

TACTICAL



SERIES

# PEP GUARDIOLA

by Luca Bertolini



**Tactical Series**

**Pep Guardiola**

*By*

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## **Introduction: the principles of play of Pep Guardiola's Manchester City**

“Success without playing the way you like to play means nothing to me.”

"I will win and I will lose, but I will go on attacking with 10 players.”

These are two of the philosophical principles of Pep Guardiola's soccer, maybe the most important and representative.

Manchester City is not the same team of the two time Champions League winner (2009 - 2011) Barcelona, as it plays with very wide wingers, with inverted fullbacks, and with players like David Silva, De Bruyne or Gundogan, who are very good at cutting the ball from the back to finish. The common points are surely the building up from the back phase of play through the goalkeeper, the wide center backs and the balance player (City's Busquets is Fernandinho).

Some details clarify the basic concepts Guardiola works on: positional play, domination of possession, defending high up the pitch and running forward, to play out from the back. His ideas have been the same in Spain, in Germany, and nowadays in England. He just shaped and implemented them in relation to his players and the leagues.

Possession and attacking phase principles of play:

- 1 Possession is only a tool
- 2 Maximum intensity throughout the game as well as top level concentration skills
- 3 Dominant positions on the field and clear attacking orientation
- 4 High level of the technical skills, body position to receive a pass, and vision for passes to improve the position of a teammate
- 5 The goalkeeper creates numerical advantage to build up and play out
- 6 The center midfielder drops back to create numerical advantage (usually a 4 v 3), to play out and forward and then to stay placed inside the opposition's half
- 7 If a defender is able to exploit a space, he must dribble to invite the pressure of the opposition, freeing the spaces in behind
- 8 Attack the space behind an opponent who is pressing the ball carrier
- 9 Overload a flank, create a strong side and then switch the side of play
- 10 Switch the sides of play from one to other as quickly as possible to create 1 v 1 duels, to move the opposition defensive block and to create spaces in the weak side of the opposition
- 11 Move the ball quickly to create open ball situations (3 options for each players in possession shall be available) and attack the defense line at the back

- 12 Exchange of players' positions
- 13 Maximum width of the field to find the most suitable depth
- 14 Place the players on different lines to make the start of the moves easier
- 15 Search for the "3rd man" between the pressure lines of the opposition

Defense principles of play:

1. Defensive numerical and positional advantage in the center of the field
2. Defensive protection thanks to the possession of the ball and pressure after its loss
3. Create a center defense line of three at the back, while being in possession inside the opposition half, to be sure of the defensive numerical advantage
4. Force the direction of play of the opposition toward the sidelines or backward

Transitions deserve a particular focus, as Guardiola thinks that the possession phase must include the positioning for the defense phase and the defending phase must be a preparation for the attacking phase.

Guardiola's principles for transitions from attack to defense might be summed up as follows:

- When the possession is lost, the nearest players must apply immediate pressure against the opponents, while the others move toward covering positions.
- When the possession is lost, the 2 players closest to the ball must quickly apply pressure and cover the new ball carrier, to force a long pass or to recover the second ball.
- The closest player to the ball applies pressure for his teammates to have time to recover balance.
- The closest player to the ball must apply pressure while the team is placed in a zonal defense.
- High density of players in the center, blocking the passing lanes and closing the spaces toward their own goal.
- Defense line should be always placed out of the penalty area.

Guardiola's principles for the transitions from defense to attack might be summed up as follow:

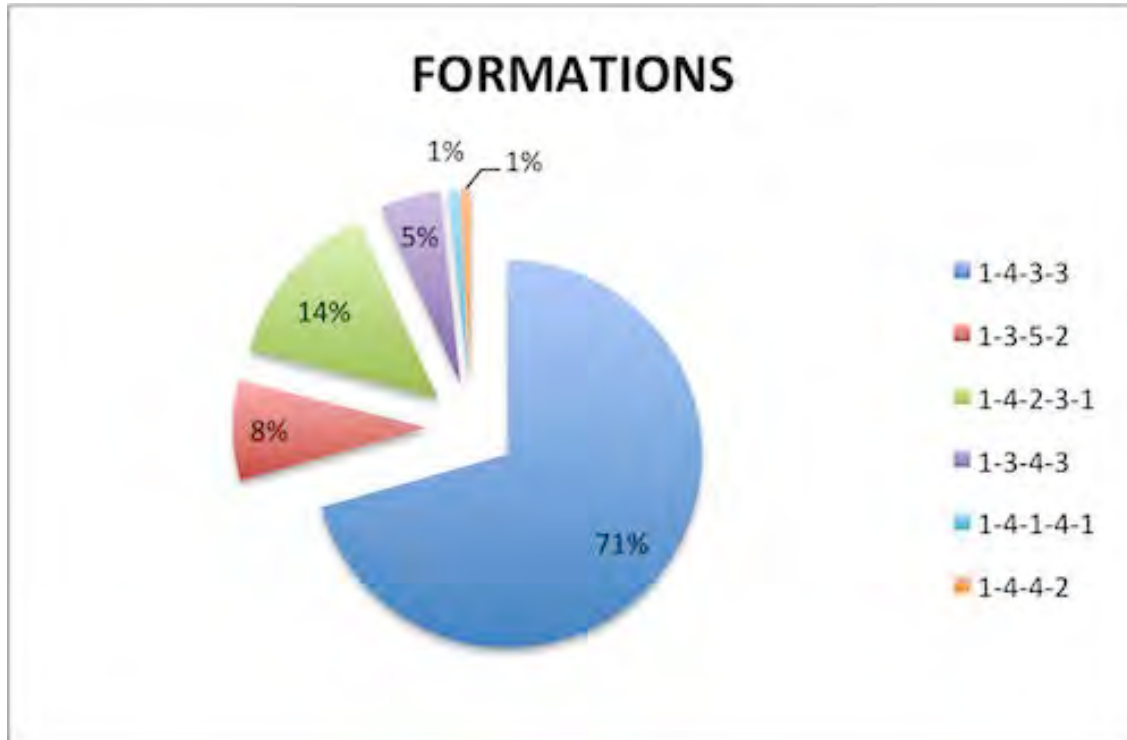
- When the possession is recovered high up the field, exploit the free spaces in the opposition half with a fast counter attack or pattern of play, to finish as soon as possible.
- When the possession is recovered in the middle third, counter attack or create fast pattern of play through the wide players
- If the possession is recovered at the back, exploit the spaces in behind the opposition lines to play out.



## General data about Guardiola's Manchester City possession phase

The line up formations during these two seasons as Manchester City manager have been many and varied, but the 1-4-3-3 seems to be the favorite to fit in the main important players of the team and to implement the tactical approach Guardiola wishes at its best level.

Apart from all the system of play, the principles and the ideas to exploit the spaces efficiently are always the same; the following graphic scheme sum up all these systems of play that Guardiola used during these two last seasons. Again, it's very clear how the principles of play are more important than the formations.



The first season as City manager (2016/2017) was the first without any title for Pep Guardiola since he was Barcelona 2nd team manager, but his tactical ideas hadn't changed during the second one; he has been able to win in the third different league anyway.

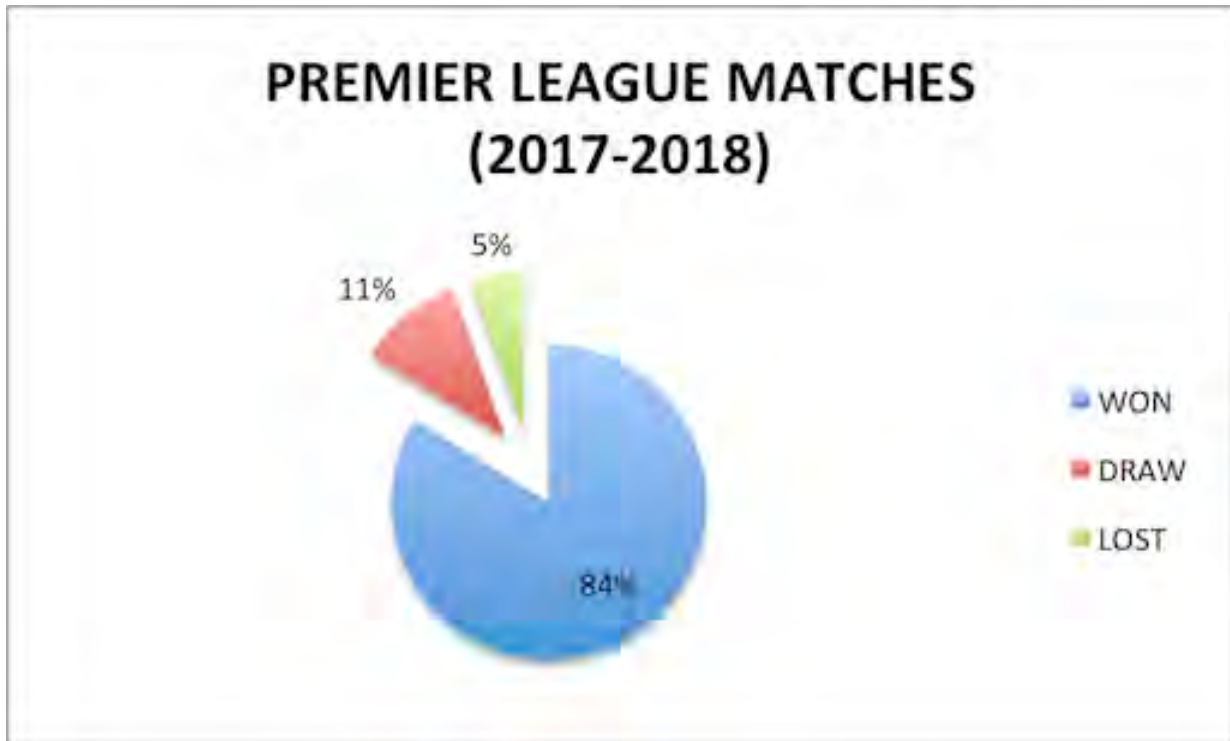
This is the scheme of the ball possession average of the first season and a comparison of both the seasons:

BALL POSSESSION	
2016/2017	59.68%
2017/2018	66.32%
2 SEASONS AVERAGE	63.00%

During the 2017/2018 campaign, Manchester City hit 78% ball possession in the Premier League matches against Swansea City or Everton; but it also conceded the possession to the opposition in some others, like against Arsenal (49% in a Premier League match) or fought for it as against Tottenham (54%). These percentages prove that ball possession is a tool for Guardiola, but not the

only one; Man City scored 28 goals after counter attacks throughout the league (0.45 goals every game).

This last league season has been a record one:



- Away wins - 16
- Points won - 100
- Goals difference - +79
- Goals scored - 106
- Game won - 32
- Game won in a row - 18
- Points gap from the 2nd position - +19



Here are some data of the season and of the league season:



As already stated, counter attacks and set pieces are now important attacking tactics for Guardiola, much more than during La Liga or Bundesliga seasons.

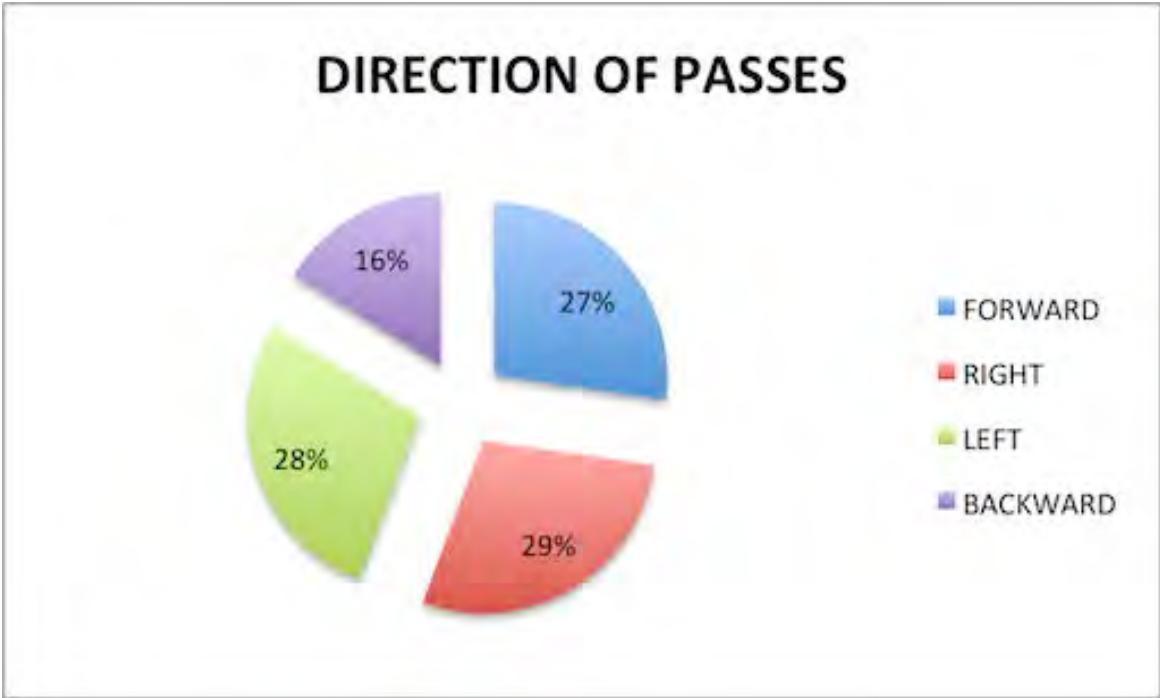


As the possession principle of play is the main key point of the offensive phase, conceding counter attacks is the main risk in case of loss of possession; the role of the balance midfielder (Fernandinho) is decisive to make opposition counter attacks positional attacks, if the recovery of the possession through high pressure isn't possible.

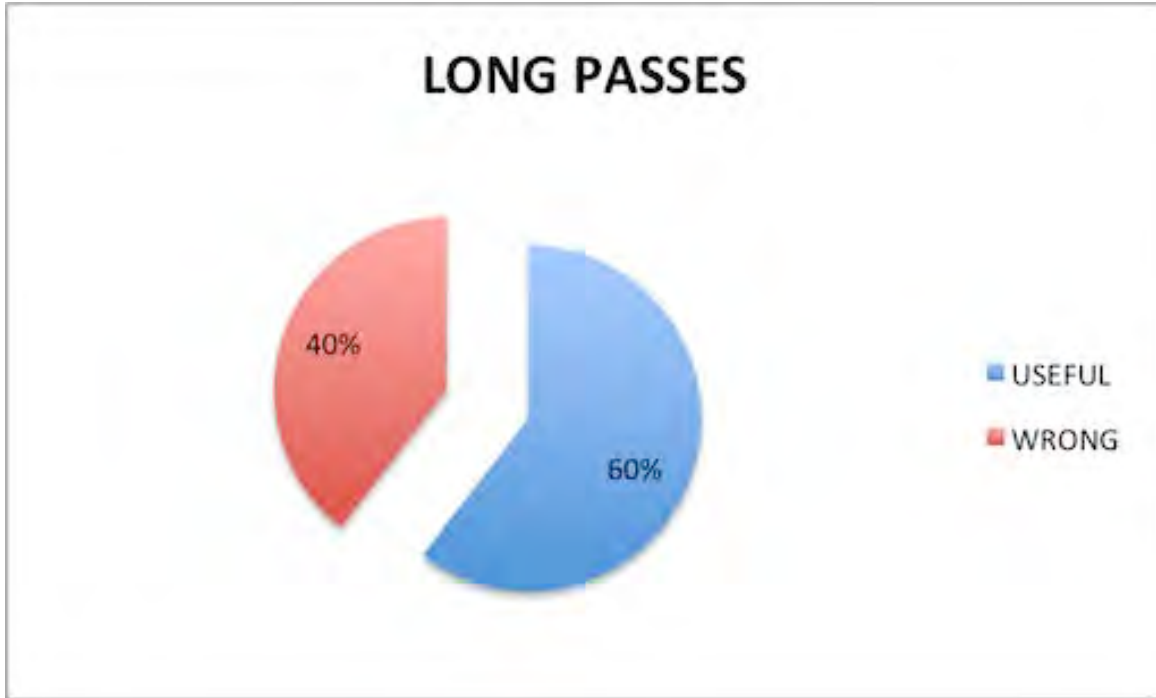
Successful short passes are still very important.



And the distribution of the passes is well spread all over the field:



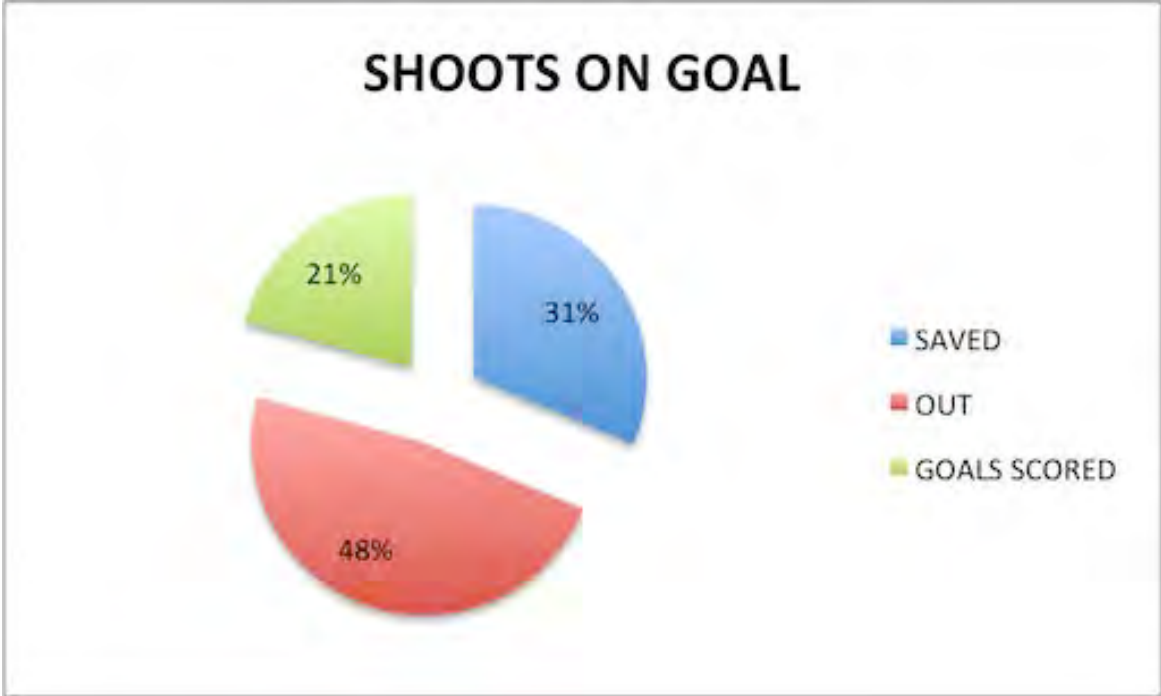
Since the first season at Manchester City, wide wingers are a key factor for the attacking phase and for this reason, long balls (1775 long passes attempts during the 2017/2018 league) are now very important to play through the weak side of the opposition and to create the wide 1 v 1 duels; Sterling and Sanè are involved more than the others. The 40% of wrong long passes demonstrate as they are also forced to find a way to finish the attacking phase on the weak side of the opposition.



Looking at the goals scored during the league season (106), it's very interesting to notice some common points with Guardiola's Barcelona and Bayern Munich; almost all the goals were scored inside the box, as proof of the search of the maximum depth possible to finish.



The high percentage of shots on target (52%) demonstrates how City is a highly effective team when the moves can be finished.



All the shots and the goals are again well distributed from a technical point of view.



Also the directions of attacks are well distributed all over the final third.



Again, these percentages show that the width of the wingers on the field is used as tool to reach the maximum depth to finish, through the center spaces.

Looking at the directions and at the distribution of the final passes, it's clear again how the maximum depth is the first objective to finish, condensing as many players as possible in the center spaces of the penalty area and around the penalty kick zone, cutting toward the goal from the opposite side to finish inside the second pole zone.



## A new concept of width in Guardiola's possession and attacking phases

We see great differences regarding exploitation of the wide spaces between Guardiola's FC Barcelona seasons and his two years at City.



Abidal looked for a deep teammate on the left side (Henry is running deep in behind here)...



...or to make overlap runs to send a cross toward the opposition goal area (he is making an overlap run past to Henry in the move up here).





On the right side, Daniel Alves was used to play inside the field from the flank.

This position must not be confused as an inverted fullback role; Alves was used to dribble inside to overload the center space of the opposition in the final third, inviting them to put pressure and opening spaces at the back.

The Guardiola's inverted fullbacks usually have an important role during the building up phases of play as well as during transition to defend phases.



Guardiola exploited the idea of inverted fullbacks during his seasons as Bayern Munich manager with Lahm and Alaba. He improved this usage during these last two seasons at Manchester City with Clichy and Sagna first and then with Delph, Otamendi and Danilo, more than with Walker.

Another aim was to make a run to receive a pass behind the opposition defense line, but always toward the goal (in this move Alves is receiving the ball from Xavi after a diagonal run toward the goal)...



...or to finish also.



Fc Barcelona's pattern of play required the fullbacks to exploit the wide spaces and to be decisive together with the midfielders, Xavi and Iniesta and with Messi. Barcelona considered the width as the space between the widest opponents in the final third or the goal area width. The direct attacks to the goal were the only solutions to finish.



Xavi had the ball in this move and the widest players were Henry on the left and Messi on the right, near the upper corners of the penalty area.



Messi dribbled the ball and all the others were attacking the goal to receive behind the defense line.

Manchester City's style of play requires wide wingers on the sidelines, to play 1 v 1 duels (the opposition penalty area is clearly much more overloaded of players than during the Barcelona seasons, as a 4 v 4 is played inside it)...



...or to create small duels if the opposition is able to cover ball zone (a 3 v 3 can be easily recognizable) to play in behind the defense line through the inside runs without the ball along the half spaces.



After quick and short passing patterns and the attacking phase through the center that Guardiola proposed during the seasons as Barcelona manager, he changed his approach at Bayern, working on the best abilities and skills of his players; the focus was now on the wingers (Robben, Ribery, Müller and Douglas Costa).

Manchester City may be considered as a mix with 1v1 wide situations on the flanks that are a recurrent solution during the attacking phases, and the center spaces and half spaces that are useful to build up and to finish.

Horizontal and diagonal movements of City's middle players, when the wingers are on the ball, De Bruyne, Silva, Gundogan, Bernardo Silva, invite the opposition center defenders out of position, opening spaces behind them.



Again, to move the opposition defense line and invite them to overload one side to switch the play...



...to open center spaces and to combine along the weak zone of the opposition after the change of a side...



...and to have the chance to play 1 v 1 duels.



If the support and center players are not immediately close to the wingers, and if the defenders can't be beaten, the rhythm of the attacking phase is slowed down, waiting for them and their cutting movements in front of the penalty area.

## **The development of the positional play game**

Pep Guardiola's fundamental football philosophy is, obviously, the "juego de posición," the positional play game; concerned with the spaces and how to exploit them when in possession, and how to cover them while in non-possession phases.

As Barcelona manager, Guardiola took a few months before his team was showing clear signs of these positional play games, thanks to the history of the club, to its organization and training methods of the youth academy.

As Bayern coach, he needed a full season, but it shouldn't be forgotten that the whole organization of the team changed and the positional play games were not only a tool to attack and to finish, but they were a tactical solution to adapt his football philosophy to the players; and last but not the least, to play wide rather than in the center spaces.

Manchester City players seem to have helped Guardiola to develop his positional play games, making them easier and faster, looking at the speed of play of the building up and of the finishing phases; City is much faster and more direct than Barcelona and Bayern. Moreover, long balls have appeared.

If Barcelona played and finished thanks to pattern of play in behind the opposition defense line, Bayern played, and much more Man City plays, wide and through the weak sides of the opposition. What Barcelona, Bayern and Manchester City have in common are the right distances between each player in relation to the systems and the patterns of play that were and are shaped on the pitch.

The opposition is usually forced to adapt its defensive shape to mark the positional play, which leaves the lines stretched, or to choose to ignore the positional play, leaving an underloaded side of the field free for exploitation, marking the most dangerous players; but this tactic leaves the team able to switch the side quickly and the attacking players to position themselves between the lines.

Even if Guardiola's Juego de Posición does not often require playing vertically quickly, and if the priority is to play forward into advanced areas in preparation of both attack and defense transitions, the rhythm and the timing seem to have been increased during these two seasons at Manchester City.

To control the ball is the key and the controlled possession, finding the right positions on the field, is an important objective to move the opposition defense; Manchester City players move into these positions in relation to the ball quicker than ever, both from the offensive and the defensive points of view.

If the opposition defense structure is very strong and it's difficult to be penetrated, then longer passes are used switching the side; and here again, the positional play game has developed.

The positional play games of Pep Guardiola have been changed, helping City to dominate the possession without losing the peculiar speed of English style of play; width penetration and creation of the final balls are fast than ever.



## The "Half Spaces"

A 'half space' is a channel between the fullback and center half on either side of the area; many of Manchester City's goals come from here. When Man City builds up from the back, the fullbacks come into the center midfield to overload it, the wingers stay placed out wide and force the opposition fullbacks to be placed back and wide there.

The half space concept has been created and developed by Guardiola through the seasons; it was not the same with Barcelona and not the same, even if closer, with Bayern Munich.

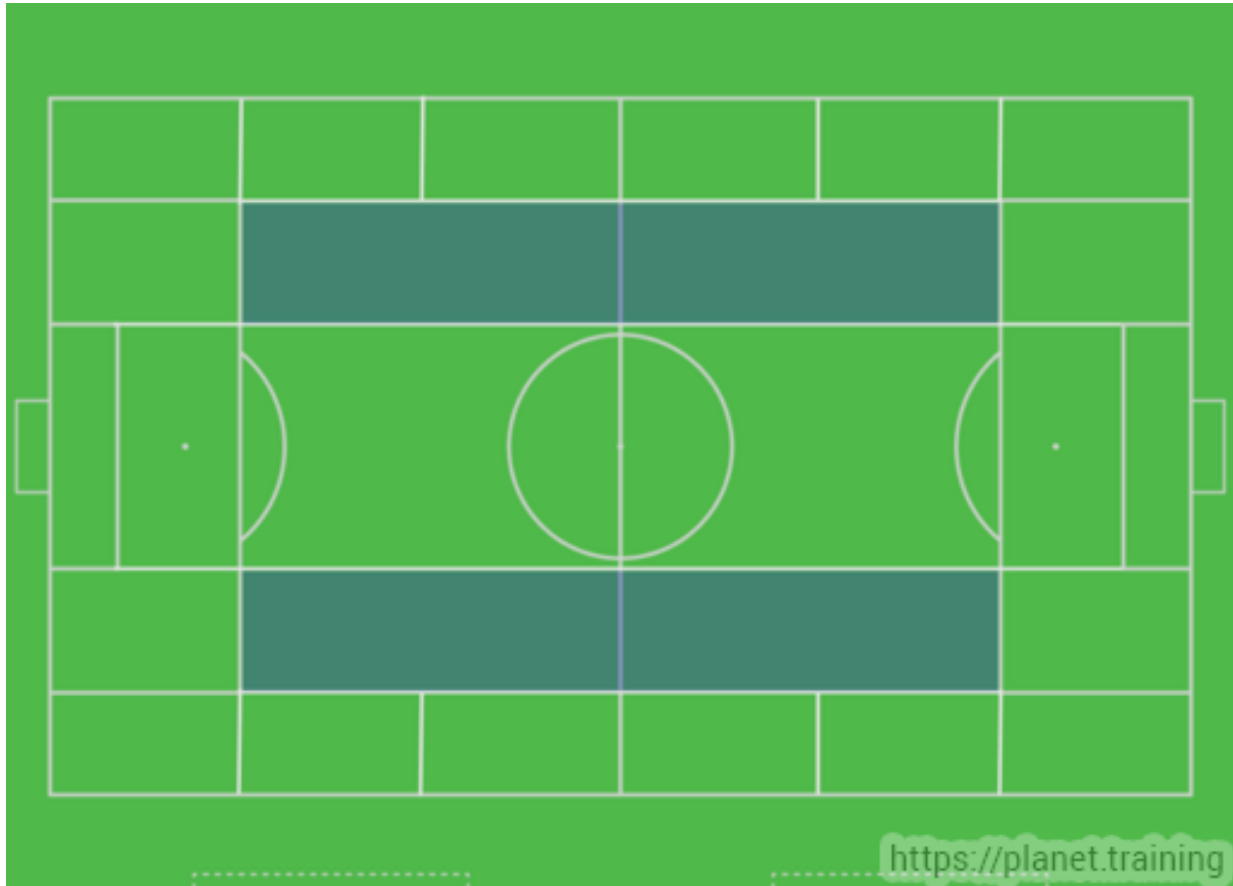
With Fc Barcelona, the first objective of the possession phase was to get the ball to the most creative players free inside opposition spaces and the wide players didn't use the full width of the pitch, being often placed between the opposition fullback and center back on either sides; the opposition players were invited away from the central zone, creating a positional and quality advantage if it couldn't be numerical advantage.

The wide players then ran in behind, when the midfielders were in possession inside the upper area of the middle third, while Messi was often dropping back to invite the defenders out.



At Bayern Munich Guardiola asked the training pitches to be cut to highlight the half spaces and he began to use the inverted fullbacks when the team was attacking, creating center numerical advantage, overloading this area and leaving the wingers free out wide to play 1 v 1 against the opposition fullbacks.

This is a division of the spaces for the positional play games on the field:



4 lines split the pitch vertically into 5 zones of nearly same measures. The flanks lines are the extension of the sidelines of the penalty area along all the pitch till the opposite one and the center space is divided into three parts along the field as well. The outer corridors are the half spaces.

These spaces are the tools to move the opposition defense set-up and to disorganize it.

The winger and the fullback don't have to be placed along the same corridor but they must play along different spaces, depending on the position of the center defender in relation with them.

The center defender should be free in the middle, the fullback should be placed in the half space and the winger must be out wide to receive the ball, as well as the center forward.

The opposition winger is supposed to follow the fullbacks in the center; if he doesn't, there is a free player in the middle and if the opposition center midfielder tries to cover the space around him, an advanced midfielder is then free to receive.

The advanced midfielders and the opposite fullback must exploit the middle space now created.

The main principle of play in these situations is to ensure the numerical advantage in the middle third.

If the fullback builds up wide and dribbles forwards, the center forward follows him and the winger must now play in the half spaces and even through the center spaces, attacking the depth.

The center forward is free to move if the opposition center back comes out from defense line; in addition, one advanced midfielder often run deep to support the attacking move (Thiago Alcantara more than all the others during those seasons).



The City's inverted fullbacks are different from Lahm and Alaba, as they are not play makers but they link the play out phase from the defenders to the wingers; the lower play maker is usually the balance player and the advanced play makers are always David Silva, Gundogan, Bernardo Silva or even De Bruyne.



They are extremely athletic to get back into position if the ball is lost, as opposition long ball are the most recurrent tactic to counter attack; they must get back within two or three seconds. During the first season as City manager, the opposition attacks on the counter were hard issues to fix.

“When you have Xavi, Iniesta, (Sergio) Busquets, Messi, (Cesc) Fabregas, it is normal you play in that position, in the middle. When you have players here like Sane, (Raheem) Sterling and (Kevin) De Bruyne, we attack more the spaces. In football there are fundamentals, but you adapt them to the players you have.”

## A complete possession phase and the developments of a move

The following footages sequence is taken from different matches of the last season to sum up all the principles of play we presented in the introduction part:

- 1) The goalkeeper creates numerical advantage to build up and play out



- 2) The center midfielder drops back to create numerical advantage (usually a 4 v 3)...



...and to play out.



3) If a defender is able to exploit a space, he must dribble to invite the pressure of the opposition, freeing the spaces in behind



Otamendi is free to dribble here...



...and he can invite the pressure of Silva marker, opening a space behind him. Silva is free to receive the ball.



4) Attack the space at the back of an opponent who is pressing the ball carrier; playing in between the lines





5) Overload a flank to switch the side of play. 4 v 4 duel on the flank to free and attack the opposition weak side.



6) Switch the sides of play from one to other as quickly as possible to create 1 v 1 duels and spaces to be exploited among the opponents.





In these 1v1 situations on the flank, City has usually qualitative advantage, thanks to Sanè and Sterling and the defenders are often in a negative and difficult position; they must cover the weak side first and then press the wingers who usually has already received and controlled the ball. The positioning of the inverted fullbacks or of the advanced midfielders in the half spaces helps the connection through quick ball circulation.

Guardiola at Bayern already often used the attacking pattern of play with horizontal circulation on a flank, to manipulate the opposition's defense shape and to open an opposite side, creating 1v1 situations with qualitative superiority.

With Manchester City this sequence has been made even quicker by switches side of play with long balls.



7) Move the ball quickly to create open ball situations (3 options for each players in possession shall be available) and attack the defense line at the back





Due to the lack of header skills of City’s center forward Sergio Aguero, strong and low passes are played into the box from the byline as they are much more effective than a high cross where. The ball is played between the defenders and the goalkeeper as the players inside the penalty area often make runs to follow the move and to exploit the spaces in behind through low cutbacks. This method creates some of the simplest scoring chances.



- 8) Maximum width of the field to find the most suitable depth. The wingers are placed between the last defender and the sideline and more often, they are placed on it without the ball.



- 9) Place the players on different lines to make the start of the moves easier



10) Search for the “3rd man” between the pressure lines of the opposition.



The third men are usually Silva and De Bruyne; two dynamic advanced midfielders who build up in the middle third (Silva more than De Bruyne), attack the second balls (De Bruyne more than Silva), support the wingers when they are near the ball and who attack the opposition goal, when the ball is played along the opposite flank.

Silva drops back to play out with vertical movements from the opposition backline and he usually stays placed between this opposition backline and the first midfielders' lines; De Bruyne attacks more directly the final third along the right side, supporting the right winger Sterling.

## Transitions to defend

Manchester City is a wider team than Barcelona and Bayern Munich, and even deeper on the field, as long passes are much more used than during La Liga and Bundesliga seasons. Also the distances among the players are larger while building up and during the possession phases.



Gundogan has the possession in this picture, but he is under pressure; the only close and easy pass option is a back pass toward Fernandinho; to play toward all the other teammates, means to cut an opposition line because of their positions. This is a significant difference from Barcelona pattern of



play that was used to build up and to play out; and it's much more similar to the Bayern Munich one, that was carried out through Alonso, Lahm and Alaba.



When one winger has the ball on the flank, there are teammates who are placed inside the opposition penalty area.



Walker has the ball and seven players are placed over the ball line, exploiting all the width of the field. If the opposition team defends the depth spaces, all City players are free to receive (as in the picture), if the opposition defends high marking on, there are available spaces at the back and toward the goal, and if they defend a potential strong side, a weak one will be created.

The possession structure with short distances among the players should be the key for an immediate counter pressing in case of loss of possession; if they are placed wide, the players might be alone against the new ball carrier, in case of loss of possession and without any chance of closure of passing options and pressure.



Guardiola fixed the potential issue of isolation of the players who lose the possession and of all the others on the field behind the ball line, with some easy principles of the forward defensive play:

- 1) Support players around the ball area; the second defender on the ball must cover the teammates who lost the possession and double the mark if the time allows him. A third player must cover the spaces just out of the ball area or mark the most dangerous opponents.



De Bruyne is on the opposition ball carrier; Gundogan is covering the easiest and nearest passing solution, Walker is placed to cover the flank and Otamendi together with Fernandinho would be able to double the mark on the opposition center forwards.



Sterling is involved in a 1 v 1 defense duel against the opposition ball carrier, Walker is covering the flank and Fernandinho can press the center passing options.

- 2) The inverted fullbacks congest the center spaces to allow the counter pressing phase and to avoid oppositions counter attacks inside there. Delph is closing the center left space together with the balance midfielder Fernandinho, who is placed very high on the pitch. The player with the ball can't start any counter attack, as forward passing lanes are closed.



(The roles of Manchester City inverted fullbacks, when in possession, are not restricted to the center, but they are often placed into their half spaces, as link players from the defenders to the wingers).

- 3) The winger near the ball puts pressure to either prevent a pass out to the fullback, or to press him as he receives the ball. Sterling is running after the opposition left fullback to press him as the first attempt of passing lane closure wasn't successful. Bernardo Silva is ready to double the mark on him.



- 4) High intensity pressure on the new ball carrier of the nearest player of the defending team, usually the player who lost it.



Gundogan forces the opposition player to pass back; De Bruyne and Sterling are closing forward passing lanes and Sanè and Aguero are ready to press the defenders as they receive.



In this similar situation, Gundogan is pressing again and Sanè, De Bruyne and Sterling are closing the forward passing lanes to the opposition defenders.



## Defense phase

These are some Guardiola statements about the defense phase organization:

"It is important that the tackle belongs in your team as a skill, but the tackle is the last choice; I don't train tackles. I train to keep the ball and defend as well as possible."

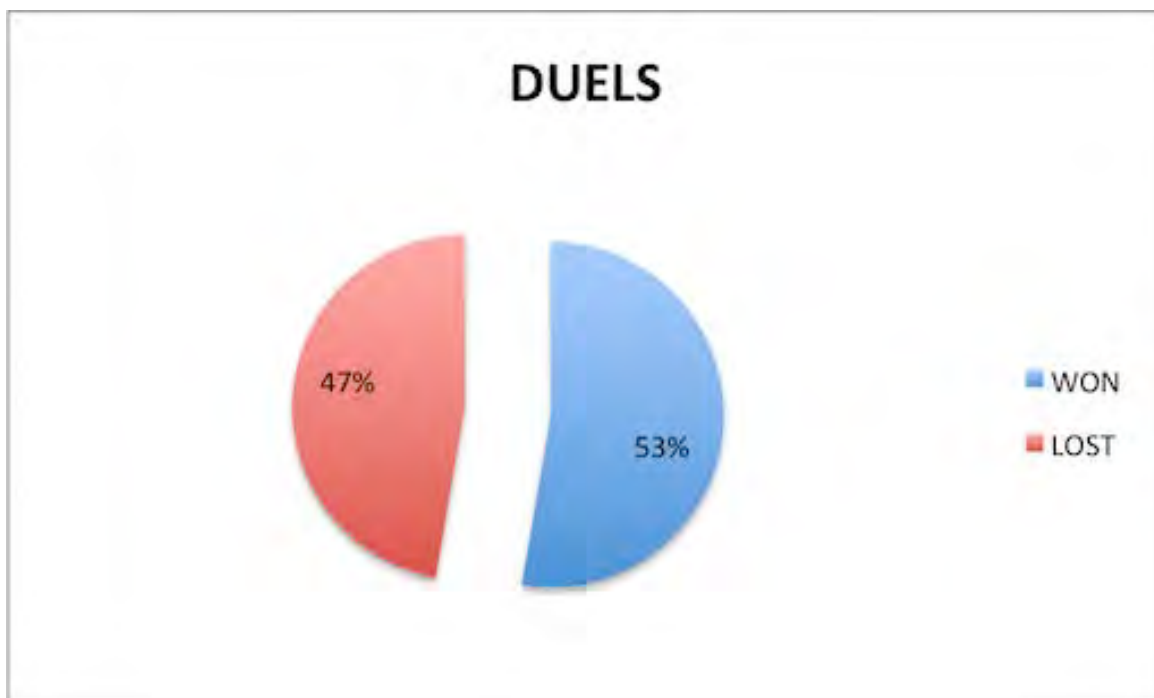
"The second ball is a concept. It's typical here in England, when they use a lot of tackles. I am not a coach for the tackles. I don't train tackles."

"What I want is to try to play well and score goals. What are tackles?  
You have to win the duels, that is true. But normally when you play good, you win a lot of tackles."

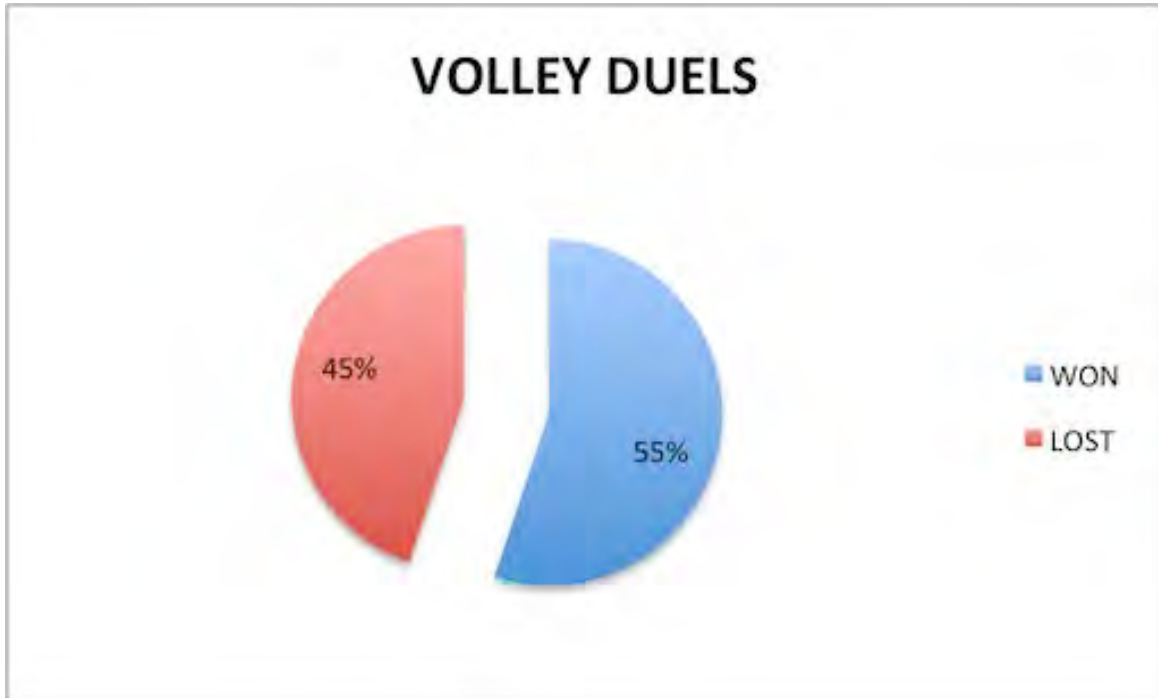
"You concede counter attacks when you lose easy passes, simple passes, when the players want to do more creative things that are not necessary, and you are not organized when you lose the ball."

"We have been playing more simple. Our game is quicker because we play simple, not just because, of course, we are fast in front, but especially because we are simple. We play one or two touches. One or two touches: no more than that. We are organized through the ball. We travel, we play with the ball together and when this happens, it is different."

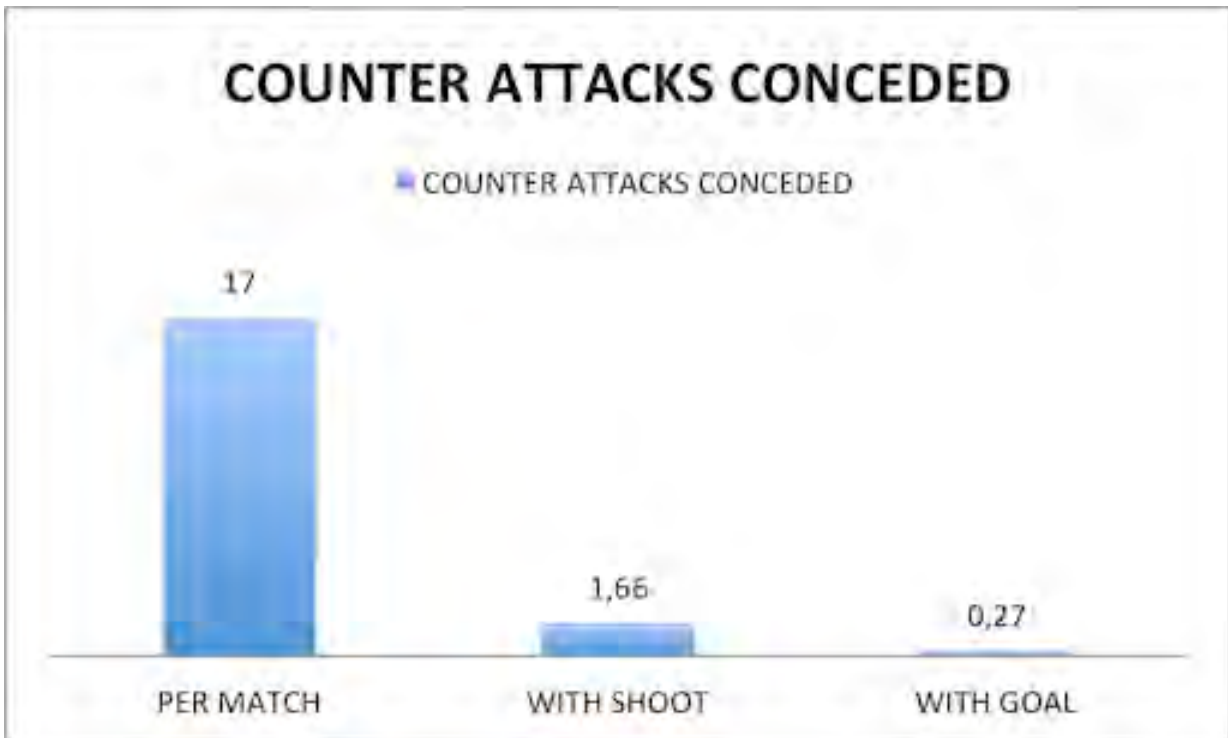
Here are some percentage data of this phase:



The duels percentage is the proof how Manchester City is not a "fighting team," but it's also a proof of what Guardiola says and how it's carried out on the field; it's a team which is organized through the ball and the ball is the first and most important key element of the structure.



As the main opposition tactic against Man City, as transition to attack, is to play long ball behind the defense line, since the first season, Guardiola's team improved the ability to defend the volley and long balls. During the second and winning season (2017/2018), the players have been able to limit the opposition counter attacks, which was the most difficult issue of the first season.





The tackles percentage is very explicative of their main objective: they are used to recover the possession and not just to block the opposition possession phase.



All the main defense principles of play are explained in the following pages.

1) Defense numerical and positional advantage in the center of the field



A 3 v 2 duel is played on the ball with Delph as inverted fullback, the balance midfielder Fernandinho, and the nearest advanced midfielder De Bruyne. The wingers Sanè and Sterling are dropping back to cover the spaces on the flanks and one of the center backs is placed very high to prevent the opposition center forward from playing toward the penalty area.



In this situation of open ball against Everton, a significant numerical advantage is very clear; a 6 v 3 + 1 duel is played in the area where the ball is arriving and a 4 v 3 along the defense line, where two players are attacking the ball and two are defending the depth at the same time.

- 2) Create a center defense line of three at the back, while being in possession inside the opposition half, to be sure of the defensive numerical advantage



In this situation, the move starts with a 3 v 1 duel at the back; one defender attacks the opposition ball carrier to close the spaces and prevent him from dribble forward. The other 2 in the center are able to close the deep spaces, being in numerical advantage 2 v 1. A general 5 v 3 situation is easily recognizable.

- 3) Force the direction of play of the opposition toward the sidelines or backward.



The center spaces are already close while the opponent is receiving the ball along the sideline.



De Bruyne is on the ball, forcing the opposition ball carrier toward the sideline and then double marking with the left fullback. Sanè is marking the nearest potential receiver. A 3 v 2 duel is played on the ball and the orientation of the opposition pressure is clearly forced out wide. A general 9 v 5 duel is played around the ball area.



A 5 v 3 situation is being played along the defending right flank of Manchester City; a cross is allowed in the end, but as the opposition has been forced to bring more players inside this space to keep the possession, the finishing phase becomes difficult inside the penalty area, where there are few players.



A 2 (+1) v 1 duel is played against the opposition ball carrier as well as a 3 (+1) v 2 duel just inside the penalty area. The opposition winger is closed and his danger is very poor.



In this move, the opposition build up phase of play has been forced wide first and then backward; it's now very important to put intense pressure against the center defenders to prevent them from finding an easy forward center passing lane toward the midfielders. Long balls are preferred, as there should be a line of three players at the back who can cover them.



#### 4) Protection of deep spaces from long balls



Cover the center space in front of the penalty area with a unique line against opposition free kicks.



In this move, the line of three defenders (2 center backs and the balance midfielder) is helped by the fullbacks to create a strong side in the area, where the opposition long ball is sent. One center back covers the depth; the second one and the center balance midfielder can attack the ball. The fullbacks overload the area.



## **Transitions to attack and counter attacks**

Counter attacks, as "positive transitions" are the main and most interesting evolution of Pep Guardiola philosophy.

Barcelona's transitions to attack were carried out managing the possession to shape the team before attacking the opposition goal. When the ball was recovered on the flanks, after the orientation of the opposition possession toward the sidelines, Barcelona used to attack along the same flank if in numerical advantage, or the field was split if outnumbered.

When the ball was recovered in the center space, the attacking phase was carried out thanks to the diagonal runs without the ball of the wide players, finishing through the spaces in front of the goal; if any space was available, free wide teammates became important options to keep the possession.

During the seasons as Bayern Munich manager, when his team started to play with fast wingers, the counter attacks phase was improved and developed thanks to players like Ribery, Robben and Müller.

Manchester City is both a possession team as well as a counter attacking team, when it is possible to recover the ball and to break to the other end without giving the other team a chance to regroup. Man City can counter attack directly and to play out quickly with fast pattern of play; in these situations, the rhythm is higher than ever.

Pep Guardiola's team was able to reach the 70% of possession in some matches this season, but Man City did many damages to the opposition with counter attacks very often a part of all their passes during the build-up phase of play. Quick one and two-touch passing combinations was often carried out to open spaces for Sergio Aguero, Kevin De Bruyne, Sanè and Walker to play forward or to finish.

28 goals were scored through counter attacks, the 19% of all attempts (14 attempts each match), with an average per match of 0,45 (3%); 1 goal every two matches.



This first counter attacking sequence shows a counter-trend with the pattern of play during Barcelona seasons. The opposition possession phase was directed toward the flank first, but then the ball was recovered in an outnumbered situation. As Man City plays in a more direct way than Barcelona and Bayern Munich, a counter attack attempt is carried out anyway.



As an important principle of play is to overload the center during the defense phases of play, then the center spaces can be overloaded even while counter attacking. Two players, the center forward Aguero and the opposite winger Sterling are attacking the opposition goal, the second advanced midfielder De Bruyne could be able to attack a potential second time of the ball or a rebound of the goalkeeper.



This sequence is again very explicative because it reflects the data of the finishing zones inside the opposition penalty area



Here again, a remarkable 2 v 5 outnumbered situation for Aguero and Sanè against the opposition defenders is very clear. We may find quality advantage but not even a positional advantage, as all the defenders could cover the spaces and put pressure on the forwards.



Finishing phase is searched dribbling the ball near the opposition goal even if outnumbered.







In this third example, Sanè recovers the possession after the counter pressing move and exploits the center space in front of him.



A 5 v 5 situation is then played overloading of the center space and with the chance to play behind the opposition defense line, toward the winger, who can attack directly the opposition goal in the end. Sterling can dribble freely till the opposition goal in the end.





This last example is like the previous one as development; the ball is recovered in middle third, the balance midfielder Fernandinho closes the opponent at the back, who loses the possession. All the three forwards attack the depth.



A quick pattern of play through the winger, who ran inside, is then played to finish, supporting the move from the back.