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CHRIS WILDER'S **ATTACKING** **CENTRE BACKS**

IN THE EXAMPLE OF SHEFFIELD UNITED'S 1=3=5=2

by **ALEX TRUKAN**



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Chris Wilder's Attacking Centre Backs

In the example of Sheffield United's 1-3-5-2

By

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Introduction

Tactical systems using three central defenders is not a new idea. 1-3-5-2 is widely popular all over the world and successfully used by clubs and national teams. Rather than emergence of totally new systems of play, what happens more and more often is adjusting and putting own stamp on it as a team. Sheffield United has its' own way of playing and been very successful using it.

In 2016/17 season the Blades have secured promotion from League 1. Two seasons later, in 2018/2019 campaign they have achieved an automatic promotion to Premier League after coming second in Championship. Since then, Sheffield United has been successful on the highest level, currently sitting 7th, level points and game in hand behind Wolves and two points behind and game in hand to Manchester United. All of this success came under management of Chris Wilder, lifelong fan and former Blades player. Their preferred formation is 1-3-5-2 which utilises many strengths their players possess. Although there is so many more aspects to their style of play, one thing that stands out is how they utilise their centre backs in attacking play. This has been one of the main things that has helped them to be a little bit different and achieve good outcomes.

This is a different interpretation of traditional 1-3-5-2 roles and responsibilities and just shows that it is not the formation that matters the most. Formation is only a starting point and a point of reference for players to start from. It is what you do and how you move within that structure to utilise individual and collective strengths. Utilising centre backs in attack the way Sheffield United proposes helps to create overloads in wide areas, penetrate in behind, create good numbers in the box as well as vary delivery of crosses.

This book will explore couple of aspects in utilising centre backs in attacking play using Sheffield United as an example. It is important to remember though that it is only a very narrow aspect and one of many facets of the way they play. None of the systems and tactics is important if your players chose to not work hard and be committed. This is the basis of everything and something that should be given and not something that needs extra praise and recognition. If

your players have desire and work ethic as well as buy in what you propose as a coach then everything else, including tactical plan, style of play etc. becomes easier to implement and be successful!

Thank you and enjoy the book!

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Formation

Although this book will focus specifically on centre backs and their attacking roles, it is important to provide some context to formation in which they operate. Sheffield United uses 1-3-5-2 both when attacking and defending. Most of the time they would line up in the following manner:

1 x Goalkeeper (GK)

3 x Centre Backs (RCB, CB, LCB)

2 x Wingbacks (RWB, LWB)

3 x Centre Midfielders (CDM/CAM/CM rotate roles – point up/point down triangle)

2 x Central Strikers (CF)



The main focus of this book would be three centre backs (emphasis on RCB/LCB).

Players

Within the formation there will be couple personal adjustments and changes that might be needed from game to game. However, Sheffield United are consistent in how they look to set up. In relation to positions and numbers above, below there is a team squad attached.

1 – Henderson

25 - Moore

2 – Baldock

6 – Basham

15 – Jagielka

12 – Egan

5 – O’Connell

3 – Stevens

16 – Norwood

7 – Lundstram

4 – Fleck

10 – Sharp

9 – McBurnie

17 – McGoldrick

22 - Mousset

Building the attack

During the build up from the back phase, all three centre backs play a key role in helping to bring the ball through the thirds. Sheffield United is mixing both short build up from the keeper passing out to the centre backs as well as long build up with a long pass onto opposition half. The more common approach is a long pass onto the opposition half, mixing up the areas and target player into which the ball is directed.

An example below. During long passes onto the opposition's half, the whole team gets compact and narrows down distances to be able to deal with a second ball. One of the wingbacks usually pushes up higher, while the opposite one stays deeper. All three centre backs stay central and within short distance from each other to protect central areas.



Short build up is less used option, however it is crucial if playing 1-3-5-2 for centre backs to understand their role when receiving the ball from goalkeeper. Unlike having two centre backs who just drop wide to provide angles, having three centre backs provides a different challenge.

There is couple of main variations (but not limited to): bowl, line, triangle or zig-zag.

Bowl

Left centre back wide, centre back edge of the box, right centre back opposite edge of the box (or the opposite way)



Line

Centre back stays central, both right & left centre backs adjust around the edges of the box providing angles



Triangle (point up)

Left and right CBs provide angles around the edges of the box, CB higher in the pocket of space.



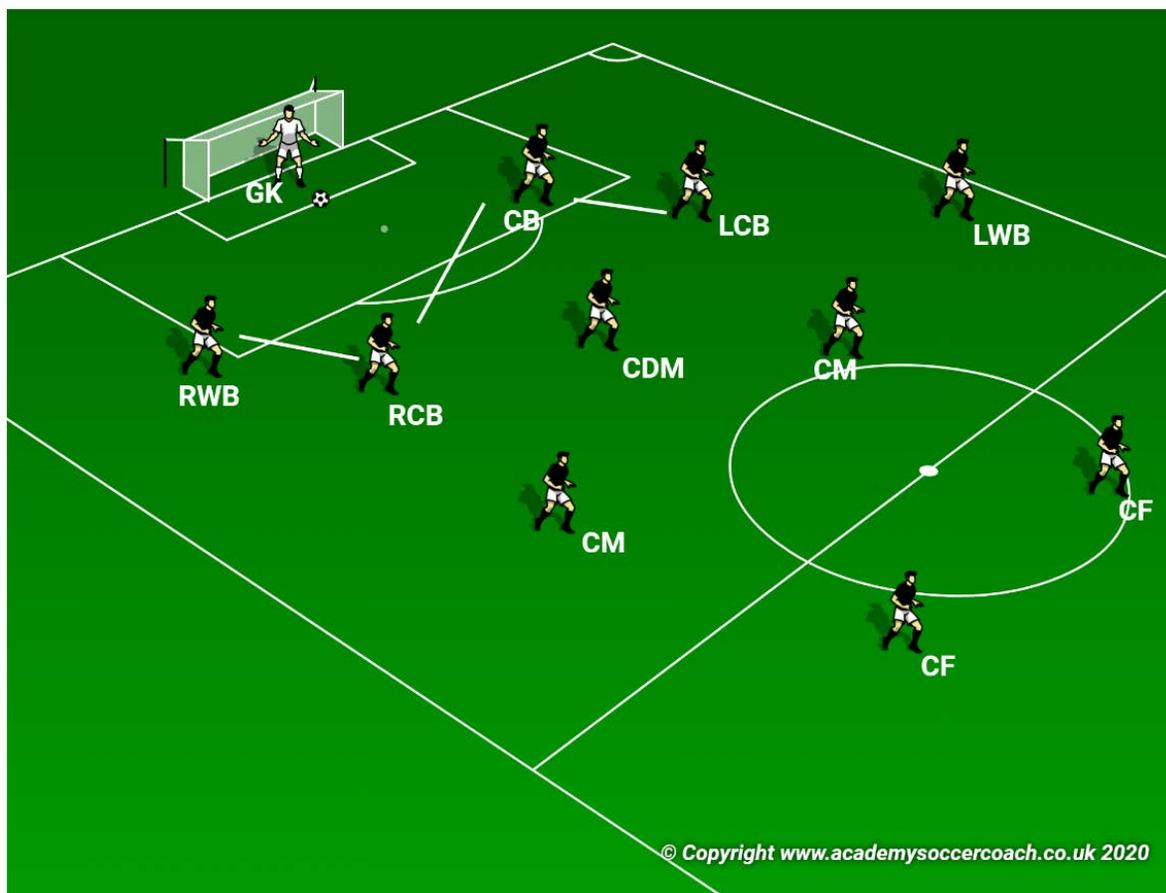
Triangle (point down)

Centre back drops in into the box, left and right centre backs provide angles around edges



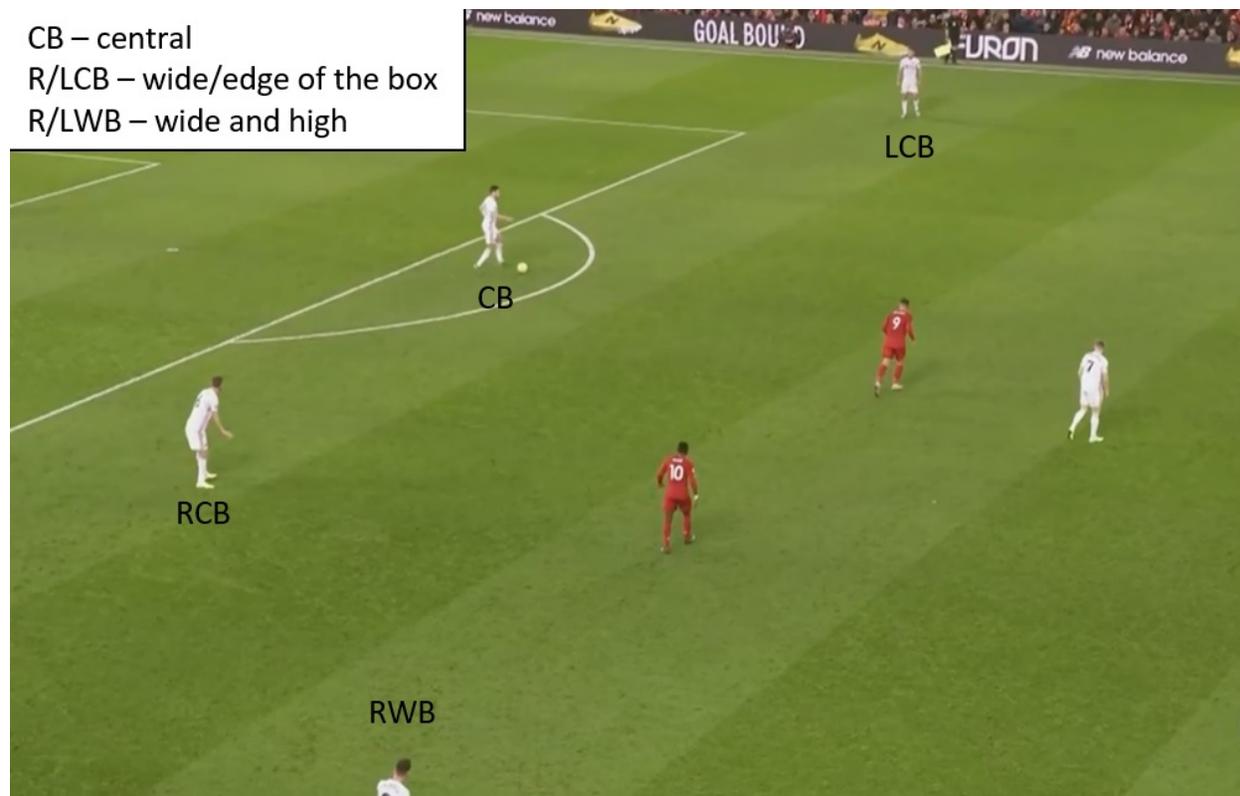
Zig-zag

RWB moves deeper around the edge of the box, CB provides an angle on the other side of the box, RCB moves higher up the pitch, LCB moves higher and wide



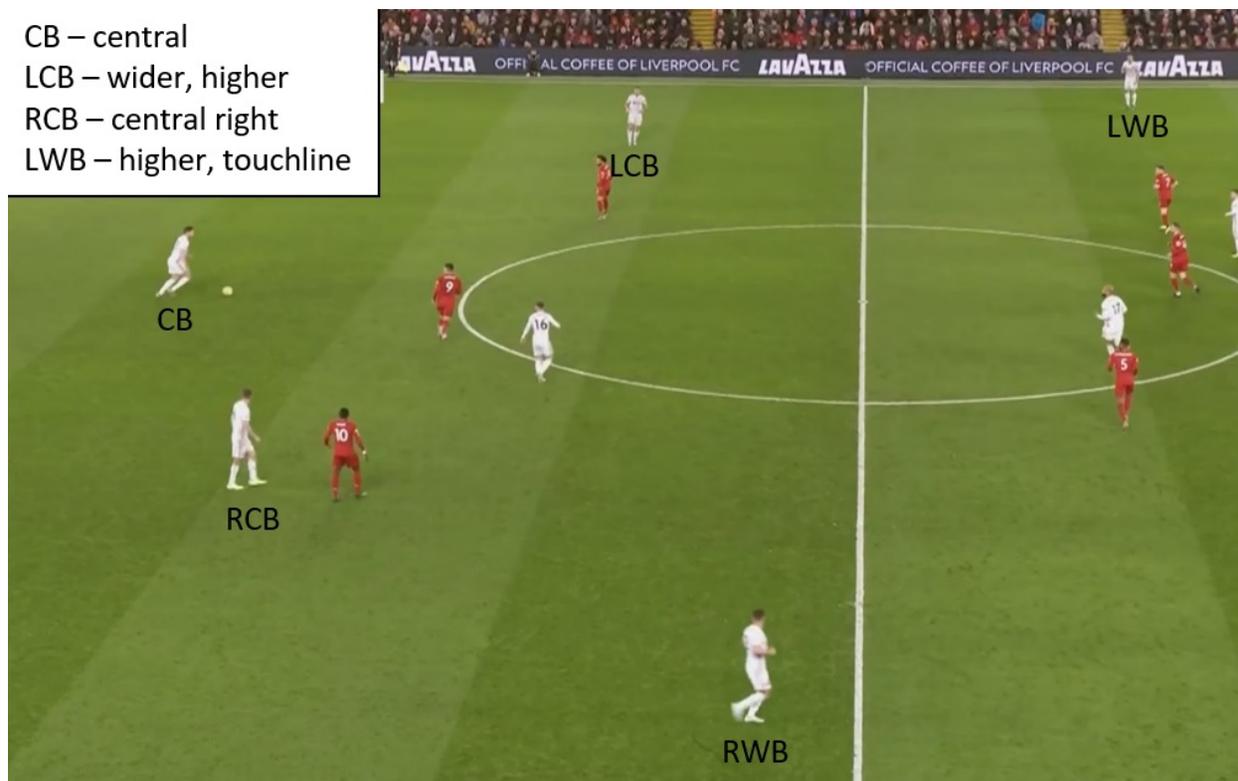
How does it look like in practice?

When a team builds up from the back through short passes out from the back line, three centre backs position themselves centrally within and around the penalty box. Centre back operates in the area in front of the goal while right and left centre backs operate around the edges of the box (line). Both wingbacks push up higher up the pitch.



Centre backs and wing backs will dictate whether the back line has symmetrical or asymmetrical shape. As one of the right/left centre backs moves higher up the pitch, this will influence the position of both wingbacks and dictate which side of the pitch will have numerical superiority. An example below (early stages), where left centre back starts to move wider and higher towards left side of the pitch. This influence left wing back who pushes up higher. Right centre back remains narrow and right wingback deeper.

CB – central
LCB – wider, higher
RCB – central right
LWB – higher, touchline



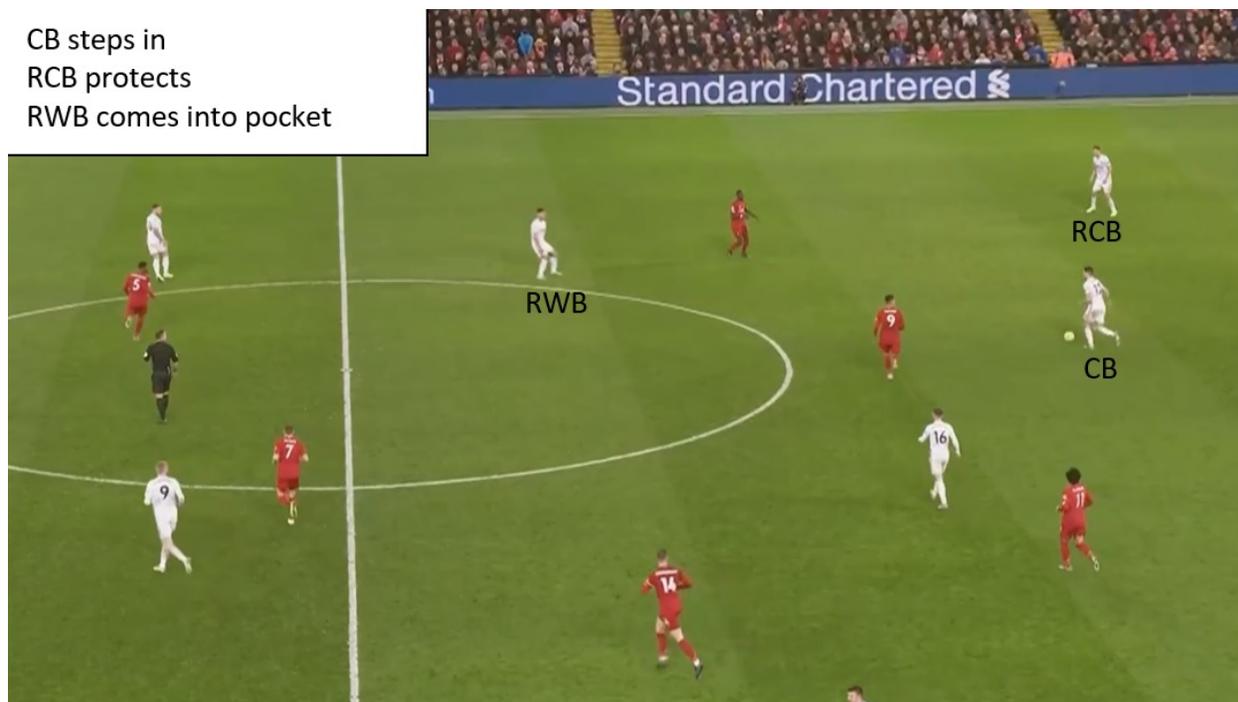
As this sort of build up progresses onto later stages, the back line reminds us more of the back four. Left centre back and right wing back look more like full back's positions. Centre back and right centre back both remind us of two centre backs in a classic back four shape. This allows ball side wing back (in this case-left) to come inside the pitch or push up higher up the pitch.

Ball with LCB
LWB pushes up higher
CB & RCB central



Another possibility is a 'point up' triangle where centre back steps in with the ball (or off the ball but Sheffield uses it not so often) and right/left centre backs stay deeper. On the example below we can see an interesting movement by right wing back who tries to break the opposition screen by coming inside the pitch rather than staying wide by the touchline. This provides a different angle in the middle and allows one of the centre midfielders/strikers to come into wide area.

CB steps in
RCB protects
RWB comes into pocket



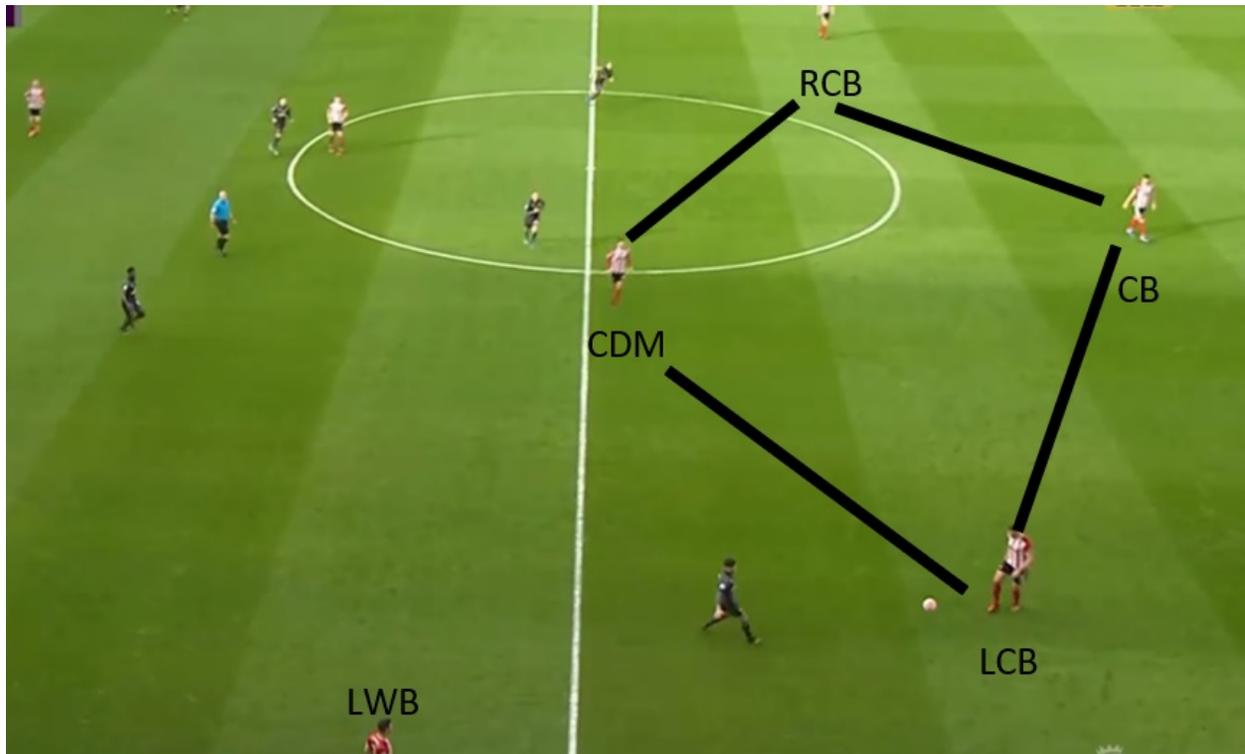
Attacking roles of the three centre backs don't only start on the opposition's half. There is a wide range of roles and responsibilities on their own half when playing out from the back, whether it is short or long.

The next chapter will look at how their roles progress as the ball is moved up the pitch onto the opposition's half.

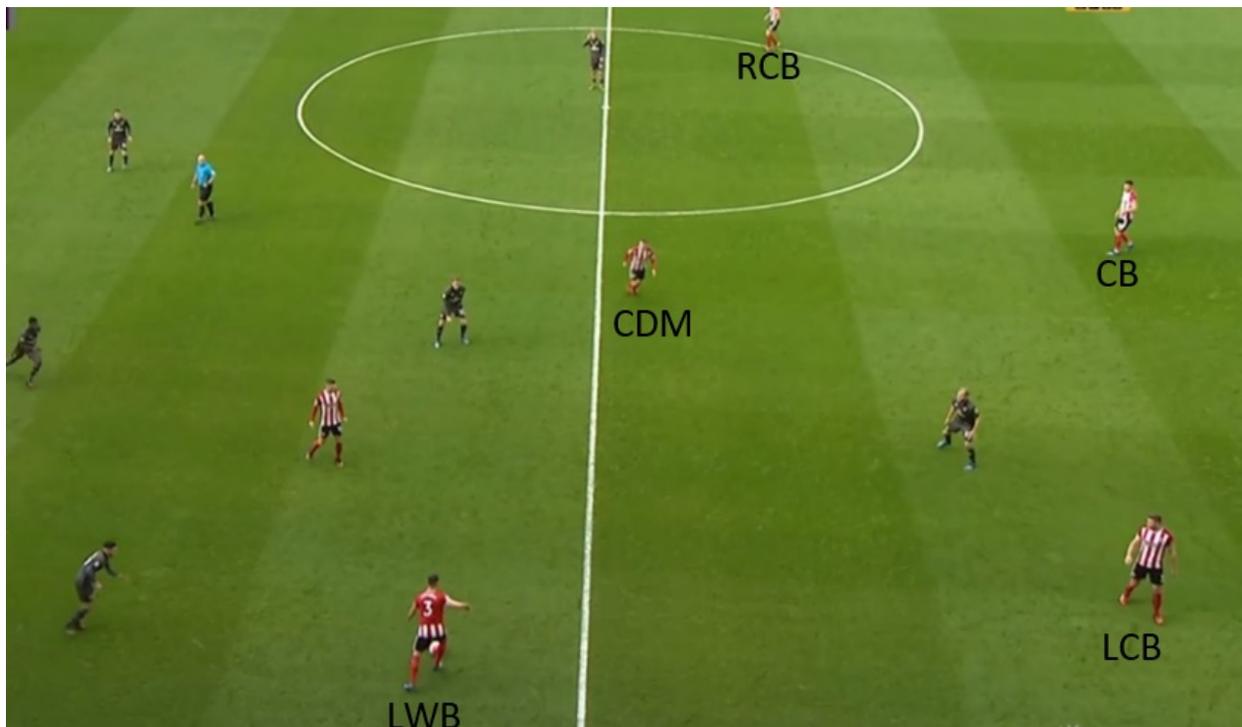
Support from behind

As the ball is moved up the pitch into the opposition half, centre backs are supporting the attack from behind. This ensures the depth is provided and ball can be circulated across the back three into other side of the pitch to change the 'picture'. Most common depth/support structure used by Sheffield United is a diamond (3-1) with three centre backs in a triangle (point down) and centre midfielder dropping in. To allow the ball to be circulated effectively it is important to retain appropriate **angles** and **distances**. Angles should be provided to allow passing lines but also distance should ensure that movement of the ball will force opposition movement and create gaps/opportunities. Position too far from the ball will make it difficult for centre back to join higher up in the attack. Therefore, distances should allow enough depth but also be close enough to move forwards as the attack develops. **Diamond structure** creates more opportunities for diagonal passes and therefore moving the opposition diagonally what potentially can create more situations to break lines.

Below, we can see an example of a diamond structure to help with providing appropriate options behind the ball (centre backs), having a player working in pockets (defensive midfielder) as well being able to recycle the ball through the back (far side centre back).



Below, ball side centre back dropping in to provide depth while the other two centre backs get on different angles and open up passing lines to switch if needed. As we can see all three players providing different angles and ensuring that the pass will move opposition diagonally.



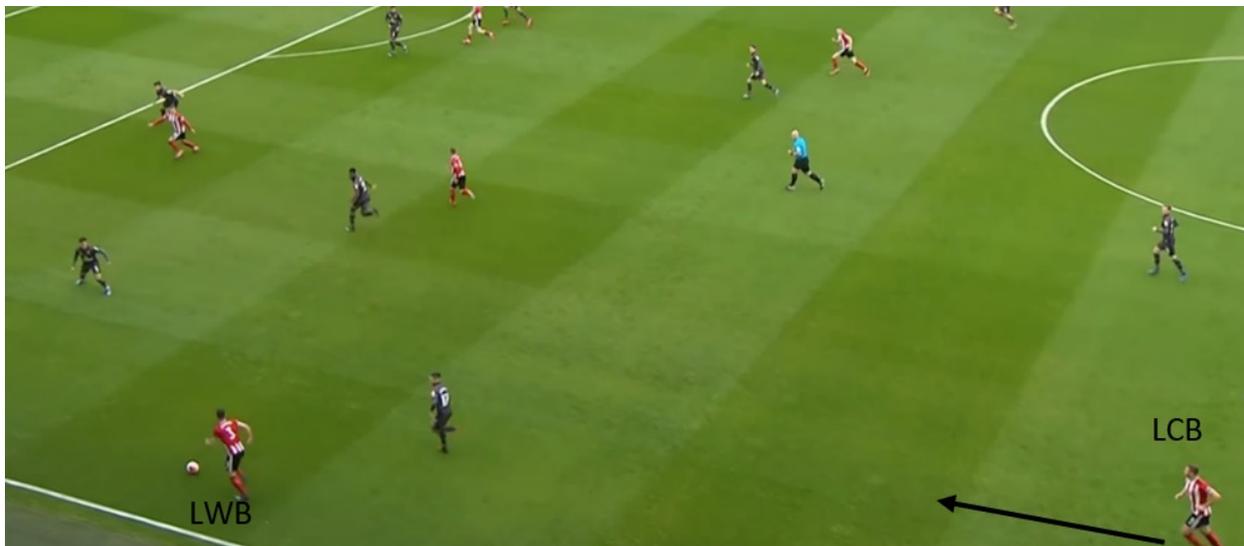
If opportunity arises centre back supporting from behind can actually start to be more proactive and get into pocket of space to be able to switch play directly. This is something Sheffield United look to do on numerous occasions and it can be an effective strategy to switch point of attack providing wing back stays wide and centre recognises this opportunity and is able to execute it technically.



As the ball moves up the pitch, the principles still apply. It is important for centre backs to recognise triggers to move up the pitch early and with energy as if it's done too late the opportunity might be gone. Staying 'tuned' to where the ball moves and where it will move is crucial. Centre back might remains at a good distance (mentioned earlier in the book) and has to recognise following triggers:

- Forward pass
- Player in wide area gets his first touch forwards
- Player in wide area (i.e. wingback) with no pressure on the ball and able to drive forwards
- Opposition disorganised/delayed

The quicker the ball moves forwards, the quicker the support movement should be. Otherwise the distances will become too big and opportunity to get involved higher up the pitch might be gone (if end product comes early)

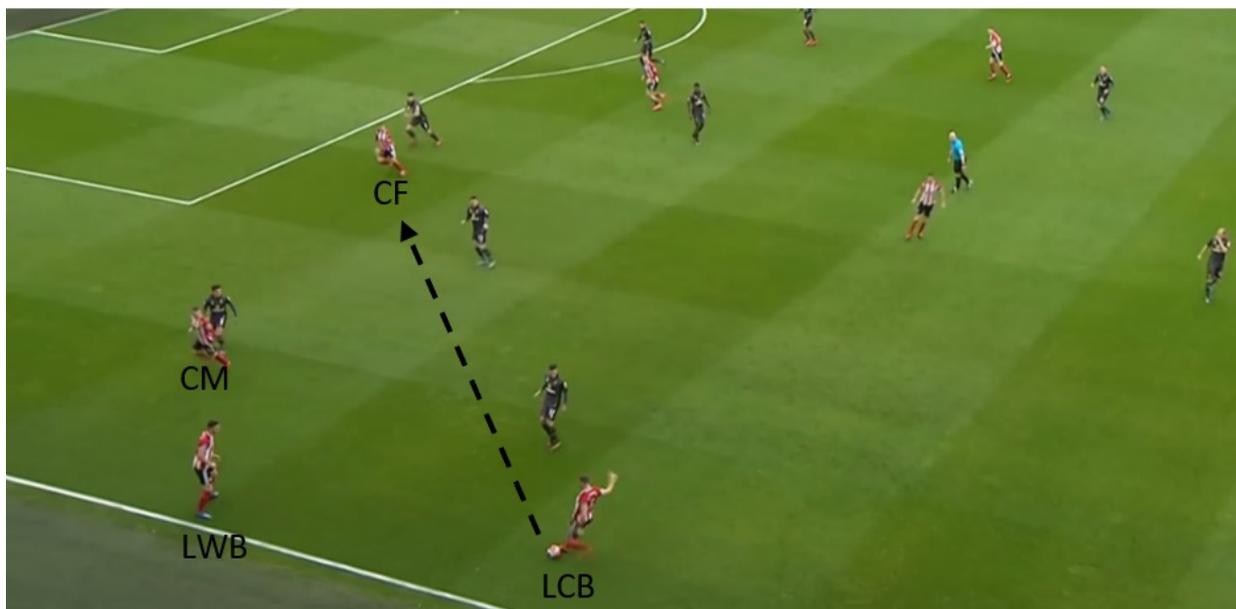


The detail of supporting position is important. As mentioned earlier in the book, remaining diagonal, on the angle and right distance ensures depth is provided to recycle and change picture. As the ball moves higher up the pitch this becomes even more important to move the opposition and create gaps to take advantage of. This is where supporting position might be

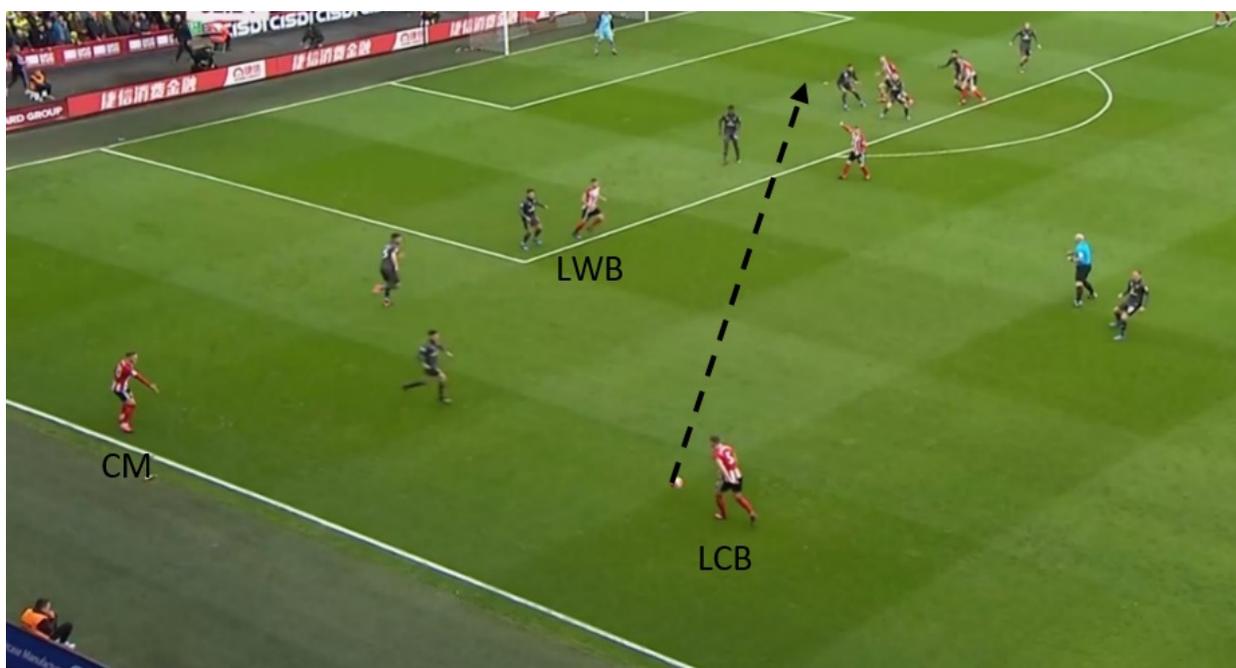
inside the pitch what drags central players out (rather than wide players) of position and potentially ‘frees up’ central midfielders to do other jobs. It might also create less screening options for the opposition to cut off the strikers, therefore allowing more access to these players.



The area from which support will happen (wide/central) will influence the type of options that will open up. Below, we can see an example of opening up a passing line into the striker – as centre back gets on the ball, ball side centre midfielder makes a forward run into wide area what opens up a gap for pass centrally.



Supporting from behind the ball also provides an opportunity to change the angle of the delivery into the box. This is a common aspect in Sheffield United's approach. Moving the ball backwards and setting it up for a cross delays/helps to adjust the runs into the box. An example might be a late arriving run which will now be able to make it in time to meet the ball. It also creates more space in behind the back line for the runners to exploit forcing the back line and goalkeeper to readjust (making it harder for goalkeeper to defend space in front of him).



Below, another example of how to use centre backs' support from behind to change the angle of the cross and deliver it from deeper areas. Please note the number of players in and around the box to be able to bank on the cross as well as pick up 'second' balls if required.



Most importantly, retaining appropriate supporting distances from behind allows centre backs to make overlapping and underlapping movements. In the next chapter we will start exploring the detail of overlaps.

Overlap movements

This is where Sheffield United uniqueness of interpreting 1-3-5-2 really comes in. Both centre backs are adventurous in getting involved higher up the pitch, creating chances and scoring. Most of the times this happens in wide areas but not only excluded to. The most common structure of positional relationships in wide areas includes centre back (ball side), centre midfielder, wing back and striker.



One of the most common forward movements used by centre backs is an **overlap**. This is based on exploiting space outside of the ball carrier and providing an option to play down the line or stretch out the opposition's back line.

This has its' potential benefits:

- Gap created between opposition full back and centre back
- Additional option to exploit space behind the full back
- Creates an opportunity for ball carrier to drive inside
- Option to combine into central areas to come back out wide (into striker to then go wide again)
- Allows wingback to join in into central areas without the ball

The obvious one is when the centre back goes on the overlap and he gets the ball. This potentially creates local numerical superiority (2v1 against full back) and helps to provide a cross from more advanced area as well as get more players in the penalty box.

Below, we can see left centre back overlapping wingback who cuts inside and slides him in to deliver a cross. Both strikers, one of the central midfielders as well as opposite wing back get into the box creating a good chance to finish from.



The fact that centre back goes on to overlap does not mean he has to get the ball. And this is where a lot of inexperienced players get it wrong, especially at youth level. Centre back overlapping hopefully shifts ball side full back towards wide area and 'blocks' him to go out and engage centrally. This allows ball carrier (in this case wing back) to drive inside and link with players positioned centrally. This is where the ball can potentially come back out wide if the options are blocked centrally – looking at wide-centre-wide combination play. When wingback decides to drive inside and not play the overlap two aspects are important and often overlooked:

- Desire and energy of the centre back going on the overlap – make it as real as possible to disguise the full back and really make him think that you will get the ball!
- Disguise from ball carrier – open up your body (and do fake pass movement if possible) to let the defender go one way and delay him going back centrally

When centre back ends up that wide and far away from central areas it is especially important to provide good structure behind the ball to protect against the counter attack.



If overlapping centre back does end up on the ball it does not mean either that he has to cross it. Be aware of other options on the ball. Common movement is wing back (who went inside) or ball side striker coming in the space between full back and centre back to receive the ball and potentially progress forwards or combine with other midfielders.



What can trigger an overlap?

- Wingback positioned wide plus centre back within appropriate distance
- Both strikers and central midfielders inside the pitch (wingback isolated)
- First touch towards centre of the pitch
- Body position facing inside when receiving the ball
- Lack of good support for the opposition full back

From personal experience, a lot of young players won't be as keen to overlap. They need encouragement to do so early on to go even if it's not 100% on. This will make them used to the concept and as they grow confidence they will start recognising when to do it and will start doing it with more and more quality. As much as it is physically tiring, it can also be draining mentally when you run and don't get on the ball. That's why players should be made aware of the benefits of the overlap when the ball is not played in. But on the flip side, player on the ball should be encouraged to use the overlap as a lot of the times it will be one of the best solutions in a given moment. When completed with quality and at pace it is always part of the game that is entertaining. Centre backs in our context a lot of the times will be more central than a typical full back would be in a back four what means that they will have more choice whether to go

inside or outside but also to make a good overlap they will need potentially earlier recognition of triggers as the distance is bigger.

The next chapter will look at underlapping runs.

Underlap movements

These are less common, however still used and providing its unique benefits. Underlap movement in our context is based on centre back making a forward run on the inside in relation to the ball carrier. So, it is an opposite to underlapping movement.

This has its' potential benefits:

- Can create overload in central areas
- Frees up central midfielders to make more forward runs
- Narrows in opposition to then potentially create out wide again
- Provides an option for central midfielders and strikers to combine with

Below, centre back makes a forward run inside the pitch as the ball is wide. There is good support in wide area provided by striker and one of the centre midfielders. This allows centre back to run inside the penalty box and provide more opportunities to finish from the cross. This is less common movement but has its benefits. Centre back arrives late in the box what causes more problems for centre backs to pick him up and creates opportunities to finish.



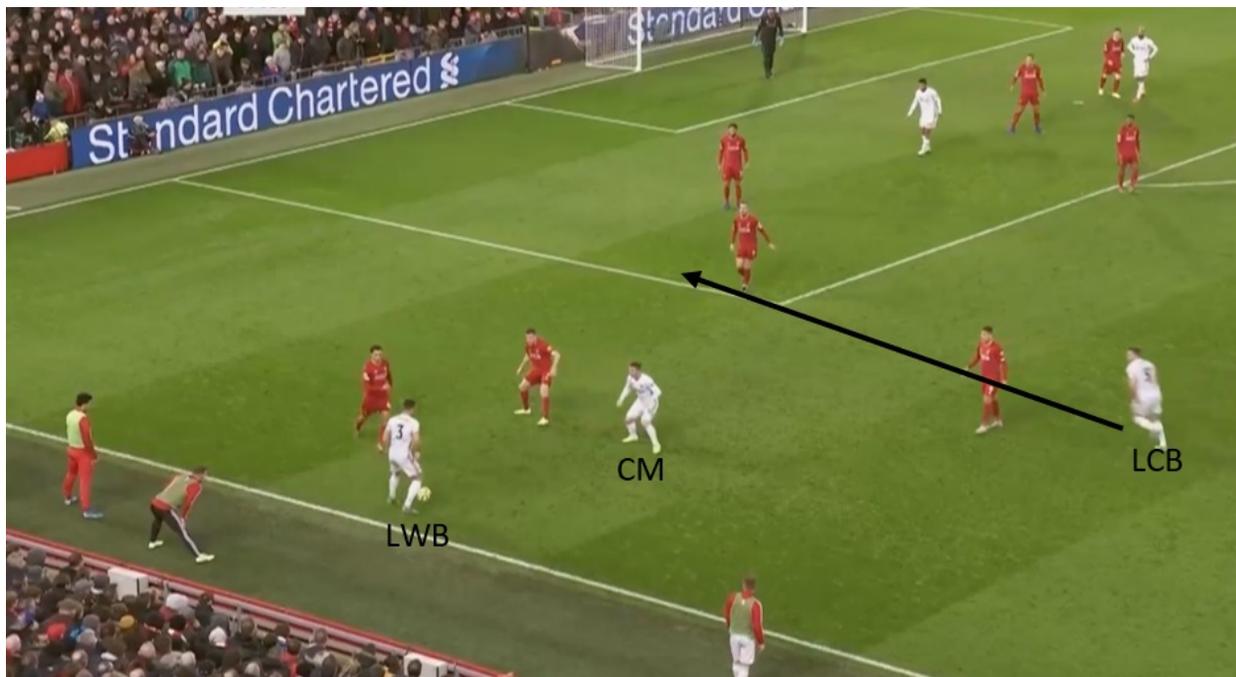
What can trigger an underlap?

- Centre back already inside the pitch (no point in going wide now)
- Striker/centre midfielder coming into wide areas (wide areas overloaded)
- Opposition central midfielder dragged out wide
- First touch down the wing
- Body position facing forwards down the line when receiving the ball

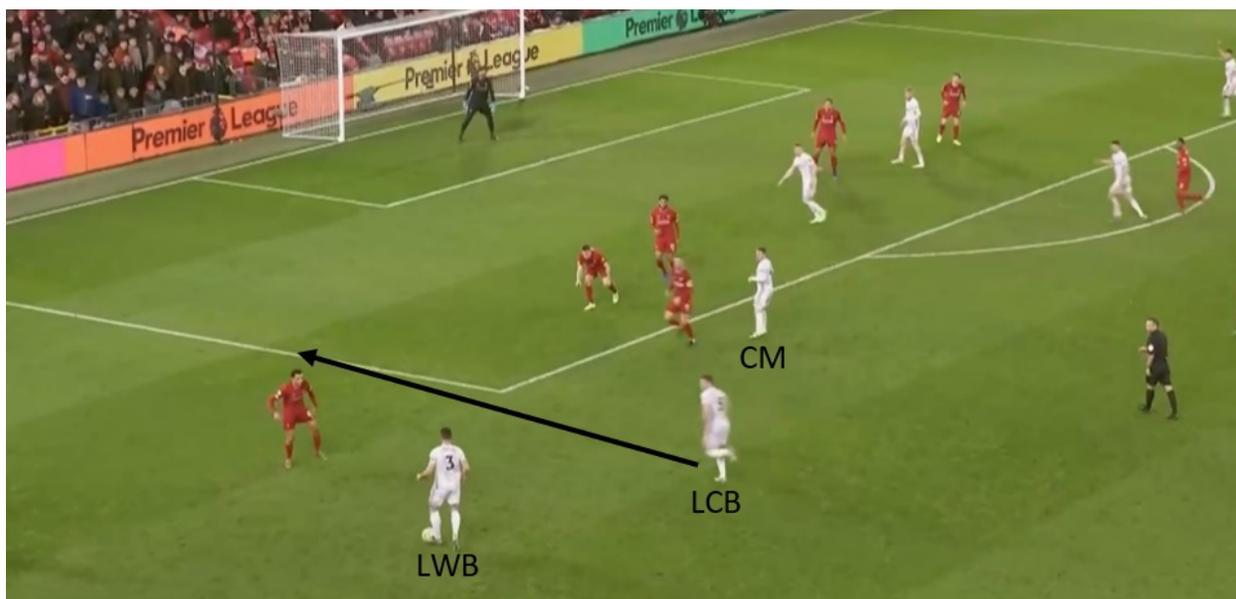
Below, we can see an example of centre midfielder coming into wide area to support wing back on the ball. Left side centre back recognised this. His starting position nearby and space created centrally triggers his run centrally. This causes couple of questions for opposition to be answered

- Will central midfielder track the run?
- Does one of the players positioned centrally need to push wider to cover space?
- How will a potential overload in wide areas be dealt with?
- How will space behind full be protected?

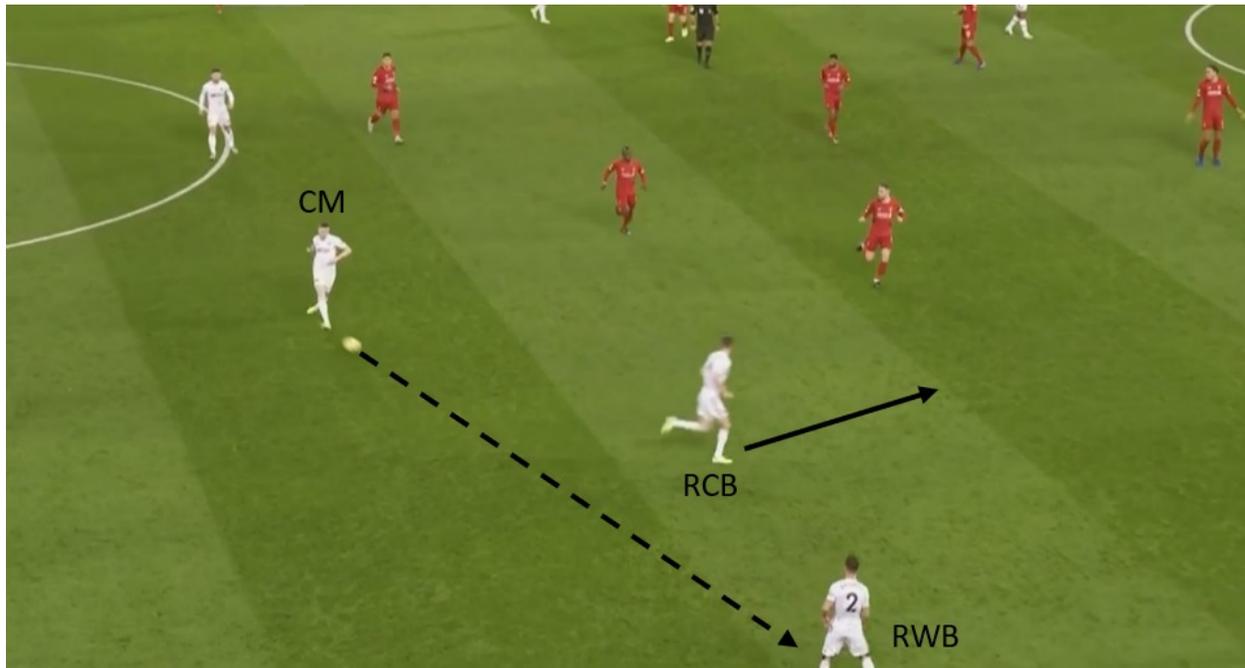
Similarly, as with the overlaps, these sorts of runs don't have to 'force' the pass. Creating space by disorganising the opponent is the first objective. Player on the ball should make a decision based on this. The movement creates 'conditions' to improve the quality of decisions that potentially be made. There is no one single decision that is right for the player on the ball and it shouldn't be forced by a coach. Create **conditions to disorganise opposition** but leave the final decision to the player.



Another example – much clearer situation in terms of spaces this time. Wing back isolated ‘1v1’ in wide area against opposition full back. Ball side centre midfielders as well as strikers remain centrally. There is space behind opposition’s full back to exploit by an underlapping run by centre back.



The example below is a structure after switching play (you can see the opposition sliding across). As the ball is played from strong side towards centre and then weak side, right centre back starts to make a forward run. Relating back to triggers for the underlapping run – we can see both wing back and one of the strikers in wide space therefore space on the inside has opened up to run into.



When making an underlap, the body position is especially important as it might involve receiving the ball from side and then deal with pressure coming from the opposite side. Scanning to be aware of the pressure from both sides and trying to adjust body to remain 'open' can help.

Switching play

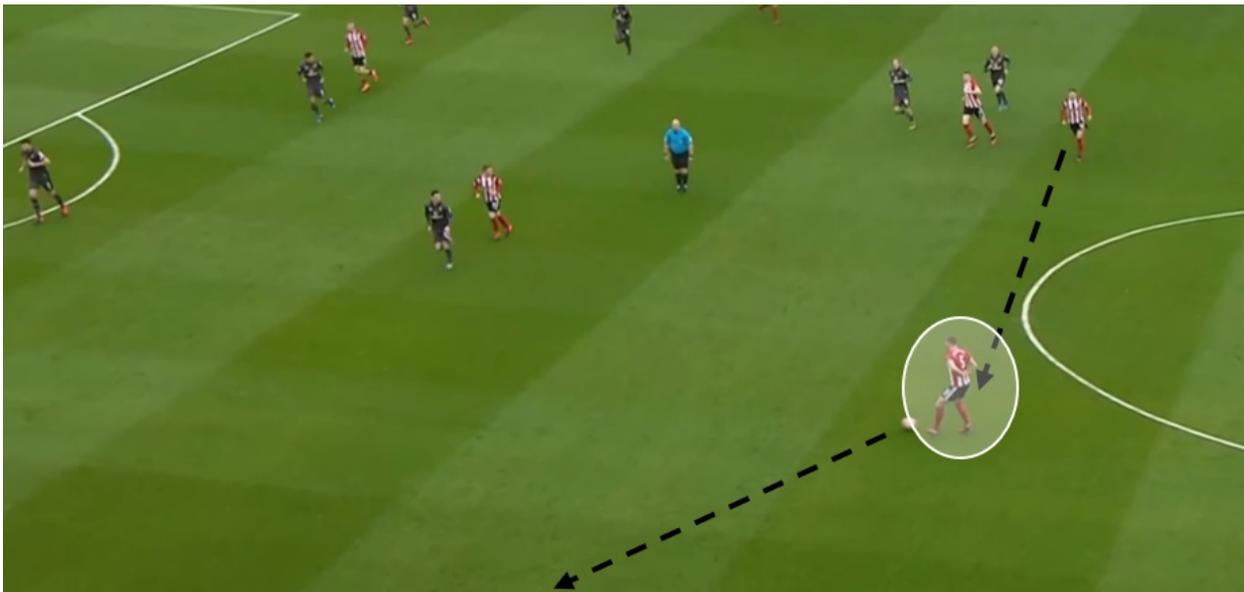
When the ball is in wide area and ball side centre back gets involved in the attack, the opposite side centre back provides protection against counterattack and depth but also helps in facilitating switch of play if required (changing picture). The key is the right angle and depth at which the opposite centre back positions himself. If he is too deep, he won't be available to reach immediately, and the ball would have to be recycled in deeper area. Him stepping in forwards and trying to play beyond opposition's first line allows quicker access and therefore quicker switch. The key here is timing of the movement and being able to link it to the next area quickly.

Below, we can see an example of opposite side centre back stepping in higher up the pitch to provide good angle to switch the play. Him remaining central still allows him to be in a good position in case the team loses the ball. It also overloads central areas to facilitate quicker switch and frees up other central midfielders to get higher up the pitch.



As he gets on the ball, most of the players will be on the side where the ball came from. Centre back should not ignore opportunities to play back into that side, however in reality it might be

more advantageous to switch the play to the opposite wingback where the space is. Speed of play should be encouraged at this stage. The detail of the pass from centre back into the opposite wide area should be into space if possible to gain territory, not only switch the play. Wing back on the other side has to be able to receive forwards and link the next action. This is a good example of **overload to isolate** principle. One side of the pitch gets overloaded to drag the opposition players in. This leads to a quick switch into opposite side of the pitch where there is potential for isolated duel with significant free space available. Players on the side where the ball came from are looking to reorganise and get into the penalty box as well as support/protect in behind the ball.



If the 'switch' is not used, centre back opposite to the ball side should be careful in getting too high up the pitch as this will mean in most cases that both right and left centre backs are high and potentially leaving remaining centre back in 1v1 position. Relevant structure should be in place to **defend against potential counter attack**. This might mean:

- RCB/LCB – CB – CDM
- CDM – CM – CB
- RWB/LWB – CB – CDM
- RWB/LWB – CB – RCB/LCB

Centre back (CB) is the player that is always involved in protecting and remaining behind the ball. CDM, both wing backs as well as left/right centre backs alternate their roles depending on situation to provide enough protection. This will of course also depend on the opposition structure (i.e. how many strikers left in front of the ball), strategy for a given match, state of the game, momentum etc.

Structure behind the ball should also remember about **diagonality** principle (both when attacking and defending) to be on different lines and on angles in order to be able to access all areas quickly upon losing the ball and prevent breaking a line with one pass.

Part of that which is often forgotten is the **goalkeeper** who should move up the pitch higher and provide good positioning to cover space in behind the back line. As well as be an angled pass option for centre backs and other players in front of the ball.

Transition to defend

Upon losing possession, centre backs might find themselves in quite high positions up the pitch. This means there might be space left in behind given the structure to protect is not good enough. On the flip side, there will be bodies around the ball after losing it. So first role for centre backs after possession is lost might be to try **counter pressing** and winning it back straight away. This required quick reactions and anticipating when the ball might be lost – staying on the ‘front foot’. If that is not possible, it might be **delaying** needs happening when a player would close any forward passing options and force backwards and sideways to get the rest of the players back in shape. Transition to defend is of course not an individual task, therefore although we are discussing the role of centre backs there, it shouldn’t be viewed in isolation.



Centre back who stays deep (central) remains in the middle of the pitch and in a position to be able to deal with space in behind him. He should also dictate appropriate support needed in front of him (from CDM, wingback etc.) by clear communication.

Centre backs that stay deep and not get involved higher up the pitch (last line) should adopt a sideways body position to be able to quickly deal with space in front of them (front foot) and as mentioned earlier - space in behind (back foot).

When **transitioning to defend** there is couple of key factors to remember:

- Can we press and win the ball back ASAP?
- Delay if press not possible
- Players from wide areas sprint to narrow in
- Players behind the ball sideways on ready on front/back foot
- If you are in front of the ball – sprint to press or get behind the ball
- Try to screen and cut off any passes through the lines

Most important though is how quickly can we react both individually and collectively.

This should be mirrored in the way we **practice**:

- Include transition in your practices
- Transitional consequences (goals, points etc.)
- Encourage high tempo and reactions
- Practices that challenge speed of decision making – consequence if too slow
- Competitive/encourage to win

Patterns of play

These are patterns of movements that occur within team structure and relate to attacking roles of centre backs. It doesn't mean the below patterns have been trained in structural way. It might happen that these occur through team principles or just individual player characteristics and relationships they form. Patterns of play are not one and only solution to given problem on the pitch but rather bring general principles to life and provide players with several solutions they can use and work off each other.

The below patterns are examples of different relationships that can be formed between CM, R/LCB, R/LWB and ST in wide areas and facilitate centre backs involvement on the opposition's half. These can be mirrored on both halves of the pitch. For players, the above patterns can form a starting point to other movements. These patterns are not to be trained in isolation. Of course, unopposed passing and movement patterns can be used as well as a starting point and for automatization, however big chunk of work should be done within phases of play, function practices, 11v11 and small sided games as well as wave practices.

When training these, it is important that players experience their position as a reference but understand how it relates and what relationships are formed with positions around them. This will ensure effective transferability between training and games.

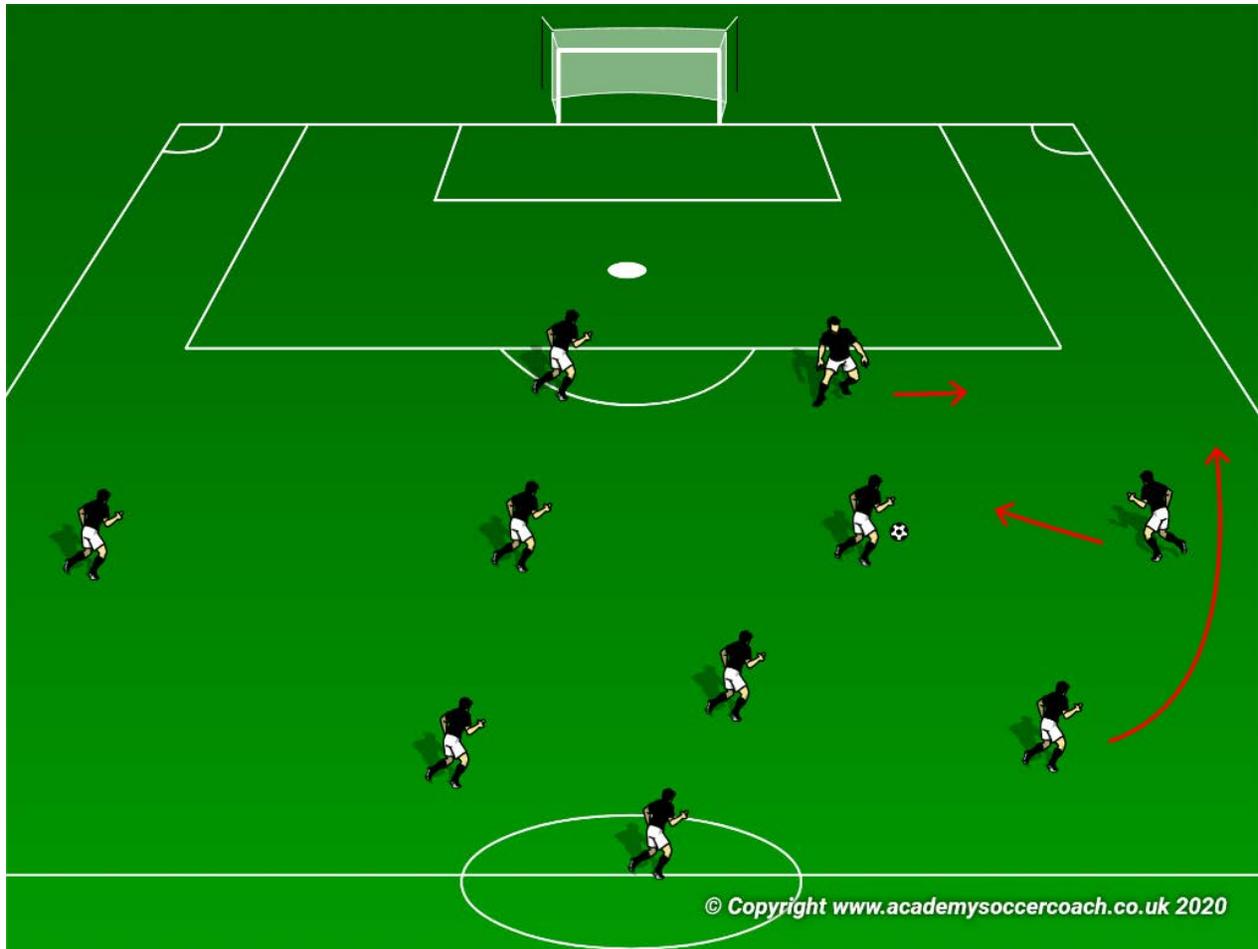
Movement 1 (overlap):

RWB moves inside

Striker moves towards wide area (but remains central)

RCB on the overlap

Potential space created out wide for an overlap, options centrally to combine



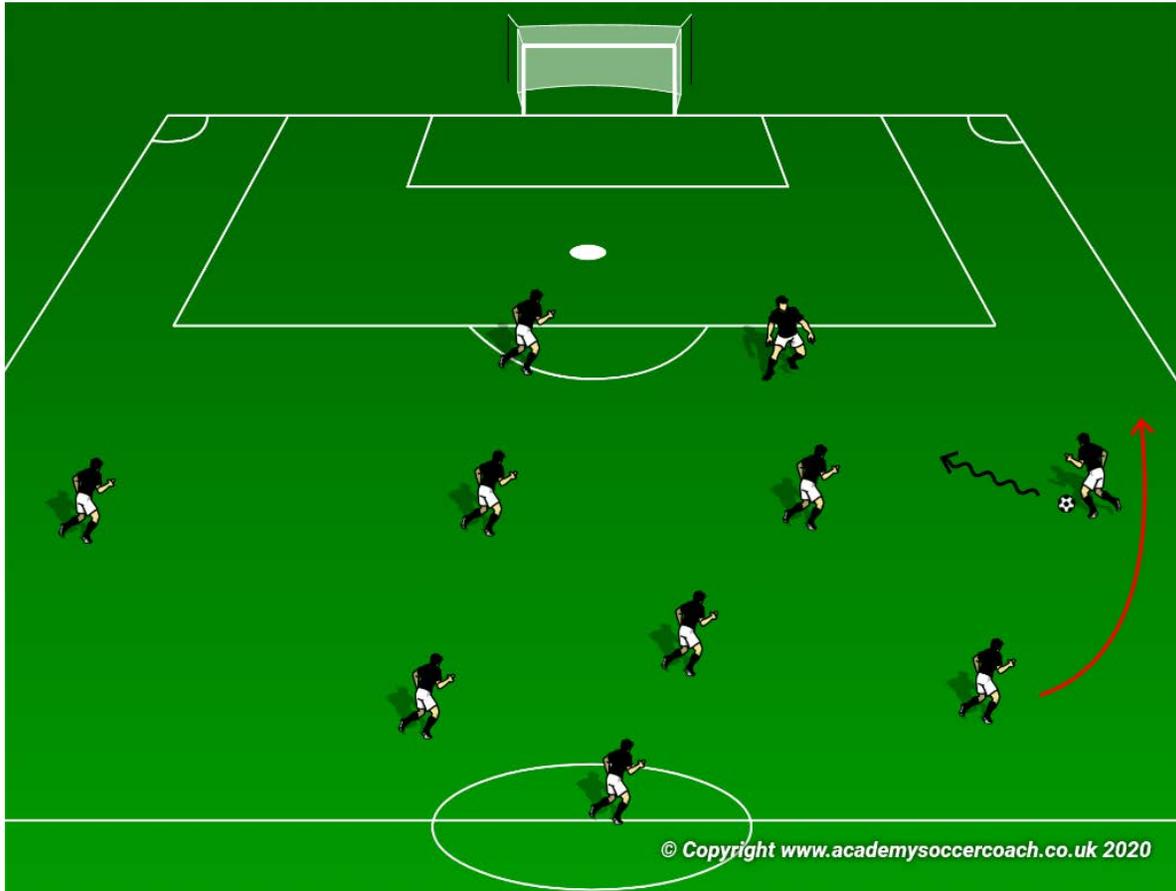
Movement 2 (overlap):

RWB moves inside to combine

RCB on the overlap

Striker and centre midfielder adjust centrally

Potential space created out wide to overlap, isolated wide to deliver centrally

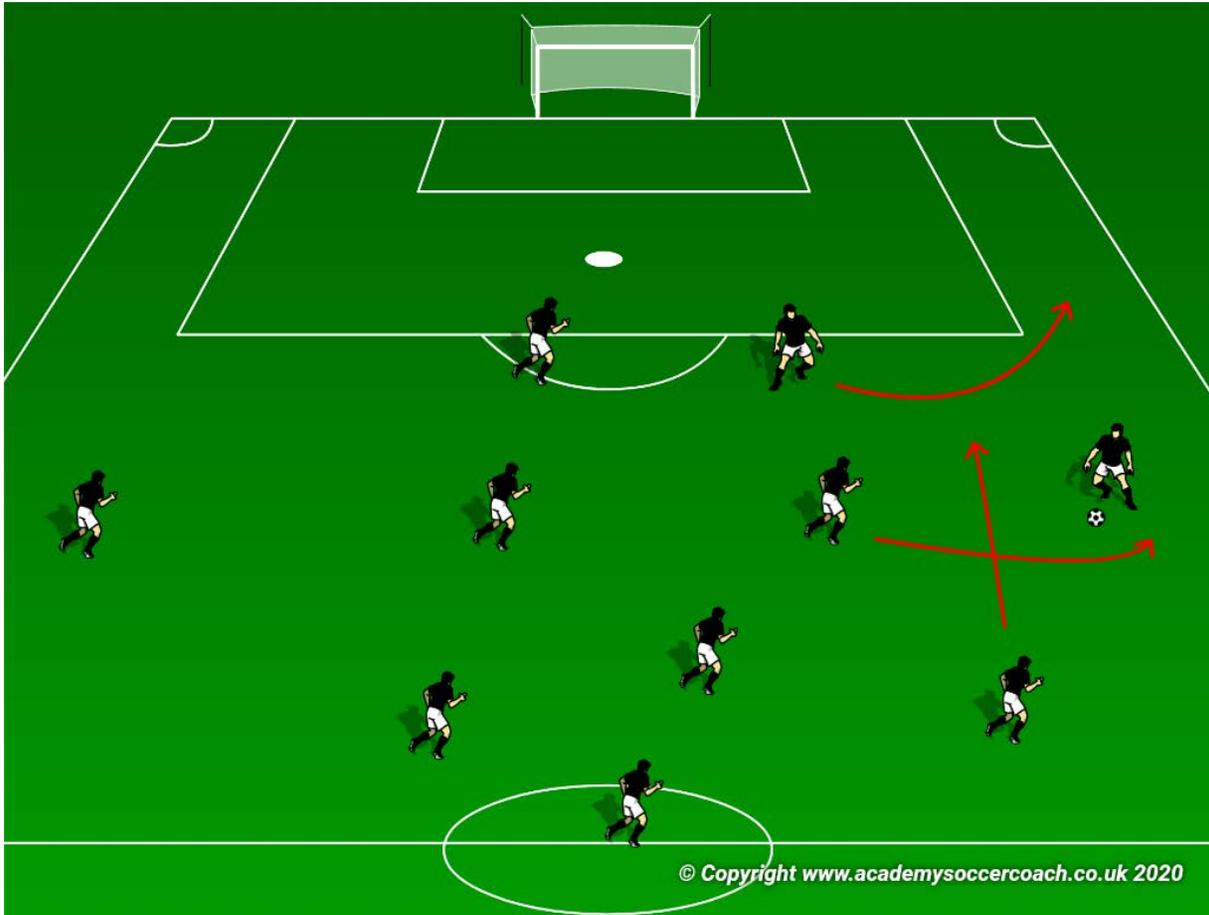


Movement 3 (underlap):

Centre midfielder moves outside into wide area

Strikers makes a diagonal run in behind the opposition full back

Centre back moves inside on the underlap

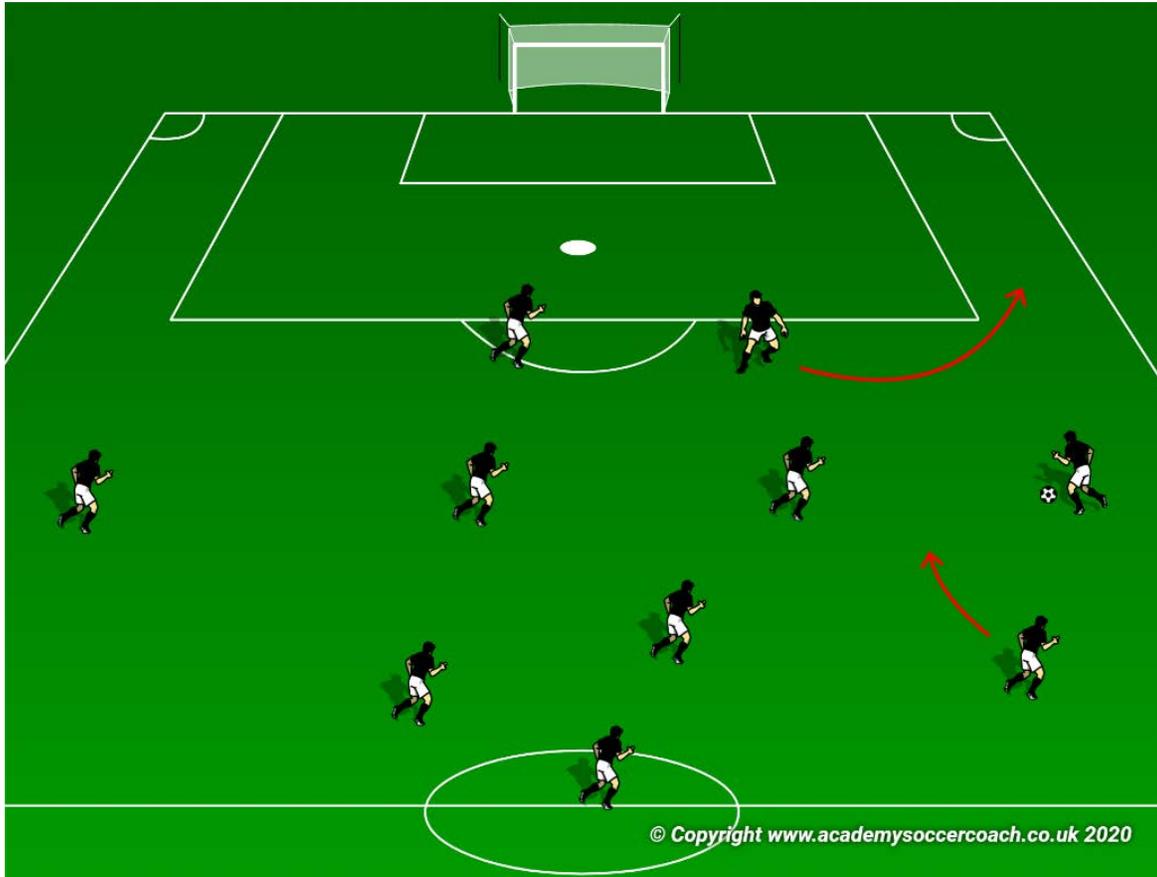


Movement 4 (underlap)

Wing back drives inside

Strikers makes a diagonal run in behind opposition's full back

Centre back supports from behind centrally/ready to make a forward run on the inside

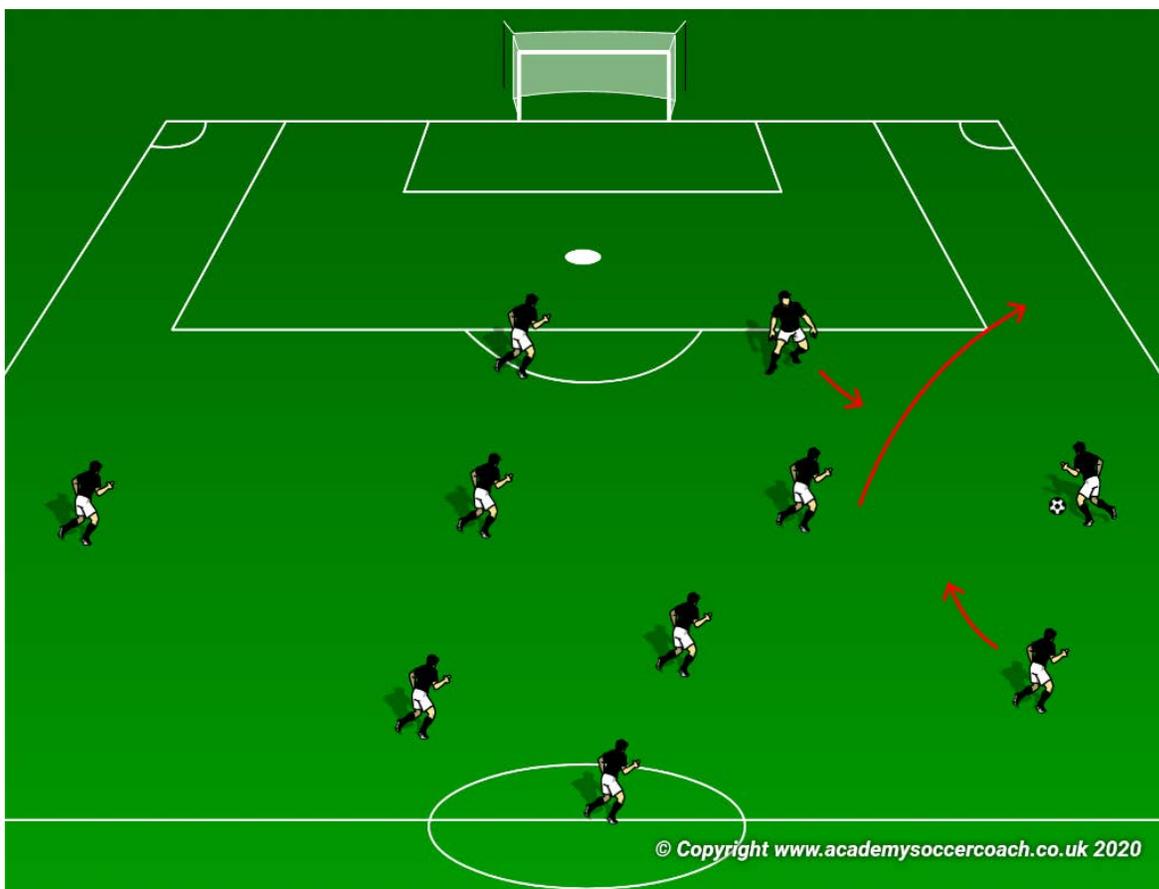


Movement 5 (underlap):

Striker comes in deeper

Centre midfielder runs diagonally into wide area in behind opposition's full back

Centre back comes inside on the underlap



The above patterns are examples of different relationships that can be formed between CM, R/LCB, R/LWB and ST in wide areas and facilitate centre backs involvement on the opposition's half. These can be mirrored on both halves of the pitch. For players, the above patterns can form a starting point to other movements. These patterns are not to be trained in isolation. Of course, unopposed passing and movement patterns can be used as well as a starting point and for automatization, however big chunk of work should be done within phases of play, function practices, 11v11 and small sided games as well as wave practices.

Technical requirements

The role of centre backs' in the analysed 1-3-5-2 context can be challenging from technical point of view. Their responsibilities force them to be versatile players. They have to defend and be able to do what traditional defender has to do but also they will find themselves in situations where the game will be around them (not just in front like for most CB's) and space will be

significantly reduced. They will have to make much quicker decisions and move with the ball at a higher speed and with detail. At times, centre backs will find themselves on the outside and will have to drive with the ball or cross it in from wide. Coming onto inside, they will face pressure coming from both sides therefore that will force them to be better at receiving skills and passing in tight areas and away from pressure. Overall, the role and specific interpretation of this position makes it a very hard one and only versatile players can fulfil the requirements. From technical point of view, these would be the areas of importance to practice:

- Receiving in all directions with emphasis to play forwards, under pressure, on the move
- Disguise and ball manipulation to get out of tight areas and link in next action
- Variety of passes, both short and long under little pressure to move the ball quickly
- Variety of passes, both short and long under pressure to get out and link/play through
- Crosses from various positions – deep, cut back, classic, inswinging, outswinging etc.
- Finishing ability off one or multiple touches, outside/inside the box, on the run
- Turns to get out and switch play

These should be practiced in context and with pressure. Technical work doesn't mean isolation as it is commonly understood. Work within possession, wave practices, small sided games and other opposed variations to challenge players and bring technical work as close as possible to real context. When choosing players to fulfil the analysed role of centre back consider above technical requirements:

- Can they do them all?
- Where are the gaps to fill in?
- Can these technical gaps be filled in within given time frame?

Physical and Psychological requirements

The way this position is interpreted will also influence physical and psychological requirement. From the conditioning point of view, centre backs will cover much bigger distance than traditional centre back. But it is not the actual distance that matters but how many times per game can he make a forward run or react in transition to defend with quality. Therefore, the quantity of actions matters across the full 90 minutes (endurance). It is no good though if he makes 5 runs within first 20 minutes and then 1 for the rest of the game. Frequency should be maintained as well. This is where speed endurance comes in. Finally, the quality of every action – speed & power. All of these should be treated with equal importance to start off and then adjusted depending on players' needs and specifics of the strategy. Physical preparation for a given position is a common practice across levels nowadays and should be taken into consideration when planning weekly, monthly and season long periodisation.

How fit is the player only matters if he is willing to use that fitness – in our context it might for example be getting involved higher up on the opposition's half in the attack.

All of the areas link together, psychological qualities are as equally important. It's just been mentioned that willingness to attack is important – in other words motivation, desire, commitment. But not only this. Due to quite versatile and wide nature of the role (big range of responsibilities) it is important that players remain concentrated on task and are able to switch concentration between different tasks. Communication and recognising body language – triggers will enable them to make the right decisions. Courage is equally crucial. Centre backs in this role should be brave enough to make forward runs, to not think about space they leave behind to go and attack with desire and energy. Confidence will also enable them to get on the ball and have desire to do it again and again. They need to be confident to produce risky actions and even if they get caught out of possession couple of times, do not let that influence them.

Training ideas

Possession game 6+3 v. 4

Working on linking three centre backs with three central midfielders and be able to play through. Two teams of black players are locked on their halves. Three red central midfielders can go anywhere they want. Four yellow players press all the time. The aim is to transfer the ball from one half to the other, however this can be only done through one of the red players. Black team players can play direct but that won't count as a point. If yellows win the ball back, they try to score in one of the four goals.

Key factors:

- Starting positions of the back three
- Angled movement in relation to the ball
- Movement and relationships with three central midfielders
- Ability to open up passing lines into opposition's half
- Recycling the ball through the back three



Possession game 8v4 + 1

Working on inside positioning of the right/left centre backs to allow underlaps/asymmetrical shape of back three in relation to wingbacks. Two halves of the pitch and two wide channels, similar to previous possession, two teams of three are locked on their half. Two wing backs operate on the outside of the pitch. One neutral can go anywhere he likes. The aim is to keep possession and transfer the ball from one half to the other. It can be done directly or through neutral player. Four defenders press all the time. The main condition is: when the ball is on your half, the back three can only occupy two channels out of three. This ensures one of the centre backs comes inside the pitch and opens up space for wing back to drop in. R/LCB marked out with a circle.

Key factors:

- Starting positions in relation to the ball
- Movement inside to allow diagonal movement between CB and wing back
- Wingbacks operating on different lines
- Centre midfielder clearing space for centre back to come inside the pitch
- Try to always have min. 4 players in the middle channel



Possession game 8v4

Working on the back three movement and its' relationship with three midfielders point up (two defensive midfielders). Three thirds of the pitch. 3v1 situation the first third, 2v2 in the middle and 3v1 in the opposite third. Black team keeps possession, certain amount of passes equals a goal. Yellows are locked in their zones, if they win the ball, they can go anywhere and try to score into one of the four goals. R/LCB marked out with a circle.

Key factors:

- Starting positions of the back three
- Angled movement in relation to the ball
- Movement and relationships with three central midfielders
- First and second line passes
- Centre midfielders clearing space for second line pass



Wave practice 4v2

Working on overlaps and crossing. GK starts with the ball playing out to RCB – marked out (alternate sides every go). He then plays out to the wing back on the outside and goes on the overlap. Wing back passes to ball to him to then the ball to be delivered. Striker stays centrally. Opposite wingback gets in the box. Two central defenders remain in the box and defend. If they win the ball they try to clip it to the other GK. Two pairs of defenders rotate within themselves. Wingbacks stay. Centre backs rotate within themselves and alternate sides.

Key factors:

- Starting position to go on the overlap
- Detail of the pass into wingback
- Recognising triggers
- Pace of the overlap
- Detail of overlapping movement
- Delivery of the ball



Pattern practice

Working on relationships in wide areas between R/LCB, CM, R/LWB, CF. The ball starts with a centre back as shown below. This practice is a set up to work on patterns in wide areas. Patterns mentioned in the chapter earlier on in the book should be introduced. Two defenders and one CDM for the opposition defend in and around the box, they stay centrally and only work within realistic areas. Mannequins are used for a reference. Two channels are marked out in wide areas to act as a reference, at least one of the four combining players tries to stay centrally. Every pattern should be finished with an end product.

Key factors:

- Starting positions in relation to the ball
- Recognising triggers for different movements
- Movements introduced as per patterns of play chapter
- One side is involved only, then as a progression link both sides of the pitch



Function practice 5v5+GK

Working on relationships on wide side of the pitch. This is where previously mentioned patters can be taken another level higher and worked on in more opposed environment. One side of the pitch is cut off. The game starts with centre back feeding the ball in. There is CB, RCB, RWB, 2xCM and CF involved. Defenders shape up in 1-2-2-1 shape. Attackers attack and try to score into the big goal. Defenders try to win the ball back and score in mini goals. The game restarts from the centre back. Off sides apply and off side line should be marked out by a coach.

Key factors:

- Introduce different patterns of movement

- Relationships between centre backs and centre midfielders
- Working off wingback positioning
- Building the attack
- Link to overlap and underlap runs
- Runs into the penalty box and end product



Phase of play 8v7 + GK

Working on deep positioning of the R/LCB in relation to 3xCM's and 2xCF's. The practice starts from centre back on the half way line who plays the ball in. Right and left centre backs are locked in their boxes what restricts their movement only to deep areas. Three central midfielders and two strikers move freely. Defending team is lined up in a 1-4-2-1 shape, if they

win the ball back, they try to score into one of the two mini goals. Off side line applies and should be marked out by a coach.

Key factors:

- Positions of CB's to recycle the play and retain possession
- When to come inside and when to play wider
- Working on different angles in relation to CM's
- Triggers to deliver the ball into the penalty box
- Recognising when to play into pockets and when to penetrate in behind
- Protection by one of the CM's staying deeper



Phase of play 10v9+GK

Linking and reinforcing all of the concepts together in attacking on the opposition's half context. The practice starts from centre back playing out into attacking players. Centre back is locked in the designated box. The aim of the attacking team is to score in a big goal. Attacking team is lined up in a 3-5-2 shape. The defending team plays in a 1-4-4-1 shape. If the defending team wins the ball back, they try to score into one of the two mini goals. Two wide channels are marked out as a point of reference to previous practices. Off sides apply and off side line should be marked out by a coach.

Key factors:

- Centre backs retaining to then progress
- Starting positions when the ball is in wide areas
- Overlapping/underlapping runs
- Positioning to switch the play/protect against counter attack
- Reaction in transitions to defend



Implications for youth development

In this book we have analysed specific role of a given position within a team structure. We have discovered how a popular system of play might be used in a slightly different way. What implications does it have for youth development? When teaching football and all of its decision-making complexities and relationships, variability is important. We talk about coaching universal and adaptable players but how can they be that if they play the same formation and style for 10 years? To develop flexible players that understand the game well it is important to expose them to various roles, styles, responsibilities etc. One of the tools to enable this is changing formations as well as the way team plays between seasons/two-year cycles. This way, from 12 years of age up until they reach first team, players will be exposed to all possible relationships that can be formed on the football pitch. This book shows just one of the ways to use centre backs in 1-3-5-2. If as a centre back, all I know is playing with a back four or just back three then I will be not as ready as if I was exposed to both at some point in my youth development journey. Therefore, as a coach, have I considered the following questions:

- Are my players getting enough variability within game understanding/tactical training?
- What style is my team playing? For how long?
- What formations my players been exposed to?
- How am I developing various roles and interpretations of a given position?

'I think the opposite of something I hear a lot. One hears that they say that all the teams in the same club must play with the same system. In my opinion, all youth teams in a club must play one system per year. A year with 4213 and its variation, with a line of 3 defenders. One year this system, another year this. One per year and its variation.'

Marcelo Bielsa, at Somos Futbol conference in Brazil, 2017

Conclusions

Sheffield's United interpretation of centre backs' role in a 1-3-5-2 brings a lot of freshness into how this system is understood. It has shown that thinking outside the box how certain players are utilised can bring a lot of unpredictability and success.

The role of three centre backs starts with playing out from the back. If the play is opened with a short pass from the keeper, it is mainly back three that is responsible for dictating the direction, tempo and intent of the attack. As the ball moves up the pitch, they play a key role in supporting play from behind. This is where recycling the ball through the other side comes in as well as producing crosses from deeper areas.

Staying 'connected' to the game helps centre backs to get involved with a forward run and be more adventurous higher up the pitch. When they move on the overlap, it creates good opportunities to progress in behind within wide areas as well as can potentially create a 2v1 situations to deliver a cross. It also opens up opportunities for other players to stay centrally and maintain enough players in the penalty box.

Moving on the inside of the ball – overlapping, can also bring many opportunities. This in turn can create space out wide and help strikers or one of the central midfielders to make a run into wide area. It brings in options to combine through the middle and create an overload centrally which can be unfamiliar for the opposition.

Centre backs can be also used to switch play and recycle the ball. This enables quicker circulation and move the ball into wing backs. It also frees up midfielders to make forward runs and threaten the box.

This way of using centre backs can be very effective, but it requires a certain type of players that fulfil technical, physical and psychological requirements. They also have to fit within a wider picture and be able to interact with other players within team context well.

If done well, it brings a lot of unpredictability and forces opposition to deal with unfamiliar situations. Whether it is for the purpose of developing young players or getting the best out of your group of senior players, it is definitely an approach worth considering!

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