

# **FLEXIBLE FORMATIONS**

## **ATTACKING**

**How RB Leipzig change their formations from 3-5-2, to 5-3-2, to 3-3-2-2 to 3-4-3 and more...all in one game if needed**



**by LUCA BERTOLINI**

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## **Introduction: who is Julian Nagelsmann?**

The German coach was born on 27 July 1987 (Landsberg am Lech, Germany). He played as a defender at the youth level for 1860 Munich and Augsburg before persistent knee injuries ended his career at the U19 level. "At first, I didn't want anything more to do with football; it was very sad for me that I had to end my career so young." He studied Business Administration, took his degree in Sports Science, and moved into coaching, returning to former club Augsburg, where he briefly worked under Thomas Tuchel, scouting the upcoming opponents. "That was my way into coaching," [...] "I learned a lot from him.", Nagelsmann explained. He has also coached U16 to U19 teams for other clubs in the southwest of Germany. At the time, he started saying that coaching is 30% tactics and 70% social skills, and he probably turned into this idea thanks to his universitarian studies.

He was an assistant coach during 1899 Hoffenheim's 2012–13 season and up until 11 February 2016 (He to the Hoffenheim's "junior team" to the 2014 title), was coaching the club's U19 team; during these seasons, Tim Wiese, the former Klopp's BVB goalkeeper nicknamed him "Mini-Mourinho," when the young coach was his assistant (2012/2013). Nagelsmann was appointed head coach of 1899 Hoffenheim on 27 October 2015. He was due to begin his tenure at the beginning of the 2016–17 season. He was given a three-year contract. At the time of his appointment, Nagelsmann was 28, and the youngest manager in Bundesliga history.

He was to be the successor for Huub Stevens, who had replaced Markus Gisdol the previous day. On 10 February 2016, Stevens resigned as head coach due to health problems, and Nagelsmann's tenure as head coach was brought forward by the Hoffenheim board a day later. Hoffenheim were 17th in the table, 7 points from the 15th spot's safety, and avoiding relegation.

Under Nagelsmann, they avoided relegation by winning 7 of their remaining 14 matches and finished a point above the relegation playoff spot. Their good run of play has continued in the 2016–17 Bundesliga campaign, seating 4th in the table as of May 2017 and qualifying the club for the UCL for the first time in the club's history. The following 2017/2018 season, he confirmed the club at the top of Bundesliga (3<sup>rd</sup> seat), decreasing during the last one (9<sup>th</sup>).

During these three years, he became a technological innovator; furthermore, during the training sessions, Hoffenheim is one of the few clubs in the world to use the 'Footbonaut' to fine-tune their players' touch and control. Still, Nagelsmann took the use of technology in training even further. As well as using drones to film his squad's movement, he had made a giant video wall installed on the halfway line of their primary training pitch. The system works with four cameras, two from a tower high above the halfway line and one behind each goal. The feed from each camera is on the screen at any time, and the cameras are controlled by the training staff, allowing them to stop, rewind or fast-forward the footage to show the players particular points of interest. It gave Nagelsmann the chance to explain situations in far more detail with four angles at his disposal.

At the end of the 2018/19 season, Hoffenheim earned a total of 191 points; only Bayern (279) and Dortmund (228) won more over the same period, with big teams such as Bayer Leverkusen (182), Borussia Mönchengladbach (170), and Schalke 04 (158) some way behind.

The bases of the young german coach style of play are three:

- The wingbacks provide defensive solidity and allow a high front three attacking shape

- The constant seek of numerical superiority in between the opposition's lines
- The pressure style that Nagelsmann inherits from Ralf Ragnick, who is the Maestro of the pressure style of play in German soccer.

The Nagelsmann's effect on his first club is evident, and the last 9<sup>th</sup> seat of the young coach with 51 points and the 6<sup>th</sup> of the previous season with 52 points don't have to mislead the reader; Nagelsmann missed the third Champions League qualification in a row for 7 points; last season Hoffenheim sat 6<sup>th</sup>, but 13 points behind the last UCL qualified team.

Hoffenheim 2017/2018 (left) vs Hoffenheim 2019/2020 (right) [Bundesliga only]

Passing Parameters					
PARAMETERS	34 ↗ matches	AVG	AVG	34 ↗ matches	PARAMETERS
Passes	↓	452.79	465.97	↑	Passes
Successful passes	↓	379.26	394.85	↑	Successful passes
Received pass	↓	315.65	337.71	↑	Received pass
Smart passes	↑	8.47	6.85	↓	Smart passes
Successful smart passes	↑	3.26	3	↓	Successful smart passes
Key passes	↓	2.56	3.76	↑	Key passes
Successful key passes	↓	2.56	3.74	↑	Successful key passes
Long passes	↑	50.26	46.79	↓	Long passes
Successful long passes	↑	28.76	25.53	↓	Successful long passes
Through passes	↑	9.24	8.65	↓	Through passes
Successful through passes	↓	2.32	3.35	↑	Successful through passes
Passes to final third	↑	58.62	50.18	↓	Passes to final third
Successful passes to the final third	↑	40.65	33.44	↓	Successful passes to the final third
Crosses	↑	15.53	12.47	↓	Crosses
Successful crosses	↑	5.06	4.29	↓	Successful crosses

Nagelsmann was used to shape Hoffenheim with 3 players at the back, 2 wingbacks, 1 holding midfielder are 4 flexible attacking players. The 2 at the back of the center strikers usually shifted out wide along the flanks).

The center back was tasked to help the center pivot in the center midfielder.

The pressure phase was more a tool to win the ball back and hold the possession, rather than looking for forced counter-attacks, building up play patiently rather than looking for constat out and out verticality.

Otherwise, verticality was a constant seek after building up phases, with the center backs looked for the forwards to receive and lay off the ball for wingbacks and the first line of forwards. The average of long passes and passes to the final third was pretty much higher during the Nagelsmann's seasons concerning nowadays Hoffenheim (through passes average per game is adequate proof).

When vertical passing options were blocked, the wingbacks gave wide solutions down the wings, shaping a 1-3-3-4 or 1-3-1-6 (if the bottom line of forwards has shifted wide); indeed, the average of cross passes and successful ones was higher than today. Nagelsmann was also used to ask his player to drop in between the opposition's lines to open passing channels.

The positional fluidity had the aim to place the players concerning the teammate's passing options, furthermore the central pivot.

This positional play vision took Hoffenheim to divide the team into 2 blocks, back 6 and front 4, or back 4 and front 6

TSG 1899 Hoffenheim					
Offensive Parameters					Comparisator
PARAMETERS	34 ↗ matches	AVG	AVG	34 ↗ matches	PARAMETERS
Goals scored	▲	1.94	1.56	▼	Goals scored
Assists	▲	1.21	0.91	▼	Assists
Shot assists	▲	9.53	8.03	▼	Shot assists
Shots	▲	13.53	12.26	▼	Shots
Shots on target	▲	5.18	4.71	▼	Shots on target
Head shots	▼	1.94	2.56	▲	Head shots
Dribbles	▲	29.85	22.47	▼	Dribbles
Successful dribbles	▲	20.65	14.94	▼	Successful dribbles
Attacking actions	▲	67.38	54.06	▼	Attacking actions
Successful attacking actions	▲	34.15	24.38	▼	Successful attacking actions
Touches in the box	▼	17.38	18.26	▲	Touches in the box
Penalties	▲	0.15	0.12	▼	Penalties
Successful penalties	▲	0.12	0.09	▼	Successful penalties
Expected goals	▲	1.65	1.6	▼	Expected goals

Comparing the offensive data of the second season of Julian Nagelsmann (the first complete one) to the last 2019/2020, the differences are ruthless:

- Hoffenheim could attack almost 13 times more per game, with ten successful attacking actions more than last season.
- The wider center backs and wingbacks provided much more dribble actions with a higher percentage of success.
- The team was able to shot on goal more and in a more efficient way. The result was a higher average of assists and scored goals (almost 0,30 than the xG against the 0,04 less of the last season).

Hoffenheim 2018/2019 (left) vs Hoffenheim 2019/2020 (right) [Bundesliga only]

Passing Parameters						Comparisonator
PARAMETERS	34 ↗ matches	▲	▲	▲	34 ↗ matches	PARAMETERS
		▲	▲	▲		
Passes		▲	471.5	465.97	▼	Passes
Successful passes		▲	395.68	394.85	▼	Successful passes
Received pass		▼	329.79	337.71	▲	Received pass
Smart passes		▲	7.85	6.85	▼	Smart passes
Successful smart passes		▲	3.5	3	▼	Successful smart passes
Key passes		▲	4.12	3.76	▼	Key passes
Successful key passes		▲	4	3.74	▼	Successful key passes
Long passes		▼	45.09	46.79	▲	Long passes
Successful long passes		▲	27	25.53	▼	Successful long passes
Through passes		▼	8.21	8.65	▲	Through passes
Successful through passes		▼	2.88	3.35	▲	Successful through passes
Passes to final third		▲	61.44	50.18	▼	Passes to final third
Successful passes to the final third		▲	44.88	33.44	▼	Successful passes to the final third
Crosses		▲	19.62	12.47	▼	Crosses
Successful crosses		▲	7.09	4.29	▼	Successful crosses

The third and last season of Nagelsmann as Hoffenheim's head coach was even better than the previous one, looking at the data and comparing them to the team's first one without him. Possession and passing parameters were higher than nowadays, but the received ones, due to the pace of possession style. Key passes and successful key passes improved, both concerning the previous season, and they were better than the data about the last completed season.

Hoffenheim improved the passes to the final third and the successful ones concerning the previous season, and these data are much higher than last season's team:

- +11 passes to the final third per game
- +11 successful passes to the final third per game

Cross passes and successful cross passes improved, and the data are much better concerning the 2019/2020 campaign:

- +7 cross passes per game
- +3 successful cross passes per game.

Attacking actions and successful attacking action comparisons are other proves of the quality of soccer-style that Hoffenheim was able to improve during Nagelsmann years:

- +23 concerning the 2019/2020 season (+10 about the previous campaign)
- +16 successful one concerning the 2019/2020 season (+6 about the last campaign).

The touches into the box improved up to 4 more per game, and the scored average was 2,06, just lower than expected (0,9) but better than the previous season (+0,12).





Offensive Parameters



PARAMETERS	34 → matches	A/G	A/G	34 → matches	PARAMETERS
Goals scored	↑	2.06	1.56	↓	Goals scored
Assists	↑	1.09	0.91	↓	Assists
Shot assists	↑	11.32	8.03	↓	Shot assists
Shots	↑	16.71	12.26	↓	Shots
Shots on target	↑	6.59	4.71	↓	Shots on target
Head shots	↑	2.71	2.56	↓	Head shots
Dribbles	↑	33.21	22.47	↓	Dribbles
Successful dribbles	↑	23.79	14.94	↓	Successful dribbles
Attacking actions	↑	77.38	54.06	↓	Attacking actions
Successful attacking actions	↑	40.97	24.38	↓	Successful attacking actions
Touches in the box	↑	22.79	18.26	↓	Touches in the box
Penalties	↑	0.21	0.12	↓	Penalties
Successful penalties	↑	0.18	0.09	↓	Successful penalties
Expected goals	↑	2.15	1.6	↓	Expected goals

Since July 2019, he is the RB Leipzig Head coach; despite his young age, he already has more than 250 games on the bench and a good average of won matches (52% wins, 26% draws, and 21% losses.). He just finished his first season in charge of the new club with the following results:

1. Champions League semifinalist, beating Tottenham (4-0 total score) in the last 16 round, winning 2-1 to Atletico and only losing to Paris Saint Germain
2. 3rd in Bundesliga with 62 points, behind 2020 five titles team Bayern Munich (82) and BVB (66), the club best final rank ever.

The following scheme sums up his career as of 7 October 2020:

Competition	Country	Matches	Won	Draw	Lost	Average	Last
Bundesliga	Germany	156	72	52	32	1.7	2020/2021
DFB Pokal	Germany	9	5	-	4	1.7	2020/2021
UEFA Champions League	Europe	18	6	5	7	1.3	2019/2020
Club Friendlies	World	6	3	-	3	1.5	2019
UEFA Europa League	Europe	6	1	2	3	0.8	2017/2018
U19 Bundesliga	Germany	73	52	10	11	2.3	2015/2016

Nagelsmann predominantly uses a three-man backline with attacking wingbacks and switches to a back four whenever necessary. Generally, he uses vertical passing and direct approach-play to break through opposing defenses while maintaining a solid defensive shape.

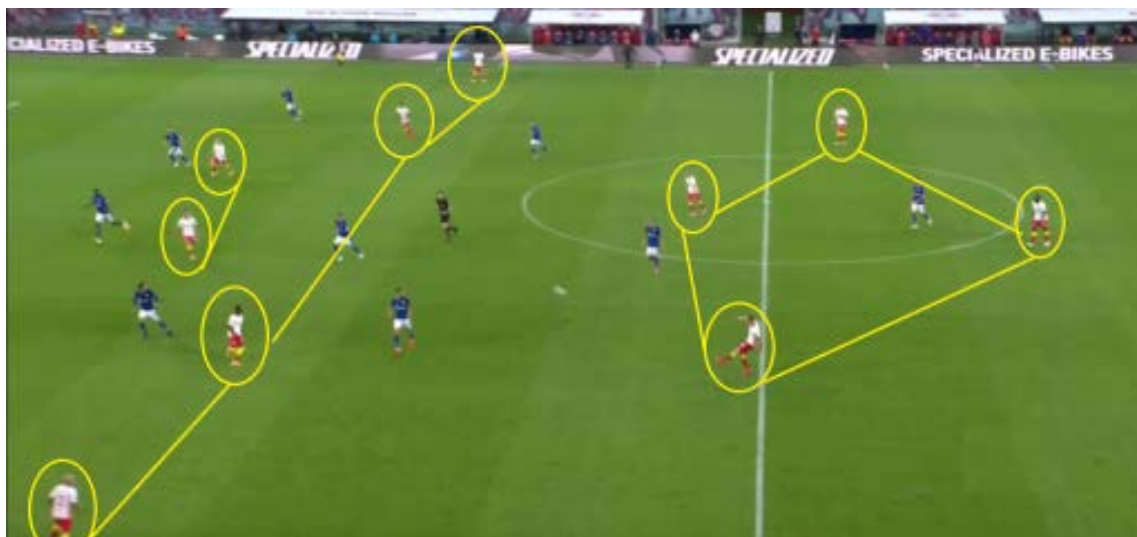
He likes to have a double pivot in midfield to recycle possession and break down any hostile counter-attacks in front of his ball-playing center-backs. His wingbacks are tasked with providing width on the overlap while also supporting the defensive effort.

Upfront, he usually deploys a pair of strikers. One of them is used as a target man, but the other drops deep to receive the ball and help in the buildup while also running the channels to provide added width. He is very adaptive and keeps tweaking his game-plan to suit his opponents; opposition and match's score are the main factors that influence his decision-making process before and during the games.

The following scheme shows all the systems of play RB Leipzig used last 2019/2020 season in the Bundesliga.

 4-4-2 25%	3-5-2 15%	4-2-3-1 14%	3-4-1-2 10%	5-3-2 5%
	3-4-3 4%	4-3-1-2 3%	3-4-2-1 2%	4-4-1-1 2%
4-2-2-2 2%	4-3-3 1%	<b>5-3-1</b> 1%		

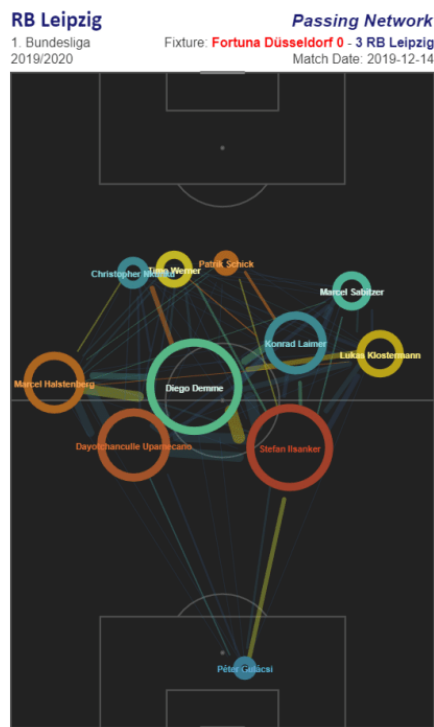
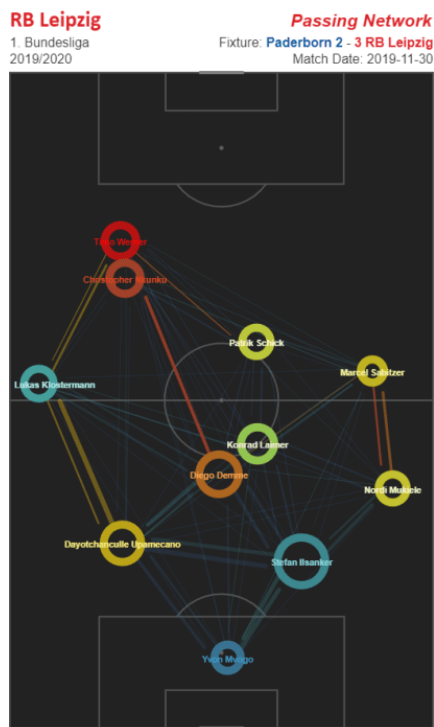
His formations are usually variations of the 1-4-4-2 or 3 at the back shapes; apart from formations, vertical play, emphasis to attack and high pressure are the main principles of play which make RB Leipzig so recognizable.



This example of offensive shape (the left center back is playing a long pass to the forwards) recalls Nagelsmann's Hoffenheim idea of the team's blocks (4+6).

**The Nagelsmann's effect on RB Leipzig (2018/2019 vs. 2019/2020 seasons) and a comparison with the rest of the Bundesliga average attacking data (2019-2020)**

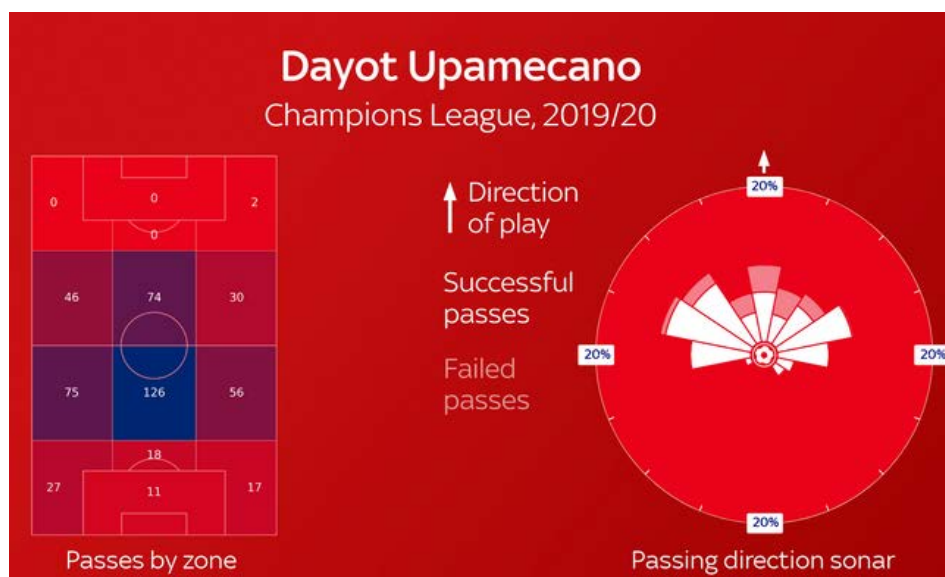
Rasen Ballsport Leipzig					
Passing Parameters					
PARAMETERS	34 ↻ matches	AVG	AVG	34 ↻ matches	PARAMETERS
Passes	↓	425.24	532.29	↑	Passes
Successful passes	↓	338.76	449.79	↑	Successful passes
Received pass	↓	270.74	387.97	↑	Received pass
Smart passes	↑	9.35	8.15	↓	Smart passes
Successful smart passes	↑	4.47	3.41	↓	Successful smart passes
Key passes	↓	3.18	4.76	↑	Key passes
Successful key passes	↓	3.03	4.68	↑	Successful key passes
Long passes	↑	47.68	45.74	↓	Long passes
Successful long passes	↑	26.65	26.44	↓	Successful long passes
Through passes	↑	9.88	9.76	↓	Through passes
Successful through passes	↑	3.68	3.03	↓	Successful through passes
Passes to final third	↑	67.91	64.5	↓	Passes to final third
Successful passes to the final third	↓	46.59	47.68	↑	Successful passes to the final third
Crosses	↑	16.5	15.56	↓	Crosses
Successful crosses	↑	5.82	5.35	↓	Successful crosses



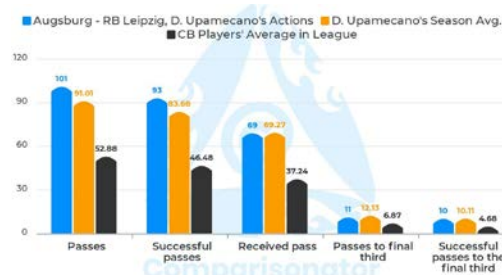
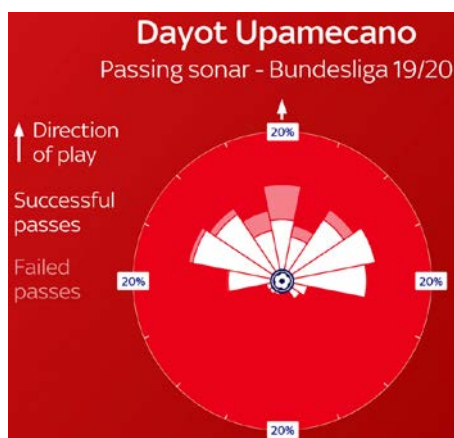
Apart from the 100 and more increase of passes (received and successful ones included) per game, as first average data, these 2 examples of passing networks are indicative to understand the real change after Nagelsmann's arrival. The quantity has increased, as the variety of solutions during possession phases: RB Leipzig won to Paderborn using vertical and diagonal passing patterns of play all over the field, with the team spreading out wide and deep the field. Otherwise, RB Leipzig won (one month later) to F.Dusseldorf with a narrow shape much higher up in the field, and a more offensive formation.

The passing networks are indicators that help understand why other passing data decreased a few with Nagelsmann. The minimum differences in all different kinds of passes (smart, long, though, and crosses) don't mean a quality decrease, but they prove the play's liquid system while managing the possession. On the other side, the key passes and those to the final third increased, despite the possession amount is much larger than the last season; this means that the possession phase always has a precise aim: to move the ball through the thirds to achieve a finishing chance.

Before the real vertical-style appears, the center backs use to move the ball horizontally to find the right space, overcome the first line of pressure, and provide the midfielder's chances to play quickly through the middle third. The importance of the back 3 becomes evident, looking at their passing sonars, networks, and stats.



Upamecano, one of the most involved center backs in building up phases, has an interesting passing sonar (Champions League 2019/2010 campaign) to realize the variety of solutions, directions of passes, and positions from where he plays. He usually plays in the center, but he also moves through the first and middle third close to the final third.

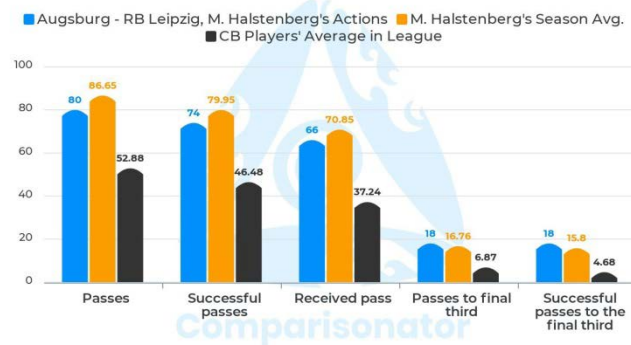
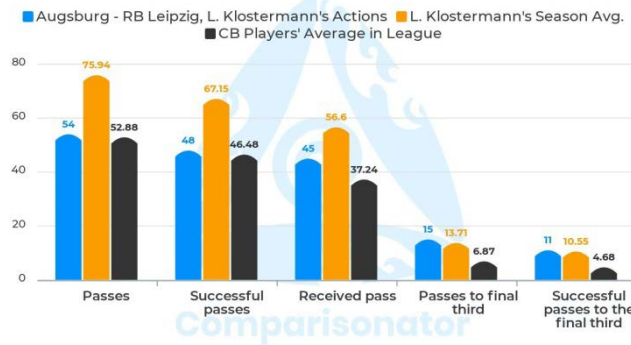


(2020-2021 season's data)

The comparison data make him the best passer in the Bundesliga among the players with the same role:

- Best passes made, completed and received
- Best passes to the final third and successful ones

Upamecano's usual teammates, Klostermann at his right and Halstenberg at his left, have also better passing average data than all the rest of the League (2020-2021 season's data). Comparing the data among them, it appears very clear their role at the beginning of building up and possession phases, finding the most suitable passing path to allow the receivers in the middle third to play quickly through the field and toward the final third.



Season Average	Upamecano	Klostermann	Halstenberg
Passes			
Successful passes			
Received passes			
Passes to final third			
Successful passes to final third			

Upamecano is the leading passing distributor at the back, concerning the other 2, but the wide center back is the defenders who try to progress the move and play to the dropping strikers or wingbacks.

Parameters	AVG TOTAL	Weekly Rank
Passes	532.29	4
Successful passes	449.79	4
Received pass	387.97	4
Smart passes	8.15	5
Successful smart passes	3.41	5
Key passes	4.76	2
Successful key passes	4.68	2
Long passes	45.74	14
Successful long passes	26.44	12
Through passes	9.76	3
Successful through passes	3.03	5
Passes to final third	64.5	2
Successful passes to the final third	47.68	3
Crosses	15.56	6
Successful crosses	5.35	5

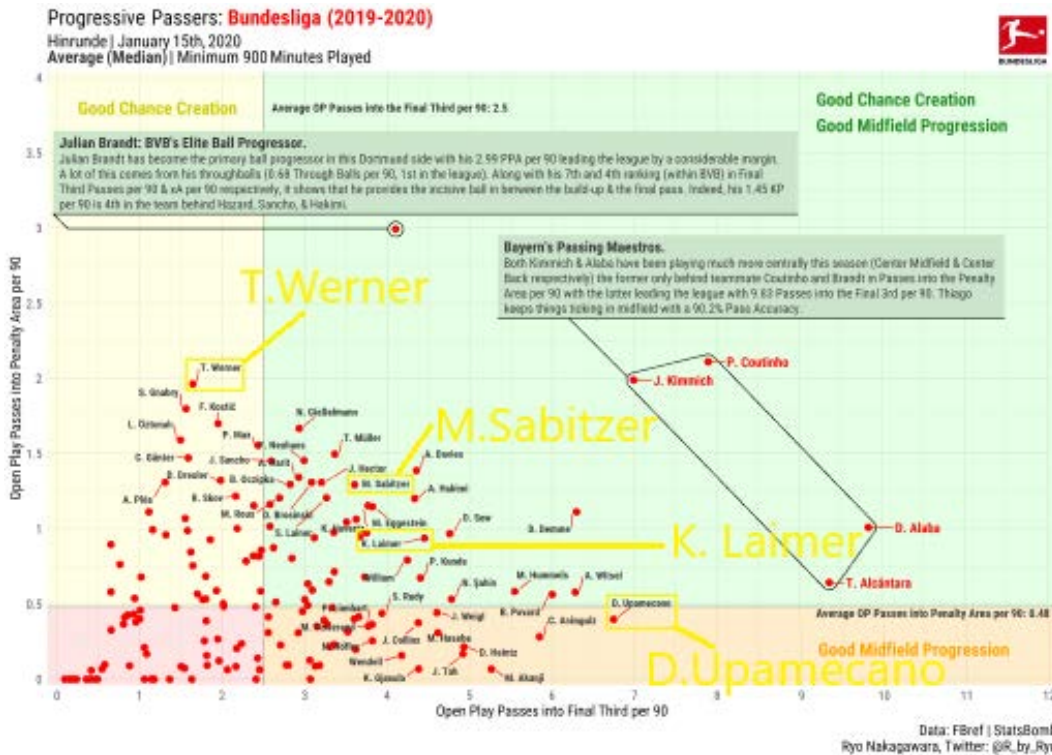
The increase of passes per game and the possession average (48,77% in 2018/2019 vs. 53,85% in 2019/2020) increased data are the first sign of Nagelsmann's job in his first season that took Leipzig to seat 4<sup>th</sup> in this particular table. The accuracy has also increased (4%), despite the verticality of the possession phase. The increase of key passes (and successful ones) and the small decrease of the smart one proves the vertical possession phase; possession is useful to play vertically as soon as possible (2<sup>nd</sup> team behind Bayern Munich). The almost equal number of passes is another proof of the predominant verticality. The passes to the final third slightly decreased during the first Nagelsmann's season in charge. Leipzig sat 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> among the other German teams; the increased success of this type of play comes from the idea of vertical possession.

Parameters	AVG TOTAL	Weekly Rank
Goals scored	2.38	3
Assists	1.53	3
Shot assists	10.29	2
Shots	15.12	2
Shots on target	6.21	2
Head shots	2.44	4
Dribbles	28.41	5
Successful dribbles	19.71	4
Attacking actions	67.24	4
Successful attacking actions	29.82	3
Touches in the box	24	2
Penalties	0.15	4
Successful penalties	0.15	2

The results were many more goals scored in 2019/2020 concerning the previous season (88 vs. 63), 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the Bundesliga for assists and shots on goals after assists. Generally, all the finishing indexes increased and the touches into the opposition's box and the; in all these average data rankings, RB Leipzig sat between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> places. Dribbles have decreased due to RB Leipzig's fast passing combination based possession. Attacking actions and the successful ones decreased due to the needed preparation for the right passing path when playing vertically and the risky play style that led to an increase in the unsuccessful average data. Otherwise, the touches into the box increased concerning the last season without the German coach; this is the proof of the offensive efficacy of the style of play, despite being risky defensively.

Offensive Parameters					
PARAMETERS	34 → matches	AVG	AVG	34 → matches	PARAMETERS
Goals scored	↓	1.85	2.38	↑	Goals scored
Assists	↓	0.88	1.53	↑	Assists
Shot assists	↓	9.76	10.29	↑	Shot assists
Shots	↓	13.59	15.12	↑	Shots
Shots on target	↓	5.26	6.21	↑	Shots on target
Head shots	↓	1.82	2.44	↑	Head shots
Dribbles	↑	31.85	28.41	↓	Dribbles
Successful dribbles	↑	21.97	19.71	↓	Successful dribbles
Attacking actions	↑	71.29	67.24	↓	Attacking actions
Successful attacking actions	↑	37.53	29.82	↓	Successful attacking actions
Touches in the box	↓	19.94	24	↑	Touches in the box
Penalties	↑	0.21	0.15	↓	Penalties
Successful penalties	●	0.15	0.15	●	Successful penalties
Expected goals	↓	1.78	2	↑	Expected goals

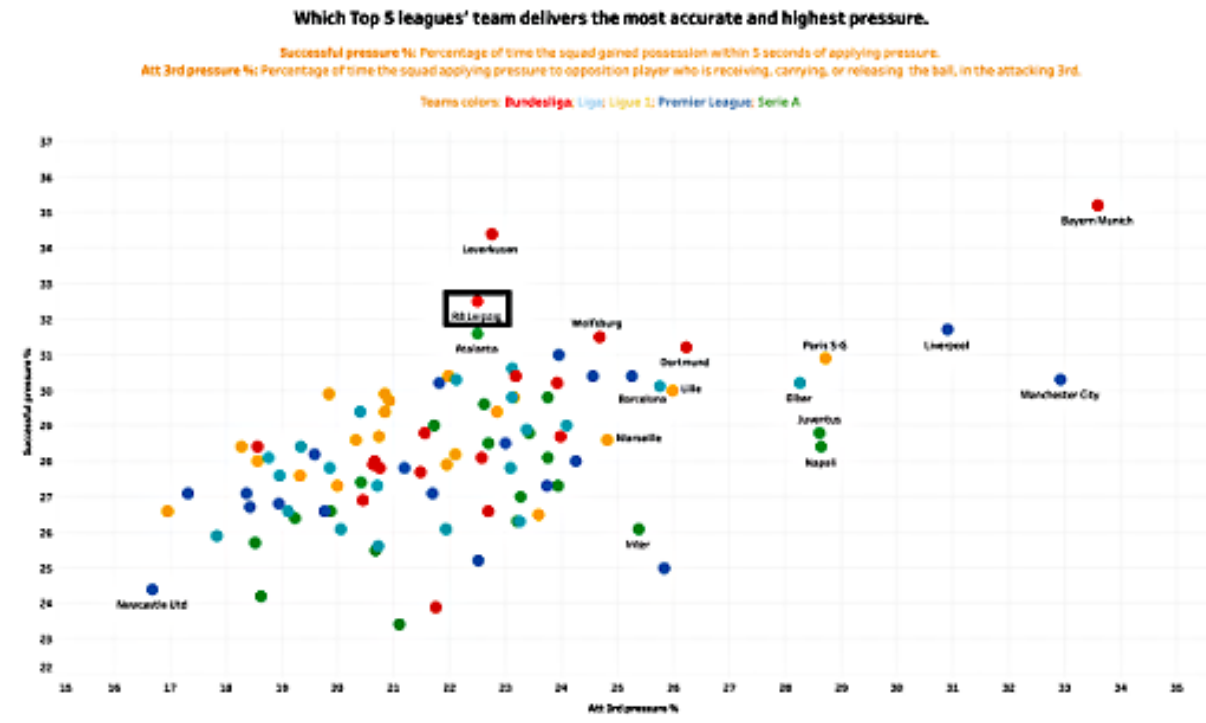
The results of this variety and liquid style of play are remarkable: more assists, shots, shots from assists and on target, touches inside the opposition's box, and goals per game, as the above comparison scheme shows (2018/2019 on the left side and 2019/2020 on the right side). Dribbles and attacking actions decrease due to a more balanced possession phase, not offensive inefficiency (2,38 scored goals per game against the 2 as xG). The following scheme proves how the possession phase is so variable in the team



**Werner** has been one of the best chances creator of the League, since he joined Chelsea. **Sabitzer** and **Laimer** were well ranked for good chances creation and progression actions in the middle third. **Upamecano** is one the best center backs for progressive passer to the middle third.

## Possession and attacking principles: an aggressive and vertical style of play

RB Leipzig is the third team in Europe, taking into consideration the five main leagues (Bundesliga, La Liga, Ligue 1, Premier League, and Serie A), for pressure and efficient pressure, as well, but not for the pressure on the receiving opponent in the final third:



- 32% of the time, the time can win the ball back within 5" after the beginning of the pressure action (left indicator's line).
- Only 22% of all pressure phases are applied inside the attacking third against the opposition's ball carrier, and it takes to a ball's recovery (right indicator's line).

Borussia VfL Mönchengladbach		49	1
Düsseldorfer TuS Fortuna 1895		47.32	2
1. FC Union Berlin		46.59	3
1. FSV Mainz 05		45.38	4
Rasen Ballsport Leipzig		42.21	7

Looking at the pressing duels (when a player moves to apply pressure on an opposing player who is in possession of the ball but doesn't make physical or ball contact), RB Leipzig only sat 7<sup>th</sup> in the rank; this means that when Nagelsmann's team presses the opposition, the aim is always to win the ball back as quickly as possible, and 32% of time, its players are able to do it within 5".



The team's shape variation influences the pressure phase and the consequent attacking shape and patterns of play.



In this first example, 3 players aggressively pressing the goalkeeper, forcing him to play out wide along the defensive left side, the wingback pushes up and press the center back, who is going to receive, and RB Leipzig deliberately allow the opposition to play out wide along the flank toward the fullback; the opposite center back is screened, and the pivot could be under immediate pressure if he received.



As the opposition plays out wide, the German team tends to create strong sides around the ball to prevent the opponent from playing out and to recover the ball with easy passing options to make the possession safe. Despite being a good counter-attacking team, RB Leipzig always aims to build up possession through the thirds due to the offensive mobility, which could take issues after ball losses. Apart from the high variety of solutions with the ball, some play's recurrent principles can be recognized.

- **1-3-2-5 (or 1-5-2-3) basic shape that turns to a 1-3-3-2-2 to spread the team into 4 lines, providing vertical solutions (1-3-4-3 or 1-3-3-4 sometimes)**

The four attacking players are flexible in taking wide positions from the initial center square. The lower attackers must provide support to break down the opposition's pressure lines.



Haidara on the left and Laimer on the right shifts wide, and Kampl act as a center pivot in front of the back 3; these movements allow the wingers to stand inside the half-spaces and the forward to act in front of the opposition's center backs or between the center backs and the fullbacks.

The center backs exchange passes to open up gaps into the opposition's pressing line to advance to the next third or move the opposition, opening the opposite wingback since the beginning of the possession phase. In this next sequence, Upamecano and Angelino, the left wingback, can play a quick vertical passing combination along the left flank, overcoming the opposition's lines with 3 passes.



To find a man in between the lines is always a crucial offensive solution inside the final third.



The left wingback cuts inside the half-space and creates space for the ball carrier to dribble toward the center, exploiting the deep run off the ball of the wingback, who invites the defensive line backward.



The teammate who has tracked the attacking move from the back can usually receive free for markers or enough time and inside a pocket of space to shoot or assist a teammate.

As the opposition is forced to stand narrow in front of the box, the receiver could have also played a wide pass to the right.

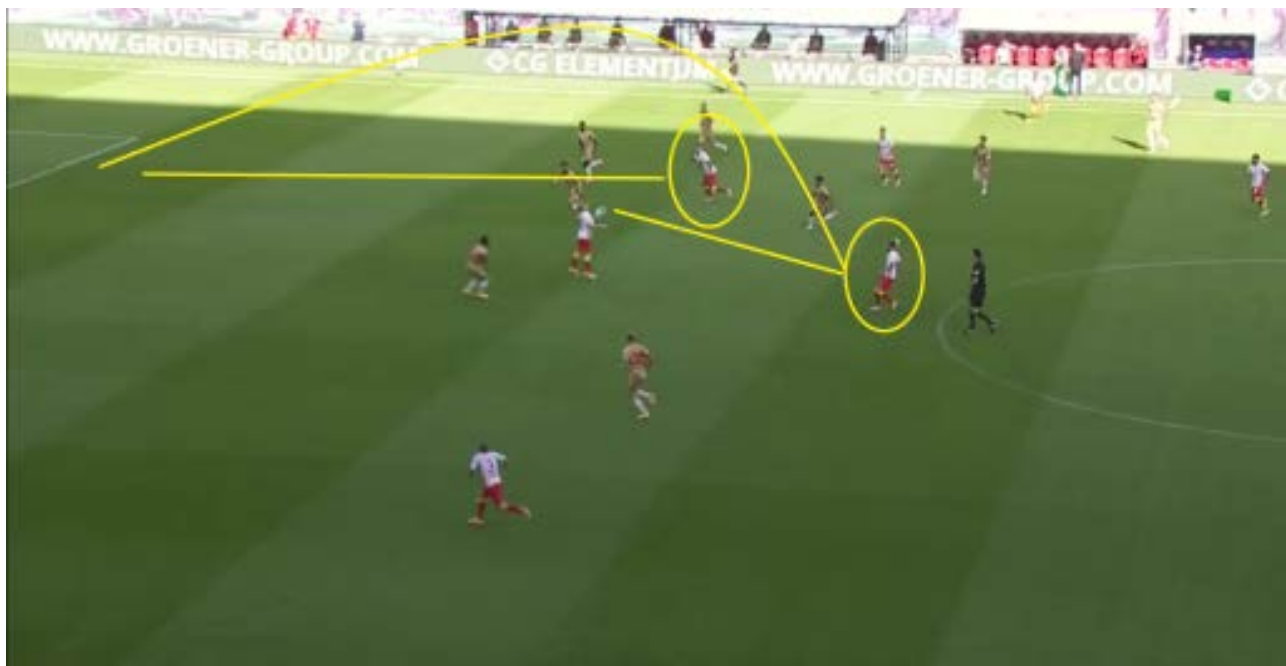
- **One of the forward drops back to receive and the center midfielders are prevented from receiving the first pass out of the defensive third.** The dropping back forward usually plays the ball back to a center midfielder...



(The No.10 usually doesn't stand in between the lines when the team starts the building up phase of play, but one striker drops back from the opposition's defensive line to receive a long pass from one of the back 3 defenders. The pivot or one of the pivots supports him together with a wingback.)



(When RB Leipzig shapes 2 pivots, one moves forward, and the second one stands behind him to cover the back 3, as both wingbacks push higher up in the field.)



(When the pivot receives, he looks for a third man to run in behind the defensive line; this player can be a striker or a wingback if he hasn't received the layoff pass.)

- ...or a wingback



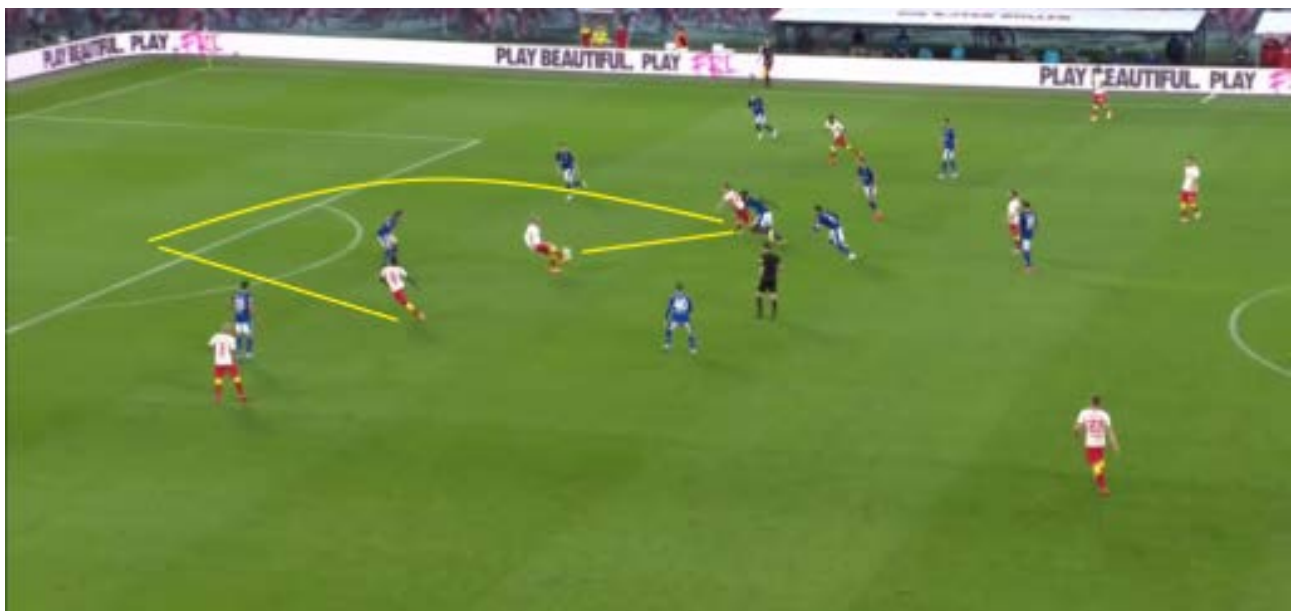
(In this example, the striker lays the ball off for the wingback along the attacking right flank, and he then moves in behind the defensive line to receive.)

Meanwhile, the pivots have made opposite movements (dropping deep and running higher up), as in the previous situation.

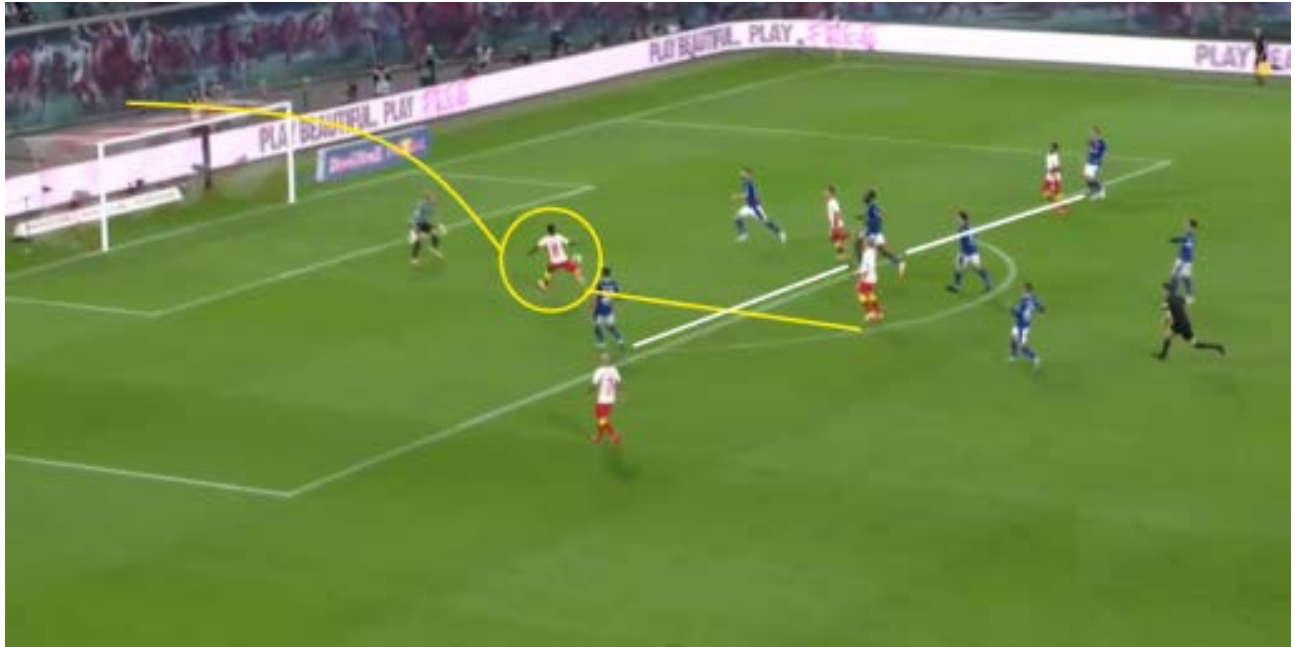
- **The men in between the line force the opposition to change shape; this is usually the moment for RB Leipzig to act its vertical style of play; 1 touch passing exchanges or 1-2 combinations throughout the middle third to advance into the final third at a high speed**



When the striker who drops back invites the opposition center back out of position, he can also play forward and look for a quick combination, as in the picture above.



Haidara, standing between the center back and the fullback, is the third man in this sequence. He returns to the opposition's last defensive line after a triangle passing combination between the lines (defenders and midfielders).



RB Leipzig midfielder can shot without pressure.

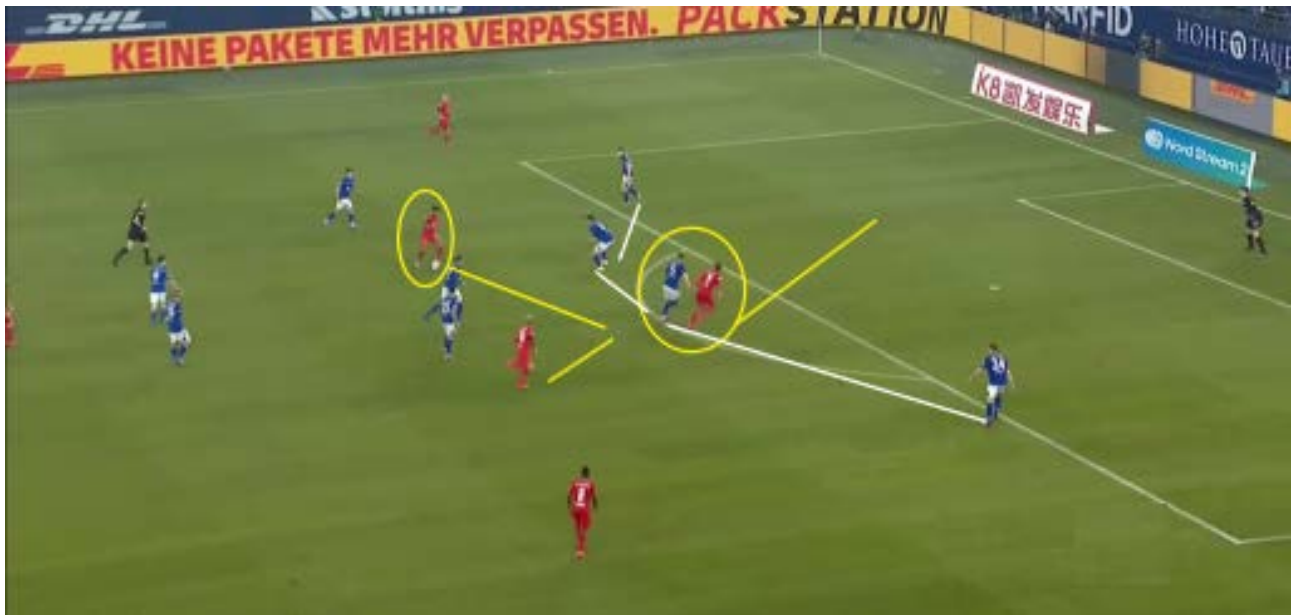
- **If it isn't possible to play high up in the field and through the final third with the first building up sequence, the wingback or dropping back forward, play back again to find another target player in between the opposition's line**



(Angelino, the left wingback, can save the possession, but he can only play backward due to the opposition's pivot pressure. The strikers stand along the back 4 lines to be ready to drop back again when the pivot can play.)

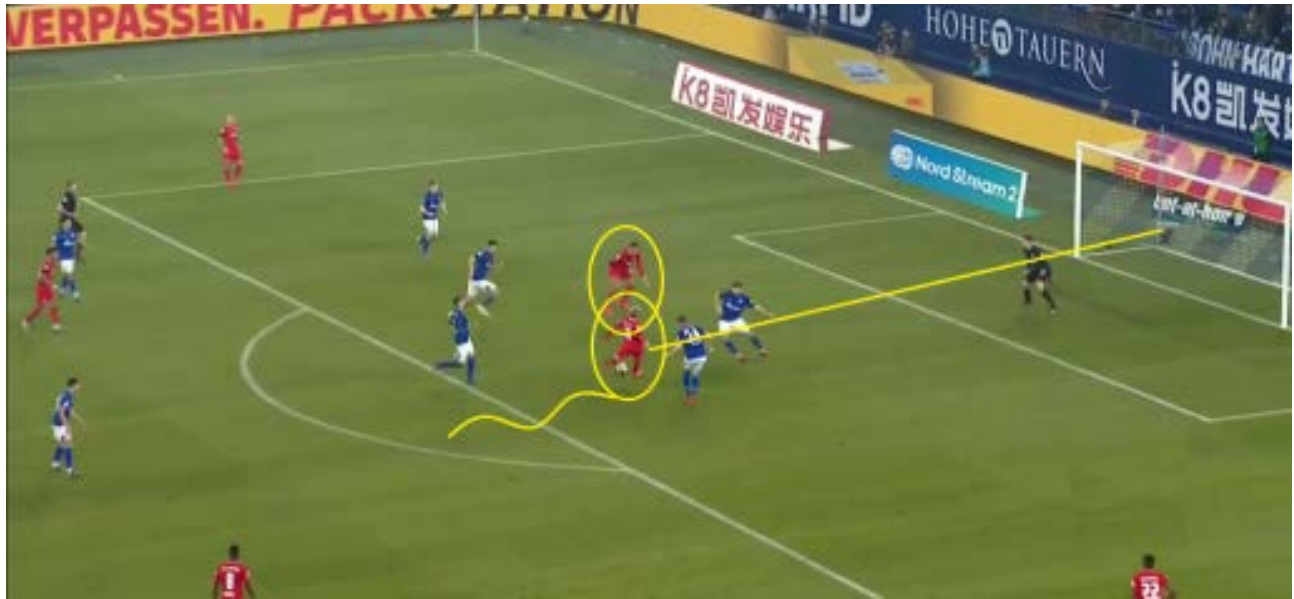


(Poulsen, the right striker, drops back, and he invites the center back out of position. The left fullback must stand wider to check Haidara, and a gap appears between him and the nearest center back.)



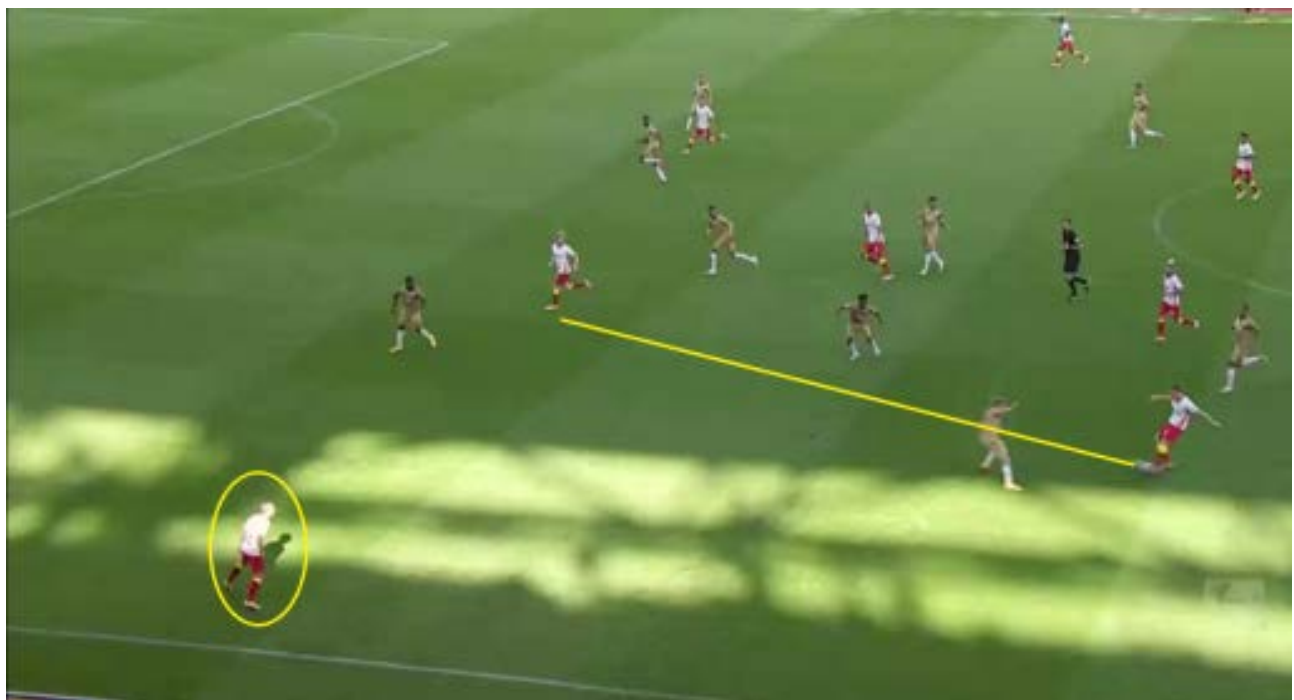
(The pivot receives the layoff pass, Poulsen attacks the depth, and his marker tracks him. A third man can move toward the box free from markers along the path that the teammate has just created. The opposition's left fullback is too far from the center back to cover the gap.)



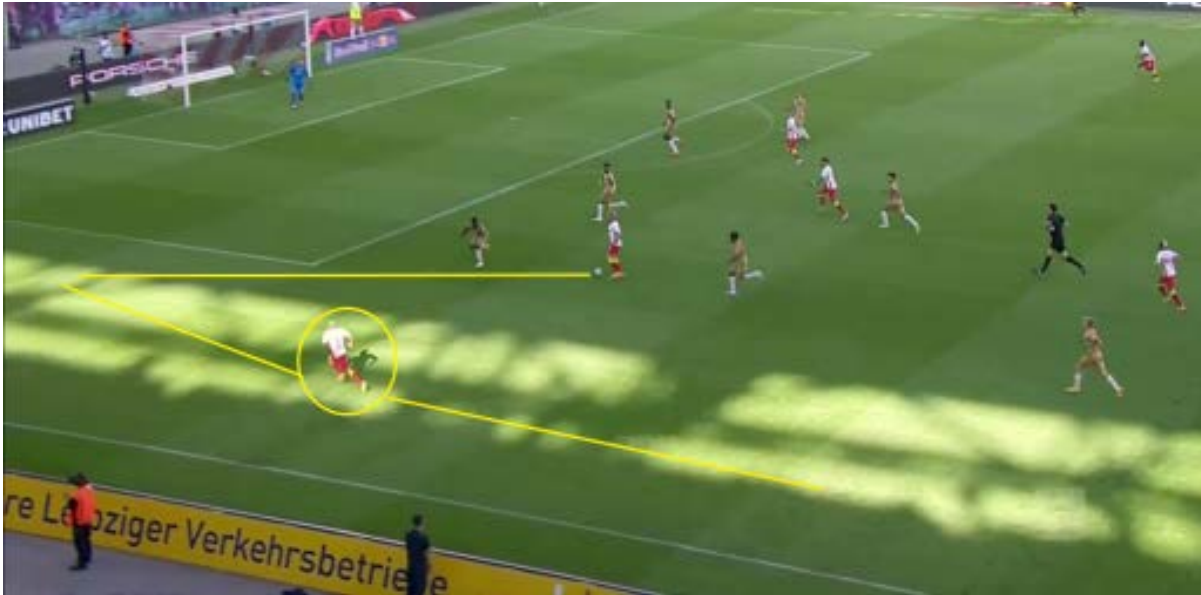


(The third man receives inside the box, and both defenders are late to counter his shooting attempt; the fullback was too far, as we analyzed, and the center back moves away from Poulsen too late to be able to counter RB Leipzig's incoming attacker. The receiver has time and space to score.)

- **If the opposition congests the center to counter the play patterns between the lines, the wingbacks have space along the flanks to push up in the field.**



(Forsberg receives between the opposition's center back and fullback, turned out wide to pass to the wingback, who can support the move free from markers.)



Forsberg's position in between the lines invite the opposition's fullback and a winger to stay narrow in the center, and the wingback can receive deep along the flank, deep and at the back of the defensive line.

- **The wingbacks usually try to play diagonally to a forward in between the opposition's lines when they receive in the middle third...**



(Haidara receives from Angelino in between the lines, and the strikers force the opposition's backline to run deeper; these runs allow the receiver to be free from the marker and dribble the ball to the final third.)



(When the No.10 receives, the strikers stand between the center back and the fullback to attack the depth at their back.)



(The striker can now receive behind the defensive line, facing the opposition's goal; the second striker attack the depth off the ball to be an assist option; Forsberg passes to Poulsen, who receives between the center backs and shot on goal.)

- ...play a pass inside the box to finish if they are already standing deep along the flanks...



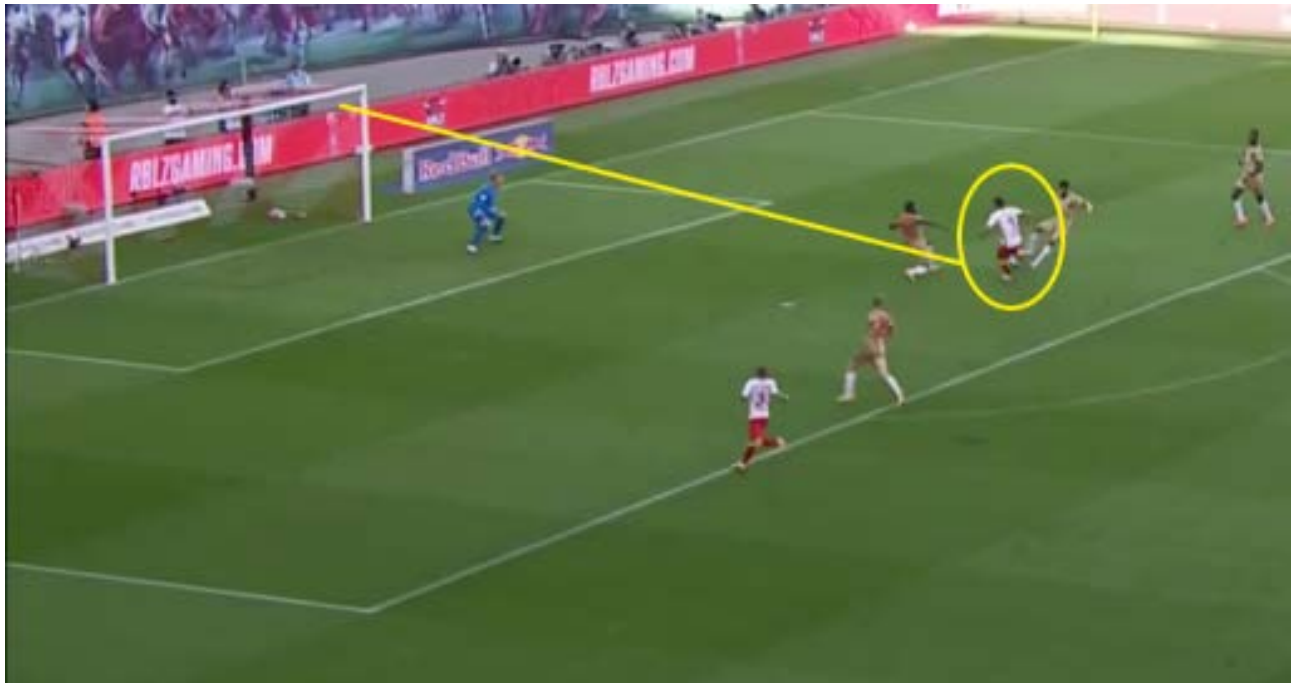
- ...or play toward the target striker to finish.



(Sabitzer, the right wingback, receives along the right flank from Upamecano.)



(He plays a cross pass toward the opposite striker, Poulsen, who stands between the center back and the fullback. The line of three forwards is placed between the opposition's center backs and fullbacks and between the center backs.)

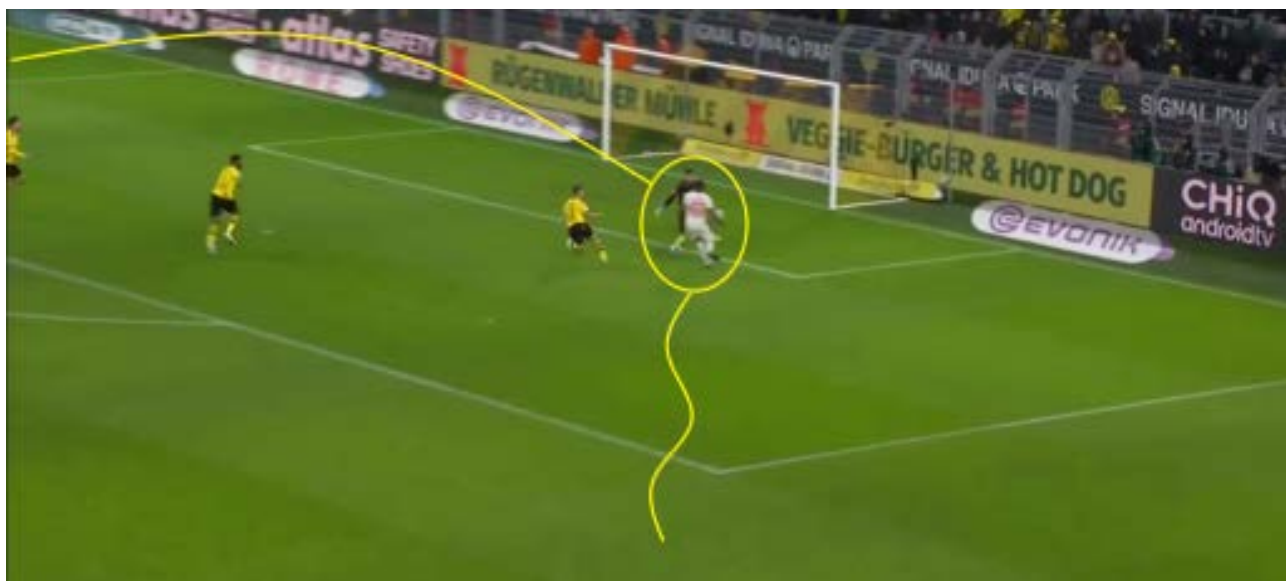


(Poulsen can face the goal while receiving, anticipate the opposition's defensive actions, and shoot on goal, scoring for RB Leipzig.)

The space created along the opposite side can be then exploited to finish when the German team shapes a double line of forward in front of the opposition back lines, as they are forced to stand narrow in the center.



(The center strikers stand between the center back and fullback, and the second line is placed between the opposition's sectors; 7 opponents are then busy to check 4 attackers.)

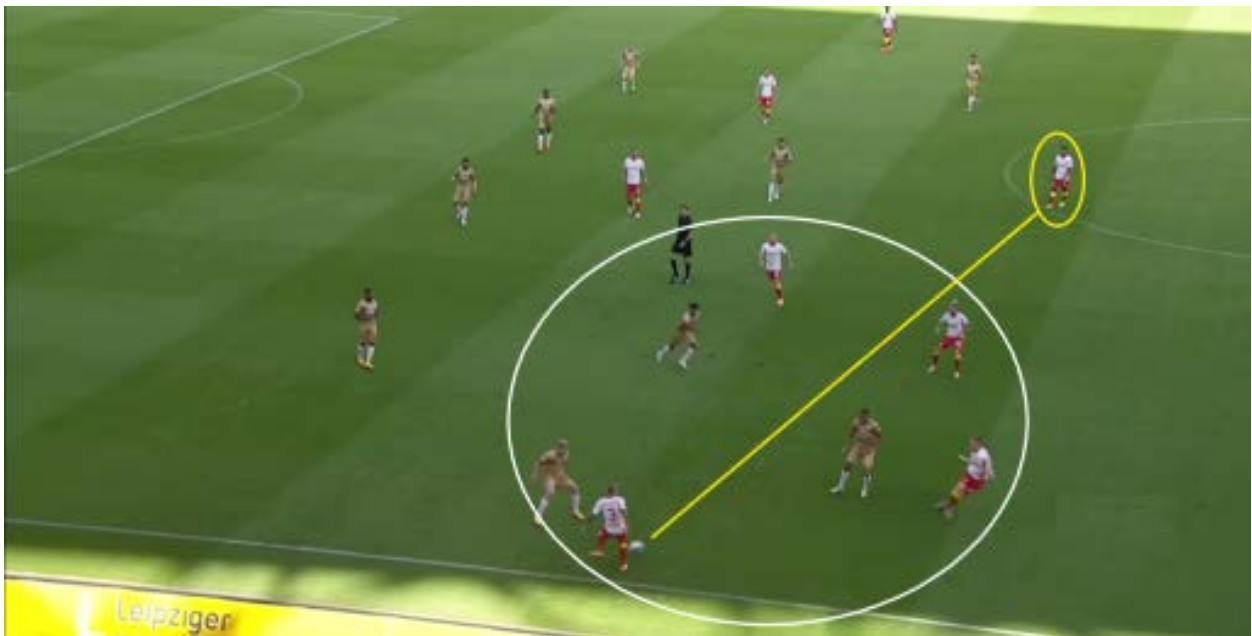


(Upamecano can switch the side to Mukiele to the right flank, and he can face the opposition's goal to try to score.)

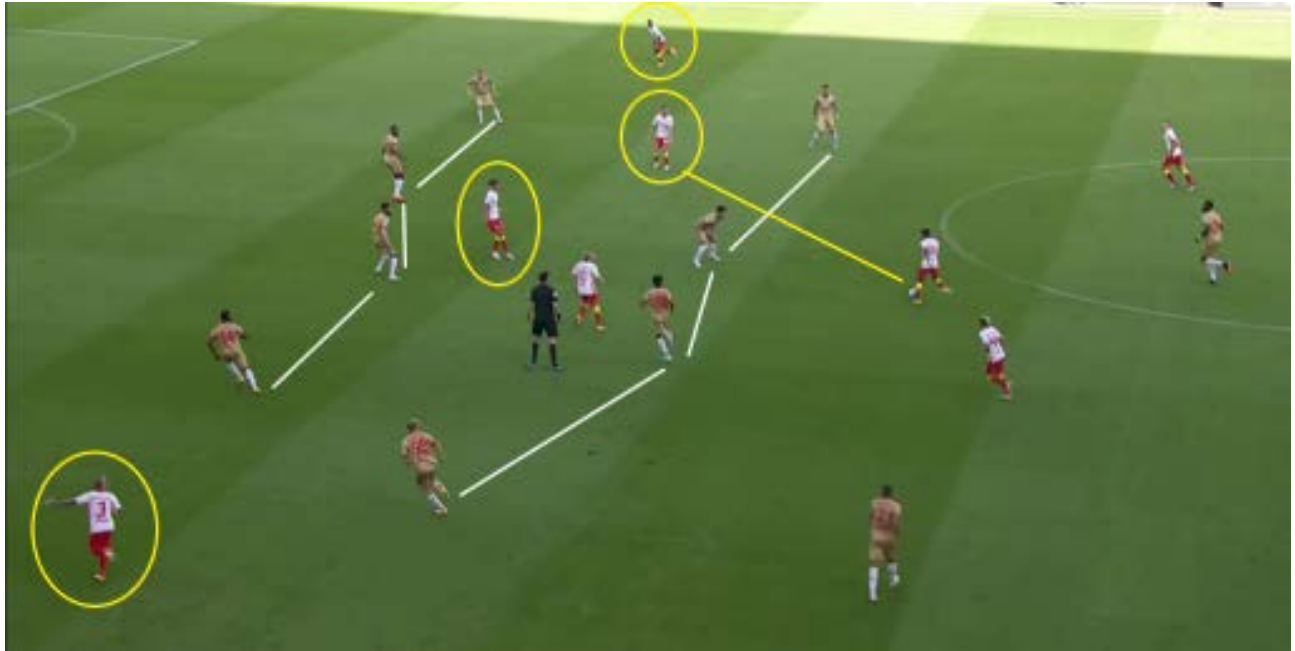


(The defenders are now invited toward the goal, and the second line of strikers can attack the defenders' rebounds, as Laimer can do in this situation, scoring a goal for Nagelsmann's team.)

When RB Leipzig creates strong sides out wide, the second center midfielder stands in the center and out of the condensed area; together with the teammates between the lines, they can carry out quick vertical passing patterns of play to finish.



(The left wingback Angelino plays out the condensed area along the flank, where the opponents have created a 2 v 2 duel; despite RB Leipzig has the numerical advantage around the ball with a 4 v 3 duel, the third opponent could intercept the ball toward the shortest passing options. The center back has pushed up in the middle third, and he stands in the right position to create a passing lane for the teammate.



Upamecano must now exploit the teammates between the lines and the moment when the opposition's midfield line shifts across to screen the ball carrier. Laimer and Poulsen stand in the center, and Angelino and Haitara can stand wide with enough space between them and the fullbacks; all of them are positioned in suitable zones to create passing lanes.



The second pivot, Forsberg, joins the attacking shape, and RB Leipzig creates a new numerical superiority situation against the opposition's back 4, together with the wingback and the center forward. The ball carrier decides to shot rather than to exploit the attacking situation.



When a center back can dribble the ball high up along the flank, he creates a numerical superiority 3 v 2, together with a shifting wide midfielder and the wingback; this way, the center back has the chances to overcome the direct opponent in front of him or 2 opponents with the midfielder's cooperation.



Haitara, the left pivot, shifts wide toward the left side back to the next opponent, making a blind run, and taking a suitable position to create a passing lane for the outer defender to overcome the opponent who was previously screening the passing lane toward the center midfielders.

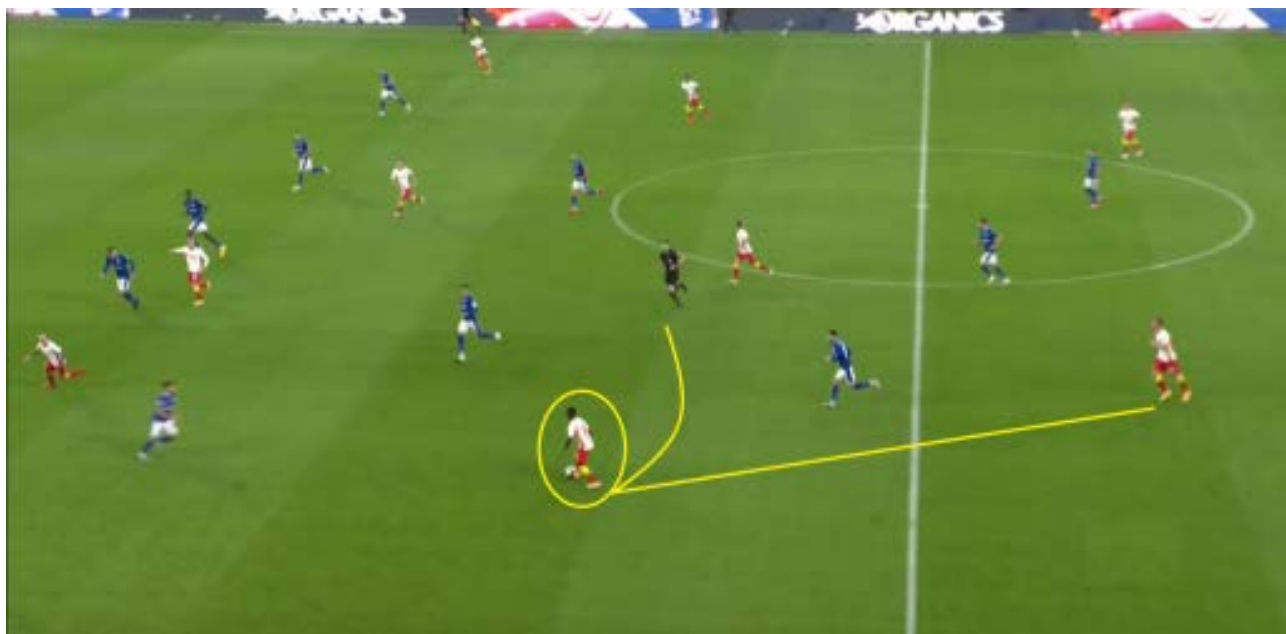


Haitara receives, and the left wingback Angelino moves forward along the flank, receiving from the teammate. Now, the opposition's center midfielder has to shift wide and backward to cover RB Leipzig's left wingback, as the fullback has been overcome due to the combination along the flank.

The center midfielders shift wide toward the half-space to create a considerable overload and a strong side around the ball. Together, the dropping deep forwards also create the chances for through passes in behind (or along the flank, as we have already analyzed).



The dropping deep forwards and the shifting wide midfielders create the chances for through passes in behind (or along the flank, as we have already analyzed).





If the opposition's lines are invited high up in the field, the line of three forwards can attack the space directly behind them.



(The left wingback Angelino passes backward to the left defender Halstenberg; both are under pressure.) Kampl provides a passing option in the center just out of the condensed areas, and RB Leipzig can play out toward the final third. Meanwhile, the forwards have invited the opposition's defenders higher up in the field, as Nkunku and Werner (he was still an RB Leipzig's player at the time) invite the defenders high. Poulsen stands between the center backs, and he is ready to attack the depth.

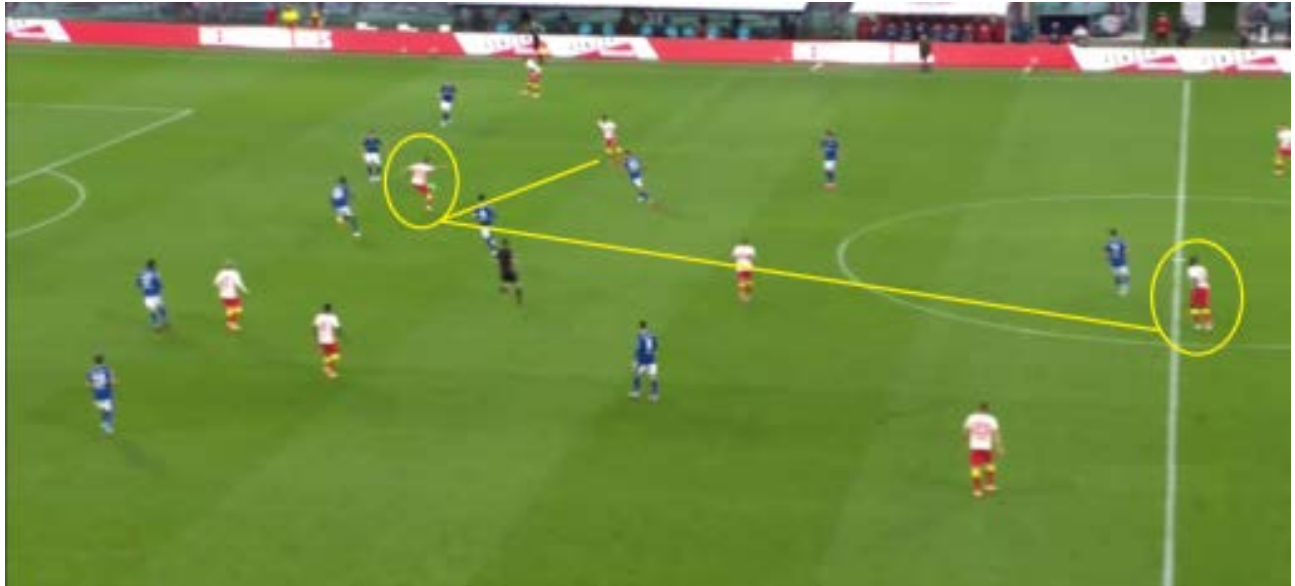


(Kampl can receive, turn, and play a long pass to the final third, exploiting his position out of the condensed area RB Leipzig has previously created along the attacking right flank. Werner stands still and forces 2 opponents to control him.)



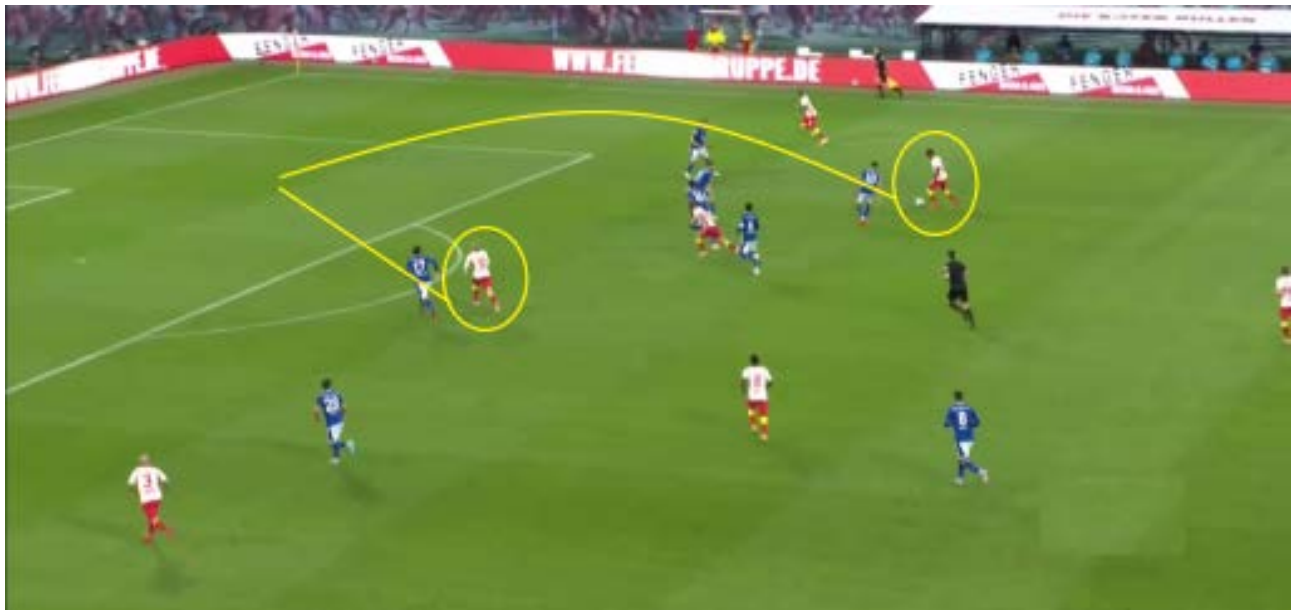
(Poulsen can attack the opposition's box in a 1 v 1 duel in front of the goalkeeper, scoring to the far post. The previous combined movements between the forwards have forced the opposition's defenders to lose time while checking them, and only one can track the RB Leipzig's striker through the middle third.)

Otherwise, when the opposition drops deep inside the defensive half, the center striker drops straight back between the lines to receive from the center backs.



Poulsen drops back, he receives from Upamecano, and he lays the ball off for Nukunku, who moves forward to provide support and equalize the duel against the opposition's back 5 lines. The dropping back and the moving forwards coordinate runs force the opponent to push high up to stand narrow and close.

The third man is now a recurrent tactic to exploit the opposition's high line.



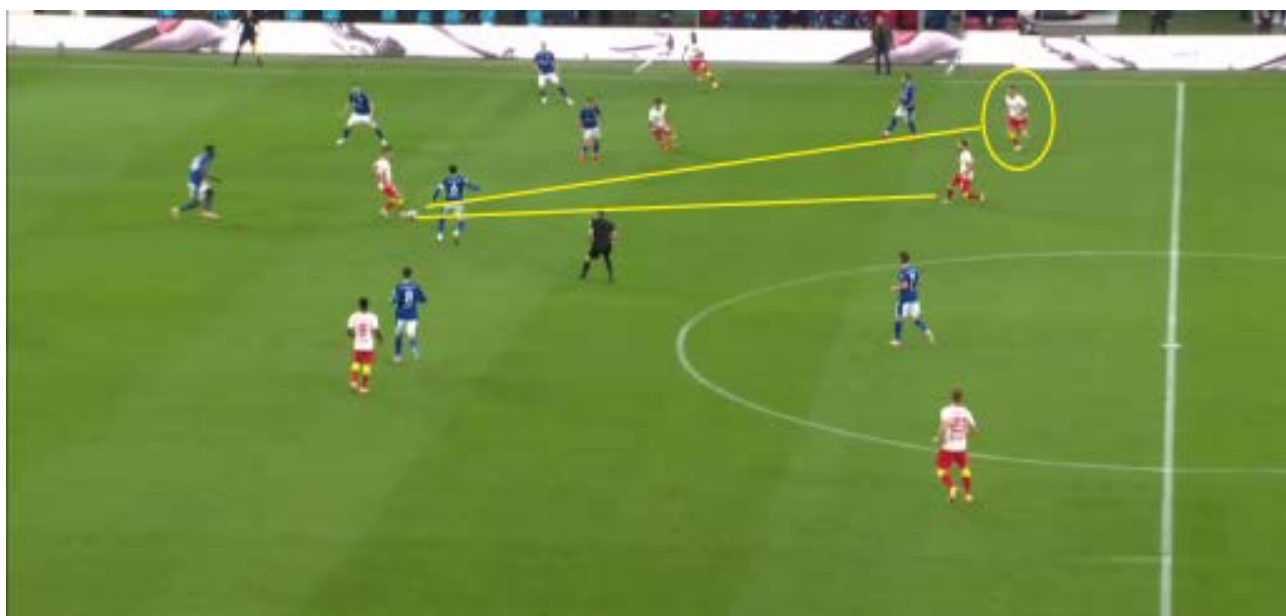
Forsberg can now move from the back toward the opposition goal as the third man, exploiting the defensive line's unbalanced shape.

If it is not possible to progress the move for the center midfielders after those kinds of combinations, one center back steps into the midfield line to provide an extra passing option, shaping a 1-4-2-1-3 shape

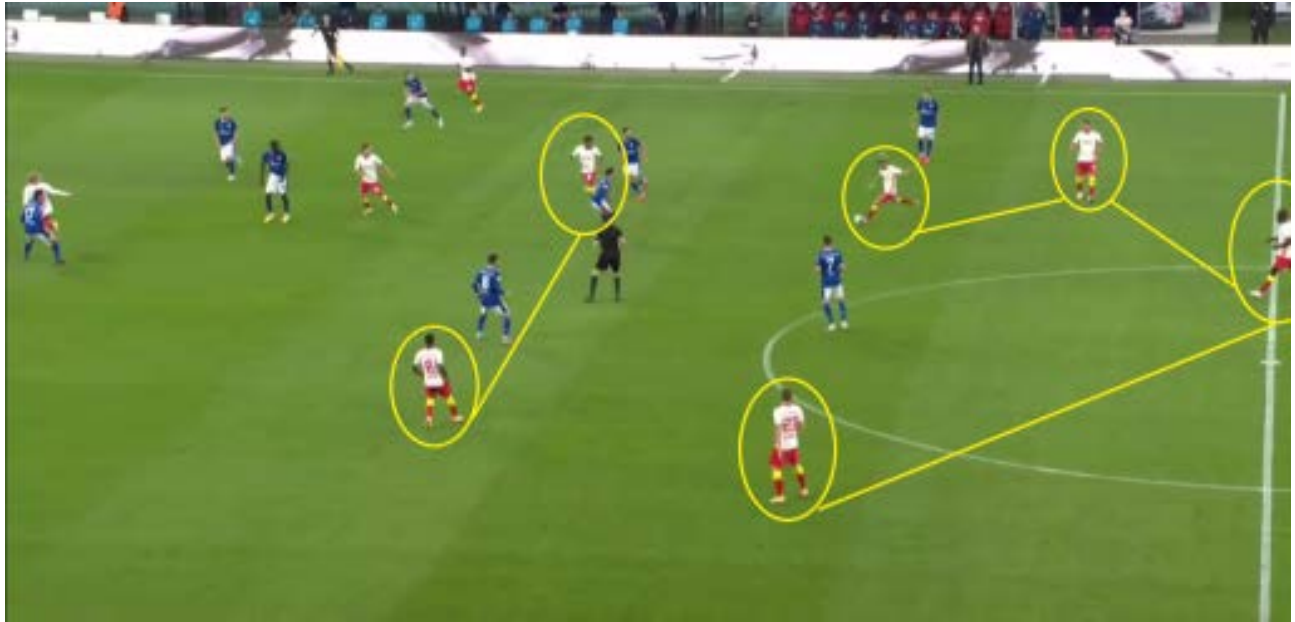


Klostermann joins the middle third line; Haidara, Olmo, Poulsen, and Mukiele shape the attacking line; Olmo stands higher up, exploiting the opposition's left positions defender and wingback.

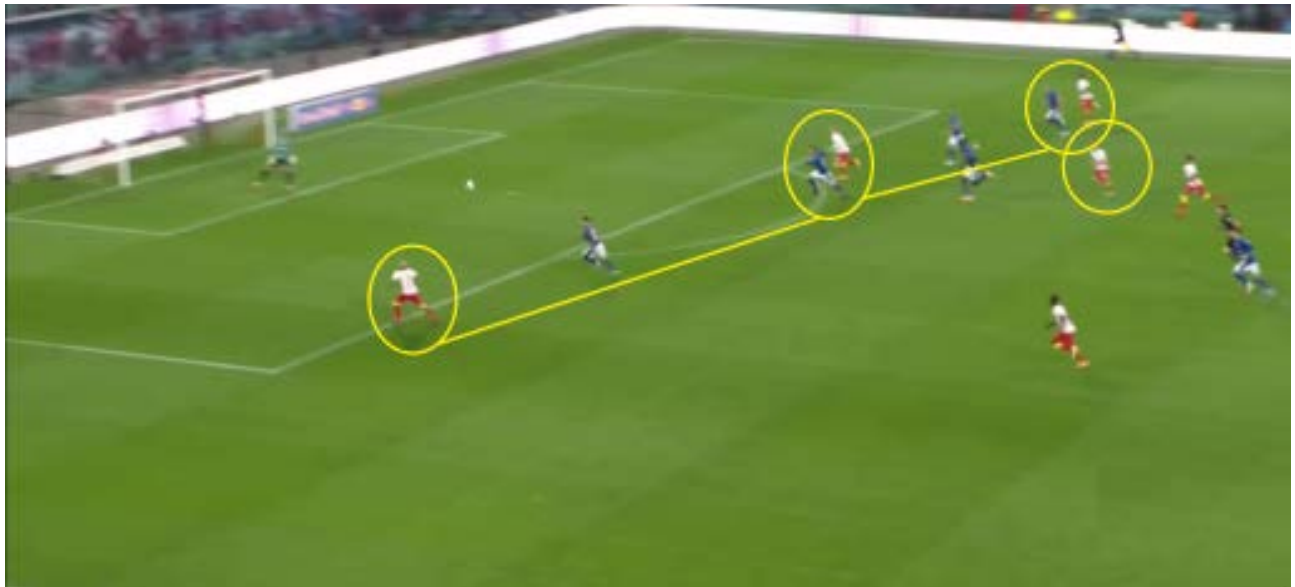
Otherwise, when the combination center back – striker – center midfielder works, but it's impossible to play forward to the final third, the opposite wingback is always wide and ready to receive a side switch.



In this example, where RB Leipzig shapes a 3-1-2-4 attacking shape, Haitara and Nkunku stand close in the center, inviting 3 opponents to create a numerical advantage situation.



Furthermore, the opponents have created a strong side along the right side; Forsberg, Poulsen, and Mukiele have forced the opposition's back 4 line to shift out wide along the defensive left side.

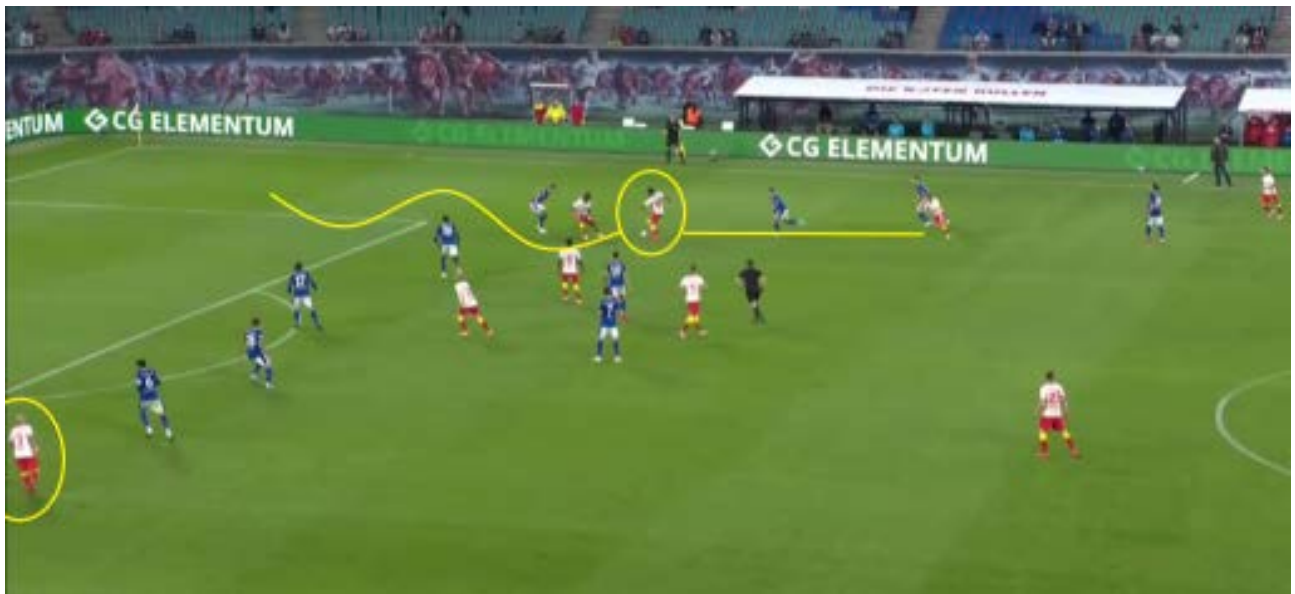


Kampl switches the side toward the left, where Angelino can receive free from markers and attack the goal. When the opposite wingback has received, the attacking players who have previously created the string side now attack the opposition's box to receive the cross pass.

The creation of a strong side around the ball invite the defensive line to move toward the ball, and the weak side can be attacked with a switch of side toward the opposite wingback; in this situation, the strong side has been created through passing patterns of play, rather than through a formation's shape.

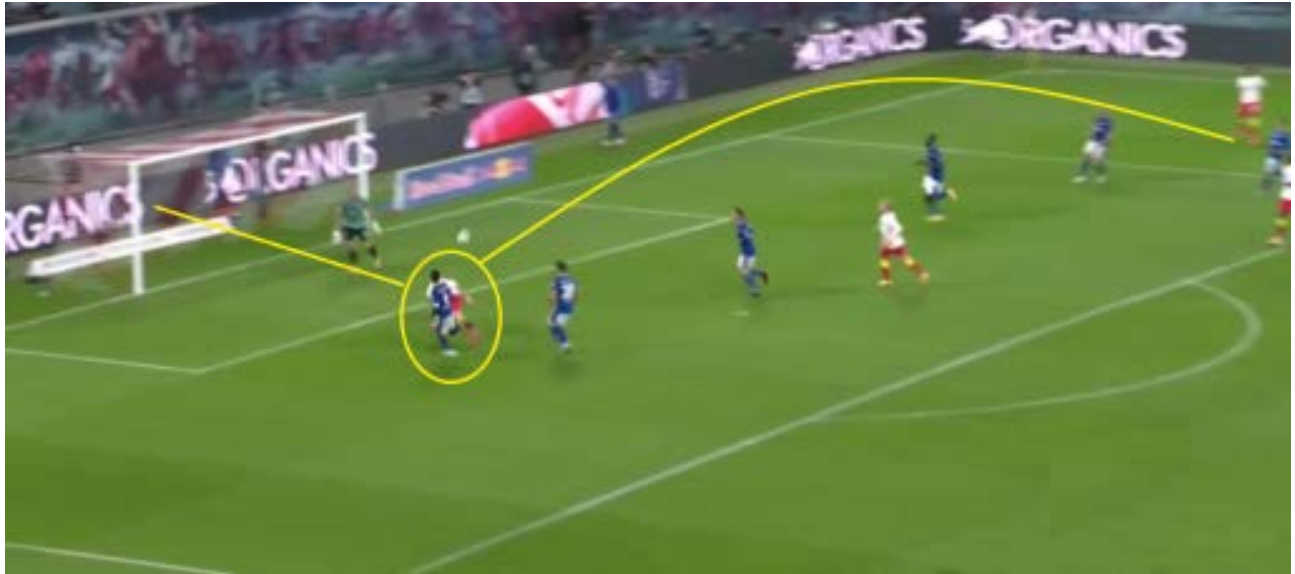


4 players create a string side along the attacking right flank. They create a general 4 v 4 duel and a 3 v 3 duel around the ball; Laimer receives, and Mukiele cuts inside from the sideline, overcoming the opposition pressure and playing out of the condensed area.



Mukiele exploits the teammate's dropping run, who invites his direct marker out of position, and he backbeats him. He can dribble the ball along the flank free from markers. Meanwhile, Angelino stands along the defensive line far from the opposition's wingback on the weak side.





RB Leipzig's left wingback Angelino can meet the cross pass from the box's right side, moving through the blindside and running in behind between him and the center back.

Otherwise, when RB Leipzig switches the side to play a cross pass after creating a strong area around the ball, the same players attack the box to receive and header the ball inside the box.



Sabitzer stands out and back to the condensed area, and he receives a back pass to switch the side.



Angelino, the left wingback, receives from Upamecano, who supports the attacking move, and he plays a cross pass into the box. In contrast, the ball travels to the opposite side. They spread out to attack the opposition's goal in the center and both the posts. They have numerical superiority 4 v 3 inside the box.



Schick headers the ball to the goal, jumping higher than the direct marker and exploiting the defenders' wrong positions in the center of the goal space.

RB Leipzig can score thanks to the players who attacked the opposition's goal while the defenders were shifting across to track the side switch.

- The same play patterns appear when the opponents screen the through and in behind passing lanes, and playing out wide is necessary...



Kampl has the possession in the center of the final third, but neither Poulsen, neither Schick can receive due to the high density of opponents who mark them. Kampl plays to the right to Laimer, who can receive free from markers. Halstemberg, the right center back who supports the attacking move, is free from markers too along the box's right side.



He plays a cross pass into the box, and Schick can header the ball free from markers, as all the defenders have tracked the ball's path out wide, losing time against the opponents.

- ...and even after pressure phases.



The strong side creation along the attacking left side invites the opposition's right center back and fullback to shift out wide, opening a gap between them and the other 2 defenders of the line. Poulsen, the center striker, stands in the center and between the left-center back and fullback. Kampl supports the attacking move pushing up in the field and shifting slightly wide, and he is a passing option to play out of the condensed area.

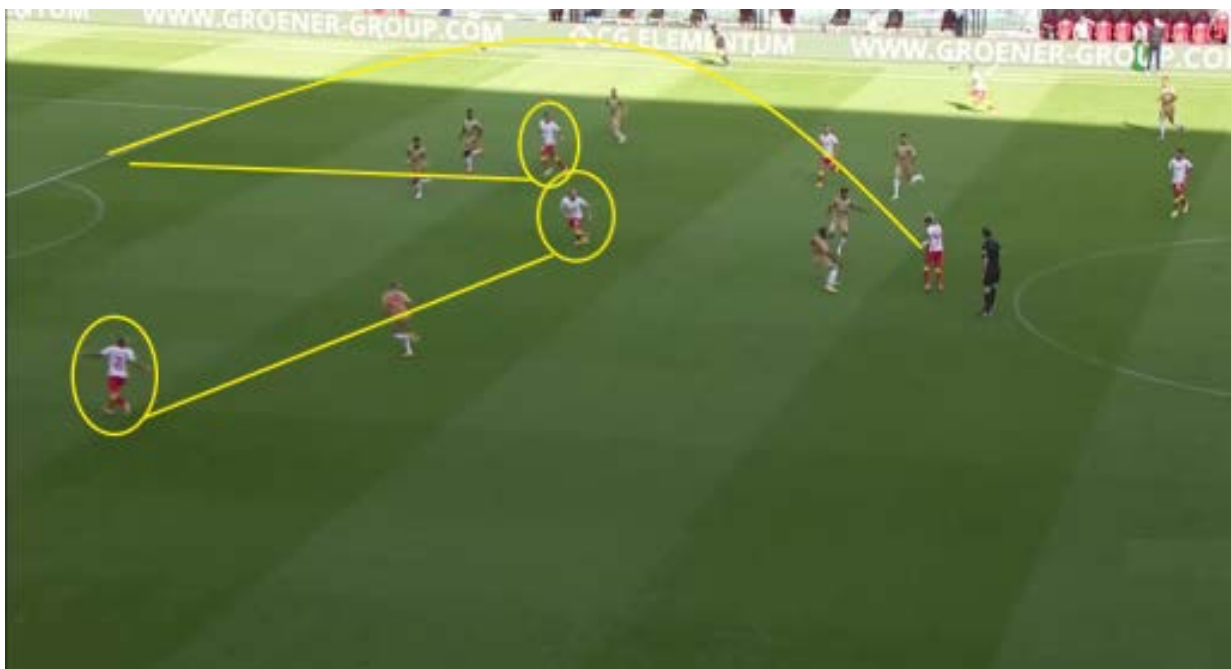


Kampl can play a through pass in behind the defensive line, exploiting the gap between the fullback and the center back that the previous strong side creation has opened in the defensive shape. Forsberg can move as the third man off the ball and receive at the back of the last opposition's line.



At the same time, Poulsen can attack the opposition's goal, beating the defenders the previous position between the center back and fullback along the weak side.

Combining players in front of the defenders and behind the last defensive line makes the defensive counter hard.



When the team must play through the center, the forwards are not aligned along the same lines; they stand in front of the defenders and ready to move in behind to stretch the opposition; Kampl has the ball, Angelino, and Forsberg stand deeper to invite the fullback out of position. Otherwise, Poulsen stands along the rest of 3 defenders, allowing the first 2 teammates to run and receive at the back in play.

- **The 1-3-3-3-1 formation to place 2 lines of midfielders in between the opposition's defensive lines**



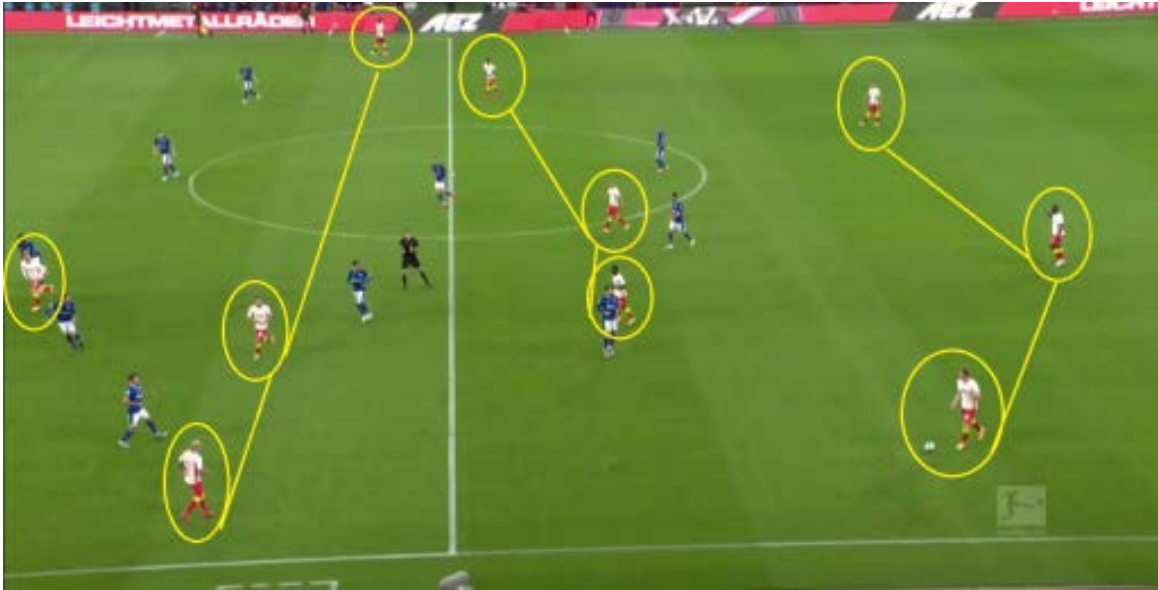
The first line of midfielders stands behind the opposition first pressure line, trying to open up passing chances through positions in the space between the pressing opponents' imaginary line.



The third line of players stands between the opposition's midfielders and defenders, together with the center striker, who usually stands between the opposition center backs.

The second line of three must provide chances for quick progressions from the back. The third line of three must provide support for the striker's layoff passes.

- **One of the attacking midfielders (the center one, usually) shifts into the half-space to create 3 v 2 overload out wide...** When RB Leipzig shapes the 1-3-3-3-1 shape, and one center back has the possession along the flanks, as Klostermann in this situation, the midfielders usually don't shift out wide, but one of the third lines of three does.

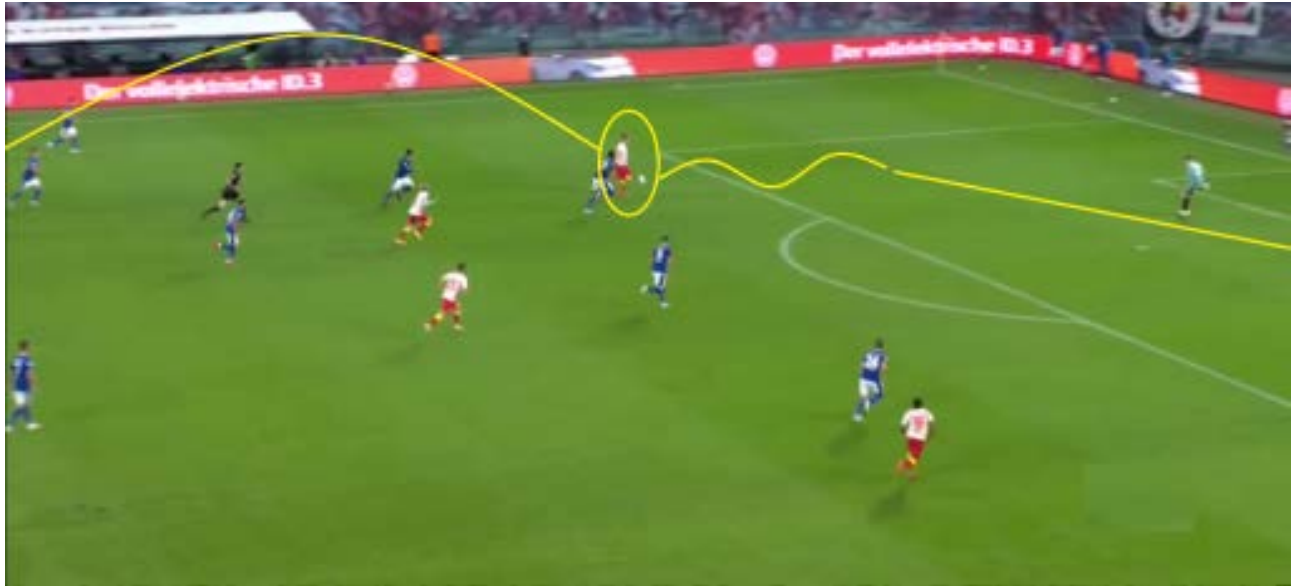


(Klostermann has the ball, Sabitzer shifts out wide to play near Angelino and creates a 3 v 2 duel along the left flank.)

- **...or drops back from the initial line of 4 strikers to invite the direct marker out of position and free the wingback or a wide striker.**



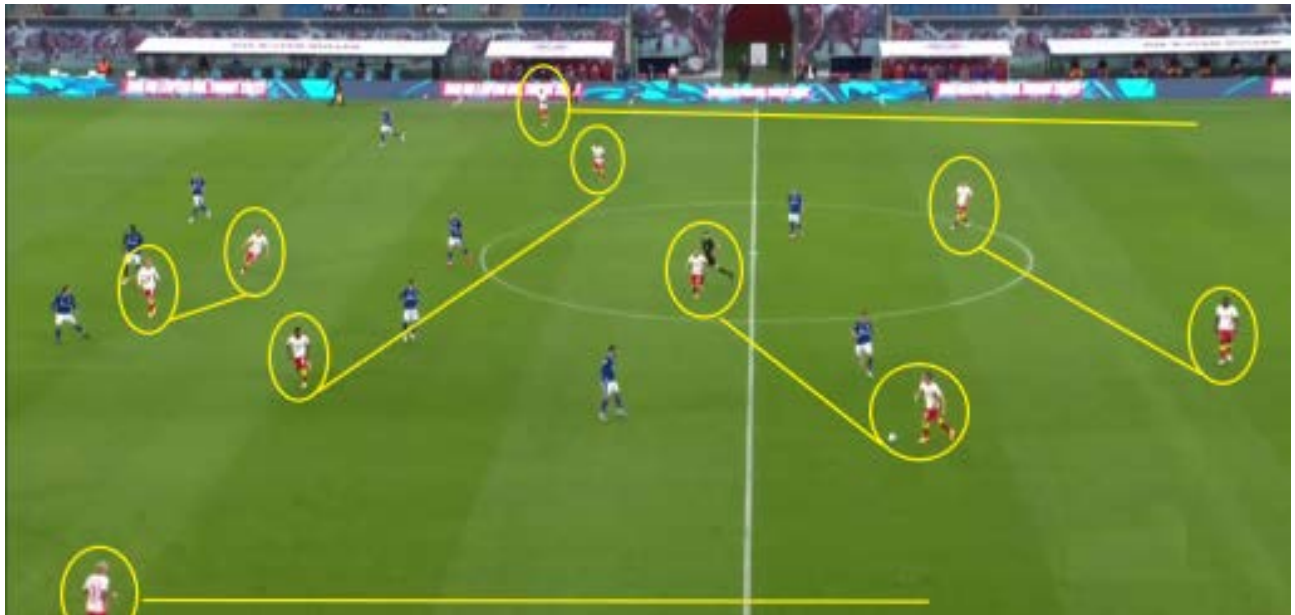
(Upamecano has the possession, and Haidara drops back, inviting one opposition's defender out of possession.)



Olmo, the left striker in this situation, exploits the space that the teammate has created to run in behind, receive, and shot to the goal's far post.

- **The 1-4-2-2-2 formation provides an extra line of players and verticality**

Narrow positions of the 8 central players; apart from the center backs, 2 holding midfielders, 2 center midfielders, and 2 center strikers, shape the formation



When RB Leipzig shapes this formation, the fullbacks become attacking players, joining the attacking midfielders and the center forwards (Angelino and Mukiele have pushed up in this situation, while Halstemberg has the possession in the middle third.)



When RB Leipzig builds up from the back, one center back joins the pivot, turning from a back 3 line to a 2 center defensive shape; the fullbacks stand diagonally concerning the center backs.



Upamecano pushes up to stand along the same line of the pivot Kampl.

When the center midfield sector shapes 2 pivots in front of the backline, when the dropping back target player receives from defenders, the holding midfielders run toward different directions, creating a passing triangle.



Kampl drops back, and Haidara pushes higher up in the field.

The fullbacks become attacking players as the rest of the team condenses the thirds' center space.



While the team is building up from the back, the center midfielders have 2 tasks, basically;

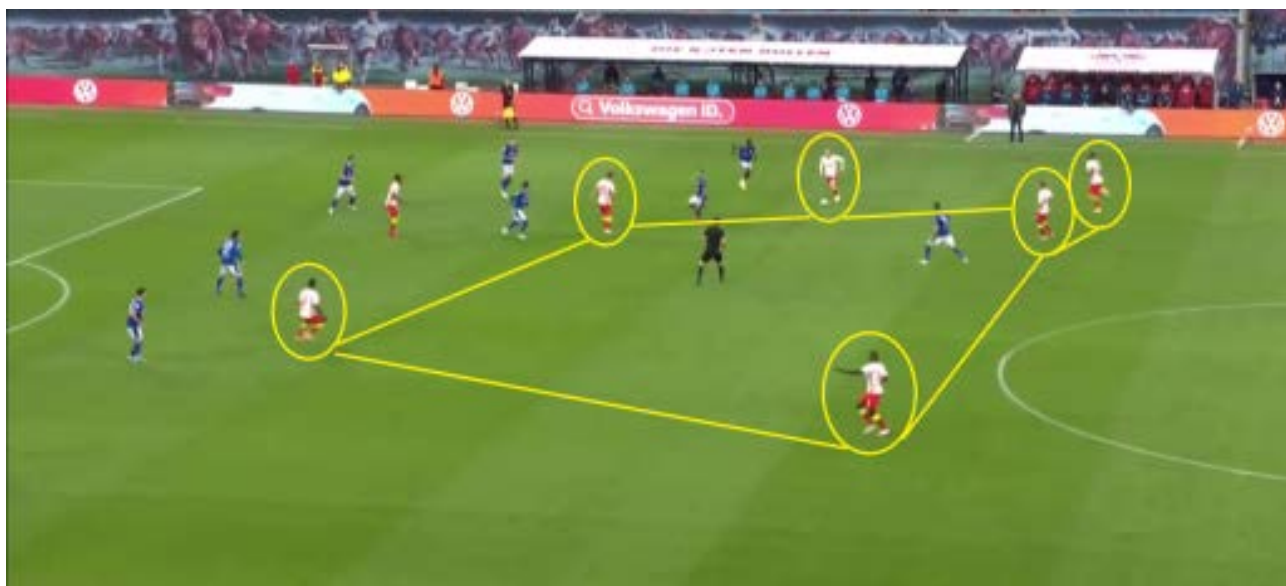
1. Move toward and through the half-space to be a passing option for the center backs to overcome the opposition's lines of pressure



2. Shift wide to open up the passing lanes to the center forwards or support the possession phase after breaking the pressure lines.



This way, a sort of hexagon, or a six players box in the center that congests the middle third, it helps Leipzig to counter-press effectively after losses of possession



The aim is to make busy as many defenders as possible with the fewest number of players likely.

The strikers move between the opposition's center backs and fullbacks to allow the advanced midfielders to receive in behind, having enough time and space on the ball to finish or assist a teammate



(Poulsen and Olmo stand between the opposition's center backs on the left, and Haitara has time and space to move in behind off the ball along the space between the center backs on the right.)



(Haitara can receive free from markers in front of the goal and score against the goalkeeper, who is leaving the line.)

If the opposition place 2 strikers to screen the passing lanes toward the second line of No.4s, one center back drives the ball into the midfield, creating 3 v 2 duels against the opponents.

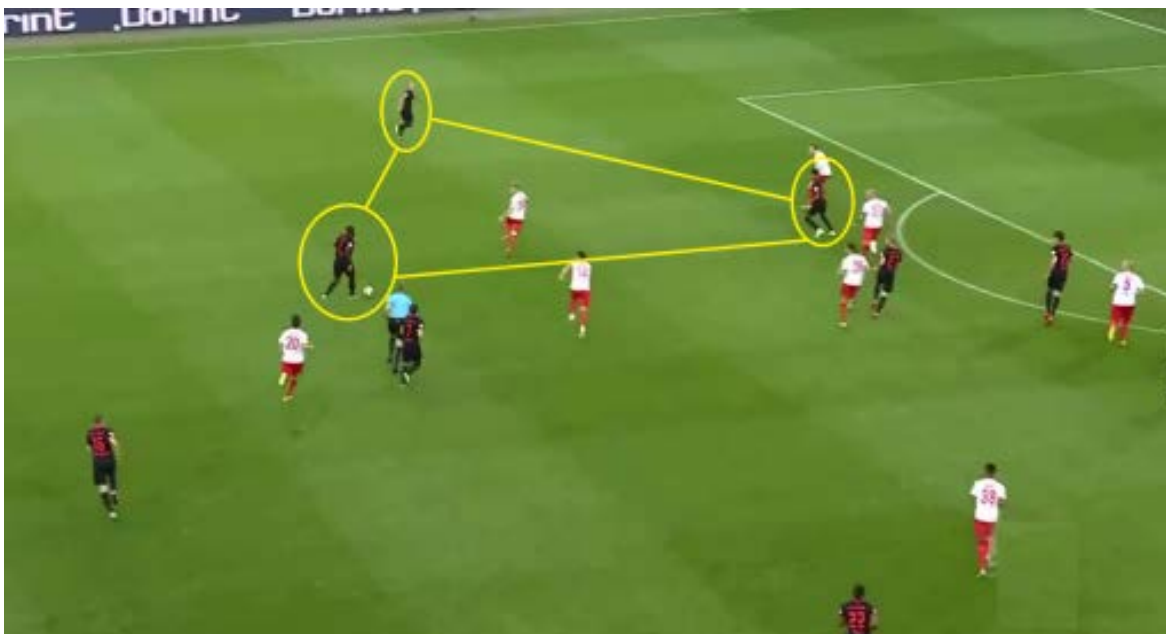


(Upamecano dribbles the ball toward the opponents...



...and he creates a 3 v 2 duel together with Sabitzer and Kampl around the center cycle.)

Furthermore, suppose the opposition defends deep inside the first third. In that case, RB Leipzig's center backs can dribble even higher in the field to create 3 v 2 duels with an advanced midfielder and the fullback and spaces at the back of the opposition's fullback; the advanced midfielder usually stands inside the half-space. The German team's vertical shape forces the opponents to condense the center, opening gaps along the flanks.



(Upamecano dribbles the ball till the final third, Haitara stands inside the half-space forcing the opposition's fullback to stand in the center, and Angelino is then free to receive along the flank free from pressure.)

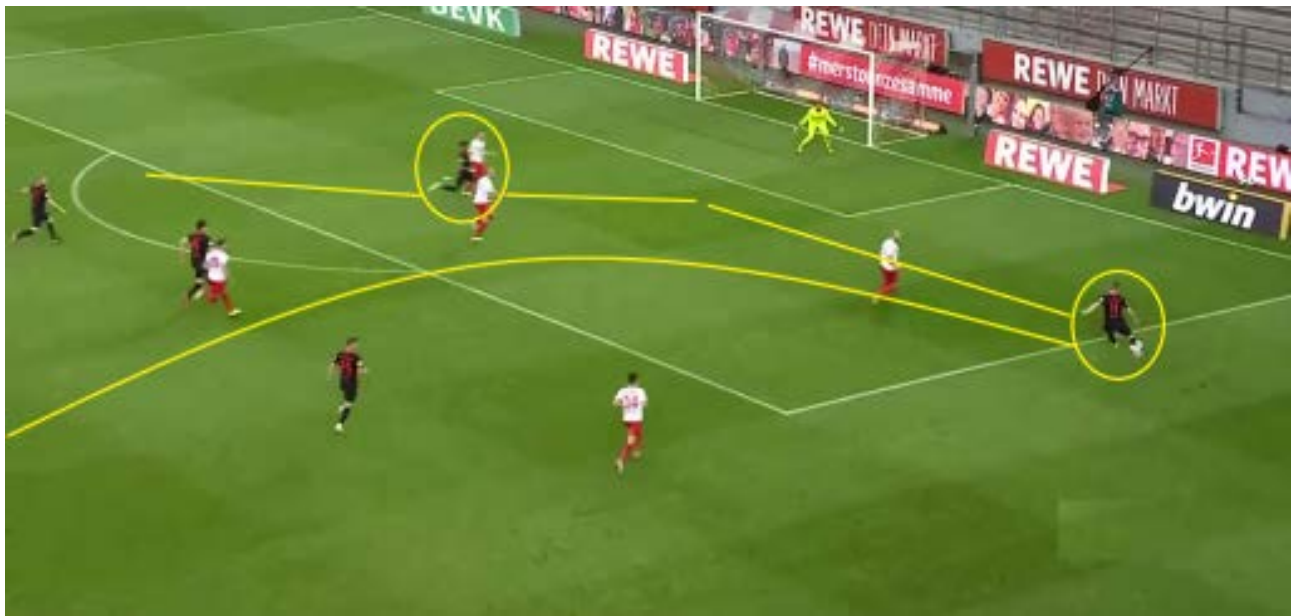


All the players that have condensed the center before can now attack the opposition's box.

This 1-4-2-2-2 shape allows attacking the half-space and the area between the opposition center back and fullback...



...and to look for 3<sup>rd</sup> man runs off the ball in behind.



To counter-attack, usually, one forward moves away from the defensive line, inviting the marker out of positions, he lays the ball back for a running teammate, and the others engage in 1 v 1 duels against the remaining defenders.



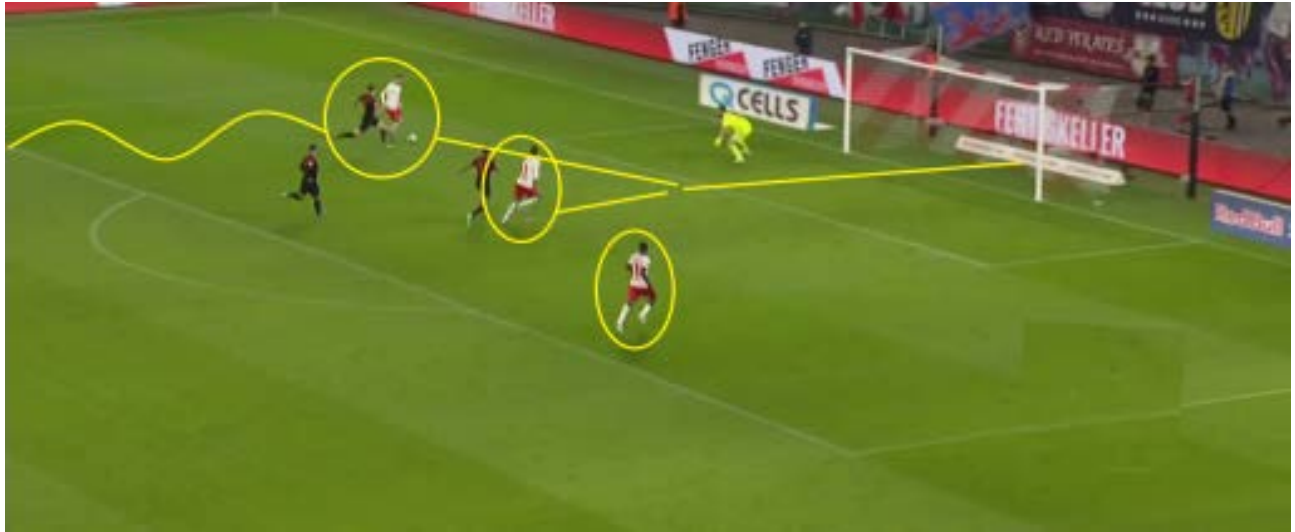
(Poulsen drops back and he lays the ball back to Sabitzer just after the ball's recovery, inviting his direct marker out of position.)



Sabitzer can exploit the gap and dribble the ball high up in the field; Olmo on the left and Haidara on the right can attack the deep spaces inside the offensive half.

Poulsen creates a 3 v 3 duel, supporting the counter-attacking move after the initial dropping back run.





Olmo plays a cross pass toward the space between the opposition's defenders, and goalkeeper and Poulsen can score.

The center backs also dribble the ball higher up in the field when RB Leipzig shape single pivots formation shapes, as in this 1-3-1-3-3 situation.



Halstenberg dribbles the ball high up in the field, and he joins Kampl, who is the only center pivot in this situation.

## Set-pieces

RB Leipzig scored 15 goals from set-plays during the last season, and we can consider them a crucial attacking weapon, taking into consideration the 81 total scored goals (18,5%). They use a variety of intelligent decoy runs and movements to get the chance to shoot.

Blockers create separation from markers. Patrick Schick is at the center of many movements and is often a target player due to his good aerial ability.



Here, Patrick Schick starts as the closest to the near post, while runners move towards the same near post's area. Opposition's man-mark the RB Leipzig's players, and the back post/center area is underloaded; Schick then moves into this area, and the oncoming runners block his marker towards the near post.



Schick's marker can't follow him, as he is blocked, and the RB Leipzig's striker can score heading the ball inside the free space.

RB Leipzig's players create a block in the center in this further situation, and Upamecano moves toward the overloaded area to lose his marker, as the blocker moves towards him.



Upamecano can then create a gap between him and his marker to have more time and space to header the ball to goal.

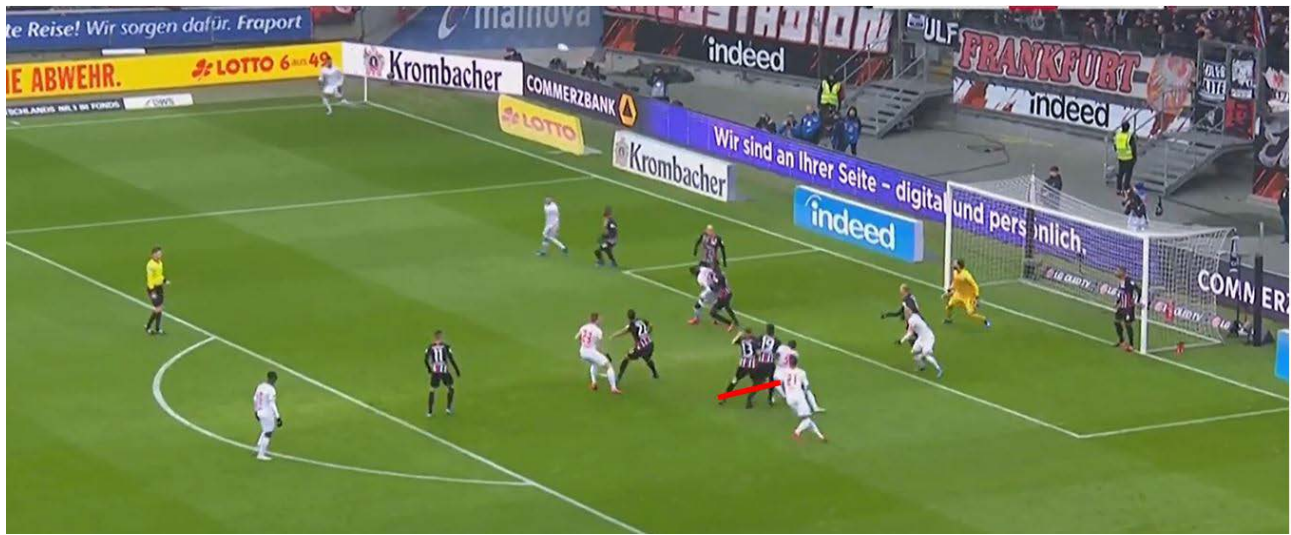


Schick could also header the ball on the far post, exploiting the space that the defenders' movements create to counter the in-swinging corner kick.

Simultaneously, all the other RB Leipzig's players can move toward the ball, and only 2 of 4 are properly goal side marked.

The opponents are now forced to a zonal marking situation due to the blocking tactic, and 3 RB Leipzig are free to attack the ball to score.

Here again, Schick and Upamecano combine, with one blocking to create space for the other.



Schick arches his run from the center to the back post, while Upamecano remains far side of his opponent and makes a run to the back post. Upamecano is then able to stay far side and block both his markers, and Schick can run toward the back post area.

The creation of separation is another tactical solution to free one player on the near post and create space in the center for an incoming 3<sup>rd</sup> man.



Two players run toward the same direction (near post, in this example) to block the opposition's path to the ball, preventing them from heading.

The out-swinging delivery provides more chances to the more in-depth player of the 2 on the near post or the incoming 3<sup>rd</sup> player in the center if the ball's trajectory is longer and higher toward the penalty point.

The creation of space in front of the goal is always the main aim of the movements off the ball, apart from the in-swinging or out-swinging ball's delivery.



Werner initially positions himself on the near post, making a fake movement to invite the opposition toward the front post's area; the marker tracks him, creating a large space and a defensive issue. Orban can run from the back, heading the ball inside the area that Werner has just freed.

In this further situation, RB Leipzig empties space and then runs back to win the header, again creating a defensive issue. The ball is driven to the back post toward a 3<sup>rd</sup> man's runner to the marker's far side.



Eventually, this is another example of space creation with blindside movements in the first post.



Timo Werner runs from the near post zonal marker's blindside, and he makes the timing of this near post marker's run difficult, as he can't see the opponent's movement.

Werner also has dynamic superiority. He picks up speed while running toward this zone; Werner has more chances to win the header, anticipating his opponent, if the corner's taker plays an in-swinging pass.

### Summary

Verticality is the main principle of play that underlies all the possession and attacking phases of Nagelsmann's RB Leipzig. This play principle has to be analyzed in 2 ways; the first one is from passing patterns of play to progress the move through the thirds. The second one is the verticality of players' runs that requires horizontal passing combinations to find the right passing path. Verticality is not only through passes, but it also dribbles through the thirds and runs off the ball in behind the lines or dropping back movements to invite defenders out of position, or even long ball to the final third.

This principle takes RB Leipzig to shape many formations concerning the opponents and the tactical ideas to beat them playing through the thirds; all of them are tools to carry out these "vertical principles of play."

For all those reasons, to write an ultimate analysis book about RB Leipzig is very hard, but this book takes a look at:

- Julian Nagelsmann's career as a coach;
- The Nagelsmann's effect on RB Leipzig (2018/2019 vs. 2019/2020 seasons);
- Comparison with the rest of the Bundesliga average attacking data (2019-2020);
- Possession and attacking principles that create the aggressive and vertical style of play;
- Set-pieces.