Introduction

The England Men's Football Team last won a major honour in 1966, 58 years ago. We have had the highest quality of players since then, ranging from Paul Gascoigne in the 90s and the so-called 'Golden Generation', but nothing ever came to fruition.

England fans cannot forget Paul Scholes being shifted to the right-wing to accommodate Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard in central-midfield. It seems like such an obvious error but the manager refused to leave out any star players, even if this meant playing them out of position to the detriment of the team and team structure. Current England manager Gareth Southgate must not make the same mistake.

England approach Euro 2024 this summer with the usual high expectations, but this year is different - three of the top five favourites for the Ballon D'or (yearly award for the best player in the world) are English: Harry Kane (striker), Jude Bellingham and Phil Foden.

Bellingham and Foden both play in a similar position for their respective clubs, and fans can see the danger of an all too familiar clashing issue. This report, therefore, seeks to use statistical data to show how Southgate can incorporate both players in a way that maximises the contributions and influence both players can offer to the team.

Background

Jude Bellingham (aged-20) is a newly-formed attacking midfielder currently playing for Real Madrid, having signed at the start of the season. Having previously found success playing in a deeper central midfield role (an '8') at both Birmingham City, Borussia Dortmund, and also previously for England. With high-profile and Ballon D'or winning centre-forward Karim Benzema departing Real Madrid at the start of the season, manager Carlo Ancelotti had a vision with new signing Bellingham and decided to deploy him further forward to fill the void left by Benzema, with a slight modification to Madrid's formation to better suit the adapting Bellingham. Combining with fast, fluid attackers, Bellingham often poses as the ruthless, box-crashing finisher resulting from byline attacks.

Phil Foden (aged-23) is a versatile, attacking midfielder who has been at Manchester City his whole career, able to play in any forward position supporting the striker. City play a very different, more technically robust system than Madrid, much more regimented and possession-based, resulting in Foden developing into a sublime carrier and distributor of the ball. Smaller and more nimble in stature, he often finds himself in dangerous pockets of space in the box, alongside feeding teammates in similar positions.

Below we begin to investigate how the underlying statistical data of Bellingham and Foden compare, and how it corresponds to the suitability of playing in the crucial central-attacking midfielder position for England. This comparison will be presented using player 'radar wheels', which are becoming more and more common in the football industry due to their extremely clear way of visualising statistical data. (The data is from the 2023-24 domestic league seasons.)

High-Level

We first look at quite broad data in order to produce an holistic view and get a general feel for the overall profile of both players:

Jude Bellingham
Real Madrid

Phil Foden
Manchester City
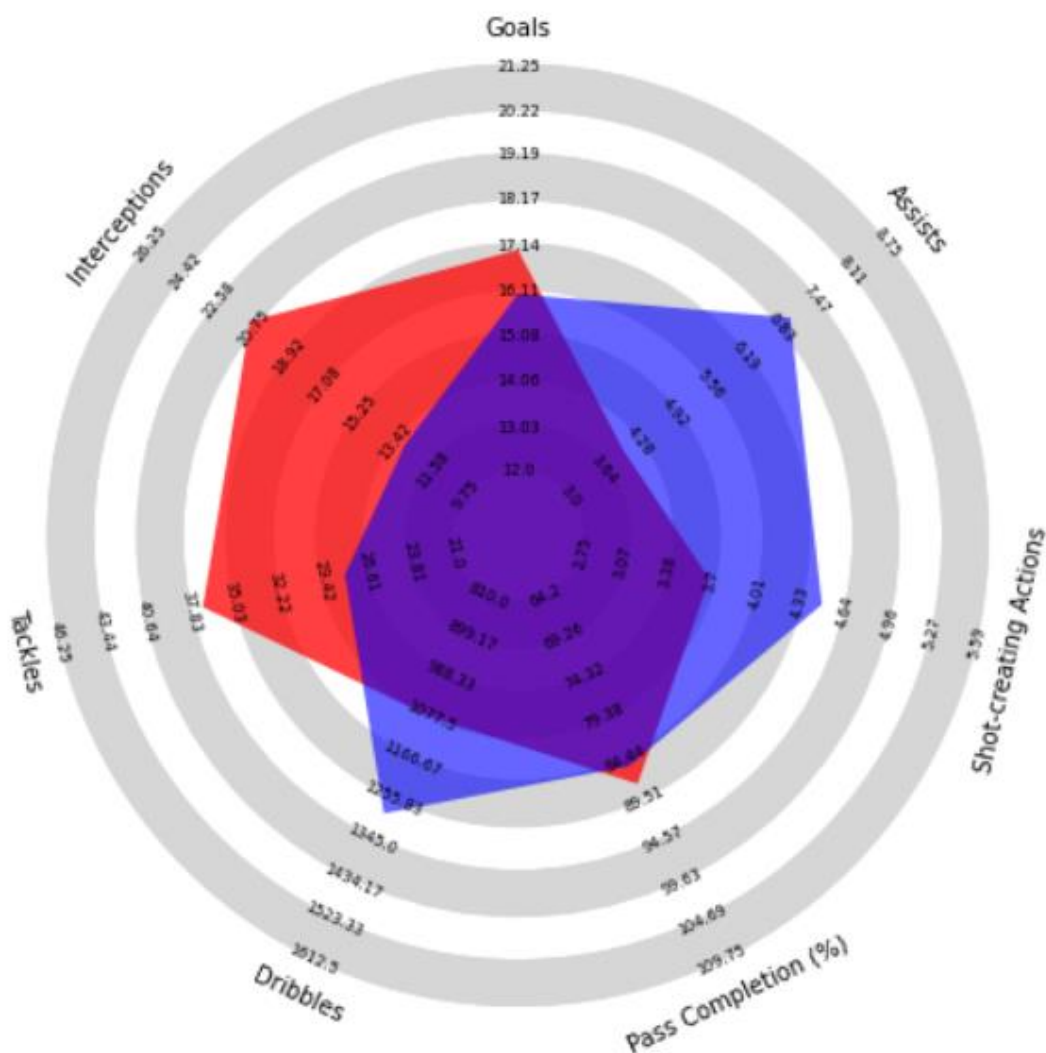
From this radar wheel, it is clear to see that the two players are extremely similar in terms of raw scoring output this season, as well as both being accurate

passers of the ball. Both of these qualities are imperative to being an effective attacking midfielder.

The radar also highlights some differences in the approach to the way they play. Bellingham dominates in the more defensive attributes of tackles and interceptions, whilst Foden has the clear advantage in terms of creativity and possession. This is as a result of the way his club team, Manchester City, play - a possession-based, fluid attack in which the ball is passed between teammates quickly waiting for a gap in the opposition defence to exploit.

Football has evolved to a state now where the role of this profile of player transcends purely attacking attributes, whether that be directly scoring, assisting teammates or by transitioning with the ball in the build-up. Defending is also an important role for this position, but it is a different role from that of an absolute defender - it will be occasionally tracking back but primarily preventing the opposition from building-up attacks in the midfield via interceptions and tackles. Knockout-bracket football requires adaptability, especially late on in matches, or in added and extra time - perhaps when all allotted substitutes have been used and the manager requires attacking players to adapt; to sit in and protect their area. Therefore, being able to adapt to suit the dynamic match situation is another crucial component.

As such, it stands to reason that focussing on shooting, possession-based, and transitional-specific defensive metrics are a better way of judging suitability for the attacking midfielder position *today*.

Standardised Analysis

The radar above uses raw data/statistics that does **not** account for the number of minutes each player has played. Playing more games results in more chances to register higher statistics, resulting in this radar potentially being inflated in his favour. Inspecting the data shows that Foden has played 4.6 more '90s' than Bellingham this season. [This metric is calculated by taking the total minutes of football played divided by 90 (representing a full game of football).] For this reason, we construct an adjusted high-level radar below which *standardises* the data according to the number of minutes played and allows for a fair and accurate comparison. (Note: Some metrics are in % terms which do not require standardisation.)

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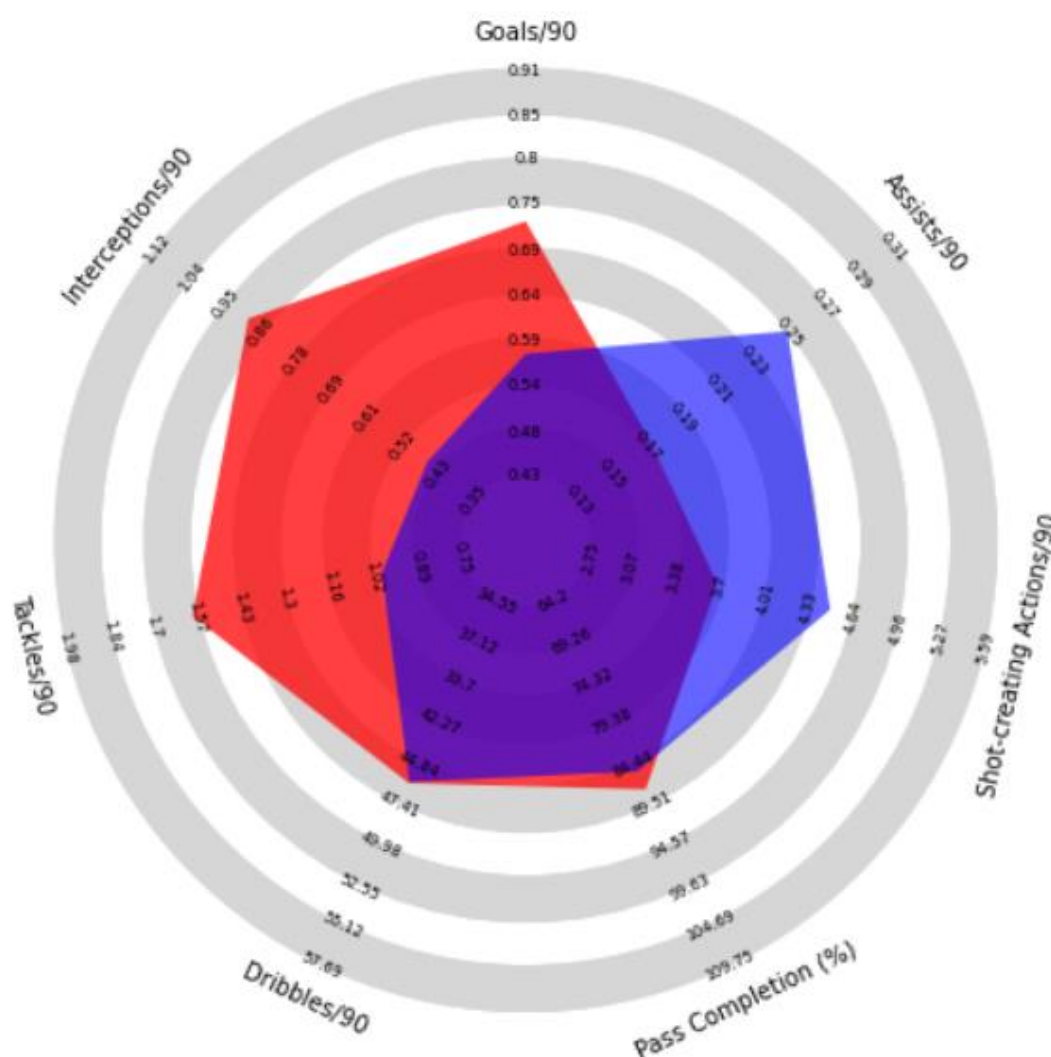
The baseline statistics were previously influenced by the fact that Foden has played more minutes this season, so this radar emphasises the fact that Bellingham's goals scored, tackles and interceptions being higher in the first is an impressive feat. Foden remains the clear winner in terms of assists and shot-creating actions.

However, absolute statistics such as goals or assists are often not truly representative of the actual quality of the player. These include penalties (neither will be taking penalties for England, unless in a shootout setting) and are also potentially misleading in the sense that one could score lots of simple chances, or could have far more opportunities to score etc... Therefore, it is imperative to dive deeper into position-specific underlying data to truly

understand the impact that these players are having in the games they play.
[Note: All subsequent radars will
be presented using statistics in per-90 terms]

Shooting

We first look at shooting to investigate the potential reasons for Bellingham's superior statistics in front of goal: is it because he has had far more chances in scoring positions, and should therefore have scored perhaps even more goals? Is he more clinical? Is his positional play better to create better chances for himself?

The below metrics are useful for us to better understand the shooting quality of both players:

- xG/90 - expected goals or "xG", "measures the quality of a chance by calculating the likelihood that it will be scored by using information on similar shots in the past" (Opta, 2023), standardised per 90 minutes of football played. 'Outperforming' xG (scoring more actual goals than expected) means that the player exceeds expectations in this metric. Conversely, having a higher xG than actual goals may be an indication of poor finishing.
- Non-Penalty xG/90 - the same as expected goals, but with the omission of penalties taken to allow for more accurate comparison between players that regularly take penalties and those that do not - penalties are a fantastic opportunity to score, and contribute significantly to the xG calculation. Therefore, a player who is a designated penalty taker would have 'inflated' xG metrics compared to a non-designated penalty taker.
- Shots on Target/90 - the number of shots on target, *standardised* per 90 minutes of football played.
- Shots on Target % - percentage of all shots taken that were projected to hit the back of the net. A higher percentage is better as this means that the player is accurate when shooting.
- Goals per shot - This is a great measure of shooting efficiency. A high goals to shot value demonstrates that the player makes the most of his chances.
- Average shot distance - this a good indicator of the positions that the players take aim from. A shorter shot distance means that the player finds themselves closer to the goal when shooting, implying that they are better positionally aware and can create better scoring opportunities.

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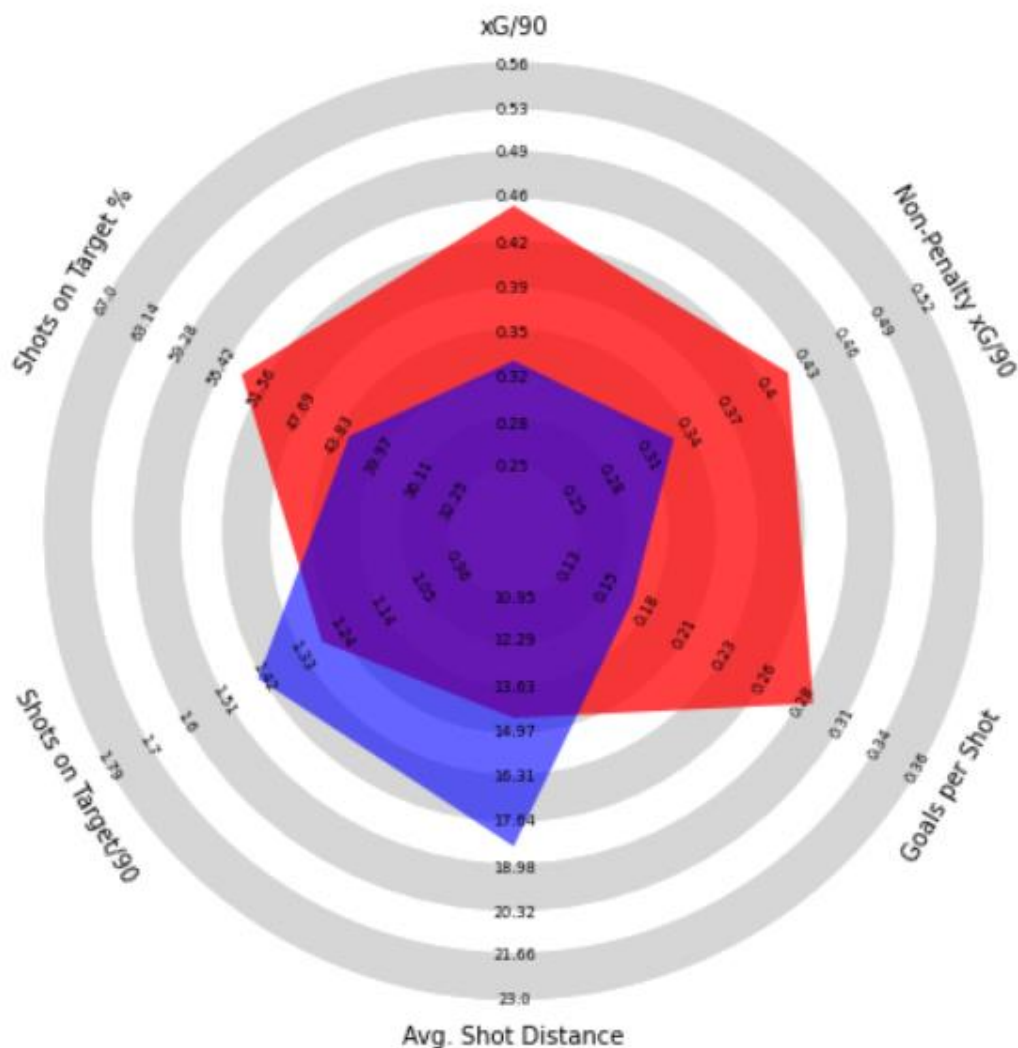
The aspect that stands out straight away is the fact that Foden has actually had more shots on target per 90 minutes than Bellingham, despite being significantly behind when it comes to expected goals and his percentage of shots on target. This can be explained perfectly by the other metrics – Bellingham's efficiency statistics are better, and his average shooting distance is shorter than Foden's. This suggests that Bellingham crafts better scoring opportunities for himself, allowing him to be more accurate and efficient in front of goal, qualities that manager Gareth Southgate will definitely like to see from his player. This is reflected by Bellingham's superior goals per shot (*despite* having fewer shots on target in total).
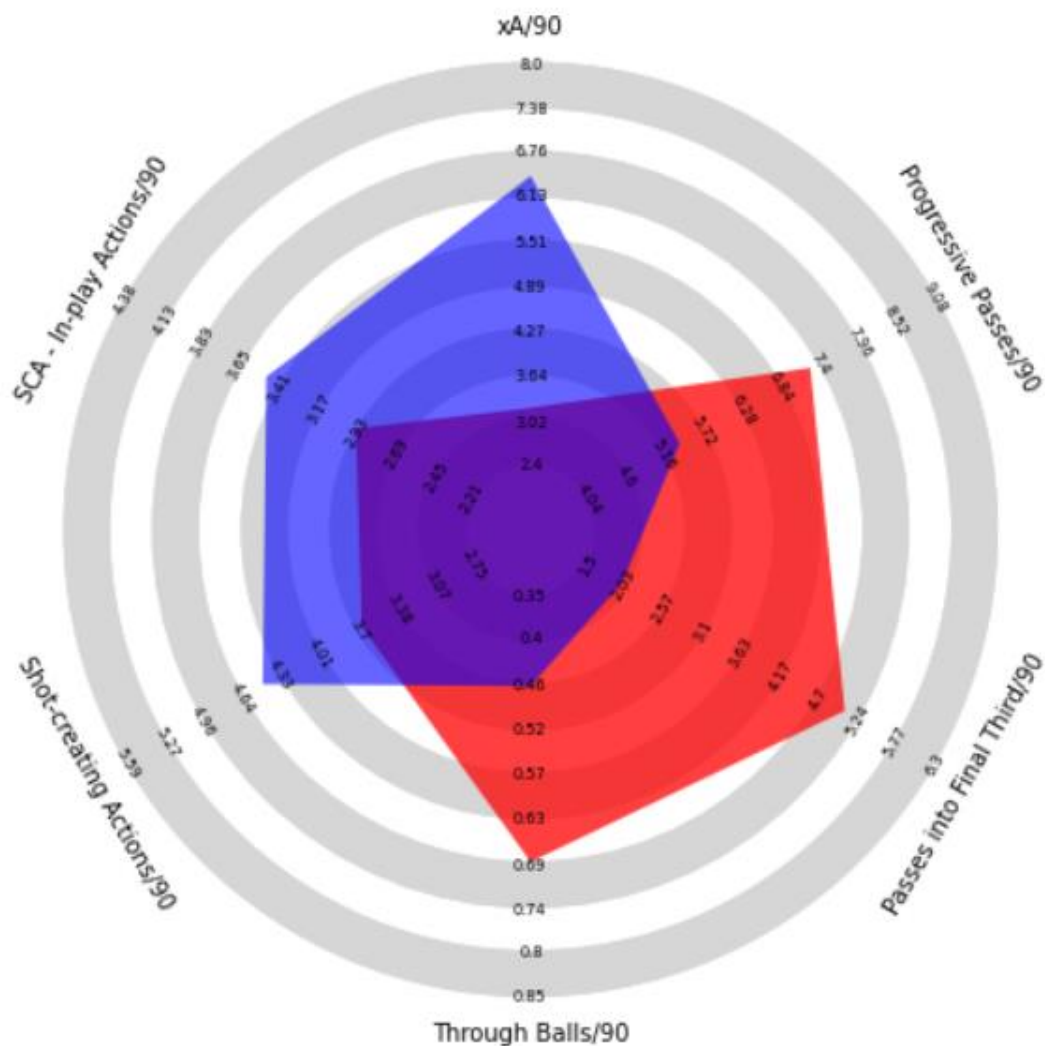
Passing

Attacking midfielders tend to control how their team attacks, often setting up the strikers and wingers or, when in possession of the ball in their own half, look to progress the ball up the pitch in the best manner possible.

The below metrics allow us to visualise how Bellingham and Foden interact with their attacking teammates and understand where they operate on the pitch:

- xA/90 - "measures the likelihood that a pass will be a primary assist. The model is based on the finishing location of the pass, what type of pass it was and a variety of other factors" (Stats Perform, 2024). This is a great metric to measure the quality of final pass that the players output.
- Progressive Passes/90 - defined as any pass "towards the opponent's goal at least 10 yards" (FBREF, 2024), or any pass into the opposing penalty area. This kind of pass is a crucial quality of any attacking midfielder; a good volume of progressive passes shows that the player can provide a dangerous attacking threat and work well with teammates.
- Passes into the Final Third/90 - a similar metric but different positionally. This is more specific to transitioning from defence to attack and how the player is able to help the team transition effectively.
- Through Balls/90 - "completed pass sent between defenders into open space" (FBREF, 2024). This metric highlights the ability of a player to not only give a threatening pass in-behind the opposition defence, but the vision initially to see space on the pitch. Both are extremely desirable qualities.
- Shot-creating Actions/90 - actions that lead directly to a shot, via passes, dribbles or being fouled resulting in a dead-ball effort on goal.
- Shot-creating Actions - In-play actions/90- a subsection of the above, where we specifically evaluate how many chances the player creates solely from the quality of their passing.

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Phil Foden
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This radar depicts well how differently both players perform when looking to pass the ball. We can see that Bellingham excels in progressing the ball and feeding threatening passes to the attackers, but Foden has the clear edge when it comes to expected assists and shot-creating actions despite the progressive deficit.

We can attribute this trend to the way that their respective clubs play football - Manchester City tend to dominate possession and are much more patient in attack, passing the ball quickly in the opposition third waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. This results in lots of opportunities for the attacking players to create goal-scoring opportunities.

Real Madrid deploy two pacey attackers (Vinicius Jr. and Rodrygo), who line-up just ahead of Bellingham who look to utilise their pace advantage by making runs in-behind the opposition defence. It, therefore, makes perfect sense that

Bellingham has far more progressive passes, but also far fewer shot-creating actions - a very typical style of play for Real Madrid is for Vinicius/Rodrygo to receive the ball, drive to the byline and cross the ball for Bellingham to score. This also explains why these progressive passes for Bellingham do not always result in a shot, and also why Bellingham has so many goals from close range this season as we saw earlier.

In Possession

- Dribbles/90 - shows us how many times the player has carried the ball, displaying comfortability in the game and knowing where space appears on the pitch.
- Successful Take-ons (%) - the percentage of dribbles that successfully passed a defender, showing the *quality* of their dribbling. This metric does not include carries where the player retains the ball but does not beat the defender, so it is a great indicator of how effective the chosen carries are.
- Progressive Dribbles/90 - "carries that move the ball at least 10 yards towards the opposition goal" (FBREF, 2024). This tells us how often the player looks to directly drive towards the goal, showing strong positivity and intent when in possession.
- Dribbles into Attacking Third/90 - similar metric to the above, but from a different starting position (middle third), thus highlighting how well the players can carry the ball whilst looking to *initiate* an attack.
- Touches/90 - this showcases how often the player is on the ball and therefore how central and important they are to the team's playstyle.
- Touches Def. Third/90 - this metric goes back to our earlier point regarding adaptability: how much influence does the player have in the defensive third domestically, and how could this perhaps translate to their ability to play in a more defensive role if required?
- Touches Mid. Third/90 - specifically in the middle of the pitch, i.e how central the player is to transitioning from defence to attack and how well positioned they are to receive the ball whilst in possession.
- Touches Att. Third/90 - this helps us to understand how much influence the player has on their team when attacking. Lots of touches indicate that the player is central to how their team attacks.
- Progressive Passes Received/90 - this tells us how well positioned the player is when posing as an out-and-out attacker. This metric allows us to understand how the player reads attacking situations and how often/easily they can find a pocket of space to receive a threatening pass and create chances.

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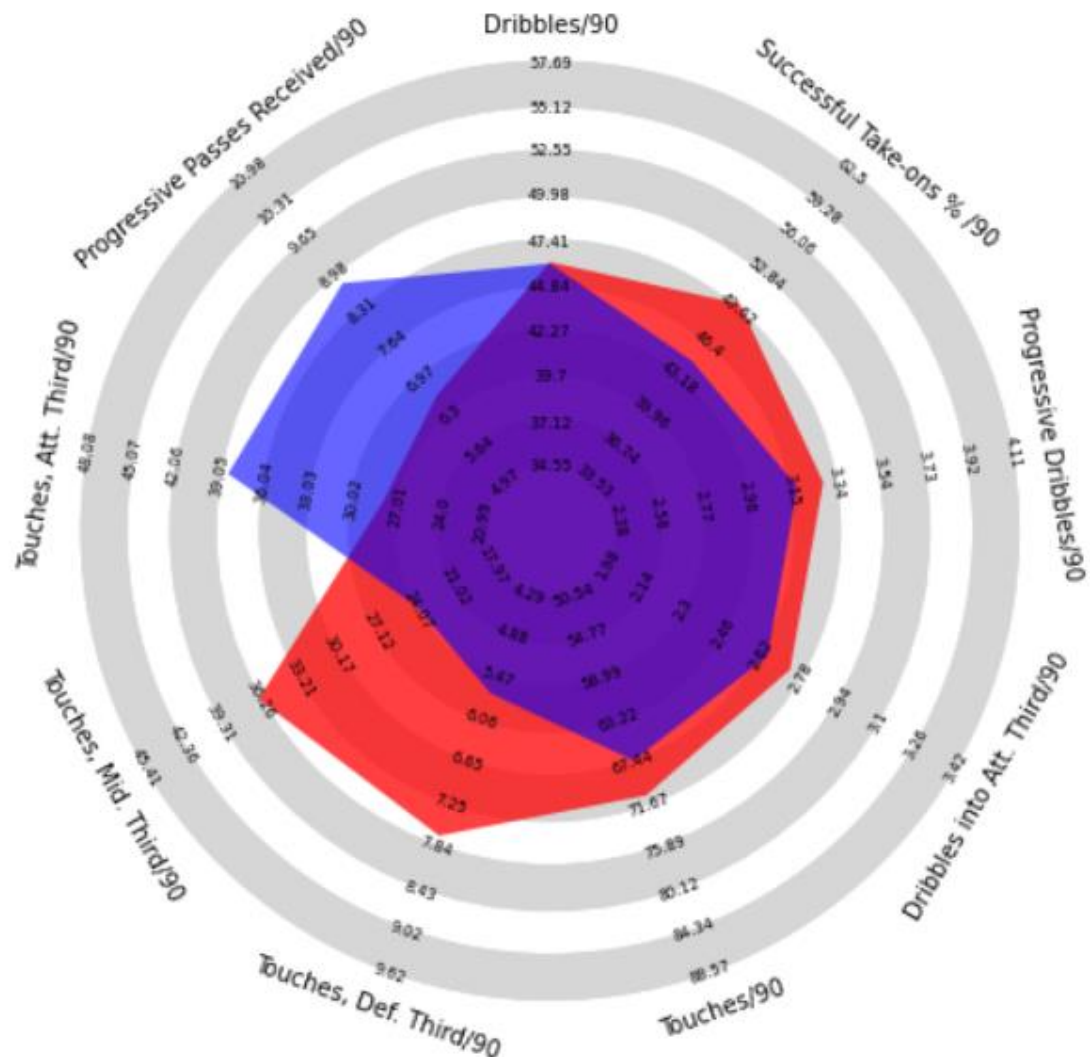
What we can immediately see is that, overall, Bellingham and Foden dribble the ball a near-identical amount, but that has more successful dribbles so it could be argued that this gives him a slight edge. Bellingham also has slightly more progressive (offensively-impactful) dribbles and more touches too, implying that he is more central to how Real Madrid play than Foden is for City.

This radar also depicts the playstyles of the players very well - Bellingham has far more defensive and midfield responsibilities for Madrid, with a role focussed on progressing the ball to his attacking teammates (seen earlier in the passing section - see progressive passes/90, passes into final third, through balls), but Foden has a different attacking profile, *receiving* a significantly higher number of progressive passes. This suggests that Foden is able to find space in the opposition defence and also able to dictate how City finish their attacking manoeuvers due to his high volume of touches in the final third. This shows the

key difference in attacking responsibilities - Bellingham starts and also *finishes* attacks, whereas Foden receives the ball high up the pitch and dictates how the attacks are finished (supported by his high shot-creating actions from our passing section).

This opens up an interesting potential dynamic that the statistical data supports - could both Foden and Bellingham play in the same side, but with Foden higher up than Bellingham, receiving his proressive passes then using his shot-creating ability to set up Bellingham to score? The attacking profiles seen above complete every stage. This is definitely something Gareth Southgate can investigate.
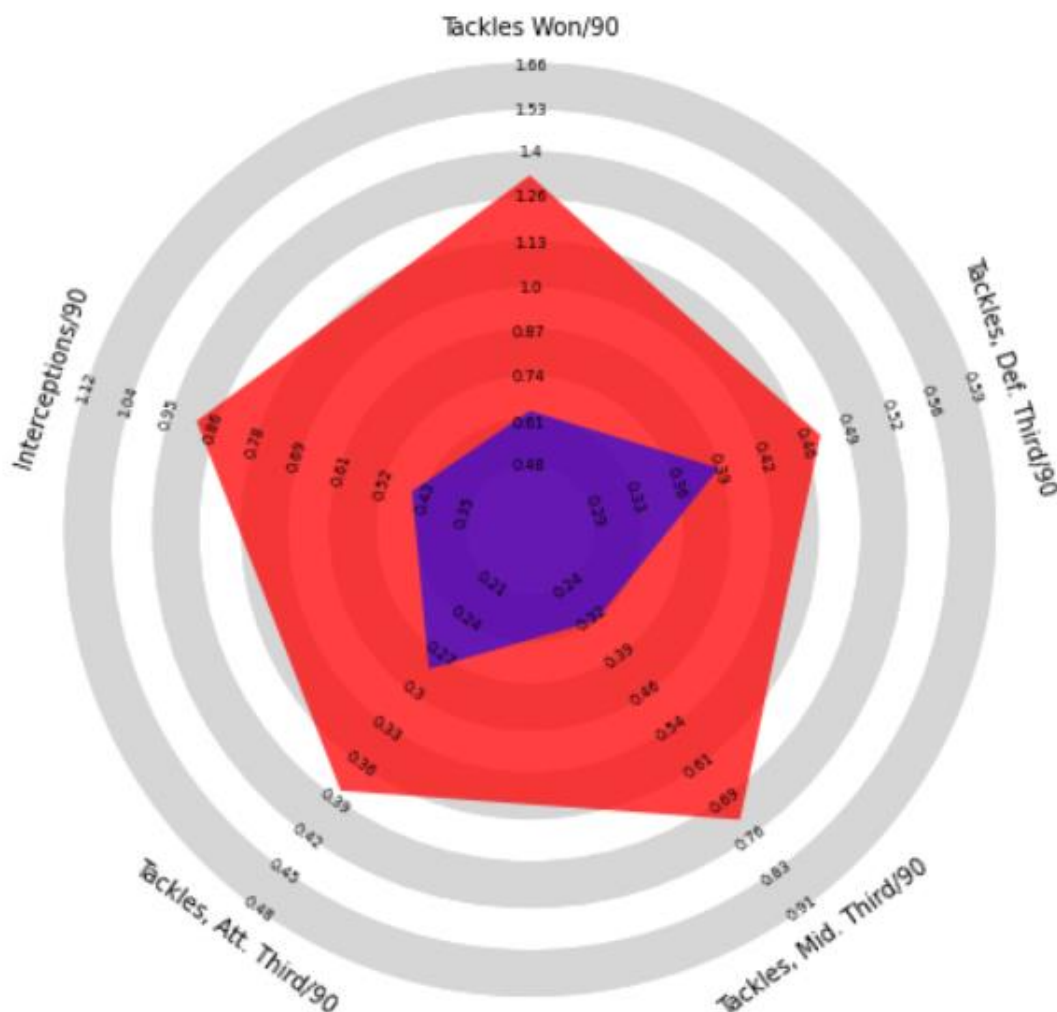
<u>Defensively</u>

These defensive metrics fit the adaptability criteria (outlined earlier) well:

- Tackles Won/90 - this displays the overall picture of how many situations the player puts themselves in to win back possession.
- Tackles/90, Def Third - this highlights the effectiveness of the player when defending direct opposition attacking threats. For an attacking midfielder, this will most likely come in the form of set pieces (corners and free kicks etc.) and also in the latter stages of the game when defending deeper to protect a lead.
- Tackles/90, Mid. Third - this portion of the pitch is where players in this position should be completing the highest percentage of their tackles. It is their job to break up the opponent's transition from defence to attack by marking the midfielders and turning the ball over.
- Tackles/90, Att. Third - this is a great indicator of how the player applies pressure when the opposition defence has possession of the ball. Pressure leads to mistakes and, in the attacking third of the pitch, this can lead to scoring opportunities. Lots of tackles high up the pitch is a very desirable quality.
- Interceptions/90 - similar to the above, this metric highlights the ability to read the game well and break up the transitional flow of the opposition. Having a high number of interceptions is invaluable to any team.

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Phil Foden
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It is very important to understand that Bellingham (for Madrid) often, as a converted-central midfielder after all, has much more of a defensive responsibility than Foden, who rarely needs to sit behind the ball and defend due to the positional superiority Manchester City play with.

However, this does not make this defensive dominance from Bellingham any less impressive - his pressing of defenders and ability to cover so much ground on the pitch, whilst still outputting incredible offensive number, is an invaluable trait that will serve extremely well to international football and its demands.

Conclusion

Upon completion of all the analysis above, it is apparent that Gareth Southgate is blessed with his options. Here are the key takeaways:

England have to take advantage of Bellingham's obscene goal scoring ability and his overall influence of all aspects of the game. His ability to take up attacking positions from which to score from, combined with the fact that international defences are not as well drilled as domestic sides, means that allowing Bellingham the freedom to play as he plays will be invaluable to England. Adding in his ability to progress the ball from deep in the transition by either carrying or passing, having him operate centrally in the pitch is vital. His ability to defend well and cover all areas of the pitch is a cherry on top. Bellingham MUST start for England in the central-attacking position (the highest midfielder in a 4-3-3 formation) and be England's focal point in all aspects of the game.

The data above also shows the potential of Foden to play even higher up the pitch, possibly drifting in off the wings. The frightening number of touches he has in the final third, progressive passes received, whilst also registering numerous shots on target and a far superior number of shot-creating actions, a more advanced role may suit him even better. This would also reduce his defensive demands to better suit his game.

The key difference here to the clashing issue described in the introduction is that the data in this case supports the fact that Foden could play higher - he has applicable statistical qualities to the wide positions. Playing Bellingham, with all of his quality described above, slightly in-behind a player like Foden (in the attacking 3 of the 4-3-3) with his ability to operate in the final third, would create a scary threat to any side and would be something I would definitely like to see, even if only as a test in a friendly, warm-up fixture in the run up to the main competition. This way, Southgate can trial this system with no substantial consequences and be completely prepared for the tournament in the summer.