

# The Importance of Pressing in Modern Football – Why the English Game Must Keep Up

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As football's ever-evolving state enters a new phase, pressing has quickly become one of the most recognised pieces of the tactical jigsaw. The pursuit of tiki-taka football, mastered by Pep Guardiola's Barcelona side of 2008-2011, is on the decline, whilst styles of football such as the ones implemented by Jurgen Klopp at Borussia Dortmund and Diego Simeone at Atletico Madrid are on the rise.

The three aforementioned styles are distinctly different, yet all of them have enforced a successful style of pressing. All three teams employed counterpressing, an approach based on winning the ball back high up the pitch as soon as it is lost, to great effect. Differences in each style of play are clear to see: Barca favoured a possession-oriented game, whilst Atletico show near-refusal to keep the ball, and Dortmund base their play on penetration. A chunk of each side's success is down to their well designed pressing methods.

## **Types of pressing**

There are various types of pressing in the world of football; some are common, some are sparse, some are effective, some are self-destructive, and some are down to an outright lack of design.

### **UNCONDITIONAL PRESSING**

The idea of unconditional pressing is self-explanatory; the team presses constantly when out of possession of the ball. Like any other method, it has its strengths and weaknesses. It is rare to come across a team that uses this style purely because of the excessive physical demands it

requires. Players are often left lying on the floor in exhaustion after implementing the system in a competitive match, take [Athletic Bilbao's match vs Barcelona](#) as an example.

Its effectiveness comes against teams who lack confidence and technical ability on the ball. If a player is uncomfortable on the ball in the first place, they will be quaking in their boots when they see a hungry pack of players who are eager to win the ball running at them. The thought of constant pressing, to some, is akin to disjointed pressing except in numbers; players running like headless chickens towards whichever part of the pitch the ball is in. This can happen, although it would be largely unsuccessful. Another point is that this pressing system requires man-marking to be truly effective. It simply would not work with zonal marking as opposition overloads of certain zones would undermine the system.

However, Marcelo Bielsa's teams, for example, have used the system well by being precise. His players are not made to all run after the ball, but to anticipate where the next pass will be and to arrive before it has gone. Bielsa, nicknamed El Loco for his unconventional methods, has always kept his tactical set up the same, with the shape being structured by two principles: keeping a spare man at the back, and having 4 forwards. The reason for the spare man at the back is to compensate for opposition counter-attacks, i.e. 3 defenders vs 2 forwards or 2 defenders vs 1 forward. Key to his pressing style is the use of 4 forwards, consisting of 1 striker, 2 wingers and an attacking midfielder, which is never altered.

To read more on Bielsa, read @chalkontheboots' excellent breakdown of his methods –[Marcelo Bielsa – Method in the Madness](#).

The greatest example of unconditional pressing can be watched here, implemented, yet again, by Bielsa.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTKiMGYN9eQ#t=62>

### **DISJOINTED PRESSING**

This form of pressing is arguably prevalent in the English game. It involves one man pressing solely whilst his teammates watch, running like a man possessed, following the ball in every direction, usually as a result of frustration or anger, and usually to no avail. Think Wayne Rooney: a couple of years back he was hailed for his 'high work rate' and how he harried defenders. Last season, Danny Welbeck got the nod ahead of him to play against Real Madrid because of Rooney's unwillingness to mark their deep lying playmaker Xabi Alonso. So, has Rooney stopped his child-like energetic chasing of the ball? No. What is the problem, then? The problem is that he shouldn't be doing it in the first place.

By chasing the ball on his own, he would be breaking from the tactical plan. The plan was to stay compact as a unit against Madrid, but Rooney's lack of patience often means he goes chasing the ball because his side are not in possession, so was dropped for the game. Another reason is his laziness in terms of transitioning quickly from attack to defence, in this case a deep shape.

However, Rooney is not the only player to do it. It is commonplace in the English game (albeit more common in the lower leagues) for a lone striker who has grown in frustration from not getting the ball enough to lose his rag and eventually crack; sprinting at full speed to the ball, only to be ridiculed by a simple pass. It allows teams who play a deep lying playmaker, a la Real Madrid, to utilise them and start attacks because the headless chicken of a striker has gone missing. It is no wonder that this is the least effective pressing system as it is highly likely that it is a result of a lack of coaching of pressing.

It doesn't necessarily have to be a sole player either; it is usually the two vertically highest players in a team, ie 2 strikers or 1 striker and an attacking midfielder. They press, whilst the rest of the team maintain their defensive position, making the team disjointed whilst neglecting space at the same time.

## **COUNTERPRESSING**

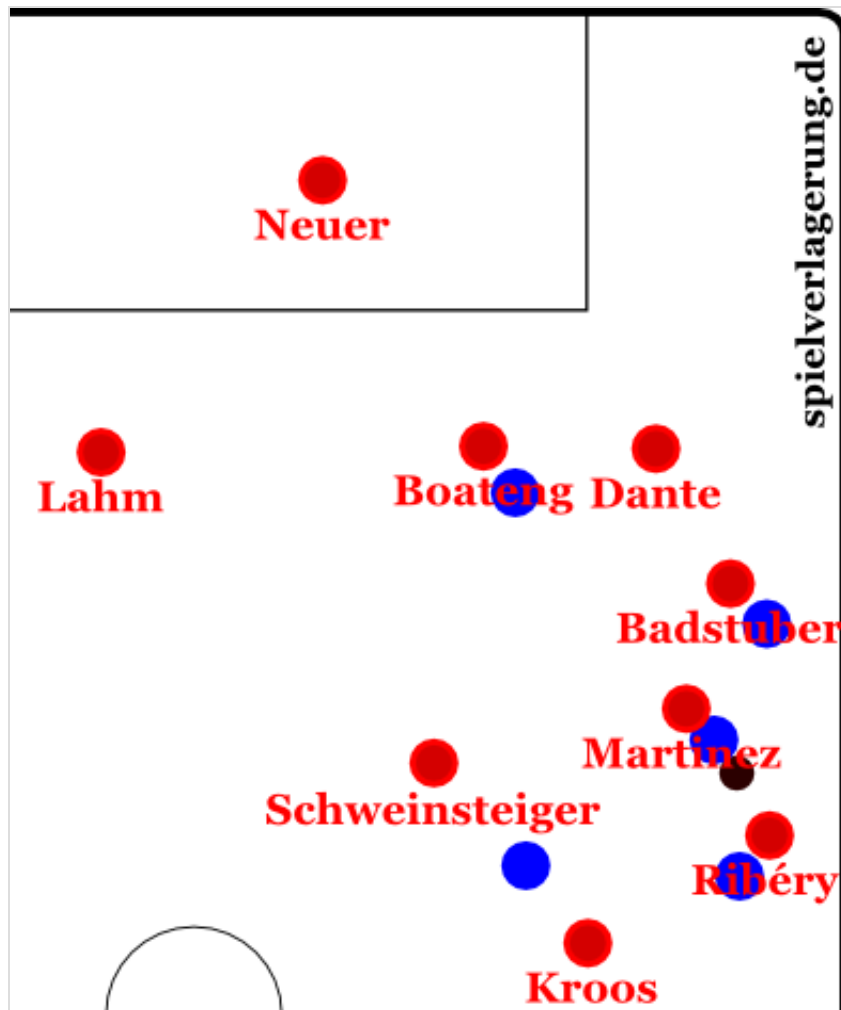
This style of pressing, as mentioned above, has been used successfully by Barcelona, Borussia Dortmund and Atletico Madrid. It was also used by Bayern Munich under Heynckes in the last season under his reign, taking inspiration from Dortmund.

It is the idea that the best time to seek to regain possession is when it is first lost (transition from attack to defence), usually in the opponent's half, because the opponent is at their most disorientated and if won, the distance to the opposition's goal is shorter. The opposition are trying to get the ball under control, which requires high concentration, and will feel under even more mental pressure if they are being pressed. The system is organised, and the whole team moves as a unit to squeeze the play. One player will press the player on the ball, whilst others look to cut off any available passes, and the defence will move up in unison with the pressers to make the pitch compact. As more players are higher up the pitch as a result of the pressing positions, a quick attack with numerous players can occur, which is always a danger.

If the ball is not won as a result of the counterpress, or if certain triggers to press do not arise, the players transition quickly into their defensive shape. There are various triggers: the opponent is facing their own goal or the opponent is facing the touchline, and the team is organised enough to start the press (e.g. counterpressing should not be used if 5 players are ahead of the ball and there are various passing options available for the opposition). The cues from conditional pressing can also be used, which I will outline later.

The beauty of this system is that if the counterpress regains possession, the team can start a counter-attack from high up the pitch when the opposition is unbalanced, which presents a good opportunity to fathom a clear cut chance. And if the ball is not won from the counterpress, the players get back into their defensive shape and employ a conditional pressing system. I will explain the conditional pressing system in the next section of the article.

This picture from [Spielverlagerung](#), and the article itself, shows how Bayern put counterpressing into practice:



As you can see, Martinez is pressing the player in possession. What you cannot see, however, is that the player in possession has his back to goal. This is a key pressing trigger. Badstuber is preventing any attempt to back heel the ball, Ribery is cutting off the lay-off option, and Schweinsteiger and Kroos have closed down the space for the only realistic passing option (anticipating the next ball). Dante has provided *cover* for any over-the-top balls whilst Boateng and Lahm have provided *balance*, which are two highly important aspects of defensive organisation.

The outcome of this situation was that Martinez poked the ball from behind, dispossessing his opponent, towards Ribery, allowing him to pass to Schweinsteiger who could then start a counter attack.

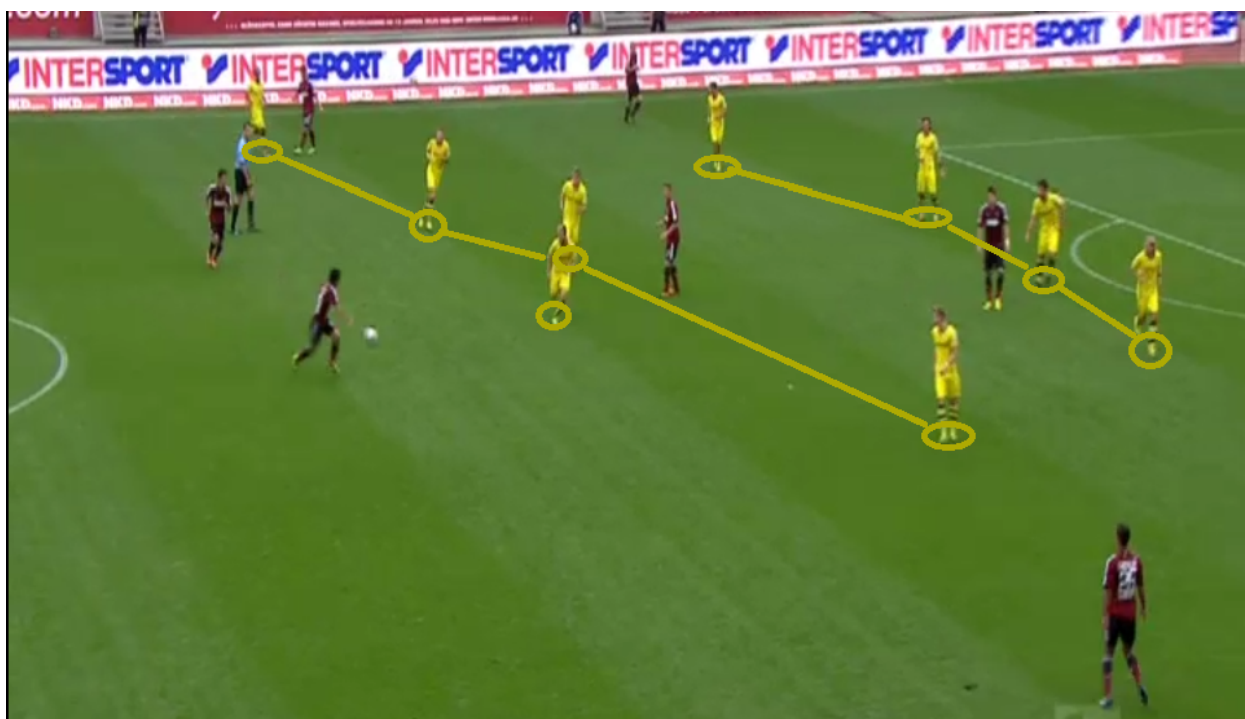
It should be noted that, in my opinion, counterpressing is not specifically used by numerous teams because: a) the system requires a lot of training and design, b) it requires high concentration over a long period of time in matches, c) transitions from defence to attack and vice-versa have to be quick to be effective.

### **CONDITIONAL PRESSING**

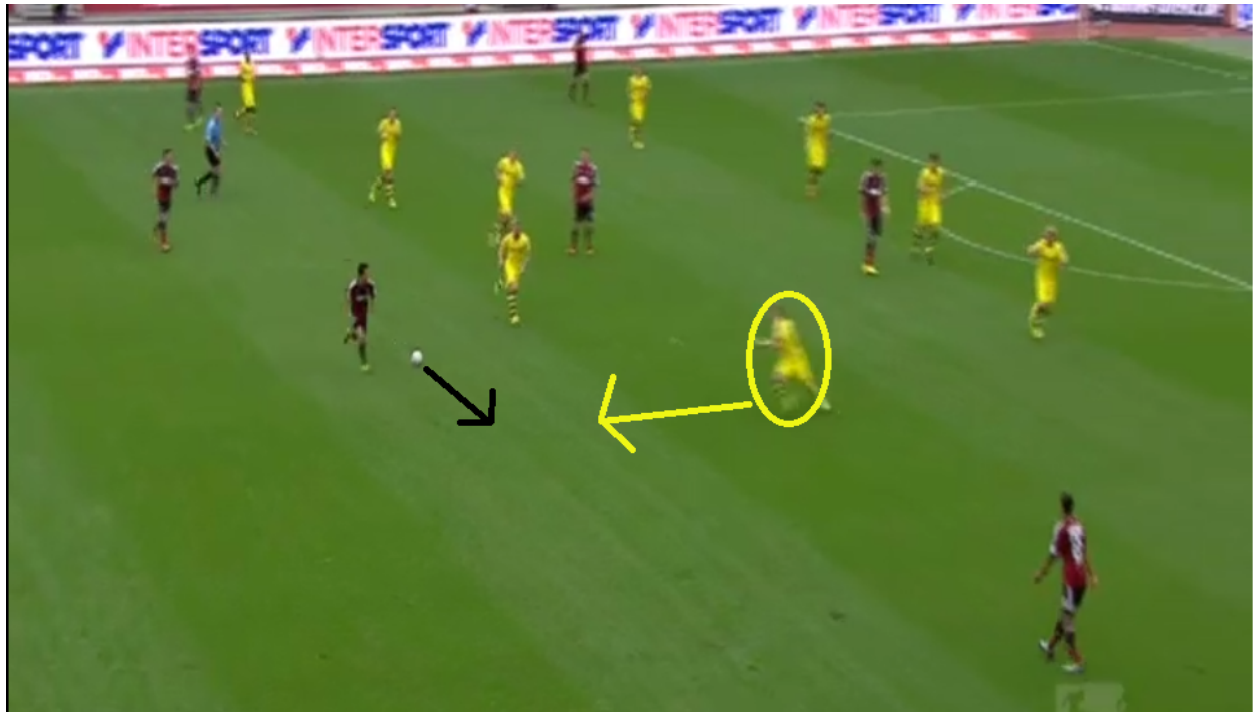
Probably the most commonly used pressing system in football, conditional pressing has the ability to be effective without substantial amounts of effort. However, it is unsurprisingly most effective when high concentration, high levels of training and good design are applied.

It is the idea of pressing only when in the designated defensive shape when triggers (conditions) occur. Conditional pressing is usually a consequence of design, particularly in European football, but is sometimes applied subconsciously, usually in English football. It is probably the second most common type of pressing in England. Triggers include, from the opponent: a loose touch, an underweighted pass, or a pass into a congested area (e.g. centre of the pitch).

Here is an example (excuse poor editing as Paint was used):



Dortmund are in their defensive shape of 4-4-1-1 (striker not on screen), whilst a pass is being played across midfield.



The pass is overweighted and the Nurnberg player fails to control the ball, triggering Dortmund to press the ball.





The Dortmund Player (Reus in this case) wins the ball as a result of successful conditional pressing and is able to start a counter attack. The counter attack resulted in a corner for Dortmund.

Another example comes from Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid. Whilst employing a low block 4-4-2, which sometimes changes to a 4-5-1 in their defensive shape, they seek to force the opposition wide by congesting the middle of the pitch. They then double up on the wings to force a lateral pass inside, which triggers one of the central midfielders, who act like pistons, to press due to there being a higher probability of an interception being made as opposed to a diagonal pass

## **Conclusion**

The rise of double pivots, 3-man midfields, modern day centre-halves and liberos in continental football means that if the English game doesn't progress with the times, it will fall behind its

footballing counterparts because of the sheer speed of which attacks are assembled at in modern football.

Managers should have an effective pressing strategy in mind and should implement such strategies, as a result of design and practice, on the pitch. Effective pressing systems are seen more commonly in top footballing nations such as Germany, Spain & Italy, and it is no coincidence that these countries often perform excellently on the continental and international stages, whilst England fall behind. The art of pressing should be taught from an early age so that it is second nature to players who rise through the system. Of course coaches' preferences will differ, but that promotes versatility, an invaluable asset that is growing in importance as the game evolves and demands players to be able to play in a number of positions and roles.

After all; if you don't have the ball, you can't score.