

FLEXIBLE FORMATIONS

DEFENDING

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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By

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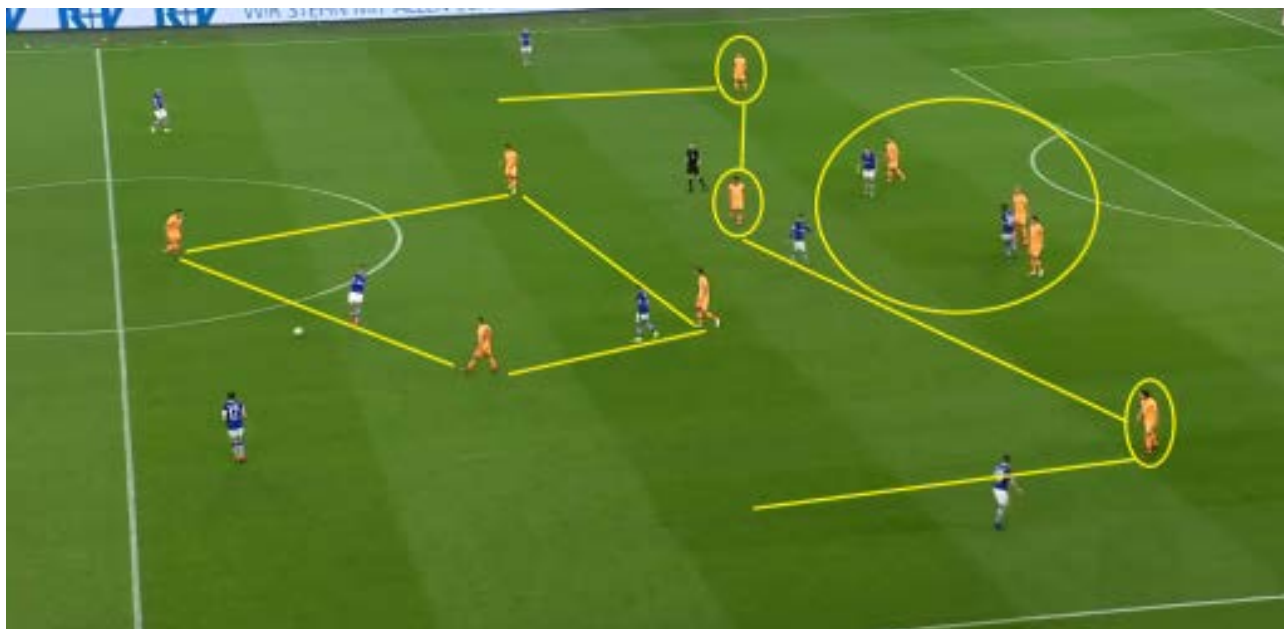


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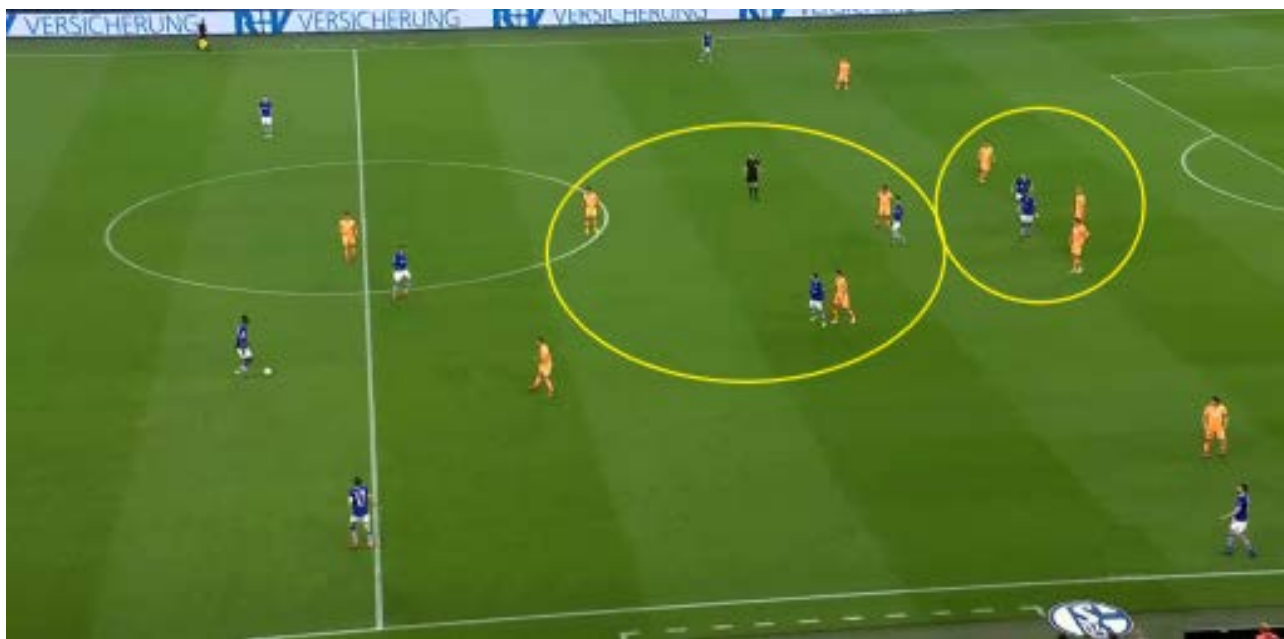
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Introduction: Nagelsmann's defensive principles at Hoffenheim

At Hoffenheim, the basic 1-3-5-2 attacking shape turned into a 1-3-3-2 defensive shape. The 4 attacking players congested the center space in front of the holding midfielder and the wingbacks joining the 3 center backs to create a line of 5 at the back.



The key was to create numerical superiority in the center to prevent the opposition from playing through the middle third and behind the center backs area; Hoffenheim deliberately allowed the opponent to play along the flank.



(Center backs and midfield trio shape a double 3 v 2, leaving space along the flanks.)

2 advanced midfielders behind the strikers shifted wide to overload the ball's area when Hoffenheim was pressing high up in the field; the strikers usually tracked the ball path along the opposition backline (ex, a fullback with the ball and the nearest passing option, the center back).



(The advanced midfielders create a 4 v 3 duel along the defensive left flank, forcing the opposition's fullback to play a long ball.)

When the opposition defensive lines distributed the ball to switches the side, the attacking midfielders completed the pressure line of 4, countering the other 2 defenders, along the opposite side, concerning the strikers' pressure side.



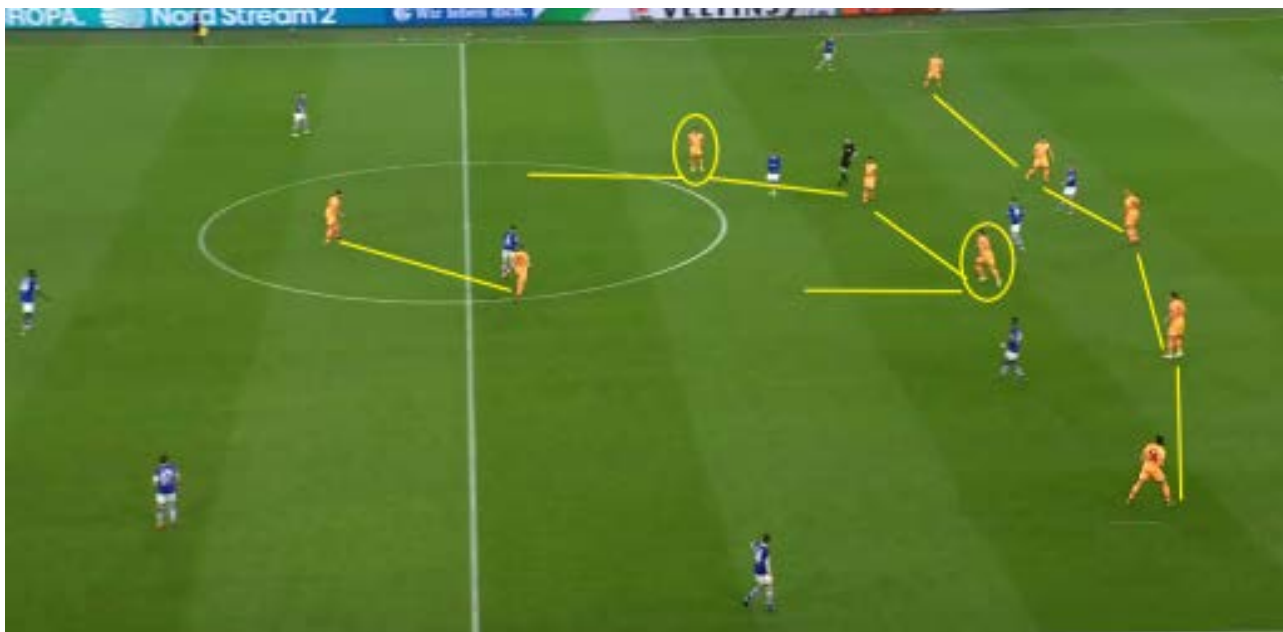
(Strikers and advanced midfielders create a 4 v 4 situation against the opposition's defensive line.)

When the strikers were pressing, but the distances didn't allow direct defensive actions, the advanced midfielders covered the opposite side to prevent the ball carriers from playing to the holding midfielder or switching the side of play.



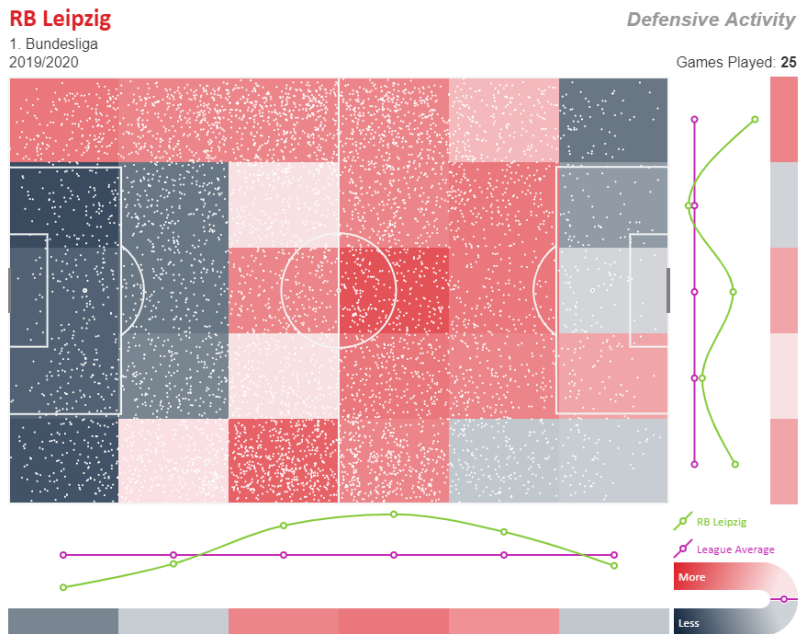
The four lines of players provided immediate backward or forward vertical passing paths after the ball's recovery.

When the opposition forced Hoffenheim to defend deep, the attacking midfielders drop deep beside the holding midfielder, shaping the defensive 1-5-3-2 formation



RB Leipzig's defensive aims and 2019/2020 vs. 2020/2021 (as of 2020 October the 18th) stats

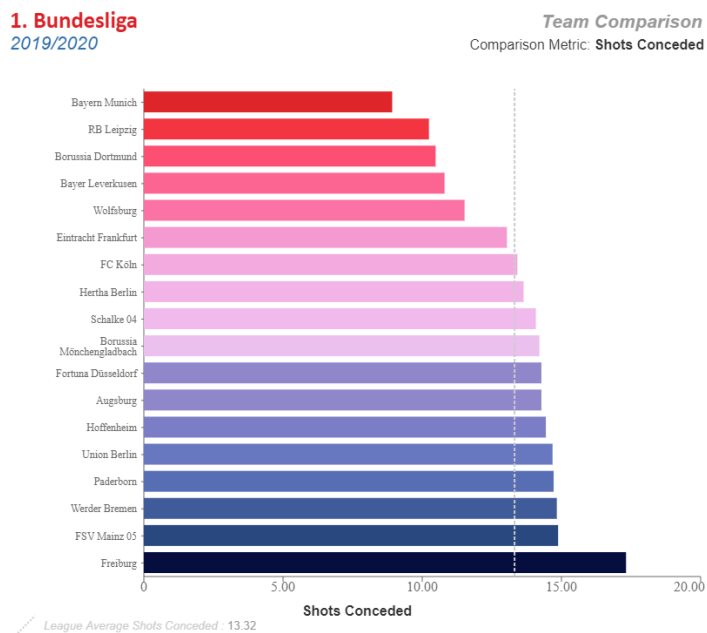
Leipzig wants to defend far from their own goal and force the opponents to beat the aggressive pressure, forcing mistakes to create chances.



Challenge Intensity	Interceptions	Clearances
6	1466	516
	43,11 (p. 90' - 40,76)	15,08
Defensive duels		won
2169		1379
63,79 (p. 90' - 60,31)		40,56
Sliding tackles	won	%
	306	150
6,38	3,13	49,02

Aerial duels	won	%
1080	542	50,02
31,76 (p. 90' - 30,03)	15,94	

At the same time, Nagelsmann's team is also a classic shot-suppression side, as Germany's second-fewest shots concedes.



Conceded goals	xGA	Shots against	
37	40.03	325	
p. match 0,92 p.90' - 1,09		9,04	
xG p. shot against		on target	
0,123		128	
		3,76	
Shot ag. p.90'	%	Blocked shots	p.90'
9,56	39,38	79	2,2
% blocked shots		% blocked shots against	
20,09		23.1	

Despite the aggressive pressure, RB Leipzig conceded too many goals to be a League winning contender due to some issues we will analyze in the last chapter of the book.

RB Leipzig's defensive trend of the second season with Nagelsmann as head coach, after just a few Bundesliga's matches, to be honest, it seems to be again focused on a balanced team defensive phase, trying to choose when and how to press the opposition, improving the young German coach pressure idea concerning the previous coach, who asked the team a constant aggressive pressure.

Defensive Parameters					
PARAMETERS		3 → matches		34 → matches	
		AVG	AVG		
Goals conceded	↑	0.67	1.09	↓	Goals conceded
Ball recoveries	↓	77.67	86.21	↑	Ball recoveries
Ball recoveries in the opponent half	↑	30.33	27.41	↓	Ball recoveries in the opponent half
Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s	↑	4.67	4.62	↓	Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s
Interceptions	↓	40.67	43.09	↑	Interceptions
Ball losses	↑	99	110.5	↓	Ball losses
Ball losses in his own half	↑	27	36.74	↓	Ball losses in his own half
Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s	↑	3	4	↓	Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s
Defensive actions	↑	138.67	138.56	↓	Defensive actions
Total successful defensive actions	↓	99.33	99.47	↑	Total successful defensive actions
Expected shot against	↑	0.58	1.15	↓	Expected shot against

For now, the results are a lower average of conceded goals per game, a more efficient high defensive shape that takes the team to recover the ball inside the opposition's half (with shots also); the expected goals against is halved indeed. The balanced defensive shape is also the result of a more efficient possession phase, as the averages of ball losses and those lost in the won half are decreased. The defensive actions and the successful ones are on the same page of the first Nagelsmann's season in charge. Generally, the ball recoveries have decreased, but as a consequence of fewer ball losses.

Duels Parameters					
PARAMETERS		3 → matches		34 → matches	
		AVG	AVG		
Defensive duels made	↓	63	63.71	↑	Defensive duels made
Defensive duels won	↑	33.67	16	↓	Defensive duels won
Offensive duels made	↓	65.33	69.79	↑	Offensive duels made
Offensive duels won	↓	28.67	34.59	↑	Offensive duels won
Aerial duels made	↑	35	31.76	↓	Aerial duels made
Aerial duels won	↑	19.33	15.94	↓	Aerial duels won
Pressing duels	↑	50.33	42.21	↓	Pressing duels

To press in a more balanced way doesn't mean don't push anymore; the average of pressing duels increases (the Ppda of this season is 7,95, for now, against the 11,67 during the last one). The real crucial data is the increased average of defensive duels won that is more than doubled, playing the same number of defensive duels per game. The aerial duels, and won, are also increased, showing that the opposition needs to play more long aerial balls due to the RB Leipzig's defensive shape. The higher challenge intensity of these first matches of the season (7.6) is higher than the previous one (6).

Pressure phase

When opposition builds up play, Leipzig usually shapes a **1-4-4-1-1...**



(2 v 1 against the opposition holding midfielder, 6 v 3 against the opposition's strikers, and potential 2 v 1 along the weak defensive side.)

...1-4-3-1-2



(3 v 1 against the opposition holding midfielder, 3 midfielders screening the through passing paths and ready to counter the opponents in front of them, 4 v 3 situation along the defensive line.)

...or 4-2-3-1 formations.



(The center striker stands in front of the opposition's center back, the advanced center midfielder is ready to counter the opposition's holding midfielders, and the outer ones are screening the passing paths along the half-spaces; they are also prepared to press the opposition's wide defenders or the wingbacks.)



(The back 4 line shifts across to create a string side near the ball, and the center midfielders screen the passing paths toward the center; the farthest fullback concerning the ball is ready to counter the opponent preventively.)

[When RB Leipzig stands deeper toward the goal, the defensive shape becomes liquid, as we will analyze further in this book.]

The strikers adapt their positions to the opponent, and they vary slightly within games also.



2 strikers are screening the passing paths toward the middle third, and they are ready to counter the opposition center backs; the No.10 is preventively marking the holding midfielder. The strikers' body positions close the center options and invite the opposition's possession to build up out wide.



As the opposition's goalkeeper passes the ball to the fullback, the nearest forward shifts out wide too, and the teammates follow the direction of play to close down the center passing paths again.

If the opposition asks the holding midfielder to drop in between the center backs and the fullbacks to push up along the flanks, RB Leipzig's shapes the pressure line with 3 players, as the No.10 tracks the holding midfielder.



One wide midfielder tracks the opponent who becomes the momentary holding midfielder behind the forwards line; all the passing options are closed down.



The pressure shape forces the opposition's goalkeeper to go long.

The deliberate intention to force the opposition's building up the phase out wide becomes even more evident in this next sequence.



The RB Leipzig's center forwards screen the passing path toward the center and the holding midfielder. The advanced midfielders stand narrow in the center, close to the opposition's midfielders. The defensive right side is controlled, and the only opposition's player who can receive are the right fullback and winger.



As the fullback receive, the nearest advanced midfielder closes him down, and the backline of 5 covers the depth with a 5 v 3 numerical superiority. A 1-5-3-2 defensive shape becomes clear now.



Suppose the opposition fullback and winger try to combine. In that case, RB Leipzig's wingbacks push high up quickly to force him backward, allowing the team to seek for numerical superiority near the ball.



The outer midfielder stands out wide, waiting for the holding midfielder to shift wide too, creating a 3 v 2 numerical superiority near the ball and closing the opponents down the flank, as no passing option toward the center is available.

When the opposition tries to distribute the ball from one side to the other in the first third, RB Leipzig lets the center backs playing between each other, but they create strong sides along the flanks, closing down the passing diagonal passing lanes to the center.



The opposition's goalkeeper has possession. The strikers screen the passing lanes to the midfielders; only the center backs can receive and play between them, as the fullback and the center midfielder are immediately under pressure.



RB Leipzig creates a 4 v 2 situation out wide, and the ball carrier must switch the side to the opposite flank, passing to the second center back.

Suppose the center back can play out wide to the fullback. In that case, the strikers and the midfielders shift out wide to create numerical superiority again. The farther striker screen the diagonal passing path to the center midfielders, forcing the ball carrier to pass it along the flank.



A 5 v 4 numerical superiority situation is clear in this picture.

Apart from the defensive shapes, when the opposition builds up from deep, RB Leipzig deliberately let them playing toward specific areas;

- **If they are strong in playing through the center thanks to numerical superiority, Leipzig forces the direction of play out wide** (the front 3 shifts in a 2-1, compacting the center)



The strikers close the center passing paths, and the midfielders create a 3 v 2 numerical superiority situation.

The sideline becomes an extra-defender, and the wingback push high, or the outer midfielder shifts wider and diagonally to prevent progressions, cutting of center passing paths, forcing mistakes or backward passes



(The opposition's fullback receives, but he can't play toward the center with the right timing, as the passing patch is closed.)



The center midfielder is forced to run out wide toward the sideline to receive, but he can only play quickly along the flank. The outer midfielder, the wingback, and the outer defender close the opponents and create a 3 v 2 situation with numerical superiority.

- if they are strong in playing along the flanks, and Leipzig have the natural numerical superiority in the center, the pressure phase aims to cut off the passing options out wide



The opposition center back has the possession, but the center strikers screen the passing lanes to the right fullback and the second center. N0.10 screen the center passing lanes to the middle third and look after the opposition's pivot preventively.

When the first opposition's pivot receives a pass, Leipzig pivots press the ball carrier from the blind side high in the field to win the ball or force him backward



In this sequence, the pivot receives, but he is immediately closed down and forced backward.

Before the player receives in the center, RB Leipzig creates a strong side along the blind flank concerning the ball carrier, deliberately forced toward his team attacking the right side.



The pivot can only play backward to the center back, as the pivot prevents him from turning, together with the No.10, who moved deeper under the ball's line.



Here again, the center back receives the ball. Still, one striker is ready to cover the passing path to the second center back, and the 2 players behind the center one are screening the passing lane to the fullback. The pivot is still standing high up in the field to close down the opposition's holding midfielders.



In the 4-4-1-1, Patrick Schick often stands as the temporary No.10 near the opponent's center midfielders.



The striker, who is the most advanced team player, is standing along the imaginary line between the center back. The holding midfielder and Schick are standing in the middle of the opposition's midfield trio. He is ready whoever receives the ball from the fullback.

Since he was sold to Chelsea by the end of the 2019/2020 season (and now Poulsen), Werner stands higher up as a runner, pushing the center backs wide toward the flanks guide passes toward the sideline.



The flanks, though, are not being defended head-to-head. Especially in the 4-4-1-1, Leipzig's wingers are positioned centrally in the midfield line and only move in on the opponent when he receives the ball to prevent diagonal passes. The opposite winger usually shifts across the center circle, creating a strong side and congesting the center.



The fullback has the ball. He has to pass it back to avoid RB Leipzig's defensive action. The dropping back winger could receive a numerical inferiority situation (2 v 1), and the center midfielders are 1 v 1 marked.

Leipzig's central midfielders are typically man-orientated when an opponent pushes forward through the center to receive an option behind the halfway line.



The opposition's left fullback has the possession along the left flank in the middle third, the winger touches the sideline, and the center midfielders are 1 v 1 marked;



The farther center midfielder receives, and he runs toward the defensive line; Olmo tracks the ball carrier backward, and Sabitzer stands, marking the direct opponent.

Nkuku, the right-winger, and Mukiele overload the ball's area and create a 4 v 2 duel.

The other 3 defenders drop deep to cover the depth against the only opposition's strikers.



Olmo tracks the ball carrier even deeper; Mukiele and Nkuuku complete the backline (4 + 1 wider outside), forcing him to turn back and avoid the attacking move. Furthermore, Sabitzer now screens the easiest lay off the passing path.

Counter-pressing is the first choice after the ball's losses as the defense usually pushes high up in the field.



Laimer has the possession in this example, and he tries to cover it to counter the direct opponent's pressure attempt; he would have 2 backward passing options, but he can't progress the move forward.



The double opposition team the mark against RB Leipzig's midfielder, and he loses the possession. (As we will analyze in the next chapter, Laimer is a crucial player for his team during the phases off the ball)



RB Leipzig's defensive line always stands very high in the field apart from his shape with 2 or 3 center backs or including fullbacks or wingbacks; this kind of shape allows immediate counter-pressing actions after ball losses.

The right fullback pushes high, and he contests the ball to the opposition's ball carrier.

(Vice versa, the same defensive principle also becomes an issue if the opposition overcomes the counter-pressing or the pressure phases, as the back 3 line that usually remains deeper in the field must face opposition's counter-attacks with an equal number of players.



The ball carrier can win the first duel, but Olmo, the right-winger, is very close to the ball area, and he can perform a second quick counter-pressing attempt.

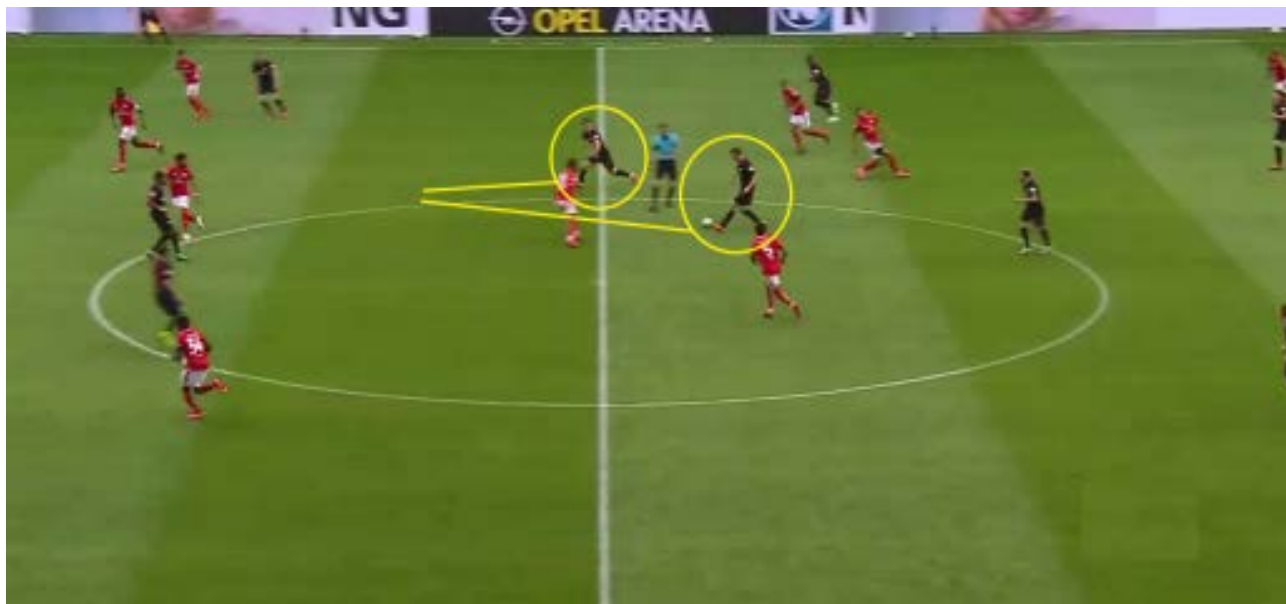


Olmo forces a back pass, and Laimer can contest the ball immediately, winning it back, anticipating the opponent.

The counter-pressing aims to prevent the opposition from consolidating the possession and find offensive options while the opposing team is organizing the defensive transition phase.

Furthermore, in these kinds of play situations, the opposition becomes vulnerable, losing the ball just after winning it and being forced to organize the defensive transition phase just after the attacking transition organization.

In this second example, RB Leipzig tries to overcome the opposition's midfield line in the center.



Sabitzer receives, and he tries to dribble the ball toward the final third.



He is immediately under pressure, and he loses the possession along the line of the third middle cycle.

In this situation, immediate counter-pressing action is not possible due to RB Leipzig's players' distances, as the team has just lost possession after shaping the attacking formation.

The opposition can play out and progress the ball forward along the field.

When immediate counter-pressing is not possible, a line of 5 players at the back aims to prevent any progression through the final third.



The right fullback Mukiele and Sabitzer, who has tracked the opposition's possession, create a 2 v 2 duel around the ball on the right; they force the opposition's ball carrier backward first, and then they double team him, winning the ball back.



As the possession wins the ball back, Leipzig counter-attack exploits the usual numerical advantage around the ball and the previous opponents isolating defensive action.

In this example, RB Leipzig can counter-attack along the flank in a momentary 2 v 1 situation before a second opposition's defender can equalize the duel.

The pivot stands high and tries to win the ball quickly before the opposition can consolidate the possession, after RB Leipzig ball's losses.



Sabitzer underlaps through the center, but the nearest opponent anticipates him while retreating his position and wins the ball.



RB Leipzig stands high up to close the opposition attacking phase far away from the opposition's goal in these situations.

Kampl, the player who usually act as a center pivot in front of the defensive line, pushes high up in the field to contest the ball, as the deep opposition's ball carriers are generally forced to go long from the first third.



Kampl wins the ball, and he starts a new counter-attacking phase high up in the field with more solutions to play a through pass, as Leipzig is already placed high up in the field.



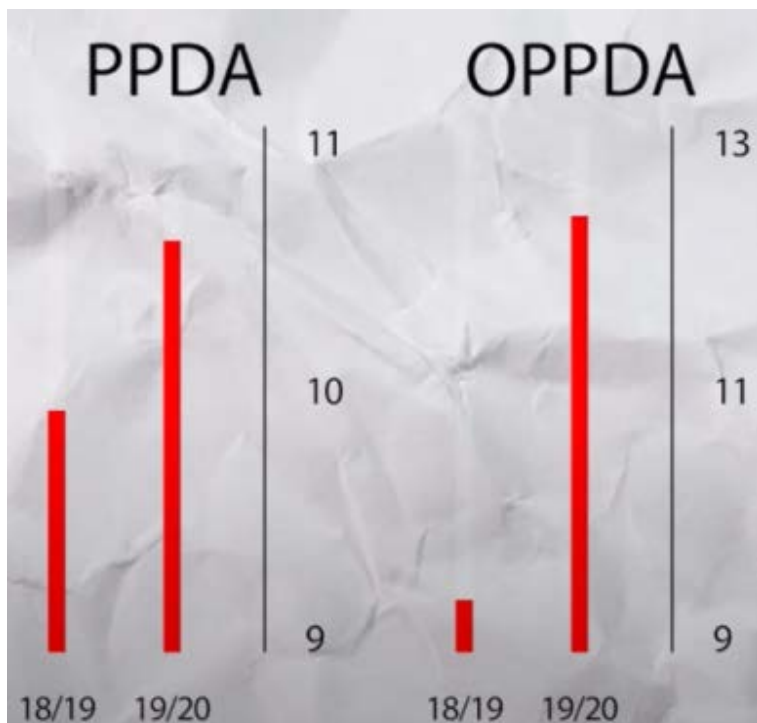
The left wingback Nkunku (winger and wide striker are also other positions he usually takes) can receive in behind the opposition's center back and fullback, exploiting the high attacking line.



RB Leipzig has created a scoring chance after a counter-action; this is the perfect situation. Nagelsmann's team looks for when it seeks the ball's recovery.

Otherwise, when counter-pressing and pressure phases are not effective, Nagelsmann's team faces a simple defensive organization (1 v 1 duel and low rhythm positional pressure).

The pressure phases are the German team's defensive point of strength, although the young coach has developed the way RB Leipzig presses the opponents.



The Ppda proves how Nagelsmann's RB Leipzig presses in a more strategic manner than the previous seasons without him (2019/2020 - 10,97 vs 2018/2019 - 9,11).

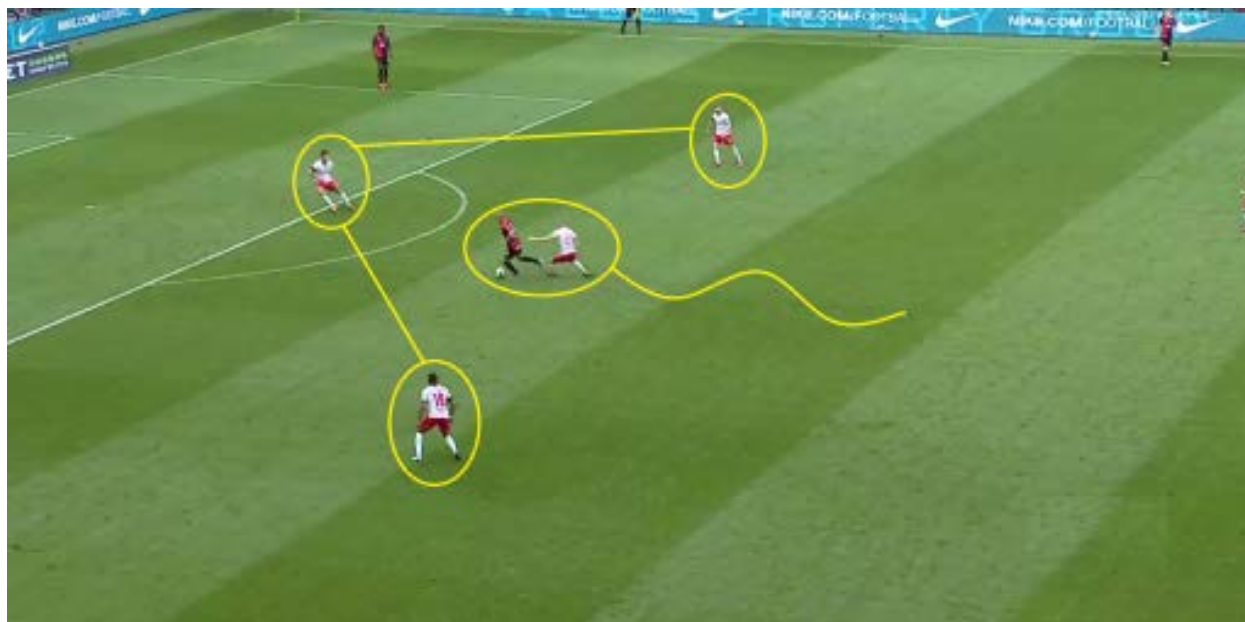
Leipzig is also more patient against the opposition's pressure, as the Oppda shows, and this is also the issue for conceding goals more than expected.

Konrad Laimer, a key player for RB Leipzig's pressure phase

Despite being one of the best pressing midfielders, Laimer is also the midfield sweeper, who allows the front 3 or 4 to press high, providing cover.



The line of 3 forwards creates a numerical advantage against the opposition's center backs (3 v 2) and close the passing lanes toward the middle third; the outer forwards are forcing the direction of play toward the defensive right flank trigger the pressure phase. Meanwhile, the center forward screens the opposition's center pivot; Laimer is ready to mark him at his back.



In this second example, the opposition center back receives, and Laimer is ready to force him back to prevent any progression through the middle third. The forwards have created a numerical superiority situation.

- If Laimer acts in a double pivot midfield shape (he usually stands higher than the sector's teammate), he tracks the opposition's midfielders, which move off the ball to be a passing option.



4 RB Leipzig players force the opposition's possession phase to the defensive right flank, and Laimer is standing higher than the teammate. He is ready to counter the opponent who tries to move off the ball to be a passing option.

- If he is the only pivot shape, he is the screen behind the pressuring teammates.



4 RB Leipzig players are closing down the opposition's building up phase along the defensive left flank, pressing the center back with the ball, the potential receiver in the center, and standing close to the second center back and the opposite fullback, preventing the opposition from switching the side.

Laimer screens the back 5, providing coverage behind the pressing teammates. After Demme's transfer to Italian team Napoli, Laimer also acts as a defensive midfielder when the team must defend deep and shaped.



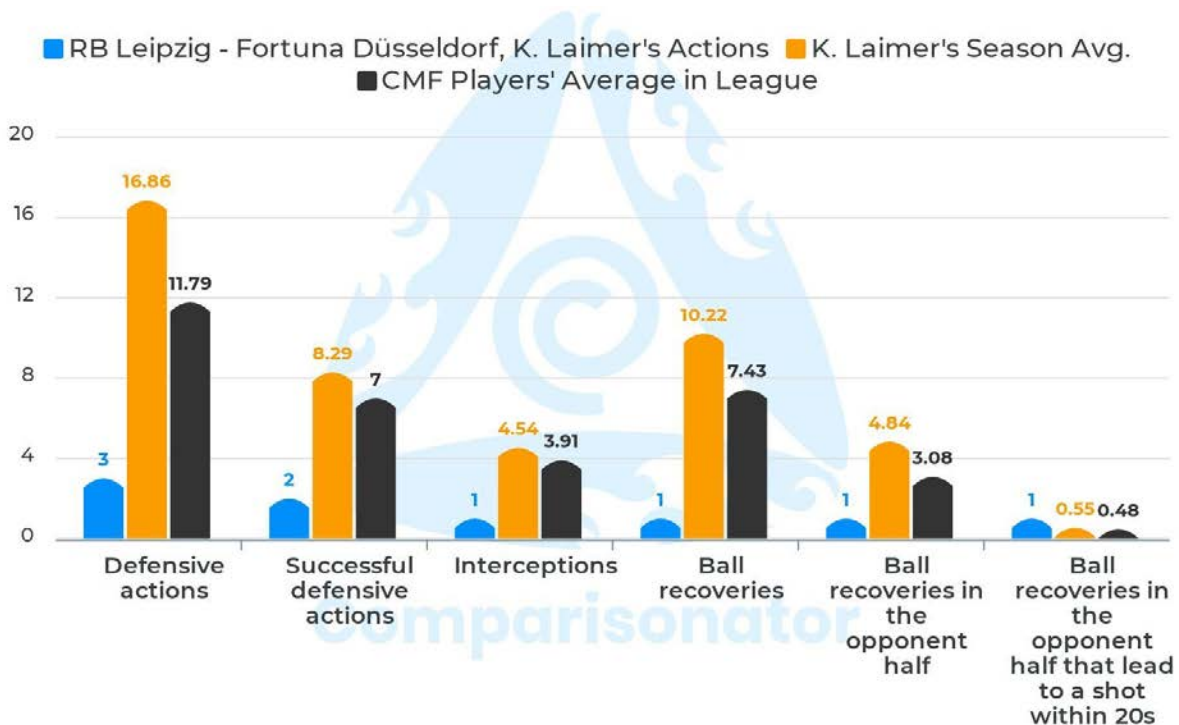
RB Leipzig often defends with a 1-5-3-2 shape inside its half. Laimer is usually the center pivot of the midfield trio. Usually, RB Leipzig aims to save the center, force the opposition down the flank, trigger the pressure phase when the winger or the wingback receives thanks to the wide defender, the wingback, and the outer midfielder, who shifts out wide.



When RB Leipzig has the numerical superiority in the center, Laimer presses the opposition's receiver of a back pass. In contrast, the opposition switches the side, breaking the 3 in the middle third while RB Leipzig middle trio tracks the ball's path.



When the opposition widest player receives, RB Leipzig starts the pressure phase, Laimer drops back into the midfield line. The outer midfielder and the wingback begin to press the opposition's receiver. Looking at Laimer's defensive data this current season (2020-2021), his defensive solidity is apparent, also concerning all the other defensive midfielders of the league:



- Higher average of defensive actions (and successful)
- Higher average of interceptions and ball recoveries
- Furthermore, a higher average of ball's recoveries inside the opposition half leading to a scoring chance for his team

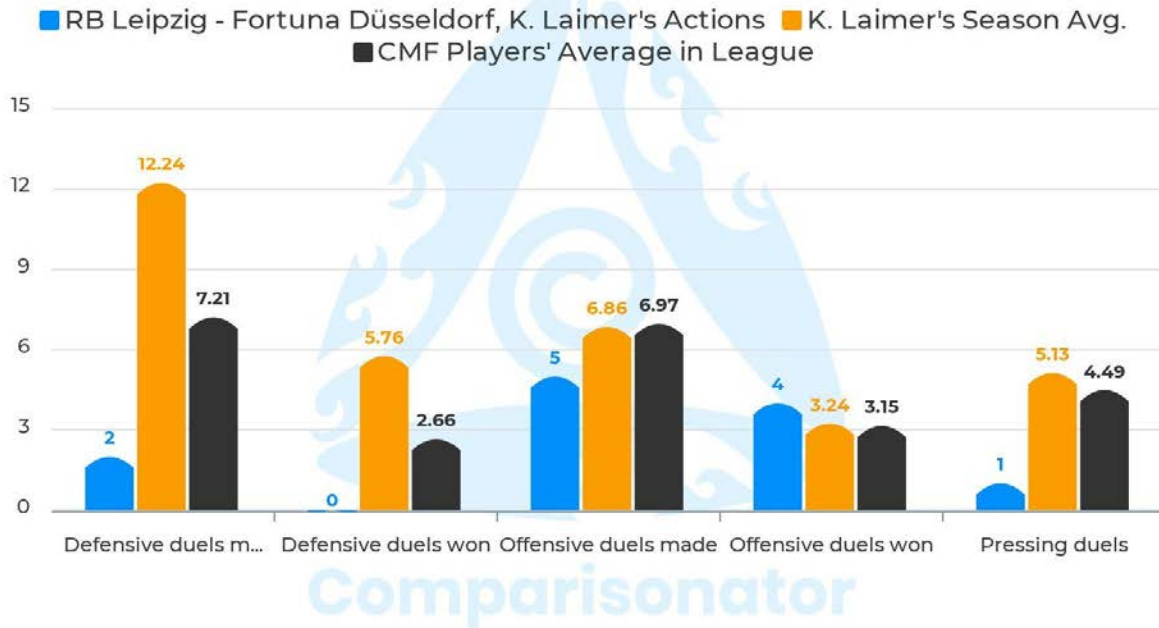
Besides, he pushes up to press the ball carriers, looking for turnovers or closing down the passing lanes. He is also the player who goes on pressing even out of position, exchanging the position with the teammates that cover him. (Despite Laimer's action areas are the center and the right side of the middle and final thirds, he often tracks the ball's paths if the center pivot he was previously marking passes out wide on the left. We are going to analyze his positioning in the field within the next few pages.)



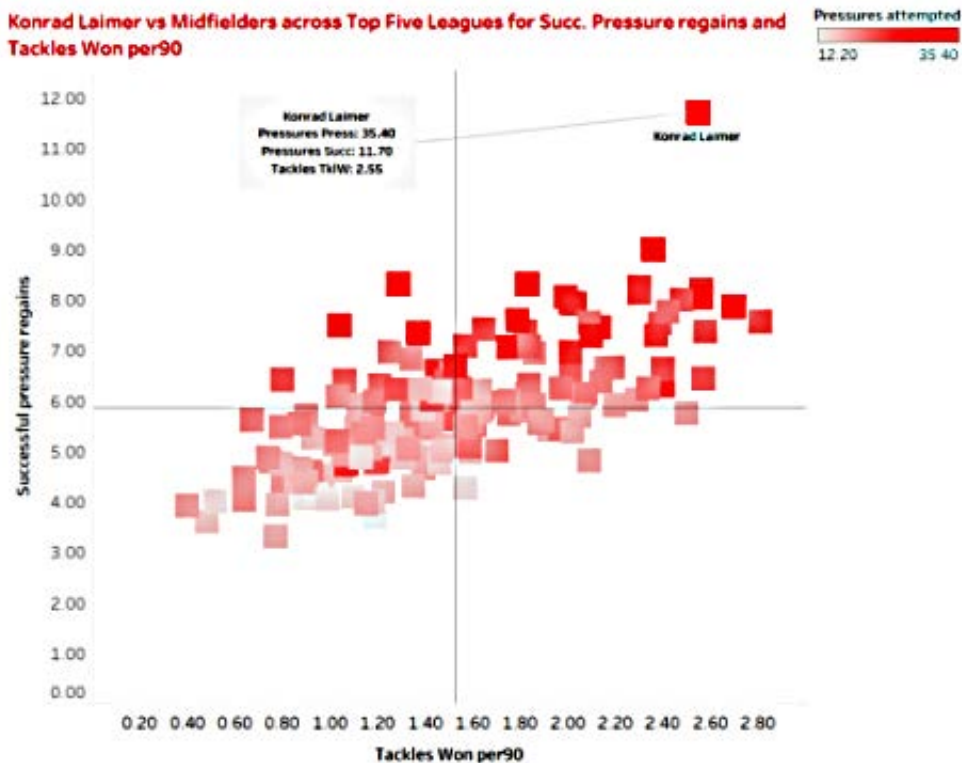
In this situation, Laimer was marking the opposition center pivot before he passed the ball to the center back; as the RB Leipzig's midfielder decides to track the ball's path and press the receiver, the left striker shifts across and deeper to cover his position.



As he can win the ball back, he then finds a passing lane that allows RB Leipzig to stand high up in the field and to look for a third incoming teammate creating a numerical superiority situation while counter-attacking. Looking for numerical superiority while countering the opposition building up phase allows the German team to counter-attack with numerical superiority near the goal.

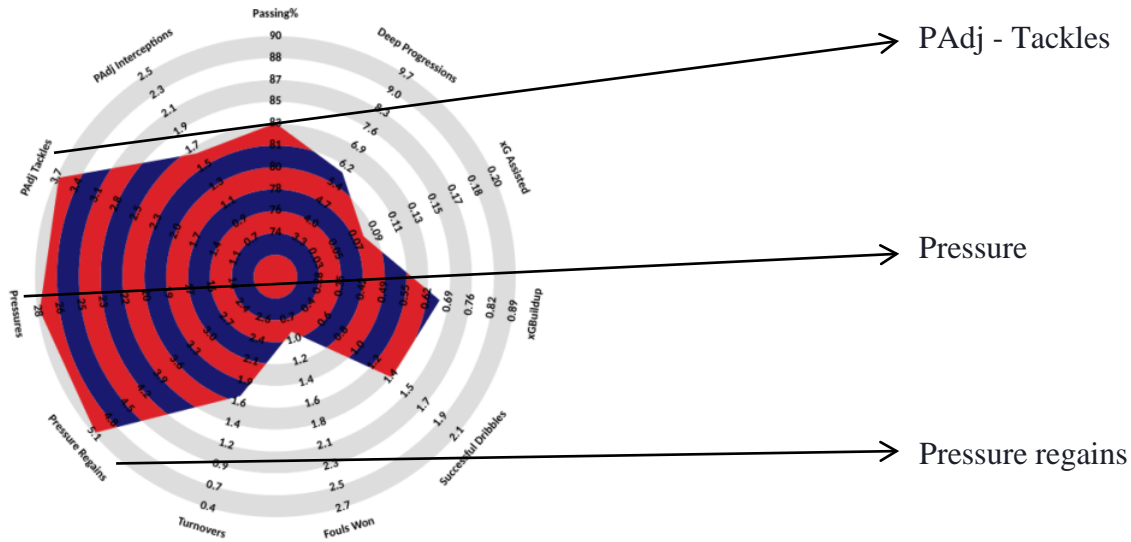


The duels average data of this 2020-2021 season confirm Laimer's versatility as a midfielder; besides being a defensive, pressure, and positional midfielder, he contributes to the offensive phase. The higher average of defensive duels and a successful one, concerning the other players with the same role of his league, he maintains a high level of offensive duels and a high average of successful defensive duels and a high indicator line of pressing duels.



The balance between the successful regains after pressure average p.90', where Laimer seats first in the European rank, and the tackles won p.90', where his is one of the first players all around Europe confirm his efficacy as midfielder.

Konrad Laimer
RB Leipzig



Stats Bomb data confirm again what we have already stated about the pressure, and the regains after the pressure action of Konrad Laimer, but there is another stat that highlights his crucial role.

The high number of possessions adjusted after tackles; this means that he not only brake the opposition's possession phase, but his defensive actions result in a safe possession phase for his team.

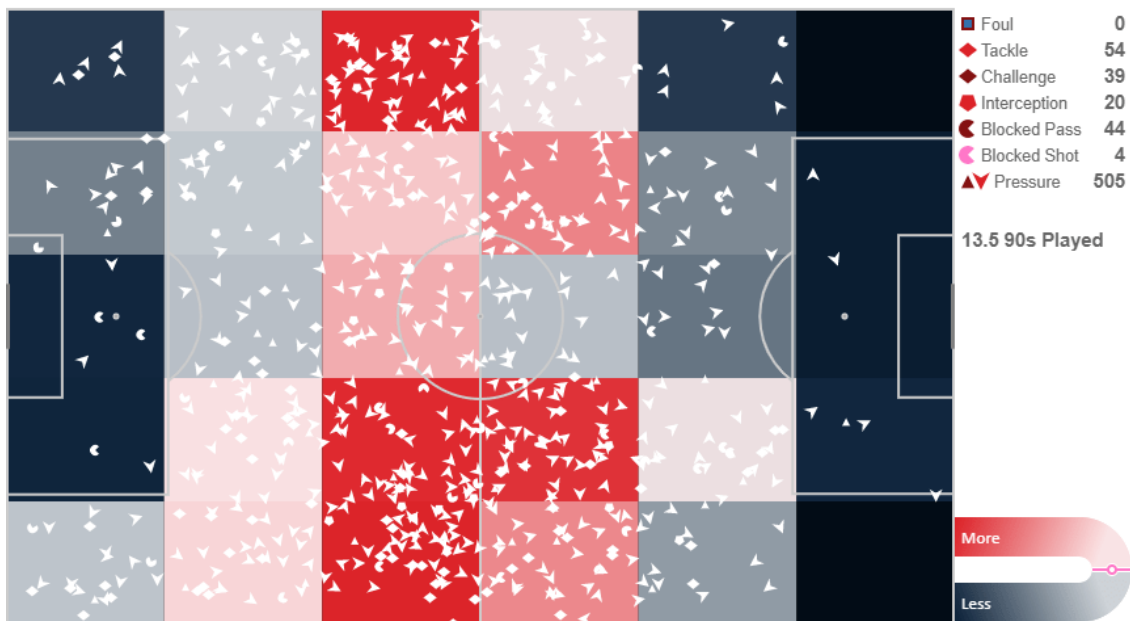
Laimer's action heat maps show his trend to act along the center-right area of the middle third (the left side is also a recurrent position as Nagelsmann sees him as a midfield joker in the starting 11.

Otherwise, it's evident as Laimer is an "all field and box to box" midfielder in Leipzig's scheme, excluding the finishing phase in the final third and the last defensive zone in the first third.

Konrad Laimer
RB Leipzig

Defensive Activity

1. Bundesliga
2019/2020



Laimer's Defensive Activity over the entire last 2019-2020 season shows how he behaves quite dominantly on his usual half-right position, anyway.

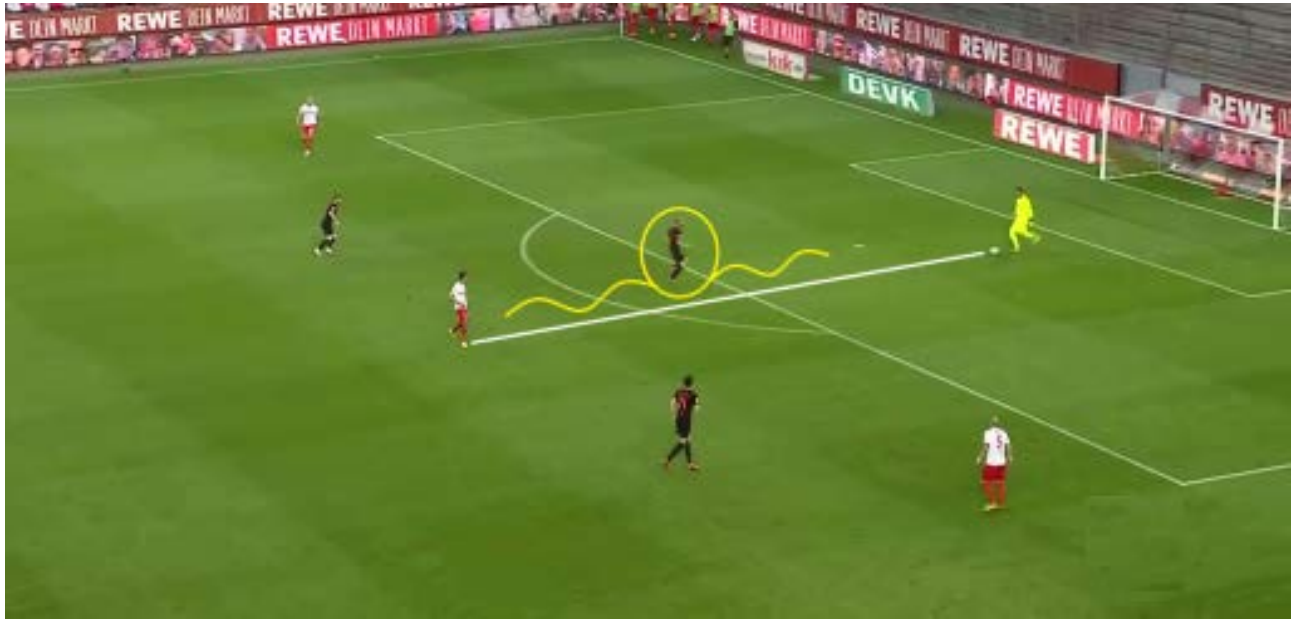


Even though he usually wins the ball in the center area of the middle third and along with the right half-space, he uses his energy to press the opponents even across the pitch, apart from his role.

This next example is crucial to understand the importance of his pressure skills.



The forwards screen the center backs. The center holding midfielder receives; Laimer immediately presses him to force his dribble action backward, exploiting the strikers covering the passing paths to the center backs.



The goalkeeper receives, and Laimer runs toward him, covering the passing lane to the center holding midfielder; his pressing action against the holding midfielder and the goalkeeper, together with the strikers' screening positions, block the opposition building up phase at the back.

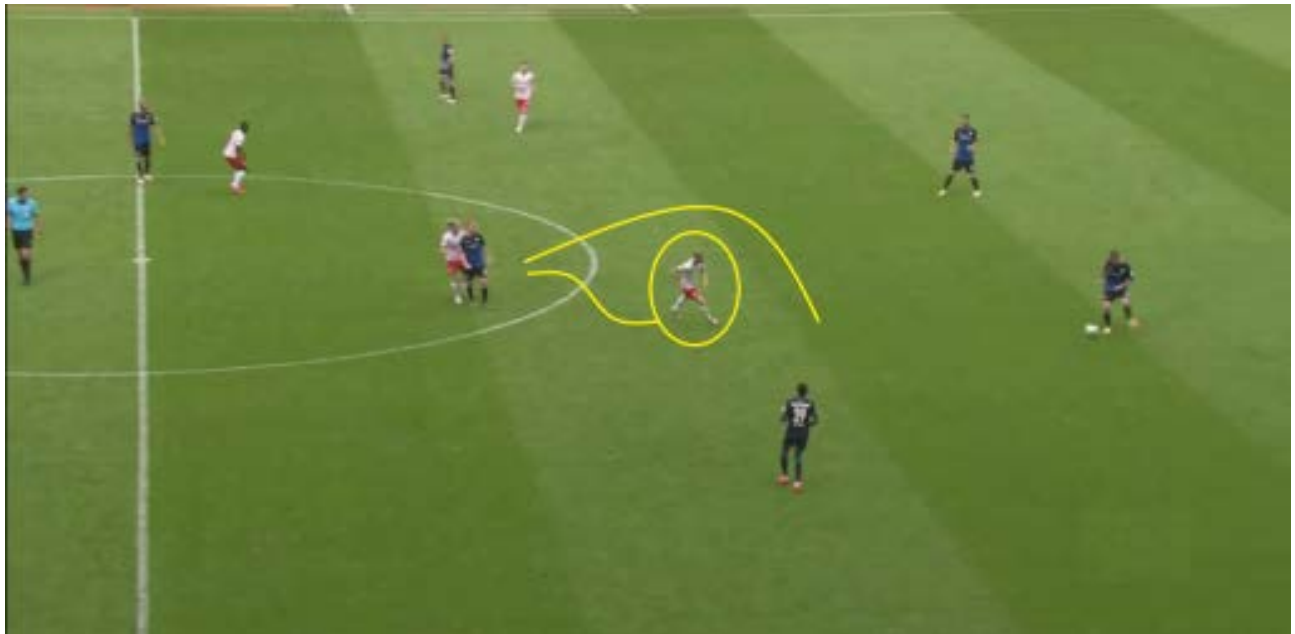
In the next sequence, Laimer loses the ball in the middle third due to a pressing opponent, who double teams him in a 2 v 1 duel.



Laimer tries to save the possession in a 1 v 1 duel initially; the opponent forces him backward and toward a second teammate, who creates a 2 v 1 duel around him. He loses the ball in the end.



As he loses the ball, he starts to counter-press the opposition's ball carrier.



Even if the first ball carrier can pass the ball out to the center back, overcoming first Laimer's pressure, and even if he stands among three opponents, which can create a passing pattern of play, Laimer goes on pressing each of them once they have the ball at their feet...



...and he tracks the opponent who dribbles the ball along RB Leipzig defensive right flank. In this sequence, Laimer acted as an advanced center pivot, as a center midfielder, and as a wingback in the end.

Another Austrian midfielder's defensive task is to create numerical superiority out wide from his central position as a single or double pivot.



Angelino, the left fullback, and Nkunku, the left-winger, are fighting in a 2 v 2 duel along the left sideline. Laimer starts to shift wide to create a 3 v 2 duel with numerical superiority.



The ball carrier can otherwise play toward the center and overcome the pressure; Laimer turns his run's direction and tracks the new ball carrier, preventing the other pivot from moving out of position.



He tracks and forces the ball carrier backward toward the striker, creating a momentary 3 v 2 duel, which prevents any opposition's progression of the move and allowing RB Leipzig to advance through the field despite a deep defensive shape at the beginning.

The player's defensive tasks become very clear again by virtually placing the Austrian midfielder in the Bundesliga midfielder's table.

Seasonal Rank		AVG / 90 TOTAL	Parameters
7	^	10.22	Ball recoveries
4	^	4.84	Ball recoveries in the opponent half
20	●	0.55	Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s
30	●	4.54	Interceptions
42	v	10.43	Ball losses
27	^	3.45	Ball losses in his own half
19	^	0.38	Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s
1	●	16.86	Defensive actions
16	^	8.29	Successful defensive actions

Seasonal Rank		AVG / 90 TOTAL	Parameters
31	^	2.14	Aerial duels made
34	^	0.93	Aerial duels won
1	●	12.24	Defensive duels made
1	●	5.76	Defensive duels won
13	v	6.86	Offensive duels made
12	^	3.24	Offensive duels won
7	^	5.13	Pressing duels

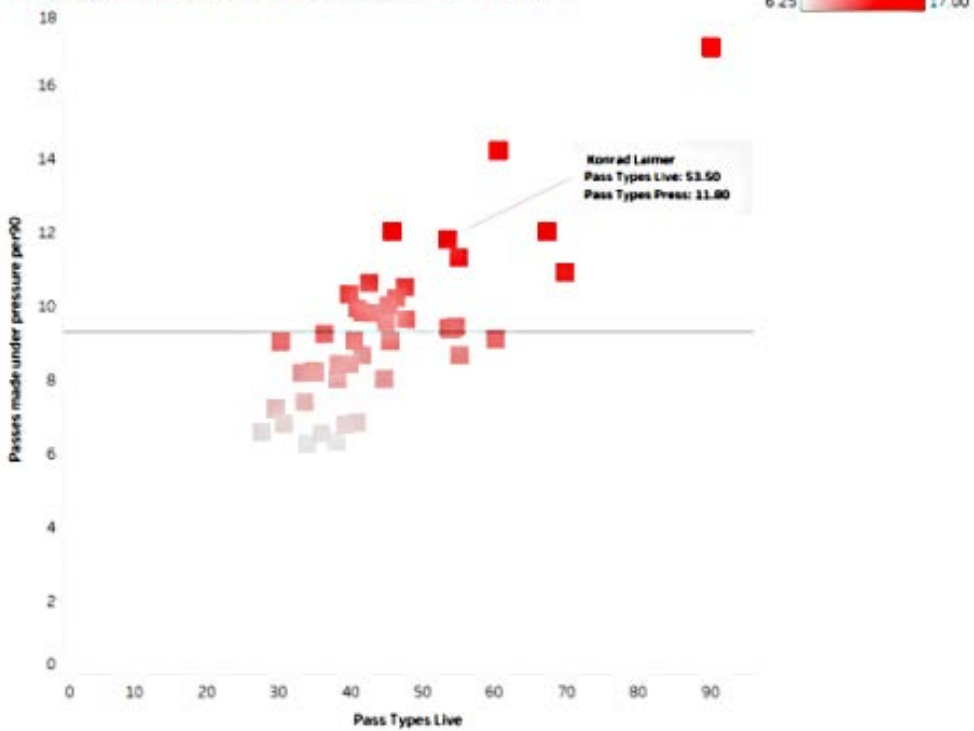
Konrad Laimer is the first midfielder in Germany for defensive actions, for defensive duels made and for defensive duels won.

He seats in the top 10 for ball recoveries all around the field and in the opposition's half and for pressing duels.

Despite being a defensive player, he maintains a good position for offensive duels made and for offensive duels won.

Furthermore, he is at the bottom of the table for ball losses, which is a remarkable stat for a running defensive player.

Press resistance in passing for Bundesliga midfielders per90



Laimer technical ability is another key factor for RB Leipzig:

- He is a forward passing option for the center backs to progress the ball or an inside pass option for the fullbacks.
- He contributes in creating passing triangles while building up to find the fullbacks or the winger in behind the opposition's pressure lines.
- He is an out of pressure passing option for the wingers or wingbacks while playing high up in the field.
- He is always an option to recycle the ball in the final third and to look for new through vertical passes.

In this example, he moves to win a wandering ball after a rebound header of a teammate.





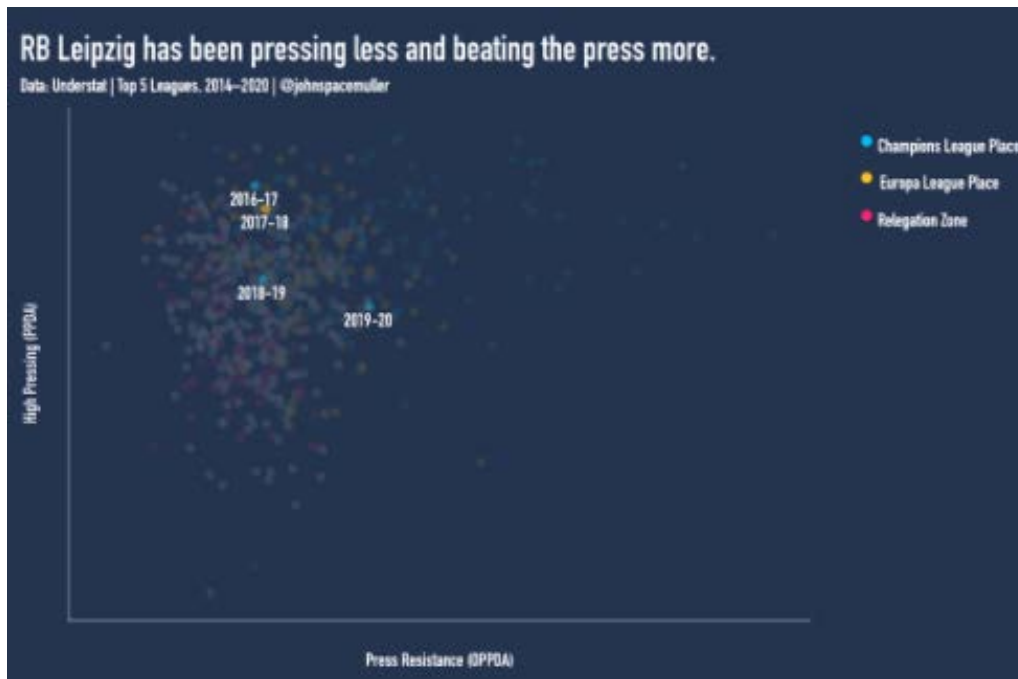
He controls and drives the ball away from a first pressure attempt, exploiting the space between the opposition defensive lines...



...and he anticipates a second defensive duel, playing a through pass in behind the opposition back three lines. His technical skills are useful to win a ball that allows RB Leipzig to stand high up in the field and the three strikers to stand along the opposition's defensive line before attacking the deep space behind them.

Laimer is indeed the 5th player in Bundesliga for completed passes during play by play sequences (53,50 per 90') and the first one for receiving and completing passes under opposition's pressure (11,80 per 90').

RB Leipzig's liquid defensive shapes after pressure phases

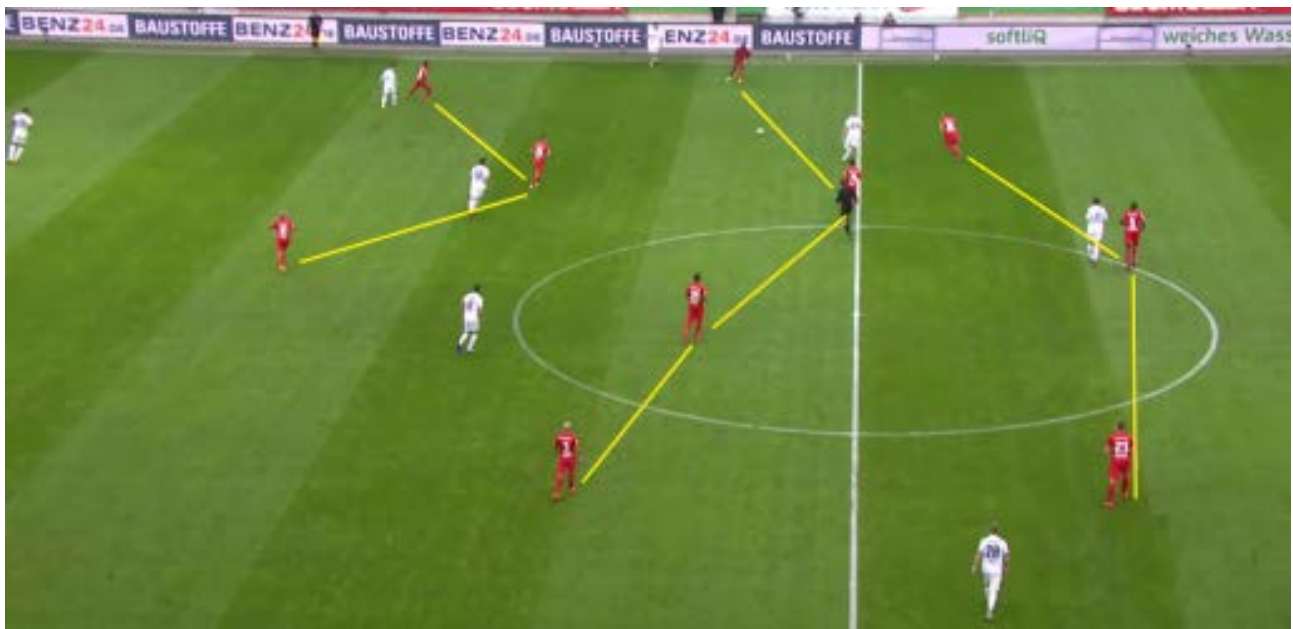


Despite being a pressing team, RB Leipzig can become a seating deep defensive team, with the wingbacks shaping a back 5 line when the system of play is the 1-3-5-2 or in a compact 1-4-4-2, when the Leipzig spreads out the 1-4-2-2-2 system for possession phases (the central midfielders protect the defense).

But they are not the only ones.

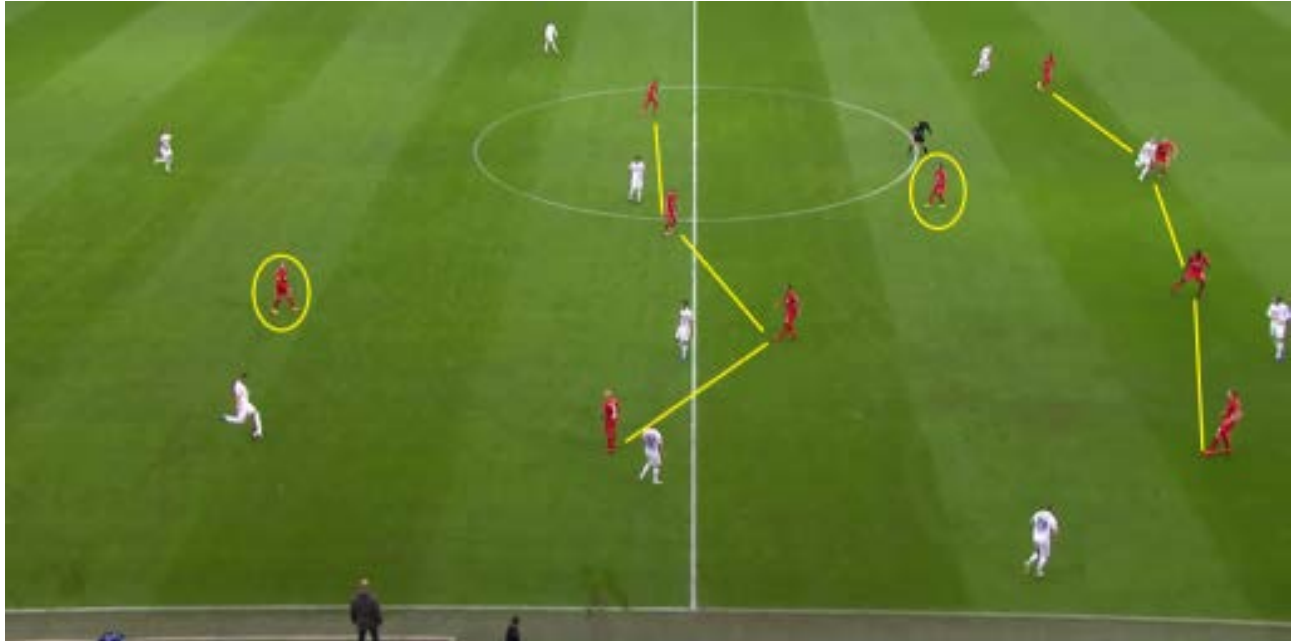
The defensive shapes depend on the opposition's attacking formation and seeking vertical and horizontal numerical advantages.

- 1-3-4-1-2



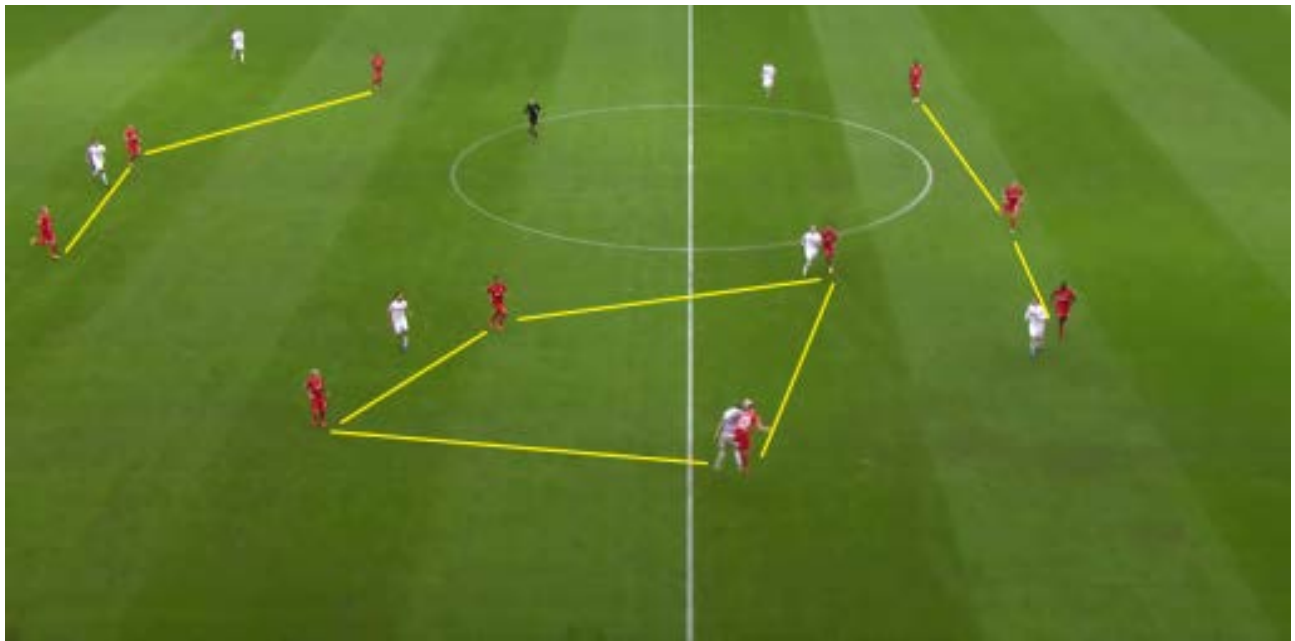
(Horizontal 2 v 1 in the middle third and 3 v 2 in the final third duels; 6 v 3 along the right flank and 4 v 2 in the center.)

- 1-4-1-4-1



(4 v 3 duels along the lines of 4 players, 5 v 3 in the center, and 4 v 4 along the left flank that the pivot can turn into a numerical superiority situation.)

- 1-3-2-2-3



(3 v 2 along the forwards and defenders lines, 4 v 3 around the ball area; 5 v 4 along the left side and around the ball's area. Numerical equality along the weak side.)

- 1-5-3-2



(5 v 2 along the back defensive line and 4 v 3 in the center around the ball's area.)

- 1-4-3-2-1



(2 v 1 against the opposition's center striker, 3 v 1 against the pivot, 2 v 2 against the potential opponents could play between the lines, and center back and center midfielder in a 4 v 3 duel against the striker and the advance midfielders.)

- 1-4-1-3-2



- 1-4-4-2 from the 1-4-2-2-2 formation



The players of the second line become wingers in the defensive shape



(4 v 2 along the 4 players lines, 8 v 5 along the strong side, and 2 v 1 along the weak side.)

- 1-4-2-3-1 from 1-3-3-3-1 with one of the wide players of the second line dropping back out wide as a fullback and the other two acting as center pivots.

The center forward cuts the passing lane between the center backs...



...the three attacking midfielders congest the ball's area and shift across the center...



(5 v 3 along the string side.)

...the pivots push higher up but behind the ball's line...



(2 v 1 duel of the pivots against the opposition's No.10, and 3+1 v 2 against the center midfielders.)

...shaping two blocks of 6 players under the opposition's midfield line and 4 looking for possession's recovery...



(6 v 3 at the back.)

When the fullback pushes higher up to press the opposition's winger, the team's shape turns into the 1-3-3-3-1 again, creating a strong side along the vertical half of the field.



(5 v 3 along the strong side and around the ball's area.)

RB Leipzig defensive issues

RB Leipzig's strengths are duels and intensity near the ball when the team is in movement. If the opposition can play through the pressure, the defensive phase depends on the back three coordination (one against the ball carrier and the others should cover the depth).



The opposition's ball carrier can overcome the pressure, escaping the double-teaming action, driving the ball away with the ball's control.



The midfielders are late on the ball, and the back 3 must face an opposition's striker who can face the goal and run in behind the line to receive; the right defender Upamecano can't close the passing lane toward the goal due to his previous wide position out wide and the opposition's striker can move between the other 2 defenders.



The opposition's striker can receive and score anticipating the goalkeeper.



The distance between Upamecano on the right and the center back is apparent, as well as the chance for the striker to beat the other 2 defenders in between them and facing the opposition's goal. None of the back 3 can cover the depth in front of the goal.

The high lines of RB Leipzig become an issue when the team loses duels or wandering balls.



In this situation, an opponent can header forward a long ball from RB Leipzig's defenders, and all the team stands high up in the field.



2 defenders face 3 opposition's strikers; the ball carrier wins the 1 v 1 duel, and he can free the teammate on the right side of the middle third; he receives and dribbles the ball higher up in the field.



The opposition now has the positional advantage in the final third, despite the defenders' retreat; the ball carrier can dribble the ball inside the box and play a ground cross pass between the defenders' line and the goalkeeper. The third opposition's forward can receive, moving along the defender's blind side and score to the far post concerning the last ball's position before the cross pass.

Leipzig's defensive issues become evident when the team moves back in a 4-4-1-1 or a 4-4-2 and tries to defend while using a low press, and the opposition carries out quick passing patterns of play. They turn into a relatively simple man-orientated defensive team that is continuously a step too late and only rarely manages to block passing lanes, simply because it fails to disengage from its man-orientation.



The midfield sector of the German team stand narrow in the center-right side of the first third, and the right-winger is marking is close to one opponent; the back 4 line is narrow along the edge line of the box, and the fullback and the center back are keeping their opponent in 1 v 1 duel. The opposition left winger can receive free from pressure.

RB Leipzig tends to slow down the defensive actions' rhythm to delay the opponents attacking patterns of play in these kinds of situations. Still, if the offensive phase's pace remains high, the German team usually can't increase its rhythm, and all the defensive attempts are late.



The opposition winger can then dribble the ball and enter the box facing RB Leipzig's fullback and center midfielder, which tracks him, but they don't attempt to dispossess him. The 2 v 1 duel takes the nearest center back to the ball to look at the opponent in front of him; meanwhile, the other center back, Upamecano, must mark the center striker. A fourth attacker is then free to move in between the lines inside the box without pressure.



We can receive free from immediate pressure; 4 RB Leipzig players have previously tried to close down the winger, but they have left a passing lane to the incoming opponent in the middle of the box.

Despite the ball carrier receives back to the goal, all defenders are late, and he can turn to face the goal.



The center back tries to counter the opponent while shooting on goal, but he is late, and RB Leipzig concedes a goal due to late defensive actions despite being inside the box.

Opposition's attempts on goals often result from playing on the counter or from very inviting positions after open play; the usual high attacking shape helps the opponents counter-attack when quick counter-pressing actions are not possible.



The center back has the possession, and he tries a diagonal pass forward and out wide toward the right, but the opposition's left fullback intercept the ball. Due to the high position in the field, none of the defenders are covering the depth space at the back; furthermore, 3 opposition's attackers are close to RB Leipzig's defenders, and they could beat them on timing, running off the ball to control a long pass from the first third.



The left fullback intercepts the ball, and he anticipates the opponent; the defender falls into the trap of the strikers, which drop back first, opening a bigger space at their back, as the depth is not adequately covered. RB Leipzig right fullback stands even in front of the left striker, looking at the ball and not at the opponent, opening a path along the flank. The center forward receives the ball and the center back is not marking him goal side, so he can receive and play a one-touch pass behind the fullback and space for the teammate to run onto.



Despite 3 RB Leipzig's defenders retreat, the opposition's left striker can enter the box and score to the far post after saving the ball possession.

Building up with a back-three and wingbacks positioned higher up the pitch seems like an effective means against Leipzig; the fullbacks push Leipzig's wingers or wingbacks backward.



The 3 v 2 duel is useful for the opposition to invite RB Leipzig forwards toward the center; the half-spaces are free areas to receive. 2 v 1 duel can be created along the flanks the midfield trio doesn't shift wide with the right timing.

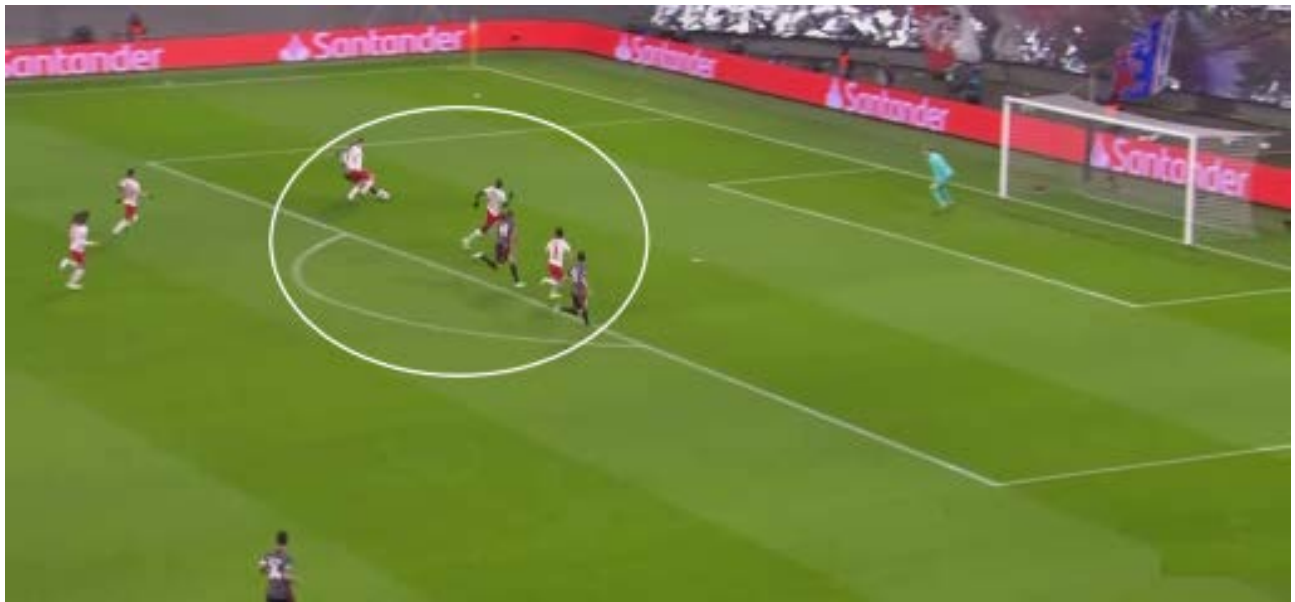
Simultaneously, the first build-up line's numerical advantage would allow for secure passing paths and gaps through the half-spaces.



The opponent receives in the half-space, and RB Leipzig's right wingback pushes up, but the midfielder along the same side doesn't counter him; the right defender is now involved 1 v 2 duel on the right, and passing paths are available.



As the right defender has been invited out of position, a clear gap is opened behind the central defender, who is not correctly marking the direct opponent, due to his flat position in front of the ball carrier.



He can receive and dribble the ball to the box's edge line in a 3 v 3 duel.

None of RB Leipzig's defenders can cover the goal space, as they are retreating on late.



RB Leipzig's center back tries to clear the box, but his body position is not proper, and his touch lets the ball inside the box; furthermore, 2 opponents have the numerical superiority 2 v 1 in front of the goal.



The only defender in front of the goal is late in his defensive action, and the opponent has enough time and space on the ball to shot and score; the goalkeeper is out of time too, as he has had to check the attacking action of three strikers before he can attempt a save.

Summary: 2018-2019 / 2019-2020 defensive data comparison. Pros and cons of Nagelsmann's defensive principles

To sum up, everything analyzed in this book aims to show the pros and cons of RB Leipzig after Nagelsmann's arrival. The following scheme is a comparison between the 2018-2019 season with Rangnick as a coach and the last completed one (2019-2020):

Defensive Parameters					
PARAMETERS	34 matches	AVG	AVG	34 matches	PARAMETERS
Goals conceded	▲	0.85	1.09	▼	Goals conceded
Ball recoveries	▲	94.38	86.21	▼	Ball recoveries
Ball recoveries in the opponent half	▲	28.5	27.41	▼	Ball recoveries in the opponent half
Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s	▼	3.94	4.62	▲	Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s
Interceptions	▲	48.94	43.09	▼	Interceptions
Ball losses	▼	122.53	110.5	▲	Ball losses
Ball losses in his own half	▲	35.29	36.74	▼	Ball losses in his own half
Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s	▲	3.26	4	▼	Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s
Defensive actions	▲	171.18	138.56	▼	Defensive actions
Total successful defensive actions	▼	89.35	99.47	▲	Total successful defensive actions
Expected shot against	●	1.15	1.15	●	Expected shot against

The defensive phase seems to be less efficient, as the goal conceded, and the ball recoveries have decreased, like the balls recoveries inside the opposition's half. On the other side, when RB Leipzig wins the ball inside the opposition half, Nagelsmann's team can create more chances.

As the ball possession phase has improved, the ball losses average has decreased as well. The total number of defensive actions has reduced, and the defensive actions' efficiency has been decisively improved.

Suppose the expected goals are the same for both seasons, and the conceded goals have increased during the first season with Nagelsmann as a head coach. In that case, it means that the German team's real issues are the moments when the opponent can play out after an inefficient pressure phase.

Apart from these last comments, the book analyzes these key points:

- Nagelsmann's defensive principles at Hoffenheim
- The defensive aims and 2019/2020 vs. 2020/2021 (as of 2020 October the 18th) stats
- Pressure phase
- Konrad Laimer, a key player for RB Leipzig's pressure phase
- Liquid defensive shapes after pressure phases
- Defensive issues