

One Position, Too Many Problems

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No one could have predicted that the days of Leo Messi and Dani Alves storming down the right side of the pitch and harmoniously combining to score would come to such an abrupt end. Obviously, as you know, Dani Alves left Barcelona to go to Juventus on a free, pushed out by the incompetent board and has now completed a move to PSG, unfortunately. So, the club couldn't hold onto the best rightback in the world and they did not fill that position he left.

And because that gap was never filled and that position was never strengthened while Alves was still there, Barcelona faced a series of problems sort of like a chain reaction in the upcoming 2016/17 season.

You may not think that the rightback position is one that would cause so much damage to a team. However, in a system like that of Barcelona, the absence of a good rightback affected the positions up front as well. On the team lineup before each game, Dani Alves was always behind Leo Messi (RW to RB). While the three midfielders (2 CMs and CDM Busquets) worked very closely to each other and did not have to move out wide, it was the fullbacks' responsibility to provide cover for wingers and so it was Alves' task to support Messi, likewise, Alba's task to support Neymar. And Dani Alves always did that perfectly. He allowed Messi to do whatever he wanted, whether that was to just stay at the wing (Leo played on the wings more and moved centrally in between matches from Luis Enrique's arrival onwards – Messi played false nine under Pep) and cut in to create a chance or shoot or whether that was to move into a more central role, playing in the lines between the striker and CM and creating/scoring from there.

Now at Barcelona this season, Roberto has had to play at rightback and while he does a pretty decent job, he's obviously not a natural rightback (he's a creative midfielder). And so, from using the best rightback in the world to moving a midfielder to play in that position, a midfielder who himself has said he is not comfortable in this new position, there was naturally going to be an effect on the system itself. Leo Messi did not have the same cover with Roberto that he had

with Alves and that would not let Messi vacate his position that freely and instead he had to drop a bit deeper on the right.

But then there's a complication. As mentioned right now, Messi didn't have the same freedom with Roberto that he had with Alves, but it was Barcelona's lack of a central midfielder that Enrique could really trust this season that really caused some more headaches. Andres Iniesta was having fitness issues despite performing well in the games he appeared in (causing many fans to think Luka Modric, almost the same age as Iniesta, had a vastly better season in terms of individual performances). Ivan Rakitic had a huge dip in form and wasn't that box-to-box mid anymore that we needed, and the new signing, Andre Gomes, had the trust of Luis Enrique for some odd reason but was not performing (often played in odd positions) and the talented Denis Suarez with his huge potential and Iniesta-esque playing style, was not trusted enough to even make regular appearances.

Combine the rightback and the midfield issue and you have a huge problem that required a player of Leo Messi's caliber to fix just long enough for the season to finish. Messi had to move infield with no midfielder in that creator/controller role as the board did not line up a replacement for Xavi and instead pursued players which the club did not need: Turan, Gomes, and even Rakitic. Messi was required to drop deep, playing in the same lines as Busquets almost all of the time, and create through long balls, dribbling, through balls and score as well from there.

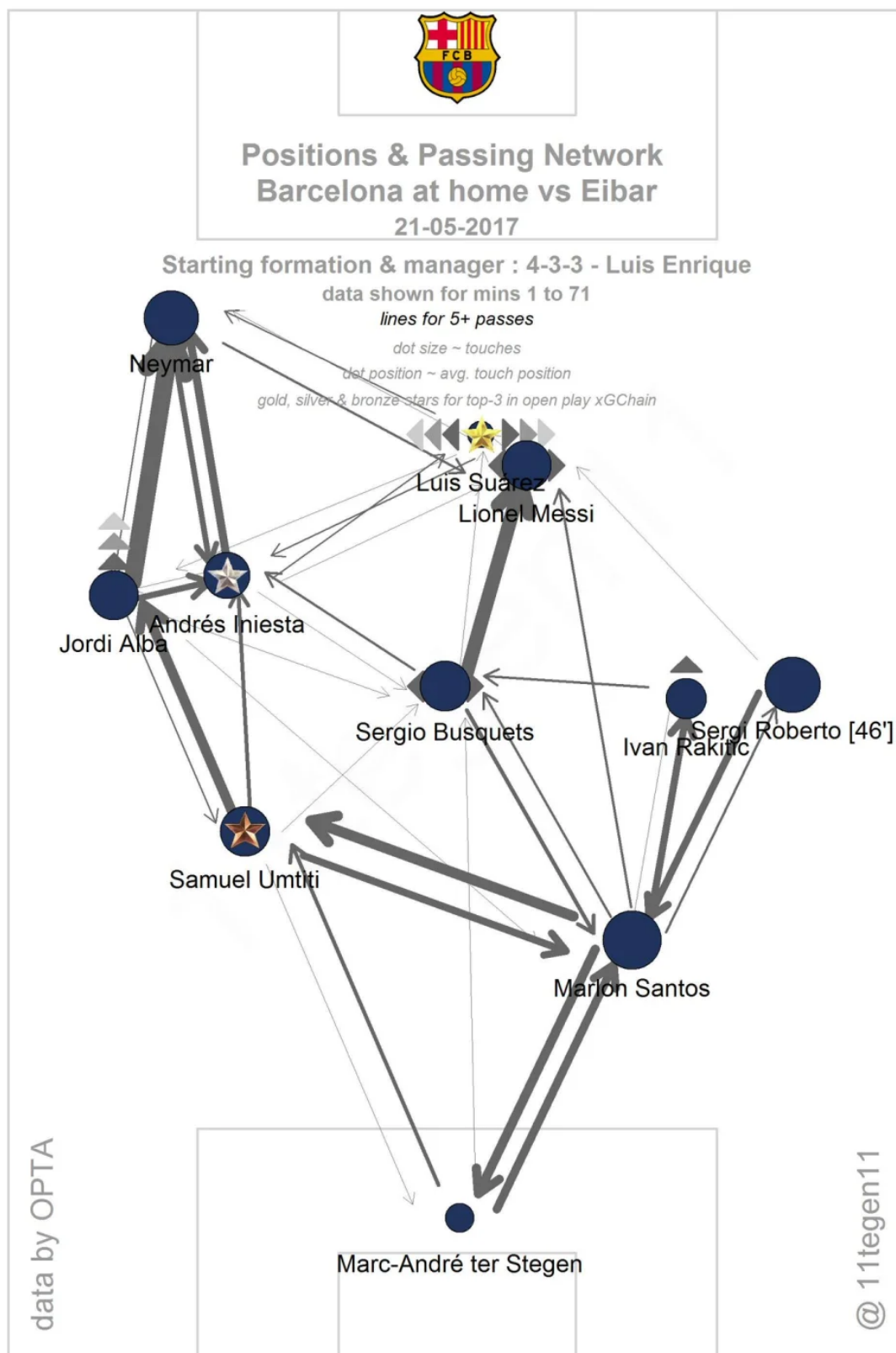
Huge pressure on any player but Messi handled it and did a phenomenal job. However, Luis Suarez and Neymar missed various huge and easy chances and at times (both had disappointing seasons on the goal front), Iniesta as well (recalling that Juventus miss that could've changed the game). Because of their misses and Messi's deeper role, a lot of Internet "experts" have declared that he doesn't show up in big matches. He was creating chances perfectly for the team in every big game and scoring in almost all of them, which takes us to the point of Messi being the leading goalscorer across Europe this season. I can't exactly remember the last time a CM/CAM scored 54 goals in a single season while having to do all of the work in the midfield as well.

And while a lot of people can say that it was a terrific individual season for Messi and Barcelona should have done more to help him out (the sheer reliance on him was hard to miss most of the time), that's exactly what the rightback and midfielder issues are highlighting. When other players aren't performing in the

position they're playing (whether that's due to a lack of quality or because they're not suited to that position) then it affects the whole system. Barcelona became too reliant on Messi and the front 3 sometimes as it was getting them through games.

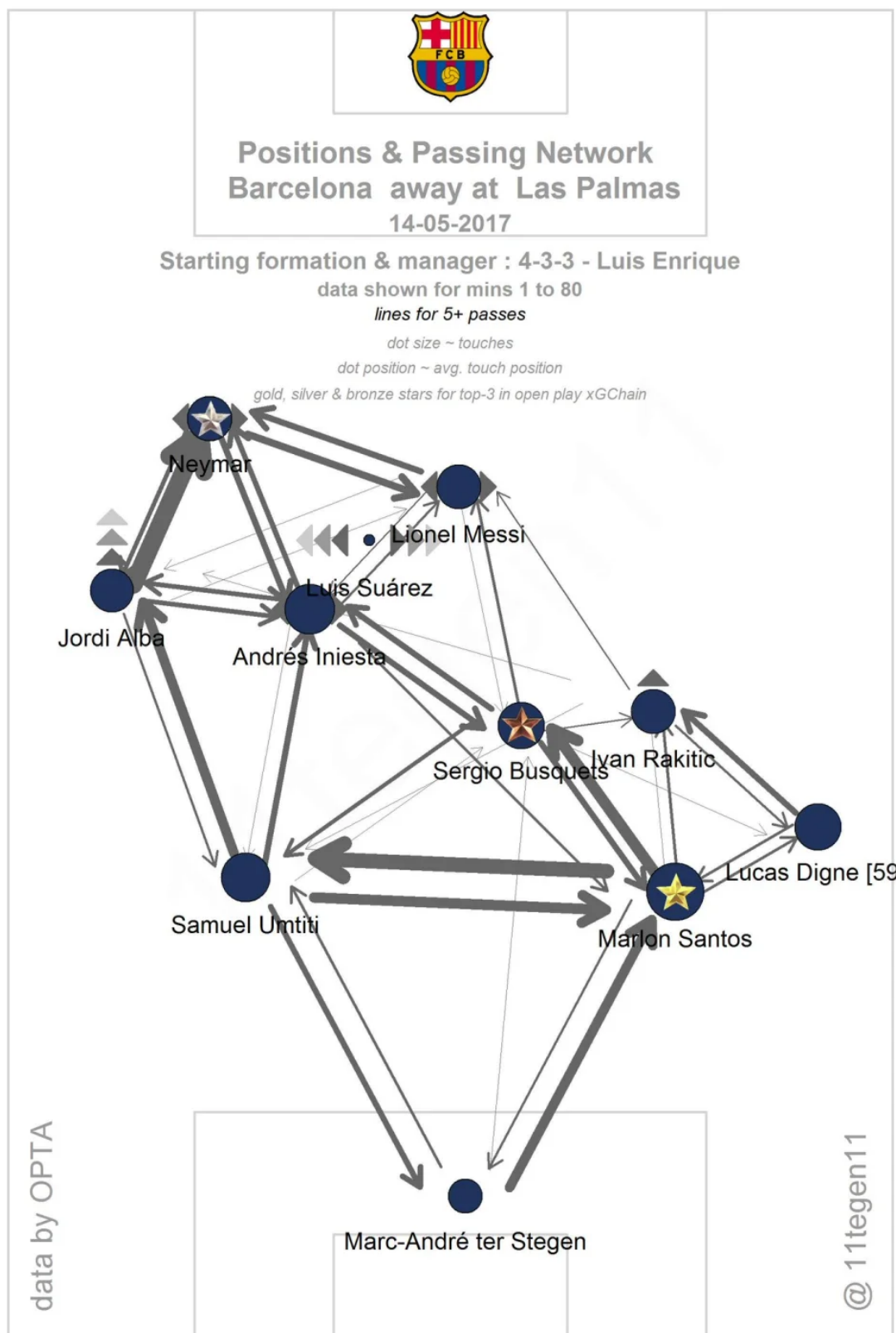
And because Messi always had to move to the center, the right-sided central midfielder essentially became an RW/RM because Messi vacated that RW spot and a player was needed there. Roberto did an amazing job at RW/RM/CM whenever he played there (we saw his wonderful ability on full display in the 4-0 rout at the Bernabeu) and so did Vidal before his injury. However, after the injury, Roberto had to permanently play RB, so there wasn't someone available at RM/RW and subsequently, many times during many games throughout the season we saw the central midfielders, Rakitic and Gomes move to that position (Rafinha's injury did not help) and do an awful job, often having to drop as deep as RB and subsequently play as RWB. They completed the easy, non-constructive passes, got backed into corners by defenders and made poor decisions and ultimately lost possession. Their lack of comfort and subsequent lack of confidence was quite evident from their football.

As a result, Barcelona couldn't play through the right side. One whole side of the attack was rendered useless. Take a look at the passmaps for some of our games, especially for that Juventus first leg and a few league games in particular as well. 2 maps of our passing are shown below. One versus Eibar and the other versus Las Palmas, where there is literally NO PASSING on the right side.



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We became left side heavy team and every play was having to be made through Neymar. Passing was done on the left, fullback pushed on the left, Messi was finding and creating chances for teammates on the left. It was becoming something like a forced routine week in, week out. Boring and predictable too. Barcelona became reliant on one player, Neymar, (in addition to Messi) to make that final play in the box when nothing else was working. Teams like Juventus were quick to nullify our left sided attack in between matches. As a result of Luis Enrique's direct method of play (bypassing midfield and relying on front 3), attack after attack was wasted as Neymar wasted chance after chance and Suarez was essentially taken out of the game by many defences.



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It showcased Neymar's poor judgment to the fullest as he had the ball a lot more due to the system and was trusted to make space or score and often lost possession. Too much reliance and too much responsibility on certain players really hurt chances of getting the job done when there was no other idea/tactic to be employed and the team suffered. Xavi himself said that the difference between Pep's Barca and Enrique's Barca was that in the former, the team would make 20-30 passes before creating space, whereas, in the latter, only 4-5 passes were needed before feeding the ball to MSN and waiting for the goal.

And so, with the club's horrible board and their incompetence, Alves leaving was something left unchecked and something that caused a domino effect. Now the time for repairs is here (by getting a deal done with a fantastic rightback like Semedo and making Palencia a first team player and giving him the experience he needs to develop) when last year was the time for prevention and reinforcement and the club might not have had to go through this ordeal. Because the board messed up the club and couldn't get things together, they now have to spend around 100 million for Verratti + around 30-50 million for someone like Semedo to repair all the damage that has been done now. Not making the right decisions during the previous seasons now forces the club to shell out huge amounts of money, that may or may not even be available, when world-class replacements could have easily been lined up for much less than half the amount we may have to spend this window.

(Image source: <http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/459815/hubfs/daniel-alves.jpeg?t=1499741852696&width=640&name=daniel-alves.jpeg>)