

İlkay Gündoğan's Off-Ball Run Tendencies

UEFA Champions League Final 2023

By Efstathios Papadopoulos

Introduction

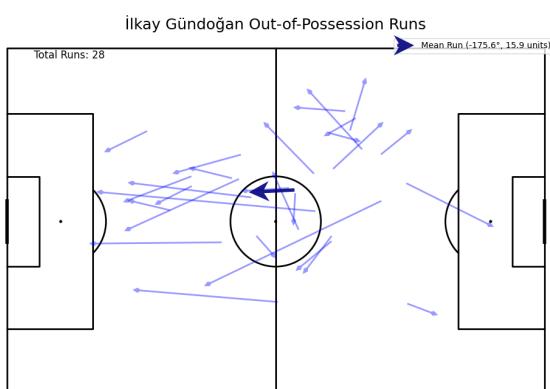
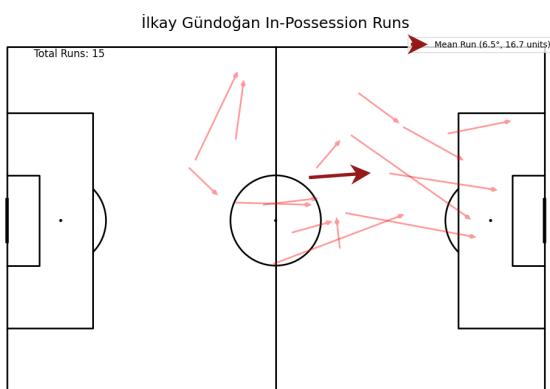
During the 2020–21 season, İlkay Gündoğan began to play a new and influential role under Pep Guardiola. He was often used as a late runner from midfield, arriving in the box to create and finish goal-scoring opportunities. That adjustment proved decisive—Gündoğan ended the Premier League season as Manchester City's top scorer, reflecting how effectively he adapted to his advanced attacking role.

Ironically, in that same season's Champions League final defeat against Chelsea, Guardiola deployed Gündoğan as a lone number six rather than allowing him to make his usual forward runs. The change blunted his attacking threat and exposed City's midfield defensively, as Gündoğan is not naturally suited to a single-pivot role.

Two years later, in the 2023 final, Guardiola appeared to have learned from that tactical misstep. He restored Gündoğan to a role that better leveraged his timing, intelligence, and late runs into the box. The following analysis examines Gündoğan's off-ball movements in that match—particularly his positioning and tendencies during Manchester City's possessions—to illustrate how his adjusted role contributed to the team's attacking dynamics.

Visualisation of Runs

During Manchester City's possession phases, Gündoğan made 15 runs, most originating from the left hand side of the midfield and driving directly toward the penalty area. These movements were predominantly vertical rather than lateral, emphasizing his role as a secondary attacker whose well-timed arrivals created constant threats inside the box.



Out of possession, as we can see from the direction and distance of his runs, Gündoğan's activity was more positional than expansive. Rather than tracking many deep recovery runs, he tried to maintain central compactness, pressing intelligently and preparing to transition quickly once City regained the ball. This positioning allowed him to rejoin attacks efficiently and sustain forward momentum.

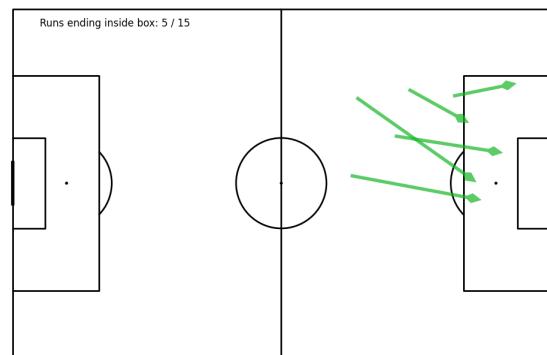
Runs Ending Inside the Box

A simple metric was developed to capture in-possession off-ball tendencies:

$$\text{Box Run Ratio} = \frac{\text{Runs ending in box}}{\text{Total in-possession runs}}$$

Gündoğan's ratio is 0.33, meaning one-third of his runs while his team had possession of the ball, conclude inside the penalty area. The following plot illustrates these movements that end inside the box.

In-Possession Runs ending Inside the Box - İlkay Gündoğan



Comparison with Other Players

When compared with all players in the final (Table 1), Gündoğan's box run ratio (0.33) is similar to centre-forwards Romelu Lukaku (0.38) and Erling Haaland (0.33), underlining his advanced attacking tendencies.

Player	Team	Runs	In Box	BRR
Romelu Lukaku	Inter	8	3	0.38
Erling Haaland	Man City	12	4	0.33
Robin Gosens	Inter	6	2	0.33
İlkay Gündoğan	Man City	15	5	0.33
Phil Foden	Man City	20	6	0.30

Table 1: Top five players by proportion of in-possession runs ending inside the box.

Conclusion

Gündoğan's movement profile in the Champions League Final mirrors that of an advanced attacking midfielder or secondary striker. His box run ratio, comparable to leading forwards, highlights his tactical intelligence and timing. This demonstrates his key role in Manchester City's positional play—creating central overloads and supporting attacks through well-timed, penetrative runs.