

TACTICAL



SERIES

PEP GUARDIOLA

DEFENDING

by Luca Bertolini



Tactical Series

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Introduction: a difficult week

04/04/18 - Liverpool 3:0 Manchester City (Champions League Round of 8 - 1st leg)

07/04/18 - Manchester City 2:3 Manchester United (Premier League)

10/04/18 - Manchester City 1:2 Liverpool (Champions League Round of 8 - 2nd leg)

After three defeats in a row against English teams Guardiola stated: "We lost against Liverpool, against United and then against Liverpool. I have to analyze what we've done in 10 months and I think it's quite good".

"I was today with my chairman. I saw the body language of my players. You won't find a team who can keep the same momentum, the same rhythm and the same pace with this amount of games. It's almost impossible".

"We would have liked to win the Premier League in the last game (against United) and it was our dream to get through to the (Champions League) semi-finals. But we have to reflect and think what we can do better next season".

"Last season it was the round of 16, this season it's the quarter finals, hopefully next season we can go to the semi-finals".

He is talking about few games and about a difficult week and not about the issues of his method.

As we have already found out in the first volume, after a first 2016/2017 season without titles, Guardiola was talking about like this:

"But I know we will be judged on the titles we have won. My period in Munich was judged like a disaster because we were not able to win the Champions League. We won three leagues in a row, we won two cups from three, we arrived every time in the semi-finals and finals, but it was judged a disaster.

"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 is 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"[...].

The 2016/2017 season defending failures

We may say that the worst defeats of the first season were against Everton and Leicester, when City conceded 4 goals in both the matches, showing wrong team shapes when not in possession and even during possession and attacking phases of play.

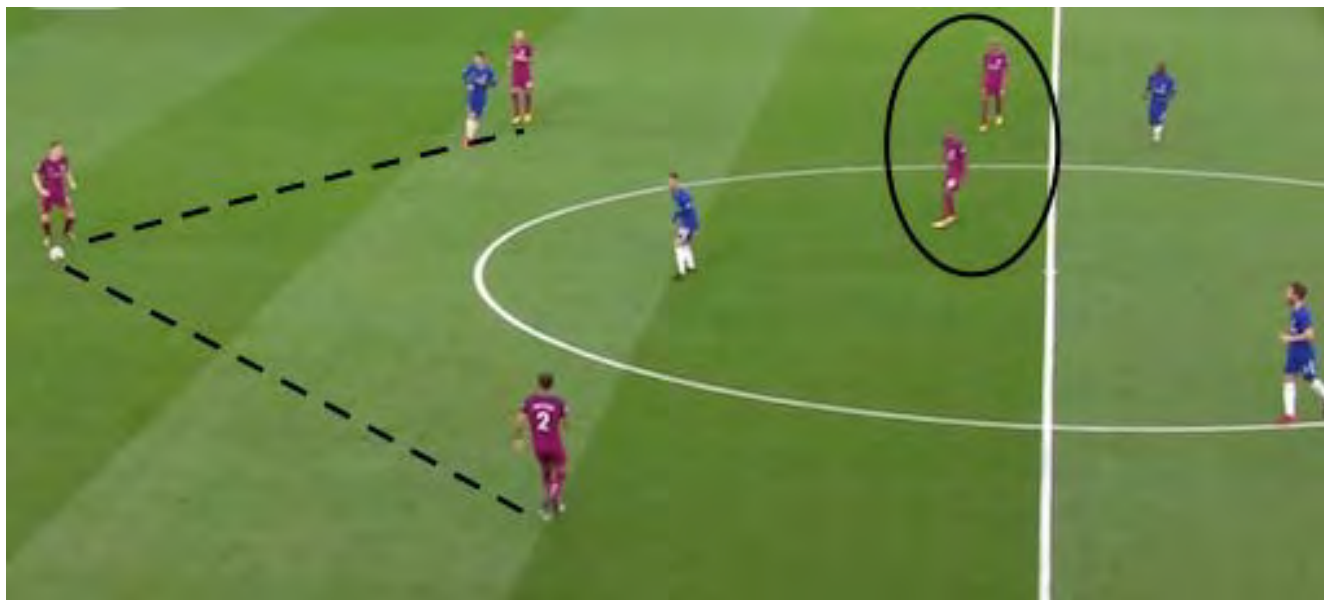
In the first match against Leicester, on 2016 December the 10th, City played with a back line of 3; Fernando and Zabaleta were positioned in front of them to support the build up phase. But this 3-2 defensive formation when in possession failed, conceding 2 goals inside the first 5 minutes.



A big space was very clear on the left side of City middle third, as well as a large distance between the center back Stone and the left center back Kolarov; moreover Kolarov wasn't placed enough toward the center, Leicester forwards, Vardy and Slimani were then able to get in between the defensive lines, cutting off Zabaleta and Fernando as passing options.

City had to play long balls or pass side by side to maintain the flow of play; Leicester defended with two very compact lines of four in the center. Manchester City tried to build up from the flanks, but counter attacks were conceded after the loss of possession.

Here's the same situation but as it was managed during the second season: the back three were not placed on the same lines and the new right fullback Walker is a more defensive player. Delph, on the other side was the inverted fullback, exploiting his skills as midfielder to support the balance teammate.



The first goal of the match was scored by Leicester because of the positioning we were talking about before; Mahrez received in between the lines and he played toward Slimani with a one-touch pass...



...Slimani was then able to be positioned toward the opposition goal and to play on the Vardy's run over the last defense line as the back three were again positioned on the same line without chance of space coverage.



Stones was not able nor to close the passing lane toward Vardy, neither to follow him as he was placed frontally in relation to the opponent in possession.



Kolarov were not able to cover the goal space because he was on late and not positioned between the opposition forward and his own goal.

Vardy was then able to finish in front of the opposition goalkeeper.



City was often vulnerable after the loss of possession because of a unique high defense line and individual mistakes. Stones had to decide whether to play 1 v 1 against Slimani or to catch up with Vardy, who positioned himself in the big space between Kolarov and Stones.

Vardy could easily overcome the direct opponent, being in a positional advantage in the 1 v 1 duel towards the goal when running inside from the flank.

The high intensity passing system failed in this match, as the team lost the defensive positions and the duels, and available spaces could be exploited for counter attacks. This was highlighted during the move that led to the fourth goal.



The defense line has the possession, but the players were not shaped in a proper way, being too far from one another...



...and they were untidy in case of loss of possession also. If the player in possession in this footage had lost the possession, there wouldn't have been anyone to cover the space toward the goal.



The possession was lost while taking the move to the final stage and because the coverage of the spaces near the ball was very poor again, as no one was able to close forward passing lanes.



The center back had to run out of his position to cover the space and he was able to win the ball, this time.



This is the sequence of the third conceded goal:



Kolarov took the position that he usually prefers when deployed as a left back during the build-up phase. Fernandinho would have dropped deep to cover the spaces.

8 City players were placed in the attacking half, creating a 2 v 2 duel at the back with positional advantage for Vardy and Slimani. The defense was then again exposed to long or through balls.



Kolarov dribbled the ball forward, leaving space behind him and Fernando didn't cover the position properly together with the center back.

In this sequence, Leicester caught up the ball; Vardy ran past Kolarov behind him.

In this sequence, Leicester caught up the ball; Vardy ran past Kolarov behind him.



Wide spaces in the defensive half were left and they could be occupied and exploited by Mahrez as the Manchester City defenders played a very high line without depth coverage.



The 2 v 2 situation allowed Leicester players to be in positional as well as qualitative (thinking about their basic speed without the ball) superiority.



One good long ball from Fuchs found Mahrez in space who played to Vardy on his run.



This was the first time in which Man City had conceded 4 goals. On this day, the defensive failures were terribly shown, as Leicester seemed to be so perfect in taking advantage of them.

Part of the blame was towards the players rather than the system, as individual mistakes and poor defensive shapes at the back caused the goals.

Guardiola suffered a second four goals defeat in the league against Everton, and this match is very interesting to understand how the shape on the field was so different during the first season, in relation to the second one, despite many different players.

The following formation shows Zabaleta as a right center midfielder in a diamond that was completed by Tourè as balance midfielder, De Bruyne on the left and Silva as a free "advanced midfielder".

Sterling played as a left-hand second forward behind Agüero with the idea to run to receive decisive passes through the space and between the opposition lines.



Everton played with a man orientation defense phase and City was surprised by its very good pressing decisions.



In this sequence Sterling came too deep, he couldn't receive as Davies and Mirallas easily covered him. Silva was marked by Barry but still comes deep for no reason just to play a backwards pass.



Everton's three defenders could control Agüero and Sterling playing 3 v 2, also because there were no wingers. The Everton's fullbacks against Clichy and Sagna controlled the wider spaces next to the back three



Everton players were able to be passive when high pressure was not possible to save the offensive passing lanes.



They suddenly played for ball recovery as soon as they could, creating defensive overloads; this was the reason why they could isolate City ball carriers. City could not play forward to the attacking line, but its players were forced to just circulate the ball along the middle third.



Sometimes Everton players even moved up into a high pressing and forced City playing long balls.

Three of Everton's goals were scored after long balls into the left defense half space. They attempted to build up with clean passes, but City prevented that well; but, again, the depth was not covered properly.

Everton often played long balls even if they didn't have a proper team structures; but City fullbacks moved up early to attack Coleman or Baines, and they destabilized the defensive line. In the space in front of the back they had to face Lukaku, Mirallas, Davies and Barkley.



This way all the goals were created through the channel between Clichy and Stones.



City especially had problems with their defensive orientation and communication: a pattern during all goals was players moving up to create pressure without anybody covering the spaces created by these movements.



This is another clear example of missed pressure without space coverage inside the middle third and the following creation of a center gap between Stones and Otamendi.



Clichy and Otamendi seemed to be confused by all the movements in midfield in these situations; Stones was clearly on late here and Otamendi was not covering the goal space properly as he would have to be placed backwards as last defender.

Clichy was not covering the spaces properly as he didn't reduce the gap with the center defender inside the first third while running back



Touré's defensive play was not on the same level of the previous seasons anymore and he couldn't be the sole defensive midfielder without problems.

Zabaleta switched between a balancing and an attacking role, moving around Touré, to help him, or positioned himself in order to be the defensive midfielder, but he was often on late as in this goal move. His role was as a classic fullback for the whole career.

In this situation, it's clear that in spite of a 2 v 1 duel on the ball and a general heavy numerical advantage 4+1 against one or two forwards, Everton players were often in positional advantage to finish.



Transition to defend and counter-pressing

These are the main principles of play in transition that Guardiola always tried to carry out on the field since Barcelona and Bayern Munich seasons and they deserve a particular focus, as he 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.

- 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 closest players to the ball must quickly apply pressure, when possible, and they must 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 balanced positions.
- 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, to block the passing lanes and to close the spaces toward the own goal.
- Defense line should be always placed out of the penalty area.

Another one of City's tactical issues on the pitch was the reaction to losing possession. Not only with a lack of strong pressure on the ball, but also with opened gaps in the middle third, which allowed teams such as Leicester to cut through the lines.

This issue was created by the weak spacing when in possession; when the players are not linked and placed properly, counter-pressing and transitions to defend phases can't be efficient. The weak positional structure makes the counter-pressing poor and fast counter attacks of the opposition easier.

The main issue was found in the middle third, with Silva and De Bruyne having large distances between them and with Touré, not dynamic enough as defender, or Fernandinho, who was often left alone in saving the back line.

City also had issues when pressing during non-transitional phases of play, to effectively close the opponents and being opened while doing, with, again, big distances between the players.



When the forwards tried to put pressure, it was difficult to make the opponent's build-up phase of play difficult, as an extra space was often available to overcome the pressure, taking advantage of the lack of support from the midfield four (2+2).



The most common example was perhaps found between the central midfielders and the strikers. Because of Touré and Fernandinho's deep positioning, they were often far from their higher teammates and the opposition could take advantage of the spaces in between the lines.



Pressing with an open and stretched shape allowed the opposition to take advantages from a direct passing style of play, even with long balls that are commonly used to counter a pressing defensive system, to overcome the pressure higher up. If the midfield is uncompact, the opposition forwards have more space in which they can receive the ball and play 1 v 1 duels to finish.



Guardiola's approach with a lot of possession and ball dominance was not wrong during the first season and even how City played on the basis of the principles, but the defending in the last line and the organization of their games through the midfield were not good enough to counter these long balls also.

And also the choice of the system combined with the player roles did not work properly. The problem was not the strategy but the tactical application of the strategy. Guardiola's many changes didn't help as well.

During last winning 2017/2018 season, Guardiola gave his team a stronger and clever starting positioning to improve these points of lack. The players were different, better connected and very often in numerical advantage around the ball to put pressure quickly and from many directions against the opposition ball carriers; moreover on the first one after the loss of possession.



The back three became a fix principle of play and the balance midfielder was always helped by the inverted fullback (Delph and even Mendy when available).

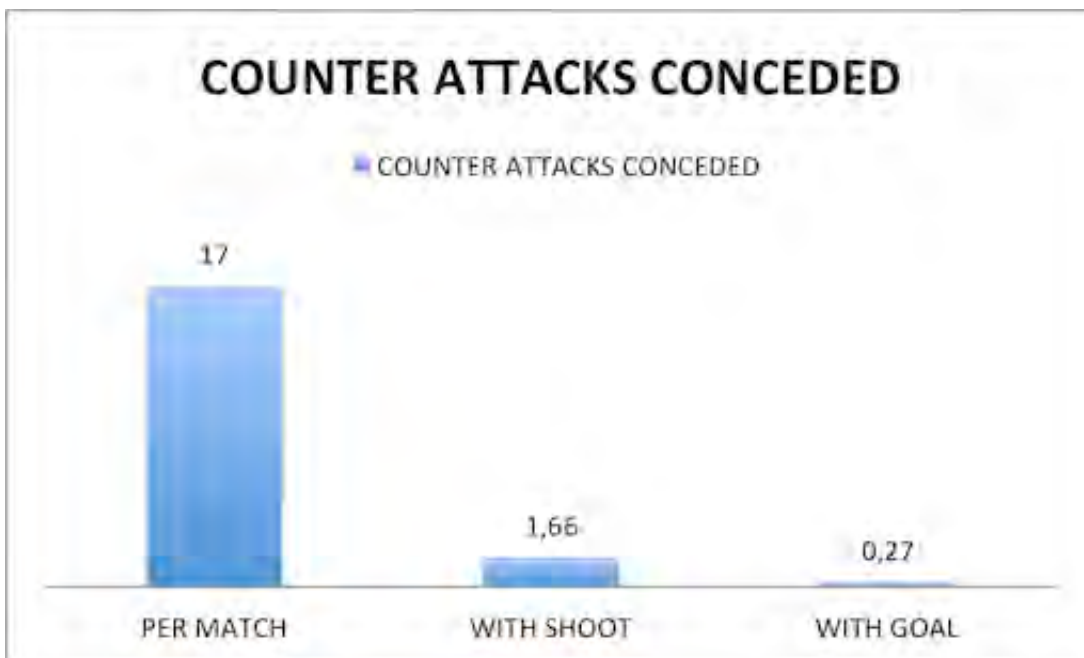
Silva and De Bruyne played as advanced midfielders and they were (and they are yet) the key players during the transition to defend; the 3 forward were always the first to put pressure on the new ball carrier of the opposition, but they had to double the mark and to close the nearest passing lanes.

The reaction speed has been improved also in the second season; pressure and recovery runs made the transition phase to defense much more efficient, avoiding many more counter-attacks of the opposition than in the first season; only Liverpool and his forwards (Salah, Manè and Firmino) were able to beat City 3 times in a row thanks to counter attacking moves.

All the midfielders of the second season were often able to get back into stronger defensive positions, as the inverted fullbacks worked better in condensing the center and because Silva and De Bruyne were able to push the opposition back in case of loss of possession due to their advanced positions when in possession.



This following picture shows as the Man City was able to reduce the efficiency of the opposition counter attacks, conceding 1 goal every 4 matches; it means that almost all the counter attacking attempts were blocked with or without recovery of the ball.



Manchester City is anyway 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 the following 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. The possession structure with short distances among the players, as it has been already stated, should be the key for an immediate counter pressing team action 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 issue of isolation of the players who loses 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 could be able to double the mark on the opposition center forwards.



Sterling is involved in a 1v1 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 the forward passing lanes are closed.



- 3) The winger near the ball put 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 defending player of the team, usually the player who lost it.

The 2017/2018 team, data, defense principles of play, 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

"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". This what Guardiola often talks about defending tackles to counter the opposition possession and finishing phases.

These are the basic data of the Man City defense phase data of the last 2017/2018 winning season:

COMPETITION	P.TS	PLAYED	W	D	L	GOAL SCORED	GOAL CONCEDED	GOAL DIFFERENCE
Premier League	100	38	32	4	2	106	27	79
FA Cup	-	3	2	0	1	6	2	4
League Cup	-	6	4	2	0	11	5	6
Champions League	15	10	6	0	4	20	12	9
TOTAL	115	57	45	6	6	144	46	98

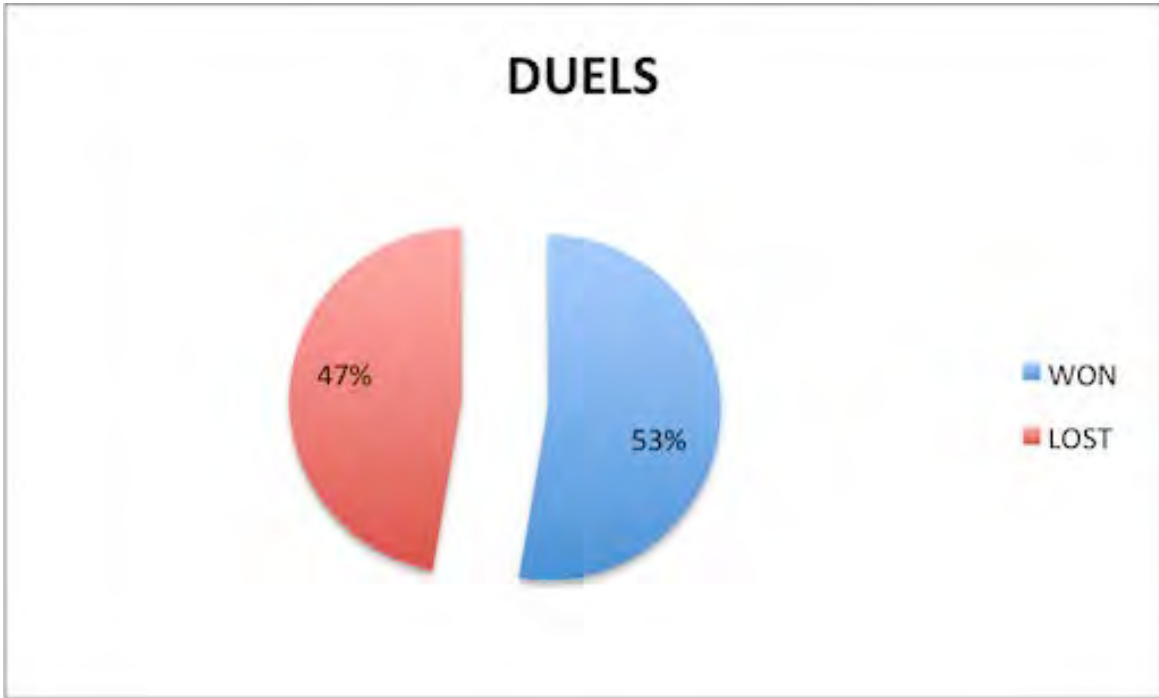
And these are the basic data of the first season with Guardiola as manager (2016/2017)

COMPETITION	P.TS	PLAYED	W	D	L	GOAL SCORED	GOAL CONCEDED	GOAL DIFFERENCE
Premier League	78	38	23	9	6	80	39	41
FA Cup		6	4	1	1	16	3	13
League Cup		2	1	-	1	2	2	0
Champions League	9	10	5	3	2	24	16	8
TOTAL	87	56	33	13	10	122	60	72

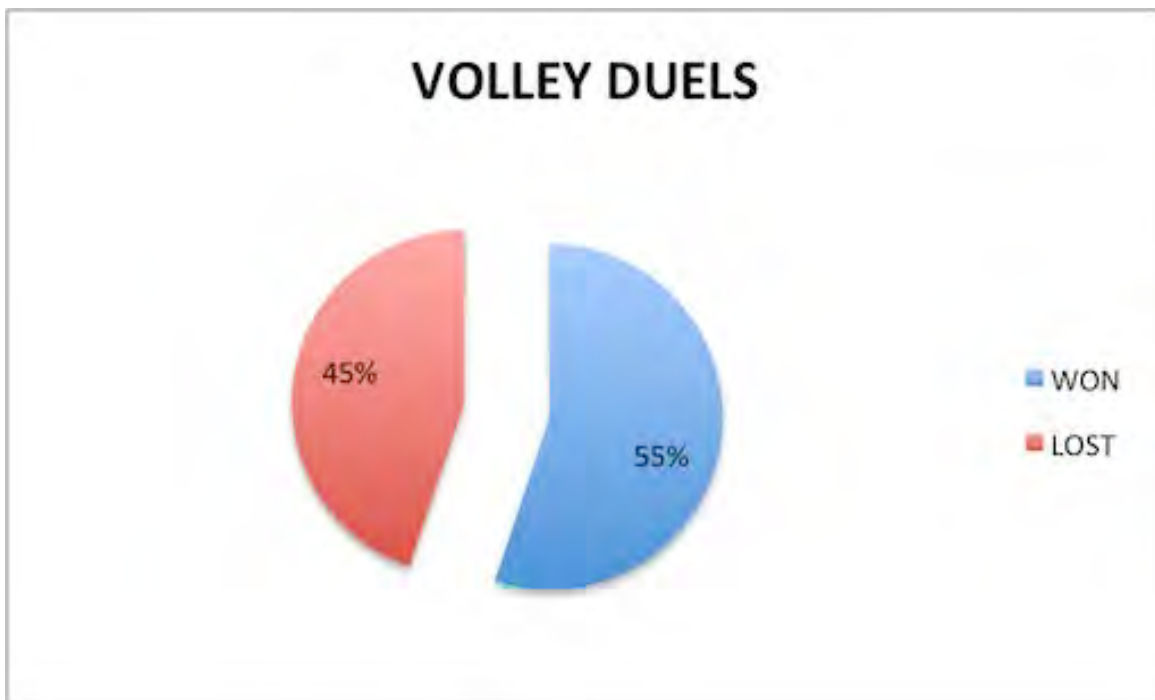
These are the main points to be underlined, to understand the improvement of the team from the first season:

- 1) 14 conceded goals less
- 2) 22 more scored goals
- 3) 26 goal more as difference then
- 4) 12 won games more

These data can be considered good enough to realize as the better attacking shape helped the transition to defend and defense phase and the same better shape helped the team in scoring more goals; team shape and positioning are clearly more important than the individual duels from a defense point of view. 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 tactics against Man City, as transition to attack, is to play long ball behind the defense line, since the first season, and as it was one of the main issue then, Guardiola's team improved the ability to defend the volley and long balls, being 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.



Looking at the players data, the main defense principles of play can be called out and it's again possible to understand how the positioning on the field, the defense transition process, the connection among the sectors and the players and the defense phase was considerably improved.

PLAYER	ROLE	2ND ROLE	MINS	DUELS	VOLLEY DUELS	RECOVERED BALLS	PRESSURE
R. Sterling	RM	LM	3963	17,41	1,82	2,24	72
Bernardo Silva	RM	CM	3054	14,56	1,64	3,63	73
L. Sane	LM	RM	3952	15,85	1,84	2,35	70
S. Agüero	F	/	3273	14,81	2,26	1,29	37
G. Jesus	F	LM	2960	18,74	5,07	2,16	79

The center forwards were not asked to put pressure all around the final third but only on the opposition goalkeeper and the center backs if the move was not a transition to defend and if they didn't lost the ball directly.

Agüero was then often available for a quick transition to attack and for a fast finishing of the moves.

Gabriel Jesus has different skills and he is naturally talented at running without the ball more than Agüero and he played as advanced winger also as replace.



The wingers had to put pressure to counter the opposition build up phase while starting new moves or when the possession was lost in the final third. They had to try to force the direction of the opposition possession phase wide or backwards and to follow closely behind the fullbacks if they ran or dribbled forward. The defense tasks of the forwards are very important for Guardiola, as they can be key players for a fast recovery of the possession.



The midfielders usually have completely different tasks if they are advanced midfielders or balance midfielders, but they have common objectives:

- 1) Immediate recovery of the possession
- 2) To force the direction of the opposition possession phase out wide
- 3) Creation of numerical advantage on the ball
- 4) Closure of forward of near passing lanes for the opposition
- 5) Wait for the team to be balanced when the first pressure phase didn't work
- 6) Slow down the rhythm if a quick recovery of the possession is not possible

These are the data of the midfielders of the team who played the most during last season; let's compare them to find out the main principles of play without the ball:

PLAYER	ROLE	2ND ROLE	MINS	DUELS	VOLLEY DUELS	RECOVERED BALLS	PRESSURE
David Silva	CM	RM	3503	11,67	1,72	2,89	82
K. De Bruyne	CM	DM	4574	14,44	1,42	3,85	86
İ. Gundoğan	CM	DM	2888	13,53	1,45	3,41	76
Fernandinho	DM	CM	4331	15,64	6,28	4,54	100
Y. Toure	DM	CM	1257	13,01	3,45	3,57	71
O. Zinchenko	CM	LD	1227	15,6	3,65	3,94	86

The average data of Silva, De Bruyne and Gundogan show how often they played as second pressure players to double the mark and to help the wingers, creating numerical advantage on the ball, if they didn't put direct pressure because they lost the possession.



They were always just behind the center forward when pressing the opposition center backs or the goalkeeper. Looking at the average of the duels, it's clear how De Bruyne and Gundogan were the players who looked for the recovery of the ball through them, more than Silva, who was often the first player in possession after the recovery.



Gundogan was on the ball here, just behind the center forward and on the same line of the wingers; De Bruyne was ready to close a forward passing lane or to press higher after a back pass of the opponents.



The defense midfielder, but it's better to consider them as balance player, was always placed behind the second line of pressure, which was shaped by the advanced players. Fernandinho was placed behind the advanced midfielders and wingers to give balance, to close forward passing lanes or to counter the nearest receiver of the opposition...



...or anyway behind the first block of pressure. Fernandinho was a key player in this role, more than Tourè. Agüero, Gundogan, De Bruyne and Sterling were shaping a 4 v 3 duel near the ball and Fernandinho was placed just behind them to give balance and covering the space in the middle third.

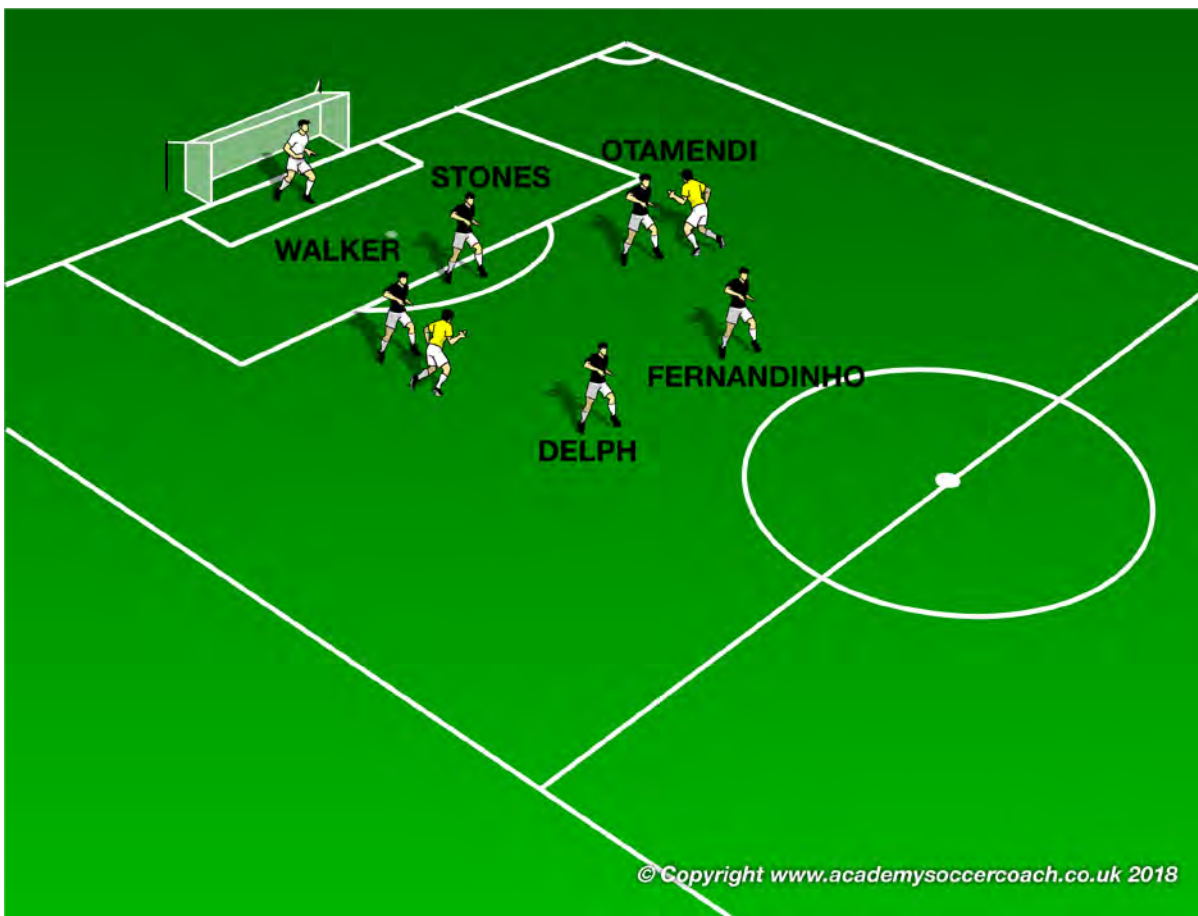


If we overview the defense squad, one main theme is very clear; all the defenders are very strong in pressure and in duels against the opponents; duels, not tackles, as Pep Guardiola defenders must play to recover the possession and to build up new attacking moves and not just to counter the opposition to clear the opposition attacking area.

PLAYER	ROLE	2ND ROLE	DUELS	VOLLEY DUELS	RECOVERED BALLS	MINS	PRESSURE
N. Otamendi	CD		12,66	5,84	3,1	4655	83
J. Stones	CD		8,71	3,84	2,24	2586	79
F. Delph	LD	CM	15,31	2,69	4,44	2335	100
K. Walker	RD	CD	12,23	4,11	2,54	4367	79
Danilo	RD	LD	12,37	3,05	3,94	2887	90
A. Laporte	CD	LD	11,81	5,77	2,67	2964	78
V. Kompany	CD	DM	11,2	4,89	2,69	2087	76
B. Mendy	LD	LM	15,34	3,45	3,8	489	86

Stones, the center defender of the line of three at the back, when City was in possession, didn't play to counter the opposition forwards as first task, but to cover the deep spaces from long balls of the opposition. This was one of the most important improvements from defense point of view, which helped City in conceding fewer goals and less counter attacks.

Walker and Otamendi played usually as marker against the opposition forwards; Fernandinho and the “inverted fullbacks”, Delph moreover, saved the center spaces to cover the through passing lanes; this way Stones had to cover the depth from the opposition long balls.



The key role for City defense phase was the inverted fullback and Fabian Delph; he had the highest average of duels for each game and the highest average of recovered balls of the whole team together with the center balance midfielder Fernandinho.

PLAYER	ROLE	2ND ROLE	DUELS	VOLLEY DUELS	RECOVERED BALLS	MINS	PRESSURE
F. Delph	LD	CM	15,31	2,69	4,44	2335	100

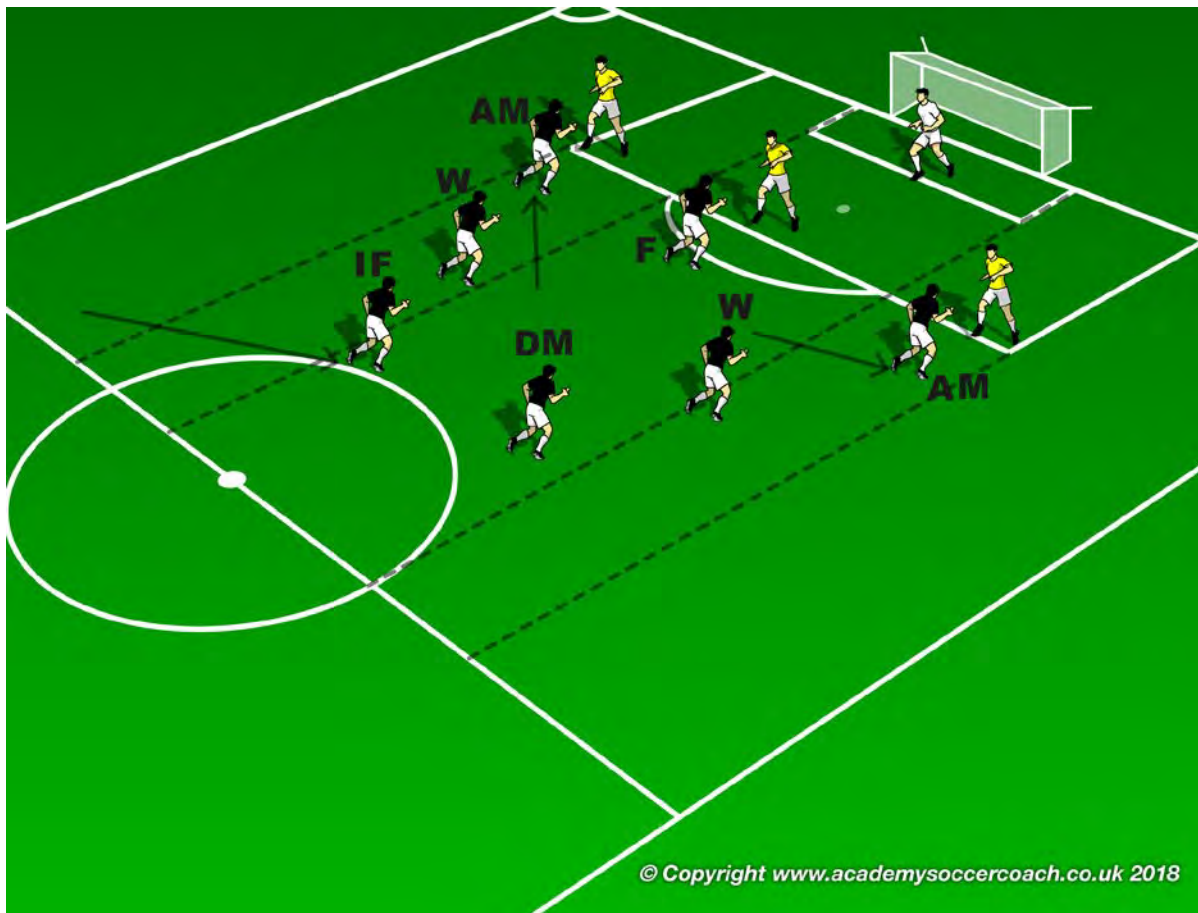
The inverted fullbacks were able to man-mark the opposition's forwards, moving inside during the previous building up phase, and this placement of the formation reduced the risk of being caught out on the counter attacks, when they were on time, as we saw before.

This was the second tactical improvement to avoid counter attacks, condensing the center since the possession phase of play, keeping the same position during the transitions to defend and leaving the opposition as far as possible from the own goal.

The high pressure with equal number of players and the counter pressing are the main principles of play that allows Pep's Manchester City to play with inverted fullbacks and to revolutionize the idea of defense phase and of players positions.

1) Press high the opposition center defenders and playmakers while building up with the center forward and the advanced midfielders.

The wingers must cover the half spaces and the chance of vertical passes together with the center balance midfielder (Fernandinho).



These positions and pressure tactic couldn't be possible without the support of the inverted fullbacks inside the center spaces of the middle third.

2) Equal number of players near the ball in the middle third. The concept of balance for Guardiola is again very revolutionary, moreover during these seasons as Manchester City manager. To be balanced means to have the same number of players near the ball and another one (the balance player) near it, but out of the highest density area.



In this footage of a Champions League rounds up match against Naples, Delph (18) could mark the direct opponent Callejon or even close the center passing lane to the ball carrier. This way Fernandinho could move wide on the right to cover another forward passing lane option.

In these kinds of duels, the inverted fullbacks became very important. A 3 v 3 duel was played on the right side of Man City here, and the right fullback Danilo took part as third player on the ball, together with Sterling and De Bruyne.

Fernandinho was just out of the ball's area and he could create a bigger 4 v 4 duel, if the opposition midfielder would have received the ball.

The opposite fullback Delph could cover the space against the nearest forward of the opposition, being already placed in the center of the middle third. The inverted fullbacks usually become balance players in this defense tactical idea.

3) Counter pressing phase. As the inverted fullbacks are often placed in the middle third and high on the field, they also take active part to the transition to defend phases. These phases for Guardiola teams mean moreover counter-pressing actions. They can play as balance players, if the first or the second opponent in possession is already under the pressure of a teammate, like Delph in this move, where Sanè is already on the ball and two other midfielders, De Bruyne and Gundogan, are very closed to the ball as well.



Or they can press the opposition midfielders to send them backwards and to avoid them from playing out, like Delph is in this second example.



General Pep Guardiola's defense principles of play

It is very remarkable to understand how Pep Guardiola has always based his defense phase on some main principles of play and he realized them on the field with all the teams he coached, from Barcelona B to Manchester City.

1) Always try to recover the ball as soon as the possession is lost.

- Run forward to put immediate pressure to prevent the opponent's counter-attacks from the beginning
- The players must have quick transition to defend attitude
- Try to recover the possession within 6" or start running back (this rule was very effective with Barcelona; Guardiola let the team high on the field to stop the opposition move for longer time with Bayern and City thanks to the inverted fullbacks and the wide wingers who run inside to press)



2) Make the field small for the opposition

- Create a strong side with the players running towards the ball area; with Barcelona was the main rule, because it was a "smaller" team when attacking. With Bayern and City, that are wider teams with wingers, strong side were and are created if the ball is not recovered after 1 v 1 duels of the forwards, advanced midfielders and wingers, against the opposition ball carrier
- Ensure defensive coverage thanks to the balance defensive midfielder
- Pay attention to the opponents who may receive a pass



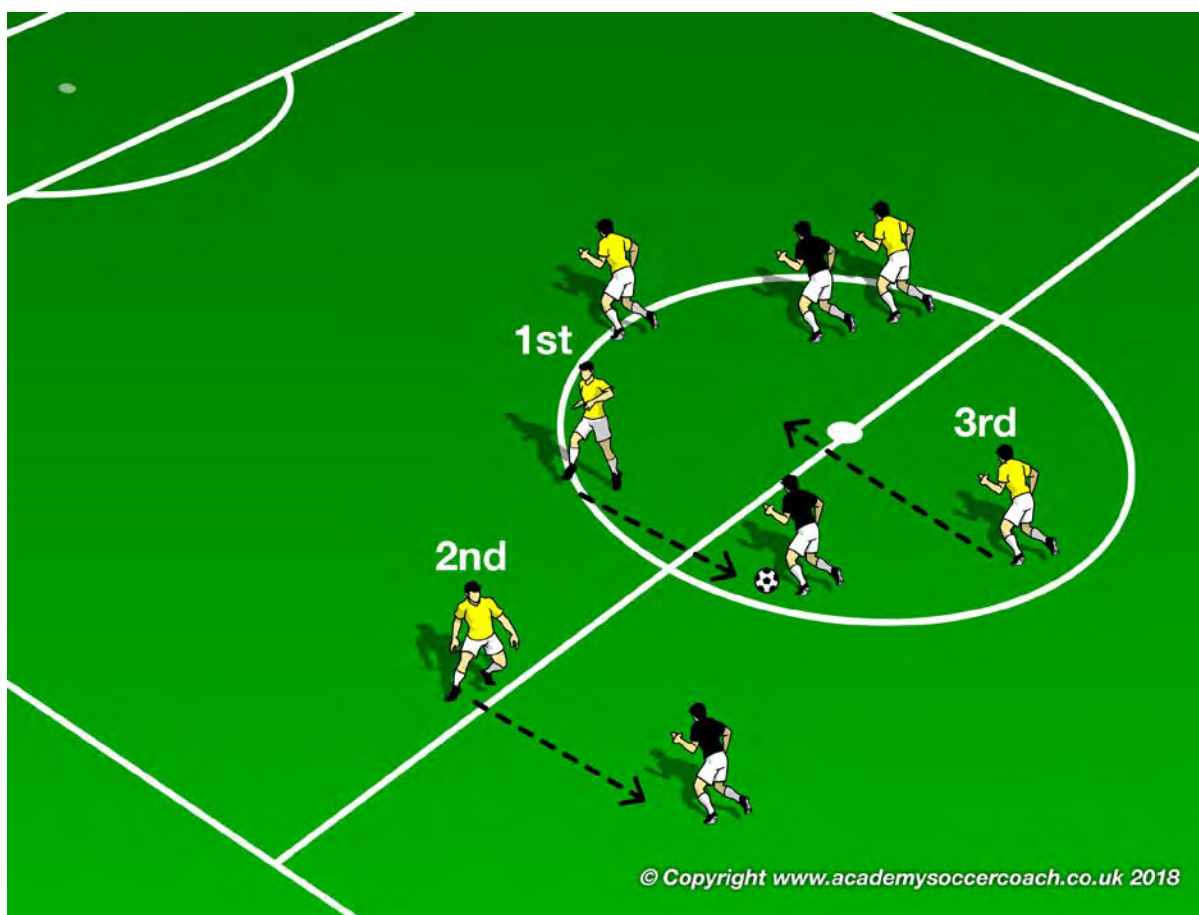
At Barcelona, both the last requirements were asked the balance midfielder (Busquets), but at Bayern Munich and Manchester City, these tasks were and now are required to the balance midfielder and to the inverted full backs. As these teams play wider than Barcelona, the center spaces need to be condensed.

3) Run back to organize the defense phase.

- If the ball is not recovered quickly the team must organize the defense phase to save the first third



- Play with pressure, while the rest of the team runs back, to make the team less vulnerable, through the rule of the "three defenders":
- The player on the ball must press the ball carrier
- The 2nd player must mark the easiest passing option for the ball carrier
- The 3rd player shall close the easiest forward through passing option



4) Prevent the opposition build up from the back phase of play if the direction of the possession was at least forced backward:

- Press the opponents as high in the field as possible, to keep them away from the penalty area
- The player near the ball must always press the ball carrier
- Try to force the direction of play toward a wide channel
- Cover the long balls to avoid counter attacks and to recover the possession back
- Keep the defensive line high to anticipate the opposition forwards
- Be fast and aggressive
- All the players on strong side must press whatever is the body positioning of the opponents (toward their own goal or toward the goal to attack)



5) **The 2nd pressure phase**

- It should not require long time efforts as the team must be balanced and small now
- Just try again to recover possession as close to the opponent's goal as possible, but the balance and the coverage of the spaces are the main points to be focused on

6) **Save the space behind the defenders and win the win the wandering balls**

- Defend the long balls
- The defensive line must press the opposition forwards; Otamendi and Walker are the ones for Manchester City back 3, while the center defender covers the depth (Stones). As already stated, this defensive pattern was one of the best improvements for City in the second season, also thanks to Kyle Walker signing
- All the players must now recover their positions quickly to support the defense line with short distances among the players
- Keep the defensive line balanced and create numerical advantage on the ball side to be ready to win a potential wandering ball

7) **Create a small field again in the middle third and the first third**

- The players must move towards the ball area constantly, keeping right and small spaces among them
- Prevent opponent's penetrations and through passes, being compact near the ball



8) Close the Inside Spaces

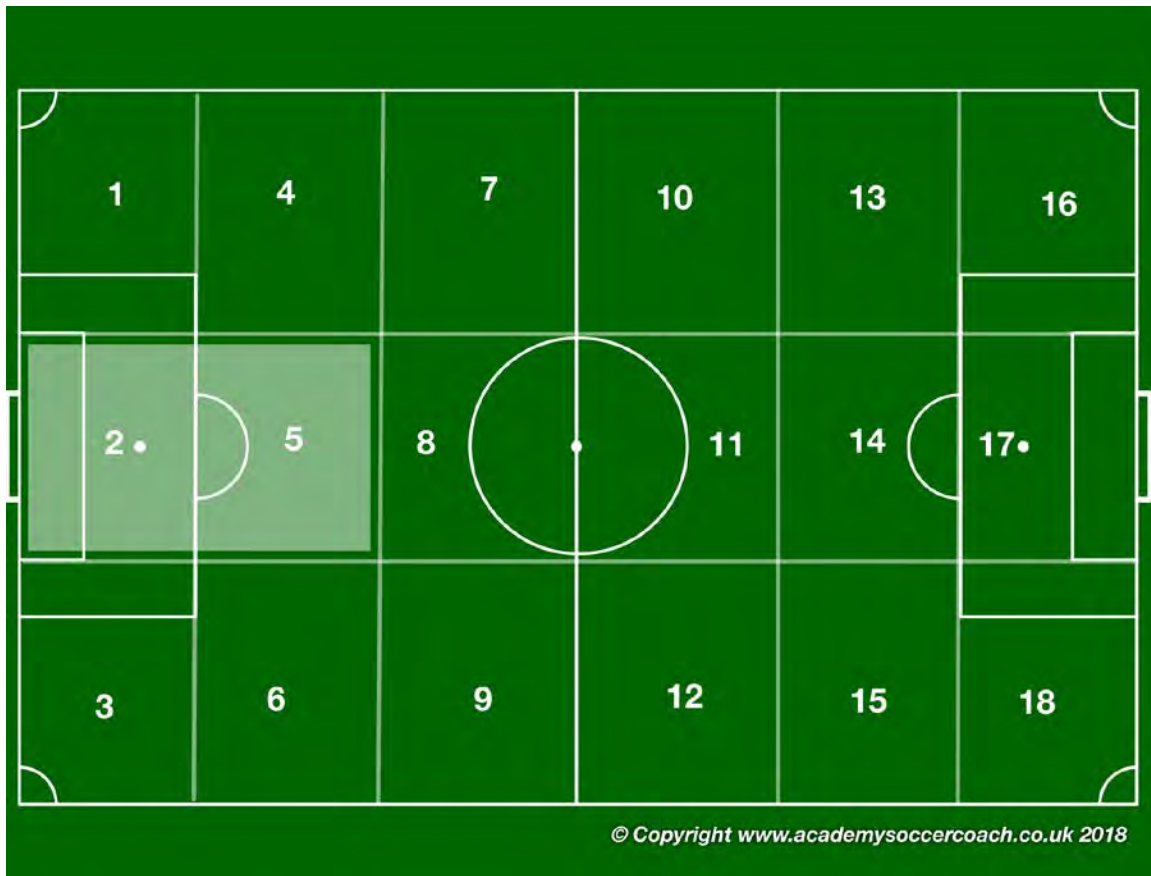
- Protect the center spaces to prevent the ball through the middle
- Look for interceptions of their passes to launch a counter attack as the opponents are supposed to run forward
- Prevent to be overcome by a ball carrier or by a run without the ball
- Force the ball carrier and the direction of possession wide



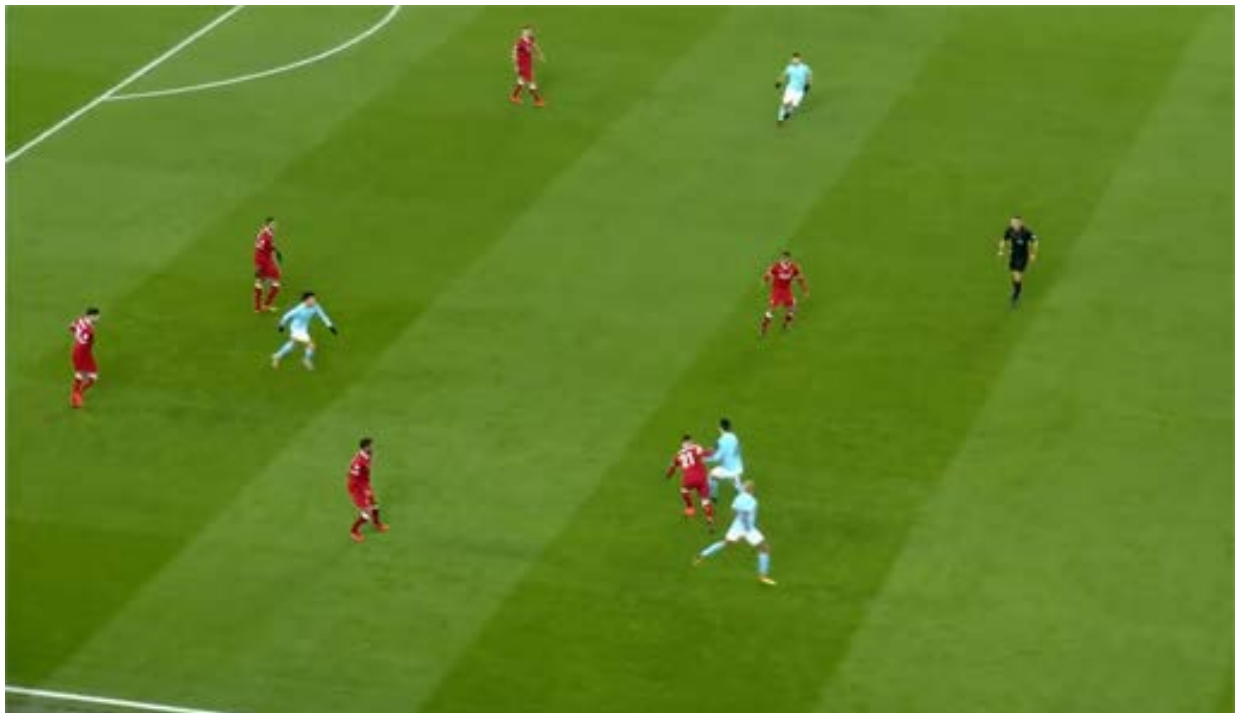
9) Group defense

- Two center backs press the opposition forwards with the ball or near it, the other center back covers his teammates position
- If a center back moves out of position, the balance midfielder must drop back to the defensive line to balance; the inverted fullback becomes the balance player
- The opposition wingers or wide pattern of play are covered and countered by the advanced players, together with the winger of that flank; the opposite winger runs inside then
- The advanced midfielders and the winger must be just away from the ball to be able to double the mark of their teammates constantly
- The defensive line is not only marked by the ball position, but also by the 18 zones concept Guardiola uses for possession and attacking phase and for defense phase

If the most dangerous attacking area for the opposition is the number 14, following Guardiola concepts, it's clear how it's the same from a defense point of view (2 and 5). The coverage of these areas and of the zone 8 was the main issue during 2016/2017 season.



- One of the forwards is the player who can unbalance the opposition defense more than all the other teammates (or whoever he is), and for this reason he can have active rest to be reactive as the ball is won back; Aguero is this kind of player for Man City.



10) Prevent the opposition from scoring:

- Prevent cross passes toward the 1st pole
- Fullback and center backs must defend the ball before any chances of passes toward the first pole can be created
- Clear the ball before it reaches the goal, but always toward an advanced teammate, who can support the transition to attack, just after the recovery of the possession
- Run up to the field as the ball is received

