

Bayer Leverkusen: An Analysis of an Historic Unbeaten Season Masterclass in Modern Football

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In a season that will be etched in Bundesliga history, Bayer Leverkusen achieved the unthinkable: an unbeaten season that dethroned Bayern Munich's long-standing dominance and brought the Meisterschale (league title) to a new home, and no better way to achieve winning their first-ever league title by going the entire season without losing a single game. This remarkable feat places them among an elite group of teams in modern football (post-2000) to achieve an unbeaten season: Arsenal 03/04, Porto 10/11 and Juventus 2011/12. This incredible achievement can be placed to the mastermind of Xabi Alonso.

Taking over Leverkusen during the 2022/23 campaign, were they placed in the relegation zone, Alonso's brilliance led them to a 6th place finish, securing a spot in the Europa League. With key additions in the summer, including Victor Boniface, Alejandro Grimaldo, Granit Xhaka, Jonas Hofmann and Nathan Tella, Alonso was ready for his first full top-flight season in management.

In the 2023/24 season, Leverkusen's defensive solidity and attacking versatility were key to their success. They scored 87 goals, secured 28 wins, remained unbeaten in 17 away games, achieved 10 consecutive wins, and amassed 90 points to clinch the Meisterschale.



Figure 1 The final league standings, showing team's position during each game week.

Tactical Setup of Xabi Alonso's Squad

Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen frequently employed a 3-4-3 formation, one that allows for midfield control, defensive solidity with flexibility. This setup provided better coverage of the central areas while the wing backs often dropped back to form five-man defense when out of possession. When attacking, the wingbacks were deployed higher up the pitch to provide width, stretch the opponent's defense, create space for the forwards and deliver crosses into the box.

Formation

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Season Average Position

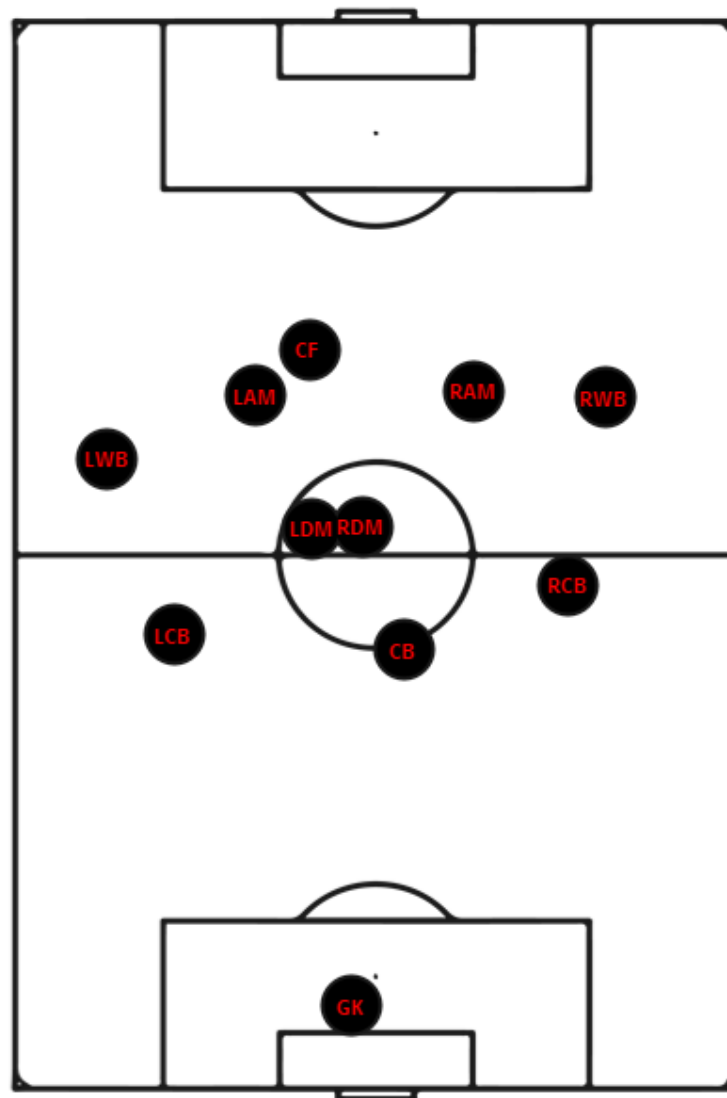


Figure 2 Bayer Leverkusen's 3-4-3 formation, showing the starting XI's average position.

Formation and Pass Network Analysis

The team's formation remained consistent throughout the season. An analysis of their pass network highlights the cohesiveness and stability of their play. Some key highlights from these pass networks are:

- Defensive Compactness: With the defensive line pushed higher up, the team remained compact defensively. This allowed midfielders and wing backs to support the defense, making it difficult for opponents to penetrate through the middle.
- Exploiting Wide Areas: With wing backs pushing high, the team can exploit the wide areas effectively, creating overloads and crossing opportunities.
- Dynamic Attacking Options: The interchangeable roles of the attackers created attacking options, making it harder for the opposition to mark and predict movements, catering to various in-game scenarios and opponent strategies.

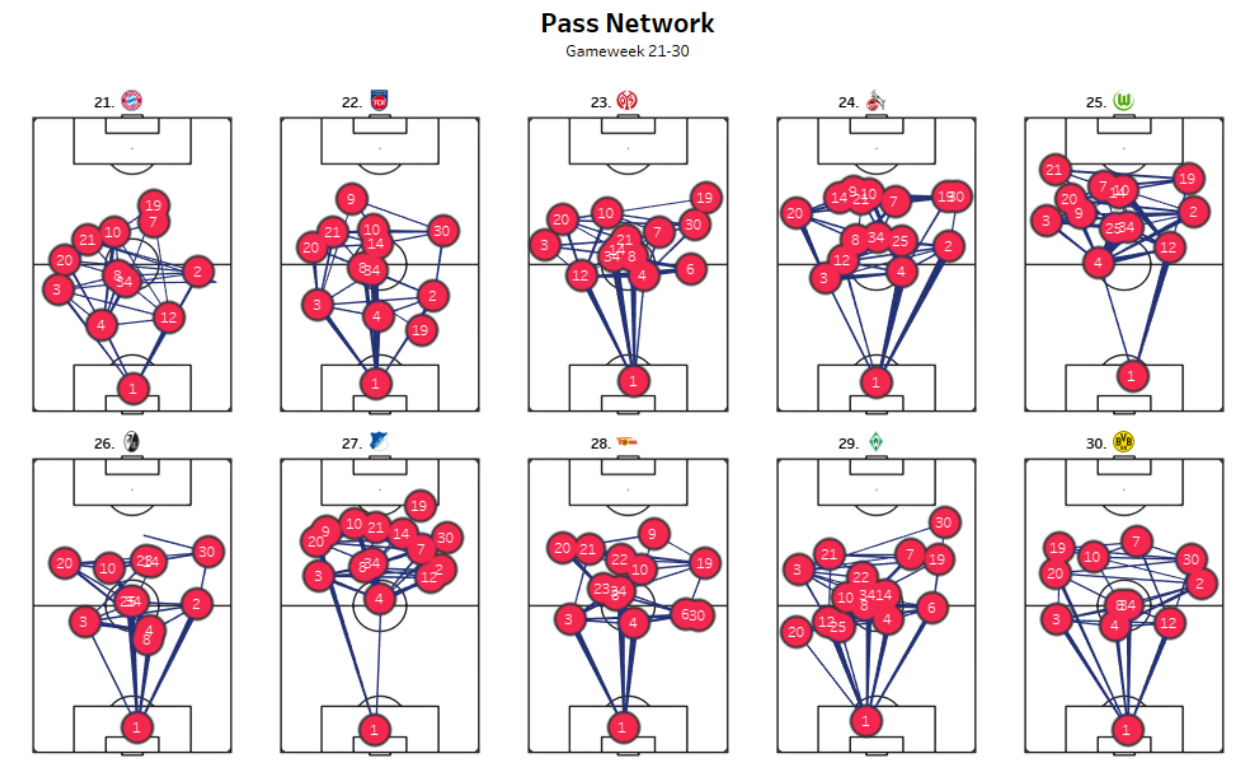


Figure 3 Bayer Leverkusen's pass network from game week 21-30, showing the compactness in the midfield and the high defensive line, notably in game week **23**. FSV Mainz 05, **25**. VfL Wolfsburg and **27**. TSG Hoffenheim

Tactical Mastery and High-Quality Scoring Opportunities

With this tactical setup, Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen excelled in creating high-quality scoring opportunities. The 34-game expected goals (xG) trendline illustrates a significant xG difference, outplaying their opponents in 28 out of the 34 games.

From the xG trendlines, as the season progressed, Leverkusen's strategy of limiting opponents to low-quality shots contributed to their impressive defensive record. They conceded only 24 goals from an expected goals against (xGA) of 27.81, while scoring 87 goals from an xG of 72.70. This efficiency in both attack and defense underscores the effectiveness of Alonso's tactical approach, combining a solid defensive base with dynamic and versatile attacking play.

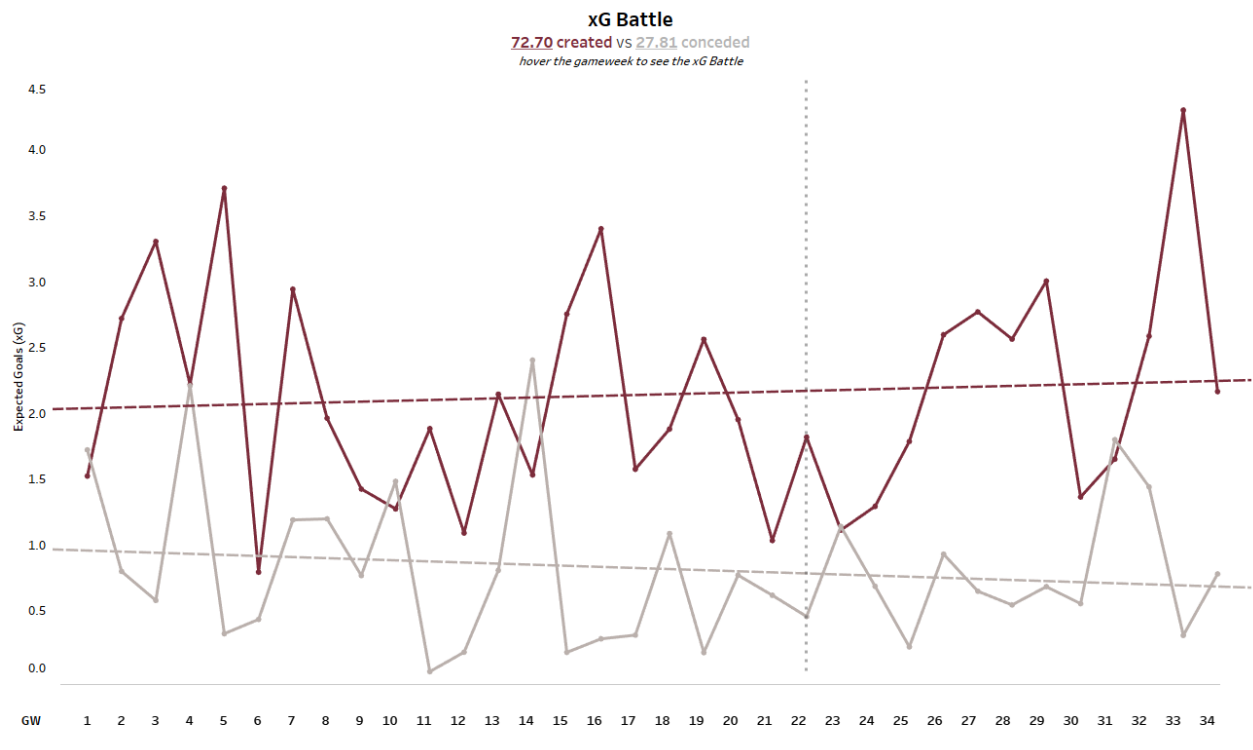


Figure 4 Expected Goals (xG) throughout the season

Leading the Goal Involvements

Scoring goals was not a problem for Bayer Leverkusen, with 16 different players finding the back of the net. Leading the charge was newly acquired Nigerian forward Victor Boniface. Boniface wasted no time making his mark, contributing 18 goals (10 goals, 8 assists) in his first 16 league games. Boniface's outstanding performances earned him several personal accolades, including Bundesliga Player of the Month in August and Bundesliga Rookie of the Month from August to November 2023.


| Goals | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------|----|
| <div><div></div><div>Victor Okoh Boniface</div><div>14</div></div> | | | |
| 10 | F | Florian Wirtz | 11 |
| 20 | M | Alejandro Grimaldo García | 10 |
| 30 | M | Jeremie Frimpong | 9 |
| 14 | F | Patrik Schick | 7 |
| 19 | M | Nathan Tella | 5 |

Figure 5 Goal Scoring Leaders


| Assist | | | |
|--|---|----------------------|----|
| <div><div></div><div>Alejandro Grimaldo García</div><div>13</div></div> | | | |
| 10 | F | Florian Wirtz | 10 |
| 22 | F | Victor Okoh Boniface | 8 |
| 30 | M | Jeremie Frimpong | 7 |
| 7 | F | Jonas Hofmann | 7 |
| 21 | F | Amine Adli | 5 |

Figure 6 Assist Leaders

Victor Boniface’s goal contributions momentum was cut short due to an abductor injury he sustained with the Nigerian National team at the 2023 AFCON, seeing him sidelined for 10 games. Boniface returned to the side often as a substitute and finished the season as Leverkusen’s goal leader and the Bundesliga Rookie of the Year.

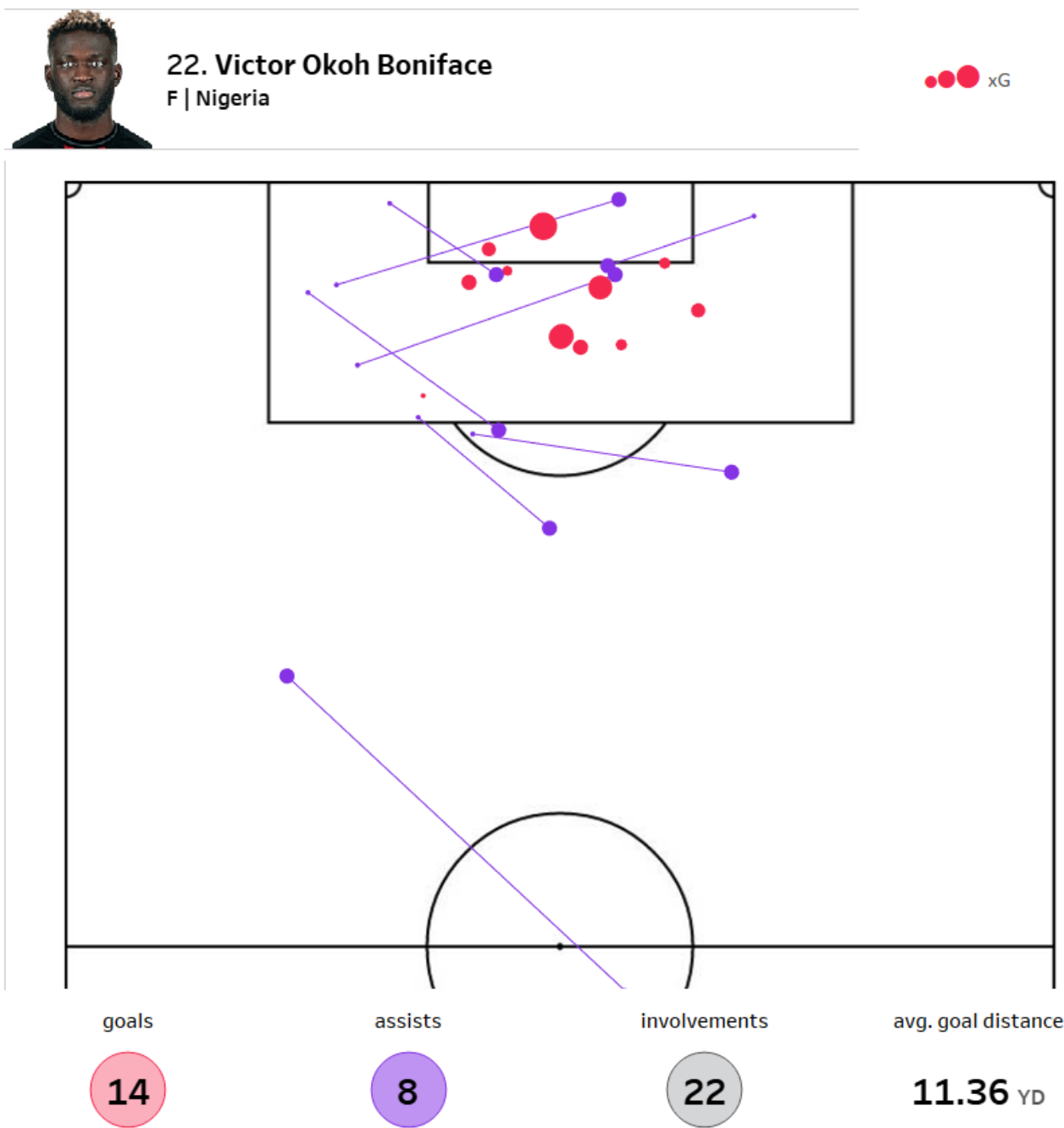


Figure 7 Victor Boniface goal involvements, red circle showing the shot location and the size being the expected goal (xG)

Alejandro Grimaldo's Creative Spark

Alejandro Grimaldo, who joined in on a free transfer in the summer, was at the forefront of Leverkusen's attack, dictating play from the left-side, delivering pinpoint corners and crosses resulting in 13 assists, the highest in the league. The left-footed maestro's vision, passing accuracy, and total goal involvements were instrumental in breaking down defenses and creating scoring opportunities.

Grimaldo's exceptional playmaking ability made him a crucial component in Leverkusen's offensive setup, consistently providing the creativity and precision from wide mostly through the precise crosses needed to get the goals.

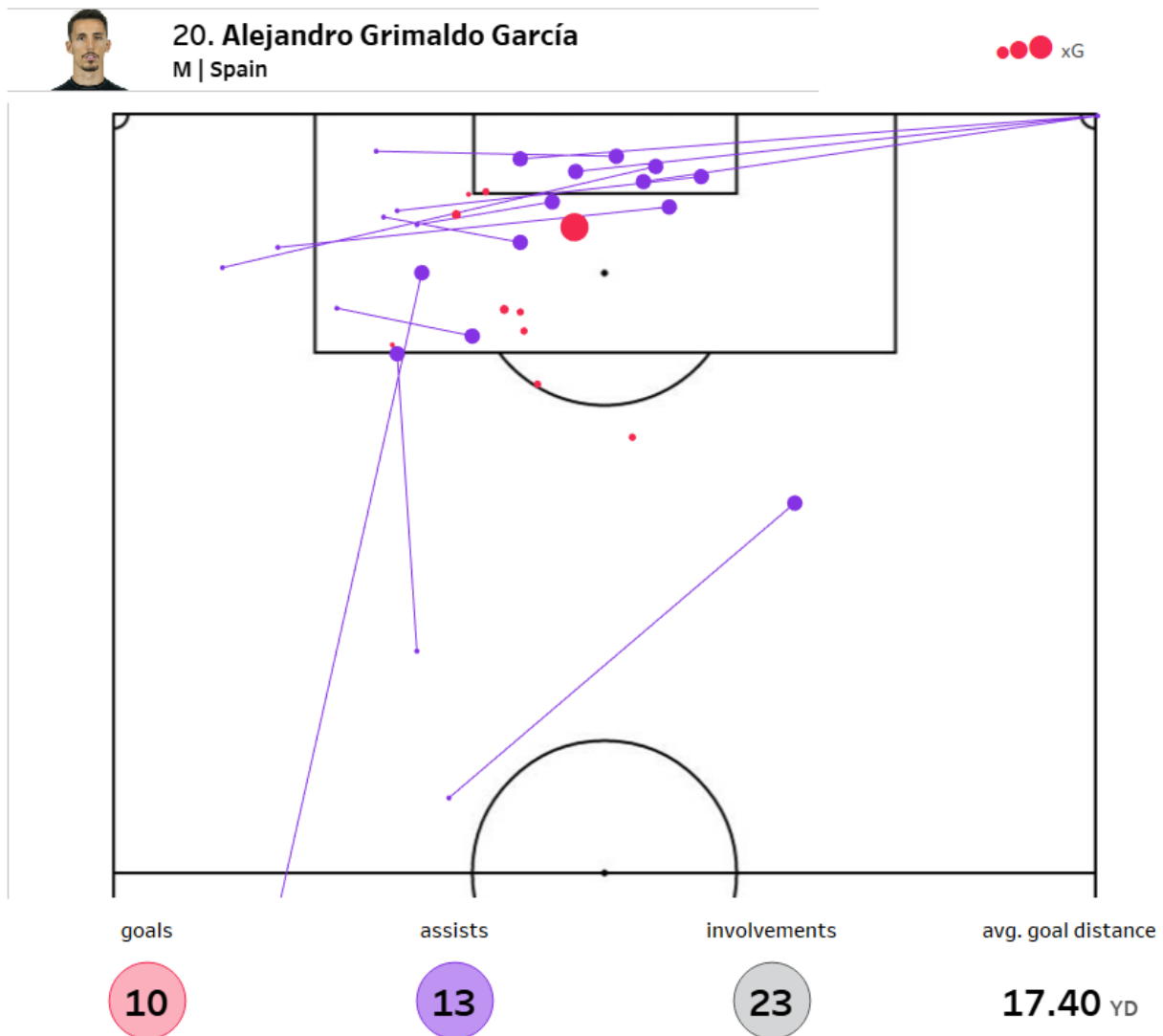


Figure 8 Alejandro Grimaldo goal contributions. The purple line showing the assist, where smaller circle being the assist origin and bigger end showing where the pass was received.

Granit Xhaka's Midfield Mastery

Granit Xhaka's arrival brought a newfound stability to Leverkusen's midfield, seamlessly integrating into Alonso's 3-4-3 formation and enabling the team to dominate possession and control the tempo of the game. Acquired from Arsenal, where he spent seven years, Xhaka brought a wealth of experience and discipline to Leverkusen's midfield. His partnership with Exequiel Palacios provided stability and control, forming the backbone of the team's midfield.

Xhaka's tireless work rate and exceptional passing accuracy were crucial to Leverkusen's success. Achieving a remarkable 93% accuracy from 3,275 passes, he became an indispensable part of the squad. His ability to dictate play, recycle possession, and maintain the team's structure both defensively and offensively highlighted his importance in Xabi Alonso's system.

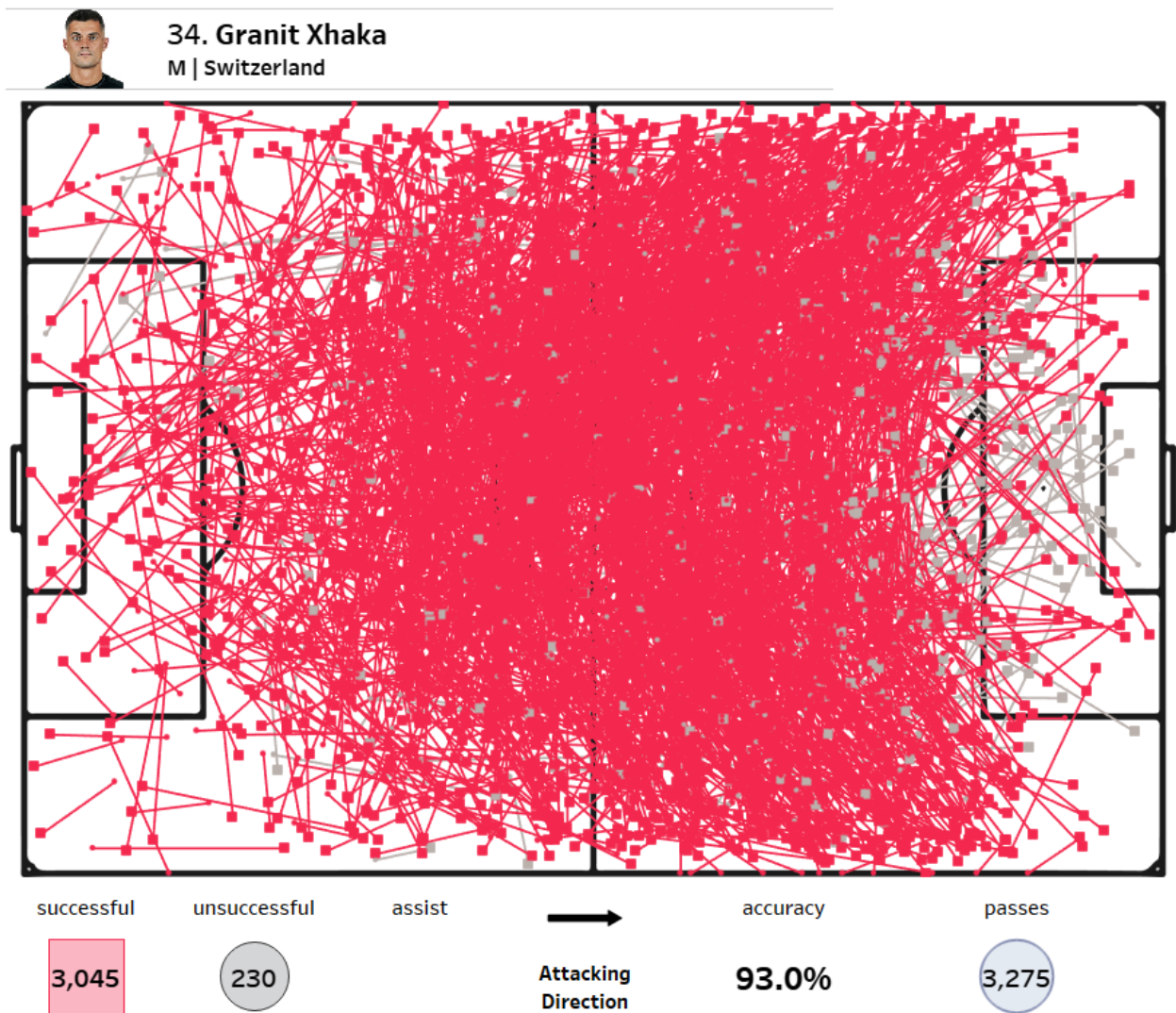


Figure 9 Granit Xhaka's pass map showing the start and end point of each pass.

Creative Sparks: Florian Wirtz and Jeremie Frimpong

Florian Wirtz creativity and flair along with his goal contributions (11 goals, 10 assists) added an extra dimension to Leverkusen's attack. His ability to unlock defenses with incisive passes, achieving an 85% accuracy from 1804 attempted passes, was crucial in tight matches. Wirtz also lead the team in through ball passes – cutting through the last line of defense with precision and creating numerous scoring opportunities.

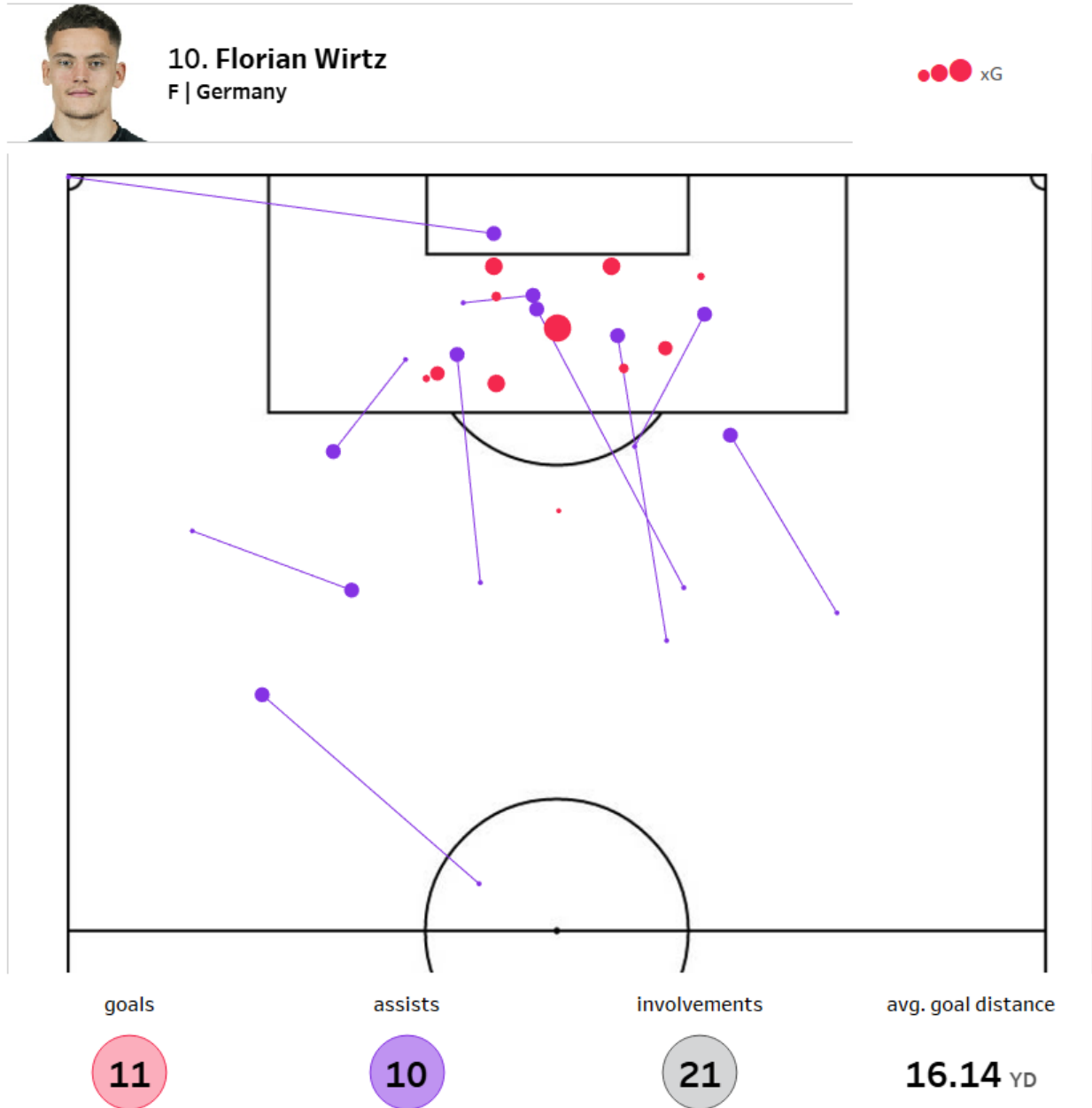


Figure 10 Florian Wirtz goal contributions.

On the right side was another young standout performer, Jeremie Frimpong. Frimpong's pace and defensive acumen on the right flank provided balance to the team. His attacking contributions, especially with his crosses saw him rack up 7 assists. His dynamic presence on the right side was vital in both defense and attack, helping to stretch the opposition and create chances.

Together, Wirtz and Frimpong were integral to Leverkusen's fluid and potent attacking play, further exemplifying the depth and talent within the squad during their historic unbeaten season.

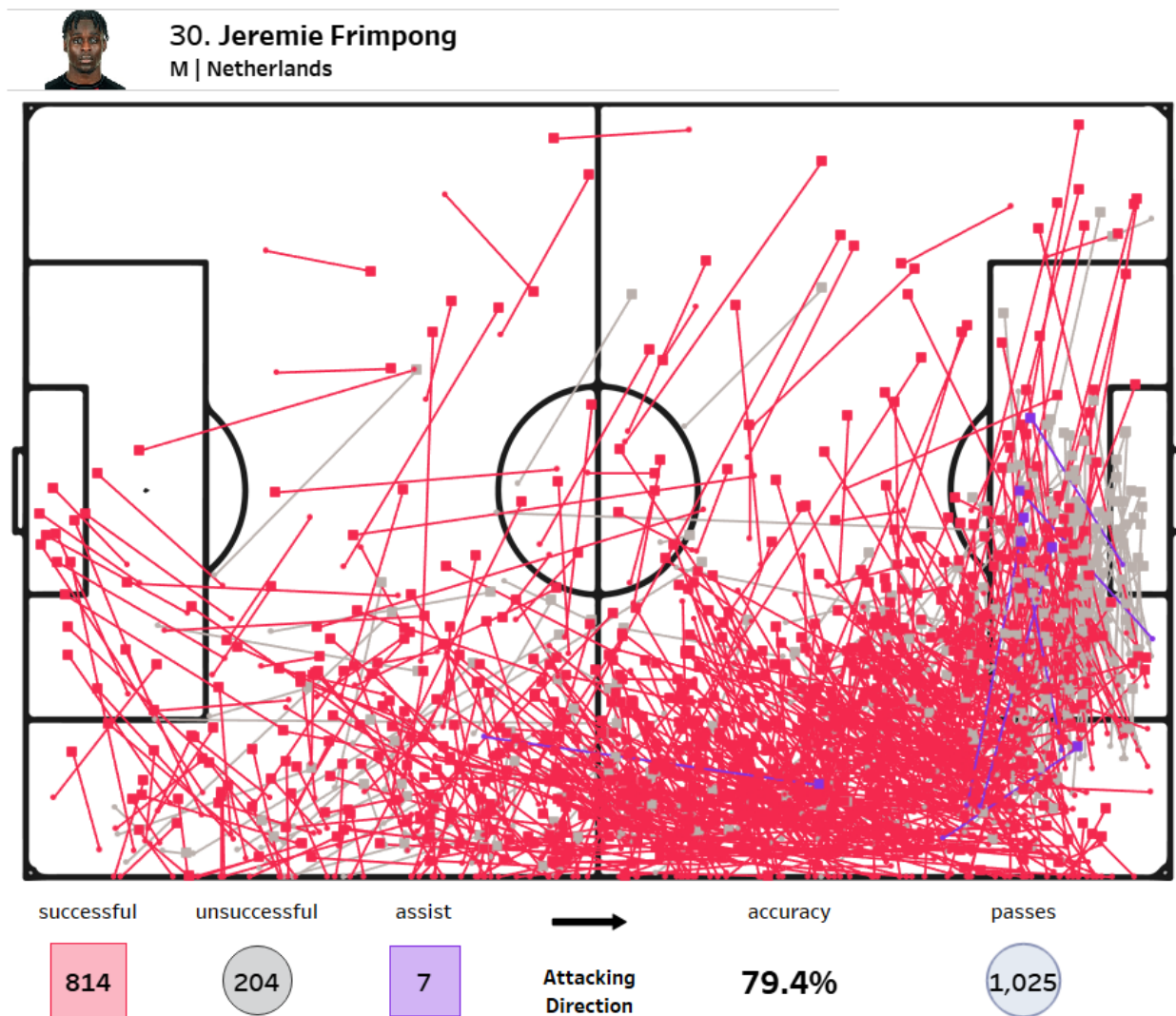


Figure 11 Jeremie Frimpong Pass Map

Bayer Leverkusen's unbeaten season stands as a testament to planning, advanced player scouting, tactical innovation, and collective effort. By dethroning Bayern Munich, they have set a new benchmark in the Bundesliga, promising a bright future for the club under the guidance of Xabi Alonso. This season will be remembered as a milestone in Leverkusen's history, a triumph of strategy, skill, and unyielding determination.

You can check out this [dashboard](#) for a more interactive and in-depth analysis of Xabi Alonso and Bayer Leverkusen's invincible season.