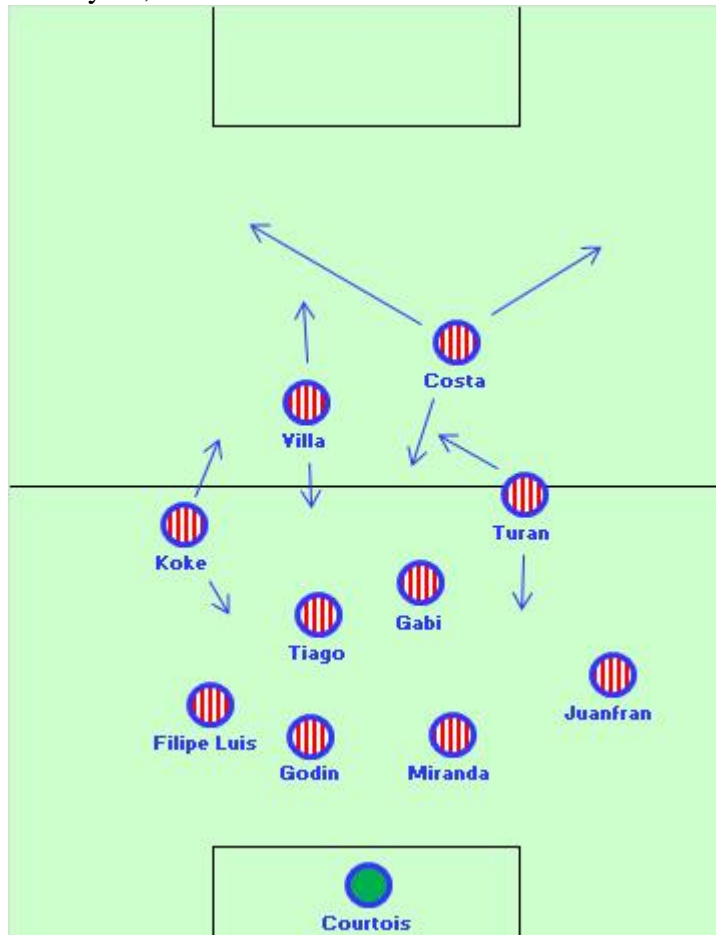


Atletico Madrid proving tackling can be a quality

January 10, 2014



Atletico's regular starting XI

This weekend, Atletico Madrid host Barcelona at the Vicente Calderon stadium in the biggest game of the European season so far.

The two sides are level on points, and therefore it is literally a top of the table clash – La Liga's rules mean teams are separated by head-to-head results rather than goal difference, and therefore having not played each other this season, the sides can't be separated.

Halfway through the season, La Liga's best two clubs are neck-and-neck, joint first.

This is such an intriguing contest because the sides are so contrasting stylistically. For the last half-decade Barcelona have specialised at possession play, with former manager Pep Guardiola memorably saying, "Without the ball we are a horrible side" at the height of their dominance. "One thing I can't stand is losing possession," he says.

Atletico are the complete opposition. “Possession isn’t everything,” says their coach Diego Simeone. However, Atletico are utterly magnificent without the ball.

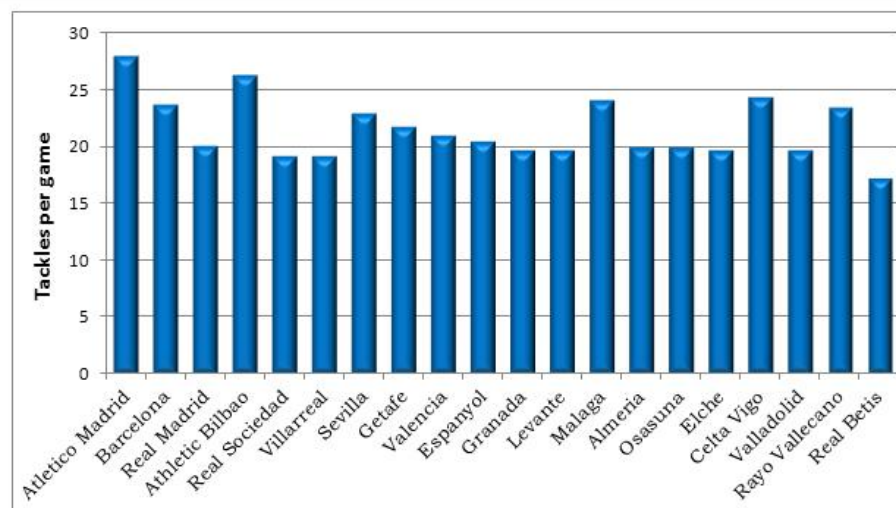
Essentially, Atletico are the opposite of everything you expect from a Spanish side. The current footballing identity of Spain is based solely around keeping possession of the ball, an approach justified (and popularised) by the fact their national side is probably the most dominant in the history of the game.

Some of the key players in the national side are strict ideologues, obsessed with possession. In this respect, one of the most interesting views came from Xabi Alonso in a [2011 interview with the Guardian](#), on the subject of whether tackling is an attribute to be admired.

“I don’t think tackling is a quality. It is a *recurso*, something you have to resort to, not a characteristic of your game. At Liverpool I used to read the matchday programme and you’d read an interview with a lad from the youth team. They’d ask: age, heroes, strong points, etc. He’d reply: ‘Shooting and tackling’. I can’t get into my head that football development would educate tackling as a quality, something to learn, to teach, a characteristic of your play. How can that be a way of seeing the game? I just don’t understand football in those terms. Tackling is a last resort, and you will need it, but it isn’t a quality to aspire to, a definition. It’s hard to change because it’s so rooted in the English football culture, but I don’t understand it.”

Tackling, however, is precisely what La Liga’s joint-leaders Atletico excel at. Inspect the statistics from Atletico Madrid’s season so far, and you find they’re distinctly unimpressive in terms of possession (10th best in La Liga), pass completion rate (7th), or shots per game (6th). (Away from home, they have the fourth-least possession in the league.)

But their statistics without the ball are remarkable. They make more tackles than any other side, have conceded fewer shots than any other side, and have conceded the fewest goals in La Liga. At Barcelona’s peak, they conceded the fewest shots and goals because they dominated possession so heavily. Atletico concede the fewest shots and goals despite not looking to dominate the ball, and instead focusing upon stopping the opposition in their tracks.



To underline how unusual it is to see a title challenger with these tackling statistics, it's worth looking at the most prolific tacklers from the other four major European leagues: Werder Bremen are 11th, Toulouse are 11th, Parma are 9th and Crystal Palace are 18th. The league's most prolific tacklers are, ordinarily, midtable sides or battling relegation, not top of the league.

Barcelona midfielder Cesc Fabregas, when asked about Alonso's comments on tackling, took a more balanced view. "I think Xabi's not dismissing tackling but referring to it as a last resort," he says, also in a Guardian interview.

More interesting was his definition of an excellent tackler. "But there's a player who's played in both leagues and does that better than anyone: Javier Mascherano. Masche always dives in and he always comes away with the ball. He uses it a lot but not as a last resort, rather as a specialty. For him it's a *recurso* [something you have to resort to] and a *cualidad* [a quality, something to aspire to]. Masche is incredible, very clever: he knows when to tackle, when to stand. He's a guy who really knows how to play football."

What is Mascherano but the modern day equivalent of Simeone? Mascherano may now play as a centre-back (which would probably not be the case at any other club in Europe) but he's essentially the old-school, tough-tackling Argentine defensive midfielder, the number five that attempts to mark the opposition number ten out of the game.

And, of course, Simeone's style is perfectly reflected in Atletico's gameplan. "Atlético Madrid play like Diego Simeone played," says Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti. "Tough, focused, and tactically perfect."

Positionally, Atletico's approach is relatively simple. They stay very compact, with centre-forwards David Villa and Diego Costa dropping deep to prevent the ball being played through the centre of the pitch. More importantly, they remain extremely narrow, with the wide midfielders Koke and Arda Turan tucking inside into the centre of the pitch. "We are not a team of individuals," midfielder Arda Turan tells FourFourTwo recently. "We are a collective group of hard working players who always want the best for the team. We battle for every ball during every minute of each match."

Against Barcelona, this is particularly effective because it prevents them playing through Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta and Lionel Messi, and they instead work the ball wide, and switch play repeatedly.

It's simple in principle, of course, but Atletico work extremely hard without the ball, shuffling from flank to flank to close down possession, repeatedly doubling up against wide players. They generally regain the ball in their own half, although often the positions of tackles are in wide positions rather than in the centre – the opposition are put off playing the ball through the congested middle, and try more ambitious passes down the flanks. A good example was in their win over Real Madrid earlier this season:



The peculiar thing is that in a pure positional sense, Atlético's approach is similar to that of possession-based sides – packing the centre of the pitch to dominate that zone. They're simply doing it in a completely reactive way, positioning themselves there to break up passing moves, rather than create them.

Of course, they also have superb attacking weapons – a variety of talented midfielders that all play different roles, and the best striker in the division, in Diego Costa.

The most interesting football matches often come between two sides that are well-matched in terms of ability, but completely different in terms of style. This weekend's clash should be a perfect example – a side top of the league because of their passing, against a side top of the league because of their tackling