

# Module 2. Study of the Structural Elements of the Goal Kick and Build-up of Play

## Overall Structure of the Team in Possession of the Ball

In order to make a good build-up play, whatever the course of action, first of all it will be essential to have a good **overall structure**, that is to say, to achieve a correct distribution of the space to later gain any type of advantage. This depends mainly on the structure that a team will have based on their style, their game system (1-4-4-2, 1-4-3-3, 1-5-3-2, etc.) and the strategic modifications that are carried out during a game in relation to the opponent's structure.

As we already stated in the first module, at the goal kick and build-up play, the general structure will also depend on a previous phase (**before**) that will affect, according to the situation analysed, the playing field distribution by the team.

During the goal kick, such distribution will initially be static, as it is actually a restart of the game.

We can use these conclusions as a parameter to understand, within the build-up play phase of the game, whether or not there are differences between the two situations and what the general principles of the team are to build-up in a combination or in a more direct way.

Despite the situation in which we find ourselves, we always have to observe the organisation of the team based on the parameters that we have previously known:

- division into zones and corridors,
- distribution depending on the width,
- distribution depending on the depth, and
- dynamics depending on the position/situation of the ball.

This information will allow the analyst to know the way in which a team presents its specific **rational playing field distribution** in the build-up play phase and, from there, to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each of the possible organisations in relation to the structure developed by the rival.

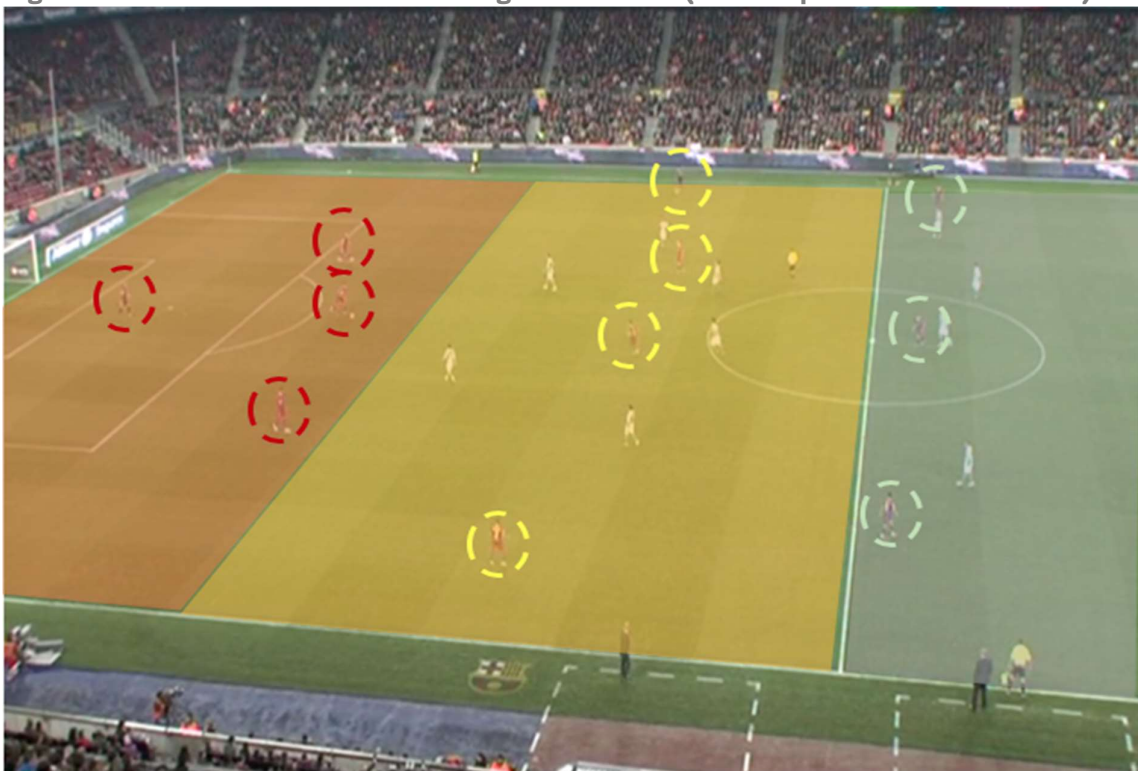


If we take the division into 4 zones as a reference, we can differentiate within the general structure **3 substructures (or lines)**, each with its own functions and organisation related to each other:

- 1<sup>st</sup> substructure: it is made up of the players preferably located in zone A (for example, goalkeeper, centre backs, pivot, or full backs)  
→ They are the "brain" of the team in this phase of the game since they make the first tactical decisions and choose the type of build-up play. Although the entire team constantly participates at all times, I believe that these players have the most important roles during this moment of the game.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> substructure: it is made up of the players located in zone B (for example, full backs and inside forwards)  
→ They serve as backing and support to the other two substructures as they generate superiorities and occasionally compensate for spaces.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> substructure: furthest players in ZC-ZD (for example, strikers-wingers)  
→ They carry out cooperation functions since they favour the roles of the teammates through attracting the attention of rival defensive line, detachments, and mobility.

As we have said, these substructures are interrelated, i.e., they take specific positions and roles, but they are linked, and each one contributes to the overall organisation of the team.

**Figure 1: The 3 substructures according to the zones (team in possession of the ball)**

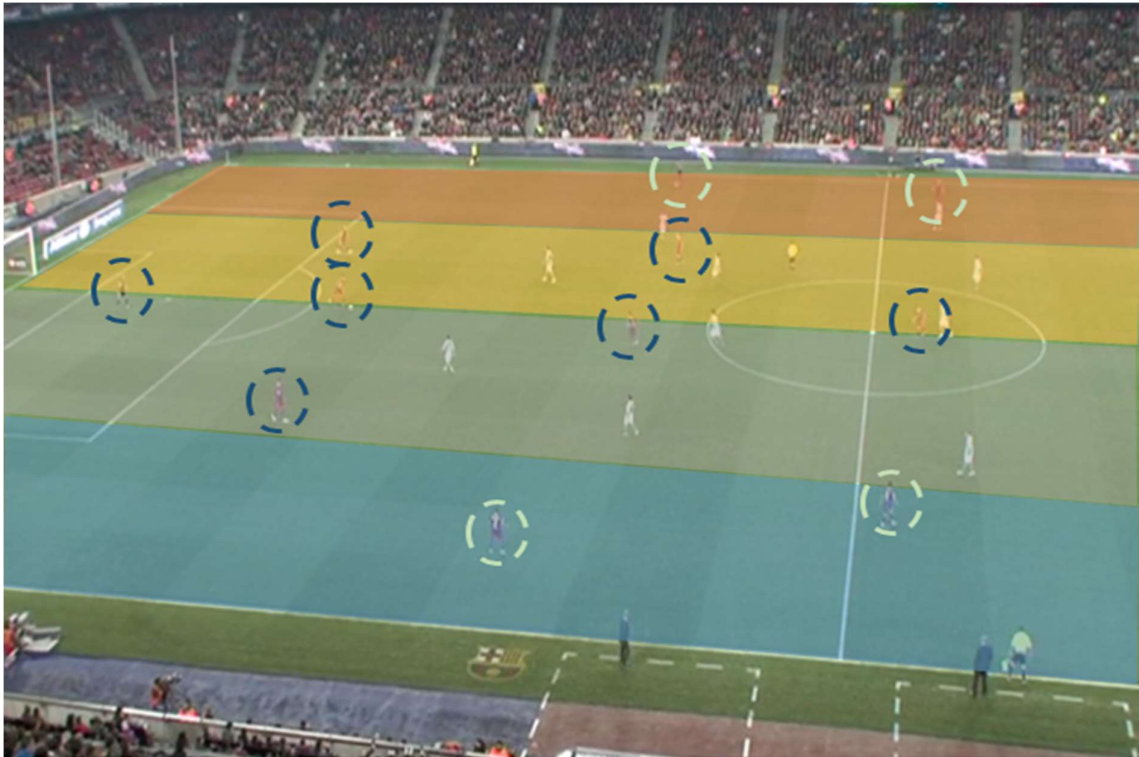


Source: own elaboration.

If we take the division into 4 corridors as a reference, we can differentiate within the general structure other **2 substructures (or axes)**:

- Players in central corridors (for example, goalkeeper, centre backs, pivot, inside forward, strikers)  
→ They have the function of progression and orientation of possession.
- Players on the corridors (for example, full backs, wingers)  
→ They undertake the task of giving the team width in order to create more space inside and balance it if progressing inside is not possible.

**Figure 2: The 2 substructures according to the corridors (team in possession of the ball)**



Source: own elaboration.

It must be understood that each means of analysis used as an evaluation filter will help us obtain specific information, which will allow us to know more about the organisation of the analysed teams.

Static positioning (especially in goal kick) will be a very important aspect since it will strongly condition all the successive dynamics in play and will give us prior information about the following intentions of the team in possession of the ball (as we will see later, the same applies to the defending team).

In relation to the spatial parameters used, in the next section, we will study in more detail the different specific locations of each substructure (lines or axes), which allow the team in possession of the ball to have a good organisation so as to achieve a correct distribution of the space and get an effective build-up play.

## Substructures in relation to the zones

### Zone A-B (build-up play)

We can classify our build-up play phase based on the number assigned and the structure created by the players in zone A and zone B, according to the organisation itself, the height, and the structure of the opponents' block.

Taking these factors into account, we usually classify the types of structures during the build-up play phase according to the number of players present in these zones.

Below are the most used ones:

- Build-up play with 4 players
  - Pure: 2 centre backs + 2 full backs (at different heights or holding the line)
  - Mixed: 3 centre backs + 1 pivot/inside forward
- Build-up play with 3 players
  - Pure: 3 centre backs
  - Pure: 2 centre backs + 1 full back
  - Mixed: 2 centre backs + 1 pivot
  - Mixed: 2 centre backs + 1 inside forward
- Build-up play with 2 players

By “pure”, I mean a build-up play made up of players from the **same defensive line**, and by “mixed”, a build-up play in which players from the midfield line join the defensive one.

It is clear that this division refers mainly to outfield players. However, the role of the **goalkeeper** must be taken into account since they will always be our **free man**, capable of establishing superiorities that occasionally allow us to handle rival pressure or ensure possession in case of such situation.

- Build-up play with 4 players

The **pure build-up play with 4 players** is one of the most used build-up plays in the majority of game systems.

It is characterised by the main participation of the two centre backs and the full backs.

Generally, it is used against teams pressing with only one striker.

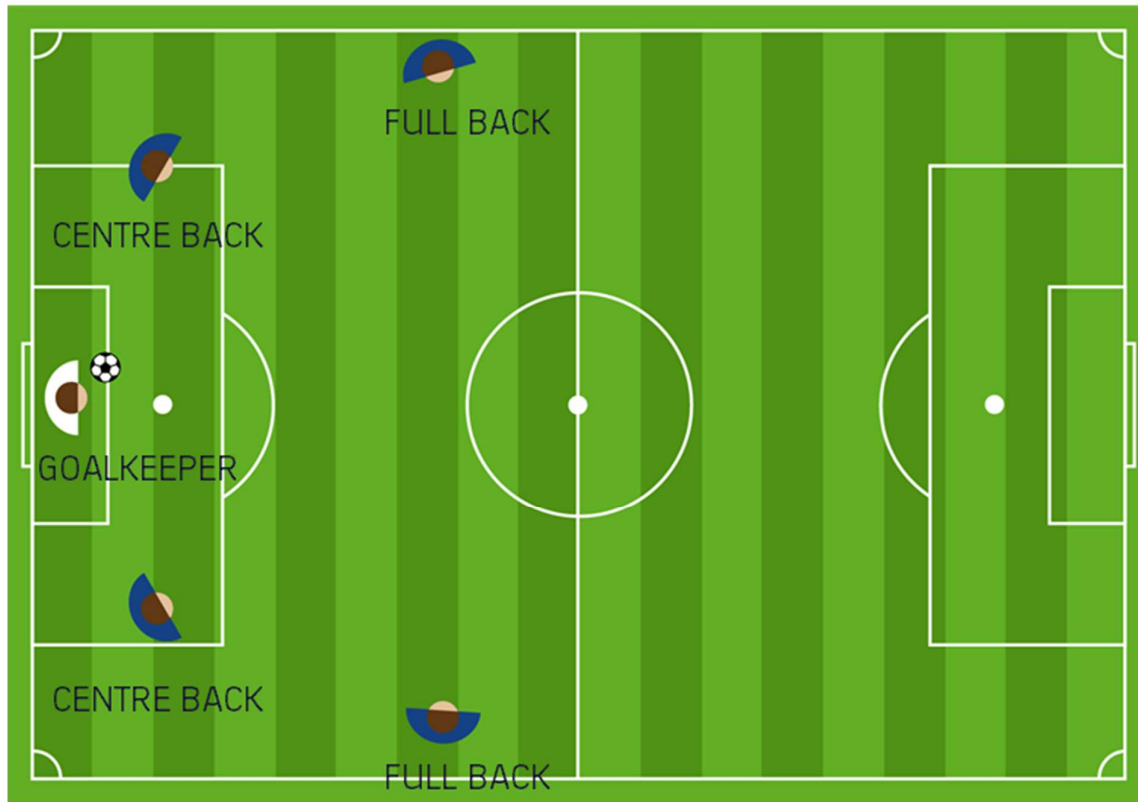
The height of the full backs, which can be located higher or in line with the centre backs, will depend both on the type of pressure that the rival generates (high block or low block) and on the type of build-up play that the team wants to achieve, that is, if you want to create spaces in a specific playing field location.

For example, a lower line of the 4 will try to attract the rivals by means of its own arrangement or a previous circulation of the ball and then create space in more advanced zones of the pitch.

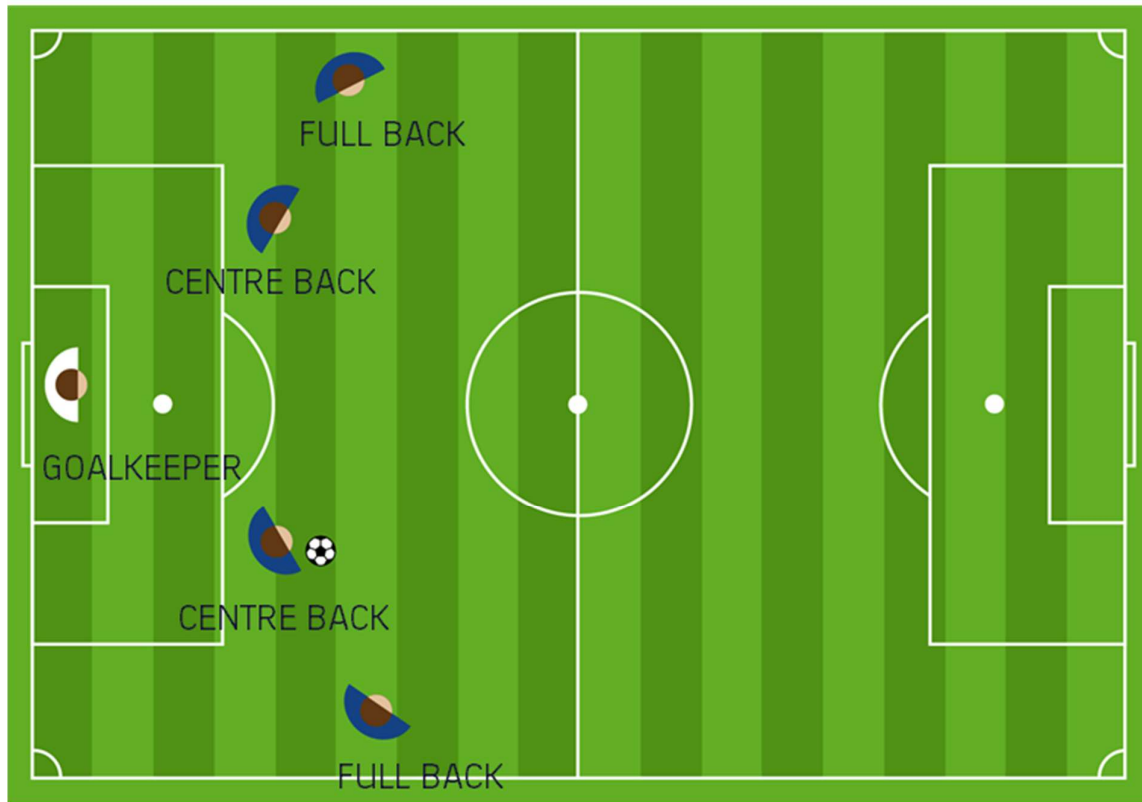


Figure 3: Pure build-up plays with 4 players

## Build-up play at different heights (trapezium)



## Build-up play holding the line (of 4)



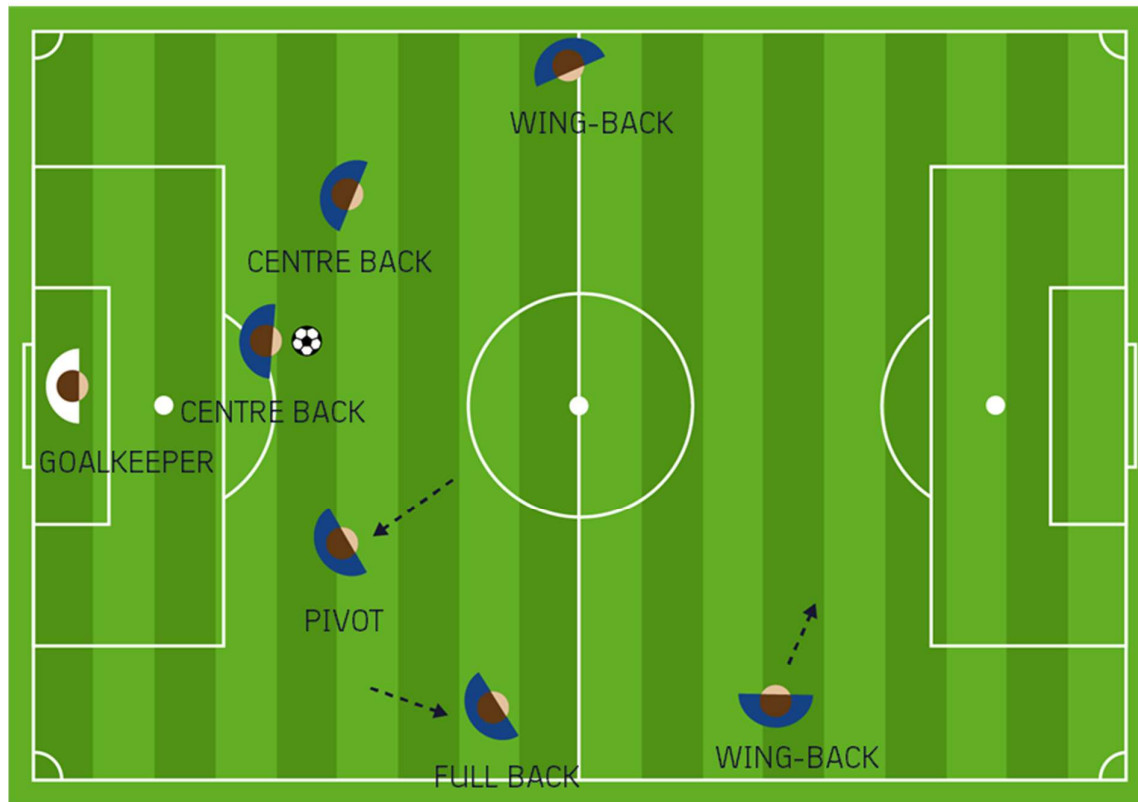
Source: own elaboration.

The **mixed build-up play with 4 players** is a variant, although not as widely used, implemented by incorporating a pivot or inside forward to the line of the 3 centre backs to allow the close centre back to be higher and establish a numerical superiority in this flank with the wing-back (teams like Conte's Inter Milan uses it).

It is an interesting variant, surely used to adapt the build-up play to the characteristics of the players themselves (or the rival's), rather than just a numerical issue.

Figure 4: Mixed build-up play with 4 players

## Build-up play with 3 centre backs + 1 pivot



Source: own elaboration.

### Build-up play with 3 players

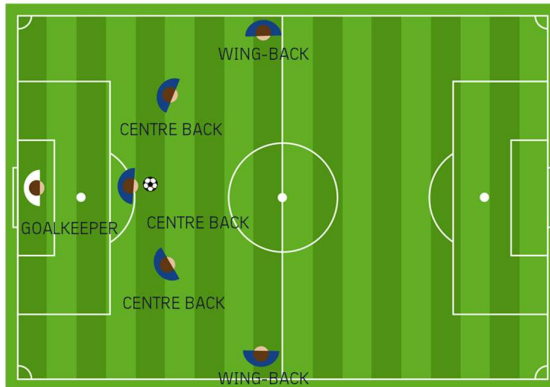
The build-up play with three players is very good because you modify the opponent's pressure. When you build up with three players, even if the opponent presses you with two ones (one striker and one attacking midfielder), you force them to develop a parallel structure in 4-4-2 hence you overcome them. (Guardiola informed in Marsuian, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3hLK40F>)

The **pure build-up play with 3 players** is typical of game systems in which there are 3 centre backs (1-5-3-2, 1-5-4-1 or 1-3-4-3); therefore, they already have a numerical superiority in this area against a team that, for instance, escapes the pressure created by two strikers.

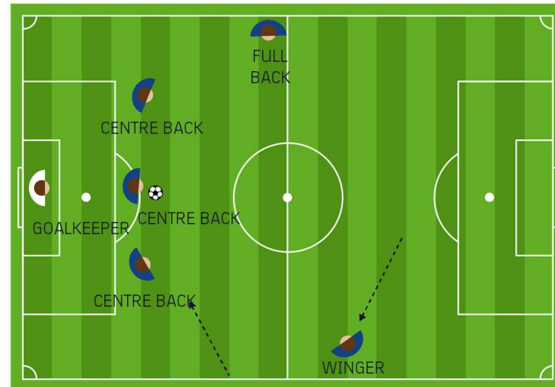
A variant is the incorporation of one of the full backs at the height of the centre backs (that is, why it is still pure), which causes a shuffle over of the line as it allows the full back of the opposite side to be higher.

**Figure 5: Pure build-up plays with 3 players**

**Build-up play with 3 centre backs**



**Build-up play with 2+1 full back**



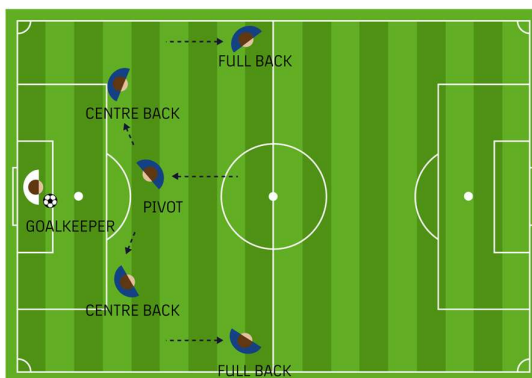
Source: own elaboration.

The **mixed build-up play with 3 players** foresees the incorporation of a midfielder to the defensive line. Thus, a numerical superiority is obtained in the build-up play. The most used one, known as "Lavolpiana build-up" since it was devised by the Argentine coach Ricardo La Volpe, foresees that the centre backs open and that the centre midfielder is located between them. At the same time, the full backs advance their position in width, forcing the wingers to play more inside (teams like FC Barcelona or Guardiola's Bayern Munich use it).

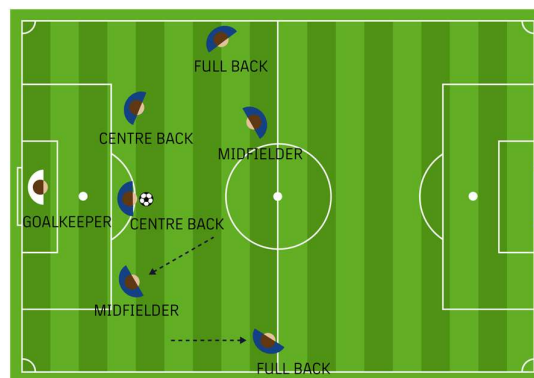
A variant foresees the flanking of one of the inside forwards to the defensive line and forces the full back of the adjoining flank to position themselves higher (variant often used in Tuchel's Borussia Dortmund or Lopetegui's Sevilla).

**Figure 6: Mixed build-up plays with 3 players**

**Build-up play with 2+1 Pivot**



**Build-up play with 2+1 Midfielder**



Source: own elaboration.

All these variants are applied by the coach according to the specific characteristics of their players in this phase of the game (they may depend, for example, on the ability or inability of the centre backs to filter good passes from the inside) and according to the intention



that the coach proposes to make a build-up play from behind (for example, with a short ball or jumping lines directly).

#### Build-up play with 2 players

This refers more to a specific situation since it either presupposes that the rival team is in a low block or presses with a single striker and, hence, it does not force the team in possession of the ball to take other players to get superiority. Personally, I think that this build-up play consists more of a variant of the build-up play with 4 players in which the full backs will have more advanced positions, with the intention of progressing rather than supporting the centre backs at the build-up play, and where the pivot can be located more ahead of the centre backs to provide progression support rather than join the line.

#### Zone A-B (goal kick)

Following the recent rule change, many teams have taken advantage of the new rules in order to have the upper hand when making a build-up play from behind.

As we have already mentioned, the team in possession of the ball has more spaces available since it creates the possibility of positioning its players within the box. This is due to the fact that the opponents will not be able to get in the box until the ball has clearly moved.

Therefore, the team defending the goal kick will have more spaces to protect, which is a clear advantage for the team in possession of the ball when it comes to making a build-up play in a combined way.

Depending on its initial diagram, the team in possession of the ball will position within its box different players whose main objective will be to attract opponents and perhaps create space between the lines or to the sides, depending on the way in which the opponents handle the pressure.

The most used variant, especially by teams lined up with a defensive line of 4 players, is the one that lowers the two central defenders together with the goalkeeper just outside the goal area in order to offer the goalkeeper a more comfortable first solution with a short passing line.

The support of one or more players (generally pivots or inside forwards) can be anticipated. These players can get in to assume superiority, attract even more rivals and create spaces in more distant zones.



Figure 7: Goal kick with 2 players in the box plus a goalkeeper (FC Barcelona)



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

You can either include even more players to “fill the build-up play” or arrange them at different heights within the box to later cause imbalances in the opponent's structure, who rapidly pressurize them, forcing them to defend more space.

It will be crucial to identify their achievement followed by a certain position (where we create spaces and with whom we take advantage of them).

Even for teams that are in line of 3 defenders, a more convenient solution may be to lower two centre backs next to the goalkeeper while the third one is outside the box. In this way, we make the central midfielders go higher.

**Figure 8: Goal kick with 4 players in the box plus a goalkeeper (Milan Inter)**



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

#### Zone C-D

As we have previously explained, players located in the rival half during the build-up play phase (mainly strikers, midfielders, and wingers) usually have two main objectives:

- to create spaces in zones, close to the ball (thus preventing rivals from participating in the play), engaging, and attracting the rival defensive line, and
- to be the direct or indirect receivers of the ball (in case it is decided to play a long ball).

We have to understand that these players are the ones who allow and facilitate a correct build-up play, whatever their successive dynamics be.

According to the number (whether with 3 or with 2 strikers), the players will be able to position themselves in relation to the rivals of the defensive line (more open or closed to man or during intervals) to gain some type of advantage that allows them to raise possibilities of progression towards the goal.

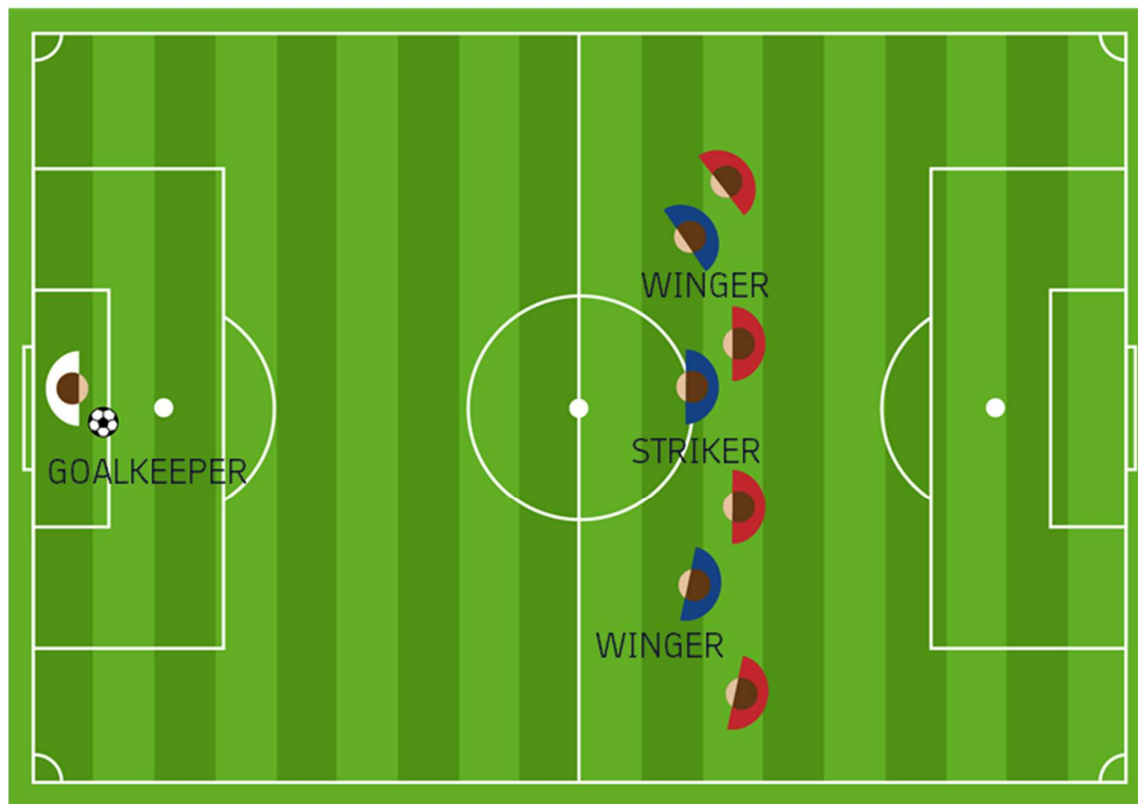
Identifying this location (in width and depth) and their achievement by means of this arrangement will be essential to understand the overall operation of the team and its performance.

There will always be three possibilities of acting: playing directly a long ball, playing indirectly a long ball, or playing a short ball. Within these possibilities, as we will see in the next module, there are a lot of variants and alternatives.

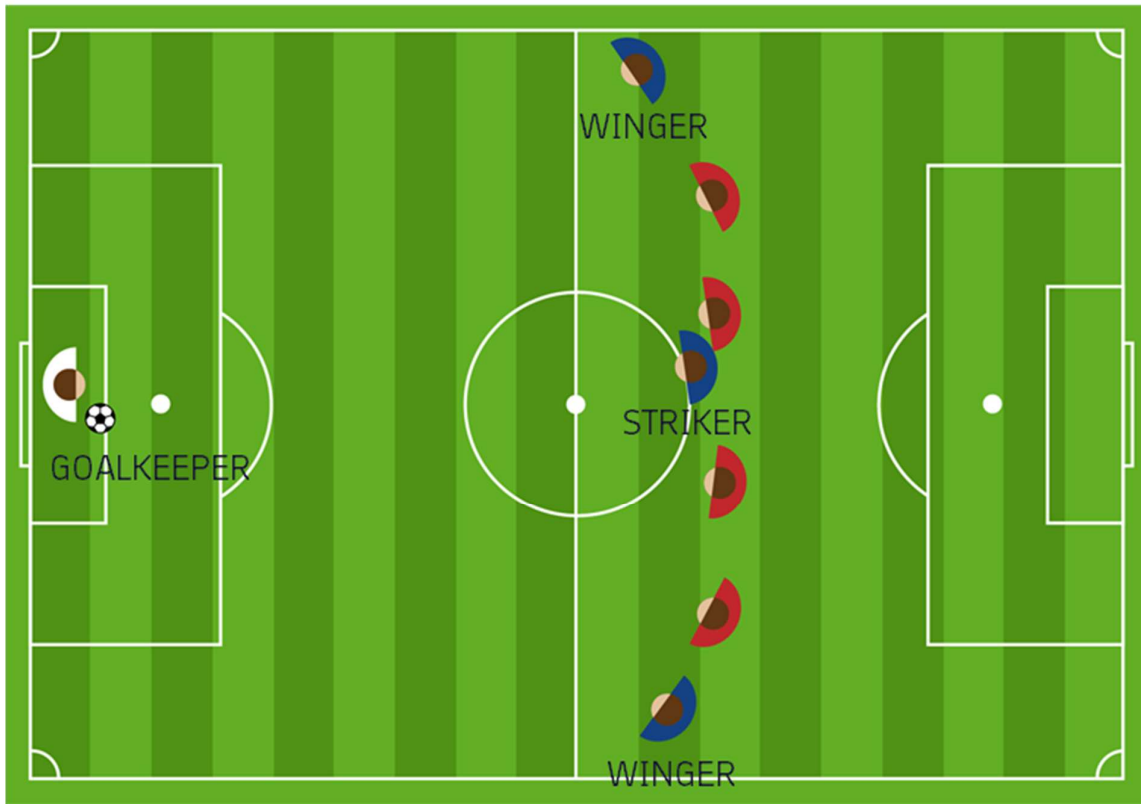
However, the structure by itself, especially if we take the players furthest from the ball as a reference, can provide us with a lot of information regarding the intentions of the team that wants to make a build-up play and create spaces.

**Figure 9: Some positions of strikers and wingers related to the defence line**

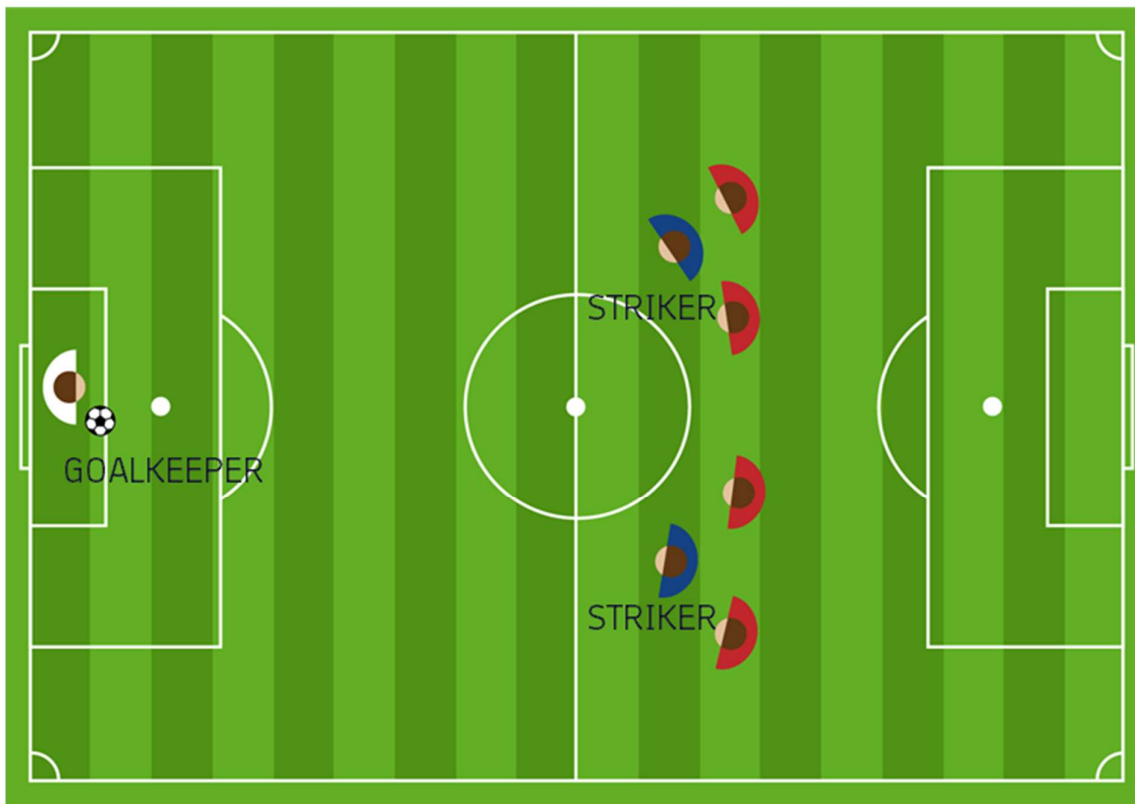
## Nearby Striker-Wingers



# Far Away Striker-Wingers



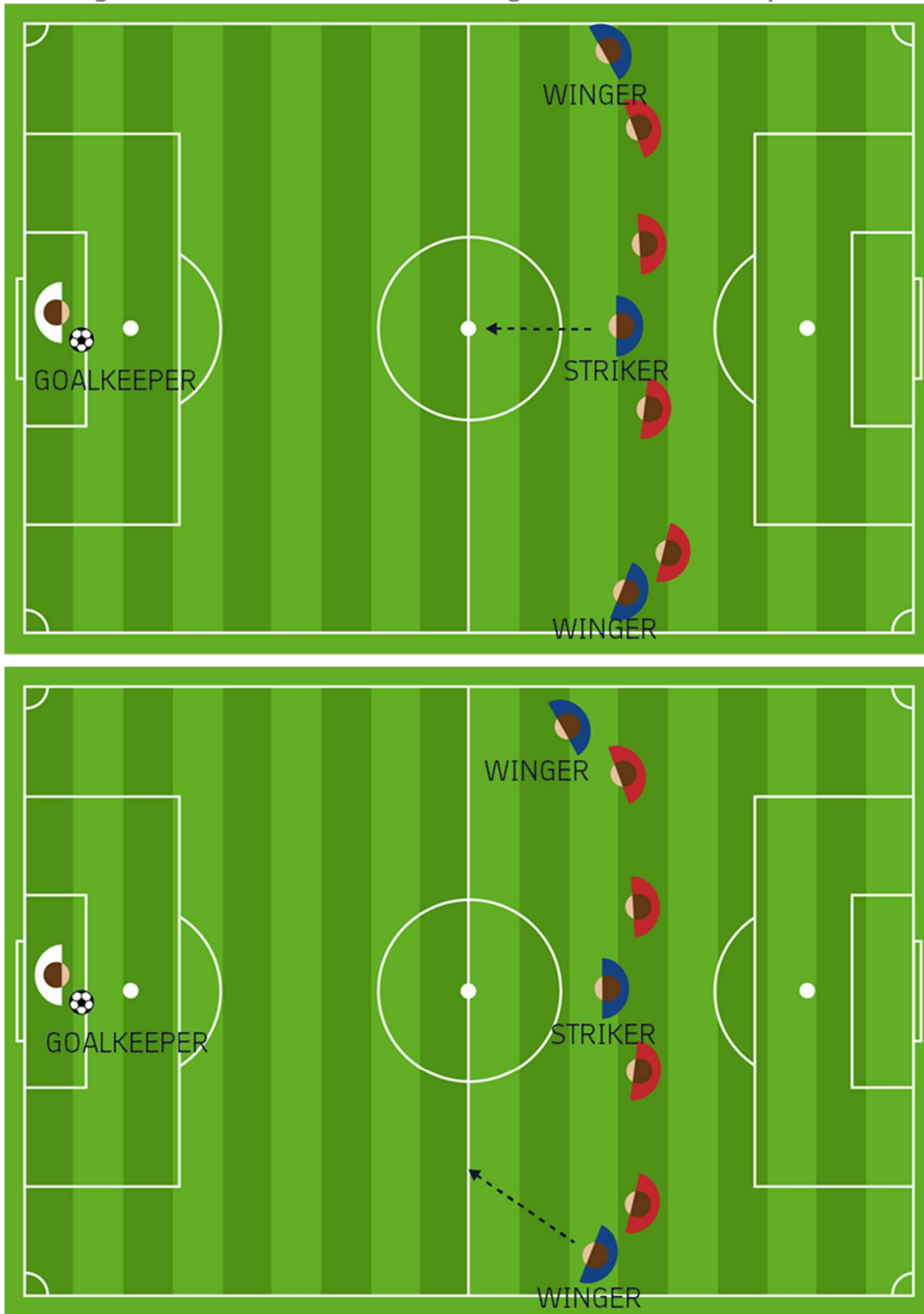
## 2 Strikers

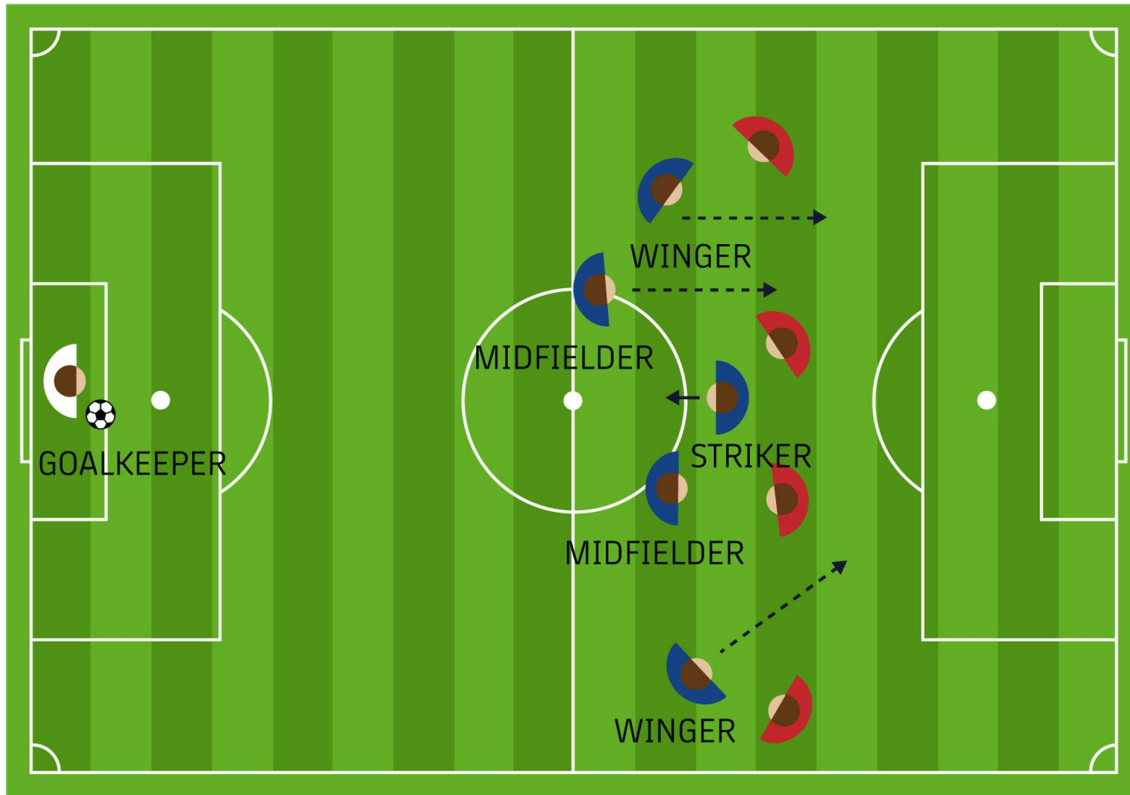


Source: own elaboration.

In relation to the game diagram, it is possible to take into account that the incorporation of players from other lines may also be necessary to attract the attention rivals and generate possible 2vs1s.

Figure 10: Different movements according to the forwards' initial position





Source: own elaboration.

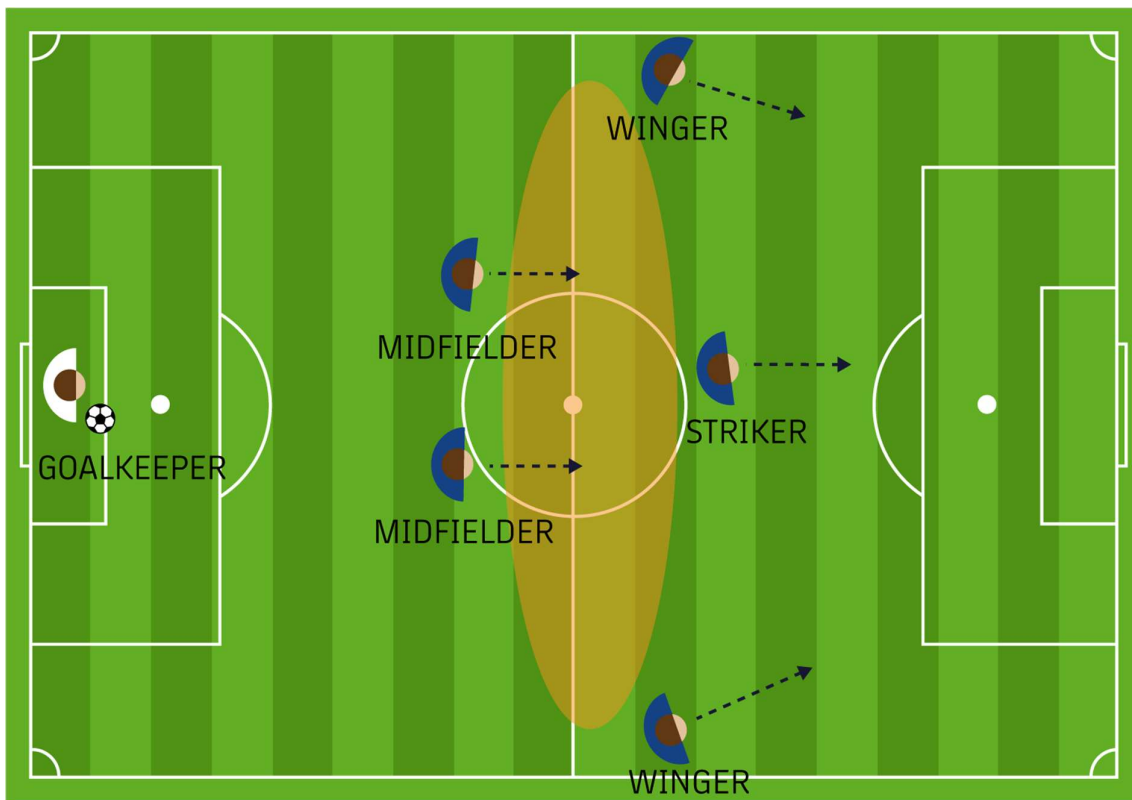
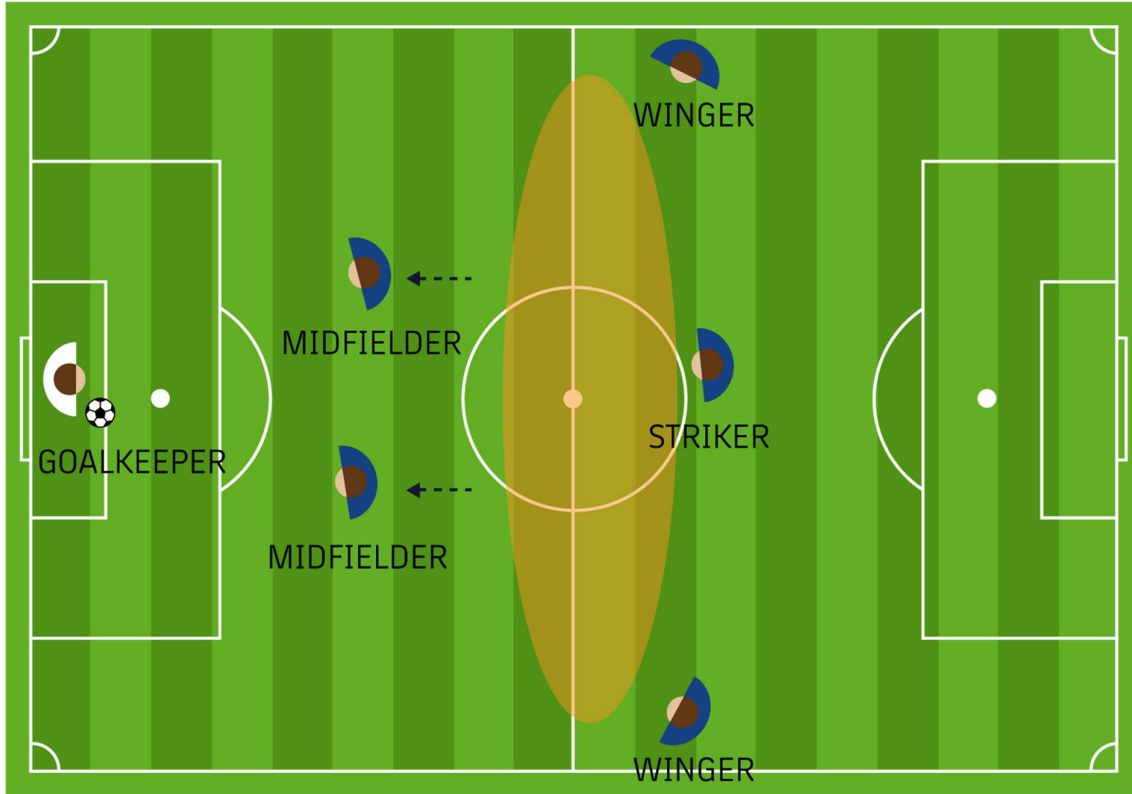
Of course, such behaviours will always be coordinated with the closest and most distant teammates so as to create those spaces that we want to take advantage of.

In the following figure, we can see two of the many possible options to create spaces between lines as a result of the relationship between the forwards and the inside forwards.

In the first option, it is the inside forwards who approach the goalkeeper to attract rivals who will chase them, with the strikers taking advantage of the space created to receive the ball directly (this option is often taken by Valverde's FC Barcelona). In the second option, on the other hand, it will be the forwards who will "push" the rival defensive line to allow the inside forwards to occupy the space created and occasionally win second balls.

We can take both options into consideration, which will depend on the study and analysis of the rival's strengths and weaknesses in relation to our players' characteristics.

Figure 11: Attract the attention in order to create spaces



Source: own elaboration.



For instance, if we play against a 3-player defence, we can implement the strategy of lowering the players in the first two lines to make space for 3vs3 in the attacking area and place the forwards according to the opposing defenders' characteristics, while we try to take advantage of this situation by playing a direct pass (De la Fuente 2019, internal club training).

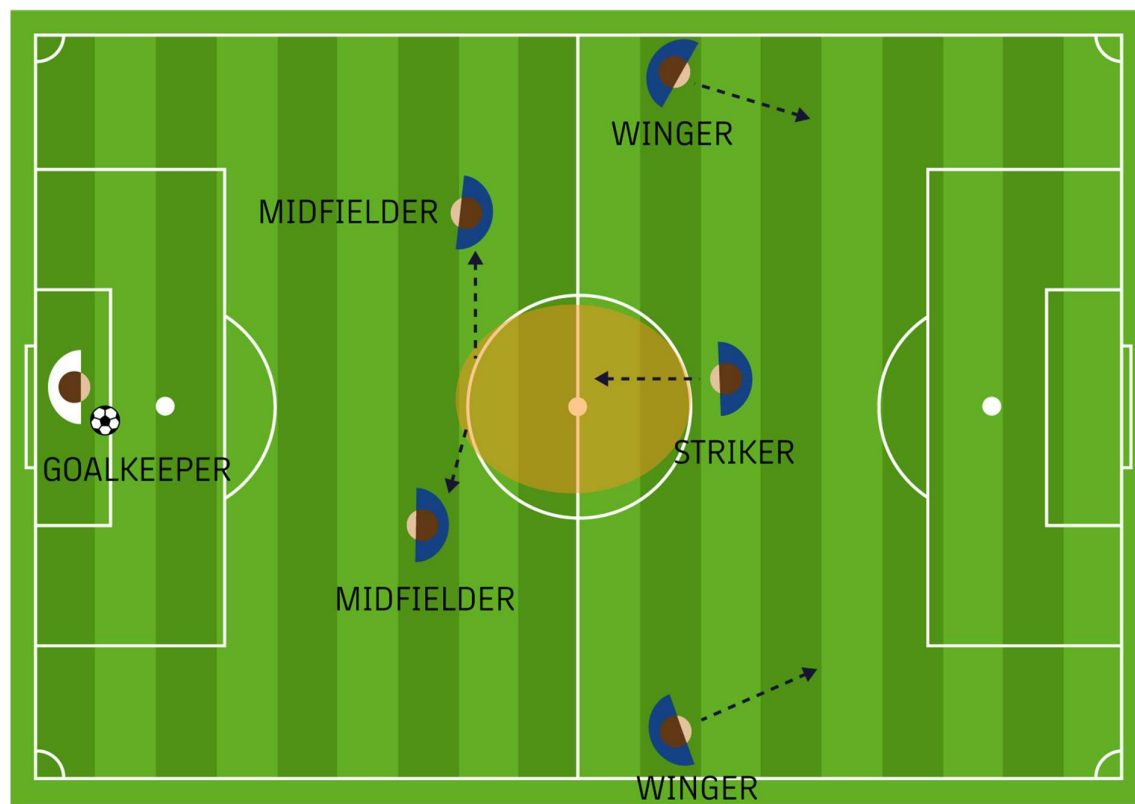
### Substructures in relation to the corridors

#### CENTRAL CORRIDORS

The number and position of the players located in the central corridors will depend on different factors such as the game system and the modifications that will be made with respect to the opponent's structure. However, it is advisable to have at least the same number of players as opponents to foster the creation of passing lines or an equal number of players that allows us to recover the ball in case of loss.

Achieving any type of superiority (especially numerical or positional) will depend on the movements or the specific structural modifications of each situation during a game.

**Figure 12: Movement of the inside forwards to “empty” the central corridors and create space for the striker descending to receive the ball**



Source: own elaboration.

Placing at different heights will clearly give us options to progress as it will make different pass alternatives possible that will force the defending team to change its structure.

### CORRIDORS

Placing players across the width of the field allows us to:

- create spaces and gaps in the opponent's structure;
- force opponents to cover more space to defend;
- open up gaps (superiorities) inside the field, and
- have a choice of continuity in possession of the ball.

Identifying how and with whom a team manages to obtain width will be important when it comes to obtaining qualitative information since it will indirectly allow us to know the number of players located inside the playing field.

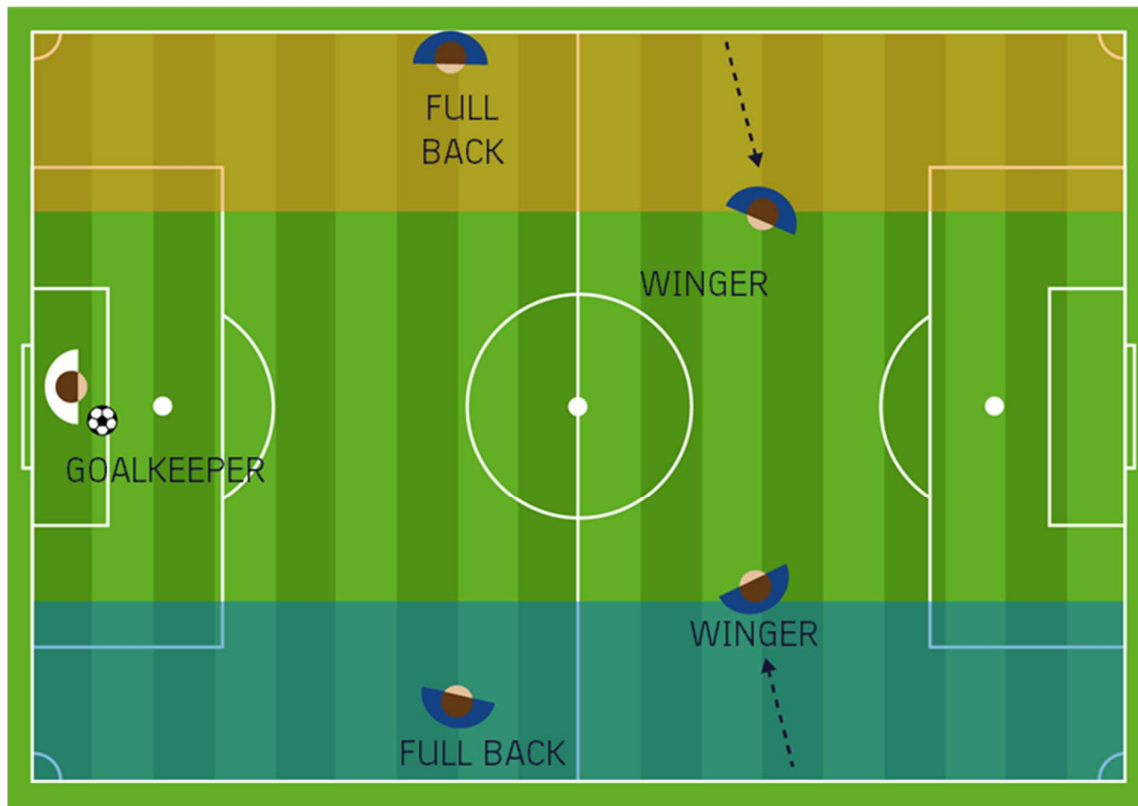
As we can see in the following images, there is an example of the different ways in which we can occupy the corridors (reference 1-4-3-3 in relation to the full backs-wingers' positions):

- to cover the corridors only with the full backs (the two wingers are located on the inside);
- to cover one flank with one player and the other with two players, and
- to cover both corridors with two players.

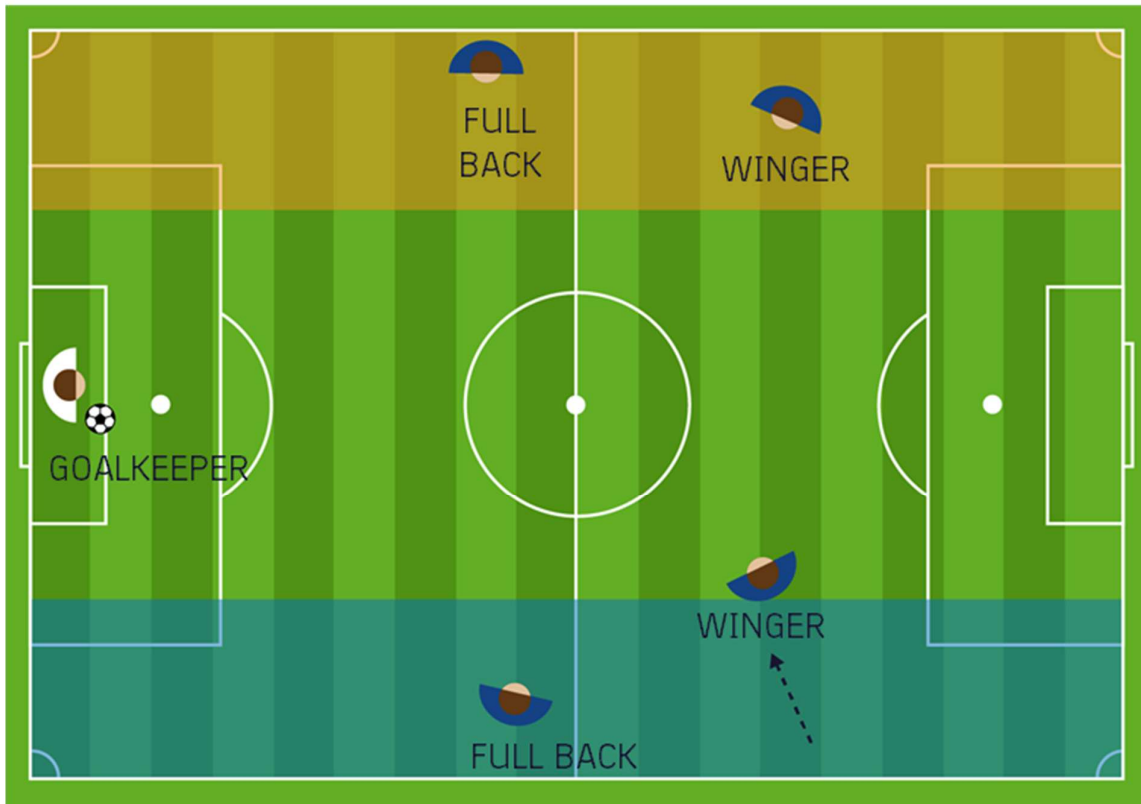


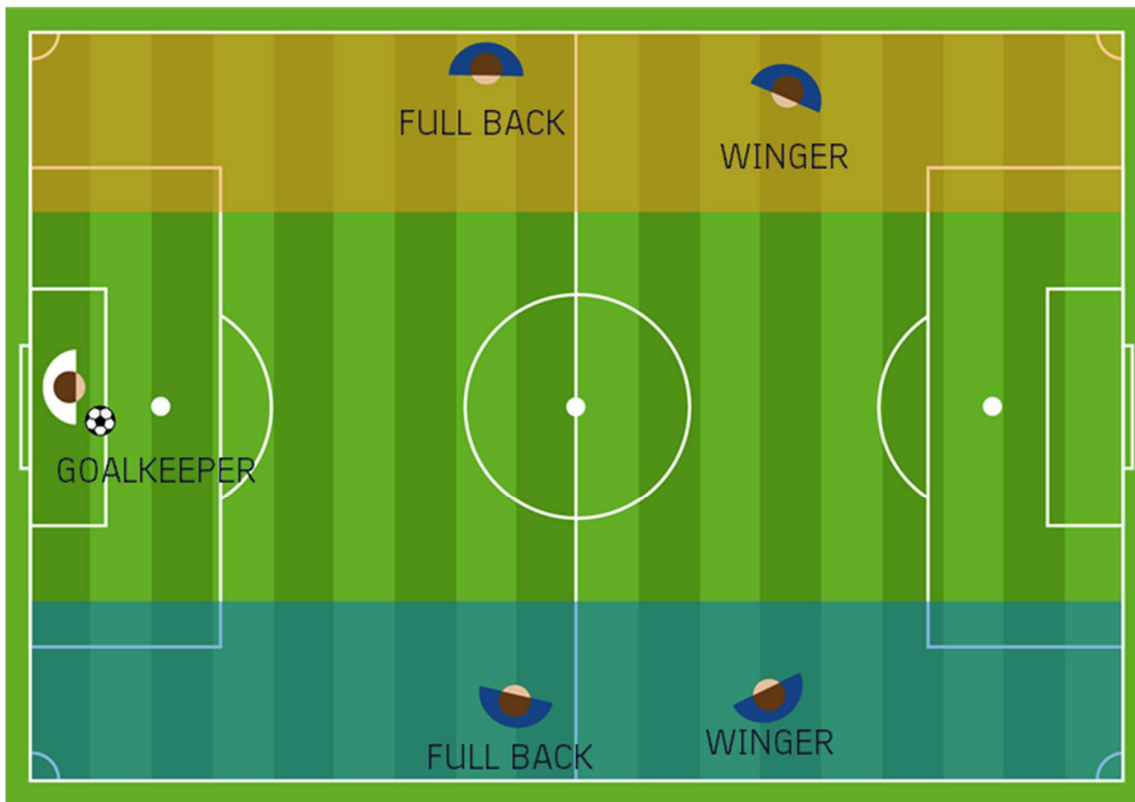
Figure 13: Cover of the corridors by full backs and wingers

2/0



2/1





Source: own elaboration.

Not only can this filter be used for any game system, but also for these two positions, although they are the ones that preferably occupy these places in the playing field. It is possible to occupy the corridors also with other players depending on the situation in which we find ourselves and the objectives we want to achieve.

### Overall structure of the team in recovery of the ball

The same parameters that allow us to analyse the structures and the position of the team in possession of the ball will also be important to identify the structures in the team defending the rival build-up playing phase since it will oppose their structure, which, by itself, will affect that of the rival and its following dynamics.

It will always be important to evaluate each situation according to the type of defensive system adopted and the height of the pressure.

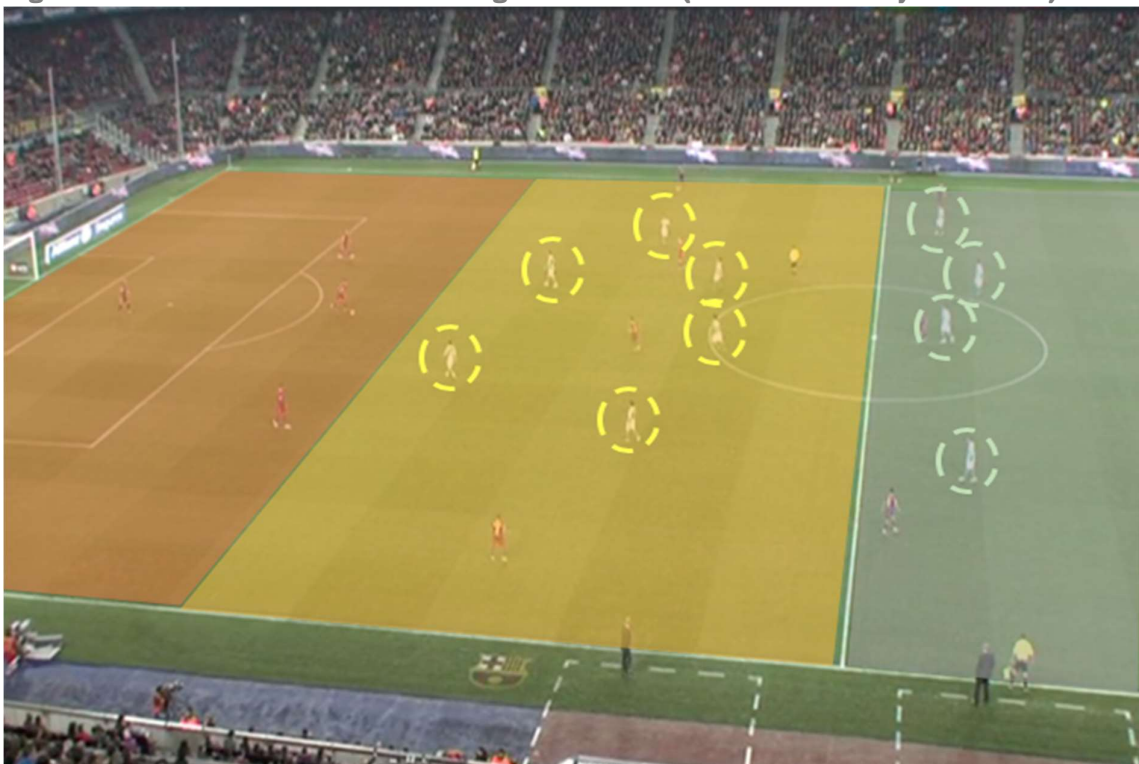
Generally, the first parameter that is taken into consideration is the **height of the block**, which can be any of the following options:

- In a high block: a team presses in rival zone A, placing the defensive line at the height of the midfield and tries to recover during the first circulation of the ball.
- In a mid-block: the team starts to press in rival zone B or in their own field, prioritising defending the spaces behind them and leaving the first pass at the build-up play.
- In low block: the opposing team prefers to be completely located (or most of its players) in their own field and closes their spaces between lines as much as possible.

Within each of these scenarios, we can directly identify how many players occupy zones and corridors as well as what structure they will preferentially establish. Depending on the height of the block, we can identify the dynamic spaces between the different lines of the defending team.

For instance, we can see in the following figure how the defending team does not position any player in the opponent's Zone A (its Zone D) and leaves the build-up play with a short ball to the centre backs to prioritise the defence of the spaces between lines. Therefore, it presents a very compact in-line mid-block which will surely start to press when the opposing team tries to play inside or outside.

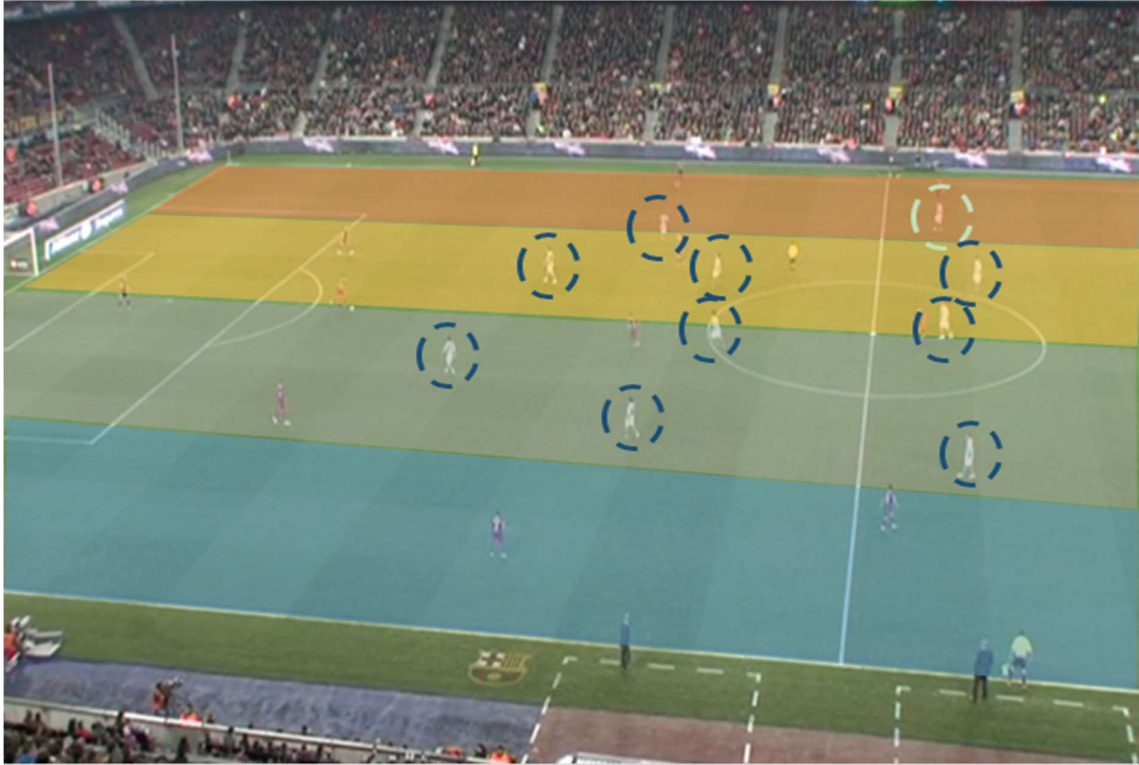
**Figure 14: The substructures according to the zones (team in recovery of the ball)**



Source: own elaboration.

The same filter can be used to identify the position of the team in relation to the width and thus to the corridors. Besides, as we can see, the same team has the majority of its players in the central corridors and only one, the right full back, slightly more open. In this case, we can come to the conclusion that the intention of the team will be to defend central spaces and give the rival the possibility of making an outside build-up play, and from there, start the possible pressure.

Figure 15: The substructures based on the corridors (team in recovery)



Source: own elaboration.

Below, there are examples of different methods implemented to face a team during the build-up playing phase, which is divided by **pressure lines**.

Players of 1<sup>st</sup> line in high-mid block

**1. They press with 1 player (striker)**

→ **Possible solution:** open centre backs that can progress in dribble.

Figure 16: Pressing with 1 striker



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

## 2. Pressing with 2 players (2 strikers or 1 striker + 1 inside forward/attacking midfielder)

→ **Possible solution:** line of 3 players with a pivot that is positioned between centre backs or behind the jumping strikers, flanked inside forward, lower full back in line with the centre backs.

Figure 17: Pressing with 2 strikers



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

3. Pressing with 3 players (3 strikers or 2 strikers + 1 inside forward/attacking midfielder)

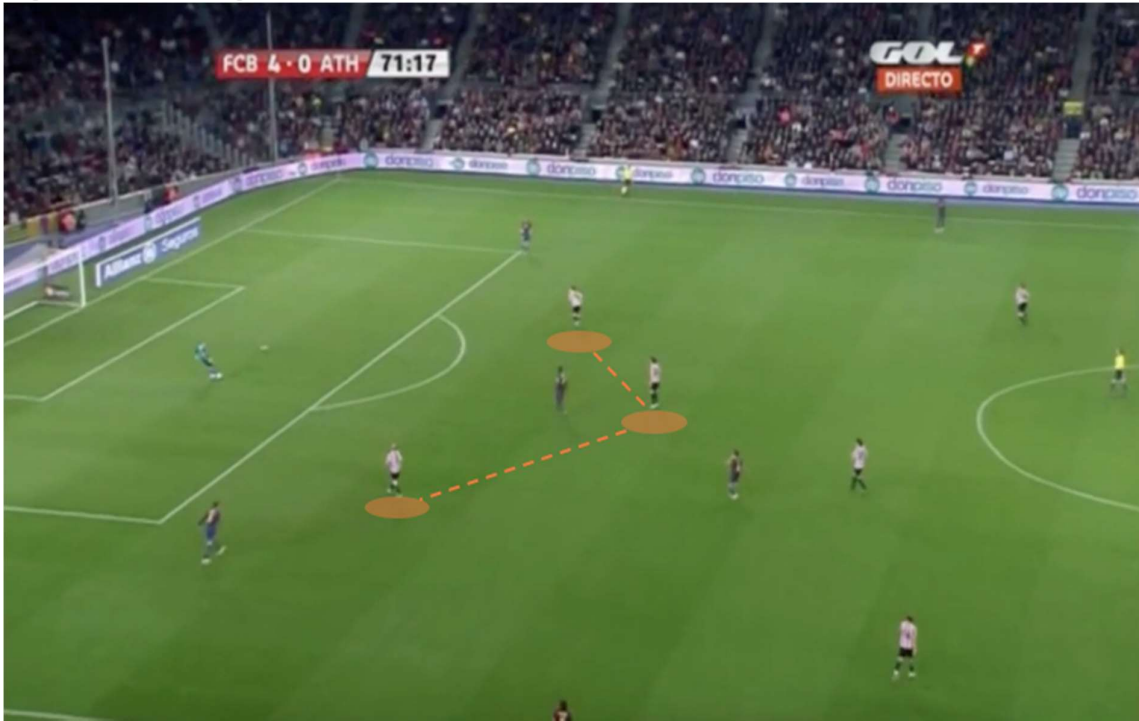
→ Possible solution: option of playing directly to players of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> line.

Figure 18: Pressing with 3 strikers



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

**Figure 19: Pressing with 2 strikers + 1 midfielder**



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

#### Players of 1<sup>st</sup> line low block

1. *They press* with 1 player (striker)

→ Possible solution: circulate quickly with the two centre backs.

2. Pressing with 2 players (2 strikers or 1 striker + 1 inside forward/attacking midfielder)

→ Possible solution: line of 3 players with a pivot that is positioned between centre backs or behind the jumping strikers, flanked inside forward.

Many teams will apply different variants when starting the pressure. This means that, despite its initial structure, once the ball moves, they will be able (or not) to alter that structure. A clear example is a team that presses on 1-4-3-3, where the striker jumps to a centre back, while when jumping towards the other, it will be the inside forward (with the wingers ready to jump to full backs), which will actually change its structure in 1-4-4-2.

We can also draw the attention to the players of the 2<sup>nd</sup> line and identify the following elements:

- the number (2, 3 or 4),
- their structures (in line or diamond),
- their pairings (to zone or to man),
- whether they split the block or not, and

- the possible asymmetries towards a flank.

For instance, in Figure 20, we see how the diamond structure in the middle of the team defending the goal kick makes it practically impossible for the opponent to find their inner players directly. For this reason, it will be important for the team in possession of the ball to establish superiority in the sides.

**Figure 20: Diamond structure (of 4 players in the central corridors)**



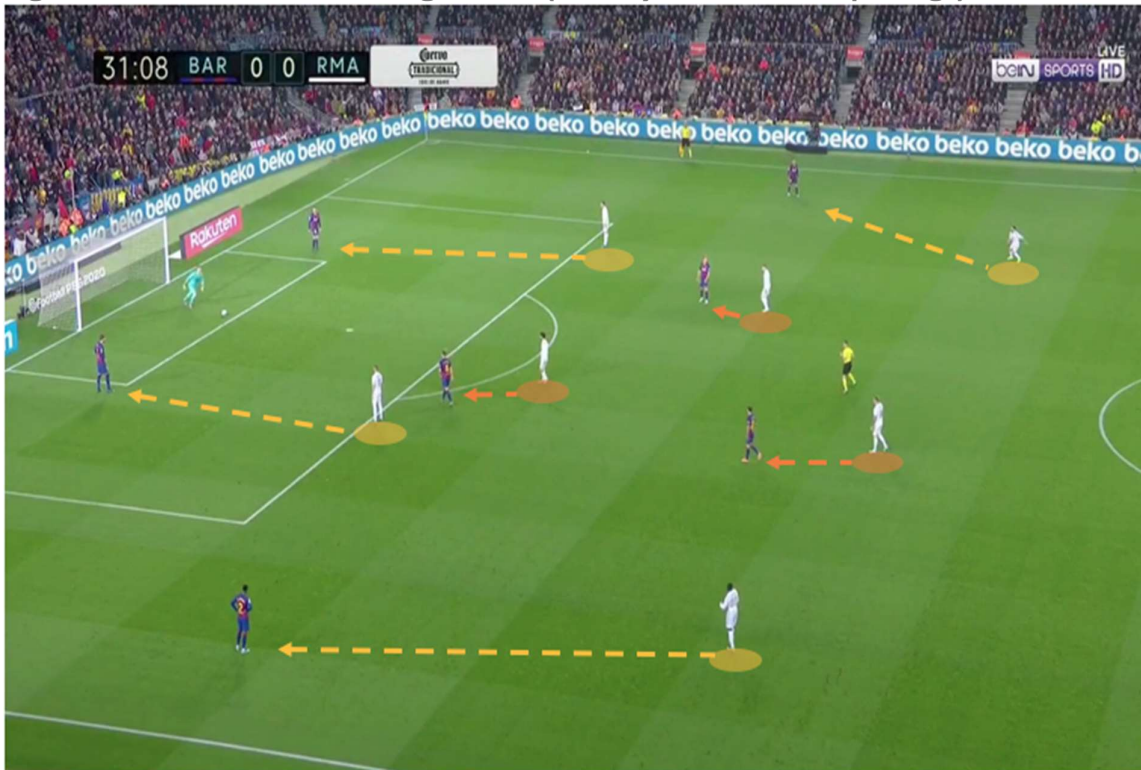
Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

Figure 21: Hold the line structure (3+1 players) + divided block



Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

Figure 22: Defence structure for goal kick (identify distances and pairings)



Source: Wyscout screenshot with own adaptation.

For the players of the 3<sup>rd</sup> defensive line, it will be important to identify factors such as the following:

- the number,
- the height (and distance to other lines),
- the distance between players on the same line, and
- pairings.

The lack of offside in the goal kick will be another factor that we must take into consideration in order to understand the far away players' behaviour.

**Figure 23: Hold the line structure with 4 players**



Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

**Figure 24: Hold the line structure with 3 open players**



Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

**Figure 25: Hold the line structure with 3 closed players**



Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

Likewise, we will have to observe the possible position of the players in vigilance in the event of set pieces such as corners or fouls and identify the following elements:

- how many players they leave further back,
- where they are located, and
- who they are.

In this way, we can get possible advantages when restarting the game and decide if we will play directly a long ball.

From all the information presented, we can arrive at the conclusion that teams adopt different types of pressure against the rival's build-up play and vice versa. In this way, they occupy the playing field in different ways, thus forcing opponents to display different behaviours or developing certain structures.

### Comparison of both overall structures

Once we have acquired the necessary knowledge of the structures of the two teams, we will be able to superimpose both structures and obtain other information that will help us identify areas, spaces, and possible advantages.

We will particularly focus on the following information:

- number of players of both teams in zone A and zone B (midfield);
- number of players of the two teams that stay advanced;
- players in intermediate zones (numerical and positional superiorities); and
- pairings (qualitative superiority).

**Figure 26: Overlapping structures of the two teams in a goal kick**



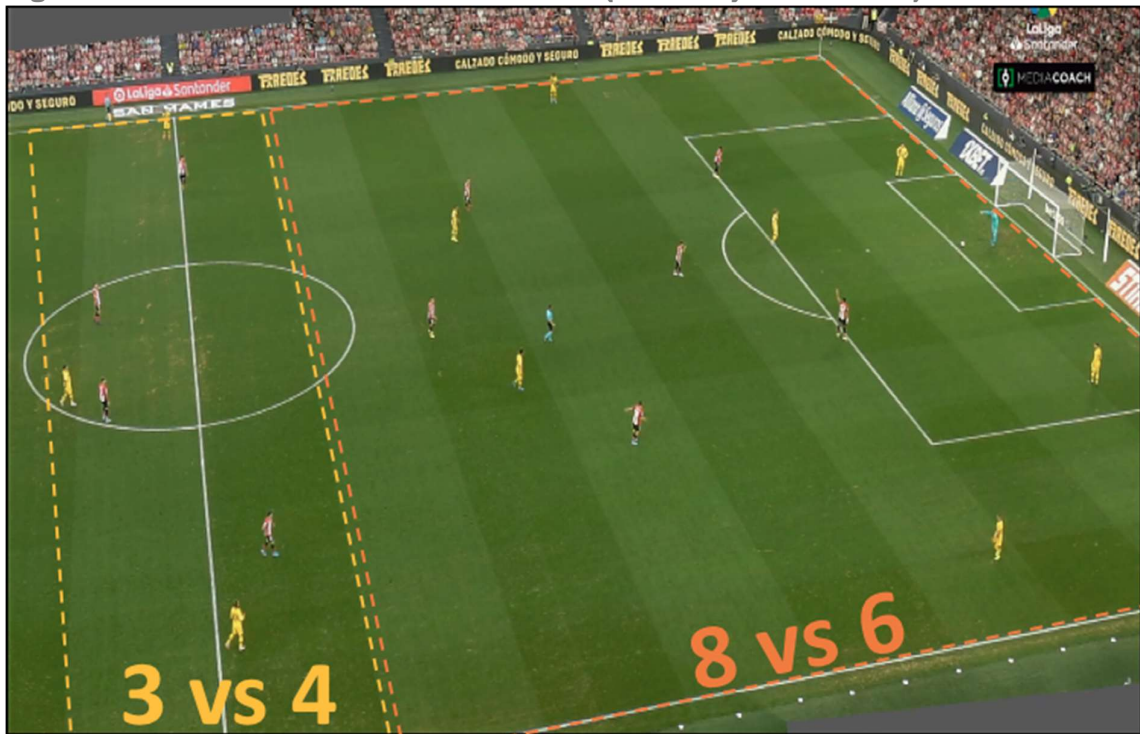
Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

Counting how many players from the two teams are in the two halves of the field allows us to know the possibility or the absence of playing in own field or directly in the rival field.

An indication that is given to the goalkeeper when removing the ball from their box is to pay special attention to **distant players** (they must look away):

1) If you find yourself in a situation of **numerical inferiority** (such as 3 vs 4) of the strikers against the rival defensive line, it means that you can find a numerical superiority of the outfield players (8 against 6 opponents) in your midfield. Therefore, it will be advisable to play a short ball in order to take advantage of this superiority.

**Figure 27: An 8 versus 6 situation in own field (inferiority in the attack)**

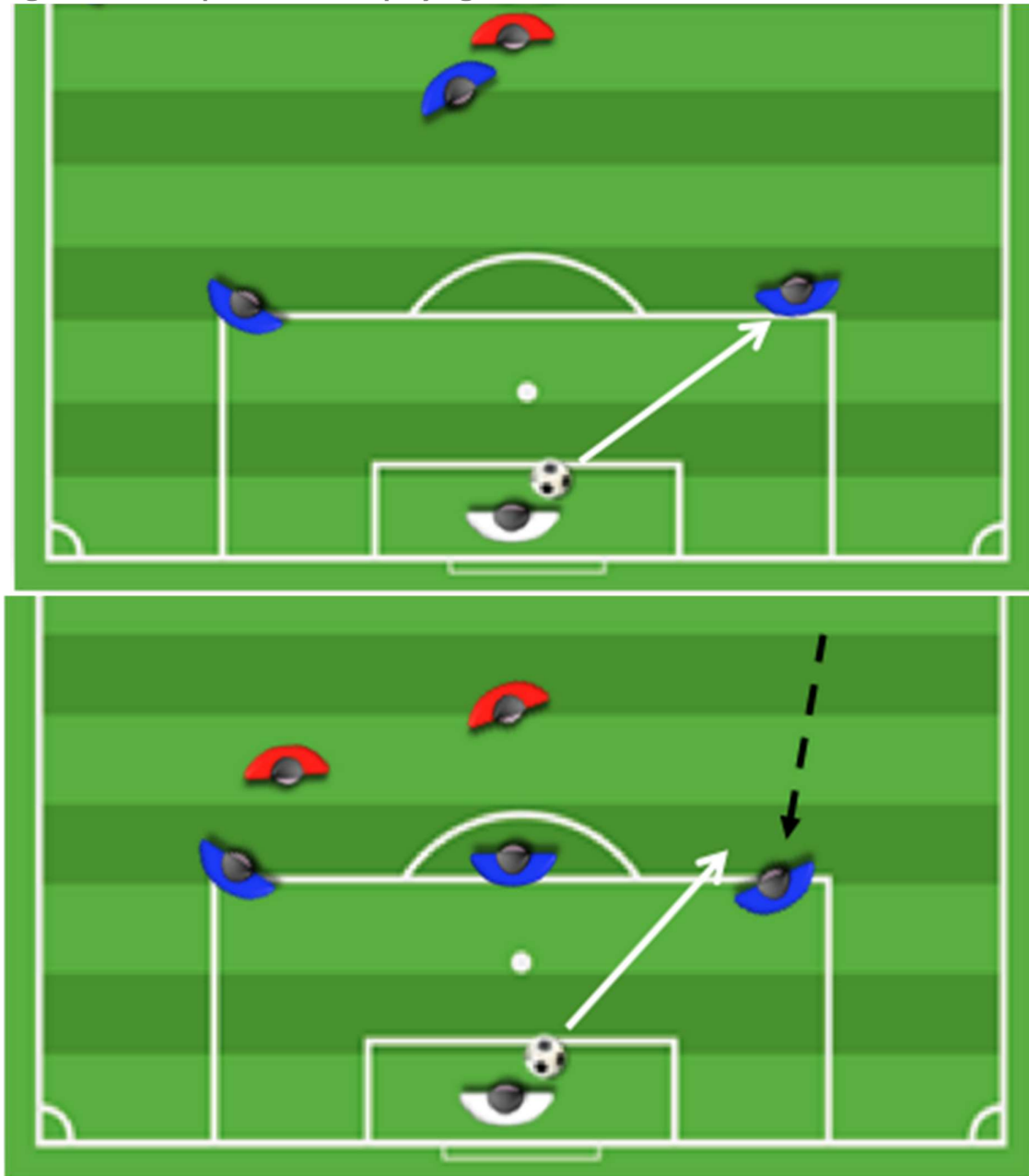


Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

According to the establishment of the two structures, numerical superiority can be found in different places, which will tell us where to play directly:

- Play in zone A (1<sup>st</sup> line) if we have superiority with the build-up play of 2 or 3 players
  - With centre backs
  - With players joining the line of the centre backs (pivot, inside forward, full backs)

Figure 28: Some possibilities of playing with the 1<sup>st</sup> line.





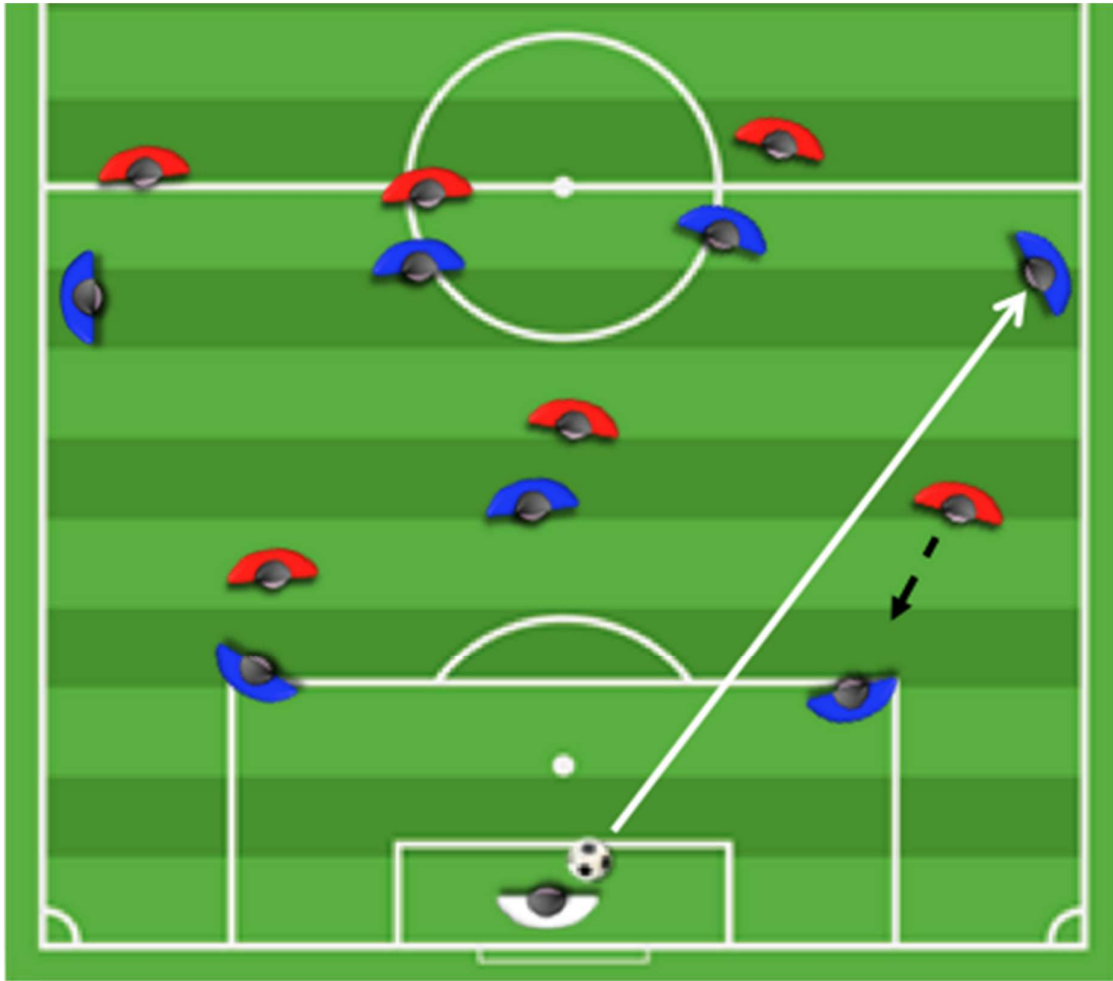
Source: own elaboration.

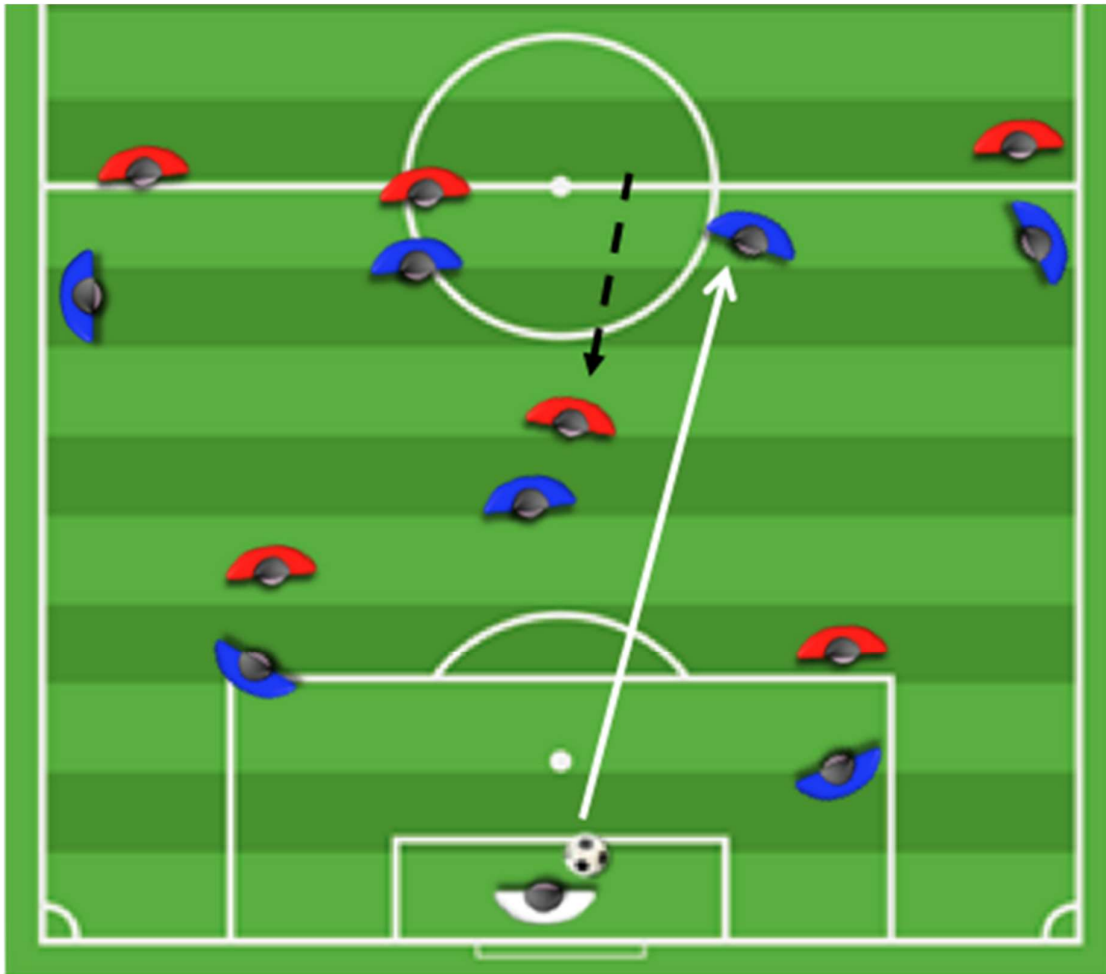
- Play in zone B (2<sup>nd</sup> line) if they match the build-up play of 3 players in zone A

→ Inside forwards between lines

→ Wide full backs

Figure 29: Some possibilities of playing with the 2<sup>nd</sup> line



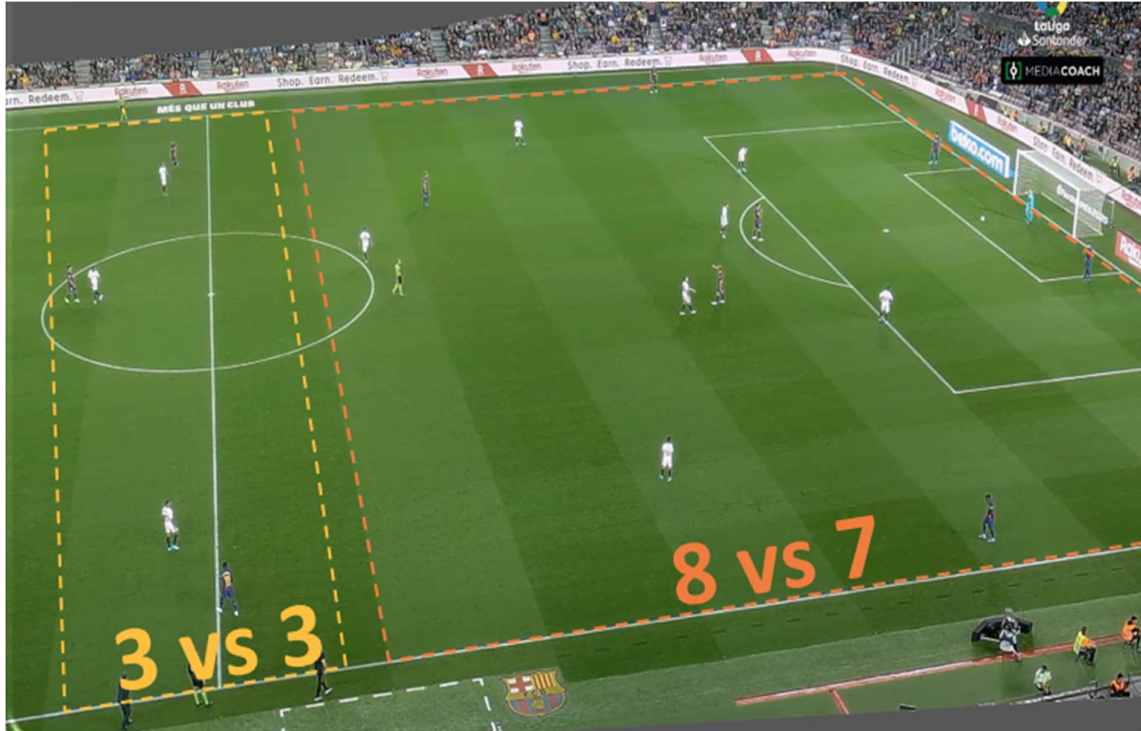


Source: own elaboration.

2) In a situation of **numerical parity** (like a 3 vs 3), it will be possible to have the intention of playing a ball directly towards the far players and take advantage of the forwards' possible reception capacities.

Having a 3 versus 3 play means that, in the own half of the field, there will be a situation of 8 versus 7, in which case the numerical superiority is given by the goalkeeper. Therefore, if we only take into account the numerical factor, it will be much more difficult to play a short ball. In this case, the objective of the nearby players will be to attract rivals either by means of a previous circulation of the ball or by means of attraction and engagement movements to create spaces and divide the rival block, which will hinder occasional recoveries of second balls.

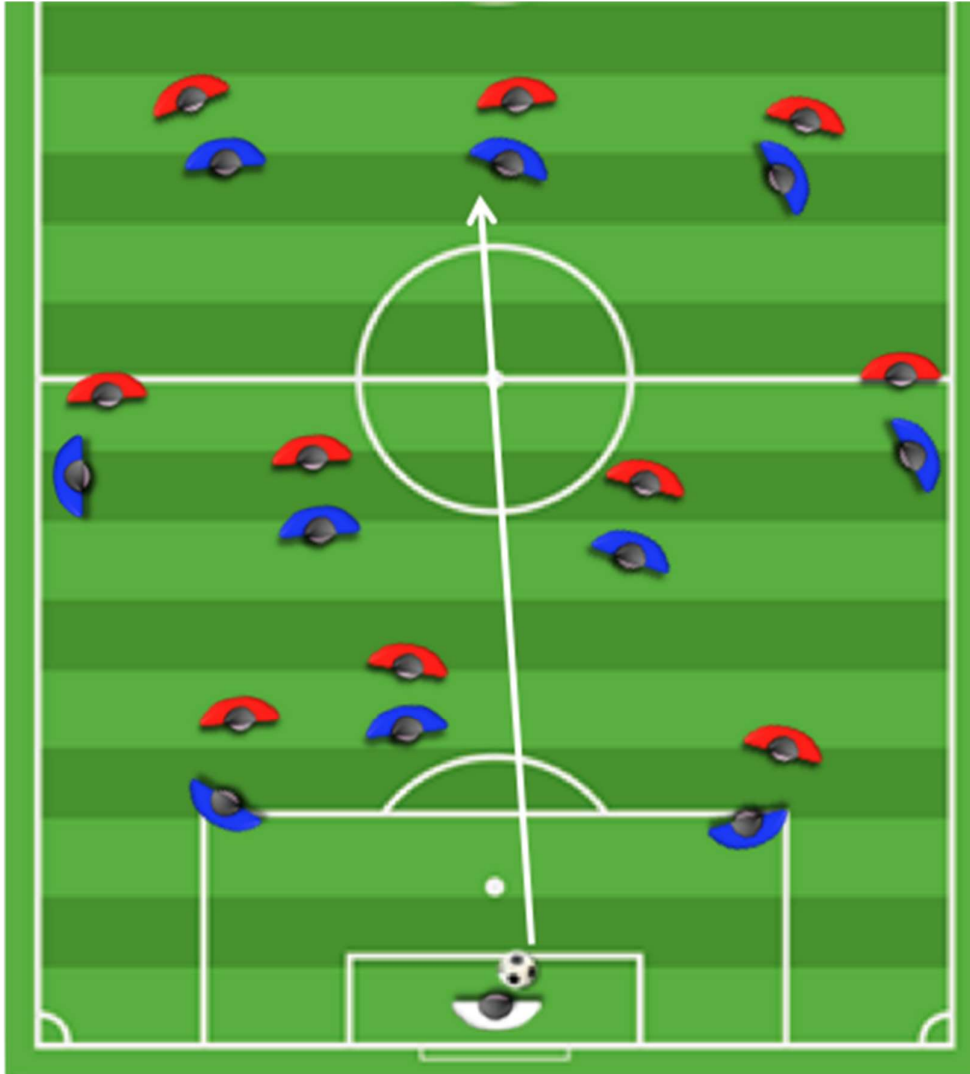
Figure 30: An 8 versus 7 situation in own half field (equality in the attack)

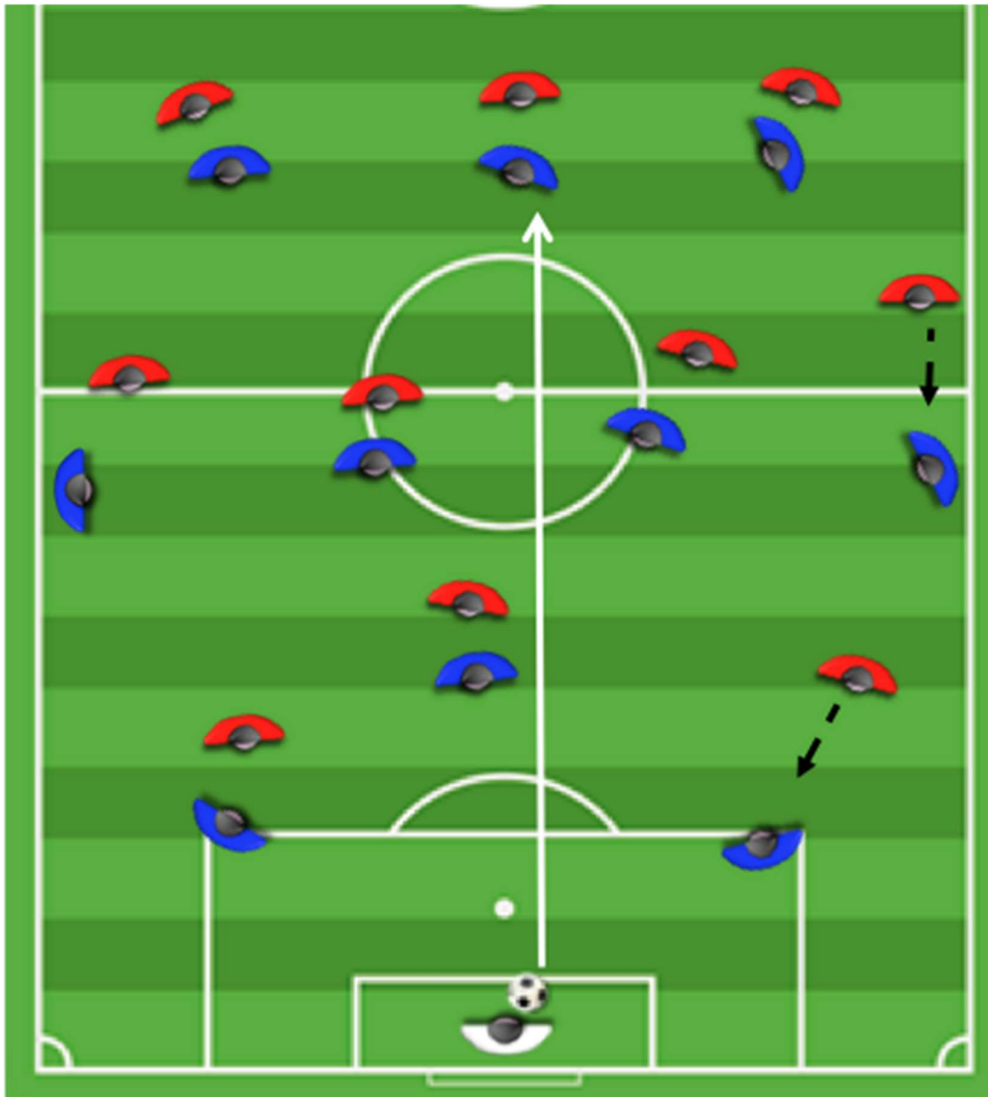


Source: Mediacoach screenshot with own adaptation.

Issues such as physical abilities, previous movements and the next play intention will be one of the main factors that will influence the decision that the goalkeeper will make to play directly with the strikers and far away players.

Figure 31: Some possibilities of playing with the 3<sup>rd</sup> line





Source: own elaboration.

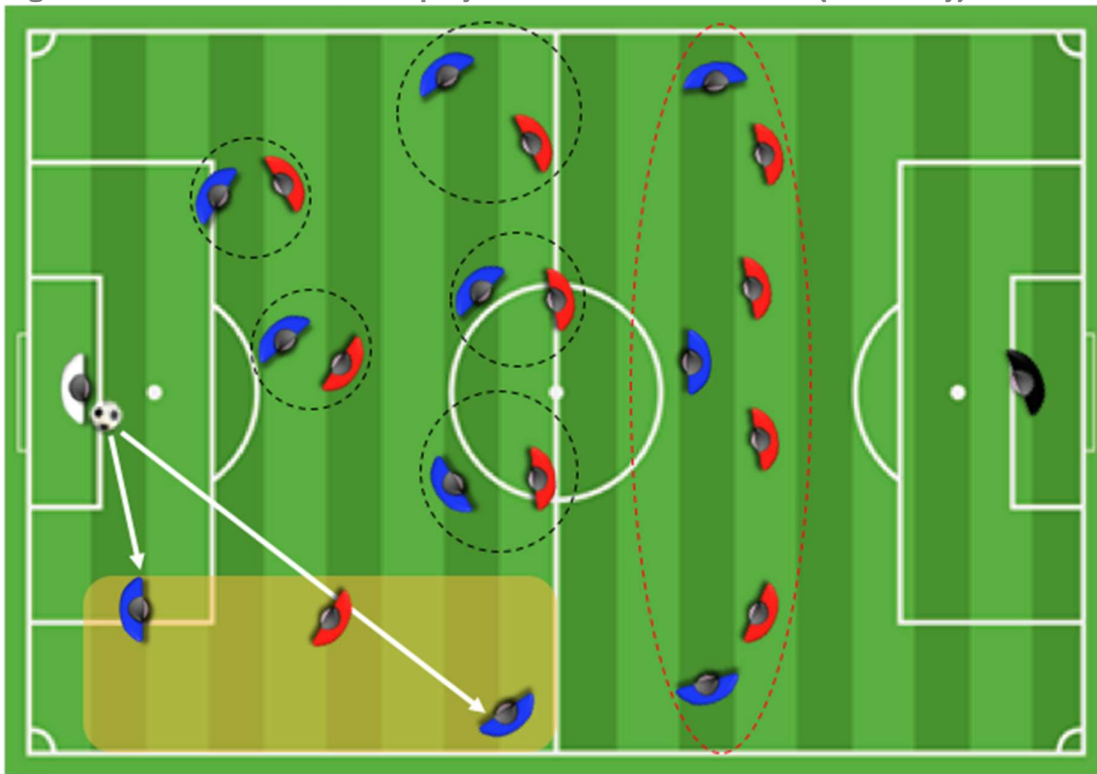
The position and distance that the players of the 2<sup>nd</sup> line will have with respect to the furthest away players will be essential when it comes to understanding the possibilities of making the most of the numerical advantage and not losing possession of the ball since they must be ready to recover any second balls.

Another factor that must be taken into consideration is the **relationship distance** and, consequently, the appearance of **players in intermediate zones**.

In structural terms (without taking into account the movements for the moment), the coincidence of the two structures will give us certain distances between the positions, which will create places in which superiorities (density), or inferiorities appear.

Identifying the zones where there are fewer rivals in inferiority (intermediate) will allow us to find solutions more easily in order to progress, forcing the rivals to change their structure.

Figure 32: Identification of rival players in intermediate zones (inferiority)



Source: own elaboration.

## References

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