

Tactical Play: '20 Zones'

Written by Paul Bright

Acknowledgements

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“I want players who can make decisive moves in small spaces, I want them to work as little as possible to save energy for that decisive action.” - Johan Cruyff

Breaking Records

Questions and doubts of a positional play approach were raised when Manchester City recruited Pep Guardiola, with some critics and pundits asking if he could dominate the Premier League with his positional and possession-based brand of football, as he did in La Liga at Barcelona and in the Bundesliga with Bayern Munich.

Fast-forward to May 2018 and Manchester City secured the Premier League title and broke 7 records in the process;

Aside from breaking records, what impressed many soccer fans was the manner and style of play brought to the Premier League, showing that a 'Juego De Posición' (Positional Play) philosophy could be implemented into the fast-paced English game.

Analysis

Jonathan Wilson's analysis of Manchester City's title win cleverly highlighted the 'vulnerable channels' (also referred to as the 'red zones', 'interior channels/corridors' or 'half spaces') as key areas to exploit when in possession. Ultimately, the space between the opposition Full Backs and Centre Backs

Many coaches have also seen the aerial images of Bayern's and City's training grounds complete with numerous vertical and horizontal lines before scrambling to Marti Perarnau's documentary books, to ask "How do coaches use those field set ups in delivering a positional play philosophy?"

'20 Zones' and 'Interior Channels'

The approach of Juego de Posición, when in possession, is all about making the opposition defence move in order to disrupt their defensive structure.

“Move the opponent, not the ball. Invite the opponent to press. You have the ball on one side, to finish on the other.” - Pep Guardiola

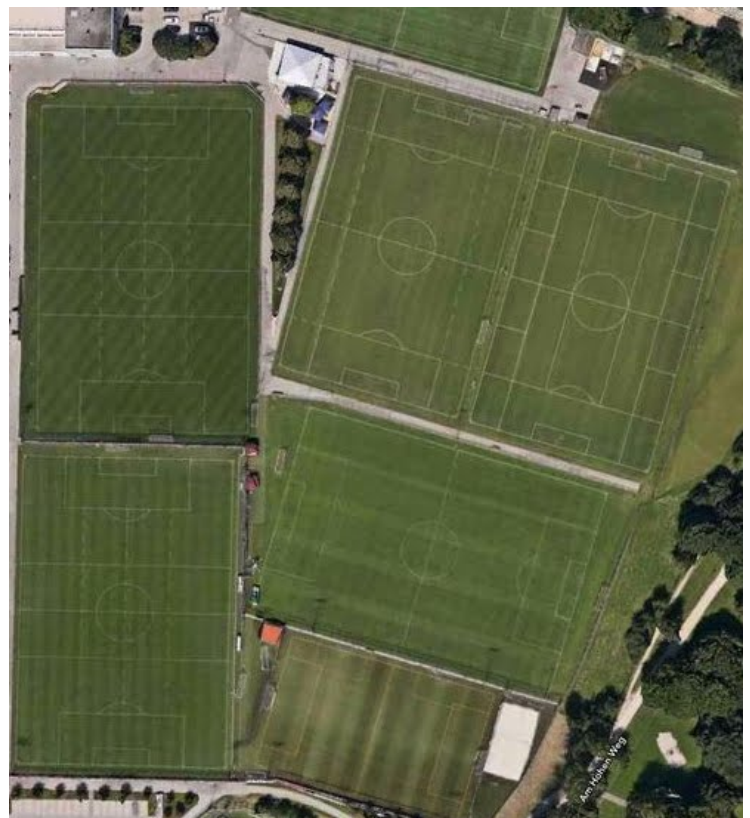
Coaches who utilise the positional play approach mark out a number of his training pitches with 20 zones, with the focus in possession on exploiting the space between the opposition Full Backs and Centre Backs; the Interior Channel (as we will refer to this zone in the article).

The field markings are set with 4 x vertical channels and 5 x horizontal lines and elite coaches tend to adopt general rules, in-line with these field markings to create advanced passing options (numerical and positional superiority) around the ball or to exploit the weak side and the opposite interior channel.

* These principles are seen as guidelines for players. Every situation in a game is different and calls for players to understand and then action their decision in relation to the ball and these lines on the field.

Manchester City: Premier League Records 2017-2018

Record	Previous Record	Manchester City 2017-2018
Most Premier League Points	95 Points (Chelsea 2004-2005)	100 Points
Most Goals	103 Goals (Chelsea 2009-2010)	106 Goals
Most Wins	30 Wins (Chelsea 2016-2017)	32 Wins
Most Away Wins	15 Away Wins (Chelsea 2004-2005)	16 Away Wins
Biggest + Goal Difference	+71 (Chelsea 2009-2010)	79
Biggest Title Winning Margin	18 Points (Man Utd 2009-2010)	19 points
Least Time Losing	170 Minutes (Arsenal 1998-1999)	153 Minutes



Principles of Juego de Posición

No more than 3 zones on the same horizontal line should be occupied

Having players positioned on the same horizontal line creates sideways rather than diagonal/forward passing options. These sideways passes are dangerous as if they are intercepted then a minimum of two players are now ahead of the ball and have to recover.

The principle of no more than 3 players on the same horizontal line means that players must continually scan and check their position in order to create diagonal passing options or support behind the ball, thus allowing the team to advance forwards with balance and protection.

In the above scenario blue 6 is in possession in the central zone, with blue 2 and blue 3 taking up positions in the interior channels on the same horizontal line. This may draw in opposition defenders to then release the attacking midfielders, blue 10 and blue 8, higher up the field.

If a 4th player moves into this horizontal zone, another player already occupying the zone may drop off and support, or advance forwards.

No more than 2 zones on the same vertical channel should be occupied

As the touchline can be used as a defender and straight passes can be intercepted, coaches may encourage their team to have no more than 2 players in a line when possible. The 2 players (Blue 2 and blue 7) in the above scenario are positioned in the same channel and this draws across opposition players (red 11, 3, 6 and 5).

By blue 8 occupying the interior channel, he offers a diagonal passing option that advances the team forwards and towards goal, taking the pressing opposition players out of the game.

Blue 11 on the opposite side is also positioned to exploit the 'weak side' as the opposition defence have been dragged to the right side of the field.

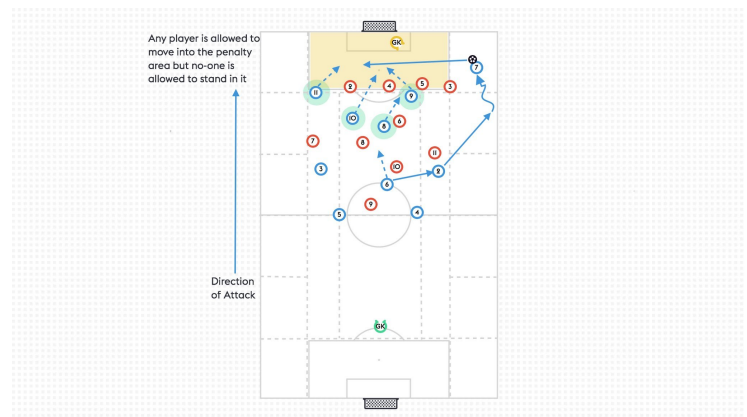
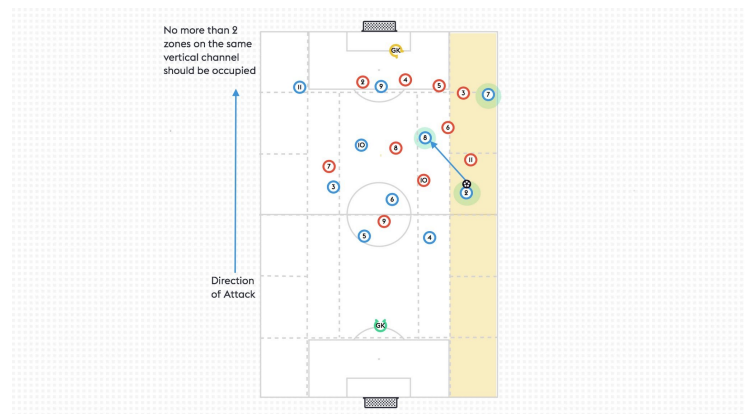
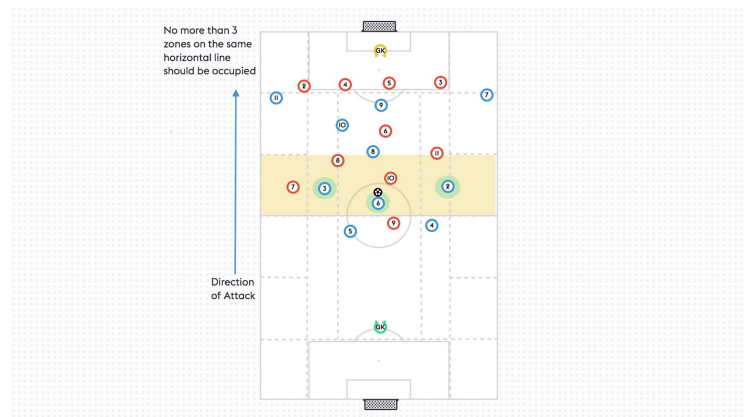
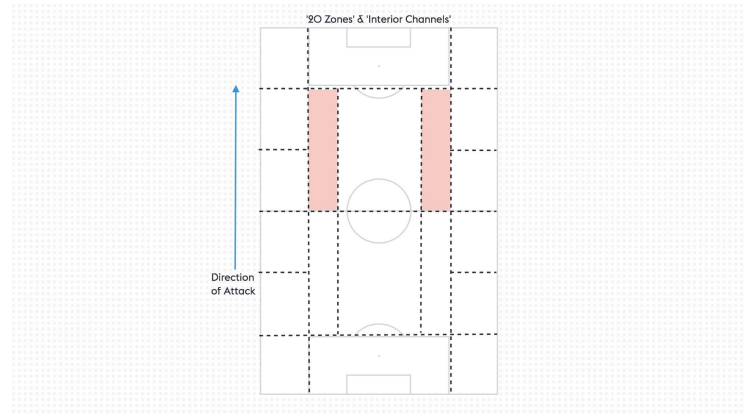
Any player is allowed to move into the penalty area but no-one is allowed to stand in it

Timing of movements into the penalty area is key for teams adopting a positional play strategy, and really focuses on the build up play through the interior channels.

If players are waiting for the ball inside the penalty area this normally means that opposition defenders have recovered behind the ball and can also view the attack to cover the interior channels.

Rather, teams may utilise the space in behind by drawing out the opposition before playing penetrative through balls into the penalty area for a quick finish. Again the wide forwards of blue 7 and blue 11 stay high and wide, as blue 2 receives a pass in the interior channel from blue 6, before releasing blue 7 in the wide zone and beyond the defensive line.

This allows blue 10, blue 9 and blue 11 to arrive in the penalty area to attack the ball as blue 8 advances to the edge of the area for protection and to collect any stray balls.



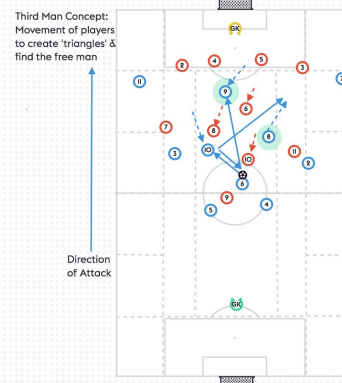
Third Man Concept: Movement of players to create 'triangles' and find the Free Man (3rd Man)

Whilst the scenario above portrays a simplistic view of movements to release the free man and find players in space, the concept requires players to recognise movement cues and how to drag opposition defenders into zones of the field, to then exploit space elsewhere.

For example, blue 10 drops to receive and draws in red 8 who follows the runner. This allows either;

1. Blue 10 to drop the ball back to blue 6, as blue 9 makes a run into the space on the edge of the area to receive a penetrating pass from blue 6.
2. Blue 8 recognises the opposition red 6 advancing forwards to support the press, and makes a run to receive directly from blue 10 in the right interior channel.

The movement, positioning and rotation of ball and players allows the blue team to find the free man in central areas, and adopting 'triangles' in these areas creates penetrating passes as well as freeing up the #8 or #10.

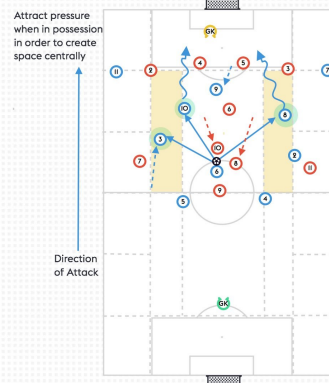


Attract pressure when in possession in order to create space centrally

Any player that plays in a team who use a positional play strategy must be confident and technically astute, even under immense pressure from the opposition.

Coaches should actually encourages players to embrace the ball and attract pressure, in the understanding that if an opposition player closes the ball down aggressively and intensely space will be created, and hopefully exploited, elsewhere on the field.

With blue 6 in possession and attracting pressure from the opposition 8 and 10, space is created in the interior channels for blue 10 or blue 8 to receive. The advancing inverted full back (blue 3) offers a pass to relieve pressure and also the centre back pairing of blue 5) and blue 4 could also call for the ball before playing a first time penetrating pass to the attacking midfielders.



Interior Channels and Inverted Full Backs

Ultimately, 'Juego' coaches works within these 20 zones, and in particular the 2 x interior channels and the central zone, to unbalance the opposition defensive units and create opportunities to penetrate and advance towards goal.

As we can see from the principles and images, receiving the ball in the interior channels has the most potential to eliminate and penetrate opposition players, whilst moving diagonally towards goal, as the defenders have to shift out of position to close down the ball.

The attacking player in possession also requires team mates to recognise and make decisions based on the positioning of the ball and the principles listed above, in order to provide team balance and passing options to penetrate, play around or play in front of the opposition.

A juego de posición approach may differ dependent on players at your disposal, as demonstrated in the differing approaches of Barca, Bayern and Manchester City, however the principles and methodology hold true.

"When you're out on the touchline, like a winger, it is easier to play. You see everything: the mess, the crowd, the activity is all inside. When you play inside, you don't see anything in there because so much is happening in such a small space and all around you." - Pep Guardiola

With Manchester City, the wide forwards are encouraged to stay as wide and as high as possible in attack, in order to flatten the opposition back line and create space in central areas for the striker (#9) to drop in and receive, or to free up the roaming attacking midfielders (#8 and 10) in advanced areas of the field.

In order to do this, the full backs (#2 and 3) would be encouraged to invert and move into the interior channels when possible, as width is provided by the wide forwards; resulting in a 2-3-2-3 shape on a number of occasions.

Compare this to the positional play approach of Barca and Bayern, where the width would often be provided by the full backs advancing forwards as the wide forwards would move inside and provide central options.

Playing the wide forwards high and wide stretches and flattens the opposition back line whilst also providing options for quick counter attacks, as often seen in the English Premier League.

Juego de Posición in action

The following video link shows Guardiola, who is belied to be a huge advocate of positional play as influenced by Juan Lillo, Bielsa and La Volpe, delivering principles of positional play with Bayern Munich at an open training session in Doha.

Attacking Sessions with focus on 'zones'

The following attacking sessions will allow coaches to deliver activities for their players that focus on exploiting the interior channels and utilising positional play to create opportunities to advance forwards through utilising horizontal lines and vertical channels;

[Playing on different horizontal lines and vertical channels \(https://www.thecoachingmanual.com/Session/5689127638925312\)](https://www.thecoachingmanual.com/Session/5689127638925312)

[Attacking through Interior Channels \(https://www.thecoachingmanual.com/Session/5690886025379840\)](https://www.thecoachingmanual.com/Session/5690886025379840)

Feel free to share your analysis and juego de posición sessions and share with us on Twitter @coachingmanual and Facebook @thecoachingmanual