Manchester United F.C. Recruitment Dossier 2024/25

Football Statistics & Data Analysis

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Introduction

In this assignment, I will create a realistic recruitment dossier for Manchester United's upcoming 2024/25 season. I will employ data analysis to construct a starting line-up for the 2024/25 season using player data from the top five European leagues in line with a proposed game model. The game model will take into account the club's current context, coach philosophy, player abilities, and tactical principles. As a result, the game model will be an extension of Erik ten Hag's game model in the 2023/24 season.

Event Data and Performance Indicators

Modern football is characterised by the study of performance indicators derived from event data to objectively measure performance. This data, obtained live or post-match, can enhance knowledge and inform decision making (Anzer, 2021). Performance indicators, derived from data points, are used to measure and benchmark performance. The analysis of performance indicators enables an objective assessment of team and player performance (Memmert and Raabe, 2018).

Positional and Role-Based Data

Positional data is crucial in measuring individual player performance across various positions, considering the differing skill requirements (Hughes et al., 2012). Furthermore, players in the same positions may exhibit stylistic differences. Therefore, to more accurately analyse a player's performance relative to their tactical responsibilities, it is important to categorise players in the same position with role-based data (da Costa et al., 2009). Incorporating role-based data into football recruitment enables clubs to assess a player's tactical capabilities, and thereby evaluate the capacity of a player to operate in the team's game model.

Tracking Data

The development of tracking data has provided an additional layer of information alongside event data. Tracking data such as heat maps and passing networks, can contextualise event data while also providing insights into collective team behaviours and player synergies (Caicedo-Parada, 2020). Tracking data allows for a more comprehensive overview of on-the-ball and off-the-ball activity, whereas event data only captures on-the-ball actions (SciSports, 2021).

Validity and Reliability

A drawback of data analysis in football is poor validity and reliability of selected data. Reliable data ensures consistency and accuracy in performance indicators. To increase the reliability of my data, I will only be using performance data from the Wyscout Platform (Wyscout, 2024). Statistical data from the Wyscout Platform is collected by a specialised team of analysts internally to ensure that the data is accurately processed and maintains a consistent level of validity.

Contextual Factors

While data analysis offers valuable insights, its effectiveness may be limited by a lack of context regarding player performance. Player data may be positively, or negatively skewed in relation to the overall team performance. To better understand a player's abilities and potential, I will analyse various types of player data while also considering the overall team's performance, playstyle, and tactics.
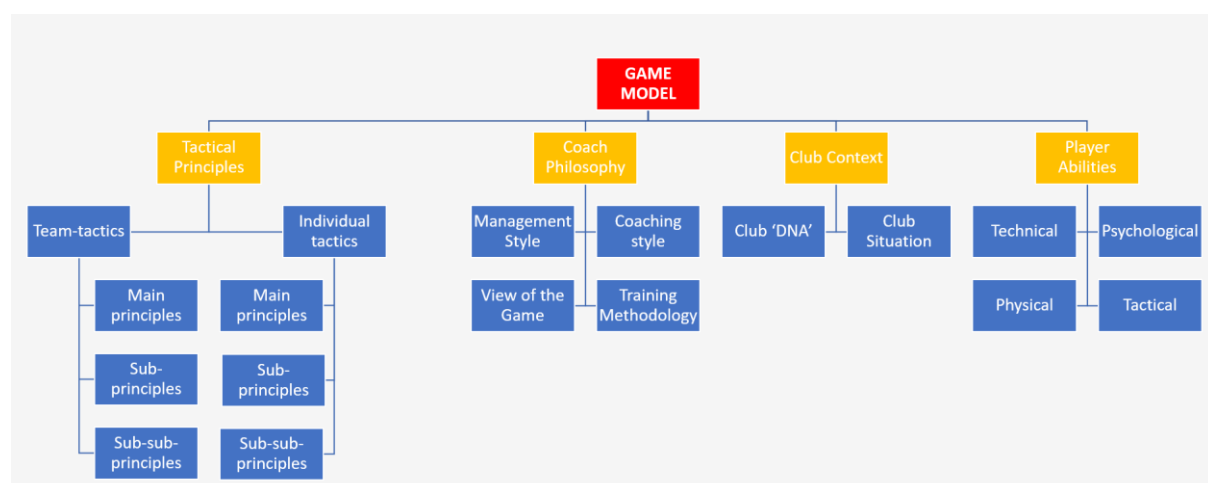
Manchester United FC

Game Model 2023/24

Manchester United FC Game Model 2023/24

Plakias (2023) defines a team's game model as a framework encompassing the coach's ideas, players' capabilities, and the club's culture, structure and objectives. A team's game model is constructed by the manager and serves as the basis for team organisation, training, and individual player development (Plakias, 2023). Each of these components contribute to the team's core tactical periodisation. According to Balagué (2023), a team's game model can be simplified into four main modules. These include the club context, player abilities, coaching philosophy, and tactical principles (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Game Model four module concept (Source: Balagué, 2023: Online)
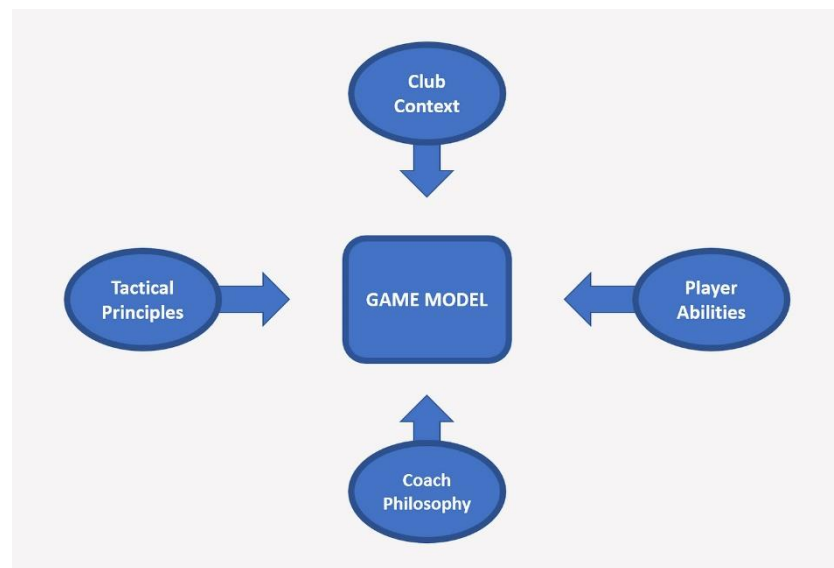
Balagué (2023) breaks down each module further to illustrate the various factors that influence a team's game model (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Four module breakdown (Source: Balagué, 2023: Online)

Club Context

Since Sir Alex Ferguson retired in 2013, Manchester United have failed to win a Premier League title and have appointed numerous managers with differing game models and recruitment philosophies. This period is characterised by instability and poor recruitment, exacerbated by the ownership's lack of a cohesive sporting strategy and club model. In February 2024, Sir Jim Ratcliffe and INEOS's purchase of a minority stake (27.7%) in Manchester United received approval from the Premier League and the English Football Association (The Athletic, 2024). The acquisition, and further investment of $300 million in the club, aims to significantly improve football operations by hiring industry-leading personnel such as Omar Barreda and Dan Ashworth.

Coach Philosophy

Erik ten Hag has demonstrated flexibility in the various game models he has employed throughout his twelve years in management. Ten Hag has designed his game models around the technical and tactical capacities of his players. This can be seen during his period as manager of Ajax F.C. (2017-2022), where he adapted the style of play each season depending on the players in the squad.

The style most commonly associated with Ten Hag at Ajax is the possession-based system in the 2019/20 season where players such as Frenkie De Jong and Dušan Tadić enabled Ajax to produce highly effective build-up play and final third chance creation. Ajax would build up in a **1**-3-1-5-1 shape, with their full-backs pushing up the pitch and Frenkie De Jong dropping deep to receive the ball in the defensive line. Ten Hag instructing his players to occupy the five lanes advanced up the pitch is a principle associated with positionalism – a philosophy of play popularised by Johan Cruyff. The intention of positionalism is to create a platform upon which every player, through their positioning and movements, can generate superiorities against the opposition using the "free man" concept (Breaking The Lines, 2022). Further links to Ten Hag's 2019/20 Ajax team and positionalism includes Ten Hag instructing his player to press high up the pitch (utilising a high defensive line) and encouraging positional fluidity.

Following the transfers of key players, Ten Hag altered the Ajax 2020/21 game model. Although Ajax 2020/21 maintained an emphasis on high tempo short passes, the introduction of Sebastian Haller as a target forward allowed Ajax a more direct approach in-possession. This was a contrast to the season prior where Dušan Tadić was employed as a false 9.

At FC Utrecht (2015-2017), Ten Hag adopted a more pragmatic game model. Ten Hag's FC Utrecht team placed little emphasis on the ball and playing out from the back. However, they were tactically flexible, playing three at the back and a diamond in midfield at times. Despite the variations in formation, the tactical principles remained unchanged; occupy half-spaces, work the ball into the box rather than taking long shots, constant rest defence cover and deploying a zonal-press to counter opposition build up play (Overtime Heroics, 2022).

Player Abilities

Erik ten Hag has repeatedly stated that the ability of the players dictate the team-tactical landscape of his Manchester United game model. Ten Hag quickly discovered in his first season that the current Manchester United squad is unable to replicate the possession-based game model he implemented at Ajax. Although Ten Hag has recruited players such as André Onana and Lisandro Martínez, who are both comfortable playing in possession-based teams, the majority of the players in the squad are more effective playing counter attacking and transitional football. United's two main attacking outlets are Marcus Rashford and Rasmus Højlund - both dynamic forwards who excel in more direct systems where they can attack space.

Moreover, United's most influential player over the past four seasons has been Bruno Fernandes, providing exceptional creativity in the final third. To compensate for the lack of a deep lying playmaker, Ten Hag has experimented with Fernandes dropping deeper in the build-up phase. However, this has a negative impact on United's productivity in the final third. Other key players such as Casemiro and Varane possess weaknesses in-possession which can be negated by adopting a more direct game model.

Tactical Principles

Manchester United's poor start to the 2023/24 season, combined with the squad's severe injury record, prompted Erik ten Hag to switch to a heavily transitional-based system, as opposed to the possession-based style he had implemented in the first few games. Ten Hag introduced several sub-sub-principles to counter for the loss of players such as Martinez, Shaw, and Mount.

	Main Principles	Sub-Principles	Sub-Sub-Principles
In-Possession	Fast, vertical and direct build up play.	Back 3 in the build-up phase.	Positional fluidity and rotations:
		GK and CB's attract pressure to unlock the spare man.	CB's step into midfield from goal kicks.
		Attacking players occupy the five lanes across the pitch.	FB's tuck into midfield.
Out-of-Possession	Proactive pressing.	Hybrid-Press – Zonal structure in defensive 3rd and player-orientated structure in opponents 3rd.	Low defensive line.
		FB's do not back up the press, allowing horizontal weakness.	
		Wingers press out-to-in.	
		Drop into **1**-4-1-4-1, **1**-4-4-2 or **1**-4-2-3-1 mid/low block if the press is bypassed.	
Attacking Transition	Counter-attack immediately following turnover in opposition half.		
Defensive Transition	Counter-press opposition immediately following turnover in opposition half.		

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# Game Model 2024/25

Manchester United Game Model 2024/25

While the Manchester United 2024/25 game model will consider the coaches philosophy, club context and current player abilities, the primary objective of the revised game model is to improve the team's current tactical limitations. The most important areas of improvement for Manchester United include:

1. **Controlling games through possession**
2. **Rest defence and defensive line height**
3. **Favouring vertical rather than horizontal weakness in the hybrid pressing structure**
4. **Compactness in a mid-block**
5. **Combination play in the final third**

I have developed the 2024/25 game model based on these factors which will inform the player profiles recruited through statistical analysis.
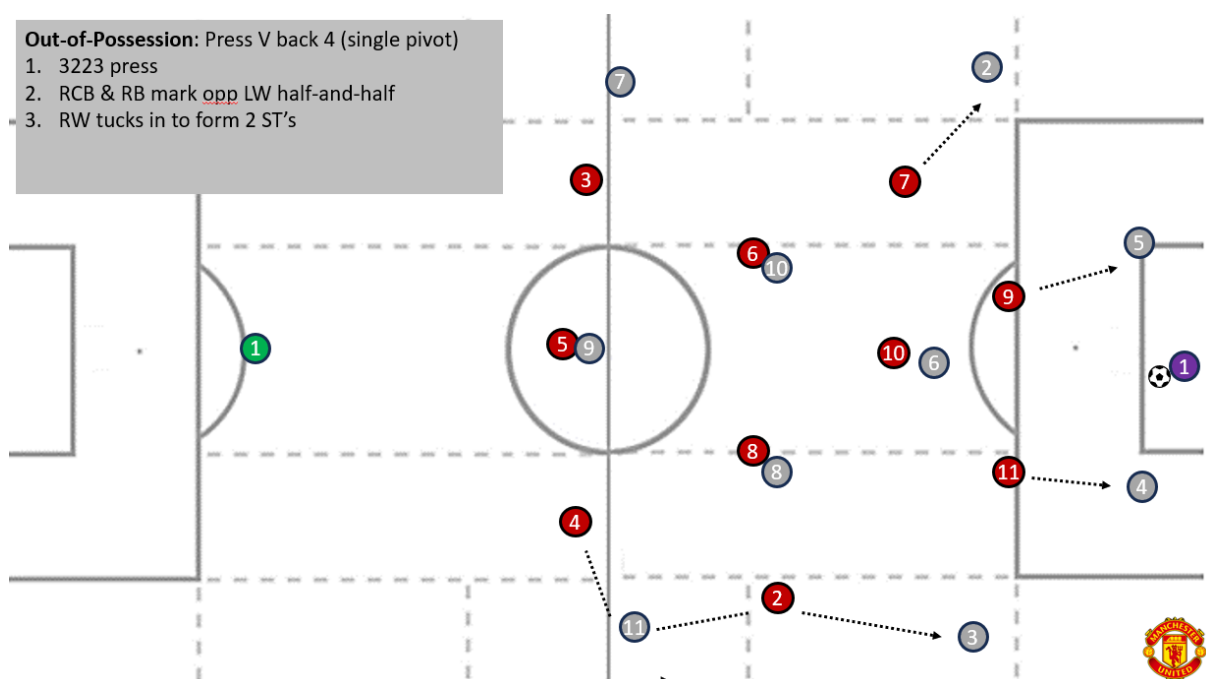
In-Possession

To improve United's game model in-possession (areas **1** & **5**), United need to play less direct in their build-up. This requires less dynamic player profiles with high ball retention. Depending on the opponents press, United should build-up in a 3+2 or 4+2 structure and unlock the spare man through third man combinations. This build-up structure can be formed through a variety of positional rotations, including the goalkeeper stepping into the defensive line.

In-Possession: Goal Kick V back 4 (double pivot)
1. 1-3-2-4-1
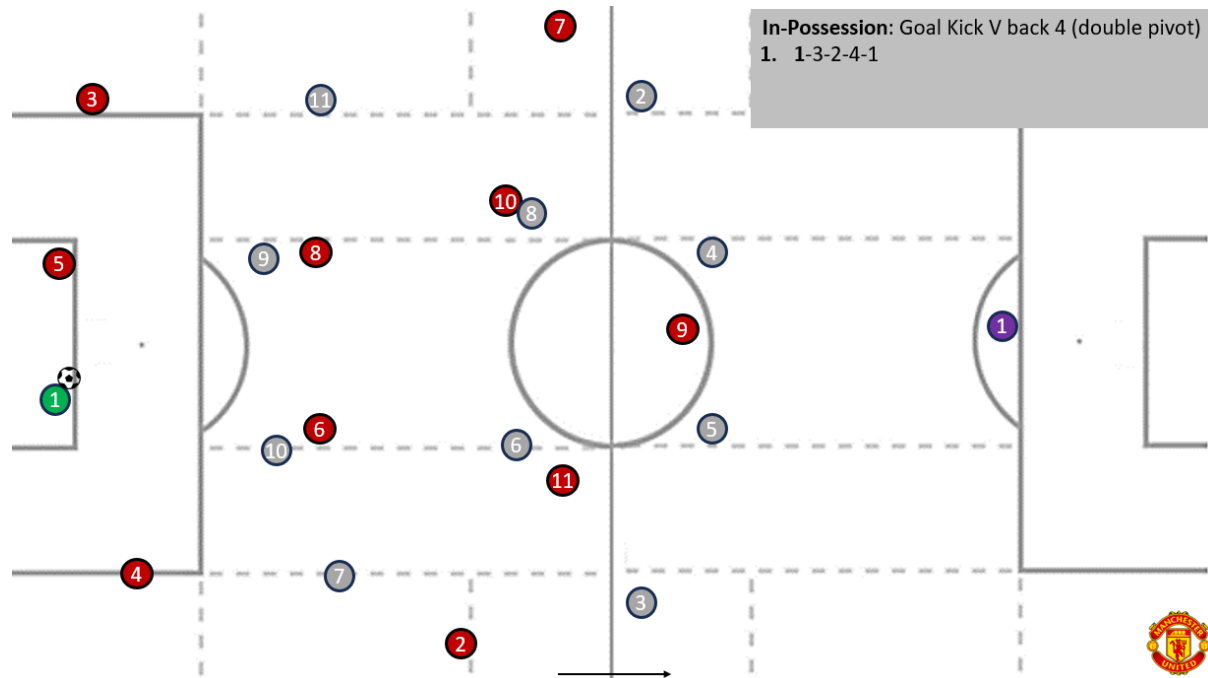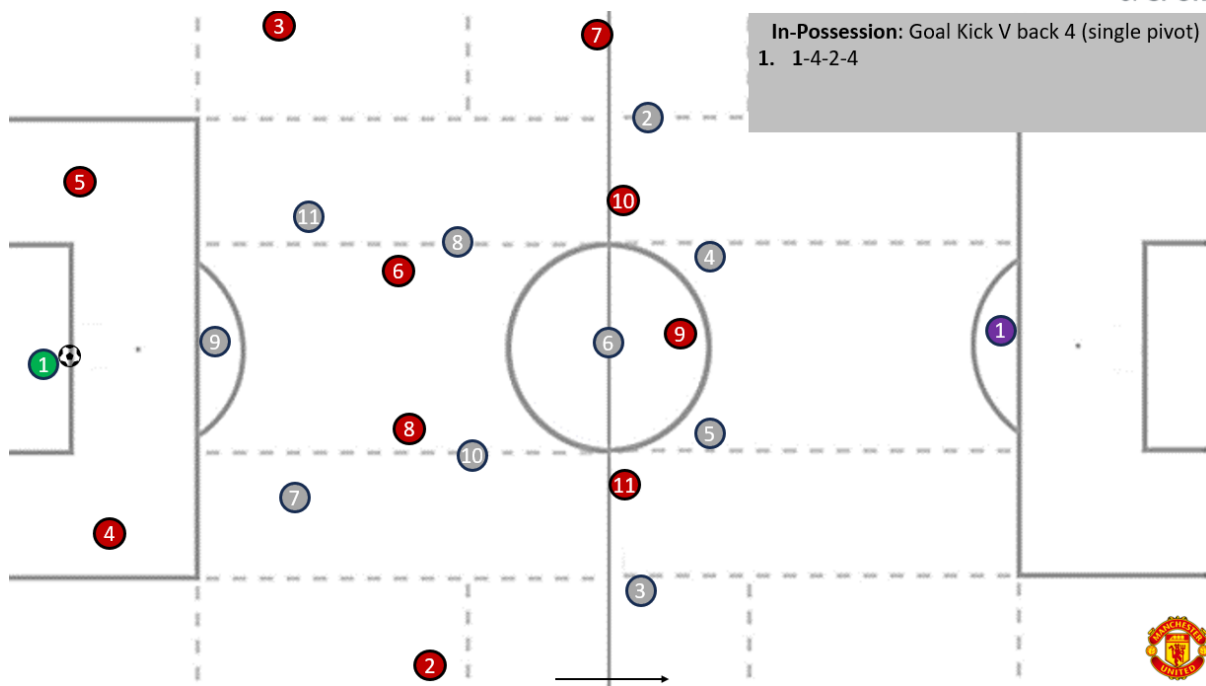
Out-of-Possession

To improve United's game model out-of-possession (areas **1**, **2** & **3**), United need to employ a more compact rest defence and mid-block structure, while also allowing vertical weakness in their high-press. This requires more defensively minded central midfielders and defenders who have good positional awareness. Moreover, allowing vertical weakness in United's hybrid-press demands a physical wide-centre-back alongside a dynamic modern wing-back.

Out-of-Possession: Press V back 4 (single pivot)
1. 3223 press
2. RCB & RB mark opp LW half-and-half
3. RW tucks in to form 2 ST's

Tactical Principles

	Main Principles	Sub-Principles	Sub-Sub-Principles
In-Possession	Patient build-up play based on high tempo short passes.	3+2 or 4+2 in the build-up phase. GK and CB's attract pressure and unlock the spare man through bounce passes and 3rd man runs. Attacking players occupy the five lanes across the pitch.	Positional fluidity and rotations. Forward players drop into build-up to create overloads. Option to go direct if opposition is pressing aggressively.
Out-of-Possession	Proactive pressing.	Hybrid-Press – Zonal structure in defensive 3rd and player-orientated structure in opponents 3rd. FB's back up the press, allowing vertical weakness. High defensive line Drop into **1**-4-1-4-1, **1**-4-4-2 or **1**-4-2-3-1 mid/low block if the press is bypassed.	Direction of press depends on the opposition's setup and player abilities.
Attacking Transition	Counter-attack immediately following turnover.	Fast, vertical and direct passes into forwards.	
Defensive Transition	Counter-press opposition immediately following turnover in opposition half.	Compact rest-defence structure.	

Methodology and Scope

In my data analysis, I produced shortlists for each position in the game model using the Wyscout's advanced search feature. Shortlists were developed using relevant KPIs and parameters. Data points were exported to Excel for percentile analysis, comparing the top three shortlisted players in each position. To ensure that realistic factors for the final XI are considered, where the Manchester United squad contains a high-quality or recently acquired player, I have included two players from the shortlist in addition to the Manchester United player in that position.

Player shortlists are based on current season (2023/24) data from the top five European leagues, with position-specific parameters detailed in Table 1.

Position	Age Range	Mins played (minimum)	Shortlist size
GK	16-28	1,396	30
LB	16-27	1,571	46
LCB	16-27	1,496	39
RCB	16-27	1,546	86
RB	16-27	1,546	48
CDM	16-27	1,546	73
CM	16-27	1,546	88
CAM	16-27	1,546	44
LW	16-27	1,495	56
RW	16-27	1,546	53
ST	16-27	1,594	67

Player transfer values are obtained from the Wyscout database (Wyscout, 2024), while player wages are acquired from Capology (https://www.capology.com/, 2024).

Manchester United FC

Player Profiles 2024/25

Goalkeeper

The goalkeeper must be highly effective in the build-up phase. While the goalkeeper must be skilled in playing short passes into midfield to unlock the spare man, he must also be capable of distributing the ball accurately over the large distances to bypass an opponent's press.


Legend: V. Milinković-Savić — A. Onana — M. Di Gregorio

Radar chart axes: Short / medium passes per 90, Accurate short / medium passes, %, Long passes per 90, Accurate long passes, %, Progressive passes per 90, Accurate progressive passes, %, Save rate, %, Prevented goals per 90, Exits per 90
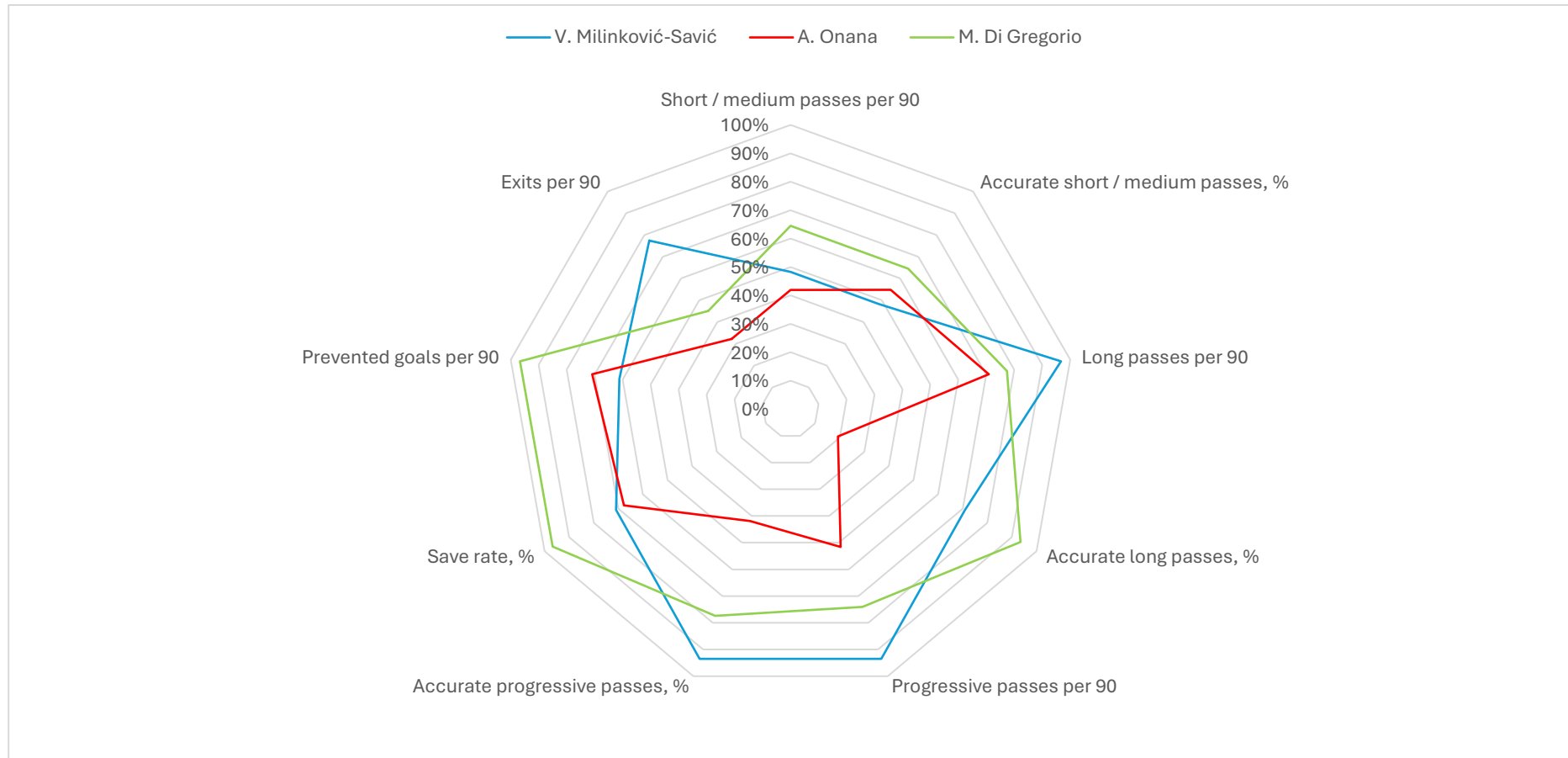
Goalkeeper

Di Gregorio's data is well rounded, demonstrating exceptional shot-stopping ability and effectively contributing to his team's build-up play. The data for Milinković-Savić indicates a more traditional shot stopper with the highest Prevented Goals per 90 in the shortlist. Milinković-Savić is also effective with his feet, showcasing high accuracy from short and long distances. In the context of the high attacking output of the Premier League, Onana's performance data is good. Onana has significantly improved United's ability to play out from the back, a key important component of the 24/25 game model. Furthermore, Onana is currently in the first of a five-year contract, so it is unlikely that he will be replaced in the summer.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. A. Onana	27	190	£0	£120,000
2. M. Di Gregorio	26	187	£10,000,000	£21,000
3. V. Milinković-Savić	27	202	£4,200,000	£18,000

Left-Back

The 24/25 game model requires a left-back who is excellent on the ball, while also being capable of playing in a high defensive line and being successful in a high number of defensive duels.
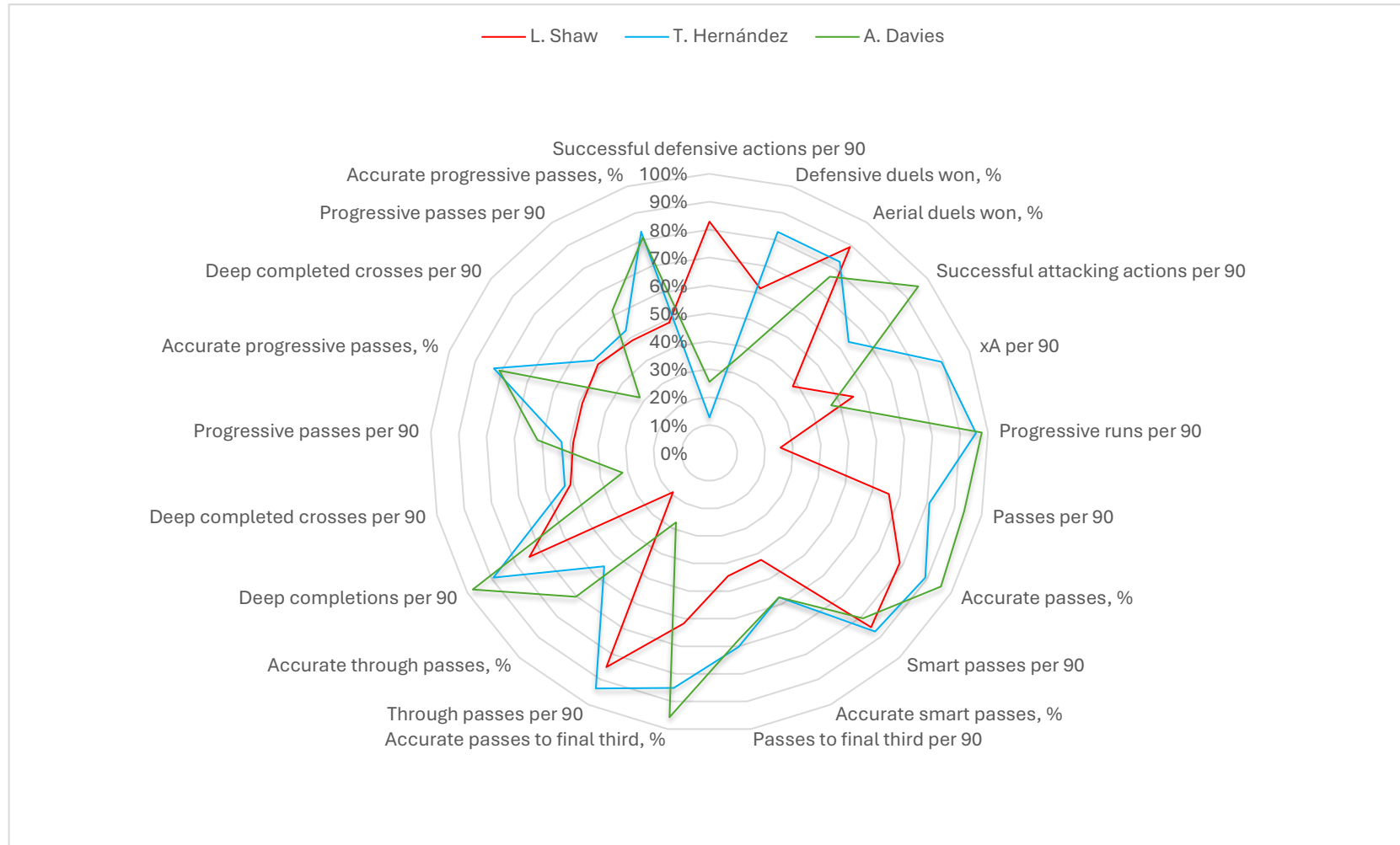
Left-Back

Davies and Hernández both have outstanding attacking and passing data. In comparison to Shaw, Davies and Hernández are superior at progressing play with forward dribbles. On the other hand, Shaw massively outperforms Davies and Hernández out-of-possession. Furthermore, the positional data displays how Davies and Hernández operate higher up the pitch, while Shaw generally plays deeper, and more narrow. If Shaw is unable to stay fit in the 24/25 season, Hernández may be a suitable replacement.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. L. Shaw	28	181	£0	£150,000
2. T. Hernández	26	184	£60,000,000	£85,000
3. A. Davies	23	185	£70,000,000	£185,000

Shaw
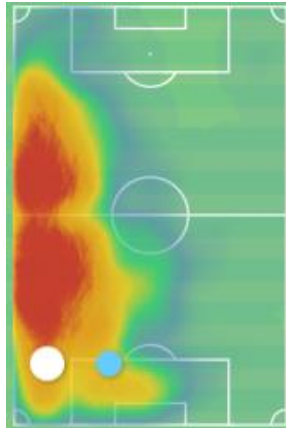
Hernández
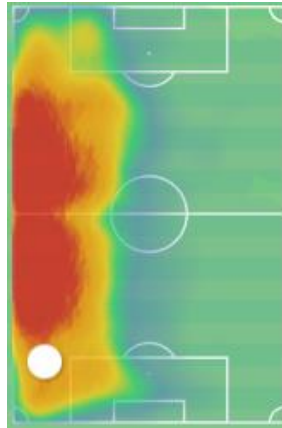
Davies
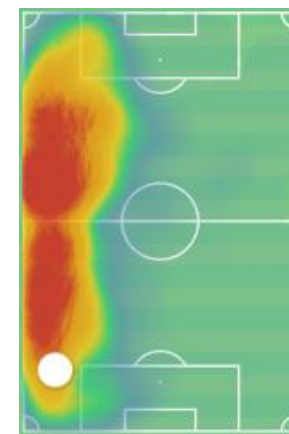
Left-Centre-Back

The left-centre-back must be comfortable in a possession-based system and capable of stepping out-wide or into the midfield line due to the fluidity of the 24/25 game model. Moreover, the player must be physically strong to engage in a high number of duels and play a high defensive line.
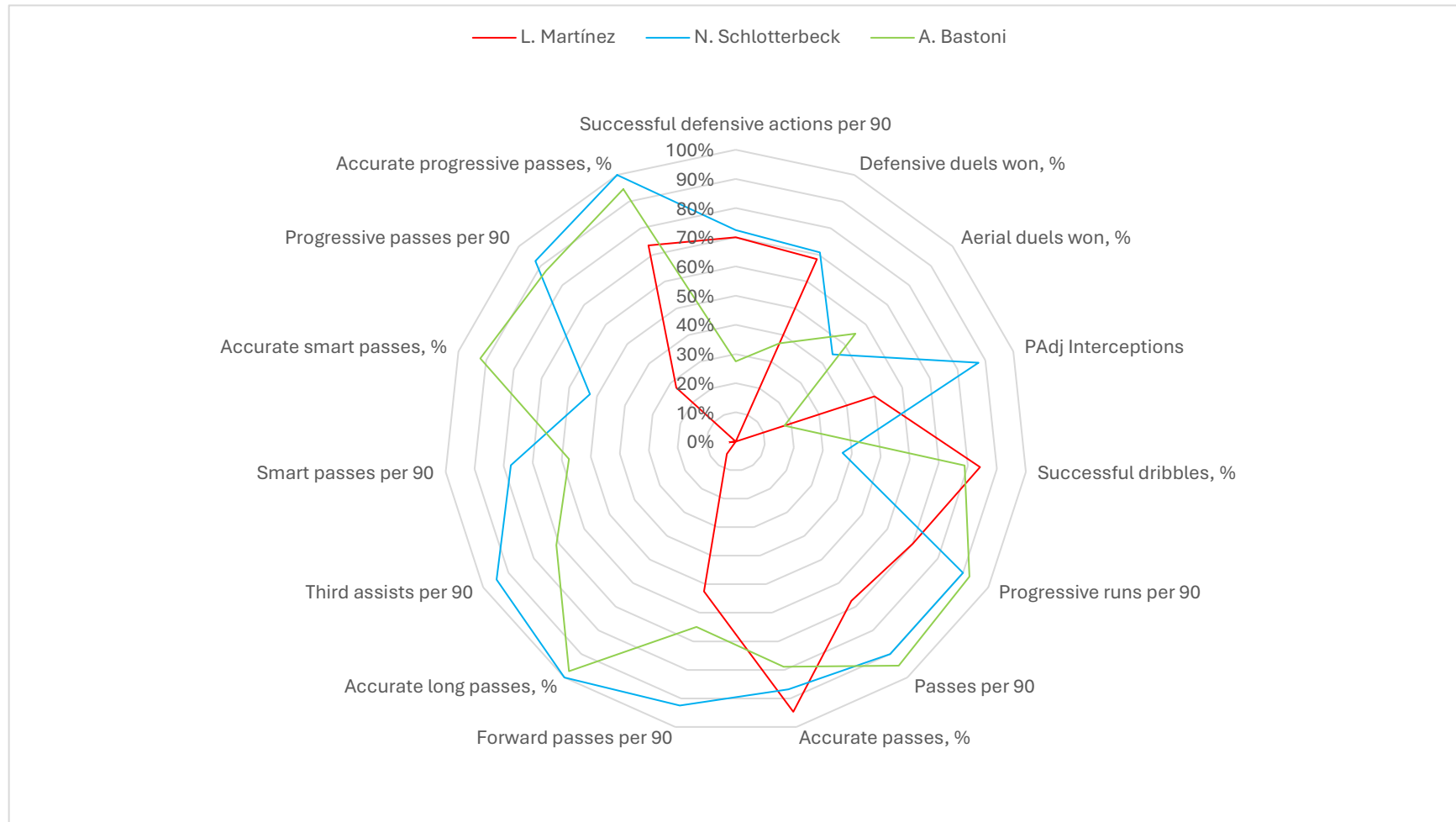
Left-Centre-Back

Schlotterbeck's data illustrates high volume and effective passing, while also demonstrating strong ability out-of-possession. Bastoni is highly effective on the left of a back-three, making overlapping runs and driving into midfield with the ball. However, Bastoni's high wages may be an issue as INEOS will look to reduce United's inflated wage bill. Due to several injury setbacks, Martínez's stats are relatively poor, especially in-possession. However, Martínez had an outstanding 2022/23 season and has been crucial to United's build-up play under Ten Hag. It is unlikely that Martínez will be dropped if he remains fit. However, if Martínez's injuries persist, United should consider Schlotterbeck as a replacement.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. L. Martínez	26	178	£0	£120,000
2. N. Schlotterbeck	24	191	£40,000,000	£77,000
3. A. Bastoni	24	190	£55,000,000	£198,000
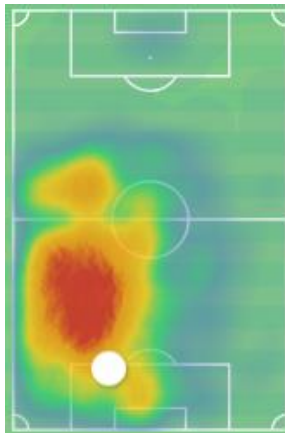
Martínez   Schlotterbeck   Bastoni
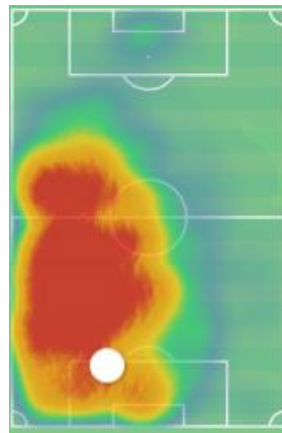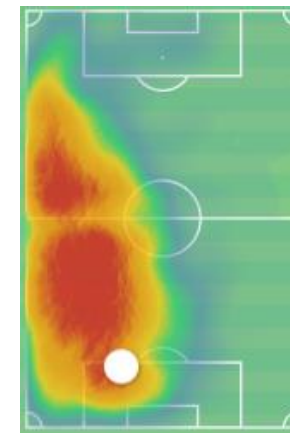
Right-Centre-Back

The right-centre-back must have high-quality in-possession to successfully contribute to United's build-up play. They must also be excellent defensively and physically capable of defending in wide areas by themselves to support the high-press.
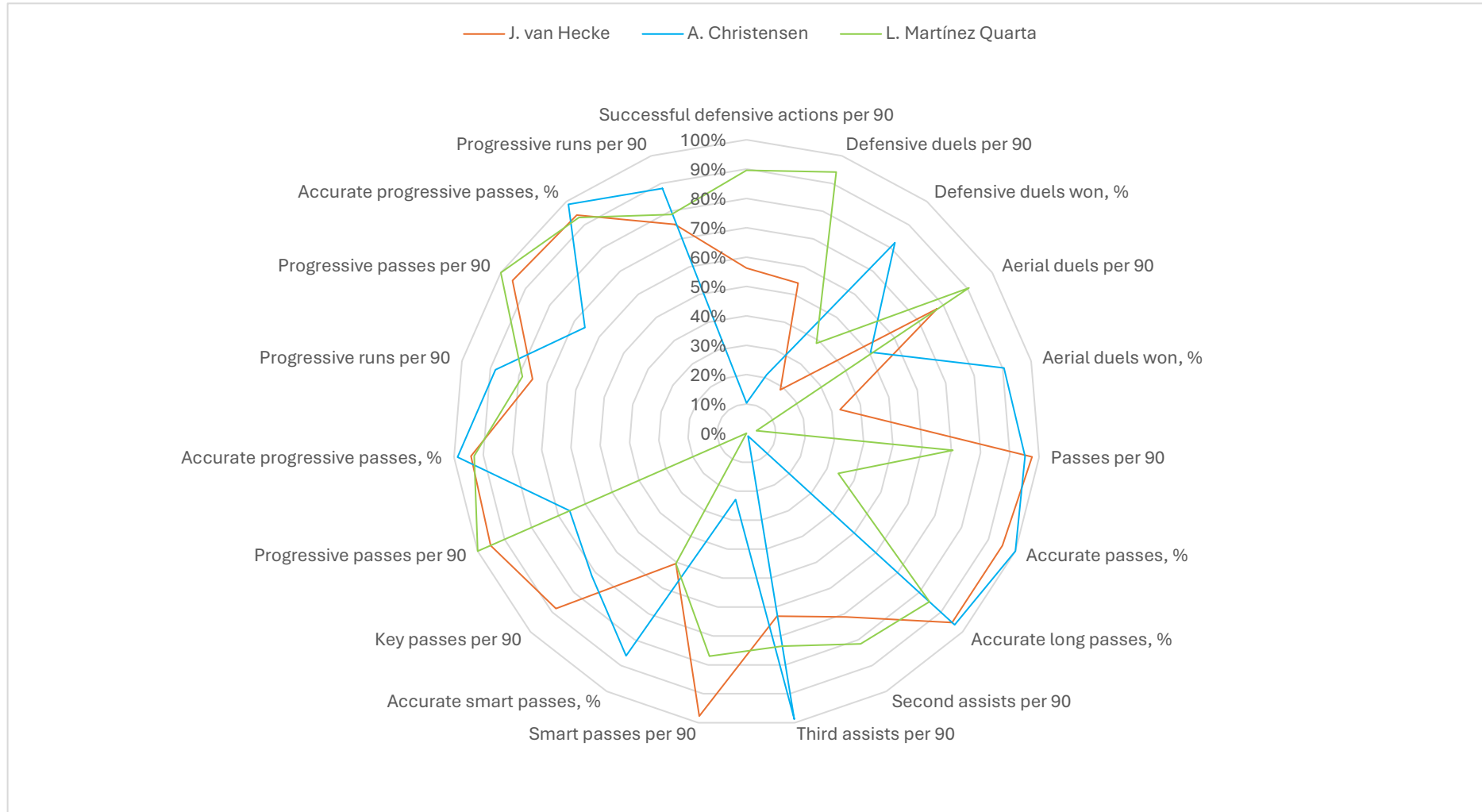
Right-Centre-Back

Christensen has excellent passing statistics and ranks first in progressive runs. This makes Christensen ideal for possession-based systems like Barcelona's. However, his defensive data is quite poor. Compared to Van Hecke, who also plays in a possession-based system under De Zerbi, who has a significantly higher rate of successful defensive actions. Van Hecke is also the youngest and tallest player on the shortlist, which increases his capacity to operate in a physical wide-centre-back role.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. J. van Hecke	23	189	£4,000,000	£30,000
2. A. Christensen	27	187	£30,000,000	£213,000
3. L. Martínez Quarta	27	183	£10,000,000	£21,000

Van Hecke
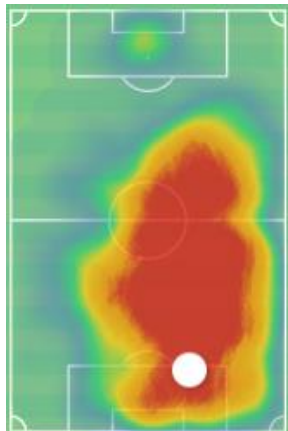
Christensen
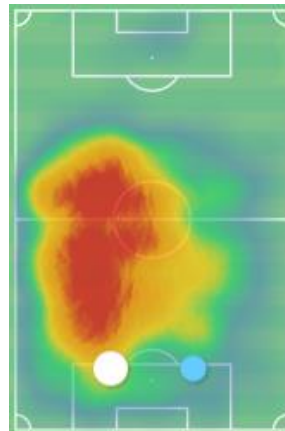
Martínez Quarta
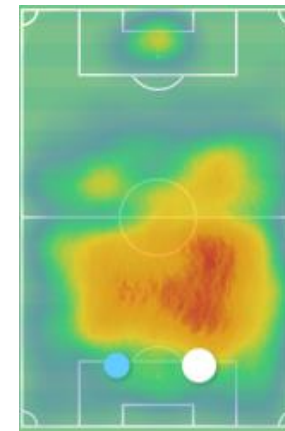
Right-Back

United's right-back must act as an aggressive wing-back with high attacking output in-possession, while also dropping into the defensive line in a mid-block. The role also demands a dynamic right-back with good physicality to apply a hybrid-press.
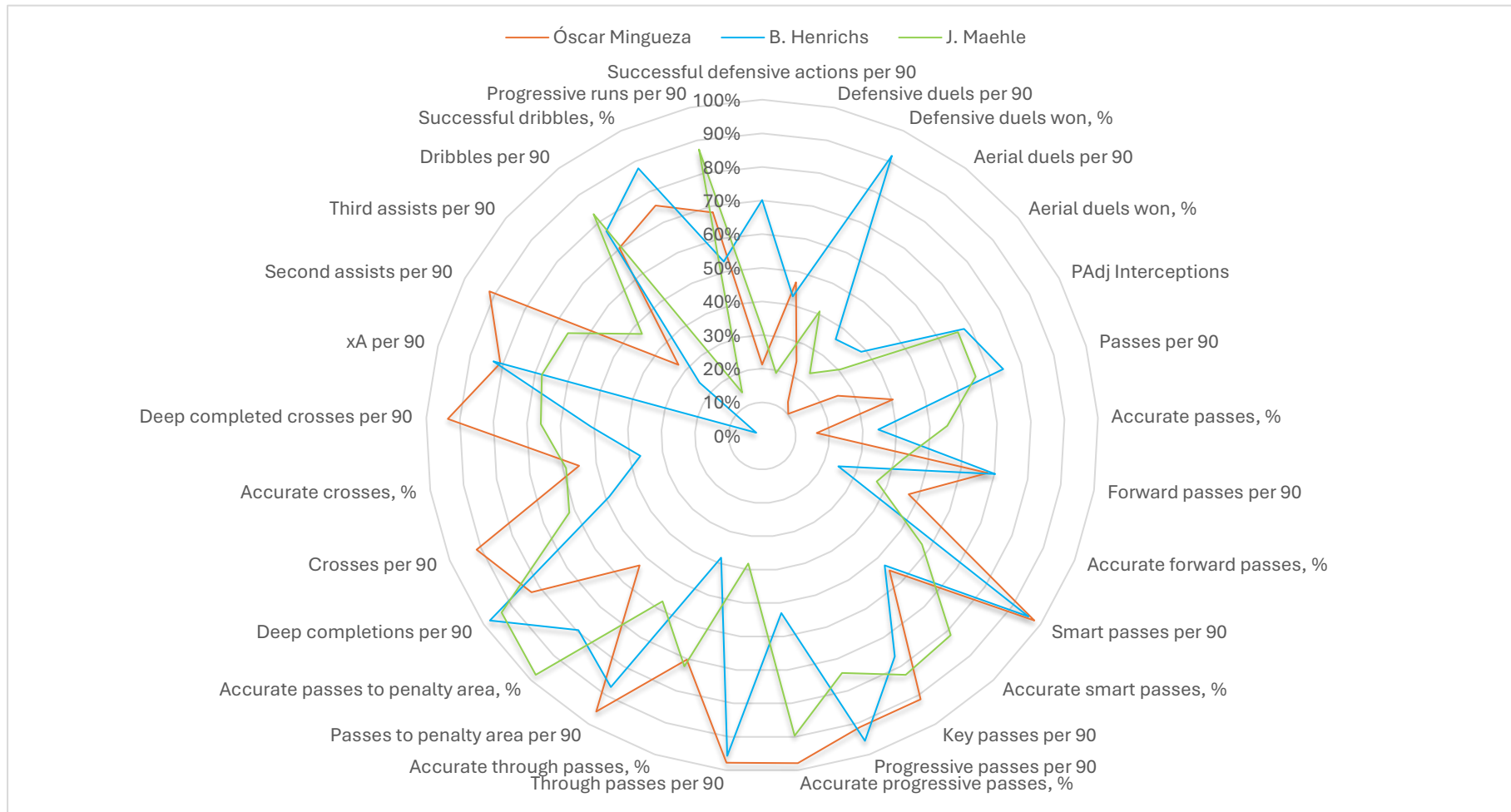
Right-Back

Mingueza offers exceptional attacking output, scoring in the 90th percentile for nine of the passing and attacking metrics including Second assists and Smart passes per 90. The tracking data also displays how Mingueza often comes inside and operates centrally, in addition to attacking the byline. The versatility of Mingueza's attacking runs allows for a variety of combination play patterns.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. Ó. Mingueza	24	184	£3,000,000	£19,000
2. B. Henrichs	27	183	£15,000,000	£62,000
3. J. Maehle	26	185	£14,000,000	£31,000

Mingueza
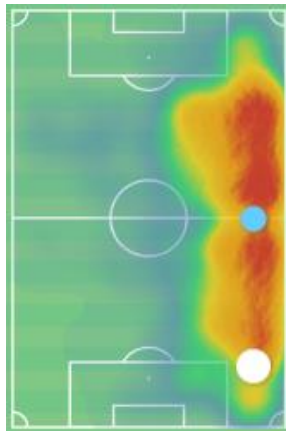
Henrichs
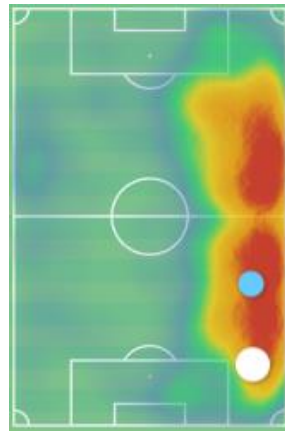
Maehle
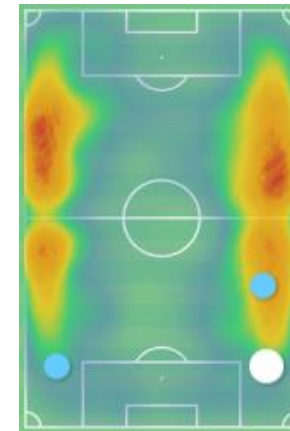
Defensive-Midfield

The defensive-midfielder, or number 6, needs to actively contribute to United's build-up play in the first and second phases. This requires high ball retention and passing skills, in addition to strong defensive capabilities to successfully man-mark opposition players in midfield.
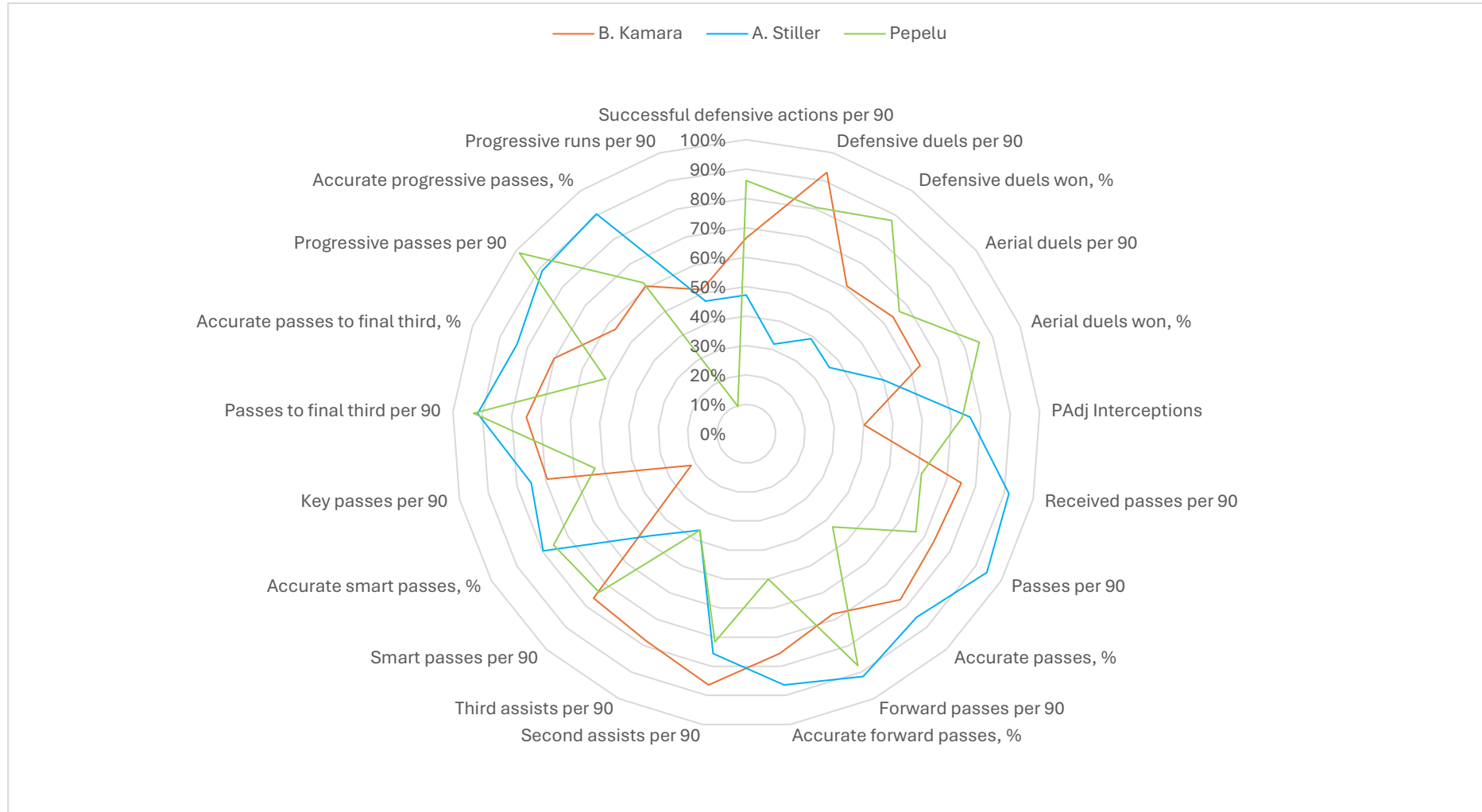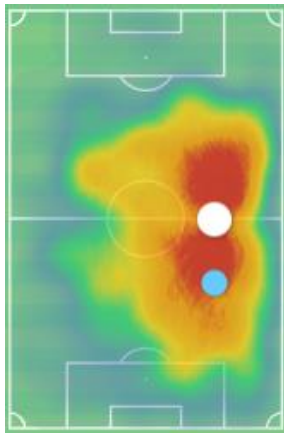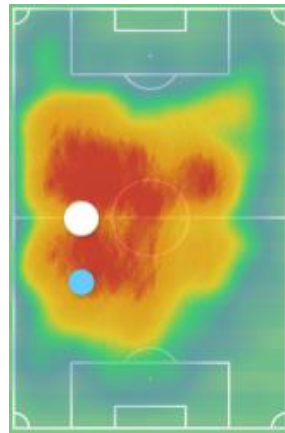
Defensive-Midfield

According to the data, Pepelu excels out of possession, ranking high in defensive actions and duel win rates. Stiller, on the other hand, has impressive attacking statistics. When combined with his more advanced heat map, this suggests that Stiller is effective going forward and may be more suited to a box-to-box or playmaker role rather than a defensive-midfielder. Kamara has excellent, well-rounded data from playing in the Premier League. According to the data, Kamara is a strong defensive player with high ball retention who can progress play with passes or dribbles forward. Kamara ranks highly in third & second assists, which highlights how he is often involved in build-up play which leads to a goal.

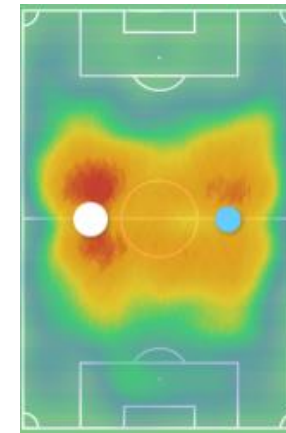| Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. B. Kamara	24	184	£25,000,000	£150,000
2. A. Stiller	22	183	£6,000,000	£21,000
3. Pepelu	25	186	£3,000,000	£21,000

Kamara

Stiller

Pepelu

Centre-Midfield

United's centre-midfielder must be competent in all phases of the game, with or without the ball. As such the player must have balanced defensive and attacking output, alongside strong passing data.
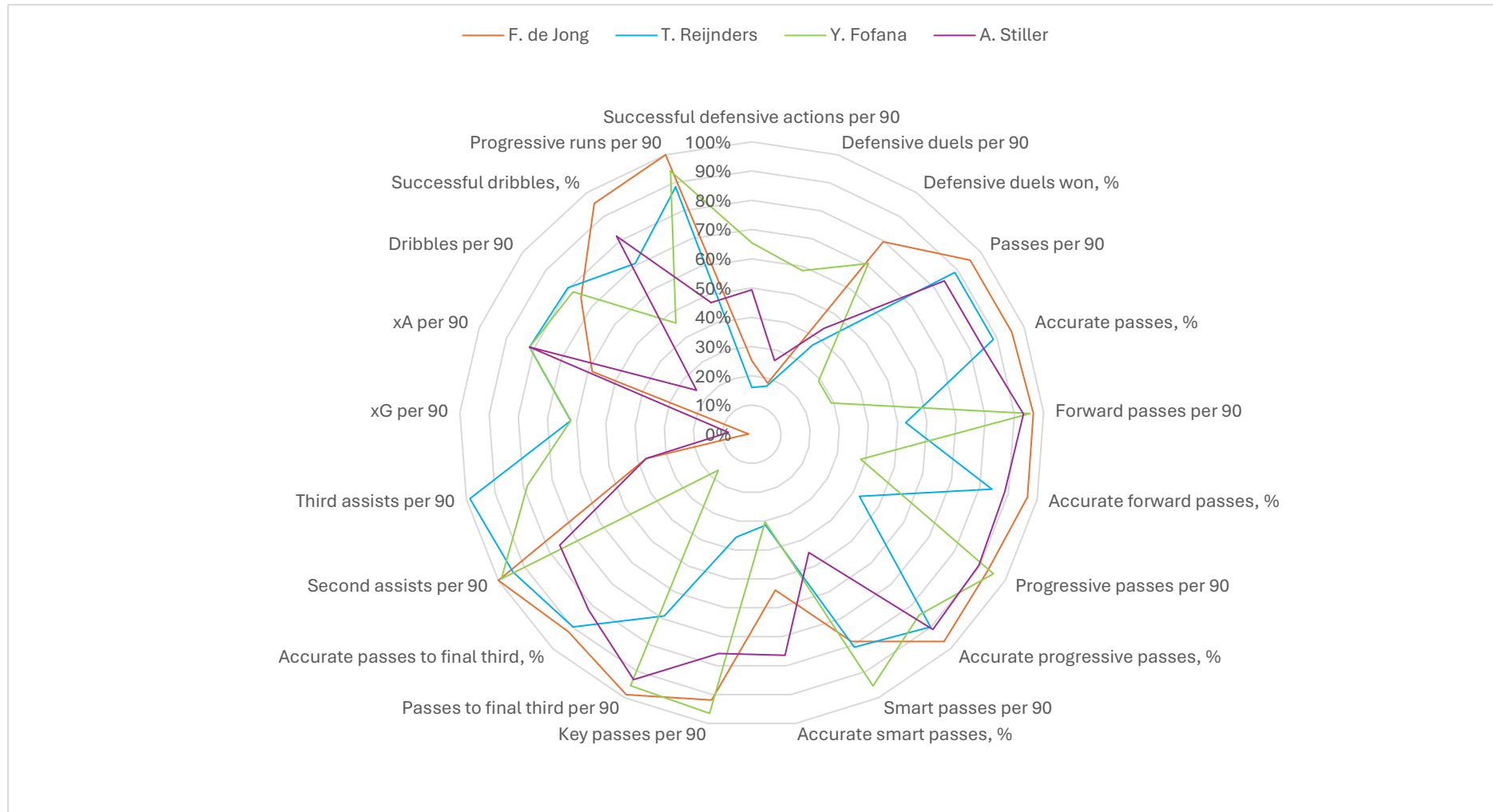
Centre-Midfield

Although Fofana performs well in the out-of-possession metrics, his passing accuracy is relatively poor. This suggests that he may not be as effective in a possession-based team. Reijnders has more well-rounded data, but ranks last in defensive actions per 90, indicating a more attacking temperament. De Jong's data is exceptional, with almost all of the passing data falling within the 90th percentile. Although his defensive output is low, Barcelona employ a heavily possession-based game model which reduces De Jong's out-of-possession actions. Stiller is a good back-up option to De Jong as he provides an excellent balance of in-possession and out-of-possession ability. His capacity to successfully perform a range of skills is ideal for a centre midfielder.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. F. de Jong	26	181	£60,000,000	£296,000
2. A. Stiller	22	183	£6,000,000	£21,000
3. T. Reijnders	25	185	£8,000,000	£35,000
4. Y. Fofana	25	185	£25,000,000	£21,000

De Jong   Stiller   Reijnders   Fofana
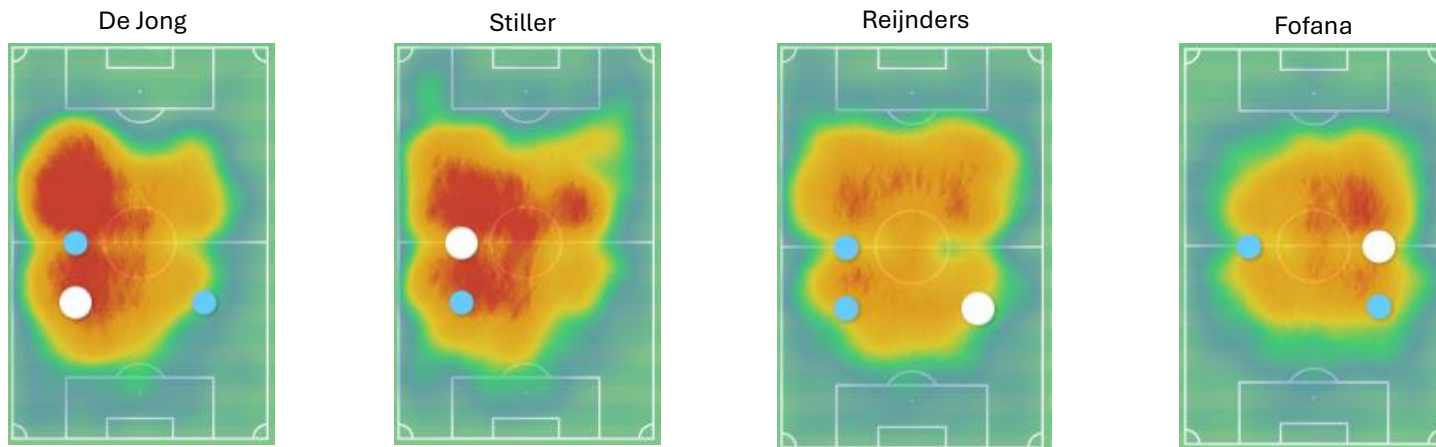
Attacking-Midfield

The attacking-midfield player must offer exceptional creativity and attacking output in the final third. It is also important that the player is strong out-of-possession, to meet the demands of the game model's high press.
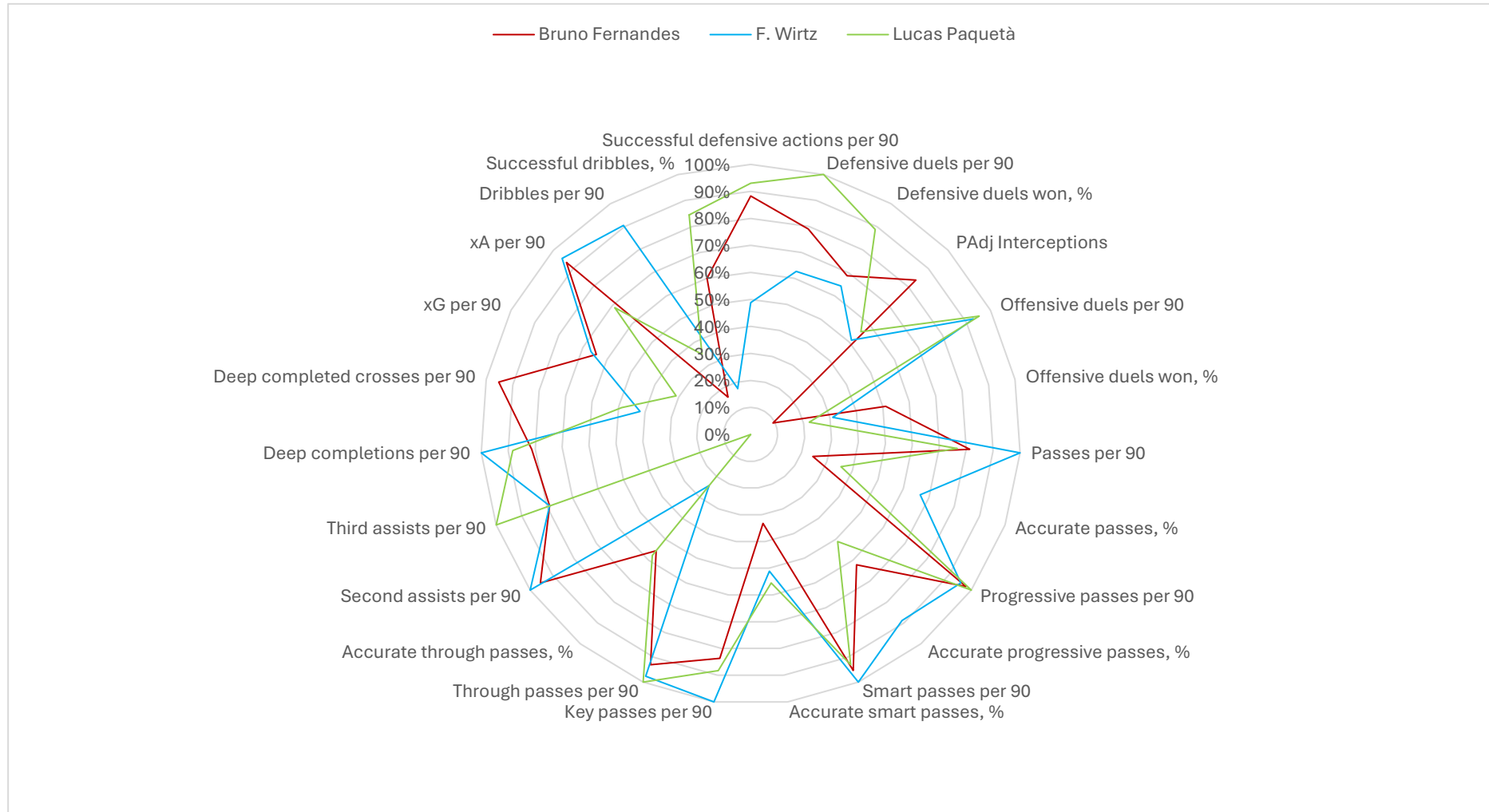
Attacking-Midfield

Wirtz has the highest xA per 90 and accurate progressive pass percentage, and he is also in the 90th percentile for progressive passes per 90. This demonstrates Wirtz's exceptional creativity while also contributing significantly to Leverkusen's build-up play. His tracking data shows that he operates in the left half-space, which is suitable for the proposed in-possession game model. Similarly, Paquetà has good build-up data from the left-side of the pitch, albeit deeper than Wirtz due to West Ham often employing a low/mid-block. Although Wirtz's attacking output is better, Paquetà has exceptional out-of-possession data which indicates how could effectively play in a high-press. However, Fernandes also offers high defensive output, alongside excellent creativity in the final third.

Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. B. Fernandes	29	179	£0	£240,000
2. F. Wirtz	20	177	£85,000,000	£123,000
3. L. Paquetà	26	180	£45,000,000	£150,000
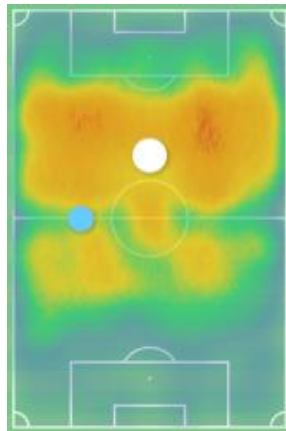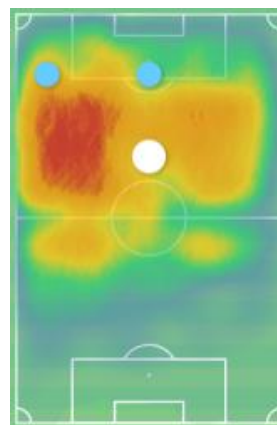
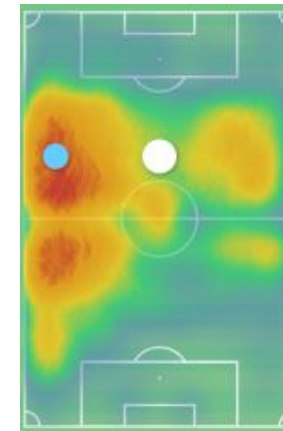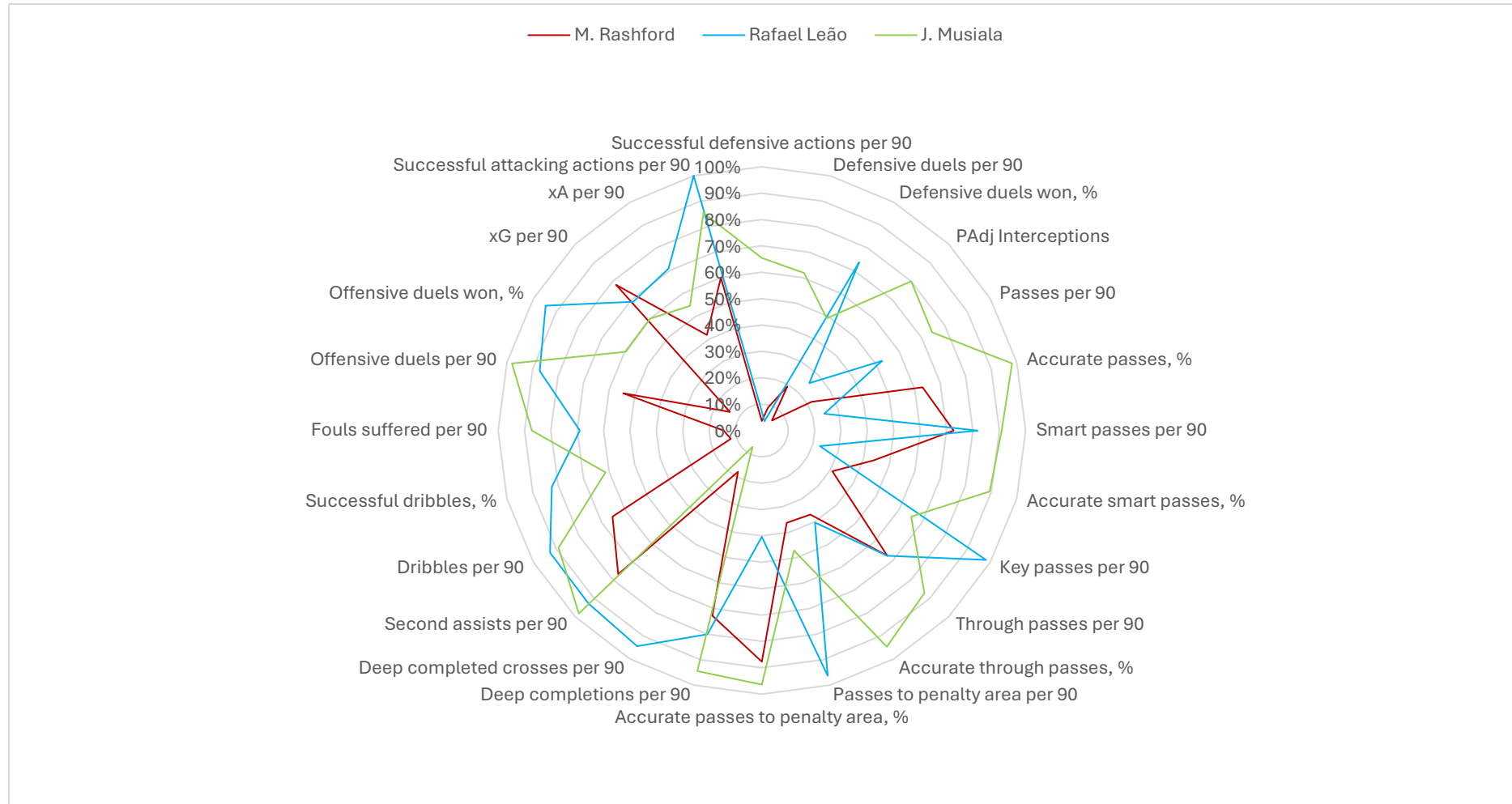Fernandes   Wirtz   Paquetà

Left-Wing

The left wing position demands a dynamic attacker who can beat defenders with speed and skill in transition. In possession, they will play high and wide to stretch the pitch and create space in the midfield third.

Left-Wing

Although Musiala has good in- and out-of-possession data, his tracking data illustrates that he is more of a roaming playmaker than a winger. Whereas, Leão is a traditional winger who excels in most attacking metrics. Rashford's data is underwhelming, reflecting United's poor attacking performance this season. Despite this, Rashford still leads in xG per 90, indicating that his movement is good and that he will eventually match his xG trend with goals.

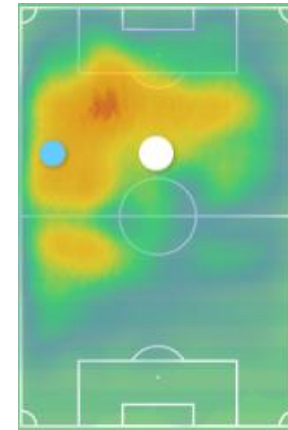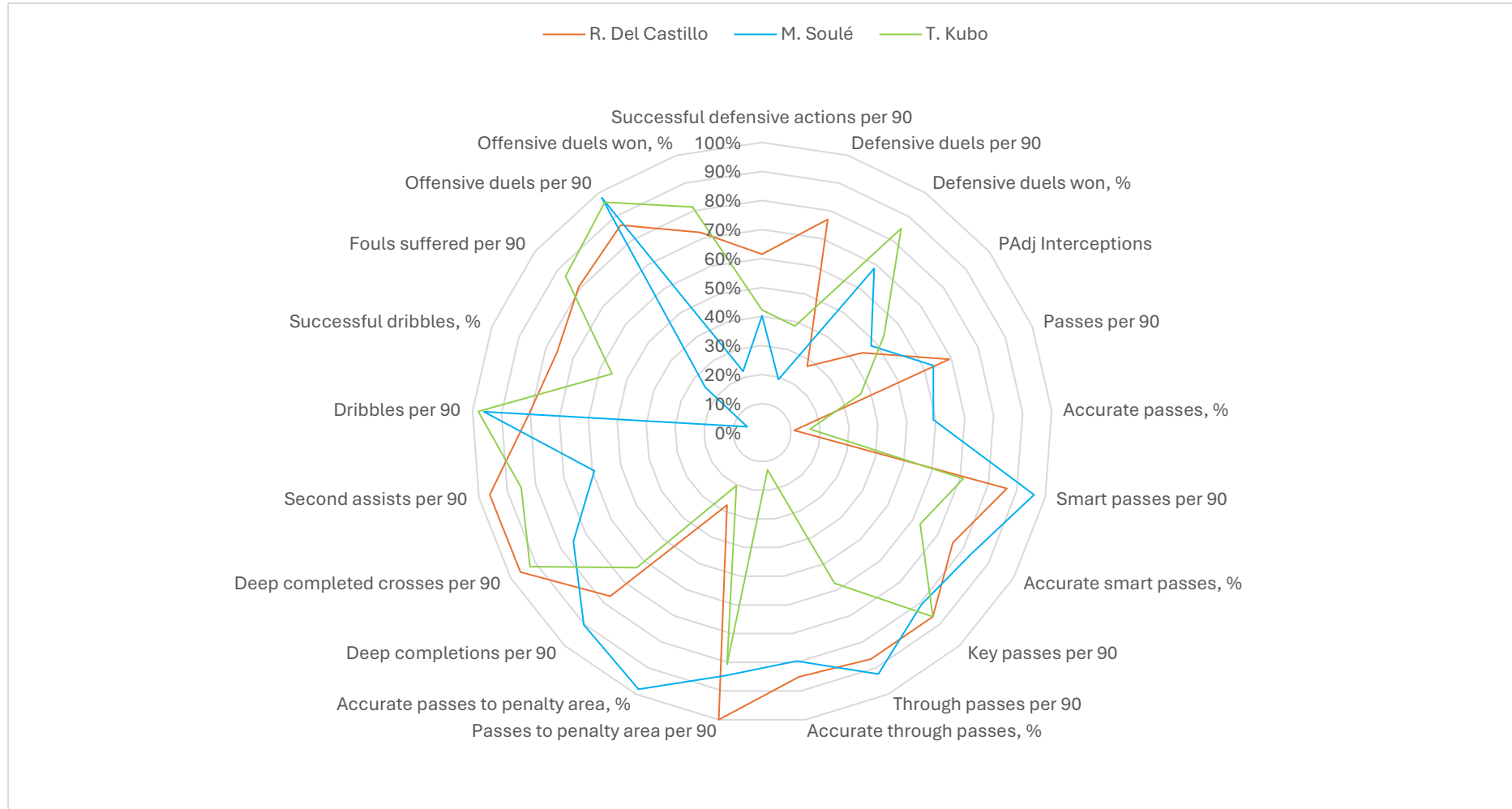| Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. M. Rashford	26	186	£0	£375,000
2. R. Leão	24	188	£80,000,000	£147,000
3. J. Musiala	21	184	£110,000,000	£82,000

Rashford
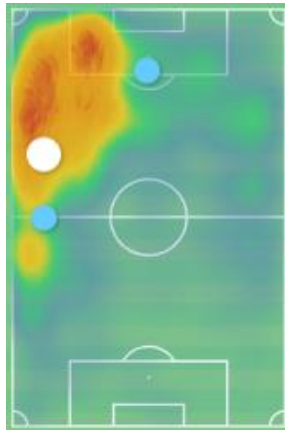
Leão
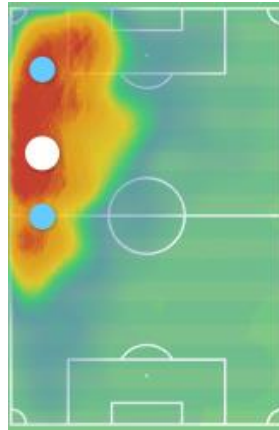
Musiala

Right-Wing

The right-winger must possess high ball retention and creativity to operate in the right half-space.

Right-Wing

Kubo engages and succeeds in a large number of offensive duels and dribbles. Soulé also engages in a large number of duels and dribbles, but he is more wasteful in possession. Despite this, Soulé demonstrates strong passing ability, indicating that he is more of a playmaker. Del Castillo provides an even distribution of passing, dribbling, and defensive data. Along with his more diverse heat-map, this suggests that Del Castillo is proficient in all aspects of the game and has the ability to play more central.

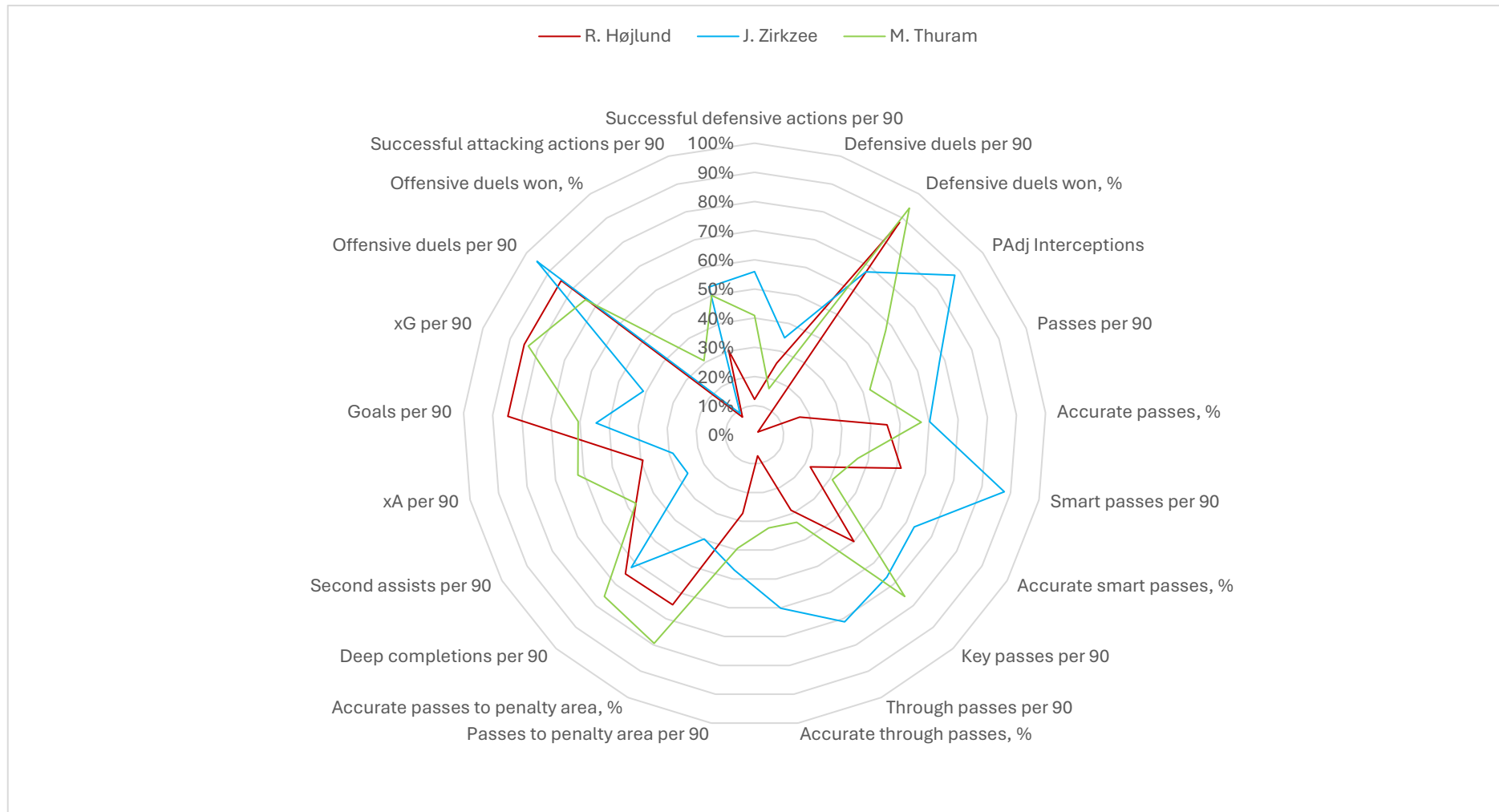| Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. R. Del Castillo	27	172	£3,000,000	£18,000
2. M. Soulé	20	176	£4,000,000	£9,000
3. T. Kubo	22	173	£15,000,000	£41,000

Del Castillo
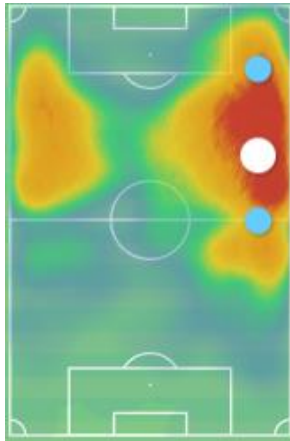
Soulé
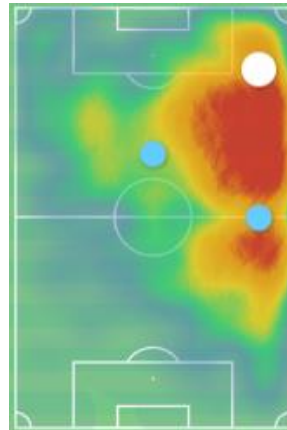
Kubo

Striker

To effectively apply the 24/25 game model, the striker must be physically strong to play as a lone striker while also being able to link play with excellent on-the-ball ability.

Striker

Thuram's tracking and attacking data indicate that he plays as an advanced forward. Thuram ranks highest in xA and Key passes per 90, indicating strong link-up play in the final third. On the other hand, Zirkzee plays as a deep lying forward, frequently dropping deep into the middle third and contributing more out-of-possession, as evidenced by his high volume of defensive actions. Højlund's recent form has pushed him to the top of the shortlist in terms of xG and goals per 90. However, his passing statistics are poor, corresponding to United's poor build-up play in-possession. Despite this, Højlund has made a good start at United and has time to develop his technical and tactical capacities.

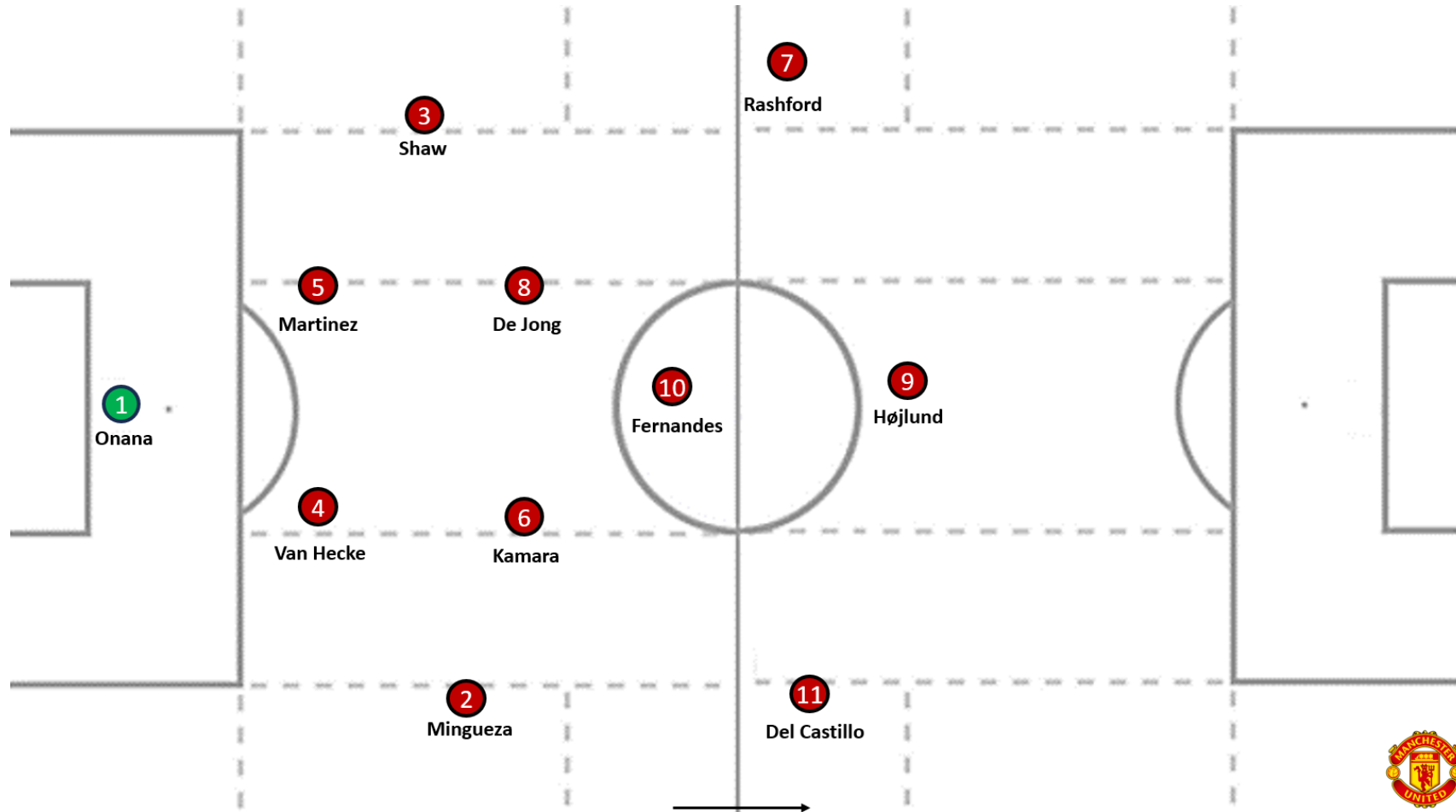| Player	Age	Height (CM)	Transfer Cost	Wages
1. R. Højlund	21	187	£0	£85,000
2. J. Zirkzee	22	193	£9,000,000	£18,000
3. M. Thuram	26	192	£32,000,000	£137,000

Højlund
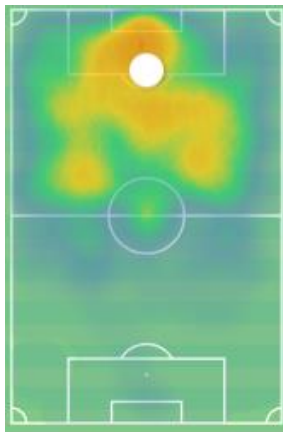
Zirkzee
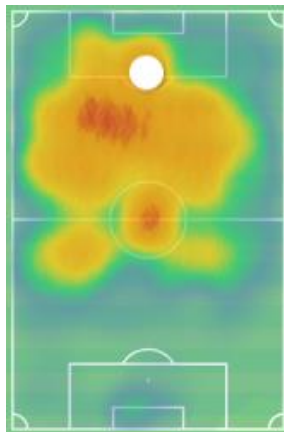
Thuram

Manchester United XI 2024/25

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