

LEE SCOTT

Marcelo
BIELSA

13 STEPS TO THE PREMIER LEAGUE

Marcelo
BIELSA

13 STEPS TO THE PREMIER LEAGUE

LEE SCOTT



Contents

1. 4-1-4-1 or 3-3-1-3	9
2. Man-Orientated Marking	28
3. Pressing	46
4. Verticality	64
5. Rotations	82
6. Role of the Wide Players	100
7. Free 8s	118
8. Ben White	134
9. Stuart Dallas	152
10. Calvin Phillips	170
11. Mateusz Klich	188
12. Pablo Hernandez	206
13. Jack Harrison	224
14. Patrick Bamford	240
15. Anatomy of a Goal	255
1) Patrick Bamford vs Millwall	257
2) Luke Ayling vs Huddersfield Town	259
3) Pablo Hernandez vs Stoke City	261
4) Helder Costa vs Stoke City	263
5) Stuart Dallas vs Charlton Athletic	265
Conclusion	267

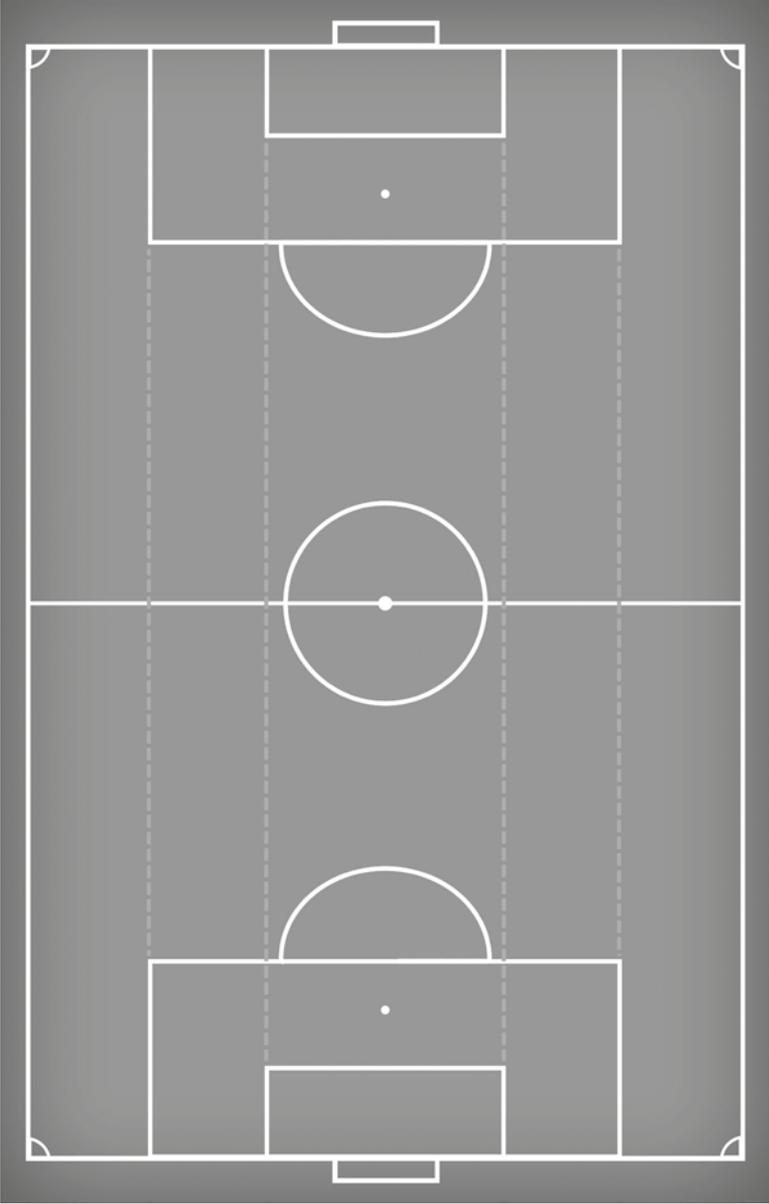


Figure 1

Chapter 1

4-1-4-1 or 3-3-1-3

When assessing the tactical model of Leeds under Marcelo Bielsa in the 2019/20 season, it makes sense that we first have to understand the structures that were used. There is an argument, of course, that formations in and of themselves do not matter. This is predicated on the belief that players' positions can be relatively fluid and based around other important reference points; the position of the ball, the position of the opposition and the position of your team-mates, for example. The truth, I believe, sits somewhere in the middle.

We cannot fully discount the importance of positional structures and team shape. Although at the same time, a coach like Bielsa has very specific tactical concepts both in and out of possession that can see players occupy different positions on the pitch depending on the factors that I have listed above. As you, the reader, progress through this book you will find that each chapter concentrates on these concepts one at a time before giving specific examples using key players from the season as case studies from a tactical perspective.

For most of his coaching career, Bielsa has been known for having a very specific tactical style of play. When he coached

MARCELO BIELSA

the Chilean national side, for example, they became known for playing an extremely aggressive 3-3-1-3 system which they rarely deviated from. While coaching in club football, however, Bielsa has shown a degree of tactical flexibility that belies his reputation as a coach who relies on one system above all. At Athletic Bilbao we began to see a willingness to morph into a more structured 4-1-4-1 system although the 3-3-1-3 was also still used. More recently, at Marseille, there were matches in which the tactical structure was primarily a 4-2-3-1 with a double pivot occupying the midfield zone.

Suddenly Bielsa was exhibiting a willingness to change structurally that was largely unexpected. What lay below these structures was incredibly interesting as whichever system was used in any given game, the underpinning tactical concepts that formed Bielsa's game model were still evident.

When Bielsa was appointed as the Leeds head coach on 15 June 2018, there was a sense of genuine excitement, and not just among Leeds fans but from those around the world who were fascinated by the tactical approach. So what would Bielsa do from a tactical point of view with players who were perhaps at a level below those with which he had worked in the past? The answer, in his first season at the club, was to play a loosely structured 4-1-4-1 system although there were some instances in which the 3-3-1-3 was used.

Going into the 2019/20 promotion season, however, there was a sense of a shift from a tactical perspective and that season saw 3-3-1-3 used more often, although the 4-1-4-1 was still the primary system of choice from Bielsa and his coaching staff. In order to fully understand why these two structures are so important to Bielsa, though, we have to first understand the difference between the two.

In order to achieve this we will break down each positional group one at a time to see how they act differently depending

4-1-4-1 OR 3-3-1-3

on the numerical structure. As a note, this will be done without reference to the goalkeeper who is a constant in the same position regardless of which structure we are discussing.

We will start then with the defensive line, which gives the greatest difference between the two structures. In terms of tactical concepts, one of the most famous that surrounds Bielsa is his preference to maintain a +1 structure on the first line (or defensive line), which means that he always wants to keep one defender more than the opposition have strikers. In other words, if the opposition are playing with one striker then Bielsa wants to have at least two central defenders. If the opposition plays with two strikers then he wants to have three central defenders and so on. This concept is built around the idea that Bielsa wants to maintain one free man on the first line. This provides cover and allows for additional flexibility in terms of his marking schemes. So, straight away we can see the value in having two defined tactical structures. In the first line the 3-3-1-3 allows for two markers and one free man while the 4-1-4-1 allows for one marker and one spare man. This is, of course, not including the full-backs in the 4-1-4-1 who have a more dynamic role which we will discuss later.

Next we will move to the following line and discuss the space between the defence and the midfield. Here, we have the '6' position that was made his own by a player developed through Leeds' own academy, Calvin Phillips. The role of the 6 is one of the most important in the Bielsa system as that player has so many responsibilities whether in or out of possession. In 4-1-4-1 the 6 is positioned on that line on his own and he has a larger defensive responsibility as he forms a defensive triangle with the two central defenders. This allows the central defenders to split wide in possession as they allow the 6 to control the central areas. In moments of quick transition from defence to attack from the opposition it is the 6 who is most proactive in moving to cover

space and denying the opposition the opportunity to attack the available space before the rest of the defensive block can reset.

In possession, it is not unusual to see the 6 take up a variety of positions in order to help with the progression of the ball. At times, he will drop back into the defensive line to form a three with the two central defenders. What is especially interesting about this movement is that this does not necessarily mean that he will drop centrally to split the central defenders wide. Instead, we will see the 6 situationally drop back to the sides of the two central defenders, into the space between the central defender and the full-back. This tends to happen when the opposition are pressing in a high and aggressive manner and the 6 dropping into that slot simply allows Leeds to change the angle of the build-up with a vertical passing option being more likely from that previously unoccupied positional slot.

In possession in the 4-1-4-1 the 6 is important for his ability to receive possession of the ball before playing vertically. We will examine the importance of 'verticality' to Bielsa in chapter three but the concept is simple. Instead of looking to maintain possession of the ball in these areas with passes back or to the side, the 6 is expected to hit a higher line wherever possible. When playing in this role, Phillips displays an excellent passing range with the ability to change the angle via long diagonal passes to the wingers or to find driven vertical passes into the central midfielders, who tend to move high, or the striker who can receive with his back to goal before linking with attacking team-mates. It is in the 4-1-4-1 that we then see the slightly different roles of the full-backs under Bielsa as it is not unusual, when Leeds are in possession, to see at least one of the two move into a more inverted position in order to support the 6 and provide a further option on that line.

In the 3-3-1-3, of course, the two full-backs, who have now become wing-backs, start, at least nominally on that second

4-1-4-1 OR 3-3-1-3

line along with the 6. The presence of a third central defender changes the role of the 6 in this shape somewhat with less of an expectation that this player holds a defensive structure with the central defenders. Instead, we tend to see the 6 roam more freely and look to take up supporting positions to allow the ball to be cleanly progressed through the thirds of the pitch. He will also move into spaces on the pitch that are vulnerable as the opposition looks to transition to the attack.

In the attacking phase the 6 is supported by the wing-backs who look to occupy the half-spaces. This allows the wide forwards in this attacking shape to isolate themselves in the wide lane against the opposition full-back and suddenly the spatial occupation from Leeds in the opposition half allows them to dominate and keep their opponents pressed in their own half. The role of the wing-backs in this system is key as their positioning is fluid and can change quickly depending on the location of the ball. They can support the wide player to form overloads against the opposition full-back or move inside to occupy the central spaces that are created when the central midfielders move on to occupy a higher line.

Next, we move on to the midfield line of the two structures – the four in 4-1-4-1 or the one in 3-3-1-3. First of all we will look at 4-1-4-1. Here, the line of four is made up of two central midfielders and two wide players. In the attacking phase the overriding characteristic of this line is that it moves high quickly. The wide players very much play as wingers and look to stay high and wide as Leeds are attacking. This movement profile is designed to achieve two clear aims from Bielsa. First of all, the wide positioning forces the opposition to commit defensive players to mark the wingers. This prevents the opposition from forming a deep and compact defensive block and creates space centrally that the central midfielders and striker can take advantage of. The second aim is to create opportunities for the

wide players on the weak side (furthest away from the ball) to isolate against the opposition full-back. The ball can then be played to this side where Leeds will have a one v one opportunity. The central midfielders also look to move high. They would often completely empty the central area of the pitch and leave a gap between their line and that of Phillips as the 6. This would mean that when the ball was played vertically, again referring to the concept of verticality, the midfielders or 8s would be positioned on a line that is close to the centre-forward.

In the 3-3-1-3 we are, of course, only referring to a single player on this line and most often this would be the Polish international midfielder Mateusz Klich. In this system the central midfielder has been described by Bielsa as his '*enganche*' – this is a term used in Argentina to describe a team's 'number 10'; the player who links the midfield and attack. It is in this role that Klich in particular has excelled. He tends to play across the full width of the pitch and can be seen on a regular basis moving into the half-space or wide area in order to further overload the opposition in this area.

The role of the central midfielders, or 8s, is similar in the 4-1-4-1. Here we saw Klich partnered with several different players although the experienced Spaniard Pablo Hernandez made this position his own towards the end of the season. In this system the two 8s will push forward to link with the striker or provide rotation options in the wide areas. In doing so they naturally stretch the space between them and the 6 and this is where the full-backs are again important as they can look to occupy these central spaces situationally to allow for the ball to be circulated through the central area of the pitch.

Lastly, we have to consider the highest line. In the 3-3-1-3 there are, of course, three players on this line with two wide forwards and a single '9'. The wide forwards perform the same roles as the wide midfielders in the 4-1-4-1 and tend to stay high

4-1-4-1 OR 3-3-1-3

and wide. The 9 on the other hand tends to stay either centrally or in the half-spaces where he can receive the ball with his back to goal before linking play. When the ball is progressed to the final third, the 9 then looks to make intelligent movements to attack the spaces that the opposition leave unoccupied in the penalty area. Patrick Bamford was Bielsa's preferred option as the 9 throughout the promotion-winning season and although he gained a reputation for missing chances his technical ability allowed him to play the role that his head coach wanted perfectly. The role of the 4-1-4-1 is, of course, identical from the 9's point of view.

Now that we have discussed the theory around the two systems we will go through some practical examples to show how each line interacts and works with one another.

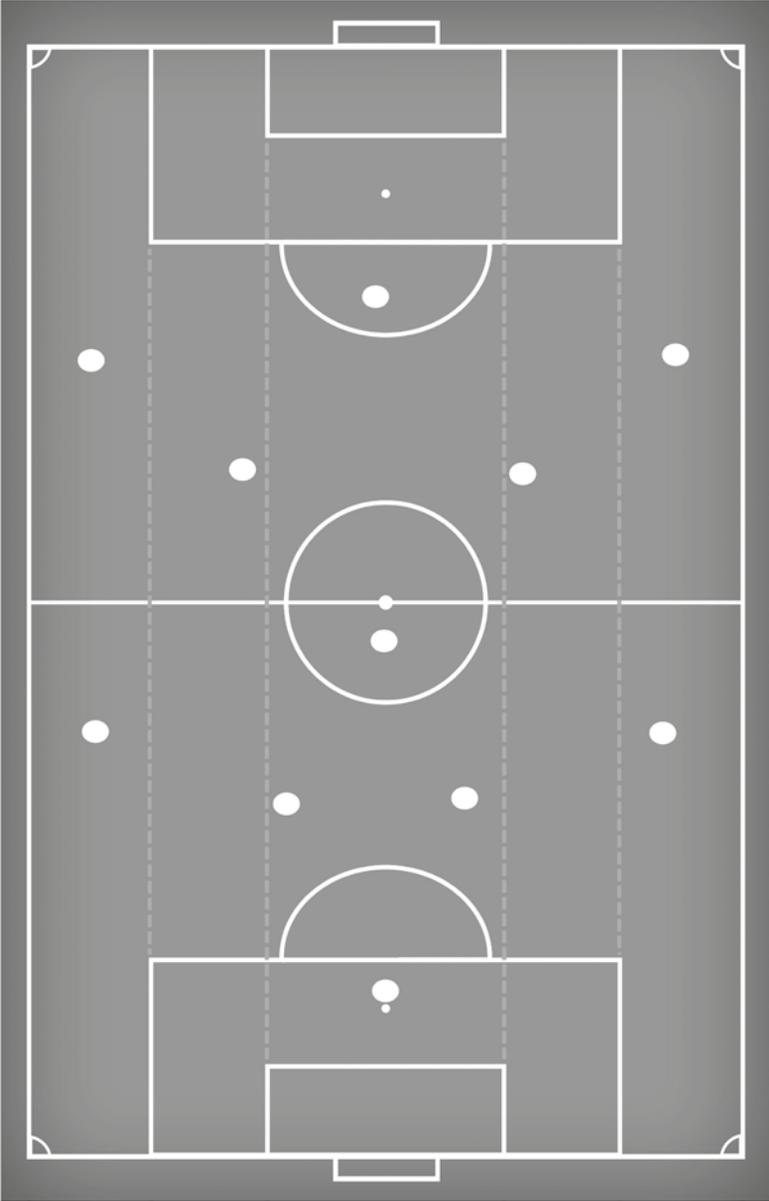


Figure 2

First of all we will break down the positional structures of the two shapes that we have been discussing in this chapter. While I appreciate that there are some among you who are more than comfortable picturing the systems and positions from what was written above, there are others who would prefer a more visual representation of what we have been talking about so far.

First of all we have the 4-1-4-1 system and it has been plotted without any opposition shape so that we have full clarity.

The first line is the defensive line with four players across the pitch. When Leeds have possession, of course, that line shifts with the full-backs moving high or into central spaces to support the attacking phase.

Next, we have a line of one with the 6 sitting in the space between the first line and the third line. This line is one of the keys to the way that Bielsa wants to play the 4-1-4-1 as he is not only expected to provide defensive strength and cover, he also becomes one of the key ball progressors for his side.

The third line has four midfielders with two central 8s and two wide players. As with the first line, however, the positioning here is largely nominal as all four players will move quickly into advanced positions when Leeds are in possession. Both 8s move high to link with the highest line and the two wide players stretch wide and move high. Even when out of possession we do not necessarily see a structured midfield block from the third line as each player will mark their individual man closely.

Finally we have the last line with, of course, only one player. The 9 here has an important role as they need to find pockets of space or create separation from the defensive players in order to provide an option to receive the ball as Leeds play to the highest line.