

How France can slow Messi down

Les Bleus are looking to be the first back-to-back winners of the World Cup since Brazil did it last in 1962. They are faced with the daunting task of facing a hungry Argentina team that is looking to get Messi his evasive World Cup trophy which is the only thing missing in his decorated career. In order to bring the cup back to Paris, France needs to slow down Messi, which is way easier said than done, albeit not impossible. Looking at data from Argentina's games so far in the tournament we have come up with a 3-step plan on how France can slow Messi down.

1) Cut the passing lanes of the 3 players that get him the ball

Well, the best and most obvious way to prevent Messi from destroying the French dreams is to prevent him from getting the ball in the first place. Since the competition started, 3 players from Argentina stand out as having looked to get the ball to Messi more often than their other teammates. Rodrigo de Paul leads the team with 93 attempted passes to Messi, which is 43 more attempts than Enzo Fernandez who is next (to be fair, Enzo started one less game). Following closely with 47 attempts is Nahuel Molina who is tasked with playing the entire right flank as Messi drifts inside in his free roaming role (more on that later). This trio is responsible for over 45% of passes that target Messi.

To determine how the French defense should pressure these 3 players, we developed a pass probability model to better understand how certain types of pressure affect a passes chance of being completed. Similar to how expected goals work, the pass probability model aims to determine the probability of a pass being completed accounting for other factors such as if the pass is a standard pass or a through ball, elevated or on the ground, with right or left foot etc. Using this model we were able to extract the effects of three different types of pressure: direct pressure to the on ball player, pressure to the passing lanes of the player and attempted pressure. On average, the model estimates that a pass is almost 75% less likely to be completed when the passing lanes are pressured of the player on the ball whereas surprisingly, a direct pressure on the player makes it around 40% more likely that pass will be completed, holding everything else constant.

Thus, when France is on defense, instead of pressuring De Paul, Fernandez and Molina directly, the defenders should pressure the lanes towards Messi and try to force inaccurate passes or funnel the ball to the left wing, further away from Messi.

2) Push him wide when he gets the ball

While we outlined a plausible strategy to reduce the times Messi gets on the ball, France still has to be prepared to react once he gets the ball. Stopping arguably the best player to play football requires a multi-step strategy and a 90-minute effort after all. To formulate a plan on minimizing Argentina's threat when Messi has the ball, we need to look at where Messi does most of his damage. A good way to do this is to inspect Messi's PFF grades and see where his positively graded actions have occurred on the pitch.

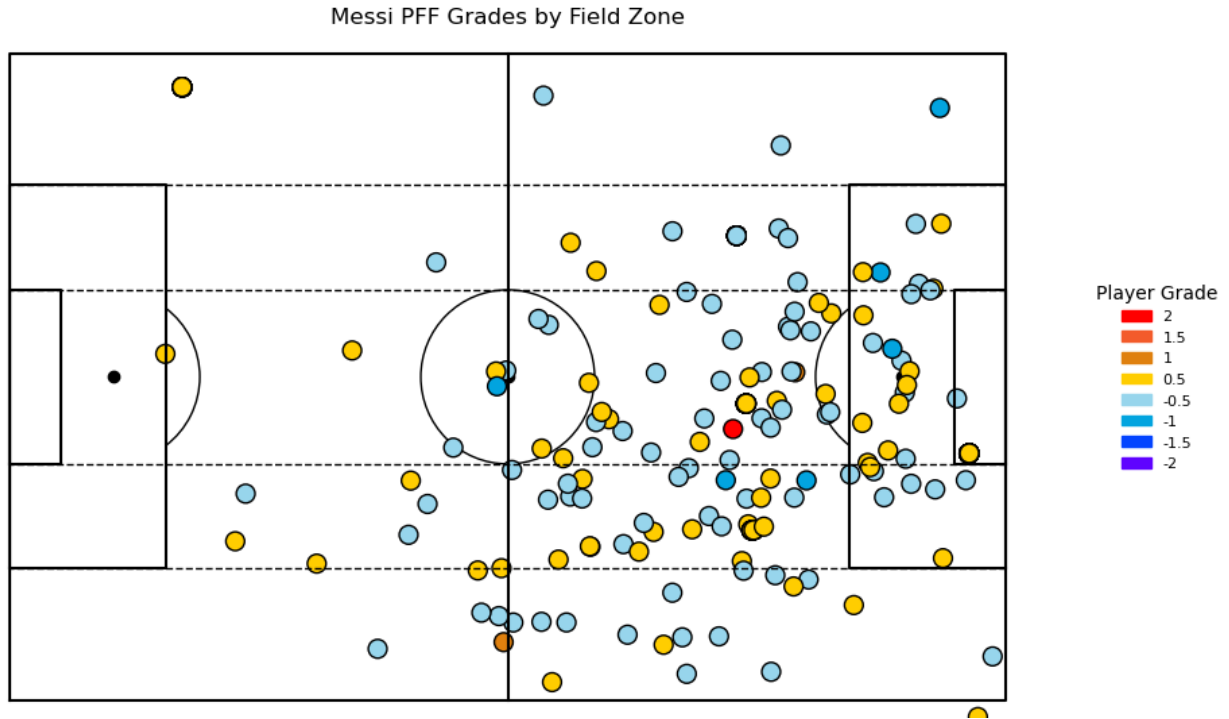


Figure 2 –All actions are plotted in a way that Argentina is attacking to the right

We can see from *figure 2* that the majority of Messi's positively graded actions have come from the right half space and the central area, especially between the right half space and the middle of the field, and in the box. We can also observe that he has more negatively graded plays as he gets closer to the left half space and the left flank as well as on the right flank. Once Messi has the ball, the French defenders should try to funnel him to the wider areas of the pitch and try to keep him away from the box so that he can't hurt them from the central areas where he's ever so dangerous.

3) Pray

This is still Messi we are talking about after all. The best teams and defenders in the world have tried and failed to stop him. You can do everything as planned and he can still undo all that work with a moment of magic. At the end of the day, you need some luck to be on your side.