

DEFEND LIKE THE PRO'S

THE DEFENDING TACTICS OF **JURGEN KLOPP** AND **PEP GUARDIOLA**



by Luca Bertolini

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Guardiola

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1st Leg Introduction

In this match, the defenses beat attacks. The first leg was a very peculiar match, considering the attacking style soccer of Jürgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola.

The three previous matches between Liverpool and Manchester City had created thrilling results: 5-0 for City in January 2018, 4-3 for Liverpool in the second leg of Premier League, and 3-0 for Liverpool in the Champions League quarter-final first leg in April. They were the Premier League unbeaten leaders in this early match of the season. The managers' respect for each other and the missed penalty in the first minutes by Mahrez created a more tense 90 minutes than ever.

Liverpool's wins were based on two three-goal blitzes in each game (3 in 9' in the first game and 3 in 19' in the second, scored through intense pressure by the attacking trio of (Firmino, Manè and Salah).

In this first leg we are going to analyze, Guardiola tried not to let it happen again if we pay attention to his words after the match: "If it is an open game at Anfield, you don't even have one percent of a chance. Up and down, they are the best team in the world in these offensive/defensive transitions; it [Liverpool] is built for that. In those situations they are much better."

Citizens were still looking for attacking options, but they were more conservative, slowing down the rhythm of play, trying to engage Liverpool inside more calm open play situations.

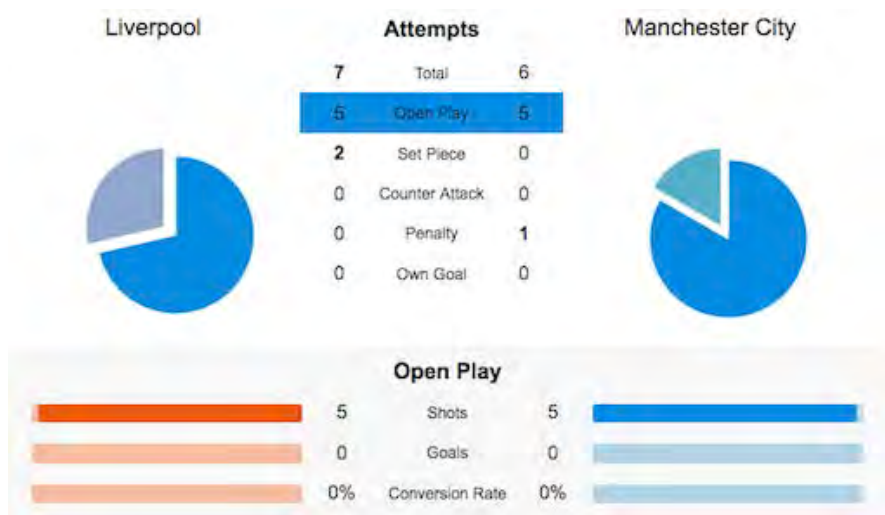
No Premier League match this season had fewer shots, three, in the first half so far. The first shot on target came from City's Mahrez in the 62nd minute, followed by one from Liverpool's Mohamed Salah 35" later.

Some data are very explicative to explain the 0-0 draw:

The attempts to score were very few, considering the styles of Liverpool and Manchester City, which always try to attack, although through different ways.



The chances coming from open play situations, which is a normal trend for both teams, even if with different basic tactical ideas, were very poor.



The complete lack of counter attacks, especially on Liverpool side, confirms that the first aim was not to concede scoring chances to the opposition.



Liverpool's 1-4-3-3 was positioned with blocked center backs (Van Dijke and Lovren), the fullbacks constantly pushing forward (Robertson and Gomez), two alternate balance midfielders (Henderson and Wijnaldum), one advanced midfielder with pressure tasks (Milner) and three close forwards (Manè, Salah and Firimino, who used to drop back into the midfield zone) to create space on the flanks for the fullbacks inside the final third, when in possession. The same formation structure was maintained also to face the opposition possession phase, pressing high or dropping into a mid-block.

Klopp's squad played without the usual high pressure after the first 25', countering the building up phase of Manchester City only when playing with the goalkeeper.



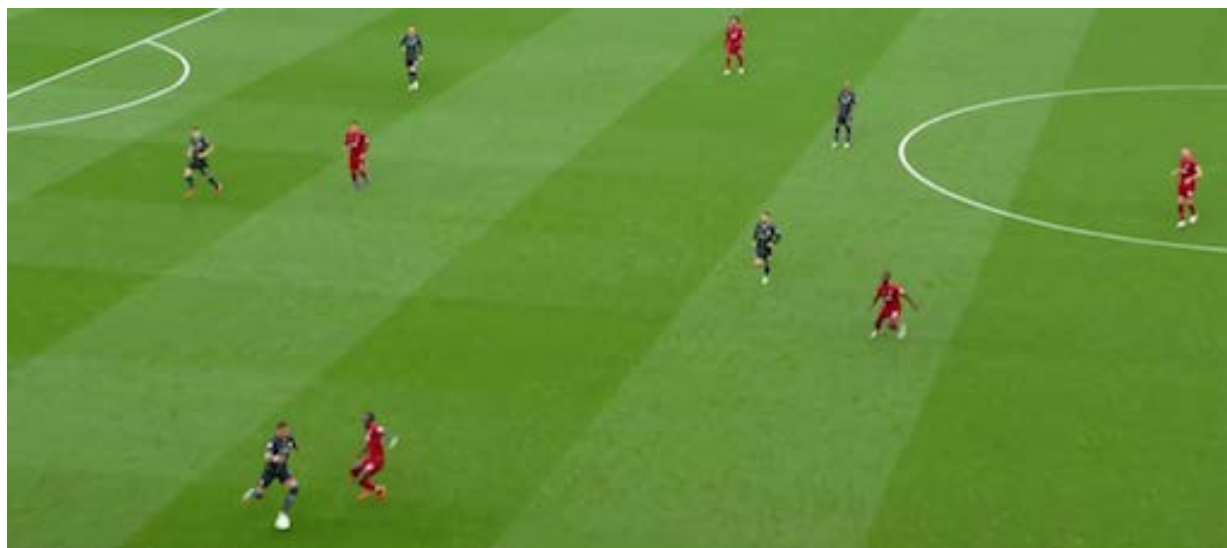
A defensive middle block was preferred to prevent City from progressing forward to Bernardo Silva and David Silva...



...playing 1 v 1 duels against the opponents in possession...



...in the middle third...



...along the flanks...



...and in the final third.



Manchester City's 1-4-2-3-1 turned to a 1-4-4-1-1 (2) without possession, as the inverted wingers (Mahrez and Sterling) dropped back to cover the flanks and David Silva (21) was usually placed behind the only center forward Aguero (10). Mendy (22) was often placed high to support the attacking move, leaving a line of three at the back (Danilo, Stones and Laporte). Fernandinho (25) played as a balance player, as usual, and Bernardo Silva (20) was left free to move and to receive throughout the middle third.

Despite Guardiola's classic defending masterpieces, such as the creation of strong side around the ball...



...and the pressure on the opposition ball carrier,



Manchester City preferred to defend deeper inside their own half. This choice was exactly the opposite from what was known about his teams. The space coverage was the first tactical choice just after a pressure transitions phase instead of reinforcing the same pressure phase if it was not effective at the beginning. Guardiola chose to defend back rather than defend high.



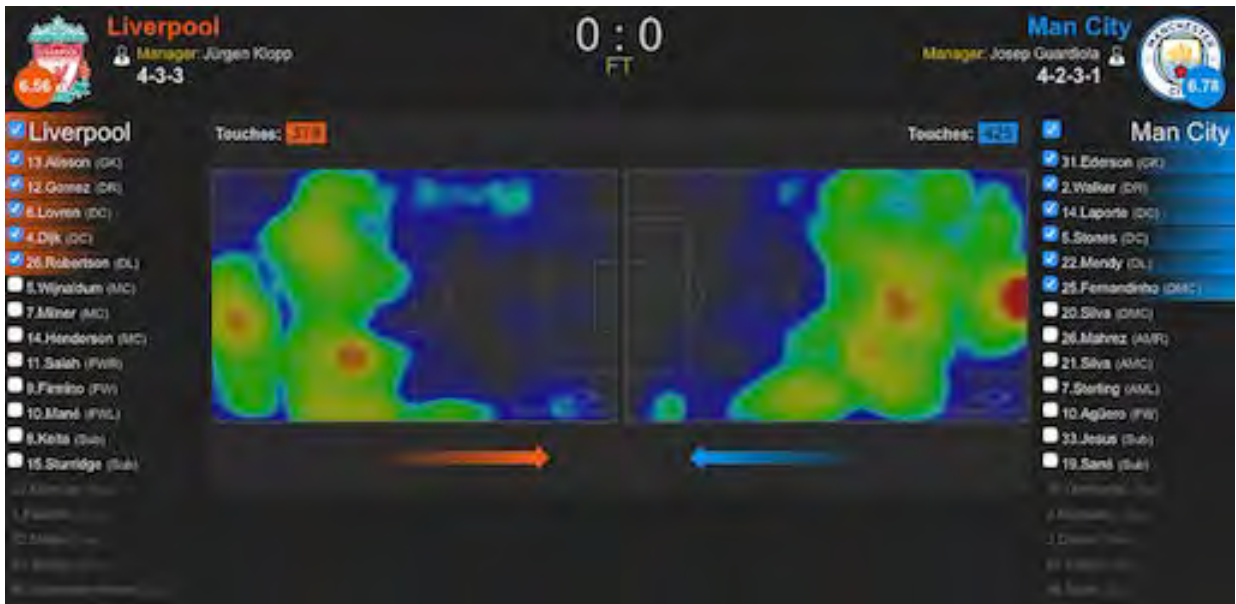
City played two close lines of four in the final third to prevent Liverpool's front three from running in behind the defense line. This positioning caused many problems for the Reds' finishing phase, as Firmino, Manè and Salah often had to drop back deep to receive the ball.



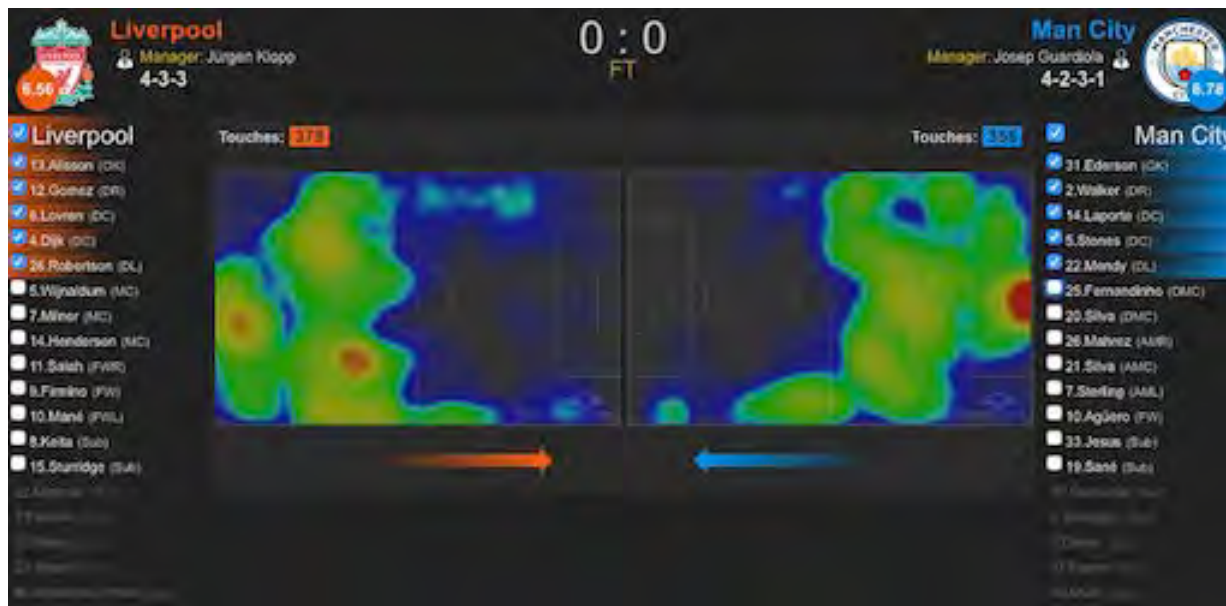
The 1-4-4-1 became similar to a 1-5-3-1-1 when the opposition move was played near the 18 yard box; the back four remained place narrow inside the box, and one of the midfielders shifted across the ball area (Bernardo Silva is countering Manè in the following example), when outside, to help the dropping winger. This allowed the fullback to stay placed near the center back.



The importance of the balance midfielder for Guardiola is one of the characteristics of his Barcelona seasons (Busquets first, then Xavi Alonso). Looking at the defenders' heat map with Fernandinho, the balance players of these Man City years,

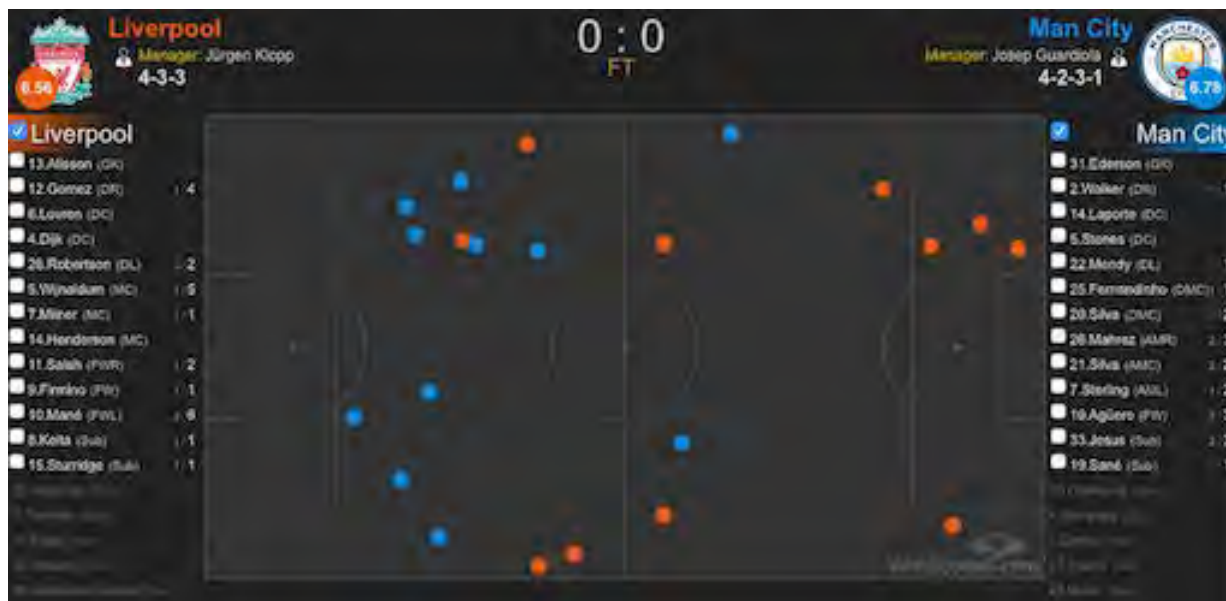


or without him. The cover role in front of the defense line and along the left side of the field, as this flank usually faces more attacks, becomes very clear.

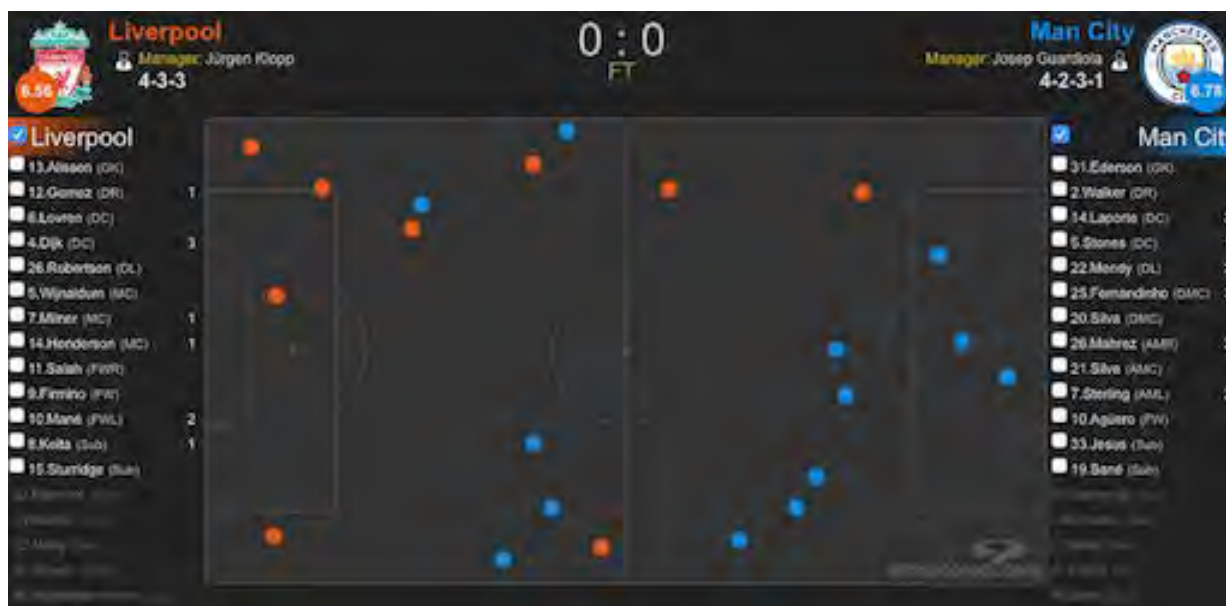


1st leg defending data

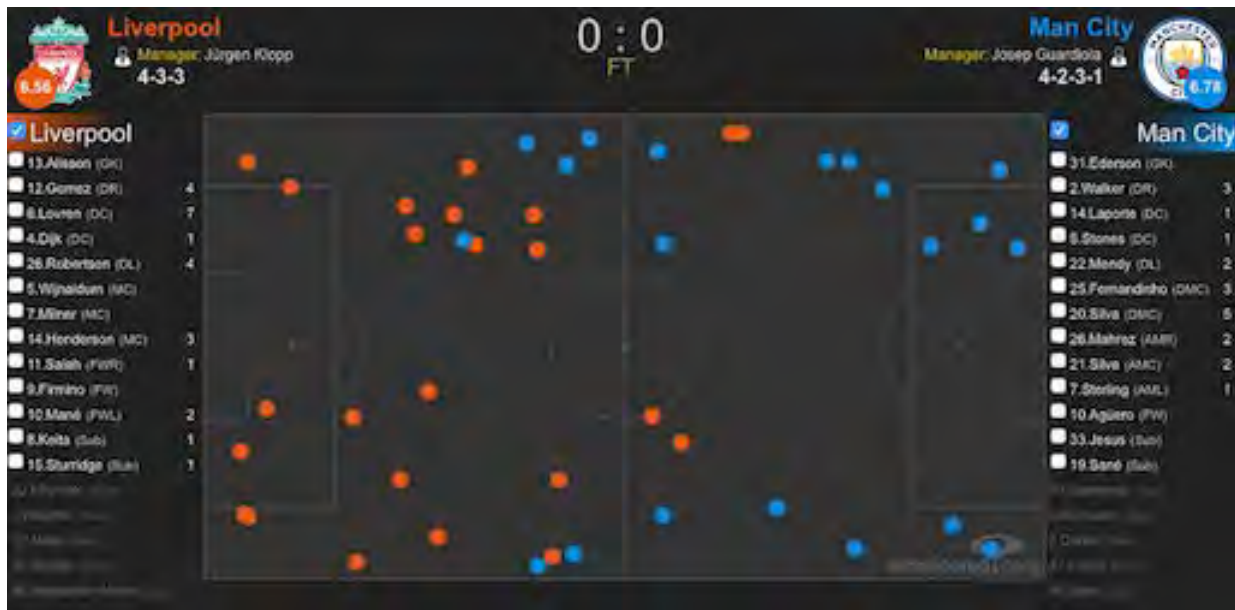
Looking at the dispossession data, we realize that Liverpool defended more inside their own half too, despite the usual high pressure, avoiding direct duels in the middle third. City recovered the ball on the flanks more than all the other zones of the field, as Liverpool tried to exploit the sides, through the offensive players' speed. The narrow back four saved the final third and the goal space as plotted by Guardiola.



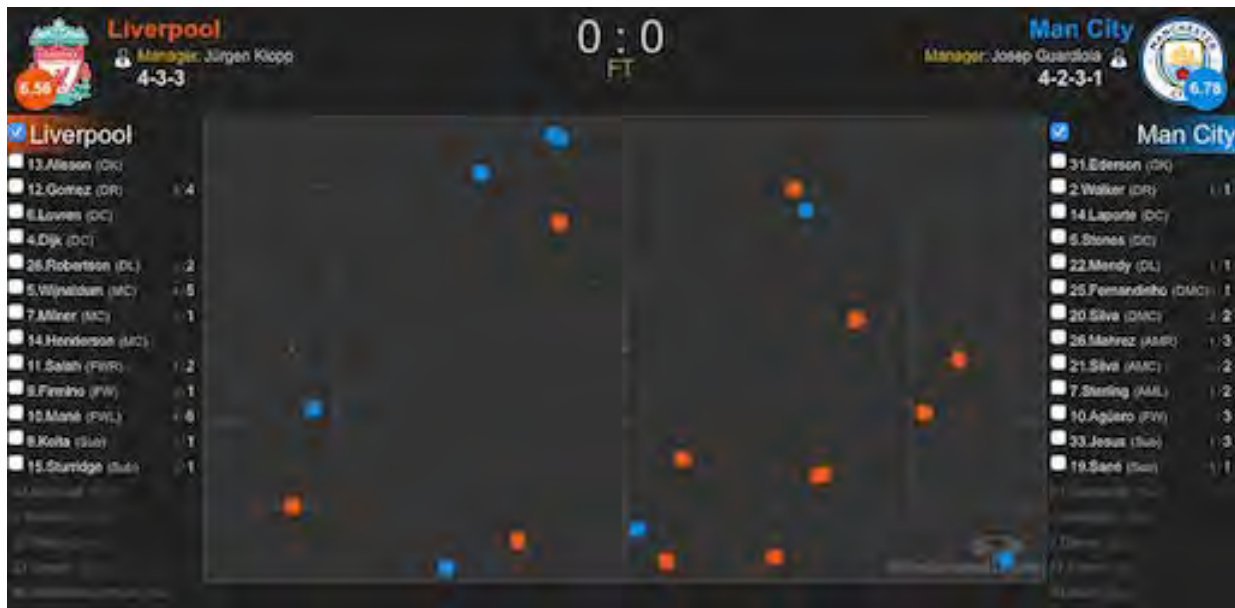
From the interceptions data, we see that Man City recovered the possession on the center left, as Liverpool tried to press and attack their left fullback Mendy inside the box, catching the long aerial in behind passes toward Salah. Both teams tended to close the space in the middle third, forcing the opposition possession out, rather than counter the opponents through direct duels.



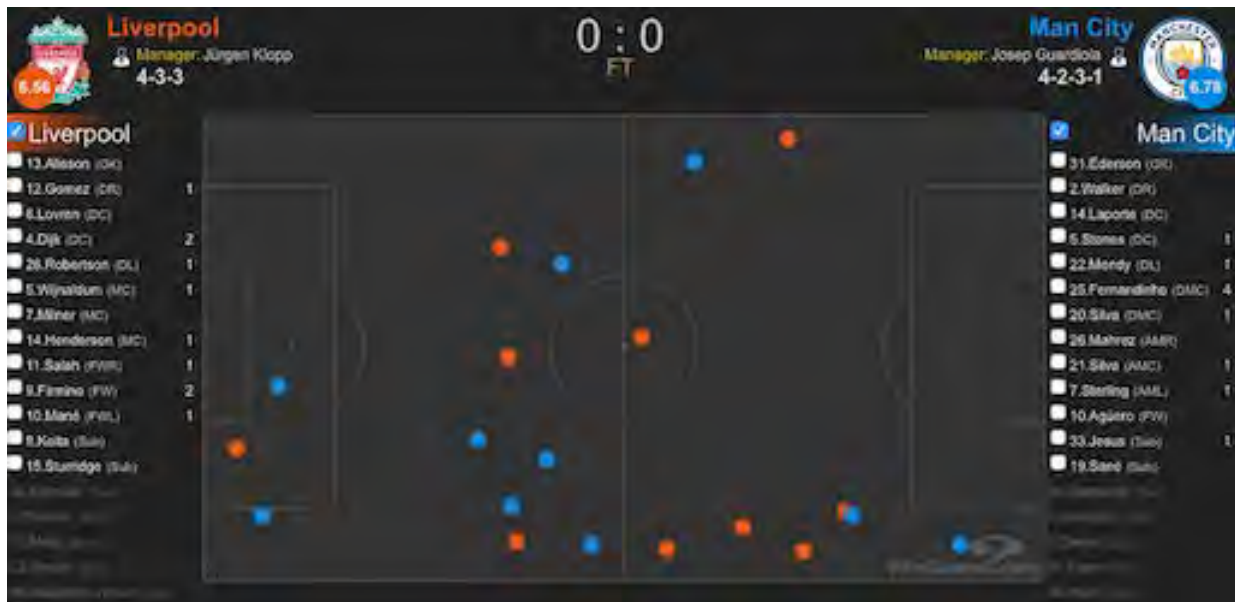
Tackles data are again very explicative; counter directly inside the defensive half and outside and cover the final third to avoid through passes in behind of the back line.



The turnover data confirm what we were talking about before: Liverpool looked at the left side of Manchester City as the easier zone to win the ball back and to try to attack along the side or to build up possession phases. On the other side these data show that City defended much deeper than usual, pressing the opposition while building up but paying attention to shape a close 4-4 formation during the phases without possession if Liverpool could progress.

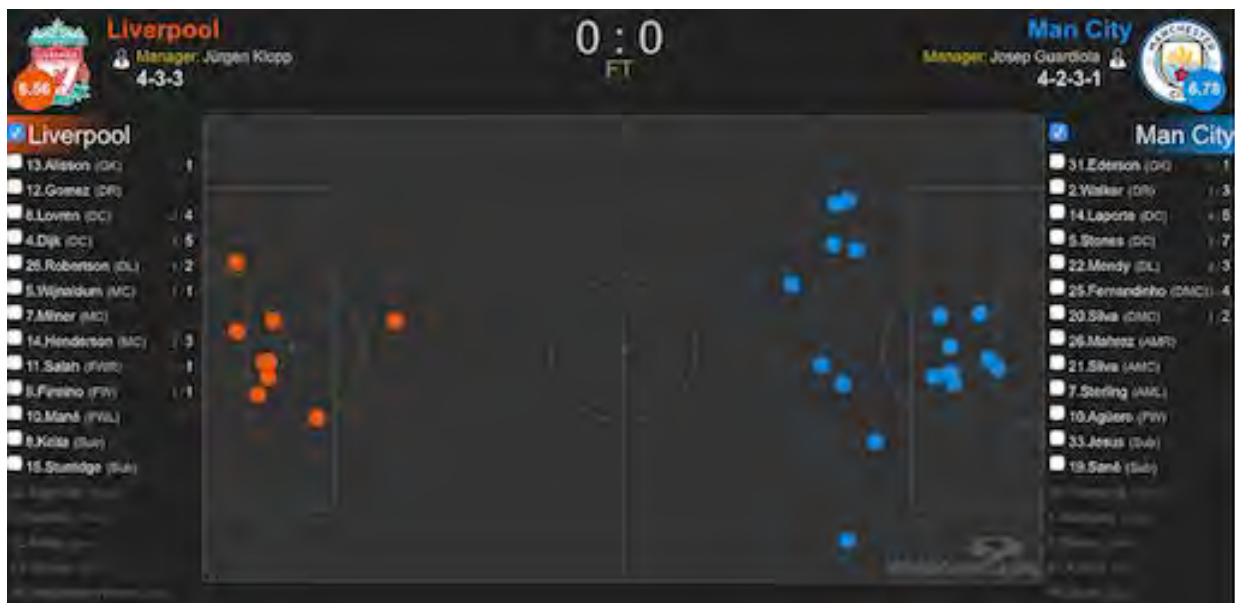


The overloading of the left side by Manchester City and the attacking trend down the right side of Liverpool are confirmed by the fouls map.

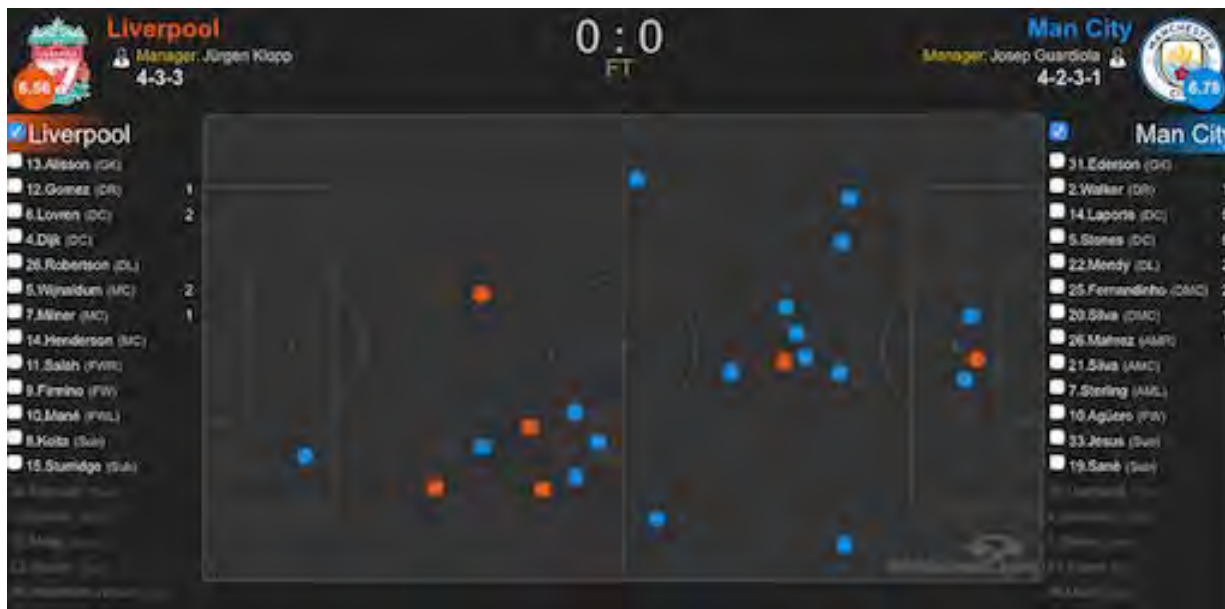


To protect the first third from the speed skills of Liverpool's advanced players and the through pass ability of Manchester City were the main objectives for both teams.

In this following picture, we show the head clearance data. It's clear how Manchester City had to fight against long balls toward the box or, anyway, in behind the defense line. The few head clearances of Liverpool defense came from corner kicks and few crosses.



The aerial duels heat map shows us Manchester City was able to defend very well the final third, being able to stop the attacking long passes out of the box and defending well also along the flanks (left one moreover), against the switches of side of Liverpool. As usual, long balls were used by Manchester City to move the opposition through safe passes rather than to take the move to the final stage.



Feet clearances show that Liverpool defended deeper inside the box to defend against Manchester City passing combinations. On the other side, Manchester City countered the opposition attempts trying to close the moves outside of the box or as far as possible from the goal.



The very few offside calls of the match confirm that the defense lines were placed deeper than usual for both teams.



2nd leg introduction

In the second leg, Pep Guardiola set his team up in their usual 1-4-3-3 basic formation, with Fernandinho as the deepest of three central midfielders and Leroy Sane and Raheem Sterling providing attacking width.

Americ Laporte played as pushing up left fullback, helping the overload of Sanè side, and Danilo on the right completed the line of three at the back when City was in possession. Stones and Kompany acted as blocked center backs.

Liverpool tried to force the direction of opposition possession toward the right side, to prevent City from exploiting the left one.

As Roberto Firmino permanently blocked the passes lanes toward Fernandinho...



...Bernardo Silva dropped back to support the teammate shaping a 4-2-3-1 practically.



Out of possession and when not pressing high on the field, City utilized the same 1-4-2-3-1 structure.



City didn't lose the usual high-pressure characteristics, aggressively pressing Liverpool's back line and Lovren, when in possession, more than the other center back Van Dijk. They looked at him as the weak factor of the opposition, while building up from the back, because of his lower technical level and because of City trends to overload the left side, which took them to prefer to win the ball back along Laporte and Sanè side.



In this further example, the direction of play was forced toward Lovren again; Aguero was covering the passing toward Allison, David Silva was along the pass lane toward Van Dijk, Bernardo Silva and Sanè were ready to press Lovren on the right side of Liverpool first third.



Sterling vs. Robertson...



...and Sane vs. Arnold, the wingers locked on to their respective fullbacks...



...and Aguero often was placed near Virgil Van Dijk position to left Dejan Lovren, whose distribution was inconsistent throughout, as Liverpool's free man in the back line, before pressing him, when in possession. The same situation we already saw before.



As it was done in the first leg, Manchester City's first third defense was planned to be narrow and close lines, as back four and midfield lines were very compact, countering the overload of the center final third planned by Liverpool and preventing the opposition forwards from dropping deep; the only conceded movements were to drop back, as Manè was doing in this example.



Many deep playing attempts were easily covered and the receiver was then double marked, as Salah against Stone and Fernandinho in this picture.



Without the ball, Liverpool utilized a 1-4-3-3 in the first half, which was shifted into a 1-4-2-3-1, when Fabinho was included into the 11 on the field in the second half.



The mid-block of 6 players didn't press high the opposition, giving City the time to build up; some tactical pattern can be recognized anyway. Salah blocked off the passing lane toward Laporte side, trying to avoid the beginning of the overload of that side and again it's possible to see Firmino covering the passing lanes toward Fernandinho.



Stones, Bernardo Silva and Fernandinho were much more pressed than Kompany, as Liverpool clearly wanted the Belgian centre-back to distribute the ball into midfield. Liverpool tactical ideas seemed to be forcing the direction of building up phase toward the overload left side of Manchester City, to avoid any changes of play toward this side from the right and to avoid making this part a weak side of defense space.



Leroy Sanè was too tightly marked to make the most of forward passes,



while the tireless work of Liverpool's central midfielders ensured progress of the opposition move was limited, if Laporte or even David Silva received the ball.



The overload of attacking left side that was plotted by Manchester City made Liverpool's defensive unit slightly shifted to their right. This pattern of play naturally increased the space on Liverpool's left, where former Red Raheem Sterling maintained full width.

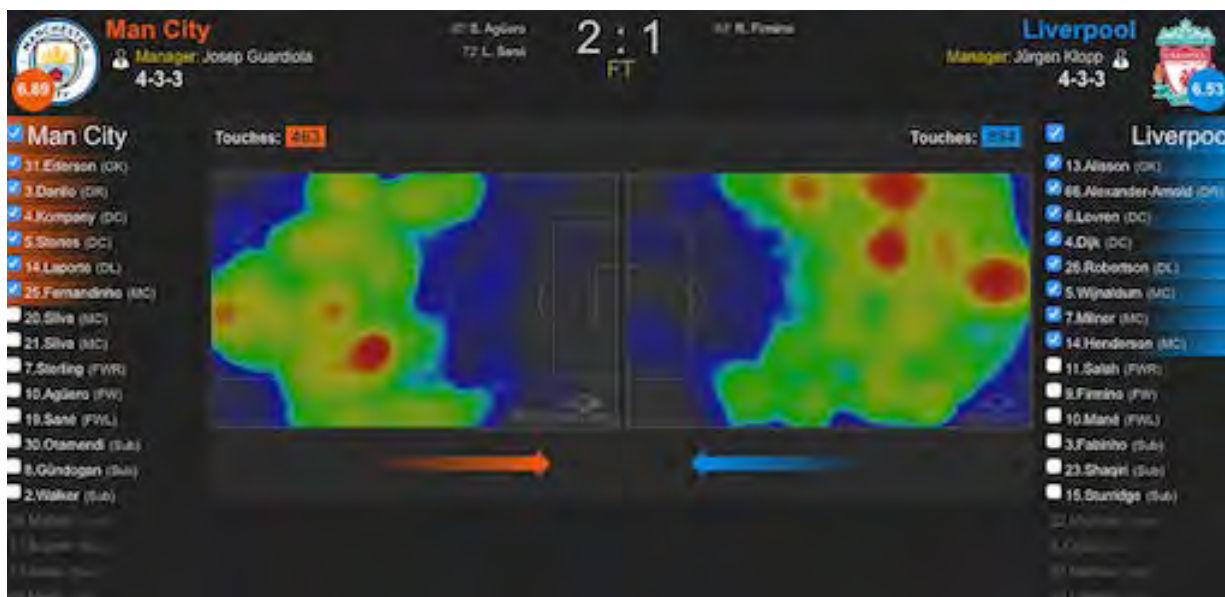
To stretch Liverpool back line was one the attacking objectives of wide wingers, but City rarely took advantage of the switch from the left side toward the right one...



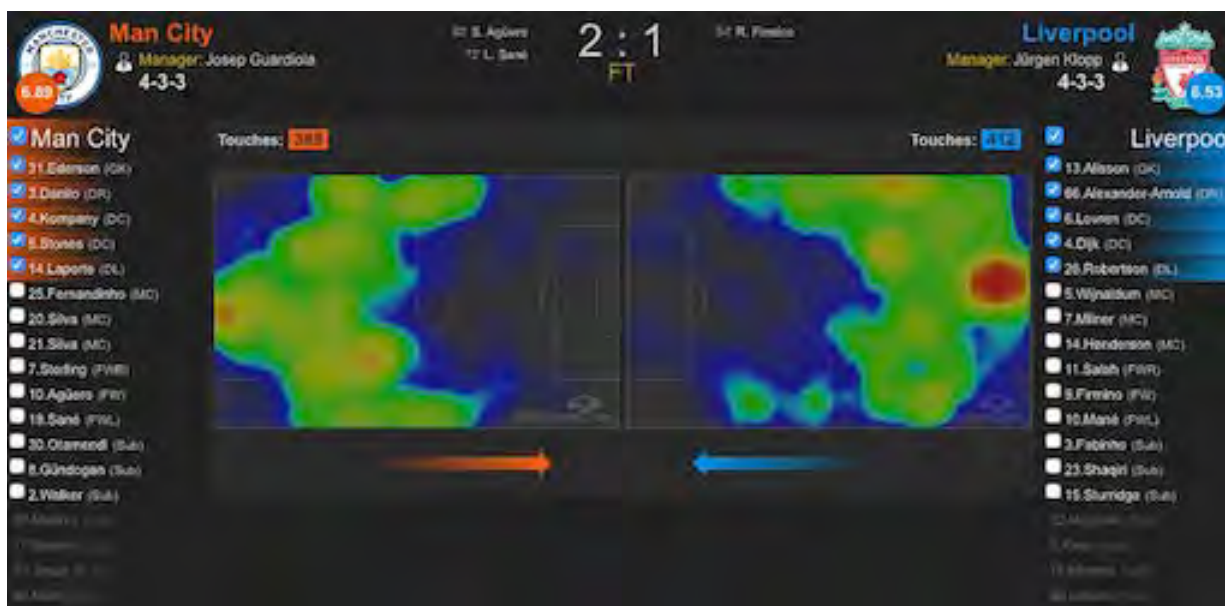
...where Andy Robertson would have had to deal with Sterling, defending an enlarged space.



The heat maps of the defending/balance players of Liverpool are very important; the overload of the attacking left side of Manchester City can be understood by the red zones on the right defending side of Liverpool, where the midfielders had to shift across to counter the opposition.



Looking at the heat map without Liverpool midfielders and without City's Fernandinho, we can realize how the Brazilian had to balance the left overload on the right side (red zone up here) and how the midfield block of Liverpool was compact and narrow, shifting all over the field's width.



It's also very clear that Liverpool had to defend the depth on the center right and Man City concentrated the back four inside the center first third to counter the front three of Liverpool. The Citizens' wingers tracked back the opposition fullbacks to allow Laporte and Danilo to help the center backs.

2nd leg defending data

The basic match data confirm that the second leg was less tactical than the previous one and that open play allowed both teams to finish more than in the first match.



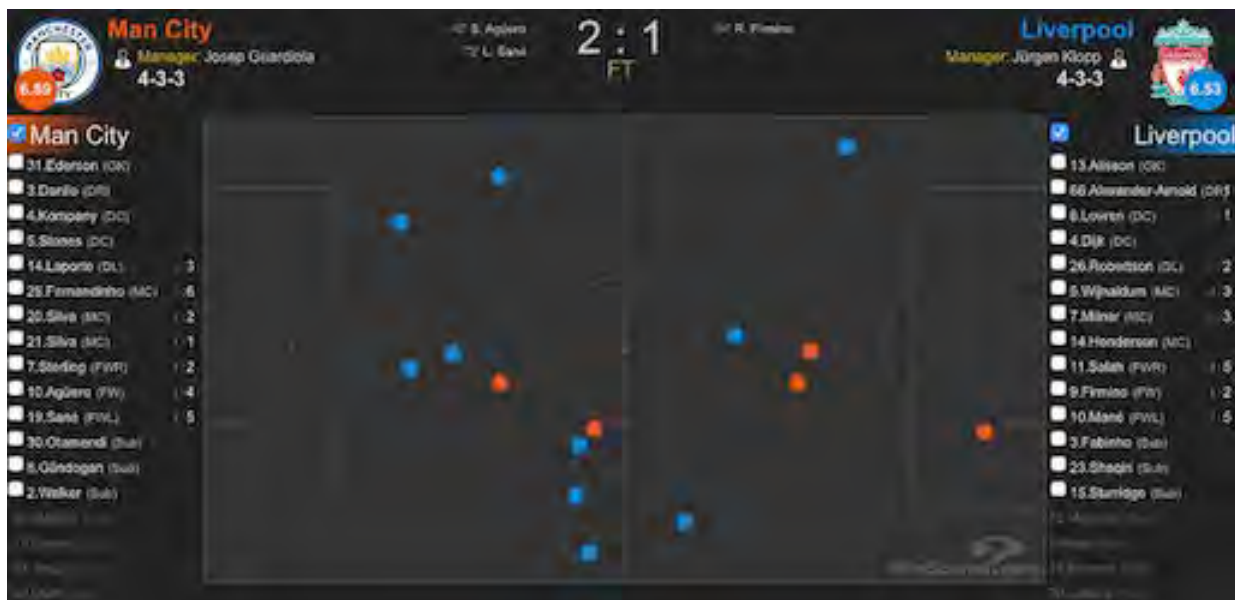
The defense situations against the open play created never ending transition phases on the field, and much more through the middle third...



...as the only real counter attack of the match led to the winning goal of Manchester City, thanks to Sanè.

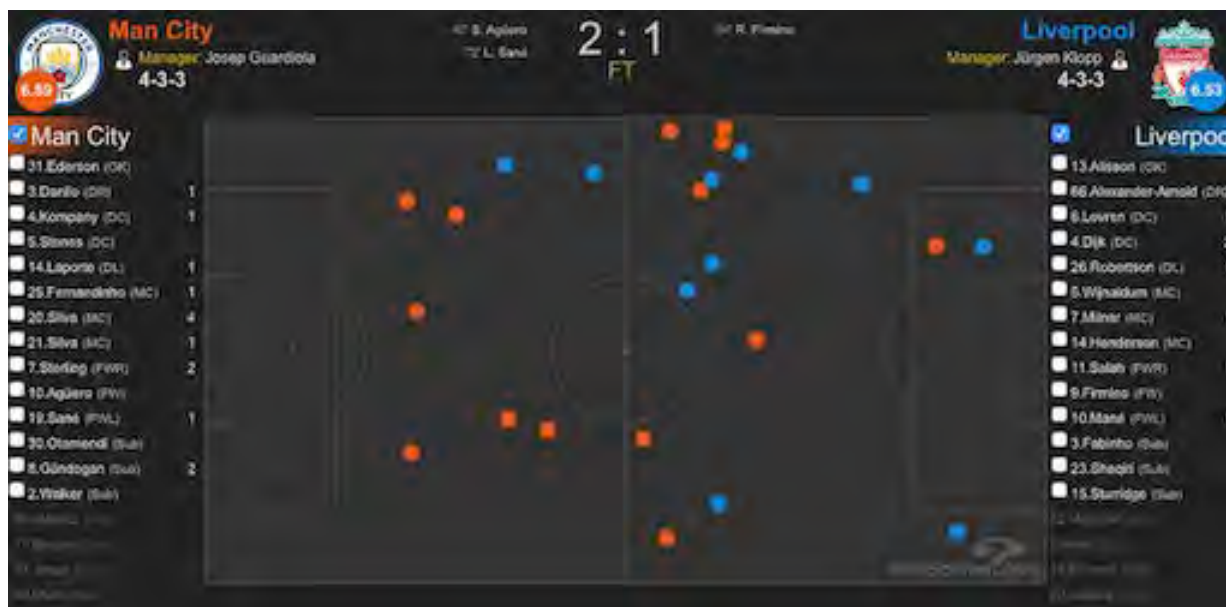


Looking at the dispossession data, we can realize that City was able to keep the possession much more than in the first leg and that Guardiola's team learned how press high Liverpool building up, but without opening spaces at the back, as the ball was usually won inside the middle third. City won almost all the duels; on the other hand, it's clear that the lower pressure of Liverpool didn't allow Klopp's squad to regain the possession very often.

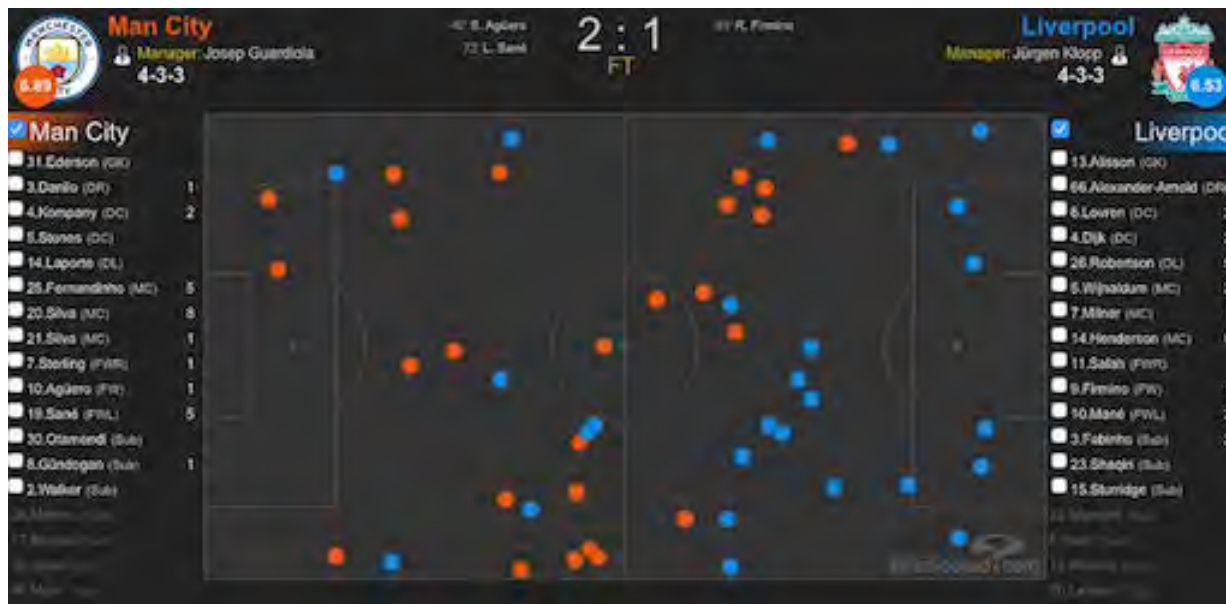


The interception heat map confirms again the left side of the attacking phase overload by Manchester City and how Liverpool was forced to defend shifting across the right side of the field. Despite the good number of interceptions for Klopp's Reds, the first goal of the match was the result of combination play along that flank.

On the other side, the interceptions of Manchester City are clearly a proof of the center-oriented attacking phase of Liverpool, as the flanks were utilized for building up, trying to play in behind the narrow defense shape of citizens to finish.

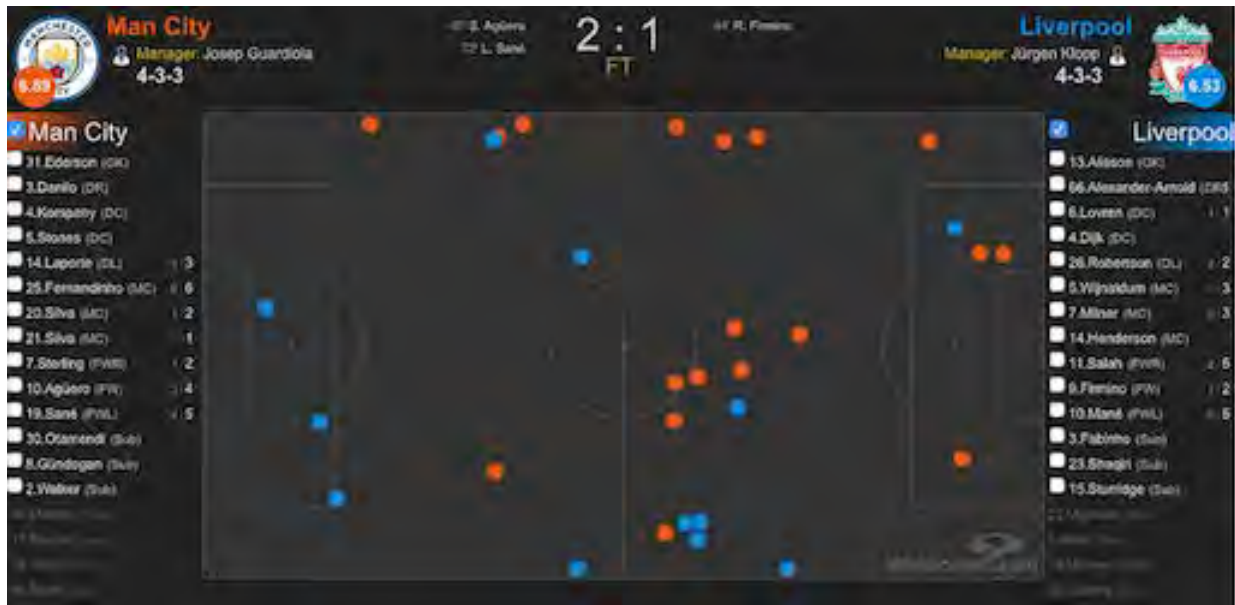


Tackles data are another proof that Liverpool shaped a middle third block, rather than pressing high. Guardiola's team's top level technical performance in building up forced Liverpool to defend deeper, and, on the other side, the high pressure of Man City had the goal to slow down and to delay the possession phase of Liverpool, then trying to counter it directly in the middle third.



Klopp's team was anyway enough good to provoke mistakes during City possession phase in the middle third, exploiting the lower mid block of six players we already analyzed before; the average of turnovers shows how Liverpool was good at pressing inside the defense half.

Again, the number of turnovers shows the trend of Manchester City in playing toward the center left part of the field.



Committed fouls are another proof of a middle third battle and how City prevent Liverpool from playing in behind, stopping the attempts as soon as possible, if the ball was not recovered.



These are the head clearances data that shows how Manchester City had to fight again against long balls toward the box or anyway in behind the defense line, as in the first leg. The few head clearances of Liverpool defense came from corner kicks or switches of side from the left to right, when Sterling was served on the run from the overload opposite flank. These data are interesting, to notice even better that the second leg was more open play and possession oriented match, then the first one, when both teams thought about how not to concede goals (playing long balls to keep the midfielders in more defensive positions), rather than looking a way to score.



Man City was much better on aerial duels on Liverpool...



Feet clearances increased in this second leg and they were located much deeper inside the defensive third; this means that both teams arrived to the final stage of the match much easier than in the first leg, thanks to a more open play style.



The fewer offside fouls, than in the first match, confirm that the defense lines were placed deep, following a tactical solution of the first leg that helped both teams to not concede goals.



Goals Succession Analysis

Manchester City 1 - Liverpool 0

Despite the overload of the left side of Manchester City's attacking direction and of Liverpool's right defense block (a general numerical advantage for the Reds is very clear), the wingers and the wide combinations isolated the defenders into 1 v 1 duels (Laporte has the possession against Arnold, in this first picture)...



...or 2 v 2 duels on the ball (Bernardo Silva is dribbling against Wijnaldum and David Silva is countered by Arnold, who could have double the mark against the ball carrier).

The movement of Sergio Aguero, who was coming back from an offside position, proved very important for the developments of this first goal move.



Bernardo Silva was able to dribble to the end line, Wijnaldum didn't cover the inside pass lane toward the box; Arnold didn't double the mark and he didn't cover the goal first pole space.

Aguero was positioned between the center backs; Lovren couldn't see him and Van Dijke left him free to move without the ball.



Bernardo Silva could play an inside pass toward Aguero, who moved behind and from this side, overcoming Lovren, while he was only looking at the ball position.



Aguero anticipated the direct opponent and Van Dijk did not double the mark on him or close the shooting lane toward the goal. Lovren was not placed between the potential receiver and the goal to save; this way Aguero could turn freely, while receiving, to prepare the shot on goal.



Even if Allison was properly placed on the first pole to save the goal, Aguero had the time to shot under the crossbar to score the first goal.



Manchester City 1 - Liverpool 1

Liverpool's draw goal was an example of the new patient possession phase, which gave an alternative way of play to the usual vertical direct attacking style that characterized the Reds during last seasons. This attacking move was not forced, as the spaces were closed in the first stages of the finishing phase.



Midfielders, forwards and fullbacks were all placed inside the attacking half; the shape is clearly planned to create wide possession and to attack the goal thanks to three center forwards, who invited the opposition defense to be placed narrow in the center, leaving spaces outside.



A first switch of side from the right to the left was played to move the opposition defense; Firmino was placed wide to occupy Laporte and Wijnaldum ran deep against Danilo, opening a space on the attacking left flank for Robertson. Salah was placed between the center backs (Stones and Kompany).



City was able to shift across quickly and to cover the left side (6 v 3 for the citizens is clear in the picture); the center midfielders of Liverpool 1-4-2-3-1 in the 2nd half were in support and City midfielders were far away from the ball. Fernandinho dropped back along the defense line, Bernardo Silva and David Silva couldn't press the ball carriers.



Arnold could receive on the right again and exploit Sanè's wrong defense action, turning inside. (Sanè tried to rebound a potential cross pass, while the opponent was changing direction toward the center).



Three close attacking players (Firmino, Salah and Wijnaldum) forced the back four to save the box in a 4 v 3 duel; again, another exploitable space was opened on the left side of Liverpool final third. Sanè was again too much passive against the opponent, who could switch the side easily toward Robertson.



Danilo was on late in covering the space in behind, Ederson couldn't go out of the goal space to catch the ball and Kompany didn't follow the movement of Firimino toward the second pole...



...and the Reds number 9 scored easily.



The draw goal summed up some new characteristics of Liverpool possession phase (patient build up to move the opposition, overload the center final third to open spaces for the fullbacks and finish inside the 18 and 6y boxes). On the other side, the deeper defense of Manchester City made the opposition move easier, staying placed too close to the goal.

Manchester City 2 - Liverpool 1

The pressure phase of Liverpool's forwards that started inside the middle third was not followed properly by the center midfielders of the 1-4-2-3-1 formation in the second half, leaving space to dribble up for Danilo.



All the five attacking players of Manchester City could face the opposition goal and Sterling could dribble the ball easily on the other side of the midfield line. The Red's back four line was quite compact in covering the depth, but Arnold had to control Aguero, as the center backs were busy while looking at Sterling, who was dribbling inside and Bernardo Silva, who could have ran in behind in the middle.



Arnold decided to track Aguero, rather than leaving him offside and closing the passing lane toward Sanè on the left side; Manè was too far away to counter Sanè or to intercept the ball. Sterling could play without effective pressure also.



Sanè could receive inside the left part of the 18y box, as Arnold was on late and couldn't cover the goal space properly...



...and he scored exploiting that space, toward the second pole of Allison goal.

