

SHEFFIELD UNITED'S

3-5-2

FORMATION

ATTACKING

**A look at Chris Wilder's
innovative 3-5-2**

by **LUCA BERTOLINI**



Sheffield United's 3-5-2 Formation (Attacking)

By

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Chris Wilder: the coach

Chris Wilder is the Premier League's most original tactical innovator at Sheffield United since Pep Guardiola arrival at Manchester City in 2016 and his team sometime included and include British and Irish players with few experience in Premier League in his starting eleven.

“Ten of the eleven that played our last game (a draw at Tottenham) were in the Championship with us last season” [...] “But then not a lot of us here had any Premier League experience before August.” This is what Wilder said when interviewed by The Guardian, last 23rd November 2019, at a time when his Sheffield United was ranked 6th, with 18 points after 13 games. A great result for a freshly promoted team from the Championship and even bigger, thinking to the double leap in three seasons from the League 1 to the Premier League.

Chris Wilder could be considered as spot for all the coaches which try to arrive at the top in their career, after raising up from the amateur and semi-professional leagues season after season, one after the other. Furthermore, he is still the one of those guys who uses the bus stop near his home and who talks with the old friends of the team he once coached at the pub. His managerial career started at Alfreton Town in (01-02), he spent 6 seasons as Halifax Town manager (02-08) in the National League and only 3 months at Bury FC. The second long term coaching experience was with Oxford United from December 2008 to January 2014, before taking in charge of Northampton Town manager role from that January until May 2016. From May 2016 he if the Sheffield United Head Coach.

During the first season, as Alfreton Twon manager, he started to win local and regional trophies: the Northern Counties (East) League Premier Division, the League Cup, the President's Cup and the Derbyshire Senior Cup.

As Oxford United manager he get a promotion from the Conference National League to the Football League after the winning play-off final against Yorke City

Wilder saved Northampton Town from relegation in League Two in the first season and the team won the League in 2015–16, taking the club to compete in the League One the following season, using a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-4-2 formation.

On 12 May 2016, he joined his boyhood club Sheffield United as new manager on a three-year contract, in 2016/2017 pre-season he signed new free transfer players, and made Sheffield born and United fan Billy Sharp club captain. The team become League One Champions with 100 points (a club record), being promoted in Championship, moving away from the classic English 1-4-4-2 to adopt the system of play that did the good future of the club. The first Championship season (2017/2018), the second one as Sheffield United coach, Wilder was able to save the club in a mid-table campaign, apart from the ups and downs of the team. Wilder led Sheffield United to the Premier League after 12-year absence in 2019, following nearest rival Leeds' 1–1 draw in the last game at home against Aston Villa; this was the second promotion in just three years at the club. He also earned the LMA Manager of the Year award, beating coaches like Pep Guardiola, Jürgen Klopp and Mauricio Pochettino and the Championship Manager of the year award.

In July 2019, Wilder signed a new three-year contract with the club and he extended the contract with the club (2024) on 10 January 2020, Wilder signed a four-year contract extension with the club. These data represent the constantly growing of Chris Wilder as great manager of “normal players and clubs”.

Sheffield United and Chris Wilder’s reign

Chris Wilder has become one of the most innovative coaches with his (1-3-4-1-2) formation, his peculiar attacking tactics and for his interpretation of the 1-3-5-2/1-5-3-2 that he has used to shape his team in the first part of the Premier League season.

The best thing he’s been able to do is to make the things simple for his players. “We are not trying to reinvent the wheel” [...] “Sometimes it goes well, sometimes you have your off days. We have a way of going about things. Basically we are positive people trying to improve players and teams.” This is what he thinks and said in an interview for The Guardian in November 2017. Wilder also added: “Just simplify the game”; “we’re not coaching gurus”; “I don’t think the game changes too much.”

In the same interview he revealed the secret behind Sheffield United’s success: “We play on the front foot. There are teams who play on the counterattack, who sit back and retreat to the halfway line. Then there’s us and we think we play a little bit different to a lot of teams in the division (Championship). This is the way that suits us and suits the way we want to play.” Wilder wants to explain that Sheffield aim is to play well and putting on lots of pressure on their opponents.

At the end of the interview he added: “I am ambitious. I want to drive this club forward, to play at the highest level. That is my mindset and I want the players to have that. I have a short-term view, just keep going game after game. The position we end up will be what we deserve.” And they were promoted.

This last statement shows a second essential principle for Wilder’s coaching way: he created a winning mentality and solid team spirit at the club. He thinks that building chemistry is vital due to the turnover of players and that motivating his players, creating a positive environment allow them to express themselves in their best way possible. “I believe in the players more than they do sometimes”, he said once.

Which is the best way to do all these things together? George Baldock, the right wing-back, answered this question in another interview for The Guardian: “The manager is never less than honest.” [...] “If he’s happy he tells you; if he’s not he lets you know. If we get ahead of ourselves he’ll come down on us like a ton of bricks. He keeps us so grounded and I think that honesty, desire and fight can be seen in our performances.” These characteristics certainly arise from Wilder’s childhood as Blades fan growing up in Sheffield’s Stocksbridge district and from being a former Sheffield’s player. There is a deep passionate connection among the coach, the city and the club.

Chris Wilder is not only a great mental coach for his players, he is also tactically gifted; after the first evolution from the 1-4-4-2 to the 1-3-4-1-2, he has develop the team shape to a more defensive 1-3-5-2/1-5-3-2 to face the Premier League campaign and to try to prevent the opponents from playing between the midfield and defensive lines.

In this regard, the midfielder John Lundstram says: “We do a lot of work on the shape,” [...] “A lot of drills focused on getting the ball wide, on overlapping, on creating overloads and getting the triangles right. We work a lot on the strikers’ movement and getting midfielders into the box.” These are the main principles of play of Wilder’s Sheffield United attacking phase.

They say that there is a great woman behind a man’s success; but Chris Wilder makes an exception to the rule; the role of the former Manchester United coach Alex Ferguson played in getting him to this point was crucial.

Wilder said about this matter: “It shows the class of the man that when Sir Alex Ferguson was winning Premier League and European titles he took time out to help young managers like me.” [...] “Sir Alex used to call and give me little pointers. He even phoned the night before the Conference promotion play-off final with Oxford and passed on a couple of tips that helped us get the win. I don’t know what would have happened to Oxford as a club if we’d lost that day, or where I’d be now.”

Here the formations 1-3-4-2-1 during Championship campaigns



Sheffield United has been an attacking oriented team during the Championship's seasons, playing "on the front foot" of the opponents, standing high up the field, pressing the opponents, creating and cementing the principles of play that work so effectively in Premier League also.

1-3-5-2 with extra-defensive midfielder (1-3-3-2-2 in the final third) to take part to the first Premier League season after 12 years.



Other players: Freeman (Mid.), Osborn (Mid.), Besic (Mid.), Berge (Mid.), Jagielka (Def.)

The main difference from the previous seasons in the starting eleven is the center defensive midfielder and the shape change to a more balanced 1-3-5-2.

The tactical task of the holding midfielder is not to take part the building up from the back phase, as Sheffield United is not designed to play out from the first third, as the following data demonstrate, but to cover the pocket of spaces that the pushing up defenders and midfielders leave when they support the attacking moves.

The wingbacks overlap, the wingbacks push up the field, the outer midfielder support the forwards; the principles of play are not changed because of the Premier League promotion; the only objective is to

balance the team shape that is usually fielded high up the field. Playing on the front foot is always the tactical dimension of Chris Wilder team.

From 1-5-3-2 to 1-3-5-2: the basic shapes

1-5-3-2 when defending:

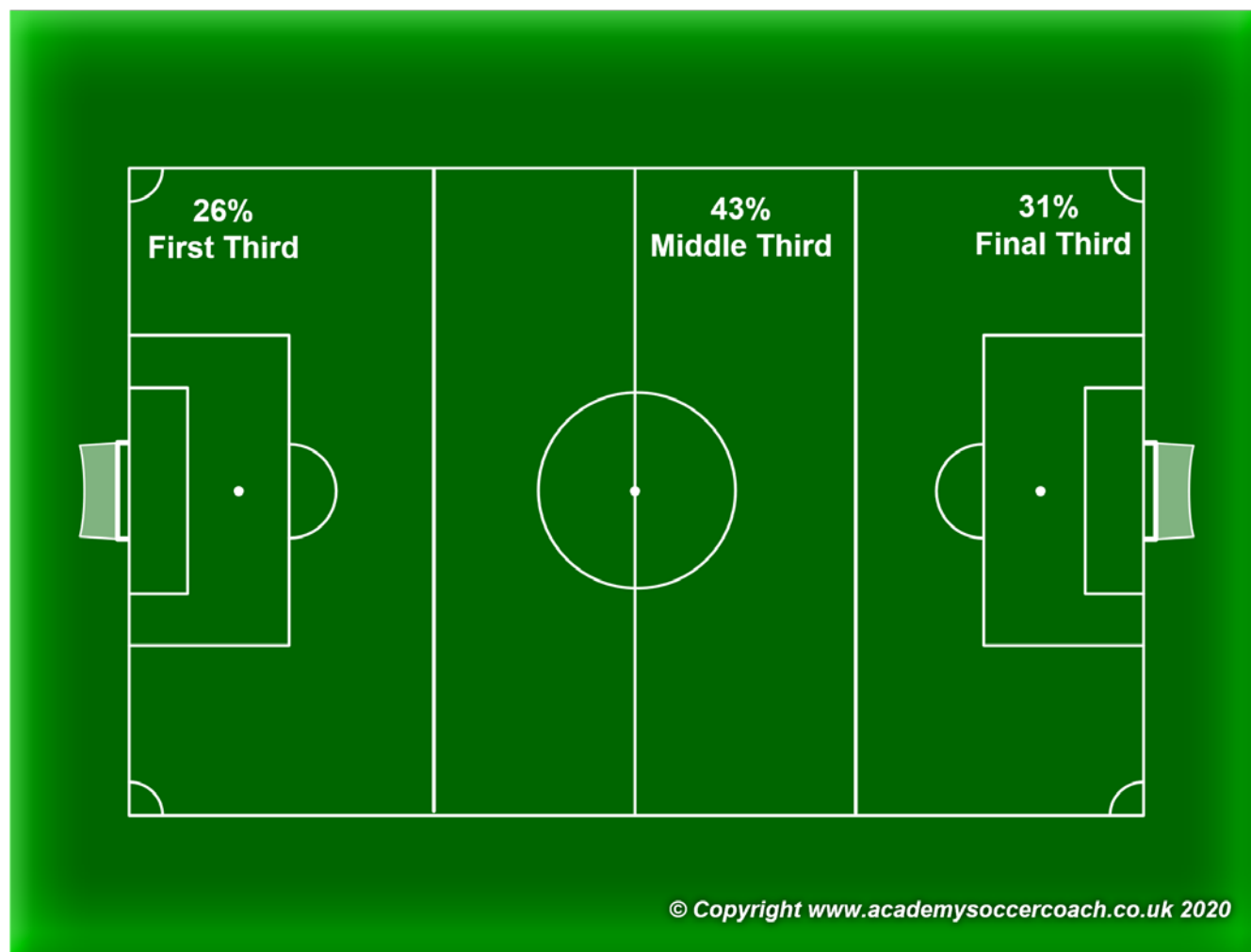


1-3-5-2 during possession phases:



Sheffield United principles of play (Attacking)

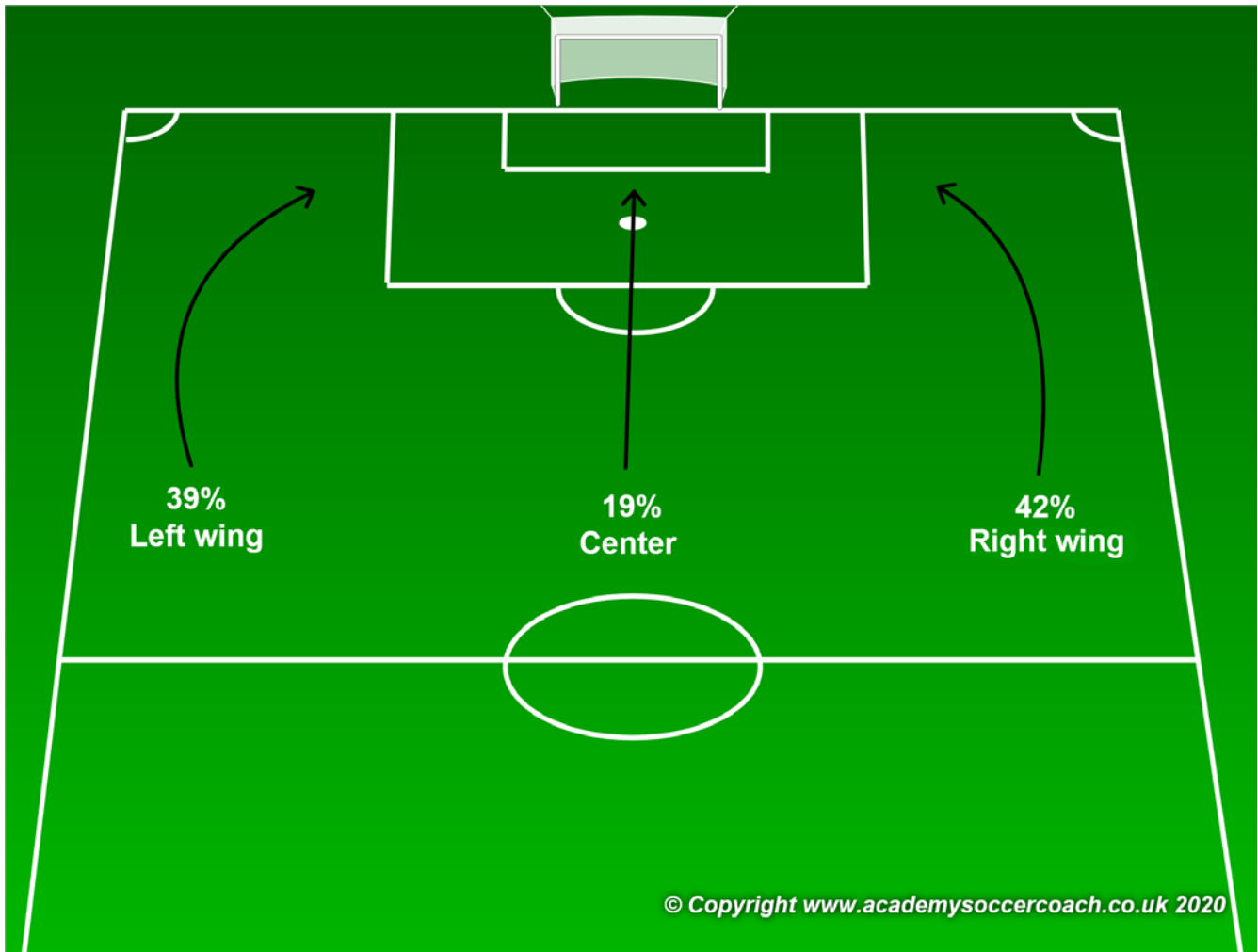
Average action's zones in the field of the team (2019/2020 season - after 28 games).



These rates are a first indication of Sheffield United's possession/attacking tactical principles of play:

- Play out of the first third as soon as possible through quick passing patterns along the flank to prevent the opponents from pressing high. Long passes from goalkeeper or defenders are another solution that can be noticed, watching a United's match.
- Build up throughout the middle third thanks to the passing and movements sequences we are going to analyzed further on this book.
- Place the team in the final third along the flanks (wide center backs and wingbacks) and in the center (wide midfielders push up and exchanges of position with the forwards).
- Keep the possession as far away from the own goal as possible

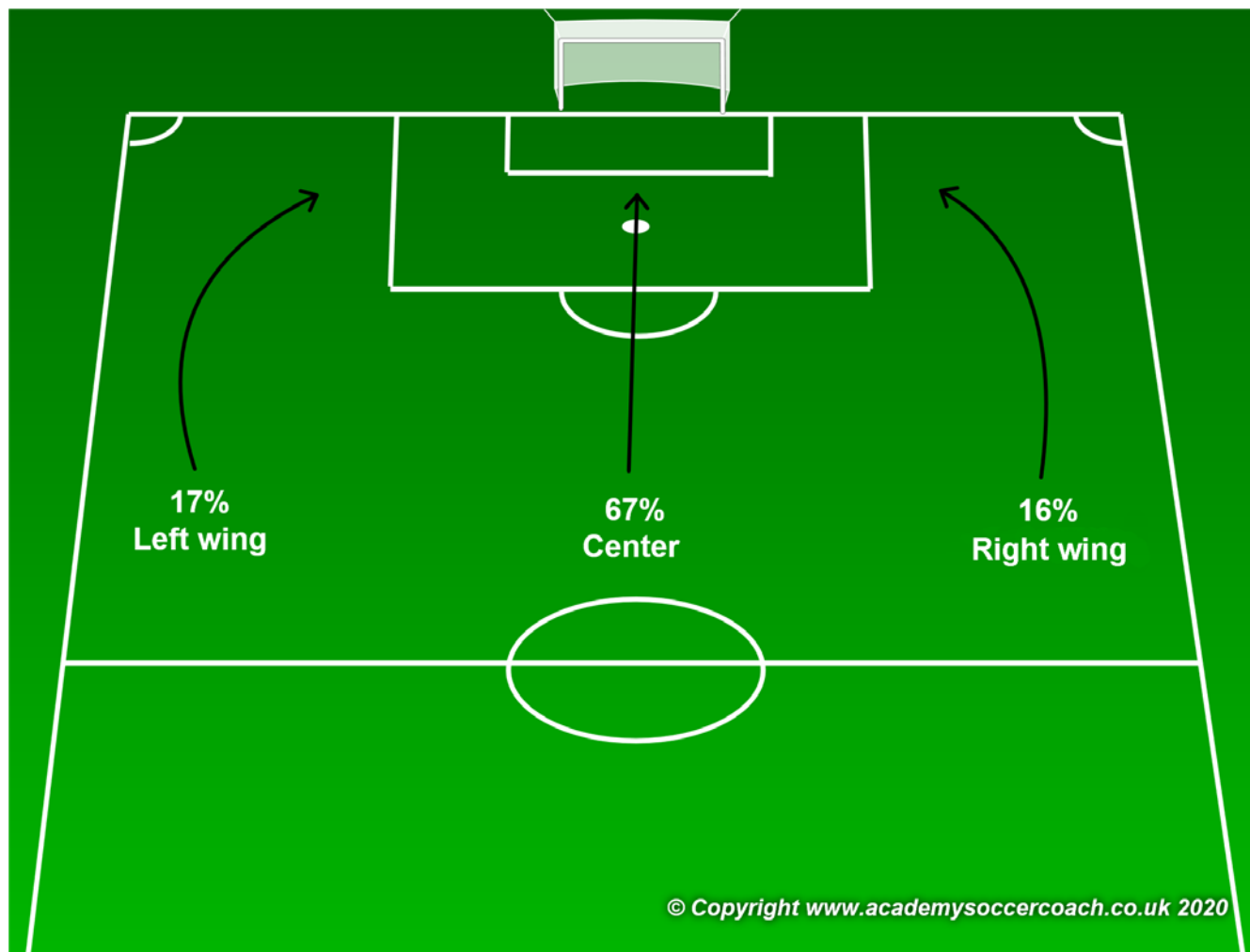
Average attacking directions (2019/2020 season - after 28 games).



This picture shows how crucial the flanks are for Sheffield United:

- The attacking phase are carried out combining along the flanks;
 1. Wingbacks push up along the forwards' line or shift across the center off the ball to create space out wide and to overload the zone 14.
 2. The outer midfielders usually stand in the half spaces as link players for wingbacks and wide center backs. Overlaps are not rare, anyway.
 3. The wide center backs overlaps to create 2 v 1 duels out wide and to play cross passes that are the main finishing weapon for Sheffield United.
- The center final third (zones 14 and 17) is used to distribute the ball (zone 14) or to shot on goal (zone 17) after cross passes. When cross passes are not possible, quick passing combinations are the solution to break through the opposition defense line.
- The defensive shape that allow the striker to stand high up the field, allow them to counter-attack along the channel (half spaces) and run in behind off the ball to receive passes from the flanks.

Shooting and finishing directions in the final third of the field (2019/2020 season - after 28 games).

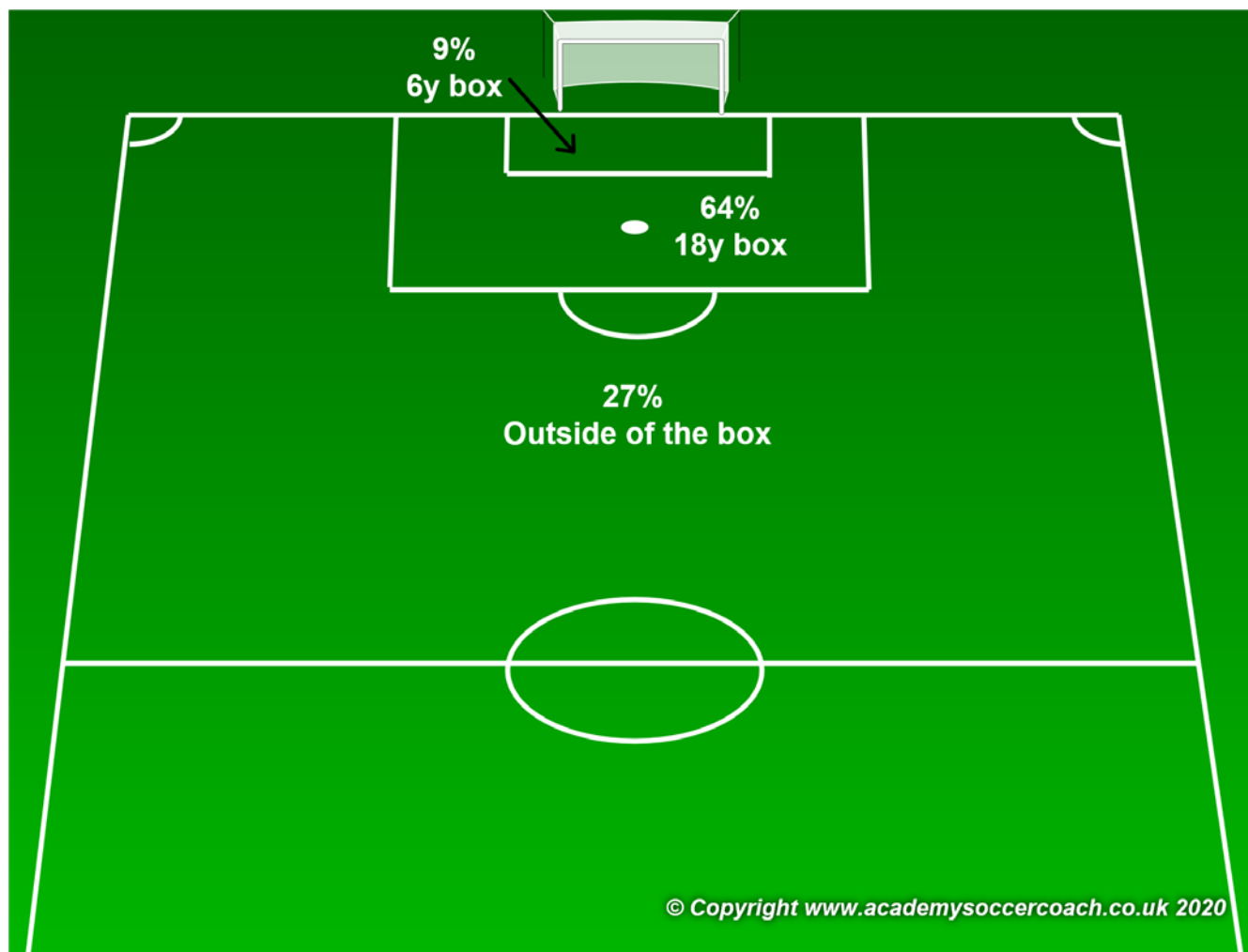


The shooting directions average data confirm that the wings are the field's areas where Sheffield United builds up the attacking moves and zone 17 (the opposition penalty box) is the finishing area, as cross passes are the main assist weapon for Wilder's team. As the following picture will show, zone 17 is the main shooting area, rather than zone 14 that is a crucial area for many teams, but not for Sheffield. The remaining shooting rates of the right and left sides of the final third represent the finishing attempt of the wingbacks when they shift across the center dribbling the ball or off the ball to receive or, otherwise, the shooting attempts of the support midfielders, who pushed high up the field to win the second times of the ball as consequence of playing on the opponent's front foot.

The attacking tactical idea behind Sheffield United is become clearer and clearer now:

- Overcome the first third.
- Build up along the flanks.
- Use the center spaces in the middle third to switch the side of play.
- Provide assistance passes from the flanks in the final third.
- Finish inside the opposition penalty area.
- Counter-attack along the channels

Shooting and finishing directions in the final third of the field (2019/2020 season - after 28 games).



The finishing rates confirm how Sheffield aim to bring strikers inside the opposition penalty area to shot after cross passes more than after through ball from zone.+

The 64% of the shots come from inside the opposition penalty box (9% of this 64% from the 6y box) receiving cross passes or winning the wandering balls.

The 27% of shots outside the box are the result of support actions or won second times of the ball, as we already analyzed that zones 13, 14 and 15 are useful to move the ball from one flank to the other to find spaces that allow to combine along the flanks, moving the opposition.

Attacking formation shape and main rotations



This is the team shape that is making Chris Wilder and Sheffield United well known in England and in Europe also. Furthermore, 2 players' rotations are peculiar in the team shape:

- Right Flank:
 1. The wide center back overlaps along the flank
 2. The wingback shifts across the center
 3. The deep laying midfielder covers the center back position
- Left Flank:
 1. The wide center back decides not to overlap, but to underlap, instead
 2. The inside forward (or center midfielder) moves out wide along the flank
 3. The wingback retreats to cover his the center back position
- Player can operate in different positions
 1. Strikers in the midfield or as wingback
 2. Center backs in the midfield or as wingback
 3. Center midfielders and wingbacks rotate in all four position of the middle third line in front of the defensive midfielder

The result is a 6 or 7 player attacking shape that allow Sheffield United to stand high the field and that force the opposition to defend deep.

- **Free positional interchanges**



- Stevens, the left wingback has the possession and Sharp shifts wide, inviting the marker to follow him and to move out of position.



- Stevens moves inside off the ball, but Sharpe is closed down the out wide.
- The left center back O'Connell pushes up the field to support the possession phase.
- The center midfielders Fleck and Lundstram support the second forward Mc Burnie, who is waiting for a cross pass.



- The left center back receives without pressure as the opposition is forced to defend deep.



- The forward receives again with time and space on the in a 2 v 2 situation.
- The left center back overlaps to prevent the defenders from double-team the teammate.
- The left wingback has moved inside and he is free from markers.
- The opposite wingback Baldock has shifted toward the center to help the potential finishing stage after a cross pass.



- The left center back receives and he can to the wingback, who stand at the back of the defenders, who are trying to screen the opponents in the 2 v 2 duel.



- The left wingback receives and he has time and space to play a cross pass toward the box.
- The defending team has placed only one player more than Sheffield because of the left flank overload action while moving the ball.

This is another situation along the right flank with a four players combination



- Baldock, the right wingback has the possession out wide
- Lundstram, the right midfielder shifts wide to receive
- Basham, the right center back is supporting the move at the back.



- The right midfielder receives but he is closed down and he lay the ball back to Basham
- The right wingback moves off the ball out wide and deep along the flank
- The center midfielder Norwood moves closer to the ball position to support the possession phase.



- The right center back combines with the center midfielder and he can advance up the field with the ball, having time and space.
- The center midfielder stands still to cover his position.
- The right wingback stands out wide to create space for the ball carrier.



- The right center back passes out wide and he moves forward off the ball, exchanging the position with the wingback
- The right midfielder is supporting the combination as well as the center midfielder, who is standing at the back of the overload field's area, as right center back.
- 3+1 players of the defending team are forced to be positioned out wide along the left flank.



- The right wingback has the ball but the defender double team him; he is then forced to play a back pass



- The holding midfielder receives at the back; the half space is now free of opponents, as the previous combinations invited four players of the opposition team out of position
- The center midfielder can play a through pass for the right midfielder, who is shifting across the center, exploiting the free half space.
- The left center back is ready to receive after pushing up the field



- The right midfielder switches side toward the left center back, who can receive free of markers and exploit the weak side of the opposition.

This picture represents an essential exchange of position among Sheffield United players:



- Mc Burnie, the forward, has the possession as wingback
- Fleck, the left midfielder, is acting as wingback at the back of the ball carrier
- Stevens, the left wingback is moving up off the ball as left midfielder

The next two pictures are useful to understand the attacking exchanges of positions among the forwards and the wide midfielders when Sheffield United can play through open spaces.



- The left center back has the possession along the left side of the middle third
- Fleck the left midfielder and Lundstram the right midfielder push up the field to attack the depth



- Mc Burnie and Sharpe, the forwards, stand still in third previous positions.
- The midfielder are now playing as center forwards.
- The center forwards are acting as they were advanced midfielders.

- **Creation and maintenance of triangles all over the field along the flanks:**

1. Wide center back, center midfielders and wingbacks



The right midfielder Fleck has the possession > the left wingback Stevens is providing support out wide > the left center back is providing forward support. Here again exchanges of positions





- The left center back is the player who crosses instead of a wingback, as it would be expected in a 1-3-5-2 system of play. The wingback is placed as left midfielder and the left midfielder is playing as left center back.

2. Center midfielders + wingbacks and strikers.



The right wingback Baldock has the possession > the right center back Basham is ready to overlap

- A wide center back overlaps > the wingback shift across the center > the center midfielder replaces the center back



- The left wingback is playing a 1 v 1 duel against the opposition right fullback, for a support action of the center back and creating a 2 v 1 duel



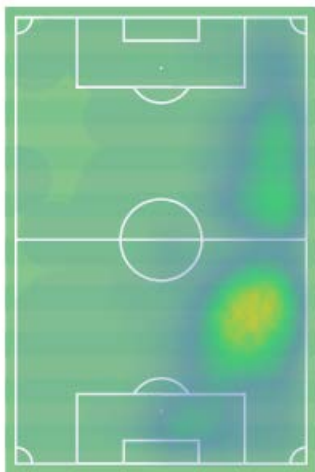
- The forwards and the opposite wide midfielder and wingback are overloading the box; this way the opponents can't add a defender out wide, leaving the right fullback alone in a 1 v 2 duel.
- This way the right center back O'Connell can overlap and receive without pressure
- The holding midfielder is providing balance behind the attacking shape
- The left midfielder stand still to provide balance behind ball area.

- This way, the left center back is free to play the cross pass toward the box.

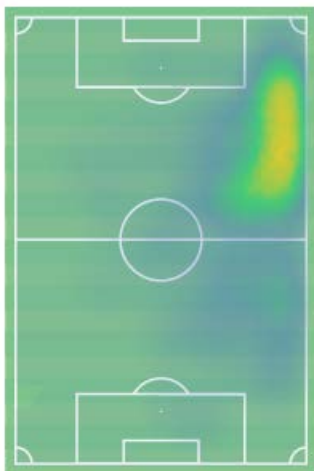


As we have just analyzed, flanks combinations are crucial for Sheffield United possession and attacking phase. Gps tracking of the wide center backs, wingbacks and outer midfielders confirm it very clearly. Right flank positioning:

- Basham (6) Right Wide Center Back



- Lundstram (16) Right Midfielder

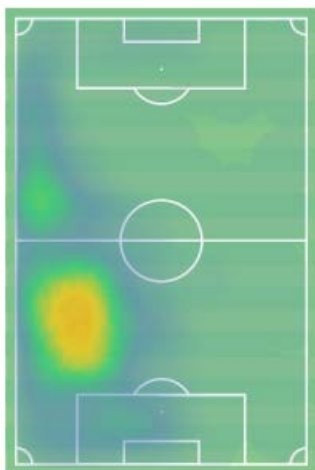


- Baldock (2) Right Wingback



Left flank positioning:

- O'Connell (5) Left Wide Center Back



- Fleck (4) Left Midfielder



- Stevens (3) Left Wingback



- **Creation of 2 v 1 duels along the flanks in the final third for crossing into the box**

When one attacker of Sheffield Unite involved in a 1 v 1 duel wide along the flank, he is always supoted to create 2 v 1 duels.



- Sharpe, the striker is involved in 1 v 1 duel along the left flank.



- The left wingback underlaps behind the defender who is beaten with a pass at the back.



- Stevens, the left wingback can dribble the ball toward the opposition goal.



- And play a cross pass toward the goal space that is overload by the 3 teammates, as usual.

- **Crossing is the main weapon to finish; here are some examples.**



- The left wingback Osborn dribbles the ball along the left flank being in a 1 v 1 duel



- Mousset, one of the forwards, has shifted out wide to invite the opposition right fullback out of position, stretching the back line, and he receives.
- The forward is clever as he exploits the wrong body position of the opponent, who is placed at the other side of the ball line; this way the ball carrier can change direction and turn toward the box.



- He can play the cross pass with right foot from the left flank toward the goal.



- The opposition box is overload with 3 players as it is usual for Sheffield in these kind of moves
- A 2 v 2 duel can be notice near the 6y box; a third player is ready to header on the further post and the other two are attacking the goal in the center and on the first post.



- Sheffield United scored the equalizer goal by the end of the match, provoking an own goal on the first post, in a 2 v 2 draw against Chelsea in an early Premier League match of this current 2019/2020 season.

The next sequence is another example of building up the attacking move, overloading and combining along the flank (the right one), and of finishing heading a cross pass.



- Norwood has the possession in the right half space and three teammates are providing passing options along the right flank:
 - Basham, the right center back is standing beside him.
 - Ludstram, the right midfielder is ready to receive in front of the center back.
 - Baldock, the right wingback is placed deeper along the side line.

- A general 4 v 3 duel for Sheffield on the right side is created by overloading the ball area; the right midfielder and the right wingback could play a 1 v 1 duel.



- The right wingback receives, meanwhile the right center back overlaps, creating time and space on the ball for the wingback to play a cross pass toward the opposition penalty box, as the nearest opponent chooses to track the overlapping run.
- Sheffield positional play creates a 3 v 3 duel in this situation, and the exchanges of position among the three players along the right side line misled the opposition's defenders.



- As the opposition has been forced to create a strong side around the ball along their defensive left side, Sheffield United strikers Sharp and Mc Burnie can finish winning a 2 v 2 duel in front of the goal.
- Sharpe scores with a crossed header on the second post.
- **Throw-ins 1-2 quick combinations**

Another interesting Sheffield United's attacking tactical solution is the quick 1-2 combination to throw the ball in and to attack the depth with fast passing patterns. The wide center back often throw-in in the middle and final thirds.



- O'Connell throws the ball in, meeting the incoming run of the left midfielder Fleck.
- The left wingback Osborne and one of the strikers are standing higher up the field along the same flank. The opposite right midfielder Lundstram has shifted across toward the ball area.



- The left midfielder passes the ball back to the teammate, who can receive free from markers.
- Norwood, the center midfielder, provides balance behind the ball line.



- The wide center back dribble the ball higher up the field and the left midfielder exchanges the position, covering the space behind the ball carrier.
- The right midfielder moves off the ball to run toward the opposition goal at the back of the condensed ball area.
- All the opponents are looking at the ball without covering the ball area; the striker and the right midfielder are free from markers; only the left wingback would be under pressure after the potential reception.



- Musset, the striker, can receive and turn toward the goal.
- The right midfielder Lundstram can run inside the goal area freely, as the opposition has been forced to overload the defensive right side and the 18y box is not covered properly.
- The opposition's left center back and fullback are out of position and on late



- The right midfielder can receive free with time and space on the ball on the edge of the 6y box.



- And he can score shooting toward the far post.

This is another example deeper along the right sideline; the fast 1-2 combination allows Sheffield United to send a cross pass into the box.



- The right wingback Baldock throws the ball in for the right midfielder Lundstram.
- One striker, mc Goldrick, the center midfielder Norwood and the right center back Basham overload the ball area, forcing the opposition to defend deep and to create a string side around the ball, leaving spaces inside the box.



- 1-2 fast passing combination with the return pass toward the further feet and on the run of the right wingback, who can receive inside a pocket of space.



- Even if the opponents have numerical advantage around the ball (2 v 1), the right wingback can play the cross pass, having space and time on the ball.
- Sheffield strikes and the opposite left wingback and the opposite left wingback are standing in front of the goal space, ready to header the ball.



- Stevens, the left wingback can header the ball coming from the far post and anticipating the defender on the edge of the 6y area.



- And he can score with a crossed heading just inside the 6y box.
- **1-2 shape into the box to finish from crossing**

As we analyzed, cross passes are the crucial finishing weapon for Sheffield United; 3 players in a 1-2 formation stand inside the opposition penalty box to try to header toward the goal.



- In this example, the entire right side chain is combining in a 3 v 2 combination.
- The strikers and one player of the opposite left chain (the left midfielder) are attacking the opposition goal.
- The disposition is very classic:
- The strikers attack the near post and the center of the goal
- The third player, who can be the left midfielder, like in this situation, the left wingback or the left center back, attack the far post or the center of the goal, running from the far post.

- Generate overloads one side of the field with strikers, center midfielder, wingback and pushing up center-back. The opposition is then forced to retreat deep in the first third to mark and cover the space and it's hard to counter-attack.



- In this example, the right wingback Baldock and the right midfielder Lundstram are involved in a 2 v 2 duel along the flank in the final third



- The right center back Basham pushes up and the center midfielder Norwood shifts across the ball area; a 3 v 3 duel is then created near the ball, as a third opponents is forced to shift wide to equalize the duel and a fourth one has to track the center midfielder.
- The left wingback is standing in the center out of the opposition's penalty area and the left center back is providing balance at the back in the middle third.
- The strikers and the left midfielder of Sheffield United are waiting for a cross pass inside the 18 y box; the opposition's players are all forced to stand deep inside the first third.

- **7/8 players attack to combine throughout the advanced areas of the field**

To overload the final third to distribute the ball quickly is the usual tactical solution when combining along the flanks is not possible. The opposition can create a 4 v 3 duel along the flank in the defensive right side; condensing the final third allow Sheffield United to maintain the possession and to switch the side without losing yards in the field.



- The left midfielder tries to dribble the ball inside to find a through pass, but the opposition's defenders can close the passing lanes toward Sharpe, the striker who moves off the ball behind the defensive line. The left center back Stevens is providing support at the back, the second striker Mc Burnie stands inside the 18 y box, before moving out to receive, inviting the defender out of position. The right midfielder moves forward to provide another passing option.





- The center midfielder Norwood provide a safe back passing option and he receives; at this point the opposition defensive shape is condensed in the center, between the Sheffield's attacking zones 14 and 17.



- The opposite right wingback Stevens can receive having space and time on the ball to control the ball, advance and play a cross pass.
- 4 Sheffield United players can attack the opposition penalty area to header the cross pass, a sixth one is standing along the opposite sideline of the 18 y box and a eighth one is providing balance along the hypothetical border line of the final third.
- Sheffield United is overloading the final third with 7 players, in this example.



- A 3 v 2 duel (Sheffield United has numerical advantage) can be notice in front of the goal to catch and header the ball on goal.



- The striker Ms Burnie scores, beating the the opponent in front of him.

- **Unbalance the opposition defense shape through in and out runs off the ball or with unexpected players positions (wingbacks on the top of the box, overlapping center-backs, midfielders in the half spaces)**

Forward and backward passing combinations along the flank are used to allow the exchanges of position among the Sheffield players, moving the opponents, after the overloading of a flank.



- Baldock, the right wingback has the possession as wide center back and, vice versa, the right center back Basham is standing in front of him as wingback. The center midfielder Norwood is moving toward the the ball to invite the marker out of position and to create a pocket of space behind him. The right midfielder Lundstram is standing higher up the field as wide attacker.



- A forward and backward passing combination between the wingback and the center back creates a forward passing path along the right flank.



- Mc Burnie, the striker receives and even if the marker forces him out wide, the right midfielder can act as a support player along the side.



- The right midfielder Lundstram has time and space to receive.
- Despite the equal 3 v 3 duel around the ball, the opposition defense shape has been unbalanced along the defensive left side and few players can save the center spaces of the first third and the 18 y box.

- **When a wingback receives on the flank after a switch of side, the wide center-back overlaps (for instances after having overloaded a side and the center midfielder switches the side).**

The following sequences represents a usual and typical passing and movements pattern of play to build up along the flank.



- Norwood switches the side toward the left flank. The left center back pushes up and receive, the left midfielder Fleck is positioned as left wingback on the left side.





- The left wingback Stevens shifts across the center to create space along the flank and to force an opponent to stay in the center to mark him. The striker Sharpe shifts wide to receive inviting the marker out of position.



- The striker lays the ball back to the left midfielder and the left center back overlaps along the left flank without pressure.

- **Wingbacks cut inside to generate shooting chances**

This sequence is very explicative to understand another movements pattern after the wide centerbacks' overlaps.



- Mc Goldrick is playing as left midfielder, in this sequence, he has the possession and the left center back overlaps to receive along the flank.



- While the center back is dribbling the ball higher up the field, the left wingback Stevens shifts across the center, as one of the strikers has dropped back before.



- The left wingback receives as target player along the opposition defensive line and the left midfielder Freeman moves deep off the ball to receive as third man.



- He receives and he overcome the defenders line with one touch and he dribbles inside the opposition's penalty area. Mousset who dropped back before runs back inside the 18 y box as well as the right midfielder Lundstram.
- A 2 v 2 off the ball is going to be created in front of the opposition's goal.



- The striker plays a ground pass in the space between the opposition's goalkeeper and defensive line.



- The the second forward Mousset tries to finish.



- The right midfielder can catch the opposition goalkeeper's rebound and he scores shooting from the middle of the penalty area.
- The opposition's 18 y box overload with four players can be noticed again.
- **Aggressive pressure after loss of possession out wide (17,5 fouls per game; 5,3 more than the highest average of the last 2018/2019 season in Championship)**

Despite the high positioning of the team shape when attacking, Sheffield United can't be considered as an ultra-offensive pressing team.



- High pressure transitions to defend phases are carried out along the flank to prevent the opponents from exploiting the center spaces of the field, while the rest of the team drops back to shape the 1-5-3-2 formation inside the own half of the field.

- **The strikers can counter-attack into the channels standing placed high in the field in the 1-5-3-2 (or 1-4-1-3-2) attacking formation**

Sheffield United overload the flanks rather than the half spaces when in possession; half spaces are useful to counter attack dribbling the ball along them or running off the ball to receive from the flank and drive the ball toward the opposition goal.



- Mousset, the striker retreats and wins the ball tackling.



- The left wingback Stevens dribbles the ball higher up the field along the left flank.
- The striker who recovered the possession pushes up along the left attacking half space.



- The striker receives in behind inside the half space and he invites the opposition pressure keeping the ball at his feet and waiting for the support teammates from the back



- The opposition condenses 3 players around the ball and a 1 v 1 situation is created along the edge line of the penalty box.
- 3 players are supporting the counter-attacking move from the middle third and all them can receive free from immediate pressure.



- The right midfielder Lundstram receives, but the shooting path is covered and the opponents has been able to shape the back four line quickly



- But the continuous wide supports to the attacking moves is always a solution for Sheffield United; the right wingback runs up the field along the opposite half space, and he can finish and score, beating on time his direct opponent, after the right midfielder wide pass.

Chris Wilder's Sheffield United stats

2016/2017 – League One (promoted in Championship)

SHEFFIELD UNITED



3-4-1-2 54%

4-4-2
15%

3-5-2
5%

4-2-3-1
2%

4-3-1-2
1%

3-4-2-1
1%

Goals	xG*	Shots	on target	%	Shots from outside box / on target
2	1,8343478	14,82	5,2	35	5,35

Positional attacks	with shots	%	Deep completed passes accurate	accurate	%
40,9	8	19,7	13,24	11,76	88,8

Penalty area entries (runs)	Penalty area entries (crosses)	Touches in penalty area	Offensive duels	won	%
34,4	2,3	23,8	67,85	28,3	41,7

Counterattacks	with shots	%	Set pieces with shots
2,5	0,7	28,7	23

Crosses accurate	accurate	%	Deep completed crosses	accurate	%
25,9	7,8	30,1	8,17	7	85,6

Corners	with shots	%	Free kicks	with shots	%
7,4	1,8	25,2	2,3	0,7	31,1

Passes Type and Directions	Average No. per game	accurate	%
Forward	165,6	116,9	70,6
Back	60,14	55,3	91,9
Lateral	144,6	120,1	83,1
Long	60	31,14	51,9
To final third	80,7	53,4	66,1
Progressive	97,3	77,4	79,5
Smart	9,18	4,5	49,5

Passes per min.	Average passes per possession	Long pass %
16,1	3,7	14,3
PPDA **	Average shot distance	Average pass length
7	17,47	21,9

SHEFFIELD UNITED



Goals	xG*	Shots	on target	%	Shots from outside box / on target
1,35	1,156	11,1	4,04	36,4	4,9

Positional attacks	with shots	%	Deep completed passes accurate	accurate	%
35,6	5	14,2	11,3	10	89

Penalty area entries (runs)	Penalty area entries (crosses)	Touches in penalty area	Offensive duels	won	%
27	2,4	19,37	68,9	28	40,77

Counterattacks	with shots	%	Set pieces with shots
2,87	0,9	31,8	24,2

Crosses accurate	accurate	%	Deep completed crosses	accurate	%
19,7	5,7	29	5,6	4,8	86,7

Corners	with shots	%	Free kicks	with shots	%
6,2	1,5	24,5	2,4	0,61	25,5

Passes Type and Directions	Average No. per game	accurate	%
Forward	158,8	110,2	69,4
Back	64,2	58,9	91,7
Lateral	137,8	117,3	85,1
Long	59,2	30,37	51,3
To final third	70,9	45,1	63,6
Progressive	83,8	64,7	77,2
Smart	7,4	3,4	46,3

Passes per min.	Average passes per possession	Long pass %
16,42	3,74	14,36
PPDA**	Average shot distance	Average pass length
9,29	18,82	20,91

2018/2019 – Championship (2nd – Promoted in Premier League; 30 wins, 92 goals and 100 points)

SHEFFIELD UNITED



3-4-1-2 52%

5-3-2 10%	4-3-1-2 4%	3-5-2 4%	3-4-2-1 2%
4-3-3 1%	4-3-2 1%		

Goals	xG*	Shots	on target	%	Shots from outside box / on target
1,7	1,5	11,2	4,3	38,25	1,7

Positional attacks	with shots	%	Deep completed passes accurate	accurate	%
32,07	5,5	17,2	11,6	10,2	88

Penalty area entries (runs)	Penalty area entries (crosses)	Touches in penalty area	Offensive duels	won	%
27,7	1,9	21,4	57,1	22,1	21,4

Counterattacks	with shots	%	Set pieces with shots
2,5	0,68	27,4	21,9

Crosses accurate	accurate	%	Deep completed crosses	accurate	%
20,9	6,5	31,4	6,5	5,9	90,3

Corners	with shots	%	Free kicks	with shots	%
6,8	2,02	30	2,04	0,59	28,7

Passes Type and Directions	Average No. per game	accurate	%
Forward	154,6	109,6	70,9
Back	63,1	58,4	92,5
Lateral	140,5	120,5	85,8
Long	56,1	29,6	52,8
To final third	64,1	41,7	64,9
Progressive	81,7	63,1	77,2
Smart	7,04	3,4	47,8

Passes per min.	Average passes per possession	Long pass %
17,54	3,91	13,52
PPDA**	Average shot distance	Average pass length
10,15	16,62	20,36

2019/2020 – Premier League (7th with 43 point after 28 games)

SHEFFIELD UNITED



3-5-2 58%



5-3-2 27%

3-4-2-1
2%

4-3-1-2
2%

Goals	xG*	Shots	on target	%	Shots from outside box / on target
1,07	1,41	9,18	3,29	35,80	2,93

Positional attacks	with shots	%	Deep completed passes accurate	accurate	%
30,9	3,93	12,7	7,89	6,89	87,3

Penalty area entries (runs)	Penalty area entries (crosses)	Touches in penalty area	Offensive duels	won	%
25,39	2,43	17,18	53,79	20,43	37,98

Counterattacks	with shots	%	Set pieces with shots
2,57	1,14	44,44	18,64

Crosses accurate	accurate	%	Deep completed crosses	accurate	%
18,75	6,11	32,57	5,71	5,46	95,63

Corners	with shots	%	Free kicks	with shots	%
5,93	1,32	22,29	1,75	0,61	34,69

Passes Type and Directions	Average No. per game	accurate	%
Forward	136,9	92,4	67,5
Back	59,36	55,25	93
Lateral	123,47	104,5	84,6
Long	56,64	29,4	51,8
To final third	57,2	34,6	60,5
Progressive	69,60	51,5	74
Smart	4,5	1,5	34,13

Passes per min.	Average passes per possession	Long pass %
16,75	3,67	15,34
PPDA**	Average shot distance	Average pass length
13,96	15,47	21,06

* xG (**expected goals**) measures the quality of a shot based on several variables such as assist type, shot angle and distance from goal, whether it was a headed shot and whether it was defined as a big chance. Adding up a player or team's expected goals can give us an indication of how many goals a player or team should have scored on average, given the shots they have taken (Opta).

** **Passes allowed per Defensive Action** addresses the need to quantify the intensity of the pressing of each team. It is calculated by dividing the number of passes allowed in the attacking half by the number of defensive actions taken, intended as interceptions, tackles attempted and fouls committed. The resulting number indicates the frequency of a team's attempts to recover the ball in the early stages of the other team's build-up, allowing to measure the defensive pressure in an objective and comparable manner. The greater the offensive pressing brought by a team and the lower the value of the PPDA will be. On the contrary, a team that prefers to defend closer to the goal will have a higher PPDA, resulting from the greater number of passes allowed in the attacking half before attempting to recover the ball.

$$\text{PPDA} = \frac{\text{number of passes allowed in the opposition's defensive half}}{\text{interceptions} + \text{tackles} + \text{fouls}}$$

Summary

Chris Wilder is the rising star among Premier League's starts, apart from his born date; he is one of those coaches who has grown up from the lower leagues and he has deserved his fame thanks to promotions and victories in all the leagues under Premier League.

He is not a philosopher, he is not an inventor, as Pep Guardiola, but we may define him a practical creator of tactics that make effective a team; and a coach is the head coach of a "normal team" with "normal players", it is everything needed. And if we add that he is a great motivator, the mix is perfect.

The break point of his career is the adoption of the 1-3-4-1-2 system of play during the first season as Sheffield United coach and the evolution to the 1-3-5-2 after the promotion in Premier League (2019/2020) from the Championship (2018/2019)

Furthermore, what makes Sheffield United's style of play so interesting, it is the interpretation of the system is the so peculiar way his team attacks.

The players haven't a precise role, they interchange the position continuously, the attacking phases are often effective and all the player are perfectly involved in the pattern of play and movements; all these factors make Sheffield United a very brave team, despite being a neo-promoted squad.

The landmarks of this style of play are the overlapping wide center backs along the flanks, pushing up until the final third; but this is only a type of trigger for many more perfect attacking, supporting and covering movements of the player, while the team has the possession.

The attacking principles of play could summarized as follow:

- Free positional interchanges.
- Creation and maintenance of triangles all over the field along the flanks.
- Creation of 2 v 1 duels along the flanks in the final third.
- Crossing as the main weapon to finish.
- Throw-ins 1-2 quick attacking combinations.
- 1-2 shape into the box to finish from crossing.
- 7/8 players attack to combine throughout the advanced areas of the field.
- Unbalance the opposition defense shape through in and out runs off the ball or with unexpected players.
- A wingback receives on the flank after a switch of side, the wide center-back overlaps..
- Wingbacks cut inside to generate shooting chances
- Aggressive pressure after loss of possession out.
- The strikers counter-attack into the channels.

These seem to be simple principles of play, and maybe they are; but the effectiveness that Chris Wilder has demonstrate in shaping his team on the field and the perfect connections among the player make Sheffield United's style of play outstanding.