

ABDULLAH ABDULLAH



# LIONESSES

## GAMECHANGERS

Foreword by Charlotte Stacey

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## Chapter 3

# Pre-Euros tactics – build-up

THE FIRST 18 months of Sarina Wiegman's tenure before the European Championship were always going to be intriguing. After the very predictable tactics of Phil Neville – which admittedly did see England through to a World Cup semi-final – Wiegman was seen as a tactical upgrade given her status as an international tournament winner.

I think it's intriguing to see Wiegman's fingerprints across the team at this particular moment and how quickly her methods were implemented. The pre-Euros tactics were the precursor (or theory if you will) to the application during the finals. You might be starting to wonder why I'm looking first to explain the tactics of a few friendly games instead of a major tournament. If this were a deep look into a club manager, it's unlikely there would be much of an insight to their pre-season friendlies

so why should this be any different? Using the Arnold Clark Cup and the three pre-tournament friendlies gave me a chance to do a deep dive into Wiegman's mind and be conscious of what she wanted to implement before going into her first real test in charge of England.

The way I wanted to structure this book was to use this chapter as a base of comparison to the Euros and pinpoint key and precise tactical nuances for us to analyse and break down to see how the team's tactics transition to their final form.

And that is the most intriguing aspect – seeing how much England would evolve from under Neville and how effective their approach would be against different types of opposition. One of the key differences between managing a club and managing a country is that there is no luxury in just buying a player for a certain role, so coaching becomes much more important in developing a style for the team.

Though England are fortunate in having a squad that houses a multitude of styles, from ball players to creative visionaries and pure goalscorers, Wiegman wanted to create a cohesive line-up that was able to compete against both low-block and high-possession teams by using a similar structure and system.

I'll break this chapter into build-up, attacking mechanisms, and pressing/defending concepts. Each

one will be explained in as much detail as possible to give you a solid foundation of England's style, which leads us into interpreting some of the more distinct and contrasting tactical plans from the Euros. This chapter is being written before the 2022 Euros to give you a sense of my thoughts and feelings before a ball has even been kicked in the finals.

When we look at England's tactical structure, it's important to understand the different areas that create a coherent and otherwise collective system. The tactics can be split into three distinct phases: build-up play, middle-third transitions, and final-third patterns. All three have their unique triggers and movements that integrate players from different areas to create a seamless flow of movement.

Wiegman's overall philosophy is to play a direct and efficient yet intelligent style of football that is also adaptable. The central defenders are very important in choosing the first action out from the back, whether it be a long ball or short pass to the central or wide areas. The full-backs have a unique role while the midfield trio are the catalyst to England's defending and attacking transition patterns. Movement defines their structure and is emphasised by Wiegman's obsession with efficient ball progressors and off-ball playmakers. These two types of role have probably defined her

tenure the most so far, given she wants her England side to play fast, effective, and technical football.

England's build-up structure was as much a mystery as it was effective. There were games where they played some scintillating football out from the back, while other matches seemed a bit more chaotic with no sense of a plan, but rather a haphazard choice in the heat of the moment.

Let's take it a step back and analyse the system Wiegman utilised. She favoured a 4-2-3-1 formation with the double pivot and attacking midfielder as vital components that embodied how her side was going to play. Each of the pre-tournament friendlies – against Germany, Spain, Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland – saw Wiegman use 4-2-3-1 as the starting formation with a few similarities in the build-up. What was most pertinent about England was their various methods of building out from the back.

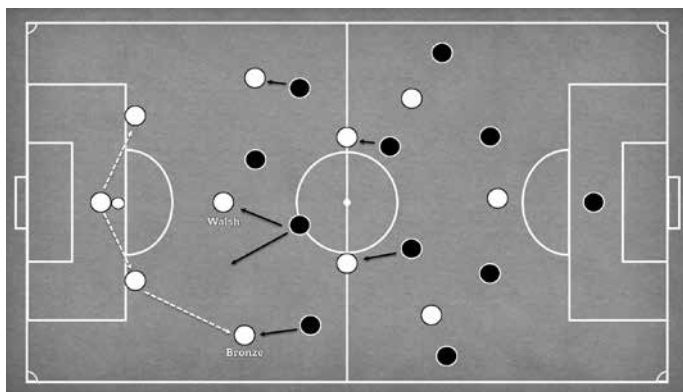
England adopted different iterations depending on the game circumstances and depending on whether opposition teams utilised a high-pressing strategy or a low-block pattern. In either scenario, the Lionesses have implemented and used two distinct build-up patterns for ball progression. First up, it's the most commonly used method of utilising the full-back.

Part of Wiegman's thinking was how best to employ England's exceptional ball-playing ability from the back given that she was in possession of two of the best ball players in European football, Millie Bright and Alex Greenwood. Steph Houghton and Lotte Wubben-Moy are serious options too, but the former was dropped from the squad due to fitness issues while Wubben-Moy is still honing her craft. Using the centre-back pairing was key in ensuring that England were able to have an effective outlet to play out of a press while retaining possession between the thirds.

The main principle is to funnel progression through the right flank to create solo attacking situations in the wide areas through a mixture of overloads and underloads. As I've explained before, overloading one side automatically forces teams to shift across, leaving the opposite flank clearer. The setup is often built with the centre-backs split wide and the full-backs high with the number six settling vertically opposite the goalkeeper as shown in **Figure 1**. This gives England space and time to choose their options and adjust their move based on the game state.

This illustration shows how they are ideally set up when playing out from the back. The two central defenders want to be on either side of the goalkeeper to stretch the opposition forward as much as possible to





**[Figure 1]**

give the next pass more time. The first pass is usually towards the central defender which eventually reaches the right-back. In Lucy Bronze, England have one of the best ball progressors in world football regardless of position, and utilising her strengths in dribbling, positional awareness, and movement is critical.

The alternative is a direct pass from the goalkeeper to the right-back in the event of the keeper being pressed. The double pivot is often used when teams sit back and give Keira Walsh time and space to receive and turn, and though she's excellent under pressure, passing it to the number six against a high-pressing side can be perilous. The black arrows indicate the players who will want to press the England players in the build-up but the innate press resistance in Walsh helps to negate this to an extent.

Once the ball moves to the right-back, she'll push up and create combination plays with the ball-sided central midfielder and right-winger to create an underlapping run. This essentially creates space on the far side while also ensuring there is a passing option on the ball side. Williamson will hover around the play to give England a wall pass option and continue the link forward. The two sixes create a pendulum that works in sync with their positioning. When one pushes forward, the other holds their position and it's usually Walsh who is sitting deeper than Leah Williamson.

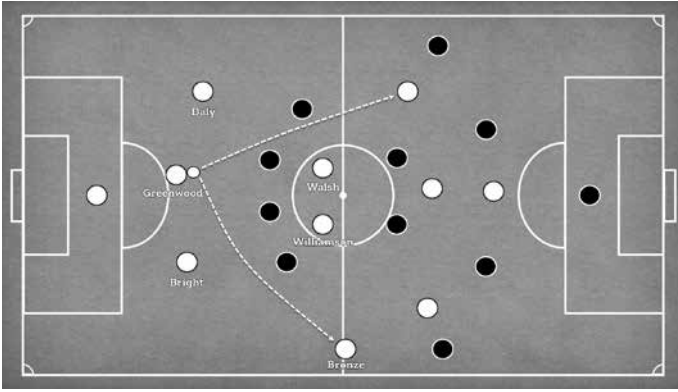
This build-up structure ensures the ball is played through some of England's best players to generate effective progression through the thirds. Bright, Bronze, Beth Mead, and Williamson are all involved in such a sequence of play with a combination of wall passes and short, punchy passes through midfield. Bronze is an inverted full-back which means she can drive into the interior channels and underlap while providing an extra body in midfield. This gives the right-winger space to operate and given the profiles of these players being able to thrive in one-on-one battles, it makes the final-third progression much more effective.

You might be asking, 'What about Keira Walsh and Leah Williamson being used from the outset?' You would be right in wondering why they aren't used

more – but it's because most competent, high-pressing teams can single out Walsh by man-marking her, just as Alexia Putellas did when Spain played England in the Arnold Clark Cup. In staying tight to her, Putellas effectively killed any opportunity for England to use their most competent ball carrier and so resorted to the aforementioned methods of build-up. If Williamson does decide to drop deeper next to Walsh, England are outnumbered further forward if the ball does get played longer.

Alternatively, England have opted for a more direct approach – and I don't mean 'route one' football (yet); rather they want to get the ball from back to front using the quickest possible approach. The Lionesses amass a healthy percentage of possession in most games they play unless they are up against the very top sides. In doing so, they might encounter situations where teams will sit off them slightly, allowing the central defenders some space and time to operate but will nonetheless cover the central third, not allowing progression through the midfielders or full-backs as shown in **Figure 2**. This means England need to find another way forward without giving away possession cheaply.

Wiegman wanted to do this without losing the effect of her central defenders and so she devised a plan to have Greenwood play accurate passes straight

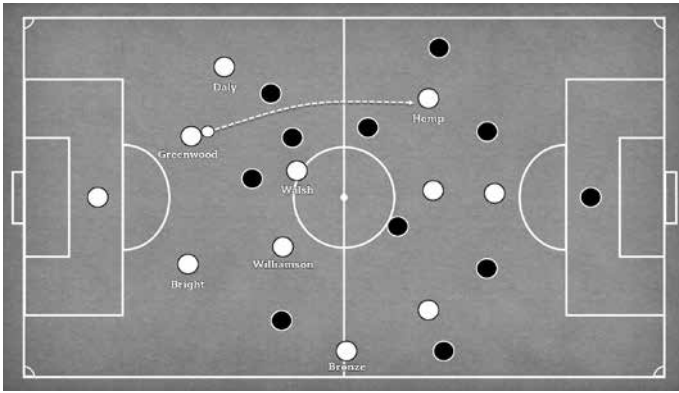


**[Figure 2]**

into Lauren Hemp through the channels. This sort of pass occurs with Greenwood stepping forward from the left centre-back position and threading a ball right through the channels if the opportunity presents itself. Greenwood is England's best distributor and creating situations that get her on the ball as much as possible means they can pinpoint short or long passes from the back.

**Figure 3** shows how Greenwood would position herself to capitalise on this sort of scenario. Hemp would drop into the space in between the lines to create the angle for Greenwood before turning and driving forward. The strength and speed of Hemp means she can start lower and push forward if needed given how good she is in one-on-one duels.

However, ideal situations are far from realistic in most cases. In reality, teams routinely look to position



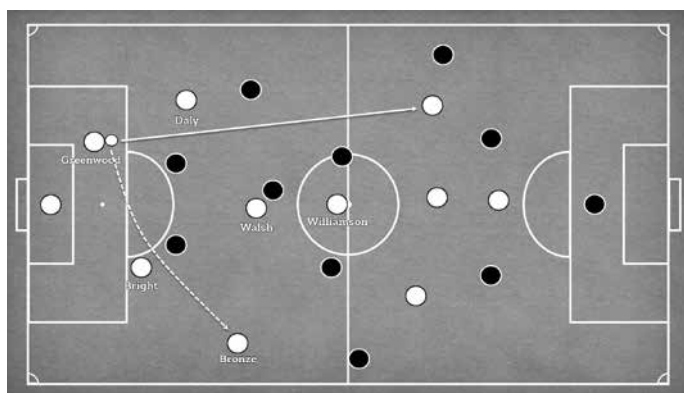
**[Figure 3]**

and press high up the pitch. This hurries central defenders into making quicker decisions and playing a misplaced pass or forcing the ball long where the opposition can retain possession. Of all England's principles in practice, the build-up is their greatest area of concern.

So far, they are yet to find a suitable way to play out of high-pressing situations without resorting to long, direct balls into midfield. This method of build-up goes against the 'moral values' of every top side in football, yet it is a formula that has worked for England when their first-choice options are unavailable. For them to transform and move to the next level, it will require an ethos shift of constantly trying to play out from the back where they'll make more mistakes than not. Wiegman has the players to execute this style, but they just need to 'trust the process' as they say.

If you analyse Spain and Sweden, you start to understand how repetition and confidence can change the team's outlook. In each of the friendlies, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands had all figured out how to disrupt England's build-up through varying techniques from high-pressing to mid-blocks, thus stopping certain passing lanes into key players.

Take the game against Germany in the Arnold Clark Cup in 2022. The Germans opted for a high 4-2-3-1 out-of-possession structure to cover the passing lanes and not allow England easy channels to pass into. As such, England's usual setup was nullified by Germany using their inside-forward and striker to sit in the cover shadow of England's centre-backs while the two central midfielders would push in the space where England's midfielders would be.



**[Figure 4]**

Walsh was isolated in this square and became a difficult passing option. With the full-backs high and wide, Greenwood's only other option was to go long. The depiction of this build-up sequence is shown in **Figure 4** where the resulting long ball is won by Germany, but immediately lands at Bronze's feet and England's build-up continues.

Spain had a similar concept but instead used two players to cover-shadow the centre-backs and goalkeeper. This time, Georgia Stanway is isolated with only her partner (not in frame) to help. This forced Hannah Hampton to go long into Jordan Nobbs, who lays a pass off to Jill Scott. The Manchester City midfielder is then immediately pressed by Mapi León and the move breaks down.

Despite all of this, we can see how England's mindset has changed from Phil Neville's time in charge. Walsh is arguably England's most comfortable ball carrier and in some ways is reminiscent of a player brought up in the Spanish school of football with the way she moves and uses the ball. Having her at the base of midfield goes a long way in dictating how England should be playing from the back. How they adjusted and improved their build-up technique for the Euros would be critical.