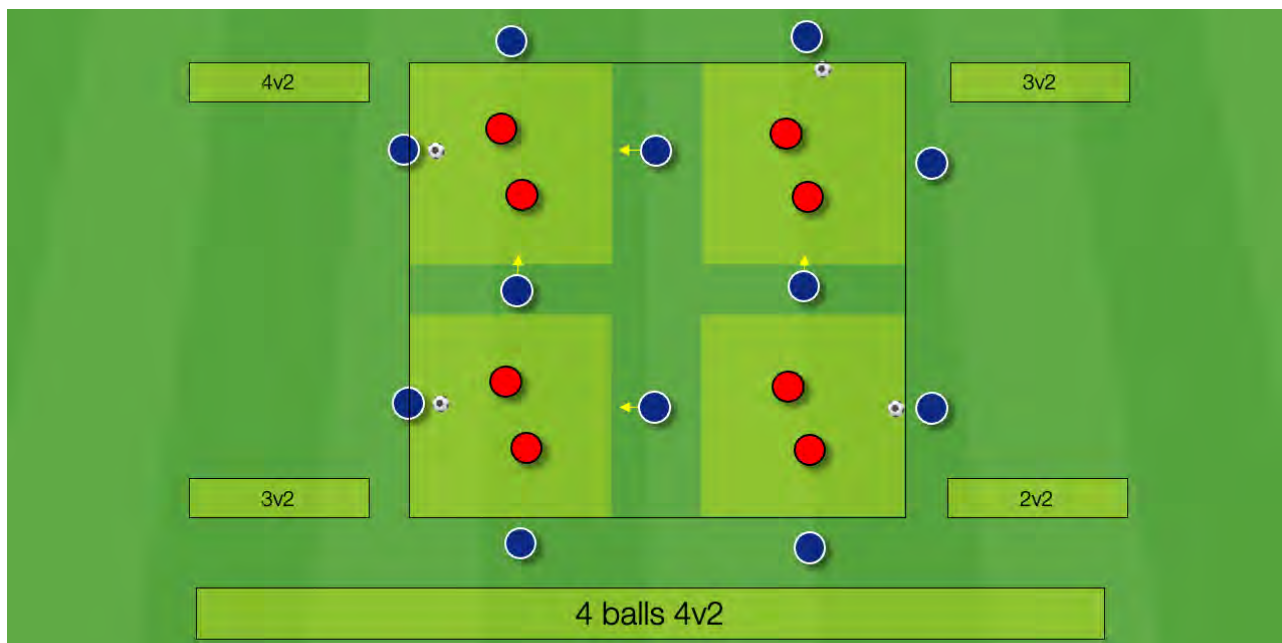


Figure 223 – 4v2 drill to train scanning

Rondos can also be used for playful drills. In the following exercise, a 4v2 is played either advancing or retreating. If the blue team completes eight passes, they advance toward the goal on the left. If the red team regains possession before the eight passes, they advance toward the right. In the final zone, the attacking team must score in the small goal.

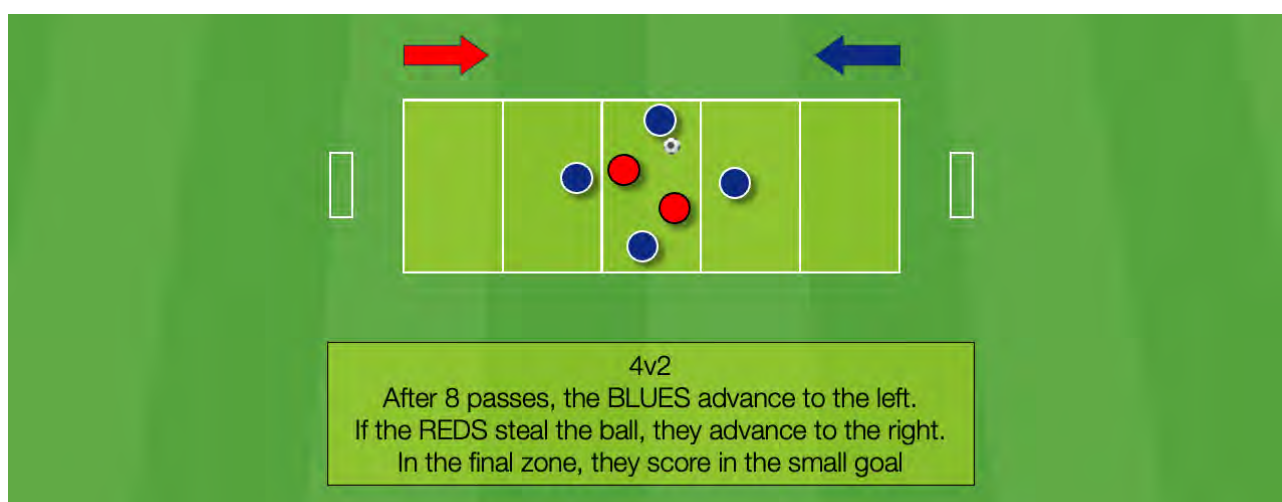


Figure 224 – Rondos 4v2, ascending or descending

For technique, as mentioned, I do not favor passing drills with mannequins because they do not involve a decision-making process in choosing the play. For this reason, in

a warm-up drill at the start of the session, we can propose a dynamic passing drill: instead of playing automatically to the player, I must choose the functional play based on the movements of the red defenders, who defend semi-actively.

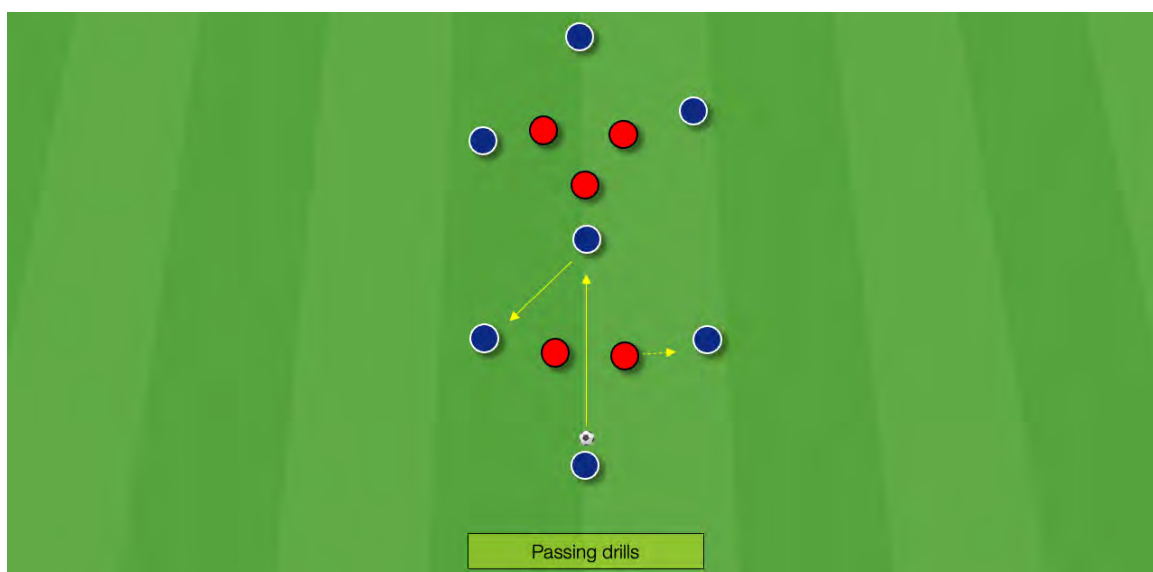


Figure 225 – Passing drills based on the semi-active movement of the red team

Another drill focusing on the concept of **switching play** and **counter-pressing** is the one shown below. The reds play a 5v4 against the blues, and after eight passes, they must find the yellows in the opposite box. The blues must immediately run to the opposite zone to defend against the yellows. If the ball returns to the reds, this time, after eight passes, they can score in the three small goals.

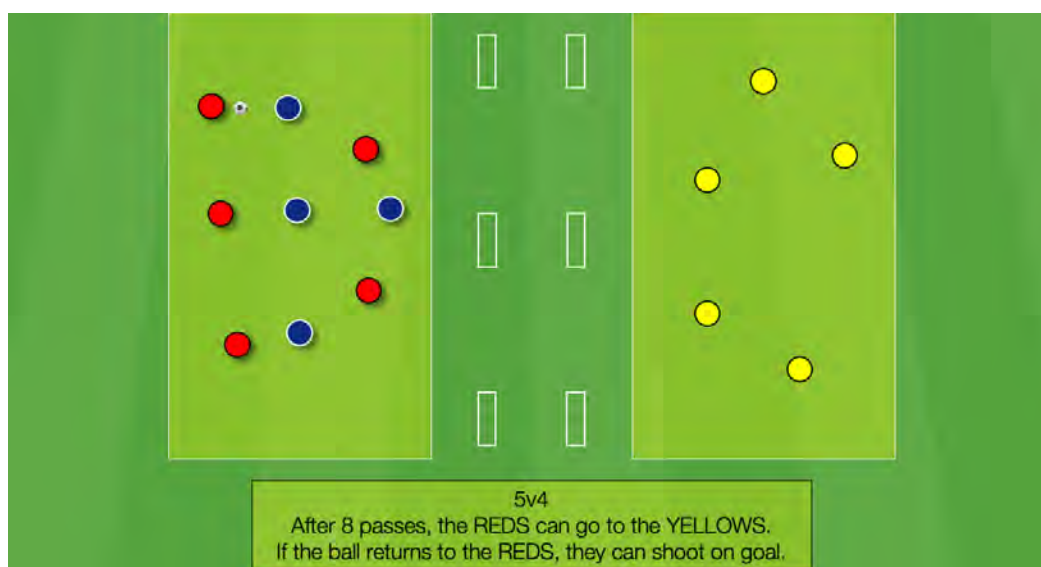


Figure 226 – Possession 5v4 to work on switching play and counter-pressing

A simple but effective drill to train pressing exit timings is to create constant 2v2 situations. The red team must circulate the ball while being pressed by the two blue players who are coming out in their respective zones. If the blue team wins the ball, they must score in the designated small goal.

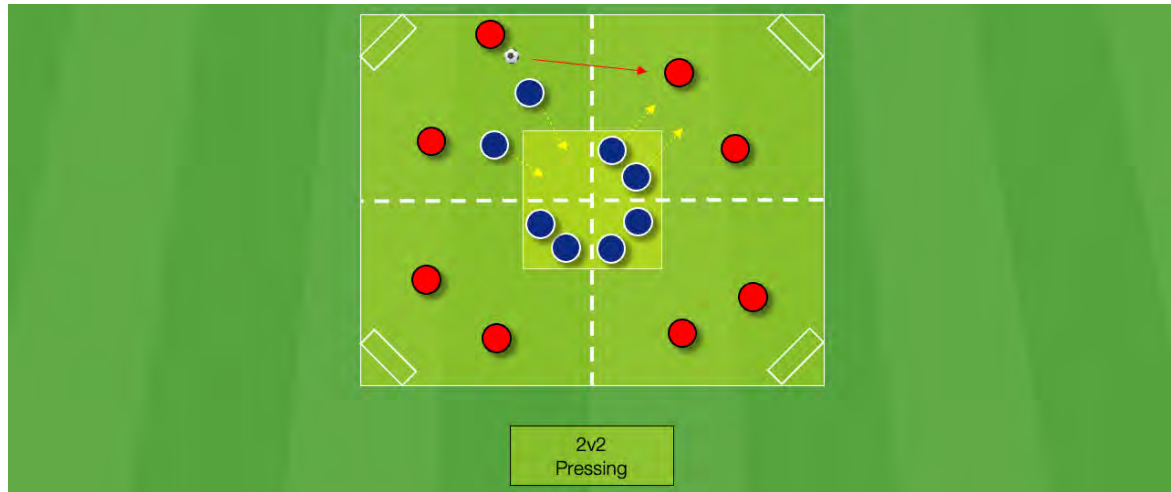


Figure 227 – 2v2 drill with constant pressing exits

A specific drill for positional play is the one shown in the image below. The ball is played by the goalkeepers. The attacking team, in this case, the blue team, positions itself to create a 7v5, with the wingers coming inside to play in the central box. The team in possession can also use the three "floaters" (2 defenders supporting and 1 attacker offering support). A point is earned when the team reaches 10 to 15 passes. If the red team regains possession, they reposition themselves like the blue team and begin their own possession play. In this drill, the following variations can also be added: after 10 passes, the wingers of the defending red team also play inside the central box, creating a numerical equality of 7v7; After 10 passes, the team must look for a combination play and make a deep run to finish with a shot on goal.

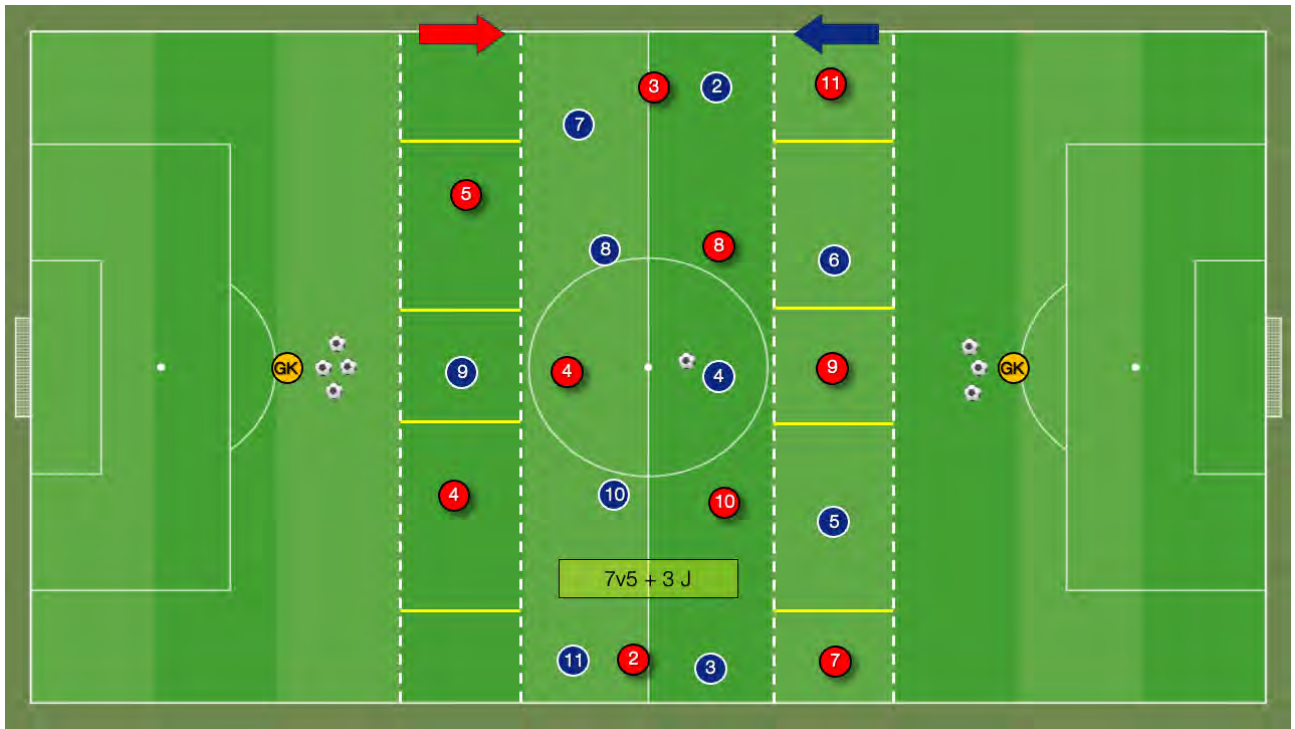


Figure 228 – Positional possession 7v5 + 3 neutral players

In an interview, Rydström was asked if it's possible to train this new fluid freedom between players, and how to train it. His response was: *"We train it by working with exercises to create the right conditions for what the situation requires, whether that's hiding the ball from the opponents, playing beyond the lines, or scoring. And the solution varies because it depends on what the opponents are doing. So, in training, we try to vary the behavior of the opponents. But, like most things, it's about helping the players understand the why. This work is done in the meeting room, where we show clips from training sessions or matches"*⁷⁸.

Training according to the principles of associative-relationship football involves one key concept: giving players fewer **positional references** in exercises, as opposed to positional play.

In the images of the proposed exercises below, spatial boundaries will be shown graphically only to help clarify the exercise being proposed.

A technical activation could be to allow the two teams to play freely with two balls on the field and ask the players of each team to interact by creating **escadinhas** (a specific type of quick **combination play**, often involving a quick pass and movement) and subsequently developing technical combinations. To make the activation more stimulating, the available space is progressively reduced, forcing the players to play closer together and more in sync with each other.

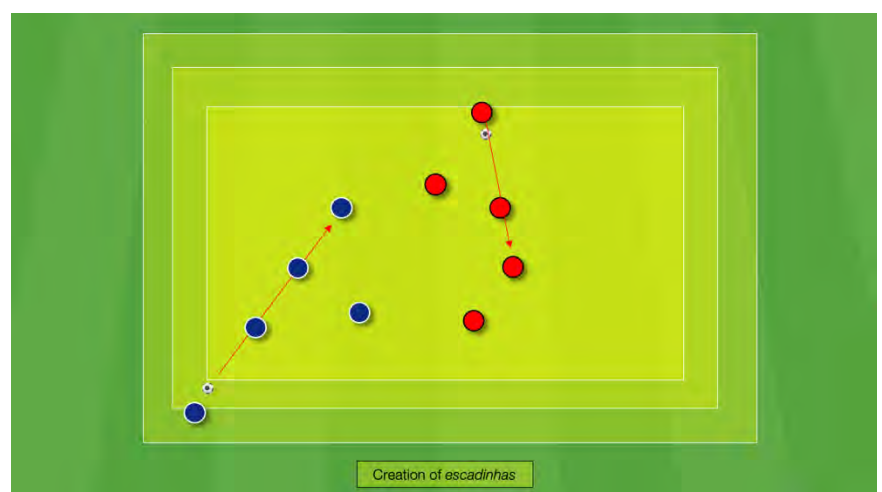


Figure 229 – Free ball possession to create technical relationships between players

⁷⁸ Michele Tossani – Il Malmö sta facendo una piccola rivoluzione – www.ultimouomo.com/rivoluzione-malmo-come-gioca-squadra-svedese-henrik-rydstrom-calcio-relazionale

To train the principles of **fluid associative-relationship** football, it is increasingly necessary to conduct ball possession exercises in restricted spaces. This possession exercise develops like a **tilting** and is played 8v6 + 2 floaters, but the blue defenders can defend with a maximum of four players beyond the halfway line. The red team, on the other hand, can bring as many players as they want to create numerical superiority against the four defenders. The team in possession earns a point when they maintain possession for more than 30/45 consecutive seconds, regardless of the number of passes. Additionally, a point is awarded each time a triangulation, a wall pass, a third-man run, or a nutmeg is performed.

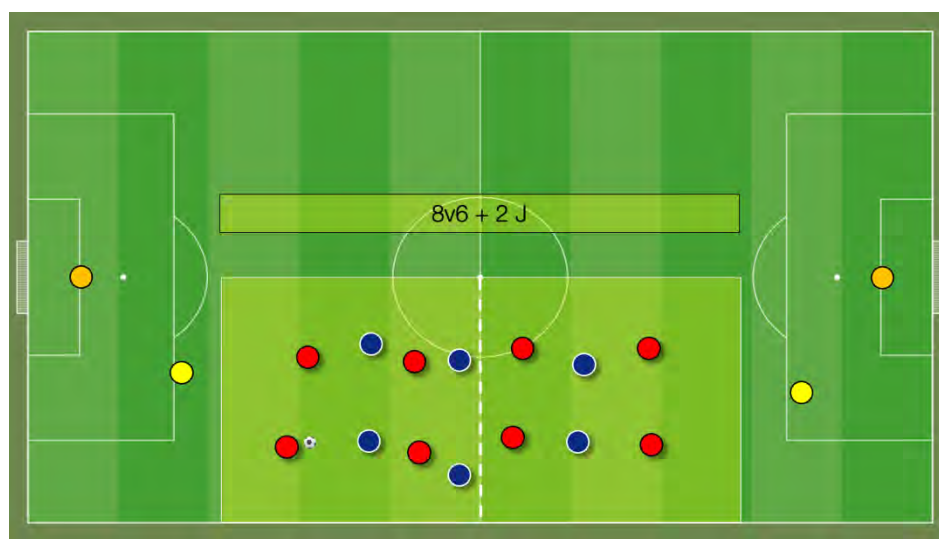


Figure 230 – Ball possession 8v6 + 2 neutral players

Starting from a **game situation** like the one in the following image, where we can see Rydström's Malmö team overloading the right side in possession, a similar proposal can be created in training by setting up a possession drill with 9v8 + 1 floater that stimulates and trains the relational density on the ball side.

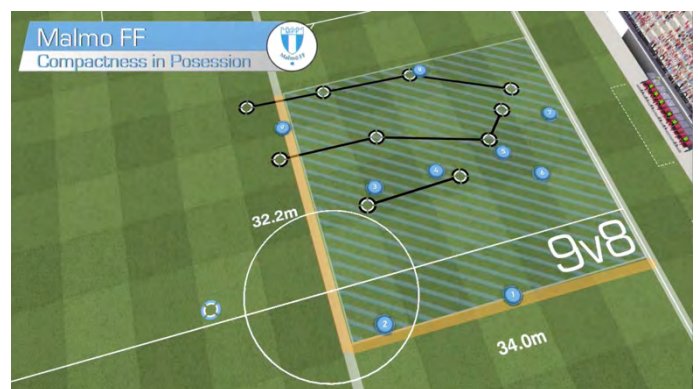
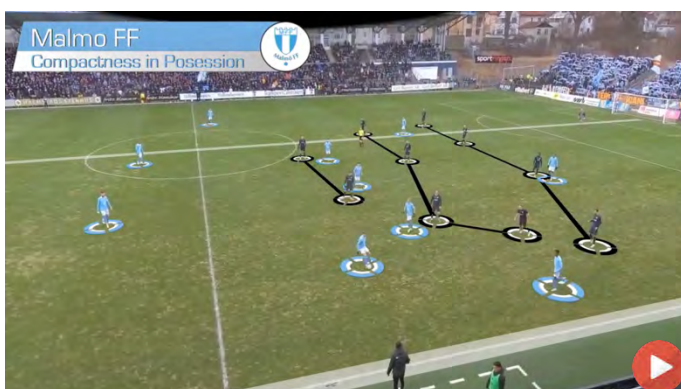


Figure 231 – From match situation to drill



Figure 232 – Possession 9v8 + 1 neutral player to train relational density on the ball side

A themed game could involve playing 8v8 + 2 floaters (one positioned outside the field and one inside) in a narrow space. The objective is to score in the goal, but only three attacking players and three defending players are allowed to cross the white line. Every 4 minutes, the coach blows the whistle, and the field expands, requiring players to adjust and **reposition to the opposite side** of the field. This exercise is useful for training the creation of *escadinhas*.

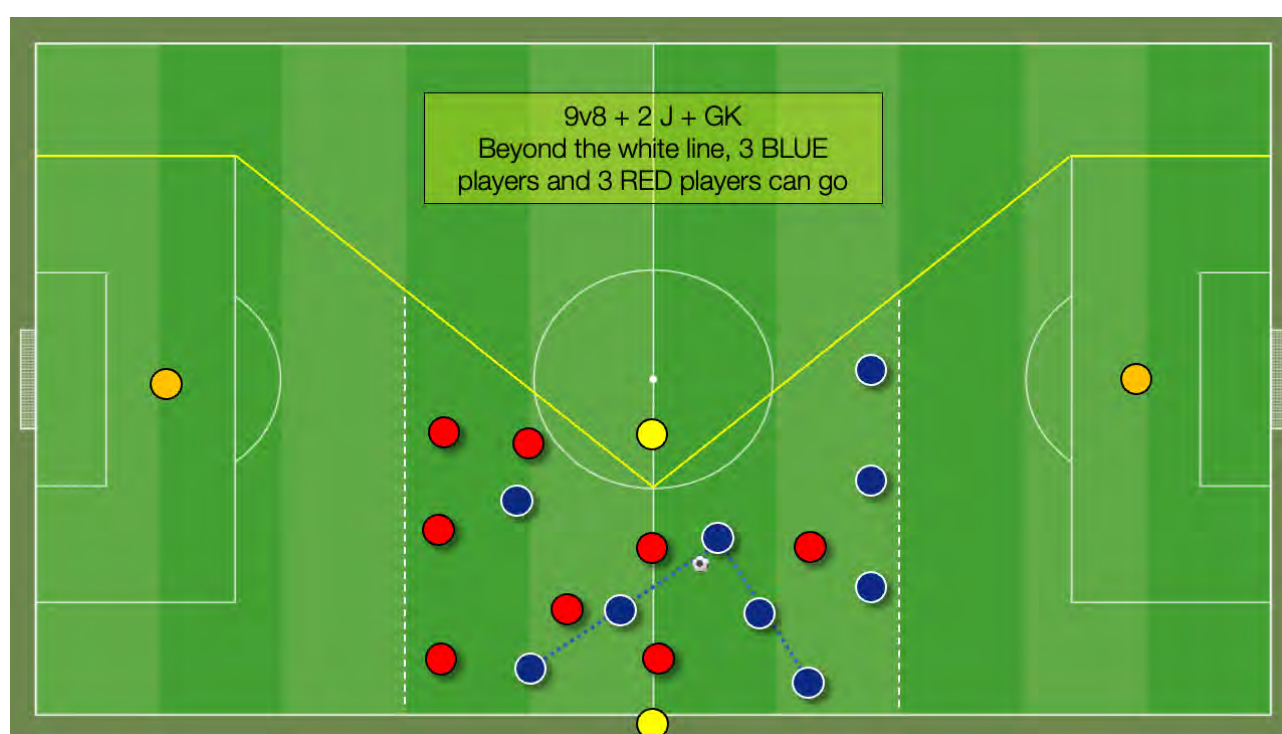


Figure 233 – Themed game 8v8 + 2 neutral players

To develop plays in the **final third of the field**, an exercise is proposed where a 4v3 + 3 floaters (one wide and two in support) is played. The blue team, after completing 8 to 10 passes, must look to find the two support floaters, who in turn must combine with the attacker (creating a 3v2 situation against the two red defenders) and finish on goal. The attack develops by alternating between the right and left sides of the field.

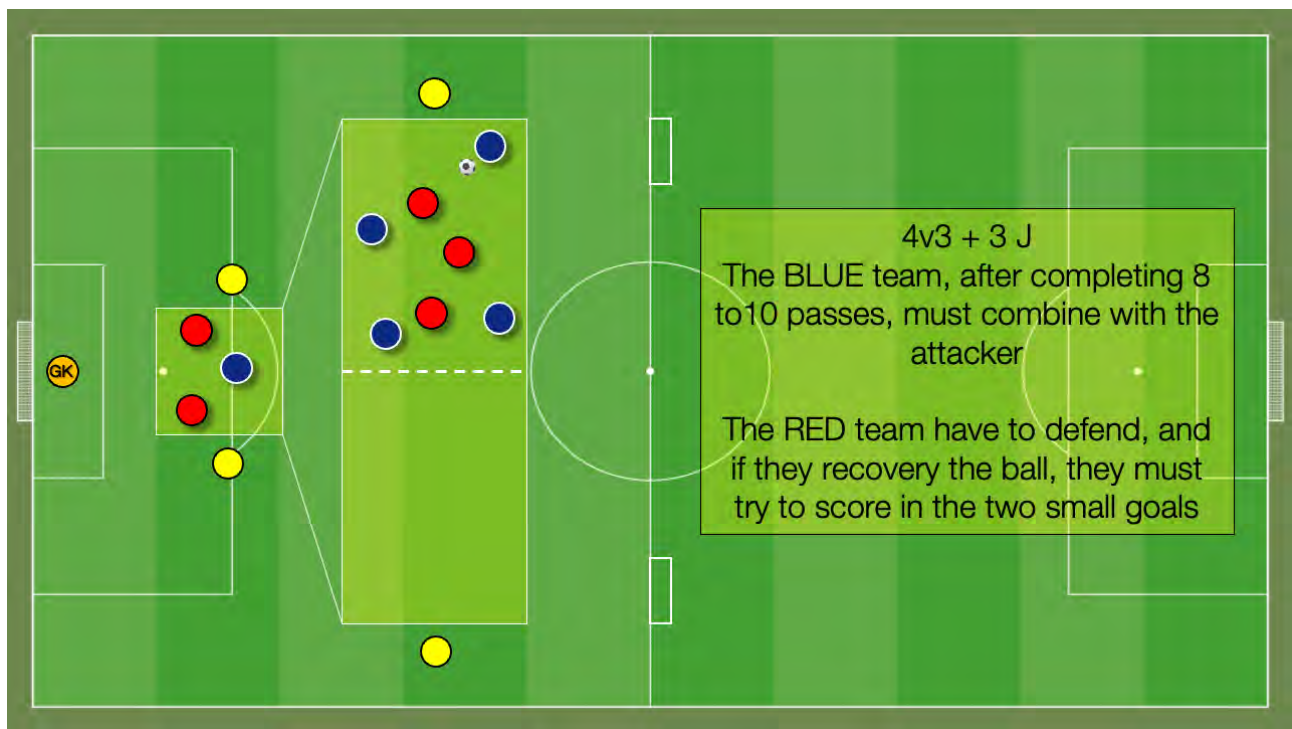


Figure 234 – Possession 4v3 + 3 neutral players to develop combinations in the final third

Additionally, group-based fun exercises can be included in the sessions to reinforce the concept of **relationship** and **association** between players.



Figure 235 – Play-based warm-ups

I have always been an advocate for the cross-pollination between sports, even those that are deeply different from one another. I think of **Horst Wein**, one of the technical developers of Barcelona's *la Masia*, who came from hockey but gave a brilliant boost to the world of football by bringing new methodological and tactical ideas.

If we can take inspiration from sports completely different from football, then we can and must absolutely open ourselves to the world of **futsal**, the younger sibling of 11-a-side football (not in importance, but in spatial dimensions). In futsal, we can find many situations, both technical and tactical, that we can also encounter in a football match.

The dimensions of a futsal court are 40 meters in length and 20 meters in width, for a total of 800 square meters, where the game is played 5v5 with four outfield players in action. The dimensions, in relation to the number of players, are not that different when compared to the effective playing area on an 11-a-side football field.

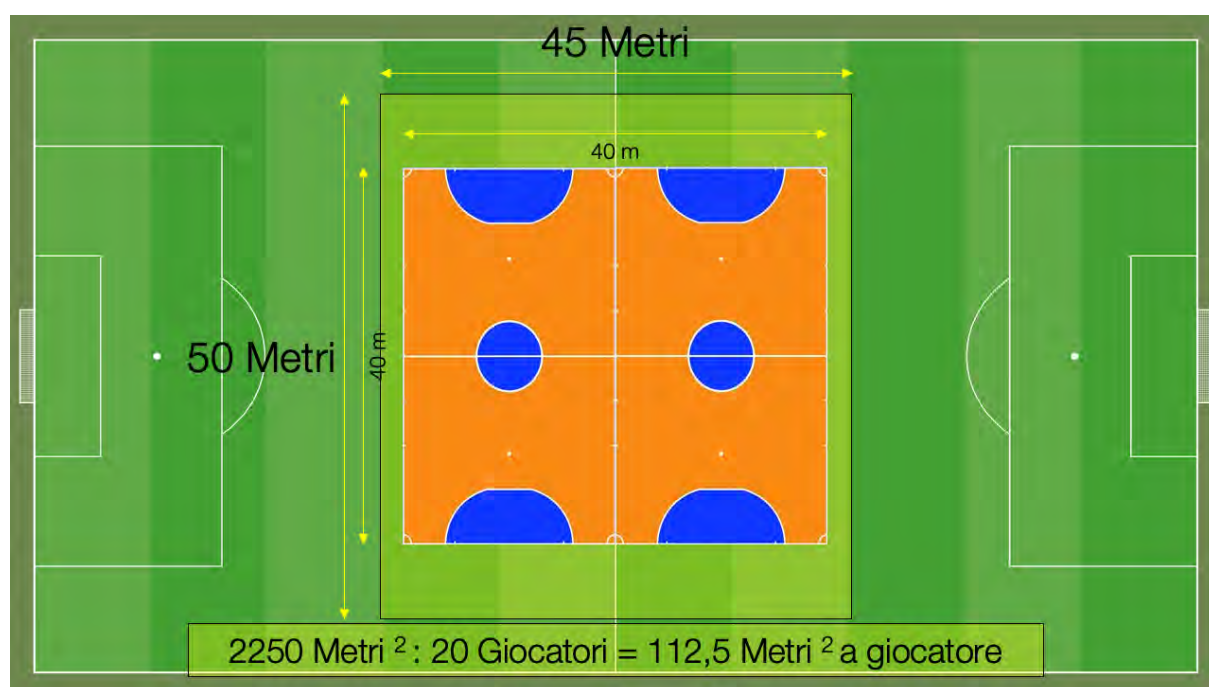


Figure 236 – Comparison between two futsal courts and the actual area where the game is played on a football field

Additionally, in futsal, we find very important **technical skills** for 11-a-side football, such as the use of the **sole** to receive, control, and invite pressure from the opposing players.

Beyond the technical aspects, we can take advantage of certain tactical situations. We have seen how many teams are increasingly defending more courageously, accepting **1v1 situations across the entire field** and not conceding numerical superiority.

A sport that can help us develop a solution to this problem, where both full-field pressure, man-to-man, and the need to control the ball and maximize each possession coexist, is futsal. In futsal, there is the necessity, while attacking, to maintain team **balance**: losing possession immediately gives the opponents a free chance to shoot.

In an interesting article by Raffaele Falco, it is noted that, to address these issues, futsal has developed a system called the “4-player game”, which differs from the classic 3-1 formation with a pivot in attack⁷⁹

As highlighted in the figure below, the classic **3-1** formation allows the defense to comfortably accept the 1v1 situations across the entire field.

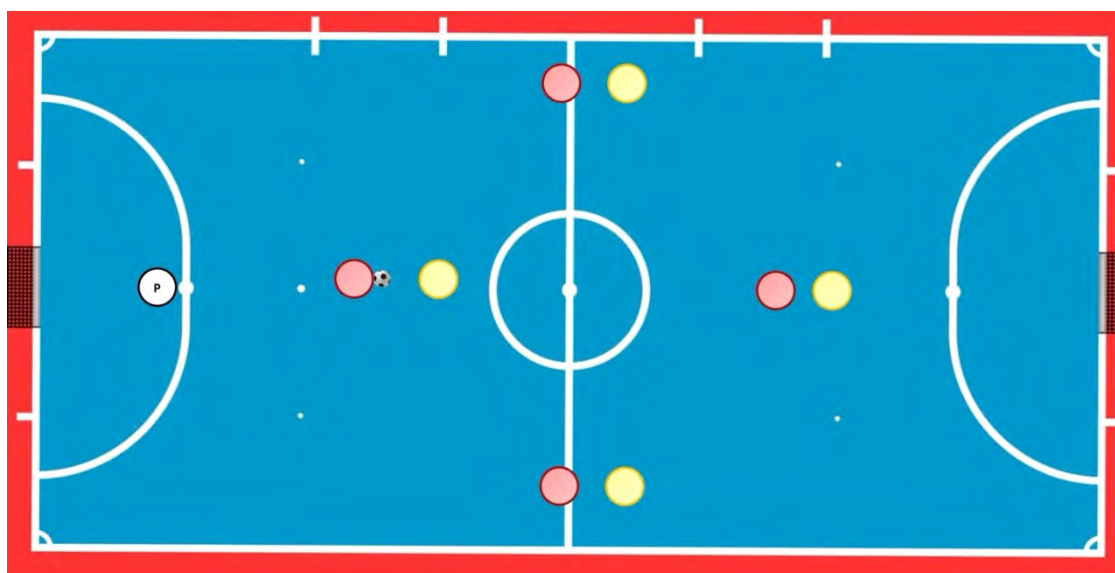


Figure 237 – 3-1 system in futsal that facilitates and encourages man-to-man marking. Source: Raffaele Falco

⁷⁹ Raffaele Falco – La superiorità dinamica dal calcio posizionale alla costruzione 4-0 – www.linkedin.com/pulse/la-superiorit%C3%A0-dinamica-dal-calcio-posizionale-alla-4-0-falco

The “4-player game” requires a true revolution in the defensive systems of futsal, where teams are forced to shift from a **man-marking defense** to a predominantly **zonal defense**. In the “4-player game”, the players are positioned as shown in the following figure.

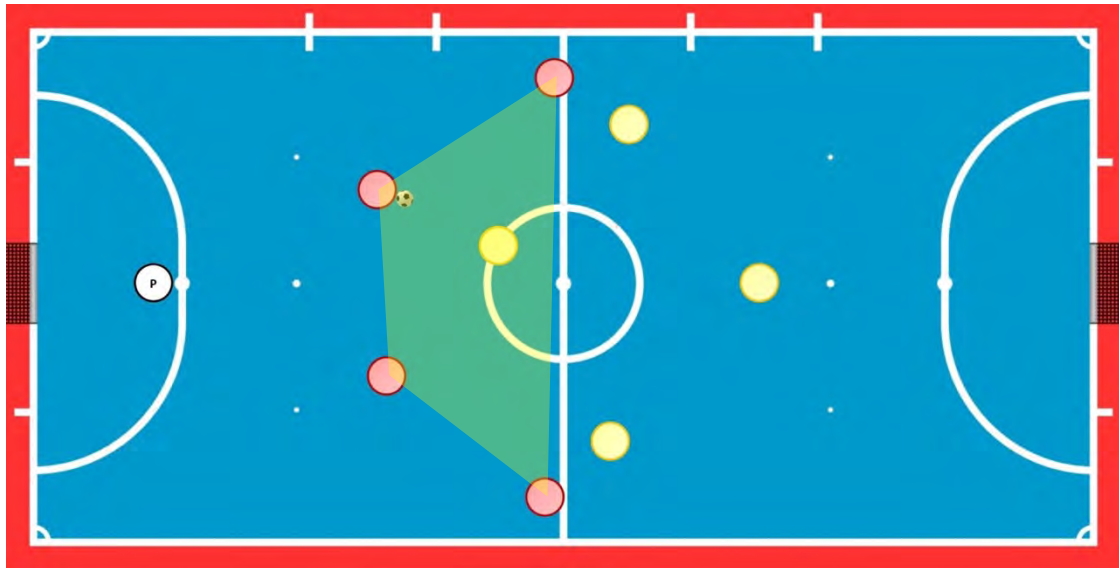


Figure 238 – The “4-player game” in futsal that does not allow man-to-man defense. Source: Raffaele Falco

In this case, it is intuitive to observe that the defenders cannot mark man-to-man, as this would leave space that could easily be exploited by the opponents. In this system, there are certain offensive movements, true **rotations**, that allow the team to attack while maintaining **balance**, both “horizontally” (how many players are covering the goal and how many are moving into advanced areas of the field) and “vertically” (how many players are positioned in the left and right zones of the field).

There are two main rotations that ensure the team always maintains this balance:

- The “**8 rotation**”, where, after passing the ball, the player makes a run toward the center of the field (movement 1) and then moves to widen out on the same side from where they started (movement 2). Meanwhile, their initial position is covered by the player who was originally positioned laterally (movement 3). This ensures that both horizontal and vertical balance are maintained, while simultaneously creating movement, **forcing the opposing players** to choose whether to follow the run and cover

the player, thereby **leaving the new ball carrier free to play**, or to press, following the ball and risking a through pass for the opponent's run.

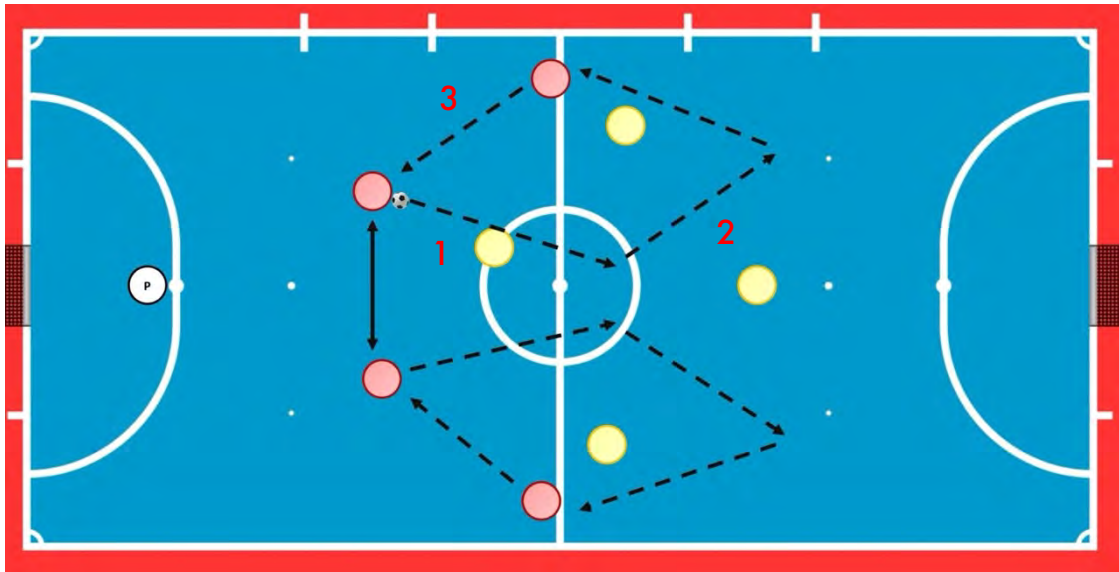


Figure 239 – The 8 rotation. Source: Raffaele Falco

- The “**X rotation**”, where the player passing the ball makes a movement to cut across the entire field (movement 1). It is important to note that this movement briefly creates a **vertical imbalance**, as three players will occupy the right side of the field while only one player is on the left side. This also forces the next teammate making the run to perform a new cut towards the opposite side in order to restore balance (movement 2).

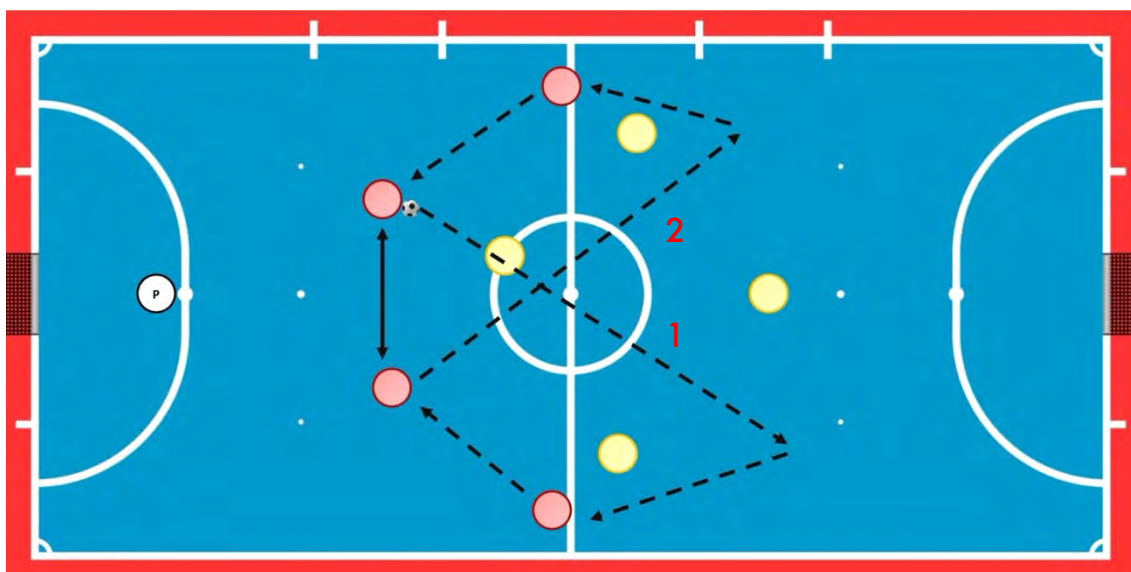


Figure 240 – The X rotation. Source: Raffaele Falco

Cristian **Dobrick** is a young coach who has gained attention for introducing a very fluid style of football in the youth sector of the German team Holstein Kiel, where the movement off the ball is fundamental. These players create a “**dynamic superiority**”, meaning a continuous generation of space and passing lanes through **positional interchange**. This is no longer created by the movement of advanced players who get free behind the defensive line, but through the **invasion** of space by the players involved in the build-up.

The most notable feature of Dobrick's play is the **build-up** from the back, often executed even with numerical inferiority, by applying the movements and rotations seen earlier in futsal.

In the build-up phase, he isolates the four defenders and positions the midfielders along the midfield line, creating a central space between them (highlighted in yellow in the image below). This forces the opponents to choose whether to press, thus accepting numerical parity in defense, or to mark these players, thereby leaving space for the players involved in the build-up.

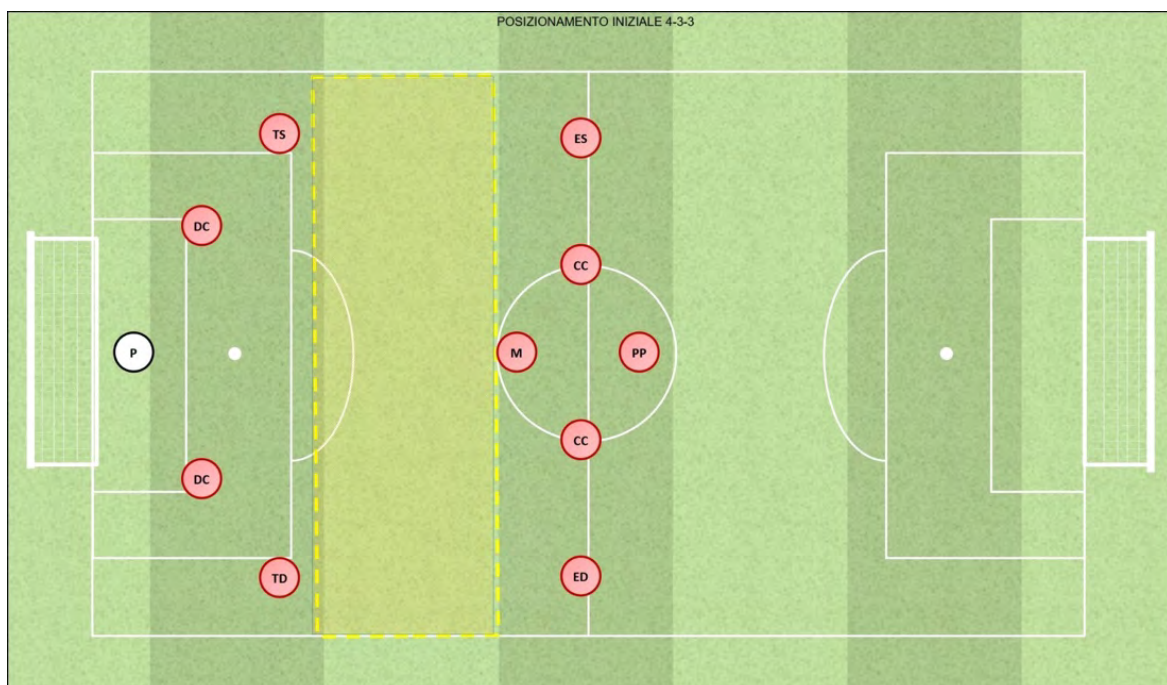


Figure 241 – Building formation to create the '4-player game' in futsal. Source: Raffaele Falco



Figure 242 – The build-up play of Cristian Dobrick and the application of futsal rotations

The four defenders are arranged almost in a line, creating a space to attack, just like the “4-player game” in futsal. The rotations proposed by futsal would allow this type of build-up to solve its biggest issue, which is the loss of defensive balance. The left-central defender exchanges passes with the goalkeeper and then makes a diagonal run to receive the ball in the space.



Figure 243 – Defender's movement as in futsal rotations

The two main things that link futsal and football in this type of build-up from the back are: the **need to play the ball**, forcing the opponents to adapt to our plays; and the **need to build up with numerical parity** without risking exposing the goal when we lose possession (the need to maintain balance).

Numerous futsal exercises can be integrated into training sessions, which is why I believe it is very useful to have a futsal expert within the coaching staff. An interesting exercise is a 5v4, where the player in possession within the box is required to interchange positions with a teammate after passing the ball. This exercise greatly stimulates the fluidity of the players' movements.

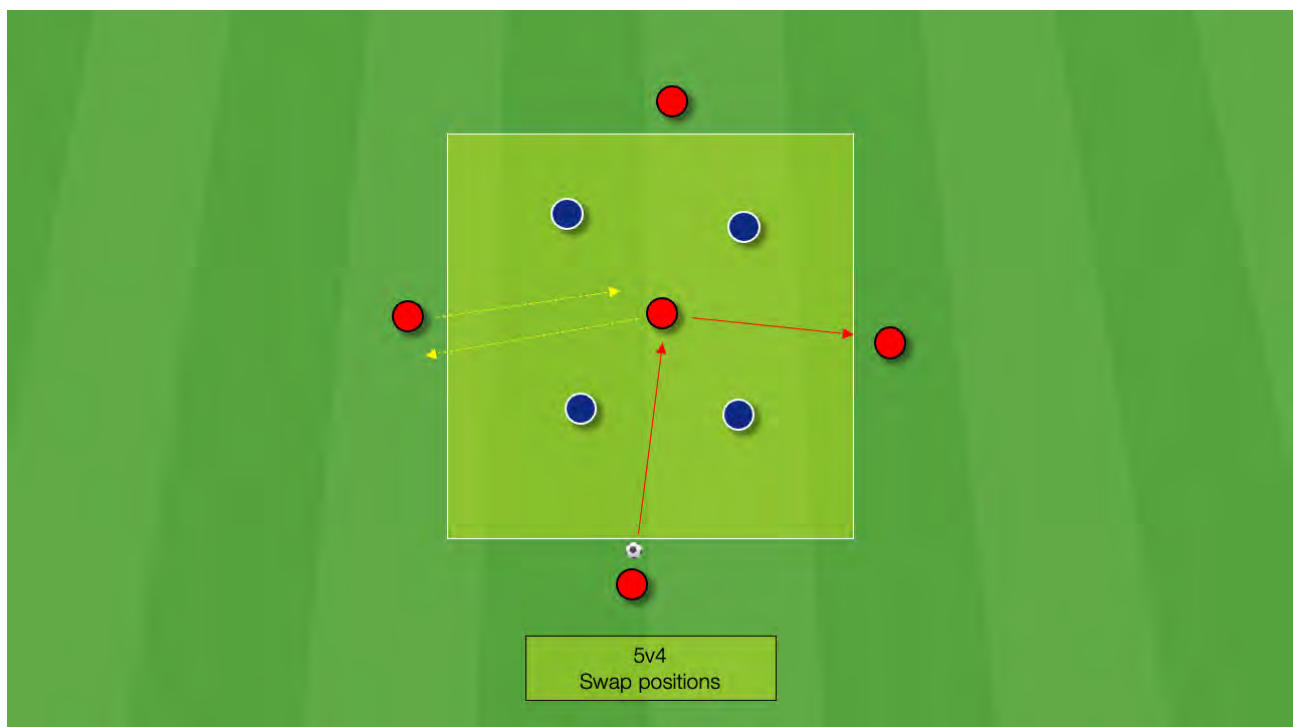


Figure 244 – 5v4 where the central player must swap positions with an outside player

A variation of the previous exercise is to create a 4v4 + 1 joker, where only one player in possession can enter the box, while outside, the game is played 4v4. The player who receives the ball inside the box must play the ball outside and then exit the square to make space for a teammate.



Figure 245 – Drill 4v4 + 1 neutral player with central player rotation. Source: Riccardo Manno

Another exercise from futsal focuses on training the concept of counter-pressing. The blue team is in possession of the ball and plays against the red team in a 4v4, with the possibility of using 3 jokers (two wide and one inside). If the red team recovers the ball, the blue players must immediately make a run inside to attempt to win the ball back.

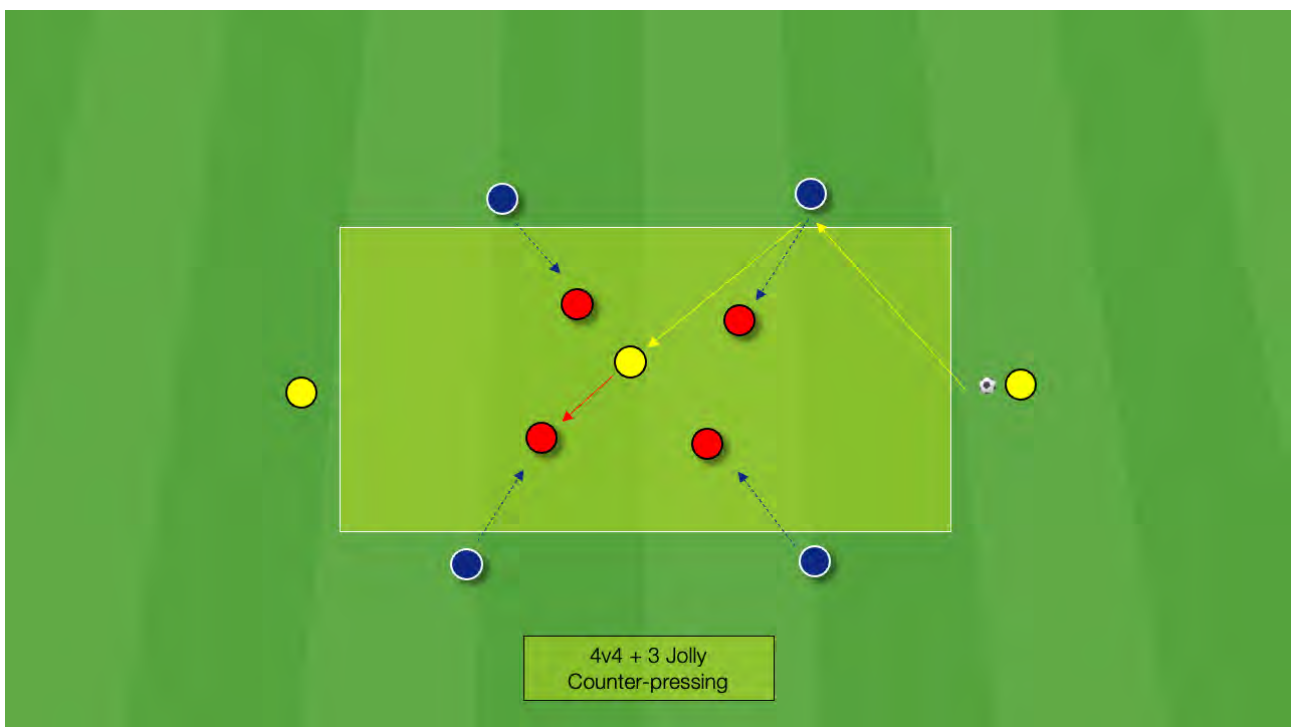


Figure 246 – Drill 4v4 + 3 neutral players to train counter-pressing

CONCLUSIONS

After a journey through football, from the distant past to the present day, we have explored a path rich in solutions, tactical innovations, philosophies, and principles. It is now time to summarize and conclude by discussing what the possible trends of the future may be.

Football is a continuous **back-and-forth between defense and attack**, and as we have seen throughout its history, it is the defenses that decide what **space** and **time** to concede to the opponent.

In football, the initial focus was on **controlling spaces without the ball** (zonal defenses), to stop non-conformists and artists who could control the game. Then many teams learned to control spaces while having the ball, with Arrigo **Sacchi's revolution**. In a rational response to the **organized defenses** that came before, more **organized attacks** had to be created to overcome them (positional football). Defensive order against positional order led attacks to exploit the half-spaces created between the various lines. Out of necessity came the response of **man-to-man defense**. In recent years, many teams have adopted a defensive phase based on the concept of “marking the man”, seeking to follow the opponent's reference and pressing with numerical parity.

In Italy, the mentor is Giampiero **Gasperini**, and this philosophy is gaining more disciples, including Ivan **Juric**, his former player and assistant, Igor **Tudor**, also from the same nationality as Juric, with a connection formed after the coaching handover at Verona, and finally Raffaele **Palladino**, a young coach who was also a former player of Gasperini at Genoa.

“With Juric, we are friends and have known each other since we were kids: we often talk about football, although each of us has his own vision. I hope to achieve a little of what he has done”

Igor Tudor



Figure 247 – Connections between the coaches of the mark-mark school

During the UEFA Pro Master, I had the pleasure of visiting Marseille, coached by Igor Tudor, along with my colleagues. In his classroom session, he showed us tactical situations where his team defended **man-to-man** against Paris Saint-Germain, featuring Neymar, Messi, and Mbappé.

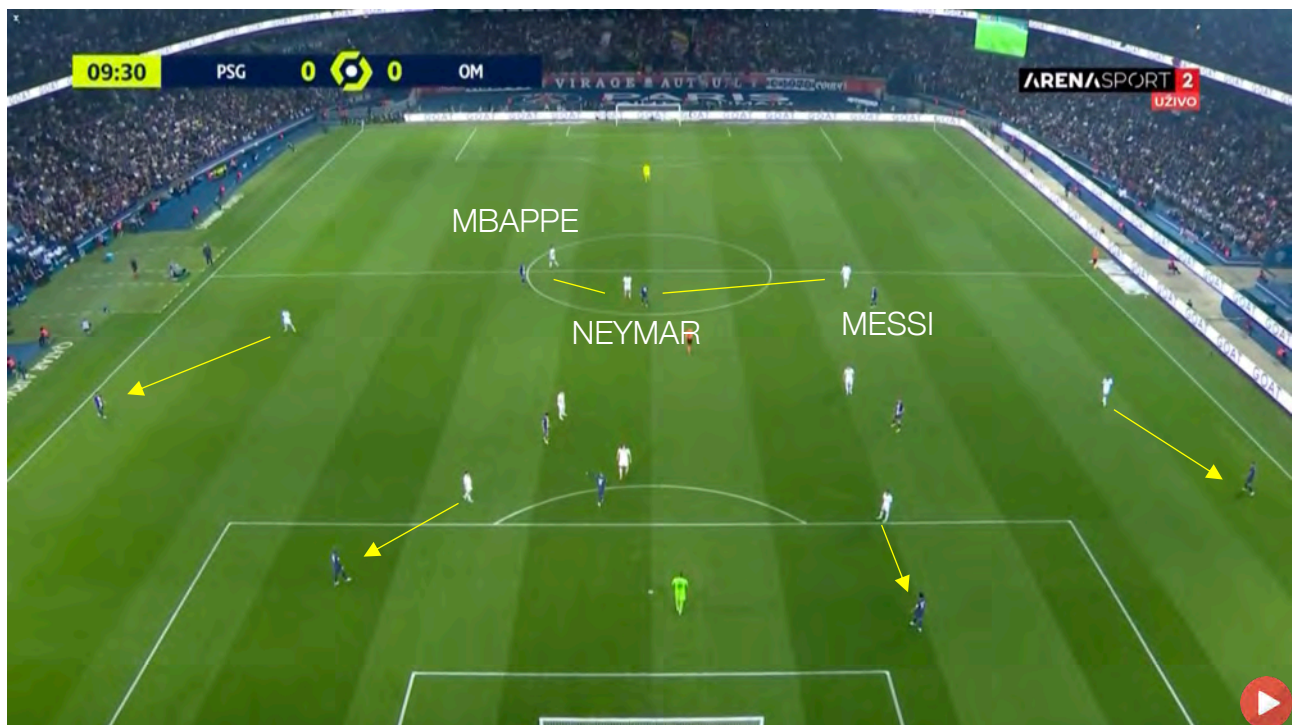


Figure 248 – Tudor's Marseille defends with man-to-man marking, conceding defensive numerical equality

Of course, the Croatian coach spoke about the potential risks of the defensive strategy, but he also expressed the idea of believing in what he was proposing and believed that man-to-man defense was the best way to defend. He emphasized that hybrid situations were not considered, repeatedly stating the phrase **“either everything or nothing”**.

Positional football, therefore, began to struggle against the principle of man-marking. A famous moment came in 2019 when Guardiola, after facing Gasperini's Atalanta in the Champions League, said: *“Playing against them is like going to the dentist, you always suffer”*⁸⁰.

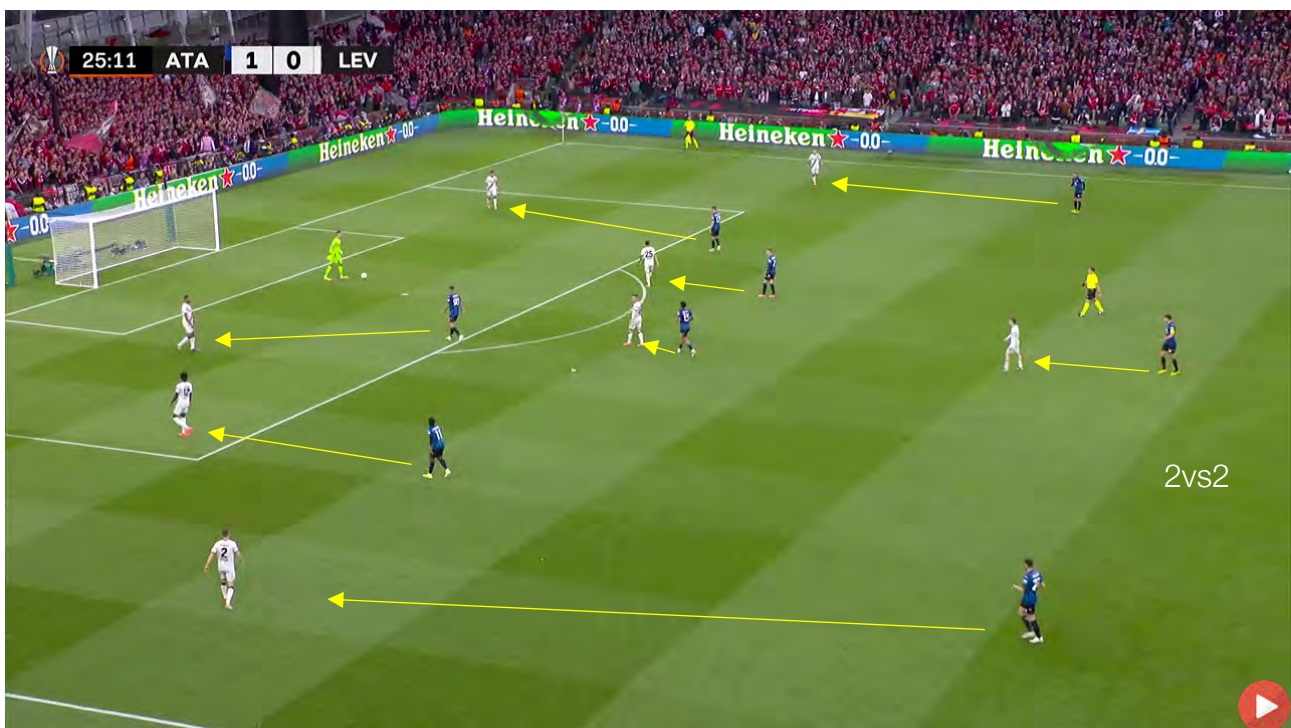


Figure 249 – Gasperini's Atalanta with man-to-man marking against Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen in the 2024 Europa League final

Positional play can no longer exploit the half spaces because they are no longer conceded. To create **superiority**, it is necessary to introduce dynamism with fluid player movements, thus seeking **dynamic superiority**.

⁸⁰ www.tuttoatalanta.com/altre-news/atalanta-come-il-dentista-sentite-quello-di-gasperini-101585

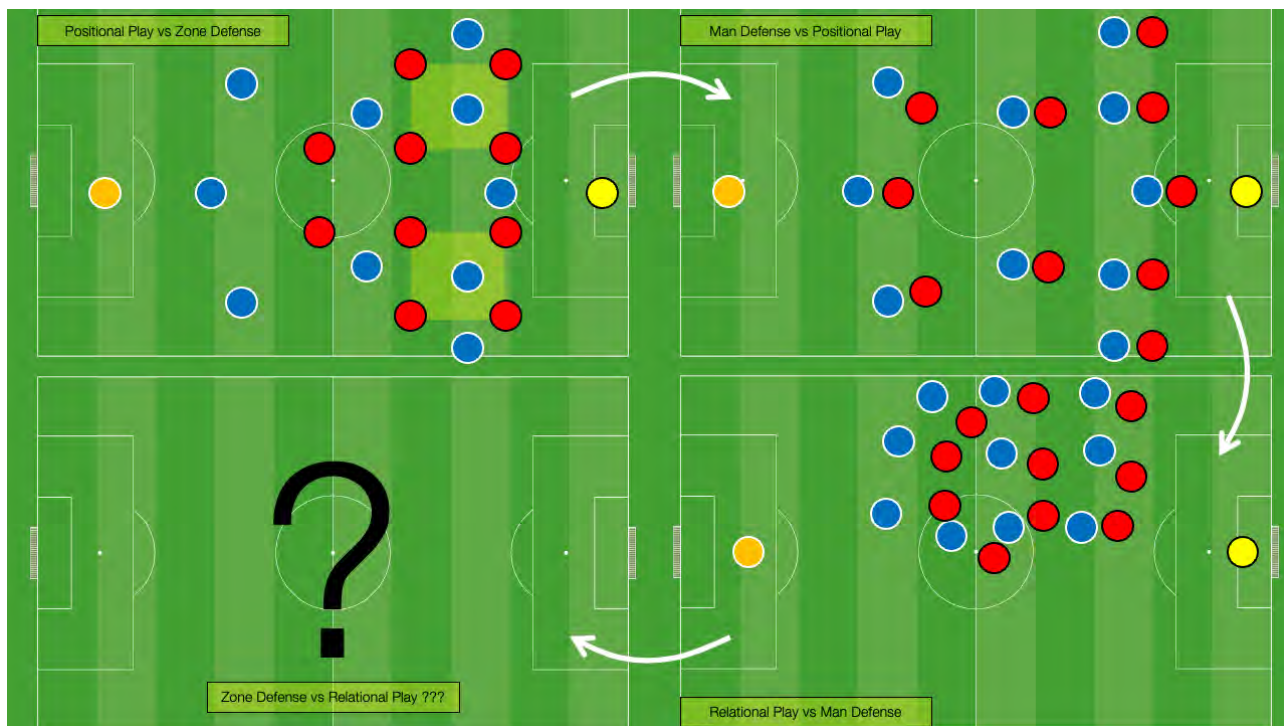


Figure 250 – Evolution of the back-and-forth between the defensive and offensive phases

Recently, or perhaps it's better to say that it has been revived from the past, functional play and **relational football** emerged from Brazil as a potential answer and solution to defenses that focus on man-marking. Positional fluidity, chaos, and asymmetries could challenge Gasperini's defensive school, as we await to see the next move in defensive strategies.

In defense, between Sacchi's strict zonal defense and Gasperini's man-marking approach, hybrid systems have appeared, such as Giovanni Trapattoni's **mixed zone** or the more modern **hybrid pressing** system used by Arteta at Arsenal.

In Europe, in recent years, the football philosophy of relational play has emerged, combining principles of positional play with those of functional football. Today, many teams apply **principles of relational football** while still maintaining a **positional structure** to respect, in an **integrated** approach.

In a 2018 article⁸¹, Argentine coach and analyst Giulio Genoud wrote that Spain (one of the most prominent positional teams) was transforming its attacking play. The Argentine highlighted how the game now relies on other resources, particularly to exploit different types of superiority, such as positional, qualitative, and socio-affective superiority, rather than just numerical superiority. **Key spaces** are now uncovered and compensated for, and the **free player** is intentionally chosen by the opponent so that they appear in **low-risk areas**.

The analysis continues by pointing out how Spain positions itself with seven positional players on the outside, creating an external structure, and three dynamic players within the structure (sometimes this would become six outside and four inside).

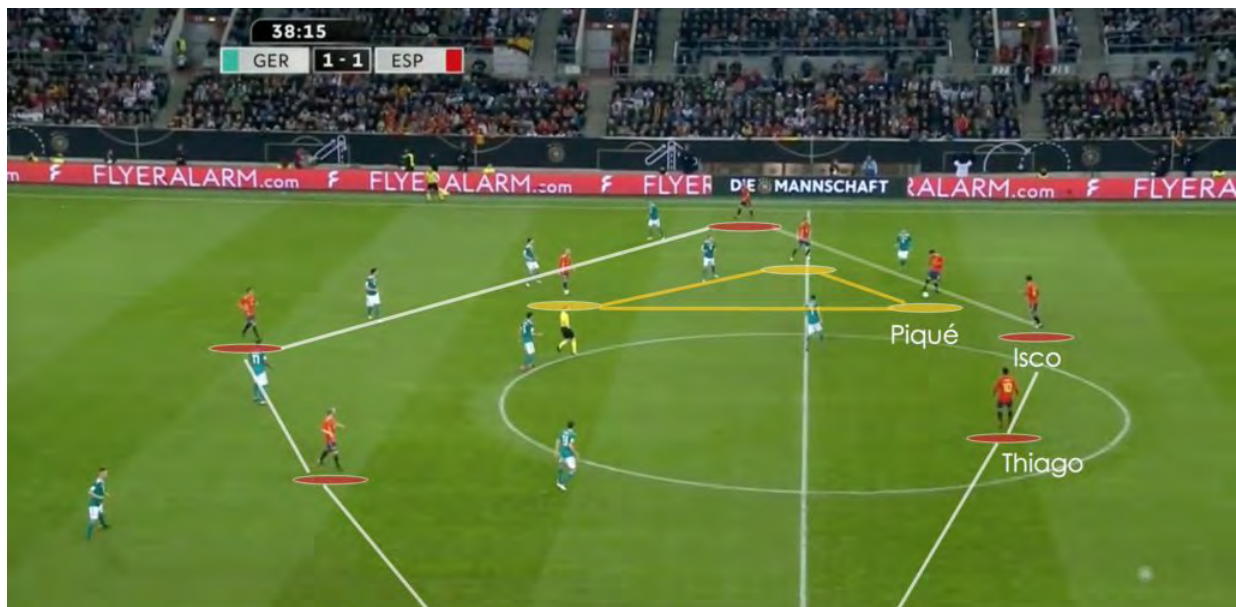


Figure 251 – Spain proposes a structure with players in fluid positions. Source: Giulio Genoud

This structure is reflected both in a 2019 tweet from the @Jozsef_Bozsikin account and in a recent article⁸² written by Antonio Gagliardi and Francesco Bordin, which discusses the new era of relational football in Europe.

⁸¹ Julian Genoud – Positional Fluidity and the future of football: Initial thoughts – www.rondos.futbol/2018/06/positional-fluidity-and-the-future-of-football-initial-thoughts

⁸² Antonio Gagliardi e Francesco Bordin – Una nuova era – www.figc.it/it/tecnici/news/1-era-del-calcio-relazionale-disponibile-l-articolo-di-analisi-tattica-a-cura-di-gagliardi-e-bordin

In the old continent, a hybrid system is emerging that integrates positional football with relational football, which we could call **structural-relational** football, featuring both fixed positional players and dynamic, fluid players.

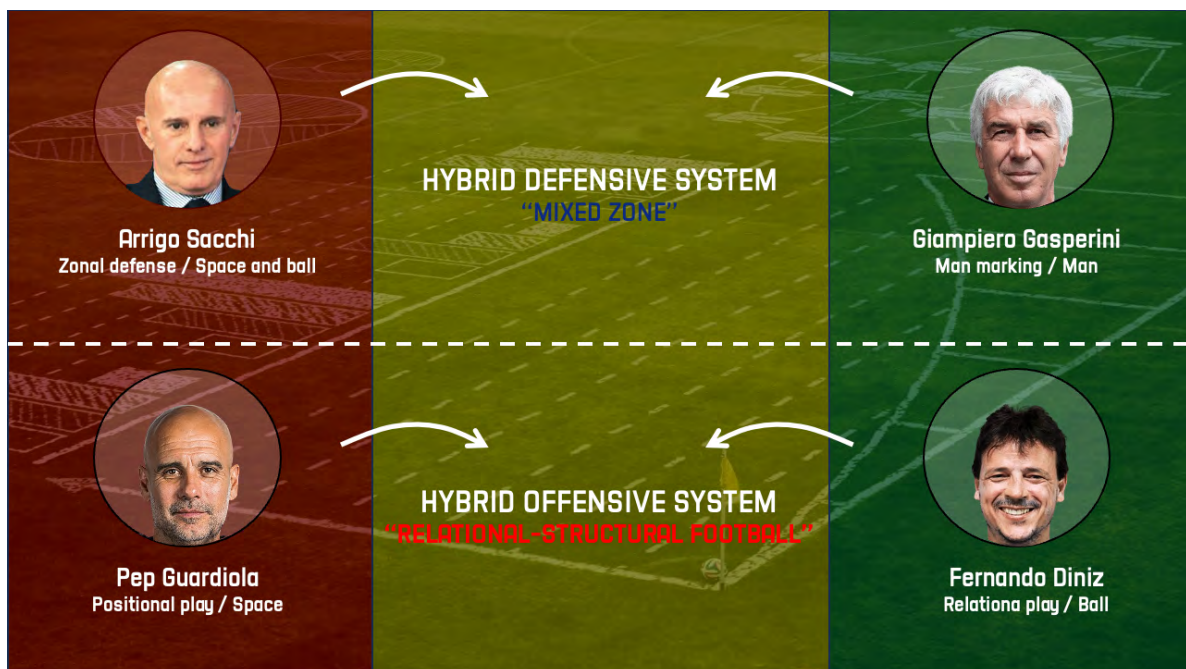


Figure 252 – Between two extremes, there are always hybrid systems

In the following image, a structure is shown with **6 external players** (peripheral) who fix the perimeter, providing balance and width to the team, and **4 dynamic players** functioning within.



Figure 253 – Structural-Relational Football: 5 Outside and 5 Inside

The structure can also vary by having 5 players outside and 5 players inside, as shown in the following image, or 7 players outside and 3 players inside.



Figure 254 – Structural-Relational Football: 5 Outside and 5 Inside

The development leads to creating overloads on the flanks, following the principles of relational football, with 4 players in the ball zone supported by 4 perimeter players. Of course, to make the team even more fluid, interchanges can be made between perimeter players and dynamic-functional players, while always maintaining the predefined external structure.



Figure 255 – Relational-structural football with an overload on the right

The relational-structural football maintains the principle of the **chaotic freedom** of functional and positional play within the **positional perimeter** boundaries characteristic of positional play.

In the following images, we can see Ancelotti's Real Madrid, freshly crowned European champions, which maintains an external structure and moves players inside, creating areas of density near the ball.

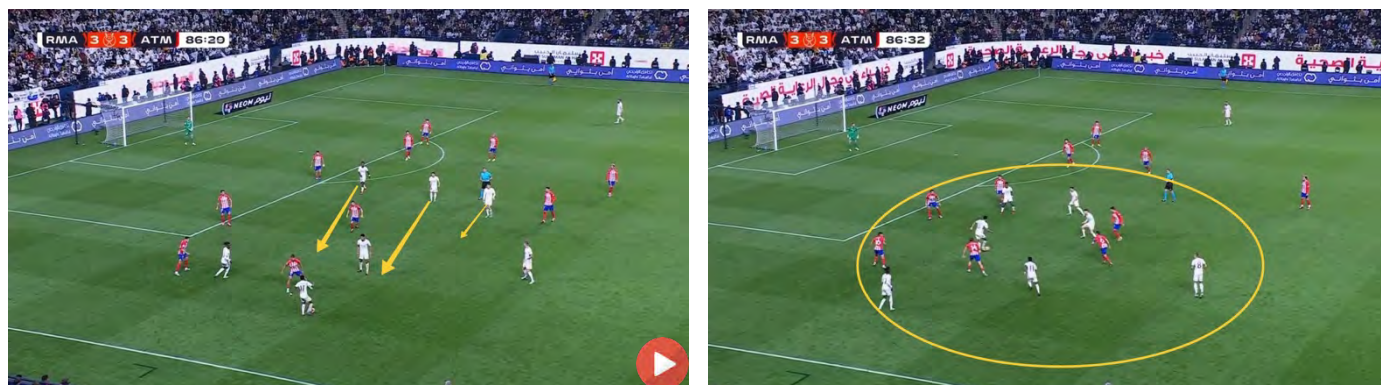


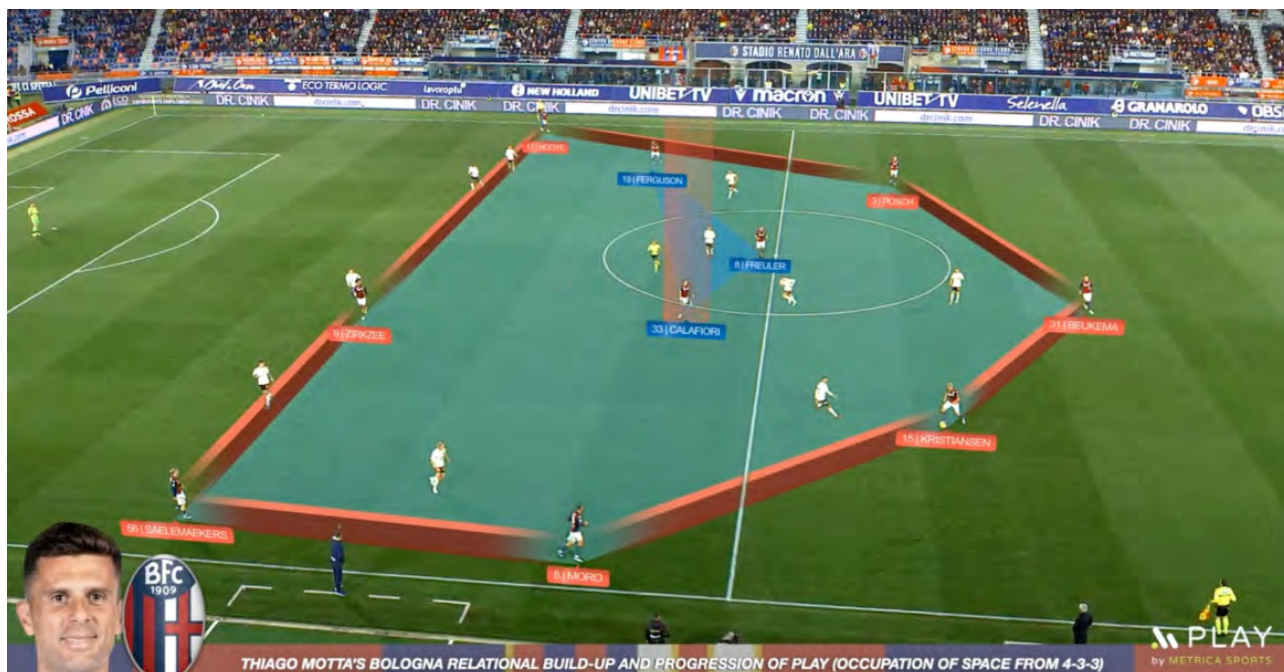
Figure 256 – Real Madrid plays relational-structural football



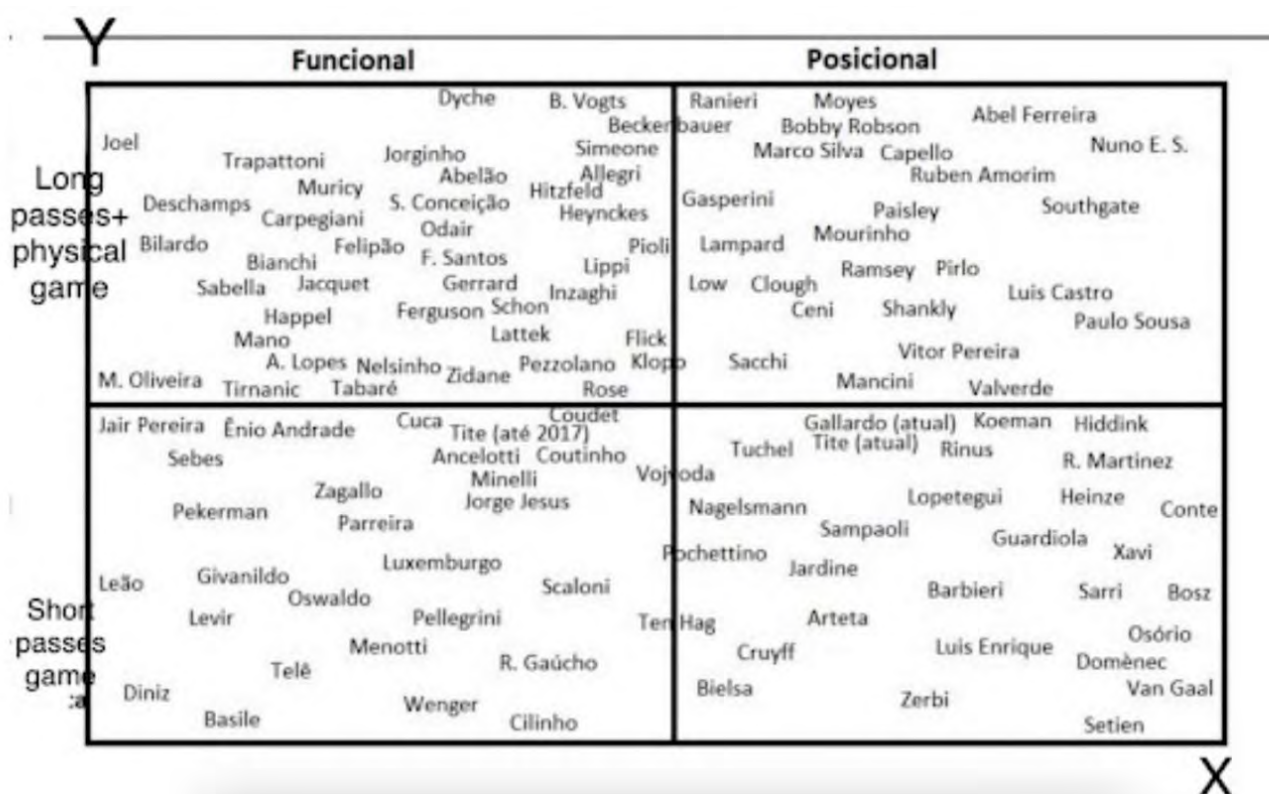
Figure 257 – Fluidity of Real Madrid's three midfielders within a structure

Other teams, such as Spalletti's Napoli, the 2022/23 Italian champions, Simone Inzaghi's Inter, Thiago Motta's Bologna, and Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen, are implementing this type of football. In an interesting video produced by match analyst Nicholas Lazzari⁸³, some actions from the previously mentioned teams are shown, demonstrating the application of **relational-structural football**.

⁸³ Nicholas Lazzari – www.linkedin.com/posts/nicholas-lazzari-86b548148_matchanalysis-videoanalysis-analytics-activity-7203274281177251840-S2yg?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop



In the image below, from the account X @Jozsef_Bozsikin, coaches are categorized based on whether they are closer to functional football, on the left, or positional football, on the right.



I wanted to do the same with active players, categorizing them based on their characteristics, whether they are more inclined to play positional football or relational football, and perhaps create a mix of them for the **hybrid philosophy** of relational-structural football.

ROLE - FUNCTION	POSITIONAL PLAYERS	RELATIONAL PLAYERS
GOALKEEPER	Neuer	Onana
CENTRAL BACKS	Stones – Van Dijk	Bastoni – Calafiori
FULLBACKS	Walker – Kimmich	Cancelo – Marcelo
PLAYMAKER	Rodri – Jorginho	Chalanoglu – Andre
MIDFIELDERS	De Bruyne – Pedri	Ganso – Verratti – Bellingham
WINGERS	Mbappé – Salah – Vinicius	Messi – Di Maria – Foden
FORWARDS	Haaland – Cristiano Ronaldo	Alvarez – Wirtz

Figure 260 – List of active players categorized by positional or relational characteristics

History is important to understand where we come from and what revolutions and innovative ideas have shaped the football we know today, as well as to gain the knowledge needed to try to predict what football in the future might look like. At the beginning of this thesis, I discussed how important it is for a coach to continue studying and staying up to date. This thesis is a bit like the final piece of a puzzle, made up of many elements I've put together over the last few years of my career in football. Page by page, I've enjoyed presenting analyses I had stored, studies I had done, books I had read, and ideas I had in mind. During my studies, I've attended numerous lectures (thankfully, mostly interesting ones), but even in those where the topic wasn't one of my favorites, I always tried to leave the room with at least one **doubt** or question in my mind. This is exactly the goal of my thesis: to give those who read it some food for thought and reflection. Every coach has their own vision, their own philosophy, and their own principles. In football, no one holds the absolute truth. The beauty of this **wonderful** and **fascinating** game is precisely that.

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