

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

Analysis of Offensive Transitions of Barcelona based on the Initial Penetration after the Ball Recovery

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Abstract

Coaches and analysts alike agree that offensive transitions are very important in modern football. However, only few studies have analyzed offensive transitions in depth. The aim of this study was to analyze the effect of initial penetration on the tactical elements of offensive transitions of Barcelona during the period 2018-19. The sample included 1164 offensive transitions (605 with penetration and 559 without penetration), from 37 matches. The phases were recorded using SportScout analysis software. The parameters of the study were: outcome of attack, match location, quality of opposition, zone of ball recovery, type of ball recovery, initial opponent number, players in possession, type of attack, duration of attack, time frame of attack and match status. The statistical processing of the data was done with the Crosstabs analysis and the Chi-square significance test. The results showed that the tactical characteristics of Barcelona's offensive transitions were significantly influenced by the initial penetration of play, with the exception of zone of ball recovery and quality of opposition parameters. In conclusion, it seems that the profile of Barcelona's offensive transitions is influenced by the initial penetration. Also, the findings on quality of opposition suggest that Barcelona utilizes a similar play-style, regardless of opposition. Finally, the fact that offensive transitions that had penetration were almost equal to those that had no penetration, confirms that Barcelona didn't always try to attack, as soon as they recovered possession, but often chose to complete more passes, aiming to develop its attacking play with more patience and less risk.

Keywords: soccer, attacking phase, tactics, video-analysis

Introduction

Football analysts have mainly focused on the characteristics related to the attack, setting aside the processes that express the dynamic of the game (Fernandes, Camerino, Garganta, Hileno, & Barreira, 2020). In addition, in football it seems important to understand the relation between the recovery of ball possession and the impending success or failure of the attack that follows (Barreira, Garganta, Guimaraes, Machado, & Anguera, 2014).

Despite that, little research has been done on the connection between: a) the type of ball recovery in different field zones, b) the level of competition and c) the overall success of the teams (Barreira et al., 2014). Also, the finding of how and where the ball recovery takes place at the top level is cru-

cial for the understanding of the attacking patterns and the time sequence of the actions, while the resulting knowledge can be used for the creation of specific training drills (Barreira, Garganta, Machado, & Anguera, 2014).

According to Cooper & Pulling (2020), the importance of ball recovery has been recognized by research conducted in the past. However, the same authors report that there is still a need to investigate a range of variables, that impact on ball recoveries and the impending possession. Therefore, this specific study is of particular interest for coaches, while, at the same time has the necessary originality, as it examines a field that is of great importance to coaches and hasn't been sufficiently explored in the past.

The field in question is that of offensive transitions, name-



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ly the attacks that happen after recovering ball possession. Offensive transitions are a football element that occupied both the study of Hughes & Lovell (2019) and the study of Turner & Sayers (2010). However, it is a part of the game that hasn't been extensively examined from previous research that had the analysis of offensive tactics in football as their objective.

At the same time, initial penetration is a parameter that has been shown in the past that can play an important role in the outcome of phases. According to González-Rodenas et al. (2019) the initial penetration can really be an important factor in creating goal scoring opportunities. More specifically, the authors state that the initial penetration played an important role in achieving offensive penetration, but also in creating goal scoring opportunities in games of the Spanish league (La Liga).

Concerning Barcelona, it seems that coaches recognize the quality of the team's playstyle, based on the way it manages ball possession, which is difficult to deal with for all teams (Sarmiento et al., 2013). The difficulty in dealing with Barcelona when it has ball possession is mainly due to its passing game ability. The man who made a great contribution to the development of Barcelona's passing game was Johan Cruyff, who served the team from two different posts, first as a player and later as a coach (Chassy, 2013).

In addition, LópezBondia, González-Rodenas, Calabuig Moreno, Pérez-Turpin & Aranda Malavés (2017) report that Barcelona does not always try to attack immediately after regaining ball possession, but often chooses to complete more passes, aiming to develop its attacking play with more patience. This claim seems to be confirmed by the sample of this present study, since from the 1164 offensive transitions that Barcelona completed, the 605 had penetration and the 559 had no penetration.

In conclusion, the reason why the games of Barcelona were chosen was because the team is a reference point, for football as a whole, as it has many times defined the football trends in terms of playstyle. This is due to the fact that many teams around the world try to implement attacking elements of Barcelona's game into their game. This is probably due to the very popular and very effective offensive game it uses and characterizes the team.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effect of initial penetration on the tactical elements of offensive transitions of Barcelona during the season 2018-19. The research of Barcelona's match behavior is of particular interest since according to Chassy (2013), the famous passing game that Barcelona widely uses to this day, has led to win significant titles, both Barcelona and the Spanish national team (also utilized the same play style).

Method

Sample

The sample of the study included the offensive transitions that Barcelona completed (1164 offensive transitions in total) in 37 out of the 38 matches that the team played in one of the top European Championships, that of Spain. Specifically, all the offensive transitions that Barcelona made in its games in the Spanish La Liga of the 2018-2019 season were recorded and evaluated in terms of their tactical characteristics.

The selection criteria of the championship was that, apart from Barcelona, top clubs of the European continent compete in it, such as Atletico Madrid, Real Madrid, Valencia, Sevilla and Athletic Bilbao. The high level of the championship studied is evidenced by the fact that the aforementioned teams have won many European titles and most of their participations in European competitions are remarkable. Regarding the selection of Barcelona, it relied on its dominance in the last decade and especially in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 seasons, when it won two championships with differences of more than 10 points from the second team in the standings and at the same time played in 2 Spanish Cup finals, winning the trophy one of the two times.

Data collection and measuring instruments

The observation protocol was created to observe the matches of this study concerned the offensive transitions. At this point, it should be noted that an attack is considered an offensive transition when at least two completed passes are made between teammates, when a player carries the ball forward for at least 15 m (Turner & Sayers, 2010) and when a ball recovery is followed by a goal scoring opportunity. Offensive transitions are completed when a goal attempt is made, when a goal is scored, when a defender intervenes on the ball, but the attacking team retains ball possession, when ball possession is lost and when the game is interrupted for any reason. Excluding offensive transitions are the phases where the attacker passes the ball back to the goalkeeper, those that despite the intervention of the defenders the ball remains in the possession of the attacking team and those that begin after the application of the fair-play rule.

Thus, the analysis scheme (observation protocol) contained the following parameters: 1) initial penetration, 2) outcome of attack, 3) match location, 4) quality of opposition, 5) zone of ball recovery, 6) type of ball recovery, 7) initial opponent number, 8) players in possession, 9) type of attack, 10) duration of attack, 11) time frame of attack and 12) match status (Table 1).

Table 1. The Categories of Analysis and their Respective Parameters

Categories	Parameters	Operational definitions of the parameters
Initial penetration	Penetration	Passes or dribbles towards the opponent's goal past opponent player(s) performed in the first 3sec of the ball possession (González-Rodenas et al., 2015).
	No penetration	Any technical action towards any direction that does not past opponent player(s) performed in the first 3sec of the ball possession (González-Rodenas et al., 2015).
Outcome of attack	Goal	The team scored a goal.
	Scoring opportunity	The team made a shot or a header on/off target without scoring a goal.
Match location	No scoring opportunity	The team had no chance to score a goal.
	Home	
	Away	

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Table 1. The Categories of Analysis and their Respective Parameters

Categories	Parameters	Operational definitions of the parameters
Quality of opposition	2nd-7th	The teams that finished 2nd-7th in the league standings.
	8th-14th	The teams that finished 8th-14th in the league standings.
	15th-20th	The teams that finished 15th-20th in the league standings.
Zone of ball recovery (Figure 1)	RDZ	Right defensive zone.
	CDZ	Central defensive zone.
	LDZ	Left defensive zone.
	RCDZ	Right centre-defensive zone.
	CCDZ	Central centre-defensive zone.
	LCDZ	Left centre-defensive zone.
	RCOZ	Right centre-offensive zone.
	CCOZ	Central centre-offensive zone.
	LCOZ	Left centre-offensive zone.
	ROZ	Right offensive zone.
COZ	Central offensive zone.	
LOZ	Left offensive zone.	
Type of ball recovery	BR1	Ball possession recovered by any means other than from a player of the same team with the ball in play after a pass or a wrong control of the ball (Aranda et al., 2019).
	BR2	During restart, the tactical situation of the opposite team is not prepared to try to shot at goal or to cross the ball in penalty box in 1-2 passes and that's why tries to pass the ball forward in order to attack (Aranda et al., 2019).
	BR3	During the set-play (corner, foul or penalty), the tactical situation of the opposite team is not prepared to try to shot at goal or to cross the ball in penalty box in 1-2 passes (Aranda et al., 2019).
	BR4	All ball recoveries that came after actions of attackers (wrong control of the ball, wrong dribbling, wrong pass, wrong dribble etc) and led to the ball being recovered by the analyzed team (Gómez et al., 2012).
Initial opponent number	1-3 players	
	4-5 players	
	6 players	
	7+ players	
Players in possession	0-3 players	
	4-5 players	
	6+ players	
Type of attack	Combinative attack	In combinative attack the number of passes were ≥ 4 (Papadopoulos et al., 2021) and usually > 7 . The team aims to maintain the ball possession, until the right opportunity to attack is found and its duration depends on the number of players participating in it. (≥ 11 sec and usually > 20 sec). Combinative attack ends with a shot or a header, when a goal is scored, when ball possession is lost and when for any reason the game is interrupted.
	Direct attack	Team tries to pass the ball fast towards the opponent's goal with a long pass. Through long pass, the ball move forward ≥ 20 m, while usually ≤ 40 m (Fernández-Navarro et al., 2018). Direct attack ends with a shot, with a goal, when ball possession is lost and when for any reason the game is interrupted.
	Fast attack	In fast attack the circulation of the ball is performed in width and depth with short and quick passes (maximum of 7) with a maximum duration of 18sec and the players with a direct participation in attack are 6 in maximum (Sarmiento et al., 2018). A fast attack ends with a shot, with a goal, when ball possession is lost and when for any reason the game is interrupted.
	Counter-attack	Counter-attack starts by winning the ball in play and progresses by either utilizing or attempting to utilize a degree of imbalance from start to the end of the attack. During the ball possession could be used passes in depth (and long passes), while the circulation of the ball takes place more in depth than in width. Moreover, number of passes is small (≤ 5) and a quick offensive transition (usually with duration ≤ 12 sec) from the zone where the ball is recovered to the finishing zone. The number of players intervening directly on the ball were usually ≤ 4 (Sarmiento et al., 2018). A counter-attack ends with a shot, with a goal, when ball possession is lost and when for any reason the game is interrupted.
	Very short attack	The attack that the ball possession starts by winning the ball in play or restarting the game and the duration of the team possession is too short to allow the observer to categorize it in the other types of attack (Aranda et al., 2019). Very short attacks have duration ≤ 10 sec and end with a shot, with a goal, when ball possession is lost and when for any reason the game is interrupted.

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Table 1. The Categories of Analysis and their Respective Parameters

Categories	Parameters	Operational definitions of the parameters
Duration of attack	Very short	Attacks that lasted 0-4sec.
	Short	Attacks that lasted 5-10sec.
	Long	Attacks that lasted 11-20sec.
	Very long	Attacks that lasted 21+sec.
Time frame of attack	0:01-15:00	
	15:01-30:00	
	30:01-45:00	
	First half added time	
	45:01-60:00	
	60:01-75:00	
Match status	75:01-90:00	
	Second half added time	
	Winning	Barcelona was winning.
	Drawing	Barcelona was drawing.
	Losing	Barcelona was losing.

The observation of the matches and the collection of the data was done using the SportScout analysis software. The recording of the phases started when Barcelona regained possession of the ball and ended when a goal was scored or when the game was stopped for any reason (e.g., offside).

The observation protocol was created with the assistance of a professional high level football coach. The validity and reliability of the data were checked using the intra-observation agreement, with which both the coach and the observer recorded (separately) 60 random offensive transitions, in ac-

cordance with the observation protocol already formatted for the needs of the present study. From Cohen's Kappa value, it appeared that the parameters were recorded correctly by the observer ($k=1.000$ for all indicators). Then, to check the stability regarding the correct recording of the phases, another 60 phases were observed, but this time only by the observer. After a week, the same observation was repeated where Cohen's Kappa value was high ($k=1.000$), which confirmed that the observer was consistent in recorded the phases (Papadopoulos et al., 2021).

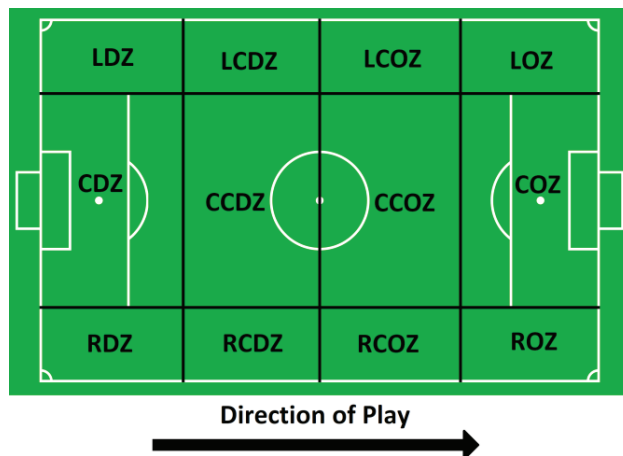


FIGURE 1. Field zone and the zones of ball recovery.

Legend: LDZ – Left Defensive Zone, CDZ – Central Defensive Zone, RDZ – Right Defensive Zone, LCDZ – Left Centre-Defensive Zone, CCDZ – Central Centre-Defensive Zone, RCDZ – Right Centre-Defensive Zone, LCOZ – Left Centre-Offensive Zone, CCOZ – Central Centre-Offensive Zone, RCOZ – Right Centre-Offensive Zone, LOZ – Left Offensive Zone, COZ – Central Offensive Zone, ROZ – Right Offensive Zone.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical analysis software. The type of analysis used was the Crosstabs analysis and the criterion of the Chi-square test significance value $p < 0.05$. In case even one expected price was < 5 (cases where the conditions of statistical analysis were not met), then Fisher's exact test value was used. The purpose of the above analysis was to check whether the frequency of occurrence of the parameters observed for the offensive transitions depended on the initial penetration.

Results

According to the results (Table 2), a significant effect of the initial penetration was observed in all parameters, except the zone of ball recovery (Fisher=17.900, $p > 0.05$) and the quality of opposition (Chi-square(2)=4.724, $p > 0.05$). In addition, the findings show that the offensive transitions that ended in a goal and there was penetration, were almost four times those that did not have penetration (4.5% against 1.2%).

Also, Table 2 shows that regardless of match location,

Table 2. The Percentages of Offensive Transitions based on Initial Penetration.

Categories	Parameters	Penetration	No penetration	
Outcome of attack (p<0.001)	Goal	4.5%	1.2%	
	Scoring opportunity	19.5%	8.8%	
	No scoring opportunity	76%	90%	
Match location (p<0.05)	Home	58%	52.1%	
	Away	42%	47.9%	
Quality of opposition (p>0.05)	2nd-7th	33.8%	28.4%	
	8th-14th	33.6%	38.5%	
	15th-20th	32.6%	33.1%	
Zone of ball-recovery (p>0.05)	RDZ	3.3%	5.7%	
	CDZ	33.2%	32%	
	LDZ	4.8%	5.4%	
	RCDZ	5.6%	5.4%	
	CCDZ	21.8%	23.4%	
	LCDZ	5.5%	6.8%	
	RCOZ	4.5%	4.7%	
	CCOZ	13.4%	11.8%	
	LCOZ	3.3%	2.9%	
	ROZ	1.2%	0.2%	
Type of ball recovery (p<0.05)	COZ	2.8%	0.7%	
	LOZ	0.6%	1%	
	BR1	53.7%	50.8%	
	BR2	4.8%	7.3%	
	BR3	4%	1.8%	
	BR4	37.5%	40.1%	
	Initial opponent number (p<0.001)	0-3 players	7.8%	0%
		4-5 players	25%	3.6%
6 players		14.6%	11.2%	
7+ players		52.6%	85.2%	
Players in possession (p<0.001)	1-3 players	55.5%	17.9%	
	4-5 players	29%	33.3%	
	6+ players	15.5%	48.8%	
Type of attack (p<0.001)	Combinative attack	15.7%	60.8%	
	Direct attack	8.8%	6.6%	
	Fast attack	22%	11.1%	
	Counter-attack	21.5%	0%	
	Very short attack	32%	21.5%	
Duration of attack (p<0.001)	Very short	13.4%	2.3%	
	Short	45.1%	22.9%	
	Long	28.4%	31%	
	Very long	13.1%	43.8%	
Time frame of attack (p<0.01)	0:01-15:00	13.4%	17.9%	
	15:01-30:00	16.9%	19%	
	30:01-45:00	13.9%	14.7%	
	First half added time	1.3%	1%	
	45:01-60:00	18.2%	16.6%	
	60:01-75:00	12.6%	14.8%	
	75:01-90:00	17.7%	14%	
Match status (p<0.001)	Second half added time	6%	2%	
	Winning	48.1%	36.1%	
	Drawing	42.5%	52.5%	
	Losing	9.4%	11.4%	

Barcelona achieved penetration more often, but this phenomenon was more intense at home matches (58% against 52.1%). Respectively, the most common type of ball recovery was the BR1, whether there was penetration (53.7%), or not (50.8%).

Furthermore, it turns out that in most offensive transitions where there was penetration, the players in possession were 1-3 players (55.5%), while in those with no penetration players in possession were 6+ (48.8%). Respectively in both cases,

the most frequent initial opponent number that appeared was 7+players (penetration: 52.6% & no penetration: 85.2%), but there were significantly more phases with penetration that the number was 4-5 (25% against 3.6%) or 1-3 (7.8% against 0%).

Regarding the type of attack, it was found that when there was penetration, the very short attacks appeared more often (32%), while when there was no penetration, the combinative attacks occurred (60.8%). Additionally, the duration of attack

was usually short (5-10sec) when the offensive transitions had penetration (45.1%) and very long (21+sec) when they had no penetration (43.8%).

According to Table 2, it is clear that Barcelona achieved penetration more often in the second half (54.5% against 45.5%) and more specifically in the time frame of 45:01-60:00 (18.2%). At the same time, it seems that Barcelona had more offensive transitions with no penetration in the first half (52.6% against 47.4%) and specifically in 15:01-30:00 (19%).

Finally, showed the most offensive transitions with penetration when it was winning (48.1%) and the most with no penetration when it was drawing (52.5%), while similar were the percentages of offensive transitions that took place while Barcelona was behind in score (penetration: 9.4% and no penetration: 11.4%).

Discussion

In recent years there has been an increase in researches, which are dealing with defensive (Vogelbein, Nopp, & Hökelmann, 2014; Freitas, Volossovitch, & Almeida, 2020) and offensive transitions (Malta & Travassos, 2014; Lago-Peñas, Gómez-Ruano, & Yang, 2017). At the same time, Hewitt, Greenham, & Norton (2016) consider transitions to be key moments of play, while according to Fernandez-Navarro, Ruiz-Ruiz, Zubillaga, & Fradua (2020) the attacking tactical parameters have been widely studied in football.

However, offensive transitions haven't been extensively investigated in terms of their attacking tactical characteristics. Therefore, the present study is of particular interest, since as it was mentioned before, its purpose was to analyze the effect of initial penetration on the tactical elements of Barcelona's offensive transitions during the season 2018-19.

Regarding the quality of opposition, in this research was found that the largest percentage of offensive transitions took place against medium (8th-14th) and high (2nd-7th) quality teams. In particular, when there was penetration, the highest percentages of transitions occurred against high and medium quality teams, while when there was no penetration, towards medium quality teams. Respectively, González-Rodenas et al. (2020) observed that more than half of the attacks of the sample occurred versus medium quality teams.

The same authors (González-Rodenas et al., 2020) also noted that most of their sample attacks took place in home games. Respectively, in the present study it was found that regardless of whether there was penetration or not, the largest percentage of offensive transitions took place in home matches, with the differences observed, however, being statistically significant.

In the research of Maneiro et al. (2019), it was observed that the majority of offensive transitions made by Europe's top national teams took place in the first half hour of the games (2008: 33.4% and 2016: 34.3%). Similar percentages were found for Barcelona when offensive transitions had no penetration. On the contrary, when Barcelona's offensive transitions had penetration, the highest percentages were observed in the second half and specifically in the intervals of 45:01-60:00 and 75:01-90:00.

In the present study, the 605 offensive transitions had penetration and the rest 559 had no penetration. The findings of López Bondia et al. (2017) are similar to those of the present article, which report that in 51% of Barcelona's phases that were observed, there was penetration and in 49% there was not.

In addition, the same research states that 57.3% of

Barcelona's phases took place after the ball was recovered with the ball in play (BR1). Respectively, in the present study similar results were found when there was penetration (53.7%) and when there was no penetration (50.8%).

According to Cooper & Pulling (2020) the Spanish teams included in their sample more often regained the ball possession in the defensive and in the centre-defensive zone. A similar behavior was shown by Barcelona, which more often started its offensive transitions from the defensive and centre-defensive zone, whether its transitions had penetration, or hadn o penetration.

The data show that in the most offensive transitions the number of defenders was 7+ players. However, the percentage discrepancy between the transitions in which there was penetration and those that there wasn't penetration was large, while the differences observed were statistically significant. Respectively, in the study of Gonzalez-Rodenas, Lopez-Bondia, Calabuig, James, & Aranda (2015) it was found that in 76.6% of the offensive transitions of the Spanish national team the number of defenders was 7+. In addition, the findings of Gonzalez-Rodenas et al. (2015) can help to understand Barcelona's attacking game better, since according to Chassy (2013) the national team of Spain has widely used the Barcelona's famous passing game.

In the study of Lago-Ballesteros, Lago-Peñas & Rey (2012) 908 ball possessions from 12 La Liga matches were analyzed and it was observed that in most phases 1-3 players participated. At the same time, in the same research it was noted that in 31% of the phases in which 1-3 players participated, the ball reached the penalty box area of the opponents. Respectively, in the present study it was found that when there was penetration, the largest percentage of offensive transitions was that of 1-3 players participated, while when there was no penetration, then the largest percentage was that of 6+ players participated.

Regarding the parameter duration of attack, the findings show that when there was penetration then the majority of Barcelona's offensive transitions were of short duration. Similar was the percentage of offensive transitions of short duration of the Spanish national team in the study of Gonzalez-Rodenas et al. (2015).

According to the Table 2 Barcelona had almost three times as many goals and more than twice as many goal scoring opportunities when the offensive transitions had penetration. In the research of González-Rodenas et al., (2019) a similar variation was found in terms of percentages. More specifically, it was found that 7% of the attacks of the Spanish teams ended up to a goal or a scoring opportunity when there was no penetration, while this percentage more than doubled when there was penetration (14.6%).

In the same research it was observed that the most common type of attack was the combinative attack (35.5%) and the fast attack (34.4%). However, in the present study, large differences were identified in the type of attack based on the initial penetration. More specifically, in most of the offensive transitions that had no penetration, the type of attack used was the combinative attack while when there was penetration, then the very short attack appeared more often.

Although Barcelona is one of the best teams in Europe, analyzing only their own matches could be a limitation of the present study. But as mentioned it is considered as a team, popular for effective play and can be an example for teams of the same or lower level. Future research could analyze Barcelona's

matches of the last three years, for the reason that they are not the first team in the final ranking of the Spanish league. In this way, it will be studied whether the change in the final ranking (from first to second and third place) is due to the different coaching philosophy of the team or to the departure of important players from this team.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research show that the tactical parameter of initial penetration significantly influenced the tactical characteristics of Barcelona's offensive transitions. Additionally, in the past it has been observed that this specific parameter and the type of attack play an important role, concerning the creation of goal scoring opportunities

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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(González-Rodenaset al., 2019). Therefore, these parameters should be taken into account by coaches and analysts when analyzing football matches.

Finally, the results of the present study are particularly important, as there are many teams around the world that try to apply several elements of Barcelona's playstyle to their game. This phenomenon is probably due to the fact that this is a team that determines the tactics around football, something that is likely to happen due to the very popular and very effective attacking play that it uses most of the time. The attacking game in question was assimilated by Barcelona, during the period when Pep Guardiola was the team's manager (head coach in period 2008-2012) and is still widely used to this day (Bekkers & Dabadghao, 2019).

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