



# *THE ROLE OF THE* **FULLBACK**

## **ATTACKING**



by LUCA BERTOLINI

# **The Role of the Fullbacks (Attacking)**

*By*

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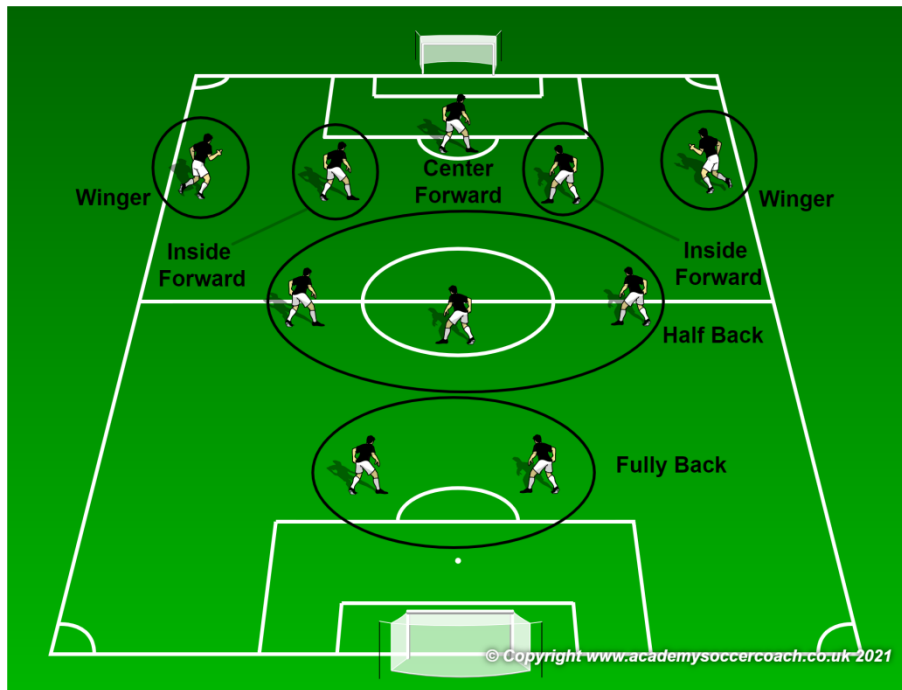


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## Introduction: the origin of the role and the developments.

The term came from the 1-2-3-5 system of play when they were the lower players in front of the goalkeeper, and the three in the middle were called half-back (the outer players of the front five were called wingers, and three in the middle were the inside forwards and the center forward. So this was the Pyramid System.



These players also maintained their names when the teams' formations evolved in a "WM," the Sistema...



...Or when the players shaped the "WW" Metodo.



When the team started to stand in the field with four players at the back, the fullbacks went out wide alongside the flanks, maintaining their names and defensive roles.





They maintained the same name even when the team started to deploy five players at the back with the "Libero" behind the line of four defenders, shaping the first type of the 1-5-3-2...



...But they became "Wingbacks" when the backline was shaped again with three center backs, and they had to assist both the back and the middle lines of players.



Anyway, since when the fullbacks shifted out wide, and they maintained their traditional defensive roles, their attacking tasks were only to provide passes to the winger and support them at the back, to be sure to provide also defensive cover. When the teams started to shape midfield trios or diamonds, the width high up in the field naturally appeared. The fullbacks started to occupy this space to support the possession phase; in this tactical environment, the attacking fullbacks appeared.







From then on, fullbacks became technically gifted and tactically competent, as they had to understand the correct times and space to take part in the offensive phases.

The list of great attacking fullbacks of soccer's modern era is indeed "full"; in the next chapter, we're going to look at them, at their teams, and at the tactical factors which made them crucial and effective.

## Who are the most crucial attacking fullbacks of soccer history?

**Giacinto Facchetti**, the left fullbacks of Helenio Herrera's Internazionale Milan and the runner-up Italian National Team at the 1970 World Cup. He was able to switch the defensive actions into an attacking shape, and he was the first target player for his teams to achieve the goal to make the transitions to attack phases effective with a fullback role.

Facchetti was part of the most famous football team teams and an offensively innovative tactical shape. The starting eleven had become a sort of poetry in Italy when the formations were pronounced 3 by 3 for three times and the last 2: **"Sarti, Burgnich, Facchetti / Bedin, Guarneri, Picchi / Jair, Mazzola, Domenghini / Suárez, Corso."**

Corso was free to act as a spare defender behind the markers and contribute to the defensive phase first and then to the phase possession in that team. Herrera applied the 1-5-3-2 with some modifications, as the 1-4 backline with Armando Picchi as a libero. Jair on the right acted more like a winger higher up in the field, so Facchetti was the first attacking fullback.



"1) Sarti, 2) Burgnich, 3) Facchetti, 4) Bedin, 5) Guarneri, 6) Picchi, 7) Jair, 8) Mazzola, 9) Domenghini, 10) Suárez, 11) Corso.

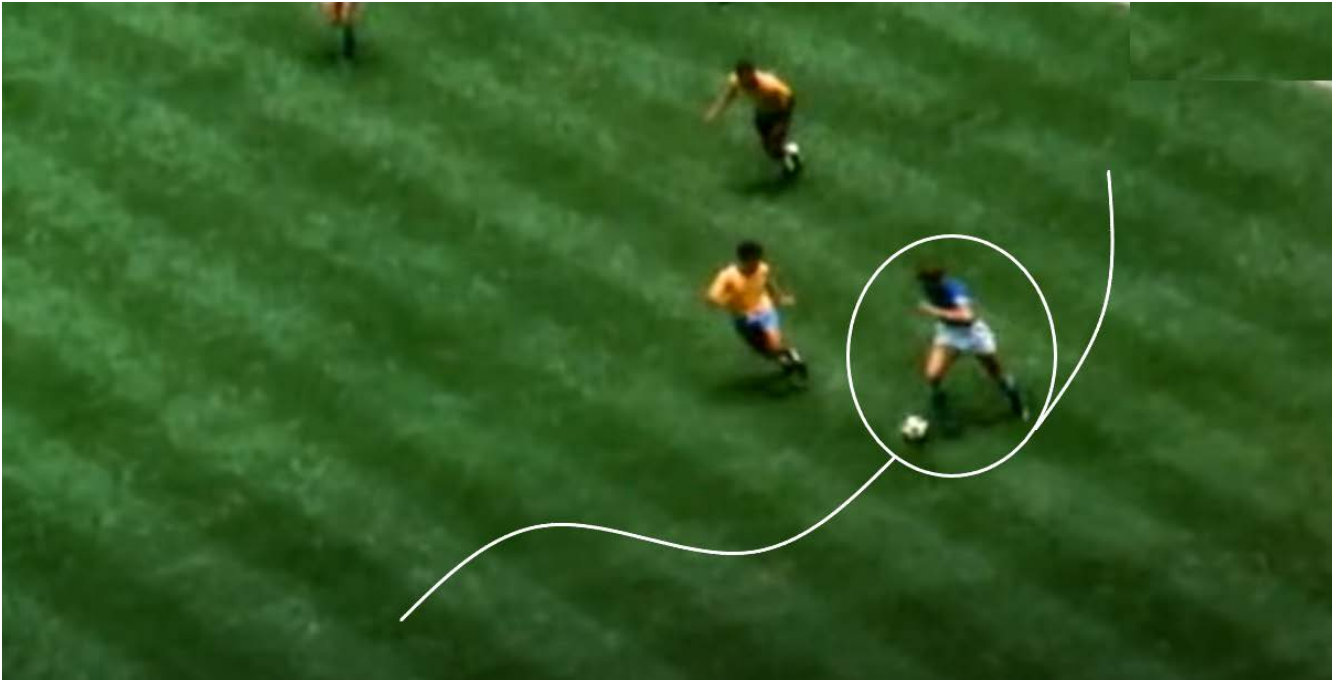
When the team has possession, Burgnich, Bedin, Guarnieri, and Picchi were the fixed defenders, with Picchi as the libero behind a line of three center backs and markers of the opponents.



Luis Suarez often dropped back to act as low No.10, with Mazzola as the real No.10 despite playing with the No.8 on his shoulders. This automatism created space long the flanks; Jair, along the right flank, was a winger more than a fullback. Facchetti played an "all along with flank fullback," providing width and a solution for the finishing phase.



The Italian National Team played similarly to give Facchetti the chance to exploit his attacking characteristics. This footage is taken from the 1970 World Cup final against Brazil, and they show the two main skills of Giacinto Facchetti as a fullback. First, he was very good at countering the opponents as a defensive fullback, and he was also able to exploit his essential speed to dribble the ball higher up in the field to switch the phase from defensive to offensive.



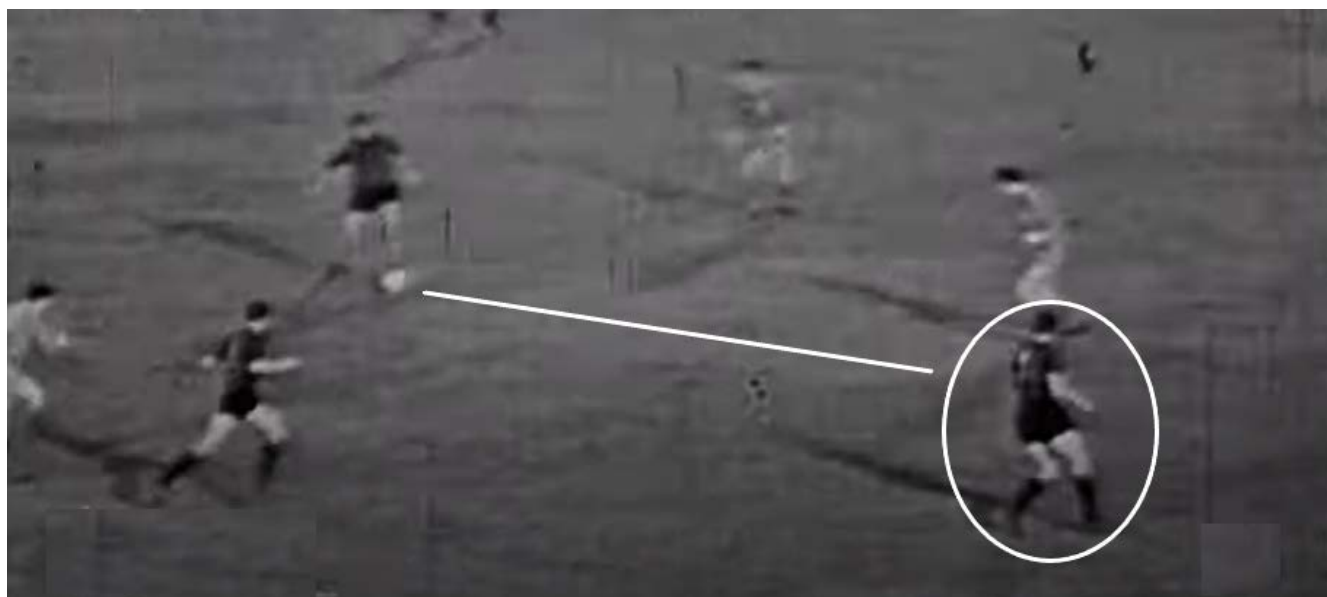
The midfielders supported his action along the center channel, and they could take advantage of his actions higher up in the field than usual for those times.



As a left fullback, Giacinto Facchetti played as he was in the future, he was an assist man for the teammate, and he was also a goal scorer. He was the first fullback of this type.

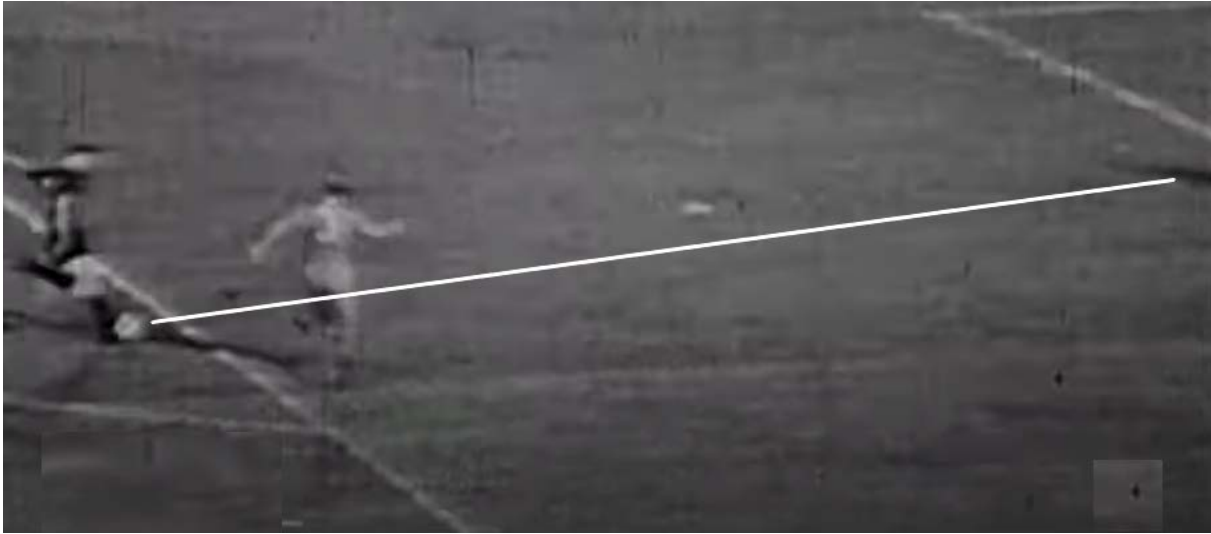


In this first example, he joined the final third dribbling the ball higher up in the field. Again, he created a 3 v 3 situation, forcing the opposition's defender, who created numerical superiority (3 v 2 at the back), to move out to counter him. This way, a gap appeared, and he could play an assist pass sideward the opponent, and the receiver could receive and face the goal as the direct marker wasn't in the proper position to mark him properly.



In this second example, Facchetti received sideward the marker after a diagonal run from the left flank and a passing combination in the middle third.





He could shoot and score as a central striker, exploiting his run-off from a deep position and through the field.

Despite not having the same assistance and support when playing with the National Team, Ferruccio Valcareggi deployed the Catenaccio system and Herrera with fast transitions to attack.



1 - Albertosi, 2 - Burgnich, 8 - Rosato, 5 - Cera, 3 - Facchetti, 16 - De Sisti, 10 - Bertini, 13 - Domenghini, 10 - Mazzola (14 - Rivera), 20 - Boninsegna, 11 - Riva.

**Carlos Alberto**, the Brazilian right fullback at Mexico 1970 World Cup. The 1970 World Cup was also a "Red Carpet" for the Brazilian National Team which would have been titled as then considered the best team ever in a World Cup. Brazil was totally on the opposite side of the defensive style of the final runner-up, and the fullbacks were attacking players in an already offensive 1-4-2-4.



In that team, the right fullback Carlos Alberto allowed the right-winger Jairzinho to get closer to Tostao and Pelè, creating space for himself to push up.



When Tostao and Pelè both dropped back, Jairzinho and Rivelino both tucked in as strikers, and the fullbacks, Everaldo and Carlos Alberto, were free to act as "all along flanks" fullbacks.



The fourth and last goal of the final resulted from a similar situation along the edge of the Italian penalty box.



Jairzinho tucked in dribbling the ball, Tostao made the Italian right center back busy, and Pelè could receive free from markers away from the opposition's defensive line.





The Italian defense had to stand narrow in the center, and space appeared along the right flank.

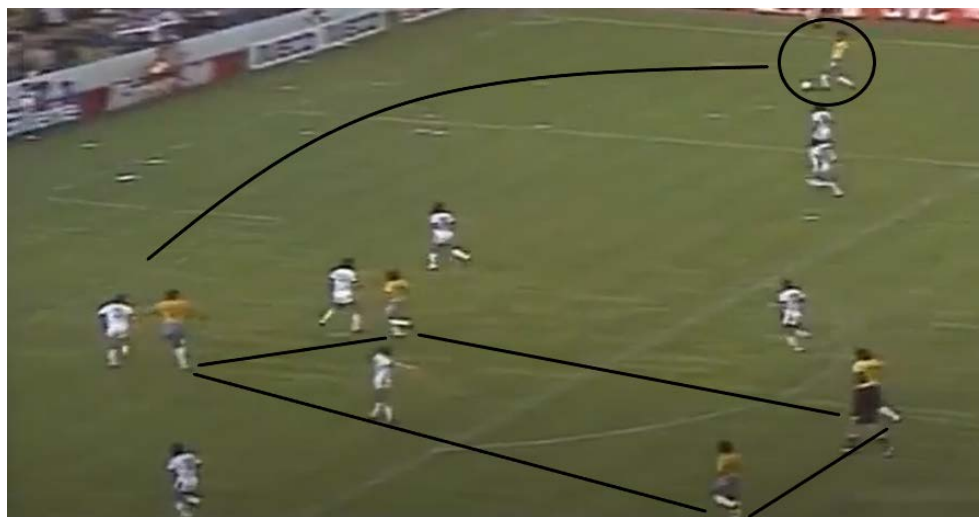


Carlos Alberto pushed up off the ball, and he had enough time and space to arrive on the ball without pressure and score with a one-touch shot to the opposition's goal far post.

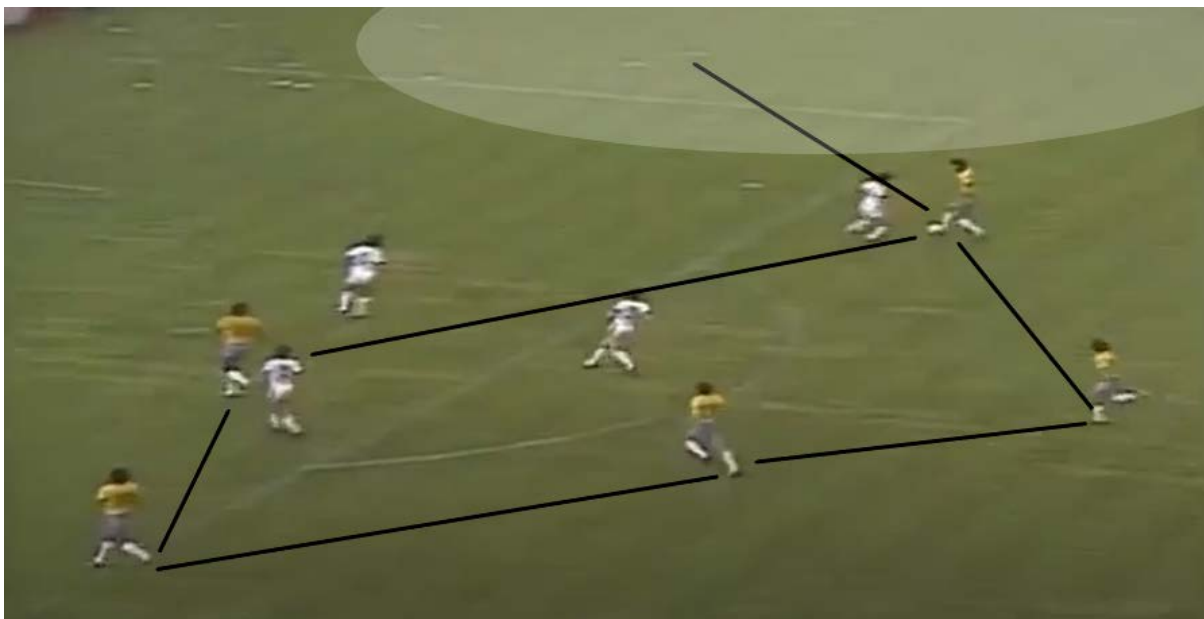
**Leandro and Junior**, the right and left fullback of Brazil at the 1982 World Cup. Despite not reaching the semifinals, being knocked out by the Italian team which beat them 3-2 in a thrilling last match of the second round robin of the tournament, Brazil played the most outstanding football among all the teams. The play system was similar to 1970, but the front four aimed to create the space out wide for the fullbacks to push up.



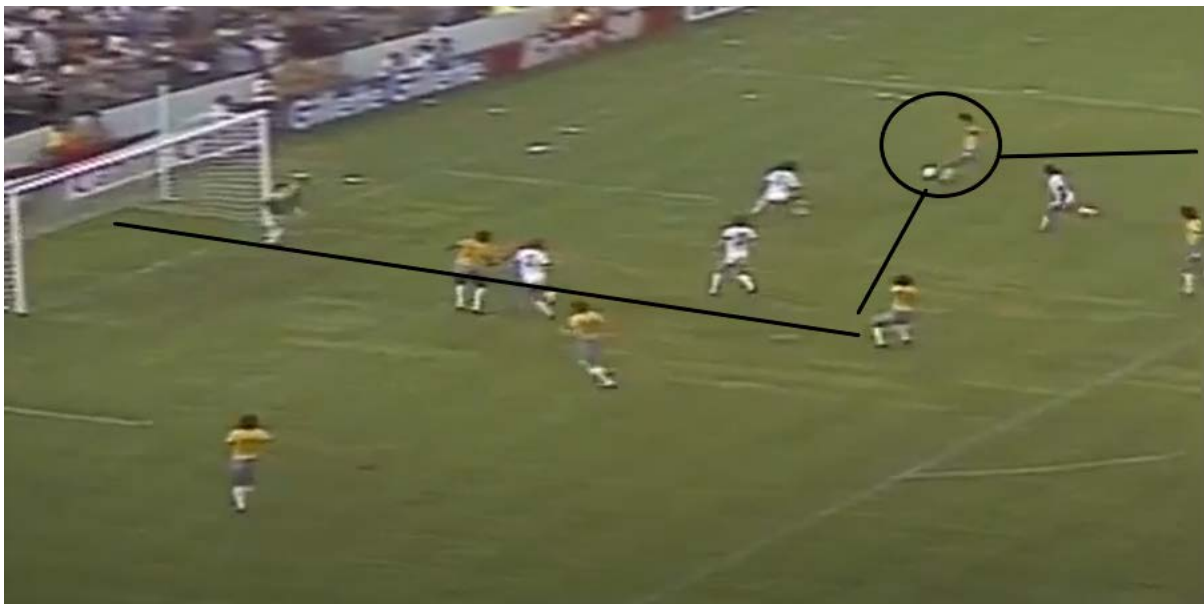
The 1-4-2-2-2 was made for the high-class top players and to make them combining in the center and to create space along the flanks for the fullbacks to push up and provide width.



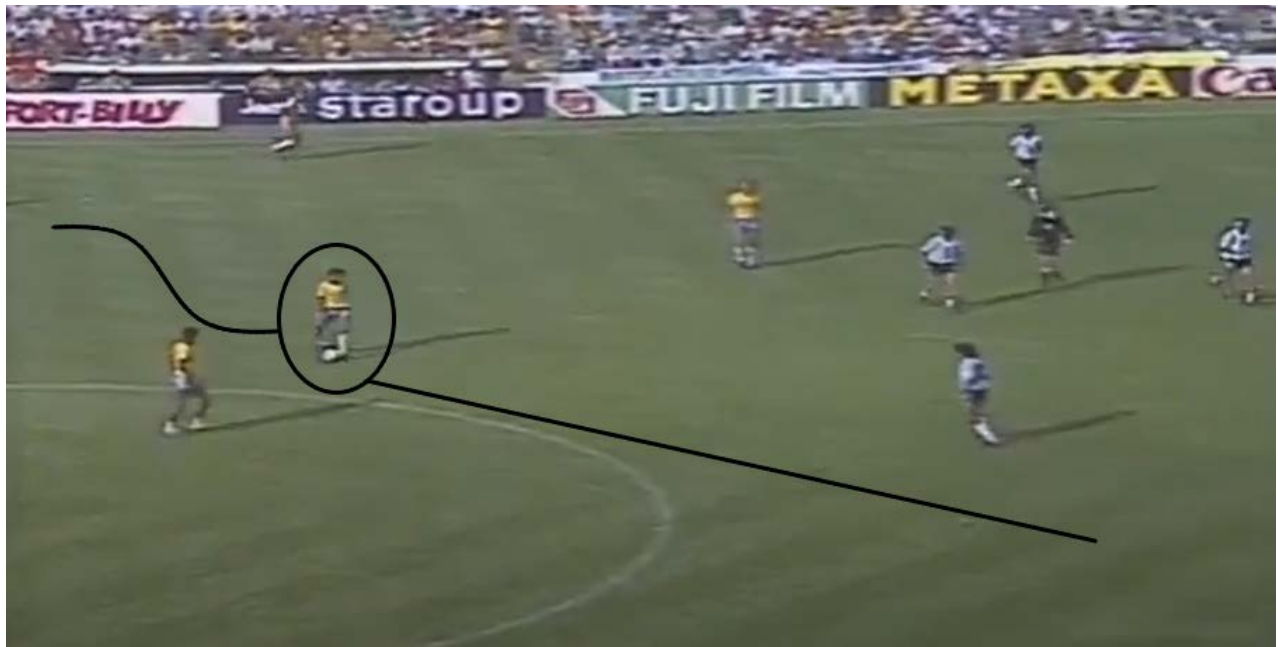
In this first example, the four advanced players, Serginho and Eder, inside the penalty area and Socrates and Zico behind them created the available space for Leandro along the right, as they forced the opposition's defenders to stand narrow in the center.



In this second example, both Junior and Leandro supported the attacking move; Junior joined the offensive shape standing narrow in the center, and together with his teammate, they created space along the right flank for Leandro to push up and receive free, as the defenders were forced again to stand narrow in the center. Furthermore, in numbers, Brazil created an offensive numerical superiority 5 (+1) v 4 inside the final third.



Leandro received at the right side of the condensed area of the field, and he could find an easy passing lane to play a cross pass to the center for Zico. Serginho and Eder forced the defenders deeper inside the penalty area. The other two had to look at the incoming opponent at the left side of the penalty area; these movements created enough space for Zico to receive without pressure to shot on goal. Almost 40 years ago, Brazil was a liquid offensive team like no others at that time.



Junior built up the attacking move tucking in and passing forward; he could exploit the shifting wide previous one of Falcao, who created a pocket of space in the middle of the rectangular offensive shape.



Zico received, and he dribbled the ball inside to invite the opposition's defenders awareness and open gaps in behind the backline; one defender came out leaving the line, the second center-back couldn't cover the space from the ball line and the libero, and indeed the libero was too deep and far both from the ball and the potential receiver at the right, as he had to mark Serginho in the center. So Eder moved away, and he created a path to meet the run of Brazilian left fullback.





Junior could receive in behind and beat the opposition's goalkeeper, although he left the goal line.

**Marcos Cafù** at San Paolo, Roma, and Milan. The Brazilian right fullback conquered the name of "Pendolino" in the Italian language, "Bullet Train" in English thanks to never-ending runs along the flanks at the maximum speed possible. He also won all the main trophies that a soccer player could win with Roma, Milan, and Brazil; he was a perfect example of an attacking fullback during the 90s and the early 2000s.



Marcos Cafù had always provided support along the right flank since the beginning of his career; the following sequence is an example of San Paolo's goal in the 1993 Intercontinental Cup against Ac Milan.



Milan's defensive shape was previously forced to shift out wide to the right, and San Paolo could switch the side toward the right flank where Cafù was moving higher up in the field through the opposition's weak side.



Providing width along the right flank, Cafù allowed his team to find a gap to reach the final third and create space between the defensive line and defend where Cafù could drive the ball.



Indeed, San Paolo's striker could move between the lines and attack the ball, exploiting the space in the middle of the 18 yds. box that a teammate's early forward run previously created.

Cafù played the same way at Roma and Milan; he also played as a wingback for his National team, as Brasil often shaped a 3 men defense to exploit the speed of Cafù and Roberto Carlos along the flanks.



Roma and Milan Cafù often played as an additional striker at the right of his teammates; in this first example, Roma played a long pass from the back, and the opposition headed the ball away from the defensive line.

Roma's strikers were positioned inside the box both between the center backs and the fullbacks; Cafù tucked in from a broader position to counter the opponents and win the ball high up in the field.





He anticipated the opponents and could drive the ball close to the end line, having enough time and space to play a cross pass inside the area behind the last opponent along the other side.

Marcos Cafù played under Carlo Ancelotti during the seasons as a Milan player; he was the attacking right fullback in the 1-4-3-2-1 system of play which the journalists recognized as the "Christmas Tree" system.



In this example, he receives the ball from the farther No.10 wide along the flank, and he received along the same line of the center striker who moved toward the opposition's goal to receive a cross pass.



Cafù used to overlap along the right flank, creating a passing option, forcing the opponents deep toward the end line, and opening gaps inside the box for incoming teammates.



In this example, Cafù overlapped sideward Kakà, who has had dribbled the ball higher up in the field, and he received forcing a teammate to move out and create a gap between him and the concerning center back.



The Brazilian right fullback received, the direct opponent had to move out and leave a gap behind the defensive line, and Kakà could receive enough time to control and shoot free from pressure.

The overlapping movements of the fullback created a numerical superiority inside the opposition's box (4 v 3), supporting the attacking move.

The skills along the flanks of the Brazilian fullback were always helpful to create numerical advantage or to stretch the opposition's defensive lines, allowing the teammates to move toward the smaller box and receive crosses or cut back passes from Cafu



In this example, there weren't any chances for San Paolo to play through the opposition's defensive line in the center, and Cafu provided width beside the defensive line. As a result, he received a deep pass close to the end line, and he stretched the opposition's back 4 lines.



Stretching the opposition's line first, the defenders couldn't drop back toward the goal with the right timing to clear the space in front of the goal.

Cafu played a cut-back pass toward the near post, and his closer teammate shot on goal anticipating the last defenders in front of the goal.

Cafù created the same situations when he was a Milan and Roma player.



In this example, a 4 v 5 duel was evident in the middle of the penalty box, and Milan's advanced players were outnumbered. As a result, the opposition cleared the box toward the defensive left flank.



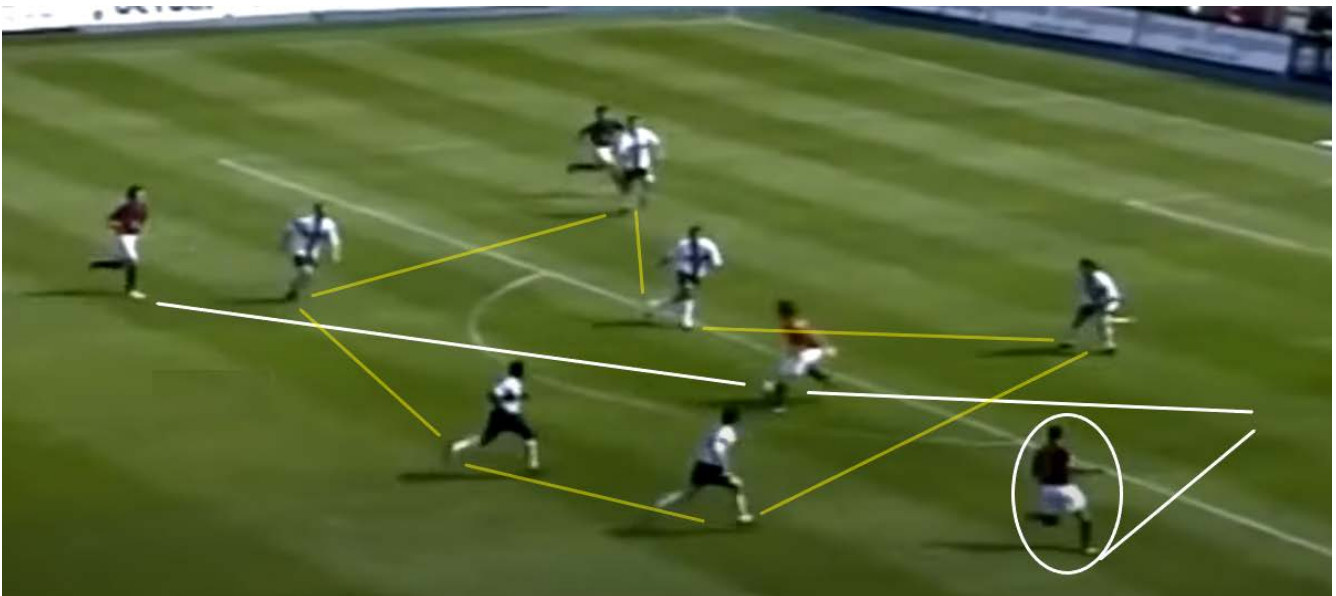
Cafù attacked the penalty box off the ball, and he won the second time of the ball. Then, as the teammates got closer to the goal, they created the space for Cafù to shoot and score just inside the penalty area.

The closest marker could have potentially countered the Brazilian fullback as he was too far from the ball position to prevent him from shooting and scoring.



In this second example, Cafù acted as the third striker along the opposition's backline and sideward the left fullback. As a result, he overcame the direct opponent besides the fullback and behind the defensive line. As a result, he could dribble the ball to the opposition's goal before scoring past the goalkeeper.

This last example is crucial to realize the tactical awareness of Marcos Cafù.



The opposition's defensive block of six was busy closing down the passing lanes to the goal in the center, but one striker could receive in between the lines despite having his back to the goal.

Cafù moved forward off the ball from the deeper area behind the opposition's defensive shape, and he received a quick pass beside the opposition's defensive block.

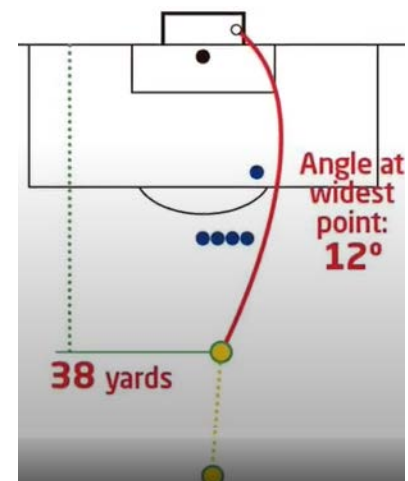




Cafù received, and he could shot and score as the left-center back and wingback were both too late on the ball to counter him.

**Roberto Carlos** at Real Madrid and Brazil (the 90s and early 2000s): while Marcos Cafù was the right fullback of the South American team, Roberto Carlos was the left one. They both played as fullbacks in the back four defensive line for their club, and they played as wingbacks of a 3+2 backline for the National team. Roberto Carlos also won everything with Blancos in Spain and Europe, and with the National team also.

The Brazilian left-footed player is famous worldwide thanks to the second unforgettable and impossible free-kick against France in a 1997 friendly match (maybe, Maradona kicked the first one against Juventus about 10 years before.)



The analysis data of this free kick are helpful to understand his technical skills and the kicking technique he was able to deploy. Furthermore, this was not the only free-kick of this kind we performed during his career, scoring goals for his teams from set-pieces despite other ways.

First of all, his speed made the transitions to attack from deeper areas of the field easier for Real Madrid.



In this example, he won the ball against the opposition's left-winger. First, he overcame him with a volley touch behind the opponent. Then, he dribbled the ball higher up at speed, making the possession safe just after the recovery.



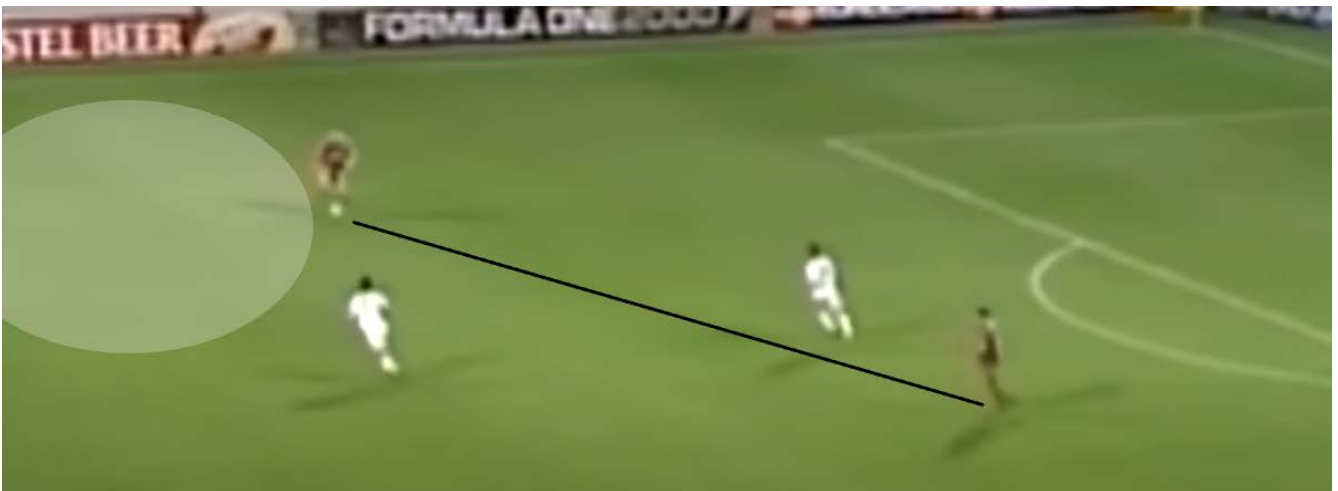
He created distance between him and the first opponent with just one touch, and he faced the second one along the flank, dribbling the ball and ready to change the speed of his action.

He also overcomes the second opponent along the flank in front of him with the right timing to create space between them.



Despite not finding a way to progress the move higher than the middle third, Roberto Carlos could create an individual transition to attack with few touches and thanks to his speed of play.

Roberto Carlos was also pressure and a counter-attacking weapon when Real Madrid pressed higher up in the field.



In this example, the opponents distributed at the back to overcome the pressure of the No.10 and the striker. The receiver made a wrong ball control, and he lost control close to his feet.



Roberto Carlos accelerated along the flank, exploiting his speed of play. He won the ball against the opposition's ball carrier; he exploited the space behind him that the opponent created while he was running toward the ball.



He could shoot on goal and score from out of the penalty box with enough time and space, as all the opponents were late recovering the proper space to cover and counter him.



His speed was crucial to fix the issues of the numerical inferiority situations of play both for Real Madrid and the Brazilian National Team.



In this situation, Brazil had possession in the final third, but the opposition defended 5 v 3. Roberto Carlos dribbled the ball high up in the field, but he hadn't any solution to finish. The center striker moved toward the space behind the higher line of the defensive shape, and he combines 1-2 with him, as the opposition's right fullback could have countered the outer pass solution.



Roberto Carlos combined, and he received the return pass on the run; thanks to his speed, he could shot on goal beating the opponents on the time of the ball after the return pass.

Speed and technical gestures at speed were not the only skills of one of the left fullbacks in soccer history. As we stated at the beginning of the dedicated book to Roberto Carlos, he is not the kicker of the second-best free-kick ever, but he could repeat that kind of shot even with the moving balls.

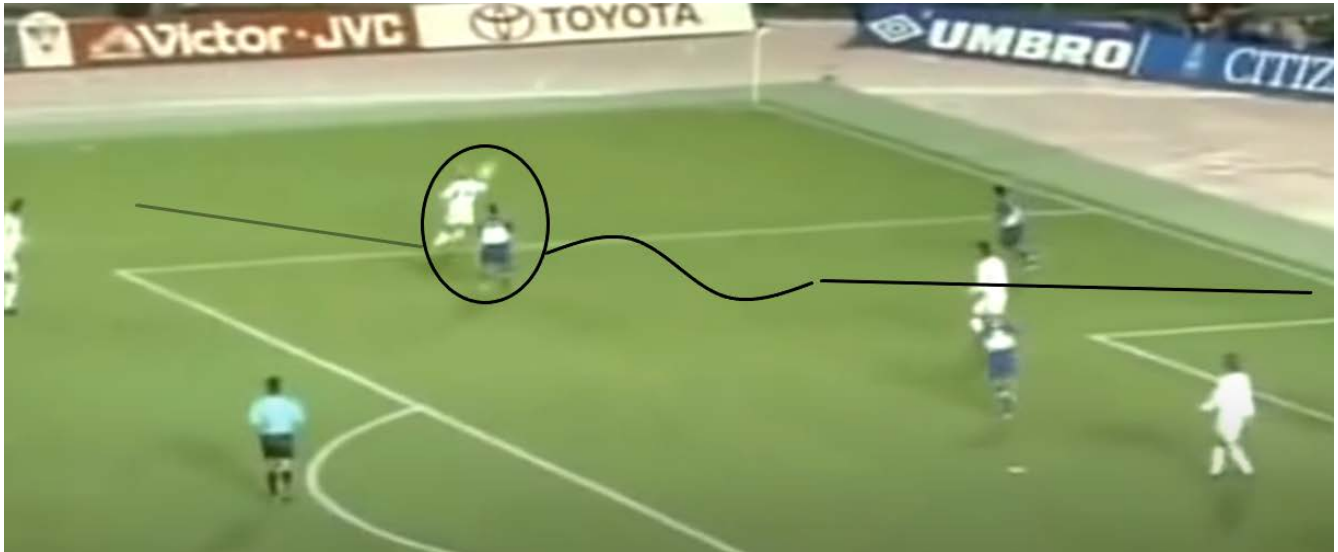


In this first example, Roberto Carlos scored past the goalkeeper shooting from the left to the far post of the goal out of the box and the center-left side of the final third.

As we analyzed, Roberto Carlos had excellent skills to win the second time of the ball thanks to his natural speed.



In this example, the opposition right center back headed the ball away inside the penalty area to clean it from the dangerous cross pass. Instead, he made the right tactical choice, driving the ball out of the goal space and sideward.



Roberto Carlos moved forward along the flank at speed from a wide winger position, tucking in, and he won the second time of the ball. He shot quickly after dribbling the ball inside the penalty area, and he scored from a wide position concerning the opposition's goal.

The last footage shows one of the best and most famous goals he had ever scored during his career.

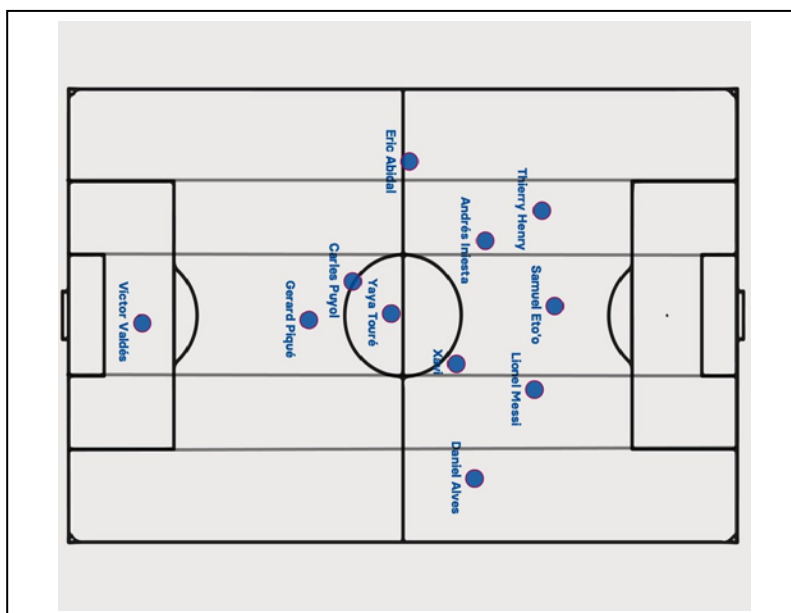


He moved off the ball to the field's end line, and he scored shooting with one touch, kicking the ball with the outer part of the feet and the three last fingers of the left foot, driving the ball under the crossbar and close to the far post. His support right leg and foot nearly touched the field's end line when he kicked the ball.

**Daniel Alves** is the most decorated soccer player nowadays; he is only missing the Fifa World Cup. He is the perfect example of the modern attacking fullback; he was a good example during the seasons at Sevilla. He became the best example possible thanks to Guardiola at Barcelona when the Catalan coach asked him to provide attacking width alongside the right flank and passing options out wide to improve and make effective his possession-based offensive style. He is spending the last seasons of his career in Brazil after winning all the possible trophies in Spain, Italy, France, and Europe, apart from the cups with his National team.

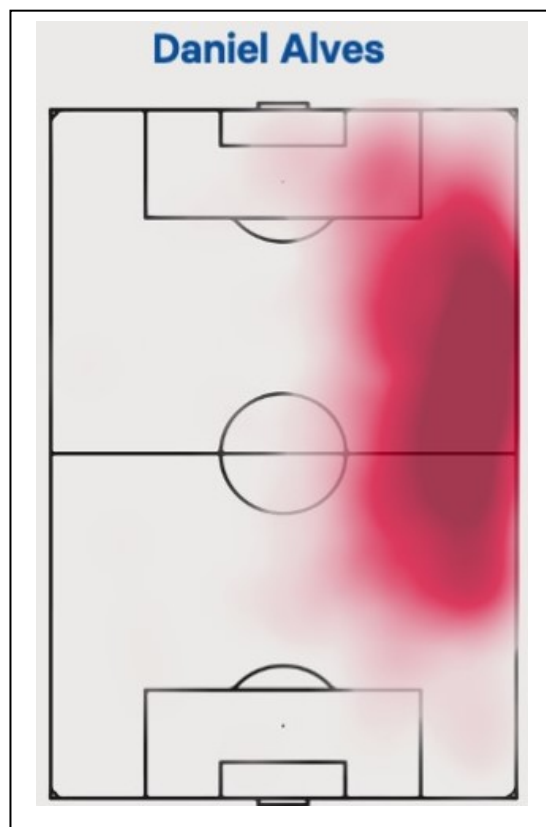
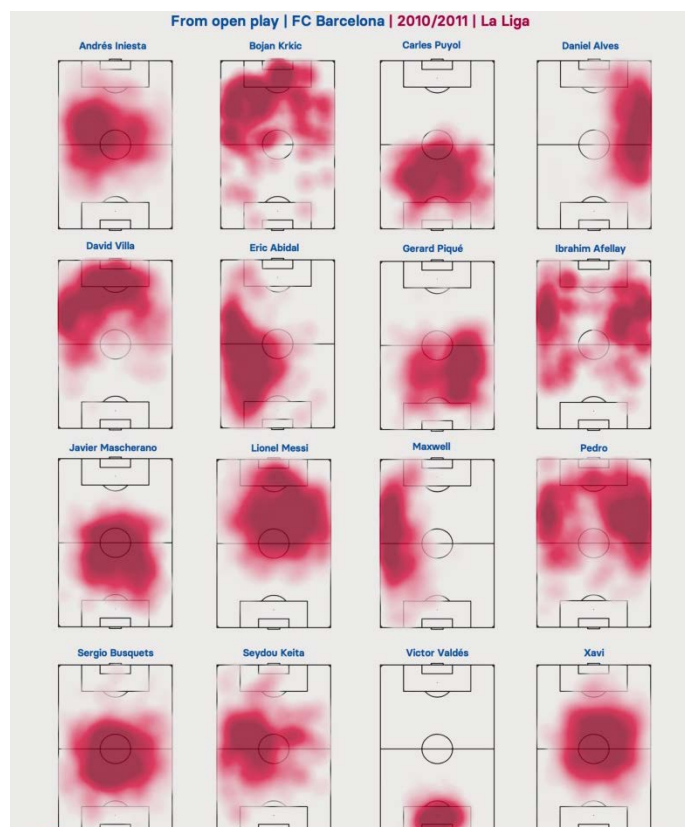


The average position of Daniel Alves as a right fullback during the first season with Guardiola as a head coach explains very well the concept of attacking FB. Alves was a winger along the same line of the forwards; furthermore, the coach made him responsible of the almost entire wide right channel, as the division in zones of the positional play proves without any doubt. Eric Abidal, the left fullback, also patrolled the opposite wide channel, but Henry was a more willing to retreat than Messi or Eto'o, and Abidal himself was a more defensive fullback, completing a back line of three with Pujol and Piquet. Iniesta provided width along the left, and Eto'o acted as a center striker, after the deployment of Messi as a false nine. Actually, Daniel Alves was a ultra-offensive right winger.





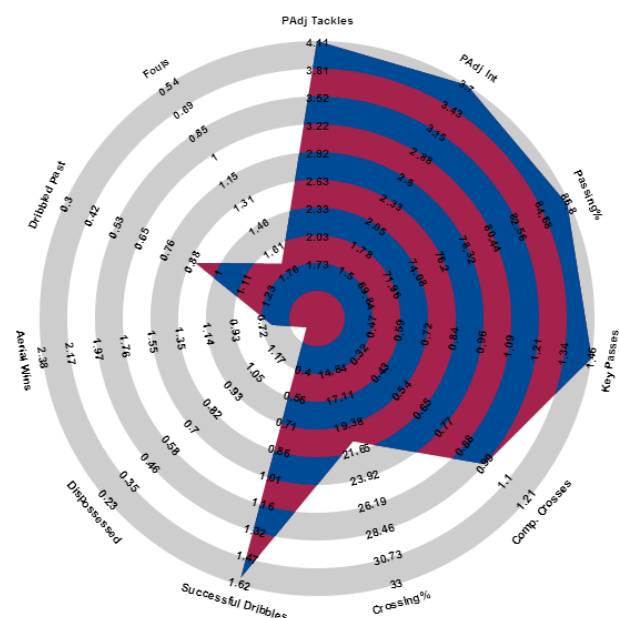
The continuous assistance of the right fullback didn't change through the seasons, even when other players like David Villa, Maxwell, and Pedro were included in the squad.



All units in per 90  
Time played: 32.23 90s

**Dani Alves**  
**Barcelona**

Season: 2010-11  
Age: 28



Fullback Template  
Created by @mixedknuts

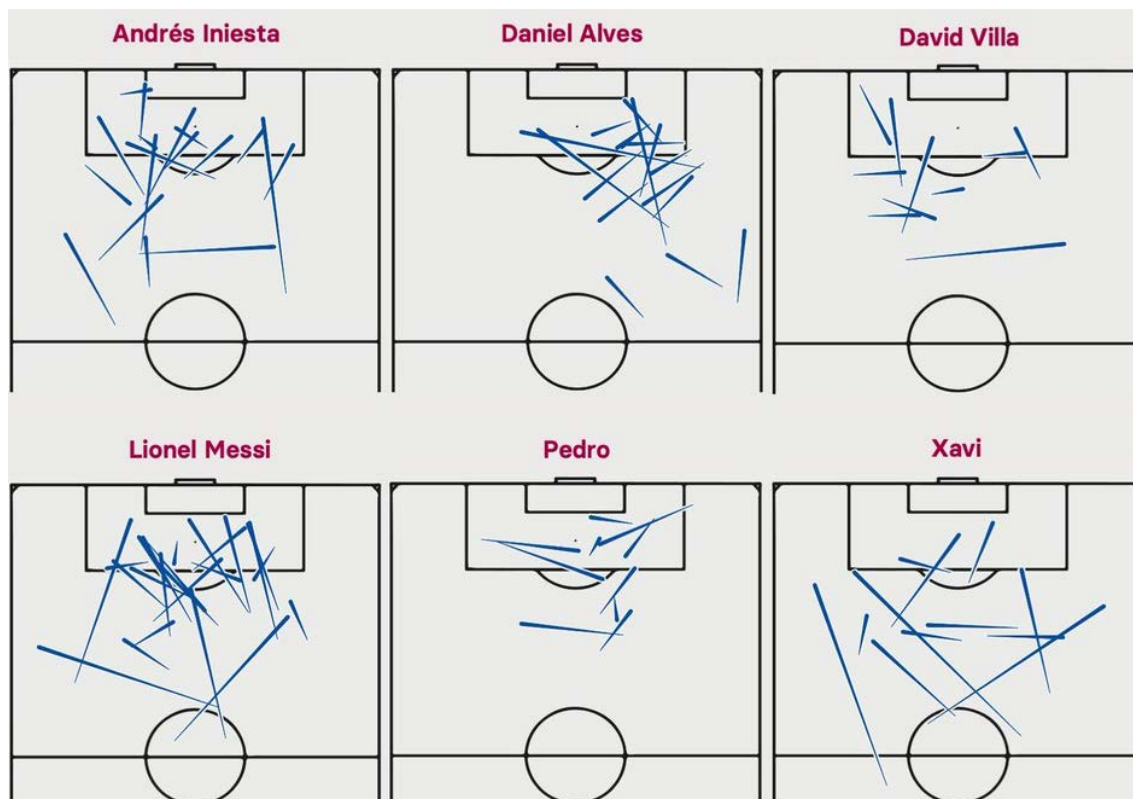
**opta**  
**StatsBomb.com**

During the third seasons with Guardiola, Daniel Alves performed one of the best seasons of his entire career;

- He was almost never dispossessed
- 86,8% of passes' accuracy pg
- 1.46 key passes pg
- Around 20% of useful crosses pg (leading to a shot)
- Around 1.5 succesfull dribble pg
- Almost 1 dribble past an opponent pg

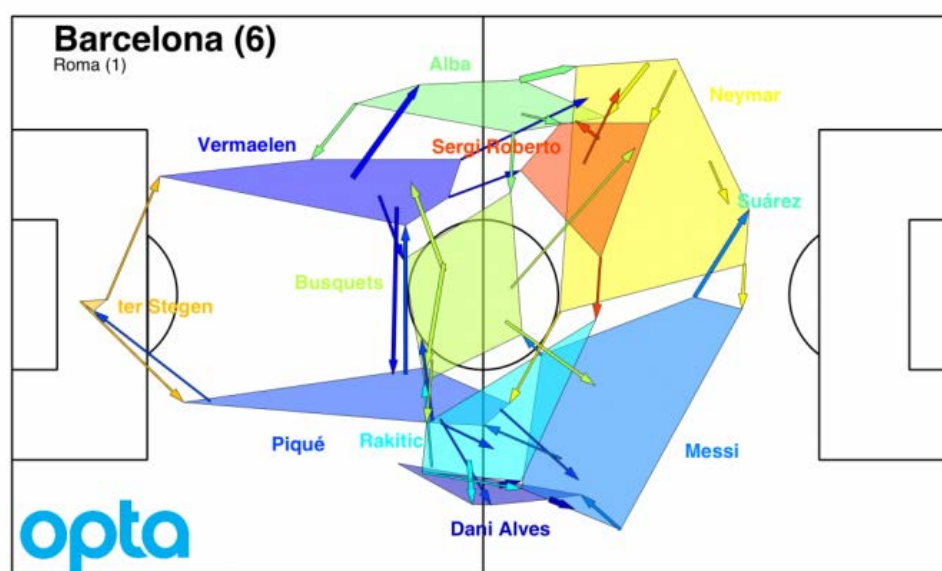
Above all, Alves became decisive for transitions to attack through adjust possessions after a defensive action:

- 4.44 PAdj Tackles pg
- 3.7 PAdj Interception pg

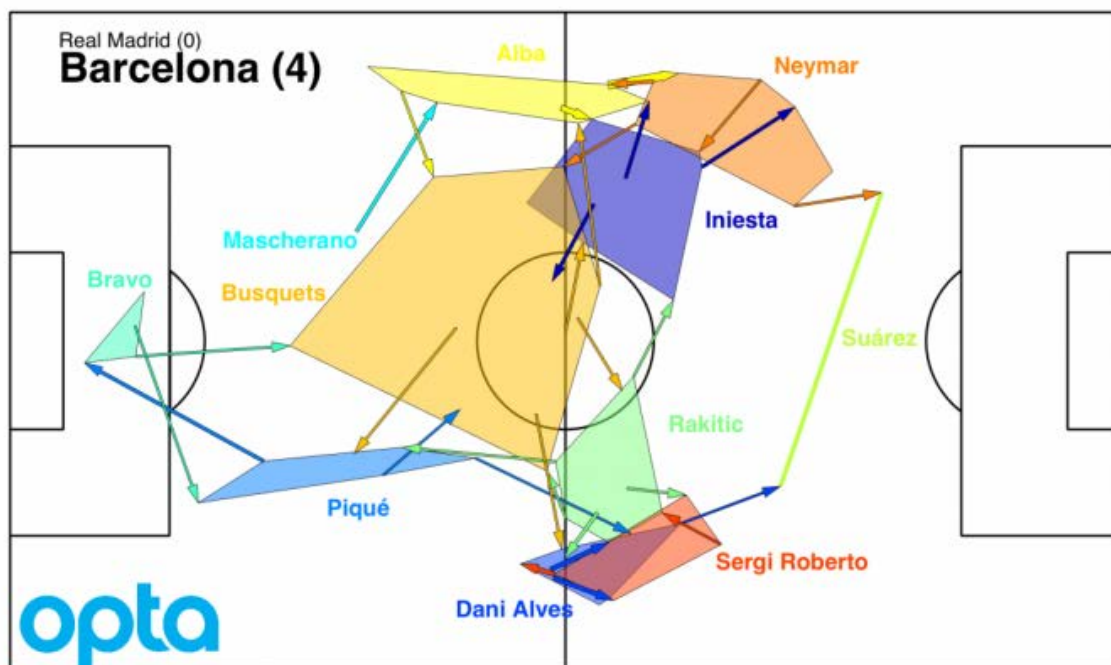


Daniel Alves maintained the same position and role even after Guardiola's reign, under Tito Villanova, Tata Martino, and Luis Henrique.

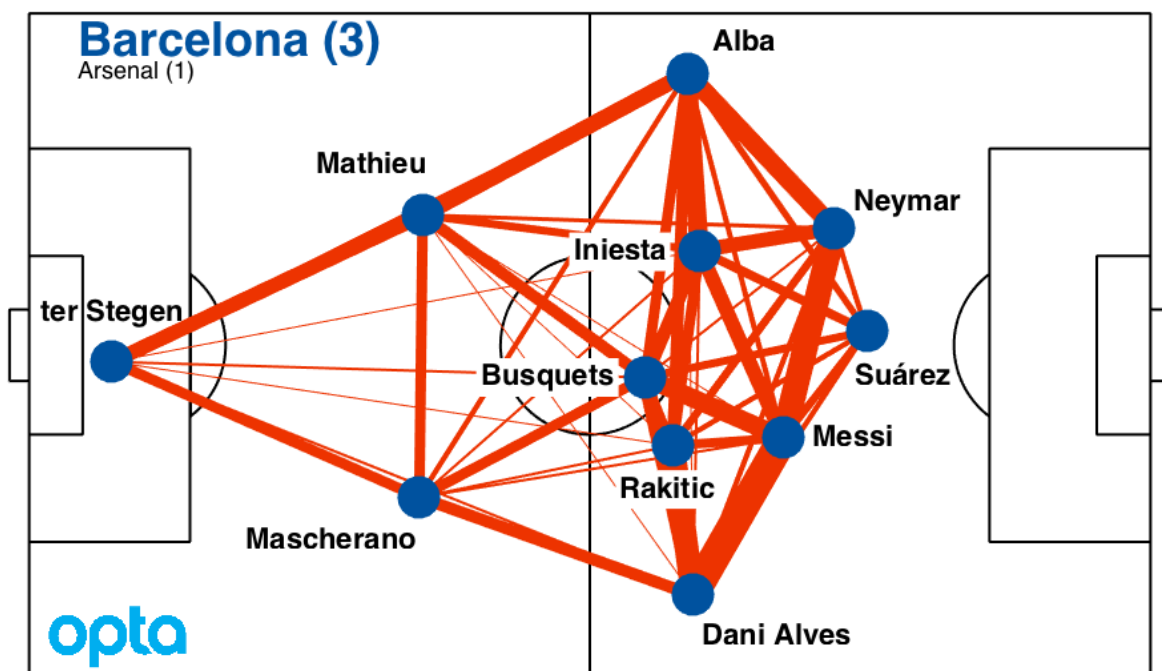
The following three passing networks show that Daniel Alves's positions at Barcelona haven't changed through the seasons, and they didn't depend too much on the teammates, apart from the different coaches.



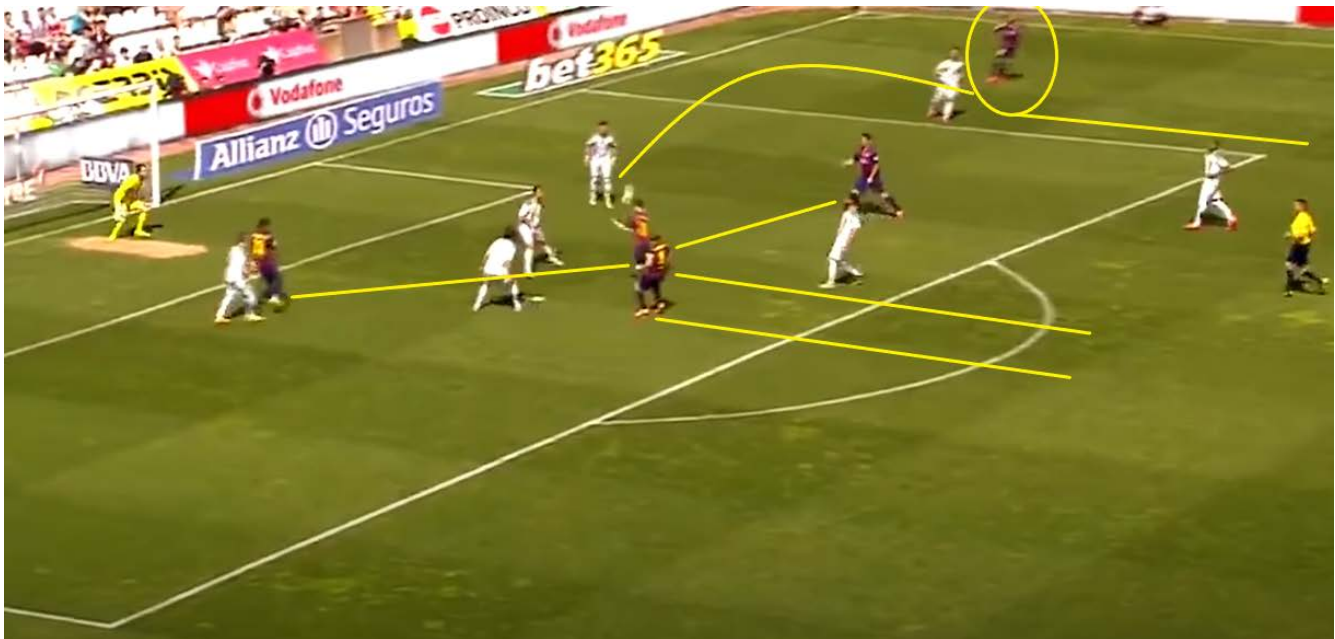
In this first example, he patrolled along the right flank, with Piqué as a right-center back behind him and Messi moving diagonally from the left to the center.



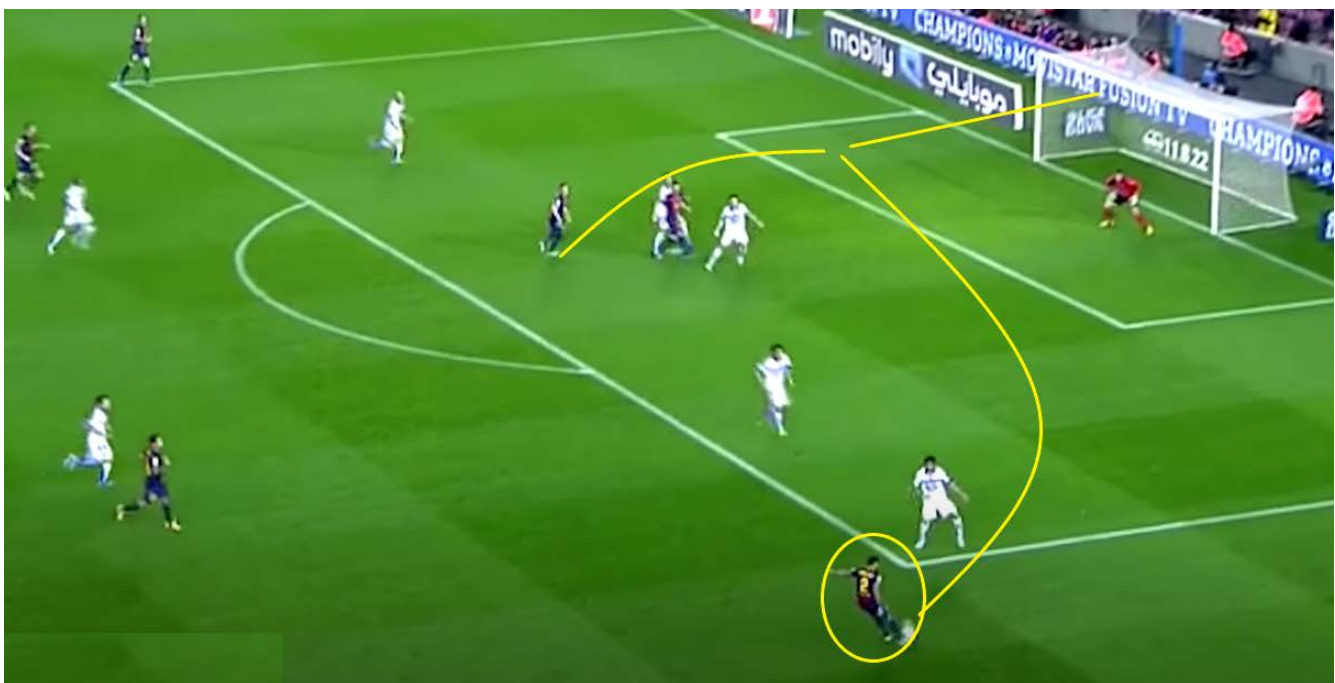
In this second example, Daniel Alves played close to Sergi Roberto as an advanced right-winger. Still, his average position didn't change despite Barcelona deployed a back three with the holding midfielder between the center backs and two advanced midfielders behind the center striker.



Daniel Alves completed the line of five upfront with the strikers apart from the position of the key player of the Blaugrana, Lionel Messi. He was always tasked with pushing up tasks, wherever Messi played (as a false nine or a tucking in winger.)



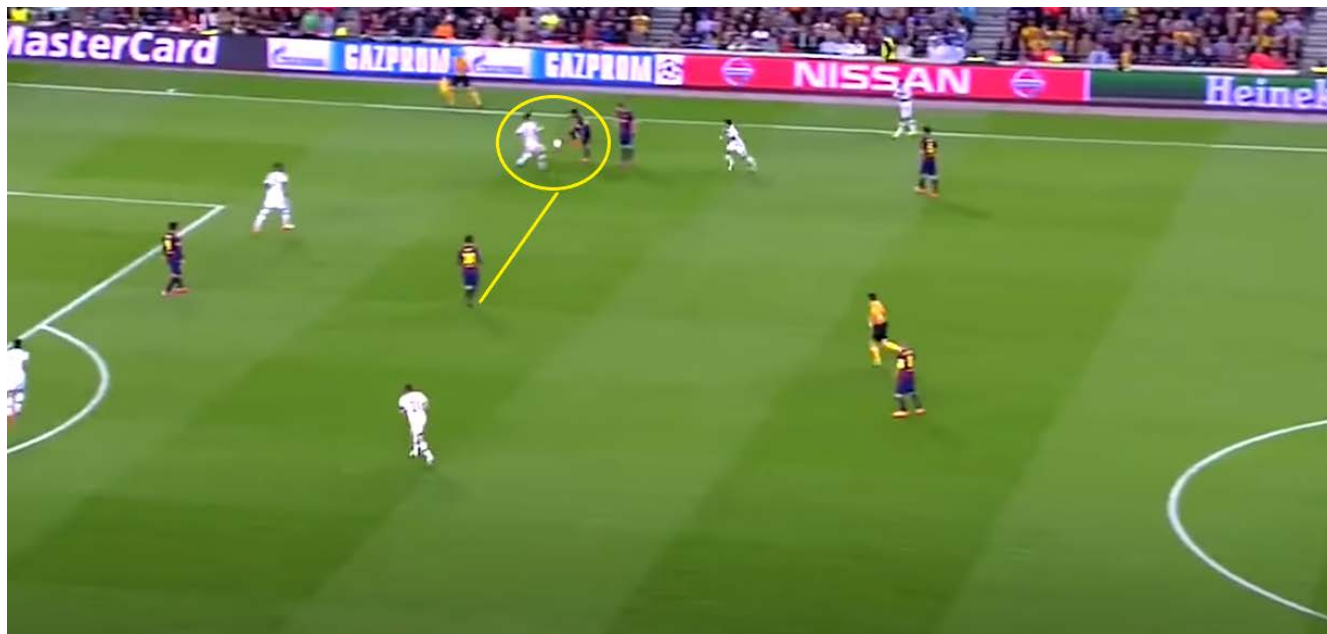
In this first example, Messi exploited a cross pass from Daniel Alves entering the opposition's penalty area from the back position concerning the attacking trio shape.



In this second situation, Messi was again in the center of the penalty area, and he created space for the striker to receive a cross pass by Daniel Alves close to the corner of the penalty area.



In the first example, Daniel Alves played a cross pass in the center of the penalty area to meet the run of an incoming teammate; in the second one, Alves played a cross pass between the defensive and the goal's line further striker to receive and score. Daniel Alves also helped the Argentinian be decisive, moving the ball away from the teammate when this last was dribbling it to the center.



In this example, Daniel Alves won the ball, and he passed to Messi in the center.



As Messi received, Alves moved between the last defensive, preventing a defender from tracking his run, as he had to check for Alves' run inside the penalty area; his run opened a path zone 14, where Messi could dribble in and score.

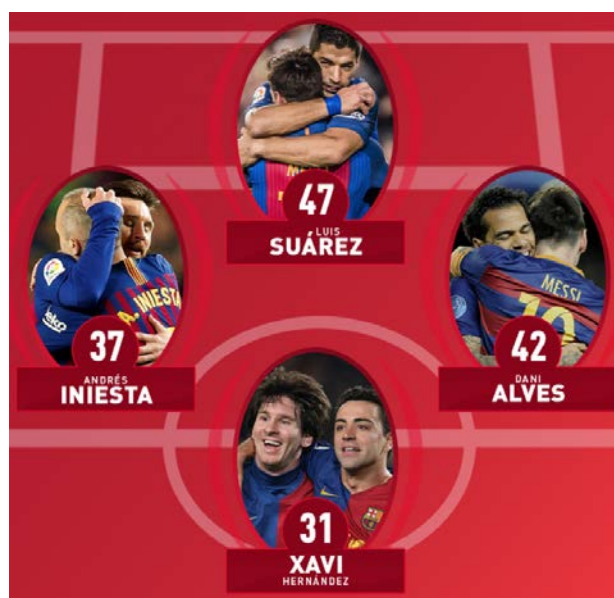
Daniel Alves has the record of assist pass in La Liga as a fullback:

SINCE 2003-04

### DANI ALVES IN LALIGA

SEASON	GAMES	GAMES	ASSISTS	CHANCES CREATED
2003-04	Sevilla	29	3	22
2004-05	Sevilla	34	1	25
2005-06	Sevilla	35	8	44
2006-07	Sevilla	34	11	69
2007-08	Sevilla	33	14	86
2008-09	Barcelona	34	9	58
2009-10	Barcelona	29	10	54
2010-11	Barcelona	35	15	68
2011-12	Barcelona	33	11	54
2012-13	Barcelona	30	6	44
2013-14	Barcelona	27	3	38
2014-15	Barcelona	30	6	40
2015-16	Barcelona	29	4	21

STATS CORRECT AS OF 09/07/2020



SINCE 1988/89

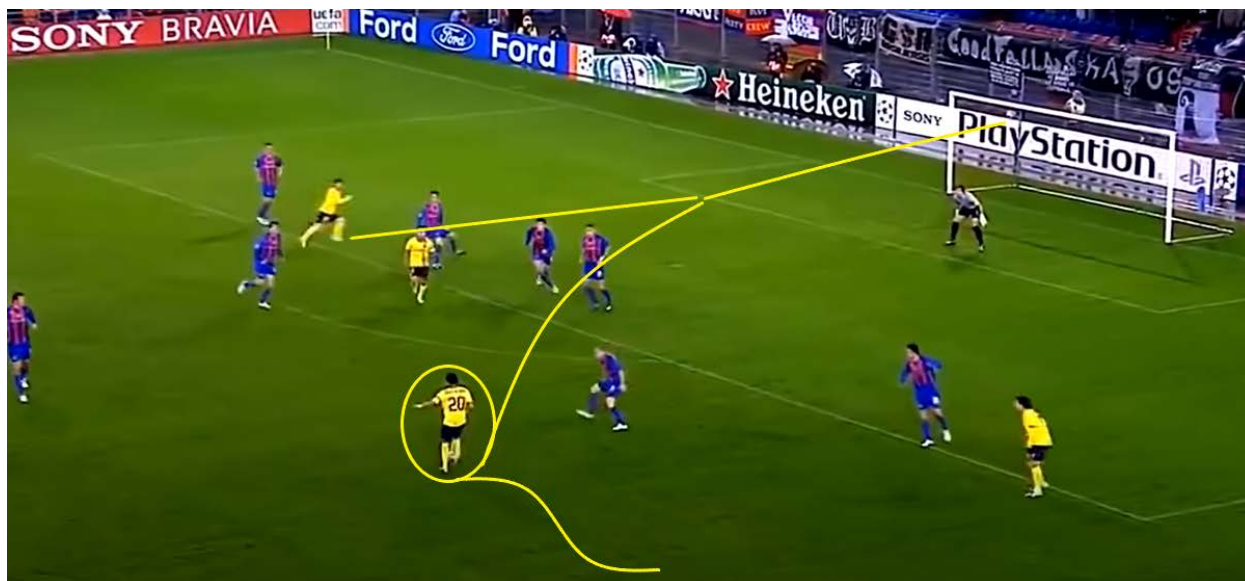
### MOST ASSISTS PROVIDED BY A DEFENDER IN A SINGLE LALIGA SEASON

PLAYER NAME	ASSISTS	SEASON	TEAM
Dani ALVES	15	2010-11	Barcelona
Dani ALVES	14	2007-08	Sevilla
Dani ALVES	11	2011-12	Barcelona
Dani ALVES	11	2006-07	Sevilla
MARCELO	10	2016-17	Real Madrid
Dani ALVES	10	2009-10	Barcelona
Dani ALVES	9	2008-09	Barcelona
MARCELO	9	2009-10	Real Madrid
Jordi ALBA	8	2017-18	Barcelona
COTE	8	2017-18	Eibar
Jordi ALBA	8	2018-19	Barcelona
Dani ALVES	8	2005-06	Sevilla
Roberto CARLOS	8	1998-99	Real Madrid

STATS CORRECT AS OF 09/07/2020

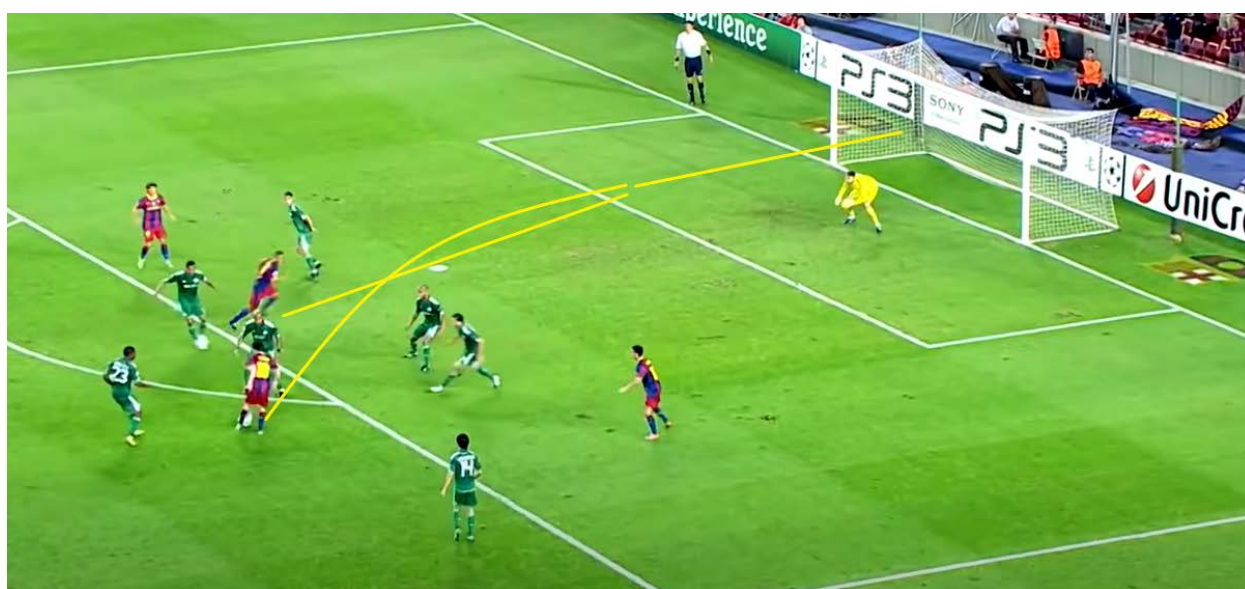
- Daniel Alves was able to play 101 assist passes in his 13 seasons spent in teams taking part to La Liga (Sevilla and Barcelona)
- As we analyzed his positions was very linked to Lionel Messi, and the 42 assist passes for the Argentinian player prove it (he is the second assist provider for Messi behind Suarez.
- He sat first 7 times in 13 seasons in the special rank for “defenders as assists providers.”
- If he wasn’t the assist provider for the scorers, he was also a great “big chances creator all through the seasons.

Messi also acted as a space creator for Daniel Alves's assists to other teammates.



In this example, Daniel Alves had the possession along the right half-space inside the offensive half. He dribbled the ball toward the center; Messi dropped back and invited the awareness of the opposition's center back toward him opened a gap behind the defensive line. This way, the right fullback could play an aerial pass behind the defensive line, and Jordi Alba could receive and score free from pressure.

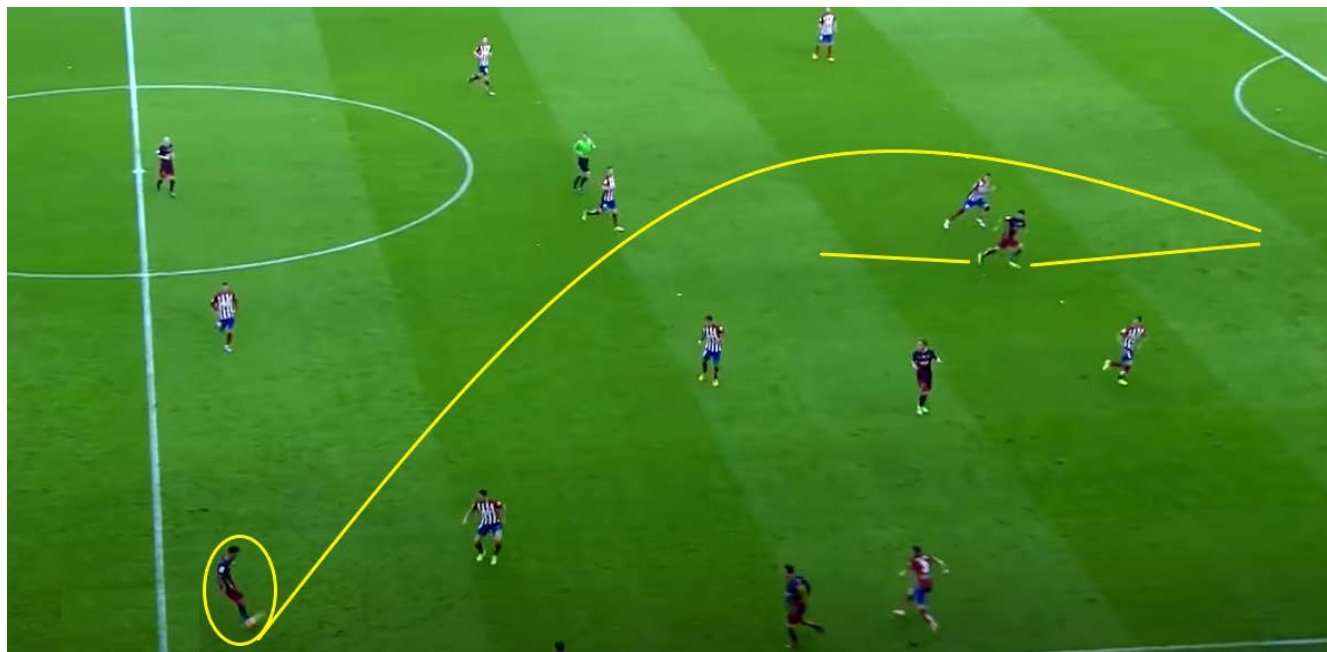
On the other side, Messi often was an assist provider for Daniel Alves, exploiting his position as a false nine.



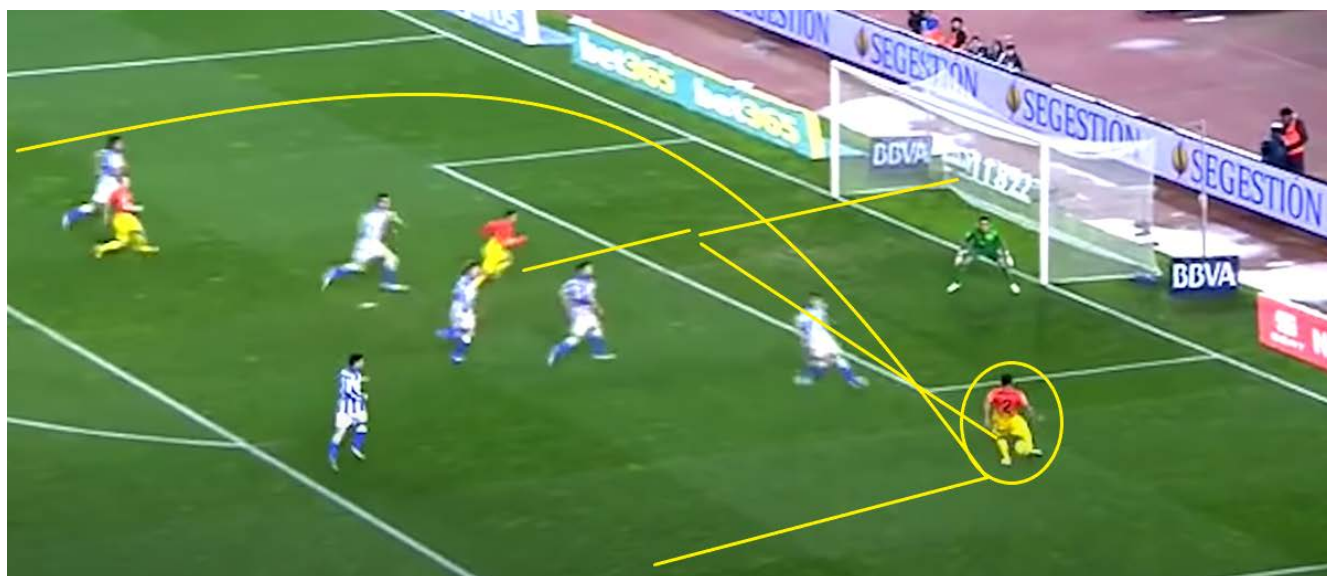
In this example, Messi dropped back from the opposition's defensive line, and he opened a gap between the defensive line between the center back. Alves received back to the defenders and shot and score, beating the goalkeeper after a 1 v 1 duel inside the penalty area.



Apart from Messi, Daniel Alves was an assist provider for all Barcelona's teammates after introducing the false nine tactics, and when Barcelona played without strikers along the opposition's defensive line.



In this example, Alves received close to the half-line of the field. He played along with an aerial ball to Suarez, who cut the defenders off running behind from a deeper position (when he received, the striker was moving between the lines to mislead the opposition's midfield and the defensive line about the player responsible for marking the free opponent).



In this second example, Daniel Alves received a switch of side inside the penalty area and played a one-touch pass to the opposition's 6 yds. box for an incoming teammate who scored.

When Eric Abidal was still in the squad and alternately with Jordi Alba the following seasons, Daniel Alves was the player. The latter provided width out of the typical formation of the Blaugrana in the center.



The three players up front forced the opposition's defensive line to stand narrow in the center. As a result, they left free spaces along the flanks; Daniel Alves provided width on the right and received a long aerial pass from the holding midfielder on the run behind the defensive line.



Daniel Alves received the ball inside the penalty area, and he could play a one-touch volley cross pass to the center for Messi, who received and score the empty goal in front of him.

They were overloading the center of the field to condense the opposition's defenders in the center channel to have two essential possible solutions to finish. First, if the false nine opened a gap in the middle, then Barca played through passes. Otherwise, Alves provided wide passing solutions to attack



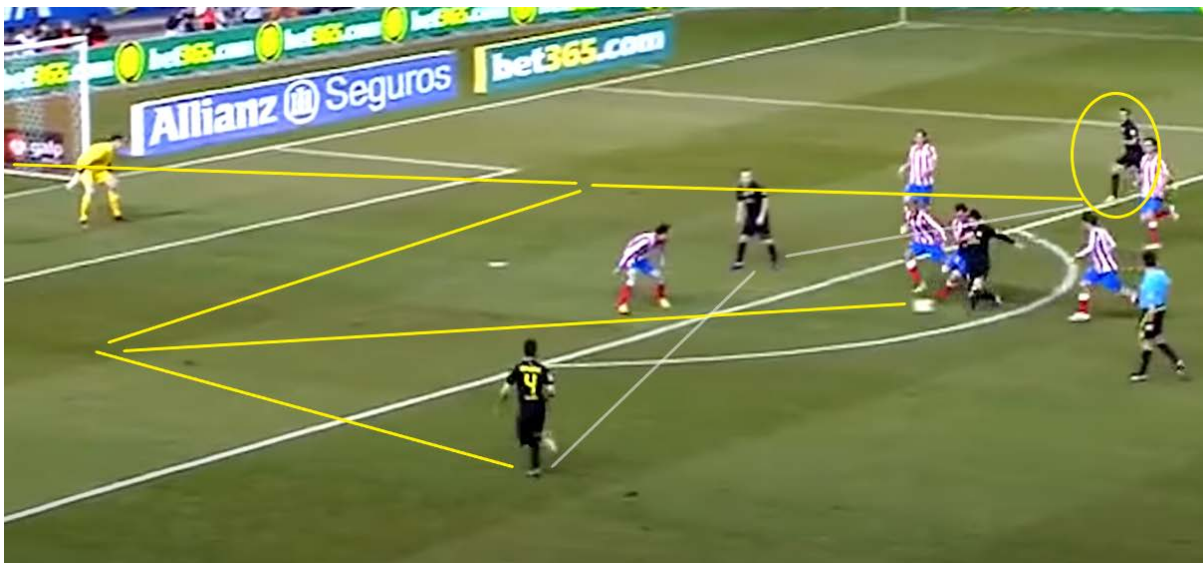
the opposition's penalty area sideward. Second, Barcelona often overloaded the attacking left flank, and Daniel Alves provided width along the weak side of the opposition's defensive shape.



In this situation, the three up front and the midfielders and the left fullback overloaded the left flank around the penalty area; only the right midfielder and Daniel Alves remained along the opposition's right weak side.



Daniel Alves waited for a switch of side inside the penalty area, and he could score, heading the ball to the goal after a blind run sideward the last opposition's defender inside the weaker area.



In this last example, Daniel Alves provided width along the opposite side of the condensed area in the center, exploiting the space throughout the weak side after the combination of play at the left of the middle area.

**Maicon Douglas Sisenando** at Inter Milan 2009/2010. The Brazilian right fullback was the real attacking weapon along the right flank for Mourinho's team and an option to play out wide when the opposition's midfielders overloaded the middle third. He had the same tasks despite the different formation's shape and the styles of play to face the Serie A Home League and the Champions League campaigns. Inter shaped 3 types of formations to play National matches: the 1-4-3-3, the 1-4-3-1-2, or the 1-4-3-2-1.



Otherwise, Mourinho decided to shape the team with the 1-4-2-3-1 to create a safer 1-4-4-1-1 defensive formation to face the European opponents.



When the team was forced to defend inside the final third or the penalty area, the wingers dropped deeper along the flanks, and they allowed the back four to stay narrow and save the goal space. In addition, Eto'o and Pandev often helped the fullbacks or even substituted them as additional defenders.



At the end of the domestic season, Maicon had the highest average of passes of the entire team (50.6); running up and down the flanks, the Brazilian also had the highest team assists (11, before Sneijder and Eto'o with 6 each.)



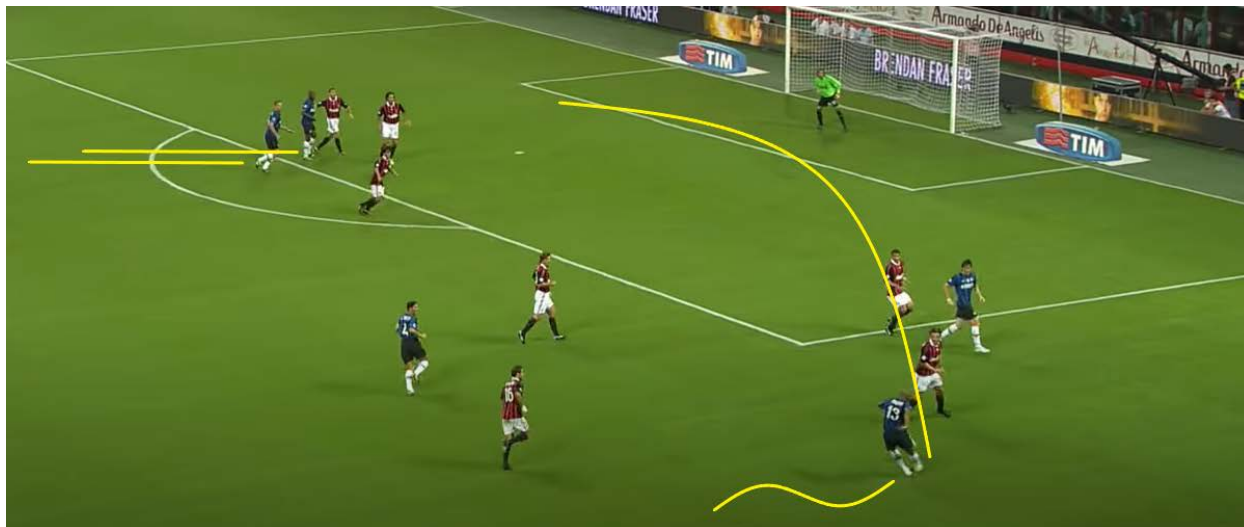
In this example, Sneijder and Milito combine inside the left half-space. They invited the pressure of the opposition's defenders to condense the left area of Inter's attacking middle third. Milito nullified the opposition's numerical superiority, as he received between the lines and could control the ball without pressure.



He switched the side to the right flank, where Maicon ensured a passing option out of the overloaded area, and he received. The switch of side created gaps between the opposition's defenders while tracking the ball and shifting across the field.



The right midfielder Zanetti and the center striker Milito pushed up and shifted out wide toward the ball's area and invited the opposition's defender to overload again the zone around the ball carrier



Maicon could dribble the ball higher up along the flanks. He could play a cross pass free from pressure, as the center striker and shifted wider, and he invited the direct marker to track him and the second defender close to the ball to screen the passing lane toward him. Maicon found the space to play a cross pass toward the ball area for the second striker Eto'o and the No.10 Sneijder, who attacked the opposition's penalty area.

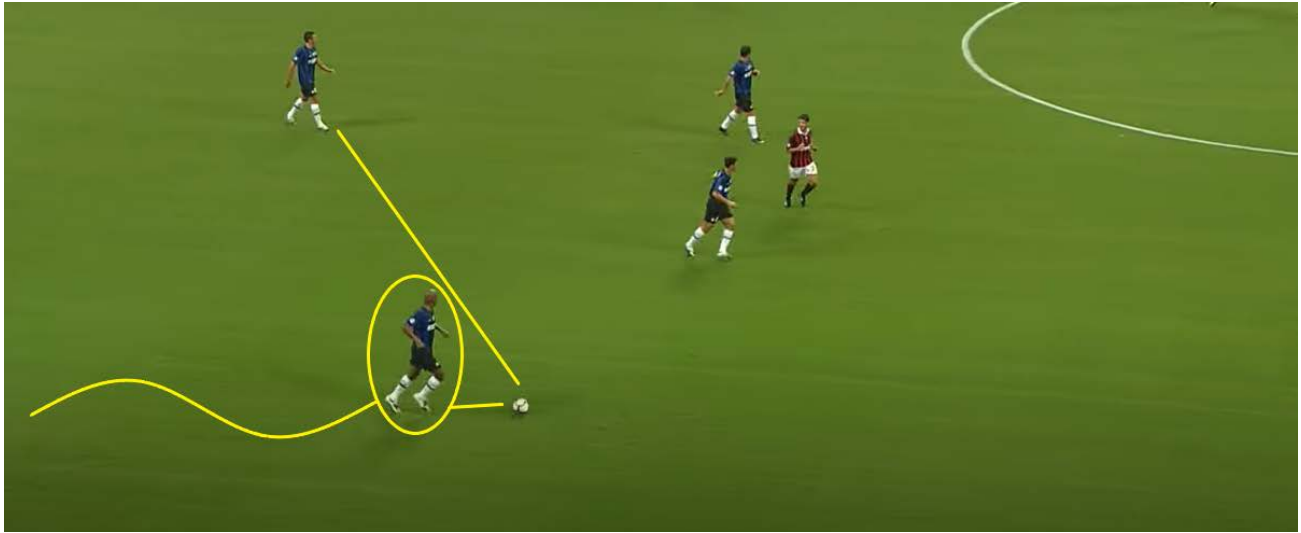
Maicon was also a weapon to build up from the back, as the center backs Lucio and Samuel only played as lower link players when the team has the possession.



The goalkeeper passed to the right fullback to build up and nullify the pressure of the lonely opposition's center striker against the center back.



The following sequence is a typical example of the building-up phase of Mourinho's Inter during that season.

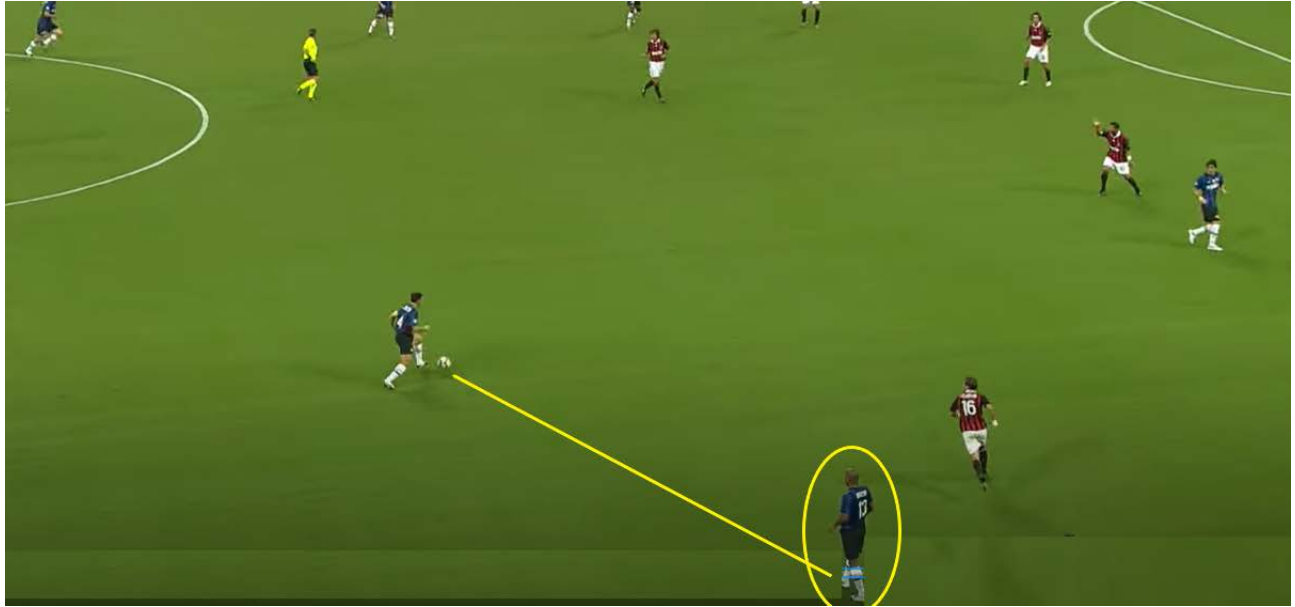


Maicon dribbled the ball higher up along the flank, and he passed to Lucio, who acted as a link player.

Inter combined and overloaded the attacking left flank to free Maicon or isolate him in 1 v 1 duels along the right flank.



The Brazilian right fullback received a switch of side, and the right midfielder moved to support the teammate, who was under pressure in this situation.

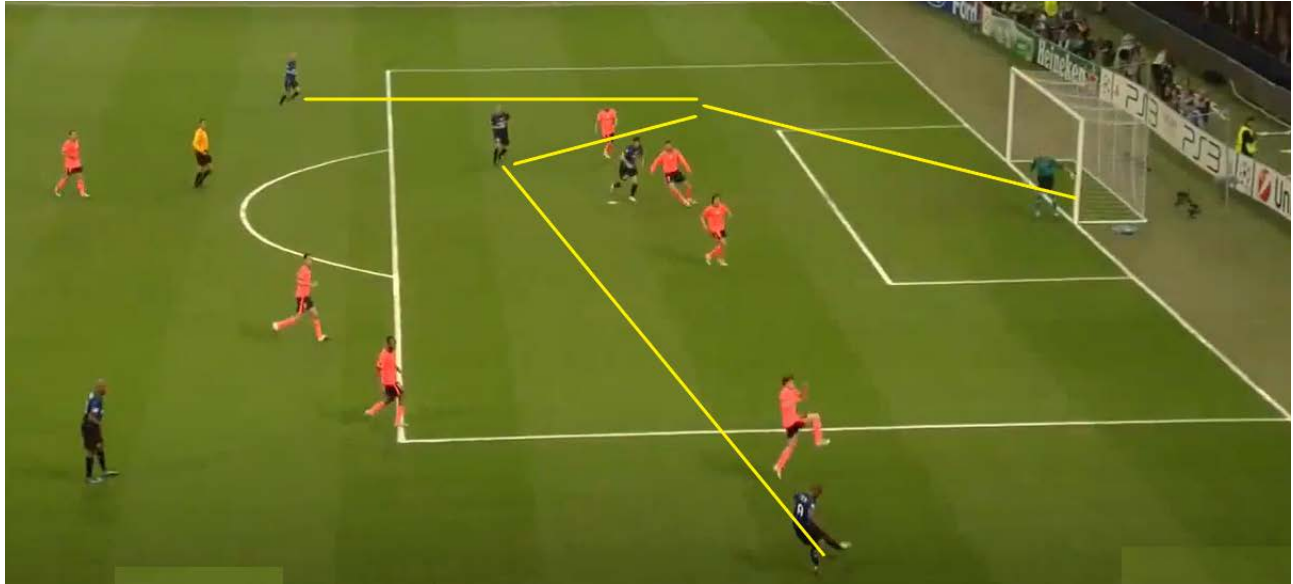


Maicon passed inside to Zanetti to progress the move as he couldn't beat the direct marker.

Maicon often combined with Eto'o to exploit the double man shape along the flanks during the Champions League campaign. The following sequence was the equalizer goal against Barcelona in the 1<sup>st</sup> leg of the semifinal round against Barcelona when Inter had got the Blaugrana beat 3 -1



Maicon dribbled the ball close to the penalty area and forced the opposition's left midfielder to leave the defensive line before passing out wide to Eto'o at his right.



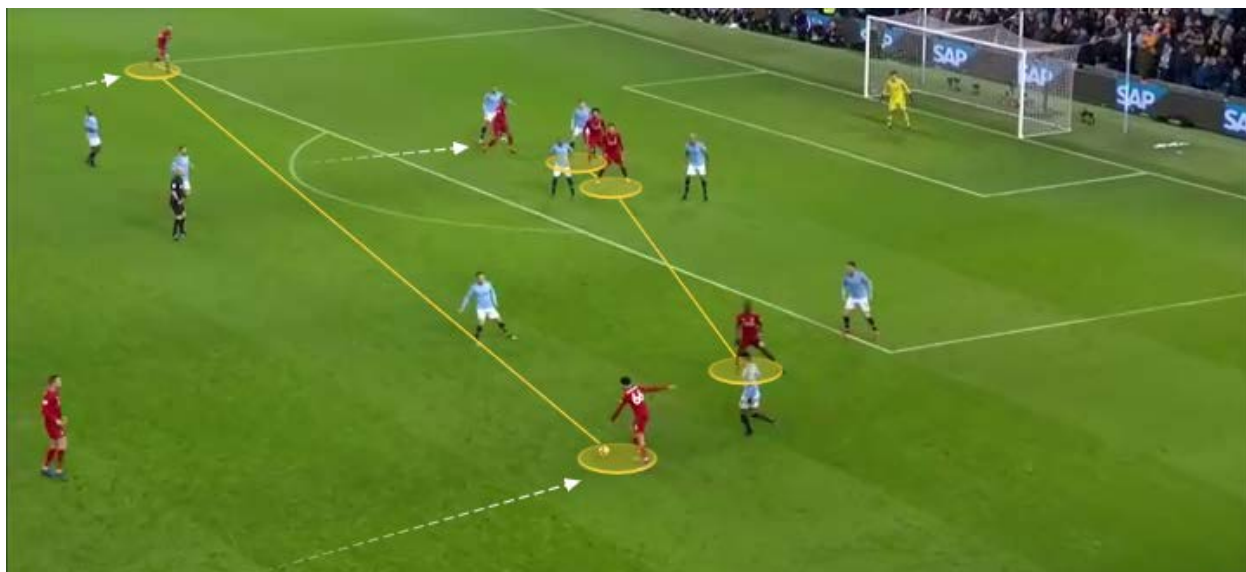
Eto'o played a cross pass inside the penalty area; Milito invited the center back out of position, and he created space for Cambiasso to receive free from markers. He could receive and play at this left for an incoming teammate (Sneijder), who scored exploiting the men's defensive shape inside the penalty area (the left fullback moved out of the line to counter Eto'o with wrong timing.)

**Trent Alexander Arnold and Andrew Robertson and the Liverpool's renaissance:** the ultimate example of attacking fullbacks are the Liverpool's ones during 2018/2020 seasons, before this last one when all the squad has decreased the general performances. They gave a crucial contribution to all the successes of the Reds under Jürgen Klopp. The German coach has the merit of finding the way to make them both pushing up along the flanks, making them some of the assists players in Premier League and Europe, and cover them at their back. These tactical solutions were crucial to winning the European Cup, the Uefa Super Cup, and the Fifa Club World Cup in 2019 and bring the Premier League Cup back to Liverpool after 30 years. The focus of their style of play is their skills to provide assists for the teammates.

Player	Trent Alexander Arnold		Andrew Robertson	
	xA	Assists	Xa	Assists
2020/2021	7,16	<b>6</b>	6,54	<b>5</b>
2019/2020	11,97	<b>13</b>	6,29	<b>10</b>
2018/2019	7,06	<b>13</b>	5,67	<b>8</b>
2017/2018	/	<b>1</b>	/	<b>4</b>

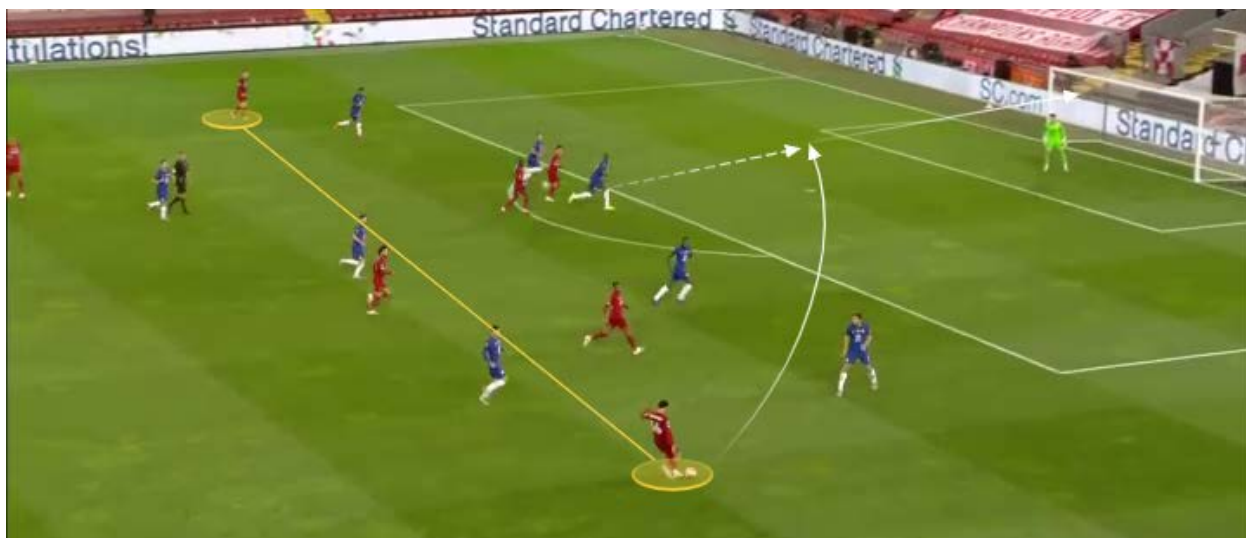
Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson have made 76 assists throughout the last 4 seasons. Trent leads the overall tally with 41 to Robbo's 35, but the left-back has more Premier League assists, with 33 to Trent's 31.

The pushing up fullbacks allowed Liverpool's front three to stand narrow in the center and make the opposition's defenders busy; when one striker dropped deep, one midfielder could join the forwards' line.



In this example, Arnold had possession on the right, and he was ready to switch sides. Manè dropped back to support him for a potential pass. Robertson pushed up along the left flank. Firmino and Salah could stand in the center and make 4 opponents busy to create numerical superiority in the center, as Keità joined the front teammates. Then, Arnold could switch the side for Robertson toward the left side.

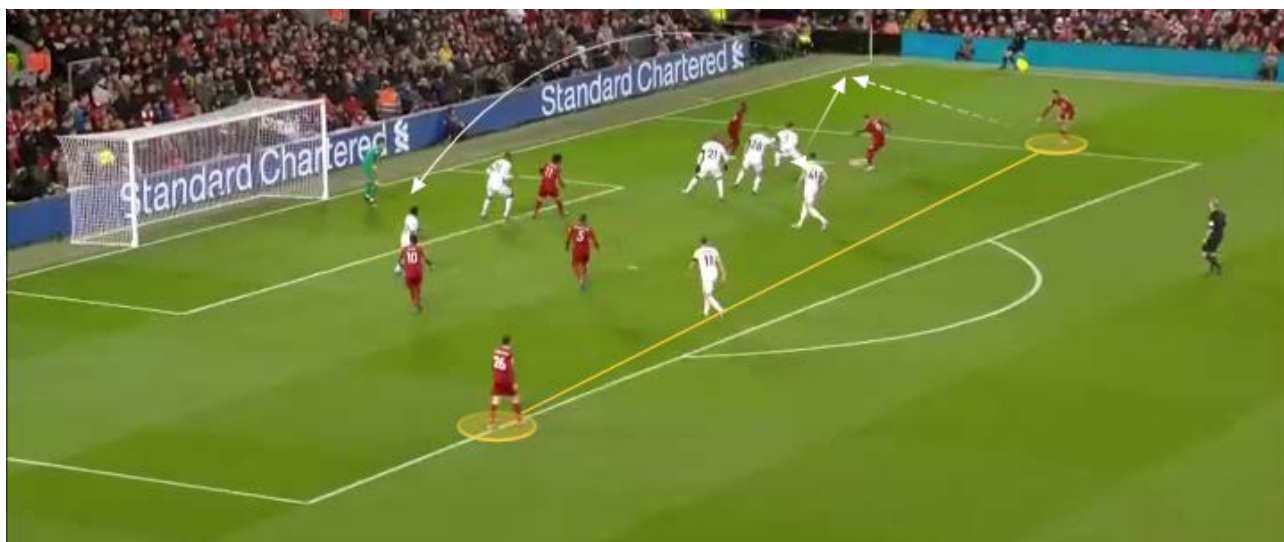
Arnold and Robertson constantly both attacked the opposition's final third.



Arnold played a cross pass to the opposition's penalty area for Firmino, who scored. Robertson supported the move along the left, and Wijnaldum joined the attacking position, as Salah had previously dropped back in the middle third.



Arnold and Robertson's attacking positions were also crucial to win the second ball high up in the final third.



In this example, Liverpool attacked in numbers; Firmino attempted a shot, but the defenders rebounded it out wide; the high position of the right fullback allowed to win the ball back quickly along the right flank, anticipating the closest defender near the ball.



Arnold attacked the ball, played a cross pass back inside the penalty area, and Liverpool could exploit the previous attacking shape inside the penalty area; Wijnaldum anticipated the defenders and scored, heading the ball to the goal. Robertson shifted across to win a potential other second time of the ball just out of penalty area.



Liverpool's attacking fullbacks often joined the strikers' line when the center back dribbled the ball higher up in the field to exploit the opposition's deep defensive shapes.



In this example, Gomez dribbled the ball to the final third, Salah dropped back, and Arnold exploited the space behind the last defender of the line, receiving a pass over the opponents' line. Robertson remained deeper along the flank as the center back, and all the midfielders joined the strikers.



Arnold received in front of the goalkeeper, who left the line, and he played a cross pass toward the center where Mané met the ball in front of the empty goal, and he scored.

Robertson usually did the same along the left flank



Shaqiri played a through pass for Robertson behind the defensive line between the opposition's right center back and fullback. Salah arched his run around the left center back, and he attacked the opposition's goal.



Robertson received, and he played a ground cross pass for Salah to shot and score, facing the opposition's goal.

Anyway, the offensive way to support the moves in the final third was very similar on both sides.



In this example, Liverpool overloaded the attacking left flank and the penalty area, and the opposition had to defend deep inside the 18 yds. box. Robertson was free to manage the ball along the left flank and play along with an aerial cross over the defensive line behind the last opposite defender.



Shaqiri could score with a one-touch shot in front of the goal after moving through the blind side of the opponent, and Arnold supported the attacking move shifting across to win potential second times of the ball.

When Liverpool condensed the center, the fullbacks always found space to receive and play assist passes.



In this example, Firmino dropped back, Keità, Manè, and Salah overloaded the center inside zone 14. Milner, who played as a right fullback in this situation, pushed high together with Robertson. The left fullback received free from pressure, and he could play a ground cross pass to the second post of the goal for Salah, who scored free in front of the goal. The striker could exploit his position behind the defensive line, as the left fullback pushed up and receive diagonal deep through the pass from Keità.

## Where Does Liverpool Score?

All Competitions

	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16
% Danger Zone	88.7%	77.0%	77.2%	73.5%
% Wide Box	7.0%	10.4%	8.7%	8.2%
% Out Box	4.3%	12.6%	14.1%	18.4%
Penalties	11	4	7	5
Total Goals	115	135	92	98
Goals per Game	2.17	2.41	1.96	1.56

• Danger Zone = Six-yard Box + Center of the Penalty Area

The Champions League winning season stats show how Liverpool became so efficient in scoring goals by shooting on goal from the smaller area and the center of the biggest area. 88,7% of goals came from that areas, as all the images we have included in this last chapter prove.



## Joao Cancelo study case: a peculiar attacking right or left fullback at Manchester City under Pep Guardiola.

To define Joao Cancelo as a fullback is hard and reductive, and Pep Guardiola had made him a better player, as he always does. This 2020/2021 season Cancelo has become a sort of joker, or we may say he is a "half-space/wings" invader along the right and the left channels; he is another "inverted fullback" for Guardiola, after Phillip Lahm or David Alaba, or Fabian Delph and Alexander Zichenko at Manchester City. The heat map of three games can prove his flexibility:



### 1. Left attacking fullback against Manchester United



In this situation, Cancelo received a classic position for a fullback when his team builds up from the back, despite turning his body toward the center as the right-footed player often does when playing along the left flank.



When City had to distribute at the back, Cancelo helped create numerical superiority near the ball shifting across.



Rodri and Walker were under pressure in this situation, and Cancelo supported the center backs to create numerical superiority and make the possession safe.



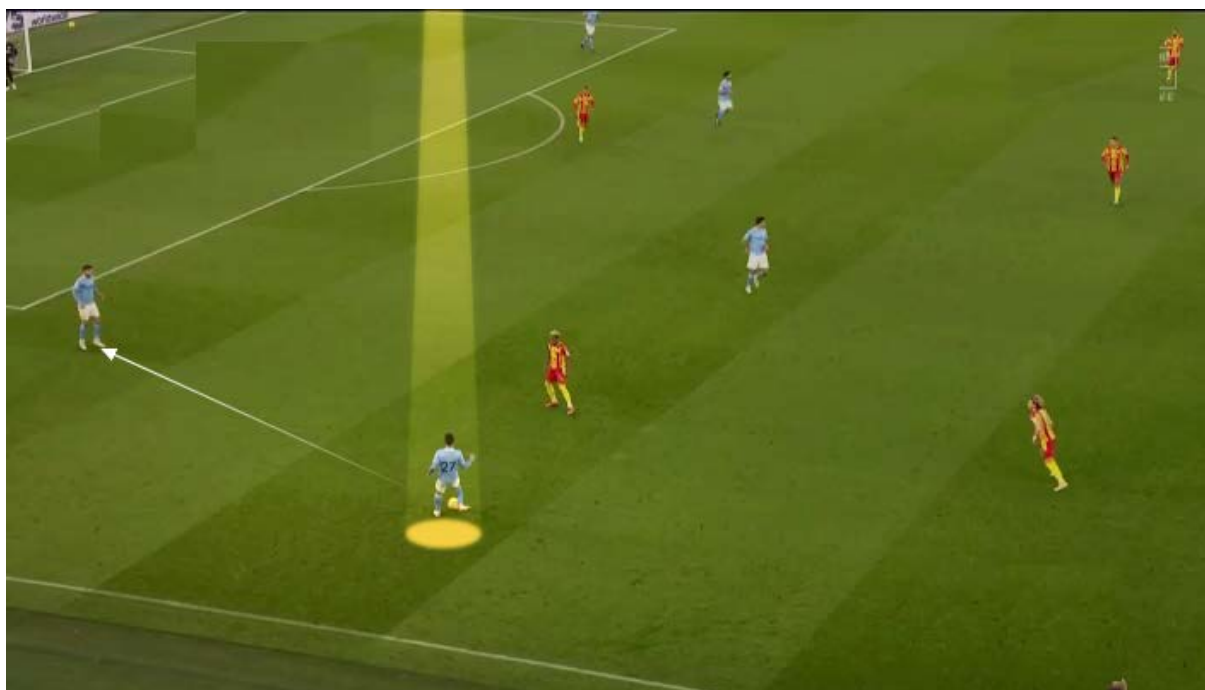
As City could play out from the pressure, Cancelo helped the movement's progression; he passed to Kevin de Bruyne higher up along the left flank, overcoming the opposition's second line of pressure.

## 2. Right advanced midfielder inside the half-space against West Bromwich Albion

Cancelo is very good at alternating the positions as a classic and inverted fullback.



In this first example, he played a triangular passing combination with De Bruyne, receiving the return pass inside the penalty area after exploiting the outside-inside positions concerning the attacking right half-space.

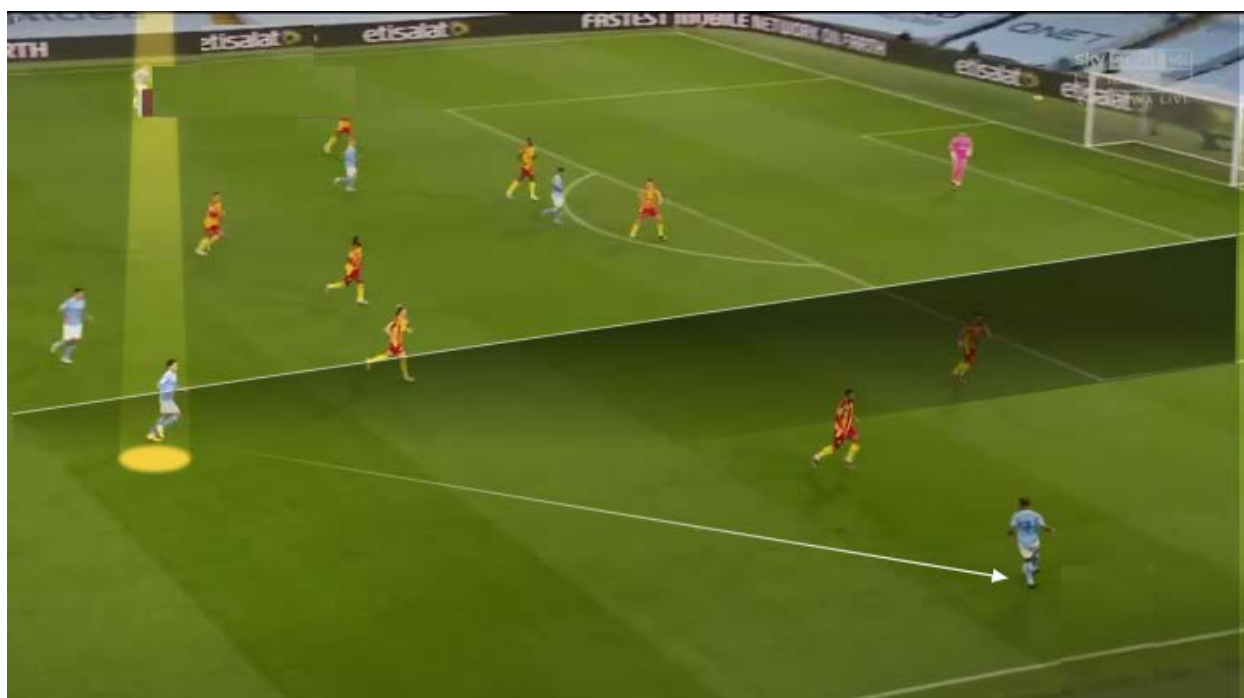


In this second example, Cancelo took part in the building-up phase as a classic right fullback to provide a wide passing option and move the opposition's first pressure line.



He stands inside the suitable half-space during the same possession phase to concentrate the opposition's defensive line in the center and free the flanks.

When the wingers or strikers, after shifting wide, provide width to City's attacking shape, Cancelo acts as an inverted fullback



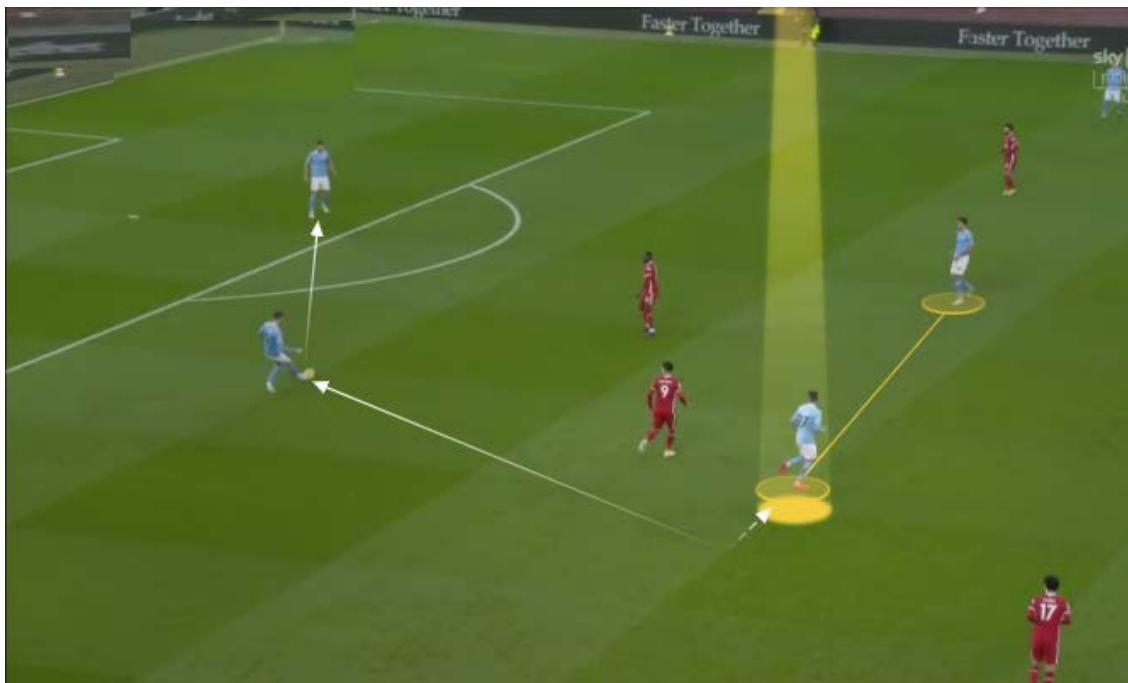
He passed out wide to Gabriel Jesus from the right half-space in this example.

### 3. Right defensive fullback against Liverpool

His performance in the away 1-4 win at Anfield against Liverpool was one of the best after he arrived at the light blue side of Manchester. Cancelo could play as an inverted fullback during possession phases and complete the backline of four after losses of possession.

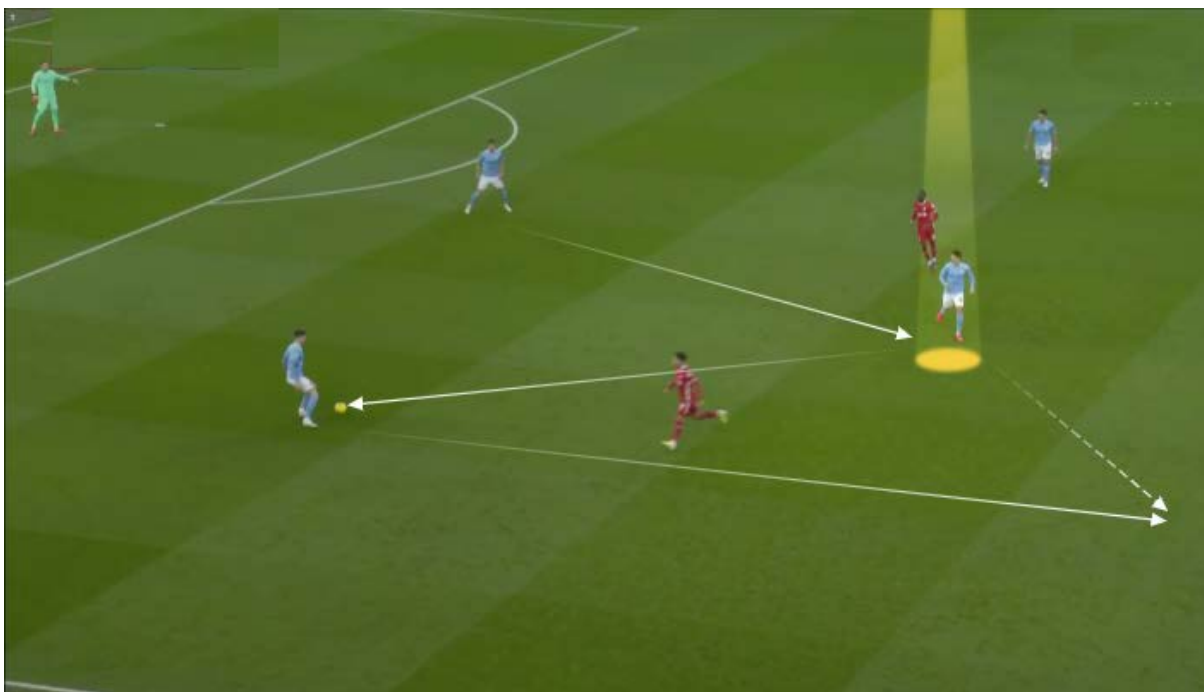


Cancelo invited the pressure of Salah, in this sequence standing in the center and freeing the right center back to receive from the goalkeeper; if Salah had pushed higher up, he would have become a passing option to overcome the line of pressure. Thus, stones could receive free from pressure.



Here again, he helped the distribution phase and then moved to be a center passing option at the other side of the opposition's first pressure line. The following sequence is a crucial example of his role at Manchester City.





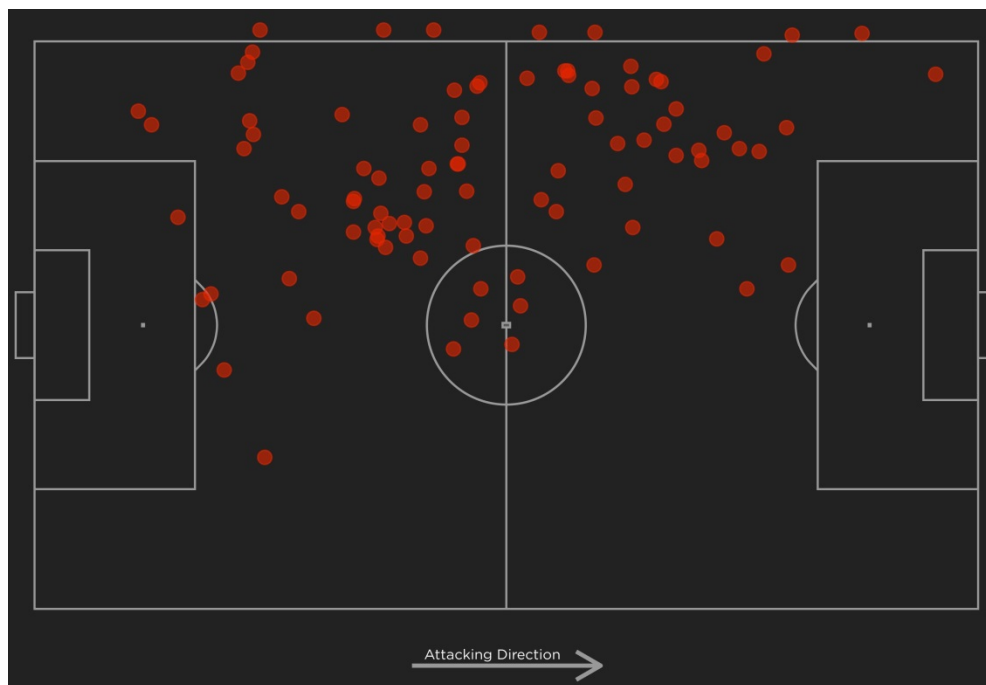
The team built up from the back. He played a triangular passing combination with the right center back after receiving from the left one, overcoming the opposition's first pressure line (Salah and Manè.)



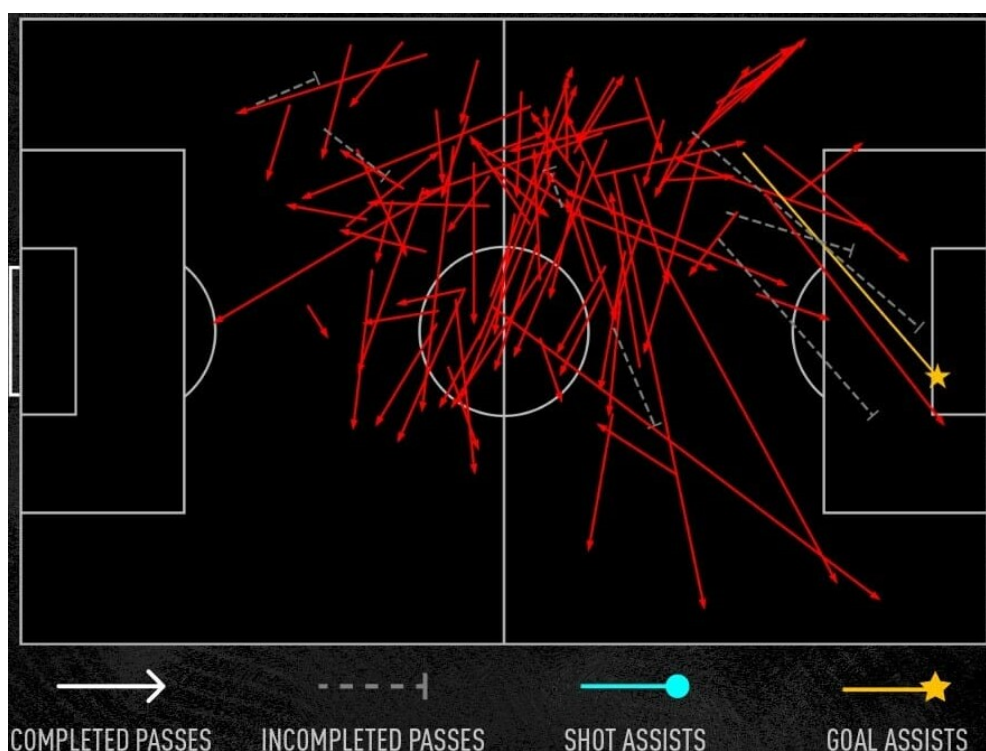
As City lost the possession, Canelo dropped immediately back to complete the backline of four. The left attacking midfielder and the left inverted winger Mahrez provide pressure against the opposition's ball carrier.

4. Center-left fullback for the Champions League round-robin match against Borussia Mönchengladbach

(The following 2 pictures are the receptions' points along the left flank and half-space and the direction of passes Cancelo performed during that match.)



The tendency to play from the flank to the center and overload the left attacking half-space is clear.



The results were two assists for the scores of the only 2 goals which City needed to ensure the three away points

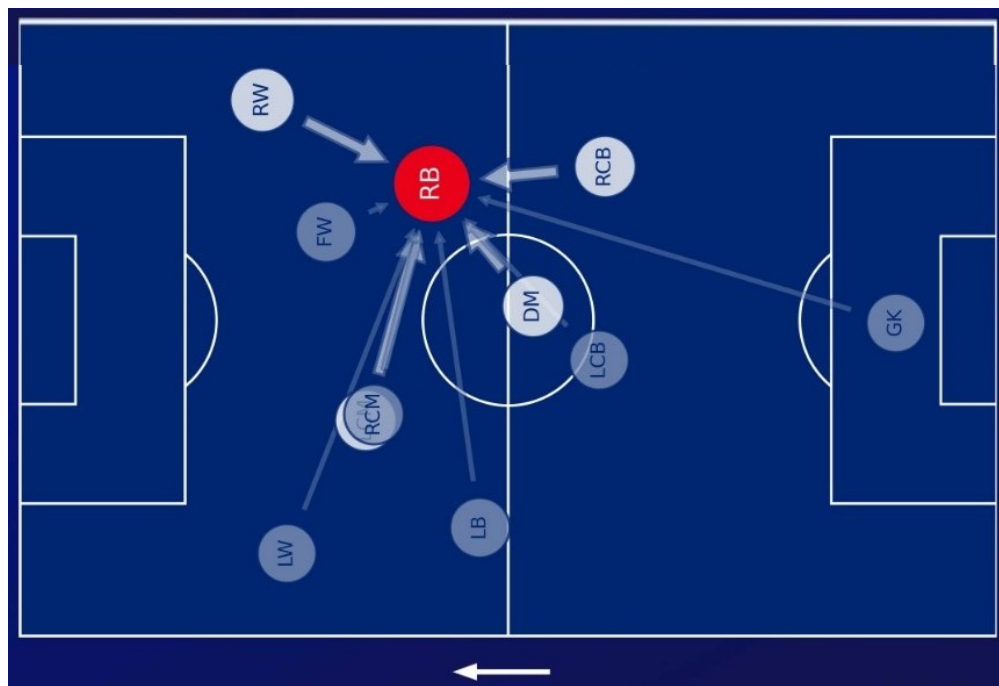


In the first goal, Cancelo won a second time of the ball inside the half-space, he dribbled the ball out wide toward the touchline, and he could then dribble it back inside before playing a decisive aerial pass toward the far post for a teammate who headed the ball and scored.

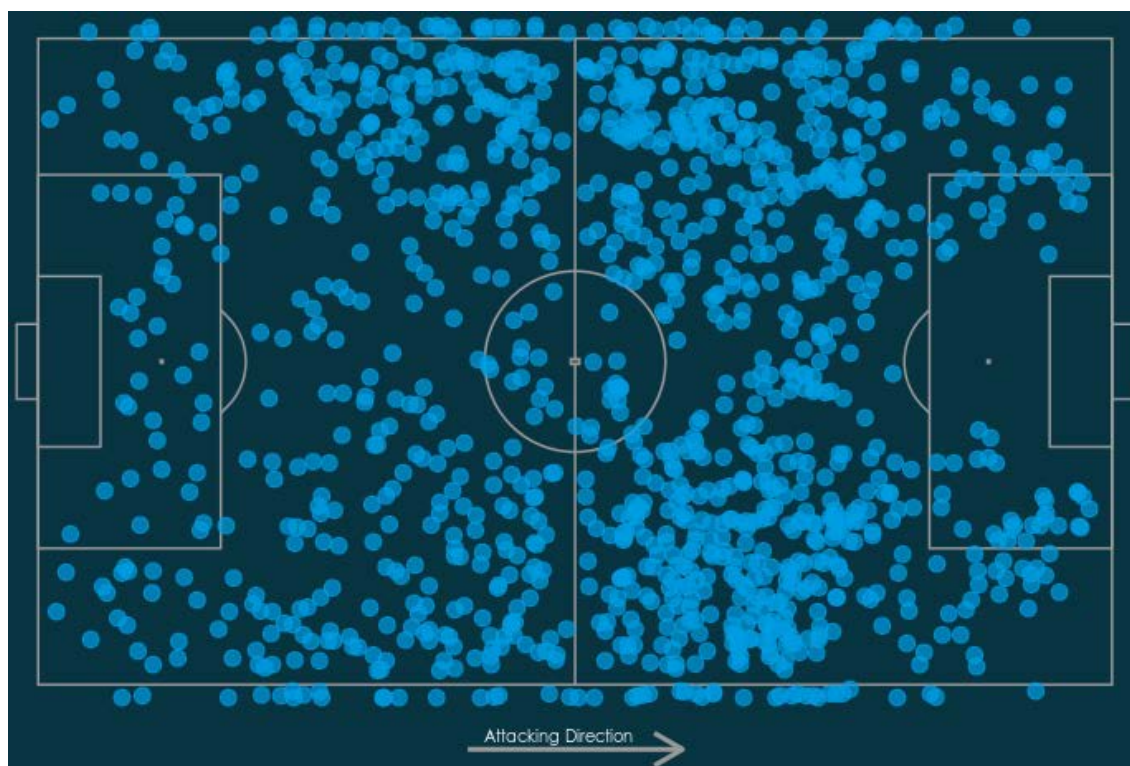


In the second example, he supported the left inverted winger Sterling, who passed back. Cancelo received and played another diagonal cross pass to the far post for a teammate to receive and play a ground pass for the attacking midfielder.

5. He also played as a right play-maker inside the half-space in a winning match against Burnely, as his passing network map shows:

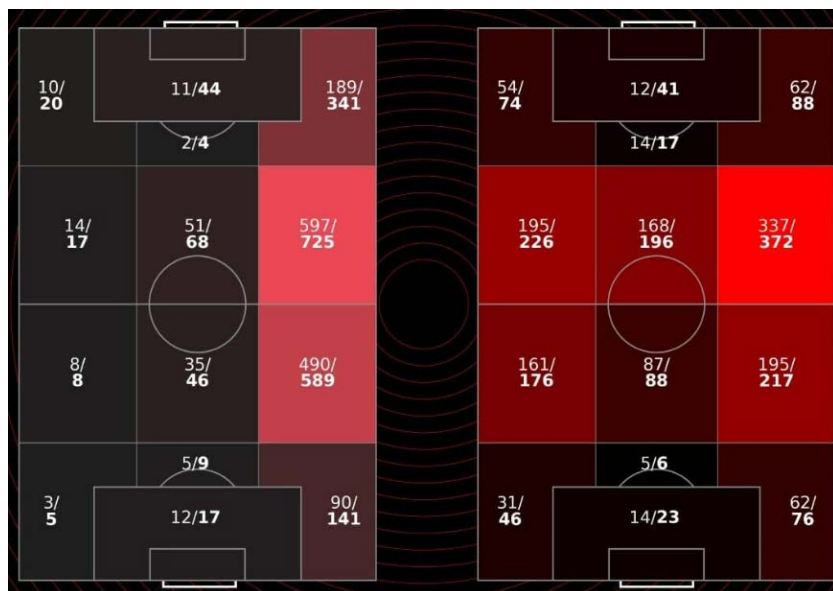


His average map of touches in Premier League seems more a "Total Player" map rather than a fullback's one:

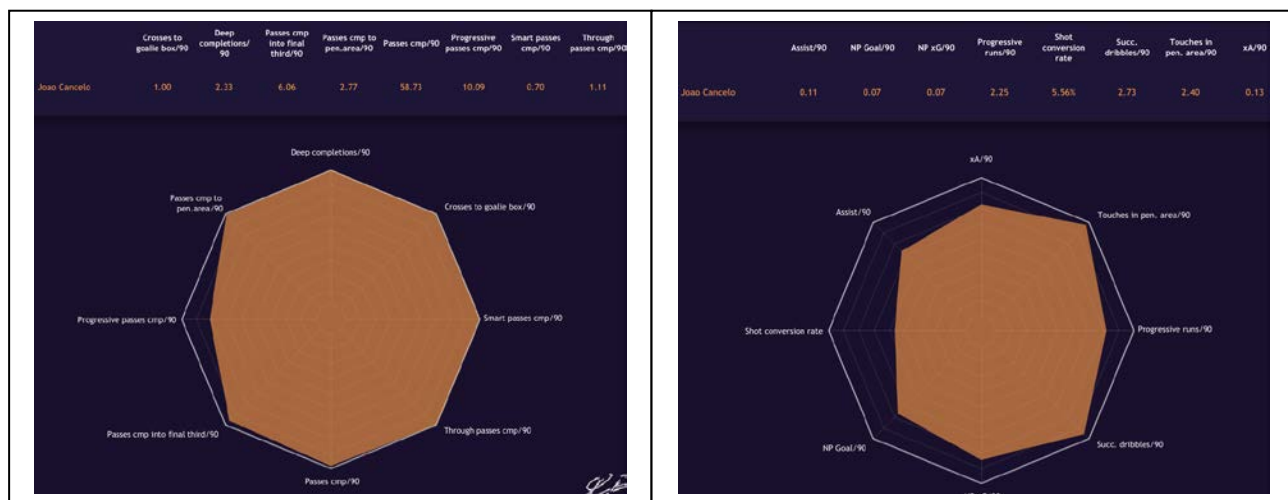




A comparison with Trent Alexander Arnold touches' map of this last 2020/2021 makes everything clear:



His possession and attacking stats confirm Cancelo as a "Total Attacking Player," who "also plays as a fullback along the right and the left flanks."



During this last 2020/2021 season, Cancelo has had passing stats as a midfielder and offensive stats as a second striker playing behind a target teammate.

- 58,73 passes per game
- 6.06 passes to the final third per game
- 10.09 progressive passes per game
- 2.33 deep completion
- 2.77 passes to the opposition's penalty area
- 2.73 successful dribbles per game
- 2.4 touches in the penalty areas per game
  - 2.25 progressive runs per game
  - 0.11 assist per game
- 5.56 shot conversion rate of his attacking moves

## Summary

This book aims to be an overview of a fullback's role through time and give an idea about the evolution of the role and positions of a fullback when his team has the possession using concrete examples.

I have briefly analyzed some of the most crucial and famous fullbacks of the modern era and the last decades; some others are indeed missing, but those included have had and have a deep influence in the role's developments, apart from coaches they have worked with and the team they have played for.

The main points and players I have looked at are:

- The origin of the role and the developments
- The most crucial attacking fullbacks of soccer history
- Giacinto Facchetti at Internazionale Milan during the 60s
- Carlos Alberto: the right fullback of the Brazilian National Team at Mexico 1970 World Cup
- Leandro and Junior: the right and left fullbacks of the most outstanding Brazilian National Team ever at Spain 1982 World Cup, although they didn't win the title
- Marcos Cafù at San Paolo, Roma, and Milan during the 90s and the early 2000s
- Roberto Carlos at Real Madrid during the same times
- Daniel Alves at Barcelona under Pep Guardiola
- Maicon Douglas Sisenando at Mourinho's Internazionale Milan at the end of the first decade of the 2000s
- Trent Alexander Arnold and Andrew Robertson, the pushing up fullbacks of Klopp's Liverpool
- Joao Cancelo at Manchester City under Pep Guardiola

The conclusions say only one thing by my side; nearly all the best-attacking fullbacks of soccer history have played or are playing in Europe. They were or are Brazilian, even if the first attacking fullback was Italian. He played for Helenio Herrera's Internazionale and Ferruccio Valcareggi's Italian National Team, shaped with the "Catenaccio" formation's shape, the defensive system par excellence.