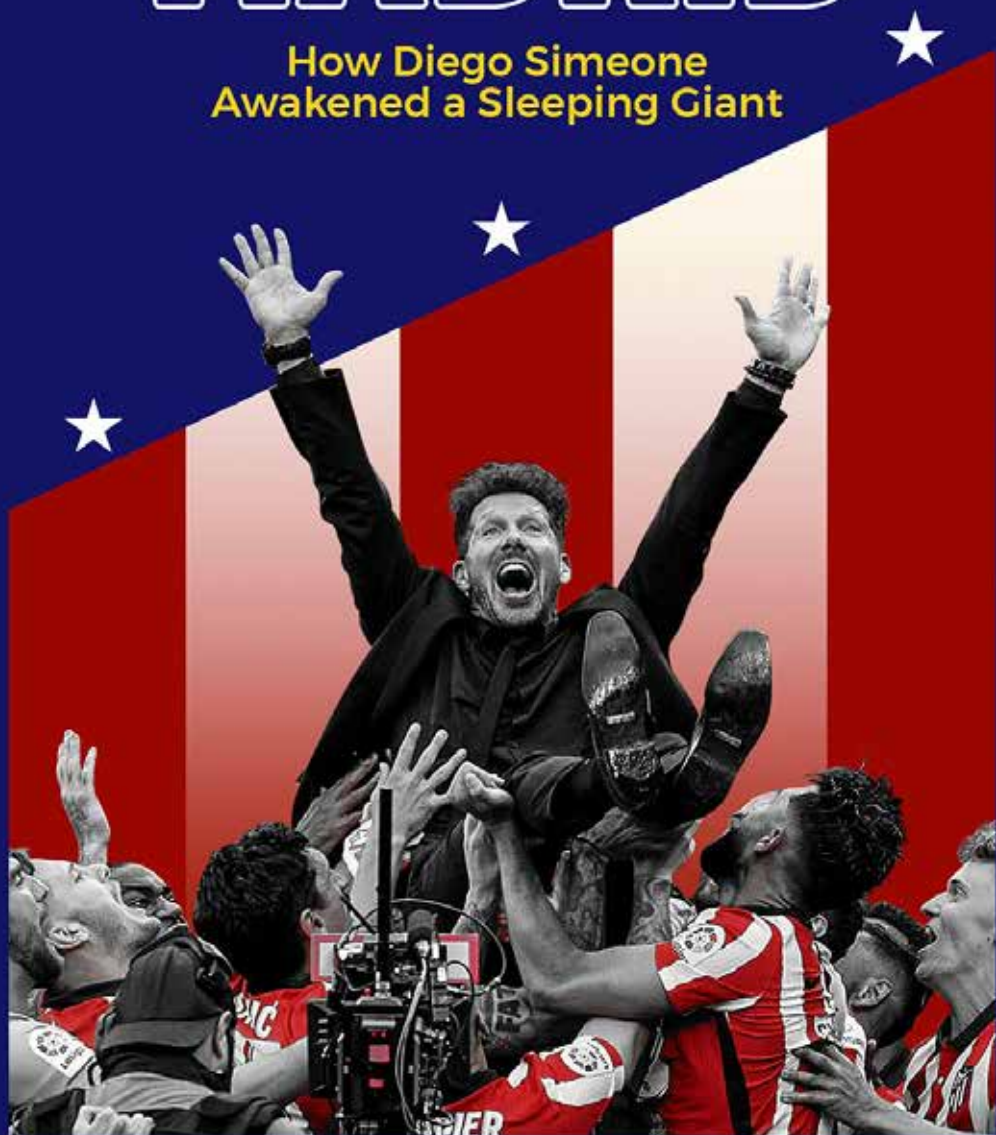


MADE IN ARGENTINA MASTERED IN MADRID

How Diego Simeone
Awakened a Sleeping Giant



ASHWIN REUBEN BALLAL

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The Predecessor: Gregorio Manzano

*‘Atlético is going to be strong
and powerful’*

‘NO SOY un incapaz.’

Roughly translating to ‘I am not incompetent’, these were the words that Gregorio Manzano uttered at his presentation as Atlético Madrid manager in June 2011.

‘If I am here it is not because my agent is García Quilón. There is no strange situation. I am here because I am a professional and I believe in myself ... Atlético is going to be strong and powerful.’

Manzano was not new to coaching, and furthermore not new to Atlético Madrid, when he signed on to lead *Los Rojiblancos* in June 2011. In fact, he was a well-respected professional who first began coaching back in 1983, at the age of 27, moving up the ladder and coaching sides in Spain’s third and second divisions before arriving at the top flight with Real Valladolid in

1999. The journeyman coach swapped outfits regularly from then on, moving to Racing Santander (2000), Rayo Vallecano (2001) and Mallorca (2002) en route to Atlético Madrid in 2003.

His first stint was altogether not too bad either as he took the side, then in their second consecutive top-flight season since being promoted back, to a seventh-placed finish, just a point off the UEFA Cup (now Europa League) places, only missing out to sixth-placed Sevilla on goal difference. It was also the season where Fernando Torres was named captain at just 19 years of age, finishing as the joint third-highest goal scorer in the league, netting 19 times. The man who would eventually succeed Manzano after his second stint, Diego Simeone, would also play a key role, returning to the club and making 28 appearances in midfield.

Funnily enough, both would leave six months apart in 2004, only for them to arrive six months apart later in 2011. By this time, Manzano had spent a season at Málaga, four years back at Mallorca and led Sevilla to Europa League qualification in the 2010/11 season, maintaining his status as a true journeyman capable of coming in and doing a quick job to bump sides up the table more often than not. However, this Atlético Madrid side had won a Europa League just

two seasons prior, meaning Manzano's appointment seemed like a step backwards and, as is evident from his opening quote, the Spaniard immediately found himself defending his ability as a coach.

With Quique Sánchez Flores's departure at the end of the 2010/11 having been announced as early as April 2011, there was much speculation over who would take over. The side had finished seventh in an average season, having been knocked out of the Europa League in the group stages even though they had won the same competition, along with the UEFA Super Cup, just the year before. There was perhaps no expectation to achieve this consistently, but the squad still had potential to regularly push for European places.

As the rumour mill spun, it became clearer that contact had been made with Rafa Benítez, Luis Enrique and Joaquín Caparrós, with some reports suggesting Unai Emery as well, understandably leaving a section of fans bemused when they found Manzano's name signed above the dotted lines. After all, with no disrespect to Manzano, the others had a certain pedigree, excitement and international reputation to them, the latter point being particularly important as Atlético Madrid wanted to develop into a respected and well-known team in Europe. Benítez was the last man to win the league managing a side other than Real

Madrid or Barcelona, when he did so with Valencia in 2004, and from 2008 to 2012, it was Emery who ensured that the same club consistently qualified for European competition, finishing third in three out of the four seasons.

Enrique had ended a stellar playing career in 2008 and looked a promising manager, having led Barcelona B back to the second tier after an 11-year absence and subsequently taking them to the play-offs for the top flight, despite their ineligibility for promotion. Caparrós was best known for his success with Sevilla, ending their four-year wait to return to the top flight in his very first season in charge, back in 2001. More recently, he had taken Athletic Bilbao to the finals of the Copa del Rey in 2010, unfortunately falling at the last hurdle. Manzano's CV, though impressive in its own right, paled in comparison to what the other four (at least) could offer, meaning the start to his second stint rightly made for mixed feelings among fans.

There was no time to take in any pleasantries either, with Manzano having to deal with the transfer situation of two of the club's most promising youngsters right away. Twenty-year-old David de Gea had already signed for Manchester United and clubs were circling for the signature of a certain 23-year-old forward by the name of Sergio Agüero. With the uncertainty surrounding

the Argentinian, Manzano needed to find replacements for two key positions, right down the middle at either end. Within the squad, Joel Robles and Sergio Asenjo, who was then recovering from injury, were the only goalkeeping backups at 21 and 22 years of age respectively. The forward line looked bare as well, with 31-year-old Diego Forlán being the only other recognised frontman, but he too departed later in the window.

Manzano was already set on changing the system, from the 4-4-2 that Sánchez Flores had predominantly used to a 4-3-3, even stating in an interview with Spanish news outlet *MARCA* before the season, ‘It’s about giving the middle one more man, a 4-3-3, with players who provide quality and balance, so that the team does not split and become weak.’ To put this into effect, he needed quality players to lead the line, control midfield and to take up the goalkeeping spot and, in hindsight, the recruitment in his tenure set the foundations of the club for the next few years. Whether this is down to him, though, is a whole different question, as this was a period where Atlético Madrid were changing and evolving as a club with the hope of achieving international acclaim, and they had just hired José Luis Caminero as the sporting director to drive the project forward. Nevertheless, they got down to business.

Thibaut Courtois, then a promising 19-year-old, was loaned in from Chelsea to take his place between the posts and €40m was spent to bring Radamel Falcao from Porto to lead the line. Adrián López, who went on to be an able forward himself, joined on a free, with Arda Turan coming in as a winger for €13m. Diego was loaned in from Wolfsburg, Tiago was signed on a free and Gabi returned to his boyhood club for €3m to strengthen the midfield. Priority was given to strengthening the defence as well, with Sílvio and Miranda coming in to occupy the right-back and centre-back positions respectively. 'It is the goal of a team like Atlético,' Manzano said of the aim of finishing in the top four and the Champions League qualification places, and despite a shaky reunion with the side, it seemed like he had taken the right steps to make his vision a reality.

With the off-field aspect relatively well managed, the Spaniard could now turn his focus to translating his work into results on the pitch. Because the club had reached the qualifying rounds of the Europa League by means of their seventh-placed finish the previous season, Manzano's opening game was the first part of a two-legged tie against Norwegian outfit Strømsgodset IF. José Antonio Reyes scored twice in the home leg and, despite a late red card for Miranda, Atlético saw

off the visitors 2-1. In the away leg, newly signed forward López opened his account for *Los Rojiblancos* and a stoppage-time goal from Reyes again ensured that Manzano got off to a winning start back in the dugout. There was still another qualifying round to get through, but the team brushed aside Portuguese side Vitória Guimarães, winning 6-0 on aggregate to reach the group stages. Atlético had scored 12 goals and conceded just once in four games by the time the La Liga season began, and with the first matchday having to be postponed due to a strike called by the Association of Spanish Footballers over unpaid wages, Manzano's side kicked off the campaign at home to Osasuna.

The momentum did not carry over though, and the side were held to an anti-climactic 0-0 draw at home before losing away in the next game at Valencia. However, a return to Europa League action for the group stages rekindled some form, with a 2-0 win over Celtic followed up by consecutive 4-0 league scorelines at home to Racing and Sporting Gijón. With the two resounding victories, Atlético sat eighth in these standings, a good recovery after the opening two games. It was still only September and, with Manzano having lost just once with seven wins in nine games, the start was still a positive one.

Then came a visit to the Camp Nou. In a game that ended 5-0 to the home side, Barcelona found themselves three goals up within the first half hour and then proceeded to knock the ball around for the rest of the game, with Lionel Messi scoring two late on to seal a hat-trick. Pep Guardiola's side was one of the best in Europe, but the manner in which Atlético were dismantled made it nearly impossible to believe that the teams were playing in the same league, let alone separated by a solitary point heading into the game.

The gulf in quality was starkly apparent and the thrashing sent Manzano's side down a slippery slope from which he never seemed to recover. They went winless in the next six in all competitions, the last one being against Marcelo Bielsa's Athletic Bilbao, a game in which resolute defence eventually gave way to a glut of goals, with the Basque side scoring thrice in seven minutes without reply. This was also a game after which, crucially, the fracture between Manzano and the supporters intensified when fan-favourite Reyes, who swore at the coach after being substituted, would go on to be ostracised and left out of the line-up and squad.

Excuses were invented to cover up his absence, but it was evident that Manzano had not handled the situation well enough. The fans were turning on him and despite Europa League form improving from there on, with

Atlético winning their remaining three games, this did not carry this over into the league, where with three victories and four losses in the next seven games they found themselves just four points off relegation. Defeats to then bottom side Getafe and another mismatch with city rivals Real Madrid were the gravest results, but the nail in the coffin was struck by third-tier Albacete in the Copa del Rey.

In what was Atlético's first match in the competition that season, they travelled away for the first leg of the tie, only to lose 2-1 with a late López goal rescuing some hope for the return meeting. Unconvincing and crucial losses to Espanyol and Real Betis, who were a few points off Atlético above and below them at that point, meant that the second leg was all the more important with pressure mounting on Manzano with every passing game. Against Betis, Manzano was sat in the dugout for about an hour before venturing out after conceding the first goal, only to walk right into the view of the thousands of fans who had been waiting for such a moment. In a Europa League game the week before, they had chanted for him to come off the bench so they could hurl insults, only to abuse him anyway when he remained seated. Now that they had got what they wanted, they were sure to not miss. *'Manzano véte ya! Manzano véte ya!'* they chanted, meaning, 'Manzano go now!'

Manzano's titanic had hit its iceberg, slowly inching towards its eventual sinking. *The Guardian's* Sid Lowe rightly called him 'Atlético's dead coach walking', and when Albacete rounded off a stunning performance with a 1-0 win at the Vicente Calderón, progressing 3-1 on aggregate, the axe swiftly came down the next day and ended the Spaniard's tenure.

When he joined, Manzano had mentioned that the defence was an area to improve, with the side having conceded the second-highest number of goals in the top half of the table the previous season. At the time of his dismissal, only two teams had let in more goals than Atlético, and they had failed to outscore opponents regularly either, having a goal difference of -4. 'Modern football has a balance between attack and defence,' he said, but what he seemed to understand by this failed to show itself in his tactics. Despite stating that a 4-3-3 would be his preferred formation, Manzano also used a 4-2-3-1 equally and to a much lesser extent, a 4-4-2. As you would expect from subsequent results, these setups had inherent flaws in them and this meant that, much as Manzano would have liked them to be, Atlético were neither solid at the back nor an attacking force to be reckoned with. What they were left with was a side that sparked at times, but never caught fire to burn as brightly or as consistently as they could have.

Twenty-one points off rivals and table-toppers Real Madrid, ten points off fourth place and a Champions League spot, five wins from 16 in the league, four points off relegation and knocked out of the Copa del Rey in the first round: this was where Atlético stood at the time, and not even topping the Europa League group with 13 points from a possible 18 was good enough to make up for it.

Dissecting Manzano's tactical setup, fundamental flaws, both in terms of instructions and execution, are apparent. By failing to rectify these faults, Atlético continued to be exposed regularly, largely depending on the individual quality of their players to mask some, if not all, of these errors on a game-by-game basis. While not only being vulnerable in the defensive phase and against transitions, an ineffective and poorly executed build-up was also a key feature of the side, all of which warrant a deeper look.

* * *

Poor defensive organisation

Out of possession, there are a few main things that a team must do consistently in order to maintain solidity. Firstly, they have to ensure that they are in position, which means that they have occupied the right areas of the pitch according to their tactical setup, ensuring

that no area has been left vacant due to them not being positioned correctly. Secondly, they have to be certain that they are maintaining the right distances between team-mates and are shifting accordingly to ensure their shape off the ball is maintained. Thirdly, they should look to minimise the time and space that opponents have on the ball, while also cutting down their options.

This is usually known as pressing, where teams quickly move in to put opponents under pressure and force them into a bad pass or nick the ball off them to win back possession. An alternative means of doing this is to cut out the potential passes that an opponent has, basically allowing only the ball carrier enough time and space to play, but reducing their passing and shooting options by closing down team-mates or blocking their line to goal. Finally, a team must ensure that they have the concentration and communication to consistently carry out their role by anticipating and then effectively dealing with potential situations.

Unfortunately for Manzano, his Atlético side did not tick any of these boxes regularly.

Despite aiming for defensive solidity and ensuring that his midfielders remained deep enough to support his back line, his players were consistently dragged out of position by clever passing manoeuvres and combinations. Even when they looked to maintain their

shape and defend deep, they were not able to effectively cut out any passing options and opened up wide areas of the pitch for multiple players, allowing easy passes and conceding possession in dangerous areas. Not to

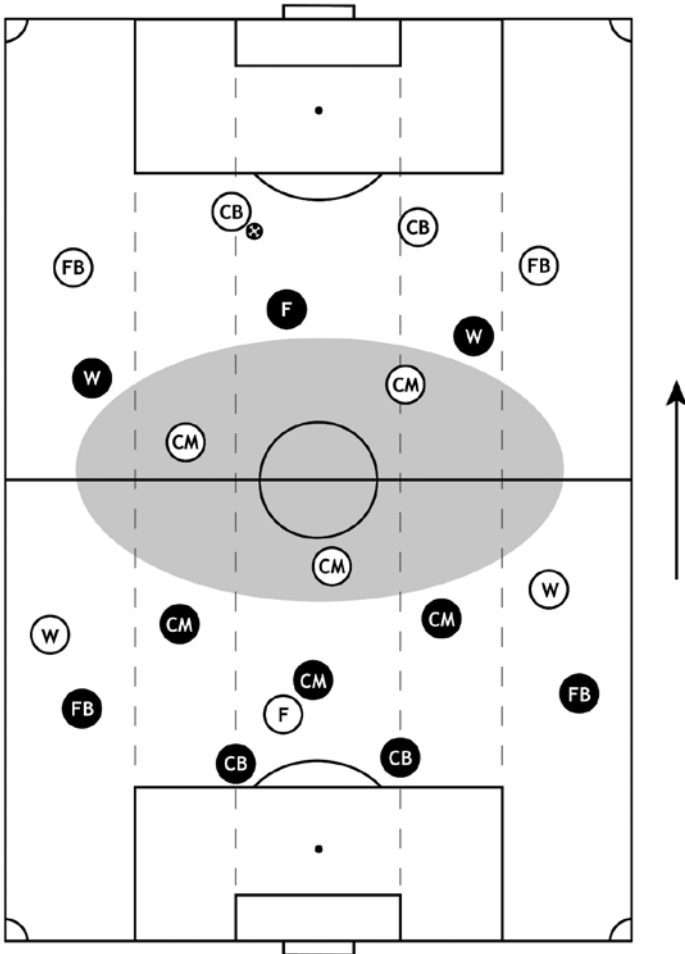


Fig. 1 Atlético Madrid's inefficient press due to large spaces between the forward and midfield line

mention that Atlético also found themselves vulnerable in transitions regularly, with poor concentration and communication, meaning that they did not consistently anticipate quick passes; nor did they track runners in behind consistently, leading to opponents exposing them on counter attacks regularly.

Visualising these errors, we shall start with the faults with the defensive shape.

As mentioned earlier, in order to provide additional support for the back line, Manzano ensured his midfield dropped deeper and closer to the defence, minimising the space between the two lines. The priority, at least initially, was to drop deep and take up positions closer to their own penalty area to ensure they could form a solid enough structure at the back to defend their goal. In such scenarios, a side needs to drop in synchronisation, with all the players looking to get behind the ball and not only ensure compactness horizontally, but also vertically. As for this Atlético Madrid side, the attacking line did not often do this regularly, staying higher up to press the opposition defenders instead.

It is important to understand that pressing is a tactic of a team and not just a few individuals, but in this case it was only the attacking line looking to apply pressure higher up in the hope of forcing a turnover. With no support from their midfielders or full-backs,

the forward line could only cut out so many passes, having to prevent passes to the opposition full-backs, within the centre-backs and to their central midfielders as well. This, along with the fact that the attacking line was so detached from the rest of the side, allowed the opposition midfielders to then have loads of space to roam in the middle of the pitch. With simple movements, they could make themselves an easy passing option and a single pass to them would bypass an entire line of Atlético players, while also allowing them to receive with ample time and space.

The opposition midfield could then pass it among themselves or carry the ball forward to move quickly deeper into the Atlético half, where their own attacking line would already be present. In such a scenario, there are six opposition players compared to seven for Atlético, and should the opposition full-backs make quick supporting runs forward, Manzano's side would be outnumbered deep in their own half. Such a quick move forward by the opposition could then lead to the instance shown in the figure overleaf.

Here, we see that using their wingers, central midfielders and full-backs, opponents are able to exploit the wide areas of the pitch by creating triangles, and with Manzano's desire to stay compact centrally they cause overloads, which means that they have more

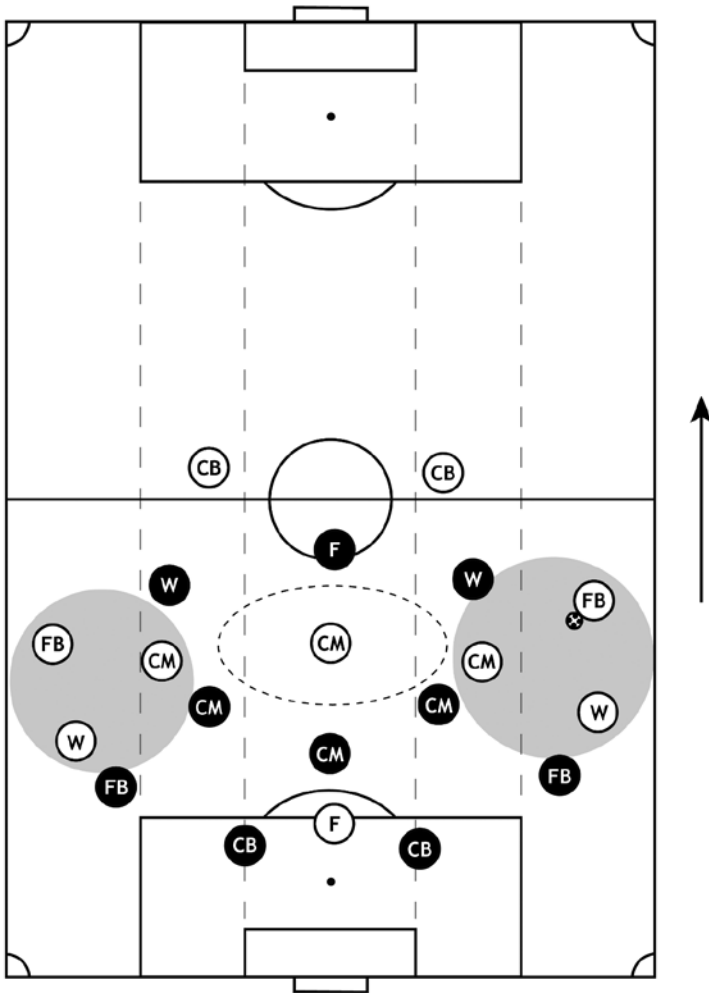


Fig. 2 Opposition players using triangles and overloads to exploit the spaces out wide

numbers in that particular area of the pitch. The gap between the forward and midfield line from earlier means that the front three of Atlético are slower to

track back, meaning that they are not able to drop in and neutralise the numerical advantage regularly.

This also means that one of the opposition's central midfielders (the one in the middle) would be allowed ample space to dictate the play and control the flow of possession from his position, making it easy to switch flanks as well. The Atlético forward is unable to drop back in time to neutralise this player and their two central midfielders cannot risk stepping out for fear of leaving their man free down the flanks. Atlético's central midfielder and full-back have to be wary of committing in such scenarios, for fear of being dragged out of position, and if they are beaten, they risk allowing opponents considerable space in and around their box.

If we look more closely into the situation, we also see that due to the Atlético winger's higher position, it is often a three-v-two in favour of the opposition, hence why we have called it an overload. In this overload, we notice that it is usually the opposition full-back who finds himself free, while his central midfielder and winger have pinned (i.e. holding them to their position) the Atlético central midfielder and full-back respectively. In such scenarios, the full-back is allowed further freedom to get forward and make runs either down the outside, called overlaps, or down the inside of the winger, known as underlaps.

Such runs are crucial for a full-back to make as it usually means that they are able to attack spaces higher up the pitch, either wider or more centrally depending on the run, giving them time to pick out crosses and passes to team-mates. It is tough for the defending full-back to deal with such a situation on their own since they would already be occupied with a winger, and hence they would require support either from a midfielder or winger, or even a centre-back moving across.

In our scenario, however, a centre-back moving across is dangerous as this then allows the opposition forward to run in behind and exploit the space that they have left behind, giving them more room in the penalty area. Eventually, it could probably lead to a situation as follows in the next figure (opposite).

In this case, we consider that the opposition right-back has made an overlapping run, with the winger occupying the Atlético full-back and centre-back with a run in between them. The opposition central midfielder (in the middle) is in possession of the ball and makes a quick pass to his right central midfielder. This midfielder can then play his right-back through into space, with the Atlético left-back needing to track him as well as be wary of the winger on his other side. The winger on the opposite flank can also dart into the box in this scenario, so too the forward, meaning

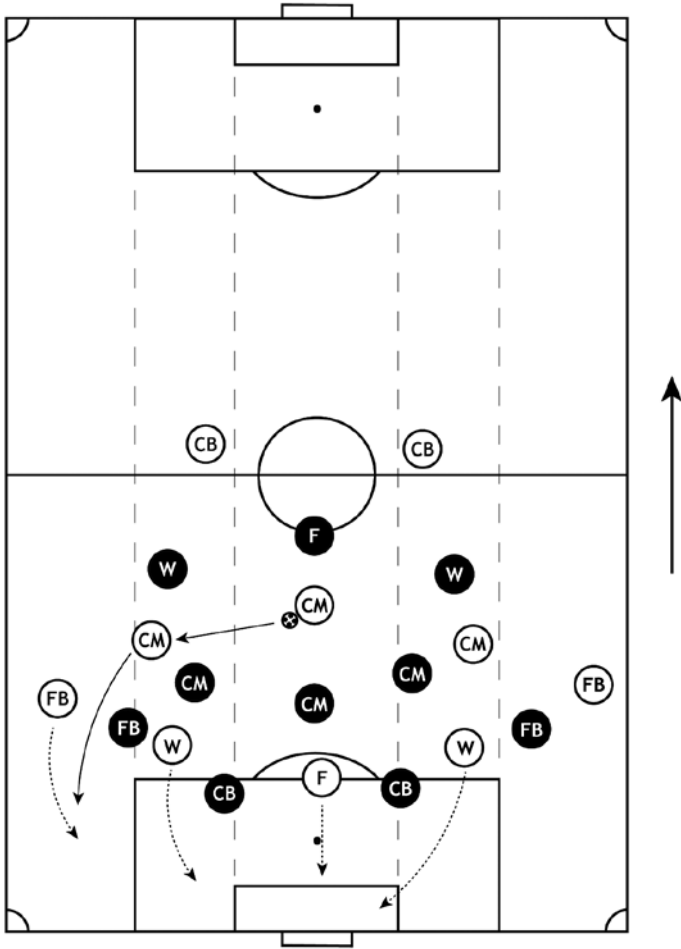


Fig. 3 Atlético Madrid's vulnerability from crosses / passes from wide areas

that already there are three options for the right-back in the penalty area.

Of course, we are assuming that most players are static when we visualise this on a diagram, but even

if three of Atlético's central midfielders track the two opposition wingers and forward, we can still expect the opposition central midfielders to push forward themselves and find space in and around the box. This basically meant that, once the opposition full-back was in possession of the ball in the wide areas, he had good enough passing options to create a chance of quality for his side.

This was understandably one of the more frequent ways that Manzano's side would concede chances, and while we have viewed it as an entire sequence from start to finish, these were also independent flaws that could be exposed in different phases considering the multiple ways a game sequence could unfold. The fact that most sequences eventually led to the exploitation of the above-mentioned flaws, though, was certainly cause for worry.

Of course, this did not mean that Manzano did not try, but unfortunately even then some issues remained. The switch to a 4-2-3-1, or even a 4-4-2 at times, was one that had been brought about owing to the fact that not only did Manzano want another outright attacking player, but it also meant that his wingers no longer had to play as high as they did and could offer some support to the full-back owing to their naturally deeper positioning. The attacking midfielder or second forward

could pair up with the forward up front to form a first line of pressure as the wingers settled into midfield, meaning that they could then ensure that they were not as vulnerable down the flanks.

There was also an attempt to play a higher line to mitigate the space that was afforded to the opposition midfielders in the centre of the pitch, ensuring that all three lines were much closer to each other than they had been earlier. This was also something that Manzano would implement in the 4-3-3 to minimise the space in midfield, but unfortunately it failed to consistently address the aforementioned issues to prevent them from occurring. In the 4-2-3-1/4-4-2, this higher line did serve to make the centre of the pitch more compact than it had been, but a key error was the positioning of the forwards who ended up too close to each other to press effectively.

This would then lead to a situation as given on the next page in Figure 4.

The narrow front two were ineffective in preventing a pass from the opposition back line into midfield, resulting in a similar process as seen earlier, despite the deeper positions of the wingers. A point can be made to then push one striker, or the attacking midfielder, back into midfield, and this indeed was tried by Manzano, but the fact remained that the Atlético structure off

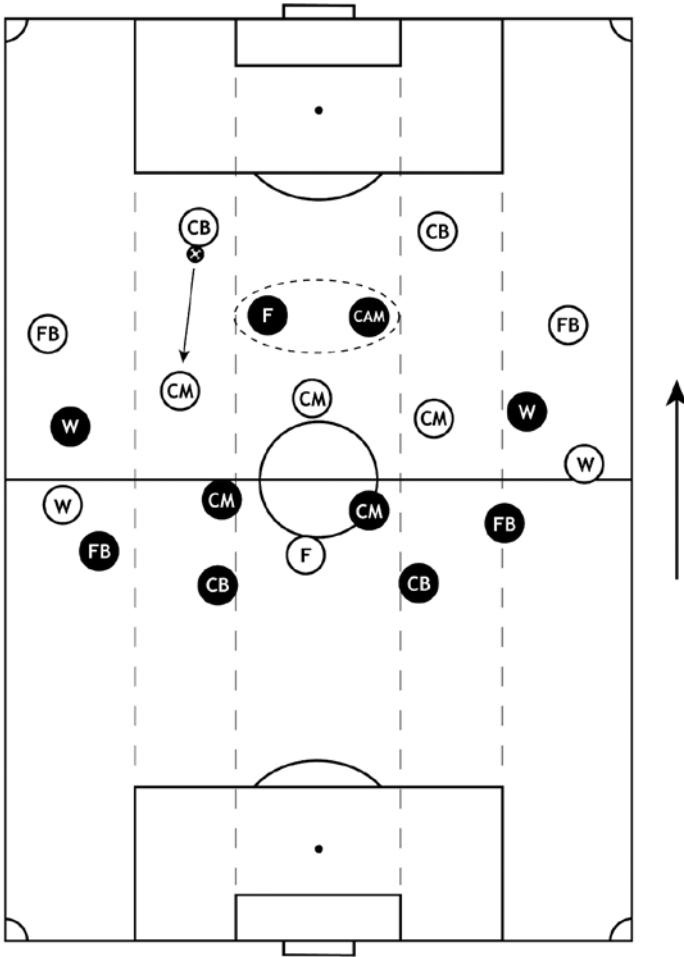


Fig. 4 Atlético Madrid's narrowly positioned forwards allow opponents to bypass them with ease

the ball was not properly coordinated and assembled, leading to cracks that opponents opened up. Moreover, it seemed that with every correction that Manzano attempted, new errors would spring up, with their

vulnerability in defensive transitions being one that would show across all setups. Let us take the situation shown below as an example:

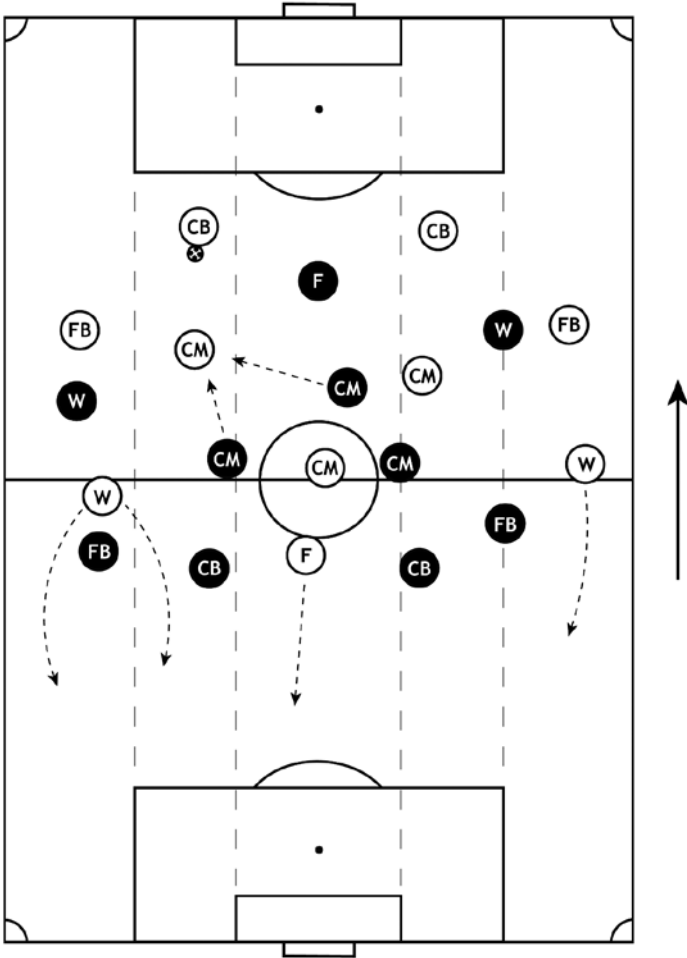


Fig. 5 Atlético Madrid's vulnerability in defensive transitions

With Manzano attempting to play a higher line and considering the space that his side were offering in

midfield when they dropped back, Atlético found themselves hit on the counter, with opponents looking to get in behind. As we saw earlier, an inefficient first line of pressure still meant that sides could exploit space in midfield, which meant that the Atlético midfielders had to overcompensate in order to close them down. While Manzano had wanted his midfield line to be close to the defence, it could not be done consistently owing to the space afforded to the opposition, leading to the Atlético midfielders having to move out instinctively.

In the situation above, the opposition centre-back has a relatively free pass out to the central midfielder ahead of him. Note that in this structure, we cover the 4-3-3 and a variation of the 4-2-3-1. The latter is clearly visible in the image, but this could also be interpreted as the 4-3-3, where, say, the right central midfielder has stepped up to apply pressure on an opponent while the other two midfielders have held their positions. Getting back to the situation, upon allowing the free pass to the opposition midfielder, Atlético need to close him down, which they can do with either of the two central midfielders moving as shown. The worst-case scenario would be that both the Atlético midfielders move in, but in essence, with just this one pass, the opposition have drawn the Atlético midfield out of position and can now look to bypass them with minimal passes.

We can also see that the opposition front line has occupied positions higher up and, in a way, pin their respective Atlético counterparts to their positions, preventing them from covering efficiently for their midfielders who have stepped up. The wingers are able to make darting runs around the outside or between the full-back and centre-back, while the forward is allowed a run between the centre-backs, and having opened up space in midfield to play into, the opposition is able to play their attack through into space, quickly transitioning from deep in their own half to the Atlético box with ease.

Of course, it has to be added [otherwise why say it?] that when Manzano switched to the other variation of the 4-2-3-1 and set up in a 4-4-2 out of possession, the midfield would find themselves short of a man to cover for the inefficient front line of pressure and be drawn out even more easily, allowing opponents to slice through them like a hot knife through butter.

* * *

Ineffective chance creation

It was hard enough to prevent the frequent concession of chances, but it was then even harder to consistently create more than they allowed, with Atlético finding themselves unable to outscore opponents to the degree

that they needed to in order to win games. The stats show that the side managed to score 23 goals up until Manzano's departure, which roughly amounts to 1.4 goals a game, a decent return and the sixth-highest in the league at that point. However, eight of these goals came against the bottom two sides in the division, meaning that in the remaining 14 games Atlético had scored just 15 times. They failed to score in half of those matches as well, dropping valuable points that would have seen them positioned much closer to the European spots and, more importantly, further away from the relegation spots that they were hovering over. A key reason for this can be seen in the next figure.

Now, Manzano had not set up to be a high-possession side, despite having the quality to do so and having the bulk of possession in the odd game. Under his leadership Atlético were not to be known as a side that would keep control of the ball and force opponents back consistently. Instead, they would more often than not lie deeper in their own half in order to ensure defensive solidity, before then relying on quick passing to get up the pitch upon winning possession. This, however, was not just a case of 'parking the bus' before attacking on the counter, but rather a system where Manzano hoped that he could focus on getting the ball forward and directly progressing to the final

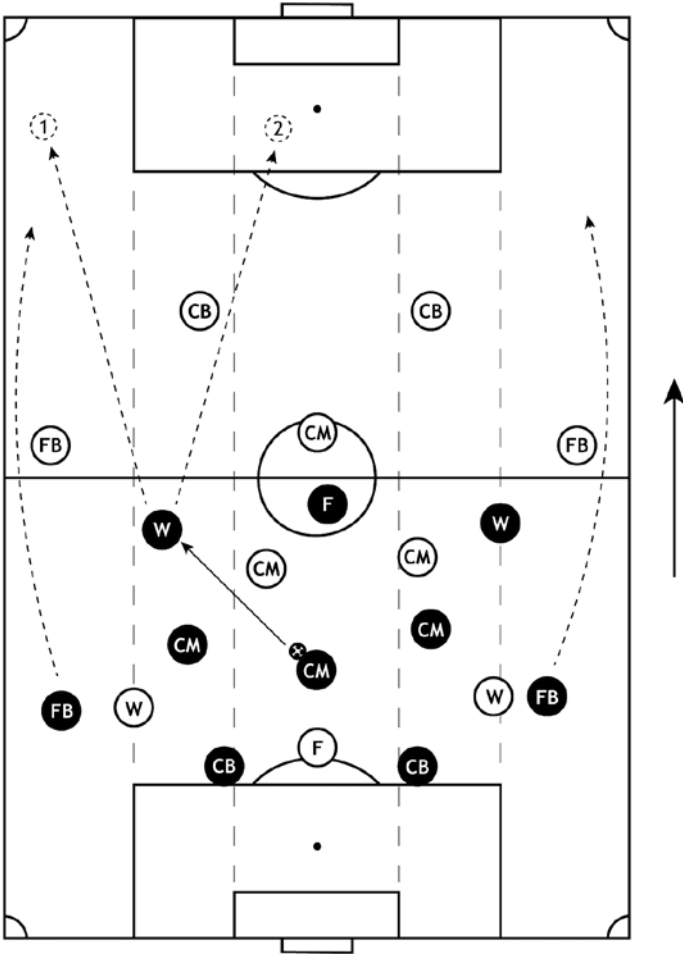


Fig. 6 Atlético Madrid's difficulties with ball progression

stage of the build-up, where his team could then look to plan and orchestrate attacks, as opposed to patiently building up right from their deeper positions.

The problem with this, however, links back to some of the issues that we saw earlier. The attacking line was

evidently cut off from the rest of the side, meaning that even when the midfield or defence won back possession of the ball, it would not always be easy to find the outlet consistently, having to rely on more medium to long-range passes with a greater margin for error. In the figure on previous page, we have also taken a situation which is not immediately after Atlético have won back possession, but instead a scenario where upon winning the ball back and playing out to the winger, the opposition have had the time to drop deeper, especially the full-backs, ensuring that they are back in place and close to getting in line with the ball, if not already behind it.

Immediately, we notice that the winger is a fair way from goal, and with his passing options all relatively close to him, his main method of progression is to drive forward with the ball on his own. Of course, Atlético were not short of technically sound wingers capable of beating opponents, but they were not blessed with pace and to do so consistently and carry the ball 30 to 40 yards towards goal on a regular basis is not something that players can consistently be asked to do. In waiting for team-mates to support with forward runs and then progress the ball, the winger loses out on time and space, allowing opponents the chance to fully settle in a defensive structure and forcing Atlético to build up from the middle third. Doing this would go against

what Manzano wanted his side to do, hence forcing the winger to either carry the ball towards the wings (1), or go directly down the centre (2).

The lack of a consistent way to progress up the pitch and commit numbers in the right areas with the right positions hampered Atlético's ability to get at the opposition, and the ones that suffered consistently were the full-backs. As we can see in the figure, the full-backs are expected to make supporting runs forward, but having occupied deeper positions earlier on, they are now tasked with running virtually the length of the pitch to provide support for an already disjointed attack. There again, any loss in possession would result in them having to drop deeper, meaning that they were being asked to fulfil two separate roles at the same time. Such tactics made for weary legs and poor positioning and decision-making, with the full-backs finding it difficult to occupy positions at two extremes, while completely bypassing the middle third of the pitch, as it was not an area that Atlético looked to build up in.

This is not to say that it was impossible though, and Atlético did find some success at times in terms of ball progression to get higher up the pitch and have the territorial advantage that they wanted. They could then combine down the wide areas that Manzano wanted to play through, but unfortunately even these situations

exposed some flaws in the build-up, as we see in the figure below:

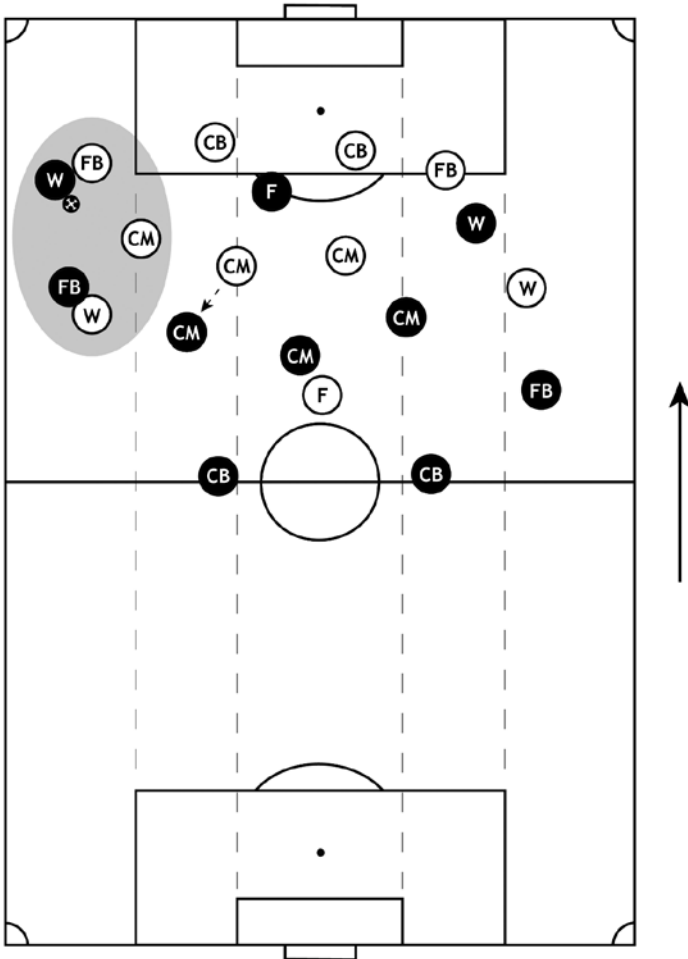


Fig. 7 Atlético Madrid's ineffective build-up and combinations in the wide areas

In this situation, we take it that Atlético have indeed managed to get up to the other end of the pitch with

their method of ball progression having worked, meaning that their winger and full-back have managed to get forward with some supporting runs from their team-mates. The opposition has also managed to fall back, looking to get into a solid defensive structure to stall Atlético's attack. However, we mentioned earlier that the supporting runs for Atlético were often slower and hence failed to produce good enough passing options and this situation highlights the negative effect that this had on the attack.

We see that the winger and full-back are occupying the wide areas, looking to go deeper down the flanks and exploit the high and wide areas of the pitch. Now, an effective way to do this is by forming passing triangles, which we saw earlier, and by which means it becomes easy for Atlético to pass the ball around and make good movements to attack space in behind defenders. Unfortunately, though, the slower support from the central midfielders meant that these triangles were not consistently formed in time, instead allowing the defence to overload the wide areas with their full-back, central midfielder and winger moving in to crowd out Atlético's players down the flank. Should the Atlético central midfielder then opt to move in to make it a three-v-three, the opposition still have the luxury of moving across and adding a

fourth player since they would still have decent cover down the other side.

This meant that Atlético's passing combinations and wide attacks often looked haphazard and poorly coached since they were unable to regularly play clearly defined passes and habitually repeat the same set of passes to get players consistently in the right positions. They ended up having to get to these areas before looking up to find the best possible solution, and in a day and age where the likes of Guardiola, Mourinho, Bielsa and Emery were sat across in the opposite dugout, they hardly stood a chance.

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'We start with a year and I hope we reach ten,' Manzano said in response to a question on whether he would be done at the end of his one-year contract. A leaky defence and an inefficient attack, however, meant that he departed even before the new year, having been in charge for almost exactly half the season. Of course, the fact still remains that the good work to remodel the squad with some astute recruitment laid the foundations for Simeone to take over, much of it down to José Luis Caminero, with some credit to Manzano. Unfortunately, it did not translate into results on the pitch and with a public falling out leading to rumours

of a lost dressing room, it was time for Atlético to pull the plug on yet another manager.

‘Atlético is going to be strong and powerful.’
Somehow, Manzano was not wrong.