

Džeko and Lukaku in the CL Final 2023

Inter Milan striker partnership

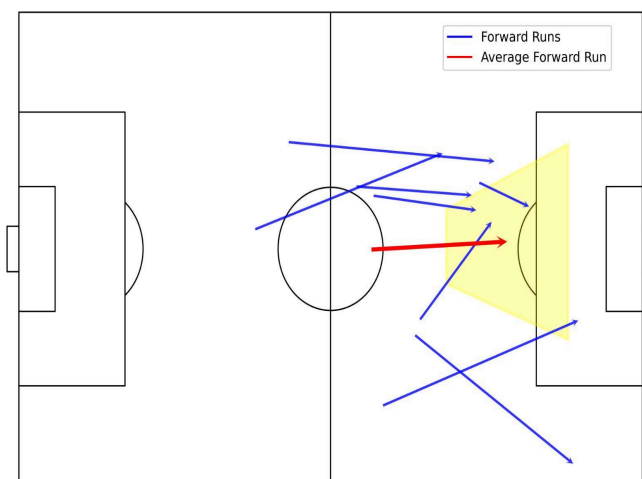
In this analysis, using tracking data for the Champions League final between Inter Milan and Manchester City we examine the attacking runs made by Inter's forwards Edin Džeko and Romelu Lukaku. Although their side was unable to secure a victory, the duo made numerous attacking runs that highlighted both their similar qualities and their distinct traits. Simone Inzaghi's 3-5-2 formation played a key role in Inter Milan's successful Champions League campaign, with the team suffering only two losses in the group stage (both against Bayern Munich). This formation allowed Inter to remain defensively solid while maintaining a high Expected Goals (xG) rate, even without a heavy reliance on possession.

The partnership between the two forwards was a standout feature, adding a dynamic edge to the attack. Lautaro Martínez as the main man usually partnered with Džeko or Lukaku. The selected duo would often have different roles in the attack. One striker would stay high while the other would drop deeper to link play. This would also create pockets of space for the strikers as they interchanged frequently confusing the opposition. In addition, Džeko and Lukaku, standing at 192 cm tall, offered a physical presence in aerial duels and were instrumental when crosses were a key offensive option.

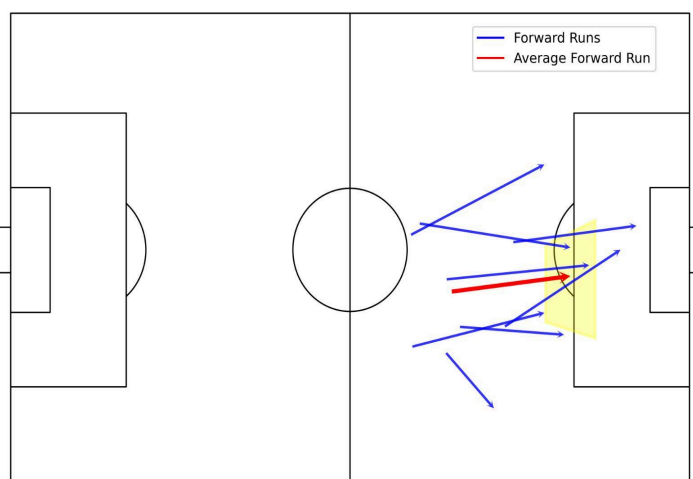
Attacking runs variety

In the 2023 Champions League final, Inzaghi opted for Martínez and Džeko as his starting forward partnership. Martínez played the full match, while Džeko was replaced by Lukaku in the 57th minute due to injury. Manchester City won the match 1-0, with Rodri scoring the only goal in the 68th minute. Although the two strikers couldn't secure a victory, they made several forward runs while Inter Milan was in possession. The following two graphs display their forward runs, with the red arrow indicating the average distance and angle of each run. The shaded yellow area represents the standard deviation for both the distance and angle of the runs. A larger area indicates greater variability in the distance and angle of the runs.

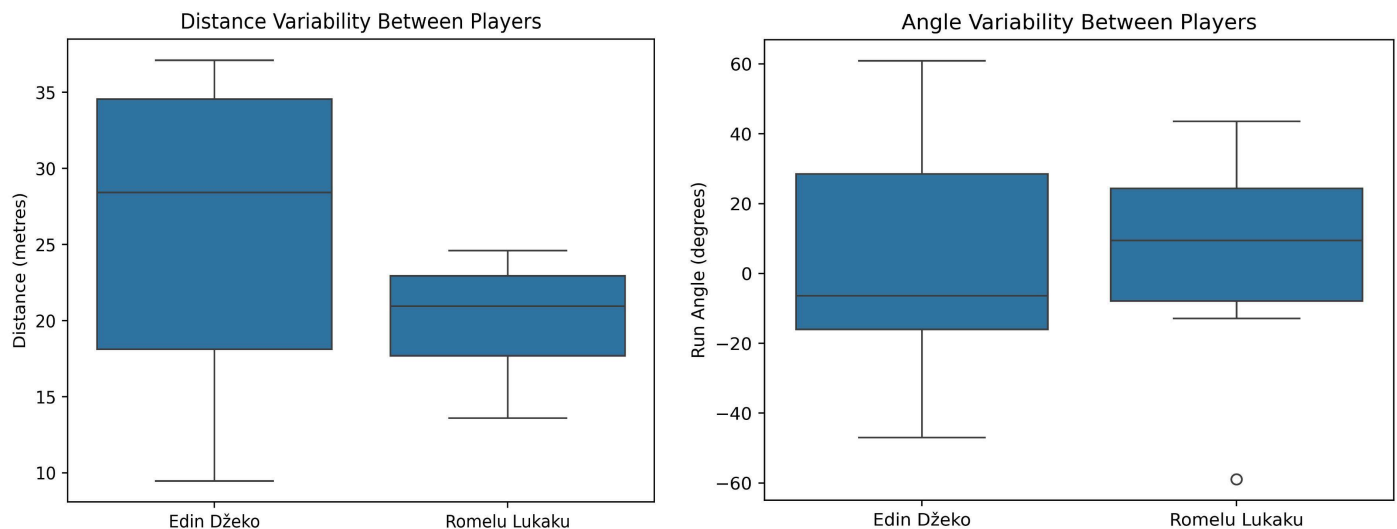
Edin Džeko's runs



Romelu Lukaku's runs



Both players made 8 forward runs while Inter Milan was in possession of the ball even though Lukaku was on the pitch for less time. Džeko's runs were more varied and spread out, while Lukaku's runs were more compact and consistent. Overall, Džeko's runs covered greater distances on average, while Lukaku's runs showed less variability in terms of angle. To further analyze the yellow shaded areas in the previous graphs, two boxplots are provided, comparing the run distance and run angle for both players.



The boxplots reveal that while both players made central runs, they differed significantly in terms of variability in their run distance and angle. Džeko's runs showed much more variety, both in distance and angle, while Lukaku's runs were more consistent and standardized. This difference could be attributed to the game situation: Inter Milan was not trailing while Džeko was on the field, allowing for more flexibility in his movement. In contrast, Lukaku was introduced later to chase a potential equalizer, which likely led him to focus on making more direct, aggressive runs towards the penalty area.

Animating the action

Although neither player scored, Lukaku missed a big chance with a total xG of 0.56, while Džeko, who had no shots, recorded an xG of 0. Despite this, Džeko's off-the-ball movement was key in creating space for his teammates, boosting the team's overall xG. To illustrate this, I've attached an mp4 file, *RunDžeko*, showing player locations, direction, and acceleration. In the animation, Manchester City players are represented by sky-blue circles, while Inter Milan players are in dark blue.

In *RunDžeko*, we focus on the dark blue number 9, Džeko. His well-timed run towards Barella (23) draws Gündoğan (8) out of position, creating space for Çalhanoğlu (20), who advances and passes to Dimarco (32) on the left. Dimarco attempts a cross, with Džeko free on the right after making a second run in the same possession. However, the cross is too short, and the action is blocked. This sequence demonstrates how Džeko created space for his teammates without directly involving himself in the possession chain. There are many other runs in this game and throughout the 2022/2023 Champions League campaign that highlight how strikers can contribute to the team without possessing the ball.