

# 4-4-2

## DEFENDING



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# 4 – 4 – 2

# Defending

*By*

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## Introduction

Looking back to the recent seasons, only Leicester City (2015/2016 English Premier League Champion with 81 pts., after the 2014/2015 season 14th place in the table, with 41 pts.) and Atletico Madrid (2013/2014 - 2015/2016 Champions League finals' runner up, 2013/2014 La Liga winner and 2011/2012 and 2017/2018 Europa League winner), have adopted and improved this system of play with success. Aggressive and deep defense phase and counter-attacks were the landmarks of both these teams, and still, they are for Atletico Madrid, with Simeone as head coach. Three were the words for that season at Leicester City side, under Claudio Ranieri: organization, hard defensive work, counter-attacking at pace.



The center backs, Morgan and Huth, were very good at clearances and headers, but they suffered a lack of speed and mobility. Ranieri chose to defend very deep toward the goal and to place near them both the fullbacks to close the gaps and double team the opposition forwards when they played the ball out wide.

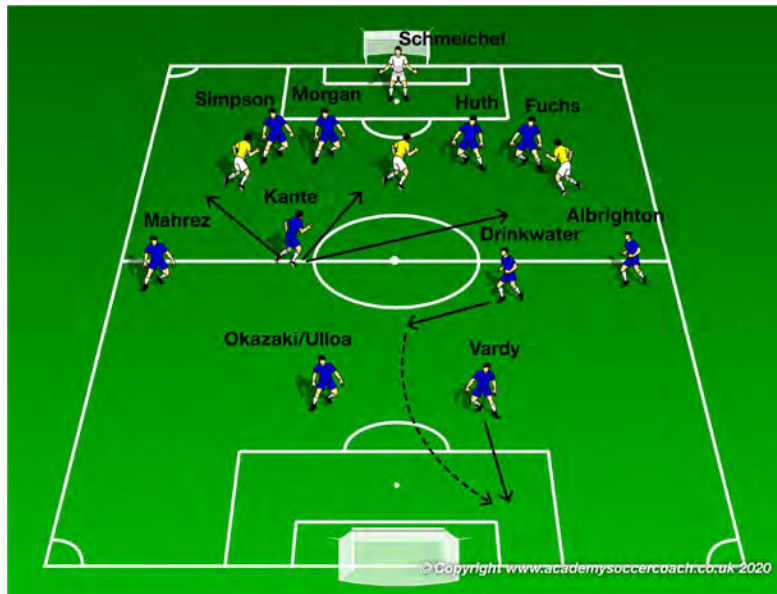




This tactical solution was possible thanks to Kante, who started as a center midfielder, but who acted as 360° defensive players, closing down all the opponents along the edge of the first third, winning the highest number of tackles and interception of the whole Premier League that season.



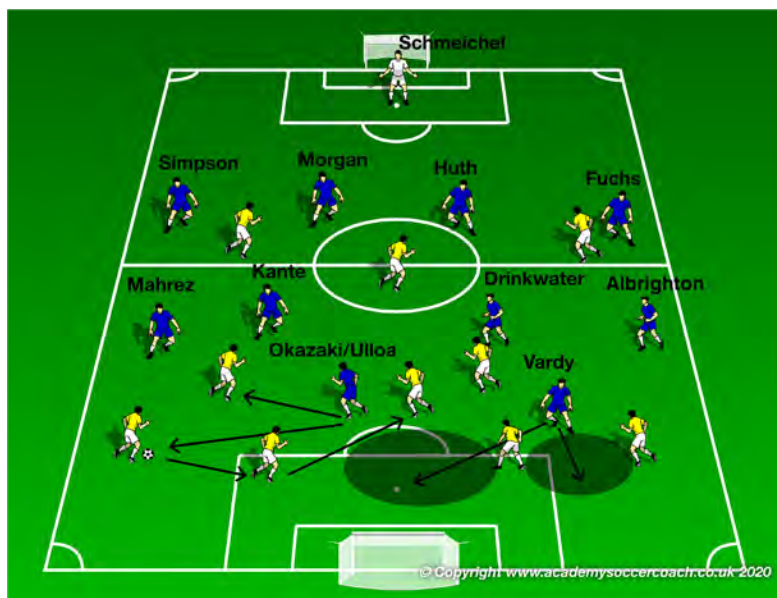
Kante's role was to compensate the more attacking-minded midfielder Drinkwater, who was the one to play long, aerial, or deep passes toward Vardy.



The center duo was anyway responsible for protecting the back 4, dropping deep to maintain the team's narrow defensive shape and for running forward to support the attack during transitions to attack. Transitions to attack were always effortless, with long and direct forward passes to Vardy or with shorter or medium distance passes to Okazaki and Ulloa in behind the opposition's lines.

The deep defense was one of the foremost winning factors have Leicester City, as well as the pressure of the forwards against the opposition's defenders throughout the final third.

Vardy was more responsible for moving off the ball between the opposition's center back and through the gap between the center back and the fullback, being ready to counter-attack at speed as the ball was recovered.



Okazaki and Ulloa were, on the other side, responsible for pressing the opposition defenders while building up:

Outnumbering the nearest midfielder to the fullback in possession, together with the winger and the center midfielder (Mahrez and Kante, in this example)

Pressing the center backs during distribution phases

Countering the opposition holding midfielder, preventing the center duo from stretching their shape at the back of the attacking line.

The back four line was never too high on the field due to a lack of speed and quickness of the center backs, preventing the opposition from counter-attacking.

Claudio Ranieri at Leicester City represented a return to the 1-4-4-2 in Premier League after the winning seasons of Manchester United before Cristiano Ronaldo's arrival that evolved the team shape into a 1-4-3-3, and the Jose Mourinho's 1-4-2-3-1 at Chelsea.

The 1-4-4-2 of the Italian coach was quite typical and standard at first sight, except Riyad Mahrez's tendency to move inside and next to the forwards, as inverted right-winger; but like all tactical systems, it changed shape during games, and it was built up to suit the players and take advantage of the weaknesses of opponents.

Ranieri's Leicester seemed to be influenced by Arrigo Sacchi's flat back four and zonal defense. The former Ac. Milan coach wanted a maximum of 25 yards between his defenders and forwards to compress the playable area of the field and that Leicester's shape displayed similar tendencies, leaving little space for opponents to play centrally with the only difference of a more in-depth defense block.



In this footage, the right fullback is very close to the opposition forward and the teammate center back; the three lines of the 1-4-4-2 are very narrow inside the defensive half of the pitch.



When the opposition attacking phase get closer to the 18y box, the back four lines saved the box, and the wingers dropped deeper, shaping a 6 (4 + wider 2) -2 defensive line along the edge of the box. A center 4 v 2 situation was apparent in this situation, as well as one of the center midfielders, shifted wider to ensure numerical advantage around the ball (3 v 2).

Diego Simeone has won plaudits for the way he's turned Atletico into a defensive machine just like Ranieri did with Leicester; when they defend, they do it with two lines of four to eliminate space.



Talking about Atletico Madrid, the usual 1-4-4-2 formations was born after the 2011/2012 season that ended up winning the Europa League final against Athletic Bilbao (3 – 0 was the final score).



Diego Simeone replaced Gregorio Manzano after 16 league games when Atletico was 10th in the rank with only 19 pts. (3rd place for conceded goals) and he decided to maintain the current system of play for the rest of the season, working on the mechanism of the team's shape, rather than changing the system. The 1-4-2-3-1 was made more compact during the defense phases, and Atletico started to play with fast counter-attacks and with a strong center forward to keep the ball up the field. These were the first principles of the incoming 1-4-4-2 of the following seasons. The defense of Atletico Madrid is analyzed in a specific section of this book; the basic formations during the time that took Atletico to be one of the most important European teams, are the following.

2012/2013 (Spanish National Cup and European Supercup winner).



The well-known fitness coach Oscar Ortega joined the club, and Simone started to prepare the squad from a physical point of view.

The team became comfortable without possession (only 48% average), conceding only 31 goals in the league, shooting on goal 13,2 averaged times per match (54% from inside the box). The 1-4-4-2 system of play was used in the 63% of the matches and it was turned into a 1-4-2-3-1 that the players already knew, in the other ones. The results were the highest number of tackles of the league per game (23,75%) and less than 1 goal conceded per game.

Usual middle block without high forwards' pressure against defenders, allowing them to play until the half line or team aggressive pressure against the opposition center midfielders or out wide against the opposition wingers were the landmarks. When the opposition was able to play into the box, overcoming the fullbacks in 1 v 1 (Arda Turan and Koke were usually tucked into the center midfield), a block of two lines of four were standing inside the penalty area and the center backs were comfortable in cleaning the aerial balls.

2013/2014 (La Liga winner with 90 pts. and Champions League final runner up)



After the first complete season in charge, Simeone “announced” his soccer philosophy for the club, stating, “We’re a tough team, strong, intense, powerful at counter-attacking. I don’t want this to ever change. We don’t know how to play any other way. Should we change our style, it would be a total disaster.” Falcao was sold, and Diego Costa replaced his role, beside Villa. The 1-4-4-2 system of play was used in 87% of the matches; the wingers spent the 26% of the playing time in their classic positions only, helping the center midfielders during defense phases.

Transition phases become very quickly, playing passes without spending too much time in the middle third, passing aerial balls to the forwards or with direct straight passes through the midfield; Atletico spent only the 26% of the average time inside the first third when in possession. The team became strong in set pieces (the second one in the league with almost 20 goals scored)

The strong defensive, transitions oriented and aggressive team pressure focused 1-4-4-2 was then recognized as the Atletico way of play, just like Barcelona (2008-2012) Tika-Taka. All these factors together with an unbreakable team spirit created the so-called “Cholismo”, which would have been the same during the following seasons, apart from the transfer market of players.

2015/2016 (Champions League final runner up)



2017/2018 (Europa League winner)



Years before, Alex Ferguson's Manchester United have been the most successful team with a 1-4-4-2 formation, and the 1998/1999 treble-winning season epitomized this system of play.

A solid goalkeeper, defense and central midfield with Paul Scholes and Roy Keane allowed Alex Ferguson playing with two wide wingers as Ryan Giggs (more speedy, moving off the ball and receiving on the run) and David Beckham (more passing into the box, receiving on feet) and two center strikers as Andy Cole and Dwight Yorke, who were totally interchangeable.



The total amount of trophies that in 26 years is uncountable at the Scottish manager side; he only stuck with the 1-4-4-2 formations until Cristiano Ronaldo's arrival season (2003-2004 - turning to the 1-4-3-3)...





...And for his final few years as Manchester United manager, when he added an extra man to midfield to adapt to difficult opposition, such as his lineup for the 2009 Champions League against Pep Guardiola's Barcelona.



Maybe, Ac. Milan has been the very first successful 1-4-4-2 team, between the '80s and the '90s, under Arrigo Sacchi and Fabio Capello reigns when the Italian team won one national league and one Champions League after another. These following images are a couple of formation's examples:

- Ac Milan – Real Madrid (5 – 0); 88/89 Champions League semi-final 2<sup>nd</sup> leg





- Ac Milan – Barcelona FC (4 – 0); 93/94 Champions League final



Nowadays, 1-4-4-2 is often considered as a useless shape and a formation for lower-level teams and underrated clubs without high ambitions. The coaches who adopt this system of play seem to be unconvinced of modern ideas about soccer and not sure about the players' ability and skills to be involved in more advanced game plans when in possession. They seem to think, "my players can't do anything more than this."

But to an open mind observer could realize two essential factors:

1. All the systems of play are born from and are developments of the 1-4-4-2 (at least those with 4 players at the back, but we may include even the 1-5-3-2); looking at the diamond 1-4-4-2, rather than to the flat one, everything becomes quite easy.
2. The 1-4-4-2 is still the safest and used defensive shape to save the first third; above all, when the opposition has been able to overcome the pressure phase and the transition to defend phase has resulted ineffective.

For these reasons, these two books' set about 1-4-4-2 starts from the defensive phase, and the attacking one is the topic of the second books.

## 1-4-4-2 defensive factors and developing the principles of play

1-4-4-2 is a balanced team shape in his nature, as the team can defend and attack in numbers.

Two lines of four can be tough to attack and to penetrate for the opposition, especially when the four midfielders drop deep to close and limit the space in between the lines.

This action then makes it very difficult to find space and time to create finishing chances for the opposition. As we already stated, this shape is advantageous to save the first third and to protect the penalty area and the goal space.



These two lines can work this way up the field also when the team is attacking; the defenders' line stands along the halfway line, closing the opposition in their half and condensing the space; it is again hard for the opponents to play out from the back.

Arrigo Sacchi's Ac. Milan's aggressive and robust pressure and offside trap were born from this simple team shape, as well as Klopp's counter-pressing basic idea, by my side. Both these defensive tactics aimed to recover the ball quickly and as high up the field.

On the other side, this defensive shape shows the first and maybe riskier weakness of the 1-4-4-2. The opposition long passes in behind the defense that the team needs to be very wary of; big spaces could appear in the defensive half between the back line and the goalkeeper. In these situations, the goalkeeper must often be aware of coming out to clear the ball, anticipating the opponents before they meet the ball, or to recover possession.



The offside trap could fix this weakness point, but the defenders must be coached very well to work as a unit, stepping up together the right time; but offside could become a second weakness factor as a single mistake is enough to allow the opposition to play toward the goal, leaving the goalkeeper as the only last player before the goal's net.

Asking the back four to drop deep automatically could another tactical idea to cover the space inside the defensive half, but if the midfielders do not get the same with the right timing, gaps appear between the lines.



Two flat lines of four players create these gaps (unless the team formation shapes a diamond formation); the opponents who can move into cause confusion between the defenders and midfielders about who then have to run forward (defenders) or drop deep (midfielder) mark and counter them. The opposition could move up the field quickly, press the team, and make the potential further potential possession phase very difficult due to the deep positioning of two of the three team's steam lines. The back four must be very aware of moving forward and dropping back with the right timing concerning the ball position on the field.

A diamond midfield shape helps to fix the gaps between the lines, thanks to the holding center midfielder and the narrow shape in the center, but it can lead to a lack of width (along the flanks) protection in the middle third; the fullbacks risk to be involved in 1 v 2 duels in the first third.



Wingers (in a flat 1-4-4-2) and the outer midfielders (in a diamond 1-4-4-2) must track back to support the fullbacks and provide them with cover. Again the back four must be very aware of shifting across and wide concerning the ball position.



This system of play is the best one to create strong defensive sides around the ball out wide, but, on the other side, the weak opposite side becomes a danger if it's not covered correctly and with the right timing.



All the midfielders must have excellent technical and conditioning skills. They often receive the ball from anywhere on the field. In case of loss of possession, there isn't any other balance line behind them and in front of the back four when then the team is not correctly shaped, or the players don't retreat with the right timing.

A flat 1-4-4-2 can take the team to have issues, if the center midfielders can be passed around by three opponents middle third sector...



...And along the flank of a diamond 1-4-4-2 where the wingers could leave the fullback involved in 1 v 1 or 1 v 2 outnumbered situations in the middle could appear a risky system of play.



The 1-4-4-2 is a very flexible formation from a defensive point of view, but it requires constant communication and interchanges of positions among the players; if they can do this, all the defensive principles of play are carried out in the best way possible.



**Pressure** – When possession is lost, the nearest player(s) try to regain the ball or to delay the opposition attack, applying pressure on the ball; the farther player(s) help this action by making recovery runs to deny the opponents the chance to play forward quickly.

Trap the opposition in their half – By pushing the defense up to the halfway line, you can effectively keep your opponents bottled in their half.

Pressure phase can be divided into 3 different actions:

- **Counter-pressing:** it is the pressure around the ball during the transitions to defend phase of play, just after the loss of possession, to try to force the opposition toward a specific area, to win the ball back as soon as possible. Counter-pressing is independent of the system of play; it is only a situation of play (when the possession is lost) and from the area where the ball is lost. It's not strictly related to players' roles, but only to their positions on the field at the moment of loss of possession.



- **Aggressive pressure:** it is the pressure phase of the defending team, when the opposition has already made the possession safe, to force the direction of play backward or sideward, denying time and space and, if possible, to win the ball back directly or after a wrong choice of an opponent.



- **Positional pressure:** basically, it is the closure of passing lanes to the opposition to force mistakes or direct the attacking phase toward a specific area of the field, where a numerical defense advantage can be exploited to put aggressive pressure. In this case, as the definition suggests, the positions of the players on the field are crucial to ensure coverage and balance to not create gaps in the defense shape; this is the perfect situation to put into practice the Juan Manuel Lillo second dogma, "Positional Play" from a defensive point of view.



Delay – The defender(s) forces the attacking team to slow down the rhythm so that the defense phase can be organized if it's not possible an immediate recovery of the possession. It's crucial to not be overcome easily in this phase, as the time for the team to organize the defense shape is shortened. The team without possession is supposed to be a bit closer to the own goal, inside the defending half, and a compact positioning is needed to prevent the opposition from being dangerous.



Depth – The immediate organization behind the pressing defender(s), where all the other predetermined players should recover into defensive positions to support the teammates if they are beaten; this is what is called "providing defensive cover." With four defenders defending the box and potentially four midfielders sitting deep, it can be tough for the opposition to penetrate the defense.



Width – With four across the midfield, the two wingers and the center midfielder must shift across the field to prevent the opposition from stretching them. The fullbacks also support the wingers in providing the team double-teaming along the flank when it is needed.



Compactness – While the defending team is retreating toward the goal to organize the defense phase, time and space for the opponent must be limited, concentrating their defense all around the area of the ball. Defenders also recover centrally towards their goal to limit the opponents' ability to attack the goal directly.



Control and Restraint – The players should pay attention to play under control when challenging for the ball, not to make poorly timed or off-balanced attempts; otherwise, they should restrain from tackling until they are sure to recover the possession.





Balance –When there is pressure around the ball area, the other players who are away from this space or on the opposite side of the field must position themselves to cover the spaces (central areas or weak sides) to prevent penetrating runs, where the opponents may receive a pass. In the 1-4-4-2 formations, you can both attack and defend in numbers with relative safety because the structure dictates that the defenders stand back.





## Atletico Madrid defensive 1-4-4-2 case study

Coaches, fans, journalists, experts or not, can be agreed or not with “Cholismo” and with the Atletico style of play, but it is effective, and the results confirm it.

At a time when soccer has turned into a 360° passing game, teams of all kinds play out from the goalkeeper, the ball has to be recovered as quickly as possible and high on the field, many coaches are studying Guardiola for 10 years, as well as Klopp for his style of play as Dortmund and Liverpool manager, Diego Simeone has taken a countertrend way, it seems he wants to go back to the Italian Catenaccio’s times. But, in the end, it is his way, and it works, because the results tell us he is right.

When a coach needs to analyze the perfect (or tending to perfection) defense phase and to look for defensive tactical ideas for his training sessions, he can’t miss to watch at and to read about the Atletico Madrid playing phases off the ball with 1-4-4-2. He can’t, even if he would like to.

Eventually, Simeone’s defensive phase is something over the difference form man-marking or zonal defending; it’s El Cholo way to defend. Which are the principles of play?

### 1) Man-marking when the opposition builds up from the back



The opposition holding midfielder receives from the goalkeeper and Koke, the left center midfielder presses him aggressively to prevent him from passing forward.

The only options for the ball carrier are to play back to the goalkeeper or out wide toward one of the center backs.

The forwards beside Koke, Morata and Vitolo, are ready to counter the out wide center backs.

Meanwhile, Atletico shapes the pressing formation turning the direction of runs toward the potential receiver inside the left part of the final third, looking at the body shape of the opposition ball carrier.

The opposition ball carrier passes out wide toward the right, before Koke can counter him and 5 players of Atletico move toward the left defending side high up the field.



Vitolo track the ball while it is travelling and Morata shifts across the center on the edge of the penalty area. The left winger Saul and the second center midfielder Thomas are pushing up the field to press the opposition right fullback (Saul) and right midfielder (Thomas)



Koke stands in front of the opposition holding midfielder to screen the passing lane toward him, Vitolo is screening all the forward passing lanes to the opposition right center back, Saul and Thomas may counter their direct opponents easily.

Morata is standing along the edge of the box, to screen the switch of play chance and to counter the goalkeepers if he receives, limiting time for him on the ball.

This way Atletico creates many kinds of duels inside the opposition first third, during its building up phase:

- 5 v 7 throughout the opposition first third (considering the opposition left fullback)
- 4 v 4 along the strong side around the ball (1 v 1 sub-duels)
- 5 v 5 against all the field players around the ball (excluding the opposition left fullback)
- The opposition goalkeeper can be involved in a 1 v 1 duel, if he receives and doesn't control the ball properly.

The easiest passing option for the ball carrier is to pass back to the goalkeeper, who kicks the ball away due to Atletico aggressive pressure. Atletico 5 players may counter all the short passing options. in this situation.



When high aggressive pressure is not immediately possible, the forwards and the rest of the team don't push high up, but they allow the opposition playing in their lower part of the middle third.



The opposition ball carrier has time and space on the ball in this situation; Vitolo is on late and he can't counter him effectively.

There is a 4 v 4 duel in front of the ball carrier (Morata vs. the holding midfielder, Saul vs. the right fullback, Correa vs. the left fullback and Koke again the left midfielder, who dropped deep), but the ball carrier has space and time to watch and to understand the defensive movement of Vitolo while he is retreating his position toward the holding midfielder.

A real 1 v 1 pressure is not possible.

Vitolo opens a passing lane for the ball carrier toward the second center back as he follows the holding midfielder shifting wide movement.



The 4 v 4 duel around the ball is not effective in this situation and even if Atletico is placing 5 players inside the opposition half (a 5 v 5 duel against the ball carrier and the passing options in front of him is clear), the opposition has time and space to build up and to move the ball with big danger with a back pass. Atletico aims to wait for the right moment to recreate 1 v 1 duels along the same or the opposite flanks when this situation happens.



As the second center back receives, the forwards Vitolo and Morata, together with the winger along the ball side (wingers are always very narrow to the midfielders usually), screen the forward passing lanes to the ball carrier and forces the opposition possession out wide. Koke is ready to counter the opposition left midfielder and Thomas is shifting across to provide balance.



The opposition left fullback receives along the flank; this is the trigger to increase the defensive rhythm, to create 1 v 1 duels again and to close down the ball carriers and the potential passing options.



Correa accelerates to counter the opposition's fullback, Vrsaliko, the right fullback pushes up the field to close down the opposition left forward, who is dropping back. Koke keeps controlling the left center midfielder and the forwards (Morata and Vitolo) shifts across the center to create a strong side around the ball. The center defenders Felipe and Savic stay deep to control the opposition center forward.



Versaliko (Fb) push higher up the field to force the left forward backward when he receives and Correa pushes up along the forward teammates' line to be ready to counter the left fullback. Koke is screening the forward passing lanes and the right center back Savic would be ready to win the ball along the flank.

The right winger Correa forces the opposition fullbacks to pass backward to the center back, creating 1 v 1 duels along the defensive right flank.



The right fullback Versaliko vs. the opposition left forward, the right-winger Correa vs. the opposition left fullback and one of the Atletico's center forwards Morata is pushing up and wide to counter the opposition left center back.



Atletico has created a 3 v 3 duel around the ball area, forcing the opposition possession backward. It is interesting to analyze the angle that Morata shapes, while curving his movement. Atletico forward counters the ball carrier sideways from the center for two reasons.

1. He forces the opponents out wide.
2. He closes the passing lanes toward the goalkeeper, who could switch the side again, if he receives.

The only possible and safe option for the ball carrier is to kick the ball away.

Atletico right fullback catches the ball out wide but high on the field.



Someone's team can now play with equality of players around the ball (3 v 3) and with a general numerical advantage in the right attacking quarter of the field; this is the aim of the narrow shape of the four midfielders.

The transition phases when the team loses possession in the final third are interesting, as the counter-pressing phase is very aggressive and it seems that the defense shape is less important than the recovery of the ball or the opposition possession blocking (with a foul, if needed).



The wingers are not cross passer for Simeone's Atletico Madrid due to their narrow positioning during defending phases; they usually overload the opposition box, supporting the center forwards during finishing phases. The right fullback Versaliko is crossing, in this example, Saul from the left side and Correa on the right are attacking the opposition goal together with Morata. The second center forward is standing just backward on the edge of the penalty area.



The opposition center back can catch the ball and clean the box on the first post; 5 Atletico's players are standing inside the opposition 18y box.



Only Correa on the right and Vitolo on the left seem to be in effective positions to counter the potential receivers of short opponent's kick.



The opposition can't kick the ball away from the penalty area and the player on the ball doesn't take advantage of the free from marking situation, attempting a header that can't make the possession safe.

The opposition left midfielder can't play a clean transition to attack in this situation, and Atletico can stay positioned high up the field and it doesn't suffer the unbalanced team shape.

Aggressive pressure seems to be the best solution to carry out the transition to defend phase.



The first opposition player who can control the ball properly is the right midfielder, who is however under immediate pressure.



The left midfielder Thomas stands high up the field to counter him and to prevent him from turning and playing forward. The right center back Savic retreats his position quickly to cover any potential long pass from the opposition's first third toward the forwards.

The rest of the team, although with a unbalanced shape stands high up the field to aggressively press the opposition's ball carriers. The aims are:

- To prevent the opponents from playing forward.
- To force the opposition transition to attack phase backward or sideward.
- To win the ball back.
- To block the opposition possession phase (with a foul if needed).



The center midfielders (Thomas and Koke) together with the right winger create a 3 v 1 duel against the ball carrier, who can only pass back to the left fullback.

After the first phase, where Atletico forces the opposition possession backward, the team starts to organize a defense phase.



One center midfielder stands still after the first pressure phase (Thomas) and the second center midfielder (Koke) together with the right winger (Correa) go on pressing the opposition fullback, who receives under pressure. The opposite left winger Saul, drops deep toward the center to provide balance between the pressure line and the defense line. The forwards (Morata and Vitolo) are ready to counter the potential opposition's receivers inside the box.



Koke and Correa create a 2 v 1 duel against the ball carrier, who hasn't any easy passing option.

All the forward potential receivers could be under pressure of the advanced line of four, of the line behind them (Thomas and Saul) and of the fullback Vrsaliko, who is pushing up along the right flank.

The pressing duo can win the ball back, and Atletico has already four players near the opposition box to try to finish again and a balance center duo on the line between the final third and the middle third.



When the opposition can play out through Atletico's high pressure, two lines of four are shaped in the middle third as soon as possible, the wingers move very narrow to the center midfielders and the back four line get narrower if Atletico must defend inside the box. In Simeone's idea of defense phase, the opponents can play along the flanks, but never through the center.



In this situation Atletico loses the possession high up the field, the team is unbalanced.

The ball carrier can play out, having time on the ball, as Vitolo and Koke are too far to press him while controlling the ball. If the second center midfielder pushes up, we would open center spaces and the only defense line would be made of 2 players at the back.



Atletico chose to condense the center of the field and the ball area in these tactical situations, leaving the opposition the chance to play out wide.



The left winger Saul shifts across the center and the same does the right winger Correa, while Koke is pressing the opposition ball carrier to limit time and space for a forward pass to the advanced teammates. A line of three at the back ensures balance and they could be ready to counter the potential receivers in front of them.



The only options for the opposition is to play out wide along the right flank, while the back four line is being restored at the back to save the depth and the first third, creating a defensive numerical advantage against the opposition forwards. Meanwhile, the left winger Saul is shifting wide and backward not to press the receiver directly, but to delay his action, and the other three midfielders are retreating back to shape the second line of four in the middle third.



Even if the opponents try to combine to attack, the defensive lines are quickly restored at the back and the players in possession must slow down the rhythm, as it is not possible to counter-attack anymore.



The center forward Morata drops deep to help the midfield line, as the right winger is still out of position on the weak side; this way nor the left fullback, neither the left winger must run out of their positions to counter the ball carrier and they can maintain the defensive shape under the ball line. The opponents are closed down along the flank and they can't play forward passes.



Morata defensive action is very effective, as the opposition must play backward and Atletico is now shaped with two lines of four and the forwards' third one under the ball line and inside the defensive half of the field. The opponents don't have any chance to attack quickly.

The two lines of four now also Atletico alternate pressure on receiver and to provide balance at the same time.



Koke, the right midfielder pushes up to press the opposition's receiver, forcing him to play backward again and the sector teammate Thomas provided balance just behind him. The forwards are very close to the midfield line; Morata and Vitolo are ready to counter the opposition receivers at the back. It is not possible to play through the attacking right flank; the only solution is to distribute, switching the side of play toward the attacking left side.



As already analyzed, Atletico's forward never force pressure against the opposition defenders, when the team has the defensive shape on the field; in this example they just track the ball distribution and Vitolo tries to screen forward passing lanes to the opposition's center back.

This sequence is very interesting because it shows a peculiar characteristic of Atletico defensive movements.



Usually, the winger should shift wide to counter the opposition fullback or winger along the touch line, preventing the fullback from pushing up; but due to their narrow defensive positions near the center midfielders, they would often be on late.

This is the reason why the fullback (Vrsaliko) pushes up the field to counter the opposition wide receiver and the winger (Correa) track the movements off the ball toward the first third



The result is again two lines of four with a momentary inversion of roles, between the fullback and the winger. A string side around the ball forces the opposition to play backward again and the back four correctly covers the depth.

The only issue, which a classic, for the 1-4-4-2 would come from a potential receiver in between the line; Atletico's coach usually asks the center midfielder to drop back rather than the center back to push forward, as there would a chance to open up a gap along the last defense line.

Atletico center backs don't push up to counter the opposition forwards if they are standing up the field, but they track any move off the in behind them.



Felipe and Savic drop deep to counter the opposition forward and to close him down, preventing him from receiving in behind them; offside trap is never the first tactical choice in these situations.

The following sequence shows an opponent who can receive in between the lines and Atletico reactions.



The opposition right center back has the possession and he can dribble the ball up the field, with time and space on the ball; on the other side, Atletico is properly shaped in a double four players' line high up the field. Four midfielders are screening the forward passing lanes, but the back four are outnumbered, considering that 5 opponents are making the field big and wide (4 v 5).



When the opposition plays through the center of the middle third, Atletico reactions are always the same.



The center midfielders Koke and Thomas press the opposition receiver and they try to force him to pass backward; in fact the ball carrier can't turn toward the goal. However the forwards Vitolo and Morata are standing on the other side of two opponents and nor they are not screening the passing lanes toward them, neither they can press to force them backward and sideward. Secondly, the back four line doesn't follow the pushing up movement of the center midfielders; one of them is man-marking the opposition forward, but the other one doesn't push. The left winger Saul is not as narrow as needed to screen through passes in the middle third



For these reasons gaps appear in the defensive shape of Atletico:

- There is big space between the back four lines.
- A passing path appears to play through passes in behind the midfield line due to a wide positioning of the left winger Saul.

A simple back and forward passing combination is enough to play in between the lines and to allow an opponent receiving and dribbling the ball up facing the penalty area and the goal.



The reactions of Atletico defensive shape are something that every youth academy player should look at. Saul tracks the ball carrier very aggressively and very quickly and the center backs (Felipe and Savic) immediately drop deep to track the center forward to save the goal space. The left fullback Lodi turns toward the center and he is ready to closing the passing path in behind, as well as to double team the ball carrier, if he dribble forward.



Saul is able to force the ball carrier out wide and the opposition can attack out wide only; the left fullback concedes the wide space to the opponent with the ball along the flank, but he cover the center path very well. The opposition right fullback is overlapping along the right side, but Ateltico is already covering the center space in front of the goal.

Atletico left fullback can't win the 1 v 2 duel and the overlapping opponent can receive, dribble inside the penalty area and attempt a cross pass.



Atletico has already created a safe defensive phase inside the box and huge numerical advantage against the opponents (8 + gk v 3)



Eventually the defender can clean the box, kicking the ball away.

The protection of the center spaces and of the penalty area is always the first aim of the Atletico defensive phase; Someone prefers to let the opponents playing out wide, even very close to the 18 y box, but then Atletico always condenses the opposition zones 14 and 17 with the middle third and back four lines. The next footages show how Atletico can be flexible when defending with the 1-4-4-2.



When Atletico faces high quality opposition (like Liverpool, the other team of these tactical situations), Simeone's defending phase can vary from the usual double four players' lines.



Liverpool left center back is dribbling the ball and Atletico seems to be shaping the usual two four players' line while retreating.



But in this situation, Atletico is clearly following a different idea: to counter the most dangerous players of the opposition.

- Three players are protecting the 18y box against only one forward
- As one of the main attacking weapon of Liverpool are the fullbacks, Atletico's right fullback Vrsaliko and the right winger Koke are countering the left fullback Robertson and they are covering the passing lane toward Firmino.
- The left center midfielder Thomas and the left winger are standing along the edge of the penalty area to protect the back three and the right center midfielder is preventing Wijnaldum and Salah from moving in behind off the ball
- The forwards, Morata and Correa, are very close the other teammates and they are ready to counter the potential receivers of a back pass from Robertson.



This second defensive situation is another example. To counter the opposition main attacking weapon becomes crucial; much more than the defensive shape.



Salah has the possession on the upper corner of the penalty area, as inverted winger. The right fullback is overlapping behind him. Liverpool usually look for players runs off the ball inside the box, or Salah tried to dribble the ball inside the penalty area to finish. Atletico left fullback Lodi is close to Salah, but he is tuned wide, ready to counter Arnolds, if he receives. The left winger Lemar is covering the center space to counter Salah if he tries to dribble the ball inside. Three defenders and the center midfielder are protecting the box to clean it in case of cross passes. The forwards, Morata and Correa, are very close the other teammates and they are ready to counter the potential receivers of a back passes, preventing switches of sides.

The last example of different defensive shape analyzes the situation when the opponents shape two different lines of players in the middle third. The opposition center back has the possession and he is dribbling the ball up the field; Atletico middle third line stands high up the field, while the forwards try to careen the passing lanes to the opposition center midfielders.



The opposition shapes a 2 – 2square shape in the middle third to find passing options and to advance the ball.



Atletico breaks the middle third line into two alternated players' lines; meanwhile the forwards go on trying to screen the passing advanced passing lanes for the ball carrier.

- The center midfielder who is closer to the goal pushes up the control one of the lower opponent among the four.
- The winger behind him stands still to control to advanced opponent inside the same area
- The farther center midfielder stands still in his position too to prevent through passes in toward the opposite advanced opponent of the four
- The opposite winger shifts across the center to provide cover and balance and to counter the second opponent on the same line of the lower midfielder.

Despite being a defensive oriented team, with specific and recurrent principles of play, Atletico Madrid can be very flexible if the situation of play requires it to be. The 1-4-4-2 system of play allows this flexibility, as from a flat 3 lines shape, the team can change the defensive disposition, with few and simple movements (backwards, shifting across, pushing up), always keeping balance on the field.

## **General player roles and defensive responsibilities:**

### **Goalkeeper:**

- He must communicate with the defense line.
- He is responsible for the command the 18y box.
- He is positioned on the edge of the box and even further up; he moves out of goal to clear or retrieve the ball if the opposition play the ball in behind the defense when the line stands high up the field
- The goalkeeper is usually good at catching crosses from the flanks

### **Center backs:**

- They must limit the opposition's chances of scoring, working on marking and coverage movements of the opposition's forwards.
- Their good positing is essential.
- They are usually physically imposing and they use their body to hold off and tackle the opponents, marking them preventively if they are off the ball and preventing them from turning if they have the ball, to win aerial duels, and to block any shots attempt.
- They are responsible for defense coordinate movements, driving the fullbacks' actions to shift across properly.
- They have to cut out the opposition's passes in behind the defense and to close the forwards who try to move off the ball between them and the fullbacks.
- Center backs guide the midfielders' dropping back and pushing up runs.

### **Fullbacks:**

- They need to be very fit and speedy.
- They must support the center backs along the defense line and double team the forwards if needed.
- They are expected to defend against the opposition's wingers, block crosses from the flanks, and win their defensive headers.
- They can push further up their flank to block the winger and to limit the space, paying always attention to stop the opposition attacking moves, if they are out of the line, as they have left space behind them.
- If an attacker runs in behind the defense or manages to turn the centre-back, the fullback must see the danger and cover them.
- When the opponents try to switch the play, it is often the fullback who intercepts the cross pass or who steps up to header it away.
- While the centre-backs head up field when their team has a corner, it is usually one of the fullbacks who stay back around the halfway line to protect the team against the counterattack due to their speed and athleticism.
- Correct timing and execution is imperative otherwise they risk getting cut off with the opposition's winger goal-side of them if the ball is intercepted.
- In that case, they would then have to track back towards their own goal while a covering midfielder or the winger engaged the opposition's winger.
- As well as timing the run, they need to know when to attempt it and when not to.
- They need impeccable positioning and decision-making skills to know exactly when to stay back and when they have the freedom to go forward.
- This is even more crucial in a 4-4-2 formation than other formations, which provide them with more cover.

### **Center Midfielders:**

- In a flat midfield, while one midfielder is usually more attacking and the other one is more defensive; but both of them need to contribute at both ends of the field.
- In a 1-4-4-2 formation their positional sense is crucial and as there are only two of them. They must work together and communicate well to know what the other is doing or intending to do.
- They must limit the space between them and the defenders; otherwise the opposition can exploit gaps between the lines.
- They should force the opposition to play out wide, intercept passes between the lines, and cover any positions that the fullbacks or central defenders have left free while pushing up.
- They have to limit time and space that the opposition has in front of goal, forcing them to rush their play, leading to mistakes or to find opportunities for a tackle.
- If the opponent is counterattacking, they sometimes need to make tactical fouls to allow their teammates to get back in position.
- In a 1-4-4-2 formation, the center midfielders are crucial to the balance of the team

### **Wingers:**

- The wingers must support the fullback's defensive work.
- They must track the opposition's fullback and stop them from moving off the ball and getting goal-side of them.
- When the wingers don't work this way the fullbacks usually deal with 1 v 2 duels on the flanks.
- They could also stand up the field to prevent the opposition's fullback from pushing up to avoid the risk of the wingers' in behind runs.
- If their center midfielders are being overrun, the wingers need to play inside to support them.

### **Forwards:**

- They are responsible for starting the pressure phase against the opposition building up or playing out phases.
- While the only defensive responsibility they seem to have in the classic 1-4-4-2 is to drop back for corners, but they should always try to close down the opposition's defenders and stop them from playing out from the back.
- With two of them up front, they should also force the opposition to play wide as they can stop passes toward the opposition center midfielders.
- The best strikers are able to track the opposition defenders, if they dribble the ball up the field, to allow the middle third teammate to stand along the line, without creating gaps.



## From 1-4-4-2 to other systems of play: from defense to potential 1-4-4-2 attacking shapes

This last chapter has the goal to show how 1-4-4-2 can be so flexible to be the starting point of the all other systems of play that can be shaped with simple rotations of the midfielders (center midfielders and wingers) and of the forwards. Furthermore, 1-4-4-2 in attacking phase can easily become a 1-3-5-2, a 1-3-4-3 or a 1-3-1-3-3; if the team with possession loses the ball, it is easy to see them carrying out the transitions to defend phase with these shapes, before shaping the original system of play in the first third. This is an introduction to all the possible variation of the 1-4-4-2 when a team has the possession and to consequent defending variations once the opponents win the ball.

From flat 1-4-4-2...



...to diamond 1-4-4-2 (1-4-3-1-2); one center midfielder becomes an holding player in front of the back four, and the other one becomes an advanced midfielder (he can be a No.10, as role). The wingers usually have to stay close to center in narrower positions



From 1-4-3-1-2 to 1-4-3-2-1: the midfield sector becomes a classic 3 man shape, with an holding player in front of the back four and two wider teammates. The team now plays with two advanced midfielders, who can play as forwards also, together with the center one, behind him of beside him.



From 1-4-3-1-2 to 1-4-3-3 (a); both the advanced midfielders shifts wide to play as wide attacker beside the center forward and they shape an advanced line of three.



From 1-4-3-1-2 to 1-4-3-3 (b): the advanced midfielder and the second forward shift wide, shaping an line of three with the center forward.



From 1-4-3-2-1 to 1-4-2-3-1:

1. The midfielder sector loses the unique holding midfielder, who becomes an advanced center player and the other attacking midfielders shift wide to become wide attackers. The outer midfielders become center players in front of the back four.
2. One of the outer midfielders becomes an advanced center player, and the holding midfielder takes his place, shaping a two center player line in front of the back four.





From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-5 (1-4) -2: when a fullback pushes up the flank, three players at the back shift across to shape a last 3 men defense line. The winger of the side where the fullback is pushing up, usually shift across the center, creating space for the fullback and allowing the nearest center midfielder to drop back in front of the three defenders in the center.



From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-4-3: when a fullback pushes up the flank, three players at the back shift across to shape a last 3 men defense line. The winger of the side where the fullback is pushing up can play further up the field if the fullback stops his run in the middle third (1), or the winger shifts across the center to create space for the teammate if he run toward the final third. One forward (the opposite one) shifts wide to try to stretch the opposition defensive line.



From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-1-3-3; when a fullback runs inside as inverted fullback, the winger of the same side can push along the forwards' line and one of the forwards (the opposite one) shift wide to try to stretch the opposition defensive line. The center midfielder of the inverted fullback's side becomes a holding player; the opposite winger stands along the midfield line.



From 1-4-4-2 to 1-3-3-4: when a fullback runs inside as inverted fullback, the winger of the same side can push along the forwards' line and one of the forwards (the opposite one) shift wide to try to stretch the opposition defensive line. The center midfielder of the inverted fullback's side becomes a holding player; the opposite winger pushes up to stand along the attackers' line.

