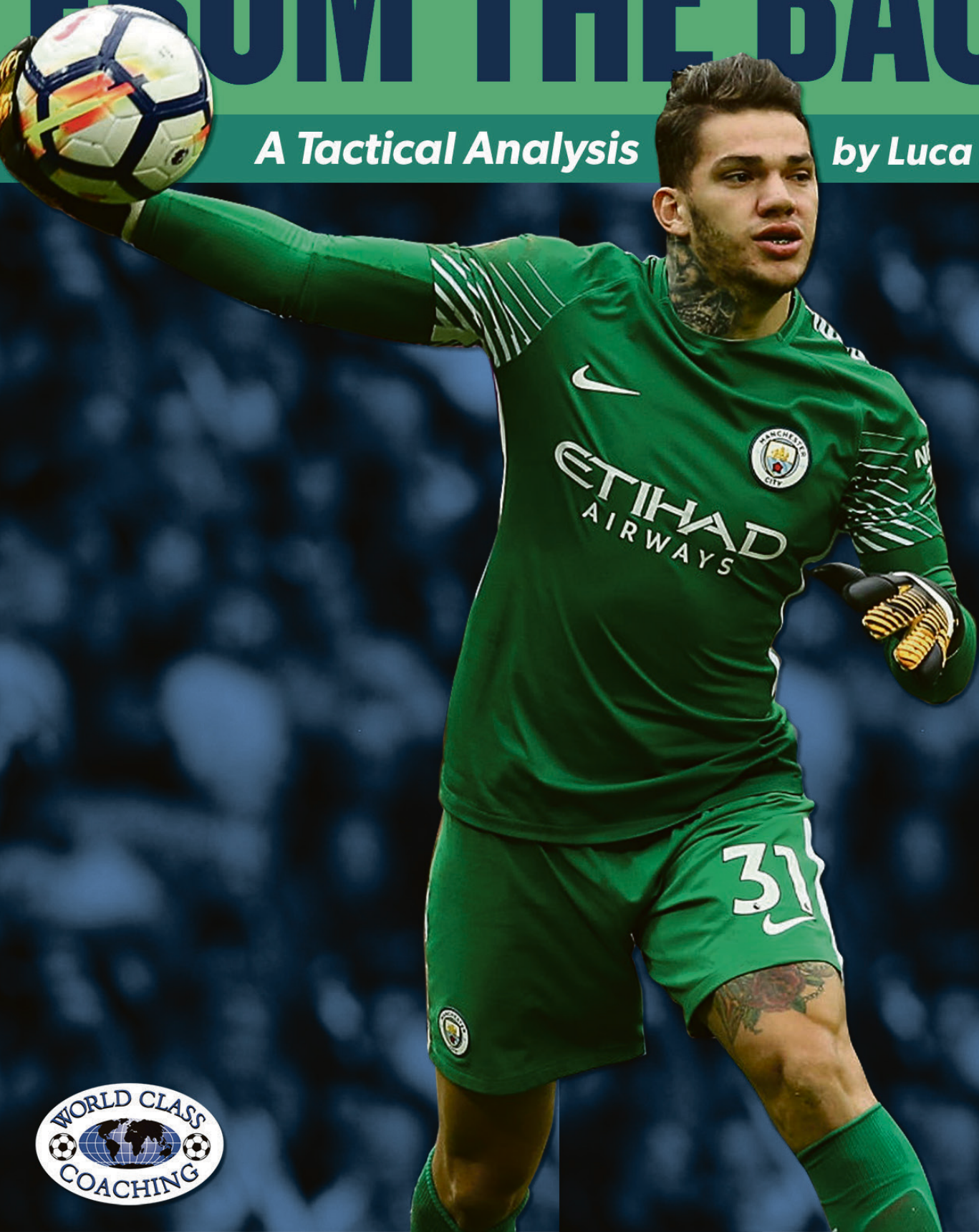


BUILD UP FROM THE BACK

A Tactical Analysis

by Luca Bertolini



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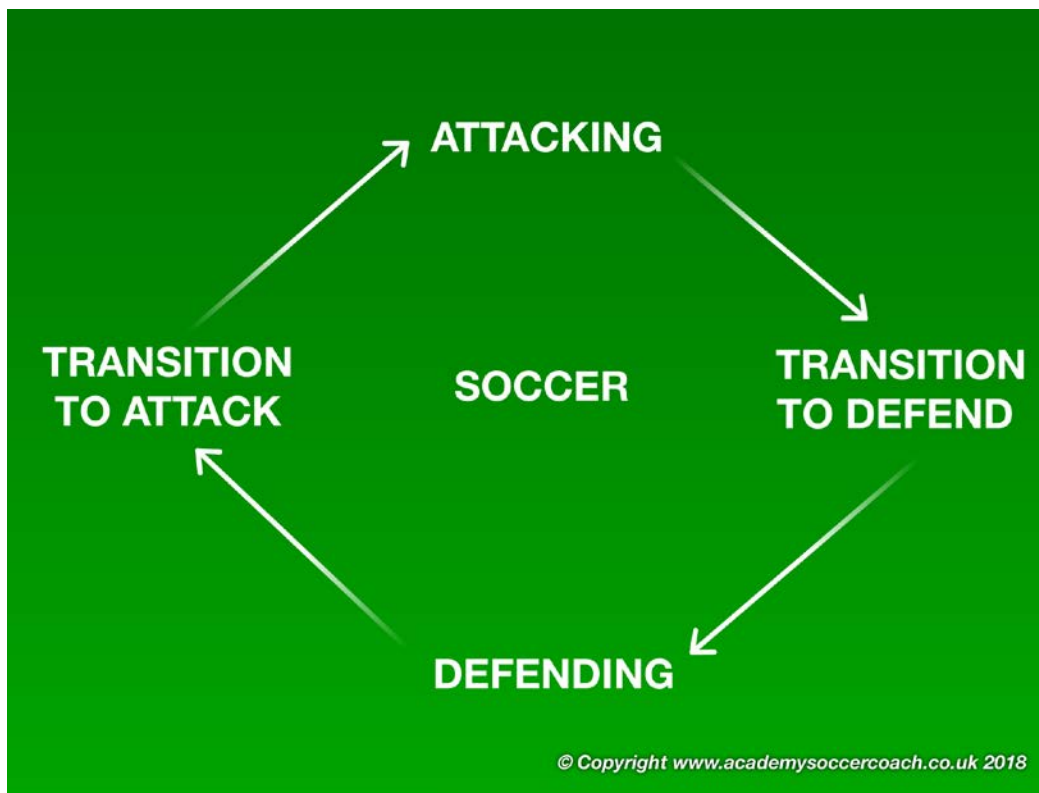
Build up play and/or build up from the back

Since Marcelo Bielsa and Pep Guardiola showed all their ideas on how to start the possession phase from the goalkeeper with their teams, footballers have increasingly discussed build up play. The influence of their soccer philosophy and principles of play is now very clear both in Europe and South America. The motherlands of soccer have prompted the majority of football fans around the world to have an opinion on the concept of build up play. Everyone, fans included, has an opinion as to whether building attacks from the goalkeeper with short passes is good and useful or not.

There are coaches who still prefer to see their goalkeepers starting the play with a long ball to reduce the risk of losing possession close to their own goal. But many others, like Ricardo La Volpe, Maurizio Sarri, Marcelo Bielsa, and Pep Guardiola will defend their ideals of building attacks from the back forever. Ricardo La Volpe gave a huge contribution to this principle of play, creating the well known "la salida lavolpiana," a method to build up from the goalkeeper, when the build up phase of play must be started again, through the dropping back of a center midfielder between the center backs who move wider and with the full backs running up.

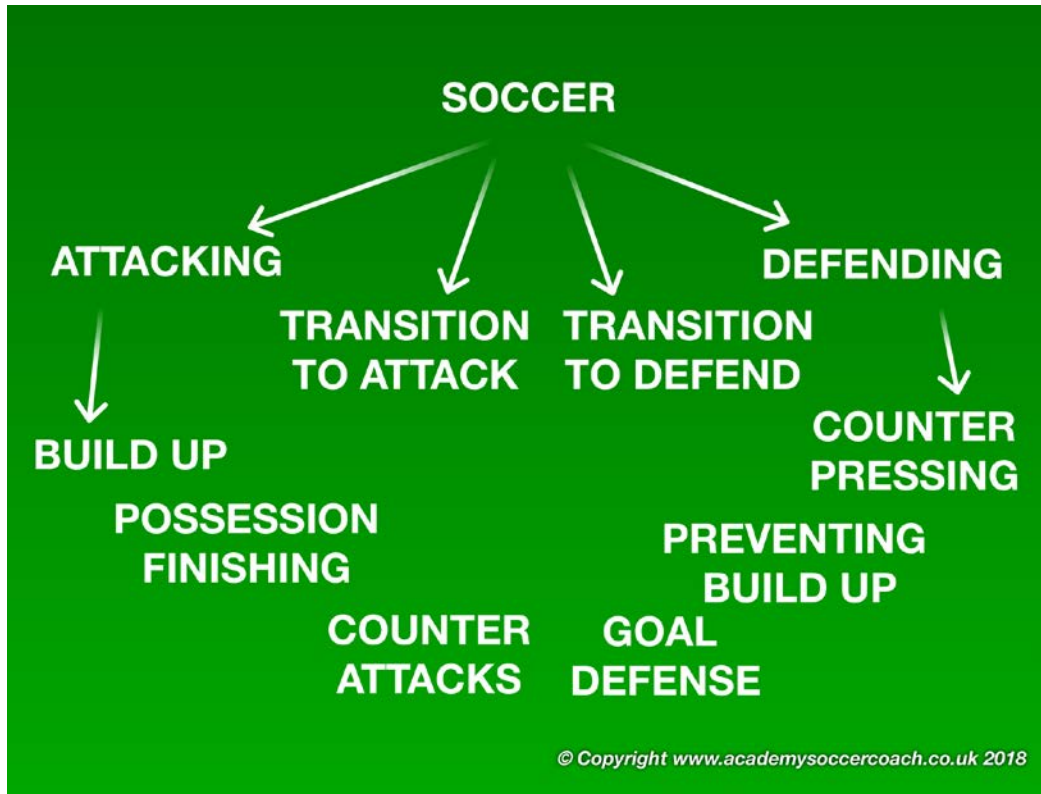
First of all, it's important to answer a philosophic question: Is build up play the same phase or pattern of play as building from the back?

What does "build up play" mean? To begin answering that question, let us take a step back. We can divide football into four phases; attacking, defending, transition from attack to defense and transition from defense to attack.



The attacking phase includes build up play, possession and counter-attacking (transition to attack), the defense phase includes counter-pressing (defensive transition) and preventing build up play and goal defense.

These are the main, summed up flows of play of every soccer match:



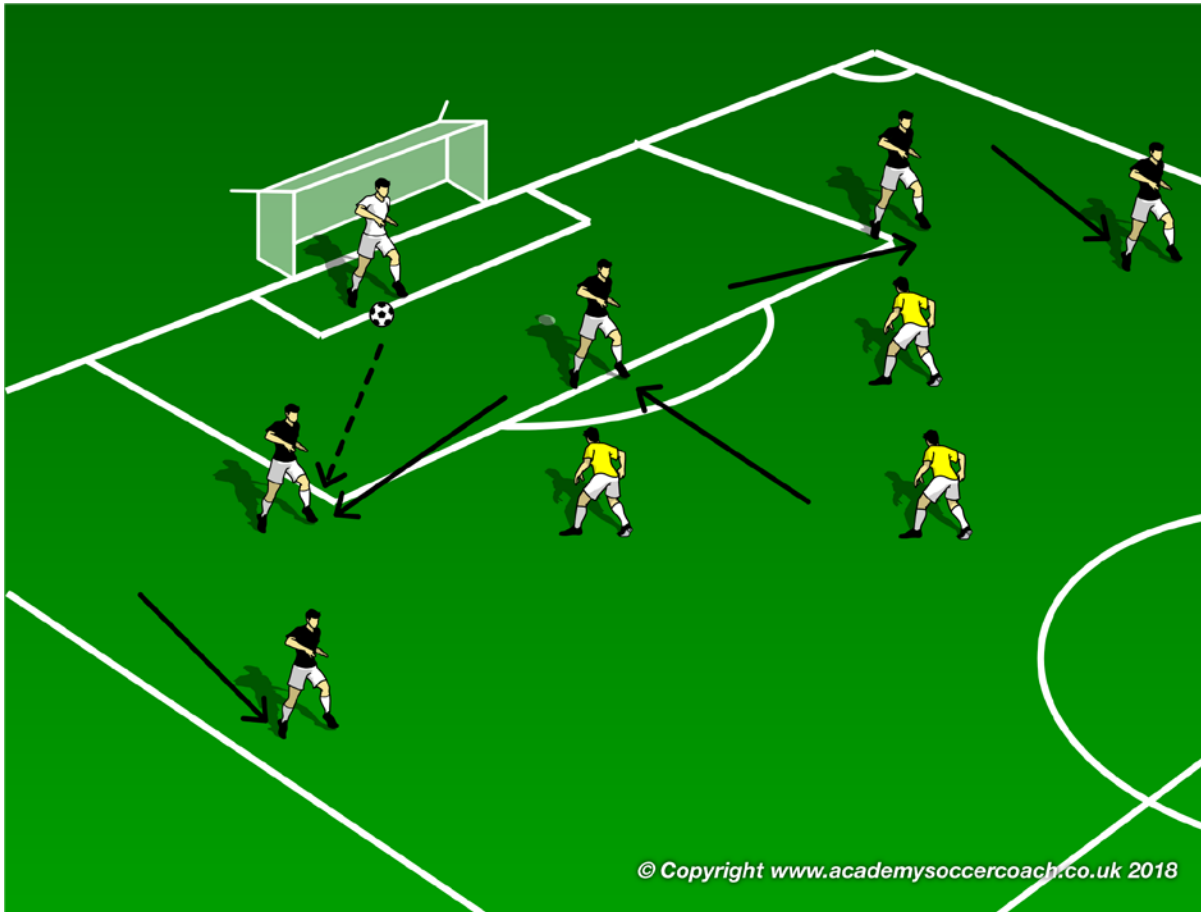
- If a team is building up then the opponent is preventing it
- If a team is in possession phase, trying to finish, then the opponent is defending the defense half and the goal
- If one team has just won possession and it is counter-attacking before the opponent is organized, then this opponent is probably in a counter-pressing phase, actively (pressing) or inactively (retreating to defend the space).

Then, if we want to define what kind of phase the building of play and the building up from the back are, we could write:

- 1) **To build up play** means that a team has the possession of the ball and it's trying to score while the opponent has already organized the defense phase, both through a long ball from the goalkeeper or a defender towards a forward or through short passes pattern of play.
- 2) **Building from the back** can be considered a part of “build up play” but it is a philosophy, a method to score and to win, starting the attacking moves from the goalkeeper or defenders and moving the ball, to stretch the opposition before creating a goal scoring opportunity.

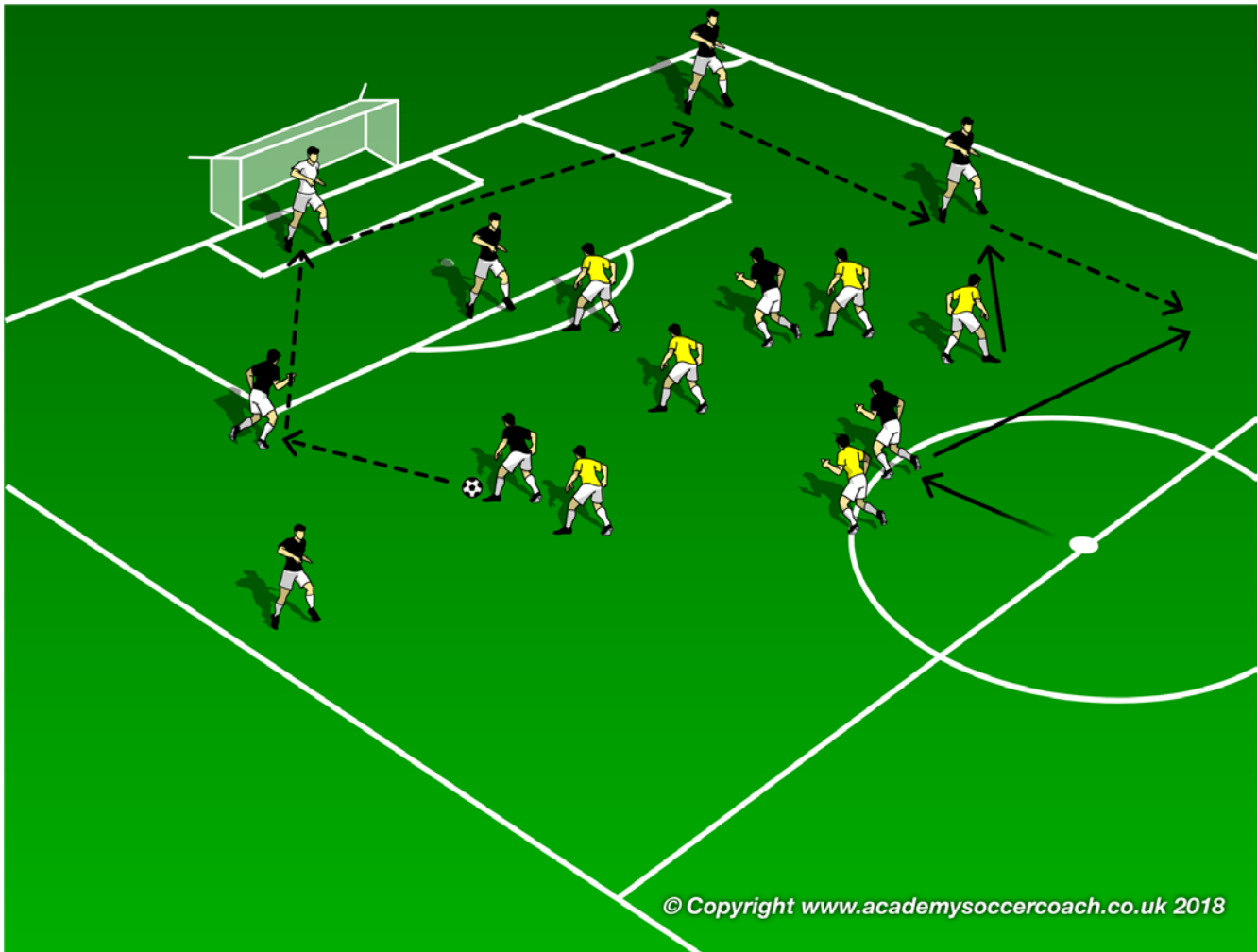
I think another thin difference may be found out when talking about "building up from the back" and "playing out from the back"; both the situations should be coached through the same practices.

- 1) **Building up from the back** could be considered as a phase of play which starts from the goalkeeper or the defender in possession of a still ball and with the opposition who is not immediately able to put pressure. For example, the opposition forward can't press the first or second pass of the sequence. In general, we may talk about all the moves starting from the goal line or from a free kick near the goal (not from throw-ins as all the players can be pressed any time).



La Salida Lavolpiana (from the Argentinian coach Ricardo La Volpe) is a classic and well known tactical pattern of play to build up from the back, creating numerical advantages in the first third and in the middle third to play out.

- 2) **Play out of from the back** may be considered as a phase of play with a moving ball, where the team in possession is under pressure (midfielders and defenders), both inside the first third or in the middle third. The ball must be played back inside and throughout or toward the first third from the center, to avoid the opposition pressure, to switch the side or to find a new available space in the middle third, to play forward and to attack the opposition half (throw-ins inside the defense half could be included).



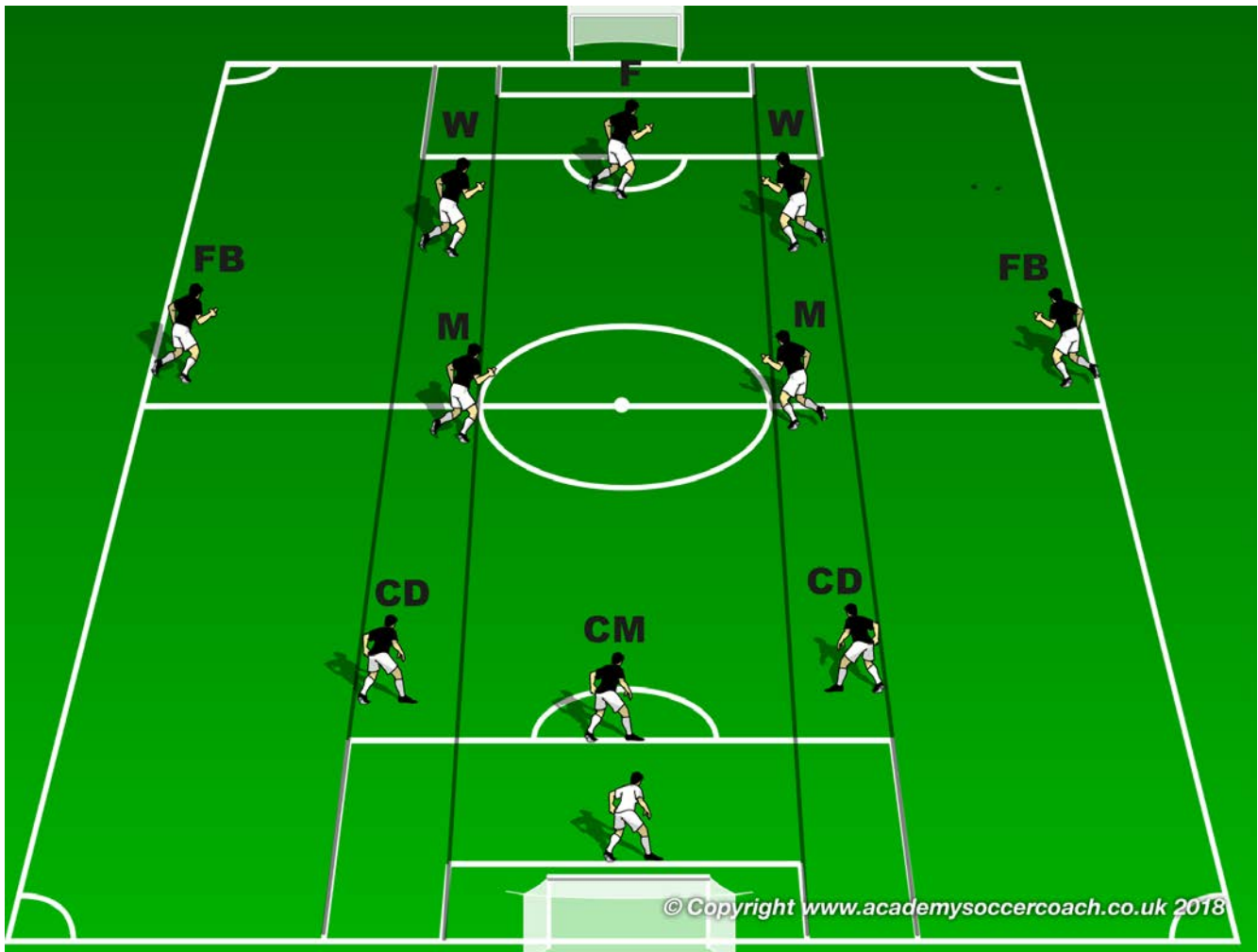
In this sequence the team in possession has already built up from the back to go forward the pitch, but the midfielders are under pressure of the opposition.

They must play back to the goalkeeper, through the right center defender, who then can switch side of play; the second center defender receives the ball wide on the opposite side and the center midfielder, who dropped back, is able to give balance and protection to the goalkeeper.

The center defender and the advanced fullbacks are then able to play out, taking advantage of a wide channel, together with the run of the center forward who escapes the marker to receive along the flank.

"Everything is much easier when the first progression of the ball is clean," according to Juan Manuel Lillo. This is the dogma for every team to start from, which aims to begin the possession phase from the back.

To build up from the back doesn't mean only educating the players on a system of play, but it means to create a complete team structure to place them on the pitch in right positions, to progress the ball forward at speed, to move the opposition, to stretch the defense's lines wide and deep and to arrive to finish the moves, finding the right time and space.



"I think that the best solution for building up and for playing out is the 1-3-4-3 formation, because it helps creating numerical advantages in the middle third," said Ricardo La Volpe.

It also can create numerical or positional advantages when the building up breaks through the opposition's first and second pressing lines, and the team is able to play the ball inside toward the crowded areas, in order to move the opposition defensive structure to one side (strong side) and creating space in other areas of the pitch (weak side) that can be exploited.

On the other hand, a team playing with a direct style of play will move the ball with deep pattern of play and towards teammates with physical advantages against the opposition and in advanced positions, to fight for the first ball with support for the second ball from the middle third.

The early building up from the back

It's easy to understand that all the players must be well skilled from an individual technical point of view, whatever their role. We may think that the building up from back principle of play was created as a potential idea when the goalkeeper couldn't catch back passes with their hands anymore, from the 1993-94 season.

From that season all the old school goalkeepers had to learn to use their feet to play rather than to kick the ball, the defenders and midfielders had to learn to move quicker than before to be unmarked, as those moves couldn't be considered as finished. Moreover, all the goalkeepers of the following generations have been coached to develop their technical skills at their best possible, as well as the defenders, who are now skilled like back midfielders when in possession.

AC Milan won the league twice (93/94) in a row and reached the Champions League two times in a row (three time if we count the 93 final against Olympique Marseille) after the change of the rule as the club was used to build up from the back since the late '80s, with Arrigo Sacchi as manager.

In the next few pictures, we are going to analyze how Arrigo Sacchi built up from the back, taking into consideration that the opponents did not press high on the field, but they were used to covering the depth under the ball line as the possession was lost and counter-pressing was just intended as 1 v 1 individual duels.

Build up from the back meant the ball carrier was to dribble up the field together with all the defense line to stay placed high on the middle line, or over it also. This way, Milan experienced the first forward defensive tactics ever, pressing on the ball and through the offside trick, in case of possession loss.

The center backs, Baresi and Costacurta, or the center midfielder Rijkaard were the players who dribbled the ball out of the defense third, finding space in middle as the opponents used to retreat inside the defense half.



The main concept was to take advantage of the available space on the field...



...even until the penalty area; the fullbacks always supported the move on the flanks.



This is another sequence; Rijkaard dribbled the ball out of the first third...



...and the building up of the move had the support of the fullbacks, on the right...



...and on the left side, at the same time. Fullbacks played as wingers.



The build up phase of play had the main goal of creating space in the middle third, even against the opponents who were defending the depth as block, and to take advantage of these spaces, thanks to an unmarked player moving inside there.



The ball was moved with short and quick passes, and with synchronized movements and timing of runs.



The player technique and tactical skills to build up from the back

The available time for players of the team in possession, wherever the ball is being played, is always getting shorter, and the opponents are always getting closer and closer inside a space. The training sessions and methods are nowadays based on small-sided spaces, whatever the practices are (small sided games, rondos or position games); the consequence is an improvement of the technical skills of the players and of the speed of play (receiving and passing) and of the combinations among the players.

The increase of the speed and the shorter available time to play convinced the coaches to find principles of play to find forward spaces as quickly as possible, to think about how and where to open them, how to counter the pressure of the opposition through the numerical or positional advantage, how to play out in a weak area of the opponent formation after a possession phase in a strong side.

In modern soccer, counter-attacks can lead to a finishing phase in few seconds (the average is 5"/6"). The whole pitch can be used to follow the principles of play we talked about just above.

These are the reasons why building up from the back from the goalkeeper and one's own goal is not less risky than a possession phase in the middle or final third. One these principles of play strategically on the pitch. For example, the beginning of the move invites the pressure of the opposition upward and creates useful spaces in behind the lines.

Sure, all the players are now asked to be skilled at the best level of their potential in regards to individual technique and tactic (how to escape a marker is an essential requirement), and have the best quickness possible.

Classic examples of players formation since the youth academy are the La Masia ones, who then were included in Guardiola's Barcelona FC 2008/2012 team. All them were coached and grew up with the proper technical skills to manage, to pass and to receive the ball under pressure and to build up from the back. That team was not an accident; that team was created through the years, and those years are the late '90s, just after the change of goalkeeper rule.

Let's see it in details:

Player	Role	Academy Years
Víctor Valdés	goalkeeper	1995-2000
Charles Pujol	defender	1995-1997
Gerard Piqué	defender	1997-2004
Xavi Hernandez	midfielder	1991-1997
Andres Iniesta	midfielder	1996-2000
Cesc Fabregas	midfielder	1997-2003
Sergio Busquets	midfielder	2005-2007

All these players are those who were more involved in the build up process of the best team ever, from this point of view (among other categories): the 2008-2012 FC Barcelona. Their technical skills, in this first phase of play, fit at the best possible level the required steps to build up and play out from the back: being an option for the goalkeeper, finding a free teammate, and creating and exploiting numerical advantage in a specific area of the pitch, where the team wants to go forward.

The main technical skills the players are asked to demonstrate, are:

The goalkeeper must be good at playing with both feet and with proper distribution; he has to be always ready to receive with the right body positioning. Ederson Moraes, Man City goalkeeper, is the best example nowadays.

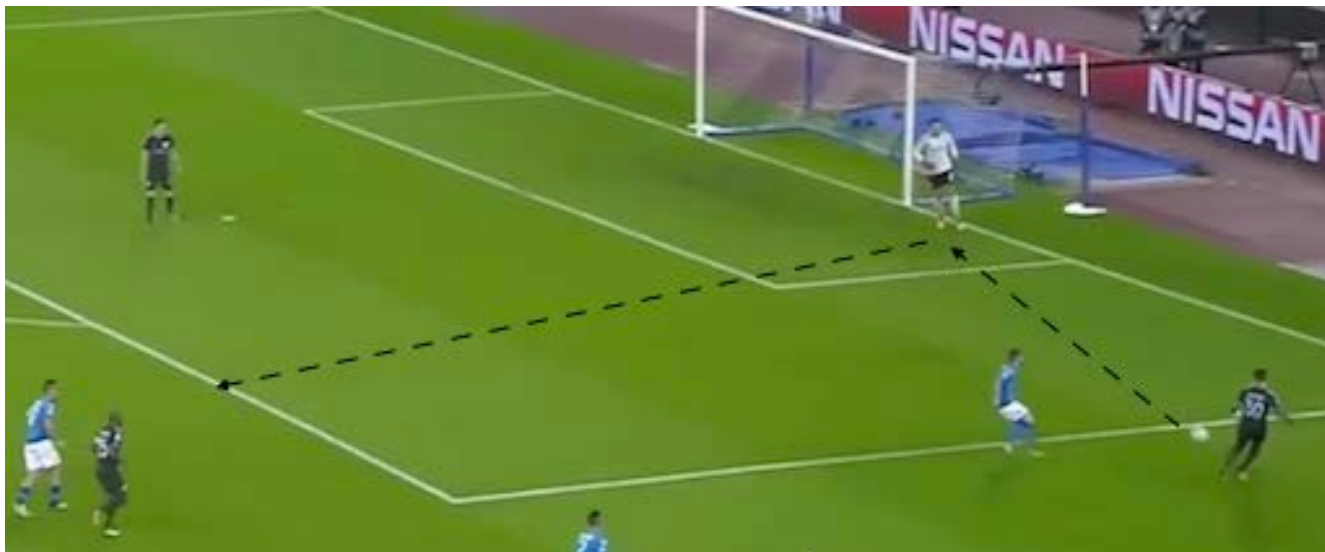
He can play as support teammate to circulate the ball through (he seems to substitute for the midfielder dropping back, e.g., Fernandinho, who can stay placed higher...



...and he is able to distribute to the teammate breaking through the lines of the opposition pressure, even in front of the goal...



...similarly, he is able to be part of position games (as lower vertex here) inside the match.



The center backs must be able to receive and pass quickly inside the first third or out of it, to overcome the opposition pressure.



Two forwards are pressing the build up phase; two center defenders and the goalkeeper create a 3 v 2 duel.

The center backs must be able to overcome the pressure and play out to advance on the field.



The center midfielder must be always placed near the ball to be an easy passing option. They must be skilled for one touch play....



...or to switch the side toward a weak area of the opposition.



The advanced midfielders must be unmarked along the passing lanes and in behind the opponents.



The fullbacks must be placed high on the field to support the move in the middle third; they must be unmarked and they must take part to the attacking phases.



The forward must move toward the strong side to support the move, to create a strong side and to open spaces in between the lines for the teammates...



...or to create a deep weak side where the fullback can receive after a switch of the side.



As far as tactical requirements to build up from the back, the basic player skill is to escape the marker or to be able to play under pressure with the right time and passing in the right space. The team must use positioning, through mobility, to create numerical advantages on the ball to play out.

Bielsa theory about how to escape the marker consists of five types of movements. The player who must receive the ball needs to be able to do these movements. These are described below.

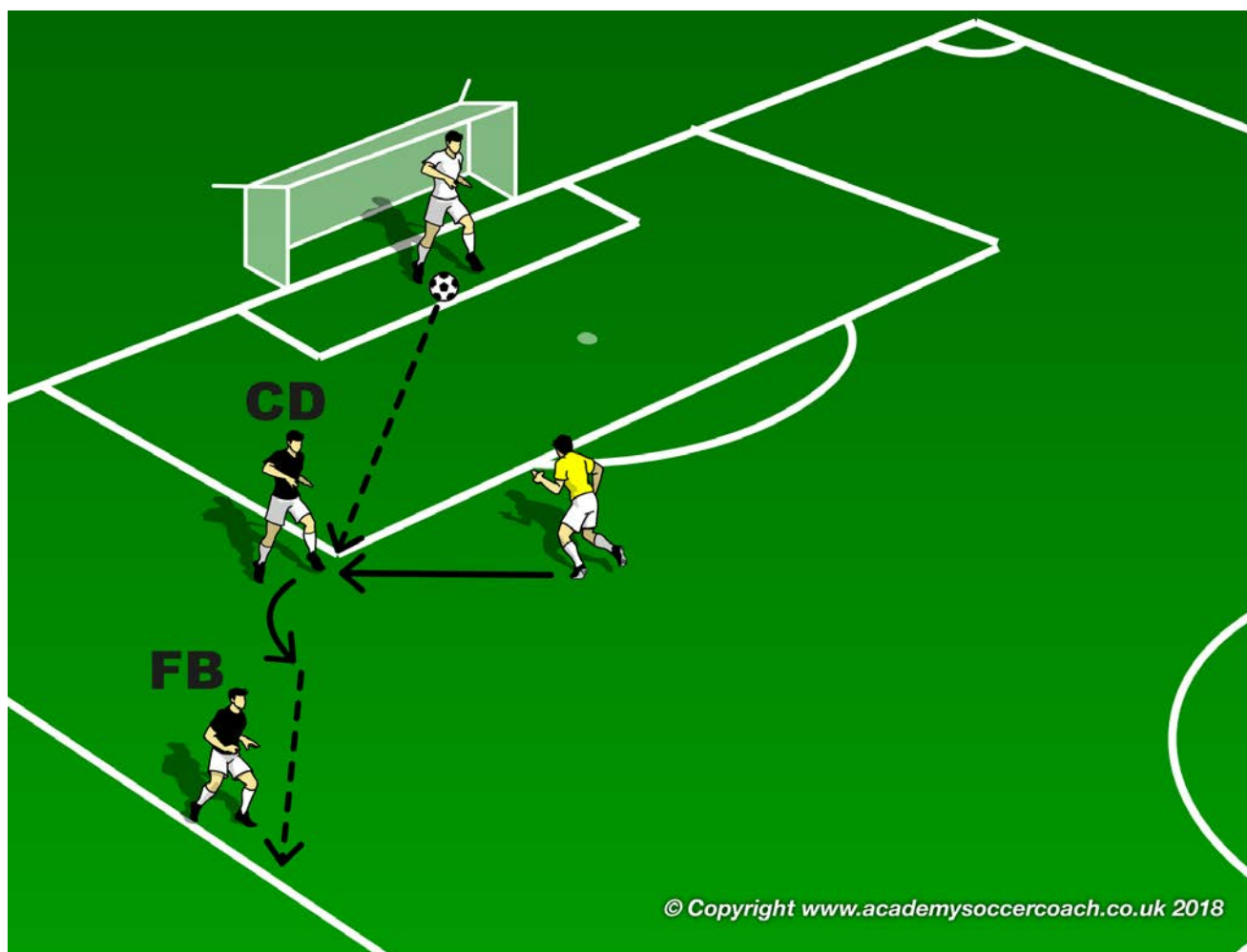
1) Move to receive a pass and turn around with one touch control or dropping back, straight on or along a diagonal path and then turning around to go forward.

The player must run away from the marker or the pressing opponents, but with an open body shape to go forward with the following pass or dribble and to give continuity to the pattern of play.

In this first example, the center defender receives from the goalkeeper but he is under pressure of an opponent.

He then moves a little away from the pressure direction, he receives with an open body shape, looking at the pitch in front of him and he turns with one touch toward the fullback by his side, passing the ball wide on the flank. This way a first line of pressure is usually overcome.

Quickness and ball touch and body shape are the key points to keep the possession safe.

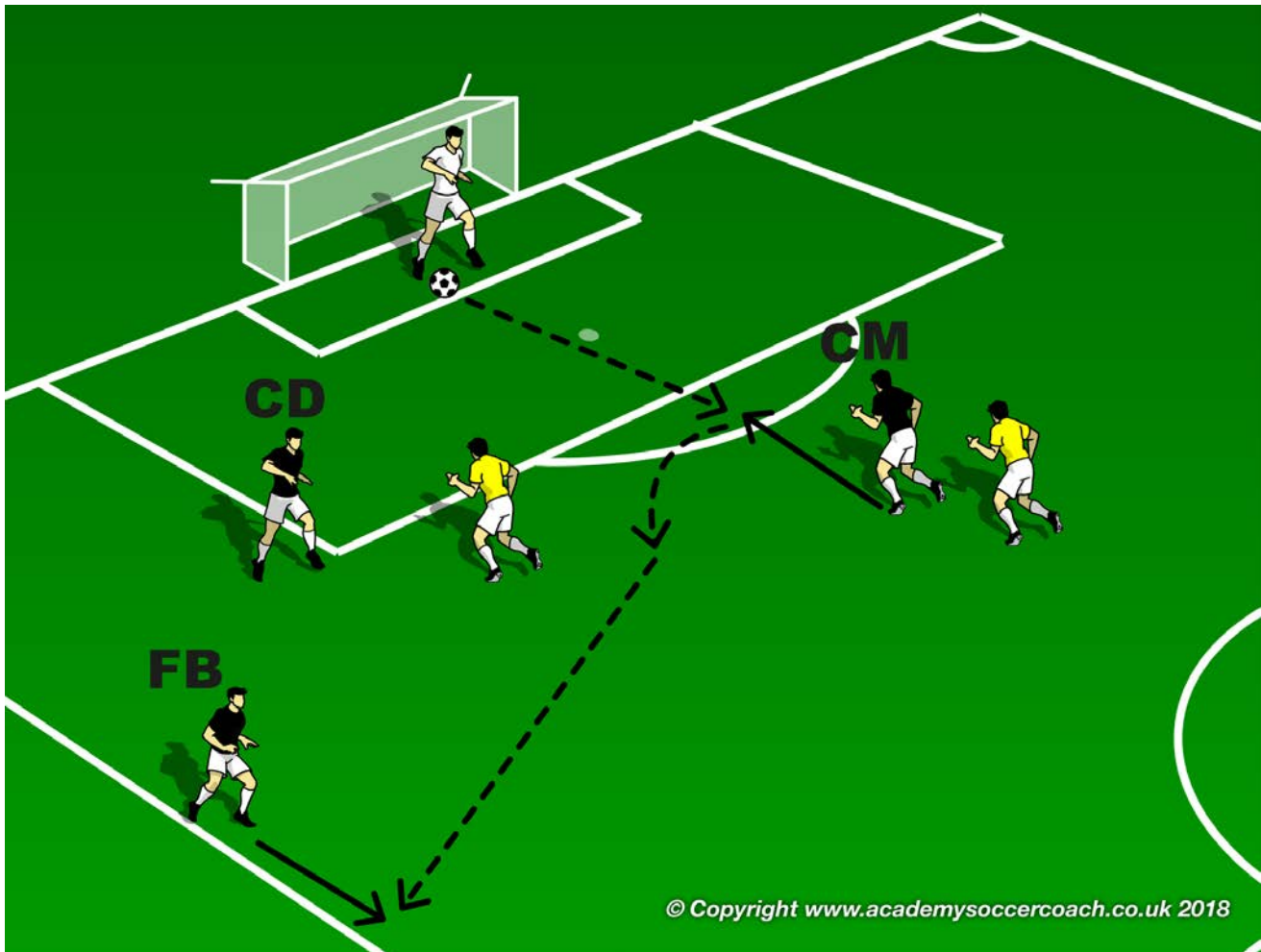


In this second example, the move didn't start from the back, but the team must play out from the back because it's under strong pressure. The goalkeeper is in possession and the center midfielder receives under pressure at the back.

The receiver is able to get a little away from the marker, finding time and space for a one touch control to turn and to play forward and wide onto the fullback's run. It's very important to cover the ball with the body to avoid tackles and loss of possession; two touch play or back passes can be easier solutions if the pressure action creates risky situations.

Here again a first line of pressure is usually overcome; two players might be used in case of ultra-offensive pressure of the opposition.

Ball defense, body shape, and technical skills are the key points to keep the possession safe.



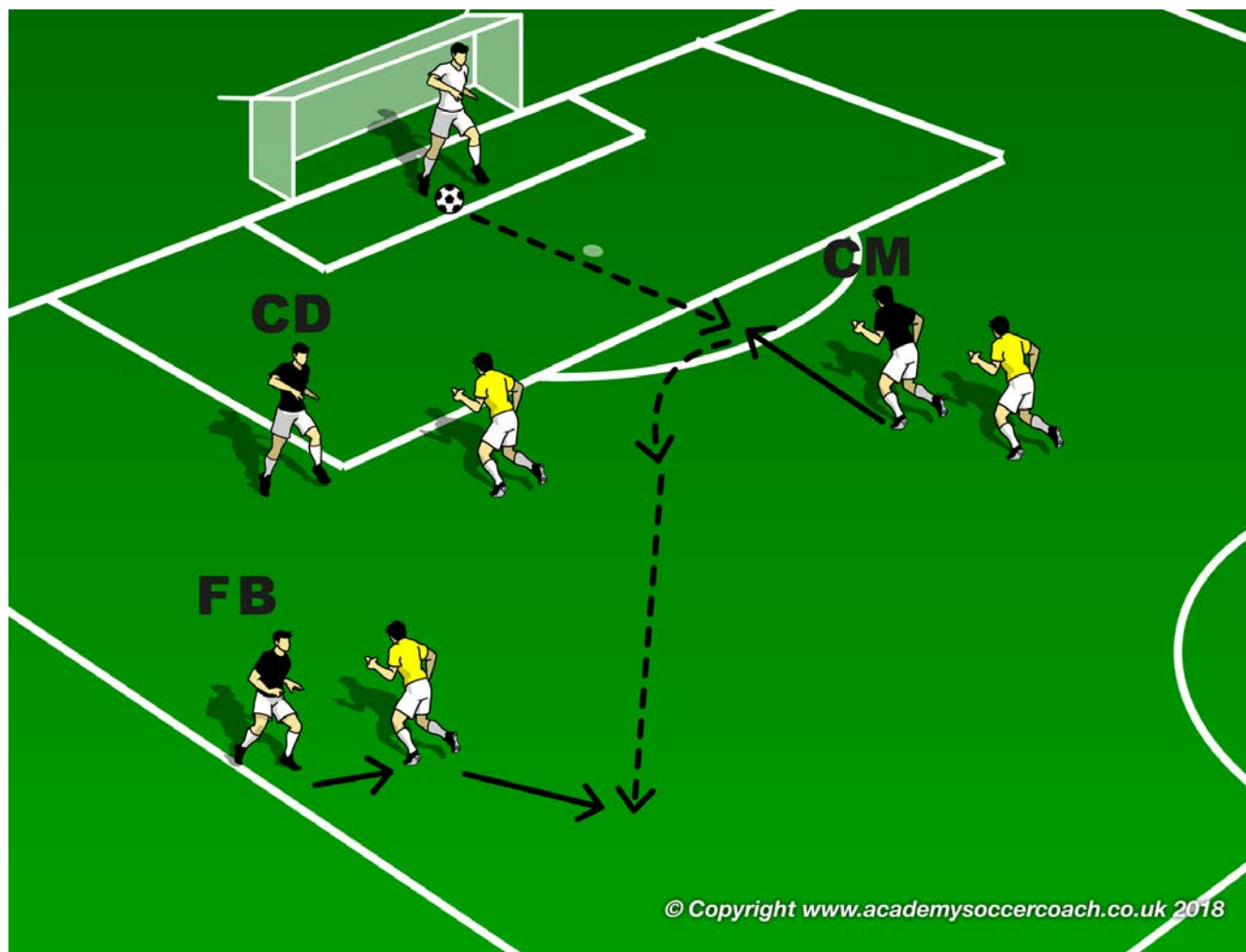
2) Move to receive behind the opponent with the right timing of run and pass, from the flank toward the depth, from the center toward wide spaces or in behind the opposition lines

It's possible, when the opposition is pressing the player of the possession team strongly and closely to run away at the back and to receive behind them. The closer the defender is, the easier the potential receiver can get free from him at the back.

The sequence of runs may be summed up with an L movement with different speeds; get closer to the opponents slowly (moreover if the freeing player is a forward) and then straight to the objective as fast as possible, to gain space and time before the defender can turn.

In this first example, where the possession team must play out under pressure, the fullback escapes from the marker at his back and toward the center to create a potential numerical advantage in the middle, as inverted fullback for example, receiving the pass of the dropping back center midfielder.

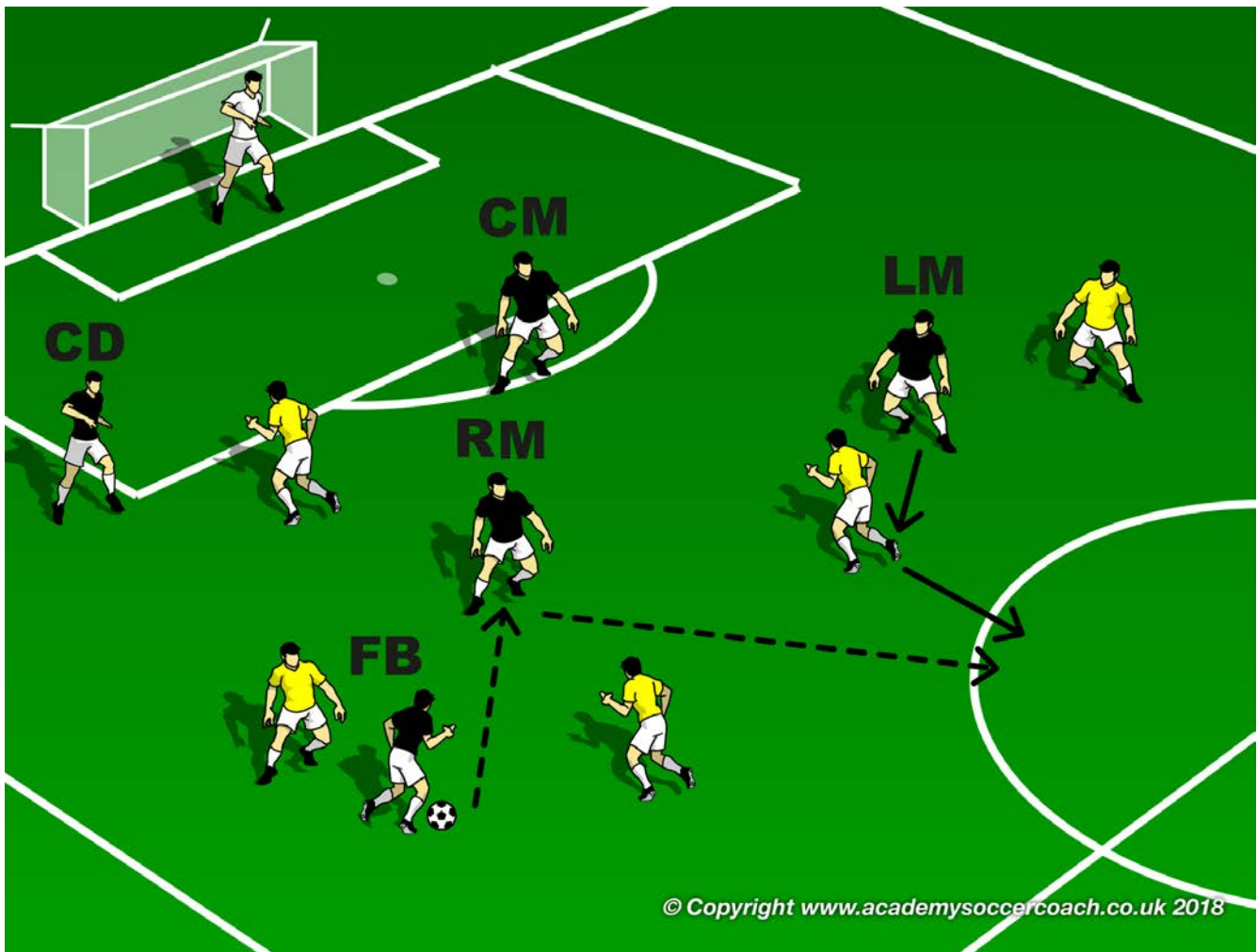
This is a more complex 3 player combination (the fullback can be considered a 3rd man) and all the timing of passes and runs must be perfectly linked to avoid the loss of possession.



This second example can be considered as a play out progression of the previous picture; the fullback receives in the middle, but he's put under pressure of two opponents. He then passes back to the right midfielder.

The right center midfielder is under pressure too, but the opposite teammate (LM) exploits his forward run to escape at the back and he receives a pass over the second line of pressure. This is situation is quite favorable for the team in possession, as the ball is received with nearly half of the opposition field player, who are supposed to run toward the opposition goal.

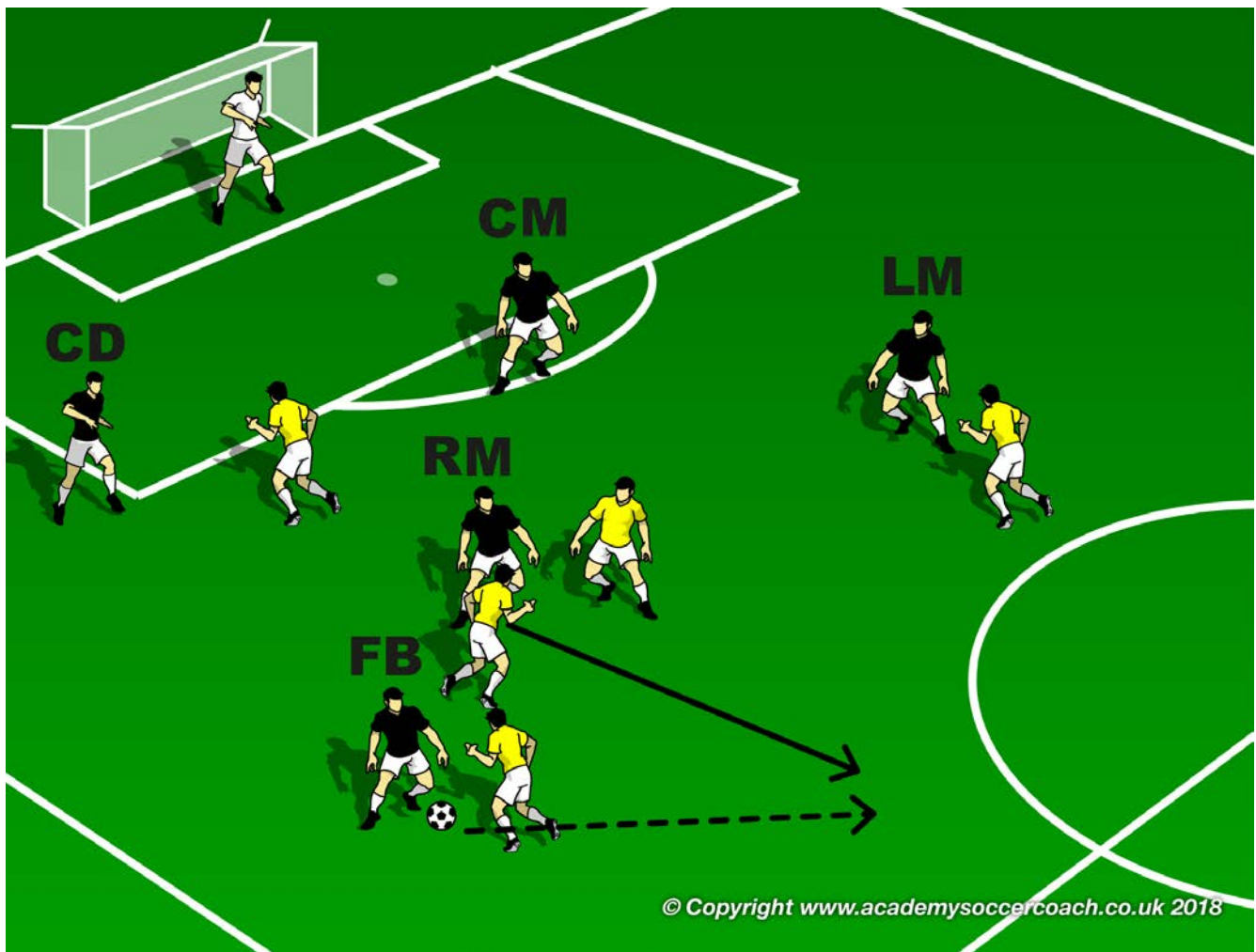
Again, this is another 3 player combination (the left midfielder can be considered as a 3rd man) and the timing of the passes and runs must be perfectly linked to avoid the loss of possession.



- 3) Move to receive along a path by the opponent's sides, generally between two very close to each other, or by the a defender's side, getting away from him if it's not possible to receive behind him

Here, the forward gets closer to the defenders, who are closing him, and, if possible, he receives between and over them, by their sides, on the run. This would be the ideal situation to progress on the field, as it's the best sequence possible for counter-attacks.

In this example, the right fullback is in possession but under pressure. The right midfielder is able to overcome the line between two defenders, running by their side and receiving over them.

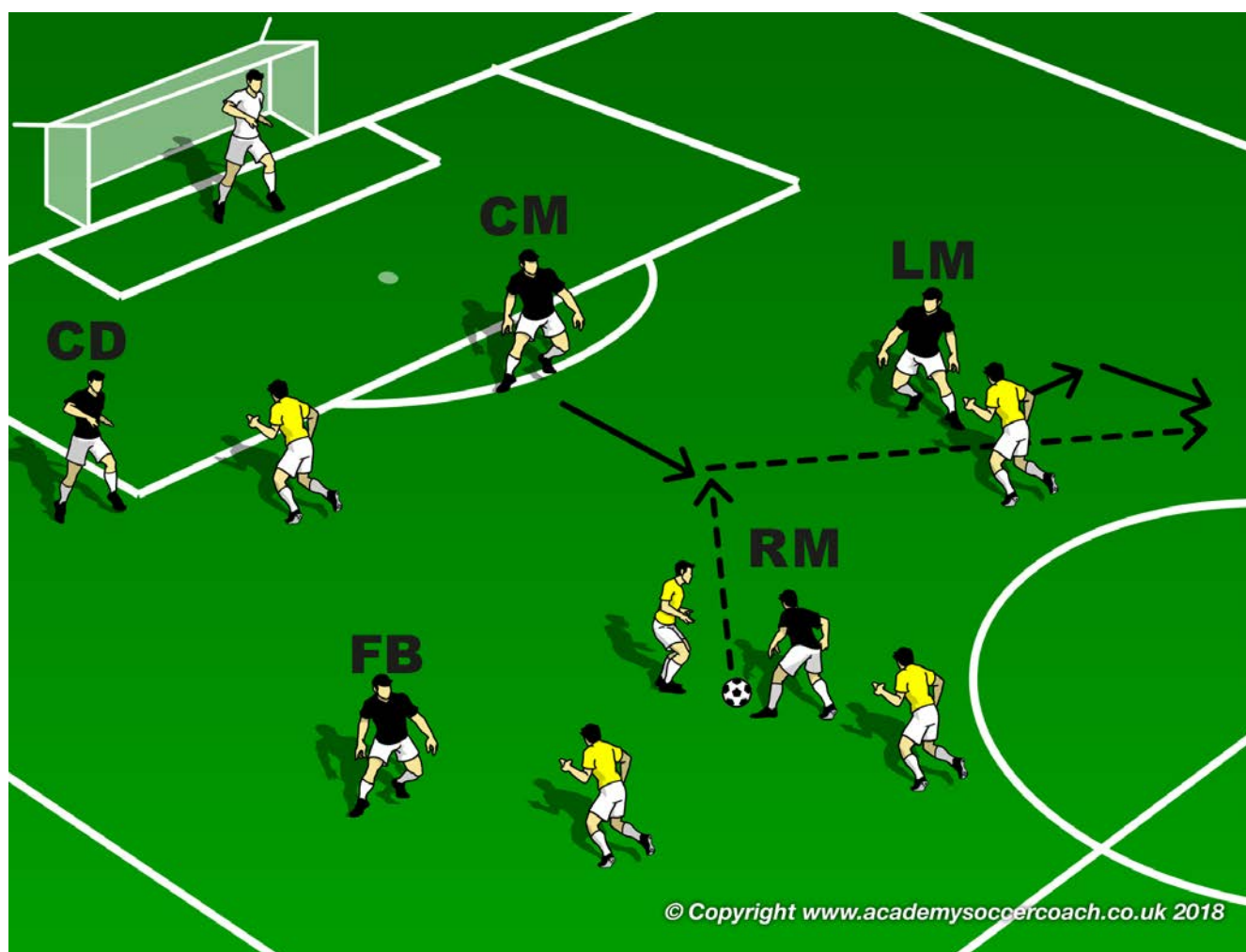


When progressions between the defenders or to free from the marker behind him are not possible solution, the best choice is to escape the marker by his side.

The potential receiver must get away along a diagonal imaginary line as he is close to the opponent, trying to create enough space to prevent him from tackling, but without losing the vertical line that leads toward the following objective (forward pass or dribble) as the ball is received, while the defender tries the anticipation or the interception.

In this example, the right midfielder passes back to the center one, who is moving forward after the first phase of the building up; meanwhile the left center midfielder moves away by the direct marker's wider side, to create enough space to receive and play forward.

It's very important to start moving one pass before the ball has to be received, to link the timing with the second teammate. The prior pass gives the sign of counter-movement; the second pass must be received already unmarked and away from the opponent.

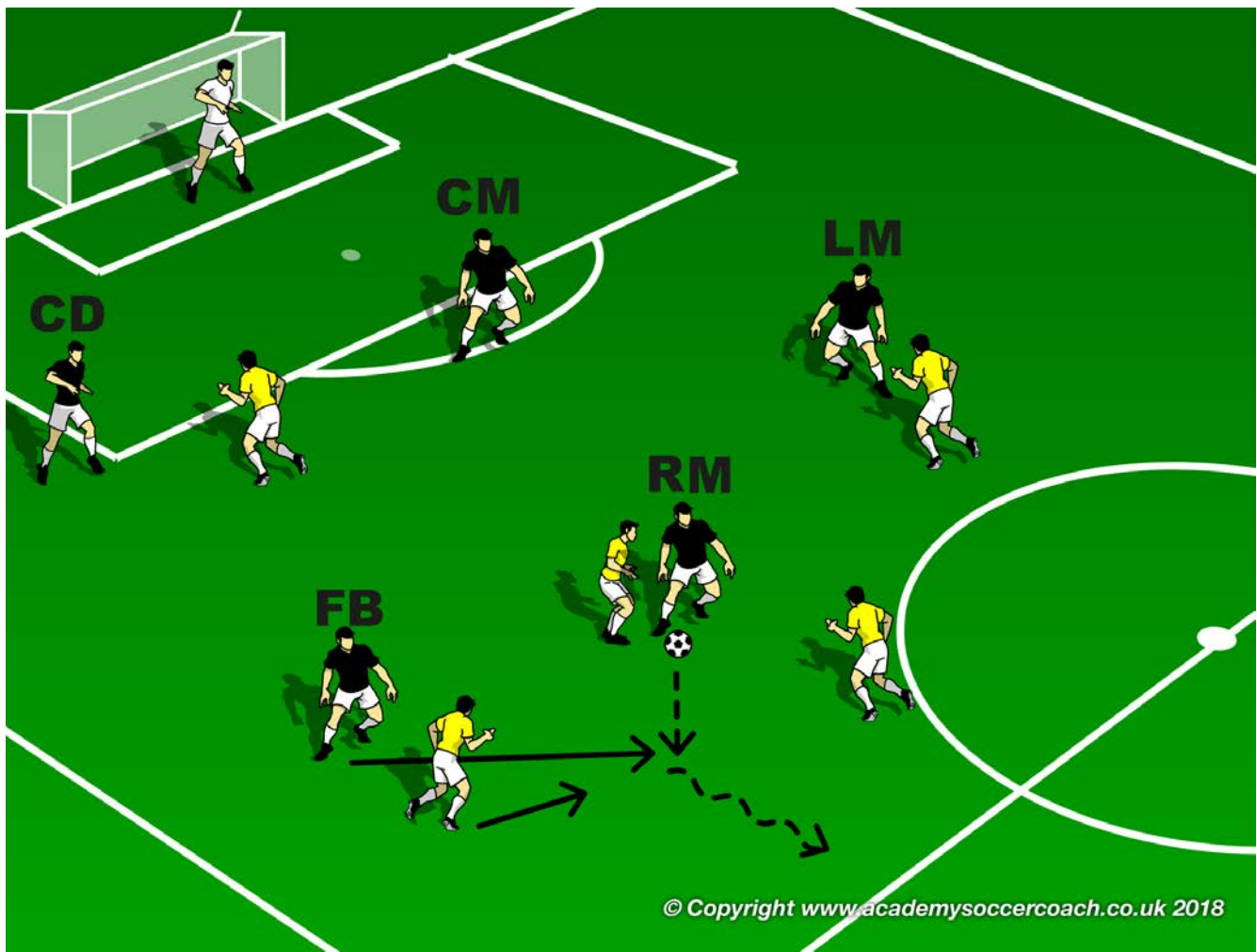


4) Move to receive and counter the opponent's anticipation

The forwards runs close to the defender to receive ahead of him and he overcomes with (usually) one touch control, moving toward the opposite direction of defender's run.

The first objective of the player who receives this way must be to anticipate the defender, who is trying to anticipate him as well. This movement is useful to gain time against the nearest opponent.

In this first example, the fullback runs inside to receive a pass from the right midfielder, stealing the time to the direct opponent who is trying to anticipate him.



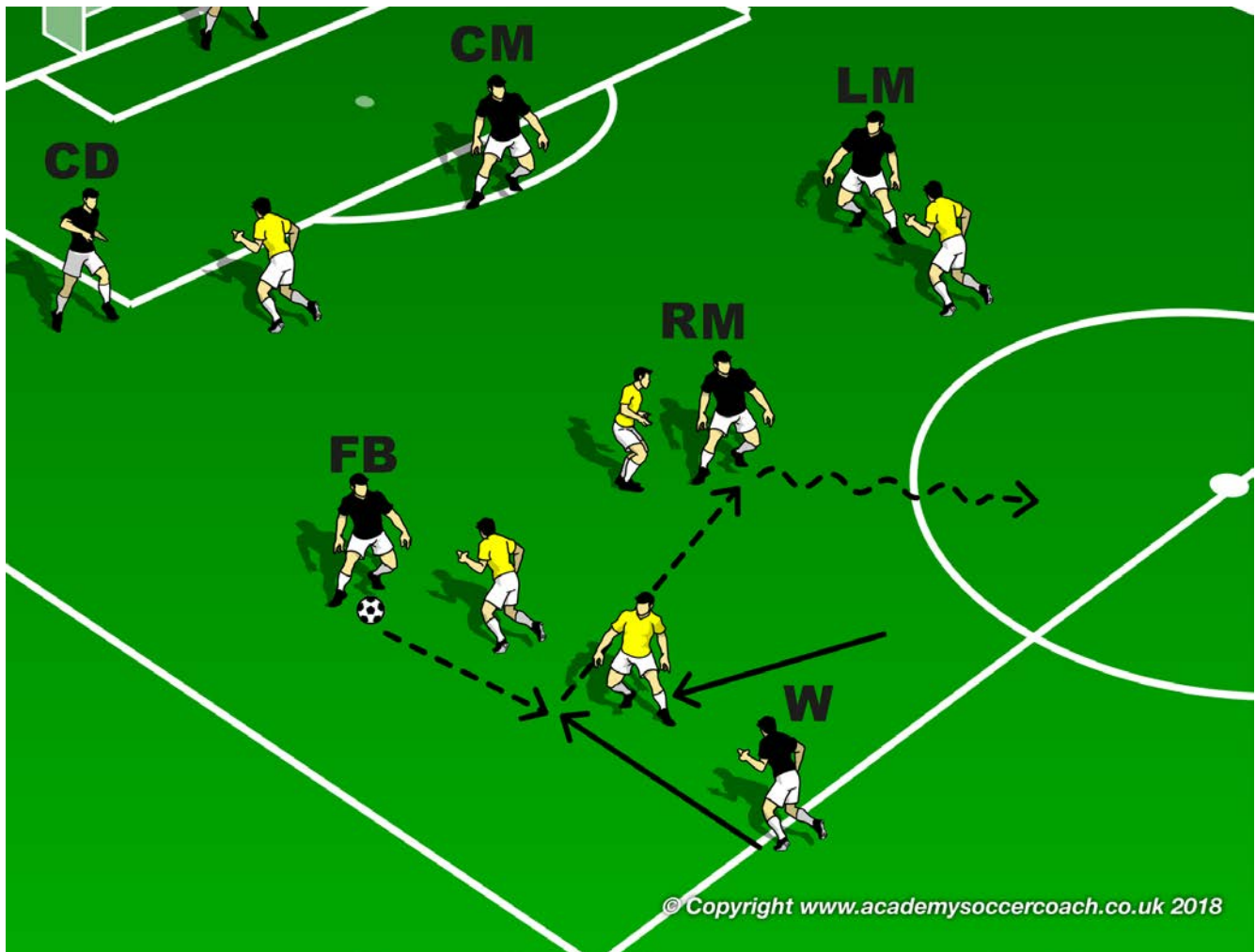
Reaction speed and sprint are necessary to win the ball against the defenders, as well as a good first touch at speed to gain space from him, to maintain the possession, or anyway, not to lose it against other defenders, as the ball is received.

In this second example, the fullback is in possession, but the nearest passing lanes toward the winger and the right midfielder are closed; all the players in possession are under pressure in a duel 3 v 3, as the attacking team could not create numerical advantage while building up.

The winger's run to anticipate and get free from the nearest opponents, while receiving from the fullback, creates positional advantage for the right midfielder, who can dribble forward leaving his direct opponent behind him.

As the winger receives, he must be able to avoid the double marking of a potential second defender and he must pay attention not to lose the ball, as the opposition ball carrier could easily face the penalty area and the goal.

The timing of movements and the technical skills to manage the ball at speed and under pressure are key points for the players in possession to carry out this kind of combination.



How do we synchronize all the players to play from the back successfully?

The player who sends the pass must be able to control the timing, the speed, the direction and the type of ball touch to give his teammate a positional advantage when he receives.

- If the timing and the direction of the pass are not correct, the teammate doesn't receive the ball and it means the loss of possession in the specific move. It could be recovered with a throw-in, for example, but the danger of the move is lost
- If the pass is too slow or too fast, an interception of an opponent is very likely
- If the type of pass is not good enough, the teammate will lose time and space while receiving, giving the opponent enough time to recover the position, to put pressure and to win the ball

The receiver must be able to control the timing and the speed of run without the ball, in relation to the tactical situation (teammate, opponent and space).

- Early runs create a situation where the player is out of position when the ball should be received
- Late runs lead to the loss of potential advantages (including positional), against the direct opponent; the consequence is to be under pressure or even man on man marked
- Changes of rhythm, speed and direction are important key points, because they could surprise the opponents and to create a positional advantage.

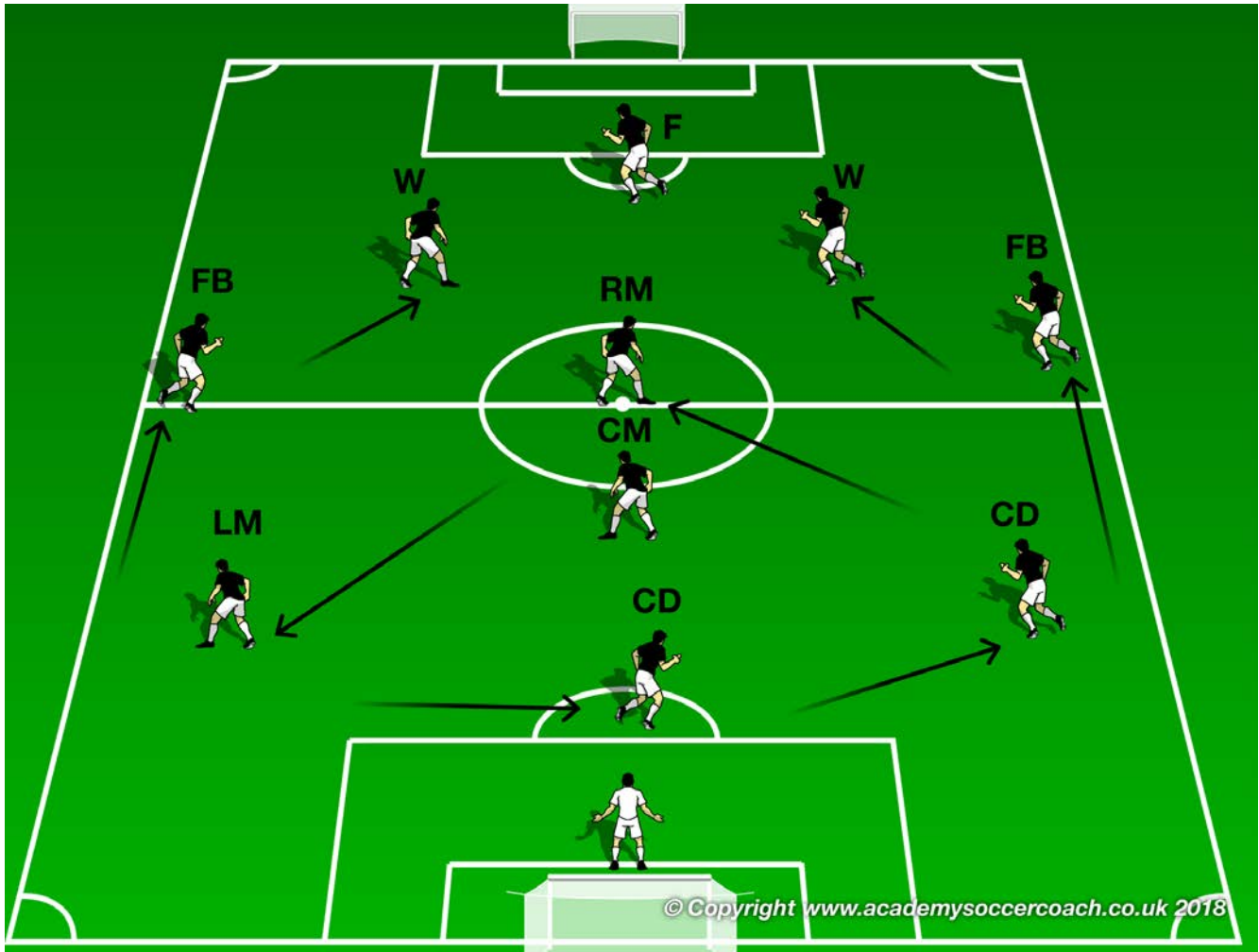
Team positioning to build up from the back (the goalkeeper is in possession)

1-4-3-3

The team shape is basically structured with a classic 4 at the back, 3 midfielders with a lower vertex and 2 wider teammates, 3 forwards, of which one center striker and two wider advanced wingers.

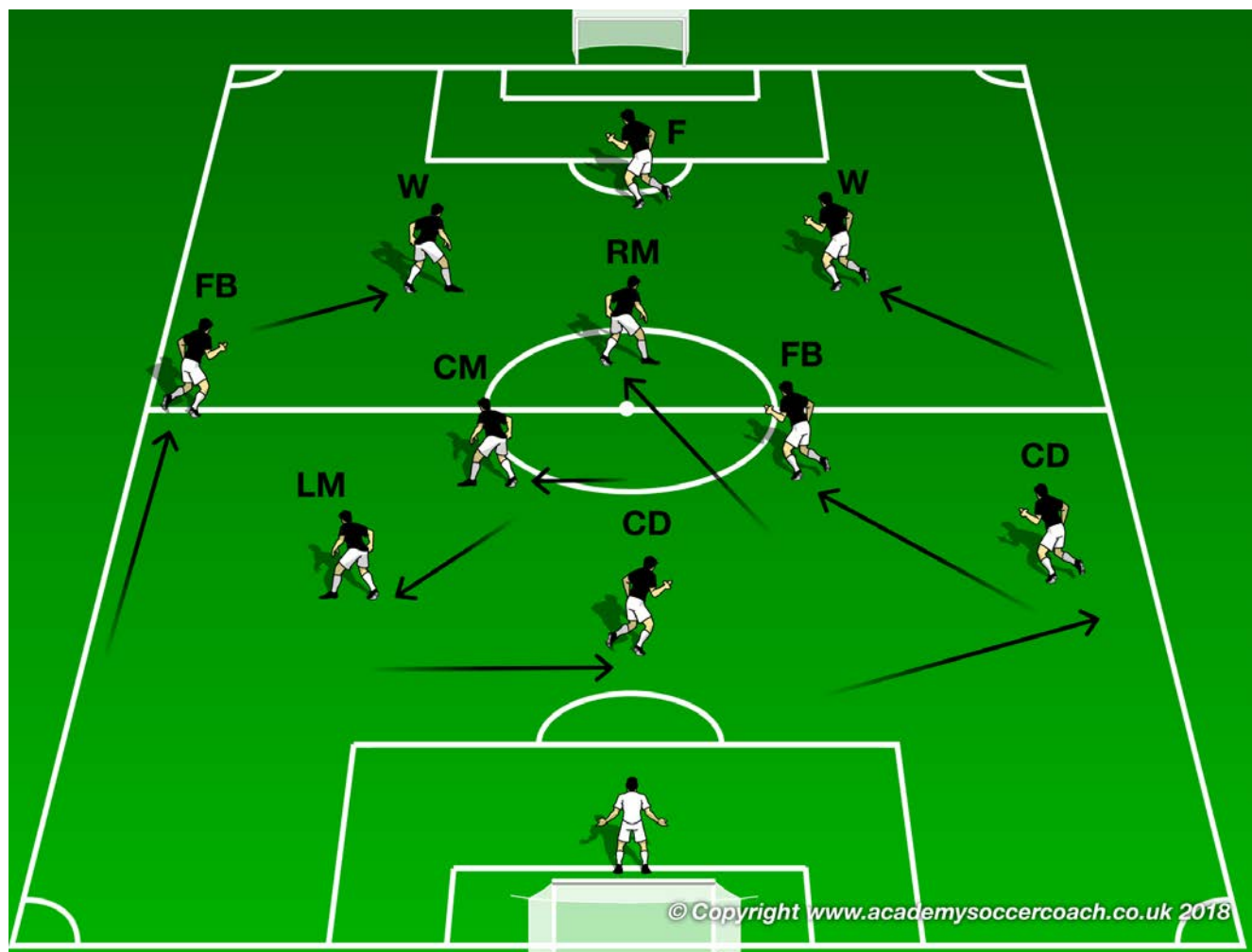
The players are placed inside the spaces and half spaces, commonly recognized in all the tactical analysis by now.





Whoever is the first receiver of the goalkeeper pass (the receiver is likely the center defender on the right, who is supposed to be the most skilled player in this example), this could be a first possible rotation to re-shape the team on the field and to progress forward.

- The center defenders shift toward the right side (or the left)
- The right and left fullbacks run forward to play as wingers
- The center midfielder becomes a balance player
- The right midfielder runs forward as advanced player to shape a rhombus
- The opposite midfielder drops back to cover the space and to shape a line of 3 at the back
- The wingers run inside to support the forward and to create space on the flanks



Whoever is the first receiver of the goalkeeper pass (the receiver is likely the center defender on the right, who is supposed to be the most skilled player in this example, or even the dropping back midfielder), this could be another possible rotation to re-shape the team on the field and to progress forward.

- The center defenders shift toward the right side (or the left)
- The right fullback runs toward the middle to overload the center as inverted fullback
- The left fullback runs forward to play as winger
- The center midfielder moves toward the left to give a couple of middle players
- The right midfielder runs forward as advanced player to form an advanced rhombus
- The opposite midfielder drops back to cover the space and to form a line of 3 at the back
- The wingers run inside to support the forward and to create space on the flank



This third example is very close to the "La Volpe Exit," with few, but important different concepts, as the main objective is to overload one side while building up, creating a weak side in the opposition defense, where the opposite winger and fullback can exploit the space.

- The center defenders run toward wider positions just out of the penalty area
- The goalkeeper is the third active player who supports the building up phase
- The center midfielder drops back in a balance position, not between the defenders, but in front of them to be an option
- The right midfielder shifts across and the left one drops back a little toward the flank
- Both the fullbacks run forward
- The winger of the strong side runs inside to overload the center
- The winger on the supposed opposition weak side stays wide
- The forward must attack the goal

1-4-2-3-1

The team shape is basically structured with a classic 4 at the back, 2 center midfielders who start on the same line, 3 advanced players behind 1 forward.

The players are placed inside the spaces and the half spaces, commonly recognized in all the tactical analysis by now.





This is a first example, where a 1-3-3-3-1 formation is developed on the field and it recalls to our mind the Bielsa building from the back idea; further on some pictures of this kind, looking at the formations of Bielsa's Athletic Bilbao and Lille will be analyzed.

- The center defenders run wide to stay positioned between the penalty area and the sidelines
- One of the center midfielders drops back as lower vertex and the other one runs forward as upper vertex; two lines of 3 are now formed
- The fullbacks run forward to play as outer midfielders, forming another line of three in the middle third, together with the midfielder, who moved forward
- The outer advanced midfielder moves wide to have the chance to play combinations with the fullbacks
- The center advanced midfielder and the forward stay placed in the center of the final third to finish, but they don't have to be on the same line; the second forward forms another line of 3, with the outer teammates



This is a further example to shape a 1-3-3-3-1 formation to recall to our mind the Bielsa building up from the back idea on the field again.

- The center defenders move wide on the right (or on the left)
- The center midfielder of the side where the center defender moved runs inside to play as center midfielder
- The opposite center midfielder drops back to cover the space, forming a back line of 3
- The fullbacks run forward to play as outer midfielders, forming another line of three in the middle third, together with the midfielder, who moved forward
- The outer advanced midfielder moves wide to have the chance to play combinations with the fullback
- The center advanced midfielder and the forward stay placed in the center of the final third to finish, but they don't have to be on the same line; the second forward forms another line of 3 with the outer teammates

1-3-5-2

The three-man back line hasn't returned because it never truly went away. It is always in use by one team or another, always an option in emergency.

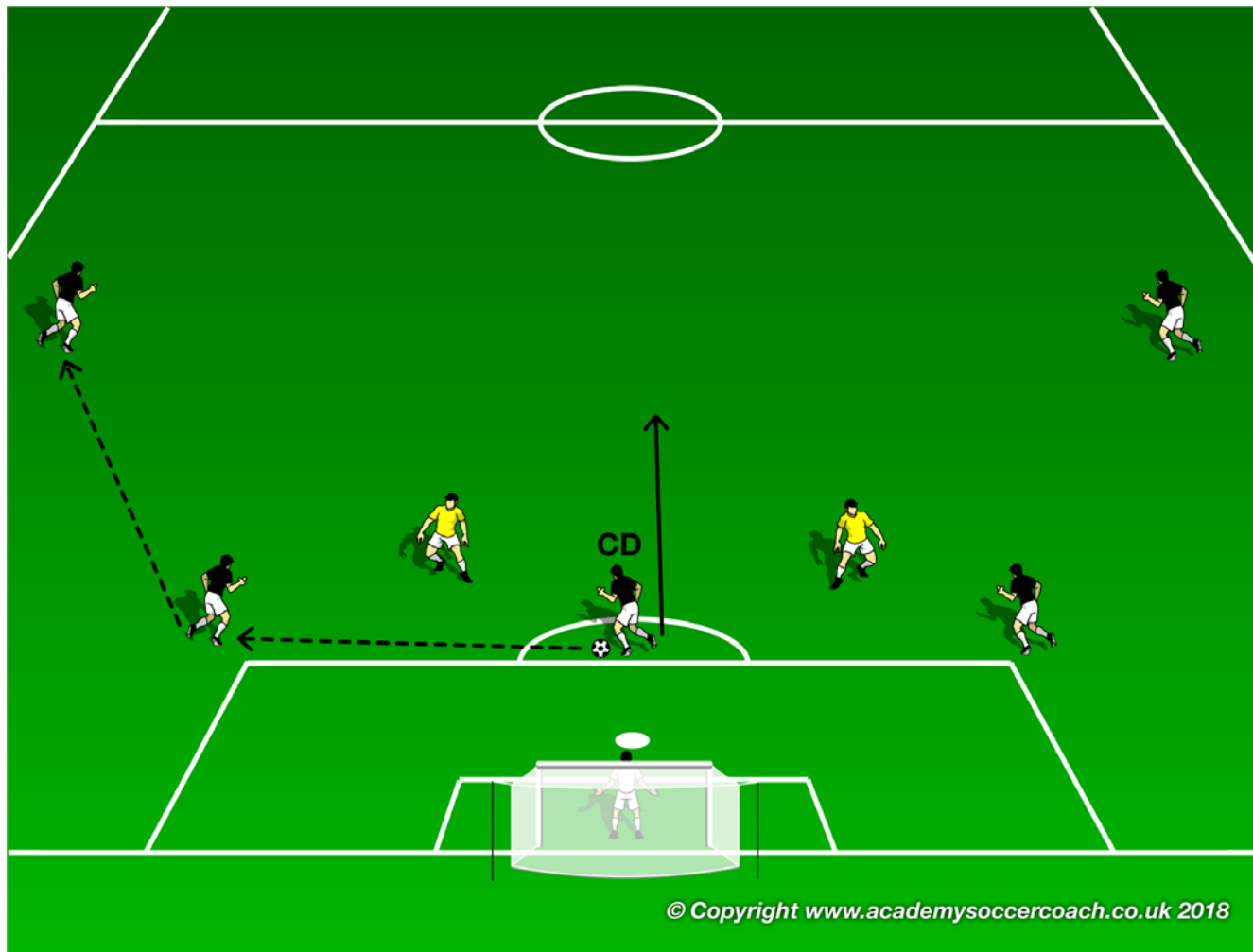
As we will analyze further on in this book, in the progression of La Salida Lavolpiana, the defensive midfielder drops between the center backs, who move into the channels to start the build-up phase and the fullbacks then move further to play as wingers. These exchanges of positions are the fundamentals of the "Juegos de Posicion" and of the occupation of the well-known 5 vertical columns of the pitch.

The position games are built around playing against a 1-4-4-2-defense shape, the most common defense shape. This way a 3 v 2 duel is created at the back, and then a 5 v 4 inside the first third; the numerical advantage is not the only a benefit, as the pitch is made wider to defend for the opposition.



The permanent back 3 was inevitable, following the rise of the building up situations. A good player at playing in both defensive midfield and center back positions is required. The fullbacks must be tasked as wingbacks and to be more technically skilled players. Many wingers are now 'inverted' and they adapt well to being placed more permanently in the channels.

The center backs increased their technical skills and with the fixed 3 at the back, they can push into midfield, as they can be relied upon to play quality passes and to carry the ball up into midfield or out wide. The back 3 is a safer way to defend and to press high as three forwards can equalize the initial numerical disadvantage against the opposition defense.





The starting duel is a 3 v 2 in front of goal: center defender, left center back and right center back against opposition forward. The goalkeeper can be used as link or support player, creating a 4 v 2 duel. The numerical advantage is then sure since the beginning, without any previous player rotation.

If the team is able to overcome the first line of pressure, 7 players can build up play in the middle third and try to finish against 8 opponents. An attacking move, which starts with equal number of players or with a little numerical disadvantage, can be dangerous, moving the ball from a strong side to the opponent's weak one.



If the opposition puts pressure with 3 forwards in the first third of the team in possession, the center defender, the left center back and the right center back together with the goalkeeper, ensure a 4 v 3 numerical advantage. One midfielder can drop back or open a passing lane to create a position game 5 (4+1) v 3 to progress on the pitch.

If the team is able to overcome the first line of pressure, 7 or 6 players can build up the play in the middle third and try to finish against 7 opponents, keeping the team balanced on the field.



If the wingbacks run up the field, one center midfielder must help the defense line, saving it or also dropping back; the other one can support the attacking move behind the forwards. A group of 5 players can now try to finish and score.

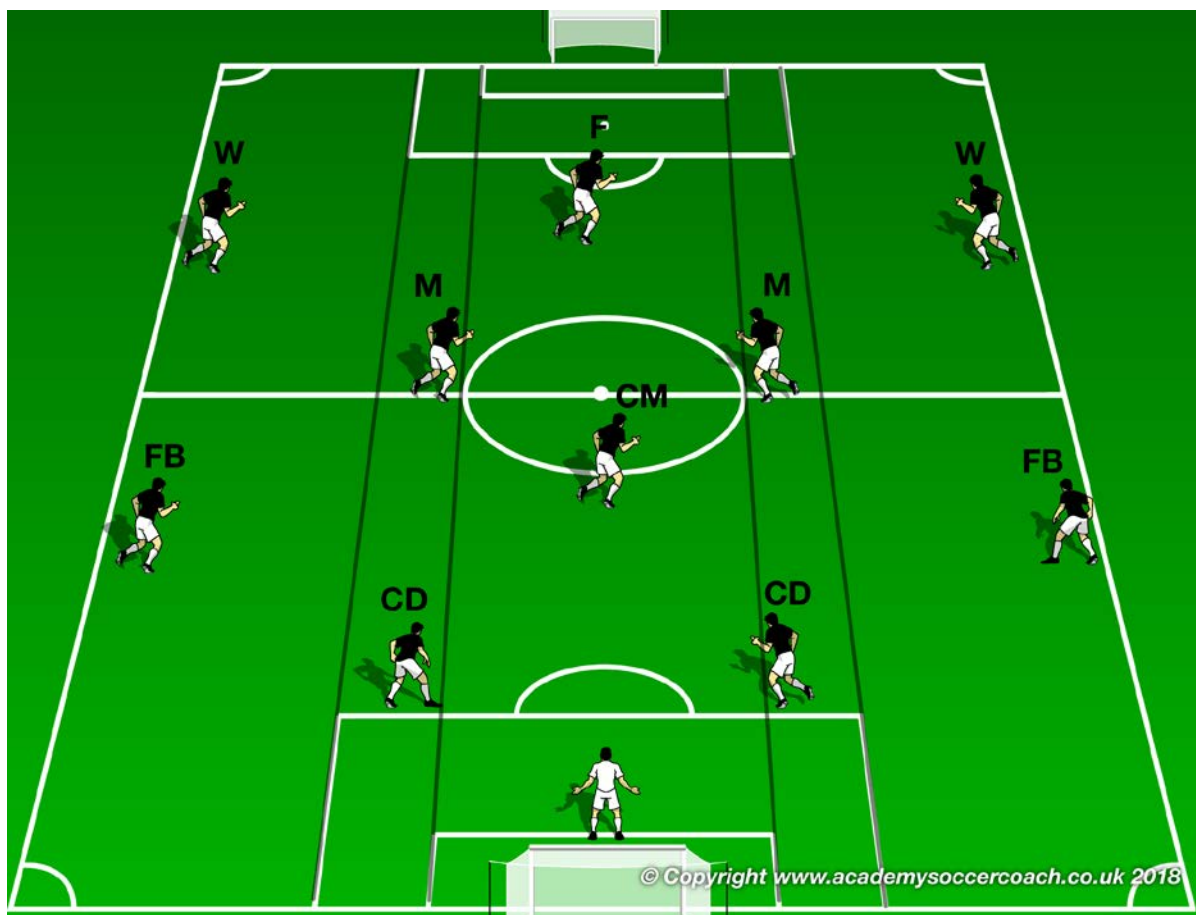
La Salida Lavolpiana - The La Volpe Exit

This term describes the most common way of building up from the back, a concept that is used by the Argentine coach Ricardo La Volpe and that requires a player who drops back into defense line, to create a numerical advantage against the first line of the opponent.

The goalkeeper usually has possession and if a team plays with two center backs and against two forwards, then the center backs split out wide and a midfielder drops back in between them to create a 3 v 2 situation against the forwards. It's actually a 4 v 2 when including the goalkeeper. This line is also a defense line in case of loss of possession, but the main idea is to always have an extra player to help the progression from the first line of the formation into the second one. The dropping midfielder creates this numerical advantage to play a 3 v 2, using again the goalkeeper if the ball can't be moved forward.

The fullbacks are positioned up and wide to receive and to create numerical advantage in the middle third, and a strong side as well, together with the midfielders and a forward who is dropping back from the final third.

Pep Guardiola is possibly the most known advocate of La Salida Lavolpiana and made the concept famous with his Barcelona 2008-2012.





La Volpe created it as a useful way to build up from the goalkeeper, but nowadays it is common pattern of play whoever is the player in possession.



Here is the concept in practice; Sergio Busquets drops in between the two center backs to create multiple 4 v 2 duels against Juventus' strikers, to help progress the play. The duel can be found as 3+gk against the forwards, or the back line of four against the forwards, or a duel with two center Barcelona players (Busquets and Pique) and two midfielders (Iniesta and Rakitic) against two forwards in the middle.

Rondos and position games are so recurrent here.



How the best coaches make or made their team building up from the back

Maurizio Sarri's Sss Napoli (2015-2018)

Napoli always started with a very fluid 1-4-3-3 formation with the players who are free to interchange, especially the front 3. The two defenders are a perfect partnership with Albiol technically skilled and Koulibaly providing power and with a good basic technique.

Sarri has coached perfectly the build up phase, like all the others phases, and the players knew exactly what to do at what point of the game.



When Pepe Reina had the ball the two center backs pushed very wide and Jorginho dropped in between them or in front of them, if they were free from pressure.

Jorginho was the midfield playmaker, setting the rhythm of play, with a very similar passing style to Sergio Busquets.

He used to play in front of the defense line, forming a rhombus, with Pepe Reina as lower vertex and the center defenders as wider support (a 4 v 2 is formed here).



Jorginho also dropped back as a third center defender to create numerical advantage, if the opposition pressed up high or even to invite the opposition pressure, to open space, behind the first line of pressure.



The two fullbacks were very complete in defense and in attack, with Ghoulam always trying to overlap and Hysaj a bit more stationary, but with the same goal of creation of a strong side to move the opposition.



Here again the same 4 v 2 shape to ensure the numerical advantage at the first stage of the move.



Allan is very good as a box-to-box midfielder, helping out in both the phases of play, attacking with Hamsik, an aggressive midfielder, playing almost as shadow striker or often interchanging the positions with Mertens.

He was often involved in the playing out sequences in the middle third after a first phase at the back.



Pep Guardiola's Bayern Munich (2013 - 2016)

The traditional formations become useful only for understanding the foundation of a philosophy; it all depends on the phase of play and opponents, all the rest was about the "Juegos de Posicion".

The moves began at the back, with the distribution of the goalkeeper, Manuel Neuer, and the two center defenders, forming a line of 3 at the back. A series of short passes had the goal to move the opposition defenders and to open the spaces to get through the highest lines of pressure.



The second solution was to organize the beginning of possession phases thanks to a midfielder, dropping between the center defenders, who distributed precisely with the same aim to overcome a first line of pressure.



If this first pressure line couldn't be overcome, due to the closure of passing lanes, the first aim at the back was to move this opposition line to create a weak side where to dribble the ball up.



The center backs with the holding midfielder, or anyway the line of three at the back, often stand inside the opponent's half, as Bayern created overloads during attacking phases. Under Jupp Heynckes, the defenders were positioned an average of 39.5 yards from their own goal; 44.1 yards under Guardiola.



As Bundesliga was a more defensive league than La Liga or now the Premier's league, the building up phase could also be brought until the middle line, as many teams defended deep in their first third, trying to close the spaces in front of the goal.

Manuel Neuer was used to bring up the ball far outside his penalty area in possession phases and he was often already positioned to break up the counterattacks. This allowed Bayern's fullbacks to step up and to support the attacking midfielders.

The creation of numerical advantage has been always one of the main principles of play of Pep Guardiola, all over the pitch and in all the possession phases.

As the opposition pressed high, the starting team shape to play out was made by the goalkeeper at the back, two wider center backs, the organizing midfielder and another dropping back midfielder; in this situation, a 5 v 3 position game was clearly created.



The main difference between the possession style of play that Guardiola gave to his Barcelona and then to Bayern Munich, is:

- the creation of a strong area on the ball, with high density of player of both the teams to find a space out of it then (Barcelona),
- and the creation of a strong side where to invite the pressure of the opposition through the possession to find space on the other side.



Guardiola liked to play with as many midfielders as possible; the fullbacks and wingers had similar qualities to center players, and overloading the central channel was one of the most important points in his coaching philosophy.

The creative midfielders were free to move, to interchange and to combine with the fullbacks and the wingers. The wingers and the central midfielders had close relationships in combination play, always set up to play one-twos down the touchline, after a switch of the side.



Pep Guardiola's Manchester City (current)

The goalkeeper creates numerical advantage to build up and play out (usually a 3 v 2 duel)



If there is no pressure, the back line of three or the center balance midfielder dribbles the ball to invite the opposition out, opening the space at the back.



The center midfielder drops back to create numerical advantage (usually a 4 v 3 or a 5 v 3) against the high pressure of the opposition.

After back passes toward the goalkeeper, Man City is used to fix the ultra offensive pressure in two ways:

- With long kicks of the goalkeeper to the winger (a new solution, not commonly used at Barcelona and Bayern Munich)



- Or through fast combinations inside the first third...



...to free the center balance midfielder.



Manchester City typically has a large average of ball possession, following the principle of controlling the game. Each pass has an underlying intention to open up spaces or moving around opponents; move the ball to move the opponents.

During possession, City is usually shaped in a 3-1-5-1 formation; Fernandinho is positioned in front of the defense, while the fullbacks move high up the pitch, occupying the flanks near David Silva and Kevin De Bruyne.

Fernandinho position is crucial for being able to connect the defense and the advanced players of the team in possession; he must be positioned where he could receive the ball and pass to his teammates ahead of him and occasionally positioned himself in close proximity to the attacking midfielders.

Marcelo Bielsa

Marcelo Bielsa is one of the most exciting and innovative coaches in soccer and his brand of attacking possession-based games, played with a high tempo and often based on a 1-3-3-1-3 formation, has influenced managers like Pep Guardiola, Mauricio Pochettino, and Diego Simeone.

In this first footage, the first two lines of three are those involved throughout the build up phase of play when starting from the goalkeeper. The first line creates a 3 v 2 duel (4 v 2 with the goalkeeper).



The second upper one is placed along the whole width of the pitch, to create further passing options for the back three. The three players of the third line are placed along the half-spaces (two of them), and the last one creates an imaginary vertical middle line, together with the goalkeeper, the center back and the center midfielder.



These are the two main principles of play to build and to play out, which are commonly used by Bielsa with all his teams:

- 1) Move the ball to create a strong side on the field, even with numerical disadvantage, but with high density of players shifting across toward the ball area.



- 2) Players rotate wide and straight-ahead to create space and to play out forward; the fullback is in possession and the right advanced midfielder creates space for the center lower midfielder to run in.



In further footage, we can analyze a different shape to build up of the Athletic Bilbao (2011-2013). Athletic Club reached the finals of both the Europa League and the Copa del Rey and the style of football they played when they were at their peak level was a great trademark of Bielsa football. A 3-1 formation is clear at the back, with a zonal numerical advantage near the opposition forwards (3 v 2) and a wider player in possession; a line of 4 shapes the further line of possession to progress.



There was a focus on passing out from the back, with the two center backs coming deep to collect the ball and the fullbacks pushing wide and only moving forward, when there was space to exploit, whether on the outside or the inside of the winger ahead. A holder, a runner and a playmaker formed a three man midfield sector.





Bielsa often used midfielders in the defensive line for Chile, believing they were more mobile than some of his centre-backs, and also better at starting the moves. These were the main principles of play:

- 1) Use diagonal passes to play toward a close area
- 2) Use vertical pass to play through the zones
- 3) Midfielders move along vertical channels
- 4) Wingers stayed placed close to the flank, stretching the opposition line
- 5) Forwards shifted across a free area (wide or center)
- 6) Overload a flank with the fullback, the winger, two midfielders and the forwards

To play out from the back against the ultra offensive pressure of the opposition, the first aim was to create a numerical advantage overloading the ball area; a 5 v 3 can be recognize here, as well as a potential 2 v 1 just out of the penalty area.



The second objective was to play in between the lines as soon as possible, to overcome at least one line of the opposition, finding the time to turn and play forward.



This is another sequence and progression to play out under pressure; again overloading the ball area,



and changing the side of the first third, toward the opposite fullback, through the goalkeeper.

