



**Barcelona and Real Madrid squared up on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, 2010 for a mouth watering encounter and I was excited and ready to watch just like every soccer lover around the world. In the end, Barcelona produced an indisputably celebrated show of poise and fluidity that was a pleasure to watch. The sang-froid with which they passed and moved around a very good team like Real Madrid was in itself very puzzling. In the end that is what won the game for Barcelona. These passing patterns are a result of having played together for years.**

Now, this is how I saw it and, would like a conversation on what you saw.

When the line-ups were revealed I realized Jose Mourinho, with his 4-2-3-1 had Ronaldo and Di Maria on the wings and Benzema, in for Higuain, in the lone attacking position.

Pep Guardiola opted for Abidal with his normal 4-3-3 and left out Maxwell. Messi started in the center of the attack, Villa on the left and Pedro on the right.

## Real Madrid's forwards and Barcelona's Backs

Real started the game with their outside attackers on opposite sides than usual – Ronaldo on the right and Di Maria on the left. This was a tactical decision on Mourinho's part, because he thought Di Maria would be a better tracker of Alves' attacking forays than Ronaldo. First battle to Barcelona; now, Alves can throw caution to the wind and attack since Real's most dangerous player is playing in a position that he does his least damage.

Ronaldo is not foreign to this position after all he is a seven but lets face it, this man has been a monster coming from the left side this season. What puzzled me again – I was puzzled many times in this game – was why Mourinho didn't switch Ozil from the left of center to the right of center. He left Ozil in his normal position, and as we all know, Ozil was ineffective. Could it have been that the guy with whom he connects so well was way, way on the other side of the field, or did he just have an off day at the job?

Ronaldo did a good job of making Abidal stay at his defensive third but here were the two things that made it so wrong. First, the space between Ramos and Ronaldo was huge and Iniesta was able to exploit that space. Second, Puyol switched his position from right central defender to left central defender so he could be a reliable safety net for Abidal. Pep did not have confidence in Pique because just a while back Ronaldo had burnt him when Portugal played Spain. Needless to say Puyol did a fabulous job on double teaming Ronaldo. Even when Ronaldo finally switched positions, it was 1-0 by then, Puyol was always close by. Alves' moves up high overloaded the right side forcing Real's midfielders to shift toward their left thus getting confused on who had what responsibility and leaving the right side so thin that when there was a quick switch to Iniesta, he had time to pick-up a penetrating Xavi for the first goal. When the second goal was conceded by another quick switch and low cross, the game was already out of Madrid's reach.

## The battle in the middle third.

From the get go, Ozil was tracking Xavi but Messi had left his central attacking position and also overloaded the right side which left a hole in the Barcelona attack for the midfielder or the left and right attacking players to fill and they did that splendidly. To be honest Busquets looks like a very fragile soccer player but he makes up for that with soccer intelligence that makes things pretty much simple. His passes always have some good reasoning behind them or, some would say, his ball distribution is and was excellent.

Barcelona seems to do these over and over again. Messi drops back a bit to the right of center gets the ball turns towards the left picks his head up and with a simple dribble or two finds a seam through Madrid's defense and voila there is Villa with a goal or a missed opportunity. Real was not trying to play offside traps. They were forced to play up high because they needed a goal and there was no traditional attacker for them to mark. The close neat passes of Barcelona meant the players were always ten to fifteen yards from each other. What this does is, when those lose the ball, it is easy for them to just swamp the ball winner and either force him into an errand pass or just plain lose it and Real did a lot of that.

## Error

When a team annihilates the other like Barcelona did to Real, the winning team has obviously done a good job disguising their errors and exposing those of the losing team. So, here I will talk about Madrid's errors.

Not having a second holding midfielder was disaster for Real. We all know stopping Messi is not easy but Mourinho came to the realization that he needed more than Alonso so, he brought in Lars but by then they needed goals and going from a 4-2-3-1 to a 4-3-3 with the forwards playing really high created a huge problem because they couldn't link up with the various lines. When the defense tried to close the gap between them and the midfield, Barcelona struck with a creative through ball from Messi to Villa. The game seemed to be too fast for Lars and he lost a couple of balls that cost them dearly. All in all it was a difficult day for Madrid – understatement?

## Conclusion

For some reason, I think it did not matter who Barcelona played that day but lets face it Mourihno's line up cost his team because they could not adjust to the little tweak he had put in place and, in Barcelona's case playing Abidal was the right call.

We had seen it before and let us wait and see what Mourihno learns from this defeat. Remember he did beat Barcelona while at Inter but going to Madrid this time will not be a long bus ride.

Let me know what you think...

Ralph.

