



FOOTBALL 101: A POSITIONAL ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of several blogs that I had written in 2020, during the lockdown, when all I did was watch football. I've also played football for a large part of my life and over time have developed an understanding of the beautiful game.

I've attempted to break down each position on the pitch into different tactical profiles, to better appreciate the uniqueness of every player. While some of the players I mention might not be the same as they were in 2020, I think the concepts spoken about will hold true for at least 5-7 years.

Finally, I've discussed the ideologies and methods of one of the most influential people in my childhood - my football coach, Sudhakar Sir. I learnt an incredible amount from him and his style of football. It really helped me look at football from a different point of view. It taught me about the intricacies of this wonderful sport.

I hope you enjoy this short read!

If it helps you gain an appreciation about the different ways of playing of each position, the book would have served its purpose. The next time you watch a game, you might start looking for your own tactical profiles, or maybe even one that I've mentioned might resonate with you!

CHAPTER I

The Goalkeeper



NUMERO UNO

GOALKEEPERS

The stakes just don't get any higher.

Imagine walking on to the pitch to play the UCL finals. Under the bright lights, with The Champions playing in the background. *Wow! Unreal.*

Now imagine you're wearing the No.1 jersey for your team. You could be hero, but a single mistake could cost you so much. Just the thought brings butterflies in my stomach!

Over the last few decades, no position has changed as much as the goalkeeper in terms of its demands, expectations and the attributes required.

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

The Shot-Stopper

The ol' fashioned man between the sticks. An individual with unreal reflexes and impeccable positioning, he's someone who can make save after save without faltering. His instinct in the six-yard box is truly breathtaking. Best suited in a team that defends deep in a low block. Jan Oblak is hands down the best in the business.

The Sweeper Keeper

Fancy, revolutionary and exciting. Their vision, distribution and anticipation of danger is second to none. Sweeper Keepers are heavily involved in build up play and look to glide across their defensive third, sniffing out danger and keeping the ball moving. They are best suited in teams that play a possessional style of football, and use a high line. Marc-Andre ter Stegen embodies all these attributes better than anyone else.

The D-Box Commander

The all-rounder of #1s. A keeper of this profile specialises in ball-handling, footwork and timing. His area of influence is his D - he is the alpha in the box. His skill-set is best put to use in teams that rely on a versatile, transitional style of play. With a safe pair of hands, and the ability to start counter-attacks, Allison Becker is the master of this keeping format.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

In the last part of this article, I want to highlight the underrated qualities of goalkeepers. Firstly, it's their nerves of steel and laser focus throughout the game. Truly remarkable! Secondly, it's the leadership and guidance they provide from the back. It makes it a lot easier for the ten other players to play when you have a calm authority figure behind you, who's keeping up the intensity and informing you about things that you can't see as an outfield player.

Indeed, the goalkeeper might just be one of the toughest positions on the pitch.

CHAPTER 2

Centre-Backs



THE FOUNDATION

CENTRE-BACKS

"If I have to make a tackle, then I have already made a mistake"

~ Paulo Maldini

Central defenders are one of the most misunderstood positions. In reality, it's a lot less defending, and a lot more situational analysis and decision making.

They're the foundation upon which the team is built. Elite centre halves have now become a necessity, and are no longer a privilege.

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

The Wall

The player who embodies the literal meaning of the word 'defender'. Such defenders are the most technically proficient in terms of their positioning, tackling and reliability. Very rarely would you see them make a mistake, they're solid at the back. As an attacker, you'd absolutely dread coming up against such defenders. Giorgio Chiellini has been Juventus' and Italy's rock for over a decade and his skillset is unmatched.

The Gladiator

At the other end of the spectrum, these defenders are high energy players and their roles are not limited to defending. They're almost 'volatile' in their playing style - they'll score goals, put their body on the line countless times, make dramatic tackles and stunning goal line clearances. Apart from being good at defending, they provide the X-factor in their respective teams. The likes of Pique and De Ligt are notable, but there is no argument that Sergio Ramos is the ultimate Gladiator.

The D-Box Commander

The 'Modern Defender' in some senses, these players are solid at the back, but in addition to that - they are amazing on the ball. They don't crack when pressurized, and barely boot the ball up front. They always have their heads up and are crucial in effective ball circulation. Often, these players have played in more advanced roles, and have gathered valuable traits and experience from that. Virgil Van Dijk is the best ball-playing centre back in the world. In fact, he has the most passes completed in the PL this season.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

The coordination and direction provided by a defender is overlooked by many. A team's ability to maintain its shape and structure has direct correlation to the awareness and leadership of their defenders. They are truly the foundation on which a team is built upon and make a huge difference to the team even without making a single tackle the whole game!

However, change is on the ground and their importance noted, as seen by the heavy investments in them by most big clubs.

CHAPTER 3

The Full-Back



FULLBACK. AND FULL FRONT

FULL-BACKS

The Quarterback, a.k.a., the Coolest Dude on the pitch

A few decades ago, a fullback was someone who wasn't good enough to be a centre-back or a winger. But times change - his responsibilities have been doubled, and so have his abilities.

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

The Inverted Full-Back

The I-F tucks inside to help facilitate build-up play instead of going out wide. With great composure and ball playing ability, he has an eye for a killer pass. He is very comfortable with and proficient at possessional football. An I-F is used in teams that play with conventional wingers who keep their width. Instead of moving up, the fullbacks tuck inside to create an overload in midfield. Joshua Kimmich is marvellous and definitely the most masterful at the art of fullback inversion.

The Engine

Fullbacks of this profile marshall their flanks, both offensively and defensively. They are tireless workers, and have a great sense of where they need to be. They provide an extra wide man if a winger moves into a central area. Their attacking qualities include burst of pace and accurate crossing. 'Engines' are the most common fullbacks in today's game and their versatility finds great application in a back four. For me, Andy Robertson is the best at this.

The Wingback

They are the widest players on the pitch. Their primary purpose is to create an overload on the flanks, in both halves of the game. A wingback serves as a great outlet for the team, and he is exceptionally skilled at attacking wide spaces left behind by the opposition. He is best suited to a team that has plenty of defensive cover (back 3 or defensive double pivot). Achraf Hakimi is the elite monster on the flank.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

The stamina, physical fitness, determination and boldness required to play the position with so much ease and flair. Their ability to go from a defensive orientation and mindset to an attacking one in the matter of seconds - it's not easy.

The Modern Fullback is one of the most dynamic and complete players on the pitch.

CHAPTER 4

The Holding Midfielder



THE CONTROL UNIT

HOLDING MIDFIELDERS

If football were a cake, holding midfielders would be the icing on it.

Football's magicians. Undoubtedly the most important and influential position on the football field and unfortunately, the most overlooked. The awe of watching them effortlessly decide matches is one of the things I miss most about football.

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

The Pivot

A magician who has an innate sense of everything that's going on in the game - he knows which way to turn, how to pass between the lines, casually split defences apart and where to be so that the opposition walks the ball back into his feet. He's the transition between attack and defense and helps in the formation of triangles all over the pitch. The Pivot is not one, but ten steps ahead of every other player. It's humiliating to try to press him and almost a fool's errand to even attempt to dispossess him.

Sergio Busquets. I don't think I need to say more.

THE PROTECTOR (HEIMDAL)

Thou simply CANNOT pass. He's a shield for the back four and continuously breaks down the opposition's attacks and counters. His tackling ability, combined with his pin-point precision, grit and heart make him an absolute beast marshalling the defence. No one wins a 50/50 challenge like The Protector.

The likes of Kante and Fabinho are notable, yet Casemiro is unmatched. His flair, drive and desire are great add-ons to his already fantastic technical abilities.

THE DEEP-LYING MIDFIELDER

The metronome of the team. They dictate how and where their team moves the ball. The twenty one other players on the pitch all dance to his rhythm. His vision is immaculate, and unreal at times. The elegance and calmness with which he masterfully moves the ball around is breathtaking. He seems to glide across the pitch whereas everyone else seems stuck in the mud.

Once again, De Jong and Marco Verrati are exceptional deep lying midfielders but no one has perfected it quite like The German Sniper - Toni Kroos.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

In all honesty, I could go on for hours talking about these positions and players, and still wouldn't come close to capturing their true essence. Everything they do is criminally underrated but the two things that irk me the most to see be overlooked are - firstly, how irreplaceable they are. They string 11 ones into one 11. And next, their clever dirty work is so calculated and precisely done - it's not something everyone can do week in week out.

They are super humans playing football

CHAPTER 5

The Central Midfielder



EL MAESTRO

CENTRAL MIDFIELDERS

The heart, the brain, and the binding glue of the team

I'm sure that you have heard a pundit or a commentator say "This game will be won in the middle of the park." Let's dive a little deeper into this topic and explore where, why, how and by whom in this fascinating segment of the game!

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

The Technician

The midfield maestro. As the name suggests, his technique is surreal to the extent to which it looks like the ball is stuck to his feet. With a sexy first touch and incredibly accurate passing, the Maestro dictates play when in possession. He's so elegant and aesthetic on the ball, and effortlessly weaves his way past oppositions. Lastly, his patient and calculated decision making bring stability and control to the team. Thiago Alcantara and Pjanic are the best at this currently. Considering he's still playing, I have to mention Andres Iniesta - one of the greatest ball technicians to play football.

The Box-To-Box & The Utility Man

Extremely versatile players - they can attack and defend. They rarely stop running and constantly make sure that there are no holes in their team's structure.

Owing to their magnificent durability and drive, they often act as a 12th man. Such players have wicked forward passing - defence splitting long balls and the ability to start counters effectively. I don't think anyone is at the top of their game right now but Saul Niguez, Luka Modric, Pogba and Gini Wijnaldum are some of the best. The Box-To-Box is more physically imposing and that's a crucial aspect to his game whereas the Utility Man's wide-spread array of technical skills in his arsenal is what makes him so dangerous.

The Drifter

The Drifter is a progressive midfielder who has a more attack minded role. Being very clever players, they drift into positions that are very awkward for the opposition to defend. Their swift movements and impeccable final ball allow them to exploit such spaces very well. Although they have a knack for scoring, they are their teams' primary creative hub and regularly assist attackers. There's really no doubt that Kevin De Bruyne is an absolute juggernaut when it comes to this and undoubtedly takes up the first stop. Notable mentions are Thomas Muller and Isco.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

I would not really say that anyone who watches games underrates them. Maybe I'm just lucky to have sensible friends! However, the problem arises when people judge them by their scoring and assisting stats because that's not quite the complete picture. Without their presence, goal scorers wouldn't score and assisters wouldn't be able to assist.

They help the team be better, and every single player on the pitch benefits from their presence in some way or another.

CHAPTER 6

Wingers



THUNDERSTRUCK

WINGERS

Electric. Charismatic. Dazzling.
Who can uncover the wizardry of wingers?

Yes, our beloved wingers. Born in the streets, every kid wants to imitate the thrilling skills that world-class wingers flawlessly execute. This is one position that there never really seems to be a shortage of.

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

THE INVERTED WINGER

First thing that comes to mind is that they cut inside and score. But there's more to it - it's how they destabilize defences by cutting inside. Their unpredictability is what makes them most dangerous - you never know what they are going to do next. They are so effective at this because of their great balance and agility. Players like Mane, Salah, Di Maria and Sancho are the best at this. Their teams' like to play with wide fullbacks.

THE TRADITIONAL WINGER

Stay wide, stretch defences and take on defenders - the classical winger. He attacks wide spaces and his speed, explosiveness and dribbling make him a force to be reckoned with on the flanks.

They love running into delicious through-balls and whipping crosses in. Combined with a lethal striker, they are extremely threatening. It's an unfortunate coincidence that the three best conventional wide men - Dembele, Sane and Asencio are all injured!

THE DECOY WINGER

These players are wingers by build but tend to drift into more striking positions where their control, finishing and timing make them a deadly presence. Such players are usually great at linking up with teammates - and this allows them to be extremely impactful in the final third. Of course they're quick and skilled, but they're also the most versatile profile of wingers. Mbappe (PSG), Aubameyang and Depay are my picks for the world's best 'decoy wingers'.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

A strange topic to cover considering wingers are often overrated because of their aesthetic skills and goal contributions. Nevertheless, I think their discipline and off the ball workrate is very underrated. The 75 minutes that we aren't watching them, they're constantly making runs in behind defences. Another thing I'd like to mention is their brilliant decision making. As a winger, you have so many options once you get the ball and to consistently make the correct choice is not easy, and definitely laudable.

CHAPTER 7

Centre-Forwards



FOOTBALLING PREDATORS

CENTRE-FORWARDS

OHHHHHH!!

AND ITS IN THE BACK OF THE NET!

As the assassins of football, centre-forwards have simply 'got no chill' in front of goal. To lead your team into battle from the front is no easy task and these elite warriors never shy away from the challenge.

THE TYPES THREE MAIN TACTICAL PROFILES

THE FACILITATOR

Hard working players whose primary role is to facilitate their team's attack. They enable wingers to perform at the highest level. Sharp turns and silky roulettes make them masters of linking the midfield to the attack. One of their biggest qualities is to tangle the opposition through their off-the-ball movements and create space for their teammates. Despite this, they score regular and crucial goals. The best in the business are Aguero, Firmino and Benzema.

THE STRIKER

The old school no.9. A dominant, physical presence who has one job - to score goals, and it's something he excels at. He's instinctual in the box and the delicate balance between brawn and brain makes him a deadly predator. It's his innate sense of positioning which allows him to slot in important goals frequently. Defenders tremble when they go up against beasts like Suarez and Lewandowski, who are my picks.

THE PANTHER

As suggested by the name, these players are incredibly mobile and slick in their playing. They usually play off of another striker who's more physically imposing. This allows them to constantly attack vulnerable spaces and players in the opposition. They have an exceptional ability to link up with teammates and just intricately weave their way through defences. Griezmann and Lautaro Martinez are some of the best second strikers that the world has to offer.

UNDERRATED QUALITIES

'Right place, right time' is not luck. It is not a coincidence. What it is, is the result of several hundred hours of off-the-ball work on the training pitch come to life. To dismiss the sweat that went into it and call it a fluke is criminal. Next, as a CF you're usually in a numerical inferiority (2/3 defenders vs 1 CF) and it takes courage and skill to not go missing in a game and that deserves appreciation.

I want to conclude with something my coach once told me about strikers. It's something that redefined my perspective on strikers,

'A great attacker doesn't score ten goals in one game, he scored one goal in each of the ten games'

CHAPTER 8

The Free-Roam



WHEN I TALK, EVERYONE LISTENS

THE FREE-ROAM

How do you categorize and quantify a player who starts somewhere as something but spends eighty minutes of the game somewhere else doing something entirely unique?

It's simple - you don't, instead you just appreciate the beauty of the 'free-roam.'

The Free-Roam is not a position per-se, rather it's the license a player is given which allows him to primarily focus on doing what he does best, and to partially neglect other duties that he must perform as a member of the team. Often, that'll mean that you defend with ten men and struggle to press well because of structural imbalances. So the question arises, as a Manager, why would you want that?

The reason is that these individuals are so good at what they do, that tying them down to specific roles would actually be worse for the team. The majority of free-roams are no.10s who are just magicians. Their ability on the ball is surreal. These players regularly deliver the kinds of performances that get you a standing ovation from the opposition fans in a derby.

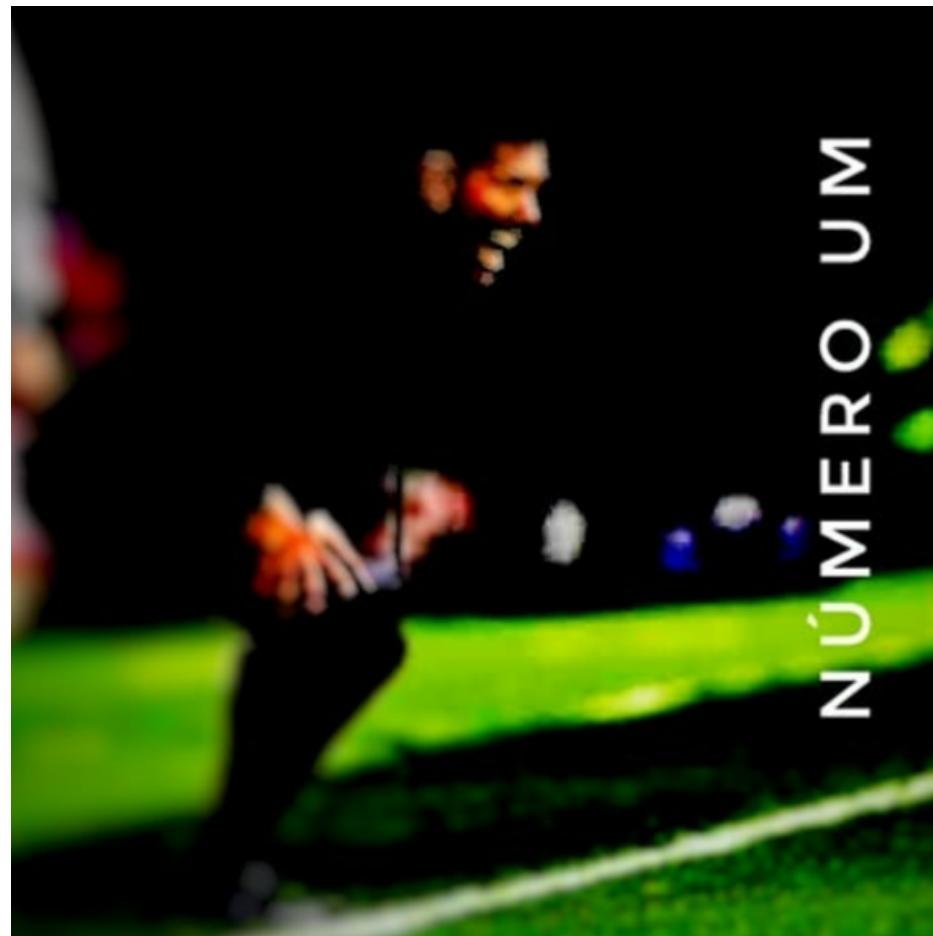
Lionel Messi is the epitome of what a no.10 free roam can and should do. He's a phenome. I'm not gonna spend too much time on him because I think I can sum it up in one word - WOW! Other brilliant free-roams of this profile are Hazard and Neymar, who are definitely Top 5 players when they're at their best.

Lastly, I want to talk about Cristiano Ronaldo. I still haven't figured out what his role is exactly. He's evolved his game in such a way that technique and muscle memory drive his brilliance more than flair and magic. He's been extremely smart in this. There's no doubt that the box is Ronaldo's. He will score when he wants to and there's very little defenders can do about it. He starts on a wing but instead of dropping deep, he prefers to occupy the no.9 positions. He positions himself in places he thinks he can be most lethal, instead of places where he can be most influential (as Neymar and Hazard look to do).

I wanted to end this series with this topic because I didn't want to do injustice to either party by including these players in the conventional positions. Usually I write a rough draft but this one was something I structured as I wrote!

CHAPTER 9

Sudhakar Sir



THE PSYCHOTIC PROFESSOR

PRINCIPLES & PHILOSOPHIES

There's so many of us who can pretty much credit one man for the entirety of their footballing knowledge, ability and perspectives - Sudhakar Sir. A polarizing character, some hate him, some love him, most are scared of him but everyone respects him. He is set in his principles and embodies honesty, passion and dedication. With an incredibly charismatic personality, his players will pretty much do anything he asks of them on the pitch.

HERE ARE SOME OF HIS IDEOLOGIES
ABOUT HOW FOOTBALL SHOULD BE
PLAYED:

ONE 11, NOT 11 ONES

The collective output outweighs the individual. At every step he demands that the thought 'What can I do so that the team benefits?' guides your decision making. His team walks, talks, eats and fights together. We win together, we lose together.

POSITIONAL OVERLOADS

The next idea is to set-up the team in such a way that in every scenario, they are in a numerical superiority. He does this by employing a 3-5-2 formation in which the wingers play a crucial role, who drop back to make it a 5-3-2 or push up to make it a 3-3-4. The team always dominates in terms of the number of players around the ball.

SHAPE AND SPACE

The yin and yang of Sir's football. You defend with such a solid and disciplined shape that the opposition can't break through. While attacking, you stretch the opposition in such a way that they lose their shape. It's a delicate balance between structure and fluidity. It's the centre-back and centre-mid's job to coordinate these transitions and enforce the rules on the pitch. "Make the pitch small while defending and make it huge while attacking" is the crux of this principle.

Sudhakar sir takes average players and teaches them how to play real football. He always says, 'There is no place for superstars on my team.' I'm not particularly 'gifted' with any attributes from a footballing perspective but Sir transformed me into someone who can now play at a decent level. This is basically the story of 90% of the team! Unsurprisingly, over the last ten years, his team has been the most dominant one in Bangalore.

One of the biggest compliments he gives to his players is '*arey dimaag wala player hai.*'

We've spoken about the philosophies of Sudhakar Sir's brand of football. Let's move on to how he executes said principles.

EXECUTION ON THE PITCH

DEFINED ROLES

Each and every player on the pitch has a different job. An important job if the team is to play well. For some, it's physical hard work, while for others, it's mental hard work. Nevertheless, every single player works incredibly hard and is extremely committed to the game. There is no room for complacency. One question he asks every player is, 'football khelne ke liye gaand me dum hai?'

SET PIECES

What better way to create and exploit numerical superiorities? Almost every important game, his team scores from a set-piece. Through rigorous practice and repetition, players are able to flawlessly execute his patterns (2nd pattern especially :P). He understands the importance of set-pieces in big games and makes sure that his team threatens the goal from every corner, free-kick or throw-in.

ADAPTABILITY

Different circumstances call for different measures. Sometimes the team plays beautiful aesthetically pleasing football, other times it's rugged gritty football. In certain matches, Sir will employ a new strategy or give certain players some specific role to carry out. Essentially, he isn't afraid to think out of the box and be innovative.

LOOK UP AND PLAY

The emphasis on making effective passes instead of more passes. Sometimes it's shifting the ball to the other flank, other times it's playing a small one-two, but there's always purpose in the way his teams play.

The countless rituals such as the trademark warmup, getting nicely ragged, the huddle and the half time talk are very important parts of his football. They give the players a sense of belonging and transmits his passion to them.

Those who are still lucky enough to be playing under him know exactly what I'm talking about, yet you might not realise how special it is.

For those who don't play under him anymore, you cherish those rituals and carry on the knowledge and his brand of football to other walks of life. Either ways, Sudhakar sir taught me so much, he is still my favourite teacher.

CONCLUSION

THANK YOU FOR READING!

TO READ ANOTHER BOOK OF MINE. CHECK OUT

<https://www.amazon.in/dp/B09MPP8MZP>