

Manchester United Team Analysis



By Willam Rees

Presentation Overview



01 — Squad Profile & Structure

Assess the make-up of Manchester United's 2026/27 squad, including the likely starting XI, depth, positional profiles and how the personnel suit the intended system.

02 — In Possession

Analyze United's attacking structure: build-up, progression through the thirds, chance creation, positional rotations and how the team looks to break down different defensive blocks.

03 — Out of Possession

Look at United's defensive organization, pressing structure, defensive block, rest defence and how effectively the team protects central areas and its own box.

04 — Transitions

Assess both sides of transition — how United attack immediately after winning possession and how they react after losing it, including counter-attacking, counter-pressing and recovery defending.

05 — Set Pieces

Analyze attacking and defensive corners/free kicks, the main routines and principles being used, key aerial threats and any areas where United can gain or lose an advantage.

Current Squad Profile



Goalkeepers:

Senne Lammens and Karl Darlow

Central Defenders:

Ayden Heaven, Harry Maguire, Leny Yoro, Matthijs de Ligt and Lisandro Martinez

Fullbacks:

Luke Shaw, Patrick Dorgu, Harry Amass, Noussair Mazraoui and Diogo Dalot

Midfielders:

Kobbie Mainoo, Bruno Fernandes, Mason Mount, Andrey Santos Santos and Youri Tielemans

Wingers:

Amad, Shea Lacey, Bryan Mbeumo, Marcus Rashford, Patrick Dorgu and Mateus Cunha

Strikers:

Benjamin Šeško, Mateus Cunha and Bryan Mbeumo



Overall Squad Assessment

Young Core

United have built a strong group entering or still before their peak years, with Lammens, Yoro, Heaven, Dorgu, Amad, Mainoo, Santos and Šeško providing a long-term group of players.

Attacking Quality

The squad is particularly strong in attacking areas. Bruno, Mbeumo, Cunha, Amad and Lacey offer different profiles, while Šeško provides a more natural focal point ahead of them.

Midfield Change

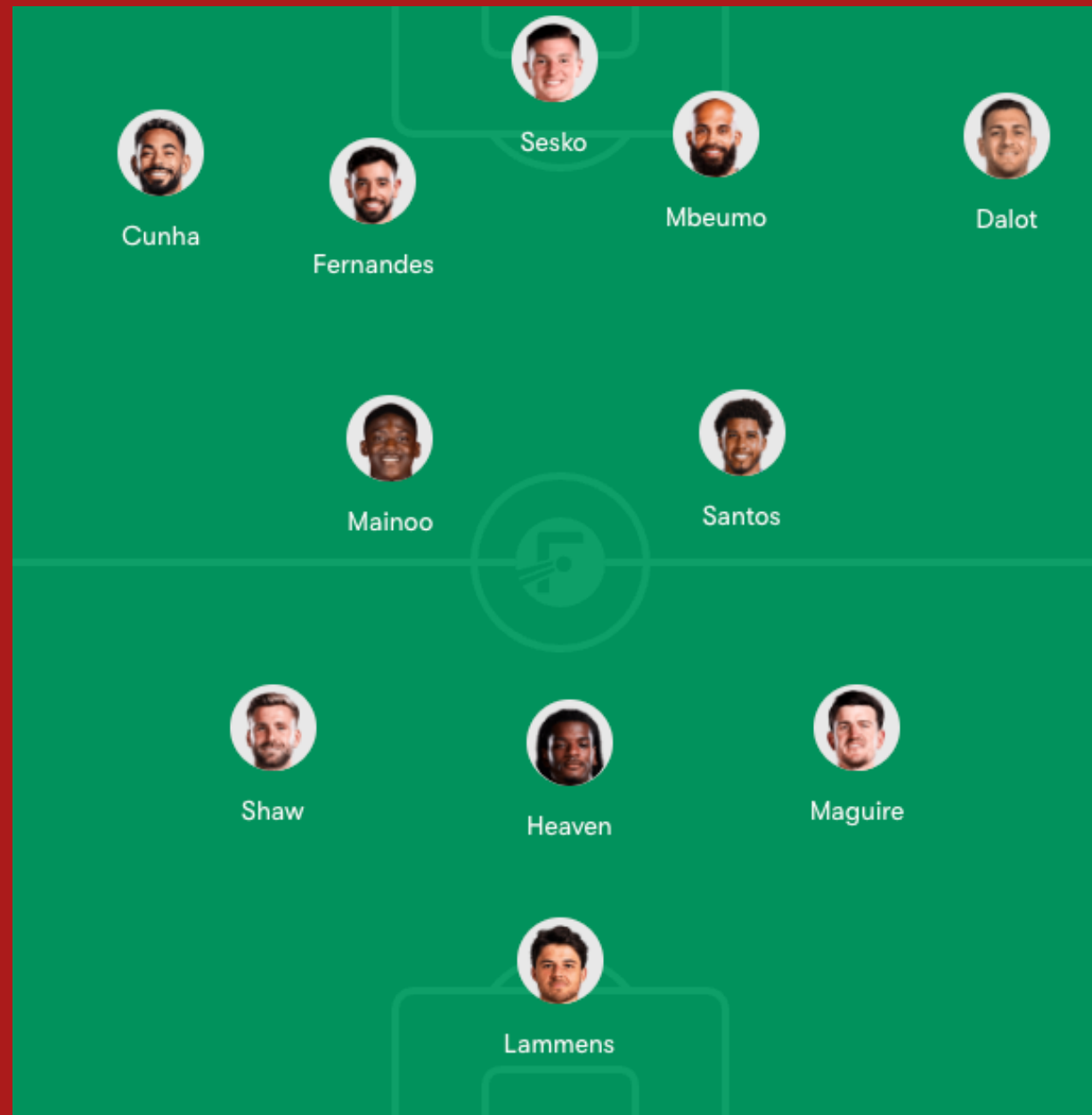
Casemiro's departure has accelerated the midfield rebuild. Andrey Santos and Youri Tielemans add significant technical quality alongside Mainoo, although the group still lacks a dominant athletic/ball-winning midfielder.

Depth Concerns

There are plenty of centre-back options, but availability is a concern, particularly around De Ligt and Martínez. Left-back depth, midfield physicality and reliable cover for Šeško are also areas worth monitoring.

Tactical Identity - In Possession

In Possession - 3-2-5



Introduction

United start from a 4-2-3-1 but can develop into an asymmetrical 3-2-5 in established possession. One full-back remains deeper to form the back three, while the opposite full-back advances to provide width. The double pivot connects the first and attacking lines, with Fernandes and Mbeumo occupying inside spaces around Šeško. Carrick prioritizes short central combinations to manipulate pressure, but United retain the ability to accelerate quickly once space opens. Carrick used similar central connections and double-pivot build-up principles at Middlesbrough, while United have already shown variations of these movements under him.

Tactical Identity - In Possession

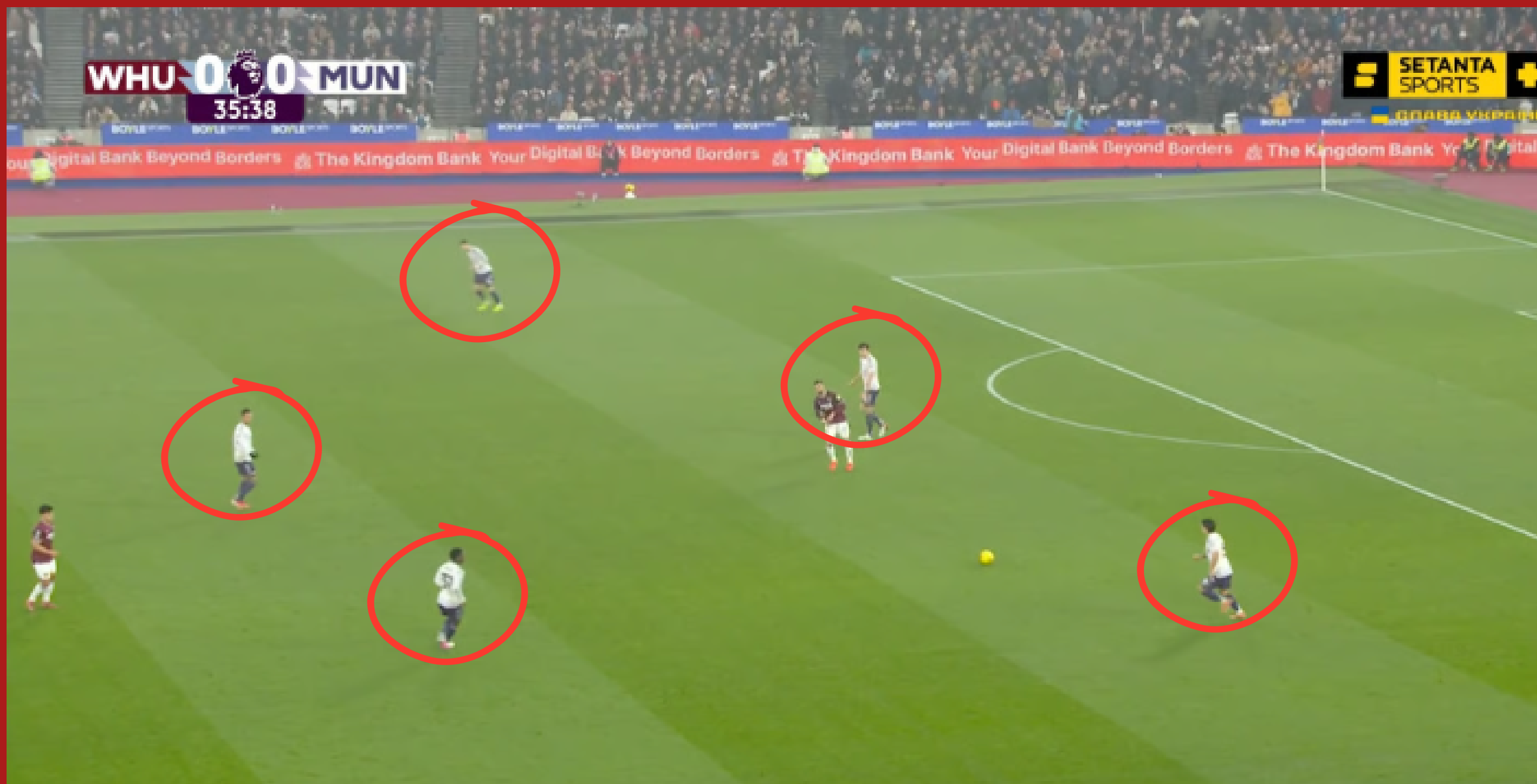
Positives

- **Strong occupation of all five attacking lanes:** Cunha and Dalot provide width, Fernandes and Mbeumo occupy the half-spaces, while Šeško pins the opposition centre-backs centrally.
- **Central overloads aid progression:** Mainoo and Santos provide two options underneath the attacking line, allowing United to circulate centrally and look for Fernandes or Mbeumo between the lines rather than progressing exclusively down the wings. Carrick's teams have historically used the double pivot heavily for short combinations and manipulation of the opposition press.
- **Effective right-side rotations:** Dalot's high positioning allows Mbeumo to move inside, creating opportunities for combinations around the opposition left-back and centre-back.
- **Vertical threat remains central to the attack:** once United break the first line, Fernandes can find runners quickly, while Cunha and Mbeumo attack spaces around Šeško. This prevents the possession game becoming purely slow circulation.

Negatives

- **The build-up can be disrupted when the double pivot is aggressively marked:** Arsenal pressed Mainoo/Casemiro tightly, followed Fernandes when he dropped and narrowed their wingers, successfully locking United into their own half for significant periods.
- **United are still more convincing attacking space than breaking down a settled block:** Some of Carrick's strongest performances last season came with relatively little possession — including just 41% at Arsenal and 36% against Liverpool — highlighting how effective United can be when matches become transitional.
- **The front five can become too flat if there is insufficient rotation:** If Fernandes and Mbeumo are both closely marked between the lines, United risk circulating around the block without creating a free player centrally.
- **The asymmetry places significant responsibility on Dalot:** If he cannot advance, United can lose natural width on the right; if the left-sided players also move inside, the pitch can become too narrow against compact opponents.

Example - First Phase Build-Up



United look to create a 3+2 structure during early build-up, spreading the first line across the width of the pitch while two midfielders provide staggered options ahead. This gives the player in possession multiple short passing lanes and makes it more difficult for the opposition to press with one compact line. The deeper players can circulate possession from side to side to attract pressure, while the midfielders constantly adjust their positioning to offer an option behind or around the first press. The spacing is important: rather than having several players come towards the ball, United try to occupy different vertical and horizontal lines. If an opponent jumps onto the ball-carrier, another player should become free either centrally or on the opposite side. Once that first line of pressure is manipulated, United can then progress into Fernandes, Mbeumo or Cunha in more advanced spaces rather than forcing an early direct pass.

Tactical Identity - Out of Possession

Out of Possession - 4-4-2



Introduction

United defend primarily from a compact 4-4-2 mid-block, with Fernandes joining Šeško on the first line and the wide attackers recovering alongside the double pivot. Carrick prioritizes protecting central spaces rather than pressing continuously, encouraging opponents towards the outside before shifting the block across. When defending deeper, the distances between midfield and defence become extremely compact, with the wingers narrowing and the midfielders protecting the spaces directly in front of the centre-backs.

Tactical Identity - Out of Possession

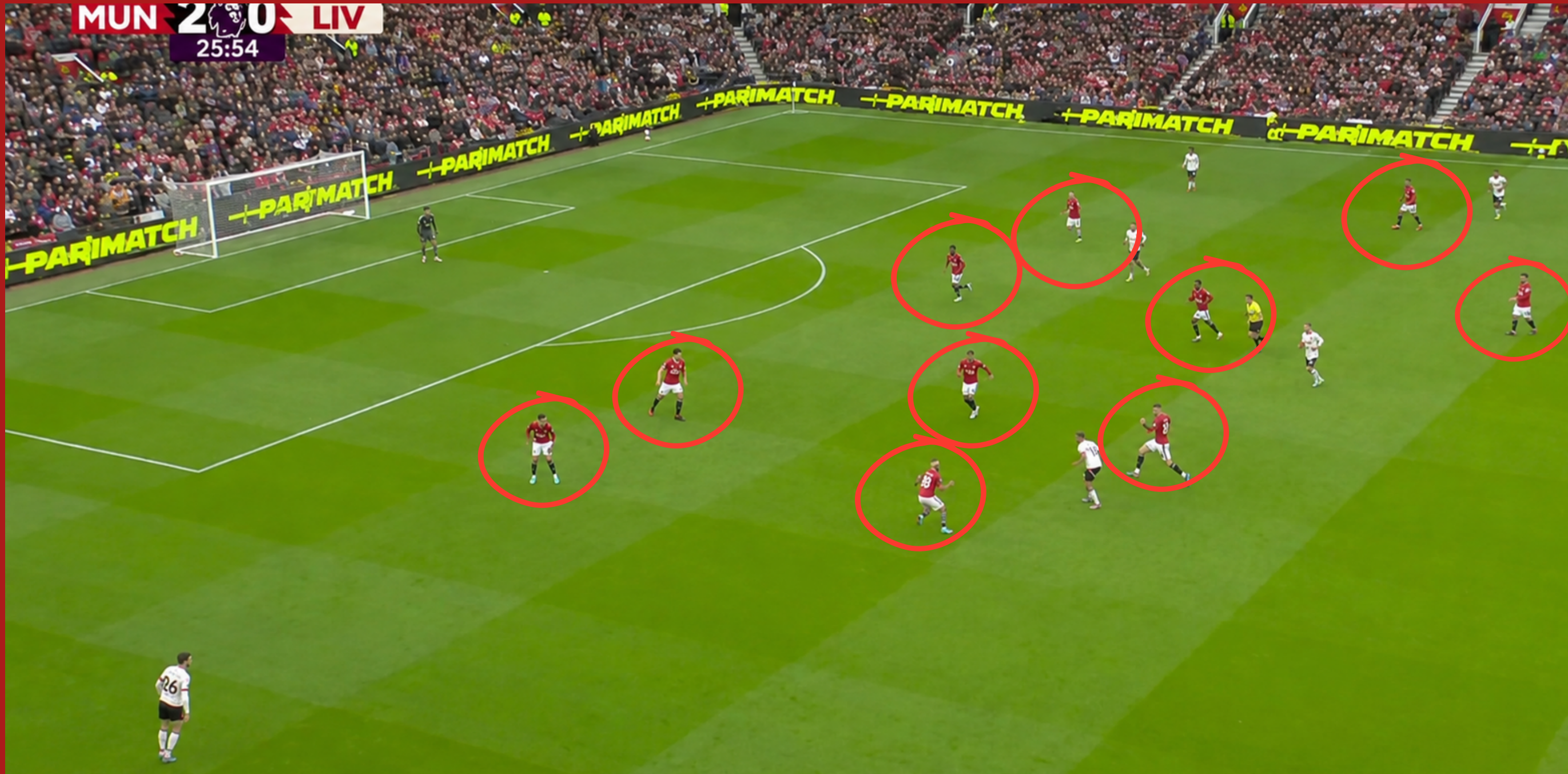
Positives

- **The front two screen central access while Mainoo and Santos protect the space behind them.** Carrick has specifically highlighted United's ability to "close the spaces in the middle" with even his attacking players expected to contribute heavily without the ball.
- **Rather than chasing the ball everywhere, the block encourages circulation towards the flanks.** Once the ball travels wide, the nearest winger can jump towards the receiver while the full-back, pivot and remaining midfielders shift across behind him.
- **When United retreat, both wide players recover, and the pivots sit close to the centre-backs.** United even temporarily formed a back five when one pivot dropped into the defensive line, forcing the opposition to play around the outside and largely restricting central combinations from open play.

Negatives

- **When a winger jumps and the full-back follows forward, the nearest pivot must cover the space inside them.** If the midfield does not shift quickly enough, opponents can reverse possession back inside the advancing full-back and access the half-space. This was also a recurring structural risk in Carrick's Middlesbrough system.
- **The compact low block deliberately protects the centre,** but consequently allows opponents to circulate outside it and deliver crosses or win set pieces.
- **This is probably the most interesting 26/27-specific issue.** Casemiro was the squad's clearest defensive midfielder under Carrick last season. Santos is a strong dueller and intelligent defender, but the new midfield has been built partly to improve possession rather than simply reproduce Casemiro's ball-winning profile. A Mainoo-Santos pivot therefore gives United mobility and technical quality but still has something to prove as a defensive screen.

Example - Settled 4-4-2 Defensive Block



United drop into a compact 4-4-2 when the opposition establish possession, with Fernandes joining the striker on the first line and the wide attackers recovering alongside the two central midfielders. The main objective is to close the central spaces and keep the distances between each line small, making it difficult for the opposition to play directly through midfield or receive freely between the lines. The front two can screen passes into the opposition pivot while the midfield four remain narrow behind them, encouraging play towards the outside. As the ball moves from one side to the other, the whole block shifts together rather than individual players leaving the structure. This allows the nearest winger and full-back to apply pressure in wide areas while the remaining players continue protecting the centre. The back four also remain relatively compact, reducing the gaps between full-back and centre-back and forcing opponents to create from less dangerous areas.

Tactical Identity - Attacking Transitions

Introduction

Manchester United look to make attacking transitions quick, vertical and aggressive, with the first few actions after regaining possession designed to exploit the opponent before they can recover their defensive shape. Rather than immediately slowing the game down, the first receiver is encouraged to look forward, while the attacking players begin moving into the spaces created by the opposition's previous attacking structure. The key is not simply running forward, but creating different movements on different lines so that the player in possession has multiple progressive options.

A common example would be Šeško dropping slightly towards the ball to occupy or attract a centre-back, while Cunha or Mbeumo immediately attack the space created behind him. Fernandes can then move underneath the attack as the connecting player, either receiving the first pass himself or playing quickly into one of the runners. If one wide attacker carries the ball forward, the opposite winger can attack the far-side channel while Šeško pins the central defender, stretching the recovering back line horizontally as well as vertically.

The midfield also has an important role. One midfielder can step forward to support the transition and provide a second-wave option, while the other remains underneath the attack to offer security if the counter breaks down. This balance allows United to commit several players forward without completely losing their structure behind the ball.

The overall aim is to create a situation where the opponent is forced to defend while running towards their own goal, with United attacking the gaps between full-back and centre-back, the space behind an advanced defensive line, or the open central areas left by midfielders who had previously pushed forward.

Tactical Identity - Attacking Transitions

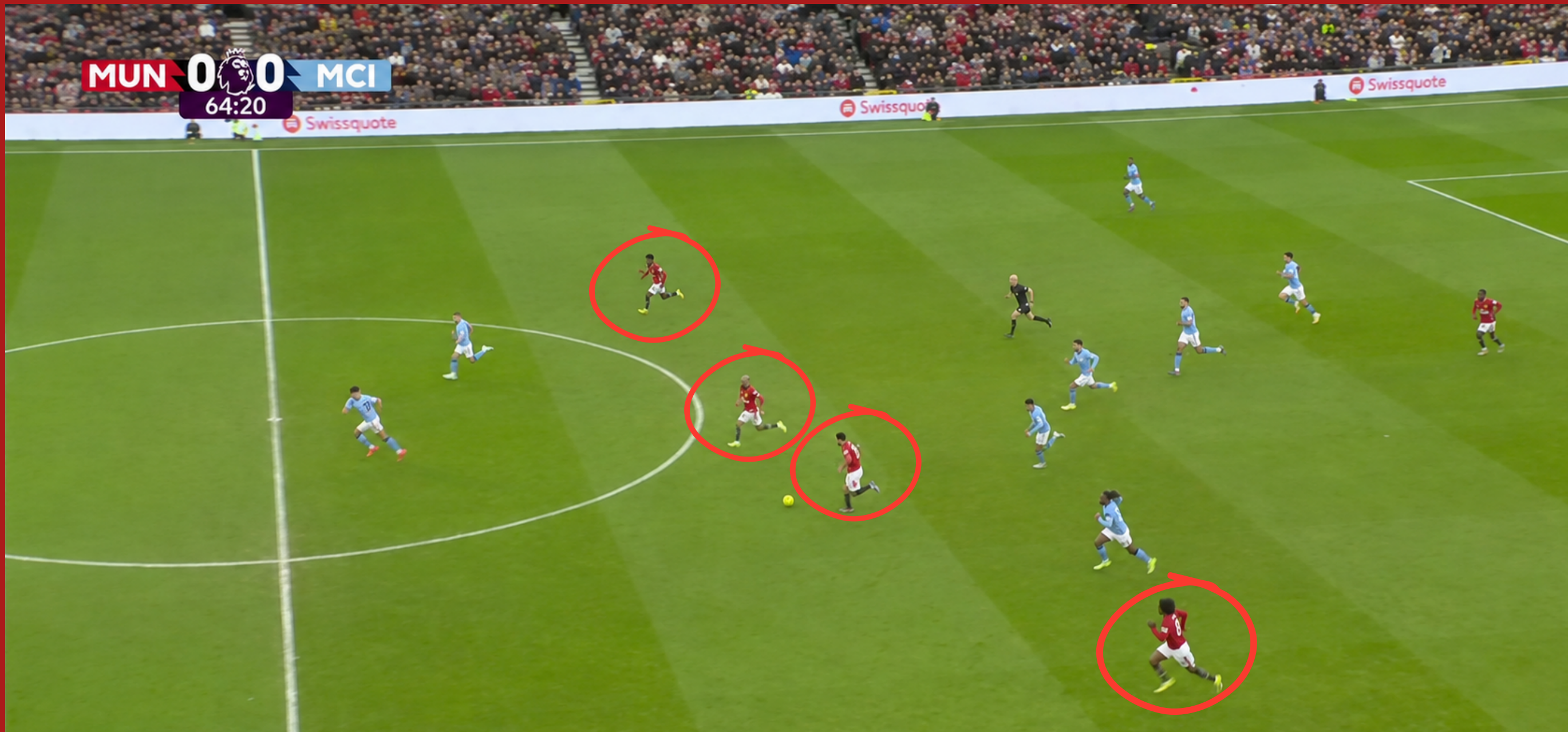
Positives

- **Multiple runners attack different spaces:** When Šeško drops towards the ball, one of the centre-backs can be drawn forward, opening space for Cunha or Mbeumo to attack beyond him. This gives the ball-carrier both a short option and a direct option in behind.
- **Fernandes provides the connection between regain and attack:** Bruno can position himself underneath the front line, receive the first forward pass and immediately choose whether to release a runner, combine with Šeško or carry into the space ahead.
- **Wide players can attack the channels aggressively:** If possession is regained centrally, Cunha and Mbeumo can immediately run outside or inside the opposition full-backs. This stretches the recovering defence and creates larger gaps between defenders.
- **Second-wave support keeps the transition alive:** One of Mainoo or Santos can move forward behind the first attack, giving United an option for cut-backs, loose balls or a recycled attack if the initial forward pass does not create a chance.
- **Different movements make the counter difficult to defend:** A dropping striker, a midfielder supporting underneath and runners moving beyond the ball force defenders to make quick decisions over whether to step forward, track runners or protect the space behind them.

Negatives

- **The attack can become too vertical:** If every player immediately runs beyond the ball, the first receiver can be left without a short passing option. United then risk forcing a difficult forward pass rather than securing possession and continuing the attack.
- **Šeško dropping can reduce the threat in behind if nobody replaces him:** If the striker comes short but Cunha and Mbeumo also move towards the ball, the opposition back line can step forward without being threatened by a runner behind.
- **Wide regains can isolate the ball-carrier:** If Cunha or Mbeumo wins the ball near the touchline and the nearest teammates are too far away, the opponent can surround them and stop the transition before United can move forward.
- **Poor spacing can send multiple players into the same channel:** For example, if Mbeumo comes inside, Šeško drifts right, and Fernandes also moves into that area, United can congest one side of the pitch and make the transition easier to defend.
- **Too many players committing forward can leave little security behind the attack:** If both midfielders join the counter at the same time, a turnover can leave the centre-backs defending a large amount of space with little protection in front of them.

Example - Attacking Transition



This image highlights United's ability to turn a regain into an attack at speed, with the ball-carrier immediately moving forward while multiple teammates sprint into advanced positions around him. Rather than slowing the game down after recovering possession, the first instinct is to attack the space left by the opposition before they can reorganise. The player on the ball drives centrally, which forces defenders to retreat and narrow towards him, while runners ahead and on the outside stretch the defensive line both vertically and horizontally. The key strength in this moment is the number of forward options available at the same time. One runner can attack the outside channel, another can support through the middle, and a third can arrive on the far side, meaning the ball-carrier is not isolated and can choose the best route depending on how the defence reacts. This makes the transition difficult to stop, because the defenders are forced to recover while facing their own goal and protecting several different spaces at once.

Tactical Identity - Defending Transitions

Introduction

Manchester United's defensive transition is built around the idea of reacting immediately after possession is lost, rather than allowing the opponent to attack freely into open space. Because United can have five players positioned high in possession, the first objective is for the nearest players to apply pressure around the ball and delay the counter. This gives the deeper midfielders and defenders time to recover their positions and rebuild the defensive structure.

The key role belongs to the players underneath the attack. If Mainoo and Santos are positioned correctly, they can protect the central passing lanes and force the opponent towards the outside rather than allowing a direct pass through the middle. Behind them, the back three must control the space in behind and avoid being dragged too aggressively towards the ball. If the counter-press succeeds, United can regain possession high and immediately restart the attack; if it fails, the priority changes to delaying the opponent and recovering into the 4-4-2 defensive block.

A typical situation might see United lose possession on the right after Dalot has advanced. Mbeumo and Fernandes can immediately pressure the ball, Santos can move across to protect the inside channel, and Maguire can shift wider to cover the space behind Dalot. On the opposite side, Shaw and Heaven stay narrower rather than chasing the ball, protecting the central spaces and potential runners. The success of the transition therefore depends heavily on spacing before the turnover, immediate pressure afterwards, and the ability of the deeper players to protect the areas the attacking players have vacated.

Tactical Identity - Defending Transitions

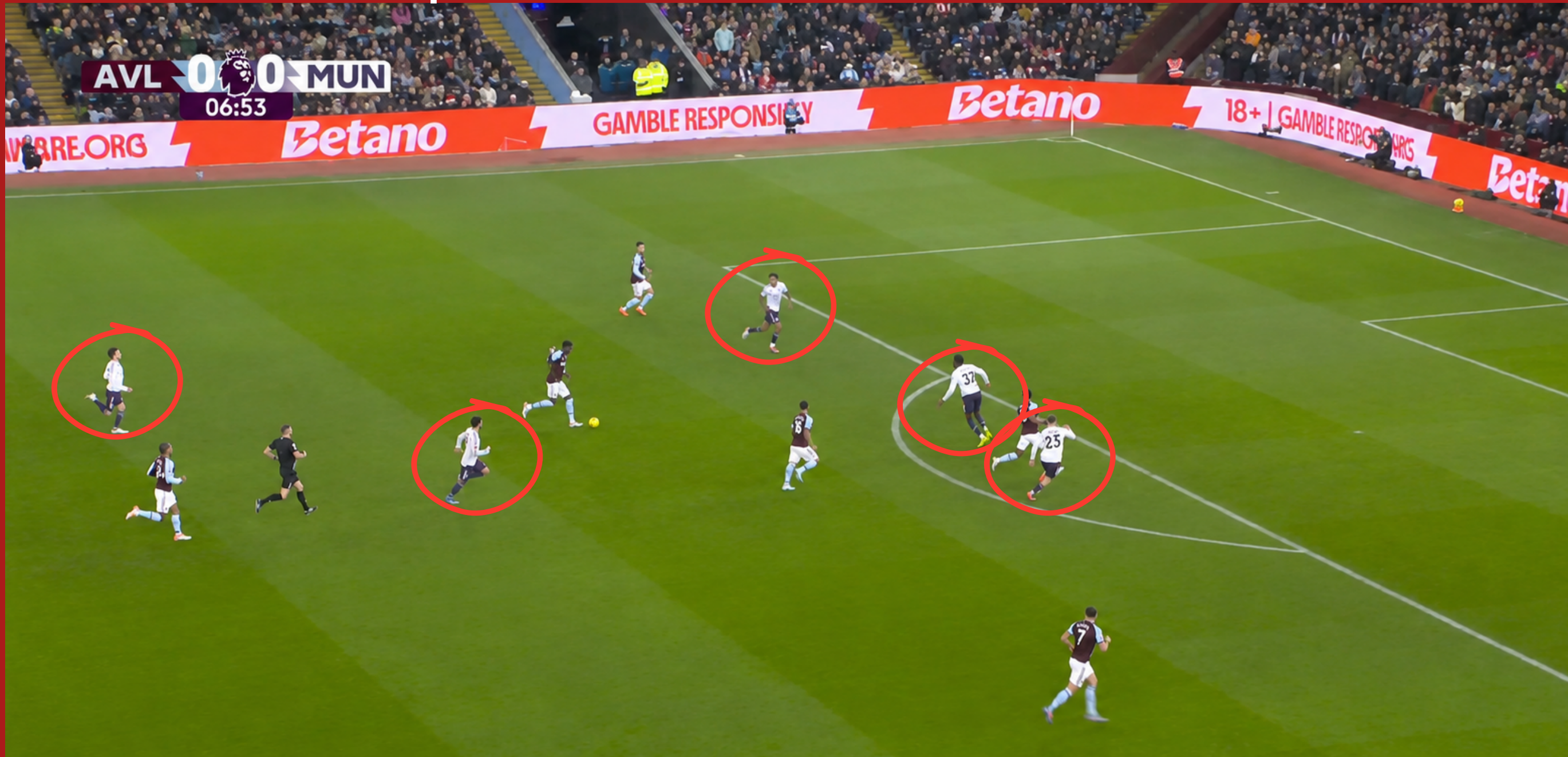
Positives

- **Immediate pressure can stop counters before they develop:** If two or three players are already close to the ball when possession is lost, United can surround the first receiver and prevent them from turning or finding an easy forward pass.
- **The double pivot protects the centre:** Mainoo and Santos can stay underneath the attack and block the most dangerous central routes. If the opponent is forced towards the touchline, United gain more time for the rest of the team to recover.
- **The back three provide security behind the counter-press:** With one full-back remaining deeper, United can keep three defenders behind the ball. This allows the nearest attackers to press aggressively without leaving the goalkeeper completely exposed.
- **Players can cover for one another:** If Dalot is caught high, Santos can move across while Maguire protects the outside channel. On the opposite side, Shaw can remain narrower and help maintain the defensive balance.
- **Successful counter-pressing can create another attack:** Winning the ball back immediately means the opponent is often still stretched from trying to counter, allowing United to attack again before the opposition can reorganize.

Negatives

- **If the first pressure is beaten, large spaces can appear behind it:** Once an opponent escapes the players surrounding the ball, they can attack directly at the double pivot or back three with United's attacking players temporarily out of the game.
- **The space behind the advanced full-back is naturally vulnerable:** If Dalot is high when possession is lost, the right channel can be exposed. Santos and Maguire must react quickly, otherwise, an opponent can immediately attack the space outside or behind Maguire.
- **Both midfielders stepping towards the ball can expose the centre:** If Mainoo and Santos are attracted to the same area, one pass around the pressure can leave the centre-backs without protection in front of them.
- **Poor spacing before the loss makes counter-pressing difficult:** If the attacking structure becomes too stretched, the nearest players may simply be too far away to pressure the ball effectively. The opponent then has time to turn and select a forward pass.
- **Following the ball too aggressively can open the weak side:** If too many players collapse towards the turnover, an opponent can switch play into the opposite side, where United may have very few players positioned to defend.

Example - Defensive Transition



This image shows the danger United can face immediately after losing possession when several players are still positioned ahead of the ball. The first priority is to delay the counter and protect the central route to goal, with the nearest players trying to pressure the ball while the deeper defenders retreat and recover their shape. The key issue is the amount of open space between the midfield and defensive line. If the first pressure is bypassed, the opponent can drive directly at the back line while United are still reorganising. The deeper defenders are then forced to make difficult decisions: step towards the ball-carrier, track runners in behind, or protect the central area. If one defender jumps too early, space can open either side of him for another runner to attack. This is why United's defensive transition depends so heavily on rest-defence positioning and recovery speed. The players behind the attack need to slow the opponent long enough for the midfield and wide players to recover, otherwise the back line can be exposed in large spaces before the team returns to its compact defensive block.

Tactical Identity - Attacking Set-Pieces

Introduction

Manchester United's attacking set pieces should remain an important method of creating chances, combining high-quality delivery with several strong aerial targets and coordinated movement inside the penalty area. Fernandes is the primary delivery option, with Mbeumo and Tielemans providing alternatives that allow United to vary the angle and type of service.

Rather than simply loading players into the six-yard box and crossing towards the biggest target, the objective is to create separation before the delivery arrives. Players can begin close together and then make different movements across the defensive line: one attacker may sprint towards the near post, another can block or occupy a marker centrally, while a third delays his movement before attacking the space that has been opened behind them. With players such as Maguire and Šeško, United have targets capable of challenging directly for the first contact, while others can position themselves around the edge of the main duel to attack knockdowns and second balls.

The movement of the strongest aerial players can also be used as a decoy. For example, if Maguire aggressively attacks the front zone and takes two defenders with him, Šeško can arrive into the central or far-post space rather than both players competing for the same delivery. Likewise, a cluster of players around the goalkeeper can force defenders to defend facing their own goal, while a late runner attacks the space behind the initial group.

The structure outside the box is equally important. United need players positioned to collect clearances, recycle possession and prevent the opponent from immediately counter-attacking. The best attacking set-piece structure therefore creates three threats at once: the initial delivery, the second contact and the possibility of sustaining the attack after the first clearance.

Tactical Identity - Attacking Set-Pieces

Positives

- **Several genuine first-contact threats:** Maguire and Šeško give United strong central targets, allowing the delivery to be aimed into dangerous areas without relying on one individual to win every aerial duel.
- **Movement can create separation before the ball arrives:** If one player attacks the near post and drags his marker with him, another attacker can delay his run and attack the newly-created central space. This makes the delivery much more difficult to defend than a static group of players waiting underneath the ball.
- **Fernandes provides variety and quality of delivery:** United can change between inswinging, outswinging and flatter deliveries depending on the defensive structure, while Mbeumo or Tielemans can offer a different delivery profile when required.
- **Second-ball positioning can extend the attack:** Mainoo, Santos or another midfielder can remain outside the main aerial contest, allowing United to recover partial clearances and immediately deliver the ball back into an unsettled defensive line.
- **Different aerial threats can be used as decoys:** The opponent may naturally focus heavily on Maguire, for example, which can create space for Šeško, Heaven or a late-arriving attacker elsewhere in the box.

Negatives

- **Too many players can attack the same space:** If Maguire, Šeško and another target all make similar runs towards the six-yard box, defenders can compete for one area rather than being forced to make individual decisions.
- **Predictable delivery makes strong movement irrelevant:** If every corner is aimed towards the same player or zone, the opponent can overload that area and position their best aerial defender directly against United's main target.
- **Poor blocking or timing can leave attackers stationary:** Runs have to begin at different moments. If players arrive too early, defenders can establish body position before the ball is delivered and the advantage of the routine disappears.
- **Overcommitting numbers can expose the counter:** Sending every tall player into the box increases the attacking threat, but somebody must protect the space outside the area. If the first clearance bypasses United's second-ball players, the opponent can immediately attack a reduced rest-defence.

Tactical Identity - Defending Set-Pieces

Introduction

Defensive set pieces are primarily about protecting the highest-value spaces, winning the first contact and maintaining organization if the initial delivery is not completely cleared. United can use their strongest aerial defenders around the central six-yard area, while other players track opposition runners and prevent attackers from gaining a free run towards goal.

The first priority is to make the area immediately in front of Lammens difficult to attack. Maguire, Heaven and Šeško can provide height and physical presence centrally, while players positioned around them deal with blockers, late runs and loose balls. The defenders should not all become attracted towards the flight of the ball; some must protect the goalkeeper, others attack the delivery, and others prepare for where the second contact is likely to fall.

For example, if an opponent overloads the near-post area with three runners, United cannot simply send every defender towards that zone. One player may attack the first ball, while the remaining central defenders hold their position to protect against a flick-on or a runner arriving behind the initial duel. Likewise, if an opposition player deliberately blocks Maguire from attacking the delivery, another defender must be positioned close enough to challenge rather than leaving the central area completely dependent on one player.

The organization continues after the first header. A clearance that only reaches the edge of the box is still a dangerous situation, so midfielders must be ready to close down the second ball while the defensive line moves outward together. United also have quick attacking players who can remain slightly higher, meaning an effective clearance can potentially turn a defensive set piece into an attacking transition.

Tactical Identity - Defending Set-Pieces

Positives

- **Strong aerial presence in the central zones:** Maguire, Heaven and Šeško give United several players capable of challenging for the first contact rather than leaving one centre-back responsible for every dangerous delivery.
- **Hybrid responsibilities protect both space and runners:** Keeping defenders in important zones while assigning others to dangerous opposition targets means United can protect the goal without allowing attackers completely free movement.
- **Multiple layers provide protection against flick-ons:** If the near-post defender attacks the first ball, another player can remain deeper to deal with anything redirected across the six-yard box instead of the entire defence moving towards the initial contact.
- **Second-ball players can prevent repeated attacks:** Mainoo and Santos can position themselves around the edge of the main defensive group so that a partial clearance is immediately pressured rather than allowing the opponent a free shot or second delivery.
- **An outlet can discourage opponents from committing everyone forward:** Keeping someone such as Mbeumo or Cunha slightly higher gives United the possibility of counter-attacking and can force the opposition to leave additional protection behind the ball.

Negatives

- **Blocking can remove the strongest aerial defender from the play:** If an opponent successfully prevents Maguire or another main header from attacking the delivery, somebody else must recognize the situation quickly or a major gap can appear centrally.
- **Too much focus on the ball can lose runners:** Defenders may become attracted towards the delivery while an attacker starts outside the main group and arrives late into the space behind them.
- **The second phase can be more dangerous than the first:** Even if United win the initial header, a poor clearance towards the edge of the box can allow the opposition to immediately shoot or return the ball into a defensive line that is beginning to move out.
- **The goalkeeper can become crowded:** If United allow opposition players to establish position around Lammens, his ability to attack crosses becomes restricted, and much greater pressure is placed on the defenders to win the first contact.
- **Breaking the defensive line too early creates space for recycled deliveries:** If two or three players sprint out immediately after the first clearance while others remain deep, the line becomes disconnected, and attackers can stay onside for the next ball into the area.

Conclusion

OVERALL

Manchester United enter 2026/27 with a squad that appears increasingly suited to Carrick's preferred style. In possession, the team can create a fluid 3-2-5, using width on the outside, technically strong players between the lines and a double pivot capable of controlling progression. Without the ball, United become more compact in a 4-4-2, protecting central areas and looking for opportunities to regain possession before attacking quickly into the spaces opponents leave behind. The overall identity is therefore built around control when possible, verticality when space appears, and compactness without the ball.

WHAT CAN MAKE IT WORK?

- **Strong attacking profiles:** Fernandes, Cunha, Mbeumo and Šeško offer creativity, movement, pace and depth, giving United several different ways of progressing from possession into chances.
- **Improved midfield balance:** Mainoo and Santos can provide greater mobility and technical security underneath the attack, helping United connect the defensive and attacking lines.
- **Excellent transition potential:** United possess the profiles to punish teams immediately after turnovers, particularly when opponents commit numbers forward and leave space behind.
- **Flexible structures:** The ability to move between a 4-2-3-1, 3-2-5 and 4-4-2 allows Carrick to change the team's behaviour without constantly changing personnel.

THE BIGGEST QUESTIONS

- **Can United break down deep blocks consistently?** Their transition threat is clear, but the next step is creating the same level of danger when opponents defend with numbers behind the ball.
- **Can the midfield protect transitions?** Mainoo and Santos provide quality with the ball, but their positioning and discipline will be vital when United commit five players into the attacking line.
- **Can the rest of the defence remain secure?** The aggressive positioning of Dalot and the attacking midfielders creates opportunities going forward but can leave large spaces when possession is lost.
- **Can Carrick find the balance between control and directness?** United should not lose their transition threat, but they also cannot become dependent on matches opening up.