

THE ROLE OF THE
WIDE
MIDFIELDER

DEFENDING



by **LUCA BERTOLINI**

The Role of the Wide Midfielder (Defending)

By

Luca Bertolini

Published by
WORLD CLASS COACHING

First published March 2021 by
WORLD CLASS COACHING 4015 N 78th 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: where do they play in the field during defensive phases?	3
The wide midfielders in the field: where and how do they play when their team is off the ball?	12
The wide midfielders in the 1-4-3-3: Xavi Hernandez and Andres Iniesta at Barcelona with Guardiola as a coach	12
The wide midfielders in the 1-4-4-2 (flat midfield shape - the classic wingers): Saul Niguez and Ferreira Carrasco (and Angel Correa) at Atletico Madrid (condense the center and shifts through the field)	19
The wide midfielders in the 1-4-4-2 (flat midfield shape - the inverted wingers); Arjen Robben and Frank Ribery at Bayern Munich during 2012/2013 treble season: Bayern – Barcelona U.C.L.'s semi-final case study	33
The wide midfielders in the 1-4-4-2 (diamond midfield shape): Ivan Rakitic, Iniesta and Paulinho at Barcelona under Ernesto Valverde	39
The wide midfielders in the 1-4-2-3-1 (wide attackers): Cristiano Ronaldo and Mezut Ozil/Angel Di Maria at Real Madrid under Mourinho (team off the ball.)	45
Wide midfielders in the 1-5-3-2 (1-3-5-2): Nicolò Barella and Stefano Sensi at Internazionale Milan during pressure and defensive phases	52
The wide midfielders in the 1-3-2-5 or 1-2-3-2-3 attacking shape (Pep Guardiola): David Silva and Kevin de Bruyne defensive tasks when City was off the ball	59
The wide midfielders in the 1-3-3-1-3 shape from attacking to defensive shapes: the Marcelo Bielsa's way to create a 1-4-1-4-1 shape	62
Finding complete K.P.I. factors' set for a wide midfielder (defensive phase)	68
Summary	69

Introduction: where do they play in the field during defensive phases?

The following pictures are the defensive chalkboards of Stefano Sensi, and Nicolò Barella in a Serie A derby match played last September 2019; they played right and left the holding midfielder Brozovic.



The tackles attempts' points show how Barella played alongside the right flank and higher in the field concerning Sensi, who tackled the opponents in front of the opposition's box and deeper inside the defensive half.



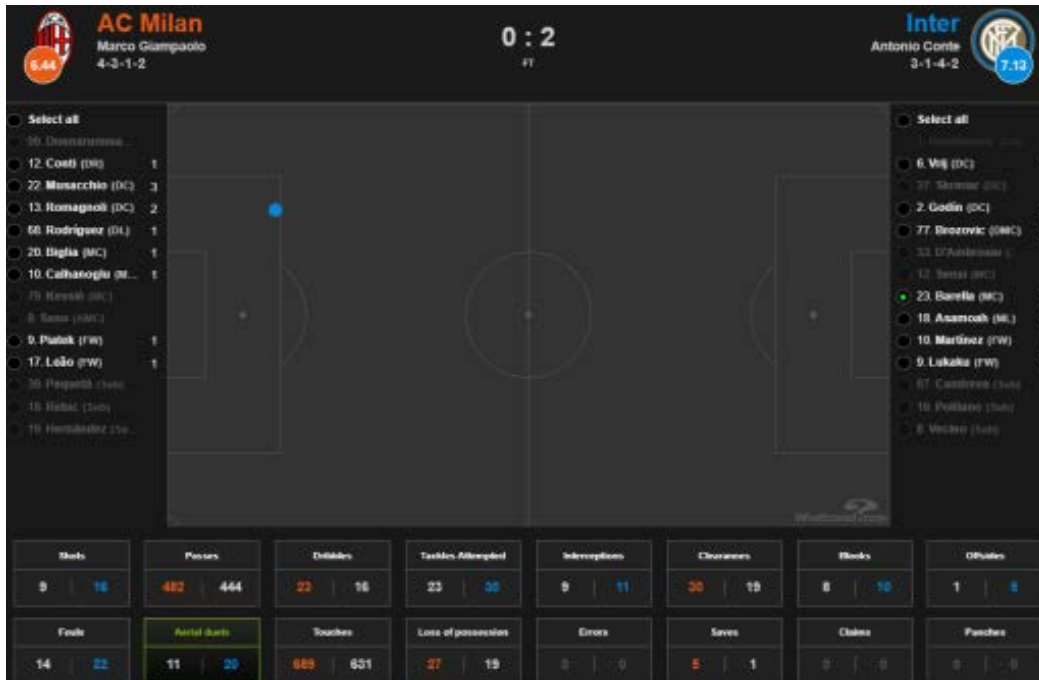
Few interceptions along the right flank are from Barella; this depends on the high pressure or deep defensive shape that Antonio Conte asks his players.



Few blocks show that other players were tasked with blocking the opponents with possession in the coach's tactical idea; the back five takes the wingbacks and the center forward to act as blocking players in Conte's idea.



The fouls' points show the wingbacks' attacking attitudes; the wide midfielders cover the wingbacks' positions while attacking higher up in the field. Their positions require them to counter the opponents if the team loses possession. These defensive tasks took them to commit fouls along the flanks if the ball's recovery was impossible.



In a team where all the three center backs are tall and physically strong, as the holding midfielder is, the aerial duels are not the first defensive tasks for the wide midfielders. Inter made 20 aerial duels in that match, and Barella only played one of them inside the box.

Looking at the heat maps of the wide midfielders, a different style of play and distribution appears.



Sensi is a more distribution player. He often switches the positions with the deep-lying midfielder; indeed, he seems to be an "all field midfielder" concerning the teammate along the opposite side.



The right side of the field seems to be the preferred playing area of Nicolò Barella. Furthermore, the heat map becomes warmer in the higher right zone of the middle and final thirds, showing a more attacking style of playing concerning the teammate.

And these are the chalkboards and the heat maps of the attacking-minded wide midfielders per excellence: David Silva and Kevin De Bruyne.



The fouls points of Guardiola's wide midfielders show the different positions in the field, following players' positional play dogma along different vertical and horizontal lines. David Silva committed 3 fouls high up in the field along the left side and inside the box, De Bruyne deeper along the right side of the middle third.



The interceptor of Guardiola's teams is always the deep-lying /holding midfielder (Fernandinho for Manchester City); this is why De Bruyne intercepted only 1 of the team's 10 balls.



The wide midfielders in Guardiola's teams often stand along the half-spaces. They are the first counter-attacking weapons after the ball's recovery; this is why we find one aerial duel inside the defensive box. Kevin De Bruyne and David Silva were the corner takers (De Bruyne still is a corner taker) of Manchester City.



Kevin De Bruyne is the first pressing midfielder of the Citizens along the right flank; the Belgian player made the only two blocks.



Again, Guardiola's team usually has a fouler, a player who makes tactical fouls all around the field when counter-pressing and pressure phase are not effective; this player is the holding midfielder wide ones are the first passing options after the ball's recovery.



Center backs, holding midfielder, and the inverted fullback when used are the players who usually engage the aerial duels if these balls are not coming from the opposition's corner kicks or free kicks to the box.



Both wide midfielders stand along the half-spaces more than inside all the other areas of the field.



Kevin De Bruyne, along with the right one, and David Silva, along with the left one.

Player Comparison / Me2Others


K. De Bruyne ('91) Manchester City Premier League, England, 2019/2020 LWF, CF, LW, AMF, CMF

David Silva ('86) Manchester City Premier League, England, 2019/2020 LWF, AMF, CMF


Defensive Parameters

PARAMETERS	1 → Matches	TOTAL	TOTAL	← 1 Matches	PARAMETERS
Ball recoveries	4	5	3	5	Ball recoveries
Ball recoveries in the opponent half	3	2	3	2	Ball recoveries in the opponent half
Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s	2	0	2	0	Ball recoveries in the opponent half that lead to a shot within 20s
Interceptions	1	0	1	0	Interceptions
Ball losses	14	4	14	4	Ball losses
Ball losses in his own half	2	1	2	1	Ball losses in his own half
Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s	0	0	0	0	Ball losses in his own half that lead to a shot within 20s
Defensive actions	6	5	6	5	Defensive actions
Successful defensive actions	5	3	5	3	Successful defensive actions


Apart from the almost equal number of ball's recovery in the match we have just looked at, De Bruyne did it inside the opposition's half and David Silva inside the defensive one. The same number of defensive actions show that they had the same tasks along the opposite half-spaces.




Player Comparisonator / Me2Others



K. De Bruyne ('91)
 Manchester City
 Premier League, England, 2019/2020
 LWF, CF, LW, AMF, CMF



David Silva ('86)
 Manchester City
 Premier League, England, 2019/2020
 LWF, AMF, CMF

Duels Parameters  Comparisonator

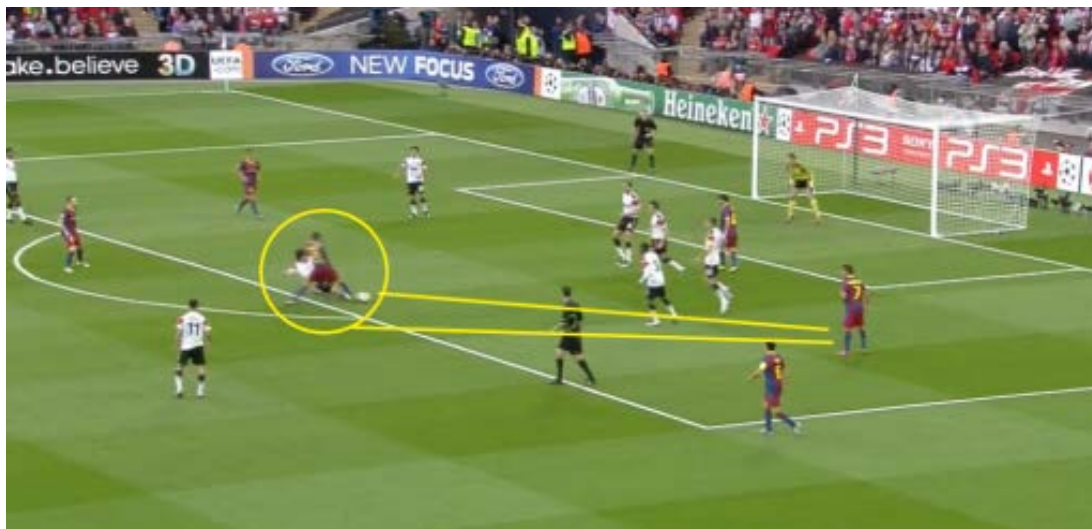
PARAMETERS	1 → Matches	TOTAL	TOTAL	1 → Matches	PARAMETERS
Aerial duels made		● 1	● 1		Aerial duels made
Aerial duels won		● 1	● 1		Aerial duels won
Defensive duels made		● 5	● 5		Defensive duels made
Defensive duels won		● 1	● 1		Defensive duels won
Offensive duels made		▲ 15	▼ 9		Offensive duels made
Offensive duels won		▲ 10	▼ 5		Offensive duels won
Pressing duels		▲ 8	▼ 1		Pressing duels

The main difference between the wide midfielders was the attacking play; David Silva used to combine through short passes along the left side, and Kevin De Bruyne was, and still is, a more direct attacking-minded midfielder, speeding up the play along the right flank and moving off the ball toward the opposite box to receive near or inside the box.

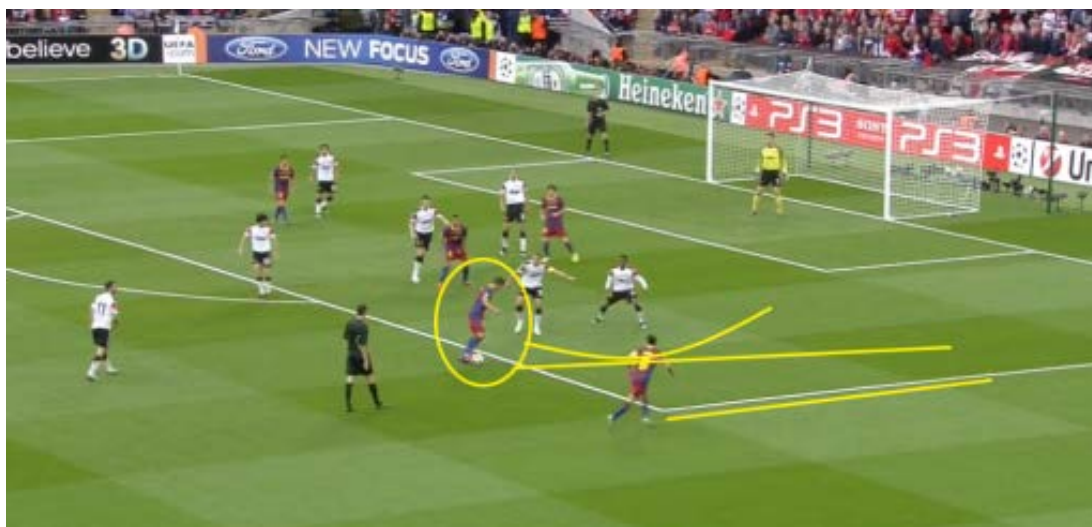
The wide midfielders in the field: where and how do they play when their team is off the ball?

The wide midfielders in the 1-4-3-3: Xavi Hernandez and Andres Iniesta at Barcelona with Guardiola as a coach.

Guardiola used to say that there is only one secret in the world of soccer: "I have the ball, or I haven't." The defensive phase of Barcelona 2008-2012 and tiki-taka mean pressure. Johan Cruijff used to say that if the possession team players aren't far away, more than 10 meters from each other, the recovery is easier and faster than immediate pressure (counter-pressing) against the opposition's ball carriers.



Daniel Alves won the ball back from a central position just inside the opposition's box, and he passes to David Villa on the right. Thanks to the quick and high recovery, Barcelona can maintain the box overloaded, despite the momentary loss of possession.



This way, Villa can control the ball and wait for an incoming teammate from the back, and Barcelona could counter-attack very high in the final third.

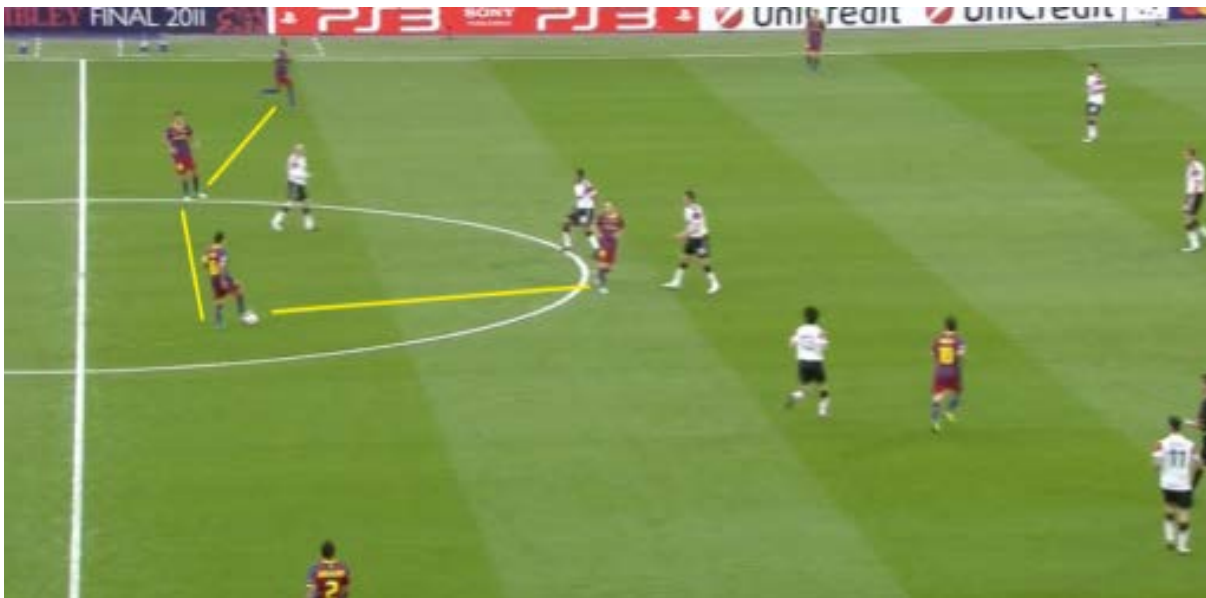


Xavi plays a cross pass, and the three defenders in front of the goal found themselves in an equal number duel (3 v 3), and the fourth one was out of position.



Pedro could shot on goal, anticipating the center backs, moving from a free position and looking at the ball, concerning a standing aligned opposition's defensive line.

The same passing triangles that the team shape created during possession phases were used to counter-press and close the opposition's ball carriers' potential options.



Iniesta was shifting across two triangles, as apex between Abidal and Busquets and between Busquets and Xavi.



He lost the possession while receiving a through pass from the back, but Xavi was placed very close to him, and Abidal was a suitable passing option after the ball's recovery.



Xavi could win the ball back immediately, exploiting his close position to Iniesta, and Abidal could receive just after the ball's recovery, as a wide option to save the possession.

The wide midfielders were the players and the wide forwards tasked with the ball recovery high up in the field.



Pedro pushed up along the left flank, pressing the opposition's right center back, who was forced to play a quick pass forward to an incoming teammate with his back to the field.



Iniesta tracked the opponent (opposition's passing option) deeper inside the final third, forcing a quick pass out wide toward the sideline; furthermore, Iniesta tracked the ball's path to press the third receiver and close him down.



Iniesta also forced a quick forward pass of the opposition's fullback; meanwhile, Pedro dropped back to close the passing lane for a back pass inside the field to the center midfielder.

The fullback's only solution is to play a long pass alongside Barcelona's defensive left flank, forcing the opposing team's rhythm to win the ball back or stop the opposition's attacking team.



The left fullback Abidal countered the direct opponent along the flank, near the sideline, using it also as an additional defender.

Furthermore, all the shortest passing options for the player with possession were closed or marked 1 v 1: Iniesta against the fullback, Pedro was closing the holding midfielder. Xavi was screening the opposite center midfielder.

Barcelona's defensive secret was to recover the ball just after its loss, and opposition's recovery, exploiting the moment of defensive weakness during their transition to attack, thanks to the smaller pocket of space conceded to the ball carriers that the short distances helped to create.



The opposition rebounded a ball inside the opposition's box, with four Barcelona players inside...



...Iniesta pressed the first opposition's ball carriers, forcing the rhythms and play times; Xavi and Messi stand near the ball, in a defensive triangle, just out of the box...



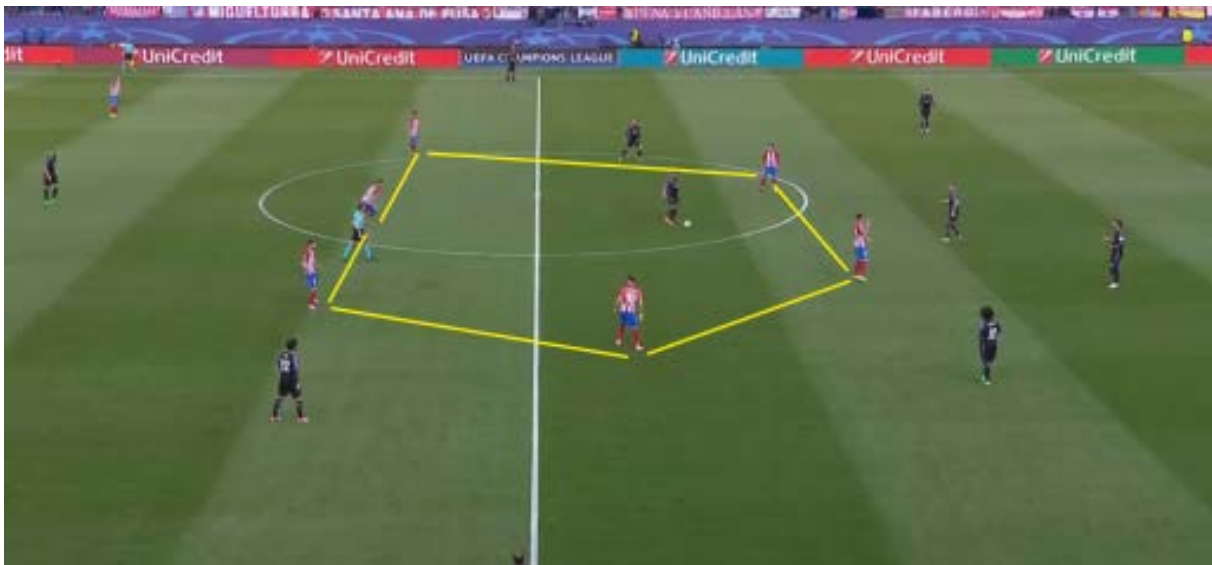
...The short distances among the players allowed Iniesta to recover the ball and exploit the space created in front of the opposition's back four.



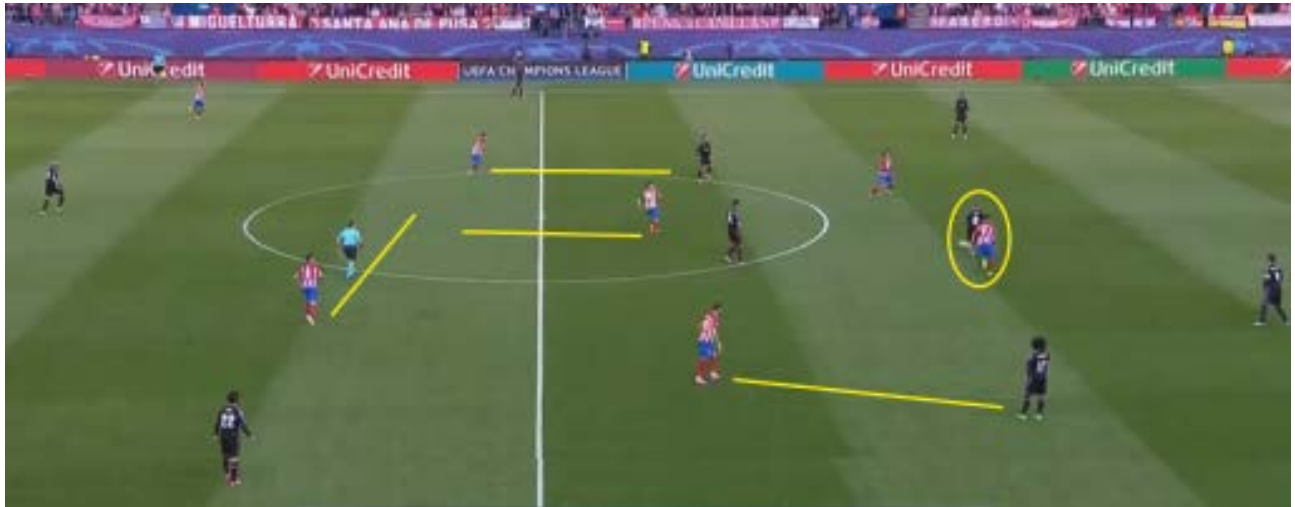
Messi received and invited more opponents close to the ball (3 v 1), and Xavi could exploit the space in front of the opposition's box.

The wide midfielders in the 1-4-4-2 (flat midfield shape - the classic wingers): Saul Niguez and Ferreira Carrasco (and Angel Correa) at Atletico Madrid (condense the center and shifts through the field)

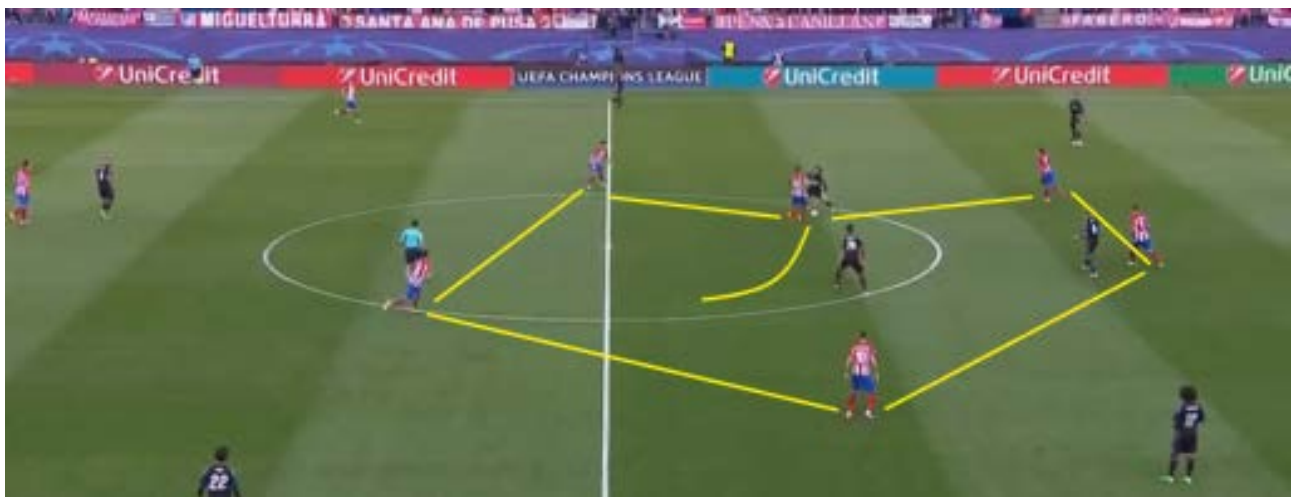
The essential elements of Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid tactics have always been the center midfield's congestion with narrow defensive shapes...



The opposition's center midfielder had the possession. Still, Atletico built up a defensive pentagon around him, screening all the shortest passing options and positioning the three further players ready to press the opposition's defensive lines. The wingers stand narrow in the center and beside the center midfielders.



As the first opposition's center back received, Torres pressed him, but all the passing option near the ball were closed or screened; the wingers marked the opposition's second midfielder along the defensive left side (Saul Niguez), and the other one countered the opposition's left fullback (Carrasco).



When the opposition's second pivot was received, he was forced toward the center. Atletico could create a safe numerical advantage; 4 v 2 against the opposition's center midfielders, as the winger supported midfielder standing narrow and compact in the center.

Wingers and fullbacks shifted across the field to maintain the lines narrow and compact; they create wide weak sides, but the ball's strong sides usually take to a ball's recovery.



Furthermore, to switch the side is always very hard for the opposition due to the condensed areas around the ball and the closure of passing lanes of the opposite fullbacks and wingers.



Atletico Madrid overloads the ball areas out wide when the opposition has the possession to find useful passes near the ball's recovery point. The winger near the ball becomes an active defender, and the opposite one, along the other side, covers the weak area and becomes the first passing option to switch the side if Atletico wins the ball back.



Saul Niguez tracked the opposition's center forward, and Carrasco, the opposite one, saved the middle third's weak side while retreating. Even if the opposition can play out wide switching the side, Atletico usually shifts across quickly and create a strong side again along the opposite flank.



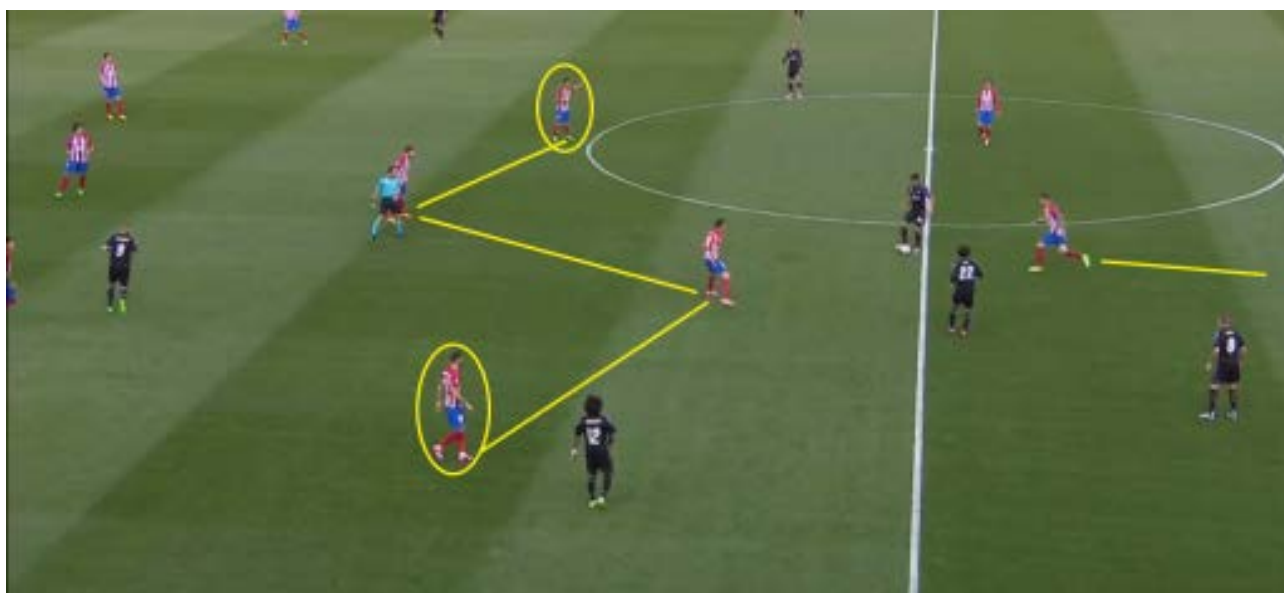
The center midfielder tracked the opposition center forward, forcing him backward and through the middle third, driving him toward the left fullback, easily marked by the right-winger Carrasco.

Atletico creates the same situation with a numerical advantage around the ball, shifting from one side to another, preventing the opponents from playing through passes to the final third.



Carrasco screened the forward passing lanes to the opposition's fullback. The center forward (Torres) was retreating to counter the advanced pivot; the opposition's left midfielder moved forward off the ball the other three midfielders were ready to control his movement.

The following situation is similar to the previous one; Atletico always covers the center's spaces, while the center forward drops back to press the ball carriers.



Carrasco was preventively marking the opposition's fullback. The center midfielders were creating the classic marking/covering positions in front of the ball. The opposite winger (Saul Niguez) shifted across the center to create a compact and narrow 4 men midfield sector.

When one center midfielder pushes high up in the field, along the same line as the forwards, the wingers stand along the same line as the second center midfielders and cover the upper line.



The right center midfielder pushed up and pressed the opposition's momentary deep-lying midfielder, standing along the same line of the forwards; the wingers, Carrasco and Saul Niguez, aligned themselves with the covering center midfielder behind the pressing line.

If a real overload area around the ball isn't a possible solution; a minimum numerical superiority out wide is always the choice for Simeone's team.



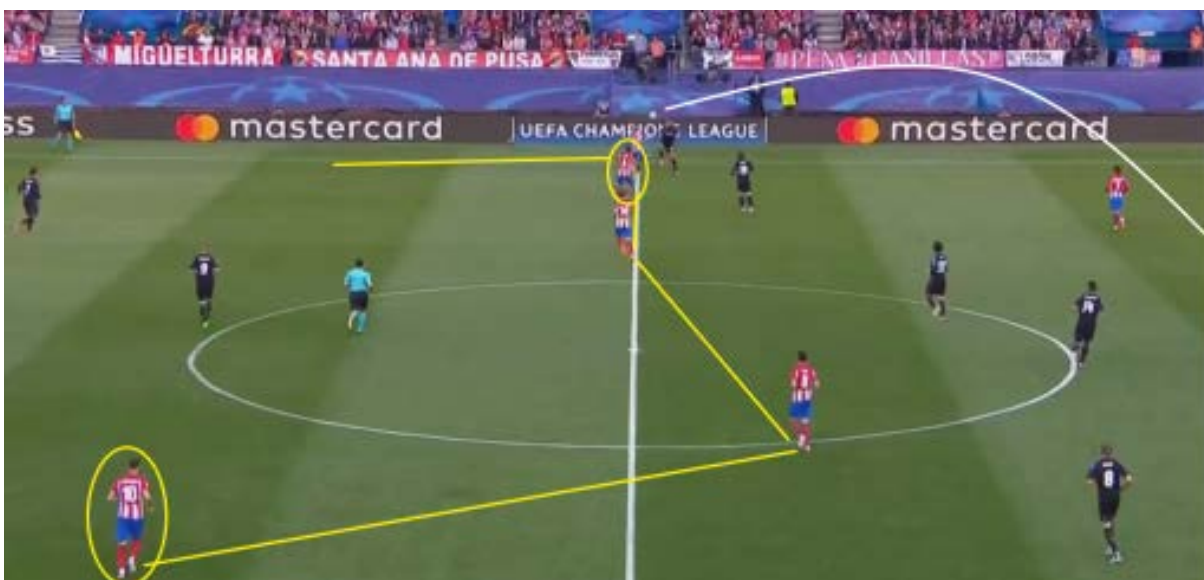
One of the center midfielders was out of position in this situation, and Carrasco, the right-winger, screened the passing lanes to the opposition's fullback. The left-winger Saul Niguez shifted across to stand in the center and act as a defensive pivot, and the center midfielders tried to close down the passing path to the center.

Atletico is also a pressing team, despite not being a high pressure organized team. To save the center spaces is always the first aim of the phases off the ball.



Saul Niguez and Carrasco pressed the opposition's wide passing options, while the forwards pressed the opposition's center backs.

As the opposition's ball carriers are forced to play long passes out wide, the real aggressive pressure starts, using the extra defender's touchline.



Saul Niguez pressed the opposition's right fullback near the touchline; the nearest forward and left midfielder moved toward the ball to create a strong area near the ball.

The opposite winger, Carrasco, patrolled the weak side along the right flank.

Once the weak side is created again, the ball area's overload becomes the crucial objective.



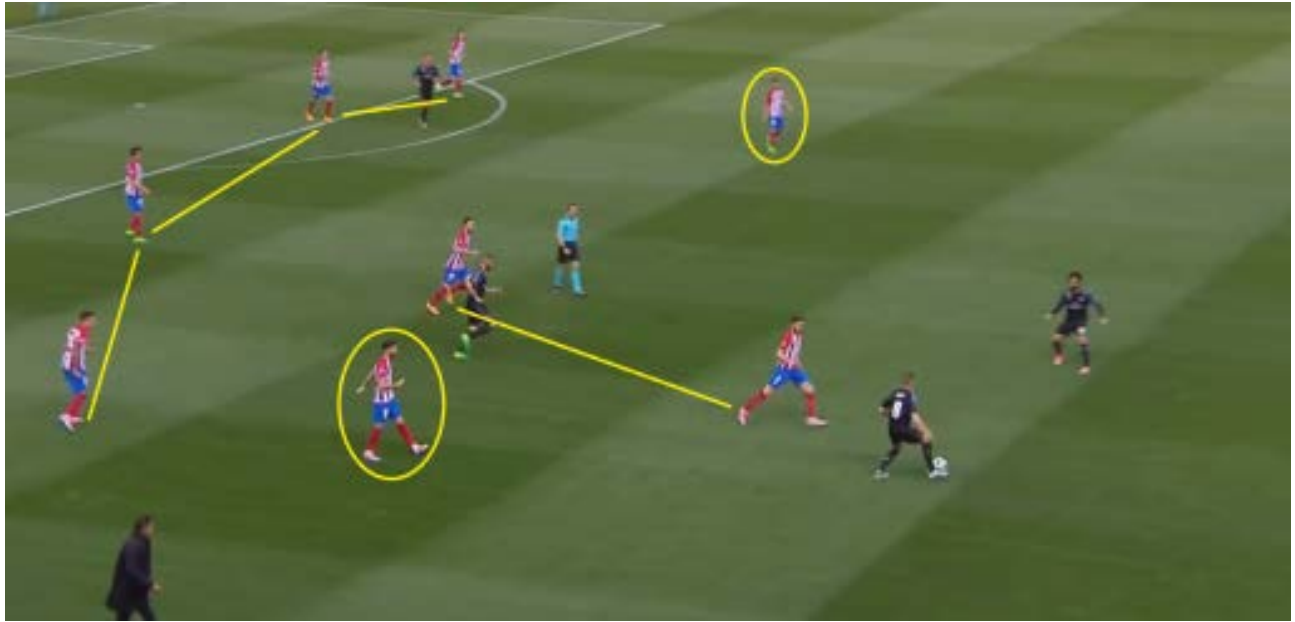
Niguez was standing near the ball's area, and Carrasco was standing along the weak side higher up in the field as a potential further passing option.

Atletico also lets the opposition distribute the ball from one side to another if the opposition doesn't progress the move, always creating string sides around the ball and numerical superiority against the opposition's ball carrier.



The opposition's left fullback had the possession, and the right fullback and winger (Carrasco) of Atletico Madrid created a 2 v 1 duel; the center midfielder closed the passing paths to the center, and the opposite winger shifted across the field from the opposite flank to make the field smaller. All the opponents were outnumbered in 2 v 1 duels in these situations.

Atletico Madrid comes back to press the opponents, as they must play the ball back to the middle third.



Carrasco and Niguez made the field smaller again in front of the back four, and the center midfielders shape the marking-pressing/covering duo formation again in the center.

They didn't press directly, but they waited for the center forwards to retreat and double the mark against the opponents.



Both the forwards (Torres and Griezmann) double-teamed the opposition's center forwards, while the left-winger covered the passing lanes toward the space between the left-center back and fullback.

The closure of passing lanes from the flanks to the center is always crucial for Atletico, even when a right overload area can't be created.



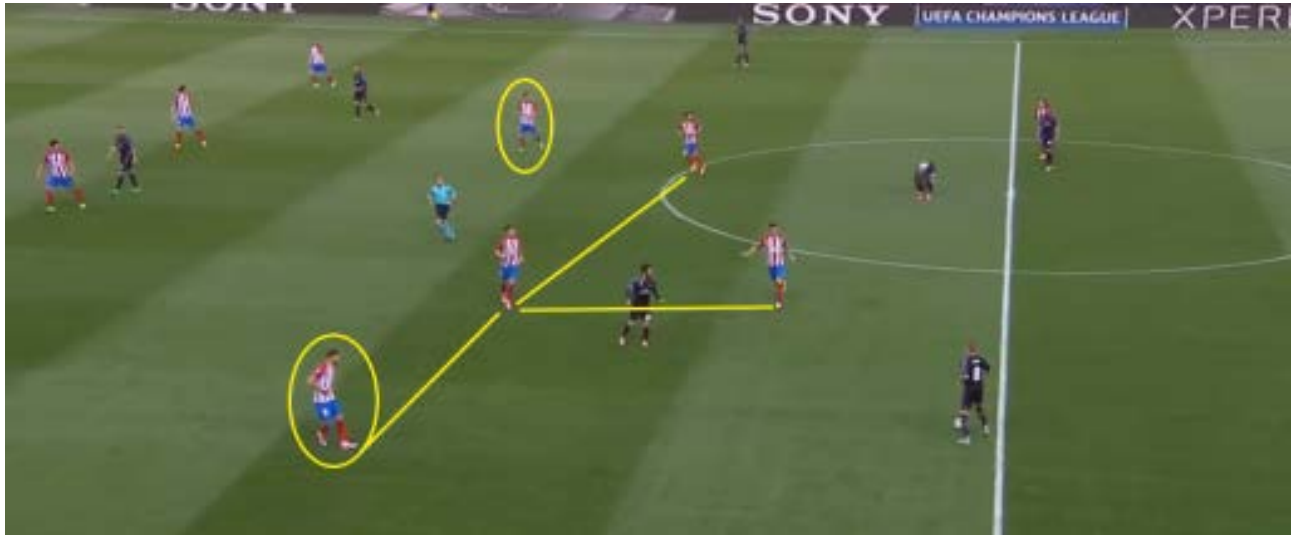
The left fullback, the left-winger Niguez, and one of the forwards closed the passing lanes to the middle third's center area; the first and upper forward (Torres) closed the passing lanes to the center back.

As the ball carrier along the flank id forced backward, Atletico comes back to press the opponents



Left fullback, winger, and center midfielder pressed the opponents, forcing them backward. In contrast, the center forwards were ready to press the opposition's center backs while receiving a potential back safe pass inside Atletico attacking half.

Here again, closure of the center passing lanes.



The right-winger Carrasco and the center midfielder shaped a line of three behind the easiest passing option for the ball carrier. Torres's closest center forward-shifted across to act as a pressing player of the potential receiver in front of the ball carrier.

If the opposition could play through the center and progress toward the final third, the two lines of four become smaller, and the winger becomes center players in front of the defensive line.



On the left, Carrasco, along the right side, and Niguez were placed deeper than the center midfielders in this example, acting as retreating and defensive players.

This way, they acted as a passing option for the forwards after the recovery of the possession.



Griezmann played the ball back to Niguez, in this situation, and Carrasco moved higher up in the field along the opposite side.

As the team spreads out through the field, wingers can move out wide.



Niguez had the ball along the left flank, and Carrasco provided width along the right flank, ready to receive a switch of side.

The wingers are also direct ball recovery players, as they press actively out wide, using the touchline as an extra defender, after making the midfield's sector narrow in the center.



(Saul Niguez tracked the opposition's ball carrier, covering the space along the flank that the fullback David Lopez created by pushing up.)



(He recovered the space and counters the ball carrier in a 1 v 1 duel, forcing him to turn backward and toward the nearest center midfielder, who retreated to double team him.)



They were also the first diagonal passing options if the fullbacks or the center midfielders won the ball back after 1 v 1 duels.

The wide midfielders in the 1-4-4-2 (flat midfield shape - the inverted wingers); Arjen Robben and Frank Ribery at Bayern Munich during 2012/2013 treble season: Bayern – Barcelona U.C.L.'s semi-final case study

Jupp Heinkes shaped his team with a floating shape between the 1-4-4-2 and the 1-4-2-3-1, but the team defended as a solid unit, apart from the system of play. After Mandzukic floating movements between the opposition's center backs and a fullback reception, one of the winger pressed the ball carrier. The center striker closed the way back to the center back; the fullback behind Ribery or Robben always followed their pressing actions high up. The opposite winger followed the movements of the teammates, making the field small. Suppose the pressure phase was not effective, and Bayern had to defend deep. In that case, the wingers retreat to assist the fullbacks, shaping a classic 1-4-4-1-1 defensive shape. This way, the wingers became counter-attacking weapons once the ball was won back deep, exploiting the spaces inside the opposition's half. The masterpiece of the defensive phase of that Bayern is the 4-0 to Barcelona in the Champions League semi-final, second leg.



Bayern could screen the progression passes from the back to the opponents through a high midfield line and narrow wingers to the center midfielders; the center forward screened the holding midfielder.



As the opposition played the ball out wide, the winger shifted out wide too, and all the passing lanes toward the nearest passing options were marked 1 v 1.



When the opposition center backs found spaces to play, the opposition wide midfielders are marked 2 v 1. The wingers shifted across the field to support the center midfielders with the defensive action. One forward usually tracked the holding midfielder, and the second one always tried to counter the opposition's center back while playing the ball.



The left-winger (Ribery) usually marked the opposition's wide midfielder in front of him, also when the central midfielder has to move out of his area. If the opposition's holding midfielder could progress the move, the center forwards had to track him back along with the center space, preventing the center midfielder from moving out of position. In this situation, the opposite winger, Robben, provided passing solutions out wide in potential ball recovery.

Here again, the opposition-held midfielder with the ball out wide. All progression's passing solutions were marked or screened; the wingers were placed inside the field and closed to the center midfielders, and they were ready to counter the opposition's wingers or the wide midfielders.



One winger had the task to screen the opposition's forward when dropping back (Ribery against Messi), and in this case, one forward had to shift out wide to screen the wingers or the pushing up fullback. In this picture, the opposite winger was placed narrow and inside the field, and he was ready to double team the wide midfielder or counter the other fullback along the opposite side.



Robben was placed behind Iniesta or Jordi Alba, and he could press both the wide midfielder or the fullback.



Martinez shifted out wide and countered the opposition's wide midfielder, and Robben shifted out wider to cover the potential passing combination with the fullback. Simultaneously, the opposite winger Ribery shifted across the field when he had to track the dropping back opposition's striker, allowing the center midfielders to track the direct opponents in the middle and prevent any progression opponents.

When Bayern had to defend deep, the wingers could become fully active defenders along the flanks or even could substitute the fullbacks beside the center backs.



Robben stands deep and near the fullback alongside the left flank. Robben dropped even deeper along the opposite left flank to cover the fullback (Alaba), who had to track the opposition's striker (Messi, who was acting as a false nine.)

The wingers shifted across toward the center to complete the defensive triangles when the opposition tried to play through the middle third.



(Robben covers Iniesta passing lane while Martinez is tracking the direct opponent, and Lahm pushes Pedro backward.)

If the winger was already standing inside the field, double-teaming the ball carrier was the solution.



(Ribery closes down the passing path to Daniel Alves, shifting across, double-teaming the mark against the ball carrier.)

If a fullback could dribble the ball along the flank, and the fullback was retreating the position, the winger exchanged the position with him to delay his action.



(Ribery delays the opposition's ball carrier action, and Alaba retreats to close him down in a 2 v 1 duel.)

The wide midfielders in the 1-4-4-2 (diamond midfield shape): Ivan Rakitic, Iniesta, and Paulinho at Barcelona under Ernesto Valverde

Ernesto Valverde's Barcelona version was more balanced and defensively aware concerning Luis Enrique's 1-4-3-3 shape; his 1-4-4-2 placed Busquets and Paulinho in the double pivot center midfield sector. Ivan Rakitic used to tuck in from the right flank to create space for the fullback, Sergi Roberto, to push up; Iniesta used to do the same along with the left one in favor of Jordi Alba. Messi played all around the space behind Luis Suarez, the only real striker of the formation. Despite being a balanced team, Barcelona was still a pressing team when the opposition played wrong passes or actions; those were the triggers for the pressure phase. Suarez usually forced the opposition's center back to look at the left side of the pitch; closing down the center and making the field smaller, the pressure phase against few opponents was easier. When Rakitic was not involved in pressure phases, he covered the center's space and Busquets or even alone as a deep-lying midfielder.



Iniesta and Paulinho completed the line of four midfielders in this picture, as the Brazilian covered Rakitic, who was playing as third forward in his team's last attacking phase.

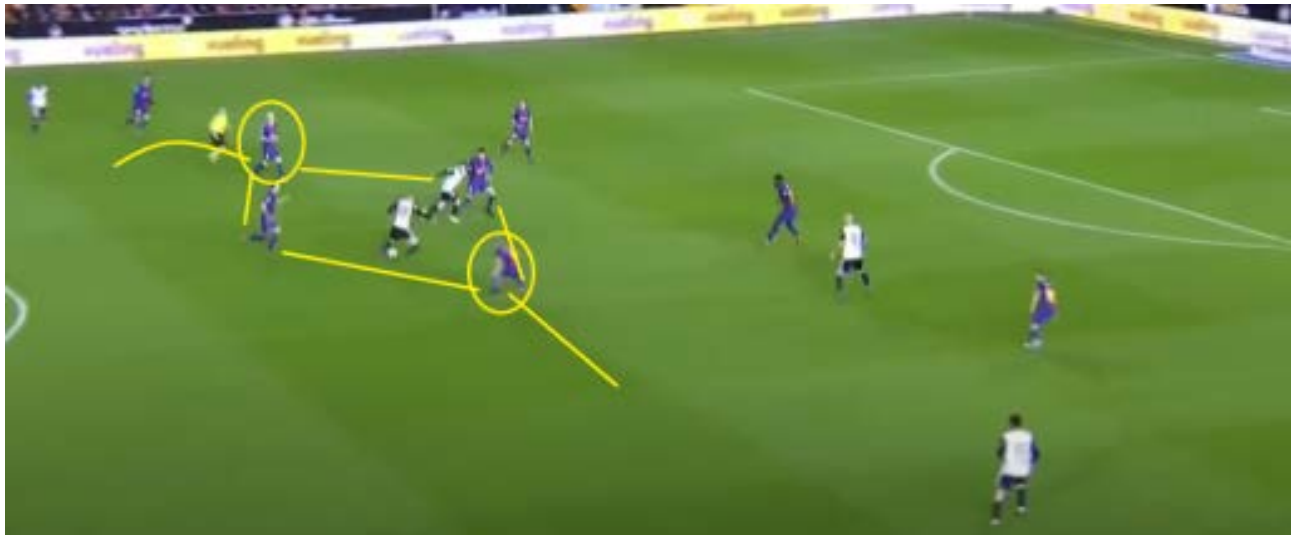


Iniesta exchanged the positions along the left flank with the fullback, which pushed up to mark his dropping back the direct opponent.



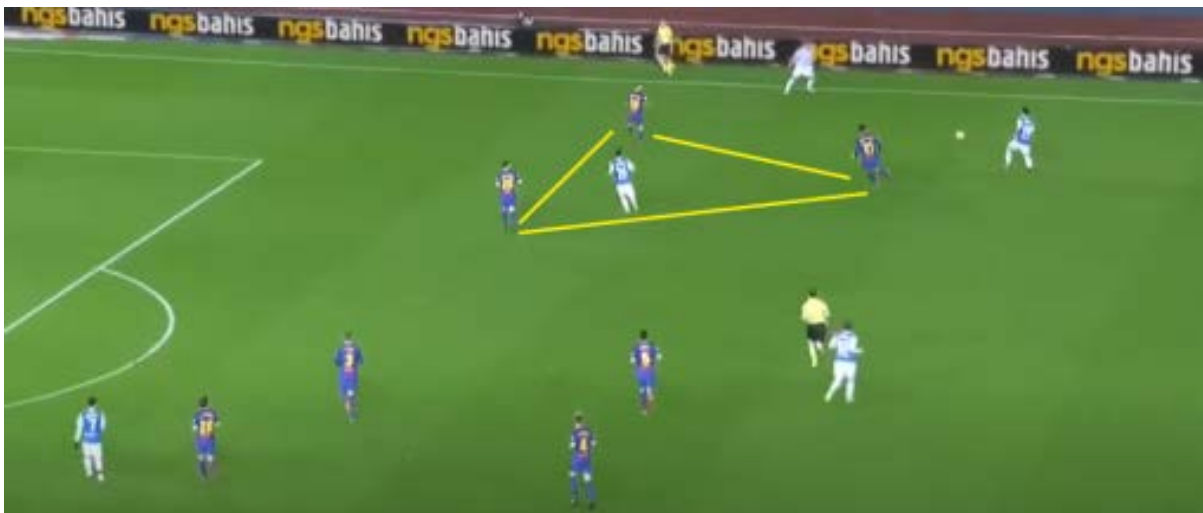
In this sequence, they were both marking the opposition's winger along the right flank, and Iniesta shifted across to cover the second pivot (Busquets), who shifted wide.

When the opposition tried to attack through the center, the flat four-line became a diamond shape around the ball carrier and the potential opponent in between the lines.

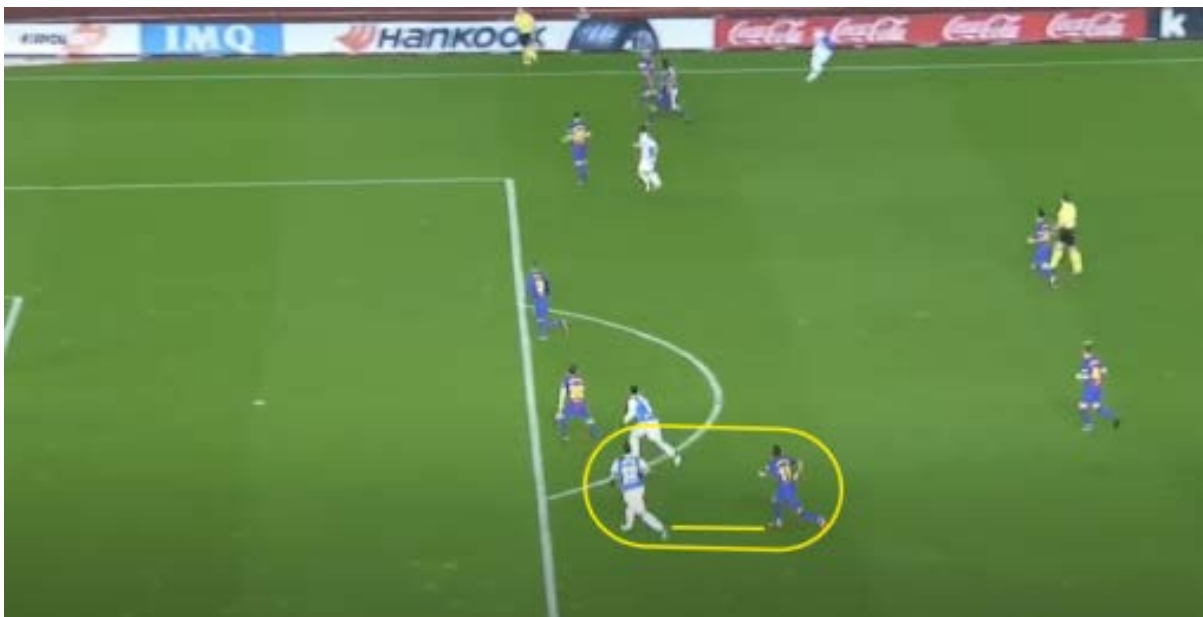


Rakitic and Iniesta shifted across the field to close down the spaces around the opposition's ball carrier.

When the opponents played out wide and close to the final third, defensive triangles were shaped, and the winger along the opposite side retreated as a fullback.



Iniesta, the left fullback, and Messi shaped a 3 v 3 triangle defensive shape alongside the left flank...

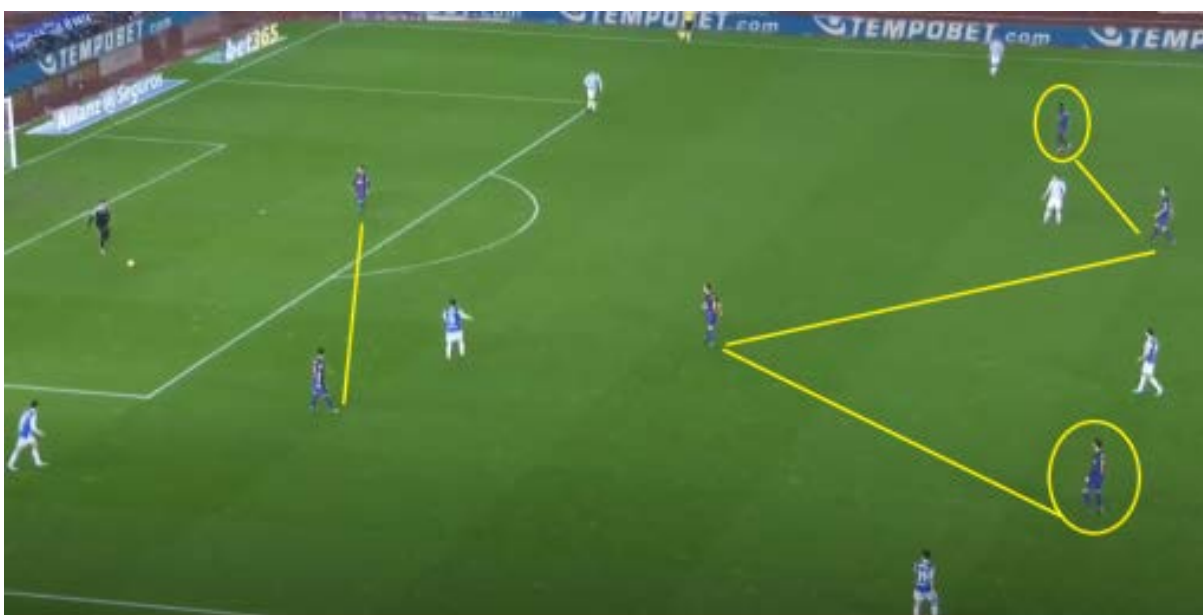


....and the Paulinho retreated along the defensive right flank to cover the fullback position, as Jordi Alba shifted across the center of the defensive line.

When a center pivot moved higher up in the field to press the opposition holding midfielder, the winger shifted across and provided cover and balance at the back. Barcelona used to close down one flank and leave only one passing solution out wide to trigger the pressing phase.



Rakitic moved up, and Paulinho shifted across the center; Iniesta and Busquets remained aligned.



Rakitic pushed higher up again in this situation, and Iniesta shifted across; Busquets and Paulinho stayed aligned on the opposite side.

When the opposition played long passes, the strong side was used to counter-attack.



Barcelona's middle third sector rebounded a goalkeeper's long ball...



...and Suarez could anticipate the direct opponent, turning toward the goal, and facing it while receiving.

If the opposition decided to play short, 1 v 1 pressure duels were the first tactical defensive choice.



The wingers were positioned as required by the opposition's building-up and attacking shape.

If the ball was not recovered quickly, and the goalkeeper played long passes, Barcelona tried to rebound them to launch counter-attacks as we have just analyzed in the previous pages.



The wide midfielders in the 1-4-2-3-1 (wide attackers): Cristiano Ronaldo and Mezut Ozil/Angel Di Maria at Real Madrid under Mourinho (team off the ball.)

Counter-pressing as much as possible against the weaker opponents was a recurrent tactic when Real Madrid lost possession. Still, the basic defensive formation was the classic one that anyone would expect from a 1-4-2-3-1, with the winger dropping back along the center pivot line if immediate pressure was not possible.



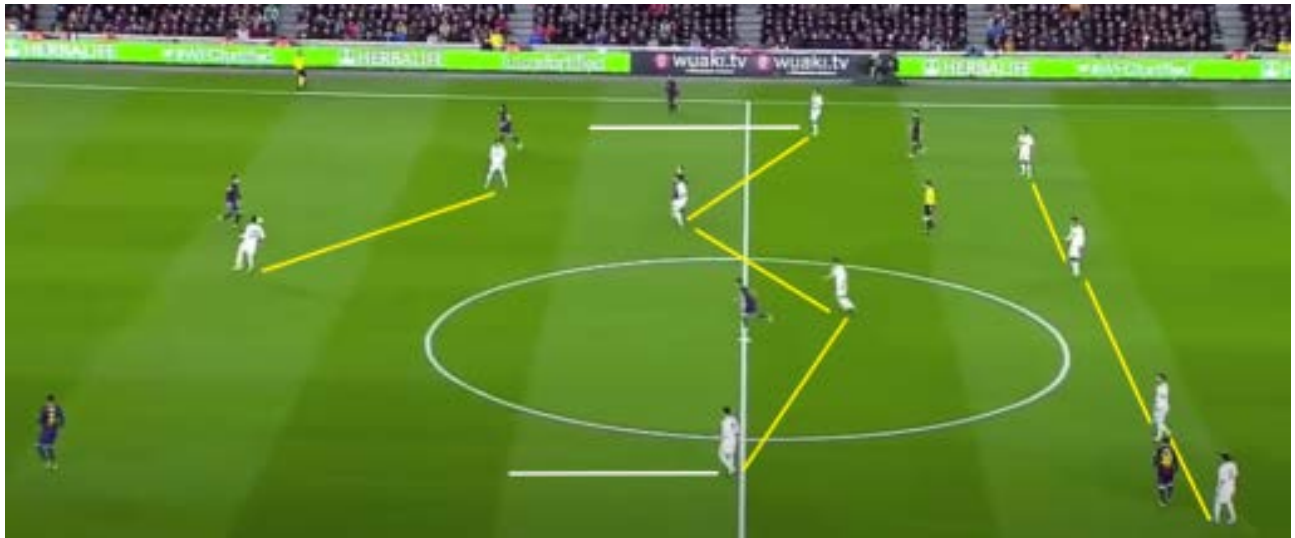
(Ronaldo and Di Maria dropped back along-side the center pivots' line this situation, and Ronaldo shifted slightly across to fill the center's gap.)

Keeping the backline of 4 was dogma for Real Madrid, and the wingers could also drop deeper along the flanks alongside the defensive line (1-5-3-2).



(Di Maria joined the backline, further on the prior situation.)

When the opposition built up from the back, Real Madrid forced play toward one side, man-marking all the passing options near the ball. The winger along that side marked the fullback 1 v 1, and the opposite one shifted across (usually Ronaldo) without marking tasks to be ready for a counter-attack.



(Di Maria was ready to counter Jordi Alba, the center forward, and the center AM marked 1 v 1 the opposition center backs, and Ronaldo was free and ready to counter-attack. Furthermore, the center pivots were also marked 1 v 1.)



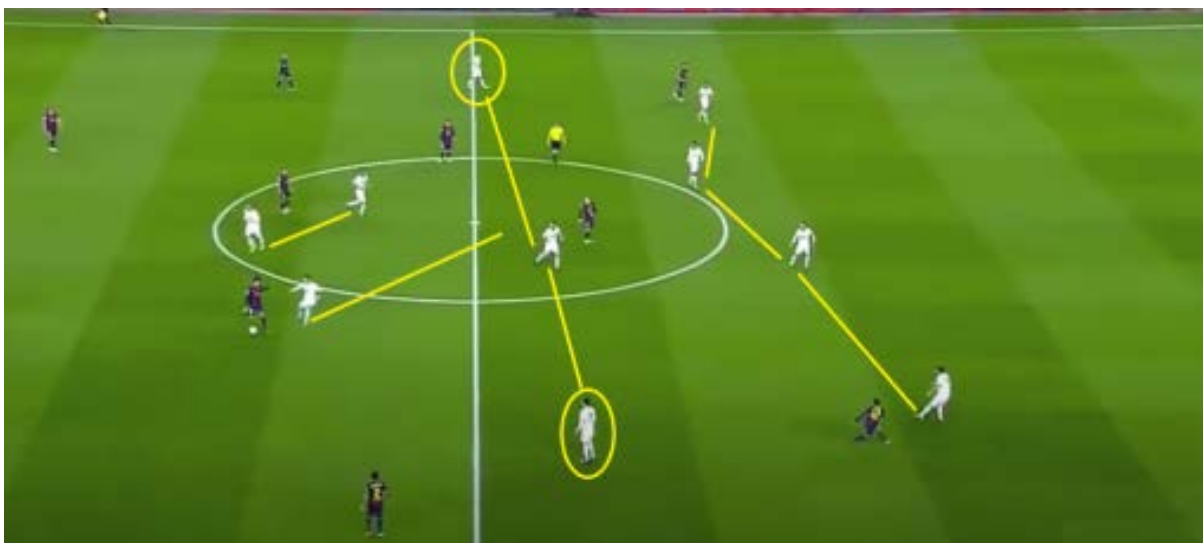
The opposition couldn't distribute, and a long pass was the only solution. Di Maria dropped deeper along the backline again, and the opposition's three forwards could be double-teamed. The fifth fullback along the weak side could then track the direct opponent, who was moving off the ball, and read his intention before the ball's kick from the backline (Piquet to Messi.)

Defending in the middle third, Real Madrid's first aim was to not allow any attack through the center of the pitch. The wingers were free from marking tasks to be ready to counter-attack after the ball's recovery.



(The center backs and 1 fullback, the center pivots and forwards controlled the center channel here, and Ronaldo and Di Maria were placed inside the half-spaces, ready to receive and launch a counter-attack.)

This is a similar situation concerning the previous one.



(The fullback were marking the wide forwards, Messi dropped back as false nine, and a pivot was screening him, the second pivot and the forwards condensed the center to force a long pass. Ronaldo and Di Maria were again free from marking tasks alongside the half-spaces to be ready for a counter-attack.)

Defending deeper inside the lower area of the middle third, Real Madrid shaped a 1-4-1-4-1 defensive formation, condensing the ball area and freeing Ronaldo from marking tasks every time was possible.



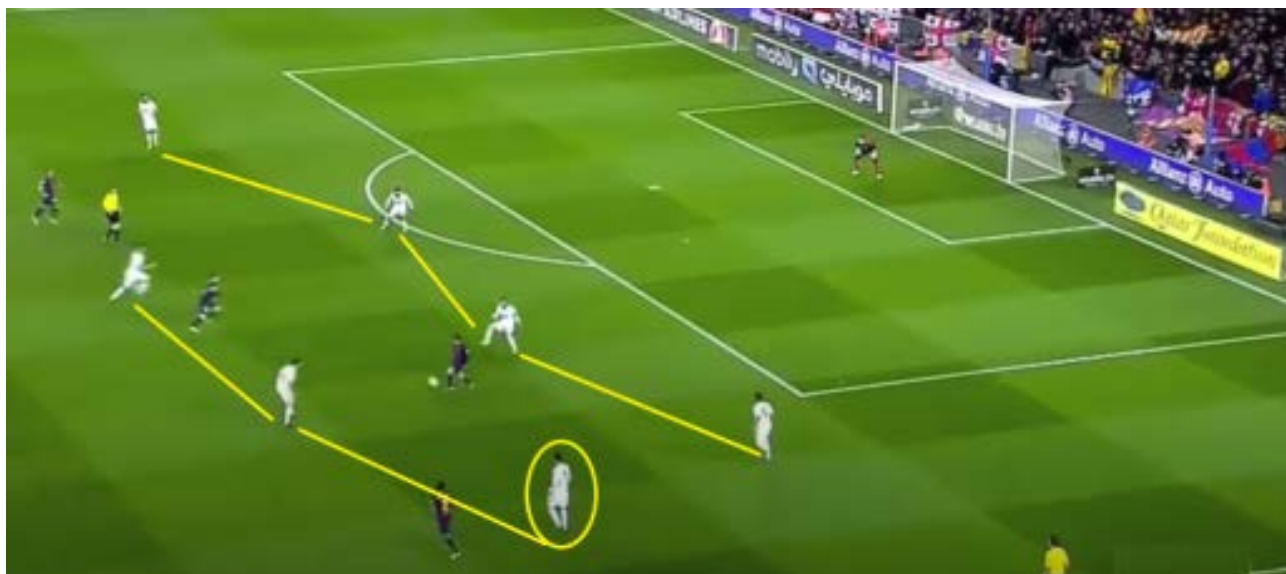
(The back four and the holding midfielder were checking the opposition's three forwards, who were trying to stretch the line, four players were around the ball, Di Maria included, and Ronaldo was placed wider on the left to be ready to receive after a ball's recovery.)

To condense the center always became the first aim defending deeper and deeper. The wingers should be free every time was possible, for the same counter-attacking chances creation.



(4 v 2 duel in the center and Ronaldo and Di Maria free from marking tasks and ready to counter-attack after ball's recovery.)

One between Ronaldo or Di Maria stands much higher than Benzema or Higuain, concerning the defensive flank. The attacking midfielder Ozil dropped more in-depth, shaping a 1-4-3-1-2. This was the perfect position for counter-attacks.



(Ronaldo was placed deeper alongside the center midfielder, and Di Maria was retreating as a wide right midfielder.)



(Di Maria dropped deeper to support the center back, and Ronaldo standstill higher up to launch a potential counter-attack.)

The following sequence explains even better how Mourinho asked Di Maria to act as a defensive winger and Ronaldo to be the first counter-attacking option.



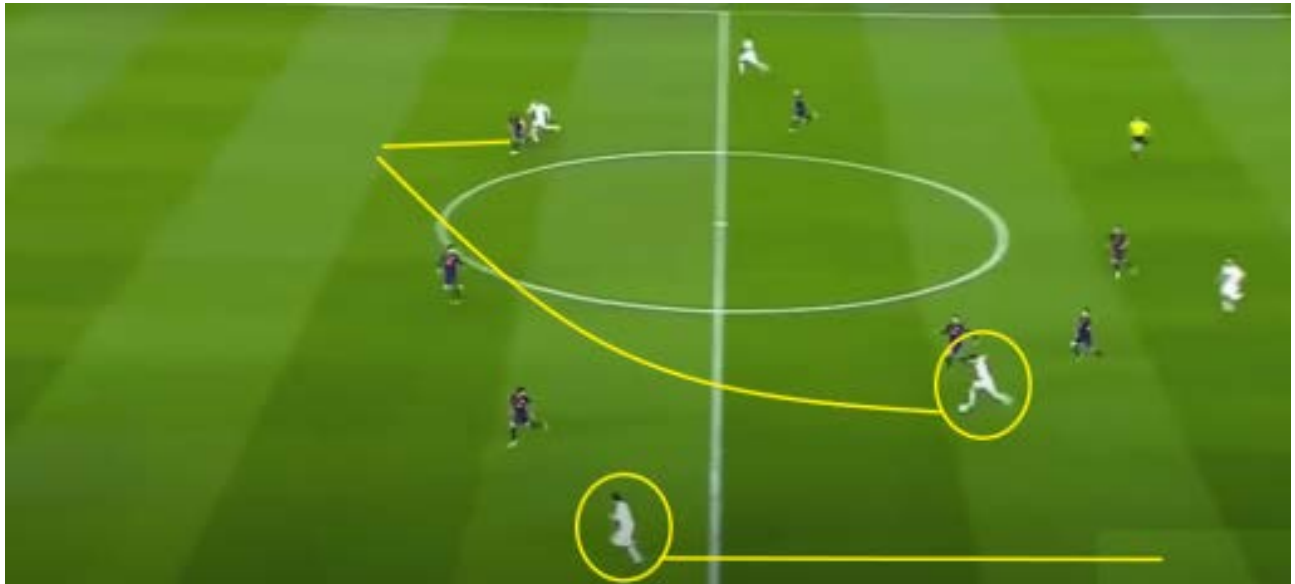
(Real Madrid right fullback pushed high to counter the opposition's winger, and Di Maria tracked the fullback while he was overlapping along the flank. The center midfielders patrolled the center, and the opposite winger Ronaldo stands higher up in the field.)



(Di Maria tracked the opponents inside the first third to support the center back.)



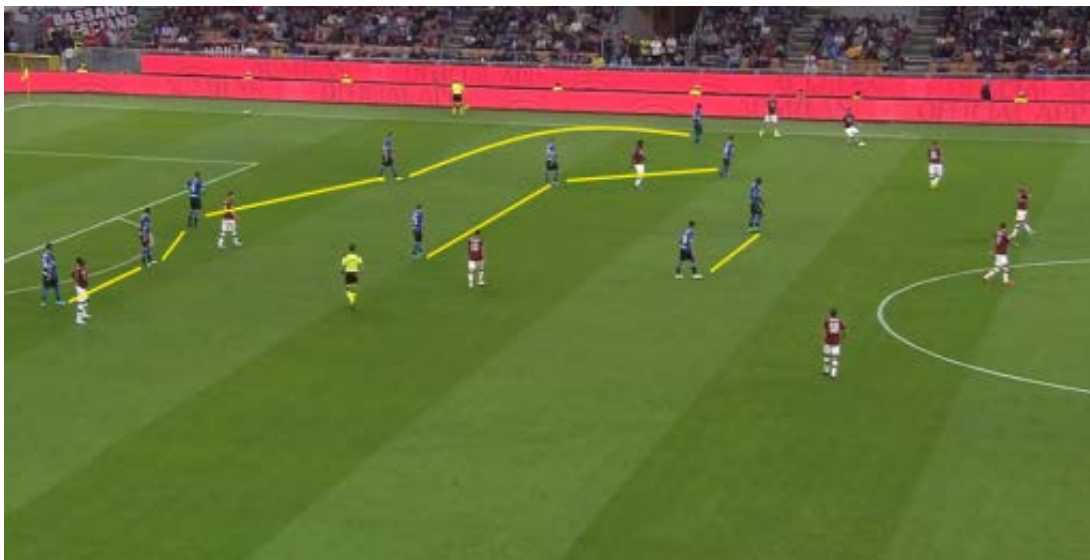
(Ronaldo stand higher inside the middle third alongside the left flank, and he was ready to counter-attack together with Higuain in the center and Ozil along the right flank.)



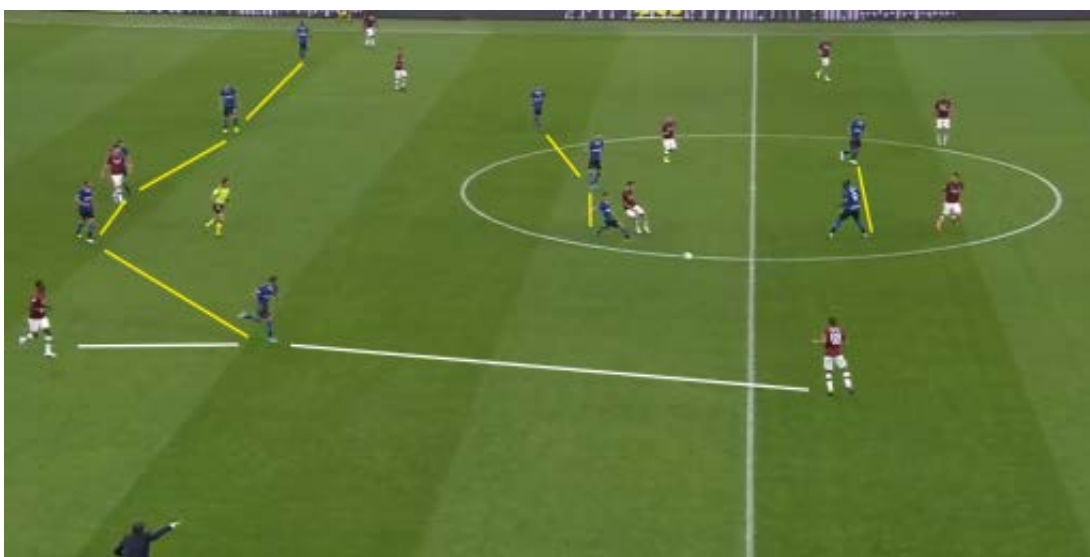
(Higuain received, Ronaldo supported the move along the left flank, Ozil shifted wider and attacked the deep with a blind run behind the farther center-back, and Di Maria pushed higher up along the opposite right flank.)

Wide midfielders in the 1-5-3-2 (1-3-5-2): Nicolò Barella and Stefano Sensi at Internazionale Milan during pressure and defensive phases.

Inter attacking 1-3-5-2 becomes a 1-5-3-2 system of play with a deep defensive line if the first pressure phase doesn't work. The back five and the middle third trio shifts wide toward the ball's side.

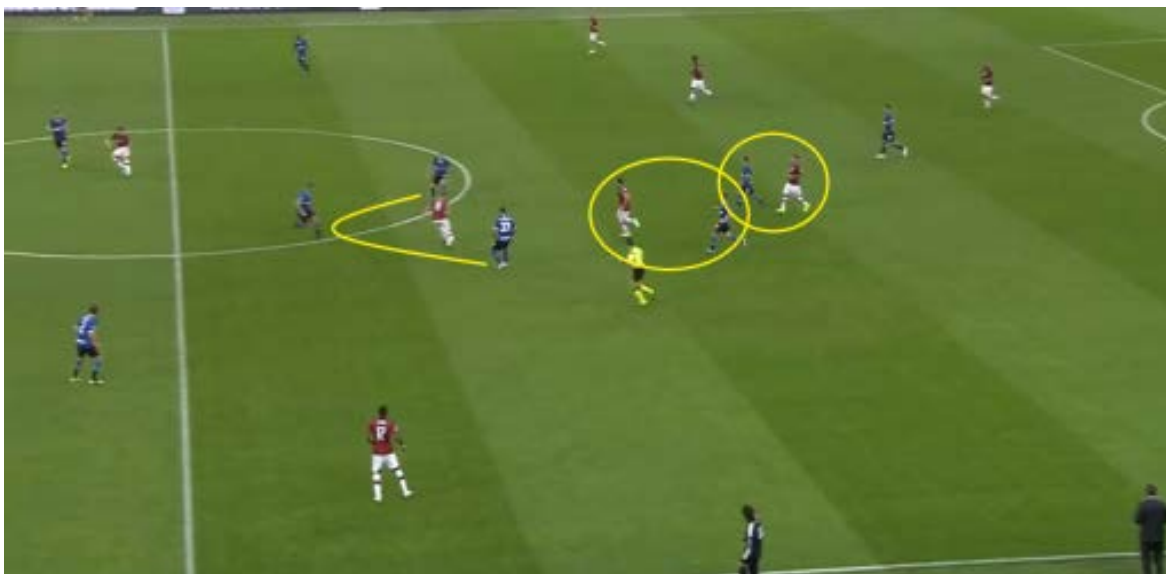


(Sensi, the wide midfielder near the ball, screened the easiest passing option in front of the ball carrier, and the holding midfielder Brozovic provided coverage behind the opponent. Barella, the right midfielder, was marking the second opposition's pivot. The team's shifting movement ensured the 3 v 2 duel against the opposition's center forwards and the coverage of all the passing paths through the center.)



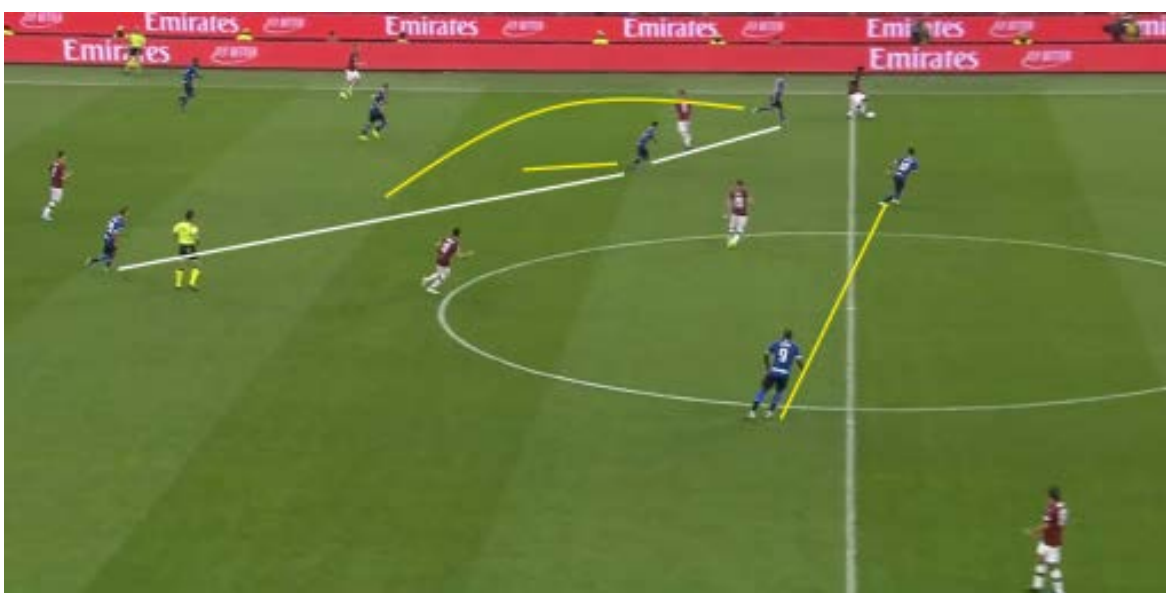
(The opposition's fullbacks were usually free from markers, following a precise defensive tactical plan; the center forwards screened the opposition's center backs, and the wide midfielder close to the ball carrier; Barella forced a wide pass to the fullback that Inter's wingback attacked immediately.)

Pressure man to man high in the pitch leaving the opposition's fullbacks free to receive, but closing passing lanes and limiting the potential passing options.



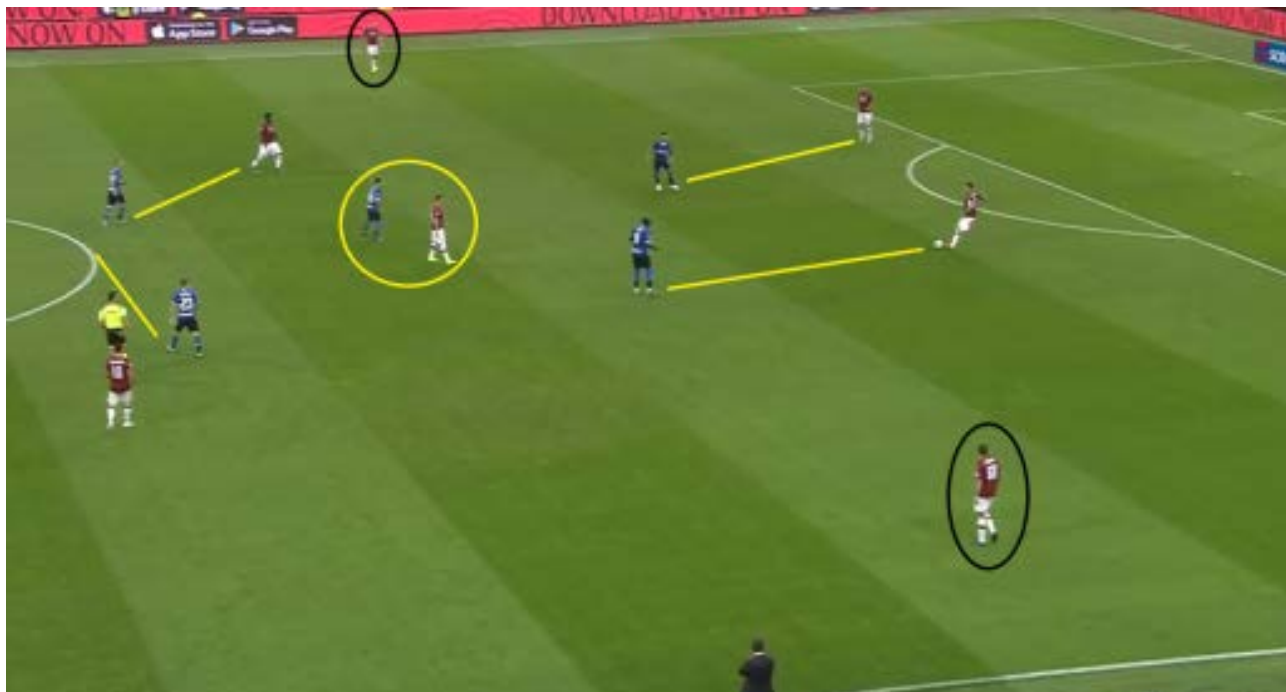
(The holding midfielder, together with the left-center back, and the right wingback, closed down the opposition's dropping back center forward; meanwhile, the right midfielder Barella retreated to counter the first back passing option, and Sensi screened the second one in front of the ball carrier.)

As the pressure phase is possible, all the team pushes higher up in the field; the wide midfielders always support the center forwards during these phases. If the holding midfielder is one of the pressing players, the opposite wide one exchanges the position with him.



(Brozovic and Sensi were pressing the ball carrier along the left flank, and Barella, the right midfielder, became the deep-lying holding midfielder, despite pushing up and advancing his position to follow the pressure phase.)

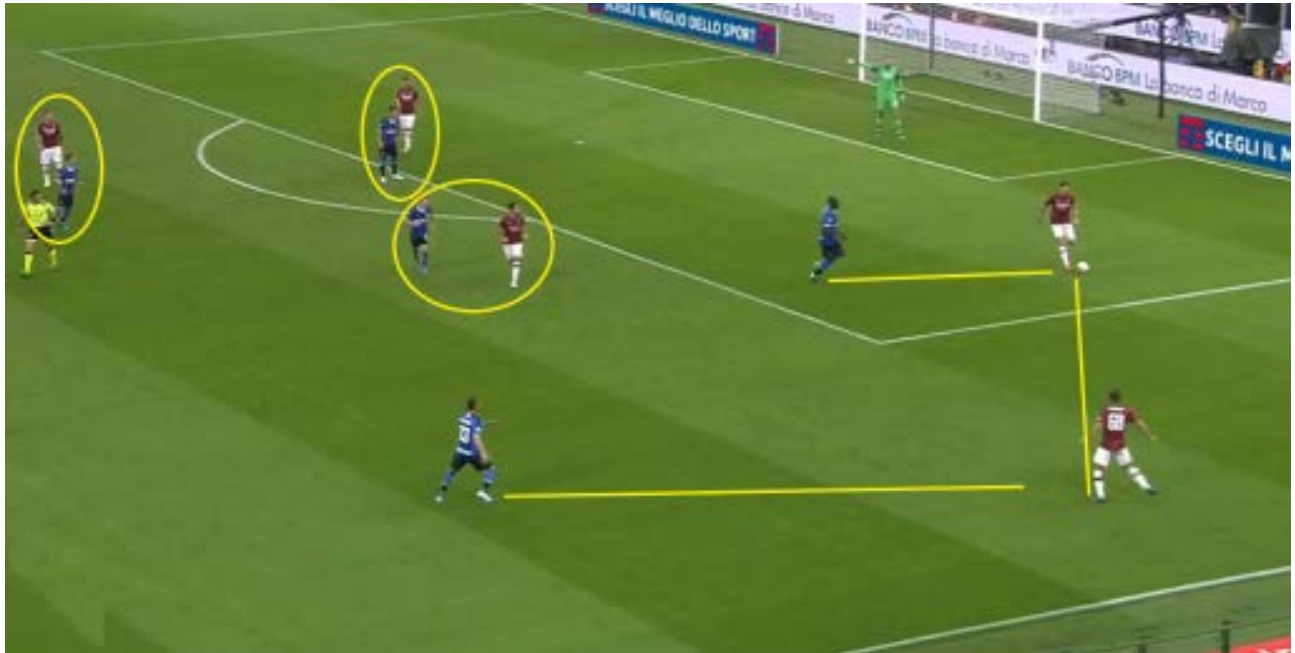
The forwards cut off the passing options to the pivot, as Inter aims to prevent the opposition from playing through passes in the middle, allowing passing patterns out wide.



Sensi and Brozovic were pressing the opposition's center midfielders, and Barella shifted across the field as holding midfielder behind them.



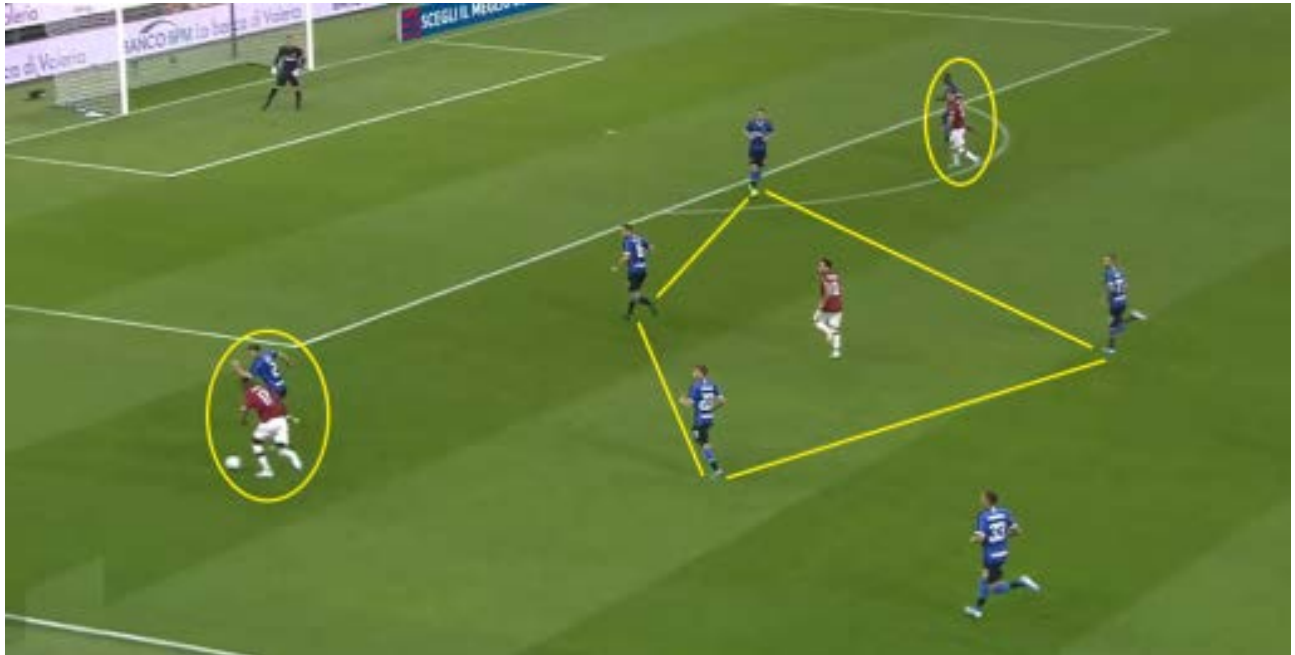
As Barella pushed high in the field to track the dropping back movement to receive, Brozovic tracked the direct opponent's run, becoming the holding midfielder.



The opposition center back was forced to play out wide to the fullback, and Inter's right wingback attacked him immediately. All the center passing options were marked 1 v 1, and the wide midfielders are placed high up to support the center forwards.



The opposition left fullback was forced to play longer due to the pressure and the center middle third overload.



(Despite the opposition's left-winger could receive, and the center back had to move out the line to cover the wingback, the wide midfielder near the ball Barella, and the holding midfielder Brozovic could retreat and provide balance in the center, supporting the rest of the defensive line.)

When pressure phases force the opponents to switch the side, distributing from the back, Inter is always able to shifts across the field and let the wide midfielders pressing the center midfielders.



(Barella was pressing the opposition's ball carrier, and Sensi was ready to counter the second pivot.)



(The opposition's farther center back received, and Sensi and Barella shifted across the field to maintain the 1 v 1 duel against the opposition's center midfielders.)

When the opposition switches the side, the deep laying defensive shape and the wide shifting movements of the wide midfielders provide defensive solidity.



(Sensi tracked the opposition's ball carrier, the wingback, and the center back maintained the 1 v 1 duels against a center forward and the winger. Barella, the opposite wide midfielder, dropped back to provide cover in front of the center back, as the holding midfielder Brozovic moved out closer to the ball's position.)



(The opposition's ball carrier was forced to a wide position and closed down while trying to dribble the ball through the center and to the box.)

The wide midfielders in the 1-3-2-5 or 1-2-3-2-3 attacking shape (Pep Guardiola): David Silva and Kevin de Bruyne defensive tasks when City was off the ball.



- Provide support behind the attacking line, and be the first counter-pressing and pressing player after losing possession.



- Shift out wide to counter the opponents, if the holding midfielder was too far from the ball



- Provide cover behind the fullback if he had to push higher up in the field to counter a direct opponent.



- Drop deeper inside the middle third if the holding midfielder had to stand along the center backs line or cover the fullbacks who pushed high up during a possession phase.



- Rotate the position with the holding midfielder to provide cover in front of the backline and balance the attacking line.



- Track and follow the center backs and the holding midfielders when the ball's numerical superiority was not practical.

The wide midfielders in the 1-3-3-1-3 shape from attacking to defensive shapes: the Marcelo Bielsa's way to create a 1-4-1-4-1 shape.

- High pressure to win the ball back quickly



- LWM plays a 1 v 1 duel against the ball carrier, and the opposite one shifted across the field as holding midfielder.



- The LWM double-teamed the opposition's ball carriers together with the fullback, and the opposite one patrolled the opposite flank to maintain a 1 v 1 duel against the direct opponent.

- **Man oriented pressure**



- Support the holding midfielder, tracking the opposition's first potential passing option.



- Shift across the field (R.W.M.), or push high up along the flank (LWM) to maintain a line of three if a center midfielder of four had to move out of the line to press the ball carrier.

- **Defensive 1 v 1**



- Drop deep beside the holding midfielder to cover a potential passing option, and force a backward pass to prevent passing progressions.



- The R.W.M. helps create 1 v 1 duels in a square shape down the wing, allowing the winger to shift wide and force the opponent with possession backward.



- The wide midfielders screen the passing options for the receiver (a dropping back center midfielder.)

- **Ball's areas overloads**



- The R.W.M. helps the holding midfielder and the winger to create a 3 v 2 duel around the ball, and the opposite one keeps a 1 v 1 duel out wide along the opposite flank. The center forward tracks the back pass to counter the receiver.

- 2 sides cut the pitch off the ball and passing lanes closure.



- The wide midfielders create a strong side along the left flank and a numerical superiority around the ball (8 v 3+2).
- **Defensive rotations to maintain 1 v 1 duels**



- The LWM moves across the field, covering the holding midfielder's position, who had just pushed up before and maintained the 1 v 1 duels together with the opposite midfielder.



- The R.W.M. exchanges the positions with the fullback, who pushes higher up to follow the direct opponent, and the midfielder drops back as a fullback. All the 1 v 1 duels are maintained.

Finding complete K.P.I. factors' set for a wide midfielder (defensive phase)

Following the analysis of the play situations included in the book, some crucial indicators define a K.P.I. (Key Performance Analysis) of a wide midfielder. The following metrics are the fundamental and general ones to define a wide midfielder's performance, apart from the specific roles, positions, and tasks he may have in style and play system.



- **PAPI** – Passes allowed per Interception
- **PAPT** – Passes allowed per Tackle
- **PAPPA**– Passes allowed per Pressing Action
- **PPDA** – Passes allowed per Defensive Action
- **Tackles**
- **Fouls**

Summary

This book aims to make the role of a wide midfielder when his team is off possession. It wants to analyze a wide midfielder from positional and heat map points of view rather than from a static involvement in a play system, showing case studies that can be as comprehensive as possible.

These are the points that build the book:

- Where do they play in the field when their team loses possession?

Wide midfielders in the 1-4-3-3, 1-4-4-2 (diamond midfield shape), 1-4-2-3-1 (wide attackers), 1-5-3-2 (1-3-5-2), 1-3-2-5 attacking shape (Pep Guardiola at Manchester City), and in the 1-3-3-1-3 (Marcelo Bielsa at Leeds United).

- Where and how do they play, concerning the phases of play? The case studies:

Xavi Hernandez, and Andres Iniesta at Barcelona with Guardiola as a coach, Saul Niguez and Ferreira Carrasco (and Angel Correa) at Atletico Madrid, Arjen Robben and Frank Ribery at Bayern Munich during 2012/2013 treble season, Ivan Rakitic at Barcelona under Ernesto Valverde, Cristiano Ronaldo and Mezut Ozil/Angel Di Maria at Real Madrid under Mourinho, David Silva and Kevin de Bruyne, and the Marcelo Bielsa's way.

All the play situations are introduced with the opponents already with the ball, and the defensive team is pressing or defending after an ineffective pressure phase.

To complete the book, we try to find out the K.P.I. factors' set for a wide midfielder (defensive phase) apart from specific systems and play styles.

Just like as I thought to work for the wide midfielders' attacking book, I looked at examples and case studies as the best solutions to explain what a modern wide midfielder should do when his team is off possession. I hope I was able to do it.