

4-2-3-1

DEFENDING



**FORMATION
SERIES**

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Defending

By

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Introduction

The main benefit of the 4-2-3-1 formation is that the players are spread across the pitch proportionately and never too far away among themselves and from an opponent; this way they can close the spaces and limit the playing time to the possession team easily.

1-4-2-3-1 is the only basic formation among the most used on the field, but 1-3-3-1-3 (or 3-1), which in fact it's a potential attacking development, that shapes 4 lines of players "on paper"; if the opponents start the possession phase from the goalkeeper, they should overcome ideally four lines of pressing opponents before finishing or two compact lines of 4, thinking about the easiest wingers movements, retreating back along the flank, to shape the midfield line.

The center of the field is usually strong enough with the two center backs and central midfielders in front of the goal and the team can be confident to control the game, forcing the opposition possession toward the center, where numerical advantage is always ensured and leaving space down the sidelines

On the other side, the team can be weak down the flanks if the wingers don't track back, when the opposition is able to combine out wide; this is the reason why the first defensive idea about 1-4-2-3-1 is to call the wingers back along the center midfielders line and ask them not to leave the fullbacks alone in 1 v 1 duels. This situation becomes very dangerous if a counterattacking pass is received by one of the opposing wingers behind the pressure lines.

The wingers are the supposed to track back automatically, both if there are pressure chances for immediate possession recovery or not.



In this ideal situation, all the players are supposed to be positioned properly as their roles ask them, just after the loss of possession and wherever the ball has been wrongly passed, received or intercepted by the opposition.

The center forward and the advanced center midfielders seem to be only players who can press the opposition possession phase; balance and coverage are dominant in this idea.

This basic defending tactical idea is not really wrong, as it's useful to fix the main issue of this system of play, but it doesn't take into account the opposition's attacking actions; it is related to defensive positioning rather than to defending actions which may allow possession recoveries.

High and aggressive pressing oriented teams like Manchester City are usually shaped in this formation when the pressure phase inside the attacking and middle thirds failed and they are forced inside the final third against opponents with two forwards along the defense line. Manchester City opponents are shaped in a basic 1-3-4-2-1 formation, and usually one of the three attacking players moves wide and the second one move up beside the center forward, as in this picture.



The center backs, Otamendi and Laporte can control the first center forward, the opposite fullback on the left side, Zichenko, can control the second center forward. Man City midfielders, Rodri and De Bruyne, are much closed to the defense line.



The fullback near the ball, Walker, is not involved in a 1 v 1 duel thanks to the right winger, Mahrez, who retreats his position, force a back pass and press the receiver, directing the opposition possession phase backward.

The opposite left winger, Sterling, has made the same back run and despite being oriented toward the ball position, he could be able to cover the space along the flank, in case of a switch of side.

This second image is also interesting as the center advanced midfielder, David Silva, has retreated back in front of the holding midfielders, as second forward.

Wherever the second forward is placed, beside the center striker or beside him, the main movements are made by the wingers, who help the fullbacks not be involved in 1 v 1 duel near the ball and to be easily under pressure along the opposite flank.

The Premier League match against Brighton & Hove Albion (08/31/2019) was very interesting, because it showed how 1-4-2-3-1 can be liquid, with constant exchanges of positioning as holding midfielder and advance midfielder between De Bruyne and David Silva.

Another possible defense shape development of 1-4-2-3-1 is the 1-4-3-3; the advanced center midfielder drops back in between the holding midfielders.



The most important thing is to understand the reason why behind this movement; the opponents ensured a momentary numerical advantage near the ball (3 v 1) and Man City creates numerical advantages situations against the potential receivers, being positioned very narrow. (One of the center holding midfielders is pressing the up the pitch trying to force the opposition pressure backward).

1. 6 v 3 inside the defending half
2. 2 v 1 on the left (left fullback Zichenko and second holding midfielder Rodri)
3. 2 v 1 duels in the center (center backs and fullbacks: Otamendi + Walker and Laporte + Zichenko)
4. The right winger Mahrez is trying to screen a wide pass toward the flank
5. The center advanced midfielder, De Bruyne drops back to take the role of center holding midfielder to protect the back four.



This defending action is not only an established tactical development of the system of play, but it's a precise answer to the non-possession tactical situation of play. This situation can be considered a 1-4-2-2 also, but the right winger, Mahrez, is ready to take the role of third midfielder on the right side of the momentary holding midfielder.

We may also think about the possible shape inside the first third, with the advance center midfielder who drops back between the center midfielders or who covers a space in the middle if one teammate has shifted wide, shaping a strong defensive 1-4-5-1.



Again, there is a precise tactical reason behind this Man City defense shape; the opponents, Liverpool, asks both fullbacks too push up during possession phases and three forwards are always positioned along the opposition defense. The back four must control the opposition attacker and none of them can move forward. The 4 v 3 numerical advantage is not huge also.

The main principle of play for Pep Guardiola is to defend running forward and, as in this situation is not possible, Man City tries not to lose yards on the field, screening any forward potential pass by the ball carrier. The only possible pass for Liverpool is received among 3 center midfielders (De Bruyne, Rodri and David Silva) and the center forward (Aguero).

Liverpool places a line of 5 players in the middle third; Man City wingers (Bernardo Silva and Sterling) control the opposition fullbacks and the only way to be sure of numerical advantage in the center is to ask the advanced midfielder (David Silva) to drop back and cover the space on the right of the midfield trio, as one of the holding midfielders (Rodri) has dropped a bit deeper to screen center passing paths. This way a 6 v 5 duel is created in the middle third, thanks to the center forward, who drops back to overload the center and the ball area.



Here again, the 1-4-5-1 is not an automatic tactical solution, but an answer to the tactical situation.

The real question about the reason why 1-4-2-3-1 should be chosen as system of play, from a defensive point of view, finds its answers in the philosophic principles of play that Juan Manuel Lillo told us in the middle of the '90s, talking about this formation shape: “To ensure high pressure, thanks to 4 advanced players and to regain the ball as soon as possible in case of loss of possession, providing center defensive cover thanks to the 2 holding midfielders”... (both if they are considered double pivots, holding midfielder and advanced play maker or two box to box players; it’s only a matter of where and how they cover the center and when and how they press in the middle third)... “And being safe at the back because of 5 players, even if one of the fullbacks has pushed forward.”

[...] "It was the most symmetrical way I could find of playing with four forwards. One of the great advantages is that having the forwards high allows you to play the midfield high and the defense high, so everybody benefits". These last words give us the idea of the main defense principle behind the 1-4-2-3-1: stay positioned high on the field or as high as possible thanks to aggressive pressure as implementation of the transition to defend phase.

This idea requires fast and disciplined attackers (the front four first of all) to press the opposition defense line while building up from the back, to track back to support the defense phase (or pressure actions) of the midfielders if the first pressure phase is overcome; the center players (center backs and center midfielders) must provide coverage and balance.

We may now think that it’s possible to divide the team into two parts; 4 (3+1) attacking player and 7 defending players (1-4-2); but this would be true only “on paper”, just like the wingers retreating back and the advanced midfielder dropping back into the midfield line.

These are shapes that can be obviously found on the field, as we just analyzed in the first pages, but they are consequences of the situations of play, not tactical ideas; as Juan Manuel Lillo was used to say, the idea behind the 1-4-2-3-1 system of play is to create a pressing team, when it is involved in defending phases and a liquid team organization to recover the ball immediately after

its loss, wherever it's lost and whoever has lost the possession.

With fast forwards up front, the team may decide to press deep in the opposition's half in an attempt to win the ball back further up the pitch. By shifting across the field quickly they can force the opponents into a precise area, as in the following example, or technical mistakes.



The initial 4 v 5+gk duel is reduced to a 3 v 3 duel around the ball, making the building up phase very hard to carry out.

The opposition possession phase is forced deep toward the right side of the own box and a 3 v 3 duel is created to put all the nearest passing options under aggressive pressure.



Alternatively, the three advanced midfielders may drop back and form line of five (3+2) across the upper part of the middle third, that reverts to a 4-5-1 inside the lower area of the middle third, which is both solid in the center and out wide, as we shown in the prior example of Manchester City – Liverpool Community Shield match.



In this situation, the opposition has been able to play out despite the pressure inside the first third; but the reaction has been immediate, as the 3 advanced midfielders have tracked the opponents to be positioned between the first line of possession players and any further potential forward passing path.

The right winger Sterling is playing 1 v 1 against the ball carrier, the advanced center midfielder (David Silva here) can press the nearest inside passing option, which is anyway very difficult to play, as the ball carrier is turned toward the side line, and the right winger Mahrez can counter the third opponent of the line quickly. Never the less the center forward could double team these potential receivers, retreating back or counter attack quickly in case of ball recovery.

Behind this first pressure line, the center holding midfielders are screening forward ground passes, shifting across the left defending flank (Rodri and De Bruyne may intercept any diagonal pass attempt toward the opposition center midfielders, and the left fullback Zichenko is closing the space along the side line.

Here we can find two kinds of 3 v 3 duels:

1. The advanced midfielders are pressing the opposition ball carrier and the passing options that could open the spaces along the opposite side
2. The holding midfielders and the left fullback are closing the nearest potential forward passing options, to prevent the opponents from playing through the middle third.

A long areal pass is forced along the right flank as result of the pressure of the three advanced midfielders and of the holding center midfielders' space closure behind them.

Depth defense is very easy, as none of the opposition attackers could be placed high, trying to help the teammate in possession.



The left center back Laporte can close the receiver very wide on the right flank and win the ball back.

This is basically what Juan Manuel Lillo was looking for, by my side; try the hardest to recover the possession high on the field, and he thought that 1-4-2-3-1 was the best system of play to do it, but if it's not possible, try to recover the ball in a manner that the biggest number of players of the team can stay placed high to attack again very quickly.

Basic principles of play and players tasks without the ball

Pressure – When possession is lost, the nearest player(s) try to regain the ball or to delay the opposition attack, applying pressure on the ball; the farther player(s) help this action by making recovery runs to deny the opponents the chance to play forward quickly.

Pressure phase can be divided into 3 different actions:

- **Counter-pressing:** it is the pressure around the ball during the transitions to defend phase of play, just after the loss of possession, to try to force the opposition toward a specific area, to win the ball back as soon as possible. Counter-pressing is totally on the opposite side of system of play, because it depends only from the situation of play (when the possession is lost) and from the area where the ball is lost. It's not strictly related to players' roles, but only to their positions on the field at the moment of loss of possession.



As instance, Bernardo Silva tries to dribble inside the box from the left side of the opposition box, as inverted winger, to win a 1 v 1 duel before finishing.



But he is double teamed inside the box and covered on his left foot; this way, he can't shoot and loses the possession.

The right winger Sterling is positioned inside the box, as well as Aguero (CF), Rodri, one of the holding midfielders and Zichenko, the left fullback. Gundogan, the second holding midfielder is just out of the penalty area.

If we would think about the defensive phase as just a players' role relation and change of positions on the field, we should say that Manchester City is catch totally unbalanced in the middle third and the back and that the team is out of shape.

But if we think about the line of five attacking player that City usually shapes inside the opposition first third, we realize that the situation is not like it seems.



As the opponent in possession tries to dribble the ball up the field, Gundogan, the balance player behind the ball area presses him immediately, while Bernardo Silva, who lost the possession, is retreating back and Rodri, who recovers the position, put him under immediate pressure as well,

creating a 3 v 1 duel near the ball. De Bruyne is running back from the right attacking deep flank.

The left winger Sterling is running back to cover Zichenko position as an opponent is acting as potential option along the defending left flank, Laporte is also running back to cover the depth and double team him if he receive and Walker is running back along the center-right middle third to cover the potential space that could be available if the opponent on the right defending flanks would receive.



The ball carrier is forced to play backward and Tottenham hasn't been able to move up the pitch because of this aggressive pressure and the consequent risk of loss of possession inside the first third, and the defensive 1-4-1-4 has been maintained at the back.

Manchester City can stay positioned high on the field; the opposition must be positioned backward and its defending shape has been broken also, as the left winger has pushed a little higher, delaying the back run to cover the gap that has been created inside the left defending side.



The receiver of the back pass, the opposition left fullback, is immediately under pressure again, thanks to De Bruyne's diagonal run from the right deep attacking flank and he can only play forward with a one touch pass trying to exploit the space on the left side.



The left winger is too far away and too much on late to receive and Rodri can intercept the ball, shifting wide from the center; Man City can now exploit the gap to counter attack.

The opposition defense is strongly shape in the middle of the first third, but weak along the left side, as De Bruyne may attack the direct opponent in a 1 v 1 duel, if he receives.

De Bruyne receives and he can turn toward the goal, as Bernardo Silva overlaps, inviting the opposition left fullback to track him.



The opposition defense is again forced inside the 18 y box, and the ball carrier can dribble the ball, facing the goal.



- **Aggressive pressure:** it is the pressure phase of the defending team, when the opposition has already made the possession safe, to force the direction of play backward or sideward, denying time and space and, if possible, to win the ball back directly or after a wrong choice of an opponent.

These are two different situations of play, but where the defending team pressure has the same goal.

1. Manchester City is shaped in a classic 3-1 advanced formation and the players are involved in a numerical disadvantage situation (5+gk v 4). Aguero, as center forward, is pressing the opposition ball carrier backward toward the goalkeeper; the back three are not countering the opponents directly to avoid gaps and passing lanes opening. Easy but not dangerous sideways passing options are given to the opposition ball carrier; otherwise, they are screening all the forward passing lanes.

Aguero is forcing the ball carrier backward, the left winger Sterling can attack the right center back if he receives, as well as, the right winger Mahrez can counter the left center back on the other side. The center advanced midfielder is acting a balance player behind them and he may counter the opposition holding midfielder in the center and the advanced one at his left.



2. In this second example the defense pressure formation of Citizens has been broken, as the opposition has been able to overcome the first line that was shaped by Aguero and Zichenko, who pushed up during the possession phase.

The main objective for the defending team is to prevent the opponents from playing forward; for this reason the ball area around the ball carrier is overload, giving him the chance for a wide pass toward the left. Mahrez shifts across from the right to press the ball carrier, Sterling, David Silva and Rodri are forcing him toward the pressing teammate, screening any passing option toward the defending left side.

The direction of the opposition possession is then forced toward a specific area of the field through a combination of individual pressure and closure of passing lanes.



- Positional pressure:** basically it is the closure of passing lanes to the opposition to force mistakes or direct the attacking phase toward a specific area of the field, where a defense numerical advantage can be exploited to put aggressive pressure. In this case, as the definition suggests, the positions of the players on the field is very important to ensure coverage and balance to not create gaps into the defense shape. This is the perfect situation to put into practice Juanma Lillo second dogma, “Positional Play” from a defensive point of view; and, by my side, it’s the reason why the 1-4-3-2-1 can really exploit the defense phase of the front four and the balance actions of the holding center midfielders.



The opposition goalkeeper passes the ball to the right center back inside the box, the receiver is immediately screened by the left winger Sterling and Aguero is moving to cover the nearest passing lanes toward the center and the defending left side; a first 2 v 2 is created around the ball. Mahrez on the right, De Bruyne in the center and David Silva on the left, behind the pressing teammate are closing any further passing lanes and the nearest receivers could be under fast pressure. A 3 v 3 general duel is created at the back of the pressure zone, as well as a potential 3 v 2 against the nearest opposition passing options.



As one opponent drops back to receive between the pressure lane, the ball area is condensed, exploiting the numerical advantage in the area; a front and back 2 v 1 duel is created against the opposition receiver (David Silva and Rodri), Sterling could press the wide passing option on the left, Mahrez on the right, De Bruyne in the center and Aguero, who is placed beside the first possible receiver of a following pass, are forcing the opposition possession toward the receiver, who is going to be under pressure.

A general 6 v 7 situation can be recognized inside the opposition half, but a 6 v 2 duel is created around the ball.

Delay – The defender(s) forces the attacking team to slow down the rhythm so that the defense phase can be organized, if it's not possible an immediate recovery of the possession. It's very important to not being overcome easily in this phase, as the time for the team to organize the defense shape is shortened. The team without possession is supposed to be a bit closer to the own goal, inside the defending half (back line, the less) and a compact positioning is absolutely needed to prevent the opposition from being dangerous.

In this example, David Silva attempts a long pass toward Aguero and behind the opposition defense line and Sterling moves forward to be a support for the center striker. Man City is positioned to make the field quite big, with Zichenko providing width on the left and Mahrez on the right flank.



At this point of Man City possession phases, the team is always positioned wide on the field, but the main differences are the wrong long pass and the missing passing combinations that usually allow to overload the center spaces; when the opposition defender controls the ball, there are gaps that could be exploited among the City players and sectors' lines.



The opposition has a huge numerical advantage near the ball and the immediate Aguero and Sterling pressure actions against the ball carrier can't be effective; a 1+3 v 2 can be noticed very well in the image up here.

The center advance midfielder De Bruyne and the right winger Mahrez are too far away to help the pressure phase.

The center holding midfielders have the same issue, as they are too backward to make the pitch smaller and to shorten the space running forward.

De Bruyne and Mahrez can recognize the situation immediately and they start to retreat their positions, as the opposition second ball carrier can receive, turn and dribble forward.



When the attacking move of the opposition arrives in the middle third, David Silva's individual pressure phase is very important, as it allows Man City to shape the back four line properly, creating numerical advantage at the back (3+2 v 2 and De Bruyne who is retreating back) and not too deep toward the goal, delaying the rhythm of the ball carrier and forcing him backward



The advanced midfielder David Silva delays the opposition possession, while the holding midfielders position themselves in front of the back four.

The center backs, Otamendi and Laporte can double team the center forward, the left holding midfielder can control the right attacker together with the left fullback Zichenko and the right fullback Walker has the time to cover the space in front of the third opponents on the right.

The 1 v 1 against the ball carrier allowed Man City to get narrow at the back, to create safe 2 v 1 duels along the last defending lines and a general numerical advantage (6 v 3) behind the ball line.

This is another point of strength for 1-4-2-3-1; even when one fullback is out of position, when one of the center midfielder has pushed up during the possession phases, when the team loses the ball in the middle third, there are often 3+1 defending players who can provide balance at the back, allowing the teammate to retreat back and shape the defense formation in a correct manner and quickly enough.

Note: it's important to understand that Guardiola's Man City positioned the player in a different way when the possession phase is being developed inside the final third, when pressure and defensive positional play are fundamental.

Eventually the opposition is forced to play backward and to build up from the back again, as the only really unmarked teammate is the left wide winger along the opposite side.

As Aguero and Sterling are ready to press the ball carrier, he passes back again quickly to the center backs to answer to the pressure trace against him.



In this situation, Manchester City has lost yards on the field, being forced to retreat the positions backward, but the defensive shape ensures safety and control of the space and of the opponents at the back.



The opposition center backs can play freely but all the receivers of a forward pass are potentially under pressure; Aguero is tracking the holding midfielder, the right winger Mahrez can press the left fullback easily, David Silva is marking the second midfielder behind Aguero and Sterling can retreat back few yards to counter the opposition right fullback.

This sequence is a good example of delay action, when counter-pressing is not immediately possible and the pressure phase is not effective.

Depth – The immediate organization behind the pressuring defender(s), where all the other predetermined players should recover into defensive positions to support the teammates in case they are beaten. This is what is called "providing defensive cover".



In this first example, Manchester City opposition has been able to build up from the back, overcoming the pressure of the advanced midfielder and of the forward (De Bruyne and Aguerro); the depth is covered inside the lower part of the final third, creating numerical advantage behind them as follow:

1. The right winger Mahrez counters the opposition left wingback, screening any passing path toward the center and trying to force him down the wing
2. The center midfielders Rodri and David Silva cover the opposition holding midfielder in a 2 v 1 duel that closes any potential movement off the ball
3. The left advanced midfielder Sterling can track the second center midfielder easily



This second situation is about depth coverage behind a 1 v 1 duel area in the middle third:

1. Mahrez is countering 1 v 1 the opposition ball carrier along the middle third line on the right wing
2. Center forward Aguero has dropped back along the three advanced midfielders, David Silva and Sterling are marking 1 v 1 the nearest opponents, as well as Aguero may put pressure against the nearest passing option for the ball carrier
3. The center holding midfielders (De Bruyne and Rodri) are placed behind this “pressure line” and they are covering the back four (the right back Walker is out of the picture) shaping 1-4-2-4
4. The depth coverage in this situation is provided by center midfielders, who are preventing the opposition from playing through the center and toward the back line
5. The defending lines are very narrow to save the center depth on the field, leaving space along the flanks.



This third picture that is taken from last Manchester City – Liverpool, is about depth shows the coverage of the box and of the goal space to defend an open areal ball:

1. The back four line is very narrow on the left side and very close to the ball position
2. One center back (Otamendi) is looking for the ball, trying to anticipate the opposition attacker together with the holding midfielder Rodri and the second one moves to cover the depth space behind him inside the box; Sanè, who is positioned as second holding midfielder is very close to the teammate and he can support his action quickly
3. Body positioning of the three advanced midfielders (Bernardo Silva on the right, De Bruyne in the center of the space and David Silva on the left), who are retreating back toward the ball and teammates can be useful to save any deep passing attempt.
4. In case of Liverpool possession would be very difficult to find a path toward the goal and the only possible solution would be to switch the side or to play back to the center midfielder.

Balance – When the team overloads the area of the ball, defenders away from this space or in the opposite side of field must position themselves to cover the spaces (central areas or weak sides) to prevent penetrating runs, where the opponents may receive a pass.

Following the previous image and the development of the situation, after depth coverage to save the areal ball, Man City shows us a team defending balance action to save the opposite side.

After winning possession, Bernardo Silva kicks the ball away to allow the team to advance on the field from the first third...



...but the advanced teammates are on late against the opposition back line that is positioned high on the field; Liverpool wins the possession back. De Bruyne attempts a forward pass, in behind the defense line for Sterling, but the pass is intercepted.



While pushing up the field, Man City starts to spread out the formation shape along the width of

the field to cover the opposite flank that is, as we just analyzed in “depth section”, one of two only possible solutions to keep possession.

The center backs (Stone and Otamendi) and the left fullback Zichenko stop their forward run not to open chances for through or long passes in behind.

The middle line slows down the rhythm, staying positioned close to the back line; Sanè, David Silva, Rodri and Bernardo Silva shape a 1-4-4-2 formation is then shaped in the final third together with the back line and the last two advanced midfielders.

This way, Man City remains compact at the back, confirming once again as balance and compactness are very linked principles of play.

The only space available for the opposition to develop the possession phase is along a weak area far away from the box and the goal.

Liverpool switches the side as quickly as possible on the left inside the middle third and the fullback is free to receive wide.



Man City increases its spreading out action, as Bernardo Silva is very fast at covering the space along the right flank, De Bruyne and David Silva can double team the opposition holding midfielder and Sanè is on the nearest opponents on the opposite flank that was overload before. A 1-4-1-4-1 defense shape is then created, where the holding midfielder covers the center backs.



The right fullback Walker and the right center back Stone track the run off the ball of the left winger, Rodri tracks the center forwards who drops back and the left center back Otamendi and the left fullback Zichenko can mark the right winger and cover the space in front of him.

The only option for the fullback in possession is to dribble up the field, but the risk would be to find all the passing options closed.

Liverpool is forced to play out from the back again in a low risk defense situation for Manchester City.



In this defending action, balance has multiple meanings:

1. Shift across the field to cover the weak side and force the opposition backward
2. Create numerical advantage situations against the advanced opposition passing options
3. Save the 18 y box and the goal as far away as possible

As we have already found out, balance means to cover the space of the defense shape from this side of the pressure area.

This second sequence, where balance actions are very clear, is very interesting because it starts from a compact defense of the depth situations at the back.

Manchester City is shaped in a very narrow 1-4-2-3-1 inside the right final third.

- Otamendi and Laporte are the center backs, Walker and Zichenko the right and left fullbacks
- Rodri and David Silva act as center holding midfielders
- Sterling on the left, De Bruyne in the center, Mahrez on the right are the advanced midfielders
- Aguero is the center forward.



The ball has been kicked out from the condensed area of the field where defenders and lower midfielders have the numerical advantage (6 v 2), but the advanced midfielders and the center forward are involved in multiple 1 v 1 duels (4 v 4).

The narrow positioning of City defense shape ensure a general numerical advantage throughout the right side of the own half field; an 8 v 6 duel can be noticed inside the lower right quarter of the field.

Mahrez can mark the nearest potential receiver of the throw-in, left fullback Zichenko and left winger Sterling can press their opponents easily and with a short move, Rodri can press the third opposition attacker in front of him; the only opposition free player is turned toward his own goal and he can be pressed by De Bruyne if he receives.



The opposition throws the ball in passing backward, to switch the side quickly on the right attacking flank, to play out from the overload area.



The center forward Agüero forces the opposition center back to pass to the second one (or goalkeeper could have been another potential solution for the ball carrier); meanwhile, Man City runs up through the field quickly.

De Bruyne is starting to shift across the field to act as second pressing player.



The opposition center backs invite the pressure of the Citizens, allowing them to run up the field and to place six players inside the attacking half



De Bruyne becomes the most advanced player of the team, Aguero is on the right shifting across, David Silva and Sterling are running forward too, at the back of the pressing teammates to provide balance at a first stage.

Behind them Mahrez and Rodri are providing balance as well in the middle third.



Aguero, De Bruyne and Sterling are placed high in a 3 v 3 duel in front of the opposition box, David Silva is right behind them and he tracks the long pass toward the left defending side, providing balance along the left defending flank.

Rodri is placed in the center and Mahrez on the center right to provide balance again. The opposition center back is forced to play out wide quickly, creating an open ball situation with an aerial pass.



Even if the possession is not recovered, the opposition has lost yards on the field and City could advance thanks to combination of pressure and coverage inside the attacking half between middle third and attacking lines.

Compactness – While the defending team is retreating back toward the goal to organize the defense phase, time and space for the opponent must be limited, concentrating their defense all around the area of the ball. Defenders also recover centrally towards their goal in order to limit the opponents' ability to directly attack the goal.



In this example, De Bruyne attempts a pass in behind the opposition midfield line on the run of Gundogan, who is trying to exploit the wrong body positioning of the center right midfielder (the back four defense line is place just inside the 18 y box)...



...the right fullback is able to anticipate Gundogan and he can play forward to launch a fast transition to attack.



The left fullback Zichenko, the holding midfielder Rodri and the inverted fullback Walker ensure compactness at the back of Man City usual attacking line of five



In this situation, Zichenko attempts to counter the ball carrier with a wrong timing and making a wrong tactical choice, as he frees the direct opponent in the 1+1 v 2 duel (himself + Rodri, who is retreating to track the counter attacking move; a forward pass becomes very easy then.



A space along the flank is created for the receiver, who can dribble the ball up, but Manchester City center backs (Laporte and Otamendi) are properly positioned to recover the space and to shift wide toward him.

The prior Manchester City attacking line of five forced the opposition to place seven players inside the first third and this makes the counter attacking attempt isolated.



Laporte is able to counter the ball carrier, exploiting the defending action of Rodri, who forced him along the sideline. Otamendi cover the depth and Walker is tracking the run of the third opposition attacker.



The counter attacking move is then easily blocked, kicking the ball out of play.

Control and Restraint – The players should pay attention to play under control, when challenging for the ball, to not make poorly timed or off-balanced attempts; otherwise, they should restrain from tackling until they are sure to recover the possession.



In this situation, Aguero is pressing the opposition ball carrier inside the box and Sterling is pushing high to counter the nearest passing option out wide, as Aguero is also screening the forward option out of the box. Bernardo Silva, the right winger, is shifting across the center to force the potential direction of play of the opponent in front of him.

Gundogan realizes he has to cover the space behind the pressure area and he doesn't push higher, so he can control the space behind the pressure and ball area.



The attacking move is countered directly by the left fullback Zichenko, while the opponent is trying to control an aerial pass; Rodri is tracking his direct opponent and Otamendi and Walker ensure numerical advantage against the opposition center forward.

The opposition move is controlled through numerical advantage around the ball and against the center forward.



Despite the opposition is able to attempt to play forward again, Rodri is man marking the potential ball carrier, Laporte is closing the space down the wing and Otamendi is checking the center forward; Gundogan and Zichenko are retreating their positions to help the pressure phase.

In this second example Manchester City is acting positional pressure against the opposition building up from the back sequence.



De Bruyne acts as center forward and Sterling on the left, Aguero, who exchanged his position with the center advanced midfielder, in the center and Bernardo Silva on the right are screening the chances to play up the field for the ball carrier.



The opposition fullback is forced to receive a difficult wide pass and to pass forward quickly because of Bernardo Silva pressure; Rodri, the holding midfielder is retreating a little back to check the area behind the pressure and ball area.



Thanks to this backward movement, he can intercept the pass toward the opposition second striker...



...and City can win the possession back.

Juventus 2016-2017 case analysis: the art of the 1-4-2-3-1 defense phase

The turning point of the 2016-2017 season for Juventus was the introduction of the 1-4-2-3-1 system of play that allowed lining up all the attacking power of the squad and to find the best defending solutions, high pressure with balance, compactness and restraint at the back.

Juventus get close to win the treble that season, being champions of Italian Serie A and Italian National Cup and runner up of the Champions League final against Real Madrid, losing 4 – 1, but only in the second half.

This was the starting eleven of the match against Lazio, when Juventus was shaped with this system of play for the first time in the season.



Four at the back in front of Buffon, Pjanic and Khedira as center holding midfielders (and play makers when the team was in possession), Cuadrado and Mandzukic as wingers inside and outside the half spaces, Dybala as second forward behind the only striker, Higuain.



The main principle of play without possession was to ask Dyabala and Higuain to put high oriented pressure against the opposition low possession phase; in this first example the possession was forced toward the left, where Juventus had numerical equality (Lichesteiner would had been involved in a 2 v 1 on the right, in case of an opposition switch of side).



The opposition player who received wide was then forced backward by Mandzukic; Dybala was ready to press the nearest passing options and Khedira provided balance at the back of the ball area, as well as Pjanic and Cuadrado shifted across the center to cover the space in case of switches of side attempts. Asamoah marked 1 v 1 Lazio's right winger in case of long pass down the flank.

In this second example Higuain and Dybala forced the opposition building up phase toward the defending right side thanks to their body positioning against the right center back and the holding midfielders.



Higuain was ready to press the center back and Dybala was positioned in front of the holding midfielders, both turned toward the defending right side of the final third; for this reason the goalkeeper was forced to pass the ball to the left center back, the only one who could receive being unmarked.



Lazio played out on the left flank and Dybala, together with Cuadrado forced the opposition ball carrier to play even wider, screening the only passing option toward the center. The left fullback received free but with few options to play forward efficiently to progress the move.

The pressure phase was not considered a tool to win the ball back high against the opposition building up from the back, but to force the opposition possession toward a specific wide area, where then Juventus pressed with more rhythm.

The main goals were not to concede center passing options in between the lines and then counter attack in case of ball recovery while the opponents were pushing up the field, making their transition to defend phase more complicated.



Lazio left fullback passed along the flank, but his teammate was turned backward in relation to the final third and he was closed by Lichsteiner and potentially double teamed by Cuadrado, without any chance to play forward.



As we already analyzed, even in this situation, Pjanic and Khedira provided balance and coverage of the center spaces, Dybala and Higuain were screening the passing options toward the center, preventing a potential switch of side.

Looking at the names of the starting eleven, we may think that it was an attacking minded 1-4-2-3-1; instead, it was a defending system to allow lining up all the attacking power that Juventus could show that season.

If we compare that formation with Mourinho's Internazionale Milan treble winner (2009 – 2010), we can find a lot of similarities:

1. High and aggressive pressure only if the ball was lost in the final third
2. Pressure to force the opposition possession, rather than to win the ball back quickly
3. Aggressive pressure after possession direction forced wide in the middle third
4. Back four blocked at the back if the possession was lost in the middle third (A little difference can be found about the fullbacks: Internazionale Milan had one more attacking minded fullback on the right, Maicon, rather on the left. On the other side Juventus was more flexible with Asamoah and Alex Sandro on the left and Daniel Alves on the right)
5. Two narrow lines of 4 at the back when the first third had to be defended.
6. Two holding midfielders in front of the defense line, one more defensive oriented (Khedira as Cambiasso) and the second one more "possession oriented" (Pjanic alike Thiago Motta).
7. No.10 free to play all over the final third and as a play maker as well
8. Wingers as fullback during phases without the ball (Mandzukic and Eto'o were alike along the left flank).
9. Center striker as the first option to finish the moves: Higuain had a great season like Milito for Inter who scored 35 times in 47 played matches in 2009/2010 season. Higuain scored 32 times in 55 played matches that season (having also important tasks in non-possession and building up phases), the second best one after the record Serie A 2015/2016 season as Napoli striker with 38 goals in 42 played matches).

The final third was saved shaping two narrow lines of four players, thanks to the classic back runs of the right and left wingers and overloading the ball area.



A 3 v 1 duel was created against the opposition ball carrier at the corner of the 18 y box to force him wide and away from the goal space in this sequence. Chiellini closed the space toward the goal, Bonucci double teamed him and Lichsteiner tripled the mark on him to prevent any shooting attempt.

Cuadrado was retreating the position to shape the second defense line of four and to create numerical advantage around the ball (3 v 2)



Lazio's forward was able to keep the possession and to pass backward; anyway the possession phase had been sent away from the goal

A 4 v 1 duel saved the center space of the 18 y box in front of the goalkeeper.

The opposition possession was sent backward, but the numerical advantage on the ball was maintained.



A 4 v 2 duel was shaped near the ball carrier, with one pressing player (Lichsteiner), the right center back track the nearest opposition run off the ball and right winger and holding midfielder closed the passing lane toward the center of the field. The only possible and safe pass was to play backward again.



The ball carrier attempted to dribble inside but the space was closed by the right winger Cuadrado and, again, all the center passing options were closed and screened by the second forward Dybala and the defense was protected by the center holding midfielder.



The ball carrier was then forced to pass backward to the left fullback, who was forced to play quickly because of the pressure of Cuadrado.



In this sequence, Cuadrado pushed up to press and Mandzukic dropped back to act as third midfielder, shaping a momentary 1-4-3-3 formation with very narrow lines.

Every opponent was double teamed or potentially under the pressure of two Juventus players:

1. Bonucci and Khedira pressed the nearest passing option in front of the ball carrier
2. Chiellini and Pjanic pressed the center forward
3. Dybala screened the center holding midfielder and Higuain could have double team him
4. Asamoah and Mandzukic covered the opposite side.

Juventus was spread out through the width of the field to mark the opponents and to cover the space around them; no strong or weak sides were created, but marking the opponents was the first idea. The defending strong side was usually created in case of chances to close the opponents down the wings, but never during open ball situations like this one.

The momentary 1-4-3-3 was created by Cuadrado, who pushed up to press the ball carrier and by Mandzukic, who shifted across the center to get narrow to the holding midfielders, but the basic idea was always to defend the first third with the 1-4-4-2.

As a matter of fact, as the ball was played in the center just few seconds after, the line of four in front of the back line was immediately restored, creating a 4 + 1 v 3 situation, as Dybala dropped deeper to help the midfield line



The back four were protecting the box through zonal defense, with the fullbacks (Lichsteiner on the right and Asamoah on the left) who were positioned diagonally in relation with the wider opponents.

The middle line was very narrow and the center holding midfielders (Khedira and Pjanic) were closing the space against the ball carrier to prevent him from passing or dribbling in behind and forcing him to play backward.

Cuadrado was shifting across the center, as well as Mandzukic on the left, who was ready to push up to close the space and press the back receiver, to prevent him from dribbling up the field.



The 9 v 5 defense numerical advantage of the prior situation forced Lazio to play backward again to save the possession and Juventus pushed up, breaking the lines to press again near the ball area.

But as the ball was played in the final third again, two four defending lines were shaped again.



Lichesteiner was involved in a 1 v 1 duel against the ball carrier, Cuadrado and Khedira were ready to save the depth behind the teammate and all the other Juventus player were protecting the 18 y box through zonal defending. A huge numerical advantage in the first third was ensured, as in the previous situation.



Despite this, Lazio was able to switch the side, but positioning of Juventus defending lines throughout the first third that did not created real strong and weak sides allowed a quick overload of the left flank first and of the left flank.

Juventus faced this switch of side with a 2 v 2 duel along the 18 y box border line (Chiellini against the center forward and Asamoah against the right wingback) at the beginning and two Lazio's players were free to receive, as Khedira was pressing the ball carrier together with

Dybala and Pjanic and Mandzukic were too far from the opponents on the center right, being very close to the center back and the fullback.

Juventus defense tactical idea took the players to read this pass as a possible chance to finish the move for Lazio.

As just stated, as neither a strong side nor weak sides were usually created against opposition distribution, the switch of side were covered quickly, preventing Lazio from exploit the attacking right flank.



The defense line shifted wider toward the defending left side, as well as the midfield line; Mandzukic was positioned as left winger and Asamoah moved toward the wider opponent on the sideline.

The left center back Chiellini turned to position his body toward the left and to shadow the passing path toward the center forward, as well as the right center back Bonucci moved back to be ready to counter him inside the box.

Pjanic moved fast toward the ball area and Khedira was running back to balance the center space in the first third that was opened by Pjanic.



A 6 v 5 numerical advantage was now created to prevent Lazio from finishing the attacking move. Juventus adapted the defending shape and actions as follow:

1. A 2 v 1 duel against the most advanced opponent (Chiellini and Asamoah)
2. Pressure against the ball carrier to force him sideways (Dybala)
3. Mandzukic was ready to counter the easiest passing option on the right
4. Pjanic was screening any further passing option in behind toward the center forward, who tried to attack the defense at the back, taking advantage of the momentary non-aligned Juventus defense.

A potential attacking phase for the opposition was limited to another distribution situation of the possession phase.

Juventus was really placed high and pressed aggressively only in the final third to win second times of the ball and wandering balls after opposition rebounds



In this example, Pjanic founds himself attempting a cross pass form the right flank after an attacking move development; Cuadrado, the right winger and Lichstiner, the right fullback were placed behind him to support the move and also to preventively ensure balance behind the ball line. Cuadrado could had been a safer option, to keep the possession and to create a clear scoring chance.

Lazio's defense was properly placed with zonal defense to save the goal inside the 18 y box, with a huge numerical advantage against Juventus forwards



The ball was rebounded out of the box and a 3 v 3 duel was created near the ball just out of the right corner of the Lazio's 18 y box; Cuadrado fought for the ball, but the opposition maintained the possession despite this pressure actions. Dybala, the center advanced midfielder get closer to the ball.



Pjanic also tried to win the ball back, retreating back, Lichsteiner tried to double team the ball carrier, to prevent him from playing forward, as Juventus was now placed very high on the field, with a line of three forwards (Mandzukic, Higuain and Cuadrado, from left to right).



This objective was reached thanks to the center back Bonucci, who pushed very high to follow the right fullback, to Dybala who covered the position of the right holding midfielder and Khedira, who shifted across to get closer to the ball area.

A high line of three was shaped behind the ball line.



Aggressive pressure action was taken against Lazio's left wingback, to force him backward (two lines of four can be noticed in the picture; the higher one that was spread out along the opposition defense line and the second one near the ball area...)



...The right center back Bonucci and one holding midfielder blocked the opposition possession in the end.

Aggressive pressure action was taken because of the high positioning of the team and to keep the opposition lines backward to prevent them from playing up the pitch.

The recovery of the ball was not the main objective of these high and strong pressure, but blocking the opposition from playing out when the space in the middle third could not be covered properly just after the loss of possession.

This sequence was another example of ball area overload, due to unbalanced team shape at the back of the ball area.



The opposition had the possession inside the first third and Juventus forced the direction backward thanks to aggressive pressure behind the ball line. Cuadrado pressed the ball carrier, Dybala could have pressed the nearest passing option, Pjanic was very high on the field, marking the closes forward passing option. The right fullback Lichsteiner ran back to provide balance.



Aggressive pressure was the best tactical choice due to overload of the ball area and the creation of a strong side along the right attacking flank.



Lazio left center back received, but the center forward Higuain prevented him from switching the side on the right, forcing him again toward the left side, where Juventus ensured numerical advantage (3 v 1 in front of the ball and 2 v 1 at the back thanks to Pjanic and Lichsteiner).



The development of the defensive move took Juventus to press deep (Higuain against the ball carrier, Cuadrado potentially again the opposition left wing back, Dybala, who could pressed both the opponents at his left or right sides).

Lichsteiner and Pjanic ensured balance at the back of the ball area along the right side of the final third.

Again, the opposition possession was prevented from being developed forward by aggressive pressure.

When Juventus lost the possession being shaped inside the opposition half, the first tactical aim was to save the space at the back, rather than defending forward with pressure.



Bonucci, the right center back attempted a long pass. Juventus was shaped with a line of 3 forwards, as the left advanced midfielder Mandzukic and the center one Dybala were positioned along the same line of the center forward Higuain. The center holding midfielders, Khedira and Pjanic, provided balance in front of the center back.

The left fullback Asamoah was supporting the attacking move on the left in a classic attacking development of the 1-4-2-3-1 system of play.



The pass attempt was intercepted and Juventus was found with 3 players on the other side of the ball line; all the attacking players were too far away to press the ball carrier, but the holding midfielders could provide balance in the middle third.



Despite pressing the first opposition ball carrier, Khedira covered the first passing options...



...Forcing a back return pass, allowing the left fullback to have enough time to retreat back



A long pass was that the left center back could track, was then forced...



...Covering the depth in a proper way to force the possession of Lazio attacker backward and away from the goal space



Lazio was forced to build up to play in the middle third, after a forced long pass and the proper coverage of the depth.



Meanwhile, Juventus could shape the defense lines at the back again.



A 3 v 2 duel ensured box protection in the center and a 3 v 1 + 1 duel was created along the defense right flank...



...Forcing Lazio to play backward again and creating a 4 v 2 duel along the right flank, after as the opposition left wing back tried to pass forward again...



...And winning the ball back in the end.