

SHEFFIELD UNITED'S

3-5-2

FORMATION

DEFENDING

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

by **LUCA BERTOLINI**



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

By

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Sheffield United and Chris Wilder's reign

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; this is absolutely true from attacking points of view. Looking at the defensive side, Wilder thinks that "overcomplicating matters is the worst thing you can do." This means that the Blades' coach has always pragmatism as a base of his soccer philosophy's pyramid.

Kelvin Thomas, who interviewed Wilder for the Oxford job, before working with him as Northampton chairman said: "It was more about just getting the job done. He has a steely confidence in his decision making that allows him to get the best out of the players that he has."

Back in time, when Sheffield United was competing to establish the club in the Championship, Wilder did an interview for The Guardian, and he admitted he had a model to follow for Blades' rising and path to Premier League: "I love the Bournemouth model, they've got Harry Arter who's played in the Conference, Simon Francis, Charlie Daniels and Marc Pugh who've played in League One: the heartbeat of their team that have gone on to establish themselves in the Premier League played for Eddie [Howe] all the way through." He has done the same with his team, at all.

"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 a spot for all the coaches who try to arrive at the top in their career, after rising 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 is the Sheffield United Head Coach.

During the first season, as Alfreton Town 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 gets 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; since then, Wilder gathered 229 points in 107 games played and since the start of 2015/2016

season, no one has enjoyed as much consistent success. 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. He then 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.

2018/2019 season didn't start in a promising way; United lost the opening two games of the season to Swansea and Middlesbrough. On Christmas Day Blades sat sixth, seven points behind Leeds in second, nine off top-of-the-table Norwich; since then they won 15 matches and 5 draws in 22 games, a better record than anyone else in the division and at a points-per-game rate that could had took them clear of 100 for the season (2nd place and 86 points at the end of the season.)

To complete the winning season, 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, with a four-year contract extension. These data represent the constantly growing of Chris Wilder as great manager of “normal players and clubs.”

Before the forced break due to Corona Virus, the Blades were 19 point (7th) better off the Norwich, the Championship winner of the season before, overcoming the European safe 40 points rate (43 pts). In The last winning game against Norwich was a 1-0 (Sharpe, 36' in the first half) and not for the first time the entire 25-man squad was passed fit on Saturday before the match; Wilder is clearly doing something right in the training and sports science spheres.

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. The Blades broke their transfer record four times between gaining promotions, but the factors above remains essential.

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 and among the players as well. The center-backs trio Basham (240 appearances for Sheffield United), Egan, and O’Connell have collected 483 appearances for the club and the entire back five defensive sector (including Baldock and Stevens) costed 5 mln £ only (Egan worth the 80% of that).

The entire spine of the most usual starting XI (more than 20 appearances from the 1st minute) costed 7 mln £ (back five + Norwood, Henderson and Lundstram), apart from the 62 mln £ spent for Berge, Mc Burnie, Mousset and Callum Robinson (on loan to Wba from January 2020). Mc Goldrik and Fleck are free transfers from Ipswich Town (2018/2019) and Coventry City (2016/2017).

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.

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.” Despite being so solid, United are far from a defensive team; this should be enough to believe in Chris Wilder’s attacking and defensive tactics.

Chris Wilder’s Sheffield United defensive 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%

Matches	Ball losses per 90'	Total defensive duels (season)	per match	won	%	per 90'	won%
46	121,97	2998	65,24	41,00	62,85	60,32	62,9

Average conceded goals per match	PPDA**	xGA*	xGa per shot against	Conceded goals	Challenge Intensity***
1,02	7,05	43,93	0,104	47	7,2

Interceptions per match	Fouls per match	Clearances
43,87	12,28	22,22

Aerial duels	won	%	Sliding tackles	won	%
69,35	35,15	50,69	5,80	1,57	26,97

Total shot against	per 90'	per match	on target	%
424	8,53	9,22	3,22	34,91

Shots blocked	per 90'	% blocked shots	% blocked shots against
121	2,43	27,3	27,4

SHEFFIELD UNITED



Matches	Ball losses per 90'	Total defensive duels (season)	per match	won	%	per 90'	won
46	117,75	2977	64,72	38,09	58,85	59,82	58,9

Average conceded goals per match	PPDA**	xGA*	xGa per shot against	Conceded goals	Challenge Intensity***
1,20	9,34	42,36	0,094	55	6,4

Interceptions per match	Fouls per match	Clearances
45,11	11,50	20,41

Aerial duels	won	%	Sliding tackles	won	%
56,57	26,59	47,00	4,93	1,35	27,31

Total shot against	per 90'	per match	on target	%
452	9,08	9,83	3,50	35,62

Shots blocked	per 90'	% blocked shots	% blocked shots against
152	2,43	29,02	26,8

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%		

Matches	Ball losses per 90'	Total defensive duels (season)	per match	won	%	per 90'	won%
46	107.31	3039	66,07	39,00	59,03	61,62	59,1

Average conceded goals per match	PPDA**	xGA*	xGa per shot against	Conceded goals	Challenge Intensity***
0,89	10,18	44.67	0,092	41	6,4

Interceptions per match	Fouls per match	Clearances
44,72	12,15	21,33

Aerial duels	won	%	Sliding tackles	won	%
56,80	25,83	45,46	5,24	1,41	26,97

Total shot against	per 90'	per match	on target	%
489	9.91	10,63	3,57	33,54

Shots blocked	per 90'	% blocked shots	% blocked shots against
131	2.66	25.4	26.8

Sheffield United conceded 41 goals in 46 matches, the best record in the competition (21 clean sheets – 46% of the matches);

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

SHEFFIELD UNITED



Matches	Ball losses per 90'	Total defensive duels (season)	per match	won	%	per 90'	won %
28	104,56	1781	63,61	38,39	60,36	59.34	60.4

Average conceded goals per match	PPDA**	xGA* (season)	xGa per shot against	Conceded goals (28 matches)	conceded goal probability (38 games)	Challenge Intensity ***
0,89	13,96	35,81	0,123	25		5,2

Interceptions per match	Fouls per match	Clearances
46,61	10,75	21,50

Aerial duels	won	%	Tackles per game	Sliding tackles	won	%
47,75	22,82	47,79	16,8	4,89	1,39	28,47

Total shot against	On target	per 90'	per match	on target	%
292	91	9,73	10,43	3,54	33,90

Passes blocked per game	Shots blocked	per 90'	% blocked shots	% blocked shots against	Total saves %
6	84	2,8	22,6	29,8	75

Sheffield United conceded 9 goals in the first 12 appearances (5th in the league and 5 clean sheets after 12 games) and just 25 after 28 games (10 clean sheets and 12th team in the rank among the European top 5 leagues). Before the season was blocked due to Corona Virus spread out, Sheffield United was 7th in the league (11 wins, 10 draws, only 7 lost games and 14 points away from the relegation battle) with 25 goals conceded (2nd best of any side after Liverpool). In the end of last November, the xGA statistic

was 16 against the 9 really conceded goals (Henderson, the goalkeeper saved 8 opposition's attempts before conceding one goal.

The xGA was 0,89 per game in the 2018/2019 Championship season and 0,81 for 2019/2020 Premier League season. The xGA differential is 9,45 this season and it means almost 10 goals less than the quality of given shots would suggest.

Basham only, a free transfer from Blackpool, made 61 tackles and 60 interceptions and he has the highest numbers of the entire division; he won 193 duels and performed 80 headed clearances; he is one of the remarkable work by Chris Wilder and his loyalty the players, right coaching and tactical preparation.

Stats Legend:

* **Expected Goals Against (xGa):** the number of goals a team should have conceded based on the expected goals data.

** **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 measuring 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.

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

*** **Challenge intensity:** duels, tackles and interceptions per minute of opponent possession.

From 1-3-4-2-1 to 1-3-5-2

This is the 1-3-4-2-1 formation during 2018/2019 Championship campaigns. Sheffield United was totally an attacking oriented team, 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, but the introduction of the holding midfielder, who replaces the attacking center midfielder.



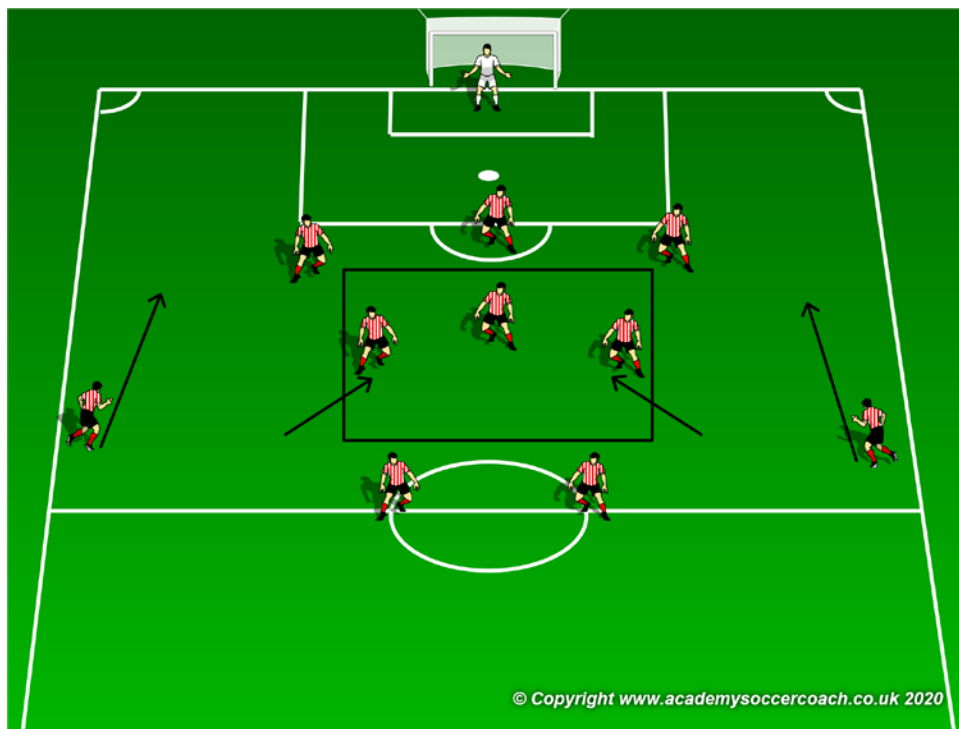
The proof of the tactical value of Wilder’s ideas is Mc Goldrick, who has been able to score 15 goals during 2018/2019 season, but none during 2019/2020 season; despite this lack, he has been included in the starting XI 16 times, because of his defensive contribution and pressure abilities (36 tackles, 1st in the division, 4,3 per 90’ aerial duels). The new entry Mc Burnie has 7,8 aerial duels won per 90’.

Chris Wilder is then an attacking oriented coach, but, as already stated, he is very concrete and effective when has to manage tactical stuff. The holding midfielder positioning shows his attention and comprehension for the situations of play and for games’ environments that are not the same of Championship when playing Premier League matches at Anfield Road or Old Trafford or against mid a and long term PL participant teams as Leicester City or Wolverhampton Wondereres.

This following picture shows the basic 1-3-5-2 formation with an extra-defensive / holding midfielder:



[Other players: Freeman (Mid.), Osborn (Mid.), Besic (Mid.), Berge (Mid.), Jagielka (Def.).] The shape changes to a more balanced 1-3-5-2 / 1-5-3-2 that ensure solid midfield and protection during defense phases; this same shape changes and turns in relation to the team's position in the field, as we are going to analyze through the book.



1-3-5-2 during possession phases:



1-5-3-2 when defending:



The tactical task of the holding midfielder is not to take part to 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.

Pressure phase in the final third

From 1-3-5-2 to 1-3-4-1-2 for pressure phases in the final third, using the touch line as extra defender



Lundstram (7) or Fleck (4) become No.10 during high pressure phases in the final third, marking the holding midfielder, if he receives and the forwards' pressure is overcome.



United's forwards Sharp and Mc Burnie are overcome in a 3 v 2 duel, and Fleck pushes up to counter the opposition's midfielder.

Sheffield's pressure phase against the opposition building up usually involves not more than 3 players, when the team has no time to push and be balanced high up the field.



The opposition midfielder prevents Fleck from countering him, taking advantage of the time and space on the ball; but Sheffield overload the center of the middle third and it's ready to cover the deep spaces toward the goal.



The opposition midfielder has the possession, but the nearest passing options are marked or shadowed; to direct a pass toward the flanks is the only possible solution for the ball carrier to keep the possession

The opposition ball carrier passes out wide along the United's defensive left flank, where the teammate can receive free from marking, as the left wingback Stevens has pushed up the press him and to prevent a close through pass in between the lines.



The opposition's receiver has space to dribble through but few passing options, as United's left center back O'Connell could counter the opponent in between the lines and the striker is running toward the goal between the center defender Egan and the right center back Basham.



Stevens and Fleck are retreating back to counter the opponent with the ball along the flank.

To cover the center space is always the first aim of United's defensive phase, when the pressure actions are not effective, as in this sequence.

Stevens, the left wingback closes down the ball carrier along the flank in a 1 v 1 duel.



The support opponents gains the possession down the flank inside United's first third.



The left wingback Stevens, the left center back O'Connell and the left midfielder Fleck close all the passing options toward the penalty area, creating a 3 v 1 duel around the ball carrier, who is then forced to dribble the ball back.

O'Connell can win the ball back anticipating the opposition's forward.



Sheffield's pressure phase is always balanced in order cover the center space of the middle third and of the first third.

This is one the main reasons why Chris Wilder turned to the 1-5-3-2 from a more offensive 1-3-4-1-2 and why to play "on the opposition's front foot" is only one of the defensive options during the first Premier League campaign since 12 years.

When the team can place the formation's shape high in the field, the objective is to create a strong side along a flank and to disrupt the opposition's building up phase near the side line.



In this move, Sheffield has just overload the attacking right flank to shadow the passing options to the opposition's center back with the ball.



As he passes back to the goalkeeper, who could play toward the opposite flank and weak side, the strikers, Sharpe furthermore, shift across to direct the opposition possession phase toward the same flank.

The switch of side is covered and the opposition is forced to play along United's defensive right flank.



Sharpe and Mc Burnie are close to the center back and the holding midfielder, Lundstram has pushed up to counter the dropping back opponent along the flank, Norwood provide cover behind him and the right wingback Baldock pushes up to counter the opposition left fullback.



The only passing option for the opposition fullback is a long ball along the flank.

In this sequence, the opposition's forwards are positioned in between the lines and one of them can receive and pass out wide.



Again, the first aim for Sheffield's defensive line is to cover the depth and the space toward the goal.



Lundstram, the right midfielder retreats his position and tries to tackle the opposition's ball carrier along the side line, but he can break the opponent's action.

At this point, the penalty area is condensed and a 6 v 4 duel is created.



4 v 2 around the ball, the center back Egan can mark the opponent in the center and Stevens, the left wingback has shifted across the control the third opponent inside the penalty area.



The numerical advantage allows Fleck to win the ball back a play out from the back.

The center block to close the key passes

The main task of the center midfielders during defensive phases is to close down the passing lanes toward the back 3 and to prevent the opposition from playing key passes in behind.



The same players rotation becomes an effective defensive weapon in the middle third; in this example, Norwood is tracking back the opposition's midfielder in the center, the left midfielder Fleck is covering the back 5 near the opposition's forward and Lundstram, the right midfielder is pushing up to press and counter the ball carrier. This way, all the key passes to the forwards are closed down.

Countering the opposition building up phase, United's forwards usually press the center backs just after the first pass from goalkeeper in connection with the center block around the holding midfielder, too force the possession phase out wide.



This picture shows a situation of play where the opposition right center back has just received from the goalkeeper, who switched the side; the first forward Mousset is pressing the ball carrier and force a wide pass. Mc Goldrick, the second forward is shifting across to track the opposition holding midfielder.



The middle third trio has pushed up in the field to support the pressure phase.

The opposition's fullbacks are free to receive as they are the only possible passing options for the center backs; as one of them has the possession, the strong pressure side is shaped again.



This positioning allows Chris Wilder's team to press 1 v 1 the opposition's formation (marking the center backs, the holding midfielder, and the outer or attacking midfielders).



The left midfielder Fleck is countering the right fullback, forcing him to play a long pass; the left wingback Stevens has pushed up the field to man mark the opposition's winger, Norwood is covering the passing path through the center. Lundstram, the right midfielder is shifting across the field to get closer to the nearest opposition's midfielder.

An opponent receives while dropping back, but United's left defender O'Connell has tracked him; the receiver must play a one touch pass toward the only possible passing option. The opponents are close down the flank and there aren't any key passing paths toward United's goal.



Lundstram anticipates the opponent and he recovers the possession.



This move is an example of how Sheffield United still play “on the opponent's front foot”, pressing high the open balls also, but only when the team shape allows the midfielders closing down the passing paths and key options. This tactical solution is usually an effective tool to counter the opposition building up phase after a goal kick.

To close down the opponents along a flank and the creation of a strong side are the essential tools to carry out this idea.

The compact defensive shape against ultra-offensive systems of play

All forwards are man-marked, the area around the opposition's play maker is condensed and his passing options are closed to leave long passing solutions only. This way the deep space between the defensive line and the goal to defend can be covered by the only retreating back movement.



Sheffield usually shapes the medium block with a very narrow 1-3-3-2-2 around the halfway line to create pressing trick out wide...



As we have already talked about, Chris Wilder's team doesn't press directly against top PL's team; positional defensive play and pressing traps are the usual tactical ideas. In this picture, Mc Burnie and Sharpe, the forwards, are screening the passing lanes to the opposition's center midfielders, the right and left midfielders (Besic and Fleck) are positioned just behind them and the center midfielder Norwood is providing cover at the back of the four teammates. The left wingback Stevens is marking the opposition right winger; the direction of play is forced toward the defensive right flank.



The opposition is forced to distribute and switch the side from one flank to the other; meanwhile the team shifts across the middle third to start the real pressure phase along the desired flank.



The wingback is usually the player who runs out of position and presses the opposition's fullback or winger while receiving. In this example, the left fullback receives but he has few passing options, as the right wingback Baldock, the right center back Basham, Norwood and Besic are shaping a square around the ball carrier and there is a 4 v 2 duel with defensive numerical advantage.



The only possible passing path is toward the opposition second forward, who is moving toward the ball, but under Norwood's pressure.



The receiver can only turn back with the ball; even if United can't recover the possession, the pressing trap the idea to force the backward the opposition's pressure are very clear.

This shape allows United to cover the switches of sides from one flank to the other and the opposition's spreading out attempts.



Following the previous move, the opposition tries to switch the side toward United's left flank; Sheffield is facing an ultra-offensive shape 3-2-5. The 3 opposition's forwards are marked 1 v 1 and the wingbacks are ready to move out from their positions to close down the opposition's wingers. The center midfielder Norwood and the right one Basic are ready to double the opponents who could receive in the center.



Again, the basic idea is to cover the deep spaces in front of the goal and conceding wide passes only



When Sheffield's wingbacks or wide defenders win the ball, the nearest midfielders and the strikers support the transition to attack phase that is usually carried out counter-attacking through the channels or switching the side to the opposite flank from where the ball is recovered.



O'Connell wins the ball deep inside the first third and he prevents the opposition from counter-pressing kicking the ball forward.

Playing against ultra-offensive opponents, the ball is often won back inside the first third, and in these situations, the forwards work in a very classic way, with one of them who drops back to act as a target player and the other one who stands along the opposition's defense line.

The second forward Mc Burnie has dropped very deep at the back of the opposition's pressure line to receive and save the possession; in this situation he contests the ball the holding midfielder, who is providing balance to his team's shape.



The left midfielder Fleck wins the ball and he passes back to the holding center teammate Norwood.



The tactical idea is to give the team time to spread out if the counter-attacks are not possible.

The center midfielder receives and Mc Burnie can act a link player to switch the side in front of him.

Sheffield striker invites the opposition midfielders toward the center to create space along the flanks for the wingbacks to run through.



Sheffield spreads out and the right wingback Baldock receives along the right flank



Outnumbering the opposition's attackers

As Sheffield condenses the center space of the middle third, to prevent the opposition from playing through passes, the wingbacks can counter the switches of side easily, shifting out wide. This shape is works well even when the opposition try long passes, as the forwards are outnumbered thanks to the 5 defenders and the holding midfielder.



In this example, the 3 opposition's forwards are moving off the ball along Sheffield's defense line in a 4 (+1) v 3 situation. The center midfielder Norwood is ready to double team the potential receiver; meanwhile, the right midfielder Lundstram is facing the ball carrier in a 1 v 1 duel and the left midfielder is shifting across the ball area, but he could counter his nearest opponent quickly.



The opposition's left forward receives and he can dribble toward the goal; United's back 5 retreat to cover the space toward the goal.



The opposition center forwards receives inside the penalty area but defenders and the center midfielders outnumber him in a 2 v 1 duel, with 3 more players as defensive support (the center midfielder Norwood is one of them). The left midfielder Fleck has drop back along the defensive line to overload the 18 y box and to double team the opponent in the center.



The only possible solution for the ball carrier is to play a back pass to keep the possession.

The opposition switches side of play from the left to the right thanks to the midfielder's support actions. United's defensive line shifts across and track the passes' direction.



The opposition right fullback receives in a center position and the left forward is on the upper corner of the penalty area. The potential receivers of a cross pass are outnumbered 2+2 v 2 in the middle of the 18 y box.



The center midfielder Norwood is positioned in the center and just out of the penalty area to support the marking action of the defenders; the same is doing the left midfielder Fleck, who is facing the ball carrier in a 1 v 1 duel, screening a through pass for the third opponent around the ball area and who allows the left wingback O'Connell to decide if to press the opponent inside the penalty area or the outer one. The center defender Egan and the right midfielder Lundstram overload the whole first third (8 + gk v 6).

The opposition right midfielder receives inside the box with his back to the goal and under pressure. The forwards in front of the goal are man-marked and the right midfielder Lundstram is moving toward the opposition midfielder near the edge of the penalty area.



Blades' defenders overload the ball area but they don't counter the ball carrier directly and he can turn and try to a cross pass toward the further goal's post.



The 2 v 1 duel becomes ineffective and the defenders are involved in a 2 v 2 duel in front of the goal. This is an example of a wrong defensive action against the ball carrier, but also a good way to understand how the outnumbering the opposition's forwards can help to fix a possible issue.

All the players who were overloading the penalty area track the ball's trajectory and the right center back Basham can control the ball and start a transition to attack phase.



The following footage shows how Sheffield overload the ball area, following the principle of outnumbering the opposition but keeping the basic 1-5-3-2 defensive shape.



- 4 of the back 5 defenders overload the opposition's forwards (4 v 3)
- The fifth defender is placed on the weak side to control potential runs off the ball of the opposite fullback (or winger)
- The 3 midfielders are placed in front of the back 4; 1 v 1 on the ball and the other one can counter the opponents in between the lines.
- The forwards have dropped deep and they are very closed to the defensive lines, and they are ready to play as target players if the ball is won back.

This picture is another example of outnumbering the opponents keeping the shape even if the teams are spread out through the field's width. 3 v 3 in the center, midfielders who can support them when countering the opposition forwards, midfielder who are positioned to screen the key passes and forwards who can support the midfielders by dropping back to double team the opposition's midfielders.



This shape is very useful for quick transitions to attack and counter-attacking phases; when Sheffield is able to win the ball, the wingbacks push up the field (furthermore the one along the weak side, who could be from immediate marking tasks) and create triangles and passing angles that the opponents find hard to press.



In this situation, the back 4 are saving the depth against 2 wide forwards and the 5th defender on the left. Stevens has pushed up to create numerical advantage against the opposition's center midfielders. The right midfielder Lundstram is placed in the weak zone to be the first to press the receiver of a potential switch of side.



Indeed, Lundstram intercepts the aerial pass and the first idea is to play toward the left wingback, who has space in front of him along the flank.



The forwards are ready to counter attack through the channels in a 2 v 2 duel against the opposition center backs.

The opposition right fullback is involved in a 1 v 2 situation. If he tracks Mc Burnie, the forward, Stevens the left wingback could receive and find available space to dribble the ball up in the field. If the opposition fullback moves toward the Stevens, without chances of a real duel, Mc Burnie has time and space along the channel to play 1 v 1 against the center back.



The fullback decides to push up and counter the ball carrier, who however has time and space on the ball to pass along the flank.



Mc Burnie can move off the ball freely and the opposition center back must shift wide, creating space at his back where the second forward Robinson can run onto, forcing the second center in a 1 v 1 duel.

United's forward can dribble the ball freely toward the opposition penalty box.



He can face involve the opposition center back in a 1 v 1 duel, after turning toward the right foot, having the chance to finish before the opposition midfielders can help the teammates.



And Mc Burnie shots on goal in the end.



Outnumbering the opposition's forwards and trying to leave a wingback free from defensive tasks is an usual shape that allow Sheffield to counter-attack quickly from the first third with few passing combinations.

Field's cover and team's balance

“We do a lot of work on the shape”; John Lundstram. These words by one of Chris Wilder’s loyal players explains very well the meaning of the 1-5-3-2 from attacking and defensive points of view.

The mid-block and the strikers acts passively, shifting across the field’s width, keeping the defensive shape compact.



In this example, the forwards are shifting wide to get closer to the opposition center back with the ball, the holding midfielder who could receive a pass and the right midfielder pushes up to be close to the fullback.



The fullback receives but he can only pass back again as the forwards has drop back to cover the passing lanes toward the center midfielders, United's left and right midfielder have pushed up, shaping a 4 v 2 duel in a square and the holding midfielder is providing balance at the back of the positional pressure area around the ball.



This shape forces the opposition to play through the block rather than over it, covers the gaps from the back five to the midfield's sector, and allow the center backs to cover the depth quite safely when contesting the opposition's long balls attempts.



The holding midfielder Norwood is on the ball over the wide midfielders, who shifts across following the ball passing directions.

The back 5 are quite narrow in the center, leaving only wide passing chances to the ball carriers.

This picture shows the perfect shifting movements of the midfielders, following the ball position.



The right midfielder Lundstram has pushed up to counter the ball carrier, the holding midfielder has taken his previous position marking an opponent at his back, and the opposite left midfielder Fleck has dropped back to act as holding midfielder in front of the back 5 to control the opponent in between the lines.



The same chain can be noticed on the other side; Fleck, the left midfielder is pushing up to counter the closest potential receiver in front of him, the holding midfielder Norwood is dropping deep to mark the man in between the lines and the opposite Lundstram is dropping back too to take the center holding midfielder position. The center forwards are screening the holding midfielder.

The shifting across movements are blocked if the opposition attacking phase is blocked and the ball carrier is forced to play backward.



At this stage, the opposition can't play through the block, and the center back can only play a forced long aerial pass that is quite easy to control for the back 4 (the 5th left wingback has pushed up to cover the potential short passing path along the flank.)



Following the previous sequence, the center midfielder, who has pushed up to counter the opposition holding midfielder, forces the opposition possession backward again



If a immediate pressure phase is not possible, the 3 midfielders keep the shape in the center of the middle third to prevent through passes toward the defensive line and leave the holding midfielder free to receive.



To cover the in behind passing path becomes the first aim of the phase off the ball.

The holding midfielder attempts a through pass inside the half way cycle to the teammate in between the lines.



As the center backs are involved in a 3 v 1 duel against the only opposition forward, the right defender Basham, who is not directly marking the striker can move out of the defensive line and counter the receiver while controlling the ball.



Overloading the center with the midfielders and the center backs leave spaces along the flanks that the wingbacks cover quickly against the wingers

Stevens, the left wingback counters the opposition winger, who has the possession after a rebound in the center; Egan, the center back and O’Connell retreat to cover the deep spaces, as the second opposition forward make a blind run shifting wide along the left flank. The holding midfielder Norwood drops back to support the defensive move of the center defender.



The opposition winger has time and space to pass forward along the flank, as Stevens is late to counter him in a 1 v 1 duel. The forward has also time and space to play a cross pass.



The center forward and the opposite winger are placed inside the 18 y box, but the chance to retreat and the right timing of their defensive movements allow them to be well positioned between the forwards and the goal to save. In the end, Egan, the center back, can header the ball away, anticipating the opponent.



When the team loses possession, but it's not positioned high the field, the first two defensive lines don't chase the ball too much, but they covers the back five.



Stevens has the ball and he has a clear passing path toward the left midfielder Fleck to play through, but he misses the chance in this situation.

Fleck can't control the ball properly and he is countered by the opposition holding midfielder



The 3 midfielders try to delay the opposition possession phase shifting across and retreating their positions, waiting for the back 5 to shape the defense line and for the forwards to drop back to get closer to the other 2 lines.



Lundstram, the right midfielder forces the opposition's ball carrier to dribble the ball wide first and then backward...
...Allowing the defensive line to move forward again



This way the forwards can place themselves between the center back and the midfield line and put pressure higher up in the field.



In this further sequence, the forwards, Sharpe and Mc Burnie are positioned between the opposition center backs and the center midfielders, and they are shadowing the passing paths toward these last.



The opposition left center back has the possession; Mc Burnie is screening the passing path to the holding midfielder, and the wider midfielders, Lundstram on the right and Fleck on the left, are close to their respective opponents. The second forward Sharpe could counter the opposition right center back and the second right midfielder.



The aim to force the opposition's direction of play out wide along one flank is very clear.

The ball carrier tries to switch the side and Sheffield's shape shifts across to track the ball's movements.



The objective of Blade's defensive phase is to prevent the opposition's fullback from playing through passes in the middle third and to force the possession phase backward when pressure actions are not possible, as in this situation, due to the distances among opponents and United's players.



The left midfielder Fleck shadows the passing path toward the opponent in between the lines, the center midfielder Norwood is marking the opposition's right midfielder and the forwards Sharpe and Mc Burnie have moved near the holding midfielder to counter him if he receives the ball. A potential solution for the ball carrier could be a long aerial pass at the back of the defense line, but the 5 players shape would cover the space and probably counter the opponents easily.

United's defensive shape forces the opponents to distribute the ball switching the side again, and the team can push up in the field while the ball is travelling. The pressure phase become active along the right flank.



- The opposition left fullback receives and United's right wingback Baldock pushes up quickly to press him.
- The right midfielder Lundstram provides cover at the back of the teammate.
- The right defender Basham pushes up to force the left winger backward.
- The center midfielder Norwood shifts wide behind the pressure's action area.
- The left midfielder Fleck is positioned in the center to be ready to cover the left weak side if the opposition can switch the play.
- The first center forward Mc Burnie gets closer to the opposition center back to counter him if he receives the ball.

The low deep block against possession minded teams

Playing against top PL teams, Sheffield United set up a safe low block, keeping the shape, pressing the opposition's receiver at the back and providing numerical advantage against potential receivers. The 1-5-3-2 shape becomes essential to counter technically gifted players and possession and attacking minded teams as Liverpool, for instance.



The opposition center back has the possession and he is free to play without pressure; the objectives of the defensive phase are to keep the shape, outnumber the opponents, press them from the back when they receive, create a strong side when pressure actions are not possible. United shapes a 4 v 3 situation in the right side of the middle third, a 4 v 3 duel at the back; the left wingback along the weak side Stevens is in a momentarily outnumbered 1 v 2 against the opposition right fullback and winger.



When it's not possible to outnumber the opponents, to equalize the duel becomes essential to force the opponents backward; the left wingback Stevens shifts wide as well as the left midfielder Fleck and the striker Sharpe to create a 3 v 3 duel along the defensive left side and to force the opposition backward.

When the opposition is forced to distribute switching the side of play, the 1-5-3-2 shape is maintained under the ball line, while the team is shifting across. There is no direct pressure against the opposition's defenders while moving the ball, but, again, to outnumber the potential receivers is crucial for the Blades.



The forwards, Sharpe and Mc Burnie, are screening the passing lanes to the holding midfielder in the center, the midfield trio (Fleck, Norwood and Lundstram) are covering the paths toward the opponent in between the lines, the defensive line shapes 1 v 1 duels against the opposition's forwards, but the positioning creates a 4 v 3 situation. The wingback who is positioned along the ball's side usually breaks the line of 5 (Baldock, in this picture) to press the opposition's wide receiver (fullback or winger).



This shape often forces the opponent to play long aerial balls that the back line of five can rebound quite easily, simply retreating back.

The deep shape helps Sheffield United to rebound the attacking second times of the ball of the opposition.



The left defender O'Connell is placed very deep in the first third and he kicks the ball away against the opposition forward, who is attacking a second aerial pass from the middle third.

Even when the opposition can play through the weak areas of the field (the holding midfielder receives at the back of United's forwards, in this picture), the potential receivers are outnumbered and pressurized at the back when they controls the ball.



The deep shape allows to create a 3 v 1 duel against the advanced midfielder of the opposition and a 3 v 2 in the center along the defensive line.

To prevent through passes in behind the defensive line, the receiver in the center are immediately under pressure.



As the advanced midfielder of the opposition receives, United's midfielders (Norwood and Lundstram) press him at the back, the right wingback Baldock shifts toward the center to mark the nearest potential receiver and the nearest forward to the ball drops back to help the pressure phase and to create a 4 v 3 duel around the ball.



The opposition is forced to play backward and the 1-5-3-2 formation is shaped under the ball line again, creating a 4 v 2 duel in the center and a 3+1 v 3 along the defensive line.

When one opponent dribbles the ball through the middle third, the main objective is to condense the center, keeping the shape to prevent through passes and to cover the depth when the opposition tries to play long balls.



The 3 midfielders create a 3 v 1 duel in the center and the three center backs have a 3 v 2 numerical advantage. 2 opponents are free to receive along the defensive left flank, as well as along the opposite side, but the wingbacks are positioned properly to shift wide quickly and to delay the attacking action.



To equalize the duel along the flank is crucial to prevent the opponents from playing cross passes; the left wingback Stevens and the left midfielder Fleck shifts wide to counter the opponents in a 2 v 2 duel. The 18 y is overload 4+2 v 3.

The deep defensive shape forces the opponents to play backward and to switch the side, but the the back 5 defensive lines is crucial to cover the opposition fullbacks or wingers. This sequence is also very interesting, as it shows a man-marking action in the defensive phase where United breaks the shape to track the opponents.



The right wingback Baldock pushes up to counter the opposition's left fullback, and the left midfielder tries to move off the ball into to space at his back; the right midfielder Lundstram tacks him to prevent the right center back Basham from shifting wide and leaving the direct opponent free from marking.



The deep and connected defensive movements force the opposition backward once again. In this picture is possible to notice the positional pressure of the forwards against the opposition's center backs and the holding midfielder Norwood, who pushes up in the field to press the opposition holding midfielder as a No.10.

Even when the opposition can invite United's pressure, widening the shape, the most dangerous passing lanes are covered and passing combinations along the flanks are allowed.



The opposition's right fullback has the possession, the center forward Sharpe shifts across to counter him, the left wingback Stevens pushes up to press the opposition's right midfielder, the left midfielder Fleck closes the passing lanes toward the center and the right midfielder Lundstram tracks the direct opponent, who tries to move as man in between the line.



The 4 v 2 duel that United shapes along the defensive left flank forces the opposition right midfielder to play a long ball at the back of the defensive line. Even when the shape is stretched, outnumber the opponents in the center remains an essential defensive principle of play.

This way, the spaces in front of the goal can be covered easily thanks to the 2 v 1 duel and the deep positioning of the center backs (Egan and O'Connell outnumber the opposition center forward 2 v 1).



Summary

When Sheffield United was competing to rise up the level of the club in League One and Championship, Chris Wilder was used to say: “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.”

The Blades’ coach essential characteristic is to be clever enough to understand that to play (always) on the opposition front foot is dangerous and risky against Premier League’s team. From this clear tactical issue, he has turned his formation into a more defensive and balanced 1-5-3-2 from the original 1-3-4-1-2 that included a No.10 behind the forwards.

He hasn’t left the idea of the “front foot”, as the holding midfielder is asked to press the direct opponent behind the forwards (the opposition’s holding midfielder) as a No.10; but this players becomes a screen in front of the back 5 and furthermore in front of the back 3 of the defensive line, when United has to save the defensive half and the first third of the field.

Wilder is very good at exploiting the strength’s points of his system of play (overloading the center) and to limit the weak points (along the flanks), asking his midfielders to shift wide from one side to the other and to his wingbacks to push up to prevent the opponents (fullbacks and wingers) from turning and dribbling up in the field.

The real essential factor of United’s defensive phase is to often force the opposition to play long aerial ball to find a finishing chance; but the back 3 and the deep shape usually counters these kind of attempts; the holding midfielder becomes crucial, as he is tasked to win the second times of the ball when possession can’t be recovered.

The defensive principles of play could be summarized as follow:

- Pressure in the final third with forwards against center backs and holding midfielder who pushes up as No.10 to counter the opposition midfielder.
- Midfield trio rotation to allow the holding midfielder to press as No.10 and space coverage of the wider midfielders.
- Keep the shape throughout the field width, creating strong sides around the ball near the sidelines with the forward, the wider midfielder and the wingback.
- Overload the center to prevent the opposition from playing through key passes and to force long aerial balls that the center backs can control easily.
- Outnumber the opponents without pressing the ball carriers when the distances do not allow safe pressure phases
- Shape a low block against possession and attacking minded teams, conceding free building up phases and covering the defensive half of the field.

“Just simplify the game” [...] “we’re not coaching gurus” [...] “I don’t think the game changes too much.” We could say that Chris Wilder has two faces: he is an innovator from attacking point of view (overlapping center backs) and he is very classic and concrete from defensive point of view, working on the shape of his 1-5-3-2 that allow the team to be ranked 7th in Premier League, facing the first campaign in 12 years.