

Chapter Three

Creation Meets Destruction



IN the middle of the field, the game pulls the same player in different directions. On the one hand, a team must score goals to win. Thus, midfielders, known as *mediocampistas* or *volantes*, will sometimes rush forward to try and create a scoring chance. On the other hand, a team cannot concede too many goals. Accordingly, midfielders also must patrol in front of defenders and sometimes their own goal. Yet space conspires against them. A player occupies a physical plane and can only exist in one part of the field at one time. The solution? Running. And lungs of steel.

Generally, a team will field either four or five *mediocampistas* at one time. Formations vary, but among those players, some patrol the *banda* [sideline] and others roam in the middle of the field. The players in the middle of the field are known as *centrocampistas*, *mediocentros/as*, or *volantes*. The players who roam out wide are known in English as a “wide midfielder” or “winger.” Multiple Spanish terms exist for wingers. One such word is *carrilero/a*. The name derives from the term *carril*, which means “lane.” The concept is simple: these players generally move vertically, from North to South, as if restricted to their plot of the field like a train to its tracks.

In other countries, wide midfielders also are known as *extremos/as*. Not surprisingly, *extremo/a* means “extreme” and refers to these players' wide position on either sideline. In terms of defense, *extremos/as* usually try to prevent the opposing team's defenders from effectively getting forward. If the defender ventures into the attack, a *carrilero/a* will shadow him or her. In regards to offense, the task is not so simple: the creation of goals. And it's different strokes for different folks.

Some *extremos/as* prefer the visually delightful art of dribbling. In the 1960's, Manchester United rose to success on the back of George Best, a wizard with the ball at his feet who had the peculiar habit of dribbling around, through, and between defenders. The Spanish term for a dribble move is *regate*. The corresponding verb is *regatear*. The contemporary master of the dribble is Argentine Lionel Messi, who dances, jukes, and bursts by stronger but stagnant defenders. Like redwoods rooted to the ground, they helplessly sway at the diminutive *extremo*.



While *regate* refers to the general art of dribbling, particular moves have embedded themselves in soccer fans' collective consciousness. In the late 1990's, Brazil produced a dazzling dribbling *delantero* by the name of Ronaldo. Nicknamed *el Fenómeno* [the phenomenon], Ronaldo was the master of the step-over. What is a step-over? Basically, he would roll the ball in front of him while approaching a defender, but dart his legs in front of the ball, one after the other. The unusual movement mesmerized defenders, while the moderate speed allowed him to change direction on a dime. It was a devastating combination. In Spanish, this move is known as *bicicletas* due to the legs' horizontal pedaling motion.

In the mid-2000's, another Brazilian stole the spotlight: Ronaldinho Gaucho. The buck-toothed winger guided Barcelona to numerous La Liga titles and a Champions League crown. Ronaldinho combined raw athleticism with elastic legs and quicksilver-fast feet. He also was the master of a distinct move: the *elástico*. Just as England defender John Terry failed to grapple with the *elástico* in the flesh, the English language has failed to adequately name this monstrosity of a move. Informally, some Americans refer to it as “the snake.” But what is an *elástico*? Usually while standing still, Ronaldinho would use his foot to push the ball in one direction, but then snap the same foot and ball in another direction. The *elástico* thus mimicked the smooth sideways movement of a snake, leaving the legs of mammalian defenders in a mess.

The self-pass ranks among the more audacious dribbling moves. Philosophically, the pass represents the best of human kind: one teammate willingly shares the ball with another. What could be nicer? To pass to one's self embodies selfishness beyond comprehension. In Spanish, the term is *autopase*. The term *auto* roughly translates to “self”, similar to automotive. An *autopase* usually requires more timing than foot-skills. A clever forward waits for an off-balanced defender to approach, and then slots the ball to one side of the defender and runs around the other. Unless, of course, that forward is Robinho of AC Milan and he pulls off a famed *sombrero*.



In Spanish, a *sombrero* literally means the thick-rimmed hats made popular in Mexican cowboy films. In soccer terms, *sombrero* refers to an aerial *autopase*. Basically, the forward flicks the ball over the defender's head and then steps around the defender. Sounds simple, but few players can pull it off. Brazilian midfielder Robinho wowed the Spanish press with a Real Madrid debut full of dazzling *sombreros*. His mastery of the ball and gravity was so complete that he left defenders kicking at air and pundits searching for synonyms for *sobresaliente* [oustanding]. Robinho has also pulled off a few *autopases* between a defender's legs, known in English as a “nutmeg” and in Spanish as *túnel*.

For all the *bicicletas*, *elásticos*, and *sombreros*, sometimes the most effective move is the simplest: a change in direction. When a forward makes a sharp change in direction, known in America as a “cut,” the verb is *enganchar*. The noun is *recorte*. When a player swivels his hips to turn directions, the relevant phrase is *darse la vuelta*. Johan Cruyff, a legendary Dutch soccer player from the 1970's, took turns to a new level and became famous for the now-named “Cruyff turn.” Basically, he would *amagar* [fake] a cross and then sharply turn his hips while tucking the ball behind his legs. Like the *bicicletas* of Ronaldo, the Cruyff turn now forms a ubiquitous part of a contemporary player's repertoire. Yet nobody quite pulls it off with the same elegance.

In the center of the field, foot-skills remain important but not essential. Why? The sheer mass of bodies in the middle renders reaction time short and dribbling options scarce. Instead, the desired skill-set consists of vision, anticipation, positioning, and passing. Central midfielders are commonly referred to as *volantes* or *mediocentros/as*. While all midfielders must contribute to both offense and defense, specialization exists. Some midfielders spend more time near the opposition goal and try to score goals, while others prefer to help the defense and *recuperar* [win back] the ball. Thus, central midfielders can be categorized as either *volantes de contención* or *volantes creativos/as*.

Contención means contention, and a *volante de contención* is a defensive midfielder. They break up the opposing team's offensive plays by winning tackles, intercepting passes, and committing fouls. A prime example is former Chelsea midfielder Claude Makelele. While diminutive in stature, the Frenchman's positional play put out fires before they would spread. He regularly intercepted passes by standing in the right place at the right time. Makelele won several English Premiership titles, and epitomized the diligent, duty oriented *volante de contención*.



Creativo/a not surprisingly means creative. Thus, a *volante creativo/a* refers to a creative or attacking midfielder. While a handful of English attacking midfielders, such as Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard, provide offensive spark by dribbling at defenders, most midfielders create by passing. In a game of twenty-two moving parts, a good *volante creativo/a*, such as now retired Zinedine Zidane, can keep a defense on its back heel with varied passes to different teammates. Another common term for an attacking midfielder is *armador/a*, because these players “arm” the offensive aspect of the team like a weapon. In South America, these players are also called *enganches* because they hold onto the ball while waiting for a teammate to make a run, literally “hooking” an advanced position in the opposition's territory.

From the *regateando* wide midfielders to the tough-as-nails *mediocentros/as defensivos/as*, midfielders run to cover acres of space with too many tasks and too little time. And too little credit.