

# *THE ROLE OF THE* **CENTER MIDFIELDER**

## **ATTACKING**



by LUCA BERTOLINI

# **The Role of the Center Midfielder (Attacking)**

*By*

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## Introduction: the types of the attacking midfielders

The attacking midfielder is a creative player who controls the offensive phase of the team, and they act as a link between the midfield and the forwards.

There are fundamentally three types of attacking midfield players in soccer:

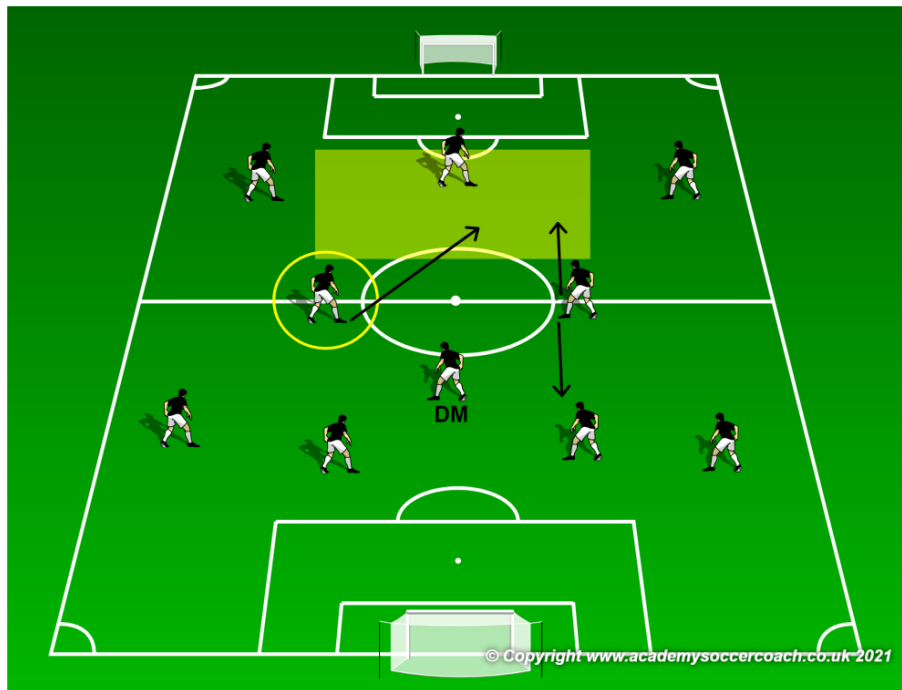
- The advanced playmaker, specialist midfielder, or central attacking midfielder: the classic No.10. This player is the one whom the Argentinians call "Enganche" (the "Hook" in English) or "the Trequartista" in the Italian language, as he usually plays throughout the final third. In Brazil, where the role seems to be born, they call this kind of player Meia-Armador or Meia-Atacante.
- Box to box midfielders combine the roles of the attacking and defensive midfielders into one style of play. Two players above all have represented this kind of role during the last 20 years, although they retired: Frank Lampard at Chelsea and Steven Gerrard at Liverpool.

Their positions in the field are not fixed, and they depend on their skills, systems, and style of play.

The "Enganche" is the center's player in a 1-4-3-1-2 when this system of play spread out during the 80s' in Argentina.



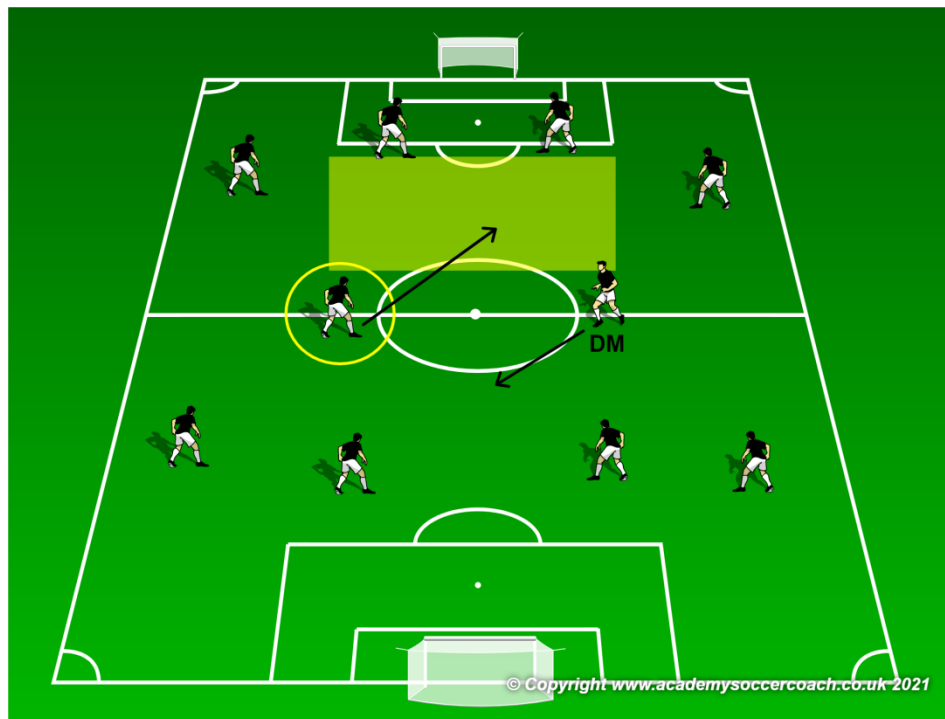
Before this period, during the 70s' when the 1-4-3-3 system of play was commonly recognized as the main one, the three men midfield sector was made of a defensive midfielder, a box-to-box player, and a No.10.



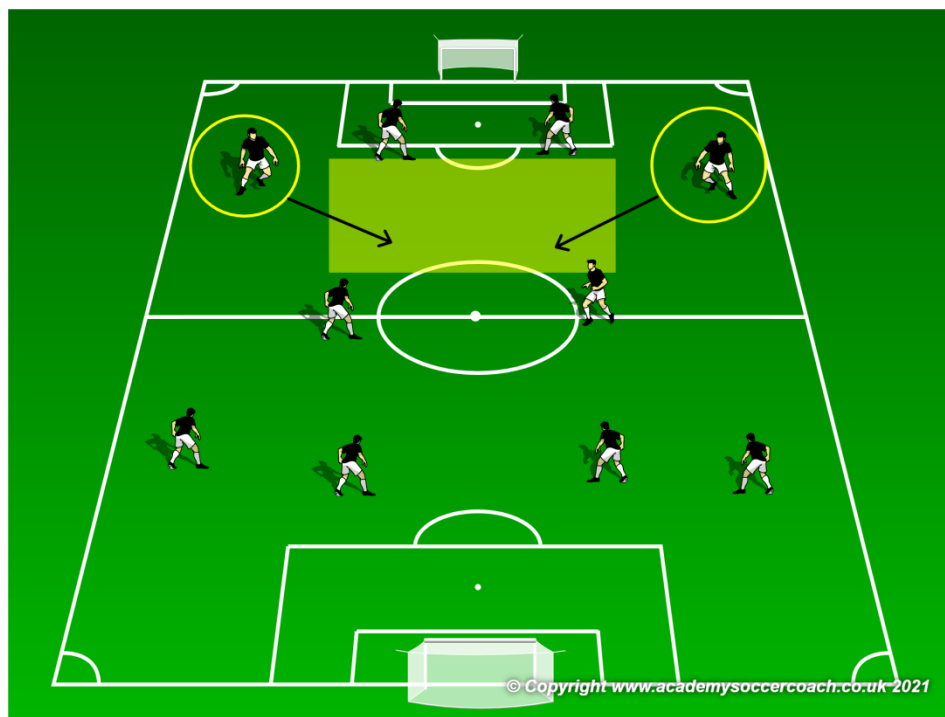
The lack of defensive contribution of the No.10 became evident, and it was only partially mitigated by the offensive contribution, excepting some of the biggest players ever. For this reason, one winger became more defensive, and the system of play became a 1-4-3-1-2 with 3 attacking players rather than 4.



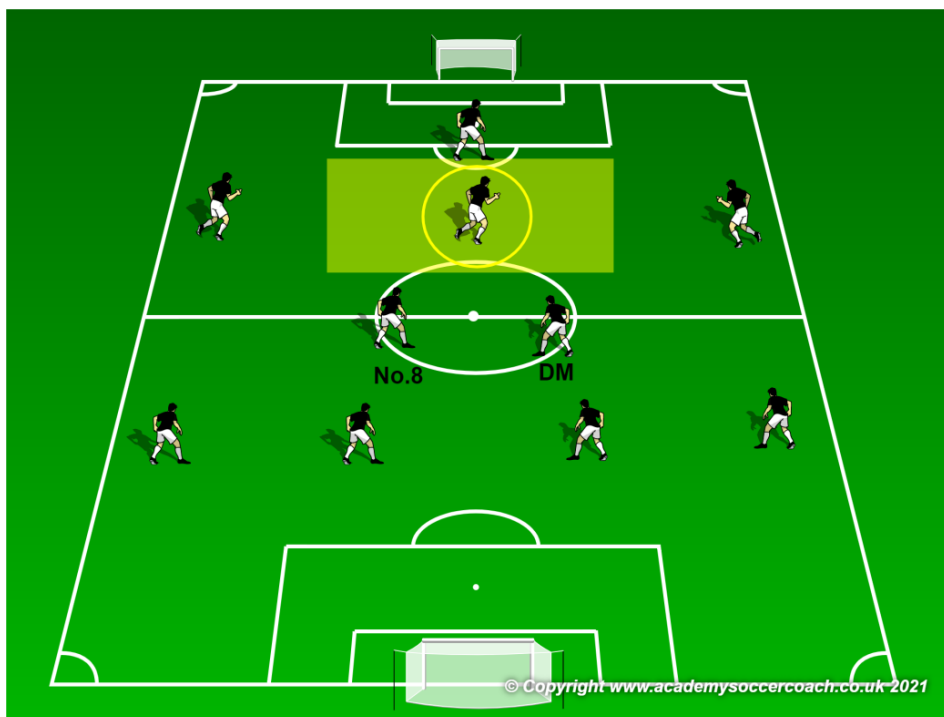
In the 1-4-2-4 system of play that was so popular in Brazil during the 70s', the No.10 was one of the two center midfielders who were used to move high up in the field close to the center forwards.



Furthermore, one of the best Brazilian National teams ever, which took part in the 1982 World Cup in Spain, included two No.10, tucking in from the flanks and creating a 1-4-2-2 system of play; those players acted as a double No.10 behind the strikers.



The No.10 had become a second forward, moving closer and closer to the center striker, when the defensive weaknesses of these systems of play became apparent, and a No.8 was included into the middle third sector. Maradona and Riquelme are the leading examples of this role; the first one was an all-around No.10, scoring and creating, the second one was a more static player and a point of reference for the teammates to move around. The Italian version of this role has been Roberto Baggio from the late 80s' to the early 2000s.







When the oppositions started to man-mark the creative players through the 1-4-4-2 and exploit the numerical superiority out wide, the poor defensive skills of the No.10 has become a tactical issue for the possession-minded teams. Therefore, these teams placed the creative player alongside the wingers, maintaining the 2 men shape in the middle third; from this idea, the 1-4-2-3-1 system was born.

Meanwhile, defensive and balanced teams, such as Spalletti's Roma at the end of the 2000s, used the center striker as a creative player between the lines, dropping back from the classic No.9 position, allowing the teammates around him to run off the ball in behind.

The pressure and the high pressure required different players from those No.10 required, and the defensive man-marking took the regista to play more deep and close to the defensive line, becoming a deep-lying playmaker. Andrea Pirlo at Brescia under Carlo Mazzone, Ac Milan under Carlo Ancelotti and Juventus FC under Antonio Conte, or Xavi Alonso at Liverpool and Bayern Munich are examples of this new kind of creative players.



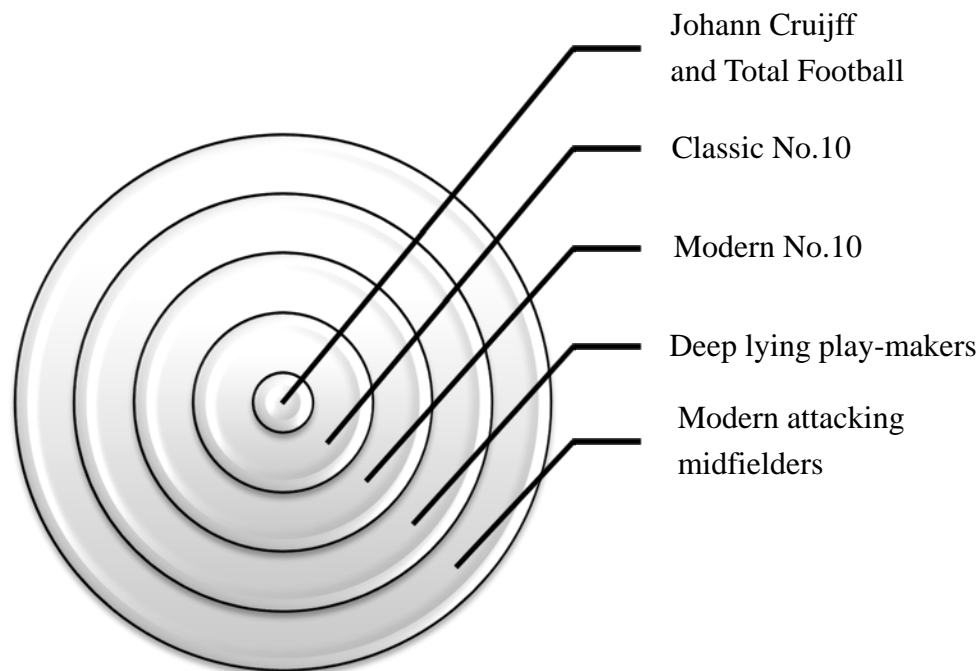
The creative player must move throughout the field's width, triggering the pressure phase and tracking the wingers when they move out wide; but in these situations, no one can play in the center hole, once the ball is won back, and asking a midfielder to move forward without a proper cover would create dangerous gaps at the back.



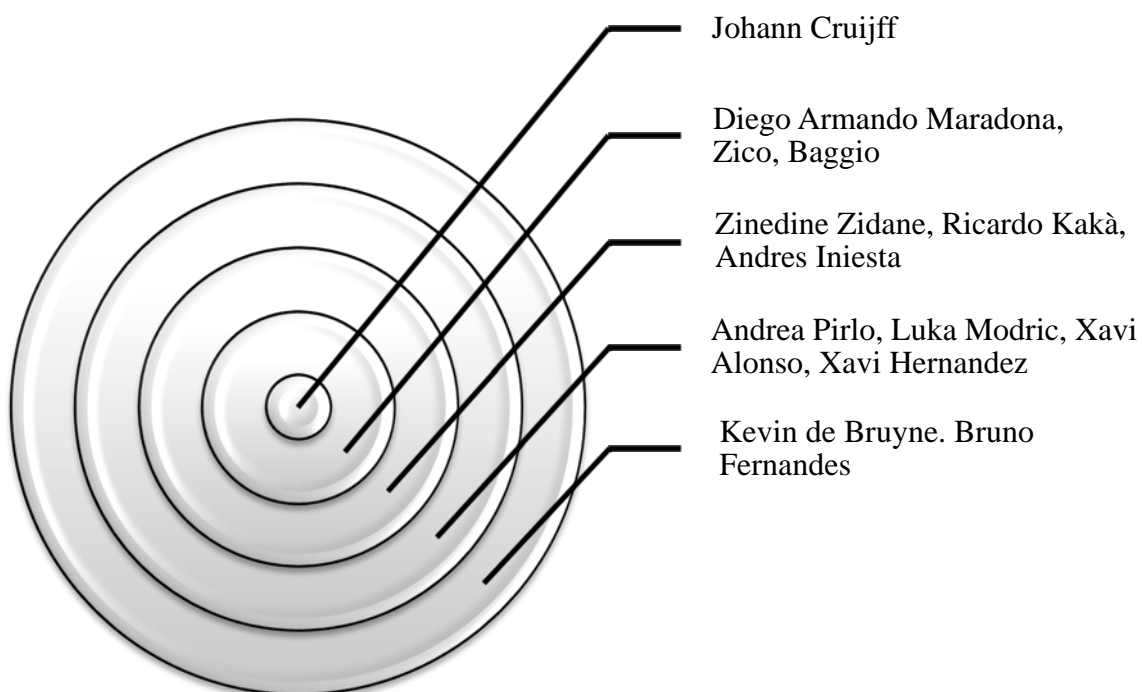
The False Nine is also born to fulfill this hole, as we have analyzed trying to create a dangerous gap in front and in the middle of the opposition defensive shape, maintaining the position of the deep-lying regista that is still so crucial in modern soccer.

These are the reasons why the "Trequartista's" skills were transferred to the "Regista," or "deep-lying playmaker": to place the creative players away from the aggressive pressure area of the field and to give them more time and space on the ball. If we would like to create a time-line of these evolutions,

mixing the attacking midfielder and the No.10 qualities through history, we may create a diagram like the following one:



Johan Cruijff seems to be someone whom soccer has come back to after a journey; he was a complete attacking midfielder, could play as possession organizer or as a No.10, or as a center striker. Likewise, Kevin De Bruyne and his evolution at Manchester City seem to be the player to whom football has returned.



The box to box attacking/defending midfielders are a different type of midfielders, and they could be considered as a factor for the evolution of the modern attacking midfielders from the deep-lying playmakers



Eventually, the box to box midfielders was born when the 1-4-4-2 or the 1-4-2-3-1 system of play appeared to counter the 1-4-3-1-2, and the freedom of the No.10 in the hole disappeared due to the increased aggressiveness of opponents' pressure:



The 1-4-2-3-1 allowed the opponents to double team the trequartista in the middle, maintaining the numerical equality against the midfielders. When the No.10 shifted out wide, the fullbacks and the wide midfielders could double team the Enganche and close him down the touchline. The second center midfielder and the other two maintained the equality in the same way.



The 1-4-4-2 allowed the opponents to increase the aggressiveness of the pressure phase out wide, maintain the numerical superiority against the No.10. The center strikers, the wingers, and also the fullbacks could take part to pressure phase, closing the passing lanes to the trequartista, who was also often in 1 v 2 duels when he could receive.

When the teams with No.10 developed and started to use the 1-4-4-2 or the 1-4-2-3-1, the center midfielders developed into box-to-box midfielders, who could defend and attack play situations in the 1-4-4-2.



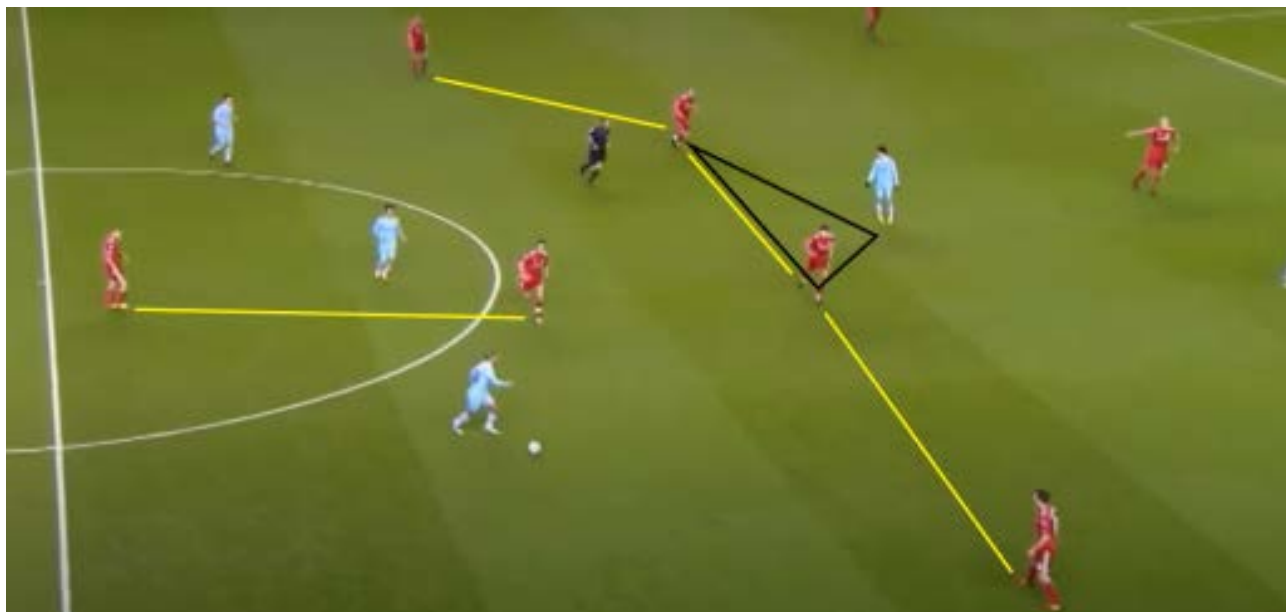
In this first picture, Steven Gerrard pushed up to equalize the duel inside the final third along the touchline and give Liverpool the chance to stand high up in the field after the ball's recovery.

In this second example, Gerrard stood along the same line as the sector's teammate and the fullback to allow the winger to provide the width and the center striker to join the opposition's defensive line.

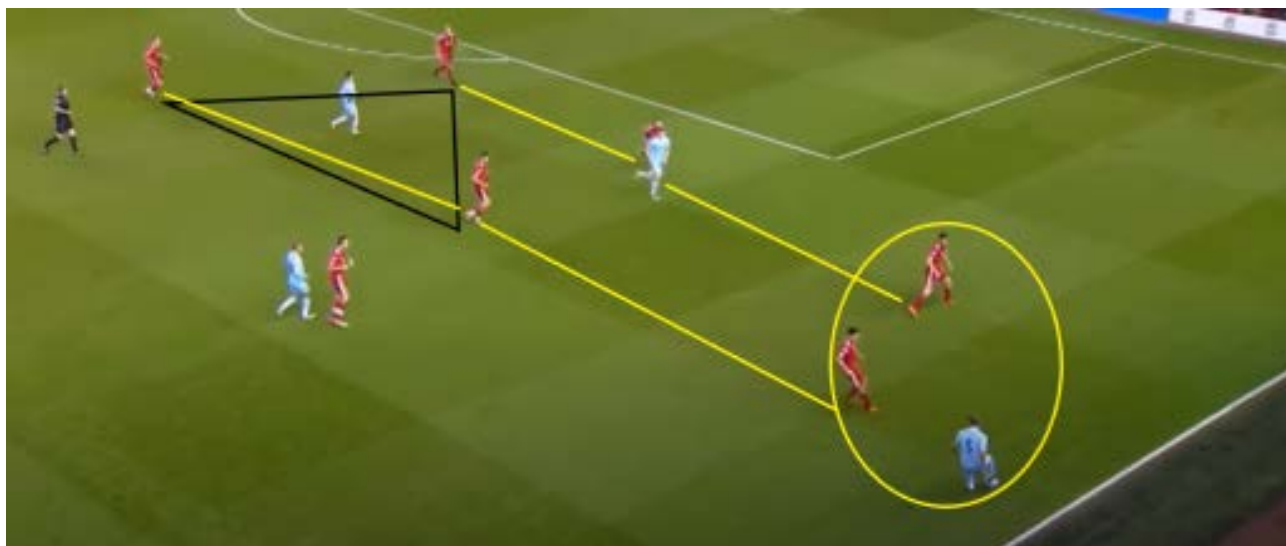




The defensive line of four is the usual one when the team deploys two box-to-box midfielders, as Liverpool did during the Gerard Ullier and Rafa Benitez as head coaches.



This picture shows the line of four behind the ball line and the center midfielder who covered the opponent in between the lines. The attackers were not aligned, as the first one stood higher as a target player, and the second one dropped back to track the opposition's ball carrier.



The entire defensive shape shifted across and wide as the classic two-four lines inside the first third. The fullback and the winger created numerical superiority along the flanks. The center back marked the opposition's striker. The center midfielders and the center back created a defensive triangle in the center inside zone 14.

The No.10 also evolved when playing 1-4-2-3-1 into the modern type of players, like Zinedine Zidane or Ricardo Kakà. Other teams used the deep-lying playmakers, or both of them as Carlo Ancelotti's Ac Milan did with the Christmas Tree system.

- Zinedine Zidane



In this first example, Zidane received behind the attackers' line, overcomes the direct marker's pressure, and made the opposition midfielders' line ineffective due to the distance between him and them. The strikers dropped back and moved in behind to receive.



In this second example, Zidane dropped back out wide, and he waited for the winger to overlap along the flank, and he played the ball on his run.

In this third example, the French midfielder received back to the opposition's goal.



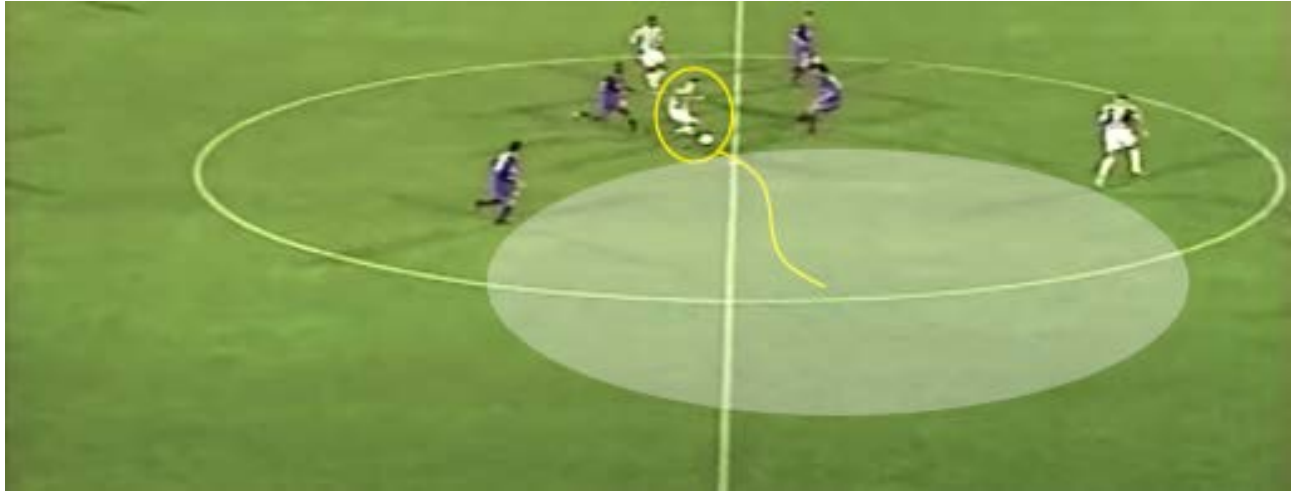
He combined with one of the center striker, who shifted out wide before. The 1-2 combination took Zidane to receive the back pass between the opposition's lines in front of the center back. Zidane invited the opposition's right-center midfielder out of his position, and he created the proper space inside zone 14. The farther striker made the left center back and fullback busy, and they couldn't cover the space with the right timing.



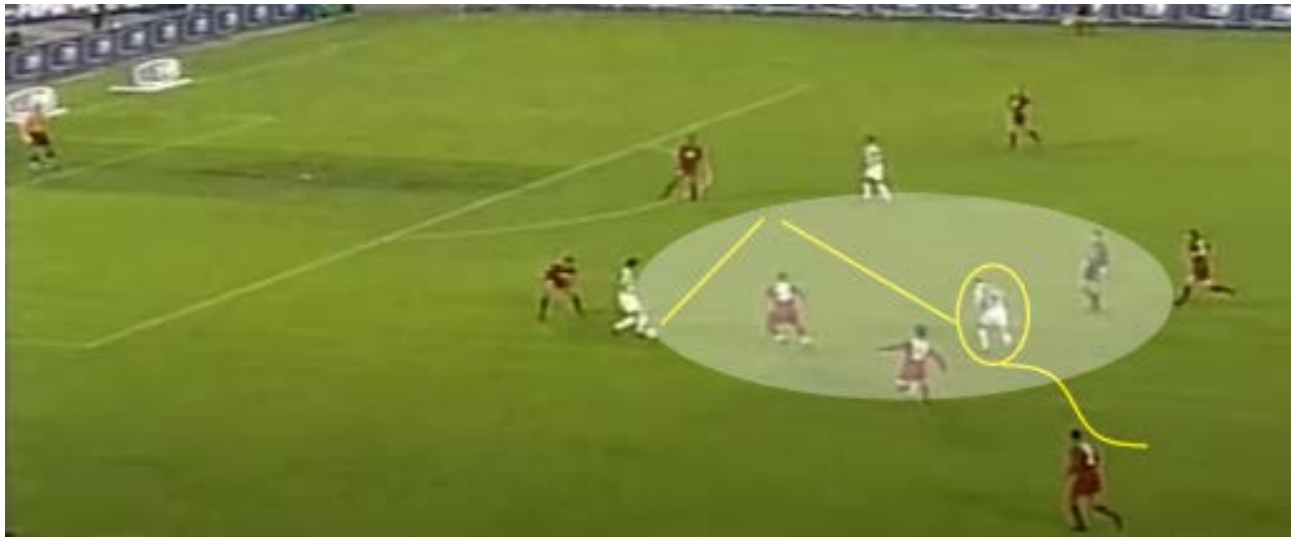
Zidane received inside zone 14, dribbled the ball higher up and inside the penalty area, and shot on goal without a real pressure; the only defensive action attempt was too late to be effective. Zidane could score.



Zidane was also free to act as a holding midfielder to collect the ball and progress the move.



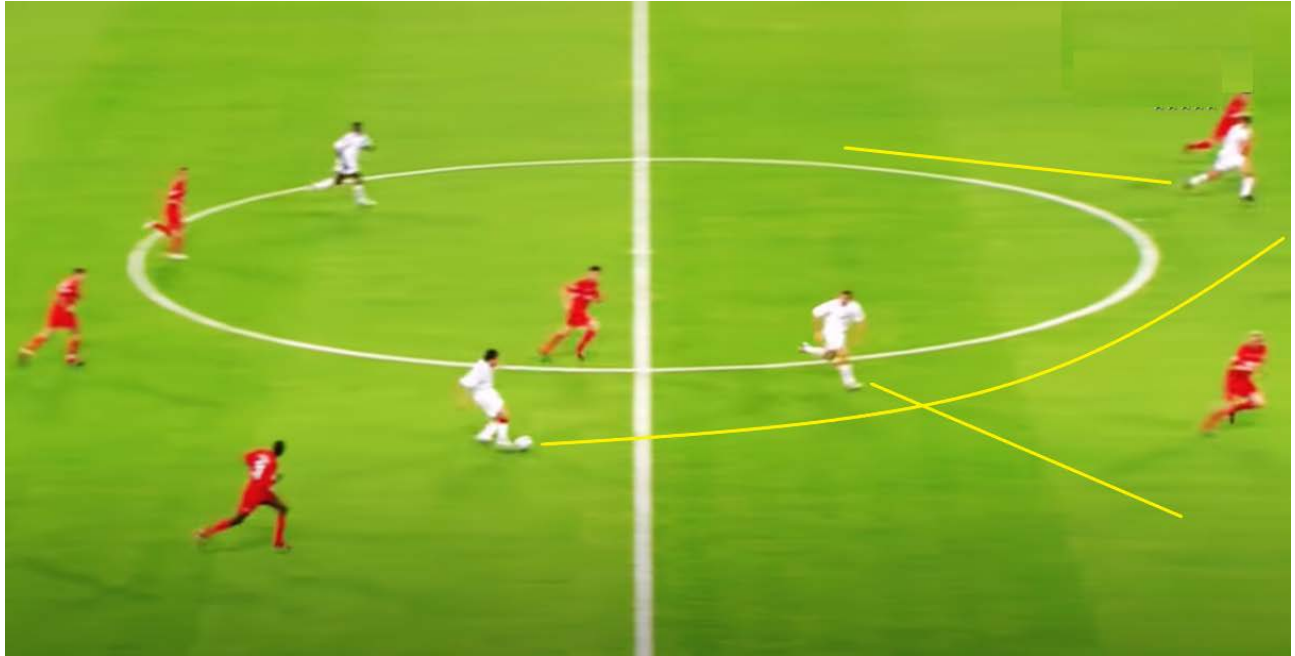
In this first example, he received and dribbled the ball away from pressure dribbling the ball across the center cycle.



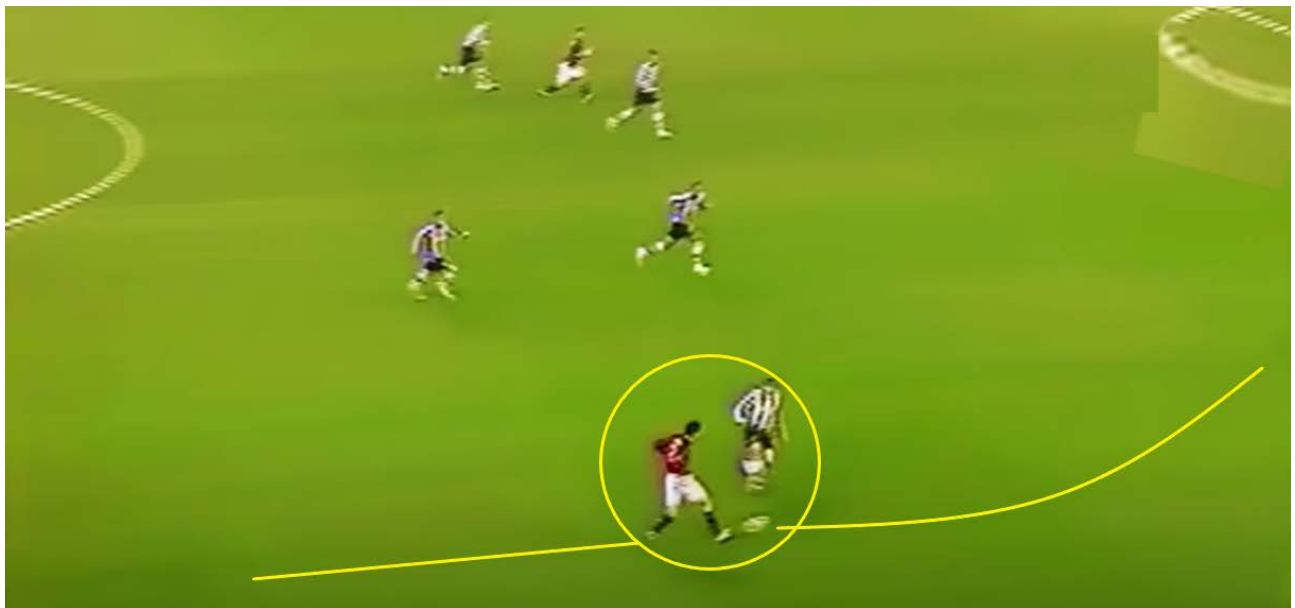
In this second one, he pushed high to support the strikers from a deeper center position, and he received an inside pass in front of the defensive line.

- Ricardo Kakà

The Brazilian is another example of the No.10 role and position evolution; he was different from Zidane. He was a more direct player, but he was one of the best of his generation, just a few seasons after Zidane.



Kakà was able to provide assists' passes like a classic No.10, as this above one to the center striker between the opposition's center back.



He could also play as a second striker or winger, exploiting his speed with the ball at his feet.

His ability to ready the game and the developments was crucial for Ac Milan and the Club's success.



In this example, the center striker received in the middle of the penalty area, Kakà moved up front to support the teammate, and he receives around the penalty point. He ran and received the right timing to anticipate the opponent in the middle and shot on goal.

The chains from the holding midfielders to the center midfielders and the advanced strikers were crucial for Milan.

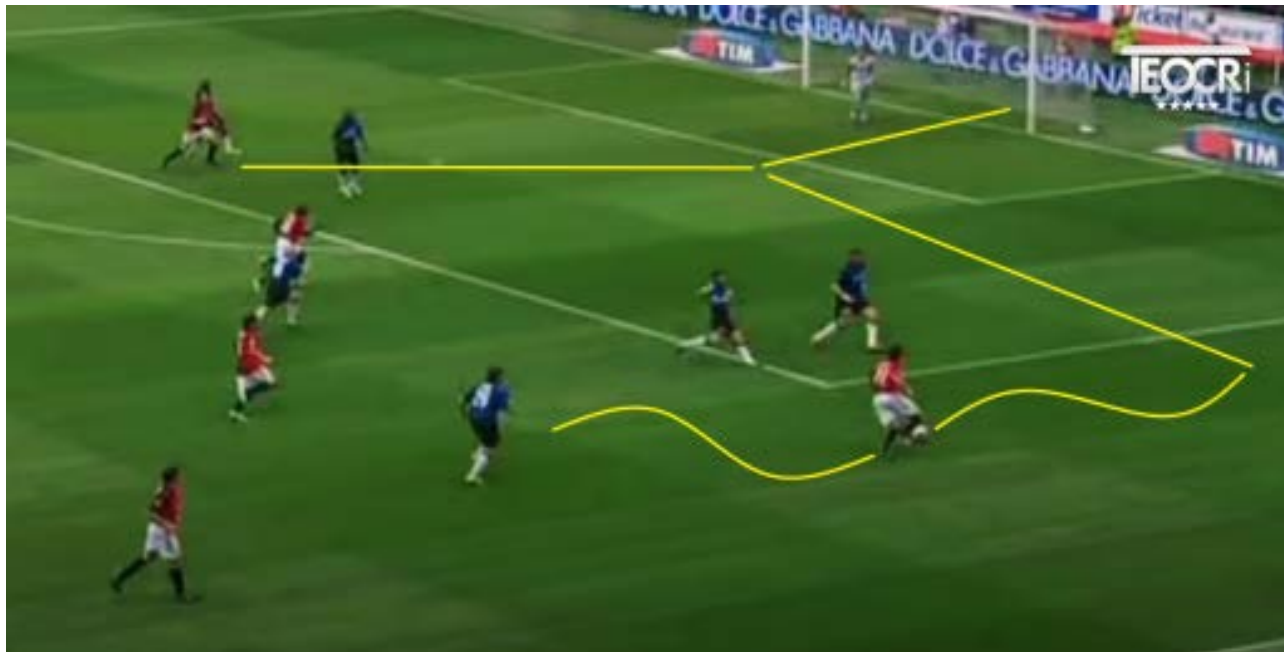


In this example, Kakà received, and he turned toward the center space that the opposite chain created; Pirlo was the holding midfielder, the left center midfielder Ambrosini and the left advanced midfielder opened the space in the middle that Kakà could exploit after the ball's reception.

Kakà was very good at playing along the flanks also.



In this first example, he got the opponent beat with nutmeg, and he could dribble the ball toward the inside area of the field, where the second, advanced midfielder supported him.



In this second example, Kakà dribbled the ball along the sideline of the penalty area. He played a cross pass toward the near post of the goal for the center striker to score after an unmarked diagonal run to escape the marker.

Kakà played like a classic No.10 in two ways:



- Behind the strikers in a 1-4-3-1-2 formation



- With the freedom to become a center striker after moving from the back in a 1-4-3-2-1 system of play.



## **Increasing the pressure and quick technical players in the middle third: the role of the modern attacking midfielder, which has made the Ppda decreasing to defend against them**

Without talking about Messi, who is another kind and unique player in soccer history, the increasing aggressiveness of pressure, the counter-pressing tactics, the high tempo of the possession phases, and the defense's tactics which tend to man-mark the opponents inside the danger zones have moved the creativity out wide, deeper in the field, and upper front alongside the forwards line (the dropping deep center striker, like Francesco Totti at Roma in Italy, was an excellent example of this kind of player.) The increasing of rhythm and the matches' tempo was the most crucial factor, by my side, to create players like:

- **Marcus Reus and Jadon Sancho at Borussia Dortmund**
- Samir Gnabry and Thomas Müller at Bayern Munich
- **Nkuku at Rb Leipzig**
- Kevin de Bruyne and Ilkay Gundogan at Manchester City
- Bruno Fernandes at Manchester United
- **Youri Tielemans** and James Maddison at **Leicester City**
- Dele Alli at Tottenham
- Jack Grealish at Aston Villa
- Mason Mount and Kai Havertz at Chelsea
- **Rafinha** and Matheus Klich at **Leeds United**
- (or even Carlos Alberto and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic at Lazio in Italy).

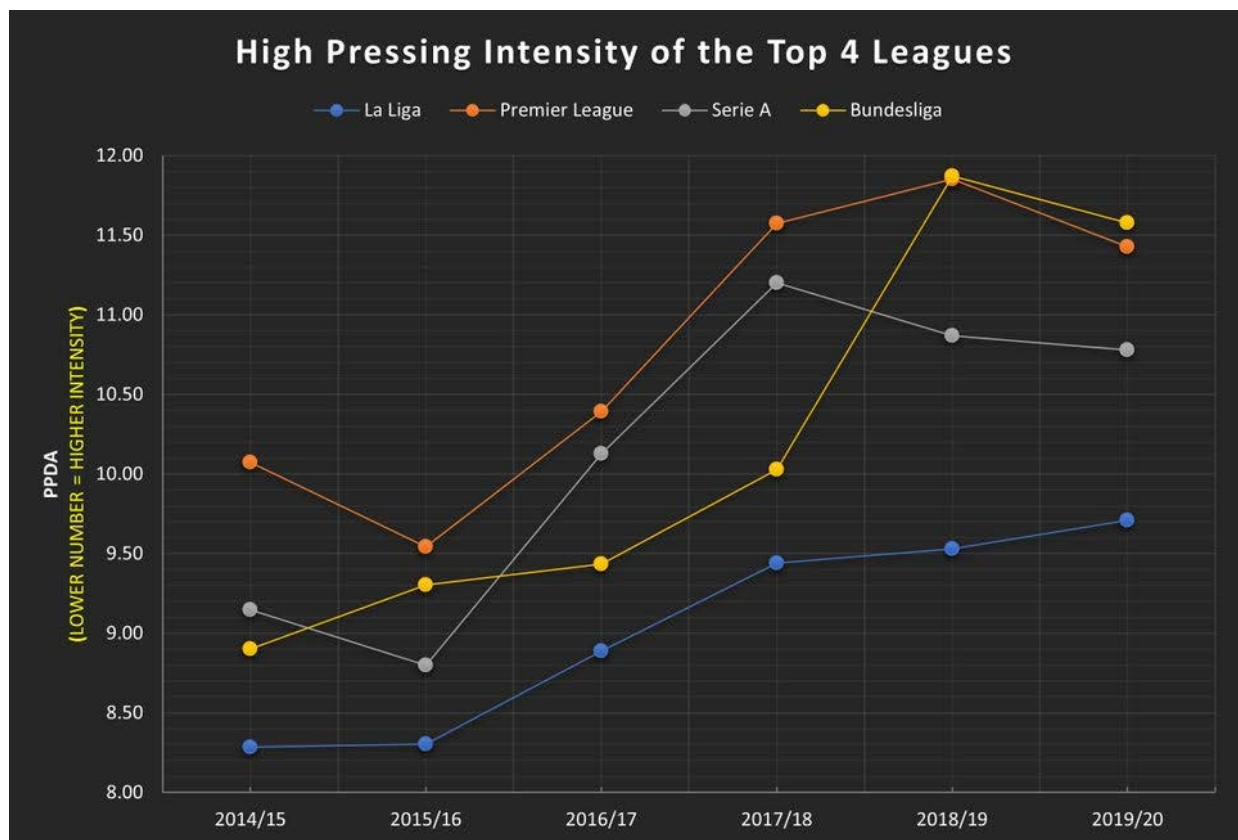
Most modern attacking players are part of the English Premier League and Bundesliga, which are the leagues with the highest rhythm in Europe. Despite the Ppda factors seeming to decrease during the last seasons, the rhythm of play is always very high. This should be the reason for a more balanced approach to losses of possession and defensive aggressiveness; apart from all, those are the most decisive midfielders, in my opinion. The main tactical issue that came from the too high and aggressive pressure was conceding too easy if the opposition could overcome the first line of pressure; Manchester City 2019/2020 was an example, as Liverpool 2016/2017 and 2020/2021.



(3 men's pressure was overcome, numerical inferiority behind the pressure line, defensive line too high in the field without cover at the back, as the last defender pushed up rather than dropping back,)

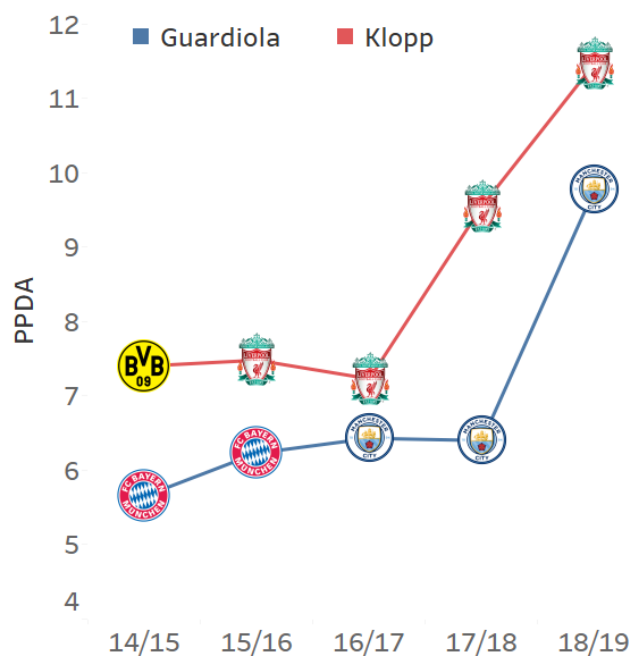


(The first potential receiver was offside, but the second behind him had got the marker beat on time, and he could receive after a blind run at the back of the direct opponent); this is an example of conceded space and the following goal to the opposition due to a too high pressure without cover at the back, giving the opposition the chance to play facing the offensive half with just one pass out of the pressure as a transition to attack.



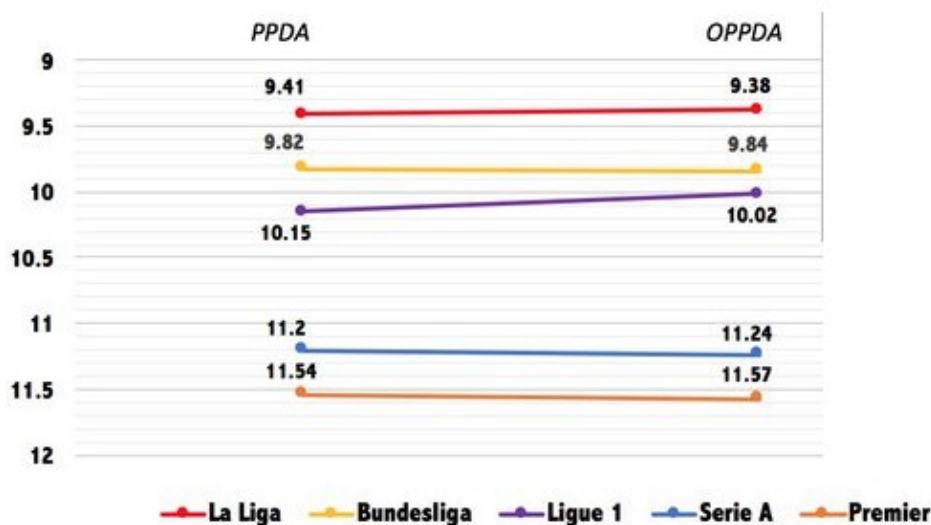
(From season 2015/2016, there has been a progressive decrease in the intensity of the pressure, as the Ppda values of the Top Four league show; indeed, a considerable number of conceded goals are due to a lack of cover behind the pressure line. In my opinion, the attacking midfielders spreading out are one reason; maybe not the only one, but one of the reasons for sure.)

The technical skills of these players required the high-pressing teams and coach to adjust their ideas about the phases off the ball and of counter-pressing; the evolution of Jürgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola are evident over the past few seasons.



The creators of the 6'' rules and of the counter-pressing had to evolve, even if they still issues when their pressure phases are overcome.

#### Ranking Europe's Top 5 Leagues Based on Average High Pressing Intensity



The balance between the Ppda, the passes allowed per opposition's possession inside the last 40%-60% of the field. The OPpda, the passes which the opposition concedes per possession in the first 40%-60%



of the field, highlights the tendency to defend more conservatively due to the increase of the attacking midfielders' role in all the teams, apart from the table position and general quality. The four main European leagues' direction is the same. This factor becomes more interesting when referred to the Premier League and the Bundesliga, commonly recognized as the leagues with the highest playing rhythm. Considering the passing rate of the winners in the top four leagues, we discover that the number of passes per possession is not directly connected to the table's seat:

League	Winner	Season	Averaged passes per possession	Seat
Premier League	Man City	2020-2021	16,3	5th
	Liverpool	2019-2020	15,6	10th
	Man City	2018-2019	16,5	4th
Bundesliga	Bayern Munich	2020-2021	15,3	15th
	Bayern Munich	2019-2020	16,3	6th
	Bayern Munich	2018-2019	16,2	6th
Serie A	Internazionale	2020-2021	15,9	9th
	Juventus	2019-2020	16,8	3rd
	Juventus	2018-2019	15,3	10th
La Liga	Atletico Madrid	2020-2021	15,9	9th
	Real Madrid	2019-2020	16,3	6th
	<b>Barcelona</b>	<b>2018-2019</b>	<b>16,9</b>	<b>1st</b>

Over the last three years, only Barcelona in 2018/2019 won the league and the special rank of the highest number per possession; this means that the quantity of possession is unnecessary to win the domestic trophies, and it's not directly connected the table seat.

Champions League	Season	Winner	Domestic League	Averaged passes per possession	Seat
	2020-2021	Chelsea	EPL	17	3rd
	2019-2020	Bayern Munich	Bundesliga	15,5	9th
	2018-2019	Liverpool	EPL	14,7	13rd

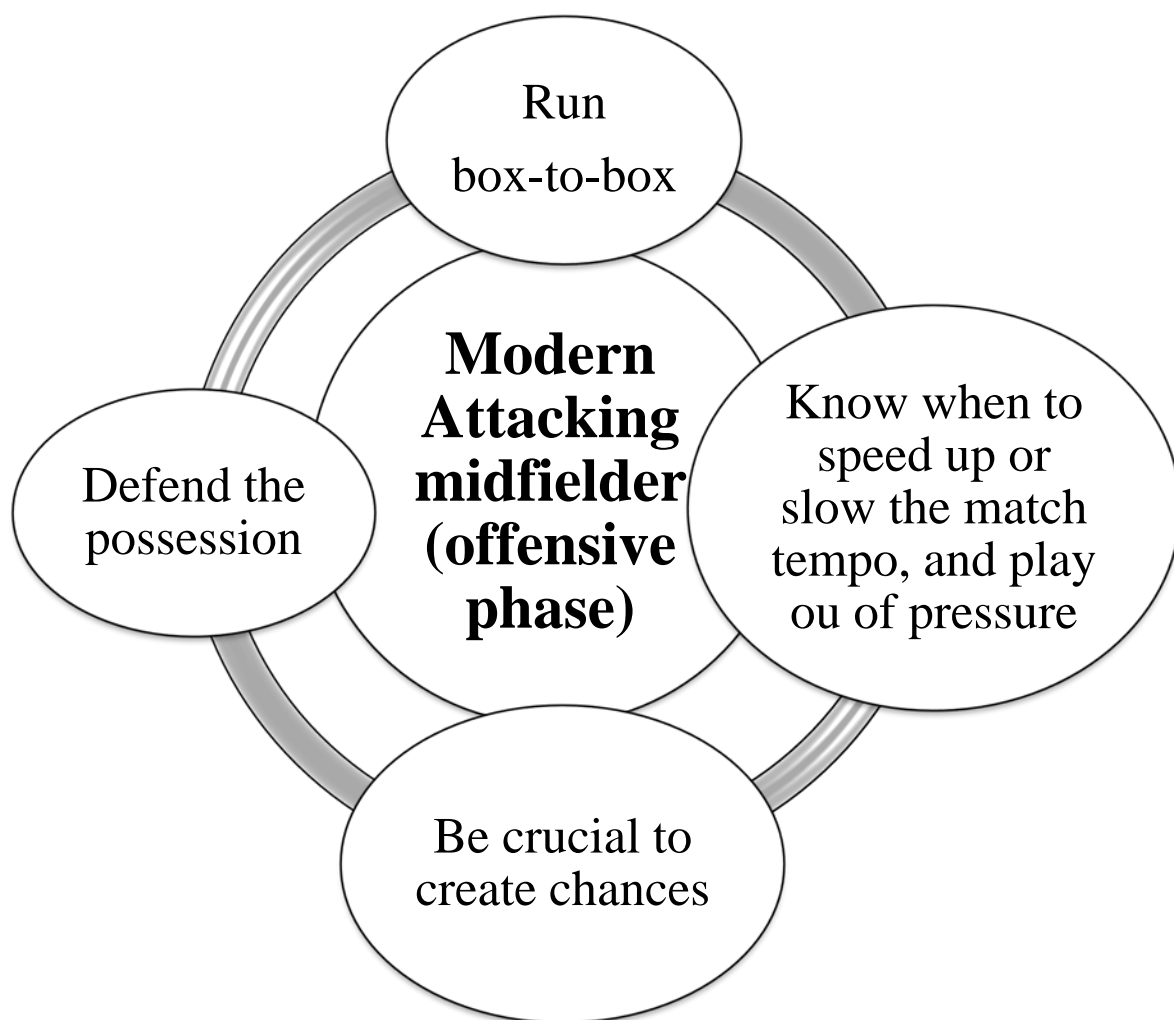
Although the tendency seems to be the same in Europe, there is a different factor that can't be ignored; 12 games are needed to arrive at the final, they are spot games, and the differences among the team regarding the number of passes per game are thinner than in their leagues. This means that having a player who can maintain the possession is crucial to go through the rounds. Otherwise, the last three winners of the competitions weren't the first on the table of a number of passes. Almost all the players we have introduced at the beginning of this chapter play for teams that have achieved remarkable results in their domestic leagues and the Champions League:

- Chelsea has just won the UCL
- Manchester City have been champions of England twice in three seasons, and they are the runner-up of the last UCL
- Manchester United is coming back to be a title contender, and they are the runner-up of the last Europa League final
- Leicester City have just won their first Fa Cup, and they now sit at the top of the table in England

- Bayern Munich is winning the Bundesliga for 9 years, and they have won the last 2019-2020 UCL
- Borussia Dortmund has won the DFB Pokal this season, and it is often the only title contender for Bayern Munich.
- RB Leipzig achieved the UCL semi-finals last season, and they are consistently among the top four in Germany.
- Lazio is always in the first seats of the Italian table despite obsessively checking the counts.

Indeed, some of them were crucial for their team to have their top league seat next season, as Leeds United and Aston Villa.

Suppose we wanted to determine the crucial characteristics of a modern attacking midfielder and his necessary skills to be decisive before considering their metrics. In that case, they could be the following one:



**Note: all data are taken from Wyscout, and they concern the 2020-2021 season.**

- Defend the possession

Player	Passes p.90	Acc. %	Forward p.90	Acc.%	Back p.90	Acc.%
Bruno Fernandes	56,07	77,14	16,71	66,26	10,42	91,69
Y. Tielemans	58,56	84,4	18,14	68,66	8,45	95,66
M. Mount	45,94	86,6	13,35	82,22	10,04	94,52
T. Müller	44,76	76,86	11	68,43	9,96	91,65
S. Milinković-Savić	53,29	81,24	14,94	64,44	11,23	95,95
K. De Bruyne	53,12	79,2	14,21	72,58	10,61	93,52
M. Reus	38,47	83,84	8,8	75,37	9,44	91,53
S. Gnabry	37,92	82,44	7,7	74,66	11,37	92,45
J. Sancho	53,49	84,35	12,54	77,75	13,87	92,38
Luis Alberto	56,03	83,25	23,02	74,76	8,66	96,77
C. Nkunku	36,97	84,29	7,97	72,89	10,07	93,62
Raphinha	30,5	71,58	8,73	61,17	5,43	89,5
J. Maddison	39,46	83,13	10,44	71	8,49	94,42
J. Grealish	38,81	83,71	11,05	80	8,33	91,43

Player	Lateral p.90	Acc.%	Long p.90	Acc. %	Av. length (m)	Av. long pass length (m)
Bruno Fernandes	18,12	79,76	6,53	53,25	18,78	39,39
Y. Tielemans	23,6	91,31	5,95	50,7	19,64	39,67
M. Mount	13,57	86,82	1,72	64	16,03	25,56
T. Müller	14,33	73,88	2,43	58,97	17,07	32,35
S. Milinković-Savić	18,47	85,33	6,24	61,46	19,41	38,51
K. De Bruyne	18,73	79,07	3,53	60,39	18,84	36,11
M. Reus	10,42	87,13	1,42	74,55	15,38	23,48
S. Gnabry	10,69	79,32	0,94	44,44	15,94	17,22
J. Sancho	14,38	85,31	0,76	53,57	14,43	13,43
Luis Alberto	15,92	87,19	4,05	64,14	17,82	36,38
C. Nkunku	10,54	83,66	0,99	61,76	15,15	20,93
Raphinha	10,74	70,39	2,85	57,89	19,02	35,71
J. Maddison	13,38	87,26	1,83	46,55	17,35	26,34
J. Grealish	12,17	86,59	1,43	66,67	16,37	28,64

- Run box-to-box

Player	Minutes played	Succ. att. actions p.90	Off. duels p.90	won %	Dribbles p.90	Succ. %	Progr. runs p.90
Bruno Fernandes	5716	4,41	6,2	44,67	2,19	58,99	1,91
Y. Tielemans	5399	2,4	5,42	45,23	1,98	55,46	0,93
M. Mount	5233	3,89	9,55	39,28	3,7	50,7	2,55
T. Müller	4327	3,62	6,57	33,23	1,93	45,16	1,06
S. Milinković-Savić	4151	3,3	7,59	37,14	2,1	47,42	1,17
K. De Bruyne	3926	5,66	8,67	44,97	3,99	62,64	3,21
M. Reus	3488	3,1	6,71	38,08	3,1	42,5	1,78
S. Gnabry	3460	5,2	8,82	43,95	4,81	55,14	2,37
J. Sancho	3323	6,12	11,75	37,56	7,04	44,62	4,85
Luis Alberto	3222	4,83	9,55	44,15	4,47	50	4,19
C. Nkunku	3084	4,93	11,79	39,6	4,73	52,47	2,13

Raphinha	3001	5,4	10,5	42	6,36	48,11	2,4
J. Maddison	2853	4,1	10,22	46,3	3,94	52,8	1,36
J. Grealish	2648	8,23	17,06	59,96	8,26	72,02	6,02

- Know when to speed up or slow the match tempo and play out of pressure

Player	2nd assists p.90	3rd assists p.90	Progr. passes p.90	Acc. %	Smart passes p.90	Acc.%	Key passes p.90
Bruno Fernandes	0,14	0,05	8,79	81,18	2,63	38,92	1,12
Y. Tielemans	0,13	0,08	8,52	79,65	1,3	41,03	0,23
M. Mount	0,1	0,02	6,07	84,42	1,12	61,54	0,55
T. Müller	0,15	0,04	6,57	84,81	1,75	50	1,25
S. Milinković-Savić	0,07	0,04	8,67	77,75	1,8	40,96	0,78
K. De Bruyne	0,11	0,07	8,41	88,28	3,46	42,38	1,15
M. Reus	0,05	0,15	4,39	83,53	1,42	38,18	0,8
S. Gnabry	0,18	0,08	4,27	80,49	1,01	46,15	0,81
J. Sancho	0,16	0,08	6,91	85,1	2,57	69,47	1,16
Luis Alberto	0,06	0,08	12,63	84,51	3,3	39,83	0,75
C. Nkunku	0,15	0,06	4,96	84,71	1,14	46,15	0,93
Raphinha	0,03	0	7,17	77,82	1,65	47,27	0,81
J. Maddison	0,09	0,03	4,92	85,26	1,99	39,68	0,5
J. Grealish	0,17	0,03	6,97	87,32	1,5	52,27	1,39

Player	Passes to final 3rd p.90	Acc.%	Passes to pen. area p.90	Acc.%	Through passes p.90	Acc.%	Deep compl. p.90	Deep complete d crosses p.90
Bruno Fernandes	8,33	66,54	6,22	45,57	4,08	35,14	2,8	0,69
Y. Tielemans	10,07	67,22	2,67	44,38	2	27,5	1	0,3
M. Mount	5,88	84,5	3,01	63,43	1,2	54,29	1,82	0,55
T. Müller	4,83	73,71	4,97	51,46	1,6	40,26	2,83	1,08
Milinković-Savić	8,35	68,05	3,86	52,25	2,32	32,71	1,65	0,85
K. De Bruyne	7,66	73,05	5,98	52,49	3,46	37,75	2,82	0,66
M. Reus	3,23	79,2	2,32	61,11	1,19	36,96	1,88	0,39
S. Gnabry	2,26	73,56	3,75	60,42	0,94	41,67	2,55	0,78
J. Sancho	2,79	86,41	5,66	67,46	1,57	56,9	4,06	0,43
Luis Alberto	12,79	77,95	5,2	60,22	3,21	39,13	3,16	0,34
C. Nkunku	2,95	82,18	3,56	61,48	1,14	46,15	1,96	1,02
Raphinha	4,38	67,81	3,3	50	1,56	42,31	1,8	0,84
J. Maddison	5,8	71,2	3,06	53,61	2,02	29,69	1,48	0,32
J. Grealish	4,28	75,4	4,11	76,03	1,26	54,05	3,6	0,92

- Create chances and score

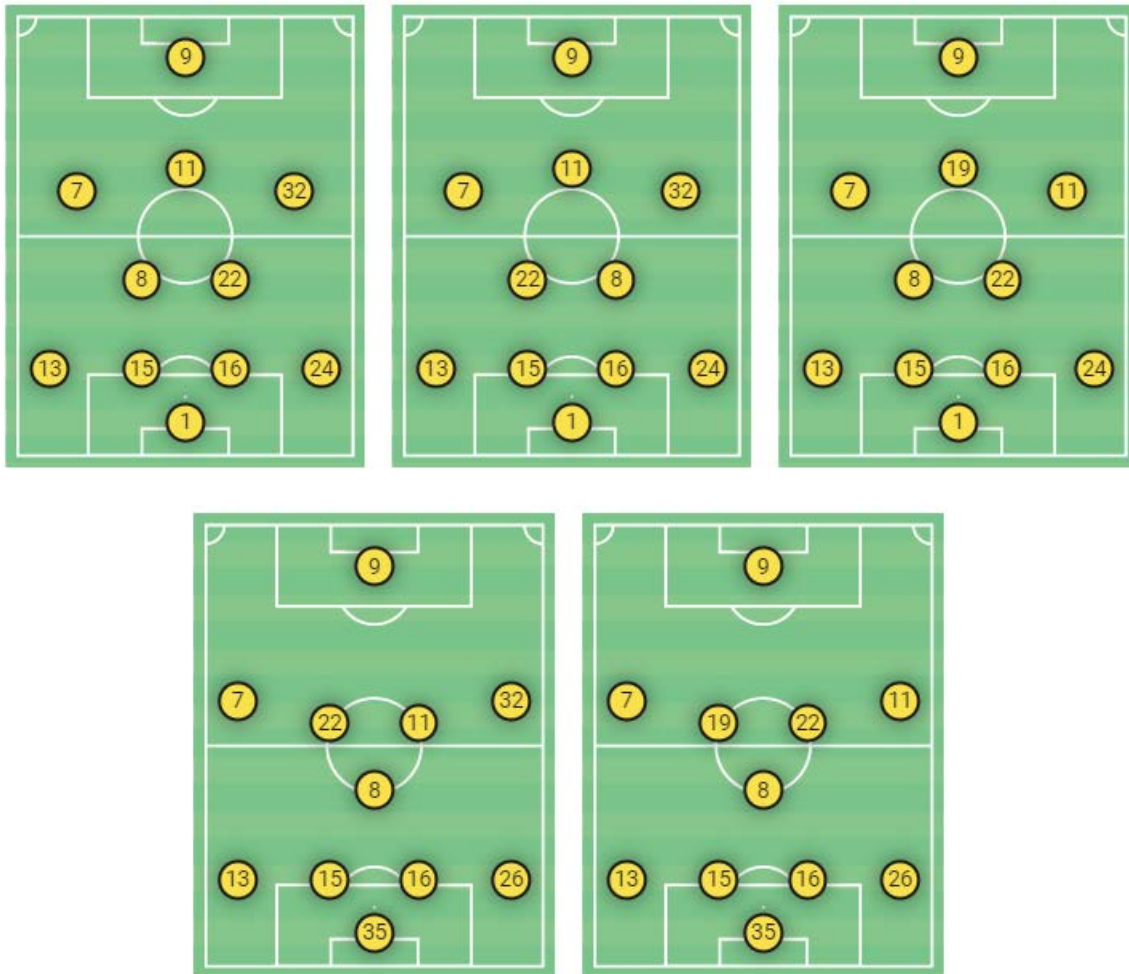
Player	xA	xA p.90	Assists	p.90	xG	p.90	Goals	p.90	Non-p. goals	p.90
Bruno Fernandes	19,01	0,3	18	0,28	26,5	0,42	30	0,47	15	0,24
Y. Tielemans	5,05	0,08	5	0,08	7,02	0,12	11	0,18	8	0,13
M. Mount	14,31	0,25	8	0,14	11,9	0,2	12	0,21	11	0,19
T. Müller	14,4	0,3	16	0,33	13,65	0,28	17	0,35	14	0,29
S. Milinković-Savić	6,83	0,15	10	0,22	9,81	0,21	11	0,24	11	0,24
K. De Bruyne	14,01	0,32	19	0,44	15,26	0,35	13	0,3	11	0,25
M. Reus	11,94	0,31	12	0,31	13,41	0,35	11	0,28	11	0,28
S. Gnabry	8,87	0,23	8	0,21	15,1	0,39	16	0,42	16	0,42
J. Sancho	9,27	0,25	18	0,49	12,02	0,33	16	0,43	13	0,35
Luis Alberto	10,93	0,31	1	0,03	7,21	0,2	9	0,25	9	0,25
C. Nkunku	10,78	0,31	7	0,2	8,48	0,25	7	0,2	7	0,2
Raphinha	10,29	0,31	10	0,3	7,85	0,24	7	0,21	7	0,21
J. Maddison	6,68	0,21	8	0,25	8,42	0,27	11	0,35	11	0,35
J. Grealish	10	0,34	9	0,31	4,91	0,17	7	0,24	7	0,24

Player	Shots	p.90	on target %	Conv. rate %	Crosses p.90	Acc. %	Touches in the box p.90
Bruno Fernandes	208	3,28	41,83	14,423	3,04	23,83	2,69
Y. Tielemans	69	1,15	37,68	15,942	1,1	30,3	0,7
M. Mount	124	2,13	33,06	9,677	1,87	33,03	3,22
T. Müller	73	1,52	45,21	23,288	3,56	33,33	5,16
S. Milinković-Savić	87	1,89	36,78	12,644	1,89	45,98	2,3
K. De Bruyne	132	3,03	34,09	9,848	3,35	19,86	3,12
M. Reus	77	1,99	40,26	14,286	1,55	28,33	4,41
S. Gnabry	106	2,76	49,06	15,094	2,26	32,18	5,41
J. Sancho	75	2,03	38,67	21,333	1,87	21,74	4,52
Luis Alberto	74	2,07	45,95	12,162	1,03	32,43	1,65
C. Nkunku	72	2,1	41,67	9,722	2,16	48,65	3,88
Raphinha	76	2,28	36,84	9,211	2,28	31,58	3,45
J. Maddison	97	3,06	29,9	11,34	1,23	25,64	2,33
J. Grealish	58	1,97	36,21	12,069	2,35	33,33	5,85

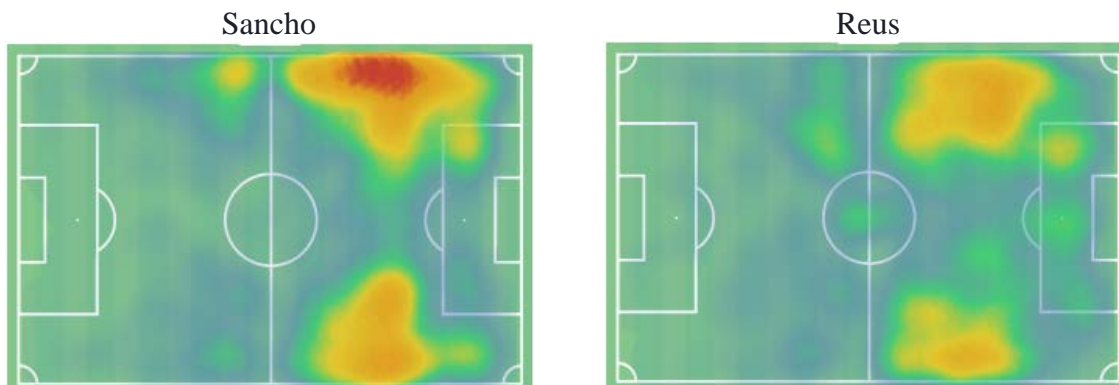
**The following pages aim to give some examples of how an attacking midfielder could play.**

## Marcus Reus and Jadon Sancho at Borussia Dortmund

Jadon Sancho has scored 16 goals and provided 18 assists this season, playing as right and left winger in the 1-4-2-3-1 and the 1-4-1-4-1 of Borussia Dortmund. Marco Reus contributed 11 goals and 12 assists, playing a more flexible way, but mainly along with the wings.



Sancho usually played alongside the left flank as a wide attacker or winger; otherwise, Reus varied his positions among the right flank and the center positions.





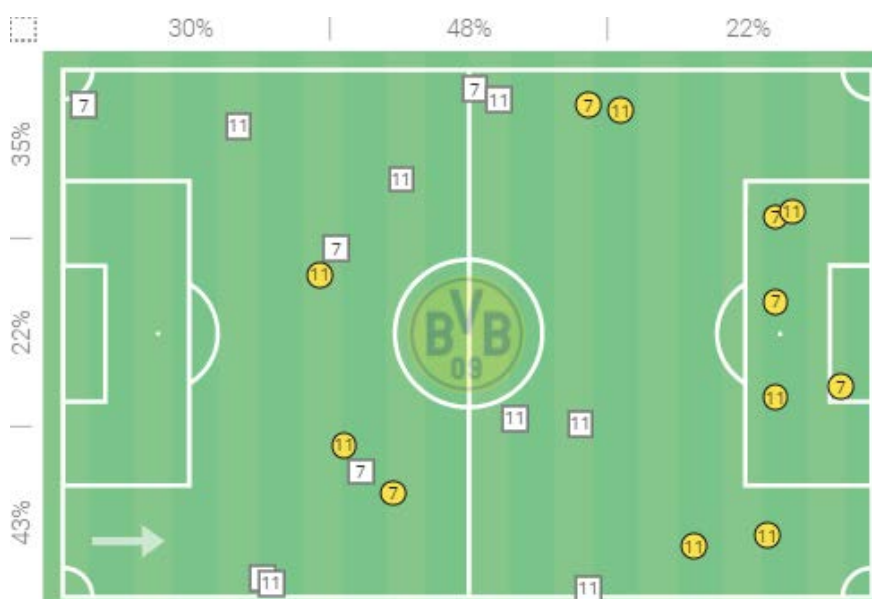
The heat maps confirm that their positions didn't exchange, but the passing networks show how they both have been vital for the offensive phase of BVB.

Sancho also occasionally played as a right-winger in other play systems, as in the DFB Pokal final of this last season which Borussia Dortmund won 4 - 1 against RB Leipzig.

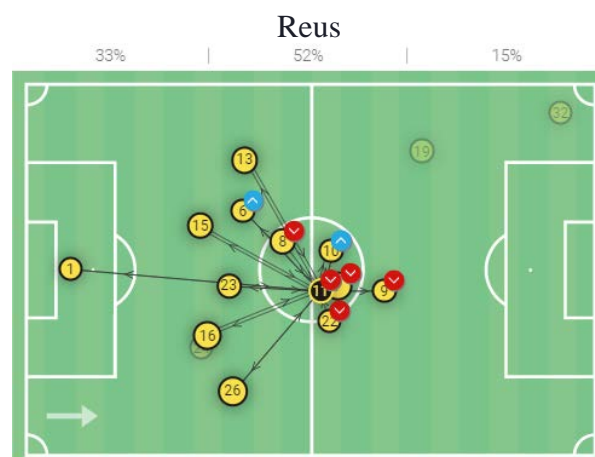
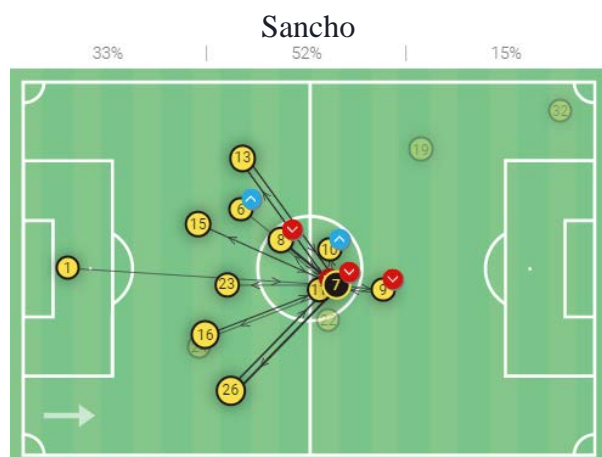


Sancho and Reus started the final as a left and right attackers in a 1-4-3-3 during the first half.

During the second half Reus played as a second striker behind the center one in a 1-4-4-1-1, and Sancho played as the right winger in this system of play.



The heat-maps of their attacking duels confirm that they played in different spaces as two separated points of reference for the attacking phase.



Looking at the passing networks of Sancho and Reus, it's clear how they were the link players from the defensive line to the center striker, and how they received passes from all the teammates along the backline and the center striker was their first passes' target. Therefore, the number of assists, second and third assist is the proof of their role during the attacking phases of the team. The first example is about Sancho at the left and Reus at the right, who provided width along the weak side of the opposition.



Sancho received and dribbled the ball toward the center of zone 14; the left fullback overlapped and invite the center back out of position, and only the fullback faced Sancho 1 v 1. Thus, Sancho could exploit the space in the center, dribbling past the fullback.



The opposition's left center back shifted across zone 14 to counter Sancho, and the left fullback dropped deeper to cover Reus alongside the weak area. The opposition's center back covered the space in front of Sancho, but the fullback opened the space by dropping deep inside the penalty area. Reus could advance through the weak side, and he could receive inside the penalty area free from markers, scoring to the goal's far post.



This second play situation is an example of combination and link play that led the team to score inside the penalty area.



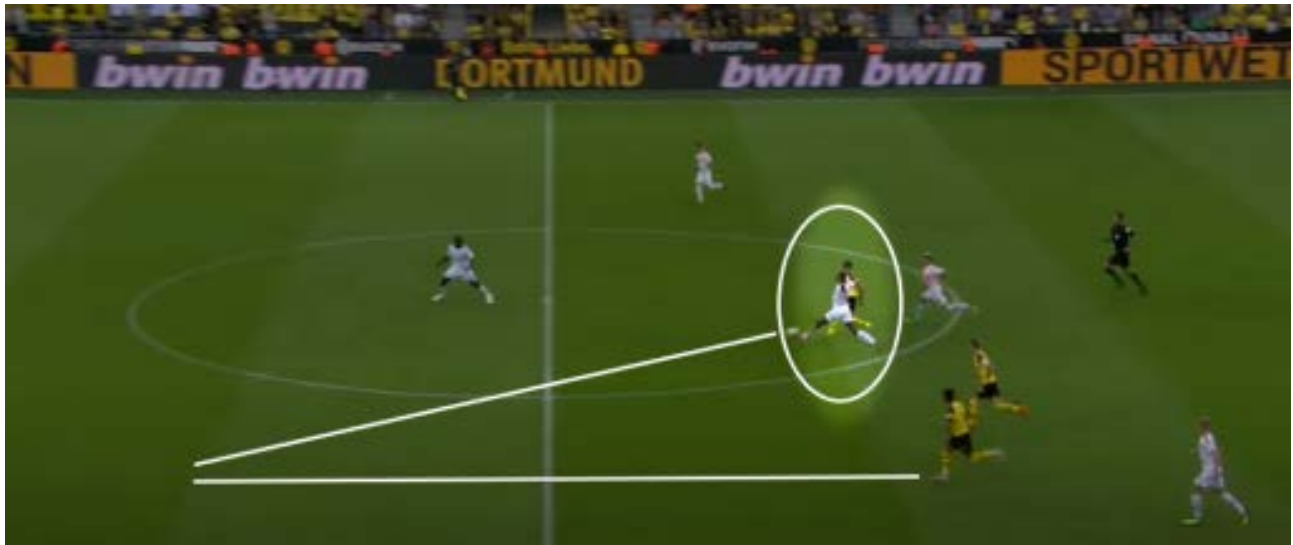
Reus combined with a teammate in the middle, and Sancho received along the right half-space to face an opponent 1 v 1.



Reus followed the attacking move together with Witsel inside the penalty area; Sancho forced the direct opponent deep inside the penalty area. Sancho's teammates did the same in the middle of the penalty area, inviting the defenders deep and creating a pocket of space between them and the midfielders, who retreated late concerning the teammates. Sancho could then play a cut-back pass for Reus, who shifted across the penalty area, and he scored to the far post of the goal.

This move was an example of indirect play between the two players; the first one, Reus, started the counter-attacking phase. The link player called Sancho into action. They cooperate to finish the move in the middle of the penalty area.

The following sequence is an example of 2<sup>nd</sup> assist and combinations leading the team to score with another move after a link player.



Sancho won the ball in the middle of the field inside the center cycle, and he passes the ball forward inside the offensive half for the teammates to run onto. Reus followed the counter-attacking phase together with the teammates, and he acted as the third man inside the penalty area.

The link player received from Sancho and dribbled the ball higher up in the field until the penalty area's edge.



Reus entered the penalty area, and he receives a pass beside the opposition's defender just out of the goal space. Reus then had the time and enough space to score to the far post of the goal, exploiting the defender position beside the opponent and the tackling leg too far from the opponent for being defensively efficient.

## Nkunku at Rb Leipzig

Christopher Nkunku is a flexible attacking midfielder, or all-around striker, in one the most flexible team in Europe, thanks to Julian Nagelsmann. Last season, Nkunku played as a right attacking midfielder in the 1-4-2-3-1, as a right winger in the 1-4-3-3, or as one of the attacking midfielders behind the center striker in the 1-3-4-2-1.

### 1-4-2-3-1



### 1-3-4-3

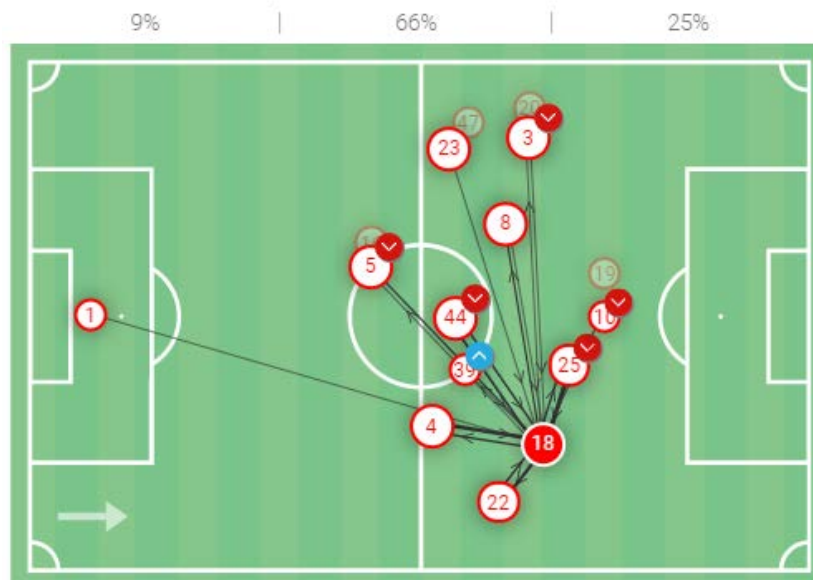


### 1-3-4-2-1



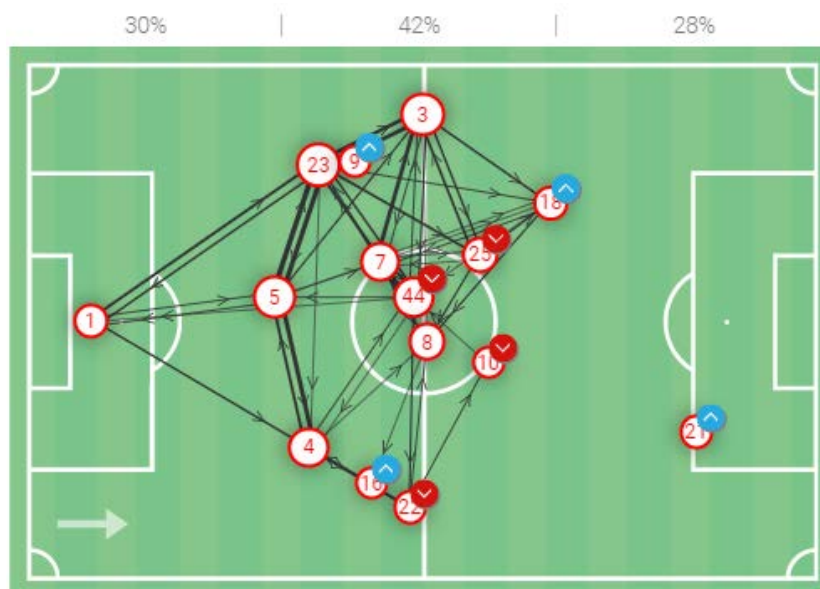


From this example of passing patterns of play, it becomes clear how Nkunku is an advanced point of reference for the teammates apart from the system of play.



In this first example, Nkunku was part of a 1-4-2-3-1 system of play. He played throughout the right half-space; the average of players' positions shows how Nagelsmann decided to organize two playing chains of three-player at the left and the right and four in the middle. Nkunku was the higher point of reference along the right side.

In this second example, Nkunku was the target player of a 1-3-5-2 or 1-3-6-1.



In this example, Nkunku was the target player of a more defensive team that Nagelsmann shaped in the field to overload the left side and the center; indeed, Nkunku was the target player above the overloaded area inside the left half-space.

Nkunku's flexibility makes him a No.10 behind the center strikers, pushing up from the middle third line.



In this sequence, Nkunku shifted across and pushed higher up between the opposition's lines (1-4-4-2) when the center midfielder dribble the ball forward. The opposition's defense stood compact in the center to mark the opposition's center midfielder, and they created a gap along the left flank. The opposition center midfielders closed the passing lanes toward Nkunku initially, and the wingers completed the defensive shape.



This way, RB Leipzig could open up a gap and a path for the left winger to run and receive, progressing the attacking move. The ball carrier invited two opponents out of position. The center strikers forced the defender deep inside the penalty area; Nkunku moved off the ball between the lines, and he supported the final stage of the move off the ball.

He received between the lines inside the penalty area, just over the edge line, and he could score past the goalkeeper, exploiting the gap in the middle and the freedom that the teammates could organize around him.

Nkunku can play both a passer, second assist provider, and target player for the teammates who underlap off the ball.



In this example, Nkunku dropped back inside the left half-space along the center midfielders' line and acted as a playmaker. The center strikers stood close to the center back, and the winger tucked in to compact the opposition's defense and free the flanks for the fullbacks. The left winger tucked in between the wingback and the center back, and he exploited the space to the goal, receiving from the teammate.

In this second situation, Nkunku received deep along the sideline of the opposition's penalty area.



Nkunku invited the opposition's back five lines deep inside the penalty area, and he turned toward the field rather than the end line. The left fullback didn't overlap, but he provided support to the teammate behind the ball's line; the opposition's right center back looked at Nkunku, and he didn't preventively mark the opponent off the ball in front of him. This way, Nkunku created space for the fullback to dribble the ball toward the penalty area.

The opposite teammates marked the farther striker along the weak side, and the center back was too far to counter the RB Leipzig's fullback before he could receive and turn to the goal. The receiver could then enter the penalty area and score to the far post of the goal with a few ball touches.

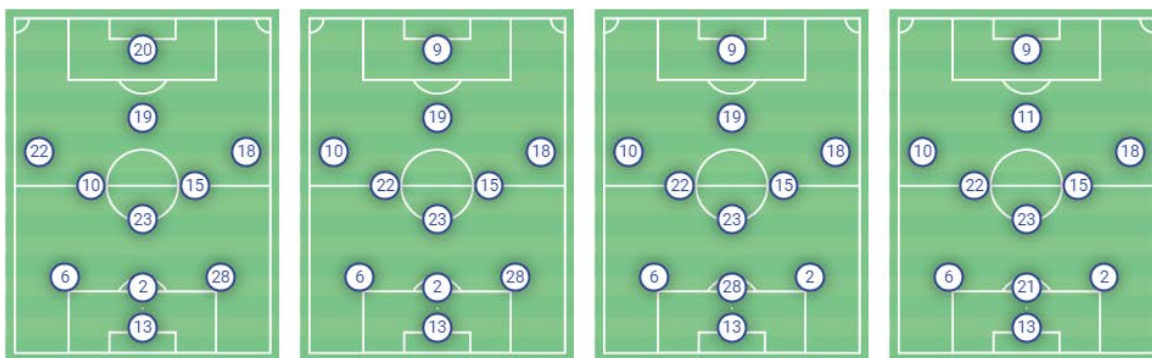


The last example about Nkunku is his usual position as a striker who plays as a target player for the teammates and makes them run behind the opposition's defensive shape.

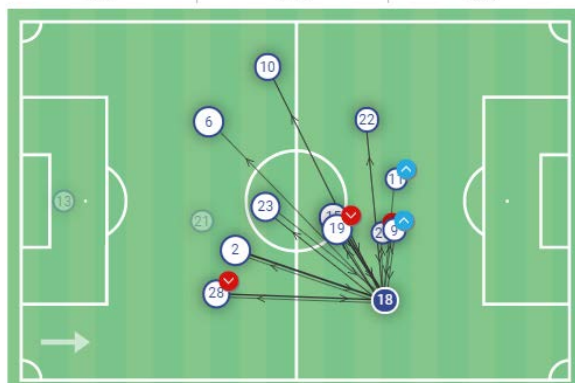


Nkunku received in between the opposition's defensive lines, and then he made the defenders and midfielders concentrating their positions around him. The center strikers invited the opposition's center back deep inside the penalty area. A third teammate moved off the ball from the middle third, and he made a blind run behind the pressing opponents. As the opposite wingback was too far to shift across and close the space, the third man could receive and dribble the ball toward the penalty area before shooting on goal without pressure.

### Raphinha at Leeds United



27% | 46% | 27%



Raphinha is the perfect example of a “Liquid attacking midfielder” in the most “Liquid system of play” that a team can create inside a soccer field. Apart from the two basic systems of play, the 1-3-3-3-1 or the 1-4-1-4-1, Raphinha played in all the possible positions inside the offensive half. Wherever he has played, he was a point of reference for the teammates.

In this first example, Raphina shifted across the field from the right flank after receiving the ball. He exploited the opposition's defensive shape, which overloaded the center of the final third.



The attackers exchanged their positions with the incoming teammates in the center, and they concentrated the awareness of the opposition's defenders toward the ball and the exchanges of positions. Finally, Raphina played a lifted cross pass from the center to the left half-space, where the left fullback received and scored, having enough time and space to control the ball and shot without immediate pressure.

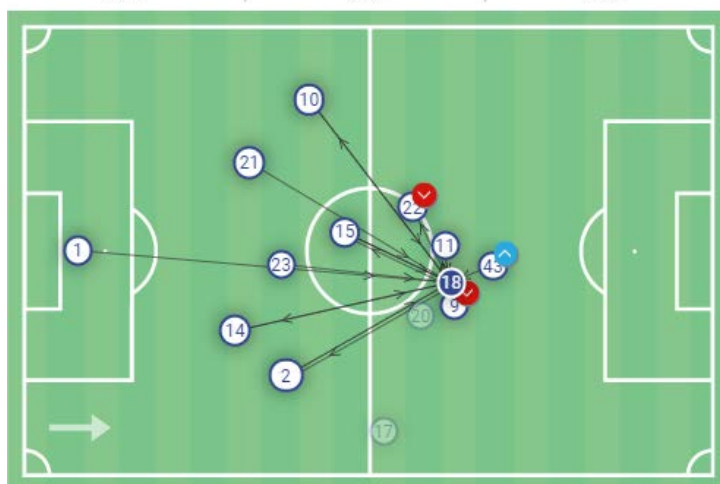
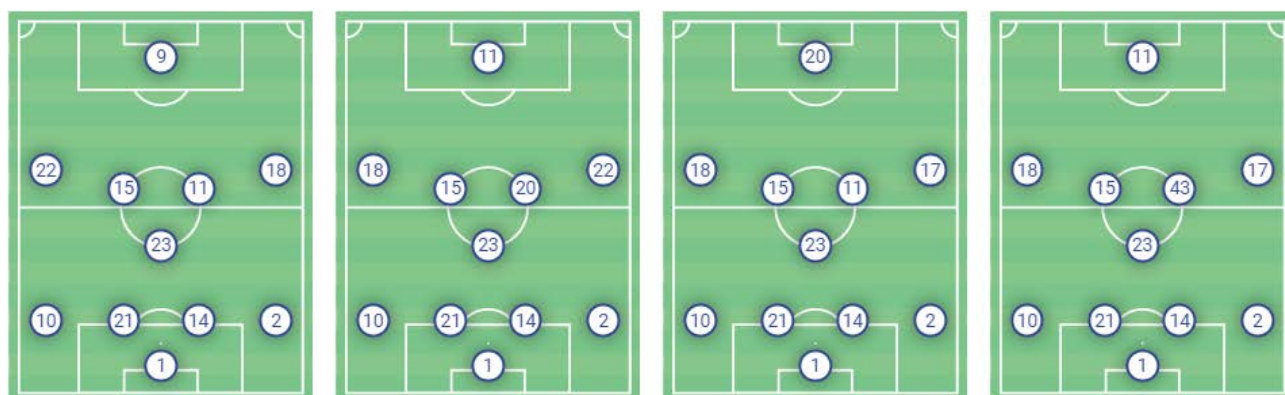
In this further example, Raphina received an inverted right winger along the line of strikers of the Leeds' peculiar 1-3-3-1-3.



Raphina received and turned his body toward the penalty area; two defenders were forced to mark him to cover the outer channel where he could dribble the ball and to close the possible passing lanes to the center striker, who moved in behind the defensive line with the defender who tracked him. Still, he was behind the possible reception line.



The opposite left winger moved toward the penalty area, and he was free from markers as he got the opponent beat on time. The left-winger received inside the penalty area, and he shot on goal part to the goalkeeper.



The formation, Raphina's positions, and the passing network of the team toward him show that this match was an example of the "Liquid organization" of the team, and of "Positional Fluidity" of Raphina, as attacking midfielder.

Looking at the formation, Raphina seemed to be a left or right winger; but looking at the heat-map, he acted a No.10 behind the ball's line.



In this example, Raphina shifted across the field while the teammates combined alongside the right flank, and he created the space for 3 teammates to combine and a passing option in the center. When he received, he was inside the opposition's zone 14, and he had enough time and space to play. In addition, Leeds' attacking line of three made the opposition's defensive line busy, and Raphina could turn and look at the opposition's goal.



The three attackers, one midfielder, and the opposite left fullback invited the opposition's defense deep inside the penalty area. As a result, they gave Raphina enough time to shoot on goal without the proper pressure of the opposition. In this following example, Raphina was the center midfielder of three behind the center advanced playmaker and the attacker in a 1-3-3-1-3. Raphina received out wide at the left, and two teammates overloaded the ball's area to condense the defenders toward the ball, forcing them to leave their initial positions.



The left-winger of the front three was involved in a 1 v 1 duel close to the sideline, and he moved behind the direct marker to receive from Raphina. As Leeds United invited the opposition's pressure down the flank, he could exploit the space and look for playing a cross pass inside the penalty area as the winger received.

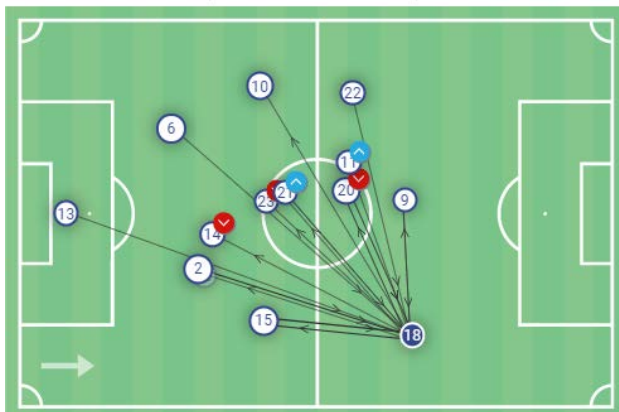


The line of three up front could then exploit the space, combine looking at the goal, and enter the penalty area to receive a cross pass between the defender's line and the goal.

Raphina was also a point of reference when he played out wide along the flanks, at the left, and the right of Leeds' attacking shape.



44% | 33% | 23%



This passing network is a clear example of the real position in the field of the no.18. He usually didn't act as a right winger, but as a higher target player at the (right in this match) whom the teammates can use as a safe pass option (ground or aerial.)

His position was clearly out wide and along the same line of the center forward

In this situation, Leeds was attacking with the typical 3-1-3 formation, and Raphina received at the right of the center forward inside the half-space.



The narrow attacking shape of Leeds concentrated the opposition's defensive shape in the middle and at the right of a hypothetical vertical division of the field, opening a space at the right side that Raphina could exploit receiving on the run and having enough time to control the ball, turn, and look at the final third of the field. The opposition's defensive shape-shifted across the field attempted to cover the passing lanes to the penalty area. Still, the defensive movements were late concerning the time of play of Leeds' winger.



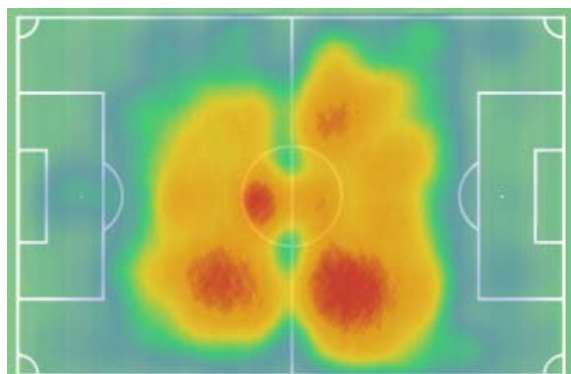
The opposition's left fullback attempted to force Raphina out wide, but his positioning opened the passing lane to the penalty area; as Raphina turned as an inverted fullback; the left midfielder started to overlap and invite another defender who could have a double team the ball carrier toward a different space in the field. Leeds' attackers moved toward the goal between the defenders, through the space between their positions, and they could face the goal. The attacker on the near post headed the ball to the crossbar, but the second on the far post could attack the rebound, and he scored.



## Youri Tielemans at Leicester City

Youri Tielemans has been one of the most prolific center midfielders of the Premier League this season, giving a decisive contribution to the fifth seat of Leicester City in the table and the FA Cup winning campaign scoring the only goal of the final against Chelsea.

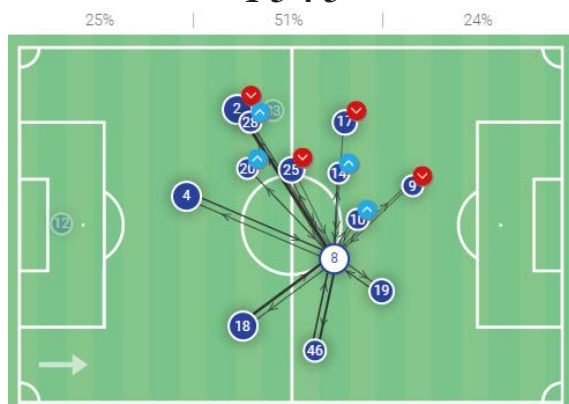
**Heat map**



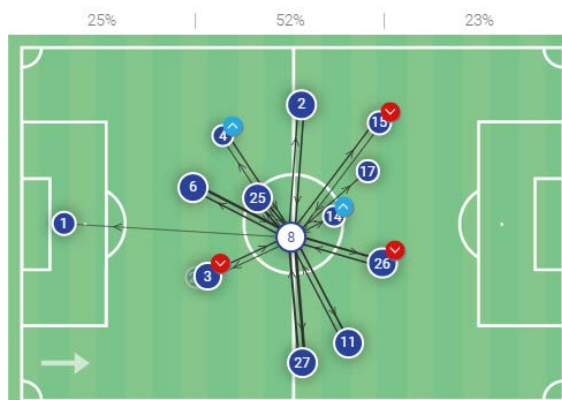
**1-5-3-2**



**1-3-4-3**



**1-4-2-3-1**



The usual initial position was the classic one of a center midfielder in 2 men center shape, alternating the lower or higher positions with the sector's teammate; otherwise, Tielemans always supported the final stages attacking phases as a proper advanced midfielder.

In this first example, Tielemans stood in the center of the field in a 1-4-2-3-1 system of play, a classic advanced midfielder, after losing possession.



The Belgian player patrolled the center of the field behind three advanced midfielders and the striker; he was ready to support the attacking phase, but he became the first covering player after losing possession.

The following sequence is a crucial example of how Tielemans becomes an attacking midfielder during the possession and attacking phases of a move.



Leicester City had the possession, and Tielemans acted back support for the advanced left midfielder, receiving a lay back under the sector's teammate line.



His position was again the classic one of 2 men center midfield's sector in a 1-4-2-3-1. He received, and he passed forward again as he tried to backbeat the direct marker of the teammate he received from before. As the marker of the left winger went on pressing the opponent, he played back to the fullback, who acted as support.



During the combination between the teammates out wide along the left flank, Tielemans pushed up over the half-line of the field to provide a forward passing option to break the opposition's lines of pressure. He then stood higher than the sector's teammate, and he exchanged the position with the left-winger.

This is another example of positional variation during the building up and finishing phases of a move that makes Tielemans flexible at being a deep-lying playmaker and an advanced assists' man.



He received in front of the backline deep in the field during the building-up phase of play. He maintained the possession, inviting the opponents' pressure and freeing the sector's teammate inside a free space at the weak side of the opponent opposition's pressure shape. Leicester distributed the ball, and they switch the side to the opposite flank.

Tielemans' sector teammate could receive and play through the center of the field.



The center-advanced midfielder dropped back along the half-line of the field, and Tielemans pushed higher up along the line of three behind the center striker, exchanging the position with him. Tielemans received after a quick combination in the middle, and he moved as a classic advanced midfielder.



Meanwhile, the teammate who previously dropped back pushed up again between the half-space and the flank, overloading the area around the ball.

In this situation, he acted as an advanced midfielder, standing higher than the sector's teammate, having enough time and space to play an aerial pass for the center striker behind the opposition's defensive line. The vertical movements of Tielemans were crucial for Leicester's possession phase.

The advanced position of the center midfielder was crucial for Leicester for two more and not secondary reasons:

1. He supported the attacking phase attempting to win the second times of the ball after the opposition's defensive interceptions or clearances;
2. He could exploit his shooting skills.



In this first example, the opposition's center back pressed the right winger after he tucked in with the ball, and he dispossessed the opponent. Tielemans pushed high, and he won the ball immediately. The following sequence is the one that took Leicester to score the only goal of the 2020/2021 FA Cup final.



Leicester could advance through the field, exploiting the deep defensive shape of the opposition; Tielemans could receive and dribble the ball forward through the center channel, exploiting the 3 v 1 numerical superiority around the ball.



The opposition's deep-lying midfielder was too far to be defensively effective. The lines of three advanced midfielders + Tielemans, and the center striker, allowed the ball carrier to dribble the ball higher up in the field. Leicester created a numerical equality play situation, and all the attacking players could face the opposition's goal. Tielemans could shoot and score free from a proper pressure of an opponent.

The last pictures about Youri Tielemans are an example of a quick passing combination with the center advance midfielder that often takes him to finish as a current No.10 from a deep-lying playmaker.



Tielemans had the possession in front of the backline. He overcame the second line of the opposition's pressure made of the three men, playing a 1-2 wall passing combination and receiving the back pass over the pressure line. Thus, he could exploit the space between the opposition's lines.

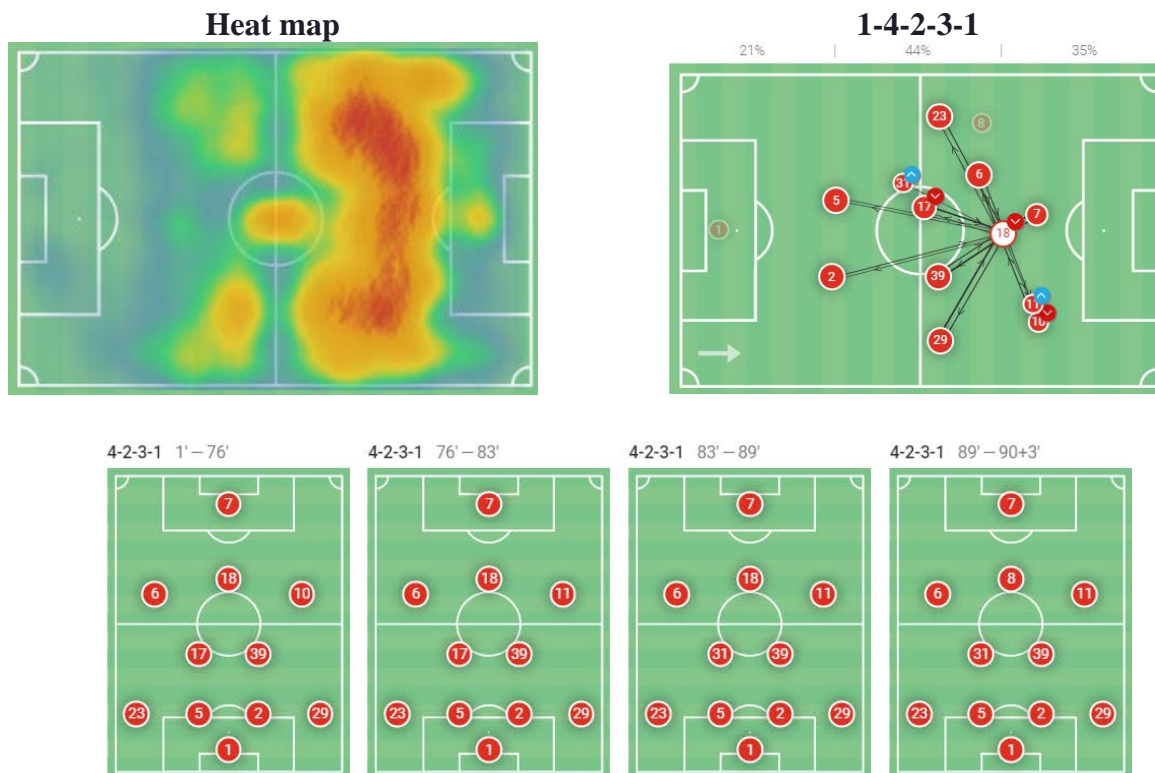


He could dribble the ball higher up in the field till the edge line of the opposition's penalty area; all the opponents tracked the center striker, who moved deeper inside the final third, and none of them countered the ball carrier frontally. Thus, Tielemans could shoot on goal and score from a second striker position behind the center one.



## Bruno Fernandes at Manchester United

Bruno Fernandes is the typical modern attacking midfielder who acts in a No.10 position of the 1-4-2-3-1 with the mobility of a box to box midfielder. He has the same ability when he receives and creates out wide and acts as a lower pivot/creator. The heat map and the example of passing patterns (Manchester United 6 vs. 2 Roma) are clear.



In this example, he received between the opposition's lines.





He exploited the positions of the opposition's center midfielders who were in front of him and not behind at the back, and he could act as a link player from the middle third to the striker. As a result, he received and combined 1-2 with the center forward.



Bruno Fernandes receive the back pass from the center striker, who moved between the opposition's center backs, opening a passing path to the winger, who tucked in before. However, the opposition's left fullback was too far from the opponent to counter him, and the center back had to track the center forward. The winger moved deep between the center back and the fullback, and Bruno Fernandes could play an assist pass toward the teammate.



The winger received the diagonal pass inside the 6 yds. box and he score past the goalkeeper, shooting to the far post.

A current No.10 is not only someone who receives the ball at his feet, and he plays assists passes, but he must also read the situation off the ball and act as a striker.



In this example, the left winger tucked inside the half-space from the left flank, and he passed to the center striker. Bruno Fernandes already stood between the lines without pressure, and he could face the opposition's defensive line and goal.

The closer center back to the goal moved to double-team the ball carrier, and the second one moved deeper to cover the teammate. These movements gave the Man Utd No.18 the time and the space to receive in front of the goalkeeper.

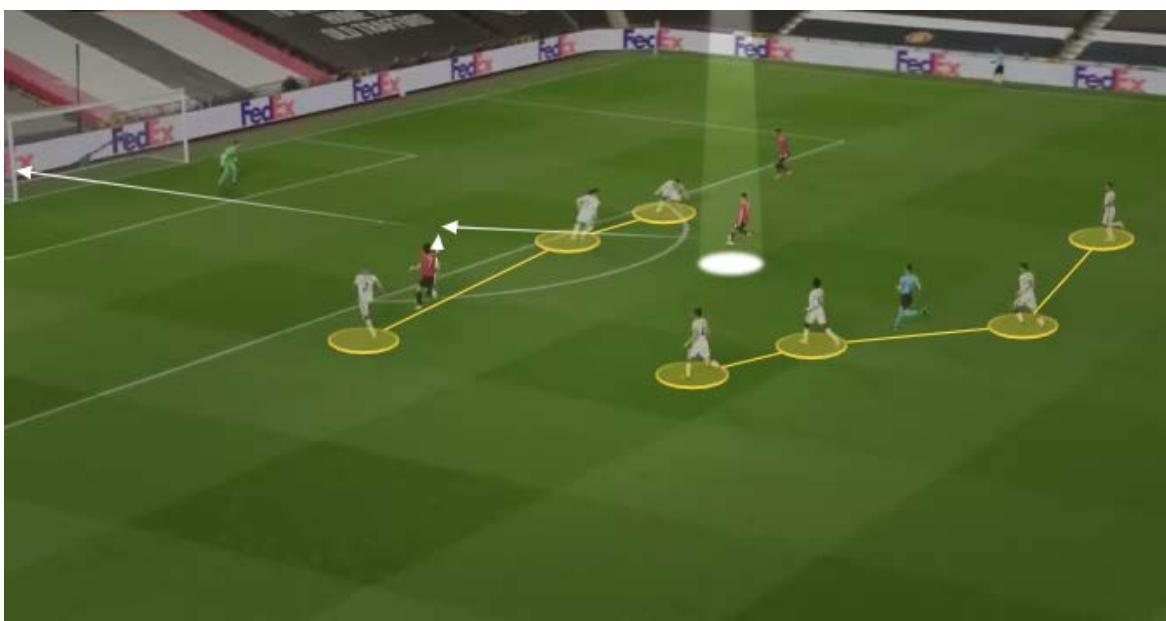


The Portuguese midfielder controlled the ball and scored past the goalkeeper, leaving the line to counter him.

The current No.10 is also a counter-attacking player who can dribble the ball higher and supports the striker.



In this example, he received a diagonal pass from the left winger in the center, and he could turn toward the final third; he passed to the center striker. If the center striker turned toward the goal, he would have been involved in a 1 v 2 situation against the center strikers. For this reason, he passed back to Bruno Fernandes, and he had enough time to turn and follow the move; the No.18 was free from markers, and he dribbled the ball high and close to the penalty area.



Fernandes invited the pressure of the center back, and the center striker could exploit the space between him and the opposition's wider right defender to receive an assist pass from the No.18. The center striker received and shot on goal free from pressure.

If the classic No.10 of the past were often static before receiving the ball at their feet, the modern one must be the exact contrary; he must be flexible, mobile, and able to play as a winger.



Man Utd was counter-attacking through the left flank, and the winger dribbled the ball higher up through the half-space; three opposition's defenders were ready to counter him as he would have attempted a dribble to the center. Bruno Fernandes overlapped at the left of the ball carrier.



The winger tucked in just out of the opposition's penalty area, and he invited the pressure of the defenders toward him. He also opened a gap at his back inside the half-space for Bruno Fernandes to run off the ball after shifting slightly across to provide back support that the ball carrier didn't exploit.



Bruno Fernandes received, and he could score close to the opposition's goal, anticipating the defensive action of the closest opponent.

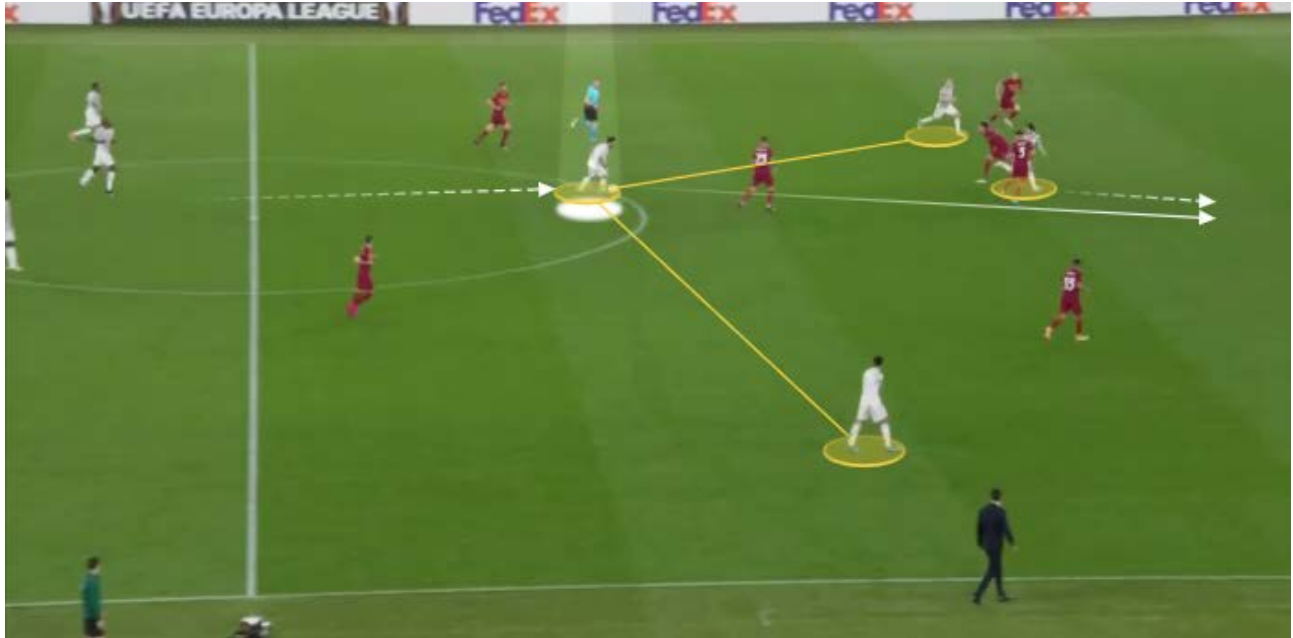
The previous sequence is an example of mobility off the ball, back support provides, and forward support to finish the move; these are all needed actions that a modern attacking midfielder must deploy.

Above all, the advanced midfielder must be an assist man who can fix the numerical inferiorities of the attacking phases inside the final third.





1. Bruno Fernandes received a back pass from a teammate along the opposition's defensive line. Man Utd was attacking in a 4 v 6 situation, but the No.18 played a volley pass for the farther teammate behind the last defender at the right, and he exploited the too deep positions of two defenders. Thus, the center striker received, and he could score with a one-touch shot.



2. Man Utd was counter-attacking, and Fernandes moved higher up behind the attacking line to progress the move. The opponents had the numerical superiority 7 v 4 inside the field's half and 3 v 2 against the strikers in the center. The No.18 played an assist pass behind the center back at the right of the center striker, who was in a wrong position while he attempted to double team him, exploiting the too deep positions of the holding midfielder.





3. In a further example, Bruno Fernandes played a long pass from the middle third to overcome the ultra-defensive shape of the opposition, and the center striker could score, heading the ball above the goalkeeper while he was leaving the line.



4. In this further example, Bruno Fernandes exchanged the position with a center midfielder, who dropped back along the defensive line to build up. All the short passing solutions were risky, and the opposition had a numerical advantage along their backline (5 v 3) and above the ball line (7 v 4). Bruno Fernandes fix the issue with an aerial diagonal long pass exploiting the opposite flank and the flat body positions of the opponents. He could progress the move then.



5. In this last example, Bruno Fernandes stood along the opposite flank, concerning the ball's position, as Utd overloaded the right attacking side. As a result, the opposition shifted too much wide due to the attacking strategy of Man Utd, and they could only have an additional player against the Utd's one; Fernandes equalized the 8 v 8 duel inside the attacking half.



Fernandes followed the attacking move, and he tucked inside the penalty area to receive a cross pass as a switch of side. While all the defenders looked at the ball's trajectory, Fernandes could play a header assist pass for an incoming teammate, who scored with a one-touch shot along the edge line of the 6 yds. box.

## Summary

This book aims to give the coaches a view on the role of a modern attacking player. Soccer is a liquidly organized sport; positions have substituted the roles, and players must attack and defend, apart from their roles on papers.

Attacking midfielder is a position in the field and not a role anymore. An attacking midfielder is not a static player behind the strikers; he is an all-around player.

To write a complete guide about this role, or it would be a set of books rather than a single book; all the players who are highlighted in these pages represent the crucial skills of a modern attacking midfielder:

- Off the ball skills (in the center channel and along the flanks)
- Technique
- Deep-lying/ Regista and Trequartista abilities
- Organization of play, assists, and scoring skills

All these characteristics can be found in some players by my side, which I have analyzed. These are the chapters I included inside:

- The types of the attacking midfielders
- Increasing the pressure and quick technical players in the middle third: the role of the modern attacking midfielder which has made the Ppda decreasing to defend against them
- Marcus Reus and Jadon Sancho at Borussia Dortmund
- Nkunku at Rb Leipzig
- Raphinha at Leeds United
- Youri Tielemans at Leicester City
- Bruno Fernandes at Manchester United