

Manchester United 2019: the team who can't create chances from open play



By Michael Cox (/author/michael-cox/) 4h ago

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Even when Manchester United were flying during Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's stint as caretaker manager last season, there was something unconvincing about their 'expected goal' numbers.

Make no mistake: upon his appointment Solskjaer genuinely refreshed United, and had them playing with more attacking freedom than during the final days of Jose Mourinho, but the numbers suggested they would struggle to maintain that form. United's first 12 Premier League matches under Solskjaer saw them go unbeaten, with a total goal difference of plus-20: scored 29, conceded just nine. Solskjaer's permanent appointment was an inevitability.

The expected goals (xG) numbers were less convincing. According to Understat, they should have scored 25.6 goals, and conceded 13.7, for a total xGD of +11.9. This was still a positive situation — but it suggested United's goal return was almost twice as good as you would expect, based upon the chances they'd created and allowed the opposition.

Many attempted to come up with explanations for why United's figures outperformed the xG. Players such as Anthony Martial and Paul Pogba looked liberated after the departure of Mourinho, while there was an argument that Solskjaer, a master finisher in his own playing days, might have tapped into Marcus Rashford and improved his composure in front of goal. It's rare, however, for a side to outperform their xG numbers consistently, and so it has proved.

This season, Manchester United's goal return hasn't merely drifted back towards what you'd expect — the numbers have completely flipped. Having dramatically overperformed their xG in the second half of last season, United are now underperforming at both ends of the pitch.

Let's start with the basics. This season, they have conceded eight goals in eight games, the fourth-best defensive record in the league. Their problem is at the opposite end, where 12 sides have managed more goals than United's nine.

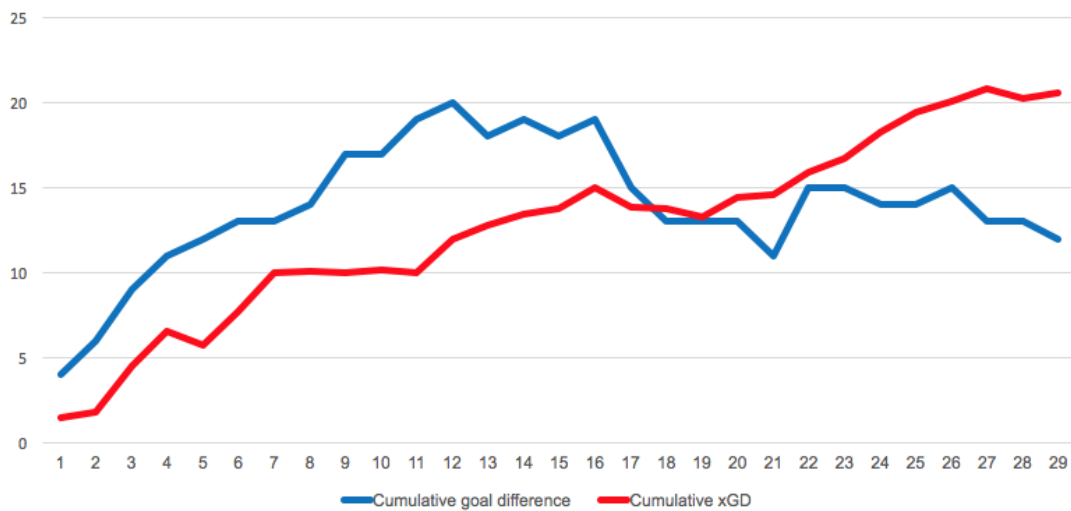
Delve a little further into the numbers and a peculiar pattern emerges.

Using the xG metric, it becomes clear that United have actually defended even better than the raw numbers would suggest. In fact, they're the best side in the league defensively, with the lowest xGA figure — effectively a measure of chances conceded — at 6.2. For the purposes of comparison, Liverpool are on 7.4, and every other Premier League side is on 9.5 or more.

So how about at the other end? Weirdly, United aren't bad here, either. They have managed 12.1xG in attack, which doesn't sound particularly impressive from eight matches and is less than half of Manchester City's figure. But it is nevertheless the fifth-best figure in the division, behind only City, Liverpool, Chelsea and — somewhat surprisingly — Southampton.

So the first question should probably be: at what stage did United start performing worse than their xG figures?

Essentially, the rot set in towards the end of last season — particularly in the final five games, when United scored just twice from 5.7xG, and conceded 10 times from 6.1xGA. Solskjaer's 18th game in charge, a 2-0 defeat to Manchester City (a harsh reflection of a game that was 0.5-0.5 in xG terms) was the moment United's cumulative goal difference under Solskjaer fell below the expected numbers, and it has never recovered.



Indeed, it hasn't recovered in dramatic fashion. But the aforementioned numbers — suggesting United have the best defence and the fifth-best attack in the league — are bewildering to anyone who has watched recent matches.

So how on earth have they racked up these numbers while seemingly playing terribly?

A partial explanation is simple: United's good performances came a while ago. From their first four matches of the campaign, their overall expected goal difference (xGD) was 4.79, whereas in the last four it's been just 1.2. Yet it is still notable that United have only been out-shot, in terms of xG, once this season — in the 1-1 home draw with Arsenal. More than anything else, it seems they're suffering from poor finishing.

So that is the figure to investigate — nine goals from 12.1xG. Their shot conversion rate of 9.3 per cent is the fifth-worst in the league. So should we point the finger at the forwards, and in particular, the seemingly off-form Rashford?

Well, not entirely. Because once you break down the xG figures by situation, it seems United's finishing in open play has been decent enough — seven goals from 6.23xG.

Their real issue has been not being clinical enough from set-piece chances.

Once you consider corners, free-kicks (both those shot directly, and those crossed or taken short) and penalties, United's figures make for disappointing reading. They've scored two goals from 6.0xG. The chief offenders here are Pogba and Rashford, who have both missed penalties at crucial stages; Pogba in the draw at Wolves, Rashford in the home defeat to Crystal Palace.

But there's also another surprise culprit — Harry Maguire. The centre-back wasn't bought for his goal-scoring prowess, but in United's last two defeats, away at West Ham and Newcastle, Maguire has wasted their best chance of the game. At the London Stadium, the ball broke to him after a corner and he sidefooted straight at Lukasz Fabianski, while at St James' Park he miscued a header wide, having been allowed a free jump because of Fabian Schar's sloppy marking.

But this, of course, is also a damning indictment of United — the fact their xG depends on set-piece chances shows they're not creating enough chances from open play. Solskjaer has turned them into a side who have pressure, and then create chances from set-pieces, rather than a side that can penetrate the opposition in open play.

Once you restrict xG figures to open play, only Crystal Palace, Bournemouth and Newcastle have created less. That's an alarming statistic, but it's in keeping with what supporters have seen.

United's performance in the 1-0 defeat to Newcastle was their worst of the season so far, at least in an attacking sense. They recorded just 1.0xG — their lowest of the season. That was against a side who conceded five goals the previous weekend. Solskjaer's team looked completely short of ideas about how to break down a deep block.

The biggest problem for United was the inability of their midfielders to play line-breaking passes through the opposition midfield and in to players between the lines. Yes, it can be difficult playing against a deep 5-4-1 — see below — but the combination of Sean and Matty Longstaff (<https://theathletic.com/1268323/2019/10/07/dads-an-ice-hockey-star-mum-and-sister-love-netball-and-the-cricketing-brothers-just-beat-manchester-united/>) shouldn't have looked quite so comfortable throughout. Matty's match-winning performance was, in itself, a fantastic story, but should also be something of a humiliation for Solskjaer's side, who allowed a 19-year-old debutant to shine.



United had no obvious plan for breaking down Newcastle. They didn't focus on switching play quickly to drag them across the pitch, while the midfield combination of Scott McTominay and Fred moved the ball slowly and rarely looked capable of threading forward passes between opponents.

Here's one very telling example of how pedestrian Manchester United were.

After 33 minutes, a goal-kick drops to Fred, who has plenty of space, and the opportunity to slip a first-time pass to Juan Mata, who is in a good position to drive forward with the ball.



But Fred's first touch is poor, and he doesn't have the confidence to play the ball in to Mata with his second touch, so instead he plays it backwards to Maguire. Note Mata's frustration that the ball didn't come his way.



Maguire is then more positive with his distribution, feeding the ball between Newcastle's midfielders and in to Mata.

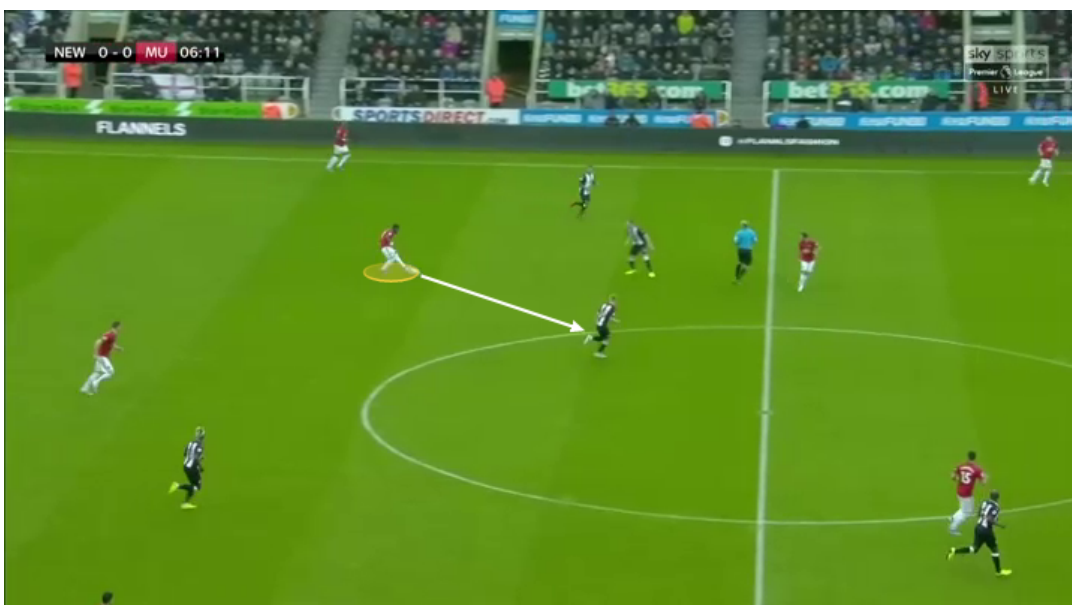


But rather than receiving it on the half-turn and moving into a dangerous position, Mata plays an easy pass out to left-back Ashley Young, allowing Newcastle to get men behind the ball again.

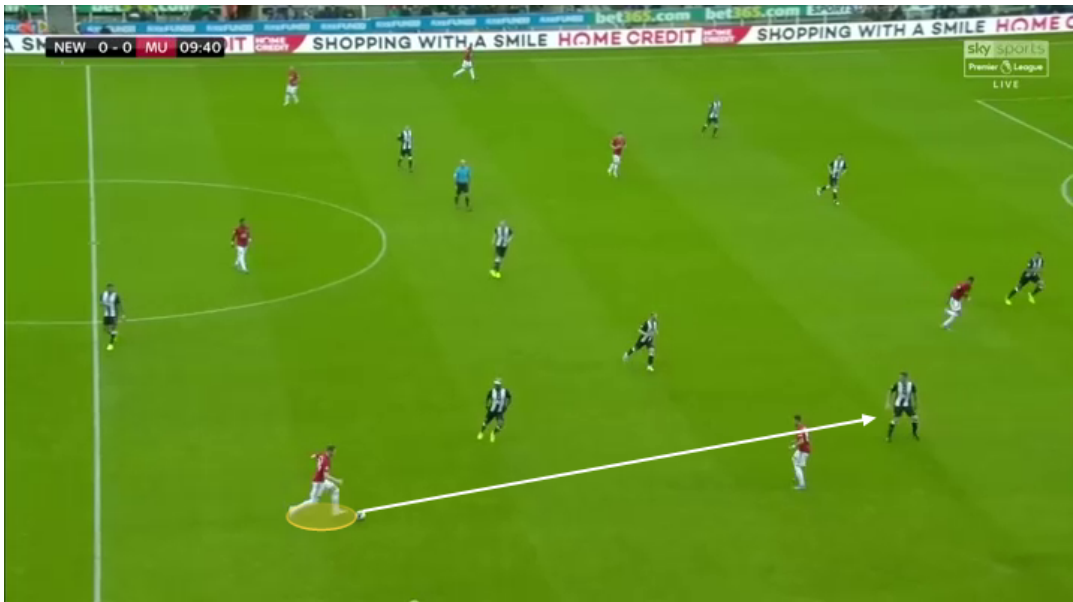


This showed two separate United problems.

The first issue is that the central midfield partnership used in this game isn't good enough. Yes, United were without Pogba, who offers more composure and incision with the ball, but it was nevertheless incredibly frustrating to see Fred and McTominay consistently concede possession cheaply. Even when there was ample space to feed the ball in to Mata, or others between the lines, they often passed straight to opponents. Early on, Fred managed to pick out Matty Longstaff when a simple forward pass to Mata was on.



McTominay often did something similar, here passing to Ciaran Clark rather than to Rashford or Andreas Pereira.



Perhaps most frustrating was that duo's lack of tactical understanding. United, who had thrived in Solskjaer's early days when playing on the break, effectively turned down counter-attacking opportunities, failing to take advantage when Newcastle's lines were stretched and midfielders were out of the game. Here, shortly after a corner, Newcastle are completely disorganised, and McTominay has the opportunity to bring the ball forward, or find a team-mate on the run.



But after a sideways pass and a backwards pass, United allow Newcastle to recover.

The ball ends up back with McTominay, 20 yards higher up the pitch, but now with nine well-assembled Newcastle players between him and the goal.



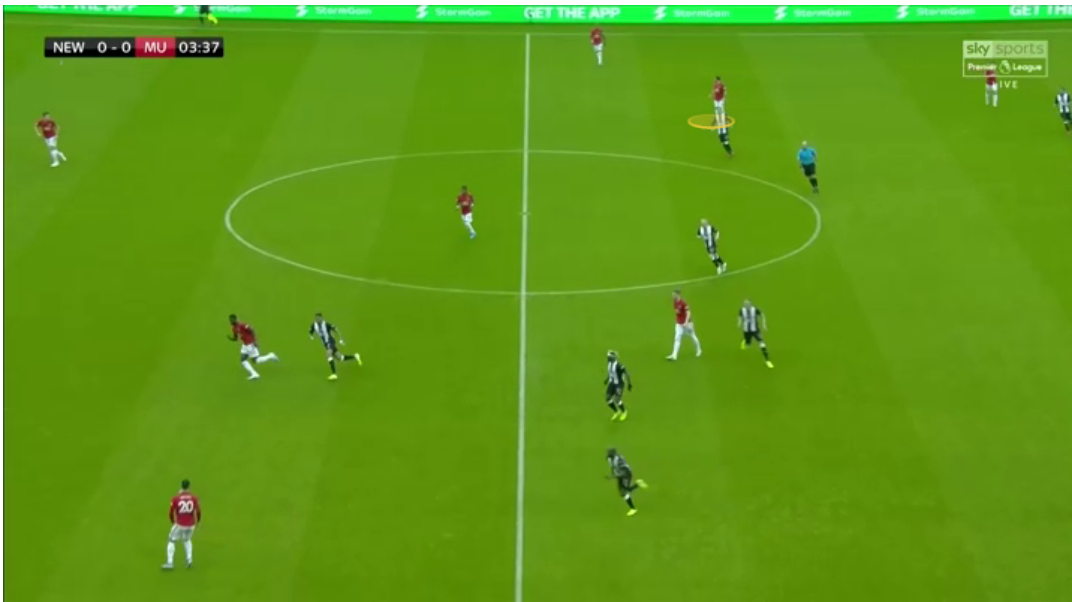
Another issue, as in the aforementioned example, was Mata.

Once arguably the most efficient, decisive No 10 in the Premier League in his Chelsea days, for long periods Mata looked like he'd forgotten how to play the position here, in a couple of ways.

First, he started the game positioning himself permanently towards United's left.



Perhaps this was a deliberate tactic, trying to get him playing combinations with Daniel James in behind DeAndre Yedlin, but it meant when Newcastle left space between the lines, Mata wasn't in a position to exploit it.



Therefore, when Manchester United *did* play passes in to Mata, it didn't actually help them cut through Newcastle's block — they simply went around it.



Any attempted combination with James, meanwhile, didn't work.

This curious example shows United in a great position for that move: James with the ball at his feet and about to speed behind the opposition full-back, and Mata waiting to play the wall pass.



But, at the last moment, Mata suddenly shifts himself a couple of yards deeper, James plays the ball towards where he'd previously been stood, and then looks exasperated at Mata's decision to change his position.

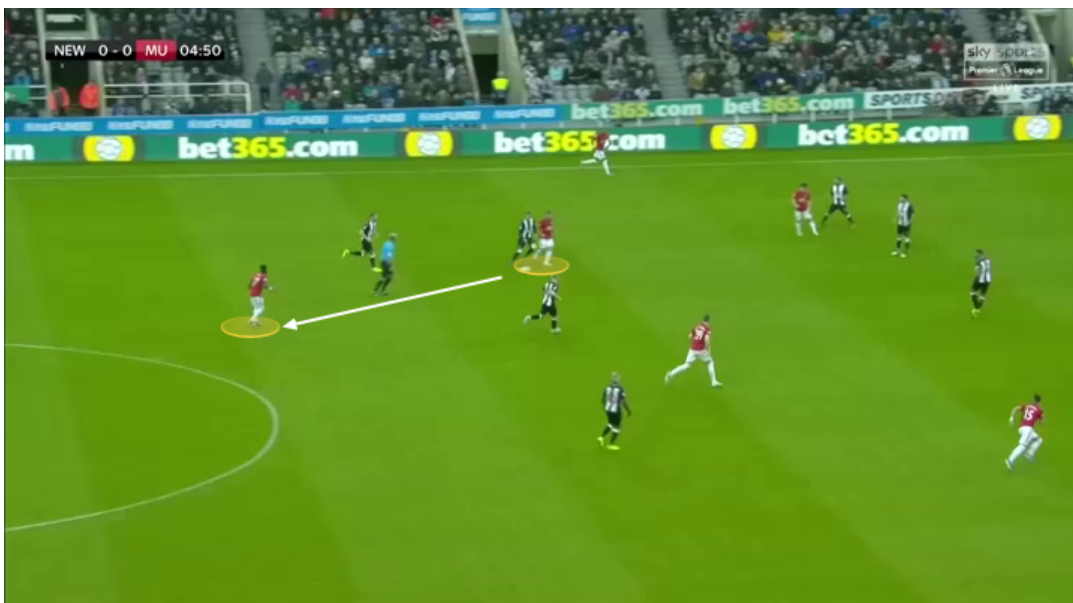


And, as in the first example, when Maguire fired balls into Mata's feet, he wasn't brave enough with his next move.

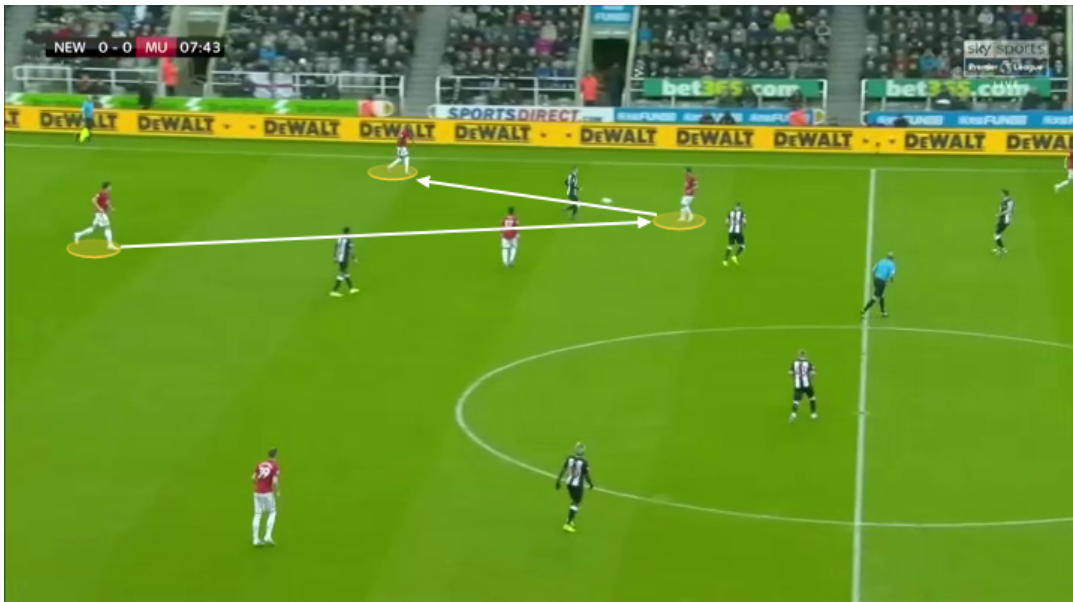
This situation seems the perfect opportunity to get Mata dribbling into a No 10 position.



But he passes the ball back to Fred, and Newcastle are now comfortable.



The same thing happens here – Mata not quite between the lines, but at least Maguire's pass was penetrating Newcastle's midfield. Mata, though, knocks the ball backwards to Young.



The common theme, though, is that Maguire was attempting to be positive with his distribution.

In fact, both centre-backs showed great confidence on the ball. Manchester United's best passing move of the first half, which ended with McTominay being put through on goal but being flagged offside, started with Axel Tuanzebe playing a good forward pass to Pereira, who then flicked the ball inside to Rashford.



It was usually Maguire who generated United's best moments. Whereas the central midfielders showed an inability to recognise when to attack quickly, here Maguire receives the ball with Newcastle's wide players not in position.



He carries the ball fully 40 yards before offloading — in truth, he could have played a more ambitious pass here, to Rashford, but at least he was progressing the ball.



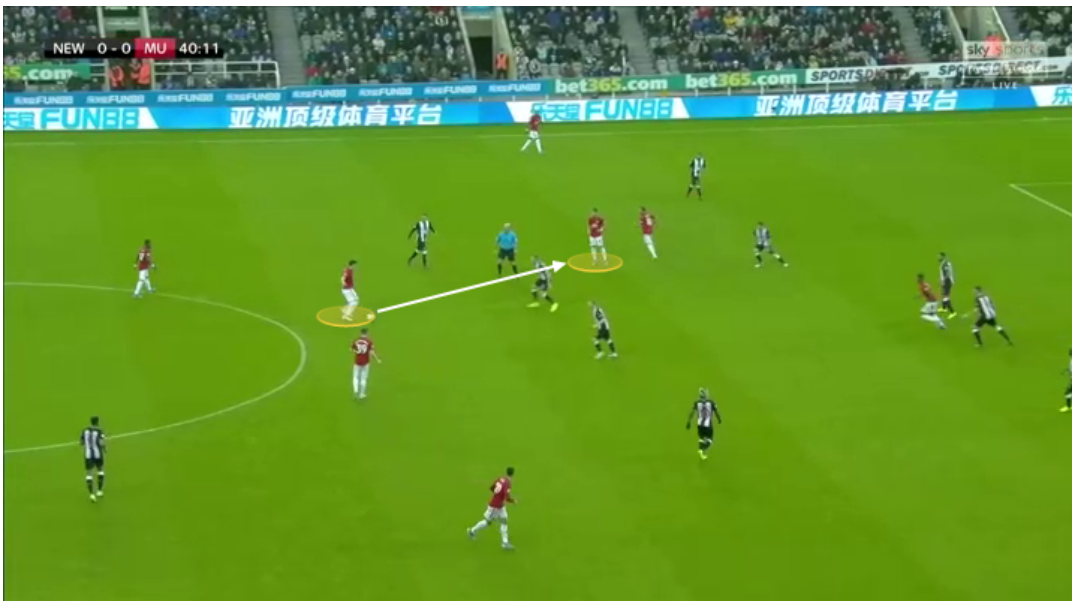
This became a familiar pattern.

Maguire was effectively United's deep-lying playmaker. Sometimes he received the ball and found Fred was actually blocking the passing lanes into team-mates, and increasingly started moving the ball forward into Fred's position, which wasn't exactly a vote of confidence in his team-mate. If Maguire thinks Fred can use the ball well in this position, he would play the pass. Instead, he takes matters into his own hands.



And rightly so, because Maguire can spot — and play — passes that Fred and McTominay cannot.

Here, he arrows a good ball to Pereira, who finds himself in the right position between the lines.



Pereira shot from range when perhaps he could have slipped in James. Still, Maguire was moving the ball into the right areas.



Interestingly, United's defensive reorganisation after 60 minutes harmed their passing. Right-back Diogo Dalot departed, with Marcos Rojo introduced in his place. The Argentine is a left-footed centre-back, so this meant Tuanzebe moving from centre-back to right-back, Maguire moving from the left to the right of the centre-back pairing and Rojo playing alongside him.

But Maguire wasn't anywhere near as effective with his distribution towards the right. Whereas most centre-backs favour playing on their 'natural' side, he excels from the left-sided role because he can check inside slightly, and play penetrative forward passes. From the right of the partnership, he was tempted into somewhat aimless long diagonal balls. Now, Manchester United penetrated Newcastle's midfield even less.



A disappointing attacking output is often blamed on the centre-forwards missing chances, or on playmakers not creating enough, but United's problem is much more about the collective, and how they move the ball in deep positions, particularly in the central

midfield zone.

There are some positives to take from all this.

Maguire, while culpable for his two set-pieces misses, is at least getting himself into goal-scoring positions at set-pieces and is also effectively acting as a deep-lying playmaker.

When combined with the side's excellent record at denying the opposition good chances, he has proved a fine signing. Tuanzebe also looks impressive on the ball.

The other crucial aspect to consider is that United have been without both Pogba and Martial (<https://theathletic.com/1205057/2019/09/13/martial-look-likes-a-united-no-9-now-he-drops-deep-and-links-with-pogba/>) in recent weeks. Those two started the season excellently, both individually and as a combination, and their return should prompt an improvement in terms of chance creation.

But it's difficult to escape the sense that United are no stronger than the sum of their parts; they don't do anything well collectively in open play, and the dependence upon set-pieces for goal-scoring chances is alarming.

Solskjaer has frequently spoken about recreating the spirit of United's 1999 Treble season, without ever truly explaining what that entails tactically. But perhaps he's achieved it; this United, like in the dying stages of that incredible European Cup final win over Bayern Munich, seem somewhat reliant on chucking the ball into the box at corners.

Boom! Glad you really enjoyed it.



Michael Cox ([author/michael-cox/](https://twitter.com/michael-cox/)) has written for the Guardian and ESPN, primarily focusing upon tactical analysis. He has written two books - The Mixer, about the tactical evolution of the Premier League, and Zonal Marking, about footballing philosophies across Europe. Follow Michael on Twitter [@Zonal_Marking](https://twitter.com/Zonal_Marking) (https://twitter.com/Zonal_Marking).



26 COMMENTS

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Tony L. 4h ago

I remember reading about Xavi a long time ago and how he was space finder. He constantly was looking for the area on the field with the most space between defenders. I can't tell you how many times United players can't figure this concept out, and secondly won't risk passing the ball or dribbling the ball forward when they do have space. I really ask myself if they actually train on this stuff because they have no idea what they're doing going forward.



15

**Richard W.** 36m ago

Finding space was something Lingard used to be good at. He looks nothing like the player he was 2 years ago. Even then, imo, he wasn't really good enough to be more than a good squad player which is another demonstration of how weak the squad has become.

**Matthew X.** 3h ago

Great piece, and especially damning on Mata. The man is such a shadow of his former self.

I'm sure you've been asked this Michael but would it be possible to have gifs/short vids instead of the screencaps? It would add a lot



16

**William C.** 3h ago

@Matthew X. I really appreciate Michael's tactical analysis too, but I think video clips would actually do his work a disservice.

By using separate screencaps that show and highlight: 1) a United player's options at the instant

a decision should be made; 2) the United player's inevitable choice to choose the safer option, it really breaks down and illustrate clearly how un-incisive United's midfield is. For me, anyway.



10



Iom P. 2h ago

It'll be that they don't have the rights to the video clips

**Alex B.** 3h ago

Nice.

Since England's loss on Friday, I've seen a lot of talk about Maguire having a bad season which has left me somewhat baffled. Glad I'm not the only one who thinks he's made a decent start to life at Old Trafford.

**Harlow G.** 2h ago

I love these stats, but can you also tell us what Tottenham's xG from open play is?

cheers.

**Thomas B.** 1h ago

understat.com/team/Tottenham/2019

**Jorge Q.** 2h ago

Great breakdown! Loved the use of stats to drill down on the issues and the tactical analysis on the midfield to show the lack of strategy, space reading, and positive play... Subscribed for this kind of content. Keep it coming.

**Nick H.** 1h ago

Great piece. More tactical stuff, The Athletic! For some of us (for example I'm a Liverpool fan so reading through Man U articles isn't always top of my list) it's the quality of content we subscribed for.



1

**Bill D.** 1h ago

Great analysis. I think that we miss though is the fact that generally Utd players pass to feet, and often behind the receiver. The sideways nature of Utd passing is not always driven by the passer, it's often the only ball on because Utd players don't drive into space. So you have a combination of midfielders who aren't penetrative, and forwards and midfielders that don't make forward passing opportunities. Signs of lack of confidence, or fear. In recent games Fred ends up passing sideways right because of Ashley Young's refusal to move forward when the ball is fed to him on the left. He increasingly just returns the ball from where it came from. Whilst the view is that Young and Mata are providing continuity and mentoring off-field, the fact is that they aren't now able to contribute on the pitch as they once did. Criticism of Rashford is valid because he doesn't take a chance in the box when the ball is fired in. I wonder if his recent habit of an extra touch before shooting is a result of OGS looking for more composure and actually blunting his natural instinct.



3

**Matthew O.** 1h ago

...very similar to the criticisms levelled about Harry Winks at Spurs. He always gets a beating for "passing sideways" but if there is no one moving into space ahead of you what are you meant to do? It's either cede possession on some hit n hope or keep possession and pass sideways / back. Also similar to Spurs on the the fear / lack of confidence front also.

**Richard E.** 1h ago

Interesting analysis as ever but I'd like to see a bit more objectivity towards xG itself. It seems to be presented as gospel but has numerous flaws, some of which might help to explain why it's good United so badly wrong.



1

**Gordon C.** 1h ago

Great piece. With reports that United want Rice, is he really going to solve the issue they are having currently? A piece on who would, would be an interesting read.

**David M.** 1h ago

Lovely piece. Glad to read that Maguire is contributing positively from the back in terms of passing and taking the ball from the back. Shows his character that he can and is willing to do that. Damning on Fred, Mata and Mc Tominay that they are so low on confidence or not good enough to play those types of passes. More surgery required on that squad!



1



Boris Z. 1h ago

I really would have preferred the xGD vs GD analysis to exclude pens. Earning them is probably weakly correlated to attacking threat but scoring/missing isn't and they have so many.



Mohamad Ali H. 1h ago

Great piece. I get that the manager is almost always responsible for his side's poor results but honestly speaking, would any other manager do that much better with this United side that has Pogba, Martial, Shaw, Lindelof and AWB all out injured? Yes, they did end the season poorly but they showed glimpses of great play when this side started the season. This was an already thin squad and injuries would only mean one thing. And as always, the manager wasn't properly backed in the summer (Ole clearly stated that he wanted a striker to come in) and now he's set to take the blame. 4 managers post SAF and we never learn.



4



Christopher M. 1h ago

Interesting piece. Surely the Athletic can afford Statsbomb/Opts xG data though?! Understat is great but the other two providers are more advanced.



Sean B. 17m ago

I would imagine, but could be wrong that the logic behind using Understat is it's accessible to the readers, as opposed to the other providers you mentioned which are behind pay walls.



Mirul F. 1h ago

Been waiting for someone to explain the plight of watching United this season (and end of last season). Thanks a lot Michael! Great article as always



Paul G. 1h ago

Proper football journalism at last. So sick of the Daily Fail



Josh J. 59m ago

Good article. Shows how the XG stat HAS to be used in context. Solskjaer keeps saying how United were unlucky + created plenty of chances and while the overall XG would support that, as Michael says in the article United are absolutely hopeless at creating chances from open play. Can't see where the next points are going to come from, they're in real trouble.



David W. 52m ago

I keep seeing more and more about xG. I am far from convinced by the stat. It doesn't reflect reality very often and appears to be more about finding something to measure rather than giving any genuine insight. Is there an article you have written (or could write) that explains why you regard this particular stat so highly?



Tom K. 35m ago

Enjoyed this article. Good to see xG being used to explain what I see at games. We look relatively comfortable at the back with Maguire excellent.

The over reliance on set pieces though, is particularly damning of Ole. We have the leagues worst record when it comes to actually scoring from them!



Paul G. 24m ago

Looks like I'm in the minority here, but I find this sort of thing totally alien to why I watch football. The expected goals thing goes against everything I like about the game, the uncertainty, the chance of upsets etc and it reinforces the arrogance of the so-called "big" teams. Over analysis is boring and

why I fast forward MOTD, pundits often look as though they're scrabbling about for something to fill the time, Keown is by far the worst. And whilst I'm ranting, could commentators please stop saying "he should have scored that" as though it was a tap in, not, for instance, a volley at a tight angle.



Jack B. 16m ago

Great read. This is exactly the kind of content I subscribed for.



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