

MOURINHO'S UNIVERSAL CHELSEA; FROM THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TO SUNDAY LEAGUE

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Over the past 10 years we have seen European football dominated by the emergence of two contrasting styles. The first outbreak was sparked by the Spanish revolution. The Johan Cruyff inspired *Total Football* brought unparalleled success to Barcelona and Spain, where a space of seven years (2005-2012) saw them win three Champions Leagues, four La Liga titles, two European Championships and a World Cup. Many followed in their tactical footsteps, while the visionaries of the game conspired to rebel.

This gave birth to the counter-possession approach which looked to absorb pressure and hit teams on the break. Again success was close at hand. While others looked to follow suit, the world's top coaches were again looking to innovate. At the highest level, the possession based approach was evolving and the importance of high pressing and ultimately the German born *gegenpressing* came to light. The evolution is still on-going and will likely remain in this ever changing state. Through all this, Mourinho has remained heavily involved in the ongoing tactical skirmish and has sought to continue his work at Chelsea.

Traditionally, Mourinho has opted to sit deep, remain compact and look to hit teams on the counter-attack. This tactic relies upon building an organised and disciplined team with the pace to catch teams on the break. At Inter Milan, this brought marked success, while at Madrid it was seen as negative and saw a three year spell yield a disappointing trophy haul. It seems the latter had a lasting impression on Mourinho, as last year we saw him experiment with a more expansive system in the capital.

His 4-2-3-1 system saw much greater attacking freedom given to the three behind the front man, while the two behind allowed the fullbacks to provide a more reliable source of width. This is not to say that a disciplined approach to the defensive work of the attacking 3 was not important, in fact it seems Juan Mata was moved on because of his failings here. But this progression on a system which had brought him much success managed to take a vastly unbalanced squad to the Champions League semi-finals and almost won them the Premier League.



Since then, there has been somewhat of an overhaul at Stamford Bridge. Mata, Torres, Lukaku, Lampard, Cole, De Bruyne, Luiz and Eto'o have all left, with Matic, Salah, Zouma, Costa, Fabregas, Filipe Luis and Loic Remy all joining the club. Incredibly, this was done at a profit and has given them a more tactically versatile and complete squad. This has allowed Mourinho to achieve something which more closely resembles what Guardiola is building at Bayern, Universality.

Anyone who reads *The Whitehouse Address* will be all too familiar with the concept of Universality which he describes as a blueprint for the future of football. It refers to a system whereby there is great fluidity between positions and players are capable of taking up a variety of tactical and positional responsibilities. Players are athletic, technically proficient and understand the various tactical variations asked of them. For an example of what happens when you achieve this mix, just take a look at this year's [World Cup winners](#).

At Chelsea, Jose has now been able to build a squad with the ability to effectively play counter-possession based football and soak up pressure against better teams. With the ability of their attacking players to break quickly and incisively and the ruthlessness of Costa up front, this tactic is far more

effective than when they relied upon the likes of Torres. Against Arsenal this season, they managed just 3 shots on target and had less possession than their rivals, yet won the game 2-0 in a relatively comfortable fashion.

But there is more to the new Chelsea. They are also a side well versed in the art of pressing when necessary, thanks largely to the incredible defensive work rate of Diego Costa. If they win the ball high up the field, it means that players like Hazard, Oscar or Schurrle are now in possession against an understaffed defence with intelligent runs being made in support.

They are capable of dominating possession and breaking down the deep lying defence that works so well for them. Where last season they relied heavily on Eden Hazard in this respect, the burden is now being shared by Cesc Fabregas who has 7 assists to his name already this season.

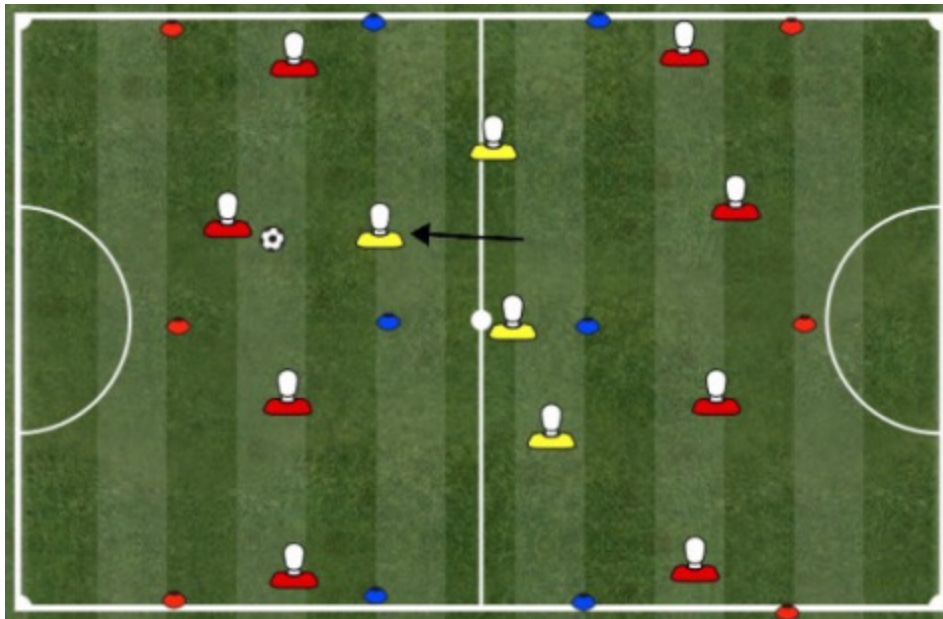
The major driving forces of success for European teams over the last ten years are now being merged at a team with quality and depth rivalled by few. The signings of Fabregas, Costa and Matic have clearly taken them to the next level and raised the game of those around them. Existing players such as Ivanovic and Courtois are now emerging as some of the best in the world in their positions. On Tuesday night, they beat Maribor 6-0 without Courtois, Costa, Cahill, Salah, Azpilicueta, Ramires, Mikel and Schurrle. There are few in world football who would turn down that group of players.

So is this the most complete team in Europe at the moment? They are certainly up there with Bayern Munich and I fully expect them to dominate domestically this season and at the very least challenge the latter rounds of the Champions League. But what can we learn from this Chelsea side? What lessons can be

passed down to our local league and youth teams and how can they influence our coaching?

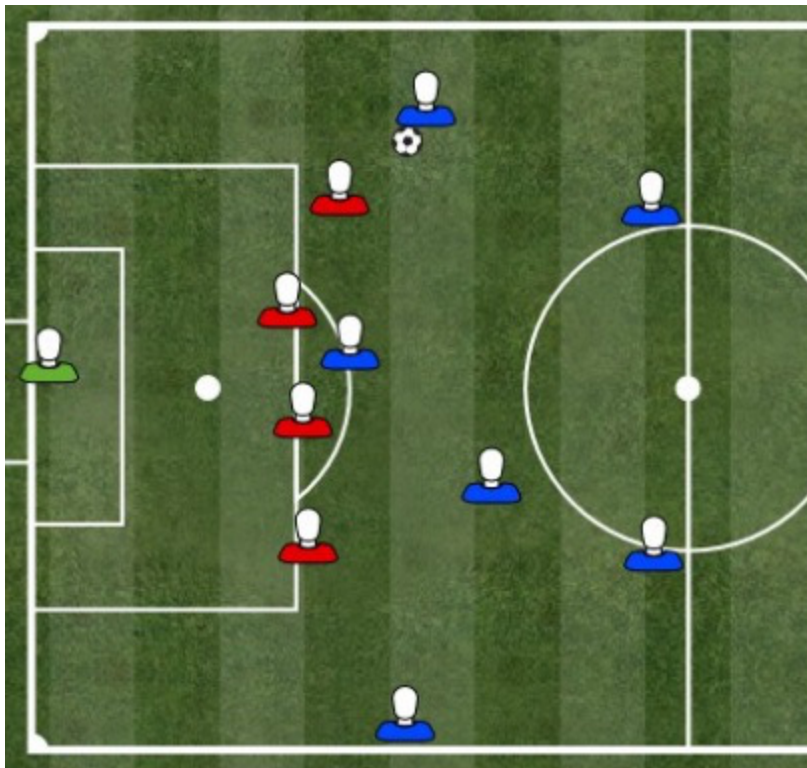
1. *Counter-Possession*

When Chelsea want to shut up shop, they can be incredibly difficult to break down. They remain compact; allow no space in between the lines and their midfield players do a very good job of protecting the back four. In youth football, it is all too common to see significant divides between the defence and midfield or between the players within those areas when out of possession. This creates space for the more creative players to operate and exposes the back four. To follow are a few sessions I use when trying to develop my players understanding of how and when to remain compact.



Players are divided equally into three groups, consisting of two possession teams and one defending team. The two possession teams are aiming to transfer the ball to the opposite side without the defending team intercepting. One of the defenders must press to the edge of their area to reduce the passing

options of the player in possession, while the remaining three get compact and cut off the easier of the angles. The attacking teams score double if they can pass between two of the defending players, which encourages the defending team to stay more compact. I give the players three minutes to accumulate as many passes as possible and then switch the defending team. To progress the session, allow one defender to move into the possession team's zone and put pressure on the ball.



A back four is chosen (vary depend on formation used) with a goalkeeper and must defend the goal. The attacking team is given an overload and must simply score a goal. If the defending team win the ball, then they must attempt to retain possession for as long as possible. Again, the focus is on remaining compact and not allowing gaps for the opposing team to play through. Time how long the

defending team can go without conceding a goal and use the time as a challenge to beat.

As with the previous drill, one player pushes out to put some pressure on the ball, but is not attempting to win it. The other defenders hold a compact line (play the offside rule) and shuffle across if the play switches flank. The goalkeeper must be ready to come and collect short through balls and chips in behind the defence. To progress the session, have one defender start on the opposite side of the pitch and jog back into play. This will create an even greater overload for a short period of time until the defender recovers position. This session is also a good exercise for the attacking team in trying to break down a stubborn defence. Encourage them to be creative and experiment with new ideas.

1. Pressing & Gegenpressing

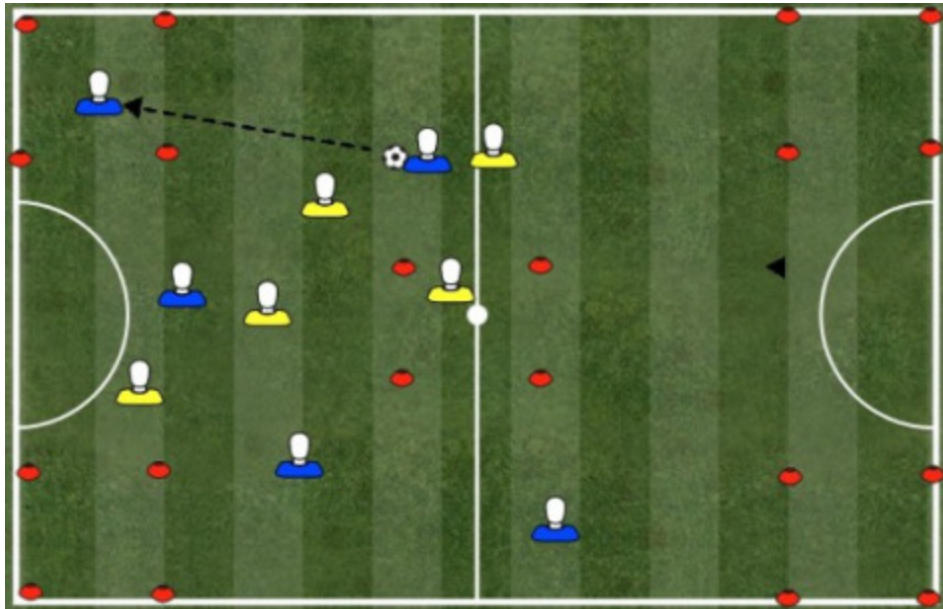
[This link will redirect you](#) to a piece I did previously looking at *gegenpressing*, including an in depth analysis along with some suggestions for sessions. It describes how to press, what to do if the ball is won and what to do if it isn't. The article also directs you to some sessions on transitioning quickly and how to counter attack.

Also see, [Bayern Munich's high pressing under Guardiola](#)

3. Possession

At an amateur level especially, maintaining possession relies largely upon your teams ability to create, find and utilise space. This process is made significantly easier when players understand the need to create width and depth for the side. By stretching the pitch in both directions, the pockets of space in which your side can play grow and make keeping the ball far easier. It also increases the

amount of work the opposition team have to do in order to close your players down. [This link will direct you to a tactical session](#) aimed at developing your sides understanding of creating width and depth.



This is a session I use to develop my players ability to recognise opportunities to exploit space. The teams are divided equally and 5 small squares (~4×4 yards) are placed within the area. The aim of the game is to receive a pass in one of the coned areas to score a goal and then work your way to another (the same one can't be used twice in a row by one team). Players are encouraged to try different ways to create space and find a way to pass into the squares. Especially in such a tight area, things like double movements, dummy runs and 1v1 skills become very important in this game.



In addition to this ability to create and exploit space, possession football relies upon technically proficient players with the confidence to keep the ball under pressure. If the defenders are not comfortable in possession, then teams will simply press the play back to them until they clear it. Long gone are the days when the defenders can get away with limited technical ability and the full backs especially are expected to play a significant role in attacking play.

4. Penetration

[This link examines](#) Ancelotti's 4-3-3 which examines penetration and innovation. It discusses the way in which his Champions League winning Madrid side hit teams on the break and the ways they went about breaking them down. There are also some session ideas included and it looks at developing more creative players.

Chelsea then, has seemingly found themselves amongst the frontrunners in the ongoing tactical evolution thanks to the return of '*the special one*'. They look set to dominate domestically and will certainly compete in Europe. As coaches, we can learn much from them and should encourage our players to examine how

they play and model their performances. That is, until the next managerial throw of the dice.