

Tactically Containing Lionel Messi

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January 2024

Finding a strategy to shut down Lionel Messi will be the main concern when MLS teams face Inter Miami this season. Messi contributed 16 goals and 5 assists in 14 matches across the MLS, US Open Cup, and Leagues Cup in 2023.

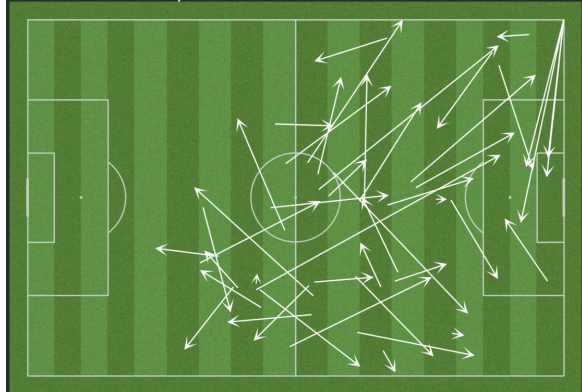
Limiting a player's time and space to turn, carry, shoot, or pass is the most effective way to shut him down. It will diminish any *possible* impact he could have.

I compared Argentina's match against Saudi Arabia, where Messi had little effect in open play (0.5 xG+xA), with their match against France in the final, where Messi had a combined 1.5 xG+xA from open play. I wanted to see if there was a difference in how Saudi Arabia and France approached Messi.

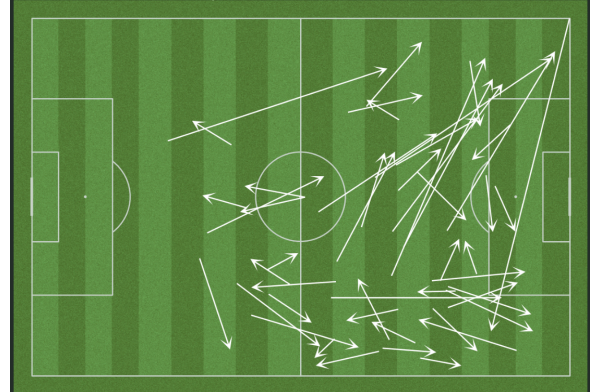
1. Pass Maps

The first thing I did was analyze Messi's completed passes from both matches. I believe an attacking player's pass map can give valuable insights. The results are shown here.

Lionel Messi Completed Passes vs. Saudi Arabia, FWC2022



Lionel Messi Completed Passes vs. France, FWC2022



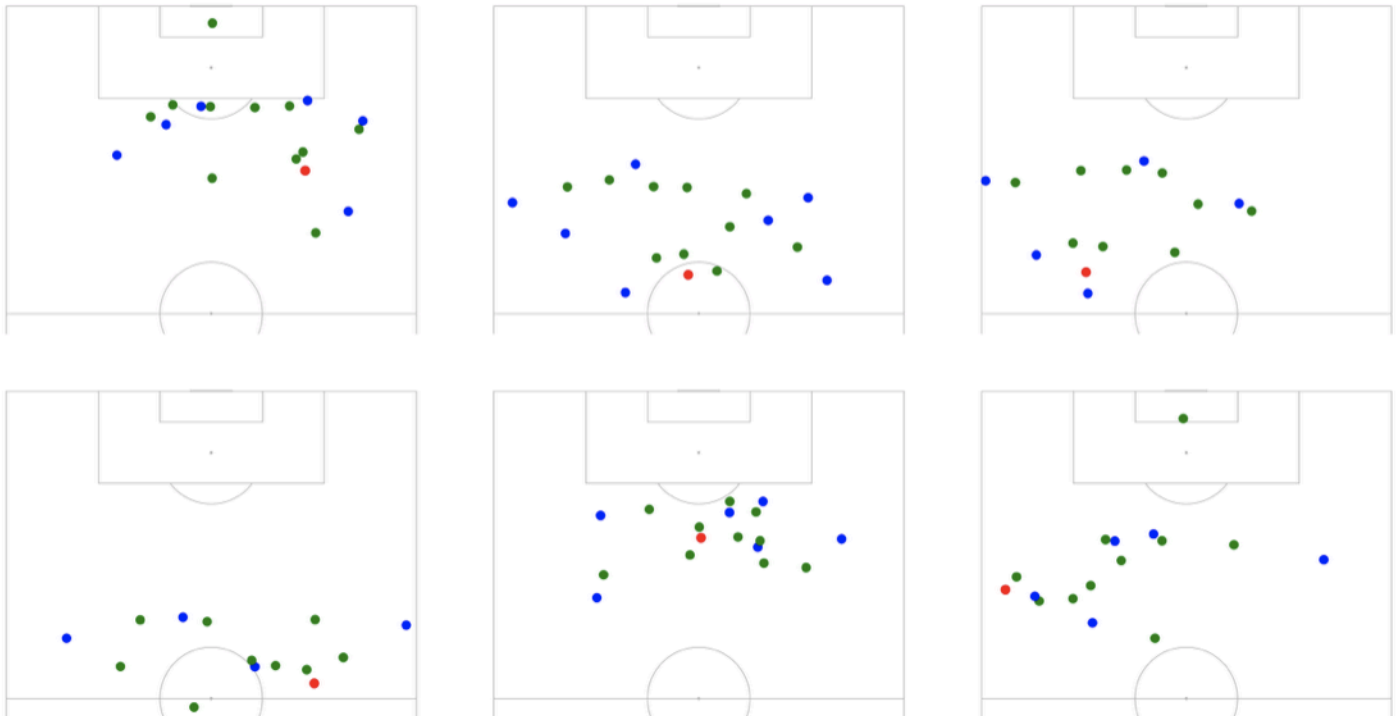
There are *fewer short distance passes* in the final third in the Saudi Arabia match. Only 5/19 (26%) of Messi's final third passes are <15 yards. In the France match, however, Messi had 14/30 (47%) of his third passes be <15 yards.

Saudi Arabia *limited Messi's ability to combine in small spaces*, arguably his best play-making quality. This forced him to play longer balls with a comparably lower success rate.

2. StatsBomb 360 Freeze Frames

To see exactly *how* the Saudis were able to do this, I looked at a freeze frame of the pitch as Messi received each ball. A selection of the results are shown below.

Argentina vs. Saudi Arabia, 2022 FIFA World Cup
Selected snapshots of pitch as Lionel Messi receives the ball.
(Argentina is attacking the shown goal in all snapshots)



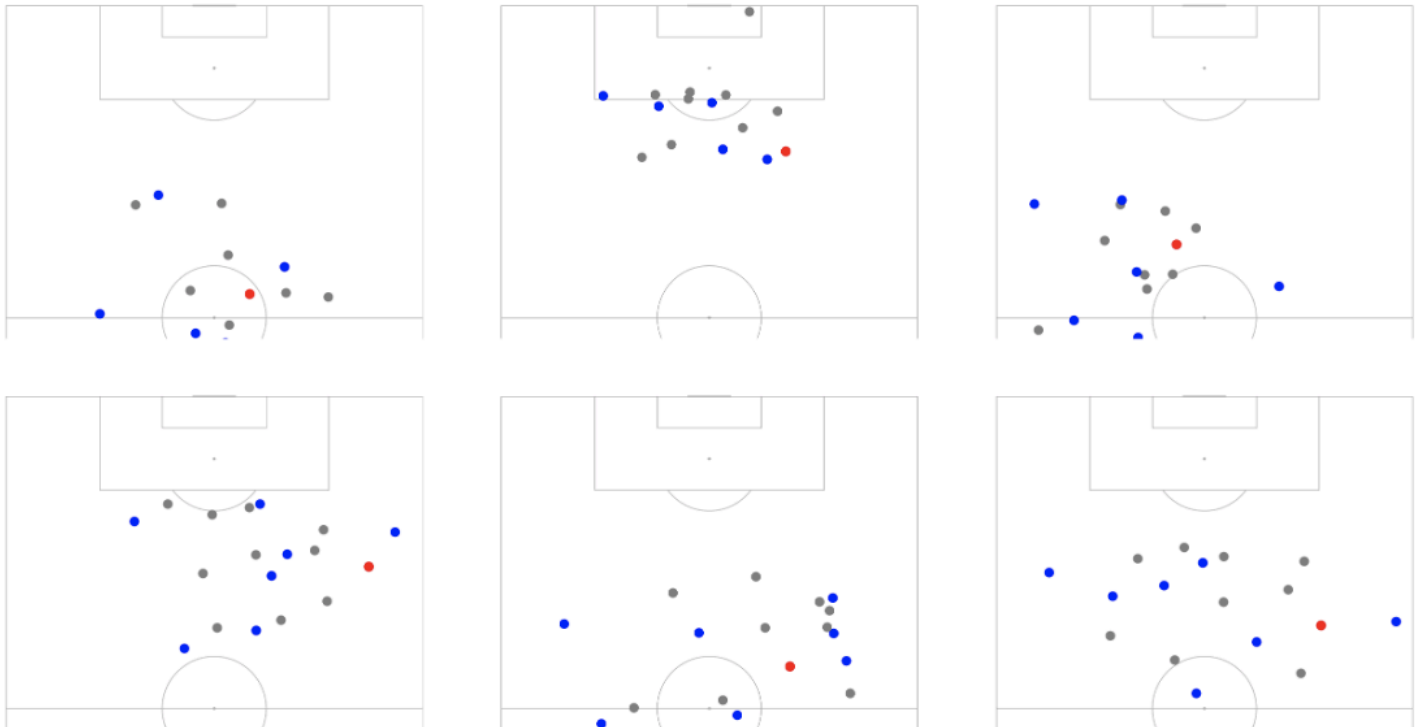
Data comes from StatsBomb 360 open data on Github.

In each of these freeze frames, there are a minimum of 2 Saudi Arabia players within several feet of Messi. This was consistent in 34/53 (64%) of ball receipts analyzed. The Saudis jammed the middle of the park, forcing Messi wide. Even as he was forced wide, he still was marked tightly.

This limited Messi's time and ability to look up and find a line-breaking or meaningful pass from the middle of the pitch. Further, the Saudis were well disciplined in man-marking the other Argentinians. Marking them as Messi receives the ball is crucial because it limits the options Messi has to release the ball.

Now let's look at the France match in which Messi had both a high xG and high xA.

Argentina vs. France , 2022 FIFA World Cup
Selected snapshots of pitch as **Lionel Messi** receives the ball.
(Argentina is attacking the shown goal in all snapshots)



Data comes from StatsBomb 360 open data on Github.

There is a stark contrast between these frames and those of the Saudi Arabia match. Messi was able to find large pockets of space where he was able to receive the ball uncontested. Predominantly in the middle or right side, Messi received the ball with teammates surrounding him rather than the opposition, as seen with the Saudi Arabia match. This allowed Messi time, space, and passing options, something teams cannot do if they want to limit his influence. This is consistent in 43/63 (68%) frames I analyzed. France's inability to close and contain Messi proved costly, as he led Argentina to victory in the World Cup Final.

System of Play Against Inter Miami

Tactically implementing a system of play where Messi is always accounted for with close man-marking and help defense will have the best chance of limiting Messi's high-influence style of play. Allowing him to receive, turn in space, and then either carry or pass the ball will result in high xG chances.

I believe a system of play that crowds the middle of the pitch would be the best way to limit Messi. This would limit his space and force him wide, as seen in the Saudi Arabia match. It is then up to the wing backs and outside mids/wingers to close him down should he opt to sneak wide to receive the ball, like he did in the France match. Saudi Arabia used a 4-5-1 formation with 3 central midfielders and withdrawn outside midfielders. This allowed them to play as described above. France used a 4-2-3-1 formation with only 2 central defensive midfielders, and their wingers and attacking midfielder did not retreat defensively for the most part. The lack of midfield presence in the defending half was

the key reason Messi saw time, space, and offensive options as shown above. Even when the middle of the pitch is unavailable, Messi will want to be on the ball; however, it would be harder for him to impact the match to the fullest extent from the flanks of the pitch.