

BOX MIDFIELD BUILD UP

Tactical Analysis

Break Lines vs High Press Zonal Defending

Build up play
patterns from
Guardiola,
Alonso, and
Arteta's teams



Box Midfield Build Up Play Principles and Objectives

Build Up Play from the Back

Build up play refers to progressing the ball from the defensive third against organised pressing. This book focuses on build up starting from the goalkeeper, typically against a high defensive block.

Different types of defending tactics influence how teams build up play, as do defensive formations which shift based on pressing intensity, requiring teams to adapt accordingly.

Please see the earlier section in the book for full details (***Build Up Play Factors: Essential Skills and Opposition Pressing Tactics***).

Principles of Build Up Play

Effective build up play relies on key principles to ensure controlled progression and attacking fluidity:

- **Numerical Superiority:** Creating overloads in key areas to maintain possession and break through pressing.
- **Effective Positioning:** Players must position themselves between opposition lines to create passing lanes.
- **Decision Making and Awareness:** Recognising space, anticipating defensive movements, and executing quick passing decisions.
- **Ball Circulation and Patience:** Moving the ball efficiently to wait for the right moment to penetrate defensive lines.
- **Support and Movement:** Off-the-ball adjustments to maintain passing options and avoid being isolated.

Objectives of Build Up Play

Main Objective: Break defensive lines, advance play, and create goal scoring opportunities.

To achieve this, teams must:

- **Beat the Press:** Find free players or use link players to progress play through or around pressing lines.
- **Exploit Space:** Use intelligent positioning and quick ball movement to take advantage of defensive gaps.
- **Ensure Defensive Stability:** Maintain balance at the back to best prepare for potential counter attacks.
- **Transition Efficiently:** Once past the first or second defensive lines, capitalise on attacking opportunities.

Note: By applying these principles, teams using a box midfield can successfully play through high pressing opponents, ensuring control and structured progression.

Options for Breaking the First and Second Pressing Lines (3 at Back)

1. Effective Positioning with 3-at-the-Back Box Midfield



With the 3-at-the-back box midfield, 4 of the 6 spaces between the opposition's lines are occupied.

See page 30 for full details of how this build up shape is formed from the 4-2-3-1 formation (it can also be from 3-4-2-1).

To break as many lines as possible, the **goalkeeper (GK)** must play accurate passes, which **relies on effective positioning from the 4 midfielders**.

The longer and more precise the pass, the more defensive lines are bypassed, which neutralises more opponents. Unlike with 2-at-the-back, the 3-at-the-back shape has **GK between the 2 red forwards (Nº9 and Nº10)**, allowing him to move forward with the ball and reduce the passing distance to the target players. This increases the likelihood of an accurate forward pass, making it easier to progress play while maintaining control.

Drawing Press with a Pass and Exploit Gaps Created (3 at Back)

1. Draw Pressure from Midfielder to Create Space Behind Second Pressing Line for Right Attacking Midfielder to Receive



With 3-at-the-back, the **goalkeeper (GK)** is positioned between 2 pressing forwards and can play through the first line easier. As the potential receiver usually has their back to goal, the **through pass typically draws pressure**. This can be on purpose and is guided with these principles:

- A. Quick read of the situation and where the available space is.
- B. Move the ball into this space as quickly as possible.

GK plays a through pass to N°8. As red N°8 moves to press, space opens up behind for blue N°10 to receive behind.

Option 1 (Yellow Arrows): N°8 passes back to GK, then to centre back (N°4), who finds N°10 before the opposition shifts.

Option 2 (Blue Arrows): A quicker but riskier option is for N°8 to pass to N°6, who then finds N°10.

BOX MIDFIELD SESSION

Training Session 1 (4 Practices)

Break Lines vs High Press Zonal Defending

Based on
Guardiola,
Alonso, and
Arteta build up
patterns



PROGRESSION

2. Moving the Ball Beyond the Lines Based on Defender Reactions 7 (+GK) v 2 Functional Practice

Variation 1: Receive + Turn When Not Pressed (3-at-Back-Box Midfield)



Practice Description (Variation 1)

- The blues have the goalkeeper, 2 centre backs, the box midfielder, and the forward.
- The reds have 2 central midfielders and the mannequins form the rest of the defensive formation.
- GK** starts and circulates the ball with the **centre backs (N°5 and N°4)** before passing to a **defensive midfielder (N°6 in diagram)** behind the first pressing line, who must scan before receiving.
- If the nearest **red midfielder (N°6)** holds their position (**Variation 1**), **blue N°6 receives on the half-turn** and passes forward.
- Nearby teammates quickly offer passing options to progress the attack, ideally forming a triangle or diamond shape.
- In this example, the **forward (N°9)** plays a give-and-go with the **attacking midfielder (N°10)** to receive in behind the defensive line and score.

Variation 2: Exploit Space Behind Press (3-at-Back-Box Midfield)



Practice Description (Variation 2)

- In **Variation 2**, the red midfielder presses blue N°6 as soon as the goalkeeper plays the pass. This means turning is not a good option as in Variation 1.
- N°6 must make a **quick decision whether to pass to the other defensive midfielder (N°8), back to the GK, or possibly back to a centre back.**
- Quick ball circulation is used to **exploit the space behind red N°6 and move the ball to the blue attacking midfielder (N°10)** behind the second pressing line. **Option 1** (yellow arrows) uses N°8 as the link player. **Option 2** uses N°4 as the link player.

- N°10 plays in behind for the **forward (N°9)** to score.
- Note: Adapt for a 2-at-the-back box midfield** by positioning the GK wider and N°5 more central.

Coaching Points

1. **Recognise pressing early** and decide quickly whether to turn or pass.
2. **Communicate clearly** using prompts like "turn" or "pass."
3. **Move the ball quickly** to exploit space behind the press.
4. **Use sharp combinations** to break through pressing lines.

Beat any Press with 80+ Tactical Patterns & 47 Practices from Guardiola, Alonso, and Arteta Tactics



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