

*THE ROLE OF THE*  
**CENTER  
FORWARD**  
**ATTACKING**



by LUCA BERTOLINI

# **The Role of the Center Forward (Attacking)**

*By*

*Luca Bertolini*

*Published by*  
WORLD CLASS COACHING

First published May 2021 by  
WORLD CLASS COACHING 4015 N 78<sup>th</sup> Street #120, Scottsdale, AZ 85251

Copyright © WORLD CLASS COACHING 2021

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

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



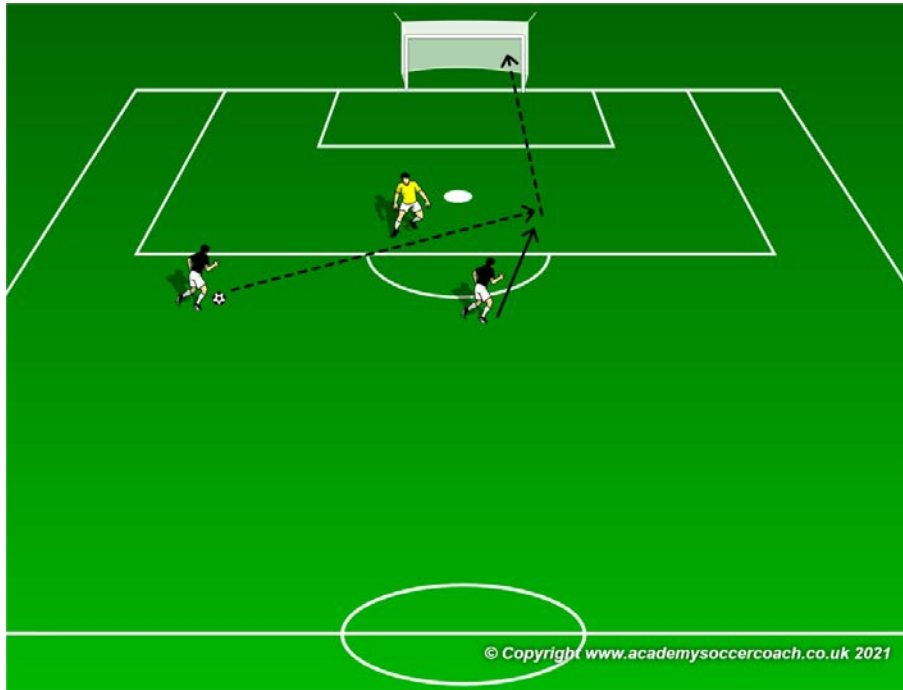
## **Table of contents**

Introduction: what is a center forward, and which tasks does he have	4
Situations of play and types of forwards	17
Target player	17
Dropping off player	24
Final third attacker (facing the goal)	28
Using the channels	33
Der Raumdeuter – The space interpreter	39
All around No.9 / Fluid Player	44
The Harry Kane case; a center striker who has become a playmaker	56
Summary	69

**Introduction: what is a center forward, and which tasks does he have?**

Generally, a forward is expected to regularly find the net, making it a so-called "striker." A striker is supposed to move along and behind the defensive line:

- Out-pacing (passing the ball to the striker while the defender is not positioned correctly to mark him and stealing a time of play and a pocket of space to receive and shot)



- Out-thinking (quick movements while the defenders are not correctly looking to mark the forwards, with a curved run) the defenders.



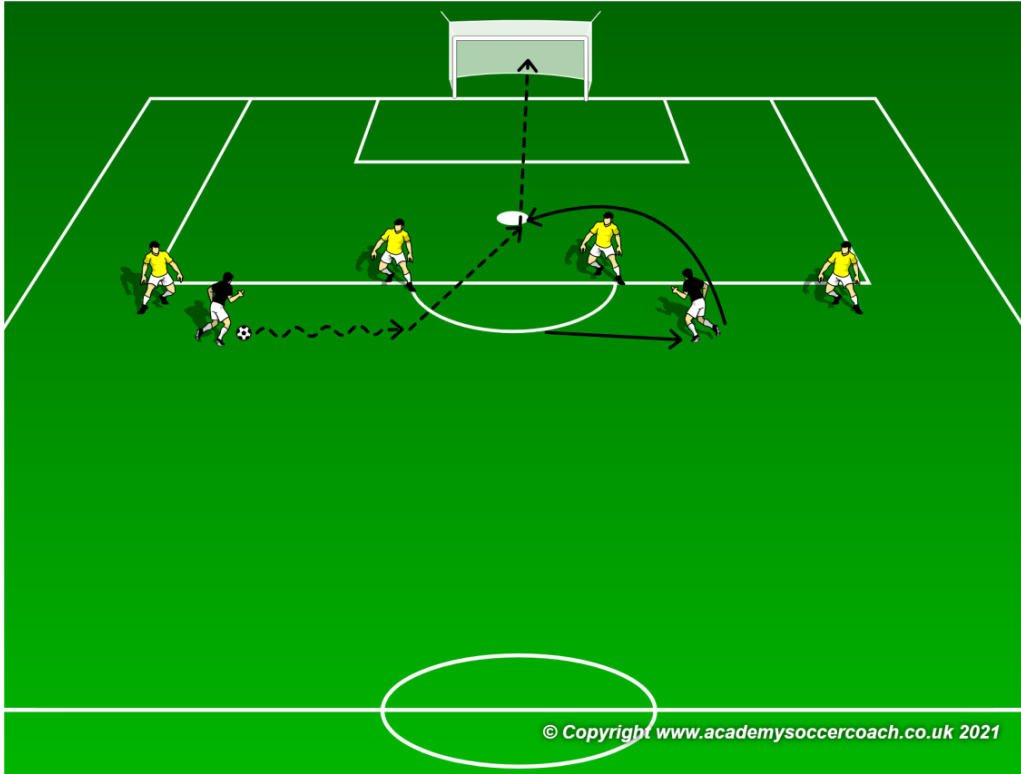
- Finding gaps between the center backs or between a center back and a fullback or even between the central defender and the center back of a 3 men defense



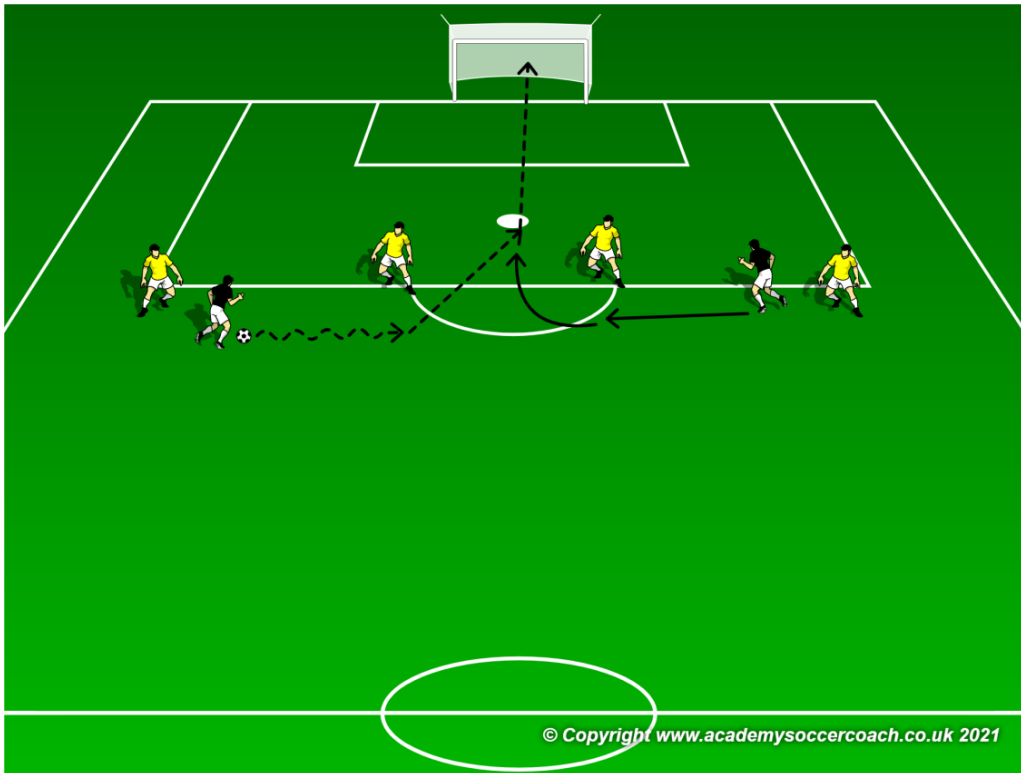
- Moving away from the ball carrier (running with counter-movements, away from the ball carrier, trying to invite the marker to pay attention to the opponent with the ball and then moving quickly in front of him to receive.



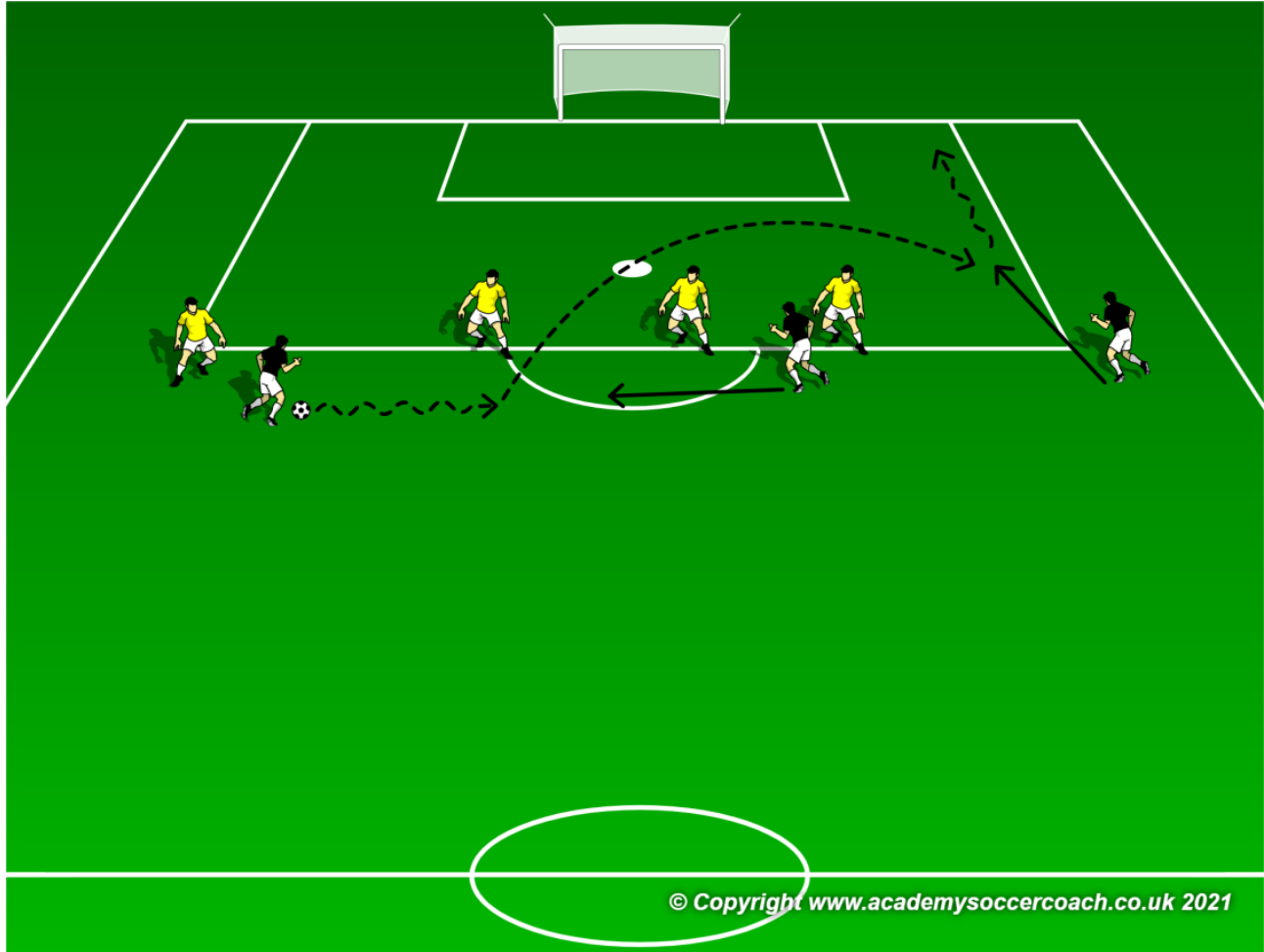
- Making runs along the blind side of the defender



- Dealing with the opposition's offside trap



- Playing 1 v 1 duels or positioning to help the teammates and freeing spaces to attack



Real and Shadow strikers in the 1-4-4-2 are the most common attacking shape of the play's 2 strikers systems. The 1-4-2-2 usually cover the width of the pitch and shape 2 narrow lines to cover the field's depth, and for this reason, it is generally considered a defensive formation. When defending, 1 forward has pressing tasks, and the second one has a more playmaking task after the ball's recovery.

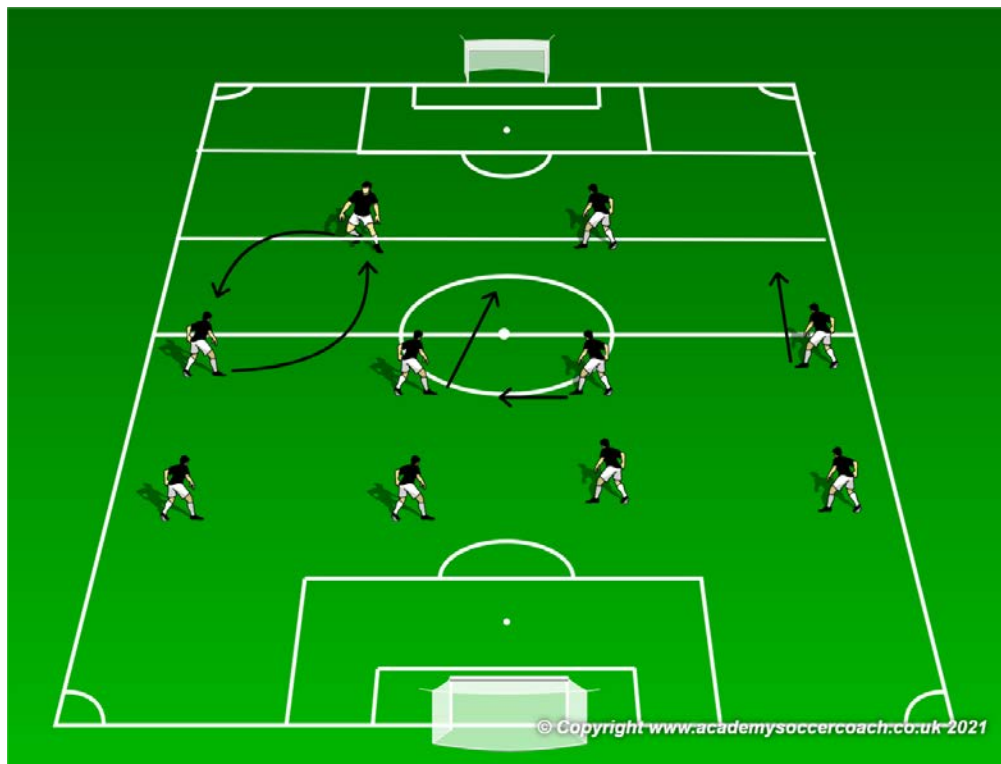
This classic attacking shape requires precise characteristics; as the actors change, even the play system is no longer the same; positional fluidity also means a change in the team's shape. The 2 strikers can be a static attacking organization.

Providing fluidity of movements, creating spaces in different spaces of the field, more players can drop off from different areas and not only from the center, have taken many coaches, but not all, to adopt other play systems or develop the basic 1-4-4-2.

Nowadays, only Atletico Madrid and Uruguay are the highlanders of this soccer idea. In modern soccer, this player has a large variety of tactical tasks concerning the style and the system of play, the moments of a game, or even a season. Their tasks can also change match after match, and they also concern the sector teammates.



A couple of examples of positional fluidity that takes the players to change positions and roles can be this one (from the 1-4-4-2 becomes 1-4-1-3-2)...



...Or this one (from 1-4-4-2 to 1-4-2-3-1)



Then a forward:

- He can be a **target man**; He is usually an outlet option for a pass from the back to the field's front areas, allowing the team to move higher up in the field. He creates chances, inviting the opposition pressure and the center backs out of position, moving out of the classic position, for the teammates in 1 center forward system of play with two No.10 (1-3-4-2-1),



or with wide wingers (one of the possible 1-4-3-3).



He tends to play one-touch lays off passes, or head passes, as well as keeping the ball until an excellent passing option appears before running toward the opposition's box to finish. He usually spends most of the matches' time with his back to the goal. He usually presses the opposition's center backs without the ball and takes part in creating pressure traps.

- He can be a **dropping off player** in 3 men attacking sectors, as Firmino is for Liverpool. He allows Manè and Salah to attack the opposition's defensive line with diagonal inside runs.



Firmino is often the starter of Reds' attacking combinations play since the front 3 was shaped, collecting the ball after dropping back and creating chances for the teammates. He can be defined as a sort of a "False Nine," which is not included in a classic positional play style, as he usually starts his actions from a "striker's position."

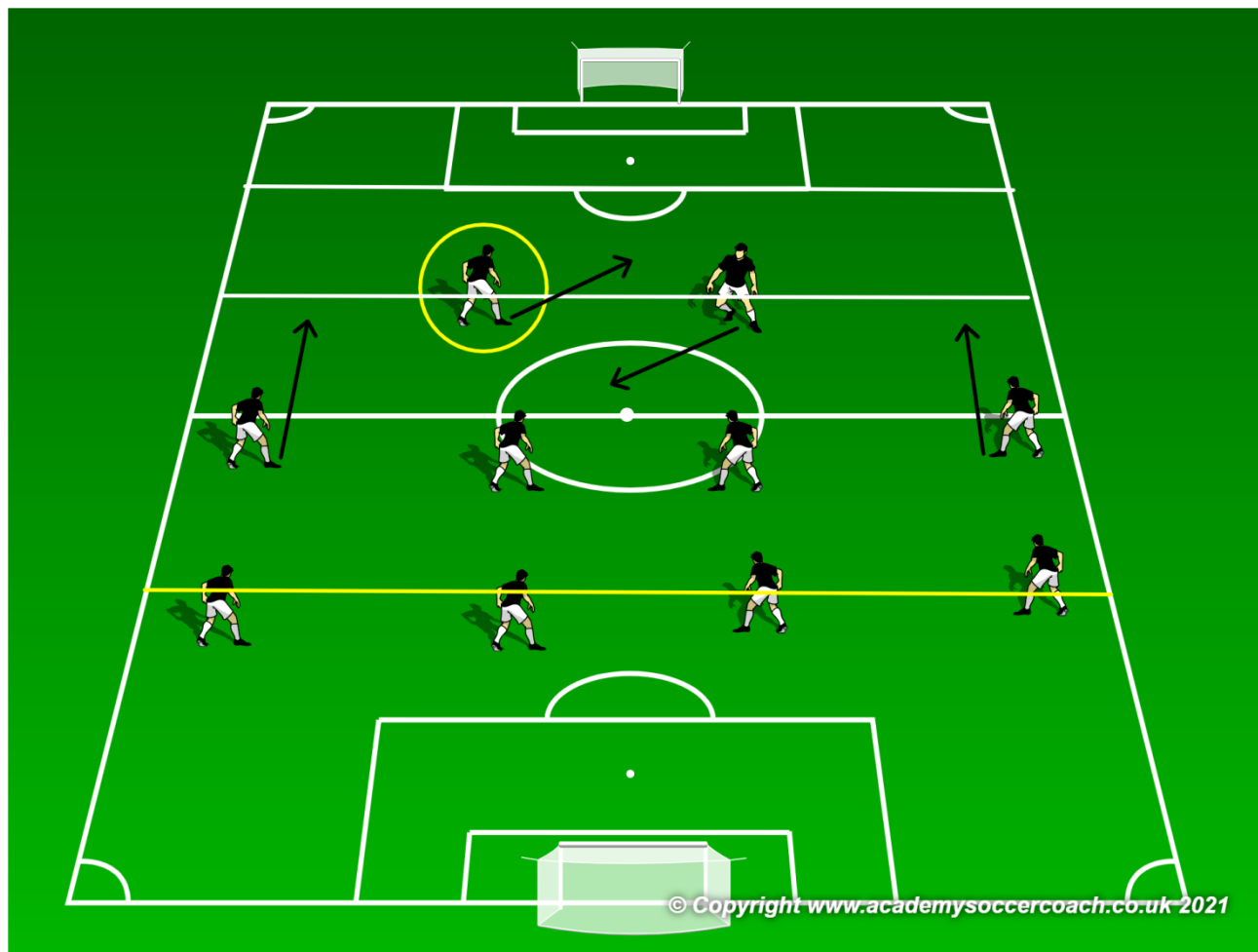
Indeed, he is more Liverpool's No.10, until last season, when Thiago Alcantara wasn't yet in the squad, trying to elevate the middle third's technical level sector. He can't be defined as a real false nine, as he usually drops off and wide also to combine with the fullbacks, allowing the opposite teammate to shift across and act as a central striker.

Again, Firmino is not a real "false nine," as he becomes a pivot when Liverpool can win the ball back after positional defensive actions in his classic 1-4-3-3 with a narrow midfield and attacking lines.

He stands between the opposition center backs; meanwhile, Salah and Manè close down passing planes or presses the opposition's holding midfielder. Rather than a false nine, Firmino is an "all-around player."

With the signing of Diogo Jota, Liverpool can also turn his shape in a 1-4-2-3-1, and the front three becomes front four. Starting from an advanced midfielder position, Firmino becomes a striker during the pressure phase against the opposition's center backs or intercepting balls standing deeper to close down the passing lanes. As the ball is won back, he is ready to attack the center's backs or the penalty area's space.

- He can **attack the final third** at speed and facing the opposition's goal, usually when this type of forward has a sector teammate who acts as a No.10.



Indeed, these forwards fit 2 men attacking shapes and three or four men midfield sector in teams that gradually dominate the possession, building up through the thirds. He doesn't stand in the center, but he positions himself in proper zones of the field where to escape the marker is easier,

concerning the ball's position (inside the channels and at the blind side of the center backs are the recurrent zones where we can find him.)

- He can **use the channels** to create chances and combine with the teammates, as Sergio Aguero is doing since Pep Guardiola has joined Manchester City.

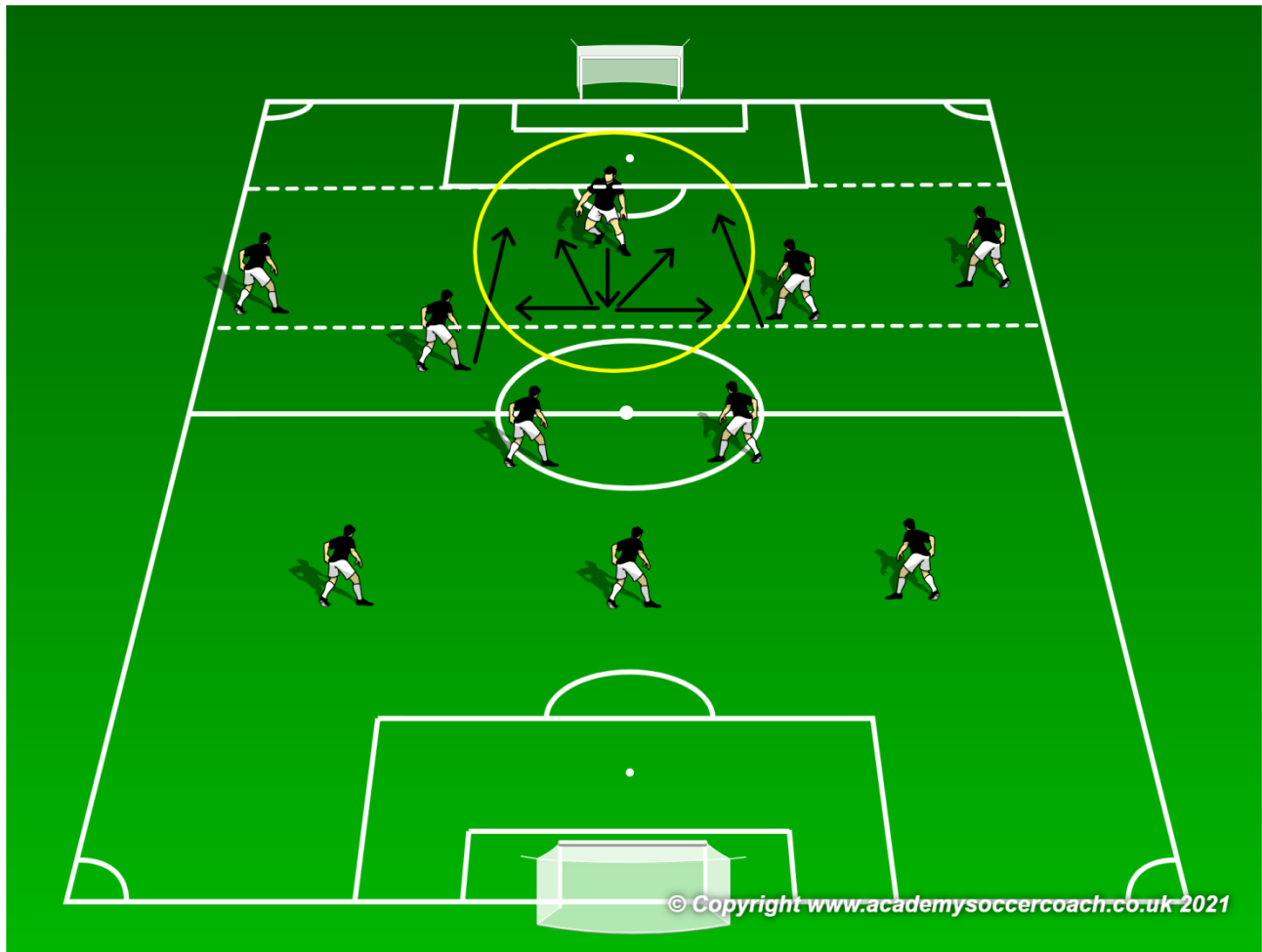


Since Pep Guardiola's arrival as a head coach at Manchester City, Aguero switched his role from a classic center striker to what we may define as a helper of the wingers while building up attacks in the final third. As the half-spaces are so crucial for Pep Guardiola and his teams, the center strikers are the players who must play alongside these channels, overloading one side to invite the defensive pressure and to free the opposite winger or advanced midfielder inside the opposite area of the final third.

There is a sequence in "All or Nothing Manchester City" that explains this idea very well. Pep Guardiola talks about it during a half-time dressing room speech. To sum up the general meaning of what he is telling the team, we explain how if the ball is being played alongside the area where David Silva is standing, the space to look for is on the other side where Kevin De Bruyne is standing free and possibly without a quick and immediate pressure.

Viceversa, if the ball is being played alongside Kevin De Bruyne, the space to look for should have been created in David Silva's area, after creating a strong side thanks to the center striker, who overloads the half-space, Kevin De Bruyne, and the winger.

- He can be **a fluid player**, alternating positions, tasks, and styles of play, becoming a creator rather than a finish man, a sort of modern No.10

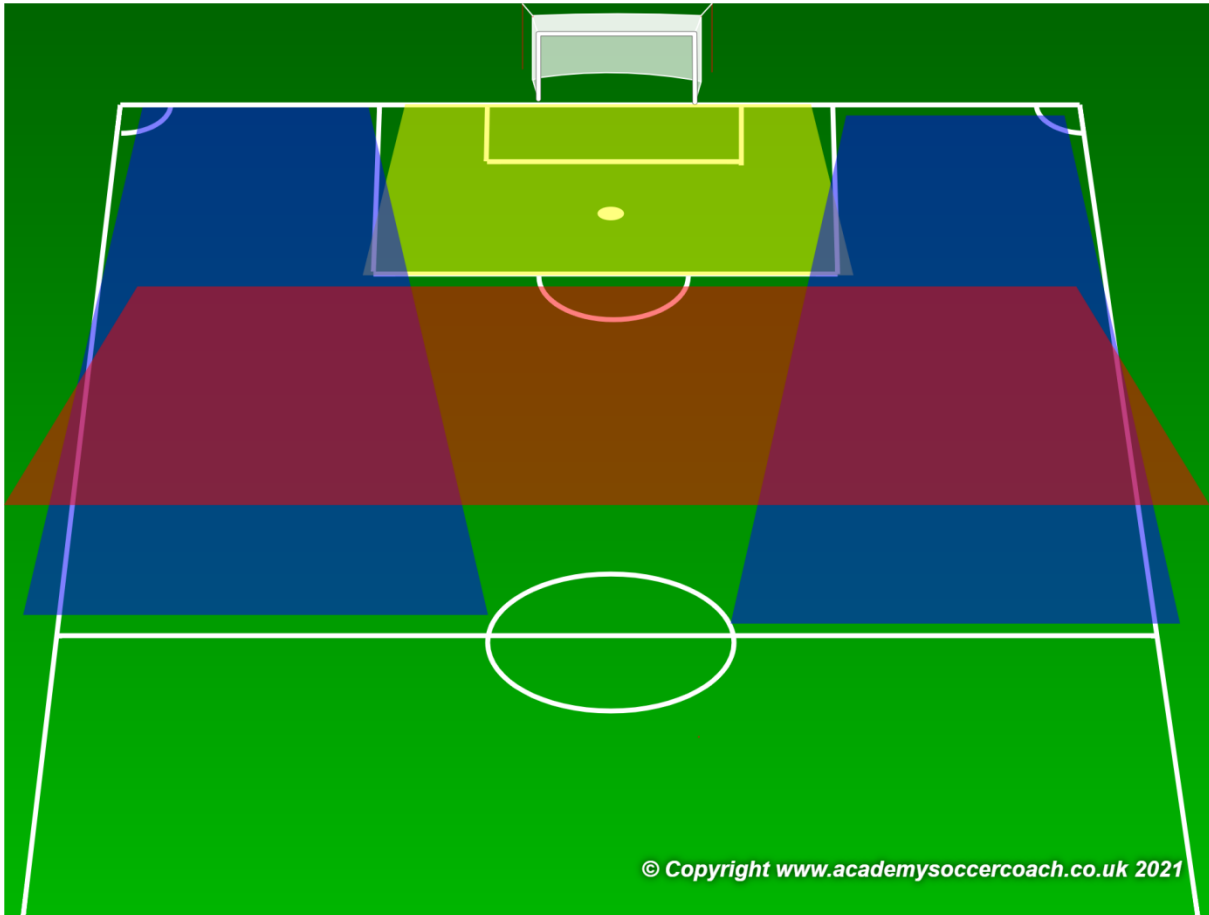


The fluid striker can be considered as the evolution, or the development of a center striker, who has added the skills of a false nine and of a dropping back player, who can also be considered as an evolution of No.10.

He should be able to play in all the situations, he must be able to play back to the opposition's goal, and in front of the same goal, he must be a good passer (out wide or laying the ball off), as well as an assist man, and he must be quick at changing his attitudes and style of play concerning the situation of play and the sequences of the same situations of play.

For this reason, this kind of player can be considered as an "All-around player," the focus of the offensive phases of his team.

- He can be what the Germans call a "**Raumdeuter,**" as Thomas Muller positioning and style of play is defined as a "**Space Interpreter.**" This kind of player doesn't have a specific position in the field as it concerns the situation of play and the ball's position, and he must be gifted with a high level of tactical sense of play. He must interpret the spaces in and all around the final third, being in the right position at the right time with anticipation skills when he is off the ball.

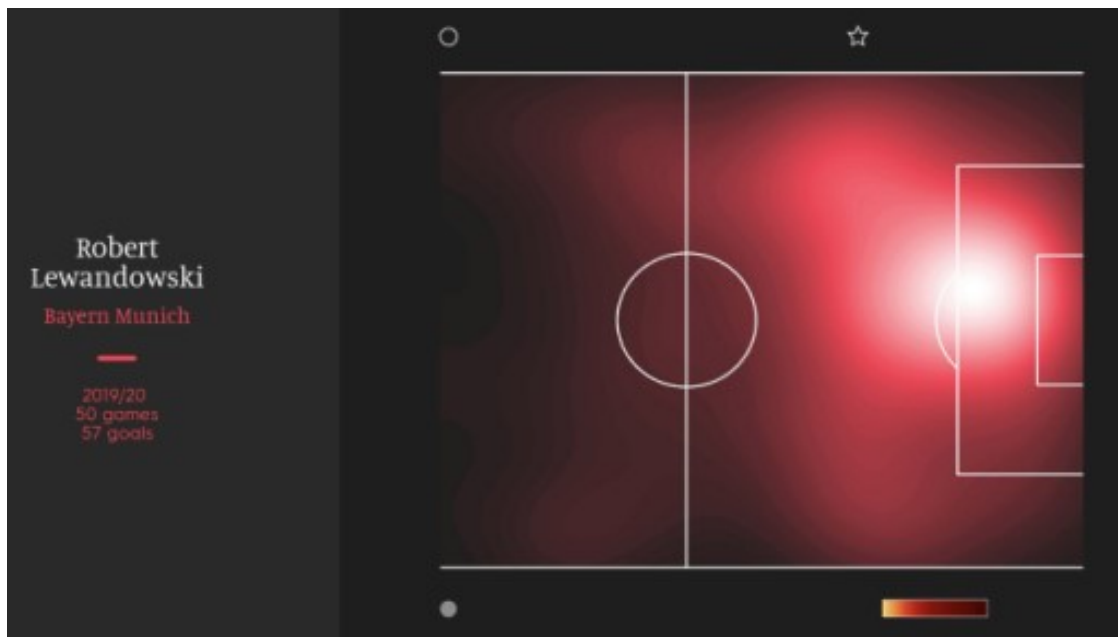


All these tasks need a player like Thomas Muller, as he is fast, strong, a good dribbler, and good at finishing, and his intelligence on the pitch is nearly unrivaled. While not appearing to excel at any particular part of the game, his forethought, anticipation skills, and decisiveness elevate his ability. The German player describes his use of space as instinctive, rather than a coach, a gift. Joachim Low said, "Thomas is a very unorthodox player, and you can't predict his lines of running, but he has one aim, and that is 'how can I score a goal?'"

For the Raumdeuter, **space is king**. He is gifted with excellent stamina, and reading of the game, until covering the fullbacks if necessary. The coach must allow his players to exploit their creativity to pass the ball into space for the Raumdeuter to receive; another striker must have a support mentality and roam around a bit to concede the space interpreter space to interpret. Players such as Cruyff and Xavi have all interpreted the field's dimensions in a way that has changed the vision of their successors, and they also created the Raumdeuter, a player who controls the space first and then the ball.

In general, this type of player adds value in the final third and moves off the ball between the opponent vertically alongside the channels. Dele Alli and Callejon are other examples of raumdeuter.

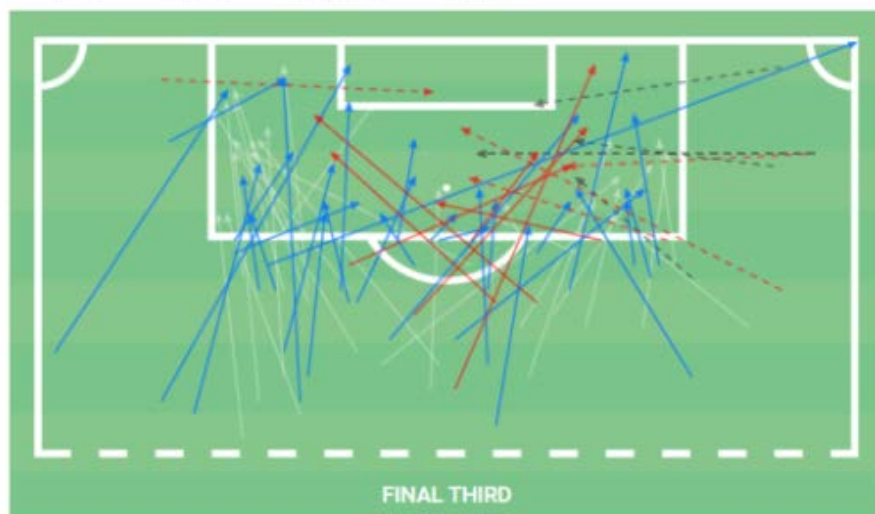
- As Bayern Munich is nowadays, he can also transition to attack passing option for direct ply and counter-attacking teams, developing his style as Robert Lewandowski has done since Pep Guardiola's seasons. From this point of view, he can be defined as an **"All around No.9."**



The heat map of 2019/2020 confirms that Lewandowski is for sure a classic striker, but he is also an all-around No.9 being active throughout the final third, arriving to support and an option for the teammates in the middle third.

### Penalty area deliveries

— Pass -- Cross — Key pass — Carry



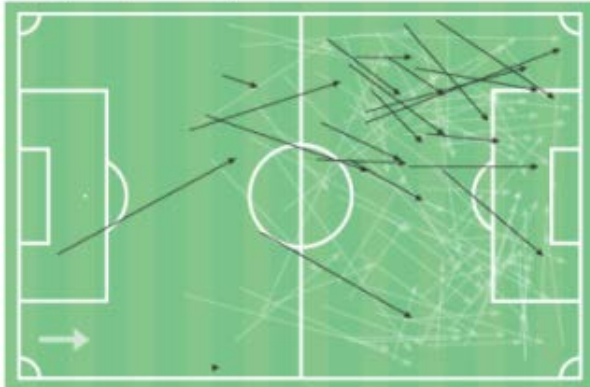
Analyzing the attacking actions completed during the last calendar year (average of 2020), it is clear how the Polish striker hadn't a precise position in the final third, and that from all the variation in his style of play concerned his freedom of movements and of attacking ideas. This picture beside is a first idea of his skills as a complete striker.



Just looking at the final third, the variety of deliveries and the positions in the field of these deliveries are other proves of his skills as a "generally attacking player."

### Ball progression

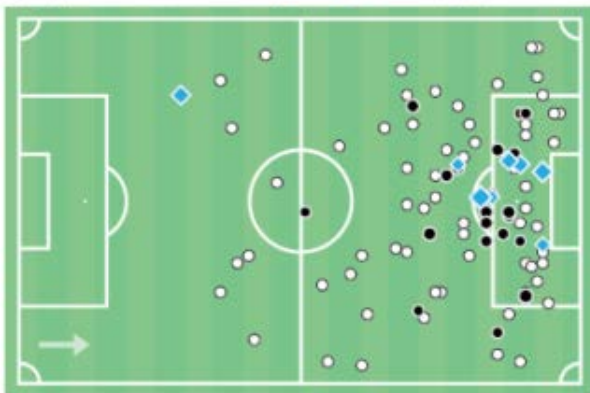
— Progressive pass — Progressive run



The progressions (passes and runs) are indicative to understand the starting positions in the field of Lewandowski; he is often in the middle third as first passing option for a teammate who wins the ball after a defensive action.

### Dribbles

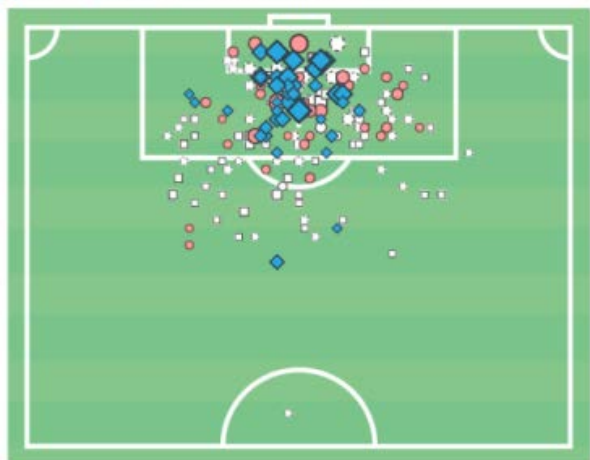
○ Kept possession ● Followed by a shot ◆ Followed by a goal



He is also a pressing player, starting the attacking phases from the middle third and far from the opposition's goal. The finishing phases and the attacking actions followed by a goal are few concerning the number of offensive actions, and this shows how Lewandowski is an "All-around player" for Bayern Munich.

### Shots

◆ Goal ● On goal ◌ Wide ○ On post □ Blocked



The main number of goals comes from inside the penalty area, confirming the tendency to finish as a classic striker. Otherwise, as we have analyzed, Lewandowski often arrives to finish and score after being a creator, a provider and a support for the offensive action of the team, both when the attacks are built up and after transitions.

- He can be a False Nine, which will be a specific topic of the next book.

### Situations of play and types of forwards

- **Target player:** Zlatan Ibrahimovic, during the second period of his career at Ac Milan, is the perfect example of a target striker, apart from his still excellent skills as a scorer.



Ibrahimović attacks the final third back to the opposition's first center to receive a long pass from the left flank.



As the direct opponent can counter his movement and Milan's striker can't control the ball toward the goal, he becomes a target player, heading the ball back for a teammate who supports the attacking move from the back.



The receiver can control the ball and wait for the center striker to move, preventing the offside trap, playing a through pass to allow Ibrahimović to score.

In this second example, Milan tries to build-up from the back, but the opposition's pressure is strong enough to force a goalkeeper's long pass, as short passing combinations are not possible.



The 1-4-2 formation inside the lower half of the field allows the team to maintain four players upfront, and they are all ready to attack the opposition's final third. Vice versa, the four opponents in the final third force the long pass, but they leave spaces behind them that could be quickly exploited if the possession can be maintained.



Ibrahimović acts as a target player, dropping back from the defensive line and control the goalkeeper's long ball. Three teammates attack the opposition's defensive line while saving the ball from the direct marker's pressure.

The long pass, which overcomes the first four players inside the first third, and the midfielders in the center of the pitch, create a 4 v 4 duel in the final third. Milan's players can now attack the opposition's defense through 1 v 1 duels.



Ibrahimović saves the possession, turns, and passes forward for an incoming teammate alongside the right flank.

The target player becomes useful to create fast attacking phases after long balls and play out from the deep first third when there are few passing chances for the player who has won the possession.



Ac Milan has just won the possession alongside the right defensive flank, but the first player with possession has few chances to progress the move, as all his teammates are standing deep inside the first third.



Ibrahimović drops back from the middle third, and he provides support for the teammate with the ball, who can pass out of the pressure and condensed area.

Acting as a target player, Ibrahimović allows the teammates to push up in the field and out of the penalty area, acting as back passing options for the striker. While the teammates are pushing up, the opponents drop back to counter them, but they are all late due to the prior deep attacking positions; Milan's players can face the opposition's goal while receiving, and they can progress the move up after a lay-off pass of the target player.



Ibrahimović receives, and he plays out wide alongside the right flank; the incoming teammate of the target player can receive facing the opposition's goal, and many opponents are late due to the prior attacking positions which the long pass to the target player has nullified.

In this other sequence, the target player becomes crucial to allow his team to consolidate the possession in the middle third and switch the side out wide.



Six opposition players are standing inside the attacking half of the field, and they are countering the AC Milan possession phase. The target player creates an available passing lane from the fullback to him, cutting off two opposition's pressure lanes.



Ibrahimović receives, and he can lay the ball back to the center midfielder, inviting the opposition's defensive line upfront, creating space to attack inside the offensive half.



After the lay-off, the second pass receiver can dribble the ball high up along the flank, exploiting the created space and the opponents forced to retreat the positions to cover the goal space.

The target player can also exploit all defenders' retreating movements to attack the final third facing the goal and be ready to receive a cross pass from the flank.

A target player can also be a creator of space thanks to keeping the ball skills and movements with the ball while the team plays out wide in the middle third.



Milan has just won the ball back inside the first third, and six players are standing deep; the target striker receives after dropping back inside the middle third.



Ibrahimovic receives and invites the direct marker; the opposition defensive line is placed high up in the field, but all the opponents are retreating to cover the space. The defender on the ball forces the striker out wide, thanks to his body positioning.

The only solution for the striker with possession is to turn out wide and wait for the teammate's underlapping run, who has a space superiority against all the retreating opponents.





The receiver dribbles the ball high up along the flank, and two defenders must shift out wide and try to close him down the touchline; as the opposition was placed high up in the field, and the team with possession arrives in the final third with two passes, the target player can exploit the space in the center and run off the ball to attack the opposition goal through the gap that the two defenders had to create to press the opponent with the ball. Furthermore, two other players of the possession team attack the final third along the opposite flank.

This other play situation is similar to the previous one, but the target player is the point of reference along the flank to create a 3<sup>rd</sup> man combination of play.



Ibrahimovic invites two defenders' pressure, opening a gap in the opposition's defense; he receives after shifting wide and lays the ball back to a supporting teammate; the center midfielder runs as a 3<sup>rd</sup> man, exploiting the space behind the target player.



The receiver dribbles the ball out wide, creating a new gap in the center that the target player can exploit, attacking the opposition's goal.

- **Dropping off player**



Roberto Firmino has become the best example of a dropping off player (from the opposition's defensive line) to support the attacking moves of his team (Liverpool), and he is the leading creator of the attacking distribution phases among the "Front Three" Reds' attacking shape.

Manè and Salah are the players who usually attack directly the opposition defensive line between the center backs and the fullbacks or out wide.



In this example, Firmino drops back and receives from a midfielder (Henderson), escaping the fullback mark. He invites the pressure of a central midfielder of the opposition; he passes the ball to a second midfielder in the center.



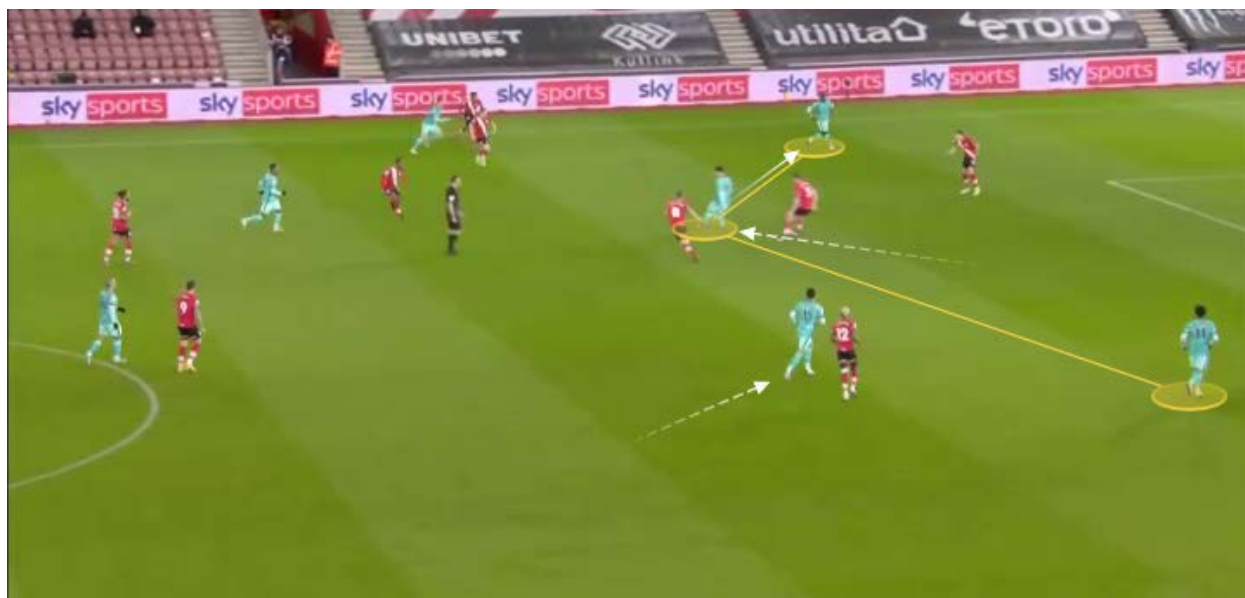
While the player with possession switches the side to Manè the left, Firmino can now attack the opposition's penalty area facing the goal to opposition's goal between the right wide defender and the wingback.

Salah has exchanged the position with him at this point, acting as the lower apex of the attacking trio.

When Oxlade-Chamberlain or Diogo Jota (2020/2021 season) are included in the eleven in the field, the front three shapes becomes a front four shape; Firmino usually plays in the same way, and the fourth component of the attacking shape moves forward of the ball. Manè and Salah usually stand or start from wide positions close to the touchlines in these play situations, rather than from the opposition's fullbacks or wingbacks.



Robertson, the left fullback passes in the center for Firmino, who drops off the opposition's defensive line; Manè attacks the left flank's depth.



As Manè receives along the left flank, Jota runs off the ball through the center, exploiting the space that Salah's wide placement has created. This combination of play has invited the opposition's defensive line higher up in the field and has created the chance for all Liverpool's attacking players to face the opposition's goal.



The left fullback receives the ball back from Manè. He dribbles the ball inside the box; Firmino, the previous dropping off player, can attack the opposition's box, exploiting the space in the center that his movements at the beginning and the combination of play have created.

- **Final third attacker (facing the goal)**

The next sequence is a crucial example of a combination of movements and passes that lead the attacking team to score a goal, driving the ball out of the defensive half, despite being placed deep inside the first and middle thirds.



Ibrahimovic drops back and receives, laying the ball back to the easiest passing option near the half cycle. He turns and moves off the ball through the space he has created, inviting the direct marker out of the defensive line.



The left-winger shifts out wide and creates space to receives without pressure, and he can attack the opposition's defense, dribbling the ball high up and toward the penalty area.



The left-winger invites the defenders' pressure toward the ball and a teammate, who drops off the ball carrier's support.

This way, the opposition's center back must face a 1 v 1 duel just out of the penalty area, and the center striker can attack the opposition goal with a blind run, checking his position and avoiding the offside trap.

Ibrahimovic receives the teammate's long pass in the box's center, exploiting the left-winger's aerial long ball.



He backbeats the opposition's goalkeeper, and he scores for Milan.

The next sequence shows how creating a numerical superiority out wide and inviting the opponents toward the ball to equalize play allow the center striker to attack the opposition's defense between the center back directly and the fullback.



The left fullback, the winger, and Milan's central midfielder have combined the flank, forcing the opposition's right fullback and center back toward the ball to equalize the duel (3 v 3).

This way, the center striker and the right-winger can attack the opposition's box facing the goal.

Ibrahimovic attacks the opposition's goal between the center back and the left fullback; he could run through the imaginary gate they create and in front of the center back.

If the cross pass were driven to the far post, he could attack the goal behind the fullback together with the winger along the right flank.



As the ball carrier drives the ball toward the center, he can anticipate the center back thanks to his position to allow him to header the ball frontally; the defender's back run prevents him from meeting the ball before the striker.

The positional advantage of the striker against the center back is very clear from this next picture.



Ibrahimovic starts a few yards back to the center back, and he can look at the ball without pressure; the center back can't check him directly, as he must look at the ball. This way, he can move with the right timing to anticipate and header the ball to the net.



This next sequence is crucial to understand the combination of movements that a striker should provide to support his team's attacking move.



The center midfielder receives, and he moves around the center back and fullback, which are marking him to stand in play and provide a potential passing option as a target player.



The ball carrier decides to pass along the left flank to the winger, passing the ball between the opposition's right fullback and center back.

Ibrahimovic can attack the final third between the center backs, looking at the opposition's goal.



As the first center back has to shift wide to counter the fullback inside the box, Ibrahimovic can attack the goal behind the center back, and he can score, receiving the cross pass on the far post and the late recovery run of the opposition's left fullback.

- **Using the channels**

Pep Guardiola, Manchester City, and Sergio Aguero are the perfect interpreters of the half-spaces exploitations, as everybody of us knows from the 2016/2017 season.



The left fullback plays a long pass for the advanced right midfielder, which overloads the left half-space; Aguero moves to receive, and the left advance midfielder B.Silva also follows the move.

Aguero's position and ball's dribble have invited the defenders toward the center, and the retreating opposition's midfielders are all late.



Aguero dribbles the ball forward through the half-space, and he invites the pressure of the defenders, freeing the space beside the opposition's right defender through the half-space.



Bernardo Silva can receive, dribble the ball inside the penalty area, and score to the far post, anticipating the nearest opponent's sliding defensive action.

In this sequence, Aguero exploited the half-space to invite the pressure of the defenders.

Otherwise, Aguero exploits the half-space as a way out from the condensed attacking left flank that City created to open up spaces in the final third.



The left fullback, winger, and advanced midfielder have overloaded the flank along the touchline; Aguero receives the ball inside the half-space after a quick one-touch passing combination. He turns toward the center, dribbling the ball through the half-space.



The advanced right midfielder (De Bruyne) moves off the ball through the center channel and toward the left half-space, inviting the opposition's left fullback pressure.

All the opposition's defenders have overloaded the right side of the first third, and the dribbling action of Aguero frees the opposite winger, who was providing width before.

He can receive the pass from Aguero toward the goal without pressure; this pass cuts off all the opposition's defensive shape and allows the receiver to face the goalkeeper.



The winger can score despite one defender can retreat and save the shooting lane toward the far post.

The next sequence ends with the same result as the previous one without properly overloading one side, but only inviting the pressure and the opponents' defensive awareness toward the ball.



Aguero cuts inside the flank's half-space, and he receives; he invites the opposition's pressure together with the advanced midfielder (De Bruyne), although he doesn't receive.

The opposition's center backs aware of the opponents around the ball, and the left advanced midfielder can approach the defensive line without pressure.



Aguero receives, he cuts the center backs off with a through the pass. Bernardo Silva can receive in behind in play, exploiting the opposition's left fullback's deeper position.

Furthermore, the left fullback is wrongly positioned and late, concerning City's Bernardo Silva.



This way, he can score, facing the goalkeeper alone and without pressure.

Guardiola often asks his players to use the half-spaces to move the opponents and create space in the final third center area.



De Bruyne switches the left half-space to the right one, where the winger and Aguero stand in inverted positions.



Aguero receives close to the end-line, and he plays a ground cross pass in the center.

This way, City has made the opposition's defensive shape moving from one side to the other.

The center backs are late, and they create space in the center and in front of the goal for a third man to score.

- **Der Raumdeuter – The space interpreter**

As we have already previously stated, Thomas Muller is the best example of a player without a specific role or position in the field, and who follows the move in the most suitable position, concerning the situation of play, providing a passing option inside a free space for the ball carrier.



Bayern's front three face the goal and force the opposition's defense toward the goal; 1 v 2 duel out wide against the ball carrier and 1 v 1 in the center and along the left flank. Muller stands away from the defensive line and provides a cutting passing option in the center.



As he receives, the opposition's holding midfielder and wide defenders try to press him. Still, he has enough time and space to play a through pass for the center striker, who can receive turning toward the goal and preventing the direct marker from saving the goal space. This way, he can score with two touches (control and shot).



In this second sequence, the opposition has overloaded the ball area, and Bayern hasn't any solution for a through pass toward the center.



Muller provides an out wide passing solution alongside the right flank, receiving and inviting the opposition's defensive lines wider and deeper inside the box.



This way, the center striker, who stands behind the opposition's defensive shape in the center of the box, can header the ball to the net without pressure and exploit the potential marker's wrong positions.

Muller is also good at creating spaces for the teammates, condensing the opposition's defense toward him.



In this sequence, he moves in behind the defensive line between the opposition's left center back and fullback, which would be a striker's classic movement in this situation of play. This way, the striker can attack the opposition goal in front of the center backs.



Muller invites the defenders to condense the ball area in the center and inside the box; the opposite winger and another teammate running along the box's perimeter have become passing options to finish without immediate pressure.

The first aim of a "space interpreter" is to provide a solution to play out from a defended area of the field and open spaces throughout the rest of the field (upfront, possibly).



The winger can't play out or dribble the ball alongside the flank, and Muller supports the move in the center, providing a passing option to drive the ball out and move it toward the opposite side.



He receives and can dribble the ball through the center and invite the opposition's center back out of position; above all, the defenders' awareness is now toward the ball; he can then play a through pass toward the opposite flank (the right one).



The center space in front of the goal is then free, and Bayern can score with a two-touches combination of play. Mueller then supports the attacking move behind the most advanced attacking line, and he is ready to attack the second time of the ball if the teammate didn't score.

The idea of support is evident in this next picture.



One teammate dribbles the ball upfront, but he is under pressure; Muller stands beside and wide, and he can receive. The opposition's defenders are invited toward the ball. The opposite teammate, the third one along the attacking line, can receive without pressure from Muller and score past to the goalkeeper.

## All around No.9 / Fluid Player

Robert Lewandowski is the perfect example of a modern striker, who sum up all the classic move-shot-score skills with the false nine and dropping back player ones, which allows him to be a distributor during the possession phases of Bayern Munich.

In this next sequence, he receives and controls the ball as a classic No.10, and he allows the wingers to tuck in and act as center strikers between the center back and fullback and in the space behind the pressing center back.



He passes forward to the next teammate behind the opposition's pressing center back...



...and the receiver can play through and forward again, exploiting the space in front of him to the teammate, who runs off the ball between the farther center back and fullback.

In this next sequence, the striker exploits the run off the "space interpreter" ball. Muller is placed as a central striker and Lewandowski as a No.10 beside the beginning's ball carrier.



The left midfielder dribbles the ball up in the field, and Muller cuts off the space in front of the striker, inviting the center back to mark him due to his position preventively



Lewandowski is then free to receive and shot on goal without pressure because of the deep opposition's defensive lines that Muller has previously force them to create.

In the end, Bayern has created an equal number of player duel in front of the penalty area (5 v 5).

This next sequence is the center striker's essential task when it is out wide along the flank.



The teammate is ready to play a cross pass from the left flank, and the center striker (Lewandowski) stands a few yards away from the opposition's center backs in the center of the penalty area.



He attacks the ball, and he stoles time and space against them both, and he can header the ball to the opposition's goal past the goalkeeper.

This is just the final sequence of a move in which the center striker is the end of the move in a traditional way like an old-style No.9 should do.

This is a second example and type of classic finishing, where Lewandowski finishes the move as a classic No.9 with a blind run.



He is standing between the center backs and few yards away from them, and he attacks the space in front through a blind run.



He scores receiving a cross pass with a driven ball beside the center back in front of him, and he anticipates the second one, who is late.

As the goalkeeper doesn't leave the line, he can meet the ball free without real pressure and score.



Lewandowski is also a player with excellent technical skills, at the highest levels among the strikers inactivity. Bayern Munich counts on his assists' skills also to create chances and score.



In this situation, Lewandowski has the ball close to the 6 yds box, but he can't play a cross pass, as the opposition's defensive line stands in front of the opposition's goal. He then finds the way to play a "rabona kick" to play an in-swinging cross pass toward the middle of the penalty area, where a pocket of space is available due to the opponents' defensive positions.



The ball falls from this side of the penalty cycle, and a teammate can meet the ball running from the back, and he can shot and score without pressure, as all defenders are late due to their previous positions.

In this next sequence, Lewandowski stands between the opposition's center backs, saving the final third during a Bayern's counter-attack. The Polish player shows his skills to move off the ball behind at the beginning and assist the man in finishing the move.



The left attacking midfielder tucks in, and he faces the final third, overcoming the pressure of the direct marker; he has time and space to play an in behind pass for Lewandowski.



The center striker moves off the ball with the right time back to the center back in front of him, and he can receive facing the goal, as the second center-back is too far to counter him while receiving.



Lewandowski decides to play an assist pass in the center, cutting off the retreating opponents in the middle of the penalty area; he passes to the incoming teammate who has passed the ball before, who receives and score, winning space and time against all the opposition's defenders.

The next attacking move is crucial to understand his skills as a target player first and then assist man in finishing the offensive phase.



He receives a long pass and headers the ball back to the first and easiest passing option to save the possession.



He follows the move, and he shifts out wide inside the final third, stretching the opposition's defensive line. Lewandowski receives and passes forward on the run of a third man. He cuts off the opponent with a one-touch pass.



Lewandowski's movements and last pass free the third man in front of the opposition's goal and allow him to score.

He also follows the move to potentially win a second time of the ball just out of the box.

Lewandowski's skills as a striker are the best possible a coach may find nowadays.



He passes back from the opposition's defensive line in this sequence, as no progression is possible.



As the teammate receives, he moves off the ball behind the direct marker, he controls the ball in behind, and he shoots, scoring a goal in front of the opposition's goalkeeper.

His ability to read the best path toward the goal becomes clear in this next sequence.



He moves toward the near post, exploiting the space, concerning the teammate with the ball out wide along the right flank.



When his teammate decides to dribble the ball toward the end line, Lewandowski stops his run and balance the timing for a new movement, following the teammate with the ball.

He also prevents the direct marker from moving in front of him, and he can face the opposition's goal and the near post, concerning the ball's position.



As the teammate attempts a cross pass, he moves toward the near post again, turning around the marker and winning a pocket of space for a one-touch shot on goal, scoring for Bayern.

The Polish striker is also very clever when pressing the opposition's center backs.



In this example, he screens the passing path to the opposition's holding midfielder. The wide passing options are also closed, and the second center back is the only potential solution for the opponent with the ball if he doesn't want to play a long ball.



The opponent with the ball keeps the possession too long, and Lewandowski wins the possession, intercepting the ball when the ball carrier attempts to pass toward the second center back.



He wins the ball, overcomes the opposition's goalkeeper, and scores before the nearest center back can counter him.



## The Harry Kane case; a center striker who has become a playmaker



Josè Mourinho has changed the tactical approach of Spurs with his typical counter-attacking style after strong defensive phase.

Pochettino asked his players to maintain the possession and create chances after intricate passing patterns of play round the box.

Now the spaces are larger and passes are longer with Mourinho as a head coach, and many indicators have developed through the these two last seasons:

**Conceded passes in the first third** has increased together with the **Ppda**, showing a decrease of defensive pressure, but with a result of increased needed **possession for the opposition** to score.

Otherwise, **counter-attacks with goals** have increased and the **expected goals (and non-penalty goals)** have improved, concerning the last season under Pochettino.

**Conceded goals indicator** is now the best one since the 15/16 season.

Harry Kane has been tasked with dropping off movements, but in more tight spaces and close to the opposition's goal while playing for the Argentinian coach.



Season	Passes / accurate	Long passes / accurate	Through passes / accurate	Crosses / accurate
<b>2020/2021</b>	<b>21.47 - 72.9%</b>	<b>2.84 - 57.1%</b>	<b>2.08 - 53.7%</b>	0.91 - 22.2%
2019/2020	16.56 - 70.4%	1.51 - 34%	1.44 - 24.4%	0.99 - 29%
2018/2019	17.85 - 76.4%	2.19 - 60.3%	1.01 - 27.6%	0.63 - 22.2%
2017/2018	16.36 - 74%	2.04 - 62.2%	1.32 - 33.3%	0.8 - 34.5%
Season	Second assists	Passes to final third/accurate	Passes to penalty area / accurate	Received passes
<b>2020/2021</b>	0	<b>5.17 - 64.7%</b>	<b>2.23 - 61.4%</b>	<b>15.55</b>
2019/2020	0	3.27 - 58.8%	1.6 - 44%	12.78
2018/2019	0.07	3.37 - 68%	1.7 - 53.1%	13.01
2017/2018	0.08	2.7 - 71.4%	1.85 - 53.7%	12.58
Season	Assists	xA	Forward passes / accurate	Back passes / accurate
<b>2020/2021</b>	<b>0.51</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>7.45 - 63.3%</b>	<b>3.19 - 92.1%</b>
2019/2020	0.06	0.07	4.52 - 61%	2.82 - 88.6%
2018/2019	0.07	0.08	4.31 - 65.3%	3.41 - 88.8%
2017/2018	0.06	0.07	4.06 - 56.5%	3.03 - 91.8%

The increase of all the main passing's indicators is very evident in the season and a half under Josè Mourinho, and the comparison with the last seasons with Mauricio Pochettino as a head coach is even more crucial to highlight the development of the English striker as a pass distributor and options provider for the teammates. The permanent contribution of goals is also remarkable, despite his farther heat map from the opposition's penalty box.

Mourinho wants him to be found in between the lines to exploit the speed of teammates like Son or Lucas Moura, and Bergwijn or Bale. Kane is the focus player who must receive after pressing and breaking runs, having the possession back or playing penetrative passes, playing from the center, exploiting the blind runs, or shifting out wide first and playing toward the center.



He has become a progressive passer for his team and one of the best passer among all the offensive players of the English Premier League.



Harry Kane is positioned as a center midfielder in this example, receiving a long pass from the goalkeeper; he has dropped back, creating space between him and the opposition defensive line, he has time and space from the closest opponents.

As the defensive line doesn't track him, Son and Lucas Moura have space to move off the ball and attack the depth together with the left fullback, which also pushes up alongside the flank.



A fourth player is also pushed up along the right flank; the wide forwards now act as center strikers, and the fullbacks are the wingers in this situation of play. The player who would be the real center striker is now the pivot of this attacking move.

The match against Southampton is very indicative to understand the new role of the English striker under José Mourinho; many of the goals Tottenham scored came from Kane's distributions in the middle third and runs off the ball by Son. This is the heat-map of that match :



He acted as a center midfielder and a left-winger rather than a center striker, creating space for the teammates in the final third and stretching the opposition's defensive line shifting out wide alongside the left flank.

All the goals Tottenham scored came from Harry Kane as a link player and a provider; the last goal of the match is very indicative, as he stands as a player in between the lines at the beginning of the attacking action and he attacks the penalty area and the opposition's goal as he didn't receive the ball from the teammate, scoring the last one of the match.

Here are the sequences of the goal, highlighting Harry Kane's positions:



Lucas Moura has just won the ball in the middle third, and he can escape the pressure of two opponents, creating enough time and space for a counter-attack.



Harry Kane shifts out wide along the left flank, far and beside the opposition's closest defender, and he can attack the depth and receive the pass facing the opposition goal. Tottenham can create a 3 v 3 duel to counter-attack.



Tottenham strikers can attack the spaces between the opposition's defenders and receive a cross pass in front of their run's direction, facing the goal.

All the opposition's defenders are late and can't cover the space toward the goal either close the passing lane (interception attempt).



Son can control the ball without pressure inside the penalty area, and he has enough time and space to shot on goal and score past the goalkeeper.

In this second example, Kane receives in between the lines after dropping back from the opposition's defensive line; this movement and the Spurs players that stand along the last line of opponents force them to decide if to track Kane cover the depth, as they do.



Kane receives and plays a through pass between the center backs; meanwhile, Son runs behind the center and the fullback. The nearest center back's wrong body placement allows him to gain a positional advantage when receiving the ball.



The second center-back has the chance to retreat and counter Son; anyway, the ball carrier can go on dribbling the ball toward the opposition's goal, and the defender can't properly force him out wide due to the previous positional advantage on the ball. Son can then enter the penalty area, despite being under pressure.



Son can create distance between him and the defender and prevent another opponent from countering him before shooting on goal and scoring for Tottenham.

This next sequence is the perfect example of the new pivotal role that Mourinho asks Kane since his arrival last November 2019.



Tottenham builds up from the back; the opposition's pressure covers the passing lanes toward the center. The ball carrier seems to be under pressure and forced to a long pass, as well as the wide and close passing option seems to be under potential pressure.

Furthermore, the opposition's center midfielders seem to close the passing lanes toward the middle third.

In the end, the ball carrier seems to be forced to play a long pass to the final third.





Kane receives in between the line, taking a proper position behind and between the center midfielders; the defensive line was previously ready to cover a potential long pass.

They aren't properly ready to face a through pass, as Tottenham strikers can also stand inside an in-play zone between three defenders and a fourth one who is standing deeper than the teammates.

This wrong defensive positioning of the defenders and Kane's ball reception behind the center midfielders allows him to play a through pass and the strikers to receive without pressure and facing the goal.



He can finish and score without pressure, exploiting his dribbling speed and the starting wrong positioning of the opposition's defenders.

These last sequences show how Kane has maintained his skills as a center forward apart from the development as an attacking pivot.



Harry Kane comes back in play from an offside position in front of the opposition's defensive line to provide a forward passing option for the ball carrier, who is dribbling the ball from the middle third, facing the field and without pressure.



Kane receives and drives the ball out wide and away from the opposition's center defender's potential pressure. He creates a positional superiority situation out wide, where he can control the ball without pressure and play a pass to the final third facing the final third.



Kane can play a cross pass before the opponent can counter him and win the ball. Son balances his run to stand in play and behind the last opponent's line to receive the ball facing the opposition's goal.



Kane plays a cross pass meeting in play Son's run, and the teammate can dribble the ball toward the goal without pressure, as all defenders are too late to counter him.

He dribbles the ball toward the goal, and he shoots on goal before the goalkeeper can try a save against him.

Kane starts as a pivot in this last sequence, but he can't receive, as the teammate can only play backward along the flank, and the opponent covers the passing lanes toward the center.



Kane stands in the center, but he can't receive during the first distribution phase.



When Tottenham can create space in the center, the ball carrier decides to switch the side toward the opposite flank, and Kane doesn't receive again, as an opponent is screening the passing lane toward him.

Tottenham tries to exploit the weak side of the opposition's defensive shape to reach the penalty area and finish.



The opposite left fullback attacks the penalty area, and he receives enough time and space to shoot on goal. Despite not receiving the ball during the early stages of the attacking move, Kane follows the sequence. He enters the penalty area in the center without real defensive pressure.



After a goalkeeper rebounds the previous shot, Kane can then shoot and score, winning the ball against the defenders.

## Summary

This book aims to provide an overview of what a modern center forward is and on which tasks he has, as the evolution of soccer has changed this role like all the other ones. This book also aims to be very concrete, finding the strikers' skills through the analysis of the situations of play and the most critical players in activity nowadays.

These are the main focus point:

- Situations of play and types of forwards
- Target player
- Dropping off player
- Final third attacker (facing the goal)
- Using the channels
- Der Raumdeuter – The space interpreter
- All around No.9 / Fluid Player
- The Harry Kane case; a center striker who has become a playmaker

As an author, I decided to include two roles, or positions, that wouldn't be part of a book about a No.9; the space interpreter, as Thomas Muller is an additional striker for Bayern Munich, and the Harry Kane analysis as an offensive playmaker because he is an example of how a coach can profoundly influence the performance of a player, changing his behaviors, without limiting the skills which made him a great player.

Lewandowski, Firmino, Aguero, and Ibrahimović during his second adventure as an Ac. Milan players are the other analyzed player in this book.

Furthermore, I tried to include all the possible play situations that may lead a striker to score or to be an assist player to be as much complete as possible and go deep inside the ways a team can score a goal thanks to his center striker. I hope I have been able to do it.