

## Technical area

# Blessed are the playmakers

Football formations keep evolving but **CREATIVITY** remains the game's lifeblood – these days it can be found all over the pitch

Many funerals have been held for the playmaker, the messianic No10 creating miracles behind two strikers. In truth, he has been football's creator-in-chief only in certain eras. Inside-forwards had their day in the 19th century and *liberos* pulled the strings in the 1970s. Those mourning the No10's recent demise should dry their eyes, because the playmaker is being resurrected all over the pitch.

The redistribution of playmaking duties over the past decade has been driven by the inexorable rise of the midfielder holder-enforcer. Many No10s have been banished from the hole behind the strikers but creativity is not under threat – it is just being shared more widely around a team than ever before.

Many teams favouring 4-2-3-1 now field two playmakers – an attacking midfielder and one of the two holding midfielders. Some of the most successful sides boast three, with an all-seeing, all-passing central defender making play from deep. There's even evidence that a fourth could be emerging, from the unlikely position of goalkeeper, but more of that later. Here's how the playmaking duties are now shared out.

### 1) THE TRADITIONAL No10

In Mesut Özil, Real Madrid CF have almost the archetypal No10. The Italians often call these

players *trequartistas* (because they traditionally played three-quarters of the way up the pitch) or *registas* (directors) a term applied to Juventus legends, Michel Platini and Roberto Baggio.

Özil's youth coach, Ralf Maraun, has described him as a "classic street player – timid and small but incredibly talented". Stories abound about the "monkey cage" – the rough, wire-fenced pitch where he learned to play, just like the dirt pitches that shaped so many South American geniuses. His Madrid team-mate Xabi Alonso has nodded to the romantic tradition of the Maradona-style No10 by calling Özil "the kind of player you don't find these days".

In the UEFA Champions League, Özil plays behind the striker. Heat maps show that he focuses his positioning and passing in the centre but, such is his desire to find space, he swaps positions with Cristiano Ronaldo and Ángel Di María to receive the ball on the flanks. Özil is the closest the modern game has to the classic *trequartista*, though Mario Götze (Borussia Dortmund) and Toni Kroos (FC Bayern München) resemble him.

Against teams that push upfield and defend aggressively – such as Dortmund, Madrid, FC Barcelona – players such as Özil, Götze and Kroos operate in such tight spaces that they don't



### STRIKERS NOW HAVE TO MAN-MARK TO RESTRICT A NEW BREED OF ATTACKING CENTRE-BACK

have room to emulate the Platini-like playmaker of old, making long runs through midfield. Creativity, therefore, has to come from deeper ...

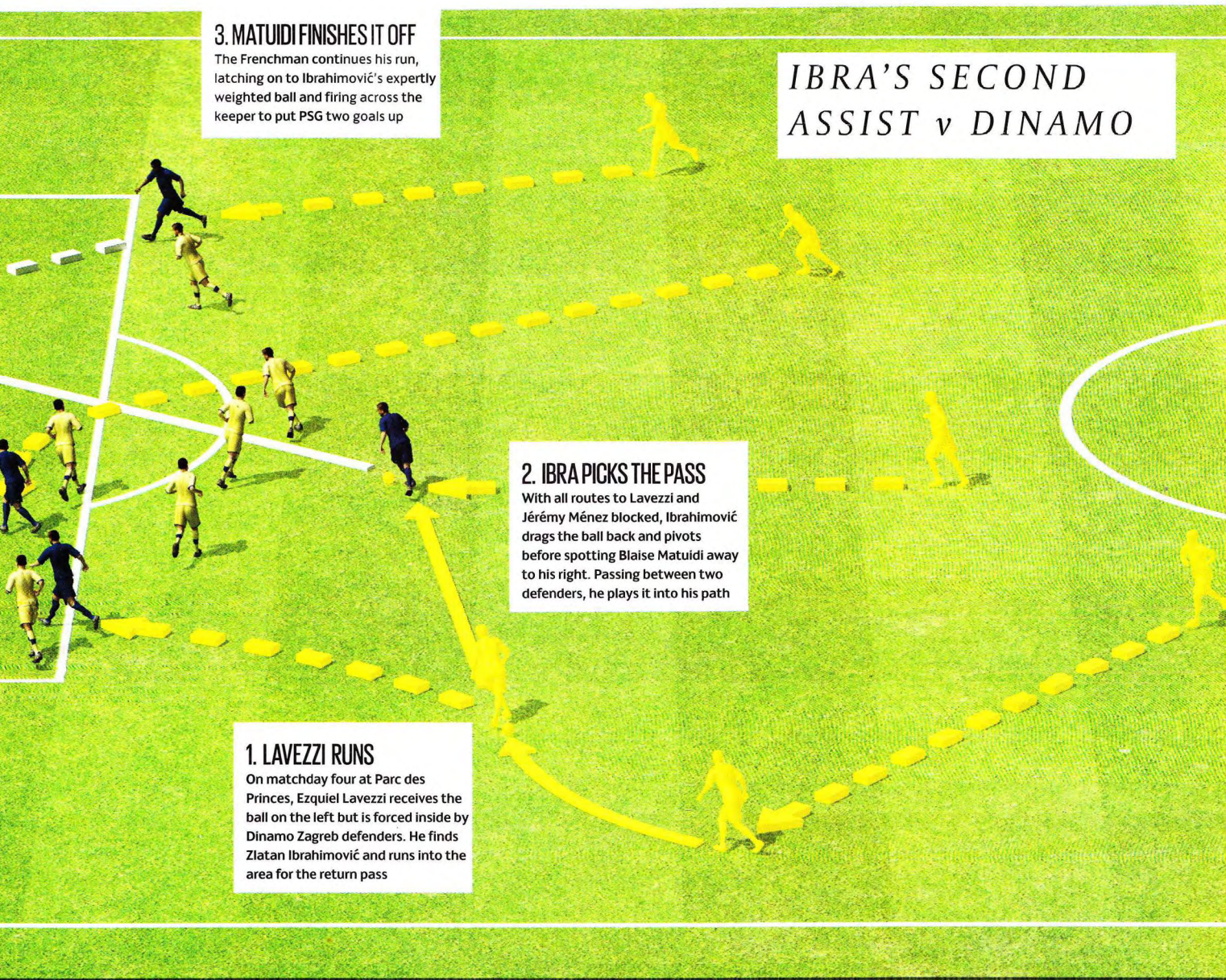
### 2) THE SITTING PLAYMAKER

The most famous deep-lying string-puller in the game today Andrea Pirlo has proved the

enduring relevance of a role perfected by Josep Guardiola at Barcelona in the 1990s. One of the reasons Pirlo stopped playing as *trequartista* at Brescia Calcio in 2001, was that Baggio had filled that position.

The sitting playmaker's main job is to get the ball to the attackers, preferably the other playmaker further forward in the team. Today this role is most often carried out by a screening midfielder, such as Alonso (Madrid), Bastian Schweinsteiger (Bayern), Michael Carrick (Manchester United FC) or İlkay Gündoğan (Dortmund).

Jürgen Klopp revealed, after his Dortmund side beat Madrid



### 3. MATUIDI FINISHES IT OFF

The Frenchman continues his run, latching on to Ibrahimović's expertly weighted ball and firing across the keeper to put PSG two goals up

## IBRA'S SECOND ASSIST v DINAMO

### 2. IBRA PICKS THE PASS

With all routes to Lavezzi and Jérémy Ménez blocked, Ibrahimović drags the ball back and pivots before spotting Blaise Matuidi away to his right. Passing between two defenders, he plays it into his path

### 1. LAVEZZI RUNS

On matchday four at Parc des Princes, Ezquiel Lavezzi receives the ball on the left but is forced inside by Dinamo Zagreb defenders. He finds Zlatan Ibrahimović and runs into the area for the return pass

at home in the group stage, that he feared Alonso more than Özil. "The build-up concentrates on Alonso. We did quite well in putting pressure on him so he couldn't express himself. In the end, Pepe was playing the long passes, and he's markedly worse at that than Alonso."

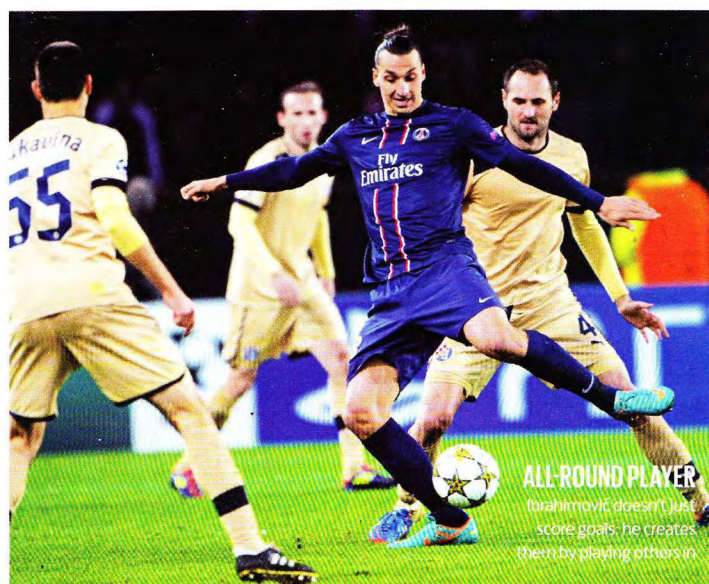
Statistical chalkboards of Madrid's UEFA Champions League matches invariably highlight Alonso as the most influential player, frequently by an astonishing distance, operating from his centre-circle base (or a little further forward against lesser opposition). Even during Özil's assist-laden 2011/12 campaign, Alonso played around

twice as many passes in those UEFA Champions League games when the German played 90 minutes, or close to it. They were not holding midfielder-type lay-offs, but mid to long-range, accurate, play-prodding balls.

### 3) THE PLAYMAKING CENTRE-BACK

Traditionally central defenders marked centre-forwards, yet strikers are now being asked to man-mark too, to restrict the attacking influence of a new breed of centre-back.

Robin Dutt pioneered this tactic, when he coached Bayer 04 Leverkusen. After deciding that Mats Hummels was Dortmund's



**ALL-ROUND PLAYER**  
Ibrahimović doesn't just score goals, he creates them by playing others in

## FORWARD THINKING

The attackers with the most assists over the past five seasons

Zlatan Ibrahimović	18
Samuel Eto'o	18
Lionel Messi	17
Thierry Henry	15
Wayne Rooney	12
Sidney Govou	11
Karim Benzema	11
Ronaldinho	11
Didier Drogba	9
Juan Mata	9
Andriy Shevchenko	9

true playmaker, Dutt ordered his striker to close him down at every opportunity.

The centre-back has been a key figure in this UEFA Champions League campaign as Dortmund have reined in their natural possession-based, counter-pressing game and – because of the sheer quality of the opposition – been forced to counterattack.

In these games Hummels, who is not averse to dribbling forward and taking on an opponent, has been essentially a backline archer. He sits primed in the high defensive line to flight balls over opposition defences, spring offside traps, or loft them to the opposite flank, exploiting space for a winger to run into. Often advancing into Pirlo terrain around the centre circle, he's also partial to long-range daisycutters and slide-rule passes that bisect the midfield. While much of his play is route one, these are not aimless punts but long-range flashes of vision.

The master of the position is undoubtedly Gerard Piqué, the artist semi-formally known as Piquenbauer. In 2011/12, as Piqué experienced a fractured season and Barcelona became several shades less vivid, it was clear how much play he had been making during the Blaugrana's Liga and UEFA Champions League-winning campaign of



## THE MOST FAMOUS DEEP-LYING STRING PULLER TODAY IS PIRLO. THE SITTING PLAYMAKER'S JOB IS TO GET THE BALL TO THE ATTACKERS, PREFERABLY THE OTHER PLAYMAKER FURTHER FORWARD

2010/11. "He had a perfect season," said Tito Vilanova – then assistant to Guardiola – in the summer of 2011. "There was a point when we were praying Piqué wouldn't be ruled out. If he got injured, our invention would fall away. We exposed him to a terrible amount of fatigue."

Piqué was integral to Barça's tiki-taka that season. His passing tallies surpassed the 100 mark on several occasions, and his passing accuracy fell below 90% in only two of his 11 UEFA Champions League appearances. These were not just central defensive taps to the full-back or holding midfielder, but a spray of balls often originating from or beyond the halfway line, usually with a right-sided bias as Piqué simultaneously covered

for Daniel Alves's forays forward. When not tiki-taka-ing, Piqué was switching play to the other flank or delivering long diagonal balls into the final third.

In Barça's 5-1 defeat of FC Shakhtar Donetsk in the 2010/11 quarter-final, Piqué helped unravel the Ukrainian side's first line of pressing. In the Blaugrana's 2-0 semi-final first-leg win at Real Madrid, he, Sergio Busquets and Xavi Hernández were the brain of the team. Operating a little deeper than usual, Piqué completed 90 passes with a 96% success rate.

### 4) THE POACHER TURNED PLAYMAKER

The 4-2-3-1 formation demands a different kind of striker, a more all-round player who can bring

others into the game. It's no surprise that five of the top ten assist-providers in this season's competition are strikers: Zlatan Ibrahimović, Olivier Giroud, Modou Sougou, Wayne Rooney and Karim Benzema. If we call Lionel Messi a striker then it's six.

Those who know how to score, as Messi and Ibra are proving in this season's competition, know how to play others in. Alfredo di Stéfano and Ferenc Puskás made this point emphatically – and gloriously – in the 1960 final.

The Hungarian scored four and made another for Di Stéfano, who scored a hat-trick and dominated the midfield as the Blancos beat Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 at Hampden Park.

## 5) THE GOALKEEPER AS PLAYMAKER

If you take the theory that there is now a playmaker in every part of the team to its logical conclusion, you arrive at, well, the goalkeeper. Believe it or not, when Manuel Neuer set up two goals in Germany's 3-1 win in Turkey in late 2011, a Berlin newspaper ran the headline: "Neuer is the new playmaker!"

The FC Bayern München keeper set up one goal with a long throw, and another with a long pass. After the game Germany coach Joachim Löw said: "Neuer played those long passes deliberately. That's how we exposed Turkey's backline."

Neuer approached his team-mate on the right flank, Thomas Müller, and told him that the Turkish left-back often played high up the pitch, leaving a lot of space behind. "I told Thomas there was a chance I'd immediately throw the ball to him if I collected a cross or a pass," said Neuer. "So yes, this was planned."

Neuer's example may have inspired Shakhtar Donetsk's Andriy Pyatov and Celtic FC's Fraser Forster. Both goalkeepers were credited with assists in this season's group stage.

## THE LAST WORD

If we add the best part of a decade of false No9s into the mix, from Francesco Totti at AS Roma through Robin van Persie at Arsenal FC to Messi at Barcelona, we see that room has been found for playmaking even in the frontline.

The redistribution of the playmaking role reflects a decade-long chain of tactical adjustments, reactions and counter-reactions: 4-2-3-1 helped to pin back overlapping full-backs, but necessitated the introduction of lone strikers. That freed up centre-backs, blurring the distinction between defence and midfield. Holding midfielders arose to combat trequartistas and were so effective that they all but did themselves out of a job.

The modern game seems too safety oriented to spawn a Beckenbauer clone and every player now has too many functions to fulfil for a new Di Stéfano to revel in that kind of free role, but the chain reaction has inspired a fascinating array of tactical approaches across Europe. ★

## BACK TO FRONT

Bayern keeper Neuer is adept at spotting attacking opportunities for his team



# BETWEEN THE LINES

ED CHAMBERLIN, the Sky Sports presenter, highlights three thirtysomethings who just keep improving with age

## Top of the class acts

### 1 A score to settle

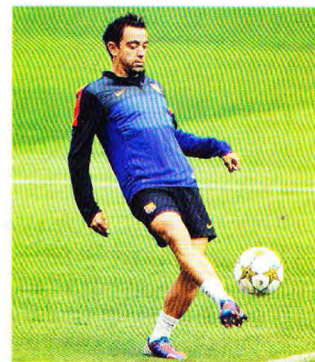
Zlatan Ibrahimović has long been criticised for being too selfish but the fact that the Paris Saint-Germain FC striker leads the assists charts (alongside Ángel Di María of Real Madrid CF) shows he has become a model forward.

Ibrahimović is suspended for the first leg of the quarter-final against FC Barcelona and he'll be hoping that his team-mates can do enough to be in contention for the second leg at the Camp Nou, where Barcelona are unbeaten in their past 20 games in the competition (W16, D4).

Now 31, the PSG No18 has won league titles in eight successive seasons, in three countries, and scored for six clubs in the UEFA Champions League - yet he has a point to prove against Barcelona. Despite helping the Blaugrana to a second straight league title in 2009/10 with 16 goals, it's the one club where he's perceived to have failed. That will surely be motivation enough for the second leg.

### 2 One last hurrah?

Two other creators are still at their brilliant best at the age of 33. Andrea Pirlo and



Xavi Hernández have more than 200 UEFA Champions League appearances between them and both seem to be at the top of their game.

Pirlo dictates the tempo from deep for Juventus. He operates in one of the most efficient units in European football. The Italian orchestrates play while Claudio Marchisio, Arturo Vidal and Mirko Vučinić sing perfectly to his tune.

He also has an excellent record against FC Bayern München, unbeaten in six games against them (all for AC Milan), the last of which was in 2007 when they met in the quarter-final and Milan went on to win the trophy. Could this be the perfect last hurrah for Pirlo?

### 3 No passing fancy

Xavi Hernández has been criticised for some low-key displays but he has still attempted 958 passes in this season's competition - 355 more than anyone else - with a success rate of 89%. Against Milan in the second leg, Xavi produced a performance that will live long in the memory, proving the pass master is no past master.

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