

STARTING WITH REAL MADRID

Chapter 9: Give Real Madrid a major operation

The history of football tactics is a saga of relentless evolution, where new waves constantly crash against and supersede the old.

Old innovators eventually became mainstream and were replaced by a new wave of innovators, promoting the continuous development of football tactics.

At the turn of the century, many fans will remember the madness of the Bundesliga, Florentino's Galácticos, Manchester United's Treble, and the afterglow of Serie A's World Cup success.

However, few fans remember a small, less conspicuous team that reached the Champions League final for two consecutive seasons.

Although they ultimately lost to giants and became synonymous with tragic near-misses, this team was undoubtedly the most impressive at the turn of the century and played a crucial role as a tactical innovator in European football.

This team was Valencia from La Liga.

From Italian coach Ranieri, who brought the Italian defensive framework to the team, to Argentine coach Héctor Cúper, who took Valencia's achievements further.

Many fans remember Cúper for his time at Inter Milan, especially his feud with Ronaldo.

Conservative, stubborn, and impersonal—these are the stereotypes most fans have of Cúper.

Even when Gao Shen searched for Cúper online before, a picture of an old-fashioned man with white hair, black-framed glasses, and a stubborn expression always came up, deepening this perception for future generations.

But in reality, whether coaching Real Mallorca or Valencia, Cúper was a genuine tactical innovator.

On the foundation laid by Ranieri, he created a 4-4-2 diamond midfield formation for Valencia, which greatly influenced the tactical development of European football.

Cúper's style not only helped Valencia reach the Champions League final for two consecutive seasons but also cultivated a group of outstanding players, such as Gerard and Mendieta.

This approach won him the favor of Inter Milan president Moratti, leading to his eventual feud with Ronaldo.

So, was Cúper's tactical innovation merely an adjustment of player positions?

To ordinary fans, it might seem so, but in reality, it was a revolution in tactical concepts. It represented a significant step forward in European football from the original man-marking tactics to the zonal defense concept outlined by Sacchi.

In the past, football tactics emphasized the possession of the ball and marking opponents, but now a third element had been added: space.

In possession, the aim was to expand space as much as possible, move the opponent's defense, and create more offensive opportunities; in defense, it was about compressing space, maintaining a tight defensive formation, and reducing the exposure of one's own space.

As a single defensive midfielder, Gerard thrived under Cúper's system and was highly regarded by Barcelona, leading to his expensive transfer. However, he struggled at Camp Nou.

Mendieta also moved to Lazio later, experiencing great discomfort, and his career plummeted.

This was definitely not a coincidence.

If Cúper led the tactical revolution in Europe while coaching Valencia, then his successor, Benítez, took these innovations a step further, making them a consensus across Europe and the world.

4-2-3-1, double pivot, high pressing!

Benítez recognized that a single defensive midfielder in the 4-4-2 diamond was insufficient to protect the space between the back line's flanks. With many European players like Zidane and Nedvěd excelling at attacking these areas, he removed a striker and adopted a double pivot. After Valencia sold Gerard, he introduced Baraja and promoted Albelda, forming one of the most classic double pivot combinations in European football over the past decade.

With four lines, the control of space reached new heights. They could attack up front and defend in depth. Benítez used this style to lead Valencia to the La Liga title and Liverpool to the Champions League miracle in Istanbul.

Even in 2007, Liverpool would reach the Champions League final again.

The 4-2-3-1 system was very advanced at the time.

From the perspective of 2006, the 4-3-3 formation used by Chelsea's coach, Jose Mourinho, is very advanced, but it places high demands on players and is not suitable for most teams. Typically, only strong teams can employ it effectively. On the other hand, the 4-2-3-1 formation is different; its universality is very strong.

At the very least, the current Real Madrid cannot play a 4-3-3.

Real Madrid once tried to play with a double pivot in midfield.

Florentino Pérez brought in Makelele, Flavio, and Celades in one go—three defensive midfielders who had performed very well in La Liga. Later, players like Gravesen and Pablo Garcia were brought in, all famous in their own right. However, Real Madrid's defense remained poor. Why?

The answer is simple: superstars.

So, why do superstars have such a significant impact on Real Madrid's tactics?

Is it just because the superstars aren't actively involved in defense?

Yes, but that's not the whole story.

It is now 2006, and the World Cup in Germany is approaching.

Many fans may wonder: why did Zidane perform so well in the World Cup in Germany but not as well in Real Madrid?

Did he deliberately hold back at the club?

Only Zidane knows for sure if he held back. However, Zidane played a completely different role at Real Madrid compared to the French national team.

In the World Cup in Germany, France adopted a 4-2-3-1 formation with Makelele and Vieira as the defensive midfielders. Zidane played as an attacking midfielder rather than on the left side of the front line.

The 4-2-3-1 formation is very balanced, especially in terms of maximizing the role of the attacking midfielder. Zidane thrived in this tactical system and did not need to worry about defending because he had two defensive midfielders behind him.

It can be said that this system allowed Zidane to fully utilize his strengths.

Could Real Madrid employ this formation?

Comparing France's World Cup lineup to Real Madrid's, the striker would be Ronaldo versus Henry, the left side Raul versus Malouda, and the right side Robinho versus Ribery. It doesn't seem unfeasible, right?

Even in midfield, Gravessen is a well-known Premier League player, Pablo Garcia is renowned in La Liga, and Beckham is an excellent long passer. It's worth a try.

Then why didn't Real Madrid try it?

The answer is still simple: the superstars!

Firstly, Ronaldo's range and abilities are not what they used to be, and he can't provide the same threat as Henry. Secondly, Roberto Carlos loves to attack and is best at overlapping on the wing. Everyone knows that for Carlos to be effective, the front line needs to leave space for him.

The problem arises when Carlos moves forward; the players on the left side of the front line shift inward, encroaching on the attacking midfielder's space. If this were the only issue, it might be manageable. However, when Carlos's forward runs don't result in successful attacks and the opponents counterattack, Real Madrid struggles to organize an effective defensive system.

Real Madrid still employs the old zonal marking approach, focusing more on individual player performance rather than a cohesive team defense. Because Carlos can't always return to his defensive position, and because superstars like Ronaldo, Zidane, and Robinho are not actively defending, the system fails.

If one or two players fail to track back, the team might compensate. But when multiple front-line players don't defend, how can the team compensate?

Thus, Real Madrid's defense has been riddled with holes for years. Even with changes in defenders and multiple purchases of defensive midfielders, there's been no improvement.

The defensive system remains unchanged, the overall tactical concept remains unchanged, and swapping players is futile.

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Gao Shen is acutely aware of the problems Real Madrid is facing now.

Before, as a fan, he only knew the problem was with the superstars but didn't understand why.

Now, he has a better understanding and is ready to address it.

He chose to study Benitez's series of books, focusing on Benitez's tactics and team formation, especially the improvements he made at Valencia and the transformations he executed at Liverpool. These were very valuable for Gao Shen.

After spending nights in the library studying these cases, although there were still many things he didn't fully grasp, his understanding of tactics had reached a new level, and he could see Real Madrid's current problems more clearly.

Real Madrid is in a dire state.

This situation can no longer be remedied with minor adjustments; it requires major surgery.

Especially in defense, the entire defensive system must be overhauled.

Without innovating the defensive system, introducing more superstars will be useless.

From Samuel to Woodgate, and the next potential acquisition of world-class player Cannavaro, even hiring the conservative Italian coach Capello, who improved Real Madrid's defense and won the league championship, stability was still an issue.

Capello's success at Real Madrid was due to his use of a double pivot.

This is exactly what Gao Shen intends to do.

Real Madrid's issue has never been the attack but the defense.

Or rather, how to better organize the defense while maintaining offensive threats.

Real Madrid is not short of good players. Gravesen, for example, was the core of Everton's midfield. While many think of him as a reckless player, he actually possesses strong passing and playmaking skills.

Pablo Garcia is also a well-known player in La Liga. His ability to catch Real Madrid's eye is a testament to his strength.

Gao Shen's task now is to formulate suitable tactics to integrate these players into a cohesive unit.

The 4-2-3-1 is the tactic Gao Shen wants. He believes it is the most suitable formation for Real Madrid at the moment.

Although this will sacrifice some attacking power, it will provide a solid defense, making Real Madrid more competitive.

Moreover, since Gao Shen has decided to clash with the superstars led by the Brazilian contingent, the team's offense will be affected anyway. It's better to proactively weaken the offense and strengthen the defense.

After deciding on the tactics, the next step is to select the lineup.

