

BEAT THE PRESS WITH A BOX MIDFIELD

**Build Up Play
and Sessions
from Guardiola,
Alonso and
Arteta's Tactics**

Terzis Athanasios



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**Written by
Athanasios Terzis**



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MEET THE AUTHOR: ATHANASIOS TERZIS



- **Football Tactics Expert and Award Winning Author**
- **UEFA 'A' Coaching Licence**
- **Greek Football Federation Instructor (HFF)**
- **PAOK U23 Assistant Coach**
- **Analyst (Pundit) for Cosmote TV**
- **Former Coach of Professional Teams in Greece**
- **M.S.C. - Coaching and Conditioning**
- **Former Technical Director of DOXA Dramas Academy (Greek 2nd division)**
- **Former Professional Football Player**

Athanasios Terzis is a football tactics expert and instructor for many coaching seminars and workshops around the world. Athanasios has written many best selling football coaching books published by **SoccerTutor.com** in multiple languages (English, Spanish, German, Italian, Greek, Japanese, Korean and Chinese) including:

- **Pep Guardiola - Coaching High Pressing Tactics & Sessions Against Different Formations**
- **Marcelo Bielsa Attacking Tactics and Sessions**
- **Diego Simeone Attacking and Defending Tactics from Atlético Madrid's 4-4-2**
- **Pep Guardiola's Attacking Tactics - Tactical Analysis and Sessions from Manchester City's 4-3-3**
- **Creative Attacking Play - From the Tactics of Conte, Allegri, Simeone, Mourinho, Wenger & Klopp**
- **Marcelo Bielsa - Coaching Build Up Play Against High Pressing Teams**
- **Coaching the Juventus 3-5-2 - Tactical Analysis and Sessions: Attacking and Defending**
- **Jürgen Klopp's Attacking and Defending Tactics from Borussia Dortmund's 4-2-3-1**
- **FC Barcelona Training Sessions: 160 Practices from 34 Tactical Situations**
- **Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid - A Tactical Analysis: Attacking and Defending in the 4-2-3-1**
- **FC Barcelona - A Tactical Analysis: Attacking and Defending**



INTRODUCTION: BUILD UP FROM THE GOALKEEPER WITH A BOX MIDFIELD

In modern football, technical proficiency has reached new levels, allowing players to perform under intense time and space pressure. As a result, **more coaches are adopting build up play from the goalkeeper as a fundamental strategy.**

A **key development in this area is the box midfield**, which provides structural advantages in build up by creating **numerical superiorities in central areas.**

This book provides an in-depth analysis of build up tactics using the box midfield and its variations, with tactical insights drawn from these top coaches and teams:

- **Pep Guardiola** (Manchester City)
- **Xabi Alonso** (Bayer Leverkusen)
- **Mikel Arteta** (Arsenal)

The tactical analysis included focuses on how these teams:

- **Manipulate space and create passing options**
- **Progress the ball effectively through pressing structures**
- **Use the box midfield to generate numerical advantages in key areas**

The first two sections examine the key factors that affect build up play:

- **Essential player skills during build up play**
- **Opposition pressing tactics with different formations**

Examining the pressing strategies used by opponents helps to understand the challenges teams face in the build up

phase, and teaches your players how to defend/press when they are in that role during training, allowing the team to best prepare for the competitive matches. We explore the defensive principles used in pressing, focusing on:

- **Zonal defending**
- **Pressing with man marking**
- **Zonal defending and man marking (hybrid)**

Based on the type of pressing and defensive structure, specific tactical solutions can be applied to create a successful build up phase.

This book details how to:

- **Create numerical advantages in key areas of the pitch**
- **Exploit pressing triggers to progress the ball forward**
- **Break the first and second pressing lines**
- **Build up play against high pressing**
- **Build up play against zonal defending**
- **Build up play against man marking**

For a broader understanding of build up play tactics, a second volume will follow this book focusing on the 4-3-3 and 4-2-3-1 formations, featuring analysis taken from **Hansi Flick** (FC Barcelona), **Jürgen Klopp** (Liverpool), and **Unai Emery** (Aston Villa). Together, these two book volumes provide a complete tactical analysis of modern build up play across different structures.



COACHES STUDIED TO PRODUCE THE TACTICAL ANALYSIS FOR THIS BOOK



Pep Guardiola

Manchester City's 2022–23 Season:

- Pep's City team adopted a box midfield shape as part of their build up and attacking structure.
- The formation evolved into a 3-2-2-3, providing central overloads and fluid progression from the back.
- The box was created by a full back (e.g. Rico Lewis) shifting inside to join the defensive midfielder, or a centre back (e.g. John Stones) stepping into midfield.
- This approach became a defining feature of Pep Guardiola's positional play throughout the season.
- Manchester City won a historic treble of the Premier League, FA Cup, and UEFA Champions League.

Manchester City's 2023–24 Season:

- Manchester City continued to use the box midfield, maintaining a similar 3-2-2-3 structure.
- There was greater tactical variation depending on opposition and player availability.
- John Stones, Manuel Akanji, and Rico Lewis were used in hybrid roles to form or support the box shape.
- While other shapes were occasionally used, the box midfield remained a key part of their build up strategy.
- Manchester City won the Premier League again (fourth time in a row), the UEFA Super Cup, and the FIFA Club World Cup.

Impact of the Box Midfield:

- The use of the box midfield was central to Manchester City's success, providing control, flexibility, and dominance in key areas of the pitch.





Xabi Alonso

- **Bayer Leverkusen's 2022–23 Season:**

Xabi Alonso took over as manager in October 2022 and quickly transformed the team, guiding them from 17th to a 6th-place finish using the 3-4-3 formation.

- **Bayer Leverkusen's 2023–24 Season:**

Alonso introduced a 3-4-2-1 formation with a box midfield. The build up became a lopsided 2-4-2-2, creating strong and weak sides based on ball position. This allowed Bayer to dominate central areas and build up play from the goalkeeper effectively.

- **Impact of the Box Midfield:**

The box midfield has been key for Leverkusen's control, progression, and compact transitions. They went unbeaten in the Bundesliga to win their first-ever league title, won the DFB-Pokal (German Cup) and reached the UEFA Europa League final.



Mikel Arteta

- **Arsenal's 2022–23 Season:**

Influenced by his time as an assistant at Manchester City, Arteta used a box midfield with a 3-2-2-3 shape. Zinchenko moved inside alongside the defensive midfielder, allowing Xhaka to push higher. This structure improved Arsenal's control and build up play.

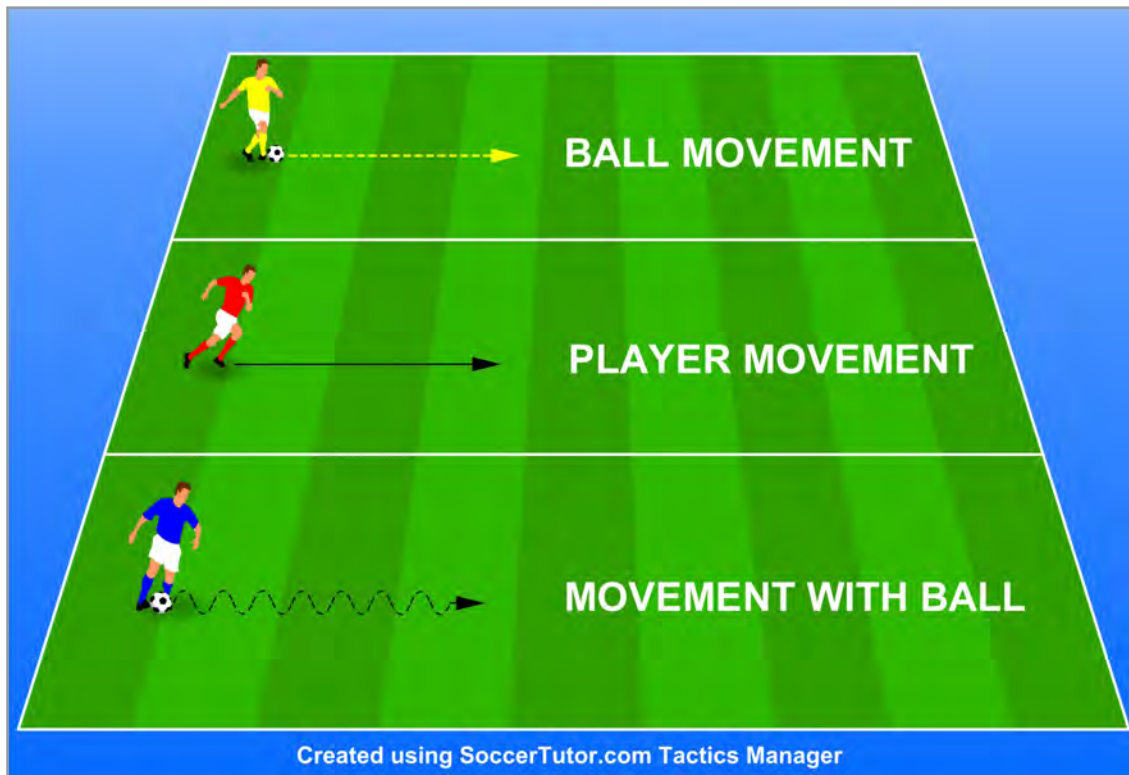
- **Arsenal's 2023–24 Season:**

The box midfield remained, now formed by a left winger (Martinelli or Trossard) shifting inside to support Ødegaard. It continued to provide central overloads and attacking fluidity.

- **Impact of the Box Midfield:**

The box midfield was fundamental to Arsenal's build up play and positional dominance. They finished 2nd in the Premier League in both seasons, which was a big improvement in performance.

DIAGRAM KEY & COACHING FORMAT



TACTICAL ANALYSIS

- All of the analysis in this book is based on recurring patterns of play observed within **Pep Guardiola's Manchester City**, **Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen**, and **Mikel Arteta's Arsenal** teams. Once the same phase of play is observed multiple times across many matches, the tactics are seen as a pattern.
- Each action, pass, movement (on or off the ball), and positioning of each player on the pitch, including body shape, is presented with a full description.

TRAINING SESSIONS BASED ON THE TACTICS

- Technical, Functional and Tactical Practices
- Functional Games / Conditioned Games
- Name/Objective, Full Description, Rules/Conditions, Restrictions, Variations, Progressions, and Coaching Points (if applicable)

BOX MIDFIELD BUILD UP

Tactical Analysis

Break Lines vs High Press Zonal Defending

Build up play
patterns from
Guardiola,
Alonso, and
Arteta's teams



Box Midfield Build Up Play Principles and Objectives

Build Up Play from the Back

Build up play refers to progressing the ball from the defensive third against organised pressing. This book focuses on build up starting from the goalkeeper, typically against a high defensive block.

Different types of defending tactics influence how teams build up play, as do defensive formations which shift based on pressing intensity, requiring teams to adapt accordingly.

Please see the earlier section in the book for full details (***Build Up Play Factors: Essential Skills and Opposition Pressing Tactics***).

Principles of Build Up Play

Effective build up play relies on key principles to ensure controlled progression and attacking fluidity:

- **Numerical Superiority:** Creating overloads in key areas to maintain possession and break through pressing.
- **Effective Positioning:** Players must position themselves between opposition lines to create passing lanes.
- **Decision Making and Awareness:** Recognising space, anticipating defensive movements, and executing quick passing decisions.
- **Ball Circulation and Patience:** Moving the ball efficiently to wait for the right moment to penetrate defensive lines.
- **Support and Movement:** Off-the-ball adjustments to maintain passing options and avoid being isolated.

Objectives of Build Up Play

Main Objective: Break defensive lines, advance play, and create goal scoring opportunities.

To achieve this, teams must:

- **Beat the Press:** Find free players or use link players to progress play through or around pressing lines.
- **Exploit Space:** Use intelligent positioning and quick ball movement to take advantage of defensive gaps.
- **Ensure Defensive Stability:** Maintain balance at the back to best prepare for potential counter attacks.
- **Transition Efficiently:** Once past the first or second defensive lines, capitalise on attacking opportunities.

Note: By applying these principles, teams using a box midfield can successfully play through high pressing opponents, ensuring control and structured progression.

Options for Breaking the First and Second Pressing Lines (3 at Back)

1. Effective Positioning with 3-at-the-Back Box Midfield



With the 3-at-the-back box midfield, 4 of the 6 spaces between the opposition's lines are occupied.

See page 30 for full details of how this build up shape is formed from the 4-2-3-1 formation (it can also be from 3-4-2-1).

To break as many lines as possible, the **goalkeeper (GK)** must play accurate passes, which **relies on effective positioning from the 4 midfielders**.

The longer and more precise the pass, the more defensive lines are bypassed, which neutralises more opponents. Unlike with 2-at-the-back, the 3-at-the-back shape has **GK between the 2 red forwards (Nº9 and Nº10)**, allowing him to move forward with the ball and reduce the passing distance to the target players. This increases the likelihood of an accurate forward pass, making it easier to progress play while maintaining control.

2a. Playing Out from Goalkeeper Through the Centre and Create Free Players Behind the Second Pressing Line



If the ball is played behind the first pressing line to a **defensive midfielder (Nº6 or Nº8)** and they can turn, the next aim is to break the second line. To do this, the attacking team has to create free players behind the second pressing line. The **players should position themselves in a way that forces defenders to make difficult choices.**

With the **blue winger (Nº11)** positioned centrally as an attacking midfielder in the box midfield build up shape, the red right back (Nº2) may choose to move forward and mark him. This can be exploited by pushing the **left back (Nº3)** forward into the space left behind.

The blue **defensive midfielder (Nº8)** shifts across to provide defensive cover in case possession is lost.

This setup normally results in the opposing defenders choosing to stay back and cover the threat of the blue attacking players (Nº9, Nº7 and Nº3). Most often, the result is that both players in the attacking midfield positions at the top of the box (Nº10 and Nº11) are left free of marking between the lines.

The diagrams to follow will show how to move the ball to these 2 target players.

2b. Moving the Ball to the Attacking Midfielders (Target Players) Behind the Second Pressing Line



Once a player receives unmarked behind the first pressing line (**Nº6** in diagram) and free players are positioned behind the second line (**Nº11** and **Nº10**), the next step is to create more passing options for the player in possession.

The **players behind the second line move into different passing lanes to create at least 2 passing options for the ball carrier**, ideally in a triangle shape.

As red Nº6 presses the ball, the **forward (Nº9)** and **attacking midfielders (Nº11 and Nº10)** position themselves to form 2 triangles (1 diamond shape).

Although red Nº6 blocks the direct pass to **blue Nº11**, the ball can still reach the **other target player (Nº10)** directly (yellow arrow) or either target player via the **link player (Nº9 - blue arrows)**.

After **Nº11** or **Nº10** receive in space behind the second pressing line, the next action is to pass in behind the defensive line for a run of an attacker.



Drawing Press with a Pass and Exploit Gaps Created (3 at Back)

1. Draw Pressure from Midfielder to Create Space Behind Second Pressing Line for Right Attacking Midfielder to Receive



With 3-at-the-back, the **goalkeeper (GK)** is positioned between 2 pressing forwards and can play through the first line easier. As the potential receiver usually has their back to goal, the **through pass typically draws pressure**. This can be on purpose and is guided with these principles:

- A. Quick read of the situation and where the available space is.
- B. Move the ball into this space as quickly as possible.

GK plays a through pass to N°8. As red N°8 moves to press, space opens up behind for blue N°10 to receive behind.

Option 1 (Yellow Arrows): N°8 passes back to GK, then to centre back (N°4), who finds N°10 before the opposition shifts.

Option 2 (Blue Arrows): A quicker but riskier option is for N°8 to pass to N°6, who then finds N°10.

2. Draw Pressure from Midfielder to Create Space Behind Second Pressing Line for Left Attacking Midfielder to Receive



In this variation of the previous example, the **goalkeeper (GK)** passes to the **left defensive midfielder (N°8)** and the **opposing red central midfielder (N°6)** presses. **Space opens up for the left attacking midfielder (N°11 - target player)** to receive in between the lines.

This can be done in 2 ways.

Option 1 (Yellow Arrows): N°8 passes back to **GK**, then to **centre back (N°5)**, who dribbles forward and passes to **N°11**.

Option 2 (Blue Arrows): A quicker but riskier option is for **N°8** to pass to **N°6**, who moves forward and passes to **N°11**.

Note: Quick decision making and timing are vital to take advantage of the space before the red defending players recover for both options. In this example, the ball must move at speed to exploit the opening created by red N°6's pressing.

Drawing Pressure with Centre Back Dribbling Forward (3 at Back)

1. Opposing Forwards Narrow the Central Passing Lanes which Creates Space for the Centre Backs to Receive and Dribble Forward



When the **goalkeeper (GK)** carries the ball forward between 2 red forwards, they instinctively shift inward to close the central passing lanes.

This movement pulls them away from their original positions and increases the space available for the 2 blue centre backs (Nº4 and Nº5) to receive. As the first pressing line collapses centrally, passing lanes to both centre backs open up.

The **full backs (Nº3 and Nº2)** push forward and create triangle shapes.

If a wide passing lane opens up to the attacking midfielders (Nº11 or Nº10), a direct pass can break 2 lines and neutralise 6 red players. If the red wingers (Nº7 and Nº11) shift inside to block the passing lanes, the ball can instead be played to the **full backs (Nº3 or Nº2)**, who will have time and space to progress play forward.

BOX MIDFIELD SESSION

Training Session 1 (4 Practices)

Break Lines vs High Press Zonal Defending

Based on
Guardiola,
Alonso, and
Arteta build up
patterns



TRAINING SESSION (4 PRACTICES)

1. Passing Decisions to Break Lines Depending on Opposition Pressing

Variation 1: Midfield Decision Making Based on Opponent's Pressing



Practice Description (Variation 1)

- **Objective:** Decision making for whether to turn or pass back (to exploit space).
- The mannequins mark the first and third pressing lines and the red player is in the second line.
- **Left Side:** GK passes to LDM, who must assess the red player's reaction. If pressed, LDM passes to RDM and the ball is quickly played to AM behind the red player.
- **AM** turns and plays a one-two with F around the mannequin before passing to the other group.
- **Right Side:** If not pressed, LDM turns. The ball is either played to AM directly or via the link player F (blue arrows). F then runs in between the mannequins to receive AM's through pass and pass to the other group.
- **Player Rotations:** GK → LDM → RDM → AM → F → GK (Other Group).

PROGRESSION

2. Moving the Ball Beyond the Lines Based on Defender Reactions 7 (+GK) v 2 Functional Practice

Variation 1: Receive + Turn When Not Pressed (3-at-Back-Box Midfield)



Practice Description (Variation 1)

- The blues have the goalkeeper, 2 centre backs, the box midfielder, and the forward.
- The reds have 2 central midfielders and the mannequins form the rest of the defensive formation.
- **GK** starts and circulates the ball with the **centre backs (Nº5 and Nº4)** before passing to a **defensive midfielder (Nº6 in diagram)** behind the first pressing line, who must scan before receiving.
- If the nearest **red midfielder (Nº6)** holds their position (**Variation 1**), **blue Nº6 receives on the half-turn** and passes forward.
- Nearby teammates quickly offer passing options to progress the attack, ideally forming a triangle or diamond shape.
- In this example, the **forward (Nº9)** plays a give-and-go with the **attacking midfielder (Nº10)** to receive in behind the defensive line and score.

Variation 2: Exploit Space Behind Press (3-at-Back-Box Midfield)



Practice Description (Variation 2)

- In **Variation 2**, the red midfielder presses blue N°6 as soon as the goalkeeper plays the pass. This means turning is not a good option as in Variation 1.
- N°6 must make a **quick decision whether to pass to the other defensive midfielder (N°8), back to the GK, or possibly back to a centre back.**
- Quick ball circulation is used to **exploit the space behind red N°6 and move the ball to the blue attacking midfielder (N°10)** behind the second pressing line. **Option 1** (yellow arrows) uses N°8 as the link player. **Option 2** uses N°4 as the link player.

- N°10 plays in behind for the **forward (N°9)** to score.
- Note: Adapt for a 2-at-the-back box midfield** by positioning the GK wider and N°5 more central.

Coaching Points

1. **Recognise pressing early** and decide quickly whether to turn or pass.
2. **Communicate clearly** using prompts like "turn" or "pass."
3. **Move the ball quickly** to exploit space behind the press.
4. **Use sharp combinations** to break through pressing lines.

PROGRESSION

4. Break Lines Through Turning, Recycling the Ball, or Dribbling Forward 3 Zone Conditioned Game



Practice Description

- This final progression of this session is a conditioned 11v11 game in 3/4 of a full pitch. The yellow zone represents space between the lines but has no restrictions.
- Blue Objective:** Focus on decision making when receiving under pressure to **find an attacking midfielder (Nº11 or Nº10) behind the second pressing line**, then progress beyond the third line to score. Also, awareness is needed if the goalkeeper dribbles forward and creates space for the centre backs to receive.
- Players must **read the reds' defensive actions** and decide to turn, recycle the ball, or dribble forward into space.
- Red Objective:** The red team **press high immediately after the GK's first pass**. If they win the ball, they counter to try and score within 12 seconds.
- Note:** This can be adapted from a 3-at-the-back to a 2-at-the-back box midfield build up play practice by positioning the **GK wider and centre back (Nº5) more centrally**. However, the **GK** will lose the option to dribble the ball forward.