RAPIDS BACKPASS

Backpass 7-11-15: Zombie Rapids Rise from the Grave

Two wins! In a row! Let's keep it going, Colorado! What's that? (stage whisper) We play Seattle and LA next? Well I'm sure that... (stage whisper) LA will start Giovanni Dos Santos and Steven Gerrard? Listen, haterz gonna hate. We just need to win or tie every game the rest of the year and we can make the playoffs. It could happen.

By rapidsrabbi | @soccer_rabbi | Jul 16, 2015, 8:00am MDT

Ron Chenoy-USA TODAY Sports

Last Saturday's match was unique for the **Colorado Rapids** for three reasons. For one, the team had a chance to put together a bona fide winning streak for the first time since they beat the **Montreal Impact** and **Houston Dynamo** on May 24 and June 1, 2014. They haven't won three in a row since August 13, 2011. Only two Rapids remain from that squad: Drew Moor and Pablo Mastroeni. But I digress.

For another, it marked the second time the Rapids were playing out of the 4-3-3. And the third interesting thing was the Rapids were playing **Real Salt Lake**, another team that uses the 4-3-3. That formation is pretty rare in MLS: only RSL, the Rapids, and **Sporting Kansas City** use it. Although the **LA Galaxy** tried it in their **US Open** Cup defeat yesterday, and I think they might be best served switching to it full time to make the best use of Giovanni Dos Santos, Robbie Keane, and Gyasi Zardes. Who we have to face at DSGP on August 1. You should probably get tickets to see that. (I don't get a commission, I just think you're likely to see some serious fireworks when Steven Gerrard links up with Gio and Keano. Jogo Bonito, yo.

Two of the best teams on the planet, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, play the 4-3-3. And when they face each other in El Clasico, the game is defined by speed, aggressive high press defending, and getting the ball up to the attacking first line quickly.

This game was more muted than a Barca-Madrid clash, for a lot of reasons: some obvious, some not. On the obvious side, Sebastian Jaime and Olmes Garcia are not quite at the same level of technical skill as Lionel Messi or Luis Suarez. Nobody on these teams has the speed of Cristiano Ronaldo or Gareth Bale. Less obviously, the game had less smooth ground passing and more slow walk-it-up development than I would expect. Both teams tended to try and squelch the opposition by flooding the area with the ball with defenders. The game was not as free-flowing as I'd expect of a 4-3-3 clash. But maybe I've been spoiled.

Still, Vicente Sanchez did get loose in Ronaldo-esque ways once or twice. The Rapids did get the ball up to the front line quickly on a bunch of occasions. And Joao Plata, Javier Morales, and Sebastian Jaime **combined on this sublime goal**: the same kind that Messi, Neymar and Suarez might themselves produce. Seriously, click on that or we aren't friends anymore.

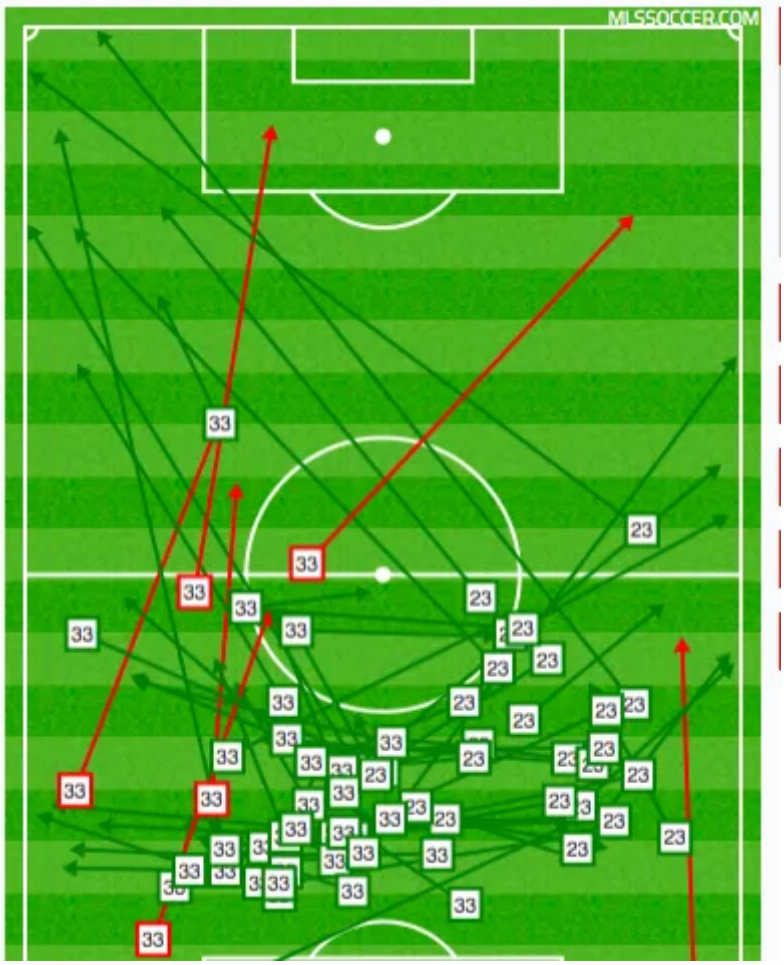
The Rapids produced their own wing attack highlight on the go-ahead goal in extra time, **with Eloundou's dribble and shot off the post to the coiled and ready Jared Watts**. Charles was electric from the moment he stepped on the pitch at the 73rd minute. Also, re-watching that goal again, what the hell was Luis Gil (#10) doing? It's like the minute the ball was played in, he developed a severe case of soccer amnesia and forgot who he was or why he was there. "Oh! There's a ball rolling towards me. I wonder what its for?" Bizarre.

The Story of the First Half: Diagonal Balls

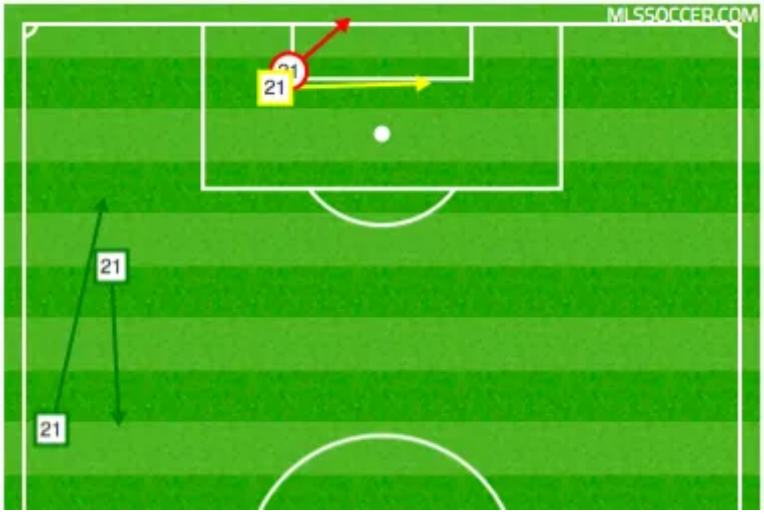
Last game, Luis Solignac was an absolute wrecking ball against the Whitecaps, producing 5 shots, 6 take-ons, 1 key chance, and 1 assist. So the plan from the start looked to me to be

‘Get the ball to Luis.’

Here’s all the first half passes from Burling and Watts. Notice the arrows all point up and to the left.



That’s nine long bombs to the Argentine. Solignac produced 2 failed take-ons, a few failed passes, 2 shots, and 1 key chance. Opposing right back Tony Beltran essentially shut him down all night. In the second half, he received far fewer diagonal balls, and here’s the sum total of all his passes, dribbles, and shots until he was lifted at 73’.



Yah, not much happening there. I think he had an off-night, or Tony Beltran was really feeling it. Hopefully, Solignac can turn the page.

The Story of the Second Half: Charles in Charge

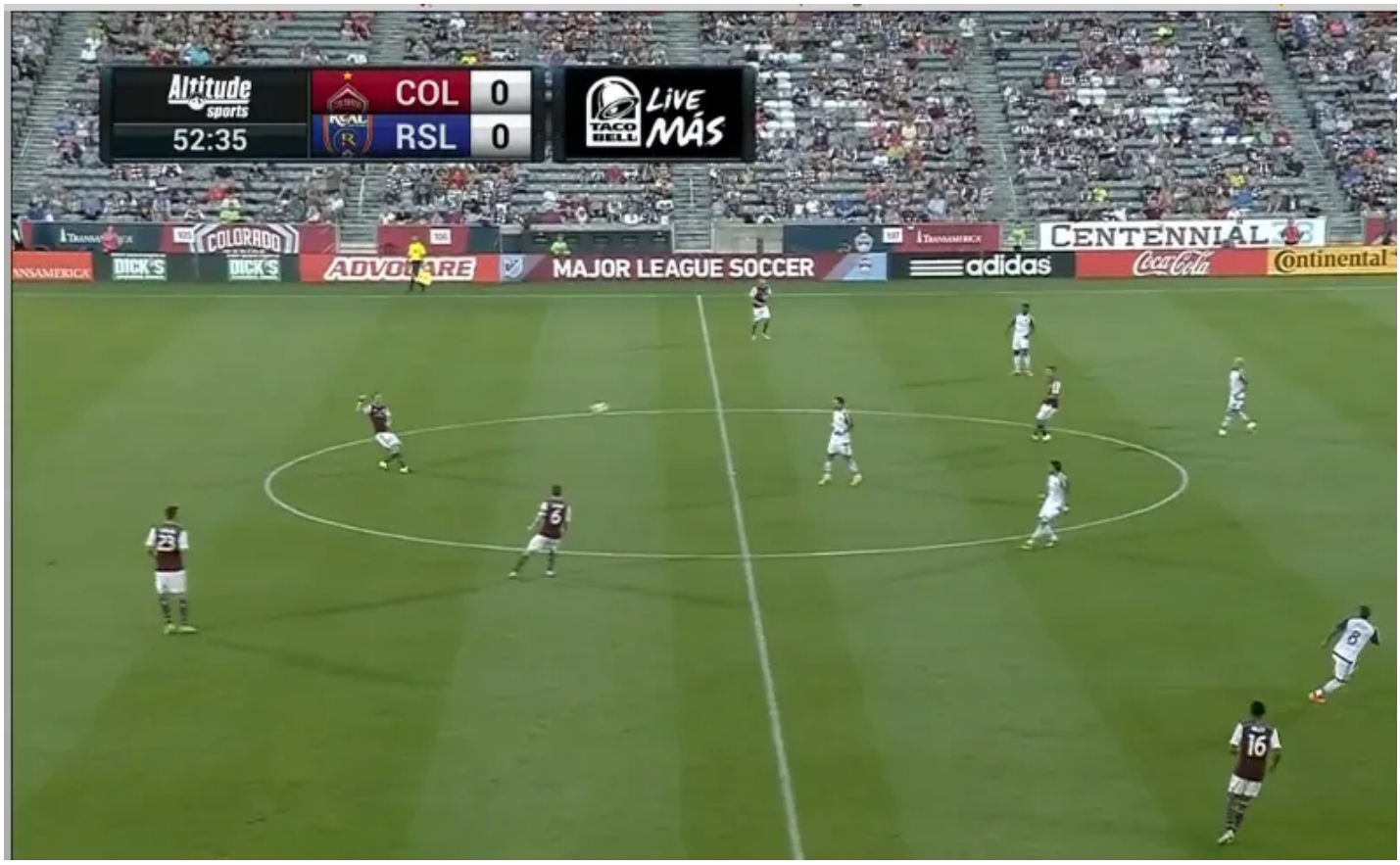
Pablo Mastroeni did something really un-Pablo-like: he made two attack-minded substitutions; bringing on Eloundou for Solignac at the 73rd and bringing on Juan Ramirez for the totally pooped Vincente Sanchez at the 80th. That was a ton of speed added, at a time when exhaustion had set in and oodles of space would now be opened in the field. It worked great: Ramirez went on two tearing runs through the midfield to get forward, and Eloundou had 3 take ons , 3 shots, 2 crosses, an assist on a perfect corner, 1 interception and 1 clearance. In 22 minutes. That's insane. Kid was outta his head.

I don't expect that kind of insane performance every night, but I wouldn't mind it.

With Gaby Torres returning soon from **Gold Cup** duty, that likely gives the Rapids a late-innings roster of Ramirez, Eloundou, Vicente Sanchez and Dillon Serna to come in and tear it up. That's an encouraging sign, especially if the front line of Doyle, Torres and Solignac can tire out the opposition or stake the team to a 1-0 lead for the young turks.

Sarvas Contained, Pittinari Set Loose

Marcelo Sarvas in central midfield is supposed to be the maestro of this offense, or so I thought. RSL closed him down a lot in this game, but also the game plan lent itself to working up the wings or going long to the attacking corners. Getting Sarvas more involved in the ground game would seem to be important, although the Rapids dominated possession 61%-39% and had the bulk of the chances, out-shooting RSL 19 to 5. Sarvas was often surrounded at midfield in a way that limited his ability to do something on the ball. That's him with four RSL players around him, like he's holding a briefcase with launch codes.



Sam Cronin, however, picked up the slack, with 82% passing and 2 key chances. That ability to have two talented twin midfield passers is good, but we'd be better off if Sarvas can get into the act more, either through getting him better support from Doyle or having multiple players playing a bit more off him to open things up.

Lucas Pittinari's role is what a high school coach I know used to call the SOB; it's a free-form harrasser role. Pittinari popped up all over the field to go after the ball, or whoever had it. He also popped up on the offense in all kinds of places. He still makes a lot of snazzy but failed passes and still misses the target too often. But his work rate is pretty phenomenal. I'm still not sold on him as a long term solution at CDM, but he certain has his uses.

Overall, if the 4-3-3 is going to succeed, the midfield needs to improve its passing rate and get better at linking up to the front line. Here's their passing numbers:

				Key Pass	Pass pct		Touches	
6	Lucas Pittinari 23, MC	5	1	2	73.7	1	71	7.42
7	Marcelo Sarvas 33, MC	1	0	1	71.1	1	49	7.00
8	Sam Cronin 28, MC	0	0	2	81.8	1	55	7.22

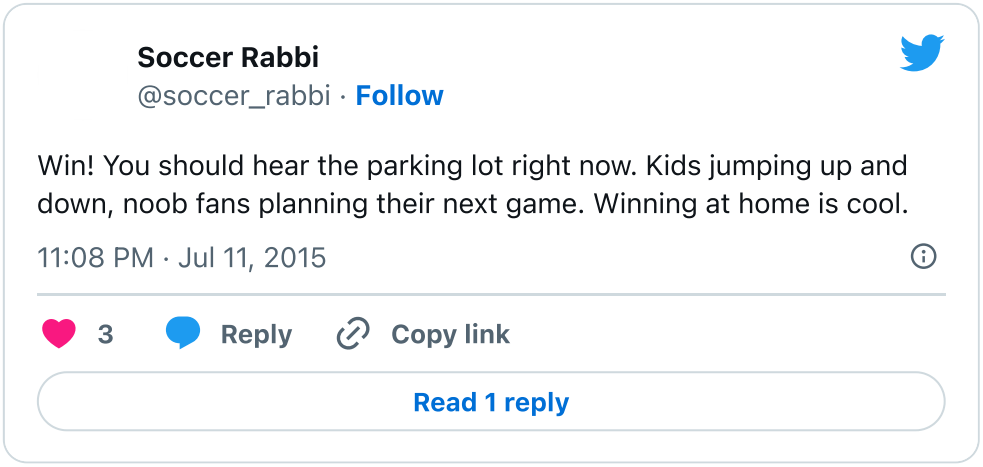
In the Champions league final, Busquets, Rakitic and Iniesta passed around 90%. Yes, they're world class players. They also faced a five-man midfield of world class players. Our midfield passing needs to be great for a possession-based 4-3-3- to work.

Quick Hits

Much twitter banter around Dillon Powers, who didn't start either of the last two matches, and Shane O'Neill, who wasn't even on the bench in this one. I think Powers could be great alongside Sarvas or Cronin, and I'd prefer him out there to Pittinari, although that puts extra pressure on the backline. With O'Neill, the defense seems to work pretty well without him, sad to say…

I said this on twitter…

I also said this...



Folks have been pessimistic about the Rapids for going on 9 months now. Attendance, the Front Office, KSE, the team, there's been pessimism, and rightly so. It all went away with some nice soccer, a couple goals, and a home win. Win, and the people will come, the turnstiles will spin, and the money will flow. People in Colorado love soccer, and they'll support a winner.

Bet Now!

3/4, 9:30p	SKC	COL
SPREAD	+0.5 (-135)	-0.5 (-105)
MONEY LINE	+235	+260	-105
OVER UNDER	> 3 (-130)	
	< 3 (-110)	

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