Unlock Manchester City's Attack: Coaching the Tactics That Led to Citizens Victory

Jeferson Matos



On UEFA Champions League 2022/2023 semi-finals, Bernardo Silva's goal against Real Madrid on May 17, 2023, was a perfect example of a system creating a dilemma for the opponent. By forcing defenders to choose between two actions, it created and exploited a tactical weakness. This shows that modern football (soccer) is about the interaction between players and the choices they make under pressure, having multiple stimuli.

The Mechanic of the first goal

Guardiola's has the genius ability to coach his players, in possession, to do manipulate the opponent's movements, to generate defensive gaps.

The principle is simple, yet relentless:

- When the ball moves horizontally, players attack vertical spaces.

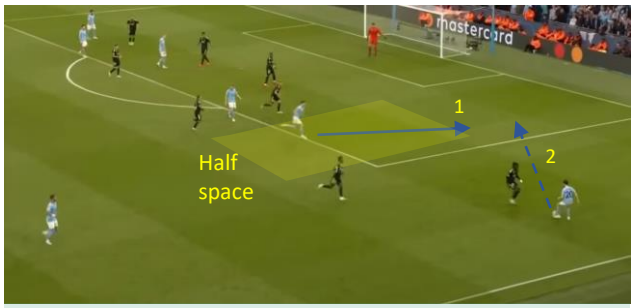
- When the ball moves vertically, players move horizontally.

These **antagonistic movements** create a dilemma for the defense, opening up space for teammates to exploit and providing the player on the ball with multiple decision-making options. It's like a game of chess, where you move a piece to attract your opponent, to clear a path for a checkmate.

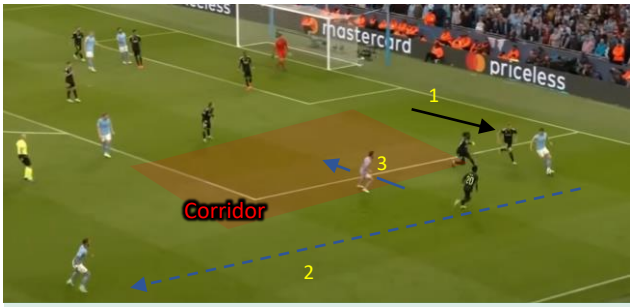
The goal in Four Acts:



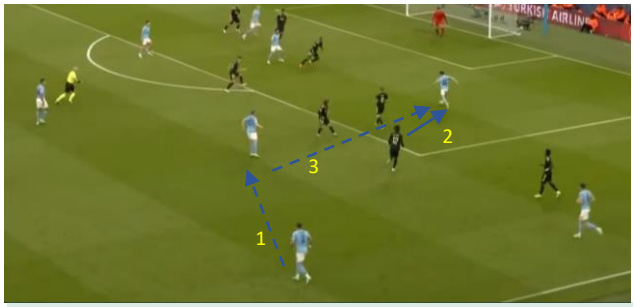
The attack against a very compact Real Madrid in a 1-4-2-3-1 formation was the living proof of this principle. The Horizontal Movement: the ball is stretched wide to the right side, to Bernardo Silva [1], displacing Real Madrid's left flank players, Camavinga and Vinícius Jr [2].



This creates a "check" on the opponent, forcing them to move horizontally and, by in doing so, opening up Real Madrid's left half-space. As Real Madrid's defense expands horizontally to mark the ball, John Stones makes an explosive, vertical run [1] into the empty space, to receive the horizontal pass from Bernardo Silva [2].



If City simplified the action, Stones'd have tried to turn and shoot. Instead, while in the most dangerous area on the pitch, he chose to attract Toni Kroos [1] and move him out of the box, opening even more the half-space. With Stones passing back vertically to Walker [2], Bernardo Silva moves horizontally to the center [3], occupying the empty half space, totally free.



Stones makes the horizontal pass to Kevin De Bruyne [1], and Bernardo understands the game's mechanics intuitively: at the same time of the horizontal pass (drawing the opponent's attention to horizontal movements), he now runs vertically inside [2], attacking the back of Real Madrid's first defensive line. De Bruyne finds him with a precise pass [3], free to score.

What does this mean for your team?

You don't need a team of superstars to replicate this logic. This play wasn't just about the talent of De Bruyne or Bernardo; it was about tactical discipline and an understanding of the game. At SoccerCoachMatrix, we transform this logic into a system. Our purpose is to break down the complexity of elite football and turn it into practical exercises that can be applied by any coach, at any level.

This is our 'why'. We believe the secret to success in football is in intelligence, not luck. And we are here to give you the tools to understand, plan, and teach perfection in every training session.

Now, let's get to work and create a training session that focuses on creating habits for this tactical action. We'll soon have a website with several sessions like this and a powerful tool to set up your training sessions, taking them to the next level.

Scoring goals with antagonistic runs: an intermediate level training session

Jeferson Matos



The analysis of Bernardo Silva's first goal for Manchester City against Real Madrid in the 2022/2023 Champions League semi-finals highlights two main tactical principles:

- **Antagonistic third-man runs**: runs that go against the direction of a previous pass, splitting the opponent's attention to create free spaces.
- **Attacking spaces on distraction:** players exploit these spaces to progress, an at the end, attack the spaces generated in the backline of the first defensive unit to receive a pass or misplace the defenders even more.

This training session will make these principles **operational for intermediate-level players**. While it can also be used with elite players, we will soon provide a specific session with the same principles designed for advanced and elite levels.

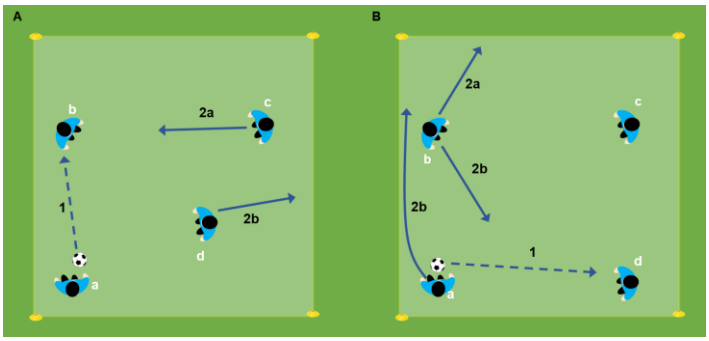
The exercises can be applied in different days, to adjust in the week's physical demands.

Keys to read the figures:



1. WARM UP: PASSING PRACTICE WITH ANTAGONISTIC THIRD MEN RUN

Exercise is presented in two panels, showing the same core concept with different movements. The aim is to comprehend the player's antagonistic run in relation to the ball movement.



Panel A: When a vertical pass is made from player 'a' to 'b' [1], player 'c' makes a horizontal run [2a]. A coordinated run [2b] is also possible, with player 'c' moving inward and player 'd' moving outward at the same time.

Panel B: When a horizontal pass is made (from player 'a' to 'd') [1], player 'b' makes a vertical run forward [2a]. A coordinated vertical run is also an option [2b], with player 'b' moving backward and player 'a' moving forward.

Rules

- Stimulate directional receiving.
- At least one player must run in a perpendicular trajectory related to the previous pass for the past to be countable.
- Count the passes and the group that has more passes wins the round

Variations

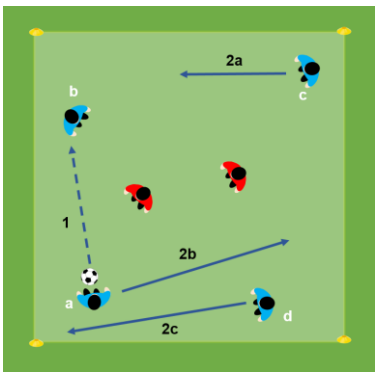
- Limit the touches on the ball

Suggestions

Field Size	Nº of Players	Time
20 x 20m	4 (4 v 0)	10 min 4 x 2' (R: 30")

2. VARIATION: POSSESSION GAME WITH TACTICAL PASS CYCLES

Application game from the exercise 1, solidifying the concept of **antagonistic movement:** a run perpendicular to the ball's trajectory, in a 4v2 possession drill. Same field.



A vertical pass from 'a' to 'b' is paired with a horizontal run by 'c' [1, 2a]. Variations include the passer running after the pass [2b], or two players swapping positions with two perpendicular movements [2b + 2c]. If the defense steals the ball, the attackers' pass count is reset.

Rules

- Attackers score points by completing a set number of passes, but only when each pass is accompanied by a simultaneous antagonistic movement.
- Switch the defenders at every bout.

Variations

Limit the touches on the ball

Suggestions

Field Size	Nº of Players	Time
20 x 20m	4 (4 v 2)	12 min 4 x 2' (R: 1')

3. THREE ZONE APPLICATION GAME

GK+4(+4 J) v 4+GK played on a 50 x 40m field, split into three horizontal zones: defensive, midfield, and attacking zones. The teams rotate, with one team acting as a 'joker' to provide numerical superiority to the attacking team.



Yellows attacking, blues are jokers, reds defending. GK passes to player 6 (or p6) [1], who passes laterally to p3 [2]. Immediately, p2 makes a vertical run into the next zone [3a], validating the progression [4].

Rules

- To advance a pass into the next zone, the last pass of the attacking team must be followed by an antagonistic movement.
- The horizontal-zones rule refers to the movement of the ball. Players move freely.
- When the defending team wins the ball, they immediately switch roles, playing with the "joker" team, and attacking the other goal, following the same rules.
- Switch jokers at every round

Variations

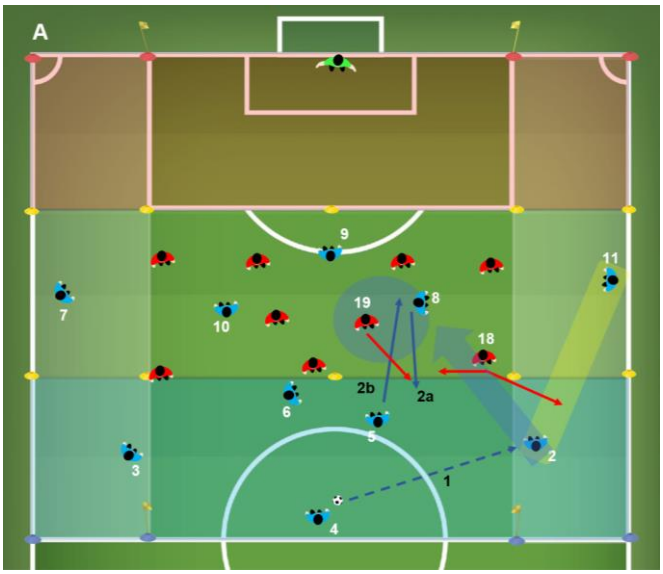
- Demand coordinated run between two players [3a + 3b].

Suggestions

Field Size	№ of Players	Time
50 x 40m	14: GK+4 (+4J) V 4+GK	30 min 5 x 4' (R: 2')

4. PROGRESSION: INTEGRATIVE SITUATIONAL GAME

This exercise is played 10 v 9+GK on a half field splitted in three horizontal zones, simulating a 3-2-4-1 vs. 4-2-3-1 formation, Integrating antagonistic movements, switching sites, and attacking the backs of the first offensive line



Panel A - the first dilemma: p4 passes to p2 [1], while p8 drops back with a vertical run [2a], attracting p18 and p19. p5 attacks the vacated space [2b], creating a dilemma for p18: pressure p2, close the pass to p5, or cut the lane to p11, guaranteeing a free player (p11, p8, or p5).



Panel B: assuming that p18 chose to close p5, leaving the wide corridor for p11 open, a new sequence of horizontal runs begins [2]: p5 gets closer to support, while p10 and p9 make runs to the ball side, attracting defenders and opening space. Simultaneously, p8 runs into the vacated space [3b], exploiting a new dilemma: if the first line drops, a large hole opens for a pass from p11 to p8, or space to run with the ball. If p17 chases p8 [2c], it's probable that p23 covers his space, further isolating P7 for a long ball, or even to attack the far post

Rules

- Ball starts in the midfield. The progression to the next zone or a goal, is only valid if it happens after, at least, 1 **antagonistic movement**—a run perpendicular to the pass. Each goal counts 3 points.
- Extra points are awarded for using the side corridors (one extra point per time that a corridor is used). Not only with a long ball, but also direct passes on the ground.
- The defense has a maximum of 5 seconds to win back possession and cross the midfield line.

Suggestions

Field Size	Nº of Players	Time
Half	20 (10 v 9+GK)	40 min 4 x 8' (R: 2')



About the author:

Jeferson Matos is a soccer (football) coach with **A** license held by **Conmebol** (Argentina), **UEFA C** (Portugal), **USSF** 11v11 and 7v7 Licenses, Bachelor in Physical Education and Sports (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil), having coached, assisted and been tactical analyst in Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United States of America.