

THE ROLE OF THE
FULLBACK

DEFENDING



by LUCA BERTOLINI

The Role of the Fullbacks (Defending)

By

Luca Bertolini

Published by
WORLD CLASS COACHING

First published July 2021 by
WORLD CLASS COACHING 4015 N 78th Street #120, Scottsdale, AZ 85251

Copyright © WORLD CLASS COACHING 2021

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Authors – Luca Bertolini
Editor - Mike Saif
Cover Art By - Barrie Smith

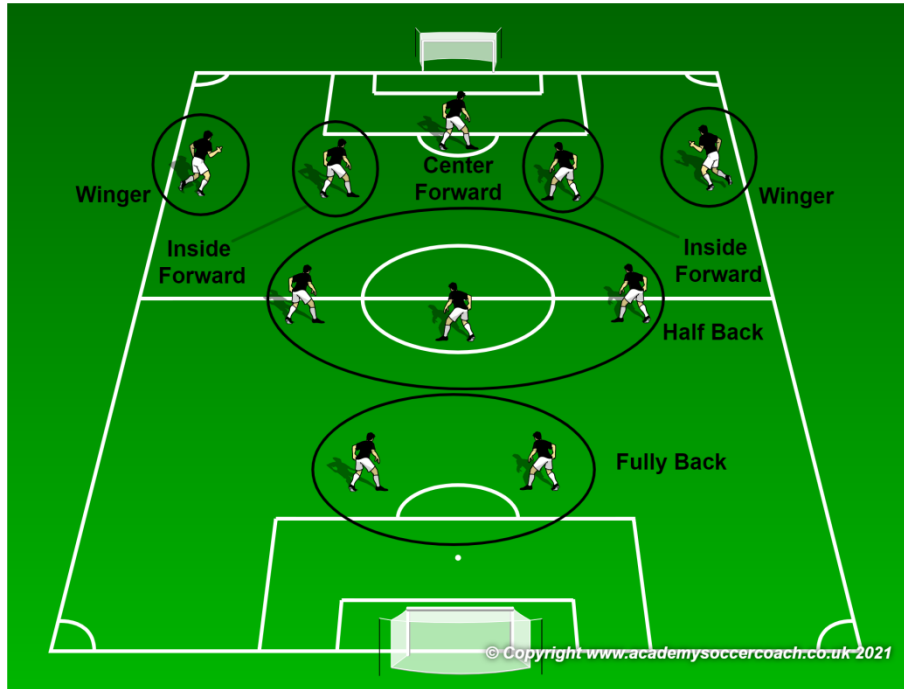


Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction: the fullbacks were defensive players at the beginning of soccer history | 3 |
| Paolo Maldini: the king of the defensive fullbacks at the time of Arrigo Sacchi's Ac Milan | 6 |
| The types of modern fullbacks and their defensive heat-maps | 11 |
| Jordan Henderson | 12 |
| Georginio Wijnaldum | 15 |
| The role of the fullbacks in Simeone's Atletico Madrid back 4 and 5 defense, alternating their positions as fullbacks and wingbacks | 17 |
| Daniel Simpson and Christian Fuchs | 25 |
| Phillip Lahm and David Alaba | 37 |
| Joao Cancelo | 45 |
| Olexander Zichenko | 50 |
| Kyle Walker | 56 |
| Alphonso Davis at Bayern Munich 2019/2020 – 2020/2021 | 60 |
| Aaron Wan-Bissaka at Manchester United 2020/2021 | 66 |
| Summary | 70 |

Introduction: the fullbacks were defensive players at the beginning of soccer history

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...



Paolo Maldini: the king of the defensive fullbacks at the time of Arrigo Sacchi's Ac Milan

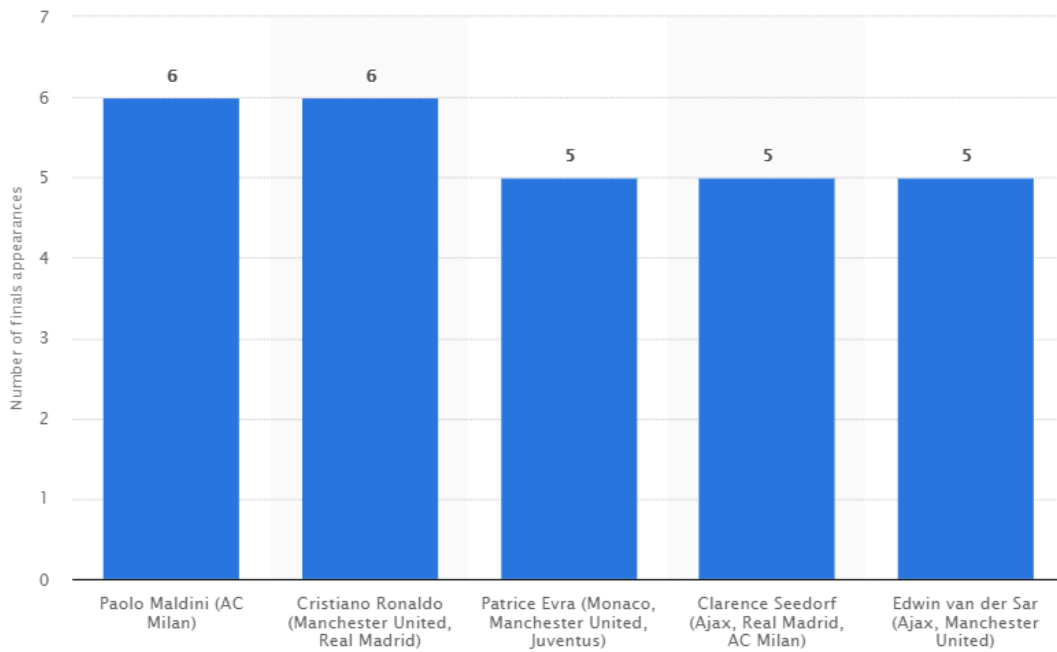


Although he spent the last seasons of his long career as a center back, Paolo Maldini had been the best defensive left fullback of his generation between the 80s and the 90s of the last century. He was also a great center back after his 30 ages thanks to his excellent defensive skills.

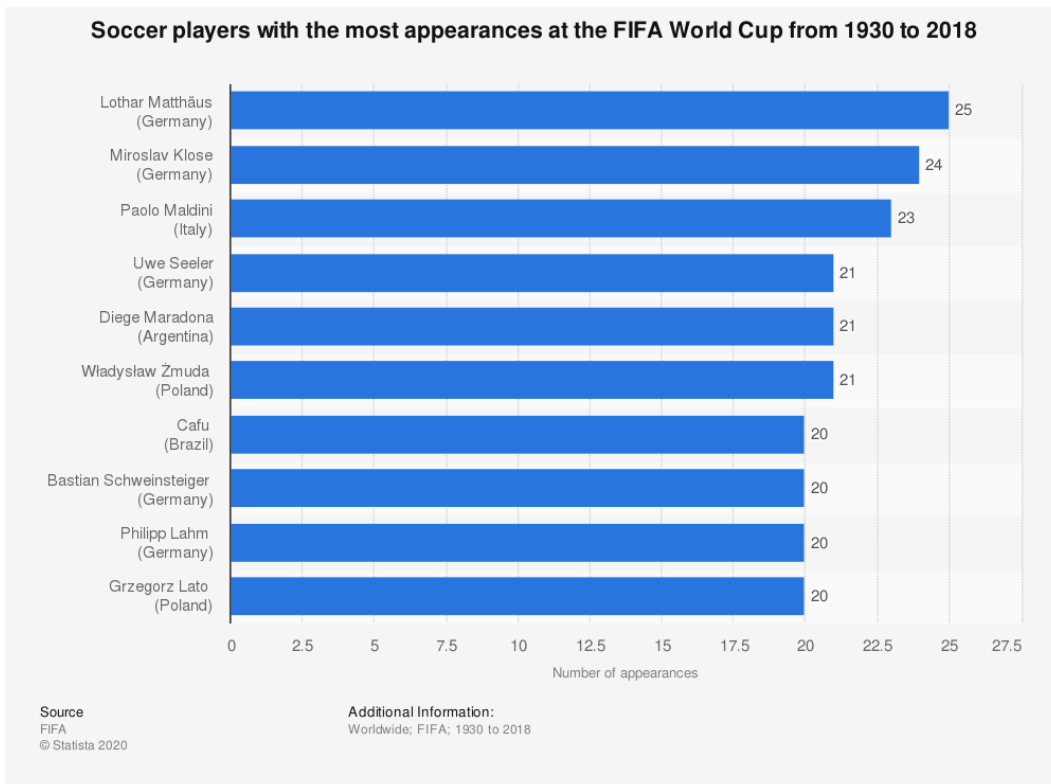
Maldini played his first match ever on the 20th January 1985 when we were just 16 years old, and he would have been playing for the same team (Ac. Milan) other 901 times before retiring on 31st May 2009. He also played 126 times for the Italian National Team (other 13 times for U21 National Team, and 1 for the Olympic one), being the captain. Therefore, the total amount of played matches is 1028.



Paolo Maldini is also the record holder of the highest appearances in a Champions League final together with Cristiano Ronaldo.



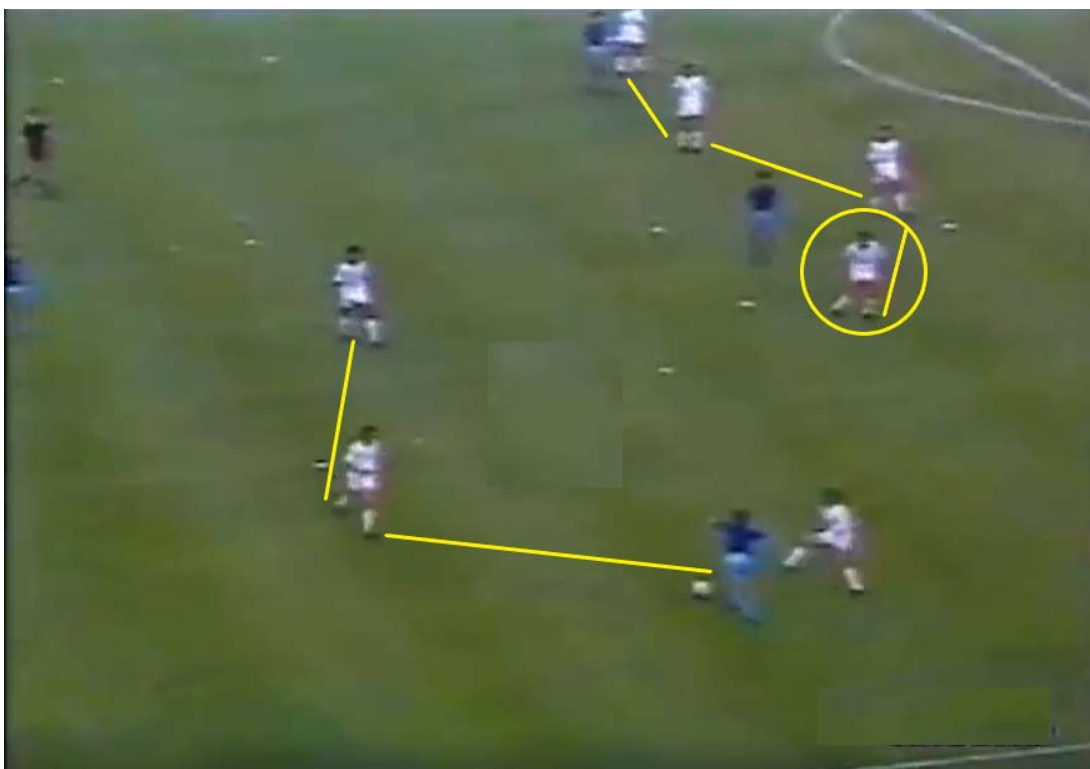
He won everything with his club repeatedly, but he was unfortunate as he could only be runner up in the 1994 World Cup, despite being one of the players with the highest number of appearances in a World Cup and 2000 European Championship finals with Italy.



After the first seasons of his career, from 1987 to 1991, Maldini was the left fullback of one of the best defensive lines of soccer history and in one of the best teams of soccer history, the Arrigo Sacchi's Ac Milan. Those players together made a sort of symphony, when they were spoken one after the other: Tassotti (right center back), **Maldini**, [...], Costacurta (stopper/center back), Baresi (center-back / libero).



That defense represented a turning point for the Italian way of defending, from man-marking tactics to the zonal marking where every player was responsible for a portion of space.



Furthermore, Maldini was also part of the team's tactical innovations, which weren't really seen in Italy and also in Europe before: middle third sector pressure and narrow team's lines
Milan often forced the opponents to go long from the first and final thirds



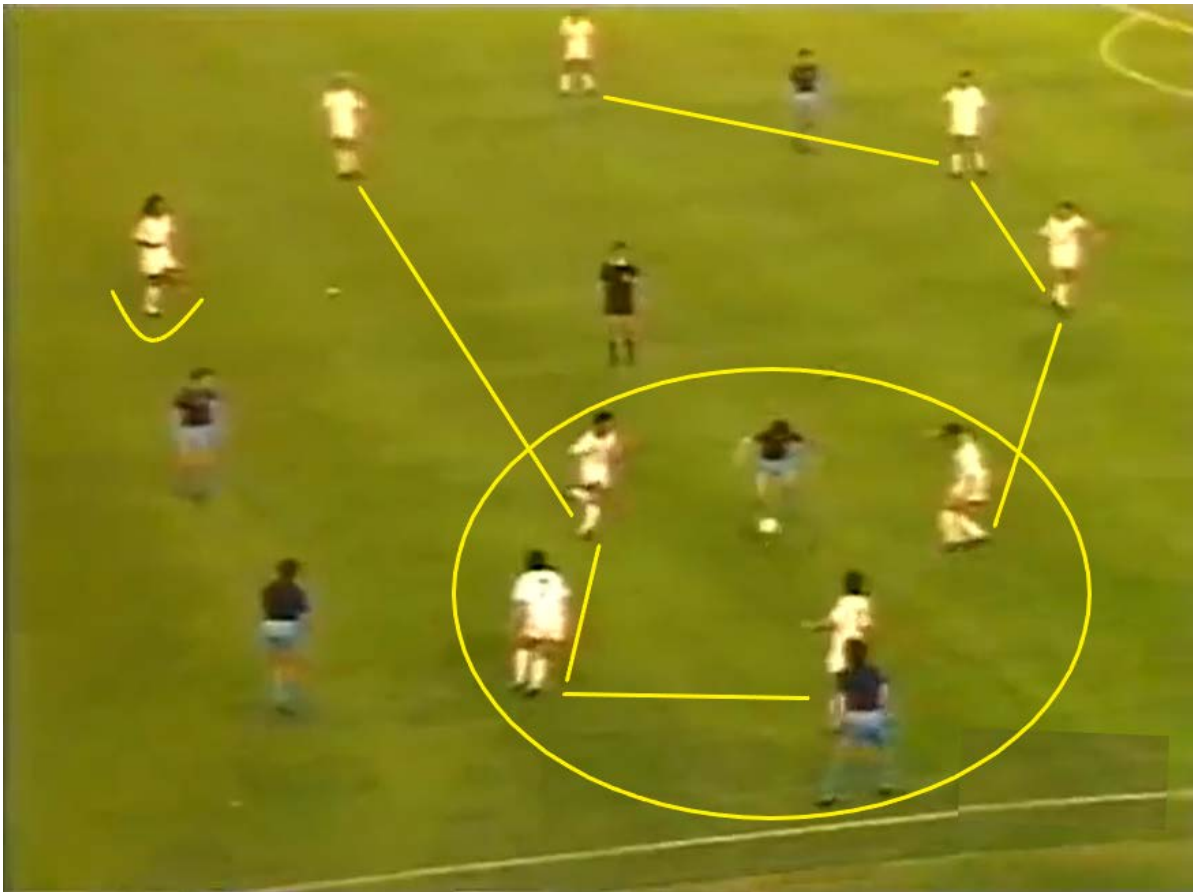
In this example, Maldini attacked the aerial ball at the left part of the field. The quality of the defenders allowed the team to accept 1 v 1 duels at the back; a 4 v 4 along the backline was evident in this picture.

Milan also attacked the open balls that usually should be covered retreating.



In this example, Maldini, Donadoni, and Ancelotti attacked the ball carrier despite being turned toward the opposition's goal. The center back, Franco Baresi, tracked the potential receiver behind Maldini.

The Italian coach required his players to create a defensive shape not longer than 27 yards from the defenders to the striker and stay compact along the lines.



Paolo Maldini may also be considered the player who has lived the turn from the old fullback to the modern fullback, from the period between the included fullbacks in the 1-4-4-2 and the born of modern 1-4-2-3-1 or 1-4-3-3. Of course, the 1-3-5-2 could also be part of this evolution, but wingbacks are commonly considered "one-man flank players," but for the ultra-defensive 1-5-4-1.

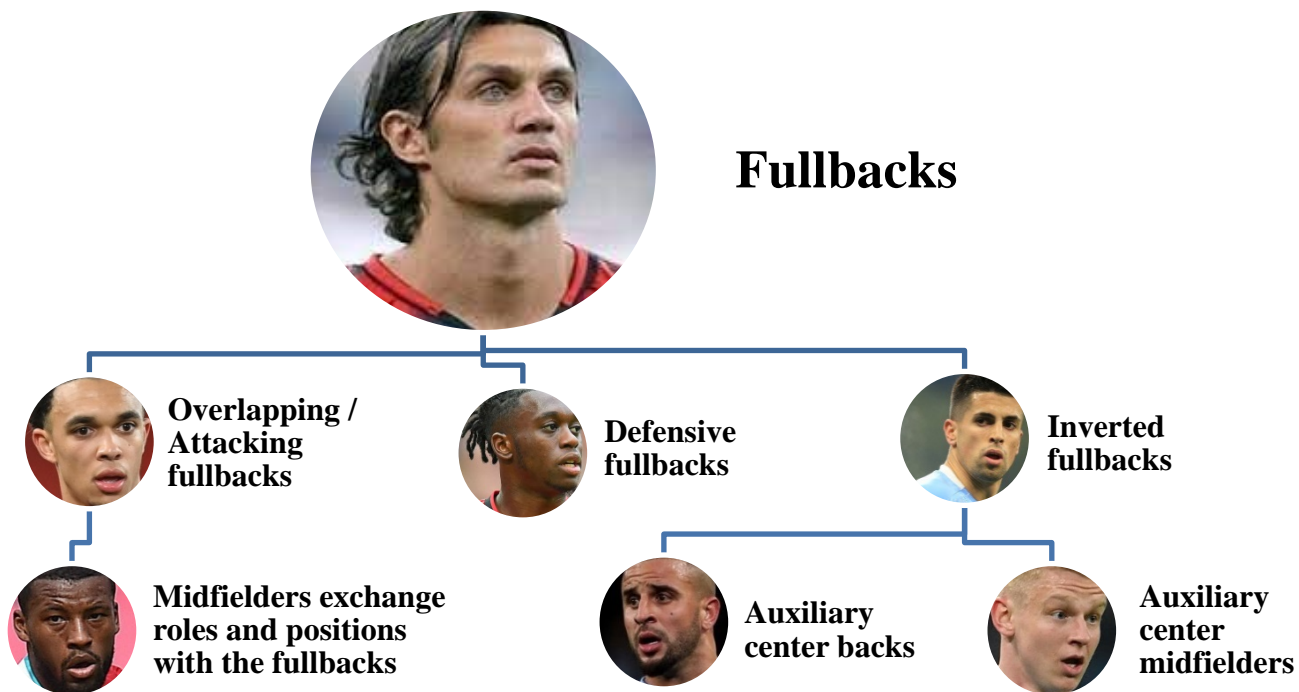
Usually, the fullbacks are the lower wide players in a back 4 formation, and the wingbacks are the wide players of a 3-men center defensive shape and a 3-men midfield shape. However, considering the further evolution of soccer after early 2000, even the fullbacks developed their play style and defensive phase.

Soccer has become a "liquid organization sport," and the system of play aren't so fixed and rigid anymore; the fullbacks are now entirely parts of offensive and defensive phases (and of transitions), and the attacking fullbacks have also created players who take their role during defensive phases shifting wide and exchanging the positions, after the loss of possession. Therefore, the fullbacks are nowadays various types of players:

- Overlapping / Attacking players
- Guardiola introduced the inverted fullbacks
- Auxiliary center-backs or midfielders
- Pure defensive fullbacks

The types of modern fullbacks and their defensive heat-maps

From an offensive point of view, apart from their individual technical and tactical skills, there are 2 types of fullbacks: the overlapping and the attacking fullbacks, as Arnold and Robertson at Liverpool under Jürgen Klopp, and the inverted fullbacks, as Lahm and Alaba at Bayern Munich and Fabian Delph, Kyle Walker, Joao Cancelo or Alexander Zinchenko at Manchester City under Pep Guardiola.



The overlapping/attacking fullbacks often require teammates to cover them behind to cover the spaces along the flanks and prevent the opponents from counter-attacking. The best examples of this kind of player are Georgino Wijnaldum and Jordan Henderson covering Trent Alexander Arnold and Andrew Robertson. They often push up along the flanks in Liverpool's attacking style.

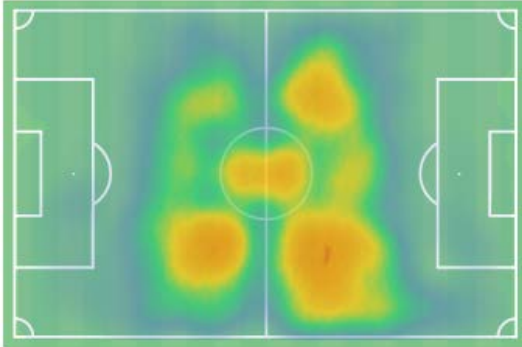
The defensive fullbacks require teammates along the flank to develop possession phases and attack; some older examples are the fullbacks in the back 4 defense of Simeone's Atletico Madrid or Wan-Bissaka for Manchester United or Dani Simpson and Christian Fuchs in Claudio Ranieri's Premier League unbelievable winning 2015/2016 campaign at Leicester City.

When a fullback becomes inverted during the possession phases, he can become an auxiliary center back or center midfielder concerning the position and play situation. Sometimes, the same inverted fullback becomes a defensive fullback shifting out when he joins the defensive phase. Thinking about Bayern Munich's seasons under Pep Guardiola, Phillip Lahm and David Alaba joined the holding midfielder to shape a line of three behind the attacking line; otherwise, Fabian Delph, Alexander Zinchenko, and Joao Cancelo become auxiliary midfielders, Kyle Walker usually become auxiliary defender from an "inverted fullback" positions.

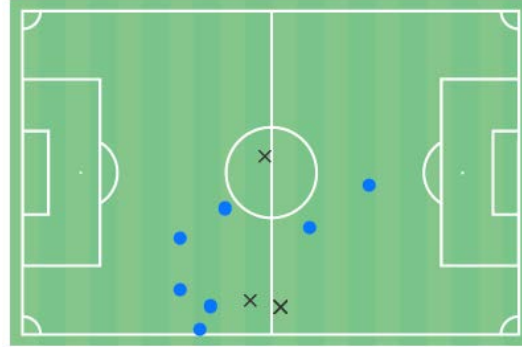
Their heat maps confirm their crucial positions and roles in a different play style before different play systems.

Jordan Henderson

Seasonal heat-map (Premier League + Champions League 2018/2019)

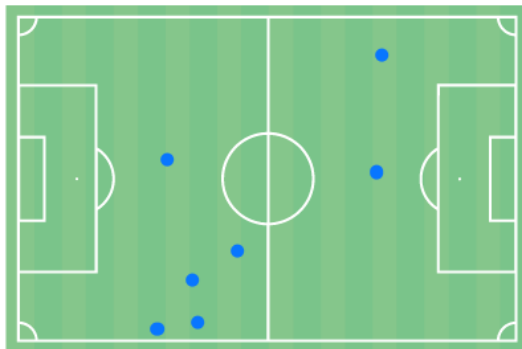


Defensive duels (Liverpool 4 – 0 Barcelona)

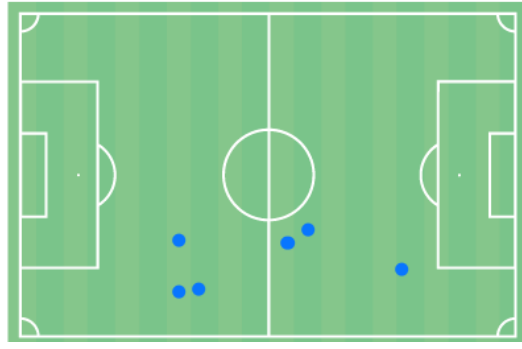


● Won ■ Neutral × Lost

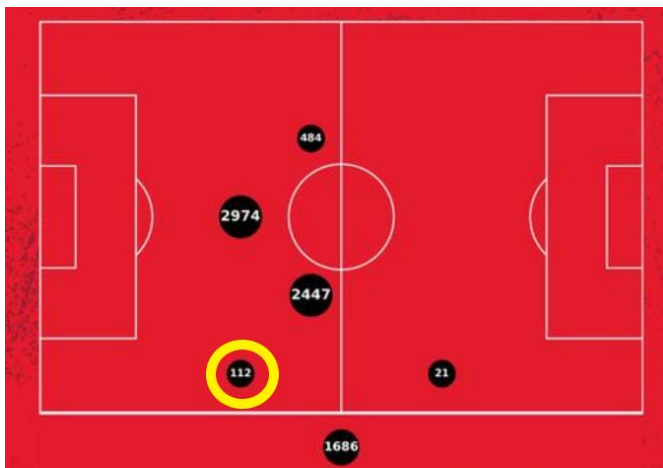
Interceptions (Liverpool 4 – 0 Barcelona)



Recoveries (Liverpool 4 – 0 Barcelona)



The darker color along the right side of the field in the heat-map shows the tendency of the wide midfielder to patrol the same areas that the right fullback usually played through. Furthermore, taking the second round of the 2019 Champions League semi-final against Barcelona, almost all the defensive duels, interceptions, and recoveries were made at the right side of the field, and some of them deeper in the field to cover the pushing up fullbacks.



The picture beside here shows the minutes that Jordan Henderson has spent in the field from 2017 till June 2020. He has played as a center midfielder and as a right midfielder near the holding one.

The 112' are those he has spent covering Alexander Arnold along the right flank.

The next few footages clearly explained Henderson's role when Liverpool attacked, apart from the occasional overlapping actions of the wide midfielders.



In this situation, Henderson passed to Arnold, who completed five attackers with Shaqiri, Firmino, and Origi. He then stands behind the fullback to cover him instead of overlapping beside him. Henderson stands along the midfield's line, but he was ready to drop deeper and act as a right fullback.

In this defensive situation, Liverpool lost possession in the final third along the right side. As the fullback pushed up before Liverpool attacked, he pushed even higher to not create space in front of the ball carrier.



The right fullback Arnold immediately counter-pressed the left opposition's left fullback. Henderson dropped deeper diagonally toward the touchline to cover him and mark the opposition's striker, the first and easiest passing option ball's carrier.



Henderson dropped deep along the flank, and Fabinho, the holding midfielder, dropped deeper to double the mark against the opposition's striker. Both covered the flank in the middle third, as Arnold pushed up before, and he couldn't cover his natural position.

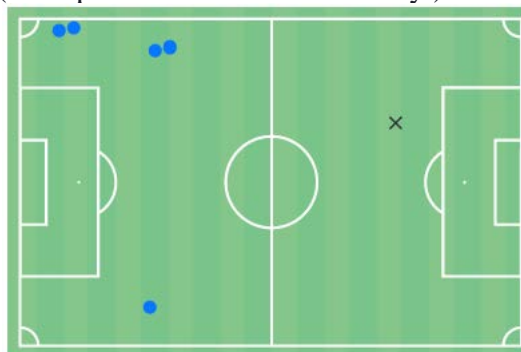
Georginio Wijnaldum

Like Henderson usually did along the right side, the Dutch player covered Robertson alongside the left flank, apart from combining with him during the possession phases.

Seasonal heat-map (Premier League + Champions League 2019/2020)

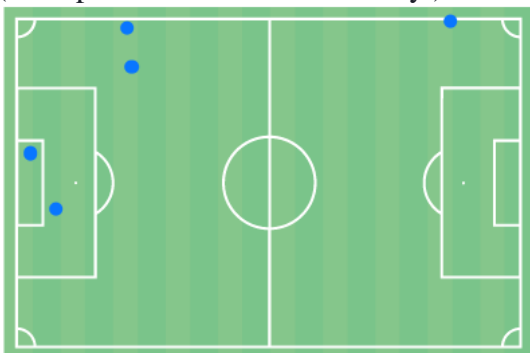


Defensive duels (Liverpool 3 – 1 Manchester City)

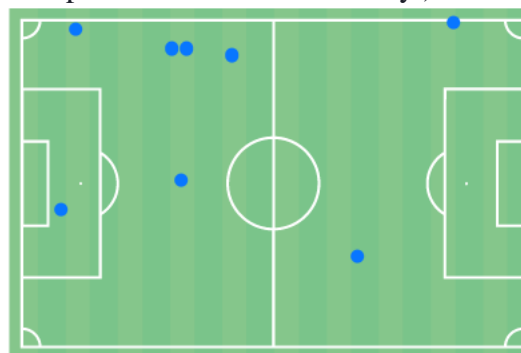


● Won ■ Neutral × Lost

Interceptions (Liverpool 3 – 1 Manchester City)



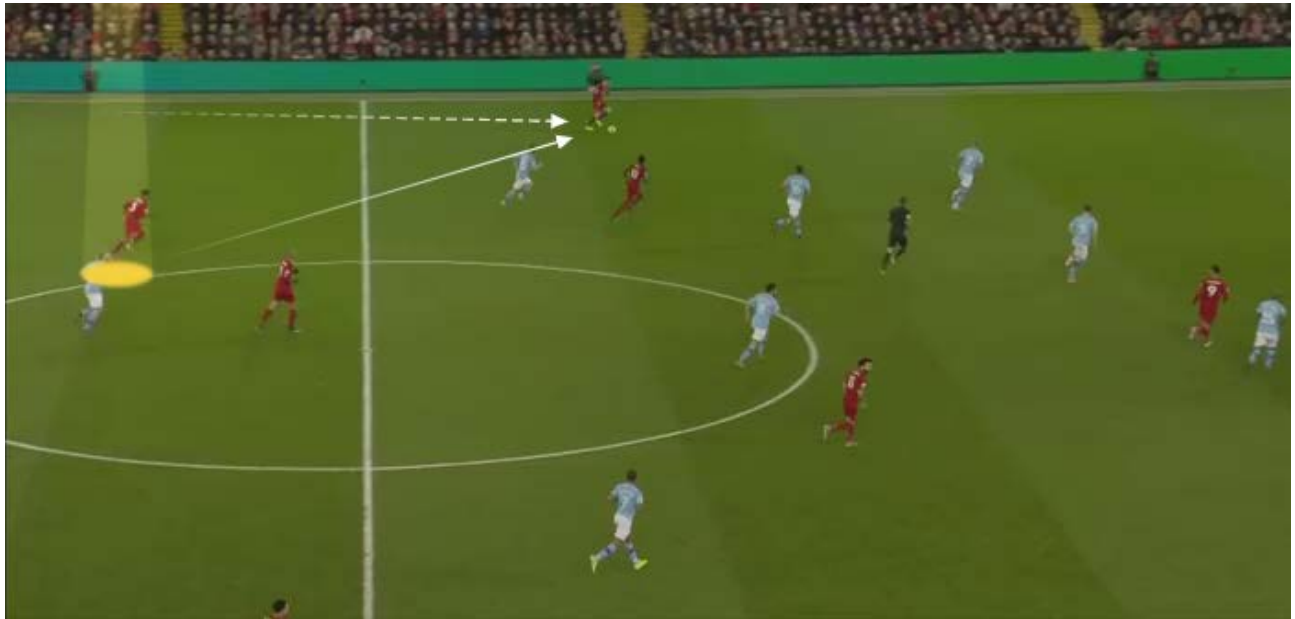
Recoveries (Liverpool 3 – 1 Manchester City)



The heat map and the condensation of defensive actions along the left flank show that the midfielder was particularly active near the touchline to cover the pushing up fullbacks, often passing him the ball before taking defensive position inside the half-space behind him.



Wijnaldum's role and position were similar to Henderson's one on the right, along the left.



In this example, Wijnaldum passes out wide for Robertson to push up alongside the flank and exploit the space where the front three forces the opposition's defensive shape to open.



In this second example, Robertson received an aerial switch of side, and Wijnaldum supported his action behind him. Still, he also stands deeper to cover his position to prevent gaps in the middle third.

The role of the fullbacks in Simeone's Atletico Madrid back 4 and 5 defense, alternating their positions as fullbacks and wingbacks

Luis Suarez's sign has changed the style of play of "Atleti"; the new center striker whom Barcelona left free last summer is quite good in aerial duels, but his real point of strength is to playground balls. Diego Costa, who finished his contract, and Alvaro Morata, who played this season on loan at Juventus, are different. Apart from the increase of offensive fluidity and efficacy, thanks to Correa, Joao Felix, and Luis Suarez, the increased tendency of the fullbacks to support the attacking move seems to be in contrast with the decrease of Ppda metric average (12.3 against 10.35 in 2019/2020), Cholo's lower wide players remain defensive fullbacks, and, from this season, wingbacks, as the 3 men at the back have started to appear, alternating players like Trippier, Carrasco, and Lodi. The low defensive blocks are still very familiar to all Atelti's players, and the fullbacks are not exceptions.

Atletico Madrid only conceded 25 goals against the 40.26 xGA (0.13 per shot against). This is an example of formations to face Real Valladolid, the last win which has just given Atletico La Liga title



No.22: Hermoso - No.21: Carrasco - No.23: Trippier - No.12: Lodi

In this first sequence, the right fullback Trippier attempted a forward pass from the right flank, but Atletico lost the possession.



He attempted to counter-press, but the opposition could pass through along the flank; meanwhile, Carrasco stands along the front line on the left to support the attacking move.



The back three shifted out wide, and the midfield's line dropped deeper to support the defensive action. Both Trippier and Carrasco moved back to take place along the flank. The usual 1-4-4-2 of Cholo's Atletico Madrid that leads the second club of Madrid to win trophies in the past has developed during the last seasons, and it has reached the best this season, leading the team to win the first La Liga in seven years. The play system fluctuates between a 1-4-4-2 and the 1-3-5-2 (1-5-3-2). It has made the offensive phase more efficient and the defensive phase more pressure-oriented, maintaining a safe, low block despite increasing the aggressiveness of pressure after the loss of possession.

The following sequence explains the fluctuating system between the four and the five at the back that has made Atletico a stringer team this season.



Trippier dropped back along the line of the three defenders, shaping a monetary back four-line, and Carrasco reached the middle third.



The opposition could only play backward, and Atletico shaped a back 5 defensive line with three midfielders in front of them who overloaded the middle third area in front of the ball. The strikers closed down the passing lanes in front of the holding midfielder, and all the team condensed the right side of the field.

The back five-line allows Atletico to cover the weaker side if the opposition switched the side; in this sequence, the only safe passing solution is to switch the side to the attacking right flank along the half-line. The fifth left wingback, Carrasco, stands a little higher than the other four teammates to be ready to attack the receive as quickly as possible.

Carrasco pushed up and pressed the opposition's receiver, and the back defensive line remained in a 4 player shape.



The closest teammate also pushed up to cover the closest passing option toward the center, and the other two midfielders protected the backline as the defenders were facing a 4 v 4 duel. The nearest forward near the ball preventively marked the opposition's center back.

The alternating system allows Atletico to maintain a compact low block if the opposition could play out of the condensed area.



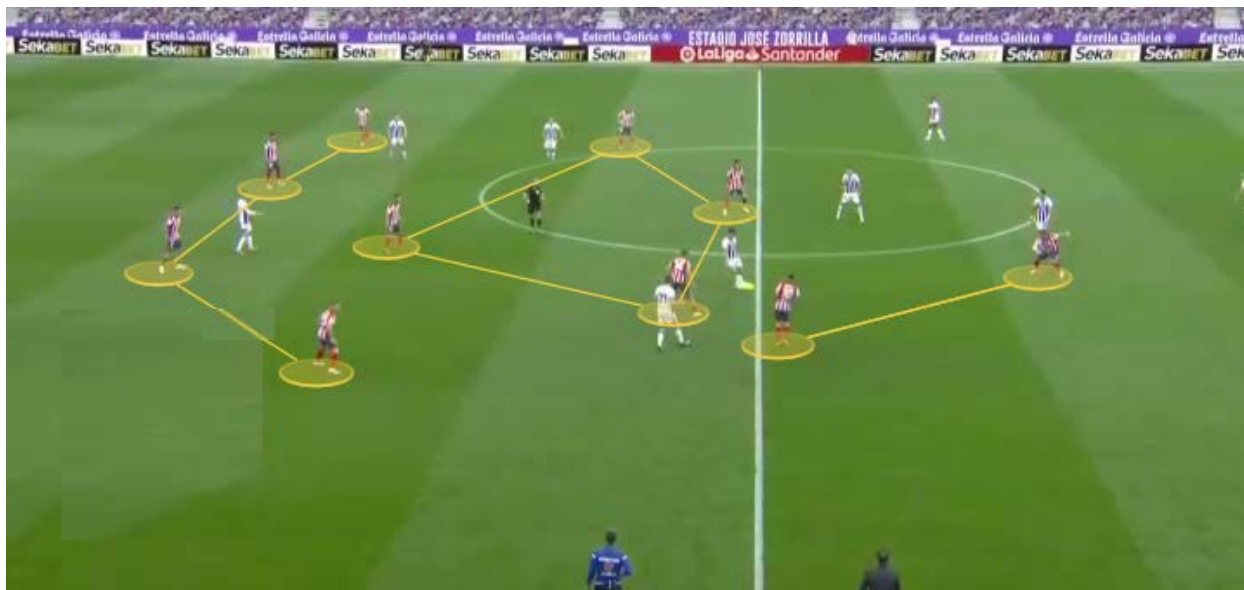
Trippier stands along the back four defensive line, and the center midfielders and the opposite winger got narrow in the center, shaping a 4+3 defensive shape. Carrasco was late in dropping back due to the previous pressure action along the flank. Still, the low defensive block and the forwards who closed the passing lanes to the center protected the middle channel and forced the opposition to switch the side once again.

This momentary shape could be considered 1-4-4-2 or even a 1-4-3-3, looking at the left wingback position.



When the opposition attempted to play deep along Atletico's defensive right flank, Atletico was ready to overload the ball area again. Trippier acted as a right wingback, and the right defender shifted wide near the line to shape a 2 v 2 duel and cover the space to win the long ball.

When the opponent attacks with two strikers, the center defender becomes the holding midfielder.



In this situation, Atletico shapes a 1-4-4-2 with a rhombus midfield's line inside the center channel to prevent through passes. Trippier along the right and Hermoso along the left are the fullbacks in this momentary defensive shape. Felipe Luiz is the holding midfielder in front of the back four.

Otherwise, the strikers pressed the opposition's midfielder in this situation, and Atletico protected the first third with a 5+3 lower block, as we have already analyzed.



Trippier and Carrasco act as a wingback, and Lopez dropped back in between the wide defenders to create a 3 v 2 duel in the center. Carrasco dropped back along the left side to stand closer to the opposition's winger, and Trippier did the same to be ready to attack the opposition's player in between the lines.

When the opposition could play out of the pressure, the second striker (Joao Felix) dropped back into the midfield line, and Atletico shaped a 5-4 defensive shape with a compact block.

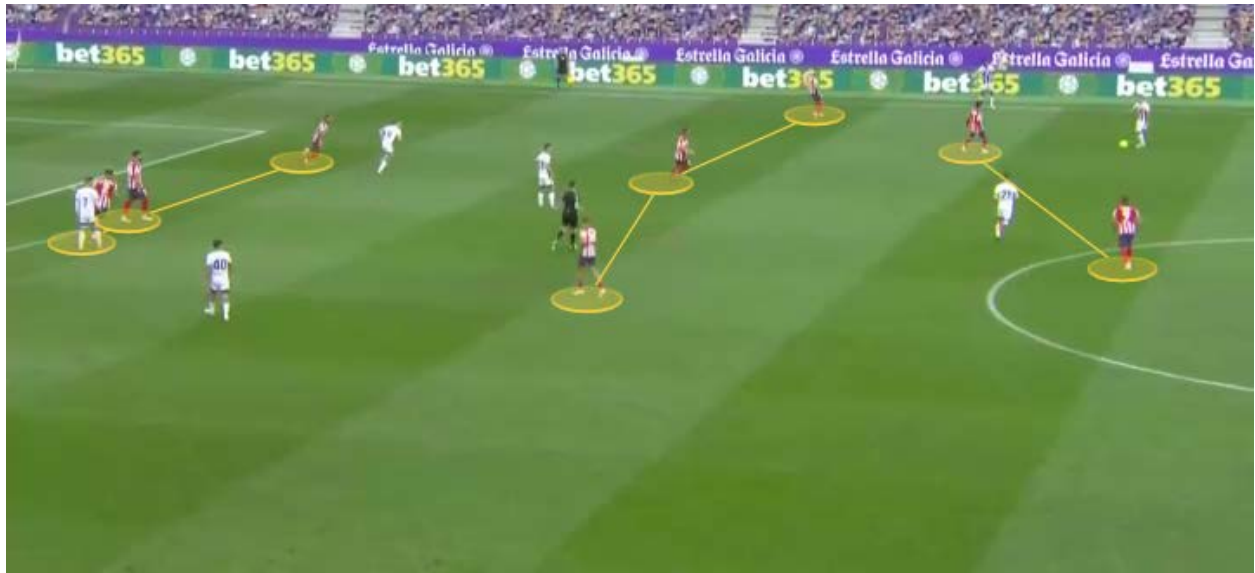


The wide midfielder became the right-winger; Trippier, the right wingback, preventively marked the opposition's winger. The wide shifting movement of the midfielder allowed the wingback to stand in the same position, maintaining the compact shape without opening any gap that the opposition may exploit. Thus, even if the opposition's left fullback pushed up along the flank to create numerical advantage, Atletico could control the situation and counter the attacking phase.



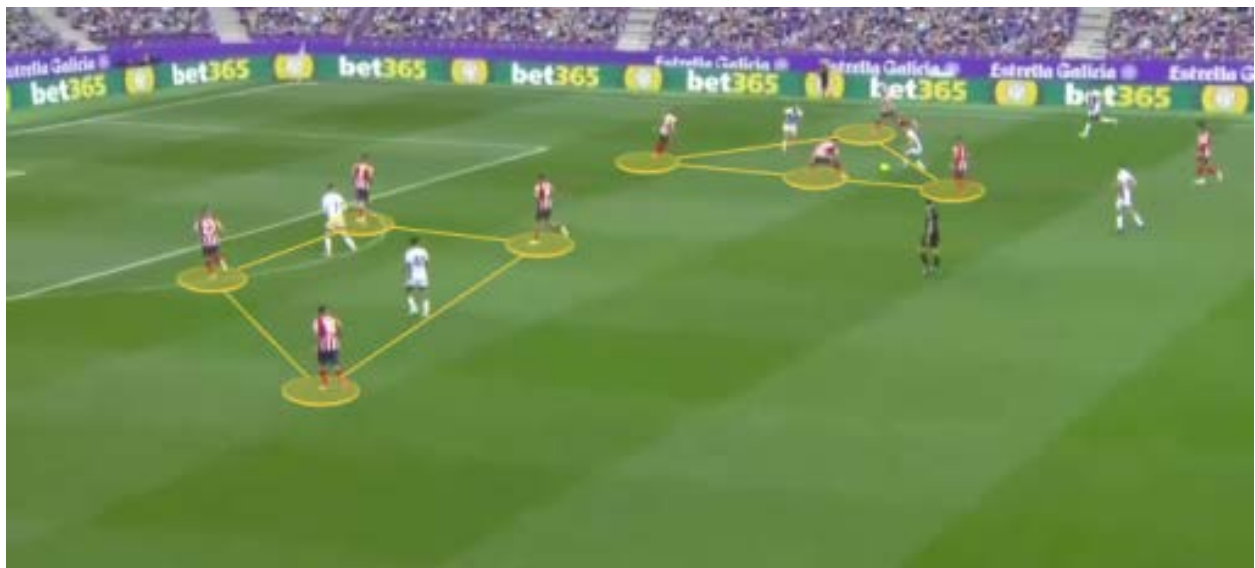
The 2 v 2 wide duel created along the flank forced the opposition to switch the side. As the holding midfielder received, Joao Felix pushed up to counter him, and the center striker closed the ground passing lane to switch the side, using the opposite center midfielder as a link player.

The opposition could only switch the side with an aerial ball, giving the strikers enough time to switch across and create a new strong side in the opposite flank of the middle third.



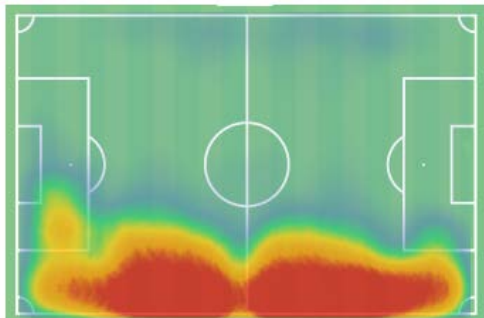
The second striker countered the opposition's ball carrier, and the center one moved toward the holding midfielder. The line of the three midfielders shifted across the field, and they create a line in front of the back five to close the passing lanes. The strikers' movements and the center midfielders allowed the backline to stand aligned and create a 3 v 2 duel along the same side of the strong area.

Diego Simeone has always been considered for his defensive tendency to highlight the defensive shape behind the ball line. Anyway, the second principle of play has always been present in his defensive phases.



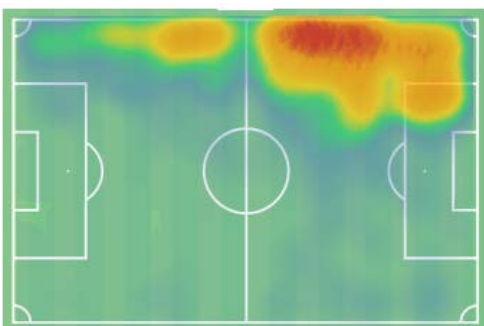
Atletico shaped a double 4 v 2 duel out wide and closed the ball's position, and in the center, against the center striker and the opposite winger.

Trippier



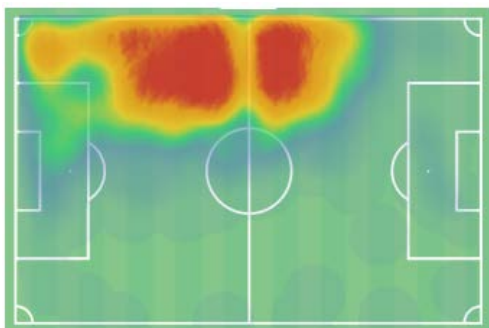
The seasonal heat map of the right fullback shows how the player is involved in all the phases of play; the yellow area inside the defensive penalty area shows how the right fullback also takes part to the narrow defensive shape inside the first third both as fullback when Atletico defend with four at the back and when he acts as a wingback.

Carrasco



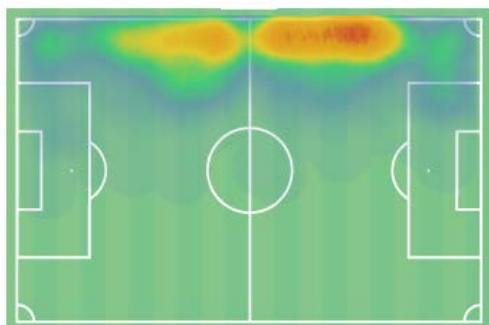
Carrasco was born as a left wingback, and Simeone adapted his position after his return from China. His natural tendency to play higher up in the field is still clear from the heat map, but his new positions as a fifth wide wingback along the left flank brings him to stand deeper along the touch line and to defend close to the touchline. He usually defend deeper, and he has the freedom to tuck in inside the final third.

Hermoso



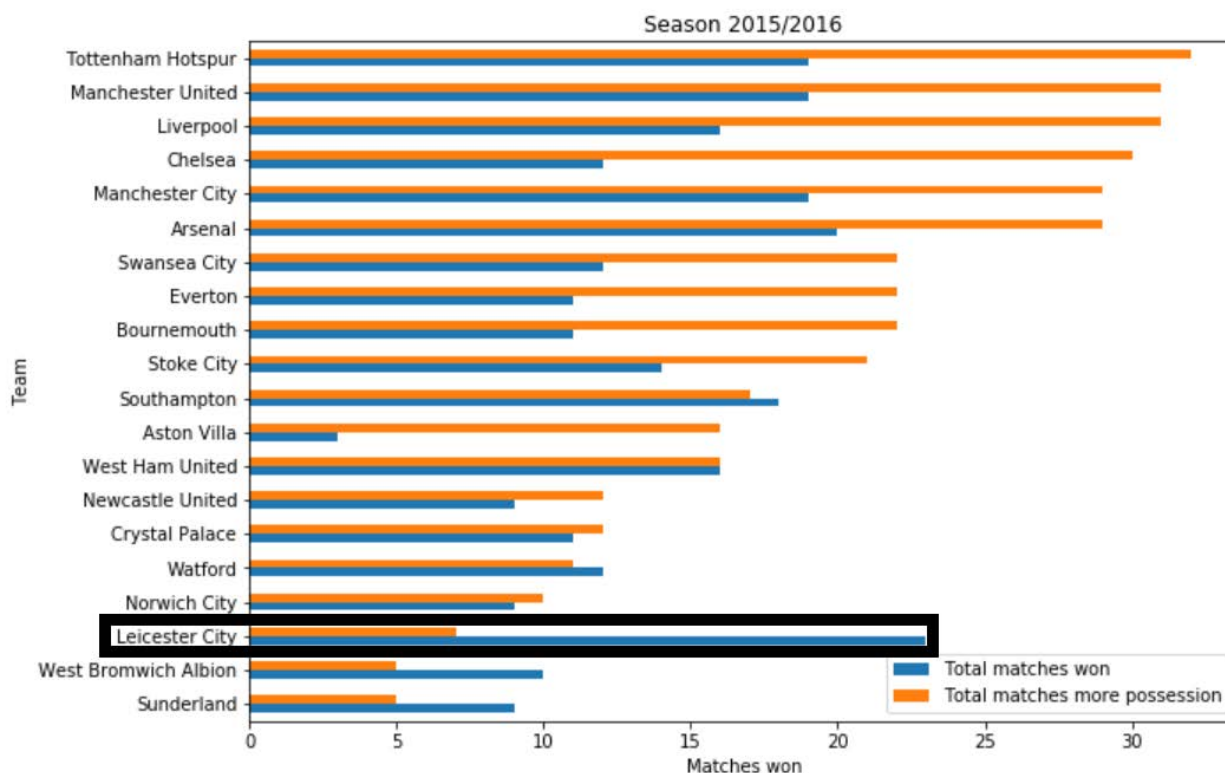
The heat-map of the left defender shows how he defends the left flank both as a left fullback and a left defender. He often covered the position as a left fullback when Carrasco remained higher up in the field as a winger. His defensive based tasks are evident from the heat map where the final third position in the field is not highlighted in any way.

Lodi



Lodi is the usual left fullback when Simeone shapes the team with four at the back. Lodi has both attacking and defensive skills, as the heat map confirms, and he runs through all the wide channel. The red area also indicates that the left fullback, as the right one takes part to the pressure phase over the half line of the field.

Daniel Simpson and Christian Fuchs in Claudio Ranieri's Premier League unbelievable winning 2015/2016 campaign at Leicester City.

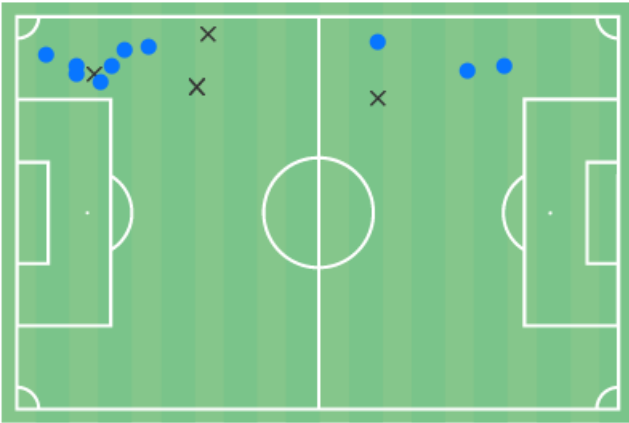


This image should be enough to understand the tactical idea of Claudio Ranieri and what stands behind that great winning campaign: more than 20 won games, just more than 5 won matches with more possession than the opposition. The average of possession per game was only 44,7%, and Ranier's team had only the 70.2% of deep completion, the lowest of the entire League. Furthermore, they performed 89.18 defensive duels per game (62.9 won), 29.11 clearances per game, the highest number of tackles (22.8 – 7.66 sliding tackles), and interceptions (21.6) per game of the entire League. The results were 12.66 conceded shots per game, but only 29.8% on target, 0.95 conceded per game, 15 clean sheets, and 36 goals conceded.

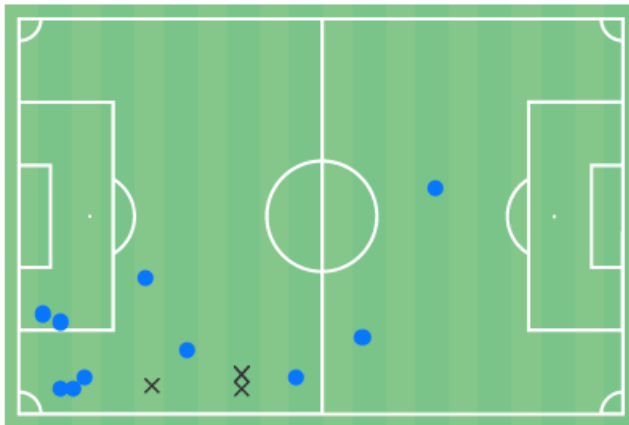


Generally, the idea behind the 1-4-4-2 was a “deep defense” and the consequent attacking style was nothing else but counter-attacks thanks to Ryad Mahrez and Jamy Vardy, despite the passes allowed to the opposition was very alternated (19.59 against Tottenham at home, and 6.08 against Southampton and West Bromwich Albion.) Apart from variations due to injuries (Leicester was the second team with fewest number of injuries with only 40 during the season), ineligible players, and situations of play after the first 60’/70’ of matches, the back four were: Morgan and Huth in the center and Fuchs on the left and Simpson on the right. Also the other players didn’t change often throughout the season.

Fuchs's (28) defensive duels against Manchester United (away)



Simpson's (17) defensive duel against Tottenham (at home)



Claudio Ranieri didn't invent anything during that incredible and winning 2015/2016 season. Leicester City was a defensive base team with few recognizable and efficient movements, with a great attacking inverted right-winger (Mahrez), a never-ending pressing second forward (Okazaki), and a striker who scored many goals from counter-attacks (Vardy).



The second line, the midfield's one also defend very deep and close to the back line shaping a double 4 line that sometimes combine along the different lines. In this example, the left fullback Fuchs shifted out wide to counter the opposition's right fullback, and Schlupp dropped deeper to mark the winger standing along the line of the defenders.

Albrighton did the same along the right flank, and the center midfielder was placed just higher up the three remaining center defenders.

This defensive formation was crucial to creating numerical advantages inside the first third.



Morgan, the right center back, and Simpson, the right fullback created a 2 v 1 duel at the right side of the defensive shape; Simpson and Fuchs also created a 2 v 1 duel at the left. The second center back and the center midfielder Drinkwater created another 2 v 1 duel in the center,

The fullbacks were very "cheap" compared to the League's level of costs:

| | | |
|----|------------|--------|
| GK | SCHMEICHEL | \$2M |
| D | FUCHS | FREE |
| D | MORGAN | \$1.5M |
| D | HUTH | \$5M |
| D | SIMPSON | \$3.5M |
| M | KANTE | \$8.5M |
| M | DRINKWATER | \$1M |
| M | ALBRIGHTON | FREE |
| M | MAHREZ | \$1M |
| M | INLER | \$8M |
| F | VARDY | \$2M |

The entire squad of the winning team cost 52 mln.£, against the 169.5 mln.£ of Tottenham sat 2nd, 223.8 of the 3rd ranked team, Arsenal, and the 411 of Manchester City, the 4th team of the table at the end. The center backs of the 1-4-4-2 system of play (Huth and Morgan) were physically strong and good in winning aerial duels, but they lacked mobility and speed.



The fullbacks beside the center backs were pure defensive fullbacks, helping the sector's teammates against the opposition's forwards.



In this example, Fuchs doubled the mark at the left with Huth, and Simpson did the same at the left with Morgan. Again, fullbacks' positions were crucial to mark the opposition's winger, cutting off the passing lanes toward the center to the forwards.

The defensive tactical plan required the fullbacks to not facing the opponents alone for a long time. The double line of four was efficient and allowed the team to close the passing lanes and create zonal duels with numerical superiority all around the first third.



Simpson, the right fullback marked the receiver in a 1 v 1 duel at the back; Leicester defended in a double compact and narrow line of four.



The winger dropped deep toward the fullback, and they created a 2 v 1 duel against the opposition's ball carrier.

The center midfielder shifted out wide, and they created a strong side near the ball; the right winger Mahrez won the ball back.

The following sequence is similar to the previous one, as the left fullback faced a 1 v 1 duel to force him out wide; the center midfielder Kantè dropped deeper to cover his position and mark the winger. Morgan and Simpson marked the opposite attackers in 1 v 1 duels also.



Okazaki, Schlupp, and the center midfielder Drinkwater were ready to double the mark against all the potential receivers and the center back. Huth could patrol the center of the penalty area.

When the center back had to shift out wide as the fullbacks were too high, the fullbacks always dropped back to double the mark and help the teammates.



Huth had to shift out wide toward the right touchline, and Simpson quickly dropped back to double the mark and prevent the opponent from laying the ball back. Kantè also dropped back to create a 3 v 2 duel near the ball. Then, the left center back and the left fullback Fuchs doubled the mark against the opponent in the center, creating another 2 v 1 duel.

To double the mark out wide was also a defensive tactical solution to allow the fullbacks to stand in their position.



Simpson and Mahrez doubled the mark against the opposition's ball carrier to prevent him from laying the ball back.



As the support player could receive, the center defender and the right winger double the mark again and prevent the right fullback from moving out of his position and not leaving the mark against the previous ball carrier.

They were also ready to double the mark against the opponents in the center.



The left fullback Fuchs faced the opposition's winger 1 v 1 close to the penalty area; the left winger Schlupp dropped along the defensive line to cover the teammate behind him, the center midfielder Drinkwater marked the second forward in the middle of the penalty area, and the right center back and fullback double the mark in front of the goal. The right center back could also double the mark against the left center Huth. The right winger Mahrez also dropped back along the defensive line to complete the back shape in front of the goal.

When the defensive shape was broken, Leicester always condensed the center to protect the goal.



Huth couldn't defend in this situation, and the second center back Morgan, the left fullback Fuchs, and the center midfielder Drinkwater created a momentary 3 v 1 duel in the center. At the same time, the Huth retreated to overload more the ball's area.

When the fullbacks were forced to stay out wide, one center defender dropped back along the defensive line to create a narrow shape in front of the goal.



Simpson was placed out wide, and Fuchs and Huth doubled the mark against the opposition's center striker. Drinkwater, the right center midfielder, dropped deep to act as the right fullback to cover Simpson's too wide position.

Fullbacks positions were also vital to support the wingers, Albrighton and Mahrez, who pushed up to stand along the same line of the strikers and cover the space behind them.



In this example, Schlupp couldn't control a cross pass from the opposite flank, and the left fullback Fuchs pushed up to counter the opponent on the ball, preventing him from progressing the move and start a transition to attack phase.

The back four were fixed when the opponents had the possession.



In this example, Simpson, Morgan, Huth, and Fuchs completed the backline of four, while Mahrez and Kantè pressed the opposition's ball carrier. The back four created a backline from the vertical half of the field to condense the area and support the action of the midfielders, which prevented the opposition's ball carrier backward.

The back four dropped very deep along the edge line of the penalty area.



Fuchs shifted out wide to counter the opposition's winger only when he entered the first third, and Kantè, who tracks the ball's path, dropped back to take the teammate's position at the back. As a result, the other three defenders stand in the center, and the center midfielder helped them to create numerical superiority in the center (3+2 v 2).

The fullbacks only helped the pressure phase, when the team lost the possession high up in the field, and the center midfielders were out of the usual defensive position.



Mahrez, the right winger, Drinkwater, and Kantè pressed the opponents to prevent them from playing out of the flank; Simpson, the right fullback, pushed up to close the passing lanes toward the defensive right flank.

When the fullbacks were out of position, they played a 1 v 1 duel to track the opponents and stop the opposition's action.

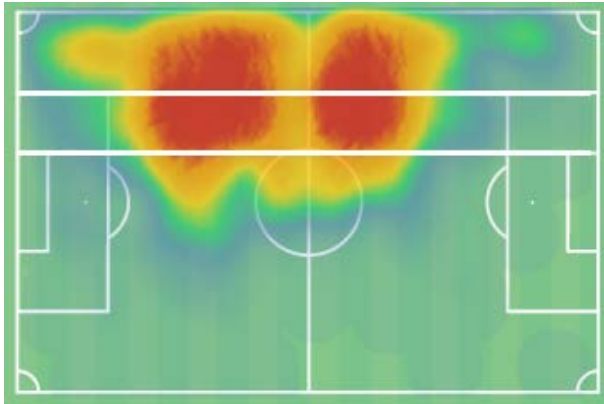


The opposition could play out from the pressure area, and Simpson shifted across the center to counter the ball's carrier and close the passing option and the chances to progress the move.



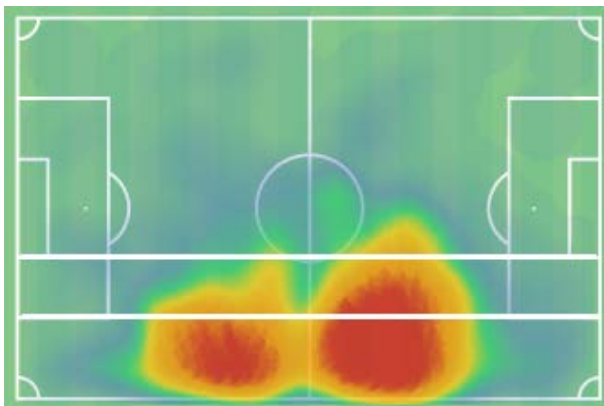
In this second example, Simpson, the right fullback, tracked the opposition's ball carrier, and Drinkwater double-teamed him to prevent the opponent from dribbling the ball inside the ball's area. Next, the center backs double-teamed the center striker in the center around the penalty point.

When Pep Guardiola signed for Bayern Munich in 2013, he decided to come back in time from a tactical point of view, shaping his team with all the existing variations of the past. Still, he did it by moving his players on the field instead of re-establishing the old roles. **Phillip Lahm** and **David Alaba** joined the holding midfielder to shape three behind the attacking line. All these variations came from the "Inverted Fullbacks" innovation.



David Alaba 2015/2016 Heat Map

The left fullback often played through the left half space inside the defensive and the offensive halves of the field.



Phillip Lahm 2015/2016 Heat Map

Otherwise, Lahm defended wider inside the defensive half, and he played inside the half-space inside the offensive half during the possession phases.





He wanted to achieve the goals: compactness and coverage in the center and the chance to press with numerical superiority and win the ball back. Phillip Lahm and David Alaba were the inverted fullbacks throughout the three seasons.



In this example, Bayern was building up from the back, and right center back had the possession at the right side of the team's shape. Alaba shifted across the center to cover the space as a center back to follow the movement of the opposite center back, who provided support to the ball carrier; Lahm provided forward support alongside the touchline.

The midfielders could stand higher up in the field and create a passing path to progress the move.



Alaba's position allowed him to recover the ball close to the half-line without opening gaps in the defensive structure at the right, where the defender could create and maintain a 3 v 2 duel. Alaba controlled the ball inside the left half-space, and the midfielders could act as an advanced passing option, as the inverted fullback preventively covered their position.

The following picture shows a similar situation where Lahm double-teamed the opposition's ball carrier.



The right center back faced the opposition's ball carrier in a 1 v 1 duel; the opponent could dribble the ball toward the goal. Lahm exploited his position as an inverted fullback to double team the opponent and create a 2 v 1 duel. The center back didn't have to shift too much wide to close down the opponent, and he could cover the depth against the potential passing option to the center forward.

The following sequence proves the importance of a center back inside the half-space when linked to the high-pressure phase.



Bayern lost possession inside the final third at the corner of the penalty area; the pressure of Bayern's striker, winger, and the left midfielder forced the ball carrier backward to the goalkeeper, who had to go long due to the high pressure of four opponents.



The left inverted fullback marked the opposition's receiver, and he pressed him at the back. However, the center midfielders could stand higher up in the field, and they maintained the 2 v 1 duel against the first potential receiver of a layback pass.

Apart from all the benefits of an inverted fullback, this position becomes helpful to prevent the midfielders from moving out of their covering positions, closing down the passing lanes, and being the first passing option, thanks to the chances of tracking the opposition's ball carriers along the center channel.



Bayern lost the possession inside the final third, and Alaba dropped back to track the ball carrier during his dribbling action; his run allowed the left midfielder Vidal to follow the move and retreat to close down space to the ball carrier, rather than pushing up to counter him and creating a dangerous gap in the middle of the opponent overcome him.



Vidal dropped deeper in front of the ball's carrier, and he tackles him sliding sideward, and he dispossessed the opponents. Alaba and Vidal's run allowed the defenders to protect the depth, and they didn't create gaps for the ball carrier.

This is the typical disposition of the inverted fullbacks behind the attacking line when the team has the possession. The tactical intention is double:

1. To allow the midfielders to support the striker and the winger;
2. To preventively cover the most dangerous areas of the field, the center channel, preventing the center backs from moving out of position.



In this example, Lahm had the possession alongside the right half-space as an inverted fullback. The holding midfielder stood in the center, and Alaba acted as a left inverted fullback. Thus, both midfielders were along the line of the center striker and the winger. During the development of the move, Bayern lost possession, and the opposition cleared the first third.



The left center back pushed higher to win the ball; Lahm provided cover at the right, as the center back shifted across to cover the sector's teammate. The left fullback was then ready to support the transition to attack phase.

The same situation with the holding midfielder in the center; Alaba as an inverted fullback at the left, and Lahm at the right along the same line of the holding midfielder.



The left fullback Alaba completed the line of five upfront, and the left midfielder provided cover behind the ball's line.



When Bayern lost the possession, Alaba put pressure against the receiver of the first pass of the transition to attack; the winger tucked in, and the holding midfielder shifted across to create a 3 v 1 duel. Lahm provided cover at the opposite weaker side of the defensive shape.

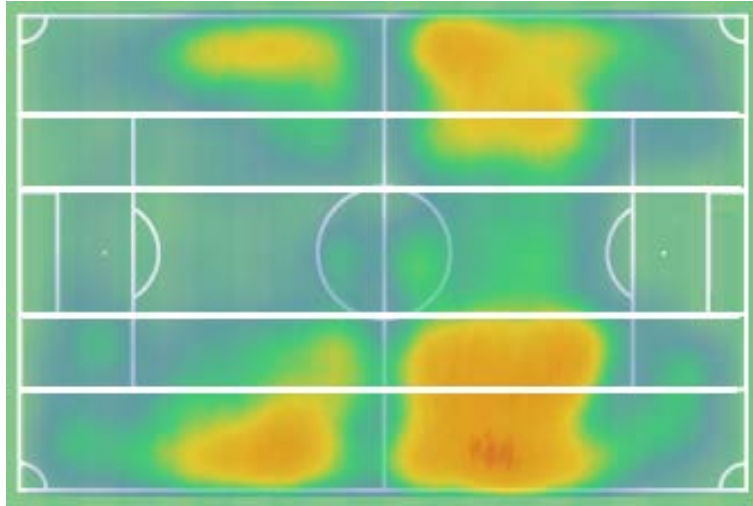


When the opposition attempted to play out wide, Vidal could move higher and out wide, and he won the ball back; Alaba, the inverted fullback, was ready to receive the first pass thanks to his previous position in the field.

Otherwise, if Fabian Delph, Alexander Zinchenko, and Joao Cancelo become auxiliary midfielders, Kyle Walker usually becomes an auxiliary defender from an "inverted fullback" position. Therefore, in the following pages, we analyze their positions after the loss of possession. We look at all these different interpretations of the role after the loss of possession of the team.

Joao Cancelo

Joao Cancelo has been a crucial player for Manchester City during the last 2020/2021 season; he played as a right or left fullback on paper, but he has been an all-around player for his team during possession and defensive phases. The heat map shows clearly as the flanks were not the only part of the field that he played along, but the half-spaces (the upper right more than the left one).



His role as an inverted fullback was independent of the play system, and his contribution to the middle third defensive shape and to the backline (creating a four or five men line) was always the same.



In this first example, Cancelo moved back from the final third, and he attempted to close the passing lane to the center through the half-space. However, the distance from the opposition's ball carrier was too long to be defensively effective, and the opposition could play through space.



Man City's defense shifted across the field to track the ball's path. The center back created a 2 v 1 duel in the center, and the holding midfielder and the left fullback forced the opponents out wide. The right midfielder ended the line of four at the back, and Cancelo retreated as a midfielder or second pivot in the center.



When the opposition could only play close to the touchline, Cancelo exchanged the position with the midfielder. He acted as a fullback; both were very close to the hypothetical vertical line in the center to create a strong area around the ball.

As we have already analyzed, the crucial benefit of an inverted fullback is to cover and patrol the center channel to force out wide the opponents furthermore during counter-attacking phases.



Cancelo substituted the center back in this situation. When the opposition won the ball and started to counter-attack, he was already properly placed to save the center paths and force the opposition's ball carriers out wide.



Once the opposition's winger received out wide, Cancelo defended as a right fullback with the winger at the right.

Cancelo often acted as a second pivot or a third midfielder in front of the backline inside the right half-space



In this first example, he double-teamed the opposition's ball beside the right holding midfielder, preventing the ball carrier from turning inside and facing the goal. This way, he fixed the tactical issue of the second midfielder in the center, who was too far from the ball.



In this second example, he pushed higher in the field, and he countered the opponent on the ball, who was receiving an aerial pass from the first third and prevented him from progressing the move with a back heading for the teammate his right.

He acted as a defensive midfielder, as space wasn't adequately covered, and all the teammates were too far from the ball.

The following sequence is crucial to understand the double role and position of Joao Cancelo.



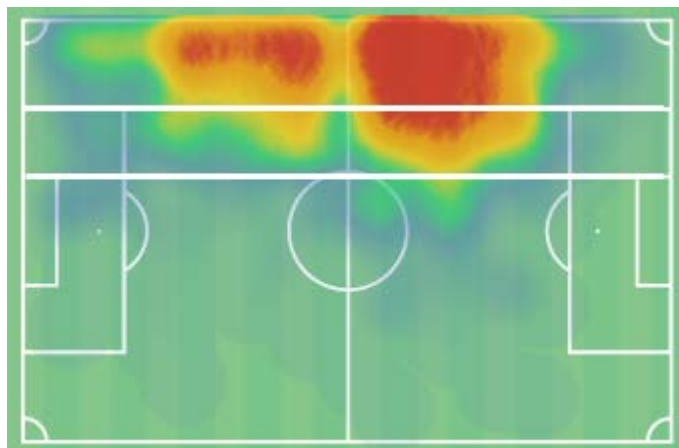
The opposition attempted a combination along the City's defensive left flank. Still, the left fullback covered the return passing lane, and the ball carrier was forced to play backward thanks to the holding midfielder. Cancelo shifted across to close down the passing lane to the receiver, and the opposition was forced to pass beside a second incoming teammate. The opposition maintained possession inside the offensive half, but they couldn't progress toward the goal.



As the right and left attacking midfielders shifted across the center toward Cancelo, they shaped a line of three in front of the opposition's midfielders, and they all forced the move backward again. They allowed the holding midfielder to stand between the lines and protect the opposition's defense. As the winger joined the midfield sector, Cancelo moved back to his "fullback position to shape the line of four at the back."

Olexander Zichenko

Zichenko usually has a similar role alongside the left flank, as he plays as a left fullback and as a left inverted fullback of the third middle line.



The 2020/2021 season heat map confirms the tactical tendency to defend out wide inside the defensive half of the field and shift across through the attacking half to act as an additional midfielder.



As Cancelo, when he joined the middle third, but the opposition could play through the line, Zichenko went back to be a fullback along the defensive line; in this example, the left center backdropped deeper to cover the depth and to delay the ball carrier's dribbling action. Zichenko dropped back to double team the ball carrier as a left fullback of a narrow back four line.



This picture above shows the opposite example concerning the previous one: Zichenko pushed up to the center from a fullback position at the left to counter the ball carrier and force him backward. This way, the holding midfielder didn't have to move out of his position. The left advanced one could force the direction of play, the right winger, and the left attacking midfielder could preventively press the opposition's short passing options.

When City players with a back five defense, Zichenko fluctuates between a wide position along the left flank and the left half-space, as in this following example.



Zichenko started to press the opposition's ball carrier from the left flank, forcing him backward, but he could turn and dribble throughout the center.



When the opposition's ball carrier attempted to dribble the ball higher up, Zichenko forced him toward the left defender, and they double team him to force the opponent out wide again.

Zichenko often joins the middle third line during the pressure phases to create a second pressure line of three and allow at least one midfielder to stand in front of the backline to protect it.



In this situation, Man City was pressing high up in the field with a line of front four (two in the center and two along the flank). The opposition could play through the first pressure line, and they joined the middle third, where only two Citizens were placed. Zichenko pushed up from the left through the left half-space, and he forced the direction of play backward to the opposition's receiver. This way, the center midfielders could stand in the center and patrol the space instead of opening gaps in front of the three remaining defenders inside the defensive half.

To prevent the holding midfielders from leaving the line in the middle is always the first aim of an inverted fullback tactic.



In this example, City lost the possession inside the final third, and the opposition center midfielder could receive. Zichenko shifted across the field from the left half-space to the middle channel to counter the ball carrier, and he prevented the teammates in the center from leaving their positions and creating gaps in front of the ball's line.

The following sequence is another example of the same aim we have just talked about.



City lost the possession inside the offensive half, and the team had overloaded the left side along the touchline, and a gap appeared behind the condensed area.

The opposition played out of the ball's recovery area, and the center midfielder received; he seemed to have the chance to dribble or pass to the gap when he received.



Zichenko shifted across the field from the left touchline, and he countered the opposition's receiver as an inverted fullback. His run prevented the holding midfielder from leaving his position, and he allowed the backline to cover the depth tracking the only center striker. The opposition couldn't progress the move in the end.

The following sequences show the last example of Zichenko's role in the field, like an inverted fullback.



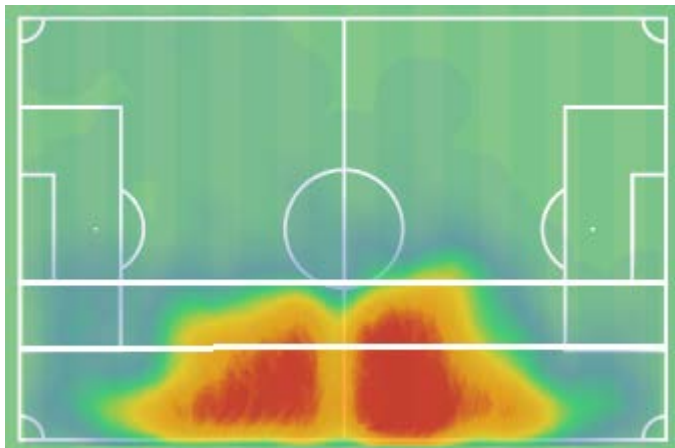
In this first one, City lost the possession high up again, and the opposition's center midfielder received. Zichenko was also placed high inside the left half-space, and he shifted across the field to counter the opponent on the ball with the center midfielder. They both covered the gap that the opponent could have exploited if he had turned toward the goal.



The opposition could maintain the possession and progress the move toward the attacking half. Zichenko dropped back, maintaining the position alongside the left half-space, and he countered the opposition's center striker. He prevented the backline from moving out, and the defenders could patrol the center of the first third.

Kyle Walker

Kyle Walker is a different example of an inverted fullback, as he usually stands inside both halves of the pitch and the defensive line.



The heat map of the last season has red areas along the flanks and inside the half-spaces, but with defensive intentions.



In this first example, Walker stood at the right side of the center back after shifting across the half-space. As the opponent with the ball could dribble the ball toward the attacking half, Walker joined the defensive line and marked the only potential forward passing option for the ball carrier.

Meanwhile, the left fullback dropped back to shape the back four line of defenders, and the midfielders also tracked back.



The initial position of Walker allowed the defenders to cover the only passing lane first and then to cover the depth, waiting for the midfielders to drop back and counter the ball carrier, who had to drive the ball back to maintain the possession.

In this further example, Walker became a center back starting from an inverted fullback position.



In this situation, Man City lost the possession deep inside the final third, and six players were flat and close to the penalty area. The ball carrier could turn and play forward inside the attacking half. Two opponents could have received further up in the field, and Walker preventively shifted across the field as an inverted fullback to counter the nearest opponent.



As the opposition could progress the move until the final third, Walker became the second center-back, shifting more across the field.



His movement allowed him to face 1 v 1, the second attacker, and two more teammates to recover the space, delaying the action of the ball carrier.

In this sequence, Walker delayed the attacking action to allow the teammates to create a numerical superiority inside the first third, after equalizing the defensive situation after losing possession.

In this last example of the chapter, Walker was already in a center-back position before losing possession.



City lost the possession inside the final third, and Walker with his teammate could only delay the opposition's action, as they launch a counter-attack with available spaces.



Their defensive action allowed the real center backs to retreat and create numerical along the center channel; this way, one could face the ball carrier, covering the depth at the back.

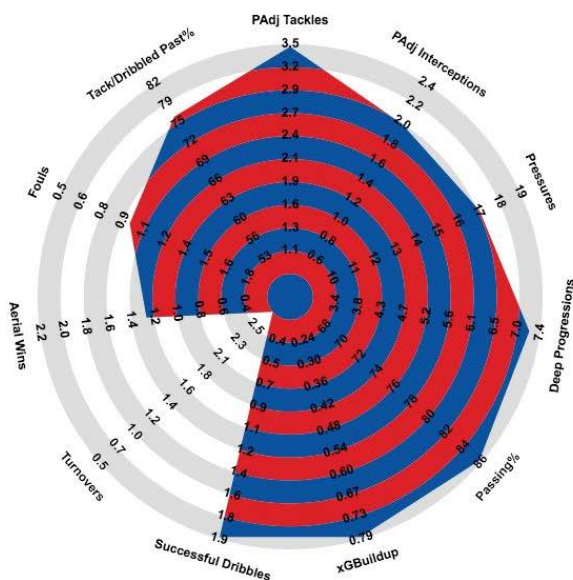
Anyway, still, nowadays, the fullbacks remain defensive players, overlapping along the flanks when their teams attack and defending in more old-style when defending; two young players demonstrate their high-level skills off the ball in the Bundesliga (Alphonso Davis at Bayern Munich) and Premier League (Aaron Wan-Bissaka at Manchester United).

Alphonso Davis at Bayern Munich 2019/2020 – 2020/2021. Alphonso Davis has been one of the best defensive left fullbacks all around Europe over the last two seasons.

Alphonso Davies
Bayern Munich

Full Back Radar and Information

1. Bundesliga
2019/2020

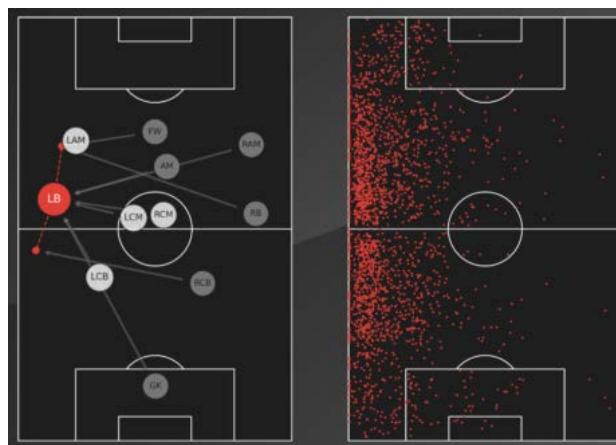


| Alphonso Davies | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------|
| 90s Played | 12.6 | |
| Competition | 1. Bundesliga | |
| Season | 2019/2020 | |
| Match Type | All Matches | |
| Team | Bayern Munich | |
| Age | 19 | |
| Birth Date | 2000-11-02 | |
| | Value | Percentile |
| ⊖ | PAdj Tackles | 5.57 99 |
| ⊖ | PAdj Interceptions | 2.02 88 |
| ⊖ | Pressures | 17.10 87 |
| ⊖ | Deep Progressions | 7.24 94 |
| ⊖ | Passing% | 87 97 |
| ⊖ | xGBuildup | 1.35 100 |
| ⊖ | Successful Dribbles | 3.90 99 |
| ⊖ | Turnovers | 3.82 1 |
| ⊖ | Aerial Wins | 1.27 77 |
| ⊖ | Fouls | 0.95 64 |
| ⊖ | Tack/DP% | 77 88 |

All units in per-90

He has been dribbled past just 7,5% of all the defensive duels he attempted. He has high metrics about the adjusted possessions after defensive actions, making him so effective for the ball's recovery average of the team.

| | 2019/20 ALPHONSO DAVIES 2042 MINUTES | 2019/20 ANDY ROBERTSON 3094 MINUTES |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| PER 90 LEAGUE & CHAMPIONS LEAGUE | 2.78 | TACKLES MADE 1.77 |
| | 1.13 | INTERCEPTIONS 1.13 |
| | 8.68 | BALL RECOVERIES 6.75 |
| | 2.6 | CROSSES ATTEMPTED 5.44 |
| | 3.75 | TAKE-ONS COMPLETED 0.55 |
| | 1.54 | CHANCES CREATED 1.43 |
| | 8.95 | DUELS WON 3.52 |



Comparing his stats with Robertson, it is possible to realize the defensive effectiveness in the same position of the Scottish left fullback.

During the 2019/2020 season, Bayern defended with a 1-4-3-3 formation when the opposition could drive the ball till their first third.



This first example is a very classic one: Davis faced a 1 v 1 duel out wide, and the other three defenders of the line marked the opposition's center strikers. The three midfielders created a horizontal numerical superiority (3 v 2).



He attempted a defensive duel against the ball carrier on his front foot, and he kicked the ball out of play.

Davis also acted as an inverted fullback when the Bayern attacked, and he did the same after losses of possession as a first pressing player if the advanced teammates couldn't.



In this situation, Bayern attacked with two lines of three up front and two behind them. Davis was one of the midfielders behind the attacking lines, and he acted as an inverted defensive fullback. He started to track the opposition's ball carrier. As the opposition win the ball back, and the player who recovered the ball passed forward to the closest teammate, David turned his body toward the ball's direction.



Davis followed the ball carrier, and he attacked him on his front foot, driving him toward the sideline.



Bayern's left fullback attempted a defensive action as the ball carrier was near the line, placing himself between the opponent and the ball.



He contrasted and won the ball back.

When the opponents placed two center midfielders in the middle third, Bayern defended in a 1-4-4-2 (1-1) defensive shape to create numerical superiority. In this example, two horizontal 4 v 3 duels can be seen.



Davis acted as a classic left fullback in these situations of play.



Bayern usually concentrated the defensive shape along the center channel, leaving spaces along the flanks for the opposition to play. In this situation, the opposition right fullback could play a through pass along the wide channel. Still, the Bavarian's defensive shape preventively shifted also out wide, and Davis could defend in front of one of the strikers and anticipate him, winning the ball back for his team.



Davis won the ball back against his opponent and drove the ball out wide.

The following image shows a similar situation to the previous one, but Davis acted as a center back.



Bayern left center back had to shift out wide before, and he opened a gap inside the penalty area; Davis dropped back and took his position to cover the gap first and then to exploit the teammate's defensive action, as he could double team the ball carrier, and he kicked the ball away.

Aaron Wan-Bissaka at Manchester United 2020/2021

Coming from Crystal Palace and with a past as a winger that helps a lot in thinking what the opponent is going to do while moving with and off the ball, as he said in an interview for The Guardian, Aaron Wan-Bissaka is one of the best tacklers and ball's recovering players of the Premier League; from 2020/2021 he plays for Manchester United. As the old tacticians asked the defenders, he showed the opponents the wide areas, adjusting his body position very quickly, defending from the center toward the touchline. His athleticism allows him to be so effective.

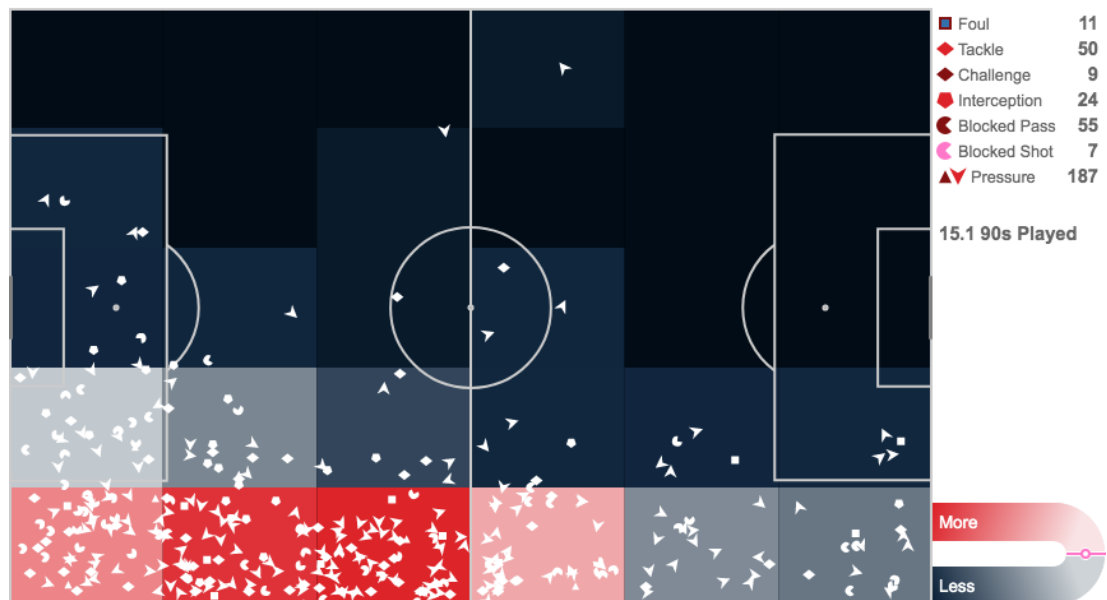
Aaron Wan-Bissaka Manchester United

Defensive Activity

Premier League
2020/2021

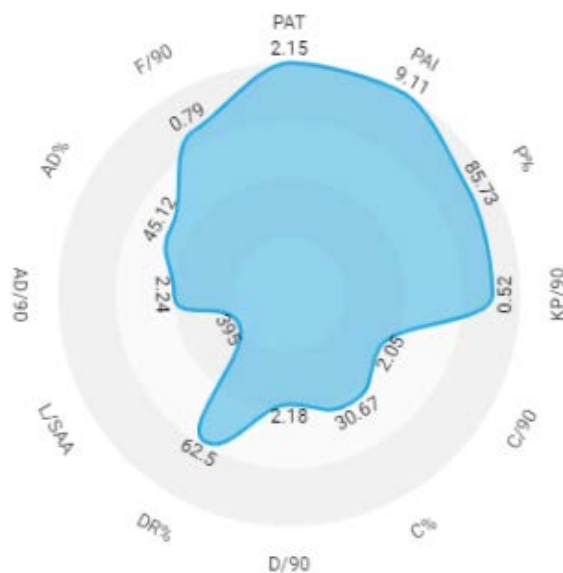
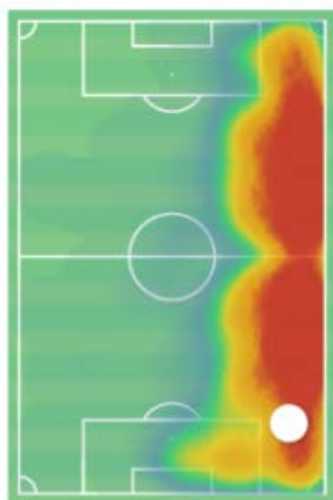
| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Foul | 11 |
| Tackle | 50 |
| Challenge | 9 |
| Interception | 24 |
| Blocked Pass | 55 |
| Blocked Shot | 7 |
| Pressure | 187 |

15.1 90s Played



The defensive actions heat-map shows his tendency to be a classic “defensive fullback.” The possession adjust metrics confirm his defensive efficiency.

POSITION



Pat: tackles every 30 opposition's possessions

Pai: interceptions every 30 opposition's possessions

Wan-Bissaka is also the third players in the Premier League for interceptions

AD/90: aerial duels per 90'

AD%: percentage of aerial duels won

F/90: committed fouls per 90'

The basic system of play of Manchester United is the 1-4-2-3-1, and Wan-Bissaka plays as a classic right fullback of the back four.



In this first example, Wan-Bissaka played a 1 v 1 duel against the left-winger, defending from the back traditionally.

In this further example, he created numerical superiority 3 v 2 to force the direction of play backward.



Wan-Bissaka shifted out wide, along the half-line of the pitch, and put pressure against the opposition's winger. The right center midfielder and the right winger created a closed area around the ball to force the ball carrier backward toward one and only teammate, who could be easily pressed before the ball's reception.

Otherwise, the following sequence is an example of defense on the opposition's front foot.

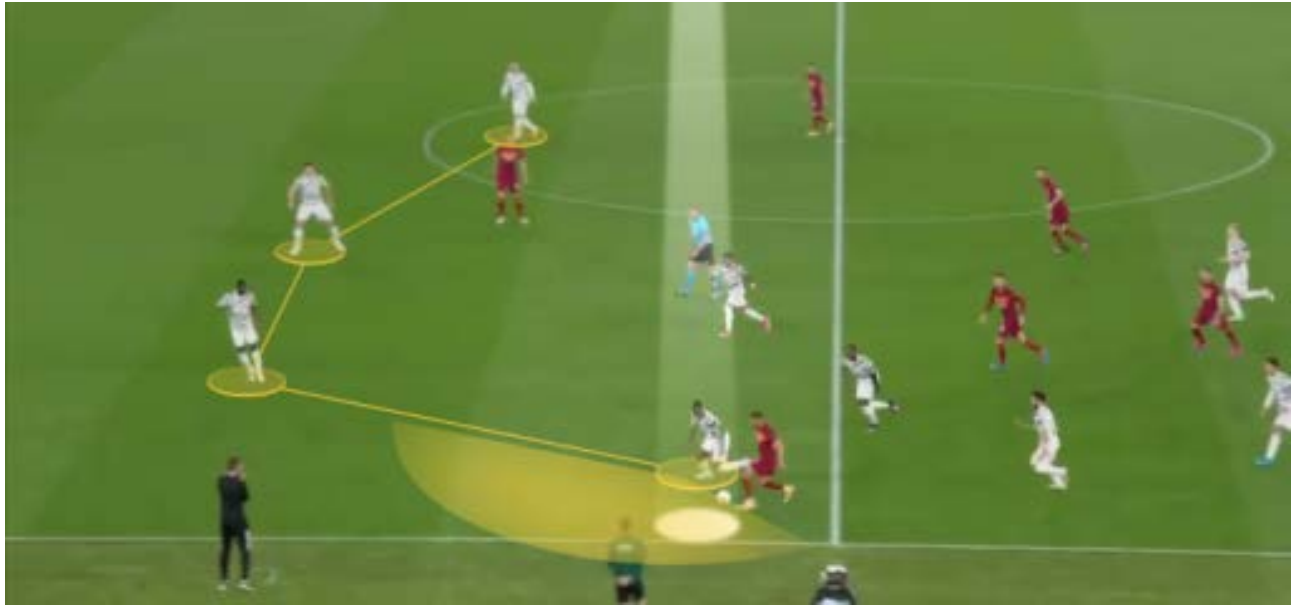


The opposition's wide player received on the far foot concerning the touchline and with his body turned toward the center of the field. Wan Bissaka pushed higher and out wide to counter the ball carrier. The opponent could only turn toward the center as if he dribbled the ball along the flank; the United's right fullback could have used the touchline as an extra defender.

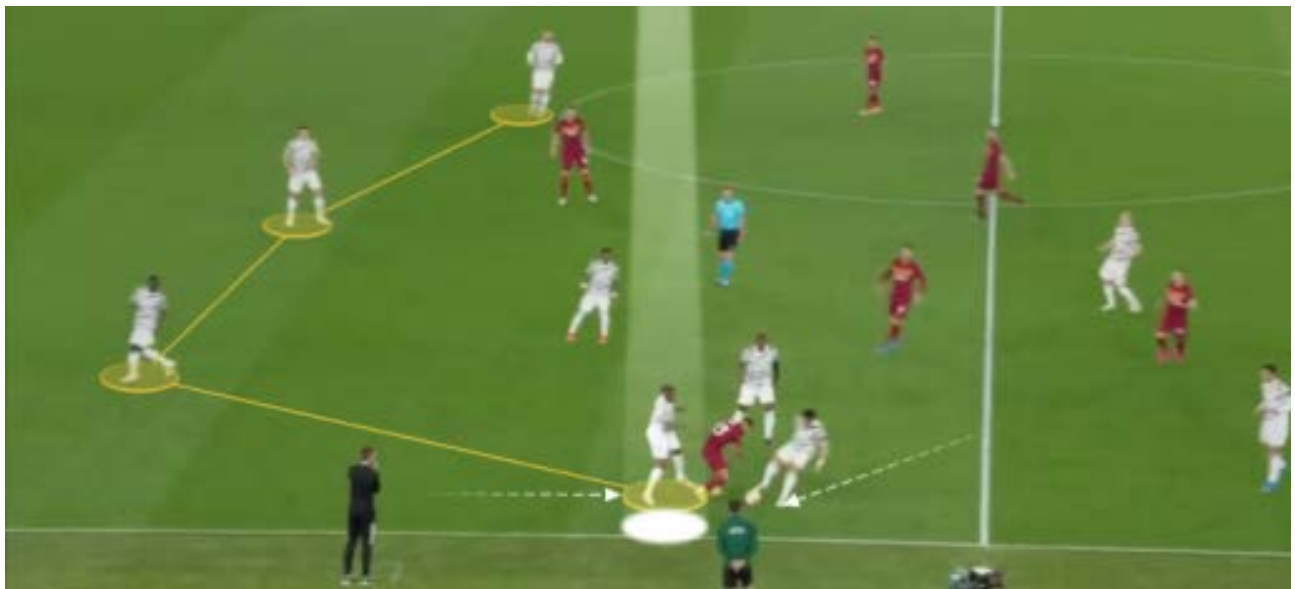


The ball carrier dribbled the ball back toward the defensive half of the field, and Bissaka exploited his pressure phase tackling him from the back. Even if he didn't recover the ball, and a second player of the opposition could win the ball, United's fullback delayed the attacking action. It caused the opposition a loss of space.

In this last example, Wan-Bissaka helped create numerical superiority along the flank to close down the ball carrier.



United right fullback track the opposition's winger to use the touchline as an extra defender, delaying his attacking action.



Wan-Bissaka forced the ball carrier backward, placing himself between him and the defensive line; simultaneously, the winger dropped back and attacked him, as the ball carrier couldn't find a passing path out of the pressure zone. His defensive action allowed two teammates to drop back and close him down without any potential passing lane. The right center midfielder closed all the possible passing lanes to the center, and United recovered the possession.

Summary

The fullbacks were defensive players at the beginning of soccer history; they were the “fully back” in front of the goalkeeper, the last line of the teams. Throughout soccer’s history, their positions evolved out wide, maintaining the name as fullbacks but playing differently concerning their origins.

Apart from the first attacking fullbacks we have talked about in the offensive volume of the set, like Giacinto Facchetti or Carlos Alberto, I think that Paolo Maldini can be considered as the king of the defensive fullbacks along the flanks during the 80s and the 90s before he became a center back at the very last phase of his career.

The modern fullbacks are positions rather than roles, Jordan Henderson and Georginio Wijnaldum have proved under Jürgen Klopp as head coaches.

Simeone’s Atletico Madrid 2020/2021 evolved the positions of the fullbacks, alternating them with back 4 and 5 defensive shapes and making them alternating wingbacks. Classic fullbacks still exist, as Daniel Simpson and Christian Fuchs were when Claudio Ranieri was the head coach of the 2015/2016 Premier League winning season of Leicester City.

Pep Guardiola used and still uses the fullbacks as Inverted Fullbacks: wide players who become midfielders or center defenders: Phillip Lahm and David Alaba at Bayern Munich, or Joao Cancelo, Olexander Zichenko, and Kyle Walker at Manchester City

Over the past two seasons, classic defensive fullbacks are back to be considerable players due to the increased rhythm of play and the return to a more traditional way of defenses under the ball line. Alphonso Davis at Bayern Munich (2019/2020 – 2020/2021) or Aaron Wan-Bissaka at Manchester United (2020/2021) are examples of this kind of physical player.

This book is far from being complete, but I hope it will give an idea about the possible positions of modern fullbacks during the defensive phases.