



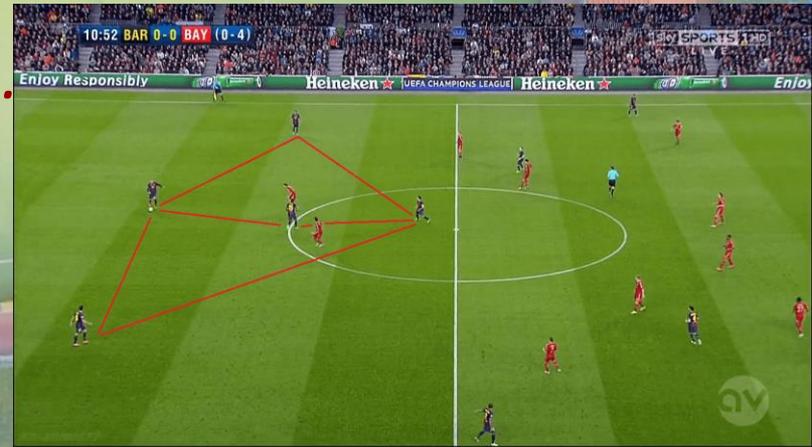
Positional Play

Principles and Explanation
By Filipe Teles

Positional Play

Before we get into more details and start explaining concepts behind positional play, it's important to clarify and give a brief overview about it, since there's lots of misunderstanding and misconceptions.

*The most common misconception is confusing **Positional Play** with **Possession Play**. Although you can use both, they are not obligated to be used together. Saying this, we can play possession without using positional principles, and using positional play don't obligate you to play possession. (we'll talk more about your options later).*



Positional Play

It's a game idea to *simplify the complexity of the game, using a relationship between positions, spaces and time.*

Offensively, the objectives are to maintain possession, progress up the pitch, and ultimately score a goal. Defensively, a team wants to regain possession, negate any opposing progress up the field, and deny any goal scoring opportunities.

Usually associate with Possession of the ball - *that is used as a tool, but not as a main goal* - pretend to **promote relationships between players, their positions, spaces** (according with the moments of the game), **creating/exploration of the superiorities** (such as numerical, qualitative, positional, social-affection and kinetic) in a tactical and technical common language inside the team.

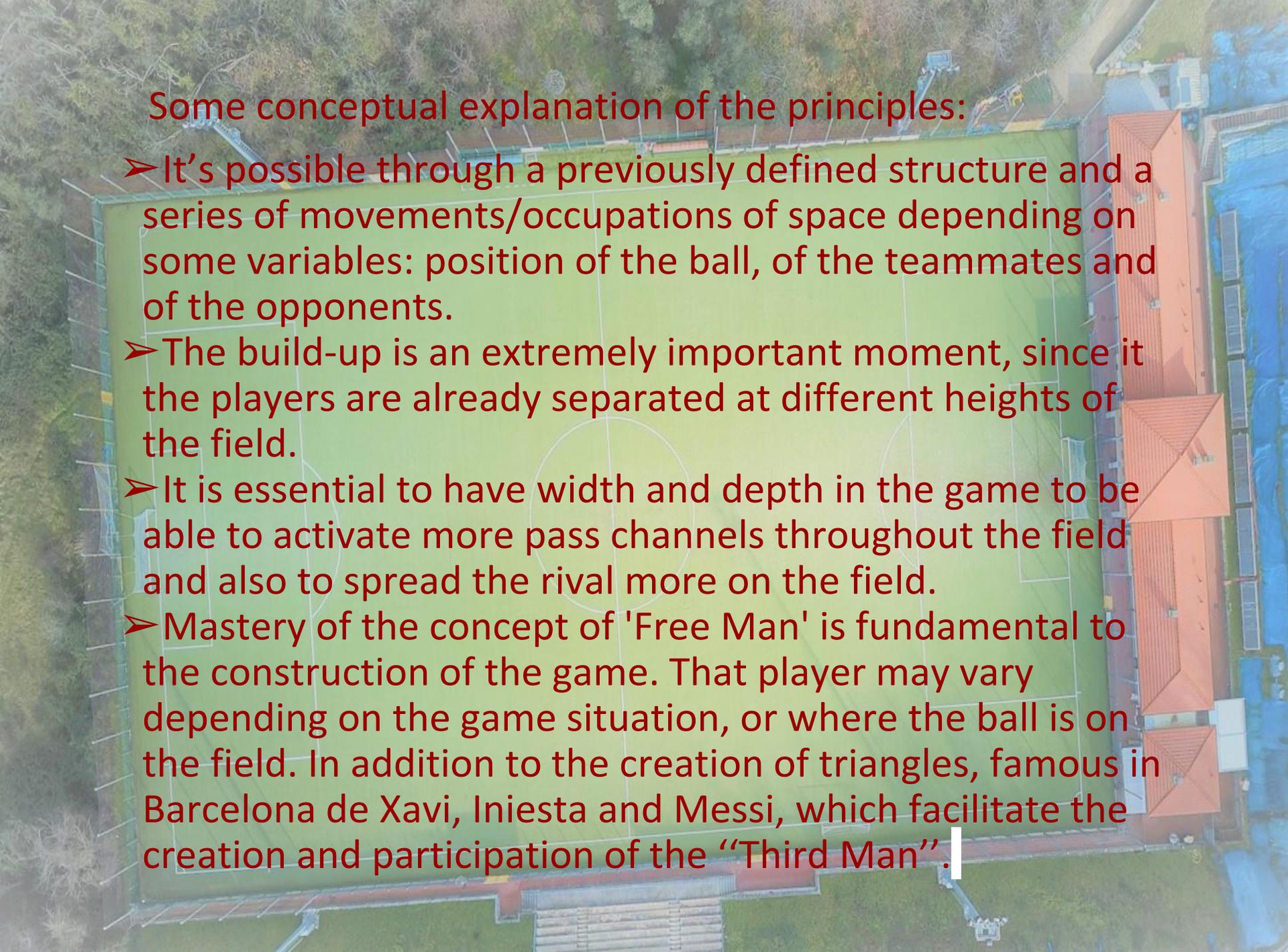
We'll take later about the superiorities, but now we'll explain more about the principles.





Credit to Sky Sports Retro

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRk3wVJp8gl>

An aerial photograph of a soccer field with a red text overlay. The field is green with white markings. To the right, there are several buildings with red roofs. The text is in a dark red color and is positioned over the field and buildings.

Some conceptual explanation of the principles:

- It's possible through a previously defined structure and a series of movements/occupations of space depending on some variables: position of the ball, of the teammates and of the opponents.
- The build-up is an extremely important moment, since it the players are already separated at different heights of the field.
- It is essential to have width and depth in the game to be able to activate more pass channels throughout the field and also to spread the rival more on the field.
- Mastery of the concept of 'Free Man' is fundamental to the construction of the game. That player may vary depending on the game situation, or where the ball is on the field. In addition to the creation of triangles, famous in Barcelona de Xavi, Iniesta and Messi, which facilitate the creation and participation of the "Third Man".

Principles of Positional Play

An aerial photograph of a soccer field with white markings on a green surface. The field is surrounded by a fence and trees on the left and top. To the right, there are buildings with red roofs and a blue pool. The text 'Principles of Positional Play' is overlaid in red at the top. A list of five principles is overlaid on the left side of the field in red text.

➤ Management of Space-Time

➤ Travel together

➤ Look down the field

➤ Find the Free-Man

➤ Ball goes to position, and not position goes to the ball.

Space-Time



<https://youtu.be/q61aaEnpYMg>
Credit to MindFootballness on the video

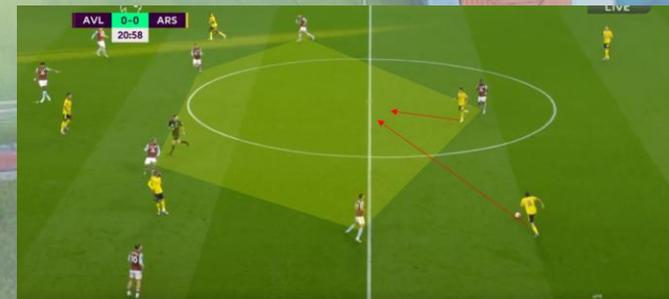
Space-Time

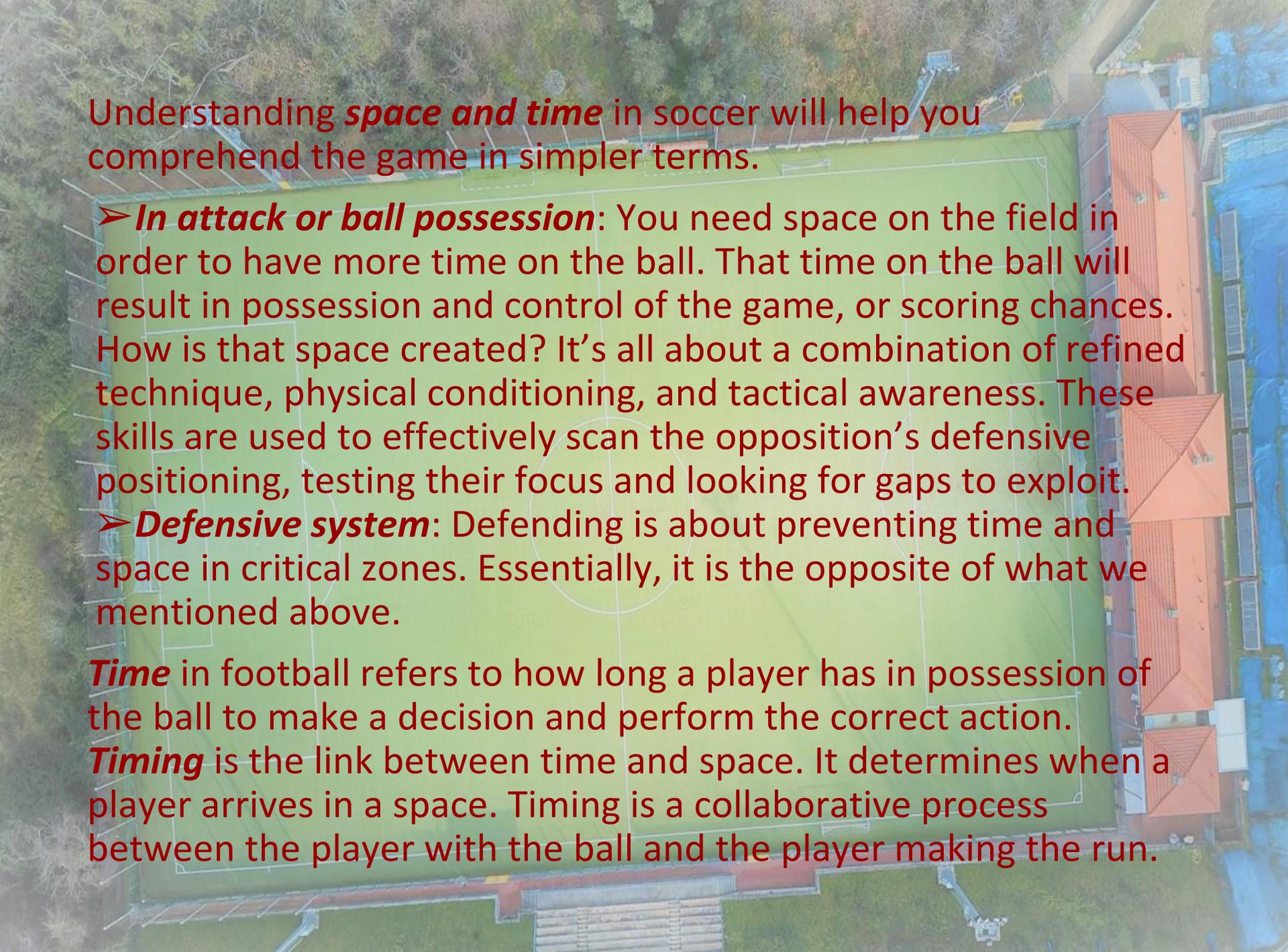
It's a correlation between Space and Time.

The purpose of all technical and tactical principles in soccer is to identify and create space to increase time when we attack and conversely, to identify and deny space to decrease time when we defend.

Space in football can be identified by determining the position of the ball, other players (opponents and teammates) and unoccupied areas of the pitch based on four parameters: width, depth, opposition defensive lines and offside line.

Time in football refers to how long a player has in possession of the ball to make a decision and perform the correct action. Obviously, more space equals more time, and more time equals more and better decisions.



An aerial photograph of a soccer field with a red semi-transparent overlay. The field is green with white markings. To the right, there are several buildings with red roofs and a swimming pool. The text is overlaid on the field and buildings.

Understanding **space and time** in soccer will help you comprehend the game in simpler terms.

- ***In attack or ball possession:*** You need space on the field in order to have more time on the ball. That time on the ball will result in possession and control of the game, or scoring chances. How is that space created? It's all about a combination of refined technique, physical conditioning, and tactical awareness. These skills are used to effectively scan the opposition's defensive positioning, testing their focus and looking for gaps to exploit.
- ***Defensive system:*** Defending is about preventing time and space in critical zones. Essentially, it is the opposite of what we mentioned above.

Time in football refers to how long a player has in possession of the ball to make a decision and perform the correct action.

Timing is the link between time and space. It determines when a player arrives in a space. Timing is a collaborative process between the player with the ball and the player making the run.

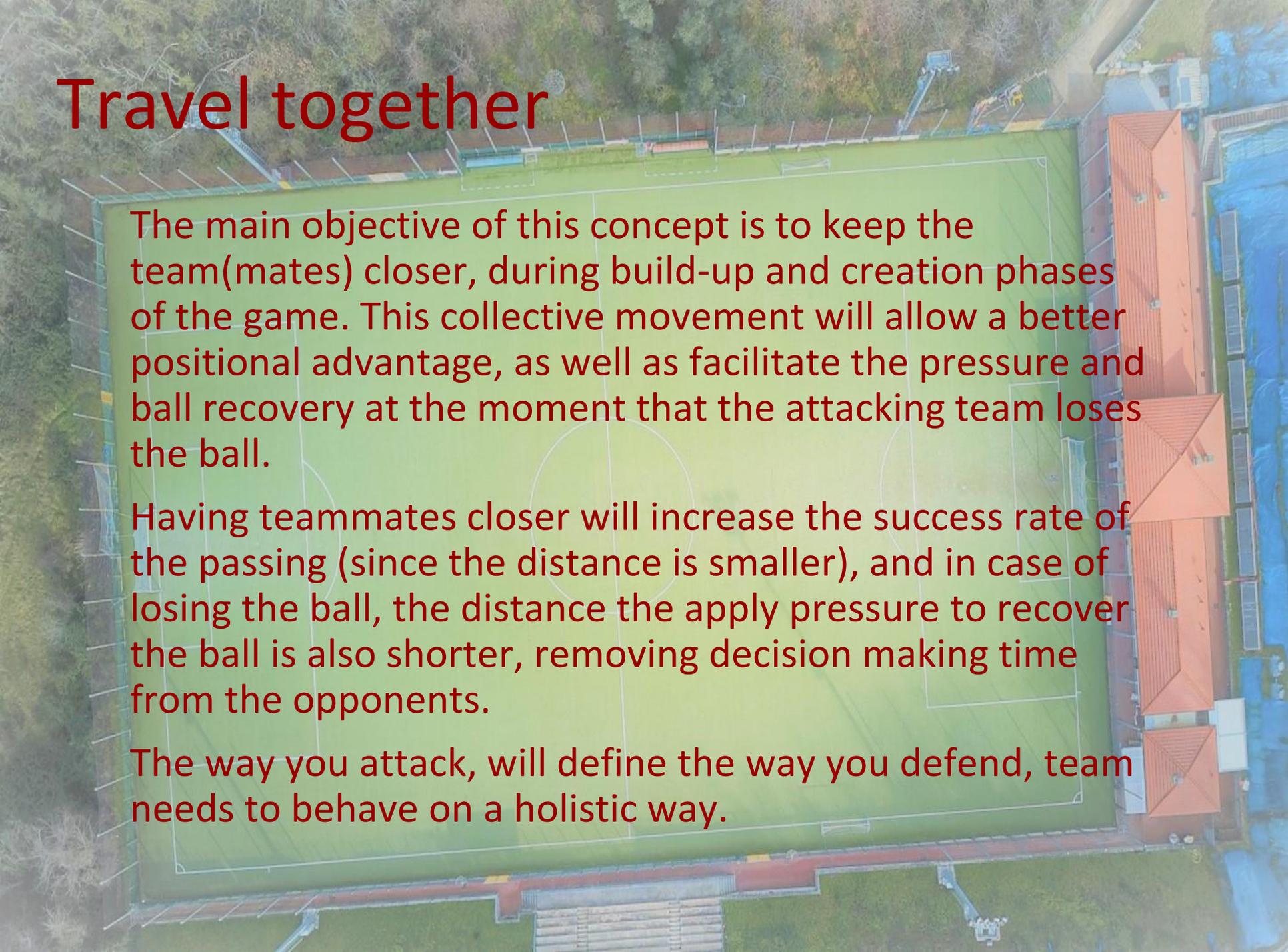


ATTACKING STRATEGY

The objective of an attacking strategy is to create space and time in which to open scoring opportunities

Credit from the video to Freaks of Football
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9xlyfP17Mw>

Travel together

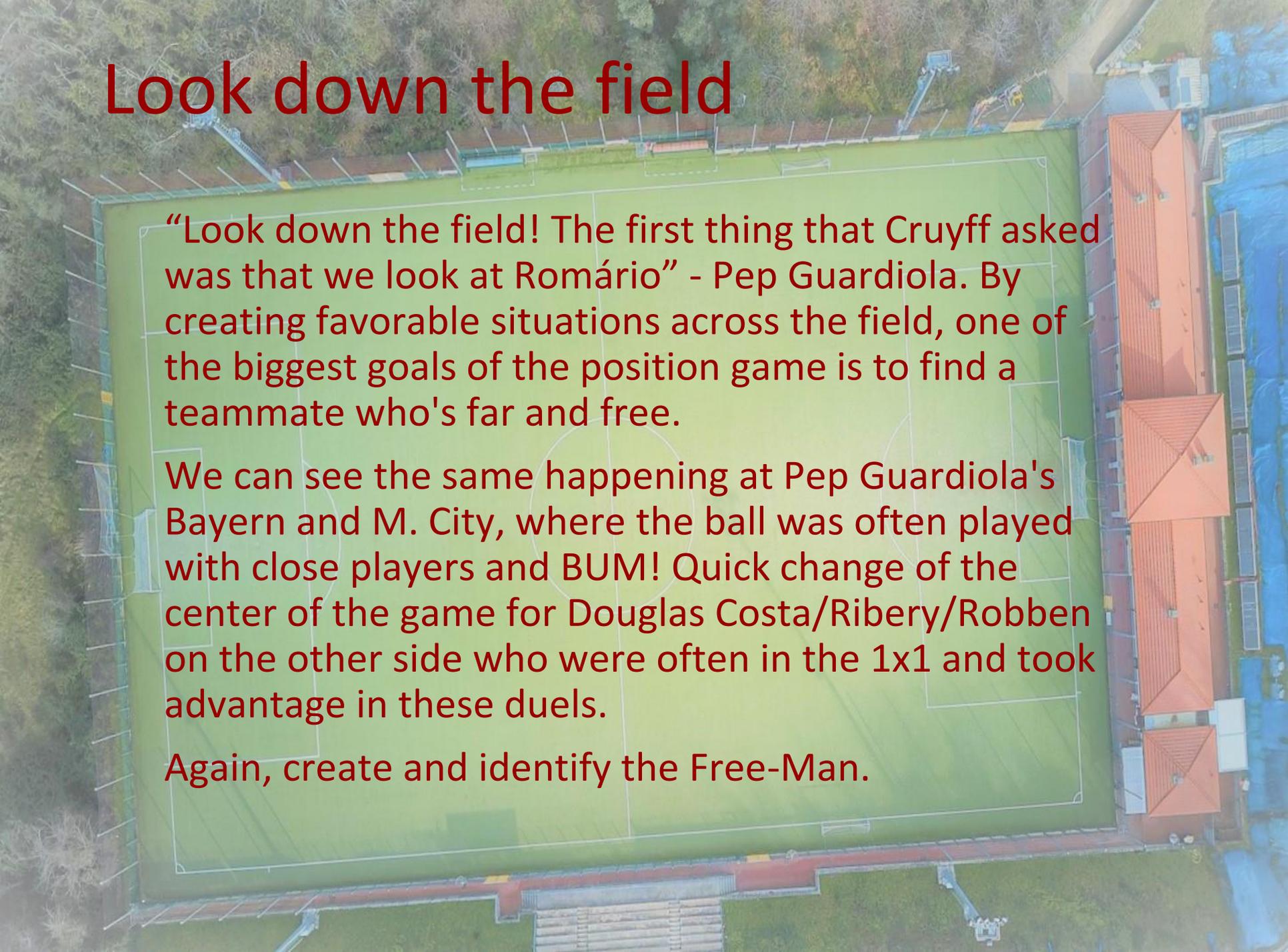
An aerial photograph of a soccer field with a green artificial turf. The field is surrounded by a fence and has a red building with a red roof on the right side. The text is overlaid on the field in a dark red color.

The main objective of this concept is to keep the team(mates) closer, during build-up and creation phases of the game. This collective movement will allow a better positional advantage, as well as facilitate the pressure and ball recovery at the moment that the attacking team loses the ball.

Having teammates closer will increase the success rate of the passing (since the distance is smaller), and in case of losing the ball, the distance the apply pressure to recover the ball is also shorter, removing decision making time from the opponents.

The way you attack, will define the way you defend, team needs to behave on a holistic way.

Look down the field

An aerial photograph of a soccer field, viewed from above. The field is green with white markings. To the right of the field, there are several buildings with red roofs. The text is overlaid on the field in a dark red color.

“Look down the field! The first thing that Cruyff asked was that we look at Romário” - Pep Guardiola. By creating favorable situations across the field, one of the biggest goals of the position game is to find a teammate who's far and free.

We can see the same happening at Pep Guardiola's Bayern and M. City, where the ball was often played with close players and BUM! Quick change of the center of the game for Douglas Costa/Ribery/Robben on the other side who were often in the 1x1 and took advantage in these duels.

Again, create and identify the Free-Man.



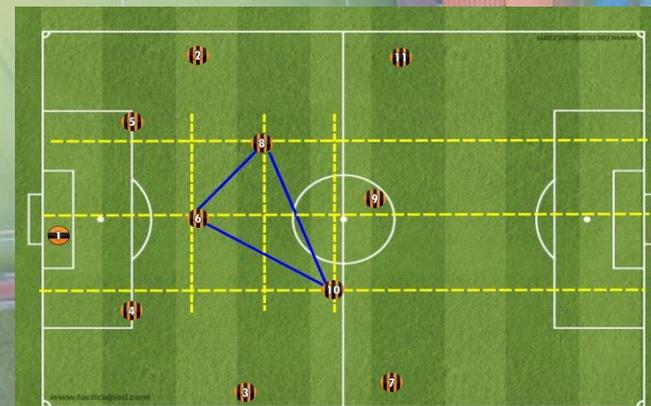
But if there is the space, then play there. Use it.

Credit from the video to Sławomir Morawski

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCn5adDu7qpf01DHHQdbtdQ3w>

Free-Man

Mastery of the concept of 'Free Man' is fundamental to the construction of the game, this player can vary depending on the game situation, or where the ball is on the field. The Free Man is simply a player who is unmarked and has the space, time and capacity to advance the ball up the field. Third Man concept, although the actual action is rather simple, the concept is one of the most important (and hard to defend) yet undervalued tools for teams find the Free-Man. Understanding the game and good decision-making (to know when to pass the ball and/or when to dribble), dribbling can be a great tool to free teammates from marking rivals and creating superiority.



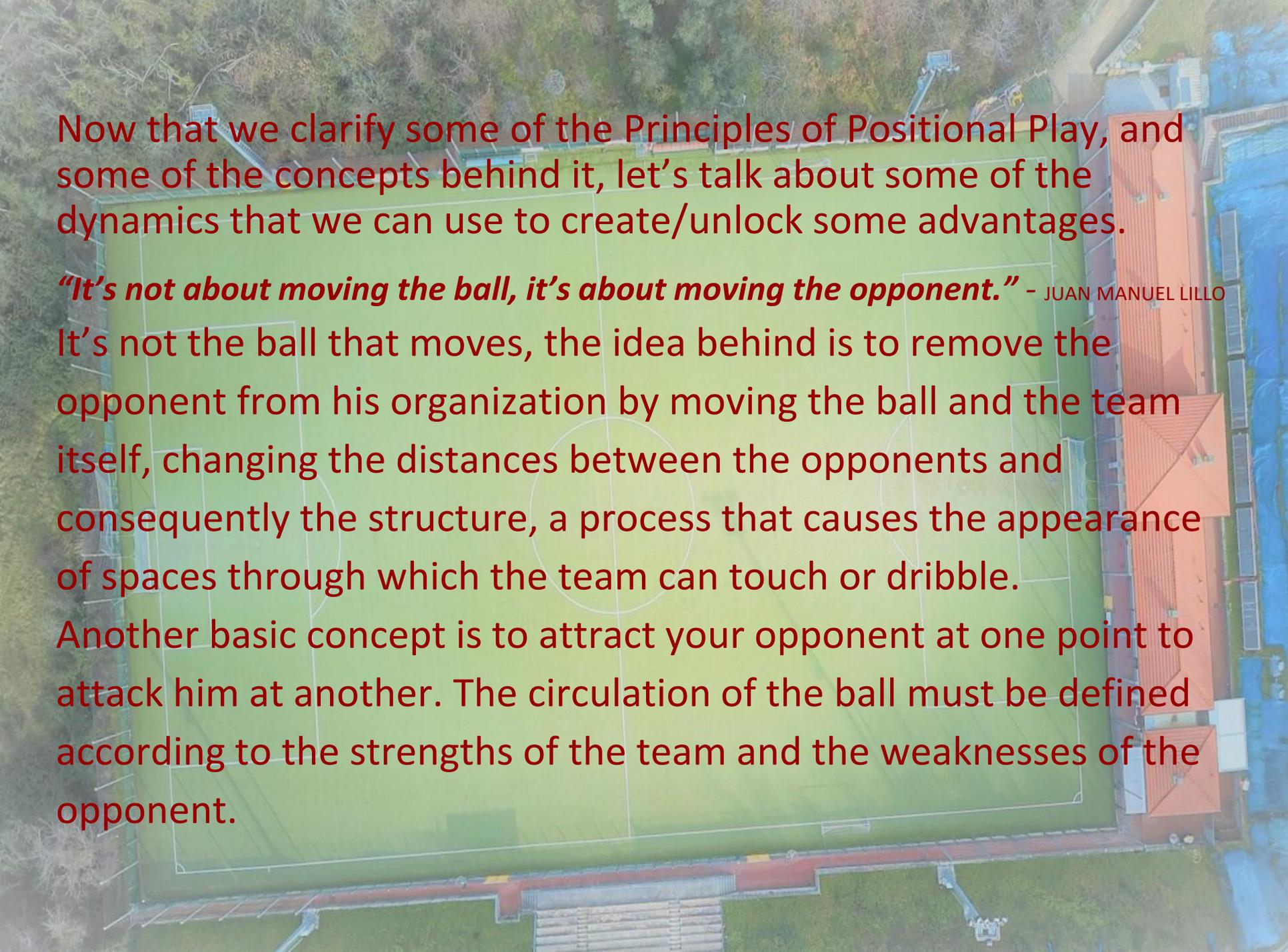
Ball goes to position, and not position goes to the ball

Juanma Lillo quote is used to describe the importance of the extruture in Positional Play system. It's crucial to understand that the current position influences the structure and behavior of the entire team, even if it is not directly acting in the situation. As Paco Seiru.lo said, the so-called "phase spaces". We can divide it into three large different groups: the players on the ball, the players off the ball (but closer) and players far from the ball.

Players on the ball: dribble the ball to attract rivals, make passes to the closest teammates or hold the ball if there is no option.

Players off the ball (but closer to the center of the game): present themselves as a pass line, preferably behind the rival's pressure line, continue after receiving the ball.

Players far from the ball: keeps the rival busy, increases the width and/or depth of the team, offers a sharp pass line.

An aerial photograph of a soccer field with a red text overlay. The field is green with white markings. To the right, there are several buildings with red roofs. The text is in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

Now that we clarify some of the Principles of Positional Play, and some of the concepts behind it, let's talk about some of the dynamics that we can use to create/unlock some advantages.

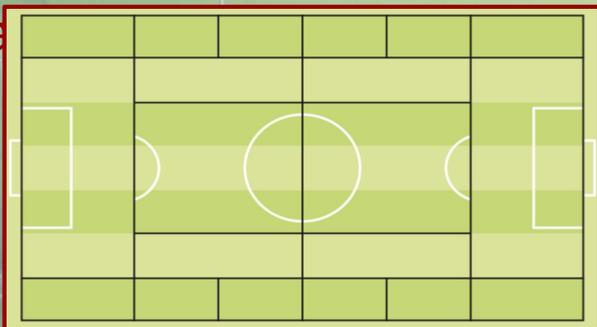
"It's not about moving the ball, it's about moving the opponent." - JUAN MANUEL LILLO

It's not the ball that moves, the idea behind is to remove the opponent from his organization by moving the ball and the team itself, changing the distances between the opponents and consequently the structure, a process that causes the appearance of spaces through which the team can touch or dribble.

Another basic concept is to attract your opponent at one point to attack him at another. The circulation of the ball must be defined according to the strengths of the team and the weaknesses of the opponent.

Players need to be in the right position but also with the right body profile/orientation. This body orientation is very important to receive a pass, as well as the angles he has and his distance from teammates and opponents. In other words, the player may be well positioned, but poorly orientated what will not give him/team advantages to play forward.

It's necessary to mention that the instructions and structure of the team will depend on the coach, his philosophy and various factors. These are just explanations for a better understanding of this vision of soccer that is becoming increasingly popular around the world. One of the most common ways to train or start introducing concepts of the "Position Play" is through the training of the **rondo**. The "Game of Position" is a way of seeing soccer that seeks to enhance the offensive streak, the interactions between players, the understanding / execution of the player in the game through a structure and the use of the ball as a tool. The final/main goal will always be the most important



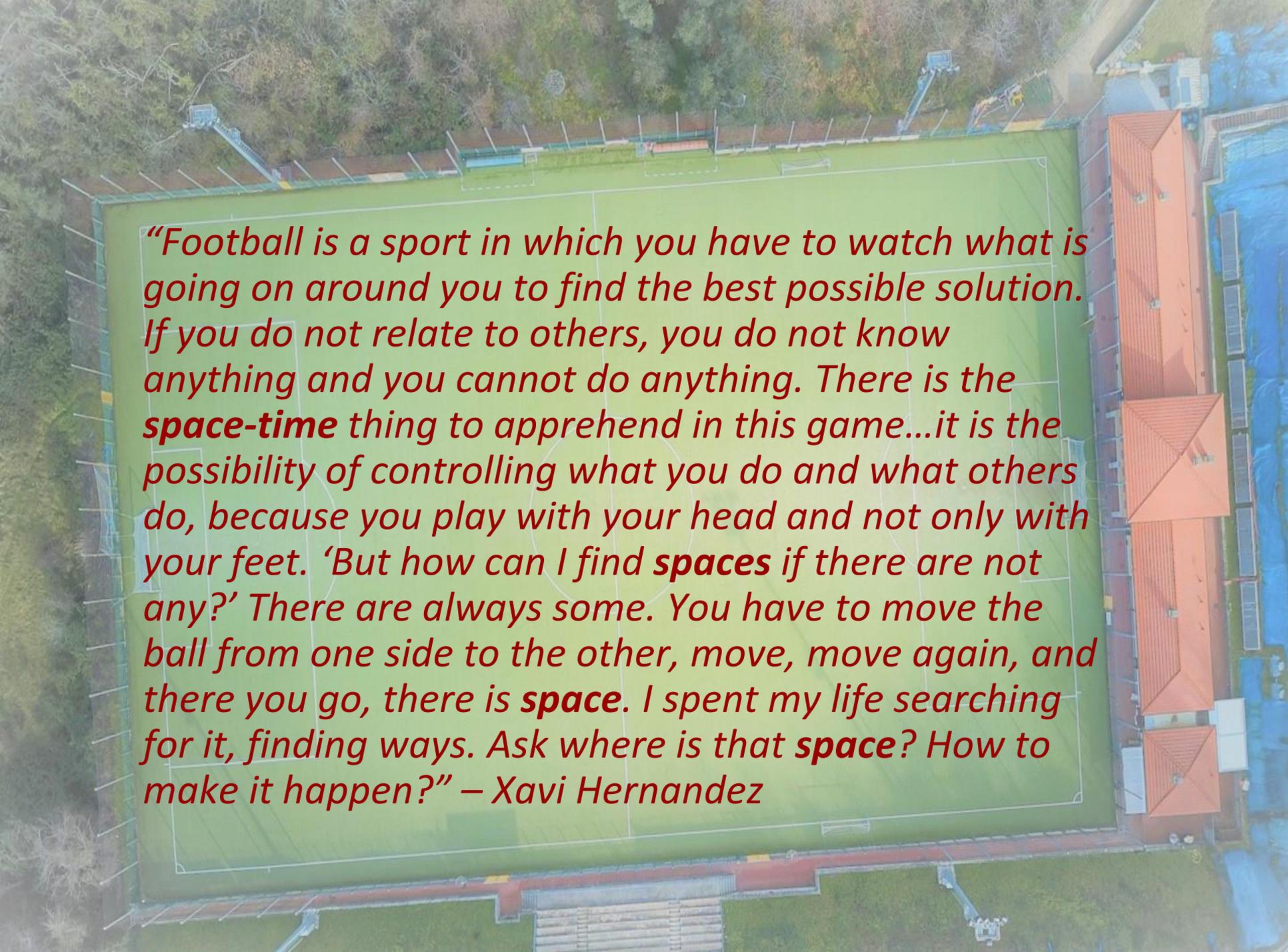
Bayern Munich's field, under Pep Guardiola, marking to train Half-Spaces





www.keepitonthehack.com

Credit from the video to Keepitonthehack
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGlo3A4X1CU>

An aerial photograph of a football stadium. The central feature is a large, rectangular green football pitch with white markings. To the right of the pitch are several long, narrow stands with bright orange roofs. The stadium is surrounded by a fence and some trees are visible in the background. The text is overlaid on the pitch area.

*“Football is a sport in which you have to watch what is going on around you to find the best possible solution. If you do not relate to others, you do not know anything and you cannot do anything. There is the **space-time** thing to apprehend in this game...it is the possibility of controlling what you do and what others do, because you play with your head and not only with your feet. ‘But how can I find **spaces** if there are not any?’ There are always some. You have to move the ball from one side to the other, move, move again, and there you go, there is **space**. I spent my life searching for it, finding ways. Ask where is that **space**? How to make it happen?” – Xavi Hernandez*

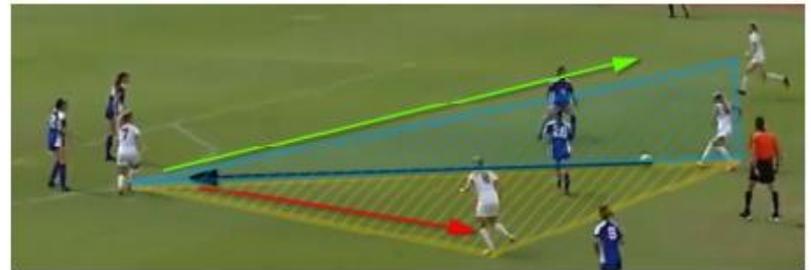
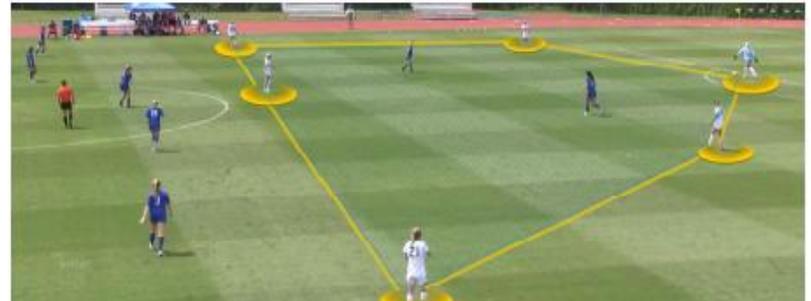
The search of *Superiorities*

Now we'll look try to describe the types of superiorities that we try to create. There's 5 types of superiorities: numerical, positional, and qualitative, dynamic (kinesthetic) and socio-affective are the fruit of positional play, and ultimately will be expressed collectively in matches.

- ***Quantitative (Numerical)***
- ***Qualitative (Better Player vs. Worse)***
- ***Positional (Space)***
- ***Dynamic (Speed)***
- ***Socio-Affective (Relationships)***

Quantitative/Numerical Superiority

- Most common type of superiority that happens in games
- More players than the opposition in an area of the field
- Examples: 2v1, 3v2, 4v2 etc.
- Training examples?
- What does the width of our CB's and FB do to the press?



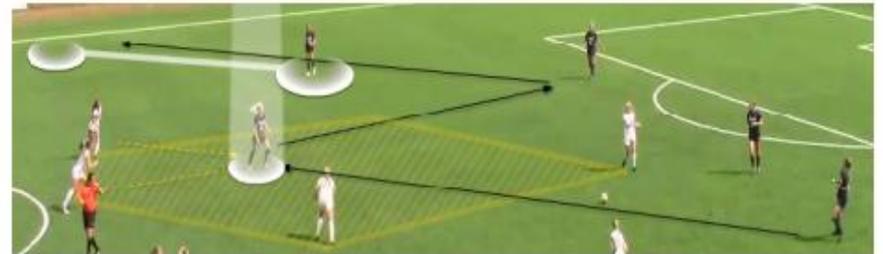
Qualitative Superiority

- Creating 1v1/2v2 scenarios where our player(s) is better than the opponent
- Must be patient in creating this (more often than not)
- Should be looking to create this as much as possible until opponents are forced to change
- What are ways to create qualitative superiority?



Positional Superiority

- Most powerful superiority that we can create in the game
- Positional Superiority is when we are positioned in such a way that:
 - a. Destabilizes the opponent
 - b. Affects the opponent
 - c. Allows our team to connect passes (circulating or penetrating the ball)
- Biggest type of Positional Superiority is a player positioned between lines (behind the line of pressure).
- Positional Superiority can be many different forms



Dynamic Superiority

- An action of momentum that is greater than the opposition
 - A through ball to a player running at speed vs. a defender who's flat footed or body square
 - A cross to a player who has a running start/jump against a player that is stood still/flat footed
 - A one-two/third man run

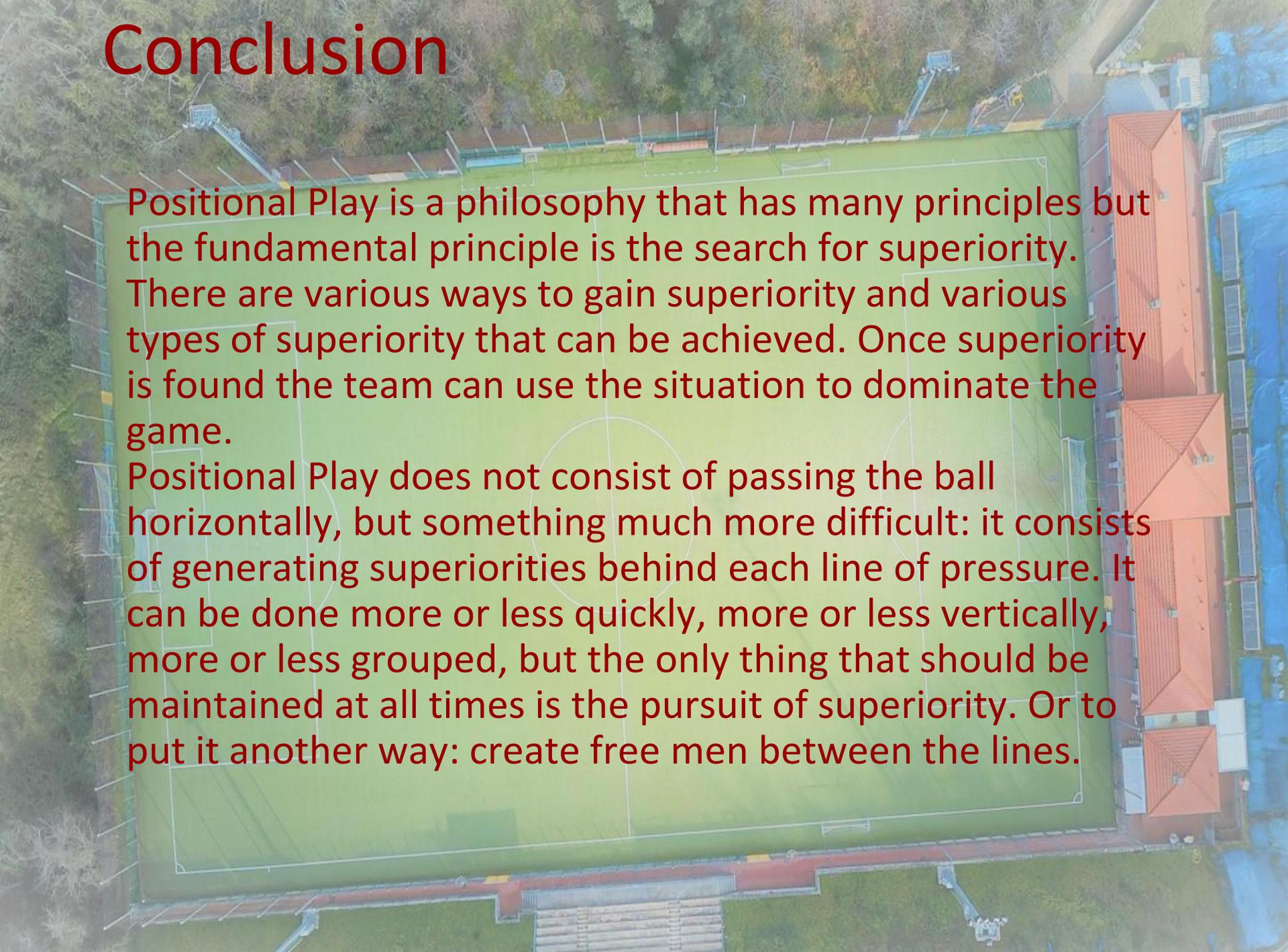


Socio-Afectiva Superiority

- This superiority seeks to optimise relationships
- Seeking to get partnerships on the ball, or into an area of space:
 - Fullbacks and Wingers
 - 2 CF's
 - Attacking Midfielders
 - Attacking Midfielders/CF
- The understanding/connections of how each other player together, and what they expect from each other

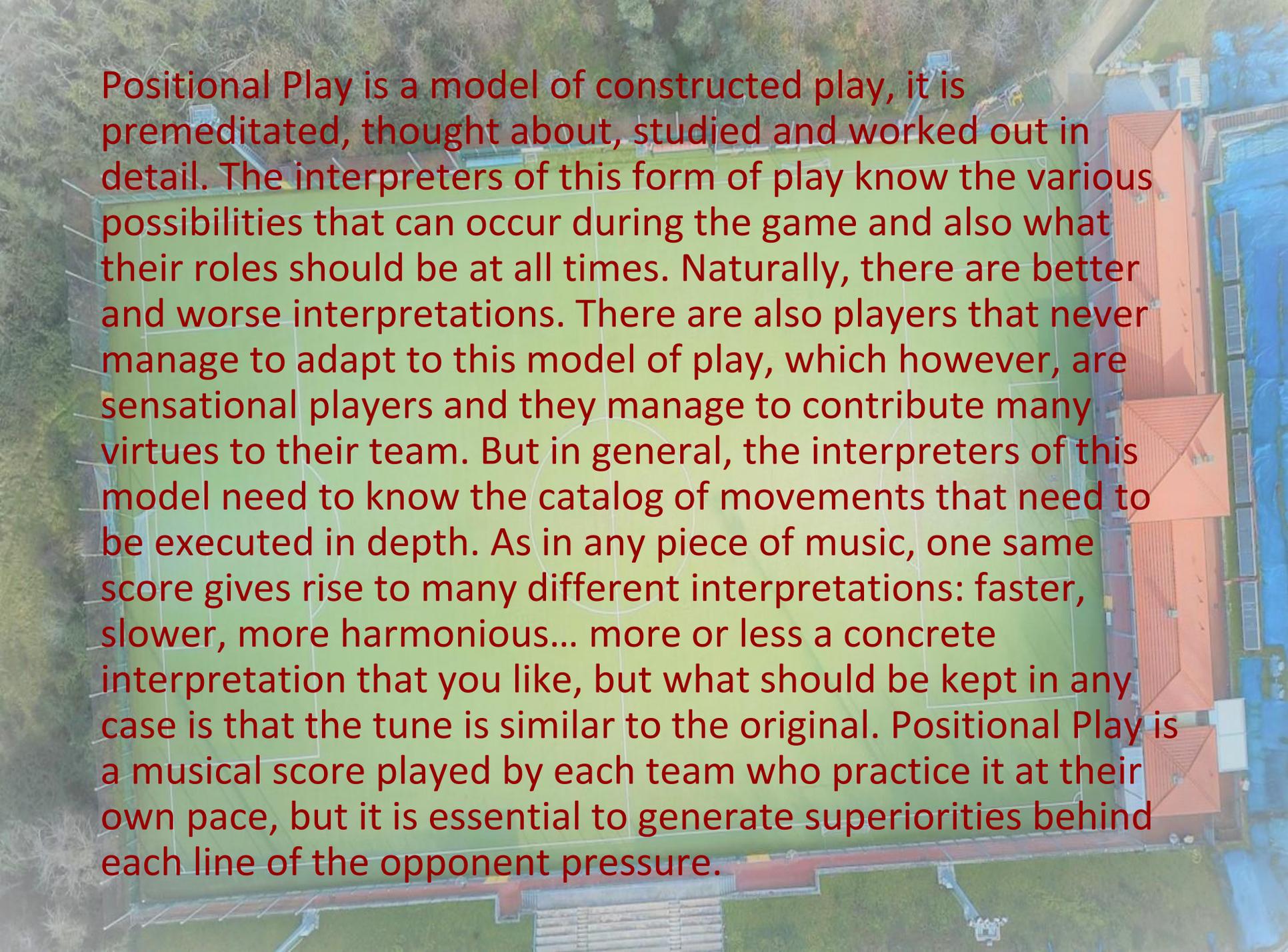


Conclusion

An aerial photograph of a soccer field with a red text overlay. The field is green with white markings. To the right of the field is a building with a red roof. The text is in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

Positional Play is a philosophy that has many principles but the fundamental principle is the search for superiority. There are various ways to gain superiority and various types of superiority that can be achieved. Once superiority is found the team can use the situation to dominate the game.

Positional Play does not consist of passing the ball horizontally, but something much more difficult: it consists of generating superiorities behind each line of pressure. It can be done more or less quickly, more or less vertically, more or less grouped, but the only thing that should be maintained at all times is the pursuit of superiority. Or to put it another way: create free men between the lines.

An aerial photograph of a soccer field with a red text overlay. The field is green with white markings, and there are buildings and trees visible in the background. The text is written in a bold, red, sans-serif font and covers most of the image.

Positional Play is a model of constructed play, it is premeditated, thought about, studied and worked out in detail. The interpreters of this form of play know the various possibilities that can occur during the game and also what their roles should be at all times. Naturally, there are better and worse interpretations. There are also players that never manage to adapt to this model of play, which however, are sensational players and they manage to contribute many virtues to their team. But in general, the interpreters of this model need to know the catalog of movements that need to be executed in depth. As in any piece of music, one same score gives rise to many different interpretations: faster, slower, more harmonious... more or less a concrete interpretation that you like, but what should be kept in any case is that the tune is similar to the original. Positional Play is a musical score played by each team who practice it at their own pace, but it is essential to generate superiorities behind each line of the opponent pressure.

Summary:

- Create **Superiority** behind the opposition lines of pressure
- Possession is a tool used to **create advantages, disrupt the opponent, attract pressure, and create superiorities** in specific areas of the field
- **Overload** one side to switch to the other
- **Free Man** concept and **3rd Man** concept
- **Width and Depth** to create superiorities
- Every **pass** has a **purpose**
- **Dribbling** to attract pressure or to allow runs in behind
- Through circulation and penetration, the **team travels together**
- Positioning of players on different "**heights**" and manage distance and angles, between players to create passing lanes
- Attacking is first and foremost but it dictates how we defend - **pressing** & distances between players



Credit from the video to Finalthrd
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXKLrIzY4G4>



Thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed.

Follow my page on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#)
Feel free to share and like.

<https://www.facebook.com/FilipeTelesCoach>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/filipe-teles-56a442101/>



References:

Footballbh.net
esdfanalysis.com
Spielverlagerung.de
breakingthelines.com