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MODERN SOCCER TACTICS

VOLUME 1



AN ANALYSIS OF THE TACTICS USED BY TOP PROFESSIONAL TEAMS AND PLAYERS
PLUS PRACTICAL METHODS TO TEACH THEM



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Modern Soccer Tactics

Volume 1

*An Analysis of the Tactics Used by Top Professional Teams and
Players Plus Practical Methods to Teach Them.*

by

Stevie Grieve



Published by
WORLD CLASS COACHING

Modern Soccer Tactics Volume 1

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Authors - Stevie Grieve



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WORLD CLASS COACHING

Hello, and firstly, thank you for taking the time to open the cover of this book. It is a great honour for me as a young coach to be able to have the chance to write a book. Not many coaches have a fantastic opportunity like this and thanks must go to Mike Saif at World Class Coaching for allowing me to have such an opportunity.

I was asked by World Class Coaching to write this book on the back of my 1st published book: 'Sergio Busquets – Barcelona's Unsung Hero?' I gladly accepted the challenge, and my criterion for using specific parts of matches was:

- Can a goal be scored?
- How was it scored?
- How was it defended if not?
- How was space created to retain possession?
- Defensive shape to stop attacks effectively

Within this book, you will find tactical observations from some of the world's best teams, and how it affected the outcome of the match. Most of the observations and analysis come from attacking scenarios, and how the attack was developed; which runs were made, possible decisions and defensive shape against the attack, and how to dismantle the defensive shape. One of the articles includes the role of Angel Di Maria within the Real Madrid team, and the type of creativity he brings to it, with speculation of regular patterns of play that Real Madrid uses. Another article includes Decision making around the goal from Arsenal v AC Milan, players dropping off into spaces between the midfield and defensive lines to create attacks, and defending in numbers.

I wanted to give my opinion on how I saw the footage develop – runs, attacking and defensive positioning, marking schemes, decision making and possible patterns of play. I hope that when you read the different articles you will see why the play has been successful, and how you could possibly implement what you have just read into your own training sessions.

The training sessions should be viewed as a way to help develop the tactical abilities of your players, but I would also like it to help coaches develop different ideas from the practice drills – Can you change this to make it better for your own team? Can it be used to develop a different aspect of the play? If from this book it helps coaches develop their player to become tactically better, and to find different ideas from a simple exercise, then for me, that is fantastic. The sessions are mainly practices I have used with my own teams, from recreational level, to travel team and professional youth academy teams, and found success after refining the initial practise I had tried. Some of the practices are training sessions I have thought up from watching a specific piece of play, and looked to make a session which fits the article preceding it. Again, you can alter these to suit the needs of your team.

I really hope that you enjoy reading this book, and can find some tactical insight into the world's best teams, and use the training sessions to develop your players to become more intelligent, tactically aware players.

Cheers,

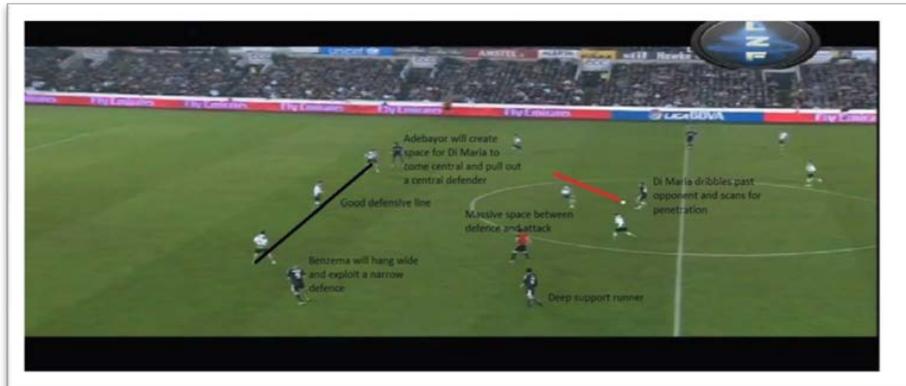
Stevie Grieve

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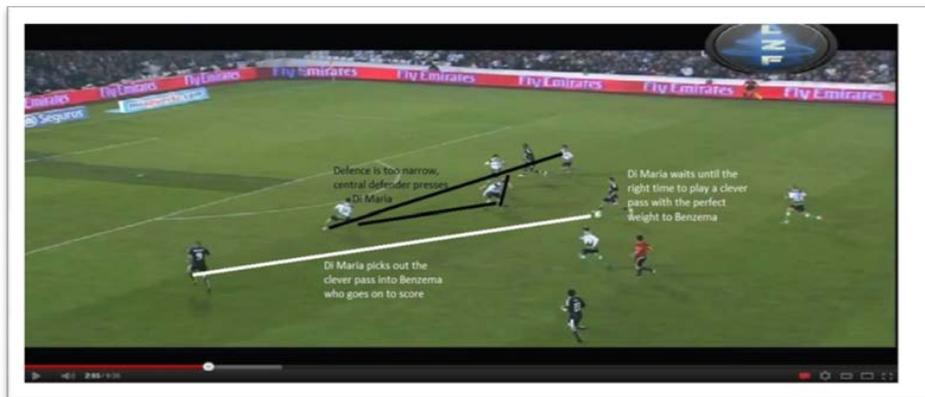
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Di Maria has cut inside away from Pirlo, and found a gap between Gattuso and Pirlo, with Higuain in space. As Nesta anticipated the wide pass, he sat deeper than required, and as the gap appears when Di Maria cuts inside, Nesta is too deep and this allows the time for Higuain to receive with more time and space inside the box – had Nesta started higher, the pass may not have been on for Di Maria.

Real Madrid v Racing Santander 2010/2011

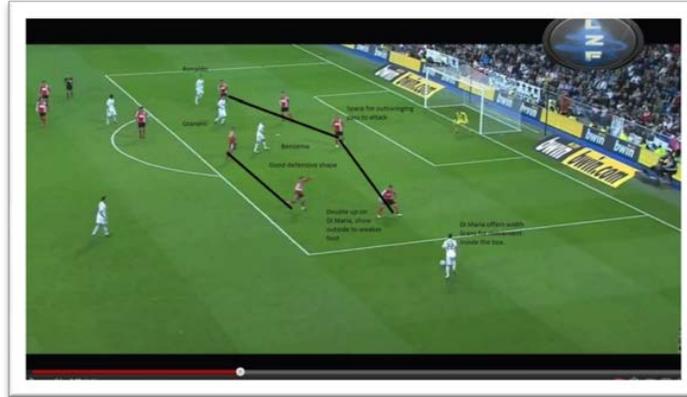


Di Maria dribbles past his opponent and as he goes past him, scans to see where the space, opponents and options are.

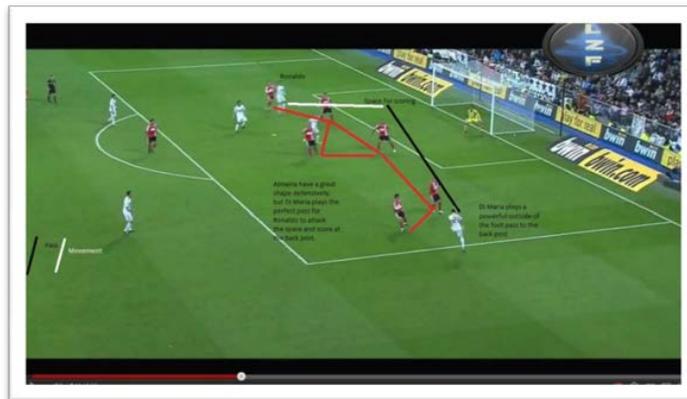


Once he attacks the space in the centre, Di Maria can see the right back tucking in too narrow, and Benzema hangs wide to widen the space for a clever pass wide. Di Maria delays until the full back is too narrow to recover then plays the pass as the centre back comes out to press.

Real Madrid v Almeria 2010/2011



Di Maria this time stays wide as the defence has a good shape and is playing narrow. Di Maria receives and is doubled up on by 2 defenders, with 3 options to find inside the box. He scans for movement and space to find a pass.



Defensively, Almeria have a good shape, but leave the smallest amount of space at the back post, maybe the full back is a yard or 2 too high, but the cross is perfect and Ronaldo attacks the space to score.

Real Madrid v Lyon 2010/2011



Di Maria scans forward and spots the high line. Ronaldo is quick and when he signals for the pass, Di Maria can play the penetrating pass under little pressure, knowing Ronaldo can outpace his opponent and be through on goal with a good pass.



Ronaldo is in space, and has time to set the ball, his approach and body shape before finishing for a simple goal.

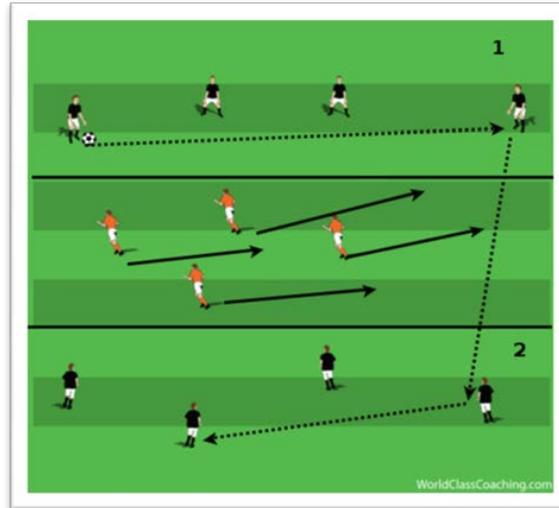
If Di Maria has been pressed, the high line may not have been punished. As he had time, he could pick out the pass and penetrate the defensive line with ease.

In conclusion, the Real Madrid speed of attack and ability to penetrate the defensive line is vital to their system of play, and with these 4 clips, can highlight the very important, but understated part that Angel Di Maria plays in the team. He can dribble, cross, play long and short passes and is a clever 2 touch player.

Stevie Grieve

Penetration and Creativity

Penetrating the Defence – 3 Zones



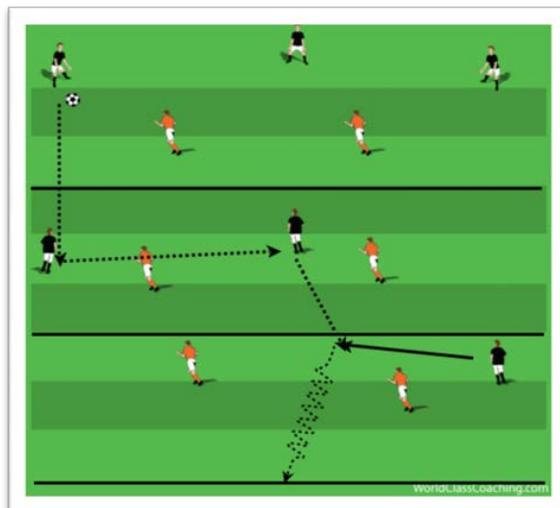
3 sections are split up into 10 yard grids. The defence look to keep gaps between players to a minimum while the attack keep the ball moving to create a space for penetration to the other group.

Play with high intensity for 2 minutes in the defensive phase, then change over. Every penetration results in a forfeit for the defending team (maybe an extra 30 seconds inside the box, or they all line up on the goal line bent over while the rest of the team kick a ball at their backsides, for a more light hearted approach).

Coaching Points:

- Always look ahead to see where a passing lane or combination exists
- Take responsibility for penetrating the defence
- Communication to team mates to play an attacking pass or a retention pass
- Communication for 1st time or 2nd time passes

Penetration Game 6v6 – 3 zones



Split the pitch into 3 grids all 16 yards wide by 10 yards long.

In the top grid it is 3v2 in favour of the attacking team.

In the middle grid it is 2v2.

In the End grid, it is 1v2 in favour of the defence.

The game starts with the attack given the ball from a defender, who is then pressed. The defence can look to build an attack by passing in the defensive zone until a free pass into midfield is open – the players in the midfield zone will always be on the move looking to create space for a pass. Once the ball moves across the line of the zone, its 2v2 in the middle zone. Again, you can pass or dribble to create the space to pass through the midfield line to pass into the striker who plays 1v2 against the defence. Once he receives, he looks to create space to dribble over the end line.

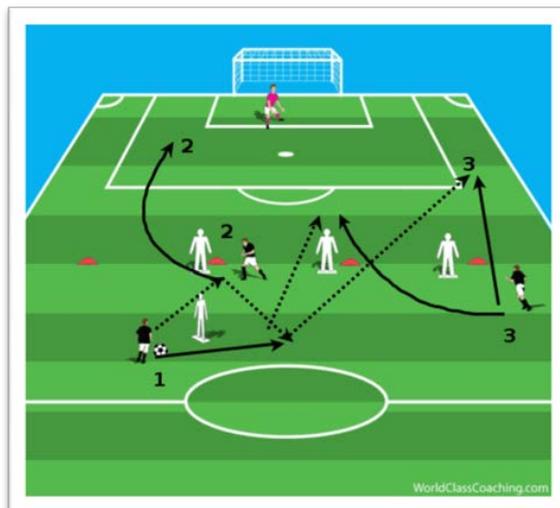
Variations:

1 attacker can enter the end zone to play 2v2

1 defender can enter the next zone if the line is penetrated ie midfield zone is 3v2 for defence v midfield, or 3v1 for defence v attacker

1 player from both teams can enter the next zone once the line is penetrated Add a goal for the attack to score into, 15-25 yards behind the last zone

Penetration Team Play – CM Penetration – Basic Exercise



Player 1 passes into player 2, who has dropped in to receive the pass. As this happens, player 3 will make a straight run down the line and receive in the space behind the defence to cross for player 2 who has continued his run into the centre.

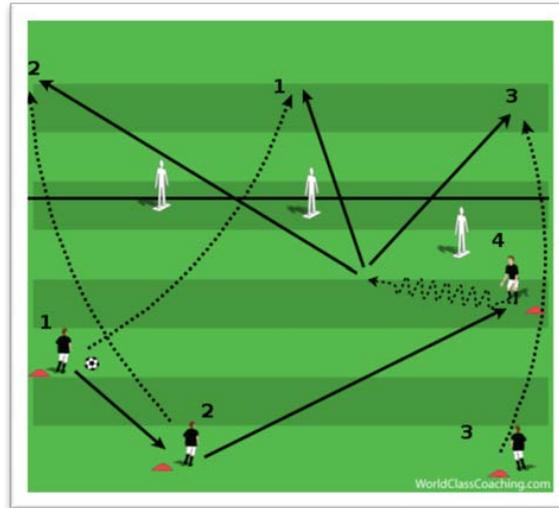
Coaching Points:

- Weight pass to allow 1st time combinations
- Time runs to stay onside
- Communication for pass direction
- Accuracy of runs and combinations

Layers:

- Check Runs before movements
- Communication between players
- Curved pass
- Introduce recovering defenders to stop the cross
- Introduce recovering defenders to mark striker
- Introduce pressure on CM to make penetrating pass difficult

Penetrating passes – Cutting Inside – Basic



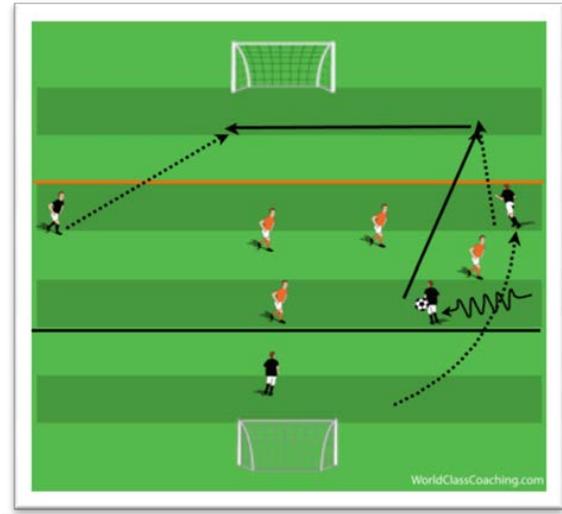
4 players start the exercise in 4 set positions, Attacking Midfield, Central Midfield, Full Back and Winger.

The ball is passed from 1, to 2 to 4. As the ball is in transit to 4, 3 will go on the overlap. When 1 passes the ball, he will make an arced run inside and attack the space between the 2 central defenders, when 2 passes wide to 4, he will use the space 1 has left and pull wide. When 4 receives he will cut the ball inside and once he is between the left centre back and left full back, he has 3 passing options; Far side pass to 2, Central through pass to 1, reverse pass to full back.

Coaching Points:

- Split the run into 2 parts; an initial jog then a burst into space for the pass
- Communication from full back to cut inside
- Scanning the play early from the winger
- Quick decision from the winger
- Correct timing of the pass,
- Correct weight of pass,
- Correct angle of pass to allow a 1 touch pass or finish when in game scenario

4v4 Games with Offside Lines – Opponent pressure



2 teams play 4v4 as normal, but with offside lines. When defending, all players must be ahead of the offside line, in attack players must not play any further ahead than the line until the ball is passed. They can play behind their own line, but not the opponents.

The aim of the game is to allow players through guided discovery, runs they can make and passes they can make in attack to penetrate the defence. Once penetrated the attackers have 1 touch to pass or score.

Only step in if a good pass or run isn't seen, after the phase of play has broken down. The player may have seen the run after they have made a decision, and can learn from it. If they don't see the pass/run show them what was missed and how to look out for the opportunity arising in future.

Stevie Grieve

The emergence of 'Flying' Full-Backs

Since the late 1990's, full backs have become an increasingly used attacking outlet for teams wishing to attack and play in the opponents half of the field. My earliest memory of football is the 1994 USA World Cup and the great Brazilian team (I was 7), and from then on I always watched football but for a certain style. I remember the 1998 World Cup - mainly for Scotland being in it - Cafu playing right back differently from my dad who played there (who NEVER attacked) Ronaldo being amazing and some guy called Zinedine Zidane. I watched the games with interest, supporting the team who attacked the most and always asked my dad "why don't you get caught offside like Cafu?"

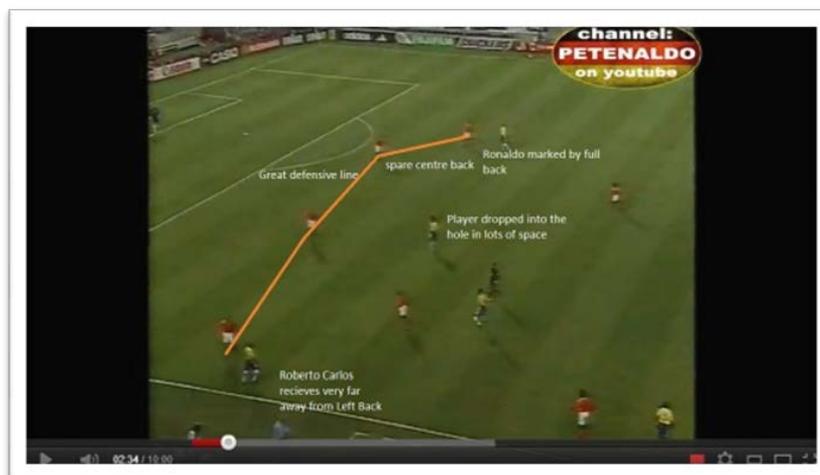
He wasn't impressed. As a kids team player, I regularly played in defence and after the World Cup 1998 I started to bomb forward from defence (with my Brazil top on underneath my shirt for when I scored) – So as I grew older, I watched with intrigue the changing of the way the game is played, and how different roles have changed – deep lying strikers, holding midfielders, attacking full backs, sweeper keepers – and the different tactical strategies now in place – we have even seen a 4-6-0 formation from Scotland, and a 3-7-0 formation from Barcelona v Santos (This is what the Santos manager called the formation that Barca played in the 2012 Club World Cup Final) and a crazy Chile team managed by Bielsa at the 2010 World Cup playing 3-1-3-3. Not a new formation but a little bit different. Not a commonly used formation by any means.

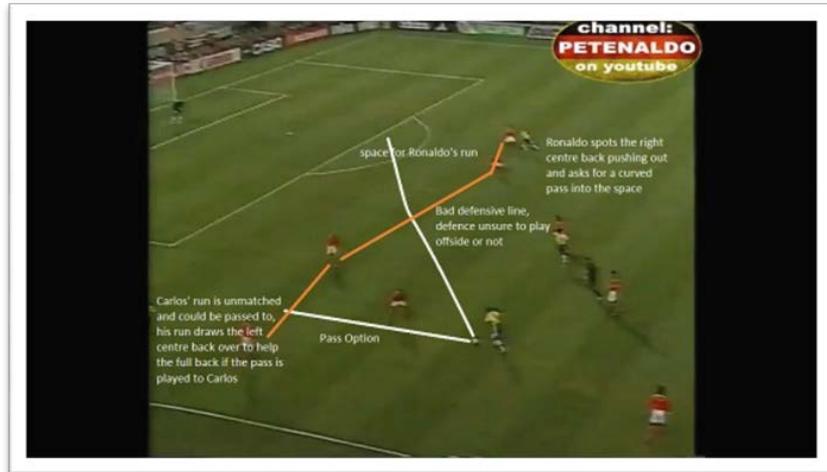
Now, the game now has more attacking full backs than ever; every good team has one, and they are almost auxiliary wingers in some cases.

I will look at my 3 of favourite attacking full backs –

1st – Roberto Carlos

Roberto Carlos was incredibly quick, could shoot with ferocious power and played switched passes with accuracy. He scored the occasional goal too.



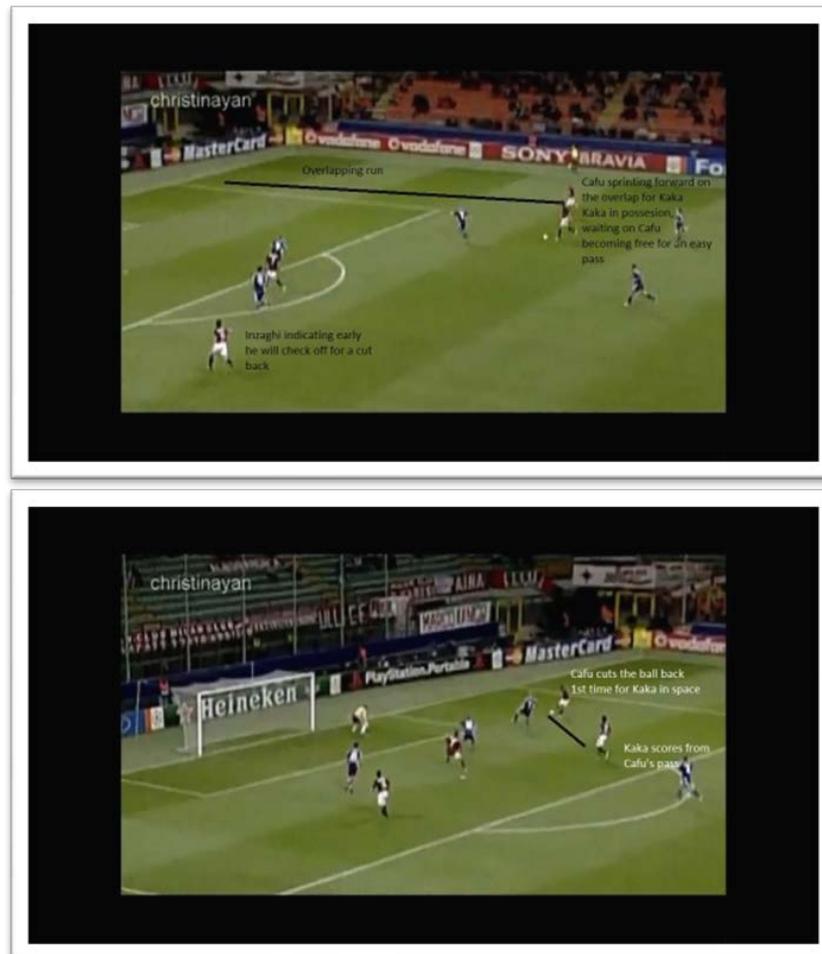


Roberto Carlos receives where a left winger would play, Hollands defence are in good position to deal with any threat, as the left centre back comes over to help his full back incase the pass is played behind for Carlos. Carlos passes inside and makes a forward run, which is unmatched. He could be played in but half of the Holland defence step out, leaving a massive central space for Ronaldo to exploit if the pass is played to him.



Roberto Carlos has been forced to dribble inside as Manchester United don't want him raiding down the outside and exploiting his pace and allowing a cut back. He cuts inside and Zidane is in space. Carlos passes inside to Zidane and makes a run ahead of the midfield and defence. As Zidane is under no pressure, and Carlos makes a run into the space. Zidane plays the perfect pass through to Roberto Carlos, who scans on the run and knows Ronaldo and McManaman are inside the box waiting for the pass for a tap in. This is a good example of when Carlos cut inside from the touchline, he could still influence the play running ahead of the ball.

Full Back 2 – Cafu – Incredible engine, dynamic leader and unselfish player, always wanted to attack and help create goals. Played in 3 World Cup Finals



On the counter attack, Kaka is looking for a final pass to score, Cafu is racing forward in support, Kaka weights the pass perfectly and stays behind the ball for a cut back, which Cafu plays 1st time. Kaka clips the ball over the goalie to finish the move. This move would've been harder to score from without the overlap from Cafu.



Cafu shows his defensive ability by reading the pass wide and winning the tackle, then he quickly gets up to pass forward, and go on the overlap.



Cafu wins the race for possession from the pass, and turns away from opponent, loses him, and plays a perfect cross for Shevchenko to score.

As we can see from these clips, the attacking full back played a major part in creating goal scoring chances for their team, from deep, wide and pushed on positions. The overlapping full back is now an essential part of the modern game and many full backs can look back to Cafu and Roberto Carlos as the the blueprint for attacking full backs.

Stevie Grieve

Defending Corners – Zonal or Man Marking?

Defending a corner is something most teams will have to do at least once per game. It's a goal scoring chance and a lot of weaker team rely on corner kicks as their main outlet for goal scoring. Sam Allardyce has always built his teams up to be a threat from corner kicks and many games of his were won from a well worked corner kick movement.

So, the question is, what is the best way to defend a corner kick? In my opinion, it depends on the players, and their mentalities for an aerial battle for a defensive header, a block or simply stopping an opponent from getting a run on you. Also reaction speed to get into position, find your opponent and get into a good body shape to defend well.

My preference as a coach is normally a split between man-man and zone, with the goalkeeper central ready to attack the ball, 2 players on the 6 yard line in a zone, 1 on a post, 2 on the half way line, one at the edge of the box and 4 man marking. Many coaches have differing opinions and that's what makes the game varied and interesting.

In this article, I will look at the 1998 World Cup Final defensive set ups from Brazil for corners – who conceded 2 goals from corners – and look at why this happened - looking at set up, shape, numbers back, marking styles and men on the posts.

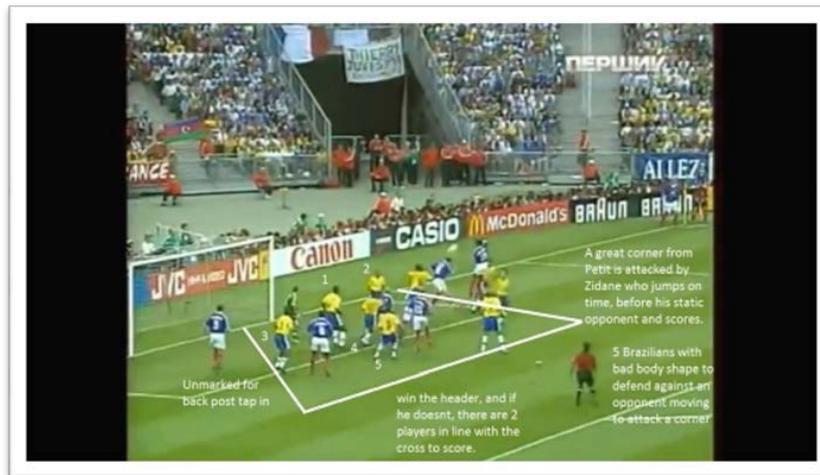
Bad Zonal Marking from Corner Kicks – Brazil 1998 World Cup Final – Zidane Scores first goal



The Brazilian zone is overloaded with players marking the front zone space, and nobody at the back post area. Only 1 French player is in the zone, and even he isn't marked properly, look at the body shape of his opponent. Of the 10 Brazilians defending, only 2 have the right body shape to start with.



Once the signal is made, the 4 French attackers outside the zone all attack the zone, Zidane going to the front post area of it, Desailly delays his run. One of the runners is picked up but would be favourite to reach the ball if it goes to the back post, Zidane is at the front and gets goal side of his marker, the other attacker is 8 yards out centre of the goal unmarked. The Brazilians don't look organised as 2 players at the front post in the first picture move out to the ball with no short option. There are now 9 Brazilians inside the zone, with 4 Frenchmen, but only 3 Brazilians are on the move ready to attack the ball. Number 9 starts to pull away from his marker to the back post space.



When the 4 attackers who start off unmarked, enter the Brazilian zone defence, 5 of the defenders have bad body shape, and 2 are badly out of position, with nobody at the far post. If the ball breaks loose, France number 9 should score under no pressure. As the ball enters the box, Zidane gets goal side, jumps early and at pace and is always favourite to score here. Terrible defending from Brazil.

Bad Man-Man Marking from Corner Kicks - Brazil 1998 World Cup Final – Zidane scores the 2nd goal



Brazil have changed to Man-Man marking for this corner, they have adapted much better and look much more organised. There's players covering the front zone for a weak corner, a player on the front post to clear off the line, and there's 2v2 at both the front and back posts. Also we have a 1v1 with a late, deep starting runner. Brazil also have a space player on the edge of the box for a loose ball, so most bases are covered, except the players look lazy, body position is all wrong and not touch tight with the opponent, so a little checked run will get some freedom and some more space for a free header.



As you can see, Brazil have initially picked up the French players Man-Man. They have then all dropped off into a zone along 4 yards out, able to attack a ball into the 6 yard box with ease. 2 players have used the bad body shape of the Brazilian markers to check away and find space – 7 yards out in line with back post and 10 yards out deeper than the back post. Zidane has also sprinted into the box late and has nobody near him – perhaps Brazil thought lightning wouldn't strike twice?!



As 2 Brazilians miss the chance to head the ball clear, Zidane is right behind them and as the ball dips, he is on hand to bullet the header into the goal. One French player is left free at the 6 yard box as his opponent is now jogging away from the defensive phase, and he could score from a rebound. Also, there is a French player 12 yards out at the back post ready to take advantage of a rebound that may fall his way. There is a Brazilian on the edge of the box, centre of the goal ball watching and it may have been his job to run with Zidane for this corner.

So, what we saw from the 1998 World Cup Final was a Brazilian team not ready to defend set pieces properly, too slow in transition and too lazy in getting the right body shape and organization to defend the corners. If Brazil had been ready to defend corners, or had France not capitalised on the weakness of the Brazil team, we may have had a different outcome from that final match.

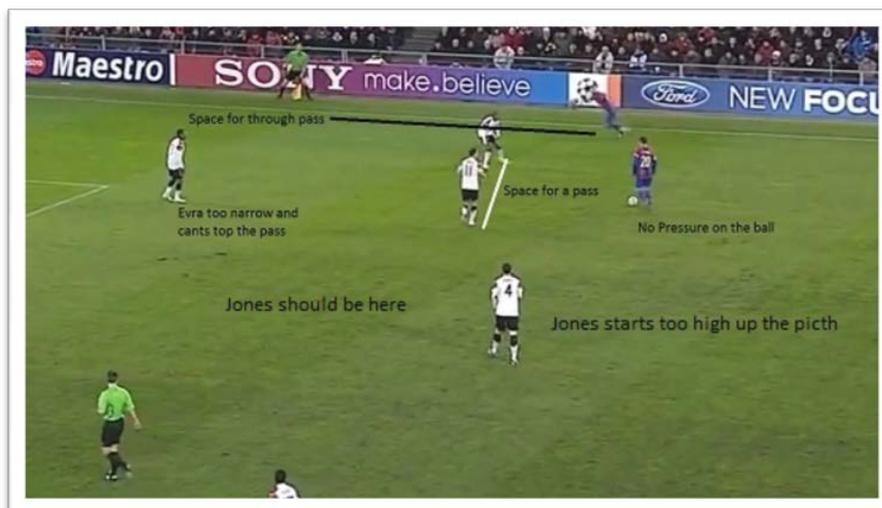
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Stopping crosses stops goals.

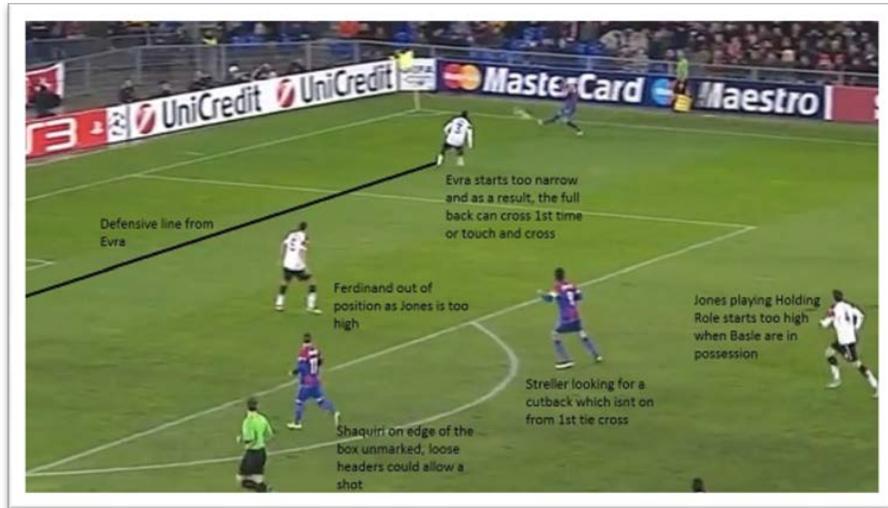
In European Football, crossing is becoming less frequent as teams are starting to favour passing in triangles to break down defences. Barcelona rarely cross the ball and have had plenty of success in recent times, even the Arsenal invincibles rarely crossed the ball, but when a good cross is delivered, goals can be scored often – the careers of David Beckham and Luis Figo are testament to how valuable a player with a great delivery from wide areas are.

In Basle's recent Champions League match against Manchester United, Basle needed a win to qualify for the last 16, Manchester needed a draw. Basle started off with attacking intent and managed to score early on from a cross which wasn't defended properly, then a 2nd cross which wasn't defended properly either. Basle's 2nd goal also came from a cross, with Patrice Evra at fault (among others) for both goals. Manchester United scored a late consolation, also from a cross (a free kick) so this is a game which can highlight the importance of stopping crosses before they end up in a goal.

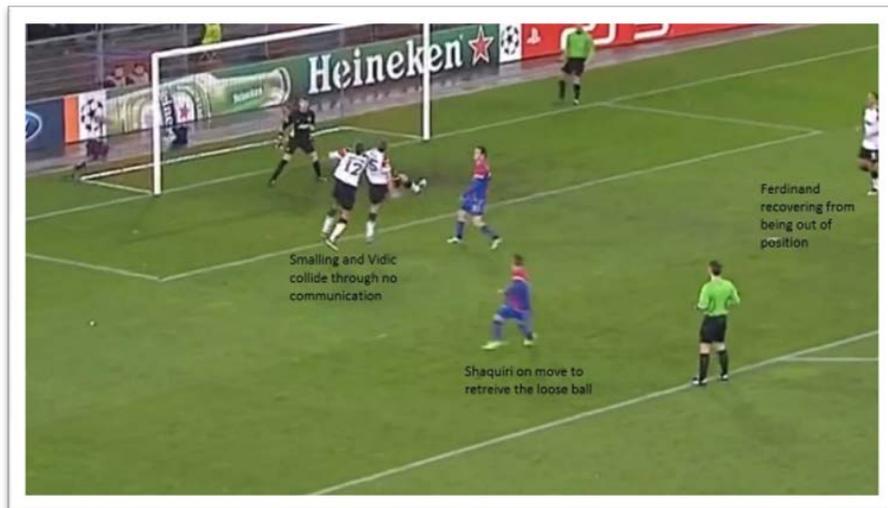
Goal 1 – 9minutes - Evra starts too narrow and Jones starts too high



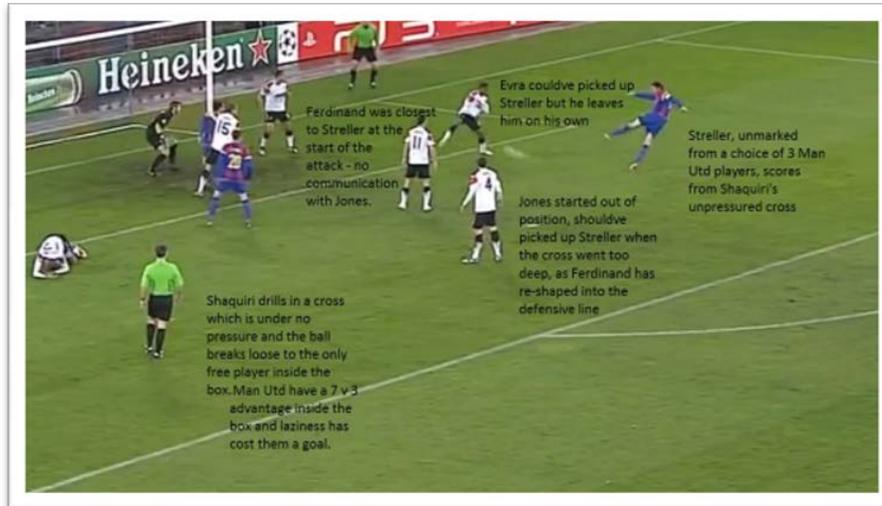
Phil Jones is playing in the holding midfield role in this match, and starts off 10 yards too high. His job is to anchor the space in front of defence, break up attacks and help defend the central zone when possession is lost or a cross is made into the box. Here, he is too high and Ferdinand out of picture, has to compensate for this. As Evra starts too narrow by 2 or 3 yards, and there is a passing lane into the space between Young and Giggs, the pass can be played to the overlapping full back.



As the full back arrives, he could take a touch and cross, he has that much time, but he chooses to cross 1st time on the run. Streller and Shaquiri are at the edge of the box with Frei around 8 yards out, out of picture. Ferdinand's body shape isn't good, and he is out of position because Jones starts too high, so he is close to Streller to discourage the cross to him. Shaquiri has drifted infield and is unmarked as there is nobody in the zone to pick him up.



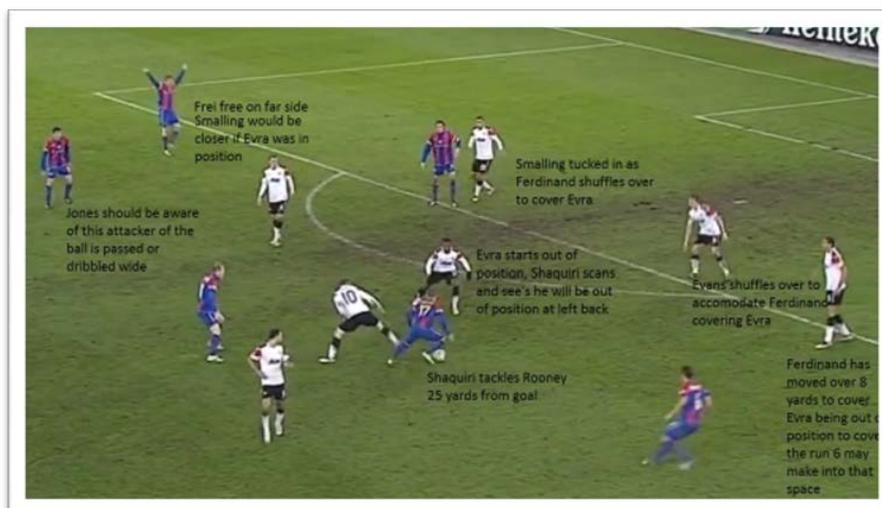
The cross to Frei is too long and the danger should be over, but as Vidic and Smalling don't communicate, they both jump to clear the ball and only manage to collide, flicking the ball wide for Shaquiri who has anticipated the collision and sprints to retrieve the ball. Ferdinand is still a little out of position but should have time for him, Jones and Evra to get back into good positions, mark the opponents and clear the ball to safety.



As Smalling is on the grass injured, no real pressure can be put on Shaquiri as he drills in a cross, but this doesn't excuse the lack of organisation in the defence. Ferdinand had to pick up Streller, and then dropped back into a defensive shape, so Jones should've picked him up, or been told to by Ferdinand. As Streller is at the far post, Evra could've picked him up, but in the end, nobody does and he's left alone to score from the cross which wasn't under any pressure on the left side from Shaquiri. Manchester United had a 7 v 3 advantage here and were punished by too many individual mistakes, no pressure on crosses and leaving opponents unmarked inside the box.

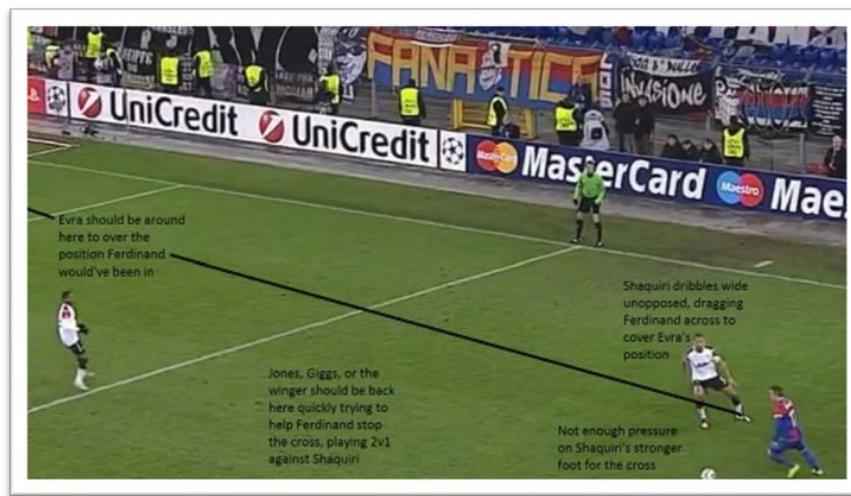
Goal 2 – Evra and Ferdinand out of position

The 2nd goal comes from Rooney being tackled 25 yards from goal by Shaquiri, then dribbling wide and crossing under no pressure, like the 1st goal.

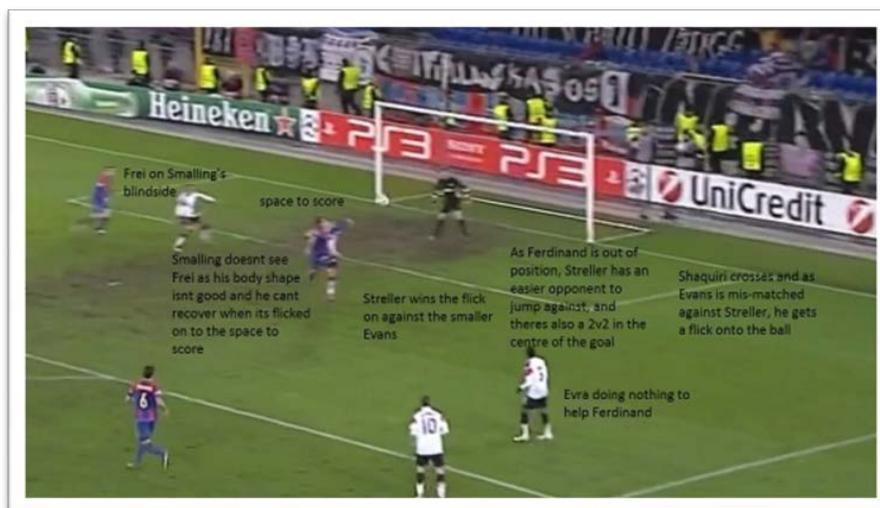


Shaquiri wins possession in central midfield, and as he has scanned for a pass, he knows Evra is not in his position at left back. Ferdinand, Smalling and Evans have all had to shuffle infield to compensate for this. Frei is left alone on the far side looking for a pass but Shaquiri hasn't the space

to get a pass over there. Instead, he dribbles to the space where Evra should be, in the hope that Ferdinand will be drawn out of the position and cross into a box without its main aerial defender.



As Ferdinand has gone with Shaquiri to put at least some pressure on the ball, Evra should retreat into central defence where Ferdinand should be and maintain a defensive shape in the centre, he doesn't and a 2v2 is left in the centre of the box. As Shaquiri is left footed, and has plenty of time and space, he cuts the ball back and scans for a target; Streller is with Evans and Shaquiri uses him as his target – Ferdinand should be with Streller to match physically inside the box.



The ball reaches Streller inside the box and he outjumps Evans, and manages to flick the ball on to the back post. Smalling has a bad body position when the cross is delivered and doesn't know that Frei is on his own at the back post. Frei reads the flick on and attacks the space to score with Smalling unable to recover or react due to his bad starting body position.

In conclusion, Manchester United took Basle too lightly, even after a 3-3 draw at Old Trafford, and were punished from 2 crosses that should've been defended much better, from more than 1 player.

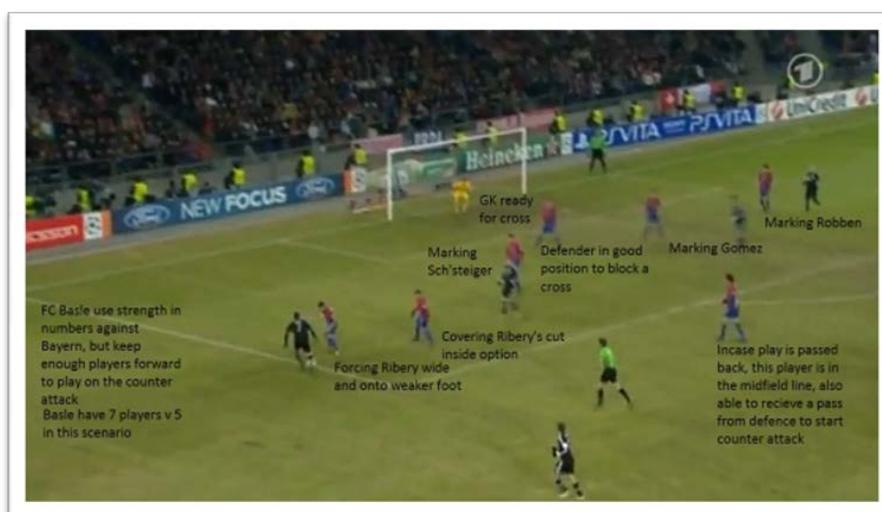
Stevie Grieve

FC Basel v Bayern Munich - Defending in numbers

Many teams defend with lots of players behind the ball, but often lose out by conceding a goal, opening up to score back then being punished with a 2nd goal for quite often, a 2-0 loss. Even when Scotland played the Czech Republic with a 4-6-0, they conceded because of one little error in defence and at the top level, one little error or lapse of concentration can result in a goal, which leads to a defeat and sometimes the consequences being relegation, the end of a title challenge or cup run.

When getting lots of bodies behind the ball, its important to ensure that players are marked tightly, spaces are covered, play is predictable and that you manage to attack. Having possession means you can't concede, and it also means that you may have the opportunity to score from an opponents mistake in defence. In the recent Champions League game, Basle beat Bayern Munich 1-0, despite having less than 40% possession. This was down to the fact that when Bayern had the ball, Robben and Ribery – who prefer to play on the 'wrong side' and cut inside onto their stronger foot – were doubled up on and forced to play wide and onto their weaker foot. This allowed the play to be predictable, or forced them to pass to less dangerous and creative team mates around the box.

Basel – Making play predictable – Strength in numbers



Ribery has the ball on the left, and looks to cut infield onto his right foot. The full back forces him wide, with a covering team mate blocking Ribery's option to cut onto his favoured right foot. The Basel defence have all picked up players closest to them, got into good positions and crucially, with the correct body shape. This allows them to see any movements made, the ball and the team mates around them. Gomez, Robben and Schweinsteiger are all marked, the GK is ready to collect a high ball and the space central defender is in a brilliant position to block any crosses.



When Ribery gets a little space to cross, it is on his weaker foot and on the run. With the spare central defender in a great position, he clears the ball out of the defence, but it lands at Lahm. The Basel team quickly move out in transition and re-shape the defence.

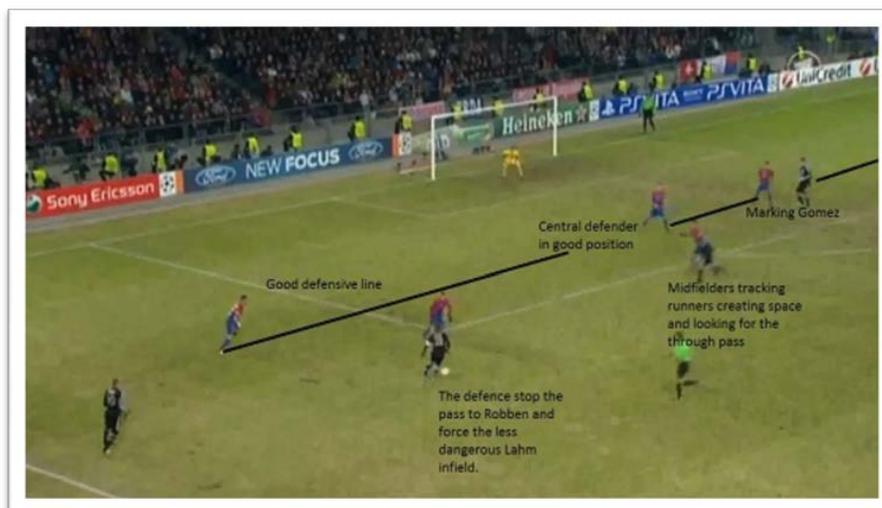


Lahm receives the clearance, but the Basel defence have marked Gomez, Schweinsteiger and Robben quickly, and formed a defensive line around 8 yards out – around 12 yards from the line of the ball – a good depth with a midfield in front of them. Shaquiri is in front of Lahm and can press if told to by a team mate, with a team mate 10 yards away who is also able to press Lahm, but would be hesitant to with Alaba able to receive if Lahm can pass away from pressure. Lahm is predictable and crosses for Gomez.

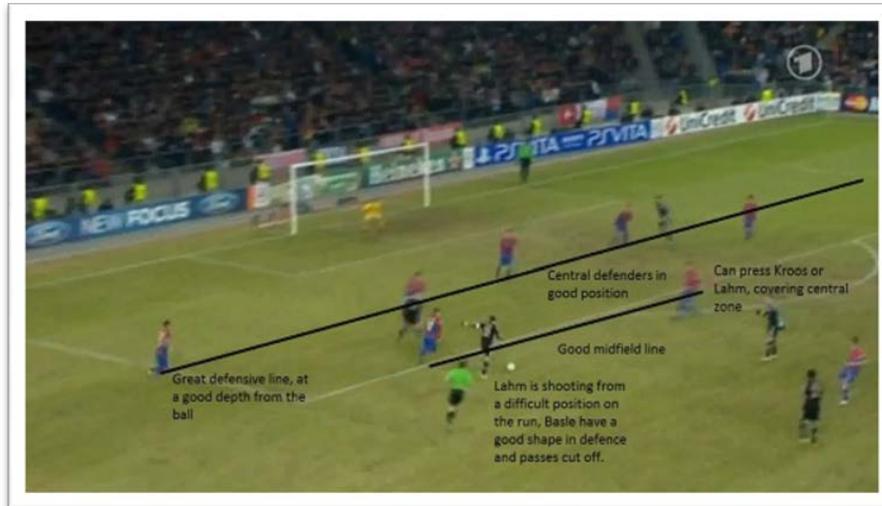


Lahm crosses to the back post to Gomez, but with one defender marking him, and another ready to attack the ball when its crossed, the Basel defence cope well with the 2 attacking phases of play and get the ball away from goal to safety.

Basel – Good positioning in defence



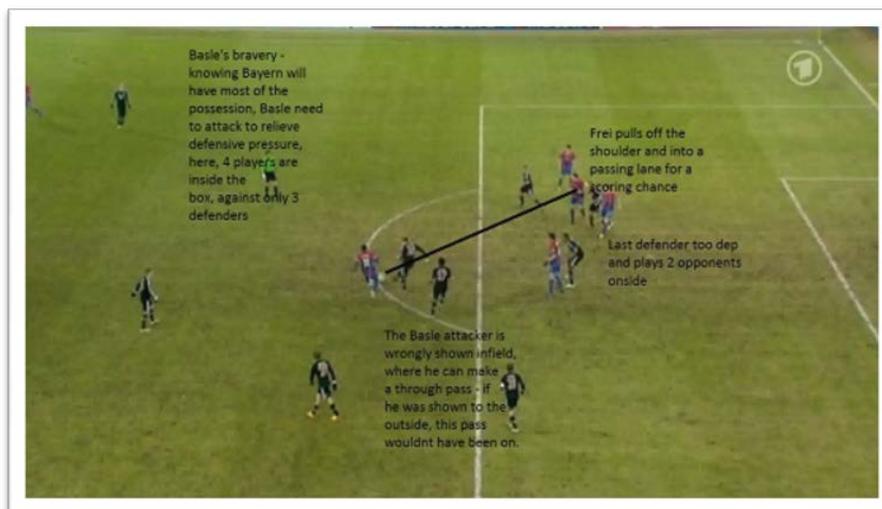
Robben is now on the left side, which means he has switched sides with Ribery. The Basle defence adjust to this and stop passes from going to Robben. Lahm dribbles inside to his stronger foot, but as he isn't an attacker, he isn't as dangerous. He is forced infield with his 2 options both marked well and the defence in good positions, with a good line depth.



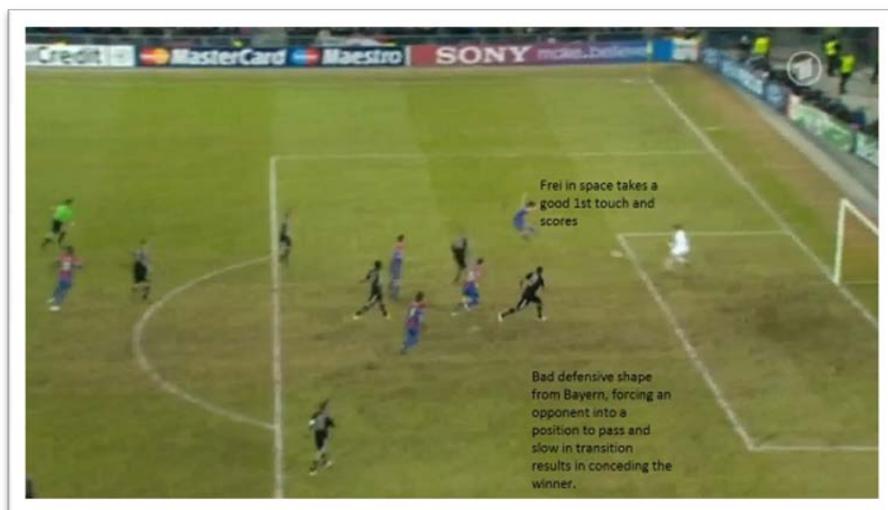
As Lahm reaches the central zone, he is looking to find a pass, but the pass to Gomez isn't on, and the run across the defence has stopped that passing option. As the defence and midfield both have good shape, Lahm is forced to shoot from a difficult angle and he misses.

Basel's Bravery – Numbers in attack

Basel have defended well all game, and been very unlucky in attack – Streller hit the post with a header from a Shaquiri cross from the right after being forced inside to his stronger foot, and he smashed a shot against the bar with the keeper stranded after a pass from the Korean left back Joo-Ho Park. Basel were brave all game on the counter attack and this attack is what they deserved after a brilliant defensive but brave attacking performance,



Bayern again force the Basel attacker inside onto his left foot, and with a 4v3 advantage in Basel's favour inside the box, Frei pulls wide off the shoulder of the last defender and opens up a passing lane through the Bayern defence. Had Bayern shown the attacker outside, this pass wouldn't have been on, and this would've slowed down the attack, and possibly allowed Bayern to re-organise defensively to stop the goal.



Frei receives the pass in the space he created for himself, takes a calm 1st touch and shoots past Neuer for the winner in the last minutes of the game.

In conclusion, Basel's work rate, organisation, communication, body shape in defence and willingness to commit players forward in attack allowed them to have opportunities to score, and had the post and crossbar not prevented them, they could've scored much earlier in the game.

Stevie Grieve

The importance of knowing when, where and why to run after a pass

Receive, Pass, Move, Offer. The mantra of 'La Masia', Barcelona's famed youth academy. It's a philosophy which has originated back to the Dutch 1970's teams, where Rinus Michels and Johan Cruyff almost perfected the game of Total Football – if only they had won the World Cup in that decade, maybe the game Weil Coerver thought in the future would be being based on power, physique and tactics (prompting him to start Coerver Coaching) the game would be in a far more aesthetic state than it has been for some time – see Greece winning the 2004 European Championships. Thankfully more and more teams are getting back to playing attractive football to find success – Real Madrid 2002 'Galacticos', the Arsenal 'Invincibles', and now this incredible Barcelona team which won all 6 competitions they entered in 2009 with a beautiful style of football.

All these teams had one thing in common – great individual players with the ball at their feet, but players who knew when and where to run, and just as importantly, when not to run. Many players find space, then instinctively run, often out of space, becoming a player who can't receive. In this article, I will look at times where a player has been in possession, and had a decision to make. The great players recognise the situation and benefit from being intelligent enough to know when was the time to hang back, drop in to make space to spin and run, or run ahead of the ball into space.

Robinho – AC Milan v Napoli – Hanging back to offer cutback in lots of space



Robinho receives a pass and has a player on the overlap, with an opponent in front to pressure Robinho. Robinho passes as he knows that the full back will shift away to press the ball, and Robinho knows as he has nobody near him, there will be a large space for him if he times his run properly. Napoli have plenty of defenders recovering and a cross would likely be cut out, with both other attackers being marked.



Robinho hangs back and gives the full back as much angle for a cutback as possible. Napoli have most crossing angles covered and Robinho is the only option for the fullback. Robinho moves onto the ball as it is in transit and scores into the goal keeper's bottom right hand corner.

The goal comes from Robinho thinking ahead of the game, knowing the movements of the immediate defender, the possibilities for the full back and where the space will appear. The cutback is of good quality and as Robinho times his run properly, he gets the chance to score.

Andres Iniesta - Running ahead of the ball to get into a scoring position



The ball breaks loose to Iniesta, who plays a 1st time back heel to Cazorla to start the attack. Torres has pulled wide and this has left a large space in the centre forward position for one of the attackers to move into.



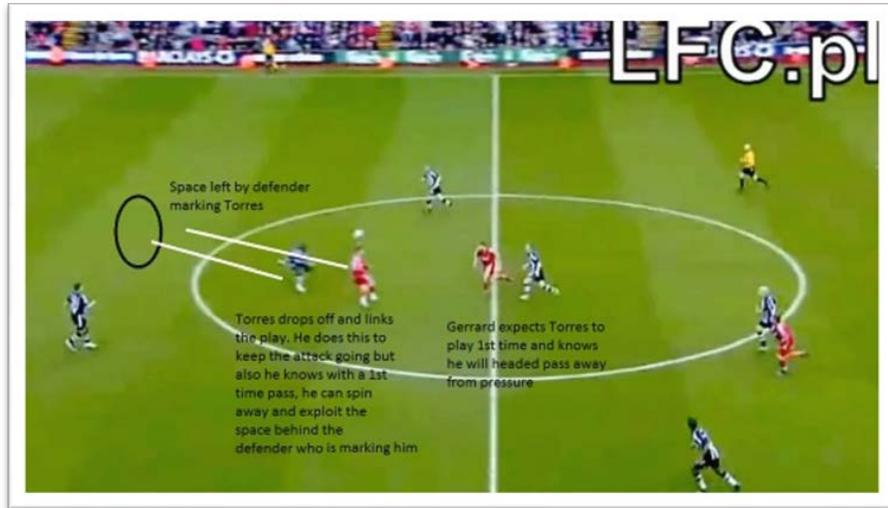
Torres receives from Cazorla and cuts inside to his stronger right foot to cross for Iniesta in the centre of the box. Holland have players recovering so Torres is trying to exploit the possible cross behind the centre back for Iniesta to receive and shoot with, before the defensive line reshapes.



The cross almost reaches Iniesta but is blocked before it reaches him. Cesc is close to Iniesta and he reacts quickest to the loose ball, before the 3 Dutch players around him. Iniesta makes sure he is onside and checks back a couple of yards, this makes Cesc's pass easier and makes sure that Iniesta will be onside, in front of goal. Iniesta takes a good 1st touch before volleying past the Dutch goalkeeper, to win the World Cup for Spain.

Iniesta scored the goal because he knew that with Torres wide, the central space needed to be filled to occupy the defence, and with 2 players in the centre available to be passed to, or in this case, react to a rebound, Iniesta was in the position to receive and score.

Dropping off to lose a marker to score



Liverpool clear the ball to safety, but Torres thinks he can make a chance for himself. Here, he drops deep and drags the defender with him, knowing he has the pace to spin and run away from him into space. He heads the ball into Gerrard away from pressure, and spins away from the defenders eyeline.



Gerrard takes a touch to keep the attack moving and once Torres has a yard on the defender, Gerrard releases a great pass into the space and into Torres' stride.

The chance was created from Torres being alive to the possibility that if he could create a space, and find Gerrard with a pass, there could be a chance of scoring a goal. He created the space himself and Gerrard had a clear passing lane to find Torres in front of goal.

Stevie Grieve

The regularity of teams using 'Inverted Wingers'

In the past, teams lined up in the formation of that time – the W-M of the early days, then the 4-2-4, moving to Alf Ramsey's 4-3-3, to 4-4-2 of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, to the commonly used 4-2-3-1 of today. Every generation has had a formation of that period, but with almost all formations being used, and known how to play against, teams now have to find new ways of using a formation in a difficult to play against manner.

Previously in a 4-2-4, 4-3-3 or 4-4-2, a left winger was a left footed player who would dribble 1v1 against his opponent, and then try to cross. He was left footed, quick and could deliver good crosses into the big centre forward's head, or the little centre forward's feet. The right winger would do the same – go on the outside and cross. Predictable, but common in world football. Fast forward to the 00s and 10s, teams need to come up with new ways of breaking down organised defences; coaches have used right footed players as left wingers, to allow them to cut inside and dribble at the full backs weaker foot, and exploit the space inside the full back, and allow the less new but now common attacking full back to overlap the play, so now wide players are playing 2v1 on full backs instead of the old fashioned way of 1v1. Particular players who play on the 'weak side' would be, David Villa, Arjen Robben, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Franck Ribery, Ashley Young, Ronaldinho and Angel di Maria. All of these players could play on their stronger side, but have found more success playing on the 'weak side' as it allows for 3 main things; dribbling inside an opponent, cutting infield to shoot and arriving at the far post inside the box for a cut back onto their stronger foot.

Cristiano Ronaldo – Left Wing – Real Madrid - Cutting inside and using the overlap to create space to shoot from distance.



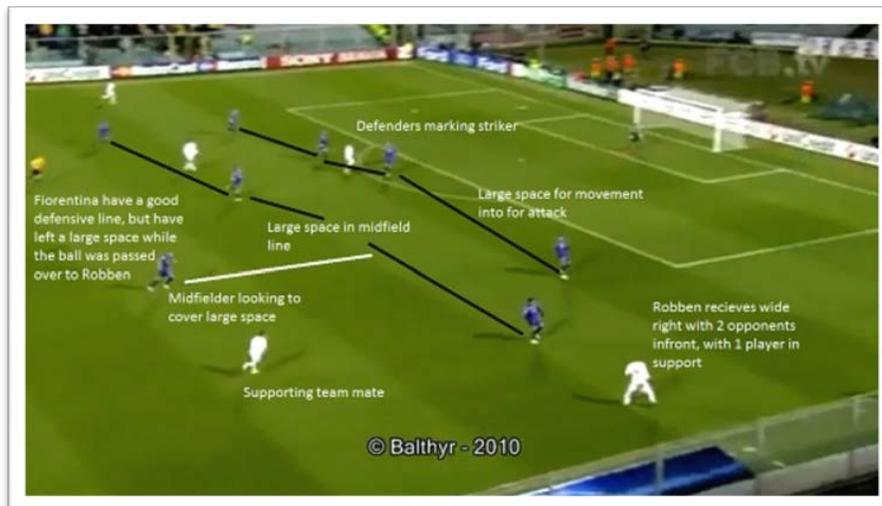
Ronaldo uses the overlap to occupy the 2nd defender, allowing him to go 1v1 on the covering player. The covering player's foot position isn't good enough and allows Ronaldo the space to cut inside and protect the ball in one movement, stopping the defender from being able to recover and stop the shot.



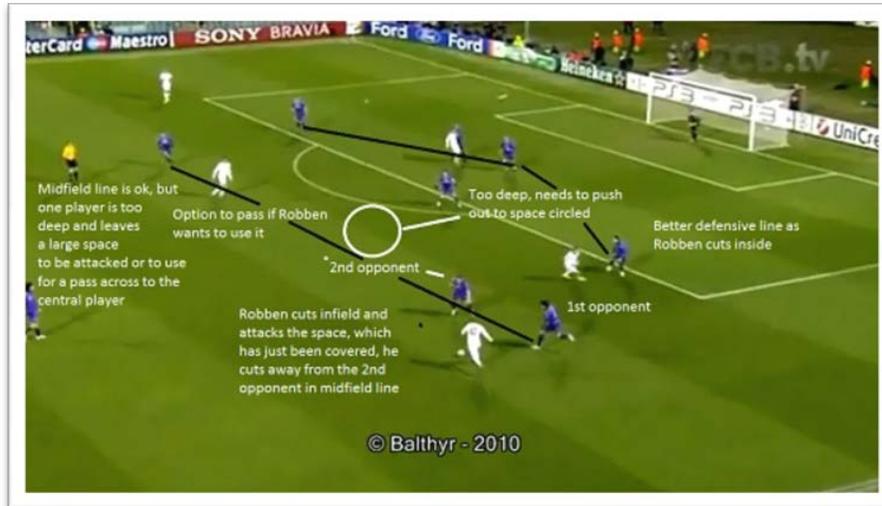
Ronaldo bursts away, able to use his left side to protect the ball, and has almost perfect shooting technique. This allows him to smash a shot at goal which flies past the goalkeeper from long range into the far side top corner.

The goal comes from Ronaldo's repeated practice of the technique of cutting inside, protecting the ball and hitting the shot after one step into the ball, with power and accuracy.

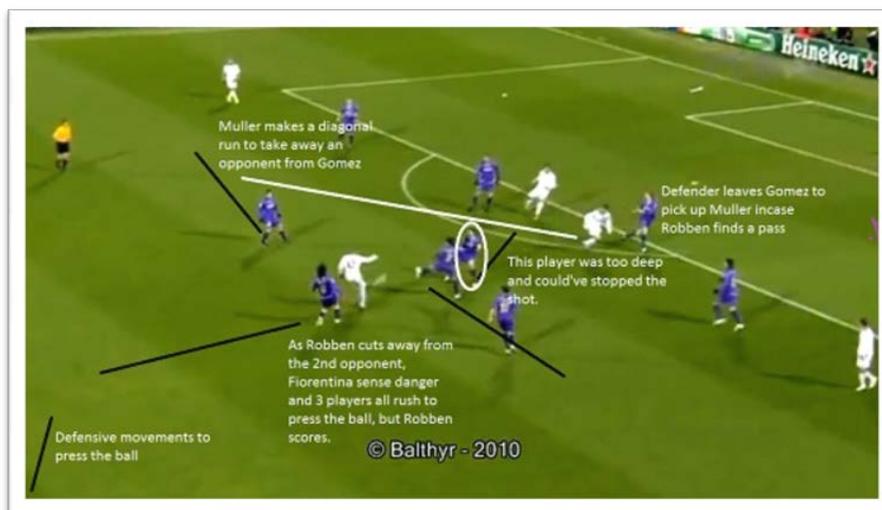
Arjen Robben – Right Winger – Bayern Munich – Exploiting space to shoot



Robben receives the long pass to the right, and as the opposition reshape in transition, they have a large space inside the left channel. Robben has plenty of space and will look to exploit the space inside the full back and use his supporting team mates run to occupy one of the opposition players closest to him.



As Robben cuts inside, one of the midfielders is far too deep and Robben knows if he can dribble away from the 2nd defender a shooting opportunity may open up. The back 4 are in good shape and the striker is marked, but the big space in midfield can undo all the defence's good positional work.



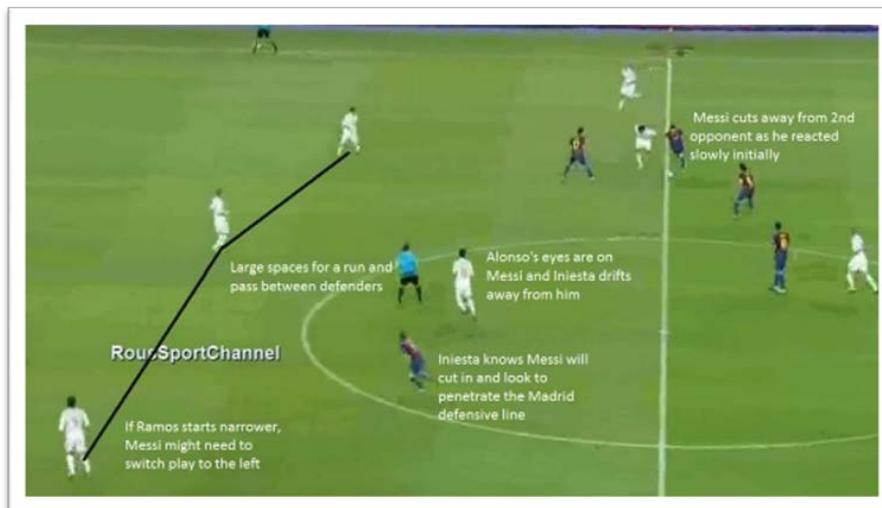
Robben dribbles away from the 2nd opponent= and cuts the ball into a position to get his body shape, approach and technique right and uses the space well. He is pressured by 4 players and stays calm to drive a perfect shot on goal which crashes into the top corner from 30 yards.

This goal comes from Robben spotting a space in the midfield line, attacking it and being decisive with the ball in attack.

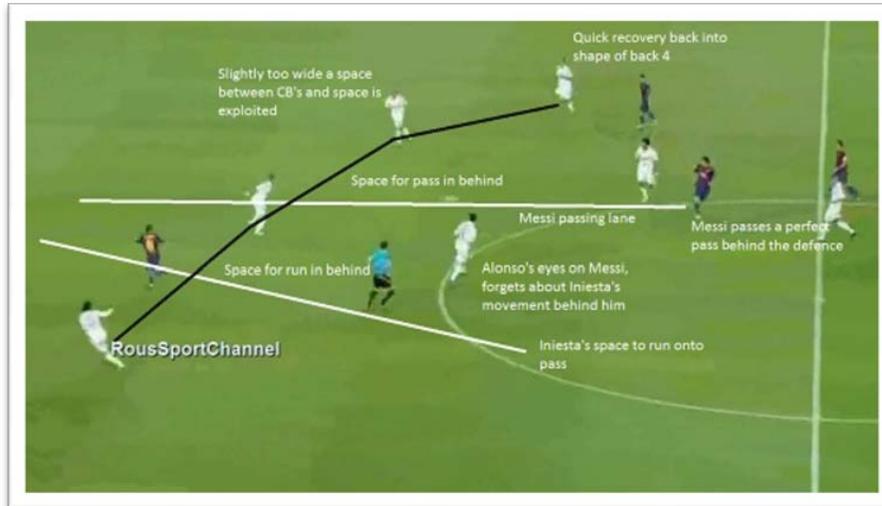
Lionel Messi – Free role from right side – Barcelona – Creating space for a through ball



Messi receives on the right and has options to pass. Messi can dribble and cuts inside onto his stronger left foot. The 2nd opponent reacts slowly to Messi cutting infield and doesn't help his beaten team mate. Messi could play into Cesc to turn, or a 1-2 with Cesc, inside to Xavi or dribble. Watch Iniesta's movement develop – he is watching Alonso's eye movement.



As Messi realises the 2nd opponent has reacted slowly, he dribbles at him as well and manages to shift the ball away from him and onto his left foot, whilst using his right side to protect the ball. He quickly lifts his eyes and sees Iniesta making a run between the right back and right centre back. Alonso has moved across slightly to allow support in the centre for the player Messi has just dribbled away from, and will look to press if he continues his run. Iniesta has acknowledged this move from Alonso and has attacked the space between right back and right centre back.



Messi can pick the pass between the large spaces between both centre backs, into the passing lane that Iniesta is running into between right back and centre back. Iniesta scores from this movement and pass.

The goal comes from Iniesta knowing Messi likes to take responsibility and Messi knowing he will always have runners ahead of him. Then individual quality takes over.

Angel di Maria – Both Sides Winger – Real Madrid – Cutting back onto left foot to find an inswinging cross into the box



Di Maria acts as the outball and receives with 2 Malaga players coming over to press him. Di Maria has no support so must be decisive. He scans the box for movement and notices the 2 centre backs have slightly off body shape, and can be punished. He shifts the ball back onto his left foot and whips a ball into the box for Ronaldo to attack.



Ronaldo makes 2 runs; the 1st is to pull away from Demichelis, to open up a small space between the centre backs, the 2nd run is across Demichelis into the space he has created for himself to attack the ball. He uses the pace on the cross and the space between defenders to reach the ball first and score.

The goal comes from Di Maria being decisive in knowing he only has a small amount of time to create a chance, and with Ronaldo in the box, a good quality cross isn't a bad option for him. Ronaldo makes space to attack the ball and the delivery can't be collected by the goalkeeper, or headed by a centre back.

Stevie Grieve

Patterns of Play – Arsenal

All coaches set out patterns of play in training sessions, and this helps players visually recognise situations they have been in before, recognise the possibilities that are available and also, how to use the information they have available to best use it in the game. As it's practised in training, the players have repeated the actions – movements, pass timings, weight of passes, secondary movements, and finishing many times, and are almost natural. In this article, I will show one of Arsenal's patterns of play from Alexandre Song, who plays central midfield. He regularly assists with Robin Van Persie's goals and this is in part down to well-rehearsed patterns of play between these players, and individual qualities to make the play and finish it off.

A regular feature of Robin Van Persie's play is pulling away from the right centre back and between the right back, regularly finding space around the box and inside the box. This creates a little pocket of space for him to receive in and a little gap of space for passes to feet and an angle for lofted passes behind the defence, which Arsenal practice over and over until the movements are fluid and almost automatic.

Alexandre Song Assist 1 – Robin Van Persie - Liverpool away



Song has received possession around 45 yards from goal. Liverpool have pushed out slightly as the pass is played to Song. The back line is out of sync and needs to be adjusted quickly. Van Persie has pulled into the space between right centre back and right full back.



Song moves forward about 2 yards and although the Liverpool back line has reset into a very good line, Van Persie is in a clear passing lane for a lofted pass from Song. Circled is the target zone for Song to Van Persie, to allow Van Persie to bring the ball down not too close to the goalkeeper. If the ball is overhit slightly, Van Persie may need to volley 1st time on the run – a very difficult technique to pull off.

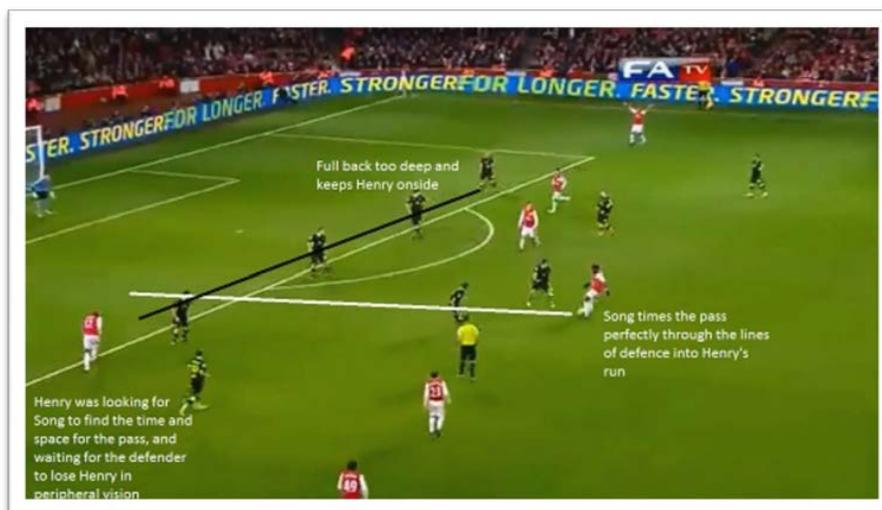


The ball from Song is slightly too heavy, but is within reachable distance for Van Persie to volley 1st time past Reina in the Liverpool goal.

Alexandre Song Assist 2 – Thierry Henry – Leeds at Home



Song again receives a pass in the centre of the pitch, but this time against a deeper defending and more compact Leeds. The midfield shape from Leeds is very good, but the line of the back 4 is not good enough. The left back is playing at least 1 yard deeper than the left centre back – full backs should NEVER be behind centre backs when forming a defensive shape, the full backs should be in line or slightly ahead so the central defenders can control the line depth, width and line of confrontation if the midfield line is penetrated. Song can see a large space between the right back and right full back, with Thierry Henry (out of picture) closely watching the movements and eyes of the defender, able to anticipate when to make the penetrating run behind the defensive line – knowing he will be on side thanks to the left back on the far side.



Song continues forward with the ball until confronted in midfield, but although the defensive line have dropped back into the line the left back was originally on, the left back has dropped deeper again, stopping the line of defence being effective. The right full back has a bad body shape – his left shoulder should be turned inside a little to allow more fluid movement to a pass inside of him, as his

starting position is too wide and leaves a space between the right centre back and himself. The space is large enough to be exploited from a good through pass from Song to Henry.

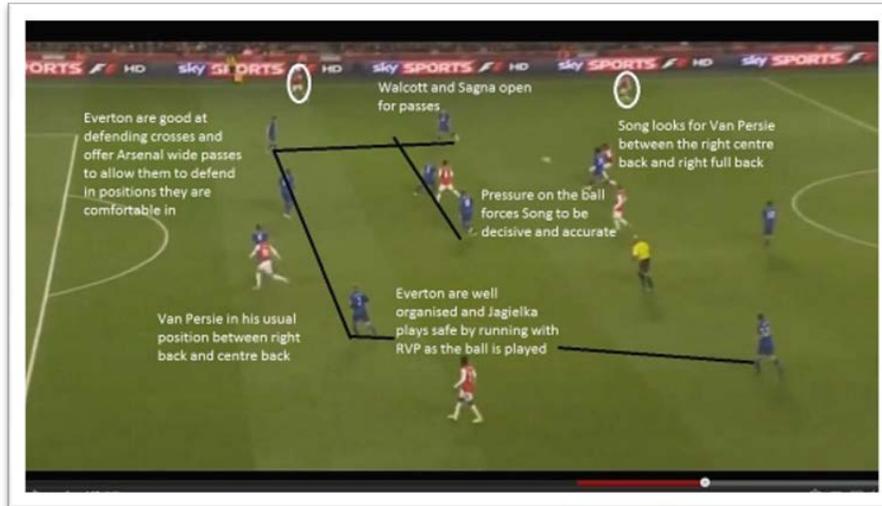


See Henry's body shape, this is the trigger for Song to release the pass. Note Henry may have been given offside had the left back not been so deep. He can't have looked along the line at any time, otherwise he would've known he was playing Henry onside.



Arsenal's pattern of play for an Alexandre Song assist has worked – the pull wide from the centre forward, the trigger run and well-timed pass into that channel has resulted in another Arsenal goal from that position from the same player.

Alexander Song Assist 3 – Robin Van Persie – Everton Home



Everton have played compact and are always comfortable at dealing with crosses and high balls, so show Arsenal wide passes, make the play predictable and then defend crosses. Arsenal doesn't use crosses too often so the Everton game plan should work. It does until late on when Arsenal's pattern of play for Alexandre Song is used – again, Van Persie pulls into the space between right centre back and right full back.



Again, Song passes into the space between right centre back and right back – with Van Persie's movement, he can receive the lofted pass. With Van Persie having a magic wand for a left foot, he knows he can't really take a touch due to Jagielka being so close to him, so he volleys his 1st time across Howard in the Everton goal, and it smacks the post and goes in for another beautiful Arsenal goal, created by Alexandre Song's pattern of play.

All 3 Assists are of the same nature, but they all show the effectiveness of using a pattern of play. Song has played 3 killer passes from around the same area, to the space between the right centre back and right full back. Robin Van Persie has scored 2 volleys from lofted passes, and Thierry Henry

has scored one across the goalkeeper from a low through pass, using a touch before a trademark curled shot to the goalkeeper's left hand corner. This pattern of play has been rehearsed so often that it is now an effective way of creating a chance for Arsenal, and the players know how to use the visual triggers on time to allow the chance to score from Song's passes.

Stevie Grieve

The Final Decision Is Crucial

On Wednesday 7th May 2012, Arsenal played AC Milan at the Emirates Stadium, London, needing to pull back a 4-0 deficit from the 1st leg in the San Siro, Milan.

Arsenal knew several things would need to happen if they were to claw back a 4 goal deficit, and force Extra Time, or do the unthinkable and win 5-0.

- AC Milan have a very bad night and take the win for granted
- Hope Ibrahimovic and Robinho have an off night
- Arsenal play at their best level for the whole game
- Score early, and hope for at least 2 goals in the 1st half to make AC Milan nervous

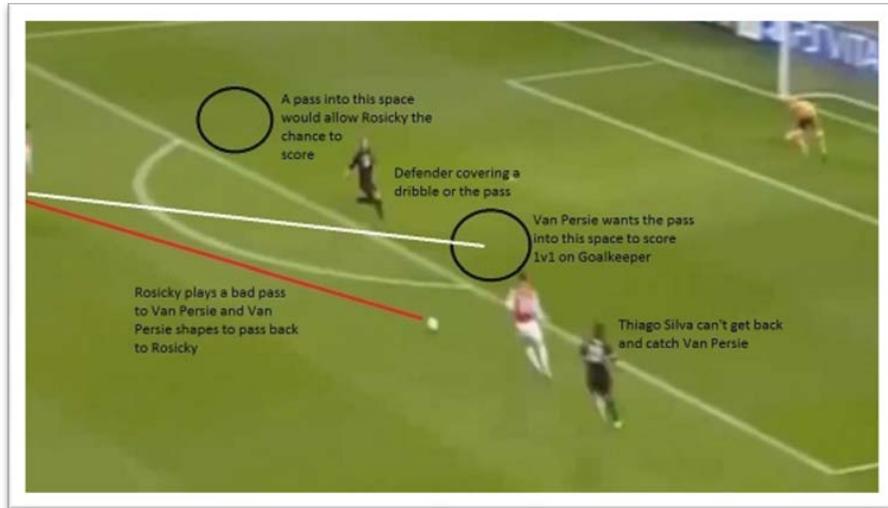
Arsenal scored on 7 minutes via Koscielny, Arsenal played at their top level for 70 minutes, AC Milan played terrible for the 1st half, and Ibrahimovic and Robinho looked less than interested in playing a game they felt was already won in Milan. Arsenal played very well but the lack of match winning players on the bench meant that the game ran away from them at 3-0 needing a 4th goal with no real quality to bring on. They went out, but had chances to get the 4 goals they needed in the 1st half – they got 3 of them – and had a few bad passes and decisions in the final 3rd when a chance was on to score. I will look at one of the glorious chances Arsenal passed up from a combination of a bad decision, poor quality pass and when the play was retrieved, a final pass was a let down.

Tomas Rosicky receives in the final 3rd, 2v1 on last defender.



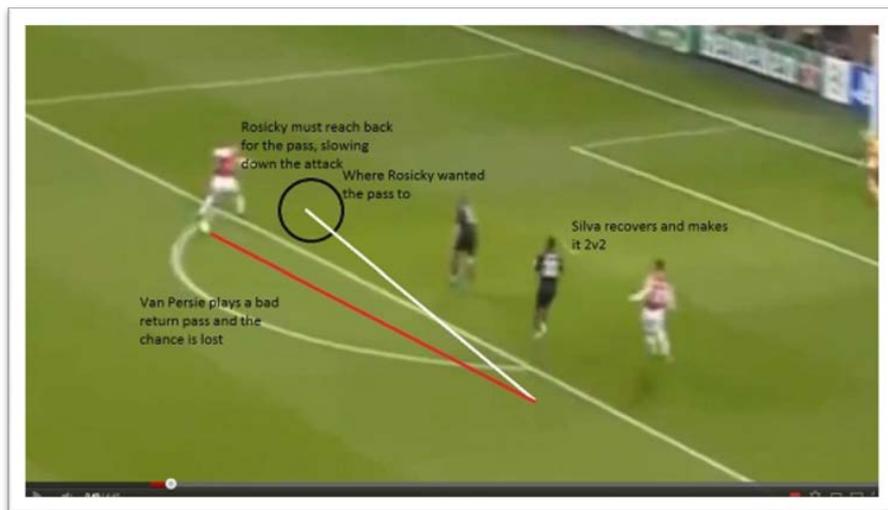
Bad Decision and a Bad Pass: Rosicky plays an unnecessary 1st time pass to Van Persie, and this prevents RVP from receiving a pass away from the defence and leaving him clean through on goal with no recovering defenders in the vicinity. RVP wants to penetrate the defensive line to score, but the bad pass stops this from happening.

Good Decision: If Rosicky takes a touch, and brings the last defender out to the ball, the pass for RVP to run through and score would've been easy for Rosicky to weight and direct and this would've been more beneficial for RVP.



Bad Pass: Van Persie wanted the ball into the space circled, either 1 touch or 2 touches from Rosicky. As the pass is well away from RVP's stride and with Thiago Silva recovering, but unable to catch Van Persie, he plays it back to Rosicky 1st time, to keep the speed of the attack high to punish AC Milan for being caught 1v2 in defence.

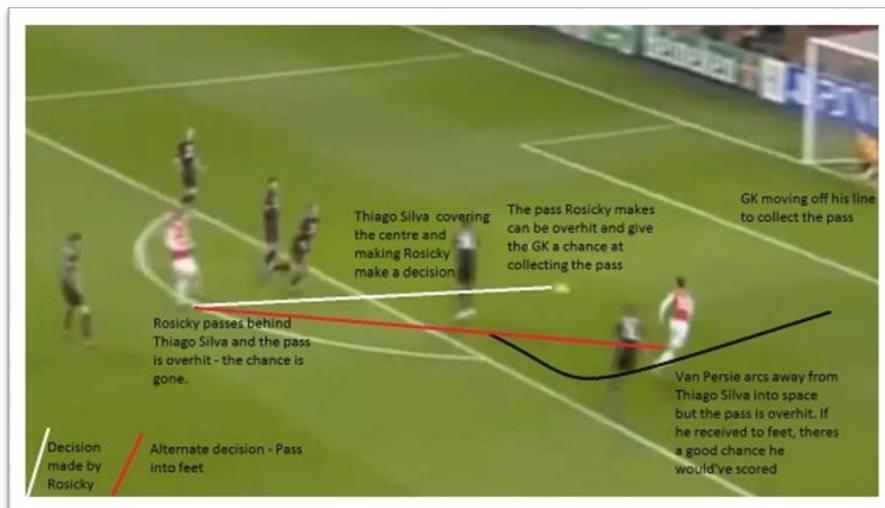
Good Pass: Rosicky wants the pass into the circle to penetrate the defensive line – like RVP previously – but RVP plays a bad pass behind Rosicky.



The ball is passed behind Rosicky and Thiago Silva is able to recover and cover the centre, it's now 2v2 and the advantage Arsenal had is now gone. If the ball is passed into the circle, Thiago's recovery is irrelevant with Rosicky 1 on 1 with the goalkeeper.



As Rosicky has to reach back for the ball and turn away from pressure, the AC Milan defence recovers in the 4 seconds between the bad passes. They now have a back 4 and covering midfielder. Again, Arsenal has a chance for a final pass from Rosicky to Van Persie for a chance to score.



Rosicky manages to turn away from pressure and must make a decision – shoot himself, pass between 2 defenders for RVP to run onto, or pass directly into RVP's feet.

Rosicky made the hardest pass his decision and the chance was lost as RVP had to slide in for a 50/50 challenge with the goalkeeper which was always going to be given as a free kick to AC Milan.

In my opinion, had Rosicky made the best decision – Passing directly into Robin Van Persie's feet, Arsenal would've had a chance to score, and with the form RVP has been in for the past 18 months, a goal was inevitable. This chance was at 1-0, with about 20 minutes played. Arsenal scored through Rosicky on 27 minutes for 2-0 and Van Persie (penalty) for 3-0 at Half-Time. One can only wonder that if at 20 minutes the score had been 2-0 and Arsenal playing with intensity and momentum, could they have achieved the 4-0 win they wanted to stay in the Champions League? We will never

know. I'm happy that as a Gooner myself, they went out of the competition with some pride regained.

This article shows us that, at any level of football, under 8s (4 a side), under 12s (7 a side), under 17s (11 a side), Amateur, Professional, or International Level, the final decisions around the goal are the ones that decide matches, and in this situation, we have shown bad decisions, poor execution and the consequences of not taking a clear chance when it arrives.

Stevie Grieve

Leaving space for the opposition

Over the years, tactics have changed, defensive and offensive. One thing hasn't changed and that is; if you give a good player time, you'll be punished. Manchester United (English Champions, and previous season Champions League Runners-up) played against Athletic Bilbao – the team who finished 5th in Spain's La Liga last season. Marcelo Bielsa is the manager of AB and has started to turn them into a dynamic attacking force, build around **Javi Martinez** in central midfield, **Iker Muniain** on the left side, and **Fernando Llorente**, the centre forward. These 3 Spanish players are quality, and I believe would fit into Barcelona or Real Madrid's teams and fit in. As an opposition manager, you don't want them having an influence on the game.

Manchester United allowed these 3 key players too much space and in the recent Europa League match, Athletic Bilbao won 3-2 at Old Trafford. Llorente scored from a cross, the pass to allow the cross set up by **Javi Martinez**, **Martinez** set up the 2nd with a lovely lobbed pass over the defence. The 3rd goal came from **Llorente** winning a header, **De Gea** saving a shot from long range then **Muniain** following up to score the 3rd. In this article, I will look at several instances of these players being given too much time.

As you may begin to see from the analysis, the result was no fluke, as they dominated the match and were the better side throughout the game. I would be very surprised if Athletic Bilbao don't win through win home advantage in the 2nd leg., and put out the English Champions.

Javi Martinez unmarked – Creative passing



Prior to this chance, **Javi Martinez** was left alone in central midfield, was allowed to scan to his left and chip a pass 1st time over the defence for what should've been a goal. In this clip, again, he is left unmarked. The ball is layed back to him, and **Park's** body shape suggests he expects a pass wide to the feet of the winger. **Javi** can read this early, and passes 1st time into the space between the 2 Manchester United defenders, for the winger to run onto. **Park** recovers well, but the winger fakes a cross, cuts inside **Park**, and gets a shot away.

Javi Martinez unmarked - Clever passing



Bilbao work the ball out of a tight situation and again Javi Martinez is in space to receive. He can see the Manchester United defence playing very narrow. There is a wide option for him and Javi knows the pass with enough weight to allow a 1st time cross. Around and inside the box, United have 7 players defending, against Bilbao's 6. Only 1 Bilbao player is marked – Llorente. Watch his movement and who is marking him (4- Phil Jones)



As the cross arrives inside the box, Llorente loses Phil Jones and attacks the ball aggressively. The far side defender can't get across and cover in time and Llorente makes most of this advantage to score. Evra here does nothing to help his defence by staying more than 1 yard away from pressing the ball, and if the winger wanted or needed a touch, he could've taken one.

Iker Muniain cutting infield – Llorente finds space.



Muniain cuts away from the left side and attacks the central space. Llorente pulls to the left and stays outside of Muniain. Bilbao have covered the left, right and centre of the attacking area's. Manchester United try to stall the defence but eventually need to come out and press the ball.



As Muniain cuts the ball back, Evans makes a tackle on him. As the far side Manchester United winger hasn't worked hard enough to get into position to defend, Llorente has continued his jog into the space. The ball is passed 1st time to him and he should score. Manchester recover to defend the central zone well, and leave the right zone free as it has little danger, but as one player hasn't worked hard enough to defend, a space is open and Bilbao use it well.



Llorente shoots under a little bit of pressure, but fails to punish Manchester United's winger for being too slow to recover in defence.

Javi Martinez between the lines – Creative passing



Again, Manchester United defend very deep, and very narrow, along the 18 yard line. Athletic Bilbao play a couple of 1st time passes and Javi Martinez is in space between the lines. He receives and in one movement, lob passes the ball over the defence. Llorente is holding the central defenders in position and because of this, Javi knows he will have runners from wider than him, and as the ball goes over the defence, 2 attackers go to receive the lobbed pass. The Manchester United defence can't defend this type of pass and Athletic score a well worked 2nd goal. Again, Martinez is left in space and punishes Manchester United.



As we can see in this picture, Manchester United have 7 players in a tight space, maybe 16x16 yards, and this pass cannot be defended against – it is dipped over the defence onto advancing attackers, the defence haven't time to turn and react and with had Martinez been pressed, his decision to turn and lob pass was made very early. The pass was perfectly weighted and dropped for the attacker to volley past De Gea.

As we have seen from these clips, the 3 players I mentioned at the start, all made vital contributions to the outcome of the scoreline, aided by good performance individually. I feel that Javi Martinez will be Xavi's replacement at Barcelona and Spain, and Muniain will be the right footed Messi for Spain in the future.

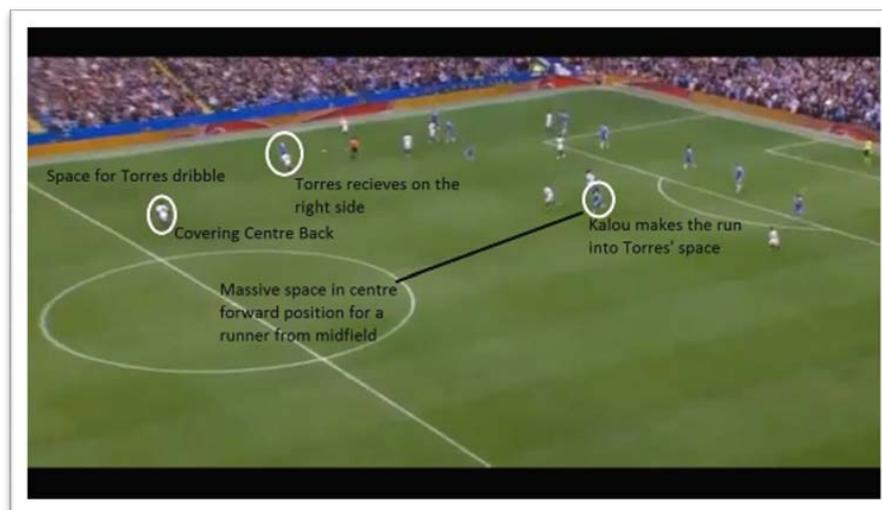
Stevie Grieve

Strikers creating space for midfielders

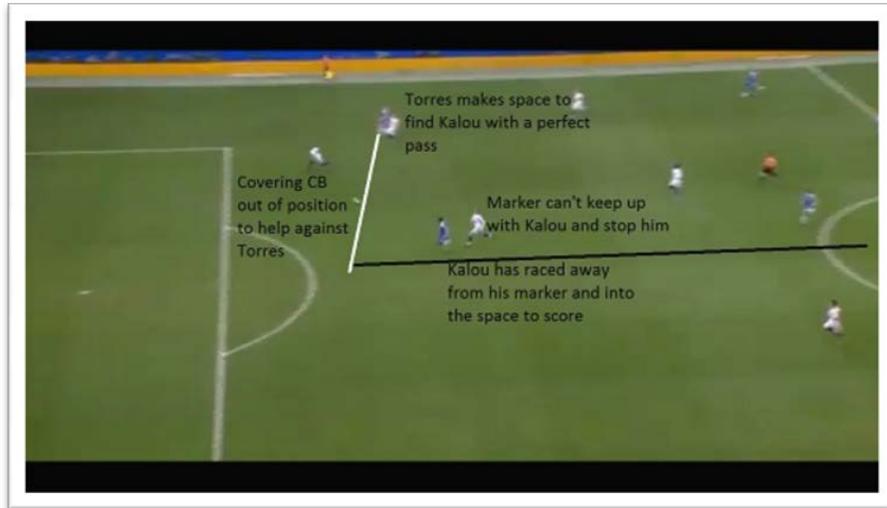
In the modern game, a striker who only plays within the width of the penalty box, and scores inside the box is a tactic used less and less by the world's best teams. A striker who only scores goals, is no longer required – the striker who only scores goals and makes little contribution elsewhere on the pitch is being switched for a striker who can score goals, but also create spaces for others to score. Teams are changing the type of players they use in attack, for example, Kris Boyd (ex-Kilmarnock and Rangers) scored every week but made no contribution to the attack - except inside the box – to a more mobile, creative striker who can score or create space – see Pedro from FC Barcelona.

We see the best players in the world in front of goal and expect to see a goal, and they deliver, so why would a team want a player who only scores inside the box, when almost all of the midfield can do the same? In this article, I will show 2 examples over the weekend of 17-18th March 2012 when Fernando Torres created a goal for Salomon Kalou by drifting wide and leaving central space and one with Pedro and Alexis Sanchez creating space for Lionel Messi to make a decision (he scored).

Fernando Torres v Leicester - FA Cup



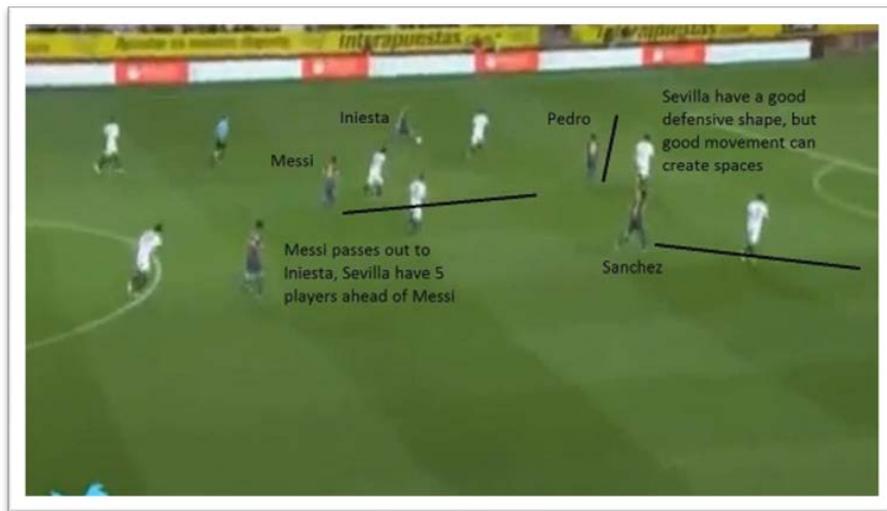
Torres leaves his centre forward position, and his marker follows him. The other centre back shifts over to cover Torres and his marker. With the full backs so high up the pitch, Leicester are vulnerable to a counter attack. Torres turns away from his marker and dribbles into the space at right back, and Kalou starts to accelerate into the space Torres has left, blindside of the covering centre back.



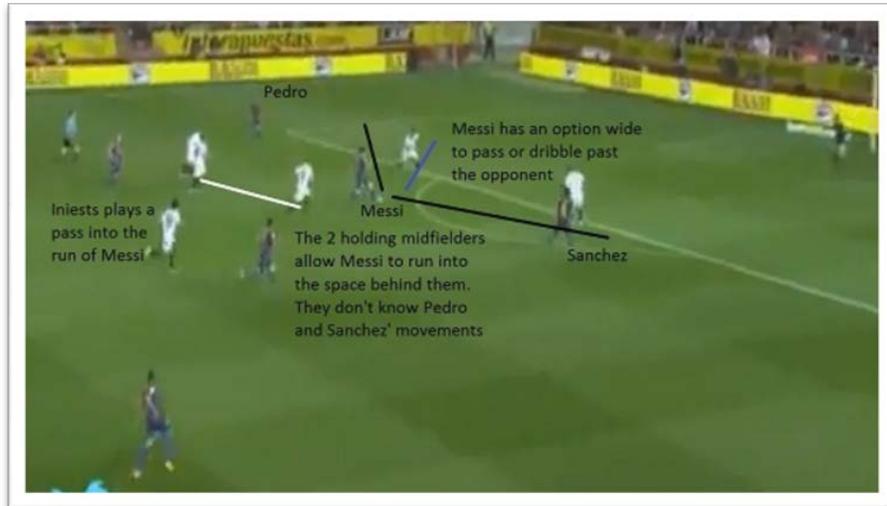
As Torres gets into a passing position, Kalou has raced away from his marker and can receive a pass in his stride, takes a 2nd touch then places a shot into the corner for a well taken counter attack goal.

The goal comes from Torres leaving the space, but more important, Kalou using the space left by Torres, and allowing a pass to be played into the space.

Pedro and Alexis Sanchez – Sevilla CF v FC Barcelona La Liga



Messi passes to Iniesta, despite an opponent being close. As Barcelona play very narrow, Pedro will offer a wide pass to Iniesta, behind Iniesta's opponent – the right back. As Messi knows what run Pedro will make, he knows that a space will appear for him to receive in, most likely on his own. Sanchez makes a run wide to the other side and this takes away the other centre back. But also blocks the full back from pressing Messi if he needs to.



As we can see, Barcelona now have a 3 v 2 20 yards from goal.

Pedro is now wide of the play, and Messi has an open passing lane from Iniesta and can pass out to Pedro after 1 or 2 touches. Sanchez can also be used as his body shape is good for receiving on his right foot on the move to shoot. Messi decides to put the ball through the recovering defenders legs then chips the goalkeeper for a well taken and well created goal.

The goal is created from all 4 Barcelona attackers knowing the moves to make, knowing how to create the space and even if Messi didn't dribble, he could've passed to Alexis or Pedro to score.

Coaching Idea's – Strikers Creating Space



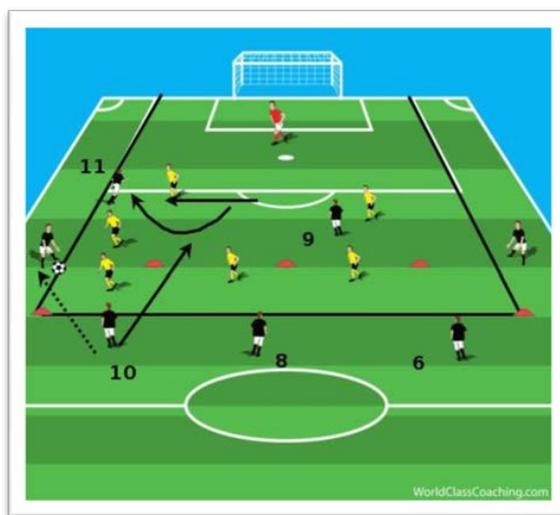
Strikers creating space – Basic development

The number 10 starts with the ball. He has 2 holding players in front of him. He passes wide and runs into the space behind the holding players, in front of the back 4. As the ball reaches the 'wall player', the nearest striker pulls wide and offers a pass down the side of the opponents, the far side striker pulls away and blocks the full back from tucking in. The number 10 will receive from the 'wall player'

in the space between the 4 players and he will either pass, dribble or shoot on goal, depending on 1st touch, movements from strikers, distance from opponents.

Coaching Points:

- Acceleration after pass wide
- Movement into the space to receive
- Accuracy and speed of pass from wall player
- Timing the run – when to run and where from strikers
- Quick decisions before you receive the ball
- Body shape when on the move



Strikers creating space 2 – Opponent pressure

The defence play a 3-3 formation the width of the penalty box. The midfield have a 10 yard deep 'safety line' that they cannot leave – they can press to the edge of the line, and chase back as deep as the cone line allows.

The 3 attacking midfielders 10, 8 and 6, all pass to each other and when they want to break ahead of the midfield line, pass to a 'wall player' who has 2 touches to receive and pass into the hole between defence and midfield. Once the ball is passed to the 'wall player' the nearest striker should pull wide and offer a pass down the side to create central space, as the defender should follow the striker.

Coaching Points:

- Speed of pass into 'wall player'
- Timing of run ahead of opponents
- Decisions – when to run, where to run
- Timing, angle and body shape of strikers runs

Progressions

- Add in extra defenders
- Remove midfield 'safety line' to press midfield more

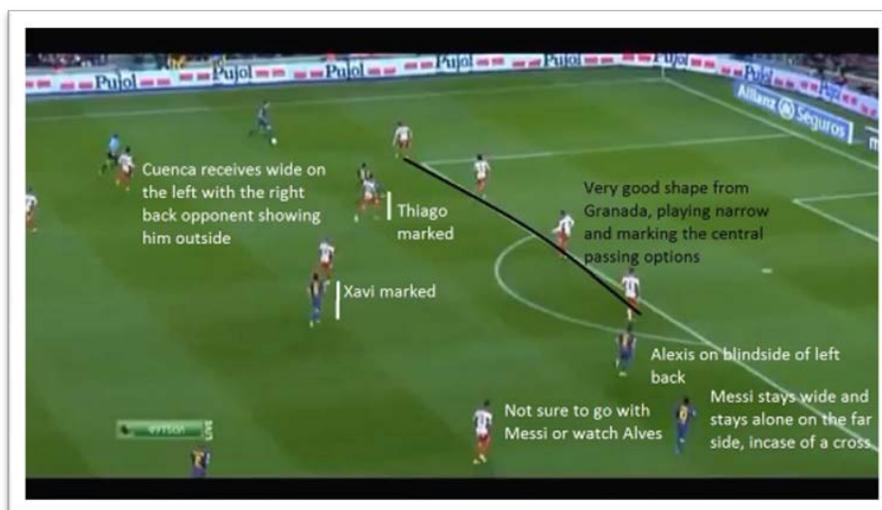
Remove back tracking line
Allow pressure on wall players
Wall players play 2 touch

Wingers exploiting narrow defences

Teams, who play with quick intricate passing sequences, generally through the centre, will play with wide players who can cut inside or play between the lines, and with using these types of players sacrifice width for a numerical superiority in the centre. Barcelona are one team who have often this season, had to come up with new ways to counter the opposition coming up with new ways to stop them scoring at will. Against Granada, they used their regular 4-3-3, but with Cuenca – a natural wide player - on the left, with Messi and Alexis switching between centre and right. Granada started with a 4-2-3-1 formation – it was more of a 4-2-2-2 when out of possession – and defended deep, with numbers in the centre and with the aim to block the side the ball was on, and the central zone. They left the far side free in the hope that they could win the ball and not need to defend the switch of play.

Barcelona countered this with using Cuenca as a fixed position on the left, to add width to the attack and open up Granada. In this article, I will look at how Cuenca's fixed position helped Barcelona into a 2-0 lead, and how Christian Tello playing on the left also managed to affect the outcome of the score line.

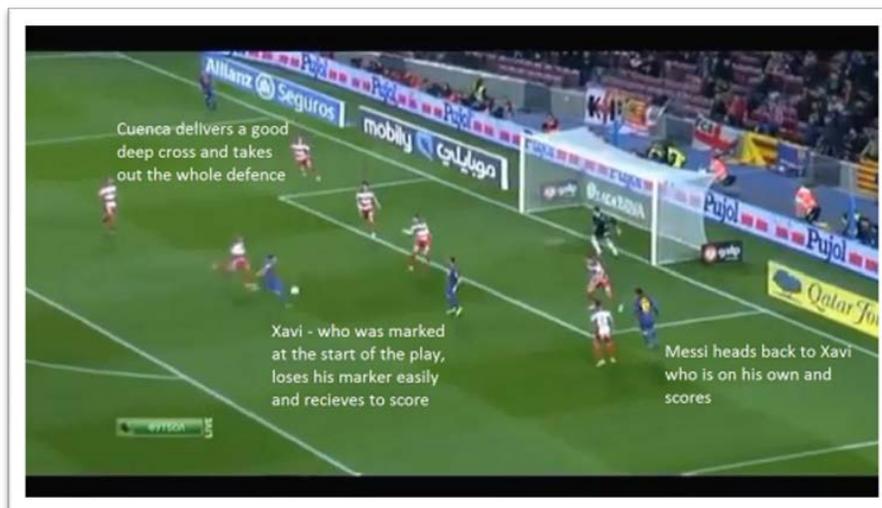
Cuenca Assist 1 – Xavi volley



Cuenca receives the ball and has space between him and the full back, he runs at pace and uses the space on the outside to cross. Granada has set up a shape to cut down passing options inside where Barcelona are most dangerous. Thiago is closely marked, as is Xavi, although Xavi's opponent has a bad body shape and Xavi can lose his man if he times his run properly. Note Granada's back line – in good shape but with the left back tucked in very narrow, and with no sight of the 2 players behind him. Messi and Alexis can be found if Cuenca chooses to cross to the far post.



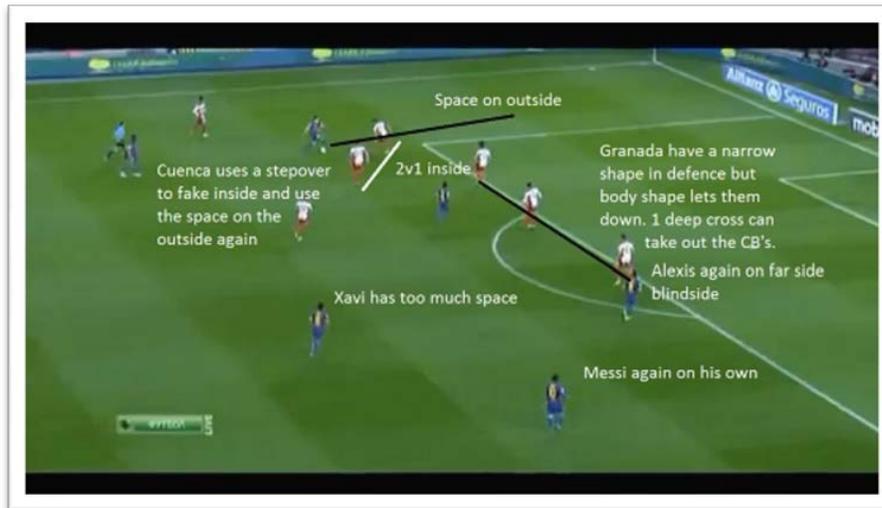
As the cross is delivered, and as the 2 centre backs are so far across from the centre line, the left back is covering the centre line, and with his bad body shape, he is caught unaware of where Alexis and Messi are – both players have stalled runs and found themselves alone at the back post. Xavi at the edge of the box has peeled away from his marker and found himself available for a knockdown or a rebound to shoot.



Messi heads back to Xavi and he volleys 1st time into the net.

The goal comes from Cuenca being direct, and staying wide, Messi and Alexis being clever enough to hang away from the defence and Xavi losing his marker easily. The cross is deep and accurate, and this takes out the back 4, which when Xavi offers a knockdown, Messi obliges with the pass to Xavi and he volleys as there's less time to take a touch and shoot accurately.

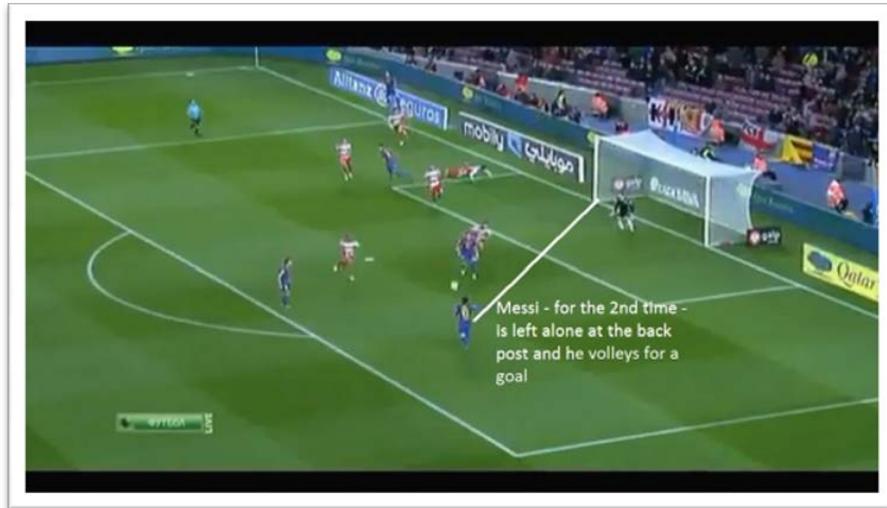
Cuenca Assist 2 – Messi volley



Cuenca again receives and is confronted by the full back. The near side defensive midfielder covers inside and plays 2v1. This also blocks the passing lane inside. Cuenca uses a right footed step over and bursts away from his opponent into the space on the outside. Again, like previously, Granada have a good defensive line, but the body shape of the players lets them down. Alexis takes up position on the blind side and Messi hangs well away from play in space. Xavi is also in too much space – leaving 2 of the world’s best players in this much space is only going to cause problems for the defence.



Cuenca reaches the touchline and delivers another cross. The near post option is covered by the CB and Alexis is in a good position to receive against the left back who again has bad body shape, and doesn’t know where Alexis is moving to. Messi is in too much space – he can recover a flick on, a deep cross or a cross being missed by everyone. Also, Barcelona have a player on the edge of the box for a rebound, unmarked – like when Xavi volleyed in for the 1st goal.

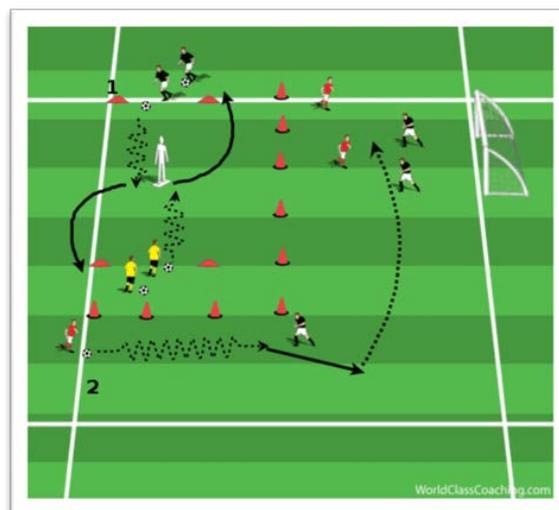


The cross is flicked on by the centre back and Messi judges the flight of the ball, moves infield to volley the ball past the goalkeeper into the far corner. This goal for Lionel Messi equalled the club goal scoring record set by Cesar 60 years ago. Congratulations to Mr Messi!

The goal comes from an almost identical scenario from the 1st goal – Cuenca staying wide and crossing into the box, taking out the narrow back 4 and allowing the players in space on the far side to benefit from a team playing so narrow.

With Barcelona having injury problems (David Villa and Pedro), teams playing so narrow and leaving Barcelona to play 10v10 in the centre of the pitch, there is an opening for someone to play as a designated winger in the Barcelona attack. If Cuenca can nail down a place in this team, Barcelona will be able to play with more width and this may help them reach the levels they reached in 2008/2009 and 2010/2011 seasons.

Coaching Session – Developing a winger



Activity 1 – moves to beat opponents and crossing after beating an opponent

Group 1 – Basic movements – 1v1 Moves.

Possible Moves – Drag Across, Drag Crossover, Stepover, Double Stepover, Same leg Roll stepover, Ronaldo Chop, Elastico, Reverse Elastico. Any other moves that the players can think of any would like to learn to use against a defender.

Players dribble at the closest foot of the mannequin, perform the move then accelerate away and then onto the next group. As players progress, they should be lifting the eyes, showing better efficiency of technique in and out of the move, speed of approach and exit. Adding in a pass after beating the opponent could also be extended to the routine.

Group 2 – Pressure from a defender – 50% pressure.

The attacker dribbles at the opponent, executes one of the moves and delivers a cross into the box. There is a 2v2 inside the box, attackers should make good movements to lose opponents and attack the cross.

Coaching Points:

- Attack the defender at pace,
- Judge defenders foot and body position
- Quick movement away from opponent
- Accurate, just above head height delivery into the box

Activity 2 – Wingers game

4v4 game – there is a half way line which 1 attacker must never cross. He stays inside the opposition half and presses the defence when they have the ball. The other 3 players retreat into their own half. The teams look to pass wide to the winger who will take one touch before crossing. When the ball is passed wide, one of the players in the defensive half can enter the other half and support the attack.

Coaching Points:

- Quick transition from defence to attack
- Early pass out to the wingers
- Wingers are decisive on when to cross and where to cross to
- Quick movement from the strikers to reach the cross 1st.

Variations:

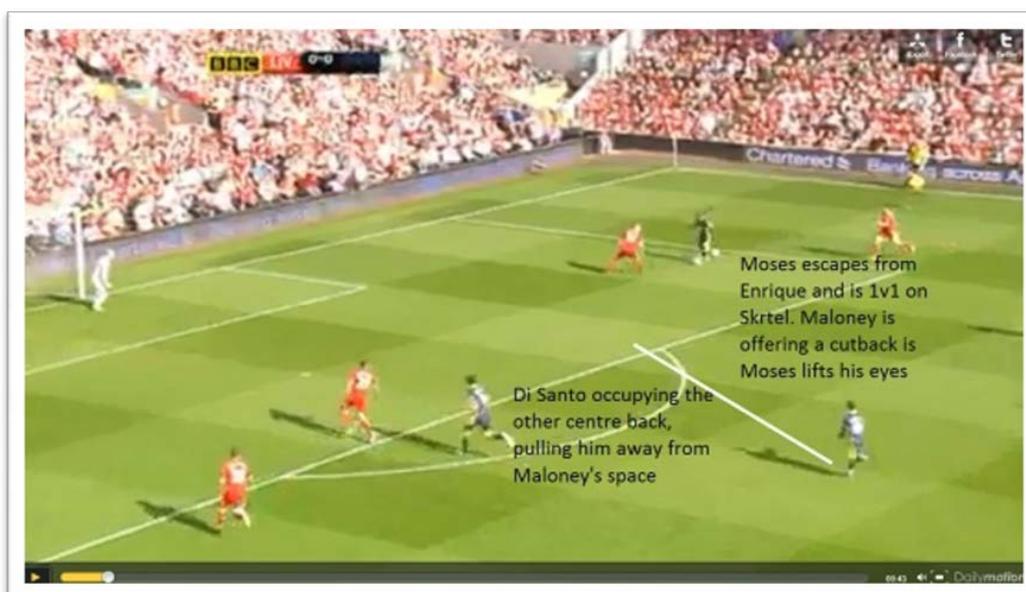
- Allow a defender to press the winger
- Allow overlaps to create a 2v1 in wide areas
- Force winger to beat opponent before crossing



Decision Making around the box

Part of any young player's development in a youth academy will include sessions on when to pass, where to play the pass and how much weight to be used. Players will often come up with their own decisions when they play and as such, they learn from the good and bad decisions they make. The best players are the players – apart from having the best technique and speed of thought – who make the best decisions most often. Around the goal is a critical place for high end, quick decisions. Decisions that can mean winning a league or being relegated, grabbing a draw when a loss was the current situation. In this article, I will look at the recent game between Liverpool, - struggling to reach the levels expected of them with 5 home wins in 15 this season – against Wigan, yearly strugglers towards the lower end of the Premiership.

Moses' Puzzle – Pass, or Shoot?



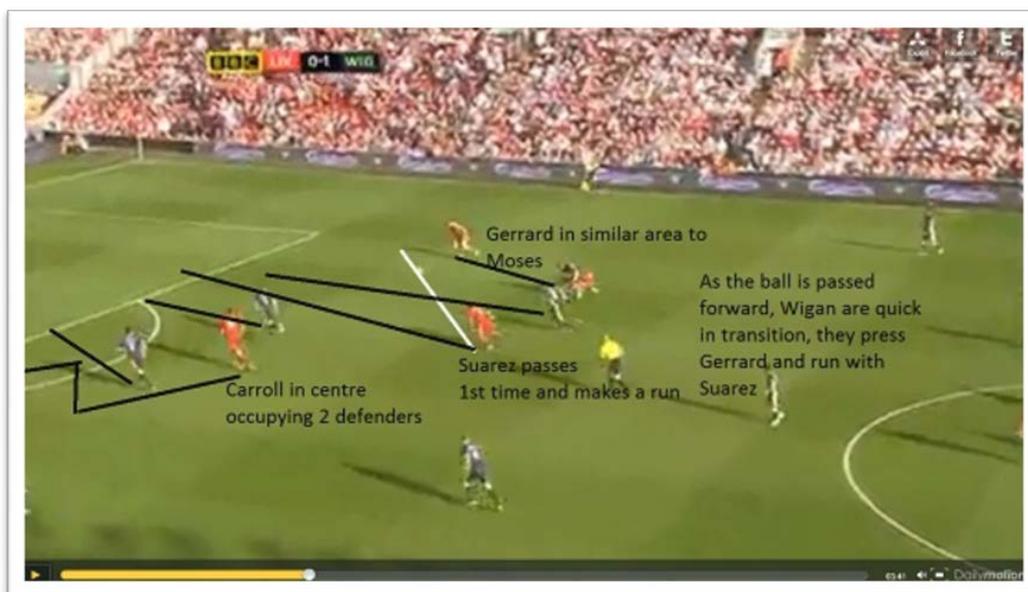
Moses has raced away from Enrique and cut inside towards goal. As he moves in, he has a puzzle to solve – lift his eyes and see Maloney in space who will most probably want to shoot 1st time, which requires an accurate, slow cut back to allow him time to adjust stride length, body shape and then a clean technical connection with the ball, or will he try to cut away from Skrtel and create a space to shoot on goal. Di Santo makes a run which has 2 reasons – score from a saved shot on the rebound, or take away an opponent to create space for Maloney's run and impending shot.



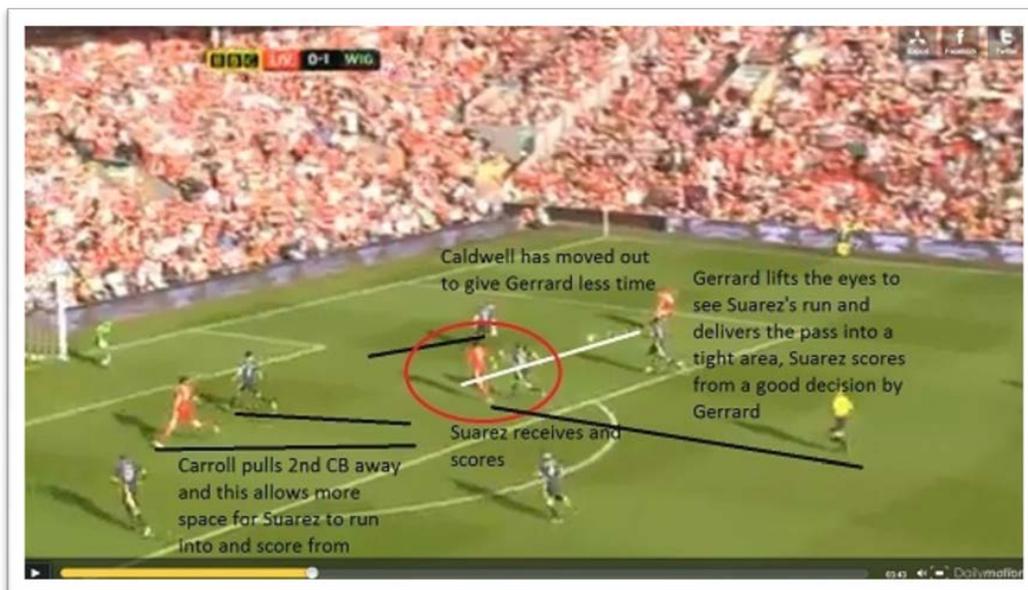
Moses doesn't lift his eyes – which means he can't see Maloney – but Maloney will have called for the cutback, so he has most likely ignored him and chosen to solve the puzzle himself. As he cuts away from Skrtel, he gets a shot in but Reina blocks it and the play is passed left to Enrique who starts a counter attack in the space Moses has left.

As coaches, we should look at this puzzle, and ask ourselves, “Why did Moses make this decision?” “Would he make it again?” and what made him make this decision - would he have done the same at youth level? We need to ensure that players can under pressure, make the best decision possible. If he scored was it still the best decision? If Maloney missed the shot or the pass was bad, was it the best decision?

Gerrard's Puzzle – Pass, or Shoot



Liverpool intercepts a Wigan counter attack, and Suarez bumps a 1st time pass out to Gerrard, in a similar position to Moses. Gerrard's puzzle is – does he take a 1st touch towards goal, and use the space at speed to go alone to score, or, take a 1st touch to give time to assess his options, be aware of the movements of his team mates, and find the right pass?



Gerrard selects the 1st touch to give him time to assess his options, and as he knows that Suarez will be making a run – albeit tracked by an opponent – he has the quality to find him with a pass and Suarez scores. As he hasn't attacked the space, Caldwell must come out and press the ball – Gerrard knows this and he also knows that this helps Suarez when he receives the pass. Suarez receives a pass between players, in the space Caldwell left and he scores a good goal.

As coaches, we must ask “Why did Gerrard make this decision?”, “Why didn't he attack the space and 'be positive' (a Scottish coaches saying)”. “Was this decision the correct decision and why?” If Gerrard had gone alone and scored, would it have still been the correct decision?

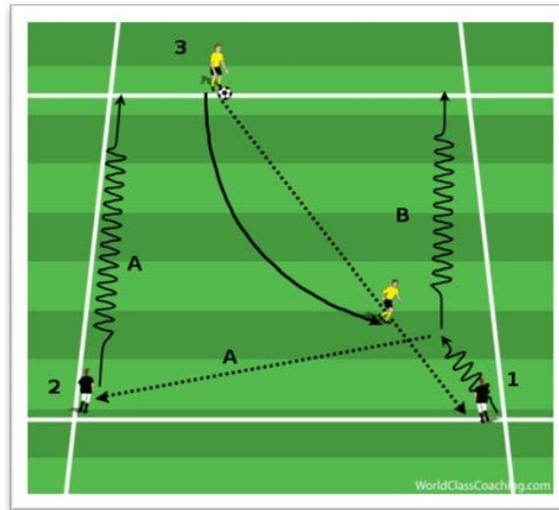
Its questions that have no set answer, and is down to perceptions. If Messi had done the same as Moses and had scored, he would've been applauded. Although the pass to Maloney was probably the better decision; creating space to shoot wasn't a bad decision. Had Moses scored, he too would've been applauded for taking responsibility.

Individual personalities formed in youth academies have big bearings on the decision making process. I as a playmaker, would've passed to Maloney, but that's my personality. Would Fernando Torres have made the same decision to take responsibility? A player out of form, out of confidence and in need of a run of goals, might not, but a player in form, confident about scoring maybe would take the responsibility.

As coaches, we must strive to ensure that player has a clear decision made early, be confident with it and be able to know why it was a good or bad decision.

Decision Making Session

Pass or Dribble – 2v1 – Basic pressure



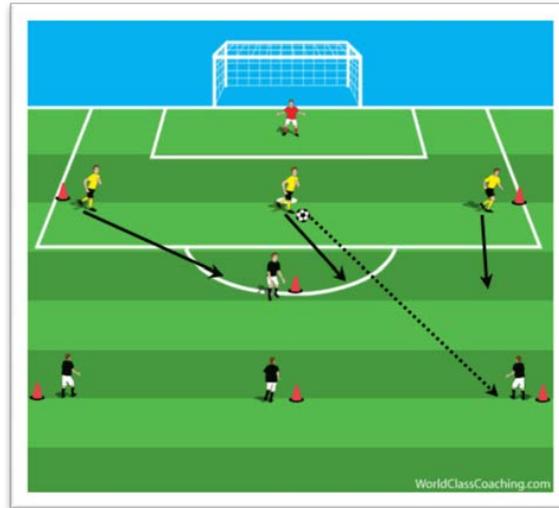
Player 3 passes to player 1, then shuts down the player as fast as possible. Once player 1 receives, his team must get the ball over the end line under control.

- Option A – Pass to team mate - Dribble to bring in the opponent, then pass across to player 2 who hangs back in space, he receives and dribbles at pace over the end line with the defender chasing back
- Option B – Fake pass then dribble – Dribble to bring in the opponent, fake the pass across then explode at pace past the defender across the line.

Factors of decision making

- Position of team mate, relevant to defenders position. Is there a clear passing lane open?
- Is the defender in good defensive position?
- Is the defender within interception or tackling proximity?
- Can I fake the pass then go past the opponent?
- Can he recover if I make the decision to pass? Or to dribble?

Decision Making around the goal



3 v 4 Attacking overload

The defensive 3 pass the ball out and push up to press the attack. The attack must make good decisions – pass or dribble to create space – then when in a position to score, make the right decision – are you able to score or is someone else in a better position? Would faking a pass and dribbling create a good scoring chance?

- Keep the ball and players moving
- Make the extra player count
- Be decisive when inside the box
- If a pass can set up an easy goal, pass
- If inside the box with little time to shoot, only use 1 touch to ensure the shot is taken

Variations/Progressions:

- Add in a recovering defender to play 4v4
- Add in overlapping players to play 6v4
- Add in defensive midfielders to play 6v6

Defensive Determination - AC Milan v Barcelona – Champions League ¼ final at the San Siro 0-0

Since Pep Guardiola took over as coach of the Barcelona 1st team, they have;

- Never had less than 50% of the possession in a match.
- Scored over 600 goals

In these matches, as they have most of the ball, they generally have most of the chances. Never has a team defended badly and come away with a clean sheet. Keeping a clean sheet against this Barcelona team takes determination, discipline, intelligence, organisation, a game plan, a Barcelona off-day and luck. In the game against AC Milan, Barcelona didn't have an offday, and they didn't score against AC Milan.

How did this happen?

AC Milan had a game plan – play almost man-man in midfield and against the furthest forward players, with the centre backs staying spare as often as possible. They knew that Barcelona may not play their usual wide 4-3-3 due to having played against AC Milan previously and Milan predicted a variation of a 4-2-3-1 formation or 4-diamond-2 depending on Messi and Iniesta's positions, or 3-1-4-2 with Alves in midfield. With this knowledge, AC Milan deployed a 4-1-3-2 formation, this was to play 2v2 with Ibrahimovic and Robinho v Mascherano and Pique.

Milan v Barcelona starting positions



Milan start off playing 1v1 in midfield – Ambrosini v Iniesta, Nocerino v Keita, Boateng v Busquets and Seedorf v Xavi. As they had success in winning the ball more often than expected, Barcelona changed shape. Also, as the ball forward was direct and central, Ibrahimovic and Robinho mismatched Mascherano – Ibrahimovic is almost a foot taller than Mascherano, and much stronger

– allowing him to hold up the ball and roll Mascherano with ease, and Robinho looking to isolate Pique 1v1 in wide area's, where Pique doesn't want to be against a tricky player with speed like Robinho. Passes to Alves and Puyol are allowed as Milan want to block the centre and use the spaces left by Alves and Puyol pushing forward.

Opening Exchanges

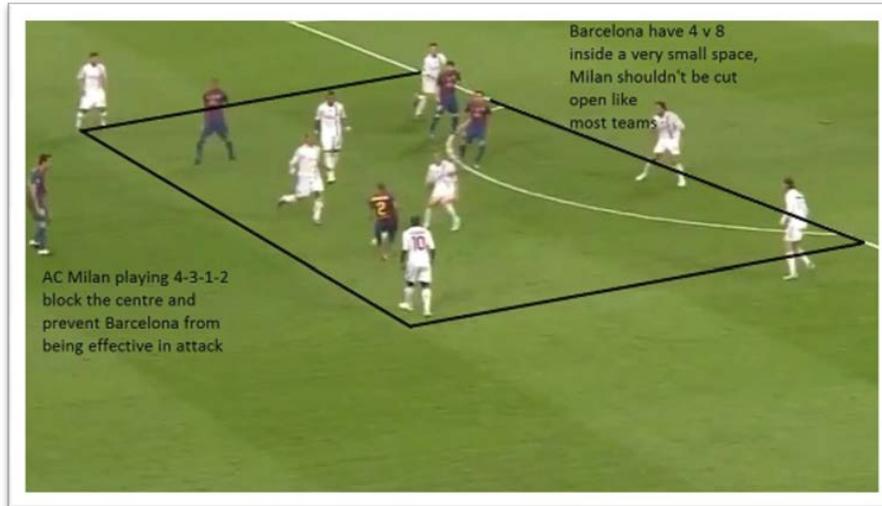
Early on, Milan looked capable of scoring and Barcelona changed to a more solid looking 3-4-3 with Puyol moved 15 yards infield to help Pique and Mascherano defend against Ibrahimovic and Robinho. This decision mean that Barcelona would commit one less player to the attack, and be less capable to move the ball around the centre effectively. Milan's game plan has forced Barcelona to change shape and pushed Alves forward more. Barcelona lack width on the left, so when Milan press, they try to show play away from the right and nullify the threat of Dani Alves's runs down the right side. Milan played most of the game as a central unit defensively as they knew Barcelona would come inside from the left, or if Alves recieves on the right, he will look to find Messi inside him in most scenario's, who will look to cut infield.

Milan v Barcelona shape after Barcelona changed formation due to Milan's positive start



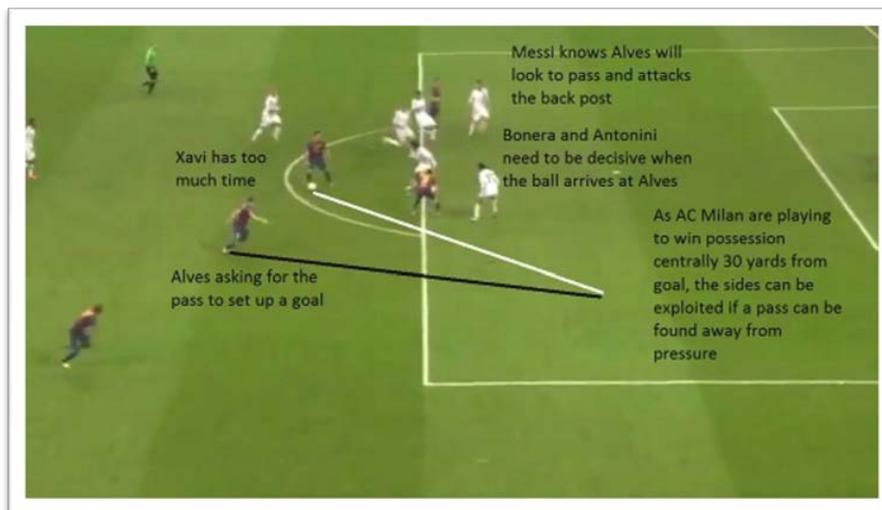
Barcelona changed shape as Puyol and Pique could play 1v1 with Mascherano spare around the player on the ball. Alves was pushed up to exploit Milans lack of width in defence or attack. Iniesta moved wider to the left to allow an outball to the left, with Alexis making constant diagonal runs across the last line of defence. Milan played almost Man-Man when Barcelona changed, with Boateng looking to press Busquets if he came far enough forward. Nocerino v Keita, Seedorf v Xavi, Ambrosini v Messi or Iniesta inside that zone.

Barcelona find a Milan wall of defence



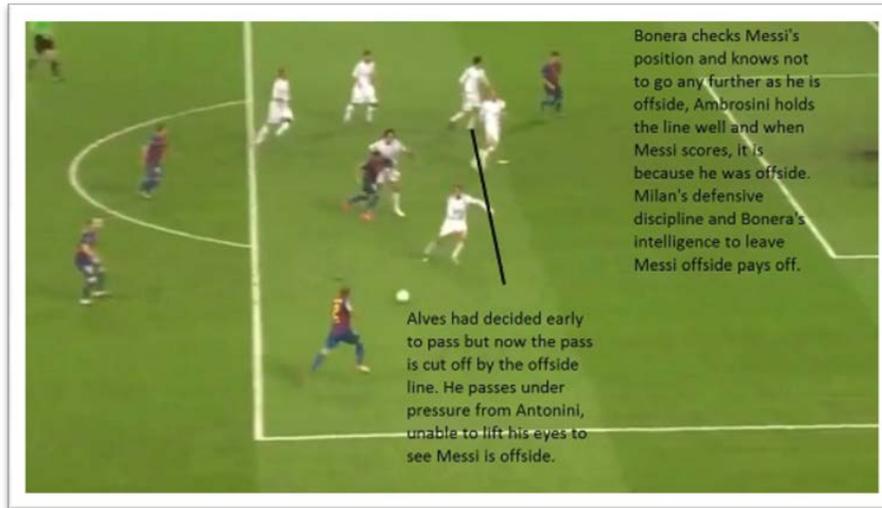
Barcelona finds 8 Milan defenders inside an area of around 16 yards squared. Dani Alves finds a pass to penetrate the midfield but the defence work hard to pressure Xavi as he receives, Bonera stays tight to Messi and although Xavi gets a shot on goal, it's a weak shot. Although Barcelona found a way to shoot here, Milan have set their stall out early – pack the centre, stay organised and ALWAYS press the ball. If Barcelona manages to shoot, it won't be a clean shot, and it will always be with opposition pressure making it much more difficult to score.

Xavi finds space around the box

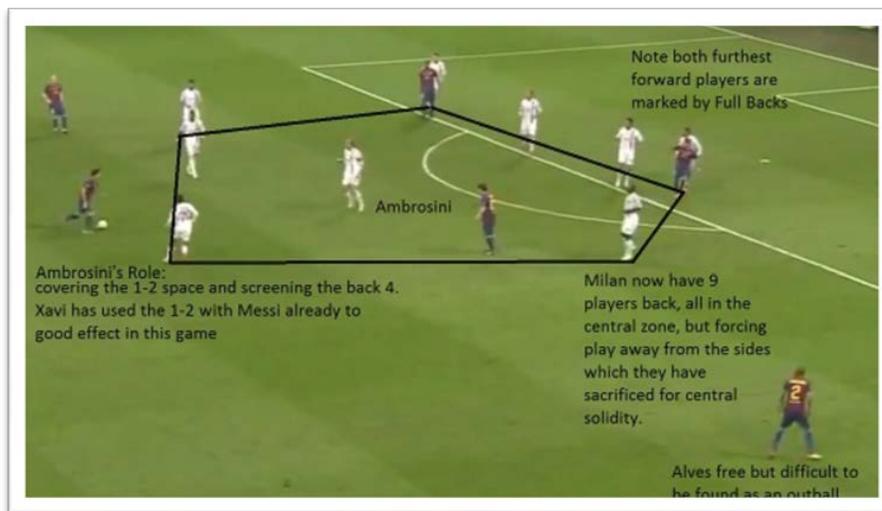


As AC Milan know that if they can attack, Barcelona have to take more time to build an attack from goal, and this also pushes players back into their own half. Milan also know that you can't defend for 90 minutes against Barcelona and expect to keep a clean sheet – they played Barcelona in the group stage and lost 5-4 over the 2 games. After a Milan attack, Barcelona move the ball forward quickly and Xavi finds space with Alves on the right side overlap. Milan knows that they can't stop the pass

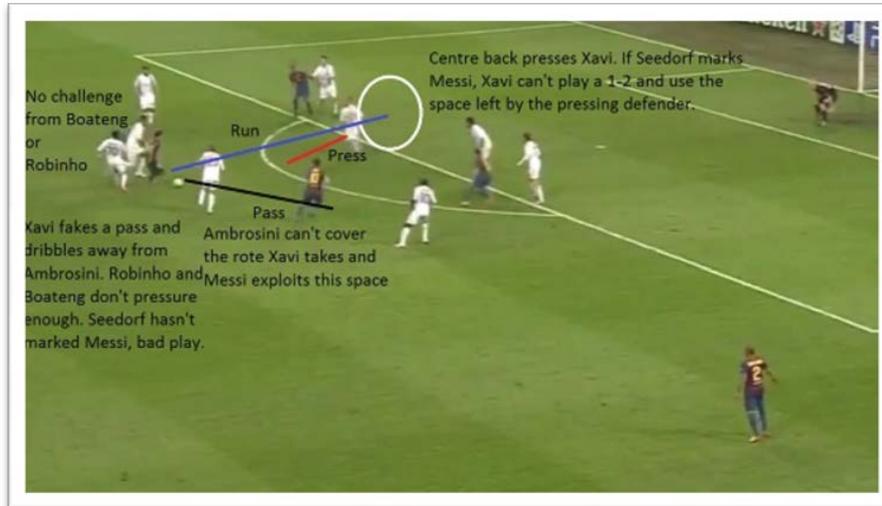
or the impending cross from Alves, so they form a line to defend from, but ensure Alves is pressed to reduce his time on the ball.



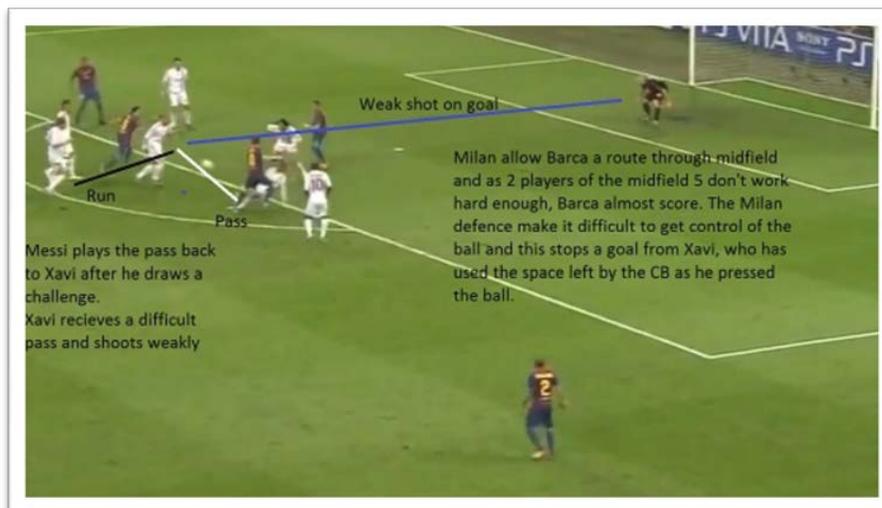
As the ball reaches Alves, Antonini is quick to get over, but is still not close enough to block the cross or force Alves to take a touch away from goal. Bonera checks Messi's position and looks to find the line of defence – he stays in line with Ambrosini and leaves Messi – Alves doesn't know Messi is offside and passes to him for an offside goal. Bonera could've panicked here and chased to get goal side and try to block the cross to him, giving Alexis and Messi a chance at a 2nd ball, and another phase of defence for Milan. Good anticipation and intelligence here from Bonera.



Ambrosini knows that Xavi and Messi play 1-2s all game, and find penetrating passes through the midfield regularly. As Robinho has dropped back to help the midfield, Ambrosini can effectively screen the back 4. Note that the 2 centre backs stay spare and the full backs tuck in very narrow to mark Keita and Alexis. Milan has 9 back v Barca's 6. Robinho's body shape shows Xavi away from Messi and Alves free on the side, eliminating Alves from this stage of the attack, making it 9v5. Again, the central zone is covered entirely, except for Seedorf not close enough to Messi.



Unfortunately for Milan, Boateng and Robinho are both flair players, who don't like tackling as it's not a strong point for either player. Xavi fakes a pass and drives past both of them. With Mexes not marking anyone, and Ambrosini unable to front press Xavi, Mexes decides to front press. Seedorf looks like he has switched off and still leaves Messi free. Xavi plays the pass for Messi and makes the run behind Mexes who has pressed the ball. Messi will look for Xavi in this space.



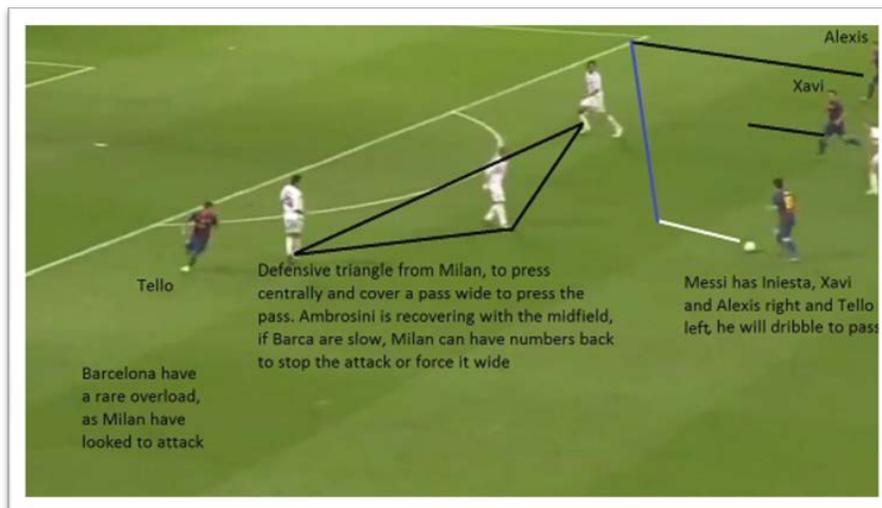
Although Barcelona have penetrated the midfield, the mentality of the Milan back 4 to work hard and always press the ball, and ensure Barcelona don't have time or easy touches on the ball, results in Xavi only being able to get away a weak shot on goal which is easily saved by Abbiati.

Alves utilised on the right



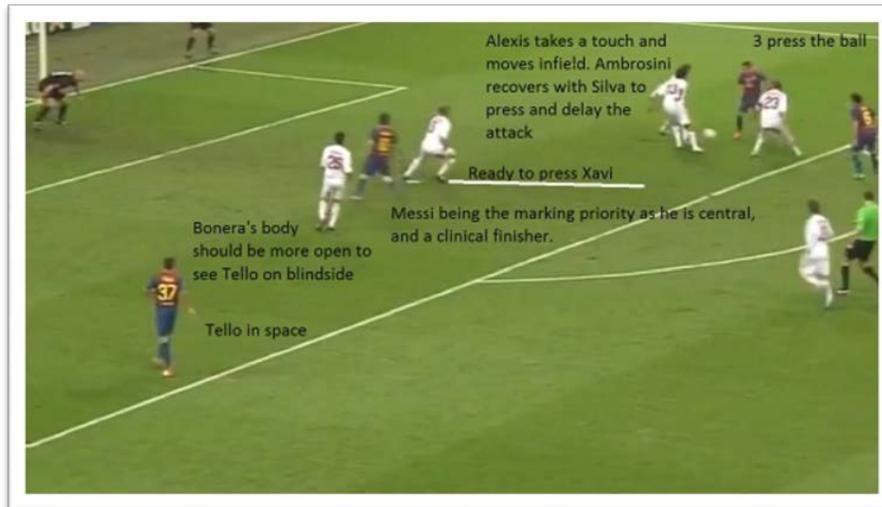
In a rare incident for Barcelona in this game, Alves finds himself ahead of the Milan back 4 from a Xavi pass, and as Antonini leaves Alexis - Thiago Silva takes responsibility for Alexis inside the box - Antonini presses Alves, who lofts a cross into Alexis when he arcs inside. Thiago wins the header and it bounces over to Iniesta on the far side. Milan quickly react to the loose ball and 3 players move over – 2 aggressively press Iniesta and one moves to Xavi to cover the pass. Iniesta is hurried and this results in a poor shot. Note that both Alexis is marked very tight and there is 2 players screening Messi, although he could possibly have found himself scoring from a loose ball had his closest opponent switched off.

Barcelona on Counter Attack

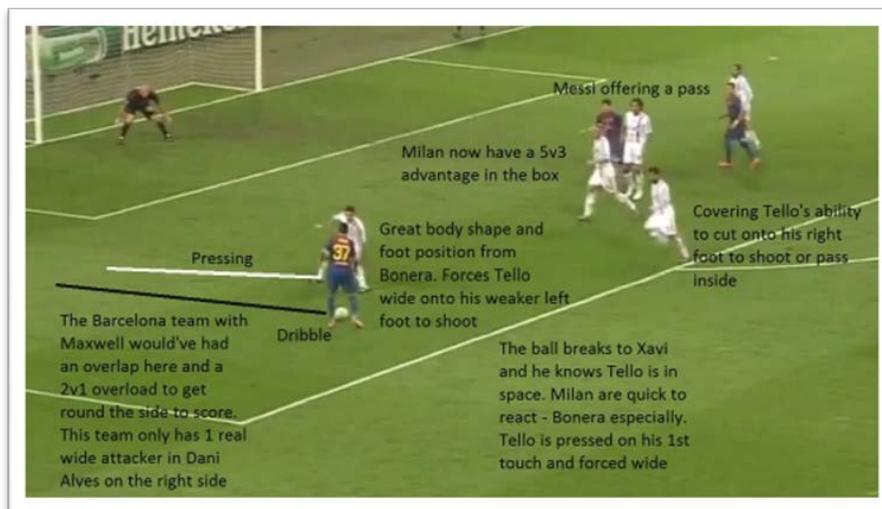


Milan again has looked to attack late on, and Barcelona has been very quick to counter attack. Messi runs at the defence which only has 3 back with Ambrosini recovering. Messi has Iniesta (out of picture), Xavi and Alexis on the right of him, and Tello circling back on his left. The shape of the Milan defence is to press the ball but to cover a dribble on either side or a pass to pressure the ball on that

side. Also, the body shape of the players is to ensure that they have forward momentum to press Messi if he decides to dribble past Mexes. Barcelona need to hurry up to exploit this rare 4 v 3 overload they have in front of the Milan goal.

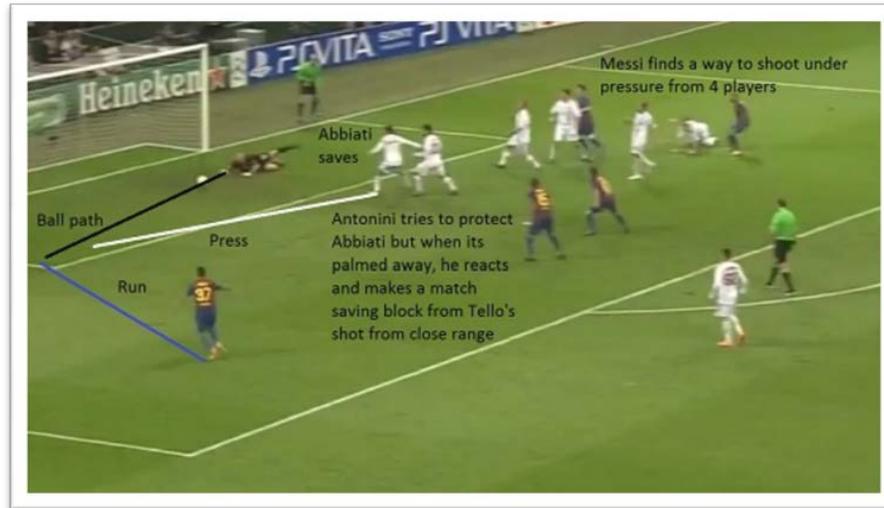


As the ball goes to Alexis, it is a slow pass, this gives Ambrosini a little more of a chance to recover, as does Antonini. Both players and the back 3 show great determination to stop a goal from this initial overload. Alexis is confronted by 3 opponents and is lucky to recover the blocked pass. Nocerino is also almost back to help the defence and again, Barcelona will need to be quick to use the space Tello is in on the other side of the box.



As Alexis is quick to use Xavi from the blocked pass, Xavi passes accurately and quickly to Tello on the left, using 2 touches, as he had already scanned play. Bonera does brilliantly here; he is very quick to get across, and as he moves, gets good foot and body position, this forces Tello onto his weaker left foot. Nocerino is now moving inside to cover Tello's ability to cut inside onto his stronger right foot. Messi is screened and marked inside the box, with Alexis also marked by Antonini. Milan does extremely well to delay the attack, press the ball and then re-adjust to the pass across goal to

Tello. Bonera in particular does well to organise his feet and body shape and position to effectively deny Tello a good shooting chance into the far corner.



Milan had a good starting position when the ball was at Dani Alves on the right, but a slip lets in Messi. He tried a 1-2 with Xavi and again, a Milan defender is there to stop the attack. Messi has the tenacity to win the ball back as the Milan player slips, Messi finds a way to shoot, which Abbiati saves. Note Antonini's body shape – he expects Abbiati to gather in the shot and he is blocking any follow ups to the save. Tello is again free on the far side, as Abbiati saves, Antonini sees him in his peripheral vision.

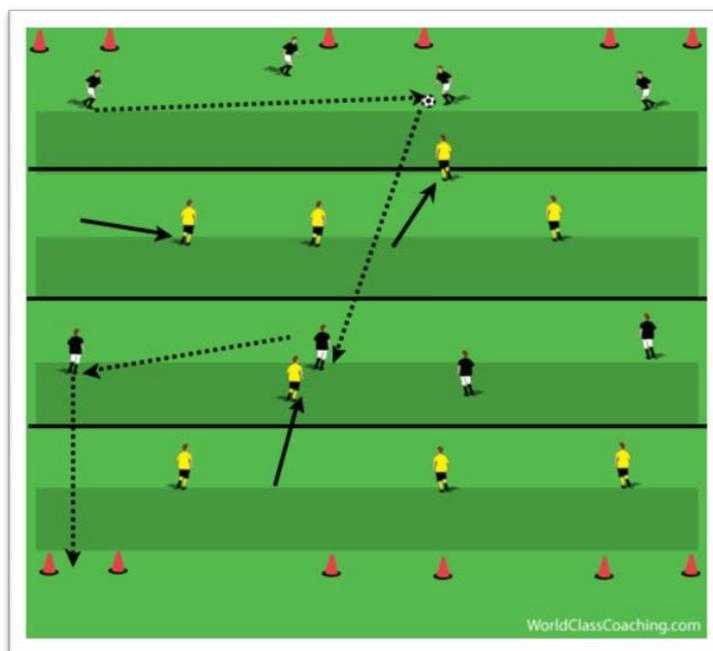


Antonini's desire to make sure Tello doesn't score, and Milan keep a clean sheet, is admirable. He sprints over and throws himself in the way of the shot, and the underside of the higher or the 2 legs make the ball bounce low and away from goal. If it hits the top side of his higher leg, it could've deflected into the net as Abbiati is also chasing over. I don't think Abbiati would've made the 2nd save here.

Over the course of the 90 minutes, Abbiati didn't have too many difficult saves to make, and this was down to the incredible desire of the Milan players to fulfil the game plan, and work hard to cover each other if any space appeared. Very little space was between the midfield and defence - part of the Milan game plan – the centre backs were never exploited or forced to be dragged out of position – down to the full backs marking the strikers – and Ambrosini doing a good job of screening the back 4 effectively.

Session to help develop defensive screening, frontal and behind pressing, covering passing lanes and covering ball movements.

Activity 1 – defending with intensity in defensive lines.



4 lines of play, around 40 yards wide. 4 players per line (if less players, reduce width) If more, extend)

The idea is to get the ball from the starting zone – the defensive line – to the midfield line, evading the defensive screening. Once the ball is in the midfield line, they must try to pass into one of the goals marked out – 2 wide, one central.

To start, players shouldn't cross the lines, only shuffle forward, back and sideways within that area. Once players have had some success passing through the lines, add frontal pressure within that zone, the other 3 players should cover him.

Once more success has been had at penetrating the lines, add in blindside pressure – players must learn to press on both sides of the opponent. The idea is to give players a chance to see where more pressure can be applied and when, to the attacking team.

Once players have a good grasp of when and where to apply the pressure, make it competitive – Possible conditions to use

- Don't concede within a set time limit
- 1st team to score 3 wins
- Time limit game
- Defence v Attack – set time limits, goals scored/conceded – only 1 team scores and one defends

Coaching Points: Defending

- Look along the line and be organised
- Communication – one presses – everyone else reacts
- See-Saw motion on pressing – one press, one covers
- When the defensive line see that the midfield will be penetrated, react quickly
- Pressure 45 degrees onto the back, not directly behind
- Angle and speed of approach and deceleration on pressuring the ball
- Body shape on pressure
- Foot position on pressure
- Communication from defensive lines to cover passing lanes and movements from opponents
- Quick movements in transition from attack to defence and from defence into attack

Activity 2 – Recovering from an overload



The 3 Yellows at the half way lines start with a ball. The black attack will receive from one of these players and attack the defensive 3. They should keep shape by pressing and covering, but maintaining a good line depth. Once the attack turns with the ball, the 3 yellows furthest from the goal will all chase back to make a 6v4, if the blacks are slow.

- Play 3v4 initially with 3 recovering players
- Reduce numbers with success

- Add in supporting attackers to again overload the attack to 8v6/9v6/10v6
- If defence is struggling badly in a 9v6, start with 4 at the back with 2 recovering players.

Coaching Points: Defending Overloads

- Don't play 2v1, isolate and attacker and play 1v1
- Delay the attack – allow recovery runners to support the defence
- If opponents take a bad touch – NEVER DIVE IN! Missing the tackle is too big a risk to take, you could leave a 4v2 or 3v1.
- Show opponents wide and away from support.
- Recovery players should look to get goal side of the ball as early as possible, and pressure from behind if possible.

AC Milan v Fiorentina – Rigid 4-1-2-1-2 v Man Marking 3-5-2

This week, I visited Milan, and watched the AC Milan v Fiorentina match. AC Milan needed to win to stay 3 points clear with Juventus still to play away to Palermo, and Fiorentina needing to win to push away from the relegation places. Fiorentina came into the match with a game plan, knowing that AC Milan had an understrength team due to injuries to most of their main players, and had to play players out of position to fill in spaces. On the positive side, Antonio Cassano gained a place on the bench after his recent heart problem and he received the biggest cheer in the pre match official line up confirmation from the tannoy announcer. Due to Milan's injuries, missing from their best team were, Thiago Silva (CB) Antonini (LB) Van Bommel (DM) Seedorf and Prince Boateng (CM) Pato (CF) and Robinho started as a substitute after playing in midweek v Barcelona.

Fiorentina made 5 changes and a change of formation after last weeks loss to Chievo, with a change to 5-3-2, and a man marking system. Fiorentina's system was flexible to allow the full backs freedom to attack down the sides on the counter attack, but with the security that the 2 near side CM's would not push ahead of the ball. The idea was to stretch play to the far side and have the far side CM break ahead of the strikers once the ball was on the far side – this would create space for Fiorentina to attack and penetrate quickly behind the AC Milan defensive line.



Fiorentina's left back pressing Abate – Milan's right back – with Maxi being marked tight from behind. Players 2 and 4 man marking Ibrahimovic on the far side, 5 playing spare incase the ball was played for Maxi to run onto, or a long cossfield pass to Ibrahimovic – this pass was used too often in the game and only really created one half chance from a header from Ibra to Maxi at the back post. Player 10 was to man mark Muntari, 8 man marking Emanuelson, 7 man marking Nocerino. Player 9 was to try to block the pass from full back into Ambrosini, to force passes back and across to the far side the long way. Player 11 was to press Mexes when able to.

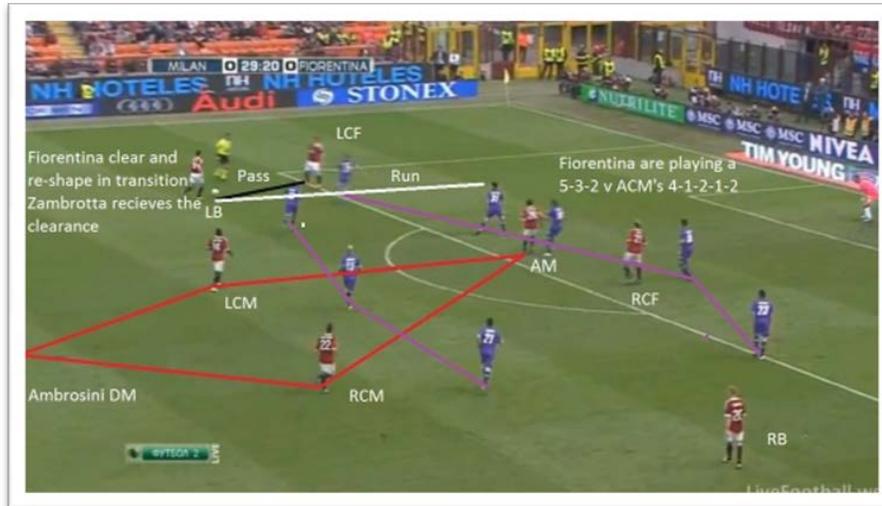


When player 11 is unable to immediately press Mexes from Abate's pass, 11 and 9 retreat to the edge of the centre circle and reshape. The back 5 spread wide so that 2 of the 3 centre backs can man mark Ibra and Maxi, the 3 CM's all move across and man mark the 3 most advanced midfielders. The 2 strikers block passing lanes into the midfielders and make the Milan midfield work hard to gain possession between players and between the lines.

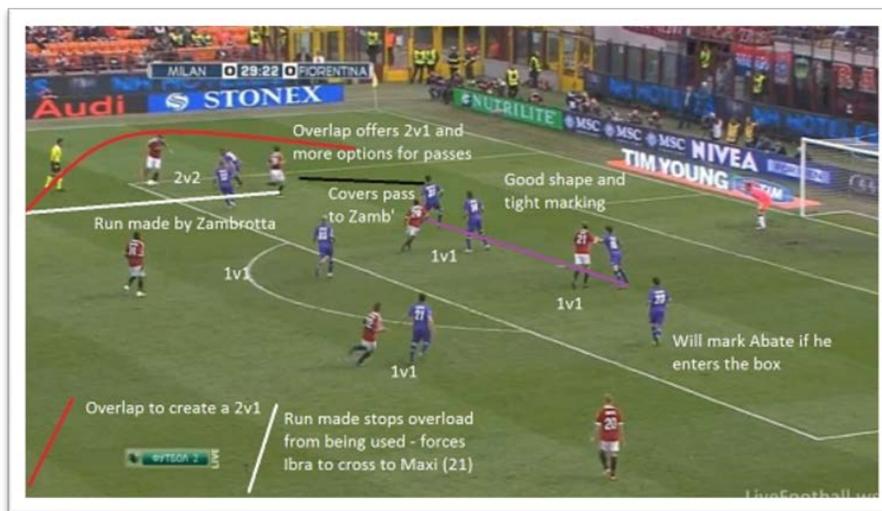
AC Milan Goal - 30 minutes

Fiorentina defended well, but the referee gave a very soft penalty for a supposed foul on Maxi. I was sitting in the stand in front of it and from where I was sitting, it was a penalty box collision between 2 players and nothing more. The ball was never reaching Maxi and was on its way out for a goal kick.

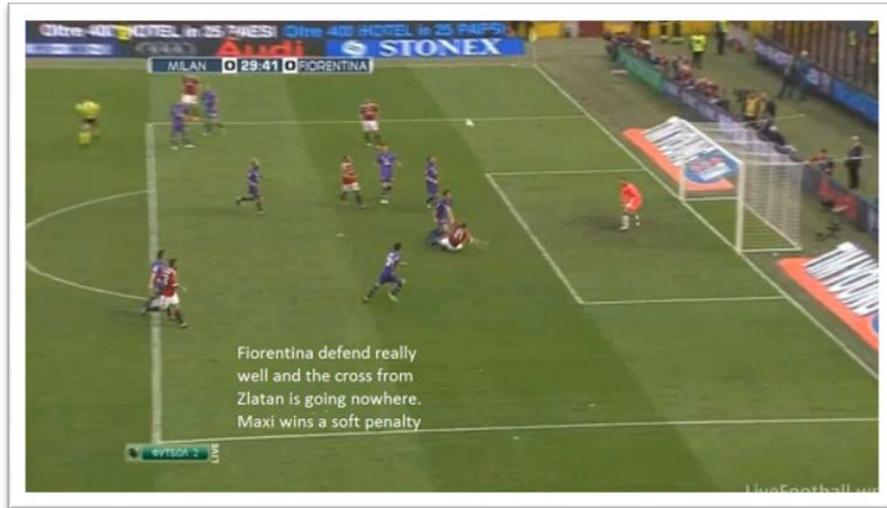
In this screenshot, we can see a few problems with Milans attack here – Zambrotta passes into Ibrahimovic who has moved wide to allow space for Emanuelson inside the box. Zambrotta uses Ibra but instead of going round Ibra and offering an overlapping pass, he runs across him, and as he does that, stops a passing opportunity. Zambrotta could've blocked the player pressing Ibra and created him some space, but he hasn't. The nearest CM will run with Zambrotta then leave him as he knows a pass isn't on and a 2v1 scenario is a good thing against Ibrahimovic. As Milan have such a rigid shape, nobody really offers anything different from a cross into the box. Fiorentina have their back 5 inside the box, and 2 of the CB's man marking Emanuelson and Maxi.



As Zambrotta doesn't overlap Ibra, there is no 2v1 opportunity to get round the side and into the space to Ibra's left – Zambrotta is no help at all in this attack. Muntari could shift 5 yards to his left and offer a pass back – this can draw out an opponent and maybe create some space for a pass, or open up Zambrotta if he circles wide and Ibra passes back then moves infield. Emanuelson could offer a pass with his back to goal, Nocerino could offer a pass to keep the ball, a Xavi Iniesta style 1-2 or a switch to Abate – Many possibilities but no movement means no options. Ibra crosses and Milan get a lucky penalty. Note all Fiorentina players have a job here – Mark a player and get into position quickly.

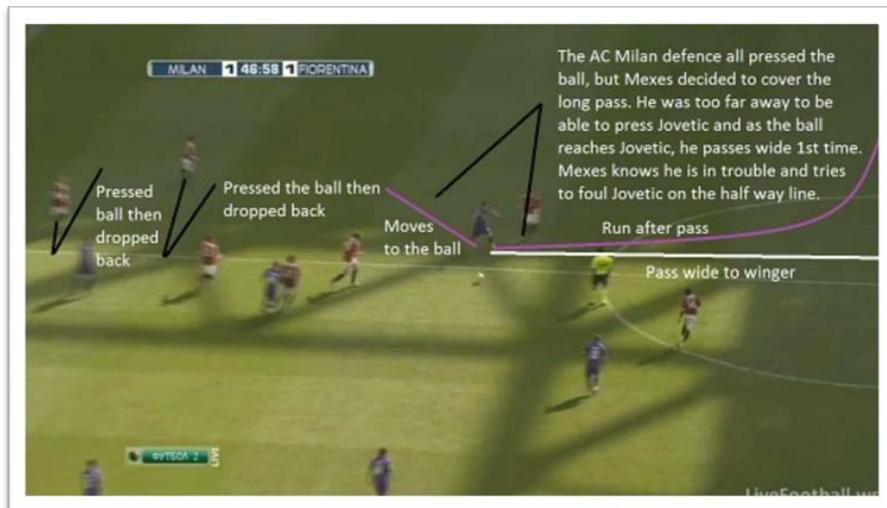


As we can see from the side view, the ball is going out and Maxi should never win a penalty here.

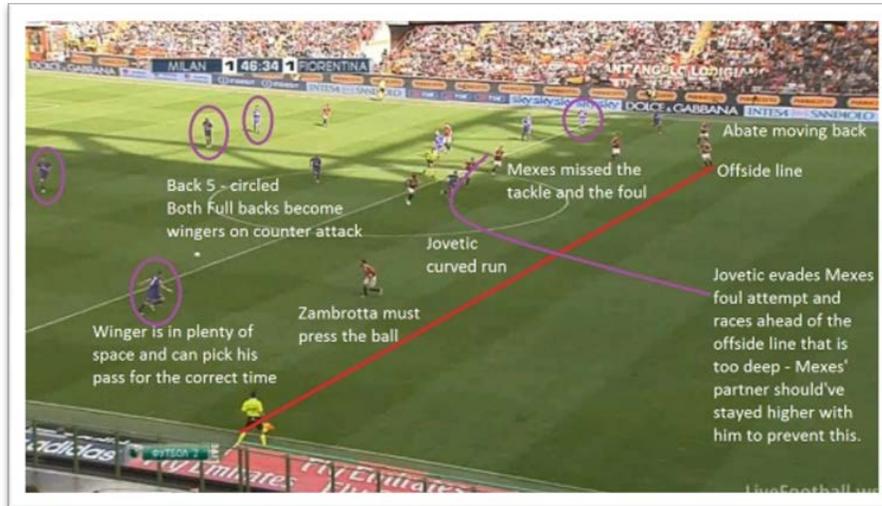


Fiorentina Goal – 47 minutes

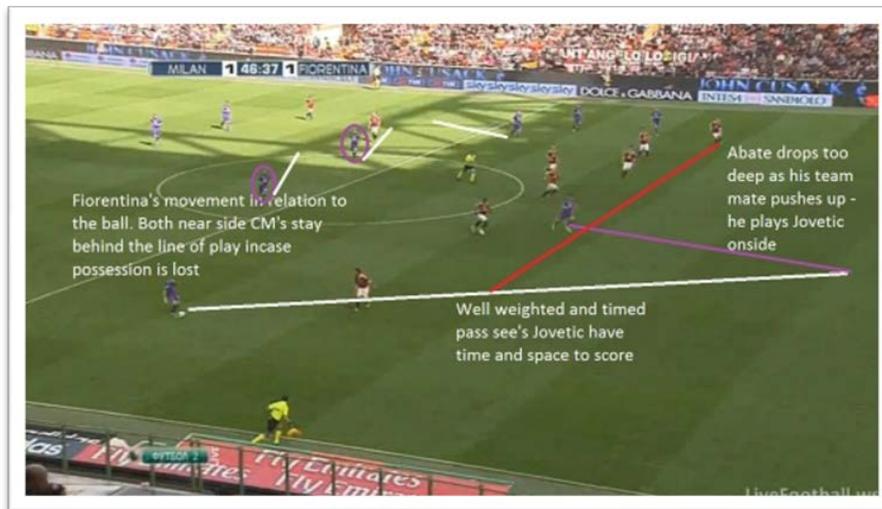
In the build-up, Mexes dropped off and acted as a covering defender, and picked up a good position, deeper than the rest of his defence, which were too high. They all pressed the ball and the space between defence and midfield was too small. Mexes tried to fix this problem, but when Jovetic moved infield to pick up the loose pass, he gave away any advantage he had over Fiorentina's attack.

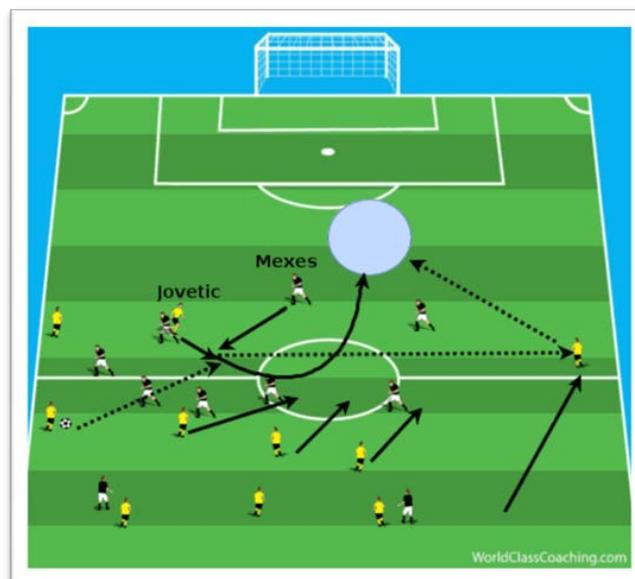


As Jovetic passes wide 1st time, he knows that the deepest defender is out of position. Mexes knows he is in trouble and tries to foul Jovetic and stop the attack, take a booking and stop a possible goal scoring chance. He misses and Jovetic used his exceptional speed to race away from Mexes with an arced run. The Right full back has pushed up quickly and offered the width to open up the attack and stretch Milan's rigid shape in attack and defence.



Zambrotta puts no pressure on the ball, and this leaves too large a passing angle to be able to stop the pass through to Jovetic. Abate doesn't think about the situation and although he has no chance of being able to run the distance required to stop Jovetic, he keeps running back. Despite Bonera playing Jovetic inside then pushing up, Abate undoes this clever play from Bonera and he is now the deepest defender – playing Jovetic inside, and allowing him to score. Note Fiorentina's 2 near side CM's – they move across in transition – not to ask for the pass, but if play breaks down and possession is lost, these 2 players can delay an attack and force it back across the opposite side, allowing the team more time to recover into shape.



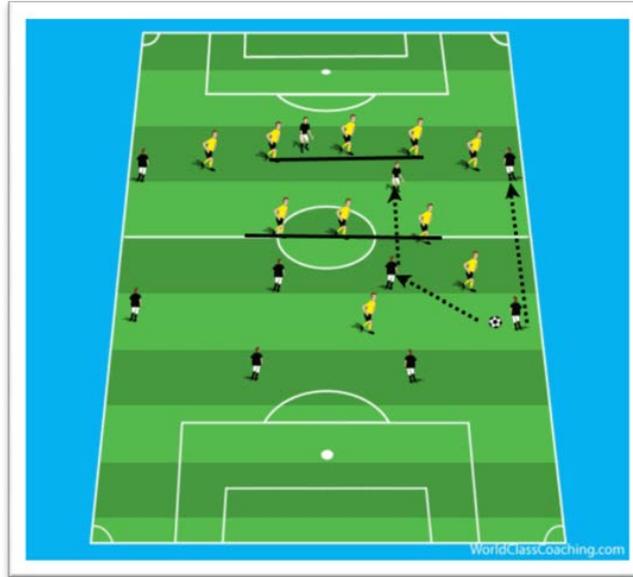


The space circled is where Jovetic knows he can run to, and the full back knows this is the space to pass to, and had the full back not pushed up to offer the width, Fiorentina would not have managed to score this goal.

Fiorentina scored a winner in the last minute – from a long kick forward, which Mexes misjudged. Amauri collected the loose ball 2v1 on Bonera 20 yards out, plays the sensible pass forward, collects the return pass then scores, for a well-deserved win.

Despite Milan having most of the possession, the team cohesion was never great, and the rigid system never helped – the defensive Man Marking system was the perfect way of playing against Milan in this game, as it allowed Milan to be predictable, and easy to defend against. Had Milan been afforded more freedom of movement – especially in midfield, this could've been a way to create central space or change Fiorentina's game plan.

An alternative formation to exploit Fiorentina only using 1 player wide on each side would be to play with 2 players wide, in a 4-2-3-1 or 4-4-2, and look for wide overloads, or to exploit playing with a 5-3-2 formation, play an attacker in the space between the lines – this either draws a defender out and creates a space, or it allows for the player in the hole to play lots of 4 v 5 attack v defence scenario's.

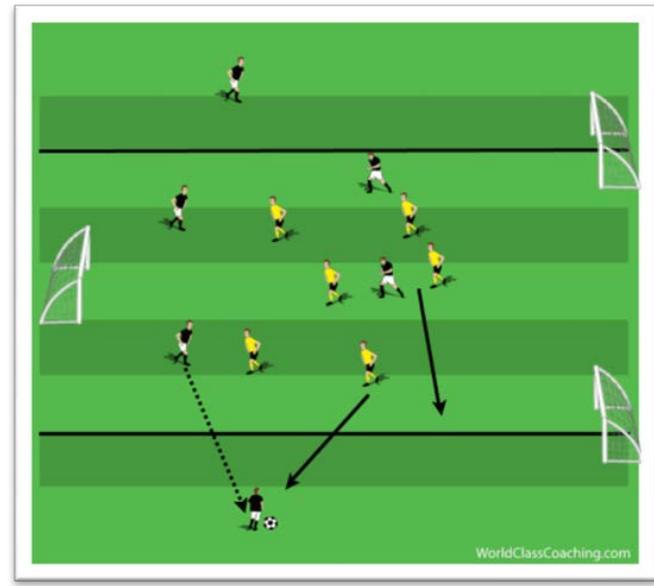


Alternative shape with Maxi being the Target Man, Ibrahimovic allowed a free role. Nocerino wide right and Emanuelson wide left – in his best position - Muntari and Ambrosini the deep lying midfielders who look to use Zambrotta and Abate as out balls to open up 2v1's on the sides, and make some space in the centre if one of the 3 in midfield move over to press.

When Robinho came on, Milan livened up but with Sully Muntari playing extremely poorly, they lost many possessions through his poor play. One possession in particular, Milan had a 4v2 with Muntari in possession around 40 yards from his own goal. A simple lofted pass left, a dribble then pass right, or an easy through ball down the centre was needed. He used his weaker right foot to clear the ball under no pressure to Boruc 60 yards away in the Fiorentina goal. Terrible play from Muntari and this was the last attacking action of the match for Milan.

Overall, as a fan, it was a good match. As a coach, it was interesting to see Fiorentina play this way and be effective. Allegri should've changed formation early on, and subbed Muntari for Aquilani, as Muntari was slow, indecisive and poor in possession, the whole match. I feel that with more freedom of movement, the 4-1-2-1-2 would've worked better, but a wider formation could've been more productive in the weaknesses of the Fiorentina formation.

Training Session to help create more width in attack



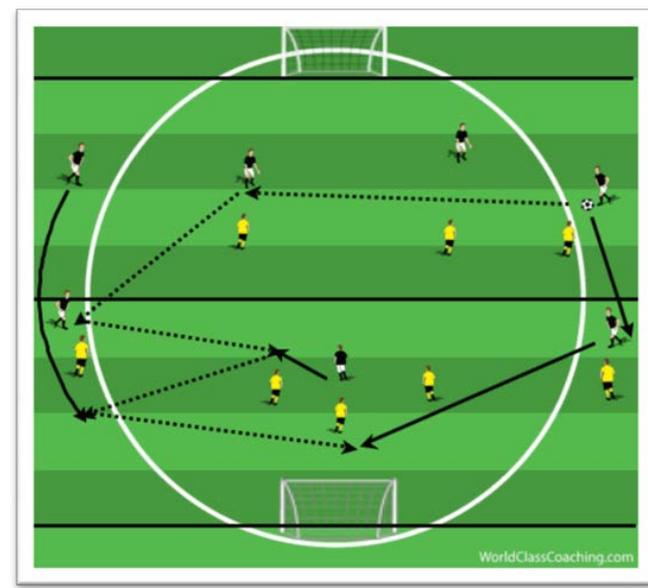
The wide attack, the Black team, have 2 designated wingers, who stay inside a 10 yard wide zone. They stay wide and take no part in play centrally. The wide attack team have 4 players who play inside a 25 x 20 yard rectangle, against 6 central attacking players, the yellow team. The Wide attacking team have 2 goals they can score into. The wingers can shoot directly into the nearest goal, for 1 goal, or cross for a team mate to score into the far side goal, for 2 goals.

When the ball goes into the wide zone, all yellows can enter the zone if they want to. Wide players in attack have as many touches as they want.

Coaching Points:

- Use the free players wide as often as possible
- Look for movement to be free to score from a cross into the far side goal
- Decision early from wide players – dribble 1v1, cross, or shoot on goal
- Central attackers should use numerical advantage to press and win the ball back
- Central attackers should be quick in possession and use the 2 extra players to break down the defence

Width in Attack 2 – Circular Pitch



Mark out a circular pitch – and make a half way line across the centre. The circle should allow for the narrowing runs defenders make when tucking in and the runs attackers can make round the back of a defence – this prohibits straight runs that end up in a stop due to having no more space left, and being able to use the ball with the correct body shape on the run.

The Yellow team play a 3-3 formation with 1 wing back on each side – effectively a 5-3 or 3-5 formation when in possession. The Blacks will use a 2-1 formation with 4 wide players, effectively a 4-3 formation or 2-5 when in possession. Wide attack team play with 1 player less to encourage using the overloads.

Rules:

- In possession, at least 1 player must be wide on each side (2 of the 4 wide players for black, both for yellow)
- To score, both wide players must be in the attacking half (or all 4 for black)
- The ball must touch both wide players of one side before scoring (see demonstration above)
- Central players must stay inside their designated half

Progressions/Variations

- Positional rotation from wide-centre and centre-wide
- Goal must be scored from a wide pass
- All attacking players must be inside the attacking half to score – 1 wide on each side

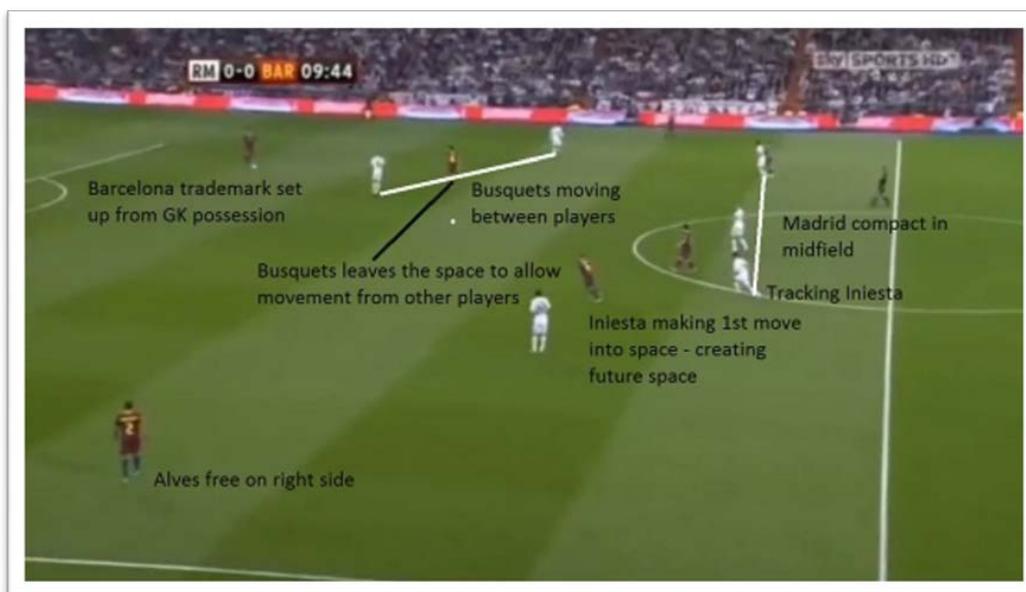
Movement In Midfield Controls the Game

Football or Soccer is a simple game. You move the ball from one goal to the other, and try to avoid the opponents touching it if possible. If you were to play a match against 11 mannequins, you would move away from the closest mannequin, offer a pass, receive the pass, pass to a team mate, move again, and offer another pass. All of your team mates would be doing the same. Eventually without much of a problem, a goal is scored. Although the game was played against mannequins, the players still had to move to receive the passes. The same would be playing against animals, or humans. It's a fairly simple game. How do the *best* teams control the midfield? It's not as easy as moving away from an opponent, receiving, passing and communicating, especially against International players, so how can we create space?

In this article I will look at one of the best midfields for moving to create space in the history of the game – Busquets, Xavi, Iniesta and Messi. Messi isn't strictly a midfielder – he doesn't really have a position, he plays with freedom and regularly plays with the midfield to gain control of the field. He regularly plays as a 4 with his 3 colleagues as in this section.

This is a passage of play from a recent match between Barcelona v Real Madrid. Note that both Barcelona full backs stay wide and make barely any movement, holding their wide opponents in position, and the 2 wide attackers stay forward, and also don't make any movement – they just hold the back 4 in place and allow the game to be played between the 2 Barcelona centre backs, and the Barcelona midfield v the Real Madrid attacker and midfield – 6 v 6 in the centre of the field. Real Madrid almost plays a man-man game against Xavi, Iniesta and Messi, so good movement to lose their marker to receive the ball must be used. A zonal system is used against Busquets, with a high pressure pressing game against Puyol, as he is viewed as the weaker of the 2 in possession of him and Pique.

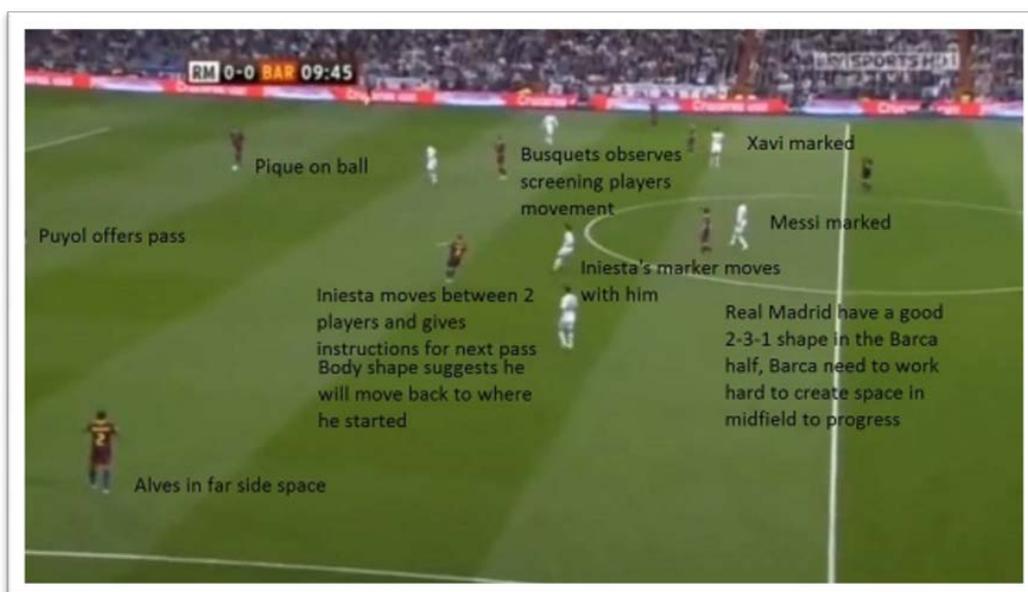
Goal Kick start – Valdes to Pique – Barcelona starts to disrupt the shape



Barcelona start with a build up around 25 yards out. Busquets has opted to move much wider and higher than his normal goal kick position. He leaves lots of space in the centre of the half, which allows movement from the opposite side. His movement here is not by accident – he is trying to occupy 2 defenders by playing between both of them. Iniesta knows the space is there and moves into the space, as this movement lets him know who his allocated marker is – Xabi Alonso – as he now knows who he must lose to gain control of the midfield. Messi holds position centrally with Xavi on the left of the 3 central midfielders. Madrid are compact and have set out their stall of how they will play here, a man marking system.

Pique has no real options here – he can use Puyol and be predictable, or wait for movement and maybe dribble forward himself.

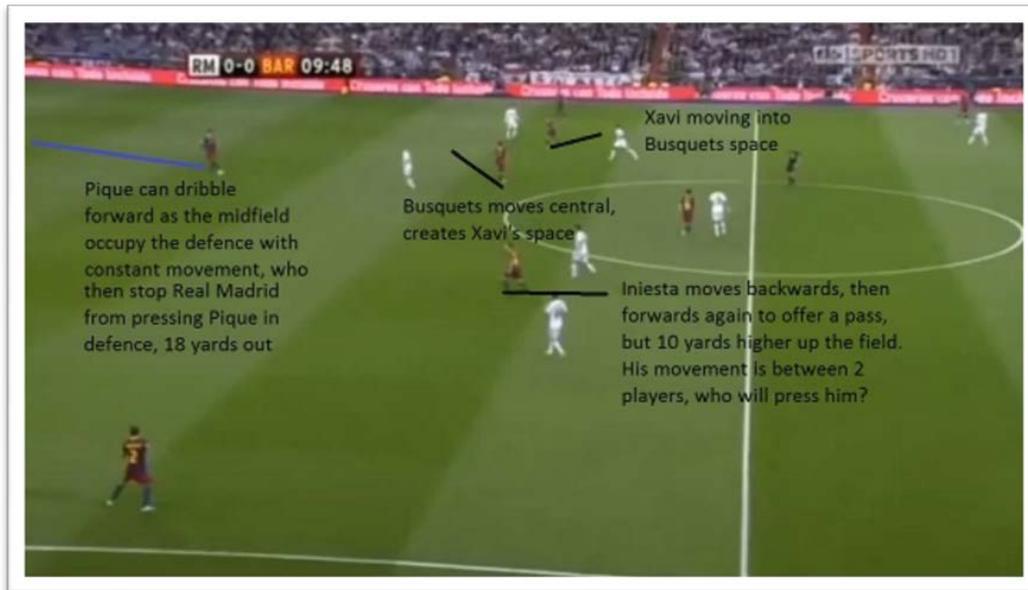
Iniesta Checks his run



This movement from Iniesta seems harmless, but from this he has knowledge of how high Alonso will follow him. He also indicates that he doesn't want the ball by directing a pass towards Puyol if it's needed. The movement also allows Messi, man marked by Pepe, and Alves to move – Messi can move left into Iniesta's space if he wants, with Iniesta moving diagonally inside (rotating positions) with Alves able to push 10 yards higher to occupy Di Maria. Busquets watches Benzema's defensive movements, with Xavi marked behind Busquets by Diarra.

Pique has an option to pass to Iniesta, but Iniesta indicates he doesn't want the ball yet. Puyol again is the only option, other than the dribble forward.

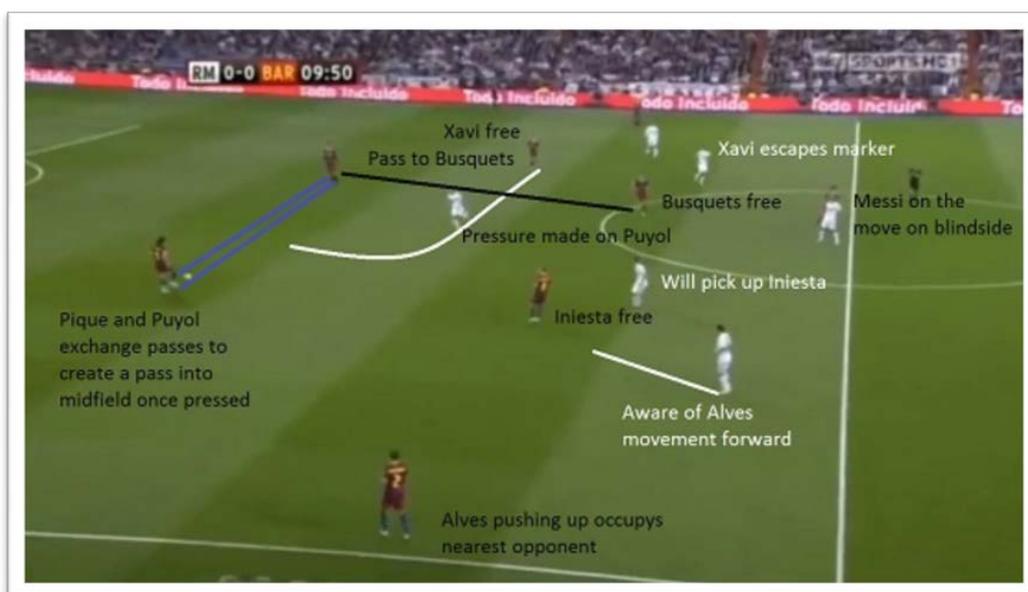
Forcing the opponent back



As Iniesta moves backwards, then forwards again, checking his run 2 times, he picks the space between Alonso and Di Maria to offer a pass in – this occupies both opponents and as Di Maria comes narrower, Alves will move forward again, to occupy Di Maria. Busquets makes a diagonal run into the centre, behind Benzema. This creates the space for Xavi to drop deep into, and lose Diarra. Real Madrid have a good shape here but once players are passed on, spaces will appear for Barcelona.

Pique moves forward, and Busquets movement inside freed Xavi from Diarra, Pique now has 2 options for passes.

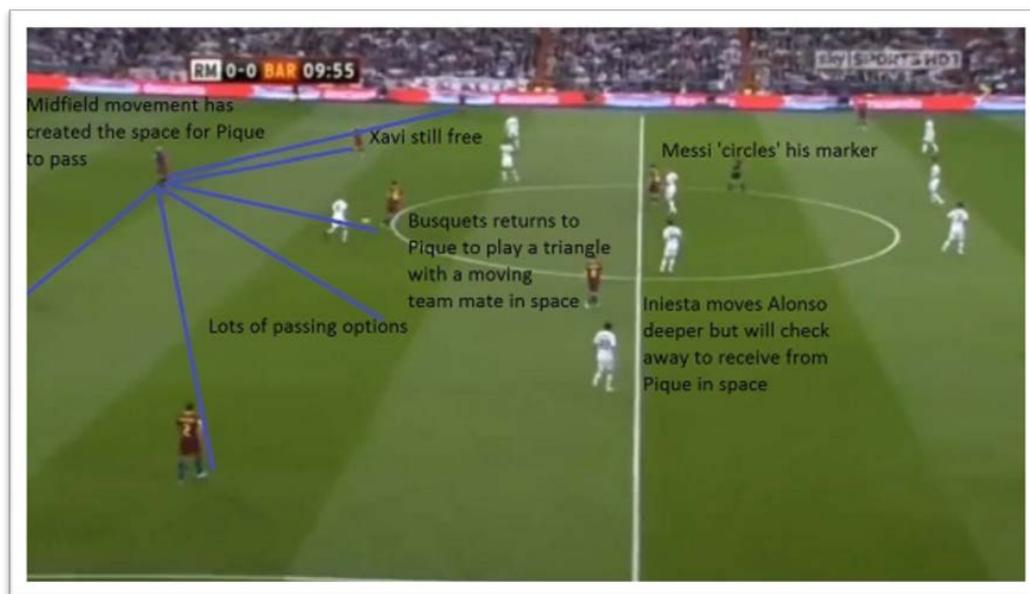
Opening a space from defence



Pique and Puyol exchange passes. Again, this seems a harmless act. What they are doing is changing the point of defence from Real Madrid, making Benzema chase the ball and leave his position – this makes more space for the midfield to find time and space on the ball at some stage. Note Xavi has dropped 10 yards deeper; this means he is free from Diarra, and able to receive on the half turn. Iniesta has checked his run for the 3rd time, again moving Alonso around the midfield, looking for a lapse of concentration or a gap in the defensive shape to exploit later. Alves has moved forward again, this pulls Di Maria wide and away from Iniesta.

Pique here has the option to use Xavi, or Puyol, he selects Puyol as he knows Puyol will return the ball when pressed, opening up a space.

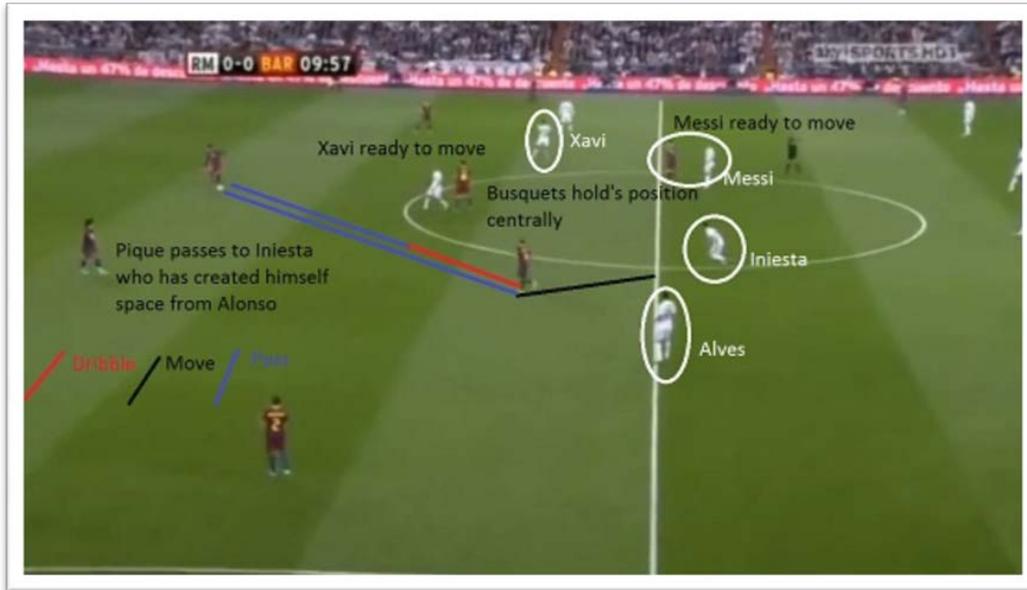
Options from Defence



When Benzema pressed Puyol, he left a space for Busquets to receive. All the players know Benzema will work hard to recover into shape and press Busquets. Busquets knows this and returns 1st time to Pique. Xavi is still free, Alves is more open as Di Maria has tucked in, Alonso has tucked in more, leaving Iniesta. They both tucked in due to Benzema leaving a space to pass into midfield.

Pique has 2 options; Xavi or Busquets, but uses the one that forces Benzema to chase the ball. With 10 minutes on the clock, this could be a long night for Benzema.

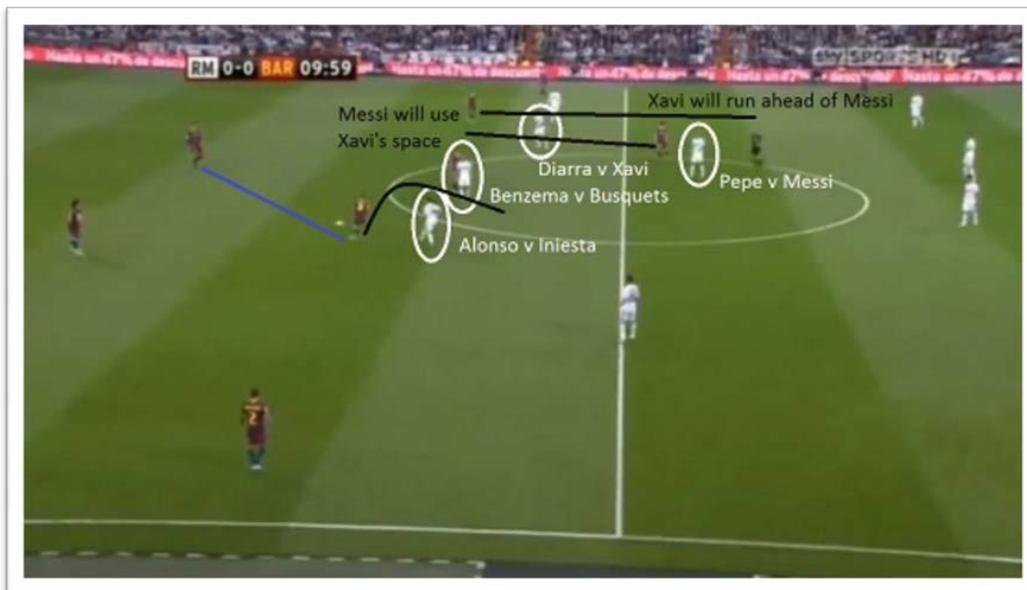
Forcing opposition back and finding space



As the ball is returned to Pique, Iniesta checks his run for the 4th time! This time, as Alonso is too far away, he won't be able to press effectively and stop Iniesta receiving with ease. Iniesta dribbles back then passes back to Pique, then circles round the back of Alonso. Xavi is ready to make his circle run, and when he does, Messi will fill in his space (positional rotation).

Note the Real Madrid players circled and who they are supposed to be marking – Diarra (Xavi) Pepe (Messi) Alonso (Iniesta) and Di Maria (Alves). Only Pepe is within pressing distance and even here, Messi is only holding Pepe in position, and not getting involved.

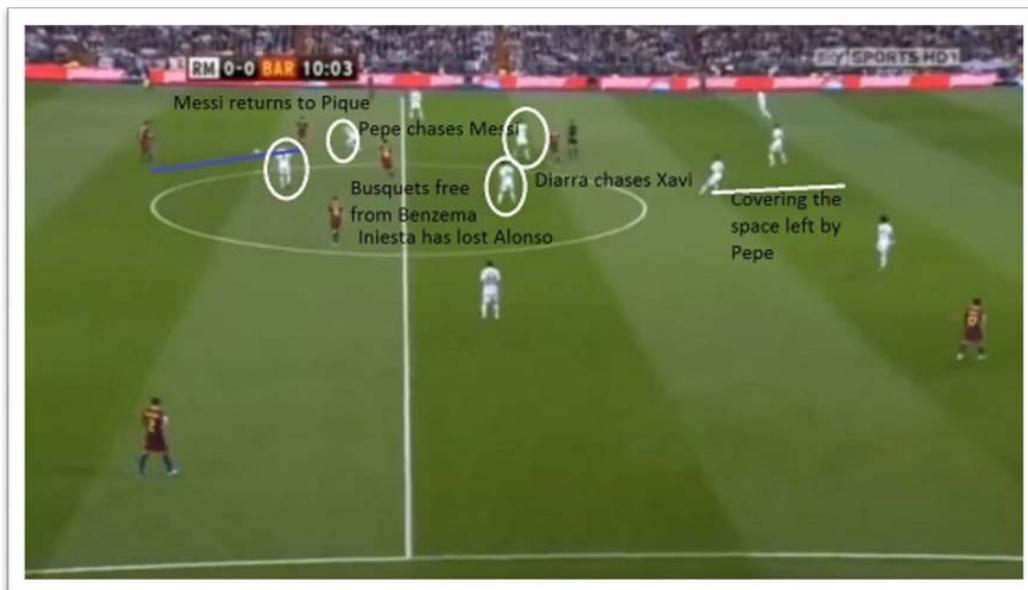
Circle your opponents to open a space



Iniesta has Alonso on his back, so he passes back to Pique, then arcs around Busquets, using him as a blocker on Alonso. Xavi has run ahead of Diarra, Messi has dropped into Xavi's space at the same time. Diarra has followed Xavi to Pepe's space, as Pepe chases Messi. If Pepe and Diarra stay in shape, Xavi and Messi would simply stop their runs and play between 2 or 3 players and when they receive, open up a space in the system, so Real Madrid make sure that they both follow their opponents.

Why does circling the opponents help? It's a movement that can create space in a medium sized space for 1v1 situations, or to create space for a team mate (Here, Messi) in a compact space, in a 2v2, 3v3 or 4v4 scenario. This movement looks like it has been practised as a set rotational pattern like in a Futsal match.

Using the space to receive the ball



As Messi drops in to receive, he passes back. Simple, yet effective. Real Madrid don't want to chase down Pique and Puyol, they want to keep the ball with these 2 and stop Busquets, Xavi, Iniesta and Messi receiving in space around the half way line. Note how far advanced Pique now is, around 30 yards closer to the half way line, forcing Madrid deeper. Note that the previous 2-3-1 defensive shape inside the Barcelona half is now a 2-2-2 shape, but with Busquets inside a box of 4 players, and with Iniesta just outside the square able to receive if possible. Watch Xavi continue his circle run into Messi's space, with Iniesta circling Alonso.

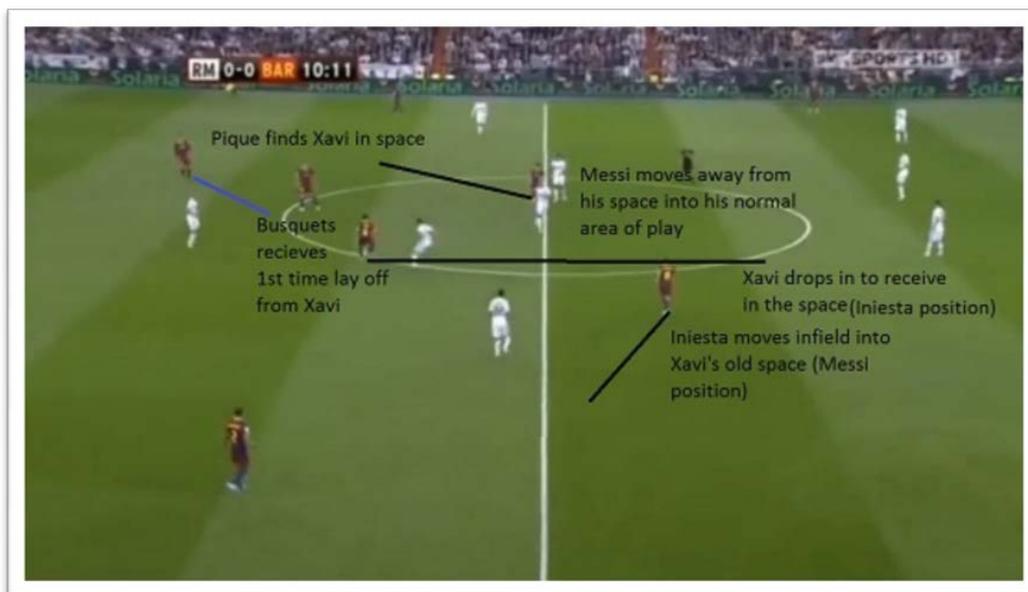
Using the space to build the attack in space



Pique uses Puyol as his 'get out of trouble' pass. Xavi has circled round into the top of the diamond, with Messi now free from pressure, as Pepe is unsure to chase the ball or not. Busquets picks up his usual position inside the centre circle at the bottom of the diamond, able to dictate play with 1 or 2 touch passes. Busquets is free of a marker, Messi is free of Pepe, Xavi is free from Diarra – he plays between Alonso and Diarra - and Iniesta is being marked by Alonso.

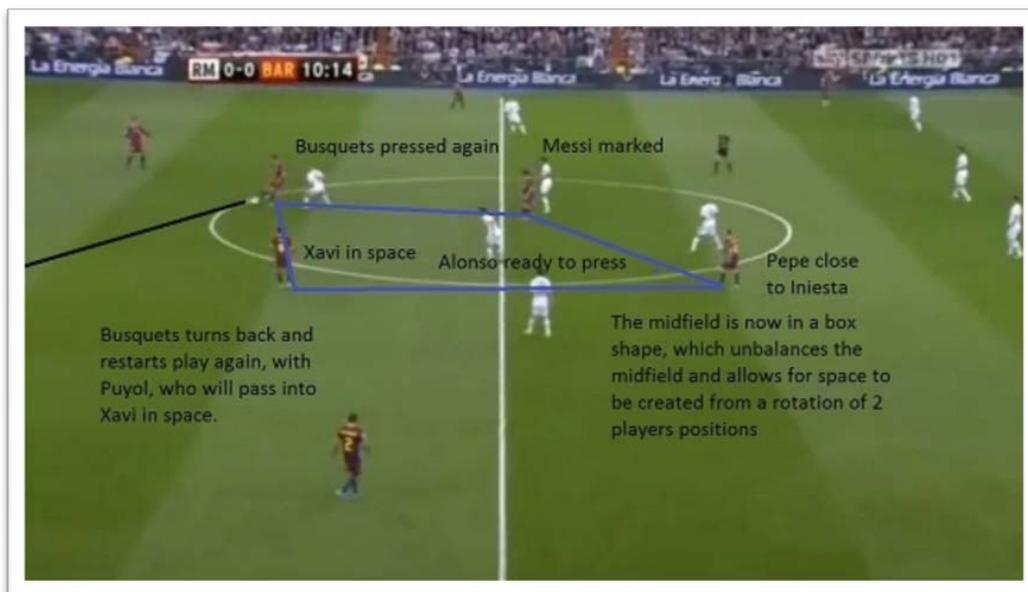
Clever, perhaps pre-planned movements have allowed Xavi, Messi and Busquets to all find space in what was previously a 2-3-1 compact midfield, now is a 2-2-2 midfield with a massive hole in the centre of the structure. Pepe is 15 yards away from the centre spot area where he should be just now, covering Diarra's movement with Xavi.

Controlling the Midfield



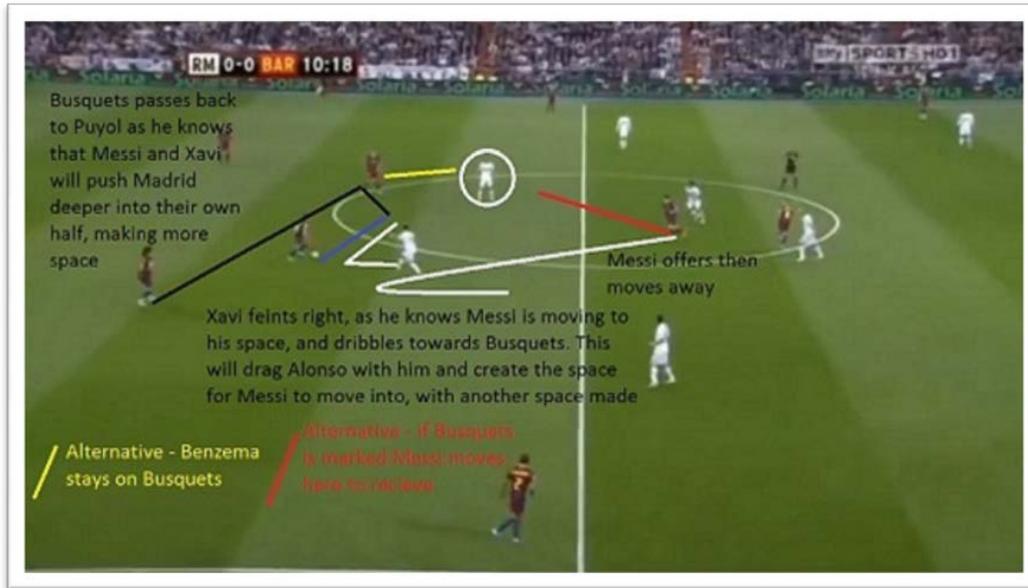
Now that Puyol returns to Pique, Pique has 2 clear passes into midfield, unopposed. He uses Xavi who knows that Busquets will anticipate Xavi will lay the ball off 1st time to him in space, where he can see he is free. Messi runs central again, pulling Diarra more central and this allows Messi to occupy 2 defenders. Alonso has moved over to take responsibility for Messi – this allows Iniesta to be free for the pass from Busquets if he wants to penetrate the midfield line.

Creating the final spaces



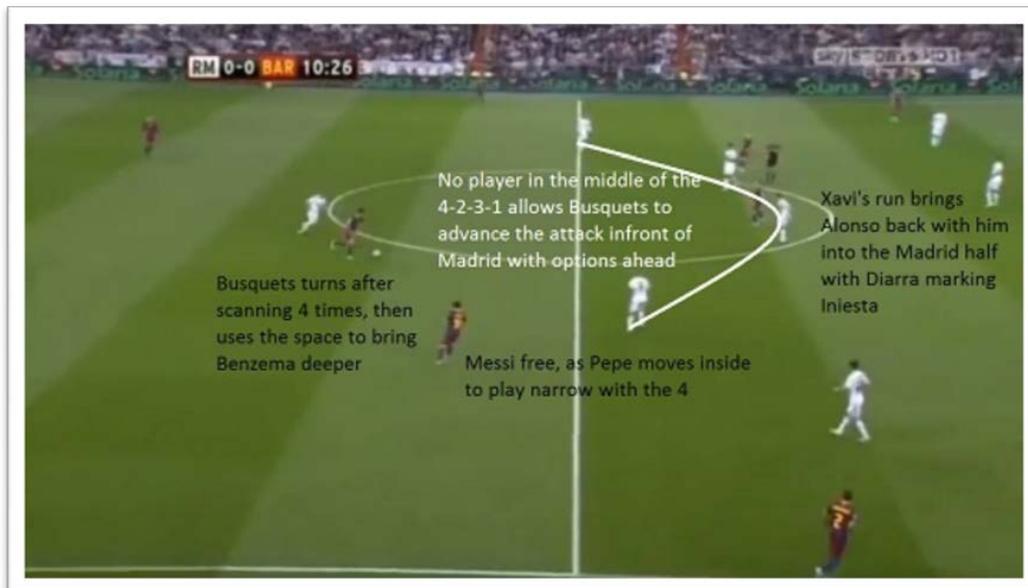
Busquets receives and turns back, he knows that the pass to Villa is open on the left side, but with little support, he turns back and starts again. Xavi is in space and Busquets knows this is the next pass for Puyol. Messi and Iniesta have made the previous diamond midfield now a square, with

Messi marked tight and Pepe screening the pass from Busquets to Iniesta, so the patient play from Busquets is also the best play.



As the ball is moved back to Xavi from Puyol, he moves inside with the ball – this drags Alonso inside with him, so when he passes over to Busquets and runs ahead of Alonso, Alonso must follow him, otherwise Messi, Xavi and Iniesta are in a 3v2 with passing lanes open to Busquets. Alonso’s arms signal that Benzema should be tight on Busquets as this pass is obvious. As Barcelona play a clever game with the opponent’s movements, I think had Benzema stood with Busquets and stopped that pass, Messi would’ve moved inside the square and received from Xavi anyway.

Control of the Game



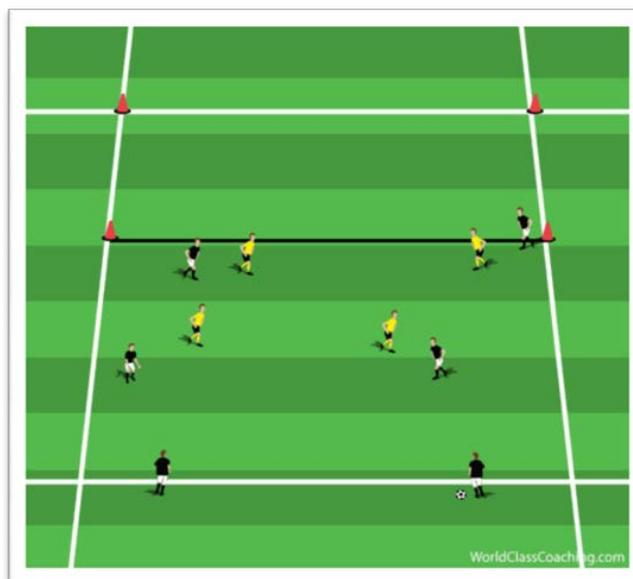
As Xavi makes a long run behind Alonso, he has no choice but to follow him. This forced Real Madrid deeper to cover any penetration in midfield, and as the lines can't be too far apart against Barcelona, the midfield becomes narrower and deeper. As Pepe is well away from his position behind Alonso and Diarra, the 4-2-3-1 or 4-1-4-1 depending on movement, is now a 4-4-2 and there is a large space in the centre of the 4-2-3-1, which Busquets can use to bring Benzema back with him, and force Madrid all deep and behind the ball, where Barcelona want them. Note the earlier image of the same midfield line, only on the half way line – 15 yards higher up.

Constructing the Attack



As Busquets receives, and Xavi pushes Alonso back, Barcelona have control of the midfield, and with opponents playing in front of them, they can play with confidence, with their eyes forward and construct and attack near the Real Madrid goal. Note that now Barcelona have Alves and Pedro involved – they will play 2v2 against Di Maria and Marcelo, forcing Di Maria away from Barcelona's goal where he is most dangerous. Messi is in space and all Madrid players are now in their own half – any turnover of possession means that Real Madrid have 60 yards to cover on any counter attack, and this is less dangerous for Barcelona, as they can quickly press in packs if they lose possession.

Training Session to Control the Midfield



Two teams play 4v4. The attacking team who are trying to gain control of the midfield must keep the ball until they have 3 players inside the end zone, and 3 of the Yellows inside the end zone. To win, one of the attacking players must be able to turn and move over the end white line with the ball under control, or, a pass can go from outside of the end zone, to past the white line to an attacker.

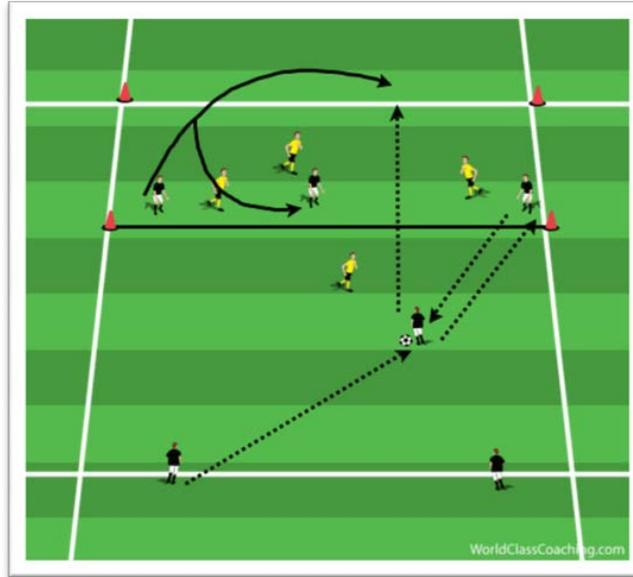
Coaching Points: Attack

- Always stay on the move
- Try to move in between 2,3 or 4 players whenever possible
- Use spaces that team mates have just left
- Try to cause confusion amongst the defending team
- Use 'circle runs' and 'checked runs' to lose your marker

Coaching Points: Defence

- Letting runners run away from you will result in penetration and a loss
- Follow runners and sacrifice ground if you need to stay compact and under no danger of penetration
- Communication – Press, Cover, Passing On, Line of Confrontation
- Stay on feet, press and show away from possible 2v1 overloads for attack.
- Force play back whenever possible
- Push up and tight to opponents when ball is passed back to deepest players

Winning Scenario - Below



To win, either you need to be able to pass the ball over the white line from deeper than the black line to a team mate – a medium length penetrating pass – or; Pass to a team mate who dribbles over the line.

In the example above, the furthest attacking player drops in between 2 opponents and offers a pass. The wider of the 2 attackers 'circles round' into the space as the ball is being returned from the opposite wide player. The loop run causes confusion and the runner is left free to receive in space.