

Technical area

WHY THE LONG BALL IS BACK

Purists love the short pass, but Alison Ratcliffe says the best sides know how to **MIX IT UP** in the UEFA Champions League

The long ball has an image problem. Stereotyped as the last resort of the hooper, it can nonetheless represent, as Marcello Lippi liked to point out, the most constructive pass a player can make. Real Madrid CF gave an object lesson in intelligent long passing in the first leg of their round of 16 clash against Manchester United FC last season. The Merengues fed plenty of direct balls from deep to Cristiano Ronaldo's side of the pitch and, as if drawn to a magnetic pole, the United defence drifted that way. Sensing a chance to stretch his opponents, Xabi Alonso began to swing pass after long diagonal pass from inside left to where the action wasn't: the right flank.

Alonso isn't the only player who has proved the enduring value of the laser-guided delivery. On average, 15.5% of passes played by the 16 sides who reached the knockout stage in last season's UEFA Champions League were long balls. That figure probably understates the impact of these

passes. The preponderance of short passes may reflect a lot of safety-first passing between defenders and goalkeepers. In this campaign, many sides can call on at least one specialist long passer: Juventus have Andrea Pirlo, Xavi Hernández pulls the strings at FC Barcelona and many Borussia Dortmund attacks start with centre-back Mats Hummels.

At Manchester United, the role is filled by Michael Carrick, who believes that players need to be sure this is the right pass to play. "If it's been end-to-end and the game's really stretched, the long ball's not really right, because if it gets cut out they're attacking you again," he told FourFourTwo. "That might be the time to slow the game down with a five-yard pass. Other times you get the ball in midfield and the game is stretched and a pass that is quite obvious and you'll try it. It's one of those risk/reward things, getting the balance right."

The diagonal switch to a winger is one way to skin a defence, especially one that is tired or out

of position. Repeated switching is also a good way to knock opponents out of shape, as FC Bayern München showed against Manchester City FC on matchday two. With the right curve, a pass can eliminate a marker by curling in front of defenders and into a striker's path.

SWITCHING PLAY

The classic long ball over the top can undo a backline. For Bayern it worked like a charm in the final at Wembley: Arjen Robben's late winner resulted from the 40m free-kick Jérôme Boateng dropped over Dortmund's defence, who invited the long delivery by maintaining their high line even though they were tired after vigorous first-half pressing.

Though Barcelona are renowned for their tiki-taka, they are not averse to using the long ball to mix things up. "If we're being pressed, hitting a few long balls isn't negative," Gerard Piqué has said. "It gives us oxygen, gives us an out-ball and forces the opponents to adjust."

Fans concerned by Barça's new approach should note that no outfield player made more long passes in last season's UEFA Champions League than Xavi. Being Xavi, he hit them with an astonishing 91% accuracy, but Javier Mascherano and, to a lesser extent, Sergio Busquets and Piqué also used the long ball. For the Blaugrana – especially Mascherano – the long pass is often what you use to get the ball to the rampaging Daniel Alves when he has plenty of space in front of him.

Bayern's use of long passes also focuses on the flanks. Instead of spreading balls wide from the centre, the Roten like to switch the ball from side to side, maximising the threat of Robben and Franck Ribéry and their ability to cause mayhem as they run in from the flanks.

Josep Guardiola has developed this passing style. The Manchester City game was typical: long, horizontal switches played in all sections of the pitch, creating patterns of passing reminiscent of seismographs. Yet the Roten can change tack when it suits: in last season's semi-final, Bayern used long, vertical passes to find gaps in Barça's defence.

PIRLO'S PEARLS

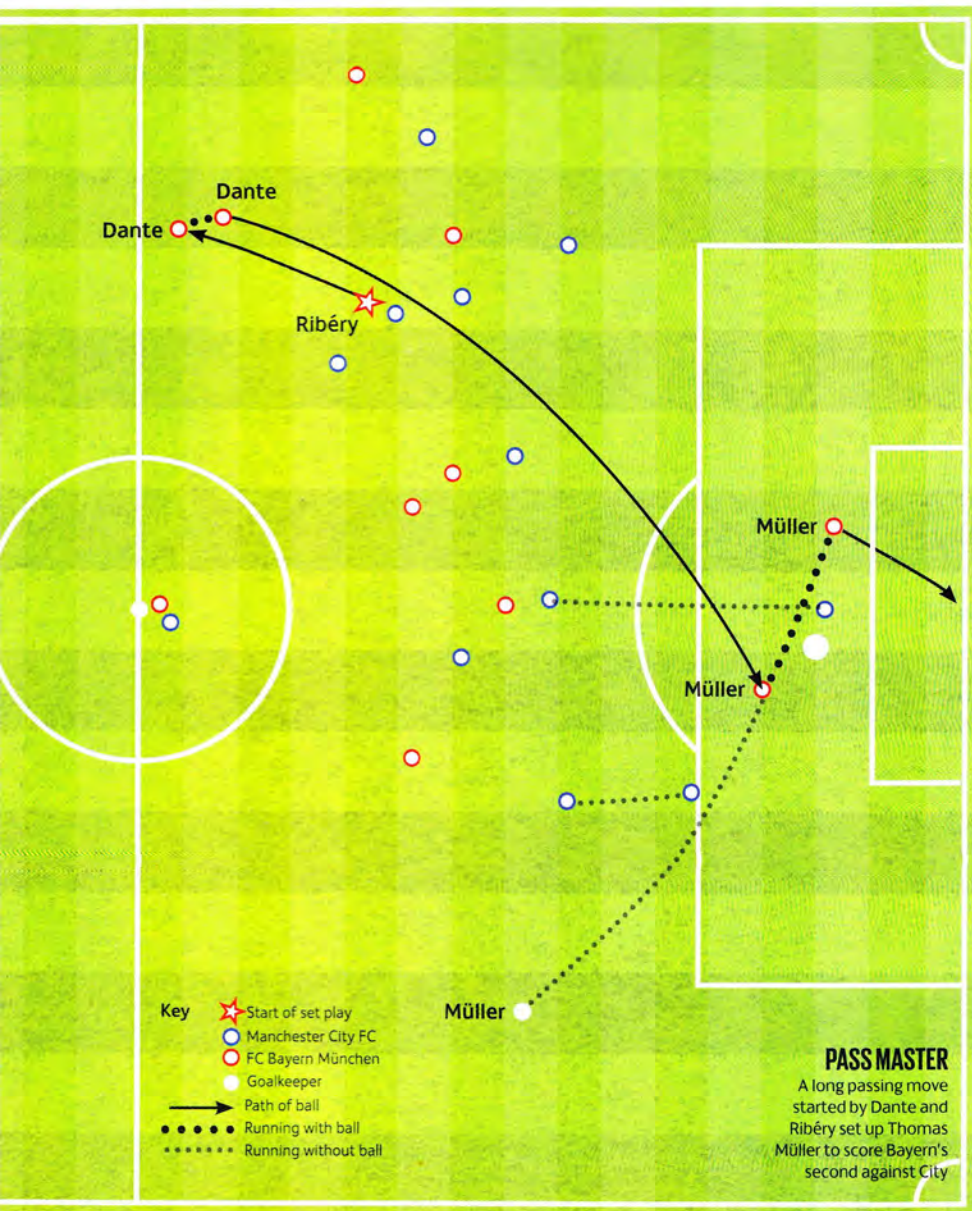
Long passes have other uses apart from creating width. Juventus' 3-5-2 features that modern rarity, the strike partnership. Andrea Pirlo's long passes can be played wide but they also fountain out from the centre circle to the front two as they work the channels.

Formations featuring a central trio have encouraged the rise of the 'quarterback' with range in his boots. Last season, Juve tended to field Claudio Marchisio and Arturo Vidal, who could create the space for Pirlo to dig out his long-range pearls. After the playmaker – then at AC Milan – was harried out of his stride by Liverpool FC's Steven Gerrard in the 2005 UEFA Champions League final, Carlo Ancelotti

LONG RANGER

Xavi hit the most long passes of any outfield player last season





BEND IT LIKE...

...these five undisputed masters of the raking long pass

David Beckham

"Beckham puts the goal on a plate from 40m," marvelled AS in its preview of the No23's first Clásico back in December 2003. The England midfielder specialised in the long-range assist – one particular favourite, against Real Valladolid CF, landed perfectly on Zinedine Zidane's left foot. Beckham was so expert at free-kicks and crosses, his precision passing has been a tad underrated.

Ronald Koeman

In adjusting FC Barcelona's style this season, coach Gerardo Martino reminded reporters that the long diagonal pass was "in Barça's DNA" thanks to Koeman, who lofted the ball with consummate style to Hristo Stoichkov and Txiki Begiristain in Johan Cruyff's 1990s dream team. Expert Dutch long-passers abound, but as Koeman himself once said: "Not too many defenders could pick out their attacking players with the type of long passes that I loved hitting."

Günter Netzer

In Germany in the 1960s, pundits often said Netzer "came out of the depths of space", as many of his remarkable telescopic passes seemed to do. The VfL Borussia Mönchengladbach playmaker's artistry – and his rock-star image – symbolised a new era for German football. He could hit passes other players couldn't even see. His career provided a fascinating counterpoint to FC Bayern München idol Franz Beckenbauer. The Kaiser wasn't shy of playing the odd superb outside-of-the-boot long pass himself.



Michel Platini

"Without equal in the art of the long pass, administered with diabolical accuracy, Platini as a strategist and playmaker constitutes a tactical system in his own right," wrote France Football in 1984 on handing the midfielder his second Ballon d'Or. The graceful Platini often loitered deep, despatching devastating 40m passes like the two that set up Zbigniew Boniek and Massimo Briaschi to score in Juventus' 1985 semi-final win over FC Girondins de Bordeaux. Just for good measure, Platini scored the third himself. French striker Jean-Pierre Papin once said: "Over 40 or 50m, he served up caviar."

Gianni Rivera

"His long passes were remote-controlled. They were so precise that you had to move your head to avoid being hit on the nape of the neck," said team-mate Kurt Hamrin of AC Milan's illustrious No10. The emissary of attacking football in an era defined by catenaccio, Rivera starred in the 1963 European Champions Clubs' Cup final, setting up José Altafini's counterattacking winner with a perfectly delivered long pass.

protected him with Massimo Ambrosini and Gennaro Gattuso in a 4-3-2-1 when the two clubs met again in the 2007 showpiece and the Rossoneri triumphed. The 4-2-3-1 now in vogue across Europe works similarly: three central berths allow for physical commitment, intelligent passing and creative flair.

EFFICIENT BEAUTY

The return of pressing high up the pitch has driven the playmaker ever deeper and forced him to hit longer passes. Yet teams that set out to frustrate the deep-lying creator can leave themselves vulnerable to technically adept, long-passing defenders. Dortmund's long-ball-driven, fast-transitioning counterattacks are often sparked by Hummels.

His priority is to switch the ball from defence to attack as swiftly as possible. That's why Hummels will often try to win the ball in one-on-ones rather than just force an attacker to pass back. Once he has the ball, it is up to him

to decide whether to run with it or risk a long pass. Without the right front man, his elegant passes would merely be a quick way of losing the ball. Yet Hummels knows he can usually rely on Robert Lewandowski, who is as adept at playing with his back to goal, trapping and defending such long balls as another master of the art, Didier Drogba.

Precise long passing – rather than aimless punting – has an efficient beauty that harks back to the golden age of total football in the 1970s. In his classic book on Dutch football, Brilliant Orange, David Winner recalls how the sculptor and football thinker Jeroen Henneman was disappointed by a visit to Brazil. The close-control skills lauded by locals didn't impress Henneman who found them claustrophobic. "I expected to see a very 'roomy' football," he said. "With the Dutch, the beauty is on the pitch... but also in the air above it, where balls can curl and curve and drop and move like the planets in heaven."