



SPANISH STYLE

POSSESSION

SOCCER

VOLUME 1

**ANALYSIS OF TOP SPANISH TEAMS
IN THE POSSESSION PHASE**

by Philip Cauchi



Spanish Style Possession Soccer

Volume 1

By

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Published by

WORLD CLASS COACHING

First published January, 2019 by

WORLD CLASS COACHING 12851 Flint Street Overland Park, KS 66213 (913) 402-0030

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Introduction

Spanish teams including the national side are renowned for dominating possession. It looks so simple to play when you are watching as a spectator, yet it is difficult to coach and master when developing a team playing using this style.

Circulating the ball at high speeds and with accuracy is something that can only be achieved with a well laid long term plan. A culture of excellence with a clear mission statement and vision should be implemented. Aims should be clarified and understood by all stakeholders. Within these aims, well-structured outcomes should emerge. Every outcome should serve us as a milestone towards reaching our target.

In the early stages of their development, young soccer players should acquire the basic motor skills. This should not only be limited to ball mastery, but also includes other capacities learned by playing and participating in different sports and physical activities. From a soccer perspective we should start by developing a solid base of mastering the ball that includes dribbling at different speeds, changing direction with the ball and applying feints and fakes. Kicking is not the same as passing. Passing is the execution of an action to displace the ball as worked out by two players with the intention of gaining a territorial advantage of some sort over our opponents (Verheijen, 2014). Kicking can be developed as part of ball mastery, while passing can be developed as a means of tactical cooperation even at the younger ages. Situations of 4v1, 4v2, 3v1, etc. guarantee lots of repetition where players must think and re-think to reposition themselves in order to carry out the next soccer action.

In the latter stages of the players' development, we move towards including playing with larger numbers. We now train in more complex situations that require faster and more accurate decision-making. Training in larger numbers is beneficial to develop the inter-relationship needed between players from different sectors of the team.

Once we have players who bear a high level of decision-making and technique, we will be in a position to put together a team that plays fluid and attractive soccer. At this stage players will feel that these movements come automatically as a result of a well-prepared long term programme in which they were properly coached to identify the when, why, where, and

how to execute a soccer action. Furthermore, training will be carried out in a way that gets the creativity out of players. Players will be able to transform their pre-programmed choice of a soccer action into another soccer action if the tactical situation changes abruptly (what if).



There are situations in which players at every age should experience as a regular occurrence. Obviously at the younger ages, players will train with a higher numerical superiority such as 6v2 while using a larger area. Therefore, we allow our prospective soccer players more time and space on the ball. At the top level, time and space is very limited and players should thus train in situations of light numerical superiority, numerical parity and even in numerical inferiority. As defences are becoming harder to unlock, the most effective way to unlock compact defences is through playing quick combinations. This is the ultimate aim of a possession dominant style of play.

What is a style of play?

A style of play is a means of communication between players of the same team through specific collective behaviours (Davies, 2016). The style of play chosen by a particular club should strengthen the relationship between the players and get out the best performances from them. The chosen style of play should therefore be built on the characteristics of the players at the disposal of the coach (Casà Basile, 2015).

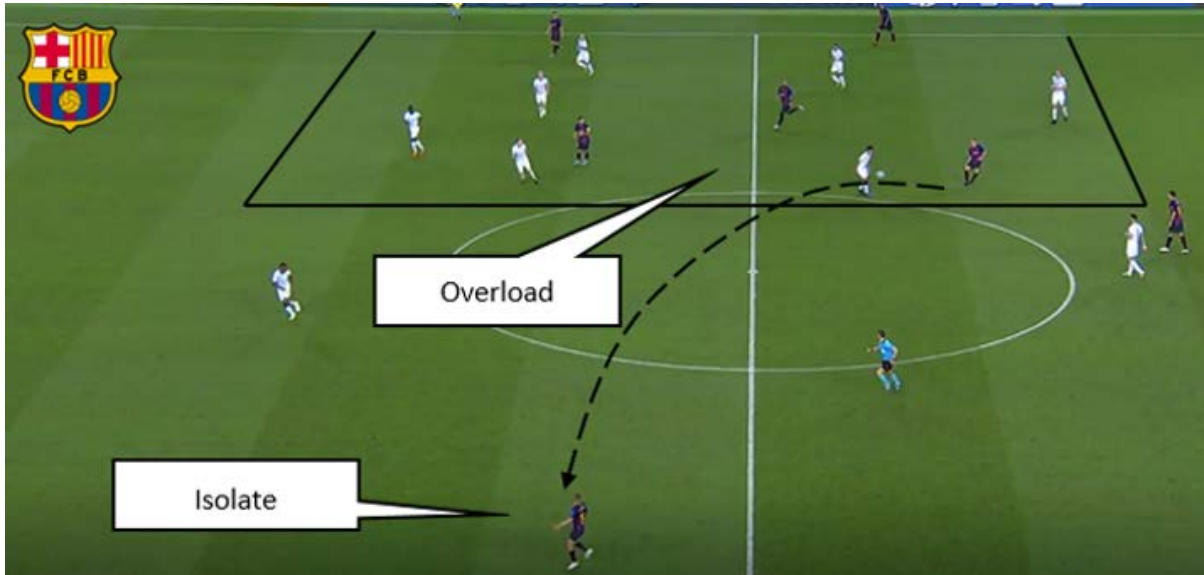
A team is an open and a living system, which is made up of different sub-systems – the players. All of the players have to interact with both their teammates, opponents as well as with other interferences such as referee decisions, the weather, spectators, etc. Each and every opponent plays the game in a different manner, a different style. Our players should thus be able to react, anticipate and execute quick decisions when playing against different teams and against different styles of play. A style of play should therefore be adjustable and allowed to grow, to adapt and to reach new heights (Mallo, 2015).

A style of play is not a short term project. Players should be nourished from an early age to play with confidence, as well as to develop their creativity and insight of the game. Establishing a club culture is therefore of utmost importance. The club should have a vision and a playing philosophy that gives our team an identity on the field of play.

The way we want to play should be clearly described and agreed between the players and the coaching staff. A well-defined training programme should show us where we currently are, our strengths and weaknesses, what we aim to achieve and how – the training process. It is thus imperative that training simulates situations that our players will encounter during a match (Casà Basile, 2015).

The coaching staff should plan training sessions which develop further the team's strengths while minimizing its weaknesses. This way we are integrating our strengths to create an effective and fluid style of play. Let us take an example. If we have three very good midfielders, a striker who can hold and play the ball really well, and two inside forwards who are great at cutting inside with the ball, we should base our game on building up through the middle vertical channel where we are the strongest. However, we should be flexible. If we are finding it hard to verticalize centrally against opponents playing very deep

and compact, we try to overload the ball side to isolate the opposite flank. This is known as *overload to isolate* (Davies, 2016), and through it we aim to switch the ball quickly to the weak side full back to receive and penetrate.



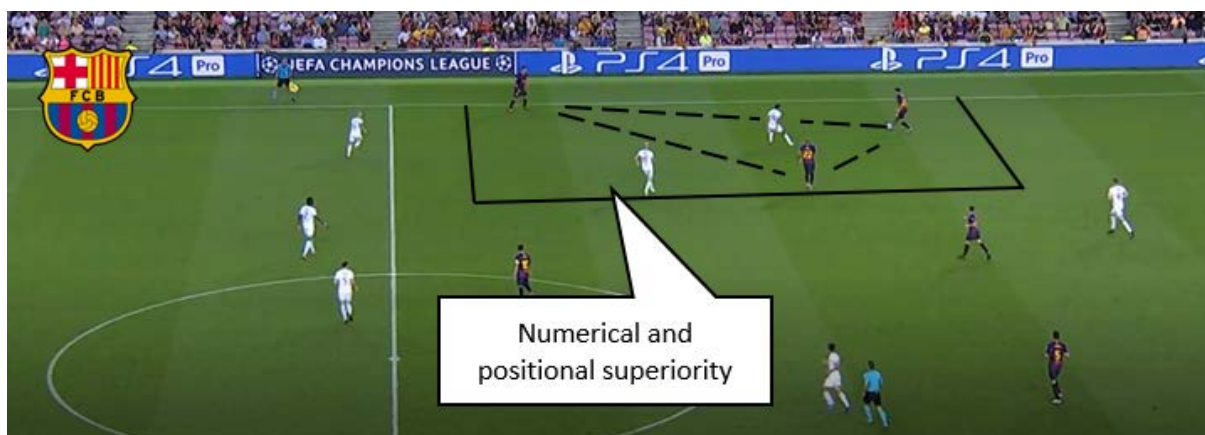
It is not just how technically and tactically good a player is to fit in our team. Identifying how a particular player interacts with his teammates is imperative. The interaction a player has with his teammates helps in getting the best out of his abilities.

Adaptation in the behaviour of our team will only be achieved if we train in situations that require the players to solve tactical problems collectively. Players should train in their natural positions with relation to their teammates positioned in the same sector and from nearby sectors. The coach should create different tactical scenarios for the players for them to solve together. On match day they will be required to do so under pressure from opponents who will be there to take the three points from us (Bordonau and Villanueva, 2018).

The principle of propensity within the Tactical Periodization training model refers to the need to train within contexts where we want a particular behaviour, either individually and/or as a group to develop. When doing so we should always take into account the playing characteristics of the players together with their strengths and weaknesses (Minutillo and Rafloski, 2015; Bordonau and Villanueva, 2018).

A system of play is not the same as a style of play. It is the strategic deployment of the players on the field of play and which is used to serve the style of play (Grima, 2017). As a matter of fact if we are playing using a 1-4-3-3 system of play, we know that we have four at the back, three midfielders and three forwards. However, the 1-4-3-3 can be interpreted in various ways. We can have the two lateral forwards staying either wide or more to the inside. We might have one or both full backs pushing forwards to give us more length and width. As a style of play we may opt to build-up directly bypassing the midfield, or we might use our midfield to attack down the middle channel with preference given to playing a short passing game. The style we choose depends on the strengths that we as a team have and how we will best exploit these strengths to our advantage to create scoring chances.

As an example if we have players in midfield who are of a higher technical level than our opponents (qualitative superiority), we can have dominance in keeping possession of the ball and verticalize. Through better positioning than our opponents (positional superiority), we can circulate the ball with speed and create gaps in their defence. This can be aided with numerical superiority around the ball and by having both short, medium and long passing options.



A possession style of play

Dominating possession is not an end in itself, but a strategy which a team may use to create space in order to play the ball close to the opponent's goal to score goals. As with other game models, this requires a team to have the right mix of technical and tactical abilities. Players within a possession dominant style of play must have a high level of applied technique, be quick to read and anticipate tactical situations and also positional awareness.



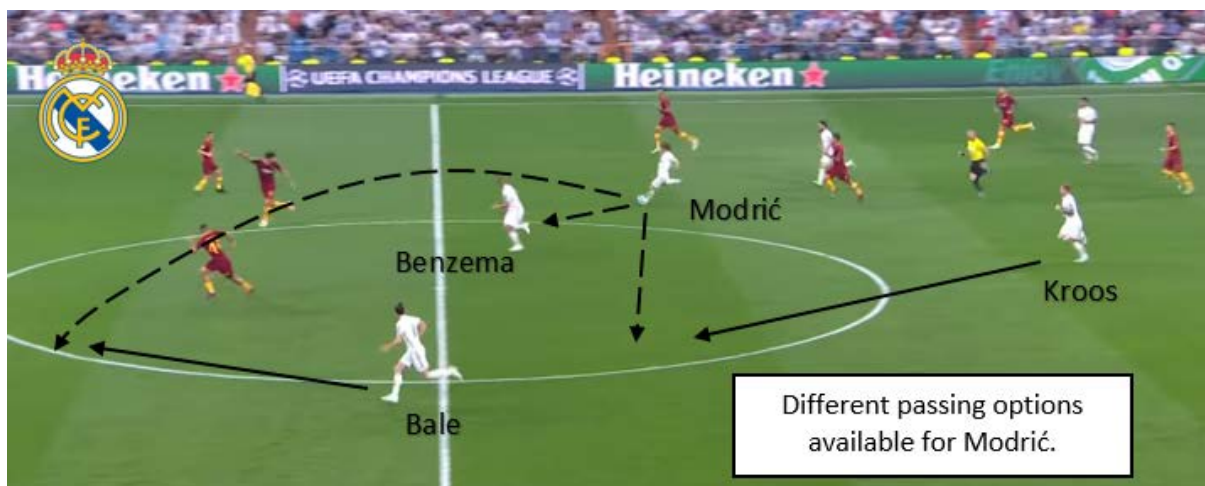
If we have the right mix of players to play with the style we will have a head start to what occurs during the match. The simple reason being that we have the ball at our feet and thus are able to dictate the game (Pascual, 2013). Having the ball at our feet conserves us energy and commits the other team chase us all over the pitch. This will tire out our opponents both physically and mentally, giving the sense that we are dominating the game.

When in possession of the ball and through good positional play we can disrupt the opposition's structure and unbalance their team (Bordonau and Villanuova, 2018). Creating gaps in the opposition's defence is the targeted outcome of possession play (Allison, 2013). Enlarging the area of play and having both width and length makes this more possible to achieve. Movement of players in front of the ball should be continuous, thus creating further passing angles and options to play the ball into more advanced zones and closer to our opponent's goal (Davies, 2016). While circulating the ball our team should have a stable but flexible structure with the players rotating positions (mobility) while keeping the shape

of the team intact. This prevents giving the opponents the space they need to hit us quick on the counter should we lose possession of the ball.

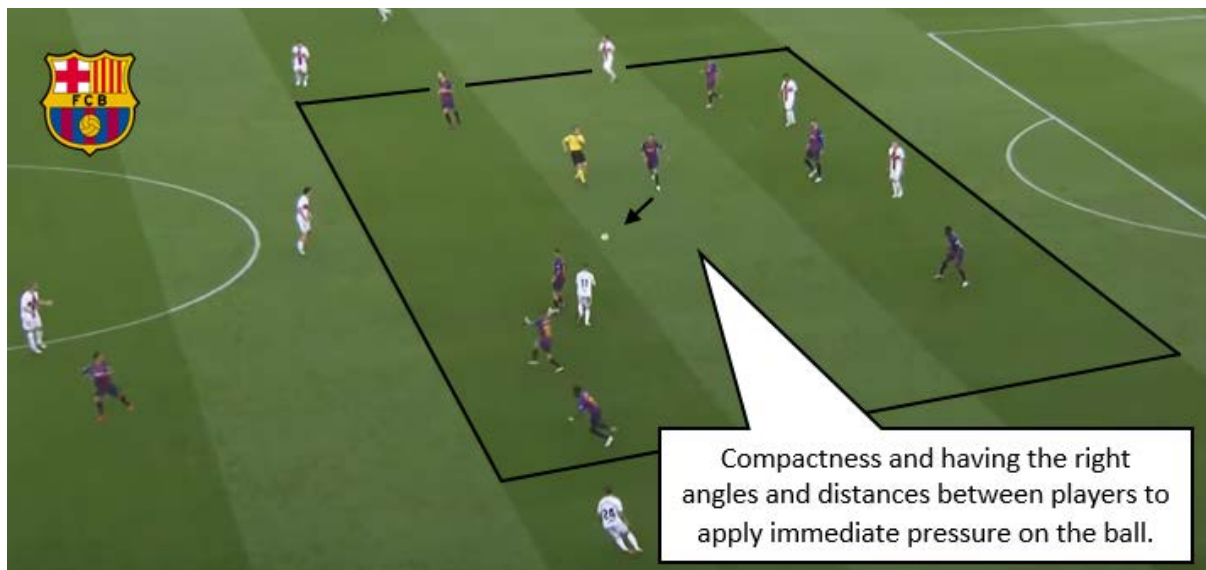


In order to surprise our opponents and never let them to settle in the game, we should continuously change our playing tempo, circulate the ball quickly and switch the point of attack rapidly when playing in verticality is not possible. In other words we must remain unpredictable, always having the opponents trying to guess our next move. Options to circulate the ball should exist both near and away from it and through having several passing lanes. It is very frustrating and extremely hard for the opponents to anticipate our moves if multiple playing options are continuously being created.



By dominating possession with quick short passes, if possession is lost we will be in good strategic positions to apply pressure on the ball. This can be achieved as a result of the short distances that exist between our players (Davies, 2013). It should become a habit to immediately press to win the ball back upon losing it. It is therefore imperative from this

aspect to pay particular attention to the details of the distances and angles between the players and the structure of the team while still in the possession phase.



Passing is the most common technique used within a possession dominant style of play. The ball travels quicker than the players. A single pass may eliminate one, two and three players or an entire sector. Passing takes place during the moment of possession which is further divided into the build-up and scoring phases (Tamboer, 2016). The main difference in these two phases are the speed and intensity of football actions. Typically during the build-up, the frequency of passes is slower than during the scoring phase. The main reason being that there is more space and time available to play the ball.

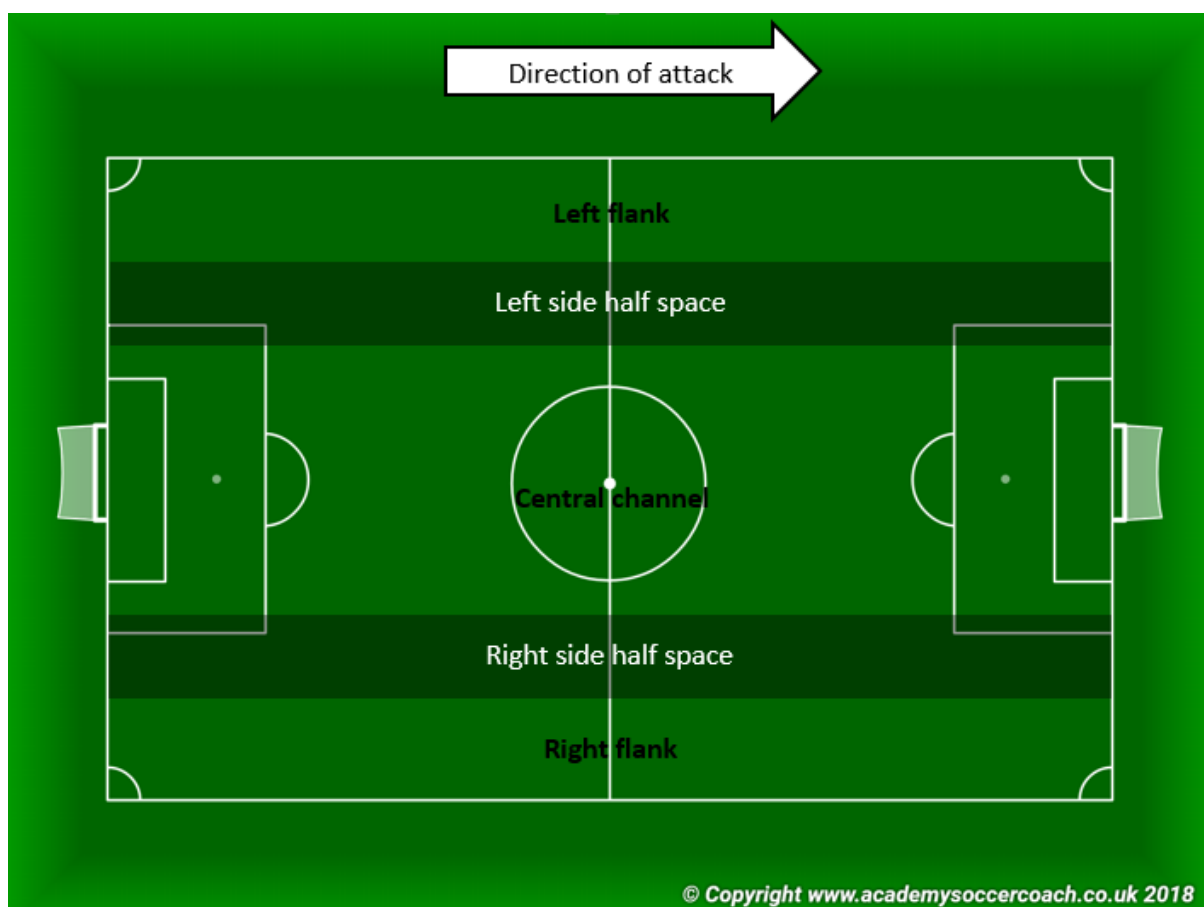
Inside and around the penalty area shorter and faster passes are used to exploit the spaces created by pulling the defenders out of position. Together with this, dribbling is also used to attract defenders thus freeing teammates who will be in good positions to receive the ball unmarked.

The Principles of Possession Play

The principles of possession play should be clear, well-defined and understood by both the coaching staff and players. Should one of these pillars not be functioning, it will be hard for our team to dominate play and create scoring opportunities.

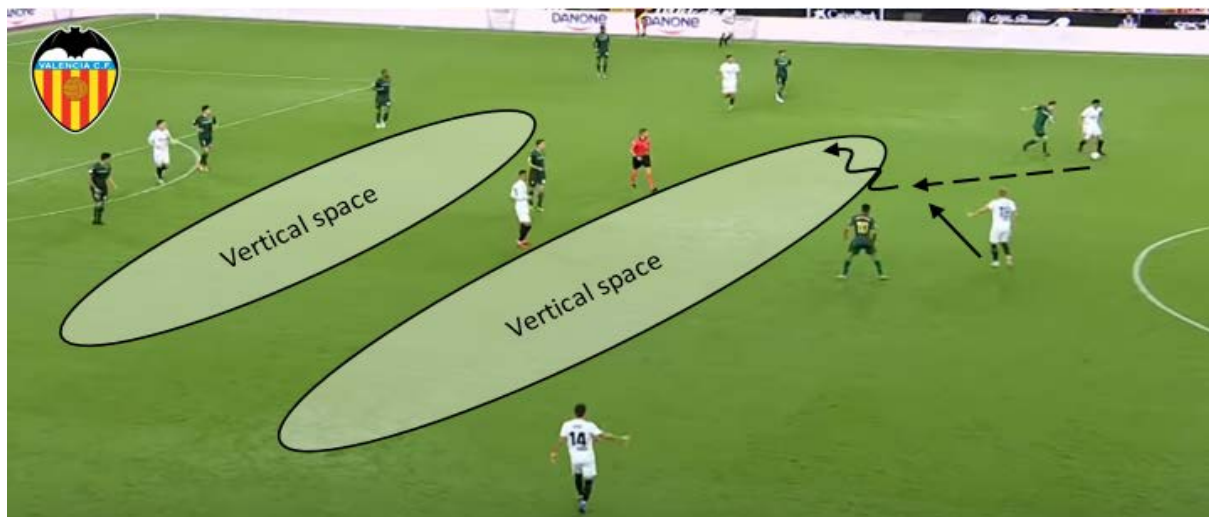
Positioning

The team should have the right players to occupy the key positions on the field of play. If these key positions are not properly occupied, dominating possession of the ball becomes very hard to achieve. Positional play helps the team to secure both the ball and verticalize to penetrate the opposition's defence. In a side that aims to dominate possession, there should be players occupying each of the five vertical channels as shown in the diagram below. We should have at least a player giving us length up front to aid in achieving verticality and to also have players who give us depth in order to provide stability and security at the back.



Penetration

The player giving the team length also creates vertical gaps in the opponent's defensive structure. This provides our team in possession a higher chance to play the ball closer to our opponents' goal and create scoring opportunities.

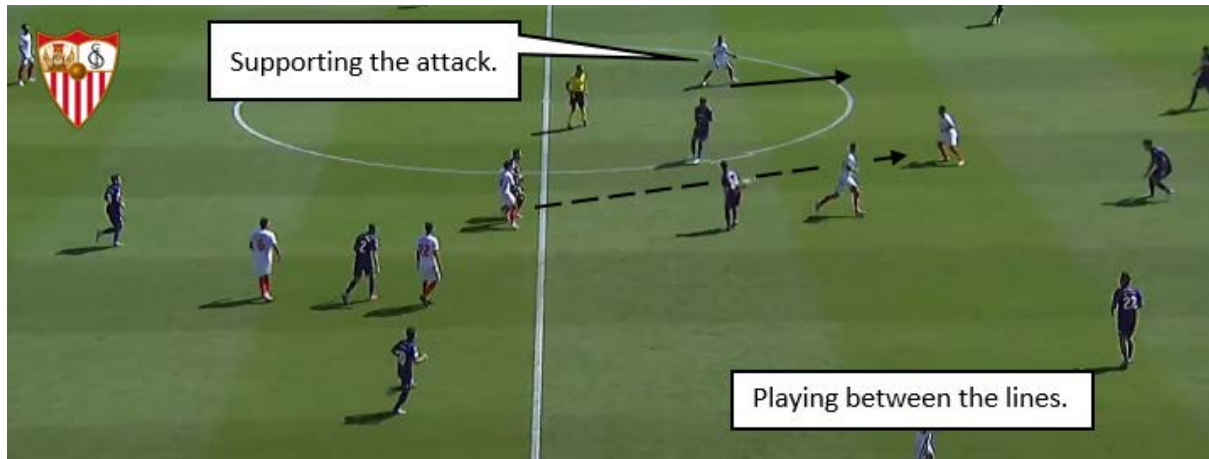


Length and depth

When our team is in possession we should create movements in front of the ball. This creates a point of reference for the team to play forward and create the necessary space to verticalize. Our forwards should position themselves as high as possible (Schreiner and Elgert, 2013).



By having length we aim to stretch the opponents vertically and thus be able to play line breaking passes in order to advance the ball into higher zones up the field in order to score. Immediate support is imperative to allow the attack to be fluid.



Depth means having players behind the line of the ball to offer support and also cover crucial zones on the field of play to prevent getting caught out of position if possession of the ball is lost.



Width

Width is the horizontal placement of the players on the field of play. The aim of having width is to be able to stretch the opponents to create horizontal gaps in their defence from which we can verticalize. If we cannot play through we still have players wide with whom we can combine and play around the defence. In the image below the encircled players are giving the team width. The outside forward moved wide so to attract the fullback with him

and enlarge the distance between the latter and the central defender. The ball was played directly to the midfielder exploiting this space from a deeper position.



Mobility

It is the off-the-ball movement and rotation of positions with the aim of creating and exploiting space in order to advance the ball into higher zones up the pitch. Key to achieving this is to always have triangles to circulate the ball (Gutiérrez Mayor, 2012).

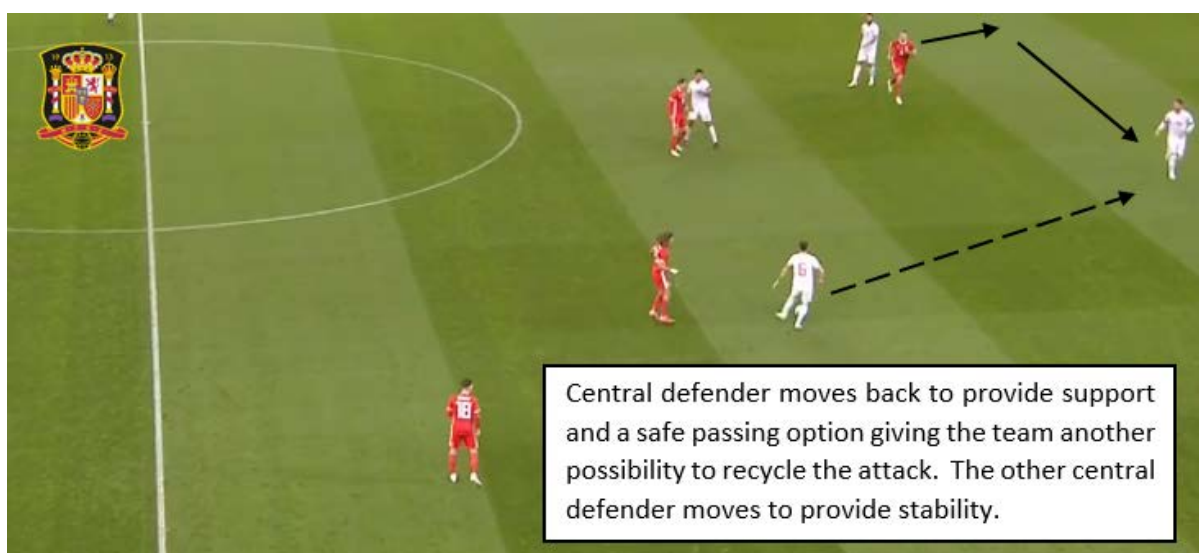
Preventive marking.

When we are in possession of the ball we should be prepared in cases not to get caught when our team loses possession of the ball. Preventive marking means marking specific players in dangerous zones of the pitch who in the case of a negative transition may receive the ball and initiate a counter-attack (Maurizi, 2018). For effective preventive marking we need our players to be well positioned and be able to read and anticipate play. The image below gives us a perfect example of this by leaving a 2v1 situation at the back in favour of the attacking team. Notice also that there are two other players marking the zone in front of the penalty area. If the cross is cleared, they have a very good chance of winning the second ball, thus denying the opponents the space they require to initiate a counter attack.



Communication.

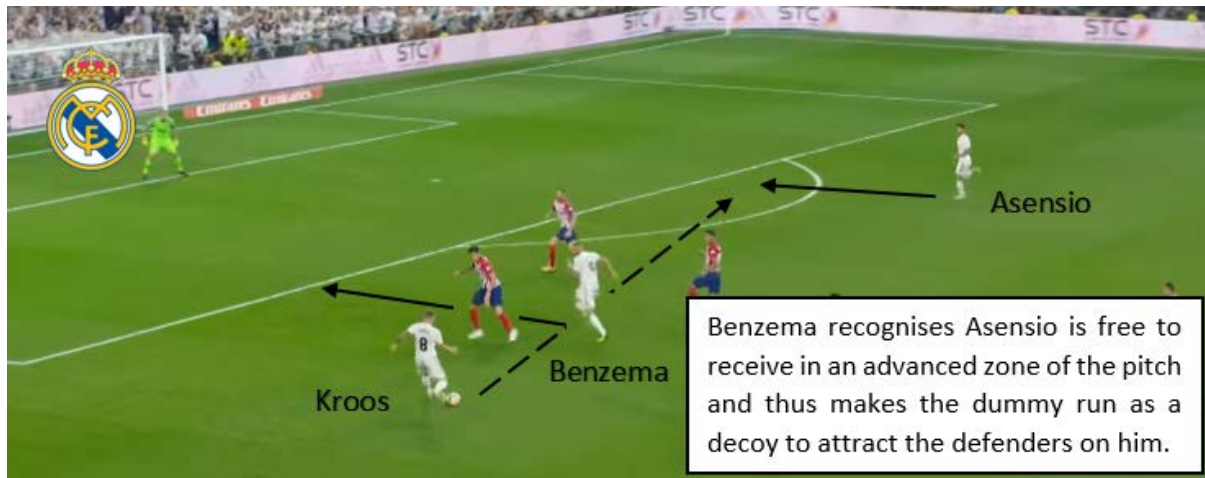
Communication is not only the verbal comments and instructions which players pass to each other during a match. Most of the communication that takes place in a soccer match is of a non-verbal type. If a central midfielder receives the ball, the other midfielders position themselves in a way to send non-verbal information to the ball carrier that they are ready to receive the ball. The central defenders also interpret this situation and make themselves available to receive the ball by creating the necessary angles and distances of support. This type of communication takes place continuously from kick-off until the final whistle. The players should therefore be trained to perceive and interpret correctly such situations upon which the correct decision and execution of soccer actions will be made.



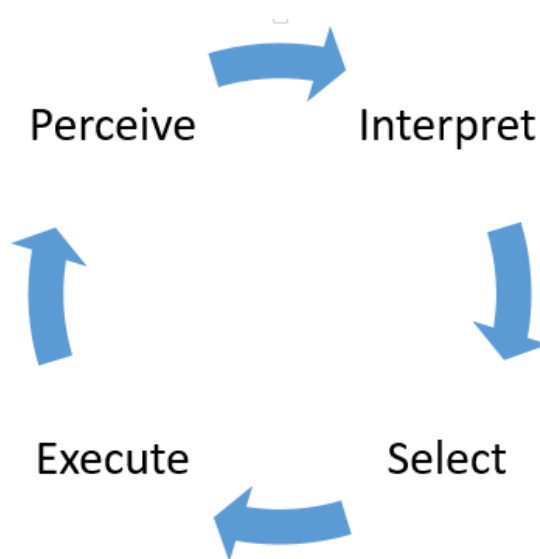
Movement of both teammates and opponents send information to the player on the ball about the situation and possible playing options (Van Kolschooten, 2015). Verbal instructions provided by teammates also help depict the situation to the ball-carrier. Focus and paying attention to the correct stimuli during a match is therefore of utmost importance.

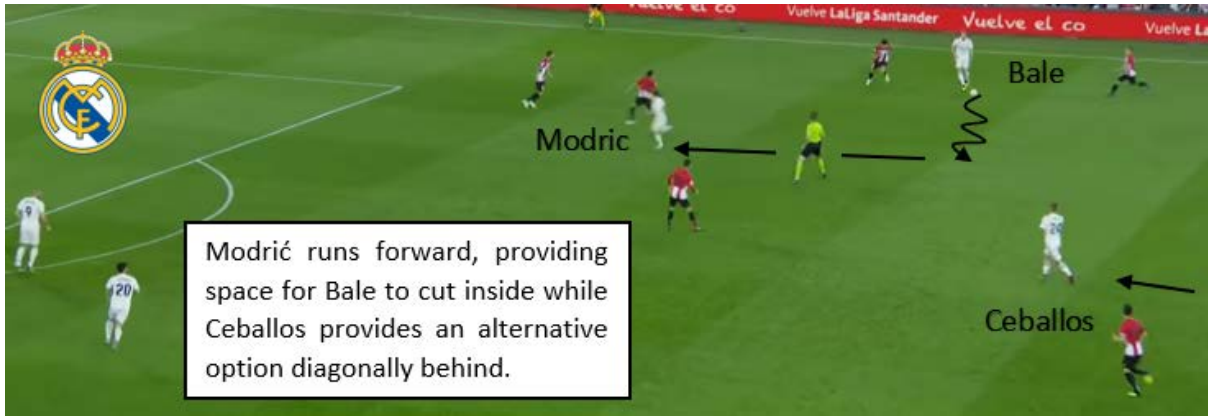
Players should take it a habit to continuously scan their surroundings as they are constantly receiving messages and assessing situations. Before receiving the ball, players should assess what options they have available and which of these put their team in a more favourable

situation. Excellent communication between the players of a team makes the execution of soccer actions much more effective and mistakes are less likely to occur.

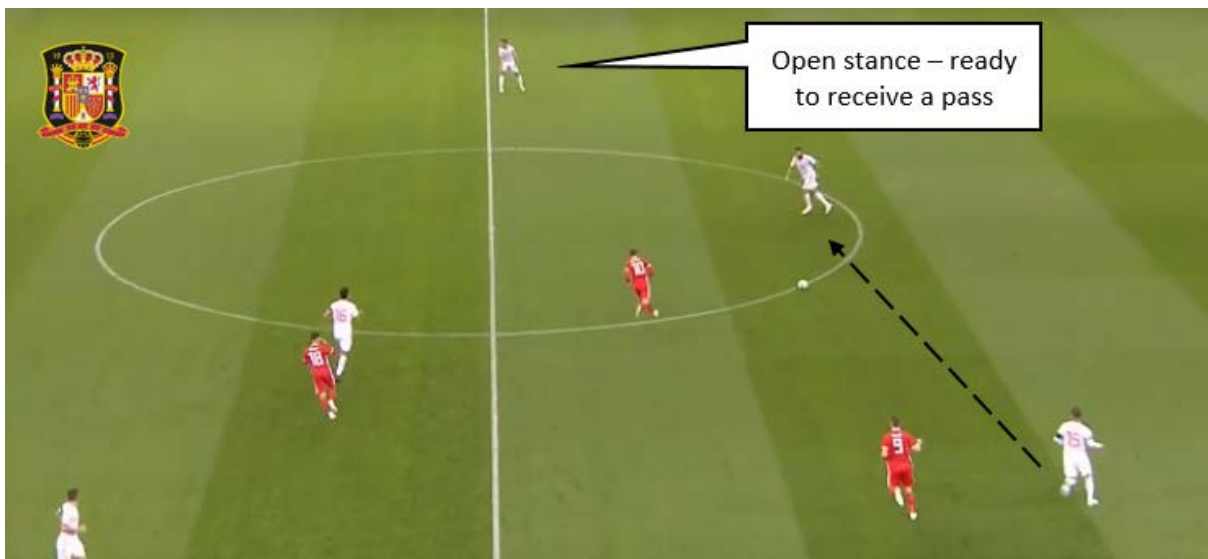


Throughout a match players execute hundreds of decisions. In Spain the tempo of soccer is high. This means that a high number of soccer actions are made each minute of the game (ibid). Typically when playing against foreign opposition, Spanish teams have higher percentage of possession which is the result of a large number of successful passes completed. To be able to dominate play throughout the game, a high level of mutual understanding is required. Soccer players playing in the same team must be able to speak the same soccer language so to successfully recognise cues and anticipate situations on the field of play. Having specific principles of play definitely helps in this matter.





Body language is also a form of communication. If a player is in space with an open body stance, he is communicating with his teammate that he is ready to receive the ball.



Well executed positional play enhances team communication. How can the players communicate effectively on the soccer field if they do not know the structure and positions during a particular moment of play? The positioning of team mates off-the-ball sends visual stimuli to the player on the ball that means that specific actions are possible to be completed while others cannot. If the player on the ball has no forward passing options, the players in front of the ball must move in order to create space either for themselves or their teammates so that verticality in play may be achieved.

Positional characteristics during the possession phase.

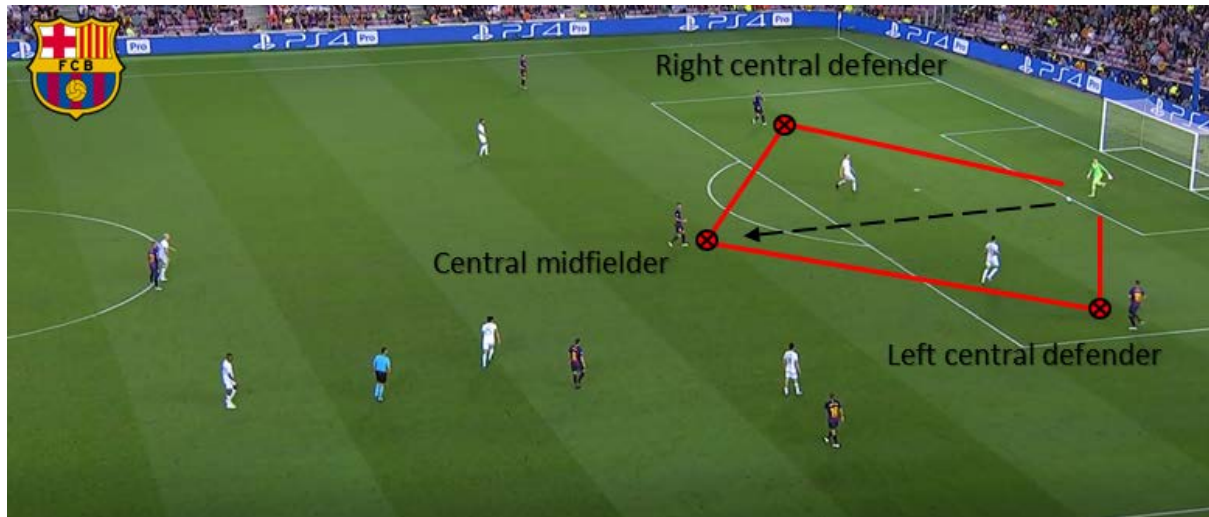
The goalkeeper

In addition to shot stopping and command of the penalty area, Spanish goalkeepers are typically good at playing with their feet. They participate actively in the build-up and are able to play both short and long passes. The positional awareness and composure of Spanish goalkeepers is outstanding and this enables them to play intelligently and quickly even when under pressure.



When the goalkeeper is in possession of the ball, options to play from the back are usually created by both the central defenders and central midfielders (usually the deepest one). The movements created by these players enable the goalkeeper to have multiple options to play the ball. However, the primary principle of play in Spain is to play the pass that takes as many opponents as possible out of the game while ensuring that the team retains possession of the ball. In the next diagram we can note that if the ball was played to any of the two central defenders, the attackers could easily track back and remain behind the line of the ball. Furthermore, the team would not have gained any territorial advantage. As is the case in this situation, the goalkeeper played the ball to the central midfielder, eliminating two opponents in the process while putting the team in an advantageous position to continue with a forward attack momentum. If the option to play to the central

midfielder was not available, either as result of having this player marked and/or having the strikers positioned in a way which prevented the ball from reaching him, the ball would have been played through the central defenders.

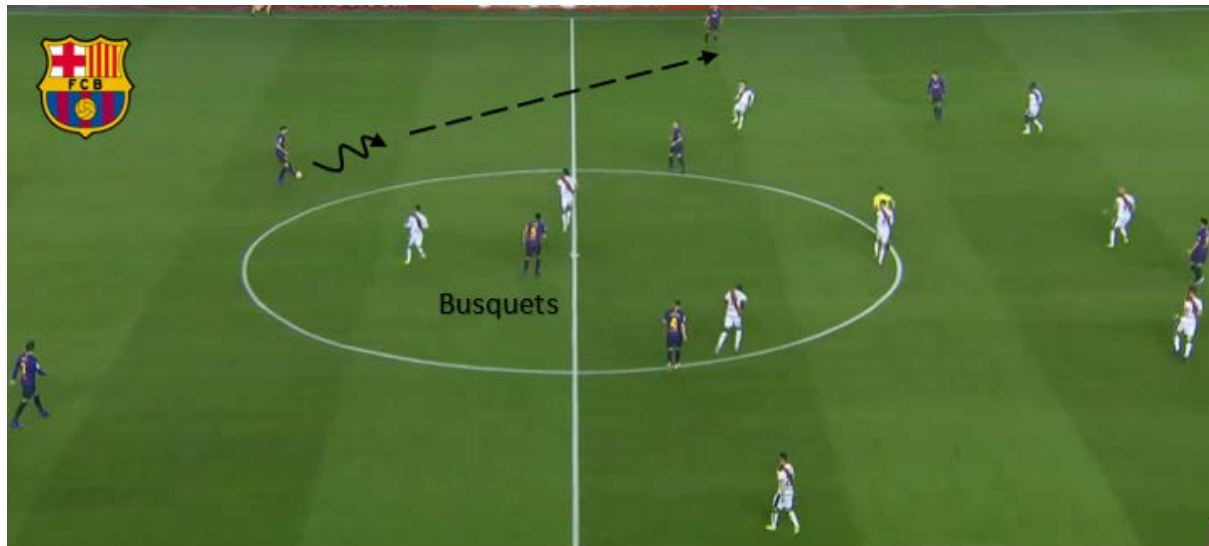


The central defenders

While being strong in the defensive phase, the central defenders are highly skilled and able to play with composure to get the ball out of pressure and build a constructive attack. They are ball playing defenders who play very close with the goalkeeper, midfielders and full backs. Their main aim in the possession phase is to start or re-cycle the build-up upon recovering the ball. In some teams like F.C. Barcelona and Real Madrid C.F. they play high inside the opponents' half where they are always available as a backwards safe option to switch the point of attack.

During the build-up, the central defenders drop deep to create space for themselves to receive the ball. This opens up the necessary passing lanes to play the ball back whenever the midfielders or full backs cannot play forward. By dropping deep into space, the central defenders are giving the team more options during the build-up phase and also more security at the back. Players like Sergio Ramos of Real Madrid and Piqué of Barcelona communicate well with their teammates. This enables the team to achieve a forward momentum to develop quick and accurate attacks. The position of the central defensive midfielder helps the back line by providing more passing options for the build-up. In the next image, Busquets of Barcelona remains central and is being shadow marked by two

Rayo Vallecano forwards. Although the pass to him is not on, his position has attracted two Rayo forwards which in turn has provided the central defender on the ball with space to dribble forward and play towards the left flank.

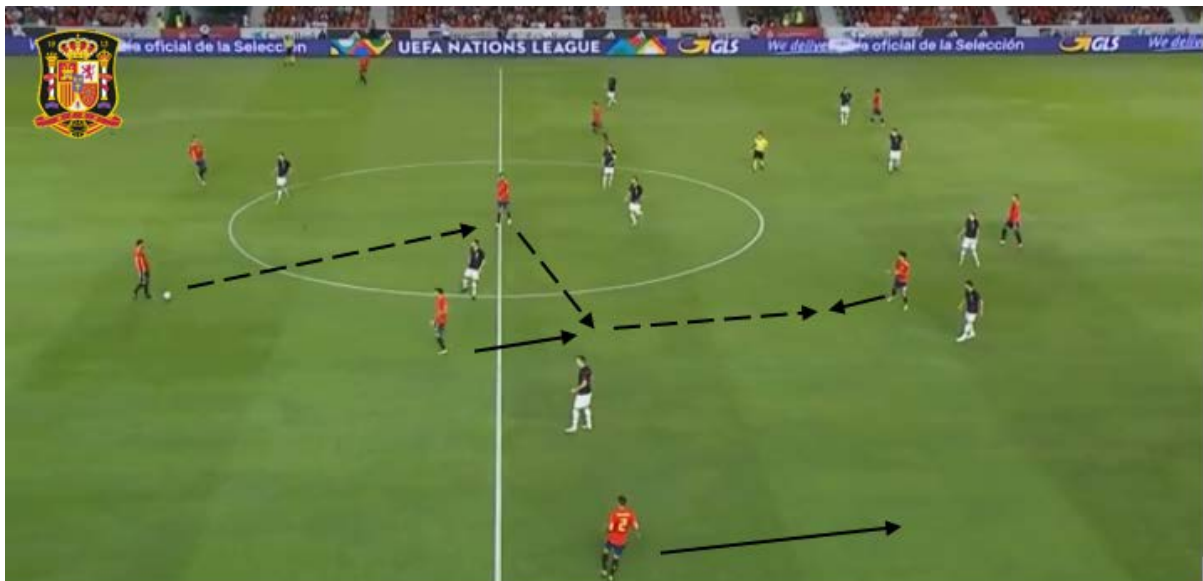


Central defenders of Spanish top teams as well as the national side have outstanding positional awareness. This gives their teams the required momentum to push forward and keep circulating the ball well inside the opposition's half. Short and sharp passes as well as positional rotations (mobility) are key to pulling the opponents out of well covered zones in order to play deep.

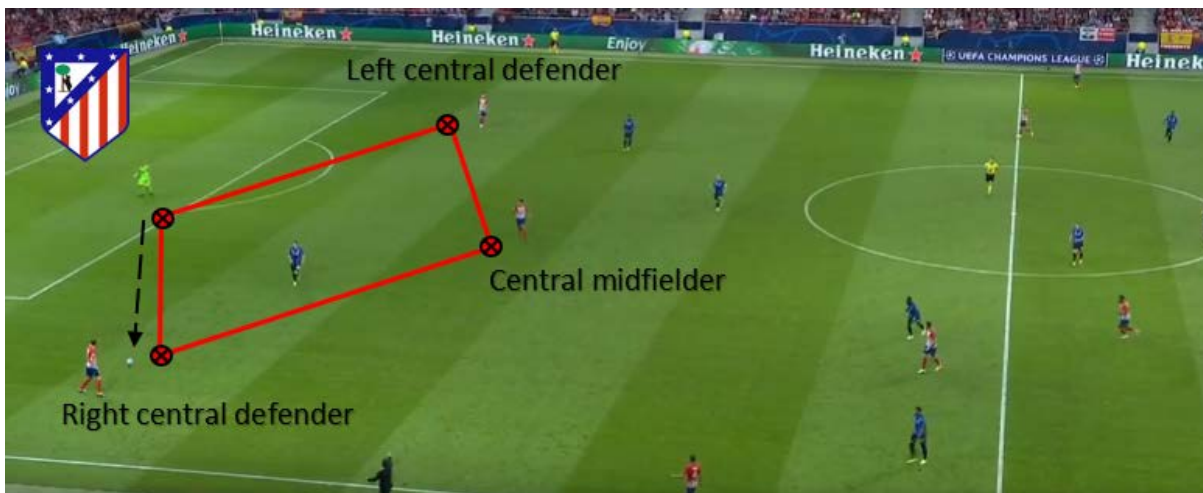


Look at the below photo and note how the national team of Spain are able to build-up play from the two central defenders while the opponents retain a medium block. In this case the

two central defenders play at close proximity to each other while two central midfielders move into the correct space to show for passes.

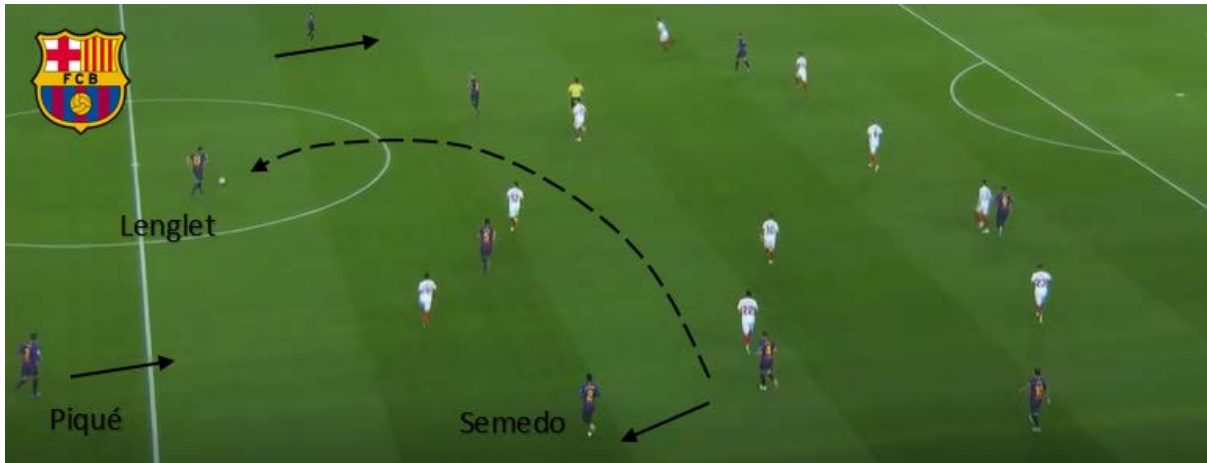


During the first stage of the build-up, teams may either choose to have the central defenders play close to each other or to stretch to the edge of the penalty area. In the latter the low playmaker should then drop to play close to the central defenders. This provides more options to play the ball out from the back and retains balance to the structure of the team.



When in possession of the ball the central defenders drop deep so to be able to receive back passes without pressure. Top teams typically play the ball back to their central defenders to switch the point of attack. The central defenders are also in a good positions to close down

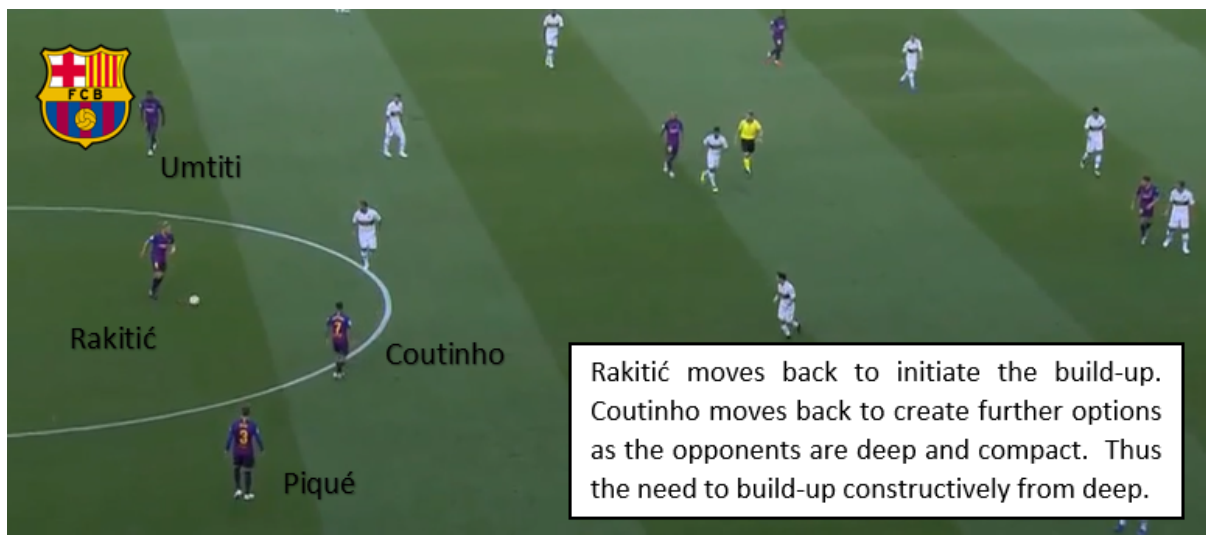
space and the team becomes compact should the ball be lost further up the field. In the next image one of the central defenders (Piqué) drops deep while the other (Lenglet) moves up in space ready to receive in a more advanced position and without being contrasted by the opponents. Both Piqué and Lenglet are free. However, being in a central position, Lenglet has more options to play. When the ball is played to him, the team opens up, creating width, depth and length.



In the middle of the field, the central defensive midfielder's position determines the distance between the two central defenders. If the defensive midfielder moves up in midfield, the central defenders remain close to each other both to support the midfielder in front of them, and each other should one of them receives the ball. On the other hand if the defensive midfielder remains deep, the two central defenders get wider so that they can circulate the ball and switch play with ease and speed. The team will also have three players in the back who are compact and ready to defend if the ball is lost in higher areas of the pitch.

The central midfielders

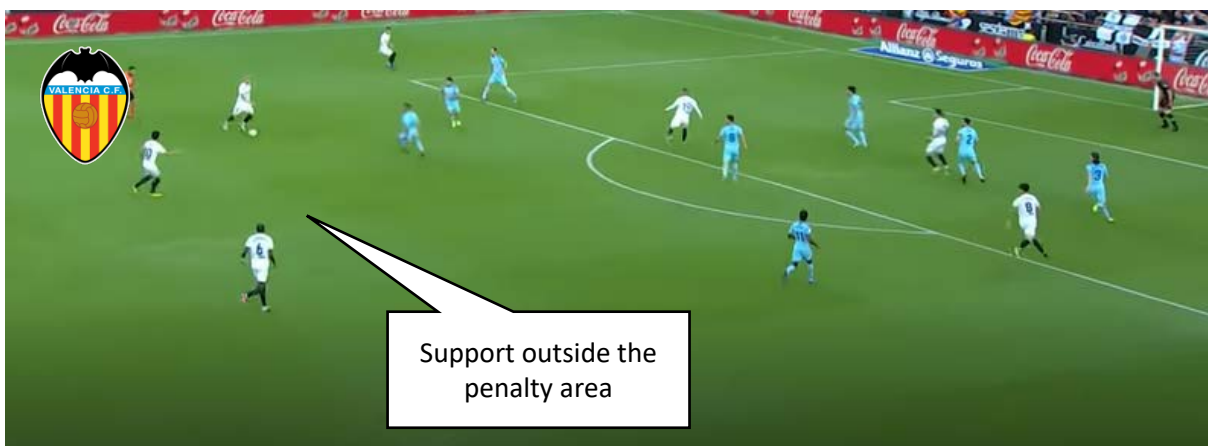
The central midfielders are crucial to possession play. They are the engine of such a style as the build-up occurs through them, and as Allison (2013) describes them they are *the beating heart of the team*. They are constantly under pressure to create space to receive and feed the forwards or other players coming from deeper positions such as full backs attacking down the flanks. Central midfielders work very close with the defenders during the build-up phase. They typically insert themselves between the two central defenders to create better angles when building up from the back. In Spain the typical defensive midfielder is also highly technical. Usually he is the one initiating play as his ability to read the game is high.



Both on and off the ball, central midfielders are very quick. This is due to the high level of tactical intelligence that they possess. They rapidly lose their marker to gain space, are able to identify the right moment to create space for teammates, and are also very quick during counter attacking situations.

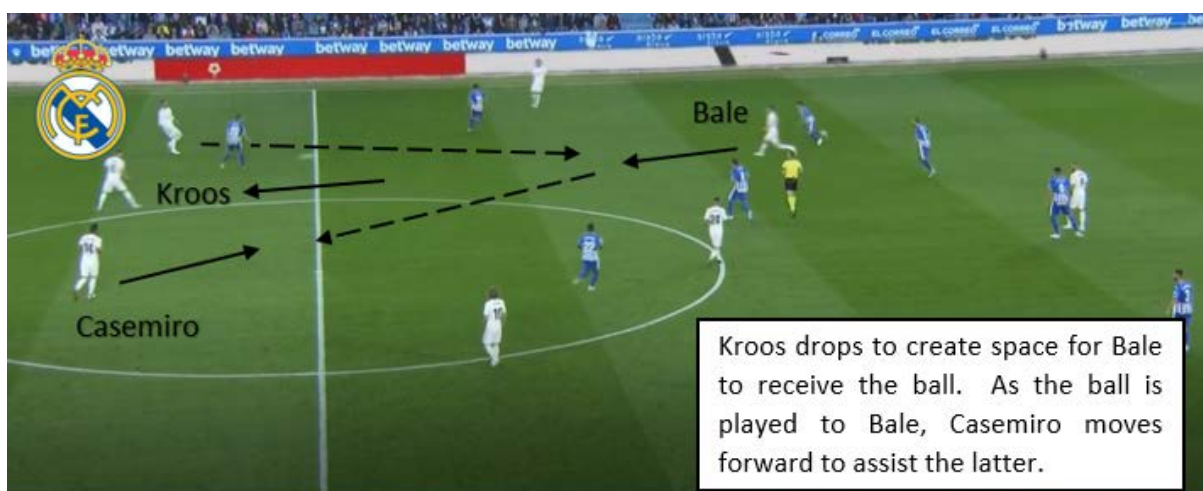


Overloading the attack is another important feature of central midfielders. When a goal-scoring opportunity is being created, Spanish teams attack with numbers, creating more options inside and around the penalty area.



By being positioned outside the penalty area, midfielders offer the team an option to quickly change the angle of an attack. Furthermore, if the ball is played into the penalty area and possession is lost, they are in the correct positions to quickly apply pressure, thus preventing the opponents from countering (counter press). The whole team thus moves together to remain compact with various players being at a close proximity to each other. Geometry of the angles and shapes created on the field of play is something which Spanish teams excel at. The midfielders are continuously aided by both full backs and forwards to create numerical overloads, thus increasing the options of playing the ball to either attack depth or retain possession (Allison, 2013).

Central midfielders are constantly moving and changing positions. This makes it very hard to mark them as they aim to continuously pull the opposing team's midfielders out of central coverage. A great midfielder does not necessarily create space for himself to receive. His movement might be needed to play the ball into more advanced areas on the field of play. In the next diagram Kroos moves back to create space for Bale to receive. At the same time the ball is played forward, Casemiro moves to support the forward pass.



Typical passes in midfield are of a high tempo and switches in play occur regularly. Defending against such a style is very tiring both physically and mentally. To be able to maintain playing at a high tempo, the midfielders are required to scan the pitch hundreds of times during a match. They must remain alert and focused so to be able to receive and play the ball quickly. They require the endurance to perform this with precision throughout the match. In such a playing style the stress imposed on the mental aspect is extremely high. We cannot afford to have players that switch off or to just switch on only when they receive the ball at their feet.

When one of the central defenders moves forward with the ball, the closest midfielder – usually the defensive midfielder – moves back to cover him. By doing so, he is offering the defender who moved forward with the ball both support and security behind him. It is common to see this manoeuvre in Spain, especially with the national team and top clubs.



The full backs

Although they are called full backs, in Spain both with the national team and top clubs these players play more as wing backs. They participate in the build-up of an attack and we usually have both full backs playing high up the pitch giving the team width. During the first phase of the build-up the full backs remain close to the central defenders providing support to build-up from the flanks if the opponent is compact centrally.



Providing width and be ready to receive the ball from a switch in play is a typical aspect in the game of Spanish fullbacks. When the ball moves at the feet of one of the central defenders from the opposite flank, the full back moves close to the back line but still wide to receive unopposed. From there a new attack can be constructed.



Full backs are continuously searching to verticalize play. It is typical of them to perform various passes and off-the-ball runs. They are constantly involved in the build-up to provide wide options in cases where penetration from the middle is difficult and risky to achieve. In the next diagram, F.C. Barcelona's right full back Sergi Roberto passes to Suárez on the right flank and initiates a forward run. This run could either provide Sergi Roberto with the opportunity to receive behind the defenders, or to open up space for the closest midfielder to receive the ball from Suárez.

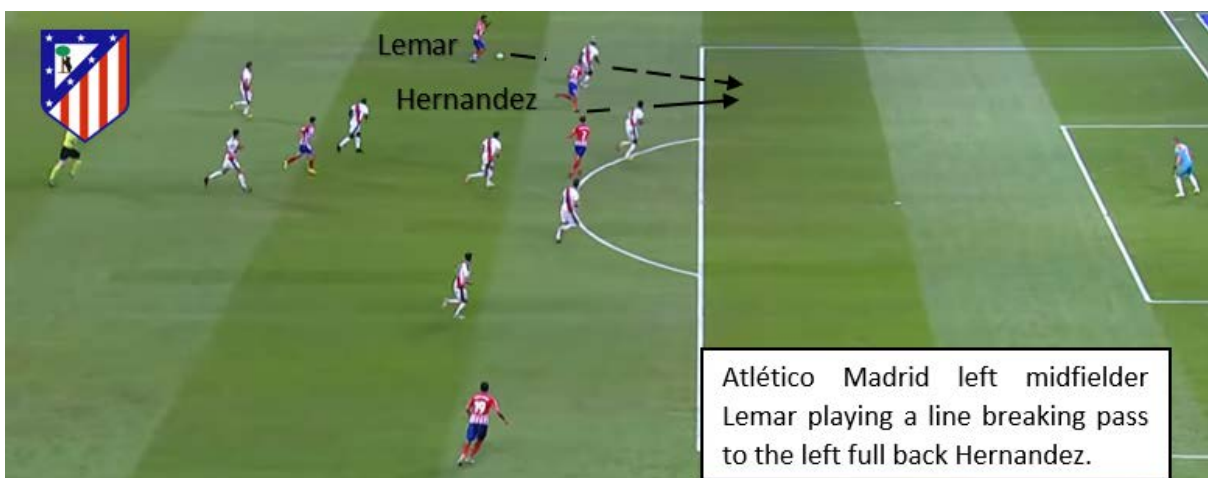


When playing with a formation with three forwards close to each other in a 1-4-3-3 system of play, space opens up for the full backs to attack down the flank. This also occurs in other systems such as the 1-4-2-3-1 when the lateral midfielders are asked to overload the inside channels. Long diagonal passes aimed at switching the point of attack could then successfully be played after the full back advances into high zones of the field unopposed.



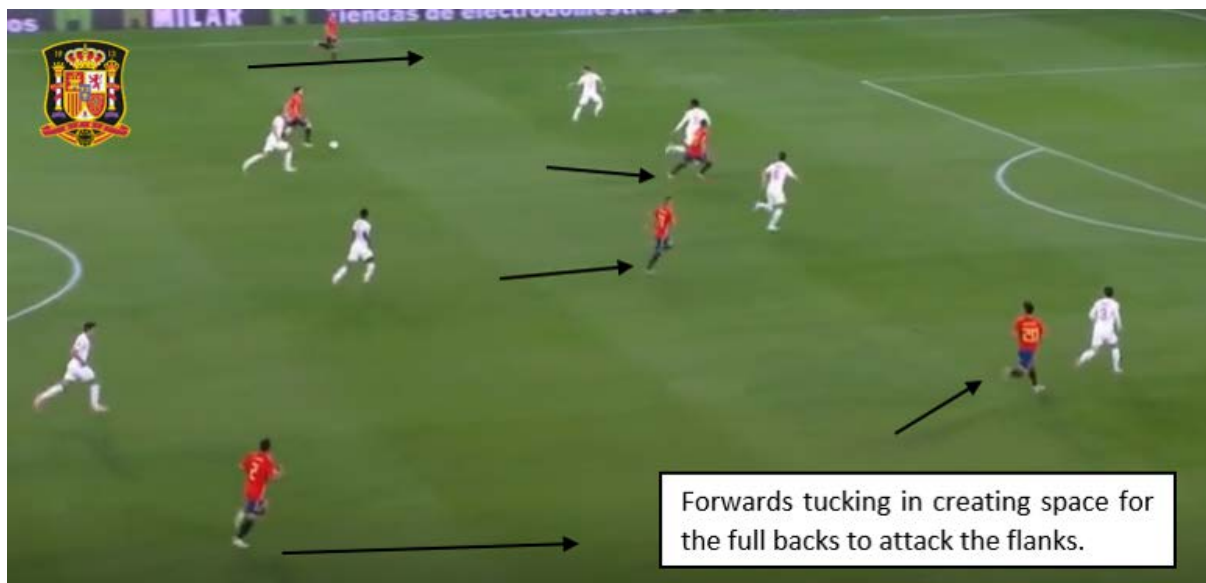
This is a very effective way of getting around the defence. It is also very dangerous for the defenders as they have to shift rapidly and re-adjust themselves to defend the attack coming from a new angle. When the full back roams forward, a central midfielder, the one with the most defensive characteristics remains close to the central defenders. However, this typically only occurs if the opponents leave two forwards close to the half way line.

In La Liga full backs excel in 1v1 offensive duels. This creates numerical superiority down the flank near the ball zone with the lateral midfielder or forward combining with the full back against the opposition's full back. The team will also have qualitative superiority in the attacking phase as the level of the 1v1 of both offensive players is high. Attacking runs might also take place by having the full backs cutting inside in a central position. Sometimes they even become like centre forwards. In this case a high level of communication between the full back and lateral midfielder is required.

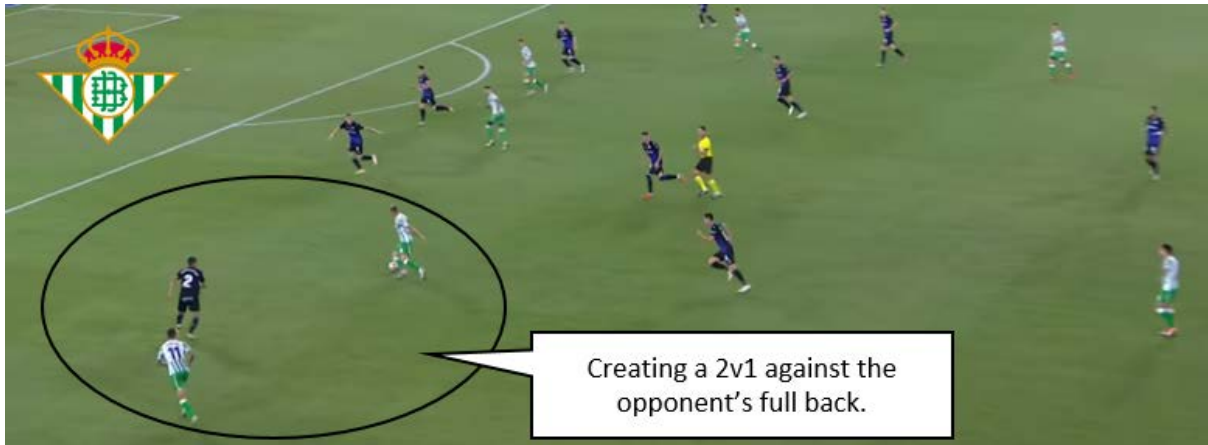


The wide midfielders or outside forwards

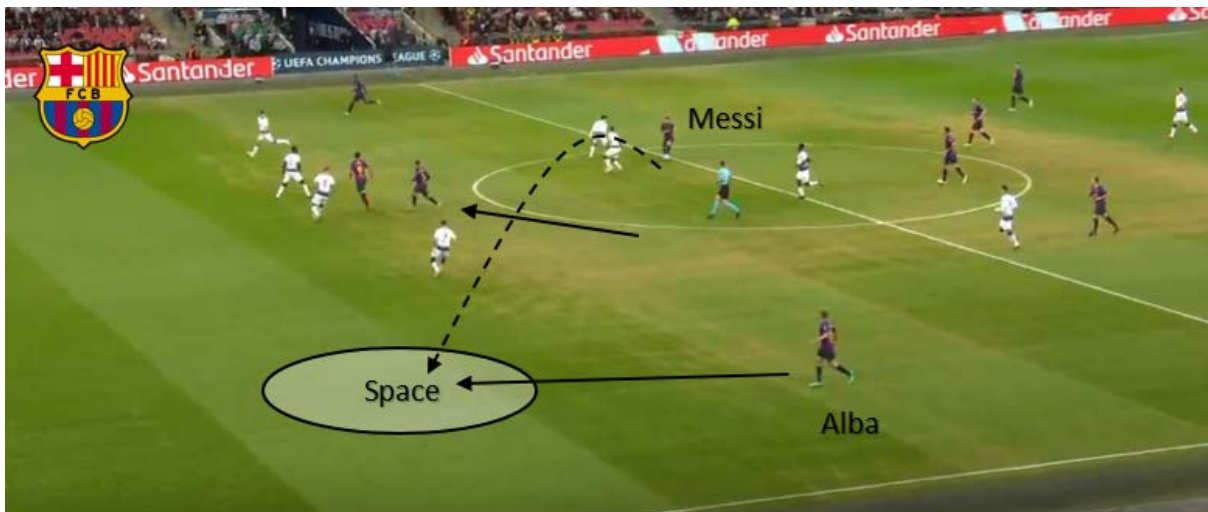
The difference between the outside midfielders and the outside forwards is that the latter are positioned higher up the pitch and closer to the striker. During an attack and when the ball is located either in the middle or attacking thirds they move inside to overload the inside. This creates space on the flanks as the opposition's full backs are attracted to their runs. Our full backs will move forward to exploit this space. Having the full backs wide and the outside forwards or wide midfielders in the middle creates more options to play the ball around and into the penalty area.



Lateral midfielders or inside forwards require that they work very close with full backs. This way they overload the flanks, create more options (crosses, cuts towards the inside, passes towards the inside, penetrating passes behind the full back, etc.), and also look to pull the opposing full backs out of good covering positions.



Teams like F.C. Barcelona and Real Madrid C.F. always leave their full backs high and wide. It is typical of their outside forwards to move towards into the half spaces and then explode towards the inside, thus attracting their markers with them and freeing the flank they want the ball to be played into. The player on the ball in the midfield third of the pitch then has the required space to play the ball in behind the opposition's defence and into the space in front of the full back.



With teams who play with three strikers and attacking full backs, when the ball is at the full back's feet high up the pitch, the lateral attacker drops diagonally behind and towards the inside. This movement creates space for the full back to take his opposite number in a 1v1 duel, while at the same time diverting the other defenders' focus on him. As a result, the

attackers gain that crucial seconds to get into ideal positions to receive the ball, play quick passes to open up the defence and finish the action with a shot on goal.



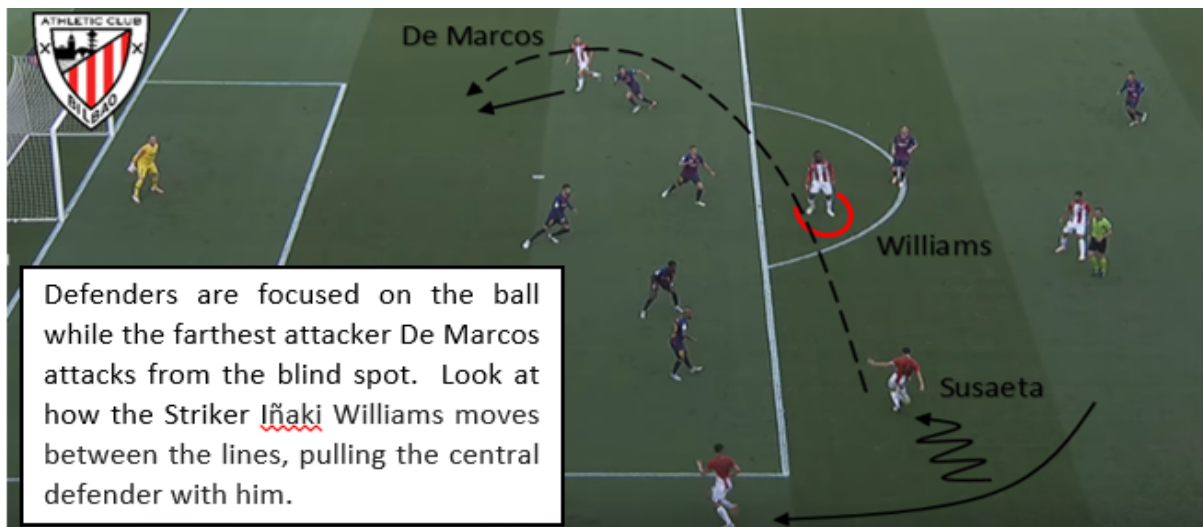
The forward line

Top Spanish teams look for forwards that are highly skilled and who can read the game well. The traditional target player to whom long balls are played and who can hold the ball to midfielders joining the attack does not exist. Forwards in Spain work very well collectively, creating space for either themselves or for their teammates. The level of tactical communication between them and the rest of the team, especially the midfielders, is very high.

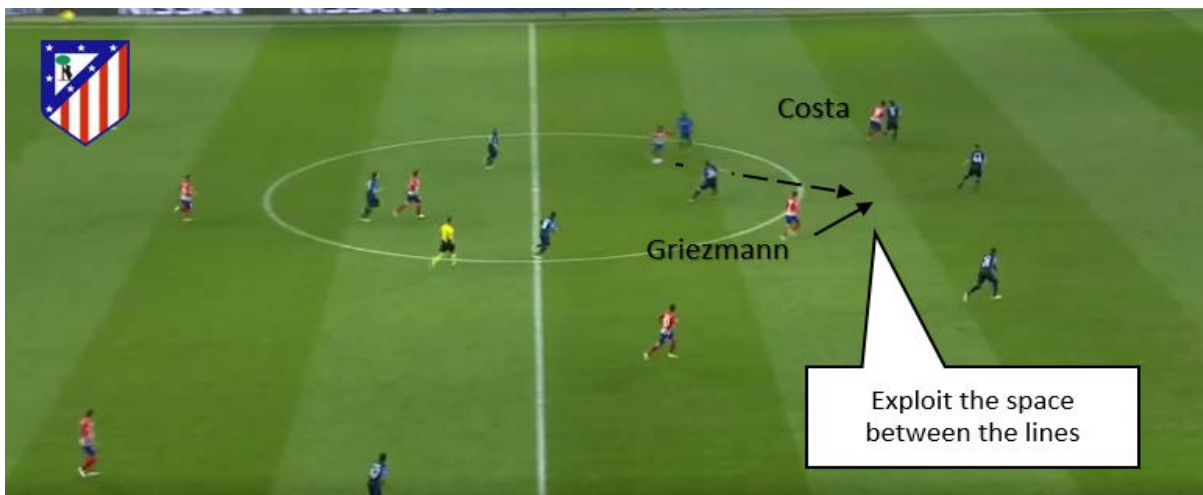
Forwards in Spain look to exploit the spaces between the defence and midfield lines very well. They very often drop into this gap to pull central defenders out of ideal covering positions or to at least divert the defenders' attention onto them for a few seconds which may be critical for a goal to be scored. As soon as the striker drops into this space, another forward or a midfielder who moves into a higher position, tries to cut inside from the defenders' blind spot while the player on the ball delivers the ball onto the danger zone.

Every team approaches the game in a different way. What is common in Spain is the way teams circulate the ball at high speeds, and the off-the-ball movements they perform to create the much needed space to penetrate. Attackers work very close with midfielders in

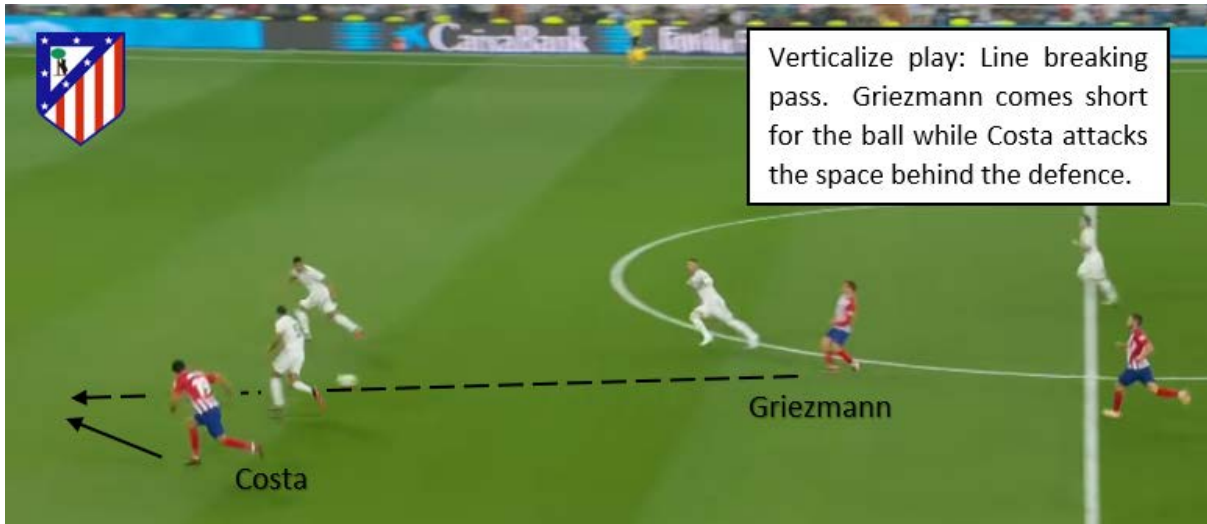
the sense that they frequently rotate positions with the aim of unbalancing the opponent's defensive structure.



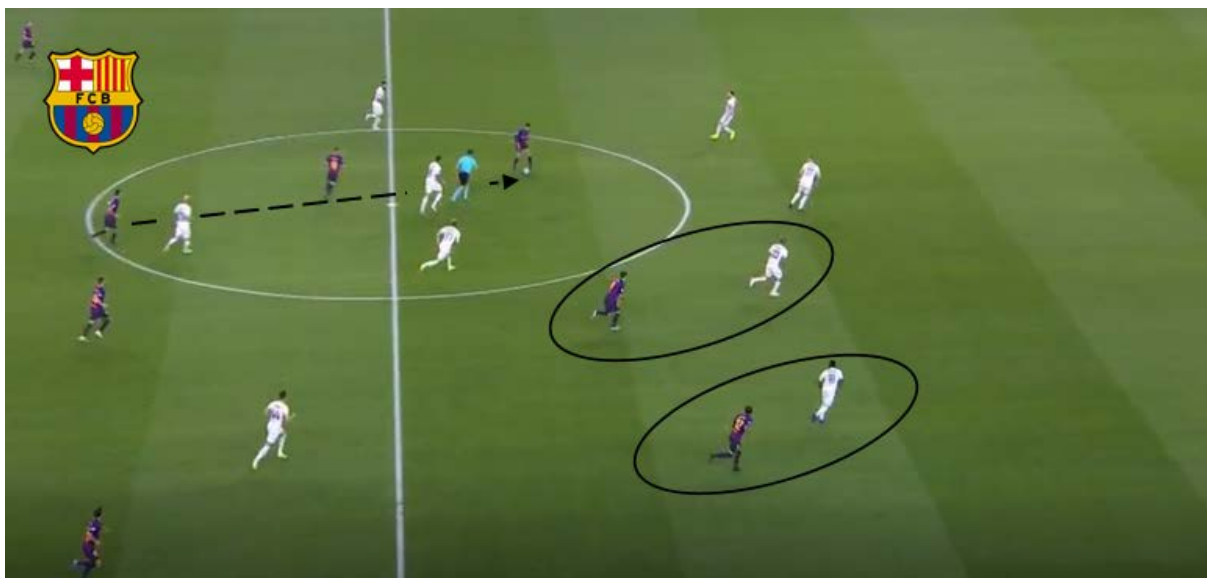
Teams that play with two strikers such as Atlético De Madrid, have them positioned diagonally to each other. One of the strikers drops between the defence and midfield lines while the other gets high to commit the defenders to track him. This creates space between the lines which can be exploited by quick off-the-ball movement and circulation of the ball. In the below diagram look at how Griezmann gets behind the defender to receive a line-breaking pass in space.



Diego Costa and Antoine Griezmann provide a superb example of how two strikers who communicate well with each other can through well-timed off the ball movements and perfect rhythm can penetrate the best organised defences.

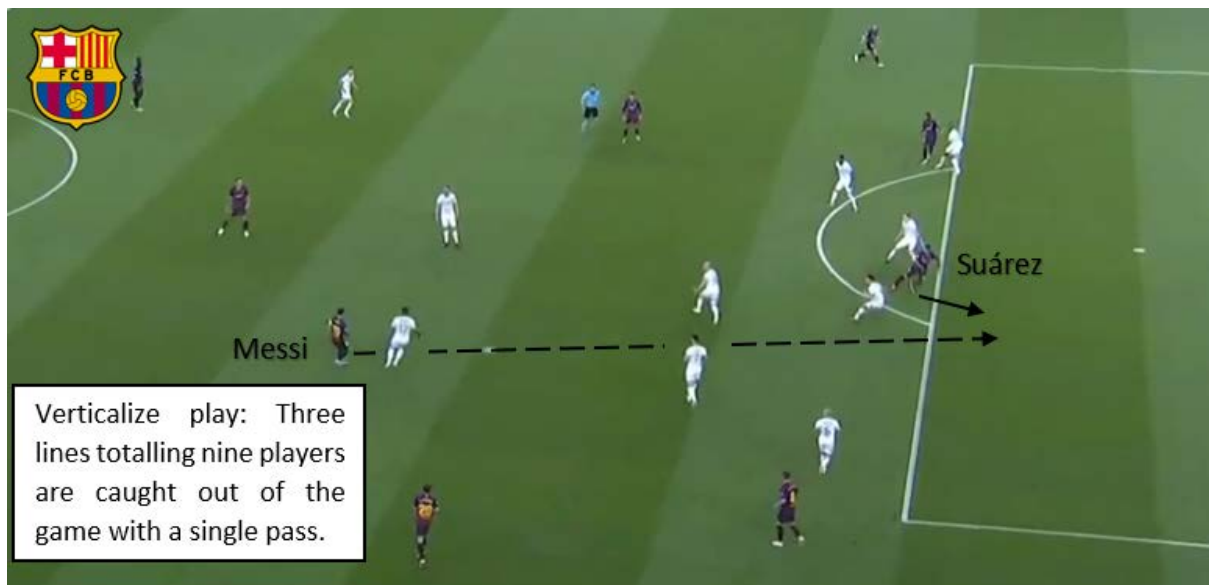


Exploiting the space between the opposition's defence and midfield lines is one of the outcomes required in order to create a goal-scoring chance. The forwards aim to explode this space by receiving the ball and be able to turn and face the defenders. In the below image on the far side of the ball two 1v1 situations (encircled) have been created. Being in the space before the ball is passed enables the forward to receive the ball already facing the opponent's goal. It is even harder for the defending team to win the ball, if the forwards excel in 1v1 attacking as is the case with F.C. Barcelona.



Teams whose style is to dominate play tend to push their forwards high in search of verticality. By having strikers pushing high, space for the ball to be played through could be

created. Players bearing a high level of game intelligence and skill level could exploit such an opportunity with well-aimed and well-timed through passes.

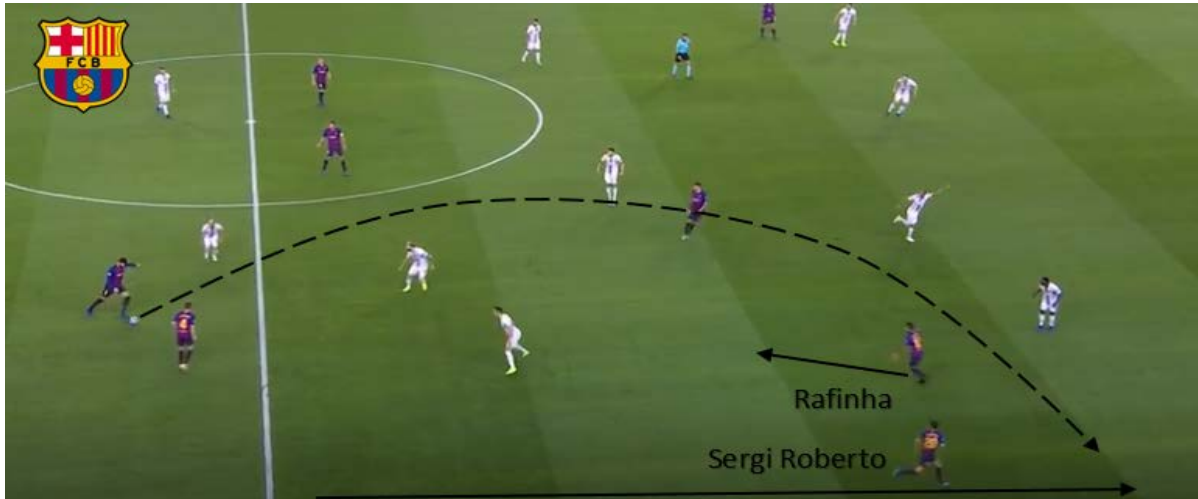


When playing with a front three, some teams such as F.C. Barcelona opt to play the three forwards at a close proximity with each other. This gets the opposition's back four compact thus leaving space on the flanks for the full backs to advance. The setup of the front three also allows for 1v1 situations to take place.



For an effective attack to be carried out, mobility of players in order to create the necessary space to play forward is imperative. The forwards must non-verbally communicate with each other and with players from the other lines close to them in order to create the

necessary space to verticalize play. Forwards typically come short to make themselves available to receive the ball. This provides the attacking team with two alternatives. One is to play a direct pass into the feet of the forward, while the other is to play into the path of a midfielder or full back (as is the case in the below diagram) who pushes forward in attack.



Training methodology.

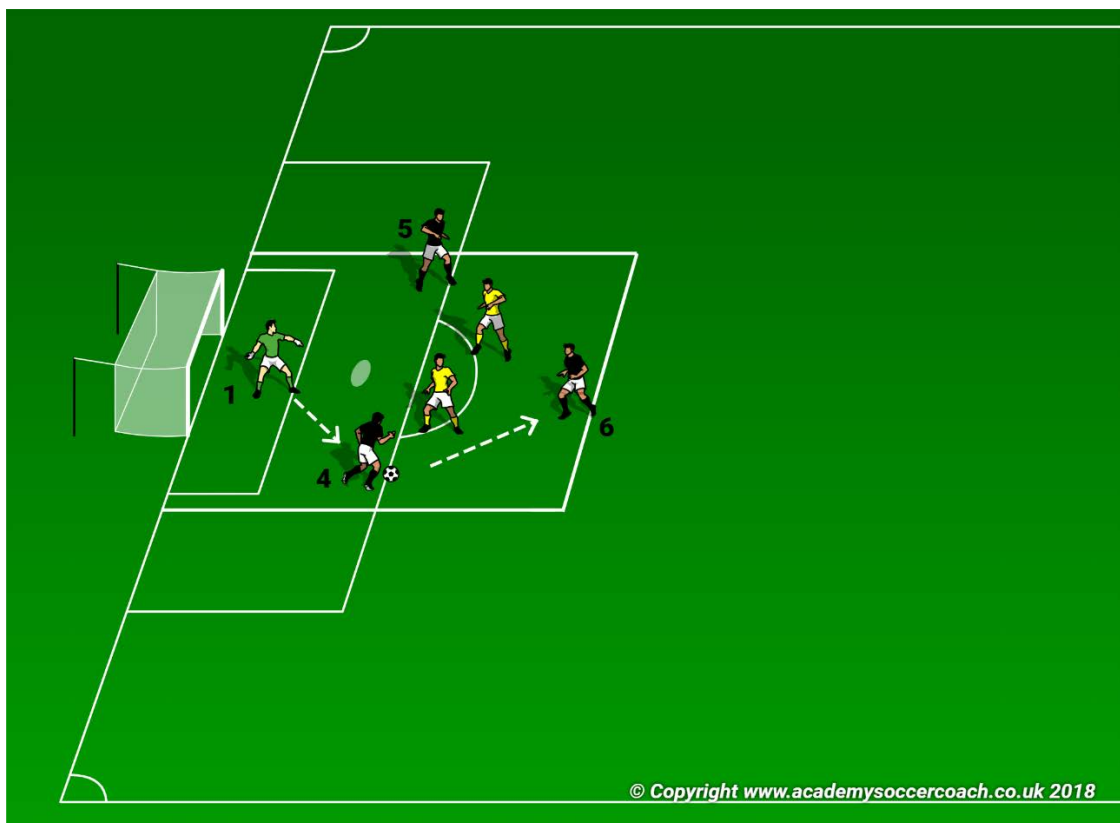
The modern game requires players who read and anticipate situations quickly. It is not about how the formation is set on the tactics board. Formations mean nothing as players continuously move according to the requirements of the game situations. It is therefore imperative that players are trained to read and interpret situations that are derived directly from the game itself.

Players should be able to identify the right moment when to move into space to receive the ball, how they can create space for their teammates while dribbling the ball, and how they help their teammates to double team their opponent during the non-possession phase of the game. Hundreds if not thousands of other situations exist in soccer. We should however keep in mind that no situation is the same as another. The game is unpredictable with the players having to continuously perceive stimuli and make the right decisions while under pressure from the opponents.

Not only must players learn to take ownership of the problems to make decisions, but they also need to be in line with the collective tactics of the team (Grima, 2016). This cannot be achieved if we train players to play without any opposition pressure. Although some

technical work might be required, the component of decision-making should always be present in training. We want players who understand the game, can make decisions, and be pro-active rather than re-active.

Rather than drills or exercises, coaches should design and run training situations. These training situations have a better meaning and a better transfer of learning to the soccer field than drills. Let us consider the below training situation. This is a 4v2 rondo where the aim is for the goalkeeper, the central defenders and the defensive midfielder to develop their ability to retain possession of the ball under pressure. There is a consequence as there will be in a real match. If the ball is lost the chance of conceding a goal is high. However, through this exercise players will develop their positional awareness, communication and decision-making speed much better than through a technical drill performed without any opposition.



Touch restrictions in training such as playing one or two touch should be avoided in the global part of a training session (Grima, 2017). It is nonsense, for example, if a player has

the opportunity to beat a defender to shoot at goal but cannot because there is a two touch restriction. It is just not realistic!

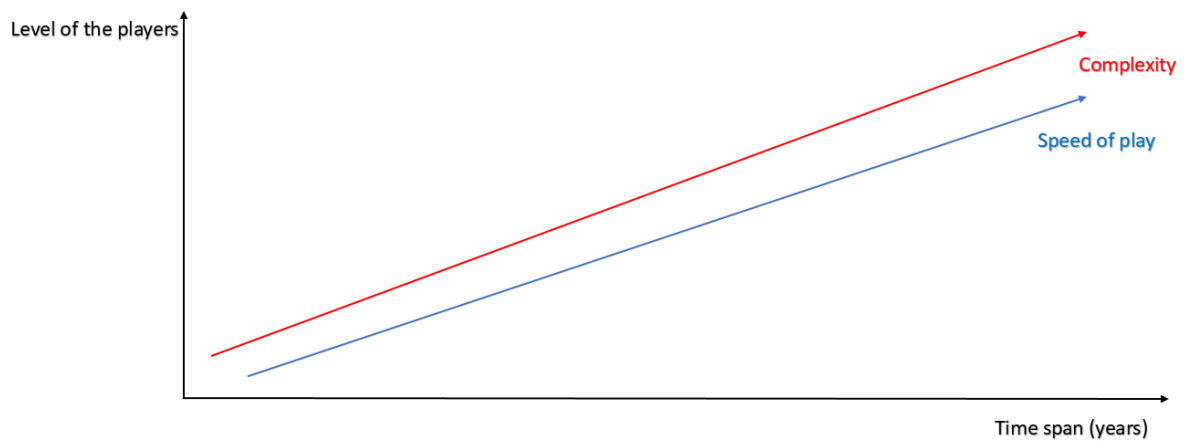
The power of the rondo.

A powerful coaching tool which is typically used in Spain is the rondo. In a rondo the coach can create different scenarios, thus making the players think collectively on how they will solve a particular situation. There is everything in a rondo (except finishing) and the coach may choose if he wants to work on width or on achieving verticality (Bertolini, 2018).

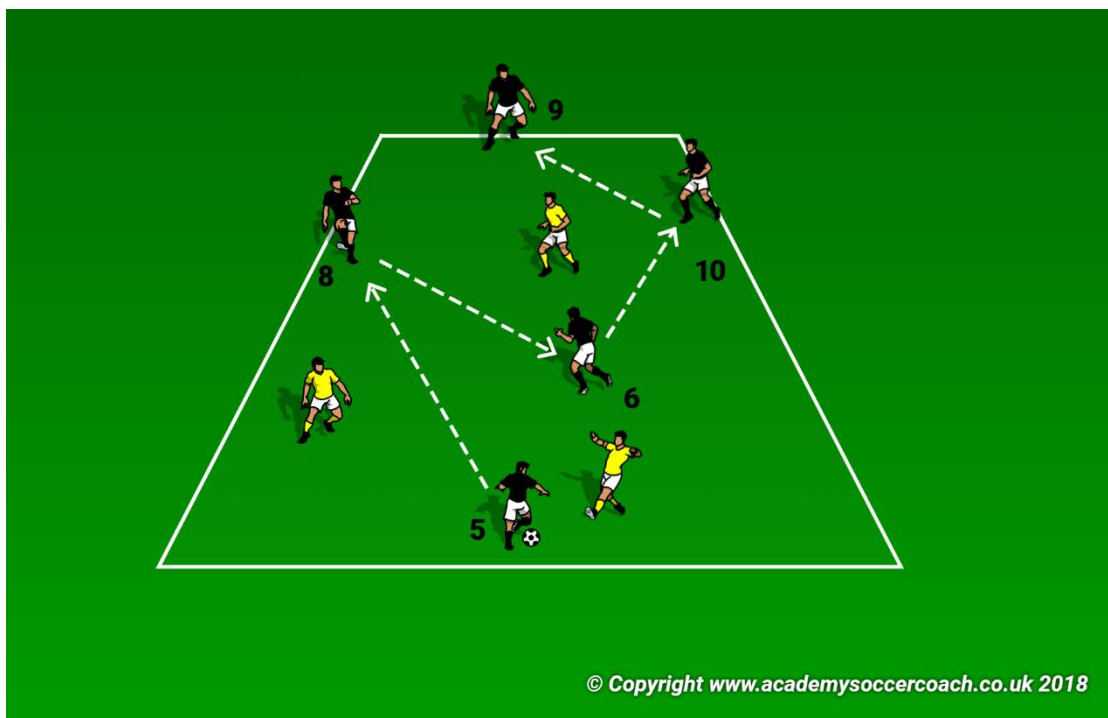
A rondo is not simply keeping possession of the ball. Behind what we see as a group of players keeping possession there is a tactical aim. When presenting a rondo to the players, the coach should always explain the main aim and outcomes of how it will help the team increase their performance on match day. A rondo should be designed to develop the team's principles of play (Fletcher, 2018).

Inter-sectoral communication can only be achieved if various lines from the team practice together (Bertolini, 2018). Moments of play such as keeping possession of the ball, transition and defending to win the ball back, all exist in a rondo (Fletcher, 2018). Players will thus develop the mentality of pressing immediately upon losing possession.

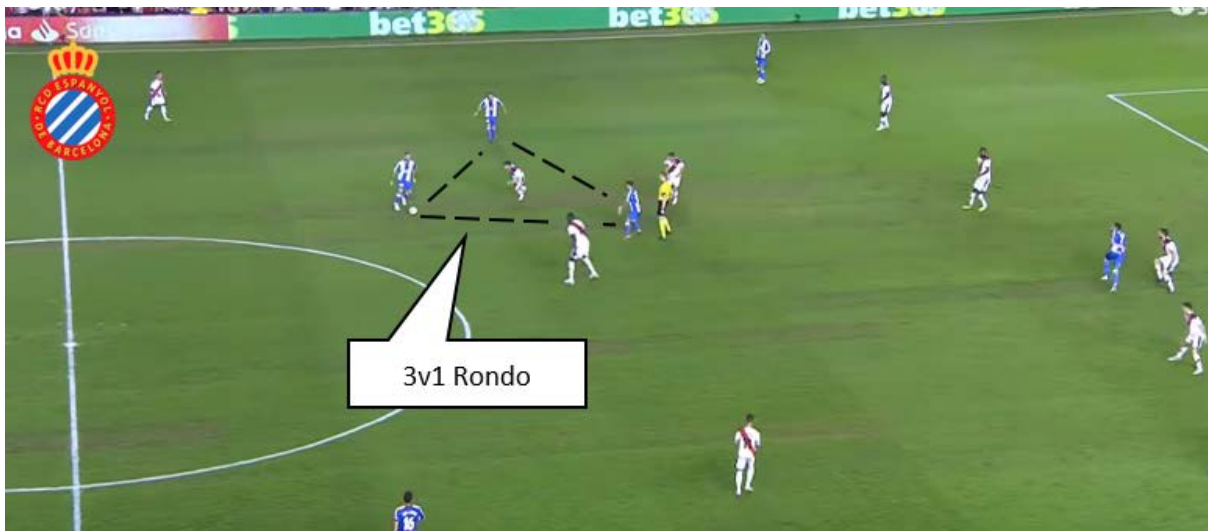
A rondo may be used at various levels. It is however important to keep in mind that when introducing a rondo to beginners or young players, we must start with a very easy and basic one. Perhaps we can start with a 4v1 in a relatively large area. The reason behind this is that these young players might not yet have the necessary first touch, passing technique and positional and spatial awareness required to keep the ball in tight areas. It would be futile getting angry with the players. We as coaches should be able to set the right height of the bar for our players and lead them towards further growth in the game by setting slightly more complex goals. Planning the way towards reaching these goals should be clear. The correct training situations should be planned, reviewed and adjusted accordingly. The work done with the players and tasks which have been accomplished should be recorded. This ensures that there is continuity in the work done throughout the years.



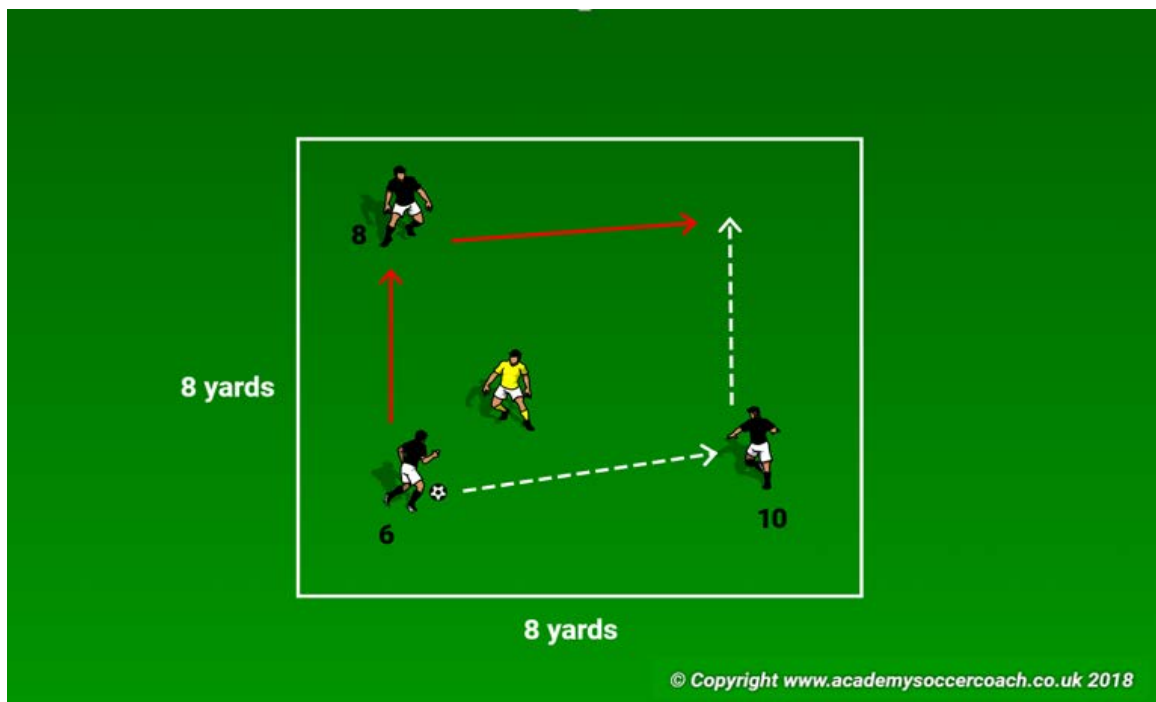
In a rondo, players should practice within their natural roles as this aids in the development of team collaboration. In the next diagram we see how a simple setup helps develop the collaboration and integrity of the team in central midfield while also involving a central defender and a striker.



In a rondo the coach may choose to focus on a particular player or a sector and coach them through a real game scenario. In rondos one of the main principles is to form triangles. These triangles are necessary in order to create options and keep circulating the ball.



In the above diagram a clear 3v1 situation can be seen. If we analyse this further we find that another important element needed to secure the ball is the stance of the players. An open stance when in space enables players to play the ball at higher speeds. We can take the situation in the above image and replicate it in training. Now we can see the relevance of such a practice as midfielders are immersed in a similar situation which they will encounter during a match.



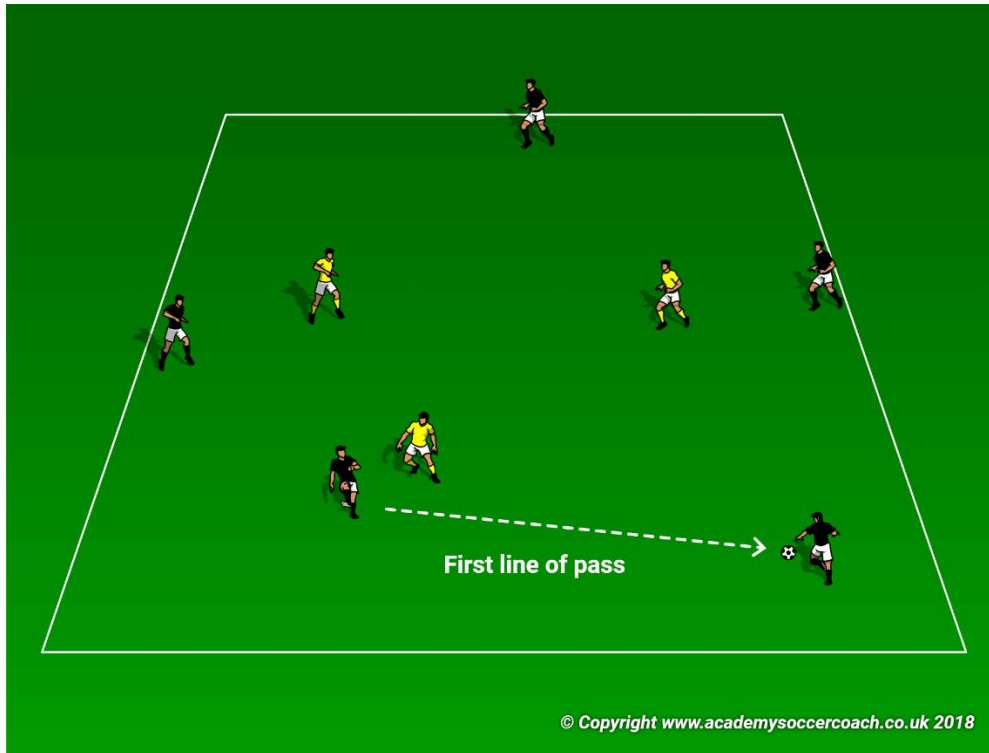
The purpose of every training session should be to improve the performance of the team. Therefore every minute the players spend at training should respect this. The cooperation and tactical understanding between the players of different sectors can be effectively developed and perfected using rondos.

The number of players participating in a rondo determine the major aim and outcomes of the practice. If we are practicing a 3v1 in a small area, the number of ball touches for each player is high. The decision-making process however is low as the only decisions the player on the ball can make is to either pass the ball (two passing options), or hold on to it. If we perform this practice in an analytical way and include a maximum of two touch restriction to play the ball, the technical execution speed will be even higher. Therefore, we can call this a technical rondo as it focuses more on developing the individual player's technical ability rather than team tactics.

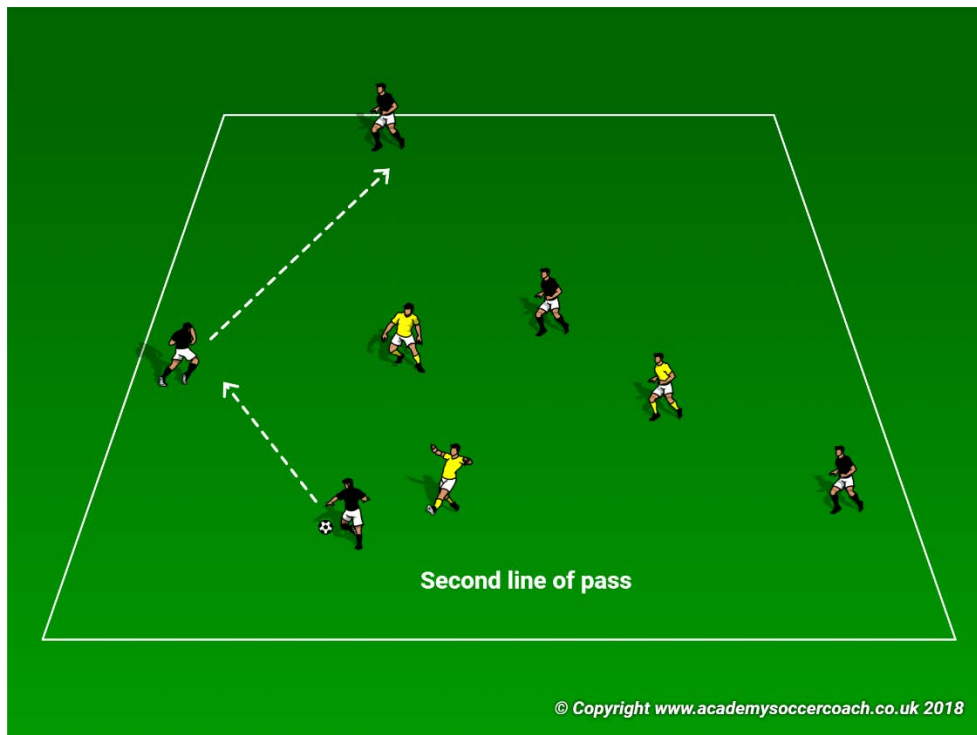
If we run a rondo with a higher number of players from different sectors of the team, the number of ball contacts for each player will be lower than in the 3v1. From a tactical perspective the players must be aware of their position, move at appropriate angles, rotate positions, provide support both near and further away from the ball, communicate both verbally and non-verbally with their teammates and read and anticipate situations. The latter type of rondo targets the development of game intelligence.

The creation of passing lanes are emphasized in rondos. Davies (2013) points out three passing lines which will help us understand how to conquer verticality either through a direct pass or by playing around the defenders.

The first line of pass is simply a pass played laterally or backwards and which does not bypass any of the defenders. Support from nearby teammates is necessary to perform this type of pass to secure possession of the ball.



The second line of pass bypasses the defenders by playing around them. Again, support is needed to perform this action. As a performance outcome the receiving player should adapt the proper stance that will enable him to pass immediately to the third player.

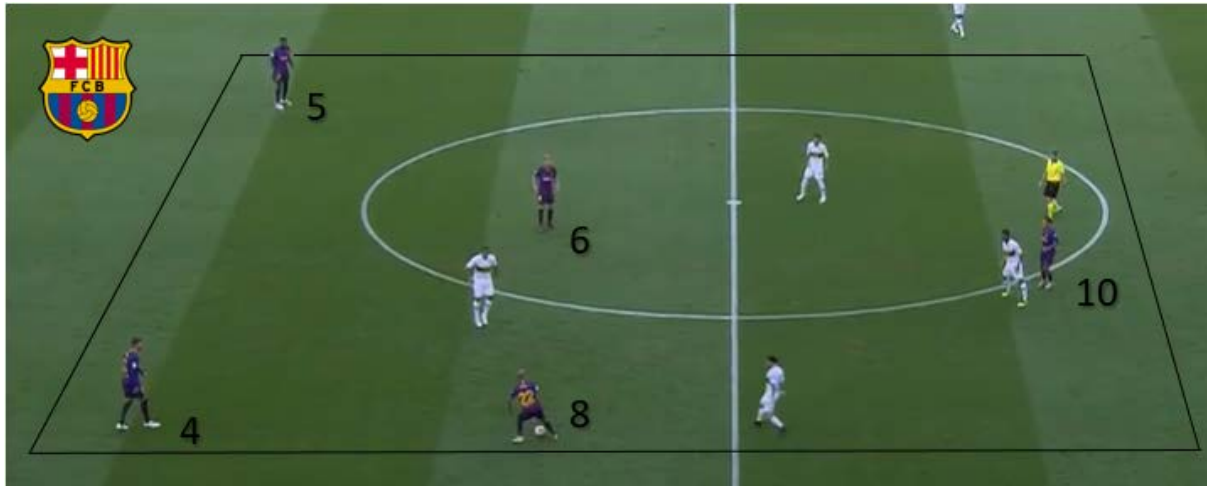


The third line of pass eliminates directly the defenders as it is played through them. Although they do not receive the ball, wide players are stretching the defenders, thus creating gaps to play through.

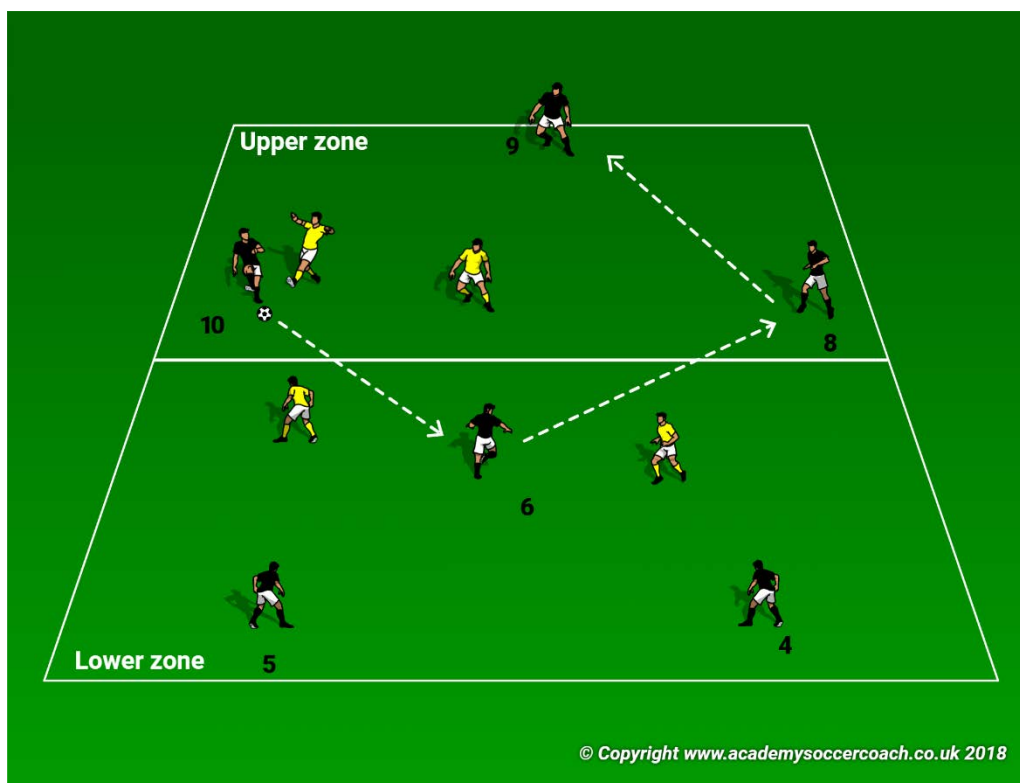


The same author also mentions the *mig toc* or the half a touch. This type of pass is just having the receiving player redirecting the ball to another player. Speed of play is thus increased and the ball becomes even harder for the defenders to intercept.

To create a rondo exercise we need to analyse what we want to develop in our team. We first need to identify what the problem is, the zone on the field of play and the affected players. We then need to create a situation in which players experience this problem on a regular occurrence. If we can take a video or a shot of the situation we want to work on, the players will better understand why this specific exercise can help them. The next image is an example taken from a match where the focus is on building up play from the back. Therefore we create the same situation where players are required to build-up play from one end to another. Once the aim of the exercise is known we need to target the outcomes required to achieve this aim. In this case we will work on having both length and depth, staggered angles, mobility (positional rotations), stance to receive and play the ball, direction oriented first touch and the quality of the pass.



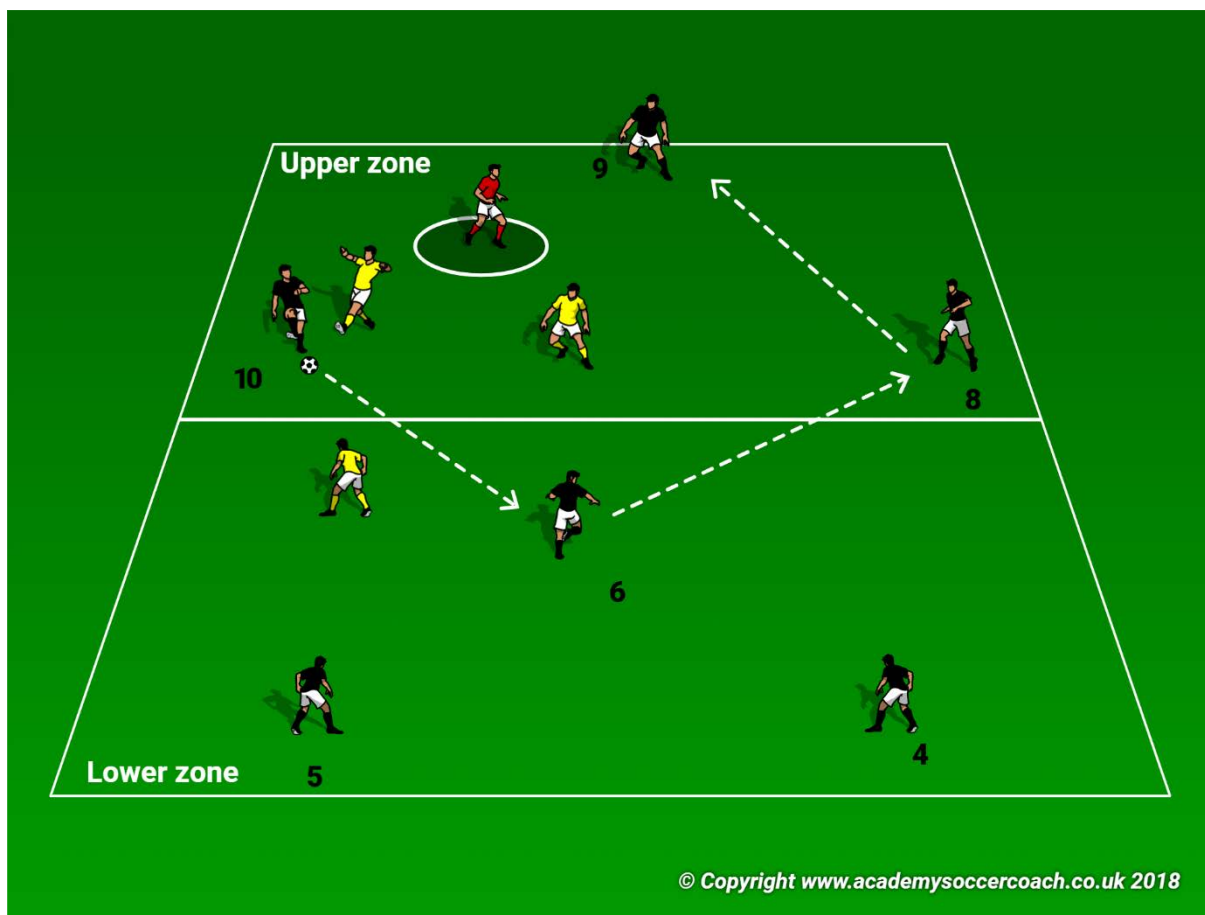
From the above game situation can emerge the exercise demonstrated in the below diagram. We have a situation of 6v4 in favour of the attackers (black team). To simplify the problem further we divided the area into a lower and an upper zone.



In each zone we have a 3v2 situation in favour of the attackers. The aim is to circulate and secure possession of the ball. At first players are restricted to remain inside their assigned zones. We progress this rondo by allowing rotations. If we take the situation in the above diagram it can be that player 8 drops into the lower zone while player 6 moves into the upper zone. As a final step we remove both zones and play in a single marked area. Players

now do not have any markings aiding them to create depth and length and have various lines and angles of support.

The above exercise may be simplified for players of a lower technical ability. The below diagram demonstrates an easier variation of this exercise. Now we have a 6v3+1 situation where the neutral player (red) may freely move between zones thus always providing a 4v2 numerical advantage. The defending team may have two players in the zone of the ball. If the defenders win the ball, they aim to dribble it out of the area to score a point. The attackers inside the zone where the ball is lost must therefore immediately press to win it back.



Conclusion.

This book analyses the technical and tactical aspects required to play a possession dominant style of play taking Spanish soccer as a main source of reference. In order to dominate play, highly skilled players who are able to read the game at an exceptional level is required. Playing top level soccer, the players must not only be able to react quickly to continuously changing game situations, but must also be able to recognise the right stimuli to anticipate play. Therefore, always being one or two steps ahead of the opponent.

The training activities and sessions presented in this book are targeted to improve correct decision-making and speed of play. Players are thus all the time being stretched cognitively to make the right decisions. In soccer, decision-making, although performed by a single player, combines for a collective team effort. If a player has the ball, another player must make the right movements to get free of marking and receive the ball in space. The ball-carrier must also be able to select the right solution from a number of options, thus increasing the team's chances of scoring.

This heavily involves team communication, which should therefore be present in all training situations. It is through such training situations that players develop strong relationship links between them. These links refer to the positions that are at close proximity with each other and in which players develop an awareness and an understanding of how they will behave as a group or sector in a particular moment of the game.

About the Author

Philip Joe Cauchi is a UEFA A and a UEFA A Youth Elite qualified soccer coach currently working in Malta. Philip's area of expertise is in the development of tactical and game intelligence in youth soccer. His experience ranges from coaching eight year olds up to senior team levels. Cauchi is also a qualified soccer conditioning coach, a speed, agility and quickness licence holder and a physical education teacher. Cauchi has also written many articles for the world renowned soccer website WORLD CLASS COACHING.

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