

# Back in the Hole

Posted on [@September 11, 2017 10:30 AM](#) by [Yazdan Basir](#)

The role "centre-forward" is used interchangeably with "striker" nowadays and the term "False 9" is thrown around frequently in discussions without many knowing what it is really is.

To understand it better, false 9 needs to be seen as a role rather than a position. Only a handful of players in the world are able to execute it as required and that too within a stable structure around them. Wayne Rooney was tried as a false 9 by Sir Alex, Totti played this role as well at Roma and even Cesc Fabregas was deployed in the hole for Spain at the EUROs. But it was Messi who performed the role to perfection.

Pep Guardiola changed modern football with his teams and having Messi operate as a false 9 was a significant move, both for the footballing world and the manager/player himself. The first time Messi was in this role was in the 2-6 thrashing of Madrid at the Bernabeu – a result of a sudden late night call Messi got from Pep. Messi's positioning and movement caused Madrid a lot of problems throughout the match and one of their defenders of the game, Metzelder, had this to say after the game:

"Fabio [Cannavaro] and I looked at each other. 'What do we do? Do we follow him to the midfield or stay deep?' We didn't have a clue."

And that's exactly one of the aims of the false 9 – causing confusion in the opposition back line and bringing players out of position. From here we can move to the current set up at Barcelona and Messi's role under EV.

One of Ernesto Valverde's priorities upon arriving at Barcelona was to remove the burden of carrying the team from Leo Messi's back. And he's done that by restructuring the team around Leo. This season we can see a switch back to false 9 for Messi with an organized team around him and vigorous pressing being carried out. We can see Alba and Semedo pushing high as they're supposed to be

(both being very talented offensive fullbacks) and we can Iniesta and Rakitic not having to move out wide because of the structure and the support they have in the wide-space due to the fullbacks.

Messi's role while operating 'in the hole' is supposed to be what Metzelder described above. With no out and out #9 in the formation (because of Suarez moving to the left side and making runs behind the defence), opposition centrebacks don't know whether to follow Messi into the midfield (bringing them out of position and leaving gaps behind them or to their side) or whether to hold their line and wait (giving Messi the space you're not supposed to give him). This allows the false 9 to distribute the ball where he needs to and create chances for runners behind the defence or take a chance himself. Messi is a master of the game and has unparalleled vision to perform his duties.

From the videos below you can see how much more involved Busquets and Alba are in this new system, especially with Messi personally and you can also see the new role Rakitic played yesterday against Espanyol, something reminiscent of his #10 days from Sevilla. For the first time in ages Barcelona played with a great structure with Messi as a spearhead of the team once again, rather than being present next to Busquets to help create something out of nothing from the halfline. This restructuring of Messi's role is a pleasure to watch especially after the "enganche" role he played last season, only for us to witness Neymar and Suarez waste so many good chances created by him. Now we watch Messi getting on the end of cut-backs from Alba marauding down the left flank and placing them into the back of the net – he's back to the most dangerous place he could be. And this is where he deserves to play. It's where he scored an outrageous 73 goals in a season and an eventual 91 for the year – and someone of his ability, the greatest of all time, deserves to be free and not frustrated. Let's hope we can see some more of this this season now.

The three passmaps below (from all three games of La Liga so far this season) show Messi's average position every game and it's quite clear to see where Ernesto wants him to play, especially in the Alaves map (which looks something like a 4-3-3 (5) out of FIFA 17). Go over these carefully and analyze where Messi is playing in relation to his wingers and midfielders. All the passmaps are from @11tegen11:



## Positions & Passing Network Barcelona at home vs Betis

20-08-2017

Starting formation & manager : 4-4-1-1 - Ernesto Valverde

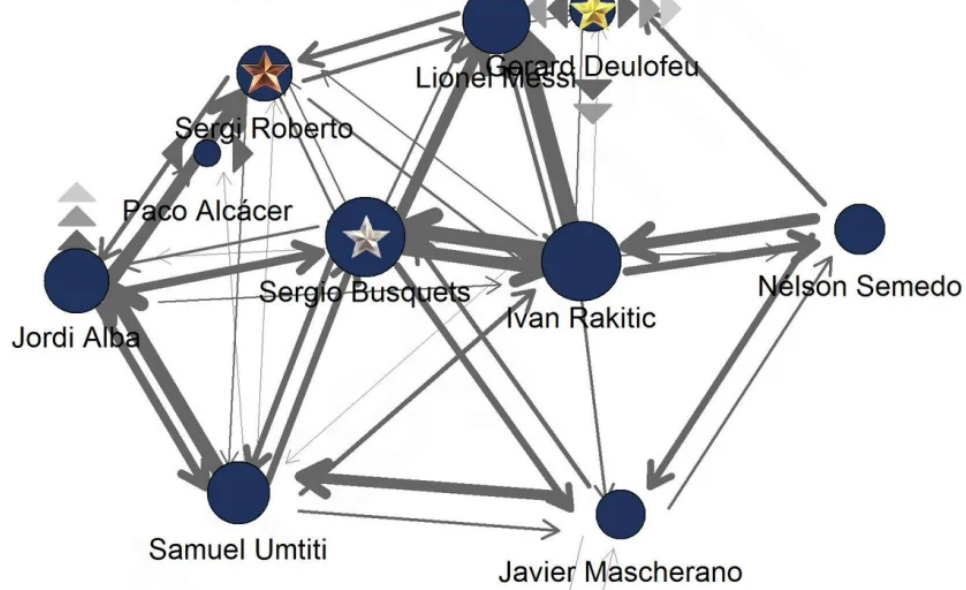
data shown for mins 1 to 72

lines for 5+ passes

dot size ~ touches

dot position ~ avg. touch position

gold, silver & bronze stars for top 3 in one play xGChain



data by OPTA

Marc-André ter Stegen

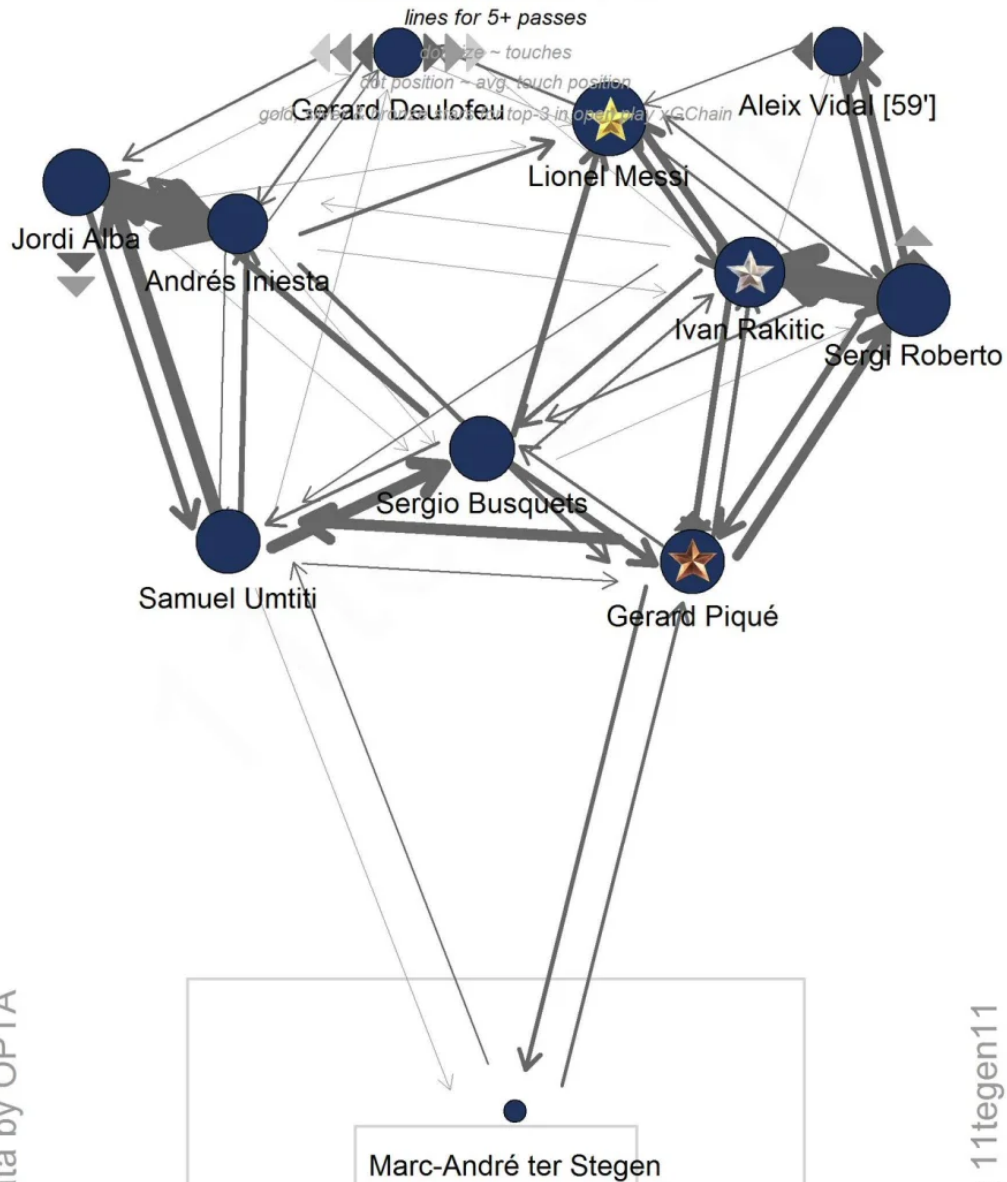
@ 11tegen11

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# Positions & Passing Network Barcelona away at Alaves 26-08-2017

Starting formation & manager : 4-3-3 - Ernesto Valverde  
data shown for mins 1 to 73



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## Positions & Passing Network Barcelona at home vs Espanyol 09-09-2017

Starting formation & manager : 4-4-2 - Ernesto Valverde

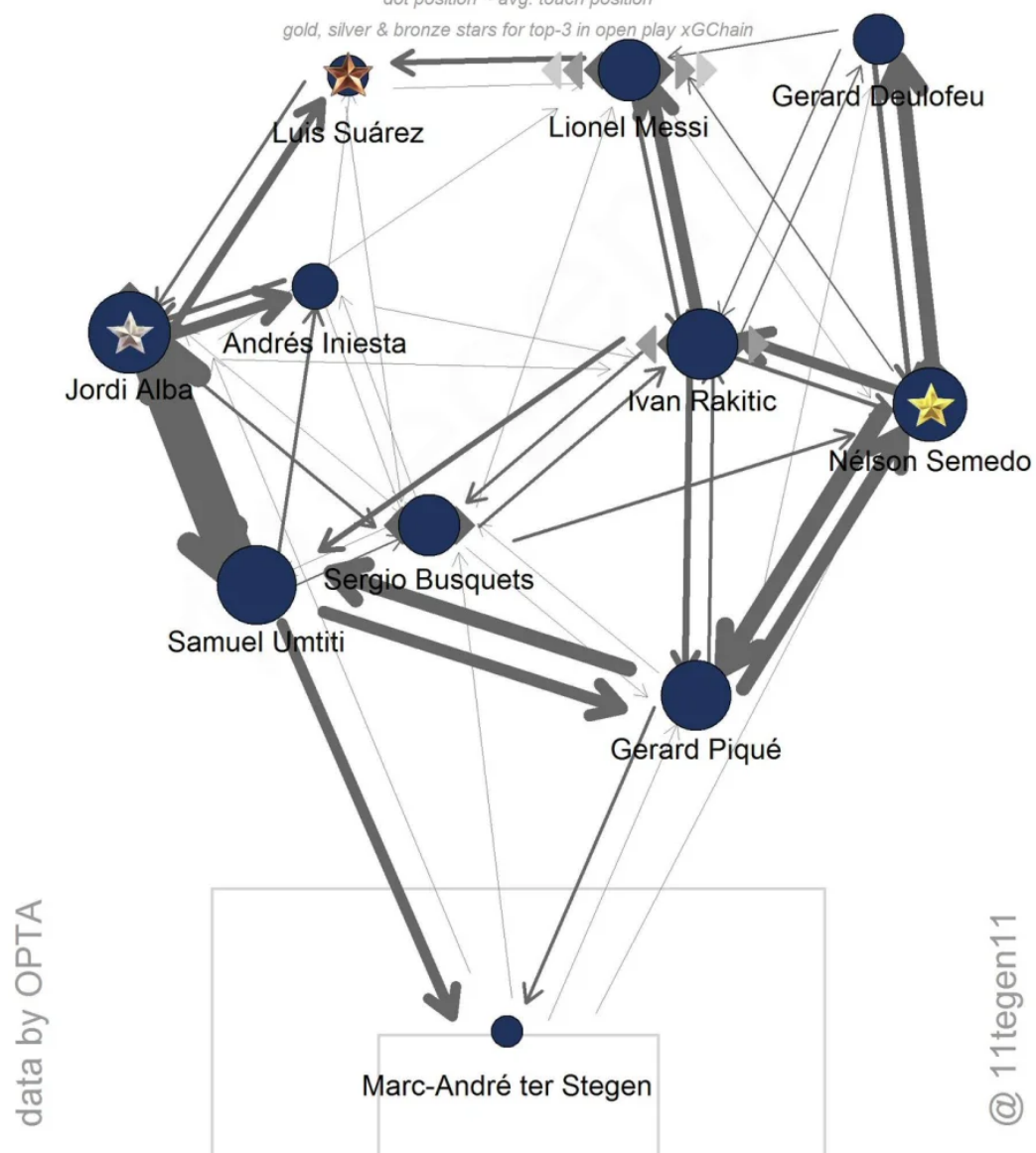
data shown for mins 1 to 68

lines for 5+ passes

dot size ~ touches

dot position ~ avg. touch position

gold, silver & bronze stars for top-3 in open play xGChain



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Here's a video from uMAXit Football explaining the role as well:

You can watch the highlights of Leo Messi at false 9 this season in the league below (video from TalkFCB):

Image source: [https://twitter.com/BCN\\_Raphi/status/894668314915504131](https://twitter.com/BCN_Raphi/status/894668314915504131)