



THE ROLE OF THE
TWO
CENTER BACKS

DEFENDING



by LUCA BERTOLINI

The Role of the Center Backs (Defending)

By

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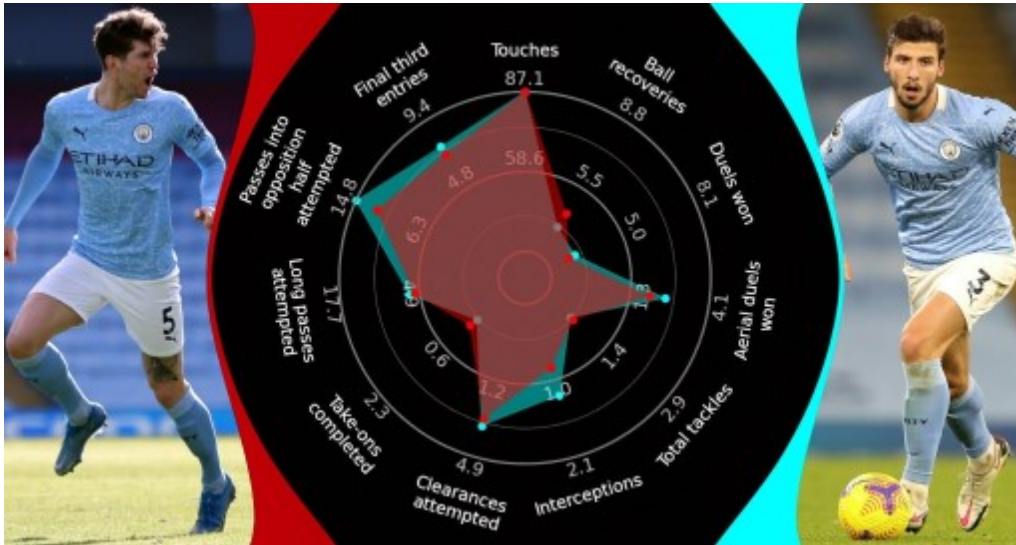


Table of contents

Introduction: active, re-active, and pro-active defenders	3
The meaning of the Padj defensive stats	11
Italy 2 – 1 Belgium at Euro 2021 Q/Finals: Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini against Rumleu Lukaku. A lesson on how to mark and limit one of the best center strikers of contemporary soccer	17
The principles of play of a modern center back	49
Defending against the opponent's front foot	55
Summary	63

Introduction: active, reactive, and pro-active defenders

The legendary Paolo Maldini has famously attributed the quote: "If I have to make a tackle, then I have already made a mistake." If we start from this statement to find the best center back, we should look to a table and take the player with fewer tackles per 90 minutes and consider him the best center back for a team.



Looking at this example, we could consider John Stones and Ruben Dias as the best center backs this season, but how about the goal that Man City conceded in the Champions League final, apart from the missing diagonal movement to cover the space of the left fullback?



- Walker, the right fullback, pushed up to counter the opponent with the ball
- Dias shifted out wide
- Stones shifted across the center
- Zichenko were behind the direct opponent, who is the scorer

Apart from their positions, the center backs were both too far from the opponents.



Dias's opponents received, and he could turn toward the goal; Stones' opponent drove him away from his center position, opening a gap that Zichenko should have been able to cover, standing between him and the goal to defend.



As the right center back allowed the ball carrier to turn and dribble the ball away from the touchline, facing the goal, and the second center backtracked the opponent and opened a gap in the center, Havertz received and dribbled the ball toward the goal with Zinchenko behind him and too far to attempt a defensive action.

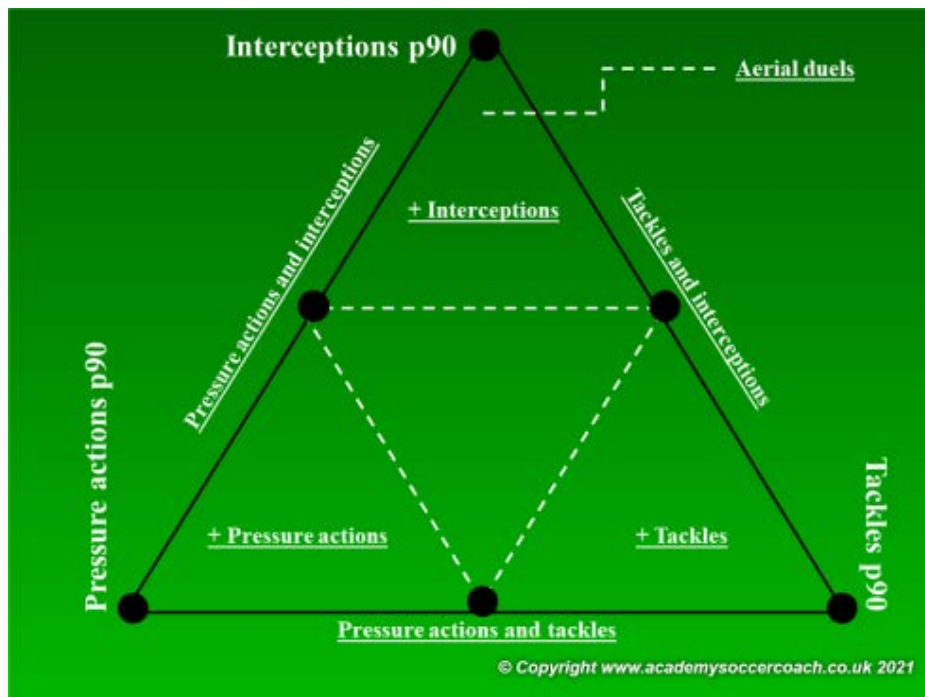
Their positions and the wrong defensive actions of the center backs before the missing diagonal cover run of the left fullback are factors that come first, concerning Maldini's statement: these center backs couldn't make any tackles to fix the issues of previous mistakes, but they were entirely out of position, as they didn't press the opponents, and they didn't cover the depth. Furthermore, the right center back made the worst mistake that a center back could make if there's no cover: he opened a gap in the center channel.



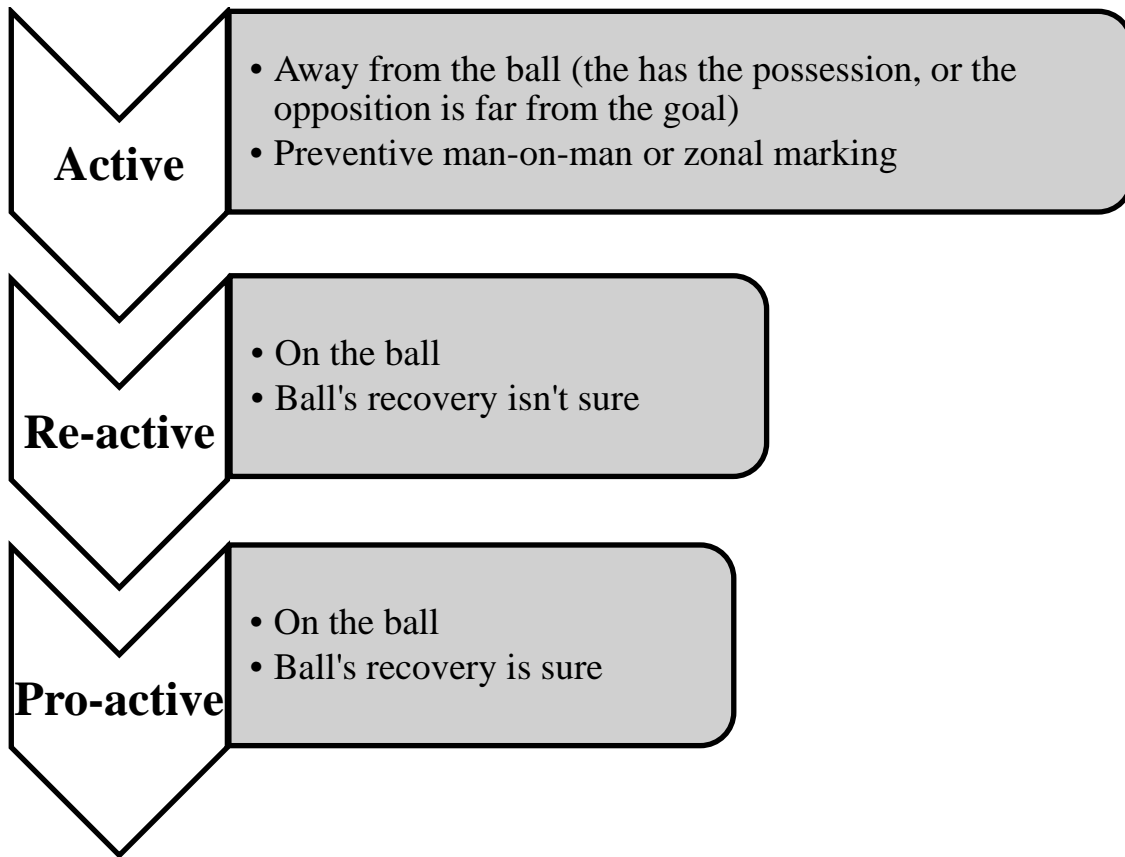
Chelsea striker could score, and the center backs were entirely out of positions, apart from the missing diagonal run of the fullback.

Suppose a tackle is the result of a previous mistake in this opposition's scored goal. In that case, the center backs couldn't even attempt a tackle due to wrong positions at the beginning of the defensive action, apart from the missing diagonal cover of the left fullback.

Furthermore, in modern soccer, the center backs as all the players in the field are expected to be effective from a possession point of view; it means that a defender is considered efficient when a defensive action has the objective to win the ball back and not only to break the opposition's attacking phase. Some of the old concepts of defense are not effective anymore. First of all, the defenders must be active, reactive, and proactive:



This is also why some metrics to analyze the center's performances are born; these players can be active, reactive, and proactive concerning the situation of play.



Active defenders:



- The right center back preventively marked the opposition's striker after his pass to the right fullback;
- The opposite center back shifted across the field to cover the space in front of him



- The holding midfielder acted as a center back, and he checked the most advanced opposition's striker, as the center backs were far from him.



- The left fullback and center back of the defensive team preventively marked the most advanced opponents of the possession team

Reactive defender:



- The center back of the defensive team ran back, looking behind him to look at the teammates' movements and be sure of their dropping back run to cover the space at his back when he realized that the ball carrier could dribble the ball along the defensive right half-space.



- The center back turned toward the ball carrier, and he started to cut his run with a diagonal movement.



- The first center back was too late to be defensively effective, and the ball carrier could play a cross pass. The opposite center back was very reactive in recovering the space and anticipate the winger, who tucked in, and who could have scored without his sliding interceptions.



- In this further example, the left-center back was very reactive, anticipating the opponent on the ball, but he could only kick the ball out of play after a dropping back runs from a higher position.

Pro-active defender:



- The center back moved toward the ball, and he anticipated the opposition's striker and the headered the ball besides a teammate.

From pro-active to active defender:

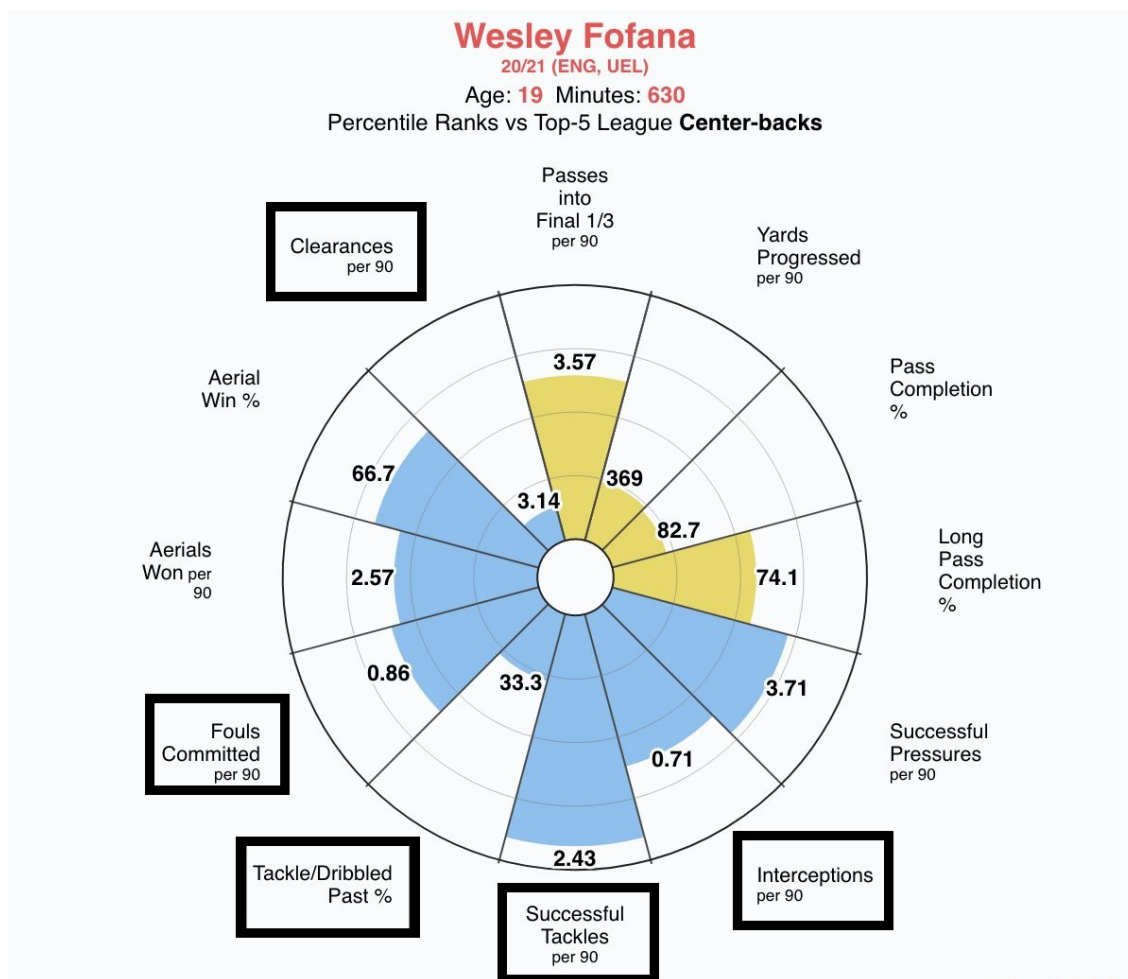


- The center back who passed the ball to the teammate, run back behind the only opposition's center striker between him and the goal when the first receiver after the ball recovery passed the ball to a third teammate

The meaning of the Padj defensive stats

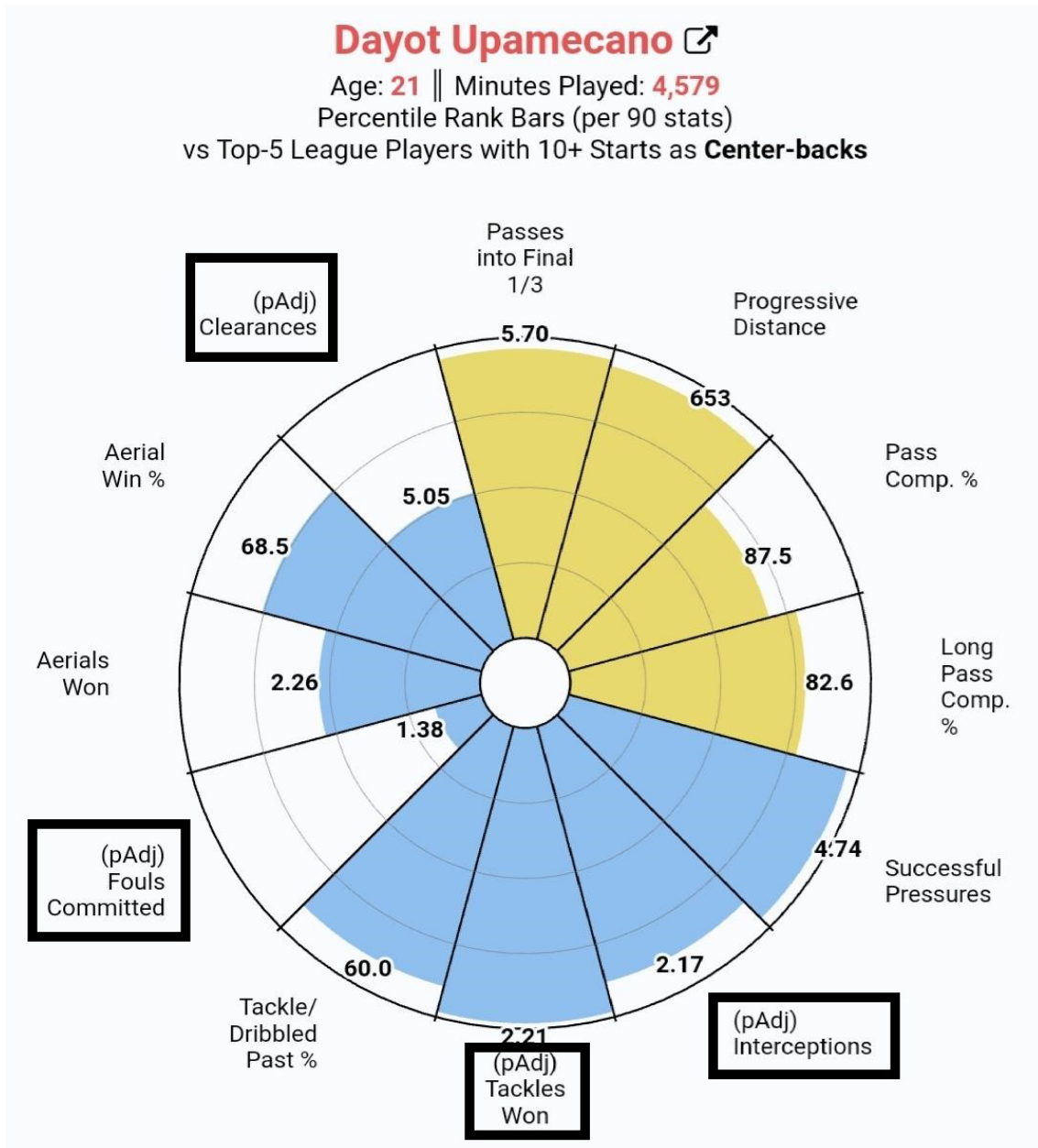
The PAdj Defensive Stats aim to fix the defensive rate stats issues because it isn't possible to tackle, interception, etc. when the team has the ball. When these teams have a lot of the ball, the defensive actions risk being under-represented compared to teams with low possession averages.

For these reasons, the pro-activity of a defender should be the main factor to consider through these kinds of data and metrics. The following picture is a functional but only numerical analysis of a defender...

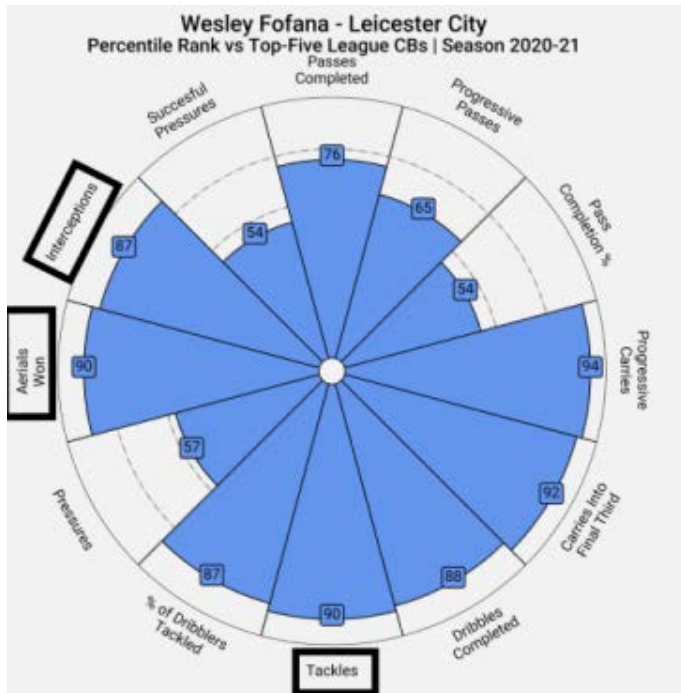


- This scheme shows the quantitative performance of a center back, concerning other players with the same role in the leading five European Domestic Leagues.
- These are the number of defensive actions based on a specific average (per game) during a season.
- One crucial data is missing in all the defensive stats: the number of times, based on the same average, the center-back's team has won the ball back after his defensive actions.

Otherwise, the following picture is a pro-active analysis of the defensive actions of a center back because it measures the average time in which the team of this center back has effectively won the ball after his defensive actions.



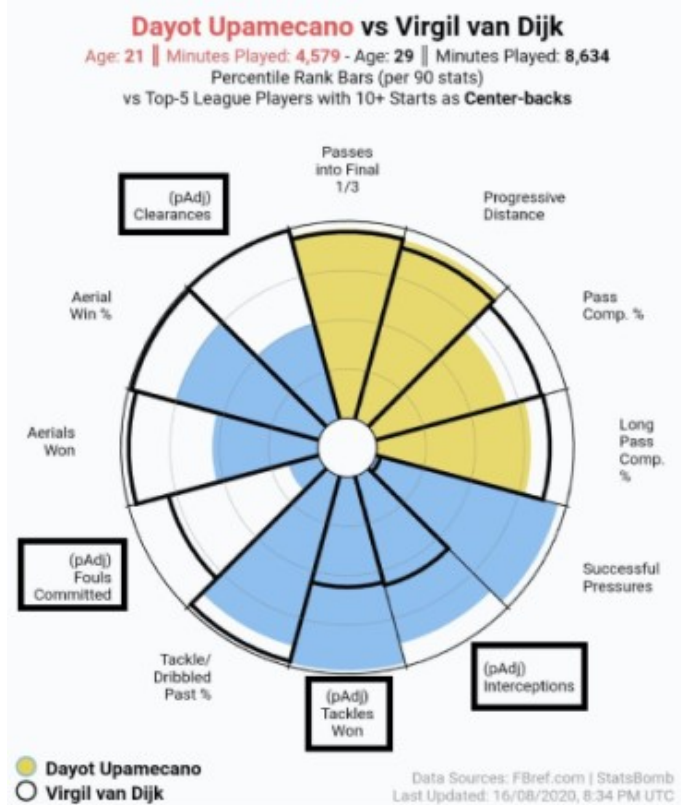
- These are the effective times when a defensive action led the team to win the ball back and preserved him; it is again based on a specific average (90') during a season.



It is possible to compare the performances of a player, concerning the average of the rest of players with the same role in the league or tournament or other leagues, from a quantitative or qualitative point of view.

The first example about Wesley Fofana takes into consideration quantitative data (total), and it refers them to the center back of the top five teams of the Premier League, during the 2020 / 2021 season.

The second example is a qualitative comparison between two players, taking into consideration 90' as average; this analysis gives an idea of effectiveness of their defensive action leading the team to win the ball back after their defensive actions.



The average of these data are p90', and the used data are only from player with more than 10 appearances as starters during all the season.

The performances of the players are compared in an efficient way, as they allow us to realize who could be the best between them.

To make the dynamic analysis more efficient, understanding the type of defense of a player, the same metrics can be analyzed inside the opposition's half, and every 30 passes of the opposition, to link the data to the situations of play; anyway, the pro-active analysis gives us a better idea of the defenders' performances, center backs included.

The following sequences are an example of possession adjust defensive actions and of simple defensive action.



Here the center back double-teamed the opposition's ball carrier, whom the holding midfielder was tracking.



The holding midfielder tried to track him toward the center back, who pushed up, leaving the defensive. He attempted a tackle and won the ball back, dribbling it away from the previous opposition's ball carrier.



He dribbles the ball higher up in the field and pasts to two opponents near him.

The following picture is an example of possession adjust anticipation.

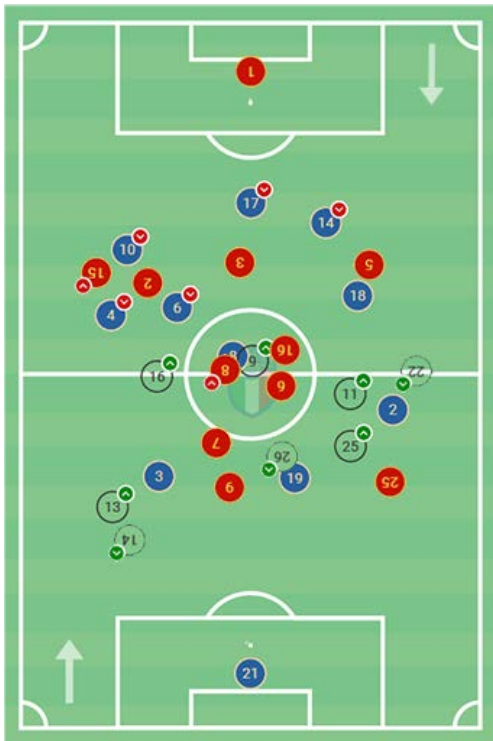


The center back pushed up and anticipated the possession team's target player; his anticipation touch allowed him to maintain the possession dribbling the ball away from the opponent he anticipated.



This last picture is only a defensive action where the center back could only kick the ball outplay, conceding the opponents a throw-in.

Italy 2 – 1 Belgium at Euro 2021 Q/Finals: Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini against Rumleu Lukaku. A lesson on how to mark and limit one of the best center strikers of contemporary soccer.

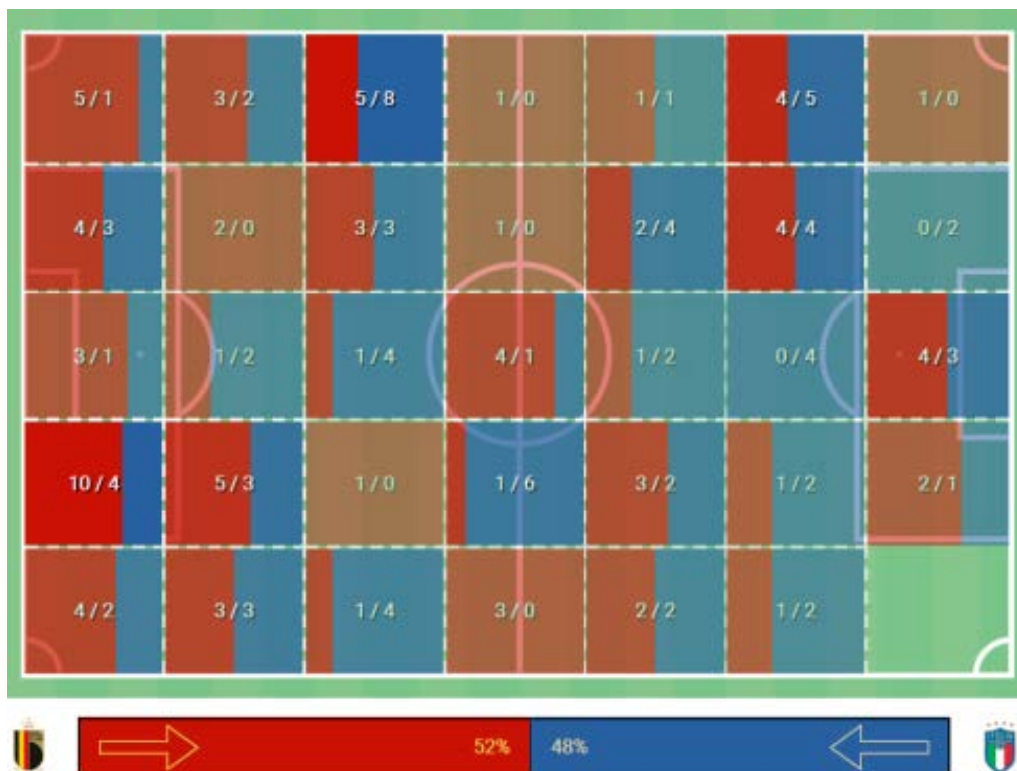


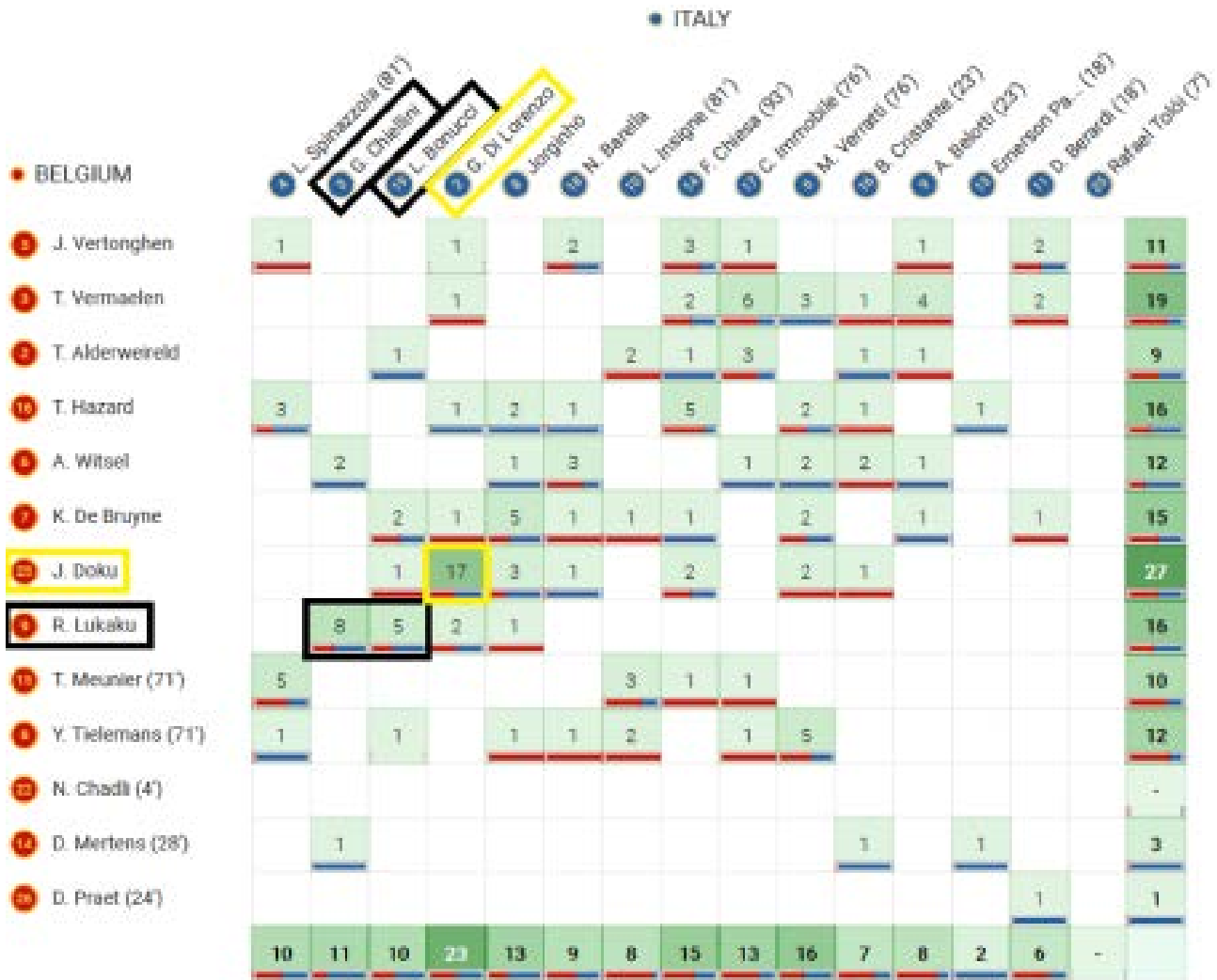
The positions' heat map shows how the Italian center backs were very close to the Belgian center striker, and how the duel was crucial during the match. To be true, Lukaku had a couple of chances in the 90', but he could score only from a penalty kick.

The left fullback of the Italian team played higher up along the left flanks, and the left center back Chiellini often shifted out wide to the same channel also due to the tendency of Lukaku to stand in the same area.

The right center back Bonucci played more centrally, as the right fullback Di Lorenzo marked 1 v 1 the opposition's right winger.

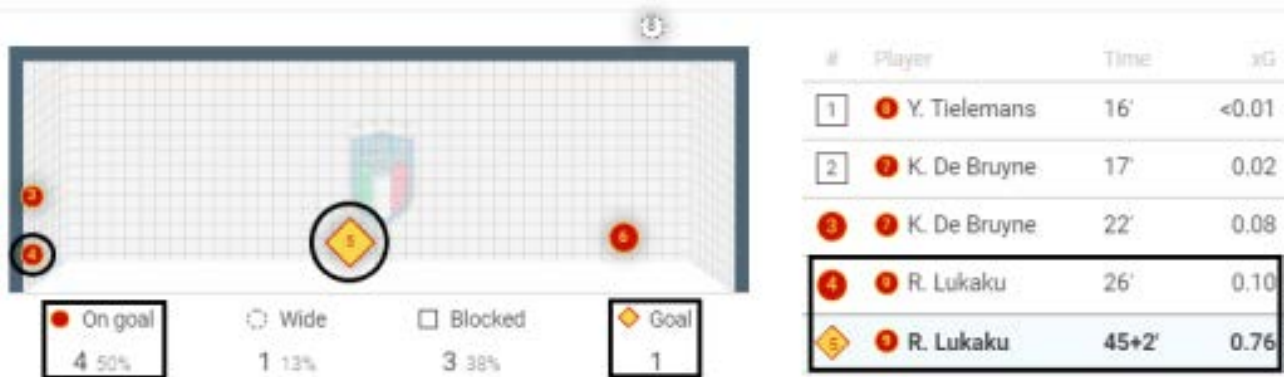
The heat-map of the duels proves that the center channel inside the defensive area in front of the penalty area was the key area for Italy to stop the opposition's attacking actions.





The highest number of duels were between the right fullback Di Lorenzo and the left-winger Doku, but the second ones were between Lukaku and the Italian center backs.

Shots against



If Doku was an issue for the Italian defenders alongside the defensive right flank, Lukaku only could shot on goal twice, and despite being two dangerous chances, he could only score from a penalty kick.

The 9 defensive duels of the center backs were almost all against Romelu Lukakum but one higher up in the field by Chiellini.



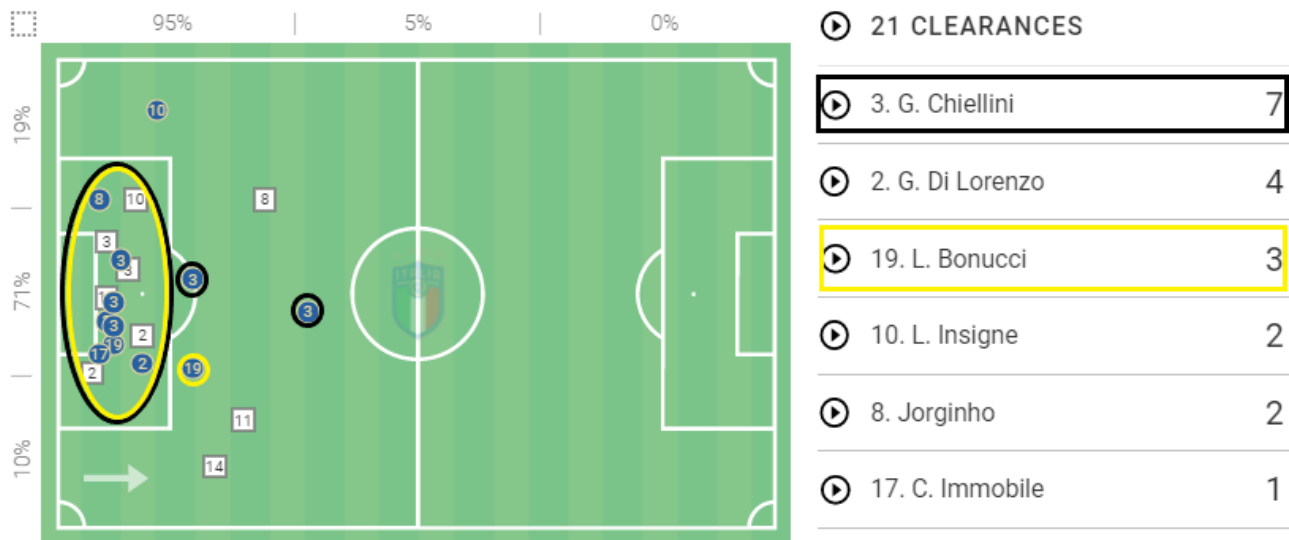
Chiellini and Bonucci intercepted the ball inside the defensive half of the field, confirming the tendency to protect the first third rather than pressing higher up.

Interceptions



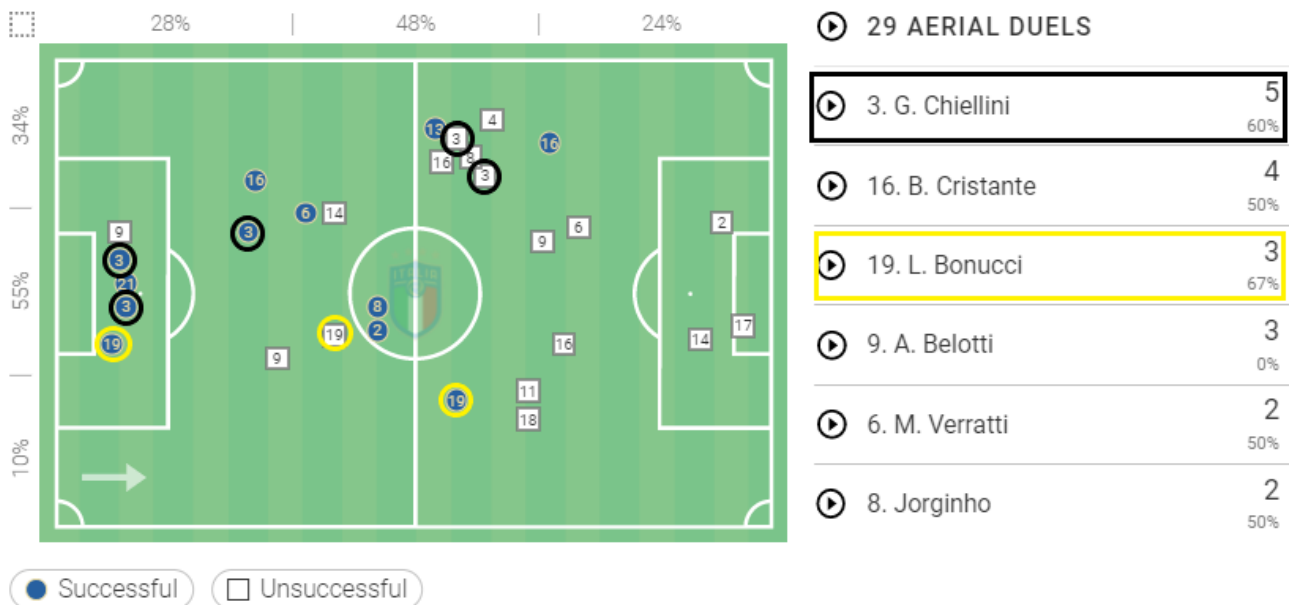
It is clear how Jorginho was a screen in front of them as 8 of his 9 interceptions were inside the defensive half. In front of the penalty area, and even more, the center backs defensive interceptions were inside the penalty area. These data show the deep defensive tactic of the Italians against the highest average of possession of the opponent and the aggressive mark/cover actions against the opposition center striker Lukaku.

Clearances



Chiellini and Bonucci were the kings of the penalty area, kicking them away from there 7 times out of 10 total.

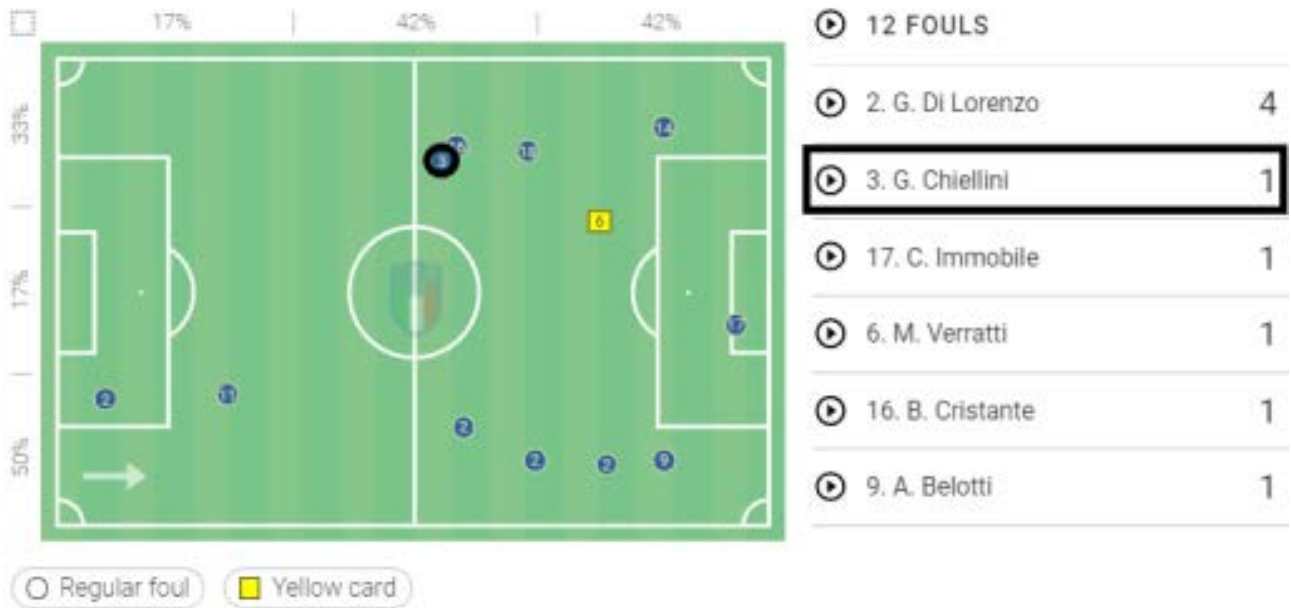
Aerial duels



On the other side, the heat map of the aerial duels depended on Lukaku's and Deku's positions:

- Chiellini attempted aerial duels against Lukaku more than Bonucci.
- Leonardo Bonucci often made aerial duels after a goalkeeper's long kick ort to cover Di Lorenzo, who struggled while marking the Belgian right-winger.

Fouls



The number of fouls confirms how the defensive actions were so influential in preventing them from committing fouls against the center striker.

Pressing intensity (PPDA)

	Total	1st half	2nd half
● Belgium	13.0	25.7	7.6
● Italy	9.9	15.5	6.8



Apart from the Ppda partial metrics, the continuing action of the center backs against the Belgian striker has been influential throughout the match, both when Italy pressed higher and more aggressively in the first half and when the Azzurri played more conservatively during the second half. The following pages contain the match analysis data about the defenders we are considering to have an idea of their positions and the type of defensive match they had to face against Lukaku, above all the other Belgian players.



L. Bonucci

Belgium 1 – 2 Italy (02.07.2021)

Defensive duels / won	4/2 50%	3/1 33%	1/1 100%
Offensive duels / won	1/1 100%	0	1/1 100%
Aerial duels / won	3/2 67%	2/1 50%	1/1 100%
Loose ball duels	2/0 0%	0	2/0 0%
Interceptions	3	1	2
Clearances	3/2 67%	2/1 50%	1/1 100%
Sliding tackles	0	0	0
Fouls	0	0	0
Fouls suffered	1	0	1

Duels

● Won ✕ Lost

DUELS MAP



Player	●	✕	Σ
9 R. Lukaku	3	2	5
7 K. De Bruyne	1	1	2
3 T. Alderweireld	1	0	1
25 J. Doku	0	1	1
8 Y. Tielemans	1	0	1
Total	6	4	10



Actions on field

● Won ✕ Lost

1ST HALF



2ND HALF





G. Chiellini

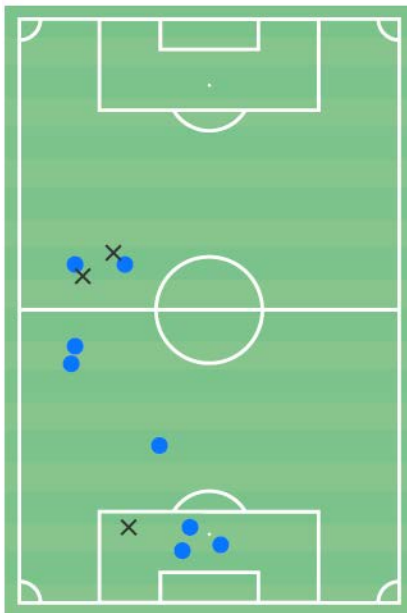
Belgium 1 – 2 Italy (02.07.2021)

Defensive duels / won	5/4 80%	4/3 75%	1/1 100%
Offensive duels / won	0	0	0
Aerial duels / won	5/3 60%	3/1 33%	2/2 100%
Loose ball duels	1/1 100%	1/1 100%	0
Interceptions	7	1	6
Clearances	7/5 71%	2/1 50%	5/4 80%
Sliding tackles	0	0	0
Fouls	1	1	0
Fouls suffered	0	0	0

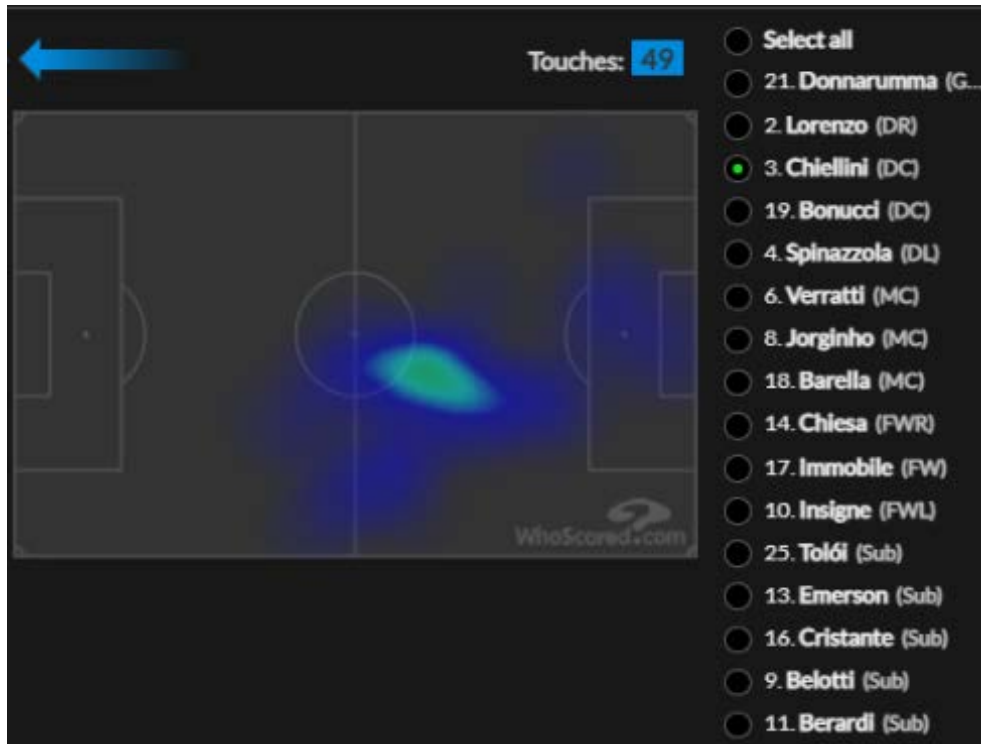
Duels

● Won ✕ Lost

DUELS MAP



Player	●	✕	Σ
9 R. Lukaku	5	3	8
6 A. Witsel	2	0	2
14 D. Mertens	1	0	1
Total	8	3	11



Actions on field

● Won ✕ Lost

1ST HALF



2ND HALF



In this quarter-final match against Belgium, the Italian defensive shape was a classic 1-4-4-2; the winger along the weak side was then ready to act as a wingback when the fullback had to shift across to create a strong side in the vertical half of the field toward the ball



Apart from the ball's position, the Italian defenders always marked 1 v 1 Lukaku, the Belgian center striker.

When Belgium could potentially play through the center, the defensive shape becomes a 1-4-1-3-2 formation. When the opposition's back three distributed the ball, the center striker was left offside, as the back four made the lines narrow and compact.



In this example, Bonucci and Chiellini stood higher than Lukaku, along the same line as the Belgian wingers.

When the opponents attempted to create a strong side, the midfield's sector-shaped a square in front of the back four; and if the fullback had to shift so wide to create gaps from him to the center back, one center midfielder or a winger dropped back to prevent the center backs from leaving his position. This way, they both could control Lukaku.



Chiellini and Bonucci dropped back to cover the depth in this situation, and they were both ready to control Lukaku.

When a center back had to create numerical superiority out wide, the center midfielders dropped back to take his position.



Bonucci shifted out wide here, and Jorginho dropped back to allow Chiellini to mark the opposition's center striker; Verratti acted as a holding midfielder.

When Lukaku shifted out wide, one center backtracked him, and Italy created a strong side near the ball. The midfielders created a 1-3 shape that helped the midfielder potentially double team the central striker.



Belgium was playing the ball along the right. In this example, the fullback marked the winger, Bonucci marked Lukaku, and Jorginho was ready to help the defensive

Phase-out wide and against Lukaku.



Jorginho and the right fullback Di Lorenzo forced the pass toward Lukaku, as the back passes the right-winger screened options and the right midfielder.

Bonucci could read the situation with anticipation, and he won the ball against the center striker.

When the center backs could play 2 v 1 against the center striker, the nearer to the ball attacked the space to win it, the second marked or tracked him.



In this example, Bonucci attacked the ball and intercepted it. Chiellini tracked back Lukaku, who attempted to move through the depth.

If the defense was more open, and Lukaku could receive and play, the fullback acted as an additional center defender



The right fullback Di Lorenzo was very high in this example, and Bonucci had to shift wider near the touchline. Chiellini was marking Lukaku with Jorginho, but they were too late to be effective, and the Belgian striker could receive. Defensively, the Italian back could force Lukaku to play a side pass.

The left fullback Spinazzola shifted across the center, and he became the third center back who could attempt a tackle, and he won the ball back for Italy.



In this second example, Italy creates a 4 v 2 duel near the ball, Chiellini tracked Lukaku's movement, and Spinazzola, the left fullback, shifted across to act as a third center back at the left.

Creating strong sided along the Italian defensive right flank, Belgium seek numerical superiority around the ball, but Italy always answered through overloads; in this situation, Italians shape a double defensive triangle with six players(3 v 3 upfront, and 3 v 2 behind.)



The right center back Bonucci shifted out wide beside the right fullback and behind the right midfielder. Spinazzola, the left fullback, shifted across toward Chiellini to double team the center striker and provide a proper central marking/covering action. The only free opponent was at the defensive left side. He could have received only after a switch of sides, which was difficult due to the Italian numerical superiority at the right.

If one fullback was late at retreating, one center back preventively covered the depth against Lukaku.



In this situation, the left fullback was higher than the other three defenders, and he couldn't have been effective if the ball arrived at the left side of the defensive shape; Chiellini dropped back to save the space behind him, despite giving Lukaku the chance to advance higher in the field.

When the opposition played long balls from the back, the Italian center backs always marked Lukaku 1 v 1, even if it meant to break the defensive line.



In this situation, Chiellini shifted out wide toward the left to contest the ball against the center striker, and he stole his time and space on the ball to win it.



In this second example, Bonucci covered the space behind Chiellini, who pushed high to make an aerial duel against Lukaku to rebound the opposition's long ball.

The preventive 2 v 1 duels against Lukaku allowed Italy to provide a proper cover of the depth against the long passes, both if they could attack those balls moving forward and when they had to retreat to take control of it.



In this example, Chiellini quickly moved back to control the ball, and Bonucci also retreats to help the teammate if Lukaku pressed the Italian ball carrier.

The initial positions of the Italian center backs against Lukaku allowed them to cover the depth, to mark him behind and in front of him.



Belgium played a long pass toward the center striker. Chiellini, who was in front of him, moved back, and he could look at the ball, saving the frontal space to the goal. Bonucci, who stood behind the center striker to mark and press him if he had received the ball, could also cover the depth with the teammate.

The initial 2 v 1 duels that the Italian center backs created allowed a double defense against the opponent.

Despite the opposition's winger dribble past the right fullback, the following sequence is similar, and he drove the ball along the defensive right flank.



Bonucci had to leave his position and attempt to counter the winger; Chiellini was alone against Lukaku, but he had a clear positional advantage concerning the goal to save.

He dropped back, tracking the ball's path and the center striker's movement.



Despite the winger could play a cross pass toward the goal's space, Chiellini had enough time to stand in front of the center striker, and he could save the goalkeeper while leaving the line and catch the ball.

The 2 v 1 duels in the center allowed Italy to recover the ball and build up, not only to stop the opposition's attacking phase.



In this example, Chiellini won the ball against Lukaky, and Bonucci's back run gave the teammate a chance to head the ball back on his run and make the possession safe.



Otherwise, in the above picture, Chiellini attacked the ball, and he could pass it to the midfielder in front of him while Bonucci shifted across to cover Lukaku and man-mark him.

The Italian defense aimed to leave Lukaku as far as possible from the goal, countering and pressing him even deep inside the offensive half, providing a proper space coverage at the back, when the center backs left the last line to track Lukaku.



Chiellini pushed high to track and counter Lukaku, and Spinazzola dropped back to replace him at the back.



At the same time, Bonucci also dropped back behind Chiellini to provide cover.

Furthermore, the man-marking actions were preventive, and they often anticipated the moment of the loss of possession.



In this example, Italy was attacking in numbers inside the final third, the holding midfielder had the possession very close to the opposition's defensive lines, and Chiellini pushed very high to man-mark the striker, who had dropped back before, as his team defended compact along the edge of the penalty area.

The preventive marking actions allowed the center backs and the defenders, in general, to screen Lukaku as a passing option during the opposition's transitions phases.



In this situation, Italy has just lost possession in the middle third, and Belgium could counter-attack. The right-winger received, Lukaku attacked the depth, but Chiellini tracked him, as he preventively marked him during the possession phase of his team.



When Lukaku joined the penalty area, the second center-back took place near him, but the ball carrier was closed down by the left fullback Spinazzola and the left-winger Insigne. The winger couldn't pass the ball to the center striker due to the preventive mark of the center back, and the only field's zone he could dribble through was along the touchline.

In this following example, the Italian holding midfielder was about to lose the ball in front of the backline, and the left fullback was already high along the flank; only three men were defending at the back.



The holding midfielder could counter-press the opposition's ball carrier as he could pass to Lukaku, as Chiellini preventively marked him after shifting wide. Bonucci shifted across, and the opposite fullback marked the winger who attempted to tuck in as a deep passing option.

Creating numerical superiorities out wide and preventively marking the center striker Lukau, Italy provided enough cover and closure of passing lanes when the opponent found a pocket of space to play toward the opposition's area.



Italy created a 4 v 3 duel out wide, and Bonucci preventively marked Lukaku, who couldn't be considered a safe forward passing option. Although the right fullback had the possession, he couldn't find an effective pass.



Here Bonucci marked Lukaku between him and the goal in an old-style defensive way, as Lukaku had the chance to receive and dribble the ball forward.



But the preventive marking action allowed the Italian defender to force the Belgian striker along the touchline and away from the goal while the teammate retreated inside the penalty area.

Secondly, Lukaku could only turn away from the goal with the ball, and he could neither attempt a cross pass.



Here again, Belgium could distribute inside the final third, and the right fullback received. Otherwise, all the strikers and Lukaku upon all the others were preventively marked.



The fullback passed back to the supporting midfielder, who attempted to play a cross pass. The center defenders and all the Italian defensive line could decide if to defend inside the 6yds. box or apply the offside trap, moving forward just before the opposition's midfielder played the cross pass.

As the center back in front of Bonucci was higher than him, he decided to defend higher and along the same line, leaving the opposition's center striker offside.

Preventively marking Lukaku provided crucial benefits:



1. Belgium was missing a target man when he could play out from the back;
2. Long ball were risks to lose the possession due to the 2 v 1 duels against him;



3. The fullbacks could contribute to the pressure phase, and creation of numerical superiorities (3 v 2 around the ball, and 3 v 1 in the center toward the direction of play and ball position);
4. The chance to cover the depth quickly against him;
5. The slow down of rhythm of the opposition when they could seek the center striker as a potential passing option to directly attack the opposition's defensive shape.



6. The center backs and the defensive line could also decide if to use the offside trap against the center striker, even if the crucial factor was not making him a point of reference for the opposition's possession phase.

When the Italian defenders recovered the ball, Lukaku was never alone during the transitions to attack phases.



In this example, the left fullback won the ball; the other back three stood deeper than the opposition's center striker Lukaku. The left midfielder Verratti stood close to him until the attacking formation of the Italian team was shaped correctly, and the center backs could mark him.

The midfielder's preventive marking on the center striker often forced Belgium to play long balls after the possession recovery.



In this example, Chiellini pushed higher to double team the striker, and the opposition's right fullback could play a long pass that the right-center back could easily control. Lukaku couldn't be a short passing option either a long pass option due to the preventive marking action against him.



The center-back – midfielder cooperation against Lukaku provided safe transitions to attack the Italian team throughout the match.

Eventually, how the Italian center back marked Lukaku?



- 2 v 1 duel to make his possession phase difficult when the center backs couldn't win the ball back.



- Standing close to him in an old-style marking action (between him and the goal)



- Defending in front of him and considering the offside trap a potential solution against long balls



- Constantly alternating the center back against him concerning the ball position



- Anticipating him, defending against his front foot, working with recent defensive actions, and covering actions.



- Fighting with the body when Lukaku could find the few chances which Italy conceded.

As I always start to form the idea that anything can be perfect in soccer, the Italian defensive system also made some mistakes.

Apart from the fact that the only goal Lukaku could score was from a penalty:



1. If the marking/cover defensive actions were not properly taken, Lukaku found a pocket of spaces to attempt a shot on goal.



In this example, Lukaku received between Chiellini and Bonucci, as only the aggressive pressure of the left fullback prevented the Belgian center striker from turning toward the goal. The center backs were late against the opponent.

2. Lukaku also played as a secondary option, freeing other attacking teammates.



The left fullbacks were late in this situation; Chiellini and Bonucci were too deep to force the opponents backward and face the goal. Lukaku invited the left center back out of position through his wide shifting movement, and the ball carrier in the center could find a space in zone 14, and he had got the right-center backbeat before shooting on goal.

3. When the center back couldn't defend the left foot of the center striker, Lukaku was good at turning the direction of play and shot on goal.



The left fullback was on late again due to his attacking tendency, and Chiellini shifted across to counter Lukaku, but he couldn't defend the space on his left foot. The left fullback covered the position of the center back, but he wasn't properly positioned to prevent Lukaku from shooting on goal after adjusting the ball on his left foot.

The principles of play of a modern center back

- Positioning



The highlighted center back marked the opponent beside him, but he could have also moved out of position to counter the opponent in front of him thanks to his half-turned body position.

- Marking



The left-center back of the last line of four defenders along the edge of the penalty area could anticipate the direct opponent, as he was standing between the opposition's striker and the goal to defend.



In this example, the left-center back left the back three defensive lines to press the opposition receiver while he was still back to the goal, and he forced the opponent to play backward instead of turning and dribbling toward the goal.

- Interception and anticipation



The highlighted center back cut the ball's direction to meet it behind the striker, attacking the depth and anticipating the opponent's ball reception. He then dribbled the ball far from the only opposition's center striker.

This is a combined defensive action, as the defender anticipated the opponent to intercept a pass from the middle third.



In this second example, the defender started at the back of the opponent, and he turned beside him quickly to anticipate his reception, and he passed to the first forward passing option.

- Contrast



This example is a classic contrast to exploit the double team against the ball carrier, who dribbled the ball toward the penalty area under the pressure of an opponent. A second defender contests the ball carrier frontally, and he kicked the ball away.

- Goal defense



This example is another combined action between the center backs; the right one retreated to header the ball away from the opposition's striker. The left one dropped back to save the space between the contact zone and the goal, defending his goalkeeper and the goal.

- Team shape

As the numerical superiority in all the play situations is an absolute dogma, the back three or the back 2 in the center are a sign of a style of play, but they also need defensive safety.



The back three are helpful to provide numerical superiority against teams with "two strikers systems of play."



The back two provide numerical superiority against the lonely center striker. Still, the fullbacks may face 1 v 1 duels if the opposition deploys play systems with two wingers and a center striker.



The back four with center backs and fullbacks can work well on double-teaming the opponents along the lines between them. A deeper midfield trio helps the center backs stand closer to the fullbacks, as they provide a first cover in the center.

- Delay



Usually, delaying an opposition's attacking actions helps the defense decrease numerical equality or inferiority. In this example, the retreating center backs help the fullback along the ball's side take a position against the winger and the opposite fullback to take the position as the last defender of a string side around the ball.

- Concentration and Restrain



For the same reason, concentration and restraint must be helpful to create numerical superiorities near the ball. This means that the center backs cooperate out wide too, and the distances between them can be larger than in the past; the center midfielders and their shape a crucial for the backline protection. Cover and Balance



In this example, the center backs dropped back to cover the fullback, who shifted across and won the ball. If the fullback had missed the attempt, the center backs would have covered the space to the potential new ball's carrier through the center channel or right half-space.

Defending against the opponent's front foot



To defend on the front foot means to look for the recovery of the ball, attempting a defensive action against the nearest foot of the opponent on the ball.



The main benefit is the opponent, who usually loses time on the ball, as the defender wins the ball kicking toward a different path from the running direction of the opponent. In the picture above, the defender can play a pass as a second touch after the ball's recovery, and the last ball carrier took enough distance for the defender to make the possession safe and pass forward.

To defend on the front foot also means to open spaces for the ball carrier, going ultimately toward another direction than the historical tactical thinking.



In this example, the defender wins the ball, attacking the opposition's front foot; but he opens a space beside the ball carrier to make the right moves to attack it. If the ball is recovered, the transition to attack is immediate. In this example, the midfielder received from the defender, who left the line to defend the opposition's front foot in the middle third.



The quick recovery of the ball and the even quicker pass to the final third created a counter-attack for the center back's team just made of two/three passes.

To defend on the front foot, the center backs are asked to play in another way from the idea of control that usually they should have when an opponent is attempting a direct attack close to the goal.



In this example, the center backtracked the opposition's ball carrier initially, but he looked for the opponent's front foot farther, concerning his position.



He placed his body between the opponent and the ball, and he took control, saving the possession at the beginning.



Then the center back prevented the dispossessed opponent from counter-attacking and passed forward to the first advanced teammate, who could counter-attack.



In this last example, the defender tracked the opposition ball carrier to the field's end line. Still, he placed the body between him and the ball instead of closing the opponent down the line, winning it back, and letting the sequence of play continue instead of starting with a new goal-kick.

To defend on the opposition front foot has also its cons:



1. If the timing of the defensive action is not proper, the ball carrier can beat the defender with just one touch, as in this situation.

The center back shifted out wide to win the ball, but the opponent got him beat with his front foot, and he dribbled away to the last yards of the field.



The ball carrier could arrive close to the end line, and he passed to the center for an incoming teammate, who cut back the opponent in front of him, and he received at the back of the defenders near the ball.



In this second situation, the defender went over the ball line while seeking it on the opposition's front foot. The ball carrier could turn inside and behind the defender, who couldn't attempt any immediate defensive action to fix his body distance and position.



The ball carrier could turn toward the center and shoot on goal, as the defenders were late.

The numerical superiority creation is the answer to the issue of a dribbled past defender



In this example, the ball carrier dribbled past two opponents who attempted to win the ball back after a front foot defense; the first one against a retreating midfielder,



And the second one against the center back, who was too flat to be effective.



The left fullback and winger retreated, and the left midfielder ran back toward the ball with the center back. The defenders created a 4 v 1 duel against the ball carrier, who was eventually dispossessed.

Summary

This book aims to define the role, the positions in the field, and the defensive tasks of a modern center back. Above all, I tried to define the defenders in a situational way, looking at this kind of players when they are active, reactive, and pro-active; I mean, how they are defensively adequate to allow the teams they play for in the ball's recovery and possession maintenance.

This is the reason why the book contains a chapter about the Padj defensive stats. These metrics define the efficacy of defensive action, taking the team to have possession instead of just stopping the opposition's attacking phase.

I also decided to insert a chapter about a specific recent match of the European Championships for National teams which Italy has just won. It's Italy 2 – 1 Belgium at Euro 2021 Q/Finals. Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini taught how to mark and limit one of the best center strikers of contemporary soccer (Rumleu Lukaku).

Modern defenders, modern center back also mean a new vision about the principles of play; among the others, I decided to talk about the defense against the opponent's front foot, which is crucial for contemporary play styles.

I hope I achieved my hopes, and the readers enjoy the book, finding it helpful for their tactical ideas.