

# MANCHESTER UNITED

CLUB AND PLAYER EVALUATION

J U N E  
2015



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## Abstract

*This report focuses on Manchester United football club over the Louis Van Gaal era. Creating various discussions surrounding the form of the club, the ability of the manager, the tactical style and famous philosophy as well as a discussion of the future of tactics in football (an open area of discussion that is not just specific to Manchester United fans.*

*A tactical analysis has been carried out, using methods of viewing game footage in order to build up a suitable collection of knowledge for the scouting analysis' that followed.*

*This Report wouldn't have been possible without the help of Squawka and their statistical database.*

*I'd also like to thank the editors of the 'football-rumours' websites for their continuous hard work in creating one of the greatest communities of sports fans on the Internet.*

## 1.0 Short Season Review

12 months ago Manchester United were pleased that Louis 'Total Football' Van Gaal had arrived in Manchester to help rebuild the greatest club that the world has ever seen.

Follow on a further month or two, with the signings of; Ander Herrera, Luke Shaw, Daley Blind, Marcos Rojo, Angel Di Maria and Radamel Falcao - Manchester United were back.

Us, the fans weren't naïve or stupid though, we understood that Manchester United were facing a tough task to get back into the top 4, nonetheless with the players we signed we expected us to overcome this hurdles that awaited us.

The first few games were rough, we struggled and failed to win when we perhaps needed it most, 0-0 at Burnley, 2-1 v Swansea and of course the absolute riot in the 4-1 thrashing at MK Dons. Where on earth was Manchester United?

The defeats dried up and United started putting together a patchy record, in fact the first 10 games in the Premier League read; LDDWLWWDDL, That's 3 losses, 4 draws and 3 wins. 30 points on offer, 13 points collected. For most United fans, we kept the faith, Van Gaal will have us right in the end but for a few, it was already time to wave goodbye to the World Cup Semi-finalist and the 'we should have kept Moyes' brigade began to rear it's ugly head.

Fortunately, for those who had kept their sanity, we watched Manchester United win with some of the ugliest performances in a very long time, Dave the save (now destined for Real Madrid) kept

The W's coming and eventually the losses dried up to watch United go on a 10 game unbeaten run.

A loss to Southampton, in a game which was ironically a better performance than the previous 10 had propelled the #LVGOut back into the limelight and to which they stayed until one fine afternoon at Old Trafford on May 15<sup>th</sup>. Louis and his boys were hosting one of the form teams in the Premier League, Tottenham Hotspur.

This spurs game was a complete walk in the park, in the events that transpired over that 90 minutes, Manchester United had gone from Bury FC to Barcelona, from Royal Antwerp to Real Madrid, Macclesfield to Munich - You get my point. In 90 minutes we'd become the most attractive side in the Premier League and those wanting Van Gaal ousted from the hot seat at Old Trafford were now hailing the second coming of Sir Alex Ferguson.

A completely dominating performance at Liverpool, winning 2-1 in a game, which truly flattered the home side - A trouncing at Villa followed racking up a 3-1 score line and once again United were flying, unstoppable to say the least.

A week later, we had the big one, the Manchester Derby United v City, Red v Blue. This fixture in recent memory has seen City dominate with big score lines, 6-1, 4-1, 3-0, etc.

4-2- Let that sink it. Manchester United had destroyed Manchester City 4-2 in a game where City was lucky to get away without conceding 6 or 7. United were well and truly back.

The run of tough fixtures (on paper anyway) continued with a trip to league leaders to Chelsea FC. Jose Mourinho taking on his mentors Louis Van Gaal in the Premier League and this time United were ready to compete. How United lost it, we'll never know.

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In five years I have never had a match where my team has had less possession than the opponents. – Jose Mourinho.

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But with over 70% of the possession United ended up losing 1-0. Eden Hazard stealing the winner and ultimately the united hate club were back out in full force screaming "It's only

possession" in a very similar way to "You don't win anything with kids".

In the end, United finished just as they started with 2 wins in 6. Ending the season hitting our target of 4<sup>th</sup> place, for some though, it just wasn't good enough....

My view is that with a few more additions to the side, United will once again be flying high and competing for major honours. Our style of play is on the right path and now all we need to add is the consistency.

I'll rate our 2014/15 season at a B-

## 2.0 Louis Van Gaal

Since day one Louis Van Gaal has been incredible with the media, exerting his egotistical and influential authoritarian style onto the UK press and media. Essentially Louis Van Gaal took 'no sh\*t' from anybody.

In his very first press conference Van Gaal was asked an important question, Q. Is 4<sup>th</sup> place the target for this season? His answer, along with his persona carried an aura that was set to reignite the dying flame inside Manchester United, A. "For me, the challenge is always to come first. Not fourth".

A much contradictory answer in comparison given to the one by David Moyes in his first Manchester United press conference, Mr Moyes was asked in his first press conference can you replicate the success of Sir Alex? His answer was that of a man yet to be broken – A. "Sir Alex will always be here – his stand and his statue are here –

The supporters need to realize that it was Sir Alex Ferguson's time to go and someone needs to come in. To manage at this level for 25 years, I don't think another manager will ever do that at a club at this level."

At the very least it was refreshing to hear somebody take control of the Old Trafford hot seat, the one mistake I felt Van Gaal made was when he stated Wayne Rooney was undroppable because of the arm band, in other team on another day with another player it could have caused their performances to drop knowing they'll expect to be in the team. That said, I couldn't see a Van Gaal captain not giving his all week in, week out, and if he didn't give his all I imagine the captaincy wouldn't be long lasting.

Looking into his transfer dealings so far (excluding Depay), he seems to have played a good hand. Herrera and Shaw were good youthful players out growing their current clubs and in needs of moves to a bigger

pond (without trying to sound Disrespectful).

Daley Blind and Marcos Rojo were both signed on the basis of a strong world cup, Blind of course new Van Gaal very well and has been a steady player for the club, I believe his value also lies in the fact that he is almost a carrier of knowledge and information about how Van Gaal wants his players to play, having somebody who understood what Van Gaal wanted from his players was vital.

The two big guns followed, Angel Di Maria and Radamel Falcao – at the time Manchester United were going to win every game 40-0. Big things were expected and not so big things were delivered.

Let's look at Di Maria first. The Argentine was fresh off the back of an incredibly successful World Cup tournament in Brazil having been his sides' most important player ahead of Lionel Messi – some even argue that Argentina lost the final due to Di Maria's absence through injury. In club football Di Maria had just won the UEFA Champions League, taking home the plaudits with a Man of The Match performance. Much like with the World Cup display, it's also argued that behind Cristiano Ronaldo – or perhaps instead of, Angel was the best player at Madrid last season.

Based on a report like that, it's hard to argue with the logic behind his signing, and at £59 Million, it would appear to be an absolute steal!

On the face of things, and at the time everyone was sure Di Maria was going to be a success and in many ways he has, at a club with names like Falcao, Mata, Rooney, Van Persie and Herrera – in his limited appearances Di Maria has been a more consistent

attacking threat statistically with his double figured assists.

On the pitch though, after his personal issues throughout the Christmas period his form took a downward spiral.

It was unforeseen, but nonetheless I don't think signing him has been a disaster.

Onto Falcao, every Manchester United fan in the country was rubbing their eyes watching Sky Sports News on transfer deadline day, Manchester United had just signed every fans dream striker, this doesn't happen! Especially after signing Di Maria too!

Nonetheless the reports were true, Falcao was a Manchester United forward, signing initially on loan for 12 months, and United had got a great deal. From every angle it was a great deal and still is a great deal. On the face of things United had paid £6 Million (peanuts in today's market) for a 12 month loan spell of the greatest marksman on earth, taking home £250,000 per week, again for a club the size of Manchester United it's nothing. Things may not have worked as planned and several reasons can be documented as to why it didn't, but the fact is it didn't.

Van Gaal said in a press conference mid way through the season that he was trying everything to help Falcao, and in the end it appears that we took a low risk on a player who had recently returned from a massive, possibly career ending injury but yet if he returned to previous form we had something very special on our hands, sometimes it works, other time's it doesn't. I'll point in the direction of Henrik Larsson for evidence, at 35 United should never have signed him on loan, much less should he have been as successful as he was, scoring 3 goals in 13 games wasn't the

success, the success came in his influence off the field and his link up play on it, watching Larsson was nothing short of superb but that wasn't supposed to work out, yet it did – sometimes things work out when they shouldn't and other times things don't work out when they should. It's football, but the important thing to remember is that for a club the size of Manchester United, signing Radamel Falcao had so little opportunity to backfire and cause any real disaster.

Overall, bringing players into the club, he's done a remarkable job, nothing too risky and nothing has backfired all that much, although a few ups and downs are to be had.

On the outgoings list, things have been pretty straight forward, I still don't understand the loan spell of Javier Hernandez at Real Madrid, firstly because as a manager you want your players to develop and do well and at Real Madrid it's incredibly difficult to break into a star studded line up, let a lone stand out as a top performer.

Personally, I would have let Hernandez stay and play his natural super sub role, or perhaps loan him out to a Premier League club in need of goals (Arsenal maybe would have been a better fit instead of Welbeck) – Southampton would have maybe been my pick of the bunch, creative, attacking and plenty of opportunities for young Chicharito to bury the ball.

On the whole though, the departures of Anderson, Nani and Welbeck were steps in the right direction for Manchester United.

Van Gaal's signings showed a man looking to Attack! Attack! Attack! Unfortunately that's not what we got, a lot of defensive errors and very little on show in the final third. The development of the season saw Manchester United pursue a Barcelona tika-taka style of football, which has been largely successful, is it total football? Not in the slightest. But as fans, we can be pleased with the direction and football on display as opposed to that of the previous 3 years.

## 1.0 Tactical Analysis

### 3.1 3-5-2

Entering the first few months of the Premier League season it was evident to see that Van Gaal wanted his men to play with discipline and ball retention, hounding teams with a high pressure system (hence the 3 man defence).

The back 3 allowed United to play with a higher line but still provide defensive cover (in theory) and thus press the opposition high up the field, unfortunately for Van Gaal it was a system that the players

Were incapable of adopting and the 3 man defence wasn't as effective as it could have been. Arguments have been made to the system being out-dated, but in reality such a term is invalid, nothing in football is out dated, much like American Football, the success is in the execution of the play and system. Whether you're playing 4-4-2, 3-5-2, 2-2-6 or whatever combination of formation you wish to use, it doesn't matter. If you have the players then it can be successful, Manchester City spent last season showing that a 4-4-2 system, executed correctly is

capable of destroying the newest systems.

Back to the 3-5-2, Liverpool have used it to success, Juventus have built one of their most successful club eras on the 3-5-2 and it also lead Holland to a world cup final, not too mention it was used under Glen Hoddle during his England Tenure. Is it flawless? Of course not, and at times a different system will exploit a weakness in the formation, but if Manchester United had started this season with a more talented group of players then the performances,

I'm sure would have been far better.

The tactic itself, originating in South America has been adopted globally by some of the best club and international sides in the world, Germany in 1996 spring to mind as the biggest stand out team to use the system.

The development of the system was created to ensure a quicker route between the defence and the attack, teamed up with a counter attacking system it's considered one of the strongest in world football.

The central defender, although the deepest player on the field is also the most creative of your defenders and to some extent carries traits similar to that of a midfielder, Daniele De Rossi filled the role brilliantly for Italy at times, the central player is expected to pick the ball up, bringing it out of defence to start attacking moves, A role Michael Carrick would be very successful in playing. Depending on the system of the manager would depend on the duties of the rest of the players, however it was used to a far great effect and has been more successful in a man marking system as

opposed to a zonal marking system (A problem which had befallen Hull City and QPR in the recent Premier League season).

Another 'flaw' with this system, especially when it was adopted into the English game related to the LCB and RCB – as a playing role you're expected to be able to cover the wide areas of the field and to do it effectively, in Britain big central defenders were deployed into these roles and subsequently had less mobility – Chiellini executes the role to perfection due to his mobility, where as for Liverpool, Kolo Toure isn't as mobile as Sakho and therefore doesn't execute the role as well.

The midfield represents a different scenario completely, a midfield trio consisting of a holding midfielder, a shadow striker who is expected to always take up roles in the box and a player in the mould of a young Lampard who sits on the outside of the box observing and capitalizing on defensive errors.

For Juventus, their midfield was perfect, Pirlo sat deepest while Marchisio became the 'striker' and Vidal sat outside of the box, a brilliant combination of midfielders, since the introduction of Pogba the team have played 3-5-2 less, but on the occasions they have, Vidal has been the midfielder occupying the forward role.

The most critical position in the 3-5-2 is where Manchester United lacked and is why this system did not work as effectively as it could have (A midfield trio was effective, Rooney however needed to be far more present in the box, and the defenders were 'mobile enough'). Our wingbacks, are supposed to form a back 5 (in an arch – this is critical) whereas in attacking situations join in to form a midfield 5. The players need to

be incredible game readers and brilliant decision makers both in defence and attack, converted midfielders tend to take to this formation a little bit easier, but without an intelligent pairing of wingbacks the formation and system will fall apart and it will not work. Valencia in himself has intelligence when reading the game to an extent but not the required extent, Luke Shaw and at times Ashley Young do not have the required intelligence to play this system.

In this system the wing backs biggest duties are to know; When to press the opposition, where to take up a defensive position and when to close down while being comfortable on the ball, have high levels of stamina for the box to box role and to understand the mentality of the fullback.

Without a doubt, the best fullback to ever play this system is the incredibly under-rated but effective Dan Petrescu (in my opinion).

The forwards play a similar style to what they would in a 4-4-2 (or a variation of) with one forward slightly deeper than the other operating in the number 9 & 10 roles. But the forwards essentially are judged externally to the system and play to their own strengths.

A popular belief that the system doesn't work against 1 forward are simply not true, it becomes more difficult when facing a 4-3-3 system or a 4-2-3-1 system due to the fact that the defenders will each have a man to defend against, however, this is why an intelligent pair of wing backs is critical to the execution of this formation.

Could Manchester United use it in future? Potentially, in a strengthened side it is certainly possible.

### 3.2 4-3-3

Towards the backend of the season United found themselves at home with a 4-3-3 system, during their most successful spell of the season it was this formation which rolled over the likes of Manchester City, Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool while also dominating an incredibly strong Chelsea side at Stamford Bridge.

Playing a very similar style to Barcelona during the Guardiola era. The system itself is something Van Gaal has used often throughout his career and for the most part used by Holland up until the World Cup in 2014 before key man Kevin Strootman picked up a career defining injury.

One of the most intriguing things about the 4-3-3 is the variation of playing styles that it can be used for, Barcelona are a prime example of this with their two most recent Champions League winning teams. The Guardiola team offered a total suffocation of possession while the Luis Enrique side, which won the 2015 UEFA Champions League, was focused on a counter attacking system, very similar to the system Manchester United used in the 2007/2008 season.

It's clear to see that Van Gaal is favouring the possession system, and the 4-3-3 will only naturally draw links to Barcelona, so with that in mind we'll break down the 4-3-3 in relation to Pep Guardiola's side.

One of the most intriguing things about being able to play a 4-3-3 system is the interchanging on positions and all round flexibility.

On paper, the 4-3-3 is a single striker formation, however quite the opposite is what entails, depending on the wide player

with the ball, for example the Right Forward, the striker and the left forward are expected to be in the box waiting for a cross, pass, take on, mistake, etc. it is absolutely essential that two players are in the box when attacking simply down to the fact that single striker formations without advanced playmakers or 'No.10s' make very few goal scoring opportunities.

One of the more interesting things surrounding the 4-3-3 is that central midfield trio – Barcelona operated very differently to most other systems adopted in the past and currently.

Usually the Central Midfielder will sit deepest giving the other two central midfielders a license to roam forward in the hunt for goal scoring ventures, in the Guardiola system the midfield 3 took on 3 separate roles. The deepest man will sit in front of the back 4 and play a secondary role in dictating the pace of the game, Xavi would often roam a bit further upfield operating in the middle third on the right hand side and through the middle, while Iniesta would play even further forward and drift out left or become the number 10 for Barcelona and operate in that central role outside of the penalty area. Think of it as a 4-1-1-1-3 in essence. The deeper midfield 2 (Xavi and Busquets/Mascherano) allows the full backs to push on so far that in fact they may be seen as wide midfielders or wingers.

The midfield will also act as a triangle, being pulled across the field and keeping the same shape. When the loses the ball the point of the triangle closest to the ball with apply pressure while the other two sweep round (while keeping the shape) to allow a greater defensive cover.

A football basic, which is needed, more so in a 4-3-3 than in most other systems is to condense the space when defending and move across accordingly in order to protect the defence and restrict opposition movement.

These are more basics with a traditional 4-3-3. The differences between the traditional 4-3-3 and a Guardiola side are explained below.

**High Press:** Probably the most talked about part of how Guardiola plays football; whenever Barcelona or now Bayern lost the ball they would attack in numbers in order to recover the ball, 3 or 4 players chasing after the same man at pace within a second of the ball being lost. The disciplines shown in playing like that is incredible and almost always forced mistakes from the opposition players that resulted in the ball being recovered.

**Possession:** redefining what beauty in football really means, Barcelona created something of a legend in the way they kept 70-80% possession on a regular occurrence in the UEFA Champions League and in La Liga. The much coveted pivot system allowed an option to always be open with simple 5 yard interchanges being a heavy component of the 'Barcelona way'

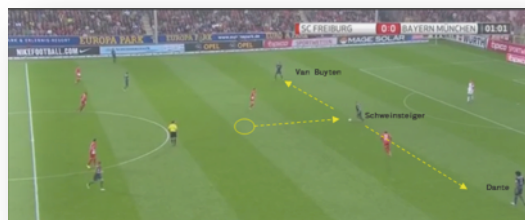


Figure 1 - Barcelona Pivot

### 3.4 The Philosophy

What exactly is the Philosophy?

During his time at Manchester United to date Van Gaal has used 6 different formations, selected from more players than any other team (32) and often has the Long ball as his plan B. If anything this 'Philosophy' doesn't seem to exist, unless it's code for doing anything and everything.

When somebody says something so much then everyone around you will start to believe in it. When Sir Alex Ferguson was asked about why Manchester United perform better towards the end of the season his reply was remarkable, stating that it was all a placebo effect, he started saying it in 1994 and since then it has stuck, nothing changes but the players and the opposition always believe United play better in the latter part of the season even though statistics and methods do not change, has a similar thing happened with the Philosophy?

Van Gaal used the term so much that many of us were questioning whether the word was a real word at all it had been said that many times, after the victory at Liverpool in December Van Gaal produced this formidable sentence incorporating the word 'Philosophy' 3 times.

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*"The most important thing is my philosophy and when you stick by your philosophy you can do that because every player has played in that philosophy," - Louis Van Gaal (2014).*

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12 month ago it was suggested that Van Gaal was going to come into Manchester United with his favoured 4-3-3 system, but until the Christmas break we had seen neither the 4-3-3 or the 4-4-2 variations he used during his

time at Bayern Munich - a system that lead him to 23 successive wins and a Bundesliga title.

Van Gaal joined Manchester United as a manager who had been there and won it all, he won the Champions League with Ajax with teenagers (some as young as 17!), he'd arrived with a huge cheque book and splashed out on signing 6 players for £150 Million and smashed the British transfer record, yet we're still no closer to understanding the philosophy it seems.

Perhaps the Van Gaal philosophy is about the promotion of youth? Well, I beg to differ, although he's given meaningful opportunities to McNair and Blackett he has overseen the backwards progression of Adnan Januzaj and the stagnation of another bright prospect in James Wilson. The decision to let Welbeck leave (although perhaps the right one) could well be one the club regret, his versatility and work rate is something Van Gaal looks for in a player, so to see Welbeck leave was surprising, but yet another home grown youth player has left making the notion of a youth based philosophy void.

The evident passing and possession style seems to be the way to go, however when the going gets tough Fellaini is called upon for the long ball tactic, a plan B is an incredible thing to have, however if you have a belief, a philosophy then that is what you believe in and you create solutions around your philosophy, plus the fact that Van Gaal has spoken about the philosophy for years yet Manchester United are his only side to favour a patient possession style of football.

Over the course of the season you do get the impression that United are moving to a possession based game, the

statistics also back that up with an average possession of 61% and a pass accuracy of 85%.

So what does this philosophy really mean?

Well, it appears that the Dutch legend's belief stems from his plays having an understanding of those around them, both their fellow teammates and the opposition. An emphasis on positional understanding is huge in the Van Gaal beliefs, Rooney has to understand exactly what Phil Jones should be doing just as much as the other way around, it provides a greater respect for their positions and offers an insight into where the player has to be on the field.

Digging deeper, when at Barcelona he was credited for his style, which enabled players to interchange positions with ease, in Germany he was praised for his methods, which turned Bayern into a 1-touch footballing side. At Manchester United we don't see that, we see a system built on multi-positional and functional players, preferring the usage of multi-dimensional players (explained by the loan of Nani and Javier Hernandez), he also claims to dislike selfish players but an argument can be made against that with the previous purchases of Angel Di Maria and Arjen Robben.

But are these philosophies? From a personal point of view it looks as if these are just personal preferences in his players, the things he does and doesn't like.

Further research indicates that that Van Gaal's philosophy relates to 'understanding'.

Louis had made references to a player's experience being in maturity and being able to

adapt, functional is the word Van Gaal used on a regular basis.

We also must refer back to his constant statements on multi positional players and their ability to understand each other better.

That is the philosophy of Van Gaal, to create a system of players that are able to adapt and change depending on their situations and to think independently. It is the reason behind the departure of Welbeck who refused to adapt and play a new position, it's the reason behind the departure of Anderson who refused to adapt his lifestyle and become more positive as a player. It is the reason behind the successes of Fellaini, Young, Mata, Blind, Valencia and Herrera as well as McNair and Blackett – All of these players have been capable and have been asked to play in different positions and have done it relatively well. They can all adapt their game on the field also, knowing when to keep possession, play the right pass, the long ball, etc.

Players that survive with Van Gaal are players that adapt and are intelligent in positional play. Schweinsteiger, Muller, Van Bommel, Badstuber, Van Buyten and Lahm all survived because they were all very talented players but all possessed an intelligence to play multiple positions and understand where they needed to be on the field at each given time.

Intelligence is the Van Gaal philosophy.

## 4.0 The future of possession

The future of possession-based football I believe rests firmly in a system Pep Guardiola developed towards the end of his at Barcelona.

Currently, when United play against a deep sitting side for 90 minutes that use the Plan B, an effective yet limited plan which requires Fellaini to hold the ball up, knock it down and the midfield players coming into the space worked by Fellaini to shoot or thread a direct ball through.

As effective as this system can be at times it effectively means during the period of possession United have to accommodate Fellaini and his lack of technical skill just in case the team need him.

In Guardiola's final year he recreated the 3-3-4 that Cruyff designed in the early 90's with the idea to create more chances against the teams that sit deep and attempt to contain the opposition when entering the final third of the pitch. Ironically it was a team, which Guardiola played in.

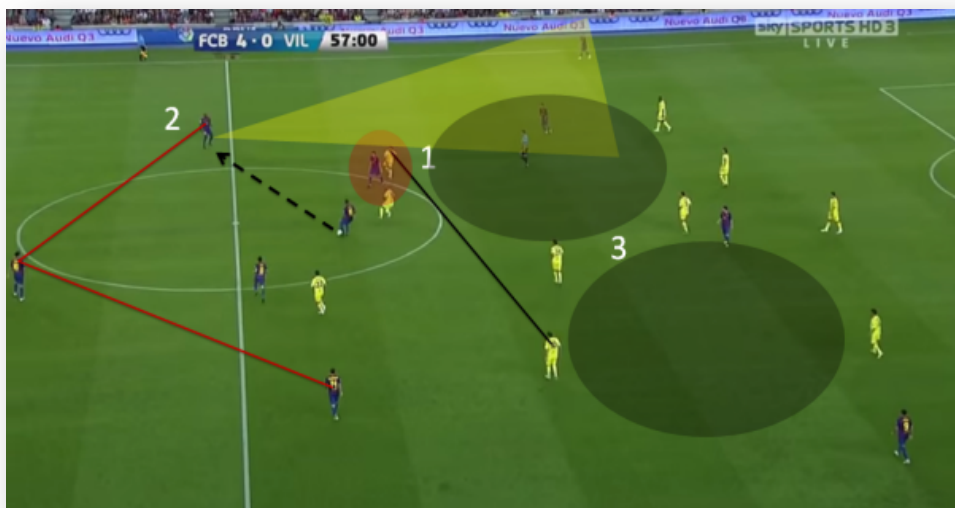
Generally, Pep introduced Fabregas in to the team for a full back and then Fabregas switched to a forward role with Messi and Sanchez.

The 3-3-4 is very much a system developed from both Cruyff and more recently Biesla, one of the biggest inspirations behind the tactical set up of Guardiola.

## The defence

Much like the 3-5-2 system discussed in section 3.1 the defence sits with 3 central defenders, which drifted into a back 4 when the team has possession of the ball with the deepest midfielder joining the back row. The back 3 would spread the width of the field and Busquets became the pivot allowing maximum width to be covered, stretching the opposition.

Against narrow teams that sit deep (most of the Premier League has sat narrow and deep all season) the width of the defence allowed the creation of more passing lanes, which actually opened up the midfield and encouraged vertical passing.



### Figure 2 - The defence

1) The amount of midfield plays in the central areas for Barcelona mean that the opposing side has to bring wide players inside in order to pick up the wide players.

2) As previously mentioned the 3 Defenders are evenly spread across the width of the defence. In figure 2 you're able to see the left sided defender receiving the ball, in which Barcelona can now move round the opposing teams midfield; his options are to either play to the touchline or back into the middle of the field to move into what would be phase 3.

3) Villarreal, the opponent in this match switched to a 4-1-4-1 system giving them areas to exploit in the half backspaces. Due to they're being 1 pivot instead of 2, putting stress on the play slightly, however with intelligent players this is easily overcome. Although the 4-1-4-1 puts slightly more pressure on the back 3 it also creates two craters of space in final third (highlighted by the circles), in this situation Villarreal are attempting to push out of their half, a risky tactic which many clubs will not attempt to operate with. The play does however remain narrow.

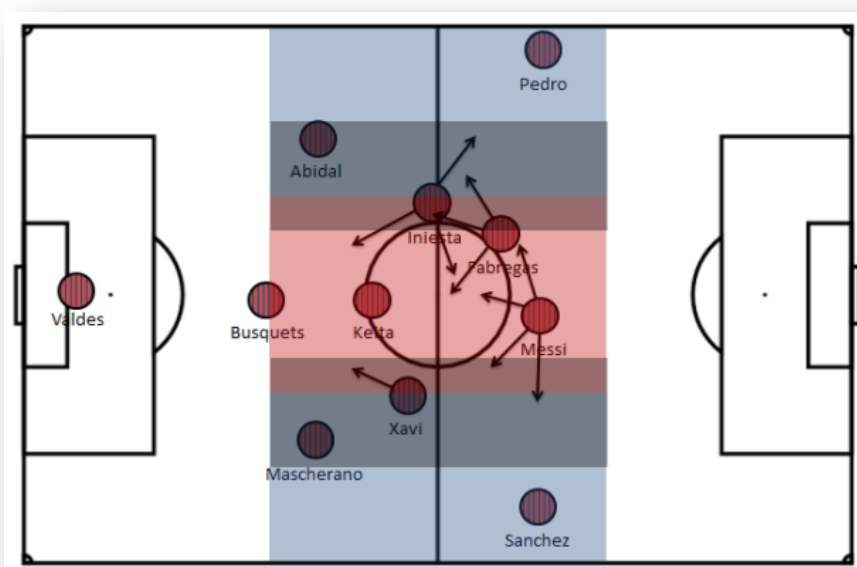


Figure 3 - 360' passing

One of the more intriguing structural benefits of the 3-3-4 is the coverage of circulation surrounding the general area of play. As you can see from Figure 3 by splitting the field into 3 spaces we have the standard dimension of a central area and the two wings – however what makes this interesting is the introduction of inside wing zones. This split provides a player in each zone, by permitting players into these half zones it gives the team a

360' play area while also allowing the inside wing zone players to drop to a more central zone quicker should the team lose possession.

The central defender has to be a player with an incredible amount of tactical awareness and intelligence due to demands on the role; having less time on the ball with more opponents surrounding you at times.

Kieta in this part of the build up plays in a void role; although he's dropping deep he is likely to be surrounded by the opposition and thus considered a poor passing option. In aid of the central defender you will have the other two central midfielders dropping into a deeper role in order to provide passing options and provide defensive cover if it is needed, in figure 3 it is highlighted by the slightly deeper positions of Xavi and Iniesta. Carrick is a player would be perfect in the central defensive role, as would Hummels to an extent.

As you can see in both figure 3 and figure 4, the central defender drops deeper than every other player on the field, this brings with it a couple of benefits. 1) Switching the play becomes easier as the defender can simply turn away from the opposition striker (although he must never turn his back). 2) Arguably the most important

role for this sole defender is that he increases the space for the deep-lying playmaker in the side, in this particular instance that is Xavi.

The role of the central defender (evidentially displayed in in figure 4) is usually given to that of a typical number 6 in the team, who is often the holding midfielder. The changes from a #6 are slight however they do provide a great difference to the team. As previously mentioned, his deeper positioning allows the deep-lying playmaker to operate in far more space giving him greater time and accuracy to pick out passes, but the biggest difference it makes is to the opposition, with the defender sitting so deep it provides the forward with more space to cover which 1) makes it more difficult to press and defend against and 2) tires out the opposition striker making occasional breaking counter attacks less effective.

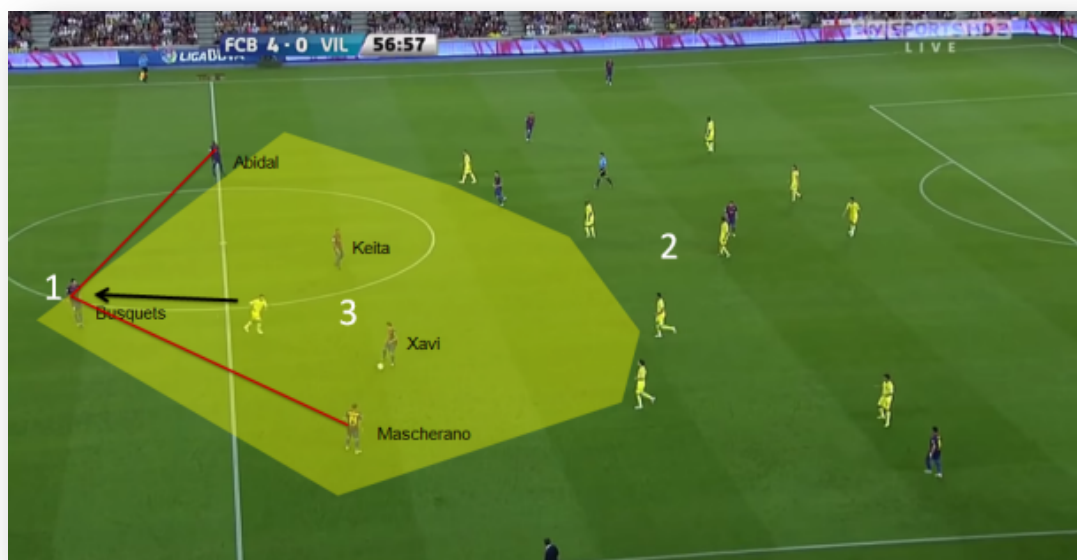


Figure 4 - Midfield space

1) The central defender drops deeper into an almost sweeper position, creating a diamond shape with Keita (The central midfielder). By doing so he not only expands the teams depth

but also gives the team a greater capacity to play horizontally rather than vertically. In addition the other central midfielder along with the

Midfielder at the top of the diamond will also come deeper (along with the advancing of the sided wide central defender in order to create a 3-2-type system in front of the opposing midfield thus giving the play a greater dimension.

2) Most opponents will line up with more in midfield in an attempt to battle your midfield capabilities. In figure 4 you can see that Villarreal line up with 5 in midfield (4-5-1).

Hence the need for the 3-2 system.

As a result of the diamond being formed and the 3-2 also being produced the space in front of the opposing teams midfield meant it was nearly impossible for the strike to press effectively without pulling one of the central midfielders out of position.

Effectively taking one of the players out of the game.

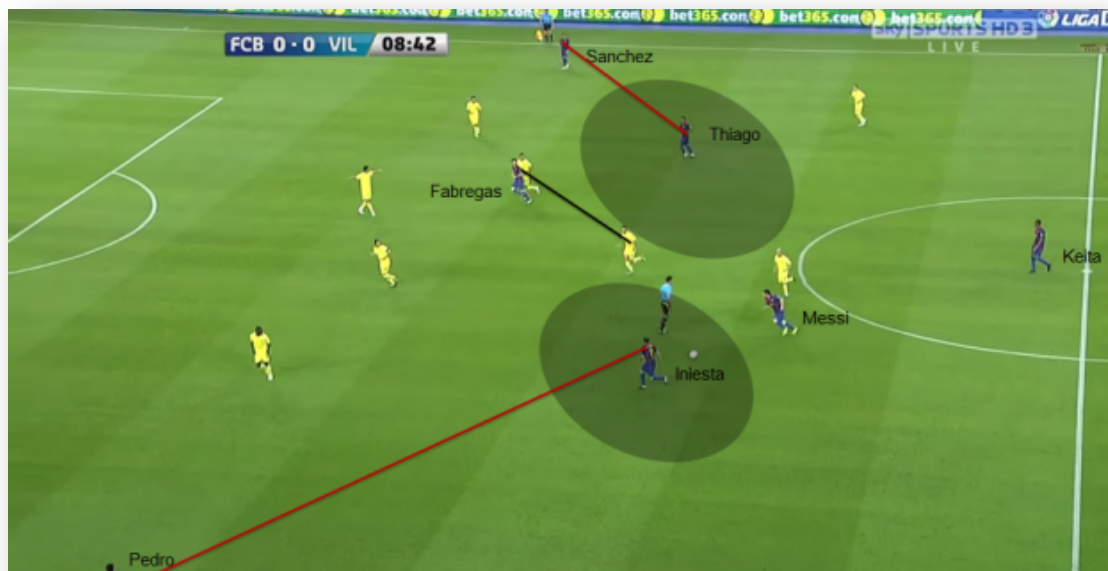


Figure 5 - Phase 2 controlling the midfield

One of the most important phases of this 3-3-4 is the behaviour and movements of the two wide central midfielders. In Figure 5 you can see both Iniesta and Thiago are operating in a slightly wider role than the traditional central midfielder in a 4-3-3. By positioning themselves in a wider position they are on the outside of the double pivot that the opposing team started out with this allows them to have a greater area of play and the ability to combine effectively out wide and inside with Fabregas in the advanced central role (as well as with each other).

Barcelona's two central wide midfielders played slightly different roles from one another in order to disjoint the opposition slightly.

In the above figure you're able to see Thiago on the right hand side (top of the image), in this system the right sided player rarely moved from his position horizontally and instead played vertically instead, often this midfielder would drop deeper (IE Xavi in figure 3 and 4) but he would also advance further in order to support the attacks.

This can be seen with the opening goal in figures 6 and 7.

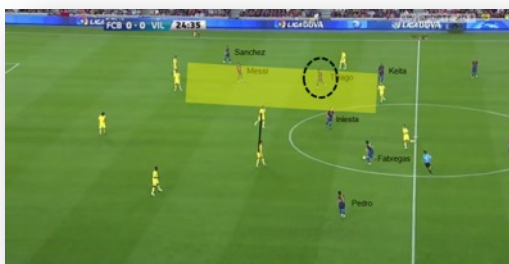


Figure 6 - Thiago in a deeper position

At the start of the attack we can see that Fabregas has moved into a deeper role while Messi the other false 9 has pushed forward and is in a similar position to Fabregas in figure 5. From this position the opposition defence and midfield are occupied with the forwards (Messi and Sanchez) while the midfield is focusing on Iniesta, Keita and the rest of the deep lying diamond.



Figure 7 - Thiago in possession as the opening goal is scored

Therefore Thiago can pick the ball up with space ahead of him and directly attack the opposition defensive line (Figure 8). It also draws the defensive line into a narrow position opening up passing opportunities for both Messi, Fabregas and Pedro.



Figure 8 - Thiago advancing in possession

It also appears as if Iniesta has a completely different role in comparison to Thiago/Xavi (something that was briefly pointed out earlier). In figure 9 you can see that Iniesta has a free role giving the diamond between himself, Pedro, Fabregas and Sanchez more freedom and flexibility which creates more space and circulation (similar to figure 2 with the positioning of the wide central defenders offering a better passing circulation and space coverage).



Figure 9 - Iniesta's freedom

Figure 9 displays the freedom that Iniesta has in this system.

1) As you can see Messi drops deeper and adopts his self defined false 9 position as a result of Iniesta influencing the attack on the right hand side, Messi is essentially covering Iniesta in order to provide a consistent structure so that the play can continue in the best possible way.

2) Thiago has also dropped deeper, this provides cover for Barcelona as an insurance option and it also drags the midfielder closest to him slightly deeper in order to create a slight advantage for Barcelona in a 3-2 system (3: Messi, Iniesta and Sanchez – 2: Fabregas and Pedro). Thiago's role here is critical to a successful attacking play, by dragging a midfielder a meter or so deeper it creates channels to feed the ball to

Iniesta and thus completely bypass the midfielder sitting in front of the defence.

In this particular instance the positioning in figure 9 leads to a goal, which is greatly credited towards the positioning of Thiago. The 3v2 formation allows for Iniesta to be found easily, due to the constricted space a technical player (I.e. Mata) would have to be used here as it required quick combinations of passes and plays in order to score. In this particular goal scoring play Iniesta exchanges passes with Fabregas who drags the central defender out slightly while Iniesta drifts over slightly to the left hand side where the deep sitting Messi (who a through ball is played too) has an almost straight, unmarked run at goal before rounding the keeper with a tidy finish. A GIF of the goal can be found [here](#)



Figure 10- Phase 3, final third fluidity

The creation of the false 9 has meant the changes between a 4-3-3 and 3-3-4 substantial in the final phase of possession. This system, especially in the final phase puts an incredible amount of emphasis on positional rotation and fluidity of play with both false 9's (Messi and Fabregas in this instance) given completely free roles to drift into opened channels.

The wingers in this system have a fairly manageable role, either wide area is constantly covered, it's vital the central players avoid covering in order to keep a strong and steady structure of play. The wide players, like in most cases have to stretch the plan to the best of their abilities. Wide technical players are needed for this to be effective however, the idea is to have the opportunity to pin the opposing fullback into 1v1 situations (the wide opposition players will likely drift central to help the midfield and pick up the wide central midfielders), by doing this it allows the technical skill of the wide player to beat the fullback and open up passing opportunities into the 18-yard box.

The 1v1 battles between the wide player and the fullback offer a

critical dimension to the attacking prowess of this system. Ideally, when defending against the system you have to remain compact, by engaging the fullback you are able to drag the player out of position and disorganize the defensive structure thus opening up space.

The introduction of two false nines (in a footballing world where most clubs struggle to incorporate one), gives greater freedom to move deep or wide. Barcelona had a particular special case with the more attacking flair of Messi and the passing ability of Fabregas, this meant that Fabregas would often drop into midfield and occupy the number 6 role to pick the ball up and Messi would stay high up field and drift between the channels in an attempt to create space. The ability of both players however meant that they could easily interchange positions and be effective, making it far more difficult to defend against. Therefore, in order for this system to work two false 9 players with a variation of attacking and playmaking attributes would be needed, fortunately Wayne Rooney possesses the ability to play a false 9 role with relative effectiveness.

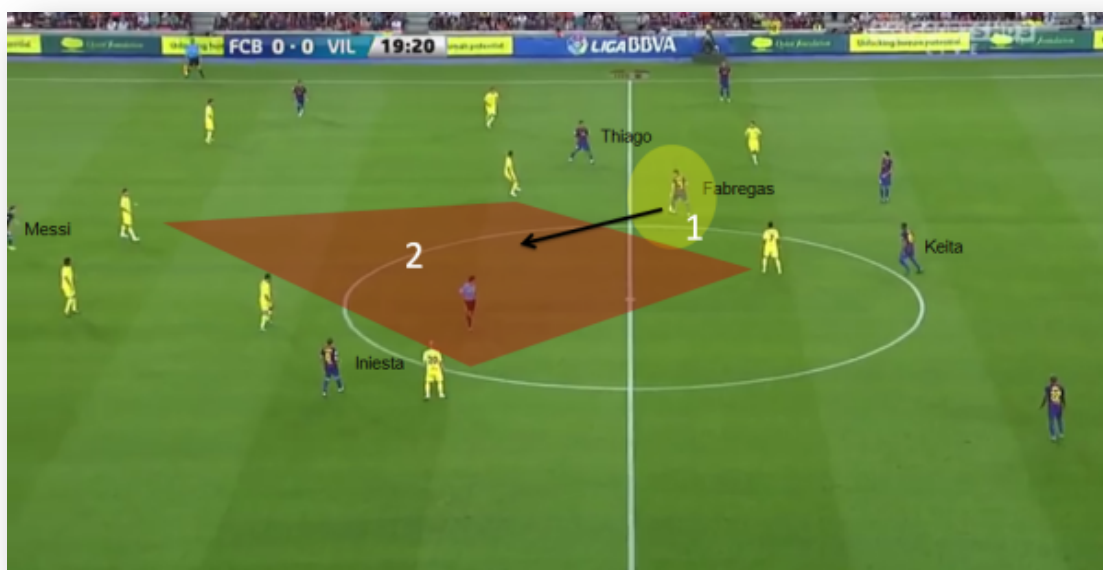


Figure 11 - Fabregas as a false 9

At Manchester United, this is a position Rooney would likely occupy effectively, although he lacks some playmaking attributes that Fabregas possesses, he is more effective from an attacking point of view.

In figure 11 you can see there are two key areas, the first surrounds Fabregas. With Keita dropping into a role which almost backs the defence a back 4 Fabregas drops deeper than both Iniesta and Thiago who both occupy familiar positions further up field as previously discussed. With Fabregas dropping this deep it drags the opposition midfield further forward to expose space in behind the midfield and open opportunities for the attacker,

In figure 12 below you are able to see another feature of the false 9 roles in this system with both Fabregas and Messi for Barcelona dropping deep to outnumber the midfield and play

wide midfielder and most advanced midfielder.

The red diamond displays the amount of space between the highest and lowest player in the opposition team (excluding the goalkeeper). And while both right sided players on the opposition are marking Iniesta it provides new opportunities for Fabregas who has the option to run into the space in front of him, almost immediately leaving him in a 3v4 scenario with the opposition defence (Messi, Sanchez and Fabregas).

Pulling the midfield around in this system requires mobile players with high technical skills and quick acceleration (not pace).

through the midfield easily with short, sharp passing combinations.

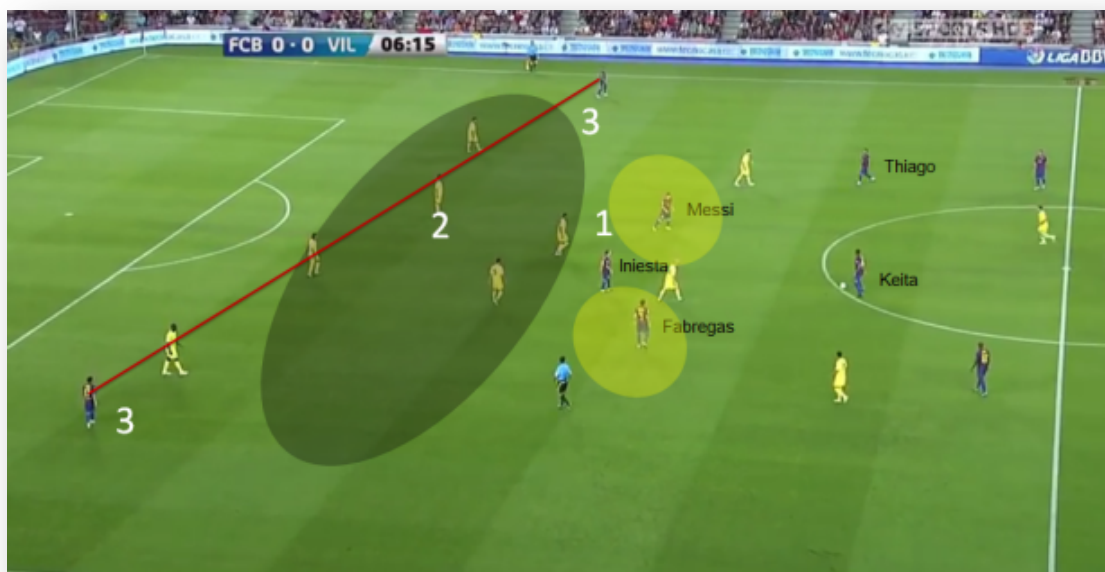


Figure 12 - Central midfield domination

In figure 12, you can see that both false 9's have dropped into positions alongside Iniesta in an attempt to use short passing combinations to evade the opposition midfield and open up goal scoring opportunities (1).

Area 2 on figure 12 shows a frustrating sight for central defenders and anchoring midfield players. Currently due to both false 9 players dropping deep the defensive line have nobody to pick up and mark which causes confusion and uncertainty for the opposition as although they're aware that the space around them will be attacked they are unequipped to deal with the situation due to the vast size of the space.

Lastly, you can see that the defensive line in-between area 3 is pinned back, this is due to the fact that the wingers or wide midfielders push as high as they can up field which creates space between the midfield and defensive line opening up space for the central midfield players

and false 9's to operate and find goal scoring opportunities.

Messi was of course the focal point of this team, with the addition of Fabregas it allowed a far greater control on the central areas due to the midfielders natural inclination to sit in a no.10 position, however Sanchez was the greatest addition and aid for Messi in this side – although he struggled to replicate his Udinese form out wide it was his rotation with Messi which made him a valuable asset as the fluidity between the two attackers made this system even harder to defend against.

One of the biggest attributes to having Sanchez in the side, especially when he drifted inside and rotated with Messi was his horizontal running ability. Picking up the ball and running across the front line before either deciding to cut in, pass or use his phenomenal technique to outwit his defensive opponent.

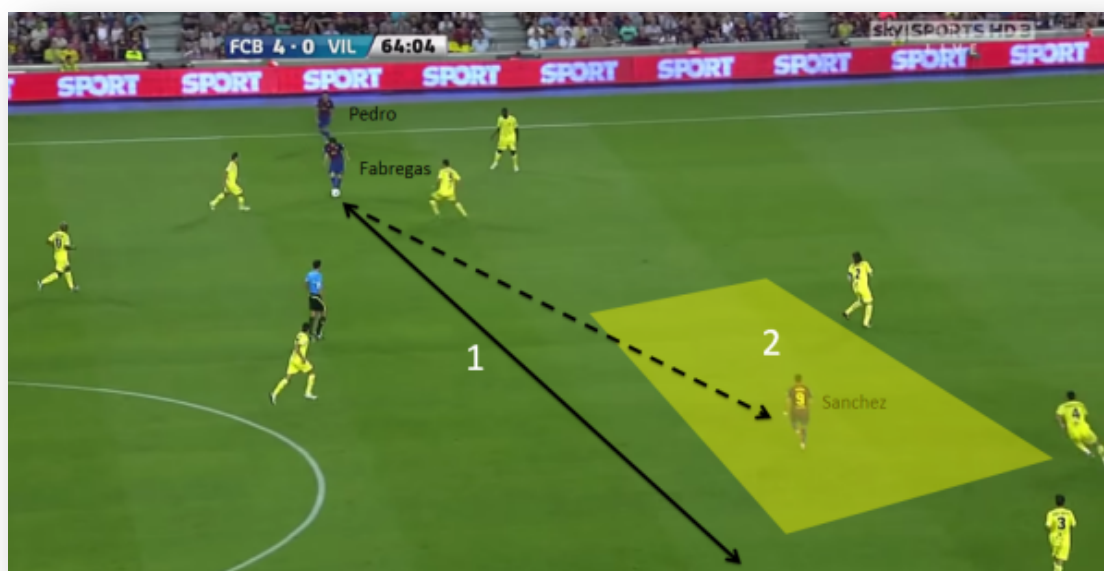


Figure 13 - The Sanchez Effect

As previously mentioned, Sanchez' horizontal running is something that caused problems in almost every defence that Barcelona played against in that season.

Figure 13, area 1 shows that with Fabregas occupying a similar wide position to Pedro and the interchanging of Messi and Sanchez (who moves into the false 9 role) the advanced playmaking role and striker roles on the field are left vacated this opens up the central defence with nobody to mark often resulting in confusion and poor midfield awareness creating the space. The opposing

midfield's lack of awareness appears as a result of the entire central role in the oppositions field being vacated which the central midfield will take as a license to push knowing there is nobody to mark in behind.

Area 2 is where Sanchez becomes effective, his horizontal running ability along with his technical skill (sharp turns, changes of pace, explosive pace and quick acceleration) allow the spaces between the defence and midfield to be exploited and with the lack of defensive organization often results in goal scoring opportunities.

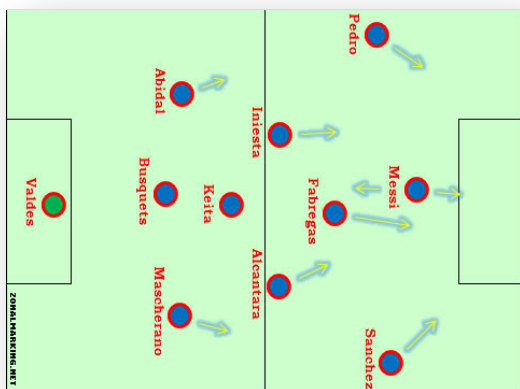


Figure 14 - Barcelona 3-3-4

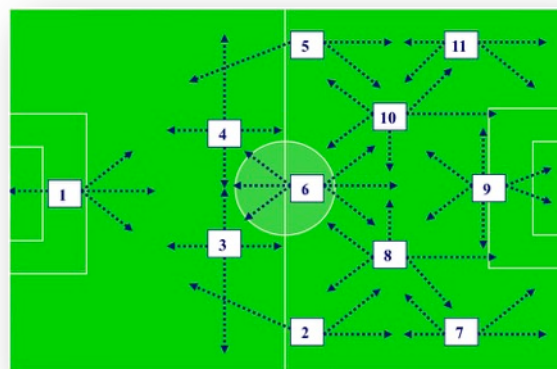


Figure 15 - 360° passing

If Manchester United were to adopt this system, when with my future recommendation of Pep Guardiola as manager then perhaps they may well do so, then an intelligent squad would need to be assembled, based on

possible signings in the Summer 2015 transfer window I believe that the team selected in figure 16 would be able to adequately replicate the system that Guardiola began to develop in his final season at Barcelona.



Figure 16 - Manchester United 3-3-4

In a like for like replacement I will state who is playing in which Barcelona player's role.

Victor Valdes (Victor Valdes), Marcos Rojo (Eric Abidal), Mats Hummels (Sergio Busquets), Marquinhos (Javier Mascherano), Ander Herrera (Andres Iniesta), Daley Blind (Seydou Keita), Michael Carrick (Xavi), Angel Di Maria (Pedro), Wayne Rooney (Cesc Fabregas), Adnan Januzaj (Lionel Messi), Memphis Depay (Alexis Sanchez).

**Back 3:** *Mats Hummels possesses the steadiness and has the tactical awareness to play this role effectively and to the same ability as Sergio Busquets. Marcos Rojo and Marquinhos have both played in the full back roles of their sides of the field and are both quick mobile central defenders comfortable in wide areas – both are also composed on the ball.*

**Midfield 3:** *Daley Blind is a very similar player to Seydou Keita in that he is able to do a solid yet unspectacular job, his defensive work rate and positioning is what makes him a strong option in the deepest midfield role. Ander Herrera is a very similar player to Andres Iniesta, picking the ball up deep and roaming forward, interchanging positions and using quick bursts of acceleration to beat his man; an alternative would also be Juan Mata. Michael Carrick and Xavi are also very similar players, both play in the same role with Carrick perhaps a better fit in this system due to his natural defensive positioning and his exceptional passing range that will suffice in this role.*

**Front 4:** *Angel Di Maria will occupy the left hand side but carry the duties*

*of Sanchez with his similar traits and ability to run horizontally. Memphis Depay on the other side will be a good option to hug the touchline and his natural technical ability will help in those 1v1 situations. Although unproven at the highest level he has the ability to rival Pedro. Wayne Rooney, as previously mentioned is very similar to Cesc Fabregas in his ability to play a midfield, No.10 and False 9 striking role, although his midfield attributes may not be as good his attacking ability certainly makes up for the lack of midfield skill. The final player is Adnan Januzaj, the reason behind his selection is down to his ability to dribble effectively, his midfield link up play and his finishing attributes, although he isn't Lionel Messi, Adnan possesses traits which would see him as a suitable replacement in the role (not a replacement of Messi).*

The Opposition layout in figure 16 is that of a typical premier league formational set up when defending, 4-4-2 diamond, 4-2-3-1, 4-5-1 and 4-4-1-1 can all be identified in the above opposition system.

## 5.0 Transfer Analysis – outgoing players

Section 5.0 of this analysis, review and report covers the players expected to leave old Trafford over the summer and provide reasons as to why their departures are considered the correct move.

I'll be looking at the potential of the player, what they can currently offer and what they have offered as well as potential destinations for them.

### Anders Lindegaard

Once upon a time Anders was seen as the successor to a retiring Edwin Van Der Sar by some, a player with solid attributes who is a victim of being too good for his current position at the club. Anders is almost certainly never going to claim the jersey of David De Gea so a move to pastures new may be the best option of the Danish shot stopper.

I think for Anders it is best that he departs, although he's had some great performances he just lacks what is needed to be a top, world class goalkeeper. A move does look likely especially with Valdes arriving in January and regardless of De Gea it looks like the Dane is destined for new shores.

### David De Gea

The worst kept secret of 2015, David De Gea is unfortunately returning to Spain to reunite with his family and join an elite team in Real Madrid.

There's not an awful lot I can object to with this transfer, he's a Spanish lad who has an offer to go home and join one of if not the most famous team in the world, we would all do the same.

Everyone expected De Gea to be at United for 4 or 5 years before going on to Madrid or Barcelona, it was always going to happen and it's exactly what has happened.

The stumbling block with Real Madrid is that he's a boyhood Atletico fan, however, during his time there he at times was made to train alone and was nearly sold in several occasions to the likes of QPR, Wigan Athletic & Numancia.

We also need to remember that De Gea is a professional goalkeeper who will always want what is best for his career, playing for Real Madrid at this current moment is a step up from playing for Manchester United.

### Jonny Evans

Jonny Evans has had somewhat of a sandwich career at Manchester United, his first few seasons were met with groans from the crowd as the home grown lad just didn't appear good enough, after which there were a around 3 years of good performances which earned him a title of being called our best central defender in an era with both Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic still playing to a high level.

Since the departure of Vidic and Ferdinand, Evans has had to step up, even during the Moyes era he failed to perform and this season has seen his performances regress back to those not too dissimilar from the start of his career.

Entering the twilight of his career Evans is limited, this should be the strongest time in

his career and instead it may turn out to be the weakest, the potential wasn't there and the current talent certainly isn't there either.

Evans, when on form does have composure on the ball and can play a relatively decent pass, it is because of this that I can see him moving to Everton and eventually replacing Phil Jagielka in the side.

### Luis Nani

I fully expected Nani to stay until around February when the links surrounding Memphis Depay picked up more pace. A player like Nani needs regular football to hide his inconsistencies and cannot build form without a steady run of games (as with most players), the problem occurs when you contemplate who he will start ahead of, with 6 wingers currently at the club; Depay, Di Maria, Mata, Januzaj, Valencia & Young.

Ignoring costing, I would like to see Nani stay as a squad player but his potential and ability means that he should be playing football on a first team basis somewhere in Europe.

Likely clubs would consist of; Turkish teams, Italian teams and French teams.

### Angelo Henriquez

I'd never really seen much of Henriquez, in the games he did play he didn't look impressive and in general I never bought into much of the hype. His displays since joining Zagreb have been impressive however, with his finishing technique and work rate above all else.

So far he's failed to look like a united player but seeing as he didn't really cost much and is still only a kid you can't write

him off as a united player just yet. However, with Wilson growing into his role at United, Wilson potentially staying, Rooney and players like Fellaini, Depay & Di Maria it's hard to see exactly where he fits in and for that reason I can see him leaving the club in the summer either on loan or Permanently.

Likely destination: Stoke City, Getafe, Levante, Real Zaragoza, (Mid table clubs in Italy, England and Spain).

### Javier Hernandez

His initial departure is one that surprises still to this day. I understand the need for multi-positional players with high intelligence levels, however Van Gaal likes his striker to play off of the shoulder and have less than 20 touches per game, while also being an opportunistic finisher. Javier Hernandez fit the bill perfectly.

My only thought process leads me to think that Falcao, Rooney, Van Persie and Wilson were all seen as far more complete strikers than Hernandez and thus his services were no longer needed.

His record at Real Madrid was okay, having the 3<sup>rd</sup> best minutes to goal ratio in La Liga behind Ronaldo and Messi and his displays in the Champions League Quarter-Final against Atletico Madrid was of the highest quality.

It'll be a shame to see Hernandez leave, as a squad player he would be useful, on low wages and very deadly in and around the opposition box, however for the sake of his own career he does need to be playing on a weekly basis and for that reason I can see the Mexican leaving Old Trafford this summer.

Likely Destination; Top 6 Premier League Clubs (Arsenal, Tottenham, Southampton), Italian Clubs (Juventus, AS Roma, Milan) or Spain (Athletico Madrid).

#### Robin Van Persie

12 months ago I believe we all thought that Robin Van Persie would lead Manchester United's front line this season, and to a degree he has done. Constant injuries have plagued his season and coincided with Manchester United playing their best football of the season without the Flying Dutchman.

The 3 biggest factors behind the potential departure of the former Arsenal front man are; 1) A lack of playing time 2) Van Persie is approaching the end of his career and maybe a move to Italy would prolong his decline 3) Robin Van Persie is currently the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest paid player at Manchester United, for the outlay that represents Robin but start delivering on a regular basis.

I would expect a move to Germany (Wolfsburg, BMG,

Schalke, etc.), Italy (Juventus, Roma, Milan, Inter) or Turkey.

#### Rafael Da Silva

The departure of Rafael is almost guaranteed. Unfortunately the Brazilian has suffered from the same fate as his England international teammate Phil Jones, although it could be Jones' flexibility that saves him.

Since Rafael arrived and cemented his place as a first team player his shortcomings have yet to be ruled out of his game with rash tackles, ill-disciplined runs, poor positioning and all round general rashness. Rafael has been a favourite at Old Trafford since his arrival for his passion, Flair and fire – however, ironically it seems to be those things which have cemented his future, it'll be sad to see him leave but it is understandable and he does at times become a liability for his team mates.

I would expect Rafael to have many clubs interested, with most Champions League clubs being interested.

## 6.0 Target Areas

Assuming the above outgoings happen then I believe the squad will need to sign players in the following positions.

#### Goalkeeper

With David De Gea leaving and the signing of a Victor Valdes in January, the best possible option would be to recruit a first choice goalkeeper in the summer window. However there are limited targets are potentially available who would be able to keep the sheets clean at Old Trafford.

#### Central Defence

Manchester United needs to strengthen heavily with first choice central defenders in order to challenge for the Premier League title. Although United possess adequate squad players they do not possess the type of defender who is capable of stopping world class forwards.

### Central Midfield

Central midfield has been arguably the biggest problem for Manchester United since the departure of Roy Keane in 2005. Herrera has been added to great effect and Blind offers a vanilla type option in the midfield. Carrick is finally being recognized as one of the best midfielders in the world while Mata has adapted his game in order to take up a central role in a 4-3-3.

However, a successor to Carrick is needed, as is a greater presence in the holding role currently occupied by Daley Blind.

### Right Winger

Antonio Valencia is a very good squad player, although he's likely to fulfil the fullback role in the future; Adnan Januzaj is a player who needs to adapt his playing style in order to play out wide.

United need a player who can operate as a wide man and come inside if need be.

Angel Di Maria is a terrific winger, but United will need threats down both sides if they're to compete. It remains to be seen whether Depay will play on the left side of midfield offering competition to Angel Di Maria.

### Striker

Javier Hernandez, Radamel Falcao and Robin Van Persie are all expected to leave Old Trafford during the summer transfer window.

Figure 17 - Memphis Depay signs for United

Although the club have moved to 4-3-3 towards the back end of the season Rooney and James Wilson aren't strong enough to carry the forward line. A striker will be needed to provide strong competition.



## 7.0 Reported Targets.

### 7.1 Goalkeeper

#### Petr Cech (Chelsea)

I'm not really sure what I can say about Cech that most of the readers won't already know, as a Keeper at the age of 33 he has all the experience and pedigree needed to command a top defence. As a keeper his ability has kept as one of the worlds best all round keepers for over 10 years and to call for him to replace David De Gea is a sound argument.

Certain media outlets will have us believe that Cech could be made available for free, I sincerely doubt that personally, the fee that Cech will command wouldn't be unrealistic for a goalkeeper of his standard and his wages, one would assume would not be astronomical either.

Unfortunately, it looks like Arsene Wenger has been thinking the same and, as such it is likely that the appropriately named Czech will move across London. The shock departure of Ospina to Fenerbahce will all but confirm this move.

#### Hugo Lloris (Spurs)

Lloris has been the Tottenham number one since he signed from Lyon in 2012. His heroics between the sticks have earned him the club player of the year award for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year running in a side that has featured likes of Harry Kane and Jan Vertonghen.

May have also made reference to the 'mistakes' which Lloris apparently makes on a regular basis, but to bust the myth the Goalkeeper is much like our own De Gea where his initial mistake fuelled reputation overshadowed his development and ability as a top goalkeeper.

Eyebrows will be raised over a mediocre record of 31 clean sheets in 3 years at Spurs but a quick glance at the inconsistency of the spurs defence and all out attacking player will somewhat argue against his clean sheet record.

In the 2014-2015 season Lloris has played his best season of football ever, averaging just fewer than 2 saves per goal and slightly over 5 saves every 2 matches (both higher than that of David De Gea).

Between De Gea and Lloris this season there isn't much to separate them, perhaps with the exception of Lloris punching far more often and acting as more of a sweeper keeper, bringing the ball out from the back that De Gea. He is also far more commanding and demands more from his defence vocally that big Dave – and in that particular department would be a huge upgrade.

I think it's quite possible that Lloris will be a Manchester United player this season, although the goalkeeper transfer record will need to be beaten and a transfer in the region of £40 Million would likely secure the Frenchman.

Jan Oblak (Athletico Madrid)  
My first look at Oblak came last season while he was keeping the nets of Benfica safe in Portugal. The 22 year old struggled to get a look in at Athletico until January having arrived for a huge price tag (£12.8 Million) – making him the most expensive goalkeeper in La Liga history.

It's also worth noting that Oblak only rose to fame after having a good second half to the season in Portugal, which appears to have happened at Athletico as well. Questions would certainly need to be asked about his form and consistency in the early part of the season.

His breakthrough in the first place only came when former Getafe stopper Moya was taken off injured in a UEFA Champions League tie against Bayer Leverkusen (Moya is a Goalkeeper I rate very highly).

He failed to take his opportunities in the first half of the season and was at times horrific in his positioning, timing and reflexes – A performance against Olympiakos (A 3-2 loss) was very similar to the performance David De Gea gave in his debut against Manchester City in the 3-2 Community Shield defeat.

Oblak's rise to fame has come through a series of high profile saves against Real Madrid and saving a Penalty against Barcelona and Lionel Messi. During the Leverkusen game more players began to take notice of the Slovenian after he saved 3 shots, all of

which were impressive saves. All of this then led to what has given him the hype, playing over 5 hours – that's just fewer than 3 and half games without conceding a goal. Those 3 games however were against Cordoba (Relegated having scored 22 goals in 38 games, Getafe, 15<sup>th</sup> scoring 33 goals in 38 games and Sociedad, 12<sup>th</sup> scoring 44 goals in 38 games – not great records. To put it into perspective, QPR managed to score 42 times this season before finishing bottom of the EPL).

Statistically he has looked strong, keeping 9/15 clean sheets and making nearly 3.5 saves every game, conceding only 9 goals in the process and claiming 91% of his ball.

Alarmingly he has been booked twice in 11 appearances for rash challenges.

Overall, my opinion of Oblak is that he isn't a top goalkeeper and he needs to develop further before even being considered as a top keeper. I believe he moved to Athletico too early and staying at Benfica another year would have aided his development. For a fee of what would be close to €30 Million he should be avoided at all costs this summer.

Asmir Begovic (Stoke City)  
Current reports suggest that Begovic is in line for a shock transfer to Chelsea as a replacement for Arsenal bound Petr Cech.

The Bosnian divides opinion amongst many, while some believe he is a steady option

others believe he is the consistently brilliant, for me I believe he is a good goalkeeper, capable of doing a job at a top club, is he likely to develop into the a Neuer? A Buffon? A De Gea? It's very unlikely, although he is the type of goalkeeper that will install confidence into your defence and throughout the team.

Begovic has rightly been linked to bigger clubs that Stoke City for years now and it appears that this year is his year for a move.

Over the past 3 years Begovic has made 105 Premier League Appearances keeping 29 clean sheets and conceding 124 goals, the worrying issue comes from the fact that over the past 3 seasons Begovic has made 13 defensive errors which have all lead to goals. His defence hasn't helped either racking up a total of 46 (only 6 last season) defensive errors, which have lead to goals. When you remove those defensive errors Begovic will have 'only' conceded 78 goals in 105 appearances – a better record to say the least.

The worrying issue comes with the keepers high tendency to concede goals in the corners of his goal, perhaps creating a discussion over his positional place and reflexes with 81 goals being conceded towards each post and 34 goals being conceded in the low central area of the goal (10 in the 14/15 season).

His commanding skills are adequate and ultimately he's a 'good' goalkeeper, however I wouldn't make him a high priority choice with better,

more formidable goalkeepers being available this season.

#### Tim Krul (Newcastle United)

There would have been a time, namely during the 2011/12 Premier League season that I would have taken Tim Krul as the Manchester United number 1 goalkeeper, his performances up until that point drew similarities to fellow Dutch goalkeeper and Manchester United legend Edwin Van Der Sar – Although perhaps comparisons to his time at Juventus rather than his time at Manchester United.

Over the past 3 years Krul has made 90 appearances keeping 22 clean sheets and conceding 138 goals. If we look at his defence over that time we can see that 67 defensive errors have lead to goals and a further 16 errors which lead to goals made by Krul himself.

Many argue that Krul's strongest attribute is shot stopping, however out of the 138 goals the Dutchman has conceded over the past 3 years 77 have been from inside the area, although his save record of 2.62 shots saved in the penalty area per goal over the course of the past 3 seasons indicate a high level of saves have been made and although I wouldn't consider Krul to be a strong shot stopper, I would consider that to be his strongest attribute.

Tim Krul as a squad option would be a viable transfer, however for the financial outlay involved it maybe best to avoid this one altogether, especially considering his

record is worse than that of Asmir Begovic.

#### Jasper Cillessen (Ajax)

Jasper Cillessen's goalkeeping career has gone from strength to strength over the past few years and more recently his performances and controversial substitution in the World Cup finals have given him a platform to build on.

Admittedly, when I first considered Cillessen I dismissed it immediately, however the more he was touted the more I thought about it and I would consider him a strong candidate for the United number 1 jersey this summer.

Unfortunately his vanilla name has earned him a pretty negative response to the rumours circulating and it's certainly understandable.

Many football fans look at the substitution for the Penalty Shootout in the World Cup as a sign of no confidence in the 26 year old, however in my opinion that was a tactical decision bringing on a goalkeeper who is known for his penalty and shot stopping ability.

So let's look at the statistics over the past 2 seasons taking into consideration the level of the opponents faced during this time period.

So firstly we must recognise the difference in the quality and league opponents, therefore things like goals conceded, etc. will be looked at and scrutinised slightly more, because of this references to international

fixtures and European competition will be used to gain a greater picture.

Over the past 2 years Cillessen has made 57 Eredivisie Appearances keeping 26 clean sheets and conceding 39 goals, as opposed to Krul and Begovic, Cillessen will put your mind at rest with the fact that over the past two seasons Cillessen has made 2 defensive errors, which have lead to goals. His defence hasn't helped but have only totalled 21 defensive errors, which have lead to goals.

Internationally, in the 2014 World cup Jasper made 7 appearances keeping 4 clean sheets and conceding 4 goals, only 2 however cam from open play. The Dutch also averaged 3 saves per goal, an impressive statistic especially considering the 3 defensive errors that lead to goal scoring opportunities.

Against world-class opposition in the UEFA champions League Cillessen has made 11 appearances over the past 2 years and had 3 clean sheets, conceding 14 goals in the process. Defensively he hasn't made any defensive errors while the rest of his defence pitched in 6 defensive errors. Although it is worth noting that in this 2 year period of UEFA Champions League football Ajax have faced Lionel Messi's Barcelona 4 times, Zlatan Ibrahimovic's PSG twice and El Shaarawy's AC Milan twice.

In the Europe league Cillessen has made 5 appearances in 2 years, with 2

clean sheets and conceding 6 (5 goals conceded in a tie vs. Salzburg) goal making 3.5 saves per game and a 100% success rate in punches and claimed balls. Cillessen in this time made 2 defensive errors that lead to goals.

Having watched Cillessen for most of the Eredivisie season and having the pleasure of watching him live on 3 occasions this season I feel well equipped to give my opinion of the Ajax number 1.

His footwork and confidence on the ball is incredible and he constantly brings the ball out of defence at times taking on opposition players, although that would be tolerated less in the premier league, his ball playing skills and comfort within tight spaces are highly appreciated.

One of the biggest things you'll notice when watching Cillessen is his brilliant positioning, decision making and ability to make himself big, closing down the angles, during the past 2 years against Barcelona it is demonstrated heavily in the incredible amount of 1v1 saves made.

Jasper also has a tendency to parry away the ball after making a save and although he has strong hands they're not always used as effectively as they can be, in the Premier League that would be punished severely by the opposition and therefore needs to be ironed out of his game much like it was with De Gea.

His diving technique is also below average (not quite

poor) and he could use help with getting the full use of his athleticism involved when making saves. Cillessen's quick reflexes go some way to making up for his lack of diving technique and his understanding of the game is of a high standard, he knows where to be and when to be there understanding the game around him and the positioning of other players very well.

As a goalkeeper, one thing we lacked in De Gea was vocal ability and it is something that Cillessen has, the Dutchman has a very 'Dutch' attitude and as such wants to be the best, therefore if you make a mistake he will make you aware of it.

His confidence is also reflected in his play.

Finally, a new age trait that most goalkeepers have taken on is the use of their feet, and for me Cillessen is just as good if not better than David De Gea at using his feet when shot stopping.

Jasper Cillessen is a goalkeeper with the need for some improvement but ultimately is a solid purchase, and he would be a quality replacement for David De Gea.

## 7.2 Fullbacks

### Fabinho Tavares (Monaco)

Fabinho is a slightly strange transfer; the Brazilian has spent the past 2 years on loan at Monaco from Rio Ave, and before that he was on loan at Real Madrid. The Brazilian

however has just completed a move to Monaco and as such the idea that he will be sold immediately is a little strange however we've seen this sort of thing happen before.

This season across all competitions including national inclusion, Fabinho has played 48, scored twice, assisted once and been booked 5 times. Not a bad record but certainly not a great one. Tavares is only 21 years of age however and does have time to develop.

Ultimately he's a modern day fullback, he likes to play box to box, and he dribbles heavily and is always in search of trying to provide a goal scoring opportunity. His biggest strengths are his versatility in being able to play further up the field and occasionally as a left back, he's also featured a couple of times in a central midfield area although it has been brief and I've only seen it in one game for a little over 15 minutes.

Strangely for a fullback he is very good in the air and tackles incredibly well, which makes him unique in comparison to most.

Unfortunately, due to his young age he doesn't possess a high level of intelligence and as such often makes poor decisions when it comes to passing, dribbling, etc.

His agility at times helps him recover but Ligue 1 is a different and much slower competition compared to the Premier League and he may struggle with the pace of the

game if he continues to make incorrect decisions.

His ability is similar to Rafael but outmuscles Rafael in being able to defend; perhaps a more suitable comparison would be with Patrice Evra during his peak years, although with less intelligence. Ironically a player we also signed from Monaco.

Whether Louis Van Gaal is capable of getting more out of him and correcting his poor decision making only he knows, he's certainly a worthy investment for €15 Million.

#### Nathaniel Clyne (S'hampton)

Nathaniel Clyne is an English fullback at a very good time. Kyle Walker hasn't progressed, the less said about Glen Johnson the better and the likelihood of Jenkinson, Trippier or Wisdom breaking into the England team is very slim, concerns have also got to be had about Micah Richards also.

The reason Clyne is lucky to be playing at this time is because the English game has a shortage of right back options, much like the shortage of top quality central defenders.

Nathaniel Clyne is a good fullback made to look better by his 'international player' status and his obvious media hyping.

A record of 94 games, 3 goals and 8 assists (0 in 14/15) in 3 years isn't very impressive while he's also contributing towards his teams downfall by

making 6 defensive error that have lead to goals in the same time period.

His decision-making is poor, as is his ability to defend.

A key point when assessing Southampton's defensive players is that as a unit they are incredibly well drilled, individually they aren't as successful. Dejan Lovren & Luke Shaw are two examples of players who haven't shown the same kind of ability since leaving the Saints while a poor Toby Alderweireld at Athletico has looked sensational during the 2014/15 season.

Players like Jose Fonte, a 31 year old central defender who didn't stand out in a poor Crystal Palace side has also looked brilliant, at times along side an occasionally flattering but not outstanding Maya Yoshida, 26.

My opinion of Nathaniel Clyne is that he is a player in the spotlight, enjoying good form but he is not a top quality defender, he is simply a good defender in a top quality defensive scheme.

#### Seamus Coleman (Everton)

In 2013/14 Seamus Coleman was incredible, winning award after award at the Everton end of season award ceremony and a lot was expected of Seamus moving into the 2014/15 season.

The Everton fullback featured heavily for Everton this season starting 41 games, scoring 5 and assisting a further 2 goals. However his season hasn't gone to plan

and he was part of a defence that conceded 66 goals last season and aside from the odd glimpse of form shown he never really recaptured the form, which had him down as one of the best fullbacks in the English game.

In fairness to the young defender his form did improve after the Christmas break along with the rest of the Everton defence and the signing of Aaron Lennon appeared to breathe a new lease of life into Coleman as the final few months of the Premier League season kicked on.

An issue that Coleman does suffer from is that he is very poor in closed down situations and thus needs a winger in front of him who will pin the opposition fullback further down field, such player and playing style does not currently exist on the right hand side of Manchester United's midfield.

Over the course of the season it was clear to see that Coleman struggled to replicate his form, many will argue Everton as a unit were poor and to some extent that is true. However, the fullback made less tackles, less interceptions and committed more fouls than he did in the previous season while also lacking in the passing and dribbling area indicating a lack of intelligence and decision making.

Manchester United fans often criticize the lack of concentration from current make shift right back Antonio Valencia, unfortunately Coleman offers no upgrade on

the Ecuadorian from that perspective. The right back let 'countless' balls run past him all season and when dispossessed his lack of urgency to regain possession is concerning. Going forward things look equally as poor with more often not his runs end up with him running out of play.

In the premier League Coleman's statistics in 2014/15 look like; 35 apps, 3 goals, 2 assists, 84% Pass accuracy, 2 defensive errors that lead to goals, 5 defensive actions per game and 5 yellow cards.

This season has been poor for the Irishman and a regain to form would be welcomed, at this current moment though I believe he is at his level challenging for Europa League.

### 7.3 Central Defenders

Nicolás Otamendi (Valencia)  
El Mohicano as he's affectionately known in Spain and Argentina is a powerhouse of a central defender. Arguably the best defender in Spain last season he is known for his incredible attributes when defending 1v1 situations and his incredible aerial dominance. Naturally a central defender the Argentine has also been played at both right and left back during the Maradona of the Argentinian national team. It is that flexibility that gives this transfer more plausibility with Van Gaal's love for all things flexible.

Many will watch Otamendi and applaud his likeness to

Vidic, which in some aspects is true although if I were to make a comparison to a modern day premier league central defender it would be to Chelsea legend John Terry. The best of both worlds mixing an impressive warrior playing style similar to Vidic with that of finesse similar to Rio Ferdinand.

Over the past 3 years Otamendi has shown great consistency with 80 appearances, 6 goals (in 14/15), 8 (2 ast) key passes and a passing accuracy of 79% (81% Forward) However issues over his defensive lapses have lead to goals having made 5 defensive errors during the 3 year period (Including spells at Porto and Atletico Mineiro).

Defensively speaking over the past 12 months in La Liga Otamendi has 74 tackles (49%), made 111 interceptions, 267 clearances and 28 blocks. His tackling success percentage appears to slightly misleading with the Argentina averaging 12 defensive actions per game more than any other central defender in Europe's top 5 leagues. Due to the weakness in Valencia's defence due to their attacking playing style it is easy to see why Otamendi may have lost more tackles that he has won.

Overall he would be a solid signing; I would worry about him as singular defensive signing this summer however. As talented as the 27 year old is he is still developing at this late age and would need a partner such as Hummels or existing partner Mustafi – A

player that will be covered next.

### Shkodran Mustafi (Valencia)

The 22 year old German was released by Everton 3 years ago and now is a World Cup winner having been a prominent figure throughout the group stage of the competition.

The first thing that will stand out about the central defender is his attitude, after being released (by request) from Everton he had various offers from top flight clubs around Europe but instead opted to drop into Serie B and develop his skills further. The German is quoted last season as saying "I took a step back to go to Serie B in Italy to make two-steps forward" – A great attitude from a young and talented central defender.

I started watching Valencia last season after former Getafe Loane Paco Alcácer returned to his parent club, wanting to keep an eye on his development I made an effort to watch Valencia as much as I could and as such got a good first impression of the Valencia central defence.

One of the first things you'll notice about Mustafi is his incredible reading of the game, tracking back at pace, recovering from mistakes and huge intelligence when reading the game, he's been a pleasure to watch over the past 12 months. He certainly isn't the finished article however and does have some areas to improve.

Standing in at just over 6ft and weighing in at just 82kg

(12 stone) he doesn't give off the impression of an imposing central defender but much like Koscielny at Arsenal the German is like a terrier constantly gunning for the ball displayed in his average of 10 defensive actions per game on average.

Despite his size he's incredibly good in the air winning 62% of his headed duels this season.

The 22 year old also possesses a strong attacking threat from set pieces having scored 4 goals this season and played 3 key passes. One of things that really stood out about him is his ability to lose his defender in the box, quick bursts of pace really help him pull away from his man for goal scoring attempt.

His ball playing ability is also exempt, having played over 75% of his passes forward (averaging 24 Meters).

An ideal comparison would be to Rio Ferdinand while at Leeds, at times he can be a little rash and his positional sense can lack when bringing the ball out from defence, however his all round game is superb and may be a better addition than Otamendi.

At 22 years old he is light years ahead of Smalling, Jones and Evans and will almost certainly become one of the better central defenders in world football.

My advice would be to purchase Mustafi as well as Otamendi or another central defender.

### Aymeric Laporte (Ath. Bilbao)

For the past 18 months Laporte - a name that I've seen come up time after time on football forums across the Internet, And for great reason he has blossomed into a talented central defender with an incredible amount of potential.

He's a player with strong beliefs and a good entourage of people around him. At the age of 15 Laporte turned down some of Europe's biggest clubs including boyhood team Marseille in order to sign for an academy in 'the best league in the world' - A decision motivated by belief and not financial incentive. Aymeric feels he has a lot to thank Bilbao for, the club stood by the player as a teenager as he overcame an ACL injury that nearly ended his career, and since his debut in December 2012 he has gone from strength to strength starting over 85% of the games after the 12/13 Christmas break.

Being Spanish, La Liga is still my league so to speak and I like to keep track of as much of it as possible, therefore I watch a lot of Spanish football, as such Bilbao is a side I've come across a lot over the past few years and Laporte has had no issue standing out.

He doesn't really struggle with any part of his particular game per say, earlier in his career he struggled with defending against long balls and balls over the top which is a big part of counter attacking football in the Premier League, luckily for him his pace papered over the cracks in his game until he

managed to overcome the issue.

As a young player you would expect improvements across his entire game and that can't be any truer for his ability in the air and attacking the ball with his head, demonstrated by the fact that in 2012/13 he won 38% of his aerial battles whereas last season he won 68%. One of the Frenchman's biggest qualities is his ability to play in a high line, not simply down to his pace but with an exceptional ability to read the game demonstrated by his interception (121) and clearance (155) rate in 33 games.

Laporte is a future captain at both club and international level wherever he ends up, currently captain of the France U19 team due to his organisational and leadership qualities. Bringing the ball out of defence is another one of the excellent attributes the Bilbao defended possesses having completed 1613/1936 passes with 77.6% of those being completed forward.

Versatility, an apparent theme in our central defender links is something that Laporte possesses having been played at left back several times throughout his career to date.

The biggest issue surrounding Laporte is his lack of discipline, over the past 3 seasons the Frenchman has picked up 22 yellow cards and 4 red cards in 83 games (A booking offence every 287 Minutes and a foul committed every 40 minutes).

Aside from his discipline, in those 83 games played he has

committed 8 defensive errors that lead to goals however they are partially redeemed with an average of 10 defensive actions per game over the past 3 years.

The physicality of the Premier League shouldn't be a problem for the Frenchman as Athletic Bilbao are known for their tough tackling stance in Spain (Spain's answer to Stoke City physically) and therefore a no brainer transfer target.

#### Mats Hummels (B. Dortmund)

When the 6'3 central defender joined Borussia Dortmund from Bayern Munich in was no coincidence that Dortmund won the Bundesliga with the best defensive record in the league and suddenly Hummels was a revelation.

Originally sold by Louis Van Gaal in 2009, Hummels has struggled with injury concerns and has only played 72 games over the past 3 years – averaging 10 games missed per season.

During this time the German defender has made mistakes leading to 4 goals conceded but has however averaged 8 defensive actions per game. His pass accuracy isn't as potent as people would believe having only completed 2638/3779 passes with 79% being forward passes.

Despite this common flaw amongst defenders Hummels is still recognized as the one of if not the best central defender in the world. His strong tackle and power

presence make him a formidable force in aerial and 1v1 situations while his interception (334) rate and clearance rate (52) over the past 3 years indicate his advanced intelligence to read the game, a read challenge every 16 minutes (The highest minutes per read challenge record in Europe).

Another major misconception about Mats Hummels is his lack of pace, and although he may be found out in the Premier League he is able to keep up with all but the worlds quickest of players, his lack of acceleration at times does however hinder the German.

Hummels is not a player that Manchester United should have concerns about signing unless they are related to his fitness, without a doubt one of the world's top central defenders. A short clip displaying Hummels pace can be found [here](#).

#### Ezequiel Garay (Zenit St Petersburg)

The Argentine defender has recently found form in Russia and has caused a media frenzy surrounding the 28-year-old central defender.

Signed by Zenit in the 2014 summer transfer window after more than 2 years of being linked to Manchester United the Argentine just won't go away.

His game over the past 2 years has remained consistent indicating a good level of consistency and general ability across different leagues in Europe. Over the past 2 years he's played 53

games, averaged 6 defensive actions per game and made 9 defensive errors that have lead to goals.

When faced with defensive responsibilities the Argentine has won 31 aerial battles, 24 tackles and committed 34 fouls over the past 26 appearances. Garay is also averaging an interception 5 times every 2 games and has also managed 94 clearances over the same period indicating a satisfactory ability to read the opposition game well.

Focusing on this season it's Garay's passing displays which have earned him plaudits, with an 87% completion rate and 951 completed forward passes the defender as 2 assists and a further 2 key passes.

Beyond his passing ability in a slower, less tactically organised league it is hard to see what Garay really offers. His ability to impose himself on a game hasn't been seen despite his physique while his tackling and heading game remain poor.

He is a player I would personally avoid, he offers no upgrade on the likes of Chris Smalling and players such as Hummels, Otamendi and Mustafi offer a more favourable investment.

#### Raphael Varane (Real Madrid)

Out of every young defender in world football or every wonder kid Real Madrid's Varane is someone who always come's up in discussions. Over the past 18 months Varane has become a

main stay at the heart of the Real Madrid defence alongside fellow former wonderkid Sergio Ramos.

Earlier, Laporte was described as having no real weak areas of his game, Varane takes that statement to a different level. The fellow Frenchman is seen as the perfect defender with all the skill and potential to be greatest central defender of his generation.

His size adds to the defenders sheer strength and power standing in at 6'2, his weight stands in at around 11 stone that also aids the defenders raw pace. His confidence also shows through in his ability to bring the ball out from defence and play, most of the time a perfectly timed pass.

As many of you who follow Real Madrid will know Varane has an excellent rate of interceptions (52) and clearances (140) in the 27 games played this season, which demonstrates his ability to read the game well.

Often compared to compatriot Lillian Thuram for his all round game Varane also possesses the ability to start off attacks with accurate long balls completing 70/113 long balls this season with an overall pass completion of 89% and 846 forward passes indicating the players eye for a pass and his mentality of going forward is only backed up further with his 67% player take on success.

Like many young central defenders, the issue facing Varane is his concentration. Although the issue is improving having only made

3 errors which have lead to goal scoring opportunities this season.

Varane's attitude is also something that could potentially hold him back. A lot of young players who move to an elite club often to develop an ego that isn't quite deserving of their talent but more of their potential. There have been stories over the past couple of years surrounding the attitude of Varane and perhaps he may be more hassle that is worth if/when he moves on in the future.

Varane on first glance is a top player who would improve any team and he is yet to fully grow in to his potential. Concerns over his attitude and concentration could also be overlooked. From a talent perspective if Varane is available it is an easy decision.

#### 7.4 Central Midfield

##### William Carvalho (Sporting CP)

Sporting CP Have a habit of producing some of the most talked about and requested players on the planet, sometimes referred to as the Portuguese Ajax the club are renown for their ability to spot and nurture players on Europe's biggest stages.

William Carvalho is another player developed at the Sporting youth academy and made his debut in the 2010/11 seasons, in the same season he was establishing himself as a young international in the Portuguese U19 side.

Carvalho did struggle to break into the Sporting team however and originally not an awful lot was thought of the midfielder, eventually he earned a loan spell to Cercle Brugge where he stayed for the rest of the 11/12 season and the 12/13 season before his impressive displays helped him in his return to Portugal.

Upon his return, he was given a starting role for the club, mainly due to circumstance than talent with new manager Leonardo Jardim remoulding the team after a poor couple of years. Carvalho started every game for Sporting that year ultimately earning him a place in the Portugal national team for the much-famed 'Ibrahimovic v Ronaldo' World cup play off.

After an impressive 2013/14 Carvalho earned himself a call up to the Portugal set up where he featured in the World Cup boosting his value to upwards of €40 Million.

Often the young starlet is compared to Patrick Vieira in his style of play, perhaps a premature comparison although similarities are there. Much like Vieira, Carvalho acts as a battering ram destroying every pattern of play entering his area of the field. Re-watching the 'Ibrahimovic v Ronaldo' World cup play off it is clear to see from Carvalho's introduction as a second half substitution why the Swede's were unable to create anything through the middle of the park and often has to rely on deep crosses and long balls to try and beat the young battering ram.

Ironically, despite my comparison of Carvalho being a 'battering ram' he very rarely gets booked or commits fouls as despite his size, his biggest attribute is his anticipation and ability to read the game like a seasoned veteran. Perhaps at times comparable to the finesse midfielders of Pirlo, Scholes and Xavi for his composure (not his passing) the midfielder very rarely gets dispossessed in the middle of the park (partly due to his towering size).

Conceivably Carvalho's biggest strength lies in the fact the midfielder understands the limits to his game and often lays the ball off to a more creative midfielder to control the game and dictate the tempo.

Aside from some impressive reading and understanding from his own game Carvalho does struggle hugely when confronted with talented opposition players. The positioning of his opposite midfield number causes great confusion in how Carvalho should attack the situation with his limited offensive ability and his positioning will sometimes cause issues when facing world class attacking midfielders (Such as those in the Premier League (Silva, Fabregas, Cazorla, Ozil, Coutinho, etc)).

He also often unbalances the side, in the offensive part of his game he struggles to roam free of his marker and therefore cannot press to the extent that is required.

Overall I believe that Carvalho is a player to watch,

his limitations are currently too heavy for a club like Manchester United to seriously consider and at times he would be a passenger in the side.

People often compare him to Patrick Vieira; I would compare him to Cheick Tiote.

### Morgan Schneiderlin (S'hampton)

Morgan Schneiderlin is the most debated and contest Premier League player among fans of rival fans, everybody wants him in their side and it's easy to see why.

The fact that Morgan is from the Premier League means that many of you will know a great deal about him although where he best plays has always been something up for debate.

It's been argued over the past few months that he would be a terrific replacement for Michael Carrick and that couldn't be any further from the truth. In fact he would be a brilliant partner for the Englishman in midfield. A trio of Schneiderlin, Carrick and Herrera would drive this United team and potentially offer a Premier League title challenge in the near future.

However, the French international is not a defensive midfielder nor an out right attacking midfielder, although he does possess ability in both of those areas, he is a Box to box midfielder with a 65/35 split in favour of attacking duties, similar to Ander Herrera or Jack Wilshire in some aspects.

Following on from a theme used throughout this analysis review Morgan's previous 3 seasons will be analysed.

Over the past 3 years Morgan has made 95 appearances, scoring 11 goals and creating 79 chances (2 assists) and averaging 4 defensive actions per game (Average of 7 during the 12/13 season).

His attacking prowess doesn't get the recognition it deserves and his positive mentality to drive forward has been highlighted this season in his 67% forward pass completion and 38 take on attempts (16 successful). It is in his defensive game however that we see the midfielder's intelligence, as although he managed to create 79 goal-scoring opportunities over the past 3 years, last season saw him make a staggering 63 interceptions and 47 clearances in 26 appearances. Even more impressive is that the Southampton player did not make one single defensive error.

His goal scoring ability could do with improving however, but considering his lack of options in front of him over the past 3 years it is no surprise to see his assist record so low, the focus should be on 79 key passes in 95 games, even if half of those assists came off he would be one of if not the most deadly playmaker come box to box midfielder in world football. At Manchester United with Di Maria, Rooney, Mata, Depay and Van Persie you could imagine an increase in his assist record is likely.

The midfield engine's biggest attribute is most likely his ability to make the game look effortless, as opposed to Daley Blind – the Jack of all trades, Morgan is the master of all trades. From his passing, positional flexibility to his ability to shake defenders whilst running with the ball, Morgan Schneiderlin is a must sign midfielder for Manchester United in 2015.

### Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern Munich)

It's difficult to look at the World Cup winner and find his role in Manchester United, not as such because he's not talented but because at some stage in his career he has fulfilled nearly every role on the pitch.

Starting off as a right-winger Bastian was converted into a box-to-box midfielder by current Manchester United manager Louis Van Gaal. As he's grown older he's adapted his game to play deeper and use his energy wisely while also adapting based on the playing style of his manager at the time.

Worryingly the Munich legend has spent a lot of time injured over the past 2 years missing a total of 50 games and has a reoccurring injury of a ruptured ankle joint capsule which has kept him on the side-lines for a month in total over the past 2 years.

His newly found role is that very similar to that of Michael Carrick's with perhaps a greater dynamic placed on offensive play rather than defensive play,

the difference is slight however. Some are worried that Schweinsteiger age prevents him from being a major part of the future of United but I disagree, his role in the team means he can go on into his late 30's, his experience offers just as much as his ability on the field and much like Michael Ballack I would expect Bastian to enjoy a few seasons of success at Old Trafford before he retires.

In the Bundesliga over the past 3 years Bastian has made 71 appearances, scored on 16 occasions, created 76 chances and assisted 11 while also making 0 errors in this time. His conversion into a deep-lying playmaker has seen an improvement in the German's passing with an average of 88% completed averaging 19 meters per pass with around 65% of those passes being forward.

Defensively speaking Bastian has been capable, however it's important to remember that the current Bayern side puts an emphasis on passing and possession play therefore you could expect higher statistics and less pass orientated sides. Averaging 2 defensive actions per game, Bastian has excelled with his reading and interception rate with over 65% of those defensive actions being interceptions, while for Germany in the World Cup he averaged 3 defensive actions per game with 81% of those being clearances. Those statistics indicate a high level of intelligence and positioning.

In comparison to Michael Carrick his defensive statistics

over the past 12 months have been somewhat poor, in Less games Carrick as made more successful tackles (48%), committed less fouls (18) and won slightly more headers (57%) whereas Schweinsteiger has a tackle success rate of 30% (24/81), has committed 58 fouls in 20 appearances and won 51% of his headers.

In a similar fashion to Herrera however, Schweinsteiger has completed 21/30 take on attempts and Herrera has completed 26/34.

These statistics help you build an image of the type of player Bastian would likely be for United, rotating with Carrick in the midfield our defence may be slightly more exposed but with defensive reinforcements it wouldn't be a huge risk, his attacking play would inject some much needed creativity into the Manchester United midfield and had Falcao stayed this season then perhaps he would enjoy more success in front of goal.

For any price under £20 Million Bastian is a welcomed addition.

#### Grzegorz Krychowiak (Sevilla)

Since hosting Euro 2012 Poland's fortune as a footballing national has been on the rise, blessed with players such as Lewandowski, Piszczek, Blaszczykowski and the emergence of wonderkid Milik have given Poland their strongest squad, perhaps in their history.

Among these 'star' names another player has silent crept on to the scene and become one of the very best midfield players in Europe - Grzegorz Krychowiak.

The 24 year old has played 26 times for Poland already and was a key part of the Europa League winning Sevilla side last season, which if Reports are to be believed, have him linked with Arsenal, Liverpool, PSG and Manchester United among a whole host of Europe's other top clubs.

Krychowiak isn't known for his attacking ability at all, and is in fact a traditional out and out defensive midfielder, standing in at just over 6ft his height doesn't harm his ability to win aerial duels winning 71% of them last season. His passing ability isn't exactly Pirlo but it's certainly an improvement on Fellaini's ability (averaging 81% pass completion last season).

Defensively there aren't many better with the midfielder making on average, 6 defensive actions per game, his intelligence and positioning is demonstrated with 54% of his actions being interceptions while another 38% are clearances.

Unfortunately, as previously mentioned Grzegorz Krychowiak is no Pirlo or Scholes and his playmaking abilities are pretty much non existent (Highlighted with his 5 key passes in 32 league apps).

Concentration is the Pole's biggest issue with 4 defensive

errors that have lead to goals this season and as such it's something that will need to be improved on vastly if he is to make the step up to one of Europe's elite clubs.

As an out and out defensive midfielder there are few that compare to the Polish International's record, however with his lack of concentration at the age of 24 it is unlikely to see a drastic improvement and as such an alternative option may be considered less of a risk.

### Ilkay Gundogan (B. Dortmund)

In 2010 there was shock around the German national team camp when Sven Bender was left out to accommodate his less impressive twin, Lars. The reason for doing so revolved around the fact that Sven Bender had recently lost his place in the resurgent Dortmund side to a young playmaker called Ilkay Gundogan.

Since joining Dortmund the Turkish-born midfielder has been sensational operating in a deep midfield role.

Ilkay has developed into one of it not the best player in his position in recent years where he operates in a role similar in description to that of Paul Scholes during the Roy Keane partnership years, without an anchoring midfielder next to him Gundogan struggles to make an impact.

During his spell next to Kehl at Dortmund the Turk enjoyed some of his best form. His biggest attributes stem from his ability to

control the pace of the game with his technical and creative ability to thread key passes through to the defence highlighted by his key pass rate of 52 apps and 46 key passes (7 assists) over the past 3 seasons. Gundogan also possesses great ability to slow the game down with relative ease in a very similar way to that of Paul Scholes.

Arguably his biggest trait however is his Wilshere-eque dribble and running where the German competes on average 70% of his runs. Perhaps making him unpredictable in the process.

A football players intelligence is one of his strongest attributes in the modern era and in most cases decides how a players career will develop, Ilkay possesses intelligence levels of a player 10 years his elder with great decision making and maturity in taking players on, simply passes, extravagant attempts to beat a player and so on, the German knows exactly when and how to beat a man, however his preference is to keep the ball simple and more often than not, sideways.

Gundogan's biggest problem however lies in the fact that he struggle for fitness, demonstrates by 24 appearances in 2 years and an injury hit spell of 12 injuries in 3 years, the most serious of which kept him out for 88 games and 403 days with a spinal compression injury. It appears as if he may be over the worst of it but perhaps it is too early to tell?

Ilkay Gundogan is a player Manchester United should

certainly be looking at to boost their midfield options albeit with extreme caution.

### Miralem Pjanic (Roma)

Often used in the attacking 3<sup>rd</sup> of the pitch Pjanic is an attacking midfielder who made his way up through the French divisions, originally with Metz and then onto to Lyon where the Bosnian didn't enjoy the best of times due to inconsistent form and recurring foot injury.

However, it was still clear that Pjanic possesses extraordinary raw ability and thus earned himself a move to Roma in a risk that has paid off brilliantly partly down to the Bosnian's attitude on and off the field.

It is Pjanic's technical ability that is arguably his best attribute; ball control, precise passing and accurate dribbling have lead to a 3 year period consisting of 86 apps, 90% Pass accuracy, 8 goals, 21 assists and 196 chances created while also completing over half of his take-on runs at opposition players.

Training with Italian legend Totti has also developed the Bosnian's game further, from what was a very Michu style attacking midfielder at Metz he is now more comparable to Totti himself in the sheer elegance and finesse surrounding his play. Perhaps the space in Italy has given him an exaggeration of ability and skill however he also looked effective in the Champions League in games against Manchester City and

Bayern Munich where he created 7 chances in 6 games.

The biggest flaws in his game centre on his goal return and quite oddly his discipline. The Roma midfielder as only managed to score 17 goals in 126 appearances, a poor return for a player of his quality (although he is more comparable to Juan Mata than Frank Lampard in his play). Disappointingly his disciplinary record is unbelievably poor with 24 yellow cards and 2 red cards in the past 3 years. A record which would surely increase given the amplified pace in the Premier League.

He would be an ideal signing in a team where is sold responsibility is too attack. Manchester City and Chelsea would be the perfect fit for the Bosnian.

## 7.5 Attacking Midfielders

### Felipe Anderson (Lazio)

Felipe Anderson at 22 years of age is what Wayne Rooney was at 21, quick, powerful, direct and full of potential (completing over 60% of his runs). Perhaps more so than Rooney today one of Anderson's biggest attributes is his ability to play a well-timed pass splitting the opposition defence, shown with his season stats of 32 apps, 7 assists and 35 chances created.

Manchester United's biggest regret in Paul Pogba is known for hitting a shot from distance and finding the net, well Anderson does it on a far more regular basis and

challenges the goalkeeper more often than not (3 of his 10 goals this season came from 25 yards or more).

Currently Anderson will only really be effective given space, in this current Manchester United style and in the Premier League it is difficult to imagine that happening and as such his performances will suffer, at 22 he still has time to develop into a player capable of working plays in tighter situations however currently he is unable to do so and until he does would likely be ineffective in the Premier League.

Anderson needs 1 or 2 years to develop further before he can be pursued by a top club and perform in the Premier League. A move at this stage would be too early for him.

### Youri Tielemans (Anderlecht)

The issue with discussing somebody as young as Tielemans is that most of the discussion will be tied up around potential, an element of his game that quite simply doesn't exist, therefore this will focus on his current ability as much as possible with a short breakdown of his potential.

For most Tielemans came to the forefront for most general football fans in the UK in a UEFA Champions League game against Arsenal putting in a display which left almost everyone in awe of the fact he was 17 and playing like a little genius.

Much like Cristiano Ronaldo the boy has a serious confidence overload, in a recent interview he described himself as having the soul of a leader – A big thing to say at such a young age, but the confidence (and not arrogance) is inspiring to see in a young player in the modern era.

The Belgian midfielder possesses talent in abundance and although he is as quick as most he uses his footwork and skill to beat a player 1v1 instead of his pace.

His range of passing signal that of a player destined to fit in with the likes of Scholes, Iniesta, Xavi, Pirlo and Alonso – In fact like those players his ability to find a man in almost any situation is mind blowing. His versatility displays maturity and he has played as far forward as a striker and as deep as a defensive midfielder over the past 2 years for Anderlecht.

The young man has also developed a technique for accurate and challenging free kicks, driving them hard and low into the bottom corners and under the wall. Often causing the goalkeepers and opposing player's difficulty.

Decision-making is where the 17 year old lacks, as do many players. It is something that comes with experience and age in most cases. Often he will attempt to impress far too often and play a 40 yard Hollywood ball, when a simply 15 yard forward pass is all that is needed and at times is found wanting with his dribbling and although he often beats a man he will

keep going until he is dispossessed or until he has lost all of his possible passing angles.

The final issue with Youri is his lack of goal return, Anderlecht head coach believes his constant changes in position has not helped but he has no worries for the young playmaker in the future.

All in all, it's easy to buy into the hype surrounding Tielemans and in some aspects has traits very similar to that of Kevin De Bruyne.

At this current moment he is still 2 or 3 years away from a move to an elite club and ideally should focus on his game currently rather than making similar mistakes to Martin Odegaard – following the riches.

Sure to be a world class player in the future it's easy to see Tielemans emulating the likes of Eden Hazard, De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku as the next biggest Belgian star to break out from obscurity.

## 7.6 Strikers

### Carlos Bacca (Sevilla)

The 28 year old has been in sensational form for Sevilla this season helping them win yet another Europa League.

On the theme of the Europe league, Bacca scored 7 goals in 15 games and assisted a further 3 over the same period.

As a player Bacca is often compared to Luis Suarez, perhaps due the South American connection more than anything. His play does have similarities but he is nowhere near the ability of his fellow La Liga player.

Often playing in between the defenders and looking to sneak in on the last man Bacca has a habit of finding space where there is none, his work rate is also excellent as he often charges down the opposition defence when not in possession – hence the 68 fouls committed and 4 yellow cards over the course of the La Liga season. His relative strength and acceleration are also two attributes that give the Colombian comparisons to Luis Suarez, His finishing can be relatively average at times however this season he's buried the ball an impressive 20 times in La Liga (playing 37 games) all of those goals came inside the box – the furthest out being penalties. A fox in the box would be a good way to describe Bacca.

Last season Bacca also picked up at a good goal return, scoring 14 goals in 35 appearances with only 1 coming from outside of the box.

Unfortunately Bacca's weakest is Manchester United's strongest and that is passing. The forward is incapable of stringing a series of passes together and is far worse than Fellaini averaging 67% pass accuracy and only 287 forward passes throughout the season.

The players other major weakness comes in the form

of poor offensive awareness, Bacca struggles when playing against opposition defensive lines operating the offside trap and has been caught offside 37 times during the season.

Overall, Carlos Bacca is a good forward entering the form years of his career and is operating at an exceptionally high level at this point in his career.

He is not a player Manchester United should be targeting, he doesn't fit in very well with the playing style, although if Louis Van Gaal is looking for a player to stay within the box perhaps sticking with Javier Hernandez is a better option?

### Alexandre Lacazette (Lyon)

Lacazette is to put it simply, a player for the big occasions; Scoring the winner in the u19 European championship against Spain, assisting 2 goals on his UEFA Champions League debut in a 4-2 defeat and scored 2 goals in both semi-finals of France's domestic cup competitions.

At 24 years of age Lacazette is seen as a slight late bloomer with a versatile playing styles – depending on what is being asked of the young Frenchman he can either be a deadly finisher in the box, or play a role similar to that of Wayne Rooney.

He's the perfect striker for any system involving high pressing with his endless energy and intelligence he is able to close down the opposition defence far easier

using his sprint distance more effectively that almost every striker in Europe. Using his pace when an opposition player in his area of the field receives the ball, to which he then presses intensely.

As many have noticed, Lacazette is also a capable finisher having scored 42 goals in 65 appearances over the past 2 years. His excellence in finishing is something that's been highlighted extensively over the past 12 months and it's that ability along with his general ability to find the net from any range that is contributing towards his high goal return over the past 24 months. Capable with both feet, the right-footed Frenchman has netted 5 of his 42 goals with his left foot – although not mind blowing statistics it shows a capability to use his left foot when needed.

In terms of dribbling there are very few players offering a better site across Europe's top 5 leagues. Using his pace, skill, finesse and guile Lacazette has completed 66 take on runs in Ligue 1 last season.

At Lyon his understanding and link up play with his fellow team mates is a joy to watch, with constant 1-2 passes, hold up play and through balls making Alexandre one of the most exciting players to watch in all of world football.

Looking at his statistics over an extended period of time the French international's goal ratio looks patchy, however that is mainly due to

the fact that it is only over the past 2 years that the Frenchman has transitioned into an out and out lone striker as opposed to an attacking midfielder, or more often a winger (The right side to be specific).

The forward does suffer from weaknesses however and it is on his heading ability that he suffers his biggest weakness, standing at only 5'9, he understandably struggles to get the ball on his head although his jump reach suggests potential in his heading development can be had with the right team and coaches.

Despite his height Lacazette is very good and holding the ball up, emphasized by his body mass index of 23.8 (Benteke has a BMI of 23). It also means he has a greater chance of surviving the physical demands of the Premier League and that the risk, physically speaking would be minimal.

Ligue 1 possesses the quickest central defenders out of Europe's top 5 leagues, yet none of them are able to keep up with Lacazette and for a team which puts great emphasis on counter attacking play Lacazette would be the perfect striker.

Overall, Lacazette has very few areas of development and improvement, without a doubt the best striker in world football that doesn't play in Spain and would be a welcome addition to the Premier League.

For any side, including Manchester United he should

be signed regardless of the fee. The boy is a star and he is only going to get better as time goes on.

### Harry Kane (Spurs)

A one hit wonder or the start of a career comparable to that of Alan Shearer?

Harry Kane has been subject to intense scrutiny and criticism since he broke onto the scene destroying every Premier League defence during the 14/15 season.

The Spurs forward has all the ingredients to make him into the best striker this country has ever seen, exceptional in possession and an incredible work rate when not, Mr Kane is talented. Reminiscent of the old number 9 strikers and centre forwards, Kane has an element of bullishness to his play not seen since the days of Didier Drogba.

Everybody knows his statistics going forward (31 goals, 5 assists and 27 chances created) but what you wouldn't have seen from Harry Kane is his 23 clearances, 17 interceptions and 30 tackles in the Premier League – testament of his hard work and work rate.

The big question for football fans around the world is whether Kane can continue to find the net and according to Les Ferdinand “we worked a lot on his shooting” which would go some way to explaining his impressive shot accuracy of 58% - to put that into perspective Cristiano Ronaldo averages 54% shot accuracy and Lionel Messi averages 64%.

Perhaps his biggest strength lies in his positional intelligence and flexibility, able to play in the hole as a number 10 or up top as a number 9, Kane gave an incredible account of himself in the League cup final sitting out wide and looking to provide Roberto Soldado with a constant supply of crosses drop deeper wide areas.

The only weakness visible in Harry Kane's game is his lack of pace, however his work rate essentially makes up for that slight weakness and his pace is moderate enough for him to be successful, although not the slowest either and would in fact rival players like Wayne Rooney in a foot race.

Unfortunately, it remains to be seen whether Kane can adapt his lack of pace and develop his game to outwit opposition defenders, failure to do so will see him cancelled out of the game by most Premier League managers – although the same thing was said of Wayne Rooney.

To summarise Kane is a player with very little weakness to his game and a very real chance of success in the near future, his development is only going to continue and it's likely that his goal scoring form will also continue. Harry Kane is the break out forward of this generation, the forward we all expected Daniel Sturridge to be.

The rumoured fee of £40 Million seems steep, however if left back Luke Shaw is

worth £30 Million then the Kane price is justified.

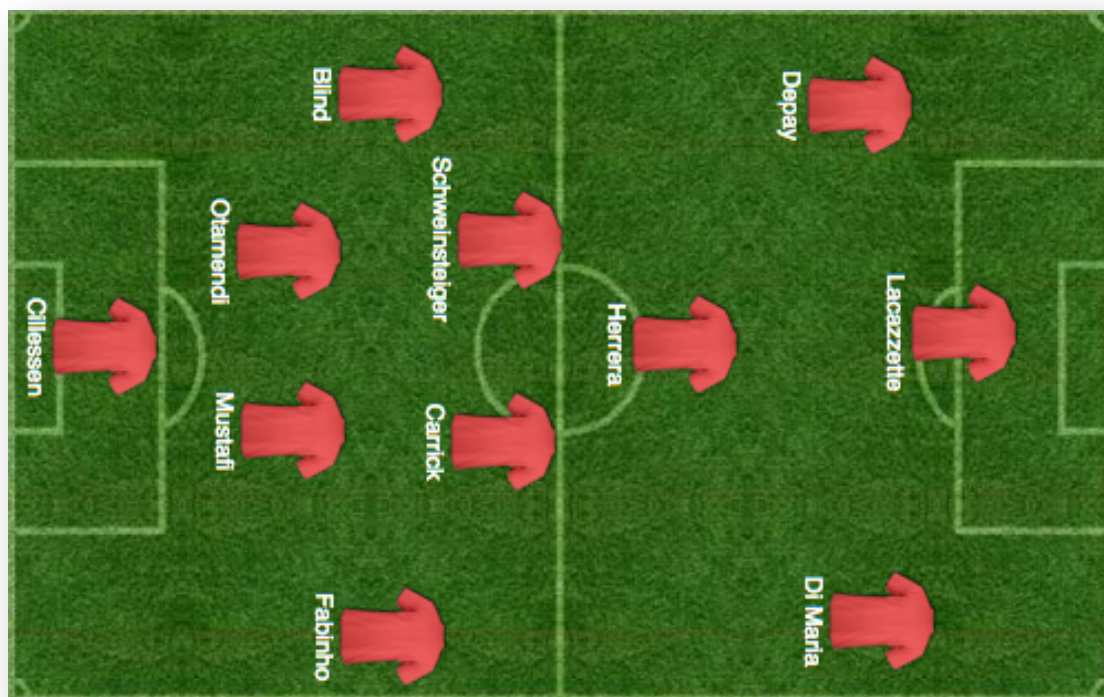
Any clubs looking to make a move for the 21 year old will of course need to consider the 10 years of service on reasonable wages that they will acquire and although the

price is steep it maybe what is needed to prize him away from Spurs and the hands of Daniel Levy.

A fee of up to £40 million would be reasonable for a player of his immense potential.

## 8.0 Authors recommended signings

If Manchester United were to enter the winter months of 2015 with the following signings and first XI, it would be ideal and perhaps, in my opinion be strong enough to guide the club to their first Premier League title of the post Ferguson era.



**Subs;** Valdes, Smalling, Valencia, Rooney, Mata, Kane, Shaw.

**Thank you for taking time out to read the Summer 2015 Manchester United Analysis. This report took over 2 months to compile and hours watching game footage of players from all around the world.**

**Feedback is always appreciated, and credit to the Football rumours websites and in particular the editors of the website who make reports like this possible with their constant providing of knowledge across the years.**