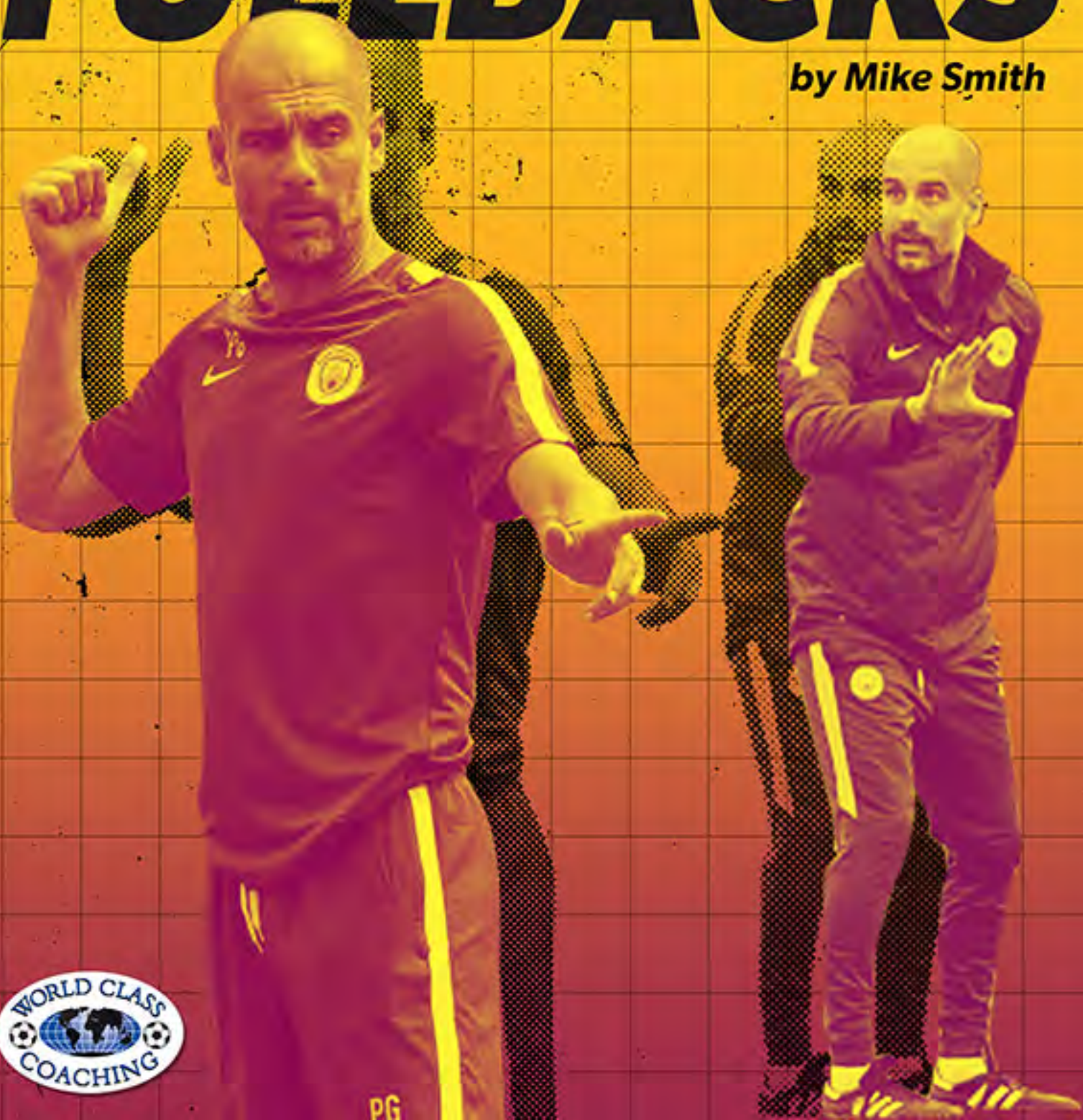


HOW PEP GUARDIOLA WINS WITH

INVERTED FULLBACKS

by Mike Smith



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How Pep Guardiola Wins with Inverted Fullbacks

Right now Manchester City is on an unprecedented streak of play at one of the highest levels of soccer. While there are many reasons for this, the major point of focus has been their use of the inverted fullback, which Jonathan Wilson in his article for the Guardian called “flying fullbacks.” Pep Guardiola has always been known as a tactician and this year perhaps more than any other, his Man City side are proving him to be a master.

The following is not an analysis of Manchester City or Pep Guardiola as a whole, but a breakdown of how they are using inverted fullbacks to win games, and how your team can do it as well. The breakdown, which will include diagrams and game footage, will look at 6 areas – What is the Inverted Fullback, What are the Conditions Required to Make Them Work, What are the Tactical Advantages, What are the Tactical Disadvantages, Fluidity, and How to Implement Inverted Fullbacks into Your System.

Chapter 1: What is the Inverted Fullback?

An inverted fullback is an outside defender who, instead of looking to get out on the line and work the ball up wide, gets right up into the central areas of the midfield, specifically into the area between the forward and midfield lines of the opponent. It is also beneficial if the player can play on the side opposite of their strong foot, i.e., a left foot-dominant back playing on the right side. Certainly at the professional level where most players, while having a preferred foot, are competent with both feet this is less of a factor in the decision to play inverted. After thoroughly analyzing Man City's use of the position, I think it comes down to utilizing the central areas of the pitch as the best distribution point and getting numbers up at every line (forward, midfield and defensive).



This is a shot from Manchester City vs. Manchester United in 2014. This shows a “traditional” 4-4-2 shape and attack/advance the ball wide concept. The outside defender (bottom left circled) has used the width of the field to pull out two opposing players, which opens space in the mid field. Here the outside defender has just passed to a central midfielder (bottom center circled), which draws more opposition back into the center freeing space on the wing. The central midfielder then uses the wing midfielder (bottom center right circled) to exploit the wide space and serve it in to the two forwards and other wing mid. This is offered as a comparison to how Manchester City are playing now with their fullbacks inverted. While most coaches will readily admit the central parts of the field are the best distribution points--because of the ease, speed, and unpredictability of being able to simply connect both sides of your formation and the entire width and length of the field--few consistently break from the tried and true approach shown above.



In this clip from Man City's match with Chelsea this season (2017), the use and intent of the inverted fullback (circled on the ball) is clear. The body language of the team, when compared with the previous clip from 2014 is clear as well. Instead of looking to blast up the wing or play wide up the left side, which is still an option, the inverted fullback is clearly looking to distribute centrally, with the only player obviously ready to blast up the field wide being the OPPOSITE side forward. Had the outside back NOT inverted, and been pinched out on the line, the switch to the right side forward would not have been a viable attacking option. We will look at the tactical implications of this later on. Without getting too far ahead, a quick count of the numbers in the scenario above speaks volumes to the impact of the inverted fullback as Chelsea has 9 players in the frame compared to only 7 for Manchester City. Even though Chelsea has numbers up--3 Man City players are clearly unmarked and somewhere off frame--Man City has a 3 v 1 advantage.

For me, the main impact of the inverted fullback is twofold – the obvious aggressiveness of the tactic cannot be overlooked – but the main impact is the ability the position gives Manchester City to easily link the entire field together. However, the use of the inverted fullback involves way more than putting a left footed guy on the right side of your back line and running him up high and central. As the next chapter will show, there are several conditions which also come into play in making the use of the inverted fullback a success. Something I found interesting from the 2014 game shown in the first clip (which was before Pep Guardiola) was the moment Manchester United went down a man, Man City adopted a much more aggressive approach, in fact perhaps foreshadowing what was to come.



With virtually no pressure from the lone Manchester United forward, Man City readily pushed up centrally with their back line. Able to connect the entire field, Man City was able to tack on their second goal (shown below) with a through ball into the box behind a sliding Manchester United defender when United was forced to hold in the middle.



I include this to support the fact playing with inverted fullbacks is an aggressive approach. Most coaches will admit the immediate response to going a man up is “Now we can get more aggressive.” Manchester City unknowingly showed signs of things to come in 2014 by choosing

to be more aggressive after being given the opportunity. Now, under Pep Guardiola and his inverted fullbacks, Man City are being aggressive by design and creating these opportunities from start to finish.

Below is perhaps the best example I have seen of what the inverted fullback can do, and while done in another man up situation, this time it was a matter of purpose according to the plan.



After some deliberate possession, Man City #2 (Walker) drops in to receive the ball from the center back as it is being swung around. Again, Liverpool is a man down at this stage, playing a 4-4-1, but the additional player up top would have made little difference in the outcome of this possession.

As seen in the clip below, Walker makes no effort to turn and use the wide areas of the field, but instead sends the ball directly back to the left side. The problem is, there is so much space available to work that the Liverpool players must be ready to cover every section of the field. This aspect of using an inverted fullback will be covered in detail later, but the advantage can clearly be seen in this clip.



With the Liverpool midfield holding centrally and ball watching (above), an easy split is found, which brilliantly takes out 3 of the 4 opposing midfielders and puts them squarely behind the play (below).



Another beautiful pass puts all 9 Liverpool field players chasing the play (next clip)



Had the inverted fullback played traditionally and gone wide at the start of this run, Man City very may well have scored. However, it is almost certain all of the Liverpool players would have been behind the ball, facing the play and had better awareness of their marks. Again, much more to come on this in the following pages. But as the next two clips show, by making the opposing side defend the entire field with simple, on the ground, connecting passes between the lines, Man City rings one up fairly easily here.



The ball is sent perfectly across to the near post runner and can be seen going in on the final clip below (circled in red).



There is no better example of what an inverted fullback is and what playing this way can do than can be seen in the previous 6 frames.

Chapter 2: Conditions Required to make the Inverted Fullback Position Work

Pep Guardiola calls his formation a 4-3-3, and when starting the game and being caught without the ball, Manchester City often times shows this basic shape on the field. In the clip below, while the outside backs are pushed up and into the center a bit, the 3 forwards and 3 midfielders are clearly visible at kick off. Also clearly visible is the holding central mid, which is the first element which really helps to make playing with inverted fullbacks work.



Below Man City shows a very compacted 4-3-3 during the run of play as well, with only the wide forward not visible in the shot. This is another key condition to making the inverted fullback work – the team moves together to make the concept work and they are all very situationally aware of when to play, for lack of better terms, “traditionally” and “non-traditionally.” I consider this situational awareness to be part of Manchester City’s overall fluidity and will cover this further later on.



While their team fluidity is important, these elements are important on any team with any system. Manchester City has become unique with their inverted fullbacks largely in part to the work of the holding mid. As shown below, and to be seen in several following clips, the discipline of their holding mid (#25 circled below) is critical to the success the “flying” inverted fullbacks have had.



Still referencing the above clip, the holding mid’s positioning here allows the fullbacks to press up and in to aggressively mark their attackers and as will be seen later, Man City is actually

funneling the Arsenal attack into the central areas of the field to try and bait them into forcing the ball wide, where Manchester City is then usually able to steal the ball and counter. While the other midfielders and forwards are all doing their respective parts to create pressure, the holding mid's discipline here is what makes the concept work. This may not seem noteworthy when talking about the Premier League or any other high level professional league – most professionals are disciplined team players. However, those of you reading this from a club, high school or even collegiate level who may be considering playing with inverted fullbacks need to understand how critical the holding mid position is to making it work.

The second key elements are the center backs. As shown above, when defending, the center backs work well together and form a relatively tight area in not just the center of the field – but also the center of the formation. This in itself is important. Their biggest benefit, however, in the use of inverted fullbacks, is when transitioning into possession.



As the above clip shows, the two players circled in red are the CENTER backs. This is during the run of play from a pass back to the keeper and is a staple of the current Man City approach. ANY time the keeper has the ball, the center backs split out to the top corners of the box, i.e., the wide areas of the field, for the supporting pass. This immediately opens up the holding mid in the center and while the ball side fullback can go wide, they most commonly get right up between the opponents forward and midfield line. In my opinion, the center backs, and keeper for that matter, HAVE to be proficient at this. Combined with the holding mid, this immediate movement creates a 4 v 2 and basically ensures possession. In the case seen above, the field is spread so wide the keeper has a straight shot up to the forward line (following clip). The center

forward heads the ball back to the oncoming mid, who distributes out to the right forward. (as shown in next two clips).



I know it seems odd to show shots in a book dedicated to the inverted fullback, which contain every player EXCEPT the inverted fullback, but this goes to show the extent to which their aggressive play and ability to stretch and connect the field frees up the other positions, especially

the 3 attackers up top. The result, as shown below, is a wide open shot, well-taken but deflected off the head of a well-positioned Chelsea defender.



So, on top of the standard desirable aspects of any team , including what I call Fluidity (mobility, situational awareness, discipline, etc...) the two most important supporting pieces to the inverted fullback puzzle are how the holding mid and center backs work to support the overall aggressive concept/style of play. The next chapter looks at the exact tactical implications of the inverted fullback in detail.

Chapter 3: Tactical Advantages of the Inverted Fullback

My grandfather always told me “Michael, if you want to make sure you make and keep lifelong friends, never talk about religion or politics.” I have found this to be sound advice, and after 20 plus years of coaching, I would put tactics as a close third on this list. I don’t think I have ever lost a friend after a serious tactical discussion, but I can’t really remember a time when any of these discussions ever determined who was “right.”

I will cover these 5 distinct tactical advantages of playing with inverted fullbacks: 1. Creates a Numerical Advantage in Every Line 2. Allows for Connecting and Pivot Points Across the Length and Width of the Field 3. Stifles Many Counter Attacks/Nullifies the Wings 4. Allows for a Very Aggressive Attack 5. Creates Great Shape for Possession.

The Numerical Advantage

The number one advantage of the inverted fullback is the idea of creating a numerical advantage. Actually, this numerical advantage is not always seen as far as overall numbers in an area, HOWEVER, because of the spacing and multitude of triangles created, even when “numbers down,” Manchester City is usually numbers up within the triangles created by their spacing. The fullbacks are especially involved in directly creating numbers up in both the defensive and midfield lines. Because of this, Man City can take an already potent 3 forward attack and engage additional midfielders aggressively on every possession. It is almost like having 5 players in every line all the time. For example, in this clip from before (below), the clear movement of the fullbacks up to mark centrally, combined with the center backs and holding mid, basically creates a 5 man back line, which serves well to handle a 3 forward attack.



This clip shows a staple part of the inverted fullback concept. Manchester City is basically inviting teams to play in the wide areas of the field by banking on the fact their pressure will win the ball when their opponent attempts the wide play. This goes against traditional wisdom. There is another component here I should have addressed earlier as a condition to make the inverted fullback concept work: the wing play of the top 3. Manchester City's attacking players willingly work back into the mix, as seen in the above clip applying pressure to the ball. I did not mention this as it is not a new concept and many teams which play 3 up top utilize these players on the wings for defensive support. It does play a significant role, however, in creating numbers up and "baiting" the opposing side into playing into the center.

Most teams attempt to create "numbers up" around the ball, but just having more players in a certain area does not dictate success. The idea then becomes more about where the numbers are, and in a lot of respects it can be a gamble. Manchester City has gone all in with the use of the inverted fullback which, while appearing to open up the wide areas of the field, has actually nullified the wing play, which is a staple of many teams. The clip below shows a 50/50 ball being squarely attacked (and won) by the inverted fullback. As mentioned previously, the inverted fullback's main area of focus is in between the opponent's forward and midfield line. This aggressive approach forces the opponent to compact themselves immediately or surrender possession. This clip shows the inverted fullback helping to speed a quick transition to attack.



The ball is subsequently sent from the inverted fullback to the midfielder and then through to the oceans of space the forwards now have to work with (following clip).

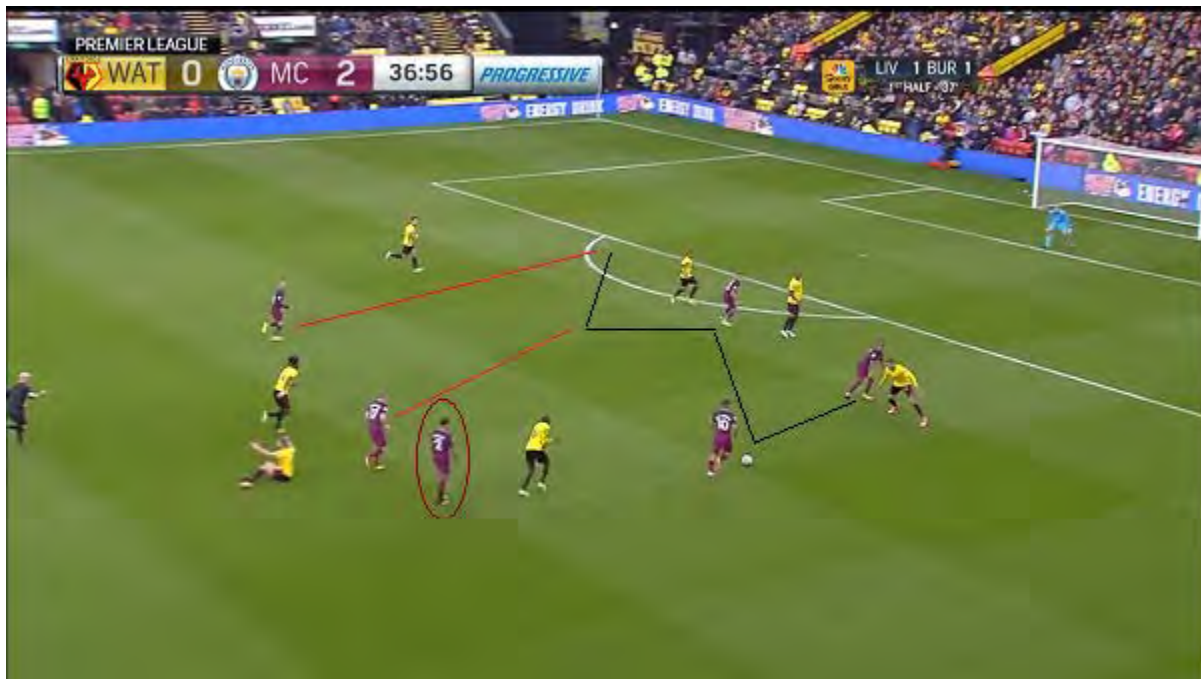


The next clip shows a more purposeful look at this idea of getting 5 players in good shape and baiting the opponent into losing possession. Feeling confident in a 9 v 5 advantage coming out, Watford attempts to get the ball into the feet of their midfielder. However, the aggressive central play of the inverted fullback springs the trap. While Watford does have a numerical advantage in

a large section of the field, Man City clearly has numbers (5 to be exact) and open players around the ball.



A good win from a player (the inverted fullback) who would “traditionally” be out on the wing, combined with a good pass to the open forward who is working back on the ball side to support and the 5 are poised to attack (below).



Still referencing the above clip, a 3v3 is on with trailing players closing quickly to create a 5 v 4 advantage for Manchester City. While the inverted fullback (circled) was initially part of the 5 in the midfield transition, he now holds to let the final wave of 5 execute the attack.

Even those who argue the 4 player back line is not the “norm,” most coaches agree on the need for extra numbers at the back. And, most coaches realize the extra numbers in the back are often wasted from an attacking standpoint. Thus, the idea of the overlapping back, working wide up the line or perhaps coming in to finish a service or cross from the far side are fairly common practices at every level. What is uncommon is getting the outside back into the attack in the central areas of the field. While common sense would suggest this exposes the wing areas to a counter attack, and it does, Man City’s aggressive approach forces teams to utilize their wing players centrally or give up unchallenged possession. These ideas will be looked at a bit further on. Below is one more example of the inverted full back not only pushing play centrally up the field, but getting squarely involved in the attack.



The inverted fullback (Walker #2) is driving the ball straight into the best distribution point on the field. This time however, after distributing to the open supporting player coming in, he stays up into the attack as part of a group of 5 (following clip).



It does sound crazy in a section on numerical advantage to suggest the team of 5 has the advantage over the team of 9, but as the above clip shows, this is exactly what is happening. At the top left of the clip, Manchester has a clear 2 v 0 at the top of the box. The inverted fullback compacted play centrally so quickly the defenders have left 2 attackers in a 2 v 1 versus the keeper on the weak side as well – and this is against Chelsea. As touched on previously, should Manchester City choose to hold possession, they have a 5 v 2 off screen. It is a win/win and they are doing it against some of the highest level of competition in the world.

The following diagrams illustrate the exact numerical advantages playing the inverted fullback provides within the various triangles their shape provides.



The red lines are not passing options (above). Note the 4 v 1 created between the back line and mids of the attacking team (black). All 3 lines then combine to create 3 v 1s on the wings and a 4 v 2 in the middle. While the backs are not inverted here, this is the way Manchester City plays out most of the time on goal kicks and keeper possessions. Once the ball is sent out wide to the outside back, rather than forcing play up the line into a numerically inferior 3 v 4, clogging the middle and making play predictable, Manchester City's outside backs most often choose to invert and go central (following diagram).



The defending side (yellow) must adjust to the numerous connecting options. The above diagram shows only those triangles created once the fullback inverts and, combined with the adjustment the defending team must make to even hope to apply pressure, there is now a 4 v 1 in the center and a 5 v 1 when adding the wide forward into the mix. One could argue the numbers on the outside right are a 3 v 0 as well.

Even when pushed squarely into attack (and my diagram below looks more compact here than it actually does on the field) the number of 4 v 2 and 3 v 1 scenarios is staggering.



The final diagram sheds light on the only glaring weakness playing an inverted fullback brings, and there is a whole chapter dedicated to this coming up. In the diagram below, note the two red triangles making areas where IF possession is lost, the defending team can quickly play out with a 3 v2 advantage. Teams are creating some chances against Manchester City this way but because Man City's players are constantly aware of this, as the second diagram below shows, they usually recover well, with only the quickest of counters actually posing any real threat.





Connections

Once the inverted fullback has helped create the numerical advantage the lines and groups of 5 provide, the big tactical advantage becomes the ease of which Manchester City can connect the entire field. Traditional wisdom seems to suggest immediately getting the ball wide and either spreading out your opponent to exploit gaps or keeping possession while they park the bus (pack 8 – 10 men inside the box) is the way to play. It works. However, if one breaks down what is happening, the wide first approach funnels everyone into the same small area, which is actually the area the attacking team wants to open AND puts the only open space (the far side) squarely out of reach for attacking purposes. This should be seen as an advantage for the defending team as traditional numbers would put 8 defenders plus the keeper going against 6 or 7 attackers, with only 3 or 4 of those attackers actually posing a shooting threat. The following clip demonstrates the “counter” logic having the fullbacks play inverted provides.



In this clip (above), the inverted fullback (Delph # 18) has immediately turned toward the center (in) and is able to connect with several players in several areas of the field. The player to 18's immediate right is actually the holding mid. There is another center back off frame to the bottom right. When building up from a goal kick, as shown previously, Man City sends their center backs to the top corners of the penalty box. Many times, the fullback is out there with them on the line. As the backs push up a bit wide, as a back line of 4 traditionally does, even more space is created centrally and once receiving the ball the fullbacks look to invert. The same clip shown again below with markings shows the impact of this turn in.



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Because the left wing is still an option (and a Man City forward is up there) the two Chelsea defenders at the top left of the screen (circled) must turn their bodies and be aware of the man out wide. Again, Manchester City's top 3 do a great job of providing width. The remaining Chelsea player (circled left center) must at least apply passive pressure to the ball handler. Just the act of inverting itself now opens up the entire field immediately to Manchester City, allowing them to pivot their point of possession/attack at will and KEEP their opponents pushed back in their end.

While there are 3 additional tactical advantages to cover, the advantages of numbers up in every line and the ability to connect the entire field seamlessly are the two main benefits of using the inverted fullback. When compared to the traditional 4-4-2 for example: The back line of 4 connected the width of the field using a 4 v 2 advantage (5 v 2) including the keeper. Two solid strikers would push up for a long ball and they would hold the attention of the opponent's back 4. Now the battle is in midfield – but once a wing is chosen – the opposition fills in the center, pressures the ball and essentially, the opposite wing is cut off. Should an opportunity for an attack arise – great – if not, conventional wisdom state drop it back, reset on the back line, and try it again. This type of play was/is allowed because the field is just too big to cover – even when using only the center and one wide area. The inverted fullback expands the field, especially the wings, by forcing the opponents to choose between being dominated by possession, spreading out too far/too early, or compacting play centrally too high and too early. With strong central backs, a disciplined holding mid, and forwards who readily work back and provide width, the inverted fullback is simply a game changer.

Eliminates Most Counters/Nullifies Opposing Wings

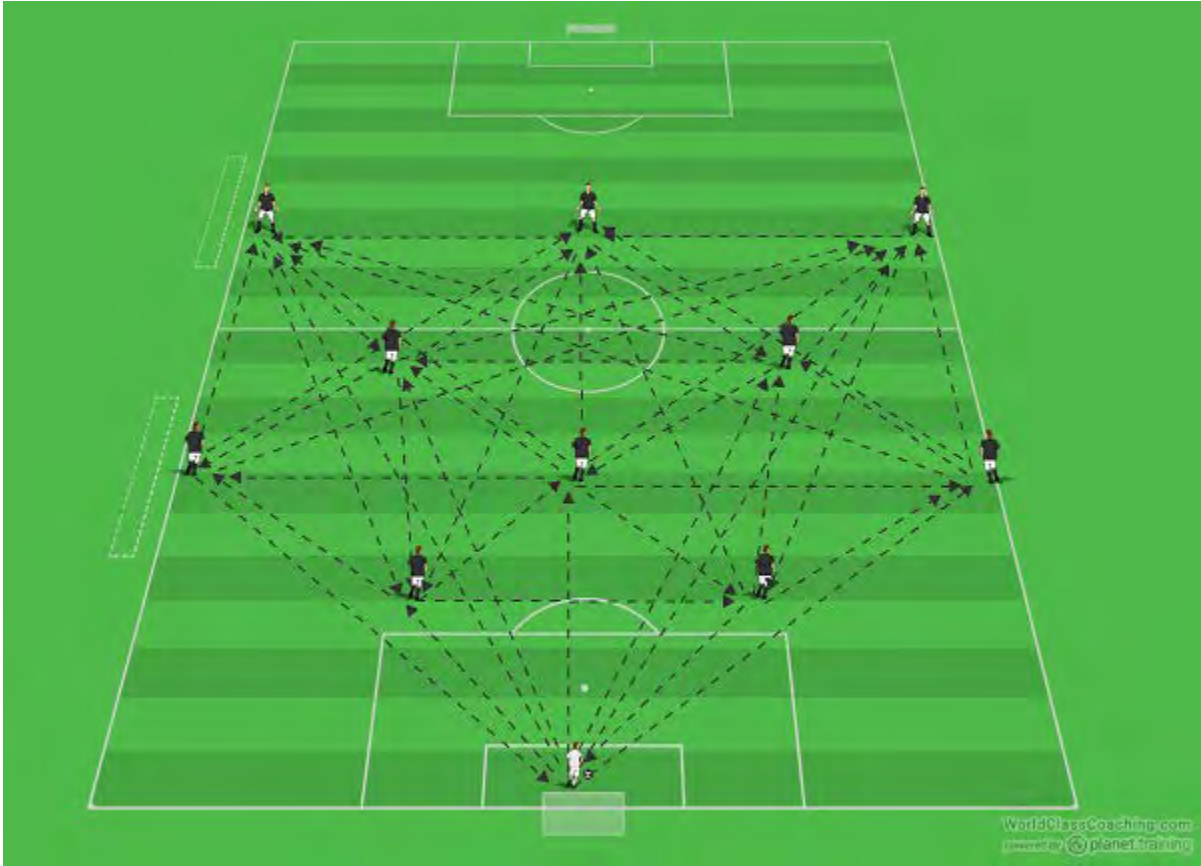
On paper, the idea of pushing outside backs up and into the center seems like an open invitation to get countered on the wings, and there is a weakness to be exploited here. However, the majority of counter attacks come from, in my opinion: 1. Mistakes by the Possessing Team, 2. Good Play Making by the Defending Team, 3. Poor Attacking Team Shape and 4. Poor Recovery. Manchester City's inverted fullback approach ENSURES good possession, LIMITS playmaking by the defenders everywhere except their defensive third, provides STRONG ATTACKING OPTIONS and Manchester City RECOVERS WELL.

Provides Aggressive Attacking Options

While it is common to assume every time a team has good possession of the ball there will be an attack, there is a difference between possessing and attacking. Many teams, although moving quickly up the field, take the time to "build" into an attack, especially against a good, defensive minded side. With their use of the inverted full back, Manchester City intends to, or is prepared to attack almost immediately every time they have the ball. In essence, the inverted fullback showcases their aggressive attitude, team speed and quickness as their key strength. The diagrams used in the following section of possessing shape, combined with the previous and following diagrams and clips, clearly show the aggressive attacking options using the inverted fullback gives.

Good Possession Shape

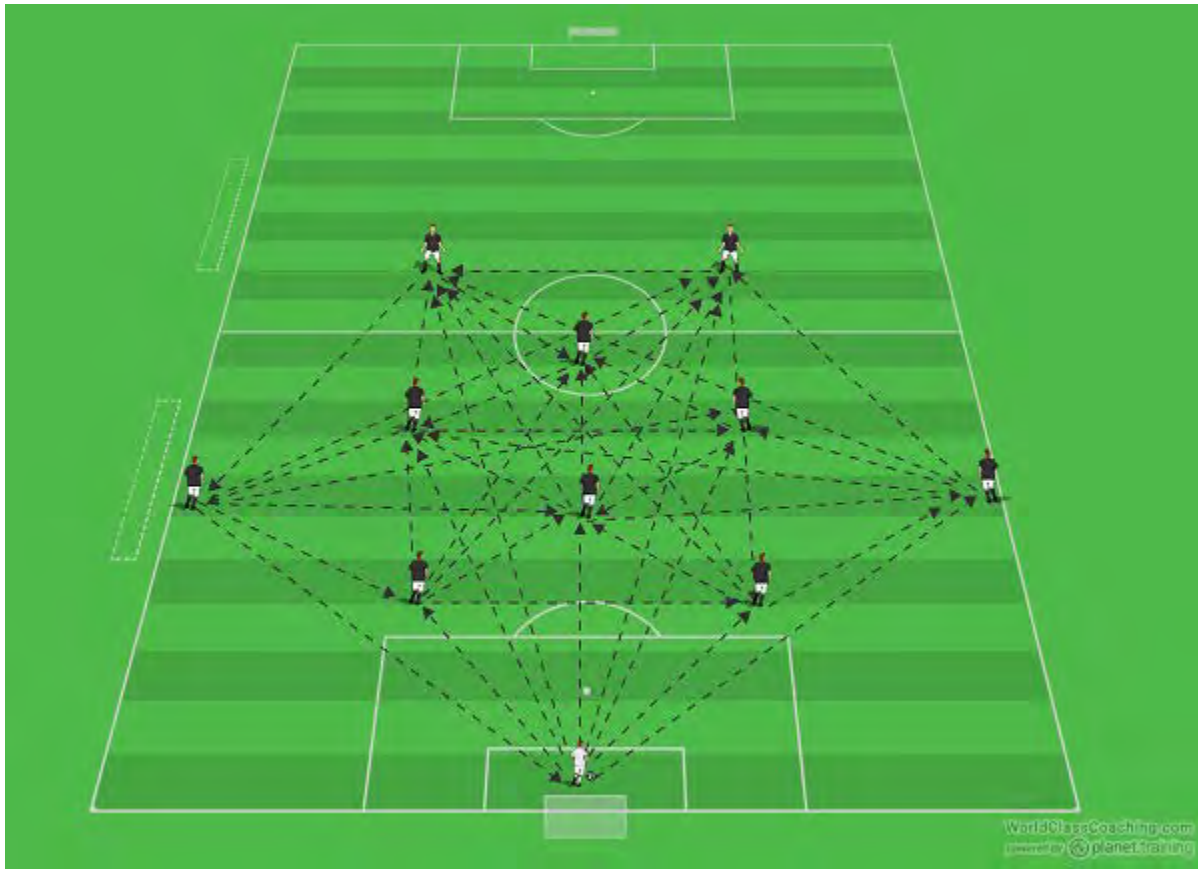
As stated previously, Pep Guardiola calls his formation a 4-3-3. A quick google search of Pep's tactics will reveal the idea of dividing the field into 5 vertical sections and always keeping two players in each section. After doing some research for this book, I would take this idea a step further and call his formation a 5-5, the classic W-W or for those of you who have to have more than two lines in your soccer formations, a 2-3-2-3. The following diagrams show the positional spacing of the W-W shape, which allows for 44 direct passing/connecting options, an average of 4 per player. A player with this many options, and the ability most professionals have to use them, is very hard to defend (diagram below).



Compare this to a 3-4-3 for example, which many will argue is the most balanced formation:



There are only 37 options here. The next diagram shows a 5-3-2 or a 4-4-2 with a diamond mid:



There are 43 options here, however, the balance across the entire field is not there and the outside backs are isolated in their sections.

While this is not a book on the number of passes/connections various formations give, the diagrams clearly show the passing/connection options of Pep's 4-3-3 (5-5) to be superior or at worst equal to other popular formations. Pep's formation wins as far as balance across the pitch with exactly 2 players in every section. By inverting the fullbacks and opening up the central space all while expanding and contracting, this shape to create numerical advantages which compact the opposing sides Manchester City is almost guaranteed to always dominate the possession battle.

Chapter 4: Disadvantages of Using the Inverted Fullback

While I hope the previous pages have clearly outlined the big advantages of the inverted fullback. (If you can't take my word for it, the rate at which Man City is dominating the Premier League this season should provide additional proof), there are some disadvantages which should be mentioned, with one (open wings) garnering the major focus.

As touched on previously, there are several components which **MUST** be in place for a team to be successful being this aggressive with their outside backs. Simply putting players in a certain place on the field will not guarantee success. Manchester City is very fluid and very mobile (more on this later) and they move and cover each other brilliantly because they understand the three big weakness their use of the inverted full back brings: 1. Getting caught "in between" (being "non-fluid") 2. Being overly aggressive regardless of risk vs reward and the biggest of all: 3. The wings are open. Much of the open wing issue is by design as they often bait their opponents into forcing play into the wide space knowing their inverted backs are ready to win the ball, however this is a gamble and does not always work in Manchester City's favor. Following are two examples where Manchester City gets overly aggressive and gets caught "in between" stepping up to pressure centrally (inverting) and actually covering the wide space traditionally.

Again, it is rare, but they do get caught "in between" sometimes and in fact, many of the scoring chances they (Man City) have given up have come when their outside back has gotten caught in between being in an inverted vs. traditional position while defending, often times leading to a shot or corner for the opposing side.



The inverted fullback is primarily focused on playing the ball out centrally early. However, because of the overall concepts of compacting play centrally, nullifying opponents wings, creating numbers up and winning the ball aggressively early to quickly transition into attack, the backs who are looking to win the ball and/or invert, can get caught out of position or being over aggressive. In the above clip, Chelsea has clear possession of the ball and all 10 of Man City's players are back defending. This looks precarious for Manchester, however, these are the moments from which Manchester has been creating swift counter attack goals and it appears they have just what they want. Above again, Man City's left forward has worked back, presumably to apply some pressure and force a bad pass, but I think the outside back (foot circled) has just realized there will be no pressure on the ball and the open wing will need some attention as he decides to sprint back instead of step up and attempt the steal. As mentioned previously, this is the glaring weakness of using an inverted fullback.

The clips below, 2 and 4 seconds later, clearly show the extent to which the fullback was out of position and the result of this play is one of Chelsea's best chances of the match.





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Only a sliding Man City defender and a lax near post run from the Chelsea attacker saved a goal from being scored.



I feel like this was a situation where the fullback got caught in between thinking “Get up, be aggressive, get the ball back over to the other side....” And essentially got away with one.

18 minutes later (clip below) the positioning of the fullback is much better in a similar scenario and the focus is strictly defensive. There is better pressure on the ball from Man City as a whole

(even though Chelsea does earn a corner here eventually) and the outside back is positioned much better to both deny the wide pass and defend the center (second clip circled).



While it would be easy to think this strictly defensive approach is just because of where the game is as far as time and score, watch what happens a few minutes later:



The series from the 91st minute wasn't because Manchester City stopped being aggressive, it was because the left back and midfielders were more situationally aware than they were in the 73rd minute and did not get caught "in between." Above, in the 93rd minute, their continued aggression can be seen as Manchester City's right back comes flying into the ball very high and aggressively – which is a staple of their inverted approach – and wins the ball right in front of the Chelsea attacker (top right of screen). The run is so quick a Chelsea player can be seen laying down having fallen trying to turn and disrupt the run (next clip). While this run is more suited of a traditional fullback as the ball is pressed high into the corner, the concept of constant aggression is clear.



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While this aggressive approach does and is paying dividends for them right now (as the previous clips have shown), with aggression comes OVER aggression. In the clip below, Arsenal perfectly exploits the available space on the wings:



Here (above) Arsenal have kept the ball at the back a bit and then worked it up centrally to number 17.



Man City actually has everything they want here (above) but are just caught up too high and out of position from a traditionally outside back point of view. Had their outside back (circled) been playing in a more traditional role the central defender would not have been isolated in a 2 v 1 and the space for the through ball would not have been as readily available. As the next clip shows, the center defender chooses to turn into the player with the ball, without help on the outside (wing), Arsenal creates and converts a chance.



The inverted back (circled) is still trailing.

Another example of the occasional negatives this aggressive push to get forward and central brings can be seen in the following clip from Man City's match vs West Brom.

Manchester's holding mid can be seen heading a ball clear from the center of the box. Note the space circled in red.



Below, West Brom #6 is under pressure from a Man City forward and usually the resulting poor touch or pass is readily available for the inverted back, whose run is marked on the diagram with a red line. A more traditional outside back would have been tucked in behind the West Brom player in the area circled in red.



As the clip above shows, with a West Brom win of the ball, Manchester City is now in a precarious position. Only a well-positioned keeper (shown below) saves a goal from being scored. Again, had the outside back (optimal run marked in red) been less aggressive here, there would have been no room for a shot/scoring opportunity. I'm not second guessing the overall

aggressive approach, simply pointing out the occasional weaknesses which over aggression brings.



Chapter 5: Fluidity

Obviously most of us do not have access to the best talent, facilities and competition in our respective leagues. Many times, these factors alone are the main contributors to the success of a system, tactic or concept. However, the use of the inverted fullback is a tactic which I feel can be used with in many formations, concepts and systems if players understand the previously listed points (conditions, advantages and weaknesses) in addition to understanding the principle of fluidity.

Previously I described Manchester City as “fluid.” I use this term to describe the ease and speed of which a team moves together seamlessly to achieve their goals – or put another way, makes the plays they need to make to win given the needs of the current situation. If I had to define fluidity beyond the text book definition (which is “a substance which has no fixed shape and adjusts easily to external pressure) I would break it down into these 5 categories:

Moving Between Defending Possessing and Attacking Shapes

Tactical Awareness of Strengths and Weaknesses of Team Formation/Style

Situational Awareness

Understanding of Risk vs Reward

Work Rate/Selflessness

Fluidity readily develops on its own in players and teams after they mature, gain experience, play with a group or within a system for an extended period of time, etc., but when broken down into the components listed above, fluidity can be taught and is certainly not a trait limited to clubs with elite levels of skill, talent or experience, i.e., your team can learn, practice and do these things and thus become more fluid.

Take the idea of moving between Defending, Possessing and Attacking Shapes. Not only are Man City scoring lots of goals this season, they are allowing few, and even fewer in the run of play. This is because they do not just leave their outside backs up in the central part of the field all the time (as we have shown, that is not what an inverted fullback is.) They typically invert only after gaining clear possession or in an attempt to gain clear possession, again, fluidly switching between defending, possessing and attacking shapes and roles. I mention this because younger players at lower levels of the game many times get fixated on positioning in terms of the area of the field they are to work in. For example, forwards who won't work back, defenders who won't push up or the wing mid who won't come central. Pep Guardiola and Manchester City's use of the inverted fullback has shown how a “4-3-3” – a formation which appears numbers down in the midfield – can become a potent numbers up formation at every stage of play (defense, transition, possession/attack) when all the players involved have a solid grasp of the 5 principles listed above, or Fluidity. Again, this is something which can be taught at almost

every level of the game. While this is not a book on Fluidity and this concept could have been included in Chapter 2, I felt it was important enough to the inverted fullback concept to garner a chapter all its own.

Below are two clips which show this overall team “fluidity” where both backs readily drop in, protect the box with a line of 4 and wait for the right situation to come out (and most likely invert). Unlike some previous clips where the Manchester back got too aggressive or caught “in between,” here they are clearly aware of the situation and risks involved should a gambling effort fail. This is traditional zone soccer at its best and a great example of fluidity (second clip, outside backs circled in red).





Above is another example of overall fluidity, focusing on the difference in defending, transition and possession/attacking shapes – which is also something your team can do. The situation is such as the game is in control, Manchester City has possession, so why not work into perfect passing shape? As the clip below shows 7 minutes later the focus is still on possession. Noteworthy however is how the concept of central distribution through inverted fullbacks can still be seen (next clip) as the center back has his pick of passes with Liverpool, albeit a man

down, holding in the middle but not really “compact.” (This is largely due to the presence of Manchester City # 25 (below clip) holding centrally between Liverpool’s forward and midfield lines.)



Manchester City’s match with Liverpool was their third Premier League game of the season. Liverpool did go down a man early, however, this game, for me, was a statement from the Manchester side and this game offers numerous examples of their aggressive, inverted fullback concept. The clips below shows a great example of their ability to fluidly switch from possession to aggressive attack.



18 minutes from the previous clip, the shot above shows their continued efforts to possess the ball turning to an attempt to make an attacking run. While still maintaining width, the midfielders and forwards are starting to cheat back and in centrally.



The holding mid (above center) can easily connect with the checking forward as the attack is set. Notice the Man City player at the top left pointing to the open mid and wing.



The attack is on (above)



An attacking line of 5 vs 8 plus the keeper should be a win for the defending 8, but not here as every field player in the frame is facing the goal. A desperate poke foils this run for City, but 5 minutes later an almost identical attack (shown on pages 8-10) earns Manchester a goal.

There are two more clips I want to show to help drive home this idea of fluidity, and the various shapes Manchester City uses as they progress through the match with their “flying fullbacks.”

As multiple shots have shown, Manchester City will drop back and defend, and even occasionally show their stated 4-3-3 formation in the run of play. But they also use lines of 5 to create width for possession and exploit the space this width creates for aggressive attacks. The inverted fullback often starts this by forcing the opponent to attempt the impossible and defend the entire width and length of the field. The clip below shows two things. One, if the opportunity to invert is not there, and the traditional run up the wing is closed down, a reset to the keeper is always an option. This was touched on earlier and Man City does this (drops to keeper) as a matter of play/keeping numbers up, not out of desperation. More importantly however is the selfless play which is shown. Selfless play is not a huge problem in the elite levels of the game, but as touched on earlier, can be an issue in areas with low number player pools and at the youth and lower levels in general. There is a Manchester City player shown right under the timer in the top center of the screen, taking clear responsibility for the only Liverpool player who could pose an issue should Liverpool exploit a bad Man City pass or touch and win the ball. This player is a Manchester City forward. This is a total commitment to the needs of the team as a similar scenario to what happened in the West Brom match (seen previously) could have spelled disaster early for Man City in this game.



Many of the topics covered so far are not on their own new to the game. Pep Guardiola himself has used many of these similar tactics and ideas in his previous coaching stops. What is new is the efforts to which Manchester City has gone to impose their will on their opponents from the opening whistle to the last. This battle to impose one's will is, after all, at the heart of any competition and the use of the inverted fullback is Manchester's main vessel for this.

I feel like many coaches are saying "What? He is not leaving his outside defenders back there in case we counter or run up the wing?" or "What? They are not working the ball around the back until they choose a side to run up and hit their cross from?"

Manchester City has clearly successfully bucked conventional wisdom. For me, underlying the aggression and tactical goals is their mastery of the concept of fluidity.

Chapter 6 : How Your Team Can Use an Inverted Fullback

I will admit to being one of those coaches who yells “wide” a dozen times a game. I have purposely steered teams away from the center of the field, especially on my own end, not because I don’t understand the distributive advantages of the middle or the value of possession, but because I wanted to avoid turnovers/getting countered and the unpredictable back and forth involved when youth and high school players try to “force play right down the pipe.” I have used sound conventional logic to explain this to my teams: “If we get the ball out wide, good defensive teams will fall in center so we want to work around that area and try to draw them out.” The bulk of my coaching has come at the high school and club levels but I have had the opportunity to spend time with a couple successful NAIA Men’s programs and one NCAA Division I Women’s program and have seen this same logic played out there as well. Obviously, after writing this book, I am considering how I can use an inverted fullback on my team. Following is how I plan to do it, including a few exercises which will help your team implement/teach the concept if you choose to try playing with an inverted fullback as well.

1. Analyze My Current System/Style and Player Pool

Most successful teams find and play to their strengths. I personally prefer to run 3 attackers but have always struggled to have players who could defend and/or run the midfield with only 3 players. Every season is a search to find the right balance between what I want to do and what my team can do. This has to be the first step in any tactical/style of play adjustment and as stated previously, Manchester City is no different. Without their strong central backs, their disciplined holding mid, their mobile mids, and selfless forwards, there would be very little discussion about their inverted fullbacks. After a great high school season this year, my biggest team need is actually learning to possess the ball more effectively and we only graduated 2 seniors from a core group of 14 players. We tied the school record for second most goals scored in a season, we were not shut out, had 5 players with double digit goals but only one player with double digit assists. This is not a book about my own soccer team of course, I am just using my situation as an example of a team which is set up to absolutely benefit from the advantages playing an inverted fullback can bring, at least in some situations. The first step has to be taking a moment to decide if using an inverted fullback is right for your team.

2. Answer This Question: How Can I Coach the Principles of Fluidity?

Moving Between Defending/Possessing and Attacking Shapes

Tactical Awareness of Strengths and Weaknesses of Team Formation/Style

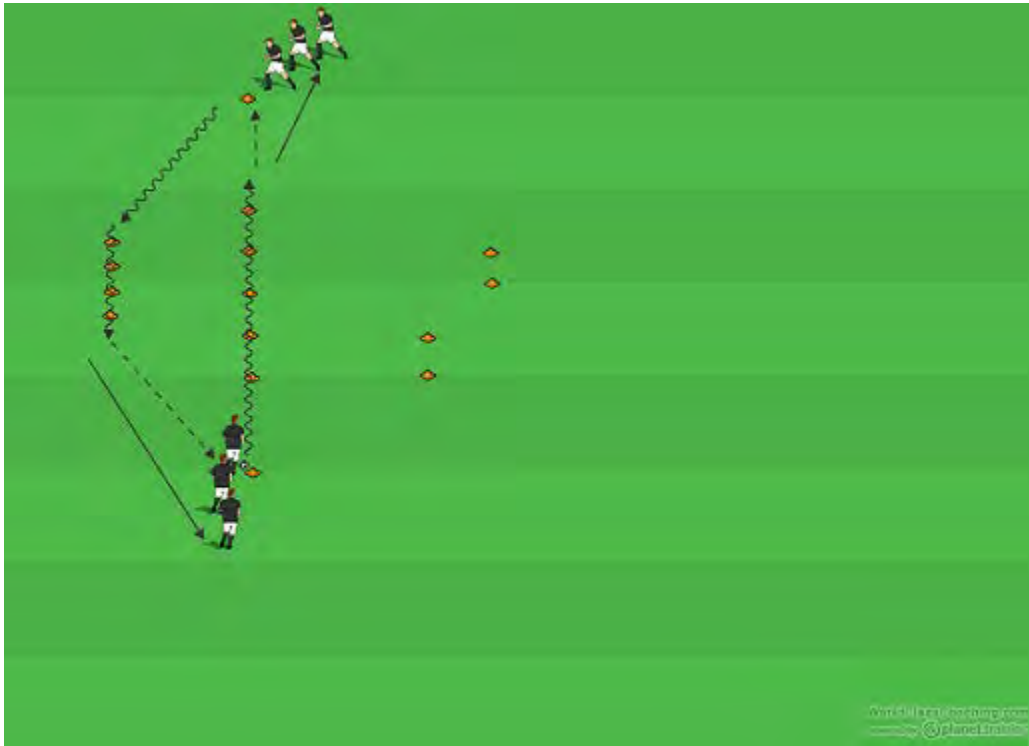
Situational Awareness

Understanding of Risk vs Reward

Work Rate/Selflessness

A better heading is perhaps, “What Can I Do to Coach the Principles of Fluidity?” While there are specific drills and activities a coach can use to work on these aspects (and I will include some here) many of these principles can be added to existing exercises as well. For example, simply put your players in situations where they have to make a choice. For example:

Pass/Move/Communicate



To help assess situational awareness, work rate/ethic and selflessness, set up a basic cone dribble with 3 lines (as shown). Each line will be different than the others, with one (shown center) obviously involving more work than the other two. Do not tell the players which line they have to dribble through, let them pick. The only instruction is for them to dribble as quickly as they can through the line, pass to the player in the next line and then go to the back of the line they passed to. Encourage the group (6 to 8 players) to work hard and keep the ball moving. What will your players do? Will they avoid the line with the most work? Will they rotate? If there is a bad pass will they take the ball toward the closest line to keep it moving or stop and turn and take the easy route. This same principle of choice can be applied to many different activities and provides for both the assessment and teaching of work rate/ethic and selflessness in addition to situational awareness. Having them demand the ball and constantly encourage their team mates during the entire drill will help with their overall willingness and ability to communicate.

Here is another way to make sure the players are constantly on the ball, moving off the ball, and communicating. Instead of the traditional passing lines used in warm ups, try this:



Line 5 players up as shown. Instead of just passing and following their pass have the players pass, check to the cone grid, run up and back around two cones (as shown) and then check to the next line while demanding the ball, regardless if they are up to receive it or not. With 5 players and 4 cone lines to check to, there should never be a player who is not on the ball, moving off the ball or communicating. Small changes like this help to increase a players' work rate and transitional speed/abilities.

Enough cone dribbling? Here is game in which every aspect of fluidity can be assessed, taught, practiced and perfected, and it also introduces a formational component which will help in using an inverted fullback.

7 v 7 with Assigned Marks

On a half field, set up two teams of 7 plus keepers and let them play. The team whose goal is at the half line in the center circle (as shown) will be the team keeping the wider, two diamond shape. The other team will set up in a 4-2-1. Keepers must stay in their boxes, with the center circle serving as that keeper's box. There is one catch. Assign each player a mark who is the only player which can actively tackle and engage them. All players may shadow/jockey and all players may steal passes but players can only challenge/tackle the ball away from their assigned mark. Every aspect of fluidity is in play here.



In addition to working on the concept of fluidity, obviously there are drills which work purely on the tactical aspects of using an inverted fullback. Here are 3:

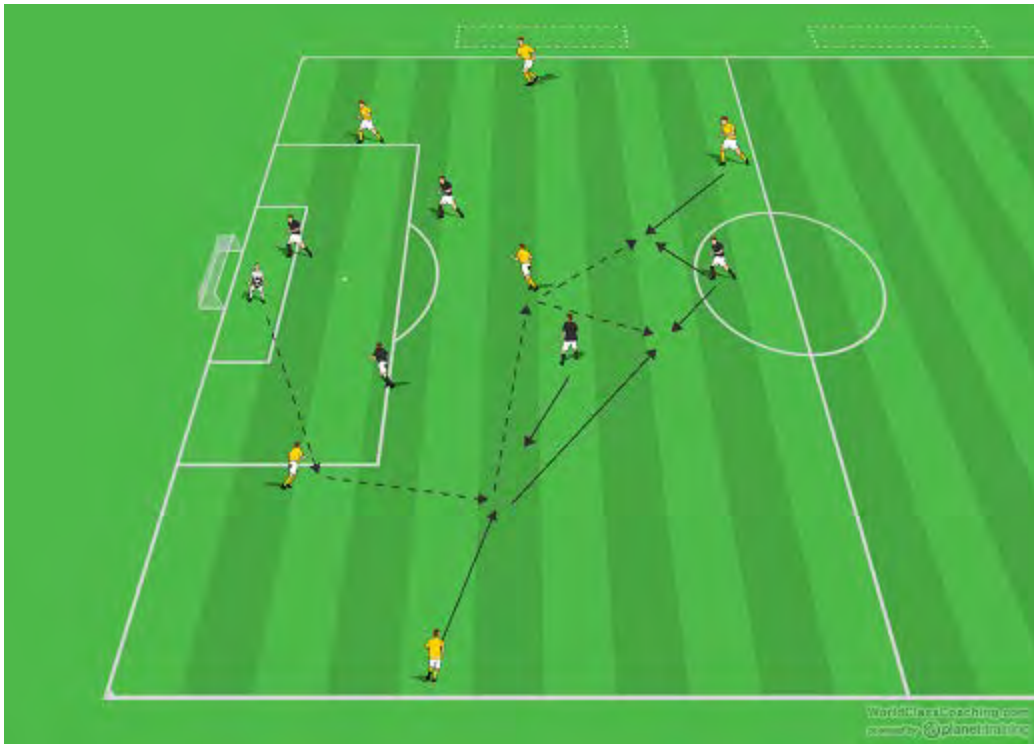
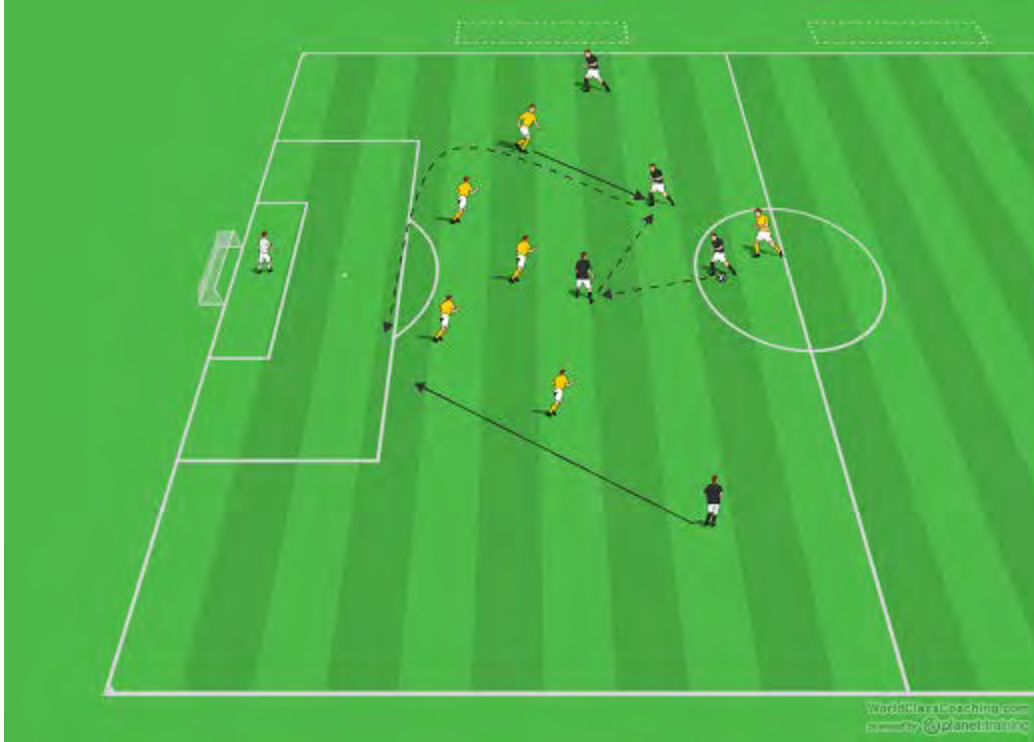
6 v 3 Zone with Wings

Set up a 35 – 40 yd wide by 30 yd long cone grid (as shown). Designate goals on one end with flags or posts. The goals are for the defending team (yellow). Set up zones to designate each wing. The defending team places one player in each wing zone, and 3 in the central zone. The attacking team has 6 players in the central zone, but designates two players (in red) who may enter the wing zones once the defending team has the ball there; one red player per zone to create a 1 v 1 in the wide space. This drill simulates much of what playing an inverted fullback is about, creating numerical advantages. In a game, IF the possessing/attacking team has 7 players in the center of the field, the defending team will be forced to adjust their shape, most likely bringing their wings in, or will allow dangerous possession. In this drill, set a goal of 20, 30 or 50 passes for the attacking team. IF the defending team gets the ball, they can score on either of the wings by dribbling through the posts. The attacking team can send in one player, simulating the inverted back trying to get back and recover to stop the counter.



5 v 5 Plus Keeper and Target

The focus in the drill below is on the defending team (yellow) and how they transition from defending to playing out. The attacking team (black) starts with the ball in the center circle and should actively try and score. IF the defending team wins possession or there is a goal kick, they should attempt to widen their shape (which includes the keeper being available for a drop/switch) and possess for a chance to hit their target player, who can check back but must stay within 10 yards of the half line (second diagram).



As seen previously, playing out this way is the first step in creating the space for the inverted full back to use.

Forward Check Down for Numbers Up

Again on a half field, play 8 attackers plus a keeper against a team of 8 who will be defending 3 stick goals (as shown). Place stick goals on the half line in the left, center and right sections of the field to give the attacking team 3 targets for scoring, they must however dribble through to score. Play starts with a goal kick and the attacking team should simulate both the wide W shape to start and the inverting fullback as play progresses. The forward should check back in for support and just like in a real match, the attacking team should seek to create numbers up through triangle spacing (next diagram).





As play shifts, the focus is on possession and numbers up movement as a unit to open the space between the sticks. Just like in a match, if the defending players covering the stick goals choose to stay up, the attacking team should have tons of possession with a 9 v 5.

Chapter 7: Bringing It All Together

As of this writing, Manchester City have 14 wins and 1 draw in their first 15 Premier League Matches. They have scored 46 goals and allowed only 10. Their use of the inverted fullback has been the catalyst for this start and to date they have shown no signs of letting up.

Playing with or allowing your fullbacks to invert is an aggressive tactic which comes with some risk. However, when combined with the tactical and formational support shown in Manchester City's approach, there are advantages as well.

While the need for total team buy in and fluidity is important to the inverted approach, these are concepts which can be taught, learned, practiced, and perfected. With a focus on the tactical advantages as far as possession and attacking options by implementing the inverted fullback, your team could gain an advantage in your league, similar to the one Manchester City has gained in theirs.

Good luck!

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