

JUL. 13, 2018, AT 11:51 AM

# France Is Rich With Offense But Is Winning With Defense

Croatia will have few opportunities to spark an upset.

By Michael Caley

Filed under 2018 World Cup



Paul Pogba celebrates France's first goal during its semifinal against Belgium. SIMON STACPOOLE / OFFSIDE / GETTY IMAGES

France entered the European Championships in 2016 with perhaps the most talented squad, and Les Bleus beat fellow tournament favorite Germany in the semifinal. A final matchup loomed against a less-heralded Portugal, which had never won the tournament. [Portugal had played a defensive style that bottled up the midfield](#) and limited opposition attacking opportunities.

Sound familiar?

In this World Cup, France knocked off two former champions from South America before winning its semifinal over Belgium, the next-best team remaining in the tournament [according to FiveThirtyEight's Soccer Power Index](#). Croatia, like Portugal in 2016, has never won a major tournament and got to the final through [a comparatively easy draw](#). In the 2016 final, Portugal managed to stymie France and won its first ever European championship on an extra-time strike. Will this international final see another upset and first-time winner, or will the French golden generation bring a second-ever cup home?

Croatia is a clear underdog — as it was in the semifinals against England — and there's reason to believe the task ahead is even more difficult than it seems. SPI rates France as a solid 59 percent favorite to win. Through the tournament and even in qualifying, [as Mike Goodman pointed out before the games started](#), it has been clear how France would choose to play. Despite an incredible blend of world-class attacking talent, Les Bleus set up first to prevent opposition chances and win on defense. And they have. France has conceded just four goals in six matches — three of which came against Argentina in the round of 16. And Didier Deschamps's team has even better underlying numbers, with about 0.6 expected goals conceded per match.

## The blue wall

Teams with the fewest expected goals allowed per match in the 2018 World Cup

TEAM	EXPECTED GOALS ALLOWED
Uruguay	0 . 50
Brazil	0 . 56
<b>France</b>	<b>0 . 61</b>
Senegal	0 . 64
Australia	0 . 76
England	0 . 89
Croatia	1 . 00
Sweden	1 . 00
Spain	1 . 02
Portugal	1 . 10

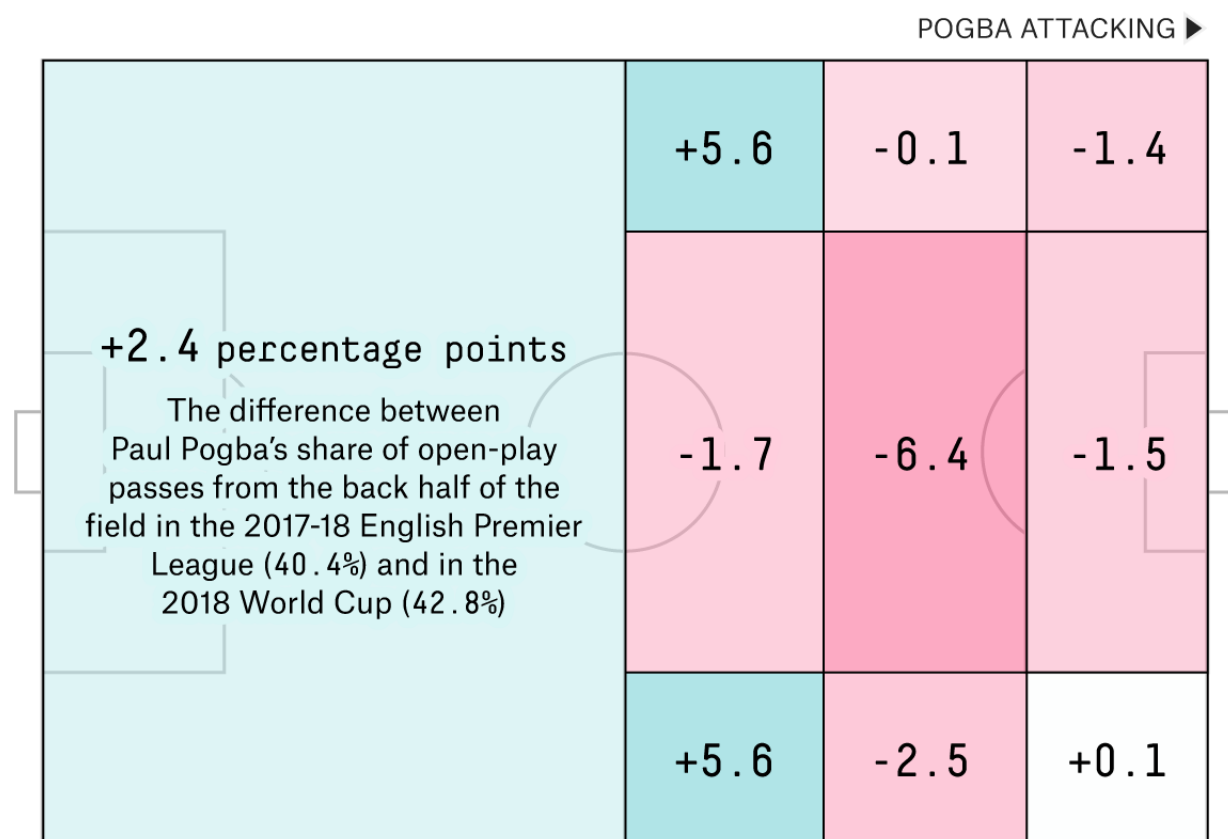
SOURCE: OPTA SPORTS

Three players exemplify how the French approach works. First is N'Golo Kante. He may be the world's premier open-play defender. Kante has averaged about 7.5 tackles or interceptions per 90 minutes since 2014-2015, most in the world among players with at least 8,000 minutes played in league and Champions League play those four seasons. Brazil's Casemiro, at 7.04, is the only other player with more than 7. Kante's talents prevented [Leicester City's open attack from leaking goals](#) during the Foxes' miracle title campaign, and they then helped Chelsea rebound to a title after falling out of the top four the previous season. He is the primary

reason that France so rarely concedes good chances. But instead of giving Kante the job of cleaning up midfield himself, as he often does for his club teams, Deschamps gives him added protection with the deployment of Paul Pogba.

Pogba is a great playmaker who does much of his best work in more advanced areas. With France, Pogba is reserved, and his forays into the final third are limited.

### Pogba is passing from further back in his World Cup play



FiveThirtyEight

SOURCE: OPTA SPORTS

Pogba has much more rarely gotten into the final third to create, passing instead more from deep and wide areas. This has kept him from being particularly dangerous in the attack, where his shot involvement has dropped by 4.6 shots attempted or assisted per 90 minutes with Manchester United to 2.8 for France. But in this disciplined, defensive role, the midfielder has found ways to affect the game, most recently with six attempted tackles and two penalty area clearances against Belgium. Pogba has been asked to trade his usual attacking production for defense, and so far, the plan has worked.

The one man on France who doesn't seem limited by these tactics is Kylian Mbappe. With Pogba playing deep, Mbappe has been asked to move the attack through the final third. He has attempted 52 take-ons, most in the tournament — a rate of about

10.6 per 90 minutes. Mbappe is a dangerous dribbler, but for Paris Saint-Germain last season, he averaged 6.4 take-ons per 90. If you're hoping for excitement from France, wait for Mbappe to get on the ball. He will be looking to beat a defender or two, and that will be the primary danger France poses in open play. Otherwise, Les Bleus will be focus on defending.

Will this strategy work against Croatia? Deschamps has to trust that his attack will produce goals even while outnumbered in the final third, while the midfielders trail the play. If Mbappe cannot progress the ball for his teammates, a long and scoreless match is possible.

Croatia has thus far excelled in long matches, surviving extra time three times to reach the final. Its strength is its skilled midfield, where Luka Modric, Ivan Rakitic, Marcelo Brozovic and Mateo Kovacic all rate among the world's best passers. Over time, opposition teams lose the legs to press Croatia, and the midfielders can find space to work. England successfully pressed Croatia in the first half and kept possession about even at 47 percent to 53 percent, but Croatia dominated the ball 64 to 36 percent in the second half, when it scored its equalizer.

In the final, Croatia is likely to depend on its defense (seventh in the World Cup in the chart above) to hold back a more talented opponent. France will likely refuse to commit numbers to the attack and hope its skill wins out. If France can notch an early goal, it's hard to see Croatia finding a comeback as it did against England. But France's strategy has the same weakness that was discovered by Portugal in the final of the 2016 Euros. If the opposing team's defense is solid, Les Bleus do not have the kind of swarming, overwhelming attack that can be counted on to pick up a needed goal. And if the match is running late and Modric starts to find himself with an extra yard of space in midfield, the possibility of an upset — and a first-time World Cup winner — starts to look a lot more likely.

France is rightly favored, and its defense, strengthened by some conservative tactical choices by Deschamps, has been impregnable. But the final of the Euros showed what happens when this French approach fails, and if Croatia's defense can hold back Mbappe and the French forward line to start, its midfield has the skills to pull off a late upset.

*Check out our latest [World Cup predictions](#).*

