

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

**DEFENDING**



by LUCA BERTOLINI

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

*By*

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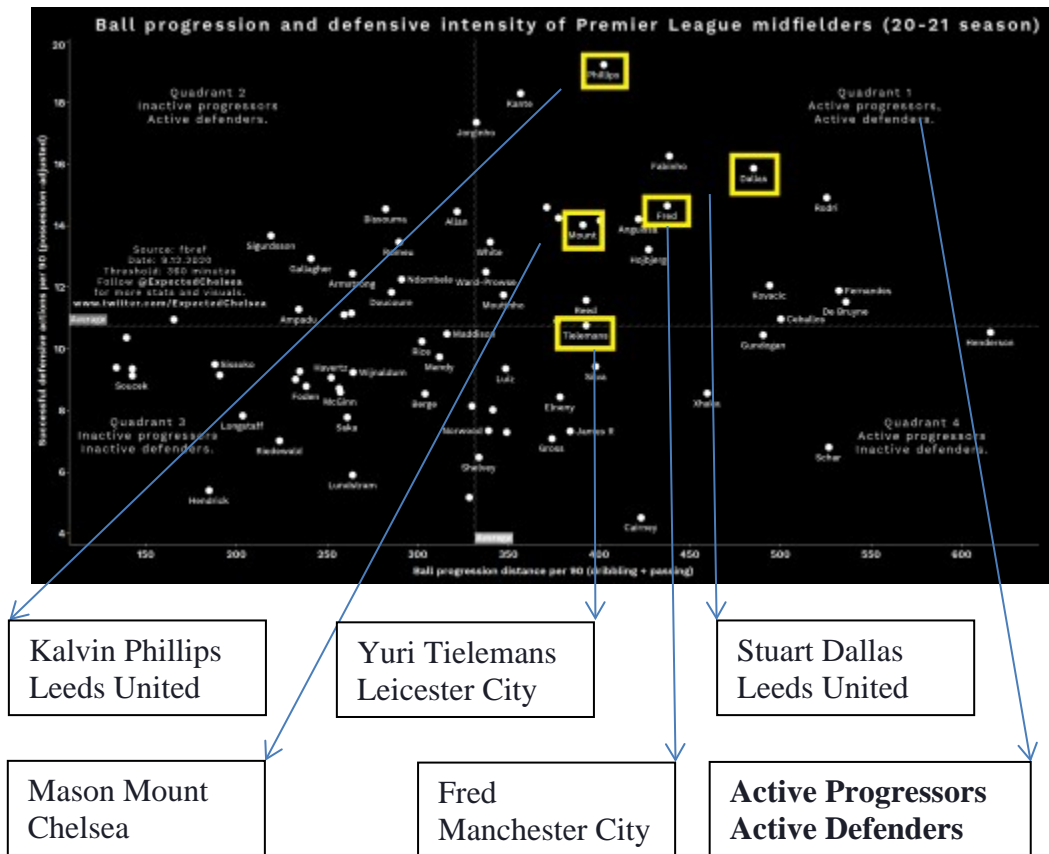
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## Introduction: the types of the attacking midfielders

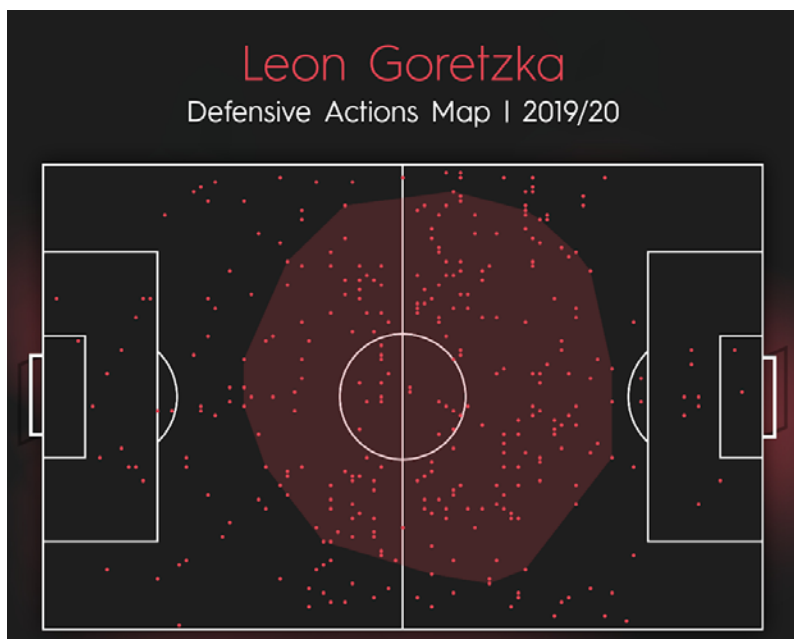


There are two types of defensive actions: team's positional actions and player's positional actions. The first type is strategy-oriented, and all players follow specific and crucial preparatory positional traps to trigger pressure phases or positional defensive phases.

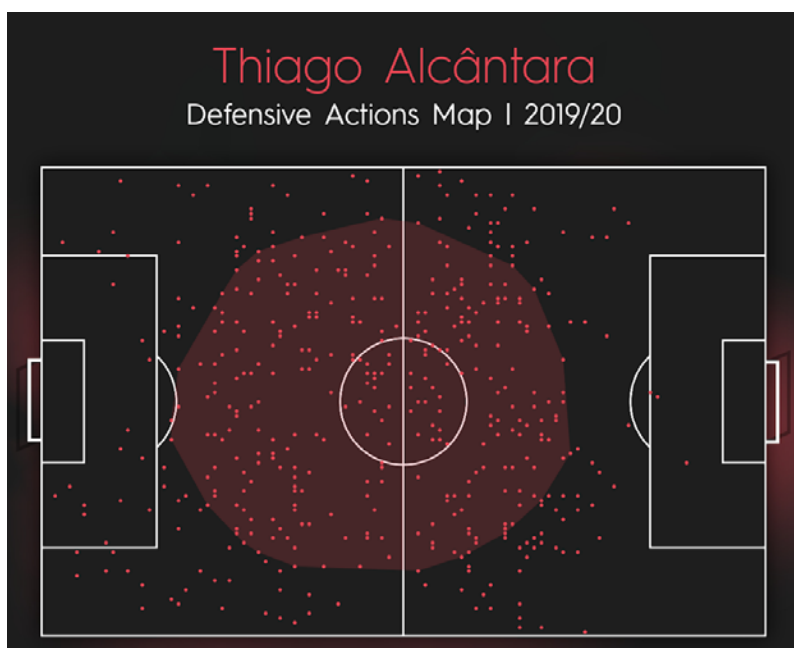


These are examples of the team's positional defensive actions; looking at the heat-maps, Leeds tends to concentrate the duels toward two specific areas of the field when they can't recover the ball thanks to pressure phases. The left and right half-spaces inside the first third and then in the middle third are the

more highlighted zones of the field; this means that they use the touchline as extra-defender, and they look to close the center channel to prevent the opposition from exploiting the zones 14 and 17. Otherwise, looking at the defensive heat-maps of two Bayern's midfielders during 2019/2020, Leon Goretzka and Thiago Alcantara, it's clear how they run all over the field to make defensive action. This means that the defensive tactical strategy was based on the ball position at the moment of the ball's loss, and all the teammates of the closest player to the ball make consecutively runs concerning the first teammate. By the way, Goretzka and Alcantara heat maps have such a crucial difference; the first one is usually defended higher than the second one.



Furthermore, Goretzka seemed to move wider than Alcantara, who mainly patrolled the center channel, and the first one was more mobile than the second one.

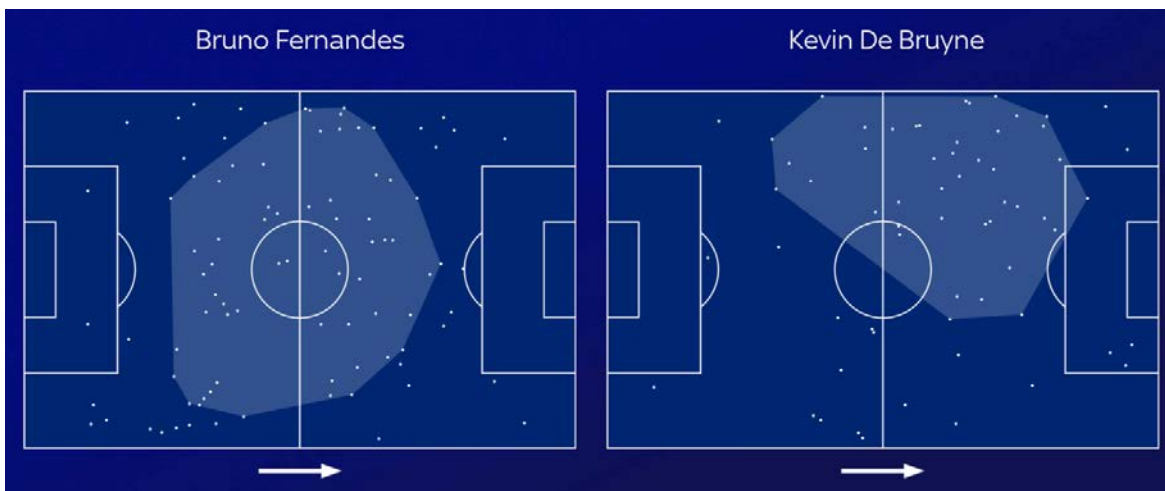


Alcantara defended deeper and in the center, and he had the responsibility of the opposition's zone 14 and the half-spaces in the center.

Jadon Sancho, the left and right attacking midfielder and winger of Borussia Dortmund, is another player during the defensive phases.



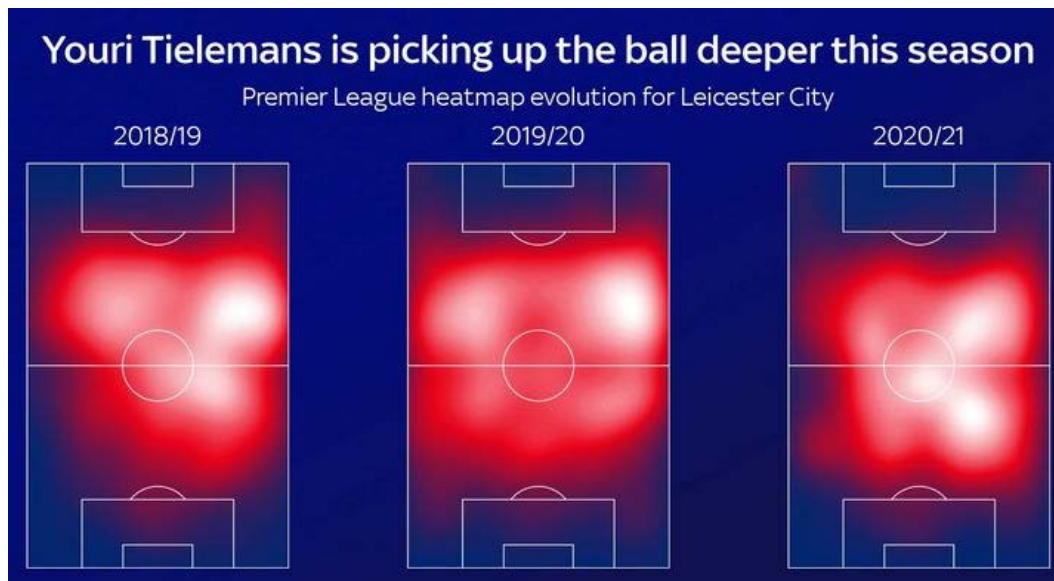
He usually defends the same areas where he attacks, and he doesn't drop too deep inside the first third, as he is the first choice to play transitions to attack and counter-attacks. Bruno Fernandes and Kevin De Bruyne are two of the most strategical modern attacking midfielders for their teams, both during attacking and defensive phases.



The heat-maps follow their attacking areas in the field, but there is a big difference in the approach of their teams:

- Bruno Fernandes defends where he attacks: he constantly counter-attacks the first opponents with the ball when he loses the possession. He concentrates the defensive duels in the center of the field because this is his usual area when he has possession. The wider defensive areas are the same as the attacking ones, as he also moves out wide to receive and build-up play patterns.
- Kevin De Bruyne is an all-around player when City has the possession, but City usually tends to overload the left side of the final third to find spaces alongside the right half-space and flank. This means that Kevin De Bruyne also supports the defensive phase, shifting across the field toward the left, and he contributes to creating numerical superiorities after the ball's loss.

Youri Tielemans is an example of defense positioning evolution that comes from picking up the ball's positions. He is a box-to-box midfielder, but he started an evolution from the 2018/2019 season to the last one.



He started as a more attacking-minded player during the first season, playing alongside the right flank and the left offensive half-space; he developed in an all-around middle third player during the second seasons, he came back playing alongside the right flank, and the left half-space, but deeper inside the defensive side of the field.

Ball recoveries by midfielders		
Premier League 2020/21		
League ranking		Total
1	Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg	179
2	Youri Tielemans	175
3	James Ward-Prowse	167
4	Yves Bissouma	167
5	Declan Rice	165

Apart from the positional evolution, the contribution to the high defensive phase hasn't changed through the seasons, and he sat second in the table for this specific metric behind Tottenham's Hojbjerg.



## Attacking midfielders pressing in the offensive half and the final third: Marcelo Bielsa's Leeds United study case.

Usually, Marcelo Bielsa deploys a back 3 to counter the 2 strikers' opponents and the 2 center backs (back) system when Leeds has to face 1 center striker system of the opposition. Counter-pressing and aggressive man-to-man pressure never change during the phases of the playoff the ball, even more, if his players lose the possession in the offensive half.

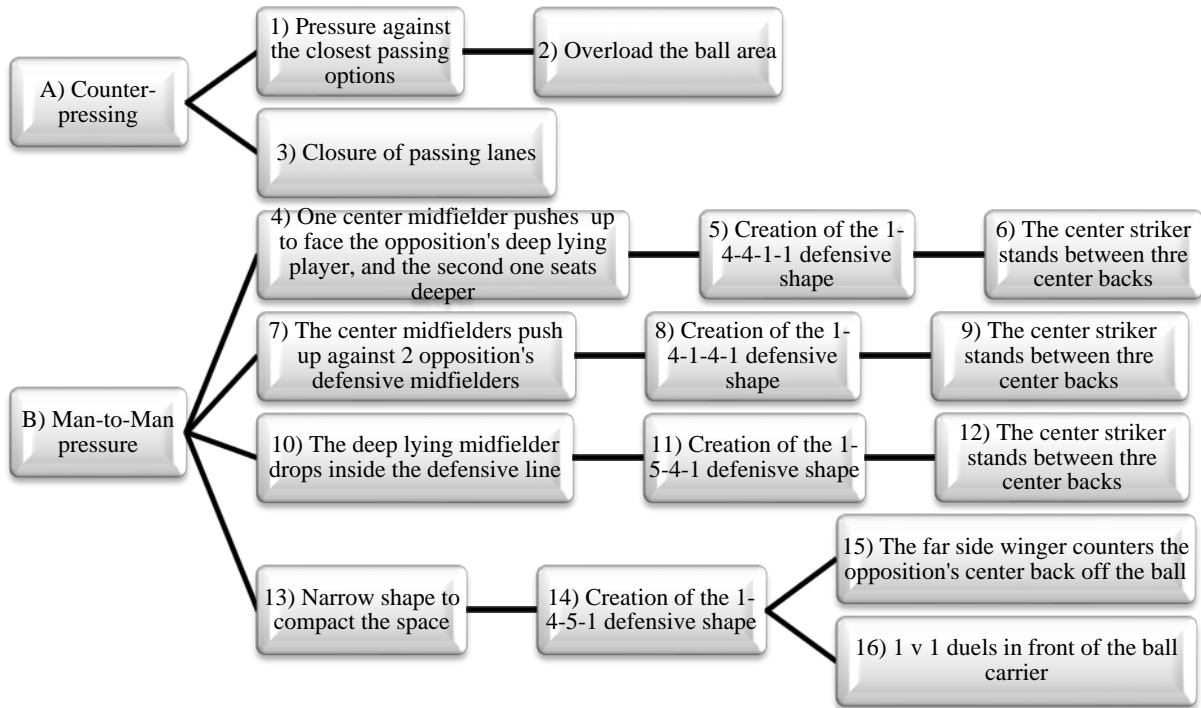
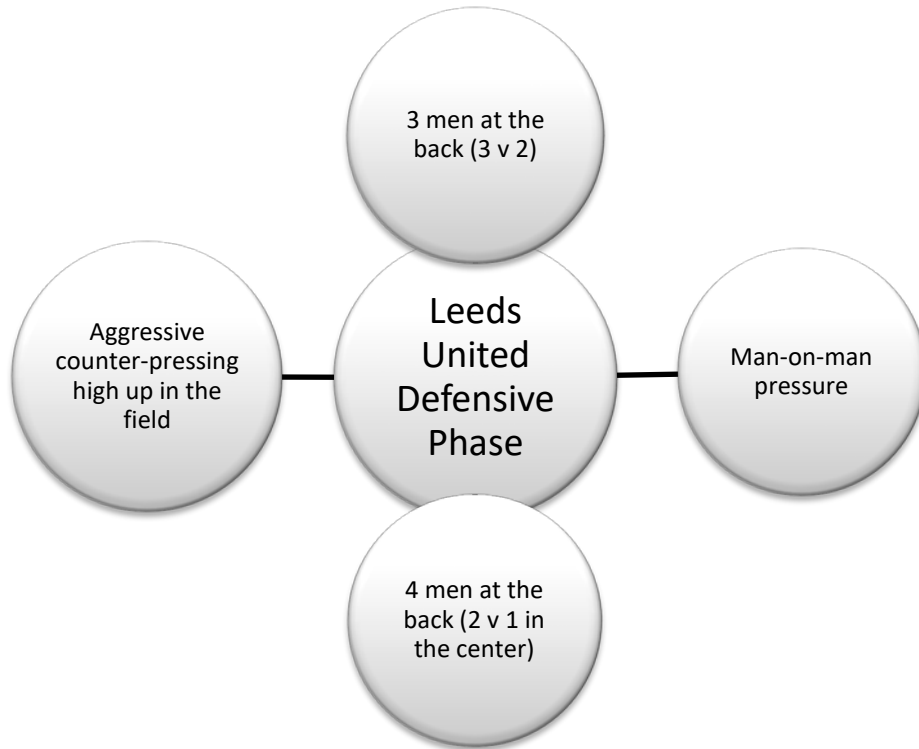


The back three defense allowed the right defender to move out and track the opposition's striker dropping back movement. The other two defenders could maintain the 2 v 1 numerical superiority alongside the defensive line.

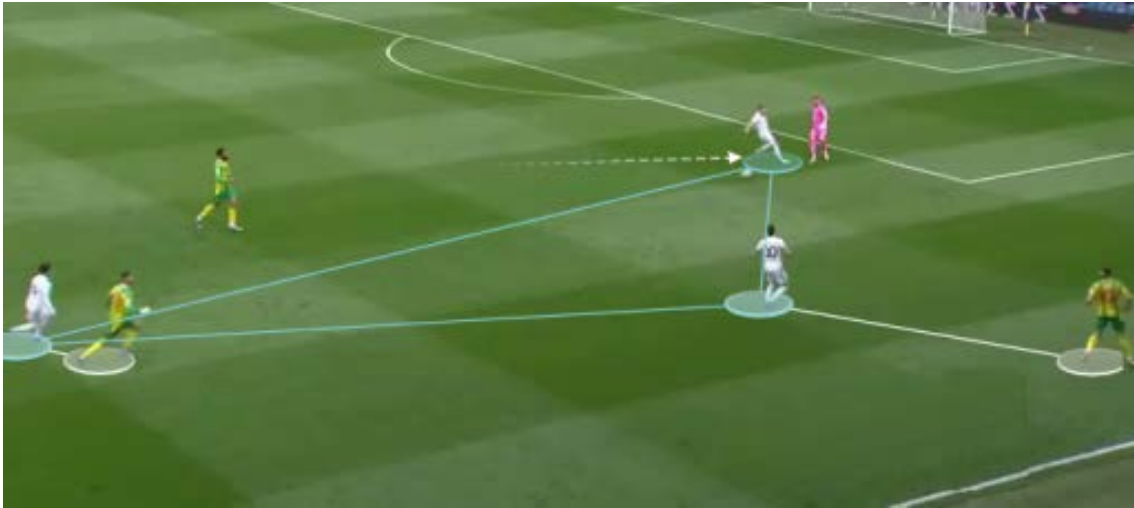


Furthermore, in this situation, the back three could maintain the 3 v 2 duel at the back, and the midfielders and the left wingback and center striker could defend 1 v 1 around the ball, in the middle, and through the right side.

Leed's defensive phases seem to be a combination of safety at the back (looking for numerical superiority against the opposition's strikers and keeping a safety man at the back when he deploys the back three men) and of aggressive pressure higher up in the field, apart from the system of play of the opponents and Leeds also. The system of play which Bielsa deploys the most: the 1-3-3-1-3 against 2 strikers' opponents, and the 1-4-1-4-1 that develops in the 3 men at the back when Leeds has the possession.



The cooperation among the center striker and the advanced midfielders and wingers is crucial to press the opponents effectively, as Leeds press very high and a wide opponent receives.



In this example, the center striker pressed the goalkeeper and closed the holding midfielder simultaneously. Two advanced midfielders pressed the opposition left fullback and the dropping back left winger to force the direction of play.

As the opposition tried to play out wide along the left flank, Leeds created a numerical superiority situation along the touchline.



The advanced midfielders forced the direction of play in a 2 v 1 duel. They closed the passing lanes to the center and pressed the ball carrier; they also prevented the ball carrier from passing back to the holding midfielder who was marked by the center striker.

The right wingback and the right defender of Leeds pushed up in the field, and they put pressure against the opposition's winger before he could receive, and they exploited the touchline as an extra defender.

The holding midfielder covers the gaps, which may appear as a consequence of the man-to-man pressure.



In this example, Kevin Phillips and the center advanced midfielder Pablo Hernandez covered a gap in the center of the field that the previously advanced pressure had opened. (the center advanced midfielder always cooperates with the holding midfielder to cover up the spaces after the pressure phases).

The goal is always to maintain the opponents far from the goal, and it is always more crucial than defensive shape maintenance. When Leeds must defend deeper inside the defensive half, the advanced midfielder helps the 1 v 1 duels creation around the ball or against the potential opposition's receivers.



The right advanced midfielder Klich dropped back and then shifted out wide to create a duel against the opposition's ball carrier, and the right defender preventively marked the short passing option.

The 1 v 1 duels often force the opposition backward, and the striker can press the goalkeeper or the center backs.



In this example, the opposition's goalkeeper received again, and the central striker and the advanced midfielders pushed up to close the forward ground passing lanes to the goalkeeper.

As a low defensive shape, the 1-5-4-1 is then preferred, with the backline made of different players concerning their positions at the moment rather than their roles.



- The advanced right midfielder became the right wingback
- The other two advanced midfielders of the 1-3-3-1-3 (or 3-1) supported the creation of a strong side around the ball alongside the left flank

The advanced right midfielder covered the weaker side to counter a potential switch of side.

### 1) Pressure against the closest passing options



- Pablo Hernandez pushed up to preventively press the opposition's center backs which could have received from the wide ball's area.

### 2) Closure of passing lanes



- Pablo Hernandez and Dallas closed down the passing lanes toward the center of the field, while the right defender pressed the ball carrier to force him toward the touchline.

### 3) Overload the ball's area



- The line of three overloaded the ball area and forced the ball carrier to pass alongside the touchline.



- The defenders created a 4 v 2 duel out wide along the touchline and near the ball, and the first passing option out of the condensed area could receive.



- The advanced midfielders dropped back and countered the receiver, and seven players overloaded the pocket of space near the ball close to the penalty area.

4) One center midfielder (or the second striker) pushes up to face the opposition's deep-lying player, and the second one seats deeper



- Phillips pushed up and forced the opposition's holding midfielder out wide, and Pablo Hernandez dropped back to cover his position and space behind him.



## 5) Creation of the 1-4-4-1-1 defensive shape



- The shape allowed Leeds to create 1 v 1 duels vertically and horizontal numerical superiority.

## 6) The center striker stands between the center backs



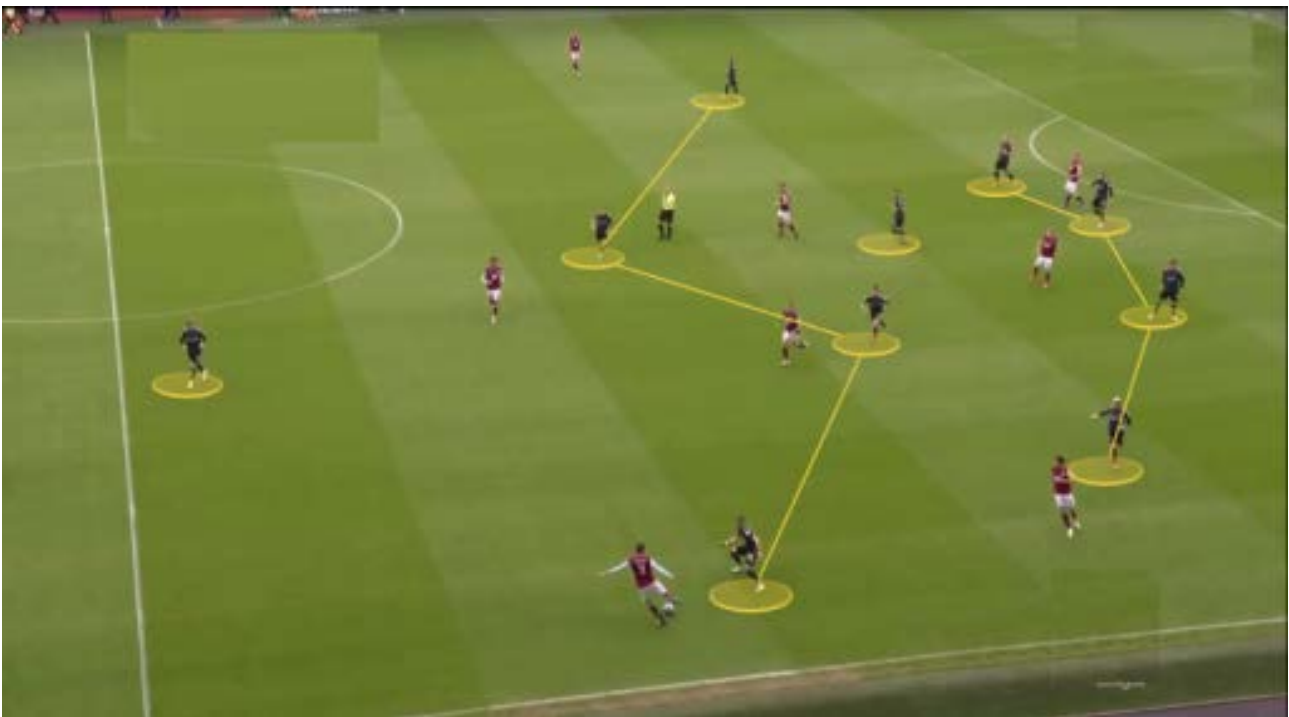
- Bamford was closed to the opposition's center backs, Phillips pushed up to counter the holding midfielders, and the line of midfielders sat behind him to provide cover.

## 7) The center midfielders push up against 2 opposition's defensive midfielders



- The 2 v 2 duel in the center prevented the opponents from playing through passes.

#### 8) Creation of the 1-4-1-4-1 defensive shape



- The 1-4-1-4-1 formation usually has the same aim as the 1-4-4-1-1: to create vertical 1 v 1 duels and horizontal numerical superiority.

### 9) The center striker stands between the center backs



- When the center striker stood between the center backs, one winger and one center midfielder preventively pressed the potential forward passing options. They allowed one center back to receive to trigger the pressure phases.

### 10) The deep-lying midfielder drops inside the defensive line



- When the holding midfielder pushed up and out of his pre-determined space, he also dropped back to track the ball carrier he pressed before to continue the defensive action. The defenders

and the other midfielders standstill, and the holding midfielder also joined the backline to complete the defensive shape, avoiding gaps.

#### 11) Creation of the 1-5-4-1 defensive shape



- When the holding midfielder dropped deep, the backline was made of five players, and the other three midfielders created a compact shape in front of the penalty area.

#### 12) The center striker stands between the center backs



### 13) Narrow shape to compact the space



- When the opposition played a long pass toward the final third, Leeds shaped a compact formation to prevent all the progression's chance for the opposition. In this example, the defensive shape was a 1-5-4-1, but also the 1-4-5-1 shape was found.

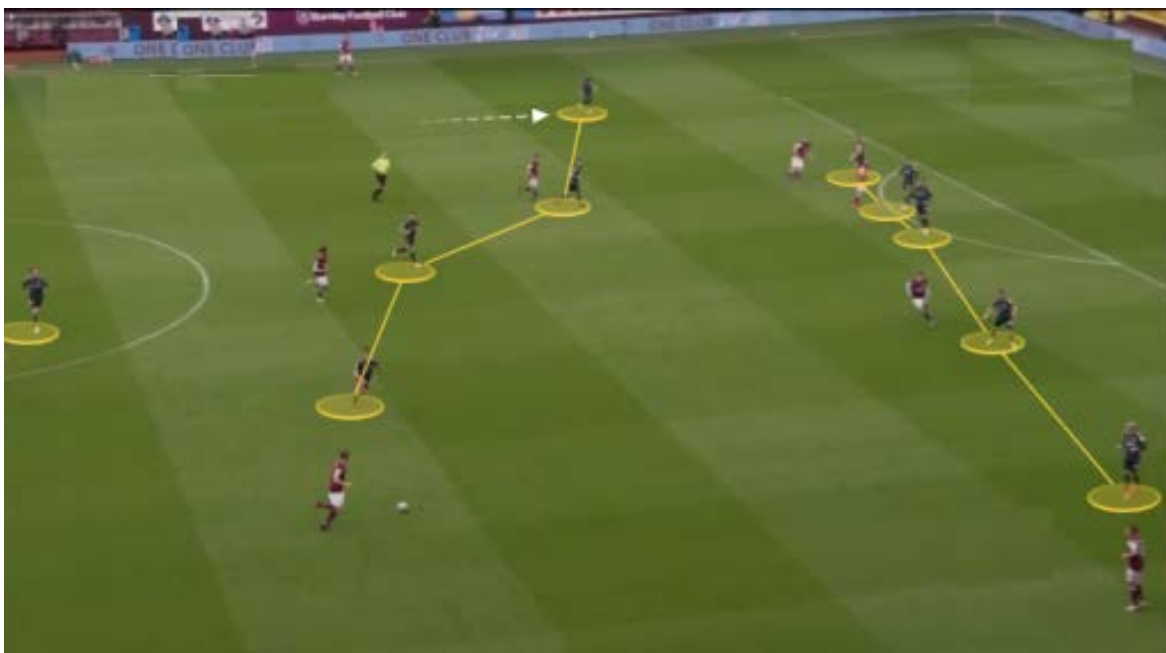


- Apart from the defensive shape, the penalty area's numerical superiority was always the first aim (5 v 3 in this example).

#### 14) Creation of the 1-4-5-1 defensive shape



- The 1-4-5-1 formation allowed Leeds to create 1 v 1 duels near the ball with the two advanced midfielders and provide cover behind the pressure area and in front of the backline. Duels and numerical superiority are always the main aims, even if gaps may appear as in this example: 2 v 2 around the ball and 6 v 5 at the back.



- The advanced midfielders out wide (of the 1-3-3-1-3) or the wingers dropped back and helped create if the 4 players half-line in front of the back. Only the striker stands higher up in the field, and all the others dropped behind the ball's line to save the final third.

15) The far side winger counters the opposition's center back off the ball



- In this situation, Leeds created a 3 v 3 duel at the defensive right side in the middle, and the center striker marked the closer center back to the ball. The opposite winger tucked in and preventively marked the opposite center back to avoid switches of side.

16) 1 v 1 duels in front of the ball carrier



- In this example, all the potential passing options in front of the ball carrier were preventively pressed 1 v 1.

## Premier League and Bundesliga attacking midfielders with the best defensive stats

Defensively, the attacking midfielder usually has pressure tasks in all systems and play styles, despite soccer becoming a liquid organized team sport. Their first task is yet nowadays to press the opponents. The following schemes have two aims:

1. To define the attacking midfielders, we are going to analyze in the following pages
2. To show how the defensive stats decrease quantitatively from deep-lying midfielders to the attacking one, but for the Padj tackles and interceptions, which are the defensive actions that take the team to win the ball back and maintain the possession

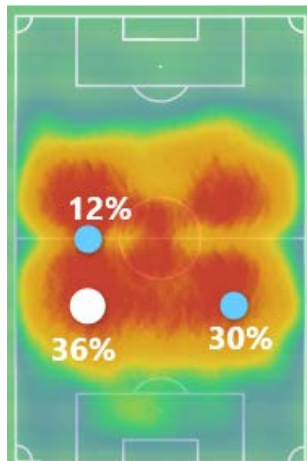
Player	Team	Successful def. actions p.90	Def. duels p.90	Def. duels won %	Aerial duels p.90	Aerial duels won %
K. Phillips	Leeds Utd	11,49	9,67	60,18	2,77	51,55
Fred	Man Utd	10,8	9,75	54,53	0,74	40
<b>P. Højbjerg</b>	<b>Tottenham</b>	<b>10,55</b>	<b>9,26</b>	<b>59,55</b>	<b>2,15</b>	<b>55,2</b>
<b>M. Trézéguet</b>	<b>Aston Villa</b>	<b>7,99</b>	<b>9,56</b>	<b>42,07</b>	<b>5,48</b>	<b>36,17</b>
<b>Y. Tielemans</b>	<b>Leicester City</b>	<b>7,68</b>	<b>5,93</b>	<b>54,21</b>	<b>1,53</b>	<b>54,35</b>
<b>M. Klich</b>	<b>Leeds Utd</b>	<b>6,77</b>	<b>9,09</b>	<b>48,12</b>	<b>1,18</b>	<b>39,47</b>
<b>J. Harrison</b>	<b>Leeds Utd</b>	<b>6,13</b>	<b>6,57</b>	<b>58,04</b>	<b>2,29</b>	<b>34,62</b>
<b>K. Havertz</b>	<b>Chelsea</b>	<b>6,02</b>	<b>4,92</b>	<b>56,32</b>	<b>4,44</b>	<b>45,86</b>
<b>Dani Olmo</b>	<b>RB Leipzig</b>	<b>5,92</b>	<b>5,21</b>	<b>58,12</b>	<b>2,16</b>	<b>41,24</b>
<b>P. Foden</b>	<b>Man City</b>	<b>3,94</b>	<b>3,38</b>	<b>60,53</b>	<b>2,02</b>	<b>26,37</b>
<b>J. Sancho</b>	<b>BVB</b>	<b>3,9</b>	<b>2,87</b>	<b>57,55</b>	<b>0,79</b>	<b>24,14</b>
<b>Heung-Min Son</b>	<b>Tottenham</b>	<b>3,73</b>	<b>4,19</b>	<b>52,48</b>	<b>2,32</b>	<b>29,46</b>
<b>M. Rashford</b>	<b>Man Utd</b>	<b>3,02</b>	<b>2,66</b>	<b>50,7</b>	<b>1,67</b>	<b>42,7</b>

Player	Team	Sliding tackles p.90	PAdj Sliding tackles	Shots blocked p.90	Interceptions p.90	PAdj Interceptions
K. Phillips	Leeds Utd	0,48	0,74	0,37	5,19	7,91
Fred	Man Utd	0,67	0,86	0,19	4,81	6,16
<b>P. Højbjerg</b>	<b>Tottenham</b>	<b>0,17</b>	<b>0,22</b>	<b>0,21</b>	<b>4,86</b>	<b>6,31</b>
<b>M. Trézéguet</b>	<b>Aston Villa</b>	<b>0,12</b>	<b>0,16</b>	<b>0,06</b>	<b>3,85</b>	<b>5,44</b>
<b>Y. Tielemans</b>	<b>Leicester City</b>	<b>0,6</b>	<b>0,81</b>	<b>0,2</b>	<b>3,87</b>	<b>5,24</b>
<b>M. Klich</b>	<b>Leeds Utd</b>	<b>0,25</b>	<b>0,38</b>	<b>0,12</b>	<b>2,14</b>	<b>3,28</b>
<b>J. Harrison</b>	<b>Leeds Utd</b>	<b>0,09</b>	<b>0,14</b>	<b>0,03</b>	<b>2,23</b>	<b>3,49</b>
<b>K. Havertz</b>	<b>Chelsea</b>	<b>0,42</b>	<b>0,62</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2,83</b>	<b>4,16</b>
<b>Dani Olmo</b>	<b>RB Leipzig</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2,89</b>	<b>4,4</b>
<b>P. Foden</b>	<b>Man City</b>	<b>0,13</b>	<b>0,2</b>	<b>0,04</b>	<b>1,76</b>	<b>2,67</b>
<b>J. Sancho</b>	<b>BVB</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0,03</b>	<b>2,25</b>	<b>3,23</b>
<b>Heung-Min Son</b>	<b>Tottenham</b>	<b>0,02</b>	<b>0,03</b>	<b>0,08</b>	<b>1,51</b>	<b>1,99</b>
<b>M. Rashford</b>	<b>Man Utd</b>	<b>0,11</b>	<b>0,15</b>	<b>0,09</b>	<b>1,56</b>	<b>2,08</b>

The three players from Leeds United in this specific table with different roles and positions are not a coincidence, thanks to the different and peculiar style of play of Marcelo Bielsa. He always asks his players to be "all-around players" when attacking and defending, furthermore during transitions to defend, as we have just analyzed.



## Pierre Emile Højbjerg at Tottenham



As a center midfielder Pierre Emile Højbjerg is usually the one who launches the pressure phases inside the final and middle thirds. This way, he allows the strikers to move higher up in the field even when the team is defending deeper inside the middle third.

In this example, Højbjerg pushed up toward the center cycle, and the striker Son could also push higher and counter the opposition's back line.

Højbjerg then won back the ball inside the center cycle and he passed back to make the possession safe before attacking.

Position and pressure actions don't concern the system of play.



This is the first example of high pressure that took the Spurs to score a goal.



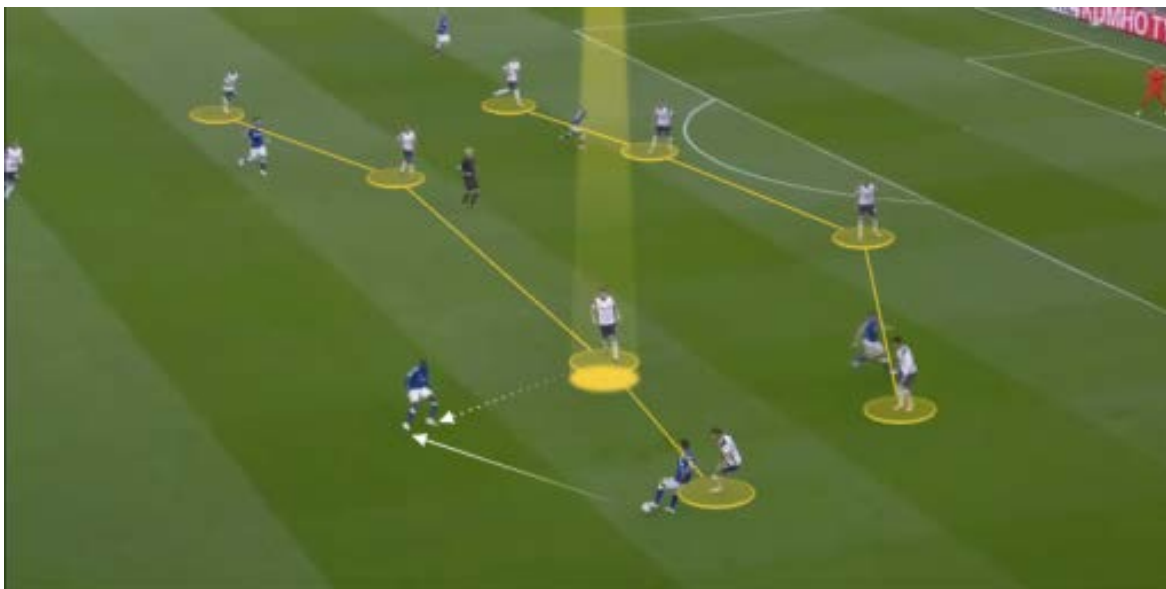
Hojbjerg pushed up and won the second time of the ball behind the strikers' line and the left-winger beside him.

Pressing and winning the ball back to start a transition to attack while the opposition is driving the ball higher up usually backbeats the opposition and creates pockets of space to finish the attacking phase quickly.



Hojbjerg won the ball while the opposition was moving higher up in the field; he could find the striker free from markers, and he could turn and look to the goal, dribbling the ball forward and shooting on goal.

Hojbjerg usually stands along the second defensive line of a 1-4-4-2, but he is the first player who puts pressure against the opposition's ball carriers in the center channel.



In this example, the opposition's fullback passed back to the center midfielder, as Tottenham's fullback and winger pressed him and the only forward passing option. Hojbjerg pushed up immediately and pressed the receiver before we received it.

From a classic position of a center midfielder alongside the second line, Hojbjerg often becomes an advanced midfielder during the pressure phases. He goes on pressing in 1 v 1 duels the ball carriers.

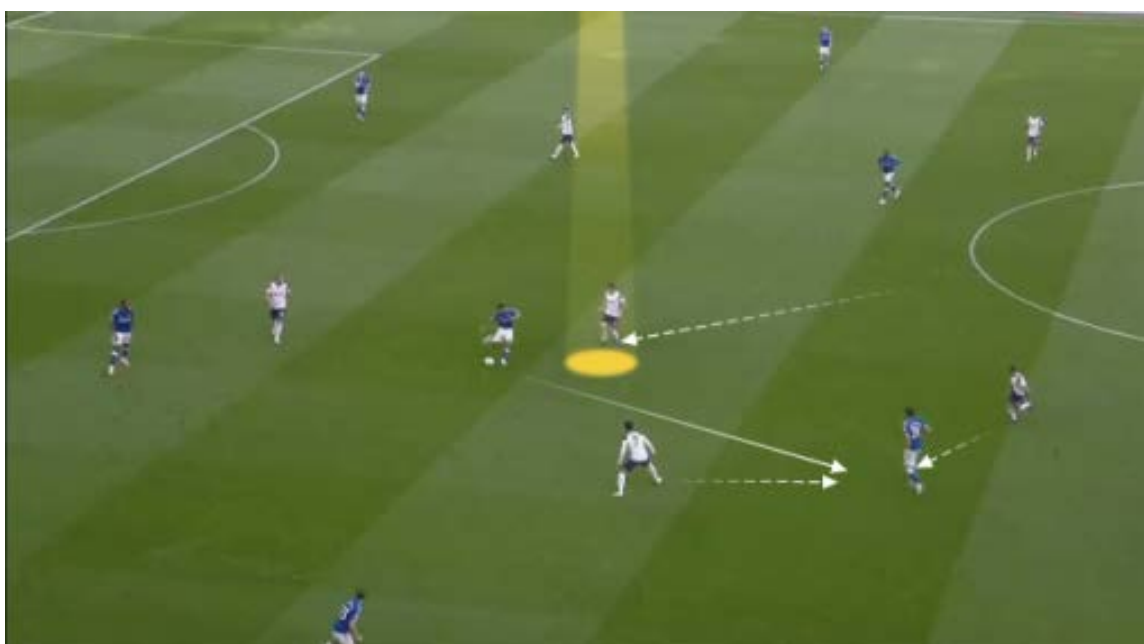


In this sequence, the defensive 1-4-4-2 formation became a 1-4-3-2-1, as Hojbjerg stood along with the same line of the second striker, and the center forward pushed higher to counter the opposition's center back close to the ball.

As a center midfielder, Hojbjerg usually pushes up close to the center striker and the wingers; he is also the first defender when the team loses possession in the final third.



In this example, Hojbjerg dropped back to double team the opponent who won the second time of the ball and the sector's teammate acting as a defensive midfielder. He won the ball back, and he dribbled the ball higher up in the field. When the opposition overcomes the first line of pressure, the center midfielders can choose to stand aligned, cover the passing paths, press the opposition's receiver, and create a duel around the ball's area.



Hojbjerg pushed up to press the opposition's holding midfielder, who could control and pass forward. Even though he didn't recover the ball, he triggered a 2 v 1 duel against the receiver, as the second center striker and the double winger team the opponent. Hojbjerg acted as a sort of defensive No.10 here.

This is another example of the center midfielder who acts as a defensive No.10.



From the 1-4-4-2 defensive shape, Tottenham usually created a sort of 1-4-1-1-4 attacking formation: one center midfielder pushed up as a No.10, and the wingers were free to tuck in or run along the flanks to stay aligned with the center strikers.

In this sequence, Hojbjerg won a second time of the ball against the opposition's midfielder, and he played the ball back to the left-winger who had previously tucked in, and Tottenham won the ball back.

In this second example, Hojbjerg dropped back to counter the opposition's holding midfielder along the same line of the midfielders starting from a previous No.10 position.



Hojbjerg allowed the winger to a standstill by dropping back, the second midfielder to cover the space in the center, and the strikers to act as an immediate forward passing option after the ball's recovery. Hojbjerg often wins the ball by dropping back when he acts as a No.10, and he then starts the transitions to attack phase from a center midfielder position. By the way, the wingers could stand in their positions and support the transitions to attack immediately.



Hojbjerg won the ball deeper inside the middle third, and he could immediately pass to the second striker along the opposition's defensive line. The No.10 defensive position also allowed the team to maintain higher positions in the field and have advanced passing options after the ball's recovery.



In this situation, Hojbjerg dropped back, and he countered the opposition's midfielder inside the center cycle.



He won the ball back, and he could pass forward immediately to the second striker, who dropped back to provide a safe passing option.

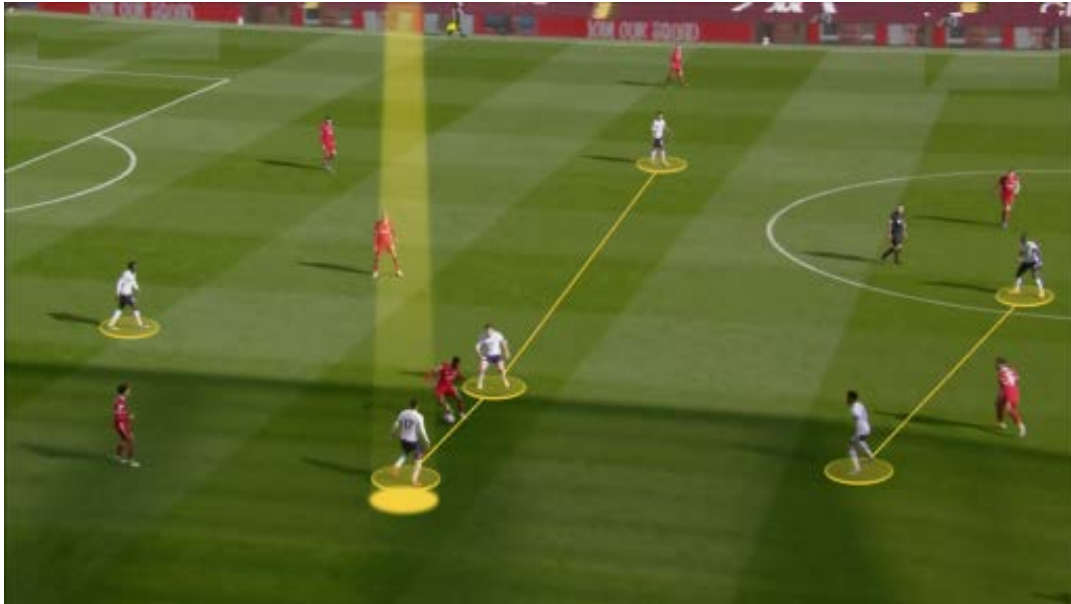
### **Mahmoud Trézéguet at Aston Villa**

Mahmoud Trézéguet has been one of the most crucial wingers during the last Premier League season, both from attacking and defensive. He always played as a left or a right-winger in the 1-4-2-3-1, providing an effective contribution to possession, attacking, and defensive phases.



Aston Villa usually defended deep behind the ball's line in a compact shape. They maintained the shape all over the field, especially inside the first third; in this example, Trézéguet put pressure against the opposition's fullback along the left side, and he sent him backward.

Usually, the wingers in a 1-4-2-3-1 tuck inside to double team the opposition's midfielders, providing support to the No.10 behind the central striker.



In this sequence, Trézéguet double-teamed the ball carrier together with the advanced center midfielder. They close him down to force the direction of play backward; the center midfielders closed the passing path to the opposition's offensive half. The center striker stands still between the lines, and he was ready to receive.



Trézéguet won the ball back, and he exchanges the position with the No.10. The striker received and passed out wide to the No.10, exploiting his position between the lines. Trézéguet from a defensive left winger position moved to a center striker pocket of space after the possession's recovery, exploiting the space between the opposition's center backs.



Aston Villa is an excellent pressing team despite being a middle table team, which is usually expected to defend behind the ball line. 2020/2021 Ppda metric confirms (12.28 passes per opposition's possession inside the last 60% of the pitch, seating 9th in the specific table, in league with an average of 14,02, and Liverpool seating first for pressure with 10.01 passes per opposition's possession. The wingers in the 1-4-2-3-1 are the first defenders along the flanks, as they must press the opposition's fullbacks and prevent the team's fullbacks from being involved in numerical inferiority duels.

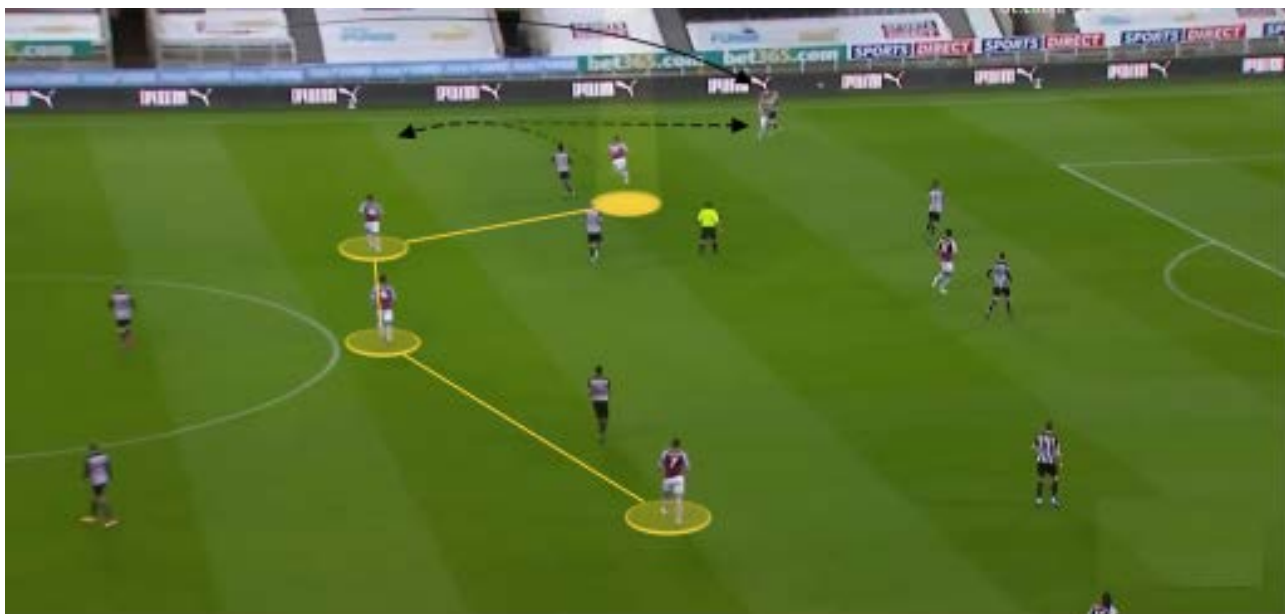


In this example, Trézéguet moved to press the opposition's fullback, but the ball carrier could pass the ball away before he could make any defensive action. The fullback also pushed up to counter the winger close to the touchline.



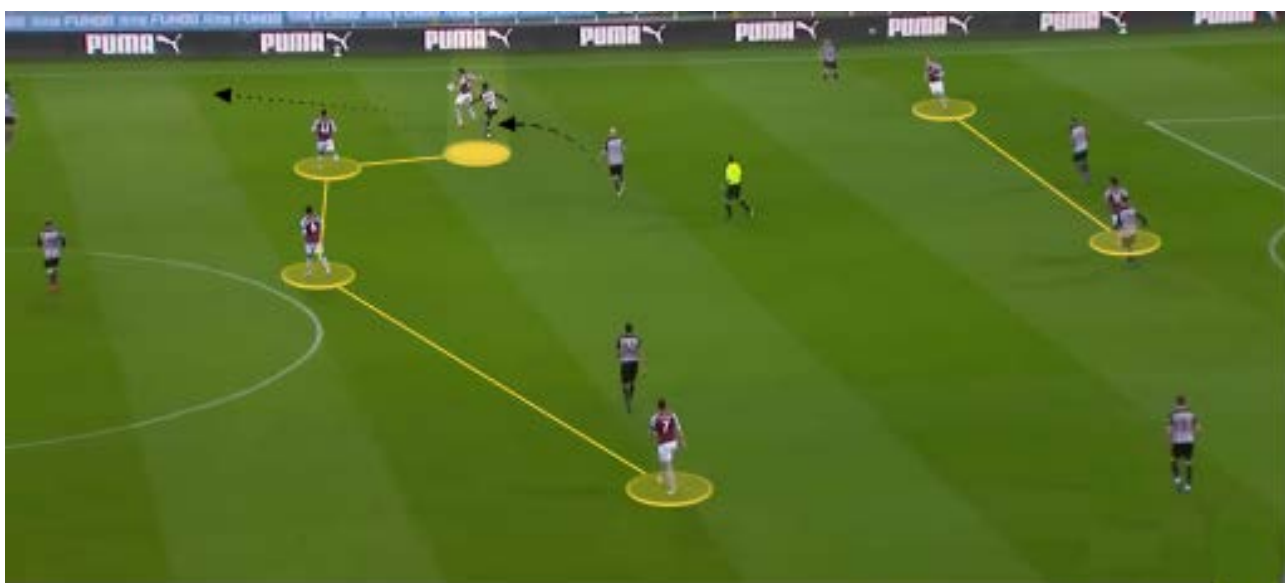
When the winger received, Trézéguet dropped back to help the fullback with his pressure action, and they created a 2 v 1 duel against the receiver. The No.10 shifted out wide, and the winger shifted across the field to condense the ball's area and mark 1 v 1 to potential receivers of a pass. The center midfielders closed the passing paths to the middle third. This way, the opposition's ball carrier lost possession after a wrong pass out of the field.

Another crucial factor of the winger in the 1-4-2-3-1 is to provide cover to the fullback if he stands higher than the same winger or any way to cover a space that the opposition could exploit after the loss of possession.



In this sequence, the No.10 preventively shifted out, pushed up, and attempt to control a long pass from the center back; Trézéguet shifted out wide toward the touchline, and he provided cover behind him.

In the momentary 4-2 attacking formation, Trézéguet acted as a classic left-winger, and he moved out wide to contest the ball.



He won it, but he was also forced to dribble it backward along the touchline.

The 1-4-4-2 defensive lines allow the team to efficiently use the touchline as an extra defender, limiting the space to play for the ball carrier.



The fullback pushed up, and he helped the pressure action of Trézéguet, who retreated his position; the opponent who attempted to counter the winger was then closed down, and Aston Villa maintained the ball thanks to the left-winger, and the creation of a 2 v 1 duel.

The classic back four defense of Aston Villa usually becomes a back six-line when the team is forced to save the penalty area; the wingers join the back four-line, and they support the fullbacks to allow the center backs to stand in front of the goal.



In this example, Trézéguet dropped deep inside the penalty area, and he double-teamed the opposition's winger at the right; the same did the opposite winger and fullback at the left. This way, the center backs and the holding midfielder, who also dropped deep in the center of the penalty area, could create a 3 v 2 (+gk) duel to provide numerical superiority and defensive safety in front of the goal.



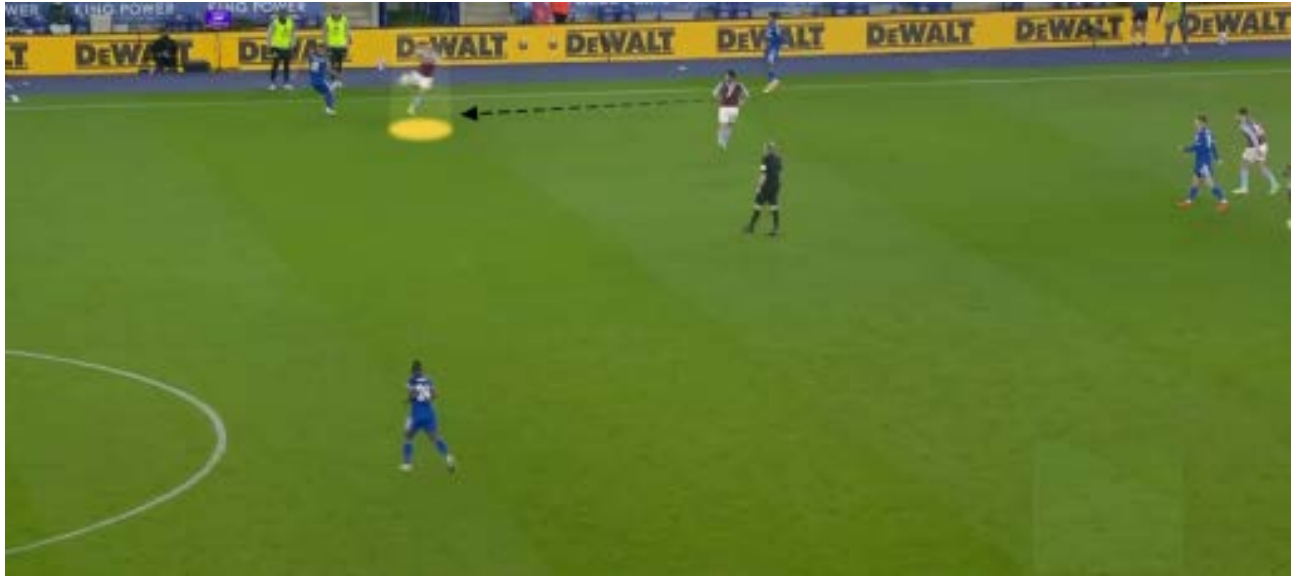
Trézéguet cleared the penalty area heading the ball away from the penalty on the far post of the goal concerning the cross's flank.

The line of six at the back allows the wingers to put aggressive defensive pressure with safety when the opposition wins the second time of the ball close to the penalty area.



After Trézéguet's header, the opposition's fullback, who previously supported the attacking move, won the second time of the ball just out of the penalty area. He dribbled the ball away due to Trézéguet's pressure action that forced the ball carrier to turn back to the goal to attack.

As he was the 6<sup>th</sup> defender at the right, he could push forward and out of the line, and he also allowed the fullback and the center back to stand deeper and create a 3 v 2 duel together with the holding midfielder.



The fullback had to pass back to the center midfielder, which shifted out wide to support the new possession phase, and Trézéguet could push even higher along the flank to force the receiver to play a long pass toward the opposition box. Although the opposition recovered the ball, they couldn't organize a safe possession phase due to the winger's pressure and the provided cover behind the pressure line.

Trézéguet was one of the most efficient wingers in the Premier League during last season, and his team could also count on him for the transitions to defend and the defensive phases.



In this example, Aston Villa lost possession inside the penalty area; the opposition attempted a counter-attack with a long ball. Trézéguet quickly dropped back alongside the defensive right channel to track the ball's path.

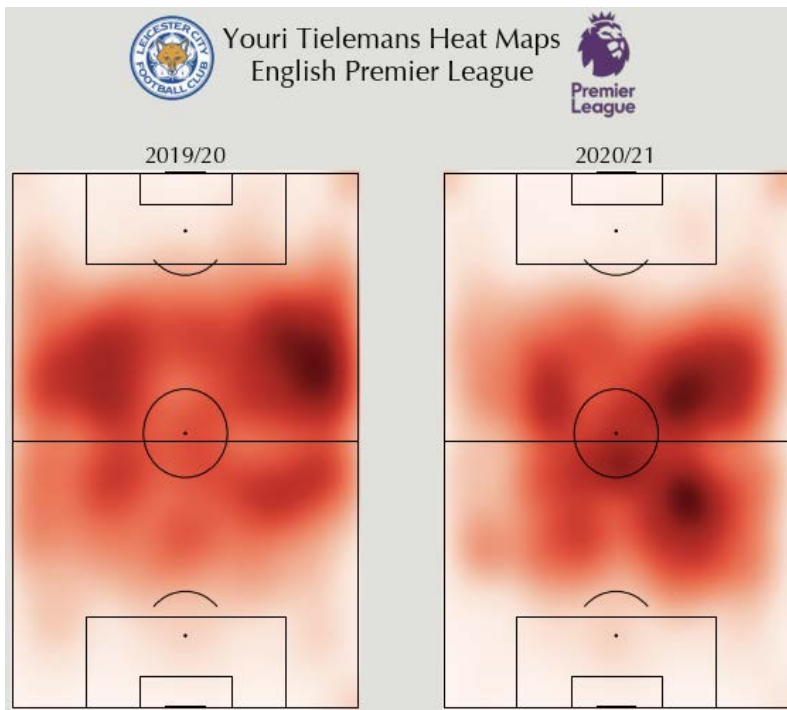


His speed allowed him to join the center cycle, counter the ball carrier, and win the ball back.



Trézéguet was also the point of reference for transitions to attack; he received a teammate along the center channel in this example. He dribbled the ball higher up in the field, and he launched the counter-attack for Aston Villa.

## Youri Tielemans at Leicester City



Although the heat-maps of Youri Tielemans have changed during the last two seasons, as he seems to be a more defensive center midfielder than a box-to-box attacking-minded midfielder, he is still very present in the pressing phases and duels inside the offensive half.



The higher part right flank and half-space are the main defensive duels we can see from the second heat-map of defensive duels. Yuri Tielemans usually played as the right midfielder of a 3 men midfield sector, 1-5-3-2, or as the right center midfielder in a defensive 1-4-4-2 (1-4-2-4 during the pressure phases.)



In this first example, Tielemans shifted out wide to support the defensive action of the right wingback, as the opponent could anticipate the right Leicester's forward. The wingback standstill and Leicester maintained a 3 v 2 duel with numerical superiority deeper along the flank against the potential passing option for the ball carrier.



The second striker dropped back and shifted out wide close to the touchline, and he created a 2 v 1 duel near the ball thanks to Tielemans; the midfielder prevented the wingback from moving out of his position and from equalizing the duel down the flank.



Despite the Belgian midfielder usually becoming an attacking midfielder in the 1-5-3-2, he is quick to retreat his position and help the back 3, who usually stand behind all the other teammates.



In this example, the opposition counter-attacked with two players close to the ball and a third one at the right of the ball carrier. The back three created a 3 v 1 duel against the center striker, but the two wider ones turned toward the opponents; the center defender tracked the striker. Tielemans dropped back quickly, and he acted as holding midfielder, stopping the opposition's action through a sliding tackle that made the opponent lose possession.

As we have briefly analyzed, Leicester's second play system is the 1-4-4-2 that becomes a 1-4-2-4 when the team attempts high-pressure phases. When the team attack, the center midfielder always support the teammates upfront, but they also become the first defenders after losses of possession.



In this example, Leicester lost the possession along the right flank, and Tielemans sifted out wide to support the fullback who could have been involved in a 2 v 1 duel, as the winger was too high in the field to be defensively effective.

Otherwise, the defensive 1-4-4-2 works in a traditional way when the team is off the ball, and 2 lines of four are behind the ball's line.



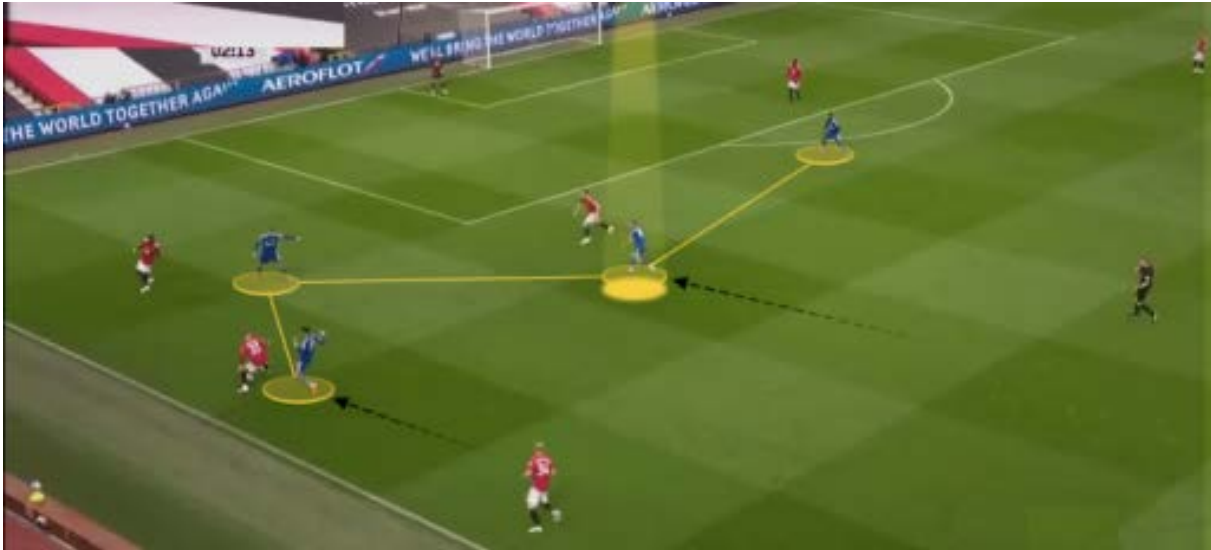
In this example, the left-winger and midfielder and a center striker created a 3 v 2 duel close to the touchline, and they forced a back center pass, as all the passing lanes along the flank were closed. Tielemans also shifted slightly out wide to the left, and he preventively moved higher up in the field to press the only possible receiver in the middle.

Tielemans is often the first pressing player of the two center midfielders, and he also joins the attackers' line upfront as he tracks the ball carriers.



The midfielder moved high up, and the right midfielder could press the receiver and make him turning backward without any chance of progression

The opposition then attempted to play out wide toward the right flank, and Leicester went on with the ultra-offensive pressing inside the final third.



Leicester's left winger and one forward countered the opposition's right fullback and winger. Tielemans and the second striker preventively pressed the center back to close down all the passing options for the ball's carrier, who was turned back due to the winger's pressure.

Tielemans is also the first player to leave the position and to press the opponents in the center of the field when the team creates compact defensive formations, as in this example. When the team is potentially outnumbered in the center, the center striker drops back and helps the midfielders close down the passing lanes first and press the ball carrier as soon as possible.



In this example, Leicester created a 5 men compact shape in the center to allow the center midfielder to man-mark the opposition's midfielder inside the cycle and the winger to close down the center passing path. The compact shape allowed the team to exploit the numerical superiority around the ball

As the opposition's center midfielder received, Tielemans moved out of position, and he attacked the ball carrier, driving him backward and out wide.

When the team presses high up in the field, the center midfielder of the 1-4-2-4 shifts out wide along the touchline to cover the winger.



In this example, the right-winger moved high along the touchline. When the team attacks, the center midfielder always supports the teammates up front. Still, they also become the first defenders after a loss of possession. Tielemans shifted out wide toward the flank to counter the opposition's left fullback, and Tielemans shifted out wide to preventively press the opposition's winger.

## Kai Havertz at Chelsea

Havertz for Chelsea is a fluctuating player between a second striker and an adding midfielder, who develops the usual 1-5-3-2 defensive formation in a 1-5-4-1 shape, and allows the midfielders to stand in front of the backline to protect him, rather than moving out of their positions. This is true not only for the first third defense but also for all the other field zones.



The following sequence of pictures shows the different positions of Havertz, who tracks the direction of play alongside the right half-space and flank. (All pictures are taken from the 2020/2021 Champions League final against Manchester City that Chelsea won 1-0 thanks to Havertz's goal.



Chelsea defended with a back five-line to counter the seek of the width of the opponents; the midfield's sector was made of two basics, but Havertz played a fluctuating 3rd man for the line of strikers and of midfielders. In this situation, he tracked the opposition's left fullback, who attempted to help the left-winger through an underlapping run. He allowed the wingback to mark the ball carrier, and he prevented the wide right defender from leaving the line of defenders.

The opposition could only maintain the possession, playing backward close to the half-line. Chelsea shaped the 1-5-2-3 defensive shape, and Havertz moved higher up in the field to help the pressure phase of the strikers.



Chelsea only left free spaces along the flanks, overloading the center and created horizontal numerical advantage situations along the opposition's lines. The three up front closed down the passing lanes to the center and created a 3 v 1 positional duel against the holding midfielder. The center midfielders worked with a classic mark/cover defensive chain, and the backline protected the first third.



The left defender received, and Havertz pushed up to press him after the ball's reception, but he immediately shifted out toward the touchline as the opponents passed out, as the center passing paths were all closed down.

The opposition's left fullback combined with an advanced midfielder who dropped back inside the half-space.



Havertz exchanged the line of play with the concerning center midfielder, which pushed up along the half-space to counter the receiver, and Havertz tracks the fullback, who moved forward. In this sequence, the German player joined the line of the deep-lying midfielder along the flank, and the central midfielder joined the line of strikers inside the defensive part of the right defensive half-space.

This is a perfect example of positions' fluctuation between two players. The defensive shape of Chelsea requires at least one defender in front of the back five, and the wingback must provide cover and reduce the space from the wide midfielder when this last one pushes up to press the ball carriers outside.



When the middle third is made of 1 back and 2 more advanced players, as in this picture, the second wide midfielder must shift across as Havertz has done in this example. The other midfielder pressed the

ball carrier, the holding midfielder provided cover in front of the back 4+1, and the right wingback pushed higher up to cove the midfielders. As one striker dropped back to close the ball carrier, Havertz was ready to attack any potential back passes as the ball carrier was turned toward his goal.



As the opposition could switch the side, and the deep-lying midfielder had to cover the opponents between the line, Havertz shifted across the center channel and tracked the ball carrier to prevent him from playing through passes and forcing out wide the opposite side. Havertz completed the line of three in front of the defensive one, and Chelsea could overload the weaker side quickly, with Havertz, the center midfielder, the wingback, and the outer defender.



Havertz's fluctuating role is crucial to provide Chelsea a safe cover of the first third.





In this example, he ran back to counter the potential receive of a pass inside the half-space:

1. He covered the space that the center midfielder has left free before attempting to counter the opposite advanced midfielder.
2. He prevented the right wingback from moving out of position, and he could check the left advanced opponent.
3. He could counter the receiver despite being back to him, and he could force the direction of play although the opponent could receive facing the goal.



Havertz tracked the opposition's ball carrier, and even if the opponent joined the defensive line, he couldn't find any solution to play a through pass inside the penalty area. Chelsea maintained the backline of five, and they could counter the finishing attempts of the ball carrier.



As Havertz dropped deep inside the first third, tracking the opponent with the ball, the right defender and wingback could check the opposition's advanced midfielder, who moved in behind off the ball. As none of the defenders had to move out of position, the other two center midfielders could save the first third in the center, and the opposite left wingback didn't have to shift too much across the field and could preventively mark the right-winger along the weak side.

When Chelsea faces defensively strong opponents, like Atletico Madrid, and they have to overload the center spaces of the field, Havertz often plays as a second striker and advanced midfielder during the defensive phases. He supported the defensive triangle in the middle third in the following sequence after acting as a second striker to press the opposition's center backs.



In this first example, the German player stands along the same line as the center striker to stay vertically aligned with the center bac in front of him; the opposition's goalkeeper could only play along

an aerial hand pass to build back. The defensive midfield triangle created a 3 v 2 duel in the center and prevented the opponents from receiving.



Havertz dropped back and shifted out wide to counter him while receiving the opposition's left fullback. The upper apex of the middle third defensive triangle went on, marking the opposition's holding midfielder, creating an advanced line of three. The center midfielders protected the back five who could man-mark all the opposition's advanced players. Havertz also prevented the ball carrier from playing to the center, switched the side, and forced the direction of play out toward the touchline, creating a 3 v 2 duel with the center midfielder and wingback.

The 1-4-3-3 is not a usual tactical shape for Chelsea under Thomas Tuchel, but Frank Lampard was the usual play. Havertz usually played as a right-winger of the three upfront or the right midfielder of the three. Jorginho as a holding midfielder or a left one and Kantè, who alternated the roles with the Italian player.



In this sequence, Havertz shaped a line of three in the middle third and the other three up front who tried to close the passing lanes down to the center backs.

The opposition distributed the ball from right to left, looking for spaces out wide along the left flank.



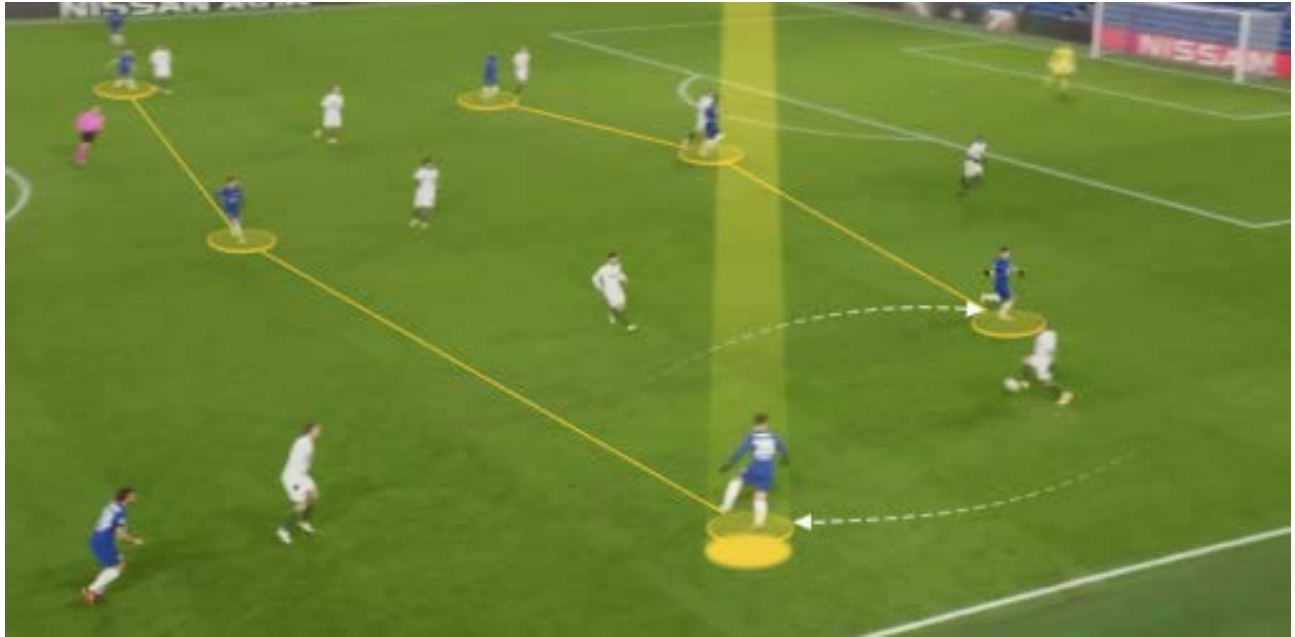
Two opponents attempted to combine alongside the right flank. Still, the suitable defensive chain of Chelsea created a 3 v 2 numerical superiority against the opponents and forced them to play backward again.

Havertz and the right-winger dropped back diagonally to force the opposition's midfielder out wide and created a 2 v 1 duel. The right fullback pushed up to preventively press the receiver and allow only a back pass path.

Havertz was also the right-winger of the three up front, but he often exchanged his positions with the right midfielder in this sequence when Chelsea had to organize the transitions to defend.



In this sequence, the right midfielder moved forward off the ball to receive a pass from the right fullback; potentially, he could have shaped a 2 v 1 duel against the fullback at the right together with Havertz.



The opposition's left fullback intercepted the ball and attempted to dribble it higher up; as Havertz looked at the ball intercepted, he dropped back in front of the opponent and covered the teammate's position, who was still running forward when the fullback won the ball. This way, the German player could cover the position of the teammate, and Chelsea quickly restored the 1-4-3-3 shape with seven players between the ball and the goal to defend.



Havertz forced the opposition midfielder to dribble the back. He started to defend 1 v 1 against him, preventing the other two midfielders from moving out of positions and forcing the ball carrier backward.



Havertz also tracked the receiver of the back pass, and he countered the center back, kicking the ball out of position.

## Dani Olmo at RB Leipzig

RB Leipzig is one of the most pressing teams of the Bundesliga and all around Europe, as the Ppda metrics demonstrate, after a decrease during last season: 9,56 last 2020/2021 season, 11,91 in 2019/2020, 10,21 in 2018/2019, and 9,45 in 2017/2018. The first line of pressure is crucial for the team, which is also so "liquid" and uses many types of the play system. Dani Olmo has been crucial for Nagelsmann during the last few seasons.

He has always been along the first line of pressure.



He often has been the player who dropped back when the opposition broke through the first line of pressure.



The former coach Julian Nagelsmann, who is now in charge at Bayern Munich, has been used to change the shapes of the team concerning the opponent, and he has made Leipzig a title contender over the past few seasons, despite not being the winner. Olmo has always been part of the first or second line of the team during the possession phases, and he has also been very involved in the pressure phases of the team.

The first situation we analyze is the 4-4(3+1)-2 compact formation to rebound a long pass from the opposition's goalkeeper.



RB Leipzig won the first duel in the right side of the middle third, and the player on the ball headed the ball back toward the opposition's defensive line.



The center striker put pressure against the center backs and forced them to play the forward, heading quickly without a specific direction. Olmo moved out of the third middle line, and he attacked the ball to win the second time. He got the opposition beat on timing, and he passed the ball toward the center striker, who acted as a target player to maintain the possession.



This second play situation is similar to the previous one. The opposition's goalkeeper played a goal kick; RB Leipzig created a 5-3-2 defensive formation to counter the opposition, which placed the players in number inside the offensive half.

The result was a 8 v 6 duel inside the middle third (defensive half). This example is crucial to understand the double task of Dani Olmo during both phases of play.



He was part of the second line in the middle third, and he had to mark the wider player of the second line of the opposition, which created a 4-2-2-2 formation.



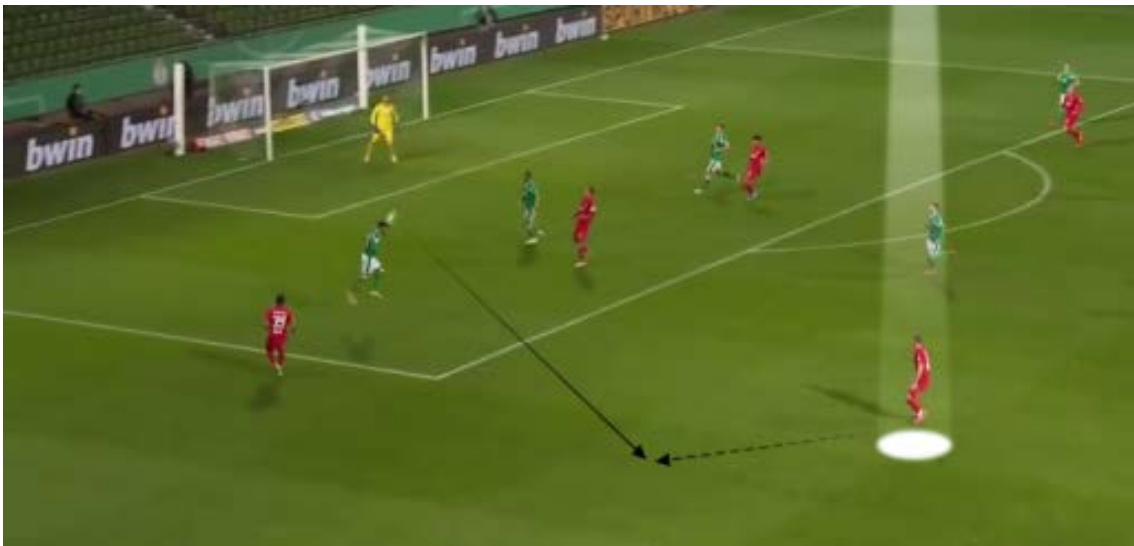
He shifted out wide, and he anticipated the opponent, heading the ball away while the teammates moved toward the ball line. As many players were placed inside the defensive half, his defensive action was not immediately useful to win the ball back. Still, the team could move higher up in the field and press the opposition inside the attacking half.

As we will see in the following pages, Leipzig took advantage of the opposition's back four-line because the advanced players retreated with a late time, and Leipzig could win the second time of the ball close to the penalty area.

All the RB Leipzig players along the first line pushed quickly higher up to the first third, they stood in front of the opposition's back 4, and they were ready to create a transition to attack in numbers inside the final third.



The advanced players of the opposition could not support the back four who were facing a 4 v 4(+1) duel at the back; Olmo pushed higher up and moved toward the ball as an additional forward behind the first line of four.



Although the opposition's right fullback could header the ball away from the penalty area, Olmo won the second time of the ball thanks to his position and the late retreating runs of the oppositions (the only center midfielder was too late to prevent Olmo from receiving or pressuring him just after the reception).

As the attacking midfielder met the ball, he had 4 passing options further up in the final third.



He passed out wide to the winger as the opposition defended through a 2 v 2 duel. All the other advanced attacking teammates took place inside the penalty area, and they invite the defender to drop deep along the line of the penalty area. This way, they created gaps between the lines where a left-winger could play toward finding a teammate in between the lines.

In this new sequence, Olmo stood in a No.10 position of the 1-4-2-3-1 (or 1-3-3-3-1, as the left fullback was momentarily aligned with the center midfielder). The opposition was building up from the back, and Dani Olmo was very close to the opposition's midfielder.



It is clear how the team was defensively placed alongside the left flank before, shifting across the field toward the right side. The left fullback stood inside to check a couple of opponents in front of him, despite completing the backline.

The winger pushed up at the beginning when the opposition started to switch the side from right to left at the back but immediately dropped back, looking at the pressure phase of Dani Olmo.



The defensive No.10 pressed the opposition's advanced midfielder, tracking him in a 1 v 1 duel and forcing out wide toward the touchline. The winger closes down a potential diagonal pass to the left, and the center midfielder stood in their position to close the spaces toward the defensive line.

The defensive contribution of Dani Olmo has become crucial also an upper apex of a rhombus four men midfield sector to counter the opponent between the lines.



In this example, he dropped back to counter the receiver of a through pass from the flank. He prevented the holding midfielder from moving out of position; he also allowed the wide midfielders to cover the wide but forward passing path and patrol the center in front of the defensive line.

As we have realized initially, Olmo has been one of the best pressers of his team and in Bundesliga also.



In this sequence, he played as a right winger of the front 3 of the 1-4-2-3-1 to counter the short throwing-in solutions for the opposition.





Leipzig forced the direction of play backward, and Olmo cooperated out wide to press the receiver a close him down in a 2 v 1 duel. Olmo forced the opponent toward the teammate, who shifted out wide to support the defensive action.



The center striker won the ball, and Olmo could dribble it away from the condensed area, anticipating a second opponent, who attempted to create numerical equality of players.

## Phil Foden at Manchester City

Foden can be defined as an all-around player for the 2020/2021 Man city side, which won the Premier League and the League Cup in England and achieved the first final ever of the Champions League. By my side, Foden is a new "Space Interpreter," after Thomas Müller for Bayern Munich in Germany. He plays all the roles and positions in the advanced formations of Pep Guardiola: along the wide channels, inside the half-spaces, and in and out of the penalty area. The attacking positions also affected his defensive contribution, referred to the pressure phase and the phases behind the ball's line.



In this first example, Foden was standing aligned with another teammate as strikers of a 1-4-4-2 defensive formation, preventively marking the opposite fullback to avoid the distribution phase to the opposite side.



When the opposition played through the center, finding a pocket of space inside the center cycle, Foden dropped back and prevented the left winger from breaking the compact line in the middle and one center back from pushing up and leaving the backline. Furthermore, the deep-lying midfielder could

double team the opposition's ball carrier, and they both started to track him to force him out wide. City's backline faced a 4 v 3 duel: the center backs against one striker and the fullbacks against the wingers in 1 v 1 duels.



Foden and the holding midfielder won the ball back inside the lower part of the right half-space. By dropping back and tracking the opposition's ball carrier, Man City could maintain three players above the ball line and another one along the left half-space to create a safe transition to attack.

In the following sequence, Man City had the same defensive shape as the previous one, but Foden acted as a left winger of the 1-4-4-2 formation.



The fullback pushed up and received, and Foden put pressure just after the ball's reception. The middle third line of the Citizens was not perfectly under the ball line, and the fullback could have exploited the space in between the lines if Foden didn't close him down to the touchline, covering the passing or dribbling path with his body's position.



In this situation, City usually create numerical superiorities around the ball, breaking the defensive shapes.



Foden went on pressing, the left fullback left the opponent he was marking and double-teamed the ball carrier, and the left midfielder shifted out wide to cover the passing path to the center; City created a 3 v 2 duel along the left touchline. This duel was possible only thanks to the first pressure phase by Foden, who tracked the ball carrier and forced him out wide.

The following situation of play shows the defensive efficiency of Foden when the team loses the possession high up in the field after shaping the usual attacking 2-3-5 or 3-2-5 formation.



The opposition's right winger dropped back to receive as a target man; all the midfielders were too late to prevent him from turning but the left center back. If the striker turned to the goal, the opposition

would have created a 3 v 2 duel, as also the holding midfielder was too far from the ball. The center back opened a gap inside the left part of the defensive half by moving out of position, and the opposition's fullback started to push up along the flank. Foden dropped quickly back from a left winger position to become a fullback and cover the gap.



Although the opposition's right fullback could receive a quick passing combination, the left center back dropped immediately. Foden ran at speed to counter the receiver inside the first third and to prevent the center back from shifting out wide, leaving the sector's teammate alone in a 1 v 1 duel in the middle of the area. Foden's defensive effectiveness is to be good at pressing and standing behind the ball's line in the same opposition's attacking sequence if he can't recover the possession.



In this example, he acted as a pressing striker with another teammate, who pressed the opposition's goalkeeper and forced the direction of play toward the right; Foden was ready to press the receiver and use the touchline as an extra defender.



Foden tracked the opponent with the ball, and he stopped the opposition's attacking action.

In this further example, Foden was the left winger of a 1-4-1-4-1 defensive shape, and he forced the ball carrier to pass back to the goalkeeper covering the only possible passing path out wide to the left flank. The other two midfielders and winger marked the opponents at the right, and the holding midfielder marked the potential receiver in between the line.



Here again, Foden acted a left winger of 4 behind the center striker to counter the opposition's seek of width along the defensive left flank.



The line of 4 behind the center striker was defending with 2 v 2 duels at the left and right.

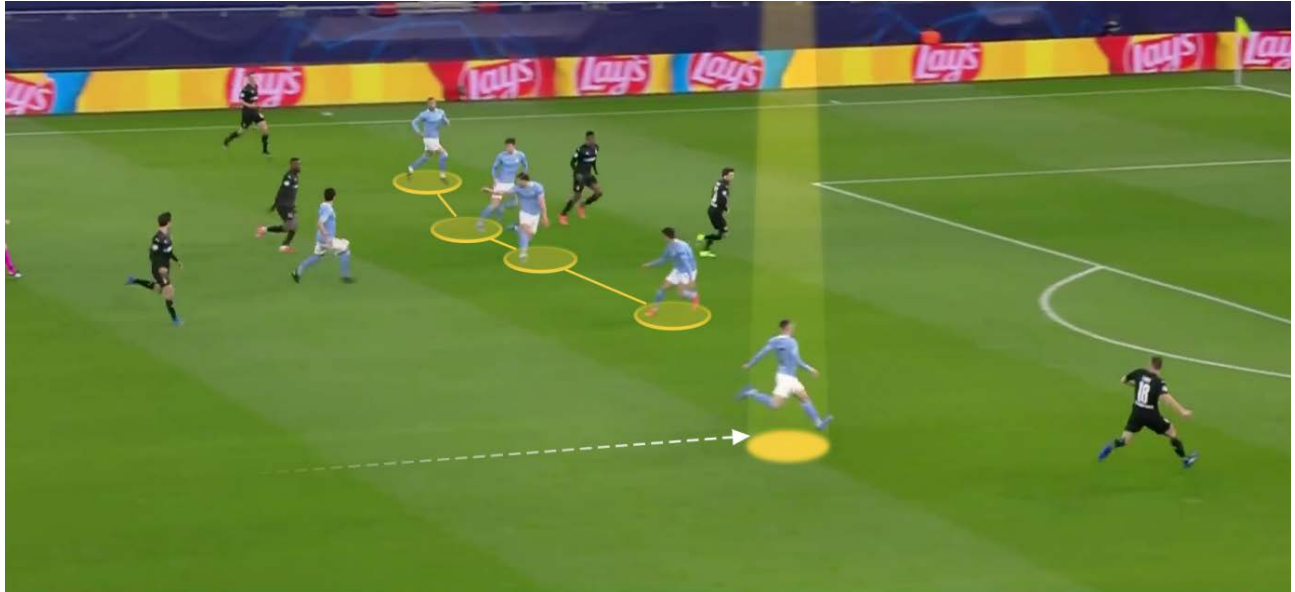
The opposition right midfielder passed out wide, and the line of four shifted toward the ball's position. Foden was ready to press the receiver. Otherwise, the duels' creation opened a gap in the middle, and the opposition could exploit the gap to overcome the pressure line.



Foden attempted to press the opponent behind the pressure line tucking in, but he was too late; he then shifted out wide to counter the opposition's right fullback, preventing City's left fullback from moving out and leaving the winger alone. Here the dropping back movement allowed the defensive line to save

the first third and cover the depth, and fixed the issue of the second line where not all the players were under the ball's line.

Foden became the fifth of a middle third sector; in this following picture, he became a wingback alongside the left flank. He cleared the penalty area after dropping deep to cover the opposition's winger along the weak side.



The opposition overloaded the left attacking flank and half-space; the backline and the holding midfielder had to shift out wide and create a strong side around the ball to equalize the duel. City also create a big space along the left side that Foden could cover by dropping back quickly, preventing the ball's carrier from switching the side.

Foden also allowed the defensive line to drop back and put a bit of pressure against the opponents delaying their attacking action.



Eventually, City created numerical superiority inside the penalty area, and Foden cleared it, kicking the ball away, exploiting the previous back run.

In the following sequence, Foden did the same kind of run to complete the line of 4 midfielders in front of the defenders tracking the run off the ball of the opposition's left winger along the weak side.



The ball carrier overcame the left fullback, and he attempted to dribble past the left center back; the right center back covered the depth, and the right fullback was marking the opponent 1 v 1. Three midfielders looked after the strong side, but the opposition's winger was moving through the weak side, and Foden dropped back to track his run and acted as a right winger, completing the line of four, providing cover through the space at the right.

In this following sequence, Foden completed the line of four in the middle first to cover the space, and then he double-teamed the opposition's winger to support the right fullback.



The ball carrier could pass through the middle third line between the lines, and Foden dropped back to counter the receiver, preventing the holding midfielder from shifting wide. He didn't recover the possession, but he could force him out wide to the right. The backline could cover the depth and space in front of the goal.



Foden also dropped deeper to support the fullback and create a 2 v 1 duel to prevent the ball carrier from tucking in. This way, City could create a safe 4+3 defensive line along the edge of the penalty area, delay the opposition's attacking action, and leaving the attackers away from the goal.

When City played in 1-5-3-2 basic formation shape, Foden also played as the left or right midfielder beside the holding midfielder.



In this sequence, Foden dropped back and protected the center of the first third, as City overloaded the defensive left side of the penalty area and the opposite center back and wingback patrolled the far post of the goal.

## Summary

The defensive tasks of an advanced midfielder have changed just like his offensive attitude, or it would be better to say that the evolution of the role and position created the defensive tasks which the old-styled No.10 did not have before.

Mobility, exchanges of positions, different styles of play, and passing patterns require the attacking midfielder to be the first defender of the team high up in the field and inside the first third. These players must press the opponents, close the passing lanes when the opposition builds up from the back, recover the spaces the mobile attacks could create, and track the opponents even inside the first third.

The players I analyzed should provide a complete or understandable overview of what an attacking midfielder or a player who finds himself in the same position should do when the team loses possession or must defend in shape.

The book's topics to achieve the goal above are:

- The types of the attacking midfielders
- Attacking midfielders pressing in the offensive half and the final third: Marcelo Bielsa's Leeds United study case
- Premier League and Bundesliga attacking midfielders with the best defensive stats
- Mahmoud Trézéguet at Aston Villa
- Youri Tielemans at Leicester Cit
- Kai Havertz at Chelsea
- Dani Olmo at RB Leipzig
- Phil Foden at Manchester City

I hope that the book is interesting enough to clarify what an offensive midfielder should do nowadays when the team is off the ball.