

TACTICAL SERIES



PEP GUARDIOLA ATTACKING

by Luca Bertolini



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Introduction:

"I'd rather my players to thank me for improving them, rather than for the titles."

What I want most of all is after each game, and after the season ends, City supporters saying that they have enjoyed the football. That is the most important thing.

I'm here because the Premier League is a huge challenge. I proved myself in Barcelona and again in Germany and now I want to prove myself here with my staff and amazing players.

I want each of my players to be a good teammate; this is the most important quality. I like a player who thinks about himself but also about the group and Manchester City.

I know how hard the Premier League is; it is a tough league in which to put together lots of wins back-to-back. That is a challenge. There are many teams who can finish in first place and the competition will be fierce.

We are all working here to make this club better. I don't like the guys to think about what the club can do for them. We are here to help Manchester City to become a better club over the upcoming years and hopefully that is what you will see.

We have to try to help each other and go forward and be aggressive without the ball. I like to see the fight when we don't have the ball because without that we can't win anything.

We speak and we train, we help each other to see if we can press and build up from the goalkeeper.

These are a few words by Pep Guardiola for the Matchday Program before his first Premier League match ever, against Sunderland, on August the 13th, 2016.

The first season was without titles, in spite of many new signings: John Stones (center back - 55 mln £), Leroy Sané (winger - 50 mln £), Gabriel Jesus (center forward - 32,00 mln £), Ilkay Gündogan (center midfielder - 27,00 mln £), Nolito (winger 18,00 mln £), Claudio Bravo (goalkeeper - 18,00 mln £).

At the same time, the transfers were very poor from an income point of view, with many players on loan: Stevan Jovetic, Edin Dzeko and Wilfried Bony (forwards), Samir Nasri (wingers), Martín Demichelis and Eliaquim Mangala (center backs) and the goalkeeper of the previous seasons, Joe Hart.

At the end of the first season, the team was classified 3rd in the league and it was eliminated in the 4th round of the League Cup, in the round of 16 of the Champions League, and it was a semi-finalist of the FA Cup.

These are some thoughts of the manager for "The Independent" on line, about his first season:

"Of course. I thought 'If it doesn't work, I'll go home, another one is coming and someone can try in his way', so in that moment there was concern about the results, what we can do to improve..."

“In that moment I thought that could happen, that it doesn’t work...

“But at the same time, I thought if next season it’s not going well, if it’s the same, Txiki (Begiristain, City’s director of football) or Ferran (Soriano, City’s chief executive) would decide ‘OK Pep you are not good enough’ and change...

But: “I said last season many times when I was asked – it works to play my way and I said ‘I am going to insist, so I never had a doubt about that...

The new 2017 market windows brought new and decisive players for the future league title; Kyle Walker - 52,70 mln £, Danilo - 30,00 mln £ (fullbacks), Bernardo Silva (winger - 50,00 mln £), Ederson (goalkeeper - 40,00 mln £) and others like Aymeric Laporte (center back - 65,00 mln £), Benjamin Mendy (fullback - 57,50 mln £).

As for the previous transfer campaign, the players who left the team didn't bring big incomes (Iheanacho, Bony, Nolito, Fernando, Kolarov, Zabaleta, Clichy, Mangala, Jesus Navas).

David Silva, Kevin De Bruyne and Fernandinho became definitively top class players during these two seasons. Aguero was confirmed as the best center forward for his team.

Sterling improved definitely. This is his scoring data and skills:

Season	Matches	Goals scored	Assists	Goal every min	Total played mins
17/18	46	23	17	155	3.568
16/17	47	10	21	362	3.627
15/16	47	11	10	371	2.981

John Stones, Leroy Sané, Gabriel Jesus, Ilkay Gündogan were decisive for the league title, as well as the new players like Ederson, Walker and Bernardo Silva. Fabian Delph has become a well-known and useful player at the age of 28, after three seasons in the squad.

These are the main general data of Lorey Sanè, comparing his two seasons as Manchester City player:

Season	Matches	Goals scored	Assists	Goal every min	Total played mins
17/18	49	14	19	258	3618
16/17	37	9	8	288	2597

Here are some average data of Sterling and Sanè as Manchester City players:

Player	Goals/match	Shots	Passes	Passes	Key passes	Key passes	Dribbling
Sterling	0.5	2.65	38.16	85%	2.83	99	95
Sane	0.34	2.06	42.1	81%	2.06	83	93
Player	Duels	Duels	Dribbles	Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses	Finish skills
Sterling	17.45	39%	6.19	51%	1.25	23%	100
Sane	15.81	44%	6.43	57%	1.88	19%	80

And here the same average data of Gabriel Jesus during his first season and half as City forward:

Season	Matches	Goals scored	Assists	Goal every min	Total played mins
17/18:	42	17	5	153	2.594
January '17	11	7	5	105	741

Player	Goals/match	Shots	Passes	Passes	Key passes	Key passes	Dribbling
Gabriel Jesus	0.58	2.46	27.89	81%	1.92	75	77
	Duels	Duels	Dribbles	Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses	Finish skills
	18.71	34%	3.65	51%	0.14	43%	99

Raheem Sterling stated this about Pep Guardiola: "His desire, his attention to detail and his man management will galvanize everyone with whom he comes into contact. Everyone knows he is one of the most innovative and successful coaches there has ever been and I can't wait to sit back and enjoy the next few seasons."

Taking advantage of the players' skills to win is always easier than improving players' skills. These are some statements from the Matchday Program of the first Premier League match of the last 2017/2018 season:

"The group of players that our fans will watch this season will be the backbone of this Manchester City for a long time. Raheem [Sterling], Leroy [Sané], Gabriel [Jesus], Bernardo [Silva], Mendy, Ederson...**all of them are young and will stay for the future and get better.**"

"I want to say thank you to the club. **For the next four, five years we have players with huge talent who will grow better together.** Our average is now is around 24, so it means a lot for the future of the club."

"It is true that we have a big squad and a lot of midfield players, but there are many games and four competitions, so everybody is going to get time on the pitch. If you want to play in a certain way, the way I like, with players on the ball, then you need exceptional talent. Our midfield options are fantastic. They all have such a lot of quality. All of them are going to play. Last season I rotated the team a lot and I will do that again. They will all be involved. After that it depends on them."

These are the goals of Pep Guardiola as manager at Barcelona, Bayern and Man City: to win titles, improving and developing his players.

The 2017/2018 team and key players

Player	Main position	Second position	Age	Height	Weight	Foot	Weak foot
Ederson Moraes	GK		24	188	86	left	3
C. Bravo	GK		35	184	80	right	2
J. Stones	CD		23	188	70	right	
N. Otamendi	CD		30	183	81	right	2
V. Kompany	CD	DM	32	193	85	right	3
K. Walker	RD	CD	27	181	73	right	3
Danilo	RD	LD	26	184	78	right	2
B. Mendy	LD	LM	23	185	85	left	
F. Delph	LD	CM	28	174	60	left	3
Fernandinho	DM	CM	33	179	67	right	4
Y. Toure	DM	CM	35	188	90	right	3
İ. Gundogan	CM	DM	27	180	80	right	4
K. De Bruyne	CM	DM	26	181	68	right	4
David Silva	CM	RM	32	170	67	left	4
L. Sane	LM	RM	22	184	75	left	3
R. Sterling	RM	LM	23	170	71	right	3
Bernardo Silva	RM	CM	23	173	64	left	
Jesus	F	LM	21	175	73	right	
S. Aguero	F		29	173	70	both	5

Other players							
Name	Main position	Second position	Age	Height	Weight	Foot	Weak foot
D. Grimshaw	GK		20	/	/	right	
Tosin Adarabioyo	CD		20	195	80	right	
A. Laporte	CD	LD	23	191	86	left	
D. Duhaney	RD	LD	19	/	/	right	
T. Dele-Bashiru	CM	DM	18	/	/	both	
O. Zinchenko	CM	LD	21	175	64	left	1
Brahim Diaz	CM	F	18	170	68	both	
P. Foden	CM	RM	17	171	/	left	
L. Nmecha	F	LM	19	185	/	right	

Team Age Average – 24.78

Both the goalkeepers, Ederson especially, have good skills to play with both feet, as they usually start all the moves from the back and they are always a back pass option for their teammates. The average of passes per match of the line-up goalkeeper Ederson is very high:

Total passes (49 matches)	Average per match	Useful passes
1375	28	93.73%

Looking at the data of the defenders, a high number of passes and of key passes can be easily noticed. One of the center backs, Stones, with 29 appearances during the 17/18 season, has played 22 key passes and he has a 94% average of useful passes. He has been always an active player during the building up phases of play.

Player	Passes	Passes, %	Key passes	Key passes
J. Stones	74,96	94	22	0,08
Dribbles/Match	Dribbles %	Total Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses %
0,48	88	41	0,02	0

Otamendi, with 46 appearances during the 17/18 season, has played 45 key passes and he has a 92% average of useful passes. He has a high percentage of useful dribbles, as he is the center back who often tries to invite the opposition pressure.

Player	Passes	Passes, %	Key passes	Key passes
N. Otamendi	85,02	92	45	0,22
Dribbles/Match	Dribbles %	Total Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses %
0,43	76	34	0,06	67

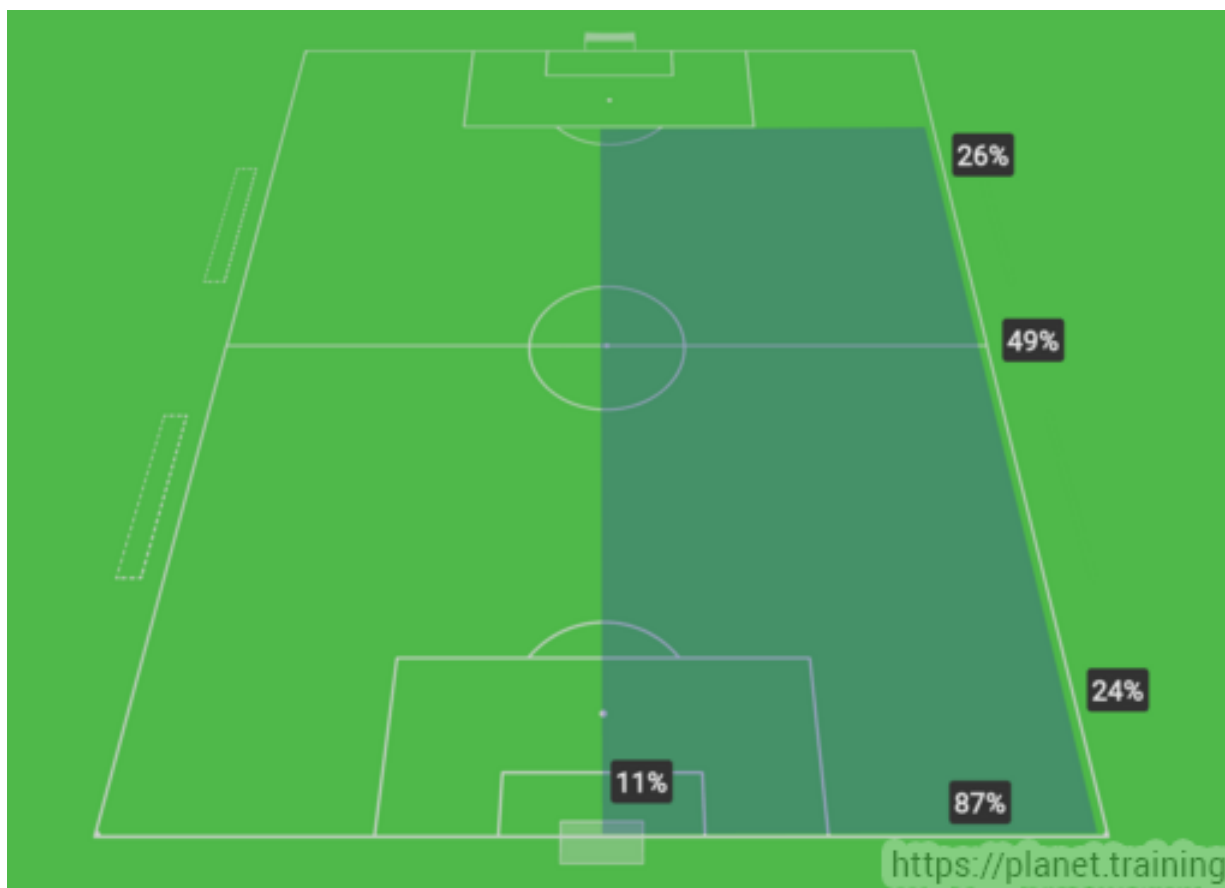
This is the distribution of his positions on the field; for nearly the 50% of all the moves, he has been in the middle third, both dribbling the ball and being positioned as balance player of back line of three.

Thanks to these positions, the advanced midfielders have been able to play near the center forward and to exploit the center space behind the opposition lines.



Walker, the right fullback, has played 62 key passes attempts during this season; he has taken active part to the play out phases of play in the middle third.

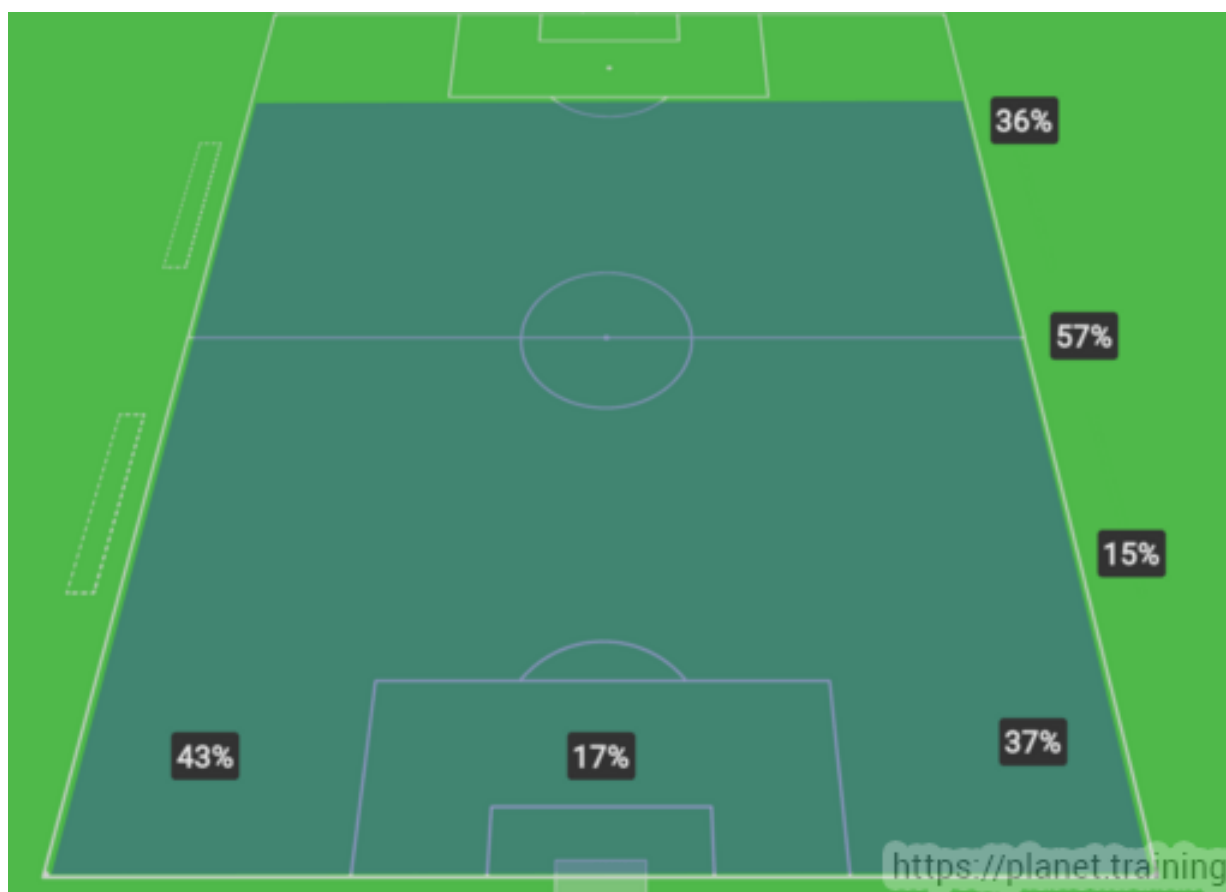
Player	Passes	Passes, %	Key passes	Key passes
K. Walker	75,49	89	62	0,99
Dribbles/Match	Dribbles %	Total Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses %
2,42	63	67	1,85	26



The role of Danilo is very interesting; he has played 38 matches throughout the season, as right fullback, as left fullback and as defensive midfielder. The number of the key passes is very interesting.

Player	Passes	Passes, %	Key passes	Key passes
Danilo	67,32	89	77	1,46
Dribbles/Match	Dribbles %	Total Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses %
1,82	66	69	1,34	20

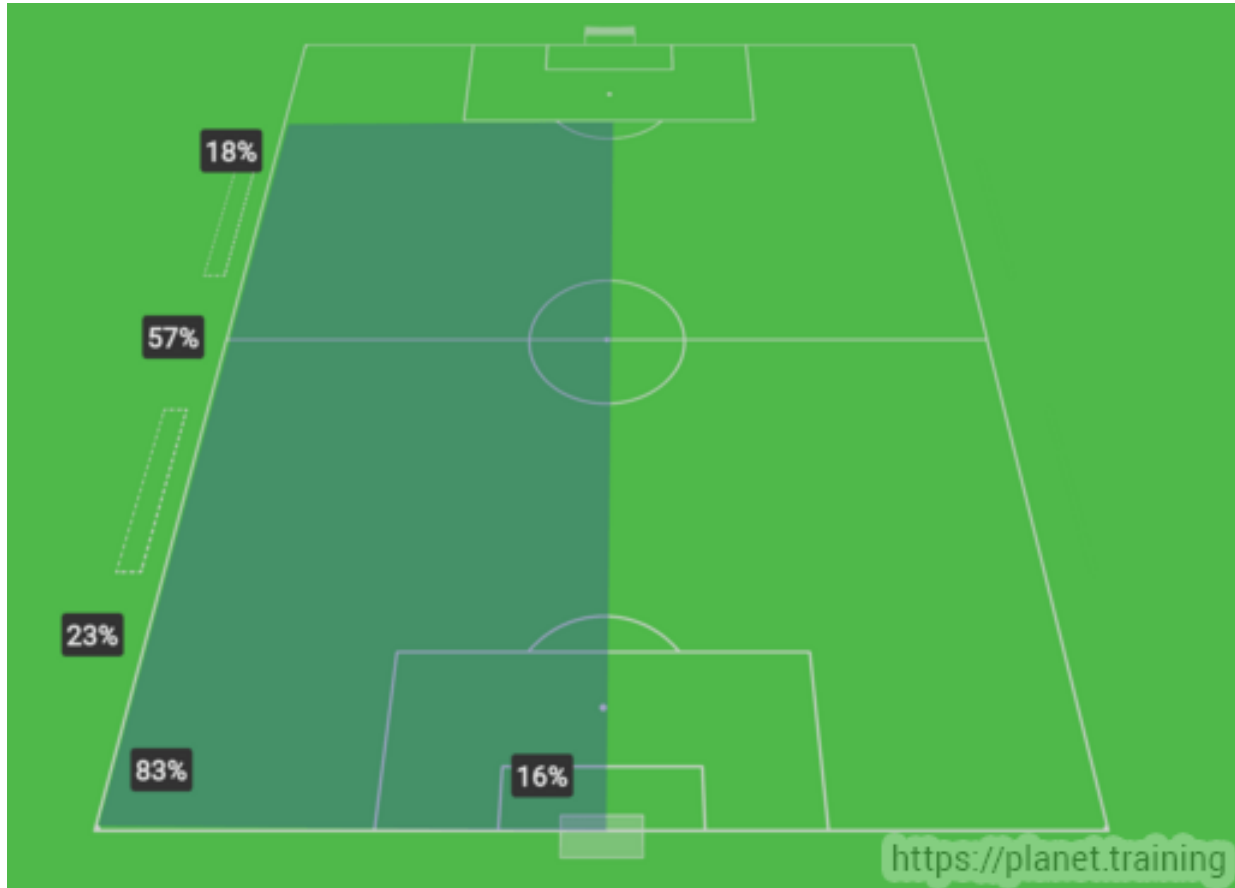
This is the distribution of his positions on the field;



His starting positions in the line up are for a 61% as right fullback, 32% as left fullback and the rest as defensive midfielder. As left fullback Danilo has often played as inverted fullback, in the middle third, as his teammate Delph.

Fabian Delph is one of the players who improved the most with Pep Guardiola; after the first season on the bench as center midfielder, he has been transformed into and developed as fullback, as inverted fullback moreover, exploiting his skills as midfielder.

Player	Passes	Passes, %	Key passes	Key passes
F. Delph	74,16	93	51	0,55
Dribbles/Match	Dribbles %	Total Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses %
3,34	73	80	0,85	33



During this last 17/18 season, he has played 29 matches as left fullback (61%), as center midfielder (22%) and as defensive midfielder (17%). He has the highest percentage of dribbles per match, of cross passes (taking into consideration that City is not a cross-oriented team) and a high percentage of useful passes (93%).

As for Otamendi, the main goal of dribbles in the middle third is to invite the opposition out from defensive positions and to invite the pressure, opening spaces at their back and in behind their lines.

Mendy has played moreover as left fullback or left midfielder, in his 9 season appearances; his main characteristic is the crossing skills from the flank, but he played a high number of key passes as well.

Player	Passes	Passes, %	Key passes	Key passes
B. Mendy	53,59	76	14	2,48
Dribbles/Match	Dribbles %	Total Dribbles	Crosses	Crosses %
3,66	78	58	7,23	18

All the midfielders either have defensive and balance roles or advanced and attacking tasks, they are well skilled at playing with their weak foot. Build up and "liquid" possession phases require these kinds of player.

The whole squad seems to include just three center forwards as specific role; but, again, the mix of roles and of patterns of play, during the finishing stages, allows all the advanced midfielders to shoot on goal together with their supports moves.

The defenders allow the advanced positions of the midfielders, keeping the balance at the back with a line of three.

Here are some basic data about the Manchester City advanced midfielders, who don't have a specific role during building up phases of play, but they usually take an active part of playing out in the middle third and during the finishing phases.

The four main midfielders have scored 37 goals at the end of the season, and all their positions on the field have been evenly mixed, except for Bernardo Silva, who aims at playing as inverted midfielder, starting from the right side.

Player	Matches	Shot/Match	Goals scored
De Bruyne	52	2,7	12
David Silva	40	1,8	10
Gundogan	49	2,1	6
Bernardo Silva	53	1,5	9

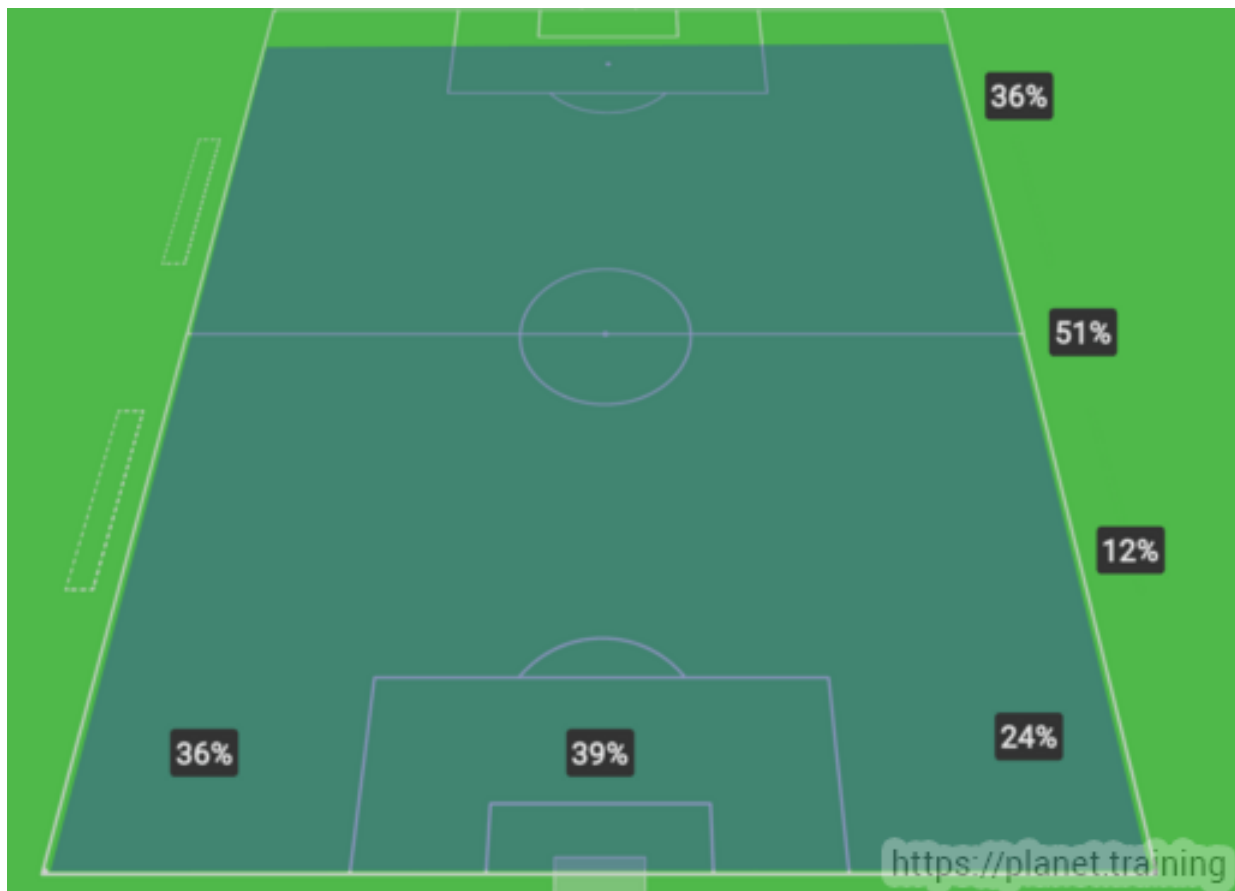
Looking at the following scheme and graphics, low percentages of action in the first third are very explicative of what Guardiola wants from them; the build up phase is not their task, but they basically:

- 1) must play out
- 2) move in between the opposition lines
- 3) take the moves to the final stage
- 4) run without the ball to be a third man option and a support for the wingers
- 5) are be able to keep the possession if direct attacks are not possible
- 6) finish the moves
- 7) be the first pressure players when the ball is lost
- 8) launch and support the counter-attacks

This is the scheme of the field coverage of Gundogan, through his positioning. Among the advanced midfielders, he is the one who plays as advanced center play maker, more than all the others. He is often positioned all over the width of the field, but he is active in the middle third, more than in the final third. He played a key role in City’s recent League Cup win, playing all the six matches of the trophy.

Player	Apps	Mins	Assists	Key passes per game
Gundoğan	49	2013	3	Average 0.7
	Passes per game	Long Passes per game	Successful Passes	
	Average 46.6	1	91.5%	

The vertical middle line and the center horizontal line identify the main playing area, with a tendency toward the left side of the field.



As he plays with a high percentage of successful passes, but with a quite low key passes average, it's clear that his first task is to be an advanced playmaker, to keep the possession high on the field, receiving from the build up area and passing toward the final third. Gundogan has a lower average of positions in the final third and he usually attacks the opposition goal less than the other advanced teammates.

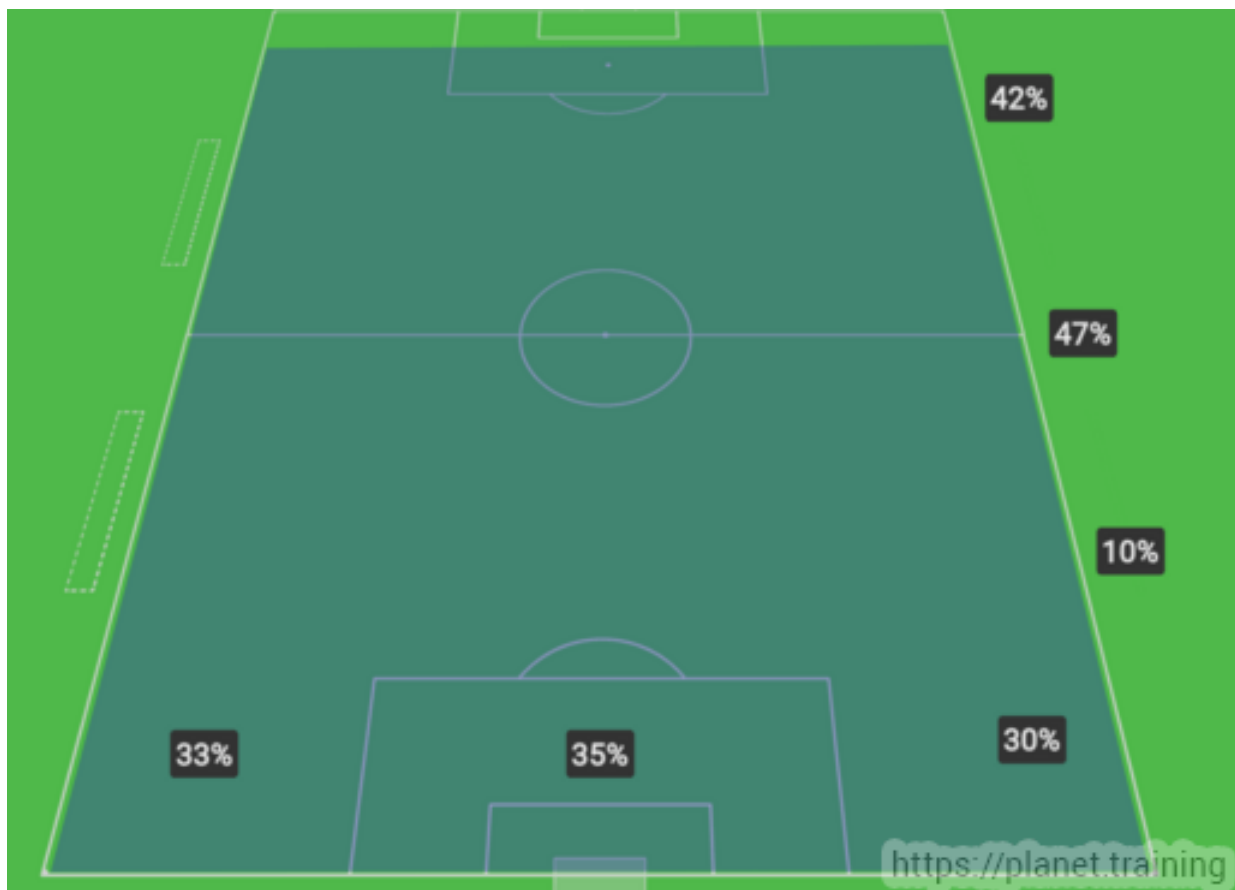
Gundoğan usually moves higher when an inverted fullback is placed inside to create a double play maker situation, with the balance player Fernandinho.

Kevin De Bruyne has been transformed into a total midfielder. He also doesn't start the moves and he becomes very active from the middle third until the finishing phase in the final third.

When City's wingers are able to push back the opposition fullbacks, he usually has a lot of space to play and he combines with Kyle Walker very often, creating space in which he can run into with overlaps or underlaps. He is able to cover a lot of ground as total freedom is given to the pattern of play creators: free spaces must be always occupied, creating passing triangles around the pitch and playing into the attacking third.

As long balls have appeared into Guardiola's patterns of play to exploit the width of the pitch, De Bruyne is the one of the passers. City's wingers are often involved in 1v1 situations, after receiving long balls to switch the side; his average of long passes is 3.7 per game, much higher than all the other players.

Player	Apps	Mins	Assists	Key passes per game
De Bruyne	54	3752	20	Average 2,6
	Passes per game	Long Passes per game	Successful Passes	
	Average 72,6	3,7	83,30%	



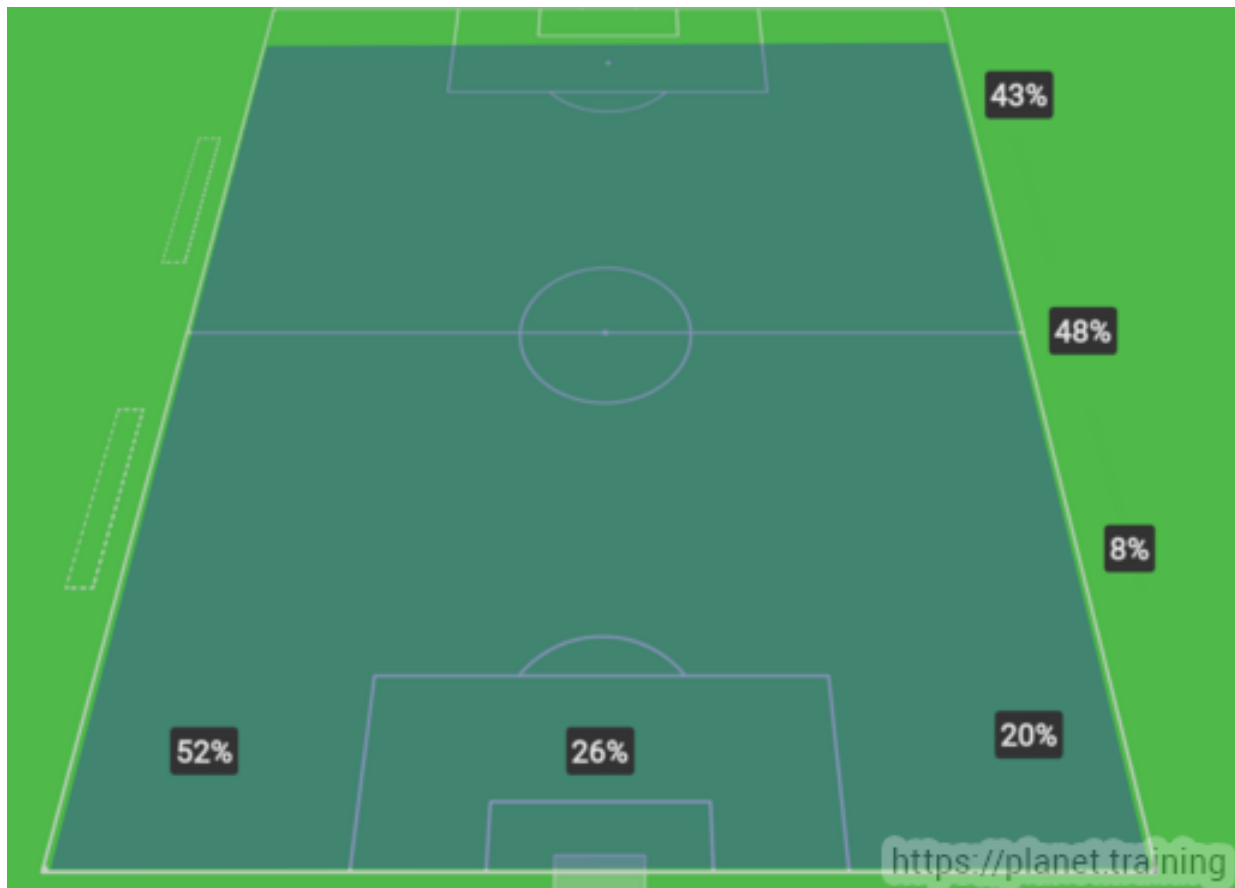
A large number of scoring chances has come from De Bruyne set pieces and crosses as well.

City's creativity in the possession phase, during the seasons before Pep Guardiola, used to come from David Silva and it was upgraded thanks to Kevin De Bruyne; both them were playing on the flanks or behind the striker.

After two seasons under Per Guardiola, who wants always to overload the center spaces, David Silva now plays with fast and short passing, protecting the ball in tight spaces, without changing his basic center-left positioning.

He is free to carry out his Spanish style with a patient approach, working up and managing the rhythm in the final third, playing with one touch combinations, which have been very effective. Silva has in fact the highest average of passes per game (77.5), as well as the highest average of successful passes (88.60%).

Player	Apps	Mins	Assists	Key passes per game
D.Silva	41	2863	13	Average 2,1
	Passes per game	Long Passes per game	Successful Passes	
	Average 77.5	1,3	88.60%	



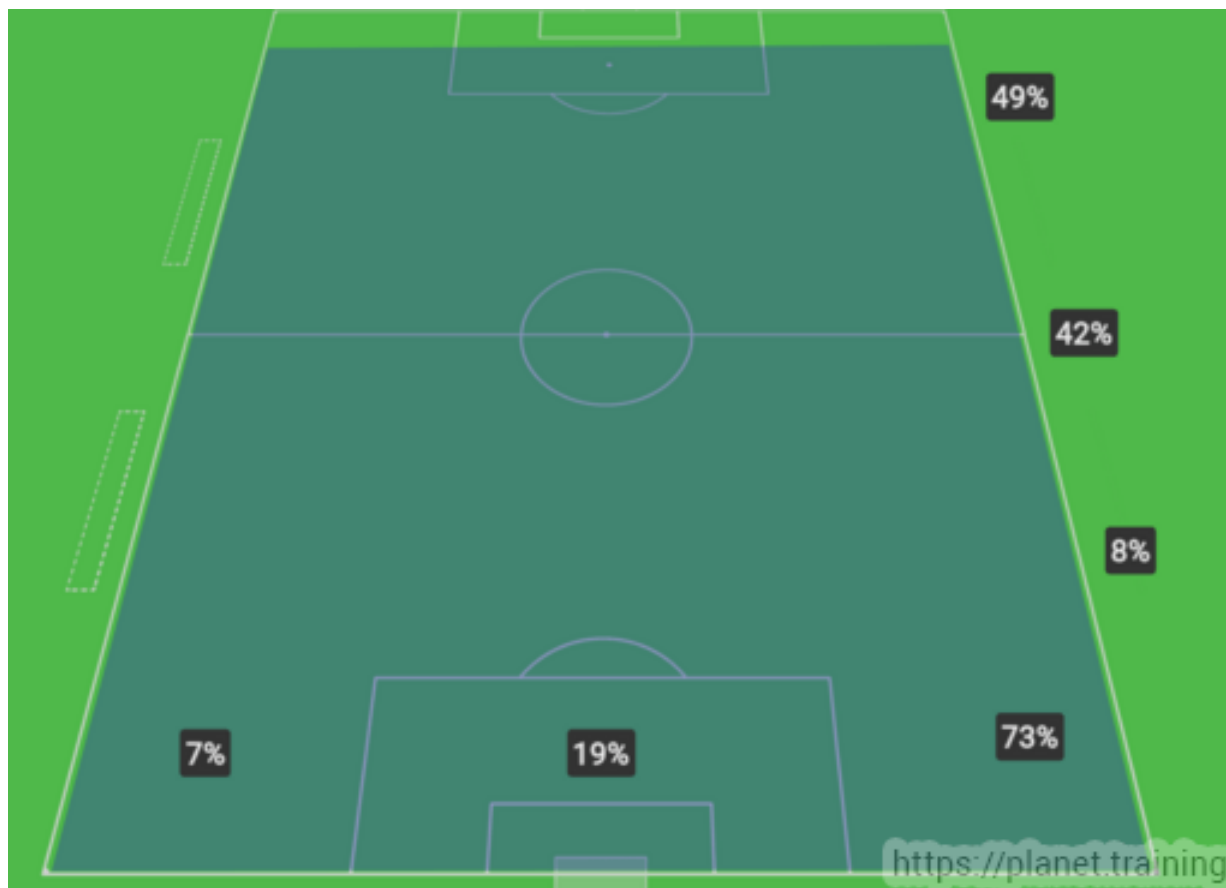
The main difference between D. Silva and Kevin De Bruyne is the Spaniard's natural inclination to check the options based mainly on the positioning of teammates and opposing players when in

possession, and to wait with the ball to create new ones if the current ones are not the best possible. He is able to progress up the pitch to draw a defender or an entire defensive block out of the space, then passing there to find an arriving teammate. David Silva is very good at drawing a defender increasingly close, before making use of the space behind, dribbling around him and into the space.

A new player in the 2017/2018 squad is Bernardo Silva, who played 57 matches, many of them from the bench, with a huge quantity of minutes in all the games, and who has been utilized as inverted winger on the right side of the final third.

His basic task is to play 1 v 1 just like Leroy Sanè does on the left side.

Player	Apps	Mins	Assists	Key passes per game
B.Silva	57	2083	6	Average 1.1
	Passes per game	Long Passes per game	Successful Passes	
	Average 28.9	0.7	86.70%	



Formations and attacking shapes on the field

This is the basic starting line up with the back four (1-4-3-3):

Ederson, Walker, Stones, Otamendi, Delph, De Bruyne, Fernandinho, Silva, Sterling, Aguero, Sané.



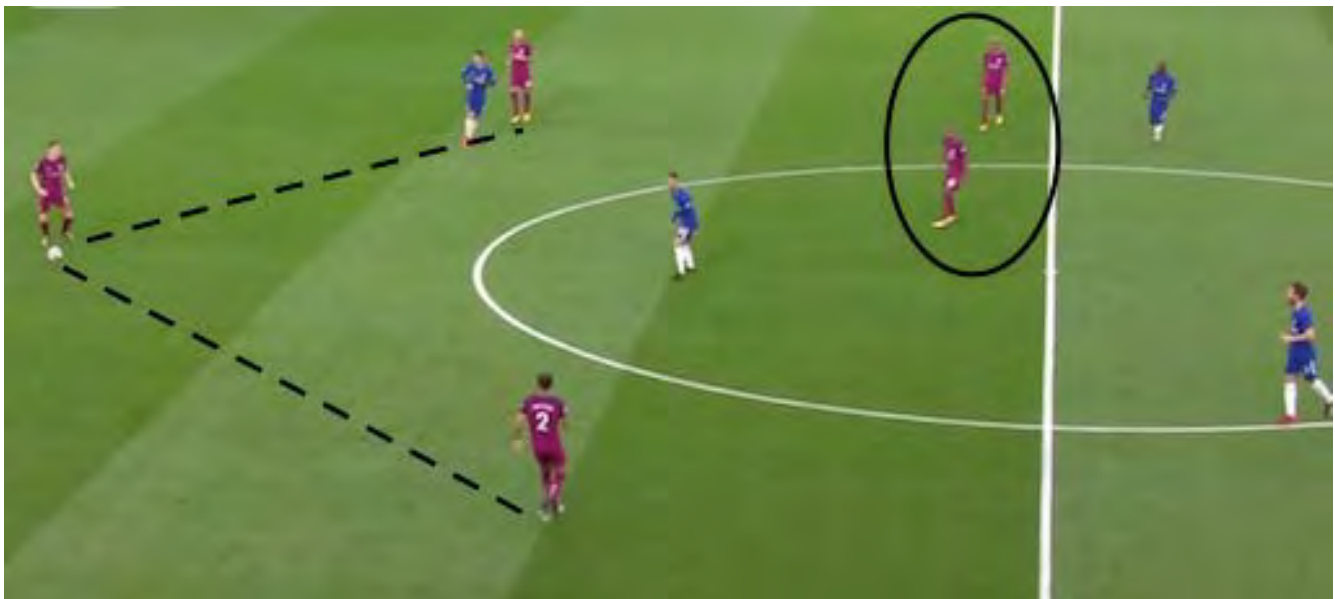
In the second season with Guardiola as manager, Man City has improved the ability to control the game significantly compared to the first one and the ball possession average has been increased as well.

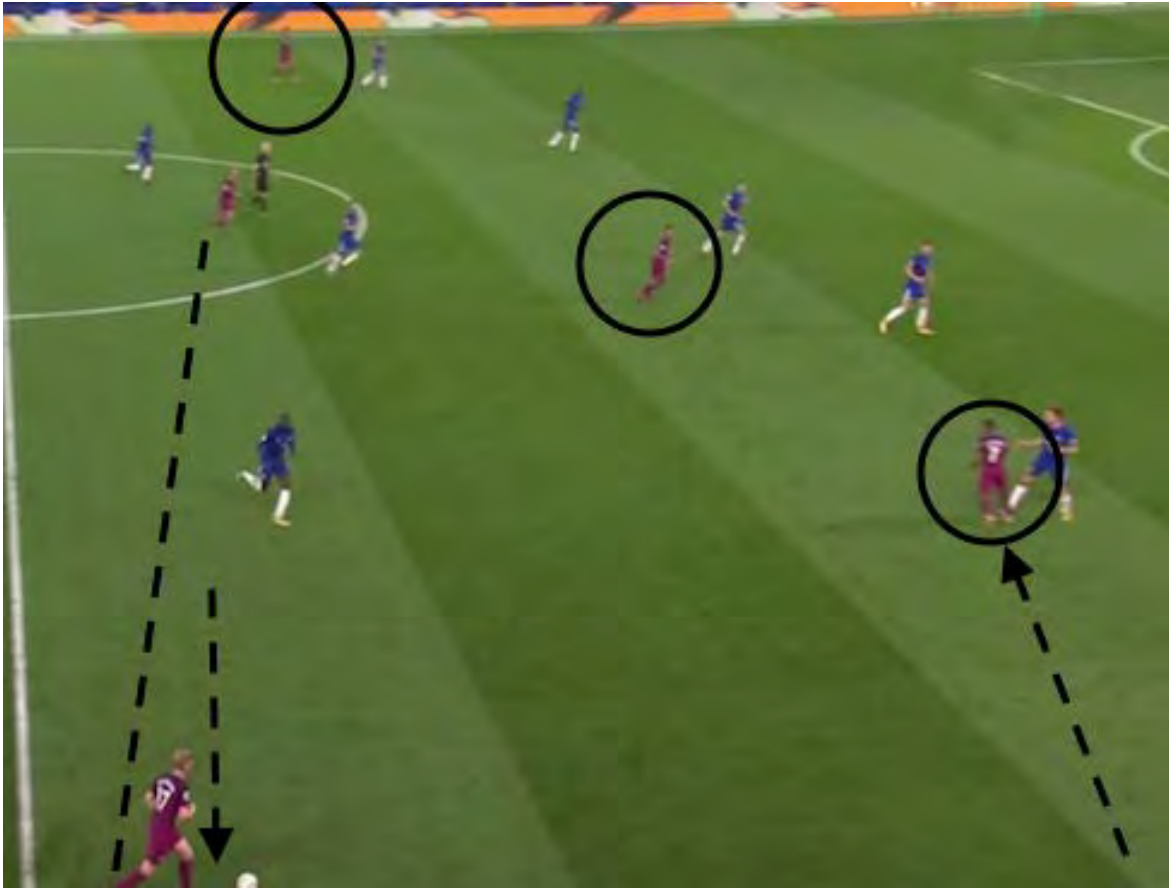
The patterns of play have become natural and flowing from the building up to the final stage. Man City has restricted the risk of losing possession, to a level much lower than during the first season, when phases of game control were alternated with moments of suffering without the ball.

The 1-4-3-3 of the City is usually reorganized into a 1-3-2-2-3 to build up, with Walker who joins the center backs on the right, Stones is placed in the middle, Otamendi is on the center-left, to shape the back three line. Delph plays in the middle as inverted fullback, near the balance midfielder Fernandinho.



This sort of 1-3-2-2-3 allows to create numerical advantage with the defenders and to have a second option, together with Fernandinho, to advance on the field.





(Gabriel Jesus was the center forward in this Premier League match vs. Chelsea, that was played on September 30th, 2017).

Wide wingers become very important now, as well as their specific characteristics; Sterling moves without the ball to cut the opposition defense more than Sanè, who usually plays 1 v 1 duels, while dribbling the ball.

David Silva and Kevin De Bruyne are then free to play all around in the middle third, to bring the move to the final finishing stage and to support its finish.



In this first move, David Silva is attacking the penalty area to finish inside the zone, where many of the City moves are usually finished; the so-called zones 14 and 17.

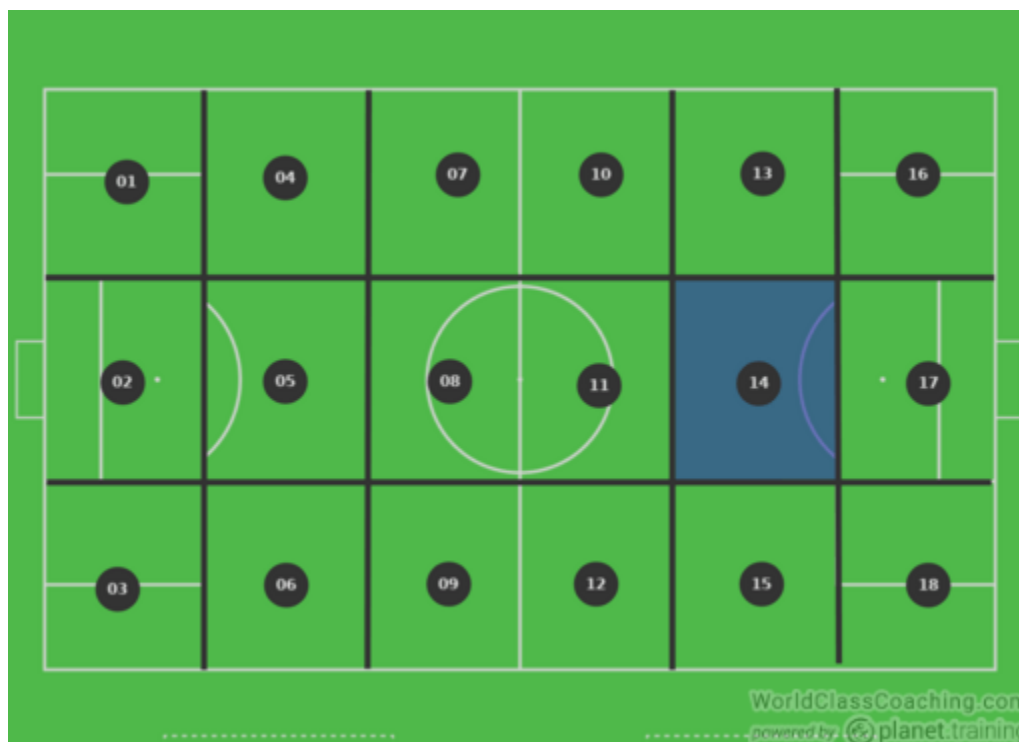


In this second one, the only goal of the match against Chelsea was scored by Kevin De Bruyne inside the zone 14, just outside the penalty area, after a 1-2 combination with the center forward.

(The zone 14:



On a pitch which is divided into a six-by-three grid, with a central strip as wide as six yards boxes, there are 18 zones. Zone 14, called "The Hole" or the "Golden Square," has been classified as the rectangle that helps teams score more goals. Zone 14 is located in the middle of the pitch, immediately outside the opposition penalty area.



The finishing phase inside zone 14 must be combined with positive, forward passes and the possession from the back of the field. Wide spaces must be used to move the opposition defense, but to finish just out of the penalty area is a surer way to score goals than by passing into the penalty area from the flanks. Quick attacks through zone 14 must be utilized also, because moving the ball wide rather than

forward into the penalty area requires more passes and longer time for possession, and the danger of zone 14 could be neutralized.

Crossing can be an effective way to score goals also, but not using short and wide passes from zone 14 and switching the side of play through the whole field, but moving the ball forward down one side to attack the flanks and send cross passes. Zone 14 becomes an area to win the second times of the balls and to win the wandering balls after the rebounds of the opposition defense.

If we look at the principles of play to exploit this area, we can find some of the key factors of Man City:

- 1) Positive and forward passes
- 2) Width is useful to move the opponents
- 3) Finish in front of the goal
- 4) Do not cross high balls directly from the flanks
- 5) Find the space between the last defense line and the goalkeeper
- 6) Pass behind the defense line from the center spaces
- 7) Counter-press the opposition rebounds

If one or two opposition forwards put pressure, attacking the defender in possession, it's quite easy to find an option to counteract them and force the opposition to fall back.



If there are three pressing forwards, the balance midfielder usually drops back to ensure the basic numerical advantage, if the passing lanes toward him are closed.



Sometimes even Walker is positioned as an added midfielder when it remained vacant, if the opposite fullback has dribbled the ball up the field. David Silva and De Bruyne are then free to move...



...and be unmarked all over the upper side of the middle third; Sterling and Sanè ensure wide options.



The opposition midfield line must decide to press the center lower midfielders or to save the space where the advanced midfielders can be active. If the defensive pressure timing is not correct, pressing the center lower players means making the playing out phase easier, by allowing the advanced ones to play in between the lines. This leaves the defense block alone and the defenders involved in 1 v 1 duels.



Saving the lower part of the middle third means letting the whole opposition team advance on the field toward the goal area, increasing the danger of the possession phase.



When the pressure timing of the opposition is right during both the phases, the wide players are new options to advance on the field.



All the opponents, or many of them, are supposed to be placed in the center to equalize the numerical disadvantage, which is the essential prerequisite for pressure; the wide players can now receive having the time to play 1 v 1, at least just after the first touch. The freedom of wide players can be obtained also overloading a flank through low rhythm possession phases.



To hit one side Guardiola asks both the advanced midfielders to move wider or through the center space (De Bruyne and Silva) to create numerical advantage with Sterling or Sanè...



...or to play in between the lines.



When the opposition decides not to press the start of the moves and to defend the width, leaving the center players as defenders of the depth, the offensive phase is usually poor, as all the team must be placed behind the ball.



In this situation the opposition is defending the width with six players and other three are trying to block forward passes in the center through a 3 v 3 duel. In case of ball recovery, it would be very difficult to advance on the field, as 8 players are under the ball line; a long possession phase is required if a counter attack is not possible.



This situation is similar; when the ball is recovered close to or inside the own penalty area, with few options to advance with an effective possession phase...



...and a high risk to lose the ball because of City aggressive counter-pressing.



Effective counter pressing requires the offensive structure Man City creates. At the same time, with few options for transitions to attack for the opposition, the recovery of the possession is very likely.



The main goal when the move is being played inside the attacking half, is to force the opposition toward the own goal, finishing inside the box or around it.



This is another type of formation, with the starting back three (1-3-5-2) that City shaped on the field in a winning Premier League match of last September 9th, 2017, against Liverpool. Anyway, the 1-4-3-3 has become the main system of play through the seasons and it's the most used by Guardiola as Man City manager. This was the line up: Ederson, Mendy, Stones, Otamendi, Danilo, Fernandinho, Walker, De Bruyne, Silva, Aguero, Jesus.



To build up, City is shaped in a 1-3-1-4-2. The usual 1-3-1 formation is used to start the move from the goalkeeper; the back line includes all the three center defenders.



The midfield trio is required to help the build up from the back and to play out; the balance midfielder is also the playmaker.





If the playmaker is under pressure or the opposition closes all the forward passing options, then one advanced midfielder drops back to support him and to play out. A 3+2 shape is then created.

But if there is no pressure, David Silva and De Bruyne place themselves in between the lines in the final third, shaping a small group of 3 + 1 forwards



As we are going to analyze in the next pages, the center forwards are never placed on the same line during possession phases; one of them drops back and the second one is placed on the defense line and ready to attack the depth.

The principle of play of two wide players is respected anyway; the fourth and fifth wide fullbacks on the left and on the right replace the wingers of the 1-4-3-3 system of play. A 5 (3+2) + 1 shape is created in the final third.



The nearest fullback to the ball must ensure the wide support for the attacking moves; one of the advanced midfielders must play in between the lines and as support for the couple of forwards.



The opposite fullback, the center back and the second center defender must shape the back three line,

to cover the depth. The second advanced midfielder (De Bruyne in the picture) must support the balance player as the inverted fullbacks usually do.

The two center forwards don't play on the same line during the defense phases; Aguero is usually on the same line of the advanced midfielders and Jesus is ready to attack the depth if the ball is recovered.



Here again, Aguero is helping David Silva to close the possession phase of the opposition toward the sideline, pressing the ball carrier, and Gabriel Jesus is ready to receive as the ball is recovered.



Aguero and Jesus are placed on the same line, on the opposition defense line, during low rhythm possession phases, and they place their bodies toward opposite direction; Aguero is positioned to drop back and to receive a pass from the center back and Jesus is positioned to attack the depth in this picture.



As one of them drops back (Aguero in the picture), the other one attacks the opposition penalty area behind the defenders.



When the ball is played wide on the flanks, both the center forwards are positioned toward the opposition goal, to attack the penalty area and to exploit the space between the defense line and the goalkeeper.



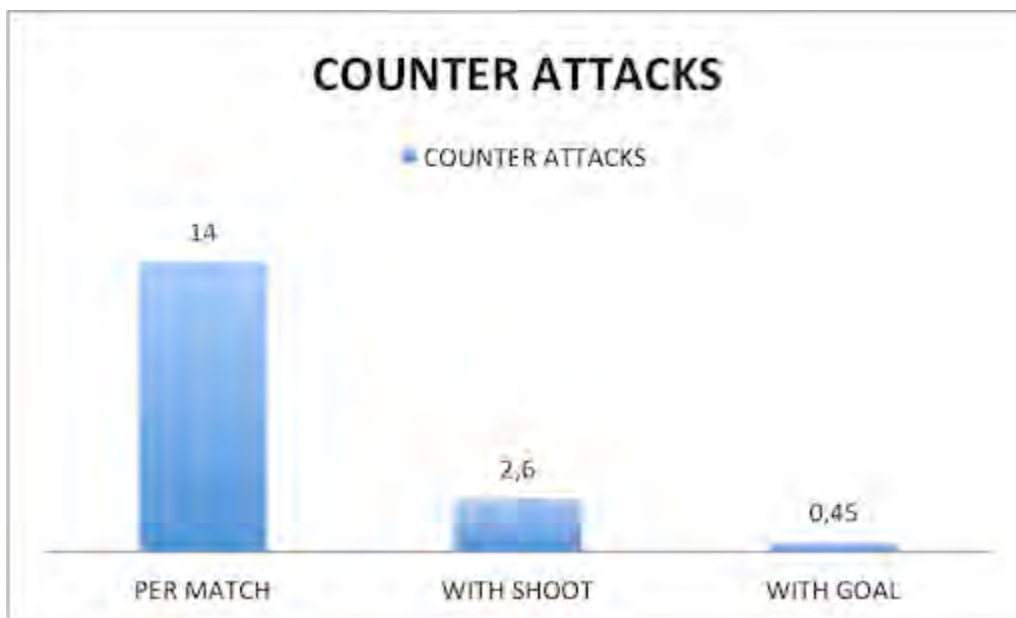
The main goal is to find positional advantage in the final third. In this situation, Gabriel Jesus is in a better position to receive the ball, as he is positioned in the middle and the opponent who is his marker seems to be on late. Aguero can start behind his direct marker who can't see him but on late.



They attack the first and the second poles (the near and far posts) of the goal to finish. City attacks this goal area both to finish directly inside it and to free the area just outside of it, which the advanced midfielders and occasionally the balancing midfielder attack.

Counter-attacks

Manchester City scored 28 times (18% of all goals) after a counter attack during this last 2017/2018 season. This following scheme sums up the average percentages of each match; 3% of counter attacks ended with a goal. We must obviously think that many of these missed counter attacks are not considered lost balls, since they have been converted into possession phases or positional attacks, due to spaces coverage by the opposition.



Guardiola has been always seen as an idealist of football, but, in reality, he is much more flexible than everyone thought. When he moved to Bayern Munich, he applied much of the possession and pressing tactics of Barcelona, but took advantage of the center forward at his disposal, Robert Lewandowski, who played as classic number 9. He also used the inverted wingers, Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery, as counter attacking players.

The most important evolution of Guardiola's style of play from Barcelona years to Manchester City seasons is the idea to counter attack even if the players are involved in an outnumbered situation after the recovery of the possession; nothing ever seen during Barcelona "tiki-taka" winning years (2008-2012).

The speed of City's counter-attacks has not only brought goals, but it has made the high press defending tactic riskier for the opponents; this is one of the main differences from the first 2016/2017 season. On the other side, to defend back and deep invited Man City to attack again and again as we have already analyzed.

Pep Guardiola has transformed his team into one of the best counter-attacking teams of the Premier League.

City players have been always the leaders of the possession average and they have been magnificent in pushing down the opposition and in exploiting the spaces behind the opposition defense throughout the

whole season; but they have also been good at counter attacking every time there was enough space. De Bruyne is the most "counter-attacking player" among the advanced midfielders of Man City and he is the main reason why Guardiola decided to improve this team tactic, making the squad one of the most dangerous teams on the counter in the League. The physical stamina during the pressure phases and in the 1 v 1 duels against the opponents makes De Bruyne able to recover many balls inside the attacking half and his speed of play and vision of the game inside open spaces allow Man City to counter-attack even when definitely outnumbered.



A general 4 v 2 duel is very clear in this picture, but the Bruyne is able to avoid the pressure of the defender and Aguero is in positional advantage against the defender, who is not running back properly, as he can see neither the possession opponent, nor the nearest forward, who is running toward the goal.



When the defender turns, Aguero has already received and controlled the pass with the first touch...



...and he can finish easily with the right timing, shooting in the space between the defender and the goalkeeper and toward the second pole.

The following sequence is very interesting because it shows clearly the second main task of the wingers inside the tactical plan of Guardiola's Man City. Sanè and Sterling must be usually placed wide along the sidelines to open the opposition defense line or create a strong side. This is during the possession and positional attacking phases when the width of the space is intended to be the width of the field.

When City is counter attacking, the wingers run inside the field and they stay positioned at the back of who is, for them, the last defender, and they attack the goal. In these kind of moves the concept of width is different. By doing this, the wingers gain positional advantage to receive and are able to attack the goal with an oriented one touch control.



De Bruyne is carrying the ball here, and both the wingers and the center forwards are attacking the depth and their direct marker at the back.



Sterling attacks the depth inside the penalty area to receive...



...and the opposite winger Sanè attacks the goal on the first pole, drawing the opposition's defensive block deep, freeing the support player, De Bruyne, to finish.



Here again, De Bruyne wins the ball thanks to a pressure phase...



...Gundongan is in possession then and he carries the ball toward the opposition goal.

Both the wingers and the center forward Aguero attack their direct opponents at the back and they place themselves in a positional advantage.

The defender near Sanè is wrongly positioned with his body, as he is in front of the ball carrier and he doesn't follow the winger on his run.



Sanè is then able to receive freely, attacking the first pole and anticipating the goalkeeper who tries to run out...



...and Sterling can finish on the opposite second pole.

This is another sequence that shows a different concept of counter attacks, when the ball is recovered along the flanks. De Bruyne has recovered the possession again and he is carrying the ball along the right flank; the winger (Sterling) runs inside to create space for him and for a third teammate, who could run from the back (Walker).



The opposite winger (Sanè) and the center forward (Gabriel Jesus) attack the penalty area.



Walker can receive the ball deep inside the penalty area and behind his direct opponent...



...and Gabriel Jesus can score, anticipating his direct marker on the first pole. Both the wingers could win a rebound inside the penalty area.

City seemed to be so dangerous when in and out of possession. If the opposition possession phase could be stopped on the edge of the own box and City could counter attack to the other end, the other team hardly had a chance to regroup.

Guardiola and City have been able to mix the concepts of possession and counterattack; the third goal that was scored in the winning away match against Arsenal, played last March the 3rd, 2018, is very telling:

1) Creation of a strong side/area, management of the opposition pressure, keeping the ball possession inside tight spaces (Kompany and Walker invite the opposition pressure).



2) One forward or a center advanced midfielder drops back to receive and to bring at least one opposition defender out of the block; the goal is to create a space to exploit behind him or behind the whole defense. Aguero is dropping back here to play with David Silva, who is placed in a support position and then to Bernardo Silva, who is positioned wide on the right, directly or through a third man.



3) This would be the recurrent combination: a back pass, followed by a forward pass in the space, on the run of the center forward or of the wingers. If the pressure against the dropping back player or against the receiver of the back pass is successful, the possession phase inside the strong side is resumed to move the opponents again. It's interesting to notice that Aguero stays positioned in between the midfield and defense lines; this will be a key factor to dribble the ball forward on the field and to finish.



4) David Silva is in possession again and he is playing inside a square that is shaped by four Arsenal players, together with Walker and Bernardo Silva; but the Arsenal defense shape is not right, because the line has been moved again and again by the possession phase of Man City. David Silva is able to receive and he seems to be under pressure; but the pressure direction is not toward the opposition goal and he is able to orientate the ball control and to attack the available space before another opponent can press him. Arsenal midfield line leaves space in the middle third to combine and play forward.



5) The center forward is now able to receive in positional advantage against his direct marker. Aguero can exploit the space in the middle third to receive and then he can exploit the forward spaces to dribble; the direct marker is not positioned on this side of the forward body and toward the goal. Aguero has now space to exploit and the nearest second defender who can cross his dribbling line and close the space is too far to be effective.



The same space inside the attacking half is now created, as if the possession was just recovered, after a possession phase of the opposition as in a classic counter attack situation.

6) Bernardo Silva is along the same flank and Sanè, who is cutting inside from the opposite one, supports the move and takes active part in the finishing stage



Guardiola's method is simple: spread the play all over the pitch and create overloads, leaving defenders with too many players to deal with and too much space to be able to stop them.

Even when Man City players are under pressure, like Vincent Kompany, Kyle Walker and David Silva at the beginning of the move we have just analyzed, and they are forced to combine with risky touches, playing some passes toward teammates in difficult body position to control the ball, everybody follows their principles of play.

The amazing point of this move is the creation of what could be a counter-attacking move through a prior possession phase and not through the recovery of the ball, after a pressure phase against the opposition.

Set Pieces

"I understood English football the day I saw one game; I was at home, Swansea vs. Crystal Palace were playing. Nine goals, eight from set pieces. You have to control that, and we are unable right now to control that. Eight goals from set pieces, corners, free kicks, throw-ins. That is English football and I have to adapt because never before I have lived that."

Pep Guardiola, December 2016

"Now we have to improve in the set pieces because West Ham, United, all the teams...Tottenham...all the teams are stronger and taller and higher than us, that is why we have to spend more time on that."

Pep Guardiola, December 2017

This is another aspect of the evolution of Pep Guardiola. Set pieces for his Barcelona were almost a way to resume the game and the possession phases. Set pieces were properly intended as a defense phase against the long balls of the opposition. At Bayern Munich, corner kicks and free kicks started to be played toward the box, because of good skilled heading players like Lewandowski, Müller, Martinez, Dante, Alaba and others. Again, Man City seems to be a mix of the early Guardiola and his evolution at Bayern Munich. As he stated many times, English football is a game made of long balls, free kicks, corner kicks, and after the first season he realized his team was asked to become dominant also in these phases, to win the title.

Here are some data about 2017/2018 season. Even if the Man City squad was not strong and tall like many other teams of the Premier League, two recurrent tactics to exploit the attacking set pieces are very clear and recognizable:

- 1) Quick passing combinations to shoot on goal from corner kicks
- 2) Attack of the first pole to anticipate the opponents and reducing the physical gap if the ball is played high



De Bruyne and Gundogan are the kickers of nearly all the free kicks and corner kicks, whatever is the side.



This is a first example of a three men combination, exploiting the spaces out of the penalty area, when the opposition overloads it.



Bernardo Silva can easily control the pass from De Bruyne, without pressure and he can play to Danilo,

toward the center...



...and Danilo can shoot without pressure too, as all the opponents are inside the penalty area creating numerical advantage, unable to run out and press the receiver.

This another example of passing combination where Sanè can receive freely along the end line, with no protection of the first pole at the beginning, taking advantage of the zonal marking of the opposition inside the penalty area.





The 1-3-4 zonal defense formation of the opposition is clear, but they are not marking anyone while the ball is moving, except an outer 1 v 1 duel. The late pressure against Sanè can't stop him from passing back, crossing the run of Fernandinho...



...who can shoot on goal freely against on late defenders.

In this sequence, it's clear how the Basel team is trying to avoid short passing combinations from the corner kick (4 players are placed on the side of the corner kick).



But they leave 1 v 1 duels inside the box, with one defender who is saving the first pole.



Gundogan can score by anticipating his direct marker, as the direction of the pass bypasses the nearest block of 4 players and is too far from the opponent on the first pole; the 1 v 1 duel is then well exploited.

This is an explicative free kick situation. The defenders are placed along the same line of two-man wall in front of De Bruyne.



De Bruyne kicks and Man City is outnumbered inside the box, with only four players who could exploit the pass.



But the idea is to look for the first pole, that is not saved, and to anticipate the direct marker; this way the numerical advantage of the opposition is totally nullified.

Here is the same prior situation...



...nullify the numerical advantage of the opposition, attacking the first pole when it's not properly saved.



The late defense of the zone is just a consequence of timing.

This is a last similar situation, but farther from the box; the opposition defense line is placed on the edge of the penalty box.



De Bruyne kicks again toward the first pole space and not toward the center of the group, where winning a duel is easier...



...and Gabriel Jesus can score by anticipating the direct marker and taking advantage of the decision of the goalkeeper, who has not come out to catch the ball.