

# MASTERING THE PREMIER LEAGUE

THE TACTICAL CONCEPTS BEHIND PEP GUARDIOLA'S MANCHESTER CITY

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## *Chapter 1*

# Playing Out from the Back

It has become a common sight when watching Manchester City under Pep Guardiola to see the central defenders and goalkeeper engaging in periods of combination football that would not be out of place around the opposition penalty area. Such is the ability with the ball that these players possess, they are able to receive the ball in tight areas under extreme pressure.

We saw the importance placed on this concept by Guardiola in the way that he approached the goalkeeper position upon being appointed. The first choice goalkeeper at City when the Spaniard took charge was England international Joe Hart. It took no time at all for Guardiola to assert that Hart would not be part of his plans; there were huge doubts surrounding his ability to play with the ball at his feet under pressure.

Initially, we saw City turn to Barcelona, and they signed Chilean international Claudio Bravo. Unfortunately, this move proved to be largely disastrous and by the start of the 2017/18 season, the club were forced back into the transfer market again,

this time securing the signature of the Brazilian international Ederson from Portuguese giants Benfica.

So far in his career in England, we have seen Ederson gain plaudits not only for his shot-stopping ability but also for his distribution and ability to contribute to the build-up phase.

The ability to control possession in the attacking phase from the defensive third is a key concept for the game model installed by Guardiola at City.

In order for them to be able to play forward through the thirds and create opportunities in the final third, the initial ball out from the back has to be clean. In order to achieve this clean ball progression, there are certain automatic movements that we see time and time again from City depending on the numerical match-ups faced by their defensive players. If the opposition only commits one player to press the ball in the initial moments then the build-up is fairly simple as the two central defenders split to the sides of the penalty area and form a wide triangle with the goalkeeper and outplay the pressing player. When the opposition starts to press with more players then the situation becomes progressively more complex. Two pressing players will see the deepest sitting midfielder drop back to give a passing option and provide numerical superiority for the pass. A third pressing player sees a further option added for City with either a full-back or one of the two more advanced central midfielders dropping back in order to secure the clean progression of the ball. Indeed, there is a simple formula to the idea behind this style of ball progression: the +1 rule.

In order to secure the ball and enable the play to develop from the defensive third into the more advanced areas, City need to create numerical superiority over their opponents.

The basic idea, therefore, is to have at least one more player offering passing options from the first moment of the build-up of play than the opposition has committed to pressing the ball. This should always ensure that there is at least one free player available to receive a pass.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule: there are some opponents, Liverpool for example, who press intelligently using angled runs that allow one pressing player to cover two City players. When faced with sides that adopt a more intelligent pressing model we tend to see City use more complex rotations to ensure that they are still able to play through the press.

It is important to note that the above does not mean that City look to play the short pass out from the goalkeeper every single time. With Ederson in goal, there is the option to play a slightly more direct pass over a medium range that can bypass the press and find a player in space behind the opposition press. This option is contrary to the belief that many people held after Guardiola's first season at City that the Spaniard was so focused on a single model of play that he would not allow any deviation from that model. Instead, we see City adopt a flexible approach to their game model, in possession, that can be adapted depending on the tactical approach that is used by the opposition. This makes it far more difficult for opposing coaches to develop and install an effective defensive game plan when they are preparing to face City. Should they press high and in numbers and give up the medium pass over the top to the full-backs or central midfielders? Or should they drop slightly deeper and allow City to progress the ball from the goalkeeper in a clean and easy manner? Now, after three seasons in the Premier League, the majority of coaches, and

even casual fans and pundits, can see what City want to do at the beginning of their attacking phase. The issue is that reacting to stop one aspect of the City build-up leaves you wide open to another. You are essentially damned if you do and damned if you don't.

It is this impossible choice that makes it so difficult to play against this City side and to prevent them from securing safe possession of the ball. There are times in which sides will adopt a high press against City as they are progressing the ball up from the first third. It is a mark of the importance that Guardiola places on this concept that the coach is willing to allow for his defensive players to make mistakes when playing out in this manner.

In the early stages of his tenure as coach, there were points in the season where the media were critical of the mistakes made by the central defender John Stones in particular. Whenever Guardiola was questioned by these media outlets about the mistakes being made by the young defender, the coach was vocal in his support for the players, stating that any mistakes were the responsibility of the coaching staff who were working in training to implement their game model. This support from Guardiola and the other first-team coaches allowed the players in the defensive unit to learn and assimilate all of the information being fed to them in a safe environment. It would have been easy for the players to have taken the criticism on board and then started playing more direct passes whenever they came under pressure. Instead, they remained calm and kept trying to play out through pressure until it became second nature for them.

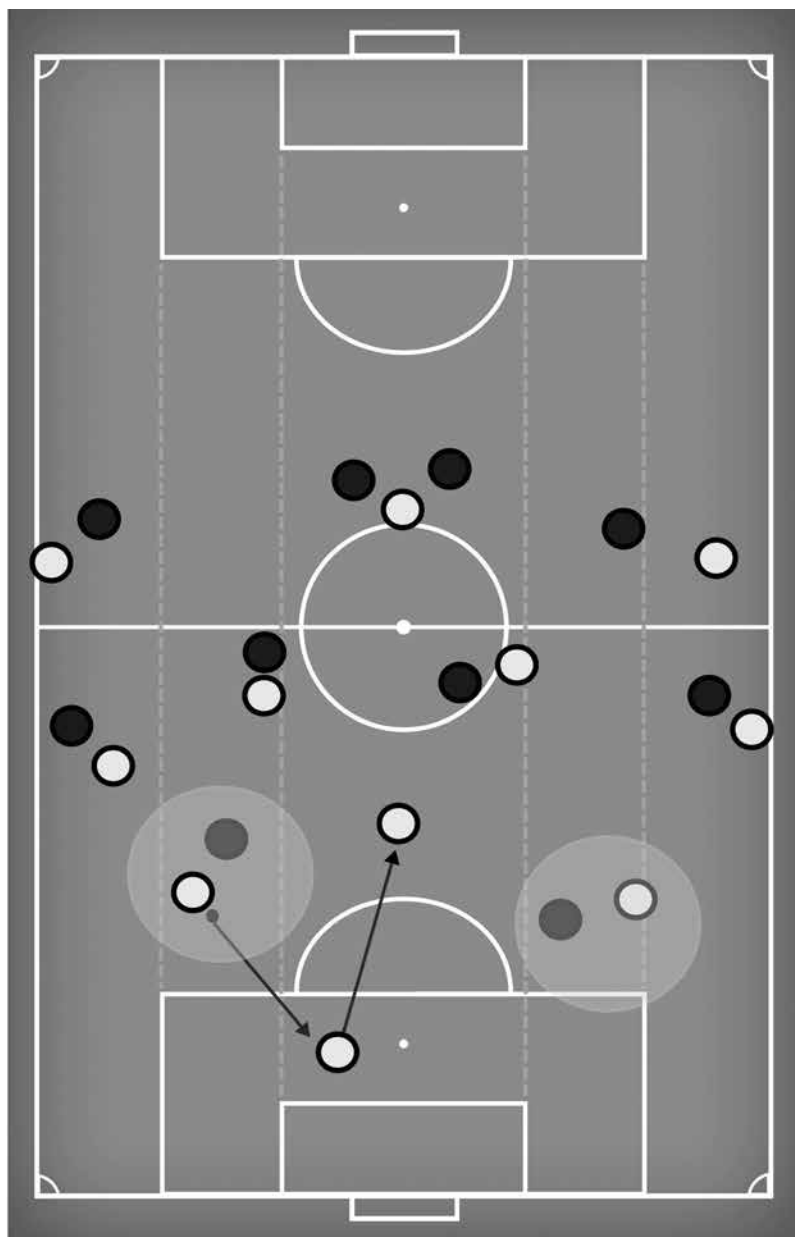


Figure 2



The most important aspect of this tactical concept is the ability for City to develop numerical superiority against their opponent when they are looking to build up from the back. This means, very simply, that they need to have one more player in a position to receive the ball than the opposition has applying pressure.

In *figure 2*, we see a simple example of City in possession of the ball just outside their penalty area. Both central defenders are closely marked but the man in possession, the left-sided central defender, is able to use the supporting position of Ederson in goal to play back. It is at this point that we see the first part of the concept really come into play. While the two central defenders are being engaged, the number '6' is not. The two defenders will split into wider positions, aware that this will drag the two opposition attackers with them, and this will leave Ederson with a simple vertical pass through to the '6' as he drops centrally.

The concept works the same way if City have a 3v2 situation but the pressure is on one central defender and the '6'. The free man will simply drop into a pocket of space so that they can receive the pass and play out of the press. If the opposition press with more than two players then one of the full-backs or one of the two central midfielders then comes into play in order to ensure that City continue to have the numerical advantage.

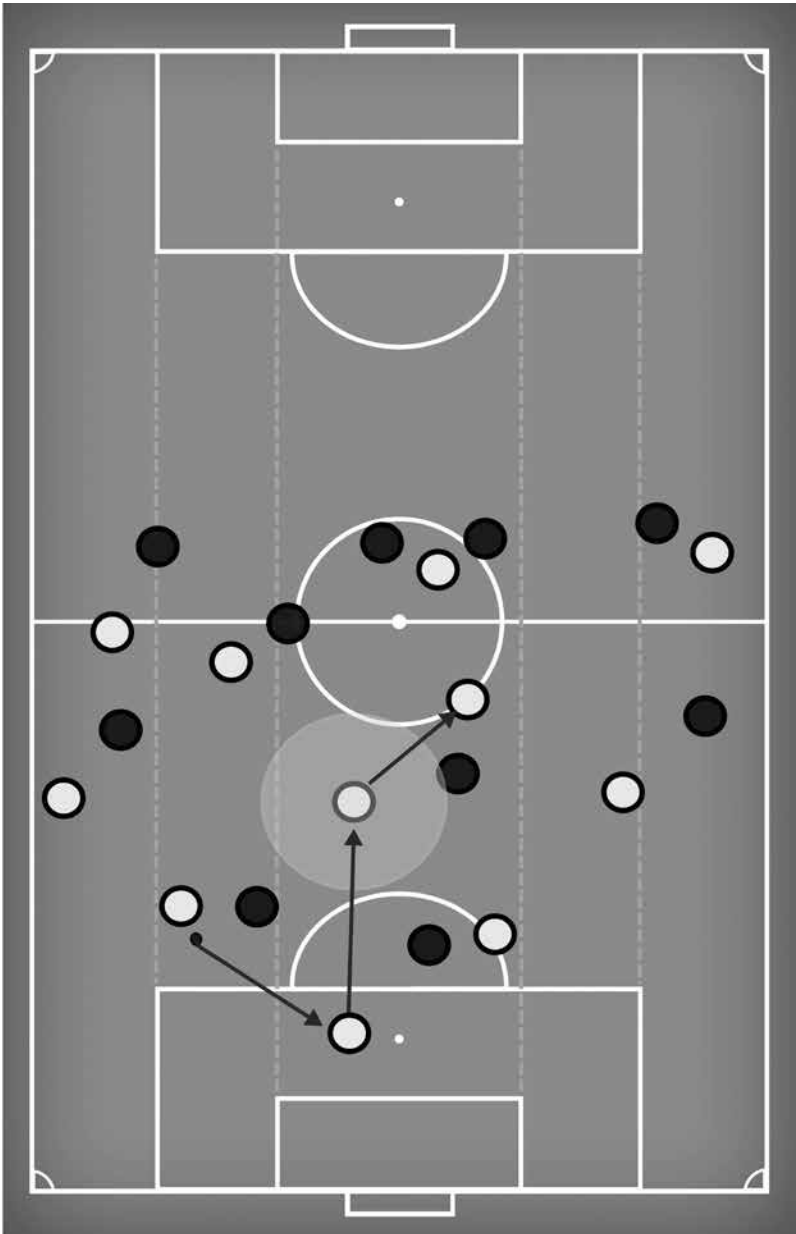


Figure 3

In *figure 3* we see a somewhat similar example with the '6' once again operating as the free man when City are trying to build out from their defence. The same principle applies as the ball is first passed back into Ederson before the Brazilian goalkeeper escapes the pressure with a vertical pass to the '6'. This time, however, the pass is riskier as the space between the two central defenders, and therefore the pressing opponents, is much tighter.

It is only logical to think that a large part of the recruitment plan that led City to sign Ederson prior to the 2017/18 season was the ability of the Brazilian to contribute with his feet. It is situations like this that informed this decision. As Ederson takes possession, the structure ahead of him is actually relatively set. The two full-backs have advanced forward, but only to the same line as the '6'. This 'line' refers to a horizontal line across the pitch. Most attacking structures involve players positioning themselves on lines that allow for the ball to be progressed using passes at different angles. Here, in order to secure the safe progression of the ball, the two full-backs are ready to drop back, either centrally or wide, in order to provide a passing option to bypass the press.

As the ball is progressed from Ederson to the '6' he is then able to simply turn away from pressure and feed the ball forward to a more advanced team-mate. All of this is possible due to the knowledge that the City players have of the angles and lines they need to occupy.

As the ball is progressed into higher areas of the field, the role that Ederson plays in enabling the progression of the ball is lessened. Instead, the '6' and the two full-backs take on a greater role. This is especially true when Kyle Walker plays at right-back and Aymeric Laporte at left-back. Both can be seen moving inside in order to receive the ball on the same line as the central defenders, to allow for the ball to be played forward.

On occasions, it can look as though City are passing the ball without real purpose when they rotate the ball across the defensive line. In fact, each player receiving the ball looks for a vertical pass into the midfield as a priority before moving the ball across once more. If the clear pass into the midfield, often beyond the line of pressure, is not on then the ball moves to the next man.

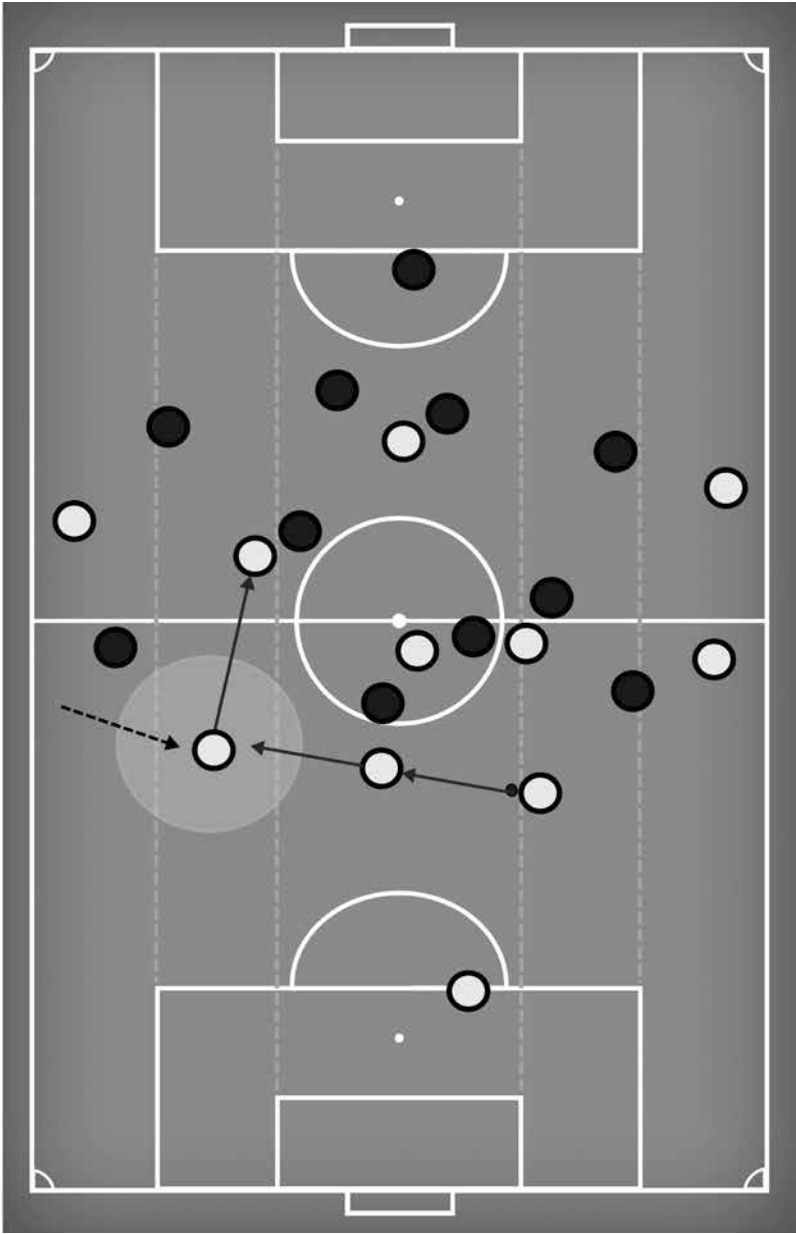


Figure 4

In *figure 4* we see the ball being shifted across to the left-back who has moved infield slightly to occupy the left half-space. This small piece of movement allows the left-back to receive the ball and then play forward to the central midfielder who is on a higher line in the same half-space. With the opposition defensive block concentrated on the opposite side of the field, City are able to bypass it due to the speed at which the ball is moved across and then forward.

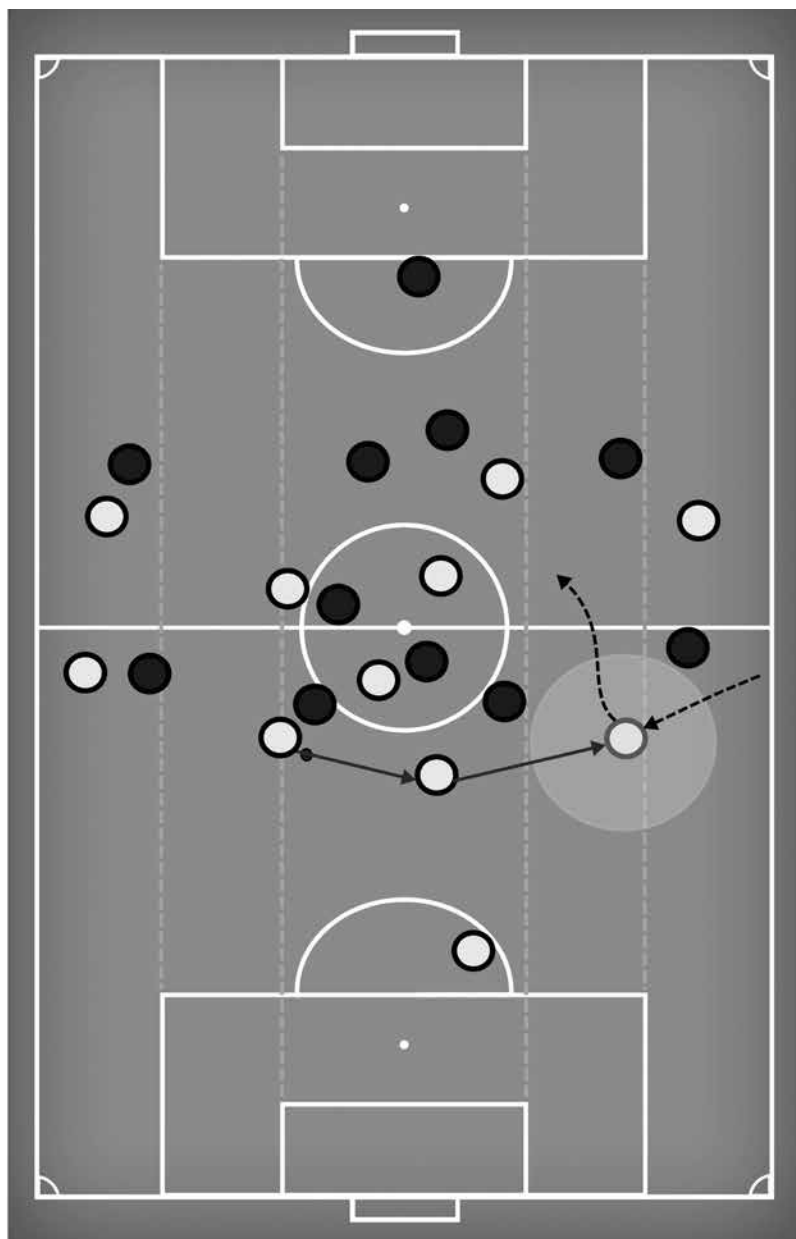


Figure 5

While at left-back Aymeric Laporte is a more cautious player who will look to distribute the ball in the first instance, Kyle Walker is more likely to use other options with which to progress the ball forwards. In *figure 5* we see the ball being cycled across the defensive line once again. As the ball reaches Walker, however, this time instead of passing forwards beyond the line of pressure, he would drive forward in possession of the ball and dribble past the defensive block of the opposition. Having a player capable of carrying the ball in this manner from the defensive line is hugely beneficial, as a single player running with the ball can force the opposition defenders to have to move out of position in order to engage the ball. This movement then creates space in behind that can be exploited by the more advanced players for City.

We often see City use this method of forcing the opposition defensive block to engage often when the other team are trying to sit in a deep and passive block, meaning they are unwilling to press and be caught out of position. City will use their full-backs or even their central defenders to dribble forward with the ball. As soon as the opposing defenders move out to engage the space that they have vacated, they will be ruthlessly exploited by the more creative players in the City squad.

A player such as Walker collecting possession on the same line as the defenders represents a dual threat for the opposition. He is capable of driving forward, as seen above, or passing through the lines into advanced areas. This tactical understanding of the game model implemented by Pep Guardiola explains why Walker has been a mainstay in this team under the City boss.

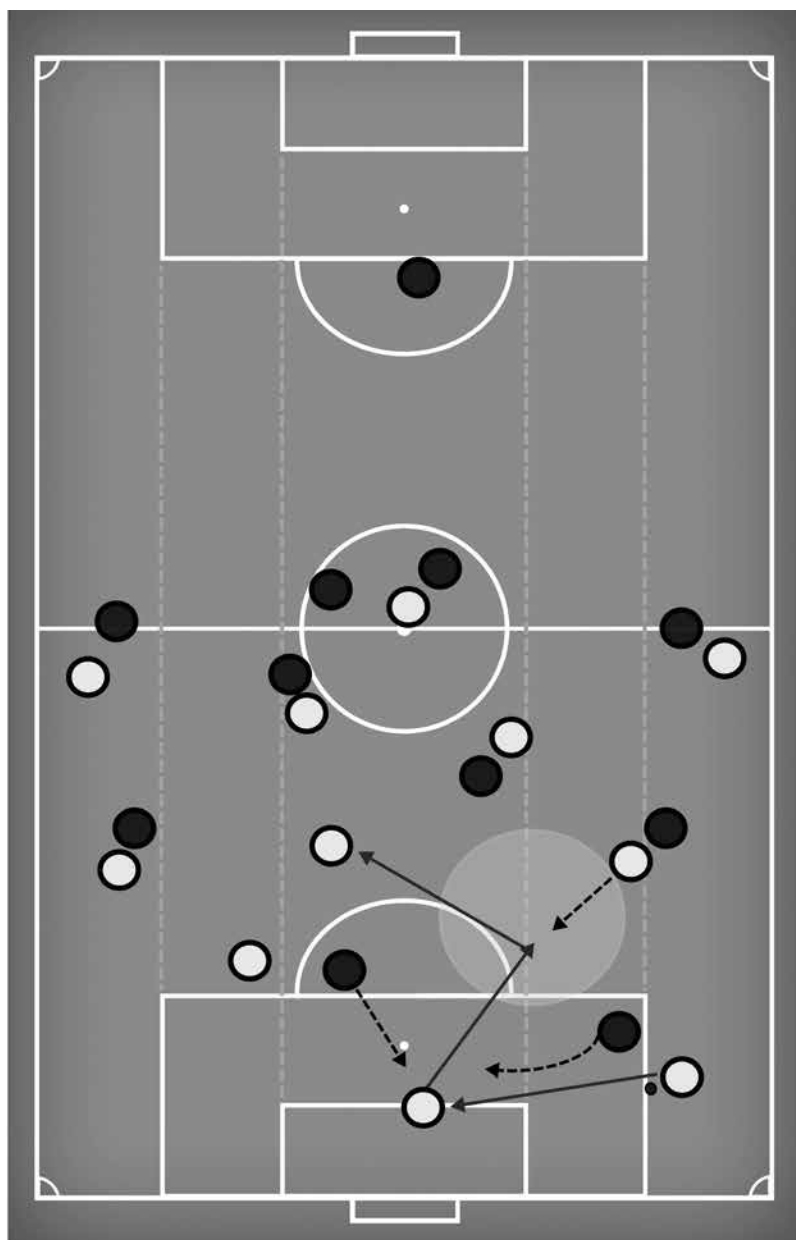


Figure 6



As we touched upon previously, there are times when looking to progress the ball that City use the full-backs to move the ball cleanly past the opposition block. In *figure 6* the ball is originally with the deepest defender. He is under pressure and so accesses the supporting position given by Ederson in goal. Normally in this situation with two opposition attackers pressing, we would see City create a numerical advantage using the '6'. The opposition attacker on the far side, however, is pressing the pass to the goalkeeper and he angles his run to cover both the second central defender and the '6'.

With more time the second central defender would drop quickly to the wide section of the penalty area. This would allow the goalkeeper to escape the press and retain possession. With the press from the forward coming too quickly, the goalkeeper has to react quicker. The right-back then drops back into the right half-space where he creates a clear passing lane that the goalkeeper can use to progress the ball.

We often see City make these movements with the ball first coming out to a player occupying the half-space before moving into the central areas, either to the '6' or to one of the two more advanced central midfielders.

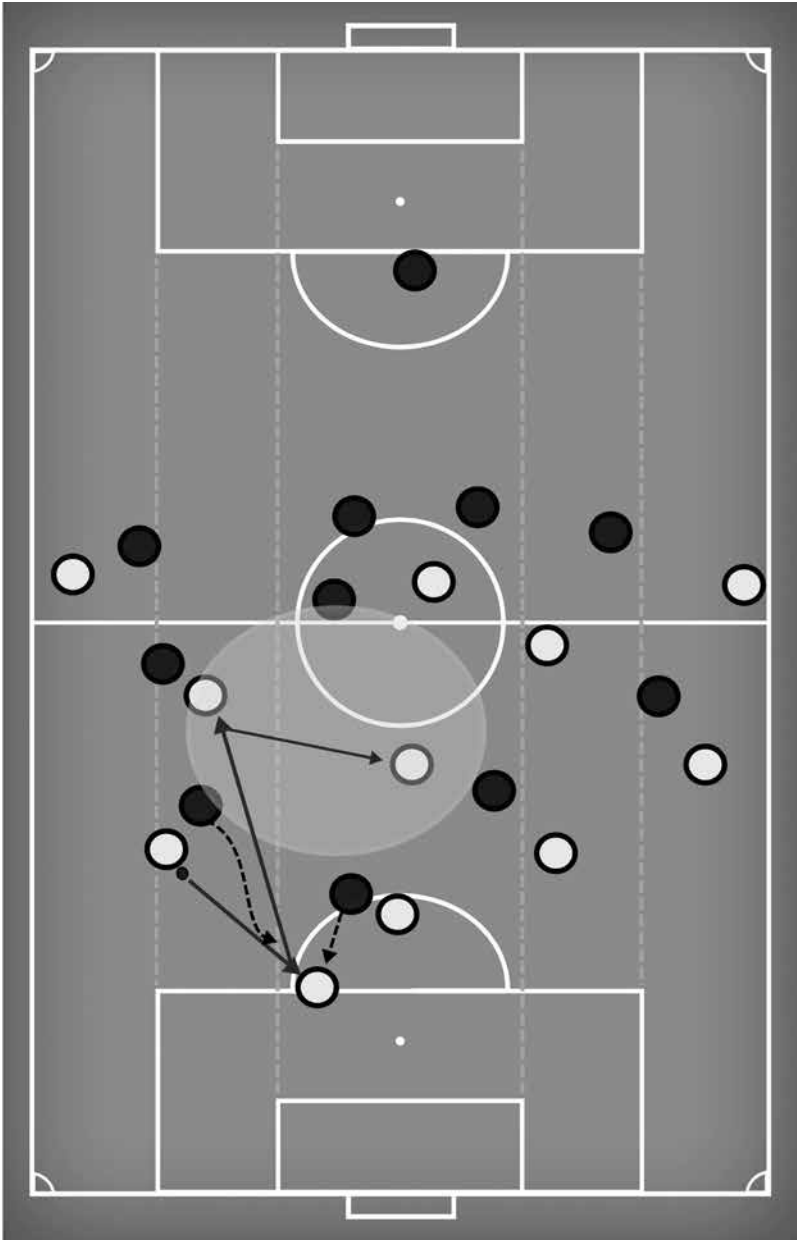


Figure 7

With the passing ability of Ederson in goal, the manner with which City progress the ball from the back is greatly altered. His ability to use the ball allows City to create structures that let them outplay the opposition from a variety of positions. In *figure 7* the opposition press is once again preventing City from easily playing out.

The angle and proximity of the two pressing players again means that Ederson has to play quickly to avoid being closed down and potentially losing the ball.

The movement in order to create the passing lane and allow the ball to be played through this time comes from the central midfielder, who drops back from his advanced position into the half-space to receive the pass through. The pass when it is made splits between the two pressing players for the opposition and once again City are able to play into more advanced areas comfortably, bypassing opposition players who have allowed themselves to be forced out of position.

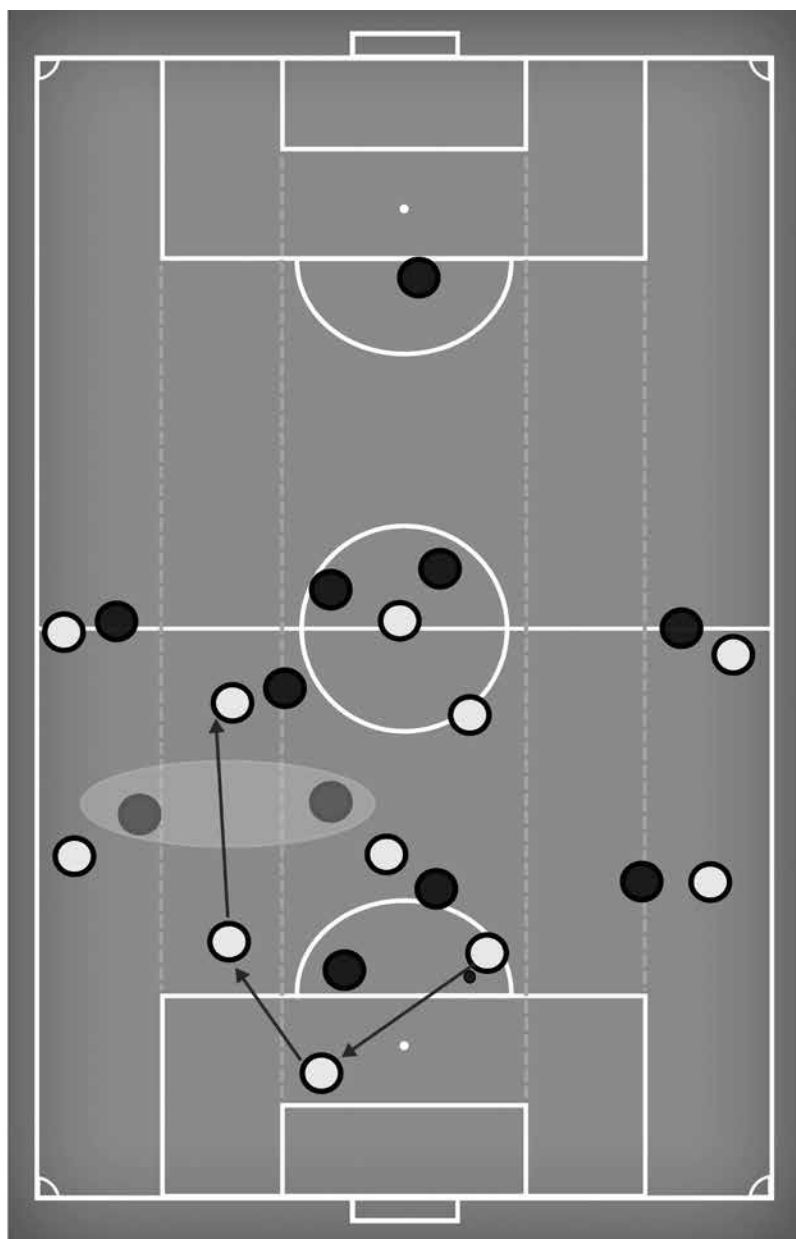


Figure 8

The final aspect of this concept that we need to discuss comes in the desire of City to progress the ball forwards into the central areas while breaking the lines of the opposition through vertical passes. In *figure 8* we clearly see this in action. Once again the initial pass comes back from a central defender to Ederson. As the goalkeeper takes possession of the ball he is able to open his body and play out to the second central defender around the pressing players.

It is at this point that City will look to play forward into more advanced areas of the field. The opposition defensive structure is not compact and they have allowed themselves to be pulled up to apply pressure to City. As the central defender takes possession of the ball he is able to turn upfield under little immediate pressure.

There are two opposition players ahead of the man in possession on the same line. The central defender is able to play a vertical pass between these two players that splits their line of pressure and finds the more advanced central midfielder in space behind them. As soon as this pass is completed, City have created an advanced platform from which they can launch their attacking move. These advanced platforms behind the opposition lines are incredibly effective for City.

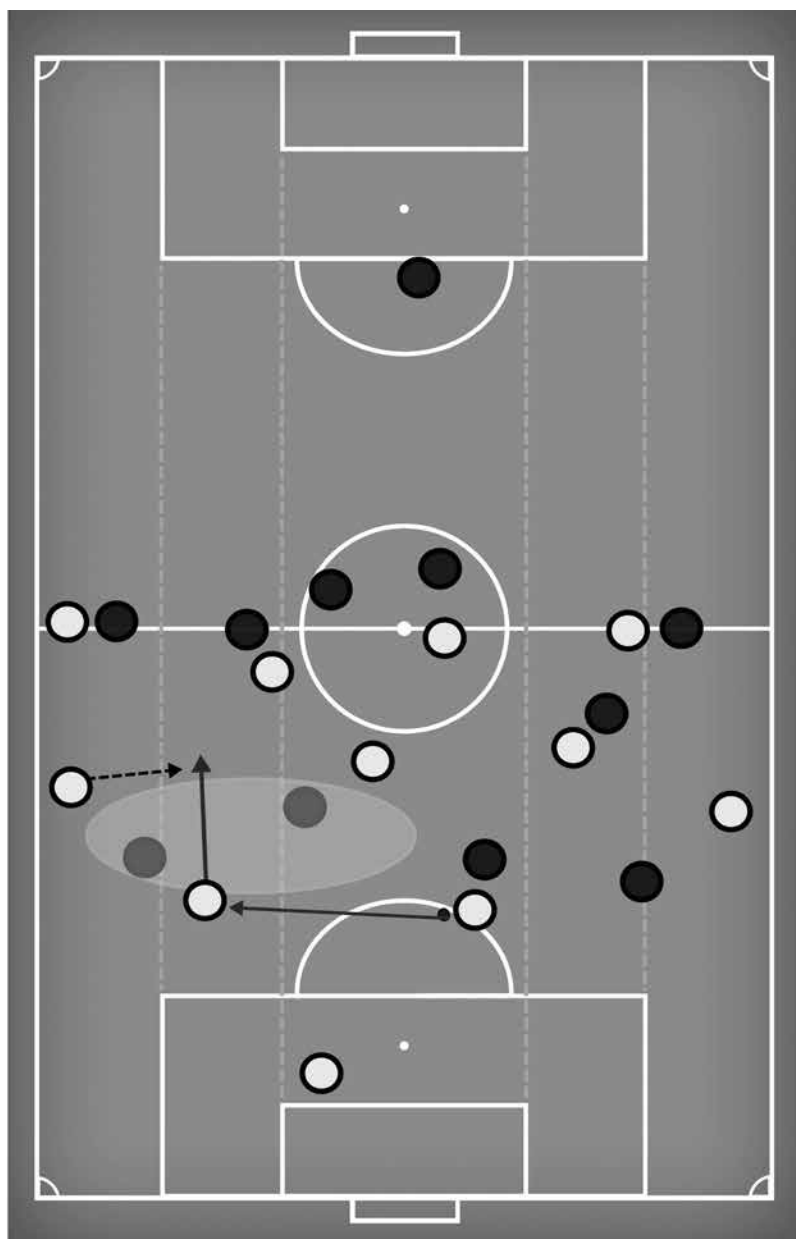


Figure 9

*Figure 9* shows a similar situation with the ball this time progressed across between the two central defenders. This time as the left-sided central defender takes possession of the ball he is faced with two opposition players in close proximity to him. These players, however, are not compact and a clever piece of movement from the left-back allows the ball to be easily played through this line into space.

As the central defender takes possession of the ball, the left-back makes a small lateral movement from the wide area into the left half-space. This movement creates a passing lane for the man in possession through the two closest defensive players. As soon as the pass connects with the full-back they are able to collect the ball and either drive through towards the halfway line or continue with the passing move upfield.

These small tactical movements allow Manchester City to effectively and safely progress the ball forward and through the opposition. The most clever aspect of these pieces of play is that they are so flexible. Whatever the opposition choose to do in order to press the ball we see City having an answer. They create numerical advantages that allow them to play forward into central areas and use clever positioning in order to create passing lanes for the goalkeeper or central defenders to use.

The concepts used by City in these areas are not complicated, and nor should they be, but this does not mean that they are easily stopped. There are some teams who will press high and hard in an attempt to prevent City from playing out of these areas; this is when we see Ederson accessing his range of passing to play the ball over the press into central areas.