

LEE SCOTT

KING KLOPP

REBUILDING THE LIVERPOOL DYNASTY



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Contents

Introduction	9
Trent Alexander-Arnold	14
Defenders in possession	30
The importance of the '6'	48
Pressing as a playmaker	64
Functional midfield	78
The '9'	92
False wingers	110
Virgil van Dijk	126
Jordan Henderson	142
Fabinho	156
Naby Keïta	172
Sadio Mané	186
Mohamed Salah	202
Roberto Firmino	218
Anatomy of a goal	234
Conclusion	250

Chapter 1

Trent Alexander-Arnold

For football fans, there are few more pleasing sights than that of a player making his first steps in the first team having developed at the club's own youth academy. Now, imagine that player went on, in the space of just a few years, to become one of the best players in the world in their position. That is the situation at the moment with Liverpool and their 21-year-old right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold.

When Alexander-Arnold first made the breakthrough at first-team level in 2016 there were few signs that the young full-back would develop into the player we see today. He played as an orthodox full-back and appeared to be lacking in the physicality that he would need to become a regular first-choice at the club. During his initial exposure to the first team, we saw the odd flash of the technical ability that would come to define him as a modern full-back but no more than that and, in retrospect, this should come as no surprise.

As a youngster in the Liverpool youth teams, Alexander-Arnold played in a variety of positions. He was a central defender, an attacking midfielder and a central midfielder at

various points but rarely a full-back. Indeed, the fact that the 21-year-old once stated that his preferred position was in the centre of the midfield leads some to feel that eventually he will move back into the centre of the pitch for club and country. As with many young players who are prodigiously talented at an early age there were issues around his attitude at times and he was easily wound up by the opposition for a period of time. Contrast that to the player that we see now, described by his coach Jürgen Klopp as *'one of the most relentless professionals I've met when it comes to focusing on getting better each and every day'*. Alexander-Arnold is a prime example of the dangers of labelling a young player early as a result of the normal growing process, whether mental or physical.

While there may be a logic in those calls for Alexander-Arnold to move into the centre of the midfield, many draw parallels to the skillset of the young full-back and that of Kevin De Bruyne of Manchester City, we have to consider the impact that move would have on the tactical structure of Liverpool as a whole. While for Manchester City we see De Bruyne act as the key ball progressor and creator from central areas and that is part of the overall game model for Pep Guardiola at the club, the picture is different for Liverpool. The 2019/20 season saw a firm move from Jürgen Klopp and his coaching team to use the midfield three, in their 4-3-3 system, in a functional rather than creative sense.

The 2019/20 season saw a significant development in the way in which Trent Alexander-Arnold was used in the Liverpool game model. This was a clear acknowledgement of the fact that the young right-back was now seen as a key creative force and progressor of the ball for his side.

To fully understand this change and why it was so important we have to understand the mechanisms and movements of the rest of the team as a whole. Everyone reading this book will be aware of the quality of the front three at Liverpool. The Senegalese attacker Sadio Mané occupies the left, the Brazilian forward Roberto Firmino is positioned centrally and then, and perhaps most importantly, the Egyptian Mohamed Salah plays from the right. At least those positional slots are what we see on the pre-match graphic that depicts the formation of either team. The positions occupied by these players are far more fluid with both Mané and Salah tending to move inside to either the half-spaces or the central areas. To allow these inverted movements from the wide forwards the central striker, Roberto Firmino, drops off into space traditionally occupied by a number '10' forming a loose triangle with the other two forwards.

These movements are designed to overload and confuse the opposition defence. Do the full-backs move inside to follow the wide forwards when they make their runs? Does one of the central defenders step out to follow Firmino when he drops into the deeper position? If the answer to either of these questions is yes then space is immediately created which can be exploited by other players in the Liverpool system moving forward from deeper positions. Of course, the opposition could simply drop into a narrow block with the full-backs tucking into the spaces beside the central defenders. To prevent this easy counter-movement Liverpool need to maintain their width in attack to force the full-backs to stay wider. This then creates the pockets of space that we see Liverpool use consistently as they move into the final third.

Traditionally this width would be offered by the full-backs who would both move high to occupy the opposition full-back and provide a wide outlet should the ball need to be played out to get in behind the defensive line. Indeed, this is still the case with Andrew Robertson on the left-hand side but not for Alexander-Arnold on the right-hand side.

In the 2019/20 season, we have seen Alexander-Arnold given a much freer role with the ability to move inside into positions that would normally be occupied by an inverted full-back. These movements see him take up positions centrally in areas in which we would typically expect to see a central midfielder. These movements from outside to inside change the angle of play that Alexander-Arnold has in possession and allow him to have a more direct influence on the game. This, of course, does not solve the issue of maintaining width on the right and with Salah and Alexander-Arnold both coming inside to play narrow the danger is that the centre of the pitch could become even more congested. To solve this issue Klopp came up with an inventive solution, the right-sided central midfielder, normally Jordan Henderson or Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain would pull out to the right side when Liverpool were in possession. This would stretch the opposition and create the space that Alexander-Arnold had when in possession of the ball.

This move to a different role for a player that is obviously the most important in the team from a creative standpoint is designed by Klopp and his staff to exert more control in games. When the German coach first arrived at Liverpool he did so surrounded by the narrative of *gegenpressing* and initial signs were that Klopp would look to implement his high tempo and aggressive pressing style of play. The 2019/20 season saw a

move to something different. Pressing was still an extremely important part of their game out of possession but it was no longer quite as strongly part of the *identity* of Liverpool. Instead, they now look to dominate the game and control the tempo in a more efficient manner. With Alexander-Arnold now able to move inside to combine centrally Liverpool became far more effective in controlling the game and moving the ball until they found a passing lane that allowed them to penetrate into the opposition penalty area.

Over the course of the 2019/20 season Alexander-Arnold became one of the most efficient passers and effective playmakers in European football. His ability to access every area of the pitch through driven or floated passes explains the reasoning behind Klopp giving the young right-back such an important role within the team.

Before we delve further into the performance of Alexander-Arnold and the changes to his role in the 2019/20 season it can be helpful to use data to form a picture of the player and his performances for Liverpool.

The scatter graph in *figure 2* is designed to show players who progress the ball for their teams and who create high-quality chances. To do this I have created a metric called progressive actions per 90 minutes. This is a combination of two metrics from *Wyscout* called progressive runs and progressive passes per 90. The aim is to show which players progress the ball effectively into the opposition half and into the penalty area. The second metric is expected assists (xA) which is calculated in a similar way to the more well-known expected goals. This measures the likelihood that the chances created by each player would be converted into goals.

I have taken data from the top five European leagues and identified players who have played more than 1,000 minutes in the 2019/20 season. Straightaway we see two clear outliers in the data. The aforementioned

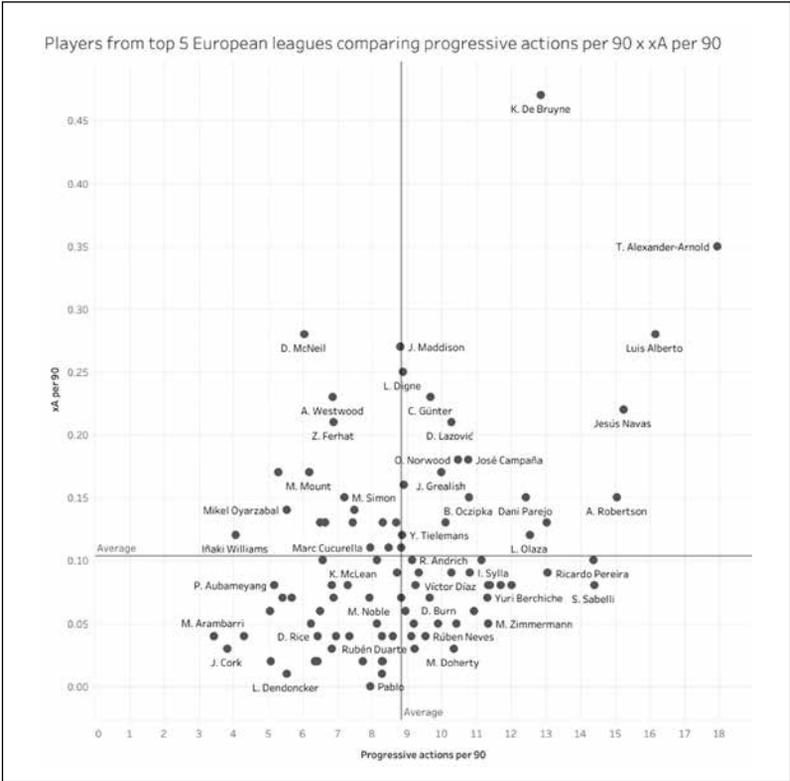


Figure 2

Kevin De Bruyne, of Manchester City, has an xA of over 0.45 per 90 minutes. To put this into context we can expect the Belgian international to directly assist one goal every two games. Then we have Alexander-Arnold with just under 18 progressive actions per game and an xA of 0.35 per match. With De Bruyne widely regarded as one of the best, if not the best outright, players in the Premier League then the data shows us that Alexander-Arnold is performing at a comparable level to the Belgian, despite being seven years younger.

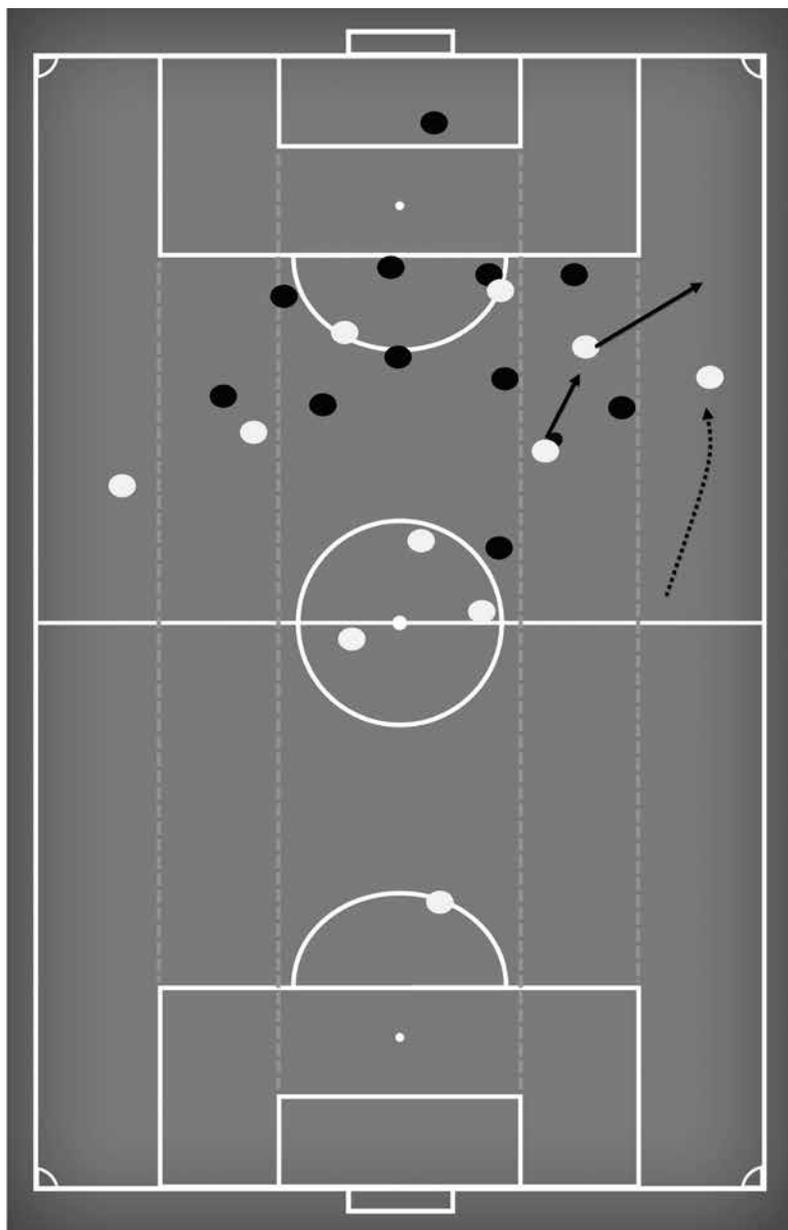


Figure 3

We touched upon this earlier in the chapter but *figure 3* gives a basic insight into the typical movements that we would see from a full-back in the attacking phase in a 4-3-3 structure. As the ball moves forward into the '8' in the right half-space we would then see the wide forward move inside to look for space to collect the ball.

This movement from the wide forward would empty the wide space and the full-back would move quickly to a high position to provide the width on that side of the field. When Alexander-Arnold first made his move into the first team these were the kinds of movements that we would see most often from him. We should acknowledge that even from these areas, as he does still at times make this movement should the situation arise, Alexander-Arnold poses a significant threat to the opposition with his ability to cross the ball. Indeed, he has already developed the ability to access the penalty area through a wide variety of crosses whether driven or curled into key zones. We see this crossing ability most prominently, however, when he is positioned just outside the corner of the penalty area and when the ball is set back to him. He has perfected the art of playing a curved looping cross to the far side of the penalty area that bypasses the opposition offside trap.

This traditional full-back role is of course perfectly fine in most cases. Indeed, up until this point Klopp had only ever used his full-backs in this sense. For the majority of his time at Borussia Dortmund, the right-back was the Polish international Lukasz Piszczek who was entirely dependable but not creative. Instead, the creative function was carried out by the three central midfielders as they took responsibility for progressing the ball and creating openings.

The challenge for Klopp coming into this season then was to find a way to unlock the creative powers of Alexander-Arnold.

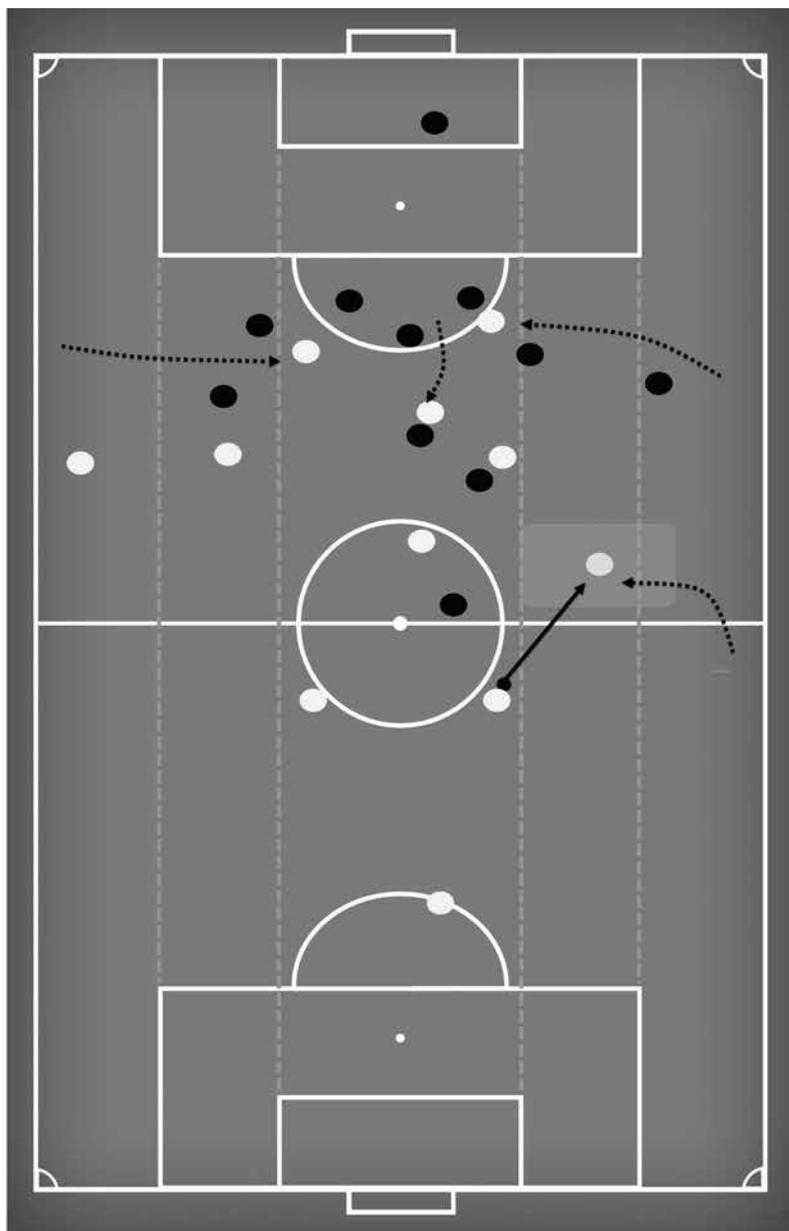


Figure 4

In *figure 4* we see an example of the kind of movement that we have seen more prominently from Alexander-Arnold in 2019/20. Early in the attacking phase, the ball is still at the feet of the right-sided central defender Joël Matip, and we see the front three making their rotational movements in the attack. Both Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah move inside from the wide spaces while Roberto Firmino drops off the front line into a deeper position.

With these movements, we then see Alexander-Arnold moving inside, into the half-space, so that he can collect the ball from Matip in a pocket of space. As soon as he receives the ball in this area Alexander-Arnold will look to touch forward into space and progress the ball towards the opposition penalty area.

Here, we start to see the issues mentioned previously in the chapter. As Alexander-Arnold moves inside and collects possession we can see that the right-hand channel is now empty. This would allow the left-forward for the opposition to press Alexander-Arnold from one direction while a central midfielder pressed from a second angle. This is why there was a need for Liverpool to find a mechanism to stretch the field and pin the wide players out in the wide position.

From this position, however, Alexander-Arnold is now in a position to more effectively control the game.

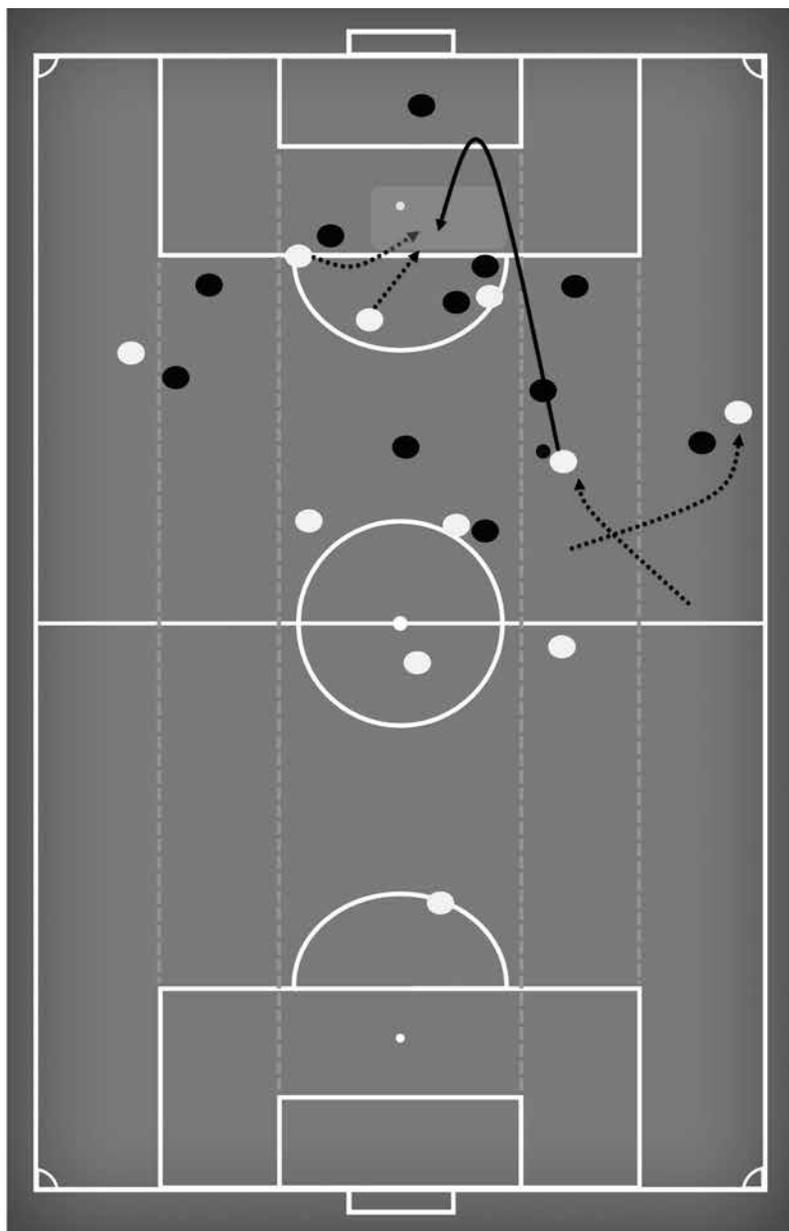


Figure 5

The difference in the position of Alexander-Arnold from playing as a traditional full-back or as an inverted full-back may be relatively slight, the difference between playing in the wide area or in the half-space, but the change of angle in the final third can be crucial for Liverpool when breaking down a deep defensive block.

In *figure 5* we see this in action with Alexander-Arnold in possession of the ball in the half-space although this time in an advanced position. An option to the outside has been provided by the movement of the right-sided central midfielder, Jordan Henderson, in this example and this prevents the wide player for the opposition from being able to move to close down the ball. From this position, there are a number of options available to Alexander-Arnold. He can play the easy pass outside to Henderson who is free to move forward into space or he can play the more difficult but potentially effective pass to access the penalty area. The young Englishman has the quality to consistently play passes from these angles that drop into the space between the defensive line and the goalkeeper. To be able to judge the weight of pass into these areas is a sign of a supremely gifted and technical footballer.

This is why we tend to see the attacking players for Liverpool constantly trying to lose their markers and move into space when Alexander-Arnold has possession of the ball in this area. They are looking for pockets of space in the defensive line that gives them separation from the defenders as they understand that the ball will be played perfectly into space and any advantage that they can get over the defenders will give them the optimum chance to get a shot on goal when the ball is played in. Another interesting feature of the Liverpool system that we see in this example is the position of the other two midfielder players. They are on the same line behind the ball with Fabinho as the controlling midfielder and Georginio Wijnaldum positioned to his left, away from the ball. Wijnaldum is less of a vertical threat in terms of making runs but he positions himself perfectly to receive possession and play forward when Liverpool look to change the angle of the attack.