

SETTORE TECNICO



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**“Pressing e
riagggressione,
presente e futuro del
calcio dominante”**

**“Pressing and counterpressing, present
and future of dominant football”**

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INTRODUCTION

In my football career, I have always been attracted and influenced by **the great teams of the past and present**, capable not only of winning big matches and trophies but, also and above all, of leaving something in the minds and hearts of professionals and fans.

In this path, the admiration for an offensive, attacking and "dominant" type of football was so strong, that I studied for years, almost exclusively, principles, solutions and offensive positioning.

I believed, and partially I still do, that the big teams **dominated the game** because they had developed a fantastic **offensive game**.

However, the more I studied the big teams, the more I realized that their dominance of the game passed through their off the ball strategy. An aggressive **and "proactive" non-possession phase**, aimed at taking away time and space from opponents and recovering the ball as quickly and as "high" as possible.

I think the three most important teams in the history of football were **Michels' Netherlands, Sacchi's Milan and Guardiola's Barcelona**.

Well, what did these three great teams have in common?

Not only an offensive mentality and a collective style of play illuminated by incredible champions, but above all, an incredible desire to win the ball back as soon as possible.

The Pressing and Counterpressing of these three legendary teams are the true common ground of their **dominant football**.

The pressing and counterpressing are at the same time a defensive and an offensive weapon, thus crucial elements to influence a football match.

The only real and independent choice that a coach and a technical staff can make in their gameplan is essentially this: to decide their teams' non-possession strategy. As for pressing, deciding whether to wait or press high.

All other offensive strategies, even the most creative ones, will depend on the respective defensive strategy of the opponents.

Do I want to attack the space? If my opponents stay very deep in their penalty box, it will be impossible for me.

Do I want to build from the back with a dense network of short and horizontal passes? If my opponents want to press very high, man against man, they will probably prevent my team from doing that.

In the defensive strategy, on the other hand, I am the master of my destiny. I can decide, basically, whether to wait or to go and "catch" them high up the pitch.

The match tempo and the control of the match will largely depend on my defensive strategy.

And it is precisely this aspect that we are going to investigate.

However, we must first clarify the definitions of Pressing and Counterpressing.

Pressing is a collective defensive action of strong pressure on the ball and on nearby supports, aimed at the immediate ball recovery. A pressing action is a message from the defending team: "we are not waiting for the end of your action or your mistake to get back in possession of the ball, but we want to come quickly to win it back".

There are obviously different types of pressing and different heights at which the pressing itself is triggered. These are concepts that we will try to further analyse in this paper.

Counterpressing, on the other hand, is a defensive transition that occurs immediately after losing the ball (usually within 8-10 seconds after). The Counterpressing is a reaction to the change of possession, which involves running forward instead of tracking back towards the goal to protect it. It usually takes place in the final 35 meters and, more generally, in the offensive half of the pitch. The counterpressing is indissolubly linked to the possession phase: an attacking action with a large **density** of players around the ball will favour a natural counterpressing to recover the ball.

Another interesting concept for me to take into consideration is the ability to maintain a high performance over time (one or more seasons), regarding the application of pressing and counterpressing.

One of the biggest problems in winning teams wanting to dominate the game comes after an important cycle of successes: **they lose the will to counterpress effectively.**

For teams with many players in offensive areas of the pitch, reducing counterpressing means exposing to numerous and dangerous counterattacks from the opponents.

There are many examples: we can remember **Germany after the 2014 World Cup**, still very strong on the ball but exposed at the back (especially at the 2018 World Cup in Russia) or even **the post-Guardiola Barcelona** (winning "only" a single Champions League despite the generation of champions Pique-Xavi-Iniesta-Messi as well as the many phenomenal signings along the way, among which we can mention Suarez and Neymar).

This consideration makes us reflect on how important the daily work on pressing and counterpressing is, which must always be constantly trained while maintaining a consistency in the work **methodology.**

The **generational change** must also be guaranteed, with the gradual but continuous addition of new and young players to

always maintain the "desire" for victory high and, at the same time, enthusiasm and determination to win the ball in the offensive half of the pitch.

We end this introduction with a further aspect to take into consideration: the recent rule that allows teams to make up to **5 substitutions in the match**. A rule that can favour a certain type of high intensity pressing, especially for teams with deep and high-quality squads: a coach can now introduce fresh legs on the pitch, potentially keeping the mental and physical levels that pressing and counterpressing require, with constant accelerations and decelerations.

HISTORY OF PRESSING

Some of the most recognized writers on the history and the evolution of our fantastic sport, agree in highlighting the fundamental contribution of **Viktor Maslov** in the birth of the so-called modern tactics. Especially *J. Wilson* in the excellent "*Inverted Pyramid*" tells the life and ideas of this Russian football genius born in Moscow, winner of numerous trophies with Torpedo Moscow and Dynamo Kiev between the 50s and 60s.

Among Maslov's innovations we remember the **4-4-2** formation with the wings positioned close to the midfielders. A defensive move in an era when many teams still played with a 3-2-5 system with the five strikers in line or with a 4-2-4 model of play, as the World Champions Brazil in Sweden, in 1958.

The 4-4-2 formation, compounded with great athletic and physical conditioning of the players, (Maslov was among the first coaches to change the physical preparation of the players and introduce ad-hoc nutrition) was the basis of the first modern and organised pressing that the history of football remembers.

Maslov took inspiration and reworked an important **ice hockey** concept: **forechecking**.

Forechecking consisted, and still consists, in trying to aggressively retrieve the puck on an ice hockey ring. Three players in a coordinated manner attack the opposing ball holder: one forces him against the side wall of the ring, a second recovers the puck and the third is often in a privileged position to immediately try to transform the defensive recovery into a goal in the attacking phase.

Later on, a former Maslov's player became equally important in the development of this and other tactics - **Valery Lobanovski**.

The "colonel", born in Kiev, was one of the greatest coaches in the history of football, able to achieve important goals several times and in different timeframes, both with the Soviet Union National team and with Dynamo Kiev (coached at different times from 1973 to 2002).

One of the pioneers in the use of technology within a football team, he made great use of the new **computers** that arrived in European homes and companies in the '70s. Obsessed with trying to "split" the physical effort of the players into equal parts (probably contaminated by the communist ideology of the former USSR), he was among the first coaches to divide the pitch into zones and analyse the individual events that happened within the different portions of the pitch.

A second, important and, at the same time, innovative, characteristic of "The Colonel"'s work model was to train universal players to cover multiple roles and functions, thus anticipating a trend that would become fundamental, several years later.

"The role of modern football is no longer a position but a function"

(cit. Antonio Gagliardi)

The **pressing** of Lobanovski's teams was a collective and suffocating pressing, capable to give an intensity and a pace to the games unseen before.

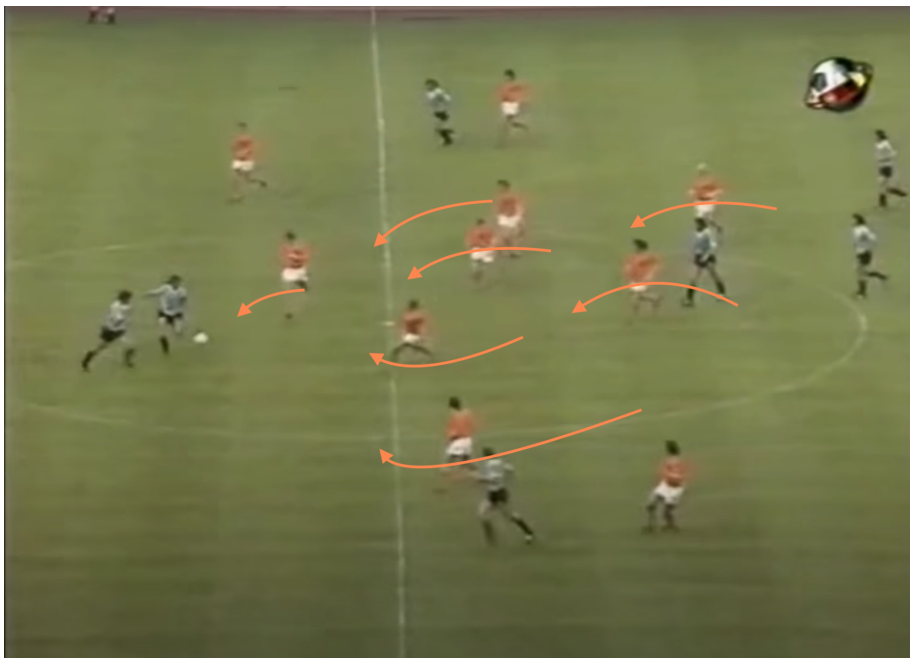
Between the end of the 60s and the early 70s, several kilometers further west, in a local team in Amsterdam, the greatest football revolution that the game remembers had been happening: Michels becomes coach of **Ajax's** first team. A former player of the Dutch team, **Michels** was one of the first modern managers based in an office within the training ground that also paid great attention to the tactical part of the game. Also gaining advantage from an incredible generation of talents, Ajax won three consecutive European Cups, surprising the whole sporting world of that time. The real pinnacle of that model of play was however the 1974 World Cup, under the flag of the Dutch national team, when the great Ajax already almost no longer existed: Michels and **J. Cruyff** had already left Amsterdam to go to Barcelona and Neeskens will follow them just after the World Cup. Rep will instead go to play at Valencia and Haan at Anderlecht and so on all the others. The very strong Krol, for example, will also be seen in Italy with the Napoli shirt, after his experience in Canada.

The 1974 World Cup in Germany is therefore presented as the last great opportunity to admire those fantastic players and that model of play all together: the most intriguing "**Last Dance**" that the world of football has ever seen. To the Ajax block, Michels adds some elements of the 1970 European Champions Feyenoord and the talented winger Rensenbrink, who played for Anderlecht.

The Dutch National Team introduced to the world the tactical innovations led by the superstars who had brought Ajax to the top of Europe: ball possession with short passes and universal players who, starting from a 4-3-3 shape, continuously exchanged roles and positions.

A choral, collective and unpredictable game that will go down in history as **Total Football**: even to this day, almost the entirety of the tactical innovations we are witnessing derive from that incredible team with the orange shirt.

However, the most interesting innovations for this study remain the defensive ones (which then, as we are seeing, are not so defensive): **Pressing and Counterpressing**.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfqTy2bJzmU&ab_channel=FootballtheGreat

Also helped by the systematic use of tactical fouls and offside trap (taking advantage of a different rule that will be changed only 20 years later), the way the Dutch team regained the ball was something outstanding. Especially the South American teams (Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil) had never seen anything like that and were totally taken aback.

If on the ball the key man was J. Crujff (one of the first false-nines in history), off the ball, **Neeskens** was central. The Dutch midfielder acted as a theoretical lower tip of the three-men midfield. However, he was often the most advanced

and aggressive man off the ball, the one who used to trigger the ferocious Dutch pressing. As soon as they lost the ball, they applied a strong and wild pressure, not codified, often disorderly but still in an organized manner.

For those who want to deepen their **tactical and cultural knowledge and, more generally, the legacy of Dutch Total Football**, a few years ago I wrote an essay with my friend Roberto Pizzato on this topic.

With the original contribution of David Winner (author of "Brilliant Orange") and David Endt (historic Team Manager of Ajax) directly from Amsterdam.

Storia ed Evoluzione del Calcio Totale:

<https://www.ultimouomo.com/totaal-voetbal/>

It should be remembered that the 1974 Dutch National team lost the final of the World Cup against Germany, led by Beckenbauer and G. Muller, but despite not having won the trophy, we are still keen to remember and admire that historic team, to this day.

Winning in football is the highest goal, thus the reason that captivates the interests of the experts and the enthusiasm of the fans, but it cannot be the only yardstick of such a complex, situational, sport.

In the history of football, some teams, despite not winning titles, have managed to gain plaudits and offer higher tactical concepts than other "winning" teams.

I am thinking, for example, of the **Hungary** led by Puskas, Hidegkuti and Kocsis, defeated in the World Cup final in 1954.

Or even the **Real Madrid of the famous Galacticos** R. Carlos, Figo, Zidane, Raul and Ronaldo "O Fenomeno" that failed to win the Champions League but enchanted the world with an amazing football.

As per the Italian teams, I would like to mention **Spalletti's** first, scintillating Roma, Sarri's incredible **Napoli** and Gasperini's brave **Atalanta**. Teams that, for one reason or another, failed to win the title they should have deserved.

After talking about the Netherlands in 1974, we make a leap forward of almost 15 years, but guiltily forgetting other fantastic teams and great coaches (among all, the Austrian **Ernst Happel**).

In the mid-80s in Italy, in Milan, the economic capital of the country, an almost unknown coach, inspired by Michels' Netherlands, forever changed the history of world football, forcing even FIFA to change the rules of the game.

"I wanted the team to defend by attacking and not by retreating back, but by advancing. I wanted the team to be in charge of the game at home and away. It was difficult to understand the new way of playing, the synchronized movement of the team without the ball, having eleven players with and without the ball always in an active position. Having an active defense means that even when the opponents have the ball you are in control of the game. With such pressure you force them to play at such a speed, pace and intensity that they are not used to it, making them struggle." (cit. Arrigo Sacchi).

Arrigo Sacchi set up a revolutionary team for the Italian sports culture of that time. A general Italian culture, not only limited to sports, often dominated by cunning, laziness, the desire to achieve the goal without sacrifice.

At a time when away teams played exclusively for the draw, **the Milan of Baresi, Maldini and the Dutch** contingent began to impose their game in every Italian and European football ground.

"While Crujiff and Dutch football in general aimed to control the ball to be in charge of the game, Sacchi aimed to control the space to achieve the same goal. With Sacchi the teams for the first time were pleasant on the eye even without the ball. "

(cit. E. Battazzi - Ultimo Uomo)

Sacchi's Milan took the Dutch **offside** strategy and brought it to its highest level: taking advantage of a different rule that sanctioned any opposition player who stepped beyond the offside line, the *Rossoneri* defense led by Baresi was pushing forward ferociously, gaining large chunks of space to their opponents at great pace, something that had not been seen before. The synchronism of the movements of the **4-4-2 formation by the Milan's players** will forever remain an outstanding example of how a team can move as a single unit.

On November 1, 1989, Sacchi's Milan won the European Cup round at the Bernabeu against Butragueño's Real Madrid putting the Spaniards **offside 23 times!** A crazy figure.

The Italian team in those years adopted an exasperating tactic for opponents that took away time and space.

At the time of the "Sacchi revolution" in Italy the offsides per game were 8.5 per game. At the World Cup in Russia there were only 2.7 offsides per game.

To cope with this revolution, FIFA in 1992 was forced to change the rule on passive offside. Sacchi forced football to become a better game.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtmNO2_W4mY&ab_channel=melvisol%C3%A8

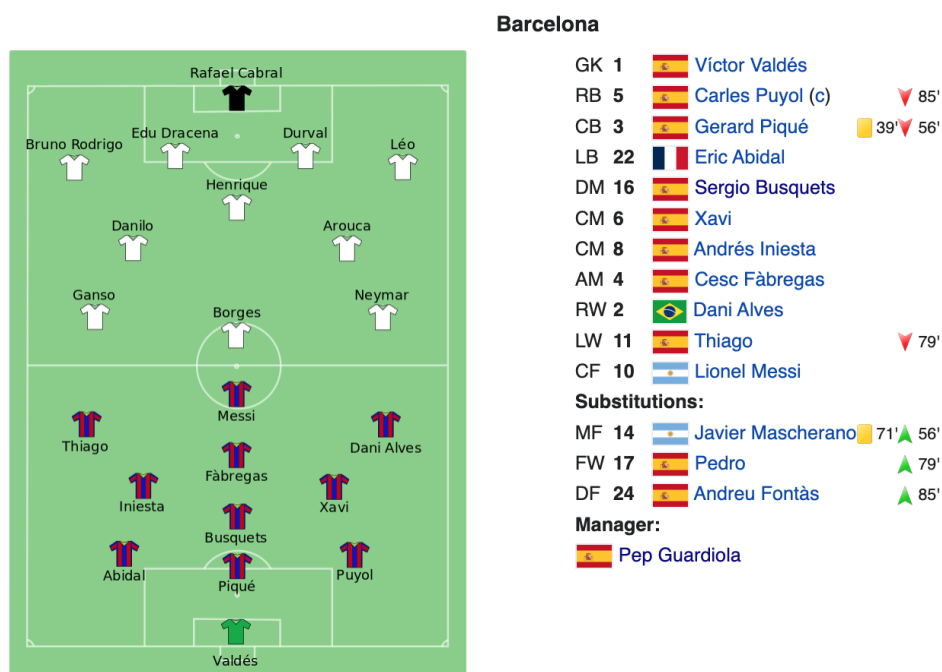
From Sacchi's Milan to **Crujff's Barcelona** and **Van Gaal's Ajax**, we seamlessly make a huge step forward following the same path. However, it is only at the end of the first decade of the new millennium that the third great football revolution takes place: a former player of the Crujff's Dream Team, Pep Guardiola becomes the new **Barcelona's head coach** after a one-year experience at the B team of the same club.

Guardiola's Barcelona could count on a generation of talents such as Puyol, Piquè and D. Alves in defense, Xavi, Iniesta, Busquets in midfield and, of course, Messi in attack. Guardiola has forever changed the history of this sport by elevating purely offensive game principles: from **building up from the back** to the magnification of the **positional game**.

But starting from these principles and offensive positions, the Spanish team takes recovering the ball fast (the so-called **Counterpressing**) to a new level:

firstly, by inventing the rule of the **5 seconds** (after losing the ball) Guardiola manages to often win the ball back in the offensive third, thus continuing his nerve-wracking (for opponents) ball possession.

The control of the center of the pitch, with many players close to each other and countless short passes, sometimes just for the sake of it, are preliminary to the Spanish counterpressing, reaching the apex at the Clubs' World Cup final between **Barcelona and Santos** in 2011. In that historic game, Guardiola deployed five central midfielders in addition to Messi as false nine, gaining full control of the center of the "chessboard" and making counterpressing natural.



Guardiola's **Barcelona dynasty** also greatly influenced the Spanish National team, with the Iberian players winning everything possible between club and country in the four-year period 2008-2012.

Meanwhile, in those years, **Germany**, coming from the failure at Euro 2000, completed its revolution through the overhaul of the academies and training methodologies. The emergence of the "**Laptop trainers**", coaches educated with tactics and computers, often former analysts, and the rise of the **Red Bull model**, brought a real revolution in the German footballing philosophy. It was a revolution on different tactical and methodological concepts. Among these, the most interesting for us is certainly the **Gegenpressing**.

Gegenpressing is the German word to indicate counterpressing. With **Ralf Rangnick** (main creator of the Red Bull model from a technical and tactical point of view) and **Jürgen Klopp** (the most important and winning German coach of the last 15 years), the Gegenpressing strategy reaches great heights in the tactical evolution of the game.

The Red Bull model even theorizes to **lose the ball** in advanced areas of the pitch or in favourable situations in a bid to immediately win it back, thus exploiting the "open" positioning of the opponents and quickly having a go at the goal, often from very dangerous positions. A style therefore based on immediate **verticality**, a lot of **running** and **aggression** in duels.

Klopp starts from a similar concept often favoring very **dynamic** players, suitable for his football. Although he has mainly prioritized the offensive principles based on speed of thoughts and action, in the last few years in England, Klopp has added more control of the ball to his team, transitioning, season after season, into a more positional attacking style, perhaps influenced by the nearby rival Guardiola.

On the other hand, the Catalan coach has, in turn, slightly modified some aspects of his game inspired by **Borussia Dortmund** and Klopp's **Liverpool**.

We could say that "**Klopp, in recent years, has edged nearer to Guardiola and vice versa**".

The German Gegenpressing has added more rules to this part of the game: while one player takes an aggressive stance towards the ball carrier, often in an attempt to put pressure on him without engaging in a duel, the other players take care of the potential passing option, being then ready for the actual recovery of the ball. An evolution of the "forechecking" concept from ice hockey, already seen with Maslov.

The last chapter of this long and historical journey, in the evolution of pressing and counterpressing, is dedicated to **Marcelo Bielsa** and **Gian Piero Gasperini**. Two coaches who have not won many titles in their career but who have often been a source of inspiration for many professionals.

Two managers who, starting from different ideas and backgrounds, have come to a similar concept of pressure on the ball, bringing this part of the game to the highest level of aggression ever seen on a football pitch: **man against man**.

Individual marking was the basis of the defensive phase of any team from the 50s until the 80s, with Italy among the nations that best interpreted this tactical model. The **Italian National Team, World Champion in 1982**, is one of the greatest references for that type of football. The advent of Sacchi's Milan, the zonal marking, the new offside rule and the evolution of the offensive principles had then led to the almost total disappearance of the fixed man to man marking.

Bielsa and Gasperini have instead rediscovered them with a meaning, however, very different from that of the 80s: no longer in a defensive and speculative perspective, but a very aggressive, all-round man marking to recover the ball high up the pitch.

The big difference between Bielsa's football and Gasperini's is that the former always aims to have the numerical superiority in the defensive line. This implies that an opponent is always free while his teammates are each paired with an opponent to mark. Gasperini's game model is even more aggressive: each player is paired with an opponent, following him "almost" all around the pitch. A structure of ten individual duels that obviously leaves a lot of room for opponents, yet very hard to exploit. As we will see later, changing the man marking, within the Gasperini's model, is allowed and even incentivized although not always easy to carry out.

We have certainly forgotten other great teams and coaches who have influenced this important aspect of the game analysed in this research. An unmissable mention goes to **Simeone's Atletico Madrid**: in the recent years, the Argentinian coach has built his fortune on a strong defensive strategy, applied in a rigorous and orderly manner. However, while acknowledging innovations in the implementation of "**pressing traps**", often the Cholo's teams have practiced medium or low-medium blocks, whereas, in this study, we are focusing on high pressing styles.

1. TACTICAL ANALYSIS

1.0 DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRESSING

As we have already seen on our historical journey, there are different types of pressing.

Surely, a first filter we must apply is the one that concerns the height of the opposition's pressing.

High, medium-high, medium, medium-low and low depending obviously on the height of the pitch where the pressure begins.

As already mentioned in this dissertation, we want to focus on high and medium-high pressing, that are the types of pressing that come to our purpose: to influence the game with our off-ball strategy.

The other important filter to consider when we talk about pressing is the type of pressing.

During our study, we decided to categorise high pressing in three different ways.

- 1. Pressing man against man**
- 2. Opposition Pressing**
- 3. Zonal pressing**

So, let's dig deeper into the characteristics of these three different pressing types.

1.1 PRESSING MAN AGAINST MAN

In the previous chapter we talked about Bielsa and Gasperini as the last key figures in the historical evolution of pressing.

The first aspect to emphasise when we talk about these two coaches is their **influence on colleagues**. Many teams play this type of football, especially those coached by the former players of these two managers. Among the many disciples of this way of organising the defensive phase we can, for example, mention: **Sampaoli** to Bielsa and **Juric** to Gasperini. But there are many more, in every tier and league.

We have got to know Gasperini's man against man strategy in Italy well, but let's try to summarise here the most interesting details.

This game model provides that, from the opponent's buildup, whether the ball is in play or not, ten individual duels are formed all around the pitch. Each opponent is matched with a player of the defending team, making it difficult to build from the back and upsetting the opponent's overall game.

Often, the teams that implement this model of play are the teams that recover a high number of balls in attacking areas, make more fouls and, more generally, mess up the opponent's game. The duels are also almost always engaged in **advanced positions** despite having **little cover** behind them (a slight cover is given by the markers on the weak side). In essence, the opposite of what we have been used to hearing for years, at all latitudes and in all football discussions.

"More marking and less covering" (cit. Maurizio Viscidi), and therefore the Gasperini's teams do not have cover behind them as well as filter in midfield for direct balls on the opposition attackers. These potential spaces constantly influence opposing

coaches to study how to deal with this model of play. Often, opposing teams just need a well-executed through pass, a counter movement in the space or even a run from behind to get in front of the goalkeeper.

Therefore, this is an extremely risky, type of game.

And how is it possible then that the teams that apply this style of play have achieved great results in recent years?

If they leave all that space in behind, they will have to concede many goals!

Instead, over the years, these teams have been among the best in the league for number of goals against. For example, Gasperini's Atalanta have achieved results, both in **Italy** and in **Europe**, something truly unthinkable for the level of the squad just a few years back.

Playing against this type of defense is, in fact, very hard.

Because it is always difficult to play against those teams who deny the space and time.

Against these teams, attempting to break the pressure to go into space, is, indeed, very complicated.

Winning duels against aggressive players, trained week after week for this high intensity style of play turns out to be problematic in every game.

Another important feature of this gameplan is the mental aspect and the "**comfort zone**" concept.

All sorts of gameplan (offensive and defensive), evolved and performed by top level teams, often have to deal with the opponents that force the team to rethink the initial strategy, as planned by the coaching staff.

This also happens to very coherent, identity based, models of play: take for example Guardiola's Manchester City and Klopp's Liverpool.

Simplifying, we can say that Manchester City wants to control the game by keeping the ball at low pace; this approach turns out almost always successful, however, in some games, the team could be forced to raise the pace by the opponents and play on quick transitions, far from its “comfort zone”. As a further example, Klopp's Liverpool play a trademark style of football, made of quick transitions, nevertheless they are often forced by lower-level opponents, who defend in their own box, to play a more patient and controlled style of football.

Gasperini's Atalanta in recent years have always imposed its own pace to the game. Perhaps, they also have lost a few games because of that, but, above all, they always have made their opponents play the type of game Atalanta planned, regardless of the strength of the opposition. At the Bernabeu, against Real Madrid as well as when they went just three minutes from eliminating the Paris Saint-Germain of the superstars Neymar and Mbappé.

Playing man against man across the pitch forces opponents to adapt and "accept" this type of game.

Furthermore, the in-game adjustments against these teams are harder to make, as the simple change of position of an opposition player, decisive in some contexts, turns out to be less effective as his man marker will simply follow him, even after that move.

Of course, over the years, the **countermeasures** against this type of defense have been refined. Especially in Italy where the technical staff find themselves having to prepare 4-6 games per season against this style of play.

This represents another reason to integrate many training drills focused on building from the back against high pressing into the training methodology.

Regardless of any team's playing model, the tactical reality of most leagues would demand to practice these situations that will surely occur during the matches.

1.2 OPPOSITION PRESSING (“PRESSING DI OPPOSIZIONE”)

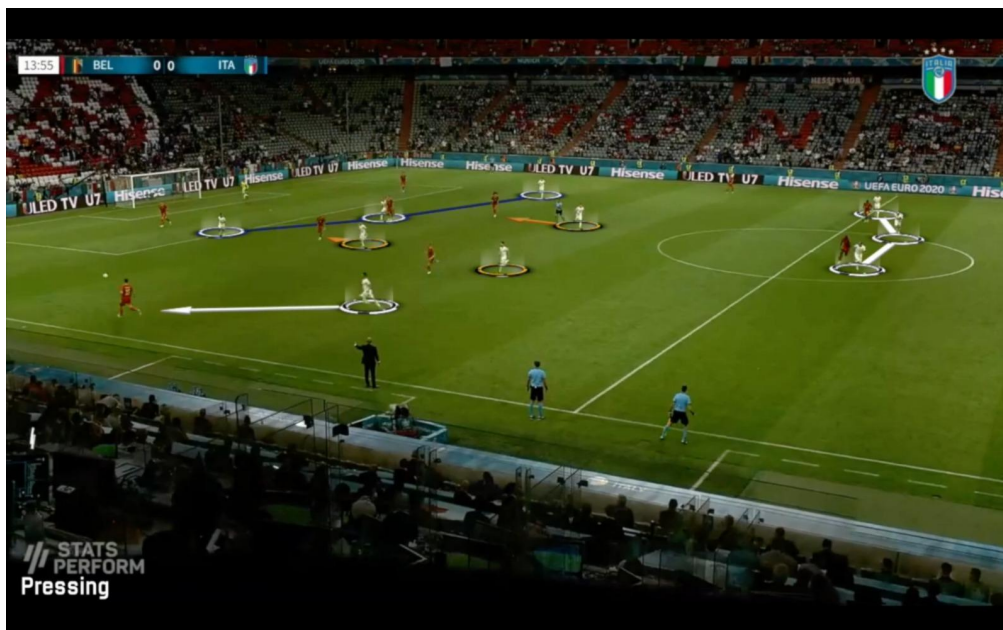
We decided to call the classic way of pressing as "**Opposition Pressing**"; the one implemented by most European and Italian teams.

Especially in Italy, for years, we have been used to thinking (and still many do) that there is only this type of pressing.

A type of pressing that basically provides predefined **movements**, shuffling across the pitch with roles and tasks assigned to each player.

The best teams in Italy for this type of pressing in recent years have certainly been the **Pioli’s Milan, winner of the last Serie A title, Spalletti’s Napoli and Italiano’s Fiorentina**. In addition to **the Italian National Team coached by Roberto Mancini**, of which we are going to see an example that helps us to better understand this type of pressing.

Belgium play with a 3-4-2-1 formation with De Bruyne and Doku behind Lukaku. The Italian National Team deploy the classic 4-3-3 shape.



(Image by Simone Contran, Italian National Team, Match Analyst)

The pressing of Mancini's National Team is aggressive with the three strikers against the three Belgium defenders. **The goal is to force the ball towards the two sides of the pitch.**

(See image above)

In my opinion, forcing the balls towards the sides of the pitch, where the space is reduced and the touchline becomes an “ally” of the defending team, is often the best solution. On the other hand, when we are in possession of the ball, we always try to keep the ball in the central areas from where we can play on the right, in the center and on the left; therefore, a team not in possession must try to limit this aspect.

In addition to the three-vs-three played out by the Italian forwards, the two mezzali (Verratti and Barella) are already "naturally" matched to the Belgian midfielders. The ball travels towards the right-back of Martinez's National Team, with Italy deciding to come out very strong with their left-back Spinazzola. Jorginho, acting almost as a third added central defender, goes strong on De Bruyne. Chiellini is involved in a duel against Lukaku, with Bonucci covering and Di Lorenzo on Doku.

This is an "opposition pressing". A pressing that starts from the study of the opposition's formation and the contrapositions with our model and then decides accordingly how to best shuffle across based on the height and characteristics of the players on the pitch.

The key to Italy's pressing against Belgium was then the Lukaku-Chiellini duel. In the days before the game there had been much discussion about this duel and the potential trouble that the Belgian striker could perhaps create to the Azzurri's captain, in open space. However, not all duels are the same, even those between the same players. Lukaku - Chiellini in the open space with De Bruyne or another Belgian midfielder

running through the middle would have become potentially very tough to manage for the Azzurri. A series of Lukaku versus Chiellini duels with inaccurate balls received by the Belgian striker on his weak foot, playing back to goal and under pressure is a completely different matter; those duels were, indeed, won by the Azzurri's captain with great effectiveness.

A very skilled team in this type of pressing is Pioli's Milan. Milan adopts this type of pressing after an in-depth opposition analysis. Milan's technical staff often decides to leave unmarked the opposing player identified less technically skilled in build-up. Therefore, this player would be the only player free to receive without pressure, so the ball is often played straight to him.

A "**pressing trap**".

For example, against an opponent who plays with a 4-3-3 system with a right-back with below average technical skills, Milan often tuck in Rafael Leão on the right centre-back. The other players are all matched, with the three midfielders against the three opposing midfielders and the four defenders against the three attackers. The only free player is the right-back. When the ball travels towards him, the players start shuffling across; it is often the left midfielder Tonalì who moves forward diagonally on the right back and then the central defender Tomori, in turn, advances forward on the opposing midfielder, left unmarked by Tonalì.

An aggressive and courageous system that often leads to breaking the line even with both defensive center-backs. **Milan's offensive recoveries and fast offensive transitions have been instrumental in the Rossoneri team's recent successes.**

As attentive readers you will surely have noticed one thing: opposition pressing, once implemented with the various movements, becomes a pressing man against man.

That is absolutely true!

But it is the basic concept that is different: you do not start from an all-out and already predefined man-to-man pressing, but you start the pressure with departments that are then split to go and press man against man. When not pressing, the departments are reassembled to regain order.

There is therefore a lot of difference in the entire approach of the off-ball strategy between the two types of pressing, especially when the team is not under pressure.

Another very important consideration to make for this type of pressing is the **opposition analysis**.

For this type of off-ball pressure, it is essential to analyse the characteristics of the opposing team and the possible positional structures that they may have in place during the game. This way of working has produced good results for several years and partially still does.

But football changes, and it changes very fast! Once, it was only the most advanced teams that were able to change system or tweak positional structures from game to game, if not within the same one. Now this possibility belongs to more and more teams as they are able to seamlessly change or disrupt our gameplan that we have so diligently prepared during the "classic" game preview session. In an increasingly fluid football, made of functions and not of positions, of readings of spaces and situations, the more I try to use predefined moves, the more I risk finding myself unprepared in the match.

It seems a paradox, but it is not.

The more I prepare, the less prepared I am.

The **emotional factor** in this case is fundamental. For the players, arriving at the game with too much information (especially defensive opposition) and finding themselves on the pitch in a different context than the one prepared can cause an emotional deficit: *"And now? What do we do?"*

This consideration should not be underestimated but investigated further.

But let's go back to the tactical point of view.

For some years we have become accustomed to thinking of an offensive football made of principles, adaptations to opponents' responses and readings of spaces. We should start thinking this way for the defensive strategy as well. But it is more difficult to do, because it is way too risky. How can I not overly structure the off-ball strategy, thus risking conceding goals?

But if we think that football is fluid in attack, isn't it a bit naïve to think that it would be not defensively? Water or any other liquid subjects remain fluid in all surfaces and containers as they are fluid by nature.

We are convinced that we will move increasingly more towards a defensive strategy made of principles and readings of spaces and/or situations, exactly as for the offensive one.

1.3 ZONAL PRESSING

The third type of pressing identified is what I wanted to call "**zonal pressing**". Why zonal pressing?

Because the positions of my teammates and the ball are the priorities. Pressure on opponents is "only" a natural consequence of these priorities.

The masters of this type of pressing are **Klopp's Liverpool**.

Klopp's team puts fierce pressure on the ball and opponents while respecting these priorities.

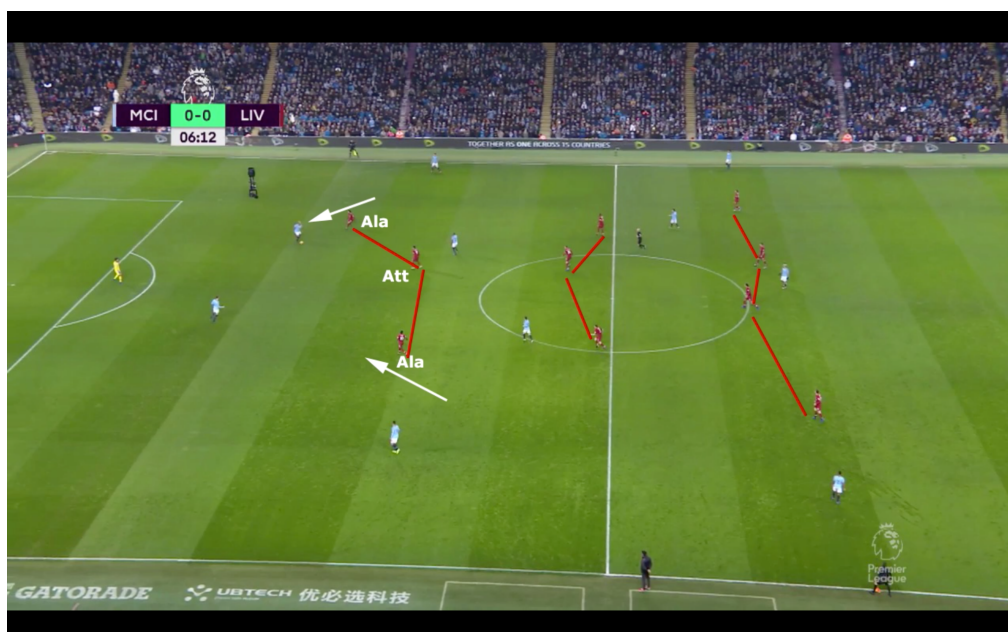
The priority, as mentioned, is the distance between the players together with their defensive principles. **Therefore, this aspect allows him to be less influenced and exposed to the changes made by the opposition.**

Liverpool's pressing is often with a 4-3-2-1 shape with the three, narrow strikers.

The centre-forward position (Firmino in recent years) is fundamental.

Sometimes his position is deeper than the left and right forwards and start from the opposition playmaker, making the defensive positional structure similar to a diamond.

(See image below)



The left and right attackers must stay between the centre-back and the respective full-back, thus blocking the direct pass between the same two players (*see image below*).

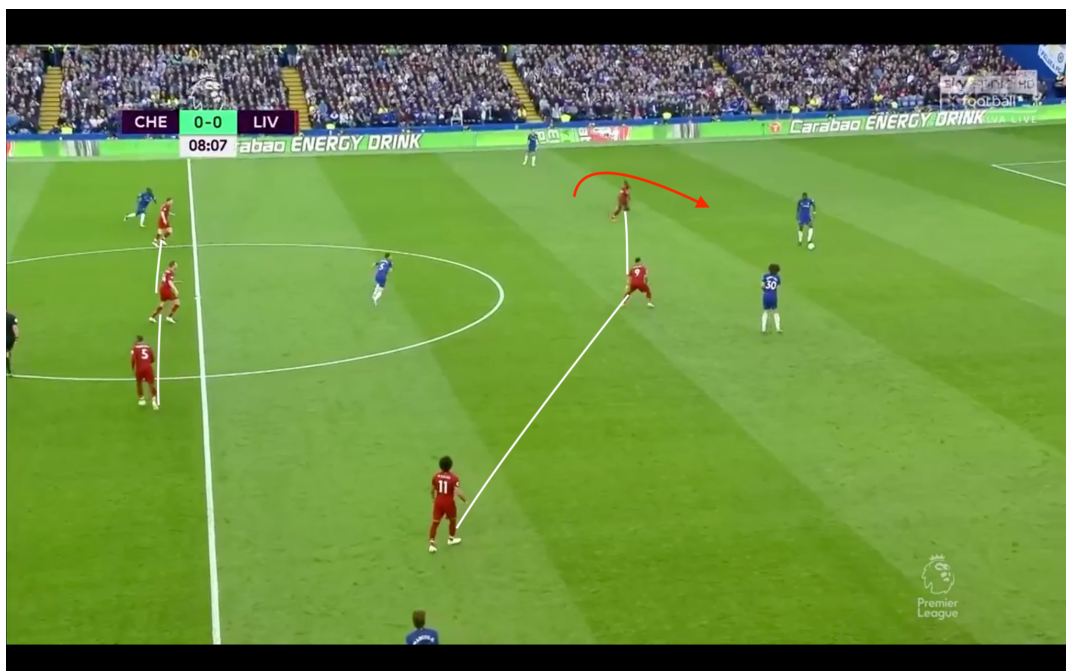
The aim of the external attacker is to force inside.

It would sound as the opposite of the principle exposed before, always forcing outwards. In reality, Liverpool want to avoid the direct pass for the full-back because it would be way too easy to come out of pressure for the opposition.

However, the principle of pushing the opponent on the sides and then closing it down remains unchanged anyways.

Avoiding the direct pass would force the centre-back to look for either a difficult vertical pass or, more likely, a third man play through a midfielder.

Liverpool manage to give an extra playing time to their mezzala or to their full-back to come out and press the opposition full-back.



Pressure on the opposing full-back can be applied in fact either by the mezzala or even by the full-back for a more aggressive approach, "full-back on full-back". This decision takes place directly on the pitch and is not previously planned.

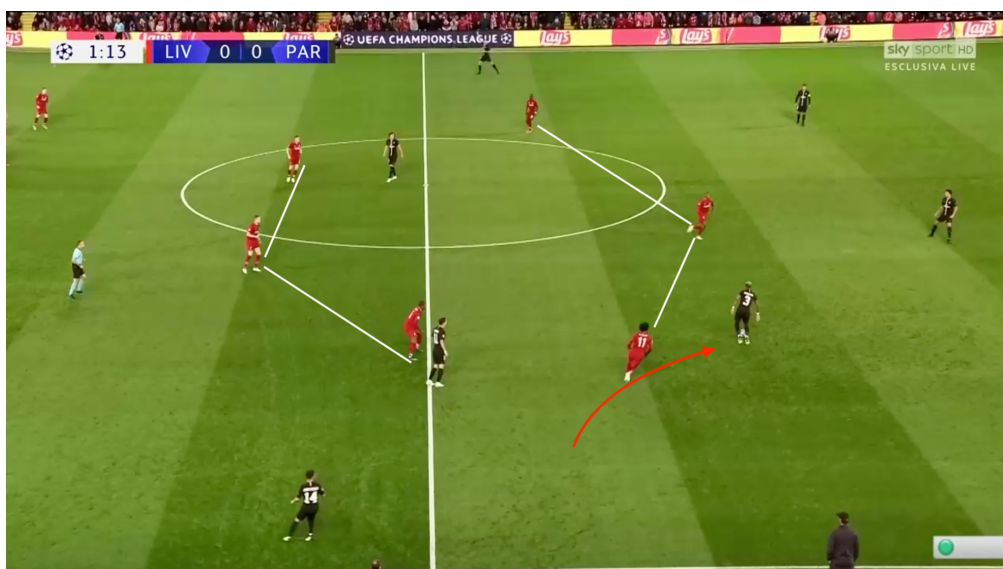
The area of the pitch where to start the pressing action and the opponents' positions, with the relative characteristics, influence the type of "shuffle".

If possible, the preferred choice is almost always triggering the full-back, because it allows the team to be more aggressive while not using any of the three midfielders in the middle of the pitch. Obviously, with these moves, the area of the pitch cannot be too high and opponents should not have a pacey winger that "hugs" the touchline. In this case, going high to press with the full-back would become hard and extremely risky.

Against a five-men defense, as you can see, little changes ([see image below](#)).

The left and right forwards stand between the respective centre-backs and the wing-backs, closing down the passing line. Liverpool's pressing system does not change, with a very compact central block formed by the positional structure of the midfielders, thus forming a 4-3-2-1 shape.

A central block that spontaneously forces the opponents' buildup on the sides even if the first pass is directed inwards.



The midfielders' position is often flat with the central playmaker almost never pushed back in front of the defensive line, as often happens in many 4-3-3 formations that switch to a 4-1-4-1 shape off the ball.

Liverpool maintain the central midfielder high as this player must be ready to slide across with the entire line from right and left and close down on the opposing mezzala, when the Reds' mezzala shuffles across the opposing fullback.

Klopp's centre-left and centre-right midfielders must obviously be players with great fitness levels and resistance because a huge physical effort is demanded of them. Their attitude is very aggressive, almost always anticipating and, possibly avoiding the play on the "third man" and the opposition coming out to press the fullback.

Another interesting aspect is the possibility of remaining compact, always with three midfielders inside and almost always defending pushing forward, unlike other defensive positional structures that, starting from a 4-3-3 formation, send out one of the two side midfielders on the opposing center-backs and are then forced to make different runs, thus often switching to a 4-4-2 formation.

Liverpool's defensive line plays very high, reducing the space with midfielders and with a particular use of the offside trap and width.

"The opponent's depth and the offside line are not seen as a danger, but as an opportunity." (Quote by Andrea Maldera)

Often risking individual offside trap and counting on central defenders with great physical and athletic skills, the Liverpool's back line almost never tracks back even with the ball uncovered, challenging opponents to shoot with the right timing.

Analysing (*see image below*) the number of offsides caused by Liverpool last season in the Premier League, Klopp's team ranked first with distance. They had more than double the average of the league, a figure even more striking if we consider they keep possession of the ball for 63% of the time, on average (second in the entire Premier League). Needless to say, the few times their opposition had the ball, the chances of them ending up offside were very high!

Squad Stats			Opponent Stats								
Squad	#	PI	90s	Performance							
				CrdY	CrdR	2CrdY	FIs	FId	Off ▼	Crs	Int
vs Liverpool	27	38.0	63	3	0	417	410	144	309	735	413
vs Manchester City	26	38.0	68	3	2	453	360	94	250	597	424
vs Wolves	26	38.0	90	3	3	423	439	81	473	584	429
vs Leicester City	28	38.0	60	0	0	502	446	73	448	644	400
vs Manchester Utd	29	38.0	48	1	0	425	465	72	420	691	418
vs Brentford	29	38.0	50	3	0	443	435	71	504	581	323
vs Chelsea	26	38.0	69	4	1	515	467	67	363	646	440
vs Southampton	25	38.0	64	1	1	456	480	65	480	528	421
vs Arsenal	27	38.0	69	3	2	450	406	64	408	548	374
vs Newcastle Utd	29	38.0	75	3	0	461	484	58	468	429	413
vs Norwich City	28	38.0	62	2	1	504	461	57	536	540	372
vs Watford	30	38.0	64	1	1	409	523	55	539	478	480
vs Burnley	23	38.0	44	0	0	405	460	53	557	455	306
vs Leeds United	29	38.0	74	3	3	463	567	53	368	670	416
vs Crystal Palace	24	38.0	74	3	2	579	481	52	420	580	487
vs Everton	33	38.0	72	0	0	473	436	43	459	535	368
vs Tottenham	25	38.0	83	6	4	519	464	43	512	610	421
vs Brighton	26	38.0	80	0	0	463	449	42	444	654	383
vs Aston Villa	31	38.0	83	1	0	604	488	39	432	499	406
vs West Ham	25	38.0	49	3	1	374	362	35	501	492	358

(Data from StatsBomb, <https://fbref.com/en/>)

We have analysed how the Liverpool lines are always tidy and connected, accordingly applying the pressing actions, with all the nearby players respecting the distances. Even in high and aggressive pressing situations, it is rare to see Liverpool shuffling up the lines, something that we notice more often in teams that press forward adopting the other two options (man against man and opposition pressing).

Perhaps, Klopp's well-known admiration for Sacchi has been so influencing that the work of the lines, the offside tactics and the importance of working in the "zone" come exactly from this.

The past returns, cyclically.

A very particular type of pressing, often even outnumbered in the first line of pressure and, on the other hand, possessing several weak points like any tactic or arrangement ever applied in the rectangular, football pitch.

Adding up advantages and disadvantages makes the “zonal” pressing very interesting, especially compared to the tactical trends that probably await us in the coming years.

Last, but not least, a further characteristic of this type of pressing is the **offensive transition**. Unlike other teams that adopt a 4-3-3 system and demand their wingers to take significant defensive responsibilities as midfielders, Liverpool work with their attacking wingers as real attackers, leaving them as high and in a central position as possible.

This allows the team to be extremely dangerous in case of a medium-high ball recovery by quickly playing the ball for the attacking trio who can then attack an open and struggling opposing defense, also considering the skills and characteristics of the attackers in the Reds' squad.

1.4 GEGENPRESSING

"**Gegenpressing** is the best playmaker in the world. Gegenpressing allows you to recover the ball near the opposition goal, often just one pass away from creating a scoring opportunity. No assist man in the world can be as decisive as a good Gegenpressing situation." (Quote by Jurgen Klopp)

We start this new chapter on Gegenpressing by citing Jürgen Klopp, words that perfectly describe how this defensive transition phase is also a **deadly offensive weapon**.

As we already know, the game is always linked by a continuous cycle and the counterpressing is certainly one of the best examples.

Riaggresione - Gegenpressing - Counterpressing - Contrapresion These are the names used in various countries to indicate perhaps the most important, in my opinion, situation for the **control of the game**.

Being able to attack well allows you to stay in the opponent's half, thus continuing the attack with incredible physical, mental and tactical benefits.

Physical benefits? It has been demonstrated (we will see that later) that the short high-intensity sprints and runs of the players involved in a positive counterpressing action are less physically expensive than the long runs back by the whole team to face an opposing counterattack.

Mental benefits? I keep attacking, I have fun with the ball and I gain confidence while my opponents get nervous chasing the ball and physically and mentally tired from yet another defensive action.

Tactical benefits? I simply have an additional offensive action and the possibility of being able to score goals.

As already described above, the best counterpressing arises from a collective and coordinated in possession strategy.

The faster the ball arrives in the opponent's half of the pitch, the faster it will probably come back. In the positional game, on the other hand, a dense network of short passes line by line allows the team in possession to reach the offensive half in a compact and cohesive way, a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for a successful counterpressing.

This is the best setup to be able to overload the ball possession area and, in case of a lost ball, to be able to attack with many nearby players ready for immediate recovery.

The **control** of the penalty box and the **prior cover-ups** by the game builders become aspects of fundamental importance.

When an attack gets near the opponent's penalty box, the job of the game builders is often fully or, at least, almost completed; now it is the turn of the invaders who must take care of being able to transform the numerical superiority into a dangerous opportunity.

At this time, however, game builders must stay in an active position.

The players closest to the ball and the penalty box (usually midfielders, if we want to talk about traditional roles) take care of guarding the penalty box itself. They approach the opponents by forcing the position in the ball area and must be ready to win the ball coming off the opposition defense.

Instead, the players furthest from the ball (usually defenders) apply prior cover-ups, marking, when possible, (often remaining in numerical superiority with an extra player) the opposing attackers higher up the pitch and remaining above the ball line.

These two "deterrent" actions are extremely connected to the counterpressing and the immediate recovery of the ball; without a great deal of work on these aspects, every offensive action with many "invaders" risks becoming a dangerous opponent's counterattack.

In the analysis carried out for this dissertation, we have studied hundreds of situations of pressing and counterpressing, and it can be very interesting to try to see these tactical situations from both points of view.

For example, the times when a counterpressing is beaten and opponents come out of it to start an offensive transition.

We have tried to summarise and codify the principles of the game to recognise and train to get out of a counterpressing situation.

We called them: **3 + 1 ways to beat counterpressing.**

1. **Offload** = playing the ball backwards towards an unmarked player.
2. **Changing direction** = dribbling out the first man who applies the pressure.
3. **Forward play** = playing the ball to the tip of my buildup diamond.

Each of these three options is practically always followed by **+1 = going to the other side.**

Offloading behind and changing the direction of play to the other side.

I change direction with the ball and go the other way.

I play on the tip and move the ball to the other side.

To these subprinciples, we add the macro-principle of **moving the ball quickly**, possibly with just one or two touches.

Easier said than done, of course. Constantly training these situations, with a coherent and modern work methodology, becomes of fundamental importance to get used to getting out of the opponents' counterpressing.

But we will further investigate it later.

Ah, I almost forgot!

"**Game builders**" and "**Invaders**" are two terms coined by Maurizio Viscidi (coordinator of the Italian National Youth Teams) that fit well into the trend of roles / functions and no longer positions that modern football is demonstrating.

In this regard, I would like to point out to the work we did with the Soccerment team to identify the new roles / functions, in a totally unrelated way to the simple positions on the pitch: **#TheClusteringProject.**

Starting from the analysis of the statistical data of all the players from the five main European leagues, we investigated their real functions and skills on the pitch without any kind of bias related to the traditional positions (full-back, winger, midfielder, etc.). Then, we fed this data to an algorithm that, using machine learning techniques, has identified 13 clusters (sets) of players with similar functions:

Ball stopper, Buildup initiator, First line breaker, Wide controller, Wide creator, Ball stealer, Buildup director, Box to box raider, Chance creator, One to one explorer, All-Round finisher e Target Man.

For each cluster, in addition to the presentation of the current players, we have chosen one foreign and one Italian legend of the past, thus telling the characteristics of players like Giggs, Passarella, Conti and Baresi, among others.

Particularly interesting are also the sections about the hybrids (players belonging to multiple clusters) and the composition of the teams.

"The role is no longer a position but a function", from the tactical concept to the application on the pitch, with detailed numbers and figures of what the players really perform on it.



(<https://soccerment.com/store/>)

1.5 THE GOALKEEPER'S ROLE

We conclude this macro-chapter on tactical analysis by considering an increasingly fundamental role in modern football: the **goalkeeper**.

The three functions of any goalkeeper within the game are, at the same time, clear and important: apart from the traditional goal defense, over the years, participating to the team's buildup and defending the space (the function that we will obviously examine more in this work) have become extremely important.

A high-pressing strategy cannot be separated from an aggressive goalkeeper able to **defend the space forward**.

Defending the space forward for a goalkeeper means guaranteeing the necessary cover-up against the opposition balls in behind the defensive line, something that a high-pressing team almost inevitably concedes.

A modern goalkeeper who plays in such a context must read the game at every stage and cannot fail to have a developed **understanding of the game**.

If we combine this aspect with building from the back, with all the connected challenges (from a technical point of view, as well as being able to visualise the game well) it becomes easy to know why understanding the game is an aspect perhaps sometimes underestimated in the evaluation and training methodology of goalkeepers. Understanding the game, **from the offensive to the defensive part is actually a single action, as is the cycle of the game**.

Therefore, a goalkeeper who takes excellent decisions in possession and has good vision, is also a goalkeeper with good ability at reading the space to cover when the team is not in possession of the ball.

Similarly, the defenders who are best at completing through balls (what Sics and myself call "**key passes**", <https://www.sics.it/intervistaantonioagliardi/>) are often defenders with excellent defensive reading of the game, precisely because the understanding of the game is unique and seamless as the game itself.

If we agree with this view, it is curious to note that a key metric (among other offensive examples) such as the number of through balls / key passes completed can become an index of understanding the game and, also, of defensive capabilities. Therefore, for the first time, we have an objective metric for one of the least "measurable" characteristics in a player.

Going back to the goalkeeper, it is clear that defending the space with interventions away from the penalty box to stop the deep completions of the opposing team does not only require a developed understanding of the game but also important athletic skills and high-level technique.

Defensive interventions like tackles or with headers are not easy to perform and the risk of leaving the goal unguarded is still fairly high.

However, a quote from **J. Cruyff** could help us to see the situation from another point of view.

In 1988 a skeptical Zubizarreta, goalkeeper of his Cruyff's new Barcelona, asked him "Gaffer, if I play so far from my goal, there will be a high probability that they (the opponents) will score a goal chipping the ball over me!", Cruyff replied: "Well, if they score such a goal, you must applaud!"

Goals from distance surprising the goalkeeper are slightly increasing in recent years, but they are still very rare and probably in the total sum of advantages and disadvantages (which is the only real thing that matters) at the end of the year the advantages remain way higher.

I believe that the success of a goalkeeper like **M. Neuer** has contributed greatly to the development of the goalkeeper called the **Sweeper Keeper**, the free goalkeeper capable of covering the space in behind of a very high and aggressive defense.

His performances at the 2014 World Cup against Algeria remain perhaps the highest point of this interpretation of the role, almost never seen at the time:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOL3A9Y_e0M&ab_channel=MaxMustermann

Another curious aspect to analyse is how the **German school** is way ahead of all the others, in this particular aspect.

Perhaps starting from Neuer's experience, several German goalkeepers are ranked among the firsts in Europe for defensive interventions outside the penalty box (Opa/90 in the *image below*).

Pos.	Giocatore	Nazione	Ruolo	Squadra	Competizione	Età	Nato	Libero	
								n. OPA/90	Distanza media
1	Manuel Riemann	GER	Por	Bochum	Bundesliga	32	1988	2,00	18,4
2	Gaëtan Poussin	FRA	Por	Bordeaux	Ligue 1	22	1999	1,77	15,9
3	Alisson	BRA	Por	Liverpool	Premier League	28	1992	1,75	18,1
4	Nick Pope	ENG	Por	Burnley	Premier League	29	1992	1,75	18,2
5	Paul Bernardoni	FRA	Por	Saint-Étienne	Ligue 1	24	1997	1,63	16,2
6	Robin Zentner	GER	Por	Mainz 05	Bundesliga	26	1994	1,50	17,2
7	Manuel Neuer	GER	Por	Bayern Munich	Bundesliga	35	1986	1,47	19,8
8	Sascha Burchert	GER	Por	Greuther Fürth	Bundesliga	31	1989	1,36	16,6
9	Oliver Baumann	GER	Por	Hoffenheim	Bundesliga	31	1990	1,30	15,9
10	Péter Gulácsi	HUN	Por	RB Leipzig	Bundesliga	31	1990	1,30	17,9
11	Gianluigi Donnarumma	ITA	Por	Paris S-G	Ligue 1	22	1999	1,29	17,2
12	Alexandre Oukidja	ALG	Por	Metz	Ligue 1	33	1988	1,25	16,4
13	Sergio Herrera	ESP	Por	Osasuna	La Liga	28	1993	1,19	15,6
14	Luís Maximiano	POR	Por	Granada	La Liga	22	1999	1,18	15,9
15	Predrag Rajković	SRB	Por	Reims	Ligue 1	25	1995	1,11	15,8
16	José Sá	POR	Por	Wolves	Premier League	28	1993	1,10	15,3
17	Yann Sommer	SUI	Por	M'Gladbach	Bundesliga	32	1988	1,09	15,6
18	David Raya	ESP	Por	Brentford	Premier League	25	1995	1,08	15,0
19	Stefan Ortega	GER	Por	Arminia	Bundesliga	28	1992	1,06	15,8
20	Álex Remiro	ESP	Por	Real Sociedad	La Liga	26	1995	1,06	15,8

(Data from StatsBomb, <https://fbref.com/en/>)

The data refer to the 2021/2022 season when 6 of the top 10 Sweeper Keepers in Europe (top 5 leagues) played in the Bundesliga, led by Bochum's Riemann who makes 2.0 defensive interventions per game outside the penalty box.

The first and only Italian in this ranking is Donnarumma who, however, plays for Paris Saint-Germain.

To find goalkeepers playing in Serie A, we have to go down to almost the 40th place where we have Musso, Atalanta's goalkeeper (0.89 per game), Fiorentina's Terracciano (0.88) and Milan's Maignan (0.81).

It is no coincidence perhaps that these three teams (Atalanta, Fiorentina and Milan) were among the most high-pressing teams in Italy, over the last season.

2. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

2.0 INTRO

I believe that the world of **data** can be very useful for our objective: **to understand, as much as possible, what really happens in the 90 minutes.**

This aim should be one of the most important goals of any coach and any coaching staff, at all levels:

"What really happens physically, mentally, technically and tactically during a football match?"

This question is extremely hard to answer as football is an outstanding sport, yet full of unpredictable situations. And the response can never be complete since the tactical video analysis and the data will obviously not be able to provide all the answers.

Data, together with video analysis and tactical knowledge, however, certainly help to get closer to those answers and I believe it is therefore essential to include it in our working methodology.

Being able to answer this question, even partially, is necessary to be able to make **more informed decisions** from many perspectives, **from the tactical side of the game to the methodology aspects.**

In the following pages we will further investigate this topic with practical examples.

2.1 INTEGRATED ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

There are different types of data related to the game of football.

There is **physical data** that has been used for years by the clubs, within their performance analysis departments, to better identify collective and individual workloads. Number of km travelled, accelerations and decelerations and number of sprints made. As well as speed peaks and physical effort.

This data already shows us how numbers can be an integral part of the decision-making process.

It is certainly true that the world of sports performance analysis is closer to science than the technical-tactical area. But the approach to numbers could be similar.

Then, there is the **technical-tactical data**, that derive from the event-by-event analysis of the match. In the past few chapters, we have already seen several examples: from the number of offsides of a team to the number of defensive interventions outside the goalkeeper area. Obviously, there are many others: passes, shots, dribbles, with relative positions and outcomes for each event.

Around this data, interesting and more detailed metrics have arisen in the recent years: from Expected Goals (XG), to PPDA and others.

Also, there is the newest generation data: **positional data** second by second (actually, they are detected up to 30-50 times per second). For each frame, the position on the field of all 22 players plus the ball is recorded. With this data, you can measure the height and intensity of the pressing action, rather than knowing how many times an attacker has tried to run in the space. The potential queries of this data are almost endless. Unfortunately, we are still not taking full advantage of these

possibilities, not having completely identified precise and consistent patterns along the real tactical aspects of the game. Data, however, is bringing us closer to the most important question we were talking about:

"What really happens physically, mentally, technically and tactically during a football match?"

To answer this question, a few years ago, at the **Italian National Team**, we started a project that aimed to produce tactical data internally, within our own analysis department. We integrated (hence the name of **Integrated Analysis**) this information with the physical data in our possession and we shared the expertise across multiple departments. The results are, in our opinion, very interesting.

The study was carried out by the performance department, part of the working group, led by Valter Di Salvo, and by the Football Analysis department, with the team led by myself and Simone Contran (Italian National Team Match Analyst).

The initial idea was inspired by similar previous studies conducted within the Federation by F. Bordin and C. Osgnach at the Under 20 National Team and by F. Lorenzon and V. Azzone at the Under 21 National Team (*more information on the latter can be found in the article published on Notiziario del Settore Tecnico n.2 of 2019*).

The analysis model involved analysing all the matches of the Italian National Team, minute by minute, to really understand what happened during a match.

The different situations were categorised as follows:

Positional attack

Under Pressure attack

Offensive Transition (Counterattack)

Offensive Transition coming out from Counterpressing

Positional Defensive action

Defensive Pressing action

Defensive Transition

Defensive Counterpressing Transition

Offensive set-piece

Defensive set-piece

Ball not in play

For each of these situations we then collected a whole series of sub-levels related to time, zones, outcome and players.

So, at the end of the first analysis, after each match played by the Italian National Team, we had a clear picture of how many attacks and defensive actions we had carried out, how many pressing or positional actions and so on. At that point, the Performance Analysis department took over, distributing the physical data across the different types of actions we had identified. The results confirmed the perception and insights that we already partially had.

I here summarise only the most important insights, since they will be published soon:

1. The physical effort in possession is lower than in non-possession.
2. The more our team's time on positional attack actions increases, the more the physical effort of the opponents increases proportionally.
3. Pressing and Counterpressing are two very physically expensive activities but useful to avoid long spells in positional defense and defensive transitions that, in turn, become even more physically demanding.

As you can see, even just hinting at the most important results we are starting to approach the question:

"What really happens physically, mentally, technically and tactically during a football match?"

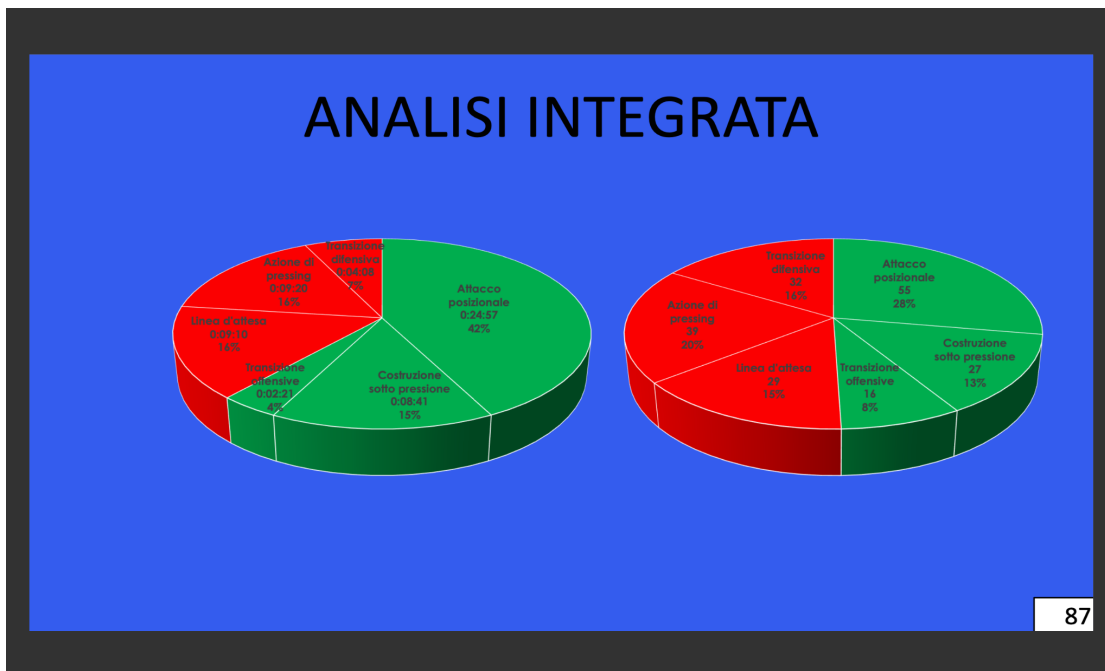
Analysing the tactical data, we realised that the answers could be even more significant and we expanded the study to include many other club matches at national and international level.

The results have helped us to identify new insights that I am going to summarise.

- **The 100-100-100 rule.** Each top-flight game, regardless of level and style of play, consists of approximately 100 attacking actions, 100 defensive actions and 100 situations when the ball is not in play.

- How much time do we spend in positional attack? How many pressing actions do we attempt in a game? With this data, we can answer these and many other questions of this kind.

(See image below)



- On average, the Italian national team **spends 42% of the ball in play time in positional situations, performing 39 pressing actions and 29 positional defense actions per game.** So, the times the team decides to go and win the ball instead of sitting back and waiting are higher.

- Numbers on pressing and counterpressing are of fundamental significance, since these are the aspects investigated by this dissertation. The results are very interesting. **Top teams' counterpressings are about 30-35 per game with 70% chance of success (immediate ball recovery). The average duration of these positive counterpressings is about 5 seconds and involves an average of 2.5 players.**

- The players most involved in the counterpressing are, of course, the midfielders and the **top players in this aspect of the game are able to complete more than 12 counterpressing actions, on average per game.**

- The areas where the most counterpressings occur are half-spaces and closer to the touchlines. It is more difficult to attack in the central area (opponents have more chances to get out) and in the opponent's penalty box where, even if the ball is recovered, it is often immediately kicked away.

- Pressing data tell us the same story. **The big teams in Europe carry out about 45 pressing actions per game for a total of 12-14 minutes of actual play spent defending forward. About 60% of these actions lead to a ball recovery and only 10-15% of the time the pressure is beaten by the opposition buildup.** However, when the high pressure is beaten, the chances of creating a dangerous opportunity increase considerably.

Looking at the numbers, we can make a first important assertion: even at a high level, it is **very hard to get out of a strong pressure, whether it is high pressing or counterpressing.**

About 8 out of 10 actions pressing forward do not let the opponents' buildup to be completed in a positive manner (either the ball is recovered or a tactical foul occurs, even resuming play with a free-kick or a throw-in).

Therefore, often, the fear of pressing high and accepting situations of numerical parity at the back, is unjustified.

The above data is only part of the analysis carried out, however, I am pleased to share the method and approach, beyond the results.

I think you can immediately understand how this type of analysis gets us closer to a possible response to the famous question we previously asked, thus helping us to make more informed tactical decisions and plan a methodology as close as possible to what really happens on the pitch.

How long do I have to train the pressing action for to get close to the performances I would like my team to achieve during the match?

How many seconds do high-intensity actions like counterpressing and transitions last for?

These are just examples of how we could use these analyses to identify a proper **methodology, adhering to our technical-tactical match performance model.**

2.2 OTHER DATA

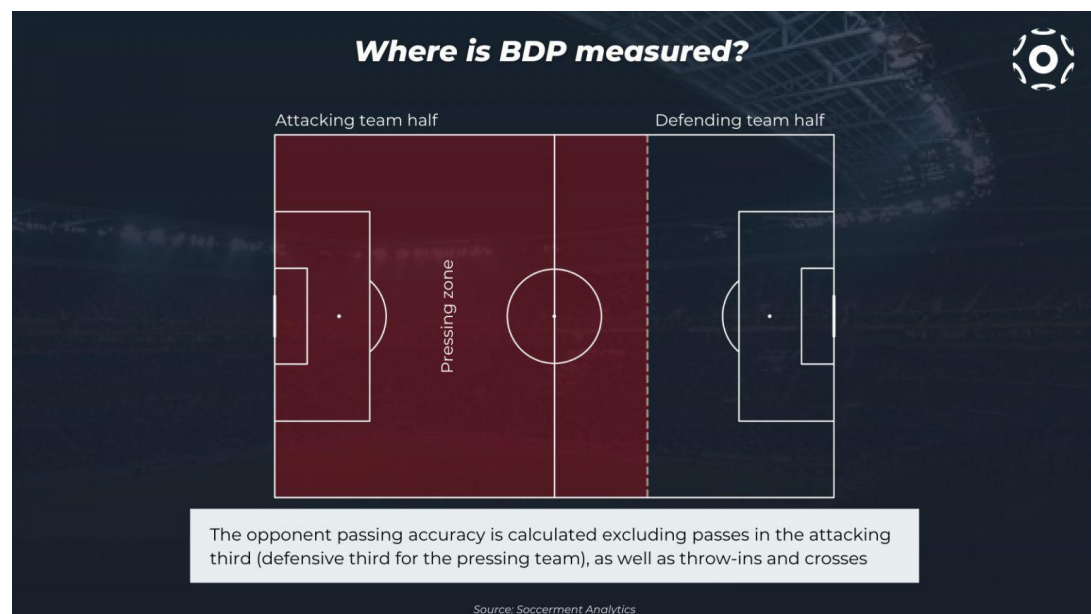
Among the already existing technical-tactical data we have presented, there are other useful metrics to understand whether my **pressing** strategy is working: from the simple number of offensive ball recoveries to the advanced metric of PPDA (Passes Per Defensive Action).

However, studying this data, I was not fully satisfied. I could not have enough figures to investigate what, as you have seen, I consider a fundamental part of the game of football: pressing and counterpressing.

So again, with the **Soccerment** team we thought of setting up a new metric:

Buildup Disruption Percentage (BDP).

Let's calculate how much the % of pass completion of a team changes against a certain opponent. How much can my team's pressing action affect the passing qualities of another team?
(See image below)



Very frequently, a team that presses aggressively forces the opposition to kick a long ball forward, therefore with the risk of losing it. That ball, however, would not (rightly so) be counted as an offensive recovery as the long ball may have been picked up by the defenders; but, in essence, it is a ball recovery originated from a high pressing.

Hence, the idea of going to investigate how often I can influence the quality of your buildup.

The results are very intriguing.

(See image below)



Last season, **Torino and Verona** were the two teams in Europe that most disrupted the opponent's buildup phase.

What does this mean? Two main considerations:

- The man-to-man pressing type is one of the most difficult to deal with.
- Other Italian teams had a hard time building under pressure.

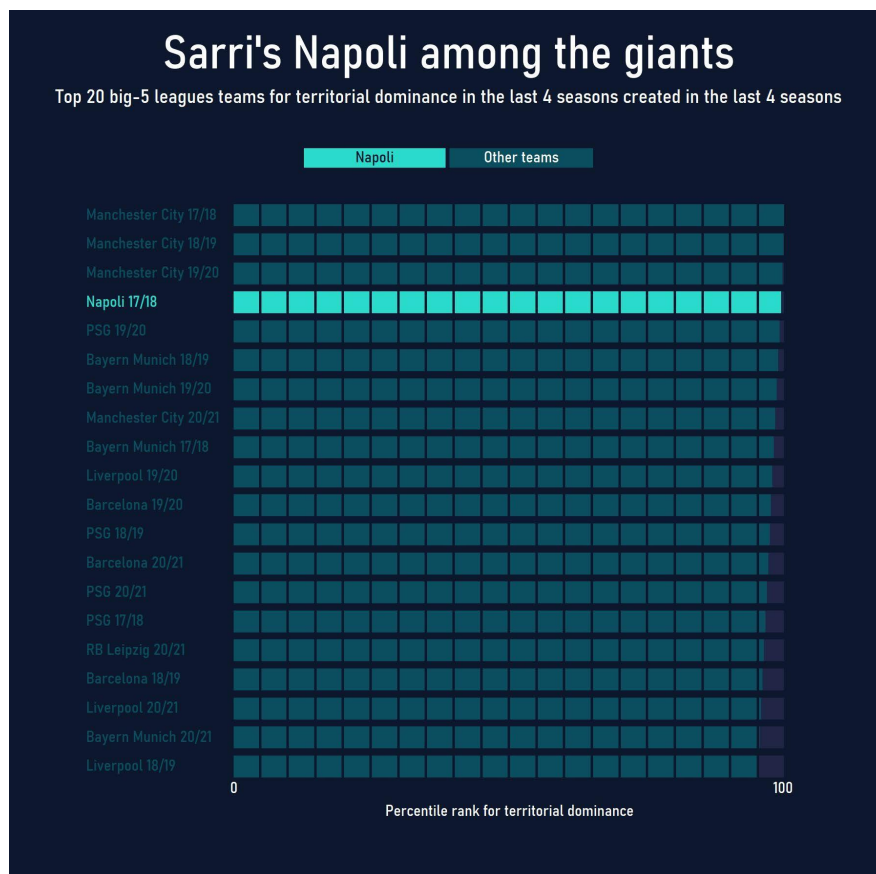
For more information on this metric, I would recommend reading this article on the Soccerment blog:

<https://soccerment.com/measuring-pressing-success-buildup-disruption-percentage-bdp/>

Another very useful metric is **Field Tilt**: the territorial dominance.

I believe it is an interesting metric because it summarises the offensive ability of a team to keep the ball in the offensive half as well as in pressing and counterpressing, out of possession, with a single number. On the other hand, the cycle of the game is unique and often even the data confirms it.

(See image below)



From this analysis by Matteo Pilotto, now Football Data Analyst at Manchester City, we see how one of the best versions **of Sarri's Napoli** (2017-2018 with 91 points achieved in the league) has been one of the most dominant teams in Europe in recent years, behind only Guardiola's Manchester City, but ahead of PSG, Bayern Munich and many others.

2.3 STATISTICAL CONCLUSIONS

I believe that the above examples go in the direction we proposed at the beginning of the chapter: trying to understand more about what really happens inside a football match.

Over the years I have met many people who are skeptical or even opposed to using data to analyse matches. I believe it is a narrow-minded view which does not encourage progress.

If the data helped me to understand even a tiny 0.1% more (and that's much more), then why wouldn't I use it? Trying to understand through data analysis does not detract from the tactical vision of the game or the emotional evaluation of the various situations. If anything, data adds more!

The results of the integrated analysis can be very useful in setting up the working methodology.

Most teams work, week by week, without really knowing their performance model from a tactical point of view. As a consequence, it is hard to train the approach to a match, which should instead be the main objective of a modern work methodology.

Knowing how many pressing actions, per game, my team does, how many seconds they last and how many players are involved can provide essential information to plan the training schedule.

METHODOLOGY

3.0 INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY

The methodology is such an important aspect that it would need a separate work.

Here, I will only try to summarise some important parts regarding the main topics we have analysed: pressing and counterpressing.

I think that in the 2010s, Match Analysis has completely changed the world of football.

In the 2020s, it is instead the working methodology that is changing and will change even more the world of football.

First of all, it is necessary to understand what we mean with work methodology. The methodology (**method**) used to train a team does not concern the physical-athletic part. Or rather, the physical-athletic part is only just a piece of the whole jigsaw that is the working methodology.

The method and methodology involve all aspects of the life of a player and a team; they include the athletic and the technical areas as well as the mental and, above all, the tactical department.

For years, especially some schools such as the Portuguese in the first place, then the Spanish and the German have prioritised the tactical area, thus adapting all the other departments.

I strongly believe that this is the way forward.

Returning to our main topic, training pressing, especially Gegenpressing (or counterpressing) requires specific methodology, perseverance and consistency.

We have already talked about how much counterpressing is influenced by the mental aspect and that "hunger" is one of the first "secrets" when things go well and a team achieve great results.

That is why we must include the **principle of counterpressing in almost every exercise, daily.** We need to identify a few fundamental principles for our game model (and counterpressing is definitely one for many game models) and try to stimulate them continuously.

It must also be pointed out that every time I train the counterpressing, I am actually also training to get out of counterpressing with the ball, always having a team in possession and another in non-possession.

These two aspects together contribute to the effectiveness of our transitions.

3.1 TRAINING DRILLS AND GAMES

I believe that Rondos are good starting drills which can be proposed daily because they contain many principles close to my views.

We also have the example of the Spanish school that has in the **rondo** one of the fundamental training games. from the lower age groups to the first teams.

I believe that the constant production of players, especially midfielders, by the Spanish school is a solid proof of their effectiveness.

But what is a rondo?

Let's start by saying what it is not. It is not a playing keep-away. Rondo is a game in which the team in possession of the ball is in numerical superiority - and has the objective of maintaining the ball possession - while the other team tries to win it back.

Johan Cruyff once said: "Everything that happens in a game, apart from the shot, can be done in a rondo. The competitive aspect, the fight for space, what to do when you're in possession and what to do when you don't have the ball, how to play one-touch football, how to face tight marking and how to win the ball back."

Through this exercise, we can reach a complete development of the player in the technical, **tactical, physical and psychological components.**

For example, a good passing technique and a correct orientation of the body are essential to maintain the possession of the ball.

Tactical thinking is also important in pressing.

The mental aspect influences teamwork.

And let's not forget the physical component: those who have to win the ball must obviously run and sprint at high intensity.

But it does not just end here! It is also possible to make the exercise even more specific by adding one or more principles related to our game model, thus approaching the real situations that occur in the game.

An example can be the addition of transitions (offensive and defensive) such as **counterpressing**.

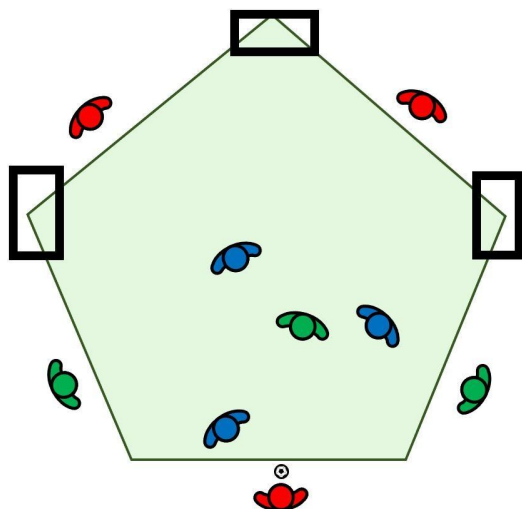
A rondo does not only consist in passing the ball around, but it is something through which we can implement the specific principles of play of the team, related to each phase of the game.

Planning rondos starting from the activation stage of any training session will allow us to immediately practice the counterpressing principle and have a consistent training schedule, thus constantly stimulating this fundamental aspect of the game.

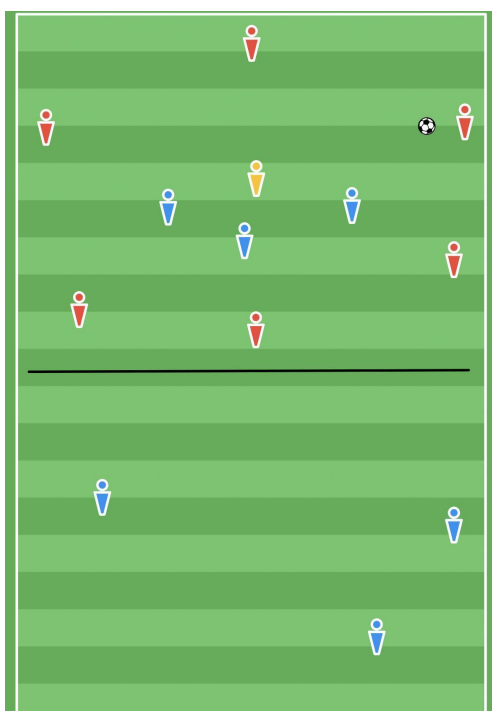
From an offensive point of view, it is important to highlight that I prefer the rondos where each player stands on his own side (i.e. a hexagon if the external players are 6) for several reasons: it gives the player more responsibilities and forces him to move in the receiving area along his side. In addition, in doing so we allow diagonal passes.

Another fundamental feature is as follows: at least one player of the team in possession must play inside (i.e. in the case of a 6vs2, a pentagon with 5 players outside and 1 inside to help possession). The use of the player "inside" is vital to train the inside-outside passing lines and encourage the use of the **third man**, helping to recognise where the pressure comes from.

Rondo iniziali

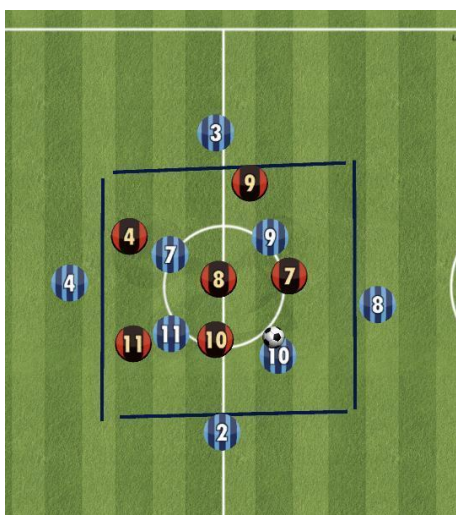


6vs3 = 6 vs 3 with 3 teams/groups, the aim is counting how many goals the Blue team scores from recovering the ball. Timed turns.



6vs6 +1j = rondo 6(+1) vs 3, if the Blue team recovers the ball, they must pass the ball to the players in the other half (getting out of counterpressing), then creating a 6(+1) vs 3 also in that part.

The Red team needs to apply counterpressing to prevent the Blue team from passing the ball towards the other half.



4+4 vs 6 = the Blue team (4 outside e 4 inside) has to maintain ball possession. If the Red team (6 players) wins the ball, there must be an immediate counterpressing by the blue team. Ball possession of the 6 Reds against the 4 Blues inside and, in case of a lost ball, immediate counterpressing against the Blue team who needs to play the ball out to come out of counterpressing.

Other essential aspects of a modern training methodology are **possessions and theme-based matches**. These are the most similar drills to a match situation, so they are really recommended during training sessions.

Possessions-based scenarios will have to be linked with the macro-principles of the game model. In this case, we only display a few examples regarding pressing and counterpressing.

Theme-based possessions

Possessions – offensive ball recovery

8 + GK vs 8 + GK = team in possession scores a point if it goes from one GK to the other. If the defending team wins the ball in the offensive half, it can score a goal in the goal defended by the GK.

Buildup vs pressing

7vs6 = Buildup 7vs6 with the objective of reaching the target (if a team reaches it straight from the defense, the point is valid only if the target first offloads the ball to a midfielder in support). The defending team presses and tries to score a goal in the small goalposts.

Here are some examples of themed matches, emphasising again the high and immediate recovery of the ball.

Themed matches

Sector game

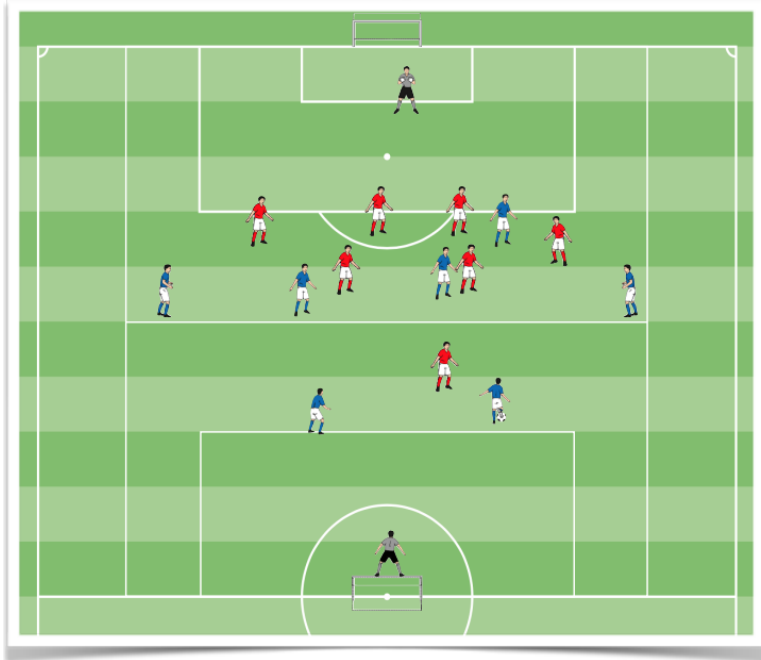
Regular match, Blues vs Reds (from 5vs5 to 11vs11, variable number) with the pitch divided into 4 sectors (right and left defensive, right and left offensive).

The team that loses the ball has the chance to earn a point (goal), if it recovers the ball in the same quadrant where the ball was lost. We encourage counterpressing in case of a lost ball as well as exiting the pressure.



Match – prior cover-ups

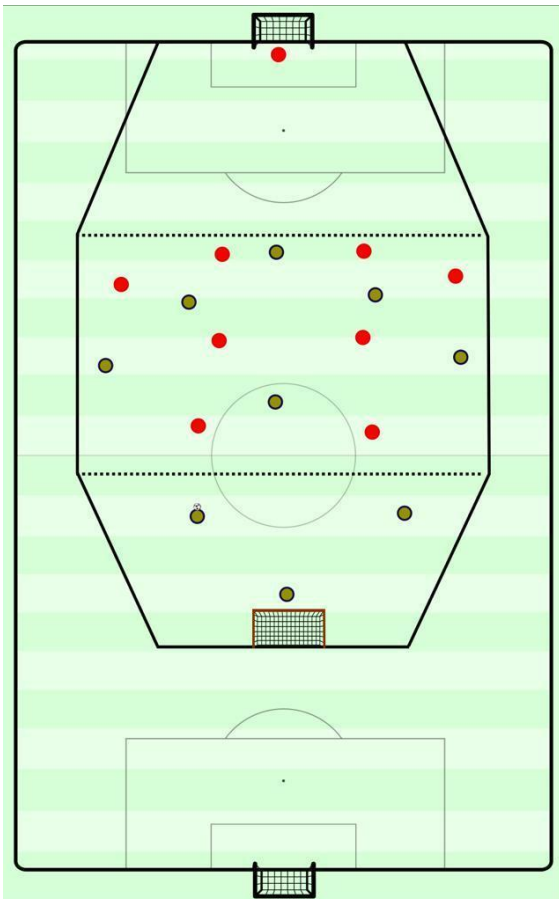
Blue vs Reds, regular match with 2 Red players that can't get deeper than the dotted line, forcing the Blues to apply defensive cover in possession.



Match – Transitions

Regular match, a “double” goal is awarded if it is scored within 5 seconds after a ball recovery.

Adding more emphasis: high pressing (to score quickly, it is more convenient to win the ball high up the pitch), counterpressing and offensive transition.



Match – Medium to High Press

Regular match, the Yellow team starts without being pressed. If they pass back from the central area to the defensive one, the Red team can press high.

CONCLUSIONS

We have reached the end of this path, in which I tried to investigate a decisive, in my opinion, part of football, especially for those who would like to implement a dominant type of football.

A team with great possession and offensive quality but little predisposition and effectiveness in the high and immediate recovery of the ball will find it much more difficult to dominate the game against a team with sufficient qualities with the ball but also with an aggressive and effective attitude during ball recovery.

I believe that we have given several examples that point in this direction.

Finally, I like to emphasise an emotional aspect, since we have talked (I think rightly so) a lot about tactics and also about numbers. The aspect of courage!

Courage is an essential aspect in football and, particularly, in pressing high.

The first individuals to lack courage are often head coaches and technical staff, overwhelmed by multiple fears when setting up an aggressive strategy. Courage or fear are then transmitted to the players who see their performance influenced by this fundamental emotional aspect.

Instilling courage and a winning mentality will help the team overcome the inevitable hard times within a match or a season.

Another aspect to highlight: the progressive disappearance or relatively less importance of traditional formations and systems.

I think that talking about systems, nowadays, is very limiting and, as far as I'm concerned, I would rather define them as

positional structures, on the ball and **defensive dispositions** off the ball.

I would like to conclude by highlighting the approach that led me throughout this work: the desire to investigate and understand more what really happens within those magical 90 minutes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Today is an important day for me.

For those who have not been professional footballers, as unfortunately happened to me, it is not easy to get to this step. Therefore, my acknowledgments go very much to all the people who have helped me on this journey.

I cannot thank my family enough, especially my women, starting from the beautiful **Victoria** who illuminates my every day with her incredible beauty and sweetness. The **girls**, my **mother**, my **sister** and all the people who surround me not just for the parental title, from my extended family.

My father and my uncle Massimo who transmitted this crazy passion to me.

My friends, a real second family, with whom I grew up since high school.

From a professional point of view, I must necessarily begin with the **Federation** that through the Club Italia and the Technical Sector has been my home for more than 12 years. I must mention **D. Albertini** and **P. Piani**, for different reasons, fundamental in my development.

All the coaches with whom I was lucky enough to have collaborated: **Donadoni, Prandelli, Conte, Ventura, Di Biagio**. Honorable mentions go to **Mancini** with whom I had the joy of sharing the **victory at Euro 2020**, and to **Pirlo**, who first believed in me in a different role and, to this day, gives me the opportunity to test myself each time.

Together with them, I would like to thank all their respective collaborators, from whom I always learned something. Among them, a warm hug goes to **G. Spinelli, A. Gregucci** and **P. Vanoli**.

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Finally, the final thought goes to **Diego Armando Maradona**, authentic inspiration for my love for this fantastic sport!
The emotions you have given to fans all over the world, Diego, will remain forever eternal.

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