Pass Reception and Transition

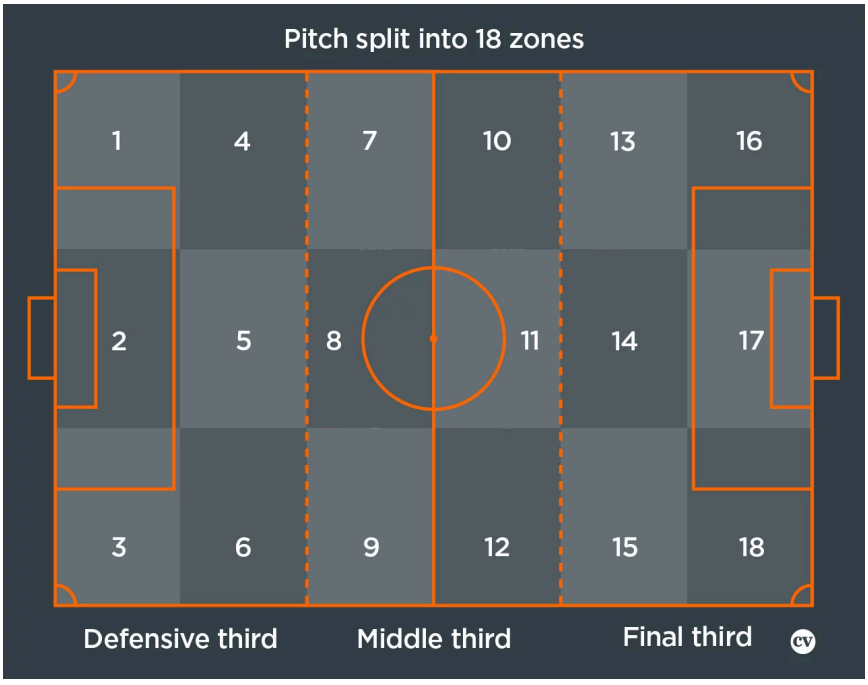
Identifying Ball-Progressing Midfielders

One of the key skills of a midfielder is the ability to drop back into her defensive half to receive passes and subsequently transition the play to her attacking third via ball-progressing sequences. Here's an example clip of such a transition by Chelsea's So-Yun Ji (# 10) starting at 58:37. Transitions like these can increase a team's chances of scoring more goals and winning games. Therefore, it's essential for teams to have midfielders who can execute these transitions effectively.

The objective of this analysis is to identify such ball-progressing midfielders from the FA Women's Super League (WSL) 2020-21 season and analyze them. This analysis uses event data provided by StatsBomb and 'minutes played' data provided by FBref.

Defining Pass Reception and Transition

Here are the rules and conditions that are used to define and analyze *pass receptions* and *transitions* in this analysis:

- We are going to use a pitch configuration where the pitch is divided into 18 zones, with 6 zones in each third of the pitch:
  - 

- For a *pass reception* to be considered in this analysis, it must satisfy the following conditions:
    - The pass should be successfully received by a midfielder in **zones 4-9**.
    - The pass must have started in **zones 1-9**, i.e., the defensive half.

- A *transition* following a pass reception is considered successful if it satisfies the following conditions:
    - The transition events must belong to the same possession as the pass reception event.
    - The transition must end in the final/attacking third, i.e., **zones 13-18**.
    - The transition can involve **2 players at max** (the first of which is the player who receives the pass).
    - The transition can have a **maximum of 4 events**.

- Events are processed and counted using the following rules:
    - A successful pass of any length is counted as an event and the final location of the pass is recorded (to check if the ball has reached the attacking third).
    - A successful carry is counted as an event only when the carry distance is **5 metres or more**. The carry end location is also recorded.
    - If a successful carry's length is less than 5 metres then it is not counted as an event but its end location is recorded.
    - Events like dispossession, miscontrol, block, interception, clearance, unsuccessful pass, unsuccessful dribble, shot, foul will break the transition.
    - If there's a successful dribble between two successful carries, then both the carries will be combined for 'event count' and 'ball location' calculation.
    - All other events like duels and ball recoveries are ignored since those are covered by one of the above events/rules related to them.

- To simplify the analysis, we are going to consider all types of midfielders in this analysis.

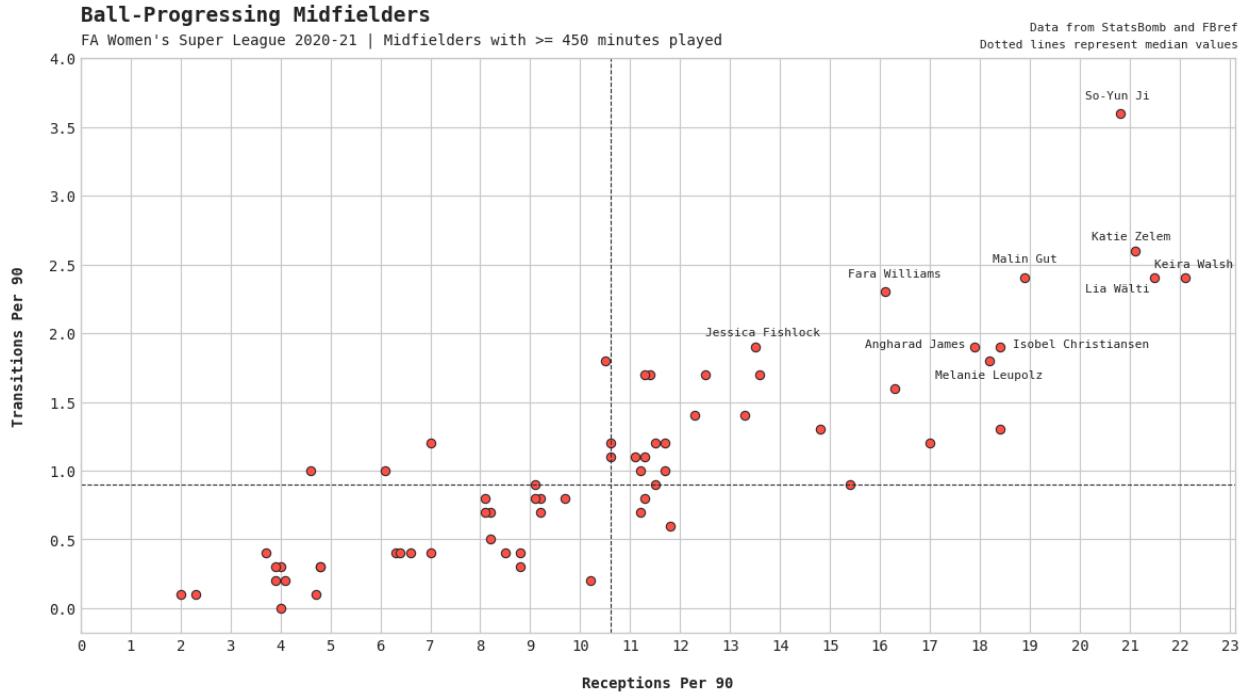
- We are not going to analyze any pressure related data in this analysis - since in the defensive half, sometimes a midfielder will move from a crowded area to an open area to make passing and receiving easier, and sometimes she will move to high pressure areas to receive the pass and relieve the pressure. I don't want to differentiate between these two situations in this analysis. My primary focus in this analysis is on the events following a pass reception, but pressure data can definitely be used for further analysis.

Process Walk-through

Here are major steps I took to prepare the data for the analysis:

1. Get event data for the FA WSL 2020-21 season from StatsBomb.
2. Prepare a dataset for pass receptions based on the definition discussed in the previous section.
3. Process each pass reception instance and its subsequent events to create transition data - a success/failure flag, final x-coordinate of the ball, number of events, and number of players involved.
4. Create a summary table with total receptions, transitions, and solo transitions data for each midfielder. For a successful solo transition, the number of players involved will be one.
5. Add ‘minutes played’ data from FBref in the summary table and calculate 'per 90' metrics - receptions per 90, transitions per 90, and solo transitions per 90.
6. Retain only those players in the summary table whose most-played position during the season was in the midfield, and who had played for **at least 450 minutes**.

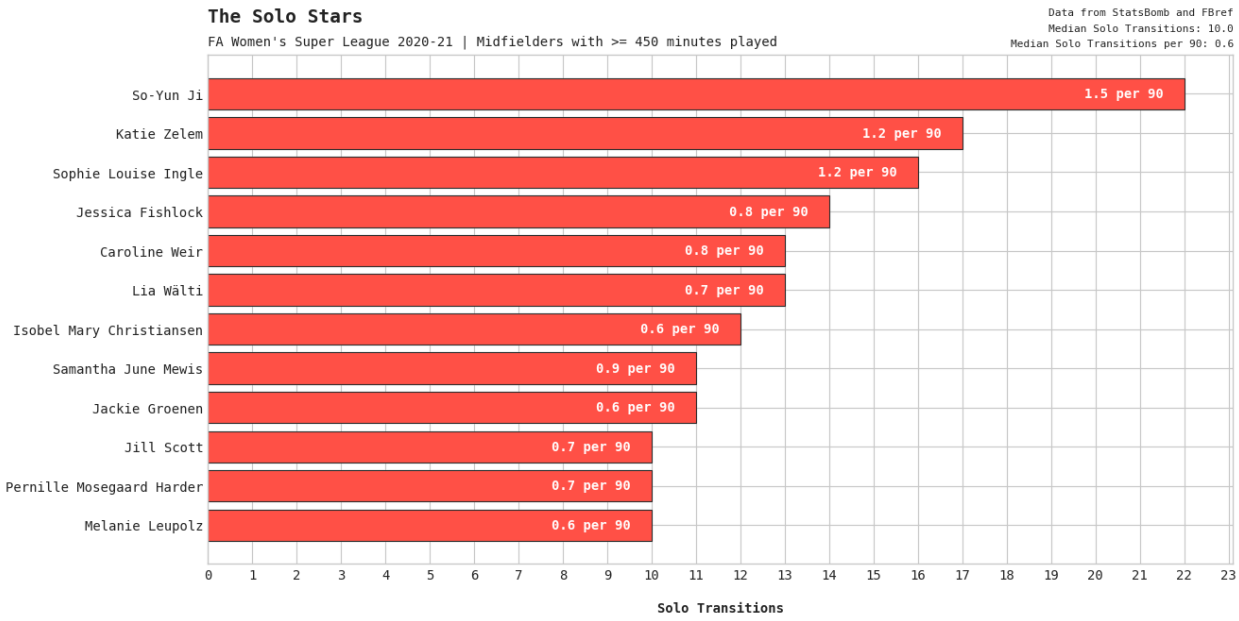
Ball-Progressing Midfielders



The Solo Stars

Solo transitions are those sequences where the midfielder receiving the pass single-handedly (or, shall I say, single-footedly?) transitions the ball to the attacking third through a pass, a carry, or a combination of both.

Players capable of such individual contributions can significantly influence a team's potential to score more goals and win games.



Video Samples

Let's also have a look at some match clips of Chelsea's So-Yun Ji (# 10) to understand how impactful these transitions are:

1. This clip perfectly summarises the essence of this analysis.
2. Observe Ji from 45:04 in this possession clip.
3. Observe Ji from 54:59 in this clip.

Conclusion

I hope these clips have effectively highlighted the key message of this analysis. A midfielder's ability to drop into her defensive half, receive a pass, and transition the ball into the attacking third can significantly enhance her team's prospects of scoring more goals and winning games. As previously observed, the top 5 players in terms of transitions per 90 played for the top 4 teams of the FA WSL 2020-21 season.

This analysis can also serve as a foundation for various applications:

- Player recruitment
- Opponent analysis
- Identification of the two players most frequently combining to create attacking opportunities within a team
- Examination of the playing style of players or teams, evaluating their preferred methods of transitioning the ball, such as through long balls, a combination of quick short passes, or via the wings
- Integration with tracking data could allow us to quantify the effort made by these midfielders in dropping back and receiving the ball. This could involve metrics like the distance moved or the reduction in pressure from their starting position to where they move to receive the ball, as these players aim to find open spaces for both effective passing and receiving.
- Conducting a similar analysis for different pitch configurations, such as the '5 lanes - 2 half spaces' configuration